
Case Study 8.5: Napata, Sudan

including the temples of Djebel Barkal and the Nuri necropolis

Presentation and analysis of the site

Geographical position: The site of Napata is located close to the city of Merowe in the Northern Province of Sudan whose capital is Dongola. (This is distinct from the historical city of Meroe, in the Butana region.)

Location: Latitude 18° 32' 5" N, longitude 31° 50' 4" E. Elevation 260m above mean sea level.

General description: The area is dominated by the mountain of Djebel Barkal, the 'Pure Mountain' of ancient sources, located on the western bank of the Nile. This is surrounded by temples and pyramid fields. The necropolis of Nuri, on the other hand, is located on the east bank.

Inventory of the remains: No fewer than seven temples and several palaces were built by the Nile at the foot of the Pure Mountain. Two small fields of pyramids are located nearby, while the older necropolis of El Kurru is found some kilometres downstream. The temple of Amun at Sanam is located on the east bank opposite Djebel Barkal. The cemetery of Nuri contains no fewer than 20 royal pyramids.

History of the site: The earliest shrines at Napata were built during the 18th Dynasty. The Nubian kings of the 25th Dynasty (c. 700 BC) selected it as their capital, and were buried at El Kurru (with the exception of Taharqa who inaugurated the burial site of Nuri). Napata remained the capital of the Kingdom of Kush for several generations afterwards. The royal cemetery remained at Nuri for a few centuries after the capital had been moved to Meroe by Aspelta (i.e. until c. 300 BC), and the temple of Amun at Napata remained a royal pilgrimage destination until the end of the kingdom six centuries later.

Cultural and symbolic dimension: Napata was the cult centre of Amun, Lord of the Pure Mountain, a hypostasis of the god Amun of Karnak. The temple was built at the foot of the mountain and nearly perpendicular to the Nile. On the opposite bank, at Sanam, Taharqa built another temple for Amun, orientated to sunset at Wepet Renpet (new year) during his reign. Taharqa himself inaugurated the cemetery at Nuri, at a selected spot possibly connected with the Pure Mountain by its intrinsic astronomical alignment. The Nuri pyramids themselves were orientated so that the diagonals of their bases aligned closely with the cardinal directions. One of the late pyramids at the Barkal field contains a celestial diagram with Egyptian typology.

Authenticity and integrity: The foundations of most of the temples are preserved at Djebel Barkal. The temple of Amun has been partially excavated and partially restored during the past decade. The pyramids of Nuri were excavated in the 19th century; since then little preservation, restoration or excavation work has been carried out on site.

Generalities: Until recently, a US Archaeological Mission has been conducting work at Djebel Barkal, producing accurate maps of the area and 3-D reconstructions of the temple enclosure. However, there is no modern map of the Nuri necropolis, nor any documentation apart from the earliest excavation reports.

Present site management

Present use: The remains of Napata are one of the attractions that the Sudanese authorities are trying to exploit in order to bring cultural tourism to the country. The region is rapidly developing.

Protection: The site of Napata is under the control of the Archaeology Division of the Sudanese Ministry of Culture. This department controls access to the sites, which is strictly regulated, and on-site archaeological excavations. For decades, the main protection for the sites has been their relative isolation in an undeveloped and sparsely populated area of Sudan. The Napata region is now inscribed on the World Heritage List as ‘Gebel Barkal and the Sites of the Napatan Region’ (World Heritage Site no. 1073, 2003) under criteria (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv), so the Sudanese government is giving it the highest level of protection.



Fig. 8.5.1. The temple of Amun at the Pure Mountain in Napata, the nucleus of a large sacred area integrating topographic and astronomical alignments. Photograph © Juan Belmonte



Fig. 8.5.2. An area of the Napata region showing the location of the pyramid cemetery of Nuri and of the sacred mountain of Djebel Barkal, on opposite sides of the course of the Nile. The diagram also shows the view of Djebel Barkal from the base of Taharqa’s pyramid (top-left) and a close-up satellite image of the Nuri pyramid field (bottom-right). Graphic © Juan Belmonte

State of conservation: The sites are relatively well preserved. They are fenced and the local population, being very proud of their ancestors, take special care of their monuments. However, most of the movable objects (statues and stelae) have been moved to the National Museum in Khartoum.

Context and environment: The Napata region was the most sacred area of the Kingdom of Kush for several centuries. As the capital city, the main sanctuary of the national god and the necropolis of kings and queens, it enjoyed a very special status. Completely surrounded by deserts in every direction, the Valley of the Nile, flowing in this area from north-east to south-west, was the artery giving life to the region.

Archaeological/historical/heritage research: Heritage research at the site should be mandatory as part of the inclusion of the Napata monuments and necropolis within an existing World Heritage Site.

Main threats or potential threats to the site: The isolation of the site has ensured its preservation for centuries. However, five years ago the Sudanese government began to construct a very large dam a few kilometres to the north of Merowe, and close to Nuri, which is complete at the time of writing. The resulting reservoir will inundate hundreds of hectares of Nile Valley upstream from Nuri, including dozens of minor archaeological sites, but should also bring new wealth to the region, which could have positive consequences.

Management: The site follows the general management plan for World Heritage Site no. 1073. It has strong potential for tourism development and outreach, as the Sudanese cultural authorities recognise. The fact this everything must be built from virtually nothing presents a good opportunity to follow modern best practice.