

## On the Meaning of the Egyptian Term *Wedj wer*

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Thirty years ago, at the First International Congress of Egyptology in Cairo, Professor Abdel-Moneim Sayed made known the discovery of a Middle Kingdom site on the Red Sea shore. I attended this memorable session and listened with great interest to the lecture of our colleague. It was a Twelfth Dynasty site, with inscriptions from the time of Sesostris I, and it was the first time—and the only one, until now—where the term *wedj wer* appeared in a text found on the Red Sea shore.

For a long time, the Egyptological community has hesitated about the meaning to be given to the term *wedj wer*: ‘sea’ or something else?; and waited for a conclusive statement about the meaning ‘sea’, actually the then accepted meaning. The discovery at Marsa Gawasis seemed to sweep away the few people thinking that *wedj wer* does not mean ‘sea’. Nevertheless, the Egyptological community is still split up, because any new document in such a difficult problem as *wedj wer* creates as much riddle as answers.

The firmness of the group who believes strongly that *wedj wer* means ‘sea’ results from the very history of Egyptology. From mid-nineteenth century onward, the developing discovery of documents, their decipherment and translation, built up that conviction. Without explaining in details, there was the revelation of the ‘sea people’ under Ramesses III, the journey to Punt depicted on the walls of Deir el-Bahari that was unimaginable but on sea; the tale of The Shipwrecked Sailor, whose tempest could not be thought on the Nile, Alexandria built ‘on the shore of the *wedj wer* of the *Haou Nebout*’ what was

understood as ‘the Greek sea’, it is the Mediterranean, because in the inscriptions of the Rosetta Stone, from the time of Ptolemy V, the Greek writing was called ‘*Haou Nebout* writing’, not the least a mention of Cyprus in the Canopus Decree where the island was said in the middle of *wedj wer*.

The Twelfth Dynasty port discovered by Professor Sayed on the shore of the Red Sea brought then an additional important stone to the file of *wedj wer*. Nevertheless, the fight ‘against or for the sea’ did not stop after all. Both sides received supports, mainly the party of the sea, among others Kitchen, Yoyotte, Obsomer, and more. The other side was essentially sustained by Alessandra Nibbi and myself.

In order to establish the correct way to go to Punt, possible either by the Nile or by the Red Sea, Professor Sayed published recently an excellent paper<sup>1</sup> in which he attempted to find out a localization of the Land of Punt, analysing the products brought back from this Land and known mainly through the inscriptions and representations at Deir el-Bahari. The most favorable place to find frankincense trees, Hatshepsut’s men brought 31 of them into Egypt, is near the north-east coast of Somalia, so Professor Sayed concluded his researches. Navigation from Mersa Gawasis to Somaliland is a noticeable length, about 2800 km in a difficult Sea. I am quite inexpert in tropical botany; I record simply the detailed and well-informed results given by the author. Others in the past had thought of Somalia as well and the difficulty of navigation made them never question this possibility.