An erased queen in the Hathor temple at Gebelein

The decorations of the temple were damaged at least twice during pharaonic times, and these destructions were state-sanctioned, write Daniel Takács, Wojciech Ejsmond, Julia Chyla and Piotr Witkowski.

Despite over 130 years of archaeological work at Gebelein and its convenient location just 28 km south-west of Luxor, the area is still poorly known to scholars, as our 2015 season showed:

Local authorities were already aware of the existence of a rock-cut temple, but so far it has remained unpublished and unknown to researchers. Its speos consists of two rooms: the walls of the one at the rear are covered with poorly preserved decoration and hieroglyphic inscriptions. The cult place was dedicated to two gods, and there is no doubt that one of them was Hathor, bearing the cult epithet ‘Lady of Gebelein’. The other deity was probably Amun, though unfortunately his depictions and name are not preserved in their entirety.
(in contrast to the depictions and name of Hathor), and further studies are needed to verify our supposition. Amun was particularly despised by Akhenaten and his representations were destroyed extensively during the Amarna Period. Images and names of the goddess Hathor were sometimes preserved, sometimes destroyed to different degrees, leaving us with a puzzling inconsistency regarding the ideas behind the mutilations. In the Gebelein speos, her representations seem to have escaped destruction during the Amarna Period, instead suggesting a later date for the damaging of her cult statue in the niche. Most of the known rock-cut temples date from the Nineteenth Dynasty or later, while only three precede the New Kingdom. The destruction of the names and representations of Amun was the first clue to date the execution of the decoration before the Nineteenth Dynasty.

The most puzzling detail was the lack of royal names in the temple. Detailed studies of reliefs and inscriptions, however, yielded intriguing results, as they allowed tracing the construction of the temple and its first phase of decoration to the reign of the queen whose name her successors wanted to erase from history: Hatshepsut.
Examples of different methods of visualising a 3D model of the rear wall of the speos: A – simple 3D model, B and C – 3D visualisations as a pseudo-elevation map (B: without normals, C: with normals) (Image: Piotr Witkowski).

The presence of her depictions is indicated, among other things, by fragments of preserved hieroglyphic inscriptions containing feminine word endings. The preserved circumstances in which the cartouche is located, indicate that it contained the name of this queen.

After the death of her husband – Thutmose II – Hatshepsut exercised power as a regent on behalf of her stepson and nephew, Thutmose III, then a minor. At some point, Hatshepsut began to use a full royal titulary, reserved only for pharaohs, despite the fact that Egypt had a rightful ruler in the person of Thutmose III. For decades, researchers thought that the queen wanted to assume full royal powers, with her ambitious building programme and depictions as a legitimate ruler on temple walls aiming to legitimize her reign at the expense of her stepson.

More recently, that view has changed and current scholarly opinion holds that the situation was a good deal more complex: Queen Hatshepsut ruled together with young Thutmose III in order to ensure the stability of Egypt, and many of her actions helped to strengthen the position of the young king. Not until many years after her death did Thutmose III start to destroy depictions and textual references to his stepmother as a king.
Hatshepsut was neither the first nor the last woman ruling in Egypt. Other queens who were ruling independently do not appear to have been erased from history in this manner, simply because they were women. Why Thutmose III wanted to blot out the name of Hatshepsut as a ruler many years after her reign is still contested. Maybe further work in the speos will reveal more evidence concerning the queen’s damnatio memoriae.

Measuring and documenting sacred space

The documentation of the speos was undertaken by traditional measuring and supplemented with photogrammetry. Combining both methods in Geographical Information System (GIS), we were able to create the plan of the temple in a fast and accurate manner. Various photographic methods were used by Piotr Witkowski, which allowed us to enhance features that are no longer visible to the eye or else very difficult to see. This enabled some fragments of wall decoration to be more visible, and to confirm the presence of previously unseen painted inscriptions several metres above the speos.

Key word: Gebelein

Gebelein is located some 30 km south of Thebes, on the western bank of the Nile, and was capital of a nome during the Ptolemaic Period. It is named after its two hills: Gebelein in Arabic, or Inr-ti ('Two Rocks') in ancient Egyptian. The site was also known by its Greek names as Aphroditopolis and Pathyris. Already mentioned in the Description de l'Egypte of 1804, archaeological work there only began in 1884. G. W. Fraser and M. W. Blackburn excavated at the site for the Egypt Exploration Fund in 1893.

On the eastern hill, the remains of a Hathor temple have been found, dating back primarily to the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom and still in existence in Roman times. The western hill is the site of a partially explored cemetery, in use since the Predynastic Period. Furnishings of the Tenth Dynasty tomb of the nomarch and the high priest Ini found there are now in the Museo Egizio in Turin, as are contents of the First Intermediate Period tomb of the royal treasurer, an army commander Ini and his wife Neferu.

Wojciech Ejsmond and Daniel Takács examining the decoration of the speos (Photo: Piotr Witkowski).

Daniel Takács is a graduate student at the Department of Oriental Studies in Egyptology at the University of Warsaw, who is currently funded by the International Visegrad Fund and working on the publication of the speos. Wojciech Ejsmond is a PhD student of archaeology at the University of Warsaw and director of the Gebelein Archaeological Project. Julia Chyla is a PhD student of archaeology at the University of Warsaw, field director of the project and working with Piotr Witkowski (MA student of the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Warsaw) on the documentation of the speos. The research was financed by the Consultative Council for Students’ Scientific Movement of the University of Warsaw and the University of Warsaw Foundation.