

On Sunday 2nd April 2023 we were fortunate in receiving a thoroughly fascinating lecture on the last 10 years archaeological fieldworks at Gebelein in Upper Egypt from project director Dr Wojciech Ejsmond of the Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures, Polish Academy of Sciences. Dr Ejsmond explained that the project was very diverse, involving a team with a variety of skillsets. Its aim is to include all periods of Egyptian history in the project, bringing together the various archaeological features into a complete landscape.

The lecture was divided into specific periods in Gebelein's history, attaching an area of interest to each one:

- Gebelein's role during the formation of the Egyptian state
- Ethnic diversity in the First Intermediate Period
- Religious landscape and popular religion during the New Kingdom
- The Egyptian – Hellenic town in the 2nd century BCE

Gebelein lies on the west bank of the Nile, 28km SW of Luxor and adjacent to the modern village of Al Gharirah. The name Gebelein (in ancient Egypt *jnr.tj*) means two hills and these are clearly discernible as a larger western and a smaller eastern hill, divided now by the Aswan-Luxor Road.

Egypt, certainly in the early 20th century, has been viewed from the perspective of capitals rather than provincial areas. The large cities of Memphis (Egypt's political capital) and Thebes (the religious capital) have previously received most attention whilst the 90% plus portion of the population living outside these areas and in provincial towns have been underrepresented. Thus, our knowledge has been biased towards a small and largely elite group inhabiting Egypt's capitals.

Gebelein was occupied for over 3,000 years covering all periods of Egyptian history. Its occupants enable us to learn more of the ordinary people, the villagers and farmers who occupied small provincial towns.



Image: Google Earth

The vast majority of the architectural remains have now disappeared. Illegal digging in 1884 was followed by Maspero's excavation in 1885. His dig was followed by those of Grebaut and Daressy, Jacques de Morgan and Foucart, Fraser and Blackden, Borchardt, Steindorff and, the last of the 19th century, Budge in 1899 or 1900. Gebelein suffered a series of illegal digs during the first 8 years of the 20th century and it was not until de Morgan's brother, Henri, in 1908 that excavations became once again legal. Schiaparelli noted 4 years there, 1910, 1911, 1914 and 1920. Farina dug in 1930, 1935 and 1937 and more recently Bergamini in 1994-5, 1996 and 1999 and Mahmud and El-Masry in 1998. Sadly, although passing through, Petrie did not excavate here, a fact regretted by Dr Ejsmond as Petrie's excavations were by far the most thorough and were generally well recorded. The longest and most comprehensive archaeological project is that of the current mission, the Gebelein Archaeological Project, who have been at the site since March 2013. Although earlier archaeologists had left very few records of their work there were note books, letters and photographs which today allow a partial reconstruction of the site over the time it has been excavated.

Comparing the only published map showing archaeological features with current Google Earth images indicates how little is known of the site and how much farmland has expanded since then, inevitably compromising the archaeology. Following the revolution of 2011, when security was lower, settlement and agricultural expansion encroached onto sites nationwide. Gebelein did not escape this and one image showed a digger which, whilst clearing land for new buildings, had cut into a cemetery exposing Middle Kingdom pit burials. These were documented by the team. However, the majority of the team's work involved surveying the, thankfully un-intruded upon, hills and the rock cut tombs within them. Ground walking played an important part in this, with finds such as pottery shards and coins indicating areas requiring further attention.

Over 600 archaeological features of varying size have been documented and finding and interpreting them is greatly helped by the use of portable handheld equipment. An example of the success of these techniques are the geophysics survey results of a large flat area. These showed several rectangular anomalies, resembling in ground plan brick-lined tombs. Combining these with the results of field walking the team were able to recognise areas where large collections of early dynastic pottery were found as corresponding to those where the geophysics results had identified the rectangular anomalies. Thus, the team could speculate that the site held previously unknown early dynastic tombs. Although many items now in museums have come from Gebelein in the past their findspot is rarely known. Now, locations of interest and those requiring further investigation are largely established by concentrations of artefacts made during field walking.

The largescale recording of the site over the last 10 years has shown Gebelein to be a microregion, comprising several sites; the town of Sumenu in the north with a northern necropolis and a rock-cut chapel and the town of Per-Hathor close to a central and a separate southern necropolis. The latter necropolis consisting of mainly Old Kingdom and early First Intermediate Period burials. West of the eastern hill lies a medieval Muslim necropolis and further west still, a Coptic chapel.

Gebelein had limited royal and elite patronage. The tombs themselves are sometimes quite elaborate with several large rooms but are cut into poor quality rock and little decoration is preserved. A slide showed a red painted part of a man now barely discernible on the rock.

Numerous rock inscriptions discovered include cartouches of Ramesses IV identifying an expedition unknown from other sources. The destination and purpose of the expedition is as yet unknown but is currently being investigated.



Dawid F. Wiczorek documenting graffiti with the name of Ramesses IV (Image courtesy of Dr Wojciech Ejsmond).

Other remaining archaeological features are predynastic animal carvings and a Coptic chapel, again with inscriptions and paintings only just visible to the naked eye. D-stretch photographic technology which enhances colour differences and balances enables these

images to be highlighted, revealing layers of inscriptions and markings invisible to the naked eye. In addition to the photography, the images are copied and traced.

Dr Ejsmond's own work includes a very different type of digging to that of the earlier archaeologists – a comprehensive study of old archival records. He explained that without these, and particularly the photographs and drawings of earlier archaeologists, we are unable to understand the landscape. He mentioned the Museo Egizio in Turin as having a particularly good photographic collection.

Dr Ejsmond started Gebelein's history by explaining its evolution during the formation of the Egyptian state, (3500-3000BC). Early in the 4th millennium Egypt comprised numerous important centres. However, during the second half of the Predynastic Period many of these centres were amalgamated into larger towns such as Hierakonpolis, Naqada and Abydos. The amalgamation was repeated during Dynasty 0. Whether Gebelein was a capital is a matter of scholarly debate. Schiaparelli and Daressy both felt that it probably was and their hypothesis is borne out by not just the quantity but also the quality of artefacts found, such as a painted textile comparable with tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis and two small figurines, one of them appearing to wear the crown of Upper Egypt. During the 1920's and 1930's two serekhs were discovered in a nearby gebel. These carry the name of a probable local ruler and have not been recorded at any other site. Additionally, adding weight to the argument of Gebelein as a predynastic capital, the northern cemetery is estimated to originally hold about 2000 predynastic burials. Dr Ejsmond used the geographer Christaller's Central Place Theory to explain that centres become important due to their economic function as goods production and exchange centres. Later on they gained political functions. In England this distance was often one day's walk, forming centres equidistant to each other. Geographically, Gebelein fits into a group formed of five towns, each 50km equidistant to its neighbours. From north to south these were Abydos, Hiw, Naqada, Gebelein and Hierakonpolis. Economically strong initially, political importance naturally followed and although this political independence was lost during dynastic times Gebelein retained its economic position as a provincial centre.

Numerous pieces of copper slag have been found in the area of Sumenu along with stone tools, decorated pottery, clay figurines and impressions made by cylinder seals. The latter refer to Hathor and an administrative title and are the earliest inscriptions known from the area. A 4th or 5th dynasty papyrus mentions metal producing there, as evidenced by the copper slag and explains why Gebelein, whilst not being a nome capital or significant administrative centre in the 3rd millennium, produced well-stocked opulent tombs. It is likely that Gebelein had a wealthy elite, their wealth coming from the town's status as regional metal producer.

Dr Ejsmond chose the time beginning Egypt's early First Intermediate Period to illustrate how Gebelein is an important source for understanding ethnic diversity in Egypt. The concept of Nubians only acting as mercenaries in the armies of provincial warlords may need to be modified. Nubians formed part of the local population in southern Egypt and served alongside Egyptians in the same army units. From about 30 of the late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period stelae approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of them depict Nubians. In keeping with the Old

Kingdom canon of art Nubians are generally distinguished from Egyptians by a bushier hairstyle, a darker skin colour, a sash at the waist and a bow and arrow held in one hand. At Gebelein it is not always clear whether it is Nubians who are depicted on the stelae but as stelae are normally commissioned by the elite class it suggests Nubians formed a substantial part of the wealthier population.

In 1911 Virginio Rosa of the Italian Mission excavated the tomb of the First Intermediate Period nomarch Ini, the supervisor of the priests of Sobek, lord of Sumenu in northern Gebelein. Although Rosa made no plans and took no photographs, he did make detailed descriptions of the tomb and his journals have allowed an understanding of the layout of the tomb with its funeral goods. A digital 3D reconstruction of the tomb is currently in progress. The tomb is largely Egyptian in style containing pottery, models and the deceased's mummy. Certain aspects however, such as a statue standing on cow hide, are reminiscent of Nubian or Kerman burial customs. The statue is carefully painted with the upper torso very dark but the legs lighter suggesting a compromise between an Egyptian and Nubian representation and emphasising Ini's possible dual ethnicity. Ini's funeral goods are now on display in the Museo Egizio, Turin.

The religious landscape and popular religion in the 2nd millennium BCE formed the next topic. Access to the richly decorated temples with their descriptive decoration and rituals was exclusive, afforded to only a few. The ordinary people of Gebelein only became involved in temple religion during the days when the deity's statue left the temple and was carried in procession to key points in the area. Here people could access or petition the deity. Unlike architectural remains, these processions do not leave visible marks but there are tell-tale signs in the landscape than can aid a tentative reconstruction of the processional route.

A grey stain and a small amount of temenos wall is all that is visible of the temple today. Numerous other blocks found by earlier excavators are now in museums but do not provide enough information to calculate size, plan or orientation of the temple. It is known that the temple was dedicated to Hathor, specifically Hathor Lady of Dendera as evidenced by a vessel dedicated to her by 6th dynasty king Pepi I and later, a stela depicting local priestesses of Hathor. Numerous decorated stone blocks of 11th dynasty Mentuhotep II from a chapel dedicated to Hathor Lady of Dendera were also discovered. The surprising choice of a form of Hathor from 150km away can be explained. Mentuhotep II probably chose Lady of Dendera because of her associations with royal power which would, by default, reinforce his own right to the throne. In addition, he was emulating the Old Kingdom ruler Pepi I's patronage of her. Many of the kings of the 11th -21st dynasties are represented at Gebelein and even the Hyksos rulers made contributions to the temple. The large number of Second Intermediate Period kings mentioned suggests an importance during that time not matched during other periods.

The temple flourished during the New Kingdom, with probable pre-Amarna stela depicting direct contact between private individuals and the god, a situation rarely allowed before the Amarna period. If the stela's dating is confirmed this suggests that these rules were not so rigidly enforced in provincial areas. Over 80 deliberately broken faience votive statuettes were found by the Schiaparelli's 1910 mission buried in the temple area and evidence of popular devotional activity was added to by the pottery bowls found by the current mission.

Schiaparelli hypothesised that mud bricks stamped with the seal of 21st dynasty High Priest of Amun, Menkhepera came from the temenos described by him. Only a very small section of the wall now remains, the majority having been removed by local people for reuse. No stamped bricks have been found in the remaining wall and the brick used differ in size to the stamped bricks making it likely, therefore, that Menkhepera did not construct the temenos wall. Stamped bricks were found only in the northern area of the temenos wall and Dr Ejsmond hypothesised they may have been used in a watchtower or chapel and reused during the late period in the northern (now lost) part of temenos wall.

A drawing by Norman de Garis Davies showed the extent of the temenos wall with two blocks indicated within the wall. The two blocks remain in this position today and show circular recesses large enough to operate as supports for flagpoles flanking a temple entrance. Modern satellite images combined with Davies drawing and an unpublished 1902 report by Somers Clarke together with images made by Italian archaeological mission also showing a typically late period wavy mudbrick wall of several metres in height allow the reconstruction of this feature including its orientation. Within the temple area it is thought an early Middle Kingdom chapel existed which was approximately 3-3.5m tall, 7.2-7.6m long and 3-3.5m wide.

Close to where the stamped bricks were found the team discovered a narrow shelf about 25m about ground level. It was necessary to construct an elaborate rope and pulley system to allow both man and tools to be lowered into position.



Images courtesy of Dr Wojciech Ejsmond

Once there, however, an examination of the shelf and an epigraphic survey produced exciting results. Several niches designed to hold (possibly devotional) stelae were cut into the rock. The epigrapher's examination of the rockface yielded 5 separate panels containing 30 plus hieroglyphic inscriptions from the late Middle Kingdom and early New Kingdom. None, surprisingly, were found from the Second Intermediate Period. One is devoted to Hathor, Lady of Gebelein by the temple scribe Senebiu. Although the shelf provides good shade and a wonderful view of the east bank it is an unlikely place to visit. More likely is that the shelf, probably once wider, served as a viewing point for processions moving along the Nile to Gebelein, processions similar to those depicted in the tomb of Ankhtifi, just 6km south at Mo'alla.

A rock cut speos (chapel) dating to the reign of 18th dynasty Hatshepsut was discovered approximately 20m below the shelf. After three seasons of cleaning salt and soot and then preserving the inside of the speos, inscriptions revealed the chapel to be devoted to Hathor with the cultic epithet Lady of Gebelein. Again, photographic techniques enhanced the badly damaged inscriptions to be read enabling the team to better understand the significance of the chapel to the local cult.



Image courtesy of Dr Wojciech Ejsmond

Within the landscape, therefore, a temple stood at the top of the hill. A rock shelf lay below it and directly below that, the speos. Identifying these features allows a cautious reconstruction of the processional route. A pathway would connect the Nile to the speos after which a path leading from the speos, incorporating a road known from Demotic documents as mj.t.ntr

(broad road of the gods) circumnavigated the mound on which the temple stood to allow access to temple for rituals to be carried out. The tentatively identified 'Road of Horus' or 'Royal road' then led west connected the temple to the area of the necropolis. Nearby rock inscriptions include Ramesses IV (mentioned earlier), Hathor, Min and priestly titles. A line drawn from the petroglyphs through the temple and then extended across the Nile will reach the entrance to a wadi known as Wadi Dibabiyyah. This line correlates with the axis of the temple and the orientation of both the speos and the majority of tombs in the central necropolis.

The entrance to the Wadi Dibabiyyah resembles the hieroglyph symbol Akhet (the sun rising between two hills). This signified the beginning of the Egyptian year as well as the place of transformation where the deceased passed from the living world to the afterlife. At this time processions took place and people visited the cemeteries. Once a year the rising sun shone through the speos into its second chamber lighting the cultic inscriptions on its rear wall. This would indicate to the priests the time at which celebrations, processions and preparations for the new season should begin.

Over 1400 papyri and ostraca including tax statements, wills, contracts and private correspondence have been recovered from the Ptolemaic town of Pathyris, permitting a wider knowledge of everyday life in the town.

The early 20th century Italian excavations produced very generic town plan but recent fieldworks allowed it to be elaborated. An important and unique source is a fragmented papyrus containing a Ptolemaic map of the town, surrounding fields and a cultic structure which closely resembles a barque shrine which would have been placed on one of the processional roads. The ongoing project at Gebelein has received a Polish state grant enabling it to focus on the town. This project will start in 2024.

Some members of the project have published on this subject and the details of their work can be found on the Gebelein Archaeological Project website: <https://gebelein.wordpress.com/>
The first volume of the book series on Gebelein was recently published by Dániel Takács under the title Gebelein I, The Speos. Plates from the book are available in open access here: <http://egiptologia.orient.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/2020/06/Takacs-Gebelein-1-Plates.pdf>

Dr Ejsmond particularly drew our attention to the monograph published by Dr Lena Tambs; Socio-Economic Relations in Ptolemaic Pathyris which provides a good insight into everyday business and private connections in the town.

In conclusion the Gebelein Archaeological Project uses a combination of archival sources and the results of its own field surveys to reconstruct individual archaeological sites at Gebelein and the region. Work so far has included Gebelein's role in the formation of the state, the ethnic diversity of the region and religious life in Per-Hathor (Pathyris in Greek). The project has been able to tentatively identify the route of processions and their epigraphic surveys have uncovered numerous inscriptions previously invisible to the naked eye and a hitherto unknown expedition by Ramesses IV. Combined, the religious landscape has been revealed contributing knowledge not only to Gebelein's but to Egypt's history.

In the future the project directors hope to include a 3D digital reconstruction of the town with the aim of understanding the life of its inhabitants. The town would be figuratively inhabited by some occupants whose lives and families can be traced from extant documents. Later this year (2023) the team is planning to return to Gebelein to further examine metal production there. The team intend to give some attention to the medieval Muslim cemetery at the site and to follow up on the rectangular anomalies highlighted in the geophysics results. In 1887 when Petrie passed Gebelein it is likely that it was during the inundation as he made no note of seeing any tombs although they should have been visible and easily recognisable if they were above water. Many of the ceilings of the tombs have collapsed and Dr Ejsmond would like to examine these as it is possible that the tomb's contents are preserved under the rubble.

Dr Ejsmond finished by thanking the EEG for its donation to the project and explained that he hopes to use this money to bring in specialists, particularly a photographer to produce 3D images of the so far undocumented tombs. He further thanked his international team, the local inspectorate and the project's sponsors.



Image courtesy of Dr Wojciech Ejsmond

<https://www.facebook.com/Gebelein>

Thank You