

# A DECADE OF LOVING KHENY

**Maria Nilsson & John Ward** continue their celebration of a decade of successful archaeology at Gebel el-Silsila, revealing insights into their life and work at this fascinating ancient quarry site.



ABOVE: A new day at Gebel el-Silsila

**W**e fell in love with Gebel el-Silsila on our first visit to the site in 2007. Five years later the Gebel el-Silsila Project was launched, beginning as a team of four, but rapidly expanding as experts from a range of different disciplines joined us to analyse and document the vast amount of material discovered over the first seven seasons (see [AE 129](#)). But Kheny still had so many secrets to reveal!

## 2016 – Season 8

Work continued in the Temple of Sobek, surveying rock art, etc., but the highlight of this season was the start of our excavations in the New Kingdom necropolis (see [AE 115](#)). Since the very beginning of the project, we have been aware of tombs located in the north, in the area immediately to the north of the famous Stela of Amenhotep IV ([AE 116](#) - see *opposite, bottom right*) and

stretching westwards to the Nile. The tombs were described by a few previous visitors to the site, but no excavations or proper surveying had been conducted. The sandstone area in which these tombs are located is under an immediate (and unfortunately continuous) threat caused by the combination of agricultural irrigation and salty minerals in the ground, which means the sandstone is likely to erode to soft, wet sand.

The landscape has drastically changed over the years as we have removed up to 3-4 metres of debris in places. What was, when we arrived, a rocky undulating scarred landscape with no real discerning traits now bears all the characteristics of an ancient necropolis. There are chamber tombs complete with portcullis doorways and interior architecture, and most tombs are fronted by so called *temenoi*: courtyards enclosed by walls (*opposite, top*). Our initial survey revealed 34 tombs. Since then, we have docu-



mented more than two times the number of burials, but we still have to fight against the deteriorating combination of salt and water, and the quickly eroding sandstone.

Our work at Gebel el-Silsila had so far always related to the world of the living, and it has been an amazing experience to gradually come closer to the everyday life on site in ancient times. Working in the quarries and associated structures, we gained knowledge of so much more than life at Silsila because so many of the individuals we came across were part of expeditions, and several also have their names (and tombs) recorded elsewhere. However, excavating the necropolis meant that we would now have to change our approach, as digging up skeletons brings an array of emotions and ethical perspectives to consider. Overall, the one feeling that overwhelmed us was humbleness, as well as respect for these people. Diligent work on site is starting to reveal a much clearer picture of life as it really was in ancient Kheny. These men, women and children lived and died for a cause, obedient to the last breath to their living God, the Pharaoh. We cannot begin to contemplate how they achieved the enormous tasks of extracting tons of stone and clearing vast amounts of

debris while going about their daily lives – work that would be arduous even using modern day technology. Each burial represents ancient Kheny and its devoted workers. From broken bones to complete disfigurement and crippling alignments, we have undertaken a responsibility to these forgotten souls who gave so much for Egypt. If it were not for them, we would not have the magnificent architectural landscape that forms the sacred landscape of Upper Egypt.

**ABOVE**  
Courtyard of ST30 in the New Kingdom necropolis during excavation. A complete skeleton was discovered and worked on to the left.

**BELOW**  
The stela of Amenhotep IV, carved before his transformation to Akhenaten. The New Kingdom necropolis lies to the north of this famous landmark.





ABOVE LEFT:

Skeleton (ST77) *in situ* in the New Kingdom necropolis with a fracture of right humerus, a testament to the arduous nature of the work carried out in the quarries. But signs of healing show the workers did have access to medical care.

ABOVE RIGHT:

Maria excavating a child burial.

BELOW

John and Maria being interviewed on camera— one of their many appearances on television!

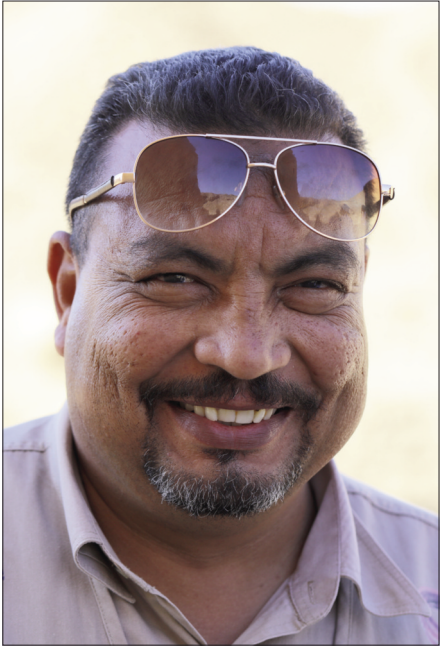


accompanied by a pack of wolves coming to drink from the Nile each night very close to our boat, much to the despair of our dog Carter!

### 2016–2017 – Seasons 9 and 10

For the remaining part of 2016, almost all our attention was focused on excavating the necropolis. We increased the number of documented burials to 69, which included six intact child burials (see AE 119 & above). From the osteo-archaeological analysis, we learned that many of ancient Kheny's inhabitants had suffered injuries and trauma consistent with high levels of manual labour, as seen in torn muscle attachments and fractured bones (see below, left). However, many of the fractures had healed, suggesting the workers had access to medical treatment and were given time to recuperate. Despite the injuries, our first analysis indicated that the majority appeared fairly healthy and must have enjoyed a balanced diet as there were few nutrient deficiencies. To put an end to the historical misconception of quarry workers being slaves, we can confirm that we found no indications of physical markers suggesting violence to compel activity. It appeared that these individuals were engaged in the work on site – in some form – and that they were looked after.

The excavations of the Temple of Sobek continued, and revealed a rectangular architectural feature surround-



OUR HAPPY TEAM

TOP: Abdel Moniem, General director of Aswan and Nubia (left) and the team of Season 8.

CENTRE: The Season 10 team (left) and Hamadi (right).

BELOW: Hamada (left), Ibrahim (centre) and Degadum (right).





TOP: The pit known as the 'Den of Sobek'.

CENTRE: John cleaning the royal stairs that once led to the Nile stela.

ABOVE: Stela B-C dating to the reign of Amenhotep III. Photo: Nils Billing

RIGHT: Egyptologist Nils Billing who joined us in Season 9.

ed by mud-brick. This structure would later turn out to be the 'Den' or 'Pit' of Sobek (AE 124 & see left), which currently reaches a depth of some 7 metres, but appears to go far deeper. We also cleaned the interior crypts of Shrine 25 and cut down grass and trees in front of Shrines 30-31 (AE 115), as well as the Nile stela on the West Bank (AE 121 - centre left) as part of our site management. We also had to carry out some rescue operations at a burial site south of Shatt el-Rigal after we were notified that tourists were picking up mummy parts. We began to document fragments from Stelae B-C, which belong to a series of monuments produced at Silsila in honour of the deification of Amenhotep III and coincide with his 2nd *sed*-festival (below left) and conducted 3D photogrammetry on a selection of monuments. Documentation and analysis continued for the site's rock art, epigraphic and quarry marks and ceramic finds.

New members welcomed to the Silsila family this season included Egyptologist Nils Billing (below), archaeologist Tricia Coletto, and students Jennifer Thum (Egyptology) and Rebecca Hodgkin (Bioarchaeology). We were also visited by a TV crew filming for an episode of the American series *Expedition Unknown*. Our 'visiting animals' in spring were cobras, and in the autumn we were joined by two cats, that made themselves at home on our boat (and later settled in at our home in Luxor).



THIS PAGE: Working and filming in the 'Waterlogged Tomb' joined by TV presenter Sir Tony Robinson (right).

CENTRE: John and Ahmed lifting a baby sarcophagus out of the tomb.

BELOW: John and Ahmed wrapping a pot.

## 2017-2018 - Seasons 11 and 12

Season 11 was the shortest season so far, with only a few weeks on site, accompanied by our newborn baby Jonathan. This was the season when we began our excavations of the sphinxes in a quarry that had been in use during Amenhotep III (AE 116). Season 12, on the contrary, was the longest season so far (six months!) and our team now incorporated nearly 60 international members (ranging from specialists and advisors, to students and volunteers) and a permanent, strong local team of workmen.

We continued our work in the necropolis, focusing on the waterlogged tomb (ST42 - see right and below). This tomb and our escapades within its murky soup-like waters became famous when Sir Tony Robinson (top right) joined us while filming his documentary *Egyptian Tomb Hunting*. This now flooded tomb was a mass burial, with more than 100 individuals interred within its first chamber, and there are still unexcavated





secrets to be discovered in its second (and perhaps third!) chamber. We hope to return to this unique shaft tomb in 2022.

Our excavations of the Temple of Sobek this season focused on the western sanctuary (Pit of Sobek) and the main temple. The temple excavation revealed hundreds of sandstone architectural and hieroglyphic limestone fragments. We continued the cleaning of monuments on the West Bank, and work in Shrine 28 revealed parts of a mummified body, although badly damaged by looters. Further fragments from Stelae B-C on the East Bank were recovered revealing new, previously unpublished material. The animal of the season was the fire-breathing dragonfly (*top right*)!

We also returned to the sphinxes and an area we know and love as the 'Fallen Monuments' quarry (AE 116 - *see left*). It is a gem hidden amongst the towering spoil heaps of the New Kingdom, and this area became highlighted during our first season in National Geographic's *Lost Treasures of Egypt*. This site represents possibly one of the most arduous excavations due to its rather isolated location. The expanse of spoil and debris is never ending, as is their depth. The New Kingdom level is buried under some 2-3 metres of Roman activity, but what wonderful discoveries have come to light in this area! It is here we discov-

TOP LEFT: Our wonderful workers team. L-R: Degadum, Ibrahim, Bedawi, Ali, Suker, Abu Hassan, Ibrahim, Hussein, Ashur and Hamadi. Front: Maria with baby Jonathan, John and Ahmed.

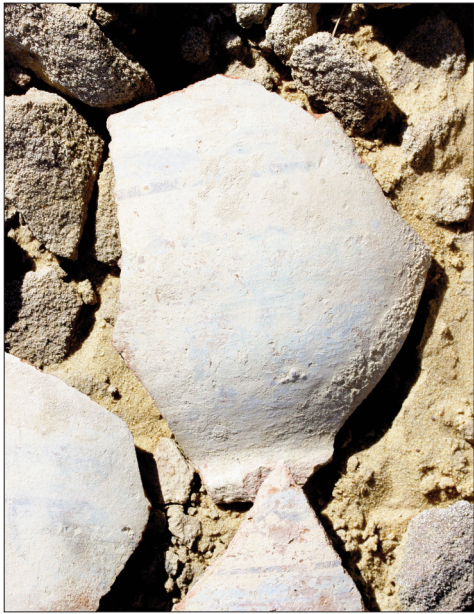
TOP RIGHT: A beautiful dragonfly clinging to the rock.

CENTRE: Mealtime with Jonathan and Freja on board our boat.

ABOVE: A large criosphinx discovered in the "Fallen Monuments Quarry".

RIGHT: Puppies living in one of the tombs.

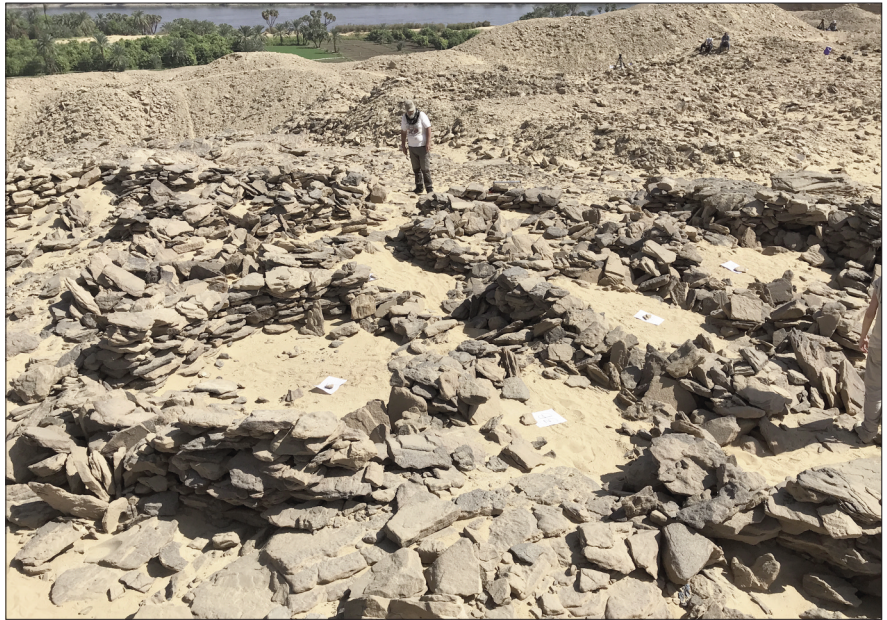




ered the two large criosphinxes (*opposite, below left*) and the ‘baby sphinx’ (an apprentice’s practice piece) that laid beneath the belly of its mother. We have recovered hundreds of fragments from Naos E-F which are integral to our reconstruction of the monument (A $\bar{E}$  116). We have also found dozens of fragments from its crowning falcon statue and flanking obelisks.

### 2019 – Season 13

This year, in addition to the continuation of previous tasks, we excavated the East Bank gallery quarry (Amenhotep III-IV – A $\bar{E}$  116 - *see below left*) and contemporaneous harbour and ‘harbour café’ (A $\bar{E}$  118), and on the West Bank,



surveyed sites related to Tutankhamun: the workers’ village (A $\bar{E}$  118 - *see above*), quarries and a small temple, destroyed in the early 1980’s (when the valley was quarried with dynamite) and said to belong to Horemheb. The encampments of the village show a clear community bond, with the practice of animal husbandry, a level of hierarchy and multiple occupations. Important finds in this area include several examples of Amarna ceramic ware (*top left*), famous for its beautiful blue shades with yellow, black and red details, often with water lily patterns. Ever since our early epigraphic surveys in 2012, we knew of the existence of a workers village, and soon noted its connection with an adjacent quay and heavily used transportation road (referred to by us as the ‘Middle Kingdom Road’, see A $\bar{E}$  114). The road itself is approximately 10 metres in width, cleared of rubble and paved by sandstones. It runs past the workers village, including the outer auxiliary structures, past a fortification positioned high up on the western mountain side, and connects with the quay to the East and stretches all the way to the southernmost part of the West Bank. We also began exploring a small wadi associated with the road and quay, located below the workers’ village, where the destroyed temple is thought to have stood. We had previously found pictorial ostraca and talatat blocks there, so returned for a more thorough survey, hoping to find further clues about this temple that had never received scientific documentation. This resulted in the finding of several

ABOVE LEFT  
An Amarna-style pot.

ABOVE RIGHT  
Tutankhamun’s Village.  
Photo: Tricia Coletto

BELOW LEFT  
Cleaning the Q14 Gallery of  
Amenhotep III – IV.  
Photo: Robert Mittelstaedt



THIS PAGE

ABOVE

Drying mattresses and bed clothes on deck after the storm of Season 13.

BELOW

A Season 14 visitor – a beautiful fox.

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP LEFT

An extraordinary discovery from Season 15 – a man with so many fractures he must have endured a life of considerable pain.

TOP RIGHT

A scorpion, one of the more dangerous creatures to join our site.

BELOW

A normal day at Gebel el-Silsila – more sand will fly hopefully over the next ten years!

Amarna ware fragments belonging to large storage jars, a faience ring, fragments from the temple, etc. Due to its closeness with the quarries and workers' village relatively dated to the reign of Tutankhamun, combined with several *talatat* blocks that formed the structure of the temple, we theorise that this temple, similar to the speos, did not belong to Horemheb initially.

This season we were visited by Zahi Hawass as we recorded another TV documentary. Together, we participated in a diving expedition to search for architectural elements that had sunk during loading. Our friendly egret Caminos returned to our balcony, and helped out with the laundry! But the team also experienced the worst ever rain and sandstorm to hit the site. The storm snapped our boat's mooring ropes and threw us first out into the Nile, then back up on the bank, and we lost our gangplank making it impossible to abandon ship. With no plastic mat to protect the roof of the boat, the entire upper

deck was flooded, and the water cascaded down the stairs and through the floor, flooding every room to the point of devastation. We lost much of our digital equipment, such as printers, and a large part of our onsite library. However, by the next day, the site was cleaner than ever!

### 2021 – Seasons 14 and 15

Season 14 took place in June, working in 50 degree heat. After 18 months of Covid-related travel restrictions, it was a delight to return to site, but how very strange and confusing not to be able to embrace each one of our local and international team members. Covid precautions forced us to make severe adjustments to our work, and even more so to our way of socialising and sharing lunch with one another. Nevertheless, Madam Silsila looked after us all, and the Temple of Sobek delivered new exciting finds to push us forward in our understanding of the site. In addition to the incredible heat (requiring repeated dips in the Nile to cool off throughout the day), this season brought us cobras, crayfish and nasty brown recluse spiders – one of which sneaked into John's boot and bit him, leaving scars that are still visible today. Another fantastic visitor was a gorgeous fox (*below, left*) that came down to the Nile next to us each afternoon.

Season 15, our most recent season, allowed more of our core members to return to site, fully vaccinated and ready to fight the blazing heat. Work concentrated on the temple and necropolis, and on preparing a pathway and boundaries for tourists for the future opening of the East Bank. John and the men became engineers, spending each Saturday laying the foundations for the pathway, removing intrusive vegetation and using sifted sand in sacks to prepare a wall. Meanwhile, Maria and the team worked in the magazine and study room, sorting bones and pottery and photographing finds.

The team uncovered some beautiful and detailed finds from the temple, including the stunning face of a pharaoh (typical of the Eighteenth Dynasty), the snout of Sobek - part of the main cult statue, and a large intact block with the body of a pharaoh (likely Amenhotep III). We were also finally able to deter-





mine the absolute south-eastern terminus of the temple itself. In the necropolis, the men moved mountains as they always do, while the combination of heat and hard labour almost drove some of our international members to despair. The most extraordinary discovery was a burial (ST77) on the southern outskirts of the necropolis that contained a man in his 40-50's (*see above*). His remains testified to a horrible life, with multiple fractures to his body - in fact more fractured bones than healthy ones. Nevertheless, this man had received medical care from a young age, and almost all injuries were healed or healing when he died. He would have been in constant pain, not able to straighten his back. He had multiple fractures to his right arm and scapula. One break just above the wrist had never healed properly, but created a pseudo joint. The left shoulder had dislocated and never set back in place, leaving the scapula deformed. With such injuries, he must have welcomed death once it came. Excavating this skeleton was a truly an emotional journey, but at the moment when we had finished and laid him out on a table, we felt liberated and incredibly fulfilled to allow him to straighten up once again.

The animals of this season were no doubt scorpions (*top*



*right*) – the largest death stalker scorpions we had ever seen on site, and they were everywhere! Our poor Egyptology student Sebastian almost daily found himself fighting with scorpions in ‘his’ tomb.

### Looking Forward

So, what can be said about the future? Well, as we have always maintained, we will continue our quest to reveal the secrets of Gebel el-Silsila as long as we have the health, funds, and political stability to do so. We are grateful for each season and for the successes that only an amazing team working together can bring. Thank you Madam Silsila for ten fantastic and exciting years - here's to ten more!

### Maria Nilsson & John Ward

Maria and John began their series of articles about the work of the Gebel el-Silsila Project in *AE* 113 and over the last three years they have generously shared their work, research and exciting discoveries with *AE* readers. We wish the team every success for the future and look forward to celebrating their 20th anniversary!

*All photos by the authors unless otherwise indicated*

