

Marsa Gawasis (Wadi Gawasis) and the Egyptian Seafaring Expeditions to Punt

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In 1976, during the First International Conference of Egyptology in Cairo, I had the privilege to listen to Abdel Moneim A.H. Sayed (University of Alexandria, Egypt) announcing his discovery of a Middle Kingdom port at Wadi Gawasis on the Red Sea coast, and was fascinated by the evidence of a possible Egyptian navigation to Punt in the early 2nd millennium BCE he was collecting.¹ At that time, I was just beginning my personal investigation in the northern Horn of Africa and the Egyptian trade with this Punt was already emerging in my mind as a crucial problem to better understand the social and economic development in the regions facing the southern Red Sea.

In 1981, one year after I started a major archaeological project in the Gash Delta near Kassala (Eastern Sudan),² Abdel Moneim Sayed honored me with his visit in Naples for a direct exchange of opinion about the location of Punt, as he was one of the first scholars to understand the potential contribution of the research at Kassala to this problem. In this occasion, Sayed gave a passionate lecture to my students in Ethiopian Archaeology and those of late Claudis Barocas in Egyptology about his fieldwork at Wadi Gawasis. This lecture convinced me that his identification of the site with the port for seafaring expeditions to Punt was right and stimulated a more intense interest and involvement of mine with the Red Sea archaeology.³ Actually, the location of Punt on the African side of the southern Red Sea,⁴ the Egyptian maritime trade in the Red Sea in the 2nd millennium BCE,⁵ and the role of Wadi Gawasis in this trade at

least in Middle Kingdom became crucial elements in my tentative reconstruction of the process of State formation in the northern Horn of Africa.⁶

Unfortunately, Abdel Moneim Sayed could conduct only two field seasons at Wadi Gawasis in 1976 and 1977 with test excavations mainly aimed at recovering textual evidence. These excavations provided evidence of inscribed stelae, potsherds with painted (hieratic) inscriptions, and some structures associated with the stelae, Sayed interpreted as small votive shrines. The occurrence of round-topped carved stones, which have been identified as anchors⁷ and a fragment of carved cedar timber with a mortise, most likely from a boat, was the main evidence of the possible use of the site as a harbor for seafaring expeditions.

The discovery of a small shrine built with blocks of limestone and two possible anchors at the base in the central sector of the site was particularly significant. The whole structure was a memorial stele recording an expedition of the “Overseer of the audience-chamber” Ankhow to Bia-Punt during the reign of Senusret I (*ca.* 1956–1911 BCE). Another relevant stele recording an expedition to Bia-Punt of the “Vizier” Antefiqer at the time of Senusret I was found in the western sector of the site. This expedition consisted of 3756 people, including 500 sailors and 3200 soldiers.

The inscriptions recording expeditions at the time of Senusret I, Amenemhat II (*ca.* 1911–1877 BCE), Senusret II (*ca.* 1877–1870 BCE), and Senusret III

(*ca.* 1870–1831 BCE) suggested a dating of the site to the Twelfth Dynasty. The calibrated radiocarbon dating of three samples from pieces of cedar wood, rope and halfa grass respectively on the contrary suggested a longer use of the site from the late 3rd to mid-2nd millennia BCE.⁸

On this evidence, Sayed identified the site with the Twelfth Dynasty (*ca.* 1985–1773 BCE) Port of Saw/Saww from where seafaring expeditions were sent to Punt.⁹

These results, though accepted by many scholars,¹⁰ were controversial. A maritime archaeologist, Honor Frost, who visited Wadi Gawasis in 1991, supported Sayed's interpretation of the site as a port,¹¹ although an underwater survey of the Bay by Cheryl Ward in 1994 did not record any ancient evidence.¹² On the contrary, Alessandra Nibbi (1976, 1981), who visited the site in the late 1970s, and Claude Vandersleyen (1991, 1996) rejected the identification of the site as a port, suggesting mainly on a philological ground that Egyptians did not use a maritime route to Punt and were navigating only on the Nile.

In 2001, University of Naples "L'Orientale" (UNO), Naples; and the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (IsIAO), Rome, Italy, in collaboration with Boston University (BU), Boston, USA, resumed the systematic archaeological investigation of the site, under the direction of Rodolfo Fattovich (UNO/IsIAO) and Kathryn A. Bard (BU). The project aimed at testing in the field the hypothesis of a maritime trade with the regions of the southern Red Sea (northern Horn of Africa and/or southern Arabia) in 3rd–2nd millennia BCE, as part of a long-term investigation about the origins and development of early hierarchical societies and ancient States in the northern Horn of Africa in progress at UNO since the early 1980s.¹³

The archaeological research in Tigray (northern Ethiopia), Eritrea, and western Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands, suggested that the development of local hierarchical societies and ancient States in the 3rd millennium BCE to 1st millennium CE, greatly depended on the progressive inclusion of this region into an interchange circuit between the Mediterranean countries and those of the Indian Ocean, which generated the maritime trade route of the Erythrean Sea in Roman Times.¹⁴ According to this reconstruction, a shift of the commercial routes from the Nile Valley to the Red Sea in the 2nd millennium BCE was a major aspect of this process, as it consolidated an inter-regional Afro-Arabian circuit between the opposite regions of the southern Red Sea, which was the background to the later inclusion of Eritrea and Tigray into the area of south Arabian political and economic influence in Sabean times (1st millennium BCE) and the formation of an early State in these regions. This shift, in turn, was explained with an initial location of Punt in the northern Horn of Africa and an increasing Egyptian maritime trade with this region in the 2nd millennium BCE.¹⁵

The UNO/IsIAO and BU expedition has conducted five field seasons, so far, December 2001 – January 2002; December 2002 – January 2003; December 2003 – January 2004; December 2004 – January 2005; and December 2005 – January 2006.¹⁶

Marsa Gawasis is located on a coral terrace (*ca.* 4–6 m above sea level) at the northern end of Wadi Gawasis, about 22 km south of Safaga. The site occupies an area of about 14 ha and is delimited by the seashore to the East, the Valley of Wadi Gawasis to the South, and a playa to the West. Archaeological remains are visible both at the top and base of the coral terrace. Most of the site is still well preserved. Only the central sector is almost completely destroyed because of the construction of a railroad.

The excavations have demonstrated the occurrence of a very well preserved stratigraphic sequence with ceramics dating from the Late Old Kingdom/First Intermediate Period to Early New Kingdom along the western slope of the terrace.

The following main features were identified during the excavation:

- 1) Small circular structures, *ca.* 2.0–2.5 m in diameter, scattered on the top of the terrace, with two main clusters in the central and northern sectors of the site.

These structures were framed on the surface with a circle of small pebbles. Some of them were associated with postholes and hearths. Most likely, they were the foundations of small huts or tents. Fragments of Middle Kingdom pottery were found outside these structures.

- 2) Light structures on the top of the terrace, to the West of the modern railway.

They consisted of a concentration of postholes, about 5–6 cm in diameter, sometimes with a wood pole inside, associated with Middle Kingdom pottery. A wall made with coral blocks, at least 10–15 m long, was also erected along the southern edge of the terrace in the south–western sector of the site.

- 3) Eleven ceremonial structures along the eastern edge of the coral terrace, close to the seashore. These structures were already recorded and partially excavated by Abdel Moneim Sayed, who interpreted them as ceremonial monuments related to Red Sea maritime expeditions during the Twelfth Dynasty. Most of these structures were associated with Middle Kingdom inscribed stelae, and sometimes with arrangements of limestone anchors.

A stone enclosure, two small shrines, and a platform have been re-investigated by the UNO/IsIAO and BU expedition, so far.

The enclosure with an inner small horseshoe-shaped stone structure was roughly oval with a main East–West axis *ca.* 10–12 m long. Both, the enclosure and the stone structure, opened to the East. Several postholes were found inside the enclosure. The occurrence of limestone fragments, most likely from an anchor, in an opening near the entry of the enclosure suggests that the structure was related to a maritime activity. Only a few potsherds dating to Middle Kingdom were collected in this structure.

The two small shrines consisted of two small chambers built with vertical slabs of conglomerate stone, which were sustained by a cairn made with pieces of coral and conglomerate stone or gravel. Both cairns contained fragments of limestone from anchors, shells, potsherds, and other materials.

The stone platform, *ca.* 1.2 m high from the original surface, was built with conglomerate slabs covered with coral and limestone blocks and consisted of an oval platform with a ramp to the West, *ca.* 9 m x 10 m in size. Originally, the whole structure was covered with compacted sand mixed with gravel and a frame of mangrove wood. Most likely this structure was an open-air altar facing the sea with a West–East orientation. On the top of this structure over 650 conch-shells from the Red Sea and Indian Ocean had been left on this platform, probably as offerings by sailors—the only evidence of a ritual which is not recorded in ancient texts—as no evidence of possible use for manufacturing shell artefacts was found.

- 4) Three tumuli along the western edge of the terrace.

The first tumulus, partly excavated by Sayed, consisted of a circular mound of coral blocks mixed with soft sand, 4–5 m in diameter and 0.7–0.8 m high, and a possible alignment of coral and other stones with a southwest–northeast orientation immediately to the east of the structure. Fragments of textiles, cordage, and branches were found inside the structure, and a great amount of Middle Kingdom ware was collected around it.

The second tumulus was originally a roughly circular tumulus made with coral blocks and sand, 8–9 m in diameter. This monument was partially excavated by Sayed, who found an inscribed stele of Antefiqer (Twelfth Dynasty).

The third tumulus consisted of a circular concentration of small coral blocks, *ca.* 3 m in diameter, mixed with sand, dark pebbles, pottery and some big shells, and many Middle Kingdom potsherds and lithics at the top of the feature.

- 5) Four large man-made caves which were used as storage for parts and rigging of seafaring ships at the western side of the coral terrace. The caves are *ca.* 15 m x 4 m in size with independent entries. The entry of at least two caves had constructed walls with anchors, limestone blocks, and wood. Stone anchors were located outside the entries. One of these caves contains over 80 perfectly preserved coils of rope of different sizes used on ship(s). These caves can be therefore considered as a maritime arsenal.

Outside the cave entrance were small carved niches, four of which still contained limestone stelae. Carved on the best preserved stele was the cartouche of Amenemhat III, who ruled about 1800 BCE, above an offering scene to the god Min. The hieroglyphic text below this scene is about two expeditions led by officials Nebstu and

Amenhotep to Punt and Bia-Punt, the location of which is uncertain. The stele provides new historical information about this King, who ordered previously unknown expeditions to these regions. Another stela with the five names of Amenemhat III was also found in a niche close to the entrances of the caves. Unfortunately, part of the inscription is lost.

A deposit of 21+ plastered wooden boxes of ship cargo were found in front of the caves. One of the boxes had a painted inscription “... the wonderful things of Punt” with the partially preserved cartouche of Amenemhat III, indicating that the boxes contained products from Punt. This inscription was carefully recorded in the site but could not be preserved as the state of preservation of the wood was poor. Many fragments of clay sealings with the imprint of seals dating to the late Twelfth Dynasty were found in the same area of the boxes.

Two ostraca were also found. One of them is surely an administrative text recording food provisions.¹⁷

- 6) A large man-made cave (*ca.* 5 m x 5 m in area) along the western side of the terrace to the north of the former ones.

This cave may have been used for storage, as pieces of cedar boat parts and five grinding stones were found inside. A broken ceramic ostrakon with a poorly preserved hieratic inscription was found there.

- 7) Structures associated with bread molds, pottery and very few copper slags at the base of the western edge of the terrace.

A small undisturbed oven and the remains of another oven were discovered on the top of a prepared floor on the western slope of the coral terrace. The undisturbed oven, which was

rectangular in shape (54 cm long, 45 cm wide, and 27 cm high), was constructed with three reddish–brown ceramic slabs with rounded tops in which a central groove (2 cm deep and 2.5–3.0 cm wide) had been made. The ceramics suggest a Middle Kingdom date for the ovens.

An area of intense activity with evidence of many fireplaces and thousands of fragments of bread molds¹⁸ was found at the base of the western slope of the coral terrace. Two possible phases of occupation and use of this area were identified. The evidence of the later phase included at least three postholes, three aligned hearths, and mud-brick or clay structures. The evidence of the earlier phase included two contemporary living room floors with many potsherds and fragments of bread molds. Based on the associated ceramics both phases of use date to the Middle Kingdom.

8) Possible workshops for the manufacture of lithic tools in the northern and central sectors on the top of the terrace.

Some evidence of unfinished limestone anchors was also found by Sayed at the base of the south–western terrace.

Well preserved, large planks from ships with their fastenings still in place were mainly found inside and outside the man-made caves along the western side of the terrace.¹⁹ The ceramics associated with these planks denotes to a Middle Kingdom date. Inside the entrance of a cave and on top of the windblown sand, two cedar steering oars were found. Pottery dating to the early Eighteenth Dynasty (*ca.* 1500–1400 BCE) was associated with these oars.

The presence of extensive damage to planks and fastenings by the shipworm, or marine borer, provides irrefutable evidence of seafaring. Most of the timbers were in contexts that indicate their reuse in ramps and walkways, and many of them were significantly

reworked. In addition to evidence recovered from some 40 timbers, wood debris fragments probably related to the dismantling of ships in an aggressive careening and rot-removal process were also recorded. Wood from Syria–Palestine, Nile Valley, and Red Sea mountains was used for the construction of the boats.²⁰

Over forty fragments of “Nubian” pottery, similar to Middle Nubian samples from domestic C-Group and Kerma assemblages dating to *ca.* 2100–1400 BCE, were also collected. A few fragments might be earlier as they are similar to Nubian ceramics in assemblages of the First Intermediate Period (*ca.* 2185–2050 BCE) at Elephantine.

Exotic ceramics include a few fragments from regions along the southern Red Sea.

A polishing tool made from a reused potsherd of a black-topped ware vessel decorated with engraved triangles forming a rim-band may have been imported from Eritrea, the only region where such a decorated ware is known, but from a later time, in the late 2nd–early 1st millennia BCE.

A fragment of a vessel decorated with stick-polished black lines is comparable to specimens from the region of Kassala (eastern Sudan) dating to the late 3rd–mid 2nd millennia BCE or the region of Aden (Yemen) dating to the mid-2nd–early 1st millennia BCE.

Two fragments of rims with a thickened lip are comparable to ceramics from the region of Hodeida (Yemeni Tihama), dating to the 2nd millennium BCE.

Finally, two fragments of rims with a truncated lip are similar to specimens from the region of Aden dating to the late 3rd – early 2nd millennia BCE.

Imported wood includes evidence of ebony most likely with an African origin.

In conclusion, archaeological and epigraphic evidence from Marsa Gawasis indisputably documents a maritime function of the site in the Middle Kingdom. The inscriptions from Marsa Gawasis clearly indicate that the site was mainly used in the Twelfth Dynasty (*ca.* 1985–1773). The ceramics, however, suggest a longer use of the site from the Late Old Kingdom or First Intermediate Period to the Late Middle Kingdom, and again in the early Eighteenth Dynasty.

A geophysical survey with magnetometer at the base of the western and southern slope of the terrace recorded some interesting anomalies which suggested the occurrence of a shore along the southern slope of the coral terrace.²¹ The shells from the sand of this shore contained a great quantity of marine organisms suggesting that the Bay was much deeper in the past. Close to this shore a big conglomerate anchor and Middle Kingdom potsherds were found.

Geoarchaeological investigations were also conducted at the base of the western slope of the coral terrace and the results supported the hypothesis that the mouth of Wadi Gawasis was originally a lagoon.²²

Finally, a more detailed investigation of the geographical setting of the site suggested that the location of the Middle Kingdom harbor at Marsa Gawasis most likely depended on the following factors:

The marina was easily accessible from the Sea through a channel cutting the coral reef up to the coast. Moreover, the Bay could provide a better shelter to boats than other larger Bays such as Marsa Gawasis.

The Wadi Gawasis, about one kilometer to the North, could provide a direct route into the Nile Valley across the Red Sea Hills.

Most likely Playa Lakes providing fresh water could have formed in the Wadi in historical times, as a complicated mixture of eolian, colluvial and alluvial deposits is visible at the site.

Different kinds of raw materials also existed close to the site: hard rocks, such as granite, basalt, chert, and limestone are found in the area; mud from the Playa and clay deposits at a short distance (up to about 2 km) from the site along the Wadi Gawasis could be used to make pottery and mud-bricks; mangroves could provide wood for shelters and fuel for the kilns; halfa plants from pools along the Wadi could be used to make ropes.

The results of the first five field seasons of the UNO/IsIAO and BU Expedition thus support the initial identification of the site at Marsa Gawasis/Wadi Gawasis with a Port for seafaring expeditions to Punt from the late 3rd–mid–2nd millennia BCE. The exotic materials moreover heavily suggest a location of Punt in both the Arabian and African regions of the southern Red Sea.

Notes

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- 1 A.M. Sayed, ‘Discovery of the Site of the 12th Dynasty Port at Wadi Gawasis on the Red Sea Shore’, in W.F. Reineke (ed.), *Acts of the First International Conference of Egyptology* (Berlin, 1979a), 569-578.
- 2 R. Fattovich, ‘Ricerche archeologiche italiane nel delta del Gash (Kassala), 1980-1989: un bilancio preliminare’, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 33 (1991a), 89-130.
- 3 R. Fattovich, ‘L’archeologia del Mar Rosso: problemi e prospettive. Note in margine alla recente pubblicazione di due siti costieri della Somalia settentrionale’, *Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, 55 (2) (1995), 158-176.
- 4 K.A. Kitchen, ‘Punt’, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* 32 (IV, 8), (1982), 1198-1201.
- 5 T. Säve-Söderbergh, *The Navy of the Eighteenth Dynasty* (Uppsala, 1946); K.A. Kitchen, ‘Punt and how to get there’, *Orientalia* 40 (1971), 184-207.

- 6 R. Fattovich, 'The Problem of Punt in the light of recent field work in the Eastern Sudan', in S. Schoske (ed.), *Akten des Vierten Internationalen Ägyptologen Kongresses – München 1985*, 4 (Hamburg, 1991b), 257-272.
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- 8 A.M. Sayed, 'On the Non-Existence of the Nile-Red Sea Canal (so called Canal of Sesostri) during the Pharonic Times', in *The Red Sea and its Hinterland in Antiquity* (Alexandria, 1993), 127-141, Fig. 1.
- 9 A.M. Sayed, 'Discovery of the Site of the 12th Dynasty Port at Wadi Gawasis on the Red Sea Shore', *Revue d'Égyptologie* 29 (1977), 140-178.
- 10 A. Manzo, *Echanges et contacts le long du Nil et de la mer Rouge dans l'époque protohistorique (III^e et II^e millénaires avant J.-C.)*, (Oxford, 1999).
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- 13 R. Fattovich, 'The Near East and Eastern Africa: Their Interaction', in J. Vogel (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Precolonial Africa* (Walnut Creek, 1997a), 479-484.
- 14 R. Fattovich, 'Remarks on the Pre-Aksumite Period in Northern Ethiopia', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 23 (1990), 3-33.
- 15 Fattovich, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 33, 89-130.
- 16 Participants to the fieldwork of the expedition were Trina Aprin (BU), Geoarchaeologist (2003–2006); Kathryn A. Bard (BU), Archeologist (2001–2006); Alfredo Carannante (University "Suor Orsola di Benincasa", Naples, Italy), Malacologist (2005/2006); S. Terry Childs (US National Park Service, Washington DC, USA), Archeometallurgist (2003–2006); Glen Dash (BU), Geophysicist (2005/2006); Andrea D'Andrea (UNO), Surface Surveyor (2005/2006); Rodolfo Fattovich (UNO/IsIAO), Archeologist (2001–2006); Reiner Gerish (Free University, Berlin, Germany), Paleobotanist (2005/2006); Magaly Koch (BU), geologist (2001); Chen Sian Lim, (National University of Singapore), Archeologist (2004/2005); El-Sayed Mahfuz (University of Assyut, Assyut), Egyptologist (2002–2006); Abdel Moneim Mahmud (Ain Shams University, Cairo), Geomorphologist (2001–2004); Andrea Manzo (UNO), Archeologist (2001–2006); Mohammed Mustafa (SCA), maritime Archaeologist (2005/2006); Carla Pepe (University "Suor Orsola di Benincasa," Naples, Italy), Archeologist (2005/2006); Cinzia Perlingieri (UNO), Archeologist, Ceramic Analyst and Illustrator (2001–2006); Rosanna Pirelli (UNO), Egyptologist (2002–2006); Gwendoline Plisson (Sorbone, Paris, France), Archeologist (2005/2006); Fathma Selim (Qena University, Qena), Egyptologist (2001/2002); Abdel Moneim Sayed (University of Alexandria, Alexandria), Egyptologist (2001/2002); Stefano Tilia (Treerre, Rome), Surface Surveyor (2001–2006); Benjamin Vining (BU), Geophysicist (2005/2006); Cheryl Ward (Florida State University), Maritime Archaeologist (2005/2006); Chiara Zazzaro (UNO), Archeologist (2001–2006). The Supreme Council for Antiquities, Cairo, was represented by Saad Ekhet Abd Elhafz (2001/2002), Elal Mahmud Ahmed (2002–2005), Moamen Saad (2003/2004), and Amer Gad El-Karim (2005/2006), Quseir Inspectorate, Quseir. The project was conducted with grants by UNO, IsIAO, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Rome), and generous contributions by Mr. Wallace Sellars, Solebury, PA (USA) and Glen Dash Charitable Foundation, Woodstock, CT (USA).
- 17 All inscribed evidence has been examined by Dr. El-sayed Mahfuz, University of Alexandria and Asyut, and Dr. Rosanna Pirelli, UNO.
- 18 The bread molds were initially identified as tuyeres.
- 19 This evidence has been studied by Cheryl Ward and Chiara Zazzaro.
- 20 The type of wood was analysed by Rainer Gerisch.
- 21 The survey was conducted by Glen Dash and Benjamin Vining.
- 22 This investigation was conducted by Trina Arpin.