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CERAMIC LIBATION BASINS FROM THE MEROITIC TEMPLE IN ABU ERTEILA¹

Abu Erteila is an ancient site located in Wadi el-Hawad, near Awlib, in 9 km to the south of Meroe Royal City. Since 2009, the Joint Italian-Russian Archaeological Mission (co-directors Eleonora Kormysheva and Eugenio Fantusati) is working here and investigating the complex of Meroitic Period, including a temple founded by king Natakamani at the beginning of the 1st century A.D. (on Kom II) and the administrative building (on Kom I).

In 2013, three small fragments of a ceramic handmade object of rectangular shape (field number AE13/II-3/16, fig. 1) were found in the upper layer of the central part of Kom II; its purpose could not be determined at the time of finding. In 2015, another broken ceramic handmade rectangular object (field number AE15/II-R26/1, AE15/II-42/1, fig. 1) was found during exploring the sanctuary of the Meroitic temple on Kom II, to the east of the altar of dark sandstone with the name of king Natakamani (fig. 2). In the process of restoration it became clear that it was originally a rectangular basin with internal partitions forming an *ankh*-sign with wide branches. The partitions were completely destroyed by erosion; however, the *ankh*-sign is read through the dark zones formed as a result of firing in pottery kiln. The dimensions of the tray are 30.5 x 24.5 cm, height 5.7–6.4 cm.

The clay fabric of both basins is similar and shows a typical version of local wadi-clays for Abu Erteila, used also for wheelmade large tubular jars, globular jars, stands, lids, and bowls (including so-called “one-minute” bowls²), found in a considerable amount on Kom I and Kom II of Abu Erteila. Wadi-clay is of medium-fine texture, gray-beige color, with an admixture of vegetal inclusions, ferrous oxides and kaolinitic grains. The inner parts of both basins were

covered with red slip, the outside walls were partly red-slipped; the bottoms were unslipped. Probably, these basins, as well as large tubular jars and other ceramics, were made in a pottery workshop near Abu Erteila, in Wadi el-Hawad area.

The fragmented basin AE15/II-R26/1, AE15/II-42/1 situated near the altar in the temple sanctuary (fig. 2), but it was moved from the original position, while the rough rectangular offering table (field number AE15/II-R26/st3) of yellow sandstone remained lying *in situ* on the floor of the temple, at the eastern side of the altar with name of Natakamani (fig. 3). In the same layer, to the north of the ceramic basin, there were fragments of a rectangular object of yellow sandstone (field number AE15/II-42/st4, fig. 1) – probably, the third basin.

Similar objects, both ceramic and sandstone, were found in other Meroitic temples: in the temples of Amun in Meroe,³ Naga,⁴ el-Hassa,⁵ and Awlib;⁶ in the Lion Temple N 300 in Naga,⁷ in the temple IID in Musawwarat es-Sufra,⁸ and in the temple in Wad Ban Naga⁹ (fig. 4). As F. Hintze noted, such trays were also found in the cult chapels of the pyramids of Begrawiya N 25, 26, and 36.¹⁰ Basins from the Meroitic temples date to the 1st – 3rd centuries A.D.; in Abu Erteila and el-Hassa – to the 2nd – 3rd centuries A.D. Usually, they are considered as offering basins or libation trays. In particular, S. Wenig assumed that “offering basins in the form of *ankh*-signs were sunk into the temple floor and served to collect offerings of water.¹¹ The interior decors of the

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2 On “one-minute” bowls see: Robertson and Hill 2004, 111-112.

3 Garstang 1911, 13, pl. VII, X.4; Wenig 1978, 255, no.190; Török 1997, 125, pl. 91; Rondot and Török 2010, 232, fig. 302; Näser 2004.

4 Kroeper and Wildung 2003, 98, pl. Ib; Wildung and Kroeper 2016, 22-23, fig. 30.

5 Rondot and Török 2010, 232, fig. 303.

6 Sander 2015, 311-312, fig. 9. About the dedication of the temple in Awlib to Amun, see: Wolf 2006, 253.

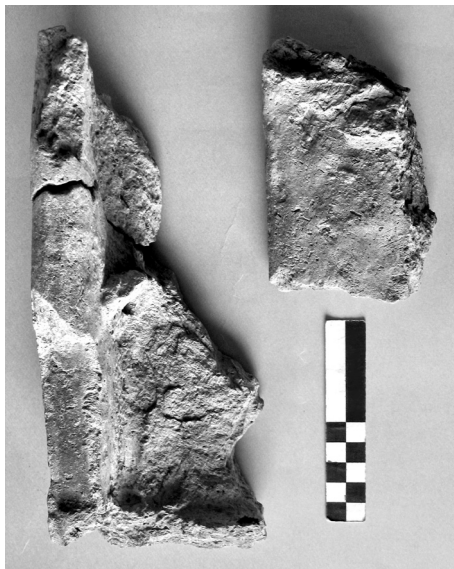
7 Kroeper and Wildung 2002, 144, pl. IVb; Michaux-Colombot 2015, 280, pl. II A3.

8 Hintze 1962, 191, pl. LXVIIIc.

9 Wenig 1978, 255.

10 Hintze 1962, 191, note 41.

11 Wenig 1978, 255.



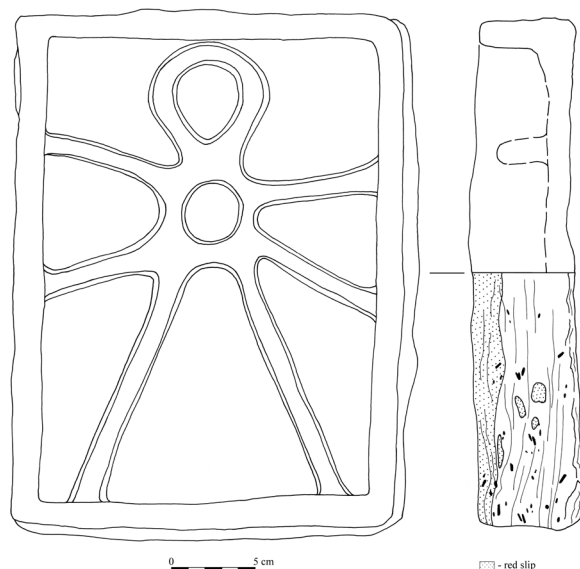
AE13/II-3/16



AE15/II-42/st4



AE15/II-R26/1



AE15/II-42/1

Fig. 1: Ceramic and sandstone libation trays from the Kom II of Abu Erteila (photos and drawings Svetlana Malykh)

basins are in a form of *ankh*-sign ♀, a combination of *ankh*-signs, flower rosette ✽, and four-leafed rosette ⚥, geometric pattern dividing the inner part into several segments (fig. 4).

In the most cases, the finds of these objects are concerned to the altars: they could lie to the east, west or south of an altar, on a podium (as in the temple of Amun in Naga,¹² fig. 4) or in front of it (in the temple of Amun in Meroe,¹³ fig. 4). These facts determinate the ritual functions of the basins, probably serving

for water libations (perhaps also for libations of wine and milk¹⁴) in front of an altar.

The dominance of symbolic motifs over geometric patterns in the shape of libation basins indicates their sacred function. *Ankh*-signs symbolized life; flower rosettes were associated with the rebirth of Osiris and renewal of life, as D. Michaux-Colombot suggests;¹⁵ four-leafed rosettes were probably correlated with youth.¹⁶ Accordingly, water or other

12 Kroeper and Wildung 2003, 98, pl. II.

13 Rondot and Török 2010, 232, fig. 302.

14 Yellin 2012, 140.

15 Michaux-Colombot 2015, 280, 286.

16 Gardiner 1957, 484 (M 42): *hwn* – “be young”.



liquid poured into such vessel acquires special, sacred properties, thereby giving life and resurrection to a recipient.

In the temple reliefs the libation into such rectangular vessel during the cult actions was almost not reflected; this fact is noteworthy. Mainly conical bowls on tall stands (sometimes with dangling scoops) are shown in front of gods sitting on thrones,¹⁷ for example, on the stele of king Tariteqas from Meroe¹⁸ (end of the 1st century B.C.) and on the bronze bowl from Gammaj¹⁹ (3rd century A.D.). In the Lion Temple of Naga (1st century A.D.), the image of a two-handed amphora is presented in the ritual libation.²⁰ In rare cases, we can see a ritual libation into a rectangular vessel placed on a tall stand and shown frontally (fig. 5) – on the relief from the cult chapel of the pyramid of king Arkamani I (first half of the 1st century B.C.) in the southern necropolis of Begrawiya (Beg. S 6),²¹ and on the rectangular altar of the prince (?) Amanikhe-dolo (second half of the 2nd century A.D.) from the western necropolis of Meroe.²² However, we do not have utter certainty that in these cases a rectangular basin was shown, but not an offering table, because on the relief in the chapel of another pyramid in Begrawiya (Beg. N 17, the second half – the end of the 1st century A.D.) Anubis and Isis make a ritual libation in a rectangular offering table in the face of king Amanitenmomide sitting on a throne.²³ Such rectangular offering tables, mostly of sandstone, were found in considerable numbers in the

17 Hintze 1971, Taf. 70, 71.

18 Baud 2010, 176, fig. 224.

19 Bates and Dunham 1927, pl. LXV, fig. 4.

20 Gamer-Wallert 1983, Bl. 9b.

21 Lepsius 1849–1856, Textband V, 323; Abth. V, Bl. 54a.

22 Baud 2010, 263, fig. 356.

23 Lepsius 1849–1856, Abth. V, Bl. 50d.



Fig. 2: Room 26 (sanctuary) in the temple on the Kom II of Abu Erteila, excavation on the level 391.28–391.37 m (photo Maksim Lebedev)



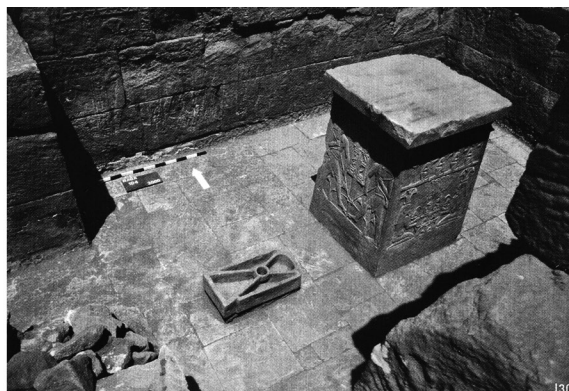
Fig. 3: Room 26 (sanctuary) in the temple on the Kom II of Abu Erteila, excavation on the level 391.23–391.28 m (photo Maksim Lebedev)

territory of the Meroitic Kingdom; as stated above one offering table of yellow sandstone was located *in situ* near the altar in the sanctuary of the temple in Abu Erteila (fig. 3).

Cult actions using vessels with partitions in shapes of any sign of Egyptian origin (such as *ankh*-sign) could be borrowed from Egyptian temple practice. In Archaic Period ancient Egyptians began to manufacture stone vessels with figured internal partitions, which include *ankh*-sign. The most illustrative example is the greywacke tray in the form of a combination of *ankh*-sign and *ka*-sign, presum-



“Throne room” to the south of the sanctuary of the temple of Amun in Meroe (after: Rondot, Török, 2010, fig. 302)



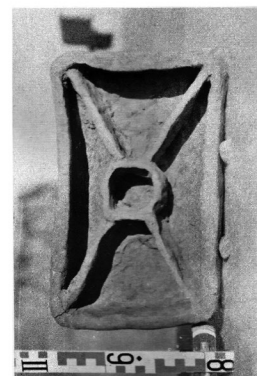
Sanctuary in the temple of Amun in Naga (after: Wildung and Kroeper, 2016, fig. 30)



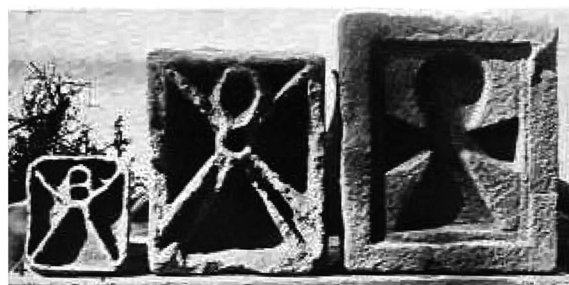
Sanctuary of the temple of Amun in Meroe
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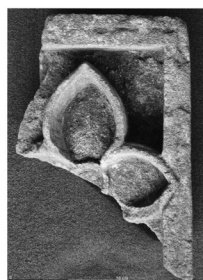
el-Hassa (after: Rondot and Török 2010, fig. 303)



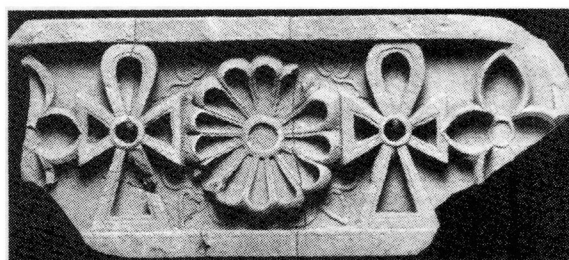
Mussawwarat es-Sufra (after: Hintze 1962, 191, pl. LXVIIIc)



Meroe (after: Garstang 1911, pl. X.4)



Awlib (after: Sander 2015, fig. 9)



Naga (after: Michaux-Colombot 2015, pl. II A3)

Fig. 4: Libation trays from the Meroitic temples

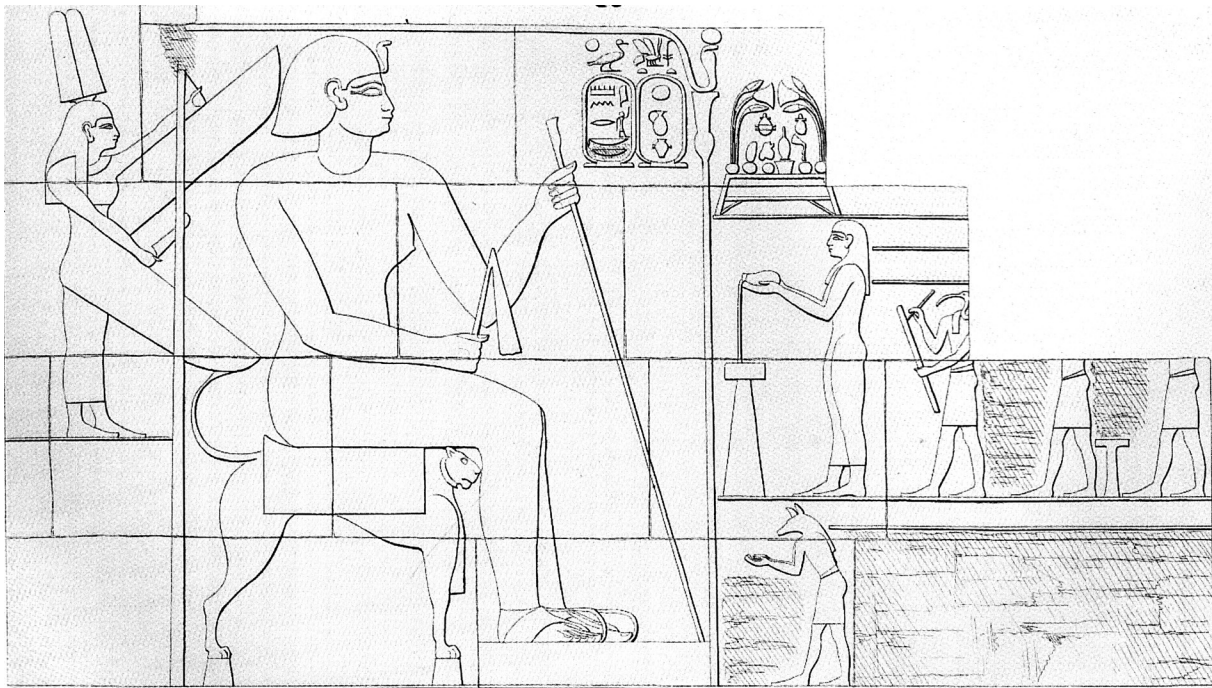


Fig. 5: Relief in the pyramid chapel of king Arkamani I (Beg. S 6) (after: Lepsius 1849–1856, Abth. V, Bl. 54a)

ably from Abydos²⁴ (fig. 6). Ceramic basin divided into segments and resembling a flower rosette was found in the burial chamber of Senebtisi²⁵ (Lisht, late Dynasty XII – early Dynasty XIII). According to H. Fischer, such trays were used for performing the ritual of lustration and libation of water, intended both for living and dead. The use of *ankh*-signs in the decor of libation trays and the images of the libation with the *ankh*-signs in the temple reliefs and on the papyrus of the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period symbolized the “giving of life” to a person to whom the ritual was addressed.²⁶

However, the use of Egyptian cult utensils in the Meroitic temples is not surprising: in fact, the architecture of these temples, their plans and decor also demonstrate Egyptian features that have a clear resemblance to Egyptian temples of New Kingdom, Late Period, Ptolemaic, and Roman times.²⁷

It should be noted that the discovery of similar basins for ritual libations in the temples of various gods of the Meroitic pantheon and in the royal pyramid chapels testifies to the uniformity of the temple ceremonies in Meroitic Kingdom, which not belonged to the cult of precise deity or king. The



Fig. 6: Egyptian libation tray, greywacke, Dynasty I, probably, from Abydos (after: Fischer 1972, fig. 1)

local clay used for two basins from Abu Erteila also demonstrates that the temple utensils (at any rate the simplest ones) were probably made in local temple workshops, but not centrally delivered from some specialized industries.

The last but not least is the fact that the use of large ceramic trays resembling Meroitic libation basins took place, presumably, in Christian Nubia: during the excavations of the church in Selib (11th – 12th centuries A.D.) poly-lobed trays were found, which, according to B. Żurawski, were used in church rituals, liturgies, and communion.²⁸ Probably, here we can see the traces of Meroitic temple practice in the shape of Christian church utensils.

24 Fischer 1972, 5–7, fig. 1–5. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Accession Number 19.2.16.

25 Mace and Winlock 1916, 6, 112–113, fig. 1, 85. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Accession Number 09.180.891.

26 Fischer 1972, 8–9.

27 Wolf 2006, 242–245.

28 Żurawski 2013, 780–782.



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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Während der Ausgrabungen (2013-2015) von Abu Erteila durch die Italienisch-Russische Archäologische Mission wurden Fragmente von zwei rechteckigen Keramikgefäßen gefunden, eines davon mit einem *anch*-Zeichen im Inneren. Ähnliche Objekte aus Keramik und Sandstein sind von anderen Fundplätzen der Region von Meroe bekannt. Eine vergleichende Analyse hatte zum Ergebnis, dass die Gefäße als Basins für die rituelle Libation von Wasser und anderen Flüssigkeiten sowohl in meroitischen Tempeln als auch bei Pyramidenkapellen diente. Das zeigt eine gewisse Uniformität der Tempelzeremonien im meroitischen Königreich und ist nicht dem Kult eines bestimmten Gottes oder Königs zuzuweisen. Keramikobjekte für Kultaktivitäten wurden wahrscheinlich in lokalen Werkstätten in der Nähe von Tempeln hergestellt. Es kann ebenso angenommen werden, dass die Form des Rituals der Wasserspende in spezielle Becken ihren Ursprung in altägyptischer Kultpraxis hatte.