

Meeting Review – Nov 2023

“Great Expeditions to God’s Land and Punt” Dylan Bickerstaffe

In November we welcomed Dylan Bickerstaff to help us explore the evidence for ancient journeys in the eastern desert, voyages along the Red Sea and the location of the land of Punt.

Dylan started by looking at the infrastructure which enabled the Egyptians to travel to Punt and began in the Gulf of Suez with the ancient harbour of Ayn Sukhana. This has similar features to the port of Wadi el Jarf, a little further to the south, which Professor Pierre Tallet talked to us about in April 2021 (see past meeting reports for a full account): a fresh water spring, a curved bay which provided shelter, easy access to Memphis and rock cut tunnels where boats and equipment could be dismantled and stored for the next voyage. Voyages from these harbours would go to south Sinai and bring back the copper which was mined there as well as turquoise. More information about Ayn Sukhana can be found at:

<https://honorfrostfoundation.org/2019/01/01/ayn-sukhna-archaeological-mission>.

Wadi el Jarf is also notable for the documentation which was found there: the work log of Merer, one of the officials in charge of workmen on the site, in the 27th year of the reign of Khufu. One section of the papyrus records the transportation by boat of white limestone from the quarries at Tura to Giza.

Further south again, is Mersa Gawasis where a similar harbour was in use in the 12th Dynasty. A stele of Senusret I and other pottery shards contained the name of Punt, a clear indication that voyages to Punt started from this harbour. The name Ber-punt also appears although it is not clear if this is Punt or a different place. The remains of imported materials at the site (pottery, obsidian and ebony) point to Punt being in Eritrea or Yemen.

Dylan also explored the possibility of a canal running from the Red Sea to the Nile which was constructed in late antiquity, credited either by the Persian Emperor Darius I or Ptolemy II, according to which classical author you read. This ran from the head of the Gulf of Suez, to the south of the Great Bitter Lake and then from the north of the Great Bitter Lake to one of the branches of the Nile in the delta.

Having looked at how goods could be transported from the Red Sea coast to the Nile, Dylan then moved on to considering the location of Punt. References to land which might have been south of Nubia begin in the old kingdom with the autobiographical inscriptions in the tomb of Harkuf at Qbet el Hawa in Aswan. He refers to a land called Iyam and also mentions bringing

back a 'pygmy' like the one brought back during the reign of Djedkare Isesi, penultimate ruler of the fifth dynasty, a hundred years earlier.

The tomb of Rekhmire, from the time of Tuthmoses III in the eighteenth dynasty, shows the tomb owner as a vizier receiving goods from a number of foreign lands including Punt. The goods from Punt include incense trees, baboons, and animal hides.

All these references do not include clear indications of the actual location of Punt. Punt is referred to as being in the east but ideas about the points the compass are not always clear. The exact location of Punt is debated by historians. Various locations have been offered: southeast of Egypt, a Red Sea coastal region, Somalia, Djibouti, northeast Ethiopia, Eritrea, and north-east Sudan – take your pick! The products which are recorded as coming from Punt include gold, frankincense and myrrh, fragrant woods, spices ebony as well as animals.

There are a number of connections which support the differing claims of these locations

- The northern coast of Somalia has lots of frankincense
- An inscription in the tomb of Sobeknakht (tomb 66 at El Kab) describes how Punt joins Nubians in attacking Egypt which suggests Punt is close to Nubia
- Hatshepsut's funerary temple shows baboons and monkeys being brought back from the expedition to Punt in her reign. Testing the strontium isotope levels in baboon mummies has revealed they came from a region which includes present-day Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, as well as parts of Somalia and Yemen.
- The tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor refers to goods coming from Punt which correspond with the good mentioned in other sources
- The tomb of Amenmose (TT89) shows him conducting trade with Punt in a chariot which suggests Africa as being the location.

As a final point about sea journeys to Punt, Dylan mentioned that the surface currents of the Red Sea change according to season which may have dictated when outward and return voyages occurred: southwards in the late summer and northwards in early spring.

Then Dylan explored the reasons for locating 'God's Land' (or Ta netjer as Punt is sometimes referred to) in the eastern desert. This was an area viewed by the Egyptians as producing special resources such as different stones and minerals. The dried up river bed, Wadi Hammamat, which runs from Qift to Al Quasyr provided a route from the Nile to Red Sea. The area produced the siltstone for the Narmer palette and the Menkaure triad. The wadi has often been felt to have a quiet and watchful atmosphere such as that described by Arthur Weigall: "a sense of being watched and judged by a supernatural presence."

Inscriptions about Henenu who was a steward of Montuhotep III describe an elaborate expedition of 3000 men through Wadi Hammamat to Punt which he commanded. Wells were dug along the way to provide water for the return journey and the ships were built when they reached the Red Sea. Goods were brought back from Punt and from the desert.

Dylan's wide-ranging talk gave us an excellent overview of the evidence of trading practices in ancient Egypt even if the jury is still out on the actual location of Punt.

Alison Woollard