

PRELIMINARY NOTES ON TWO ROYAL BUILDINGS DISCOVERED IN NAPATA¹

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It is well known that the imposing character of Natakamani's palace B 1500 in Napata and its complex development underline the special meaning of the construction. The matching of different architectural and decorative elements signifies the will of the builder to erect an extraordinary structure, new in conception, the aim of which exceeded simple residence even for a royal personage. Purification rituals and rejuvenation festivals probably took place in it.²

Two other palaces are known in Napata: B 1200 which probably was not in good condition at Natakamani's time since it had already been used for several centuries,³ and B 100, similar to B 1500 but much smaller, unsuitable for special occasions such as the coronation and rejuvenation ceremonies.⁴

We can then suppose that Natakamani needed a new palace; and for the occasion, a new model of palatial architecture, in which suggestions from different cultures came together, was created. But not only a palace was built. It must have been the core of a new royal town plan.

If we consider the fact that the main entrance of Natakamani's palace is located on the northern side, apparently looking towards the desert, it is clear that the most important buildings must have been standing in that area, now apparently empty.

In order to fill this gap in our knowledge, and to try to understand some of the palace functions, in 2001 an excavation was undertaken by the Archaeological Mission of the University of Rome "La Sapienza" at the north-eastern corner of the archaeological area, named B 2400, just beside the road which connects the modern towns of Karima and Barkal.

1. AREA B 2400

At first sight the surface was strewn with red-brick fragments and white sandstone pebbles. Research has revealed an imposing 1600-square-metre construction built in mud-brick on a square platform, 0.90 m high, closed by an external red-brick wall 1.75 m wide. The plan is similar to that of B 1500. Even the foundations (*casamatta* type) are the same (fig. 1).

The entrance is located on the western side and is formed by a ramp, more than 6 m long and 4.30 m wide, which reaches a square entrance terrace (5 x 5.30 m). Three rectangular rooms (3.30 x 4.30 m; 3.30 x 4.30 m; 4.80 x 4.30 m) divided by thin mud-brick walls lead into a large court 9.00 x 8.70 m which occupies the middle of the entire building.

¹ This paper was presented at the 10th International Conference for Meroitic Studies, Paris 2004. Warm thanks are due to Mr. Sergio Barberini for the drawings.

² Sist 2000, 255-256; 2005, 475-481.

³ Kendall 1991, 302-313.

⁴ Török 1997, 115.

A passage on the southern wall leads into another open space, the peristyle court which stood near the southern wall of the palace 4 m from the central court. It measures 4.70 x 6.70 m. The foundations are made of mud-bricks, covered at floor level by red-bricks in which twelve square (0.70 m) sandstone slabs, four for each side, are set. Some of them are missing but the empty space is still visible in the brick structure. They were the base of twelve sandstone columns. The distance between the columns and the perimeter wall is 1.25 m on the western side and 0.75 m on the southern. Distances between the columns are not all the same: the western and eastern ones measure 1.70 m; the northern and southern ones 0.90 m, reaching 1.40 m in the middle where the passage was supposed to be.

A lot of fragments have allowed us to reconstruct the column form (fig. 2): first of all the square sandstone base, then an octagonal plinth (0.20 m high, 0.70 m wide). It is difficult to find the model which inspired the Napatan architect. Most of the polygonal plinths found, for example in Egypt, belong to the late period and were used in Christian buildings such as S. Menas in the Alexandria area, the Main Church in Saqqara and the Abu Makarios monastery in Wadi Natrun; even their micro-asiatic prototype, which can be seen on the eastern side of the peristasis of the Milesian Didymaion, is dated to the first century A.D.⁵

On the plinth rested the well-shaped column base of Attic type, formed by torus, listel, scotia, listel and torus (fig. 3).⁶ The column composed of polished drums stood on this base.

On the last drum under the capital, slightly bigger and fluted,⁷ was placed the capital. It belonged to the Ionic order, as a fragment (18.5 x 25 cm) found in a hole nearby testifies (fig. 4). The finding is amazing, since the use of the Ionic order in Meroitic architecture was unknown before now.

On the columns was placed the architrave, which was decorated and surmounted by a denticulated moulding. This type of cornice belongs to the Ionic style⁸ and its proportions approach the "classical" ones remembered by Vitruvius (II 5, 11). A small fragment (7 x 11.5 cm), decorated by a rhomboidal motif, belongs to the ceiling of the cornice, according to the style of Ionic trabeations.

In spite of the complete destruction of the structure and the scantiness of the fragments which have been recovered, it is possible to understand the architectural innovation brought by an Ionic peristyle court included in a building in Meroitic style. The importance and the novelty of its decoration point to an official function of this part of the building.

The dating problem is still open and it is difficult to establish the chronological relation between the two palaces.

2. AREA B 3200

It must be noted that this palace, smaller than Natakamani's, is not aligned with the bigger one, but is instead aligned with another particular building which has been found in the area between the two.

⁵ Pensabene 1993, 189.

⁶ The fragment measures: height 23 cm, width 37 cm.

⁷ A similar example can be seen in the city of Antinoe: see *Description de l'Égypte*, IV, Paris 1817, pl. 61.

⁸ Pensabene 1993, 93-94, 104-107.

In 2002 the survey was extended to this area, which looked encumbered with a variety of constructions. In a place at mid-distance between B 1500 and B 2400, labelled B 3200 (50 m north from B 1500, and 30 m west from B 2400) a huge mud-brick building⁹ was excavated, preserved to a height of about 0.80-1.00 m (fig. 5). In spite of the fact that the structure had been reused (some walls were strengthened and some entrances were modified), and that only half of the construction has been excavated up to now, the original plan can be clearly drawn.

The building is almost square in plan, and presents a really unusual character since it is articulated around a central cell.

Let us start from the cell, which was the first part discovered. It is formed by an almost square room 8.40 m long and 7.50 m wide. The surrounding wall is 0.80 m thick and the external angles were strengthened with red bricks. The entrances, located in the middle of the northern, southern and western walls and 1.40 m wide, present jambs strengthened by red bricks. At present the walls appear doubled in the inner part so that the room is considerably smaller and the two passages located on the north and on the south have been blocked up.

The roof was supported by two white sandstone columns (diameter 0.68 m) standing on square bases (0.68 x 0.68 x 0.28 m) which are still in situ. A piece of a Corinthian sandstone capital, brightly painted in red, yellow and light blue, which was recovered in the interior, presents Hellenistic characteristics. Fragments of torus and of Egyptian cornice demonstrate that on the outside the building ended at the top in the usual Egyptian manner. A lot of finds show that interior and exterior walls were plastered and painted in bright colours (white, yellow, blue, red) with stripes and also wavy lines. The interior floor is about 20 cm higher than the outside one and is well preserved.

The central structure is surrounded by two large corridors (fig. 6). The first one is 2.70 m wide on the north and south, and a little less on the east (2.40 m) and is 13.60 m long N-S. It was probably all covered, since a door (1.40 m wide) has been discovered at the middle of its eastern wall. Many architectural sandstone fragments found nearby have permitted a reconstruction of the door jambs and of the architrave, which was surmounted by a urei frieze painted yellow to look like gold, and by a winged solar disc (fig. 7).

On the north and on the south there are instead three passages, the central one, aligned on the same axis of the cell entrances, measuring 1.40 in width and the lateral ones a little smaller (1.30 m wide). The red-brick thresholds are still preserved. All walls were plastered and painted, as were those of the cell.

The second corridor, which is wider and measures 3.20 m, is delimited by an external wall which reaches 1.00 m in width. Some sandstone slabs have been discovered in the foundation of the south-east corner (fig. 8). A similar employment of stone in building corners was already known in palace B1500: it is impossible to say if it had a special meaning or if it had only a technical significance.

The entrances were planned exactly as in the first corridor (triple passages and single doors), but they are organized in a different manner. So on the South, facing the triple

⁹ The bricks measure 19 x 38 x 8 cm.

passage of the inner corridor, we find a door; on the east, just in front of the door with the urei frieze, we find a triple passage. Some of the entrances were blocked up during the second stage of use of the building, but the red-brick-strengthened jambs are still visible.

The corridor was closed at its north and south ends by two small rooms, accessible through doors (1.15 m wide). The south room, which measures 3.30 x 3.30 m is paved with a very well preserved mud-brick floor, which is a little higher than that of the corridor (fig. 8). A lot of tiny faïence beads were discovered on it.

The western part of the building has not yet been excavated, but the square plan of the construction and the reciprocity of architectural elements noted between the northern and southern sides allow us to think that the unexcavated part must be similar to the eastern one.

Something must be said about the height of the structure. The cell was higher than the rest, since the external top was decorated with an Egyptian cornice and was then visible. The inner corridor was probably covered because doors and porches opened towards the second corridor. The roof was placed at a lower height than the cell's. The second corridor instead had uncovered and covered parts, the latter relating to the corner spaces.

The whole building was about 580 square meters (the N-S side is 24 m long) and was organised on a N-S axis. The central cell was open on both sides and was probably used as an important passage space, looking towards Natakamani's and B 2400 palaces. The royal meaning of the structure is not in doubt, but what was its function? It looks like a magnificent and richly decorated pavilion which stood in the royal town, new in conception, with imposing classical Meroitic features, enriched by Egyptian and Hellenistic suggestions. All these characteristics have already been noted in the nearby buildings and probably denote a common architectural taste, but meanings, connections and chronology between the structures have not yet been well outlined.

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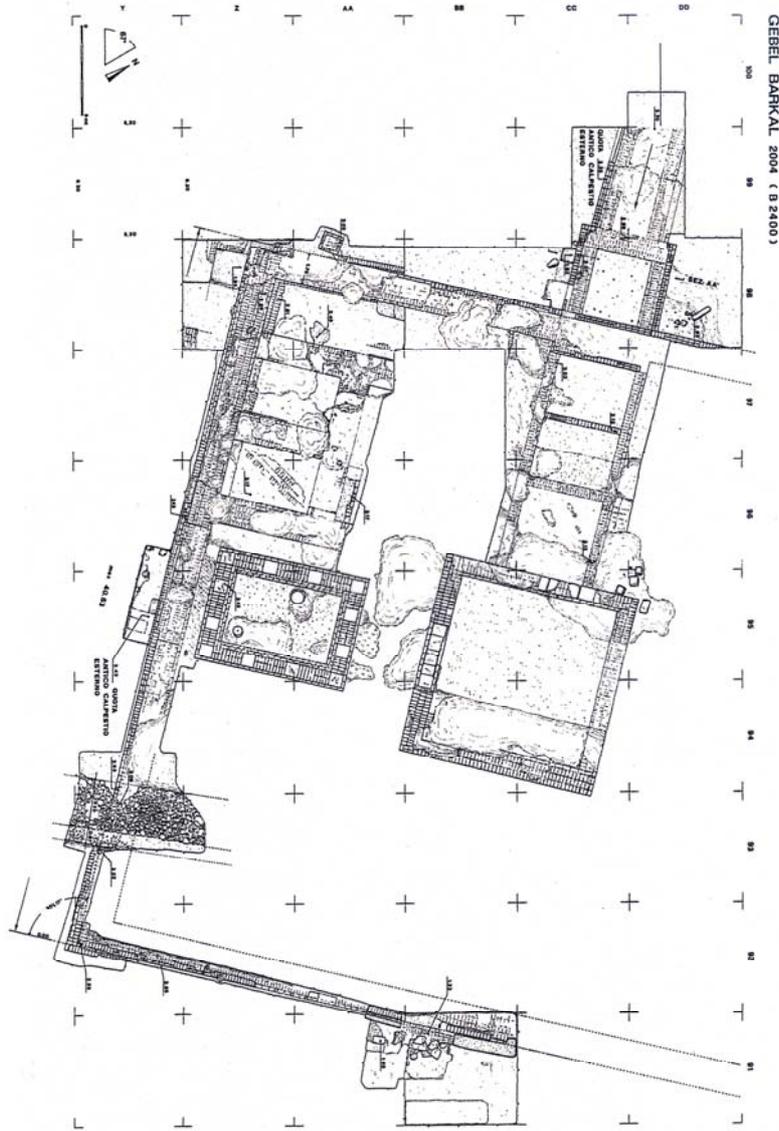


Fig. 1: Plan of palace B 2400.

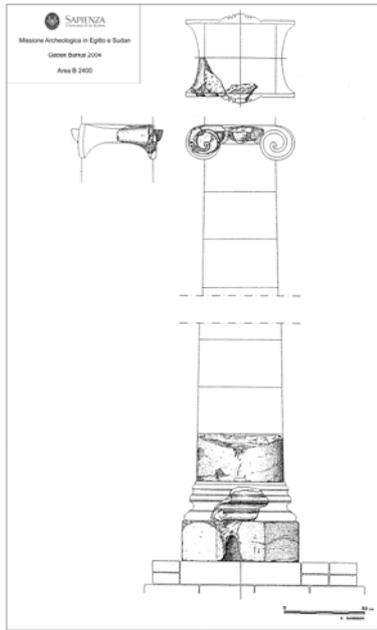


Fig. 2: Reconstruction of a column from palace B 2400.

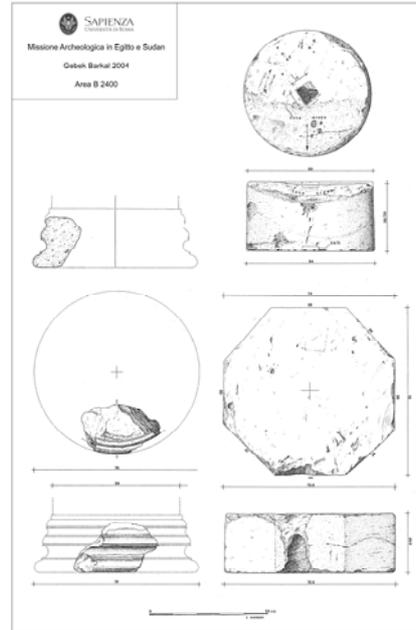


Fig. 3: Details of the column.

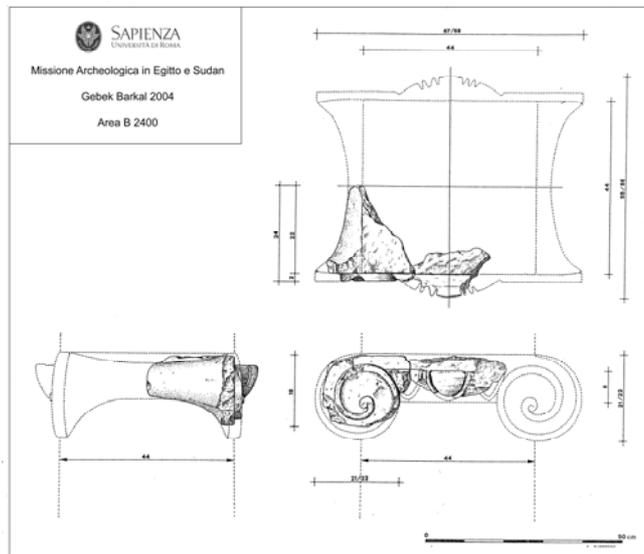


Fig. 4: The Ionic capital.



Fig. 5: Building B 3200.

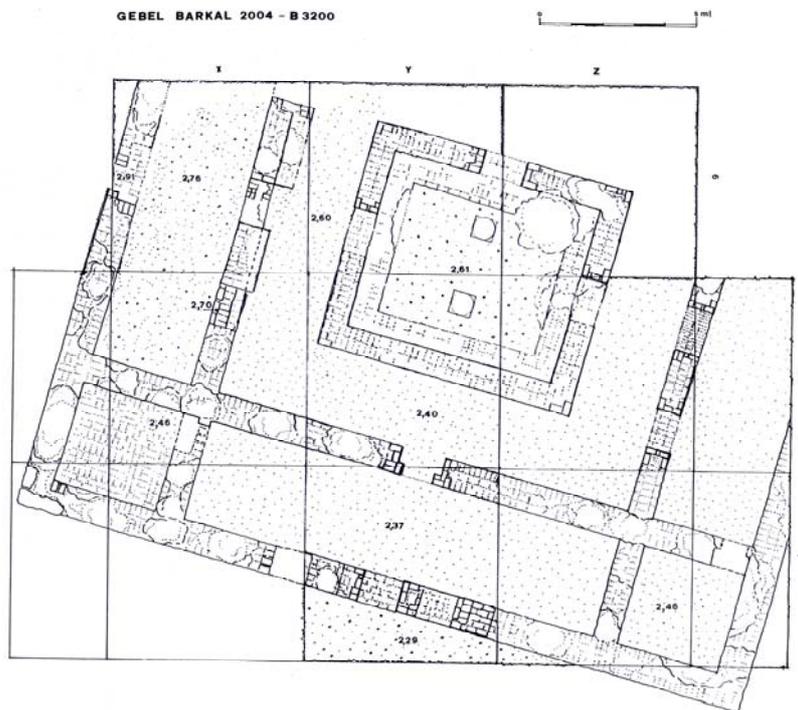


Fig. 6: Plan of building B 3200.

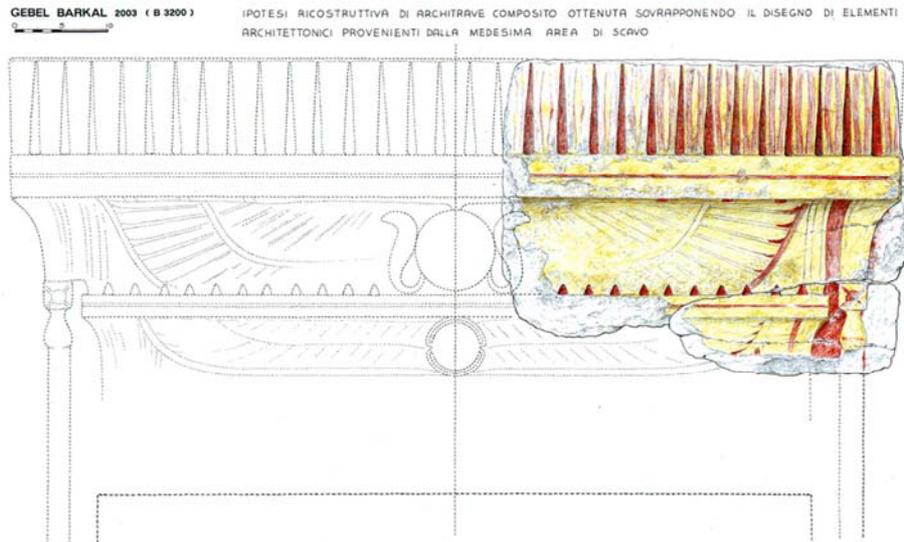


Fig. 7: Reconstruction of the architrave from building B 3200.



Fig. 8: A mud-brick floor discovered in building B 3200.