

Ayn Sukhna and the Red Sea: A Preliminary Report on the Excavations of the Site 2001–2006

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Mersa Gawasis happens to be known for 30 years as a harbor on the Red Sea and in particular as the starting point of many expeditions leading to the Land of Punt (which appears in the Egyptian sources since the reign of Sahoure). The epigraphical material found there indicates expeditions loading at Mersa Gawasis under the reign of Sesostris I and Amenemhat III.¹ Recently discovered at the end of a track between Memphis and the Gulf of Suez, Ayn Sukhna now shows a new example of Middle Kingdom's harbor, once more, certainly closely linked to Sinai.

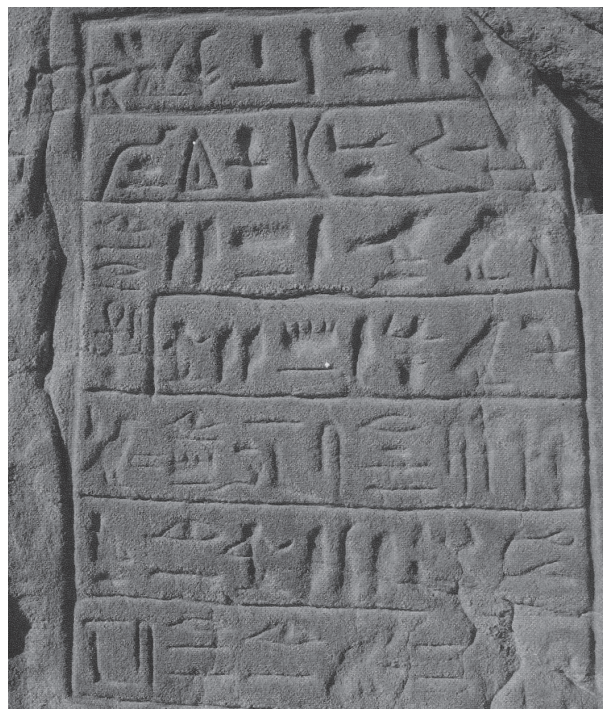
Ayn Sukhna stands out as an important site offering about 80 inscriptions, located on several rocks around the site and at the entrance of mining gallery as well.² Each and every historical period represents from Ancient Empire until Late Arab Times, New Kingdom, Ptolemaic and Byzantine periods being represented too. About 40 inscriptions can be related to the Middle Kingdom which corroborates that Ayn Sukhna was at that time an utmost important site between the Eleventh and the Twelfth Dynasties.

During 2001 started the archaeological work in Ayn Sukhna. Only nine mine galleries were discovered, implying that the mining zone was rather small.³ The mines seem to have been under Chephren or just before his reign (sealing with his name have been discovered on the site). Those galleries have been mostly changed into storage places by the expeditions. A huge quantity of archaeological material, which study is still in process, was discovered there. During the excavations in 2006, many metallurgical workshops were found, more than 20 'malachit smelting kilns' were dug up.

Those Middle Kingdom devices are the most well preserved known in Egypt nowadays. Ayn Sukhna was not only a mining site, it also used to be a harbor linked to Sinai as many epigraphical evidences show.

A stele dated from Mentuhotep IV (AS 4), describes how expeditions headed from Ayn Sukhna to Sinai search of turquoise. It is well known that this semi-precious stone was mostly extracted at Serabit al-Khadim and in the mining place of Wadi Maghara (South Sinai).

A stele, from Year 2 of Amenemhat III (AS 6) quotes the name of a scorpion expeller Ity, son of Isis



(Fig. 1) Inscription AS6, dated Year 2 of Amenemhat III, mentioning (L. 6), Expeller of the scorpions, Ity son of Isis.

(Fig. 1). The same Iti appears to be inscribed twice that same year in two inscriptions at Wadi Maghara (IS 23 and 24).⁴

The name of Panehesi, Overseer of the Silver House, leader of an expedition to Serabit al-Khadim in the Year 36 of Amenhotep III (see IS 211-222) also appears twice in Ayn Sukhna.

Recently an inscription discovered at the entrance of the mine gallery 9 gives the name of “the Terraces of the Turquoise” the usual name of Sinai from the Fifth Dynasty.

Nevertheless, those indications do not mention how expeditions actually reached Sinai. The road around the Gulf of Suez must have always been the easiest and the most usual way to reach the Peninsula. Some archaeological evidences dug out at Ayn Sukhna those last years demonstrate that these expeditions were sometimes shipped.

Two huge ship anchors were found in the gallery 9 (80 and 104 kg). On the heaviest one a Hieratic inscription can be read (Fig. 2). That red inscription probably mentions either the name of a ship, or the name of an official wearing a nautical title (Fig. 3).

Digging out gallery 2 during 2006, many fragments of burnt conifer wood were discovered that might have been part of a big ship (Fig. 4). Wooden boards (23 cm width by 10 cm depth) were discovered on four levels, they seem to have been tight together with tenons and mortises (Fig. 5), as for the bark of Cheops, discovered at Giza, ropes seem to have joined the board together. Those planks are about 6 m³ and were cautiously placed on crosspieces to avoid contact with the floor. Certain date of that material is still being in process, but several archaeological evidences would lead us to connect it either with the very end of Old Kingdom or the very beginning of the Middle Kingdom.

What could be the point of storing ships at that point of the Red Sea shore? The explanation may arise from a more global analysis of the site. As we already stated, mining activity in Ayn Sukhna mostly existed at the beginning of Old Kingdom, thereafter, run out of copper resources. On the contrary the metallurgical workshops recently dug out are all related to the Middle Kingdom. There is obviously a huge gap between the mining activity itself and the activity of the workshops. It seems as though, in certain times, copper was being shipped from Sinai to be smelted in Ayn Sukhna.

Notes

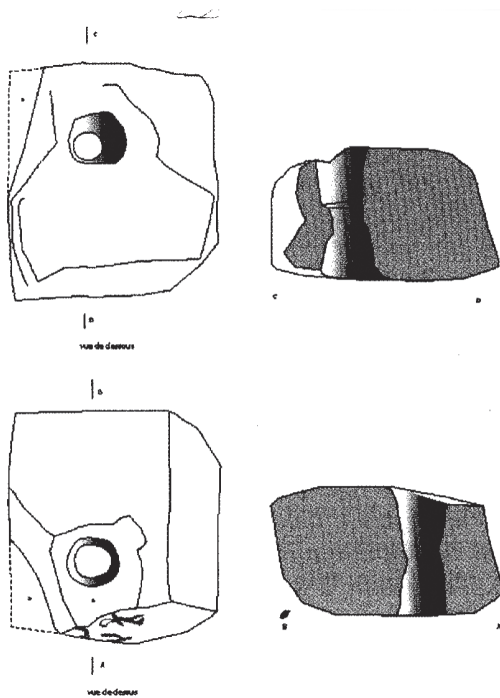
- 1 A.M. Sayed, ‘Discovery of the site of the 12th Dynasty Port at Wadi Gawasis on the Red Sea Shore’, *RdE* 29 (1977), 138-178; and for the recent excavations, the article by R. Fattovich, *Egypte, Afrique et Orient* 40 (2006), 7-30.
- 2 M. Abd El-Raziq, G. Castel, P. Tallet, V. Ghica, *Les inscriptions d’Ayn Sukhna* (Cairo, 2002) (cited AS + the number of the concerned inscription).
- 3 M. Abd El-Raziq, C. Castel, P. Tallet, ‘Les mines de cuivre d’Ayn Sukhna’, *Archéologia* 414 (2004), 10-21.
- 4 A.H. Gardiner, T.E. Peet, J. Cerny, *The Inscriptions of Sinai I* (Oxford, 1952), cited IS + no. of the concerned inscription; on Wadi Maghara in the Middle Kingdom, see also: M.-Y. Chartier-Raymond, ‘Notes sur Maghara’, *CRIPEL* 10 (1988), 13-22; M. Chartier-Raymond, B. Gratiën, Cl. Traunecker, J.-M. ‘Les mines pharaoniques du Sud-Sinaï’, *CRIPEL* 16 (1994), 1-77; Tallet, ‘Notes sur le ouadi Maghara et sa région au Moyen Empire’, *BIFAO* 102 (2002), 371-387.



(Fig. 2) Anchors discovered in 2005 on the slope of gallery 9.



(Fig. 4) View of the carbonized wood of gallery 2.



(Fig. 3) Line-drawing of the inscription of the gallery 9.



(Fig. 5) View of the details of the carbonized wood planks after restoration showing the mortises method which suggests that the planks were fastened by cords.