

Seafaring in Ancient Egypt

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For more than 40 years, Abdel Moneim Abdel Halim Sayed sought evidence to expand our knowledge of ancient Egyptian seafaring in texts, images, and along the Red Sea coast. His work in this area provided the first, and for many years, the only physical evidence of a second millennium BCE presence on the Red Sea and inspired a number of students and scholars to further explore questions related to the nature of Egyptian voyages on the Great Green. This brief contribution assesses the impact of Professor Sayed's discoveries at Marsa Gawasis on our understanding of the business of going to sea in the Middle Kingdom through an evaluation of relevant finds from the joint Italian–American expedition at Gawasis currently directed by Rodolfo Fattovich of the University of Naples l'Orientale and Kathryn Bard of Boston University.

The origins of seafaring in the Red Sea are currently ill-defined, but the presence of Red Sea shells at Nile Valley sites in increasing numbers from the Naqada II period onward suggest a growing familiarity with the Eastern Desert and Red Sea coast. At the same time, models, images, and by the early First Dynasty, planked wooden boats at Nile sites show a steady development of boatbuilding technology. Twenty-two ancient Egyptian watercraft built for use on the Nile date from about 3000 to about 500 BCE.¹ As Egyptian construction techniques used to build these riverine vessels differ significantly from those of later Mediterranean seagoing craft, many scholars assumed that Egyptian ships would more closely reflect Mediterranean-type construction. For example, river

crafts were built of thick planks fastened by lashing and by mortise-and-tenon joints that were not locked in place with pegs. These wooden boats are built like those of no other culture in the world then or since. I have argued elsewhere that wooden boat building technology evolved independently within Egypt in response to local conditions and within a social structure that relied on boats as a means to legitimize power through participation in a regional trade network at least occasionally accessed via the Red Sea before the third millennium.²

Early boat builders in Egypt had sufficient raw materials, easy conditions for traveling on the Nile, and other resources that made travel attractive to sedentary populations. Abundant native timbers and buoyant grasses or reeds allowed experimentation and evolution, both of which are visible archaeologically in the earliest villages in Egypt. Tracing Mediterranean seafaring this early is also tenuous, but possible through inscriptions of the Second Dynasty ruler Khasekhemwy (*c.* 2714–2687 BCE) at Byblos, Lebanon, and by identifying contact with the northern branch of Mesopotamian civilizations along a Mediterranean route.

The Palermo Stone presents scholars with the first secure written evidence for Mediterranean seafaring in a mention of 40 ships, loaded with cedar, in the early Fourth Dynasty reign of Snefru. Cedar, desired for its strength, durability, beauty, ease of working, length, and particularly its incense-like odor, grows even today in the mountains of Lebanon, and its traditional source in Egyptian texts is Lebanon. Two