



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

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ABSTRACT: The eleventh excavation season of the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga focused on the rescue excavations around the rail track intersecting the western part of the archaeological site, excavations around the so-called Circular Building (WBN 50), conservation of the Palace of Queen Amanishakheto (WBN 100) and other minor projects.

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

The eleventh excavation season of the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga took place between 2 and 25 November 2015. Archaeological works were launched on 4 November 2015 and concluded on 22 November 2015. The season was carried out under the guidelines for archaeological excavations as defined by the *Ordinance for the Protection of Antiquities* of 1999 of the Republic of the Sudan.

The mission was headed by Pavel Onderka (director), Vlastimil Vrtal (chief archaeologist), Alexander Gatzsche (chief conservator) and Juwériya Osman Mohamed Zain (inspector of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums). It further consisted of Jiří Honzl (archaeologist), Gabriela Jungová (anthropologist), and Irene Pamer (conservator and archaeologist).

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The works of the eleventh season focused on [1] rescue excavations around the rail track intersecting the western part of the archaeological site, [2] excavations around the so-called Circular Building (WBN 50), [3] conservation of the Palace of Queen Amanishakheto (WBN 100); [4] excavation of another part of the cemetery WBN C200, [5] taking apart baulks between trenches T6/T8 and T7/T8 and [6] site management, including a general inspection of the site.

The Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga launched its works in the western part of the archaeological site in 2011, focusing mainly on the excavations of the so-called Typhonium (WBN 200). As a result of the reconstruction works on the railway intersecting this part of the site, the Expedition had to carry out rescue excavations in the railway's vicinity in 2015. In addition to this, other archaeological and conservation projects proceeded during the respective excavation seasons.

[1] Rescue excavations around the rail track (WBN 800, T28)

The rescue excavations had already begun in the course of the previous excavation season. During the tenth season, two squares at the kom H (cf. Cailliaud 1826; Hinkel – Sievertsen 2002: Pl. IX.72) were opened. While the excavations in trench T29 were completed, trench T28 remained only partly excavated, due to a complex archaeological situation in the given area (cf. Onderka – Vrtal – Gatzsche 2016: 103–116). During the eleventh season, excavations of T28 were completed.

Works in trench T28 focused on casting light on the earliest phases of constructional activity at kom H, detected already during the tenth excavation season (Fig. 1). In the southern part of the trench, the assumed floor of one of the rooms of the early building (phase 1, cf. Onderka – Vrtal – Gatzsche 2016: Fig. 1a) was removed. The underlying fill of sand and gravel provided numerous examples of potsherds, animal bones and other archaeological material. Four potsherds were inscribed with Meroitic cursive texts (F15/009–012). As in the other rooms of the early building, the pottery from the fill included a number of painted wares and finely slipped red wares (Fig. 2), and based on forms and types of surface modulation of the vessels the formation of the fill was preliminarily dated to the 1st century BCE, thus providing insight into early pottery repertoire at the site. Some of the pottery specimens were decorated with very complex painted compositions, including floral motifs (rosette, vine branches and leaves) and in one case even a figural motif depicting a human figure (or a bust?) in a three-quarter view (Fig. 2, SM15/258, Pl. 1). The rendition was rather clumsy but it clearly closely imitated the Hellenistic style of painting. The exact medium of transmission of the motif is unclear, as there appear to be no figural scenes in the contemporary pottery production of Late Hellenistic Egypt (cf. Schreiber 2003).

In the northern part of trench T28, the works focused on establishing the relationship between the second phase of the constructional activity, represented by the main mudbrick wall with a fired brick casing cutting the trench in half in the E-W direction, and a system of walls further to the north.

The earliest construction in this area was represented by a room formed by U-shaped walls with a fired brick casing, built directly on bedrock (Fig. 1, FEAs 163 and 171, Pl. 2). The relation of these walls to the main wall of the second phase is unclear. The walls appeared to be bound together with the main wall, but show a different orientation. Oddly, their core was formed only by soil and fragments of fired bricks, with no traces



Fig. 1 Trench T28 at completion of the excavations; top plan and section showing the position of walls of the second, third and fourth phase (Drawing: Vlastimil Vrtal).

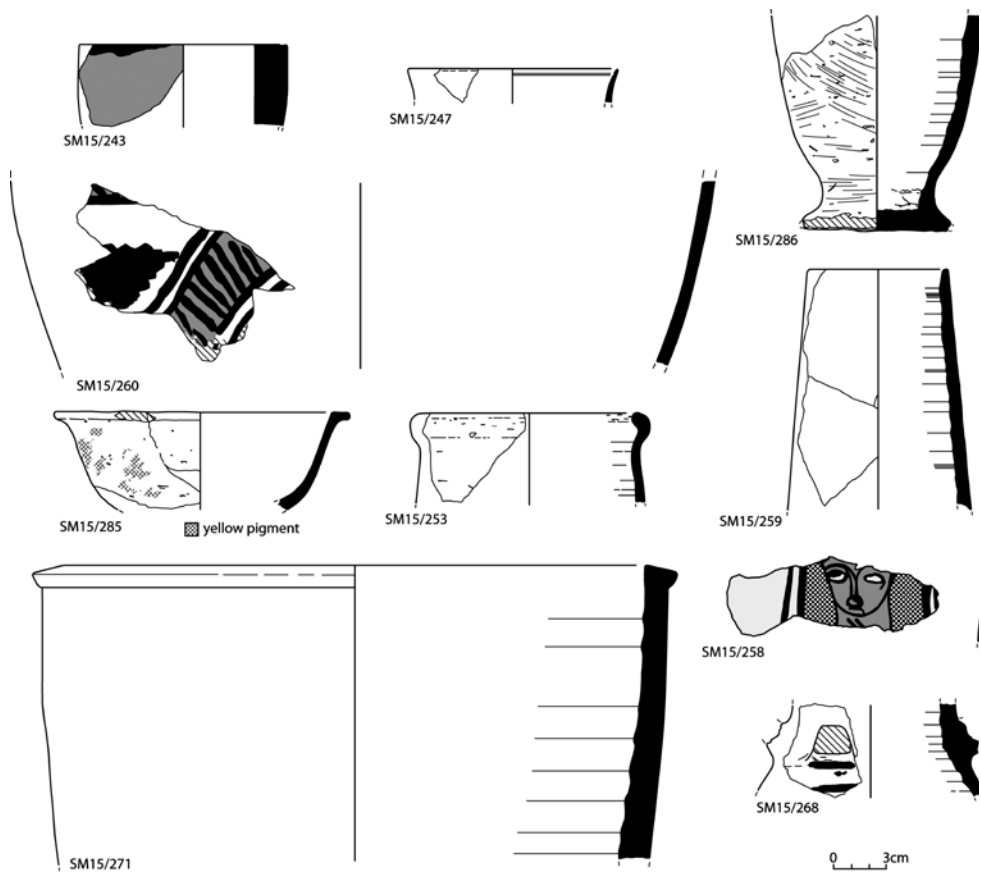


Fig. 2 Pottery specimens associated with the early building (first phase) in trench T28
(Drawing: Vlastimil Vrtal, Jiří Honzl).

of regular brickwork. However, this state may have been caused by later activity, as a result of which the walls were cut by another system of walls, this time built of local stone (third phase, Fig. 1, FEA 173). The foundations of these stone walls were built on a slightly higher level. The stone walls probably served as a support for a vaulted ceiling further to the north. Given the relationship between the main wall and the stone walls, and the relative scarcity of archaeological material other than brick debris in the fill of the early room, the walls of the third phase may have belonged to the same building as the walls of the second phase and may represent only an adjustment to the original plan caused, for example, by constructional difficulties. At some point in time, all the walls to the south of a thin mudbrick wall of the fourth phase in the northern part of the trench (Fig. 1, FEA 103) were levelled to the same height and provided space for some sort of domestic (?) activity, as was apparent from the presence of a fireplace and a circular depression made of hard-packed mud (cf. Onderka – Vrtal – Gatzsche 2016: Fig. 1c). Several fragments of wall-paintings (some showing star frieze motif) and plastered column bricks coming from the debris probably point to the high-class character of the former building.

[2] Excavations around the Circular Building (WBN 50; T30, T31)

As part of the completion of revising excavations of the Circular Building Complex, two soundings were opened in the vicinity of the Circular Building (Fig. 3). The first sounding, T30, aimed to find out whether or not a possible paved path starting at the foot of the ramp leading into the interior of the Circular Building (cf. Onderka – Vrtal 2014: 78, Fig. 3) continued towards the Isis Temple (the path was discovered during the sixth excavation season). The trench disproved its continuation in the above-mentioned direction. The square was cleaned down to *sāra* (local bedrock). The rockhead in the given area is not even. The square stretches over parts of two depressions, divided by an elevation with steep slopes. No proofs of anthropogenic changes to the terrain were ascertained. The depth of superficial deposits in the deepest point within the square was around 0.5 m.

Another trench, T31 (with the original dimensions of 5.0 x 0.5 m; its western end was later expanded to a square of 1.5 m side), was set 5.0 m to the south of T30 in order to provide a section of a small hillock located to the southwest of the Circular Building and to the north of the wall WBN 53. The trench yielded continuations of the northward projections of the wall WBN 53, which probably formed a southern passage way to the Circular Building Complex. The strata between the wall WBN 53 and the Circular Building proper (WBN 50) were rich in pottery material, including potsherds that served as palettes for mixing paints (Fig. 4, SM16/010, SM16/011, SM16/015). The upper strata were represented by debris from the Sudanese excavations in 1958/1959.

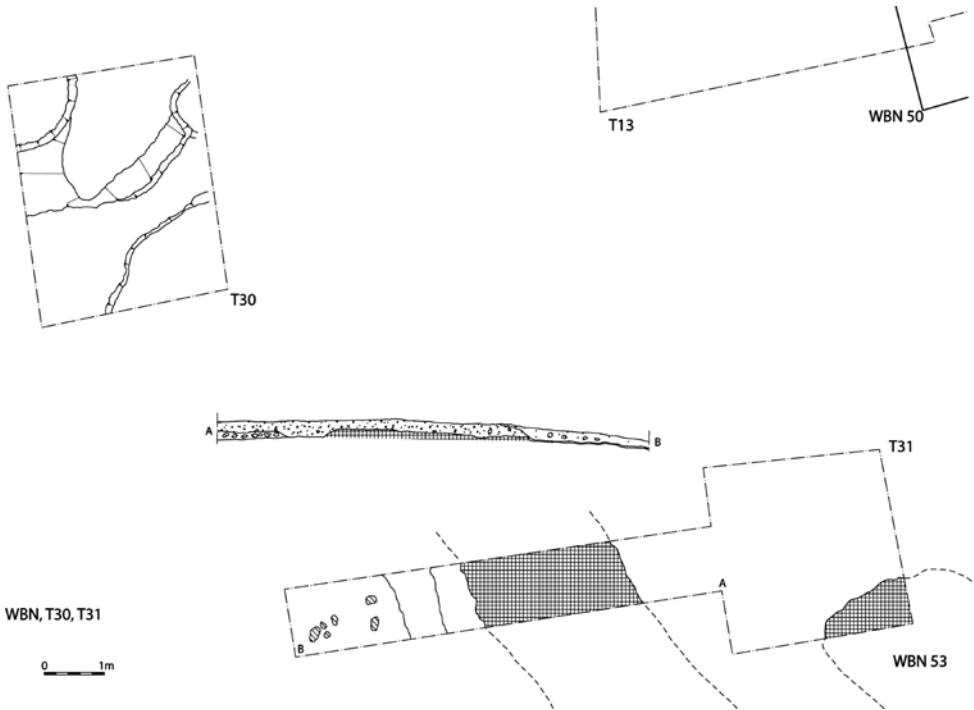


Fig. 3 Trenches T30 and T31 in the vicinity of the Circular Building (WBN 50)
(Drawing: Pavel Onderka).

Among the debris were fragments of wall lime plasters decorated with red, yellow and blue paints, as well as diagnostic pottery of various forms (Fig. 4).

[3] Conservation of the Palace of Amanishakheto (Room WBN 158)

The mission continued with the conservation of the Palace of Queen Amanishakheto. Attention was dedicated to the main western entrance, i.e. to room WBN 158, and an ascending ramp in front of the entrance (WBN 165). The aim of the conservators was to restore the entrance into the state in which it was discovered during the 1959/1960 season of the Sudanese Antiquities Service. The treatment is fully reversible and employed original Meroitic materials only (found at debris and spoil heaps). As water from seasonal rains streams through the entrance, a drainage system was developed. The report on the conservation of room WBN 158 will be published separately.

[4] Excavations in the Typhonium (WBN 200; T33)

As a consequence of the rescue excavations around the rail track, not as much attention could be paid to the exploration of the Typhonium. Works within the Typhonium focused on the excavations of baulks between the trenches T6, T7 and T8. The trench T33 included the whole baulk between T7 and T8, and the southern part of the baulk between T6 and T8, which covered parts of the porticus (WBN 202), the open courtyard (WBN 203) and the staircase (WBN 206) to the east of the open courtyard. Within the baulks, several important finds were discovered, including two hands of Bes

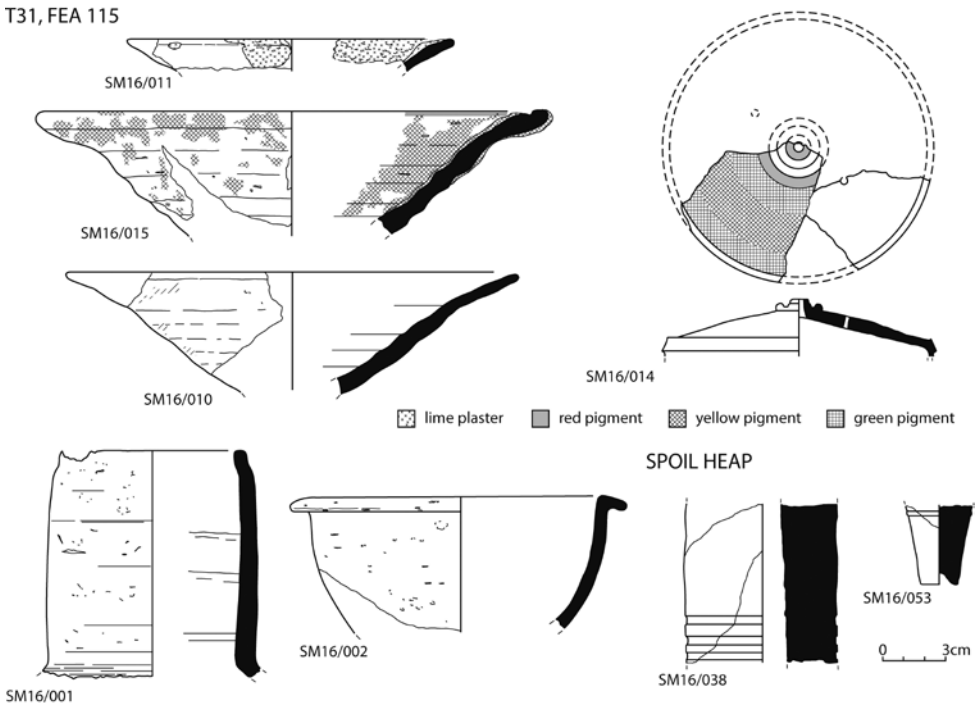


Fig. 4 Pottery specimens from trench T31 and a spoil heap from Sudanese excavations (Drawing: Vlastimil Vrtal, Jiří Honzl).

from sandstone Bes pillars (F15/015–016; Pl. 3), and a pendant in the form of a grape (F15/013) made of faience. Among the potsherds discovered in the baulks were several pieces of fineware fragments, and diagnostic pottery. A base of the western pillar of the first pair of the Bes pillars was discovered under the baulk, which enabled us to locate their original setting more precisely. The foundation of the pillar consisted of a sandstone block surrounded by fired bricks (Pl. 4). Fired bricks also formed the front foundations of the portico.

[5] Continued excavation of the Cemetery WBN C200

A trench was opened between two groups of tumuli WBN C201–C203 and WBN C204–C205. The area (15 x 6 m) was searched for subsidiary graves; however, no interments were discovered. The local bedrock, *sāra*, was even, with minor depressions. The depth of superficial deposits in the deepest point within the square was around 0.3 m. The bedrock had been exposed to subsurface weathering, which resulted in the creation of a layer of saprolite.

[6] Site Management

At the beginning of the season, a general inspection of the site was carried out. Several violations of the archaeological protected land were ascertained. Violations were also connected with the reconstruction of the rail track. A report on the damage was submitted to the Director-General of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums.

During the excavation season a number of measurements to protect the site were taken. New panels indicating the borders of the archaeological protected land were installed. The elevation plan of the north-western part of the site formed within the framework of the rescue excavations in the vicinity of the rail track was extended to the south, reaching the northern edge of Wadi Kirbikan (Pl. 5).

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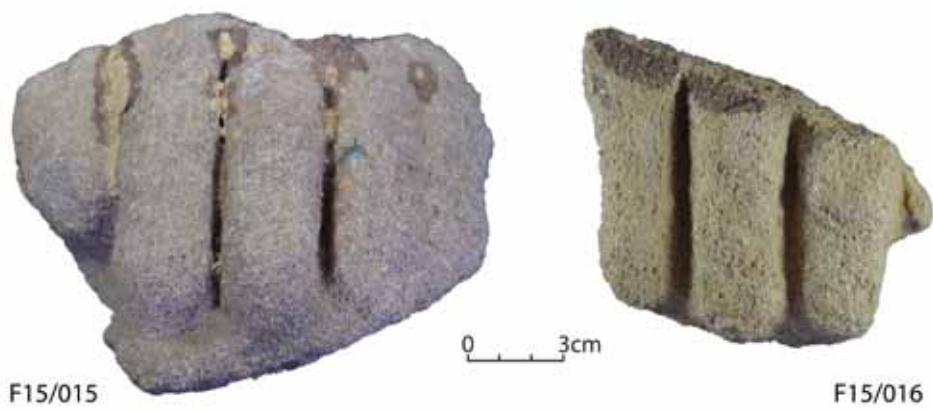
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Pl. 1 Fragment of a vessel with a figural motif depicting a human figure (or a bust?) in a three-quarter view imitating the Hellenistic style of painting, SM15/258 (Photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 2 The northern part of trench T28 at the completion of excavations, showing the main wall of the second phase (left, partly covered) and walls with a fired brick casing forming a small room (centre) associated with it, stone walls of the third phase (top, centre right and bottom) cutting through the latter brick walls, and a mudbrick wall of the fourth phase located at a still higher level (right, partly covered), view towards west (Photo: Vlastimil Vrtal).



Pl. 3 Fragments of Bes pillars discovered in trench T33 (Photo: Pavel Onderka).



Pl. 4 Foundations of the western Bes pillar of the southern pair of pillars in the Typhonium (Photo: Alexander Gatzsche).



Pl. 5 Elevation plan of the north-western part of the site formed within the framework of the rescue excavations in the vicinity of the rail track; isohypse at the interval of 0.2 m (Illustration: Vlastimil Vrtal).