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
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. 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.

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. 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.

(on the Twelfth Dynasty (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. According to 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. These results, though accepted by many scholars, were controversial. A maritime archaeologist, Honor Frost, who visited Wadi Gawasis in 1991, supported Sayed's interpretation of the site as a port, although an underwater survey of the Bay by Cheryl Ward in 1994 did not record any ancient evidence. 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.