

What Wenamon Could Have Bought:

The Value of his Stolen Goods



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Since I first read *The Story of Wenamon*¹ under Donald Redford's guidance many years ago, I thought it fitting for me to offer this small contribution in honor of his many years as teacher, mentor, and friend.

"The ideal condition

Would be, I admit, that men should be right by instinct;

But since we are all likely to go astray,

The reasonable thing is to learn from those who can teach."

(Sophocles, *Antigone*, line 720)

The mention in a recent publication that Wenamon's stolen goods were of little value (de Spens 1998:122)² has prompted me to endeavor to evaluate the stolen goods, and what they might have represented to Wenamon in what we would now refer to as "buying power".

Toward the beginning of the story, upon his arrival at the seaport of Dor, one of his own sailors - part of a Syrian crew³ - steals the precious goods that Wenamon had brought with him.⁴ Wenamon narrates the theft as such:

"A man of my own ship fled, after having stolen one gold vessel worth 5 *deben*, four silver jars worth 20 *deben*, and a bag with 11 *deben* of silver; [the total of what] he [stole was:] 5 *deben* worth of gold and 31 *deben* worth of silver". (*Wenamon* 1,10-1,11 [= Gardiner 1932: 61:13-62:2])

What value did these commodities have?

Because prices were usually given according to copper *deben*-measures, and prices expressed in silver and gold were extremely rare (Janssen 1975a:101-2), we must first estimate the value of the given commodities with a certain weight of copper. According to Janssen (1975b:155), during the Twentieth Dynasty, the ratio of gold to copper was 1 to 120 (i.e., 1 *deben* of gold was the equivalent of 120 *deben* of copper), and the ratio of gold to silver was 1 to 2 (i.e., silver was worth half the value of gold). From this we can deduce that the ratio of silver to copper was 1 to 60. In broad terms, Wenamon's 5 *deben* of gold were the equivalent of 600 *deben* of copper while his 31 *deben* of silver were worth 1,860 *deben* of copper, a total of 2,460 copper *deben*.

As will be discussed later, it is quite possible that only the bag containing the 11 *deben* of silver (i.e., 660 *deben* of copper) was meant to purchase the lumber, while the gold and silver vessels⁵ were to be distributed as gifts. However, it must be remembered that the narrator did tally up Wenamon's loss for the benefit of his audience, and that a good storyteller could choose to emphasize that total figure for added effect. Thus, I feel that the audience was indeed meant to think of both the vessels and the loose silver as a whole. Since the point of this exercise will also be to establish what those funds would have mentally represented to Wenamon, which will help explain his frame of mind upon discovering the theft, there is little need to keep separating the two elements. The first reaction of a victim of theft is not likely to try and calculate separately the value of the various items stolen. Therefore the goods detailed below will be presented as lump sums.

I. CEREALS (emmer and barley)

In terms of value, the first and most obvious item we should consider are the cereals, both emmer and barley, since these were the usual commodities mentioned in the lists of wages (Janssen 1975a:346-47, 460; 1975b:169), and also because emmer was the grain used for making bread while barley was the principal cereal used for brewing beer, both basic staples of the Egyptian diet (Janssen 1975a:112-32).

5. Note how the silver vessels were worth the same - 5 *deben* - as the gold vessel.

1. The question of whether *Wenamon* is a story has long been debated, with many scholars arguing passionately for fact or fiction. Here is not the place to repeat this discussion, but the present author thinks it safe to assume that it is fiction, as Baines (1999) has now convincingly shown; see also lately Egberts 1998:94; and Eyre 1999:237. Other summaries of the debate are found in Bunnens 1979:46-48; and Scheepers 1992:356-60.

2. See, however, Mysliwiec 2000:23, who mentions that a "considerable amount" of silver and gold was stolen from Wenamon.

3. Perhaps the fact that the crew taking Wenamon to Byblos was foreign made the theft more palatable and somehow less surprising to the jingoistic ancient Egyptian audience; see also Liverani 1990:252.

4. On the theft and its logistics, see the interesting remarks by Green (1979:119-20).

Coincidentally, the prices of both of these cereals was essentially the same (Cerný 1934:176, no. 19; Janssen 1975a:127-32), making our task easier.⁶

In the late Ramesside period, 2 *deben* of copper could be exchanged for 1 *khar*- or 76 litres - of both emmer and barley (Cerný 1934:176; Janssen 1975a:115; 1975b:156, 177-78.). This gives us an equivalence of 1 *deben* of gold being worth 60 *khar* - 4,560 litres - of grain. This means Wenamon's 5 *deben* of gold could have brought him 300 *khar* - 22,800 litres - of cereal. As for how much grain Wenamon could have exchanged for his silver, 1 *deben* of silver was worth 30 *khar* of grain. Hence, the stolen 31 *deben* of silver could have been exchanged for 930 *khar* - 70,680 litres - of grain.

All in all, the total amount stolen from Wenamon could have been exchanged for 1,230 *khar* - 93,480 litres - of grain, which certainly seems like an enormous amount.

II. WAGES

We can also calculate what those cereals would have been worth in terms of wages. Wenamon might possibly have made the mental calculation of his loss in terms of monthly wages, and what that sum would have meant to his family.

Given that wages for an ordinary worker at Deir el Medina in the late Ramesside period were 4 *khar* of emmer per month (Janssen 1975a:460-66; 1975b:169),⁷ the 300 *khar* of emmer for which the gold could have been exchanged could have fed 75 people for one month. And the 930 *khar* of emmer that the silver would have brought could have fed over 230 people for one month. If we then total up the amount of emmer for which Wenamon's gold and silver could have been exchanged - the previously mentioned 1,230 *khar* of emmer - we find that such an amount of grain could have fed nearly 310 people for one month, or over 25 people for a whole year!

As a *smsw hAyt* working in the temple of Amun,⁸ perhaps Wenamon's wages were closer to the 5 1/2 *khar* of emmer per month received by a Foreman of a Crew (*aAn ist*) on the Theban West Bank (Janssen 1975a:460). If that were the case, then the stolen goods would have amounted to being able to produce bread for over 54 people per month with the gold, and 169 people with the silver, a total of enough bread for 223 people for one month, or over 18 people for a whole year.

As for beer, if an ordinary worker received 1 1/2 *khar* while a Foreman of a Crew received 2 *khar* of barley monthly (Janssen 1975a:460), this meant that Wenamon's 1,230 *khar* of barley's worth of gold and silver could have produced enough beer for 820 people per month at the low end of the salary spectrum, or 615 people per month at the high end of

the salary spectrum. As with the previously mentioned measures of cereals, these are not inconsiderable amounts.

III. MEAT

Given that Wenamon would presumably have received regular meat rations as an employee of the temple of Amun,⁹ another staple with which he would have been familiar, in terms of its worth, is meat.

Since one ox could be obtained for 60 *deben* of copper during the reign of Ramses XI (Janssen 1975a:173, Table 15; 1975b:155-56), this means that 1 *deben* of gold could have been exchanged for two oxen. Therefore, Wenamon's 5 *deben* of gold could have bought ten oxen. Additionally, since the ratio of silver to copper was 1 to 60, this means that Wenamon's 31 *deben* of silver could have been exchanged for thirty-one oxen. This total of forty-one oxen would surely have seemed like a considerable amount of meat to someone like Wenamon.

In terms of other varieties of foods, fish and fowl for example, Wenamon's gold and silver could have been exchanged for 61,500 fish and 9,840 ducks (Janssen 1975a:348-50, 178-79). Thus, we once again get the impression that his stolen goods could have enabled him to acquire an astonishing amount of food.

IV. WOOD

Since Wenamon was sent to Byblos to acquire wood for the barque of Amun, it also behooves us to figure out how much lumber his stolen goods could have obtained.

Fortunately, and again from Deir el Medina in the late Ramesside period, we also possess prices for wood. Given Wenamon's mission, what concerns us most is the price of *a-S*-wood.¹⁰ At Deir el Medina, a *DpH*-broad plank¹¹ made of *a-S*-wood cost 1 kite (Janssen 1975a:380), or one tenth of a *deben*

8. The duties, and even the rank, of a *smsw hAyt* are difficult to ascertain. His functions seem to have been to act as a doorkeeper and to usher people in (Quirke 1990:92-93), and he also had incidental juridical duties (Andreu 1980:143; van den Boorn 1985:11). The paucity of information on the title is such that it has been described as having rather low (Hayes 1955:76; Baines 1999:212) or fairly high (Scheepers 1991:31-33; de Spens 1998:106-8) status. The title is well attested in the Old and Middle Kingdoms (Helck 1958:280; Ward 1982:152), but it is also found in the Eighteenth Dynasty (Davies and Gardiner 1915:4), the Ramesside Period (Lefebvre 1929:40; Meeks 1979:648, n. 195), as well as the Twenty-second Dynasty (Caminos 1958:59). In terms of *The Story of Wenamon*, one wonders what effect the mention of the title had on the audience. Since it is Wenamon's only title, and is not the kind usually associated with emissaries, perhaps this is part of the irony in the story and was meant to be more humorous than anything else.

9. On wages of priests, see Janssen 1979:512-13; Kemp 1989 193-97; Gasse 2001:434-35.

6. Most of the information contained herein will come from Janssen 1975a; the prices quoted will usually come from the time of Ramses XI, which is the closest period to Dynasty Twenty-one, the most likely date of the *Story of Wenamon* (Egberts 1998; Baines 1999:211).

7. And cf. Janssen's remarks (1975a:463; 1979:512) that such rations were sufficient to feed a family of ten people, including small children.

(Janssen 1975a:101). This price means that 1 *deben* of gold could have been bartered for 1,200 planks, and thus Wenamun's 5 *deben* of gold would have brought him 6,000 *a-S*-wood planks. And if 1 silver *deben* could then purchase 600 planks, then Wenamun's 31 *deben* of silver could have procured him 18,600 planks. This adds up to 24,600 *a-S*-wood broad planks, which is a considerable amount of lumber.

Another item made of *a-S*-wood were *Drat*-planks, which cost 6 *deben* of silver for planks 30 cubits long (Janssen 1975a:380-81). This means that Wenamun's 31 *deben* of silver could have obtained him 155 cubits worth of *Drat*-planks. And 1 *deben* of gold would have brought 10 cubits worth of *Drat*-planks, which means Wenamun's 5 *deben* of gold could have been exchanged for 50 cubits worth of such planks.¹²

Given that these are prices at Deir el Medina, we can assume - given how trade markets operate - that prices at the source of the lumber would be lower, which means Wenamun could therefore presumably have brought back even more lumber than the numbers just quoted.

V. SIGNIFICANCE

In the end, what do all these figures mean? As mentioned earlier, they can help establish Wenamun's frame of mind upon his discovery of the theft. How would he have reacted? And what effect would the theft have had on his subsequent behavior? Although he eventually steals 30 *deben* of silver from another ship, the fact remains that the Wenamun character has suffered a tremendous loss in a theft. That he steals to regain some of his own goods¹³ still means that his life has turned inside out. Not only is he a victim of crime but he is now also a criminal himself, haunted by the possibility of getting caught. All through his stay at Byblos, Wenamun must have carried an enormous burden: the knowledge of his own theft - and there is no reason to believe that ordinary ancient

Egyptians felt any differently about theft than we do today - and the likelihood of his victims catching up with him. At any rate it is worth remembering that Wenamun never mentions this sum of 30 *deben* during his verbal sparring with Tjekerbaal.

Perhaps one of the first things that went through Wenamun's mind was that his superiors would assume he stole the gold and silver. If so, he would have known the penalties for such theft at this time: full restitution of the goods stolen, in addition to a payment of two to three times the amount stolen (Cerný 1937; Lorton 1977:47; McDowell 1990:230-32). We can well imagine Wenamun's reaction to such a thought. It would have been well nigh impossible for such a middle level official to ever repay such a sum!

Another question we might ponder is: were these funds meant to be used for official gifts to the various rulers he was going to encounter (Goedicke 1975:29; Lichtheim 1976:230, n. 7), or were they meant for the purchase of the lumber for the sacred barque of Amun (Wilson 1950:26, n. 6; Wente 1973:144, n. 5; Green 1979:117)?¹⁴ Certainly the 30 *deben* of silver that Wenamun stole would have enabled him to purchase lumber, since that is the commodity named by Tjekerbaal when he mentions previous payments made by Egyptian rulers for his ancestors' wood (*Wenamun* 2,19 [= Gardiner 1932: 68:2-3]).¹⁵ And if Wenamun meant to purchase lumber with his 30 *deben* of silver, then another question arises: was he meant to purchase wood for an entirely new barque (Kitchen 1986:251-52; Egberts 1998:108),¹⁶ or just enough to fix an already existing one (Scheepers 1991:29)? Here, one thinks of the famous Twelfth Dynasty official Iykhernofret, who states that he simply "embellished" (*snnx*) the barque of Osiris at Abydos (stela Berlin 1204:3 [= Sethe 1928:17]). We will never be able to fully ascertain this, but perhaps if the funds were not all meant for one or the other purpose, we might perhaps surmise that the stolen gold and silver vessels were brought as official gifts, while the bag containing the 11 *deben* of silver was to be used to purchase the lumber (Zaccagnini 1993:37).

Yet another significant question arises: how would the audience hearing the story have reacted to the theft?¹⁷ We can

10. The identification of *a-S*-wood has long been a subject of debate. Loret (1916) identified *a-S* as either pine or fir, but noted particularly that it was not cedar, a point also mentioned by Gardiner 1947:8, n. 1. Some scholars have rendered the word as pine (Helck 1971:26-27; Green 1979:118; Hollis 1990:115-17; Scheepers 1991:79); others have opted for fir (Jacquemin 1933; Couroyer 1973; Janssen 1975a:75; Condon 1978:35; Giveon 1979:1013; Germer 1986; Manniche 1989:64-65); while still others have preferred the generic coniferous tree (Glanville 1932:8-9; Lucas and Harris 1962:319-20; Müller 1977:1265; Schulman 1980:86). In the end, the last rendering may be more prudent; see, e.g., the cautious remarks by Nicholson and Shaw 2000:443.

11. For *DpH*, see Hoch 1994:384-85, no. 578.

12. Other prices have been quoted for wood (Helck 1965:895), but since these are mostly reconstructed and not specifically said to be *a-S*-wood, they are difficult to convert into hard numbers for our use.

13. 30 *deben* of silver are worth 1,800 copper *deben*, around 73% of the original 2,460 copper *deben* stolen from him.

14. It is difficult to understand the assertion (Goedicke 1975: 20; Bunnens 1978:6-9; Liverani 1990:250) that Wenamun was simply meant to open up negotiations and not to actually buy anything on his trip. If that were the case, and given Wenamun's condescending attitude, we can well imagine that Tjekerbaal's reception of Wenamun would have been even frostier than it already was.

15. See also the texts quoted by Liverani 1990:248-51, where silver is the commodity of choice to pay for a number of various goods, including lumber.

16. On Herihor's preoccupation with the barque of Amun, which is specifically said in his inscriptions to have been built out of *a-S*-wood from the Levant, see Redford 1977:1132; Scheepers 1991:20-21; Baines 1999:211; and Eyre 1999:249-50.

17. For a discussion of the audience's reaction to Wenamun, see Baines 1999:217-21, 229; and Eyre 1999:235-36.

try to speculate about the motives of a particular character in a story, but perhaps what is just as important is the effect of the narrative on the intended audience.

It has been correctly argued (Egberts 1998:94) that the impact of a story on an audience had much to do with how realistic it was. If the narrative was too far from reality, it was more difficult for the audience to identify with it. *Wenamun* is a good example of this.¹⁸ The ancient Egyptian audience of the time would have known all the prices quoted above, just as surely as an early nineteenth-century British audience would have known what Mr. Darcy's annual income of £ 10,000 would have meant in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.¹⁹

The ancient Egyptian audience immediately would have made the connections between Wenamun's 5 *deben* of gold and 31 of silver, what would undoubtedly have been enormous funds for them. They also would have known the penalties for theft just mentioned, and, again, we can assume that most members of the audience would have shuddered at the thought of paying back such huge sums. All of this would have made the audience more appreciative of Wenamun's plight. Stolen goods of this magnitude were serious business.

From originally being considered as a representative of one of the most powerful institutions in the country, Wenamun would suddenly have become the "ordinary guy" for whom everyone roots. His subsequent behavior - from foolishly stealing other people's goods to his nervous impudence before Tjekerbaal,²⁰ and his final breakdown on Cyprus when, his life actually in danger, he for once has to worry about not being understood by the local population (Baines 1999:228) - would have been recognized by the audience as the obvious actions of a man whose life had taken a terribly wrong turn, and who must do whatever he can to extricate himself from his predicament.

If the tension in the *Story of Sinuhe* comes from the fact that we are never told why Sinuhe fled Egypt (Tobin 1995), the tension in the *Story of Wenamun* comes from this single dramatic event - the theft of an immense amount of money - right at the beginning of the story. Our whole response to the character of Wenamun is meant to be colored by the knowledge of the enormity of his loss.

18. See, e.g., Green's study (1979), where he places Wenamun's demand for compensation at the city of Dor (*Wenamun* 1, 14-21) within the context of well established ancient Near Eastern traditions; see also Wilson 1945.

19. Such "buying power" is elucidated for the modern reader in Copeland 1993.

20. Of course, Wenamun's behavior before Tjekerbaal was very much influenced by his Egyptian "imperialistic" attitude (Eyre 1999), but all must agree that his conduct at Byblos was rather discourteous.

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