

Abu Erteila 2016: A Preliminary Report of the Ninth Excavation Season

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Abu Erteila lies in the Wadi-el Hawad, 8km to the south of Meroe and 4km to the east of the Nile. A Italian-Russian archaeological joint mission co-directed by Eugenio Fantusati (International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies) and Eleonora Kormysheva (Institute for Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences) has been working at the site since 2009. Nine excavation seasons have taken place so far.

The mission has been focusing its attention on two *koms*: the western one, or Kom I, yielded a multi-roomed building that was hypothetically interpreted as a palace, whereas a Meroitic temple was unearthed on the eastern kom, or Kom II.¹

The ninth season of the mission lasted from 17th November to 23th December 2016. In addition to co-directors, the campaign was attended by Richard Lobban (Sudan Studies Association), Maria Rita Varriale and Sergey Vetokhov (architects), Marco Baldi, Silvia Dall'Armellina, Maxim Lebedev, Sergey Malykh, Nedjud Hassan Bashier, Alla Troshina and Mikhail Yakomulskiy (archaeologists), Svetlana Malykh (pottery expert), Irina Reshetova (anthropologist), Oxana Nosova (draftswoman), Alexey Danshin, Piera Muretti and Gianluca Tedaldi (assistants). NCAM was represented by inspector Abdelrauf Mohamed Ali.

A new Natakamani temple

During the ninth season, the mission's activities were entirely concentrated on the Temple area on kom II (Figure 1). Since 2015 the building, called K 1000, has been dated to the reign of Natakamani and Amanitore, whose cartouches appeared engraved on a ferricrete sandstone stand found close to the altar in the *naos* (Plate 1).²

The stand is 1.4m high with an approximately square cross-section. Each face bears two vertical lines of Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions, flanking the incised figures of the four goddesses supporting the roof of the Egyptian cosmic building. The texts report formulae that are already known from Wad ben Naga (Vrtal 2015, 472), exalting the divine legitimization granted by Isis to the royal family. Every text

¹ On excavations at Abu Erteila see Fantusati 2009a; 2009b; 2013; forth. a; forth. b; Fantusati and Baldi 2016; Fantusati and Kormysheva 2010; 2014; Fantusati *et alii* 2010; 2012a; 2012b; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; 2016; forth.; Baldi 2010; 2013; 2014a; 2015; 2016; Baldi and Varriale 2010; Baldi *et alii* in press; Casanova Muncicchia *et alii* 2015; Giuliani 2013.

² On this stand see Fantusati forthcoming b; Fantusati and Baldi 2016, 102-103, fig. 4. The authors are very grateful to their colleague Fabio Bellatreccia (Università degli Studi Roma Tre) for his valuable collaboration in determining the material of the stand.

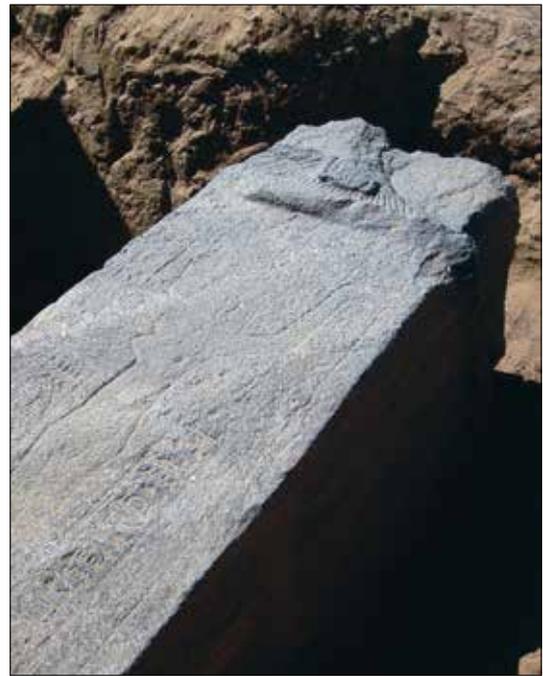


Plate 1. The stand at Abu Erteila during excavation
(photo: E. Fantusati).

includes a different cartouche: together with Natakamani and Amanitore,³ the name of *pqr* Sorkror, recognised in a badly preserved passage, represents the first known case of his name written in Egyptian hieroglyphs.

He was the youngest of the three sons of the royal couple, preceded by his brothers Arikankharor and Arkhatani, and the only one to ascend to the throne after his parents died. It strongly suggests that Arikankharor and Arkhatani predeceased their parents and Shorakaror, when the monument was erected, was the designated heir (Eide *et al.* 904-912). His inclusion in the monument as *pqr* allows, therefore, a dating of both the stand from Abu Erteila and the local temple to a late period in Natakamani's reign.

The core of the sacral building

A 150m² survey was undertaken to the east of the ambulatory surrounding the *naos*. The ambulatory (K 1031) is of rectangular plan measuring 9.8m east-west x 6.6m north-south, defined by walls of red and mud brick combined in different ways. Its rear wall, 1.07m wide, belongs to the western perimeter wall of the sacral complex; it is made from mud-brick masonry, 700mm wide, surmounting lower courses of red bricks⁴ resting on red-brick foundations protruding 280mm from the internal face. Red bricks likewise made an exterior facing covered by white calcareous plaster, painted with red, yellow and blue pigments, preserved in an irregular stripe 3.2 meters long to a maximum height of 120mm.⁵

³ The *qore* is mentioned twice with his Son of Rê name and his throne name Kheperkare.

⁴ The red bricks are 340 x 170 x 90mm in size.

⁵ On the pictorial program of the temple see Fantusati *et alii* forthcoming.

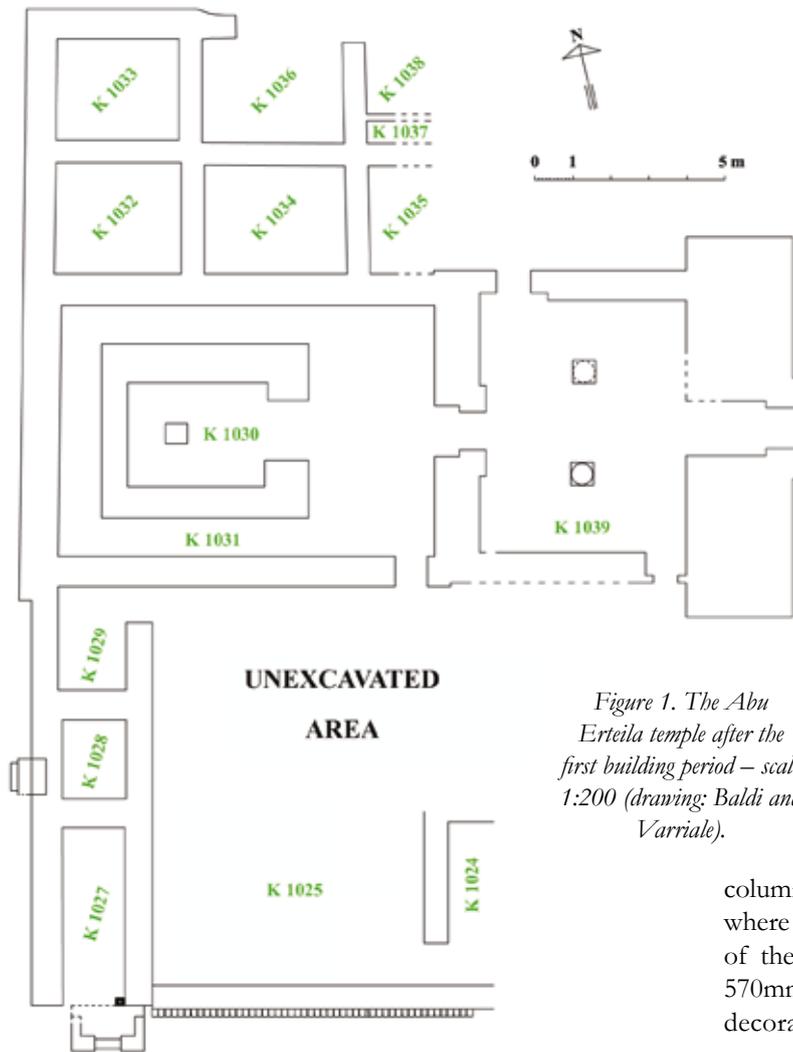


Figure 1. The Abu Erteila temple after the first building period – scale 1:200 (drawing: Baldi and Varriale).

In the south-eastern corner of the ambulatory a passage leads to the southern annex of the temple, that is still partly unexcavated. Its eastern wall was pierced by a wider entrance, in axis with the *naos*, leading east towards the hypostyle hall (K 1039) (Plate 2). This wall is 1.2m wide and preserved to a maximum height of 950mm; it is entirely made from mud



Plate 2. The entrance to the Hypostyle hall (photo: E. Fantusati).

bricks, laid in alternating stretcher and header courses resting on a red-brick foundation. The entrance is marked by a monolithic sandstone threshold 1.01 x 0.7 x 0.1m in size; it is at the end of the pavement of sandstone slabs leading to the *naos*. Two L-shaped red-brick jambs flanked a now vanished double door; a vertical bolt locked the door, as indicated by the socket and curved groove that were carefully cut into the sandstone slabs. Remains of calcareous plaster painted yellow were noted on the jambs.

The hypostyle hall measures 7m north-south x 5.5m east-west (Plate 3). It has an earth floor and is closed to north and south by mud-brick walls 800mm wide, strengthened by red-bricks and resting on red-bricks foundations. Doorways were provided in the north-western and south-eastern corners, being respectively 900mm and 700mm wide; the southern is preceded by a red-bricks platform that probably supported a now vanished furniture.

Two columns were placed in the room; they flanked the entrance in a slightly asymmetric position. Each of them rested on a stone base 600 x 600 x 400mm in size set on a slightly protruding three-courses red-brick foundation. The northern column is missing, but on the base an incised circle indicates where the column was originally placed. Only two drums of the southern column were found *in situ*, both measure 570mm in diameter and 330mm in height, and bear incised decoration. Legs of an unidentified barefoot personage are preserved: his (*w3s?*) sceptre and the tail do not clarify his royal or divine nature. He rests on a three-banded base motif under which is a floral frieze consisting of alternating triangular-shaped leaves of acanthus and palmette decoration (Plate 4).

The hypostyle hall was the first room entered from the monumental pylon (2.8m wide and extending for 10.5m)



Plate 3. The hypostyle hall during excavation (photo: E. Fantusati).



Plate 4. The southern column bearing incised decoration (photo: E. Fantusati).

The entrance, 1.5m wide, was paved with reused red bricks, apart from the slightly raised threshold formed of large terracotta tiles, one square. It is flanked by red-brick jambs. A red-brick pavement 3.4m in width leads from the pylon away from the temple and extends beyond the eastern limit of the excavation. The rest of this processional way will be cleared during the next seasons.

The northern annex

Another excavation of 100m² to the north of the ambulatory revealed an annex of which seven rooms have been brought to light (Plate 6). They are separated by 600mm wide walls, made from a combination of mud and red bricks as usual. This structure suffered a heavy collapse: several fragments of red bricks, sandstone and calcareous plaster were found in the filling. Bricklaying does not follow strict rules: different practices in a single structure are well-known in Meroitic architecture, as is the use of different practices in contemporary walls. Foundations of two red-brick courses, variously protruding from the lines of the walls, are common.⁶ The outer walls of the rooms to the north and west, being 800mm wide, were identified with the perimeter walls



Plate 5. The temple from the east (photo: M. Lebedev).

that was brought to light in the last days of this ninth season (Plate 5). The two towers have the same length of 4.5m and were similarly constructed: mud-brick masonry rests on red-brick courses supported by foundations in reused red bricks protruding beyond the face of the pylon. Scattered remains of calcareous white plaster were noted.

of the complex, whose north-south extent can be, therefore, recognized at 55m.⁷

The observed remains, surviving to a height of three

⁶ Walls bricks size 340 x 70 x 70mm; equally sized bricks and fragments of reused material were used for the foundations.

⁷ Considering all building phases of the sacral complex.



Plate 6. The northern annex of the complex.
View from the west (photo: E. Fantusati).

courses, suggest that the walls defining the northern annex are contemporary with the temple. Their foundations were built in the same phase as those of the ambulatory, and, therefore, relate to the original core of the main building. Filling material within the northern rooms suggested, however, more than one occupation phase, and a circular hole in the western perimeter wall, 100mm in diameter, may have been to support a late door made after the collapse. As seen in other areas of the complex, more ephemeral masonry of later date could have been erected using the temple remains as foundations.

Both excavation areas yielded no clearly dated ash layers; significant amounts of charcoal were particularly concentrated in the hypostyle hall and in the northern room K 1034. They were related to different levels, reinforcing the impression that the area suffered various fires during its lifetime. The radiocarbon dating of samples previously found dated the building K 900,⁸ a structure made from re-employed materials located in the southern part of the complex, and offered a chronological limit to the sacral use of K 1000 (Fantusati 2013, 233-37). The forthcoming archaeometrical analysis of the new samples will give further data on the human activities in the area.

A preliminary interpretation

To obtain a better understanding of Abu Erteila's temple, widening of the excavations is required. To achieve this, during the next seasons, the annexes and the processional avenue starting from the pylon will be investigated. Nevertheless, the last few seasons have provided very relevant data. The original building can be now recognized as comprising rooms K 1024-1039: the sacral core with its succession of pylon, hypostyle hall and perambulatory sanctuary, elongated along the east-west axis, preceded by a processional avenue and flanked by annexes on both sides. In a later period, rooms were added to the south.

Such a plan is very unusual in Nubia. Perambulatory sanctuaries are in fact rarely attested: in addition to the Sun Temple, whose structure represents, however, an *unicum*

⁸ Lab Rome 2200, 1850±40 yr BP, in calibrated age 120-230 cal AD.

(Hinkel *et alii* 2001), the three-sided gallery surrounding the naos of M 720 in Meroe is the only known arrangement close to that observed at Abu Erteila (Shinnie and Anderson 2004, 20-36, pl. VI). Annexes on both sides of the elongated core are also really peculiar.⁹

In Abu Erteila the succession of spaces along the east-west pylon axis satisfied the essential needs of cult by providing the main units necessary for rituals: sanctuary, offering hall – assured by the eastern part of the ambulatory – and hall of appearance. In its different types such an arrangement represents a reduction of the structure of large multi-roomed temples,¹⁰ according to a practice that finds more ancient Nubian examples in Egyptian and Napatan temples at Jebel Barkal (Wolf 2006, 244-46).

As rightly reported by Wolf, topography and orientation of these small temples, even if not universally attested, often depended on the main local temple. But any conclusion is still very preliminary since in the case of Abu Erteila and el-Hassa only single temples were built. In both sites excavation is, however, incomplete and apparently the real function of Abu Erteila temple's annexes remains unknown.

On the evidence available so far, the identity of the divinity worshipped in the temple cannot be ascertained. On the one hand, lion-headed water spouts unearthed during the eighth season (Fantusati and Baldi 2016, fig. 5) and snake forms painted along the southern and western external walls of the complex (Fantusati *et alii* 2016, fig. 7) may suggest Apedemak; on the other hand lion statuettes found in the *naos* (Fantusati and Baldi 2016, fig. 7) and in K 1100 rooms (Fantusati and Kormysheva 2014, figs 20-21), represent forms of popular devotion not always linked to the main temple god. Moreover, the multi-roomed plan and paved processional avenue, which will be examined in detail during the next season, are certainly uncommon for Lion temples.

A peculiar niche

An unusual internal niche 250 x 190 x 90mm in size, was noticed on the southern side of the eastern passage from the hypostyle hall to the pronaos (Plate 7). Located 380mm above the base of the wall, it was entirely covered by thick calcareous plaster bearing a roughly executed painting with black outline and internal red details on a yellow background.

Two *nb* baskets are represented side by side (Figure 2). The eastern one holds the stylized figure of a crowned ram head framed by two lateral series of angled lines, whereas a brick wall was drawn inside the other one. Both baskets support an *ʕnh* flanked by *w3s* sceptres. The subject follows

⁹ In Hamadab temple a northern annex out of the pylon line was unearthed (Wolf 2002, *farbabb.* 3; 2006, 252-53; Wolf *et alii* 2008, 205 ff.; Baldi 2014b; 2016, 224 ff.).

¹⁰ Three-roomed buildings, usually with a tripartite sanctuary, represent the most common type; examples are temples KC 100 at Meroe (Shinnie and Anderson 2004, 10-20, pl. IV), N 200 at Naqa (Kuckertz 2011) and J at Muweis (David 2016, fig. 1), as well as the temple of el-Hassa in its first period (Rondot 2012, 174-76, fig. 4; Baldi 2016, 256 ff., fig. 67; Baldi 2017).



Plate 7. The painted niche in the passage from the hypostyle hall to the pronaos (photo: P. Muretti).

well-known iconographies attested in Nubia on ceramics and copper-alloy vessels.¹¹

The function of this niche is unclear: its position along the sandstone pavement starting from the *naos*, may suggest that small cult furnishings were stowed inside.

Finds

Abu Erteila's Meroitic buildings were erected with clay material, usually combining mud bricks and red bricks. According to archaeometrical analyses of samples from the site, the sandstone employed at Abu Erteila was unsuitable for the making of walls, but was used for column drums, lintels and decorative panels (Baldi *et alii* forthcoming). Finds of sandstone fragments, collapsed or re-used in later masonry, is very common throughout the temple and several fragments of drums, likely parts of several columns, suggest that the complex may have included additional columned rooms.

During the season the hypostyle hall yielded decorated pieces. A column fragment bears an incised crown, a sun disk flanked by tall feathers, but the original figure cannot be determined: this crown was typical of a type worn by Amun, whose name is reported, but it was sometimes worn by kings, and Natakamani's cartouches were observed. A second example bears a crescent moon crown, possibly representing the god Khonsu. The last piece is part of a column base, partially plastered, containing a roughly circular hole of irregular diameter in its centre. The hole was probably associated with the making of the base, and may have held a wooden pole; in some Kushite temples these poles were often set outside the buildings.¹² A drum having a similar hole was found during the 2014 excavation season in room K 1022, together with several sandstone column drums gathered to be re-employed (Fantusati *et alii* 2016, 136-37, fig. 3).

¹¹ On Nubian pot-marks see Dunham 1958, 130; 1965; Shinnie 1967, 127-28; Török 1972; Baldi 2016, 65-67.

¹² For the case of el-Hassa see Grimal and Adly 2004, 144.

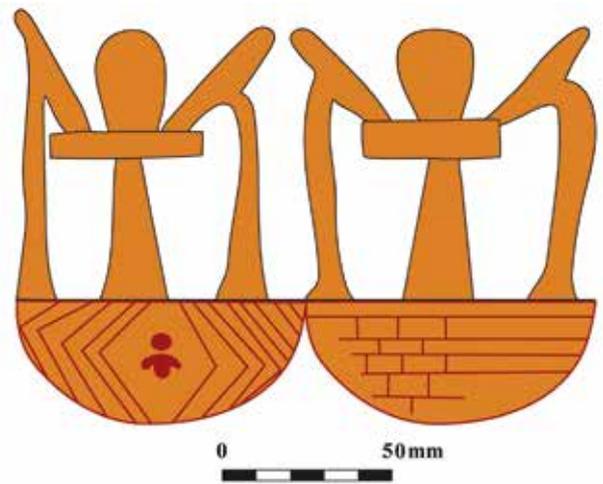


Figure 2. The painted niche in the passage from the hypostyle hall to the pronaos; reconstruction of the painting (drawing: E. Fantusati and S. Dall'Armellina).

Other objects were also excavated in the hypostyle hall. Amongst these was a collapsed lintel of plastered and white-painted sandstone. This bore a relief representing a solar disk flanked by uraei, a motive referable to an iconographic tradition quite widespread in Abu Erteila (Fantusati 2013, fig. 14; Fantusati *et alii* 2014c, pl. XII; Fantusati *et alii* 2016, fig. 4) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Fragmented lintel in the filling material of the hypostyle hall (drawing: M. R. Varriale).

Unclear remains the function of eleven balls of unfired kaolin clay, gathered inside an unburnt *wadi* clay plate. They may have been used as counters, or maybe as offerings; a similar role has been suggested for the unfired barrel-shaped items found in K 1014 (Fantusati and Kormysheva 2014, 46, figs 24-25).

Lastly a green faïence amulet 70mm high, portrays the goddess Bastet seated on a cubical throne; the personage is here represented with a human body and lion head. Her hands are clasped on the abdomen holding a papyrus flower (?) (Plate



Plate 8. Statuette representing goddess Bastet from the hypostyle hall (photo: M. Lebedev).



Plate 9. Ostrakon bearing an inscription in Meroitic cursive script from the hypostyle hall (photo: M. Baldi).

8). The object was suspended by a thread passed through a tubular hole behind the head. This statuette, as well as the other faience items found at Abu Erteila, was likely made in a workshop at Meroe. No evidence of faience production in the Keraba and Butana outside the ancient capital is known.

Pottery

The ceramic corpus brought to light in this last season can be referred to types well-known in Abu Erteila,¹³ and can be mostly related to Late Meroitic occupation phases later than the sacral role of the area.

Two large, red-slipped, globular necked jars came to light in the area of the hypostyle hall. The presence of small holes on the surfaces indicates ancient restoration attempts. The form of the two vessels, well known from the late 1st century BC till the end of the Kushite period, allows for their interpretation as ‘beer-jars’.

Epigraphy

Among the potsherds collected on the surfaces of the temple area a small fragment (35 x 30mm) was discovered. The sherd bears five lines of a brown-painted Meroitic cursive text and, considering that the edges of the sherd truncates the writing, evidently is a small fragment of a larger *ostrakon* (Plate 9).



Plate 10. Human hair from burial T 227 (photo: E. Fantusati) and hairstyle of a Sudanese girl (© Piotr Strzeżyski 2010, <http://ontbebike.pl/wp-content/gallery/sudan/a10-1024x683.jpg>, accessed 25 May 2017).

¹³ For Abu Erteila pottery see especially Baldi 2013; 2014a; Baldi *et alii* forthcoming; Casanova Muncichia *et alii* 2015.

Burials

Eleven intrusive pit-graves were unearthed on Kom II during the ninth excavation season; six of them partly demolishing temple walls. The skeletons appeared well-preserved with the exception of T 235, buried inside the northern tower of the pylon, whose skull was missing. The corpses lay in extended prone position or on one side with no preferred orientation and were not accompanied by grave goods.

Burials T 226 and T 227 yielded large pieces of wool shrouds, while in T 227 braids of human hair were preserved (Plate 10).

These burials have strengthened, once again, the impression that Abu Erteila was largely re-used as a funerary area in a late period of its lifecycle.¹⁴ So far 41 graves have been brought to light on the site.

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¹⁴ Between the 12th and 13th centuries AD according to the radiocarbon dating of a skeleton (Fantusati 2013, 248).



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