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The Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan at Jebel Barkal
University Ca' Foscari, Venice

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The royal district of Natakamani at Napata – Season 2014-2015. Preliminary
report

The 2014-2015 season of the Italian Archaeological Mission at Jebel Barkal was carried out between October 18th – December 14th. The team comprised: Emanuele M. Ciampini (Director, University Ca' Foscari, Venice); Grazyna Bakowska (archaeologist, Jagiellonian University Cracow); Martino Gottardo (archaeologist, collection and analysis of the topographical data); Francesca Iannarilli (PhD student, University Ca' Foscari, Venice, archaeologist); Liliane Mann (M.A. Student, University of Leiden, archaeologist); Alessandro Roccati (Professor Emeritus, field assistant); Alice Salvador (draughtswoman, photographer), Salvatore Taurino (S.I.S.B.A student, Universities of Trieste-Udine-Venice, archaeologist). Mr. Mohammad el-Tom represented the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (N.C.A.M.). During the excavations, a crew of about twelve workmen from the towns of Karima and Barkal was employed.

The season was supported by the funds of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and by the University Ca' Foscari, Venice. Fundamental for the results of the season was the financial aid granted in Sudan by the Qatar-Sudan Archaeological Project (QSAP), which fosters the work of the Italian Mission in a four year program (project n. QSAP.A.34). To all these Institutions, the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan would express his deepest gratitude.

The season 2014-2015

Thanks to the long period, the Mission could manage his activities in order to optimize all the planned tasks. Thus, beside the archaeological investigations on the field, a preliminary and important work of inventory and documentation of the stored archaeological materials was undertaken; this activity kept the team busy for about four weeks. The result of it was an impressive collection of data from old excavations, with an update of the methodology in the recording, which ensure a wide range of information. Among the other results, we have here to mention the database of the pottery, and the new and complete inventory of the fragmentary glazed tiles, which still offer many elements for the reconstruction of the decorative program of the main palace B1500.

As soon as the work on field was possible, the team started the investigations in a new sector of the Meroitic district of Napata. Such a choice was due to several factors: the difficulty in the opening of a regular excavation with a crew of workers, and the short time available¹. Thus, the digging moved

¹ In the original plan, the excavations were to start in the middle of November, with a complete crew of workers. Some organizing problems did not allow us to respect this program, and the digging started about a week late, and without workers up to the 23rd November. All these factors contributed to modify the digging plan, which aimed to investigate

to a new area, just at the feet of the Jebel Barkal, where some architectural remains (column drums, sandstone basements), still visible on the ground surface, let us hypothesize the existence of a monumental structure.

The work on the archaeological materials from the previous seasons

As reminded in the previous report,² the materials from the Italian diggings, stored in two different structures of the archaeological site,³ had been the object of a preliminary work of recording in order to test a system, which could ensure the maximum information from those materials, whose archaeological contexts were often lost. Sometimes, this lack is also due to some accidents that hit the Mission, such as the destruction of the Italian house during an extraordinary Nile flood in 1988, and the looting of the store in 1996. This program has fully started during the present season 2014, recording at first the stored materials from the oldest seasons; in order to create a coherent database, all the objects have been classified according to the main classes of pottery and finds, giving them a progressive inventory number, preceded (when possible) by the indication of the archaeological context. Due to specificity of these materials, the first inventory number of this large group of pottery fragments starts by n.20.001. At the same time, an inventory of the finds from the same excavations has been undertaken. Such an inventory will offer a complete collection of the archaeological materials from the Italian investigations in the Meroitic district of Napata, letting us connect the current investigations and the result of the previous season. In a general perspective, the pottery fragments offer a coherent view of the Meroitic typologies of Meroitic Napata. The most ordinary pottery (big jars, dishes) is mixed with the finest production, with a painted decoration (geometrical, vegetal, animal), clear evidence of the precious furniture of the palace. The complex decorative program of the glazed tiles testified the same richness: for instance, Dionysian motifs, such as a royal person with grapes, or protective symbols, such as the Egyptian s3-sign (𓆎), used in some round tiles (fig.1); the documentation of this material also collected several samples of undecorated tiles, probably from the floor of some rooms of the palace.⁴ In this recording program, the Mission also planned a specific work on the pottery from the palace B 2400, almost completely excavated during the previous seasons.⁵

the south-western side of the Palace of Natakamani. Because of the depth of the architectural remains of the palatial structure and the limited time, this digging will start in the next season.

² The Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan, *The palace of Natakamani at Napata (B1500). Report for the season 2013*.

³ The main part of the archaeological materials from the older excavations are stored in the Museum of Karima, while others – mainly from the most recent seasons – are stored in a structure near the site, entrusted by the N.C.A.M. to the Italian Mission.

⁴ Similar tiles were already discovered during the excavations of the Meroitic temple B1400.

⁵ The digging of the palace still lacks some part of the corners.



Fig.1 – Fragment of a glazed tiles, reproducing a *s3*-sign.

The excavations

The second part of the stay was devoted to the activity on the field. As already mentioned, some changes on the work plan needed to modify the whole program of the digging. Due to the delay in the start of the excavations, the digging in the south side of the palace B1500 was postponed to the next seasons; thus, what was planned as secondary investigations, i.e. the survey in the area around the palace, became the main goal of the season (fig.2). The team unearthed a structure, whose evidences were clear on the surface, while a survey was planned in the last part of the season in order to collect some data for the work of the next season. As in the previous years, the work of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan also comprises restorations in some buildings already investigated.

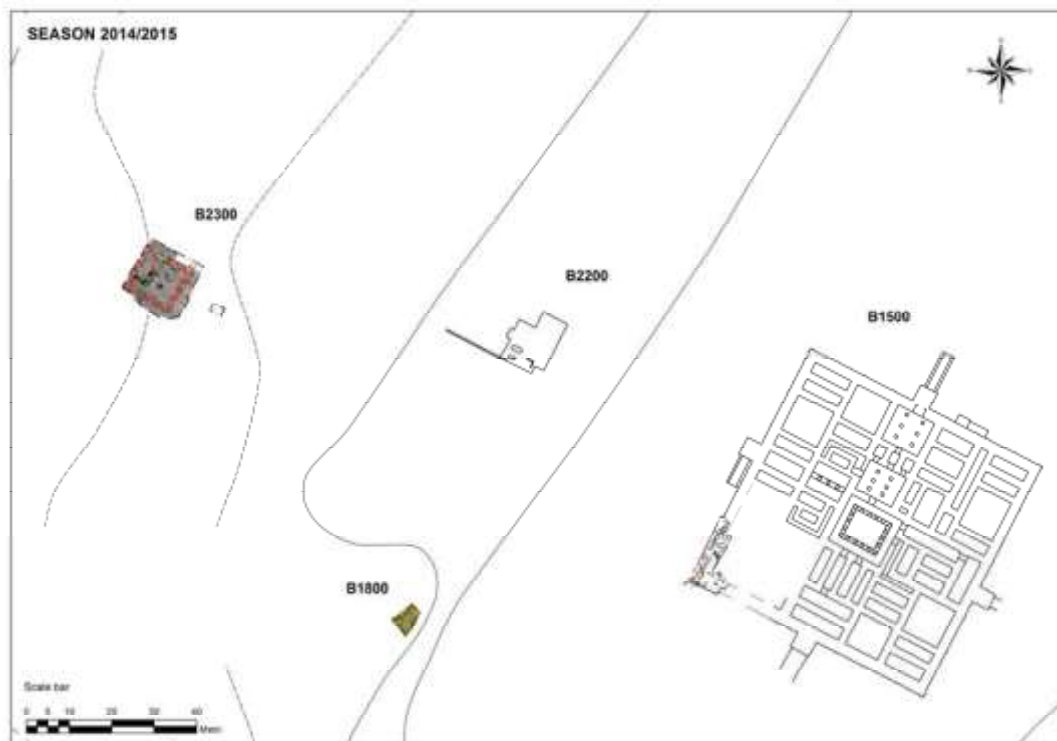


Fig.2 – The area of the excavations of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan – Season 2014-2015, with the highlighted buildings B2300 and B1800.

The activities of the Mission also convey the collection of the topographical data of the area of the Italian diggings; thus, this year the plan of the Meroitic temple excavated by S. Donadoni in the Seventies of the last century (B1400) was put in the general map of the archaeological site.

A Meroitic kiosk in the royal district of Napata: the building B2300

At the very beginning of the excavations, a surface survey confirmed the preliminary analysis of the previous year: in the area at the very feet of the Jebel (about 40 m.), some architectural elements let us suppose the presence of a small edifice, whose remains were still preserved in a restricted area (fig.3). The excavations started in the area of a couple of sandstone column bases (aligned approximately south-north), visible on the surface; at the end of the season, the size of the digging was approximately 14 x 13 m.

Just after few centimeters of sand, between the visible basements, part of a well preserved foundation mud brick wall was discovered (fig.4). Unfortunately, the broadening of the digging evidenced the quite complete removal of the mud bricks, which leave on the ground only the holes of their original position.⁵ The most characterizing topic of the structure is the wide presence of column drums, which quite totally fill the area. Despite this use of stone elements, the preserved mud brick foundations seem to be too weak for a heavy structure; probably, its roof was made of wood, as known in some samples of the I millennium Nilotic architecture.



Fig.3



Fig.4

Fig.3 – The survey on the area of the building B2300.

Fig.4 – B2300: the square column basements and the mud brick foundations.

The plan of the edifice – The severe destruction of the building, and above all the removal of its foundations, poses several problems for the reconstruction of its original plan. Despite this difficult situation, the few traces let us identify a probable double row of foundations: the inner wall corresponds to a central structure – probably a kiosk – and the outer seems outline the perimeter of the edifice. According to this hypothetical reconstruction, we deal with a rectangular building: its EW wall is 10,5 m. long, while the length of the N-S wall is still not determinable (fig.5).

As far as we know, the inner kiosk was a small edifice, with columns (three or four in the long side), erected over square basements. Around this central kiosk, another foundation wall is still recognizable thanks to its few remains. What we totally lack is the evidences of any entrance (i.e., architraves or stone threshold), which could confirm any architectural reconstruction. The mud brick wall identified

⁵ Such a situation is very common in the Meroitic structure of Napata.

at W of the southern basement in the inner foundations could be a threshold of the corridor, which surrounded the kiosk in the western side (fig.6). The current information does not allow us to reconstruct the extent of the building, which needs a careful investigation in the next season. A starting point for the incoming diggings would be the central part of the kiosk: here, during the last days of the season, few remains of a mud brick wall were identified in the central part of the building, under a massive layer of bread moulds (fig.7). What are these could actually be difficult to say now, but they fit in with the architectural core of the inner building.



Fig.5 – Preliminary plan of B2300, according to the data of the season 2014-2015.



Fig.6



Fig.7

Fig.6 – The probable threshold in the wall E-W, west of the main column basement. Fig.7
– Remains of mud brick foundations under the layer of bread moulds.

The architecture of the edifice – What is surely striking of the data collected during the current season is the fine architectural style of the edifice, which fits in very well with the general trend of the period of Natakamani. What we can here present is only a preliminary collection of observations made during the digging; they absolutely need to be confirmed by a deep analysis of the data, but may also offer a first attempt in the stylistic analysis of the monument.

The concentration of many column drums in the site is the main evidence of the structure of the building; at the same time, these elements of the Meroitic architecture offer a rich information about the style of the edifice. Indeed, despite the destruction, several elements of this architecture still survive, offering a range of the stylistic solutions created by the Meroitic architects. A first formal aspect of this architecture is the large use of white plaster, which originally covered the columns and the red brick screen walls.⁶ This colour seems to be the chromatic marker of the Natakamani's architecture: white is the colour of the palace façade, and probably its use could have an ideological nuance, which may recall a heraldic marker of the kingship.⁷

The most interesting stylistic feature of the building is its eclectic mix of elements, which expresses the original nature of the Meroitic architecture in Napata. The digging identified at least four different types of capitals, which reflect a wide range of architectural language: we find a traditional campaniform capital, well known in other Meroitic edifices of Napata (fig.8), together with a composite model, which knows up to now no other samples in the city (fig.9).⁸ Another original creation of the Meroitic architects is the capital, which repeats some themes of the northern tradition with vegetal subjects (lotus flowers and probably palm leaves) (fig.10). Last, but not least, is the well preserved capital with an original Meroitic interpretation of the Corinthian style (fig.11); the features of this piece remind the architecture of other edifices of the royal district of Meroitic Napata (see for instance the pavilion identified as B3200).



⁶ A red brick, with a plastered cover on two sides, was found in a sporadic context. This plaster cover may recall the few plastered elements of the balustrade over the podium west of the palace of Natakamani, dug in the season 2012.

⁷ According to the interpretation of the local religious tradition, the pinnacle of Jebel Barkal is the personification of a solar cobra dressing the White Crown; see the scene of Ramesses II offering to Amon of Napata in the Great Temple of Abu Simbel.

⁸ The presence of this type of capital is very interesting, because it confirms the contacts and the original elaboration of some northern patterns in the frame of the Meroitic culture.

Fig.8

Fig.9

Fig.8 – A campaniform capital from B2300.

Fig.9 – The composite capital from B2300.



Fig.10



Fig.11

Fig.10 – Fragment of capital with vegetal elements (lotus flowers, palm leaves). Fig.11 – Part of a “Corinthian” capital.

An original interpretation of the northern architectural traditions is also testified by some cornices, whose actual location is not yet clear (fig.12); these elements repeat a denticulated moulding motif, which is another characterizing pattern in the architecture of Napata, already in an early Meroitic phase.⁹ During the excavations, some other parts of the decorative elements of the building were unearthed; among them, we can mention the fragment of sandstone, with a fine lotus flowers decoration (fig.13): it fits well in with the Meroitic architectural tradition, which often repeats vegetal motifs in an original interpretation.



Fig.12



Fig.13

Fig.12 – Fragment of a cornice with a denticulated moulding.

⁹ See for instance the same decorative motif found in the palace B2400 (pre-Natakamani period).

Fig.13 – Architectural fragment with a lotus flowers decoration.

Other activities on field

The focus on the building B2300 allowed us to start a survey in the area where other architectural remains were visible on the surface (B1800). Here, a preliminary work of cleaning identified some parts of a columned building, characterized by an impressive size of the drums (fig.14).¹⁰ It is hard to reconstruct any plan of the edifice,¹¹ but its monumental character, and its location in the dromos connecting the palace of Natakamani and the Amon temple might offer some suggestions for its function in the construction of the ceremonial space of Napata. A preliminary observation on the archaeological area of the building is the impressive presence of mud, which was identified in a deep sounding: a compact layer about 30 cm. thick, which clearly testifies the high level of some Nile inundation (fig.15).



Fig.14



Fig.15

Fig.14 – The survey in B1800.

Fig.15 – The mud layer in B1800, with the impression of a column drum.

As mentioned before, the season field also planned a general mapping of the Meroitic sector of the city, which is (or was) part of the Italian Excavations License. This year the mapping comprised the first monuments dug in the Seventies, i.e. the two Meroitic temples on the edge of the cultivated palm trees.¹² The mapping of these buildings was important not only for the outlining of the site, but also for checking the current situation of the two temples. They are now at the border of the fields, in an area where is evident the growing of the farmers' activities. The few remains of the buildings – or better, of only one building, due to the almost complete disappearance of the mud brick temple B1300 on the surface of the area – are now comprised in the general map of the site, and testify the wide building program planned by Natakamani in Napata.

Thanks to this general program on the site, some restorations were undertaken in the palace of Natakamani; this work on the architectural structure is part of the regular activity of the Mission in

¹⁰ The diameter of the drums reaches in some cases about 70 cm.

¹¹ During the cleaning of a small area of the building (about 3 m. x 4 m.), in the south side of the survey, few remains of a probable mud brick foundation wall were identified.

¹² The two buildings are identified as B1300 (mud brick temple) and B1400 (sandstone temple); the first opens to the east, while the latter opens to the south, i.e. probably towards the processional way of the main Amon temple.

the site. Thanks to a year-by-year check of the edifices, in order to leave on the ground the profile of the excavated structures, we can now recognize the quite complete perimeter of the palace B1500, which marks with its impressive platform all the area of Meroitic Napata. Such a restoration is also the result of a regular planning of the activities on field, in order to tie together in a single net the new digging, and the preservation of what has been already investigated (fig.16).



Fig.16 – Part of the restorations undertaken in the peripheral wall of the Natakamani's palace (B1500).

During the last days of the season, a survey was undertaken in the area east of the main field; here, a massive stone was visible on the surface, and its proximity to the building B2300 let the team suppose a probable connection with it. The cleaning of the area unearthed part of an hydraulic pipe hewn in two sandstone blocks, perfectly covered with an hard plaster (fig.17).¹³ Such a pipe is probably part of a hydraulic system, which was hypothesized since the excavations in the Edifice of the Basins (B2200); its presence could confirm the role of the water in some part of the royal district planned by Natakamani, which became the screenplay for specific performances connected with the new water of the flood and the kingship.



Fig.17 – The two fragments of the hydraulic pipe unearthed E of B2300.

¹³ The bigger pipe is a long block, put up-side-down on a sand layer, while the small one lay over its eastern end.

¹⁵ The object was discovered in the south-eastern sector of the digging.

The finds

Despite the short length of the full excavations, the results of the archaeological material are extraordinary: surely, the architectural elements are the most impressive typology of finds dug during the season, but we can also mention other items, which were part of the ancient equipment. One of the most characterizing objects is a sandstone base, whose style repeats some patterns already recognized in the denticulated moulding cornices (fig.18). Its original location in B2300 is not clear,¹⁵ but we might suppose that it decorated the area near the main entrance of the building.



Fig.18 – The sandstone base with a denticulated moulding.

Among the small finds, we mention here a fragmentary clay plaque with some drawings, and a scarab whose decoration fits in with ramesside and Napatan models (fig.19.a-b). Near the hydraulic pipe, a small glass fragment was found; it is partially covered with yellow, and over the painting few remains of Meroitic cursive signs are still recognizable (probably ... ye ...) (fig.20).



Fig.19a



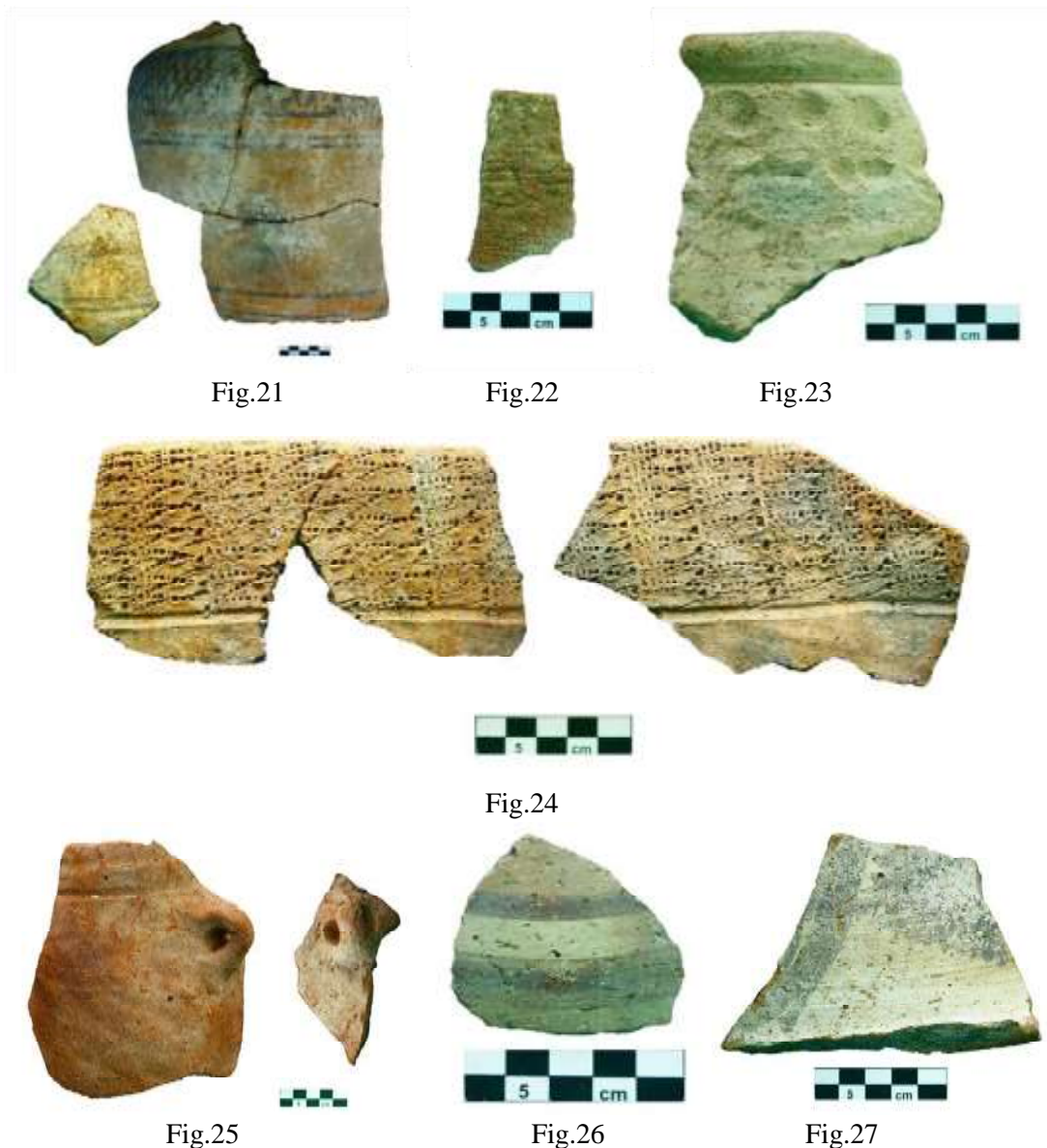
Fig.19b



Fig.20

Fig.19-20 – Some finds from the excavations: a scarab (fig.19.a-b) and a decorated glass fragment (fig.20).

In the area of the edifice, some potsherds were found; despite a low number of samples, the typology fits in well with the traditional Meroitic production; we mention some handmade sherds with an impressed decoration, some painted samples which fit in with the Meroitic tradition, and other fragments with handles (figg.21-). Thanks to these data, and the strong connections in the architectural patterns, the dating of the building B2300 to the reign of Natakamani seems to be highly probable.



Figg.21-27 – Some pottery samples from the excavations in B2300: painted decoration (figg.21, 26, 27), handmade (figg.22, 23, 24, 25).

Planned activities for the future: facilities for the visitors and reconstructions

This part of the work could be a first, fundamental step in the elaboration of a wider program for the facilities to the visitors. The presence of a complex archaeological site, composed by three main sectors of different periods (the temples of the Pure Mountain, the royal Meroitic district, and the monumental necropolis), can be a model for the growing of the Sudanese tourism.¹⁴ In this frame, the Italian Archaeological Mission planned to connect the work in the field with the exhibition of the

¹⁴ We have to note a major affluence of tourists in the site of Jebel Barkal, also due to the presence of a resort just close to the archaeological site.

most important materials in the Museum of Karima;¹⁵ such a structure is fundamental for our work, granting a safe room for the storing of the most precious objects unearthed in the site. For a long time the archaeological materials have been stored there; in the last years, some more architectural elements have been stored in a room annexed to the Museum exhibition (fig.28).¹⁶



Fig.28 – The store in the Museum with some architectural elements from the Italian Excavations.

The current situation of the excavations, and the means granted by the Qatar funds, may also enhance the facilities for the visitors, and a more rational planning of the exhibition in the Museum. In the frame of the next season activities, the Italian Mission would plan with a restorer a possible reconstruction of some architectural elements of the Meroitic buildings in Napata, displayed in the Museum.¹⁷ Such a new presentation of the materials has two aims: an easier reading and comprehension by the visitors of the Meroitic architecture, and the protection of the finest pieces dug in the royal district. What we would like to stress is the strong connection between the archaeological site and the Museum, which could become a support for the site visitors.

Other activities of the Mission and contacts.

In the site of the ancient Napata, several Missions work in the different archaeological areas. The excavations become also an interesting meeting point for the research undertaken in the same site, but under different perspectives. During the season 2014, the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan had several talks with Timothy Kendall, Director of the Mission in the Amon Temple of Napata, and Irene Vincentelli, director of the Mission in Sanam; a new contact was kept with the mission of the Central Restoration Institute of Rome (I.C.R.) that is working in agreement with the N.C.A.M. in the temple of Mut.

An interesting contact was kept with the Polish Mission working in Ghazali, directed by Artur Obluski, who guided the members of the Italian Mission in a visit to the site. This visit was also part of a didactic program for the three students who worked with the Italian Mission, and who could visit other important sites of the region (Nuri, el-Kurru).

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¹⁵ In the display of the Museum are collected some of the most representative materials from the Italian excavations: the lions from the northern entrance of the palace of Natakamani, the stela with the Meroitic cursive inscription, mentioning Amanitore and probably also Natakamani, and several glaze tiles from the façade decoration.

¹⁶ See the report of the season 2012.

¹⁷ A first attempt for the reconstruction could be part of the columns excavated in B2300, or the denticulated moulding cornices from the same edifice.

The positive results of the season depend on the skill of the team in the planning of the activities on the field and on the materials. These results were also ensured by the Institutions, that believed in the scientific program of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan; we are very grateful to the Sudanese Authorities for their reception, and a special thank is due to the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums and its representative with the Mission, Mr Mohammad al-Tom. We would like to express here all our deep gratitude to the Authorities of the Sudan-Qatar Archaeological Project for the support granted during the stay in Sudan, and we really hope that the final results of the investigations could testify the care of the team in the field and in the research connected with the digging. A special thank is due to Dr. Salaheldin Ahmed Mohammed for the constant aid and support during the work. We would like to thank here the Italian supporters of the activities in Sudan: the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the University Ca' Foscari of Venice. We are especially grateful to the Italian Ambassador in Khartoum, Dr. Armando Barucco, for his constant, encouraging reception and help in the management of the Mission and in the arrival of technical supplies in Sudan.

Khartoum, December 2014

The Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan