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# Under the lion's shadow. Iconographic evidence of Apedemak in the Meroitic Royal District at Napata

Francesca Iannarilli, Silvia Callegher, Federica Pancin<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The lion is one of the most widespread and evergreen symbols of the Egyptian kingship; the lion-king motif recurs in traditional iconography and in royal inscriptions as an attribute of power, domination, strength. At the same time, the lion gods are characterized by ambivalent value and invested with destructive as well as protective potentiality. In Nubia the lion divinity begins to take on importance in the passage between Napatian and Meroitic phases: a leonine god joins Amun like the protector of royalty, especially in central and northern Sudan; he could be the result of syncretic phenomena with the lion-headed god Mahes, but his name is purely Meroitic: Apedemak. This work is intended to give an overview about the iconographic evidence of the lion-god Apedemak, protector of kingship and guardian of the Meroitic Royal District at Jebel Barkal, currently being excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan.

## Keywords

Apedemak; lion god; Napata; Jebel Barkal; Meroitic period; Natakamani

## Introduction: the lion god in the Meroitic cultural framework (F. Iannarilli)

This paper is the result of teamwork conducted at the site of Jebel Barkal, ancient Napata, where the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan has been working since 1973. The Italian concession corresponds to an area dated to Meroitic king Natakamani (1st century CE), centred on the big royal palace whence the majority of our finds come from. Part of the material evidence of this area consists of different objects reproducing the lion-god Apedemak, who seems to be a protagonist in the decoration of the palace of the king, in his function as protector of kingship and guardian of the whole royal area.

Following C. Rilly and A. de Voogt (2012, 102–3, 183), Apedemak – the leonine Meroitic god *par excellence* – has a purely Meroitic name, consisting of the noun *mk*, ‘god’, plus the lexeme *Apede*, ‘Creator’; among the best known Egyptian transcriptions we can mention the one in the temple of Musawwarat es-Sufra: *Iprmk*, followed by the epithets *ntr* ʕ3, ‘Great God’, *hnt(y) b3-sti*, ‘the Foremost of Bowland’, and *m3y rsyt*, ‘The Lion of the South’ (Eide *et al.* 1996, 126, 582–5). Among his appellations also ʕ3-*phty*, ‘The Powerful One’, or *wsr-hpš*, ‘Powerful of Arm’ (see also Leitz 2002, 53–4). The last epithet can also be shared with other divinities, such as the lion-headed god Mahes, well known in Lower Egypt, in Leontopolis in the late New Kingdom and Bubastis in the 22nd dynasty; during the Ptolemaic Period, some inscriptions referring to him are known in Philae, Edfu, Dendera and Debod.

L. V. Žabkar (1975, 52, 62–70) suggested, in fact, that Apedemak could be the result of syncretic phenomena with Mahes (see de Wit 1951, 230–4) himself, whose motifs were also well known in Meroe. Usually placed in correspondence to pilasters or doors, leading a group of similar deities, he assumed an ambivalent role of beneficent as well as maleficent ‘genie’ protecting the entrances. This motif seems to have spread from Philae southwards in Nubian contexts, like in Dendur, Dakka and, later, Musawwarat es-Sufra, where the two lions accompanying the statues of Arensnuphis and Sebiuwerker (see Onasch 1990 and 1993) are located as guardians of Temple 300 entrance.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan - Jebel Barkal (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy).

<sup>2</sup> A similar scene can also be found in the inner south wall of Apedemak's shrine, where a relief shows Apedemak leading a lion on a leash (Hintze *et al.* 1971, pl. 51a). The lion-carrying gods or kings can be interpreted as a symbol of the traditional triumphal iconography (see Török 2011, 230).

In one of the scene legends of the Temple of Debod (Hintze 1973, 335), the theonym of Apedemak is written *p<sup>3</sup> ir-mky*, ‘The Protector’, with a pseudo-etymological transcription of the original Meroitic name. This designation appears logic since Apedemak joins Amun in the role of protector of royalty, especially in the central and northern Sudan, in particular during the passage from Napatan to Meroitic phase, between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE. L. Török (2011, 202–3) has stressed the association between a warrior aspect of the king and a warrior and hunter character of some deities – such as Amun, Apedemak, Arensnuphis, and Sebiemeker – that is particularly true in this specific period (see also Wenig 1993, 199).

Indications of the warrior character of Apedemak can be observed especially in the reliefs from the Lion Temple in Musawwarat es-Sufra (southern wall). There, the god is represented with a sort of leather armour (or a cuirass), holding bow and arrows, and a tied prisoner in one hand. Moreover, one of his peculiar features is the so-called *hmhm* crown,<sup>3</sup> dressed in the Musawwarat es-Sufra and Naga reliefs and also in a red slate plaque from Meroe.

In brief, the three most well-known iconographic depictions of Apedemak include (see Fig. 1):

1. an anthropomorphic lion-headed or three-lion-headed figure (Naga).<sup>4</sup>
2. a fully zoomorphic figure (e.g. in the Palace of Natakamani at Jebel Barkal; see below).
3. a composite form, like the lion-headed snake (Naga; see Wildung 2011, 61–4).

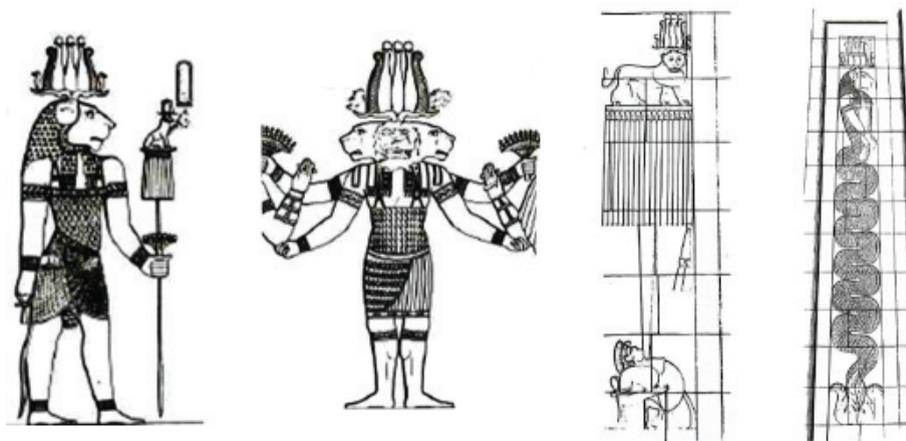


Figure 1. Different iconographies of Apedemak from the reliefs of the Lion Temple in Naga (Žabkar 1975, pls. 4, 5, 8).

This last form is quite peculiar: other deities with lion head and serpentine body are well known especially in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, chronologically close to the Naga temple and also to Jebel Barkal Palace. In the Temple of Naga (1st century CE) it is possible to find the lion-headed Apedemak emerging from an acanthus plant with snake's body and human arms; maybe an echo from the Late-Egyptian Horus child rising from the lotus flower – which can also take the form of an acanthus chalice (Török 2011, 323; Ciampini 2011, 187).

Cobras with a lion-head – and often a sun-disk – are also part of frieze decorations of royal tombs in the Ramesside period; but more widespread are the serpent-lion figures from the Ptolemaic and Roman temple reliefs, for example in the Temple of Dakka, probably with a protective role (Roeder 1930).

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that *Imn ʕ<sup>3</sup>-hmhm*, ‘Amun Great of Roarings’, is known in the Second Intermediate Period at el-Hiba (Middle Egypt) (see Gardiner 1961, 331).

<sup>4</sup> See also the bust of Apedemak found by the Czech Mission at Wad Ben Naga (Onderka 2014, 89).

At Jebel Barkal, despite the lack of inscriptions confirming the identity of Apedemak in the local religious framework, his typical iconographical elements – in particular two out of the three above-mentioned variants, that is lion shape and snake-lion shape – can be recognised in some objects coming from the Palace and the connected buildings of the Royal District.

### **The lion statues from the palace of Natakamani at Jebel Barkal (S. Callegher)**

The increasing presence of the lion figure in the Meroitic iconography of kingship is also confirmed by the archaeological data emerging from the excavation of the palace of Natakamani (B1500), where several lion statues were discovered.

The building was characterised by a square foundation platform (61.00 × 61.00 × 1.80 m) that raised it from the surrounding ground; the walking level of the structure was therefore reachable only by means of four massive staircases, one for each side of the edifice. These monumental ramps ended in a square terrace placed just ahead of the proper threshold: although none of the lions were discovered *in situ* (see Fig. 2), their finding spot on the lower ground adjoining the entrances suggests that they were originally placed on top of this structure (Donadoni 1993, 103).



Figure 2. Some of the lion statues from the northern entrance at the moment of the excavation (photo F. Lovera).

Here they were probably arranged in couples, at least on the northern access, as suggested by the finds collected during the digging of this area, where three statues were found in a good state of preservation and a fragment implied the presence of a fourth one. As far as the other entrances are concerned, two statues were discovered in relation to the southern one, and fragments relatable to at least three lions in correspondence to the eastern access.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Data collected from the excavation journals related to the years 1982, 1983, 1995, 1997 and 1998 (unpublished).

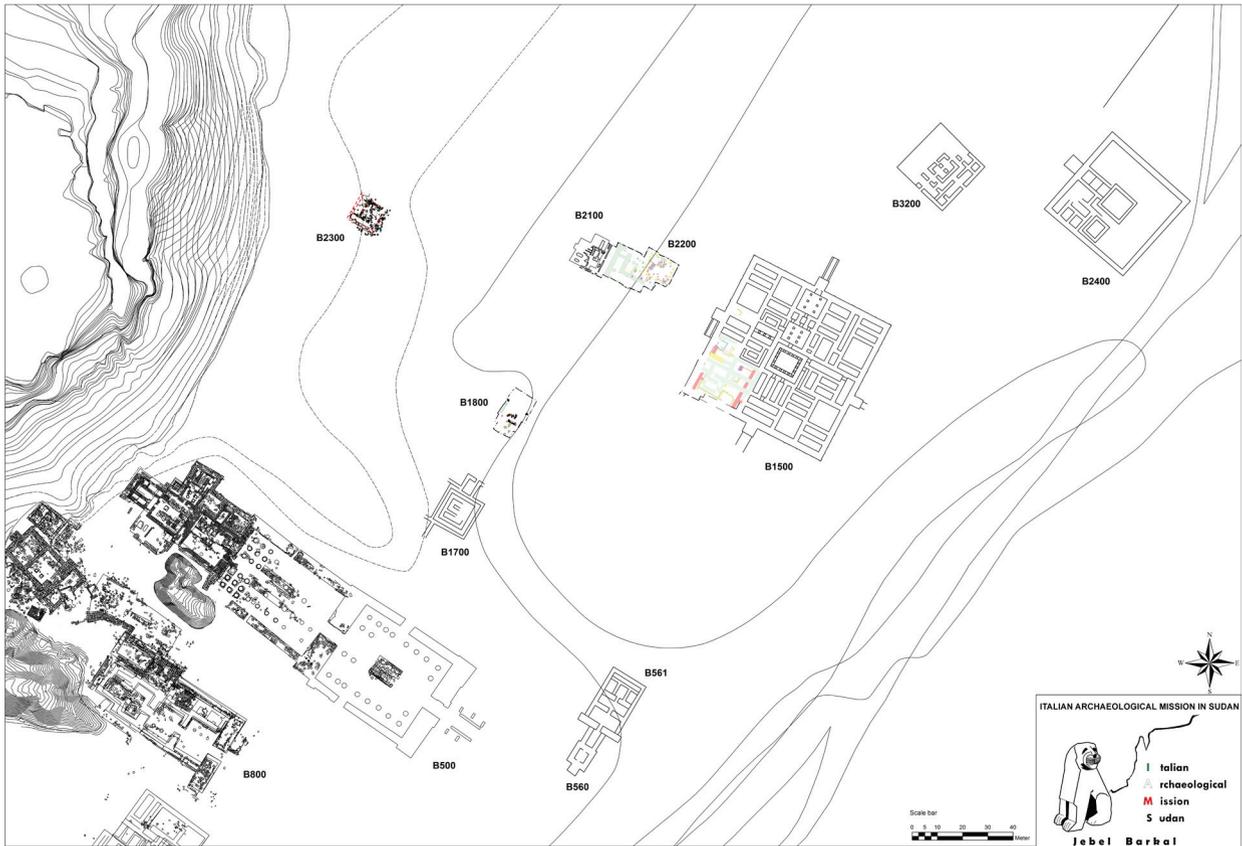


Figure 3. General plan showing the location of the buildings of the sacred area of Napata, B1500 visible on the top right (elaboration by M. Gottardo).

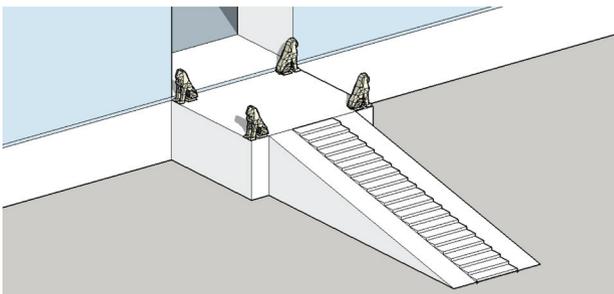
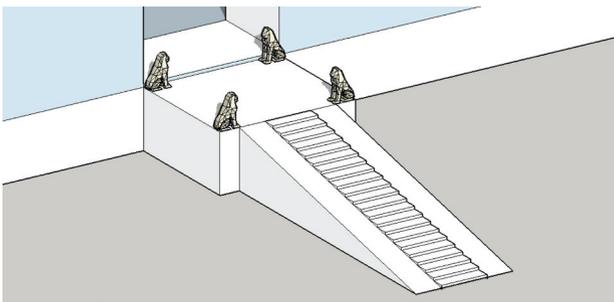


Figure 4. 3D reconstruction of two possible layouts for the lion statues on the northern terrace of palace B1500 (elaboration by S. Callegher).

The lack of evidence in the western part of the building can be justified by the different arrangement of the access in this side, it being apparently oriented towards the temple of Amun B500 (see Fig. 3), in the southern part of the site (Roccati 1997, 13).

Moreover, the location of the latter may also explain why one of the statues of the south entrance had its muzzle turned to its left, a detail which affected the reconstruction of the layout of the lions on the terraces. Indeed, considering that the only example with this peculiar feature was found in relation to the southern entrance, it is possible that at least some of the sculptures located here had their head turned in the direction of the temple, ideally following the processional way leading from the palace to the sacred area and the other way round. If this is true, we may assume that they were disposed at right angles to the direction of the incoming visitors entering the

palace, or back-to-back with their snout facing the landscape, as shown in the 3D reconstruction (see Fig. 4); certainly, in the absence of other reliable evidence, these remain just a few among many possible hypotheses.

The particular of the muzzle is not the only feature which distinguishes the southern lion from the others, it being characterised as well by a finer craftsmanship (Roccati 2015, 390) particularly evident in the rendering of the surface of the mane and by larger dimensions (1.47 m from the base to the top). In the statues coming from the north side (1.40 m high), for example, the anatomical details can be recognised only in the snout (see Fig. 5).

In addition, the presence of fragments of plaster on some statues indicates that they were originally painted in different colours: red, light blue for the bases, and yellow for the body, the same palette used for the decoration of the palace.

The role of guardians of the accesses of the royal building ascribed to the lion statues seems quite unquestionable, especially taking into account their location and the aforementioned status of dynastic deity assumed by the leonine god Apedemak. Besides, even though there is little evidence to sustain a proper identification for all the statues, it is possible that at least the southern one could actually represent Apedemak, given the presence of a carved acanthus leaf on its right shoulder. This plant, in fact, has often been connected to the birth of the deity, as suggested by the already mentioned decorative programme of the Lion Temple of Naga (see above).

### **The iconographic evidence of Apedemak from the Meroitic Royal District at Napata (F. Pancin)**

If the iconography of the god managed to spread at a very early stage of the Meroitic period from the Butana region, where it was possibly Egyptianised as early as the 25th dynasty and whence its exacerbated hunter-warrior features probably came from (Török 1997, 500–2), other models played a major role in inspiring the construction of the divine visual form in Napata. It has already been pointed out (Roccati 2011, 161–70) that the lion statues at the entrances of palace B1500 are Egyptian in concept and that their execution recalls the Pharaonic statues of the renowned ‘Prudhoe Lions’ (Roccati 1997, 12–18) collected in Jebel Barkal in the early 19th century and now displayed at the British Museum

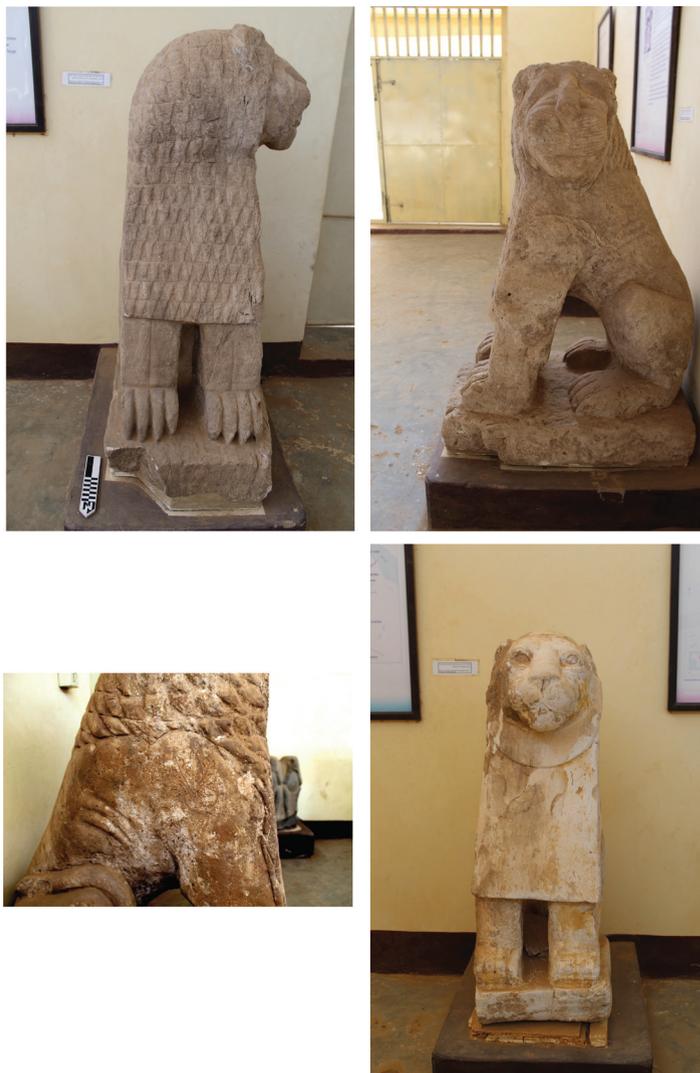


Figure 5. Lion statues exhibited at the museum of Karima. Top left and right: the lion statue from the southern access; bottom left: particular of the southern lion showing the acanthus leaf; bottom right: lion statue from the northern access (photo S. Callegher).

(BM EA 1 and BM EA 2). Inscriptions on their bases and bodies reveal that they were originally part of Amenhotep III's temple furniture in Soleb and that they were later usurped and moved to Napata by Meroitic king Amanislo in the mid-3rd century BCE (Török 1997, 322). Their turned head, an iconographic peculiarity, could be the direct inspirational model for B1500 southern lion (see above): even if a small sitting lion statuette with turned head was found in Naga (Wildung 2011, Fig. 60), this iconography is more common on recumbent lion statues, and the 'Prudhoe Lions' were the nearest example at hand at Jebel Barkal.<sup>6</sup>

Iconographic evidence of Apedemak is also abundant among the small finds uncovered by the Italian Mission in the Meroitic Royal District at Napata. If figurative pottery presents only some implicit references to Dionysiac themes,<sup>7</sup> such as grapevine and ivy leaves (Ciampini and Bąkowska-Czerner 2013, 72–4), some other material classes are more eloquent: there is a significant number of lion representations both in glazed tiles and sealings. Glazed terracotta tiles were cemented to the palace walls for apotropaic and decorative purpose: some plain instances, variously coloured, were found inside the representative area of building B1500, but the figurative specimens were a characterising feature of the external façade (Donadoni 1993, 102, 105). The moulded subjects include protection amulets – in the form of *s3*-knots – arranged in baroque compositions, Dionysiac figures represented in Hellenistic fashion inside large *tondi* (Taurino 2018, 210–25), and lunar crescents with the head of Apedemak (see Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Glazed terracotta moulded tile in the shape of a lunar crescent with lion-headed Apedemak; from palace B1500 at Jebel Barkal (photo F. Lovera).

The closest parallel for this object was found in the so-called 'Royal Baths' at Meroe (Garstang 1913, 79), suggesting that the type was a prerogative of royal contexts. The god wears the *hmhm* crown and is shown in a frontal position, a feature that somehow intentionally accentuates his terrifying aspect: the artist's attention focused on the rendering of the lion paws and mouth, conceivably to highlight the aggressive nature of the feral deity. The same frontal view is common in minor art, as shown on the jewellery – either worn by the Meroitic royalty represented on temple and funerary reliefs (Chapman and Dunham 1952, pl. 16a; Hintze *et al.* 1971, pls. 21, 22b, 33b–c, 34, 35), or treasured in the royal tombs at Meroe, such as queen Amanishakheto's gold shield ring with a moulded Apedemak's head now in the Ägyptische Museum in Berlin (ÄM 22872).

<sup>6</sup> One could argue that there is no indication that palace B1500 statues were carved in the Jebel Barkal area, and in fact it is not possible to determine whether they were brought from afar. Nevertheless, given their antiquity and prestigious setting, the 'Prudhoe Lions' could be considered a likely nationwide model for Meroitic recumbent lions with turned heads.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on Apedemak and Dionysiac features in Meroitic culture, see Manzo (2006, 82–94).

B1500 glazed terracotta tile iconography is meant to stress at least three key points in the definition of the divine figure: the first is the royal and solar character of the lion god, inferred by the presence of the crown; secondly, the fierce nature of this form of kingship is symbolised by the physical attributes of the lion, the triumphant animal *par excellence* that grasps and tears his preys apart and is therefore the perfect hypostasis of the king smiting his enemies; lastly, also the lunar aspect of the divine being is emphasised, indicating the well attested connection with water and fertility, as in Meroe – annual renovation rituals performed in water sanctuaries for the Meroitic king are known also in Jebel Barkal (Ciampini and Bąkowska-Czerner 2014, 695–701; Ciampini 2015, 369–73) and the relationship between lions and water is archaeologically attested as well, namely by leonine statues found near *hafirs*, for instance in Basa, Usuda and Musawwarat es-Sufra (Elhassan 2004, 25).

S. Donadoni’s excavations uncovered a large discharge of clay sealings in the basement of a room west of the representative area of the Palace (Vincentelli 1992, 106–21; Donadoni 1993, 107). The last seasons of work (2016 and 2017) made it clear that a specialisation occurred in the western wing of the building, where a sort of administrative area was conceived: here products were stored and basic counting media, such as *cretulae* and tokens, were employed. Among the figurative stamp seal impressions, some images of lions stand out for their fine making (Vincentelli 1993, Fig. 2). The felines are represented either standing or sitting and some details point to an identification with Apedemak. Indicative for the attribution of the subjects are *hmhm* crowns and solar disks, markers of kingship. In some instances the statues of the god are depicted, as the representation of the base would suggest, and their overall appearance is coherent with that of the lion sculptures standing on the palace entrance terraces.<sup>8</sup> Three *cretulae* types show couples of lions – or lion statues – turned backwards: the accepted interpretation for B1500 lions proposes groups of *facing* seated statues guarding the palace entrances (see above), but here the iconography is inspired by more ancient models and one instance is even more explicit in showing a lion-headed Aker (Vincentelli 1993, Fig. 2, n. 3); this further elaboration of classical icons testifies to the Meroitic awareness in absorbing and mixing Pharaonic contents with more genuine re-articulated Kushite paradigms (Török 1997, 425).

Two examples (see Fig. 7) show a crowned stepping lion protected by a winged sun disk and preceded by a rearing uraeus – it would appear that the lion is standing on the cobra’s body. This iconography is similar to the lion standard on the back wall of the southern pylon of the Lion Temple at Naga, though the cobra is missing in this relief (Gamer-Wallert 1983, pl. 4a). Instead, the presence of both lion and uraeus reminds of something further evocative: a relief in the Lion Temple at Musawwarat es-Sufra (Hintze *et al.* 1971, pl. 85) shows a recumbent lion inside a shrine, with a rearing cobra on top. This is the ideal

representation of a god in his dwelling place and at Jebel Barkal it is usually the depiction of Amun inside the Pure Mountain, with the pinnacle being the uraeus<sup>9</sup> – as engraved on one of the walls of the Temple of Mut (Lepsius 1849–1859 V, pl. 5). In Jebel Barkal’s

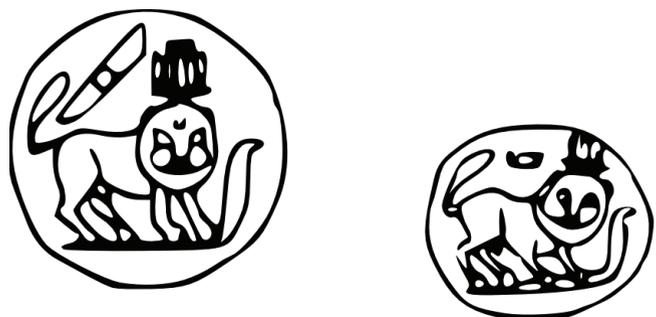


Figure 7. Lion representations on stamp-seal impressions from palace B1500 at Jebel Barkal (Vincentelli 1993, Fig. 2, n. 1–2).

<sup>8</sup> See Vincentelli (1993, Fig. 2, n. 5), for the careful outlining of the trapezoidal chest and mane of the sitting lion. The fact that the represented statues sometimes wear crowns could possibly point towards an identification of B1500 sitting lion sculptures with Apedemak.

<sup>9</sup> For some possible Kushite interpretations of the shape of the pinnacle, see Kendall (2004, 1–45).

GB 2010  
B2200  
F 687



Figure 8. Serpent-Apedemak limestone statuette from building B2200 at Jebel Barkal (photo [left] and 3D model [centre and right] S. Callegher).

glyphic art, this representation could hint at this immanence interpretation, following that *ḏw wꜥb* would not be only Amun's abode, but also Apedemak's, especially in a time in which their prerogatives somehow overlap (Török 1997, 502; Ciampini 2011, 187). The pinnacle itself could have been an aspect of the uraeiform Apedemak, as also suggested by a small limestone idol found in building B2200 in 2010 by the Italian Mission (see Fig. 8).

The object is preeminent in the record, since stone sculpture is rare in the Meroitic district. It presents a hole on its head, probably intended for the insertion of a lost element, possibly a crown. Given the small size, the feral, protective, and creative powers of the god were thus also conveyed on an individual sphere and, at the same time, grand tradition iconographies like the one of the serpent-Apedemak in Naga (see above) continued to be respected.

From local deity of southern origin, the figure of Apedemak soon grew in importance in the Meroitic period, becoming a national symbol of kingship and renewal. Though the existence of a place of worship for the lion god in the ancient town of Napata has been postulated and is still being investigated,<sup>10</sup> and notwithstanding the paucity of finds pertaining to the figure of Apedemak collected in the Meroitic District, material culture is eloquent at Jebel Barkal. A considerable number of lion statues guarding the entrances of Palace B1500 seems to refer to the apotropaic powers of the leonine god, their identification ensured – at least in one specimen – by the presence of a carved acanthus leaf (see above).<sup>11</sup> The same protective function is assumed by glazed terracotta tiles with a moulded lunar Apedemak, more easily recognisable in the typical iconography with a *hmhm* crown. As a kingship divinity, he is often chosen as a subject in glyphic art, and it is tempting to see an allusion to some representations of the god's

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the issues concerning Meroitic temple B900 as a 'Lion Temple' at Jebel Barkal, see Kendall (2014, 663–86).

<sup>11</sup> In describing lion statues placed at the entrances of Meroitic temples, L. Žabkar (1975, 62) wrote: 'although there are no inscriptions on them which would help identify them more closely, it seems reasonable to assume that in the architectural context in which they appear as guardian deities they are associated with Apedemak'. Palace B1500 is not a temple, but as a ceremonial setting for the rituals concerning the Meroitic establishment of the 'ambulatory kingship' it has undeniable cultic implications.

dwelling place in the presence of the rearing uraeus accompanying the lion. This iconic rendering seems to be also condensed in the small serpentiform Apedemak statuette, a reduced scale instance of the traditional coiled shape the god shows at Naga.

At Jebel Barkal, then, the variety and quality of the evidence allow to observe a meaningful adoption of the figure of Apedemak in palatial and ceremonial contexts; the significant record for the god, who was characterised by royal and demiurgic connotations, contributes to the outlining of an overall picture of the ancient site of Napata, perfectly fitting in the wider scenery of the Meroitic cultural milieu.

### Acknowledgements

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