



PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE FIRST EXCAVATION SEASON OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION TO WAD BEN NAGA

Pavel Onderka – Marie Dufková*

ABSTRACT: During the first excavation season, the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga focused on (1) the general survey of the archaeological site, (2) the creation of an accurate map of Central Wad Ben Naga, (3) trial digs within the so-called Circular Building, (4) the documentation of stone architectural features, (5) the preparation and development of a conservation strategy for the site and (6) a preliminary survey of Idd el-Bagger.

KEY WORDS: Wad Ben Naga – Nubia – Meroitic culture – Meroitic architecture.

Introduction

Throughout the course of 2008, the National Museum of the Czech Republic, with the help of the Honorary Consulate of the Republic of the Sudan in Prague and the Honorary Consulate-General of the Slovak Republic in Khartoum, started negotiations with the Sudanese National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums with the goal of establishing a permanent archaeological mission in the territory of historical Nubia. The negotiations were concluded on 30 January 2009 when a memorandum of understanding setting the terms of cooperation between the two institutions for the period of time between 2009 and 2015 was signed. The signing of the memorandum was followed by the visits of the representatives of the National Museum to several sites within the Island of Meroe, including Wad Ben Naga, which has become the concession of the National Museum's mission.

Consequently, the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga was established to provide the framework for the National Museum's activities in the Sudan. The National Museum was joined by its domestic and foreign partners already during the first excavation season, which took place between 13 October and 20 November 2009.

The mission was headed by Pavel Onderka (director), Petra Maříková Vlčková (deputy director) and Mohamed Saad (inspector). It further consisted of (in alphabetical order):

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Jitka Barochová (conservator), Dr. Marie Dufková (archaeologist), Dr. Ivan Cheben (archaeologist), Samuel Rihák (architect), Dr. Miroslav Vaškových (archaeologist) and Vlastimil Vrtal (archaeologist). The season was carried out in the regime of the 'archaeological survey' as defined by the *Ordinance for the Protection of Antiquities of 1999*.

The season's plan was originally to focus on five main tasks including (1) the general survey of the archaeological site of Wad Ben Naga, (2) the creation of an accurate archaeological map of Central Wad Ben Naga, (3) trial digs within the so-called Circular Building (WBN 50), (4) the documentation of architectural features unearthed in the course of previous excavations and (5) the preparation and development of a conservation strategy for brick structures located on the site.

(6) During the season, the site's ghafir, Said Ali Jerban, informed the Expedition about the illegal excavations of building material on a site located in the hinterland of Wad Ben Naga that happened during the past year.

Introduction to the Site

The name of the modern settlement was allegedly taken from the name of a certain sheikh called Salih Wad Ben Naga who was buried in a *qubba* tomb (16°29'14" N, 33°03'44")¹ some six kilometers to the south-west of Central Wad Ben Naga (Pl. 1).

Wad Ben Naga seems to be identical with the ancient settlement of Arabikeleb. This name appears in Egyptian language captions to the depiction of the Crown Prince Arka (likely the future King Arkamani, reigned ca. 218–200 BCE) who served as a *priest of Isis at Musawwarat es Sufra and Wad Ben Naga* during the reign of his father King Arnekhamani (ca. 253–218 BCE) on the Lion Temple at Musawwarat es Sufra (Pl. 2). The site is also likely identical with the Latin named Arabam (*akk.*) mentioned in Pliny the Elder's (23–79 CE) *Naturalis Historia*, namely in the abstracts from Bion of Soloi's itineraries dated to the late 4th to early 3rd century BCE.² The above-mentioned evidence suggests that a settlement of some importance must already have existed at Wad Ben Naga at latest during the late Napatan period (4th century BCE).

The site is traditionally connected with names of three Kushite sovereigns – Queen Amanishakheto (ca. 10–1 BCE), King Natakamani (ca. 1–20 CE) and Queen Amanitore (ca. 20–30 CE):³ A plaque with the cartouche of Amanishakheto was discovered in the Palace (WBN 100),⁴ while names of Natakamani and Amanitore were written in both Egyptian and Meroitic hieroglyphs on the famous bark stand discovered in the so-called Isis Temple (WBN 300).⁵

An assumed Napatan settlement on the Nile – at the moment not attested by archaeological evidence but by written sources – was likely transformed into a city of a considerable size and importance with the advent of the Kingdom of Meroe (4th to 3rd century BCE), reaching its climax during the 1st century BCE and 1st century CE. The archaeological evidence gained through the first season suggests that the city must have been flourishing in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, while Vercoutter in his report on the Sudanese excavations carried out on

¹ Cf. Griffith (1911), p. 67.

² Cf. Priese (1984), p. 497; Török (1997), p. 347.

³ For the conventional chronology of the Napatan-Meroitic rules cf. e.g. Welsby (1996).

⁴ Vercoutter (1962), p. 283, Fig. 12.

⁵ Priese (1984); for Berlin Inv. No. 7261 cf. e.g. Wildung (1997), pp. 256–257.

the site between 1958 and 1960 suggests even post-Meroitic occupation of the site.⁶ At the end of the Meroitic Kingdom, the town – then a regional centre – must have been partially abandoned in favor of el-Hobagi situated ca. 10 km downstream on the left bank of the river where extensive tumuli of post-Meroitic period chiefs were discovered.⁷

Wad Ben Naga was the southernmost real city of the Meroitic Kingdom. The city with the palace (tentatively ascribed to Amanishakheto, WBN 100), at least four temples of Egyptian architectural form (WBN 200, WBN 300, WBN 400 and WBN 500) and the so-called Circular Building (WBN 50) – as well as extensive cemeteries – was an important political and religious center. It lay on the crossroads of important trading routes connecting the Fourth Cataract region in the north, the Jazeera in the south and the Red Sea coast in the east (Fig. 1).

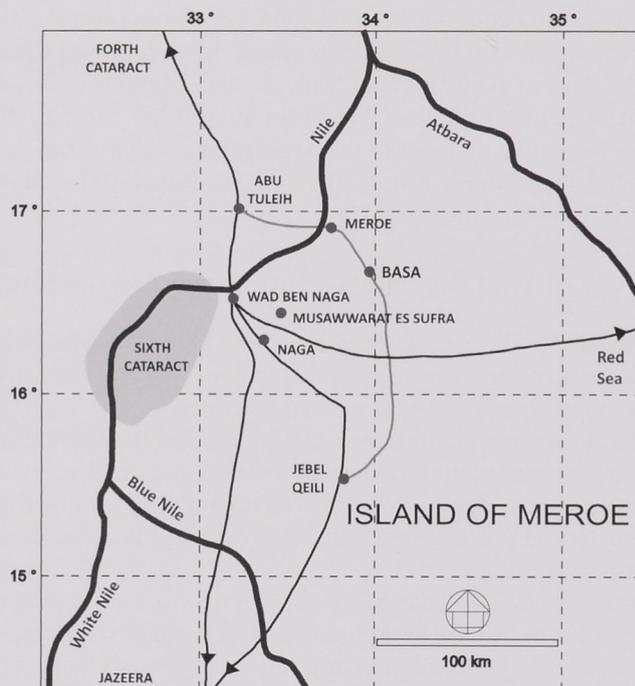


Fig. 1: The Island of Meroe (after Vercoutter 1962).

The history of exploration of Wad Ben Naga began in 1821 when the very first European – Frédéric Cailliaud (1787–1869) – visited the site. During his visit he was able to list the precise number of archaeological structures to be discovered at the site in the following one and a half centuries.⁸ A couple of weeks after Cailliaud left the site, Louise Maurice Adolphe Linant de Bellefonds (1799–1883) – the discoverer of Musawwarat es-Sufra and Naqa and the later chief engineer of the Suez Canal – came to Wad Ben Naga.⁹ The next visitor of

⁶ Vercoutter (1962).

⁷ Lenoble (2004).

⁸ Cailliaud (1823–1827).

⁹ de Bellefonds (1958).

Wad Ben Naga was Lord Prudhoe (Algernon Percy, the Fourth Duke of Northumberland; 1792–1865).¹⁰ In 1833, the site was visited by George Alexander Hoskins (1802–1863), a British traveler and amateur artist.¹¹ The next “explorer” of Wad Ben Naga was the infamous Giuseppe Ferlini (1800–1870) who was the first one to carry out any excavations at the site – most likely within the so-called Isis Temple (WBN 300).¹² In 1844 the site was partially explored by the Prussian Expedition led by Carl Richard Lepsius (1810–1884). Lepsius’s team carried out excavations in the so-called Isis Temple (WBN 300) where they discovered three bark stands, one of which now forms a part of the collections of the Egyptian Museum in Berlin (Inv. No. 7261; cf. above). The other two were published in *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien*.¹³ In 1910, the site was visited by Francis Llywellyn Griffith (1862–1934) who published the decipherment of Meroitic script based on the text from the Berlin bark stand the following year.¹⁴ The site was without any scientific attention for several decades until the late 1950s. Between 1958 and 1960, the Sudanese Antiquities Service under the direction of Sayed Thabit Hassan and Jean Vercoutter excavated the eastern part of Central Wad Ben Naga, including the Eastern Temple (WBN 500), the Small Temple (WBN 400), the Palace of Amanishakheto (WBN 100) and the Circular Building (WBN 50).¹⁵ In the following five decades, before the beginning of works of the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga in 2009, several scholars, including Khidir Abdelkarim Ahmad,¹⁶ Ahmad Ali Hakem¹⁷ and Friedrich W. Hinkel¹⁸ surveyed the site.

1. General Survey of Wad Ben Naga / Topography of the Site

Before the Expedition came to the site, only the central part of the site had been described and referred to in the literature. The areas generally known as the Northern and Southern Cemeteries were never properly surveyed or even described.

The archeological site was preliminarily divided into four sectors: Central Wad Ben Naga, the Northern Cemeteries, the Southern Cemeteries and the Riverine Sector (Fig. 2).

Within the Southern Cemeteries altogether 165 tumuli were identified and divided into five individual cemeteries (WBN S100–S500) with respect to their location and types and dimensions of tombs they comprised.

Two other cemeteries (WBN S600–S700) consisting of graves at present not visible at the surface are expected to be located within this area. A couple of years ago, a trench for a water pipeline illegally cut through the area where other cemeteries are expected brought to light numerous potsherds from types of vessels known from the tumuli of other Southern Cemeteries.

The area between the Nile and the Southern Cemeteries was named the Riverine Sector. There an archaeological structure, possibly of remarkable dimensions, was noted. Within

¹⁰ PM VII, 263.

¹¹ Hoskins (1935).

¹² Ferlini (1981).

¹³ Lepsius (1849–1859).

¹⁴ Griffith (1911).

¹⁵ Vercoutter (1962).

¹⁶ Ahmad (1984).

¹⁷ Ali Hakem (1988).

¹⁸ Hinkel – Sievertsen (2002).

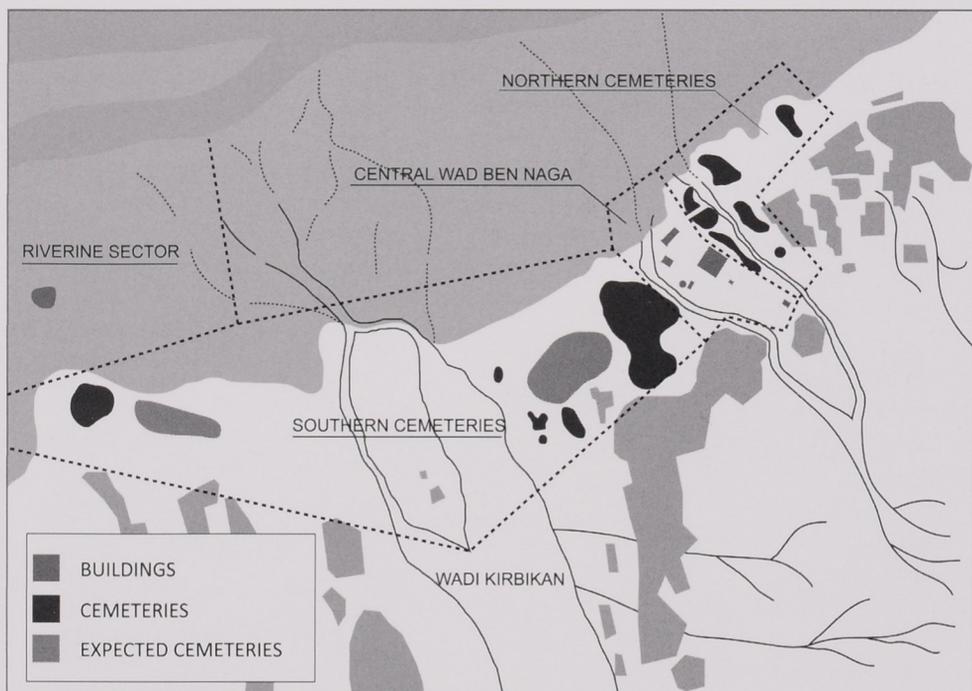


Fig. 2: Sectors of the archaeological site.

the Northern Cemeteries altogether 61 tumuli and graves were identified. They were divided into six independent cemeteries some of which directly adjoin the structures at Central Wad Ben Naga.

2. Creation of an Accurate Archaeological Map of Central Wad Ben Naga

The documentation of Central Wad Ben Naga represented an independent project of the first excavation season. Three plans of Wad Ben Naga have been created so far. The first sketch was published by Jean Vercoutter in 1962.¹⁹ The second plan was included in Ahmad Ali Hakem's publication on the Meroitic architecture.²⁰ The best plan so far was put together by Friedrich W. Hinkel, but was not published until 2002 (Fig. 3).²¹

The creation of a detailed plan of Central Wad Ben Naga is a task for several excavation seasons. A grid was established for the entirety of Central Wad Ben Naga. During the first excavation season, the Expedition focused on the documentation of structures unearthed by the Sudanese expedition headed by Said Thabit Hassan between 1958 and 1960, namely the Palace of Amanishakheto (WBN 100), the Small Temple (WBN 400), the Eastern Temple (WBN 500) and the Circular Building (WBN 50).²²

¹⁹ Vercoutter (1962), p. 271, fig. 2.

²⁰ Ali Hakem (1988), p. 327, fig. 54.

²¹ Hinkel – Sievertsen (2002), p. 72.

²² Vercoutter (1962).

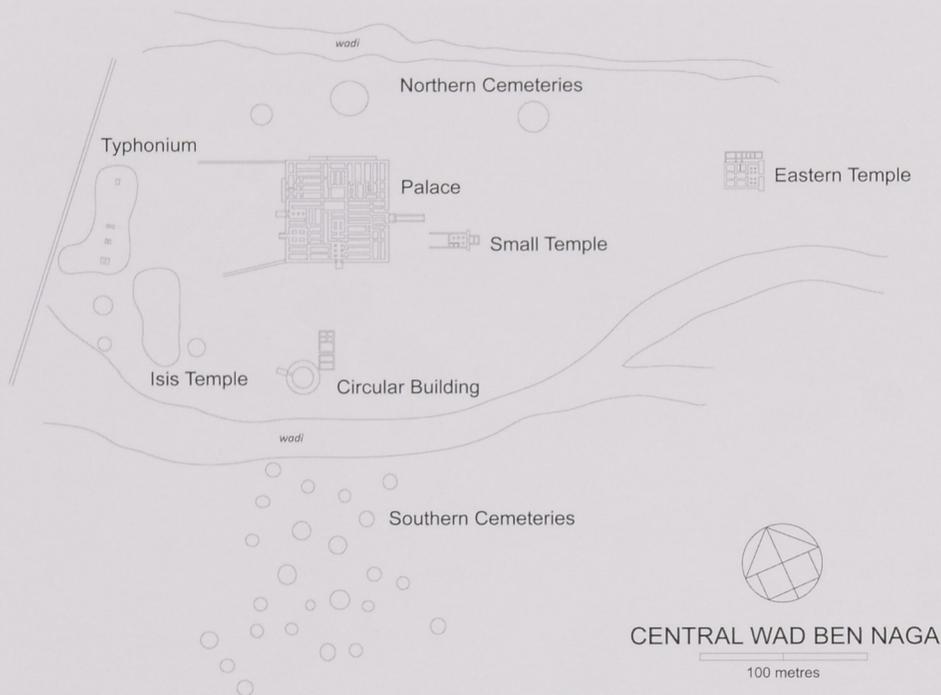


Fig. 3: Central Wad Ben Nega (after Hinkel 1996).

3. Trial Digs within the so-called Circular Building

Several trial digs were carried out inside (two test trenches aimed at determining the state of preservation of the inner stairs) and outside (clearing of sand in the vicinity of the ascending ramp) of the Circular Building (WBN 50) in order to obtain more specific information concerning its present state of preservation and precise dimensions (including the current height), to confirm or refute results of previous research and to clarify how the structure was built. The excavation of the whole structure will be carried out in the following excavation seasons (Pls. 3–4).

4. Documentation of Stone Architectural Features

Another project within the excavation season focused on the detailed documentation of stone architectural fragments (mainly column drums and capitals) originally employed in the construction of the Palace of Amanishakheto (WBN 100), the Eastern Temple (WBN 500), the Small Temple (WBN 400) and to a limited extent also the Isis Temple (WBN 300). The documentation included the basic determination of the fragments, the photographic documentation, the material determination (several types of sandstone of different quality and color), and taking of measurements. The Sudanese expedition gathered the discovered stone elements into assemblages placed in the vicinity of the respective monuments. Ten such assemblages were documented, while only one major group (placed to the south of the Circular Building, WBN 50) is left to be surveyed in the following season.

The assemblage to the west of the Eastern Temple (WBN 500) revealed two large fragments of a statue of a seated lion, which is referred to in Vercoutter's report on the Sudanese excavations.²³ The group also included the most likely complete sets of drums from two columns. The drums were lined up next to the temple by the Sudanese expedition. The external diameters of slightly narrowing drums correspond with those of the neighboring ones. This fact enables us to reconstruct the original height of the temple. North of the eastern temple a bark stand was identified (Pls. 5–6).

Two large fragments of an over-life-size statue were discovered in the assemblage belonging to the Small Temple (WBN 400). One fragment represents a substantial part of the stand with remains of feet (Pl. 7). The other fragment represents the left calf of a standing figure (Pl. 8) and adjoins the other fragment. The fragments likely belonged to the same statue (of either a king or more likely the god Sebiuameker) as the so-called "Royal Head" discovered by the Sudanese expedition.²⁴

To the south of the Palace (WBN 100) six capitals coming from the room WBN 154 of the Palace were located. Each pair of the capitals was different – (1) lotus-shaped (Pl. 9), (2) decorated with Amun's ram heads (Pl. 10) and (3) floral composite (Pl. 11). Next to it three fragments of the entrance architrave decorated with *urei* – coming likely from the southern entrance to the Palace – were discovered.

In the stone debris east of the Isis Temple (WBN 300), one fragment of a relief and two fragments of a Meroitic stela were found (Pl. 12, Fig. 4). Both fragments of the stela bear

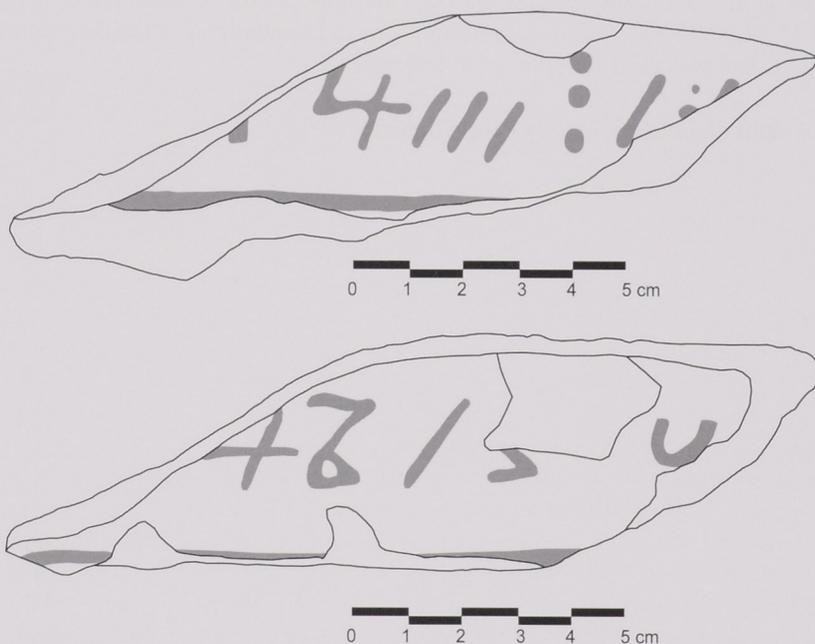


Fig. 4: Fragments of a Meroitic stela discovered in the vicinity of the Isis Temple (WBN 300).

²³ Vercoutter (1962), p. 276.

²⁴ Vercoutter (1962), p. 275, fig. 6.

inscriptions in cursive Meroitic script which based on the paleography may be dated to the period between 200 and 250 CE.²⁵

Numerous architectural features discovered in the vicinity of the Palace of Amanishakheto (WBN 100) cannot be assigned to the ground floor and therefore may serve the purpose of a reconstruction of the upper floor of the palace when combined with data provided by the ground floor and parallels in Meroitic architecture.

5. Preparation and Development of Conservation Strategy

The tasks of the Expedition are not limited only to archaeological investigations, but also focus on the preservation and conservation of ancient monuments located on the site of Wad Ben Naga. During the first excavation season plans and strategies for consistent conservation and reconstruction of the unearthed structures (constructed mainly of mud and red bricks) at Wad Ben Naga were being developed.

6. Preliminary Survey of Idd el-Bagger

The Expedition visited a site located some 10 kilometers in the hinterland of Wad Ben Naga, where illegal excavation took place in the close past and identified several affected tumuli with ceramic assemblages similar to those of the Southern Cemeteries at Wad Ben Naga. Uncovered fragments of plastered bricks decorated with paint likely indicate the presence of a temple structure on the site. The site has been identified by the locals as Idd el-Bagger (Pl. 13; 16°28'43" N, 33°08'15" E) known for example from Lepsius's map of the Ben Naga region published in *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien*.²⁶

All photographs and illustrations by Pavel Onderka

²⁵ Hofmann (1991), p. 127.

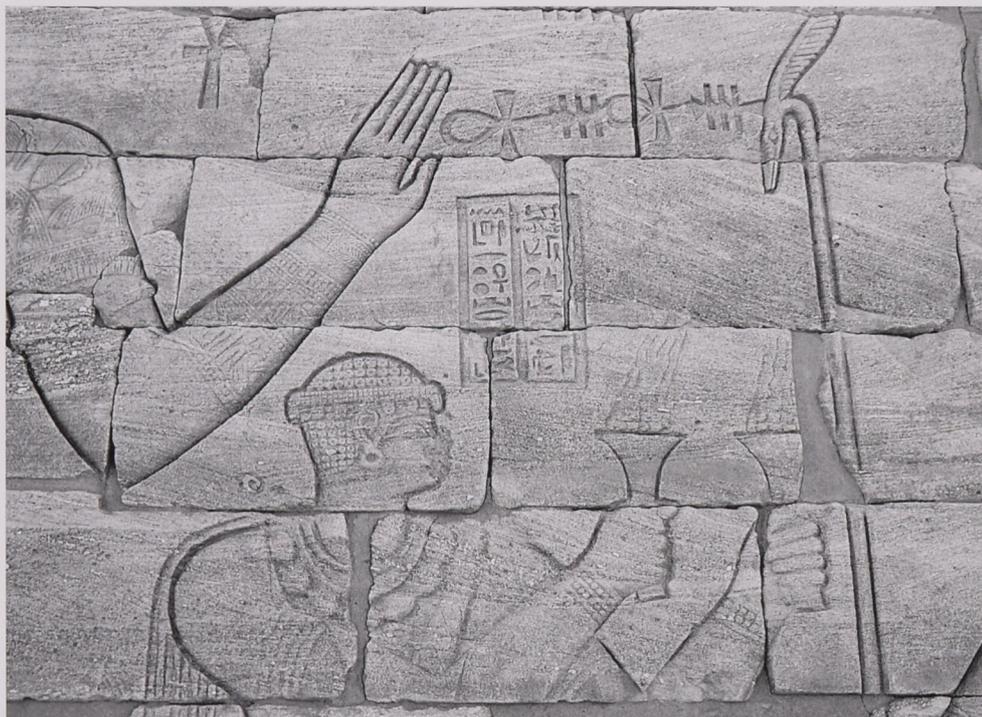
²⁶ Lepsius (1849–1959), Band V, p. 339.

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Pl. 1: Qubba of Salih Wad Ben Naga.



Pl. 2: Depiction of Crown Prince Arka with the caption mentioning ancient Arabikeleb, Lion Temple.



Pl. 3: The Circular Building (WBN 50).



Pl. 4: The Circular Building (WBN 50).



Pl. 5: Fragments of the statue of a seated lion.



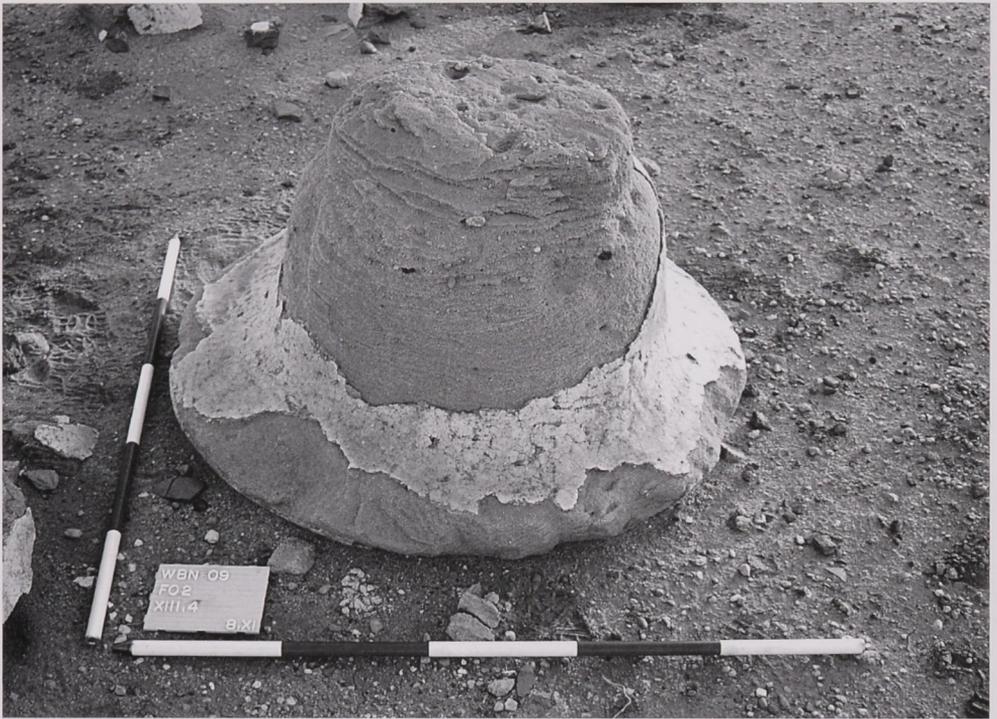
Pl. 6: Fragments of the statue of a seated lion.



Pl. 7: Fragment of the statue of a striding god.



Pl. 8: Fragment of the statue of a standing god.



Pl. 9: Column capital from Room 154 of the Palace of Amanishakheto.



Pl. 10: Column capital from Room 154 of the Palace of Amanishakheto.



Pl. 11: Column capital from Room 154 of the Palace of Amanishakheto.



Pl. 12: Fragments of a Meroitic stela discovered in the vicinity of the Isis Temple (WBN 300).



Pl. 13: Idd el-Bagger.