

New evidence regarding emerald production in Roman Egypt coming from Wadi Sikait

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Location of Sikait in the Eastern Desert. Credit: Authors

A new paper published in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* presents the results of and images from the resuming of the archaeological seasons in the Mons Smaragdus region in the Egyptian Eastern Desert. The region is known for Roman-era emerald mines, chronicled by authors like Pliny the Elder and Claudius Ptolemy, rediscovered in the 19th century by the French mineralogist Frédéric Cailliaud. During the

1990s, a team from the Berenike Project surveyed the area and conducted the first excavations, focusing on the main site identified, Sikait; archaeological digs resumed in January of 2018 and January 2020.

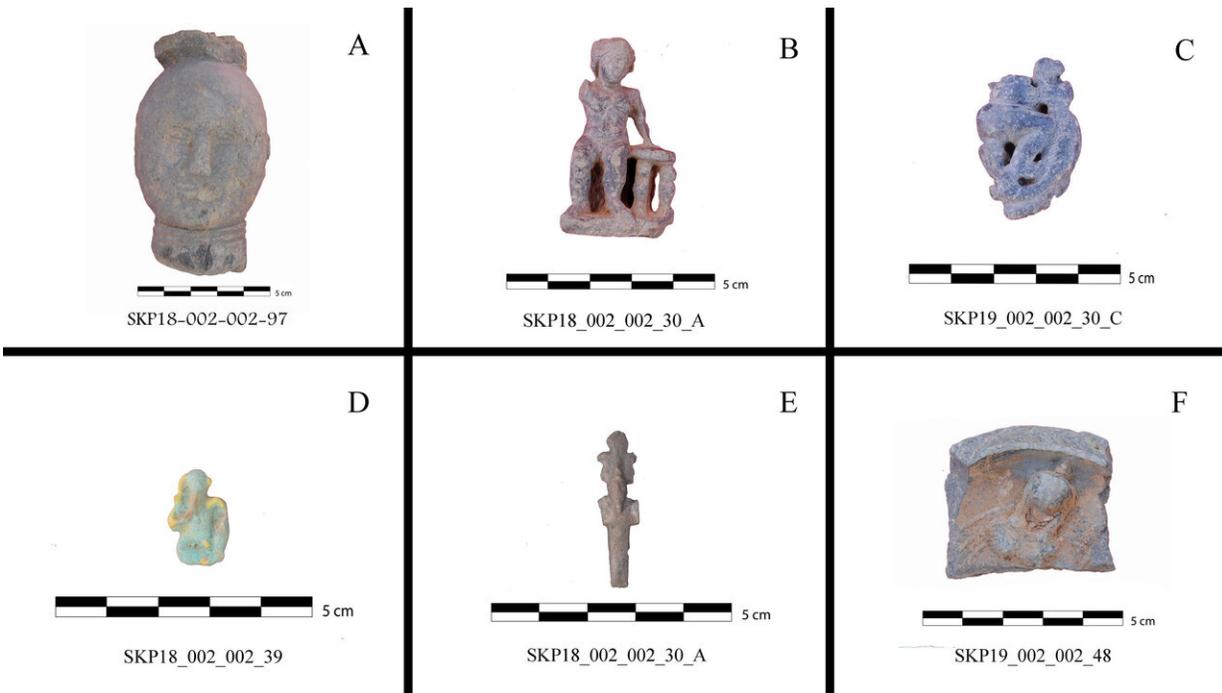
In the study, titled "New evidence regarding emerald production in Roman Egypt coming from Wadi Sikait (Eastern Desert)," authors J. Oller Guzmán, D. Fernández Abella, V. Trevín Pita, O. Achon Casas, and S. García-Dils de la Vega detail what was found in three buildings. The first [structure](#), referred to as the "administrative building," was likely a temple long occupied between the first and the fourth to fifth centuries. Nineteen coins were recovered at the site, along with other items indicating ritual use like incense burners and bronze and steatite figurines.

The "large temple," one of the most well-preserved structures standing in Sikait, also contained religious artifacts like bones, terracotta body parts, and amulets, and was likely occupied between the fourth and fifth centuries AD, although inner shrines were possibly used earlier, based on surviving traces of Egyptian hieroglyph and other materials. Finally, the "six windows building" complex, possibly a residential space, included an older inner cavity, which may have been related to [mining activity](#). However, concerning this type of structure, common in Sikait, the authors write, "After analyzing most of these spaces, we can conclude that almost none of them can be identified as beryl mines, and mainly we are dealing with storage or living spaces." Nevertheless, the study of the underground structures presents in Sikait and the surrounding areas allowed the documentation of several beryl mining spaces. The detailed analysis of some mines showed relevant evidence concerning their structure, typology and evolution, including the discovery of the first register inscription ever found in an ancient emerald mine.



Figure 12. The Large Temple of Sikait seen from the wadi floor. Credit: Authors

These excavation seasons, the authors write, add to knowledge about emerald production in Roman Egypt. "First, it confirmed the significance of the religious aspect in mining settlements like ancient Senskis." This shows the importance of the settlement within the emerald mining network, as no other site in which a similar concentration of cult spaces has been recorded. "This links Sikait to other productive regions in the Eastern Desert, which also offer plentiful evidence of the importance of cult and religion, like the imperial quarries."



Materials recovered from the Large Temple: a) "Nubian" head in steatite; b) steatite goddess figurine; c) figurine of a god riding an animal; d) faience Harpocrates amulet; e) bronze Osiris amulet; f) steatite dish. Credit: Delia Eguiluz Maestro and Adriana Molina Pérez.

The authors propose this work will provide key evidence in the future for determining how, exactly, the mines were exploited. Future seasons will focus on documenting the mining complexes to get a complete overview of the process of extraction and commercialization of emeralds, which will provide greater historical context.

"According to literary sources such as Olympiodorus, in the fifth century AD, a permit from the king of the Blemmyes was required to enter the emerald mines." Considering that most of the surviving structures in Sikait date to this period, archaeological information from such sites are

fundamental for understanding the progressive abandonment of the Roman/Byzantine control in this area and the gradual substitution by the Blemmyan power.

More information: Joan Oller Guzmán et al. New evidence regarding Emerald Production in Roman Egypt at Wadi Sikait (Eastern Desert), *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (2021). [DOI: 10.1086/712784](https://doi.org/10.1086/712784)

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