GEBELEIN

AN OVERVIEW
Almost all periods of Egyptian history have left their mark at Gebelein and it is representative of almost every kind of archaeological site found in the Nile valley. The area was a significant centre in the history of ancient Egypt, but its exact role and the reasons for its importance still awaits explanation. Recently, new research has been initiated here by a team from the University of Warsaw. The aim of the project is to understand the site’s history, functions, and to protect the antiquities in the area. The first three seasons of the Gebelein Archaeological Project observed that the microregion presents potential for further research and can greatly contribute to our understanding of ancient Egypt. The aim of this publication is to briefly present previous research, history, and topography of Gebelein and the current project.

Gebelein is located approximately 28 km south-west of Luxor on the west bank of the Nile. The modern Arabic name el-Gebelein (‘the two rocks’) has the same meaning as its ancient name – Inerty. The two hills (east and west) dominate the area, running from north to south. This raised massif is furrowed by numerous peaks and valleys.
Research history of the area is long and complicated. Most of the results from previous excavations have not yet been published. Gebelein was visited by travellers and scholars since the eighteenth century, such as Ludwig Norden (1735), Richard Pocock (1738), and Dominque Vivant Denon (1800). However, the first official research was initiated by Gaston Maspero in 1885 on behalf of Service des antiquités égyptiennes. It is unknown where at Gebelein he was working. Objects from this research went to the Cairo Museum after March 1885, and in the following years some objects were acquired by the British Museum as well as Louvre Museum (though it is uncertain whether they came from his excavations). Most of them are dated to the Predynastic Period. Some years later, Eugène Grébau and George Daressy (1891-1892) copied inscriptions at Gebelein, and their research was followed by excavations of Willoughby Fraser in 1893. In this same year, the director of the Service des antiquités, Jacques de Morgan, sent the inspector of the Upper Egyptian antiquities, Georges Foucart, to conduct short excavations there. In 1896, under unknown circumstances, a First Intermediate Period tomb with five sarcophagi was discovered, and the objects went to the Royal Museum in Berlin.

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, Gebelein was well-known to antiquities dealers, who looted the site complex. According to practices of the time, the Antiquities Service could licence local people – such as someone attached to excavations or native dealers of antiquities – to conduct excavations. This system was intended to cope with the
discoveries of archaeological remains at provincial sites, which were often thought to be of minor value. Sheikh Omar from Gourna was allowed to work at Gebelein under this system. Officially, such individuals were working on behalf of the government, and half of their finds should be sent to the Cairo Museum. However, due to a lack of proper supervision, many may have pocketed more than the half allocated to them.

Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge was informed that Gebelein is ideal for finding remains of what he referred to as ‘Neolithic Egyptians’, i.e. well preserved human bodies dated to the Naqada culture. He discovered six of such specimens there. It is known that Robert de Rustafjaell also possessed a natural mummy from Gebelein in his collection, but unfortunately nothing else is known about this specimen. In 1900, James Quibell acquired a set of artefacts dated to the late Predynastic Period for the Cairo Museum in Qena, which reportedly originated from Gebelein. In 1907, Henri de Morgan visited Gebelein during his survey of southern Egypt, despite it being not in his concession. Most of the artefacts from the research went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In season 1908-9, two scholars from Lyon excavated at Gebelein – Louis Lortet and

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*Italian excavations at the temple area on the eastern mount.*
Cécil Gaillard—who found numerous objects which are now in the collection of Musée des Confluences in their home city.

The Italian mission from the Turin Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, directed by Ernesto Schiaparelli, began its works at Gebelein in 1910. The following seasons were either conducted by Ernesto Schiaparelli or by his field director Virginio Rosa in 1911, 1914 and 1920. After the death of E. Schiaparelli in 1922, works were directed by Giulio Farina (seasons: 1930, 1934-1935, 1937). The Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Turin conducted the most complex research at Gebelein. The majority of the artefacts from the area went to the Cairo Museum and the Turin Museum. After a long break, the Italians returned to Gebelein for three short seasons (in 1995, 1996 and 1999), which were conducted by Anna Maria Donadoni Roveri, Giovanni Bergamini, and Alessandro Roccati. In the meantime, Egyptian archaeologists conducted one season of salvage excavation in 1998.

The previous excavations enriched museums’ collection but contributed little to our understanding of the topography and history of the area. In 2013, a one-day reconnaissance was conducted by Wojciech Ejsmond, Julia Chyla, and Cezary Baka from the University of Warsaw. It appeared that the situation was critical and urgent works were necessary to document and protect the local antiquities. Without this, important information would be completely lost. In the next year, the first season of survey was conducted, which initiated a new program of field research at Gebelein.

**GEBELEIN THROUGH THE CENTURIES**

What we know about the area come from the analysis of objects, although in most cases their archaeological contexts are unknown. Therefore, information that they could provide are reduced.

Gebelein played an important role in the history of ancient Egypt. The most famous finds from the area are several well preserved natural mummies dated to the late 4th millennium BC. The dry conditions at Gebelein enabled excellent preservation of human bodies. The most well-known is the ‘Gebelein man’, now in the British Museum. Alfred Wallis Budge brought to London six of these ‘Neolithic Egyptians’ and the
seventh specimen came to the British Museum from the collection of Robert de Rustafjaell. Another important find is the ‘Gebelein linen’, which dates to Naqada IIa-b based on its artistic style. It was discovered by the Italian Mission working at Gebelein in 1930 and was found lying next to a human body in a tomb located in the northern part of the area. This artefact raised the question whether it was related with some person of royal status, like the similar depictions from the decorated tomb no. 100 at

*The ‘Gebelein man’ (Naqada II). Artefacts surrounding the body are not from the original furnishing of the deceased’s grave, but rather, they demonstrate how a typical Nagadian grave may have looked.*

Fragments of the ‘Gebelein linen’ (arranged hypothetically).
Hierakonpolis, which is thought to be burial place of a local ruler. It is hard to answer this question without knowing the Gebelein tomb itself and the accompanying artefacts, which could provide additional information on its dating and furnishing. The provenance of a set of objects acquired by James Quibell at an antiquity market in Qena is also problematic, since the archaeologist was only told by a dealer that the entire set was found at Gebelein. Only a portion of it was published, and the objects date to late Naqada II or early Naqada III. They constitute one of the most opulent sets of objects from a predynastic tomb, which is comparable with the furnishings of royal sepulchres at Abydos and Hierakonpolis. These artefacts, along with other finds, suggest that some local predynastic rulers may have been buried in the area. Therefore, the exact role of Gebelein is
the subject of some controversy. Despite this, it is ostensibly one of the key sites that can further our understanding of the origin of ancient Egypt.

Many important artefacts shed light on the history of this area during the Old Kingdom. The most famous find of this period is a 4th Dynasty set of papyri related to a local estate and temple. They were discovered in a tomb located in the northern part of Gebelein in 1935. The documents possibly date to the reign of Menkaure. They list some 300 people from two villages that comprised an estate in the Gebelein area. Their titles show several of the same occupations we see in scenes on the walls of Old Kingdom tombs belonging to large estate
holders. Titles such as baker, brewer, craftsman, boat maker, sailor and rower, mason, metal worker, stockman, grain measurer, a ‘sealer of the granary’, as well as the hunter and ‘nomad’ were attested. These are the basic specialists we would find in any large farm, ranch, or plantation in an Old Kingdom estate. Some scribes are also included, as well as employees of the archive and their spouses, children, and parents who generally go unnamed.

Much of our knowledge on Old Kingdom crafts and economy comes from the chapel walls of tombs, which depicts an idealised world. In the Gebelein Papyri, one can glimpse a more realistic image of life during the pyramid age – a centralised state, a bureaucratic mind, and the controlling of the pan-regional economy of the country.

Several Old Kingdom high dignitaries were buried at Gebelein, such as Ini, who was a priest of Sobek, royal treasurer, and nomarch. His sepulchre was discovered intact at the

Furnishing of Ini’s burial (Egyptian Museum in Turin).
northern necropolis. The furnishing includes wooden models and a statuette of the tomb owner. Other individuals, those buried in the so called ‘Tomb of the Unknowns’, are dated to the 5th Dynasty. None of the people buried in this rock-cut sepulchre were named. Regardless, one can see from the opulent tomb furnishing that they must have been important.

Another well-known sepulchre is that of Iti and his wife Neferu, which dates to the First Intermediate Period. This saff-tomb (discovered in 1911) was partially hewn into the rock. Iti’s titles were priest of Sobek, the royal treasurer, and army commander. Despite the tomb being robbed before excavations, it still yielded many artefacts. Due to the well-preserved decorations on the pillars, corridor, and chapel, the tomb contains one of the most important examples of First Intermediate Period art.
Portico of Iti’s and Neferu’s tomb during the excavation in 1911 and the painted decoration (Egyptian Museum in Turin).
Unfortunately, nothing remains of the tomb today, but luckily, the painted decorations were removed and transported to the Egyptian Museum in Turin.

Nubian mercenaries also lived in the Gebelein region at this time. Attestations to their presence, as well as contacts with local Egyptians, are found on numerous stelae which combine Egyptian and Nubian elements. The tombstones found at Gebelein and er-Rizeiqat lead to the conclusion that they were living in Sumenu which was once situated between Gebelein and el-Rizeiqat.

At the turn of the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom, Mentuhotep Nebhepetre constructed a chapel dedicated to Hathor ‘Lady of Dendera’. Blocks from this building have been re-used in architectural structures of the following periods at the northern part of the eastern mount.
Dated to the Second Intermediate Period are two limestone blocks which bear the names of two Hyksos kings: Apophis and Khyan. Alongside the evidence from other sites in the region (e.g. el-Kab, Sumenu, and Medamud), these artefacts suggest that Gebelein was controlled by the Hyksos during the Second Intermediate Period. Additionally, the names of some local Upper Egyptian kings dating to the Second Intermediate Period are also attested at Gebelein.

The local temple of Hathor was modified during the New Kingdom and there is some evidence of prosperity at Gebelein, which is possibly related to stone quarrying in Dibabiyah on the opposite bank of the Nile. Some New Kingdom stelae dedicated to Hathor are found in the temenos. This suggests that it was a popular sanctuary. Unfortunately, none of the previous missions working in this area produced any published plan or documentation of the architectural structures.
Another New Kingdom find from the temple precinct is the foundation deposit of Thutmose III (Egyptian Museum in Turin).

Below the temple, a rock-cut chapel was built, probably during the time of Hatshepsut. Sunken relief decorations show Hathor ‘Lady of Gebelein’ and another male god whose depiction is badly preserved.

A fortress operated at the top of the eastern mound during the Third Intermediate Period and the Late Period, but little is known about the area due to the lack of sufficient reports from archaeological works conducted there, as well as remains of necropoleis that could reveal more about the local population.

The situation changed during the Ptolemaic Period, when Pathyris (Greek pronunciation for the town Per-Hathor) became an important administrative centre (capital of the Pathyrite nome until c. 88 BC), and was inhabited by both Egyptians and Greeks. Numerous family archives in Demotic and Greek have come from Pathyris, which has shed light on daily life in a provincial centre during the Ptolemaic Period. In

So far two concentrations of graffiti have been discovered at Gebelein. The eastern mount includes the Ramesses IV inscription here.
the mid-2\textsuperscript{nd} century BC, Ptolemaic kings founded a military base in Crocodilopolis (Greek name for Sumenu), and later Pathyris received a subsidiary camp.

Regarding the papyrological material, Horos’ and Dryton/ Apollonia’s archives should be mentioned. The archive of Horos, son of Nechouthes, is the only ‘closed find’ known from Pathyris. It appeared on the antique market as a result of illegal excavations, where it was sold intact in a jar to Lord Adler in 1924. The jar was filled with 21 Greek and 49 demotic papyri, dating from 134 to 89 BC, of which the most exciting finds being two Demotic marriage contracts pertaining to his daughters. Dryton and Apolonia’s archive consists of 53 papyri texts and 8 ostraca, which are located in several museums around the world and date largely to the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century BC. Apollonia, in particular, was an interesting figure, who is one of the few examples of a female entrepreneur in Egyptian history. She made a substantial fortune, and used her mixed Graeco-Egyptian origin to her advantage. Therefore, the papyri and ostraca from Pathyris have significantly contributed to our perception of Graeco-Egyptian...
relations during Ptolemaic Egypt.

Some construction work was also done on the Hathor temple during late Ptolemaic times. Yet, the nome capital was moved to Armant and the city seems to be abandoned for an extended period from c. 88 BC due to the likely destruction of the settlement as a result of a rebellion.

The historical Gebelein became a political centre for the last time in 6th century AD, when Blemmyes tribal rulers took residence. We know this from several parchments from Gebelein, which are connected with a local royal residence.

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN THE REGION**

As demonstrated, Gebelein is well-known from numerous important artefacts, but their context and the topography of the site complex is poorly recorded, making them less informative. Despite years of devastation and looting, there are still several archaeological sites in the area.

Starting from the north, destroyed remnants of a settlement (possibly Sumenu), which have been recorded on a map drawn in late 18th

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*The map made during Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt is highly accurate and depicts now destroyed archaeological sites as well as a preindustrial landscape.*
century as a *kom*, should be mentioned. It bordered with a necropolis, which was used from the Predynastic Period to the Middle Kingdom (with some Ptolemaic burials in one Middle Kingdom tomb). Little survived from this settlement and necropolis today. Further south, in the central part of Gebelein, a largely destroyed cemetery is located. The oldest finds from this area are dated to Naqada I. Its pivotal point is a natural spur, which has the shape of a pyramid from an east/south-east angle. There are two large, mudbrick *saff*-tomb at the foot of this natural pyramid. One of them was partially excavated in 1996 and yielded pottery dating to the 11th/12th Dynasty. A similar natural pyramid is located north from the aforementioned example, but due to the level of destruction, the type of the tomb located at its foot cannot be determined. Recently, a 300-metre-long section made by a bulldozer revealed some other tombs in the necropolis.
A large part of the cemetery is also recently destroyed by agricultural fields and the development of settlements. In the northern part of that necropolis, on the slopes and top of the rock, rock-cut tombs can be found.

Several rock-cut tombs have been discovered in the south-eastern part of the eastern mount, and are comprised of three major elements: an outer rectangular courtyard, an inner square chapel (supported by one or
more pillars), and a descending passage linking the latter to a burial chamber.

A few hundred metres north of these tombs is a small rock-cut chapel (*speos*). The entrance to the structure is located c. 3 m above the ground level. The *speos* consists of a broad vestibule and a narrow cell. In the western part of the cell, some sunken reliefs have survived. Of particular interest is the representation of the Hathor ‘Lady of Gebelein’.

Directly above the rock-cut temple, there is a shelf leading to a small grotto. Around the entrance to the cave are numerous graffiti mentioning Hathor ‘Lady of Gebelein’, as well as some private names.

The temple of Hathor once stood above the shelf. The oldest attestation of her worship at Gebelein (with the cultic epithet ‘Lady of Dendera’) are the aforementioned decorated blocks dated to reign of Mentuhotep Nebhepetre. On the slopes of the hill was the town of Per-Hathor (Greek Pathyris), of which only modest remnants survive. The northern part of the eastern mount was inhabited from Predynastic
to late Ptolemaic Period, possibly even later.

Opposite the temple on the western mount a large concentration of graffiti is located. These are dated from the prehistoric to Coptic Period. From those dated to the pharaonic times, a large inscription with the name of Ramses IV is especially important.

**SUMMARY**

Gebelein was a significant centre during different stages of Egyptian history. It is also greatly threatened by human activity and requires urgent attention.

The site complex has been frequently mentioned in Egyptological literature. Although many important objects have been discovered here, the area is still poorly understood in terms of its topography and archaeological sites. Most of the objects discovered lack their archaeological context, which makes it difficult to discern any formal patterns or interpretations of their functionality in ancient Egypt. The aim of the current research of the Gebelein Archaeological Project is to provide a better understanding of this area and its importance, as well as protecting the local archaeological heritage.

*Top and slopes of the northern part of the eastern mount was once occupied by the flourishing city of Pathyris, its temple, and fortress. Only some loose bricks, as well as a few walls, survived into present day. The area requires urgent protection and research in order to save the archaeological heritage of Gebelein.*
Archaeological sites at Gebelein have great potential to shed light on different aspects of ancient Egyptian history. To mention just some of the most significant elements of the current research: studies on the predynastic material from the area can provide clues to the role of Gebelein during the earliest stages of ancient Egyptian civilisation; the large tombs in the southern necropolis, which are preliminary dated to the First Intermediate Period, can help to better understand the significance of the region during this time and the reasons for the Nubian mercenaries to settle here. The diverse papyrological material from the city of Pathyris will require additional topographical contextualisation in order to further our understanding of provincial Egypt during the Ptolemaic Period. Recent examinations of previously unpublished objects and archaeological features, *e.g.* the southern necropolis and the *speos*, also make this area more exciting and necessary for further research.

*The northern necropolis at the beginning of the 20th century and now.*
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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY:


**Credits to the figures if not by the author:**

Page 5 – Gebelein man:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gebelein_predynastic_mummies#/media/File:Bm-ginger.jpg; Gebelein linen:
Page 6 – knife with golden handle:
Page 7 – Early dynastic block:
http://www.nefershapiland.de/Biografie%20Djoser.htm; two knives: LORTET, L.

Page 8 – papyrus: **POSENER-KRIEGER** 2004 (*op. cit.*): Tav. 3.

Page 9 – stela: [https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/31/76/9e/31769e214b2bb35a5c8b457b49ea015d.jpg](https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/31/76/9e/31769e214b2bb35a5c8b457b49ea015d.jpg).


Page 12 – block: **POLZ** (*op. cit.*): Abb. 2.

Page 13 – graffito: **WIECZOREK** (*op. cit.*): Fig. 3.


Page 18 – model by Piotr Witkowski.


Page 21 – logo of the project by Magdalena Bryk.


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*The logo of the Gebelein Archaeological Project is inspired by the decoration on this predynastic bowl from Gebelein, which depicts the two eponymic mounts.*

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