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The Meroitic Temple at Sai Island

Francigny Vincent

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BEITRÄGE ZUR SUDANFORSCHUNG. BEIHEFT 9



THE KUSHITE WORLD

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 11TH INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE FOR MEROITIC STUDIES
VIENNA, 1 – 4 SEPTEMBER 2008

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Edited by Michael H. Zach

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THE MEROITIC TEMPLE AT SAI ISLAND

Vincent Francigny

The Meroitic community at Sai Island has been known through many cemeteries¹ and one occupation level in the stratigraphy of the antique town (Azim 1975: 93). However, no discovery could ascertain that the Meroitic community had its own religious complex there despite decades of fieldwork, studies and publications on the Middle Nile Valley of Sudan. The nearby ruins of Amara East², a temple built during the reign of Natakamani and Amanitore who are associated with the prince Shorkaror, was then thought to be the only important sanctuary of this transitional area between the heart of the kingdom and the particular region of Lower Nubia. So had I believed until December 2006, when I joined the mission of the University of Lille, led by Professor Didier Devauchelle, and made the following discovery.

Meroitic Sai

Before explaining the discovery, it is necessary to present the state of our knowledge about human occupation of the island during the Meroitic Period, in order to put the finding into the context. As mentioned in numerous articles³, Sai is one of the biggest islands of the Middle Nile Valley, with more than 10 km in length N-S and about 4 km in width E-W, and is located several kilometres south of the *Batn el-Haggat*, the rocks of the second cataract of the Nile. Lying only about 20 km north of the major site of Sedeinga, which contains several thousands Meroitic burials but where all traces of settlement seems to have vanished, Sai was commonly known as a secondary location in the Meroitic kingdom – which only became important during the Post-Meroitic period, as seemingly indicated by the large tumuli field

covering the northern part of the island. However, Claude Rilly has recently pointed out that the name Sai (Rilly 2007: 306), when mentioned in a funerary text, often represents a prestigious reference for the dead. As a matter of fact, the two sites, Sai and Sedeinga, might have played complementary roles to control traffic on the river and on the deserts roads, avoiding meanders of Lower Nubia.

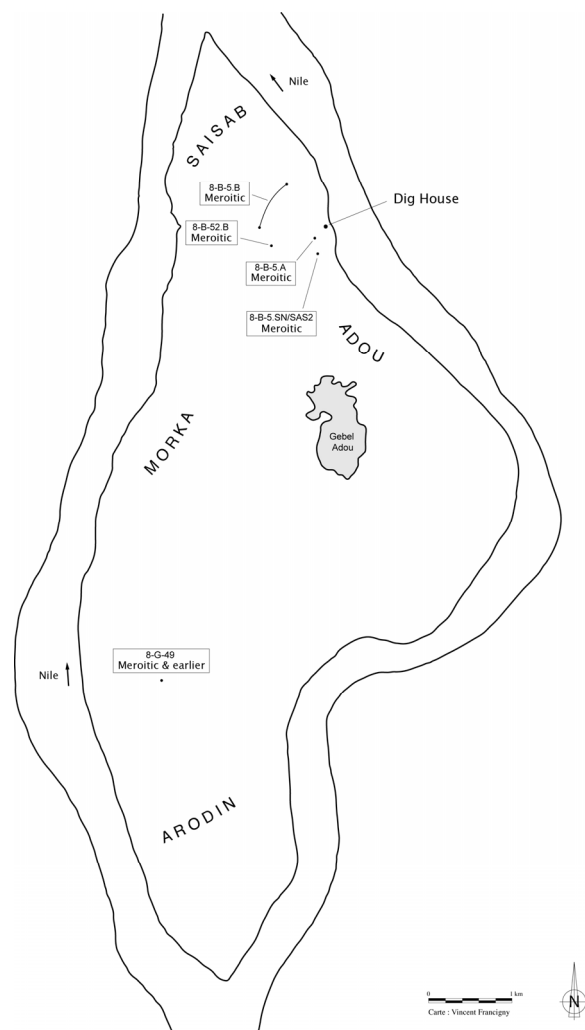


Fig. 1: Meroitic necropolises of Sai Island.

In the context of the Meroitic Period, the island is mostly known through evidence from funerary archaeology. Until now, five necropolises have been spotted and surveyed (Fig. 1), each having been numbered according to the system of Friedrich Hinkel's Archaeological Map of

¹ Excavations were resumed in 2008 on one of the necropolises, the cemetery 8-B-5.A; cf. Francigny 2009: 92-96.

² The ruins have totally disappeared and cannot be seen nowadays.

³ Cf. fieldworks activity reports published by Geus 1995: 79-98; 1998: 85-126; 2002: 95-134; 2006: 87-134.

the Sudan. Although the exploration of Sai is far from being completed, we can ascertain that human activity during the late period was mainly concentrated in the north part of the island. If the cemeteries 8-B-5.B and 8-G-49 were dedicated to the burial of the ordinary population, the three others must have been devoted to the burial of local elite; as these cemeteries were much smaller in size, contained pyramidal superstructures with chapel and provided us with very fine grave goods.

Other than necropolises, the Meroitic period is also known through remains of settlement located in an area covering a pharaonic town. An aerial view of the site clearly indicates the rectangular shape of the city, characterized by reddish colour due to tons of ceramics and surrounded by an enclosure wall, with 240 m in length and 140 m in width, dated from the New Kingdom. The mission of the Lille University, led by Florence Doyen in the field, had started excavating northern part of the town in 2008 and revealed a massive defensive mudbrick wall with its width being up to 4 meters. Meanwhile, quite some time ago (during the year of 1955 and between 1970 and 1973), the team, led by Jean Vercoutter, partly excavated the southern sector of the town, covered by an Ottoman fortress with round towers and bastions, which was built during the sixteenth century. From the latter excavations, which have never been published except in a short article written by Michel Azim (1975: 91-125), we learned that it was possible to separate five different phases of occupation⁴ within several meters of stratigraphy, even though all the layers were often mixed because of reused material and levelling works on the grounds throughout different periods. In this sequence, the Meroitic level is characterised by structures, reusing some of the Egyptian architectural blocks in their door system as threshold or as central columns supporting the roof of the largest rooms.

⁴ First, there is a New Kingdom layer, followed by abandonment, and then a continuous occupation of Meroitic, Post-Meroitic, Christian and Ottoman periods.

Temple remains on the island

At the edge of the earlier excavation of 1950s and 1970s, the team discovered the base of a temple built with sandstone blocks (Pl. Ia). This sanctuary, called Temple A, which Jean Vercoutter (1974: 11-26) first believed to belong to late period, possibly Meroitic, appears to be a New Kingdom sanctuary as confirmed by the discovery of 7 foundation deposits; as some of them contain material, bearing the name of 18th dynasty king, Thutmose the third. The date was affirmed by an inscription of Thutmose III, discovered within the fortress, which explains that during the 25th year of his reign, the viceroy Nehy was asked to rebuild in stone the former temple made of bricks. However, fragments of statues and decorated stone blocks found in the town show that an older temple had existed, dating from the reign of Ahmose, who may be associated with his son Amenhotep the first.

In summary, we have a sanctuary, destroyed under Thutmose the third and replaced at the same period by the actual Temple A. It was restored and possibly enlarged until the Ramesside period, as indicated by several decorated blocks lying everywhere on the site that bear the names of Amenhotep the second, Amenhotep the third and other kings or queens.

The abaci

It is based on this evidence scattered in the ruins of the area, excavated during the 70s, that I started paying my attention on a block, on which professor Devauchelle thought having seen a roughly carved inscription which seemed to be possibly Meroitic, while undertaking an assessment on the state of preservation of inscribed blocks. When I went to the site and saw the piece, an abacus turned upside down (Pl. Ib), it was indeed impossible to read the decoration, which was much eroded. As the original notebooks of Jean Vercoutter had not provided me with any further information about the original discovery (Pl. Ic), I understood that nobody had ever thought that sandstone blocks, showing traces of Egyptian style decoration, could be from later date. Thus I came back the following day with some workers to turn over the piece in order to conduct a final verification of all sides under rising sunlight.

The piece is square, 88 cm in width and 34 cm in height. The examination of the first side (Pl. IIa) showed us the presence of *nbw*-signs at

the bottom with god Heh kneeling on the right, as well as the beginning of three royal cartouches in the middle part. On the second side (Pl. IIb), we could recognize the same decoration with the slight difference of having the goddess Nekhbet, represented above the *nbw*-sign on the left, instead of god Heh. While the third one did not provide us with more details (Pl. IIc), the fourth one was better preserved (Pl. IId) and its decoration was clear, enabling me to draw a facsimile (Fig. 2).

Above the *nbw*-sign on the left, we find again Nekhbet; on the right of which the figure of Wadjet symmetrically appears. In the left cartouche, we can read *n* 𓏏 and *i* 𓏏, which immediately reminds us the name of king Natakamani. In the central cartouche, we can read *r* 𓏏 and *e* 𓏏, which undoubtedly indicate the name of the Candace Amanitore. Finally in the cartouche of the prince, we clearly read two signs *r* 𓏏, with an eroded sign (probably *o* 𓏏) on the left of the first *r* 𓏏. As this royal couple can be associated with three different princes known as Arikankharor, Arakakhataror⁵ and Shorkaror, it is obviously impossible to say which one of them has his name written here (because all of their names end with *-ror*). However, we can start from excluding the first one because he has never been represented alone in front of a divinity (which is the case here, *infra*). Then among the rest, Arakakhataror, the next one in the chronology, suits better because his early death could explain why some time later the same royal couple would have built a new sanctuary in the same area, at Amara East, presenting their new heir, Shorkaror.

From the architectural perspective, this abacus holds another interesting point. It shows a block divided between the base of a square abacus and the top end of a column; allowing us to reconstruct the complete abacus made of two blocks (Fig. 2), a system that suggests the existence of a base, which is equally divided⁶.

⁵ I have recently demonstrated that the prince known as Arakakhatani was the result of an erroneous reading since its name was discovered on the walls of the Amun temple at Naga. He should be called Arakakhataror henceforth; cf. Francigny 2011: 403-411.

⁶ During the Meroitic period, the same system is used in the columns of the Amun temple at Amara East (cf. Lepsius 1849-59, Abth. I: Bl. 114).

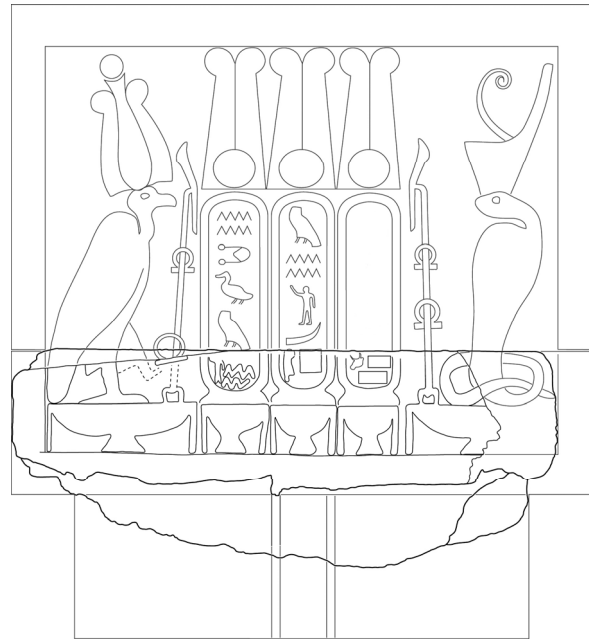


Fig. 2: Facsimile and reconstruction of the abacus

A second block with the same dimensions, lying close to the abacus, was a fragment of a second abacus (Pl. IIe). It presents a decoration similar to that of the first one. Only two sides were preserved, with one giving a new detail consisting of the first sign (*a* 𓏏), which was engraved in the vertical inscription of the column.

The column drums

Besides the abaci, four additional blocks lying inside of the fortress were identified as Meroitic. It consists of four drums of column, made of sandstone, and of different heights and diameters. The dimensions of the first drum (Fig. 3), 66 cm in height and 91 cm in diameter, indicate that it was positioned near the top of the column⁷. Two out of four scenes are still visible on it. The first scene, on the right of our facsimile, shows two male figures standing. The left figure (the god Amun with a human body?), looking to the right, is holding a sceptre (*w3s?*) in his left hand; while the right figure, wearing a long garment and facing him (the prince?), is presenting him offerings, most

⁷ According to the example of the Naga temple, the Meroitic columns from the same room could consist of a different number of drums; cf. Wildung and Kroeper 2006: Pl. 39a-b. Therefore, it is impossible to tell how many drums are missing in the columns of Sai, as we can only presume their position.

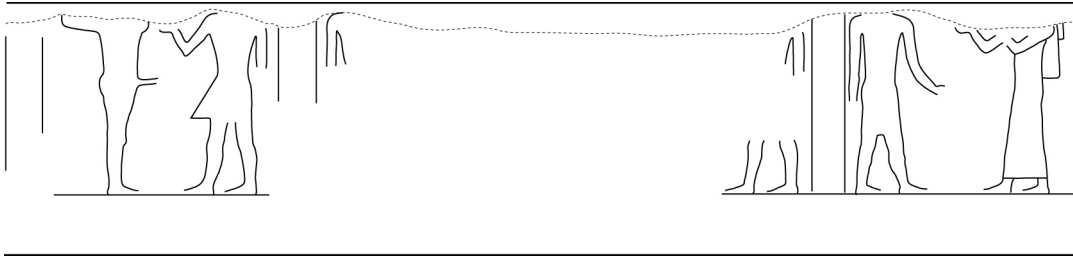


Fig. 3: Facsimile of the first drum

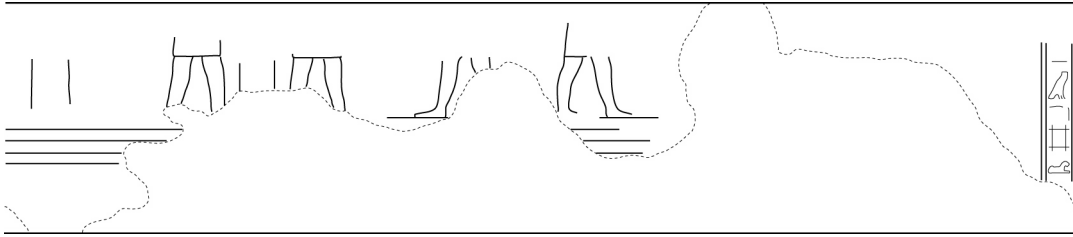


Fig. 4: Facsimile of the second drum

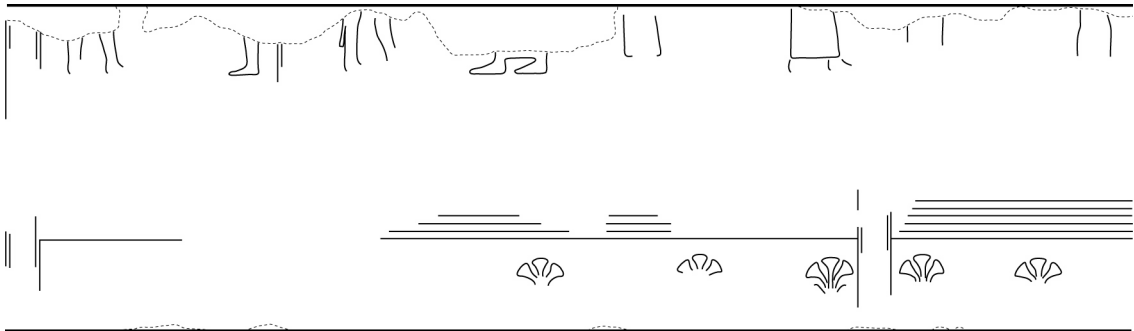


Fig. 5: Facsimile of the third drum

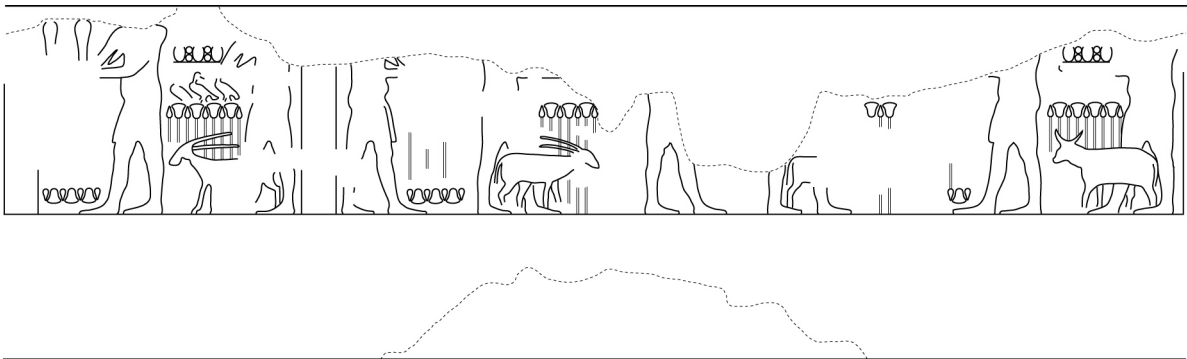







Fig. 6: Facsimile of the fourth drum

probably on a tray. The second scene, on the left of the facsimile, has the king standing on the right side in an offering pose, looking to the left towards an ithyphallic Min. The presence of Min in the top register could be an indication that the temple is associated with the cult of Amun, to whom the temple could be dedicated; as it is the case at Amara East (cf. Török 2002: 255).

While examining the scenes, I referred to the notes of Jean Vercoutter one more time. But the majority of the blocks were not even numbered and were only mentioned as “column drums coming from Temple A. Eroded decoration”.

According to its height and diameter, the first drum could have been placed on the top of the second drum. However, as the decorations of both did not match, the drums must belong

to two different columns. Therefore, the second drum (Fig. 4), 60 cm in height and 92 cm in diameter, was not placed at the top, but still in the upper part of the column. It shows remains of the lower part of the body of four characters and gives us an important confirmation of the date through a short sequence written in Meroitic hieroglyphic: [...] *m* , [missing part, probably *e*  and *d* , *se* , *l*  [...].

The third drum (Fig. 5), 82 cm in height and 95 cm in diameter, belongs to another category, constituting the lower part of the column. The decoration contains remains of two different registers, separated by several incised horizontal lines. The upper part only shows few remains of the legs of some figures; whereas the lower part apparently belongs to the first register of the column, as papyrus flowers indicate the presence of Nile gods who are placed at the base to make a link between the fertile ground and the sacred space, dedicated to the cult of the divinities and to the glory of the royal family.

The fourth and last drum bearing a Meroitic decoration, 92 cm in height and 98 cm in diameter, appears to be the first drum of a column (Fig. 6). In its original position, it was assembled with the third drum, which was placed above it. Together, they complete the first register of the column, with the traditional representation of fecundity figures. Eight gods are represented, two by two; four looking to the West and four looking to the East. All of them are in a processional pose, carrying offerings, while lotus flowers are hanging from the trays. Three of these trays are still visible; two with small vessels and bread⁸, and one with libation *hs*-vases⁹, creating an unusual alternation. Lotus or papyrus thicket¹⁰, accompanied by waterfowl, is in the background, while oryx and cattle at a diminutive scale accompany fertility gods as additional offerings, obviously without

geographical personification or reference to *nomes*.

The design of multi-drum column was originally supported by a square base and ended with a square abacus. The bed of every drum was severely damaged, and no trace of centring pin was observed. The reliefs were divided into four horizontal registers, each carrying four scenes with two figures. The decoration, identical in its form with that of the Amun temples' columns at Naga and Amara East, suggests that the columns of Sai were set up in the forecourt or in the first hypostyle hall of the temple, where the scenes demonstrate the different rituals performed inside. Yet some of the details, particularly concerning the scenes at the bottom, raise the question of the influence and model the artists referred to – a question that led us to Lower Nubia, in the temple of Dakka (*Pselkis*).

In this large Ptolemaic-Roman temple, the most southern Ptolemaic sanctuary that played a strategic role between Meroites and Egyptians, we found several parallels of Nile gods' carvings, which could be used as models for the representations discovered at Sai. The construction of the sanctuary, dedicated to Thoth, was originally initiated by Ptolemy IV, and resumed by the Meroitic king Arkamani I (Ergamenes II), who took advantage of the great revolt of the Egyptians (207/6-186 BC) to incorporate the northern part of Lower Nubia to the Meroitic kingdom. He had then a number of Egyptian artists and members of the clergy, working and living in Nubia, under his authority. They could participate in the construction¹¹, giving to the reliefs a substantial Egyptian style, which could be traced as far as Dendera.

On the external surface of the northern wall of Arkamani's chapel at Dakka, the lower register is decorated with Nile gods Hapi in a processional pose, carrying offering tables with *hs*-vases associated with lotus flowers and a

⁸ Similar to the one that prince Shorkaror carried on the relief of a column from the temple of Amara East; cf. Lepsius 1849-59, Abth. V: Bl. 69.

⁹ The presentation of trays with *hs*-vases could indicate the special relevance of libation in the Nubian tradition.

¹⁰ Here, detail of the plants seems to be more symbolic than realistic, with both plants being referring to aquatic and fertile environment.

¹¹ As noted by Török (2009: 395), this cooperation was already effective long time before the Meroitic conquest of Lower Nubia: "The contribution of Philaean priests who worked together with Meroitic priestly experts on the texts and iconographical program of the buildings of Musawwarat es Sufra was part of a large-scale cooperation with Egyptian architects and artisans".

w3s-sceptre (Pl. IIIa). Other lotus flowers or umbels are hanging from the trays. The fecundity figures are followed by the goddess Sekhet, whose feathered headdress is still recognizable in spite of erosion of the wall. She also carries a tray full of offerings; and in front of her legs a papyrus thicket is represented, on which blooms alternate with buds at the top of the stems. During the late reign of Ptolemy VIII, a pronaos was added. Among different divinities featuring on its front base, Sekhet is accompanied by cattle (Pl. IIIb). Later, on the walls of the roman sanctuary, added on the rear of Arkamani's chapel by the Emperor Augustus, fecundity figures¹² are accompanied by cattle or fowl walking in front of them, each scene being separated by long lotus stems with flowers (Pl. IIIc).

These decorations present the evolution of the motif in Nubia during the last centuries, before the foundation of the Meroitic temple at Sai. If the representation of Nile gods carrying offerings on trays rarely appears throughout the Meroitic kingdom¹³, the relief of Sai depicting animals is unique. Clearly influenced by the Ptolemaic model, the columns' decorations should have followed an Egyptian inspiration, probably indicating the joint work of Meroitic priesthood and Egyptian craftsmen.

Other evidence

In addition to these re-discoveries, some other traces have already suggested the presence of a Meroitic sanctuary on the island since long time ago. First are the two references of the cult of Isis and Horus at Sai, written on the Taneyidamani stela¹⁴ (end of 2nd century BC). Does the mention of Isis explain some of the stylistic connection with the reliefs of the

¹² In a different position, about to perform libation, one vase held up in front of the figure, while second one rest on the shoulder. This "running" jar pose was mostly connected to the Graeco-Roman period in Lower Nubia; cf. Baines 2001: 313.

¹³ A procession is shown on the walls of the funerary chapel Beg. N.8; cf. Chapman and Dunham 1952: pl. 5d; while fragments of carved wood with Nile gods carrying trays were found in the Amun temple of Naga; cf. Kroeper 2006: 291, Fig. 15.

¹⁴ *Wos Tsye-te* (line 51) and *Ar Tsye-te* (line 52); cf. FHN II: 670. Rilly (2007: 307) recently proposed to interpret the formulae *Tsye* as a more precise mention of the "Island of Sai".

Dakka temple, where the image of Isis-Hathor was worshiped?

Second are the findings made by C.R. Lepsius during his short stay on the island in 19th century: a small block inscribed with a Meroitic inscription¹⁵, as well as a doorjamb bearing two graffiti brought by F.L. Griffith to Khartoum¹⁶, which could hardly come from a grave, a house or an administrative building. To these examples, we should also add the discovery of the 70's, made by the excavators of the town: a block decorated with a vulture's wing and some Meroitic sign¹⁷.

Third and last are the several other Meroitic anepigraphs sandstone blocks, found during excavations or brought by villagers from different parts of the island. Among them, three pieces drew my attention: a frieze of uraei (Pl. IIIId), which style seems to be Meroitic; a fragmentary lintel (Pl. IIIe) published by Francis Geus (2006: 133) as part of a funerary chapel (an interpretation that cannot be valid for many reasons. It has been discovered near the settlement area and not in a cemetery, and no funerary lintel in the all kingdom bears a frieze of uraei above the winged sundisk); and another lintel (Pl. IIIf), measuring 90 cm from the centre of the sundisk to the edge, which gives us a estimated length of 1,80 m that seems to be only suitable for the door of a temple.

Based on the new understanding of the documents presented here, we conclude that the name of Sai Island should be added to the list of the building activities, led by the royal couple Natakamani and Amanitore during the 1st century AD. As archaeologists have not touched the main surface of the town yet, there is still hope that future excavations and new discoveries will provide us with more data concerning its location and the nature of its worship.

¹⁵ Cf. Lepsius 1849-59, Abth. VI: Bl. 11.

¹⁶ Cf. Griffith 1912: 9, inscr. n° 82 and 83.

¹⁷ Cf. Geus 1994: 142 and Fig. 2.

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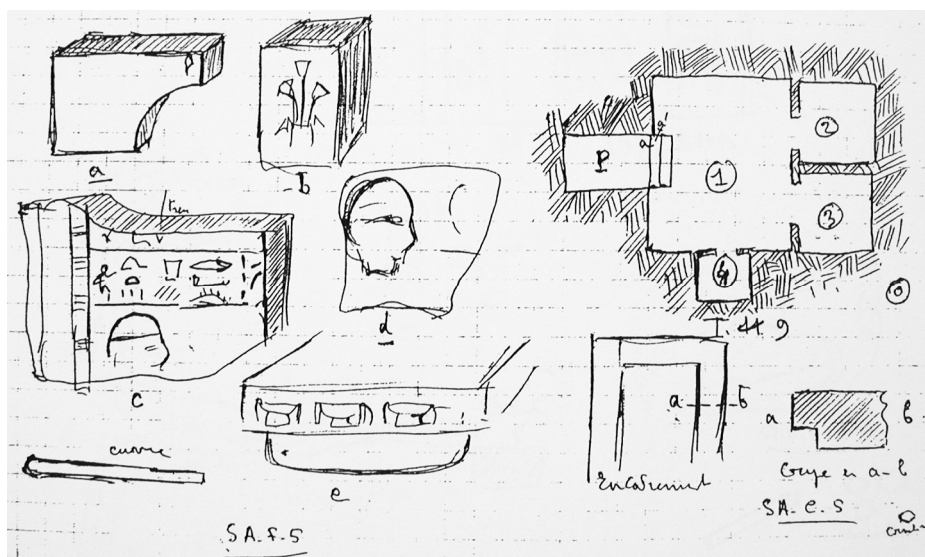
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Pl. Ia: Aerial view of the Temple A



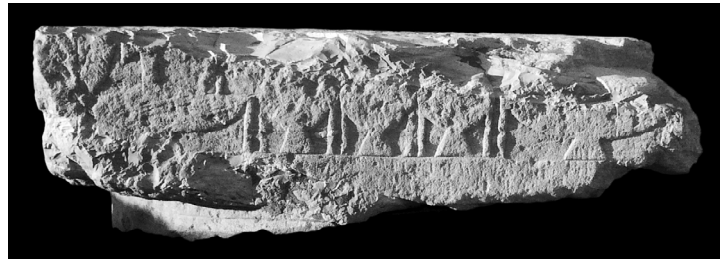
Pl. Ib: Abacus in the ruins of the pharaonic town



Pl. Ic: Notebook of Jean Vercoutter showing the abacus (e)



Pl. IIa: First side of the first abacus



Pl. IIb: Second side of the first abacus



Pl. IIc: Third side of the first abacus



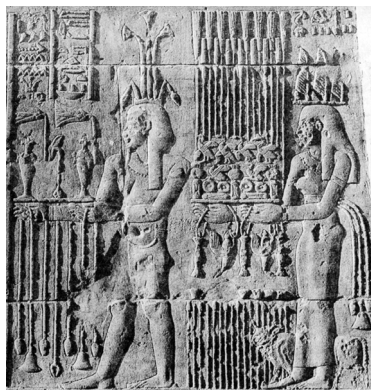
Pl. IId: Fourth side of the first abacus



Pl. IIe: First side of the second abacus



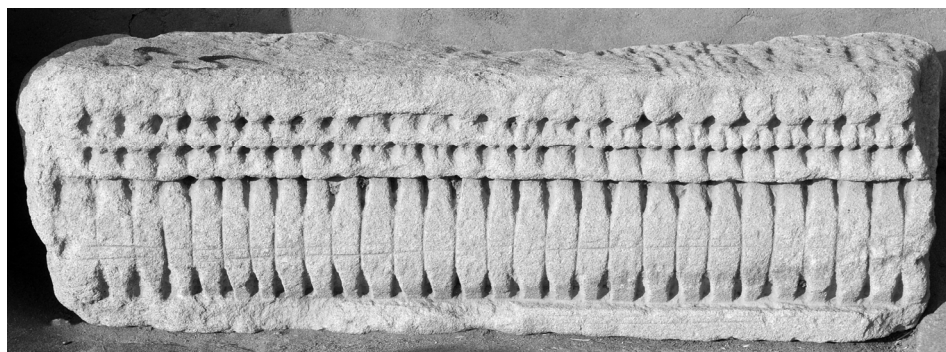
Pl. IIIa: Dakka temple (Roeder 1930: pl. 71b)



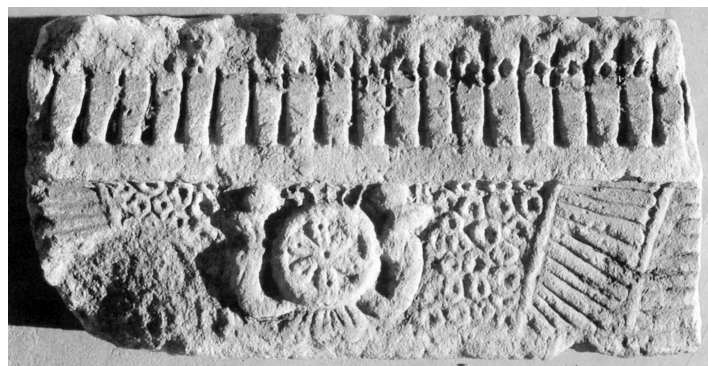
Pl. IIIb: Dakka temple (Roeder 1930: pl. 44)



Pl. IIIc: Dakka temple (Roeder 1930: pl. 121a)



Pl. IIIId: Frieze of uraei



Pl. IIIe: Meroitic lintel (Geus 2006: 133)



Pl. IIIf: Fragments of a Meroitic lintel