

The Production Area at Mersa/Wadi Gawasis: Evidence for Multiple Craft Activities

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A large production area with remains of many intense and differentiated activities was identified at Mersa/Wadi Gawasis at the base of the western slope of the southern terrace.¹ This area was characterized by many accumulations of vessel sherds, mixed with numerous clusters of bread molds and wide areas of charcoal and ash. The principal goal of the investigations was to understand more accurately the crafts performed at the site and the resources exploited. A second goal was to gain insights into the organization, duration, and logistics of the seafaring expeditions from this site through the study of the extent and functional characteristics of this area at the site.

The interpretation of this large production area is partially compromised by four important environmental factors: a) corrosion and collapse of the coral rock in the upper terrace that carried down massive rocks, sand, and archaeological materials, which then piled up on the slope area; b) wind erosion that strongly affected the down slope area in the southern lower part; c) formation of poorly understood, crusts and nodules of salt and gypsum that compacted archaeological remains at different levels in the stratigraphy; and d) the nature of the sand deposits, which are loose, evenly colored, difficult to distinguish among different strata/living surfaces.²

Excavations confirmed that this area was intensively used for production activities. Although some initial evidence suggested metallurgical activities, such as long pipe-like ceramics initially thought to be tuyères, several characteristics of the artifacts themselves and findings during the excavations did

not support this interpretation. Instead, evidence of local pottery production, as well evidence of brewing and bread-making, opened new avenues of investigation concerning manufacturing techniques, organization of the production areas, and logistical and social aspects of crafts at Mersa/Wadi Gawasis.

Stratigraphic characteristics and fire-related structures

The archaeological deposit at WG 19 is a thick and dense stratification of thin layers and features that represent alternating episodes of use of the area over a significant span of time. Concentrations of fire pits, post-holes, and dumps of discard have been found all over the area (see the general map in Fig. 1).³ The pottery evidence from the excavation area so far points to a substantial occupation during the second half of the Middle Kingdom. There is also some evidence of a Late Middle Kingdom/Thirteenth Dynasty occupation in the upper strata, and a possible occupation in the first half of the Middle Kingdom in the lowest strata.

Ceramic Finds and Chronology

Two main chronological periods have been recognized at this unit. The earlier phase, in the lowest levels (Phase 5 in Fig. 2), is ascribed to the Early Middle Kingdom, primarily based on large-sized, restricted necked jars, the “bag-shaped” jars very common in the Early Middle Kingdom.⁴ The later phase of occupation, in the highest levels (Phases 1–4 in Fig. 2), dates to the Late Middle Kingdom, Late Twelfth/Thirteenth Dynasties.