THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN, GREEK AND HEBREW CONCEPT OF THE RED SEA

BY

MAURICE COPISAROW

THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CONCEPT

During the long history of Ancient Egypt the name defining the narrows between Egypt and Arabia has undergone several changes, keeping pace with the development of the country and its various linguistic influences. This is revealed from the stone inscriptions and papyri, including the great Papyrus Harris of Ramses III, which trace the successive phases in the history of Ancient Egypt. Thus the Red Sea is primarily seen as but a part of the vast domain of the Goddess of the Great Green. Originally the Egyptian term w; d - wr or Uatch - ur - the Great Green Water applied equally well to the Red Sea, Mediterranean or any other sea, the actual location being determined by the subject matter. At a later stage this term was enlarged by the addition of words denoting direction, people and comparative size or slope of land, thus evolving new names for different seas — as for example — Uatch - ur - ãa - Mehu meaning Very Great Green Water of the North Land, i.e. Mediterranean Sea, and Uatch - ur - Hai - nebitu meaning the Ionian Sea 1). This terminology finds an analogy in that of the Assyrians who had no direct contact with the seas.

This indefinite and general character in the terminology of the Red Sea persisted as late as the beginning of the 20th Dynasty. Thus in BREASTED'S reading of the Papyrus Harris 2) "... They (the ships) were sent forth into the great sea of the inverted water, they

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2) Papyrus Harris — found at Thebes in 1855. (British Museum 10053). Facsimile of an Egyptian Hieratic Papyrus of the Reign of Ramses III, (London, 1876). Edited by S. BIRCH.
Transcribed into hieroglyphic by W. ERICHSEN, Papyrus Harris 1, (Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca, V. Brussels, 1933).
arrived at the countries of Punt . . . ." In a footnote he states that "the inverted water is the Euphrates (see Tombos Stela, 1, 13, II, 73); hence the great sea of the inverted water is the Indian Ocean, of which the Persian Gulf (into which the Euphrates flows) is a part. The Egyptians doubtless counted the Red Sea as a part of this great sea of the inverted water, for the antique maps even far down into Arab times show the vaguest knowledge of the proper relations of these waters. It is possible to infer from this passage that Punt extended beyond the straits of Bab el-Mendeb".

Since pre-historic times the people of the Nile and Euphrates Valleys were brought into contact with one another through natural disasters, war and trade. An early reference to such contact is found in the Tombos Stela of King Thutmose I, 1525-1495 B.C. of the 18th Dynasty, whose domain extended to the Euphrates. Here the Euphrates is termed the inverted, flowing as it does in an opposite direction to the paramount Nile 1) 2). A close scrutiny of BREASTED's interpretation seems to link too rigidly the term inverted—Euphrates of the Tombos Stela with the similar term used 350 years later in the great Papyrus Harris in relation to the Red Sea. It also underrates the Egyptian seamanship of that period and their ability to differentiate between the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

In the history of Ancient Egypt the Red Sea was more than a highway for trade and war. It formed Egyptian territorial waters extending from the Sinai Peninsular 3) to the Sudan, Arabia and beyond. In the Papyrus Harris the Red Sea is generally referred to as w;śd - wr - the Great Green Sea 4), but in the passage under review the Egyptian term used is Mw kdw, translated by BREASTED as inverted but literally meaning water which is turned round. The Egyptian fleet

2) J. B. PRITCHARD, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 1950, p. 239.
3) The quest for ore, building material, slaves and other forms of material wealth provided a potent reason for external conquest and the beginnings of Empire. The Southern part of the Sinai Peninsular provided Egypt with copper and turquoise. The mines were worked from pre-dynastic times till the 20th dynasty. Thus records are found relating to Semerkhet of the 1st Dynasty (about 2950 or 2900 B.C.), Djoser and Za-nakht of the 3rd Dynasty (about 2750 or 2700 B.C.) and Snefru and Khufu of the 4th Dynasty (about 2650 or 2600 B.C.). The inscription of Hor-ur-Re at Scratib el-Khadim in Sinai may be dated from other inscriptions in the same place to the reign of Amen-em-het III (12th Dynasty, 1840-1790 B.C.). A. H. GARDINER, F. E. PEET, The inscriptions of Sinai, 1, London, 1917. J. B. PRITCHARD, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 1950, p. 227-229.
4) See ref. 4, p. 260.