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Three Ostraca from Jebel Barkal: Problems of Text and Context

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ABSTRACT: The Meroitic District of Jebel Barkal, which has been the focus of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan since 1973, has provided rich archaeological evidence dating to the Meroitic period, but not an equal amount of epigraphic evidence. The most famous of these is certainly the so-called Natakamani Stele, discovered and subsequently published between the 1980s and 1990s. Less attention, however, has been paid to minor Meroitic inscriptions from the site – which are more fragmentary and varied in nature – such as those found on pottery sherds. This co-authored paper will attempt to shed some light on three of these ostraca, unearthed during different excavation seasons at the same building, B2200, also known as the ‘Edifice of the Basins’.

KEYWORDS: Jebel Barkal – Meroitic culture – Meroitic writing – Meroitic ostraca

1 The ‘Context’ and ‘Final Remarks’ sections have been written by Francesca Iannarilli; the ‘Text’ section (‘Transcription’, ‘Palaeographic analysis’, ‘Commentary’) has been written by Gilda Ferrandino. Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable remarks on both the specific Meroitic signs and the overall quality of the paper, which led to significant improvements in the final version.

Context

The Meroitic District of Jebel Barkal, which has been the focus of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan since 1973, is an archaeological area located north-east of the sandstone mountain that lends its name to the UNESCO site near the city of Karima (Northern Sudan).²

This part of the site is best known for the presence of the Royal Palace B1500, ascribed to the reign of Natakamani and Amanitore (1st century CE). It also features plenty of other architectural and material evidence, some of which is connected to the Palace, whilst others date to earlier phases.

From this area come also several ostraca, found by the Italian Mission during various excavation campaigns; these ostraca feature slightly different surfaces and brief inscriptions (usually, but not only, in the Meroitic language) that vary from one to another.³ This paper intends to highlight three of them that were selected because they all come from Building B2200 and unquestionably bear Meroitic writing. Although fragmentary, they allow for a palaeographic analysis and the identification of some lexical elements, thus providing useful information.

This building, known as the Edifice of the Basins, is a structure with a perimeter of at least 13 m, which was partially excavated during the archaeological campaigns led by the University of Turin in 2004–2005 and 2008–2010.⁴ Later, the excavation was resumed and refined under Ca' Foscari University of Venice between 2018 and 2019.⁵

The name 'Edifice of the Basins' was given to it due to the presence of a fully plastered room containing two single-block sandstone basins, each equipped with a hole that drained the water from the basins towards a north-facing open courtyard via an S-shaped corridor.⁶

The resumption of excavations and their extension in recent years have further confirmed the use of a construction technique designed to ensure the structure's watertightness, based on the alternation of red bricks for the outer walls and mud bricks for the inner walls – a feature quite typical of Meroitic architecture and certainly common at Jebel Barkal⁷ – reinforced by nearly complete coverage with hydraulic plaster.

The artefacts discovered over time in this structure also make it worthy of attention, more so given that objects from B2200 display a particular craftsmanship potentially originating from specialised local workshops. This applies to small

2 More details on Jebel Barkal and on the Italian Mission in Ciampini and Iannarilli 2022.

3 For an overview of the ostraca from Jebel Barkal see Pancin 2022 with bibliography; although not all these finds have yet been fully analysed.

4 Ciampini 2015.

5 Ciampini et al. 2019.

6 Ciampini and Bąkowska-Czerner 2014, pp. 698–700.

7 Callegher 2022, pp. 64–66; Iannarilli, *forth.*

finds, to painted decorated pottery, as well as to stone elements such as the ornamental motifs of the architecture.⁸

In general, every structural and decorative element suggests that the building was used for ceremonies related to Meroitic royalty (we must not forget that Royal Palace B1500 is just a few metres away and possibly dates to the same construction phase). It cannot be excluded that the festival in question was that of the New Year, when flood water from the Nile certainly played a central role as a guarantor of abundance, both for the land and the monarchy.⁹

Based on what is known so far, this is an attempt to contextualise the three ostraca under investigation [Tab. 1]:

Tab. 1. Table listing the number of ostraca, the building, and the season of their discovery, as indicated on the labels accompanying the finds.

Ostrakon No.	Building of discovery	Season of discovery ¹⁰
B2200-1	B2100 – B2200	GB2005
B2200-2	B2200	GB2010
B2200-3	B2200	GB2018

The three could all have come from B2200, although for the first find, the ostrakon No. B2200-1, the information on the object card is rather vague, indicating that its origin is a broader area between B2100 (a kiosk excavated during the same years and located between the Royal Palace and B2200) and B2200 itself.

The 2005 excavation diary has been lost, likely during the relocation of documentary material that took place that year due to the mission's move from the University of Rome to the University of Turin, as briefly mentioned in Roccati's chronicle.¹¹ Consequently, it is not possible to contextualise ostrakon No. B2200-1, except through its object data sheet, which, however, was produced only ten years later, during the 2015 documentation campaign.¹² The record therefore includes only information that can be determined through a visual inspection, such as the type of ceramic – a fine clay-wheel-made fragment – and its measurements (5.86 × 6.29 × 0.98 cm).

The 2010 excavation diary mentions ostrakon No. B2200-2 only to note that whilst uncovering the area north of B2200, near the severely weathered remains

8 Iannarilli 2022, pp. 85–86; Iannarilli, *forth.*
9 Callegher 2022, p. 79.
10 Although the spelling 'Jebel Barkal' is now preferred, the abbreviation GB refers to 'Gebel Barkal' and is still based on the old nomenclature initially used by the Italian Mission for the labels attached to the finds.
11 Roccati 2022, pp. 11–26.
12 Under the management of Ca' Foscari, a comprehensive documentation campaign was launched covering the previous decades of excavation. Since 2014 a database for pottery and finds has been developed under the supervision of Alice Salvador and Francesca Iannarilli, respectively, and subsequently expanded by later members of the Mission the entry of data sheets for each artefact discovered.



Fig. 1. General Plan of the buildings B2200 + B4000 + B2100 at Jebel Barkal. (Graphic elaboration: Martino Gottardo).

of mud-brick walls, an ostrakon bearing two lines of Meroitic cursive text was recovered along with several fragments of painted pottery, a bread mould, and a bone fragment. Unfortunately, the information does not allow us to provide further details about the context or the subject.

The case of the ostrakon No. B2200-3 is different; the 2018 excavation, conducted stratigraphically, revealed a sandy layer (SU 3008) and a layer of crushed pebbles (SU 3005) that served as a foundation beneath Wall 1 – likely the perimeter wall on the east side of the building.

Furthermore, an older building was gradually brought to light as excavations continued eastward: this is what we now call B4000, characterised by imposing walls but built entirely of mud-brick [Fig. 1].

The area was dated by C14 to between the 4th and 2nd centuries BCE, thus at least two centuries before Palace B1500 and presumably before the contemporary B2200 itself. Ostrakon No. B2200-3 was found between Wall 1 (the eastern peripheral wall of B2200) and Wall 3 (belonging to the older B4000). The stratigraphic

layer corresponds to what appears to be a cobblestone pavement upon which Wall 1 is built and, consequently, the foundation of Building B2200.¹³

Consequently, one might assume that the ostrakon dates from the same period as B2200 (not B4000) and, therefore, from the Meroitic ceremonial area attributed to Natakamani (1st century CE).

These data – especially in the first two cases – are, however, insufficient to provide a precise and unambiguous contextualisation for the three objects presented here.

It should also be noted that this kind of objects is not necessarily being used for their primary purpose; on the contrary, they are often found in combination with diverse materials associated with contexts of reuse or disposal, resulting from a series of causal factors that are not always identifiable.

It is even more difficult to identify the negative actions of abandonment, or post-abandonment and potential reuse of the area, events that have most likely altered the initial depositional conditions.

The fact that ostrakon No. B2200-3 comes from a context where the materials, though discarded, display a certain level of formal quality (see the painted pottery and the model featuring a vulture)¹⁴ suggests – or at least gives reason to hope – that the deposit was not totally random, but rather the result of material that was deliberately selected and buried in a sort of ‘ritual management of a building site’.¹⁵

Caution must be used to proceed and avoid generalisations, given that both natural and anthropogenic factors could have influenced the deposition phases of the finds during and after their life cycle.

Finally, it must be mentioned that the Jebel Barkal site reveals archaeological evidence even just a few centimetres below the surface, making it difficult to rule out the possibility that the materials have been disturbed. In the case of the last ostrakon, it is fortunate that an archaeological context is documented and located about 1 metre below the current ground level, but we know nothing about the other two.

As Davoli has rightly pointed out, ‘the way to proceed must be from the archaeological study of the context, such as the stratigraphic units, to the texts, and not the other way around, from the texts to the context.’¹⁶ But, given that the contexts are partially disturbed or poorly documented, what remains of the texts needs to be carefully analysed.

13 Between the wall and the paved area lies a layer of fill sand used to raise the wall to the proper level, since the orography is not perfectly flat.

14 Callegher 2022; Iannarilli 2022.

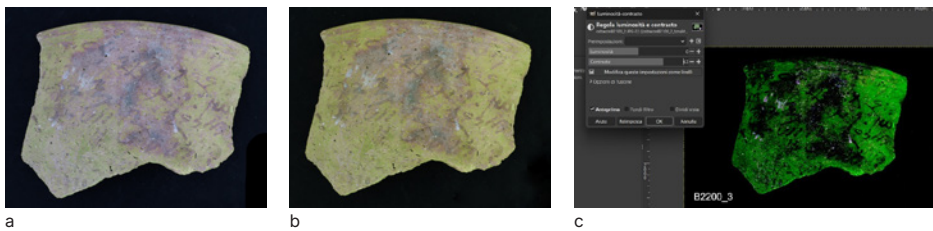
15 Sometimes the deposition of old objects, even when fragmentary, can establish a continuity with the past; this is particularly true in sanctuary or funerary spaces, but the space dedicated to ritual can also be another kind of building. It must not be forgotten that B2200 was probably used for the New Year Festival and the renewal of Meroitic kingship.

16 Davoli 2020, p. 14.

Text

Unlike the great numbers of ostraca found in Egypt, very few have been discovered in Nubia. Certainly, a number comparable to those found in Egypt is not to be expected, given the overall scale of Meroitic textual production. The already small number of surviving examples is further reduced by the limited number of settlement sites that have been excavated. Meroitic ostraca come from cultic and royal areas, as well as from settlement contexts.

This inscribed material can be divided into two categories: the so-called oracular amuletic decrees, recognisable by their well-known three protective formulae,¹⁷ and the so-called numerical ostraca, characterised by the presence of figures suggesting administrative purposes.¹⁸ Based on the limited analysis conducted so far, the content of these texts can be broadly divided into lists, labels, notes, receipts, and oracles. This approximate division into subcategories is due in part to the fragmentary nature of the texts and to the still incomplete knowledge of the Meroitic language. For all these reasons, it is believed to be important that the ostraca found at Jebel Barkal are published and commented upon, to the best of current knowledge, thus contributing new elements and information to the corpus of known Meroitic ostraca.



↑ Fig. 2. Ostrakon No. B2200-3. Digital image, colour-processed with GIMP (RGB decomposition) to enhance ink visibility: a. Step 1. The original digital image was processed with GIMP 3.0.8-2 (colour adjustment: Red channel, brightness +6), b. Step 2. Colour Curves adjustment (Blue channel) applied to the result of the previous process, c. Brightness and Contrast adjustment applied to the result of Step 2 to enhance the visibility of the signs on the last two lines.

17 Hallof 2020, pp. 255–262; Rilly 2007, pp. 216–226.

18 Rilly 2007, pp. 227–229.

TRANSCRIPTIONS

As with most known Meroitic ostraca, the texts of Nos. B2200-2 and B2200-3 are painted in black ink, whilst the text of ostrakon No. B2200-1 is incised. In all three cases, in order to achieve an adequate reading of the signs, the colour of the digital images was modified using GIMP, a free cross-platform software [Fig. 2]. The images were processed to enhance the colour of the ink on the ceramic surface. An RGB decomposition was performed, followed by the removal of the blue and green channels. The red levels were then adjusted, with different values applied to each image, so that the background appeared light and the contrast between the support and the ink was satisfactory.¹⁹

B2200-1 [PL. 1]²⁰

- x+1. ...]lo :[...
 x+2. ...] n`te :`a` [...
 x+3. ...]xror[...
 x+4. ...]tip[...

B2200-2 [PL. 2]

- x+1. ...]____: [...
 x+2. ...][a]tbe : [...
 x+3. ...]roṣi [...

B2200-3 [PL. 3]

1. ...]str[ca.6]xe :[...
2. ...]w : ekne : dmkte : mṇi²¹[...
3. ...]rṣ : tr[o] 59 me[...
4. ...]qolek²² : nsetene[...
5. ...]qlowlī[...
6. ...]l 5[...
7. ...]3[...

19 Caputo and Lougovaya 2020, pp. 82–84.

20 The following conventions are used for lacunae and uncertain readings: [] – illegible signs that may be reconstructed, and illegible sequences; [ca.2] – the approximate number of missing signs; `` – signs that are certain but poorly legible; . – a dot beneath a sign indicates that the reading is uncertain; [...] – text missing at the beginning of the line; [...] – text missing at the end of the line.

21 The word could be read ṣṣṣ mni. However, the last two signs ṣṣ ni are uncertain. The down stroke of the sign ṣ is missing or is very short as suggested by the reviewer, and a comparison with the same sign on line 4 shows that the two upper arches are barely sketched.

22 The comment made by one of the paper's reviewers is noteworthy. According to the reviewer, the sign k is questionable. Compared with the same sign in line the down-stroke is much more curved. Furthermore, the nose of the sign k is nothing else than the down stroke of the sign t from line 3. As a result, not the sign k but the numeral sign 5 is written there.

PALAEOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS [TAB. 2]

The three texts are extremely brief and fragmentary; nevertheless, a palaeographic analysis was conducted in order to achieve an adequate reading. This analysis serves, on the one hand, to define the chronological horizon of the texts – albeit with considerable uncertainty – and, on the other, to clarify the readings proposed for certain signs.

Meroitic palaeography is a complex field and cannot be considered highly reliable from a chronological standpoint, as it is based on a limited number of texts, predominantly incised, which involve a different writing technique compared to ink-written texts. Of the latter, only a few examples survive, consisting mostly of ostraca, papyrus fragments, and very few examples on leather. In the case of the three ostraca – two painted and one incised – the small number of signs, which does not allow for an adequate comparative analysis on the same support, and the limited presence of diagnostic signs make both the analysis and the reading of uncertain passages particularly difficult. In B2200-2 each sign appears only once. Ostrakon No. B2200-3 is different; given its seven lines, most signs are repeated at least twice, facilitating comparison and analysis.

The palaeographic analysis is based on the tables and chronology published by Rilly.²³ The texts of the three ostraca can be assigned to the Transitional Period, which Rilly divides into three phases: A, B, and C.

Transitional A: end of 1st century BCE

Transitional B: 1st century CE

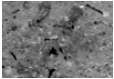
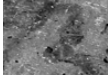
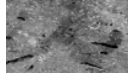
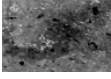
Transitional C: 2nd century/early 3rd century CE

As Rilly notes,²⁴ texts attributed to the Transitional Period cannot be dated with great precision, as the signs may display highly innovative forms alongside archaic features.

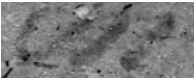
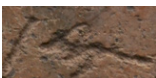
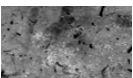
23 Rilly 2007, pp. 315–349.

24 Rilly 2007, p. 345

Tab. 2. Comparative palaeographic table of the Meroitic signs attested in texts B2200-1, B2200-2, B2200-3. The left-hand column lists the Meroitic cursive signs; the following columns reproduce, for each text, the occurrences of the corresponding sign, cropped from the relevant digital images of the inscriptions.

Texts ²⁵	B2200-1	B2200-2	B2200-3
ϣ			
ϥ			   
ϥ			 
ⲓ			
ⲓⲓⲓ			
ⲛ			 
ⲛ			
ⲛ			
ⲛ			  
ⲛ			 
ⲛ			 
ⲛ	 		  
ⲛ			   

25 The fonts used in the paper are RK-Meroitic - (Demotic), FontsGeek.com, 2026.

𐤆			
𐤅			
𐤄			
𐤃			
𐤂			  
𐤁			
𐤀			 
𐤄			 
𐤃			
𐤂			

B2200-1:

𐤀 **i**: the sign appears to be formed by two strokes: a short one on the left from which the second stroke extends horizontally to the right and curves vertically, without forming angular junctions. The sign finds parallels in REM (= *Répertoire d'épigraphie méroïtique*) 1089 from Barkal and 0126 from Meroe.²⁶

𐤁 **te**: the sign is composed of two separate components, a phenomenon attested from the 1st century CE. The left-side component appears to consist of two strokes, the first of which has the shape of an oblique 3 cut by the horizontal stroke. The sign finds parallels with more archaic forms,²⁷ with REM 1141 from Qasr Ibrim assigned to Transitional Phase A, and with REM 1038 from Meroe assigned to Transitional Phase B.²⁸

𐤂 **a**: of this sign, only the right-hand component can be identified, characterised by a vertical axis and a broad hook at the top. The stroke on the left extends to the right beneath the preceding signs, as in Transitional Phase C.

𐤃 **r**: the strokes of the sign are rounded; the curve on the left is broader than that on the right, recalling REM 0077–0078 from Barkal and 1001 from Meroe.²⁹

𐤄 **i**: the strokes are broad and long, and the axis is slightly inclined to the right. In terms of form, it shows analogies with REM 0126 from Meroe.³⁰

𐤅 **p**: like sign *a*, the horizontal stroke extends to the right beneath the preceding sign. The elongated form recalls that of Transitional Phase C.

With the exception of signs *a* and *p*, which appear to be innovative, the brief text may be placed within Transitional Phase B.

B2200-2:

𐤆 **t**: the sign has a narrow form, attested from the end of the 1st century CE. The axis is inclined to the right, and the two vertical strokes are parallel.

𐤇 **b**: the sign is inclined to the right, a feature attested from the end of the 1st century BCE. In terms of inclination and form, it shows analogies with REM 1038 from Meroe.³¹

26 Rilly 2007, p. 347, Pl. 13.

27 Rilly 2007, p. 347, Pl. 12.

28 Rilly 2007, p. 347, Pl. 13.

29 Rilly 2007, p. 347, Pl. 13.

30 Rilly 2007, p. 347, Pl. 13.

31 Rilly 2007, p. 347, Pl. 13.

ϥ *e*: the upper part of the sign is slightly flattened.

ⲗ *s*: the reading of this sign is uncertain; visually it could also be the sign *s*, as the lower stroke is short; however, the angle of separation between the two curves is not pronounced, and the upper stroke of the sign is flattened rather than rounded.

ⲓ *i*: the two vertical strokes are parallel; it recalls the sign in REM 0300.³²

Based on the characteristics of the visible signs, the text may be dated between Transitional Phases B and C.

B2200-3:

The first two signs of the text, line 1, are barely visible. The sign *t* is narrow and the upper stroke is short, as in line 3.

ⲭ *x*: the sign, with its axis shifted to the right, has a squared form and the strokes meet at angular junctions. It finds analogies with REM 0323 from Karanog and REM 509 from Faras.³³

ϥ *e*: the hook is slightly flattened and the lower stroke is short. It recalls REM 1294 from Naga and 1273 from Sai.

ⲗ *k*: three examples of this sign are present in the text; in all cases the lower stroke extends to the right until it intersects the preceding sign and is oblique, recalling in this respect the signs of Transitional Phase C.

ⲛ *ne*: the ring is small but distinguishable; however, this is not chronologically diagnostic. In terms of form, it appears to find parallels in REM 1001 from Meroe and 1138 from Barkal.

ⲉ *d*: the hook-like upper form of the sign is attested from the 2nd century CE.

ⲙ *m*: the sign is fairly simplified; the upper curved stroke is more pronounced than the lower one.

ⲧ *te*: the sign appears on lines 2 and 4; in the first instance the two short upper strokes are visible, while in the second only one is visible. They find parallels in REM 1001 from Meroe.³⁴

32 Rilly 2007, p. 347, Pl. 14.

33 Rilly 2007, p. 347, Pl. 14.

34 Rilly 2007, p. 347, Pl. 13.

Κ q: the two components of the sign are separate, and this separation is dated from the 1st century BCE. The central triangle is clearly visible and may be compared with REM 0077/0078 from Barkal.³⁵

Ͳ w: the sign appears on both lines 2 and 5. In both cases, the lower part of the sign is triangular. In the first instance, the upper part, consisting of two strokes, joins the triangle at its centre and finds a parallel in REM 1089 from Barkal. In the second case, it is shifted to the left and shows analogies with REM 0077–0078 from Barkal. The text may be dated to Transitional Phase B, although some innovative and archaic features are found alongside one another.

At the end of line 3, a numeral 50 appears, followed by a sign that, at first glance, may be interpreted as *m*. However, it is not written in one go. It is likely that this sign, together with 50, forms the numeral 59.³⁶ Perhaps the scribe first wrote the numeral 5 and then corrected it to 9.

This text can also be placed within Transitional Phase B.

COMMENTARY

B2200-1 [PL. 1]

The text consists of four lines and is incomplete. The first line is composed of the signs *lo*, which could refer to the determinant *l* with copula *o*, particularly because it is followed by two dots meaning ‘it is the...’.

The sequence]^r n^{te} : ^r a[]] on line x+2 appears to find a parallel with ostrakon REM 0575, found in the palace of Faras and currently held at the Ashmolean Museum [Tab. 3]. The latter contains 3 numerals.

Tab. 3. Comparison between line x+2 of text B2200-1 and line x+2 of text REM 0575.

B2200-1	REM 0575
x+1. ...]lo :[...	x+1. [...]rob`[...]
x+2. ...]n ^{te} : ^r a []] [...	x+2. [...]nte : q[...]
x+3. ...]x ^r or[...	x+3. [...]ibre[ca1][...]
x+4. ...]tip[...	x+4. [...]se ase 1 [...]
	x+5. [...] hole [.]10
	x+6. [...]se 1

However, the comparison of the sequence does not at present allow the type of text to be determined.

35 Rilly 2007, p. 347, Pl. 13.

36 Rilly 2007, p. 357.

Line x+3 of the ostracon No. B2200-1 includes the sequence of signs *-xr̥or*. The combination *ror* is present in many Meroitic words, titles and names, in particular the sequence *-xr̥or* is a common ending for personal names like *pqmotxr̥or* REM 0544/5; *nexr̥orso* REM 0821/1; *hllxr̥orqo* REM 0521/2–3, and also in the name of the prince Arikankharor (1st century CE), written *arikxr̥or* in Meroitic hieroglyphic on the wall of the Lion Temple at Naga (REM 0005; 0017).

B2200-2 [PL. 2]

The text consists of only 3 lines with few partially preserved signs. The first line appears to contain a numeral. Unfortunately, since the sign is incomplete, a certain reading cannot be provided, but it is likely 10, followed by a word divider and an unidentifiable sign.

At line x+2, the first sign, at first glance, appears to be *t* because of a dot, but the down-stroke of *t* is not long enough. Furthermore, the dot is much larger than the other dots. The sign may therefore be interpreted as *a*, and the word could be *atbe*. In this case, following the reviewer's suggestion, the dot would be an occasional mark due to surface damage. As for the lexeme *atbe*, it would appear to be a title. It is also attested in the inscription of Amanirenas and Akinidad REM 1003/3, 1003/8, 1088/13, the offering table found at the site of Tomas bearing the name of the viceroy Abratoye. It is further attested in REM 1138/x+24, a text from the Great Temple of Amon (B 500) at Jebel Barkal, in inscription 0410/11, and in 1333/9.

B2200-3 [PL. 3]

Ostracon No. B2200-3 allows for the reading of several words. The first evident term is *dmkte*, used in royal inscriptions and commemoration of funerary offerings.

In commemoration of funerary offerings specifically – texts that mention lists of offerings and sacrifices made by the family to the deceased in the years following burial – the term *dmkte* is frequently used. Griffith initially interpreted *dmkte* as a proper name, thus identifying a specific individual. Hofmann, on the other hand, proposed a verbal form. Rilly currently translates it as ‘offering’.³⁷ He hypothesises that the initial element *dm-* is a verbal root, but unlike Hofmann he argues that *dmkte* is not a verb, even though the suffix *-kte* recalls the verbal suffix used in funerary texts. The identification of the same term *dmkte* in the sentence of REM 1361C/x+9, the so-called Obelisk of Meroe, helped to clarify its grammatical value. Here the term appears as *dmkteqesel* > *dmkte-qese-l*. The presence of the possessive *qese* and the determinant *-l* clarifies that *dmkte* is a deverbal noun. Rilly proposes the translation ‘offering’ for *dmkte* and ‘to take/receive’ for the verb *dm*, although the two proposed semantic values are symmetrical.

37 Rilly 2010, pp. 80–88.

Another interesting term is *qolek* /k^wulka/, if it is actually written here.³⁸ It appears to be composed of *qole* translated as a demonstrative, to which the morpheme *-k* /ka/ is attached. The term *qole* seems to be similar to the form *qoli* used in most of the ostraca from the palace of Faras. Further examples of the form *qoli* are attested in the ostraca from Shokan.³⁹ Number 5⁴⁰ presents the term *qolikene* followed by the term *adeqen* and the numeral 4, similar to ostrakon REM 0556 from Faras; number 6⁴¹ [*qo*]like[*ne*] + numeral 12, which finds parallels with several ostraca also from Faras.⁴²

In these ostraca the following pattern can be observed:

1. *qoli-ke-ne* + numeral (figure)⁴³
2. *qoli* + unit of measurement + figure⁴⁴
3. *qoli*⁴⁵

If really *qolek* is written in the ostrakon No. B2200-3, the term formed with the morpheme *-k* /ka/ rather than *-ke* /k/ is not followed by numerals but by a term *nsetene*, which appears to be composed, as far as can be read, of the word *nse*. This word has been identified by Rilly as a noun, with the proposed translation 'sacrifice'.⁴⁶ Rilly suggests that the Old Nubian word ⲁⲛⲉⲩⲥ /aṇeūs/ 'sacrifice' may contain a trace of Meroitic *nse* /nas/. The noun⁴⁷ is used in royal inscriptions and in the Benediction formula E of funerary texts.

Qole appears to share the same stem as the word *qole-ne* used in REM 1304/1 and three ostraca from the island of Tila. The ending *-kw*, on the other hand, appears in REM 0101, 0103, and 1333, where it is considered a possible variant of the morpheme *-ke* following toponyms. Neither REM 2053 nor REM 2078 contain numerals after *qolekw*. The form *qolekbe*, on the other hand, finds no parallel. It is worth noting, however, that in REM 2100 the line preceding the term *qolekbe* contains a numeral preceded by *ne*.

Nevertheless, an alternative reading of the word *qolek* has been suggested by one of the reviewers. As noted in footnote 16, what is written there may not be *k* but rather the numeral 5, meaning the word would be composed of *qole* + digit

38 See footnote no. 22 above.

39 Jacquet-Gordon 2000.

40 Jacquet-Gordon 2000, p. 34.

41 Jacquet-Gordon 2000, p. 35.

42 Griffith 1925.

43 REM 0556, 0557, 0559, 0560, 0561, 1018, 1211, 1298, 1299, 1376.

44 REM 0562, 0563, 0564, 0565, 0593.

45 REM 0564, 0567, 0568.

46 Rilly 2010, pp. 86–88.

47 Rilly also identifies an adjective written in the same way, *nse*, but which must have had a different tone and to which he assigns the meaning 'long'. In the royal inscription of Amanirenas and Akinidad, REM 1003/16, the noun phrase *ns : nsl* : 'long sacrifice' appears (the phrase finds a parallel in REM 1003/20, *ns : nslw*), employing a word-play on sounds.

5. In this case, the reading would also make sense, since *qole* 5 can be interpreted as ‘these 5’.

The last two lines of the ostrakon, x+6 and x+7, appear to end with numerals. This is reminiscent of a typical pattern for item lists in which lines often end with numerals.

Final remarks

Despite the fragmentary nature of the analysed artefacts and their context of discovery, the palaeographic analysis of the ostraca nevertheless appears to reveal some interesting details. One relates to chronology, the other to function.

The occurrence of inscriptions dating between the 1st century BCE and the 2nd century CE would confirm the general dating of the entire area, which has been narrowed down to the 1st century CE and the reign of Amanitore and Natakamani on the basis of structural and architectural evidence, material culture and the – albeit scarce – textual evidence found primarily in the context of Royal Palace B1500.⁴⁸

Earlier phases of the Meroitic District have also been identified through excavations in the south-western sector of B1500 during 2016–2017⁴⁹ and at B2200 in 2018–2019,⁵⁰ when the aforementioned B4000 was identified. The latter, in particular, is dated by C14 analysis to between the mid-4th century and the mid-2nd century BCE, predating the first occupation of the district by a considerable margin.⁵¹

However, other samples collected from higher strata, associated with structures B2100 and B2200 [Fig. 1], appear to date from the early 2nd century BCE to the early 1st century CE, marking a shift towards the Classical Meroitic phase.

The placement of the ostraca, based on palaeographic analysis, predominantly in the Transition B phase (as well as the sequence of signs -*xrwr*, recognisable in many personal names, not exclusively but including Arikankharor), may confirm the general dating of the site to around the 1st century CE.

From a functional perspective, the ostraca cannot tell us much, due to their highly fragmentary nature and the well-known complexity of reconstructing the Meroitic lexicon. However, the emergence of numerals in the ostraca Nos. B2200-2 and B2200-3, together with the attestation of the verb apparently related to offerings (*dmkte*), would suggest that the inscriptions on the pottery refer to some

48 The first attempts to date the Meroitic sector of Jebel Barkal were based on the discovery of the so-called Natakamani Stele (REM 1221; see Roccati 2015); for more recent analyses of construction techniques and architectural decoration, see Callegher 2022; Iannarilli 2022; on sealings and ostraca, see Vincentelli 2019; Pancin 2022.

49 Ciampini 2017.

50 Ciampini et al. 2019.

51 See Iannarilli, *forth.*

quantity and types of goods intended for ritual activities to have been performed in the Building of the Basins, interpreted as the focal point of the New Year Festival celebrations.⁵²

This hypothesis may be supported by the type of pottery which, at least in the case of the ostraca Nos. B2200-2 and B2200-3, does not appear to be local but imported, as recorded during the field documentation phase of the corresponding excavation campaigns.⁵³ In general, the presence of imported pottery from the Aswan region or the Mediterranean has been particularly noted since the first excavation seasons in Building B2200.⁵⁴

Given that transport jars typically bear very brief inscriptions, limited to a single numeral or a single word, we must rule out the possibility that our fragments contained an indication of the contents of a transport jar. It is, however, possible to hypothesise that they were originally part of an imported jar (whose contents, unfortunately, we will never know), which was then reused, once broken, to list products or offerings (and perhaps even the names of donors). This would thus correspond to the object's second life, defunctionalised and then reused to list items perhaps intended for the celebration of occasions and festivals linked to the renewal of kingship. The theory could be further supported by the fact that the numeral 50/59 indicated on ostracon No. B2200-3 appears to be particularly high, suggesting the mobilisation of large quantities of valuable goods. This is an occurrence that presumably took place mainly during festive occasions and that could certainly have been the prerogative only of an important administrative centre capable of managing very large quantities of valuable goods, namely a royal district.

52 Callegher 2022; Ciampini and Bąkowska-Czerner 2014; Ciampini et al. 2023.

53 For definitive confirmation, the sherds in question would need to be re-examined, sampled and analysed, but the current situation in Sudan has brought archaeological missions to a halt since 2023, and the present study must rely on photographs and datasheets produced during previous excavation campaigns.

54 Bąkowska-Czerner 2015.

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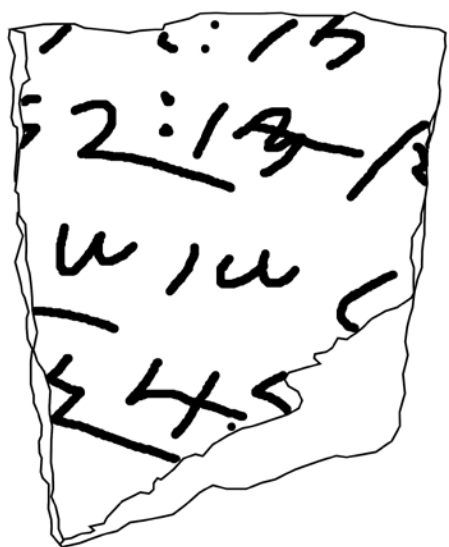
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a



b

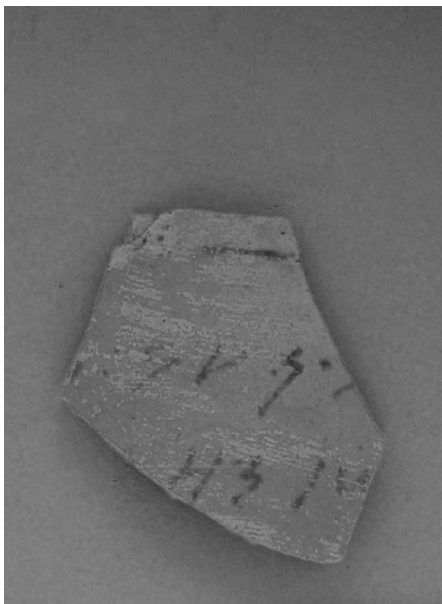


c

Pl. 1. Ostrakon B2200-1: a. photograph. (Photo: Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan – Jebel Barkal), b. digital image, colour-processed with GIMP (RGB decomposition) to enhance ink visibility (Illustration: Gilda Ferrandino), c. facsimile. (Drawing: Gilda Ferrandino).



a



b

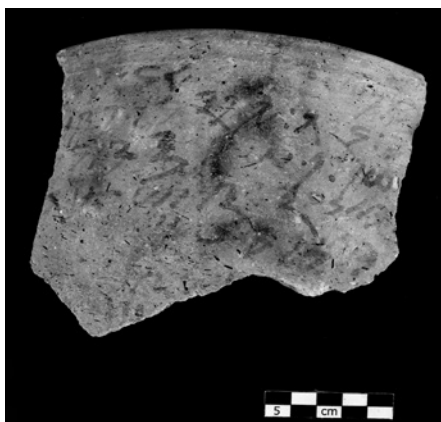


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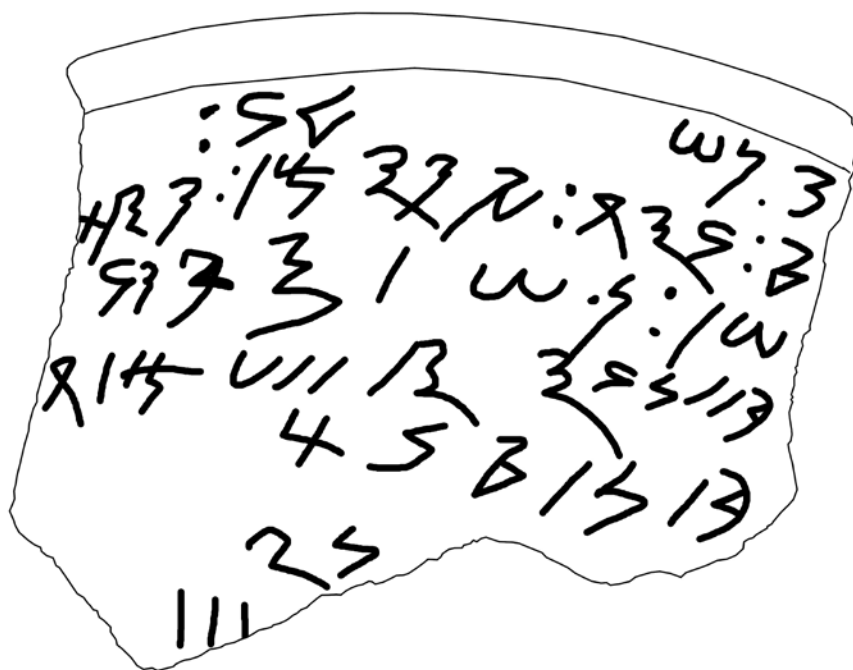
Pl. 2. Ostrakon B2200-2: a. photograph. (Photo: Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan – Jebel Barkal), b. digital image, colour-processed with GIMP (RGB decomposition) to enhance ink visibility (Illustration: Gilda Ferrandino), c. facsimile. (Drawing: Gilda Ferrandino).



a



b



c

Pl. 3. Ostrakon B2200-3: a. photograph. (Photo: Italian Archaeological Mission in Sudan – Jebel Barkal), b. digital image, colour-processed with GIMP (RGB decomposition) to enhance ink visibility (Illustration: Gilda Ferrandino), c. facsimile. (Drawing: Gilda Ferrandino).