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Nilsson, Maria; Ward, John; Coletto, Patricia

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

GEBEL EL-SILSILA THROUGH THE AGES

Scarabs for the Children

In a slight diversion from their on-going series on the historical development of this fascinating site, **Maria Nilsson, John Ward and Patricia Coletto** return to the Thutmoside cemetery at Gebel el-Silsila East and examine in detail two of the intact child burials discovered by the Gebel el-Silsila Project team, with special focus on scarabs and scaraboids.



ABOVE: Maria Nilsson excavating the child burials ST3 and ST64 in the Thutmoside cemetery. Photo: John Ward

The Thutmoside cemetery is located in the northern part of Gebel el-Silsila East, with seventy-three burials discovered so far, thirty-three of which are in rock-cut chamber tombs (see *map opposite, top*). The remaining forty internments can be classified into three groups: those in external crypts, those under cliff overhangs, and a few where the body was placed upon the ground within the surrounding quarry landscape. A total of eight intact child burials were discovered and excavated in 2016-2017, all found in individual burials outside, or relatively close to, chamber tombs. Burials ST44 and ST51 contained infants (ST44 neonatal), wrapped in reed and textile respectively, secreted within the overhangs of the natural sandstone bluffs and covered with stones. A carnelian necklace was

placed around the neck of the infant of ST51, who was further protected by an amulet of dwarf-god Bes. A rock-hewn crypt (ST59) contained a toddler of approximately two to three years of age, wrapped in textile, surrounded by organic material that had been destroyed by termites, and covered with a poorly-preserved crumbling sandstone lid, once sealed with plaster. Burials ST56, ST58, and ST69 contained children and young adults between the ages of five and late teens, each placed within the quarry landscape rather than in proper burials, also covered with quarry spoil and without burial goods. These latter three individuals show pathological indications of sickness and/or fractures.

In this article, we will focus on the intact child burials ST63 and ST64, which were discovered at the end of the



season. The two bodies had been placed on their backs, with their hands along their hips, within a natural bedrock fracture-line, situated slightly elevated outside one of the major chamber-tombs in the central part of the cemetery. The graves were separated from each other and sealed at each end by flat sandstone slabs.

The Child in ST63

The body (*see below*) was placed with the head in the east, facing north, and laid out inside a rectangular tamarisk wooden coffin reinforced with a mud casing, although poorly preserved and mostly disintegrated. Dozens of beetles were found during excavation, which explains the destruction of the casing and the mis-



ABOVE
A Google Earth map of the Gebel el-Silsila East site, showing the location of the Thutmoside cemetery and the two child burials ST63 and ST64.

LEFT
The skeletal remains of a child in Burial ST63.

Photo: Maria Nilsson



ST63 GRAVE GOODS (Photos: Maria Nilsson)

TOP LEFT: Ceramic vessels and plates placed in the coffin beside the child.

BOTTOM LEFT: A bronze razor *in situ* above the child's head.

TOP RIGHT: The bronze razor.

CENTRE RIGHT: A copper amulet in the shape of a *nefer* hieroglyph.

ABOVE RIGHT: Two bronze bracelets found around the left wrist of the child.

placement of several phalanges (the terminal bones of the hand), particularly those of the right hand, many of which were found above the child's head. According to the preliminary osteological analysis, the child was approximately 7 years (+/- 24 months) old at the time of death. As often is the case, the cause of death cannot be established at this point. However, there are some indications of a medical condition, which will be further studied by experts in the coming field season.

Below the disintegrated wooden lid was found a layer of fine, smooth, coloured pebbles that covered the body. Underneath was a thin layer of organic material, wrapped around the body. Leaves of the *nabk* shrub were also found, perhaps placed there to protect the child from lung-related deceases in the Afterlife (*nabk* leaves are still used in Egypt today to treat cough and lung infections). Ten ceramic vessels and plates, characteristic of the New Kingdom, were placed in the north-eastern and south-eastern sides of the coffin in line with the deceased's head and torso (*opposite top left*), and an intentionally broken plate was laid out to the east of the coffin, above the head. A bronze (copper-alloy) razor was placed above the child's head inside the coffin (*opposite bottom left and top right*), and above the thorax we found a copper amulet in the shape of a *nefer-sign* (*opposite centre right*), placed there to protect the child. Moving downwards, two bronze bracelets (*opposite bottom right*) were placed around the left wrist together with four scarabs and scaraboids (all photos by Maria Nilsson):



Scarab 1

Scarab 1 (see below)

A faience 'cowroid', 16.54mm long, in the shape of an apotropaic cowrie shell; smooth and undecorated on the reverse and sides. The obverse is decorated in sunken relief with two stemless, open water lilies facing each other.

In nature, the water lily closes at night and opens during the day, which for the ancient Egyptians symbolised rebirth. The cowroid shape was considered an apotropaic vehicle for the protection of pregnant woman and for fertility, perhaps here more a talisman of child protection.

Scarab 2 (see top right)

A faience scarab, blue-green with slight brown discolouration, 10.26mm long. It has Amun-Ra crudely inscribed in sunken relief on the obverse. The reverse is modelled to imitate the back of a scarab beetle, and the sides feature two inscribed lines representing stylised legs.



Scarab 2



Scarab 3

Scarab 3 (see above)

A blue-green faience scarab, 11.63mm long, finely inscribed horizontally, in sunken relief, with Lord Amun-Ra; the hieroglyphs are surrounded by one papyrus bud and one water lily bud, representing Upper and Lower Egypt. Thus, the obverse may be read as "Amun-Ra, Lord of Upper and Lower Egypt". The reverse is a well defined scarab and the sides feature deeply carved legs.

Scarab 4 (see below)

This is another apotropaic 'cowroid' in blue-green faience, 11.7mm long and finely inscribed horizontally with a sunken relief depicting a stemless, open water lily (symbolising re-birth) flanked by two stylised buds.



Scarab 4



ABOVE: A ceramic vessel found at the southern end of the ST64 burial. Photo: Maria Nilsson

The Child in ST64

ST64 contained the grave of a child of approximately 6 years (+/- 24 months) of age, laid with its head in the east. The skeleton was preserved fully articulated except for the head, which had been detached and rotated during antiquity; perhaps this coincided with the burial of ST63. As with the other child, the preliminary osteological analysis indicates an underlying medical condition, for which will be the subject of detail study in the upcoming season. The body was wrapped in textile and tamarisk matting, equally poorly preserved and disintegrated, above which was a spread layer of naturally coloured pebbles. A single ceramic vessel was found, disturbed from its original location, at the southern end of the ST64 burial (see above). Three scarabs and scaraboids had been placed around the child's left wrist (all photos by Maria Nilsson):

Scarab 5 (see below)



Scarab 5

A blue-green faience 'cowroid', 18.12mm long, with some crazing of the glaze on the obverse. The motif finely inscribed horizontally in sunken relief shows a Nile tilapia (fish), with two water lilies protruding from its mouth, one bending over the head and the other under the belly. The reverse is shaped like a cowrie shell, smooth and undecorated.

For the signification of water lilies and the cowroid shape, see Scarab 1. The tilapia represented regeneration and rebirth. Tilapia protect their eggs in their mouths and spit out the hatched young, an obvious symbol of regeneration.

The motif was intended as an 'amulet of assimilation', known from as early as the Old Kingdom. See:

Andrews, C. (1994) *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, British Museum Press, p. 67;

Robins, G. (1993) *Women in Ancient Egypt*, Harvard University Press: "Book of the Dead Spell 15 – 'You see the tilapia in its [true] form at the turquoise pool ... I behold the tilapia in its [true] nature guiding the speedy boat in its waters', indicting that the tilapia aids the sun god in his journey across the sky, and by association that the dead would take his/her place in the solar barque."

Scarab 6 (see below)



Scarab 6

A blue-green faience scarab, 13.07mm long, with abrading on the reverse creating brown discolouration patches. The obverse is finely inscribed in sunken relief Aa-Kheper-n-Ra, the throne name of Thutmose II and the reverse bears the form of a scarab. The sides feature clearly defined, deeply carved legs.

Scarabs engraved with the name of Thutmose II are extremely unusual because of his short reign. This scarab provides the burial with a *terminus post quem*, a date within his reign or the period shortly thereafter.

Scarab 7 (see below)



Scarab 7

A light green faience scarab, 11.25mm long, in an almost perfect state of preservation, with no evidence of abrading or discolouration. The obverse is finely inscribed vertically in sunken relief with a stylised *ankh* motif, with the 'loop' separated from the T-shaped base of the sign. The base and arms of the base are flared at the termini. The reverse takes the form of a scarab, while the sides feature inscribed lines representing stylised legs.

Examples of this stylised *ankh* motif (with the loop separated from the body of the sign) are common during the reigns of Thutmose II and the co-regency/reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III.

As the ubiquitous hieroglyphic sign for 'life', 'alive', 'living', or 'to live', the *ankh*-sign is an understandable and predictable amuletic motif for a funerary context and the assurance of regeneration in the afterlife.

Concluding Remarks

The two child burials of ST63 and ST64 provide us with various levels of information regarding the life and death, beliefs and customs of the ancient community of Kheny (Gebel el-Silsila) during the time of Thutmose II and III. Although relatively young, both children received a considerable amount of attention in their final resting place, represented by the carefully chosen and placed smooth, coloured pebbles, the *nabk*-leaves, and of course the various ceramic goods, the metal objects, and various scarabs and scaraboids. We hope to learn more about these children's physical health once our experts have completed the osteological analyses, but already the preliminary results indicate the presence of one or more medical conditions, which may have resulted in their premature death. Considering the *nabk*-leaves and their natural healing property relating to lung deceases, combined with the contemporaneous extraction activities in subterranean galleries, these young individuals may well have been employed in one of the many quarrying tasks, inhaling the fine silica dust, and developing a chronic cough. In the Afterlife, at least, they remain protected and in good health through the gentle and loving care given by their surviving family members.

Maria Nilsson, John Ward and Patricia Coletto

Currently Marie Nilsson is a Curie Researcher at Lund University, Sweden. Dr. Maria leads the Gebel el Silsila Project with John Ward (also Lund University). Together with their team they have documented New Kingdom epigraphy since 2013 and excavated the site since 2015. Patricia Coletto is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Exeter.

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ABOVE: Scarab number 5, found in burial ST64, inscribed with an image of a tilapia fish

BELOW: Scarabs were used by scribes as seals. Here is the impression made by scarab number 6, the throne name of Thutmose II.

Photos: Maria Nilsson

