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Sedeinga: a regional capital in the Kingdom of Kush

Francigny Vincent

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IN THE XXIST CENTURY

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edited by

MATTHIEU HONEGGER



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SEDEINGA: A REGIONAL CAPITAL IN THE KINGDOM OF KUSH

Vincent FRANCIGNY

After a hiatus of seven years, archaeological investigations on the site resumed in 2009 (Rilly and Francigny 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013). Focusing its work on the Sector II of the large necropolis, the new team has excavated a cluster of graves with a high concentration of funerary monuments marked by several chronological phases. Shedding light on the transition between early and late Kushite funerary customs, ongoing excavations provide new information on pyramidal architecture, funerals and ritual deposits that accompany the deceased on his journey to the afterlife. The new programme of research that also surveys the environs of the burial area, mapping all the historical remains on the site, suggests the strategic role played by Sedeinga as a regional capital during the Napatan-Meroitic period.

History of Research

Sedeinga is located on the west bank of the Nile valley in Middle Nubia, about 15 km north of Soleb and south of the dreadful region of the Batn el-Haggar. Although it was first described by Frederic Cailliaud who, on January 3rd 1821, made a stop at the New Kingdom temple on his way south, no account was taken of the large funerary area lying behind the monumental remains until the Prussian expedition led by Carl Richard Lepsius reached the region. It was he who first wrote about an ancient cemetery at Sedeinga, and he who collected the first Meroitic inscriptions from the surface of the site. Despite its clear potential for archaeological investigations, after the episode of the Prussian expedition the site was visited by travellers and left untouched for more than a century. Only with the arrival of a team at Soleb, did Sedeinga become again an area of interest for archaeologists.

During the winter of 1963, a team composed of Michela Schiff Giorgini, Jean Leclant and Clément Robichon began work at Sedeinga, focusing both on the cemetery and the Egyptian temple. Excited by the discoveries made in the necropolis, they decided to build a permanent storage facility on the site, but unfortunately the 'Pharaonic' work they already started at

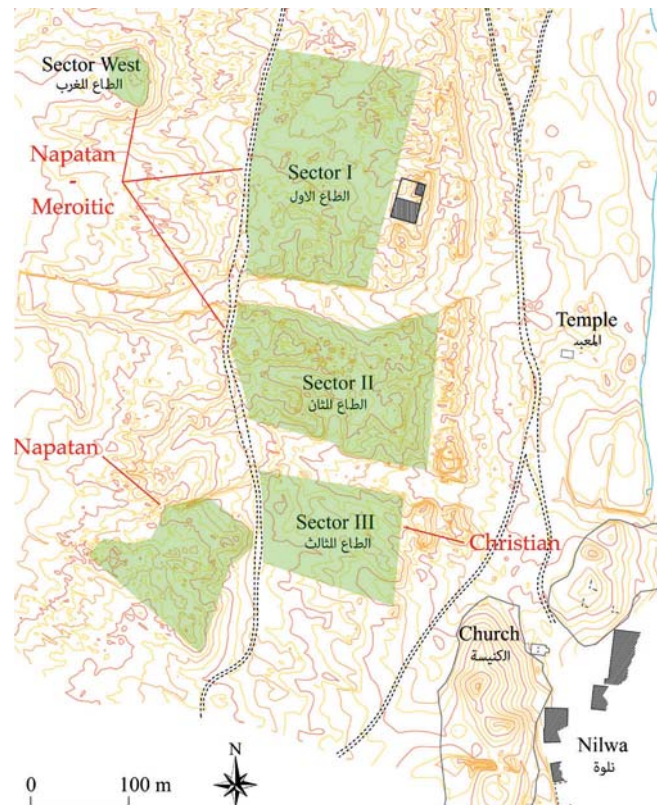


Figure 1. Archaeological map of Sedeinga.

Soleb prevented them from spending much time at Sedeinga. Therefore only 3 additional seasons took place on the site, in 1964, 1967 and 1969. Later, in 1977, Jean Leclant assembled a new team entirely dedicated to the study of Sedeinga. He was assisted by Audran Labrousse and Catherine Berger who would successively take over the direction of the mission in the 80's and the 90's. By 2002, more than 20 excavations seasons had taken place, mainly centred on the Kushite necropolis. Only published through reports and short articles, the results were unfortunately never published as a monograph, which is one of the many reasons why it was decided in 2009 to resume the work on the site.

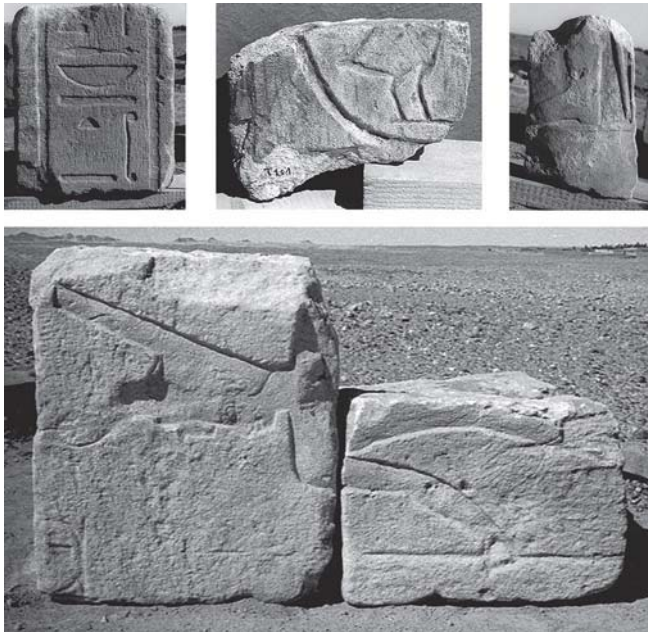


Plate 1. Sandstone blocks originating from the 'Taharqa temple'.



Plate 2. Fragmentary stela with Amun and Amenhotep III.

Evidence from the Temple

It is usually admitted that the destruction of Amenhotep III's temple at Soleb was the result of a disastrous event such as an earthquake that took place sometime during the late period. It is probably the same event that led to the destruction of the Tiya temple at Sedeinga. Therefore, any major transformation in the landscape could be a clue to understanding the chronology of events. For instance, two large wadis divide the site in three distinct areas (Figure 1). As no architect would have placed a temple at the mouth of two rivers, even though it was founded at the top of a hillock, we

can assume that the wadis appeared sometime after the New Kingdom period. As several funerary monuments were erected at the border of the wadis during the Meroitic period, we can also assume that they no longer constituted a threat at that time.

Before the study of the temple even began, many blocks originating from it were found in the necropolis (Giorgini 1965, 118-120), producing pieces of the story that turned a modest and isolated settlement into a regional capital. First was a series of architectural blocks (Plate 1) discovered in the necropolis during the 1963 campaign, all pointing to one of the main figure of the 25th dynasty: the king Taharqa. Reused to build a monumental gate at the entrance of the grave W T 1 in the West Cemetery, the blocks undoubtedly come from a temple. As no other temple is known on the site, we can reasonably assume that Taharqa ordered a renovation or an addition to the original Egyptian building, which confirms that during the first half of the 7th century BC, the sanctuary was functioning normally. This assumption was recently confirmed by the discovery in early 2015 of a block bearing the name of Taharqa in a cartouche, inside of the ruins of Tiya's temple.

Then there are two fragments from a stela of Amenhotep III (Plate 2), on which the king stands before the god Amun-Re of *Khaemmaat* (Soleb) and his own divine hypostasis crowned with lunar disc and crescent. It was reused in the blocking system of a Meroitic grave from the Sector II of the necropolis, indicating that during the late Kushite period the temple was probably in ruins. Later, in 2012, a massive sandstone panel (Figure 2) was found in a Napatan grave, where it was reused as a funerary bench. Though it was carved to match the coffin dimensions, it was undoubtedly cut to keep the image of the Amun god intact. The block was removed from the Tiya temple (though it might originally comes from Soleb), as indicates the cartouche of Amenhotep III that follows the representation of Amun. This time however, the chronological context of the grave where it was found cannot be dated later than the 4th century BC, giving us a fairly good date-range for the destruction of the temple, which must have occurred no later than between the 6th and the 4th centuries BC.

Finally, a fragmentary stela (Figure 3) was discovered in 2014 in the blocking system of a late Meroitic grave in Sector II. It is adorned with the only known representation of Thoth found at Sedeinga, the divine image of Amenhotep III and probably Amun (erased during the Amarna period). It once stood in the Tiya temple and attests the particularities of local worship.

Besides the inscribed material, architectural blocks from the temple are regularly excavated in the perimeter of the necropolis, adding relevant information to our understanding of the sanctuary and its multiple phases.

According to the archaeological records from Soleb and Sedeinga, Soleb has produced almost no trace of activity during the Napatan period, while Sedeinga seems to have supported an important community at that time; the unidentified disaster that destroyed the temple might have been the decisive factor that reshuffled the cards in the region, leading to the rise of Sedeinga as a major centre. But then, how can we explain the choice of Taharqa, who, before the catastrophe, promoted religious activity at Sedeinga by renovating or adding a construction to the sanctuary, while Soleb was apparently left untouched? The only likely answer is that before the 7th century BC, Soleb had already fallen into disuse. That would explain, for example, why Piankhy, during the second half of the 8th century BC, ordered the removal of some statues from Soleb to install them in temple B 500 at Gebel Barkal (Kendall 2002). It is therefore evident that Sedeinga was a prominent place as early as the 25th Dynasty and the Napatan period, with a wealthy community probably ruling the entire region of Sedeinga, as well as possibly the nome of *Tawete* on the other side of the Nile (Rilly 2013, 106).

The Napatan-Meroitic Necropolis

While no Egyptian grave has been identified so far at Sedeinga, the surface covered by burials significantly increased between the Napatan and the Meroitic period. To unravel the chronology of events, and understand how each section of the site had developed, the team conducted several test excavations at the edge of previous excavation pits, where archaeological material was still visible on the surface. Most of these produced no evidence for burials. Consequently, the archaeological map of the site was revised to produce a more accurate version, including hundreds of graves already excavated in no less than 8 different locations (Figure 1).

While Sector I was only an Elite cemetery, the higher density of graves around the pyramid clusters in Sector II indicates that the latter was also used for common burials. Located on a small hill overlooking the necropolis, the West Sector is of particular interest since it contains only nine graves, which according to the architecture of the funerary monuments, the material

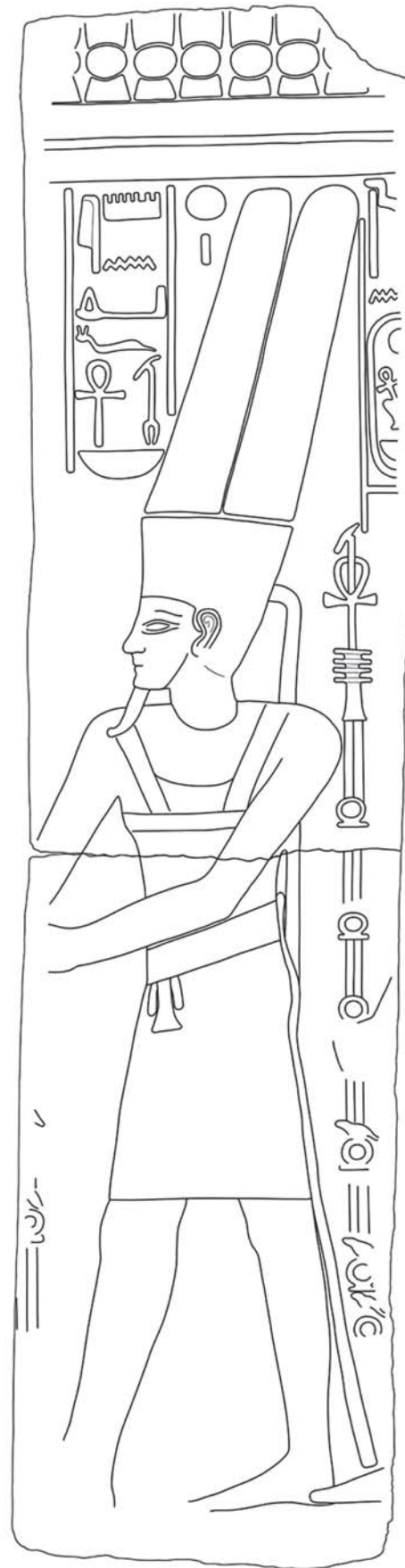


Figure 2. Sandstone panel with the representation of Amun.



Figure 3. Egyptian stela depicting Thoth, the divine image of Amenhotep III and Amun.

recovered from the chambers, and the Meroitic inscriptions collected at the surface, were made for the ruling class.

In order to better understand the relative chronology of the cemetery and understand its evolution throughout the Kushite period, it was also decided to take advantage of an unfinished excavation at the west of the Sector II, and resume fieldwork there. In this location, two neighbouring clusters of graves and monu-

ments offer great potential for studying the differences between early and late funerary practices as well as interactions between family groups. Starting with a few graves for each monument during the Napatan period, the cemetery was gradually filled with hundreds of new burials until the Meroitic period, using almost all the space available. With the area becoming filled, this strategy was slowly compensated by reusing old funerary chambers and, later, by adding new structures at a distance from the core part of each cluster. In addition, small quarries, used by workers to prepare the bricks and mortar for funerary monuments, were integrated into the cemetery area, giving the clusters the aspect of small islands.

Based on material associated with the primary burial of a handful of graves, a series of C^{14} dates provides a timeframe starting as early as the beginning of the 4th century BC for this part of Sector II. However, a few superstructures were clearly built before the graves and should be dated no later than the 5th century BC. During the Late Meroitic period, around the 2nd - 3rd centuries AD, while reusing the Napatan graves at the centre of the cluster, a new funerary monument was occasionally erected over the ruined chapel (Plate 3). These 'flying pyramids', as we wittily call them, usually stand at least fifty centimetres above the original ground-level of the necropolis. To date, Sedeinga appears to be the only Meroitic site where this singularity has been recorded. No doubt that once again, the strategic location of the reused central graves was dedicated to the burial of the most important figures of a clan or a family.

Another point regarding the funerary pyramids at Sedeinga is the unexpected diversity of the interior architecture of some monuments. Features such as internal cupolas linked to the angles by diagonal cross-braces were found, which evoke the long-standing tradition of the Nubian tumulus; an assumption supported by the discovery of a few graves covered only by a circle of bricks. But as new shapes, such as square and rectangle, were also excavated during the most recent seasons, we need to be cautious when trying to give an interpretation for these unusual features that once supported the monuments from the inside.

Superstructures and high quality grave goods including numerous imported products also point at the great wealth of the elite that lived in Sedeinga during the Kushite period. The large number of elite graves reveals that until the 4th century AD, this prosperity was con-

tinuous and probably the result of a sustained trade with distant regions via the desert roads.

An isolated royal-style Grave

In June 2012, during the construction of the asphalt road connecting Sudan to Egypt on the west bank of the Nile, the workers found an enormous trench dug on the east side of a small sandstone hill. Filled with wind-blown sand, the pit appeared to be a giant stairway leading to a grave (IV T 1). Before any local authority was aware of the discovery, the workers used an excavator to empty the descent and open a passage to the gate. In their haste for loot, they brought the excavator on top the hill, dug a small access ramp for the machine to stand vertically above the entrance, and used it in the most careless manner, destroying the stone lintel and partly damaging the west façade of the staircase. As the tomb is located only 1.5 km from the main necropolis of Sedeinga, when the team arrived in November, the rescue excavation of the grave became a priority and all the plans for the season were changed accordingly (Rilly et Francigny 2013, 61-62).

Practically undetectable (Plate 4), the tomb would probably still be unknown if the road had passed only a few meters to the east or to the west. A survey has confirmed that it was completely isolated with no kushite remain in the vicinity and no funerary monument at the surface. Built in the axis of the Tiyi temple located to the east, the grave was probably left unfinished, although it contained at least one burial. The descent was about 10 m long (partly excavated as the road was built over it) and 7 m deep at the entrance (Plate 5). Finely cut into the sandstone, the bottom was much larger than the top, with beautifully carved steps, door-jambs and lintel. Filled with tons of windblown sand, a system of walls and platforms was installed by the team to access the grave and prevent the weakening of the asphalt road. No element of the blocking system was found but some sherds left on the outside, to the right of the entrance, were associated with charcoal.

The grave is divided in two rooms: an antechamber (5,4 x 5,8 m) supported by four pillars and a chamber (3,3 x 5 m) supported by two pillars. At the end of the chamber, what first looks like a niche is in fact the passage to a third room that was never completed. The door between the two chambers has its doorjambs and a lintel roughly carved and probably unfinished.

At the time of the discovery, the tomb was partly filled with sand divided in three stratigraphic layers.

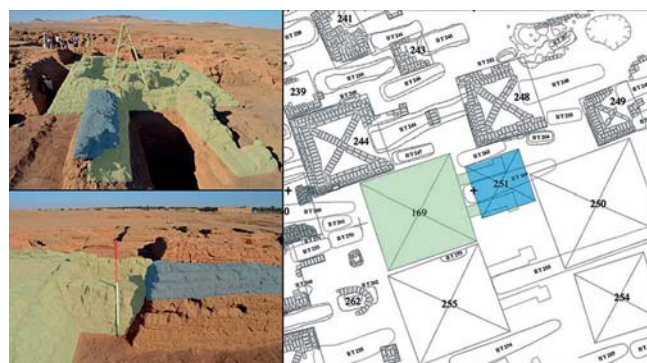


Plate 3. Napatan and Meroitic pyramids overlapping.

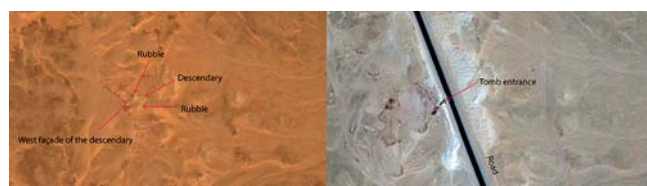


Plate 4. Satellite views of IV T 1 in 2004 and 2013.

The lower layer contained some material related to a burial. The second layer was only made of the wind-blown sand that entered the grave after it was plundered during antiquity. The third and top layer was very thin and contained modern artefacts associated with the recent opening of the grave by workers. Among them was an interesting apotropaic talisman written on a paper and supposed to avoid the evil eye while perpetrating the looting.

It is clear that the underground structure was conceived as a grave of royal standards for a high-ranked official or possibly a king. A comparison with the plans of royal graves from Barkal and Meroe shows that, if completed, IV T 1 would have been quite similar to Bar. 5 and Beg. N. 8, both of which can be dated to the second half of the 2nd century BC, which confirms the ¹⁴C date obtained on the charcoal found at the entrance that at 95% probability gives a date between 197 BC and 43 BC. As already mentioned by Török (1997, 461), we know very little about the dynastic troubles that seem to have taken place during this period. The establishment of a new royal burial ground at Gebel Barkal indicates a possible scission in the royal lineage and the likely arrival of a new family in the political game. Such an event could have affected the relations between the central power of the capital and the provinces far to the north, such as the one governed from

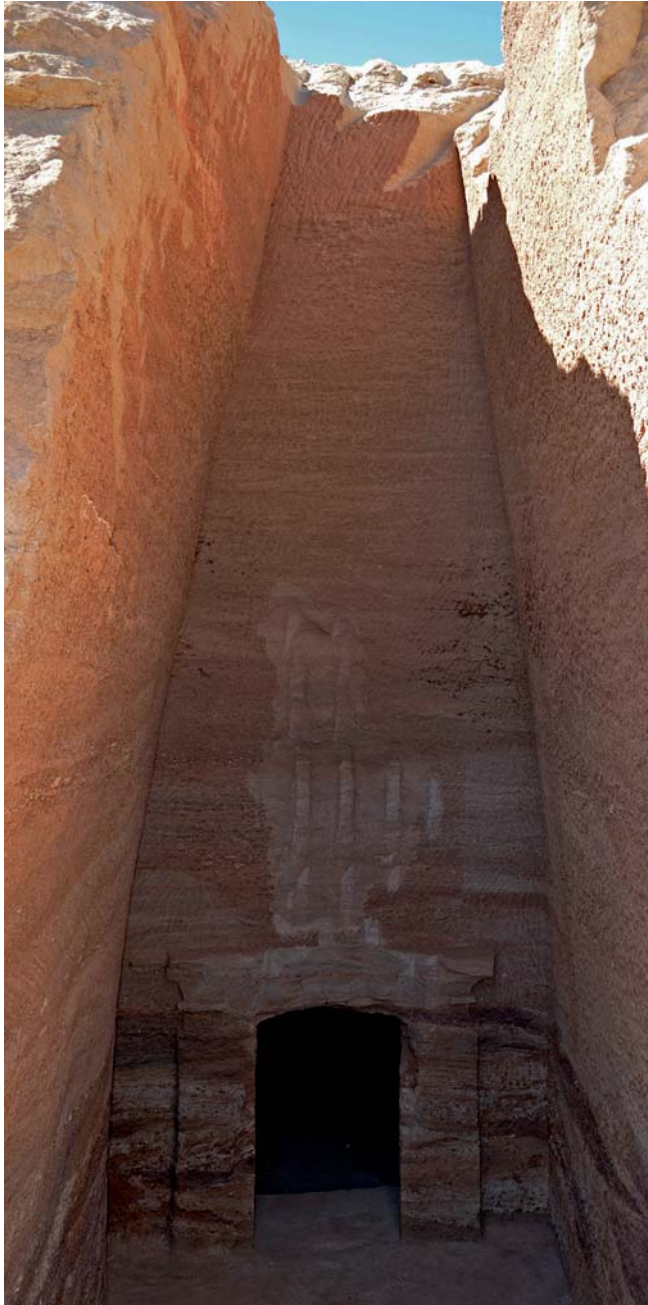


Plate 5. Entrance of the grave IV T 1.

Sedeinga. Strong similarities between the conception of the underground structure of IV T 1 and the architecture of other royal graves, point at the work of skilled manpower normally involved in the construction of the elite's tombs in the capital. Having them work at Sedeinga can only mean that at some point the city hosted some of the highest dignitaries in the Meroitic kingdom. The question is: were they local governors

becoming exceedingly powerful or notables from Meroe and Barkal fleeing from troubles?

Whatever the case, it appears to have been temporary, as the grave was never completed and no other was ever built at Sedeinga to royal standards. The fact that human remains and some material were found in the chambers, but not a single stone of the blocking system, suggests that the burial in question could correspond to a simple reuse of the structure, after the grave was abandoned and that no proper royal ceremony ever took place.

In only a few years, recent fieldwork at Sedeinga has provided more evidence regarding the status of site during the New Kingdom and the following Kushite period. What was there previously, and why the Egyptians build a temple there remains however unclear. The settlement certainly grew over several centuries in the shadow of the nearby powerful centre of Soleb. However, the situation dramatically changed at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC, as Sedeinga developed into a wealthy and powerful regional capital.

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