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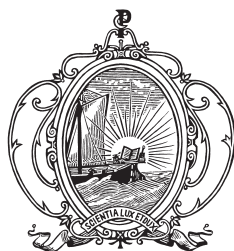
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IN THE XXIST CENTURY

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MATTHIEU HONEGGER



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ITALIAN EXCAVATIONS IN THE PALACE OF NATAKAMANI AT NAPATA (B 1500). NOTES FROM THE SEASONS 2011-2013

Emanuele M. CIAMPINI

During the 2011-2013 seasons, the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan – Jebel Barkal, worked in the area of the main Palace of Natakamani (B 1500), undertaking the investigation of some part of the still unexcavated sectors of the building and of some areas in close proximity¹. One of the main focuses of the activity was the southern façade and the southwestern corner of the platform (Figure 1), which were still waiting for an extensive dig. The activity of the season also saw a fundamental step in a new organization of the data: the recording of the archaeological material, as well as the map of the site, was organized in a manner to ensure a total comprehension of the Meroitic sector of Ancient Napata. In order to achieve this, the main tools were: the database for the recording all of the material finds (pottery, architectural elements and other finds), and the revision of the drawing of the site map. The updating of the records was fundamental for the complete understanding of the several structures recognised through the excavations: thus, the link between the data and the materials collected during the previous seasons², and the new information from the current

activity has become the only way to obtain a better understanding of the site.

The Excavations of the Seasons 2011-2013

During the three seasons, understanding of the massive platform of the palace was the main focus of the excavations. Thanks to the previous investigations, its structure was clear enough: the careful use of red and mud bricks, and the main features of the outer decoration as well, are described in the bibliography and it is not necessary to repeat them here (see Roccati 2008). New excavations on the southern façade began in the fall of 2011, and were carried out in order to investigate the structure between the canopy of the south entrance, and the southwest corner (see above, Figure 1). At this location, the destruction of the masonry was very severe: the removal of the mud bricks by the *sebbakhin* is here coupled to the destruction of the red brick wall, which jeopardised the richness of the southern façade, opened onto the Temple of Amon³. Nevertheless, this destruction allowed us to discover the foundation level of the platform, where at least one layer of red bricks had been used (Figure 2). Such a technical solution confirms the skill of the Meroitic architects, who tried to create a structure undamaged by floodwaters as well as possibly by rain, as shown in the 2013 field-season⁴.

The outer wall of the platform was enriched by a complex decoration, in which the painted façade was ruled by the eclectic style of the entrances: all the façades were covered with hard plaster, and the excavations in the south sector of the building uncovered many fragments of this, still painted with red, yellow and blue. These three colours, together with the white, are the principal colours of the chromatic range in the Meroitic royal architecture; to date, no evidence of green has been found, and the same range of colours

¹ During these three seasons, the team of the Italian Archaeological Mission comprised:

- 2011 season: Emanuele M. Ciampini, Giampietro Bakovic, Grażyna Bąkowska, Enrico Dirminti, Alessandro Roccati, Alice Salvador; the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums was represented by Mrs Shirin Ibrahim Babiker.

- 2012 season: Emanuele M. Ciampini, Grażyna Bąkowska, Martino Gottardo, Alessandro Roccati, Alice Salvador. The National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums was represented by Mrs Shirin Ibrahim Babiker.

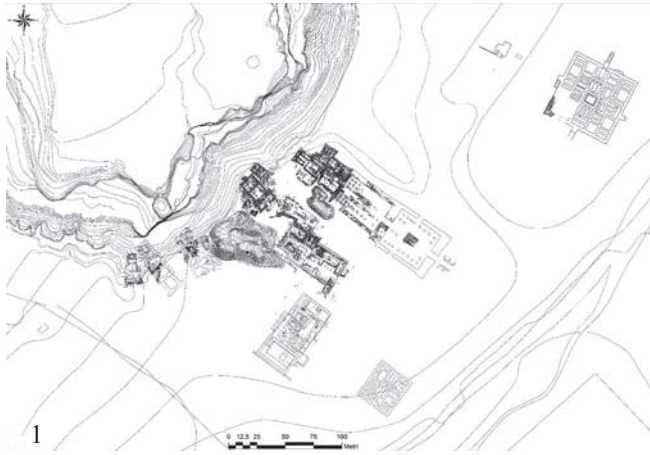
- 2013 season: Emanuele M. Ciampini, Grażyna Bąkowska, Martino Gottardo, Christian Greco, Alessandro Roccati, Alice Salvador. The National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums was represented by Mr Abd el-Rauf Muhammad al-Jubarak.

The work was funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by the University ‘Ca’ Foscari’ of Venice and – for the 2011 season – by the Association ‘Archeology4All’. Since the 2014-2015 season, the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan is part of the Qatar-Sudan Archaeological Project (project QSAP.A.34).

² The excavations in the Palace of Natakamani began 1978, under the direction of Prof. Sergio Donadoni. The material from the excavations are in the store of the Museum of Karima, and in an Italian Mission on-site store, made available by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums.

³ The use of this technical solution in the masonry is due to the necessity of protecting of the building against the water, which has often invaded the area of the Meroitic Napata.

⁴ The evidence of the rain has been noted during that season in several sectors of the Meroitic area, and some structures needed to be newly restored after the damage of this natural event.



seems to rule other coeval palatial foundations⁵. In the middle of the façade, a canopy was built in order to monumentalize the southern entrance; the structure of this entrance confirms the ruling eclectic style of the palace, where Pharaonic and Hellenistic elements are merged in an original, Meroitic framework. Some scant evidence of this structure still lay in the area of the entrance, close to the peripheral wall of the platform (Figure 3): here, we can recognise fragments of an Egyptian capital in the phytomorphic style, with some traces of red paint. These new architectural elements allow us to analyse the four entrances, to define their stylistic characteristics; despite the destruction of the canopies, the archaeological remains confirm the use of a hybrid style, in which Egyptian columns are used together with Hellenistic half-pillars. This original creation is also stressed by the position of the canopies on the façade of the building: in fact, it is reasonably clear that the four entrances are not in the middle of the façade, so that their relative positions are not axial (Figure 4)⁶. The result of this architectural arrangement is a balanced aspect of the four façades, which at the same time do not repeat the same model; we are probably dealing with a Meroitic interpretation of Hellenistic architectural patterns, present at the southern border of Egypt, and probably known to the local architects. The layout of the palace architecture requires careful analysis, which can here only be summarised in a few observations. The Meroitic architects who planned the royal sector of Napata probably had direct knowledge of some northern models, which appear to have been very popular in the architectural solutions of the royal palaces (see below).

During the 2012-2013 season, the focus of the excavations moved to the western façade, where a main entrance had been investigated in previous seasons; the

⁵ This use of the colours in the architecture has been recognised in other Meroitic royal foundations (Muweis, personal communication of Dr Marc Maillot).

⁶ These architectural features from the entrances were recognised and analysed in previous studies, see Roccati 1997.

Figure 1. The site of Jebel Barkal with the temples and the Palace of Natakamani (B1500); in evidence the southwestern corner of the platform, investigated in the 2011-2013 seasons.

Figure 2. The evidence of the red brick foundation layer of B1500 (2011 season).

Figure 3. Capital fragments from the canopy of the southern entrance (2011 season).

work started at the very end of the entrance stairway, in an area which had not been previously excavated. Here, evidence for a couple of plinths was found; these are architectural elements, which usually stressed the main entrance of monumental buildings, and whose structure and origin recall the use of the Egyptian pylons. The plinths marked the bottom of the staircase, being a connection with the space around the palace, in the direction of the temple⁷. The excavations in the area of the western façade uncovered structural evidence of the ancient features, such as the composite buttress brought to light just south of the western entrance (Figure 5). In some sectors of the collapsed red brick perimeter wall, traces of the original colours of the buttress still survived; here, we were able to recognise the original polychromy of the exterior decoration, ruled by the white of the façades, enriched by the painting of these elements with alternations of blue, yellow and red. The decoration of the façade also included several glazed tiles, whose fragments were found in the same area of the buttress; these last elements confirm the use of the Dionysian theme in the decoration of the palace, evidencing the eclectic style of the Meroitic architecture in Napata⁸.

The main architectural structure discovered during the 2012 season is a podium, built in the classical Meroitic masonry just in front of the two plinths, marking the end of western staircase (Figure 6). While its structure confirms the traditional use of red and mud bricks, the foundations are more original: here, the excavations uncovered a system of stone masonry, which has no relation with the traditional red brick architectural technique. Very interesting are also the stones of the foundation itself, which are not reused from ancient monuments, being rather rough-hewn blocks in the hard, dark stone of the Jebel Barkal (Figure 7)⁹. The podium was originally plastered and painted yellow, its top is now completely destroyed, but the excavations brought to the light some plastered red bricks, which were probably part of the cover of the structure, and a kind of balustrade (Figure 8). There is no evidence for stairs climbing to the top, which was

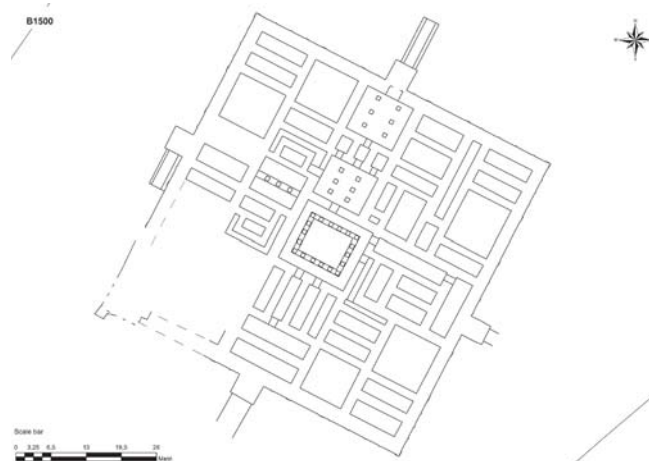


Figure 4. Plan of the Natakamani Palace (2007).



Figure 5. The painted composite buttress near to the western entrance (2012 season).



Figure 6. The podium near to the western entrance (2012 season).

⁷ We have to remember that the staircase leading to the western entrance is tangential to the façade of the platform. Such a specific feature probably depends on the necessity to ensure a connection between this part of the palace and the *dromos* open to the Temple area.

⁸ For these elements of the outer decoration, and their stylistic models, see Sist 2006.

⁹ This architectural feature is probably to render the building safe from the water - see below.



Figure 7. The stone foundations of the podium (2012 season).



Figure 8. A plastered red brick from the podium (2012 season).



Figure 9. The fallen outer wall between the façade and the podium (2012 season).

probably accessible by means of a mobile (wooden?) structure¹⁰. The position of this original structure appears to stress a path towards the area of the temple. The lack of any information regarding a hypothetical *dromos*, south of the palace, does not allow us to suggest any reconstruction of the area between the temple(s) and the Meroitic palatial sector; nevertheless, the position of the stairs, leading to the western entrance of the Palace, and the podium, might clarify the use of the area as a connecting space between the two urbanistic focal points of Meroitic Napata¹¹.

In the space between the western façade of the palace and the eastern side of the podium, the remains of a collapsed red brick wall were found (Figure 9). This collapsed wall helped preserve the original plaster cover of the building, which became sealed between the same wall, and the original ground level of the western side of the palace. In the narrow space between the two buildings we discovered important evidence regarding the ground level during the Meroitic period; this level is also confirmed by the evidence of the plastered cover of the façade, which perfectly corresponds to the level of the podium cover. During the excavations, an analysis of the palace's plaster cover also supplied additional evidence: indeed, the ground appears to slope towards the southwestern corner, where it reaches its lowest level (Figure 10). These data allow us to reconstruct the original topography of the area in relation to the western façade, near the corner of which, the deep level of the plaster seems to correspond to a lower exterior ground level; moving north – i.e. towards the entrance – this ground level rises, meeting the western entrance stairway.

During the 2012 season excavations, two architectural elements were discovered in the area south of the podium; we are probably dealing with part of the top of the outer wall, with a buttress capital, whose style clearly testifies to the contact with the Alexandrian architecture, and its blending with the local tradition (Figure 11)¹². Other architectural elements from the

¹⁰ The use of temporary structures in the monumental buildings is well known in Egyptian architecture.

¹¹ The architectural programme of Natakamani in the temple sector of Napata has recently been confirmed by the Archaeological Mission headed by Timothy Kendall, who excavated some Meroitic buildings in the area just in front of the entrance of the main Temple of Amon.

¹² The polychromy of the capital could be evidence of this active contact with the northern models: while the formal elements of the capital have correspondence with some Alexandrian models,

monumental western gate (an unidentified fragment and part of a column from the entrance) were also identified at the end of the 2012 season. The work in the outer area of the southern perimeter wall was completed with the excavation of the inner structure of the mud bricks, whose poor state of conservation made the identification of the complex structure very difficult¹³. The investigation of the area allowed us to collect several typologies of pottery; some of them are typical of the Meroitic palatial style, well known in Napata, while some samples supply evidence of the widespread cultural tradition, which merges Dionysian elements with pharaonic elements coupled to a southern imagination. Thus, the decoration of a fine vessel with a group of monkeys (Figure 12) may offer some interesting suggestions for a use of several patterns in a new, coherent representation. Indeed, the motif of monkeys is also known in some Egyptian traditions, such as the Myth of the Eye of the Sun¹⁴.

The work of the 2013 season involved opening a new sector, just south of the area investigated in the 2012. The aim of the activity was the investigation of the southwest corner of the platform, and the identification of its inner structure (Figure 13). The archaeological situation of the sector was the same as already recognised in the palace: the architectural structures were severely destroyed, and only few elements of a painted buttress were discovered in the ruins of the wall, together with several fragments of decorative tiles, near the same corner. In front of the corner, the excavations brought to the light an element of the framing decoration of the wall's upper part, where an eclectic style, mixing Hellenistic and Pharaonic models, was used (Figure 14); the stone is covered with the usual hard plaster, with some remains of the original colours: red, yellow and blue¹⁵. The ground level of this collapsed element is about 20 cm higher than the original floor; probably, when the stone collapsed from its original position, some floods had already covered the area

the colours – above all those in the bottom part of the buttress – respect the same chromatic palette of the façade.

¹³ At the end of the season, the inner area was filled with the ancient materials, in order to preserve them in the same area of the excavations.

¹⁴ The subject is widespread in the temple tradition, and creates a mythological link between Upper Egypt and Nubia: Inconnu Boquillon 2001. It also stresses the original Meroitic elaboration of these pharaonic patterns together with the Dionysian motifs of the architectural decoration, see below.

¹⁵ The colour-range of this roof architectural element respects the traditional outer decoration of the palace, see above.



Figure 10. The plaster cover of the eastern façade (2012 season).



Figure 11. The capital found near the podium (2012 season).



Figure 12. The monkeys in the decoration of some vessel fragments (2012 season).



Figure 13. The area of the excavations (2013 season).



Figure 14. Element of the outer decoration of the southwestern corner (2013 season).



Figure 15. Stone foundations of the southwestern corner (2013 season).

around the palace, leaving a quantity of mud¹⁶. The position of some decorative tiles, in a lower level, probably testifies to their collapse during 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. Near the south side of the perimeter wall, a stone corbel from the outer decoration of the façade was discovered; similar architectural elements were used in a similar manner with the sample buttress, in order to mark the level of the palace's floor.

The perimeter wall of the platform was found here at a very deep level, with only a few rows of red bricks, beneath which the foundations of the structure were found. The corner of the platform was built with a few rows of regular thin blocks, cut from in the local hard stone (Figure 15); similar blocks are also present in the lower levels of the foundations at the corners, as well as in the lower levels of the south side of the wall¹⁷. The presence of the Jebel Barkal's stone in the Meroitic architecture of Napata confirms the use of the mountain as a quarry¹⁸; at the same time, the stone from the Jebel could also have a symbolic meaning, as divine foundations for the royal building: we are probably dealing with a symbolic use of the local stone, as evocation of the primeval mound, identified with the same Pure Mountain. The use of the stone, together with the massive width of the southern perimeter wall (about 2,90m), could be an architectural solution in order to solidify the building in a sector ever-threatened by the water. The architectural solutions of the southern foundations allow us to suppose the regular presence of water (water table and rain) in the area, with occasional inundations, which could reach the foot of the Jebel¹⁹. All these data can also be useful in the drawing of a geological map of the area, where evidence of several instances of rain and flood have been recognised.

¹⁶ The presence of the mud layer in the palatial sector is confirmed by some additional evidences in the area. During the last season (2014) a survey was carried out in the columned building B1800, south of the Palace of Natakamani: here, the impressive presence of mud (about 30cm thick) was identified in a deep sounding. This widespread presence of mud in the palatial sector testifies to the high level of some Nile floods.

¹⁷ The same technique has been recognised in the foundations of the podium, excavated during the previous season.

¹⁸ Some ancient quarries are still visible on the west side of the mountain.

¹⁹ A similar incident was testified in the Eighties of the last century.

The just mentioned fragments of the fine vessel with the motif of monkeys can testify to the presence of a rich collection of pottery and other luxury objects in this sector of the building. We are dealing here with a function of the palace as the centre of administration and the storage of goods, as already noted in previous seasons, which investigated the palace area near to the western entrance. Here, some clay *cretulae* (clay sealings) were assumed to be connected with the storeroom(s) of the palace²⁰; during the 2013 season, a *cretula*, decorated with a bird and an *ankh*-sign, was found in the area of the perimeter wall (Figure 16), which was probably part of the same administrative context as the *cretulae* found during the previous seasons, and testifies to the logical organisation of the architectural elements of the palace. Another interesting sector of the palace, partially excavated during the 2013 season, is the complex of inner mud brick walls joining the western façade with the interior of the building. The complexity of this sector needs careful analysis, which will be undertaken in a future season; what we found was a series of mud brick walls, which constitutes the basement for the upper floor of the building (Figure 17).

The destruction of the palace, as already noted, began in antiquity, as confirmed during the excavations of these seasons by the presence of a large oven, located near the juncture between the outer southern façade and an inner wall. This installation, dated to the post Meroitic period, used at least two large jars, whose bottom had been cut away, and turned upside down (Figure 18); the southern one was located on a column drum, clearly not in its original position, and was still filled with ash and bone fragments; the northern oven was built in the same manner, and located on the mouth of an older and larger jar. The regular reuse of the 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. All the area of the oven was filled with ash, clearly the result of long use; as in other parts of the palatial area, the ancient structures were used as a (temporary) settlement by post-Meroitic populations. It is probable that after the collapse of the Meroitic kingdom, the build-



Figure 16. *Cretula* with decoration: bird of ankh-sign (2013 season).



Figure 17. Inner structure of the southwestern sector of the palace platform (2013 season).

ings in Napata were severely plundered of any precious material, and the few still-standing structures were reused as dwelling places by local people; such a historical phase is also testified by some disturbed burials

²⁰ The *cretulae* from the Palace of Natakamani offer a wide range of iconographic models for the Meroitic sealings in Napata: Vincentelli 1990.



Figure 18. Post-Meroitic oven (2013 season).

excavated in several parts of the buildings in the palatial sector of Napata²¹.

Notes on the Architecture of Natakamani at Napata

The results of the excavations here set out offer some suggestions for the future research in the palatial sector of Meroitic Napata, as well as of its cultural background. The poor remains of the building, as clearly stated in previous publications (see for instance Roccati 2008), offer a pale reflection of its lost richness and monumental structure; nevertheless, some patterns of the Meroitic culture in Napata are clear enough, and can be summarized as follows.

The complex architectural tradition of the Meroitic palaces is the result of several traditions, which are the main evidence for the cultural network, which can be called the Nubian mind-set. The data recently collected by Marc Maillot in a study of the palace of Muweis offer an interesting starting point for the approach to the great Palace of Natakamani (Maillot 2014). Many elements identified by Maillot in the structure of Muweis are present in Napata: the large perimeter walls, with the use of the red- and mud-bricks, the system of the casemates in the structure of the platform, and above all the care in the waterproofing of the foundations, are the typical hallmarks of a monumental building; the same quadrangular structure of some of

the principal palaces, as well as their size – about 60m each side – are part of the Meroitic tradition. The wide diffusion of these architectural patterns confirms the existence of a true Meroitic architectural language, in which some northern influences seem to be at play²².

At Napata, the Meroitic architectural tradition carries a special *nuance*, which testifies to the local interpretation of some Hellenistic and Egyptian patterns; thus, despite the destruction of the buildings, some evidence lets us suppose the use of some architectural solutions, which can represent the Meroitic interpretation of northern models. We are dealing with a complex system, which ties together the buildings planned by the royal architects, and the whole city-planning of the area. Indeed, the Palace of Natakamani is at the centre of a large royal district, or possibly even a “royal city”, which is the mark of the Natakamani ideology in an ancient centre of the Meroitic kingdom.

We would like to start with the planning of the royal district, and its meaning in the idealised concept of Meroitic Napata: a centre where the ancient tradition is represented by the temples erected at the feet of the Holy Mountain, dwelling place of a cosmic deity, identified with the Egyptian Amon. When Natakamani planned his monumental complex of buildings, he chose a sector just north of the sacred area of Amon, where some older structures already stood²³. The regular planning of the area has already been recognised: we remember here the connection between the southern exterior wall of the Edifice of the Basins (B 2200) and the western façade of the main palace, which testifies to their chronological and structural connection. From a city planning perspective, such coherence may also be the proof of an ideal model of the royal city, which represents the whole of Napata: the extension of the Natakamani foundations, and their regular planning, reminds one of a more famous Hellenistic model, that is Alexandria: according to Strabo, about one third of the city was taken up by the royal palace, being a kind of large royal residence, where the buildings were added to the original core (Pesando 1989, 230-233).

The juxtaposition of a Meroitic architectural model and the northern elements of the royal district is only part of a complex system: the ideological features of the royal residence stress the nature of the power in a multicultural framework, and the same elements of the royal palace confirms the use of many, different models

²¹ Some disturbed graves were found at west of the couple of stone basins of the edifice B 2200, and near the foundation of the outer wall of the palace B 2400.

²² Maillot 2014, 78.

²³ For instance, the palace B2400.

from Egyptian and Hellenistic architecture. A structural element of the palace is the square platform, which is regularly present in other Meroitic monumental building, and represents a typical feature of the local architecture. Each façade is marked by a monumental entrance, enriched by half-pillars and columns which created a Hellenistic-Nubian style: the half-pillars usually repeat Hellenistic patterns, while the columns are in the typical Nubian elaboration of an Egyptian phytomorphic style, whose origin dates back to the Kushite dynasty in Egypt; the coherence in the organization of the façade is stressed by the regular – but not as regards axis – position of the entrances (see above and note 7). According to the reconstruction of the palace, all the façades were marked by complex and simple buttresses; the first ones marked the entrance and the profile of pylon-like structures at the corners of the building, while the others adorned the lower level of the platform, i.e. the basement of the building, and ended with stone corbels at the layer of the inner ground of the palace.

But the most striking architectural feature of the palace, which may express this Hellenistic-Nubian style, is the inner arrangement of the palace, ruled by a central open court, which has been identified as a peristyle²⁴. A comparison of the palace of Napata, and other monumental buildings of the Meroitic period, allows us to note the specific solution of its central part, where the traditional style of the columns merged together with a new arrangement of the inner space, which is ‘built’ according to this typical Hellenistic element of the royal edifice²⁵. The presence of an original peristyle marked the plan of a palace, where the different parts are arranged in an original architectural language: the northern sector of the edifice, ruled by the monumental entrance, is connected with a columned hall and a court, which lead to the central peristyle, whose structure mixed the Hellenistic architectural model, and the Egyptian-Nubian style of the columns. The same mix is confirmed by the hall and the court of the northern entrance: its structure, clearly ruled by the light (i.e. the covered columned hall, and the open court), respects an Egyptian model, well-known in temple architecture. Such a kind of “royal path”, which connected a probable throne-hall through the peristyle and the northern

entrance, is monumentalized by the outer canopy, protected by numerous lion statues. The result of this complex system of styles is an impressive image of the Meroitic kingship.

It is particularly notable the original interpretation of the Hellenistic model of the royal palace, governed by a significant Hellenistic element (the peristyle) which is coherently merged together with other Nubian-Egyptian structures (the columned hall and the court, as well as the wide presence of traditional decorative elements); such a mixture was completed by the outer northern façade, where the typical Nubian tradition is stressed by the presence of the lions. What is striking in this creation is the use of several architectural traditions, which were typical of the coeval royal foundations: we are probably dealing with one of the most interesting result of the mature elaboration of northern patterns – i.e., Hellenistic and Egyptian – in an original framework. The palace of Natakamani, which is the expression of the architectural semantics of the Meroitic kingdom, becomes something of greater complexity: the evidence of a general attitude of the Nubian mind, which, according to L. Török, can be described as a “dialect of Egyptian art spoken by a different, autonomous society; a dialect whose continuously changing appearance was determined by the changes within this society and at the same time by its more or less continuous, always inspirative contact with the powerful neighbour, Egypt” (Török 2011, 40).

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²⁴ A careful analysis of the architectural elements from this part of the palace is offered in Barberini 2010.

²⁵ For the role of the peristyle in the Hellenistic architecture see Lauter 1999, 124-145; Brands 1996.

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