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Navigated Spaces, Connected Places

Proceedings of Red Sea Project V

Held at the University of Exeter
16-19 September 2010

Edited by
Dionisius A. Agius, John P. Cooper,
Athena Trakadas and Chiara Zazzaro

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A New Pharaonic Harbour in Ayn Sokhna (Gulf of Suez)

Pierre Tallet[1]

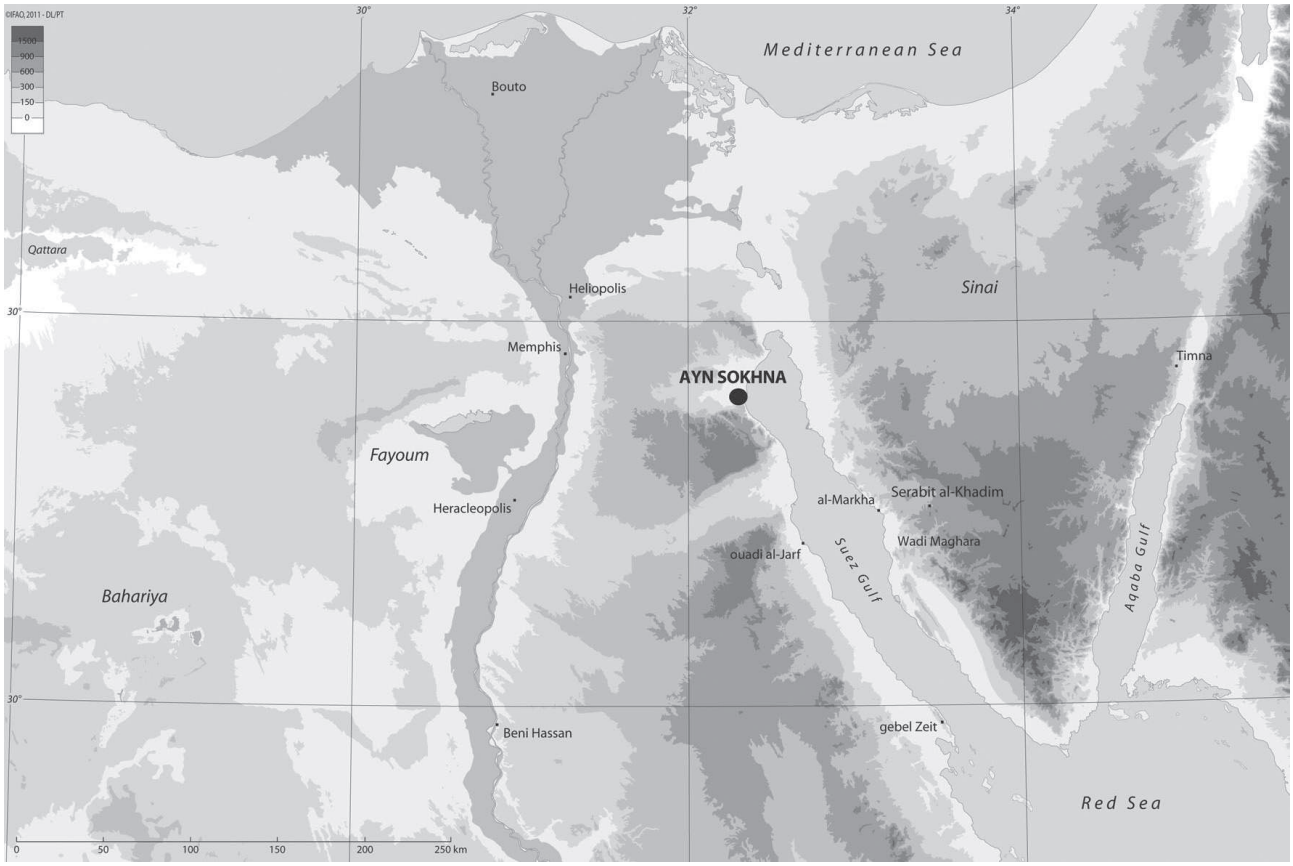


Figure 4:1. Egypt with location of Ayn Sokhna (D. Laisney).

Ayn Sokhna is located on the western bank of the Gulf of Suez, 120 km east of the modern city of Cairo (Figure 4:1). The Arabic name for the site is due to the presence of a hot water spring which emerges at the foot of the Gebel el Galãla el Bahariya overlooking the site, and flows directly into the nearby sea. The excavation and study of the archaeological remains, which were first brought to attention in 1999, have been conducted on a yearly basis since 2001 by a joint team from the Institut français d'archéologie orientale and the University of Paris-Sorbonne.[2] It has been gradually established, during the course of these investigations, that the site was occupied extensively for over a millennium during the Pharaonic period, from the Old Kingdom to the New Kingdom. The latest finds clearly indicate the existence at the site of a port which seems to have been used mainly by vessels crossing over to the south of the Sinai Peninsula on the other side of the gulf.

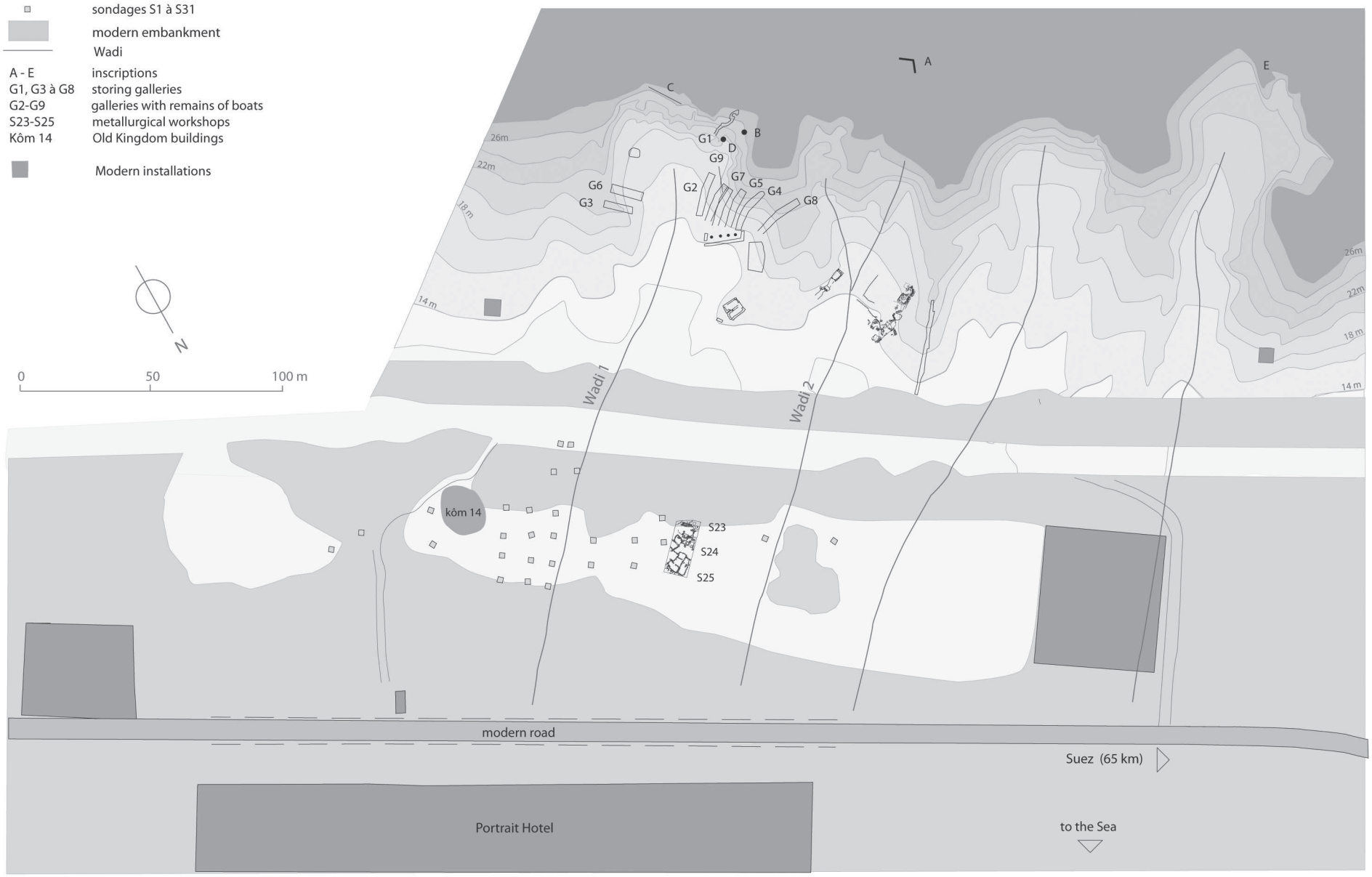
The site's most apparent feature, from the outset, has been an engraved rock wall dominating the area where the archaeological vestiges are concentrated. In particular, it bears an important series of inscriptions dating to the Middle Kingdom (from the reign of Montouhotep IV, ca. 2001-1994 BC, to the reign of Amenemhat III, ca. 1850-1804 BC), which immediately point to the connection between Ayn Sokhna and the southern Sinai zone that was mined by the Egyptians in the Pharaonic period. Indeed, the texts refer to a "mining land", the common designation for that region in the Middle Kingdom, and mention turquoise, which is one of its most distinctive resources; they also record the names of some of the men in charge who left written testimonies of their stay in the Sinai mines.[3]

The use of the site as a harbour has now been corroborated through the systematic investigation of a series of storage

1. It is my pleasure to thank Hélène Perrin for the translation of this text.
2. The excavations are directed by Mahmoud Abd el-Raziq, Ismaelia University, Georges Castel, IFAO, and the present author.

3. Abd el-Raziq 1999; Abd el-Raziq *et al.* 2002.

Figure 4:2. General map of the Ayn Sokhna site (G. Castel).



galleries dug into the foot of the mountain that overlooks the site (Figure 4:2). The 2005 and 2007 field seasons successively uncovered two boats that had been carefully dismantled and stored in galleries G2 and G9 (Figure 4:3).[4] Unfortunately, there remains little more than burnt timber since the craft were obviously subjected to deliberate destruction during the troubled times of the Second Intermediate Period. Setting fire to these boats might have been the surest way to curb the Egyptian's expeditions for those who were bothered by them. Nonetheless, the detailed analysis of these remains, conducted by Patrice Pomey (CNRS, Centre Camille Jullian), yields valuable information. The boats were made of cedar wood and specifically designed for seafaring expeditions, as evidenced by the chosen method of construction with double mortise-and-tenon joints.[5] The boats are estimated to have been ca. 13-14 m long, which makes for quite respectable-sized vessels. Radiocarbon dating, which was conducted on several timber samples, reveals that the last time the boats were stored before being destroyed by fire probably occurred toward the end of the Middle Kingdom or during the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1700 BC).[6] It can be inferred from such discoveries that the site was used extensively throughout the Middle Kingdom as a temporary harbour for expeditions to the mines in the south-west of the Sinai Peninsula.

The latest developments in the excavations, however, provide new insight into these findings. It has been concluded that the site had also been used under similar conditions during the Old Kingdom (ca. 2700-2200 BC). At that time, the place seems to have been densely occupied, and the storage gallery system initially created.[7] Two official inscriptions now provide substantial evidence of this early occupation. They were discovered in 2009 and 2010 in storage galleries G6 and G1, which had not been excavated until then because they were in a poor state of preservation.

The first text was found 3 m into gallery G6, on the left-hand side wall that had been smoothed over with plaster coating. The inscription was written in black ink on a surface estimated to be around 65 x 40 cm in size. Unfortunately, only a small part of the document – perhaps

Figure 4:3. Planks of a burnt boat, gallery G2, Ayn Sokhna (photo P. Tallet).

4. Abd el-Raziq *et al.* 2006; Tallet 2006.
5. If single mortise-and-tenon joints and L-shaped mortises for individual stitches are characteristic of naval construction in Pharaonic Egypt, double mortises are only attested on planking from Lisht (Ward 2000: 113-5), from Wadi Gawasis (Ward & Zazzaro 2007, Ward & Zazzaro 2010: 31-2) and from Ayn Sokhna (Pomey, forthcoming). One might think that the double mortise system, whose obvious function is to reinforce the structure, is a peculiarity of seafaring (Wadi Gawasis, Ayn Sokhna) and cargo (Lisht) ships.
6. Some of the thickest planks of those boats were found to pre-date that period by more than 500 years – this is an "old wood effect" which is not surprising because the inner part of an old tree is much older than the date of the tree's felling. It does not mean that those boats date from the Old Kingdom.
7. Abd el-Raziq *et al.,* forthcoming.

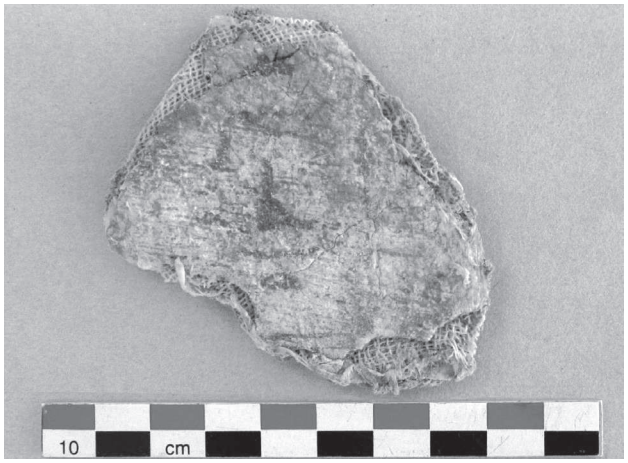


Figure 4:4. (right) Mention of a the recording of a kbnt-*boat, a "Byblos" type of vessel , gallery G6 (photo P. Tallet).*

Figure 4:5. (below) Top line of an Old Kingdom inscription, gallery G1 (photo P. Tallet).

one-third – was still intact when it was discovered, as the upper part of the wall had collapsed in antiquity. What remains seems to have been distributed between at least six columns separated by vertical lines, although the bottom of the composition, which displays horizontal annotations, may have followed a different organisation. The writing and what can be observed of the "layout" of the various elements are reminiscent of the meticulous grid-like framework of the Abusir papyri used to record the accounts of the royal mortuary temples towards the end of the 5th Dynasty. A few other fragments of the text were found on flakes of plaster lying at the foot of the wall. These are significant since they disclose the name of the king who ordered the expedition, Djedkare – Isesi, the eighth and second-to-last sovereign of the 5th Dynasty (ca. 2380-2350 BC), whose sealings had already been discovered at the site during previous field seasons.

Although it is impossible to reconstitute the whole document, its structure is quite clear: following the king's titular – which begins with his Horus name – is a short narrative detailing the main aspects of the expedition, i.e., the means of transportation, the itinerary, and the goods that were brought back. The last section was probably devoted to recording the different categories of staff. One of the noteworthy features of the fragmentary document is the recording of a *kbnt*-boat, a "Byblos" type of vessel which Egyptians seem to have used particularly for long seafaring expeditions (Figure 4:4).[8] To date, this is the most ancient mention of such boats in any Egyptian document.

A similar find was made during the January-February 2010 field season, in the largest gallery, which had suffered more collapse damage than any of the other galleries over the years. A few metres into the gallery, the wall on the right-hand side was filled in with rocks and stones and then smoothed over with plaster during the Old Kingdom. On the prepared surface, yet another expedition-commemorating text was inscribed in black ink (Figure 4:5). The state of the document is excessively fragmented as the plaster coating has crumbled and gradually slipped to the foot of the wall. Most of the text has not been preserved but what remains bears the date of the 7th census of the reign of King Isesi (around year 14 of his reign), thus providing the date of a previously unknown expedition to the Sinai. The top line of the text also shows the name of an expedition leader, one Sed-Hetepi, and provides one of the first distinct attestations of the imaged toponym used to refer to the Sinai Peninsula in ancient Egypt, "the terraces of turquoise (*ḫtjw mfkȝt*)":

> *[…] sp 7 ȝbd 4 šmw sw 4 : wpt jrt n jmy-r mšʿ Sd-Ḥtp(j) r ḫtjw mfkȝt*
>
> *"[…] the 7th time ['of the census' / or 'after the census'], 4th month of the shemou season, day 4: a mission undertaken by the leader of the troop Sed-Hetepi, towards the Terraces of turquoise"*

Fortunately, the same name is also attested in other sources found in the Sinai itself, most notably in inscription IS 10, mentioning a 1,400-strong expedition, which was discovered in Wadi Maghara.[9]

8. Tallet 2010.

9. Gardiner *et al.* 1952: n° 19, pl. IX; completed by Edel 1983: 158-63.

The discoveries made during the last two field seasons at the Ayn Sokhna site thus confirm the role of this settlement in the organisation of seafaring expeditions on the Red Sea as early as the Old Kingdom. They can be clearly connected with the material that was brought to light in the mining area itself, in the southern Sinai, and especially with that of Wadi Maghara, which holds most of the Old Kingdom inscriptions found in the region.

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