

Wojciech Ejsmond

## **Gebelein in the Predynastic Period: Capital or Provincial Centre? Review of Evidence**

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Centres such as Abydos, Hierakonpolis and Naqada have received much attention in academic discussions due to their wealth of archaeological evidence and their significance in Egyptian religion. Preservation of archaeological data and discoveries are a matter of hazard and their interpretation might be misleading. As Thucydides wrote:

“Suppose the city of Sparta to be deserted, and nothing left but the temples and the ground-plan, distant ages would be very unwilling to believe that the power of the Lacedaemonians was at all equal to their fame. And yet they own two-fifths of the Peloponnesus, and are acknowledged leaders of the whole, as well as of numerous allies in the rest of Hellas. But their city is not built continuously, and has no splendid temples or other edifices; it rather resembles a group of villages like the ancient towns of Hellas, and would therefore make a poor show. Whereas, if the same fate befell the Athenians, the ruins of Athens would strike the eye, and we should infer their power to have been twice as great as it really is. We ought not then to be unduly sceptical. The greatness of cities should be estimated by their real power and not by appearances.” (Thucydides 1900).

What if both the lack of religious authority of some centre during pharaonic times, and its modest appearance and poor state of preservation makes it look insignificant? Then we are left with indirect evidence and suspicions. This could be the case of Gebelein.

Gebelein is an archaeological site complex located about 28 km south-west of Luxor on the west bank of the Nile. The current Arabic name el-Gabalein ('two hills') has the same meaning as the ancient name of the place – Inerti. The two mounts formation dominates the area, running from north to south. This raised massif is furrowed by numerous peaks and valleys. It is a place of great strategic value. The two hills enable control of the navigation on the Nile as well as land routes connecting the valley with the oasis of the western desert and along the river. It is possible to go directly from Gebelein to Hierakonpolis, Naqada, Hiw and Abydos/This by valley and desert routes (Fig. 1).

The western mount comprises of a stone quarry, rock-cut tombs, remnants of mastabas, numerous shafts and pits with burials dating to different periods. At

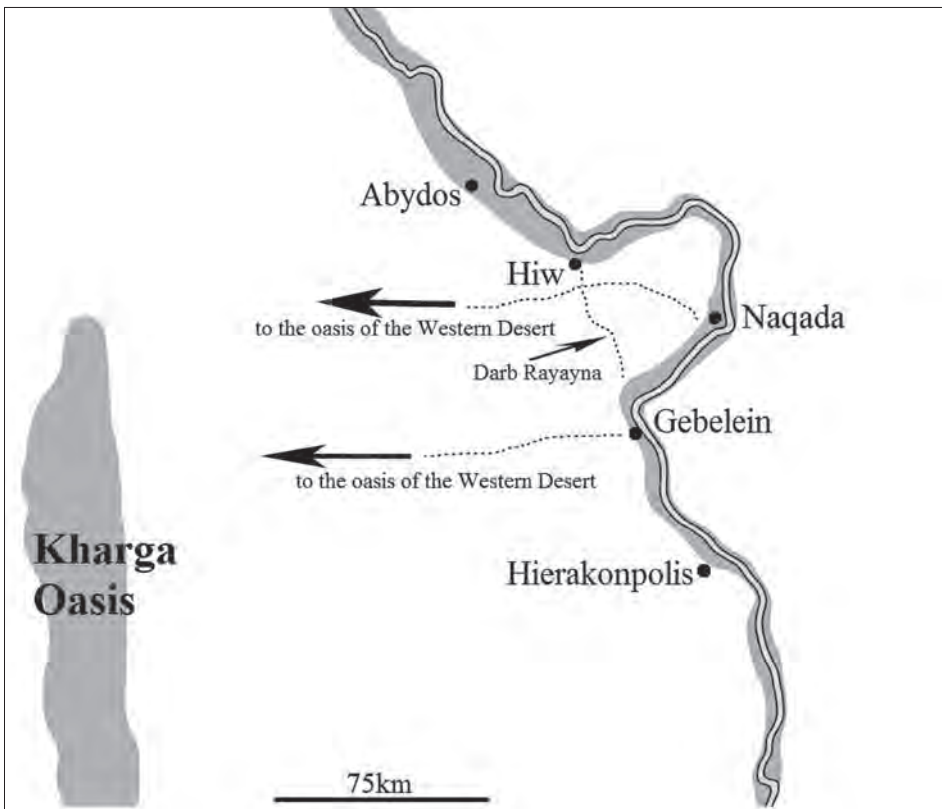


Fig. 1. Location of Gebelein, other main centres and ruts mentioned in the paper (made by W. Ejsmond)

the top of the eastern mount, a temple of Hathor once stood and the city of Per-Hathor (Pathyris in Ptolemaic times) was located on its western slope down to the area between the two hills. This mount is also the location of burials and other archaeological features (Ejsmond 2016: 15-19).

At Gebelein there are sites representing all periods of Egyptian history. The place played an important role in ancient times. Strategically located stronghold, an important administrative (capital of the Pathyrite nome during the Ptolemaic Period, till c. 88 BC) and trade centre was located at Gebelein – inhabited by Egyptians, Nubians and Greeks (Fiore-Marochetti 2013). It is a matter of some controversy whether or not rulers of some local proto-state were buried in the local necropolis during the Predynastic Period (Cervelló Autori 1996; Wilkinson 2000; Campagno 2002; Ejsmond 2015). This may suggest that an early state capital was situated in the area.

Recently, new archaeological field works has been initiated at Gebelein, which resulted in the acquisition of new data (Ejsmond 2013; Ejsmond *et al.* 2015a; Ejsmond *et al.* 2015b; Ejsmond *et al.* 2018). Studies on artefacts which came or are said to come from Gebelein also shed a new light on this place (Ejsmond 2015; 2016). Therefore, the aim of the paper is to present results of the recent studies and discuss relevance of Gebelein in the context of early history of ancient Egypt.

## 1. State of research

There is an awareness of the general processes such as changes of settlement pattern (Mortensen 1991), development of social stratification (Castillos 1998; Wengrow 2006) and regional differentiation of the material culture in the Naqada complex (Holmes 1989; Friedman 1994; Köhler 2014). There are some written sources referring to that times like the Palermo Stone (Wilkinson 2000), preserved fragments and extractions from *Aegyptiaca* by Manetho, but they are not very informative or reliable. In recent times, there is a development in archaeology of the Predynastic Period in Upper Egypt. There were some new surveys in southern Egypt, like Moalla area (Manassa 2011), Naqada region (Tassie *et al.* 2012), the Aswan – Kom Ombo Archaeological Project (Gatto *et al.* 2009) and archaeological missions are working at Hierakonpolis (Friedman 2011), El-Qab (Claes *et al.* 2014) and Abydos (Dreyer 2011), to name just the most important sites.

Archaeology of Egypt in the Predynastic Period is in large part the archaeology of necropoleis. New researches in the Delta changed this disproportion of sources and more data are available from settlements, e.g. Tell el-Farkha (Ciałowicz 2011),

Buto (Hartung *et al.* 2009), and Tell Ibrahim Awad (van Haarlem 2000). Still, the analyses of tombs and graveyards are the prime source of information on social and political processes that took place in the Nile valley, especially in the Upper Egypt. Spatial distribution of large and richly furnish tombs, sometimes with elements of royal iconography, provides information on locations of the most important cemeteries where the local elites and rulers were buried (Kaiser and Dreyer 1982; Wilkinson 1996; 2000). It is generally believed that there were three main centres with necropoleis of royal character – Hierakonpolis, Naqada and Abydos (e.g. Bard 2015: 113-114). It is thought that there was an ephemeral proto-state with its capital near Hiw (Kaiser and Dreyer 1982: 242-245; Hikade 2010). Gebelein was a place of research of many scholars, who were more interested in the pharaonic times and the results of their excavations of dynastic as well as Predynastic sites were barely published (e.g. Fraser 1893; Steindorff 1901; Schiaparelli 1921; Farina 1929, 1937; Bergamini 2005). The sites of Hierakonpolis, Naqada and Abydos were excavated at the end of the 19th century and very beginning of the 20th century. Archaeologists came back to these sites later on. Recent researches at Hierakonpolis and Abydos produced many extraordinary discoveries, which furthered our understanding of early Egyptian history (Friedman 2011; Dreyer 2011) and there is ongoing research on earlier acquired materials from Naqada (Tassie *et al.* 2012).

Gebelein is the least known of such important centres in Upper Egypt. The place was the subject of research for several scholars who were excavating its Predynastic sites<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, they did not publish any sufficient account of their works. Existing publications are extremely general. Usually, they do not contain any illustrations, plans, drawings and sufficient descriptions of the locations of the excavations what makes them difficult to understand even with a good knowledge of Gebelein's topography. Due to lack of publications of the results of previous works the site complex is poorly known and often neglected in studies on early history of ancient Egypt and therefore possibly underestimated. Both necropoleis and settlements are found at Gebelein what make the area significant for research on both kinds of sites. Its location among Hierakonpolis, Naqada, Hiw and Abydos-This makes it crucial in the understanding of the Predynastic Period.

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<sup>1</sup> For reconstruction of earlier works see: Ejsmond 2013, and for the most important accounts of the excavations of the Predynastic sites see: Anonymous 1930; 1935; 1937; Lortet and Gailard 1909: 229-230; Budge 1920: 359.

The opinions concerning significance of Gebelein can be summarised by presenting two main points of view. For example, Toby Wilkinson (Wilkinson 2000) is close to seeing Gebelein as an independent political centre in contrast to Josep Cervelló Autori (Cervelló Autori 1996; Campagno 2002: 56-57). The latter scholar suggests that there is no evidence for the existence of a powerful local elite, which would rule from Gebelein independently and the Gebelein line should be considered as a result of influence from Hierakonpolis and not as an expression of power of an independent, local ruler. It must be noted that many objects from Gebelein have not been published yet, as well as results of previous excavations and the topography of the centre is poorly known in the literature. In effect, Predynastic Gebelein is often unjustly ignored in discussions (see for example: Bard 2015: 113-114; Kemp 2006, 74-78). Therefore, the current research was launched.

## 2. Archaeological Sites at Gebelein

Several Pre- and Early Dynastic sites are located at Gebelein. They are concentrated in two areas (Fig. 2). The first group is the best recognised one in terms

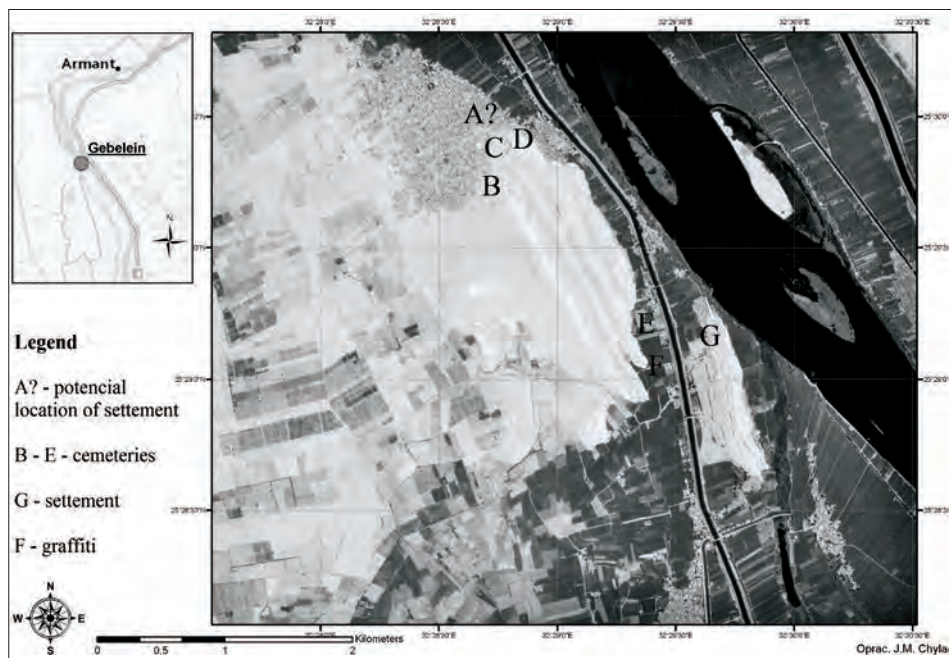


Fig. 2. Location of archaeological sites at Gebelein (base map by J. Chyla, locations of the sites by W. Ejsmond)

of archival data as well as current archaeological surveys. It is located at the northern slope and foothill of the western mount. It is hard to say whether or not there was one large necropolis running along the slope or several small ones. In the unpublished field journal by Virginio Rosa, who was conducting the field research in 1911 for Ernesto Schiaparelli, there are some information on Predynastic cemeteries on the north-eastern and north-western corners of the western mount (Rosa 1911: 25-26 and 56; B and D in Fig. 2). Unfortunately, there is no detailed description of the sites and findings<sup>2</sup>. Between those two cemeteries there was another necropolis, used during Naqada I and possibly later as well, now completely destroyed (Ejsmond and Chyla in press; Ejsmond *et al.* 2018; Ejsmond 2013); C in Fig. 2). Preserved documentation and publications are not very specific about the site. Circa 300 skeletons have been excavated there and sent to Turin during just one season (Marro 1929; Donadoni Roveri 1990: 25). In this area, the famous 'Gebelein linen' was found (Ejsmond 2013: 39). Northern foothill of the western mountain is subject to expansion of the el-Gherira settlement, which has already destroyed the northern limits of the burial grounds. Therefore, it is impossible to establish the northern extent of the cemeteries and determine if they are close enough to each other to consider them as one large necropolis comprising smaller group of tombs.

Such density of burials indicates that some settlements should be located in the vicinity. Indeed, Predynastic settlement, 'of which the stratum of ashes remains', has been mentioned north from the slope of this mound (Donadoni Roveri 1990: 23; Schiaparelli 1921; Rosa 1911: 25-26) (A? in Fig. 2). In more less the same area, a *kom* is located on the late 18<sup>th</sup> century map (Jacotin 1826: pl. 5) but there is no information on its dating. In pharaonic times, a town of Sumenu, where the god Sobek was worshipped, was located north from the western mountain. Unfortunately, there is no evidence on the exact location of Sumenu in such early period. The earliest attested instances of the deity related to Sumenu and the name itself is an Early Dynastic Period<sup>3</sup> inscription from Saqqara<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, Sumenu existed

<sup>2</sup> Preliminary analysis of the pottery from the cemetery on the western corner of the mount indicates the Naqada III dating of the site. Pottery collected from eastern corner of the mount is dated to Naqada I-III.

<sup>3</sup> Crocodiles occur in many times in early inscriptions but it is difficult to say if such depictions refer to animal, god or name of a place, see: Regulski 2010: 130; Kaplony 1963: e.g. Abb. 48, 339, 910.

<sup>4</sup> Tomb 3121 (Emery 1953: 116-120, but image and description are not published there. Drawing of the artefact and inscription in Kaplony 1963: Taf. 150, no 865). The inscription mentions Sobek and *ima* tree – the sacred plant of Sobek lor of Sumenu (for Sobek and *ima* tree

already in such early time, possibly even earlier, and it can be speculated that aforementioned cemeteries were the burial grounds of people from Sumenu.

The second group of archaeological sites is located between eastern and western mountain (Ejsmond 2013: 39-41). This area has been heavily damaged and only small part of a cemetery located at the eastern foothill of the western mountain survived until today (E in Fig. 2). According to a very general statement by Jaques de Morgan (J. de Morgan 1907: 41-42), there was a cemetery dated to the Predynastic times at the eastern foot of the western mountain (opposite location of ancient Pathyris) and Predynastic pottery acquired by the Cairo Museum at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century probably came from this place. It represents white-lined and decorated wares<sup>5</sup>. It is possible that the still existing part of the necropolis is the last surviving evidence on the location of the Predynastic burial ground. It is also likely that the well-preserved natural mummies discovered by Alfred Wallis Budge were found somewhere in this area (Ejsmond 2013: 40). Concentration of Predynastic rock arts has been discovered south from the cemetery (F in Fig. 2). It comprises of dipinti and graffiti showing animals, e.g. gazelles, giraffes, dogs etc. Jacques de Morgan mentioned some Predynastic settlement opposite the cemetery on the western foothill of the eastern mountain (G in Fig. 2). In pharaonic times, the town of Per-Hathor (in Greek Pathyris) was located there and a limestone block dated to late Early Dynastic Period was found there by the Italian Mission (Curto 1953). Second limestone block of unknown provenience was attributed to Gebelein on the basis of the material used and similarity of execution to the aforementioned one (Stevenson Smith 1949: 137). Partly preserved scenes were depicted on both, probably showing ritual of temple foundation (Morenz 1994). Similar distribution of archaeological sites in this part of Gebelein is presented by Louis Lortet and Claude Gaillard (1909: 34, 225-226). They also mentioned that predynastic burials occur at the north-western foot of the eastern mountain, under the pharaonic settlement of Per-Hathor.

Henri de Morgan, who visited Gebelein during his survey of this part of Egypt in 1907, mentioned that he found two Predynastic settlements at Gebelein, but he did not give any description of their location (H. de Morgan 1912: 49; Needler 1984: 70). Therefore, it is unknown whether or not he was referring to abovementioned settlements.

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see: Kuentz 1929: 157-158).

<sup>5</sup> E.g. JE 26531, 25633, 26528.



### 3. Selected Findings

Several important artefacts came or are said to come from Gebelein (Fig. 3). The Gebelein linen is the best known of them and its provenance is certain (A in Fig. 3). It was found in a tomb in the northern burial ground, next to some human body and is dated to Naqada Ic-IIa period on stylistic grounds (Adams and Ciałowicz 1988: 36). Depictions of boat procession with a person in a crown is suggestive of its royal nature. An analogical depiction was painted in the Decorated Tomb at Hierakonpolis. The grave is dated to the Naqada IIc and is interpreted as a burial of a local, Hierakonopolitan king (Huyge 2014: 93). By similarity

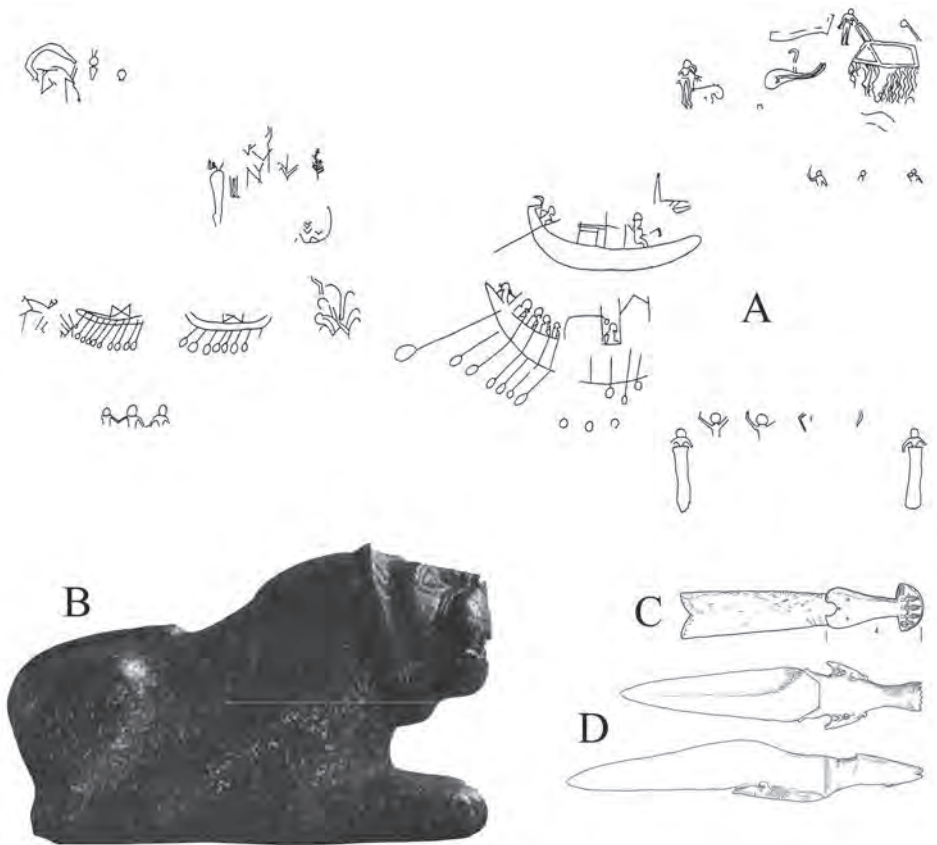


Fig. 3. Selected findings from Gebelein: A – Gebelein linen (Turin supp. 17138); B – lion figurine (Berlin 22440); C – fishtail knife with golden handle (Cairo CG 34210); D – two stone knives (Lortet and Gillard 1909: 167-168)



of the depictions, both artefacts could be considered as elements of a furnishing of a ruler's tombs, since they bear elements of royal iconography or, as Bruce Williams and Thomas Logan calls it 'early pharaonic cycle' (Williams *et al.* 1987). It can be suggested that the northern necropolis at Gebelein (C in Fig. 2) was the elite cemetery where, among other elite members, local rulers had their burials.

A set of artefacts was acquired by James Quibell in 1900 from an antiquity dealer in Qena, who said that it came from Gebelein (Quibell 1901). It consists of several stone knives, wooden staff with gazelles in a row<sup>6</sup>, decorated pot and one fragment of furniture in the shape of bull's/cow's leg, probably part of some bed or chair. There is some controversy concerning the authenticity of a golden handle of one of the knives (Aksamit 1989). This knife (C in Fig. 3) requires comments due to its shape and the decoration of its handle. The flint blade is in a fish-tail form. Such instruments are said to be predecessors of *psš-*kf** knives used during the opening of the mouth ceremony (van Walsem 1979). Decoration of the handle shows a navigation scene, which is typical for the decorated pottery known from the funerary context. It is thought that the scenes with boats are related with the beliefs concerning afterlife (Graff 2009: 121). Therefore, the connection of the afterlife scene with the knife related with the funerary ritual is very interesting. The whole set seems to be genuine and should be dated to late Naqada II or early Naqada III period. It has been proposed that the set could be interpreted as furnishing of some local ruler's tomb (Ejsmond 2015).

Two stone knives (47 and 55cm long) has been acquired by Louis Lortet and Claude Gaillard from a local person during their excavations at Gebelein (D on Fig. 3). Handles of both artefacts are ornamented by depictions of crocodiles (Lortet and Gaillard 1909: 232-233). A stone model of a boat with representation of crocodile head at one end was also unearthed at Gebelein<sup>7</sup>. The town of Sumenu was located between Gebelein and el-Rizeiqat and as the cult place of Sobek, it is tempting to believe that abovementioned artefacts are the earliest instances of the cult of this deity in the Gebelein region.

Figurines of all sizes were found at Gebelein. The most frequent are stone statues of lions (e.g. Petrie Museum UC 15191-4, the biggest of them: L15 – H8,8 cm). When the context of such statuettes is known, they accompanied the deceased king and his close retainers (Davis 1981: 42). Medium size figurines could be re-

<sup>6</sup> The only analogical artefact come from the Main Deposit at Hierakonpolis (Ashmolean Museum, E311).

<sup>7</sup> Lyone, Musée des Confluences 90000095, Emmons *et al.* 2010: 75.

garded as votive objects placed in temples (Bussmann 2010: 62), such as coming from Gebelein the New York (MMA 66.99.2, 25 cm long and 12 high) and Berlin (22440, 31,5 cm long) (B in Fig. 3) specimens. Also, one big statue of lion (MFA Boston 1980.73, estimated size of original of the complete sculpture was 45 x 50 cm (Davis 1981: 35), probably furnishing or/and architectural decoration, was found in the place. Analogical sculptures are known from Hierakonpolis and Koptos (Davies 1981; Cooney 1953: 2; Bussmann 2010: 201-203). The reconstructed size of Gebelein large figurine is comparable to Hierakonpolis lion (see: Bussmann 2010: 201-203.). The dating of such sculptures is difficult and they can be attributed to the Predynastic as well as Early Dynastic Period. This suggests the existence of some important temple in the area during these times. In the dynastic times, Gebelein was a cult place of Hathor. She was sometimes represented as lioness. Lions in ancient Egypt usually represented the king as well. Hathor was a celestial mother deity who appeared as a cow suckling a king and as a wild lioness. Sometimes she is considered as mother or wife of Horus (Arnold 1995:17; Wilkinson 1994: 140; Lesko 1999: 83-88) and therefore of the king in symbolic way. The earliest record (11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty) of any specific cult in the temple on the top of the eastern mound at Gebelein is that of Hathor, Lady of Dendera. Lady of Dendera was strongly associated with royal ideology of power (Fiore Marochetti 2010: 23-25).

In context of state religion, it is worth mentioning that a statue of falcon symbolising Horus was also discovered at Gebelein. Its size is 15,8 x 9,5 x 23,4 cm, which suggests that it was used as a cult image (Cooney 1975: 5-14; Baumgartel 1967-68). There was one more such sculptures coming from Gebelein, but it is lost now (Davis 1981: 41).

There are two aforementioned limestone blocks from the temple dated to the end of the Early Dynastic Period (Stevenson Smith 1949: 137). Such artefacts are rare. Contemporary analogies from the Khasekhemwy's reign or approximate time are known only from two temples: Hierakonpolis (Quibell 1900, pl. II) and el-Kab (Sayce and Clarke 1905: 260-261), which are essential places for state religion. Therefore, Gebelein must have played an important role at that time to receive a temple with decoration in stone. One can speculate that the aforementioned figurines and Hathor cult were related with royal self-promotion but one should remember that sculptures of lions occur also in temples not related with cult of Hathor, e.g. Min temple at Koptos or Horus temple in Hierakonpolis, and therefore they cannot be considered as indication of her cult.

These artefacts are the most exceptional examples, which testify that Gebelein was centre with very rich elite and was an important cult place. Many more

antiquities were found here but they were not published, e.g. numerous stone palettes, mace-heads, decorated pottery, small ornaments etc.

#### 4. Discussion

The hypothesis on the role of Gebelein as an independent power centre can be supported by a number of arguments.

First group of evidence concerns mainly natural setting of Gebelein and is very generic and of speculative nature:

1. A large and diverse potential of food sources (fields, areas of the low desert, mountains and swamps with hunting area) and the availability of a raw materials – flint outcrops and quarries (Ejsmond 2016). Located at Gebelein was a stone quarry, which according to Barry Kemp, Andrew Boyce and James Harrell, provided stone for sculptures in the Predynastic and Early Dynastic temples at Koptos and Hierakonpolis (Kemp *et al.* 2000). This allowed for the self-sufficiency of the region and the export of the raw materials. Therefore, Gebelein had natural resources for its development.
2. Strategic location at the crossroads of the waterway and land routes (Fig. 1) enable their control and was an additional factor which places Gebelein in a privileged position in relation with other centres.
3. Whitney Davis have suggested that some aspects of the material culture at Gebelein seems to be different from the material culture in other regions of Upper Egypt (Davis 1981: 42)<sup>8</sup>. It is natural for material culture to not be identical along the Nile. It is a matter of the degree of these differences, which suggests cultural diversities or uniformity. Nevertheless, the difference of material culture among centres in Upper Egypt is considered to be a result of the political independence of the regions or the basis for development of such independences (Friedman 1994: 923-4). This issue requires further considerations, particularly the relevance of the material culture in relation to political or cultural differences.
4. Existence of diverse furnishing of Predynastic burials proof the existence of social stratification. This suggests an advanced development of the local population.

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<sup>8</sup> This requires further research because this idea was predicated on limited group of artefacts.

Second group is of archaeological nature and give more direct conclusion:

5. Earlier works yielded opulent findings<sup>9</sup>. Local workshops required an elite class who would provide them with materials and a market for their luxury goods. Wealth could be result of economic or political position of Gebelein or mixture of both. Existence of a rich elite class is a testament to the significance of the centre.
6. Spatial distribution of the archaeological sites at Gebelein show that it had a cloister of settlements and cemeteries, like Naqada and Hierakonpolis. Such concentrations in light of settlement pattern in Upper Egypt indicates developing centres which were seats of power during the Predynastic Period (Patch 1991: 334-340).
7. In the magazine of antiquities in Moalla there is a pot dated to middle or late Naqada III that come from Gebelein<sup>10</sup> with two hieroglyphic signs: a bird (possible interpretations are Gardiners' sign (Gardiner 1994: 467, 472, 493) G1 (Egyptian vulture) or G5 (falcon) (Regulski 2010: 117-119, 416-425) and O4 (Regulski 2010: 155 and 539) which shows a 'reed shelter in fields'. It indicates use of writing at Gebelein which make it possible that it was some seat of bureaucracy at the earliest known stage of development of writing along the Nile.
8. Interest in Gebelein by later rulers (visible in construction works in the local temple and votive objects) and the wealth of this centre attested by rich burials dated to the Old Kingdom may be result of its former role as a power centre which declined to state of provincial administrative town (Ejsmond 2016: 7-11).
9. Equipment of a tomb (the set purchased by J. Quibell), which wealth is comparable to the wealth of burials from the same time at the royal necropoleis at Abydos and Hierakonpolis indicates royal burials in the area.
10. The representation of a king during a ritual and/or triumph on Gebelein linen indicates the existence of a Predynastic ruler's grave at Gebelein who used royal iconography. Rulers of proto-states were buried relatively near their capitals, e.g. Hierakonpolis, Naqada.

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<sup>9</sup> Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Turin and Cairo Museum has the biggest collections of Predynastic artefacts from Gebelein. Unfortunately, most the objects are not yet published.

<sup>10</sup> The artefact will be published elsewhere.

## 5. Conclusion

Although the current project has yielded new results and information on the site complex challenges still face Gebelein. Many artefacts have not yet been published, and the local archaeological sites are either heavily destroyed or under great threat. Therefore, the debate on the significance of Gebelein must be based on limited quality and quantity of data. Attested artefacts from the place make it clear that there was something more than ordinary provincial settlements. The discussion right now revolves around the issue, whether or not Gebelein should be considered as independent political capital or it was provincial centre which depended on other capital?

The perfect situation to prove that there was a royal necropolis at Gebelein and therefore possibly a capital city in the area would be discovery of a royal necropolis. Without that the situation is speculative. The Gebelein linen is an argument for royal burial in this place but without archaeological context, its relevance in the discussion is limited. The set of artefacts purchased by J. Quibell is also of limited value for such considerations due to their uncertain provenance. Should we consider any cemetery with rich burials and yielding artefacts with elements of royal iconography as a necropolis of proto-state capital? It is not enough and some evidence from settlement would be very helpful. Such ideal situation would be difficult to reach in Egypt because one of the biggest issues of Predynastic Upper Egypt's archaeology is relatively small number of preserved and researched settlements in contrast to large number of cemeteries. Therefore, the necropoleis still forms the main body of evidence in study of the Predynastic Period. It is difficult to formulate the answer concerning the political significance of Gebelein (as well as any other centre) based only on the archaeological evidence.

In conclusion, the present arguments for the important role of Gebelein provide indirect grounds for Gebelein to be considered as a seat of power during the Predynastic Period, which at some point lost its position in late Predynastic Period, possibly at the turn of the Naqada II and III times.

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