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Gebel el-Silsila through the Ages

Part 2: The Middle Kingdom

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GEBEL EL-SILSILA THROUGH THE AGES

PART 2: THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

After introducing readers to the earliest visitors to this ancient quarry site in the last issue, **Maria Nilsson** and **John Ward** move forward in time to the Old and Middle Kingdoms, focussing on rock inscriptions, a road and the search for an enigmatic fortress!



ABOVE: The landscape of Shatt el-Rigal in the northern part of Gebel el-Silsila, where many hundreds of Middle Kingdom rock inscriptions have been discovered.

Gebel el-Silsila was an important quarrying site from earliest times, offering a plentiful supply of good quality sandstone for pharaoh's building projects, as well as being a vital strategic trading point on the boundary between Egypt and Nubia.

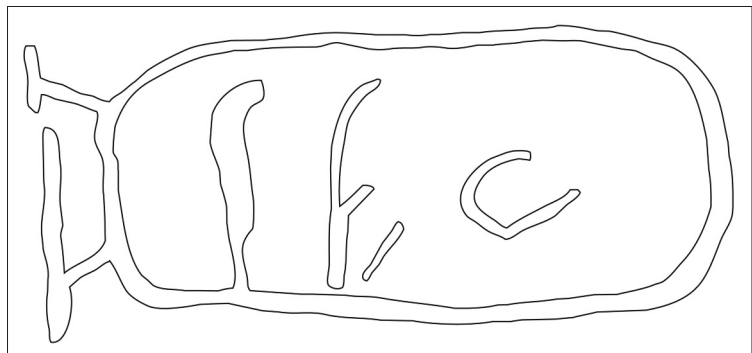
A Continuation of Rock Art

As we highlighted in our previous article (AE113), since earliest times, people coming to Gebel el-Silsila have left their marks on the rock faces. Moving from prehistory to early history, it is evident that early dynastic rock art is less common than during previous periods. With the development of the hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts, there is

instead a clear change from pictographic images to textual rock inscriptions, which normally consist of names and titles. When rock art is found, the early dynastic repertoire reproduces many of the previous motifs, including hunting scenes (men, dogs, and captured animals), designs from the natural fauna, boats, and so on. New for Gebel el-Silsila in this period is the appearance of footprints or sandals, and anthropomorphic figures are portrayed not only as hunters, but are also shown in praising positions, and soon thereafter as deities.

By the beginning of the Middle Kingdom (c. 2055 BC), figural rock art had developed into complex scenes, exemplified in a panel in the southern-most part of the West

BELOW: The cartouche of Pepy I of the Sixth Dynasty (left), with a drawing for clarity (right). This is the earliest hieroglyphic inscription found at Gebel el-Silsila, found on the West Bank at Rock Inscription Site 8.



Bank (*see right*). The scene depicts a human figure with raised arms, a dog, and several horned animals – a traditional hunting scene – but with the addition of several birds identified by John Wyatt as ostriches, and a crowning circle, most likely representing the sun. Thus, sun worship has arrived at Gebel el-Silsila.

When Gebel el-Silsila Became Kheny

The ancient Egyptian name of Gebel el-Silsila was Kheny or Khenu:



which is generally translated as the “Rowing Place”, but could equally signify the “Mouth of the River”. Its earliest attestation is a reference from a Fourth Dynasty *mastaba* at Dahshur belonging to prince Iynefer, son of Sneferu. Shortly thereafter the earliest hieroglyphic inscription at Gebel el-Silsila itself appears: a cartouche of Pepy I (*shown opposite, bottom*), located along the main cenotaph pathway on the West Bank (Rock Inscription Site GeSW.RIS.8). Surrounding this royal name is a vast number of Middle Kingdom signatures as well as a couple of Predynastic giraffes, and graffiti from later visitors to the site. No other Old Kingdom texts have been confirmed thus far. It is plausible that the site had already become a state-controlled quarry by this time, considering Pepy’s other quarry expeditions to Nubia. However, the strategic location of Gebel el-Silsila, with a clear line of sight in all directions, may also have inspired the army to set up a camp there and use the site as a forward base for military campaigns into Nubia.

The name Kheny occurs again in a Middle Kingdom papyrus, acquired in Thebes at the end of the nineteenth century by Charles Edwin Wilbour. This text later came into the possession of the Brooklyn Museum, and was labelled as Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446. Written in black ink hieratic, line 21 gives the name of a fugitive of the state called “Hemenusra, son of Khnumhotep” and describes him as a “man of Rokhen(y) of the department of the plough-lands of ...”. The topographic name is generally accepted as denoting “Kheny”, marking the border with Nubia, at Egypt’s southern-most point.



Another text, Papyrus Berlin 10495, provides us with the topographic name of Kheny in a list of seventeen Middle Kingdom fortresses. Here the site is again considered the boundary between Egypt and Nubia, but now marking the northern-most fortress in Nubia.

The two references to Gebel el-Silsila as a boundary between Egypt and Nubia are supported on site as well, epigraphically, geologically and archaeologically. As we will see below, Rock Inscription Sites 11-12 are situated at the edge of the mountainscape on the plateau, and overlook the entire plain to the south, which today is agricultural land stretching all the way down to the

ABOVE

A complex Middle Kingdom scene from the southern-most part of the West Bank which depicts a traditional hunting scene – but with the addition of several birds (*bottom left*) identified as ostriches, and a crowning circle at the top, most likely representing the sun; this is evidence of sun worship at Gebel el-Silsila during this period.



Papyrus Berlin 10495. Additionally, the team has recently identified a structure that may have functioned as a fortress, which will be excavated next season.

Middle Kingdom Activity

There are several focal points for the ongoing epigraphic and archaeological documentation of Middle Kingdom signatures and activity in the region. The area under investigation begins at the famous Wadi Shatt el-Rigal in the north and meanders along the Nile and the plateau to the far south of Gebel el-Silsila (West Bank) where the mountain meets the agricultural belt. Sections of a wide paved road survive throughout this area (*see left, below and opposite, top*), and several inscriptions have been documented on the horizontal rock surface, next to the piles of stone (*opposite, bottom*) created during the preparation work for the building of the road (clearing of the road surface).

Roman Ras Ras Temple (just south of Gebel el-Silsila, north of Kom Ombo). Thus, the Rock Inscription Sites mark a natural boundary in the south, which is perhaps why they were marked with several cartouches of Senusret I, the Twelfth Dynasty king who first extended Egypt's southern border. The natural boundary is also marked in the geological formation of the gorge which, when the Nile's waters receded after the inundation, became a cataract which people and animals could safely cross. Epigraphically, the team has located a Middle Kingdom inscription giving the name of an "overseer of the fortress", which supports the information given in

Since Petrie's studies at the site, several scholars have documented Middle Kingdom presence in the north, naturally focussing on the cliff-faces adjacent with the monumental scene of Mentuhotep II. However, despite the efforts of Caminos and his students in the 1980s, barely any of the texts strewn across the landscape of Gebel el-Silsila have been published. To rectify this, our team began a larger archaeological study in 2013, which led to the discovery of hundreds of signatures and shorter

THIS PAGE

ABOVE

Part of the wide paved Middle Kingdom road, which runs through several sections of the area – here mostly covered in sand débris.

RIGHT

Surveying the Middle Kingdom road.

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP

A continuation of the Middle Kingdom road.

BOTTOM

A pile of stones created during preparation work for the building of the road. Several Middle Kingdom texts appear on the ground near this pile.





texts that occasionally provide us with information regarding the geographic origin and profession of individuals and their activity in the region. From this, we have been able to create a directory of several individuals active on site during the Eleventh and Twelfth Dynasties. Two areas of Middle Kingdom activity will be summarised here: ‘Pottery Hill’ (= Rock Inscription Site 9) and ‘Senusret’s Rocks’ (= Rock Inscription Sites 11-12).

Pottery Hill – GeSW.RIS.9

Several inscriptions are situated in an area known to the team as Pottery Hill, which is a small mound containing a cluster of twenty-eight stone huts that were used by the quarry workers for storage. It is located on the plateau above a quarry harbour on the west bank. The nickname Pottery Hill derives from the fact that the mound is littered with pottery: thousands and thousands of sherds





ABOVE

The view from Pottery Hill, so-named because of the huge number of pottery sherds found there.

BELOW

One of the two rock carvings of a boat found at Pottery Hill. The style of boat is similar to the hieroglyphic determinative for the place name 'Kheny' shown in the drawing (bottom right).

that bear witness to a once very active site. The team's archaeo-ceramicist Dr. Sarah K. Doherty carried out an analysis of this pottery and discovered the majority was used for the storage of food and liquids. As with all archaeological sites, material visible on the surface belongs to the last phase of activity; at Pottery Hill the pottery primarily dates to the Roman Period. However, immediately below and to the north of the

hill, the paved road and its series of inscriptions indicate there was already activity at Pottery Hill during the Middle Kingdom.

The texts are arranged neatly together on a smooth, horizontal rock surface, in an area cleared from pebbles and sand, adjacent to a large stone pile. They are positioned so as to be read from the road and Pottery Hill – that is for a person standing to the east of the





LEFT
A Middle Kingdom quarry mark.

BELOW
A carved scene at Rock
Inscription Site 9, at Potter's
Hill, with a drawing below it
for clarity.

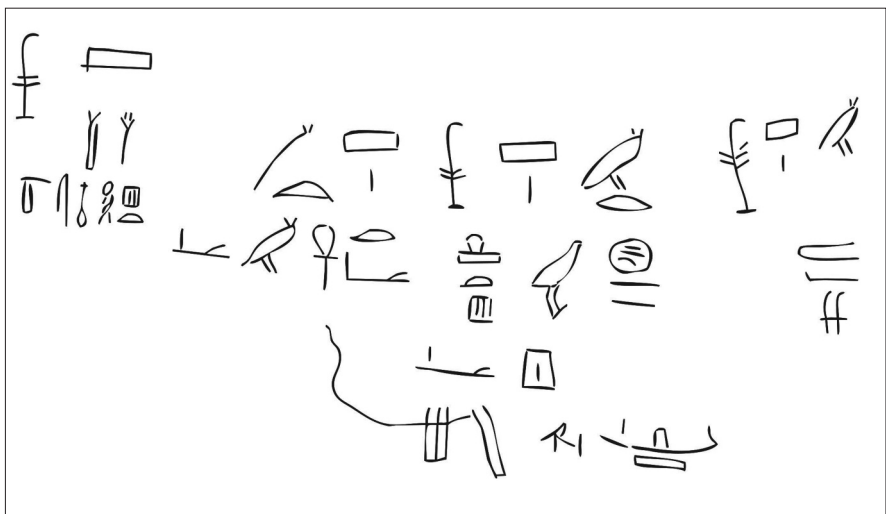
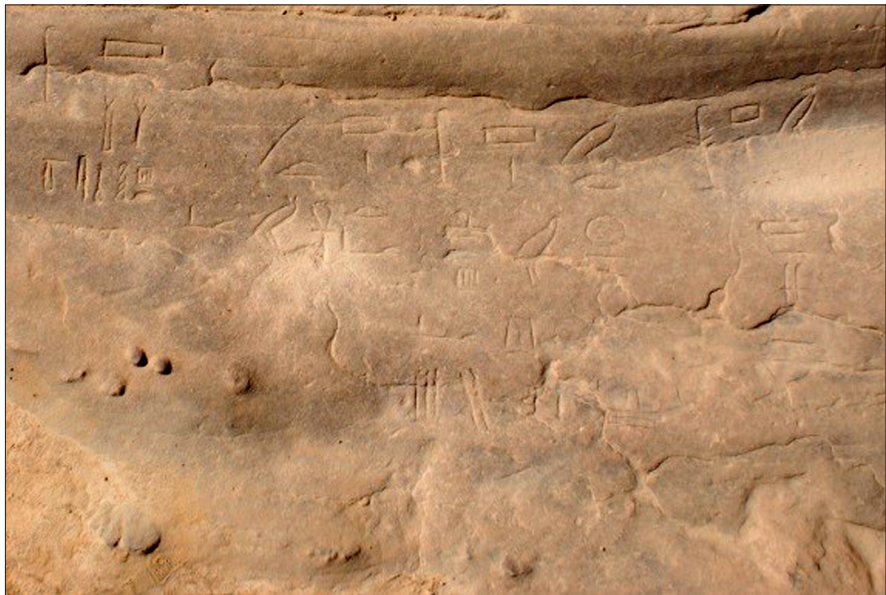
texts – and they run from north to south, reading from the right. The team recently published a selection of these texts, providing us with the names and professions of several visitors:

- “Seal-bearer (or treasurer) of the God, Ihawka”
- “Expedition leader, Sobek-hotep”
- “Overseer of the southern quarry, Thenn”
- “Overseer of the southern quarry, Khonsu-hotep”
- “Overseer of the southern quarry, Ankhemara”
- “... of the southern quarry, director of the crew, Ptah-Seshem”
- “Quarry inspector Meru”.

Several of the names already occur during the Old Kingdom, but other names, such as Meru, are certainly names only found from the Middle Kingdom, for which a Middle Kingdom date has been proposed. The team believes these texts belong to a group of high-ranking officials involved in the quarry expeditions.

In addition to the texts, there are depictions of two boats, one of which is similar to a vessel occasionally used as a determinative for the place-name of Kheny (*see opposite, bottom*). The presence of two boats may emphasise the nature of the expedition or specify the professions of the men listed. For example, the title *hry pr(w)* is a frequent nautical title, used by the crew leader, which presumably alludes to the transport of stone

from Gebel el-Silsila by ship. Moreover, the word translated here as ‘quarry’ may incorporate a reference to the nautical element of quarry work, that is a





ABOVE
The carved sandal footprint with a signature inside, which dates to the Middle Kingdom, proving that such footprints existed from this time.

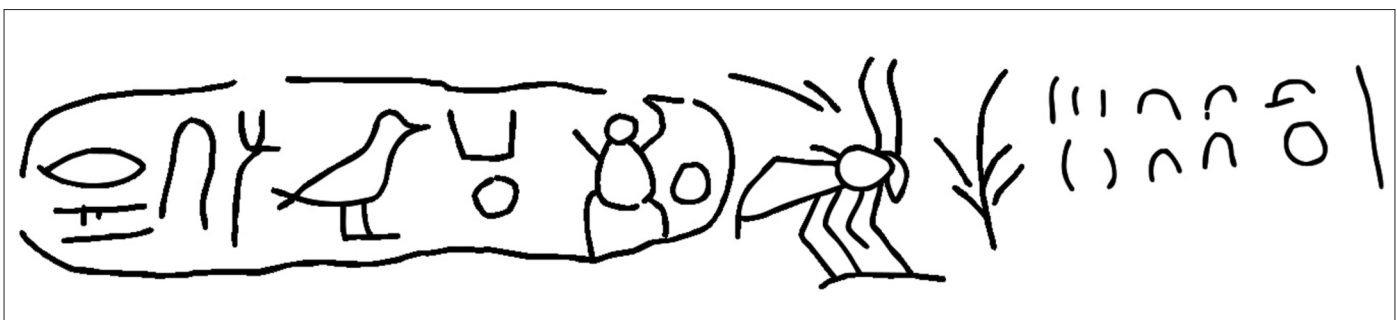
BELOW
The cartouche of Senusret I carved into the rock at RIS 11, with a drawing below for clarity.

quarried harbour or a quay associated with the quarries. Such a harbour is located immediately below Pottery Hill.

There is also a standing figure of the local hippopotamus-goddess Tausret (although severely eroded) as well as a footprint/sandal print with a Middle Kingdom signature (*see above*). The text inside the footprint is poorly preserved and very faded, but the style of the owl-sign is identical to those of adjacent Middle Kingdom texts, confirming its Middle Kingdom date. While feet and sandal graffiti occur frequently during later dynastic periods, the Gebel el-Silsila graffiti is unique in confirming the existence of footprint carvings as early as the Middle Kingdom.

Senusret's Rock – GeSW.RIS.11-12

The Rock Inscription Site known to the team as Senusret's Rock is located in the far south of Gebel el-Silsila, at the edge of the plateau overlooking the agricultural plain (*see opposite, top*). The boulder-like outcrop that makes up the RIS displays a total of forty-two pictorial and textual engravings, ranging from Predynastic petroglyphs to Roman game boards. A vast number, though, are Middle Kingdom texts providing us, again, with the names and (sometimes) professions of the people once active on site. Among the more important texts are three repetitions of the birth and throne names of Senusret I, two of





which are oriented towards the east, and the third southwards. The best example is a horizontal cartouche situated on a vertical, south-facing cliff-face of locale GeSW.RIS.12 (*see opposite, bottom*). Although somewhat eroded, it can be read as:

“Year 45 (of the reign) of King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Kheper-ka-Ra, Son of Ra, Senusret”

Current Thoughts on Gebel el-Silsila during the Middle Kingdom

Over the millennia, the Nile forced its way into the sandstone massif to create a deep and narrow gorge, providing the ancient Egyptians of the Middle Kingdom with a strategic location from which to oversee, and protect Egypt from, its southern neighbours. The formation of this nature-given barrier likely gave rise to the site's ancient name, Kheny, the ‘Mouth of the River’. Presumably, the site was also a lucrative quarrying location. The combination of natural barricades in all directions, and a supply of valuable golden sandstone made Gebel el-Silsila the ideal site for a fortified military encampment to protect the quarries and facilitate trade.

As mentioned above, the team has now found epigraphic evidence of a

fortress in an unpublished Middle Kingdom inscription by the ‘overseer of the fort’. This title confirms the inventory of Middle Kingdom fortresses listed in Papyrus Berlin 10495. However, with no excavation or documentary evidence for such a fortress – Sir A.H. Gardiner himself declared “no fortress is known at Silsilis” – there has been no attempt to understand the site's position within the larger landscape until now.

Line of Sight

There is one method that is applied to all investigations of landscape archaeology at Gebel el-Silsila (and elsewhere): the ancient use of ‘line of sight’ as a means of connecting various structures. At Gebel el-Silsila the team used this method early on to record the relative locations of a string of coexistent Roman stations, outlook posts, and structures. The results show their arrangement was deliberate and designed in such a way as to ensure mutual protection and safety, regular communication and to aid travellers journeying to and from neighbouring towns.

During the Roman Period, it was clear that structures on the East Bank of Gebel el-Silsila had direct line of sight to the location of Ras Ras on the West Bank a few kilometres to the south.

ABOVE

Senuret's Rock, in the far south of Gebel el-Silsila, overlooking the agricultural plain. The rock has forty-two inscriptions, including the cartouches of Senusret I, second king of the Twelfth Dynasty.



ABOVE
A scene carved into the rock at wadi Shatt el-Rigal, showing the Eleventh Dynasty king Mentuhotep (the largest figure) with his mother, father and treasurer.

BELOW
The vast landscape north-east of Shatt el-Rigal, with an offering table in the foreground.

From there, this chain of visibility zig-zagged back and forth across the Nile to Kom Ombo and further south. A similar pattern is discernible to the north, where Gebel el-Silsila connects by sight line to the fortified town of el-Serag (ancient Thumis), which in turn connects with Edfu, and further to Gebelein, towards Thebes. Crucially, these alignments allowed a visible interaction between the

various locales, probably by beacons or other noticeable signs, enabling warnings or support to be sent when needed. A similar system would have been in place allowing communication between the Middle Kingdom fortresses.

Another important factor to remember is that large parts of the river would have been impassable during the inundation, as the current would have been too strong. This is especially true for Gebel el-Silsila, having a bottleneck-shaped gorge where the floodwaters would have gushed. Certainly, the flooded landscape would allow enemies a chance to attack the area unless it was protected from higher ground. Geological and landscape studies at Gebel el-Silsila have revealed that many of the wadis (valleys) were flooded, and at times the waters completely encircled the two mountains (Gebel el-Silsila itself on the East Bank, and Ramada Gibli on the West), turning them into islands. During this time, the wadis could be used to circumnavigate the main river, so that the movement of troops, traders, and all that was needed to sustain a functioning infrastructure (and to process stone) could continue unabated. Wadi Shatt el-Rigal is one such example (*see below*), with hundreds of Middle Kingdom texts and graffiti (*including the*





ABOVE: The southern edge of the Gebel el-Silsila area, bordering agriculture, with the Nile in the background.

famous Mentuhotep II scene, shown opposite, top left), proof that the wadi was a busy transport corridor.

Our team has only scratched the surface of Middle Kingdom activity in the region, but with hundreds of texts documented (some recently published, and more prepared, including the name of the Major of Kheny!), the documentation of Middle Kingdom quarrying techniques, road systems, and other infrastructure, and the planned excavations of what could be a fortress, we hope to be able to paint a more detailed picture of Middle Kingdom life at Gebel el-Silsila.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our wonderful Silsila family, and the Permanent Committee of Foreign Missions for giving the team permission to work at Gebel el-Silsila, and equally the General Director of Aswan and Nubia, Mr A. Moniem Said. The documentation of MK epigraphy and archaeology has been made possible by the financial support of Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Magnus Bergvalls Stiftelse, and Crafoordska Stiftelsen.

Coming Up!

In our next article (in AE115) we will look at early New Kingdom activity at the site, and reveal some of the team's latest discoveries.

Maria Nilsson and John Ward

Dr Nilsson is currently Marie Curie Researcher at Lund University and, with John Ward (also of Lund University) has been Director of the Gebel el-Silsila Project since it began in 2012. Their team has documented Middle Kingdom archaeology and epigraphy at the site since 2013 and are now planning excavations of the potential fortress site

All photos by the authors

Further Reading

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