

A DECADE OF LOVING KHENY: TEN YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THE GEBEL EL-SILSILA PROJECT



Maria Nilsson and John Ward celebrate a decade of successful archaeological work at Gebel el-Silsila with a personal account of their discoveries and how their work has changed our perception of this amazing ancient quarry area.

We began our series of articles for *AE* Magazine in *AE* 113, and have enjoyed sharing our discoveries with you over the last two and a half years. To celebrate our tenth anniversary at the site, we would like to present a season by season summary of our work at Gebel el-Silsila, introducing you to some of the people (and animals) we have met, and giving you a flavour of life on site.

The starting point for the Gebel el-Silsila Project was a spontaneous visit in 2007 as part of a larger research trip, when we were astounded by the enormous number of engraved quarry marks and their textual context. To learn more about the enigmatic symbols, we made a series of field surveys over the next few years and, at the time of the Egyptian revolution (2011), we had documented more than three thousand quarry marks and nearly eight hundred Greek and demotic text graffiti. Following new regulations in 2012, we were granted the concession to lead a new epigraphic expedition and this was the start of the Swedish Mission at Gebel el-Silsila!

2012 – Our First Season

In the hot September of 2012, we began the arduous task of documenting every square inch of the site. Our humble team consisted of merely four members: the two of us, with demotist Adrienn Almásy (now Almásy-Martin) and *reis* (foreman) Shihat Mohammadin (*opposite, top right*). The pottery-loving (and ever helpful) Ashraf Mohamed (*opposite, top left*) was assigned as our first inspector. We aimed to outline and label each quarry and to photograph every

quarry face to create an overview and details of the preserved epigraphy. We divided the site into 104 quarries, 52 on each bank, and started a massive photographic database of epigraphic and archaeological features of these quarries. Our main target was to document the main quarry on the East Bank, Q34. This quarry, measuring some 50,000 square metres, contains 64 quarry faces, 9 ramps, 54 stone huts, protective walls, and pottery and epigraphy in abundance! Our work revealed a relatively narrow chronology, with inscriptions dating to Emperors Augustus and Tiberius. We learned that the inscriptions overall functioned as expressions of personal piety and adoration and that certain quarry marks were associated with Graeco-Egyptian deities (as we reported in *AE* 127).

These were long days – we worked from 7 am to 4-5 pm, and commuted daily from a basic (but clean enough) hotel in Aswan. It did not take long to realise how much of a logistical nightmare we were facing – the sand and blazing (50-degrees Celsius) heat damaged much of our equipment, and we constantly burnt our fingers and the soles of our feet on the fiery sandstone surfaces. Meanwhile, our presence was noted by the locals, and now and again people popped in on their way to the Nile to fish. Little did we know that some of these people would become permanent and beloved members of our team. This first season also introduced us to the local animals and brought about a tradition of naming the excavation season after the most prominent animal at the time: for this first season, bats and camel spiders.



OPPOSITE PAGE

Beautiful Gebel el-Silsila – viewed from the Nile, looking across towards the New Kingdom Nile stelae.

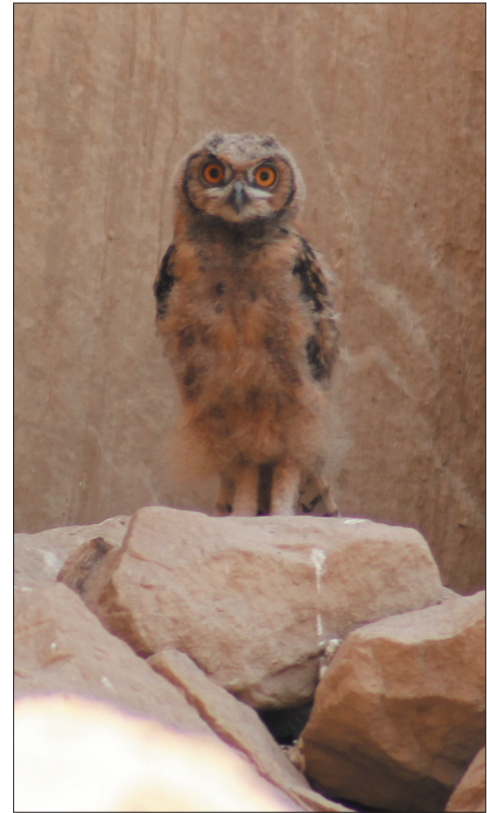
THIS PAGE

TOP LEFT and TOP RIGHT: Our first inspector, Ashraf Mohamed (*left*) and the small Season 1 team (*right*):- John Ward, Shihat Mohammadin, Maria Nilsson and Adrienn Almásy-Martin.

RIGHT: Gebel el-Silsila is home to an amazing array of wildlife, including these bats. To honour them, we began a tradition to name each season after the most prominent animal seen.

BELOW: John in the subterranean galleries of Amenhotep III-IV (see AE116).





THIS PAGE

TOP LEFT: Adrienn and Maria recording epigraphy, part of the Season 2 work.

ABOVE: A baby owl keeping a close watch on our progress during Season 2.

LEFT: Maria (*top left*) and Shihat carrying out epigraphic documentation in the Naos quarry.

BELOW: Quarry marks in Q35.

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP: The view over the West Bank with a boat passing alongside the main quarry

CENTRE and BELOW: Work and play on board our boat.



2013 – Seasons 2 and 3

Our first season proved it was impracticable to commute every day between Aswan and Gebel el-Silsila. We needed a more permanent source of accommodation that would allow us to remain on site. This is how we came to spend our seasons on a boat (*see right*) moored on the West Bank. Our first boat (called the *Rehab* – say no more ...) was driven by a single generator, which provided us with enough electricity to charge our phones, cameras and laptops. Not having to leave site allowed us to use the day more wisely, giving us time to discuss our daily results, document finds (*centre right*) catalogue photos, debate the various techniques employed by the ancient quarrymen, and try to get an understanding of their formats and developments.

In the spring of 2013, we began our second season with a focus on the epigraphy and topography in three Roman quarries on the East Bank (Q35-37 – *see opposite*). When W. Spiegelberg and F. Preisigke published graffiti from Gebel el-Silsila in 1915, the latest given date was Tiberius (AD 14-37). However, in Q35 and Q37 we learned that quarrying still took place during the reign of Claudius (AD 41-54), and pushed the dates forward. Through the analysis of epigraphy, we could also place the two quarries as the source of sandstone for the (re-)construction of the Temple of Isis and Min at Koptos. We also learned that the East Bank fell into disuse after the tenth regnal year of Claudius (AD 50) due to a natural catastrophe, likely an earthquake.

During the topographic work, we mapped a series of pathways and transportation routes running across the site and down to the Nile-side quays. The quays were also documented. We investigated a Roman stone workshop, a *naos*-like structure and a possible blacksmith's work area. The workshop contained a selection of small dressed stone blocks and the remains of a smaller obelisk. Intriguingly the *naos*, a small rock-hewn chamber with a roof made of heavy sandstone lintels, has received a large number of modern visitors who perform Sufi rituals there.

This season's animals: a family of owls (*opposite, top right*), including mama bird and three adorable fluffy babies. While somewhat concerned about our presence initially, they soon relaxed and





ABOVE
Maria and Philippe discussing
rock art and inscriptions.

allowed us to watch the chicks grow and learn how to fly.

In the autumn, we moved northwards and worked in pre-Amarna and Ramesside quarries. We cleaned the surface of Ramesside Q33 and revealed one of the site's best surface quarries with details of extraction, lifting and transportation. Comparing this quarry with the others, especially after finding evidence of Middle Kingdom quarrying, we were now able to develop a better system of recording the archaeological footprints of ancient quarrying, including the technical aspects of transportation methods. We also began work in Roman Q24 ('Stables of Tiberius', see AE124), which was to become our first proper excavation site years later.

This was also the year that we began our rock art survey with documentation on both sides of the Nile. This initial

phase brought forward 52 locales with thousands of petroglyphs and text graffiti, starting from the Epipalaeolithic Period (c. 10,500 BP to 7,500 BP; see AE113). With the increased corpus of material it became evident that we needed specialists, and therefore a bigger team. However, before moving forward, we had to fight this season's animal visitors: spiders everywhere!

2014 – Seasons 4 and 5

From a tiny team of four, we now expanded the project team, welcoming seven new members: pottery expert Sarah Doherty (*opposite, top left*); geologist James 'Jim' Harrell; Egyptologists Philippe Martinez (*see left*) and Moamen Saad; prehistory expert Dirk Huyge; and digital archaeologists Stefan Lindgren and Giacomo Landeschi.

Season 4 focussed on the continued documentation of rock art, epigraphy and topography. We added eight new rock-art sites, and we collated and analysed lithic surface material found near these areas. Jim made a first geological assessment of the East Bank, and Sarah began the first ever ceramic analysis on site. One area we named 'Pottery Hill' (see AE114). This little hill consisted of a mound measuring about 400 square metres containing 28 dry stone walled huts. The area surrounding the huts contained one of the largest ceramic repertoires of the entire site, and the rooms were probably used for storage. Later in the year, Stefan and Giacomo from HumLab at Lund University geared up for digital documentation of the site (*see left*).

As part of the growing team, 2014 welcomed not only puppy Carter (*opposite, centre*) in the spring, but also the youngest member – our new daughter Freja (*opposite, top right*), who made her very first journey to the site at the age of merely three months! This was also the year when we got to know a very friendly egret (*opposite, bottom left*) that woke us up each day at sunrise by pecking at his own reflection on our bedroom window. We nick-named him 'Camino' (after the Argentinian Egyptologist who documented the site in the 1950s) and he has since then been a dear friend to the team.

2015 – Seasons 6 and 7

Our work so far had focussed on documenting the site, but in 2015 we were

BELOW
Digital recording at
Gebel el-Silsila.





ABOVE: Sarah Doherty our pottery expert who joined us during Season 4 and carried out our first ceramic analysis of the site we named 'Pottery Hill'.

TOP RIGHT: Maria with the youngest member of the team - three-month-old Freja.

CENTRE RIGHT: Puppy Carter, another new member of the team, keeps Maria company.

BOTTOM RIGHT: The team of Season 5. From left to right - Shihat, Maria with Freja, Philippe and John (all standing) with Giacomo, Sarah and Stefan (middle row) and Abdalla and Mohamed (front row).

BELOW: Our resident egret, who we nicked-named Caminos after the Argentinian Egyptologist who worked at Gebel el-Silsila in the 1950s.





ABOVE (left to right): Huib with his 'happy face' having found a small lamp in the stables area; our friendly Hooded Wheatear; John always finds time for a quick cuppa.

granted a permit to excavate, and what a game-changer it was! It allowed us for the first time to investigate areas in more detail and achieve a deeper understanding of the site. The daunting challenge that lay ahead of us, however, was how to deal with the enormous amounts of spoil and debris that had buried most of the significant areas of investigation. This remains a problem today, which we manage by recycling the sifted material to build boundaries and pathways around the site.

One of our first major tasks was to excavate the administration building of the 'Stables of Tiberius' (see below). The work was hard going and chal-

lenging in many ways, especially as at that time we had not convened a trustworthy and able Egyptian workforce to help with the removal of debris and spoil. Although difficult, it was truly worth all the blood, sweat and tears, as every day we learned new aspects of ancient Silsila life. Coins, demotic *ostraca*, jewellery, seals and seal impressions, token figurines and plaques, fabric, organic material and tons of pottery made this location a perfect opening exercise for this new phase of the project. Season 7's animal companion joined us during this work: a beautiful and very friendly male Hooded Wheatear (top centre) that decided to greet us each day by

sitting on someone's head or shoulder. The stables were also the location where we witnessed daily the awesome sight of circling migratory storks and cranes.

Another early task was to locate the remains of the so-called Temple of Ramesses, described as a "ruin" by Lepsius and Borchardt. We managed to (re)-discover the temple, now known as the Temple of Sobek (see AE115) on the first day, and the team (now including Egyptologist Liz Warketin and student Huib van Verseveldt – shown top left) spent several weeks removing layers of sand and rubble. We discovered fragments of limestone in high relief from the reigns of Hatshepsut/Thutmose III, and inscribed sandstone from the reigns of Amenhotep III and Ramesses II.

2015 had been a busy year thus far, but the best was yet to come! As part of our site management, we set out to re-document and digitally reconstruct a monument referred to as 'Naos A'. As we cleared the sand and fallen debris, we uncovered fragment after fragment of sandstone inscribed with hieroglyphs. Upon completing the work, it was clear that we had discovered an obelisk bearing the five royal names of Amenhotep III – the first of its kind! (For more on this discovery, including a digital reconstruction, see AE116)

In the autumn, we welcomed Ole Herslund (Egyptologist), Shelby Beltz (anthropology student), Ulrika Lindblom Nilsson (volunteer) and

BELOW: Maria excavating the administration building of Tiberius. Photo: Anders Andersson





Sune Johansson (assistant archaeologist) to the team. Philippe worked in the *speos* to produce an updated publication of its epigraphy, including later graffiti. This led to the significant discovery of what is now known as the ghost reliefs (see AE115): a large vessel, complete with rigging and sails, hidden under a later relief. It is plausible that the original relief belongs to the Thuthmosid period, so changing the known chronology of the *speos*!

Work continued at the temple and the stables, but when Maria came down with an Egyptian strain of chicken pox (forcing her to spend a week in bed on a drip), John took the opportunity to work on his dream job: excavating Shrines 30 and 31 on the West Bank. As we reported in AE115, John was able to show that the shrines were far better preserved than previously believed, finding four statues (*shown above*) within Shrine 31 dedicated to ‘overseer of the foreign lands’ and ‘chief of the *medjay*’ Neferkhewe and his family, dating to the reign of Thutmose III. Excavating these shrines was truly one of the most exciting highlights of the past ten years. From a personal perspective, little can beat the feeling of pride, joy, and utter humbleness as when removing the soil from the statues’ faces, allowing the rays of Aten to shine upon them. Thousands of years after their deaths, we were able to utter their names once again. We will always cherish the



feeling of symbolically bringing this family back to life!

Our beloved Madam Silsila just kept on giving up her secrets, and as we became more aware of her landscape, its textures and shading, and the changes in colours and solar illumination, we could return to sites repeatedly, finding new details and clues to the site’s distant past.

Maria Nilsson and John Ward

Maria and John are based at Lund University, Sweden. As co-Directors of the Gebel el-Silsila Project they and the team have appeared in numerous TV documentaries following their exploits at the site. The anniversary celebrations continue in AE130, with Season 8, taking us up to their latest discoveries from the 2021 seasons.

All photos by the authors unless otherwise indicated.



TOP LEFT
John and Maria working inside Shrine 31 with the rock-cut statues of Neferkhewe and his family behind them.

TOP RIGHT
The Season 7 team.

BELOW
The team – tired-out after surveying the Middle Kingdom road.

Photo: Anders Andersson