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Gebel el-Silsila through the ages

Part 1: Early visitors

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Gebel el-Silsila T

In the first of a new **AE** series, **John Ward** and **Maria Nilsson** introduce us to this rich and fascinating archaeological site in Upper Egypt.

For over two hundred years, Egyptologists, archaeologists, explorers, knowledgeable enthusiasts, as well as intrepid tourists and lay people, have regarded Gebel el-Silsila as a minor archaeological site of little significance within the greater ancient scarred landscape of Egypt. For many, Gebel el-Silsila's enduring and captivating sculptured stone landscape has been viewed merely from the deck or window of a passing ship or *dahabeya*, while navigating the narrow passage and cruising the sacred River Nile that separates the sites into two parts. This denigration and outdated perception of the site is something the current archaeological team hope to change. This paper is the first of a series aimed to present Gebel el-Silsila: the site, the team, the various chronological periods, discoveries and new results. Here, the aim is to introduce the site and its early visitors.

The Site of Gebel el-Silsila

Located some 60 km south of the grand Edfu Temple, and 65 km north of the stunning golden landscape of modern-day Aswan, Gebel el-Silsila – 'Kheny/Khenu' to the ancients – played an important role within the overall development of dynastic Egypt. First and foremost, the site provided a

bountiful supply of prime Nubian sandstone, with a culmination of quarry activity during the time of the great pharaohs of the New Kingdom. However, the site was also a vital strategic trading location, marking the boundary between Egypt and her southern neighbour Nubia, one of Egypt's 'nine bows' (chief enemies), as witnessed by hundreds of Middle Kingdom inscriptions. But, as we will see, Gebel el-Silsila was already an important site as far back as Predynastic times, and its history during this period has yet to be fully understood or recorded.

From Napoleon to Caminos

The modern historical attestations of Gebel el-Silsila find their beginning in the Napoleonic scientific expeditions, when several scholars visited the site and documented its rock-cut temple and Nile stelae, after which they left their own engravings and signatures upon the sandstone surfaces and ancient monuments for later visitors to gaze upon. Since then, visiting scholars, including some of the great fathers of Egyptology, such as Lepsius, Petrie, Legrain, and even Carter, merely gave the site a casual glance. Occasionally, and often hastily, such visitors documented a handful of the site's visible monuments; many of their



Through The Ages

Part 1: Early visitors

accounts were inaccurate or regrettably missing vital components to do justice to the original message. Of course, it is understandable that other sites were given precedence over Gebel el-Silsila during these early days of Egyptology, when scholars could choose between majestic temples, such as Karnak and Luxor, royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings and Saqqara, and elite burials throughout the country. Simply put, the quarryscape of Gebel el-Silsila was no match for the highly prized temples and tombs that embodied the very essence of Egyptology, captivating all who were engrossed in this relatively new science.

Beginning in 1955, the Argentinian Egyptologist Ricardo Augusto Caminos spent nine field seasons at Gebel el-Silsila, and documented together with his students the site's dynastic epigraphy under the auspices of the EES (Egyptian Exploration Society). Unfortunately, only one monograph saw completion as a publication, in which Caminos and T.G.H. James describe the original epigraphy and iconography of the 32 magnificent New Kingdom cenotaphs that line the

west bank. Years later, Caminos' epigraphic work of the so called 'Speos of Horemheb' (a rock-cut temple, re-dated to the reign of Hatshepsut by the current team) was published in a doctoral thesis by Andrea-Christina Thiem.

Nevertheless, despite the great efforts of scholars like Caminos, James, Jurgen Osing and later Thiem, the true spectacular landscape and long forgotten archae-

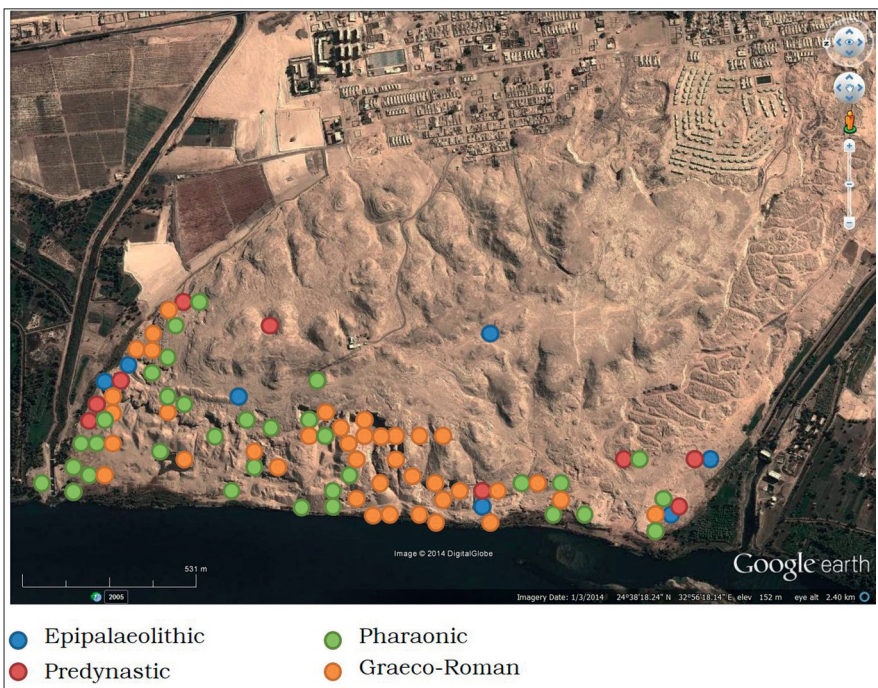
ABOVE

A view of the surrounding landscape of Gebel el-Silsila's west bank. The Predynastic rock art on the foreground slab depicts three giraffes.

BELOW

A Google Earth map showing the location of Gebel el-Silsila in relation to Luxor, Edfu and Kom Ombo.





● Epipalaeolithic ● Pharaonic
● Predynastic ● Graeco-Roman

THIS PAGE

Maps showing the locations of rock art and graffiti from different time periods documented by the Swedish mission at sites on the east bank (above) and west bank (below) of Gebel el-Silsila.

OPPOSITE PAGE

An epipalaeolithic geometric motif (top) and unique designs (bottom) at Rock Art Site 5, Gebel el-Silsila East Bank.

ology of ancient Kheny remained undocumented and hidden, buried beneath the ever-shifting sands. It was not until 2012 that the Gebel el Silsila Epigraphic Survey Project (later 'Gebel el Silsila Project') – a Swedish-led archaeological mission from Lund University – was granted its concession and began its monumental task of surveying the massive site (11.5 square miles / 30 square km), encompassing also the areas of Nag el-Hammam and Shatt el-Rigal in the north. The goal was to document, catalogue and eventually excavate and restore/preserve the immensely diverse historical context of the ancient landscape of Gebel el-Silsila, which has been virtually untouched since the time

of Roman Emperors Trajan and Antoninus Pius (second century AD), when quarrying ended and the last blocks of the Temple of Sobek were moved to a nearby destination.

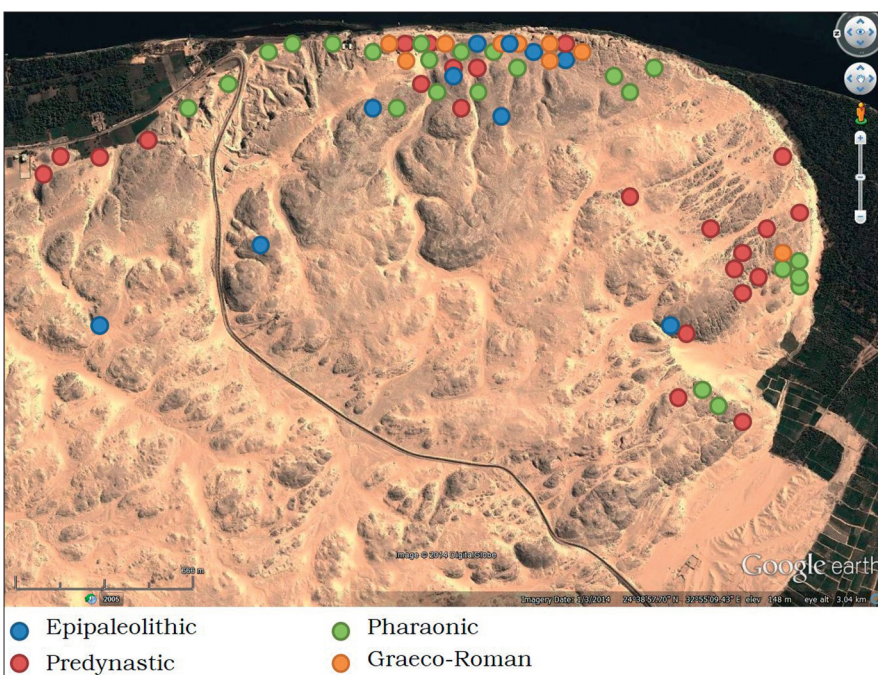
The Early Days of Gebel el-Silsila

The new project focussed on a visual survey of the scarred quarryscape, numbering and identifying 104 quarries (52 on each side of the river) that have cut into the sandstone scenery at least since the Middle Kingdom. The main goal of the first expedition was to document the Graeco-Roman epigraphy, including the enigmatic quarry marks, pictorial graffiti, demotic, Greek and Latin texts that were engraved into almost all exposed surfaces within the quarries of that time. Simultaneously, the team surveyed the surrounding landscape and archaeological remains, which soon resulted in the discovery of unique and extensive prehistoric rock art sites.

These newly discovered rock art sites at Gebel el-Silsila highlight a far more diverse historical timeline than previously thought. For over eight millennia, visitors to Gebel el-Silsila have left their marks on the rock faces and in doing so, they give witness to a chronological table of events that has dramatically changed the site and shaped the landscape to what it is today. Each locale provides a sequential glimpse into the development of the site from one of bountiful hunting ground, to industrial site and monumental engineering project, giving insights into the contemporary world and the divine pantheon.

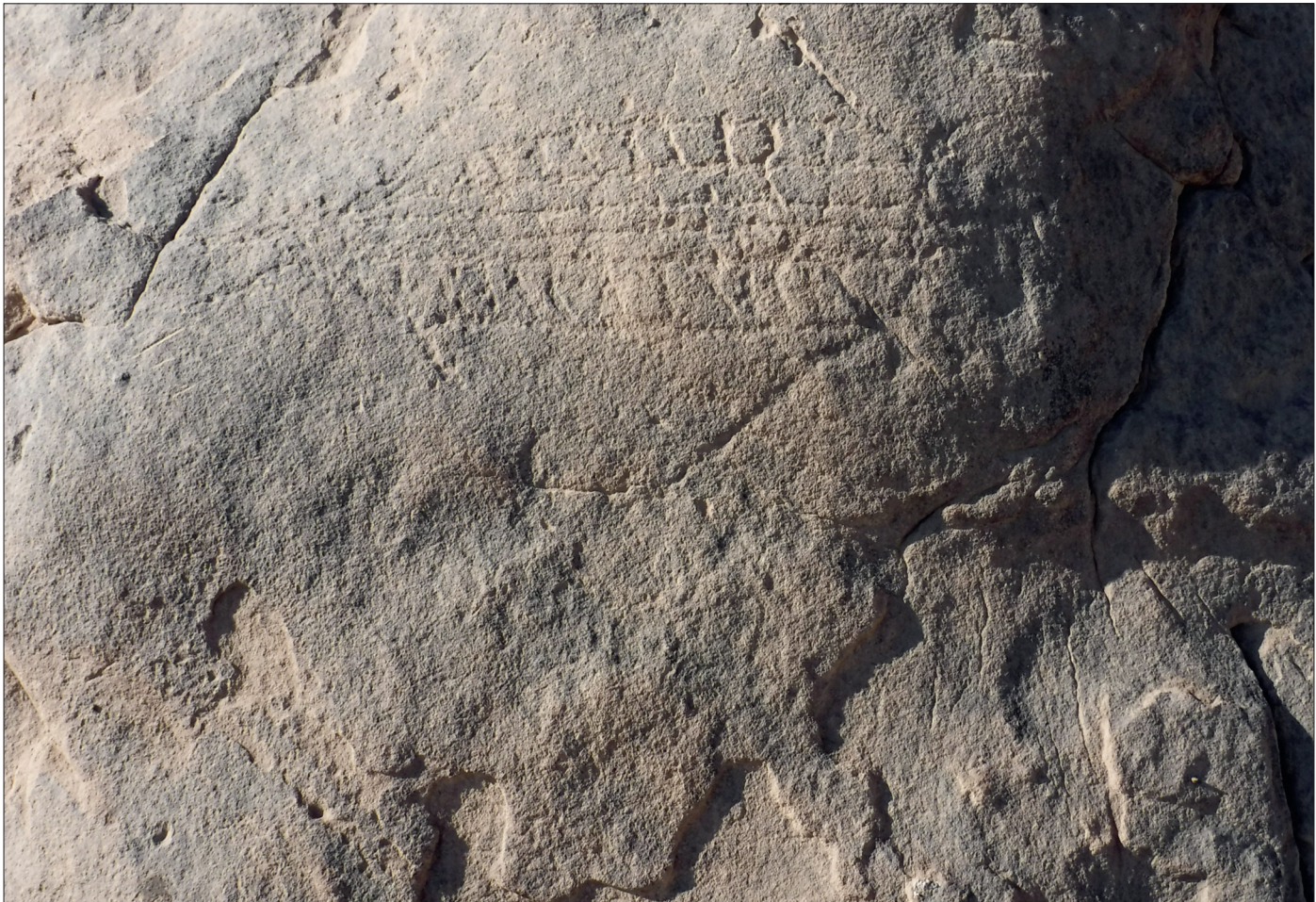
The rock art can be divided into the following periods: Epipalaeolithic (c. 8500 BP), Neolithic and Predynastic (c. 6000-3000 BC), Dynastic (c. 3000-305 BC), Graeco-Roman (305 BC-AD 200), to which can be added Coptic, Mediaeval and eventually modern graffiti.

Hammered or pecked into the natural exposed bedrock, primarily found on horizontal surfaces and heavily worn by time, the team found the tell-tale signs of one of the earliest artistic repertoires, known as Epipalaeolithic petroglyphs. These designs, some almost 8500 years old, comprise primarily geometric motifs (see opposite), some known from the nearby area of el-Hosh to represent fish-traps, and several abstract patterns that, for us, are unique illustrations. By documenting the rock art, the team could track the



● Epipalaeolithic ● Pharaonic
● Predynastic ● Graeco-Roman







ABOVE and BELOW
 Stylistic overviews of the rock art sites on the east bank (above) and west bank (below) at Gebel el-Silsila. The images range from geometric designs to depictions of boats, humans and animals such as giraffe and elephant.

footsteps of the Epipaleolithic hunter-gatherers, and it was clear that their engravings were concentrated in areas providing good hunting or fishing conditions (see maps above and below). With almost a hundred individual rock art locales discovered, the team have been able to correct the misconception that Gebel el-Silsila was almost devoid of rock art. Thousands of petroglyphs have been recorded, with a stylistic range of depictions equal to acknowledged rock art

areas such as el-Kab, el-Hosh, Wadi Kubbaniya, Wadi Abu Suebeira, and Gharb Aswan.

The discovery of several microlithic tools and workshops in a direct physical context to the rock art supported the dating of the sites to several thousands of years ago. In addition, the team has documented a series of basic rock shelters and extensive game traps. With all of this evidence, the team has established the west and east banks as areas of prehis-





toric anthropological significance, and Gebel el-Silsila can now be included within the context of the migratory hunter-gatherer tribes of the Kom Ombo plain. These physical remains give witness to the diversity of the site, and tell a story of how the early nomadic tribes utilised the undulating landscape of Gebel el-Silsila by following the rising waters of the Nile around the two sandstone massifs. By doing so, they were able to exploit the generous hunting grounds for the benefit of themselves and their fellow tribesman. Finally, there was evidence of prehistoric activity at Gebel el-Silsila that could relate in time to the lithic industry named after the site in the 1960s, known as the 'Silsilian (later the Ballanan-Silsilian) industry'.

Hunting Scenes

While Epipalaeolithic rock art is limited to a few sites in Upper Egypt, engravings of animals from the Ethiopian fauna and its famed bushy-tailed giraffes are more widespread and make up the largest

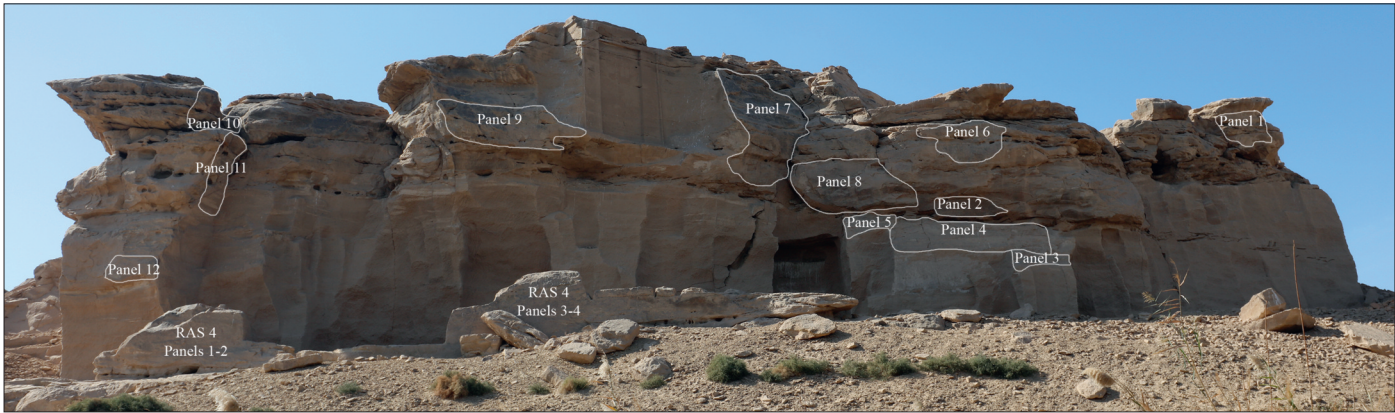
group at Gebel el-Silsila. As elsewhere, the repertoire includes giraffes, crocodiles, boats and hunting scenes with human figures, dogs and hunted animals (see above and below).

Petroglyphs are often found on vertical cliff surfaces in elevated areas overlooking the landscape, and in spaces that would have escaped the rising waters of the Nile inundation. Their locations also follow natural markers, where the landscape offers more than suitable hunting areas; for example, where the upper escarpment dramatically drops down towards what would have been the Nile edge, creating narrow wadis (valleys), perfect for corralling and entrapment. It has been remarked that the placement of such panels (*marked out for sites 3 & 4 overleaf, top*), and their contents, may have had a ritualistic relationship with the actual hunt itself; the depictions of animals may carry a certain embodiment of the intended game, by which the hunter asks for some kind of divine assistance. If we accept such an interpretation, this

ABOVE and BELOW
A stereotypical predynastic panel, Gebel el-Silsila East Bank Rock Art Site 3 (above) with depictions of several giraffe, an ibex/gazelle, a boat, an ass and a very small anthropomorphic figure (far right, barely visible).

These figures are highlighted in black in the photograph below.





ABOVE: Gebel el-Silsila Rock Art Sites 3 and 4 marked with panels.

BELOW: Predynastic rock art with a depiction of a giraffe on the west bank at Gebel el-Silsila.

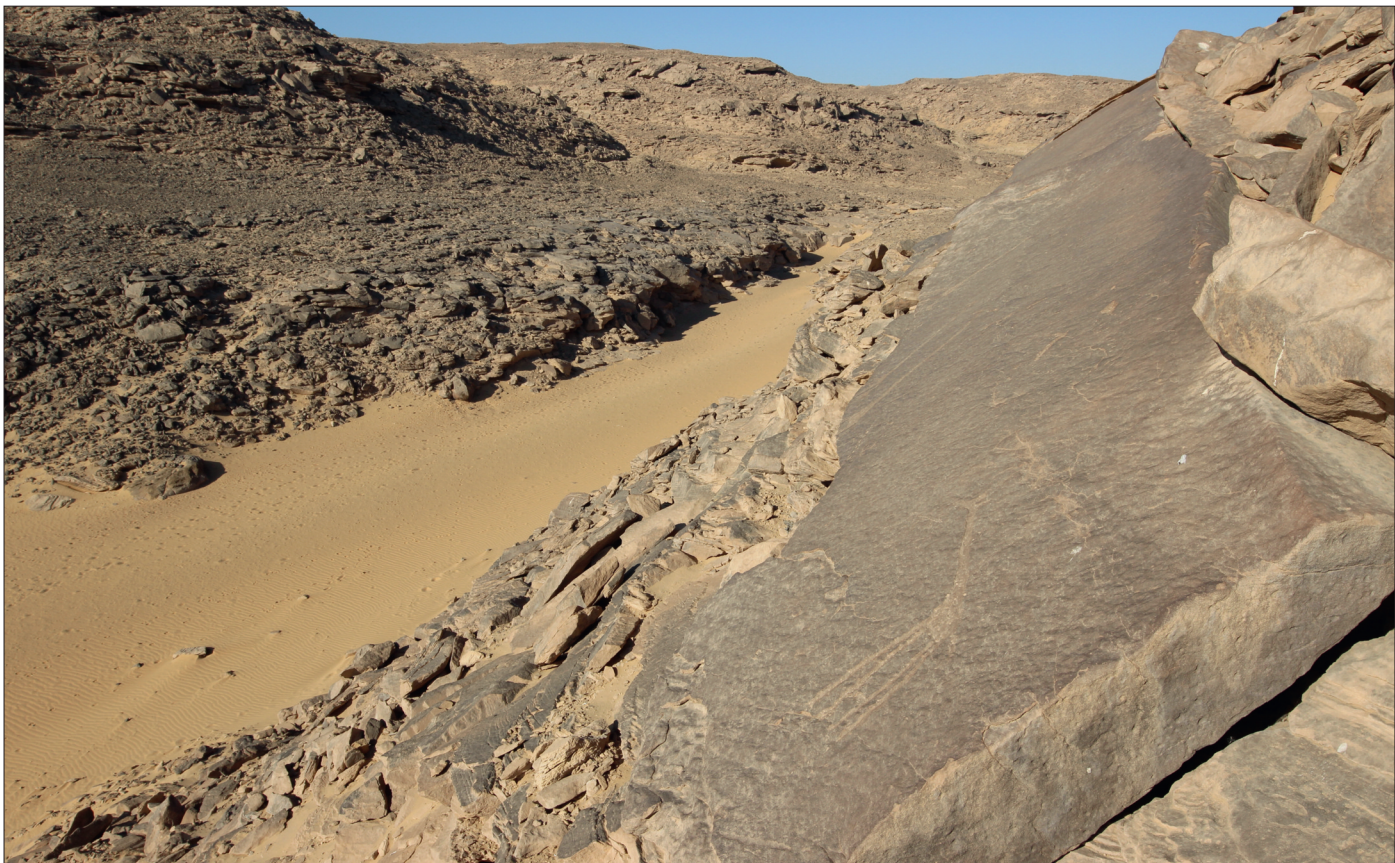
would imply that the message communicated by the Predynastic rock art producers is parallel to that of later periods, when the hunter wished to control nature and asked the divine world for supporting interference.

Thoughts on Function and Meaning

By documenting and analysing the numerous rock art sites of the Gebel el-Silsila area, the team was also able to produce a geographical and geological map of the sandstone massifs, allowing an interpretation of how the formations had played an important role in the development of the area as a provider of safe shelter and successful food supply. The nomadic life of the prehistoric visitors to Gebel el-Silsila aligned with the tide and flood of the Nile, and was naturally regulated by the migration of the local wildlife. During the flood season, the river turned the two massifs

into islands, as evidenced by the pebbled beaches in the north and south still present today. These two islands provided humans and animals with a safe and secure environment in which they could thrive. However, the lowering of the river level would have brought dangerous and life-threatening animals such as crocodiles and hippopotami, as well as the venomous snakes and scorpions, for which Gebel el-Silsila is still infamous today.

The creation of two islands separated by the narrow gorge may well provide us with an underlying reason as to why so many Naqada boat motifs were carved into the cliffs in the areas of Gebel el-Silsila and its northern sister-site Shatt el-Rigal. During low water, the area presented a cataract landscape, allowing visitors to more easily cross the Nile. It was, and still is, the narrowest point of the Nile, as reflected in the dynastic name of the site, Kheny/Khenu,



roughly translated as the 'Rowing Place'. This may equally explain why Gebel el-Silsila was chosen as the sacred place to perform the annual Nile festival, a topic that will be discussed in a future article.

Clearly the site of Gebel el-Silsila has now proved important to our understanding of the larger Kom Ombo area with regards to prehistoric rock art and the migratory patterns of hunter-gatherer tribes who roamed and hunted amongst the protruding sandstone bluffs, leaving behind their traps and ritualistic guides for us to view today. The impact later visitors had on Gebel el-Silsila, and how their lives were entangled in the sandstone landscape will be explored in later AE articles.

John Ward and Maria Nilsson

Currently Marie Curie Researcher at Lund University, Sweden, Dr. Maria Nilsson has been the Director of the Gebel el Silsila Project since its start in 2012, together with John Ward (also of Lund University). Their main current focus is to continue the excavations of the New Kingdom Temple of Sobek, the Thutmosid cemetery, and the stone workshop of Amenhotep III, all located on the east bank.

Further Reading

Nilsson, M. (2018) "From Epipalaeolithic petroglyphs to Roman graffiti: Stylistic variability of anthropomorphs at Gebel el Silsila (Upper Egypt)", in Huyge, D. & Van Noten, F. (Guest Eds.) *Whatever Happened to the People? Humans and Anthropomorphs in the Rock Art of Northern Africa (Brussels, 17-19 September 2015)*. Brussels: Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences, pp. 445-460.

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Nilsson, M. and Ward, J. (2016) "Pictorial representations at Gebel el Silsila – a 10 000 year long repertoire", in Capriotti Vittozzi, G. (ed.) *Ahmes 3: Proceedings 'Italian Days in Aswan'*, Rome: Istituto di Studi sul Mediterraneo Antico, pp.167-183.

All images provided by the authors



ABOVE: Predynastic rock art panels surrounding the famous royal scene of Nebehepetra Mentuhotep II (Eleventh Dynasty) at Wadi Shatt el-Rigal.

BELOW and BOTTOM: A Predynastic elephant petroglyph and boat motifs at Wadi Shatt el-Rigal.

