

SUDAN & NUBIA

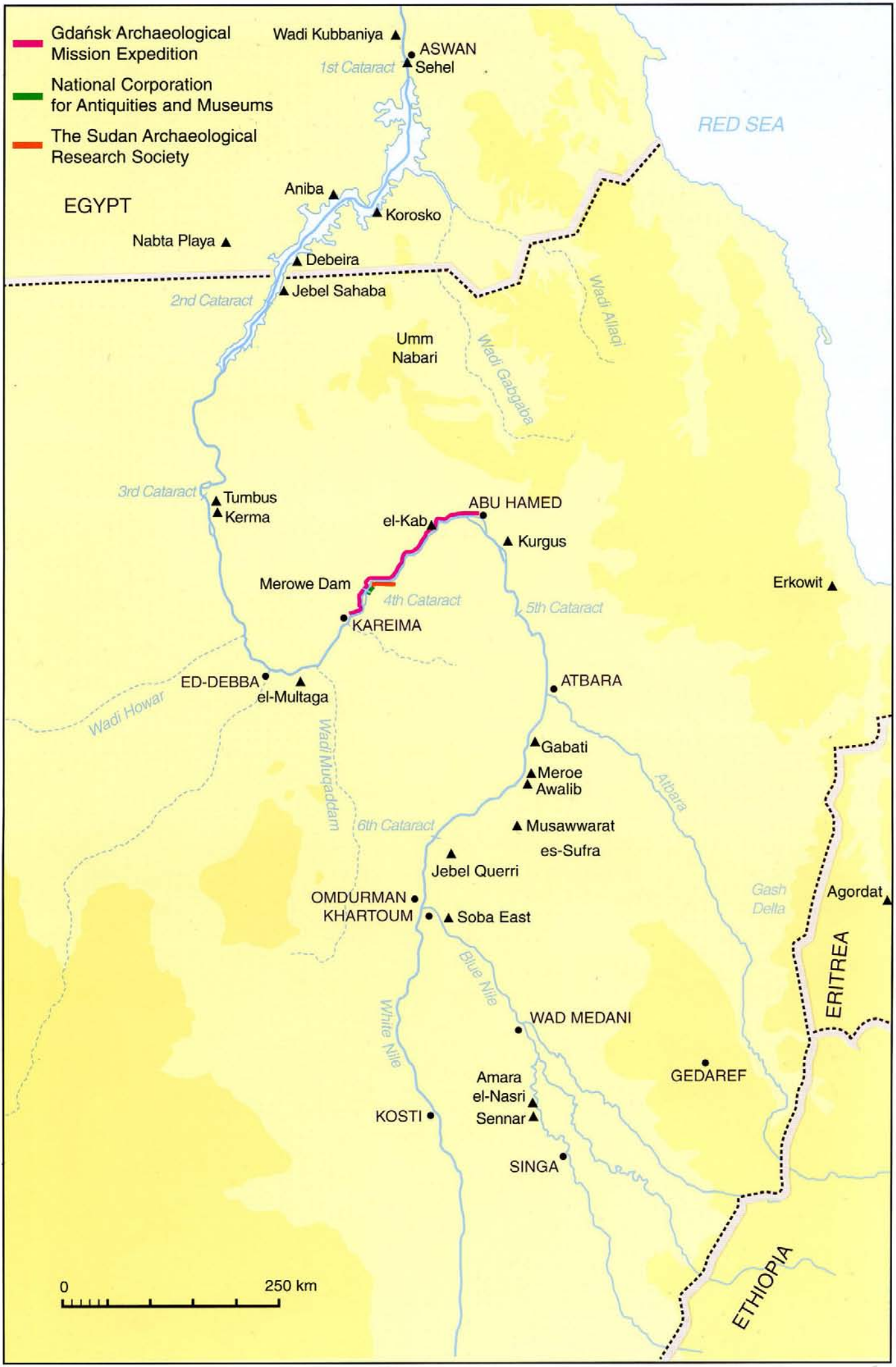
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 7

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Contents

Introduction

Vivian Davies

1

Kirwan Memorial Lecture

Forty Years of Archaeological Research
in Sudanese and Egyptian Nubia

Fred Wendorf

2

The Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project

Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (MDASP)

Salah Mohamed Ahmed

11

Archaeological Survey on the Right Bank of the Nile
between Karima and Abu Hamed: a brief overview

Henryk Paner

15

Old Kush in the Fourth Cataract Region

Elżbieta Kołosowska, Mahmoud el-Tayeb and Henryk Paner

21

The Amri to Kirbeka Survey: the 2002-2003 Season

Derek A. Welsby

26

Survey and Excavation at el-Multaga, a Resettlement
Area related to the Construction of the Merowe
Dam: preliminary results

Francis Geus and Yves Lecoq

33

Reports

The Egyptian Conquest and Administration of Nubia
during the New Kingdom: the testimony of the
Sehel rock-inscriptions

Annie Gasse and Vincent Rondot

40

Pharaonic Inscriptions along the Eastern Desert
Routes in Sudan

Alfredo and Angelo Castiglioni

47

Kush in Egypt: a new historical inscription

Vivian Davies

52

Kurgus 2002: the inscriptions and rock-drawings

Vivian Davies

55

Kurgus 2002: report on the archaeological work

Isabella Welsby Sjöström

58

Erkowitz, a Neolithic Site in the Red Sea Hills (Sudan):
interim report on the pottery

Ghanim Wabida and Abdelrahim M. Khabir

62

Painted Plaster Murals from Meroe Townsite

Rebecca Bradley

66

New Investigations into the Water Supply at

Musawwarat es-Sufra: results from the 2002 season

Thomas Scheibner

71

The Work of the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum
Expedition in the Sudan

Zbigniew Borowski

81

An Archaeological Exploration of the Blue Nile
in January-February 2000

Victor M. Fernández

85

The Blue Nile Archaeological Salvage Project:

Amara el-Nasri

Abdel Rahman Ali Mohamed

91

Miscellaneous

List of Archaeological Mission Activities in Sudan
between 1934 and 1984

Salah Omer Elsadig

98

Front Cover: Sehel Island: rock-inscriptions of Viceroys of Kush.

Introduction

Vivian Davies

The Society's two major events of the year, the results of which are published here - the Kirwan Memorial Lecture delivered in October, 2002, and the colloquium on recent fieldwork held in May, 2003 - were extremely well attended. The colloquium incorporated a special session, led by Dr. Salah Mohamed Ahmed, NCAM Director of Excavations, on the Merowe Dam salvage project. The response has been encouraging. Since the colloquium, several organisations have applied for concessions, joining the existing four missions of Gdańsk, NCAM, the French Unit and SARS. Many more are still needed. Interested parties should contact Dr Salah at NCAM tel./fax. 249 11 786784 or the International Society for Nubian Studies c/o dwelsby@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk.



Painted Plaster Murals from Meroe Townsite

Rebecca Bradley

An avenue lined with small temples once cut through the eastern edge of Meroe Townsite, from the plain to the great Temple of Amun. Three of these - M.720, KC.102 and KC.104, excavated in 1975 and 1976 by the joint expedition from the Universities of Calgary and Khartoum - yielded a large collection of plaster mural fragments, which became the subject of a separate project at the Sudan National Museum in 1978-1980. The fragments were transported to Khartoum, where they were drawn and conserved, and selected fragments were mounted on seven panels using a reversible process. This interim report is a "trailer" for a fuller publication planned in the *Meroitica* series, which will also include the technical details of conservation and mounting.

Two types of plaster are represented. The most common consists of a fine mud backing, laminar as if applied in several layers, and up to 40mm thick. A small amount of temper is present, in the form of straw, coarse sand, and occasional tiny fragments of fired brick. Over this is a thin layer of whitewash using gum arabic as a binder, on which the murals were painted. Both the mud backing and surviving painted surfaces were extremely fragile when found.

The other type of plaster, found mainly in KC.102, is a robust conglomerate of lime and small black and white pebbles in varying concentrations. Where the concentration is high, the surface tends to be crumbly, but in general the lime plaster and its pigments were well-preserved when found, and probably represent decorations from exterior surfaces of the buildings.

M.720

The bulk of the material was recovered from Room (b), the central chamber of M.720, and it presents an interesting problem in reconstruction. The structure it once adorned was abandoned as a temple at an unknown time after its construction and decoration. It was then occupied by squatters for an unknown length of time, while the fragile mud plaster still clung to the walls.

Presumably no later than the 4th century AD the structure was destroyed by violence and fire. The ruins were pilfered through the next centuries for building materials down to, and sometimes beneath, the original ground surface. There was also some damage in the central chamber. A portion of the structure was excavated in 1914 by John Garstang, whose notes reported the presence of "much painted plaster". The mural fragments recovered in 1975 were from an area of the temple left untouched by Garstang.

Reconstruction of the M.720 murals is made difficult by the nature of the destruction. It is probable that they suf-

fered to some extent during the period of squatter occupation and the period of abandonment of unknown duration that may have preceded it. Few remnants of a star-and-cornice frieze that apparently ran along the upper edge of the mural were found, suggesting it had already largely vanished before the time of the final destruction. There are some indications of water damage and slippage of some portions of the mud plaster backing onto lower portions, implying the interior of the temple may have been partially exposed to the elements for some period, or at least that water leaked through into the upper portions of the wall.

Later, at the time of destruction, the remaining portions of the murals did not fall smoothly (and conveniently) into the room as a "sheet", but piecemeal in heaps onto thin deposits of domestic debris, with adjacent portions of the scenes often ending up in different areas of the floor. This may suggest that the murals were deliberately smashed, though a similar effect might have been created if the structure was left to collapse slowly and gradually after the squatter occupation and before the fire.

In any case, the fragments were smashed and then differentially baked, burnt or left relatively untouched by the fall of the burning roof timbers. Somewhat later, a small pit was apparently dug through the burnt roof timbers in one part of the central chamber, exposing a small patch of tiled floor and - presumably - resulting in the loss of some of the plaster deposit.

As currently reconstructed, the fragments represent portions of two scenes that likely covered the east wall of Room (b), and the north wall east of the doorjamb. In each, the presiding deity is backed by Isis, and faced by at least three and possibly four figures in poses of worship or offering. One scene involves Arensnuphis and members of the royal family; the other, a kilted deity on a somewhat larger scale, and several smaller figures, some in panther skins. The figures in both scenes formed friezes on a black-edged light background, running along otherwise red-plastered walls.

The Arensnuphis Procession (Panels One and Two)

At the left edge of the scene (Panel One, Figure 1), Isis and Arensnuphis both face to the viewer's right. Isis is represented by her right shoulder and upper arm, both hands, and a portion of her lower body. Her left hand rests on the god's shoulder, and her right hangs down by her side, holding a small rolled object with a long "tail". On her lower body are traces of typical folded-wing decoration, and several broad, black horizontal bands. An isolated fragment shows a heel, unshod, which is most likely hers; behind it is the edge of a vertical black border, indicating the left edge of the scene.

Arensnuphis, preserved in three major clusters of fragments, is identified by the tall-plumed Onuris crown. The quills of the feathers are clearly marked, and the cap is decorated with faint black teardrops on a red background. Attached to the diadem at his brow is a uraeus bearing an unusually tall plume topped with a papyrus blossom. A

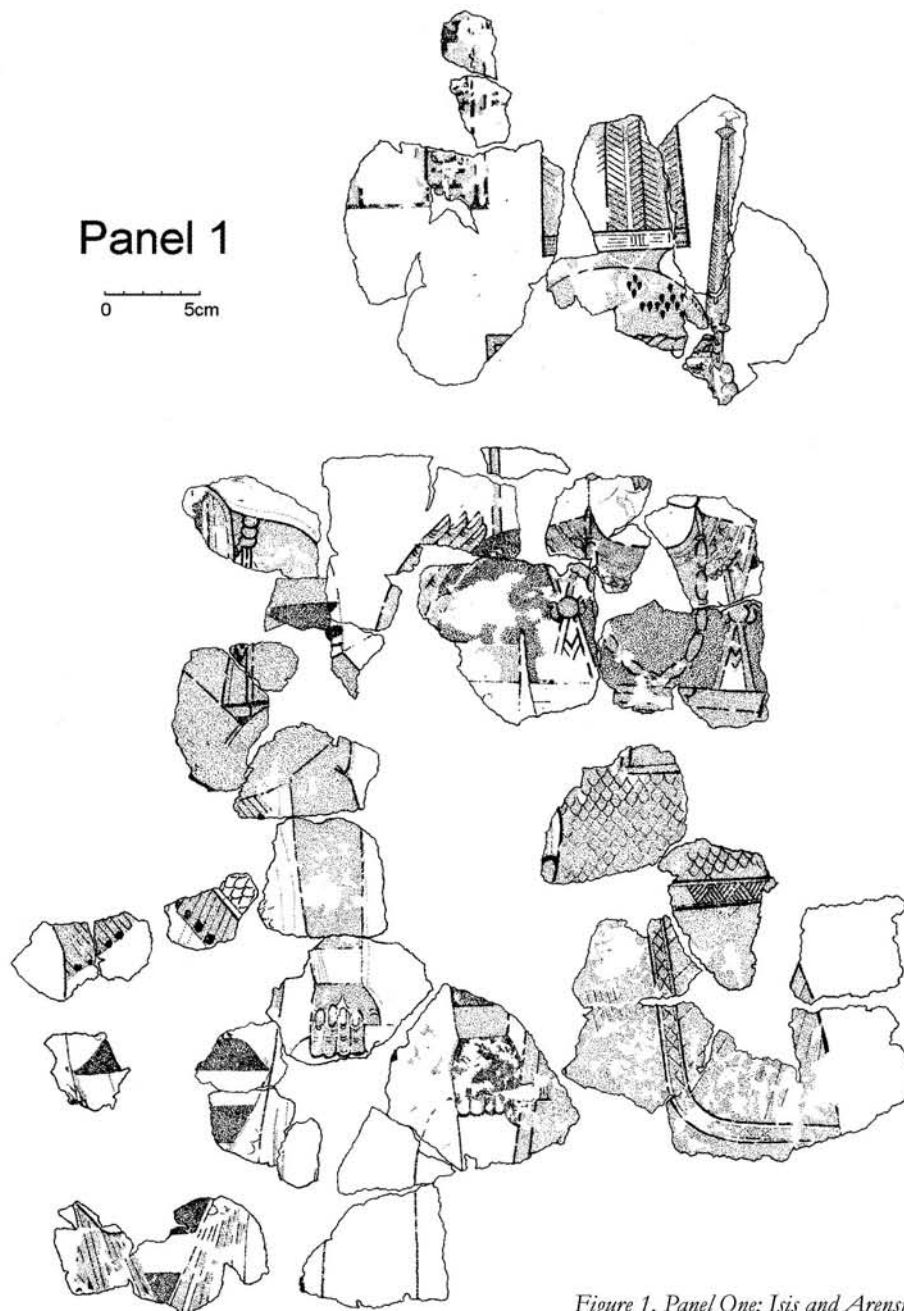


Figure 1. Panel One: Isis and Arensnuphis (scale 1:4).

narrow “ribbon” juts horizontally from the back of his head, then turns down at right angles to disappear behind his shoulder. His face is not preserved. His neck is white, with neck-rolls marked in black, while the shoulders and upper arms are black.

Arensnuphis wears a ram’s-head earring and a broad beadwork collar. Suspenders, with sundisk-and-double-uraeus ornamenting the central tie of each, support the upper edge of his red garment. A shrine-shaped pectoral hangs at chest level from a string of biconical beads. On his upper left arm is a red armlet, below which are further traces of arm jewelry, perhaps a sundisk and uraeus; at the left wrist is a plain red wristlet. He holds a rolled and tailed object similar to that held by Isis. His garment is a long red kilt with belt and apron, preserved to about knee-level, and patterned variously with

scallops, faint diagonal lines, and criss-crosses. The doubled line at the rear edge of his kilt suggests an attached lion’s tail.

The next two figures, facing left towards Arensnuphis, are iconographically similar to the representations of Natakamani and Amanitore in Naqa (Panel Two, Figure 2). Both are in a standard pose of worship, with hands held up and open before their faces. Each wears an ankle-length white(?) robe with an ornamental seam or ribbon running down the centre, and with a band of openwork weaving and a deep fringe at the hem. Each has a double streamer of the usual type attached to the back of the diadem and draped over the right shoulder. There is no indication of a pleated cape in either case. The king’s robe is scattered with black sundisk-and-double-uraeus motifs, the queen’s with ankhs. A third such figure, unfortunately not reconstructable, is suggested by two

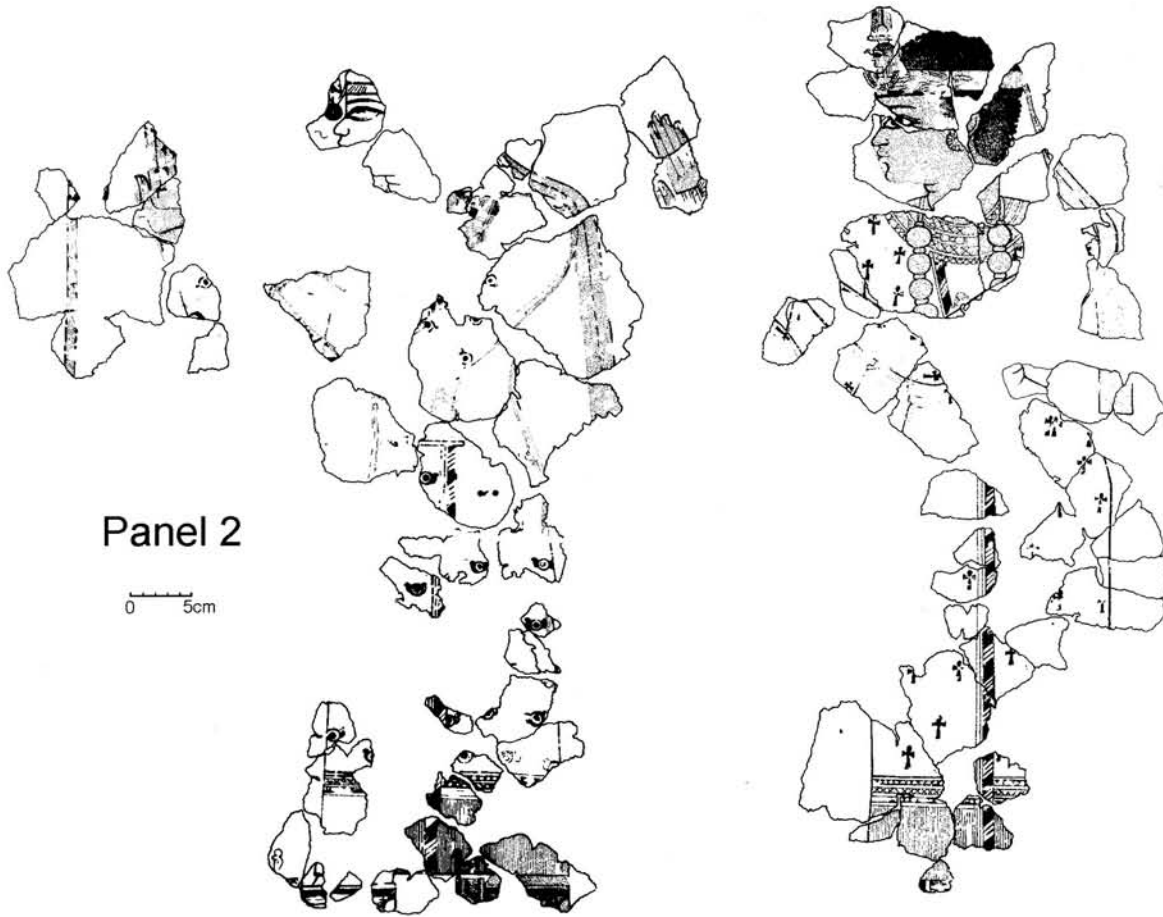


Figure 2. Panel Two: The king and queen.

small fragments of a similar robe, bearing black crescents.

Traces at the neck suggest the king is wearing a beadwork collar and a necklace, and a rosette is suspended from the uraeus at his brow. The one hand identified as his is badly burnt, but there are traces of a narrow wristlet, a broad red band across the back of the hand, and possibly a thumbring. The sandals appear to have been quite ornate, with a broad strap over the instep bearing one or two uraei with sundisks.

The queen's head is the gem of the collection (Colour plate XXXVI). Facial features and neck-rolls are clearly and surely marked. She is wearing a diadem but not a cap, and the close-curved hair is indicated by solid black dots along the curve of the head. Attached to her diadem at the forehead is an aegis of a deity wearing a double-plumed crown with a vulture(?) at its brow. She is wearing rosette earrings and the usual beadwork collar, with a long string of large red ball-beads; and she carries a royal orb of the "pinecone" type in her forward hand.

Very few textual fragments were preserved. Between Arensnuphis and Isis, at crown level, are the bases of two columns of text, both ending with Gardiner's N.23. The only other identifiable sign is Gardiner's N.31, often a determinative in the writing of Onuris. No royal names were found, but the tops of at least three cartouches, surmounted with sundisk-and-double-uraeus and neb-towy, have been assigned

to this scene.

The "Pantherskin" Scene (Panels Four and Five)

Fragments assigned to this scene were more variably affected by the fire than those above, resulting in considerable variability in the colour and appearance of the pigments. Isis is represented chiefly by some isolated wing fragments, and the presiding deity by the lower edge of a kilt and bare knees, facing right, on a slightly larger scale than the other figures. One fragment showing a round eye, suggestive of a lion-, ram- or hawk-headed deity, may be from this figure; ram-headed Amun seems a likely candidate.

At least two of the facing figures are dressed in richly decorated robes slung over with panther-skin regalia, though only one has been partially reconstructed so far (Panel Four, Figure 3). The upper portions of the robes are decorated with alternate rows of rosettes and five-pointed stars in circles, and with panels of delicately drawn deities, winged uraei and vultures, baboons, and geometric friezes. The lower portions of the robes are probably fringed panels of varying textures, including beads threaded vertically, and an ornate tiered tassel-cord hangs down one side (Panel Five, Figure 4).

The remaining figures are still more fragmentary, but an assortment of hands, feet and dress features, including

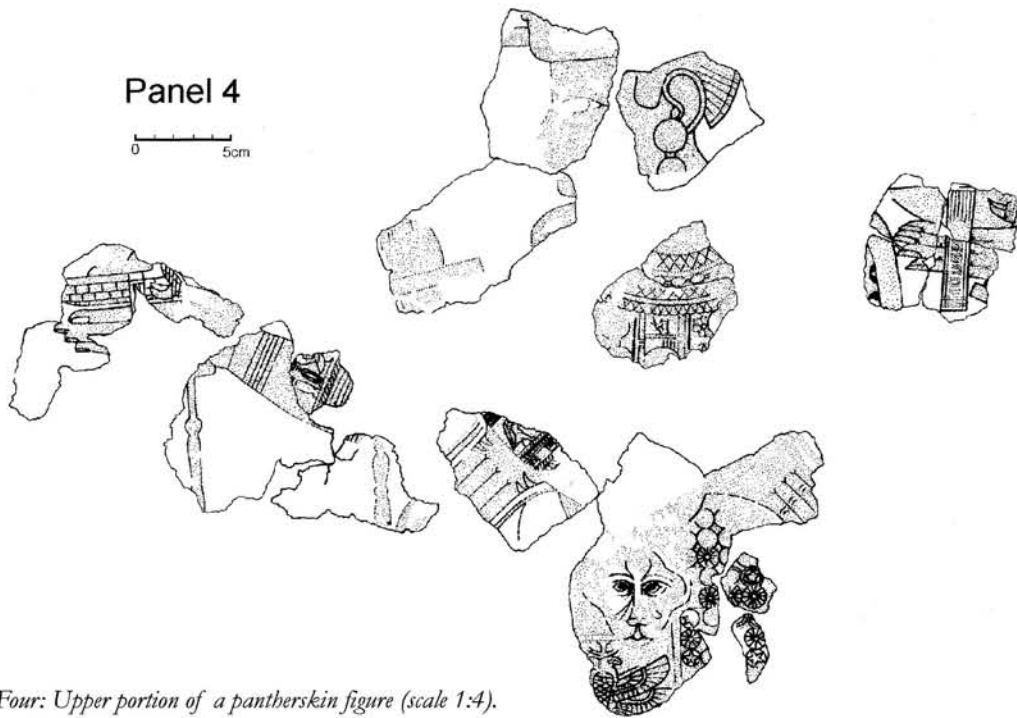


Figure 3. Panel Four: Upper portion of a pantherskin figure (scale 1:4).

portions of a red royal shawl, have been identified. Blue pigment, rarely preserved, was found on some fragments. Of the assortment of hands (examples are shown in Figure 5), most wear thumbings and/or board-rings, and hold either a bowl or basket, or a royal orb. The wristlets are decorated with tiny empty cartouches flanked by vultures and uraei, or by throned figures. Several of the sandals are decorated with vulture-wing patterns (Figure 6 and Colour plate XXXVII); two have upstanding uraei on the instep strap, and one has a narrow square-cornered toestraps. The quality of the draw-

ing is very fine throughout. A selection of the best-preserved was mounted on Panel 6.

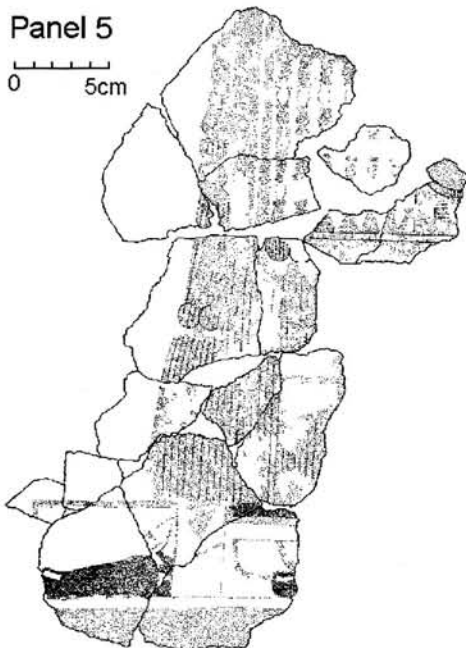


Figure 4. Panel Five: Lower portion of a pantherskin figure(?) (scale 1:4).

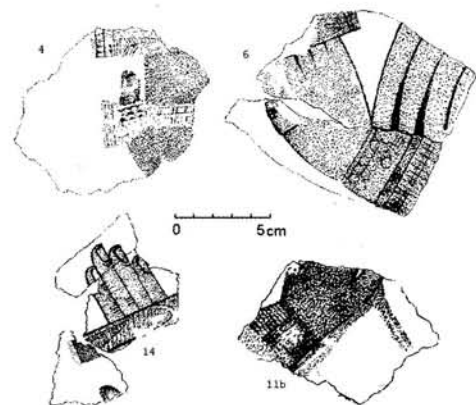


Figure 5. Panel Six: Selection of hands from M.720 (scale 1:4).

KC. 104 (Panel Three)

Of the approximately 200 fragments recovered from KC. 104, less than a quarter merited recording and preservation, and no scene could be reconstructed. The decipherable fragments include a seated royal child (Harpocrates?), parts of a bark bearing Isis and several deity-heads on posts, a few isolated hieroglyphs, and the only royal names in the collection: Amanitore and Arikankharer (Colour plate XXXVIII). A selection was mounted on Panel Three.

KC. 102 (Panel Seven)

Most of the KC. 102 fragments are of the robust lime-plaster variety with well-preserved bright pigments, presumably from the structure's exterior or from reused blocks. Six small

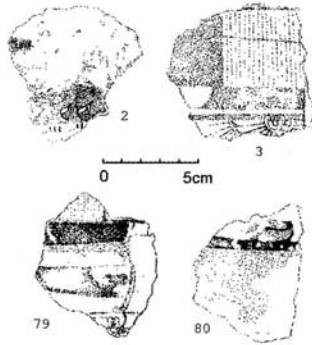


Figure 6. Panel Six: Selection of feet from M.720 (scale 1:4).

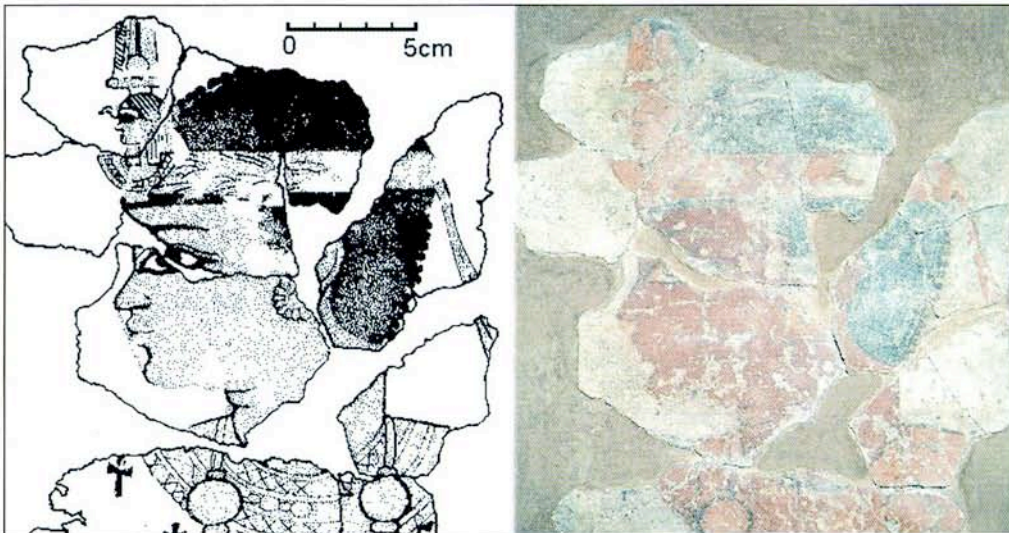
fragments of mud-plaster were also recovered, retaining vivid reds, yellows and blues that suggest how bright some of the M.720 material may have been before that temple's fiery destruction affected the pigments. No scene could be reconstructed, but fragments of each type were mounted on Panel Seven as examples of temple decoration (Colour plate XXXIX). These include fragments of wing motifs, and a face with a hand held up before it in a pose of worship.

Current Status

Work is continuing on the "jigsaw puzzle", both to extend and clarify the scenes, and to test the tentative reconstructions mounted on the panels, which will almost certainly need revision. All drawings have been scanned, to enable virtual manipulation, and to facilitate the direct use of comparative materials in looking at alternate reconstructions. The seven panels are stored in the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum, along with 11 tin boxes of fragments.

Acknowledgements.

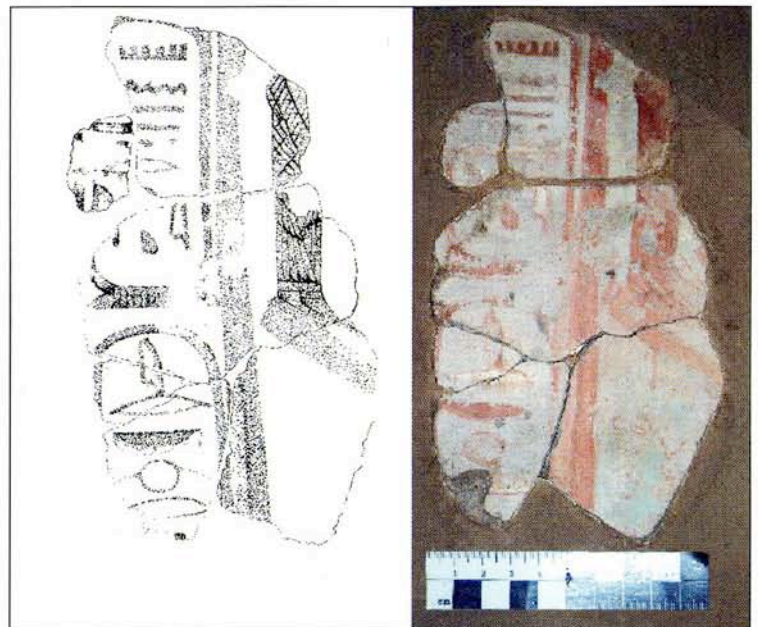
Grateful thanks are due to the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) and its predecessor the Sudan Antiquities Service, for providing space, facilities and kind assistance in all phases of this project; to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding; to the Universities of Calgary and Khartoum, and to Professor Steffen Wenig and Humboldt University for providing current facilities; to SARS for offering interim publication; and especially to the *mudirs*, Professor Peter Shinnie and the late Professor Ahmed M. Ali Hakem.



Colour plate XXXVI.
Meroe. Panel Two:
The queen's head.



Colour plate XXXVII. Meroe.
Panel Six: Hem and sandal fragment from M.720.



Colour plate XXXVIII. Meroe.
Panel Three: Isis, bark, and cartouches from KC.104.

Colour plate XXXIX.
Meroe. Panel Seven:
Examples of lime-plaster
from KC.102.

