



## TWO ROMAN IMPORTS FOUND AT THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF WAD BEN NAGA<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** A bronze saucepan and a terracotta lamp were discovered in 1959–1960 during archaeological excavations in the Palace of Queen Amanishakheto at the archaeological site of Wad Ben Naga in the Sudan. These two items are typical Roman products, judging from the context of finds and the iconography usually linked to Roman mercenaries. The use of these products has also been attested to in the everyday civil life of the Romans. The discovery of both objects, originating from Italian workshops of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, is unique not only in the context of the Island of Meroe. This is the furthest south so far that Roman imports have been found. A remarkable aspect is the excellent condition of preservation and the long period for which these artefacts were kept, perhaps with respect, in the palace, probably as valued gifts.

**KEY WORDS:** Wad Ben Naga – Sudan – Roman imports – saucepan – lamp – Meroitic culture

Both artefacts (cf. Figs. 1–4, Pls. 1–2), found in the Palace in the central part of the archaeological site of Wad Ben Naga during the second season of the Sudanese Antiquities Service expedition (1959–1960), were repeatedly reported (cf. the literature mentioned hereafter; Vercoutter 1962: 277–294) as a significant proof of Roman-Meroitic contacts at the time of the Early Roman Empire. They evidently play a vital role in evaluating the importance and position of this settlement in the broader context of the Meroitic kingdom.

The present paper concerns itself in detail with the typological analysis and chronological classification of the aforementioned finds, including a general comparison

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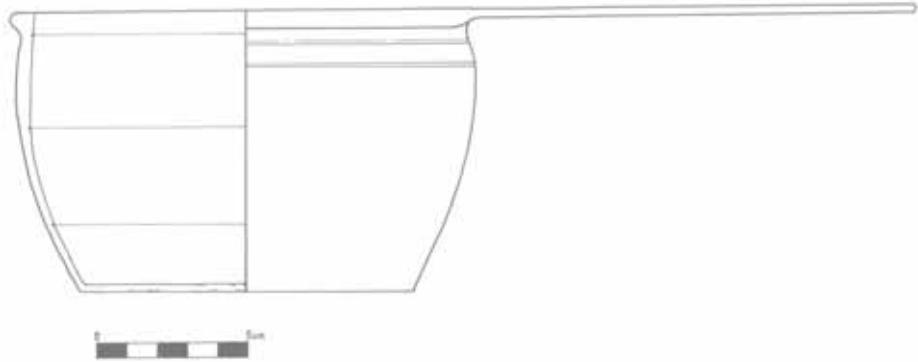


Fig. 1 Bronze saucepan. Side view. The Sudan National Museum, Khartoum, Inv. No. 62/9/43  
(Drawing by Ivana Bohušová).

of the bronze vessel with analogical finds chiefly in Roman provinces and neighbouring Germanic areas situated north of the Alps. In principle, the typology developed by Eggers (cf. his basic works: Eggers 1951 and Eggers 1955) is still used for bronze vessels. Similarly, Roman lamps rank among finds that boast a good explanatory value with respect to the timeline of the production of individual types and the related workshop circle (cf. the essential works concerning the typology and chronology of lamps: Loeschcke 1919; Bailey 1980; Bailey 1988).

Both items are fairly rare among the archaeological material in the Meroitic kingdom, as shown, among other things, by references to similar bronze products found in a grave in Faras (cf. Vercoutter 1962: 288, note 5; Griffith 1924: Pl. LIV, No. 24). They were not luxury goods in the Roman world, as such items were also used in everyday life. In particular, this applies to the terracotta lamp (Fig. 4, Pl. 2), which – despite its relief decoration – was considered a cheap series product made from a mould by the Romans. However, there is evidence that bronze lamps were precious parts of funeral paraphernalia in Meroitic graves (Dunham 1958: 108, Figs. 98, 103, 132). Bronze lamps were appreciated not only for their impressive workmanship, but also because the material was resistant and relatively rare. Both aspects determined their value, which, in fact, was true of the Roman environment as well. The principal interest in such luxurious sources of light consisted in their ritual function. The symbolic importance of light for the afterlife was indeed professed in the ancient world regardless of differences in religions.

In terms of imports into an environment that featured cultural differences, and with the aim of at least partly clarifying their function, which often hinges upon a change in the environment, a number of factors should be borne in mind. Not only cultural traditions, live culture and the disposition of the local population, but also “contemporary trends” brought by large-scale war conflicts, political and climatic turning points and, obviously, economic prosperity unquestionably played a significant role in the influx of both luxurious and less luxurious products from outside. It is only with difficulty, however, that we can determine the manner in which imported goods reached the edge of or crossed the borders of the Roman Empire. Valuable items are usually interpreted

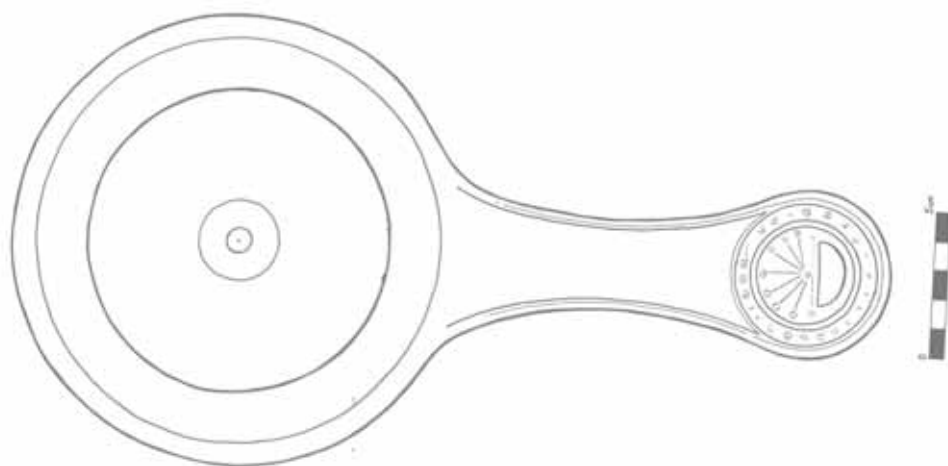


Fig. 2 Bronze saucepan. Top view. The Sudan National Museum, Khartoum, Inv. No. 62/9/43  
(Drawing by Ivana Bohušová).

as diplomatic gifts, as well as objects of long-distance trade or war booty; more customary merchandise, such as ceramics used for wine, olive oil and different types of food products, are obviously understood as results of this trade, even though in some cases, these goods may have been one-off gifts. These questions, only briefly outlined here, are frequently discussed in various studies. It is mainly sets of bronze vessels and finds of individual pieces of bronze products in the Celtic and Germanic areas that are analysed from the perspective of distribution and circulation. Evidently, as this is not a similar cultural environment to that of the Meroitic kingdom, the points at issue must be considered by applying a differentiating approach. Needless to say, the strength of the Roman power was such that the infiltration of Roman culture was in a certain respect analogical in areas geographically and culturally distant. Opinions on the supply and apparent function of the Roman bronze vessels in the Germanic regions of Moravia and the Danube basin are summarized in, among others, the recent work of J. Jílek with a select bibliography on the theme (Jílek 2012: 88–95).

In the case of the saucepan found at Wad Ben Naga, the issue of the “short” and “long” chronology of bronze vessels regarding the length of their circulation and use from the moment of their production, or, as the case may be, acquisition, until the destruction or deposition of the same in the grave (or other context), certainly bears some importance. The essential work of J. Eggers on the absolute chronology for the Roman period (Eggers 1955: 196–244) was not responded to until J. Kunow claimed that there was a number of vessels the long use of which cannot support a more accurate chronology (Kunow 1983). The same problem was tackled by S. Berke in his dissertation (Berke 1990). The use of the aforesaid vessels over a longer period, both in civil and legionary life, was pointed out by Th. Völling (Völling 2005: 198–199); the type of saucepan E 137–138 is attested to have survived until the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE (Jílek 2012: 76).

In accordance with the currently used terminology, bronze vessels were goods of “long-term consumption”. Naturally, the bronze saucepan, a component of the legionary’s equipment and an object which figured in spectacular funeral sets especially

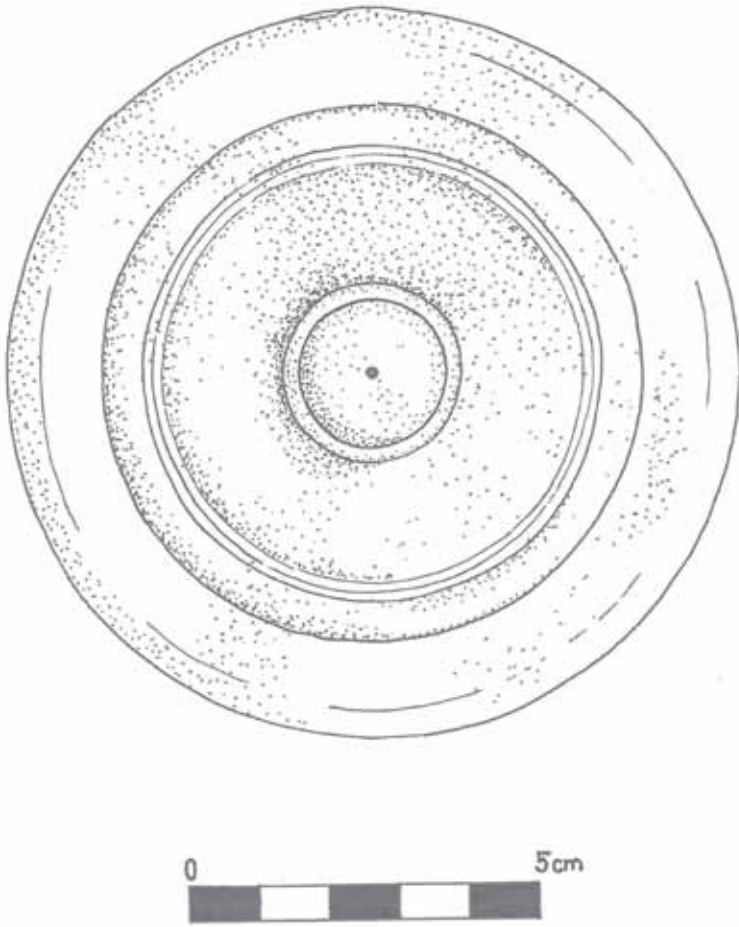


Fig. 3 Bronze saucepan. Base. The Sudan National Museum, Khartoum, Inv. No. 62/9/43  
(Drawing by Ivana Bohušová).

in Germanic Europe, was more resistant compared to fragile ceramics merchandise, and in addition, the bronze saucepan symbolized a certain material value that could not be compared with the price of commonplace ceramic products. The limited extent of finds of Roman bronze vessels in distant Nubia is quite comprehensible, but the same stipulation applies to Roman North Africa, as well as Egypt. This situation may be explained by the fact that the main influx of Roman armed forces, bringing with them bronze products, headed for various parts of Europe and then farther to the East. Apparently, this type of Roman import was not perceived in Africa and Egypt as a token of social prestige as in Germania (after all, fine crafts and arts enjoyed a long tradition in Egypt, Nubia and Hellenistic centres). Another point is that wine could not be served and stored in metal vessels owing to the hot African climate. A saucepan (*trulla*), easily transferrable, could assume its basic task of a poly-functional dish for the Roman army, possibly also for *exploratores*, travellers and traders, and only to a limited extent did it serve other purposes.

## Bronze saucepan

The bronze saucepan (Inv. No. SNM 62/9/43, h. 9.3 cm, diameter 15.0 cm, l. with handle 29.9 cm) was discovered in the Palace of Queen Amanishakheto, without a more specific localization (Vercoutter 1962: 288, 289, Fig. 20; Török 1989: Nr. 107; Hinkel – Sievertsen 2002: 70; Sackho-Autissier 2011: 373; Vrtal 2013: 61, 66; Dufková 2014: 160). It is well preserved (Pl. 1a) and compact, save for a minor perforation in one spot – the boundary line between the wall and the base. A slanting line separating the wall surface covered with green patina and the surface without a patina is apparent on the outside and inside of the bowl (traces left by the depositing of the saucepan *in situ* – partly in dry sand, partly in a damper environment or in the open air?). Two pairs of horizontal lines lead on the external side of the wall under an edge of the higher bowl with slightly everted rim (cf. Fig. 1). The inside of the bowl clearly shows two engraved measuring horizontal lines (cf. Fig. 1). The flat bottom features a small circle in the middle with a little central disc (Fig. 2), and parallel circles, without profiling, run on the base of the saucepan (Fig. 3). The handle is terminated by a flat disc with a crescent hole (Fig. 2, Pl. 1b). The disc is decorated with a relief wreath of small rosettes (?), and a sheaf of radial lines growing into relief beads – flowers (?) is found under the opening (cf. Fig. 2, Pl. 1b). The shape and composition of the ornamentation correspond to type E 137 (Eggers 1951: 172); R. Petrovsky maintains that the type further consists of two chronologically different groups. Our example may be classified as belonging to the first group – IV1, in accordance with the flat bottom and the decorated handle (Petrovsky 1993: 94; cf. Taf. 24, R.04.03). A similar vegetation (?) motif is found on one handle – a fragment of a saucepan discovered in a cremation-burial in Láb in Slovakia (Eisner 1926–1927: 55, 56, Pl. III, 4, 10, 11, 24). J. Jílek discerns water lily flower-buds in the relief wreath (Jílek 2012: 74, note 146).

The period of the production considered, saucepans of E 137 type were produced as early as the Augustan period and the production was maintained until the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, if not longer. The occurrence of the analysed type in some graves, dating back to much later periods, is of some interest (Jílek 2012: 76). This seems to be because these are examples that feature – even if modest – relief decorations. The Roman mercenaries may have been presented with these items for their merits, and therefore, the value of the gifts survived for a longer time.

For saucepans E 137, the place of their production could be identified without any doubt as Capua (Radnóti 1938: 49; Kunow 1983: 63), even though Petrovsky (1993: 68) also takes into consideration workshops in Gallia.

## Roman volute lamp

Another momentous and unambiguously Roman import, found in the same palace at Wad Ben Naga, is a Roman volute lamp with triangular nozzle termination (Inv. No. SNM 62/20/31; h. 2.7 cm, diameter 7.2 cm, l. 10.2 cm), well preserved save for a chipped fragment at the opening of the nozzle (Fig. 4, Pl. 2), and of solid quality, with respect to the relief décor and retouching of details of modelling (Vercoutter 1962: 288, 289, Fig. 21; Török 1989: Nr. 109; Hofmann 1989; Reinold *et al.* 2000: 143; Hinkel – Sievertsen 2002: 70; Sackho-Autissier 2011: 372; Vrtal 2013: 61, 66, Fig. 7.4; Dufková 2014: 160). The lamp appears to date back approximately to the same period as the above mentioned saucepan. These series products are not considered to have been used for a long period of time, judging from the fragile material and the fairly low price in the Roman Empire.

The terracotta lamp is made from a mould, and the clay is yellowish brown with a red-brown slip (Pl. 2). It has the shape of a low, closed bowl with a concave discus with a small filling-hole; the triangular nozzle, with two volutes and a wick hole, is wide. The discus, framed with parallel grooves, bears a standing figure of a gladiator with a shield (*scutum*), curved sword, helmet (*galea*) and *ocreae* (shin guards). The figure probably represents the type of gladiator indicated as Thracian (*Thrax*). The moulded relief is finished off by mechanical retouching. Lamps of this type (Bailey A III) are thin-walled with good technical execution and clear details. They were produced mainly in the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. The dark colouring by the wick hole indicates that the lamp was used in ancient times. Judging the type, from the clay and quality of workmanship, this lamp is in all probability the product of an Italian workshop. This type of volute lamp with a nozzle featuring a triangular termination appears in Italian workshops as early as the Augustan period and was imported in abundance not only to Africa but also across the whole of the Mediterranean region, and was also reflected in local production in a number of workshops (for example, later African production: Bonifay 2004: 334–337; Deneauve 1986: groups 1–2; Deneauve 1969: Nos. 1060, 1063, 1034, 1035; Bailey 1988: Q 1715; Bonifay 2004: Fig. 14, No. 35). In general, African products usually feature a small handle. The early Italian variants are mostly without handles. The themes of gladiators, warriors or fighting mythical figures appear on this type of lamps quite often. The popularity of gladiator games in the early Empire gradually increased, and the theme of gladiators was a lively one in the Roman legions, where gladiator stars were considered a symbol of audacity, bravery and also served as a boost of fighting spirit. The depiction of gladiators or the symbolism captured on small items owned by mercenaries was of a protective nature and gave strength to their owners.

How should we interpret both imports with respect to the context in which they were found? Obviously, there are several interpretative possibilities. However, what cannot be done is to create a story – a method currently popular even in professional texts – without spoiling the explanatory value of both evident and less evident facts.

We can only work with the available information, i.e. there are two Roman artefacts, one of which is still rare in this part of the Middle Nile valley. In terms of our current knowledge, these are imported products of Roman craftsmanship found in a place that is the southernmost such location known to us. How could they have got so far? There is no satisfying answer to such a laconic question. Let us proceed from the items *per se* and the environment where the items were discovered. The elements both objects have in common are their dating and good-quality workmanship and to a certain extent the type of assortment of products that are interconnected to a certain extent. The bearer or donor of these objects was probably a single person or a single group, but even this is uncertain. The function of the saucepan, mainly linked to the Roman army as well as the theme of the image on the lamp, possibly reflects the presence of Roman mercenaries on the northern Meroitic border starting from the turn of the era, and gifts presented in the Meroitic kingdom were the manifestation of attempts at a certain rapprochement and at preserving peace (cf. Török 1989: 61; Edwards 1996: 29). The quantity of valuable and sometimes unique imports from the Mediterranean region to the Meroitic kingdom in the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE is considerably higher than in later periods, which fact would confirm these attempts chiefly on the part of the Romans. From the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, the trade in customary products increased, as is attested by



Fig. 4 Terracotta lamp. The Sudan National Museum, Khartoum, Inv. No. 62/20/31  
(Drawing by Ivana Bohušová).

numerous finds of ceramics used for transportation and so on. The option of interpreting both items as war booty takes us beyond the boundary of speculative consideration. It is most likely that such gifts, which were of a fairly standard type, were left there by visitors coming from the centre of the Roman Empire or the neighbouring provinces. They went to the Meroitic areas to acquire knowledge or perhaps in pursuance of military or commercial objectives, and they needed the support of the local ruling elite to penetrate the local environment. For example, ancient written records tell of an expedition in the reign of Nero in the years 61–63 CE (*NH* 6.184–187; *Sen. Nat.* 6.8.3; *Cass. Dio* 62.8.1–2; cf. *FHN* III: Nos. 206–207, 209; Hintze 1959; Török 1997: 464; Dufková 2013: 30; etc.). While it is not impossible that there was a connection between both imported artefacts and this expedition, it is not at all likely.

## Conclusion

To attempt to connect these finds with a certain historic event, as captured in the Roman written sources is to enter the realm of mere speculation. It is possible to assume that these finds are probably gifts, something that can be inferred from the extraordinary character of both items, which so far have no counterparts among finds at Wad Ben Naga, and from the context of their discovery, i.e. the royal palace. The dating of the items suggests that these Roman products found their way into the palace during the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, most probably around the middle of the century, specifically at a time of Meroitic prosperity and consolidation of power. From time immemorial, the exchange

of gifts has been treated by various communities as a way of forming contacts with the external world, and of confirming the existence of such contacts. It has been a pacifying act and the expression of the mutual relations of the parties involved. Gifts retained in the centre of the reigning power, such as the royal palace, contributed to the tradition created, confirmed legitimacy and provided the local ruling elite with dignity. All of these facts blend well into the concept of the Meroitic politics of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE and its relation to the neighbouring Roman Empire.

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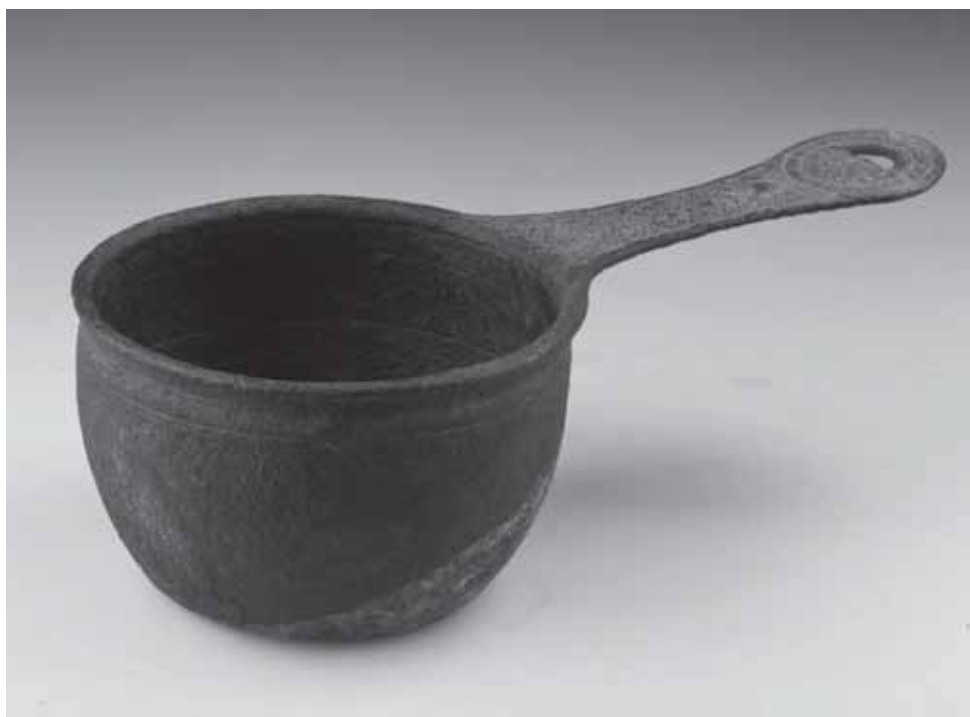
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Pl. 1a,b Bronze saucepan. The Sudan National Museum, Khartoum, Inv. No. 62/9/43 (© Sudan National Museum; Photo by Jiří Vaněk).



Pl. 2 Terracotta lamp. The Sudan National Museum, Khartoum, Inv. No. 62/20/31 (© Sudan National Museum; Photo by Jiří Vaněk).

