MOUNDS ON LABELS AND FINDS OMITTED – SOME MISCELLANEA FROM THE EASTERN TEMPLE AT WAD BEN NAGA

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a small collection of artefacts uncovered in the area of the Eastern Temple at Wad Ben Naga during the excavations by the Sudanese mission in 1958–1959. The attribution of these unpublished finds to the spatial context of the temple relied on object labels preserved on their cases in the Sudan National Museum. The collection supplements the record of finds identified previously by other means. In addition, two statuettes from the same context previously known only from sketches, could be identified and described.

KEYWORDS: Nubian archaeology – Meroitic material culture – Meroitic administration – Meroitic script

Introduction

During the first season of excavations of the Sudan Antiquities Service at the archaeological site of Wad Ben Naga in 1958–1959, a cultic structure known as the Eastern Temple (WBN 500) was unearthed. The excavations remained largely unpublished, save for a preliminary report put together by Jean Vercoutter in 1962.² In 2011 and 2015, the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga carried out reexcavations in the structure,³ which allowed – amongst other things – to precise its plan. Besides, a handful of new finds were retrieved from the area. The re-excavation lead to the publication of a comprehensive archaeological report dedicated to the structure,⁴ a part of *Wad Ben Naga Report* series, in 2019.

The report featured a dedicated section focused on artefactual evidence⁵ in which also small finds uncovered by the Sudanese mission in 1958–1959 and later accessioned in the Sudan National Museum were presented. The identification and attribution of these finds to the spatial context of the temple mainly relied on two sources of evidence: Vercoutter's report and find entries kept in the archives of the Section Française de la Direction des Antiquités du Soudan.⁶ For the sake of the comprehensive publication,

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² Vercoutter 1962, pp. 270-273.

³ Onderka 2012, pp. 118–126; Onderka et al. 2016, pp. 107–110.

⁴ Onderka et al. 2019, pp. 11-136.

⁵ Vrtal and Onderka 2019.

⁶ Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga is grateful to Vincent Francigny for their sharing.

the objects mentioned in Vercoutter's report and those recorded in the find entries were identified, studied, and documented, in a kind cooperation with the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums and the Sudan National Museum.⁷

A similar process followed with a much larger collection of artefacts originating from the Palace of Amanishakhete.⁸ During its study, a third source of evidence was extensively made use of, namely object labels in Arabic and English accompanying the objects.⁹ Some of these labels helped to attribute additional objects from the Sudanese excavations, namely a sealing, three groups of fragments of Meroitic stela(e), and a sample of wood, to the area of the Eastern Temple. As this could not be reflected in the 2019 volume on the structure, these objects are presented in the present paper.

In addition, two lion statuettes that come from the Eastern Temple and whose appearance was previously known only from sketches in their find entries, ¹⁰ were documented during the process, and therefore can be analysed in a greater detail.

Provenance of the finds

Localisation of the provenance of finds of the first group, i.e. the sealing, stela(e) fragments, and the sample, to the area of the Eastern Temple was possible based on labels accompanying the objects, written predominantly in handwritten Arabic [Fig. 1]. ¹¹ Unfortunately, not only did the cursive script show signs of rapid writing, but also the material on which the notes were written (e.g. rough textile) sometimes rendered a degree of illegibility of the labels, resulting in some pieces of information being lost.

The common denominator of all labels of the present corpus was a reference to *Mound 1*, or the *First Mound*. This reference can be without any doubt linked to the area of the Eastern Temple, despite Vercoutter's later designation of the area as *kom* E, ¹² in line with an earlier system of Cailliaud. The numerical designation corresponded to the sequence in which the individual mounds were excavated by the Sudanese mission, from east to west. More importantly, the interchangeability between the designations was verified by the correspondence between finds reported as coming from *kom* E by Vercoutter and finds reported as coming from *Mound I* in the find entries. The sequence of the seque

No information about stratigraphic context is given in the labels. Some of them nevertheless provide greater detail as to the spatial one. Besides naming the mound, the labels for the sealing and all three groups of stela(e) fragments mention numerical

⁷ Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga is grateful to the former Director of the NCAM Abdelrahman Ali Mohamad for the possibility to document the objects.

⁸ Vrtal 2021.

⁹ See Vrtal 2021, pp. 49, 55-58.

¹⁰ Onderka et al. 2019, Fig. 4.2.

¹¹ The present author is grateful to Juweriya Osman for the translation of object labels written in Arabic; all potential mistakes are responsibility of the present author.

¹² Vercoutter 1962, p. 271, Fig. 2. It is notable that the alphabetical system was used for the designation of mounds on the object labels alongside the numerical one, see Vrtal *in print*, labels for sealings SNM 62/10/94b, SNM 62/10/101.

¹³ Cailliaud 1823, I, Pl. IX.1.

¹⁴ See Onderka 2019a, p. 13; Onderka 2019b, p. 11; Vrtal 2017, p. 74; Vrtal 2019, pp. 69-70.

¹⁵ Golden earring SNM 11969 (find no. WB 58/59 7), see Vercoutter 1962, p. 272; Vrtal and Onderka 2019, p. 40.



Fig. 1. Object labels for the sealing and the three groups of stela(e) fragments (photo: Vlastimil Vrtal, Pavel Onderka).

designations of squares (2 and 1 and 12, respectively). Squares are also mentioned in the find entries for three lion statuettes from the temple (namely squares 13, 14, and 19). Thus, the existence of a square grid established over the mound by the archaeologists, with a minimum of 19 sections, can be assumed. Interestingly, this is corroborated by the plan of the site put together in the collaboration of Mutasim Hussein and Salah in 1958, Showing a square grid of five by five (i.e. 25) sections over the respective mound. It is further evidenced by photographic documentation from the excavations capturing what almost certainly were stakes delimiting the square grid. Unfortunately, the numbers in the labels cannot be assigned to any of the individual sections of the grid.

Besides the three groups of stela(e) fragments considered in the present paper, 13 additional such groups were accessioned in the Sudan National Museum following the second season of excavations.²⁰ Although only one of these groups was missing an object label, none of them can be associated with any of the mounds at the site with certainty, partly due to the illegibility of the labels as well as the absence of the respective information on them. Some of the labels mention squares (2, 3, and 7),²¹ others refer to 'corners' (1, 2, 3, 4, and 'east'),²² in further cases, only numerals could be deciphered (3, 4, and 13).²³ Similar to two groups attributed to the Eastern Temple, at least three others were collected during the initial phase of excavations, in the latter months of 1958, as the labels show.²⁴

¹⁶ See Vrtal and Onderka 2019, p. 44.

¹⁷ See Onderka 2016, Fig. 67.

¹⁸ Vrtal 2021, p. 50.

¹⁹ Onderka 2019b, Figs. 1.7–8, 1.10–17, 1.19. They can be identified as preserved sections of original fill with a short stake at the top.

²⁰ Inv. Nos. SNM 62/10/91, 104, 106-109, 111-113, 116-119.

²¹ See Vrtal 2021, pp. 519, 522-523.

²² See Vrtal 2021, pp. 495, 517-519, 527, 529.

²³ See Vrtal 2021, pp. 515, 526, 528.

²⁴ See Vrtal 2021, pp. 515, 527, 529.

Although the only groups of stela fragments that can be positively attributed to a specific mound come from *Mound 1*, that is the area of the Eastern Temple, it is equally, and arguably even more likely, that the remaining groups originated elsewhere, namely the area of the Palace of Amanishakhete (WBN 100), or *Mound 4/ kom B.*²⁵ In his report, Vercoutter specifically mentioned finds of stela(e) fragments, written in Meroitic, made over the course of the first season of the Sudanese excavations (i.e. 1958–1959) in the area of *kom B* (!), i.e. the palace.²⁶ Namely, he stated that:

Enfin, sur l'ensemble du site, autour du kôm B, des fragments d'inscription méroïtique ont été recueillis; ils semblent appartenir à une seule grande inscription qui aurait été brisée et dont les éléments se seraient éparpillés aux alentours. Ces fragments, soumis au professeur Hintze, proviendraient selon lui, d'un texte en méroïtique ancien (vers 300-200 av. J.-C); ils sont malheureusement très petits et ne se raccordent pas entre eux, de sorte qu'il est impossible d'en rien tirer en dehors de la date même du texte dont ils proviennent d'après la forme des signes.

It seems highly likely that these stela(e) fragments were the same as most, or even all remaining groups accessioned in the Sudan National Museum, although the accession happened only following the second season (1959–1960). The fact that the palace was fully excavated only during the second season is of no relevance, as the first weeks of the first season in late 1958 were clearly focused on a survey of the whole site. This is indicated by excavation dates of finds from various areas, including the palace. Even the groups of fragments marked in the labels as retrieved in 1958 could thus have originated from the survey of the palace area. Indeed, Vercoutter's choice of words ('ont été recueillis') seems to confirm the assumption that the fragments were surface finds. The accession of the stela(e) fragments in the museum only following the second season is also not unparalleled. Finally, neither the reference to squares, nor 'corners' can be indicative of the association of the fragments with the Eastern Temple, as a square grid was demonstrably established also over *kom* B, i.e. the Palace of Amanishakhete, and 'corners' 1–4 might have easily referred to the four actual corners of the same, almost perfectly square structure, whose outer walls were cleared also already during the first season.

Based on the available evidence, it is thus impossible to infer with certainty, whether Vercoutter attributed the stela(e) fragments to *kom* B erroneously, whether it is the object labels that were wrong in the case of the three groups presented in this paper, or whether the fragments came from two (or even more) contexts. With the lack of further data, only the three groups of stela(e) fragments positively ascribed to *Mound 1* in the object labels are considered to have originated in the Eastern Temple in the present paper, while the remaining groups were tentatively attributed to the spatial context of the Palace of Amanishakhete, in correspondence with Vercoutter.³¹

²⁵ Vrtal 2021, p. 50-51, 58.

²⁶ Vercoutter 1962, p. 277.

²⁷ See Vrtal 2017, p. 69; Vrtal 2021, p. 50.

²⁸ See Vrtal 2021, p. 58.

²⁹ See provenance of ring Inv. No. SNM 11960, Vrtal 2017, p. 78; Vrtal 2021, pp. 50, 58, 305.

³⁰ Vercoutter 1962, pp. 275–277; Vrtal 2017, p. 69; Vrtal 2021, p. 50.

³¹ Vrtal 2021, pp. 51, 58, 126.

In regards to the second group of findings presented in this paper, namely the two fragments of lion statuettes, their provenance has been previously established on account of the find entries, in which *Mound I* was recorded as their find spot.³²

Sealing [Fig. 2]

A single piece of a sealing, Sudan National Museum Inv. No. (henceforth SNM) 62/10/100, was attributed to the area of the Eastern Temple based on its object label on the case. The label, written in Arabic, reads: '(1) *Mound 1, Hatim* [illegible], 20(?)/1/59; (2 – later addition executed in a different ink) *First Mound, square 2* (alt. C)'.³³

The sealing was made of dried clay with no inclusions, except for fine sand. Notably, there are traces of burning on the surface. On the reverse side, there is a regular imprint with sharp edges, probably from a large stone inclusion rather than a rope. The sealing was used to seal a possible container and has the form of a cone-shaped nodule broken at the base.

On the upper side of the sealing, there is a single seal imprint: (1) complete oval seal imprint, 11×10 mm, depicting two heraldically positioned seated lions facing outwards and placed back-to-back. Similar seal images are attested from the Palace of Natakamani (?) at Jebel Barkal.³⁴

The find complements two other pieces that come from the northern sanctuary (WBN 507) of the temple. 35

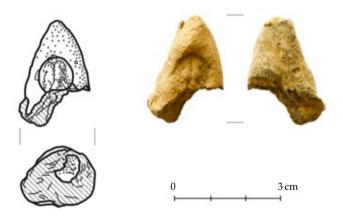


Fig. 2. Sealing SNM 62/10/100 (drawing: Vlastimil Vrtal; photo: Pavel Onderka).

³² Vrtal and Onderka 2019, p. 44.

³³ The Arabic cursive writing of the numeral '2' and the English writing of the letter 'C' are interchangeable; both systems were employed in object labels from the 1958–1960 excavations at Wad Ben Naga, thus making the correct reading uncertain, see Vrtal 2021, p. 56. In this case, the numeral designation is highly likely, however, given other designations of squares at the mound employing numerals; see the lion statuettes SNM 11947 and SNM 11948 in the present paper, see also Vrtal 2021, p. 58.

³⁴ Pancin 2021, p. 105, Cat. No. 28; Vincentelli 1994, Fig. 2, nos. 9–11.

³⁵ Vrtal and Onderka 2019, p. 40, Fig. 4.2.

Stelae [Figs. 3-4]

Three groups of stela(e) fragments could be attributed to the spatial context of the Eastern Temple based on their object labels: SNM 62/10/110, SNM 62/10/114, and SNM 62/10/115. It is uncertain whether the fragments could have originated from a single inscription, it seems implausible, however. While there is apparent internal homogeneity amongst the individual fragments within the three groups, particularly the fragments from collection SNM 62/10/114 have lines and signs of a smaller size, in comparison to the other two groups. Collections SNM 62/10/110 and SNM 62/10/115 are much closer in scale. Interestingly, they share also the presence of blank rows with no characters of the script (all pieces from group SNM 62/10/110, one piece from group SNM 62/10/115), at least three in the first case and at least four in the latter. This is hardly an uncommon phenomenon, ³⁶ and it indicates that the text of the stela(e) was formulated and added only after the design of the stela(e) was outlined. It cannot point to a private nature of the original piece(s), as even official monuments did not avoid such failures in composition.³⁷

Given the heavily fragmentary character of the texts, not to mention their complete absence in the case of group SNM 62/10/110, it is impossible to identify the class to which they belonged. Similarly, there is little data to allow proper assessment based on palaeographical grounds. From what is preserved, it can be inferred that the production of the inscriptions likely took place during the period spanning two centuries around the Turn of the Eras.³⁸

It is worth noting that besides a Meroitic cursive stela of Amanishakhete found in 2015 by the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga in the temple,³⁹ which was of a somewhat higher quality of craftsmanship than the present fragments, three additional fragments of stela(e) with Meroitic cursive inscriptions were also retrieved from small heaps of building material to the north of the Eastern Temple, which likely represented spoil heaps from the 1958–1959 excavations.⁴⁰ Despite a similarly poor state of preservation, the texts were tentatively dated to the same period.⁴¹

It would be interesting to ascertain whether the stelae constituted the official cultic context of the temple (this was surely the case with the stela of Amanishakhete) or whether they should be linked to the secondary cemetery that developed over the temple's ruins. 42 If the latter were the case, their tentative dating would indicate a fairly early destruction of the temple. Unfortunately, the fragmentary nature of the texts prevented to draw any reasonable conclusions.

Group SNM 62/10/110 included four fragments of a (single?) stela made of a finely grained, light greyish brown sandstone. A connection of the pieces could not be established. Since the rows were apparently left blank, the pieces likely come from the lower part of stela(e). The fragments were accompanied by the following label

³⁶ See REM 0212, 0214, 0217, 0223, 0261, 0373, 0504, 0510, 1063, 1067, 1073, 1206.

³⁷ See REM 1003, REM 1293.

³⁸ See Rilly and de Voogt 2012, p. 52, Tab. 2.2-3.

³⁹ Onderka et al 2016, p. 108, Fig. 3; Vrtal and Onderka 2019, p. 47, Figs. 4.3, 4.23, 4.25.

⁴⁰ Onderka et al. 2016, p. 108; Vrtal and Onderka 2019, p. 47, Fig. 4.3.

⁴¹ Onderka et al. 2016, p. 108.

⁴² See Jungová 2019; Onderka 2019b, p. 12, Figs. 1.5-6.

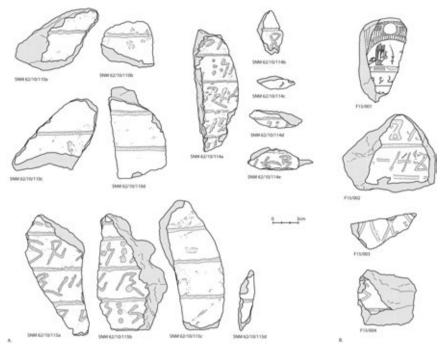


Fig. 3. Stela(e) fragments SNM 62/10/110a-d, SNM 62/10/114a-e, and SNM 62/10/115a-d (A); fragments of stelae retrieved from the spatial context of the Eastern Temple by the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga (B) are included for size comparison (drawing: Vlastimil Vrtal).



Fig. 4. Stela(e) fragments SNM 62/10/110a-d, SNM 62/10/114a-e, and SNM 62/10/115a-d (photo: Vlastimil Vrtal).

in Arabic: 'Excavations Wad Ben Naga, year 58 [illegible], First Mound [illegible] four, square 12, inscribed stone.'

SNM 62/10/110a: The fragment captures fragments of three rows of text; only two dividing lines are preserved, the rows were left blank.

SNM 62/10/110b: The fragment captures fragments of two rows of text; only the dividing line is preserved, the lower row was left blank.

SNM 62/10/110c: The fragment captures fragments of two rows of text; only the dividing line is preserved, the rows were left blank.

SNM 62/10/110d: The fragment captures fragments of two rows of text; only the dividing line is preserved, the two lowermost rows were left blank.

Group SNM 62/10/114 consisted of five fragments of a (single?) stela made of a finely grained, light greyish brown sandstone. Connection of the pieces could not be established. The fragments were accompanied by the following label in Arabic: 'First Mound, in the first square.'

SNM 62/10/114a: The fragment captures fragments of five rows of text. In the first row, two signs are partially preserved: a stroke (possibly o) and l; thus [o]l. In the second row, three signs are preserved; the first one is illegible, the second one is t and the separator follows; thus t:. In the third row, three signs are preserved; the first one is illegible, the second one represents i and k follows; thus ik. In the fourth row, one to three signs are preserved; either l and o, te, or q, followed by an illegible sign; thus: lo, te, or q. In the fifth row, two illegible signs are preserved.

SNM 62/10/114b: The fragment captures fragments of two rows of text. In the first row, no signs are preserved. In the second row, a single sign is preserved, either *d* or *ne*.

SNM 62/10/114c: The fragment captures a fragment of a single row of text; a single illegible sign is preserved.

SNM 62/10/114d: The fragment captures fragments of two rows. In the first row, no signs are preserved. In the second row, two illegible signs are preserved.

SNM 62/10/114e: The fragment captures a fragment of a single row of text with two signs preserved: *h*, *k*, or *s* and *te*; thus: *hte*, *kte*, or *ste*.

Group SNM 62/10/115 included four fragments of a (single?) stela made of a finely grained, light greyish brown sandstone. A connection of the pieces could not be established. Up to two fragments had their rows left blank, indicating their position in the lower parts of stela(e). The fragments were accompanied by the following label in Arabic: 'Ben Naga, First Mound, [illegible] square 12(?), 30/12/58, inscribed stones.'

SNM 62/10/115a: The fragment captures fragments of four rows of text. In the first row, two illegible signs are preserved; the second one might represent p, n, k, or a. In the second row, three signs are preserved; the first one is illegible and is followed by a and a; thus: a. In the third row, a is followed by a (or a); thus either a0 or a1. In the fourth row, two signs are partially preserved, most likely a1 and a2 and a3.

SNM 62/10/115b: The fragment captures fragments of four rows of text. In the first row, a single sign is partially preserved, most likely te. In the second row, three signs are preserved, a separator, followed by t and an illegible sign; thus: t. In the third row, the sign for t is followed by t; thus t in the fourth row, three signs are preserved; a sign for t is followed by a separator and either t or t; thus possibly t: t or t: t.

SNM 62/10/115c: The fragment captures fragments of four rows of text; only the dividing lines are preserved, all rows were left blank.

SNM 62/10/115d: The fragment captures fragments of two rows of text; only the dividing line is preserved, the rows may have been left blank.

Wood sample

A textile bag containing a sample of largely disintegrated wood of an unknown type was accessioned under Inv. No. SNM 62/10/147. On the bag, there was the following label in Arabic: 'Mound I, wood.' It is unclear why this particular sample was chosen to be isolated from the structure. There were nevertheless several accessions of a similar kind, such as samples of sorghum (Inv. No. SNM 62/10/168) and mollusc shells (Inv. No. SNM 62/10/169).⁴³

It is also worth mentioning that 34 wooden boards, likely originating in a piece of temple furniture, were missed during the previous excavations and retrieved in 2011 by the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga in room WBN 507.⁴⁴ Possibly, the sample of wood comes from a similar, or even identical context.

Lion statuettes [Fig. 5]

The fragments of two lion statuettes made of yellow sandstone (Inv. Nos. SNM 11947 and SNM 11948) were previously described in *Wad Ben Naga Report II* based on information from their find entries (find nos. WB 58/59 22 and WB 58/59 21, respectively) and inventory cards.⁴⁵ The find entries show that the statuettes were found at *Mound I*, in *squares 13* and *14*, respectively, on the same day, 23 December 1958.

The statuette SNM 11947 is preserved only in the form of a head and part of the right front shoulder. The modelling of details on its surface has been heavily affected by erosion

⁴³ See Vrtal 2021, pp. 168, 582-583.

⁴⁴ Vrtal and Onderka 2019, p. 42, SM11/108.

⁴⁵ Onderka et al. 2019, p. 44, Fig. 4.2.



Fig. 5. Statuettes of lions SNM 11947 and SNM 11948 (photo: Pavel Onderka).

and is largely abraded. This applies particularly to the ears (the left one is largely missing, the right one is missing altogether) but also to other, less prominent areas. The flat nature of a large area of abraded surface on the forehead indicates that the statuette may have been situated upside down on a floor for a period of time or even intentionally deformed in this manner in the course of ritual practice – a phenomenon well-documented at Naga. 46 Less exposed areas such as the nape and the throat mane show that originally, the modelling of details was rendered in a relatively high relief. The curls of the mane had an organic, natural feel in the back, with growing schematisation towards the sides. Under the chin, the uppermost line of throat mane curls was accentuated by a collar of curls distributed radially in a regular fashion with their tips curling outwards.

The other statuette, SNM 11948, is also preserved merely as a torso. It preserves the lion's body and the head, while the forelegs and the hindlegs are present partially, only where they were attached to the body. Although the surface is heavily worn, disguising nearly all detailed modelling, it is clear that the statuette was of a rather poor quality of craftmanship. It showed highly schematised collar of the throat mane with no curled tips, which were superimposed over equally schematised horizontal rows of curls/beads forming the rest of the throat mane or a decorative collar. On the neck, the tip of the mane may have been depicted tied by a ribbon, 47 as indicated by two deep grooves

⁴⁶ See Kröper et al. 2011, pp. 94, 147–148, Abb. 109/110, Kat. 58.

⁴⁷ Onderka et al. 2014, p. 175, Cat. No. 71.

in the area. Two additional grooves on the left flank may mark the position of the tail, wound around the left hindleg. Predominantly, the tail was confined to the right side on Meroitic lion statuettes, however, ⁴⁸ and the grooves thus may more likely represent a rendering of the lion's anatomy or even be secondary. Similar to the previous statuette, this one also had its surface regularly abraded on the head (right backside). In this case, it was even less clear whether it was a result of a deliberate action, however.

Conclusions

The analysis of the object labels in the Sudan National Museum allowed to attribute several additional finds accessioned in the museum to the area of the Eastern Temple. The attribution complemented the sets of information on the 1958–1960 excavations at the site and on the artefactual evidence retrieved from the area which were presented in *Wad Ben Naga Report* II. As the artefact classes attested in the present corpus did not differ from those already associated with the spatial context in question, the present paper did not substantially alter previous observations. Nevertheless, a new seal image and sealing type are now attested in the area, as well as a greater number of stelae with Meroitic cursive inscriptions.

Catalogue

SNM 62/10/100 [Fig. 2]

Sealing

Material: dried clay Colour: light brown

Dimensions: h. 29 mm, w. 19 mm, d. 15 mm Provenance: Mound 1, square 2 (alt. C) Date of discovery: 20 January 1959

SNM 62/10/110a-d [Figs. 3-4]

Stela

Material: sandstone

Colour: light greyish brown

Dimensions: -

Provenance: Mound 1, [illegible] 4, square 12

Date of discovery: 1958

SNM 62/10/114a-e [Figs. 3–4]

Stela

Material: sandstone Colour: light grey Dimensions: -

Provenance: Mound 1, square 1

Date of discovery: -

⁴⁸ For the exceptions, see e.g. some of the lion statues from Basa.

SNM 62/10/115a-d [Figs. 3-4]

Stela

Material: sandstone Colour: light grey Dimensions: -

Provenance: Mound 1, square 12 (?) Date of discovery: 30 December 1958

SNM 62/10/147 Wood sample

Material: wood Colour: dark brown Dimensions: -

Provenance: Mound 1 Date of discovery: -

SNM 11947 [Fig. 5]

Lion statuette

Material: sandstone Colour: yellow

Dimensions: h. 90 mm, w. 77 mm, d. 108 mm

Provenance: Mound 1, square 13 Date of discovery: 23 December 1958

SNM 11948 [Fig. 5]

Lion statuette

Material: sandstone Colour: yellow

Dimensions: h. 169 mm, d. 137 mm Provenance: Mound 1, square 14 Date of discovery: 23 December 1958

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