

Wadi Hammamat on the Road to Punt

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Among the major contributions which Egyptology science owe a lot to Dr. Abdel Moneim Sayed, one of the most fascinating ones is the discovery at Marsa Gawasis of the harbor or “harbor station”,¹ very probably the Egyptian *š3ww*, from which the expeditions of Punt, in the Middle Kingdom, embarked or where they disembarked. Being a close neighbor of the Eastern Desert, I would like to dedicate these pages to my distinguished colleague.

On some monuments found in Wadi Gawasis, as well as on the very site of Marsa Gawasis, principally dated Middle Kingdom, the Land of Punt seems to be related with some texts detailing the usual titles of the members of the faraway expeditions. Three of the Sesostri I reign mention the Mine of Punt (*Bi3-(n)-Pwnt*), another one, carved under Amenemhat II reign, and which was found a few kilometers from there, only mentions Punt. Besides, three of these documents allude to the God’s Land.²

Whatever the location of Punt, whether in Arabia or in Africa, it is clearly and emulously admitted that Wadi Hammamat was one of the compulsory roads to or back from it. Let us give the precision that the name “Wadi Hammamat”, in the Egyptology literature, only indicates the breccia and greywacke—the famous *bekhen*-stone—quarries located, nowadays, in between the road which links Coptos to Quseir, but not the whole of this road or even the first part, as indicated in some geographical maps.

This contribution gives me the opportunity of comparing the data well-known since the earlier publications³ and the discoveries of Dr Abdel Moneim

Sayed with the inscriptions cleared out within my works at *IFAO* (years 1987–1989; I am, currently, preparing the publication of these inscriptions). Let us put it that way, immediately, the inscriptions I brought to broad daylight do not reveal any direct allusion to whatever expedition to Punt. As far as the already known inscriptions are concerned, whose list will be found below, they are not very explicit, indeed.⁴

The only mention of Punt *in situ* appears in the famous text engraved by Henu (or Henenu), in Year 8 of Mentuhotep III:⁵

“[My Lord, life, prosperity,] health! sent me to dispatch some *kebenyt*-ships to Punt to bring for him fresh incense from the Sheikhs over the Red Land, thanks to the fear that the King provokes all through foreign countries. Therefore, I left Coptos (11) by the way His Majesty had commanded me to follow”.

In this text whose passages are not all very clear, Henu (or Henenu) mentions a travel to Punt from Coptos and a travel back from the God’s Land and maybe another destination,⁶ carrying precious products exclusively for the monarch,⁷ that he is conveying through Wadi Hammamat and which seem to have been carried through the Red Sea. The text does not point out if Henu joined the expedition but it indicates that he sent ships and conveyed the products for the king. This extraordinary mission was certainly the most striking episode in Henu’s career and so, deserved to appear clearly in his biographic inscriptions, wherever they were located; the one in his tomb in Deir el-Bahri⁸ obviously alludes to it in

the passages in hiatus. The mention of this expedition in the quarries of Wadi Hammamat does not prove that this Valley was one of the roads to Punt, but that it could be followed on the way back.

Three texts mention *t3 ntr*, the God's Land, general term to name the areas producing incense in eastern⁹ or south eastern¹⁰ Egypt among which appears Punt; however, according to L. Bradbury (1988), the God's Land is, before the New Kingdom, the area of the Eastern Desert under the protection of Min of Coptos and is therefore very distinct from Punt.

The first example lies in the same stela of Henu.¹¹

"Now, after my return from Wadj-wer, after I had executed the command of His Majesty and brought for him all the gifts found on the shores of the God's Land, I returned to/by (?) Wag (?) of/and Rohanu. I brought for him beautiful blocks of stone for the temple statues."

I will not, here, comment on the identification of Wadj-wer.¹² As to Ro-hanu, it is a well-known designation of Wadi Hammamat, but the word *wag* (?) may allude to another country.¹³

The second attestation is dated Year 2 of Mentuhotep IV.¹⁴ It appears, at the beginning of the text, among the epithet of Min and his favorite fields.

"His pure place of heart's content, set above the deserts of the God's Land".¹⁵

The last occurrence lies in the huge stela of Year 3 of Ramses IV.¹⁶

"He opened up the way to the God's Land which those who had existed previously had not known, a way far removed from the minds of other people, their minds being ignorant of how to enter it."¹⁷

The reign of this monarch shows a strong return to activity in Wadi Hammamat, which has been

rather little attended—if we trust the scarceness of the inscriptions *in situ*—during the New Kingdom. Several texts reveal the presence of gangs who had come under the reign of this king, to extract blocks of greywacke. The big inscription of Year 3 commemorate the fourth expedition of the reign, by far the most important, which involved more than 9,000 men—from whom 8,368 came back safe and sound, led by the high priest Ramsesnakht. The unexpected presence, during this expedition, of this eminent representative of the priesthood of the capital, assisted by the highest dignitaries which are seldom seen in this type of expedition, has been enhanced and its historical importance is worth estimating. The sentence quoted *supra* belongs to the first part of the text, the royal eulogy. Among the thousands of formulas taken from this kind of stereotypes, this one is quite original; it probably alludes to a very precise historic event, about which we have no information, but which undoubtedly echoed back a modification of the roads used by the Egyptians to reach God's Land and maybe Punt. The second part describes the expedition very precisely: the workers hired and the techniques used. Only the works realized in Wadi Hammamat in order to extract the blocks of *bekhen*-stone are mentioned.

As to the most famous expeditions to Punt, known through various documents generally found far from the Eastern Desert, we could expect to find some echo in Wadi Hammamat, if it really was one of the compulsory roads to the country of incense. Rather than list the total travels, I only consider here the most significant ones. No trace, indeed, of the expeditions carried under the reigns of Sahure and Isesi.¹⁸ No mention is made either of Anankhta who went to Punt for the account of Pepi I.¹⁹ Under the same reign, a certain Khnumhotep was sent to Byblos and to Punt, which he reveals by an inscription in his tomb in Qubbet el-Hawa.²⁰ This inscription gives

the names of the two treasurers of the god whom he went with during these expeditions, Tchetchi and Khui. Those two men, P.E. Newberry mentioned, probably also appear in Wadi Hammamat in several graffiti;²¹ the British scientist believed the texts had been engraved “when Tjetjii was passing through the famous Wadi on his way to or from Pwenet, for it is well known that the Egyptians used this overland route through the Eastern Desert to the port of the ancient *š3ww* (Koser), and there embarked on ships for the southern land”. Still according to P.E. Newberry, it is probably the same man, not yet a treasurer of the god, who appears in the inscription²² carved in year 36 of Pepi I, for the first *Sed*-festival. An unpublished inscription (provisional n° 3004) also mentions one treasurer of the god Tchetchi. Nothing in those inscriptions allows to assert that these persons report their going to Punt rather than to seek the *bekhen*-stone.

The Middle Kingdom, as mentioned above, is illustrated by the travel of Henu under Mentuhotep III, together with the monuments found by A.M. Sayed, and especially the stela of vizir Antefoqer, found 250 meters far from harbor Marsa Gawasis²³ which makes it clear that he was sent to the Mine of Punt by Sesostri I. The inscriptions of the same date in Wadi Hammamat²⁴ do not mention Punt and are only dedicated to the work of extraction of the greywacke.

The relations between Egypt and Punt in the New Kingdom are shown in a glorious way by the expedition Hatshepsut sent in this country and whose narration through pictures in Deir el-Bahri remains the most complete and the most precise document at our disposal on this mythic country. Now then, there is no mention of the queen in Wadi Hammamat. Thutmose III also received tributes from Punt. The Menkheperre whose cartouche is engraved in Wadi Hammamat is not this king. Furthermore, if these two monarchs have not sent any expedition to look

for the stone of Wadi Hammamat, they have left to the posterity masterpieces cut out in this material;²⁵ obviously they disposed of a stock of blocks of freestone together with satisfying quality. Certainly it is in Coptos, quite close to the sculpture workshops, that these stones were stocked.²⁶

Sethi I, as to him, left on the site large inscriptions dedicated to the details about the exploitation of the quarries. Ramses III sent to Punt an expedition which, once back “touch land in the gebel of Coptos” crossed the Desert as far as the harbor of Coptos before joining the Residence.²⁷ The fact that the fleet touched land in *Saww* is really credible,²⁸ but once again, surprisingly Wadi Hammamat does not keep any trace of such an expedition, all the more that the P. Harris I does not mention Ro-hanu, and there is no element to assert that the “Gebel of Coptos” point out this area. One may establish, during the following periods, the same lack of mention of Punt in the inscriptions of Wadi Hammamat, and the same lack of Wadi Hammamat in the texts linked with Puntites explorations.

The still unpublished inscriptions indicate much information about some expeditions or already known persons, as well as new elements to complete the already gathered documentation. As far as the Old Kingdom is concerned on this site, and also in many other Wadis of the Eastern Desert, the number of new inscriptions is particularly important. The investigations led in this area during the last decades especially by the German teams²⁹ and the American ones³⁰ are particularly interesting and perfect what was found in Wadi Hammamat. On the whole, the “new” Old Kingdom inscriptions include an important number of graffiti giving only one or a few names—mostly those of members of the teams whose works have been largely developed in Wadi Hammamat; for instance, the overseer of craftsmen Kaimedu is mentioned many times. Thanks to the scattered graffiti in other Wadis, the presence of many

treasurers of the god together with a certain number of overseers of the foreign gang can be noticed; on the other hand, we cannot take in many titles linked with the extraction of numerous stones with which the Eastern Desert is glutted. It is very probably about expeditions dedicated both to the exploration and to the “police of the desert”—Pepi I and his successor Merenre assigned numerous forces to the relationships with the inhabitants of the Desert; that is what Weni’s biography relates. Beside these isolated graffiti, several inscriptions have been found, more important and better presented, mentioning one or some expeditions led in these faraway sites, for the first *Sed*-festival of Pepi I, and especially a text explaining fully an expedition which occurred under the reign of Merenre, but in no way alludes to Punt. I will come back to that.

In the Middle Kingdom, the “new” inscriptions of Wadi Hammamat are fewer. The most important is the one of the herald Ameney, dated to the reign of Sesostri I, which perfects our knowledge about the role of this man in the expeditions led to seek the *bekhen*-stone,³¹ but nothing connects between these works and Punt.

Concerning the New Kingdom, the unpublished texts are still fewer. Apart from a few texts in hieratic, one can notice two big hieroglyphic inscriptions. One certifies the reopening of the quarries under the reign of Ahmose. The other one, dated the reign Sethi I, mentions the almost incongruous presence of an alabaster sculptor in the domain of the greywacke, and increases what we already know about the presence of this monarch in Wadi Hammamat.

All these new texts offer us information about the activity of the quarries of *bekhen*, but not about the expeditions to Punt.

Among these unpublished inscriptions, the Old Kingdom inscriptions, although seemingly

not bringing any direct information about the relationship between Egypt and Punt, are by far the most interesting and deserve particular attention.

Of all the reigns of this period, Pepi I is the best represented, as well in the already known inscriptions as in the unpublished ones. The latter fully confirms this datum. Several isolated graffiti mention men who are already known *in situ*. This seems perfectly normal for a reign which lasted nearly half-a-century, but in reality it appears that the great majority of the texts were carved for the occasion of the first *Sed*-festival of the monarch, celebrated in Year 36 and for which he sent expeditions to the main quarries of the country to have magnificent sculptured monuments to rise the pomp of the event. Two inscriptions commemorating this celebration under the form of more or less developed boards were already known³² and so was half of a third one which is presented rather similarly;³³ two new boards in the same very polished style (provisional Nos. 3103 and 3123) can be added, each one with the names of the king and mentioning the celebration.

The most important discovery was undoubtedly an inscription carved under Merenre reign. It is presented as a big board with a height of 60 cm and a width of 70 cm, very delicately carved in an extremely friable surface. It involves four lines of big hieroglyphs giving the date and the names of the those in-charge of the expedition. Below, the text is divided into several unequal parts. The main one, in more than twenty columns, providing the details of the full effective strength who came to Wadi Hammamat. The presentation follows closely the one of a text carved in Year 36 of Pepi I³⁴ and which names the principal members of the great expedition that had come to take the blocks of *bekhen*-stone for the *Sed*-festival of the king; the surface of the latter text is more important, but the content less developed. Those two inscriptions, of a unique extent and composition for

the Old Kingdom, somehow foreshadow the big texts amply developed in the Middle Kingdom.

The expedition took place during the year after the second census, that is to say the Year 4 of Merenre, short after the middle of this brief seven-year reign. The monarch is mentioned in only another text of Wadi Hammamat³⁵ which does not give the full titulary of the king: it is a board which is composed exactly like the above-mentioned ones (provisional Nos. 3103 and 3123), the only difference being that in this text there is no mention of a celebration. In their presentation, both inscriptions of Merenre copy very precisely the important texts carved by his predecessor; the process is well-known when a monarch wishes to officially show his faithfulness, and even his legitimacy with regard to another king. This is very interesting, as far as Merenre is concerned, for some historians consider him as his father's co-regent.

The name of the chief of the expedition has unfortunately been lost, a splinter of the rocky surface having taken away the end of the second line, but there is his complete titulary; a remarkable element is that his first titles (*h3ty-ꜥ, imy-is, mniw Nhb, iry-tp Nhn*) compose a quite unusual sequence that can also be found especially in the titles of Weni who traveled the main quarries of the country, first under Pepi I, then under Merenre, and in those of Herkhuef, famous for his faraway travels ordered by His Majesty. Three important persons, of whom two treasurers of the god, are going with the chief of the expedition. The name of the first person, Meryptahankhmeryre, the sole companion, greatest of the directors of craftsmen belonging to the day of festival(?), is effectively certified in Wadi Hammamat. Indeed, it is the name of a director of the works who led the expedition ordered for the first *Sed*-festival of Pepi I, three inscriptions testifying of this.³⁶ Given the difference between the two titularies mentioned, it is easy to hesitate to see in it the same person, although

it is not surprising that civil servants having worked under Pepi I, and more particularly in the last part of his reign, can still be employed under his successor, with titles revealing a very classical promotion.

However, the technical data provided by this inscription bring to light an expedition which could equal in importance the one of the Year 3 of Ramses IV,³⁷ which was composed, in the beginning, of more than 9,000 men; only the one of Year 38 of Sesostri I³⁸ outnumbered it with more than 18,000 men. Apparently, indeed, our gang would have gathered between 7,000 and 9,000 men, escorted by a huge herd of donkeys. As to the work accomplished, if its nature is not clearly detailed, we can infer from the text that it lasted three months, which is rather a long time, if we compare with the maximum times, about two months, recorded in the other texts until today.

What is there to conclude from all this? In the Middle Kingdom, Wadi Hammamat has undoubtedly been once the way back from Punt, for, in this precise case, it had been decided that it was more profitable to gather an expedition to the faraway country of the incense with a supply in *bekhen*-stone, all this with a detour through the quarries of Ro-hanu. One does not know if the gangs landed in *š3ww* or in a port located more south of this area. Not any archeological trace, currently, appears to reveal a harbor settlement in the south of Marsa Gawasis before the Ptolemaic period. No other text seems to confirm that the gangs heading to Punt had obviously gone through this Valley, because it is unbelievable that such an expedition has not deserved to be mentioned in a text engraved in a site which was so popular. As well as Coptos is the ideal starting point towards the Red Sea, since it is located at the very place where the Nile makes a curb further East, it is necessary to think about the fact that the Egyptians chose the most direct route to reach Marsa

Gawasis through the Eastern Desert.³⁹ Due to this fact, the tracks starting from Wadi Qena appear to offer an opportunity to spare some days of walking compared to the detour through Wadi Hammamat. However, there is no doubt that Ramses IV stela, above-mentioned, confirms that the routes had changed with the time passing. While the total Wadis is far from having been visited by today's explorers, the harvest of graffiti already gathered clearly shows that the Egyptians never stopped scouring the most remote tracks in the Eastern Desert. As to Wadi Hammamat, even if it was just an occasional stop on the road to Punt, it is, without contest, thanks to the riches of its quarries that since the mists of time it had attracted thousands of men, in expeditions requiring an exceptionally strict and efficient management.

Notes

* CNRS Montpellier, France.

- 1 D. Meeks, 'Coptos et les chemins de Pount', *Topoi*, Supplément 3 (Lyon, 2002), 325, n. 316.
- 2 Cf. A.M. Sayed, 'Discovery of the Site of the 12th Dynasty Port at Wadi Gawasis on the Red Sea Shore', *RdE* 29 (1977), 138-178, pl. 8-16; A.M. Sayed, 'The Recently Discovered Port on the Red Sea Shore', *JEA* 64 (1978), 69-71; A.M. Sayed, 'Observations on recent discoveries at Wādi Gawāsis', *JEA* 66 (1980), 154-156.
- 3 Essentially J. Couyat et P. Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouādi Hammāmāt*, MIFAO 34 (Le Caire, 1912); G. Goyon, *Nouvelles inscriptions rupestres du Wadi Hammamat* (Paris, 1957).
- 4 Cf. K.A. Kitchen, 'The Land of Punt', in Th. Shaw, P. Sinclair, B. Andah, A. Okpoko (eds.), *The Archaeology of Africa. Food, Metals and Towns* (London, 1993), 587-608; C. Vandersleyen, *L'Égypte et la vallée du Nil* (Paris, 1995), 35, n. 1.
- 5 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouādi Hammāmāt*, MIFAO 34, inscription n° 114, l.10.
- 6 Vandersleyen, *L'Égypte et la vallée du Nil*, 34 with bibliography.
- 7 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouādi Hammāmāt*, MIFAO 34, inscription n° 114, l.15, see translation *infra*.
- 8 W.C. Hayes, 'Career of the Great Steward Henenu under Nebhepetre Mentuhotpe', *JEA* 53 (1949), 43-49, pl. IV.
- 9 J. Osing, Gottesland, *LÄ* II (1977), col. 815-816.
- 10 Ex. G. Posener, 'L'or de Pount', *Ägypten und Kusch. Schriften zur Geschichte und Kultur des alten Orients* 13, (1977), 340; Meeks, *Topoi*, Supplément 3, 272.
- 11 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouādi Hammāmāt*, MIFAO 34, inscription n° 114, l.15.
- 12 Vandersleyen, *L'Égypte et la vallée du Nil*, 27 with bibliography; Meeks, *Topoi*, Supplément 3, 319-326.
- 13 Vandersleyen, *L'Égypte et la vallée du Nil*, 35-36.
- 14 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouādi Hammāmāt*, MIFAO 34, inscription n° 192, l.6.
- 15 Translation after M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, I (London, 1975), 114.
- 16 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouādi Hammāmāt*, MIFAO 34, inscription n° 12, l.9.
- 17 Translation after A. Peden, *Egyptian Historical Inscriptions of the Twentieth Dynasty*, Documenta Mundi series, Aegyptiaca 3 (Jonsered, 1994), 94-95.
- 18 The cartouche of the latter appears *in situ* in the name of Isesi-āa who probably lived under Pepi I: Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouādi Hammāmāt*, MIFAO 34, inscription n° 107, p. 24.
- 19 *Urk.* I, 134.
- 20 P.E. Newberry, 'Three Old-Kingdom Travellers to Byblos and Pwener', *JEA* 24 (1938), 182-184.
- 21 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouādi Hammāmāt*, MIFAO 34, inscriptions n° 64, p. 60 et 34, p. 46, pl. X.
- 22 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouādi Hammāmāt*, MIFAO 34, inscription n° 107.

- 23 Sayed, *RdE* 29; D. Farout, 'La carrière du wlmw Ameny et l'organisation des expéditions au ouadi Hammamat au Moyen Empire', *BIFAO* 94 (1994), 142-172.
- 24 Farout, *BIFAO* 94.
- 25 Thoutmosis III's statue, Cairo CG 42054, or Senenmut statue in Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth AP 85.2: C.A. Keller, The Statuary of Senenmut, *Hatshepsut. From Queen to Pharaoh* (New York, 2005), 129.
- 26 Cf. M. Gabolde, 'Les ateliers de sculpture de Coptos', *Coptos, l'Égypte antique aux portes du désert* (Lyon, 2000).
- 27 P. Harris I, 177, 8-178, 1; P. Grandet, *Le Papyrus Harris I* (Le Caire, 1994), I, 338.
- 28 Grandet, *Le Papyrus Harris II*, 258-259.
- 29 Cf. R. Klemm, 'Neue Expeditionsinschriften aus des Ostwüste Oberägyptens, I: Geländekundliche Analyse der Inschriftenvorkommen im Wadi Dungash und Wadi Umm Hode', *MDAIK* 54 (1998), 237-249, pl. 26-34; E. Eichler, 'Neue Expeditionsinschriften aus Ostwüste Oberägyptens, II : Die Inschriften', *MDAIK* 54 (1998), 250-266.
- 30 L. Bell, J. Johnson, D. Whitcomb, 'The Eastern Desert of Upper Egypt Routes and Inscriptions', *JNES* 43 (1984); R.D. Rothe, W.K. Miller, 'More Inscriptions from the Southern Eastern Desert', *JARCE* 36 (1999), 87-101; R.D. Rothe, G. Rapp Jr, W.K. Miller, 'New Hieroglyphic Evidence for Pharaonic Activity in the Eastern Desert of Egypt', *JARCE* 33 (1996), 77-104.
- 31 A. Gasse, 'Ameny, un porte-parole sous le règne de Sésostris I^{er}', *BIFAO* 88 (1988), 83-93, pl. VI; Farout, *BIFAO* 94.
- 32 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouâdi Hammâmât*, *MIFAO* 34, inscriptions n° 62 and n° 63.
- 33 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouâdi Hammâmât*, *MIFAO* 34, inscription n° 103.
- 34 Goyon, *Nouvelles inscriptions rupestres du Wadi Hammamat*, inscription n° 21, p. 55-56.
- 35 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouâdi Hammâmât*, *MIFAO* 34, inscription n° 60, p. 58, pl. VI.
- 36 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouâdi Hammâmât*, *MIFAO* 34, inscription n° 61 et 107, Goyon, *Nouvelles inscriptions rupestres du Wadi Hammamat*, inscription n° 21.
- 37 Couyat, Montet, *Les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques du Ouâdi Hammâmât*, *MIFAO* 34, inscription n° 12.
- 38 Goyon, *Nouvelles inscriptions rupestres du Wadi Hammamat*, inscription n° 61.
- 39 Cf. L. Bradbury, 'Reflections on Traveling to « God's Land » and Punt in the Middle Kingdom', *JARCE* 25 (1988), 127-156.