



GEBEL EL-SILSILA THROUGHOUT THE AGES: PART 6 – RAMESSIDE QUARRYING

Maria Nilsson and John Ward revisit the Ramesside era at Gebel el-Silsila to explore the quarries, the Temple of Sobek and a unique blueprint of ancient quarrying.

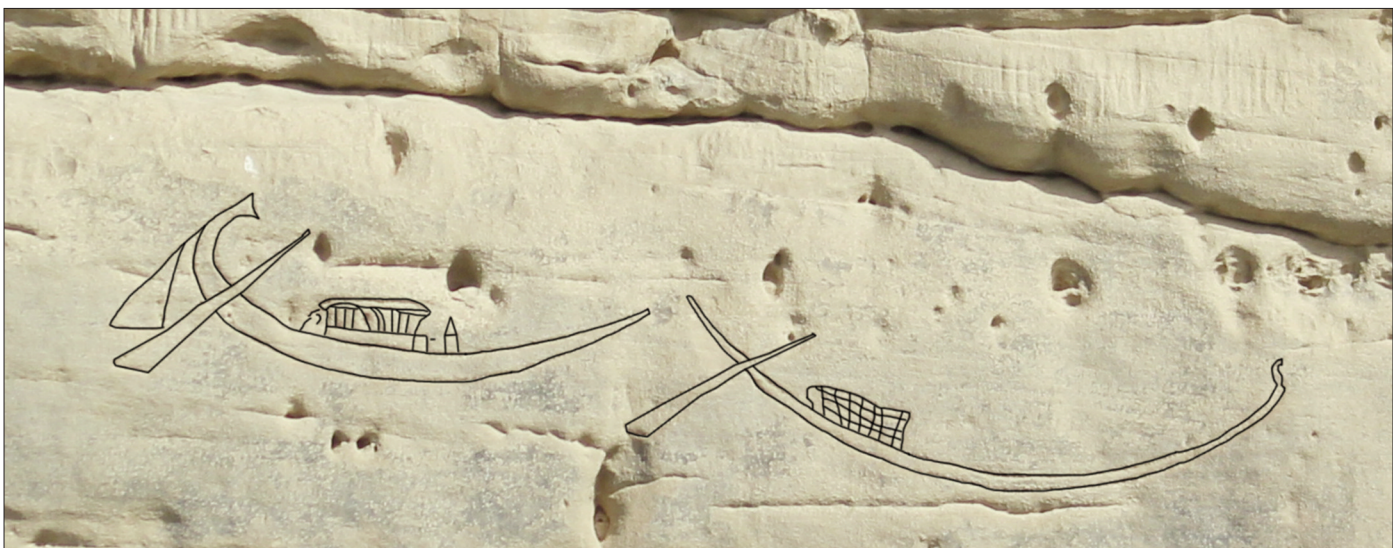


ABOVE: Overview of the transportation route from Ramesside quarries Q31–32. Photo: Anders Andersson
BELOW: A photo of the barge images near the Ramesside Quay, highlighted in pen for clarity. Each boat has a cabin, while the left-hand boat also has a small obelisk in front of the cabin. Photo and superimposed drawings: Maria Nilsson

Gebel el-Silsila was a thriving quarrying community during the Nineteenth Dynasty, and the site contains a huge number of Ramesside monuments, some of which we touched upon in our last article (AE121). This issue, we are staying in the Nineteenth Dynasty to look at some of the important quarrying developments at the site.

Quarries

Three main quarries have been confirmed as Ramesside (GeSE.Q31-33) based on epigraphy and archaeology/artefacts, which are situated on the central part on the East bank. The first two (Q31-32) are open-faced quarries embedded 300m into the mountain and are hidden from view as they are surrounded by spoil



heaps to all cardinal directions. In a way they can be seen as time capsules for one of Egypt's greatest periods of engineering and ingenuity. The two quarries reach a height of some 12-15m (measured from the current ground level), and have both been usurped in parts by the early Roman quarry workers. They are connected through their main access: a paved and raised transportation route adorned with two commemorating stelae of Sety I. The pathway then meanders through massive spoil heaps (*see left*) westwards towards their Nile-side quay. There, as one of the site's larger quays, the Nile-side cliff face is decorated with two illustrations of barges each depicted with a cabin (*opposite, below*). The left barge also shows an obelisk. There is a corresponding group of 7 individually different vessels at the back of Q32, presumably produced by the same artist. These, however, are depicted without a cabin (*top right*).

The third quarry (Q33), excavated by the team, is a shallow surface quarry situated at an elevated position on top of the hill (*see below, right*), closer to the Nile (separated only by its massive spoil heap and the Nile-side pathway), and just above the location of the rare Late Period cartouche of Apries. It appears to have been abandoned in haste, after which Ptolemaic and Roman spoil has buried large parts of it, making it impossible to estimate its original size. However, from the size of the space preserved, c.140 square metres, we have calculated that the surface of that space alone provided over 100 larger blocks (generally between 160-170cm long, c. 60cm wide, and 60-70cm deep). The blocks were extracted by means of trenching and were fractured from the bedrock by the incision of a string of 1.5-2cm deep horizontal chisel-cuts along the front base (*shown on page 32*). A large central lever mark was used for the final break from the cliff. Furthermore, preserved footprints show how a block was lifted by means of a counter lever system (*see model page 32*) which could be easily manoeuvred to either side.



TOP RIGHT: Antelope barge from inside quarry Q32. Photo: Maria Nilsson

CENTRE RIGHT: Large drum extraction from Ramesside quarry Q31.

RIGHT: The shallow surface quarry Q33 after excavation. Photos: John Ward



Stela M – A Unique Blueprint of Ancient Quarrying

Located a few metres to the north of Q33 is situated ‘Stela M’, which is a royal monument issued by Ramesses II. Today this once grand monument is lying on its side with the main panel facing downwards (as seen below left), having fallen from its sandstone pedestal during the same natural catastrophe that fractured the Nile stelae. Topped by the traditional cavetto cornice and winged sun disk, the main scene depicts an almost eradicated Ramesses II standing before the Theban triad. Behind the pharaoh

TOP LEFT: Drawing illustrating block extraction at Q33.

TOP RIGHT: Small model of the counter lever apparatus used in the Ramesside quarry.

ABOVE LEFT: A string of white marks left by heated chisels as they were hammered into the sandstone block to create a fracture.

ABOVE RIGHT: Prepared blocks ready for extraction.

Drawing, model and photos: John Ward

BELOW: The collapsed stela of Ramses II.

Photo Maria Nilsson





are two deities: an anthropomorphic representation of Sobek, followed by the goddess Nut. After several lines of stereotypical dedicatory text, the main text states that the stela was erected as a royal decree, proclaiming the opening of a new quarry for the king, for the benefit of the Temple of Amun.

While the main scene and text are certainly important, it is the pictorial scene on the right side panel that communicates a more unique message. What can best be described as a linear historical representation, in a left-to right movement and in very fine detail, the scene describes the entire quarrying process! Starting at the upper register (*shown above*), scaffolding erected against the cliff is shown in the upper left corner,



followed to the right by stone masons working with chisels and mallets, administrators/accountants, and a medical doctor attending an injured worker (*below, left*). Below the scaffolding is seen a round-topped stela placed on a sledge pulled by numerous people (*see below, right*), on a slope that leads to a quay. There the stela is seen loaded onto a barge, with two more barges carrying rectangular blocks below. The entire scene is controlled by two scribes and the royal superintendent Hapy. The same Hapy is later depicted as adoring the cartouches of Ramesses II.



ABOVE & BELOW

The right-side panel of the Stela of Ramses II depicts the entire quarrying process. This upper section (*above*) shows a round-topped stela being dragged down a slope to the boats waiting at the quay (*in close-up below right*), with the scribe Hapy supervising. Above the boat, a doctor tends to an injured worker (*shown in detail below left*).

Photos Maria Nilsson



ABOVE LEFT & RIGHT: Two scenes from the broken Ramesses II stela, with a depiction of a Sobek, sadly with face erased (*left*), and the scribe Hapy adorning the cartouches of Ramesses II (*right*).

BELOW: The western part of the Temple of Sobek. Photos: Maria Nilsson





Temple of Sobek

The Temple of Sobek has been mentioned in previous issues (AE 115 & 116) with reference to Thutmoside limestone features, and sandstone decoration from the reign of Amenhotep III. It was however long known as the ‘Temple of Ramesses the Great’ based on preserved surface fragments that contained the name of the king. Therefore it came as no surprise to us when we discovered more sandstone fragments with written and pictorial details of a Ramesside artistic programme. Included among the finds is a left side doorframe fragment containing the Horus-name of Ramesses II (*see top*), discovered during the excavations of the ‘den of Sobek’ in the western partition of the sanctuary. Two smaller fragments each carry the king’s cartouches. Another important find is a two-sided fragment (*above*), again from a door, which carries the lower details of a crocodile laying on a plinth (*Sbk*), followed by his epithet ‘Lord of Kheny’. Yet another fragment shows the divine embrace between the ruler

TOP LEFT: A fragment of door frame from the Temple of Sobek bearing the Horus name of Ramesses II (Ka-nakht Mery-maat, “The strong bull, beloved of right, truth”).
Photo: Anders Andersson

LEFT: Fragment from the Temple of Sobek, showing the lower part of the crocodile followed by his title as “Lord of Kheny”.
Photo: Maria Nilsson

BELOW: Reis Shihad Mohammadin from the Gebel el-Silsila team excavating at the Temple of Sobek.
Photo: Anders Andersson

and the crocodile lord. The sheer size of several of the Ramesside fragments indicate a completed temple of considerable size! The ongoing excavations will hopefully reveal more clues!

Acknowledgements

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Maria Nilsson & John Ward

Maria Nilsson and John Ward of the Gebel el-Silsila Project are regular contributors to AE Magazine. In the next issue, they are again joined by John Wyatt to complete their survey of bird species at the site.

