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BERENIKE AS A HARBOUR FOR MEROE; NEW EVIDENCE FOR MEROITIC PRESENCE ON THE RED SEA COAST

In 2019, excavations at the harbour town of Berenike on the Red Sea brought evidence to light of Meroitic involvement in this trading hub. The finds were made in religious contexts in two different parts of the site, but especially in its main temple, dedicated to the goddess Isis.¹ At the same time, a complex of late Roman shrines was examined in the northern part of the site.² In both these locations statues were found that point to the presence of people from Meroe, which had not been recognized before. Berenike lies at the latitude of Aswan, the northernmost extent of the Meroitic influence on the Nile, and until recently, no evidence had been found that links Meroe directly to this site on the Red Sea. This article aims at providing a first presentation of the evidence and giving an impetus to the discussion of its implications.



Fig. 1: Statue of Sebiumecker, orthophoto mosaic by S. Popławski.

1 Excavations directed by Steven Sidebotham and Iwona Zych. A general overview of the site and recent excavations are Sidebotham 2011 and Sidebotham 2018. The temple of Isis is excavated since 2018 under a grant of the Thyssen Foundation to Rodney Ast and Olaf Kaper. The present paper is based on the lecture delivered at the Sudantag organised by Humboldt University in 2021, and I have benefitted much from comments made by the audience at this but also at previous occasions where I have spoken about the same finds. I would like to thank in particular Angelika Lohwasser and Julien Cooper who have helped me generously in becoming familiar with the problems involved in Meroitic studies. Much appreciated help was also received from Pavel Onderka, Roberta Tomber, Dietrich Wildung and Simone Wolf.

2 An article about these excavations is in preparation under the title “A falcon shrine at the port of Berenike (Red Sea coast, Egypt)”, written by R. Ast, O.E. Kaper, J. Oller, M. Osypińska and S. Sidebotham.

A STATUE OF SEBIUMEKER

The principal find, both as regards its size and the prominence of its location, is a statue of the Meroitic god Sebiumecker (fig. 1).³ Three fragments of this human-size statue were found together in collapse inside the doorway (propylon) leading to the courtyard in front of the Isis temple. This doorway was erected in Egyptian architectural form in the reign of Tiberius, according to a Greek dedication inscribed on its lintel.⁴ Later, the jambs of the doorway, as well as the wall in which it was set, were decorated with

3 Previously mentioned in Sidebotham et al. 2020: 16, pl. 17 [1].

4 Ast 2021: 147–150.

Egyptian temple reliefs in the name of Trajan.⁵ The temple itself was also rebuilt in the reign of Tiberius at the location of an earlier Ptolemaic temple. Excavations are still ongoing with the aim to finding out more about the history of the building. At this moment it is clear that the temple saw a period of intensive use during the second and third centuries CE, when a large number of votive sculptures was placed in its forecourt. Greek inscriptions upon the pedestals of these items show that they were donated to the goddess Isis and that the donors were involved in the international

trade,⁶ which was the *raison d'être* of the harbour town. Many fragments of votive sculptures survive, including several images of Isis and Serapis, and there are items showing direct influence from India, such as a head of the Buddha and an Indian coin.⁷

The Sebiumecker statue was found together with three joining fragments of a statue of Isis (fig. 2), and their original location was most likely the entrance gate into the courtyard, where they were found. From the context, it is likely that the two statues were a private donation to the temple, and that they date to the early Roman period.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SEBIUMEKER STATUE

Material: Gypsum from a local quarry at Ras Banas.⁸

Size: The extant height of the statue is about 1.30 m, consisting of three separate pieces.

Condition: The legs below the knees are missing and a small section of the neck and most of the face, as well as the top of the crown. The proper left side is better preserved than the right side. The surface is damaged at many points, which is largely due to weathering of the anhydritic gypsum.



Fig. 2: Orthophoto mosaic of the statue of Isis by S. Popławski.

Iconography: The statue is life-size, depicting the god standing with his arms stretched down his sides. The statue has a back pillar that extends to the top, supporting also the crown. No decoration or text appears on this pillar, which measures only 10 cm in width.

The details of the iconography are as follows from top to bottom:

The statue is made in the Egyptian or Meroitic sculptural tradition, with a strict frontal orientation. The god depicted wears the White Crown with ostrich feathers added to the sides, which is a form of the atef crown. The upper half of the crown is missing, and the feathers are all but lost. On the forehead of the crown is a row of seven cobras in raised relief, shown in frontal view, of which the outer two cobras have undulating lower bodies, shown in side-view. Each cobra wears a sun disc on the head.

The face has bulbous cheeks and inlaid eyes, of which the top of the proper right eye and the outlines of the left eye are preserved, but the inlays are lost. The eye had a long extension ('cosmetic line') towards the temple. It seems that also the eyebrows were inlaid, of which only a part of the right eyebrow socket remains.

The mouth had deep-set corners, but is otherwise lost, as is the entire nose. The proper left ear is preserved, but not the right one, and it is remarkable that the ear is set much too high on the head, starting at the level of the eye.

The god originally had a divine (braided) beard, extending down to the top of his pectoral. Only parts of the 'negative space' behind the beard remains on

5 O. Kaper in Sidebotham et al. 2021: 19, pls. 24 [1–2], 29 [1–2].

6 R. Ast in Sidebotham et al 2019: 15.

7 Buddha: Sidebotham et al. 2020: 18, pl. 23 [1,2,4]; Indian coin: Sidebotham et al. 2019: 15, pl. 22 [1, 2].

8 On this name for the local stone, cf. J.A. Harrell in Sidebotham et al. 2021, 21–22.

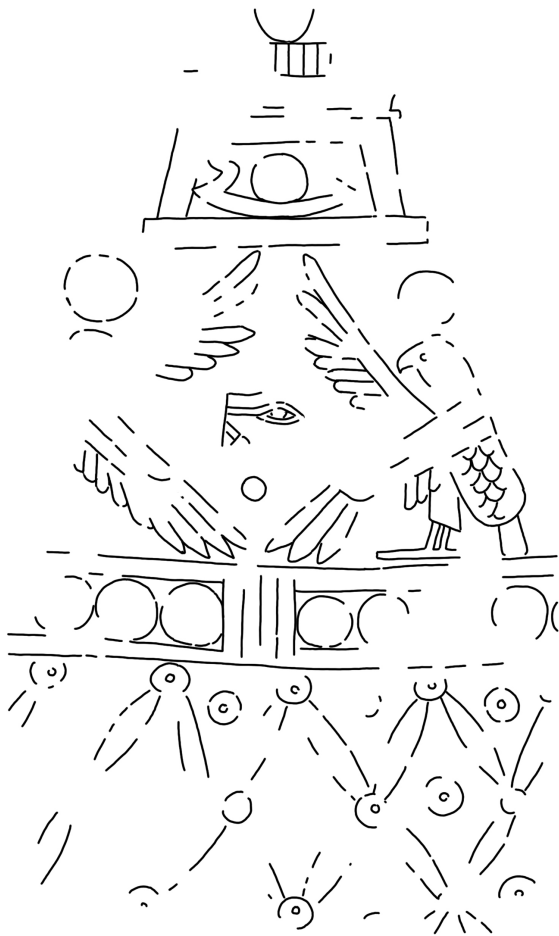


Fig. 3: Details of the decoration on the chest of the statue of Sebiumecker, drawing by O.E. Kaper .

the chin and on the chest. There is no direct connection remaining between the head and the body. It is unclear whether the face had been a particular focus of the desecration of the sculpture, but this is possible in the light of the substantial damage to this part. Against a deliberate defacement speaks the fact that in other votive statues from the temple, as well as the wall reliefs, many faces of gods remain undamaged. The shoulders are covered with a broad collar comprising three rows of beads separated by narrow bands in raised relief. The inner row has parallel perpendicular lines; the central and outer rows are filled with small flowers in side-view.

The chest and arms are broad and muscular. The pectoral is of a naos type with a simple design of a solar boat inside. It is suspended from a cord around the neck that passes over the broad collar.

Below the pectoral, the belly is covered with a design of the eye of Horus (right eye) placed between two symmetrical falcons with outspread wings (Fig. 3). They carry sun discs on their heads. Beneath the eye of Horus is the belly button rendered as a small circle set in a depression.

The belt is decorated with two groups of six discs, placed symmetrically on either side of the buckle, which is decorated with five vertical lines.

The kilt is of a simple shape and measures 35 cm from the belt down to the knees (fig. 4). It is decorated with a pattern of lentoid beads strung in a lozenge pattern, with round bracteates (1.5 cm diameter) set at each joint, while slightly larger (1.8 cm diameter) bracteates are set in the centre of each lozenge. All bracteates have a small depression in their centre.

The god wears no armlets or bracelets. The fists hold the traditional short containers (mks). Only small parts of both legs are preserved under the kilt, with the right leg placed before the left leg (sic).

SEBIUMEKER AS A MANIFESTATION OF OSIRIS

The iconography of Sebiumeker in Berenike differs substantially from other known images of the god, but its location conforms to Meroitic practice. In Meroitic temples, statues of Sebiumeker are usually paired with statues of the god Arensnuphis and placed on either side of the entrance to a temple.⁹ Current evidence for such pairings is known from Musawwarat es Sufra (Temples 300, 100 and Room



Fig. 4: Details of the kilt of the statue of Sebiumeker; photo by O.E. Kaper.

⁹ Wenig 2019: 856–858.

108),¹⁰ Meroe (Temples M 600 and M 282),¹¹ Naga (Temple 700 and its eastern gate),¹² and paired with another god at Tabo.¹³ Some of the statues are colossal (over life-size), as in Meroe (temple M 282),¹⁴ and Tabo. In other cases, the size is comparable with the Berenike example at life-size or slightly smaller. In wall reliefs, the Lion Temple of Musawwarat has two named depictions of Sebiumeke, and several images that are debatable.¹⁵ The lion temple of Naga also has a likely relief depiction of the god.¹⁷ The dating of these statues and reliefs is still largely conjectural, and ranges from the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd century CE.¹⁸

The Berenike statue is comparable in its location, at the entrance to the temple, but there is no evidence for a companion piece of Arensnuphis. Instead, a statue of Isis was most probably erected as a companion piece (Fig. 2), because it is of similar material, size and style of cutting as the Sebiumeke statue, and they were found closely together in the collapsed passage of the entrance gateway.

The iconography of the Berenike statue of Sebiumeke is much closer to the iconography known for Osiris in Egypt. The crown and the kilt are the most noticeable deviations from the standard iconography of Sebiumeke. The Kushite images of Sebiumeke all wear the Double Crown, sometimes with a circle of cobras added to the Red Crown,¹⁹ and they depict the god in a shendyt kilt. The statue in Berenike wears another type of short kilt and it has the atef crown with only seven cobras added to the front of the crown.²⁰ The latter is an attribute of Osiris in Egyptian iconography at least since the Late Period. In the temple of Hibis, Osiris Naref of Herakleopolis Magna is depicted upon a bier with some various crowns and seven separate cobras added underneath the bier (Sanctuary, north wall, reg. II).²¹ Subsequently, the seven cobras are regularly added to the crown of Osiris in Ptolemaic and Roman temple

reliefs, as in Kom Ombo (fig. 5),²² the temple of Opet in Karnak,²³ and Dendera.²⁴

In Meroitic images of Sebiumeke and other gods, the number of cobras on the crown is always (much) larger. This iconographic motif can be traced back to an earlier Egyptian tradition, as can be observed e.g. on the crowns of Osiris and Horus in the Seti I temple at Abydos.²⁵ In Egypt, the number got reduced to seven perhaps because of the importance of the number seven in the magical tradition.²⁶ The seven cobras on the crown is a specific Egyptian tradition applied to Osiris, which is not attested in Kushite temples.

The kilt has a lozenge pattern of beads which is known from the mummiform body of Osiris, as also on a statuette from the Isis temple at Berenike.²⁷ The pattern clearly imitates the bead nets that were used to cover mummies in the Late Period, and painted versions of which were used to decorate shrouds and images of Osiris subsequently.²⁸ As decoration on kilts the pattern is more rare. I can point at a parallel found in a relief inside the pronaos at Dendera that depicts Osiris seated on a throne and wearing a short kilt decorated partly with the bead pattern (East wall, 3rd reg. 1st scene).²⁹

A pectoral is in some cases added to the chest of Sebiumeke, as in the relief of the god on the Lion Temple at Musawwarat.³⁰ The pectoral with the solar boat inside is a common detail on Egyptian gods, e.g. in the Kom Ombo scene in fig. 5 (above). The protective falcons on the chest of the statue bring to mind a specific garment of the Pharaoh, the so-called falcon jacket, which consists of two falcons with out-

10 Wenig 1974; Bagh 2015: 39–40, fig. 1.25; A triad of Amun flanked by Arensnuphis and Sebiumeke was found at temple 100; Baud 2010: 190, fig. 243.

11 Bagh 2015.

12 Schlüter 2019.

13 Rondot 2011.

14 Welsby and Anderson 2004: 170 [152].

15 Hintze et al. 1993: 82, 91, 94, pls. 25, 29, 46.

16 Hintze et al. 1993: 99, 104, 114, 134, 255, 261.

17 Gamer-Wallert 1983: 65–67, pl. 9b.

18 Yellin 2020: 647 note 40.

19 E.g. Hintze et al. 1993, 176 Fig 129.

20 On the atef crown and its variants with Osiris, cf. Beinlich 2020: 30–32, who does not include the seven cobras as a variant.

21 Davies 1953, Text p. 6, Plates pl. 3; cf. Díaz-Iglesias Llanos 2017: 134.

22 Kom Ombo 150, column XI of the forecourt. The seven cobras are not included in the drawing in Morgan et al. 1895.

23 E.g. in scene CNRS-CFEETK 156101; <http://www.cfeetk.cnrs.fr/archives/?n=156101>, which includes the uraeus among the seven, or scene CNRS-CFEETK 173987; <http://www.cfeetk.cnrs.fr/archives/?n=173987>, which seems to exclude the uraeus.

24 Cauville 2020, 146; D III, pl. 176, pp. 27–8, 24–5, 21–23.

25 Calverley and Broome 1938: pl. 11a [Osiris]; pl. 17 [Horus]; pl. 31 [Horus]; pl. 34 [Horus]; pl. 41 [king]; pl. 43 [Osiris]; pl. 46 [Osiris]; pl. 61 [Osiris], all of which have numbers higher than seven.

26 E.g. in Pchester Beatty VII [5] rt. 3, 5, a goddess is invoked “upon whose head are seven cobras”. For the significance of the number 7, cf. Rochholz 2002.

27 This steatite statuette (6 cm high) of Osiris was found in the forecourt of the Isis temple; Sidebotham et al. 2019: 18, pl. 24 [2].

28 Dunand and Lichtenberg 2006: 80.

29 Dendara XIV (2020), 122–123; A photo taken before the recent cleaning of the relief appears in Cauville 2011: pl. 51.

30 Hintze et al. 1993, 185 Fig. 139.

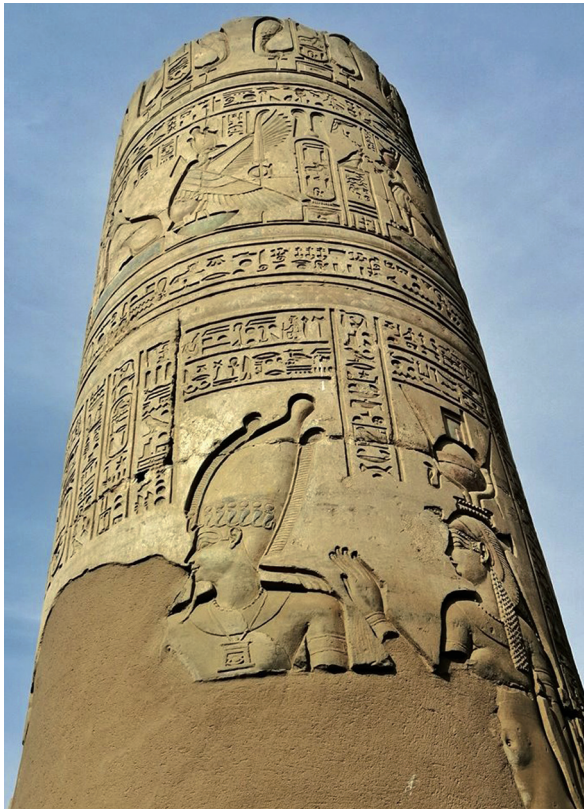


Fig. 5: Kom Ombo column XI relief of Osiris and Isis; photo by O.E. Kaper.

spread wings, which envelop the torso from a position underneath the arm pits.³¹ In the present case, the falcons have a different position and posture and they appear as decoration of a vest, as is also attested once for an image of the Pharaoh in Dendera, on the Roman mammisi.³²

The belt with a series of 12 discs is unparalleled in divine iconography. The number may well be significant, and the discs may represent either the sun or the full moon. As the sun, the discs may symbolize the twelve hours of the night, which is an important symbol of the renewal of life.³³ As lunar discs they may symbolize the twelve months of the year, and even the buckle with its five vertical lines may be taken as representing the five epagomenal days. But the latter option is not likely, because the symbolism of the calendar does not fit with the known range of action of Osiris or Sebiuwerker and neither with the other components of the statue. A solar interpretation of the discs fits better with the solar symbolism of the pectoral and the wedjat eye on the upper body.

31 On this garment in the New Kingdom, cf. Calvert 2009: 52. On a god wearing this garment in the Late Period, cf. Kaper 2019: 37–39.

32 Daumas 1959: pl. 96 [right].

33 Sheikholeslami 2010; Graefe 2018. On the relation with Osiris, cf. Quack 2002: 33.

It is extremely rare to find a statue with the right leg placed forward in either Egyptian or Meroitic traditions. I am not aware of a single example with the right leg advanced from the New Kingdom or later.³⁴ The Berenike statue has been well designed, and we must assume that there was a specific reason for this position of the legs, but an explanation remains elusive. The lower legs of the statue and its pedestal have not been found, even though the area immediately before the gate was excavated further in 2020. All statues from the temple survive in a fragmentary state, and the present statue is no exception.

The Berenike statue thus is a hybrid form, combining Sebiuwerker with Osiris. The combination of these two gods is in accordance with other data. Jochen Hallof (2005) has established that Sebiuwerker should be seen as the Kushite equivalent of Osiris, even though this has not found general acceptance since.³⁵ The present statue confirms that Sebiuwerker and Osiris are indeed closely associated.

Even though its iconography points at Osiris more than Sebiuwerker, the statue is here identified primarily as the Meroitic god, because without Sebiuwerker this statue would not have existed. There are no comparable statues of Osiris known from Egypt from any period, whereas Sebiuwerker is always represented with bare shoulders and his arms down his sides. Moreover, his presumed original position at the entrance to the temple corresponds to the usual position of large statues of Sebiuwerker. Stone statues of Osiris normally take the shape of a mummy, they are much smaller than life-size, and they have not the same amount of iconographic detail as the Berenike piece.³⁶ Moreover, in the Roman period Serapis has largely taken over the role of Osiris outside of the funerary realm, and statues of Serapis are also in Berenike by far in the majority.³⁷ Life-size statuary is

34 Sourouzian 2019: 126, confirms for the 19th Dynasty: “il n’existe évidemment aucun colosse ayant la jambe droite avancée.” Burger Robin 2019: 95 refers to the statue Marseilles, Musée d’Archéologie Méditerranéenne no. 209 with the right leg forward, but this is mistaken. An example of an Old Kingdom private statue with the right foot advanced is mentioned in Smith 1949: 54. An explanation for the preference for the left foot is offered in Schäfer 1986: 322–323.

35 J. Kuckertz in Kuckertz and Lohwasser 2016: 121. Cl. Rilly in Cabon et al. 2017: 211: “Ce dernier, malgré sa ressemblance avec le dieu égyptien Atoum, est purement méroïtique.” Traunecker 2010: 165 accepts the association with Osiris, but in the role of child and successor.

36 A representative collection of statues of Osiris may be found in Daressy 1905–1906: 66–115, pls. 12–33.

37 A range of statues of Serapis has been found in various materials including wood. Cf. Sidebotham et al. 2018, pl. XXI [2]: pl. 23 [1–2]; Sidebotham et al. 2019: pl. 24 [1–4].

not uncommon for Serapis, whereas it is completely unknown for Osiris at this time. In the forecourt of the Berenike temple of Isis, a single statue of Osiris was found, which is small in scale and depicts the god as a mummy.³⁸

It is instructive to compare the hybrid form of Sebiuwerker as Osiris at Berenike with a similar phenomenon that can be observed in the temple complex at Philae. The small temple of Arensnuphis in the forecourt was rebuilt and extended in the time of Tiberius.³⁹ Jochen Hallof has studied its decoration and he concluded that it was dedicated not only to Arensnuphis but also to Osiris in equal measure.⁴⁰ It is interesting that the temple couples these two gods, because in Meroitic temples Arensnuphis was coupled with Sebiuwerker, but in this Egyptian temple Osiris took that role. If statues had survived from the Philae shrine, it is possible that the statue of Osiris would have expressed his Meroitic as well as his Egyptian appearance, just like the statue in Berenike. The Berenike statue of Sebiuwerker is a visual translation of Sebiuwerker into the Egyptian idiom, rendering him as Osiris, while maintaining his overall appearance as the Meroitic god.

If we are correct in reconstructing the statue of Sebiuwerker to have been placed at the entrance to the forecourt of the temple of Isis, then this raises some further questions. Who would have been the donor of the piece and was the appearance of the temple changed in the eyes of a Meroitic audience? Even when the iconography of the statue has been assimilated to Osiris, and it has been placed parallel to a statue of Isis, the statue is still immediately recognisable as a Meroitic cultural product. The local sculptor who manufactured the statue managed to make the statue acceptable to two cultures. The donor who commissioned the statue must have originated from the Meroitic kingdom, just like the wealthy Roman merchants had statues and inscriptions erected in Roman style and the Indian merchants added items to the temple reflecting their own cultural background.⁴¹ The Sebiuwerker statue was visible from

afar and it must have changed the appearance of the facade, but we don't know if our current impression is correct that only Isis and Sebiuwerker were present and that not also other statues were positioned there.

A STATUE OF ARENSNUPHIS?

The excavations at the Isis temple at Berenike also produced a small but well-shaped bronze statuette that requires some discussion here (Fig. 6). It depicts a male god, left leg forward and hands clenched down his sides, who is wearing a shendyt kilt, a divine beard, a nemes headdress and a crown composed of a kalathos upon which four feathers are placed in a quadrant. The bronze is 15.7 cm high, and it still weighs as much as 163 gr.⁴²

The identity of the god is a matter for further debate. There are two possible candidates who may be depicted with the quadruple feathers on the head: one is Nefertem, the god of Memphis, and the other is Arensnuphis, who was venerated both in southern Egypt and in Meroe. The problem here is that in spite of the careful modelling of the statuette, neither options are convincing. The god Nefertem is always depicted with a lotus flower on the head, and the Berenike piece does not depict a lotus. Moreover, Nefertem is never depicted wearing the nemes head dress, but always a tripartite wig.⁴³

The god Arensnuphis poses similar problems in identification. The feather crown is in his case always placed upon a skull cap or on a low podium, but never upon a kalathos, which is an attribute of Serapis. Arensnuphis is also never depicted wearing the nemes. In fact, the nemes has become rare in bronzes of the Late Period, and it is surprising to see it appearing here.⁴⁴ When considering the two candidate gods, the god Nefertem is less likely to appear in Berenike than Arensnuphis. No other gods of Lower Egypt have been encountered in Berenike thus far, with the obvious exception of Serapis. Because of the well-established connections of Berenike with Upper Egypt as well as Meroe, the presence of Arensnuphis is certainly more acceptable. For that reason, the latter is given the benefit of the doubt. There is little reason to think of a hybrid form of Arensnuphis

In general on the identification of Serapis and Osiris in the Roman period, cf. Smith 2017: 399–403.

38 Sidebotham et al. 2018: 16, pl. 24 [2].

39 No publication of this part of the complex exists, but it may be studied on the basis of the photographs in Beinlich 2010.

40 Hallof 2005: 45, followed by Cauville and Ibrahim Ali 2013: 39.

41 The principal donor of the temple was a Roman merchant, who left a Greek dedication upon the lintel of the main gate; Ast 2021. An Indian cultural background is in evidence in a statue with a heavily draped garment; cf. Sidebotham et al. 2018: pl. 26 [1–2], as well as in the statue

of the Buddha; Sidebotham et al. 2019: 18, pl. 23 [1,2,4].

42 Previously shown in Sidebotham et al. 2020: 16, 21, pl. 25 [3].

43 For the iconography of Nefertem in metal, cf. Hill and Schorsch 2007: 143–146;

44 A bronze with a nemes is more likely to depict the Pharaoh, as in the unidentified bronze in the Brooklyn Museum in Hill and Schorsch 2007: 146–148.



Fig. 6: Arensnuphis bronze; photo by K. Braulińska.

in this case because the god has never been assimilated to Nefertem in the known sources.

MEROITIC ITEMS FROM THE NORTHERN COMPLEX AT BERENIKE

In 2019, excavations were also undertaken in the Northern Complex. This is a series of small shrines situated around a large court. This complex functioned from the early Roman period into the latest phase of habitation in the settlement. Thanks to a Greek building inscription upon a lintel of one of the shrines, it is known that the kings of the nomadic Blemmye people were in charge at this time. King Isemne is mentioned in it, a ruler from the late fourth or early fifth century CE,⁴⁵ which provides a time frame for the other shrines as well. One of the other shrines was dedicated to a falcon cult, and in the rear part of this two-roomed structure a statue was found in situ against the podium on which the principal cult statue will have stood inside a naos shrine. It is a block statue (Fig. 7), which stood adjacent to an offering stand and faced towards the entrance of the room. It measures 38 cm in height. It is of a well-known type of Egyptian temple statue, but in Egypt the block



Fig. 7: The cube statue from the Falcon Shrine; photo by by K. Braulińska.

⁴⁵ Ast and Rądkowska 2020.

statues had ceased to be made in the course of the Ptolemaic period.⁴⁶ A more detailed discussion of this find and its context will be published elsewhere, but for the present purposes I wish to point at the close similarity of the statue with the cube statues found at Naga, Sudan.⁴⁷ Whereas in Egypt this statue type disappeared, the Meroitic temples at Naga and El-Hassa have provided evidence of a continuation in the Kushite realm. There is a difference in scale, because the Berenike statue measures 38 cm in height, while the Naga cube statues are only between 17.5 and 22 cm in height, but they are identical in style and also in the high degree of their surface damage. There is discussion about the function of the cube statues in the temple, because their damage is significant. In Berenike, the use of the statue has caused the Greek inscription on the front of the body to be all but illegible. It probably contained the name of the donor, but there were three lines of text and possibly more, which are otherwise now illegible.⁴⁸ The dating of the statue will be similar to that of the Naga parallels, in the early Roman period, after which it was used or reused in the falcon shrine until its abandonment at the end of the 5th, or the early 6th century CE.

In an adjacent shrine of the Northern Complex the head of another statue was found, which provides further connections to Meroe. It is a head of Min or Amun (Fig. 8, cover picture), wearing the characteristic low cap crown of this god. In the top of the crown is a slot in which the feathers could be inserted, made of another piece of stone. The statue has a close parallel in a statue of Amun that was found by Garstang in Meroe, in temple M 6, and which is now in the Museum at Khartoum (SNM 517).⁴⁹ Other statues have been compared to this piece as well, notably a head in the Louvre that is remarkably similar to the one found at Berenike. The face has an oval shape and the crown has a double line at its base, which suggests the statues' origin in the same workshop. However, there are some problems with this scenario. The dating of the context in which the Meroe statue was found is 3rd to 2nd centuries BCE,⁵⁰ which would not fit with the context of the Northern Complex in Berenike, which goes back to the early Roman period. The Meroe statue is only small, 15.3 cm in extant height, and it is well possible that the statue was imported into Meroe from Egypt,

46 Schulz 2011.

47 Wildung 2018: 218–239. Seven cube statues were found in the Amun temple, and one in Temple 200.

48 A full discussion of the text is forthcoming in the article mentioned in note 2 above.

49 Cf. Baud 2010: 192 [245].

50 Dating according to V. Rondot in Baud 2010: 192.



Fig. 8: The head of Amun from the Northern Complex; photo by S. Sidebotham.

and that also the Berenike head came from the same source. Ideally a petrographic analysis should be done on the statues to solve this matter.

The presence of statuary in Berenike with links to Meroitic sites also gave rise to a new search among the ceramics excavated in previous seasons. As a result, Roberta Tomber together with Ross I. Thomas managed to identify more than 20 potsherds of Meroitic and post-Meroitic date that had escaped notice before.⁵¹ Two sherds are possibly of early Ptolemaic date, while the rest is Roman to late-Roman in date. This material will be published elsewhere, but the presence of Meroitic ceramics at Berenike supports the suggestion of a Meroitic presence at the site which was brought to our attention by the sculptures discussed here.

CONCLUSIONS

The recent finds at Berenike have produced clear evidence for Meroitic influence in the form of statuary in the local shrines. The cube statue in the Northern Complex is the least problematic in that respect, because it corresponds closely to a Meroitic statue type. More complex are the finds of two statues from the Isis temple. The life-size Sebiemeker statue

51 Sidebotham et al. 2021: 22–23.



depicts this god in a hybrid form with iconographic traits of Osiris, and the bronze of Arensnuphis depicts this god without his usual long kilt and with different head gear and crown. The Sebiuwerker statue was produced in local stone at Berenike by an artist familiar with both Meroitic and Egyptian idioms and conventions. The artist achieved a hybridisation, in which a Meroitic statue type was merged with Egyptian elements as an expression of the perceived identity of Sebiuwerker with Osiris. For this reason, the statue was also paired with a statue of Isis, which is never the case in Meroitic temples. The Berenike statue should give new impetus to the debate on the nature of Sebiuwerker and his relationship with Osiris.

Finding a limited number of Meroitic items in Berenike does not make the site part of the Meroitic kingdom, but the material demonstrates that Meroitic traders were involved in the international trade for which Berenike was an important hub. One of these traders must have commissioned the statues of Sebiuwerker and Isis as *ex-votos*. By placing Sebiuwerker at the gate of the forecourt of Isis, the temple acquired an appearance that would be immediately recognisable to visitors from Meroe, while to an Egyptian audience the statue would be acceptable as an image of Osiris.

In order to participate in the Indian Ocean Trade, the Meroitic kingdom had the option to travel southwards, to the harbour of Adulis,⁵² or northwards to Berenike. Thus far, it had been difficult to find information about this trade, because there is very little archaeological remains in the Eastern Desert that may be linked to Meroe.⁵³ Recently, Meroitic ceramic remains were identified at Samut on the road between Edfu and Berenike,⁵⁴ which may indicate a trade route in Hellenistic times. There is also evidence for trade items at Meroitic sites originating from Asia, because Joanna Then-Obluska has demonstrated that Indian-Pacific beads were imported into Meroitic sites via Berenike in post-Meroitic times, when no such imports to Egypt took place.⁵⁵ In post-Meroitic times, it seems likely that the Blemmyes were acting as middlemen for this trade, considering their important position at Berenike. But such aspects of the logistics and the nature of the international trade, for Meroitic and post-Meroitic times, remain to be established.

52 Cf. Peacock and Blue 2007.

53 Cf. Manzo 2020: 681, 684.

54 By J. Gates-Foster, as mentioned in Sidebotham et al. 2020: 22.

55 Then-Obluska and Wagner 2019.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Jüngste Ausgrabungen in den sakralen Bauten von Berenike haben eine Reihe von Statuen ans Licht gebracht, die den Ort mit dem Königreich von Meroe in Verbindung bringen. Vier Statuen werden besprochen, insbesondere eine komplexe lebensgroße Statue des Sebiameker. Sie erscheint in einer hybriden Form, die sie nahe an die Ikonographie des Osiris bringt. Eine Bronzestatue des Arensnuphis wird nur mit Vorbehalt identifiziert, aber eine Würfelstatue weist eindeutige Parallelen in Naga auf. Ein Kopf des Amun hat eine Parallele in Meroe, was aber nicht unbedingt auf einen meroitischen Ursprung des Stücks hinweist. Die Funde deuten auf die Anwesenheit meroitischer Händler in Berenike als Beteiligte am Fernhandel hin.