

GEBEL EL-SILSILA THROUGHOUT THE AGES:

PART 7 – LATE PERIOD TO GRAECO-ROMAN ERA

Continuing their chronological survey, Maria Nilsson and John Ward now focus on Gebel el-Silsila in the post-Ramesside era.



ABOVE: The West Bank at Gebel el-Silsila. The 'Tree Stela' (left), cut into the rock, features mention of a unique deity.

While the various rock-cut monuments along the Nile majestically testify to Gebel el-Silsila's dynastic splendour, the site's more recent ancient past is primarily represented through archaeology that is directly associated with the quarrying industry. The monumental quarries of the early Roman Period, seen on both East and West Banks, are of comparable visual magnificence to the Nile stelae (AE121) and the Speos of Hatshepsut (AE115). And of equal importance to our understanding of Gebel el-Silsila are the several villages and lookout-stations, with associated infrastructure, burials, and epigraphy.

The Late Period

After the demise of the New Kingdom, Kheny (the ancient name for Gebel el-Silsila) fell into almost complete oblivion; these dark ages would last until the end of the Ptolemaic Period, or perhaps as late as the early Roman Period, around the reign of the Emperor Augustus (c. 30 BC - AD14). Marking this transition was the destruction of the Temple of Sobek along with the eradication of all crocodile images, and also the demise of the town, the closure of its cemeteries and the discontinuation of both primary (official) and secondary (private) epigraphy.

From this obscure period, only a couple of official monuments can affirm activity at Gebel el-Silsila: the royal stela of Sheshonq I (c. 945-924 BC, Twenty-second Dynasty) on the West Bank (*shown opposite, centre right*), and the cartouches of Apries (c. 589-570 BC, Twenty-sixth Dynasty) on the East (*opposite top left and right*). While the stela of Sheshonq speaks about an official quarrying expedition, there is no evidence of any quarries from this time. This does not mean that the quarries were not there, but rather that they were reused later by the Romans. The stela is squeezed in between two Ramesside stelae on the main tourist pathway. It depicts the ruler during his twenty-first regnal year, accompanied by his son, the high priest of Amun, Iuput (A); together they are led by Mut before Amun-Ra, Ra-Horakhty, and Ptah. The rejection and exclusion of Sobek demonstrates that the only acknowledged 'Lord of Kheny' was no longer present in the local pantheon during the Third Intermediate Period.

The Ptolemaic Period

Considering the great amount of restoration work and the number of new sandstone temple structures built during the Ptolemaic Period, it is surprising – if not bizarre – to find nothing other than a few beer jugs and two stelae of potential contemporaneity. Naturally, the Romans may



have usurped the Ptolemaic quarries, and the material could be buried beneath Roman archaeology, but Gebel el-Silsila as it stands presents very limited indications of this period. Beer jars or jugs have been documented among the ceramic finds at the site of the destroyed Temple of Sobek, and in the Main Quarry (Q34) on the East Bank, as well as on 'Pottery Hill' (see AE114) and 'Black Rock Camp' on the West Bank. Between the Nile stelae and the stela of Sety I, situated in the far south of the West Bank, there is a stela mentioned by early travellers to the site (see *opposite and below*). Known as the 'Tree Stela' it depicts, from left to right, a tree, a horse and a rare Graeco-Roman deity known as Heron. Below the scene is a Greek *proskynema* (adoration). It has been suggested elsewhere that the stela dates to the Graeco-Roman age, but it is now too vandalised to determine an absolute



chronology. However, its preserved iconographical details, together with the text, follow the same Early Roman style as we have documented in thousands of images and hundreds of texts on the East Bank, so the Tree Stela may be discounted as a Ptolemaic monument.



TOP LEFT and RIGHT
A panel inscribed with the cartouches of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty king Apries (c. 589–924 BC).

ABOVE
Detail from the stela of Sheshonq I of the Twenty-second Dynasty. The king, seen with his son on the right, is presented by Mut to Amun–Ra, Ra–Horakhty and Ptah.
Photo: Philippe Martinez

LEFT
The 'Tree Stela' shows a horse standing by a tree with a divine figure named as Heron.



ABOVE: A stela showing twelve deities, grouped into four triads. The upper register most likely depicts the Edfu/Dendera triad on the left and the Kom Ombo main triad to the right; in the lower register, the Theban triad is shown to the left facing the Osirian family on the right.

BELOW: The stela shown *in situ* with steps in front of it and indentations in the floor suggesting three statues of some description once stood here.



Twelve Deities

The second stela of potential Ptolemaic age has been visible since antiquity, and is situated just north of the Speos along the pathway that today leads to the ticket office (*see left and below left*). We excavated its front face in 2018 in order to understand its relationship with the landscape, and learned that the stela was once protected by a wooden shrine, which the visitor could approach *via* a forecourt and stairs. Footprints in the floor in front of the stela (two square indents flanking a somewhat larger rectangular indentation) suggest that the shrine once held three statuary objects – perhaps similar to the monument of Amenhotep III on the East Bank with its two obelisks flanking a centrally positioned statuary falcon (*see AE116*).

The scene, which has no inscription (although it contains Greek text graffiti), shows twelve deities divided into four triads across two registers, with two groups of three gods facing each other within each register. The lower register shows the Theban triad (*i.e.* Amun-Ra, Mut and Khonsu) facing right and representing the South, and the Osirian siblings (Osiris, Isis and Nephthys) facing left and representing the North (probably Abydos), together creating a depiction of *sema-tawy* [‘the two lands’, north and south]. Their faces have been erased, but their crowns, dress and the objects they hold are clearly visible and enable identification.

The upper register is more disfigured, especially the two central male deities. However, the iconographical details of the female and child of the left-hand triad suggest that they represent the family of Edfu and/or Dendera, and so must be Horus the elder, Hathor and Harsomtus/Ihy. The right scene is more difficult to interpret as the male is almost completely erased, except for the tip of horizontal ram horns that would crown the deity in a composition that included a tall element – perhaps the two long feathers (and sun disc) of Sobek. The female’s iconography does not contain any specifying elements either. However, her crown (cow horns embracing a large sun disc with a pendant *uraeus*) indicates a form of Hathor. The child wears an *atef* crown instead of the more traditional *hemhem* that would be expected for child gods, and while the son of Sobek and Hathor (Khonsu)



ABOVE: Excavating the 'Stables of Tiberius', on the East Bank. Photo: Anders Andersson

is generally illustrated with his traditional moon disc and crescent, it is quite likely that this right group represents the triad of Kom Ombo. Some may say that this opens up the possibility that the left group is Haroeris, Tasenetnofret and Panebtawy – the second triad of Kom Ombo – but the iconography of the child is strikingly accurate for Harsomtus, and the overall symmetry of the stela indicates a geographical relationship, for which Edfu/Dendera is the more likely alternative. Duality remains a central theme.

The stela's style and composition suggest a later Ptolemaic age, at the earliest Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II, which would place it contemporaneous with the Temple of Kom Ombo and later additions to the other temples.

In terms of quarry activity, it is difficult to determine any precise Ptolemaic locations, mainly because the Romans appear to have usurped all opened areas. However graffiti in the northern part of the Main Quarry on the East Bank (including its corridor) indicate a slight temporal differentiation from the early Roman Period documented in the remaining part of this gigantic quarry. However, without any textual dating references, and with archaeology that has been heavily disturbed, such a suggestion must remain speculative.

The Roman Period

It is in the Roman era that the modern designation of the site has its roots. The Romans called the area 'Sil-sil' or

'Silsilis', presumably referring to the more ancient meaning of 'barrier' or 'frontier'. The name is believed to derive from a local tale that describes how a chain was once tied between the two banks in order to stop passing ships for taxation reasons. From this name comes the modern version, 'Gebel el-Silsila': the 'Mountain of the Chain'.

Roman activity is noticeable almost everywhere in the form of the partial takeover of older quarries, with pottery and graffiti in abundance. There are also many Roman structures with several clusters of shelters, lookout stations, storage facilities, and domestic, administrative and religious buildings around which hundreds of *ostraca* have been discovered. Since 2015 we have excavated a series of Roman areas on the East Bank, including the 'Stables of Tiberius', a *naos* and blacksmith area, and quarry shelters in the Main Quarry. We have also surveyed the 'Peak Station' and a housing complex situated above the New Kingdom cemetery, and comprehensively documented all preserved epigraphy. On the West Bank, 'Pottery Hill' and 'Black Rock Camp', as well as several lookout stations, have been surveyed and partially excavated, and all epigraphy documented.

Among the more intriguing structures is the 'Tiberius Stables' (*shown above*), an administration building and horse stables used intermittently over an eight-year period when stone was extracted from its quarry (Q24). Fifteen rooms divided over four levels have been excavat-



THIS PAGE

TOP LEFT
 Maria and the team sifting finds at the 'Tiberius Stables' site.
 Photo: Anders Andersson

TOP RIGHT
 An *ostrakon* with demotic text from the site of the 'Naos'.

BELOW LEFT
 A seal impression with the head of an emperor or deity, from the 'Stables of Tiberius' site.

BELOW RIGHT
 A ceramic oil lamp found at the same site.

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP, CENTRE and BOTTOM
 Excavations at the site of the 'Naos Area'.

ed so far, revealing well over thirty thousand ceramic sherds, 150 demotic *ostraca*, coins, seals, stamps, textiles and jewellery. This will be explored further in the next issue.

Another intriguing Roman complex is the so called 'Naos Area', in Quarry 37 on the East Bank, which is currently under excavation (see opposite page). Based on the epigraphy, it was in use during the reigns of Augustus, Tiberius and Claudius (c. 30 BC - AD 54), and was then abandoned (as were all other quarries of the East Bank). It was not exploited again until the early 1900's when parts of the quarry were dynamited to produce stone for the Esna barrage. During our early surveying days in 2012 and 2013, we found several oil lamps, a few coins and textiles amongst the surface material scattered in the area. Soon thereafter, we were given the permit to



clean the 'Naos', a shrine-like structure situated on top of the quarry. The undecorated structure had been reused by a local Sufi group and modern quarrymen, but remained in a relatively good state of preservation. We found architectural remains of columns and an extension to the shrine at its front, but it was not until 2019 that we began a more detailed investigation of the area. Among the more intriguing remains was a staircase and indications of castellation, which will be excavated more fully once we can return to the site. Coins, tools, organic material, pottery (in abundance) and *ostraca* will together help us reconstruct this area.

Quarries

Of the 104 quarries that we have identified at Gebel el-Silsila (excluding Nag el-Hammam and Shatt el-Rigal), at least



36 can be confirmed as partially or fully exploited by the Romans: 19 on the East Bank, 17 on the West. We have been able to identify the source (the quarry) and destination (the specific temple for which the stone was intended) in several cases, including Edfu, Dendera, Esna, the gate of Tiberius at Medamud, and the Temple of Isis and Min at Koptos. Often the Romans reused New Kingdom galleries (from Amenhotep III-IV), focussing their work on the exterior open surfaces rather than the subterranean rooms. In some areas, the ceiling was collapsed intentionally, and extracted together with the pillars that once supported it. Two of the large Ramesside quarries in the central part of the East Bank were also reused in parts, as indicated by the combination of Roman and Nineteenth Dynasty pottery as well as the quarrying techniques used. On the West Bank, the Eighteenth Dynasty Main Quarry (Q11) received limited extraction during the Roman Period, and the quarry faces are preserved with hundreds of pictorial and textual engravings (more about this in the third instalment!). Similarly, there are traces of Roman usurpation of the quarries of Tutankhamun.

The main differences between Dynastic and Roman quarrying are:

- Block size: Dynastic blocks are generally much larger (excluding *talatat* blocks), or regulated by cubit sizes if smaller; Roman blocks are generally carved at a height and depth of 55-60 cm, and a width of 120-290 cm depending on their intended architectural use
- The application of tools and their traces/grooves: Dynastic tools were made of bronze and copper, which limited their effectiveness, producing short *ad hoc* or herringbone-patterned tool grooves; Graeco-Roman tools were substantially longer and made of iron, a harder metal that allowed them to work more systematically and with more power; Roman tool marks are diagonal and symmetrically organised, except for corner areas in which a herringbone technique is still applied
- The quality and quantity of waste material: far higher during the Roman Period, while in the Dynastic Period there is a noticeable understanding of – and respect for – the geological features of the cliff, which allowed the quarrymen to minimize waste and work effort





- Lever marks (Dynastic) *versus* wedge marks (Graeco-Roman)
- The size and quantity of rope holes: rarely occurring small rope holes during the Dynastic Period *versus* enormous examples during the Roman Period – up to h. 75, w. 20, d. 25 cm
- The quantity of pictorial and textual inscriptions: excluding the official royal decrees as part of opening a new quarry, Dynastic inscriptions are rare, although they include both engraved and painted quarry marks and texts; during the Roman Period, the quarry faces are covered with marks, signatures and adoration texts.

Official Monuments – or the lack thereof

Despite the evidently flourishing Roman life at Gebel el-Silsila, there are no royal decrees or stelae in comparison with those of previous periods. Instead, Roman life and

TOP: The 'Den of Sobek', a large circular shaft that may have been the ideal spot to collect water.

CENTRE: One of many amphorae found by the shaft.

BELOW: The team at the top of the Naos staircase.
Photo: Gebel el-Silsila Team

activity is documented entirely through the testimonies left by normal working people – some permanent residents, but many members of a paid migratory workforce, including the quarrymen, blacksmiths, sailors, overseers, religious officers, and soldiers. During this time, religion was a more individual practice, as seen in the personal adorations and formulae such as “*I stand before X god*”. The quarries that housed the temples were considered sacred in themselves and appear to have acted as the raw state of the sanctuary for which the stone was intended. Each quarry was dedicated to the main gods of the predestined temples, which may be one of various explanations for why there are no official temples at Gebel el-Silsila from this time.

The Temple of Sobek had been a ruin for hundreds of years, but the site continued to receive attention, as is evident from the rich amount of pottery and everyday goods that we have found during the excavations. It is possible, that the structure we refer to as the ‘Den of Sobek’ – a large circular shaft to the west of the main temple (*top left*) – was used as a watering hole by the Romans, as hundreds of amphorae (*centre left*) were found along a natural shelf a few metres below the surface. Roman illustrations of harpoons, combined with fishhooks and other daily tools, indicate that this was a safe and prosperous place to catch their dinner. However, we should not forget to mention the nearby Temple at Ras Ras, which may very well have received its building blocks from the destroyed Temple of Sobek.

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Maria Nilsson and John Ward

Maria and John are Directors of the Gebel el-Silsila Project. In the next two issues, they will dive into some of the newly excavated Roman structures, including the ‘Stables of Tiberius’ and a Roman burial site; then they will round up by illuminating the extraordinary epigraphy, including enigmatic quarry marks and associated inscriptions.

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