

The Role of an Early Napatan Settlement at Jebel Barkal In the Light of Circumstantial, Historical and Archaeological Observations

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Abstract: *Over a century, the center of the earlier phase of the Kushite state (Napata) was a matter of dispute among the scholars concerned. The sites recovered by the Boston – Harvard Expedition (1916-1919) at J. Barkal, Kurru, Nuri, and Sanam were either burial grounds or temples of the royal Kushite family, widely known as the 25th dynasty of Egypt. No settlement equivalent to the glamour of this state or parallel to its activities was recovered. Suggestions and hypotheses by authorities in area of Jebel Barkal indicate the field (Reisner, 1917, Dunham, 1950, Kendall, 1990 and Hakem, 1975 alternate from Barkal to Kurru to Sanam to Meroe⁽¹⁾). Recent investigations by the Department of Archaeology of the University of Dongola revealed remains of a settlement east of J. Barkal with more than one stratigraphic architectural levels and a variety of artifacts and eco-factual remains. In the light of these discoveries and other observations, this paper aims to discuss these hypotheses and cast a light on the role of the Napatan settlement at Jebel Barkal.*

Keywords: *Kush. Napata. Kushite. Meroitic. Barkal. Kurru. Royal court. Settlement.*

Neolithic pottery and Bronze age artifacts were collected from the early settlement in the vicinity of the Jebel. With the passage of time, the rulers of the Egyptian Old Kingdom (3000-2100 B.C) sent the explorers and caravans to explore the region south of Egypt (Kush). They made many journeys through the Nile and passed the canals through the first cataract loaded with products of Kush, which includes timber, granite, leather, ivory, slaves, life-stock, etc. (Arkell, 1961: 112-114). (Arkell, 1961: 112-114).

The Egyptian kings showed an interest in the wealth of the South. Therefore, they made several attempts to conquer the area. These attempts were done by the princes of the first intermediate period and the kings of the Middle Kingdom during (2600-2100 B.C) to domain the region South to the second cataract. The obsession to extend their control and domination of the area, another attempt was

made by the Egyptian New Kingdom during the period (1500-1100 B.C) to overcome the fifth cataract and establish a center at Jebel Barkal by destroying the local state of Kerma about 1450 B.C. As a result of this domination, the Egyptians managed to link the Mediterranean Sea world with the African hinterland, which would mean opening the way to long-distance trade.

Jebel Barkal is a sandstone hill with some regular peculiar shape, length, width, and height, on the Nile river bank. The strategic location of Jebel Barkal has not only shortened the role of the two distant centers at the third and fifth cataracts by forming a land route across Bayuda and Atmur deserts (Figs. 1-4) but allowed them to sail through the long unnavigable river channel of the fourth to the fifth cataract, cutting through a region devoid of settlement (Adams, 1977: 249) (Arkell, 1961op.cit: 110).

The attraction of the mountain comes “As

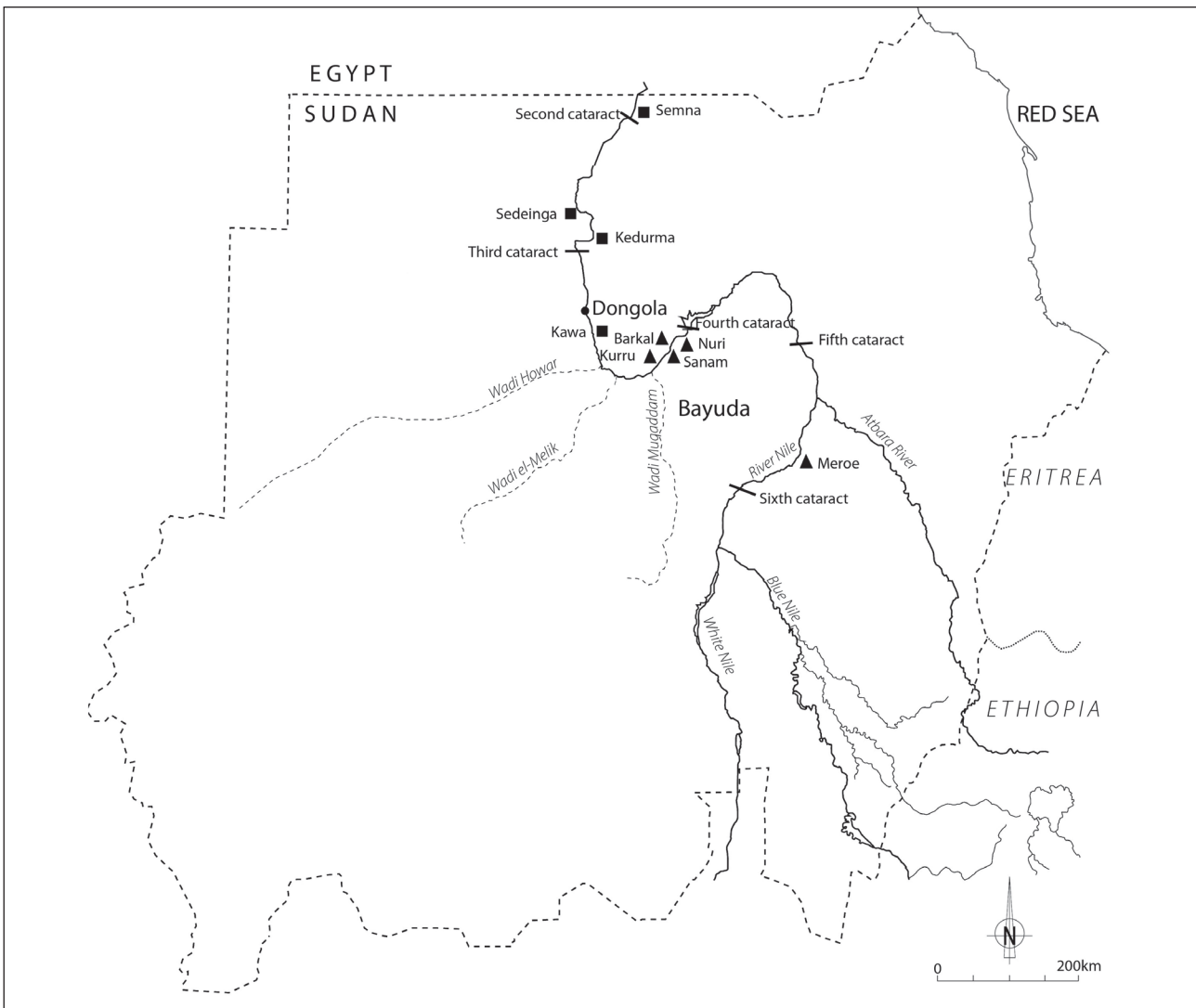


Fig. 1: Major Napatan Sites

described from some fantastic seed blown from its source an orphaned child of a primeval earth scoured by wind-blown sand in startling isolation” (Kendall, 1990: 103).

During the Egyptian times in Kush, the Jebel turned into a ritual center and became the second home of Amun after Karnak. Temples were constructed for him at the foot of the Jebel where coronation took place. The Napatan and Meroitic kings implemented the previous message by building, temples, royal burials, palaces, etc. Otherwise, whether it had any political, administrative or else role then, it remains to be seen, but no doubt, due to the

above mentioned, it was a major center of royal activities in Kush.

Until the end of the second half of the 19th century, the role of Napata played in the stream of the history of the Nile valley was beyond, or at least, on the far edge of the glamour of the Egyptian civilization.

Travellers, explorers, historians who visited North Sudan revealed at Jebel Barkal evidence of the King’s name, inscribed stela conflicts with Egyptian princes and others entities in the neighborhood and beyond (Libyans, Assyrians). Accordingly, Jebel Barkal provided a mass of

material yielding basic information to place Napata in the steam of knowledge (Morkot, 2003: 151- 168).

Advancing towards the subject of this paper, we mean to move beyond the dialogue of terminological connotations of certain terms (Napata and Capital) dwelling in the Kushite literature confusing due to lack of unified definition.

The term “Napata” dwells in meaning from place to town, culture, political entity, ethnic group. When it first came to light, early in the Middle Kingdom of Egypt it referred geographically to identify a region within the main country of Kush. Later it was used in Egyptian inscriptions to a local political entity and continued to refer to the ruling family, the formed state and its culture, before it sank in confusion (Arkell, 1961op.cit: 38-56,156).

The other term “Capital” originally driven from Latin “Capitale” to mean “head” or “chief”, before it diffused to other connotations, in commerce, law, military, writing. In modern times, it went to politics to mean “geographical center of administrative authority” (Arthur Lawrence Hayward, & John J. Sparkes, 1962).

As both terms vaguely and ambiguously dwell in certain areas of concern, hereunder, the first “Napata” refers to the Kushite political entity which developed from a chiefdom, to state, then to an empire, first-round Jebel Barkal, in Northern Sudan, then expanded bounders to reach the Mediterranean north and Central Sudan south, during the first half of the 8th century B.C. (Arkell, 1961op.cit: 126) (Adams, 1977 op. cit: 352).

By “Capital” we refer here to the “royal court” where the ruler of a political entity resides for “a permanent or considerable length of time”. That may or may not be combined with another official, administrative, religious,



Fig. 2: Jebel Barkal from the eastern side



Fig. 3: View from the top of the Mountain towards settlement ?

military.. etc. centers.

This paper aims to cast light on one of the debatable issues in the archaeology of the Kushites. It addresses the lack of the administrative center of Kush during the phase of Napatan state (8th mill. to the 6th mill. B.C.) in the region known as Napatan around Jebel Barkal in Northern Sudan, where Napata was said to have been born (Reisner, 1917. Dunham, 1950. Griffith, 1922. Hakem, 1975. Kendall, 1990) (Figs 1, 4). During that period, the state reached its maximum zenith of power and extension and turned into an empire from the Egyptian Delta on the Mediterranean coast to the south of Khartoum. It became an

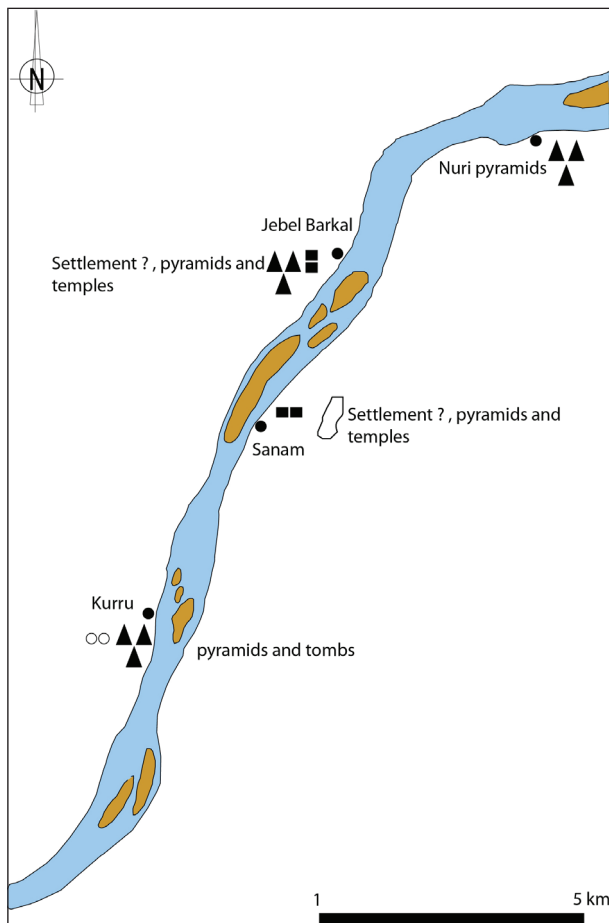


Fig. 4: Urban Centers in the Napata Core

international power known to the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Hebrews and referred to in the Holy Bible and the records of Greek and Roman writers (Reisner, 1917. Adams, 1977).

During the period (1916-1919 A.D.), the joint expedition of Harvard University and the Boston Museum revealed the major sites of this state at Kurru, Nuri, Jebel Barkal, Sanam Abu Doum, Meroe (Fig. 1), and other sites, which form the cradle and showed the establishment of a state in northern and central Sudan known in the Egyptian ancient history as the 25th Dynasty (Reisner, 1917) (Dunham, 1946: 378).

The archaeological works of this expedition revealed names of several Egyptian kings of dynasties 18th, 19th, 20th), including King Thutmose IV, Horemheb, Seti I, and Ramses II.

The mission also revealed the names of some of the Kushite kings of the 25th dynasty, and their ancestors (Alara, Kushto, Piankhy and Taharqa), as well as the names of some of their successors who came after them, including kings Atlanirsu, Annalamni, Sinkmenskin, Amanshakhto, Netkamni, and others (Reisner, 1917. Griffith, 1922. Kendall, 1990. Donadoni, 1993).

Accounts of early travelers and explorers make no mention of any major settlement sites in the cradle area related to the Kushite or Napatan State. As well, the early Archaeological works (Reisner 1917-1921, Griffith 1916-1919) failed to locate any Napatan settlement in the core area apart from a possibility of the cemetery at Sanam Abu Doum “modern Merowe⁽²⁾” (Lohwasser, 2010). The sites recovered by the early 20th century archaeologists Reisner and Griffith between 1916-1919 were either royal or non-royal cemeteries or temples.

In the fifth century B.C., the city of Meroe appeared as the capital of the Kushite State, after it became the administrative center, as a manuscript of a Napatan Kushite King, Amnentairki, indicated, in which, he says that his predecessor, “King Talkhmani, justified in his palace at Meroe”. It is believed that this transformation had previously resulted from an invasion from the north during the reign of King Psamtik II of the Egyptian 26th Dynasty, around the year 591 B.C., during the reign of the Kushite King Aspelta. The result of this invasion, as suggested, was the destruction of the temples of Jebel Barkal (Macadam, 1949).

The addressed question in this paper seeks to locate the administrative center of the Kushite State from the time it was established in the 9th century B.C. till it was moved to Meroe in the 6th century B.C.?

Napata’s mainland is known to be poor in

fertile land, grazing pasture, mining sources, and in trade routes. These are some of the determining elements for any state to grow.

Some hypotheses have been put forward calling for some sites as metropolises of the Napatan stage before moving south to Meroe. Among them, the most popular of these are: The first was forwarded by George Reisner in which he addressed Jebel Barkal, as the most appropriate place to name the city of Napata (Reisner, 1917: 23). Dunham, supporting Reisner, argued that the religious center of the god Amun at Jebel Barkal was also the administrative and political center of the state (Dunham, 1950: 5). Griffith preferred that the site of Sanam to have been the center of the State (Griffith, 1922) (Fig. 4).

Timothy Kendall, at first, also proposed Jebel Barkal as the political and religious center of the State. Yet at a later date, he changed his hypothesis suggesting that Kurru, the burial ground of the royal family, was the center of the State (Kendall, 1990 op.cit: 103). Hakem, basing his argument on the lack of settlements in the region of Napata believes that Meroe has been the capital since the beginning of the State in the middle of the 9th century B.C. (Hakem, 1975: 119).

As an attempt to analyze the above-mentioned hypotheses, it can be said that Reisner, Dunham, and Kendall (in his first hypothesis) the latter, assumed that the religious center, and the political center, at Jebel Barkal must not be separated. As for the Griffith suggestion for Sanam rests on the large partly excavated archaeological site that occupies the center of the modern city of Merowe uses the royal court, yet the site has not witnessed significant excavations to reveal a settlement, its function and nature of that site, yet unknown. What is known constitutes no proof confirming

an administrative center, despite the large cemetery, and traces of what was assumed to be a temple and a treasury.

The site of Kurru, for Kendall (1990) second hypothesis, which houses the tombs of the kings of the 25th dynasty and their ancestors, might have served the function of the administrative center in the early stages of the chiefdom and the establishment of the State. It is generally assumed that before the Kushites advanced to Egypt (about 760 B.C.), for the chiefs who were buried in the mound graves and mastabas at Kurru, the latter was the center of the State. During the period of the 25th Dynasty, the kings were mostly in Memphis (in the era of Shabaka and Shabtaku) and perhaps later in Thebes (in the era of Taharqu and Tanut Amani) (Abdullah, 2002). The question remains, where did Piye (Piankhy) reside after he returned from his conquest to Egypt?.

Hakem's hypothesis for Meroe, being the center of the State, was based on:

- a) The area east of Jebel Barkal could not accommodate a large settlement for a royal court center (Hakem, 1975: 123).
- b) The western cemetery at Meroe is the only royal cemetery housing. Burials for the children of the family, as their burials are absent in the whole of the Napata area (Kurru, Nuri and Barkal) (Hakem, 1975: 124).
- c) The southern cemetery at Meroe and the city of Meroe itself dates back to the beginning of the ninth millennium B.C. i.e. the beginning of the Napatan State, so it refutes a transition to Meroe.
- d) Names of some of the early Kushites kings were recovered from the royal cemeteries at Meroe (Hakem, 1975: 125).

Here under we set observations that can shed

light, we believe, on the current hypothesis. These include circumstantial historical and archeological observations.

Circumstantial Observations:

- a) The Napatan temples and palaces at Jebel Barkal, in number, size, and form, call for a massive size of population of workmen and experts who were settling in, or, near Jebel Barkal.
- b) Pasmmetik II invasion of 591 B.C. aimed and ended at Barkal, but never beyond. The aim of destroying temples without reaching the center of the State at Meroe (if it was) is improbable.
- c) The royal cemetery at Kurru site reveals gradual and continual development of the State to the extent that it rules out the possibility of having an administrative center 350 km away at Meroe (Muhammad Ali and Abdullah, 2003).

Historical Observations:

- a) The coronation of the Kushite kings remained at Barkal through the Napatan - Meroitic era. The temple of Amun at Meroe was not known to have taken that role even when, and after the “capital” was transferred, to Meroe.
- b) In one of his stela, Piankhy describes himself as the “Bull of Amonape (Amun of Napata) was the one who crowned him” (Breasted, 1961: 47).
- c) In his book “Natura Historia” Pliny described the towns from Aswan to Meroe Including Maharaqqa, Ibrim, Napata, and sighted the latter as a small town 80 miles from Artitigela (Pliny, 1938-1962).
- d) The Roman geographer, Strabo in his book “The Geography” describes Napata as the royal residence of the ruling Candace

(Strabo, 1917-1918).

Archaeological Evidence:

The core area of Napata has witnessed a number of expeditions excavated at Jebel Barkal, the major Kushite site.

- a) The Harvard - Boston expedition (1916-1919). revealed a large number of temples dating back to the New Egyptian State and the Kushite State, with its two parts, Napatan and Meroitic.
- b) Boston–NACAM expedition (1986) has recovered several royal burials and buildings in the area east of Jebel Barkal (Kendall, 1990: 96-103)
- c) The University of Rome expedition at Jebel Barkal recovered the remains of a Napatan settlement and a later temple and a palace in the area east of the Jebel Barkal, previously described an area unsuitable for a settlement (Donadoni, 1993: 101-115). The area also revealed buildings in occupational layers predate the above mentioned palace, dating back to a previous era. The Meroitic period is also well documented in the same area as architecture and pottery (ibid: 101-115).
- d) The ongoing excavation and re-excavation at Kurru conducted by the Universities of Dongola revealed evidence of a settlement and a city Wall east of the burial ground (Mohammed Ali et.al. 2016: 7-20).
- e) The Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, University of Dongola is conducting salvage excavations in the area east of Jebel Barkal since 2003, to protect the area threatened by projected development (roads - agriculture - cable for communications). The test revealed part of a settlement that contains architectural layers, the lowest of which dates back to the Napatan period (Ahmed, 2017: 213-234).

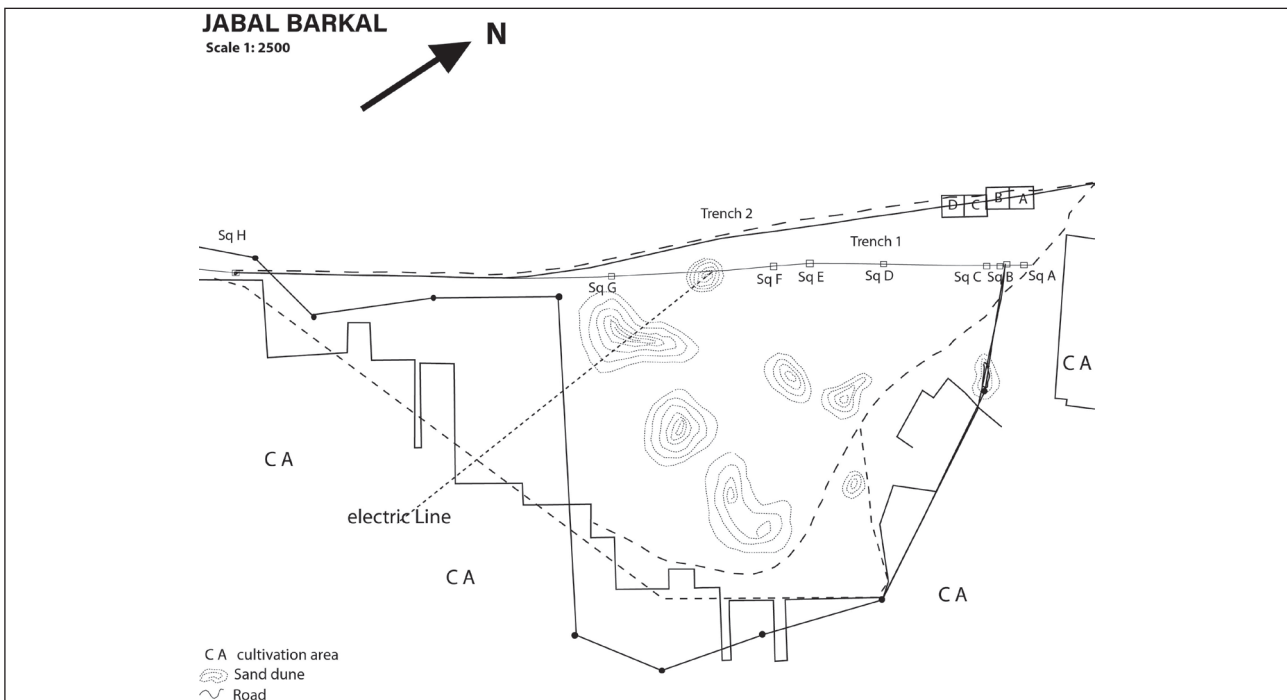


Fig. 5: The Study area shows trench 1 & 2

f) In May 2003, the Sudatel Telecommunications Company of the Northern State destroyed part of the area in question, while implementing a telephone cable from Karima town to the southern regions, of the State by digging an extended trench with a width of (40-60 cm) and depth of about (80-90 cm), along the eastern side of the site to a distance of about 640 meters.

The “Cable” trench revealed fired mud bricks foundation, yielding a large number of potsherds, grinding stones, and animal bones. Yet, the Cable trench has plundered all the archaeological layers in its way.

At the beginning of our work, two trenches (1 and 2) were planned for testing and recovering the site (Fig. 5).

Trench No.1

Excavations were First focused on trench 1, which includes the area where the plunder occurred, in order to assess the extent of the



Fig. 6: Upper grinders from plundered levels

damage. Units (A.B.C.D) were excavated, each unit 20x20 meters, yielding large number of Napatan-Meroitic pottery fragments, animal bones, and grinder stones (figs. 6-11).

All these archaeological remains were recovered inside buildings, foundation of mud or fired bricks, with large extension of ash layers.

In parts of trench excavations showed stratigraphic sequence to the depth of 125 cm, which indicates a deep sequence of settlement (figs. 12-15). Archaeological remains which

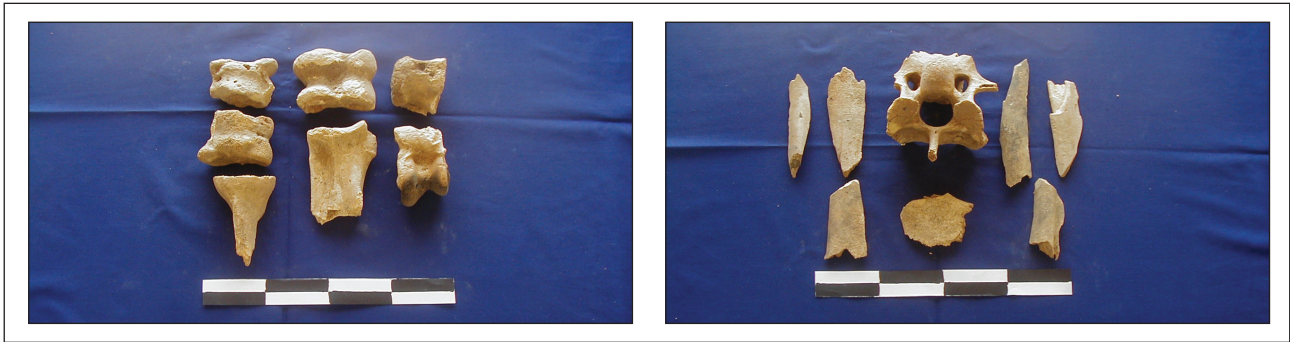


Fig. 7: fragments of animal bones from plundered levels

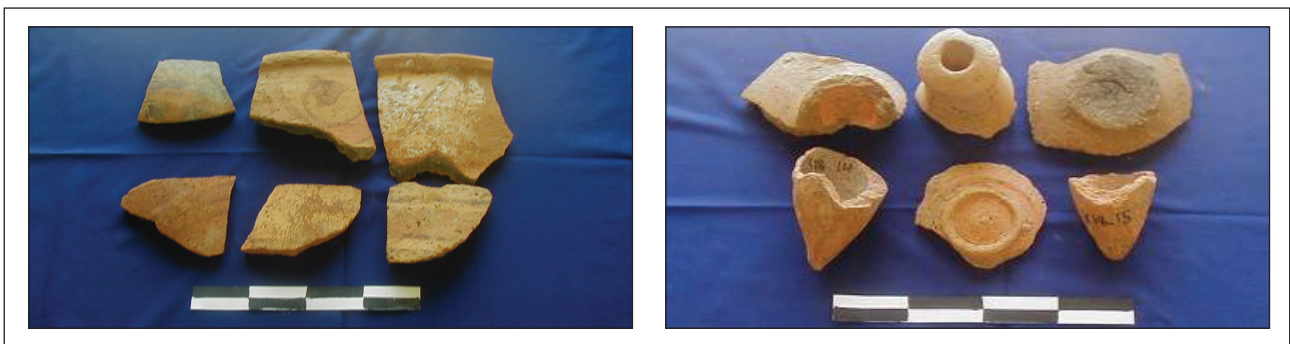


Fig. 8: Potsherds from Napatan level

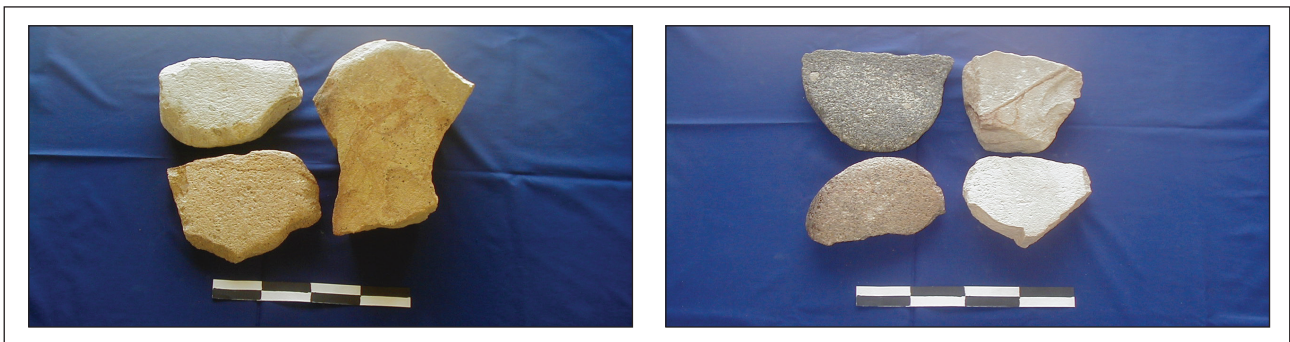


Fig. 9: fragments of lower grinder from upper level

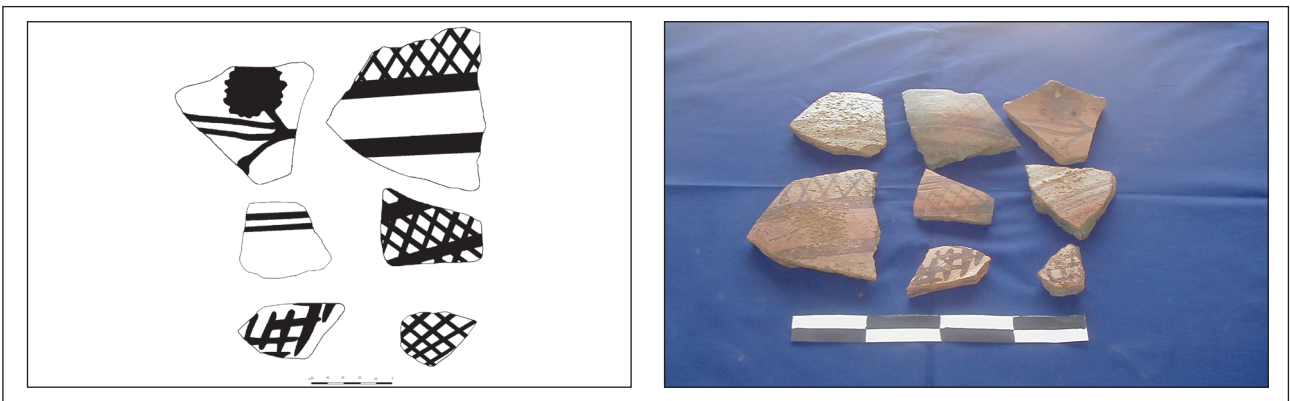


Fig. 10: Potsherds from Meroitic level

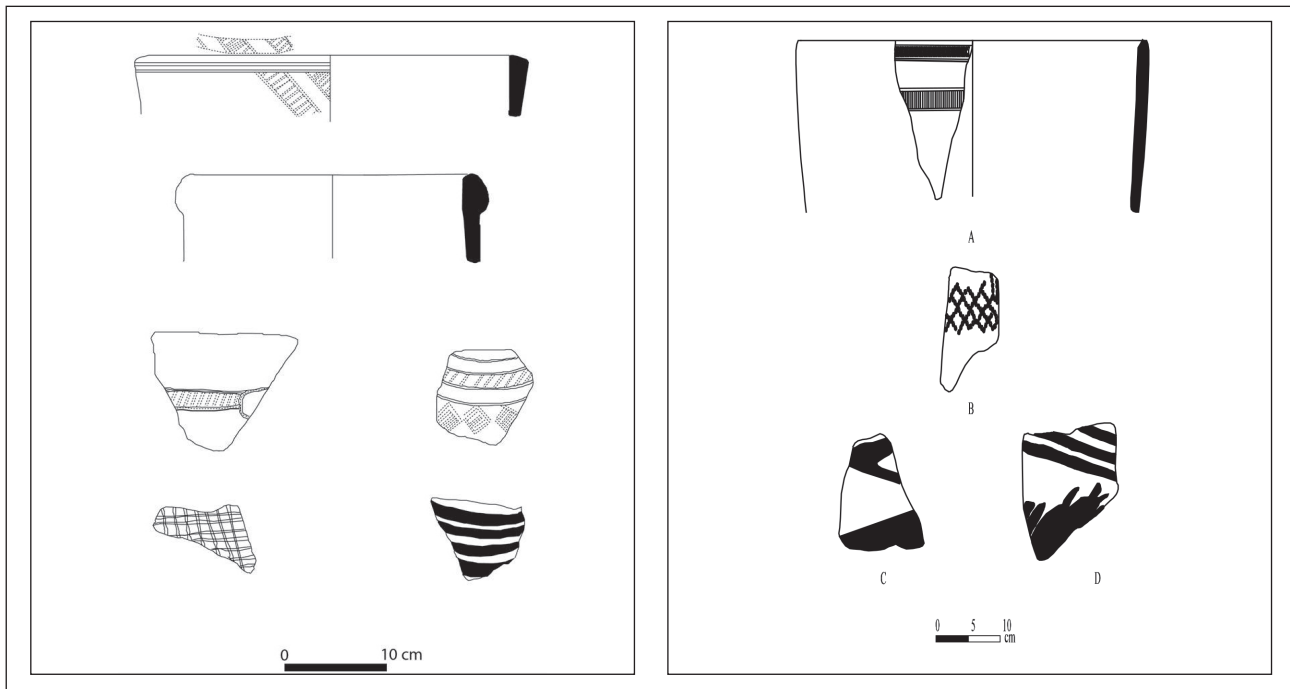


Fig. 11: Potsherds from Meroitic level.

were recovered indicated several architectural stages represented in the foundations of the buildings, which included pottery sherds, grinders, animal bones, seeds, and charcoal, etc.

Trench No. 2

The goal of the second trench was planned to form a pass for the new cable line crossing the area in question, without destroying the archaeological remains in the subsurface. Eight test pits were excavated along the planned trench (each one 2x2 meters), given the numbers (A.B.C.D.E.F.G.H.), along with to a distance of 640 meters from north to south. In some cases, these test pits were altered to drive the cable line away from the archaeological features. These units revealed architectural remains, pottery sherds, and grinders (Figs. 16-18).

Discussion

The previous account offers some observations that may pave the way to some conclusions towards the aim of this paper.

1. The random digging of the Cable line passed

through the site has plundered parts of the stratigraphy of the ancient buildings and disturbed some of the artifacts.

2. Most of the constructed buildings were damaged, as they were originally built of fragile materials, such as clay and mud bricks, beside other natural and human factors.
3. The diversity of the pottery remains, that were found in the upper excavated levels, reveals Meroitic fine ware, of a type that seems to relate to monumental buildings, such as temples and royal residences, in addition to other potsherds, from cooking, pots, and storage jars (figs. 11 & 12).
4. The presence of layers of ash, beside sherds of cooking pots, charcoal, animal bones, and grinder stones call for fireplaces indicating that some of these rooms were used for food preparation.
5. A large number of animal bone remains lead to the primary suggestion that these faunal

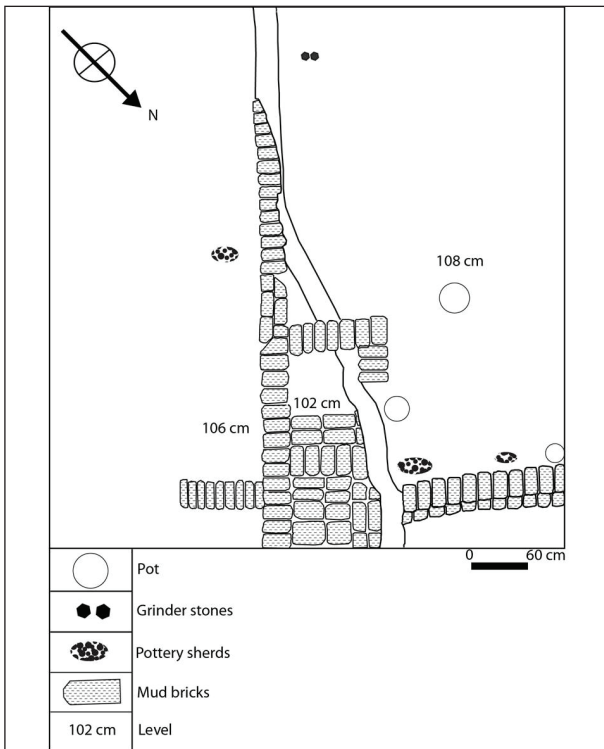


Fig. 12: Square (A) Foundations of mud brick buildings

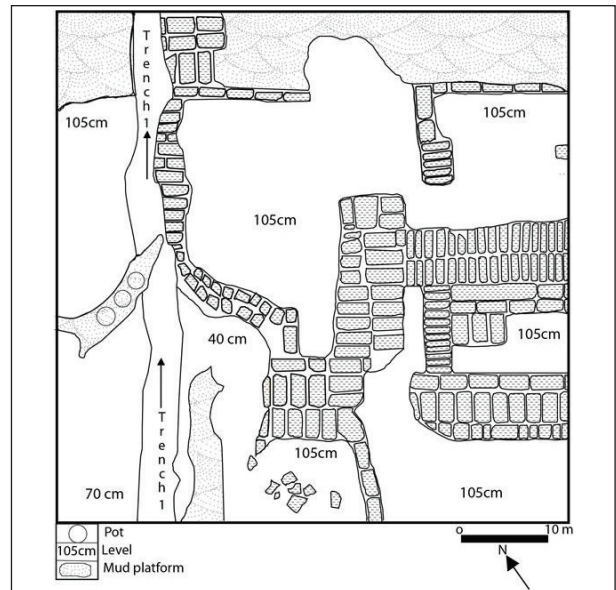


Fig. 14: Square (C) Foundations of mud brick buildings

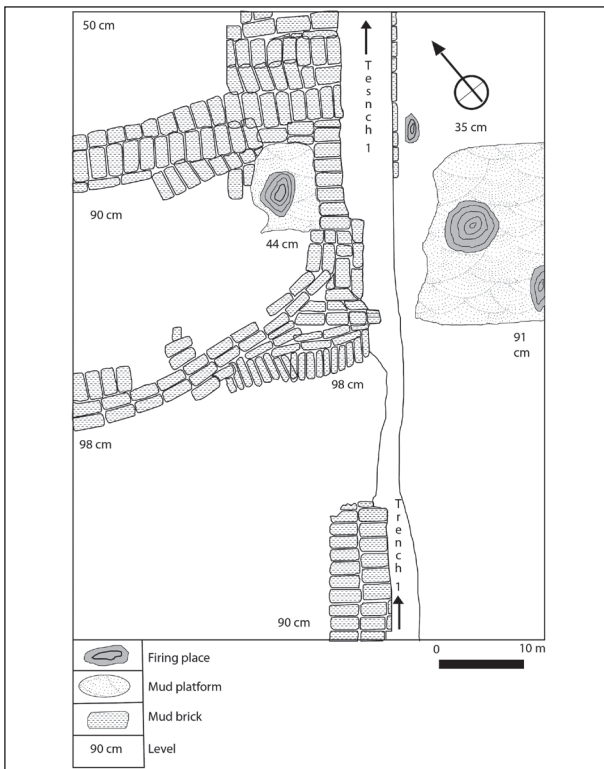


Fig. 13: Square (B) Foundations of mud brick buildings

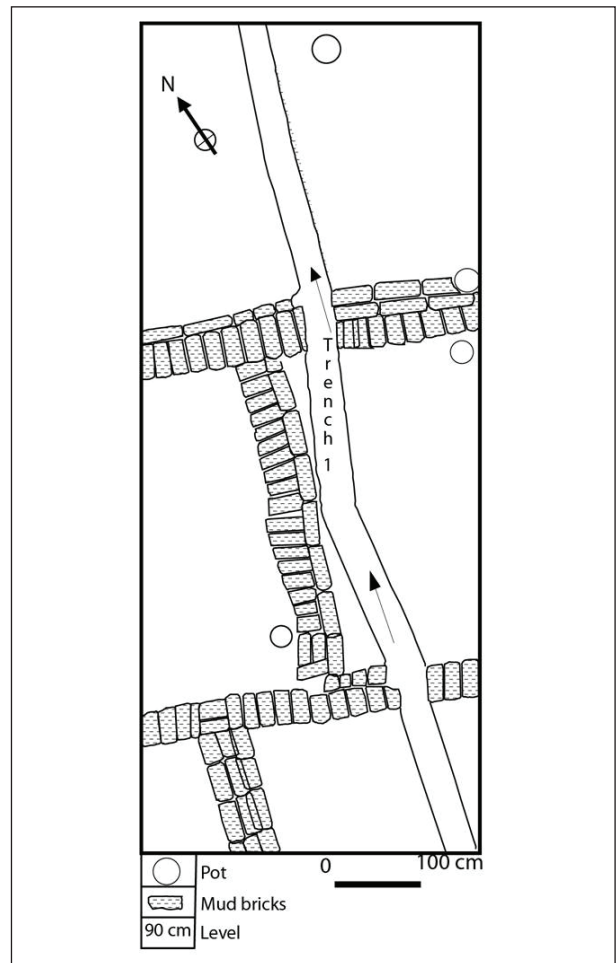


Fig. 15: Square (D) Foundations of mud brick buildings

remains were of domestic animals such as cows, sheep, and goats, part of a diet of a settled community.

6. Early archaeological researchers at the site of Jebel Barkal have focused their attention on the monumental buildings of the site at the foot of the Jebel and vicinity such as temples, palaces and pyramids beside hieroglyphic inscriptions associated with the upper classes of the society. Information is not available, as yet, of the everyday life associated with the general public, their food items, crafts, interrelation, burial customs, ...etc.
7. It became clear to us that the small part of the site we tested indicates the existence of an important residential settlement at Jebel Barkal.

Tentative results:

- a) The settlement revealed by our tests at Jebel Barkal beside the large settlement at Sanam refutes the assumption that the Napatan region suffers the lack of settlement during the Napatan phase.
- b) The center of the Napatan administration, as it appears remained in the region of Napata till 591 B.C. probably first at Kurru during the early era of the chiefdom, then at an unknown date, moved to Barkal in the early State.
- c) The role of Sanam in the administration of the State awaits further investigation in the large virgin site at modern Meroe.
- d) As for the absence of royal burials for children of the royal family in the Napata region, it must be noted that among the burials of children found at Meroe, it has not been proven that they were of Napatan age nor to the Napatan royal family.

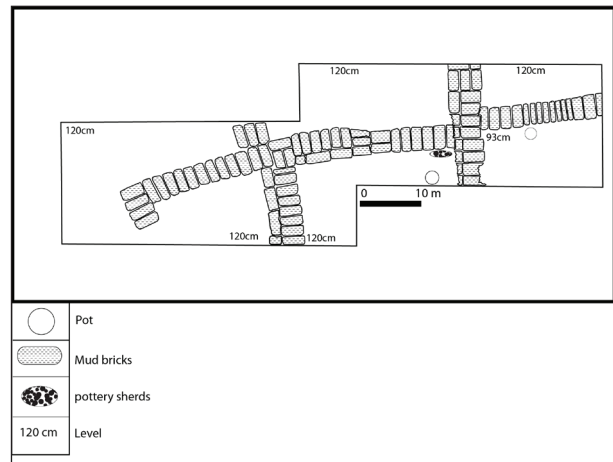


Fig. 16: Test Pit (A)

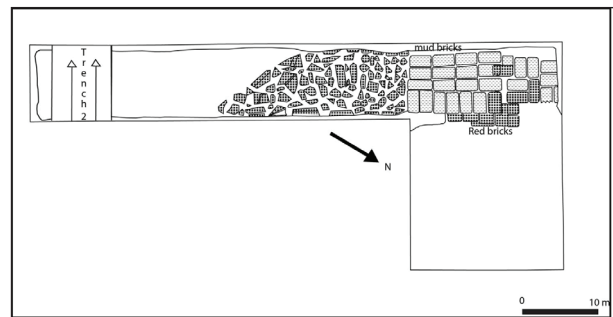


Fig. 17: Test Pit (B)

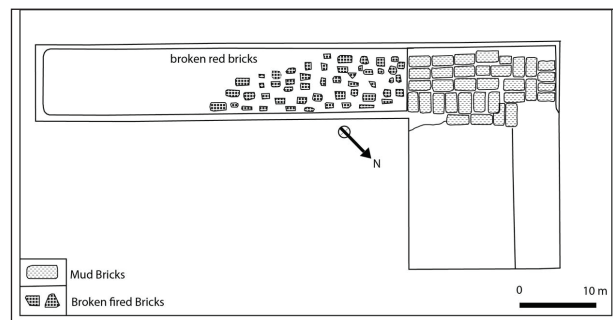


Fig. 18: Test Pit (C)

- e) Our excavations beside confirming the existence of a large residential settlement in the eastern part of Jebel Barkal, it also revealed vertical stratigraphy of a settlement covering the whole Napatan and Meroitic periods.
- f) This settlement contains remains of residential buildings of the general public unknown previously. This opens the door

wide for at least some of the hanging issues of the Napatan community to be known.

- g) The above discoveries indicate the presence of a settlement in the area during the Napatan period, possibly forming a metropolis of the State. This is an assumption that may require more work and exploratory investigations.
- h) Future archaeological works are expected to reveal the length, size, and role of this settlement during the whole Kushite era (Napata and Meroe).
- i) The assumption that the center of the administration of the Napatan royal family started at Kurru in the early phase during the chiefdom era and shortly after Piankhy took over, reached lower Egypt and returned to Kush, may be faced with a question as to where in Kush ? i.e. to which center and where? As for his successors, Shabaku and Shubitku and probably Tahargu, the matter of the center is less acute. Memphis could be a permanent or temporal center.
- j) The settlements at Barkal and Sanam remained active during the Napatan and Meroitic eras for a length of time.

Conclusion:

The above account allows for some suggestions to flow into a channel towards the objective of this paper.

- i. Topographically the location of the Jebel Barkal astride an empty plain, a part of a narrow alluvial strip surrounded by endless sand sheets on one side, and sandstone quartz gravel on the other allowed to turn Jebel Barkal into a landmark in a featureless zone.
- ii. The peculiarity of the Jebel rests on its loneliness, its regularity in form, shape and

height, as described as “scoured by wind-blown sand in startling isolation”. Natural characteristics gave the Jebel a supernatural nature and a place for spiritual meditation.

- iii. The prehistoric, stone and bronze age artifacts recovered in the vicinity of the Jebel and its neighborhood recall camps of prehistoric groups, if not permanent settlements, long before the Egyptian and the Napatans arrival.
- iv. The ritual continual construction activities of Egyptian (Middle and New) kingdoms turned the Jebel into a local center for their deities.
- v. The massive monumental buildings in the proximity of the Jebel is a proof of major constructing activities, and therefore a massive body of workmen in all specialties of architecture (cutting stone blocks, buildings, drawing, writing ... etc.). i.e. for some sort of settlement.
- vi. The location, situation and function during the Egyptian era of Jebel Barkal attracted the Napatans and later the Meroites, as shown by our excavations. Not only to establish a religious center at it, but also to worship some of the Egyptian deities.
- vii. Since the Jebel Barkal was the main house of the Amun in the whole of Northern Sudan, obviously visited regularly by high ranking authorities personnel engaged in temple services, and more, such as all those who were engaged in the coronation of the kings. All those must have resided close by permanently or temporarily.
- viii. Therefore, we assume:
 - a) As, there is no clear reason why the early chiefs of the Napatan chiefdom (before Kashta, 1100-760 B.C) were buried at Kurru, it may be safe to assume that they resided at

- Kurru, but with no physical royal court.
- b) Piankhy to Tanutamani of the 25th dynasty ruled in a period of continuous conflicts and series of battles through general unrest locally and in the region at large. The kings were in continuous move (Napata, Meroe, Thebes, Memphis, Sinai). They never settled in one place. This may explain the unapparent sign of having a crown prince, as deputy to share the responsibility of the throne, but residing somewhere else, other than that of the king.
- c) The process of events seems to lean on the assumption that the early Napatan rulers, chiefs and kings (1100-653 B.C) had no

permanent royal courts, but rather temporary courts. The court was to be where the king is, shifting to the center of events from Kurru to Barkal, Sanam, Thebes, Memphis, back to one or others, and at last to Meroe, governed by the distinguished eventual contemporary events.

Therefore, for the issue addressed in this paper (the location of a permanent royal court for Napata), we need to see it in the frame of the current events of the time. The stream of the events, then, could not have allowed for a single royal court. We need to consider more than one locality for the Napatan royal courts.

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ملخص: على امتداد القرن العشرين وما بعده، ظل تحديد المركز السياسي لدولة نبتا الكوشية (نحو ١٠٠٠-٦٥٠ ق.م.) محل جدل وخلاف بين العاملين في مجال دراسات الحضارة الكوشية. الأعمال الأثرية التي قامت بها البعثات الأثرية في المواقع الأساسية لحضارة نبتا في جبل البركل، والكرو، ونوري، وصنم أبودوم، وغيرها لم تكشف سوى مدافن ملكية ومعابد وقصور. ورغم أن نبتا شكّلت علامة مميزة في حضارة وادي النيل والشرق الأدنى إلا إن التنقيبات الأثرية لم تعثر على مستوطن يضيء طريق العثور على المركز السيادي لحكام وملوك الدولة. تحاول هذه الورقة أن تتناول تلك القضية، وأسبابها، وما طرحه الباحثون حولها، ثم تستند على ما توافر من معلومات لتطرح تصوراً نتج من تلك المحاولة.

Notes

- (1) Meroe: The name of the an ancient city in central Sudan.
 (2) Merowe: The name of the a modern city in Northern Sudan.

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