

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 Cláudis 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, Amenophis II (*ca.* 1911–1877 BCE), Senusret II (*ca.* 1877–1870 BCE), and Senusret III