

son of Meru, said, "Have no fear, peasant. Behold, you will act in accordance with what is done on my part." Then the peasant swore an oath, saying, / "On my life! Shall I eat of your bread and drink of your beer forever?" Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, said, "Now wait here, and you will hear your appeals." Then he had someone read from a new scroll every petition word for word. [...]

130 / Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, dispatched them to his Majesty, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebkaure the justified, and they were pleasing to his heart more than anything which was in this entire land. Then his majesty said, "Son of Meru, give the verdict yourself."

135 Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, caused the guards to go to [bring Nemtynakhte]. / He was brought in and a list was made [of his property ...] six servants, along with [...] his barley, his emmer, his donkeys, his pigs, and his flocks [...] of Nemtynakht [was given] to the peasant [...].

It has reached its conclusion [...]

## THE SHIPWRECKED SAILOR

**T**he narrative of the *Shipwrecked Sailor* is one of the most interesting, straightforward, and yet puzzling compositions of ancient Egyptian literature. The composition dates from somewhat later than 2000 B.C. in a single manuscript copy from not much later. Other roughly contemporary compositions are known from several manuscripts. The papyrus was found by the eminent Russian Egyptologist Wladimir Golénischeff in the Egyptian Collection in St. Petersburg, or else acquired by him. He published it in 1913, and it is now in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. It has been translated on many occasions, and every year there are at least one or two new studies and interpretations.

The basic situation involves the return of a trading, exploration, or military mission from the south and its arrival on the Nile at Elephantine at the southern border of Egypt proper at the first cataract on the Nile, the area of the new High Dam. The tale begins abruptly (one or more pages may have been missing at the beginning; see bibliography, Bolshakov 1993). A junior officer speaks to his superior, in which the former consoles his chief on what appears to be an unsuccessful mission and reassures the commander, who shows his anxiety about appearing at court before the king.

The junior officer then tells a story about his own experience when he traveled south and was shipwrecked on a desert isle (either on the Red Sea or the Nile). When he came to his senses, he was approached by the sole inhabitant

of the island, a large serpent. The serpent befriends the officer and relates its own misfortune when a shooting star fell and burnt his entire family of serpents. The serpent predicts that the sailor will be able to return to Egypt, gives him a cargo of trade goods, and bids him farewell when a boat appears. The sailor then returns to Egypt, is rewarded by the king, and hopes that his story has cheered the commander.

The commander, however, is still discouraged, and the story comes to an abrupt end, much as it begins, with the ironic and discouraging remark of the commander. Thus there are three levels: the situation of the return of the expedition, the story within a story of the sailor's experience, and the story within a story within a story of the serpent's misfortune.

Several features can be briefly mentioned. None of the protagonists is actually named, the commander, the retainer, nor the serpent. The island is also not named or located, but it is predicted by the serpent that it will disappear under the waves once the sailor leaves. Most scholars place the island off the coast of the Red Sea, but some maintain it must have been on the Nile in the south. The serpent calls himself the prince of Punt, a land which the Egyptians visited from the earliest times and is thought to lie in the south between the Nile and the Red Sea. A curious emphasis is placed on numbers, the height of the wave, the dimensions of the ship, the number of sailors, the length of the serpent's hood, the number of months of the sailor's stay, and so on. It is almost as if the tale is an allegory involving the movement of stars. Love of family and the return to Egypt is emphasized, paralleled by the cruel fate of the serpent's family. The resourcefulness of the Egyptian abroad is also a theme. All sorts of interpretations have been offered by scholars, but the precise message remains elusive. Is the serpent the god Re or a personification of Fate? Is the sailor a model of fortitude under adversity or a fool? Who is the fearful commander and why is he so afraid to report to the king? Do the talking serpent and the disappearing island characterize the narrative entirely as a fairy tale? Is the boat and crew which comes to get the sailor the same one which was wrecked with the loss of life to all its crew? These and other questions have found different answers as the study of the composition progresses. It is certainly a masterpiece of Egyptian literature and raises more questions than can be answered. It has been suggested that the sailor serves as a model for the man of the times as does Sinuhe (see bibliography, Otto 1966). For an extensive recent study, see bibliography, Burkard 1993.

Then the able retainer spoke:  
Be of good cheer, commander;  
We have now reached home.  
The mallet has been taken off, the mooring post driven in,  
The bowline cast ashore.  
Praise has been offered, and God has been thanked.

Every man embraces his comrade.  
Our shipmates have returned safe  
Without loss to our expedition.

After we reached the limits of Wawat,  
10 We passed the island of Senmet.<sup>1</sup>  
See us now, we are returning safely,  
And we are reaching our land.

Listen now to me, commander,  
I do not exaggerate.  
Wash up, place water on your fingers  
So you can reply when you are questioned,  
So you can speak to the king with confidence,  
So you can answer without stammering.  
The speech of a man can save him,  
And his words can cause indulgence for him.

20 Yet do only as you wish; for speaking to you is tiresome.

Now I shall tell you something similar  
Which happened to me myself.  
I went to the mining region for the Sovereign.  
I went down to the Great Green<sup>2</sup>

1. A quarrying, mining, or military expedition has returned by Nile from the south, and its commander appears to be downcast at the prospect of facing the king after an unsuccessful mission. His chief aide tries to cheer him up. Wawat is northern Nubia, and Senmet the island of Biggeh, just south of Aswan in the First Cataract region. The mission took place on the Nile or in the eastern desert. The expression "our land" is probably not otherwise attested in Egyptian literature and may in fact have a patriotic nuance.
2. This expression has traditionally been regarded as the Red Sea. Recent scholarship, however, has attempted to show that the term must refer to the Nile itself. See Claude Vandersleyen, "En relisant le Naufragé," in S. Israelit-Groll, ed., *Studies in Egyptology Presented to Miriam Lichtheim*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1990), 1019–24; *Wadj our: Un autre aspect de la vallée du Nil*. (Brussels, 1999). Here begins the story within a story.

In a ship 120 cubits long and 40 cubits wide.<sup>3</sup>  
 120 sailors were aboard from the best of Egypt.  
 Whether they looked at the sky or looked at the land,  
 30 Their hearts were braver than lions.

They could tell a storm before it came  
 And a tempest before it happened.  
 But a storm came up while we were on the Great Green,  
 Before we could touch land,  
 And the wind picked up and howled.  
 A wave of 8 cubits was in it.  
 As for the mast, I grasped (lit. "struck") it.  
 Then the ship died, and of those who were in it  
 There did not remain a single one.

40 I was placed on an island by a wave of the Great Green,  
 And I spent 3 days alone, my heart as my companion.  
 I lay down within a shelter of wood,  
 And I embraced the shade.  
 Next I stretched my legs  
 To find what I could put in my mouth.

There I found figs and grapes  
 And all kinds of good vegetables.  
 Sycamore figs were there together with notched ones,  
 50 And cucumbers as if they were cultivated.  
 Fish were there with fowl.  
 There was nothing that was not in it.  
 Then I gorged myself, and I put (some) on the ground  
 Because of the abundance in my hands.  
 I removed the fire drill when I had lighted a fire,  
 And I made a burnt offering to the gods.

Next I heard the sound of thunder,  
 And I thought it was a wave of the Great Green.  
 60 The trees were shaking and the ground quaking.  
 When I uncovered my face,  
 I found it was a serpent about to come.

3. The cubit is about 20.6 inches or .523 meters. The ship is about 204 by 68 feet. In many instances a length of a ship three times the width is standard.

He was 30 cubits long,  
 And his beard (hood?) was larger than 2 cubits.  
 His body was covered with gold,  
 His eyebrows were of real lapis lazuli,  
 And he was coiled up in front.<sup>4</sup>

He opened his mouth toward me,  
 While I was on my belly in front of him.  
 He said to me:  
 Who has brought you, who has brought you, citizen,  
 70 Who has brought you?  
 If you delay in telling me  
 Who has brought you to this island,  
 I shall have you know yourself as ashes,  
 Turned into someone invisible.  
 He (text: "you") spoke to me, but I could not hear.  
 While I was before him,  
 I did not know myself.  
 Then he set me in his mouth  
 And took me off to his resting place.  
 He set me down without touching me.

80 I was intact without his taking anything from me.

He opened his mouth toward me,  
 While I was on my belly before him.  
 Then he said to me:  
 Who has brought you, who has brought you, citizen,  
 Who has brought you to this island of the Great Green,  
 The two sides of which are under water?  
 Then I answered him,  
 My arms bent before him.

I said to him:  
 90 It was I who came down to the mining country  
 On a mission of the Sovereign

4. E. Lucchesi in *ZÄS* 103 (1976): 148–49; Henry G. Fischer, in Jan Assmann, Erika Feucht, and Reinhard Grieshammer, eds., *Fragen an die ägyptische Literatur, Studien zum Gedanken an Eberhard Otto* (Wiesbaden, 1977), 155–58: a human-headed serpent.

In a ship 120 cubits long and 40 cubits wide.<sup>5</sup>  
 120 sailors were in it from the best of Egypt.  
 Whether they looked at the sky or looked at the land,  
 Their hearts were braver than lions.  
 They could tell a storm before it came,  
 Each one of them, his heart was braver,  
 100 And his arm more valiant than his companions.  
 There was no fool among them.

Then a storm came forth while we were on the Great Green,  
 Before we could set to land.  
 The wind picked up and kept on howling.  
 A wave of 8 cubits was in it.  
 As for the mast, I grasped onto it(?).  
 Then the ship died, and of those who were in it  
 Not a single one remained except for me.  
 See me now at your side.  
 Next I was placed on this island  
 110 By a wave of the Great Green.

Then he said to me:  
 Do not fear, do not fear, citizen,  
 Do not turn white, for you have reached me.  
 See, God has allowed you to live:  
 He has brought you to this island of the spirit.<sup>6</sup>  
 There is not anything which is not in it.  
 It is filled with all fine things.  
 See, you shall spend month after month  
 Until you complete 4 months within this island.  
 120 A boat shall return from the Residence,  
 Sailors in it whom you know.  
 You shall go with them to the Residence,  
 And you shall die in your town.<sup>7</sup>

5. This kind of repetition is frequent in all ancient literature.

6. An island of the *ka* or enchanted island.

7. Burial in a foreign land was abhorrent to the Egyptians, a theme developed in *The Story of Sinuhe* as well.

How joyful is one who relates what he has experienced  
 After painful matters have passed by.  
 I shall now relate to you something similar  
 Which took place on this island  
 When I was on it with my siblings,  
 Children among them.  
 We amounted to 75 serpents,  
 Including my children and my brothers and sisters.  
 Without my mentioning to you a little daughter  
 Brought to me through wisdom.<sup>8</sup>

130 Then a star fell,  
 And because of it these went up in fire.<sup>9</sup>  
 It happened utterly.  
 But I was not with [them] when they burned;  
 I was not among them.  
 Then I died for them  
 When I found them as a single heap of corpses.<sup>10</sup>

If you would be brave, and your heart strong,  
 You will fill your arms with your children,  
 You will kiss your wife, you will see your house.  
 It is better than anything.  
 You will reach home where you were  
 Among your siblings!  
 I was stretched out on my belly,  
 I touched the ground in his presence.

But I (the sailor) say to you:  
 I shall relate your might to the Sovereign,  
 140 I shall have him learn of your greatness.  
 I shall have brought to you ladanum, oil,  
 Spice, balsam, and incense of the temples  
 With which every god is pleased.

8. Here begins the story within the story within the story.

9. M. Th. Derchain-Urtel, in *SAK* 1 (1974): 98–99. A meteor? In the historical text of Thutmose III from Gebel Barkal there is a description of a falling star.

10. Here the serpent's story ends. Like the sailor he was a sole survivor.

I shall tell what has happened to me  
 And what I have seen of your (text: "his") fame.  
 You will be thanked in the city  
 In the presence of the officials of the entire land.  
 I shall slaughter oxen for you as a burnt offering.  
 I will have the necks of fowl wringed for you.  
 I shall have barges brought to you  
 Laden with all the products of Egypt,  
 As should be done for a god who loves men  
 In a far-off land which men do not know.

Then he laughed at me for what I had said  
 In his opinion foolishly.

150 He said to me:  
 You do not have much myrrh,  
 Although you have become an owner of incense.  
 I am, sir, the Prince of Punt.  
 Myrrh belongs to me.  
 That oil which you said will be brought,  
 It is the main product of this island!

Now it shall happen  
 When you separate yourself from this place,  
 You will never see this island again,  
 Since it will be submerged under waves.

Then that boat returned, as he had predicted before.  
 I went and set myself on top of a tall tree,  
 And I recognized those who were in it.  
 Then I went to report it,  
 And I found him knowing it already.

He said to me:  
 In good health, in good health, citizen, off to your house.  
 You shall see your children.  
 Make a good reputation for me in your city.  
 160 This is my only request from you.

I placed myself upon my belly,  
 My arms bent in his presence.

He gave me a load of myrrh, oil, ladanum, spice,  
 Cinnamon, aromatics, eye-paint, giraffe tails,  
 Large cakes of incense, ivory tusks,  
 Hounds, apes, baboons, and all fine products.  
 Then I loaded them onto the boat,  
 And I was placed on my belly to thank him.

He said to me:  
 You shall reach the Residence in 2 months,  
 You shall fill your arms with your children.  
 You will become young again at home, until your burial.

170 Then I went down to the shore in the vicinity of this boat,  
 And I called out to the expeditionary force which was in the boat.  
 I gave praise upon the shore to the lord of this island,  
 And those who were in it likewise.

We sailed north to the Residence of the Sovereign,  
 And we reached the Residence in 2 months,  
 According to everything he had said.  
 Then I entered before the Sovereign  
 And I presented him with these gifts  
 Which I had brought from within this island.  
 Then he thanked me before the officials of the entire land.  
 I was appointed retainer, and granted 200 servants.

180 See me after I landed,  
 After I have seen what I experienced.  
 Listen to my [words]. It is good for men to hearken.  
 Then he (the commander) said to me:  
 Do not be so proper, friend.  
 What is the use of giving water to the fowl at daybreak  
 When it is to be killed in the morning?<sup>11</sup>

It has come from beginning to end as found in writing,  
 In the writing of the scribe, skilled with his fingers,  
 189 Amen's son Amen-aa, may he live, prosper, and be in health.

11. These are the commander's only words. See M. Gilula, in J. Johnson and E. F. Wente, eds., *Studies in Honor of George R. Hughes*, SAOC 39 (1977): 75-82, and A. Spalinger, in *GM 73* (1984): 91-95.