

Sailing into antiquity

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BU archeologist unearths clues about ancient Egypt's sea trade

By Colin Nickerson, Globe Correspondent | January 11, 2010

The archeological digs at Egypt's Wadi Gawasis have yielded neither mummies nor grand monuments.

But Boston University archeologist Kathryn Bard and her colleagues are uncovering the oldest remnants of seagoing ships and other relics linked to exotic trade with a mysterious Red Sea realm called Punt.

"They were the space launches of their time," Bard said of the epic missions to procure wondrous wares.

Although Nile River craft are well-known, the ability of ancient Egyptian mariners to ply hundreds of miles of open seas in cargo craft was not so fully documented.

Then the team led by Bard and an Italian archeologist, Rodolfo Fattovich, started uncovering maritime storerooms in 2004, putting hard timber and rugged rigging to the notion of pharaonic deepwater prowess.

In the most recent discovery, on Dec. 29, they located the eighth in a series of lost chambers at Wadi Gawasis after shoveling through cubic meters of rock rubble and wind-blown sand.

Only a few days earlier, Bard had been grading term papers in chilly Boston; now, with flashlight and trowel, she was probing a musty manmade cavern, one that might date back more than 4,000 years.

"When the last layer of sand was removed, stale, fetid air rushed from a crack," Bard said by mobile phone from the dig site, a dried-out water course beside the Red Sea.

The reconnaissance of the room and its relics will take time and caution. The chamber's most likely contents include ship parts, jugs, trenchers, and workaday linens, as well as hieroglyphic records.

"It's a storeroom, not a royal tomb," Bard stressed.

However prosaic they seem, the finds at Wadi Gawasis - including the ancestor of the modern package label - really speak of the glitter, gold, and glory of a long-ago civilization that bewitches us still.

The remote desert site at the sea's edge was established solely to satisfy the cravings of Egypt's rulers for the luxury goods of faraway Punt: ebony, ivory, obsidian, frankincense, precious metals, slaves, and strange beasts, such as dog-faced baboons and giraffes.

Starting in the middle of the last decade, the Bard-Fattovich team grabbed the attention of nautical archeologists with the unearthing of ship timbers, limestone anchors, steering oars, and hanks of marine rope. The precisely beveled deck beams, hull planks, and copper fittings belong to the oldest deep sea vessels ever found, dating back at least 3,800 years.

The craft appear to have been up to 70 feet long, powered by rowers and sail and capable of navigating deep seas.

"This is exciting stuff, important," said Shelley Wachsmann, a top authority on Bronze Age ships at Texas A&M University's Institute of Nautical Archaeology. He is not directly involved with Bard's research.

"She's found the first fragments of an ancient Egyptian seagoing vessel - a ship that actually sailed in pharaonic

times," Wachsmann said.

Now the privately funded work at Wadi Gawasis - and at the nearby port ruins, known as Mersa - is winning wider attention.

This month, Cairo's Egyptian Museum will open a special exhibition, "Mersa/Wadi Gawasis: A Pharaonic Harbor on the Red Sea," featuring, among other things, cargo seals, voyage accounts, and a shipping crate marked in hieroglyphic text: "Wonderful Things of Punt."

Said Rosanna Pirelli, curator of the exhibition: "This is an important scientific event, since the [discoveries] show a more advanced maritime technology" in ancient Egypt.

Meanwhile, the PBS science series NOVA tomorrow will broadcast "Building Pharaoh's Ship," a documentary detailing the reconstruction of a Wadi Gawasis vessel by archeologist Cheryl Ward of Coastal Carolina University. The film airs in Boston on WGBH (Channel 2) at 8 p.m.

The journeys upon the "Great Green" - as one hieroglyph-inscribed tablet found at Wadi Gawasis refers to the sea - involved fantastical feats of organization, navigational skill, and daring. Overland trade between Egypt and Punt dates to the third millennium BC. But by 1950 BC, the rival Kingdom of Kush had cut off traditional desert routes, forcing Egypt to find a new passage.

Egypt's eastern coast - then as now - was too parched to sustain a full-time port and shipbuilding center.

So, using timber hewn from the mountains of Lebanon, Egyptian shipwrights built big vessels on the banks of the Nile, near modern Qift, according to archaeology-based theory.

"These were then disassembled and transported, with all other supplies, over the desert by donkey, a journey of 10 days" to reach Wadi Gawasis, Bard said. The site adjoined a lagoon, in which a port was built. The ship parts were marked and rebuilt by number or color code.

The lagoon has long since been swallowed by sand, but satellite images hint at the remains of a slipway or dock.

Sea voyages to Punt would have been so costly and required such a massive logistical effort - probably involving thousands of workers, scribes, quartermasters, sailors, and pack animals - that they probably were launched only a few times per century.

Punt's whereabouts remain a mystery. Scholars can't even pin the realm to a continent. Bard places it on the Horn of Africa, in the region of present-day Eritrea and parts of Sudan and Somalia. Other researchers put it on the Red Sea's Asian shore, in today's Yemen.

Voyages from the port appear to have been suspended for two or three centuries because of political instability. There is evidence that Queen Hatshepsut, the female pharaoh, dispatched a last sea mission to Punt around 1480 BC, partly to obtain "mortuary incense."

Wadi Gawasis held its secrets for millennia.

Then, on Christmas Day 2004 - Bard's second season of exploring the site - she thrust her hand into an odd hole in a cliff's wall. She was thrilled to feel nothing: the indication of a larger space beyond.

Removal of rock rubble revealed a room containing a mud brick, some beads, and a grinding stone. Antiquities, sure, but Egypt's sands are littered with such millennia-old shards and scraps.

Instinct, however, told the professor from Boston that the sun-scorched slopes concealed more than broken pots and earthenware adornments. "It just felt like we were on to something," Bard said.

Within days, the team had uncovered another human-hewn cavern - this one connecting to a series of

underground storage rooms. Here were ships' timbers. Here were sea anchors. Here were bundles of intact nautical rope.

Here was a tantalizing tale of ancient seafaring.

"The rope was neatly stored, coiled, and knotted, exactly as some sailor left it," Bard said. "It was a moment perfectly frozen in time for 3,800 years."

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