



THE EL-HASSA RAMS: AN EXAMPLE OF EGYPTIAN-NUBIAN SYNCRETISM

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Amun Temple of el-Hassa, erected during the late first century CE reign of the Meroitic king Amanikhareqerem, represents a particularly significant expression of Egyptian-Nubian syncretism. The complex, set in the so-called Island of Meroë (present Butana) and being excavated by a Sudanese-French mission led by Vincent Rondot,¹ combines typical aspects of the Amun temples, such as the longitudinal multi-roomed plan, and more unusual elements, such as an outer high altar oriented towards the building. The edifice is oriented east-west, entering from a pylon and from three side entrances. Following an open courtyard and the hypostyle hall, a vestibule leads to the sanctuary, flanked by side rooms. The walls were made from the combination of red and mud bricks lying on red-brick foundations, according to well-known Meroitic customs, whereas sandstone was used for the columns (Figure 1).

A processional avenue of reused plastered red bricks extended from the front of the complex and was flanked by fourteen sandstone ram statues (themselves separated by a rectangular plan kiosk, also made from red bricks; see Figure 2) of different sizes. These rams are different from other known Meroitic examples: the fleeces of the el-Hassa rams are not in spiral curls but in scales, similar to the ones in the temple of Amenhotep III in Soleb, which represent the most ancient Nubian large-sized rams.

The choice of the same prenomen as Amenhotep III, Nebmaatre, may indicate the association established by Amanikhareqerem with this pharaoh. This iconographical choice by Amanikhareqerem cannot be accidental, but highlights an intended and perceived association with Amenhotep III, according to the archaistic practices of the Kushite kings. This would seem to be confirmed by the use of the same prenomen, Nebmaatre;² Amanikhareqerem was the first Meroitic ruler to use this prenomen, and only one among his successors, Amanitenmomide, ruling in the second century CE, employed the same.

The engraving of inscriptions on the bases of the rams is unusual in Nubia, the el-Hassa statues representing the only such Meroitic case. The inscription is the same on each

ram, being bilingual, written partly in Egyptian and partly in Meroitic hieroglyphs. Though Egyptian writing was commonly used on official Meroitic monuments until the fall of the kingdom, its joint employ with the local language was rare. This peculiar choice by Amanikhareqerem stands as further evidence of the Kushite archaism,³ highlighting the profitable coexistence between the rich Napatan heritage and the coeval indigenous expressions.

The inscription, translated by Claude Rilly, reads (the words in Meroitic writing are in italics):

*Oh, Amun Aritene, Amun of Tabakha, to the king of Upper and Lower Egypt Neb-Mâat-Ra, to the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands, Amanikhareqerem, given life, the ruler beloved of Amun, give life!*⁴

Tabakha is probably the ancient name of el-Hassa;⁵ Amun of Tabakha could therefore indicate a new hypostasis of the god, not evidenced elsewhere.

Equally interesting is the inclusion of the term *Aritene* after the first mention of Amun. *Aritene* is known in a limited number of Meroitic inscriptions, but its exact meaning is unclear. So far, this is only logical conjecture but based on the current progress of the Meroitic philology the inscription of el-Hassa could offer further progress.

The suggested reference to *Aritene* as a simple divine epithet is to be excluded after its occurrence in expressions with no gods' names to which it could be associated. Its only role as attribute of Amun with the meaning of "lord of" or "guest in" before a toponym was first proposed by Fritz Hintze, referring to an inscription in the Amun Temple in Naga reporting *Amani-lḥ-ariteñ-tolktete*, translated as "Great Amun, lord of Naga"; nevertheless, in addition to other cases the inscription of el-Hassa makes this unlikely, *Aritene* not being followed by a place name but inserted between two mentions of Amun. The term *Aritene* occurs in expressions lacking associated gods, so therefore it cannot be simply considered a divine epithet.

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Aritene was identified by Karl-Heinz Priese as the sun god, based on an occurrence of this name inside a cartouche on a fragmented round-shaped medallion of faience found at the royal cemetery of Meroë and hypothetically symbolizing the sun.⁶ Nevertheless, relevant iconographic cases supported by philological comparisons suggest that the sun was worshipped as the god Mash. Moreover, the association of Mash with Amun, giving life to the form Mash-Amani known from an offering table at Meroë,⁷ would have represented the Meroitic version of Amun-Re. In this sense, the proposed correspondence of Aritene to Re, under the epigraphic evidence of Aritene both as independent deity and as figure linked to Amun, cannot be confirmed.

According to the known epigraphic sources, in the Meroitic writing the term *Aritene* did not indicate only a divine epithet or attribute but also an indigenous deity who was in some occasions associated with Amun, albeit in a still unclear manner. The god was often named in inscriptions honoring kings and was included in Napatan and Meroitic royal names. In royal texts by Amanishakete, Amanitore, and Kharamadoye, kings and queens are heirs and descendants of Aritene,⁸ highlighting the strong link with the royal family, as the association with the dynastic god Amun in the inscription of el-Hassa confirms. This inscription then celebrates the divine descent of Amanikhareqerem, whose aegis on the sacral complex was already highlighted by the unusual occurrence of texts on the rams.

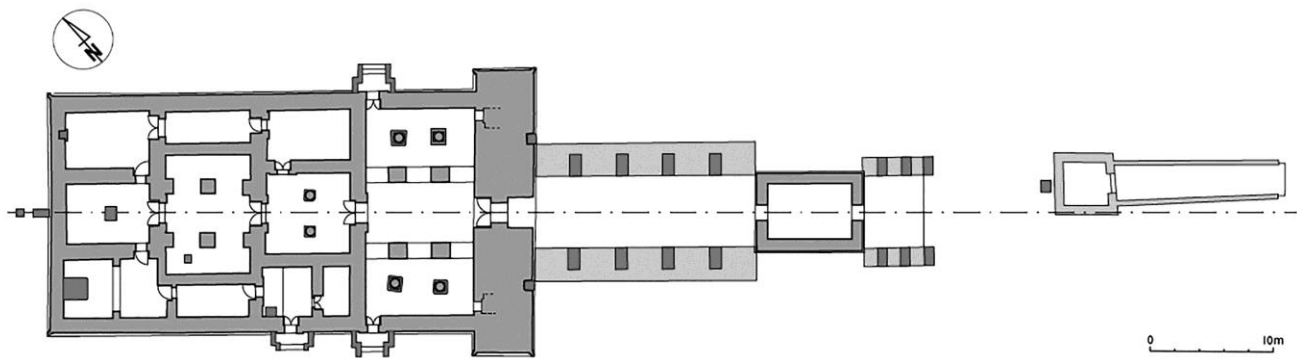


Figure 1: El-Hassa, Amun Temple. Late first century CE (after Vincent Rondot, "El-Hassa: un temple à Amon dans l'île de Meroë au I^{er} siècle de notre ère," *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 1 [2012], figure 2).

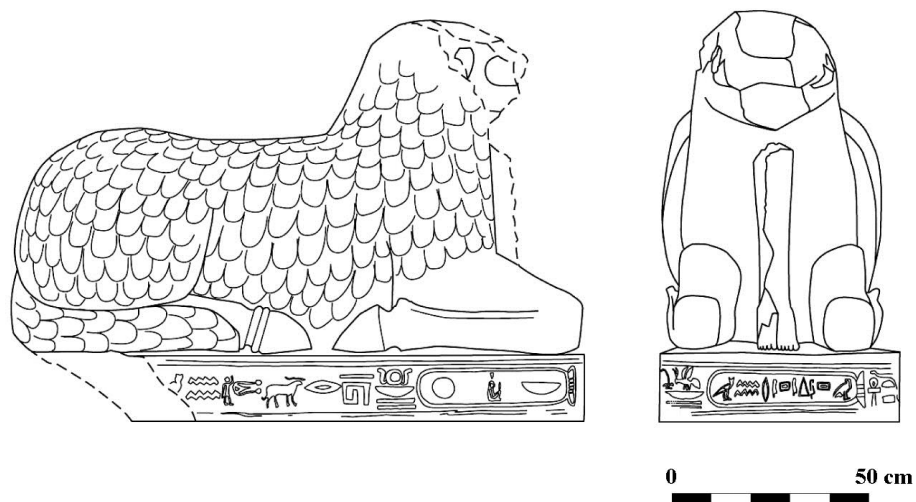


Figure 2: El-Hassa, Amun Temple, rams. Sandstone. Late first century CE (after Rondot, figure 3).

NOTES

- ¹ Vincent Rondot, "El-Hassa: un temple à Amon dans l'île de Méroé au I^{er} siècle de notre ère," *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 1 (2012): 167–182.
- ² See Nicolas Grimal, *Storia dell'antico Egitto* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2007), 601.
- ³ On this topic see Laszlo Török, *The Kingdom of Kush: Handbook of the Napatan-Meroitic Civilization* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997): 189–196, 463–467.
- ⁴ Claude Rilly, "Meroitische Texte aus Naga," in Dietrich Wildung, Karla Kröper and Sylvia Schoske (eds.), *Königsstadt Naga—Grabungen in der Wüste des Sudan* (Berlin-München: Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, München und Kunstforum der Berliner Volksbank, 2011), 197.
- ⁵ The identification as toponym may be inferred from the locative particle *-te*: see Steffen Wenig, "Ein 'neuer' alter Königsname," in Steffen Wenig (ed.), *Studien zum antiken Sudan: Akten der 7. Internationalen Tagung für meroitistische Forschungen vom 14. bis 19. September 1992 in Gosen/bei Berlin (Meroitica 15)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999), 681.
- ⁶ Karl-Heinz Priese, "Aritene als Sonnengott," in Fritz Hintze (ed.), *Meroitische Forschungen 1980. Akten der 4. Internationalen Tagung für meroitische Forschungen vom 24. bis 29. November 1980 in Berlin (Meroitica 7)* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1984), 145–146.
- ⁷ See Jean Leclant, Andre Heyler, Catherine Bergerel Naggar, Claude Carrier and Claude Rilly, *Répertoire d'épigraphie méroïtique: Corpus des inscriptions publiées, sous la direction de Jean Leclant*, 3 vols. (Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres, 2000): n. 0430.
- ⁸ A first century BCE stela in Naga reads: *amniṣḥeto-ariteñ-qrne* ("Amanishakete, heir of Aritene") (Leclant et al., n. 1293). An inscription on the Amara temple, dated to the first century CE, reports *ammitore-ariteñ-mdesl* ("Amanitore, the heir of Aritene") (Leclant et al., n. 0084). The inscription of the king Kharamadoye on the Mandulis temple in Kalabsha (fifth century CE) reads: *hrmdoye-qore-ariteñ-mdese* ("King Kharamadoye, descendant of Aritene") (Leclant et al., 0094).