w3d-wr, Punt, and Wadi Hammamat: The Implication of Verbs of Motion Describing Travel*

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Over the past twenty-five years at least, there has been considerable debate about the meaning and location of the place the Egyptians called the w3d-wr, which J.P. Allen felicitously renders literally as 'the Great Blue-Green' in his grammar.¹ Since I offered a contribution to this area of Prof. Sayed's field of expertise nearly fifteen years ago, I thought that I might once more explain the significance of the use of certain verbs of motion in a number of inscriptions that pertain to the oft-debated question of the connection between w3d-wr and the Red Sea.²

Before I go any further in this discussion, I would like to point out immediately that the word w3d-wr is a relatively frequent toponym in Egyptian texts. It occurs not only in historical inscriptions, but also in temple texts, and in a variety of ‘religious’ texts as well, usually connected with the topography of the next world.³ The very fact that many scholars connect this word with the ‘sea’ should alert us to an invaluable methodological principle when one investigates common words in particular—it is very risky to suppose that such a term can be assigned one meaning. Consider for a moment, the use of ‘sea’ as it appears in dictionaries of modern European languages. Most good of these dictionaries will doubtlessly provide a large number of definitions. Some of these meanings will apply only to a very specialized context, other meanings will have become obsolete or rare, while still others might represent metaphorical extensions of the term; there may even be some slang expressions or misuses included in the list. Examining a common word can lead to some valuable insights into other lexicographical pitfalls as well, especially by reminding us that language is a dynamic phenomenon. In short, we should expect that common words by their very nature will acquire several meanings including some rare and unusual ones. A wide range will be normal, so all apparent exceptions need not be explained away. When considering such words, it is therefore often better to examine the evidence not case by case, but rather context by context.

Some of the most interesting examples of w3d-wr connect that word with travel to the exotic Land of Punt, and occasionally, the t3-ntr ‘the God’s Land’ as well. The exact locations (if such can be said to exist) of these places are problems far beyond the scope of this paper, but I will examine here certain aspects which may have a bearing on our study.⁴ In the hope of trying to establish the meaning of the word at least within a given context, I shall limit myself largely to examples from the Eastern Desert region during the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom, essentially repeating and supplementing an argument made previously by K. Kitchen.⁵

The locus classicus for Punt travel before the New Kingdom is the much studied inscription of an Eleventh Dynasty official named Henu, who described his activities in a long graffito in Wadi Hammamat, dated to the eighth year in the reign of King Sankhkare Mentuhotep. The text relates the route he took in the following fashion (Hammamat 114, with omissions):⁶
‘[My lord, L.P.] H. sent me forth to dispatch ships (sbit knbywt) to Punt to bring back for him fresh incense (‘ntyw) from the rulers dwelling in the Red Land, fear of him pervading the uplands (ḥṣswt). Thereupon, I went up from (pr.kw m) Koptos upon the road which his Majesty had commanded me (to take), I (being) accompanied by a force (mṣ) of Upper Egypt from the wḥbw of the Theban nome from Imioteru to Shabet . . . . . (The text goes on to describe the personnel and the outfitting of the 3,000 men) . . . .

‘Now I made 12 wells on the valley floor (bḥt) and two wells in Tidḥḥt, one measuring twenty cubits, the other 30. I made another in Tisḥḥt6 of 10 by 10 cubits at all water levels.7 Then I reached the wḏḏ-wr and then I built this fleet. I loaded it with everything when I had made for it a great sacrifice of cattle and goats.’

‘When I returned from the wḏḏ-wr, I had done that which his Majesty had commanded me (to do), bringing back for him all sorts of produce that I had found on the shores of the God’s Land (ṭi nṯr). I descended from (ḥṣ.kw m) Wḥg (an unidentified place) and (or: of?) Rahenu (R-hnw, the Egyptian name for Wadi Hammamat), bringing for him precious stone (blocks) for the temple statues . . . . .’

At this point Henu stops describing his activities and concludes the narrative with several self-laudatory lines.

Lexicographical questions can seldom be answered by examining only the word(s) under investigation. Often, as in the present instance, other terms as well as the very context in which they appear, should also play a significant role in the process. The key verbs of motion in Henu’s inscription - ḫḥ ḫḥ prḥ ḫḥ hḥi - form a well-known pair of antonyms respectively meaning ‘to go up, ascend’ and ‘to go down, descend,’ or just simply ‘go’ and ‘come back.’10 These two verbs, either singly or together, are used during the period from the Old to the Middle Kingdoms in many of the graffiti left by quarrying expeditions at such places as Hatnub, Wadi Hammamat, and Wadi el-Hudi11 to describe the trip into the desert and the return to the Nile Valley. This is no minor point, but rather one that cuts to the core of the discussion. In the present inscription prḥ and hḥi apparently refer to Henu’s journey upland from Koptos into Wadi Hammamat and his return back to Koptos where he started.12 As we know from their frequent use in the appel aux vivants, Egyptian texts are much more apt to use the contrasting pair xḥi ‘to go downstream/northwards’ and xḥnty ‘to go downstream/southwards,’ when referring to travelling North and South along the Nile Valley, by boat or otherwise. Unlike the verbs prḥ and hḥi, which are never attested with a boat-determinative, the verbs ḫḥi and ḫḥnty by contrast will occasionally have the ‘walking legs’ determinative, wḥḥ. Sign-list D54.13 In Henu’s inscription the association of pri with travelling in the desert seems assured not only by the designation of Koptos as the starting point, but also by the association of the ‘rulers dwelling in the Red Land’ with that part of the trip.

Bearing in mind this specialized usage of the verbs pri and hḥi, we can summarize Henu’s itinerary in and out of Wadi Hammamat. After describing his royal commission, Henu starts his travel narrative by setting out (pri m) from Koptos, the logical place to begin if one’s intent was to travel through Wadi Hammamat and/or Wadi Gawāsīs.14 He dug wells or cisterns along his route before reaching the wḏḏ-wr, where he built the ships his assignment called for. He then descended (ḥḥi m) from Wḥg and (?)Wadi Hammamat, perhaps stopping to quarry stones along the way. In fact, it seems likely that the present graffito was inscribed at