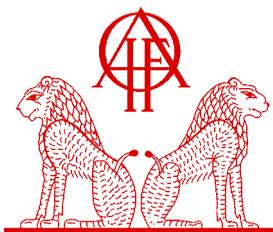


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The Red Sea in Pharaonic Times

Recent Discoveries along the Red Sea Coast

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Pierre Tallet

The Red Sea in Pharaonic Egypt Assessment and Prospects

IN 1976, the Egyptian archaeologist Abd el-Moneim M. Sayed, to whom we wish to dedicate this series of studies, discovered the pharaonic seaport of *S3ww* on the present-day site of Mersa Gawasis.¹ Here, a series of votive monuments, fashioned out of ships' anchors, some engraved with commemorative texts, revealed some exceptional information: the inscriptions, dating to the reign of Senusret Ist, gave details of an expedition launched during that period from some point on the coast to the mysterious Punt region, which most researchers nowadays locate on the southernmost coastline of the Red Sea. The Ankhu stela discovered on site even gave an idea of how the Egyptians in the Middle Kingdom operated: large vessels designed in the arsenals of Koptos, in the Nile Valley, were transported overland as "ship kits" to the Red Sea coast—clearly designated in the documentation by the expression *W3d-wr*, the Great Green Expanse. They were then assembled there before the expeditions set off. The number of people manning the operations—about 3500—is itself another indicator of the importance of such an activity for the pharaonic State at the time. This discovery aroused considerable interest as soon as it was presented in the *Revue d'Égyptologie*², and many saw in it evidence of a new dimension of pharaonic civilization: little known for their proficiency in maritime affairs, the ancient Egyptians nevertheless seemed to have been able seamen, capable of organizing long sea voyages. However, a small number of researchers³ fiercely contested this interpretation of the data. One of the main stumbling blocks was the interpretation of the term *W3d-wr* which some people believe never refers to the sea, but rather to the green stretches of the Nile valley; the other debate concerned the sitting of the Punt region, often identified as being in central Africa, reached only by the Nile. The site's function as a port was regularly challenged, and the ships' anchors discovered there were considered to be votive monuments with no special link to maritime navigation.

1. SAYED 1977; 1980; 1983.

2. SAYED 1977.

Since 2001, our knowledge of the Red Sea in the pharaonic era has evolved considerably, thus reframing, to a large extent, the terms of the debate. When, in 2001, excavations were resumed at the Mersa Gawasis site, led by the joint team of the Naples Oriental Studies University and Boston University under the direction of Rodolfo Fattovich and Kathryn Bard, they produced a rich harvest of additional information about the use of the site, making it henceforth impossible to deny its function as a port. Over the years the mission has unearthed a great number of additional anchors many of which were not used for votive purposes (Zazarro, Abd el-Maguid, in this volume). In addition, major parts of vessels were discovered in or around storage galleries dug into the rock face of a cliff on the site (Zazarro, Calgagno, in this volume). A considerable number of commemorative stelae show that the site was used regularly over a period of at least two hundred years covering the whole of the 12th dynasty (Mahfouz, in this volume). These results provide evidence of the contacts between Egypt and the Bab el-Mandab region (Bard, Fattovich, in this volume) and have enabled researchers to carry out more specific study of the conditions in which Egyptian ships navigated on the Red Sea (Ward, in this volume).

In that same year 2001, excavations were also launched at the Ayn Soukhna site by a research partnership between Ismailia University (Mahmoud Abd el-Raziq), the IFAO (Georges Castel) and Paris-Sorbonne University (Pierre Tallet). This site, situated in the north of the Gulf of Suez, has also produced a large amount of information allowing it to be interpreted as an embarkation point on the Red Sea, probably from a very early date. Excavation has brought to light a considerable network of storage galleries similar to those found in Mersa Gawasis, some of which had been used as hangars for ships. Parts of vessels, which seem to have been specifically designed for maritime navigation were found there, charred but complete (Abd el-Raziq *et al.*, Pomey, in this volume). Study of epigraphic information has enabled us to understand that the site was set up at an early point in Egyptian history (from the 4th dynasty onwards at least), no doubt in order to cross over to the eastern bank of the Gulf of Suez and the copper and turquoise mines in Sinai (Tallet, in this volume). More generally, it is noted that the Red Sea appears to have been, from earliest times, an extremely important hub of communication, which partly explains the considerable involvement of Egyptian civilization in the whole of the Eastern Desert (Gasse, Masquelier, in this volume).

The conference held in Cairo and Ayn Soukhna in January 2009 offered a valuable overview of these various aspects of the study of the Red Sea, by giving many specialists interested in this geographical area the opportunity to exchange ideas about their research topics. We are only sorry we cannot publish in the Proceedings the contribution by Gregory Mumford, who has been excavating the coastal site of el-Markha on the western coast of the Sinai since 2002, as his conference paper never reached us in its definitive form. That particular site is indeed an important milestone in the analysis of Red Sea navigation in the pharaonic era since it is

3. For example, NIBBI 1981.

the first to evince an Egyptian disembarkation point level with the Sinai mining zone, which appears to have been used essentially during the Old Kingdom period.⁴

The material presented in these studies should however not be considered as bringing the study of the Red Sea in the pharaonic era to a close, but rather as another stage on what may well prove still to be a long road ahead. There has indeed been an acceleration in the rate of discoveries since the 2009 conference. Fresh documents have come to light, enabling researchers to be ever more specific about several of the topics discussed in these pages. One major advance, which may once more radically transform our understanding of the topic, has been made on the Wadi el-Jarf site opposite the el-Markha site mentioned above. This area had been mentioned a long time ago—in particular in J.G. Wilkinson’s travel notes—as featuring a significant complex of galleries dug into the rock, a few kilometres from the coastline, where remains of wood and broken pottery were found.⁵ Additional observations were made in the same place by François Bissey and René Chabot Morissot who were both pilots in the Gulf of Suez during the 1950s. Their notes have recently been published thanks to Ginette Lacaze and Luc Camino in a slim volume in the memory of these two great amateurs of Egyptian history.⁶ Although the political situation in Egypt at that time did not enable the team to pursue any further research, François Bissey did publish a note in the *Bulletin de la Société de l’Isthme de Suez* in order to mention the discovery of an ancient wharf in the region, about 5 kilometres away from the above-mentioned galleries.⁷ In June 2011, a joint mission of the IFAO, the University of Paris-Sorbonne and the University of Assiut made an initial excavation on the site. Carried out in the light of knowledge gradually acquired in Mersa Gawasis and Ayn Soukhna, the mission was immediately able to reveal the presence there of a similar coastal site. Excavation of certain galleries produced, as well as quantities of ceramics dating from the 4th dynasty, sizeable wooden parts undeniably used for shipbuilding, proving that these galleries were regularly used as storage facilities for disassembled vessels. On the coast, confirmation was found of a very large L-shaped wharf (160 × 120 m) facing the dominant north wind. Level with this structure, on the seabed, more than twenty stone anchors, characteristic of the pharaonic era, as well as several large jars identical to those found in the gallery area were discovered.

This particular example is only given to show, if such proof were still needed, that the history of the Red Sea in the pharaonic era has not yet been fully written, and that current exploration of already known sites, and the possible discovery of others in the area are still likely to have profound repercussions on our knowledge in this domain. We simply hope that the scientific material gathered in these pages may constitute a significant stage in the study of this topic, until another meeting in ten years or so is able to set out a fresh assessment.

4. MUMFORD, PARCAK 2003; MUMFORD, 2006.

5. WILKINSON 1832.

6. LACAZE, CAMINO 2008.

7. BISSEY 1954.

