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Front cover. General view of Site WNP-J-22\1, Al-Jabalain, White Nile State. Photo by Hamad Mohammed Hamdeen.

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Further insights into a forgotten aspect of Meroitic religion: the amulets of Apedemak

Mahmoud A. Emam

Introduction

Meroitic religion historically has been considered a poorly understood indigenous religion influenced by ancient Egyptian religious practices (Kormyschewa 1990, 195). Meroitic religious practices did not completely break from the religious concepts of the Napatan period, but incorporate additional changes and developments (Kuckertz and Lohwasser 2016, 89). Such beliefs and practices include many local traditions, with new local deities emerging and earlier burial and funerary practices undergoing transformation (Onasch 1993; Török 2010; Lohwasser 2014). Many aspects of this are still understudied and require in-depth cross-comparisons and interpretations (Francigny 2012).

The study of Meroitic amulets historically has been neglected. This may be attributed to the ongoing need for increased studies to fully comprehend Meroitic religion, with many aspects still not understood. This paper aims to reconsider Meroitic amulets in their indigenous context and in particular shed light on specific types of amulets that could be dedicated or related to the primary indigenous Meroitic god, Apedemak.

Various studies (e.g., Török 1995; Yellin 2012; Francigny 2016; Kuckertz and Lohwasser 2016; Almansa-Villatoro 2018) have investigated the early phases of Meroitic religion and highlighted numerous indigenous elements. These studies concluded that Meroitic religion - both state and popular - was a dynamic blend of indigenous, Egyptian, and Graeco-Roman beliefs, which manifested in new forms and expressions. This was the result of a long process of syncretism, during which the Kushites began to incorporate external beliefs and deities into their local religious practices, assigning them new roles and epithets as needed. This is further evidenced by the incorporation of numerous local artistic elements into local traditions (Žabkar 1975; Török 1995; Wenig 2015).

Meroitic religious funerary imagery indicates there was an important relationship between Meroitic rulers and several specific deities, both Egyptian and local, including Amun, Apedemak, Isis, and Osiris. Isis and Osiris dominated funerary practices, while temple cults were centred on Apedemak, Amun, and Isis alongside others. The Meroitic period witnessed the transformation of Egyptian gods with new functions and consorts, leading to the creation of new divine families (Kormyschewa 1990). Lohwasser (2013, 241) stated that 'Das Wechselspiel zwischen Einflüssen von außen und innerer Entwicklung machen den besonderen Charakter der meroitischen Kultur aus' [The interplay between influences from outside and inner developments are what constitutes the special character of the Meroitic culture].¹

The Amulets

The term 'amulet' refers to small objects, symbols, and figures made of various materials and often provided with holes for hanging or for attaching to a necklace. They included mythical images, sacred symbols of deities, animals, plants, and human organs. These representations and others probably held significant and tangible meaning for believers, demonstrating their effectiveness. For instance, amulets in the form of deities might have been worn by pious individuals seeking protection or expressing their devotion to a specific god or goddess (e.g., Andrews 1994; Ikram and Dodson 1998).

The function of amulets in ancient Egypt was described in funerary literature such as the Coffin Texts

¹ Translation by Christina Geisen.



Figure 1. Apedemak and Amun on the southern wall of the lion temple at Musawwarat es-Sufra © Archive of the Italian Archaeological Expedition to the Eastern Sudan, Università “L’Orientale,” Napoli.

or the Book of the Dead (Pinch 2006; Teeter 2011). In the Kushite period, magic was an important part of the belief system in both royal and popular funerary practices (Séguenny 1984). The use of small amulets by various social classes during the Kerma, Napatan, and Meroitic periods indicates that the Kushites also believed in their effectiveness for achieving desired outcomes and offering protection against evil forces (Yellin 2012; Lohwasser and Kendall 2019). Unfortunately, our understanding of the function of the amulets in these periods remains very limited for various reasons, including the absence of textual sources (Séguenny 1984; Kuckertz and Lohwasser 2016). A reliance solely on Egyptian models for interpretation is likely to be misleading, overlooking the syncretism that emerged among the local populace, which was driven by a variety of factors.

Apedemak

The lion-headed god Apedemak is considered the most important indigenous god of the Meroitic period (Onasch 1993; Almansa-Villatoro 2018). Reliefs and inscriptions in Meroitic temples provided information about Apedemak and his ritual practices, as he became the patron deity of the Meroitic state (Edwards 1996; Welsby 1996). According to Rilly and De Voogt (2012, 102-103), Apedemak has a Meroitic name, consisting of the noun *mk* ‘god’, plus the lexeme *apede* which means ‘creator’. Numerous Meroitic graffiti discovered at Musawwarat es-Sufra served as invocations to Apedemak. Since this god is not known in other contemporary cultures, this confirmed his indigenous affiliation with Meroitic culture, and his specific association with Musawwarat es-Sufra.

Apedemak was usually represented as a lion or lion-headed Egyptian-style god with a *hemhem* crown, holding *ankh* and was signs (Almansa-Villatoro 2018). In the Lion Temple at Musawwarat es-Sufra, Apedemak is depicted holding a large bow, arrows, and a cord tied around the neck of a captive enemy in

his right hand (Kormysheva 2006) (Figure 1). Among the many reliefs that reflect the dominant position of Apedemak, is an example on the south wall, which depicts Apedemak followed by other gods, including Amun, Sebuimaker, Arensnuphis, Horus, and Thoth, facing King Arnekhamani (3rd century BC). Behind the king, the goddess Isis is depicted and in front of the king, his son in a small scale is holding two incense burners toward Apedemak (Hintze 1971, pl. 25). Based on textual and iconographic evidence, scholars (e.g., Žabkar 1975; Séguenny 1984) have discussed the nature of Apedemak as a warrior god, typically depicted carrying a bow and arrows, offering enemies to the kings, and conferring divine kingship.

Apedemak, who is also represented on temple walls legitimising and empowering Meroitic rulers (Morkot 2012), challenged Amun's domination as the patron god of the royal family in the Meroitic period. It is worth mentioning that Apedemak's titles included those related to Amun, which suggests that Apedemak shared with him the role of royal protector (Priebe 1993, 41; Iannarilli *et al.* 2019). Török (1997, 502-503) considered Apedemak a creator god, associated with fertility and the provision of food and water to the Meroites, based on a further translation of Meroitic inscriptions.

A number of temples were consecrated to Apedemak, e.g., in Musawwarat es-Sufra (IIC) (Hintze 1962; Török 2002), Meroe (M 6) (Garstang *et al.* 1911, 21-23, 62-74), Naqa (N 300) (Žabkar 1975; Kuckertz 2019), Amara (Kormysheva 2006) and Basa (Lobban 2003). The existence of a temple to Apedemak in the ancient town of Napata has been proposed, but it is still under investigation (Iannarilli *et al.* 2019).



Figure 2. Stone statue of a lion with Meroitic inscription from Qasr Ibrim (photographed by the author, not to scale, JE 90879; Nubian Museum in Aswan).

Several other single-roomed shrines have been connected with his cult based on archaeological evidence, including the discovery of lion statues or iconographical representations (Žabkar 1975; Wolf 2006).

Early scholars (e.g., Monneret de Villard 1942; Shinnie 1967) stated that no obvious traces of the worship of Apedemak were found in the northern Meroitic territory. However, a stela from Arminna (REM 1063/8-9, 1064B) mentioned the title of a priest of Apedemak (Plumley 1966, 12, pl. IV, 1970; Török 1984). The name of Apedemak was also written in hieroglyphs on the shrine at Dadod (Roeder 1911). Additionally, a leather fragment decorated with the symbol of

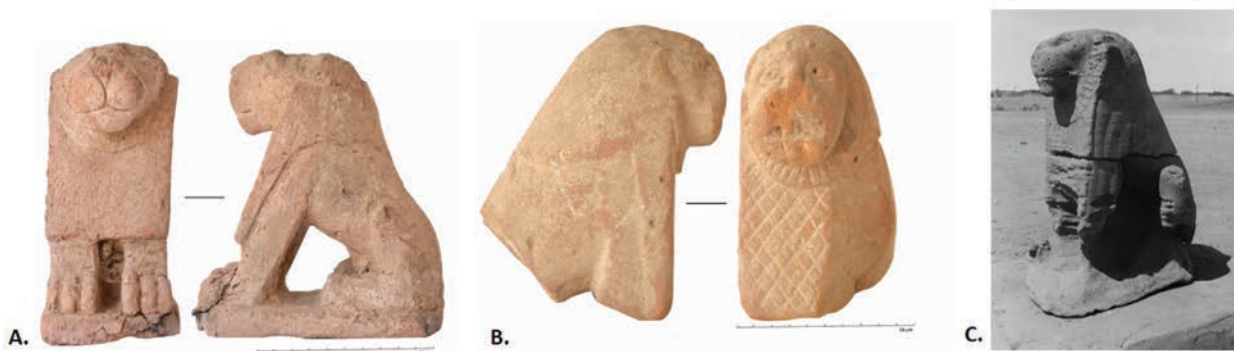


Figure 3. Stone lion statues. A. Wad Ben Naqa (SNM 62-10-23), Sudan Antiquities Service excavation 1959-1960. B. Basa (SNM 00075), Crowfoot 1911. C. Meroe, (M295), Garstang, Sayce and Griffith 1912. (A-B: photographed by the author, scale 100mm, Sudan National Museum. C: Garstang archive, Liverpool).

Apedemak was discovered in a plundered Meroitic tomb (N-451) in Semna-South (Žabkar 1975). Other scholars (e.g., Plumley 1970; Millet 1984; Dafaalla 2005) did believe that Apedemak worship was practiced in Lower Nubia, particularly at Qasr Ibrim, where a stone lion statue (Figure 2) was found bearing in Meroitic script the name of the king Yasbekhamani (c. AD 283-300), who is thought to be among the last Meroitic kings. This statue resembles the traditional model of lion statues at Apedemak's temples in the southern part of the kingdom (Kuckertz 2019) (Figure 3).

Amulets of Apedemak

Amun and Apedemak had significant influence in the religious beliefs of the Meroitic kingdom, sharing many characteristics and roles, particularly in their connections with royalty and the legitimisation of power (Séguenny 1984; Onasch 1993; Kuckertz and Lohwasser 2016). While amulets associated with different forms of Amun have been attested and highlighted in the Meroitic period (Emam 2025), there has been a lack of dedicated attention to investigating amulets that could be associated with the indigenous god Apedemak.

As previously mentioned, the significance of Apedemak in the Meroitic period increased and he became a national symbol of kingship. Temples dedicated to Apedemak featured various forms of lion statues guarding entrances, as well as emblems, graffiti and inscriptions referencing him (Garstang *et al.* 1911; Baud 2010). Notably, the lion's head was used as a king's forehead adornment, replacing the uraeus or ram head. This symbol also adorned a king's kneecap, as seen in representations of a Meroitic king at Gebel Qeili, in addition to on other objects such as a plaque from Meroe (Griffith 1917, pl. V), and on the pyramid chapels at Meroe (Beg. N. 8, 13) (Török 1987; Kormysheva 2006). Based on abundant archaeological evidence from Meroitic contexts, lions undoubtedly symbolised Apedemak. However, this raises the question, were all representations of lions in the Meroitic period associated with Apedemak?

Two lion-shaped amulets (MFA 13.4230) were found in tombs from the Kerma period: one in the Western Deffufa (K I, room Y; Reisner 1923) (<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/141675>) and another at Mirgissa (M III) (Vila 1970, 236, pl. XXVI). Later, lion amulets were attested in the Napatan period in a limited number from the royal tombs at Nuri (Nu. 15) (Dunham 1950, 249, pl. CXX.A), Begrawiya West (Adult; Beg. W. 619, 787, 571, Children; W. 643) (Dunham 1957, 39, fig. 28; 230, fig. 178.6; 294, fig. 176.12; 320, fig. 183.14), Begrawiya South (Beg. S. 85) (Dunham 1957, 366, fig. 200), in addition to four amulets from the Sanam necropolis (Balanda 2020, 305). New forms of lion amulets emerged in the Meroitic period and their number increased. They occur in royal tombs in Begrawiya North (Beg. N. 6, 34, 51) (Schäfer 1910, no. 247, 155; Priese 1993, 23, fig. 15; Dunham 1957, 111; fig. 73, 164; fig. 107, pl. LXII.C, 192), and in non-royal tombs in Karanog (G. 634, 18) (Woolley and Randall-MacIver 1910, 118, 250, 260), Nag Gamus (T. 128) (Almagro 1965, 195, fig. 226.6), Qustul (Q 154-5) (Williams 1991, 249, fig. 65a), Faras (2801B/R, 1075) (Griffith 1924, 172; pl. LXI.38, LXII.2), and Begrawiya West (Beg. W. 179, 254, 311, 140, 115, 308) (Dunham 1957, 183; fig. 133f, 248; fig. 164.8/2, 225; fig. 167.5, 133; fig. 98q, 136; fig. 100d, 1/5-9, 2/510i, 146; fig. 10g) (Figures 4 and 5).

Two unique types of amulet emerged exclusively in the Meroitic period and are so far absent in ancient Egypt and in earlier periods in Nubia (Figure 6). These were possibly related to Apedemak. The first type features a lion with *hemhem* crown over a crescent moon (Figure 7), a motif commonly found in Meroitic art and architectural elements (Wenig 2019). This representation has been discovered at various Meroitic sites, including the palace of Natakamani B1500 at Gebel Barkal (Sist 2006, 476, fig. 2) and the Water Sanctuary at Meroe (Török *et al.* 1997, pl. 59). Notably, only seven amulets depicting a lion over a crescent were found in the Faras cemetery, worn as a necklace in a child's burial (Griffith 1924, 193, pl. LXIII.4).

The second type is the *ankh* symbol positioned on the crescent moon (Figure 8). While direct evidence



Figure 4. Lion amulets from Meroitic funerary contexts. A-B: Two lion amulets (SNM 02164) from Beg. W. cemetery, Dunham 1957. C-D: Two lion amulets (SNM 00871 and SNM 00809) from Faras, Griffith 1924. E: Lion amulet (E8016) from the Meroitic cemetery in Karanog (A-D: Photographed by the author, Sudan National Museum. E: © Courtesy of the Penn Museum, Scale 10mm).







	1	2	3	4	5	6
						
Number of amulets	3	3	4	7	4	7
Number of sites	2	2	4	3	1	1
Sites	Beg. N. Beg. W.	Gebel Adda, Beg. W.	Karanog, Nag Gamus, Faras, Beg. W.	Qustul, Faras, Beg. W.	Beg. N.	Faras

Figure 5. Typology of lion amulets in the Meroitic funerary context.

	Royal context		Queen Amanishakheto	Non-royal context			Total	
	Total	No. of tombs		Total	No. of tombs	No. of sites	Amulets	Tombs
Lion	2	2	5	38	12	5	45	15
Lion on crescent	0	0	0	7	1	1	7	1
<i>ankh</i> on crescent	0	0	0	3	3	3	3	3

Figure 6. The distribution of amulets possibly related to Apedemak in royal and non-royal Meroitic cemeteries.

linking this to Apedemak is still lacking, the depiction of the *Ankh*, symbolising life, atop the crescent brings to mind the traditional representation of the lion on the crescent (Figure 7), along with the association of the *ankh* with Apedemak's role as a creator god. Three amulets in the form of *ankh* over crescent moon were found in the Meroitic cemeteries at Nag Shayeg (Catalán 1963, 41-42, fig. 23), Sai (Then-Obłuska 2016, 699, 702, fig. 4.13), and Sedeinga (Rilly and Francigny 2010, 63; Then-Obłuska 2015, 37, fig. 13), in addition to another amulet found in Attiri during the SAS excavation in 1966 (Figure 8). Although this type of amulet is only attested in Lower Nubia, its absence in the heartland of Meroe does not necessarily imply regional specificity. It is worth noting that the same motif was painted or stamped on Meroitic pottery from the Meroe region (Shinnie and Bradley 1980, 135, fig. 55; El-Hassan 2004, 25-26, fig. 3, pls 39-40) (Figure 9). Three silver amulets in the same form were found in the robber passage of Tomb 4 in the X-Group Ballana cemetery (Emery and Kirwan 1938/I: 83, 216; II: pl. 48 D, B-4-27) (Figure 8D).

It is worth mentioning that a mould for an amulet was discovered at Dokki Gel and described by the

excavators as an Apedemak amulet mould. If correct, this could be the first known amulet mould showing the deity as a human-headed god with *hemhem* crown (Bonnet *et al.* 2021, 265, fig. 216D, no. 382).

Figures of lions or lion-gods were attested in the Meroitic period (Figure 10) appearing in diverse forms in cemeteries and temples. These include decorative elements of jewellery, small finds, and statuettes (Macadam 1955, pl. LXXVIII.I; Jacquet-Gordon *et al.* 1969, 111; Priese 1993; Iannarilli 2022, 116, fig. 1). The attestation of small symbols and statuettes related to Apedemak in temple contexts could be interpreted as part of the religious equipment used by the priests, or as small objects charged with magical power by priests then offered or gifted by visitors. In addition, painted representations of lions were widely attested with and without attributes of



Figure 7. Apedemak over crescent moon (SNM 34582), from Gebel Barkal (photograph by the author, scale 100mm, Sudan National Museum). See also a necklace from a child's burial in the Meroitic cemetery at Faras, Griffith 1924, 193, pl. LXIII.4.



Figure 8. Amulets in the form of the *ankh* sign over the crescent moon. A: Amulet from the surface of the excavation zone II at Sedeinga, B. Amulet from the Meroitic cemetery at Sai. C. Amulet from Attiri (SNM 19843), SAS UNESCO excavation 1966. D. Three silver amulets (Cairo JE 11653) from the X-Group Ballana cemetery. (A-B: photographed by Then-Obluska, not to scale, C-D: photographed by the author, scale 20mm, C; Sudan National Museum, D; Egyptian Museum at Tahrir).

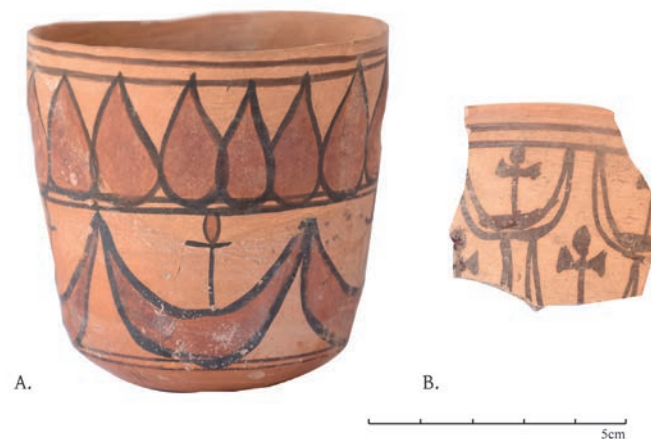


Figure 9. The *ankh* over the crescent moon painted on the Meroitic pottery. A: Cup from Meroitic cemetery at Faras (SNM 00712), Griffith 1924. B: potsherd (SNM 29466), from Wadi Tarabil, Meroe region, SFDAS excavation 1998. (Photographed by the author, scale 50mm, Sudan National Museum).



Figure 10. Small objects possibly related to Apedemak. A: Small lion emblem (SNM 00519), from the lion temple at Meroe, Garstang 1912. B: Lion amulet (SNM 24525), from Meroe (Shinnie 1967). C: Ear stud (E7964), from the Meroitic cemetery at Karanog (A-B: photographed by the author, scale 20mm, Sudan National Museum, C: © Courtesy of the

Apedemak on Meroitic pottery (El-Hassan 2004, 25-26). Various representations of Apedemak as a lion with *hemhem* crown or depicted over the crescent moon were also attested on seals and seal impressions (see Vincentelli 1992, 108-110, fig. 2).

Discussion

Returning to the main question, were all representations of lions in the Meroitic period associated with Apedemak? Lions held significant symbolic and religious importance throughout the Meroitic period (Onasch 1993, 233-237, 259-260), playing a multifaceted role in Meroitic culture. They symbolised power, protection, religious aspects and royal authority. Lions were frequently depicted in various forms, often appearing without any attributes or with attributes such as the *hemhem* crown or over the crescent moon. In funerary chapel representations, lions without attributes often symbolised the protection of the throne, while in temple iconography, they were frequently portrayed alongside kings as protectors and defeating enemies. However, while representations of lions with *hemhem* crowns were associated with Apedemak, it remains hypothetical to assume the same properties for lions depicted without such attributes.

Indeed, the amulets depicting lions with the *hemhem* crown and lion heads over the crescent moon are undoubtedly of Meroitic origin and are frequently associated with Apedemak. On the other hand, amulets of lions without specific attributes are often linked to broader aspects of the lion's symbolism as a sacred animal, such as power, protection, and fertility, rather than directly representing Apedemak himself.

Due to the absence of written sources and a limited number of amulets, it remains conventional to make assumptions or generalise specific functions for amulets dedicated to Apedemak. In attempting to reconstruct the symbolism of these amulets, it is crucial to first distinguish between the various types, including lions without attributes, lions with the *hemhem* crown, lion heads over the crescent moon, and those with the *ankh* sign over the crescent moon. Context, such as whether they were found in funerary or religious settings, as well as the social class (royal, elite, medium, and low-stratum), gender, and age of the individuals associated with these amulets, needs to be taken into account when interpreting their functions in the funerary context. Additionally, different functions and regional characteristics may also be considered as potential hypotheses.

In addition, the possibility of regional variations of Apedemak remains challenging to explore due to limited materials and an incomplete understanding of the Meroitic script. However, the distinct representation of Apedemak in two forms within the same context at the Lion Temple in Musawwarat (Hintze 1971, pl. 11) - one with a *hemhem* crown and the other with a *hemhem* crown over a crescent



Figure 11. Architrave of the lion temple at Musawwarat es-Sufra depicting Amun between two representations of the lion god Apedemak with different headdresses (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, © Margaret Lucy Patterson, not to scale).

moon (Figure 11) - raises intriguing questions about the different forms of Apedemak.² This is particularly notable considering that Apedemak held the titles Lord of Naqa and Lord of Musawwarat. This observation aligns with discussions about the various forms of Amun, distinguished by their headdresses, as discussed by Török (2006, 233), and is further supported by ram head amulets from the Meroitic period (Emam 2025).

Conclusions

The decrease in both the quantitative and qualitative distribution of amulets in the Meroitic period compared to the Napatan period cannot solely be attributed to a decline in beliefs around apotropaic amulets or a lack of knowledge regarding the narratives associated with these amulets, as suggested by some scholars. On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that the Meroitic period witnessed an increase in the distribution of specific types of amulet compared to the Napatan period. Additionally, new types of amulet emerged during the Meroitic period, indicating a dynamic evolution in religious and cultural practices during this period.

The Meroitians adeptly combined various foreign elements to create a unique indigenous character in their amulet traditions. Many of these newly created amulets represented types that had never appeared before, either in the Napatan period or in ancient Egypt. The significant role of the local god Apedemak in Meroitic religion undoubtedly reinforced a need to create new forms of amulet dedicated to this deity. These amulets were intended to provide specific benefits, which are difficult to precisely reconstruct but could be related to power, fertility, and protection. While amulets featuring lions with *hemhem* crowns and lions positioned over crescent moons were clearly associated with Apedemak, other types such as lions without attributes and *ankh* symbols positioned over crescent moons await further investigation through

² It is worth mentioning that Onsach (see 1993, 261, 267) raised this question. However, he went further and suggested that these two forms could be related to either Shu and Tefnut or Arensnuphis and Sebiuwerker as protectors of the sanctuary. He concluded that no certain decision could be made regarding which deities the two lions represent.

new discoveries, in spite of the challenges posed by the extensive plundering of Meroitic cemeteries in both ancient and modern times.

Despite ongoing investigations aimed at understanding Meroitic religion, it remains challenging to reconstruct the aspects related to the functions of amulets definitively. Therefore, this research hopes to illuminate various aspects concerning the amulets dedicated to the indigenous god Apedemak. It has also prompted further questions that hopefully could be addressed through additional excavations at Meroitic sites in both Lower and Upper Nubia.

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