

NOT SO FRUITLESS AFTER ALL? CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ACCOUNT OF GIUSEPPE FERLINI ON HIS EXCAVATIONS AT WAD BEN NAGA (VOD-BENAGA)

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary accounts of Giuseppe Ferlini (1797–1870)¹ reflecting on his four-and-a-half-years-long stay in present-day Sudan (between years 1830 and 1835) have attracted appropriate attention of many scholars interested in the ancient cultures of the Nile valley ever since the time of their initial publications. In 1836, the very first article appeared under the title *Cenno intorno la raccolta di cose etiop-egizie portate dalla Nubia in Patria dal medico Giuseppe Ferlini Bolognese*.² It was soon followed by a much more frequented treatise *Cenno sugli scavi operati nella Nubia e catalogo degli oggetti ritrovati dal dott. Giuseppe Ferlini Bolognese*³ and the latter's translation into French *Relation historique des fouilles opérées dans la Nubie par le docteur Joseph Ferlini de Bologne: suivie d'un catalogue des objets qu'il a trouvés dans l'une des quarante-sept pyramides aux environs de l'ancienne ville de Meroé, et d'une description des grands déserts de Corusah et de Sinnaar*.⁴ The two reports were centred around the description of the circumstances of a spectacular find of an undisturbed burial of the Meroitic Queen Amanishakhete at the royal necropolis at Begrawiya North that Ferlini made in the autumn of 1834, supplemented by a catalogue of artefacts that he brought to Europe for sale. His excavations and observations made at archaeological sites other than Begrawiya North were overshadowed by the dazzle of the Treasure of Amanishakhete, and the informational value of their description has been largely neglected till the present, with some notable exceptions.⁵

The latter applies particularly to Ferlini's report on excavations at Wad Ben Naga, for which nearly three pages were reserved in *Cenno sugli scavi*. The importance of the account lies not only in the fact that Ferlini was one of a few early visitors to the site of Wad Ben Naga who left testimony also of

other monuments than the so-called Bes Pillars of the Typhonium (WBN 200). He was primarily the very first European who conducted excavations at the site, albeit not exactly with the prospect of scientific exploration but rather a search for valuable antiquities – an intent in which he hardly differed from many of his contemporaries active in Egypt and Nubia. In doing so, he stumbled upon and later described archaeological structures and artefacts that have partly vanished since, leaving a sole attestation of their existence and context. At the same time, some of the artefacts that he discovered (and described as 'pillars') were later recognized – not without ambiguity – as some of the most important finds from the site.

The present paper is an attempt at a critical analysis of Ferlini's account on his excavations at Wad Ben Naga that aims not only to mitigate the insufficient attention paid to Ferlini's description of the site, but also to make an effort to identify the possible areas of Ferlini's work and the nature of structures and finds uncovered by him, with a particular attention to the pair of the so-called 'pillars'. Similar attempts at critical analysis of the same source proved fruitful in the case of Ferlini's excavations at Begrawiya,⁶ thus providing suitable reference works for any attempt at evaluation of the Wad Ben Naga stage of Ferlini's quasi-archaeological activities.

ARRIVAL AT THE SITE

Ferlini probably developed an idea to pursue his search for antiquities only several years into his stay in Sudan, which was itself a rather unwelcome development of his employment in the capacity of an army surgeon in the Turko-Egyptian army in Egypt.⁷ By that time, he managed to become familiar in the elite circles of the Khartoum society and, most importantly, to gain the trust of Ali Khursid Agha (~1786–1845), the acting Turko-Egyptian

1 For his biography, see Boldrini 1981; see also Curto 1983.

2 Pancaldi 1836.

3 Ferlini 1837.

4 Ferlini 1838.

5 Zach 1992; Davoli 1993; Onderka 2013.

6 Zach 1992; Markowitz – Lacovara 1996.

7 Boldrini 1981: XXIV.



governor-general in Sudan. Before Ferlini's planned transfer back to Cairo, Ali Khurshid issued to him a permit for excavations that guaranteed him also cooperation of local authorities and even detailed the conditions of drawing a work force.⁸ Ferlini joined forces with an old friend of his, a Greco-Albanian merchant Antonio Stefani (*~1781), whose fifteen years of experience in Sudan were thought practical for the success of the venture. Having promised him a half of any returns, Ferlini charged him first with fixing provisions, tools, and animal force for the expedition, which he obtained at the large market at *Musselamia* (= El-Musallamiyah on the Blue Nile).

Right after the arrival of Ferlini's replacement in the army, Ferlini left Khartoum in the company of Stefani, 30 workmen, and their families on 11 August 1834, or 10 *Rebilavvel* (= Rabi al-Awwal) 1250 of the Islamic calendar. While 27 camels with equipment took the overland route, Ferlini and his companions sailed downstream by a boat, reaching the village of *Vod-Benaga* (= Wad Ben Naga, the present day Qubbit Saleh⁹) three days later. From there, Stefani continued to Shendi to secure the approval of any planned excavations by local authorities, and then leaving the families by the Nile, they proceeded through Wadi Awateib to *Galla-Volet-Mamut* (= Naga), a travel that took them eight hours. In Naga, Ferlini conducted excavations at a site that can be easily recognized as the Amun Temple (N 100). They not only left Ferlini heavily disappointed with the outcomes but also proved disastrous for some of the members of his team. The hardships, no doubt fortified by the ill-considered choice of the season, prompted Ferlini to eventually return to the Nile valley, stopping *en route* at *Volet-Assan* (likely Musawwarat es-Sufra¹⁰ or Jebel Khereik), where ruins of a much smaller temple (necessarily the Lion Temple in the former case) were noted. On 3 September 1834, or 1 *Rebilaker* (= Rabi al-Akhir) 1250, Ferlini and his team reunited with their families at the village of Wad Ben Naga and proceeded to the archaeological site, situated several kilometres to the north of the village and presently known by the same name.

⁸ Boldrini 1981: XXIX.

⁹ See Onderka 2016: 10–13.

¹⁰ See Priese 1992: 12. The respective time distances seem to be roughly confirmed also by the Royal Prussian Expedition whose members travelled 8 hours (over two sections of 4½ and 3¾ hours) from Wad Ben Naga to Naga and 3¼ hour from Naga to Musawwarat es-Sufra; see *LDTV*: 339.

EXCAVATIONS IN THE CEMETERY AREA

Upon reaching the site, Ferlini noted – and later recalled in the first place – a number of still erect columns (*varie colonne tuttavia erette*)¹¹ that he considered to be of only rough quality of workmanship (*rozzamente lavorare*) and to mark the entrance to a temple (*avvanzo di antico tempio*). Similar to many other visitors, equally earlier and later, he clearly referred to the Bes Pillars of the Typhonium (WBN 200), a landmark of the site which perished after 1882 but is well-documented by various accounts.¹² Somewhat surprisingly, yet likely with regard to his previous failures at Naga, Ferlini ignored this monument completely, opting instead to search for any signs of ancient burials, which as the example of Egypt showed, promised greater chance of finding valuable antiquities in a good condition. He was rewarded by a discovery of a large underground tomb that he explored by digging, which was in turn less rewarding for its contents.

The tomb reportedly consisted of an elongated corridor which Ferlini likened to Roman catacombs (*una corsia simile a quelle delle Romane Catacombe; stendeva si questa per più tese in giro*). The corridor contained numerous ceramic vessels that reminded him of contemporary *burma*-type jars, used for cooking and transport of water or *merissa* beer. Ferlini felt forced to break one of the vessels in order to show to the workmen that they did not contain any gold, just dampen soil. Breaking of additional pots was excused by the prospect of retrieving amulets and scarabs, which had to prove unsuccessful. Having dug out several additional feet worth of soil at the bottom of the corridor, he entered the burial chamber or the burial pit itself which reportedly contained remnants of multiple individuals. Only the body situated in the centre caught Ferlini's attention. It was reportedly covered by a superimposed stone (*una lapida sopraposta*) and the individual was equipped with burial goods in the form of an iron sword on one side and a spear or a lance, a bow, and a collection of arrows on the other. Most of the iron objects disintegrated upon Ferlini's touch, but he managed to retrieve some of the arrowheads with a barb (*punta sporgente all'indietro*) and parts of the sword. It is remarkable that some of the arrowheads remained eventually in a condition good enough to be brought to Europe and included in the catalogue

¹¹ Unless stated otherwise, the quotes refer to Ferlini 1837. Activities at Wad Ben Naga are mostly covered by pages X–XII.

¹² See Onderka 2013; Onderka 2014: 83; Onderka – Vrtal 2018: 416.



under no. 114.¹³ It is likely that Ferlini tried his luck also at other nearby locations, as he concluded his works in the cemetery area only after several days of digging.

The description of the tomb, albeit rather brief, reveals that Ferlini undoubtedly encountered a relatively rich Meroitic or post-Meroitic burial. The character of the tomb substructure is hard to discern. It is unlikely that it would have the complex form of a hypogea, as suggested by Ferlini's comparison with Roman catacombs – presumably, catacombs in actual Rome were meant, some of which were known by that time. Instead, he probably uncovered a descending corridor leading to a large burial pit. Although the cemeteries at Wad Ben Naga remain largely unexplored, several such tombs were recorded, including relatively large ones.¹⁴ The circumstances of the discovery, namely the fact that Ferlini was able to assess the contents of the pit immediately, with the help of a lamp, indicate that the cavity containing the burial was not filled with any debris or soil, possibly being protected from its introduction by a stone or brick blocking. This is further supported by Ferlini's ability to observe various metal burial goods which largely disintegrated once exposed to a physical contact. It appears that already in the access area some of the burial goods were found, namely spherical beer jars,¹⁵ which may have been used during the funerary banquet. It is interesting to observe that the burial pit contained interments of multiple individuals – an arrangement that is not exceptional, but hardly common in the Meroitic and post-Meroitic periods.¹⁶ On the other hand, the presence of iron weapons accompanying the burial of the central individual finds numerous analogies in burials from the periods in question,¹⁷ including those recorded at Wad Ben Naga.¹⁸

EXCAVATIONS IN THE SETTLEMENT AREA

Following the excavations of the cemetery, Ferlini – now clearly growing severely disappointed from the lack of spectacular finds – turned his attention to the settlement area. He focused his attention to an area marked by remains of a column (*vestigio di colonna*).

¹³ For the catalogue, see Ferlini 1837: 1–17; Ferlini 1838: 19–35.

¹⁴ See Onderka 2016: fig. 28.

¹⁵ Compare with the situation at el-Hobagi; Lenoble 2018: figs. 18–19, 76.

¹⁶ Francigny 2016: 151.

¹⁷ See *inter alia* Lenoble 2018.

¹⁸ Onderka et al. 2015: 101–102; Vrtal et al. 2019: 69–70.

Given the singular, it is unlikely that he would refer repeatedly to the 'erect and roughly executed' pillars of the Typhonium.

The pattern of targets of attention recognizable in other accounts of early travellers to Wad Ben Naga¹⁹ might help to identify the locations of Ferlini's excavational interest. Most of the written accounts focused on the area of the Typhonium, with a few additional ones paying attention also to the area of the Sandstone Chapel (WBN 1100) and the Isis Temple (WBN 300). Ferlini seems exceptional in this matter, however, as he mentioned the Typhonium only in passing and was the only one who was primarily interested in cemeteries, although his later work in the settlement area may have followed the usual pattern.

Judging from the plan of the site prepared by Frédéric Cailliaud (1787–1869) in 1822,²⁰ remains of columns (*débris de colonnes*) were visible on the surface on two spots, namely on *kom*s B and D, i.e. over the ruins of the Palace of Amanishakhete (WBN 100) and the Small Temple (WBN 400), respectively. Quite possibly, other fragments may have been notable elsewhere, as references to *restes de temples* (on *kom*s B and C, i.e. also over the Isis Temple in the latter case) and numerous sketches of scattered blocks indicate. No distinctive column-like elements (apart from the Bes Pillars of the Typhonium) can be noted in another contemporary source, the precise drawings by Louis Maurice Adolphe Linant de Bellefonds (1799–1883),²¹ capturing the Typhonium and a wider area to the south (with distinct mounds of Cailliaud's *kom* C, *kom* over the Circular Building (WBN 50) and *kom* B; in this order, starting from the right). Nevertheless, large irregular blocks lying here and there on the surface permit their identification as column parts, although such interpretation must remain purely hypothetical. Accounts of Lord Prudhoe (1792–1865) and George Alexander Hoskins (1802–1863) who visited the site in 1829 and 1833, respectively, provide no further clues.

The localisation of Ferlini's works in the settlement area can be better reconstructed from accounts of visitors who arrived at the site after him. Only one year after his excavations, in October 1835, the site of Wad Ben Naga was visited by John Lowell (1799–1835). Besides the Bes Pillars and their surroundings, Lowell also described in his diary an 'entrance and a sanctuary' of a temple that had been previously 'excavated by curious travellers'.²² The

¹⁹ See Onderka 2013; Onderka 2016.

²⁰ Cailliaud 1823: pl. IX.1.

²¹ Onderka 2016: pls. 2–3; Rondot et al. 2021: ill. 181.

²² Onderka 2016: 114.



detailed description of the scenes noted by Lowell on the inner walls of the pylon allows to identify the cleared location beyond doubt as one of the three main entrances to the Isis Temple,²³ its hypostyle hall, and a ‘sanctuary’.²⁴ Importantly, Lowell mentioned also fragments of stone columns situated in a ‘hall of brick’ following the pylon.

Similarly, records of the Royal Prussian Expedition from 1844²⁵ – i.e. nine years after Ferlini’s stay – may provide additional clues. One of the expedition members, Georg Gustav Erbkam (1811–1876), noted pieces of columns already during the initial survey of the site on the last day of January 1844;²⁶ their location was not specified. Later, in March, the same (?) column pieces (*Säulenstücke*) were examined.²⁷ This time Erbkam clearly refers to the area of the Isis Temple.²⁸ The identification is also confirmed by the notes kept by Maximilian Ferdinand Weidenbach (1823–1890). Already during the first visit to the site, Weidenbach saw columns with hieroglyphic inscriptions situated in a room accessible through an entrance with the same depictions that were described by Lowell.²⁹ Similarly, the scenes and column segments are also mentioned in the notes of Heinrich Abeken (1809–1872) produced on the same day.³⁰

Lowell’s, Weidenbach’s, and Abeken’s accounts indicate that there were substantial clearances in the area of the so-called Isis Temple that allowed to discern limits of some of its rooms and observe preserved remains of architectural elements and relief decoration *without* the need for digging. Since the previous visitors did not make similar observations, it is likely that these clearances occurred between 1833 when Hoskins visited the site and 1835 when Lowell did.

One thus has to wonder whether the members of the Royal Prussian Expedition did not simply follow in the footsteps of Ferlini, excavating (for a single day!) in the area disturbed previously by his digging. These considerations have potential consequences for the identification of other finds that Ferlini made in the settlement area.

23 See Onderka et al. 2021a: pl. 2.

24 Possibly one of the side-sanctuaries, if Lowell confused one of the side entrances in the pylon with the axial one – this option is allowed by the location of presumed clearances in the temple, see Priese 1984: Abb. 3.

25 See Onderka 2022.

26 Priese 1984: 12; Freier 2022: 302.

27 Priese 1984: 12; Freier 2022: 324.

28 See also *LDT V*: 336; Priese 1984: Abb. 3.

29 Binder 2023: 259–260, 214.1–2.

30 Abeken 1844: 1035–1036; Honzl 2022: 217.

‘PILLARS’

In the settlement area, Ferlini uncovered a rectangular pillar (*pilastro di forma quadrilatera*). It was allegedly made of red granite (*granito rosso*). Its sides were about half the armlength (*braccio*) and it was roughly three armlengths high. The pillar carried rich relief decoration. Up to one third of the pillar’s height, there was a band (column?) of hieroglyphs on each of the four sides, which was surrounded by symbolical figures (*una fascia di geroglifici che attorniavano differenti figure simboliche*). On one side, the figures consisted of two males and one female, all reportedly naked (*due maschili ed una femminile tutte ignude*). On another, there were only two figures. On the remaining sides, there were still other scenes, perhaps analogous (*così differentemente*) to the latter.

Ferlini found it impossible to transport the object (which – if made of granite – would have weighed ca 500kg or more) by camels in one piece, and thus resorted to cutting. He tried to break the stone and remove the lower part, in order to retrieve the inscription (*dimezzarlo per avere i soli geroglifici*) – after all, texts were commonly considered the most valuable property of ancient monuments in these pioneering stages of Egyptological research. He largely failed in doing so, being able to detach only a larger piece from one side of the block (*da un lato solo potei romperlo e trarne un grosso pezzo*). Determined and undeterred, he then tried to cut it by a saw with the help of water, only failing once more, having made merely a shallow groove in the stone. After clearly exhausting all options, he entrusted the pillar to the care of a local chief of village (*capo della Villa*), with instructions to give it to no one without Ferlini’s previous notification. In a footnote to his report,³¹ Ferlini recalls that after his return to Cairo, he donated the pillar to a French consul, Mr. Mimmaut (*sic*) (*questo fu poi da me dato in dono al Sig. Mimmaut Console Francese*; and later in the text:³² *da questa luogo, per la solita via, mi indirizzai al Cairo, dove ottenni il mio congedo, le mie paghe col favore di M. Mimmaut, al quale per segno di gratitudine feci dono di quella colonna, o pilastro di granito rosso da me descritto, e che aveva lasciata al capo del villaggio di Vod Benaga*).

Ferlini recounts that sometime later, they uncovered another similar piece of red granite, this time larger and more skilfully incised with reliefs (*altra pietra di granito rosso simile alla prima, ma più grande, e meglio incisa*). Its location was unspecified,

31 Ferlini 1837: XII.

32 Ferlini 1837: XX.



except for a very general statement that the find was made at some other place. Contextually, it could be linked to a place with fired brick floor and a column, which Ferlini considered as a very small habitation.³³ Unlike in the former case, no description of the other granite relief block was given. With his previous experience in mind, Ferlini did not attempt to remove the piece this time but reburied it in soil (*la sepelii di nuovo*).

The nature and later history of the two granite artefacts are worth some elaboration. In his compendium on ancient monuments of Sudan, Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge (1857–1934) widely quoted Ferlini's published reports, adding to them sporadic observations of his own. Among them, a suggestion was included that the first granite 'pillar' uncovered by Ferlini could be clearly identified as an 'altar'; and being more specific, possibly the same piece brought by the Royal Prussian Expedition to the Egyptian Museum in Berlin,³⁴ the so-called Altar A.³⁵ This suggestion was repeated by Jean Vercoutter (1911–2000) who put together the very first comprehensive evaluation of the site of Wad Ben Naga in his preliminary report on the Sudanese excavations of 1958–1960. Vercoutter indirectly questioned Ferlini's identification of the material of the 'pillar' as granite. In line with Budge, he considered the piece to be identical to Altar A, removed to Berlin, making a remark that the French consul Mimaut had no opportunity, and did in fact not, collect Ferlini's gift.³⁶

In the latter assumption, Vercoutter was almost certainly correct. Jean-François Mimaut (1774–1837), the French *consul général* and since 1830 *consul général* at Alexandria,³⁷ travelled on several occasions to Upper Egypt in the company of Viceroy Muhammad Ali,³⁸ there are nonetheless no reports of his potential travels farther south. Arguably, means of having Ferlini's relief 'pillar' moved from Wad Ben Naga to Alexandria could have been at his disposal, although he concluded his term as the *consul général* relatively soon after Ferlini's departure (in 1835 or 1836), leaving for Paris where he passed away in January 1837. It is questionable, however, that Mimaut would have been even interested in such an undertaking, despite his indisputable and deep inter-

est in Egyptian – among other – antiquities. Indeed, Mimaut's extensive collection was transported from Alexandria to Paris, at the beginning under personal supervision of the collector himself, and following his death it was put on auction in December 1837. No piece matching Ferlini's description can be found among the 598 artefacts,³⁹ some of which were purchased among others by Le Louvre and the British Museum.

Budge's and Vercoutter's identifications of the first pillar as Altar A are less convincing, however. There are severe discrepancies between the two pieces in numerous aspects, namely both (i) relative and (ii) absolute dimensions, (iii) shape, (iv) material, (v) relief decoration, (vi) organisation of the text, (vii) damage, and likely also (viii) archaeological context.

(i) If the abovementioned hypothesis is accepted that the Royal Prussian Expedition followed in the steps of Ferlini when discovering the Altars A, B, and C⁴⁰ in the Isis Temple, one would have to conclude that the 'pillar' discovered and described by Ferlini, and later rediscovered by Erbkam, was either Altar B or C, but definitely not Altar A. Given their relative sizes, the latter – being the largest – could be hypothetically identified only as the second granite piece found by Ferlini, which was reportedly larger and better cut (*piu grande e meglio incisa*). It should be noted, however, that there are hardly any apparent differences in the quality of workmanship between the reliefs on Altars A and B.⁴¹ The reliefs of Altar C, still awaiting its rediscovery,⁴² are unknown to us, but the piece can be ruled out, as it lacked any hieroglyphic texts,⁴³ in which Ferlini was most interested when trying to split the first 'pillar'.

(ii) The absolute dimensions of the first 'pillar' presented by Ferlini lead to a similar conclusion. According to his measurements (or estimations), the piece had the (base) sides of about 0.5 *braccio* and the height of 3 *braccia*. In Ferlini's native Bologna, 1 *braccio* was equivalent to 0.64m;⁴⁴ thus, the dimensions of the 'pillar', as reported by Ferlini, were ca 0.32 × 0.32m, h. 1.92m. The columns of text on each side would be 0.64m high. In his report, Ferlini nevertheless seems to use a different rate of *braccio* than the Bologna one. While describing the pyramid of Amanishakhete (Beg N6), he estimated its height to 32 *braccia* and directly included the

33 See below.

34 Budge 1907: I, 287.

35 Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung (henceforth ÄMP), inv. no. 7261; see *inter alia* LD V: Bl. 55a; PM VII: 263; Crowfoot – Griffith 1911: 67–68, no. 41, pls. XXIV, XXV; Priese 1996; Onderka et al. 2014: 140–141.

36 Vercoutter 1962: 268.

37 Wiet 1943; Faü 2014.

38 Dubois 1837: viii.

39 Dubois 1837: 1–95.

40 See LDT V: 336–338; Priese 1984.

41 See LD V: Bl. 55a–b; Onderka et al. 2014: 140–143, cat. nos. 47–48.

42 See Onderka – Vrtal 2022a: 87, pl. 7.

43 LDT V: 338.

44 Doursther 1840: 71.

equivalent in metric units: 28m. Similarly, the side of the pyramid as measured by Ferlini was 48 *braccia*, equalled by him to 42m.⁴⁵ Having used the *braccio* of Bologna, the equivalent would amount only to 20.5m and 30.7m, respectively. Based on the metric equivalents stated directly by Ferlini, his *braccio* would thus seem to be equivalent to 0.875m (roughly the one used in Rome, from which Bologna was administered after 1815). Reliability of Ferlini's measurements drops somewhat when his measurements of the pyramid are compared to those of others. Reisner recorded the side of the pyramid to be mere 17.9m⁴⁶ (on the southern and western sides, up to 1m of reinforcement can be added), i.e. less than a half of what Ferlini stated. Indeed, the clearly incorrect proportions of the pyramid depicted in Ferlini's catalogue, in Figure 1, respect Ferlini's confused measurements. The height of the pyramid as recorded by Cailliaud,⁴⁷ however, was really 28m, and this would seem to confirm Ferlini's measurements at least partially (unless he copied the figure from Cailliaud,⁴⁸ disregarding the other one, which was 18.9m in Cailliaud's case). Also, a wooden model of the pyramid which Ferlini donated to the Museo Egizio in Turin in 1861 interestingly had correct proportions.⁴⁹ Using the conversion rate of 1 *braccio* = 0.875m, the dimensions of the first 'pillar' from Wad Ben Naga would be monumental: 0.44 × 0.44m, h. 2.63m; the columns of text would be 0.88m high. It is nearly needless to say that neither of the two possibilities for the absolute dimensions of Ferlini's 'pillar' match Altar A (0.84 × 0.84m, h. 1.35/1.40m⁵⁰), Altar B (0.55 × 0.55m, h. 1.35m), or Altar C (0.50 × 0.50m, height unknown).⁵¹ The only roughly corresponding measurement is the height of the text columns, provided that Bologna *braccio* was used.

(iii) As Ferlini used whole numbers or their common fractions for measurements, it may be surmised that his measurements were only estimated, pos-

sibly even retrospectively, from memory. Greater precision of such measurements could thus not be expected. It is striking, however, that the shape of the object described by Ferlini – be it real or imagined one – indeed corresponded rather to an elongated pillar than a more compact bark stand or altar,⁵² on account of its sides to height ratio of 1:1.6. The proportions of Altar A were 1:1:1.7.

(iv) According to Ferlini, the two 'pillars' that he found at Wad Ben Naga were made of red granite (*granito rosso*). This would also explain his difficulties with the transport of one of the pieces and with its splitting, him having been able to make only a shallow groove by the saw. Altars A and B (and presumably also Altar C) were made of brownish sandstone, on the other hand. Also, unlike Ferlini, the members of the Royal Prussian Expedition managed to completely divide Altar A into blocks by a saw, although only with substantial difficulties.⁵³ Generally, granite was used relatively rarely in the Meroitic heartland for large-scale sculpture (e.g. for stelae *REM* 1041 and *REM* 1044) and its use for multiple elements at Wad Ben Naga would be rather surprising. Other passages of Ferlini's report in fact do betray that his identification of the material was almost certainly incorrect. When describing Meroe, he mentioned an avenue of sphinxes made of black granite (*sfinzi di granito nero ordinate in due fila*) which can be easily recognized as the rams flanking the processional way in front of temple M 260,⁵⁴ well-visible already at that time.⁵⁵ They are made of black sandstone. Another passing reference to granite is – also mistakenly – offered when Ferlini speaks of mountains of Lower Nubia. Sandstone is only seldom mentioned, either as *grès quarzoso* (two pieces reportedly taken from the offering chapels of two pyramids⁵⁶), *grès ferruginoso* (a grindstone), or as *pietra nera dette da Nubiani Galla* (blocking the entrance to pyramid Beg N6⁵⁷).

(v) More serious discrepancy concerns the relief scenes decorating Ferlini's 'pillars'. Only the smaller 'pillar' was described in greater detail by Ferlini, although the other was described as similar. One side reportedly contained a scene with two males and one female, all naked; another was decorated with two figures, and the remaining two sides were only described as different. All three pieces uncov-

45 Confusingly, in the French version of the text, 48 *brasses* of the side are equalled to a base of 168sq.m, i.e. roughly 13m per side, despite the same ratio between *brasses* and metres in the case of the height and despite the side of the pyramid in Figure 1 corresponding to a side of 42m.

46 Dunham 1957: 106.

47 Cailliaud 1826: II, 157.

48 The fact that Ferlini was aware of Cailliaud's measurements is demonstrable, see Pancaldi 1836: 19, footnote no. 2.

49 See Boldrini 1981: fig. 24.

50 Present height of the altar is 1.16m, Priese 1996: 256; originally, it was either 1.4m high, as measured by Lepsius, see Priese 1984: 13, or 1.35m high as stated by Weidenbach, see Binder 2023: 285, 233.26–28.

51 For the dimensions, see *LDTV*: 337; Priese 1984: 13, Abb. 3; Priese 1996: 256; Binder 2023: 285, 233.29–30.

52 See, however, Kormysheva et al. 2019: fig. 36.

53 See Binder 2023: 299, 244.33–34.

54 Hinkel 1985: 322.

55 See Cailliaud 1826: II, 157.

56 See Zach 1992; Davoli 1993; Davoli 1998; Zach – Davoli 2003.

57 For identification of the stone, see Dunham 1957: 109.



ered by the Royal Prussian Expedition had always only a single figure per side – the king, the *kandake*, or a goddess. None of the figures were also naked. Although it is conceivable that the king's dress consisting only of a plain kilt and particularly the seemingly uncovered breasts of the goddesses and actually exposed breasts of the *kandake* may have captivated Ferlini and led him into a wrong conclusion of their full nudity, the numbers of figures present on various sides and particularly the non-uniformity of their number, as described by Ferlini, would speak strongly against the identification of his 'pillars' as Altars A, B, or C. The composition of the first scene described by Ferlini finds apparent analogies: it can be recognized either as a scene in which a king and a *kandake* stood before a male deity, possibly in an act of offering or worship, as a king in the company of a male and female deity, as a *kandake* in the company of two male deities, or as a depiction consisting of the king, the *kandake*, and one of the *pqr*-princes, typical for the reign of Natakanani and Amanitore. The other scene with two figures offers several interpretations, namely a king and a *kandake*, a royal figure and a deity, or two deities.

(vi) According to Ferlini, the figures depicted on the 'pillar' surrounded a single band of text (*una fascia di geroglifici che attorniavano differenti figure simboliche*), which reached to one third of the 'pillar's' height. On Altars A and B, there are two columns of text on each side, surrounding the royal and divine figures from left and right. They reach roughly to two thirds of the bark stands' heights. As already noted, Altar C was uninscribed. Notably, this discrepancy is not present in the French translation (*une bande chargée de hiéroglyphes qui entourait différentes figures symboliques*).⁵⁸

(vii) In Ferlini's description of his failed attempt to remove the hieroglyphic texts from the lower part of the smaller 'pillar', he reveals that he managed to break off (only) a large piece on one side. No damage that would correspond to such a significant destruction can be noted on lower parts of Altar B in notes and drawings of the Royal Prussian Expedition.⁵⁹ The severe damage of its upper part occurred likely much earlier⁶⁰ and it was related to its exposure on the surface. In the case of Altar A, the situation is complicated by the bark stand's division into blocks by the Royal Prussian Expedition. The regular pattern of splitting, corresponding to the use of a saw, is absent only on the lower north-western corner

– the only place where the texts are also damaged. Four deep parallel cuts, seemingly directed from the side with King Natakanani, may in fact very well correspond to intentional breaking, possibly with a chisel. However, also the Royal Prussian Expedition likely experimented with various methods of splitting, and the attribution of the cuts to Ferlini is thus at best admissible.

(viii) Finally, the description of the location of the two 'pillars' raises some doubts over their association with the bark stands found by the Royal Prussian Expedition. The first, smaller 'pillar' was spatially associated by Ferlini with remains of a column, albeit indirectly. The possible location of the column was discussed above. Directly following the clearing of the first 'pillar' in Ferlini's narrative order and preceding the discovery of the second one, a room was uncovered that was paved with fired bricks (*ambiente selciato con mattoni rossi*). In the centre of the paved area, there was a column (*una colonna*). It may be presumed from the sequence of works that the locations of the two 'pillars' were adjacent to the paved room. Based on his observations, Ferlini considered the room to be a small habitation, which was destroyed in ancient times (*l'ambiente sembrava destinato ad abitazione, ma piccolo assai, siccome è costume anche di presente tra gli Egizj*). One can only wonder what led him to such an improbable conclusion, but rather than finds (cooking vessels?, fireplaces?), it may have been just the small size of the place. Both Altar A and Altar B were found in rooms paved with sandstone flagstones, forming a side sanctuary complex of the so-called Isis Temple (WBN 304–305).⁶¹ The nearby hypostyle hall of the temple was found unpaved and consisted of four columns.⁶² It would thus not seem to be the place described by Ferlini. However, the entrance to the hall was indeed paved with fired bricks throughout the width of the pylon, and it was this area in which the reliefs described by Lowell and Weidenbach may have been seen shortly after. Erbkam's sketch of the ground plan of the temple⁶³ also shows that only one column may have been visible, and thus with a broad margin of tolerance, it could be taken for consideration. At the same time, it is very difficult to imagine that Ferlini would mistake a room with reliefs of divine figures for a habitation. Apart from the entrance to the Isis Temple, only a single room with fired brick paving has been uncovered at Wad Ben Naga during recent archaeological exploration. It

58 Ferlini 1838: 9.

59 See Priese 1984: Abb. 1, 6–9.

60 Possibly, it was even ancient, see Onderka et al. 2021a: 77.

61 See Onderka – Vrtal 2022a: pls. 4, 6; Onderka – Vrtal 2022b: figs. 2–3, pl. 1.

62 Onderka et al. 2021a: 69–71.

63 Priese 1984: Abb. 3.



was in the Typhonium Complex;⁶⁴ the room lacked any columns, however. In general, the scarcity of fired brick floors might in fact be linked to common removal of valuable and easily accessible construction material by robbers, but this habit almost certainly did not continue in the modern times (i.e. after Ferlini's visit). The possibility that Ferlini mistook sandstone flagstones in rooms WBN 304–305 of the so-called Isis Temple for fired bricks does not seem very likely either, not to mention the absence of any columns in them. It would also be strange for Ferlini to mention a spatially limited fired brick cladding in the pylon entrances and avoid mentioning the more extensive one made in sandstone, which would have to be seen after clearing the bark stand. Furthermore, one would expect Ferlini to run into some of the finds made later by the Royal Prussian Expedition in the area.⁶⁵ This apparently did not happen as he did not mention any of those in his report and left the site severely dissatisfied in terms of finds. One thus has to conclude that no place unequivocally matching Ferlini's description has yet been reexcavated at Wad Ben Naga.

A final remark to be made concerns other possible candidates for the identification of Ferlini's 'pillars' from the area of the the so-called Isis Temple. In room WBN 311, a southern side-sanctuary, a fragment of another decorated bark stand was recently found by Pavel Onderka.⁶⁶ It covers part of a hieroglyphic text built around the same phrases as the inscriptions on Altars A and B, and Onderka suggested that the bark stand was thus most likely perfectly analogical to Altar A (judging also from its location).⁶⁷ As the bark stand is missing (save for the small fragment), its removal by Ferlini to another spot seems possible, particularly if one considers the deep pit noted over the room in the stratigraphy.⁶⁸ The preserved fragment with the text could then represent the piece reportedly chipped off by Ferlini during his attempt at splitting the first 'pillar'. Crucially, this possibility is supported by Weidenbach's diary, in which he recalls that he saw (evidence)⁶⁹ that a large altar (*sic?*) had been excavated by 'Europeans' and heard that it had been removed (*ein großer Altar ist von Europäern ausgegraben und fortgeholt; das erstere*

⁶⁴ Onderka 2012: fig. 6, pl. 8.

⁶⁵ See *LDTV*: 338.

⁶⁶ Onderka – Vrtal 2022b: pl. 7.

⁶⁷ Onderka – Vrtal 2022b: 216.

⁶⁸ Onderka, *pers. comm.*

⁶⁹ The ground plan sketched by Erbkam reflects limits of room WBN 311, thus indicating that it was partly or completely excavated either by the Royal Prussian Expedition (in search of an analogy to Altar A?) or earlier; see Priese 1984: Abb. 3.

gesehen, das zweite gehört).⁷⁰ Ferlini sounds like a perfect candidate, particularly if one considers his mention about entrusting the bark stand to the local chief of village (physically?) and a similar reference by Lowell from 1835 about 'curious travellers'.

On the other hand, if the bark stand was nearly perfectly analogical to Altar A – and it is indeed highly reasonable to assume so – most arguments decisively speaking against the identification of Ferlini's 'pillars' as Altars A and B remain valid also for the bark stand from room WBN 311, including above all the discrepancies in the size, decoration, position of texts, and archaeological context. Although it is fairly imaginable that the hypothetical bark stand from room WBN 311 had a different iconographical decoration, the dimensions of the piece stated by Ferlini could not correspond to it being smaller than Altar A or B, if we accept either of these as the second, larger 'pillar'. Furthermore, the fragment of text seems to come from a corner, similar to the position of texts on Altars A and B and contrary to Ferlini's original description (but in concordance with the French version). Finally, room WBN 311 possessed neither a fired brick floor (originally, it was paved with sandstone blocks removed by stone robbers⁷¹) nor a column. A fourth, hypothetical and completely missing bark stand from room WBN 310, evidenced only by traces of wear on the surface of the sandstone floor⁷² and by symmetrical disposition of the temple, can also be considered as either the first or the second 'pillar', thus eliminating also the discrepancies of the relative size and position of texts, since its dimensions and design are simply unknown. However, only one of the 'pillars' was possibly removed by Ferlini, while both bark stands from rooms WBN 310 and WBN 311 are missing. Absence of one or both of the pieces thus most likely simply represents evidence of widespread activities of stone robbers in the antiquity⁷³ or antiquities hunters in the modern times that eluded any written records.

Is it thus possible that Weidenbach simply noted the clear traces of previous digging and linked them to a piece of information about the 'altar' that he did not 'hear' from locals who could remember the event of removal, but instead directly from Ferlini's

⁷⁰ Binder 2023: 286, 234.4–5.

⁷¹ Onderka – Vrtal 2022b: 216.

⁷² Onderka, *pers. comm.* Onderka also made an interesting observation that unlike other bark stands and altars in the temple, the hypothetical stand in room WBN 310 would not be embedded in the floor, thus making the cause of the wear in the centre of the floor uncertain.

⁷³ Note particularly the sandstone floor in room WBN 311 that was completely removed.



account?⁷⁴ After all, Lepsius was well-informed of Ferlini's previous work in Sudan already before the expedition.⁷⁵ Or was it indeed removed by Ferlini, possibly to the area of the present-day Qubbit Saleh, and then lost? And if so, did the loss occur still before the arrival of the Royal Prussian Expedition who did not record its existence while passing the village, despite the potential rumours from the locals?

The identification of the 'pillars' thus remains dubious and the potential inclination to one of the hypotheses hinges heavily on the assessment of Ferlini's account as a whole, as will be demonstrated below.

'MASQUE'

The paved room with a column, considered by Ferlini to be a habitation, was reportedly also the find spot of a 'masque' made of gagate, or jet, (*maschera di gagate/gagata*), which was worth including into Ferlini's collection brought to Europe under catalogue no. 128, despite its rough workmanship (*lavoro rozzo*).

It is difficult to establish the object category of the artefact. Ferlini himself – or rather Arcangelo Michele Migliarini (1779–1865) who helped him with the hurried compilation of the catalogue⁷⁶ – included it under stone and enamel artefacts with relief decoration (*pietre e paste diverse, lavori in rilievo*). From other objects referred to as *maschera* by Ferlini (or Migliarini), it is clear that he likely referred by this term to a representation of a human face – it was used also for Hathor heads in one case (cat. no. 3)⁷⁷ and for a Roman cameo with a depiction of a tragic mask in the other (cat. no. 101).⁷⁸ This is not paralleled in the French version of the text, however. The identification of the mineraloid (a type of lignite) from which the 'masque' was reportedly made is equally dubious, not to directly say improbable. Other black opaque substance may be expected, possibly basalt, non-translucent glass, or one of many semi-precious stones more common to the ancient Middle Nile region. Interestingly, the French translation describes the colour of the piece

⁷⁴ Notably, Weidenbach makes allusion to a great size of the 'altar'.

⁷⁵ See Boldrini 1981: XLI, L. See also a letter from Ungarelli to Ferlini, 18 March 1837, Famèja Bulgèisa di Bologna (MSS Ferlini, F.5).

⁷⁶ Letter from Migliarini to Ferlini, March 1837, Famèja Bulgèisa di Bologna (MSS Ferlini, F.5); Boldrini 1981: XXXVIII.

⁷⁷ Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst (henceforth SMÄK), inv. no. 2449; see Priese 1992: 24, Abb. 16.

⁷⁸ SMÄK, inv. no. 2497; see Priese 1992: 28, Abb. 25.

as reddish (*pierre rougeâtre dite gagate*). No other artefact made of gagate was listed in the catalogue. Ferlini, or his likely corrector(s), were able to distinguish blackish minerals, such as black jasper or nephrite (cat. nos. 2, 97, 100, 101), which could thus possibly be ruled out. Basalt is not mentioned in *Cenno sugli scavi*. Interestingly, several objects of black basalt were listed in his earlier *Cenno intorno la raccolta*,⁷⁹ however. Material of some of these objects was later corrected to serpentinite (cat. no. 118) and black jasper (cat. no. 2) in *Cenno sugli scavi*, but more importantly, they can be identified with other objects. Only in one case – an amulet in the form of a head of a lion with the *hemhem*-crown – the identification is problematic (cat. no. 127?). Although the latter could theoretically refer to a blackish masque, it is improbable that a lion head would fit Ferlini's (or Migliarini's) class of *maschera*, apparently reserved for human faces. Moreover, the list of *Cenno intorno la raccolta* was likely focused exclusively on artefacts from the Treasure of Amanishakhete.

In Ferlini's correspondence with Migliarini, Luigi Maria Ungarelli (1779–1845), and Ippolito Rosellini (1800–1843),⁸⁰ some objects from the catalogue were briefly discussed and even an annotated list of several of these (including objects of semi-precious stones) occurs. The 'masque' or any other object from Wad Ben Naga were not among these, however.

Finally, attempt can be made to match the description to any of the objects that Ferlini sold or donated to numerous museums. Through complex itineraries, objects from his collection, and their facsimiles, entered museums in Munich (in 1840), Bologna (in 1843), Berlin (on two occasions, in 1844 and 1913), Turin (in 1860–1861),⁸¹ and London.⁸² Only objects from the Treasure of Amanishakhete were purchased by King Ludwig I of Bavaria (currently in the Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst in Munich), by Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung in Berlin,⁸³ and by the British Museum. Facsimiles of some of these pieces, a model of a pyramid, a relief block, and an offering table from the necropolis at

⁷⁹ Pancaldi 1836: 14–16, nos. 5, 10.

⁸⁰ See Cesaretti 1987–1990; Boldrini 1981: XLI; Davoli 1993: 40–41. The correspondence is kept in the archives of the library of the Famèja Bulgèisa di Bologna (MSS Ferlini, F.5), Biblioteca Universitaria – Pisa (MSS Rosellini 294.1, 344802–344807), and Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la città metropolitana di Firenze e le province di Pistoia e Prato (MSS Migliarini, 5A–B).

⁸¹ See Fabretti et al. 1888: 283, 309; Boldrini 1981: XLIV, L–LI, LV–LVI; Priese 1992: 14–15.

⁸² *Zach forth.*

⁸³ ÄMP, inv. nos. 1639–1759, 6799–6802, 20896–20901, 22867–22878.



Begrawiya⁸⁴ were donated to Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna. Identical facsimiles and the model were also sent to the Royal Museum in Turin, currently Museo Egizio, in addition to two other objects – a wooden statuette of Isis from Begrawiya West and a faience clasp from Meroe⁸⁵ (cat. nos. 154 and 146, respectively).⁸⁶ No objects matching the description of the artefact from Wad Ben Naga were included among these.

Ferlini also organized a small museum, predominantly focused on natural history, in his own house. Some of the ancient artefacts remained there at least until 1913⁸⁷ and facsimiles of the Treasure were present even later.⁸⁸ Many objects from the private museum were destroyed during the bombing of Bologna in 1945.⁸⁹

The ‘masque’ of gagate can thus be considered lost at the present. The same can be said about the iron arrowheads found in the burial excavated by Ferlini at Wad Ben Naga and later brought to Europe.

TEMPLE

Ferlini concluded his month-long excavations at the site at another, randomly (*a caso*) selected place. There, he uncovered and entered vestiges of a building that he identified as a temple. The identification was almost certainly based on beautiful marks/imprints (*belli impronti*), the nature of which was not specified, except for the observation that they were destroyed (*rovinato*). Possibly, this remark was directed at remnants of relief or painted decoration of the temple. The destruction of the decoration of the completely devastated temple (*tempio tutto devastato*) was attributed to unspecified barbarians (*barbari*). It is rather questionable whether Ferlini could distinguish between any traces of deliberate war destruction or religious frenzy and results of common taphonomic processes such as stone looting, earthquakes, and water erosion.

Identification of the place that he described is quite impossible given the poor level of detail. Provided that Ferlini indeed referred to remnants of relief decoration with religious motifs by his *belli*

impronti, three possibilities presently come to mind: (i) the Isis Temple with its sandstone reliefs in the area of the entrance and the hypostyle hall⁹⁰ that were shortly after observed in an uncovered state by Lowell and Weidenbach, (ii) the Sandstone Chapel with its abundant, yet fragmentarily preserved reliefs that were noted without the need of digging already by Linant de Bellefonds and Caillaud, and later by Lowell and Weidenbach,⁹¹ and (iii) the Palace of Amanishakhete, in which sandstone and stucco reliefs were found presumably on the surface or just under it by the mission of the Sudan Antiquities Service in 1958–1959.⁹² Other candidates may yet remain unidentified. If Ferlini’s ‘pillars’ can be recognized as Altars A and B or bark stands from rooms WBN 310 and WBN 311, the first option may likely be excluded, unless the new spot that Ferlini chose for excavations was in fact very close to his previous digs.

After concluding excavations in the destroyed temple, Ferlini and Stefani decided – considering their excavations at the site fruitless and its further potential low – to move to the vicinity of the village of Begrawiya where they first tried their luck by excavating near the Amun Temple M 260, then moving on to the royal necropolis where Ferlini made the find that brought him fame.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The account of Giuseppe Ferlini on his excavations at Wad Ben Naga can be evaluated as a complicated combination of rather vague descriptions of archaeological situations and particular finds which are generally extremely difficult to attribute to specific locations, structures, or artefact classes, and a handful of more detailed elaborations that allow well-founded speculation on their identification, and in extension also veracity. The fog of the concise description offered by Ferlini who only rarely attempts to classify to any depth and often includes subjective conclusions without presenting any arguments is indeed mostly impenetrable. Some inferences show through quite clearly in spite of it, however. In the initial note mentioning erect columns, the Bes Pillars can be easily recognized even without greater elaboration from Ferlini, and similarly, the part dedicated to excavations in the cemetery can be with little

⁸⁴ Kmínek-Szedlo 1895: 350, inv. nos. 3156–3157; Davoli 1993: 39, 42; Davoli 1998; Davoli – Zach 2003.

⁸⁵ Tommaso Montonati, Johannes Auenmüller, *pers. comm.*

⁸⁶ See Fabretti et al. 1888: 283, 309, cat. nos. sub 6827 *Facsimili*, 7116; Museo Egizio, inv. no. P.8162; Priese 1992: 15, see also Boldrini 1981: LXII–LXIII, fig. 24.

⁸⁷ See Boldrini 1981: LXV–LXVI.

⁸⁸ Boldrini 1981: fig. 25.

⁸⁹ Boldrini 1981: LXIII.

⁹⁰ See Onderka et al. 2021a: 68–72; pl. 2; Onderka et al. 2021b: 149; Onderka – Vrtal 2022a: 213, pls. 2–3.

⁹¹ Onderka – Vrtal 2022a: 89–96; Onderka – Vrtal 2022b: 217–225; Vrtal *forth.*

⁹² Vrtal 2022: 9.



doubt identified as a surprisingly useful description of a collective burial of a Meroitic or post-Meroitic date with an interment of a warrior richly equipped with various iron weapons and ceramic beer jars. The detailed description of the burial finds only one other match in the account, namely the description of the find circumstances and characteristics of the two 'granite pillars' uncovered in the settlement area. Despite the level of detail provided, the latter's evaluation is perhaps the most problematic, as it hinges heavily on the assessment of the veracity and accuracy of Ferlini's statements.

Critical analysis of Ferlini's records makes confirmation of Budge's identification of the 'pillar(s)' found in the settlement area as Altar(s) A (and B) of the Royal Prussian Expedition extremely difficult. The similarities – quadratic shape, presence of reliefs and texts – appear extremely vague from the objective perspective. The contradictions, on the other hand, are substantial. Arguments such as significantly different size and proportions, numbers and nature of figures depicted, and archaeological context of the finds are hard to ignore, even if some of the arguments against the identification could be disproved (material, possibly distribution of texts and damage).

Despite the overall impression, Budge's idea nevertheless does not cease to be tempting entirely, although the first 'pillar', described in greater detail by Ferlini, would rather have to be identified with Altar B, not Altar A (based on relative dimensions; damage might speak otherwise). The plausibility of the Royal Prussian Expedition having concentrated their efforts on one of the spots disturbed by Ferlini remains very high. Lowell's and Weidenbach's descriptions of the partly uncovered Isis Temple corroborate strongly such an interpretation, although it is not certain that the clearances were Ferlini's responsibility. The dating of Lowell's visit shortly after Ferlini indicates so, however. From the state of preservation of the recently uncovered rooms,⁹³ it is also evident that tops of the bark stands could have well been noted exposed on the surface by the Prussians, even if they had been reburied by Ferlini. Moreover, the vagueness of similarities between Ferlini's description and the two Altars is compensated to a limited extent by the lasting exceptionality of this category of finds at the site. Bearing this in mind, Ferlini would indeed have to be credited with the discovery of both Altars.

Onderka's finds of the fragment of another inscribed bark stand and the possible traces of still another nearby, and particularly Weidenbach's com-

ment on the removal of an 'altar' by the mysterious Europeans allow still more alternative explanations, and show that Budge may have been only partly right, and although Ferlini was nearly certainly active in the Isis Temple, he discovered and described a different bark stand or altar – possibly one in room WBN 310 or WBN 311 – whose characteristics may have better, although certainly not completely corresponded to his description. Altar A would then perhaps represent only the second, larger 'pillar' and the first 'pillar', described in detail, could be presently considered lost.

Impressions aside, one is left with only two strictly fact-based options: Either the contradictory evidence from Ferlini's narrative speaks overwhelmingly against Budge's identification of Ferlini's 'pillars' as Altars A and B (and almost certainly also the bark stand from room WBN 311) or the perception of *any* reliability of Ferlini's record must be nearly completely rejected, leaving only extremely blurred and distorted frame of the narrative, in which reality is *untraceably* entangled with fabrication. If the former is correct, there is a good chance that sandstone (rather than granite) monumental artefacts matching Ferlini's description will be uncovered in the settlement area of the site or its surroundings in the future, unless they followed the fate of the nearby Bes Pillars.

But even the latter option is far from being unbased, in fact. Ferlini's fable over the location of the find spot of the Treasure of Amanishakhete is notorious. It was suggested that Ferlini fabricated some of the circumstantial details of the discovery at Begrawiya in order to confuse any potential followers,⁹⁴ possibly with the hope of making similar gains in the future. His motivations may have been similar at Wad Ben Naga, particularly if we consider his intention to donate the smaller 'pillar' to Jean-François Mimaut. At the same time, one can see only little benefit in making misleading descriptions of the 'pillars' themselves, rather than those of their locations. Many errors, distortions, and fabrications thus may have been rather a product of bad memory than deliberate mystification, or at best attempts to embroider the facts. Indeed, the manuscript of *Cenno sugli scavi* was produced only in late months of 1836,⁹⁵ more than two years after Ferlini's visit to the site. There are other indices hinting in this direction, such as the abovementioned inaccuracy in the measurements of the pyramid of Amanishakhete. In this case, the intention was perhaps to increase the

⁹⁴ Dunham 1953: 92; Hinkel 1985: 325; Markowitz – Lacovara 1996: 3; see also Budge 1907: I, 296.

⁹⁵ Boldrini 1981: XLI.

93 See Onderka and Vrtal 2022a: pls. 4, 6.



veracity of the record, as shapes of Meroitic pyramids were then little known in Europe, except through Cailliaud's monumental work. Another mystification concerned a relief block that Ferlini claimed to have come from the entrance to the pyramid of Amanishakhete (cat. no. 149).⁹⁶ It was demonstrated that the block in fact originated from an older chapel of a completely different pyramid in the Southern, not Northern Cemetery at Begrawiya.⁹⁷ Here, Ferlini's attribution undoubtedly aimed at enhancing the value of the piece by associating it with the Treasure, although explanation by a secondary use of the block in the pyramid was also suggested.⁹⁸ On the other hand, some of the observations reported by Ferlini betray surprising accuracy, for example the description of the funerary goods in the multiple burial at Wad Ben Naga, a relief depiction of a man (*sic?*) on a lion throne from the offering chapel of one of the abovementioned pyramids,⁹⁹ or a fairly likely provenance of the offering table of King Yesebokheamani.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Markowitz and Lacovara were successful in recognizing many elements of actual reality even in Ferlini's intentionally disorienting description of the substructure of the pyramid of Amanishakhete.¹⁰¹

The doubtful reliability of Ferlini's description of the 'pillars' is illustrative and may be extended also to other finds from the site of Wad Ben Naga. For example, the comparison of the architecture of the tomb with multiple individuals to Roman catacombs brings more confusion than clarification, as parallels to such an arrangement are lacking from the site and its hinterland. Indeed, the local geological conditions do not seem suitable for any rock-cut subterranean architecture, and brick cladding of burial chambers seems to be confined to the kingdom's north.¹⁰² Perhaps Ferlini projected to the report some of his observations from Begrawiya or the simile simply appeared as a suggestion of one of his Italian aides in writing. The possibility of an existence of tombs at Wad Ben Naga with a more sophisticated architecture – rather than a complex ground plan – is nevertheless premature to fully exclude, given the limited understanding of the site's cemeteries. It is also necessary to stress the high credibility of Fer-

lini's descriptions of the burials themselves and of the funerary goods accompanying them, which perfectly fit the expectable funerary ritus and paraphernalia. Unfortunately, in the case of the 'masque' of gagate, Ferlini's description is so vague that it barely allows to discuss its accuracy, as a variety of object categories matching the description can be imagined. The only inference that seems certain is the doubtful identification of the material of the piece.

The conundrum of the degree of veracity of some parts of Ferlini's report cannot be resolved satisfactorily until some accidental future finds allow pointing to one of the options with greater likelihood. The question may nevertheless well remain open indefinitely, as it must prove extremely difficult to match Ferlini's vague descriptions with any uncovered situations to allow comparisons. Despite all that, there is little that would support full rejection of the report, and it remains a valuable source on the appearance of the site in the 19th century, its gradual reshaping by continual human activity, and on archaeological phenomena that might have been – and with varying probability indeed were – encountered.

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96 Museo civico archeologico in Bologna, inv. no. 3156, Kminek-Szedlo 1895: 350; Davoli 1993.

97 Zach 1992: 296–297, 301; Davoli 1993: 43.

98 Davoli 1993: 43.

99 In the latter case, however, Cailliaud's drawings may have very well been Ferlini's actual source again (see Cailliaud 1823: pl. XLVI).

100 See Davoli 1998; Zach – Davoli 2003: 27–28.

101 Markowitz – Lacovara 1996: 4.

102 Francigny 2016: carte 5.



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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Studie ist eine kritische Analyse des Berichts von Giuseppe Ferlini über seine Ausgrabungen in Wad Ben Naga im Jahr 1834. Ein Ziel ist es, die unzureichende Aufmerksamkeit, die Ferlinis Beschreibung seiner quasi-archäologischen Aktivitäten – die frühesten an diesem Ort – geschenkt wurde, zu beheben. Vor allem aber werden die möglichen oder wahrscheinlichen Areale von Ferlinis Ausgrabungen identifiziert und auch die von ihm freigelegten und beschriebenen Strukturen und Funde, mit besonderem Augenmerk auf die beiden von ihm als „Pfeiler“ bezeichneten Blöcke. Letztere wurden später mit einigen der wichtigsten Funden von Wad Ben Naga identifiziert, allerdings nicht ohne erhebliche Unklarheiten, die im Detail vorgelegt und diskutiert werden. Trotz der Vagheit des Berichts, die durch den Vergleich mit kürzlich durchgeföhrten Ausgrabungen sowie neu veröffentlichten weiteren zeitgenössischen Berichten nur teilweise geklärt werden konnte, bleibt Ferlinis Beschreibung eine wichtige Quelle zum Aussehen des archäologischen Ortes im 19. Jahrhundert, seiner allmählichen Umgestaltung durch menschliche Aktivitäten und zu archäologischen Phänomenen, die mit unterschiedlicher Plausibilität von Ferlini freigelegt wurden.