

LATEST DISCOVERIES AT GEBEL EL-SILSILA

Maria Nilsson and John Ward take a break from their regular series of Gebel el-Silsila through the ages to share with us some of the archaeological discoveries from their most recent field season.



The Silsila team has just completed a very successful thirteenth season in Egypt so we thought readers of *AE* Magazine would like to be the first to hear about the latest finds at this amazing site. You will find a summary from the excavations of Tutankhamun's workers village, and Amenhotep III's stone workshop, and a snippet from

the ongoing rock art survey of the northern areas of Nag el-Hammam and Shatt el-Rigal. There is also a little treat for those who are interested in later antiquity as well, with a summary of the excavations of a Roman burial site!

Tutankhamun's Workers' Village

An ancient settlement was known already by a few early visiting scholars, and we marked out the location in 2013 during a larger survey of the area. The village is situated on the west bank, just north of the modern tarmac road that connects the Nile valley with the Western Desert (Sahara), and which divides Gebel el-Silsila proper from its northern sister-site Nag el-Hammam. The settlement (*shown opposite, below*) sits upon a small hill along the first plateau, overlooking the Nile to the east and with the quarries and associated spoil heaps to its south. A well-preserved ancient road meanders through the deserted landscape to its western side, and connects the village with an ancient quay to its northeast. The nearby small temple, previously thought to belong to Horemheb, was more likely contemporaneous with the village. Sadly this was destroyed in the 1980's when quarrymen used explosives to extract stone nearby, but the team has made a few surface finds, including a ceramic ostrakon containing an architectural drawing in a style comparable with the Amarna houses, indicating an earlier date than previously thought.

The archaeological context documented so far ranges from Prehistoric rock art and lithic industries, to Roman occupation and early Ottoman trade route activity. Based on the initial survey the village spreads out over an approximately 80 x 90 m area, and includes at least 73 rooms. It is divided in three main clusters, but individual



structures appear too. The shape of the rooms, including rectangular and semi-circular examples, is generally determined by the natural formation of the ground and cliff; some use protruding cliff faces to support the drystone wall. In terms of size, they range between approximately three to six metres across.

In 2013, when the team first documented the village, there were no threats to the site, and therefore it was not prioritised for excavation. Now, however, there is a growing danger, firstly by agricultural and urban encroachment, and secondly by contamination caused by sewage from the village of Nag el-Hammam, which is pumped into a nearby valley. Thus, we began the initial stages of a comprehensive survey and documentation of the workers' village this season. As a first step, the area was visually surveyed and the structures were allocated individual numbers, photographed and measured. So far, 41 rooms have been numbered, some of which, based on their size and orientation, appear to have been used as storage facilities. Test trenches were made in a number of rooms and among the finds were a scarab engraved with a depiction of god Re-Horakhty (or perhaps Montu - *top, right*), a faience amulet depicting the goddess Hathor (*top, left*), and numerous fragments of post-Amarna ware decorated with distinctive blue painted



patterns, red and white lines, and water lily motifs (see page 36).

While John and the team excavated the village proper, Maria conducted a comprehensive epigraphic survey of the area, and discovered a hieroglyphic inscription – perhaps marking the boundary between village and associated burial site - as well as various forms of ancient graffiti, and Predynastic rock art.

There is also a quarry (GeSW.Q8) adjacent to the village which has a hieroglyphic inscription with Tutankhamun's name. Intriguingly though, the name was misspelled, having an extra n (water-sign) but missing the t (bread-sign). The area surrounding the text was excavated in order to determine the potential existence of additional text,

OPPOSITE PAGE

ABOVE

The beautiful Gebel el-Silsila landscape.

Photo: Maria Nilsson

LEFT

Discussing finds from the Tutankhamun village.

Photo: Tricia Coletto

THIS PAGE

ABOVE

Two finds from the Tutankhamun village: a faience Hathor amulet and a scarab depicting Ra-Horakhty or Montu.

Photos: Robert Mittelstaedt and Maria Nilsson

BELOW

The team working at the site of the Tutankhamun village.

Photo: Maria Nilsson





ABOVE LEFT: Amarna-style pottery from the Tutankhamun village. Photo: Robert Mittelstaedt
 ABOVE RIGHT: Putting the pieces together. Amenhotep III Naos. Photo: Nils Billing

but instead we found a shallow trench, most likely used for feeding animals.

Another intriguing aspect of the village is the possibility that the current settlement was built upon a much earlier structure. Middle Kingdom papyri (as reported in previous articles) mention a fortification at Gebel el-Silsila, but its location has since been lost. However, tell-tale signs include a Middle Kingdom road discovered and documented recently by the team. This road runs directly behind the village and may well have supported the possible fortification; but it may also have provided an alternative transport route for the quarrymen at times of river

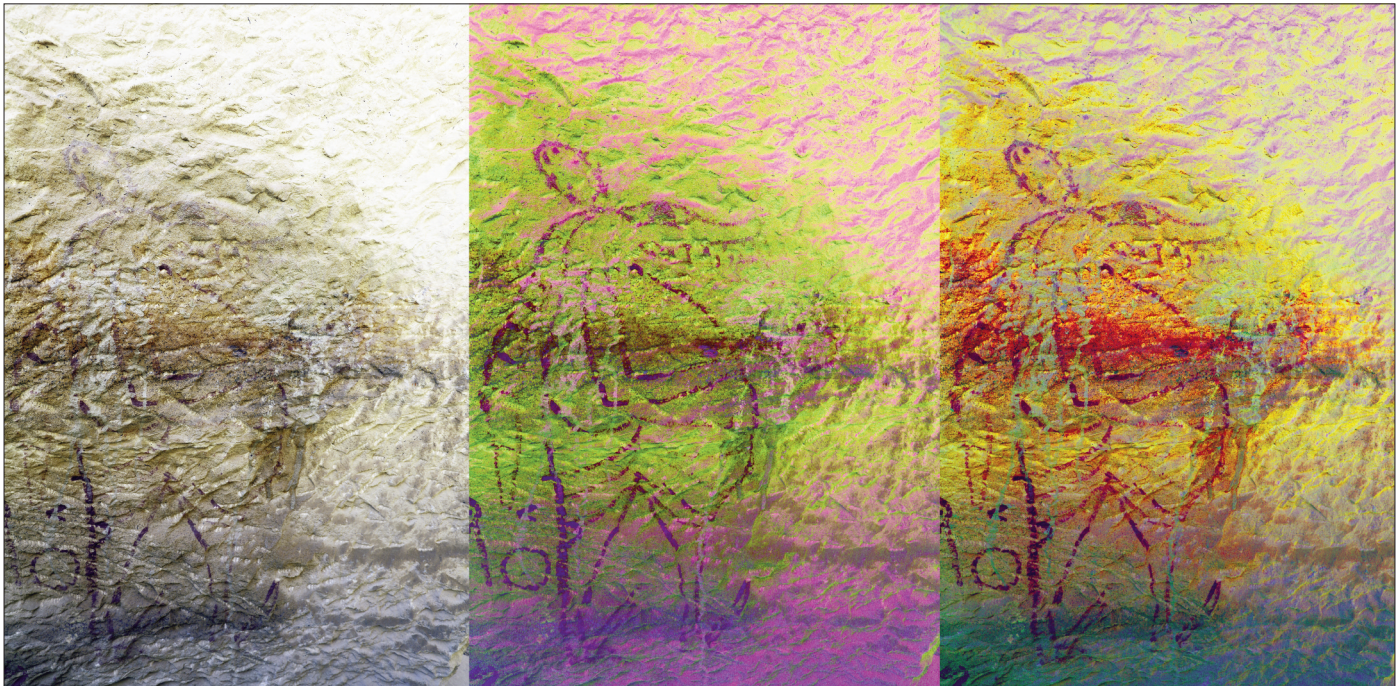
flooding when the Nile was not accessible or safe. Thus, their cargo would have had to be unloaded and taken across land on alternative routes. Further archaeological work is planned for the upcoming season 14.

Amenhotep III's Stone Workshop

Archaeological work was resumed in the area known as the "Fallen Monuments Quarry" (GeSE.Q15), initiated in 2018, which included the excavation of a series of monuments: two criosphinxes; a workshop; Naos E/F; and two empty stelae – all dating from the latter part of Amenhotep III's reign. This season, the second criosphinx (*opposite, below*)

BELOW: The second criosphinx (left) and the team indulging in a spot of creative photography by the sphinx! Photos: Maria Nilsson





was completely excavated, so we could see it had been extracted from its original position and prepared for transportation as was the case with the first statue excavated during the previous season.

The team also continued the excavations around the quarry plinth that holds the naos of Amenhotep III (Naos E/F; see below, right). There, we dug a five-meter deep trench through pure quarry spoil along the western side, widening previous season's trench and thereby making it safer and easier to document the red ochre inscription and painted figure reported in AE_116. We could confirm our identification of the figure as the goddess Taweret in her liminal form - Ammut, shown with her charismatic large belly and hippopotamus (alternatively crocodile?) face accentuated with

an exaggerated eye, and with large, sharp teeth (see above). Her head is decorated with a unique crown, and the tail of a crocodile falls behind her back. Similar to other Taweret representations, she too holds an item in front of her, although the surface is too eroded to make out its details. The final element to this unique representation is the depiction of two sharp, daemon-related knives, sending a clear message that a strong, protecting goddess guards this quarry! As reported previously, an associated hieratic text places this goddess in year 34 of Amenhotep III (c. 1356 BC).

In connection with the excavations of plinth and second sphinx, further fragments from the destroyed naos were recovered, resulting in new and important hieroglyphic text as well as structure-

ABOVE

The depiction of Taweret-Ammut (left) with two versions of the same photo created using DSTRECH software to make the image more visible.

Photo: Maria Nilsson

BELOW LEFT

Nils Billing working at the Fallen Monuments Quarry uncovers another fragment of the Amenhotep III naos.

Photo: Maria Nilsson

BELOW RIGHT

The team working below the Amenhotep III naos.

Photo: Robert Mittelstaedt





related information for this monument. By combining drawings, 3D photogrammetry, and a comparison with the adjacent Naos A, John and Egyptologist Professor Nils Billing were able to identify the fragments' original positions, and are currently preparing a digital reconstruction. At the time of wrapping up work, it was tentatively concluded that the two shrines described by G. Legrain in 1903 (E and F), are in fact one and the same monument.

The team also carried out an initial clean of the surface of two adjacent monuments known as the blank stelae. The work revealed a series of dress marks, depressions and outlines on the roof of the monuments, indicating that the monuments were crowned and adorned with statuary items. A few fragments of an obelisk were located at the eastern part of the monument, suggesting that it may have held identical adornment as Naos A and E, which were each

crowned with two obelisks acting as the double horizon for a falcon placed between them (see AE116 for a digital reconstruction of Naos A, by Dr. Martinez).

The Harbour – Quarry GeSE.Q26 & “Harbour Café”

As part of the work carried out in the Fallen Monuments' Quarry, an investigation was carried out of an area known to the team as “The Harbour” (Quarry GeSE.Q26), today almost completely overgrown with Nile reed (and a perfect haven for local cows and buffalos). The work was intended as an initial exploratory exercise to determine the depths of quarry spoil and wind-blown material that has accumulated since antiquity, but foremost to establish a better understanding of its chronology.

The excavations revealed that the harbour entrance had been used quite heavily over the past couple of centuries, primarily by the French and English engineering teams who extracted stone for the construction of the Esna barrage in 1906-1909. Their “modern” remains formed the top 20 cm! Underneath were found various levels of Nile silt deposited by the annual inundations, followed by a thick layer of quarry spoil left by more ancient workers (likely Roman). This is as far as the team could excavate for now, as the spoil continues beneath the current water level. The badly eroded surface of the quarried sandstone is testament to the detrimental effects of the ground water, with its high concentrations of salt deposits.

Located immediately to the south of the harbour are a small series of structures and an area littered with ancient pottery. One of the rooms was excavated to check for any potential relationship with the harbour, and/or with the galleries of Amenhotep III-IV further east. After removing some more modern items left by the men working at the beginning of the 1900's, the archaeology demonstrated ancient



reuse during the early Roman period, foremost in the form of ceramic material. However below this level we discovered the original ancient occupancy level, including examples of the renowned Amarna-ware, coinciding with the surrounding landscape and activity, i.e. New Kingdom. Except for a few intriguing artefacts, such as a triangular amulet (*opposite, top*) or seal and a few pieces of jewellery, the room mostly contained a considerable concentration of beer jars, suggesting its use in antiquity was as a restaurant, or rather bar, which gave the site its nickname "Harbour café".

Shatt el-Rigal Cemetery

We will now leap forward in time to the early Roman period in the Gebel el-Silsila area, and move in space from Gebel el-Silsila proper to another northern sister-site, namely Shatt el-Rigal. A short walking distance to the south of the famous Wadi Shatt el-Rigal, and located on one of the hilltops, is an early Roman cemetery (*top, right*). The cemetery was the object of initial surveying, including the numbering of individual tombs, during our previous seasons in 2018-2019. Work here began as a rescue operation, as we were told that tourists often climbed these hills, and by doing so put at risk the ancient remains that were left scattered on the floor by earlier looters.

The main focus this season was the clearing of the eastern front of the main tombs to reveal the entrances to tombs SeR.T05-11, as well as tomb SeR.T15, situated at the very top. All investigated tombs had been disturbed and looted in antiquity (*see right*) with further interference during modern times - including a relatively recent looting attempt in 2009. A large amount of archaeological material is strewn about inside and out, in particular the burned and vandalised mummified individuals and their belongings. This disturbance has made the task of identifying the scattered remains with their original tombs impossible. However, the material collated, combined with the analyses of osteological remains and other artefacts, will result in a better understanding of the individuals interned here.

Given their location towards the upper stratification of the sandstone cliff, the tomb structures are considerably weak. Combined with natural erosion and continuous lootings, this has left the tombs



in a poor state of preservation. The architectural design of each of the tombs is unique, consisting of a main chamber cut into the bedrock, sized and shaped (defined) predominantly by the stratification of the sandstone in which each had been placed. Each tomb contains one or several internal benches, so-called *mastabas* (or *kline* as they were known during the Graeco-Roman Period), each of which contained the remnants of mummified individuals. The use of a bitumen-type substance to preserve the bodies *in situ* has acted as an adhesive, and "glued" the mummies to the benches. In all tombs excavated, the mummies were burnt either *in situ* on the bench, or outside the tombs.

Tomb SeR.T10 was the only tomb to be completely excavated and documented. Facing east, the rectangular entrance is styled as an Egyptian cavetto cornice, its hinged door now lost or destroyed. Two



OPPOSITE PAGE

ABOVE
Triangular-shaped amulet found in the "Harbour Café."

BELOW
The Roman cemetery at Shatt el-Rigal.

Photos: Maria Nilsson

THIS PAGE

ABOVE
The team by the Roman cemetery at Shatt el-Rigal.

Photo: Robert Mittelstaedt

BELOW
A battered mummy in Roman Tomb 9.

Photo: Maria Nilsson



ABOVE: A collection of finds from the Roman cemetery at Shatt el-Rigal. Clockwise from top left: (i) a lead amulet bearing the image of a figure making offerings to a bovine deity; (ii) a piece of knotted rope; (iii) a wooden mummy label; (iv) a piece of painted textile; (v) a Roman period nail;
 Photos: Maria Nilsson (i & iii), Ulrika Lindblom Nilsson (ii & iv) and Robert Mittelstaedt (v)

rock-cut steps lead down into a large chamber which contains three large benches along the northern, western, and southern walls. The main bench is situated along the western wall, and contains the remnants of at least six adult individuals, laid side by side and with their heads to the east. The benches in the north and south are narrower, and presumably each held only one adult individual. Below the main bench, we found two crypts, both of a size suitable for a baby or young child. Another crypt was located in the central part of the chamber which was almost completely

destroyed by looters. A small *loculus*-like feature is situated in the north-western part of the chamber, providing burial space for at least another adult individual.

Excavations were also initiated in and around tomb SeR.T15, which is situated at the summit of the mountain. Remains of a superstructure were found both *in situ* and thrown below, to indicate a built funerary chapel formed part of this tomb. The excavations revealed a shallow crypt to its exterior, situated outside of a looters' entrance located in the north-western part. The true entrance to tomb

SeR.T15, however, was located in the western part, with access through a shaft. The interior of the tomb revealed four benches, one to each wall, with an undercut area to each one, presumably providing access to crypts. However, the tomb is filled with debris, mixing archaeological remains with sand. Further excavations are required, so the tomb was sealed off until next season.

Overall, the excavations of the Shatt el-Rigal cemetery revealed a vast amount of mummified skeletal remains, most of which were in a poor state of preservation due to burning. Fragments of outer wrapping were retrieved with painted motifs and gilded details. Among the finds was also a wooden mummy label or ticket, written in Roman Greek, providing the name of the entombed. Another find was a small lead amulet with an imprint of an anthropomorphic figure making an offering to a crowned bovid deity (see *opposite page*).

Rock Art Survey in Nag el-Hammam and Shatt el-Rigal

As a final snippet from Season 13, we would like to take you back to the northern sister-sites of Nag el-Hammam and Shatt el-Rigal, both of which have been subject to comprehensive rock art surveying for a few seasons now. This season, however, we managed to finally circumnavigate the entire northern part of Gebel el-Silsila's west bank in the process, with a walking distance of about 17 km - plus another two when including the smaller *wadis*. The results included several "new" rock art sites (see *above*) located at the very back of Wadi Shatt el-Rigal, as well as Predynastic shelters and fishing areas, and three ancient shaft burials (looted). Included in this region are two Predynastic game traps with associated Naqada-style rock art. In the prehistoric lake area to the west of the *wadi*, we discovered archaeological material that provided us with evidence for prehistoric hunting and fishing activity. For those interested in this part of our expedition, we suggest that you keep your eyes open for a more comprehensive report in a rock art-related book to be published in the near future!

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Maria Nilsson and John Ward

All photos ©Gebel el-Silsila Project



ABOVE
Prehistoric rock art by Tomb Hill.

Photo: Maria Nilsson

BELOW
Finding a way out of the tomb! Getting down and dirty in the Roman Cemetery.

Photo: Ahmed Monsour