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## Gebel el-Silsila through the Ages

### Part 4: The House of Amenhotep

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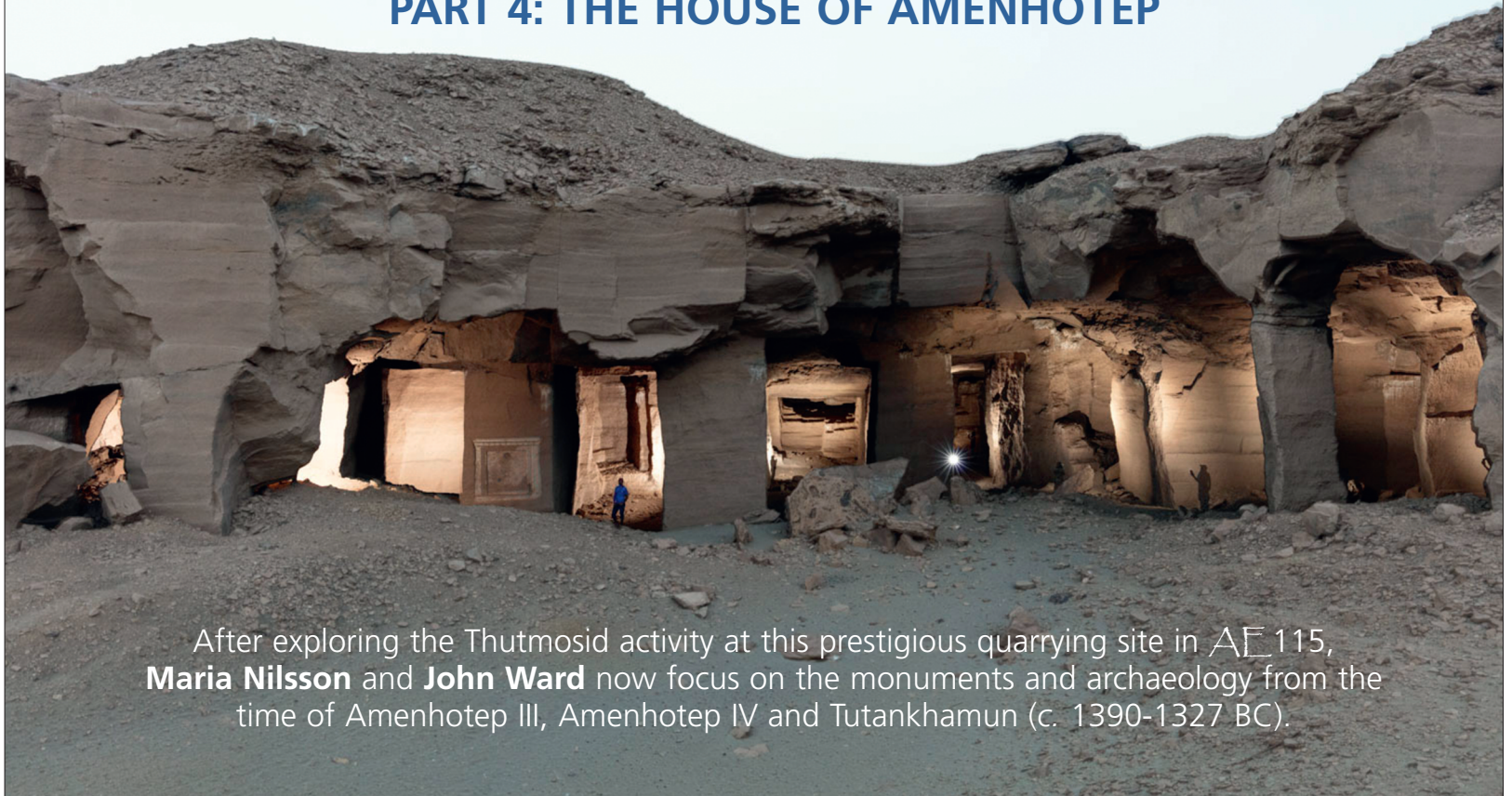
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# GEBEL EL-SILSILA THROUGH THE AGES

## PART 4: THE HOUSE OF AMENHOTEP



After exploring the Thutmosid activity at this prestigious quarrying site in AE 115, **Maria Nilsson** and **John Ward** now focus on the monuments and archaeology from the time of Amenhotep III, Amenhotep IV and Tutankhamun (c. 1390-1327 BC).

Egypt's magnificent landscape is littered with grand monuments, unique art, and astonishing architecture, each one a testimony to the endeavours of the ancient Egyptian civilisation. One pharaoh after another raised their stone structures; some dismantled the works of reviled predecessors, and others restored edifices already ancient in their time – monuments that we can still gaze upon today. Temples were built to test the limits of time itself, to honour the divine pantheon, and to immortalise those who worshipped within them. Among all these great pharaohs, who each left their own mark on history, there is one family that stands out, changing artistic and architectural components while bringing about a socio-political transformation. That family is the House of Nebmaatra Amenhotep III.



In this paper, we will explore some of the architectural remains belonging to this intriguing period of Egyptian history, with glimpses into the extraordinary period just before Amenhotep IV evolved into Akhenaten; Amun-Ra was still the most influential divinity, but the king's future obsession with the solar disc is presaged in the epigraphy preserved at Gebel el-Silsila.

### Quarries

The quarries of Amenhotep III and IV stretch out along the northern boundary of Gebel el-Silsila's East Bank, with deep, subterranean galleries that follow the mountainscape southwards, together covering an area of nearly 175,000 square metres. Three main quarries survive with their breath-taking rock-cut structure intact: tall square pillars supporting the ceilings of a series of large rooms and hallways, creating an almost cathedral-like space that gives visitors an overwhelming sense of awe and respect (see *above!*).

Our work initially focussed on documenting the quarrying techniques and mapping the true size of the quarries, but as the years have passed, archaeology and epigraphy have taken over, revealing intriguing details that help us to better understand this exceptional period.

ABOVE: The subterranean galleries of Amenhotep III-IV.  
Photo: Anders Andersson

LEFT: The entrances to the northern (*left*) and southern (*right*) parts of the gallery with a white-painted stela from the reign of Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten carved into the pillar.  
Photo: Maria Nilsson

Within the main gallery just below the ceiling, we discovered a series of red-painted hieratic texts that provide us with dates of extraction, and the names of a few high-standing individuals. These texts are currently being prepared for publication, but follow a style that is stereotypical for the period of Amenhotep III and IV.

The texts are accompanied by series of horizontal and vertical gridlines following the natural stratification of the rock (*below, right*), to provide workers with indications of the size of blocks required and the place to extract them. This ensured there was no wastage of the golden sandstone that came out of the divine mountain.

Already during the reign of Amenhotep III there are indications of *talatat* extraction; there are examples of these smaller blocks in the quarry, some in fact still *in situ*, prepared for extraction but not lifted. There are also painted *talatat*-sized gridlines marked on the ceilings. A few surviving illustrations, such as a papyrus plant (*below, left*), remind us of the developing iconography of the period.

### The First Obelisk

Other quarries of this period remain as smaller clusters of surface extractions, where the upper levels of the mountain was systematically removed, or sometimes quality tested to assure only the strongest stone was used for temple construction. Along these upper levels we find several of the renowned naoi/shrines and stelae of Amenhotep III, which were seen by the early visitors to the site and have now been re-documented by our team. In 2016 we excavated the area



immediately in front of the so called 'Naos A' and cleared it from rubble (see *overleaf, top*) in order to 3D-photograph it for digital reconstruction. The clearing revealed several sandstone fragments (*see above*) inscribed with hieroglyphic text, which when reassembled spelt out the complete five royal names of Amenhotep III.

We also found a sandstone pyramidion and several dressed corner pieces, which together form the first ever recorded sandstone obelisk from the reign of Amenhotep III. A few fragments of a Horus-falcon statue were also found. Putting these together, Dr. Martinez was

**ABOVE**

A sandstone fragment retrieved from the excavation of the naos of Amenhotep III bearing an image of the king.

**BELOW LEFT**

An image of a papyrus plant, one of the few surviving illustrations within the quarry.

**BELOW RIGHT**

The ceiling of one of the quarry 'rooms' with gridlines marking out where workers should cut to extract blocks of sandstone. The lines appear to follow the natural rock formation.

Photos: Maria Nilsson





able to digitally reconstruct this unique monument (see left). Finding the obelisk and falcon shows that there is always something new to learn when returning to a monument that has already been published!

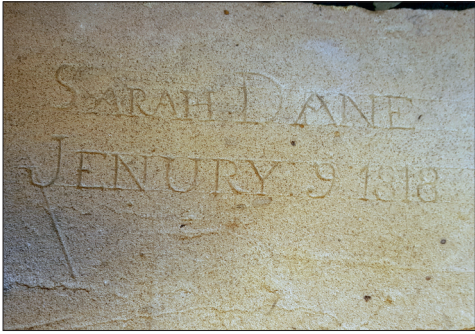
### The “Fallen Monuments Quarry”

Another quarry which we recently excavated is situated to the south of the main gallery and has been known since the days of early modern visitors. We call it the “Fallen Monuments Quarry” (or GeSE.Q15) as it is characterised by a series of monuments and statuary partially destroyed or abandoned during and since antiquity. The most famous is the destroyed naos of Amenhotep III that once crowned the entrance to a subterranean gallery – a quarry which had collapsed and been dismantled. While excavating in the quarry we uncovered one of the larger naos fragments, and noticed

ABOVE  
Excavating the Amenhotep III Naos A.

LEFT  
Partial digital reconstruction of the naos with its Horus and two obelisks as they would have been positioned.  
Original photo and digital rendering by Philippe Martinez





that it had been defaced by visitors' graffiti as early as 1818. One particular graffiti was carved by a certain Sarah Dane (see above), whom we now know was a housemaid accompanying the Belmore family on their expedition to the Mediterranean and the Holy Land. According to their journals, the family reached Egypt around this time and various family members left their marks on monuments throughout the country. It should be mentioned that the Belmore family were benefactors to the renowned Belzoni. To our amazement, Ms. Dane's graffiti appears to be upside down, suggesting that the megalithic fragment had been upended at some point after her visit – no mean feat, given its size and weight. Who, why and when are questions that still intrigue us.

Another discovery within this quarry [reported in AE113 News] was made during our excavations of one of the criosphinxes (top right and below) that were previously thought to have been destroyed during antiquity. As we



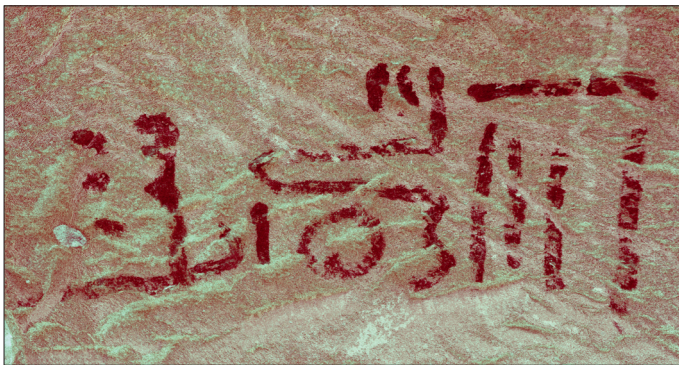
reached the intact stomach of the sphinx, one of our workers, Ali, gently lifted a nicely dressed block and handed it to John. As they turned it over, they were amazed to discover that the block was in fact a smaller sphinx (top right), presumably a practice piece belonging to an apprentice. To our knowledge, it is the first practice sculpture of a sphinx ever found. As for the larger sphinx, its shape and statuary details can be compared with those at Karnak, and we now know that it was intended for transport to Thebes to become part of the Avenue of Sphinxes leading from the 'Gate of



**TOP LEFT**  
A nineteenth century graffiti carved into a large fragment of Amenhotep III's ruined naos.  
Photo: Maria Nilsson

**TOP RIGHT**  
Maria and John with the 'baby' sphinx, a unique sculptor's model of the giant criosphinx (to the right).  
Photo: Ahmed Monsour

**LEFT**  
Excavation work to clear the large criosphinx, originally destined for the Avenue of Sphinxes leading from the southern gate of Karnak.  
Photo: Maria Nilsson



Euergetes', the southern gate connecting Karnak to Luxor Temple. And the discoveries did not stop there! Soon after revealing the full scale of the criosphinx (roughly 3.5m high, 1.5m wide and 5m long) we found the first walls of a workshop, and further excavations in the upcoming season will hopefully reveal more details.

Yet another important discovery made in this quarry occurred during our excavations to the west of where the naos of Amenhotep III once stood. At a depth of almost three metres, hidden below layers of quarry spoil, we found a hieratic inscription written in red ink (*above and right*), providing us with the opening date for the quarry and possibly for the erection of the naos: Year 34, fourth month of Ahkhet, day 28. This date precedes the nearby stela A by just a few months, and provides us with a more accurate timeframe for our quarry. The team will continue to work on the text and on an intriguing depiction of either the goddess Taweret or demon Ammit drawn alongside. Clearly Gebel el-Silsila continues to share with us some of her well-kept secrets, and there is always something to learn – despite acts of *damnatio memoriae* carried out on some of the monuments.





### Temple of Sobek

Of course, we must include at least some reference to the latest discoveries in the Temple of Sobek on the East Bank, as Amenhotep III was the first to use the sought-after sandstone of the site to construct a temple at the site, rather than cut a temple into the rock. Fragments from the excavations reveal a complete roofed temple, with an inner and outer sanctuary (naos and pronaos), colonnade, and perhaps even a small entrance pylon facing the bank of the Nile. The fragments retrieved so far follow the general artistic program of the period, with delicate raised reliefs, often painted in bright colours.

### Glimpses of the Sun-king, Amenhotep IV

Situated in a position facing due north and surrounded by Epipalaeolithic and Predynastic rock art, is the famous monumental stela of Amenhotep IV (see opposite, bottom left and right). It marks the upper level of Quarry no. 7 at Gebel el-Silsila East and was recently the subject of re-documentation and 3D rendering. The stela uniquely displays Amenhotep IV standing to the right in an offering position, as he presents his gifts to Amun-Ra (on the left). Amenhotep IV wears the white crown representing Upper Egypt, while Amun-Ra, described as the King of the Gods, wears his traditional double feather crown. Beneath the stela is an intriguing depiction (above left) of a royal man painted in red over a prehistoric rock art surface – could this be the young pharaoh himself?

Another intriguing stela, less well-



known due to its poor state of preservation, carries certain elements or telltale signs known to characterise Amenhotep IV. It is a large, white-painted stela inscribed on one of the larger square pillars at the southern entrance of the main gallery (above right and page 14, bottom left). Although the original scene has been completely erased, a centrally placed, deep circular depression is noticeable, evidence for an emphasised solar circle, perhaps an inserted disc made from a shimmering material. Nearby extraction of *talatat*-blocks provide us with a good chronological framework.

At the entrance to another gallery we recently discovered a black-ink hieratic text, which despite its very fragmentary state of preservation provides us with enough clues to place it in the early reign of Amenhotep IV. Centrally placed and surrounded by a pendant *uraeus* is an early depiction of the Aten himself. The text with all its intriguing details will be included in a forthcoming paper dealing with hieratic texts from this period.

As with other sites throughout Egypt, the next phase of activity from the reign of Amenhotep IV / Akhenaten is noticeable only through the methodical eradication of his father's name and of images of Amun-Ra. At this point extraction had come to a halt at Gebel el-Silsila, or at least, there were no ceremonial openings of new quarries. Still, the men who were there carrying out the *damnatio memoriae* were probably taking from the site what was easily accessible: left-overs they could carry, including smaller stone pieces and *talatats*.

#### OPPOSITE PAGE

##### TOP LEFT

Part of the hieratic graffiti written in red ink, here enhanced using DStrech software. The text gives a date for the quarry and possibly for the erection of the naos: Year 34, fourth month of Akhet, day 28.

##### TOP RIGHT

John brushing off the surface where we found the graffiti, three metres deep and hidden below layers of quarry spoil.

##### BOTTOM LEFT and RIGHT

The stela of Amenhotep IV, which marks the upper level of Quarry no. 7. Erected before his transformation to Akhenaten, the stela depicts the king making offerings to Amun-Ra.

Photo (bottom right): Philippe Martinez

#### THIS PAGE

##### ABOVE LEFT

A red-painted image of a prince with a sidelock, here enhanced using DStrech. Could this image, painted onto the rock art surface below the stela, represent a young Amenhotep IV?

##### ABOVE RIGHT

A white-painted stela dating to Akhenaten, carved into the face of a pillar at the southern entrance to the quarries.

Photos: Maria Nilsson



ABOVE: The workers' village from the reign of Tutankhamun.  
Photo: Anders Andersson

### Tutankhamun Resumes Work at Gebel el-Silsila

Once Tutankhamun had restored the traditional religious order in Egypt, new quarries were opened and Gebel el-Silsila was once again thriving. The major difference at this time was a shift of works from east to west, and a return

BELOW: A rock inscribed with the name of Tutankhamun.  
Photo: Maria Nilsson



to larger scaled blocks for monumental construction. Situated immediately above Tutankhamun's quarries is a workers' village consisting of over seventy stone huts spread out over an area today littered with post-Amarna pottery. This is a site that we will return to during our next season, to survey and map out, and to conduct a few test trenches of some of the rooms. This is the site mentioned in AE 114 where we believe we have discovered a Middle Kingdom fortress; it is likely the ruins of this structure were reused by Tutankhamun's workers.

Moving southwards along the West Bank, and reaching the Speos, our epigraphic survey has recently revealed a restoration program initiated during the time of Tutankhamun. The work included some architectural adjustments and the repairing of fractured relief which was further altered during the reign of Horemheb.

### Conclusion

Gebel el-Silsila provides us with a fascinating snapshot of the general socio-economic situation in Egypt during the years of turmoil following the death of Amenhotep III. The once-thriving site that provided revered golden sandstone for Pharaoh's architecture and monumental statues fell victim to systematic eradication and perhaps even looting and official closure, only to once again prosper, and give life to a new wave of divine edifices honouring the great pantheon of Egypt.

In the next issue of AE Magazine, we will continue our survey of this fascinating site, moving forwards in time to the Ramesside Period.

### Maria Nilsson and John Ward

Currently Marie Curie Researcher at Lund University, Sweden, Dr. Maria Nilsson leads the Gebel el-Silsila Project with John Ward (also Lund University). Together with their team they have documented New Kingdom epigraphy since 2013 and excavated the site since 2015. Projects dealing with the House of Amenhotep include: the excavations and digital reconstructions of Naos A and E, including the obelisks and falcons; the sphinx and workshop excavations; the excavations of the Temple of Sobek; and the epigraphic documentation of stelae and quarry graffiti.

Forthcoming work includes the surveying and partial excavations of Tutankhamun's workers' village. A summary of the work will be presented at ICE XII later this year.

### Acknowledgements

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