

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE TWENTY-SECOND EXCAVATION SEASON OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION TO WAD BEN NAGA

Pavel Onderka – Jiří Honzl¹

ABSTRACT: The twenty-second excavation season of the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga focused on the continued exploration of the so-called Isis Temple (WBN 300). The works covered the south-eastern part of the hypostyle hall (WBN 301), a part of the central vestibule (WBN 302) including its front entrance, the entire southern vestibule (WBN 310), and a large part of the southern corridor (WBN 312). The excavation in the hypostyle hall yielded most notably many fragments of columns and a complete abacus with relief decoration, which allowed for partial reconstruction of their decorative scheme. There were also many pieces of modelled and painted plaster fragments apparently coming from the southern tower of the pylon and depicting King Natakamani and the god Horus. The stone-built entrance from the hypostyle hall to the central vestibule was found to be covered with relief depictions of King Natakamani and Queen Amanitore and Egyptian hieroglyphic texts. The southern vestibule and the southern corridor were recognised to have had painted decoration, which was especially well preserved in the southern corridor. Besides the paintings, a stairway leading to the roof of the building and a later burial of a non-adult individual were located there as well.

KEYWORDS: Sudanese archaeology – Meroitic Period – Wad Ben Naga – Isis Temple (WBN 300)

Introduction

The twenty-second excavation season of the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga took place between 16 November and 17 December 2022. Archaeological works commenced on 22 November and concluded on 14 December 2022. The season was carried out under the guidelines for ‘archaeological excavations’, defined in the *Ordinance for the Protection of Antiquities of 1999*.

1 Contacts: Pavel Onderka & Jiří Honzl, National Museum – Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Ancient Near East and Africa Collection, Prague, Czech Republic; e-mail: pavel.underka@nm.cz, jiri.honzl@nm.cz. The present work was financially supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic (DKRVO 2019–2023/18.II.e).

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The mission was headed by Pavel Onderka (director) and Juwériya Osman Mohamed Zain (inspector of the Sudanese National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums). It further consisted of Jiří Honzl (ceramicist), Jana Urbánková (conservator), Gabriela Vrtalová, née Jungová (biological anthropologist), and Vlastimil Vrtal (archaeologist).

The works of the season focused wholly on the continued excavations of the so-called Isis Temple (WBN 300). The works of the season were limited to the solitary square trench T81 (with the dimensions of 10 × 10 m), set up on the northern extremity of *kom* C. Upper strata of the area in question had been previously excavated in the course of previous works and underwent a geophysical survey.²

The trench covered the southern central part of the so-called Isis Temple at Wad Ben Naga, namely the southern and central sections of the hypostyle hall (WBN 301/S and WBN 301/C), the southern part of the central vestibule (WBN 302), the southern vestibule (WBN 310), and a substantial part of the southern corridor (WBN 312).³

Recapitulation of previous works

Over the course of previous seasons, the frontal, northern, and rear parts of the so-called Isis Temple at Wad Ben Naga (WBN 300) were excavated [Fig. 1].⁴ The excavations revealed remains of a multi-roomed temple, whose architecture was inspired by that of the Great Temple of Isis at the Island of Philae, located on the traditional borders between Kush and Egypt.⁵ The temple was fronted by a pylon with two towers. Beside the main entrance spaced between towers, two side doors were inserted into the masses of the towers. The three doors, providing the access to the hypostyle hall (WBN 301), reflected on the disposition of the inner part of the temple, which was divided into three bodies, each consisting of a vestibule and a sanctuary. The central sanctuary (WBN 303) served as a place of worship of a Deified Queen (likely Amanishakhete or Amanitore), represented by a statue of fine-grained sandstone (ca. one Egyptian cubit in height).

In the northern sanctuary (WBN 305), Isis – in her capacity of Mistress of Iqer (a local name somehow associated with the archaeological site) – was worshipped; while the southern sanctuary (WBN 311) was dedicated to a male deity (most likely Horus, or Osiris). The northern vestibule (WBN 304) served the cult of Hathor. In the rear part of the temple, there were two complexes of rooms with a pair of chapels at their ends.

The walls of the temple, as well as pieces of cultic equipment were inscribed in Egyptian texts. On a number of occasions, Meroitic cartouches of Natakamani and Amanitore were employed in the text, or in the temple's decoration (e.g. the cavetto cornice at the tops of exterior walls of the temple).

The temple was built in the typical fashion for the Meroitic Period or more precisely, for the building program of King Natakamani and Queen Amanitore (mid-1st century CE). Unfired bricks were used for interior walls and cores of the outer walls; fired bricks were used for the casing of the exterior walls as well as for the pylon. Locally

2 Onderka et al. 2021b, pp. 77, Fig. 7.

3 For the designation of individual rooms within the temple structure see Onderka 2023.

4 Onderka et al. 2019, pp. 108–109, Figs. 1–2, Pls. 1–2; Onderka et al. 2021b, pp. 68–72, 77, Figs. 1–2, 7; Pls. 1–3; Onderka et al. 2021a, pp. 147–153, Figs. 1–4, Pls. 1–6; Onderka and Vrtal 2022b, pp. 80–89, Figs. 1–4, Pls. 1–10; Onderka and Vrtal 2022c, pp. 208–217, Figs. 1–5, Pls. 1–7.

5 Onderka and Vrtal 2022a.



Fig. 1. General plan of the Isis Temple at Wad Ben Naga (WBN 300) – state of excavations after the 22nd excavation season (illustration: Vlastimil Vrtal, Pavel Onderka, Jiří Honzl, Gabriela Vrtalová).

quarried sandstone of a moderate quality was used for special architectural elements, including columns, thresholds, jambs, and architraves of doors, etc.

Trench T81

Hypostyle Hall (WBN 301)

The currently excavated area extended over the south-western part of the hypostyle hall [Fig. 2]. A base for the south-western of the four columns supporting the hall's roof, as well as lower parts of the southern secondary partition (screen) wall connecting the southern pair of columns were found *in situ*. Through this discovery, it was confirmed that the hypostyle hall was indeed divided into three sections, corresponding to the three sanctuary complexes in the inner part of the temple, as was anticipated once its northern counterpart had been discovered.⁶ The main part of the debris filling the hypostyle hall appeared to originate from the southern pylon tower collapsing backwards to the room. Notably, it contained many decorated column fragments as well as numerous pieces of exterior plaster.

The partly-recovered column comprised of a rectangular base, a cylindrical shaft, and a rectangular abacus. The above-mentioned *in-situ*-found base was adorned with stylised marshland plants. The shaft of the column was smashed into pieces which were found on both sides of the secondary partition wall. Based on the fragments discovered in the fill of the room, it was possible to establish that the decoration of the shaft had been divided into several registers (their exact number still remains undetermined), and what its principal motifs and features had been. In its lower part, the column was covered by a text in Egyptian hieroglyphs organised into columns separated by dividers. As other parts of the lower part of the column were apparently deposited also behind the limits of the current trench, it has not yet been possible to reconstruct the exact contents of the texts. However, apart from mentioning King Natakamani, it also appeared to feature various prominent ethnonyms and toponyms. In the middle of the column, there were at least two registers depicting various deities (most prominently Horus, but also Isis, Osiris, and possibly Selkis) interacting with King Natakamani and Queen Amanitore [Pl. 1]. The scenes were accompanied by captions and direct speeches of the figures in Egyptian hieroglyphs. The abacus, topping the column, was found in front of the entrance to the central vestibule (WBN 302) [Pl. 2]. It was decorated on all four sides by depictions of cartouches of King Natakamani and Queen Amanitore, written in Meroitic, flanked by representations of the gods Horus and Thoth in their animal forms of lions with a falcon and an ibis head, respectively, and a representation of the Two Ladies, i.e. the serpent goddess Wadjet and the vulture goddess Nekhbet. The abacus discovered during the present excavation season seems identical to that of the one recorded by the Royal Prussian Expedition and published in the *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien*.⁷

Another part of the temple's decorative programme was represented by numerous fragments of modelled and polychrome painted plasters, which likely belonged to the façade of the collapsed pylon-tower. Despite being severely fragmented, it was possible to identify that the extant pieces, depicting parts of faces, limbs, and garments represented several figures. Some of the larger reassembled parts could be identified as part of

⁶ Onderka and Vrtal 2022b, p. 82; Onderka and Vrtal 2022c, pp. 213–215, Fig. 1.

⁷ LD V, Pl. 55c.



Fig. 2. Trench T81 at the end of excavations (illustration: Vlastimil Vrtal, Pavel Onderka).

a head and bust of the god Horus, with a falcon head and a large tripartite wig [Pl. 3], and part of the garb of the figure of King Natakamani, with his name written in Merotic in a band which likely represented a belt.

Central vestibule (WBN 302)

The north-western part of the trench T81 covered a large part of the central vestibule (WBN 302) [Pl. 2]. After the partial north-west extension of the trench (2×1 m), the entire façade of the gate connecting the hypostyle hall with the central vestibule was unearthed. Akin to the other gates along the main axis of the temple, it was reinforced using large sandstone blocks. Only in the lowermost courses of blocks (up to ca. 100 cm in height) bearing the lowermost pairs of registers were preserved.

The pair of registers was decorated by relief depictions. On both sides of the gate were representations of the royal couple, Natakamani and Amanitore, holding weapons and approaching the gate [Pl. 2]. The scenes were flanked by a column of text in Egyptian hieroglyphs on both sides, describing actions in which the sovereigns were shown and giving cartouches with their names in Egyptian. In the interior of the gateway, the jambs were covered in hieroglyphic texts organised in five columns. Although written in Egyptian hieroglyphs, the text notably included some signs rendered closely to versions in which they were adopted to Meroitic hieroglyphic script. The back side of the jambs remained uninscribed.

The walls in the central vestibule (WBN 302) were covered in the same type of plaster as the interior bearing polychrome decoration, and using the standard Meroitic palette (i.e. red, yellow, blue, black, and white). Fragments of such decoration, mainly pieces depicting the starry sky from below the ceiling from the room, were retrieved from the debris in the room.

In the south-eastern corner of the central vestibule (WBN 302), a secondary cultic place/cachette was discovered. It contained amongst others: a wonder stone (*wunderstein*),⁸ a fragment of ritual harpoon-like weapon⁹ made from a non-local coloured stone, and an ostrakon with a sketch [Pl. 4].

Southern vestibule (WBN 310)

The central part of the trench covered almost the entirety of the southern vestibule (WBN 310) [Pl. 5]. The room was paved with stone. One of the flagstones near the front gate had a conspicuous shape, similar to common Meroitic tables [Pl. 6]. The front gate of the room was built from combination of burnt bricks and mudbricks. Its southern jamb was virtually razed to the ground, as was also the case of the other gate connecting the room with the southern sanctuary (WBN 311), uncovered in the previous season. Absence of both parallel jambs could be tentatively ascribed to the possible extraction of the altar discovered by Giuseppe Ferlini in 1834 in the middle of the southern sanctuary (WBN 311).¹⁰ The walls of the room were plastered with the interior type of plaster. Its surface was decorated with polychrome paintings. Similar to the neighbouring central vestibule, fragments of the starry sky were recovered from the upper parts of the walls. A pair of blue legs could be identified in the lower-central area of the southern wall. Thus, the lowermost register evidently depicted the procession of fecundity figures bearing the symbolic gifts of the Nile. As well-attested by the grooves in the floor and preserved pivots, the front gate of the southern vestibule (WBN 310) was equipped with double door [Pl. 6]. There was also a door stopper in front of the threshold.

Southern corridor (WBN 312)

In part of the southern corridor (WBN 312) captured in trench T81, large remains of wall paintings were preserved on its walls [Pls. 7–10]. The wall paintings were preserved better on the southern side, while those on the northern side were less preserved. Opposite the gate connecting the southern vestibule (WBN 310) with the southern corridor (WBN 312) [Pl. 7], a royal cartouche with the Meroitic name of either

8 See e.g. Kroeper 2014.

9 An object with similar material characteristics was discovered at Naga; Hintze 1959, p. 187.

10 See Vrtal, *forth.*

Natakamani or Amanitore was found, the former being the more likely candidate [Pl. 11]. To its left, five life-size figures facing right were depicted [Pl. 9]. The first three figures from the right appear to be male, the fourth figure seems to represent a winged goddess, and the fifth figure looks to represent a seated male. On the opposite northern wall, a single female figure has been preserved, just behind the east jamb of the above-mentioned door [Pl. 10]. Based on the clear depiction of her breasts in the form of *mamma pendula*, the figure seems to represent a Meroitic queen, most likely Amanitore.

Similar to the northern corridor (WBN 306),¹¹ a staircase ascending to the temple's roof was built at the western end of the corridor [Pl. 8]. It is only partly preserved; however, its denuded state enabled us to examine its construction: both burnt bricks and mudbricks, their fragments, mortar in large quantities, as well as wooden beams were used in their construction. The beams, with both ends built into the opposite walls, were used for the nosing of the stairs.

A human burial WBN C313 was discovered in the fill of the room just at the western limit of the trench. It contained skeletal remains of a non-adult individual in an excellent state of preservation. The individual was tentatively estimated to have died between the ages of 6–12 years. No pathologies were ascertained.¹²

In the upper levels of the room's fill, remains of burnt wooden beam which once formed the roof of the temple were discovered.

Conclusions

The twenty-second season complemented the picture of the Isis Temple, that the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga has been trying to recreate through excavations in the past years. Finds and findings have provided new snippets of information concerning the outer appearance of the temple, its inner structure, as well as its decoration and construction techniques.

Of utmost importance were the finds from the hypostyle hall, namely the fragments of columns, which besides relief decorations bore Egyptian texts inscribed into their lower parts. Surprisingly, the text contained numerous toponyms and ethnonyms.

11 Onderka and Vrtal 2022c, p. 211; Fig. 3, Pl. 1.

12 Gabriela Vrtalová, *pers. comm.*, May 2018.

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Pl. 1. Relief fragment of a column drum with the depiction of King Natakamani offering Maat to an unknown deity (photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 2. Front gate of the central vestibule (WBN 302) with relief depictions of King Natakamani and Queen Amanitore; the fallen abacus of column from the hypostyle hall (WBN 301) in front of the gate (photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 3. Reassembled fragments of relief painted plaster depicting parts of the head and bust of the god Horus (photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 4. Finds from the secondary cultic place/cachette located in the central vestibule (photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 5. Overall view of the southern vestibule (WBN 310; photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 6. A flagstone from the pavement of the southern vestibule (WBN 310) shaped similar to a Meroitic offering table; grooves left by the door in the floor (photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 7. The view of the entrance from the southern vestibule (WBN 310) to the southern corridor (WBN 312; photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 8. The remains of stairs in the southern corridor (WBN 312; photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 9. The view of the southern wall of the southern corridor (WBN 312; photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 10. The view of the westernmost part of the northern wall of the southern corridor (WBN 312; photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 11. Fragments of plasters depicting a cartouche with a royal name in Meroitic (photo: Pavel Onderka).