



Gebel

Part 9: Roman Epigraphy by Maria Nilsson & John Ward

ABOVE: A panorama of the main quarry looking south. Photo: John Ward

OPPOSITE: A view of two quarry faces in the main quarry with inserted facsimiles. Photo and drawings: Maria Nilsson

Introduction

The starting point for the Gebel el-Silsila Project was a spontaneous visit in 2007 as part of a larger research journey, when we were astounded by the enormous number of engraved symbols or ‘quarry marks’ and surrounding inscriptions (see below). There and then, we made a promise to ourselves and to the site that we would return to document it more thoroughly, and we accepted the challenge of trying to decipher the enigmatic symbols. Little did we know that this spontaneous visit would change our lives forever!

We soon realised that the acknowledged 1915 publication on Graeco-Roman graffiti in Gebel el-Silsila by W. Spiegelberg and F. Preisgke was in need of revision in order to present a complete corpus that included the epigraphic context, as well as the surrounding archaeology and landscape. For this, we made a series of field surveys in the following years which, by the time of the Egyptian revolution (2011), had resulted in a database of more than three thousand quarry marks and nearly eight hundred text graffiti. In 2012, we were granted the concession to lead a new epi-

graphic expedition. Our first field season took place in September 2012, when we were joined by Demotic expert A. Almásy-Martin. Since then, all quarries and inscribed surfaces have been documented, but the work is updated each season as we see new details and make new connections each time that we return to the site.

Methodology

As part of the initial topographic documentation, the site was divided into 104 individual quarries, 52 on each side, running from north to south. Each quarry was subdivided into partitions, followed by individual quarry faces (the vertical cliff walls left after the stone was extracted), and epigraphic material. Thus, when creating the comprehensive corpus of the marks, they were divided in accordance with the following classification: Quarry (abbreviated ‘Q’), Partition (using alphabetic letters), Quarry Face (using Roman numerals) and Epigraphy. Displayed epigraphic material was catalogued as ‘In’ (Inscription: text graffiti) and ‘P’ (Pictograph: pictorial/quarry mark), and followed by an inventory number. For example, the northern section of



ABOVE: The quarry mark series on the West Bank – the start of our epigraphic journey. Photo: Maria Nilsson.



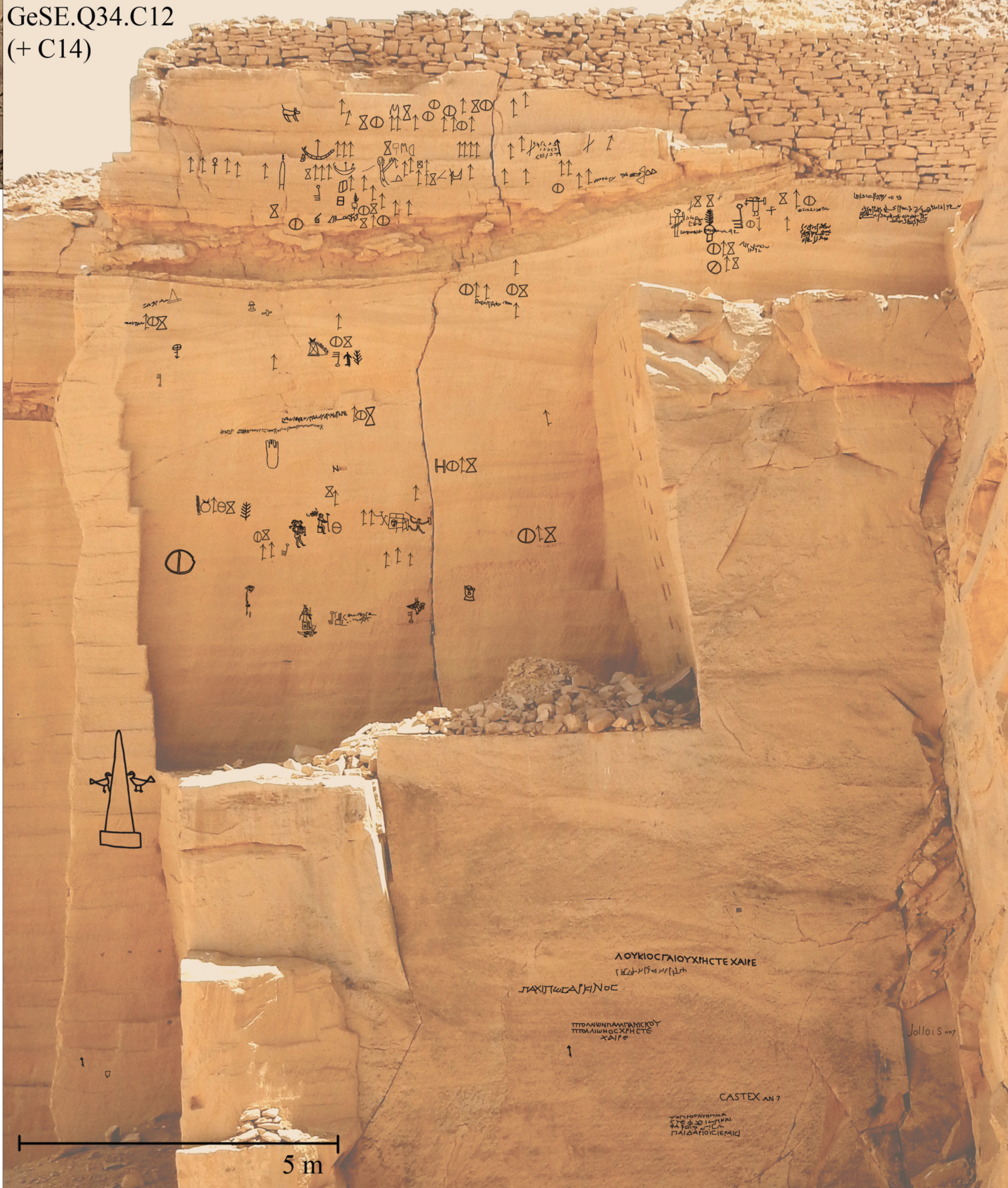
ABOVE: Maria brushing off sand from quarry marks. Photo: John Ward





El-Silsila Through The Ages

GeSE.Q34.C12
(+ C14)

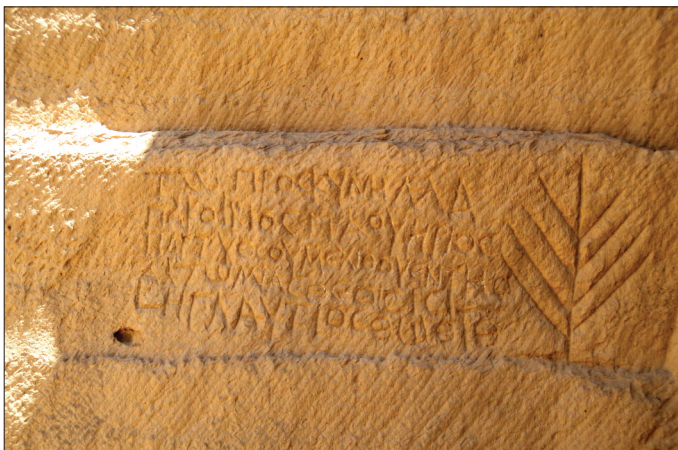




ABOVE: The main quarry looking north. Photo; John Ward

Quarry 34, Partition B, consists of 17 separate quarry faces (Q34.B1-17); its largest quarry face (B17) displays eight text graffiti labelled as 'Q34.B17.In.1-8', and 175 quarry marks classified as 'Q34.B17.P1-175'. This classification system enables the addition of symbols and inscriptions found after the initial survey without any reorganisation of the original records and without interfering with a consecutive numerical system for the entire quarry.

The material has been studied and processed by the production of 1:1 analogue acetate copies in combination with digital layer-drawing techniques (*Adobe Photoshop* and *Illustrator*). Texts situated out of reach high on quarry faces have been photographed with various digital cameras and lenses, including aerial, macros and micros in various lighting conditions, seasons and times of the day, and angled from below, full front, and above. After photographing, each image was digitally enhanced, and manipulated in *DStretch*®, as well as inverted to a negative in order to clarify all outlines and separate the text from the irregular surface marked by tool grooves from the extraction of the blocks. Photogrammetry and laser scanning were applied in areas where traditional photography was prevented by poor lighting and/or difficult locations, and it yielded clearly defined results.



ABOVE: A combination of *proskynema* text and a quarry mark in Q35. Photo: Maria Nilsson

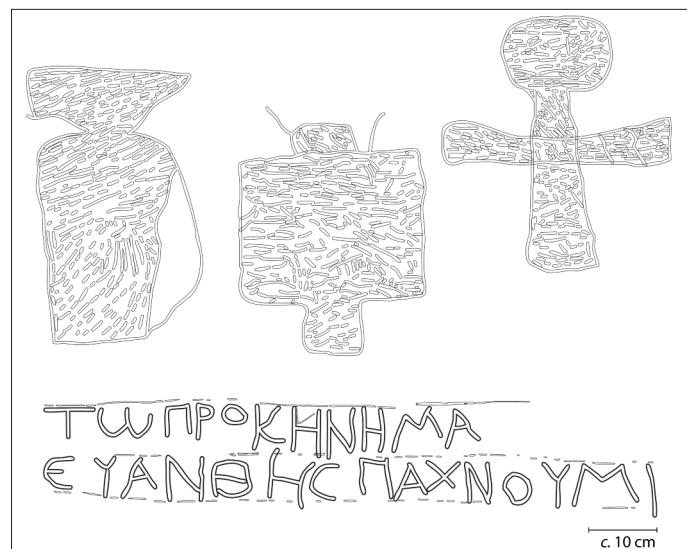
The Corpus

The epigraphic corpus now includes over five thousand graphic quarry marks and more than eight hundred Greek, demotic, and Latin texts. The vast majority (4200 documents) are situated on the East Bank, and include approximately 3600 symbolic quarry marks and over 600 text graffiti (demotic, Greek, and Latin). Most of these (more than 80%) are located within the main quarry (Q34) (see *previous two pages and left*); Greek, demotic and Latin texts appear side-by-side and intermix with quarry marks.

The graffiti were mainly produced using an iron chisel, with a tip approximately 6 mm wide. Several chisel tips of matching size were found during the excavations. In general, the graffiti were produced as incisions superimposed over tool marks created during block extraction, but occasionally the surface has been rubbed down or smoothed prior to receiving engravings. Overall, the graffiti are well preserved with very limited wear. Fragmentary graffiti were occasionally damaged by fractures in the rock, or a partial collapse of the quarry face. There are also examples of poorly-produced texts and images that were shallowly scratched with what appears to be a randomly chosen sharp implement, such as a flint or even a pottery sherd. A few examples were produced using a hammering technique.

Text Inscriptions

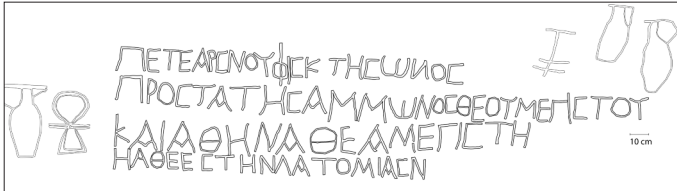
The vast majority of the text graffiti are signatures. Some are placed within a *tabula ansata*, a form of votive tablet, others within an offering table, probably to indicate religious significance and to emphasise the role of the dedicator. Several texts are placed next to one or several quarry marks, often offering tables, *ankh*-signs, harpoons, stone vessels, sandals/footprints, etc. These examples may also carry a religious meaning. Many of the texts can be understood as simplified protestations of adoration, and are equivalent to the so called *proskynemata* – signatures preceded by the Greek word for 'adoration' (see *examples below left and right*). Overall, the Greek texts are short and without any date or details of profession or religious role, while the demotic texts are more detailed and informative.



ABOVE: A combination of a *proskynema* and a series of quarry marks in the main quarry. Facsimile: Maria Nilsson



ABOVE and BELOW: The 'Athena' inscription and quarry marks in the main quarry. Photo and facsimile: Maria Nilsson



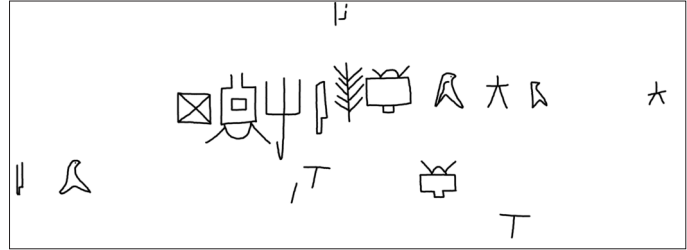
A limited number of texts are well executed by a skilled hand. These are often longer and grammatically accurate, but also aesthetically arranged. This is generally true for texts that include persons with Latin names. By contrast, there are also graffiti that were poorly composed and contain grammatical errors. Some organise the letters incorrectly, others mistake the letters and use them incorrectly. These types of mistakes may indicate semi-illiteracy, local dialects, or simply the difficulty of carving on an uneven surface.

We have listed approximately three hundred different people based on the Greek and Latin texts, with hundreds more named in the demotic graffiti. Bilingual graffiti appear, including combinations of Greek-demotic and Greek-Latin letters/signs. Popular names include Agathinos, Ammonios, Apollonios, Harbeschinois, and Harpaesis. The majority of names are of Egyptian origin, but a significant number are Greek, and a few are Latin.

Texts that include dates (primarily written in demotic) place the texts in the early Roman Period, mostly during the reigns of Augustus (30BC-AD14) and Tiberius (AD14-37). No texts postdate the reign of Claudius. Listed professions include architect, engineer, overseer, sailor, as well as 'agent' working on behalf of a certain god (and, therefore, temple area). Gods are mentioned in several texts, including Horus, Hathor, Khnum, Amun, Montu, Isis and Min. Intriguingly, there is a unique reference to the Greek goddess Athena in the main quarry (*top left*), in which she is described as 'the greatest goddess', and portrayed as equivalent to Egyptian Neith (see more below). The same quarry includes reference to goddess Tyche, the Greek counterpart to Shai/Psais – the divine 'Fate'.

Quarry Marks

At Gebel el-Silsila, the individual quarry marks take the form of hieroglyphs, Greek letters, concrete images (such as zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures), architectural components, boats and technical sketches, cosmic representations, fauna, weaponry and tools, abstract geometric patterns, and a few unidentified characters (see *some examples top, centre and bottom right*). They were careful-



ABOVE: A series of quarry marks in Q37. Facsimile: Maria Nilsson

BELOW: A series of quarry marks, including vessels, ankhs, an offering table and a Roman standard-bearer. Photo: Maria Nilsson



ABOVE: Quarry marks in bas-relief – two was sceptres flanking a central obelisk. Photo: Maria Nilsson



ABOVE: A lion or sphinx holding a knife; likely to represent Tutu/Totoes.

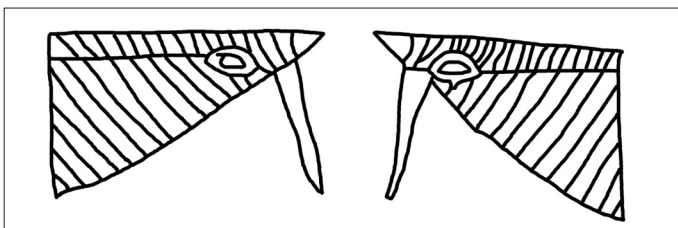
BELOW: Harpoons symbolising Pachimesen, a local version of Horus the harpooner.

Photos: Maria Nilsson



ABOVE and BELOW: A photo and facsimile of eyes of Horus in Q37.

Photo and drawing: Maria Nilsson



ly incised with a single or double outline, predominantly in sunken relief. Examples of *bas-relief* (see *previous page, bottom right*) and *dipinti* [painted but not carved] marks exist too. They occasionally appear as single marks, but more generally in series containing up to twenty marks. In the main, they measure between 10 cm and 175 cm in height. They are present in all cardinal directions, over the full height and width of the quarry faces within all Roman quarries at Gebel el-Silsila, although with higher incidence in the main quarry which has over three thousand marks, and sometimes over two hundred marks on a single quarry face.

Quarry marks can generally be recognised by their symbolic, non-literal character, and can often be equated with the 'identity marks' and graphic signs on seals, pottery, and graffiti in temples and tombs. The quarry marks at Gebel el-Silsila may appear personal and non-official (as with graffiti at large), but they were well prepared, some with guide- or grid-lines drawn prior to incision, and spatially they are well arranged. Taking into consideration the enormous size of Gebel el-Silsila, it is not surprising to find a multiplicity of marking systems that were used for various purposes, having manifold and simultaneous meanings, and applied during different chronological periods. We have identified traditional team marks, extraction indicators, technical sketches, counting systems, etc. However, during the Roman Period there is an increased tendency to use superstitious, apotropaic or religious images, indicating that different deities were regarded as local protectors of each quarry.

So far, we have identified approximately twenty deities within the quarry marking system (see *some examples on the left of this page*), of which some are concrete depictions of Bes, Harpocrates, Horus, Min, Ptah, Shai, Thoth and Tutu. As an alternative to the clearly-identifiable depictions of deities, although often used simultaneously and occasionally located adjacently, a number of gods and demons are displayed in a more emblematic form; a deity is signified by a stylistic symbol that emphasises a characteristic personal element and is often selected from traditional iconography. Interpretation of these symbols is supported by the surrounding text inscriptions in the form of adoration statements and dedications.

Where deities or demons are represented pictorially and without clarifying texts, further iconography or archaeological context, it may be difficult to determine why they were chosen as the subject of an illustration. This being so, their interpretation is limited to their traditional mythological roles and religious significance as documented elsewhere, preferably within a parallel environment.

Combining Text and Image

To demonstrate the complexity of the quarry marks of Gebel el-Silsila, we will look more closely at material referring to Khnum. Such epigraphic references are limited to the southern parts of the main quarry (and associated quay), and date to the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. A clear reference to Khnum is found in the depiction of rams, shown zoomorphically, with curled horns and in a striding position (see *opposite top left*). Greek and demotic texts make reference to Khnum in dedications and adoration



ABOVE: A ram (emblematic of Khnum) in the main quarry.

BELOW: A carving in the main quarry depicting a vessel. This may be an identity mark for Khnum.

Photos: Maria Nilsson



statements, and within the professions listed for individuals, such as “overseer of the work for Khnum” and “superintendent of the Temple of Khnum”. One text says that the workers extracted stone for the construction of a “Temple of Khnum”.

In addition to the more evident references to Khnum, this part of the quarry contains a large number of illustrations of stone vessels (Gardiner’s W9: *Xnm*), which appear in combination with *ankhs* and offering tables (together they make up 68% of the total amount of quarry marks dis-

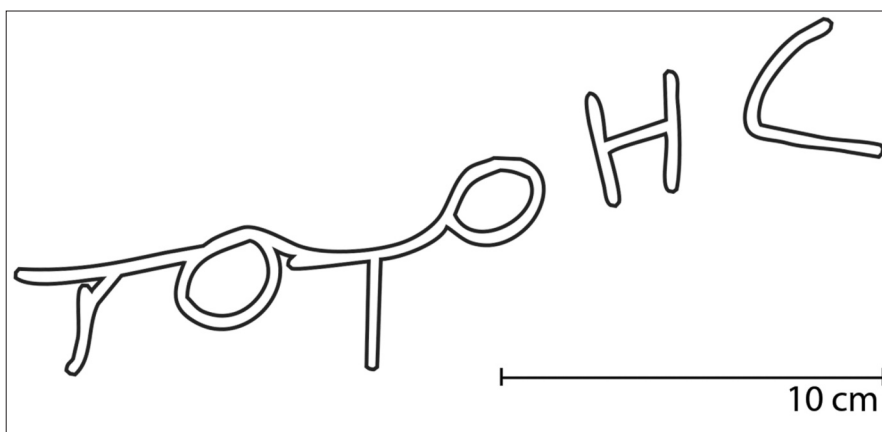
played in this part). The vessels (see *centre left*) and rams are located on quarry faces that also mention Khnum. Finding inspiration for interpretation, we know that in art, Khnum is often illustrated with a potter’s wheel and sometimes holds a vessel containing sacred Nile water. The same vessel marks the first hieroglyphic sign in the name of this god. Because of this, we have associated the quarry mark with Khnum (or with individuals working on behalf of the god), and believe that it functioned as an abbreviation symbol or rather a divine ‘identity mark’.

Returning to the significance of the Athena inscription mentioned above, it may appear peculiar at first and definitely necessitates a synopsis of its larger epigraphic context. However, combining the epigraphic details, Athena emerges as her Egyptian equivalent – Neith – and the meaning of the larger inscription can be deciphered. To summarise a complicated hypothesis, Athena was here referred to as the Greek version of Neith, mythological mother of Tutu and associated with Khnum at Esna as the creator gods. Within the quarry in which the Athena inscription is found, we have already mentioned reference to Khnum, in addition to which there are text graffiti that contain the name of Tutu. There are also quarry marks that depict the sphinx-god (see *opposite, top left*) and ram-god respectively. We have learned above that the stone was quarried and intended for a “Temple of Khnum”, and based on the combination of deities mentioned and the given chronology (Augustus-Tiberius), it is likely that this temple can be identified as Esna.

Taking it one step further, the inscription of Athena is surrounded by the quarry mark series mentioned above – stone vessel, *ankh*, and offering table. The offering table is crowned with a solar disk placed within a set of horns (or stylised wings). These marks are not only notable for their frequency, but also for their style and size, clearly emphasising their importance. If we work out that the stone vessel denotes Khnum, could the *ankh* and offering table equally signify identity marks for other deities? Well, we believe so. In fact, we tentatively interpret them as determinatives: the offering table crowned with ‘Hathoric cow horns and solar disk’ (see *below*) for a female, and the *ankh* for a male. If so, the emblematic riddle of the three quarry



ABOVE: Quarry marks in Q37 depicting an offering table flanked by a tree and a *situla*. The offering table is crowned with a solar disk placed between a set of horns or stylised wings. Photo: Maria Nilsson



marks may be interpreted as a series depicting the trinity of the temple for which stone was extracted. Not only that; with adoration texts and dedications aimed directly at Athena/Neith, Tutu, and Khnum, they were also likely to have been considered as the residing triad within the quarry.

Concluding Words

As a result of years of researching Roman epigraphy in Gebel el-Silsila, we can acknowledge at least three different functions for the quarry marks, including practical, linguistic, and religious meanings, which often were applied simultaneously. Evidently the 'symbols' had a more profound and multifaceted significance than previously thought. A selection of the marks appears to have been used as abbreviations for deities and demons, while others were used as determinatives. Combining epigraphy with archaeology and landscape has also allowed us to reconsider the chronology of some of Egypt's major temples, including Esna and Dendera, which were both built from Silsila stone.

Within the larger study of these marks, it is evident that the quarries were regarded as microcosms of the temple structure for which stone was extracted, containing the original divine 'essence' later transformed into a sanctuary. The quarries housed not only the main god but also the entire triad. However, identifying the individual deities of the triads is very similar to putting together a jigsaw puzzle, where all aspects of epigraphy and archaeology must be considered. Assembled, the puzzle reveals a wide array of religious applications and beliefs, but above all, they express the workers' collective need for divine protection in their daily journey through a harsh and dangerous quarry-scape. Gods and

demons were addressed in metaphorical formulae as either tutelary *genii loci* or as the object to be defeated. While representations of protective divinities are elaborated, defeated demons are depicted in a most simplified form. The examples included here indicate a complex religious or superstitious system, which reflects the fundamental hope of a regular worker – to stay alive. For this, they expressed their faith and asked for divine protection, and uttered their gratitude for safekeeping after completing a season.

Acknowledgements

Our work with Greek and demotic texts is carried out with Adrienn Almásy-Martin; our joint monograph on Greek texts will be published soon. As always, we would like to thank the Permanent Committee of Foreign Missions for giving us permission to work at Gebel el-Silsila, and equally to A. Moniem Said, General Director of Aswan and Nubia. The excavations have been made possible by the financial support of Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, Vetenskapsrådet, Crafoordska stiftelsen, Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Längmanska stiftelsen, Magnus Bergvalls Stiftelse, and Lars Hiertas Minne. And, of course, we are grateful to our entire Silsila team.

Further Reading

- Nilsson, M., "Non-textual marking systems at Gebel el Silsila: from Dynastic signifiers of identity to symbols of adoration", in: J. Budka, F. Kammerzell, and S. Rzepka (eds.) *Non-Textual Marking Systems in Ancient Egypt (and Elsewhere)*, Hamburg 2015, 81-105.
- Nilsson, M., "Symbolae sacrae: Symbolic formulae for protection and adoration within the quarries of Gebel el-Silsila" in: K. Szpakowska and F. Weber (eds.), *Demon Things: Ancient Egyptian Manifestations of Liminal Entities*, 2020, 138-158.
- Nilsson, M., Ward, J., & Almásy-Martin, A., "Quarrying for Augustus: Gebel el-Silsila as a Source for Early Roman Monuments at Dendera", in *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 23, 2019, 1-77.

Maria Nilsson and John Ward

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ABOVE

The name 'Totoes' inscribed in the main quarry. The name is 'theophoric' – it is derived from the name of the god Tutu, indicating the allegiance of the individual to that particular deity.
Drawing: Maria Nilsson