



*One of the workshops, remains of pottery, gypsum debris and tools.*



*Crescent drill made from chert for working the gypsum vessels*

Forty million years ago, the area now occupied by the Northern Faiyum desert in Egypt lay in a huge bay on the margin of the ancient Tethy's Sea. The area was crowded with life; oysters, fish and whales in the shallow sea, big mammals and lush forests on land. At one stage, parts of the bay evaporated, and large deposits of gypsum were formed. Practically untouched since they were excavated by Caton-Thompson and Gardner in the 1930s, the Umm es-Sawan gypsum quarries in the Northern Faiyum desert remain a well-preserved industrial landscape from the Old Kingdom Period. The vein-shaped gypsum formations were used for the manufacture of small vessels, predominantly used in funerary contexts. The shallow quarries (large photo), occupying a large, flat area of gypsum outcrops, are surrounded by gypsum workshops, shelters for the workers and chert-tool manufacturing areas. The gypsum was worked with stone tools (stone hammers, stone chisels, crescent chert drills), most of them originating from local sources, such as chert, petrified wood, basalt and silicified sandstone. Others are imported from Upper Egypt, which gives us important evidence of links between people and quarry landscapes across large distances during the same period. The gypsum quarries do not appear as a highly transformed quarry landscape, but as an example of ancient resource exploitation and spectacular geology. (Tom Haldal)



*A fragment of anorthosite gneiss, brought from Chephren's Quarry 1200 km to the south, witnesses contact between the quarry landscapes*



*"Malet and chisel" made from chert pebbles and rods of petrified wood*

*Blanks of gypsum vessels*

