



TSUBASA SAKAMOTO

SOBA AND THE MEROITIC SOUTHERN FRONTIER

At Khartoum, before the Sudan National Museum, to the left of where the ‘monumental alleys’ begin, a splendid ram statue has been exhibited to welcome visitors. According to French explorer Frédéric Cailliaud,¹ the statue was discovered in 1821 among the ancient ruins at Soba, the capital of the medieval kingdom of Alwa/Alodia. While it is not clear exactly when the statue was transferred to Khartoum, perhaps between 1866 and 1873,² the inscription along its base was first ‘noted’ by Pierre Trémaux in 1862 (cf. *infra*) and examined by Johannes Dümichen in 1863.³ If the latter’s study was of a preliminary nature, attempting to identify ‘Alwa’, Francis Griffith deciphered the text in 1911 with the following comment:⁴ “Thus the text appears to consist of the name of a king with some epithets, and a dedication to Ammon with complimentary phrases or prayers.”

The importance of this text, bearing the royal cartouche of ...reqerem, lies in the fact that it represents the most southern of the known Meroitic inscriptions (REM 0001). Therefore, the ram statue of Soba soon became used to argue for the territorial expansion of the Meroitic dynasties. It is true that the region was reached by the Napatan kings, given the discovery of statues inscribed for Aspelta at Defeia and Umm Dom.⁵ It is also true that the Christian church was excavated at Soba by Peter Shinnie in

1950-1952.⁶ However, he discovered few Meroitic objects. One may suspect that the archer’s looses prove this dating,⁷ but similar examples are also seen in the Post-Meroitic and Christian periods. Nor is it possible to assign the seated statue of Osiris measuring 2.5 feet high and the stone lion of unknown size, seen by Karl Richard Lepsius,⁸ to the Meroitic period without knowing their exact origin. It may thus seem that the ram statue could be considered, at least until this time, the only evidence of the alleged Meroitic occupation of Soba.

The question is therefore to understand who we are dealing and why he left evidence of his life at Soba. As for the former question, several theories exist. A significant contribution was made in 1977 when Shinnie and Rebecca Bradly published their examination of the remains of a Meroitic temple of el-Hassa that was discovered in the course of digging an irrigation canal.⁹ A sandstone ram soon appeared, bearing a hieroglyphic inscription along its base (REM 1151) similar to that of the ram from Soba. Despite their difference in size,¹⁰ a comparison was made showing that the texts are almost identical.¹¹

The conclusion drawn was that the two ram statues, that of Soba and that of el-Hassa, were produced by one and the same king who was named “Amanakhareqerem” and whom Fritz Hinze

1 F. Cailliaud, *Voyage à Méroé et au Fleuve Blanc, au-delà de Fâzoql dans le midi du royaume de Sennâr, à Syouah et dans cinq autres oasis, fait dans les années 1819, 1820, 1821 et 1822* II (Paris, 1826), p. 207. See also M. Shinnie (ed.), *Linand de Bellefonds. Journal d’un voyage à Méroé dans les années 1821 et 1822*, SASOP 4 (Khartoum, 1958), p. 101 and n. 3.

2 I. Hofmann, ‘Der Widder von Soba’, *GöttMisz* 43 (1981), p. 55; M. Zach, ‘Einige Bemerkungen zum Widder von Soba’, *GöttMisz* 95 (1987), p. 86.

3 P. Trémaux, *Voyage en Éthiopie au Soudan oriental et dans la Nigritie I. Égypte et Éthiopie* (Paris, 1862), p. 296; J. Dümichen, *Zur Geographie des alten Ägypten* (Leipzig, 1894), Taf. vi.

4 F. L. Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions I. Sôba to Dangêl*, ASEg Memoir 19 (London, 1911), p. 52.

5 SNM 11777 and 30177. J. Vercoutter, ‘Le sphinx d’Aspelta de Defeia’, in *Mélanges Mariette, BiEtud* 32 (Cairo, 1961), p. 97-104; Salah Omer Elsadig, ‘Some Fragments from a Statue of King Aspelta at Umm Dom (Khartoum Province)’, *ANM* 9 (2002), p. 89-93.

6 P. L. Shinnie, *Excavation at Soba*, SASOP 3 (Khartoum, 1961), p. 25-27. See also E. A. W. Budge, *The Egyptian Sûdân. Its History and Monuments* (London, 1907), I, p. 324-325.

7 Shinnie, *Excavation at Soba*, p. 58, pl. xx.a; D. A. Welsby and C. M. Daniels, *Soba. Archaeological Research at a Medieval Capital on the Blue Nile*, BIEA Memoir 12 (London, 1991), p. 147-149, 163, figs. 72, 81; D. A. Welsby, *Soba II. Renewed Excavations within the Metropolis of the Kingdom of Alwa in Central Sudan*, BIEA Memoir 15 (London, 1998), p. 76, figs. 31-32.

8 K. R. Lepsius, *Briefe aus Aegypten, Aethiopien, und der Halbinsel des Sinai* (Berlin, 1852), p. 161, 163.

9 P. L. Shinnie and R. J. Bradley, ‘A New Meroitic Royal Name’, *MeroitNewsl.* 18 (1977), p. 29-31.

10 P. Lenoble and V. Rondot, ‘À la redécouverte d’El-Hassa. Temple à Amon, palais royal et ville de l’empire méroïtique’, *CRIPPEL* 23 (2003), p. 115.

11 Cf. K. Zibelius, *Der Löwentempel von Naq’a in der Butana (Sudan) IV. Die Inschriften*, TAVO B 48/4 (Wiesbaden, 1983), p. 44.



hypothesised to have existed in the late second century AD (cf. *infra*).¹²

It must be added that the same name may appear on the so-called “Omphalos from Napata” (REM 1004).¹³ The object, discovered by George Reisner in the room B503 of the Amun temple of Gebel Barkal, is decorated with religious motifs containing two royal cartouches. Though the left cartouche doubtlessly refers to Nebmaatré, i.e., the throne name of the king, there is a long-standing debate about the reading of the right cartouche. Griffith and Inge Hofmann proposed “Amanikhanewel” and “Amanikhabale” while Dows Dunham suggested it read “Manikhanaqerme”,¹⁴ a proposition further endorsed in recent literatures with a minor change (‘r’ instead of ‘n’).¹⁵ With recent additions from Naga and at Dokki Gel,¹⁶ more than a few documents exist concerning the king Amanakhareqerem. A marked chronological revision of his reign has also been achieved by Claude Rilly in favour of the end of the first century AD.¹⁷

12 F. Hintze, *Studien zur meroitischen Chronologie und zu den Opfertafeln aus den Pyramiden von Meroe*, ADAW 1959.2 (Berlin, 1959), p. 68, n. 1. For the reading, see C. Rilly, ‘Approche comparative de la paléographie et de la chronologie royale de Méroé’, *MeroitNewsl.* 28 (2001), p. 71, n. 1.

13 S. Wenig, *Africa in Antiquity. The Arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan II. The Catalogue* (Brooklyn, 1978), Cat. No. 131; M. Baud, A. Sackho-Autissier and S. Labbé-Toutée (eds.), *Méroé. Un empire sur le Nil* (Paris-Milan, 2010), Cat. No. 69.

14 F. Ll. Griffith, ‘An Omphalos from Napata’, *JEA* 3 (1916), p. 255; I. Hofmann, ‘Der sogenannte Omphalos von Napata’, *JEA* 56 (1970), p. 190; D. Dunham in G. Steindorff, ‘The So-called Omphalos of Napata’, *JEA* 24 (1938), p. 150.

15 S. Wenig, ‘Ein neuer alter Königsname’, in S. Wenig (ed.), *Studien zum antiken Sudan. Akten der 7. Internationalen Tagung für meroitistische Forschungen vom 14. bis 19. September 1992 in Gosen/bei Berlin, Meroitica* 15 (Wiesbaden, 1999), p. 680; *FHN* III (Bergen, 1998), p. 937; V. Rondot, ‘Le qore Amanakhareqerem et son temple à Amon d’el-Hassa’, in V. Rondot and N. Detreit (eds.), *Kerma et Méroé. Cinq conférences d’archéologie soudanaise* (Khartoum, 2006), p. 37.

16 G. Hallof and J. Hallof, ‘Eine königliche Inschrift aus Naga’, *BSF* 7 (2000), p. 169-171; D. Valbelle, ‘Un petit monument du qore Amanakhareqerem’, in V. Rondot, F. Alpi and F. Villeneuve (eds.), *La pioche et la plume. Autour du Soudan, du Liban et de la Jordanie. Hommages archéologiques à Patrice Lenoble* (Paris, 2011), p. 441-444. See also K. Kröper, S. Schoske and D. Wildung, *Königsstadt Naga/Naga Royal City. Grabungen in der Wüste des Sudan/Excavations in the Desert of the Sudan* (Munich-Berlin, 2011), p. 68-85.

17 C. Rilly, ‘Approche comparative de la paléographie et de la chronologie royale de Méroé’, p. 81; C. Rilly, ‘Meroitische Texte aus Naga’, in Kröper, Schoske and Wildung, *Königsstadt Naga/Naga Royal City*, p. 195-201.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the above observations is that the ram statue of Soba bears the name of the king Amanakhareqerem. Because the parallels at el-Hassa have been proved to have flanked the *dromos* of the Amun temple on its eastern side,¹⁸ it is tempting to suppose that a similar Meroitic building existed at Soba from which the territorial administration of the area was conducted. In fact, such interpretations had already been advanced in the 1980-1990s. A substantial argument was put forward by Derek Welsby, the director of new excavations carried out between 1981-1986, i.e., after a lapse of thirty years since Shinnie’s work. If one does not include several Napatan scarabs, three apparently ‘Pre-Christian’ objects were recovered.¹⁹ The first is fragments of amber-coloured glass inlay unearthed at the western end of mound B. The second and third, much more important, are of a rectangular sandstone block measuring 99 x 55 x 28 cm (Fig. 1) and a probable sphinx about 1.3 m long. No inscriptions were noted. The last was found scattered around the entrance of building B but lacks most of the neck and head, which makes a precise dating impossible.

The rectangular sandstone block was found upside-down and, therefore reused, between the second and third column bases on the north side of the nave in building B. Yet what would surely be more remarkable is its low relief depicting the head of the goddess Hathor, with her cows’ ears and head-dress. Similar representations are seen in temple B 300 at Jebel Barkal and in the Typhonium (WBN 200) at Wad Ben Naga. While no specific dating was advanced by Welsby,²⁰ it must be noted that recent Czech expeditions have discovered at the latter temple plaster fragments bearing the name Natakamani, a king who is known to have reigned in the first century AD.²¹ This fact would indicate that the Soba block is of a reasonably similar date.

18 V. Rondot, ‘El-Hassa : Un temple à Amon dans l’île de Méroé au I^{er} siècle de notre ère’, *CRAIBL* (2012), p. 172. Cf. M. Baldi, ‘The el-Hassa Rams: An example of Egyptian-Nubian syncretism’, *JAEG* 7.4 (2015), p. 55-57.

19 Welsby and Daniels, *Soba*, p. 5, 143, 296-298 and 310.

20 Welsby and Daniels, *Soba*, p. 296.

21 P. Onderka and V. Vrtal, *Wad Ben Naga 1821-2013* (Prague, 2013), p. 116-117. See, in addition to the royal name, P. Onderka and V. Vrtal, ‘Preliminary Report on the Sixth Excavation Season of the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga’, *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 35.1 (2014), p. 72; P. Onderka, V. Vrtal and A. Gatzsche, ‘Preliminary Report on the Ninth Excavation Season of the Archaeological Expedition to Wad Ben Naga’, *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 36.2 (2015), p. 94-95.

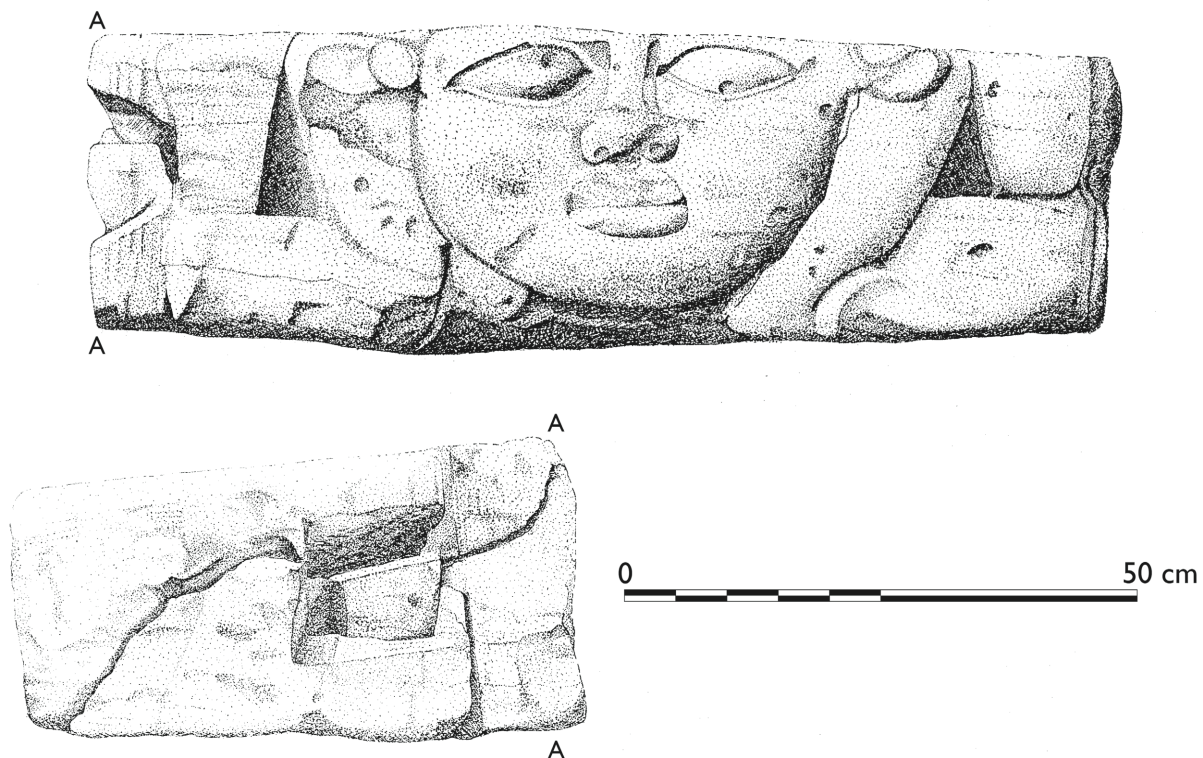


Fig. 1: Hathor Block from Soba East (after Welsby and Daniels, *Soba*, fig. 171)

The same conclusion was reached by Michael Zach, who, in 1992, added two more Hathor blocks that once crowned colossal columns to the list of parallels.²² The discovery was made in 1974, when an Italian mission led by Segio Donadoni excavated temple B 1300 of Gebel Barkal.²³ The Hathor blocks were reused in the foundations of the pylon and were therefore no longer visible to the eye, suggesting that an earlier building on or close to this location had been torn down to (re)construct the temple.²⁴ Equally significant is the fact that an inscribed fragment of architrave, also from the pylon, was proven to contain the name Natakamani in the royal cartouche and the titles of a goddess, probably Mut (REM 1181).²⁵

22 M. Zach, 'Das Hathor-Relief aus Soba-Ost. Ein Beitrag zu Fragen der meroitischen Religion', *Aegyptus Antiqua* 8 (1992), p. 27-32.

23 S. Donadoni and S. Bosticco, 'Scavi italiani al Gebel Barkal', in N. B. Millet and A. L. Kelly (eds.), *Meroitic Studies. Proceedings of the Third International Meroitic Conference Toronto 1977*, *Meroitica* 6 (Berlin, 1982), p. 300; S. Donadoni, *Documenti di architettura meroitica. Una cultura africana nell'età di Roma imperiale* (Rome, 1984), pl. [13] below.

24 For an earlier building, see A. Roccati, 'The Italian Archaeological Expedition to Jebel Barkal/Napata', in W. Godlewski and A. Łajtar (eds.), *Between the Cataracts* 1, *PAM Suppl.* 2.1 (Warsaw, 2008), p. 258.

25 Donadoni and Bosticco, 'Scavi italiani al Gebel Barkal', p. 294.

Zach concludes as follows:²⁶

„Es deuten also eine Reihe von Indizien darauf hin, daß sich zumindest zur hochmeroitischen Zeit ein Mut-Hathor- oder Isistempel in Soba befand, als dessen Bauherren möglicherweise das genannte Herrscherpaar [i.e. Natakamani and Amanitore] fungierte. Dadurch wäre auch eine relativ geringe zeitliche Differenz zu der eingangs erwähnten Widderplastik gegeben, so daß eine vielleicht existierende Verehrungsstätte des Amun durchaus zeitgleich anzusetzen sein könnte.“

Soba may therefore conceivably have contained a Meroitic temple constructed in the first century AD, to which the Hathor block originally belonged and to which Amanakhareqerem later donated the ram statue. An another argument in favour of this scenario was that a religious structure preceding Christianity was declared to have been discovered in 1990-1992, as stated in the 1999 article entitled "Meroitic Soba".²⁷ According to this article, a num-

26 Zach, 'Das Hathor-Relief aus Soba-Ost', p. 31. See also M. H. Zach and H. Tomandl, 'Bemerkungen zu den Amunheiligtümern in Süden des meroitischen Reiches', *BSF* 7 (2000), p. 130.

27 D. A. Welsby, 'Meroitic Soba', in Wenig, *Studien zum antiken Sudan*, p. 663-677. Cf. C. M. Rocheleau, *Amun Temples in Nubia. A Typological Study of New Kingdom, Napatan and Meroitic Temples*, *BAR-IS* 1850 (Oxford, 2008), p. 60.

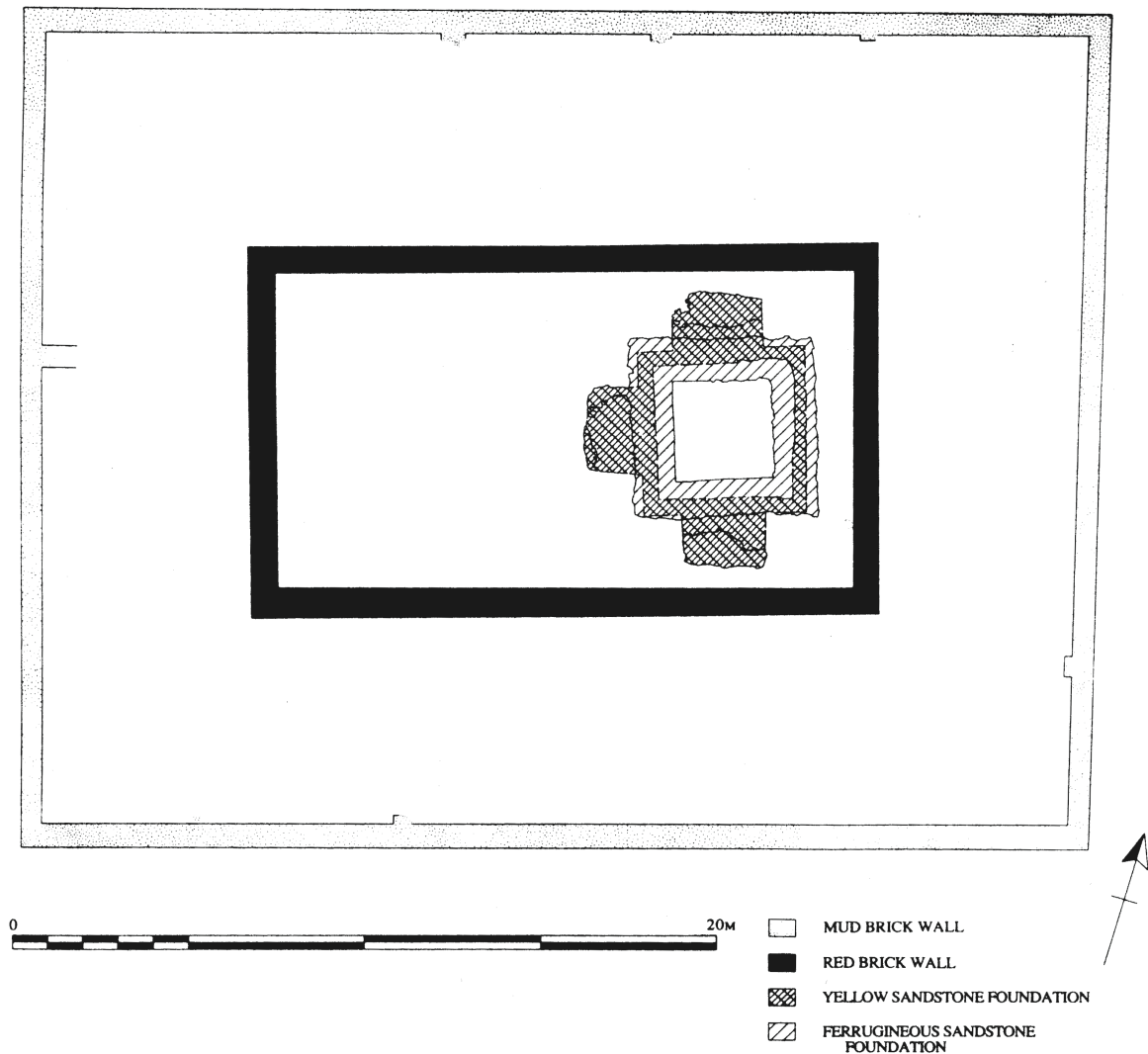


Fig. 2: Building G at Soba East, first phase (after Welsby, 'Meroitic Soba', fig. 1)

ber of ceramic materials unearthed in building G (Fig. 2) have decorations that are very similar to Meroitic painting styles.

The same logic was applied to the building G itself, which had at least two construction phases. The initial stage resulted in a rectangular area approximately 31.5 x 24.6 m enclosed by a mud brick wall. In the centre was a red brick structure measuring 17.75 x 10.55 m, which was provided with a stone podium and three buttresses. Their original form and function remain unclear. The second phase, divided later to include the third and last phase,²⁸ sees the appearance of a number of new walls that were added to the western end but outside of the building. At the west end of the podium, which may have remained in use in this phase, were large stone blocks forming two rows of what may have been three column bases or timber posts. The religious function of the

building G seems thus likely. A bibliographical survey has revealed that similar architectural features are also observed at several religious monuments in Central Sudan, such as Meroe,²⁹ although the form of the podium has no known parallels. With proper prudence, Welsby came to the conclusion that Soba was used from the Meroitic period onwards and, therefore, that the site lays within the boundaries of the Meroitic Empire.³⁰

However, this conclusion was soon nuanced by Welsby himself in 2001; while a small group of what may be considered Meroitic sherds was unearthed, they are too small to confirm Meroitic occupation, even of building G. The conclusion drawn from this is as follows:³¹ "We support the long-established

28 Welsby, *Soba II*, p. 275-278.

29 E.g. Temple KC 101. See P. L. Shinnie and J. R. Anderson, *The Capital of Kush 2. Meroë Excavations 1973-1984*, *Meroitica* 20 (Wiesbaden, 2004), p. 36-44, fold.pl. ix.

30 Welsby, 'Meroitic Soba', p. 669.

31 Welsby, *Soba II*, p. 20, 272. For a recent account of the



view that the few monumental Meroitic sculptures found were brought from elsewhere”, and “The few ‘exotic’ objects such as the stone sphinxes and glass inlays do not in themselves conclusively demonstrate a Meroitic presence on the site.” Indeed, this is the interpretation that has found favour in the current scholarship. Recent investigations carried out by Zach and Vincent Rondot have revealed that the ram statue described in the book of Trémaux does not concern Soba but is, in reality, a false copy of one of the ram-headed stone sphinxes that flanked the processional avenue of the temple of Amun of Naga.³² Thus it cannot seriously be doubted that Soba’s statue was transported from el-Hassa, a site where a number of identical examples has been recorded.

Consequently, none of the arguments in support of the Meroitic occupation of Soba can withstand scrutiny.³³ Although we are far from being able to explain why and when the Meroitic sculptures, such as the ram statue and Hathor block, were transferred, perhaps from sites in the Keraba region, it appears beyond doubt that, with the exception of el-Treis where a potsherd is supposed to bear an incised letter,³⁴ the southernmost location upon the Nile to which a Meroitic inscription belongs is Wad Ben Naga. It is not, therefore, surprising that there is a different regional character in the Khartoum province.³⁵ The graves in this area are generally quite poor during the Meroitic period and lack a pyramidal

superstructure, having instead the earthen tumulus. This tumulus covers a vertical pit or sloping passage, typically on the eastern side, leading into the burial chamber in which the deceased was placed – with very few exceptions – in a tightly contracted position and in a north-south orientation. It is not without significance for an understanding of this funerary pattern that a recent investigation envisages various cultural groups in the province.³⁶

Particularly interesting in this connexion is that the territorial expansion of Meroe is often discussed within the context of two nome-lists engraved on the temple of Isis at Philae.³⁷ One was engraved on Room I under Ptolemy II, while the other, attributed to the Ptolemy VI, is found on the western entrance of the first pylon. Regardless of the difference in their dating, both represent lists of Nubian nomes bringing tribute, more precisely local minerals, to the goddess, and end with the toponym *Phwj-Knst* “End of Kenset”, which is preceded by Meroe. Because the lists seem to maintain a clear geographic order from north to south, this would lead one to suppose that *Phwj-Knst* is located somewhere to the south of Meroe – possibly near an ancient galena (manganese?) mine – and in the general area to which Louis Žabkar and László Török once attributed Musawwarat es-Sufra, Naga or Wad Ben Naga.³⁸ Although subsequent discussions appear to have abandoned this interpretation and related the toponym to “Nubia”,³⁹ it would nevertheless be possible

building, which “post-date[s] the Kushite period”, see D. A. Welsby, ‘The Kingdom of Alwa’, in J. R. Anderson and D. A. Welsby (eds.), *The Fourth Cataract and Beyond. Proceedings of the 12th International Conference for Nubian Studies, BMPES 1* (Leuven-Paris-Walpole, 2014), p. 191.

- 32 M. H. Zach, ‘Die frühesten Fotografien meroitischer Altertümer’, in A. Lohwasser and P. Wolf (eds.), *Ein Forscherleben zwischen den Welten. Zum 80. Geburtstag von Steffen Wenig* (Berlin, 2014), p. 407; V. Rondot, ‘Trémaux’s Description of Soba’s Ram and its Consequences on the Southern Border of the Meroitic Empire’, in M. Honegger (ed.), *Abstracts of Papers Presented at the 13th International Conference for Nubian Studies* (Neuchâtel, 2014), p. 56.
- 33 For a similar remark, see already Mohi el-Din Abdalla Zarroug, *The Kingdom of Alwa, African Occasional Papers* 5 (Calgary, 1991), p. 46.
- 34 D. Usai, S. Salvatori, T. Jakob and R. David, ‘The Al Khiday Cemetery in Central Sudan and its “Classic/Late Meroitic” Period Graves’, *Journal of African Archaeology* 12 (2014), p. 195, pl. 12.
- 35 I. Caneva, ‘Le tumulus funéraire dans les cultures anciennes du Soudan central nilotique’, in C. Berger, G. Clerc and N. Grimal (eds.), *Hommages à Jean Leclant II. Nubie, Soudan, Éthiopie, BiEtud* 106/2 (Cairo, 1994), p. 84-90; I. Caneva and I. Vincentelli, ‘Research on Late Meroitic Funerary Remains in the Khartoum Province’, in Wenig, *Studien zum antiken Sudan*, p. 495-500, esp. 497.

- 36 S. Salvatori, D. Usai, M. F. Abdelrahman, A. Di Matteo, P. Iacumin, V. Linseele and M. K. Magzoub, ‘Archaeology at el-Khiday. New Insight on the Prehistory and History of Central Sudan’, in Anderson and Welsby, *The Fourth Cataract and Beyond*, p. 255.
- 37 A. Rickert, ‘Die Prozessionen nubischer Städte und Regionen in Philae: Ein Vorbericht’, in A. Rickert and B. Ventker (eds.), *Altägyptische Enzyklopädien. Die Soubassements in den Tempeln der griechisch-römischen Zeit, SSR 7/Soubassementstudien 1* (Wiesbaden, 2014), p. 321-327; H. Kockelmann and A. Rickert, *Von Meroe bis Indien. Fremdvolkerlisten und nubische Gegenträger in den griechisch-römischen Tempeln, SSR 12/Soubassementstudien 5* (Wiesbaden, 2015), p. 145-175. See also *FHN II* (Bergen, 1996), p. 564-566 (No. 112), 614-630 (No. 137).
- 38 L. V. Žabkar, *Apedemak Lion God of Meroe. A Study in Egyptian-Meroitic Syncretism* (Warminster, 1975), p. 33; L. Török, *Economic Offices and Officials in Meroitic Nubia (A Study in Territorial Administration of the Late Meroitic Kingdom)*, *StudAeg* 5 (Budapest, 1979), p. 77, map 11. Cf. L. Török, ‘Die meroitischen Nomoi’, *Mitteilungen des archäologischen Instituts der ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 8/9 (1978-1979), p. 50.
- 39 L. Török, *Between Two Worlds. The Frontier Region between Ancient Nubia and Egypt 3700 BC – 500 AD*, *ProblÄg* 29 (Leiden-Boston, 2009), p. 387; Kockelmann and Rickert, *Von Meroe bis Indien*, p. 158-159, 253.

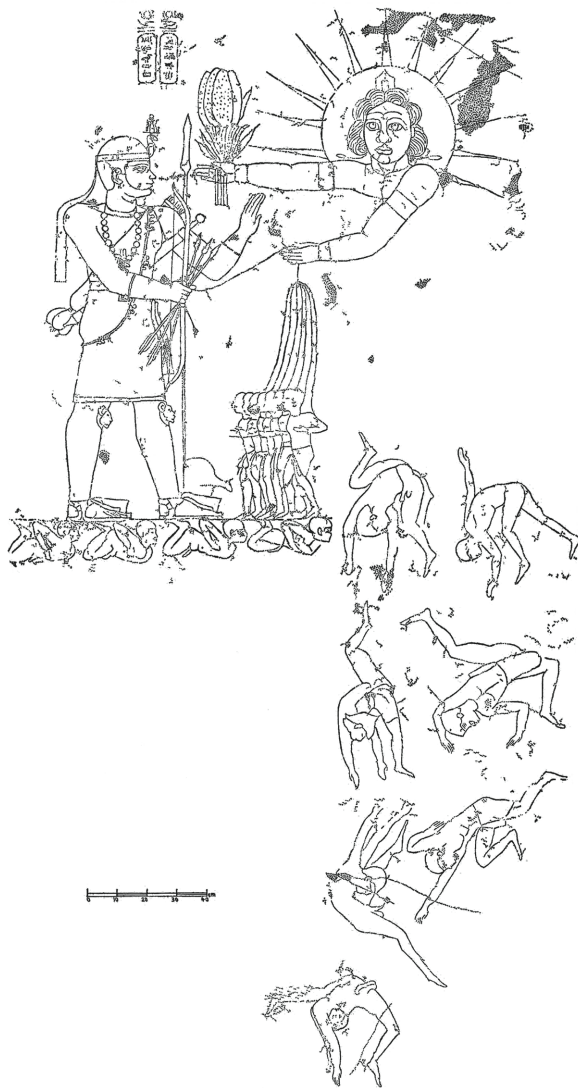


Fig. 3: Rock drawing at Gebel Qeili and king Shorkaror (after Hintze, 'Vorbericht über die Butana-Expedition 1958', Abb. 8)

to envisage a sort of territorial limit from Meroe southwards. If this were so, it would certainly not be necessary to suppose the existence, at Soba, of an administrative centre or a temple closely connected to rulers. Because of the lack of evidence, however, I would much rather leave undecided whether this region was occupied by non-residential or nomadic peoples (e.g., Noba) who had come into the Nile Valley from the peripheries of the Kingdom.

One indication that such a scenario might be the case is nevertheless provided by a written monument discovered in peripheral or apparently less important areas of the Meroitic Kingdom. Its historical significance was first brought to general notice by John Crowfoot, who, in 1908, visited Gebel Qeili and documented a rock drawing carved upon the

north face of a local boulder (Fig. 3).⁴⁰ The drawing is divided into two registers. The lower register contains four bound captives facing toward the right, while the upper register shows a religious scene in which the king receives a bundle of dura and seven bound captives, facing left, from a god, apparently of a solar character.⁴¹ All these iconographic elements seem to point towards an interpretation suggesting that the king "Shorkaror", whose name is written in the royal cartouches above him (REM 0002), undertook a successful military campaign against the inhabitants of this remote region in the first century AD.⁴²

In the absence of narrative passages related to this scene, it would be difficult to explain the nature of the military campaign and why Shorkaror should conduct such an enterprise. Because Jebel Qeili is now located on the modern road leading from Khartoum to Kassala, one may suspect that the king sailed upstream to the confluence of the Niles and then went inland toward the Butana Steppe. But this seems rather unlikely. First, of course, there was no modern road in ancient times. Second, as has already been noted by Crowfoot, the site can be reached more directly by means of Wadi Hawad, starting from Awlib, some 5 km south-west of Meroe, and then passing near Basa and finally Geheid.⁴³ It would thus appear that Shorkaror took the desert route leading to Gebel Qeili and established a political border there. The presence of another royal document, found in a cave dug on the mountain opposite the boulder,⁴⁴ may suggest that this border

40 J. W. Crowfoot, *The Island of Meroë*, *ASEg Memoir* 19 (London, 1911), p. 24-25; F. Hintze, 'Vorbericht über die Butana-Expedition 1958 des Instituts für Ägyptologie der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin', *Forschen und Wirken* 3 (1960), p. 384-387. See also *FHN* III, p. 908-912 (No. 215).

41 See recently F. Brayer, 'Eine Statue des meroitischen Sonnengottes Masa?', *MittSAG* 16 (2005), p. 138-142.

42 For a different view, see M. H. Zach, 'Nero und Meroe II: Sorakarora', *GöttMisZ* 136 (1993), p. 92; but see also Brayer, 'Eine Statue des meroitischen Sonnengottes Masa?', p. 141.

43 Crowfoot, *The Island of Meroë*, p. 28. For an reconnaissance survey in this Wadi, see Khidir Abdelkarim Ahmed, *Meroitic Settlement in the Central Sudan. An Analysis of Sites in the Nile Valley and the Western Butana*, *BAR-IS 197/Cambridge Monographs in African Archaeology* 8 (Oxford, 1984), p. 21-41; R. J. Bradley, *Nomads in the Archaeological Records. Case Studies in the Northern Provinces of the Sudan*, *Meroitica* 13 (Berlin, 1992), p. 177-197.

44 G. O. Whitehead and F. Addison, 'Meroitic Remains', *SNRec* 9 (1926), p. 52 and fig. 2; B. Williams, 'The Cave Shrine and the Gebel', in E. Czerny, I. Hein, H. Hunger, D. Melman and A. Schwab (eds.), *Timelines. Studies in*



was maintained by a reigning queen of subsequent generations.⁴⁵ In any case, taking all of the above points into consideration, there are several reasons to assume that before the military campaign, the region around Gebel Qeili was occupied by different cultural (nomadic?) groups;⁴⁶ that Khartoum province, which is at almost the same latitude, was not put under military control at this occasion; and that, though not without some reservations, this area served ethnically and occupationally distinct groups.⁴⁷

This conclusion is of certain significance for an understanding of the southern fringes of the Meroitic Kingdom because it would cast doubt the territorial extension of the royal sphere. While it can hardly be doubted that trade contact was maintained with areas farther afield, into the Gezira or beyond, given the presence of imported objects found at Sennar (cf. *infra*), the existence of an administrative/religious station at Soba cannot be established with certainty before the end (?) of the Post-Meroitic period. Rather than assuming direct control, one may be tempted to suppose that from Khartoum province – or even from the Sixth cataract – Meroitic dynasties established political allegiances with local aristocracies and developed a commercial network for obtaining exotic Sub-Saharan items.

A focal point in this perspective would be Jebel Moya, a multicultural site lying in the southern part of the Gezira plain about 30 km west of Sennar. The site was excavated by Henry Wellcome between 1911 and 1914. As a great deal of confusion continues to prevail over the archaeological dating,⁴⁸ Michael Brass recently carried out optically stimulated luminescence dating and demonstrated that, in contrast to Rudolf Gerharz's conclusion,⁴⁹ the latest occupation

of the site can be dated to the period from the first century BC until the mid-first millennium AD.⁵⁰ It is on this basis that he initiated a stimulating theoretical discussion on the Meroitic southern frontier, according to which a Meroitic outpost was perhaps founded at Sennar, and that Jebel Moya served as its economic partner.⁵¹

The similarity between the materials in these two cemeteries was first noted by Anthony John Arkell in a publication on the three graves he examined during his stay at Sennar.⁵² Echoed by Frank Addison, who added other discoveries made at a site in the same region (Site 2),⁵³ a remarkable fact is that comparable objects are known in the royal cemeteries of Meroe.⁵⁴ The assumption is therefore not without justification that there existed close contact between the royal family and the local aristocracy of Sennar, which led him to suppose the presence of an "administrative centre of the southern provinces of the kingdom, the seat of a governor who may even have been a scion of the royal house itself".⁵⁵ This conclusion, however, remains overly hypothetical. Although an inscription of two hieroglyphic letters was found incised on a carinated bronze bowl,⁵⁶ this unprovenanced material can hardly be considered as proof of such an administrative centre. If we are not mistaken in differentiating Sennar from the Meroitic heartland, we may also add that the 'bee-hive' grave recognised in the same district does not attest to the north of the Sixth Cataract, suggesting a distinctive regional character of the Gezira plain.⁵⁷

Returning to Jebel Moya, an interesting linkage between this site and the Meroitic heartland has nevertheless been pointed out by Addison and Ger-

Honour of Manfred Bietak III, OLA 149 (Leuven-Paris-Dudley, 2006), p. 153. For the exact location, see I. Hofmann and H. Tomandl, *Unbekanntes Meroe*, BSF Beiheft 1 (Vienna, 1986), Abb. 168.

45 M. H. Zach, 'Die Hölenmalerei vom Jebel Qeili', *Gött-Misz* 145 (1995), p. 110.

46 For an Aksumite point of view, cf. G. Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia. Warfare, Commerce, and Political Fictions in Ancient Northeast Africa* (New York, 2013), p. 30-31.

47 See, however, L. Török, 'Kush and the External World', in S. Donadoni and S. Wenig (eds.), *Studia Meroitica 1984. Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference for Meroitic Studies Rome 1984*, *Meroitica* 10 (Berlin, 1989), p. 76.

48 F. Addison, *Jebel Moya, The Wellcome Excavation in the Sudan* 1 (London, 1949), p. 251-255; F. Addison, 'Second Thoughts on Jebel Moya', *Kush* 4 (1956), p. 15-18. For a good summary, see R. Gerharz, *Jebel Moya, Meroitica* 14 (Berlin, 1994), p. 15-18.

49 Gerharz, *Jebel Moya*, p. 60.

50 M. Brass and J.-L. Schwenniger, 'Jebel Moya (Sudan): new dates from a mortuary complex at the southern Meroitic frontier', *Azania* 48 (2013), p. 12-13; M. Brass, 'Results from the re-investigation of Henry Wellcome's 1911-14 excavations at Jebel Moya', *SudNub* 19 (2015), p. 174.

51 M. Brass, 'The Southern Frontier of the Meroitic State: The View from Jebel Moya', *AAR* 31 (2014), p. 439; M. Brass, 'Interactions and Pastoralism along the Southern and Southeastern Frontiers of the Meroitic State, Sudan', *Journal of World Prehistory* 28 (2015), p. 282.

52 A. J. Arkell, 'Three Burials in Sennar District', *SNRec* 17 (1934), p. 105.

53 F. Addison, 'Archaeological Discoveries on the Blue Nile', *Antiquity* 93 (1950), p. 16, 23.

54 Török, 'Kush and the External World', p. 127 (No. 53).

55 Addison, 'Archaeological Discoveries on the Blue Nile', p. 19. See also F. Addison, 'Antiquities at Sennar', *SNRec* 18 (1935), p. 292; D. M. Dixon, 'A Meroitic Cemetery at Sennar (Makwar)', *Kush* 11 (1963), p. 234.

56 Addison, 'Archaeological Discoveries on the Blue Nile', p. 18.

57 D. N. Edwards, 'Three Cemetery Sites on the Blue Nile', *ANM* 5 (1991), p. 52.



harz on a decorated vessel from the Grave 2000.⁵⁸ According to a recent in-depth study by David Edwards,⁵⁹ this type of pottery, of which parallels are found at Qasr Ibrim, Amir Abdallah, Kadada, and Sennar, among others, might have been produced close to the Sixth Cataract and distributed all over the territory, which extends more than a 1000 km. Were this the case, the vessel would seem to imply, again, the existence of another territorial unit to the south of the Sixth Cataract. That Grave 2000 contained many lipstuds – a custom essentially limited to the south of Khartoum – would appear to add another testimony to the cultural characteristics of the inhabitants.⁶⁰

Finally, the above remark begins to raise an interesting question as Gerharz noted that the number of burials bearing lipstud would be significantly reduced after the transition towards Phase III, i.e. towards the Napatan and Meroitic periods.⁶¹ The same tendency holds true for the imported objects. Would it not be possible, then, that this pattern of disappearing cultural elements is associated with the development of the local aristocracies of Jebel Moya, as well as those of Sennar, in the face of the advent of the Kushite royal dynasties? In the absence of sufficient archaeological data in the northern Gezira region, however, the question must remain open, with the scenario illustrated here requiring further investigation.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Vor dem National Museum in Khartoum, links der monumentalen Allee, ist eine Widderstatue platziert. Diese wurde 1821 in den antiken Ruinen von Soba, der Hauptstadt des mittelalterlichen Königreichs Alwa/Alodia, entdeckt. Die Statue trägt die südlichste bisher bekannte meroitische Inschrift (REM 0001) und lieferte schon bald die Begründung für die Südausdehnung der meroitischen Dynastien. Jedoch: um wen handelt es sich bei dem Stifter und warum ließ er dieses Denkmal in Soba aufstellen? Was bedeutet das für die südliche Grenze des meroitischen Reiches? Basierend auf dem aktuellen Verständnis dieser Entdeckung wird in dem Artikel die Diskussion der meroitischen königlichen (Einfluss)sphäre untersucht und versucht, eine mögliche Alternative zum historischen Bild dieser Region darzustellen.

58 Addison, *Jebel Moya*, p. 222-223, pl. cxi, 3-4; Gerharz, *Jebel Moya*, p. 59, 132-134.

59 D. N. Edwards, 'Early Meroitic Pottery and the creation of an early imperial culture?', in Lohwasser and Wolf, *Ein Forscherleben zwischen den Welten*, p. 55-56.

60 Cf. E. McCann, 'Body Modification in Ancient Sudan: expressions of individual and community identities', in W. Godlewski and A. Łajtar (eds.), *Between the Cataracts 2, PAM Suppl. 2.2* (Warsaw, 2010), p. 552-555.

61 Gerharz, *Jebel Moya*, p. 59, 89.