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Gebel el-Silsila through the Ages

Part 3 - Thutmosid activity

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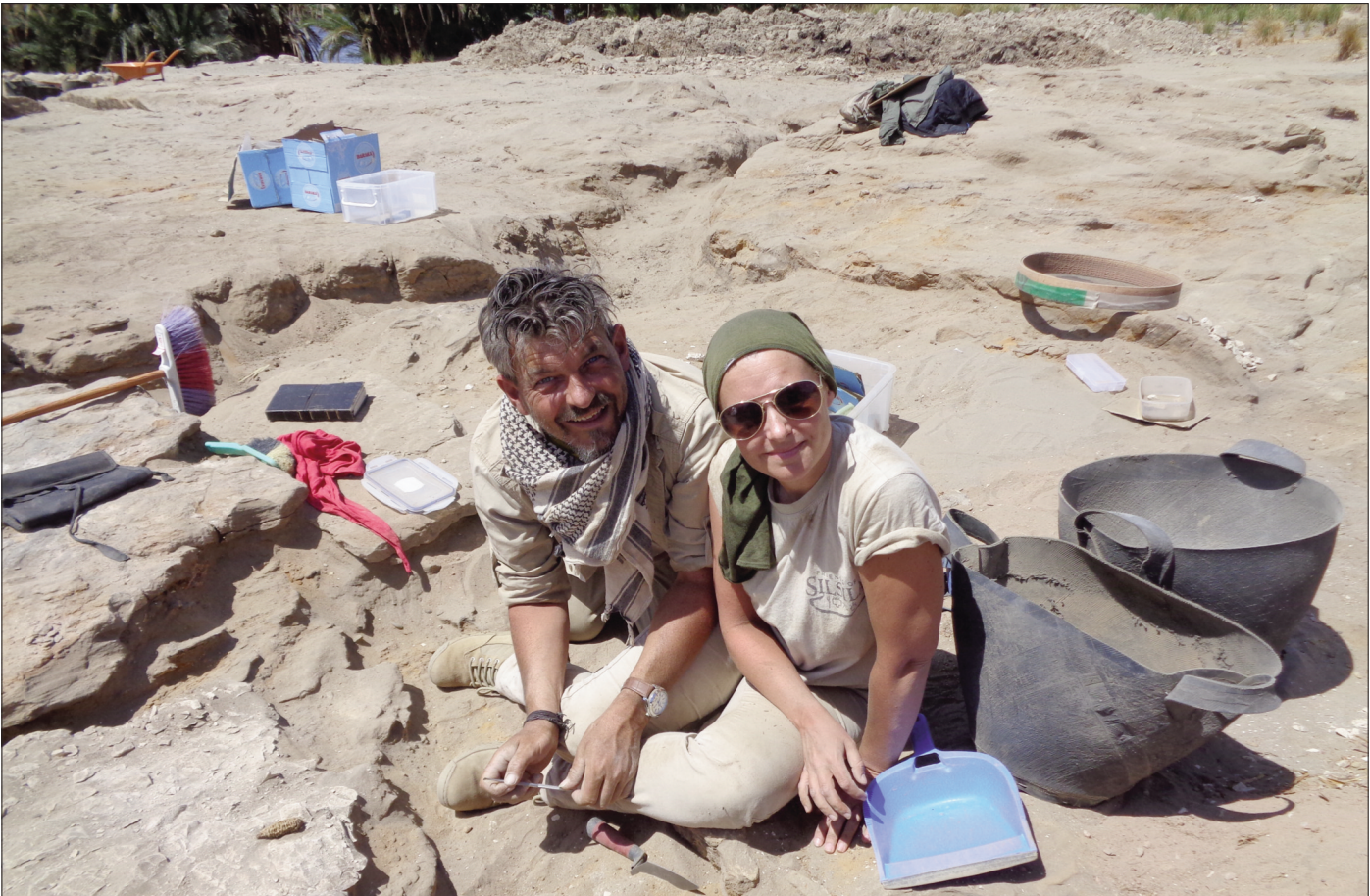
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GEBEL EL-SILSILA THROUGHOUT THE AGES

PART 3 THUTMOSID ACTIVITY

In the third of their fascinating series, **Maria Nilsson** and **John Ward** investigate shrines, the Temple of Sobek and a ghost ship in the speos!



ABOVE: John Ward and Maria Nilsson excavating limestone fragments at Gebel el-Silsila.

Our aim in this special series of articles for *AE* Magazine is to present the important Upper Egyptian site of Gebel el-Silsila: the site itself, the excavation team, the various chronological periods, discoveries and new results. We have already explored the site's human activity from Prehistory throughout to the Middle Kingdom (see *AE113* & *AE114*). Now we will move forward in time to the Thutmosid period (here defined as the reigns of Thutmose II, Hatshepsut, Thutmose III and Amenhotep II, c. 1492 – 1400 BC), summarise some of the Thutmosid activity recorded by the team, and take a peek into the necropolis!

From Middle Kingdom rock inscriptions to New Kingdom monuments

It is not difficult to find stylistic links between Gebel el-Silsila's Prehistoric rupestal [rock inscription] activity and Middle Kingdom rock art, while acknowledging the dynastic development of textual graffiti. Scenes inspired by life and the surrounding fauna continued as the main themes of expression for millennia. The spatial distribu-

tion of Prehistoric rock art generally followed the natural formations that provided good hunting/fishing grounds, while the earliest forms of dynastic (textual and pictorial) graffiti were arranged in clusters near the two main pathways or roads that connected Shatt el-Rigal in the north with Gebel el-Silsila in the south. The Middle Kingdom graffiti, particularly that preserved at Shatt el-Rigal, was associated with the first stages of stone extraction and basic infrastructure at the site.

As we proceed into the New Kingdom, there is a monumental change in activity in the area, with the west bank of Gebel el-Silsila replacing Shatt el-Rigal as the main focal point. A major change in temple construction practices led to the replacement of limestone as the main building medium. Now the golden Nubian sandstone of Gebel el-Silsila was the prime source of building material for the gods, ushering in a Golden Age for Egypt under the rule of the Pharaoh Hatshepsut. Thutmosid testimonies run across the site like a thread, connecting the two banks of Gebel el-Silsila. Monuments dating to this period comprise the rock-cut Temple of Sobek, 32 shrines

and a cemetery that so far has revealed 73 tombs, including the most recently discovered waterlogged mass burial of ST42!

Historical interest in New Kingdom Gebel el-Silsila

As we learnt in AE113, the site has attracted scholars since the days of Napoleon, with snippets of information published by Petrie, Lepsius, Legrain, and other early Egyptologists. A larger epigraphic study was carried out by Argentinian Egyptologist Ricardo Augusto Caminos and his students between 1955 and 1982 resulting in the monograph on the Eighteenth Dynasty shrines or “cenotaphs”, and a series of papers on a few stelae and field-work updates. Caminos’ documentation of the original epigraphy of the speos (“of Horemheb”) was finally published by Thiem in 2000.

As a rule, scholars tended to focus on the New Kingdom monuments and epigraphy, for which we have a considerably good overview of activity on site during this time. However little, if any, secondary epigraphy (i.e. later graffiti or additions to the monuments) was included and no comprehensive study of the Nile stelae has ever been published. For this reason, we decided to rework and modernise the Caminos epigraphic survey, and conduct a series of archaeological excavations in and around the inscribed monuments using the latest technologies: applying high resolution digital photography in different lightings, completed by photogrammetry (digital photo-based stereometry) and laser-based 3D scanning. The idea is to paint a portrait of the monument in its many realities and forms, each being of equal importance. To do this, we have applied a deconstructive epigraphic approach for each monument, exposing the various layers of use and usurpation by analysing the constructive techniques and



phases of addition and destruction. The combination of epigraphy and archaeology has resulted in intriguing new information!

ABOVE & BELOW: Stabilisation and documentation of Shrine 31, with its four rock-cut statues. The Gebel el-Silsila team are updating the epigraphical studies carried out by Caminos, using the latest photographic and scanning technologies.





Shrines 30–31

Thirty-two shrines from the reigns of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III decorate the west bank, commemorating some of the period’s most influential officials and their families, perhaps the more famous being Senenmut, Hapuseneb, and Neshi: all loyal to Hatshepsut and successful expedition leaders, architects and overseers. The shrines were published in detail by Caminos and James in 1963, but as part of the overall re-documentation of monuments, the shrines too were targeted by our team. In connection with this, we began preparing for the construction of a road to allow tourists access to the monuments without having to climb the ancient staircase and risk their lives climbing the mountain!

In 2015, John and the team began excavations of shrines 30 and 31, as they were facing an increased threat to their stability and preservation from submersion by the Nile during the flood season in ancient times, combined with destructive overgrowth by trees and Nile grass. As with other monuments at the site, these shrines (*see left and below*) were carved into the sandstone bedrock, facing the river, and were attached to each other, separated by an internal wall. They are set within an area that has suffered from seismic activity during antiquity, causing the shrines to fracture, separate and sink down several metres from their original position. Caminos and James (1963, p. 95) states that [shrine 31 was] “...almost entirely destroyed in the rock

THIS PAGE

TOP
The rock-cut statues of Neferkhewe and his family in Shrine 31

CENTRE
John and Maria working inside the shrine

RIGHT
The entrances to the shrines (with Shrine 31 on the left) after excavation and stabilisation work.

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP
The Gebel el-Silsila team inside the entrance of Shrine 31

BOTTOM
Work in progress at the Temple of Sobek.
Photo: Anders Andersson:



slip which also brought about the ruin of its neighbour, shrine 30. The remains of these two monuments are so scanty and so placed that they may easily escape notice.” Our excavations revealed that this was not true! Hidden underneath thick layers of Nile silt, the shrines were in fact well-preserved, with statues and reliefs still intact.

In shrine 30 we discovered two seated statues – a male and female – in a traditional funerary style, the female embracing the Osirian form of the male. However the interior decoration that had survived did not record the name or title of the owner. Shrine 31 however retained its complete artistic program, together with four intact rock-cut statues (*opposite, top*), dedicated to the owner of the shrine, Neferkhewe, who is described as the “overseer of foreign lands”, and as “chief of the Medjay”. As Caminos had already noted from the previously exposed lintel inscription, Neferkhewe was active during the reign of Thutmose III. The four statues show the owner in the Osirian position, surrounded by his wife and their two children (a son and daughter). The walls are preserved with scenes carved in raised relief, and follow the same artistic program as seen in, for example, shrine 17, with the seated owner and his wife receiving offerings from their children. In addition to the statues and reliefs, we



documented three blank, round-topped stelae, situated on the exterior wall of the shrines.

Limestone decoration in the Temple of Sobek

The Temple of Sobek (*below*) is situated on a sandstone outcrop at the northern boundary of the east bank, just north of





Maria excavating limestone fragments at the site of the Temple of Sobek.

the modern canal. Agricultural land surrounds the temple to the east and north, and it borders the River Nile to its west. The temple has a west-east axis, with its main entrance opening to the west.

The initial survey of the temple was carried out in 2015, followed by excavations revealing the foundations of a main temple, as well as a perplexing western structure (still under excavation). The Temple of Sobek, which will be described in more detail in a forthcoming issue, once held structures built not only from the local, golden sandstone, but also contained architectural elements made from limestone, mudbrick and granite. Its earliest building phase is preserved in hundreds of limestone fragments revealing details of text and imagery produced in raised relief. Stylistically, the artistic program and execution of details indicate Thutmosid production, i.e. from the reigns of Hatshepsut and/or Thutmose III. These limestone fragments had been used in the temple as backfilling material at a later date; the appearance alongside of sandstone fragments marked with the cartouches of Amenhotep III and Ramses II, indicate this backfilling could not have occurred before the Nineteenth Dynasty. Indeed, the temple itself was completely dismantled, down to its foundation blocks (or footprints thereof), during antiquity.



Limestone fragments depicting a royal face, dating to the Thutmosid era. The feature closely resemble the style of royal profile seen in the image of Thutmose III shown below.

Among the intriguing Thutmosid finds is a series of limestone fragments excavated by Maria, John and Dr. Liz Warketin, showing an eye, eyebrow and ear, part of the *khat* headdress and a coiled uraeus (*shown above*): together they form a royal profile, similar to representations of Thutmose II at Karnak and a limestone fragment of Thutmose III at the Metropolitan Museum (26.7.1399 - *shown below*).



A limestone relief depicting Thutmose III, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: MMA

Another series of fragments form the royal, ritual kilt, decorated with an apron terminating at its lower end in two rising uraei (*opposite, top left*).



A series of limestone fragments forming the apron of a royal kilt with uraei.

There are several finds that tie the limestone discovered at the temple site to the Thutmosid period, including a fragment of a cartouche bearing the name of Men-kheper-ra, i.e. Thutmose III:



Fragment of cartouche bearing the prenomen of Thutmose III: "Men-kheper-ra".



A fragment of the cartouche of either Thutmose I (Aa-kheper-ka-ra) or, more likely, Thutmose II (Aa-kheper-en-ra)

Another fragment is preserved with details of the throne and birth name indicating either Thutmose I (Aa-kheper-ka-ra) or, more likely, Thutmose II (Aa-kheper-en-ra) (*shown above*).

The ancient name of the site, *Kheny*, was found on a fragmented block lying on its side (*see below*), and other details reveal that the registers were completed with a list of captured enemies.

Other finds include: graffiti similar to that documented as part of Maria's graffiti survey (inside and outside the speos on the west bank); limestone fragments of engraved columns crowned with papyrus capitals; numerous fragments that together form the winged sun disk, Behdety; and the lower part of a decorated square pillar (perhaps plinth), from one of the architectural features that existed in this, the earliest building phase of the temple (*see page 48*).



A fragment (above *in situ* and after excavation, below) bearing an outstretched arm, part of the word "Kheny", the ancient name of the Gebel el-Silsila site.





TOP, LEFT
Limestone plinth or stone pillar, part of a feature from the earliest phase of construction at the Temple of Sobek.

TOP, RIGHT
Fragment of a limestone round-topped stela crowned by a *Wadjet* eye and placed in the temple by a *hem-netjer* priest.

BELOW
Overview of the western part of the necropolis.
Photo: Anders Andersson



A fragment of a small round-topped stela crowned by the *Wadjet* eye was found during the excavations of the western structure (see top, right): based on its inscription, it was placed in the temple by a priest (*hem-netjer*) who most likely served the god Ra-Sobek. A final example of an important detail that gives us a relative dating for the limestone temple fragments was also found in the western structure: a mudbrick (*in situ* in the wall) stamped with “Men-Kheper-Ra”, the royal name of Thutmose III. A similar mudbrick was found reused in a fired stratum from the Roman period.

The necropolis

The Thutmosid cemetery is located immediately to the south of the Temple of Sobek, separated by the canal. The rock-cut tombs excavated thus far consist of one or two undecorated chambers, some with one or more crypts cut into the bedrock floors. The entrance to the tombs consists of a dressed portcullis; slot-cuts were made into the door jambs, into which a stone slab would have been placed, to seal the door after burial, and possibly to allow for a later interment.

The tombs are accessed via a courtyard, followed by a series of steps that descend into a rough-cut squared room.





In addition to the chambers, the necropolis includes crypts cut into the rock - burials placed within geological fissures or cliff overhangs, or occasionally placed upon the floor within the surrounding quarryscape. The archaeology indicates multiple burials within the same chamber or crypt (conceivably complete families) with individuals of varying ages and both sexes. Furthermore, a series of infant and child burials indicates family life at Gebel el-Silsila. We have carried out excavations in the necropolis since 2016, and have so far exposed 73 burials, containing the remains of at least 200 individuals, half of which were found in the waterlogged tomb, ST42, and with 13 additional, individual burials preserved undisturbed, including those of a cat and three headless crocodiles. The necropolis will form a forthcoming AE article on its own, so here we will focus only on the datable Thutmosid material found there.

The best funerary item to use for dating is, naturally, the scarab. Several scarabs, including some engraved with the throne name of Thutmose III - Men-Kheper-Ra - were found during

the first excavation seasons (*see above*), but always within an archaeological layer disturbed or created by looters. However, in 2017 we found two intact children burials, ST63 and ST64, so were able to document seven scarabs in situ, placed around the left wrists of the two children. Stylistically, all seven scarabs show Thutmosid characteristics (common during the reigns of Thutmose II throughout to Thutmose III), such as the stylized *ankh* (*centre*). One of the scarabs found in burial ST64 gives us a more precise dating, bearing the finely engraved throne name of Thutmose II - Aa-kheper-n-ra (*bottom, right*). The excavation of the intact, but heavily disturbed, waterlogged tomb ST42 revealed a further 24 scarabs, among which were found the royal names of Thutmose II, Thutmose III, and Amenhotep II (Aa-kheper-ru-ra). It is, however, important to remember that scarabs inscribed with royal names reveal only a terminus post quem for production, which is consistent with their archaeological context; those scarabs produced after the reign of Thutmose III cannot be given an absolute date.

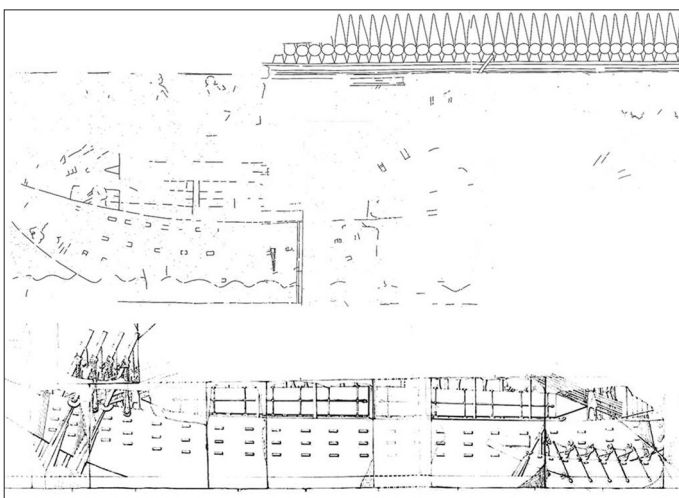
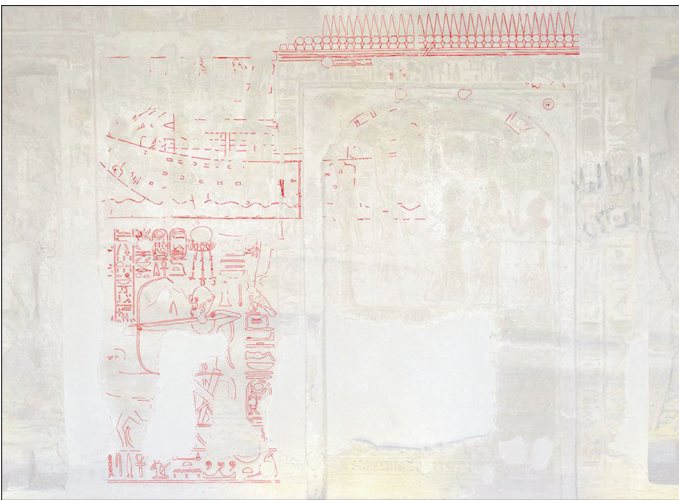
ABOVE

A selection of scarabs dating to the Thutmosid era, discovered in burials at the cemetery to the south of the Temple of Sobek. The stylised ankh (*centre*) is characteristic of the period. The discoveries include scarabs bearing the prenomen cartouches of the Eighteenth Dynasty kings:

Men-kheper-ra Thutmose III
(*top centre and bottom centre*)

Aa-kheper-ru-ra Amenhotep II
(*bottom left*)

Aa-kheper-n-ra Thutmose II
(*bottom, right*).



ABOVE: A detail from the speos King Siptah scene (top) that includes a “ghost ship”, shown in the drawings below it. The black and white drawing compares this scene with a similar image at Hatshepsut’s Deir el-Bahari temple (bottom photo). Drawings: Martinez; Photo: RBP

The ghost ship in the speos

As a final example of this very brief summary of Thutmosid activity at Gebel el-Silsila, we would like to draw to your attention a “ghost scene”, which is located to the south of the transversal hall in the rock-cut temple on the west bank, commonly known as the “Speos of Horemheb”. The surface scene shows a representation of King Siptah [who reigned at the end of the Nineteenth Dynasty, c. 1194-1188 BC - *see left*] followed by his vizier Bay, standing before Amun. As part of the re-documentation of the speos, the team’s lead epigrapher, Dr. Martinez, noted a series of strange lines that interfered with the scene, and which continued horizontally into the adjacent Ramesside scene. Following these lines, a rare superimposed scene comes to life: the representation of a large barge carrying at least one obelisk, bringing to mind the renowned relief of an obelisk-transporting barge that Queen Hatshepsut commissioned for the first terrace of her Mansion of Millions of Years at Deir el-Bahari.

When comparing the two scenes (*see left*), one can notice both similarities and differences. Parallels are found in the presence of three tiers of reinforcing deck beams along the hull, an upwards curving stern, quarter rudders, and the presence of at least one, possibly two, obelisks. Dissimilarities include a slightly more realistic rendering of the Nile for the Gebel el-Silsila scene, based on the curved wavelets marking its surface. There are also differences in the positioning of the obelisks, some finer proportional discrepancies, and in the shape of the barge, with our barge being akin to a *Menesh* [a Syrian-style vessel first seen during the Ramesside Period]. However, with the overall study of the architectural and iconographical program in the speos, we think it is possible to claim that the dating of the Speos must be revised to at least an earlier period of the Eighteenth Dynasty, most likely as far back as the reigns of Hatshepsut and/or Thutmose III.

Concluding notes

While an extensive epigraphic survey of New Kingdom monuments has been carried out since 2013, our excavations still continue to reveal more information and fragments that add to, and sometimes change what we thought we knew about Gebel el-Silsila’s Golden Age. The Thutmosid period runs like a unifying theme through many of our recent archaeological discoveries, including shrines 30-31, the Temple of Sobek, the necropolis, and of course the earliest phase of the speos. Based on the archaeology, it is evident that Gebel el-Silsila during this time was vibrant with social, political, industrial and religious activity.

The importance of the site is evident throughout the Thutmosid monuments, above all in the 32 shrines of the high officials, all whom pursued eternal commemoration for their life achievements, rooted in ancient Kheny in one way or another. It is no coincidence that the Golden Age of the pharaohs began with a switch from limestone to sandstone construction, an architectural transformation triggered by, and memorialised in, the pure golden sandstone of Gebel el-Silsila.



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our wonderful Silsila family, and the Permanent Committee of Foreign Missions for giving the team permission to work at Gebel el-Silsila, and equally to the General Director of Aswan and Nubia, Mr. A. Moniem Said. The documentation of NK epigraphy and archaeology has been made possible by the financial support of National Geographic Society (HJ-103R-17), Gerda Henkel Stiftung (AZ 47/v/18), Långmanska stiftelsen (BA18-0815), Magnus Bergvalls Stiftelse (2017-02292), Lars Hiertas Minne (FO2018-0035) TVAES, MEHEN, and all private backers in the Kickstarter campaign!

Maria Nilsson & John Ward

Husband and wife team John and Maria, from the Lund University, Sweden, have directed the Gebel el Silsila Project since it began in 2012, living on site with their family for six months of the year. Having documented New Kingdom epigraphy since 2013 and excavated the site since 2015, they and their team will continue the excavations of the Temple of Sobek as well as the necropolis. In the next issue of AE

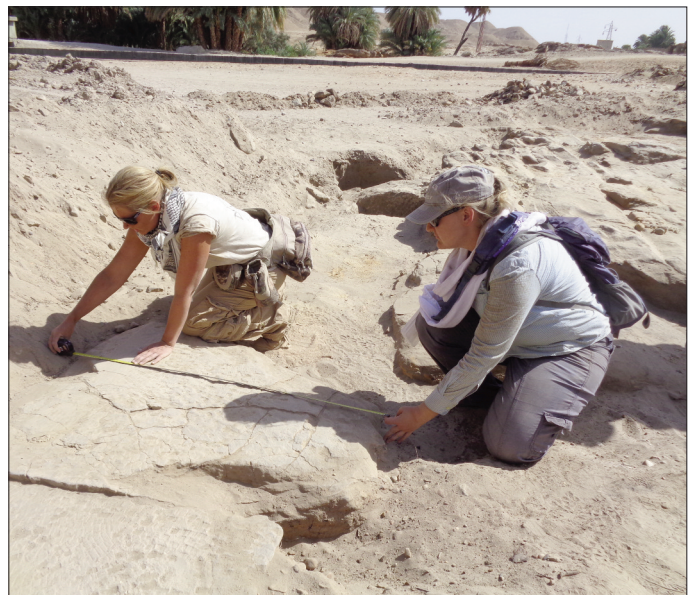
All photos by the authors unless otherwise stated

Further Reading

Martinez, P. (2015) ‘In the footsteps of Richardo Caminos: Rediscovering the Speos at Gebel el Silsila’. In *KMT* 26:3, pp.62-73.

Nilsson, M. and Martinez, P. (2017) ‘In the footsteps of Ricardo Caminos: Rediscovering the Gebel el Silsila and its rock-cut temple’. In G. Rosati & M. C. Guidotti (eds.) *Proceedings of the XI International Congress of Egyptologists*, pp. 445-449. Oxford: Archeopress.

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TOP: Overview of the west bank with the speos to the right, and the team’s boat *Sobek* in front.
 CENTRE: Maria and Liz Warketin excavating the Temple of Sobek.
 BOTTOM: John and Maria with Egyptian inspectors and general directors Abdel Menuem and Nasr Salama, at the Temple of Sobek