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Gebel el-Silsila through the Ages

Part 5: Ramesside activity

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GEBEL EL-SILSILA THROUGHOUT THE AGES: PART 5 – RAMESSIDE ACTIVITY

After several fascinating digressions into the wider work of the team, **Maria Nilsson, John Ward and Moamen Saad** present the first of a two part exploration of Gebel el-Silsila during the Nineteenth Dynasty, beginning with some selected monuments on the West Bank.



ABOVE The Speos on the West Bank with the dig boat – the *Sobek* – in the foreground.

In previous issues, *AE* readers have learnt about New Kingdom activity at Gebel el-Silsila up to the time of Tutankhamun. Here we will continue our chronological journey, with some selected monuments from the Ramesside period. Joining us this time is Dr. Moamen Saad, who has been an integral part of the Silsila Team since its beginning in 2012.

Introduction

Throughout the ancient Egyptian landscape, one cannot avoid noticing the importance and sheer enormity of Ramesside monuments. The imposing and magnificent architecture, colossal statuary and overwhelming prominence is evident everywhere and Gebel el-Silsila is no exception!

BELOW: The inner sanctuary of the Speos. The divine statuary group shows Horemheb between Thoth (*right*) and Khonsu, Amun and Mut (*left*), and further accompanied by the local divine couple of Gebel el-Silsila: Taweret and Sobek, Lord of Kheny.



The Speos

Starting at the West Bank, perhaps the most famous monument at Gebel el-Silsila is the rock-cut temple known until recent years as the ‘Speos of Horemheb’ (*see opposite*) based on several scenes depicting this ruler within the sanctuary. While it has been suggested previously that the temple initially served as a gallery quarry, there is no evidence on the West Bank to suggest that this was the case. It is more likely to have been a natural grotto used by visitors from the Predynastic through to the Middle Kingdom, as is suggested by its epigraphic context, and was later cut into a temple structure proper during the time of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III; this is in accordance with the newly discovered ‘ghost scenes’ which include an obelisk-transporting vessel (*see top right and right*). Following the radical period of Akhenaten, Tutankhamun appears to have restored and reconstructed at least the inner sanctuary, after which Horemheb, Ramesses II and Ramesses III each left their mark.

The more renowned scene of Horemheb is situated on the southern wall in the gallery, and shows Taweret suckling the king (*see below*). However, his presence is strongly represented in the inner sanctuary (*opposite, bottom*), as he is positioned within the divine statu-



ABOVE: A scene in the Speos cut in the New Kingdom (*top*) over an earlier scene of a boat transporting an obelisk, which can just be made out (*in red, above*) as a ghost scene behind it.

Photos and context drawing: Philippe Martinez

BELOW: Horemheb suckled by Taweret from the southern wall of the Speos' inner sanctuary.





TOP LEFT: The northern wall with two registers carrying the depictions of 23 gods facing towards the inner sanctuary.

CENTRE LEFT: The southern wall with the top three (of four) registers carrying the depictions of 38 seated gods facing towards the inner sanctuary.

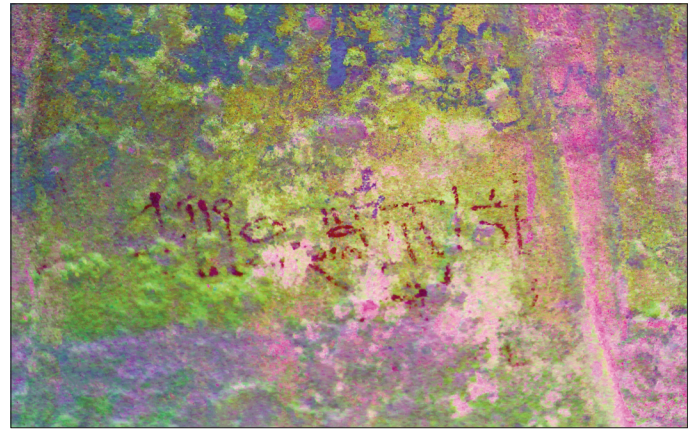
BELOW: The Speos by night, capturing the new moon and evening star.



ary group, between Thoth and the Theban Triad, and further accompanied by the local divine couple of Gebel el-Silsila: Taweret, and Sobek, Lord of Kheny. With the exception of Thoth, the same gods appear in various monuments from the Ramesside period, including the Nile stelae and Stela M (discussed in AE122). Thoth's presence, however, is intriguing; but based on surrounding relief scenes, it can be concluded that the temple was associated not only with the traditional sun worship, but also with the moon.

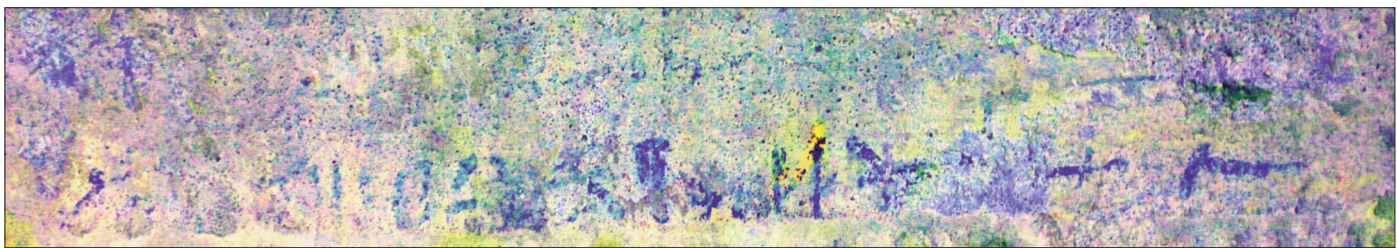
Other unique features of this monument include the asymmetrical organisation of the pictorial programme. Two main registers are shown on the northern wall (*top left*), where 23 gods are placed in a direction facing towards the inner sanctuary. The southern wall (*centre left*), however, displays four registers, of which the top three show 38 seated divinities (including two doubles) which are also oriented inwards. Generally, deities are placed in a position facing out of the sanctuary so as to receive the offerings from the pharaoh and the living; but here, all gods face inwards.





ABOVE : Detail of a *dipinto* inside the speos (*left*) and the same image (*right*) enhanced with Dstretch software.

BELOW : A wider band of *dipinto* enhanced with Dstretch.



Moving forward in time, the presence of Ramesses is noted primarily in the gallery, where several stelae, statuary niches, and shrines were added. Among the more important scenes are those that depict the crown prince and high priest of Memphis, Khaemwaset, some with reference to the *heb sed* of Ramesses II. In addition to the formal epigraphy and informal graffiti noted before, we have found several ‘new’ *dipinti*, [painted graffiti] (*see above*), many of which are situated within the inner sanctuary, providing us with dates and signatures.



ABOVE LEFT: A cartouche of Horemheb from the Speos. ABOVE RIGHT: One of several stelae that are later additions to the Speos.



THIS PAGE

ABOVE LEFT and BELOW
 Details of the Ramesses II Nile
 Stela with a facsimile by
 Moamen Saad.

ABOVE RIGHT
 Excavation work at the
 Nile Stelae.
 Photo: John Ward

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP
 The colourful stela paintings of
 Ramesses II (top left) and
 Merneptah (top right).

CENTRE LEFT
 Details of the Ramesses II
 cavetto cornice.

CENTRE RIGHT
 Moamen Saad documenting the
 Merneptah stela reliefs.

BELOW:
 The stelae of Ramses II (left)
 and Merneptah (right).

**The Nile Stelae
 (The Site Of The Pure Water)**

Located nearly 1km south of the famous Speos is a series of rock-cut shrines and commemoration stelae dating to the Ramesside period (*see opposite, bottom*). Despite numerous shorter descriptions by early scholars such as Champollion and Lepsius, colourful drawings by Napoleon’s scientific expedition, and the meticulous documentation by R. Caminos, the twelve monuments had never before been published as a comprehensive corpus. To our Egyptian colleague and dear friend, Moamen Saad (*shown at work, opposite centre right*), we gave the task of re-documenting the collective monuments and reproducing an up-to-date 1:1 facsimile as part of his Ph.D. programme. One of the main objectives was to investigate the significance of the location, the gods depicted, and how the monument depicted the local worship.

The three main shrines carry inscriptions and iconographical scenes from the reigns of Sety I, Ramesses II, and Merneptah respectively (located in a chronological development from south to north). In addition, a smaller shrine was carved during the rule of Ramesses III, and among the stelae the more important belong to Amenhotep I, Panehsy, minister of King Merneptah, and Roy, the First Priest of Amun. These shrines are rectangular in shape, set deeply into the rock facing the Nile (to the east), and are each fronted by two papyrus columns (*see above left and opposite, bottom*), one of which holds the initials of a certain Howard Carter! The walls and ceilings were plastered and inscribed with hieroglyphs and images painted in beautiful bright colours (*opposite, top left and right*). The facades are adorned with the traditional *cavetto* cornice and winged sun disk, listing the names and epithets of the ruling pharaoh (*opposite, centre left*).

Overall the theme of the monuments is the celebration of the annual inundation, describing and depicting rituals to secure prosperity. This event took place at the first rising of the Nile, as well as during the river’s lowest level. The theme is presented as royal offerings before Amun-Ra, Hapy, and other gods, and with reference to the ritual of ‘throwing the book of Hapy’. In the main iconographical scene, all three shrines show the pharaoh presenting offerings to the Theban triad on one side, and to Ra-Horakhty, Ptah, and Hapy on the other (*see left*).

Due to its poor state of preservation, little has been written about the shrine







ABOVE and BELOW
 Detail from the Sety I shrine,
 in the Nile stelae (above)
 with a facsimile drawing
 (below) showing the king
 making offerings to Amun
 and the founder of his
 dynasty, Ramesses I.
 Photo and drawing:
 Moamen Saad

of Sety I but with new recording technology and archaeological excavations, it is clear that the main difference between this shrine and the latter two is the depiction of a second royal figure behind the ruling pharaoh. Standing behind Sety I in both offering scenes is a male figure described, albeit in frag-

mentary epithets, as deceased, and believed to represent Ramesses I, the founder of the dynasty (above and facsimile below left).

Among the intriguing topics of Moamen's study was the investigation of the local name – *mw waab* ('the pure water') used from the reign of Amenhotep II as an epithet for a group of gods, and believed to describe the small sandstone outcrop on which the monuments sit. The new study revealed that ten Egyptian deities carried this epithet, and that it named the sacred area of the monuments as belonging to the Nile, while geographically remaining a sub-site of the town of Kheny. The main triad of *mw waab*, based on Moamen's research, was Ra-Horakhty, Ptah, and Hapy. Since the completion of his thesis, however, and with more work required, we have discovered several 'ghost lines' (see opposite, top left), i.e. superimposed lines and patterns that indicate an older, mostly erased original scene! Once again, continuous epigraphic detail studies may reveal an earlier chronology to Gebel el-Silsila monuments than previously thought.





ABOVE: Examples of ghost lines of earlier, erased scenes behind text (left) and the image of Merneptah (right) from his Nile stela.

The monuments fell victim to a devastating natural catastrophe (an earthquake or a massive flood), likely during the reign of Emperor Claudius, when several quarries and monuments on both banks collapsed. This resulted in the bedrock fracturing and created vertical fissures. One fissure caused Sety I's shrine to separate and slide off from the others. Another caused the disconnection of the quay or platform and associated staircase by which the visitors would arrive, which then slithered towards the Nile, and a third fissure led to the 90 degree turn, separation, and slide of the royal staircase that once connected with the oldest shrine.

Conclusion

Any attempt to summarise the Ramesside monuments of Gebel el-Silsila is somewhat doomed to fail as there are so many to cover. Here, our intention was to provide a glimpse into their variety, perhaps leaving some for future discussion. In AE121 we will revisit the Ramesside era to explore the quarries, the Temple of Sobek and a unique blueprint of ancient quarrying, before moving into the Late Period in AE122.

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Maria Nilsson, John Ward and Moamen Saad

Maria Nilsson and John Ward of the Gebel el-Silsila Project are regular contributors to AE Magazine. Dr. Moamen Saad is an Egyptian archaeologist, who wrote his Ph.D. on the Nile Stelae at Gebel el-Silsila. He is currently responsible for the safekeeping of the Tutankhamun exhibition objects shown in London, and has years of experience of excavating Karnak Temple.

Read more about research at Gebel el-Silsila with Maria Nilsson and John Wyatt on page 26.

All photos by Maria Nilsson unless otherwise stated.