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SNAKES ON THE NILE.
ICONOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL
MOTIFS IN EGYPT, NUBIA, AND
HELLENISTIC WORLD

Abstract: *Analysing the snake as iconographical motif in the Meroitic Kingdom, the study outlines its use as expression of some peculiar patterns (water, New Year, kingship). The examples here collected confirm this meaning, focusing the data from Napata, where an Archaeological Mission is carrying out the digging of the great Natakamani's Palace (probably 1st century BC), as well as some other buildings of the same royal sector. Several architectural and decorative evidences (above all painted pottery) show the use of the snake-motif in the Meroitic culture, and its elaboration in the context of the Meroitic Napata; all the elements of this cultural language are the original elaboration of many inputs from the Pharaonic Egypt, as well as from the Hellenistic world. At the site of Jebel Barkal/Napata the motif of serpent relatively often appears on Meroitic vessels. Its imaginings refer to the idea of rebirth. Very interesting is the depiction of a serpent combined with grapevine. The motifs appearing on pottery show strong religious syncretism referring not only to Pharaonic and Hellenistic culture, but also to the local tradition.*

Keywords: *Meroitic Kingdom; Jebel Barkal/Napata; snake; iconography; Meroitic pottery*

Some observation on the snake-motif in Meroitic Napata

The examples of this iconographical motif in the Meroitic Kingdom is a good example for the reconstruction of the evolution and diffusion of cultural patterns. Since the 4th millennium BC the snake is part of the Pharaonic construction of the world, representing at the same time an enemy and a guardian (Leitz 1991; Ciampini 2008). In the snake we recognize the manifestation of several divine entities; royal and creative powers, as well as local protective gods, appear in this aspect. The diffusion of the iconography of the snake in the 1st millennium BC, as shown by the Meroitic pottery from Napata (see below), is part of a wider phenomenon. In these pages, we would like to expose some reflections concerning some topics connected with it, showing its diffusion in the cultures of the Nile's regions.

A first evidence of the snake-motif in the Meroitic iconography is the connection with some conceptions concerning the water and the New Year. As pointed out in the first part of this study, the presence of snake, water and frog in the same iconographical context is common; the nature of all these motifs clearly confirms a cultural background, ruled by the cycle of the Nile and the passage of the year (Leclant 1978). The pharaonic concept of the spring of the flood and, above all, its royal character played a fundamental role also in the Napatan and Meroitic ideology. During the Natakamani's reign (1st century AD), the concept probably ruled the architectural solution of the couple of sandstone basins in the building B2200 (Pl. 1). In this edifice, some kind of royal ritual connected with the New Year and the flood was performed; but the most interesting element in the structure of the edifice is the winding corridor which seems to represent the course of the Nile, conceived as the coil of a snake (see the title 'the Winding One', given to the Nile). The water used during the royal ritual, probably similar to the well-known 'Baptism of the Pharaoh' (Gardiner 1950), was still the doctrinal core for the late Meroitic ceremonies in Napata. In the couple of sandstone basins the water, used for washing the king, was identified with the renewing power, spreading in the world as Nile's flood. This new water running to the North in the winding corridor of the building B2200 was the living and dynamic element sprung from the basins; the winding movement of the water in the building was probably represented as a snake coil, and the presence of this iconographical motif in the pottery from the same building could not be a simple coincidence.

A similar ideological interpretation of the snake motif is part of a wider cultural context, well-known also in the Late Period Egypt. Several elements confirm the connection of the Nile course with some iconographic motifs; one of the most interesting model for our approach to the Meroitic tradition in Napata has been recently identified in a couple of astral snakes, that should represent the renewing power of the Nile (Kákosy 1981; Pécoil 1993). The two basins in B2200 might represent the spring of the flood, recalling the Two Caverns ruled by Khnum, patron of the Nile inundation. The new water of the basins runs to north in the winding corridor, an architectural structure whose model was probably the landscape at north of Napata. In this structural solution (the room with the couple of basins, the corridor, and the open court at the end of the winding course) we could probably recognize an ideal representation of the Land of the Nile. The dynamic connection between the spring and the end of the course is given by the same winding passage, whose shape reminds the coil of the snake. The core of this complex ideological system is to be identified with the live-giving power of the new water (Ciampini and Bąkowska, forthcoming). The connection of the doctrine with Napata is a striking element in the Napatan and Meroitic ideology; since the 25th Dynasty, the city was celebrated as the screenplay for the coronation and the confirmation ceremonies, usually performed during the Festival of the New Year.

This last observation introduce us in a fundamental topic in the analysis of the role played by Napata in the royal ceremonies, and their relation with the snake-motif. Since the first written evidence (Stela of Thutmosis III from Jebel Barkal: Helck 1955-1956, 1227-1245), the Pure Mountain of Napata was celebrated as a divine seat and as a shrine of the kingship. In the 1st millennium its role in the royal imagery grew a lot, making the same mountain a chapel for the solar crown (Stela of Nastasen: Eide *et al.* 1996, 471-501). Such interpretation of the landscape was founded on the presence of a natural element of the mountain, the pinnacle, which was identified with several divine manifestation as snake. Timothy Kendall¹ has clearly outlined the Napatan tradition of the Pure Mountain as royal shrine. In the Nubian tradition, the royal cup with the *uraeus* was identified with the sacred landscape of Napata, giving the king the same power of the solar deity.

The royal snake (the *uraeus* of the Pharaonic tradition) embodies the divine character of the kingship. It represents the furious power of the Eye of the Sun that acts now in order to protect the king, destroying

¹ Retrived from www.jebelbarkal.org (status as of Sept. 10th, 2013).

his enemies. In the pinnacle of the Pure Mountain, the Egyptians saw the manifestation of this divine and destructive power, as shown by a famous scene from the Great Temple of Abu Simbel, where Ramesses II offers to his father Amon-Re dwelling in the shrine of Napata, protected by the *uraeus* with the White Crown. Such doctrinal element could have played a role in the Napatan royal confirmation ritual; this interpretation seems to be confirmed by the building B1200, a Napatan royal palace, whose audience hall was decorated with several representation of a female-headed solar *uraeus*, probably a meaningful representation of the renewing royal power at the New Year (Kendall 2008, 122).

The pinnacle of the Pure Mountain has soon been identified with a solar *uraeus* that is a fiery manifestation of the crown. During the 1st millennium, another element joins the nature of the Napatan landscape, giving to the pinnacle a more precise nature. In the temple of Mut at Napata (B300), the king Taharqa (25th Dynasty) is represented offering two bowls to the ram-headed Amon of Napata and Mut; the divine couple sits inside the Mountain, while a *uraeus* with a White Crown is raising in front of the king (Robisek 1989). Here, the *uraeus* can have a more precise nature, connected with the creator god of Napata, the god Amon in his form of *Kamutef*, literally ‘The Bull of His Mother’. Known in the Theban doctrine as a form of the self-created primeval god, he was hosted in the southern rooms of the Luxor Temple at Thebes. In this form, he was adored in Napata as the primeval form of Amon inside the mountain: a graffito, from a cave in the Jebel Barkal, clearly represents him twice: as ram-headed god inside the mountain, and as re-elaboration of the pinnacle in the shape of a ram-headed cobra in the attitude of the creator *Kamutef* (raising arm and *flagellum*). Such form of the Napatan creator is confirmed by a famous statue from the Luxor *cachette*, dated to the reign of the same Taharqa: the divine snake, whose head is unfortunately missing, is clearly identified by the inscription on the base as ‘Amon-Re, lord of the Throne(s) of the Two Lands’ and ‘*Kamutef*’ (El-Saghir 1996, 52-54; note that also the Meroitic god Apedemak is represented as a lion-headed snake: Žabkar 1975, 36-44).

The manifestation of the creator god as a snake seems to be very common in the Late Period Egypt. We know since the New Kingdom a tradition concerning the snake-motif of the creator god, described in an apocalyptic text (*Book of the Dead*, ch. 175: Hornung 1990, 365-371). In the late doctrines, above all in the cosmogonical treatises, we find several evidences for the presence of primeval snakes as manifestation of the same creator,

or of some deities whose role is restricted to the first steps of the creation. We deal, for instance, with the doctrine of the primeval gods, buried in the sacred necropolis of Edfu (Alliot 1949-1954, vol. 2, 503-527): they are a kind of physical memory of the creation, buried and revered as divine relics. Among the several primeval snakes of the Late Egyptian doctrine, we can here mention also *Irta* ('The One who created the earth') and *Kematef* ('The One who completed his temporal cycle'), two manifestations of Amon as creator, connected with the space and the time. They are not primeval gods, but rather primeval forms of the same Amon, clearly identified only after their death, and buried in the divine necropolis of Djeme (Medinet Habu, Thebes, West bank).

The creator god at Napata seems to have another element as fundament of the doctrine. Kendall² noted that the presence of the divine couple inside the mountain (ram-headed Amon and Mut) can represent an androgyne nature of the primeval deity: the mysterious patron of the kingship and the flood, identified as Amon of Napata, was at the origin a bi-sexual being. His double nature is the spring of current bi-sexual world, born in a process from the undifferentiated being to the multiplicity. Such original doctrine seems to remind another tradition, known in Esna and elaborated in some inscriptions of Roman period (see e.g. Sauneron 1962, 206; 252; 331). According to this texts, the creator is a mixed being (male and female), and his manifestations during the creation are the result of a differentiation, from which the goddess Neith appeared. Her very first manifestations are snakes, called *Irta*, *Tenen* and *Qerhet*; they represent the first stages of the creative act, connecting with the primeval earth and the female creative power. The full manifestation of the creator is represented by the light, while his inner nature is called Neith, mother of the sun god and actual primeval goddess, who appeared at the origin as snakes.

We have dealt in these notes with some examples of the snake as cultural medium in the Late Period cultures from the Nile's regions; the few data here collected confirm the widespread diffusion of some themes in Egypt, Nubia, and the Hellenistic world.

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² Retrived from www.jebelbarkal.org (status as of Sept. 10th, 2013).

Images of a snake on ceramics from Jebel Barkal

The research carried out by the Italian Archaeological Mission at the site of Jebel Barkal/Napata provides a wealth of information on the development of architecture, art and religion in the Meroitic period (Roccati 2008, 249-261; Ciampini 2011, 183-189). At that time, Hellenistic influences were reaching the area of the Meroitic Kingdom through Egypt. They are easily noticeable not only in architecture and decoration, especially of the palace of Natakamani (Roccati 2004, 384-388; Sist 1999, 113-116), but also in ornamented pottery (Bąkowska, forthcoming).

The ceramic material gained from the research carried out in recent years at the sites of the palace of Natakamani and the palace marked as B2400, and also in the building B2200 shows references to both local tradition and Pharaonic art, but above all to the Hellenistic culture. The images on the pottery reflect the cultural and religious syncretism prevailing in the Meroitic Kingdom.

Among the decorated vessels painted ones dominate. Motifs referring to rebirth are frequent, including an *ankh* sign, a depiction of a frog, or images associated with the god Dionysos: grapevine and ivy leaves. This kind of decoration refers to hydriae vases known from Alexandria (Török 1994, 377-387), and belongs to the most popular motifs depicted on Meroitic vessels. On the pottery from Jebel Barkal grapevine is shown in a realistic, schematic or stylized way (Bąkowska 2010, 197, figs 60, 67, 69; Bąkowska, forthcoming). On storage vessels as well as on tableware, with many imported ones among them. The motif of grapevine often ornamented the shoulders of vessels. Sometimes only leaves or only bunch of grapes are visible, branches usually take on the form of a sinusoidal wave, sometimes very thin, another time they represent a thick branch (Pl. 2: 1). There is a very interesting depiction on pieces of a vessel found at the site of the palace of Natakamani (Bąkowska-Czerner, forthcoming) (Pl. 2: 5). A winding branch of grapevine resembles a twisted body of a serpent, from which leaves are growing. The branch – the body of the reptile – is filled with intersecting black lines against red background. The ornament on the handles resembles a head of a cobra. There is another representation of this kind on Meroitic pottery. In his paper, László Török (1987, 80; see also Williams 1991, 42-43) points out to an unpublished vessel from Semna South depicting a serpent with a vine in its body. Also at the site of Jebel Barkal the motif of serpent relatively often appears on Meroitic vessels, unfortunately only on small pieces of pottery (Pl. 2: 2-3).

For example, it decorated the backside of a small plate. Strongly twisted, the body of the reptile is also visible on the handle (Pl. 2: 4). Depictions of a serpent are deeply connected with religion. Great gods of Egypt appeared in the form of it. With polymorphic nature as a distinctive feature, it was a chthonic animal, an embodiment of good as well as evil forces. A serpent is a symbol of life-creation powers and survival after death (Elhassan 2004, 17-18). On vessels from the Meroitic period, the twisting body of the reptile was depicted on the shoulders and surrounded the neck (Woolley and Maciver 1910, fig. 22: 4). Images of cobra also appear, sometimes with wings, often with the sun's disc on its head (Pellicer and Catalan 1963, 87, fig. 8: 4). On one of the vessels, there is a depiction of a cobra with a human hand holding a branch (Griffith 1925, pl. XLVI). A cobra is also sometimes portrayed with an *ankh*, sign of life in its mouth (Wildung 1996, 349, Nr 410). Sometimes ankh signs grow out of the serpent's body (Williams 1991, pl. 33c). This depiction is thematically closest to the image on the vessel from Jebel Barkal. A serpent symbolizing chthonic powers, death, and grapevine: life and rebirth, joined together. A serpent can be associated with representations of Egyptian gods, but also with the local god creator Apedemak. A well-known depiction from a pylon of the temple in Naga should be mentioned here, where the god's body in the form of a primordial serpent with a head of a lion grows out of a bunch of acanthus. Found during archaeological research in 2010, a small stone representation of Apedemak also in the form of a serpent with a lion's head can be another example (Ciampini 2010, fig. 8). On a vessel from Faras, there is a depiction of a lion's head with a snake-body (Wenig 1978, 292; Elhassan 2004, 25). A frontal lion-face decorated two vessels, pieces of which were discovered in Jebel Barkal at the site of the palace B2400. In Egypt, a lion was first of all connected with the god Re, with the rebirth of the Sun. In the Greco-Roman period, the god Sarapis was sometimes portrayed with his head surrounded by sunrays, and thus linked with Helios (Stambaugh 1972, 79-82). This god was often depicted as a serpent with a human head. He was also portrayed in the form of the serpent *Agathodaimon*, the patron of Alexandria (Pietrzykowski 1978, 959-966). The motif of Sarapis *Agathodaimon* can often be found on Alexandrian coins of Trajan, Hadrian or Antoninus Pius among others (Martini 1991-1992, 883, 890, 1036, 1323-1324; Skowronek 1998, 26, no. 31). Sarapis was associated with Osiris, the symbol of belief in afterlife, and also with the god of grapevine Dionysos (Dunand 1975, 152-185). Searching for analogies with the image on the vessel from Jebel Barkal, the iconography on magic gems made in the first centuries

after Christ can be referred to. On one of them, Osiris is lying on a boat, with a depiction of a scarab, equated with the rising sun, above him (Śliwa 1989, 62, no. 69). Sometimes above the reptile there is an image of a frog, a symbol of resurrection (Vollenweider 1984, 282-284, Nr 496), sometimes the frog it is winged above a creature with four paws, which represents the creator of the world, the primeval ocean (Delatte and Derchain 1964, 282, Nr 404). This scene refers to the papyrus of Henuttaui from the 21st Dynasty (Niwiński 1984, 97-100). The winged serpent is Atum, the personification of chaos. Between its wings there is the sun's disc with a scarab in the middle, the sun waking up.

Under the Hellenistic influence, new iconographic solutions emerge in the area of the Meroitic Kingdom, referring to the themes known from Pharaonic Egypt. These two traditions join together and complement each other splendidly. Elements borrowed from them are used in depictions showing Meroitic culture and religion. The decorated pottery from Jebel Barkal serves as a fine example of that.

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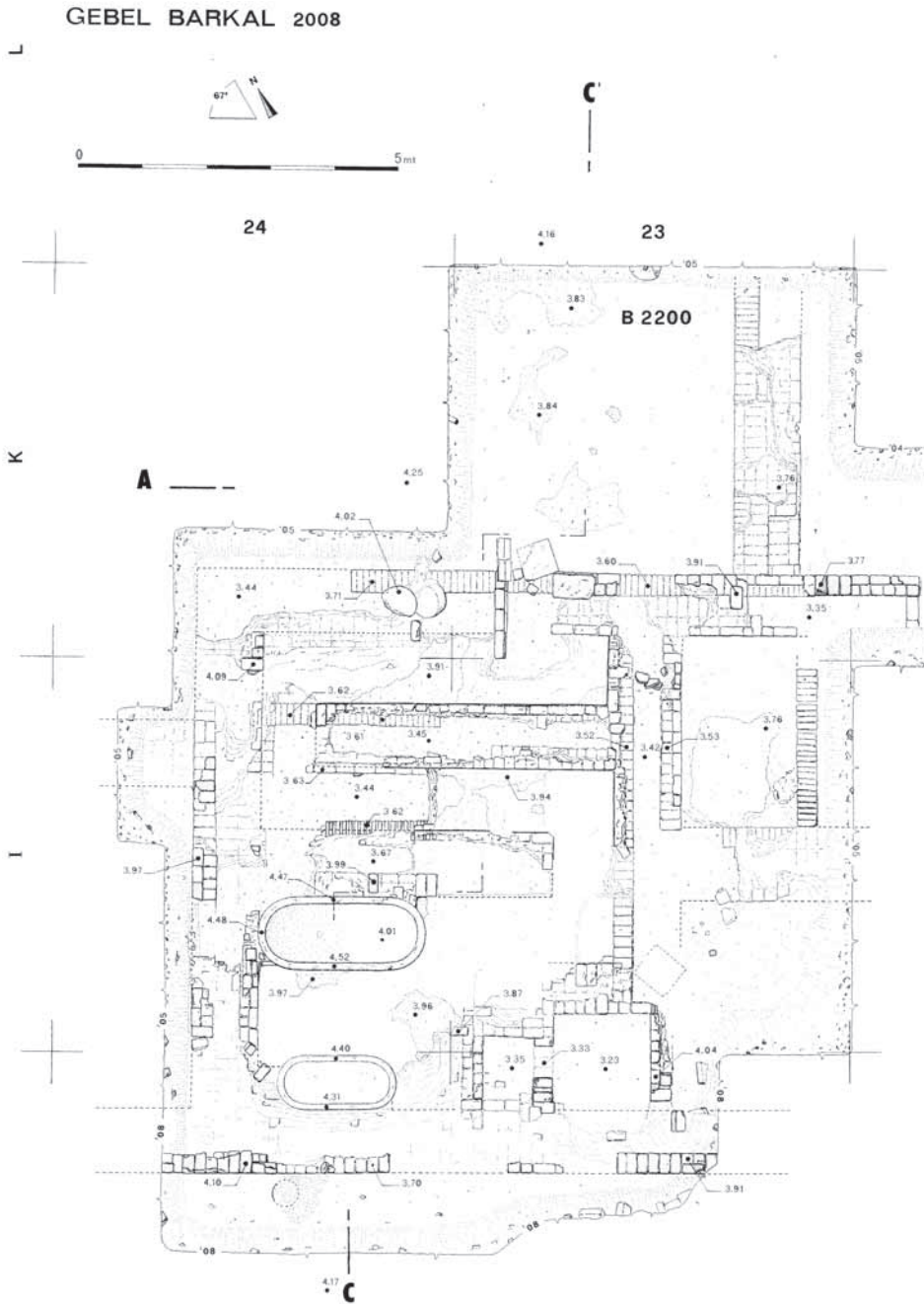
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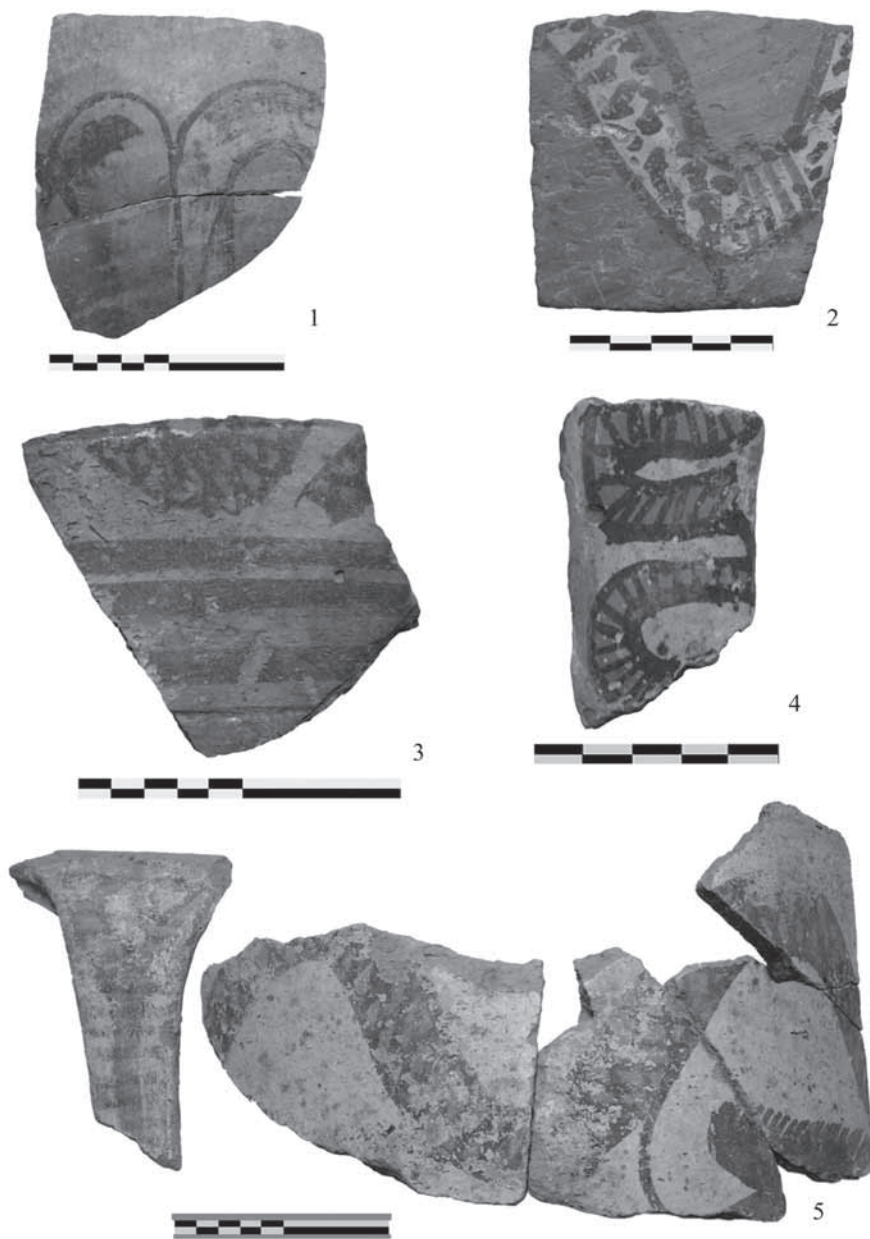
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Pl. 1. Plan of B2200 (Season 2008). Drawing by S. Barberini and C. Cataldi



Pl. 2. 1 – Fragment of a vessel with the image of a vine (B1500). Photo by G. Lovera
2 – Fragment of a vessel with the image of a serpent (B1500). Photo by G. Lovera
3 – Fragment of a vessel with the image of a serpent (B1500). Photo by G. Lovera
4 – Fragment of a vessel with the image of a serpent (B1500). Photo by G. Lovera
5 – Fragments of a vessel with the image of branch of grapevine resembling a body of a serpent (B1500). Photo by G. Lovera