Michael Speidel, “Nubia’s Roman Garrison”

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My first repsonse to this article (before I started reading it) was: wow – how can I, as someone who studies the ancient world, get a job in Honolulu?

My second response is a more irritated general rant about Classics. What on earth is the numbering system for this insane series? This was not the article I wanted to read, but I was unable to find the one I wanted. I did not have the full bibliographic reference, but googlescholar was no help and the nutjob series is not published in order – I found several volumes from the right year, some from later with smaller numbers, etc. I went through 75% of the volumes on the shelf at the Rock without finding it. This is not a system. I figured this article would cover much of the same ground as the elusive one I saught, being 5 years later by the same author in the same publication with a closely related title (Nubian garrison instead of Nubian frontier). I’m not sure, though; he doesn’t even reference the article I was looking for. This is all an aside. FAR more irritating is that the author assumes a very large degree of familiarity on part of the reader with both the generalities and the specifics of the Roman army, not to mention with Latin and Greek. The manner in which it is written (ie without translations of most texts that are quoted) is not accessible to the non-Classicist. The map that is given and the quoting of place names in the text are exclusively in Latin and Greek so that someone – for instance, me – who has studied Lower Nubia a fair amount but Roman Egypt not at all is completely at sea. Aside from those sites immediately next to Aswan I have no idea where the named places are. Would it be so difficult to use both classical names and those used by archaeologists of earlier periods? There seems no interest in slotting the information given here into a larger understanding of this place, only into a larger understanding of the Roman empire.

The article is organized rigorously, beginning with a discussion of strategy on this southern frontier, moving to titles of commanders, then to the units stationed in the south over the course of approximately two centuries, an apendix with graffiti left by the soldiers here, and concluding with some brief remarks. All of the evidence considered is textual; the author notes that very few Roman remains were adequately surveyed and next to none really excavated before the dam destroyed them.

The discussion of commanders and units is largely technical and, while important for supporting the larger claims, is difficult for a non-specialist to appreciate. The general conclusions, however, are of quite a bit of interest (and hence things I wish he had gotten into in much more depth). Three things are of note: 1) three cohorts were regularly detailed to guard Egypt against incursion from Nubia (not a lot of people, no more than 3000 I think, and possibly many fewer – not discussed is that the strength of a cohort changed over the time period under discussion); 2) these cohorts were stationed at Aswan, so that the borderlands themselves were only very little occupied by watching troops and were not thoroughly garrisoned – in part this reflects the need to keep an eye on the Thebaid as well as Nubia; 3) the cohorts were not constant over time, but saw a moderate amount of movement both within Egypt (ie up to the Fayum for trading) and outside (ie being moved to Arabia). Stated baldly in the conclusions but nowhere discussed is the further very interesting point that many of the soldiers in these cohorts were locally recruited.

Scattered through the article are hints of an answer to what I am currently finding the most interesting part of this period: the apparent activity of both Egyptians (or Romans) and Nubians in Lower Nubia, especially at religious sites. In fact, Speidel seems to regard this without much wonder as a very lightly held Roman control over the area south of Aswan in which it was partly policy and partly expediency to let Nubians build at and use religious sites. There are possible parallels mentioned elsewhere on the Roman periphery. This seems much more balanced to me than the befuddlement Edwards and Welsby seemed to bring to the fact that both “sides” were building in this stretch at the same period. I would like very much first to assemble the evidence we have of such activities and then to reapproach the meaning of such activities, delving deeper into the Roman approach to frontiers generally for context.