

The lion temple at Abu Erteila

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During the excavations at Abu Erteila (Kom II) in the archaeological seasons of 2015 and 2018, a temple was found and uncovered. In its orientation and composition, this temple largely corresponds to that of the Natakamani temple that was also excavated on Kom II (Kormysheva *et al.* 2019); however, the new temple is smaller in size. It consisted of the following rooms (Figures 1 and 2):

- Sanctuary (Room 7), 2.28m x 3.20m, floor level 391.27m asl.
- Pronaos (Room 18), 2.34m x 2.20m, floor level 391.23m asl.
- Inner hall¹ (Room 44), 3.0m x 3.60m, floor level 391.19m (west), 391.16m (east) asl.
- Court (Room 45), 2.68-2.84m x 3.20m, floor level 390.95m asl.

The main axis of this temple is east-west and the rooms are arranged one after another along the axis. The floors of the sanctuary and the pronaos were paved with large, black ferricrete sandstone slabs of ferricrete sandstone, while the floors of the other rooms were of sand (Figure 3). The north part of the sanctuary's wall (Figure 4) was preserved to a height of five-six rows of burnt bricks. This suggests that the sanctuary was constructed from burnt bricks, and then plastered with a thick layer of mud and thin layer of white plaster on the interior, to facilitate painting (a fragment of painting was found inside the sanctuary, see below). The southern part of this was poorly preserved, with the fired bricks destroyed, and only part of the mud-brick structure remaining.

Room 18 was connected with Room 7 by a clearly marked doorway. The floor was completely paved. At the entrance below the brickwork, a threshold was preserved. It was composed of large ferricrete sandstone blocks, forming a pavement (at a level of 391.37m). The remains of the southern and northern sections of the east wall of the room indicate the possible existence of a pylon. This masonry has round corner bricks that are well attested in other Meroitic temples, in particular in the Natakamani temple in Abu Erteila (Kormysheva *et al.* 2019, 62, figs. 11-12, pls XXV, XLII, XLIII). On the south side, to the west of the 'pylon' (or other structure) is an axial entrance, and a lateral passage (Room 19) into the pronaos (Room 18) (see further below).

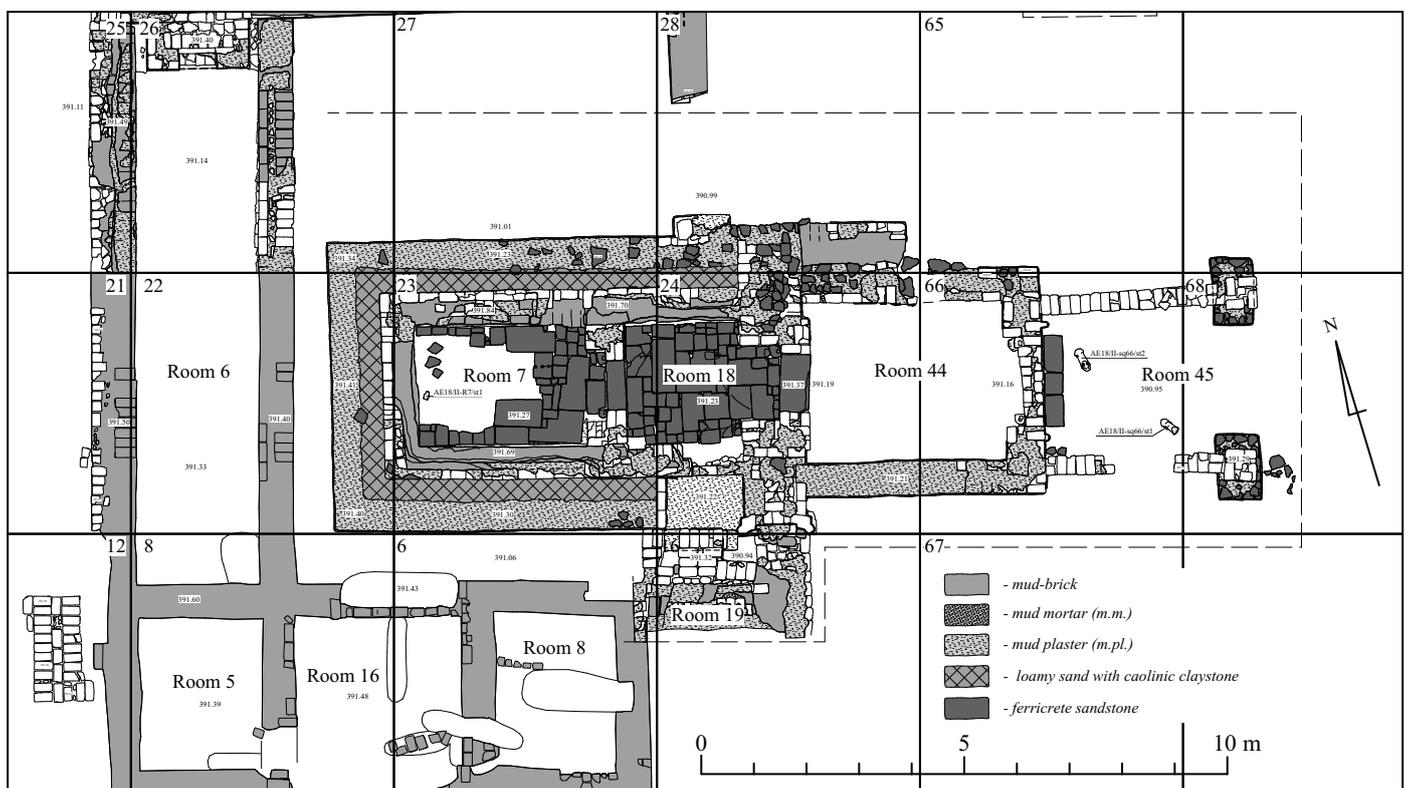


Figure 1. Ground plan of the Lion Temple (plan by S. Vetokhov).

¹ This may be a hypostyle hall; however, the floor was destroyed and no traces of columns were found.

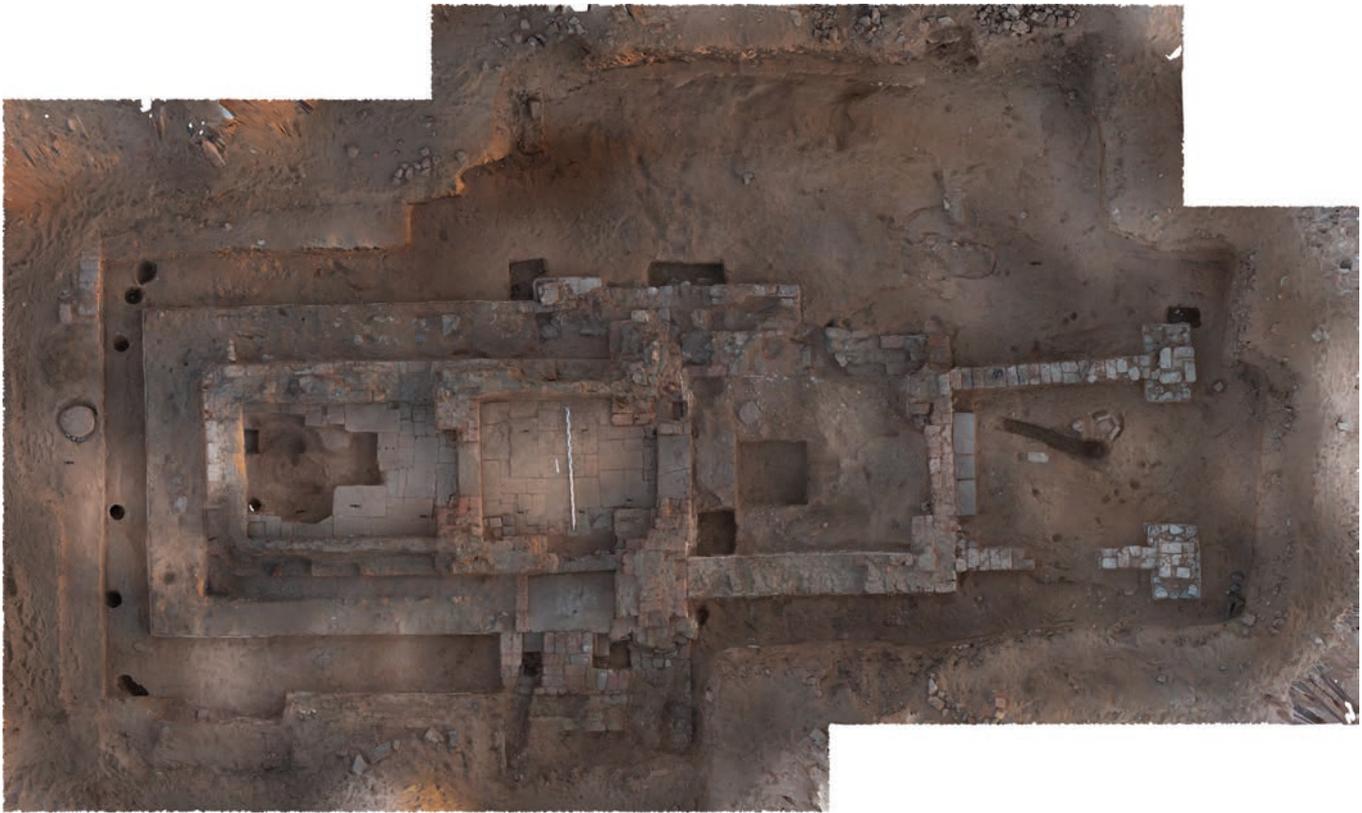


Figure 2. 3D plan of the Lion temple (orthophoto by M. Lebedev).

The next room (Room 44) may be conditionally entitled the Inner hall (see Footnote 1). Its walls were composed of mud and red bricks covered with white plaster. The south wall is almost entirely constructed of mudbricks, while the north wall is a combination of various building materials. The composition and condition of the walls suggests some destruction and possible rebuilding of this room, particularly of the north wall.

The problem of the existence of a pylon on the east side of Room 18 (or perhaps two pylons, see below) cannot be unambiguously solved by the extant structural remains. In favour of its existence are the remains of the lower part of the wall, which exhibit the characteristic masonry of round, plastered, red brick corners that in turn were laid on the foundation of red brick. Several rows of round form corner bricks were preserved on the south side of the wall. However, on the northern side the outer facing is destroyed. At present only a heap of stones and bricks from the wall interior were visible there, and all were laid on a red brick foundation.

Remains of an open courtyard (Room 45) were discovered to the east of Room 44. Room 45 gives the impression of being a roughly built structure. The north and south walls were not constructed in a straight line. The north wall of the court is represented by one row of bricks set on the thick layer of clay. The south wall has lost masonry, which most likely was simply plundered. It is unlikely that this gap represents traces of a side passage (see arguments below). Apparently this room was not built at the same time as the rest of the structure. Its walls are much thinner, while all the rooms located to the west of it are united by a circumferential wall and are relatively equal in width.



Figure 3. Westward view on the Temple (by S. Vetokhov).

The eastern extremity of this room is flanked by two podiums on a west-east line, composed of various materials including ferricrete sandstone and bricks. It may be that they were plinths destined for statues rather than for a pylon structure (dimensions of podiums: north podium 1.30mx0.82m; south podium 1.28mx0.86m).

Both podiums were preserved as two rows of bricks. In front of the south podium, six fragments of basalt with traces of plaster were found, and a large fragment of a lion's paw made



Figure 4. Detailed plan of Room 7 (drawing by M. Lebedev).

sandstone. Both were probably originally positioned facing each other or looking to the east, and after having been robbed or disturbed from that place ended up in Room 45.

The exact shape and function of Room 45 cannot be determined due to the substantial destruction of the walls and uneven masonry of the north wall. At the moment, it is not possible to determine whether this was a consequence of re-building, or the initial design of the entrance. The levels of each room demonstrate that the whole temple was constructed on a line running east-west. Such an arrangement is also attested in the Abu Erteila temple of Natakamani (Kormysheva *et al.* 2019, 63, fig. 11, pls XLIIb, XLIVa).



Figure 5. Fragment of a lion's paw.

of sandstone (Figure 5).² The level of the south podium (391.29m) and its correlation with the elevated temple axis may suggest that the original statue of a lion was positioned here and the deposition of the paw, the remains of robbing.

In the court near the passage to the inner hall (Room 44), stones of unusual strange forms were found (Figure 6a-b). Their deposition was very probably original. Keeping in mind analogies from Naga (Kroeper *et al.* 2011, 98-99, cat. 113, 115), one may suggest that these stones served as a donation or offering to the god by ordinary people.

In Room 45, two statues of recumbent lions were found. The back of one was partly destroyed, but its muzzle is clearly identifiable (Figure 7a-c).³ A figure of a third recumbent lion⁴ was also found in the same room. The head of this lion was missing (Figure 8a-b). Two lions were probably originally placed at the entrance between Room 45 and Room 44, where the passage was paved with the ferricrete

sandstone. Both were probably originally positioned facing each other or looking to the east, and after having been robbed or disturbed from that place ended up in Room 45.

Finds throughout the entire temple, and especially in the sanctuary, suggest that it was dedicated to a lion god. The most interesting statuette of a lion was found under the destroyed part of the western side of the sanctuary, where ferricrete slabs were missing, and had probably been robbed. The statuette was made from sandstone (Figure 9a-c).⁵ The level of the find was 391.17m, while the level of the pavement was 391.27m. Accordingly, it can be suggested that the figurine could initially have been in the sanctuary as a votive gift, and was lost by thieves after the looting of the pavement. This figurine has a hole on the top of the head, which suggests that the lion had a headdress or crown.

² Field number AE18/II – sq 66/st 4. Dimensions: L 140mm; W 125mm; H 100mm; Level 391.39m

³ Field number AE18/II – sq 66/st 1. Dimensions: L 460mm; W 180mm; H 175mm. Level 391.37m.

⁴ Field number AE18/II – sq 66/st 2. Dimensions: L 380mm; W 180mm; H 200mm. Level 391.52m.

⁵ Field number AE18/II-R7/st 1. Dimensions: L 88mm; W 55mm; H 157mm.



Figure 6 a-b. Stones of strange form.



Figure 7. a-d. Recumbent Lion found in Room 45.



Figure 8. Second Lion from Room 45.



Figure 9. a-c Statuette of a lion.



Figure 10. a-c Pendant in the form of an uraeus.

A metal amulet, in the form of a uraeus with a sun-disc on the head, was also found here (Figure 10a-c).⁶ The hole on the back indicates that it served as a pendant and could have been lost by a high-ranking priest or other individual who had access to the sanctuary. As was the case with the lion figurine, the amulet was found in the part of the sanctuary where the paving slabs were lost. Accordingly, we can also assume that these may have been random remains from the robbery. On the lower end of this object, a small part of the detail is visible, that exists on other similar objects and was used for insertion on any object. On the other hand, similar amulets had the usual rounded lower end. This situation suggests the probable reuse of the amulet, although there are no other options for confirmation or even dating.

In Room 7, a bronze ring depicting a griffin standing on a snake (Figure 11) was also found on the surface of the destroyed wall at the level of 391.40m, its diameter 16-16.5mm.⁷ In all likelihood, it was lost by its carrier. Neither its affiliation nor the time of its manufacture can be determined. Studying this object, its local origin must be stressed. The griffin motif was well-known in the Meroitic kingdom, and in particular, a griffin was pictured in the Lion temple of Musawwarat es-Sufra (Zabkar 1975, 73-75).

Two sandstone statues of sitting lions were found in Room 7. One was found deposited on a burial. There is no doubt that both originally belonged to the temple. These statuettes represent the type of 'sitting lions', which have

⁶ Field number AE18 / II-R7 / m1. Dimensions: L 265mm; W 17mm; H 90mm. Level 391.11m.

⁷ Field number AE14 / II-23 / m1.

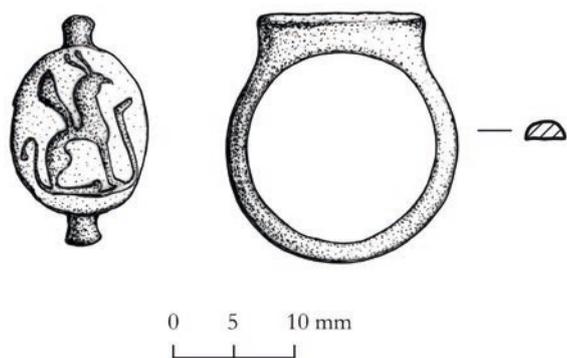


Figure 11. Bronze ring with a griffin (drawing by M. Lebedev).

destroyed and are missing. It was found in Room 7 in the north-western corner, on level 391.69m (small lion statue AE 13/II - 23/st 2: Height 188mm; width at the bottom 88mm; width in the central part 83mm; maximum thickness 130mm).

Keeping in mind that the style of each individual lion figure is specific, and that even the stylised mane plastron on the chest of each Meroitic lion figure is cut in a different manner, one may note the same situation regarding the lions from Abu Erteila. The style of the lions found in Abu Erteila is unique and no exact analogues have been



Figure 12. a-d Statuette of a lion (photo by M. Lebedev).

been found in large numbers at different Meroitic sites. The paws of both statuettes are partly or completely missing. Lion statuette AE 13/II-23/st 1 (Figure 12a-d) was found in the south-eastern part of Room 7 at level 391.73-391.83m, and part of the paws are missing. It was deposited over the skeleton laid in Grave 5 (Figure 13). This grave belonged to a child and was marked by fragments of fired bricks that were positioned around the skeleton (Lebedev and Reshetova 2017, 167) (lion statue AE 13/II-23/st 1: height 250mm; width at the bottom 100mm; width in the central part 85mm; maximum thickness 155mm).

Another sandstone lion statuette AE 13/II-23/st 2 (Figure 14a-c) was restored from three fragments. Its paws were destroyed and are missing. It was found in Room 7 in the north-western corner, on level 391.69m (small lion statue AE 13/II - 23/st 2: Height 188mm; width at the bottom 88mm; width in the central part 83mm; maximum thickness 130mm). The reason for this may be the existence of various artists' workshops, the absence of canonical models for such statuettes, and that they were handmade. Without any inscription these statuettes give no idea of which god they may personify; however, stylistically they exhibit some similarity with the votive lions found at Wad Ben Naga. At the same time, in my view, the lions found in Room 7 are more or less similar in style to the monumental statues of lions from Basa and Musawwarat es-Sufra. This may serve as evidence that monumental sculpture and minor plastic art exhibited the same stylistic peculiarities.

Apparently these statuettes belonged to this temple, being probably votive figurines of lions, but after the destruction of the temple they were occasionally or advisedly re-used as a memorial monument or even a toy in the other world for the child buried there.

Summarising the finds from the temple, one may ascertain the iconographical evidences of the lion cult – the lion statue in front of the temple (lion paw), two lying lions, statuette of the lion, found under the destroyed part in the western side of the sanctuary and the statuette of the lion discussed above. All these objects found in the temple give evidences for a lion cult that permits us to entitle this the Lion Temple.

Whether the statuettes personified Apedemak or another lion-god is impossible to ascertain. A hole for the headdress or crown (Figure 9c), which has been lost, was preserved on the head of the lion found in the sanctuary. This hole leaves no doubt that the figurine was a



Figure 13. Statuette of a lion *in situ* on Grave 5 (photo by M. Lebedev).

with the lions of Onuris, Shu, Tefnut and even Thoth (Kormysheva 2010, 196-200, see also 269-270), the question of the temple's belonging to Apedemak cannot be fully resolved.

Fragments of the re-used temple's columns with and without decoration were found in Room 7. One of them presents a head of the god Hapi (Figure 15), disposed near a lotus garland. It is impossible to confirm these columns belonged to this temple, although there is a high probability of their initial location in the eastern part of Room 7 or Room 18. Stylistically, this fragment of a column resembles a fragment of a column with a relief of Hapi (Fantusati *et al.* 2014, 83-84), that survived in a better condition on Kom II.

A fragment of painting in the form of Meroitic stars, found on the mud brick wall in Room 7, gives an idea on the painted decoration of the inner sanctuary in the Lion Temple (Figure 16).

Other objects found in the investigated area confirm the existence of a temple here. A sandstone fragment decorated with a sun disc surrounded by uraei (Figure 17)⁸ probably originally belonged to the naos or altar. Evidence suggests that the fragment is too narrow to have been used as a lintel above the entrance.

A fragment of sandstone with a large *ankh* sign with the upper part missing (Figure 18)⁹ was also found on the temple precinct. Most likely this fragment had been part of the column. A fragment of censer with a complete profile was also found (Figure 19).¹⁰

The excavations of the sanctuary and pronaos revealed the surrounding brick wall was composed of loamy sand

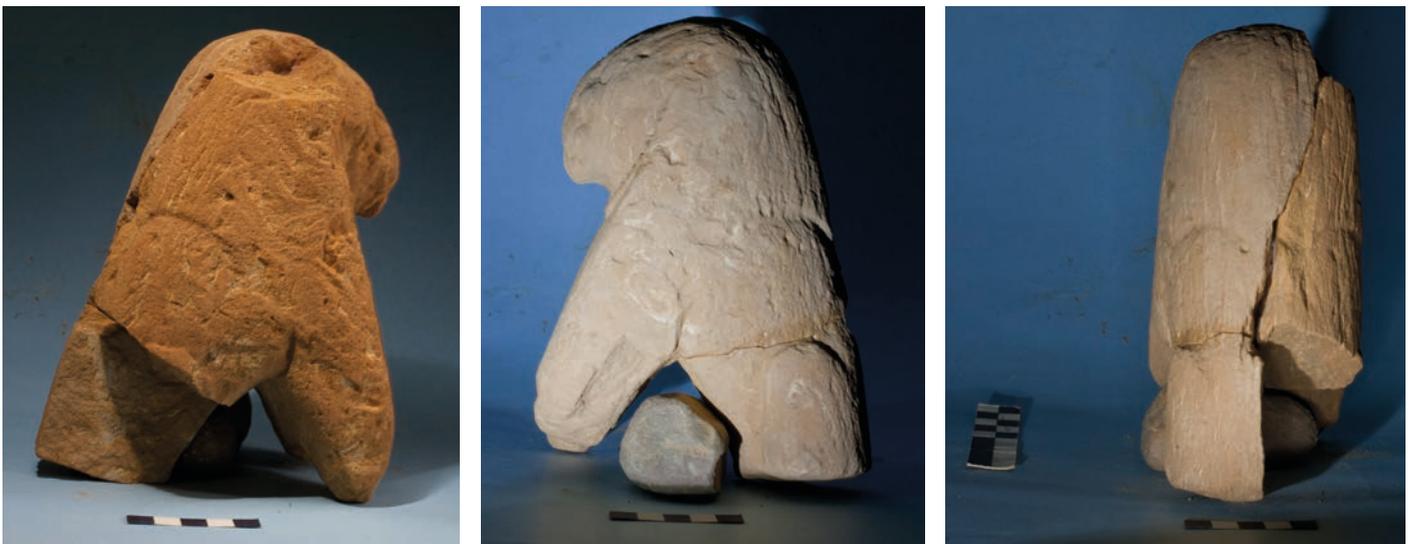


Figure 14. a-c Lion statuette found in Room 7 (photo by M. Lebedev).

⁸Field number AE18 / II - sq 65 / st1. Dimensions: L 730mm; W 240mm; H 280mm, Level 391.49-391.62m.

⁹Field number AE18 / II - sq 66 / st 3. Dimensions: L 140mm; W 132mm; H 50mm. Level 391.31m.

¹⁰Field number AE18 / II - sq 28 / cer. 1. Dimensions: D 110mm; H 102mm. Level 391.16m.

with kaolinic claystone, covered with thick layer of plaster. Of great interest is the discovery of a mural, occupying the space along the perimeter of the walls of the sanctuary. Images of human legs, walking one after another in the same east-west direction, are preserved in part along the south, north and west walls. The painting is absent only along the eastern connecting wall, between the sanctuary and the pronaos. Only the feet up to the knees were preserved, and part of a skirt is visible. In front of each figure is a large hieroglyph *zm3* – yellow in colour with black contour lines (Figure 20a-b). On the west face, figures move from opposite directions towards each other; the last pair, as it were, connects the entire procession in the middle of the western wall just behind the center of the naos inside the sanctuary. Feet were coloured with brown ochre. All the figures stand on a green line, possibly reflecting fecundity. The arrangement of the picture around the sanctuary and a possible subject of the scene may reflect a rite performed in the temple, namely a procession of human figures during the feasts.

A similar picture of a procession, from which also only feet and *zm3* signs were preserved, was also found on the small podium in Room 6 upon which traces of the symbolic nine bows were seen. The meaning of *zm3* is ‘unite’, ‘to be united’, and this might suggest that the procession illustrated the unity and fidelity of the population towards the king. It might also have referred to the royal crowns (*‘Kronen gesellen sich zu einander’* (Wb. III, 446, 5; 447, 9)); in other words, the concept of unity could be associated with coronation. Of note, two Taharqo cartouches and two cartouches of Atlanersa are located on the top of the hieroglyph *zm3* on their respective barque stands from Jebel Barkal (B 506, B 703) (LD V, 13; Aldenhoven 2014, 603, fig. 2). The granite altar of Atlanersa also has a picture of the king upon the *zm3* sign, supporting the sky (Aldenhoven 2014, 603, fig. 4). Although there is no exact analogy with the above mentioned images here, because the two human figures depicted on the altar of Taharqo, as well as those on the Atlanersa altar, face each other, stand upon the *zm3* sign and raise the cartouches, these representations merit attention. It is possible that the unique composition of the procession in Abu Erteila could have had the same or a similar meaning, and in this case, one could also look for a correlation with a ritual performed in the Lion temple with the action of ‘supporting the sky’ as found in the temple of Natakamani at Abu Erteila.¹¹

The podium found in Room 6 was excavated in the north part of Squares 25 and 26 (Figure 21a-b)¹² and measured 1.96m (east-west) by 0.90-0.96m north-south and ranged in height from 210-260mm. It was located near the north wall of the building, practically covering its entire length, to a height of two burnt brick layers. The maximum depth of the entire structure is four rows of brick. The surfaces of both sides of the podium as well as the top are covered with white and coloured stucco, which initially was probably present on all sides and is now partially lost. The surface coating consisted of two layers – a thick stucco base and a thin outer coating layer for painting as attested in other Meroitic temples. The sides of the podium are separated by a central recess and currently there are no bricks between them at the base, however this is likely due to loss of bricks as confirmed by a thin line of white stucco along the front.

On the west side of the podium, images of two pairs of human legs (and in one case the lower part of the kilt) walking southward have been preserved. One pair of legs is black, the other coloured with ochre. Between



Figure 15. Fragment of the column with the head of Hapi.



Figure 16. Painting from Room 7.

¹¹ On this subject see further Kormysheva *et al.* 2019, 111-131.

¹² The western and eastern walls of this room were preserved 0.24m high.



Figure 17. Fragment of the altar.

Figure 18. Sandstone fragment decorated with *ankh* sign.

Figure 19. Fragment of a censor.

them, a clear image of the *zm3* sign representing 'unity', is painted in yellow. A similar image may be reconstructed on the east side, where there are legs painted with ochre and a yellow *zm3* sign. It is not possible to evaluate the symbolism of the colours used here. Presumably in this case we may think about various different groups subject to the king of Kush.

An analogue is an image from the period of Egyptian colonial rule in Kush. For example, the representations of different tribes on the reliefs from Abu Simbel and Beit el-Wali, from the time of Ramses II, present the same colouring used here.

One example comes from Beit el-Wali, where a procession of offering-bearers with exotic gifts, including a giraffe, panther, monkeys, moves toward the figure of Ramses II sitting on a throne. The legs and torsos of most figures were painted in brown ochre, but two figures with leopard skins thrown over their hips were painted in black. The colour scheme was also used in the representation of the ethnic features of some figures in the tomb of Seti I (Dewachter 1990, 96, 86) and is further attested in the drawings of Champollion of Abu Simbel (Champollion 1835-1845 [edition 2006], pls. XI, XVI, XVI and XXXV; see also Dewachter 1990, 88-89).

Taking into consideration these comparative images, the Abu Erteila painting may be a representation of different tribes that populated Meroe and subordinate areas, probably moving with tribute to the king or simply glorifying his power. Consequently, one may think of this possibly as a demonstration of victory and unity.

Remains of the décor revealed on the podium suggests the possible purpose of this feature was as a platform for the royal throne or statue of the king. A stepped podium would have been used for the coronation ceremonies. Thrones were used on the occasion of temple festivals and other royal events (Török 2002, 326). Traces of bows were preserved on the horizontal surface of the podium. So, the supposition that the podium was intended for a statue of the king (or a king sitting on a throne) standing on the symbol of the 'nine Bows' is very probable. Analogies may be found on the relief from Beg. N.36 (Welsby 1996, 94, fig. 32).

The phrase 'nine Bows' is an ancient Egyptian term in origin, which denoted royal authority at first over conquered peoples, later (from the New Kingdom) over strangers (Kockelmann and Rickert 2015, S. 88). The 'nine Bows' designated lands and people, and the Egyptians often called Kush the country of the 'nine Bows'. Here in the traditional country of archers, this designation had an association with a common type of weaponry and was one of the symbols connected with the god Apedemak. The symbol itself was preserved in Meroe and perceived in royal ideology with the same semantics - a demonstration of the king's victory over enemies. Moreover, the number of

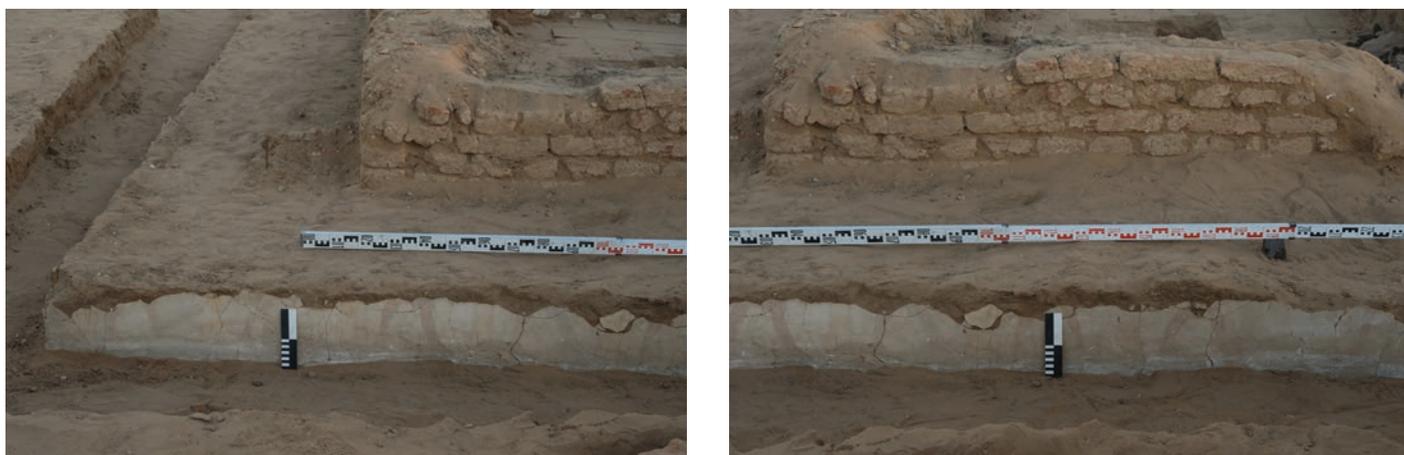


Figure 20. a-b Painting on the wall around the sanctuary: corner, and further along the wall (photo by M. Lebedev).

bows depicted did not matter. For example, six bows are pictured on the altar from the temple of Amun (Naga 100) (Kroeper *et al.* 2011, 47, Abb. 46; Baud 2014, 776).

Generally assessing the scene at Abu Erteila, it should be noted that on the west and east walls, the figures are moving in opposite directions, so that both processions should meet each other. On the horizontal face of the podium there were traces of a drawing of three bows. A blue horizontal line is drawn on all sides under the images at the bottom of the podium, as if to mark the border of the depicted scenes. Rather than supporting a statue or throne as suggested above, another possibility is that it functioned as an altar with images of defeated enemies, near which there were also images of bows. One such example of this is the altar at Naga (see above), where the bows are depicted near images of tied enemies. In this case, the moving figures are captive representatives of various tribes/groups, subject to the king or the god.

The east wall of this structure begins in Square 22. It stretches to the north and ends at the north wall, which occupies the northern edges of squares 26-28. It seems that the wall and the podium block the mural paintings on this wall. The total length of the painted wall is 11.32m. Accordingly, it can be assumed that the podium of Room 6 was built later.

Another interesting and important element found was a fragment of painted decoration. Three bricks were decorated with a thick layer of plaster, coloured with blue, yellow, and red-brown pigments. The design is of a large 'Isis knot'.¹³ It is yellow in colour with a red-brown interior and base. The sign was drawn on a white ground with black contour lines, surrounded by light blue. This fragment was found in Square 22. Several fragments of coloured plaster (blue, beige), discovered in Rooms 6 and 7, indicate that the walls were decorated with paintings.

Excavations of the east wall of Room 6 revealed a passage between Room 6 and the surrounding wall of Room 7. Given the same decor of the paintings on the podium and in room 7, (the form of walking figures separated by the

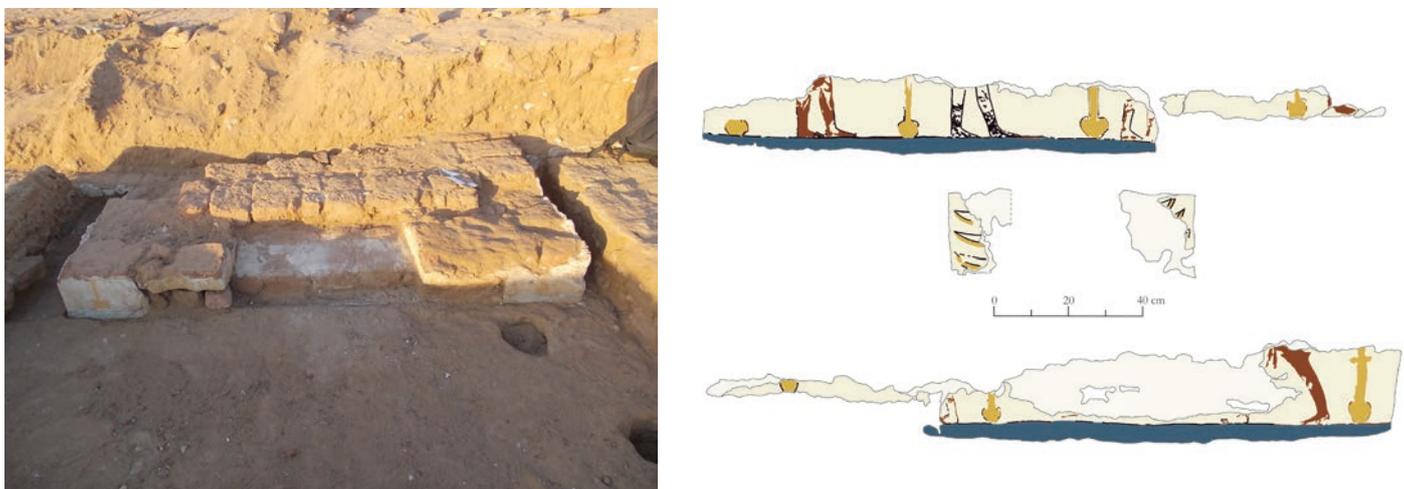


Figure 21. a-b Painting on the podium in Room 6 (photo and drawing by M. Lebedev).

¹³ Field number AE 13/II-sq22/2. The size of the two fragments joined is 270x350mm.

sign *zm3*, and the image of ‘nine bows’ - the symbolism of the defeated enemies), one may hypothesise that a royal ritual possibly associated with the coronation, performed in this complex, would have included movement to the royal throne (Room 6), as demonstration of unity and glorification of the king, which was sanctified and blessed by the Lion God, possibly Apedemak.

Conclusions

Excavations and finds on Kom II at Abu Erteila testify to the existence of a temple that may conditionally be identified as a Lion Temple. The image of the procession around the sanctuary with the sign *zm3* is similar to the podium decor in Room 6. Examination of the eastern wall of Room 6 (in Square 26) revealed a passage that led to the sanctuary; thus, it can be postulated that both rooms may have been connected by a single ritual where the semantic *zm3* symbolized the celebration of unity and loyalty to the newly elected king, or demonstrated confirmation of the power of the legitimate ruler. That the ritual was most likely connected with the king is suggested by the remains of the image of bows on the podium in Room 6, where a statue of the king may have been located. Another part of the ritual, represented as a procession around the sanctuary (Room 7) meets in the room centre where the naos with the statue of the temple god was supposed to be located, thus possibly testifying to the connection of the royal cult and the cult of the lion god to whom the temple may have been dedicated.

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