The Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan
University Ca’ Foscari, Venice

The Palace of Natakamani at Napata (B 1500)

Report for the Season 2013

Forty season of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan founded by Prof. Sergio Donadoni (1973–2013)

Karima (North Sudan) – November-December 2013
The 2013 season of the Italian Archaeological Mission at Jebel Barkal was carried out between November 20th – December 16th. The team comprised: Emanuele M. Ciampini (University Ca’ Foscari, Venice, head of the Mission); Grażyna Bąkowska (Jagellonian University, Cracow); Martino Gottardo (Archaeologist); Christian Greco (National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden); Alessandro Roccati (Professor Emeritus of Egyptology); Alice Salvador (archaeologist / draughtswoman, Graduate School of Archaeological Heritage, Universities of Venice-Udine-Trieste); the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums was represented by Abd el-Rauf Muhammad al-Jubarak. The team of the Archaeological Mission and the Inspector were hosted in the house of Ahmed Mosa. The excavations employed a crew of about thirty men from the town of Karima and the village of the Bedouin near the new road to Nawa. The financial support for the season 2013 of the Italian archaeological Mission was granted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the University Ca’ Foscari of Venice.

The length of the season (more than three weeks), and the management of the team on the field, let the Mission carry out a satisfactory work, achieving some important results. At the same time, the presence of the Mission in Karima has assessed the interest for the Sudanese archaeology, which is going to be object of some important projects.

We would like to remind here the anniversary of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan, founded in 1973 by Prof. Sergio Donadoni (University of Rome “La Sapienza”); after the end of the work in the frame of the International Project for the Rescue of the Nubian Monuments, he moved to the Sudan, where he opened a Mission in the area of Jebel Barkal. Since then, the presence of the Italian Mission on the site has ensured a continuity of the research, as well as the safety of the site.

1) The activity of the season 2013
The team planned to work in the south-west sector of the palace of Natakamani (B1500), in order to outline the peripheral wall of the platform (squares D12, D13, D14; E12, E13, E14; F12, F13); the main goal was the digging of the south-west corner, still missing in the current plan of the edifice1. The aim of this digging was the complete investigation of the western peripheral wall, in order to define this part of the building. As in the previous seasons, a fundamental activity of the team was the collection of the archaeological materials (above all the pottery sherds) in a database. The updating of the documentation can now be a part of the investigation of the palatial sector of Meroitic Napata; the architectural patterns, as well as the iconographical models of the painted pottery, confirm the position of the city in the last period in the history of Kush.

2) Preliminary survey in the site
Before the excavations, a survey in the area of the palace was carried out, in order to plan every necessary work for the safeguard of the structures; no specific damage was found, except the traces of rain, which has left many evidences on the central part of the palace, as well as in the foundation level of the mud brick restoration of the inner wall of the south side (fig.1.a-b).

1 The south-west corner was excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission headed by Prof. Sergio Donadoni in 1987; this work did not outline the whole peripheral wall of the sector, but clearly identified the presence of the stone foundation of the corner, see below. Probably, the bad preservation of the structures in this sector, identified during the work of that season, did not allow the archaeologists to investigate the western and southern walls next to the corner.
3) The excavations

The digging opened a new sector just south of the area investigated during the previous season (see report 2012); the identification of the red brick lining of the western wall, as well as the corner, was a fundamental step in the reconstruction of the general plan of the palace, and the organization of its inner structure. The works moved towards south (fig.2), following the evidence of the structures already investigated; as in other sectors of the palace, the outer surface of the wall is characterized by a white-painted plaster, which also covers the deep level of the foundations. The structure in this area was badly damaged², and just few elements of a painted lelena were discovered in the ruins of the wall, together with several fragments of decorative tiles; these last elements, part of the decorative program of the façade³, were abundant in the area of the south-west corner.

The digging near the corner also discovered an architectural element of the decoration of the roof (fig.3); it belonged to the top of the wall, where an eclectic system of elements (Hellenistic and Pharaonic) was used. As in other similar elements, the stone was covered with a hard painted plaster, with some remains of red, yellow and blue. The position of the stone element was carefully analyzed: its level is about 20 cm. higher than the ancient floor; probably, when the stone collapsed from its original position, some floods had already covered the area around the palace, leaving a quantity of mud. The position of the decorative tiles, in a lower level, probably testify their collapse in an earlier phase of the palace’s destruction. All these architectural elements fit with other fragments of the ancient decoration of the façade, such as one red brick, probably part of the torus of the corner, covered by painted plaster.

The excavations in the south side of the wall discovered, in the debris, a stone corbel from the outer decoration of the façade (fig.4); according to the reconstruction of the building⁴, such elements were regularly used in correspondence of the simple lesena, in order to mark the level of the palace’s floor. Thus, the discovering of the architectural fragment offers a useful element in the reconstruction of the south side of the building, badly damaged in ancient times.

In the area of the excavations some pottery sherds were discovered; as in the previous seasons, they testify the presence of a rich equipment of the palace, with the evidence of luxurious materials (such as the well-known Meroitic painted pottery), together with more common containers for the storage of goods. The digging also gives a clear evidence concerning the diffusion of the pottery in the area of the palace: while the pottery sherds are very abundant near the west entrance, they are rare in the sector investigated during this season; probably, this lack of pottery evidence is due to many factors, such as the deep destruction of the structure, with the removal of the debris, as well as a different use of this part of the building, not connected with the goods’ storage⁵.

An interesting sector of the field, partially excavated in the present season, and which needs a careful analysis, is the complex of inner mud brick walls joining the façade of the palace. As noted in the previous seasons, the interior of the palace presents a mixture of mud brick walls, which form the basement for the upper floor of the building (fig.5). The destruction of such structure, due to the activity of the sebbakhin, started in ancient times; such statement is also testified by the presence of a large oven, located near the joint between the outer façade and an inner wall (south side). The installation had recourse to at least two large jars, whose bottom was cut away, and put upside down; the first (south) was located on a column drum (surely not in its original position),

² The destruction of the mud brick walls by the sebbakhin is a well-known topic in the archaeology of the site, as well as in other regions of Sudan and Egypt.
³ As noted in the previous reports, the decorative glazed tiles stressed some dyonisiac themes; they could be a proof of the strong connection with some features of the Greco-Roman Egypt, where they were part of the royal ideology.
⁴ Arch. C. Cataldi.
⁵ The comparatively few sherds discovered also fit with the painted typology, already identified in the palace.
and was still filled with ash and bone fragments\textsuperscript{6} (fig.6); the second oven (north) was built in the same manner, and located on the mouth of an older and larger jar (fig.7). All the area of the oven was filled with ash, surely the result of a long use; as in other part of the palatial area, the ancient structures were used as a (temporary) settlement by post-meriotic populations\textsuperscript{7}. Probably, after the collapse of the Meroitic Kingdom, the buildings in Napata were hardly plundered of any precious material, and the few still preserved structures were re-used as dwelling places; such historical phase is also testified by some disturbed burials excavated in several parts of the buildings, and whose characteristics do not offer any indication concerning their culture\textsuperscript{8}.

4) **Architectural structures**

The deep level of destruction in the investigated sector of the corner let us analyse the structure of the masonry; here, the traditional technique of the Meroitic architecture shows some peculiar features: the use of the red bricks (outer) and the mud bricks (inner) in the construction of the peripheral wall of the palace is still recognizable in the west side, together with the well-known mark of the foundations. The still preserved part of the peripheral west wall, at the level over the foundations, is 2,40 m. wide; the south peripheral wall, despite its bad preservation, seems to be larger, about 2,90 m. wide. The masonry of the west peripheral wall respects the traditional use of the red- and mud bricks: the outer façade is in red bricks, covered with a hard plaster, while its inner side is in mud bricks; between the two rows is a massive structure in mud bricks, whose width approximately corresponds to the length of five bricks (about 34 cm. each). The position of the wall’s foundations gives us some information concerning the level of the floor in the western side of the palace: in correspondence of the west terrace, the excavations of the season 2012 recognized a high level of the floor (see the evidence given by the plaster cover of the collapsed wall between the outer wall and the platform, and the level of the plaster over the same wall and platform, fig.8), also confirmed by the level of the stairs, excavated in the season 1990. Near the south-west corner, this floor is in a lower level, as confirmed by the section; such archaeological evidence probably confirms the careful planning of the platform, which was built in a sloping plain, in order to avoid the problems of the high floods and the rain.

The corner was built with some rows of regular thin blocks, hewn in the local hard stone (fig.9);\textsuperscript{9} similar blocks are also present in the low level of the foundations of the corner, as well as in the low rows of the south side of the wall. Such impressive use of the stone, together with the massive width of the south peripheral wall (about 2,90 m., see above) could be an architectural solution in order to ensure the building in a sector, which might be threatened by the water; the technical solution could also be confirmed by a singular masonry investigated in the south-west part of the wall, dug in the present season: here, no evidence of the traditional red brick foundations, recognized in the other part of the building\textsuperscript{10}, was unearthed; thus, the original masonry of the south-west side of the palace seems to ensure a protection against the water table and the rain. All these data can also be important in the drawing of a geological map of the area, where several evidences of rain and flood (also from the desert) have been recognized\textsuperscript{11}.

\textsuperscript{6} This jar was later broken by someone, probably in order to find any treasure inside. This practice is well known in the site, and is one of the reasons for keeping the antiquities in the storeroom or in the Museum of Karima.

\textsuperscript{7} This post-meriotic use of the royal buildings of Napata was already noticed in other sectors of the same Natakamani’s Palace, as well as in B2200 (the so-called Basins Building).

\textsuperscript{8} A complete study of the post-meriotic period in Napata is still lacking.

\textsuperscript{9} The use of the stone of the Jebel Barkal in the Meroitic architecture of Napata confirms the use of the mountain as quarry; at the same time, it could also have a symbolic meaning, as divine foundations for the royal building.

\textsuperscript{10} These red bricks foundations were found during the season 2011 in the area west of the south entrance.

\textsuperscript{11} Such data were collected by a team of geologists, who took part in the season 2006 of the Italian Archaeological Mission; noteworthy is the attention devoted, in ancient times, to the water present in the area, which could be a danger for the architectural structures.
This impressive architecture of the south side of the palace needs to be analyzed very carefully in the next seasons: the structural features, indeed, may be a reason for this, but probably the same structure, together with the very severe destruction of its elements, could be a proof of the ancient richness of this side of the palace, facing the temple and probably decorated in order to stress the manifestation of the king in the ceremonial context.

The excavations also discovered the joins of some mud bricks walls, that were part of the inner structure of the building (fig.10)\(^5\); these walls form a complex system for the statics of the palace, having to ensure the stability of its impressive organization of open courts and closed rooms and halls. The analysis of the structure unearthed during the present season needs to be compared with the data of the whole south-west sector of the palace, and the next seasons will be fundamental in the reconstruction of this part of the building. The study of the inner part of the structure will be also meaningful in the reconstruction of the post-meroitic use of the area, as shown by the oven installed in the inner part of the south side; this later use probably exploited some remains of the ancient walls: the two upsidedown jars were indeed close to a mud brick wall, which probably offered a shelter to this poor settlement.

5) The finds

The excavations let us collect several finds from the ancient palace; as in the previous seasons, the decorative elements were mixed in a much disturbed context, which testifies the destruction of the building and the plunder of all precious materials and furniture. During the first part of the digging, several pottery sherds were brought to light; some of these are characterized by a very fine mixture, with a nice painted decoration, also with phytomorphic and zoomorphic motifs (fig.11). The typology of the pottery, as well as its decoration, fit well the traditional Meroitic style, testifying the presence of important ateliers in Napata during the last century of the kushite history. As already noted (see above, 3.), very few pieces of pottery were discovered in the area of the south-west corner of the palace; but some of these few sherds present a complex decorative program, also joining other fragments already collected during the previous season\(^13\).

A particular find of the season was the oven discovered in the inner walls of the south side. Here, at least three ancient jars were used: two were still in situ, while the third, probably older, was used as foundation under the northern oven, and shows clear evidence of a long use with the fire\(^14\). The reuse of ancient materials is also confirmed by the remains of the original carved decoration, still recognizable in the jar of the northern oven. It probably means that, in the post-meroitic period, part of the ancient equipment of the palace was still in quite good condition\(^15\).

Another notable find of the season 2013 is a sealed cretula (clay sealing), with several impressions (fig.12); they represent, in a circular space, a bird with an ankh-sign. Such find can be connected with an administrative sector of the palace, near the west entrance, excavated in previous seasons: here, several cretulae were found, confirming the nature of some part of the palace as storage rooms. Probably connected with the administration of the royal goods in the palace could also be the four ostraka discovered in the present season (fig.13); three of these are inscribed in cursive meroitic, while the fourth present a very cursive writing, whose identification is not sure.

A noteworthy lot of finds is represented by the glazed tiles, that were a fundamental element in the decoration of the palace; these elements were particularly abundant near the corner, being probably part of the decorative program of this part of the building. Even though their

\(^{12}\) This architectural feature of the Natakamani’s Palace is known since the earliest excavations.

\(^{13}\) See for instance the fragments with the representation of some monkeys, that join with other sherds discovered in the season 2012. Other noteworthy sherds belong to some very fine meroitic pottery, also with Egyptian decoration, as the udjat-eyes.

\(^{14}\) The texture of this jar’s mouth is very friable.

\(^{15}\) We do not deal with the most precious and luxurious objects of the palace, already plundered in ancient times.
fragmentary condition, these tiles still let us recognize the well-known dyonisiac themes; these fit well with the general meaning of the Palace as a royal foundation: here, some elements of the Ptolemaic iconographical patterns were integrated in the Meroitic ideology. The context of these materials also allowed the partial reconstruction of some tiles (fig. 14).

6) The restoration

As a rule, the work comprised some restoration of the architectural structures, in order to ensure the best protection of the edifice, and to outline as well the plan of the building. Such activity also granted an area for the storage of archaeological materials, left in the site (bricks, fragments of plaster, not decorated pottery) (fig. 15). A preliminary work of reconstruction has also been carried out on other materials, such as the painted pottery, later stored in the structure of the Mission near the site. This activity is also part of a wider program of documentation of the archaeological finds, which is a fundamental step in the research on the palatial sector at Napata.

7) The documentation

This activity of the Italian Archaeological Mission was carried out according to the standard already defined in the previous reports; the work of the season on the archaeological materials will be the subject of a lecture planned in the next International Conference for Nubian Studies at Neuchatel (September 2014). In the season 2013, the collection of the topographical data was ensured by means of a total station; this work has now become fundamental in order to outline a topographical map of the site. In order to reach this goal, an important contribution was the cooperation with the technicians of the Archaeological Mission headed by Timothy Kendall, that collected many data of the whole archaeological site; at the same time, also the position and the structure of the Museum of Karima have been positioned with the total station16.

Another work concerning the documentation of the materials has been carried out in the Museum; a project for the re-organization of the exhibition and of the storeroom is the object of a postgraduate dissertation by a member of the Mission; such study can open new perspectives in the organization of the structure, which could also include spaces for study and restoration.

8) Storage of the archaeological materials

A regular activity carried out by the Italian Archaeological Mission is the storage of the materials; as in the previous seasons, some groups of antiquities (pottery, glazed tiles, plaster fragments) have been collected in metal boxes, left in the storeroom given to the Italian Archaeological Mission by the NCAM. The architectural element from the façade has been moved to the store of the Museum, where other similar elements from the palatial sector of Napata are already collected (see the report 2012).

9) Other activities

During the season, the Italian Archaeological Mission planned some other activities, not directly connected with the excavations. During its stay, a journey to Banganarti and Old Dongola was made; on that occasion, the Italian team met the Polish Mission, headed by Bogdan Zafransky, who exposed the activities carried out in Banganarti, and the result of the exploration in the site of Salip, where an impressive shaft of the Christian period was excavated. At the same time, the work in Karima offered several occasions of talks and comments with Timothy Kendall, director of the

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16 We have also to remember that during the previous season also the position of the site investigated by the Spanish-Sudanese Mission in Karima was recorded, see the report 2012.
Mission granted by the Qatar Sudan Archaeological Project (QSAP) in the temples of Jebel Barkal, and with el Hassan Ahmed, Director of the Sudanese Mission at the Temple of Mut in Jebel Barkal, granted by the same project. In the period of the excavation, the Italian Mission received the visits of Charles Bonnet and Vivian Davies, both engaged in the preliminary commission for the Qatar Sudan Archaeological Project; at the same time, the site was visited by many tourists of several countries.

During the stay in Karima, a delegation of the Qatar Sudan Archaeological Project, headed by Sheikh Hasan Mohamed Ali, visited the archaeological site, and spent some time in the field of the Italian Archaological Mission; the attention paid to the work done by the Mission was an important confirmation of the importance of this work in Sudan, and an acknowledgement for the care in the regular undertaking of the excavation.

The results achieved by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan, season 2013, depend on the individual skills of the team, which managed good activities in the field, as well as on the materials; doing so, the team respected the tradition of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan, which granted since its birth forty years ago a regular presence at the Jebel Barkal. As in the last seasons, these activities had to recognize a regular decrease in the funds; nevertheless, the modest amount of the budget let the team continue the work and the research in one of the most impressive sites of the Sudan, in order to outline the role of Napata as crossroads between Nubian tradition, Hellenism, and pharaonic Egypt.

The positive results of the season were possible thanks to the help of many: we are very grateful to the Sudanese Authorities for their helpful reception; a very special thank is due to the representative of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Mr Abd el-Rauf Mohamad al-Jubarak, whose presence was very important for the work. We would also remember the supporters of the Mission, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the University Ca’ Foscari of Venice. We are also grateful to the Italian Ambassador in Khartoum, dott. Armando Barucco, for his encouraging reception and the help in the management of the arrival of technical supplies in Sudan.

Figures

![Fig.1.a](image1.png)

![Fig.1.b](image2.png)
The Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

Fig. 11

Fig. 12

Fig. 13
The Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan

Fig. 14

Fig. 15