Meroitic painted decoration at Jebel Barkal: the external façades of Palace B1500

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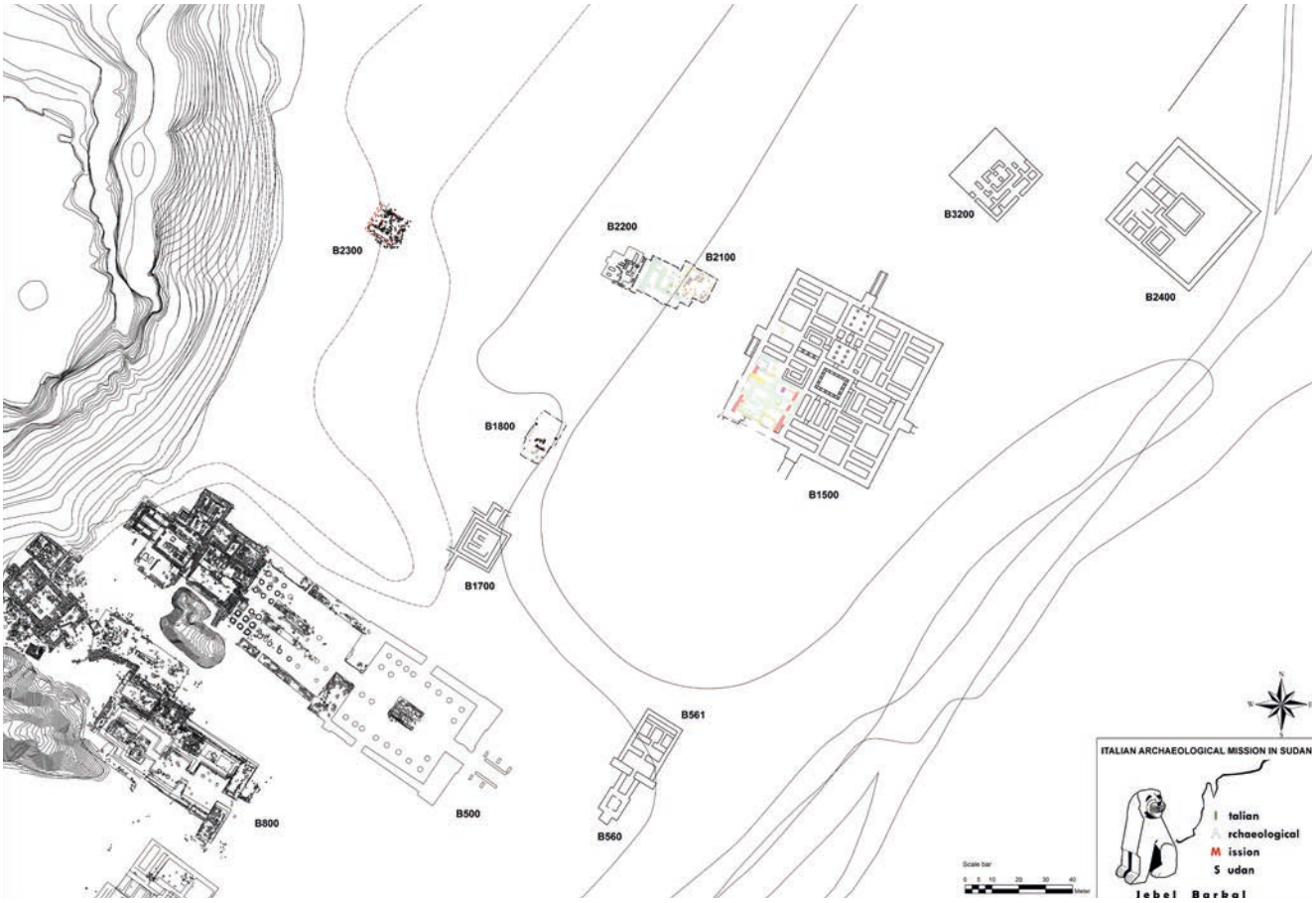

Figure 1. General plan of the Meroitic sector of ancient Napata (map by M. Gottardo).

The Meroitic Royal District of ancient Napata is located on the flat desert north-east of Jebel Barkal, the celebrated 'Pure Mountain' in the Fourth Cataract region. Since the 1970s, the excavations of the Italian Mission in Sudan have unearthed a complex system of palaces, kiosks, and other buildings integrated into a larger ceremonial area dating to the Meroitic period (Figure 1). The focus of the palatial area is Building B1500, the so-called 'Palace of Natakamani', a large edifice whose construction dates from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD. Investigations on this structure were completed in 2017, and a preliminary study was published in 2019.[1]

Palace B1500

The complex was founded on ground previously occupied and originally alluvial (non-desertic) in nature, as recent soundings have confirmed (Ciampini 2018a, 4-5; Gottardo 2019, 14-19). The building is a massive square structure measuring 61m per side, oriented parallel to the river (Figure 2). A system of mud-brick casemates characterises the foundations, an artificial platform rising 1.8m above the ancient ground level (Donadoni 1993, 101; Callegher 2019, 20). This is the only surviving structure, and it had multiple functions: to protect against the periodical floods, to allow

[1] Dissemination took the form of an exhibition entitled 'Il Leone e la Montagna. Scavi Italiani in Sudan', first hosted at the Museo della Scultura Antica Giovanni Barracco in Rome in 2019, and later at Ca' Foscari University in Venice (Ca' Bottacin) in 2020. The exhibited materials and some comprehensive considerations on the works at the Meroitic sector of Jebel Barkal were published by past and present members of the mission in a catalogue (Ciampini and Iannarilli 2019). This work intends to be a more exhaustive overview of the work undertaken so far on the wall paintings of Palace B1500. The author is grateful to the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan – Jebel Barkal, for revision, support, and permission to publish. A special mention is made of the director Emanuele Ciampini and the colleagues at the mission (in alphabetical order): Silvia Callegher, Martino Gottardo, Francesca Iannarilli, Alessandro Roccati, Alice Salvador, Salvatore Taurino, and Silvia Zauner-Mayerhofer. Marc Maillot deserves to be thanked for useful advice and comments. Gratitude is also due to National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Sudan management and inspectors, and to the workmen in Karima.

percolation of rain water, to facilitate better visibility of the monument, and to serve as a solid base for the imposing edifice, whose height possibly reached 9-10m. The original floor surface within the building is only detectable here and there in the central area, and although no superstructure is preserved, the study of both architectural remains and collapsed levels provided useful information to understand the original appearance of the building (Callegher 2019, 20; Ciampini 2019, 48).

The perimeter walls consist of a red brick exterior surface (2.5m thick) filled with a mud-brick core. Four entrances, one for each side of the palace, have been recognised and investigated. The northern and southern gateways lie approximately on the same central axis, while the eastern and western ones are offset (Figure 2). The first to be built, though, were the southern and eastern doorways, since their terraces were in the same phase as the attached perimeter wall; the northern and western entrances, conversely, were built on an already plastered surface and were added later during the construction process (Roccati 1997, 12). Even if this modular unit was erected during a second phase, the main entrance is interpreted to be the northern one. It had a monumental stone staircase leading to a square terrace platform (4x4.4m), where the portal stood. Monumentality is also suggested by the presence of three surviving sandstone lion statues, which had fallen from the terrace and were found during the 1980s excavations together with collapsed capitals and column drums (Donadoni 1993, 103). The terrace was thus possibly characterised by a columned structure sheltering some yellow, red, and blue painted sitting lion statues arranged in pairs (Iannarilli, Callegher and Pancin 2019, 57-59). The gateway has been speculatively reconstructed on the basis of architectural decoration and threshold remains; although no estimation of the total height can be made, the attested width is approximately 2m, and the overall appearance could have resembled a side-pillared pylon with a gorge and a monolithic architrave on top (Donadoni 1993, 103; Maillot 2016, fig. II-7), sculpted with a multi-level winged sun-disc motif very similar to those of the Hathor chapel at Naga (Kroeper 2011, pl. 26). During the 1995 season, examination of the southern perimeter wall revealed a similar access system, which is identical in all respects to the northern one, except for the width of the threshold (*c.* 5m) and for its more accurate alignment with the central peristyle. The entrance was conceived in a preliminary phase of the work at the palace site; its staircase seems to turn directly toward the Temple of Amun (B500) at the foot of the mountain. Furthermore, the discovery of a lion statue with a

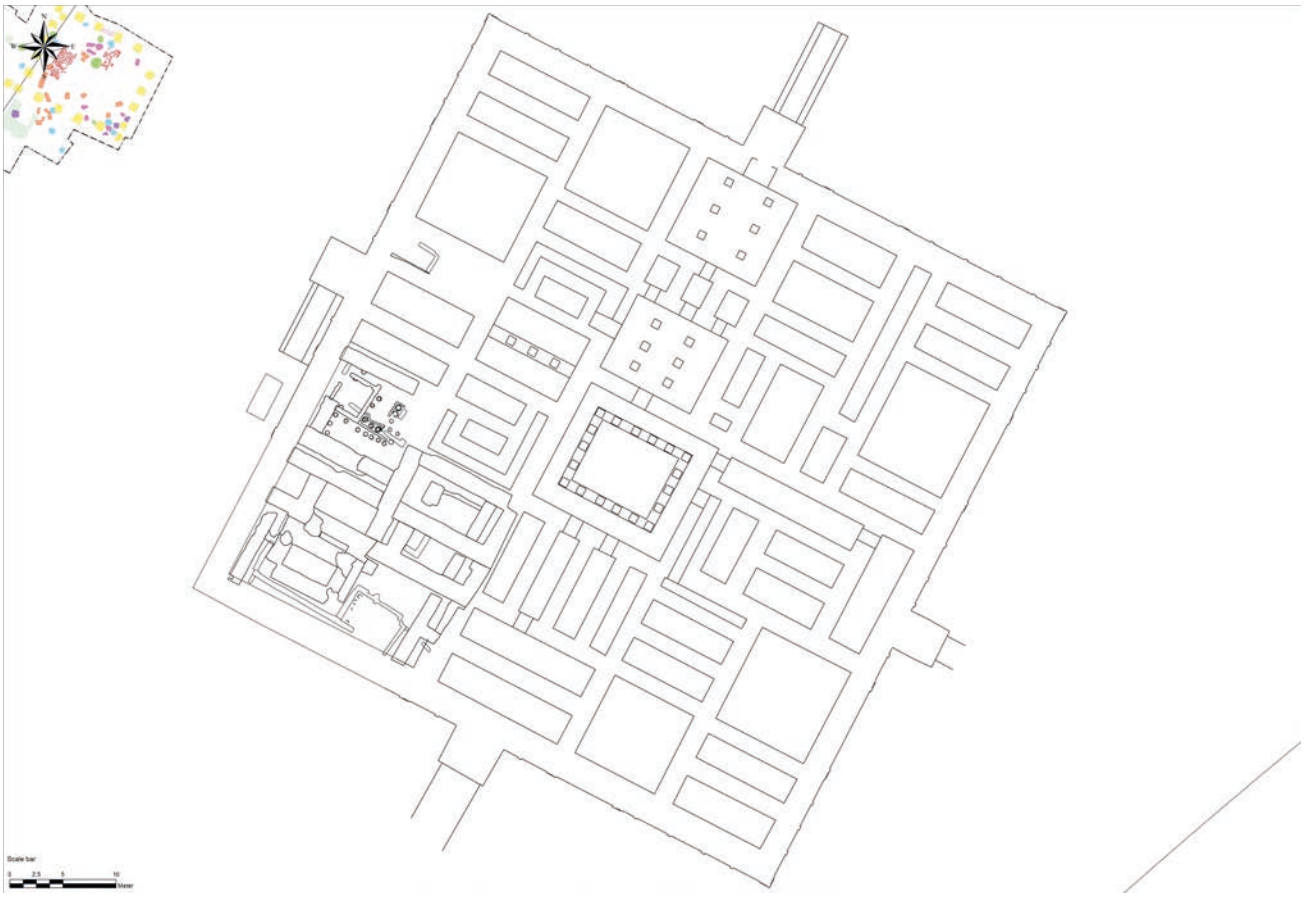

Figure 2. General plan of Building B1500, south-west sector, at Jebel Barkal (M. Gottardo).

turned head would suggest that it was facing the sacred area, thus leading to a particular ceremonial interpretation for this gateway (Roccati 1997, 13; Iannarilli *et al.* 2019, 58-59).

The pavement level of the central monumental area is preserved. The north gate led into a square forecourt, whose floor was paved with an impermeable mortar; six columns arranged into two rows running north-south define two lateral porticos. A small adjacent passage separates the court from the next area. Based upon the regular presence of gold leaf detached from the collapsed wall coating, Sergio Donadoni interpreted this room as a symbolic and ceremonial vestibule (Donadoni 1993, 104-105). The adjoining room widens into a tripartite columned hall. It may have been roofed, for some blocks have been interpreted as part of a support structure and the pavement was not made from a waterproof material (Donadoni 1993, 105). Judging by the finds in this sector, the internal walls had been lavishly decorated with glazed terracotta tiles, suggesting a high ceremonial function for this room. The physical and ceremonial centre of the building is the Hellenising peristyle court: designed on two levels, the model is reminiscent of Mediterranean examples (Barberini 2010, 169-180; Callegher 2019, 20-23), in line with 1st century AD Meroitic cosmopolitan ambitions. It is rectangular in plan, developing along an east-west axis (10x8m). Its columns and bases were carved from single blocks of sandstone, and subsequently plastered and painted – yellow and blue alternately. The upper floor was characterised by 18 blue-painted columns with papyriform capitals, on which a wooden beam structure had rested. Their plaster covering had an important structural function, as it enhanced stability between timber and stone (Maillot 2016, 61). A red-brick crowning moulding, modelled in rounded dentils imitating an Egyptian cavetto cornice, was added at the top and coloured in an alternation of yellow, red, and light blue (Barberini 2010, 178). The architectural decoration of the monumental area developing along the main axis of the palace is an eclectic mix of Egyptian and Hellenistic features, interpreted according to Kushite taste. Sometimes one inspirational model is prevalent: Egyptian iconographic influences can be detected in the layout of the north entrance doorframe, with its cornice and winged sun-disc architrave. Hellenistic traits are evident in the style of the capitals (Sist 2006, 475-481; Iannarilli 2019, 68-71). All the stone architectural elements show copious traces of plastering and painting, and polychromy was preferred. The Meroitic palette employed alternates of red, yellow, light blue and white. Black is very rare in the record from B1500. In a few cases, figurative painted motifs (Figure 3) or relief stuccoed elements (Figure 4) have been registered, suggesting that some rooms might have been elaborately decorated. Glazed terracotta appliqués were bonded to some of the internal walls of the ceremonial area by means of lime mortar, in order to lend a richer dynamism to an otherwise plain surface. Some are unadorned, while others bear moulded figurative motifs (Taurino 2018, 219-221; 2019, 65-66). Their colours range from light blue, to green and turquoise, to yellow, brown, and black.

Figure 3. Fragment of finely painted plaster from the western wing of Palace B1500 (photo by S. Callegher).

Figure 4. Fragment of relief stuccoed wavy decoration from the north-eastern sector of Palace B1500 (photo by A. Salvador).

The external façades

The collapse of the palace and the concomitant anthropic activities make it difficult to rely on the primary deposition of decorative elements. Finds belonging to the architectural decorative programme are usually randomly detected in the debris layers and careful hypotheses reconstructing the inner spaces of the palace can seldom be advanced. On the other hand, the collapsed strata assisted the preservation in some other sectors, and interpretation there becomes more reliable, especially for the outer face of the building. The enclosure wall has been entirely exposed and investigated over the decades of work at the palace, and some surviving sections of the decorative programme of the façade have been unearthed. It was established that the perimeter walls collapsed outwards, thus sealing the external surface (Ciampini 2018b, 400). The palace resembled a high parallelepipedal blind structure, with a 9-10m high perimeter wall; the whitewashed, flat vertical surfaces were interrupted at regular intervals by some polychrome lesenes, whose function was merely aesthetic (Figure 5). Donadoni recognised two typologies of lesenes (Donadoni 1993, 101-102). The plain quadrangular ones protrude by one brick, and, whenever their coating layer is preserved, they all seem to be painted blue or lime-white. They are regularly paced (2.2m) and do not extend to the full height of the façade; instead, they originally ended with a modelled sandstone corbel at a height of 1.4m. The purpose of this truncated architectural element has often been discussed (Donadoni 1993, 102; Roccati 2011, 67), but an ornamental function seems the most fitting interpretation. At the edges of the façade and at the centre, framing the portals, a different type of protruding element was conceived: the composite lesene is made of three vertical rounded elements (*tori*) followed by a squared pilaster extending the whole height of the wall (Figure 6). These architectural units, numbering six per façade, were combined in pairs and slightly converged towards one another with an inclination of 2° (60mm every vertical metre). They possibly reached the top of the façade and were joined with a polychrome gorge (Figure 7) to resemble a blind pylon (Figure 5). The *tori* were modelled in plaster over a rounded redbrick, then usually painted red, yellow, and light blue (Ciampini 2018b, 397, 399; Pancin 2019, 72-73), though no regular trends in alternation could be observed. Some capitals, fallen at the base of the walls in the proximity of the lesenes, could hint at the presence of coronation elements either for the blind pylons or for the corners of the palace (Figure 8).

The predominant colour for the façade was white, making the building an outstandingly bright landmark in the landscape (Figure 9). Colourful details such as pilasters and *tori* would have livened up the monotony of the surface. Sometimes a broad stripe was added at the bottom of the façade, where the base extended in a sort of low ledge (Figure 10). The preferred colour for this appears to be yellow.

At a certain height on the external walls, numerous glazed terracotta moulded tiles were used for decorative and celebrative purposes (Taurino 2018, 210-225; 2019, 62-67). Most of this assemblage is fragmentary and it is difficult to outline the original scheme, except that these objects were an ornament on the outer façades. They were attached by a thick layer of fresh lime mortar with no particular care, hence they frequently lost adherence and fell with the binder still attached (Figure 11).

Plaster

The B1500 render was applied in three steps. First, the façade brickwork was covered with a layer of lime mortar of differing materials chosen according to the destination; various proportions of aggregate such as sand or

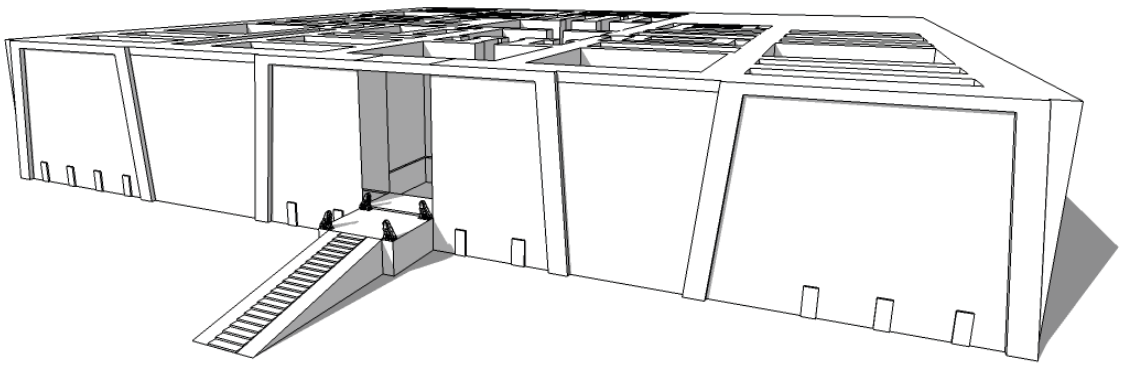

Figure 5. Reconstruction of Palace B1500 (drawing by S. Callegher).

Figure 6. Polychrome composite lesene from the western façade of Palace B1500 (photo by F. Pancin).

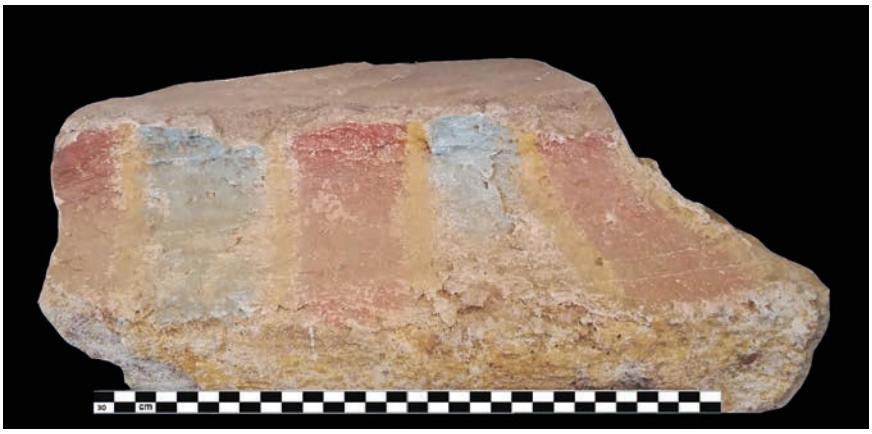

Figure 7. Fragment of polychrome cavetto cornice (photo by F. Iannarilli).

Figure 8. Polychrome Alexandrian-style capital found near the south-west corner of Palace B1500 (photo by E. Ciampini).

crushed fired bricks were mixed into the paste to improve consistency, and at least three different textures (coarse; with medium-sized inclusions; and fine) were detected macroscopically. Mineralogical analysis showed that calcite and quartz represent a high proportion of the composition of the binders.[2] Secondly, a preparatory layer of lime plaster was laid; its thickness varying between 10-30mm, the material usually assuming a corrugated irregular appearance (Figure 12), as if refinement wasn't required on the external façade. Lastly, a thin layer of whitewash ('intonachino') was applied to smooth out imperfections. This can reach a thickness of 10mm, but usually only measures 1-5mm. The whitewash contains a higher proportion of lime, thus thicknesses had to be reduced to conserve resources; moreover, denser pastes adhere better to the preparatory layer, and the result is that of a solid, hard-to-crack, coating. Interestingly, the render for the lesenes was mainly laid on coarse binders made with ground red-brick to increase adhesion and the fluted details of the concavities between the *tori* were usually modelled by hand, exploiting the plasticity of the mortar.

[2] Analyses were conducted at the Chemistry Department (Faculty of Science) of the University of Khartoum in 2018 by Abdalla Ahmed Elbashir and his research team.

Figure 9. Section of the northern façade of Palace B1500 (photo by M. Gottardo).

Figure 10. Section of the western façade of Palace B1500 with polychromy (photo by M. Gottardo).

Paint

Whitewash served a double purpose: it was a basic means of protecting the wall surface against the damage caused by wind and sand, and also contributed towards creating a neat appearance of the building (Figure 9). Such an effect can be compared to that of paint. Colour was an important feature of the decorative programme. Regularly alternated touches of bright red, yellow, and blue helped define the space on the wall, creating pleasant successions of lighter and darker areas together with the moulded reliefs (Figure 5). The mineral pigments identified so far in Building B1500 are goethite for yellow (ochre) and cuprorivaite for blue (Egyptian blue). Most of the painted fragments belonging to the façade render present a monochromatic base (Figure 13). Some have a broad striped decorative motif consistent with the lesene colour scheme (Figure 12). Elsewhere inside the palace the use of paint brushes has been identified (Figure 3; Pancin 2019, 72-73), but the colour on the lesenes was applied using fingers and followed the vertical length of the architectural element (Figure 12). Many fragments show traces of re-plastering or repainting activities (Figure 14): the technique is always the same, consisting of the addition of a new layer of fine lime plaster subsequently recoloured. Some specimens showed up to four layers of paint, and very often the colour was changed (Figure 14). Along with painted plaster fragments, containers for paint (Figure 15) and pigment lumps (Figure 16) were also discovered in the precincts of the palace. Renewal of the edifice's coating and ordinary maintenance work seem to be institutionalised activities: in fact, a notable concentration of painting materials – pigments, containers, or grinding tools with traces of powdered colour – was unearthed in the western wing of the building (Pancin 2019, 72-73), where the palatial administrative area was located (Vincentelli 1993, 116-117; 2019, 81). Such materials were thus possibly locked in the palace storage rooms. The ceramic containers for paint – usually ordinary ware bowls – show traces of colour on their external surface, indicating that the vessels were probably stacked to save space. Moreover, it has been observed that these containers did not undergo any rinsing after use, so that many different paints dried and overlapped over time (Pancin 2019, 73).

Figure 11. Plastered fragment of glazed terracotta tile from Palace B1500 (photo by A. Salvador).

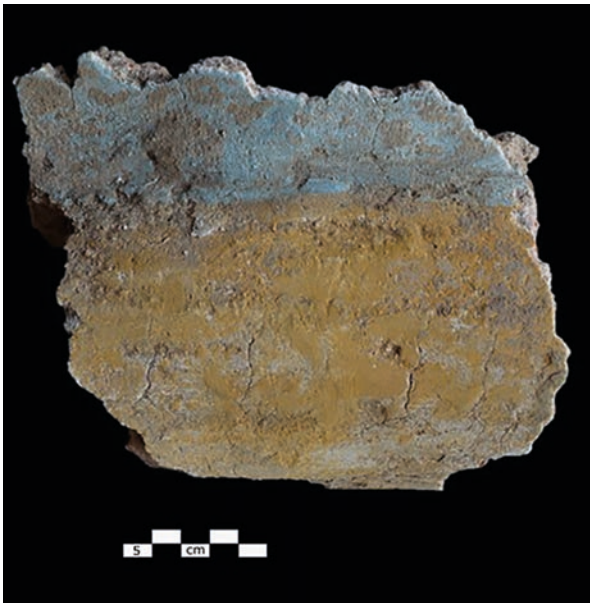

Figure 12. Fragment of lesene torus from Palace B1500 (photo by A. Salvador).

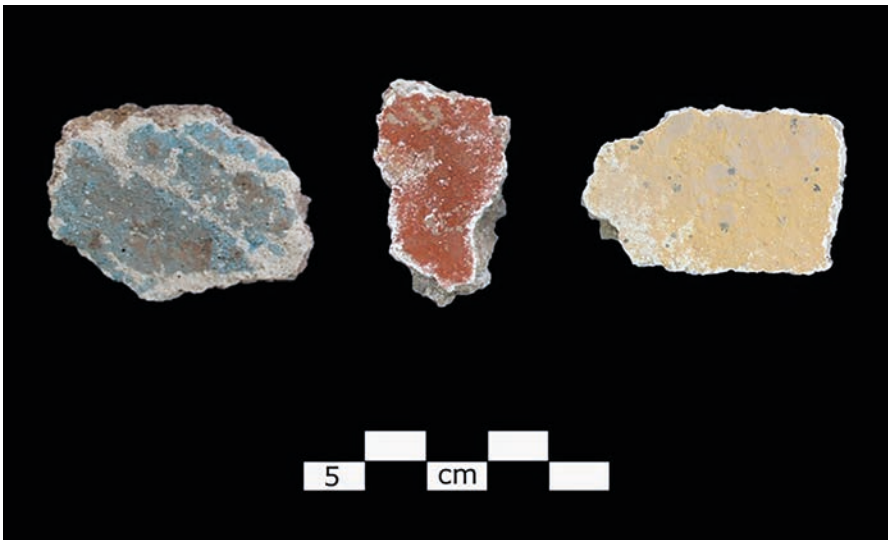

Figure 13. Monochromatic painted plaster fragments from the façade of Palace B1500 (photo by S. Callegher).

Figure 14. Plaster fragment with traces of repainting from Palace B1500 (photo by F. Pancin).

Figure 15. Fragmentary bowl with paint residue from the western wing of Palace B1500 (photo by S. Callegher).

Figure 16. Lumps of yellow pigment from the western wing of Palace B1500 (photo by S. Callegher).

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