

On the Meaning of the Egyptian Term *Wedj wer*

Claude Vandersleyen*

Thirty years ago, at the First International Congress of Egyptology in Cairo, Professor Abdel-Moneim Sayed made known the discovery of a Middle Kingdom site on the Red Sea shore. I attended this memorable session and listened with great interest to the lecture of our colleague. It was a Twelfth Dynasty site, with inscriptions from the time of Sesostris I, and it was the first time—and the only one, until now—where the term *wedj wer* appeared in a text found on the Red Sea shore.

For a long time, the Egyptological community has hesitated about the meaning to be given to the term *wedj wer*: ‘sea’ or something else?; and waited for a conclusive statement about the meaning ‘sea’, actually the then accepted meaning. The discovery at Marsa Gawasis seemed to sweep away the few people thinking that *wedj wer* does not mean ‘sea’. Nevertheless, the Egyptological community is still split up, because any new document in such a difficult problem as *wedj wer* creates as much riddle as answers.

The firmness of the group who believes strongly that *wedj wer* means ‘sea’ results from the very history of Egyptology. From mid-nineteenth century onward, the developing discovery of documents, their decipherment and translation, built up that conviction. Without explaining in details, there was the revelation of the ‘sea people’ under Ramesses III, the journey to Punt depicted on the walls of Deir el-Bahari that was unimaginable but on sea; the tale of The Shipwrecked Sailor, whose tempest could not be thought on the Nile, Alexandria built ‘on the shore of the *wedj wer* of the *Haou Nebout*’ what was

understood as ‘the Greek sea’, it is the Mediterranean, because in the inscriptions of the Rosetta Stone, from the time of Ptolemy V, the Greek writing was called ‘*Haou Nebout* writing’, not the least a mention of Cyprus in the Canopus Decree where the island was said in the middle of *wedj wer*.

The Twelfth Dynasty port discovered by Professor Sayed on the shore of the Red Sea brought then an additional important stone to the file of *wedj wer*. Nevertheless, the fight ‘against or for the sea’ did not stop after all. Both sides received supports, mainly the party of the sea, among others Kitchen, Yoyotte, Obsomer, and more. The other side was essentially sustained by Alessandra Nibbi and myself.

In order to establish the correct way to go to Punt, possible either by the Nile or by the Red Sea, Professor Sayed published recently an excellent paper¹ in which he attempted to find out a localization of the Land of Punt, analysing the products brought back from this Land and known mainly through the inscriptions and representations at Deir el-Bahari. The most favorable place to find frankincense trees, Hatshepsut’s men brought 31 of them into Egypt, is near the north-east coast of Somalia, so Professor Sayed concluded his researches. Navigation from Mersa Gawasis to Somaliland is a noticeable length, about 2800 km in a difficult Sea. I am quite inexpert in tropical botany; I record simply the detailed and well-informed results given by the author. Others in the past had thought of Somalia as well and the difficulty of navigation made them never question this possibility.

To go back to the inscriptions found at Mersa Gawasis, the most puzzling term in this context remains *wedj wer*. The Punt problem concerns essentially the itinerary. That Egyptian fleets were able to such an achievement of navigating by the Red Sea to the north coast of Somalia, as difficult as it may be, is quite possible and not unlikely at all, but it is not the only way to bring 'the marvels of Punt' into Egypt. The transit of these products through the Nile Valley is attested². Moreover how have we to understand the text added to the figurations of Hatshepsut's ships coming back from Punt 'they landed at Karnak (*ipet sut*)', without mentioning any interruption in this navigation, for instance to bring the ships from the Red Sea into the Nile Valley? What to do with the extensive documentation in which *wedj wer* is linked with Osiris, inundation and fecundity, all inconsistent with the Sea?

The discrepancy between the fundamental meaning of *wedj wer*, fertilizing water producing greenery in the Nile Valley, and the discovery of the term *wedj wer* on a text on the shore of the Red Sea, would disappear if it were admitted that Punt expeditions, sometimes or often, could take place in the Red Sea, from Mersa Gawasis, but that the bank of *wedj wer* where ships were built under supervision of Ameny, son of Mentuhotep, was the riverbank of the Nile, in the Coptos shipyards. Who knows?

The discovery at Mersa Gawasis, we owe to Professor Sayed, made known an exceedingly important document, questioning a large section of the tricky problem of *wedj wer*. May he be thanked and congratulated here.

Notes

- * Emeritus Professor, Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium (Louvain-la-Neuve).
- 1 The author owes, to the kindness of Professor Sayed, a copy of this paper 'On the geographical location of the Land of Punt', *Aegyptus et Pannonia* 2 (2005), 13-47.
- 2 Cf. C. Vandersleyen, 'Pount sur le Nil', *Discussion in Egyptology* 12 (1988), 76-80.