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Gebel el-Silsila through the Ages

Part 8: Roman Archaeology and the Stables of Tiberius

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Part 8: Roman Archaeology & The Stables

The Roman Period at Gebel el-Silsila may be described as a renaissance, with life and activity returned to site after the 'dark ages' of the Late and Ptolemaic Periods. Concentrated around a heavy quarrying industry, the site received an extensive infrastructure with a network of buildings and connecting roads. Chronologically, this activity peaked during the Early Roman period, from the reign of Augustus to Claudius (c. 30 BC - AD 54). Thereafter, the East Bank quarries were closed indefinitely, and with very limited activity noted only in the peripheries of the site. The series of Roman areas surveyed and/or excavated on the East Bank includes: 19 quarries with 15 associated quays or mooring stations; stacked stone shelters in and above the quarries; storage facilities; blacksmith areas within the quarries; and outlooks or stations on top of peaks to monitor the site (*see aerial photo, opposite*). Additionally, we have documented three more complex structures used for: 1) administration, 2) religious activity, and 3) housing.

Workers' Activity

The archaeology of the Main Quarry (Q34) may serve as an example of preserved Roman quarry-related activity. The quarry and its surrounding landscape were initially surveyed in 2007 and 2011, followed by a comprehensive epigraphic survey in 2012-2013. Simultaneously, an archaeological survey was conducted with the aim of establishing a general overview of the quarry and its infrastructure, including the documentation of pathways, spoil heaps and stone structures situated on top of the heaps and on the plateau immediately above the quarry. Five distinct sectors of ancient ruins were recorded: three sectors were located on top of the heaps, and two on the plateau. We documented, in total, 54 clearly-defined huts built of



ABOVE: Roman Period chisel tips discovered at the 'Stables of Tiberius'. Photo: Anders Andersson

stacked stone, which in general measured between 2.5 x 2.5 metres, and 4 x 5 metres. Archaeological surface materials – including pottery, charred coal, red bricks, slag products and layers of organic material – indicate that many of the structures on top of the heaps were used as shelters

Gebel el-Silsila Through The Ages

Of Tiberius by Maria Nilsson & John Ward

and temporary habitation. The organic material indicates the application of grass or reed as bedding material, or alternatively a roof.

In addition to the huts, all walls built of stacked stone were recorded. These were located in direct connection with the quarry faces, placed there to protect the workers and keep the main pathways

free from falling debris. Additionally, nine ramps were recorded within the quarry which, based on their state of preservation, indicate different periods of quarrying. Miscellaneous items found during the surface collection included chisel tips (*see opposite*), wood fragments (some from wedges), ceramic items, textile, amulets, beads, stone

ABOVE
John Ward surveying the main quarry.

Photo: Anders Andersson

BELOW
An aerial view of the Roman archaeology at Gebel el-Silsila.

Photo: Google Earth/
Maria Nilsson





ABOVE

A black-and-white photograph giving an overview of the *naos* quarry excavation area with the team hard at work.

BELOW

A game board carved into a piece of rock in the main quarry area. The quarry-workers clearly had some leisure time!

Photos: Maria Nilsson

offering tables, and stone *ostraca*. A high concentration of burned red bricks, charred coal, large pieces of slag and clear flakes of iron indicate a workman's station – plausibly a blacksmith's workshop. The ceramic analysis of material from Q34 took place in 2014-2015. The result was a typology that consists of 15 types, which together indicate ware for daily use – practical items for the workers who rebuilt Egypt.

Surveillance

Serving as a good example for the group of Roman outlook stations, 'RAS 11' (approximately 50 x 30m) is situated on the second-highest point of the East Bank, immediately above the main plateau transportation route, and with a clear line of sight across the entire East Bank, and across the Nile over to the West Bank. The station marks a strategic location from which the entire site of Gebel el-Silsila could be monitored. At the base of the hill upon which the station sits is located a series of dry-stone shelters, including an area likely to have been used to pen animals. Our survey of the area revealed that the small group of people stationed there had plenty of time to relax, play games, produce doodles and scribbles, and engrave into the rocks the outlines of their feet and sandals as a form of eternal commemoration of their time in this location. Two poorly preserved Greek signatures were also noted. Surface archaeology mainly consists of Early Roman pottery, some charred coal, flints (perhaps used to incise game boards and illustrations), and several game boards (see *left*).



Religious Buildings

As mentioned before, the Temple of Sobek was already in ruins by the time of the Roman occupation. Instead, the area appears to have been used as a safe place to collect water and/or for fishing (as it still is today!), and it is likely to have acted as a mooring or landing station, perhaps in connection with the quarrying or reuse of older stone blocks. In fact, there are no indications of any new religious structures or temple constructed during the Roman Period on the East Bank (nor on the West). Instead, the quarries acted as dwellings for the gods whose temples would receive the extracted stone. Quarry 24, for example, was the home for the Medamoud triad – Montu, Raatawi and Harpocrates, while Khnum, Neith, and Tutu dwelled in the southern parts of Quarry 34.

There is, however, one possible exception. When we initially surveyed the Roman Quarry 37 in 2013, we nicknamed it 'the Naos Quarry' (see *opposite, top and this page bottom right*), based on a shrine-like structure that is situated in the northern part (*top right*). The shrine, which was cleared from debris and documented that year, is primarily rock hewn with a constructed flat roof consisting of three large (3.5 - 4m -long) blocks. It opens to the west. In front of the *naos* were found indications of an extended sanctuary including column drums, and a series of rooms (*centre right*) excavated in 2019. Below the plateau, to the south, is situated another complex of several rooms which was roofed by means of wooden beams and organic material. This complex was archaeologically explored in 2019, with continued excavations planned for the upcoming seasons. The archaeological material that was found during the excavations included several oil lamps, beads, coins, and demotic *ostraca*. It is our hope that we can resume the excavations of this area this autumn, and to return with more details on its function.



TOP: The *naos* in Quarry 37.
Photo: John Ward

CENTRE: One of the rooms in the Naos Quarry.
Photo: Maria Nilsson

RIGHT: The team sifting in the Naos Quarry.
Photo: Robert Mittelstaedt



Administration Building

Quarry 24, in which the so called 'Stables of Tiberius' are situated (*see left*), is located in the central part of the East Bank, some 500 m south of the present-day guardians' house, and can best be reached via the main N-S pathway along the Nile. The quarry encompasses an area of almost 30,000 square metres, and the landscape is defined by a series of spoil heaps (*opposite, bottom*). Stables for larger animals (equine or bovine) are located on the ground level and follow the preserved, exposed east-facing quarry face, which is approximately 30m wide. Food troughs were chiselled straight into the vertical cliff face, next to which are a series of rope holes to which the animals were tied. The troughs are decorated with demotic or Greek inscriptions or graphic quarry marks, presumably indicating ownership of the animal.

The administration complex occupies an elevated position (*see opposite, bottom*), built into one of the Roman spoil heaps, which in turn sits directly atop an exhausted Dynastic quarry. Due to its elevation and geographic location, it was strategically placed to give a clear overview of the West Bank and direct line of sight to adjacent Roman stations to its north, east, and south. The complex at present comprises a total of 15 excavated dry stone-walled rooms that are rectangular or square in style, with the exception of one semi-circular room. The structure is divided into four ascending levels, interconnected by narrow pathways.

The walls (1m or higher) were built from two courses of stones laid alongside one another, infilled with smaller debris to provide stability and strength. Organic material indicates a roof system of reed and/or palm fronds resting upon wooden beams that were inserted into a horizontal series of postholes along the exposed quarry walls. The roof of the ground level stables may have facilitated flooring for the upper levels, thus extending the building.



TOP LEFT: An aerial photograph of the administrative building known as the 'Stables of Tiberius' in the early days of the excavation.
Photo: Anders Andersson

CENTRE: Excavation of the Stables of Tiberius. Photo: Maria Nilsson

BELOW: The stratigraphy of the floor, showing different periods of use.
Photo: John Ward

The stratigraphy (*opposite, bottom*) of the individual rooms reveal at least three occupation periods. The dateable archaeological material (foremost coins and ceramic material), however, is limited to the reign of Tiberius (AD 14-37), which indicates that the complex was used periodically then during the quarrying seasons. The chronological limitation documented in the archaeology is supported by the epigraphic documents, which record activity during an eight-year period between years 10 and 18 of Tiberius (AD 23-31).

The initial excavations of the upper level – including a room without an entrance/door that is burrowed into the spoil heap – indicate that it was used for food storage, taking advantage of the cooling prevailing northern winds. This level presented very limited archaeological objects, except for pottery consistent with an early imperial period. In contrast, the lower levels contained rich amounts of archaeological material, including coins, textile, ceramic and sandstone *ostraca* (text and graphic), jewellery, tools, seal impressions and stamps, as well as large quantities of ceramic sherds and complete vessels. From a strategic perspective, the lower levels are all located on the southern and eastern side of the heap, thus sheltered from the wind, but still with a clear overview of the surrounding landscape. These lower levels would have been more suitable for living quarters.

RIGHT: Maria excavating one of the rooms of the Stables of Tiberius. Photo: Anders Andersson

BELOW: The elevated position of the complex gives clear views of the West Bank and adjacent Roman stations to the north, east and south. Photo: Maria Nilsson





ABOVE: A pictorial ostrakon from the Stables of Tiberius.
Photo: Robert Mittelstaedt

The Archaeological Material

Ceramic Ostraca

The material excavated thus far comprises a rich variety of items and an enormous quantity of ceramic sherds. Approximately 150 ceramic ostraca were documented, including textual (89%) as well as pictorial (11%) examples. All textual ostraca were written with black ink in demotic script. The texts are documentary or connected to the life of the community there. The corpus includes name lists of Egyptian and Greek individuals, information regarding the quarry work, and lists of tools, but also writing exercises for inexperienced scribes.

Similar to text ostraca, the pictorial pieces reflect the multiplicity of archaeological material found within the administration complex. Among the more intriguing examples is a drawing of a temple decorated with Hathoric columns, with a superimposed figure of Bes and a geometric frieze on its reverse (see above). The drawing is divided over two ceramic sherds, both found in the 'rubbish dump' on the northern slope. Another example shows a geometric design similar to a solar wheel, with Greek letters attached to some of its terminals.

Sandstone Ostraca, Plaques, and Figurines

While the ceramic ostraca were found within debris layers accumulated outside the rooms, many engraved sandstone ostraca were discovered *in situ*, primarily placed within the wall, on the floor (under a carpet of organic material), or at or below the threshold leading into a room. By far the most frequently-appearing motif is the *ankh*, preserved in various styles and forms (see one example below), and the overall message communicated



ABOVE: A sandstone *ankh* ostrakon.
Photo: Maria Nilsson

BELOW: A sandstone plaque with a spider motif.
Photo: Maria Nilsson



ABOVE: A sandstone amulet.
Photo: Anders Andersson

appears associated with superstition or apotropeia.

A smooth oval plaque found on the floor level of one of the rooms illustrates a spider (*bottom centre*), plausibly revealing the owner's arachnophobia and wish to be safeguarded from such visitors.

In addition to sandstone ostraca and plaques, there are various fragments (and some intact pieces) of engraved and sculpted sandstone amulets and ornaments (*above*).

Similar to the plaques, these commonly represent *ankhs* in various forms, but also display iconographic elements similar to the site's quarry marks, including water lilies with protruding palm fronds. Similar motifs appear as pot marks. Other ceramic finds include ceramic ornaments, oil lamps, and faience figurines, including fragments of the dwarf-god Bes.

Seal Impressions

Among the discovered clay seal



ABOVE: A seal impression with a depiction of Harpocrates and a *uraeus*.
Photo: Maria Nilsson



ABOVE: A seal impression showing a standing ibis.
Photo: Maria Nilsson

impressions, is a well-preserved depiction of Harpocrates seated on a throne with a palm frond behind his back, and fronted by a risen *uraeus* (opposite, bottom right).

Another example illustrates a standing ibis with lowered head, feeding or drinking (above). There is also a male head/bust (maybe of an emperor?), possibly with index finger to lips (thus, Harpocrates?), and a depiction of either a donkey or a canid with long ears. The concentration of seal impressions and stamps indicates an administrative function for the structure.

Gaming

A series of game board fragments were located on the floor level, incorporated into the later structure of two of the rooms. These have been identified as *latrunculi* games with a game board of at least seven or eight rows of eight squares (top right). In addition to the games themselves, there were several dressed sandstone and ceramic pieces that may have been used as

BELOW: A sandstone gaming piece.
Photo: Robert Mittelstaedt



BELOW: A fragment of a game board found at the Stables of Tiberius.
Photo: John Ward

gaming pieces. The ceramic pieces are always small and circular (c. 1.5-2cm diameter) with smoothed/rubbed edges, and similar circular pieces made from sandstone have also been found (bottom left). There are also rectangular sandstone pieces (5-6 x 2 x 2cm) engraved with one or several horizontal lines on their sides that may also be related to gaming.

Metal

Several metal items were found during the excavations of the building, primarily objects manufactured of bronze/copper alloy and iron. In addition to coins, the bronze items include fish-hooks (centre right), nails, pins, pegs, and finger rings (below). Fishhooks and rings were found in two of the central rooms, while nails, pins and pegs were found primarily in the

lower levels of the building, including the ground level (stables). Iron objects mainly include nails, pins and chisel fragments (bottom right). The majority



ABOVE and BELOW: Two metal finds: a fishhook (above) and chisel tip (below).
Photos: Maria Nilsson

BELOW: A metal finger ring.
Photo: Maria Nilsson





ABOVE: A bronze ancient Egyptian *obol* with a head on the obverse (*left*) and a hippotamus on the reverse (*right*). The text above the hippo provides the name of the emperor (Tiberius), while the date LE (= *epous*/year 5) is marked below. Photos: Maria Nilsson

of the iron objects were found on the lower levels. In addition to bronze and iron objects, two thin sheets of rolled lead were found during the excavations of one of the central rooms.

Coins

Dozens of bronze coins were recovered during the excavations, recorded on almost all levels, debris piles, and along the pathways. With varying degrees of erosion and patination, they tend to remain in the size range of 14-20mm diameter, 2.5-3.5mm thick, and with a weight of 3.5-5 grammes, in general concurring with Alexandrian ancient Egyptian *obols* [an ancient Greek coin made from base metal or alloy worth one sixth of a drachma]. The majority, unfortunately, are heavily eroded and with limited details visible without intrusive conservation. There are, however, a few exceptions, the foremost recovered from the central rooms, including an ancient Egyptian *obol* (*above*) showing a bare head on the obverse, facing to the right, and with a

right-facing hippopotamus, head lowered, on the reverse. The text above the hippo names the emperor (Tiberius), while text below provides the manufacture/minting year 'five' (AD 18/19). Other examples include (faded) depictions of the Roman eagle, and many bear traces of a male bare head, but the coins are chiefly too eroded and patinated to make out any finer details prior to conservation work.

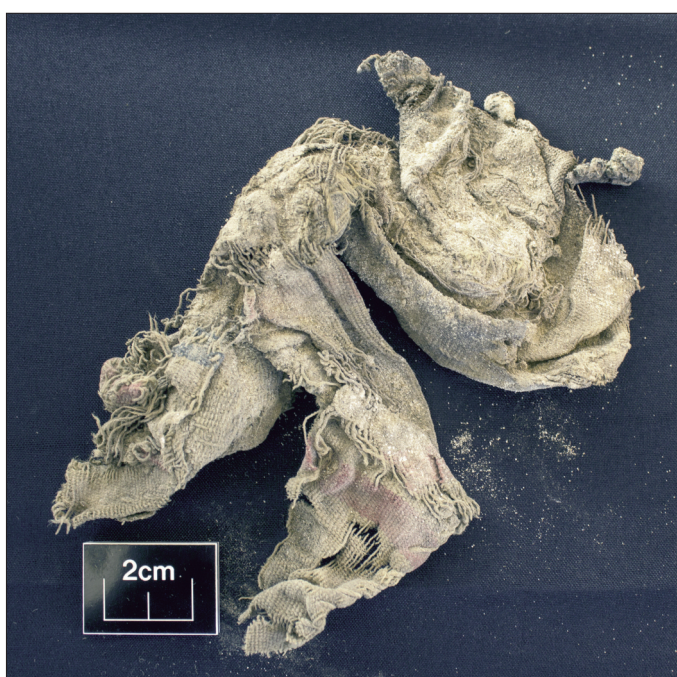
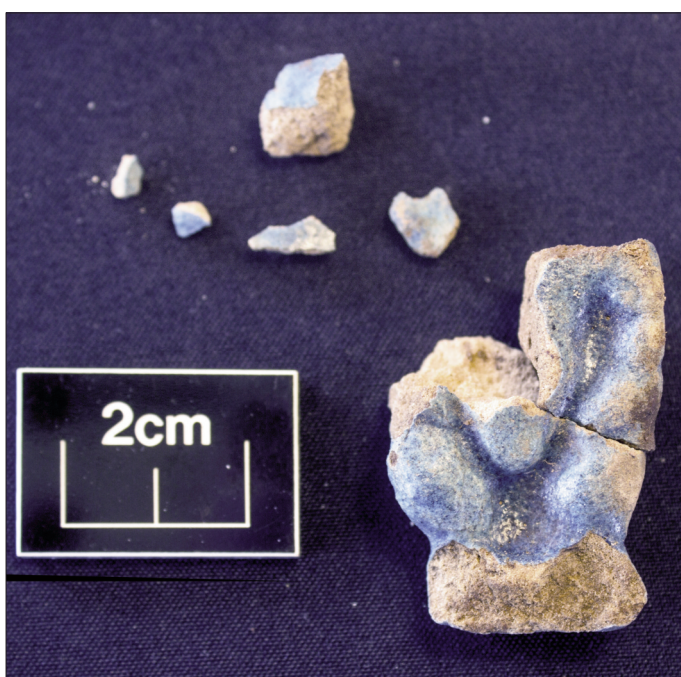
Textile

The excavations revealed considerable amounts of textile, mainly linen and wool, mostly used in a secondary application for floor or wall filling. Larger pieces of textile include folded fabric with clearly visible stitches, some with red and/or blue stripes (*see below*), but further detail studies are required prior to presenting the material in its entirety.

Conclusions

The Stables of Tiberius and its administration building reveal insights into daily life at Gebel el-Silsila during the early true

BELOW: Finds at the Stables of Tiberius also include a small faience Bes figurine (*left*) and a piece of textile (*right*) with some dye colours preserved. Photos: Anders Andersson



Roman Period. The richness of the preserved daily use material speaks of a thriving, but periodical community directly connected with the quarrying industry. Among the more informative objects are the text ostraca, which are currently being analysed and prepared for publication. As a complement to the archaeology, the epigraphy provides information integral to our understanding of the site, and we will explore this in the next issue!

**Maria Nilsson
and John Ward**

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All images
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Further Reading

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ABOVE: A piece of preserved rope. Photo: Maria Nilsson

BELOW: A pot discovered at the Stables of Tiberius, with the excavation team's sunshade and large mounds of Roman quarry spoil in the background.
Photo: Ulrika Lindblom Nilsson

