

w3d-wr, Punt, and Wadi Hammamat: The Implication of Verbs of Motion Describing Travel*

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Over the past twenty-five years at least, there has been considerable debate about the meaning and location of the place the Egyptians called the *w3d-wr*, which J.P. Allen felicitously renders literally as ‘the Great Blue-Green’ in his grammar.¹ Since I offered a contribution to this area of Prof. Sayed’s field of expertise nearly fifteen years ago, I thought that I might once more explain the significance of the use of certain verbs of motion in a number of inscriptions that pertain to the oft-debated question of the connection between *w3d-wr* and the Red Sea.²

Before I go any further in this discussion, I would like to point out immediately that the word *w3d-wr* is a relatively frequent toponym in Egyptian texts. It occurs not only in historical inscriptions, but also in temple texts, and in a variety of ‘religious’ texts as well, usually connected with the topography of the next world.³ The very fact that many scholars connect this word with the ‘sea’ should alert us to an invaluable methodological principle when one investigates common words in particular—it is very risky to suppose that such a term can be assigned one meaning. Consider for a moment, the use of ‘sea’ as it appears in dictionaries of modern European languages. Most good of these dictionaries will doubtlessly provide a large number of definitions. Some of these meanings will apply only to a very specialized context, other meanings will have become obsolete or rare, while still others might represent metaphorical extensions of the term; there may even be some slang expressions or misuses included in the list. Examining a common word can lead to some valuable insights into other

lexicographical pitfalls as well, especially by reminding us that language is a dynamic phenomenon. In short, we should expect that common words by their very nature will acquire several meanings including some rare and unusual ones. A wide range will be normal, so all apparent exceptions need not be explained away. When considering such words, it is therefore often better to examine the evidence not case by case, but rather context by context.

Some of the most interesting examples of *w3d-wr* connect that word with travel to the exotic Land of Punt, and occasionally, the *ḥ-ntr* ‘the God’s Land’ as well. The exact locations (if such can be said to exist) of these places are problems far beyond the scope of this paper, but I will examine here certain aspects which may have a bearing on our study.⁴ In the hope of trying to establish the meaning of the word at least within a given context, I shall limit myself largely to examples from the Eastern Desert region during the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom, essentially repeating and supplementing an argument made previously by K. Kitchen.⁵

The *locus classicus* for Punt travel before the New Kingdom is the much studied inscription of an Eleventh Dynasty official named Henu, who described his activities in a long graffito in Wadi Hammamat, dated to the eighth year in the reign of King Sankhkare Mentuhotep. The text relates the route he took in the following fashion (Hammamat 114, with omissions):⁶