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A short guide to the ancient site of Naga (Sudan)

The Naga Project of the
State Museum of Egyptian Art
Munich (Germany)

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Imprint

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City in the steppe

Getting there

Leave the hustle and bustle of the centre of Khartoum behind you by driving on the asphalt road north toward Atbara. On the way you will pass two toll stations – about 3 km after the second toll station you will find a sign on the right side of the road leading you onto a dirt road running south-east. The extraordinary experience of a visit to Naga begins right here on this dirt road, where you leave the 21st century behind and immerse yourself in the timeless steppe landscape. You will occasionally see some of the local semi-Bedouin population's huts and their animals, mostly sheep, goats and camels. Follow the track, keeping the mountain range on your left, until the sign to Musawwarat es Sufra; from there on continue by keeping slightly to the right for another 18 km. Soon you will see on the horizon, the columns of the Amun Temple on mountain spur extending from east to west, appearing like a Fata Morgana through the sandy mist.

[1]

Passing the Antiquities Police station, stay on the track and continue toward the well, the lifeline of the local population. Near the well there are some shady acacia trees close to two impressive ancient sandstone buildings – the Lion Temple and the Hathor Chapel.

[2]

The well, 76 m deep, was built in the beginning of the 20th century and is frequented by masses of local Bedouins watering their animals. It is extremely interesting to watch the work of the people drawing water in animal skins, as they have done for generations, but one should remember that this is not a staged tourist attraction but hard work for the population.

[3]



[1]



Rediscovery

Its isolated position far from the Nile makes Naga a special site. Almost all the other archaeological sites in the Sudan – and Egypt – are located near the Nile or in populated areas and have often been plundered in modern times for handy building material. Naga, however, has remained largely untouched over thousands of years.

The site was not rediscovered until 1822 by two Frenchmen, L. M. A. Linant de Bellefonds and F. Cailliaud, who visited Naga despite the danger of lions and other discomforts. In 1844 R. Lepsius' team of the Prussian Expedition produced detailed plans, drawings and watercolours of its visible monuments. 141

Archaeological excavations did not begin until 150 years later. A team from the Egyptian Berlin Museum received the excavation concession for Naga from the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) and work began in 1995, financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The restoration work at the site was generously supported over the years by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kulturerhaltprogramm) and many private sponsors. Since 2013, the project's license was transferred to the Egyptian Museum in Munich (Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst) and work in Naga is currently financed, like many other projects, by the Qatar Sudan Archaeological Project – Nubian Archaeological Development Organization.

Ancient Naga is a large city site extending about 3 km north to south and about 1 km east to west. It consists of several major temples, cemeteries and large size buildings, most of which currently appear as large hills of rubble. At the southern edge there are also two large ancient Hafir (water reservoirs) and on the Gebel there are the quarries from which the stones for the temples were extracted. Almost all the extant monuments were built during the reign of king Natakamani and queen Amanitore (Meroitic period), in the 1st century AD. These two rulers are the most prolific builders of the Meroitic period and their legacies can be found throughout the Sudan.



The Hathor Chapel



Two temples near the well have recently been fenced in to keep animals out, but visitors have unhindered access through the gate. The smaller decorative building, the Hather Chapel, with Corinthian columns and arched windows, is reminiscent of buildings with typical Roman features known from Alexandria and Palmyra in Syria. The rectangular windows, with cavetto cornices as well as winged sun discs as decoration, recall typical Pharaonic Egyptian features. The union of various stylistic elements from different cultures in one building is a typical feature of the art of Naga. Until a few years ago, the Hather Chapel was known as the "Roman Kiosk" but relief blocks bearing the image of the goddess Hathor were discovered inside the chapel, hence the new name for the building.

In older publications the chapel is sometimes referred to as a building of degenerate Roman style and is dated to the 3rd century AD. Today, due to the discovery of an inscription on the wall of the chapel, it is dated to the 1st century AD and is closely connected to the Lion Temple directly behind it.

The chapel was built in the flood plain of the area, unlike the Lion Temple which was placed somewhat higher. After a heavy rain fall, water accumulates inside and outside the chapel's walls, which had rendered the lower

row of stones extremely soft. Furthermore, soft stone was used in building, particularly for the capitals, probably to ease the carving of decoration. Due to this, however, the capitals disintegrated faster than the rest of the building and it was discovered that they would not support the heavy architraves much longer without danger of collapsing. In response to this condition, an extensive restoration plan was developed.

The project's conservators undertook considerable restorations over many years, including removing and later replacing the architraves and capitals. The restoration work, which served to stabilize and preserve the individual stones as well as the structure as a whole, aimed to keep the original (ancient) appearance of the chapel wherever possible. The observant visitor will, however, notice that some of the capitals are modern reconstruction. Due to the fragility of the originals, these capitals were scanned using the structured light 3D method and reproduced with extreme accuracy. They now replace the originals, which will be exhibited in the planned Naga Museum near the site. All lower layers of stone have been consolidated.



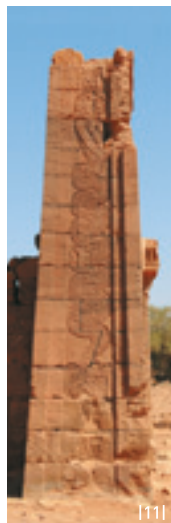


The Lion Temple

The name of the larger temple does not hail from the lions which still roamed the area in the 19th century but from the Meroitic lion-headed god Apedemak to whom the temple is dedicated. The Lion Temple, built by Amanitore and Natakamani in the 1st century AD, has survived over the centuries in its present state of preservation. So far no restoration work has been undertaken here by the Naga team. The relief decoration on the outside walls, the inner walls and the pylons (the two towers next to the doorway) represent the most completely preserved cycle of decorations anywhere in the Sudan.

The facade of the temple is decorated with a propagandistic statement of the sovereigns' power. The reliefs of the two towers show: on the left, the king in a triumphant pose, with one hand raised high holding a mace, about to slay a bunch of prisoners which he grasps by the hair with the other hand; on the right pylon, the queen, Amanitore, is also shown smiting enemies in a similar fashion, holding a sword. The prisoners have their hands raised in a entreaty and the faces of the prisoners are ethnically differentiated – some with beards, some with curly hair. Beneath the feet of both king and queen, a row of kneeling enemies tied at the elbow and with shield-like bodies also represent different conquered ethnic groups.

Although the motif is reminiscent of the facade of many Egyptian pharaonic temples, several Meroitic features are integrated into the reliefs. The voluminous form of the queen smiting enemies occurs only in the Meroitic cultural area, as does the lion on the pylon shown in frontal view, and, of course, the inscriptions in Meroitic hieroglyphs. On the narrow side of the pylon, the lion god is represented in a unique fashion, with the body of a snake, the head, shoulders and arms of a human and the head of a lion.



Continuing to the left around the temple, on the south wall, the royal pair and their son are shown in front of a row of five male gods lead by the lion-headed Apedemak. Behind him are the figures of the falcon-headed god Horus, the ram-headed god Amun, a mummy-shaped god named Akedise and another of Amun. Especially noticeable is the extremely detailed and varied decoration on the clothing of the figures. The rulers present various gifts to the gods while the five male gods breathe out the breath of life, pictured as tiny horizontal *ankh* signs, toward the noses of the royal family.

- [13] At the back of the temple, in the centre of the wall, the lion god is represented with four arms and what appears to be three heads. To the right, the king and a prince; to the left, the queen is again represented with a very voluminous body and is also accompanied by a prince. It appears that Apedemak is meant to be shown facing and welcoming, one at a time, the king and the queen by touching their elbows with one hand and holding a gift in the other. He also confronts the visitor standing in front of him, so that a kind of head movement from right to front to left can be imagined.
- [14] The right wall (north side), parallel to the south side, is decorated with the king, queen and prince on the left, facing a row of five female divinities. The first one, Isis, is holding a bunch of tied-up standing prisoners. She is followed by Mut, Amesemi, Hathor und Satet.
- Amesemi, the consort of Apedemak, is shown with short curly hair, wearing a crown with two falcons and with clearly African features. She is holding what appears to be severed hands (of enemies) in her left hand.
- [15] appears to be severed hands (of enemies) in her left hand.



[13]



[14]

The name of the goddess Amesemi was unknown before excavations were undertaken in Naga. The inscription over the depiction here on the Lion Temple is unfortunately destroyed. However, in 2002 the Naga team discovered a small stele in the Amun Temple showing the same goddess with the name of the goddess AMESEMI clearly written in Meroitic hieroglyphs beside her for the first time.

The reliefs inside the Lion Temple are very fragile and difficult to see. There, the lion god is shown in an unusual frontal view with a bushy beard, probably influenced by a Greek prototype. The combination and association of Greek, Roman and Meroitic styles, known from the architecture of the Hathor Chapel, are expressed here in the reliefs. Some of the mysterious larger round holes in the walls are caused by resident small owls. Due to generous funding by the Qatar Sudan Archaeologic Project, the conservation and roofing of the Lion Temple is planned for the next few years.



[15]



The Temple of Amun

On the slope of the Gebel to the east of the Hathor Chapel and the Lion Temple stands the largest sanctuary in Naga. The approach, from the bottom of a ramp toward the avenue of 12 reclining rams fronting the main temple, already indicates its dedication to the god Amun. Due to their subtle restoration, one does not realize that, before the excavation, these now stately sculptures placed on high bases had been covered in rubble for centuries and had collapsed in various state of preservation.

Between the knees of the rams with their fluffy fleece used to stand figures of kings, some of which have been found separately and will in future be exhibited in the Naga Museum. To this day, it is still a mystery by whom or at what time in history these figures, as well as the noses of the rams, were destroyed.

The small way-station (kiosk) between the rams – in which the statue of the god was temporarily placed during processions – is a typical feature of Amun temples. Inside, it is decorated with representations of a procession of Nile gods, each carrying two vases from which flows that elixir of life – water.



Of the impressive front facade of the main temple, only the gate, built of large sandstone blocks from the quarries on the top of the Gebel, has survived in its original state. The two much larger towers (pylons) to the right and left of the gate, originally about 10 m high, had been built of mud and burned brick so that only a few layers of bricks have survived in situ. The pylon ruins have undergone an extensive restoration project for the last two years, so that it is now at least possible to gain an impression of the size of the towers.





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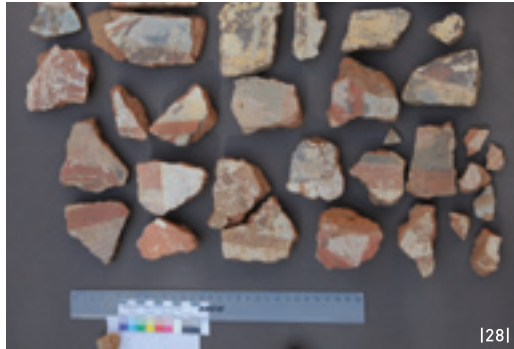
This and the following gates posts are decorated with relief scenes showing the king and queen being welcomed into the temple by the god Amun: on the south side (right), the god is represented with a ram's head welcoming the queen, Amanitore; on the north side (left), the god is shown with a human head before the king, Natakamani. In the embrasure of the gate, the god grasps the hand of the king and queen respectively. Ritual scenes can be seen on the mighty architrave above the gate, where remains of paint are preserved. Amun is represented twice in the centre of the decoration, once (to the left) looking north in human form as Amun of Thebes and a second time (to the right) looking south, with the ram's head of Amun of Naga.



[23]

After years of excavation and removing ca. 1.5 m of rubble and sand, one now enters the temple on the original stone paving, where the door pivots are still preserved. Inside the first room, six decorated columns stand today, five of which have been re-erected by our team. Only one standing column had originally remained upright, all the others had collapsed and been buried below the rubble. The columns are decorated with delicate reliefs on which remains of plaster and paint are still preserved in some places. The panels of decoration show the royal couple raising their hands in adoration of various gods and goddesses. The simple cubical capitals – an architectural feature unknown elsewhere – are decorated with the names of the members of the royal family.





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The walls of the rooms had been covered with mud plaster and painted with various royal scenes. Despite the destruction of the walls during a large conflagration, many hundreds of painted plaster fragments, which had fallen from the walls, are still preserved. A giant puzzle consisting of hundreds of fragments awaits re-assembly and restoration.



[30]



[31]



[32]

After passing through four gateways one reaches the only room built completely of sandstone blocks – the sanctuary. At the beginning of the excavation in 1995, only one wall was preserved. The huge collapsed blocks and architraves, lying on rubble and sand and weighing several tons, were removed during the excavation, leading to the surprising discovery of an almost completely preserved decorated altar. The sides are decorated with the programmatic scenes of the unification of the two lands by the gods Thoth and Horus as symbols of state order and sovereignty over Egypt and Kush. The altar, a particularly precious and singular find, is now kept in the Khartoum National Museum; a life-sized, detailed 3D copy of the altar has been placed in the sanctuary in Naga.

[31]

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[32]



The orientation of the Amun Temple follows astronomic, cultic and cosmic criteria. Standing in the sanctuary and looking toward the west, one sees the Lion Temple and a Gebel in the distance. In March and September, during the equinox, the rays of the sun at sundown reach through all the gates and illuminate the altar in the sanctuary.

[33] Behind the temple, facing away from the back wall toward the east, another ram sculpture on a base can be seen fronted by two small altars. It forms the centre of a small offering place, called a "contra-chapel", also known from Pharaonic temples in Egypt. Here the "normal" populace was able to approach the sanctuary of Amun from the outside in order to present their wishes to the ram, the holy animal of the god Amun – since only priests and the royal family were permitted to enter the temple proper.

On the north side of the temple, in an elongated room excavated in 1998, a beautiful painted sun altar was found. It has been buried once more under the sand to protect it until it can be exhibited in the future Naga Museum. [34]

Temples to the god Amun are a major feature in various sites such as Meroe, Dangeil, el Hassa, Gebel Barkal and other places. However, nowhere else does a temple come to life as it does in Naga, with its clear sequence of the ram avenue, the doorways and rooms and its dominating location on top of a spur of the Gebel.

The particular quality of the temple will only be recognizable in total when the Naga Museum has been opened and the finds exhibited. In the course of 15 years of excavation, from 1995–2010, finds of sculptures, steles and faience objects of high quality and uniqueness and of varied stylistic qualities were found in different rooms; the temple seems to have been destroyed in ca. 150 AD and was not reused. This diversity of finds adds a new dimension to the art history of the ancient Sudan, especially since, due to the almost unspoilt state of the site, the finds are in an excellent state of preservation.



SMALL SELECTION OF FINDS



This Isis figure (ca. 50 cm high), made of faience is unusual not only due to its size but also because of its stylistic features. Isis is represented in a typical Greco-Roman iconography with the pleated dress and a shawl secured at the front with the “Isis knot”. The hairstyle, consisting of corkscrew curls, can be recognized by remains on the shoulders. However, this typical Hellenistic iconography of Isis is combined here with the preferred voluminous female body type of the Meroitic time and with Pharaonic structural elements such as the base and the back pillar. The statue is currently exhibited in the Egyptian Museum in Munich as a generous loan of the NCAM.

[35]



This large statue of a draped male figure, made of very hard sandstone and representing a local dignitary, is one of two statues found in the city area of Naga. They were already noted by Lepsius in 1842 and were easily relocated by our mission in 1995. The rectangular base and the back-pillar follow the model of pharaonic sculpture, the dress is typical for high ranking officials in Greco-Roman Egypt. It would be interesting to know if the lost head showed indigenous features. The statues have now been restored and are on exhibit in the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum (SNM).

[36]



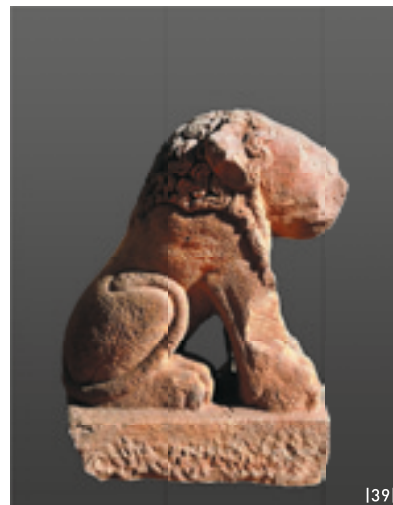
[37]

This very expressive sandstone figure of a toad was found in a magazine in the Amun Temple. Oversized toads statues have been found in Basa near the hafir (now exhibited in Khartoum in the garden of the museum). Toads are known to represent spontaneous rebirth and renewal out of mud, a phenomenon which can be seen today when small toads hibernate in a desert environment during the hot months and emerge out of the sand in the rainy season.



[38]

Many small-sized sandstone cubic figures with very distinct African facial features were found, mostly in the Amun Temple. All have strong evidence of grinding on their bodies, but it is not clear for what purpose these traces were made. One assumes it was for some ritual function.



[39]

Many lion statues of various materials were discovered in Naga, both in temples and in the city. They express the power of the sovereign. No two are of the same style. This representative of the larger statues, with its baroque curly mane, was found in the city. It was placed in front of a building on a ramp together with at least four more lion statues.



[40]

The small faience figurine shows the god Bes represented as a mixture of animal and human form. He is a simple, mostly domestic god who helped women at childbirth and generally kept away evil. Several examples were found in the Amun Temple. Most seem to have been mounted on a string, since they have bore holes, and were perhaps attached to a shrine or a wall.



A small sandstone stele found in the Amun Temple depicts, in delicate relief, the goddess Amesemi (with scarification marks on her cheek) on the left, facing Queen Amanishakheto with the typical corpulent body shape on the right. The goddess places her left hand on the back of the queen's head and touches her elbow with the other, a sign of protection and acceptance. The two ladies are connected by a chain of small *ankh* signs representing the breath of life being transferred from the goddess to the queen. The back is inscribed with fifteen lines of Meroitic cursive script, which also extends over the sides. The stele is exhibited in the Sudan National Museum, Khartoum.



This stele found in the sanctuary of the Amun Temple shows the goddess Amesemi (left) and Queen Amanishakheto standing in front of the seated lion-headed god Ape-demak. All are enclosed in a kiosk which is placed on a pedestal decorated with representations of kneeling enemies. One of them (on the left) is clearly characterized as a Roman soldier by his helmet and his large nose. The inscription on his body calls him "the white man". In the text on the back, place-names define the limits of the Meroitic kingdom from Lower Nubia up to Naga. The stele is currently exhibited in the Egyptian Museum in Munich.



This sandstone throne pedestal found in front of the Amun Temple is decorated with representations of subdued enemies, which would remain under the throne, once again emphasising the power of the king. Since similar throne pedestals have been found in the Amun Temples at Meroe and Gebel Barkal, the most important sanctuaries of the kingdom of Meroe, this pedestal is an important proof of Naga as a royal city. The pedestal is exhibited in the Sudan National Museum, Khartoum.



This unique find of a large sundial made of sandstone was excavated on a side ramp of the Amun Temple and was probably used to measure the hours for the temple rituals. One side is concave, with 12 radial lines indicating the hours; the reverse side is flat but also marked with 12 lines. Due to Naga's geographical position, the sun's course in the sky describes an ellipse of more than 180° in the summer, making both sides of the sundial applicable.

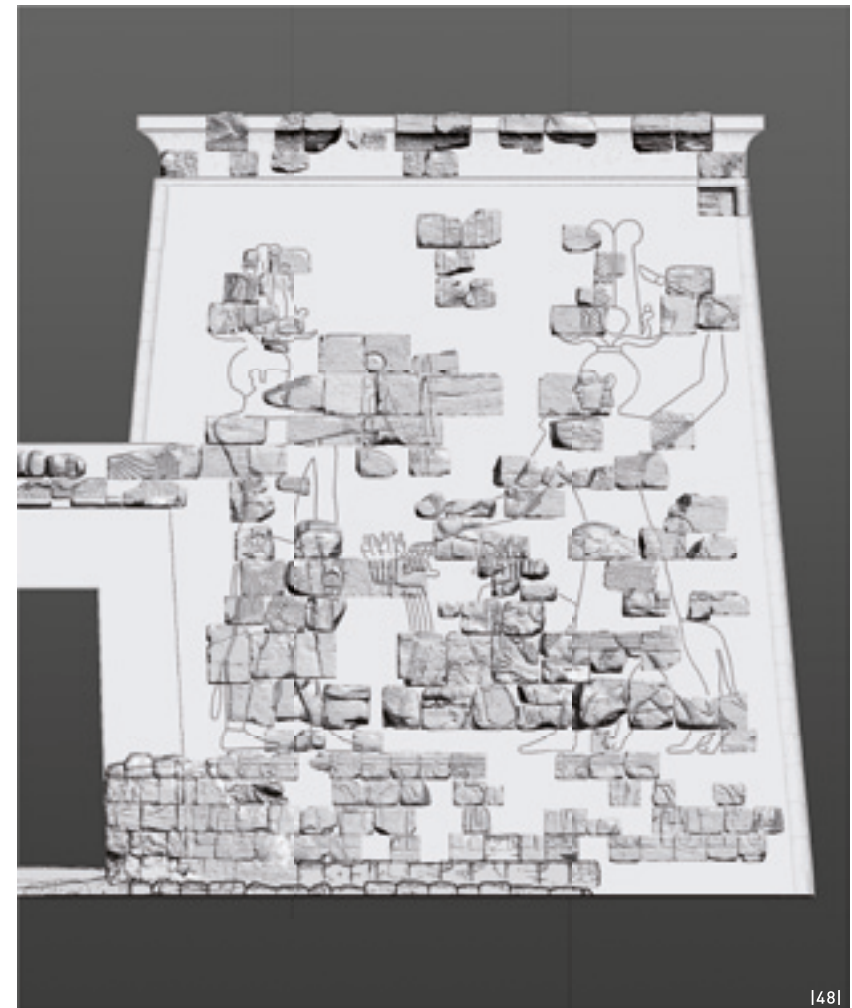


Temple 200

South of the Amun Temple another, smaller temple was located, which has been sanded in once more. The excavations started in 2002. Built rather slovenly with very soft sandstone blocks the walls collapsed anciently after only a short time of use. During four years of excavation, ca. 1,500 blocks were found, most of them decorated with relief. After many months of puzzle work, it was possible to reconstruct the relief scenes; they will be shown in the future Naga museum.



As part of the excellent cooperation between the NCAM and the excavators, several panels of decorated blocks are on loan in Berlin where they were elaborately restored and are now on display in the Sudan Gallery of the Egyptian Museum.





Gebel Naga



[50]



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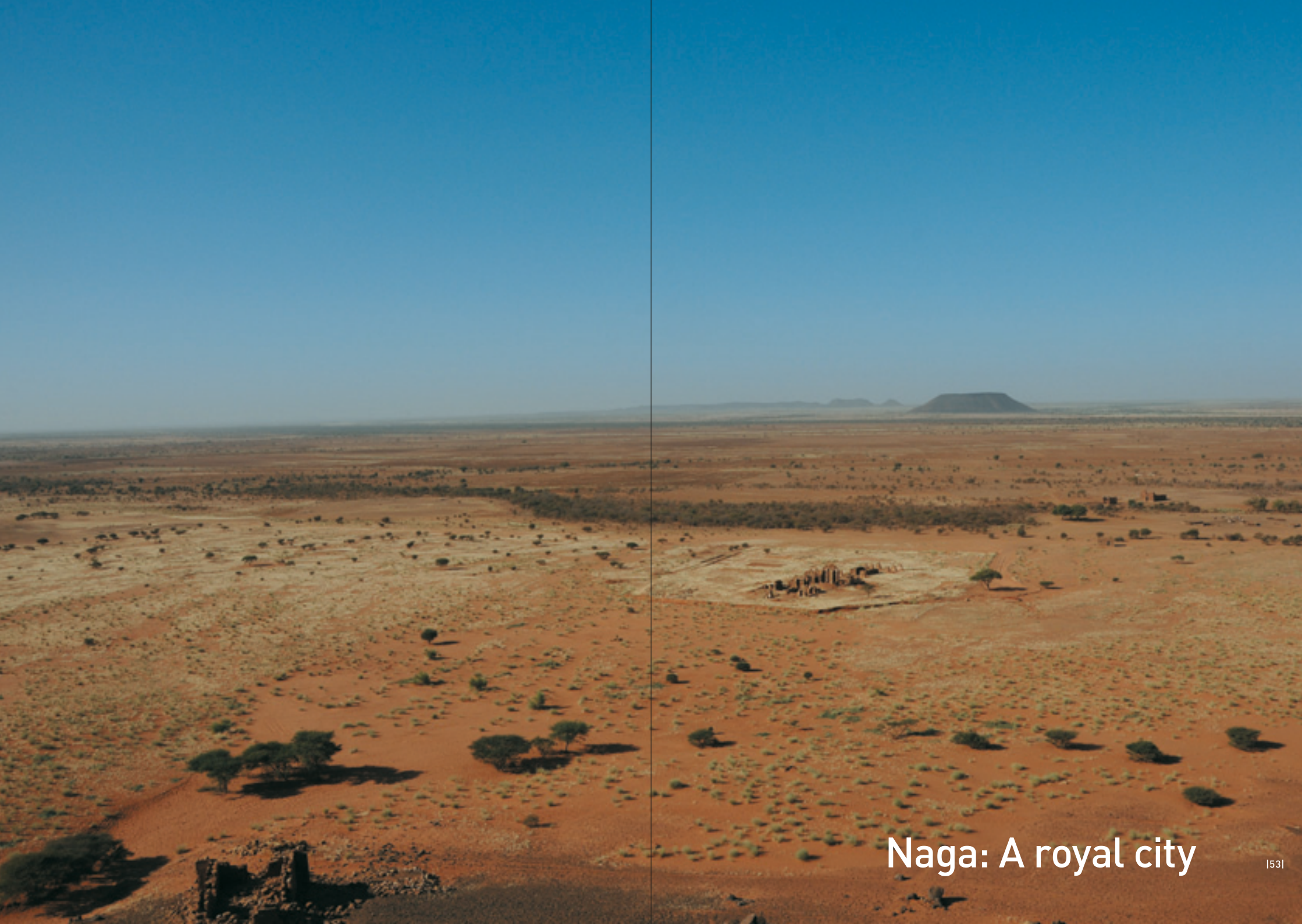
[52]

To the east of Naga, the Gebel rises about 60 m above the surrounding area. At the foot of the Gebel a small, so far unexcavated temple can be seen which appears to be the oldest temple in Naga. It was dedicated by Queen Shanak-dakhete, who reigned ca. 130 BC. The city of Naga, however, must have existed |49| even earlier, since the ancient name of Naga-*Tolkte* – is already recorded at the neighbouring site Musawwarat es Sufra, where the lion god Apedemak of Tolkte is specifically named in an inscription dated to ca. 200 BC.

Taking the time to climb to the flat topped Gebel, one is rewarded by a beautiful panoramic view over the whole of Naga and the Wadi Awatib. To the south, |50| the roundish embankment walls of the two Hafir (water reservoirs which were used to catch the water in the rainy season) are visible .

To the west and north (to the right) near the Lion Temple and Hathor Chapel, large rubble mounds sprinkle the plain – remains of still-buried temples, administrative buildings and palaces. To the north, directly at the foot of the Gebel, large and small tumulus graves are part of the large cemetery which |51| holds potential for excavation work for many generations to come.

While climbing the Gebel Naga, one should make note of many traces of chisel and other tool marks which are preserved on the rock faces. The work process of paring stones for the temples below is particularly apparent at the very top of the hill, where unfinished blocks, partly hewn out of the rock, are preserved. Almost all the stone for the temples come from this quarry. |52|



Naga: A royal city

Naga: A royal city

Looking down from the Gebel to the large spread of the city itself, one can't help but wonder why a city was founded in the steppe, about 35 km away from the life-giving Nile. The foundation date corresponds to the beginning of the Meroitic kingdom in 300 BC, with its capital city of Meroe ca. 220 km north of Khartoum. The kings and queens of Meroe ruled a territory extending in the north all the way to Aswan – a major African power independent of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. Naga was located along the caravan route leading from the confluence of the White and the Blue Nile (at Khartoum) toward the Butana steppe and Meroe onward to the Bayuda toward Gebel Barkal. Naga was the gateway of the Meroitic state, a city of ostentation opening the heart of Africa to the great states of Near East and the Mediterranean. It was an outpost of the capital Meroe and a trading centre. At this strategically important location, state representatives availed themselves of an architecture which used inspiration from the foreign lands with which Meroe cultivated political and economic contacts. The artistic decoration of the temple walls and the statues underlined the showcase function of this confident political state.

Looking to the future

The whole splendour of the ancient Naga will only be visible in the course of the next years and decades of excavation. Thanks to the support of the Qatar Sudan Archaeological Project, which finances the excavation and restoration work in Naga, the work of the the Munich Museum Project continues yearly from October to March.

In the near future, a local museum will be built in Naga, designed by the world famous architect Sir David Chipperfield. The finances have already been granted by the Qatar Sudan Archaeological Project. The Naga museum intends to be a place of cultural and historical identity. The Sudanese visitors should feel the ancient atmosphere of the site, the original setting of the art and history of their country. For foreign visitors, the museum should be a focal point for ancient and modern architecture and the Meroitic culture. In this, Naga will satisfy the high requirements of the UNESCO, which included Naga in the World Heritage List in 2011.

The work in Naga over the years would not have been possible without the help and cooperation of the members of the NCAM and our local workers. We are extremely grateful to all of them and of course also to all the members of our team.



At the site of Naga

(GPS: 16° 16' 117" N; 33° 16' 400" E)

Our main aim in Naga is to preserve the national heritage of the site for future generations, but only with your help and the cautious and respectful treatment of the ancient monuments do we have a chance to achieve this goal. Here a few recommendations and requests for our visitors:

Entrance fees can be paid at the site (currently 50 SDG) or purchased in advance at the NCAM in Khartoum. At the site, you should receive a receipt from the local ticket salesman.

Visitors' cars can be parked under the tree by the Hathor Chapel or under the tree next to the Amun Temple.

A major concern for the Naga team is the potential damage to the ancient monuments.

Please do not leave the visible vehicle track, as many archaeological features (for example graves) are nearby under the sand and therefore not visible. They can be destroyed by driving over them.

Graffiti (writing or scratching) on the walls is considered wilful destruction and defacing of the monuments and is forbidden by law.

We ask that everyone help protect the monuments and prevent this defacement.

We ask visitors not to climb on top of walls. The walls, especially those of the Amun Temple, are extremely delicate and brittle, this destroys the remaining bricks and stones, and also negates the restoration work done by our conservators.

Please do not leave any garbage, plastic or aluminium packaging material at the site. Take it with you to your home or hotel and dispose of it there.



Remember that at the well in Naga (and elsewhere), it is always polite to ask people first if they don't object to being photographed.

Another very important aspect of your visit to Naga:

Please be aware that there are quite a few snakes in Naga, especially between the stones. Most are harmless but there are several very dangerous ones. Please watch where you step, and for your own safety don't climb the walls and don't put your hands under stones.

The Mission thanks you for your cooperation.





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