

B2400: A New Page in Meroitic Architecture

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The archaeological area of Jebel Barkal (ancient Napata) to the North of the temples abounds in monumental remains, but the excavations prove rather difficult because of thick layers of sand that cover a severe destruction. Finally a magnificent royal quarter of the Meroitic period became (poor) burial ground.

Digging more buildings produced all the time fresh evidence on masonry and plans, and comparison was fit for dating and understanding what looked for some way related or similar.

Under such perspective the study of a palace already excavated by Reisner is here resumed, which shows a number of features apparently shared by another edifice, where many fragments of Greek architecture were recently detected.

In the “Meroitic sector” of Napata, between Jebel Barkal and the modern town of Karima, in North Sudan, B2400 was, until 2001, a completely unknown building (Fig. 1). Its numbering is the result of the shift of the same number given to a hypothetical structure on a map of T. Kendall a little farther to the north, whose form and position has not yet been proven. Prior to 2001 little attention was devoted to some surface stone slabs beside and inside the modern dirt road, which used to lead to the town of Karima by crossing the archaeological area of Jebel Barkal. These stones were probably unearthed during some early unrecorded sounding, possibly the work of treasure hunters.

In 2001 the Sudanese Authorities (NCAM) requested that the Italian archaeological expedition of Rome University “La Sapienza” conduct archaeological exploration outside the main area of its concession (i.e. the “Natakamani palace” [B1500]), in order to assess the extent of ancient construction in the sector. In 2002 NCAM erected a brick wall for the purpose of rescuing the excavation area, especially from the traffic on the road, which runs beside the perimeter of an older fence. Unfortunately both the original fence and the new wall stumbled upon an ancient structure, and it was necessary to dismantle a part of the newer wall in 2008. At the end of last century even a trench was dug for a telephone cable, and it

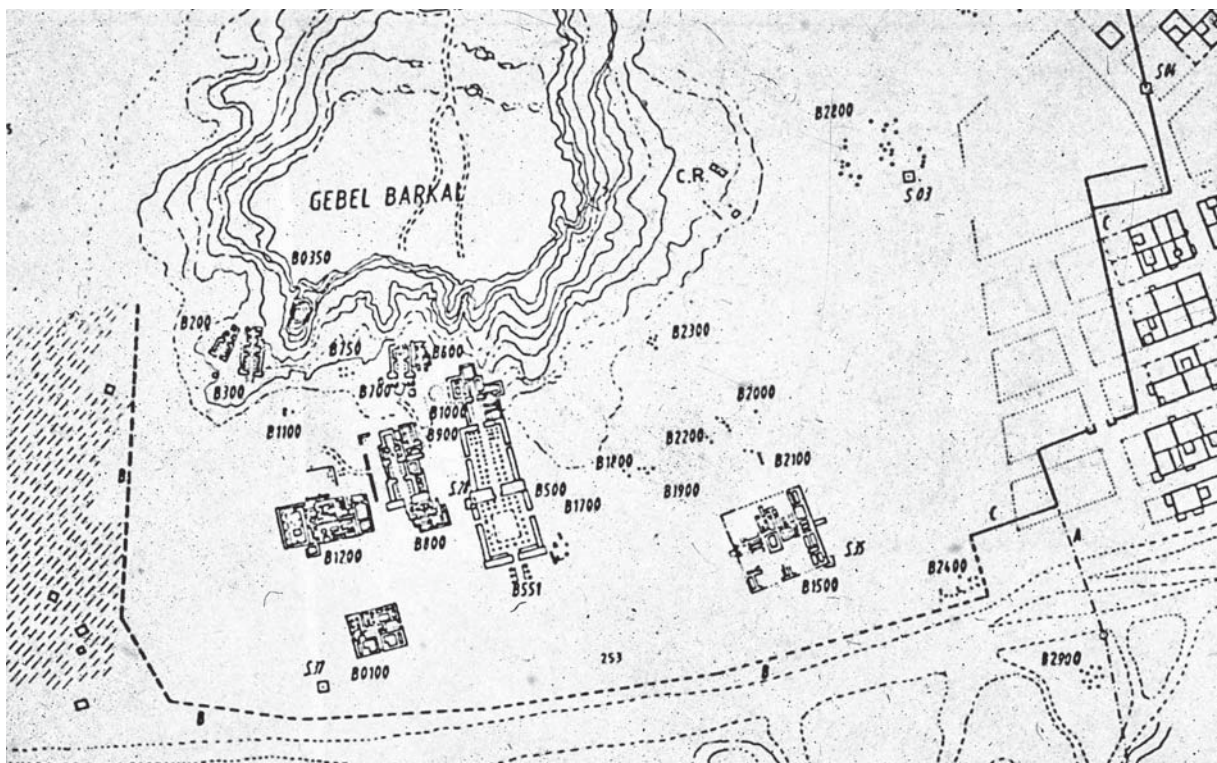


Fig. 1: General Map (Drawn by E. Mitchell)

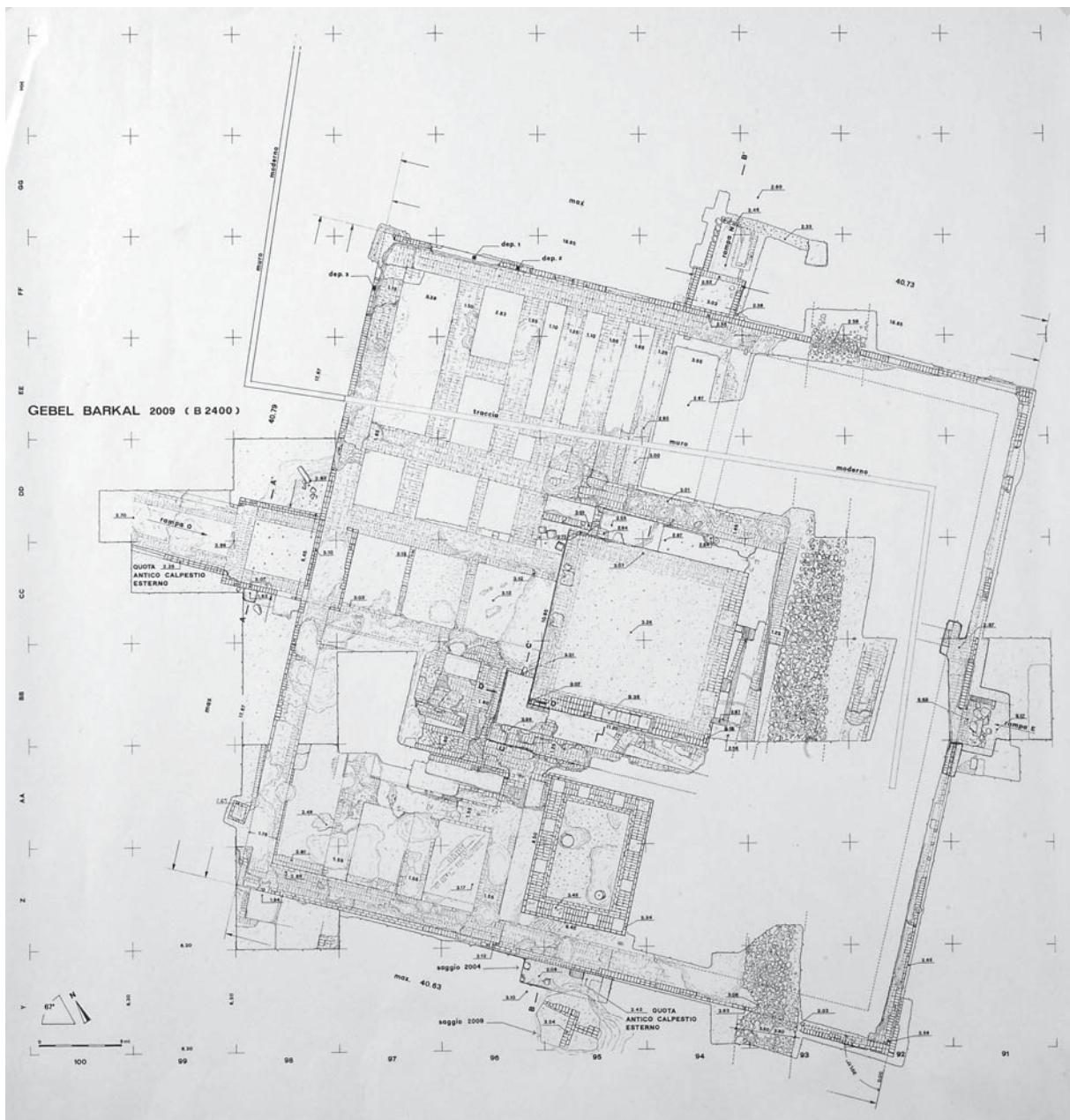


Fig. 2: Plan of B 2400 (Drawn by S. Barberini)

ran along an ancient paved road, never seen before 2004, which passed right across B2400, starting from its northern side. No attention was ever paid to the ancient remains, which could be recognized as a unity only through a comprehensive examination.

From the first sounding this area awoke an outstanding interest because of the find of a number of stone fragments of Ionic architecture, hidden and preserved in some hollows left by ancient robbers.¹ It may be here that Cailliaud noticed some pieces of Ionic architecture lying on the ground, which have

disappeared since then. But only in 2002 the shape of an original building with a square plan could be outlined and measured. Its contour was traced and many remains on an unexpectedly wide surface could be attributed to a unitary structure.²

Thanks to the experience drawn from the excavations in B1500, the work in B2400 seemed familiar, in spite of some differences (Fig. 2, 3, 4). The square structure was completely encircled by a red brick coated peripheral wall with deep and careful foundations. It was, however, left unplastered and held no decoration. Its side had a length of about 40 m,

1 Sist 2003, 580-584.

2 Roccati 2008, 251-252, fig. 5-6.



Fig. 3: A view of the Italian excavations in B 2400 (Photo Roccati)

less in comparison to the 61 m of B1500. Like B1500 some entrance was expected in the middle of each side. In B1500 the Mission found three rather similar entrances each one in the middle of three sides, and a different one (to the west) in the middle of the fourth. In B2400 no evidence could be found for an entrance on its south side in spite of a careful and wide search which eventually brought to light just later walls belonging to other buildings on the exterior. Only

the west entrance, reached by a short ramp, was better preserved, while the north and especially the east entrances were severely damaged and difficult to recognize. To the east it was the road that was responsible for heavy damage; anyhow the whole area was used later on as a burial ground, like the entire surface, after the destruction of the Meroitic sector, as far as the Jebel and inside the modern town of Karima, which became a large cemetery.

While B1500 stood on a high platform, B2400 was not erected on any platform, unlike it was suspected in the beginning, but merely on a levelled ground, and what was extant pertained essentially to its foundations. That may explain the even worse condition of its preservation. The building lay at ground level, similar to the palace of Wad Ben Naga, but at a certain moment it was destroyed and made again ground level, so that a well paved road was started from its northern outer wall and passed over the entire palace area in the direction of the Amun temp-

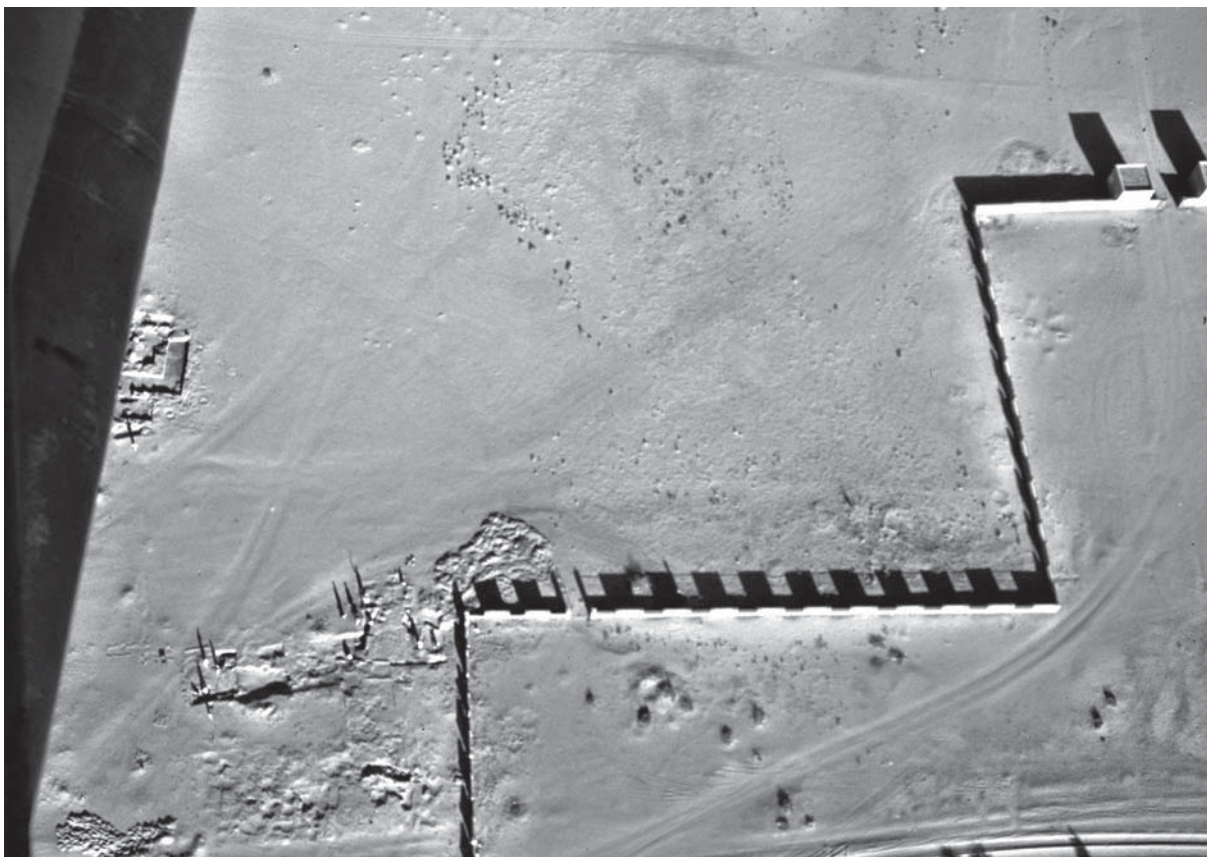


Fig. 4: Aerial view of B2400 (Photo Roccati)

le (i.e. north-south). That may show that the earlier building had been totally removed. The Ionic fragments were related to this earlier phase, as their location looks central in the plan of the building as it was definitely drawn in 2009. What is not clear is whether this building had a sacred function, like a temple, or a private use as a palace.

The building details place this edifice in the Meroitic period, even if it is sited in an earlier time than the “palace of Natakamani”. There is some relationship between B2400 and B1500, but the differences are remarkable – one for all, the orientation is different. Therefore it was deemed advisable to turn the eyes elsewhere.

Having now an excellent satellite map of the archaeological area, it was possible to recognize another building with some similar shape and measurements, lying on a rather common line at the other edge of the excavation field, where Reisner uncovered it (B100, Fig. 5). Thanks to the help generously granted by T. Kendall, it is useful to compare what has been observed in B2400 and Reisner’s unpublished notes, since both structures seem to display a number of similar features. Even if nothing of B100 can be recognized at present on the ground, Reisner found its walls still preserved to some height, whereas in B2400 they were almost completely erased (as in B1500).

Unlike B1500, B2400 had no casemate foundation of a platform, but walls rise at ground level as in B100 (and in the palace at Wad Ben Naga). Like the other buildings there was an entrance on every side, namely in the middle of three (may be four) sides in B2400 (four sides in B1500, but the west entrance was different), while in B100 the four entrances were not on axis. Two entrances (north and east) in B2400 are recognizable through a small terrace protruding in front of them, reached by an originally closed and narrow passageway (to the north) and not by a large terrace as in B1500. However, the western entrance terrace and ramp are larger than the others, while some disturbed stone slabs seem to mark a small landing or terrace to the east. Owing to the reduced height of the palace floor, there was no need

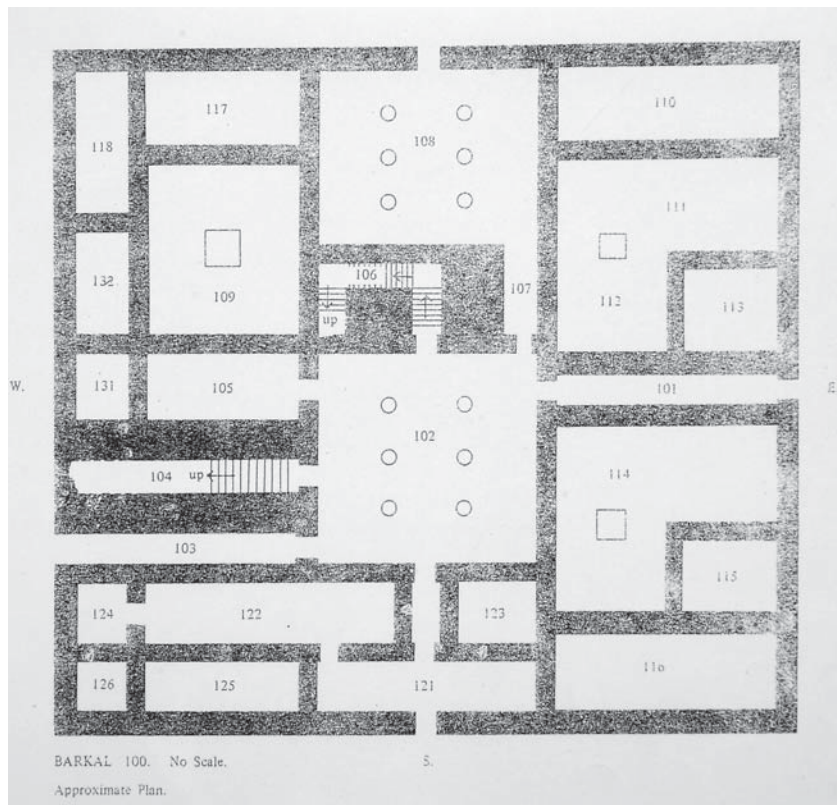


Fig. 5: Plan of B 100 (Courtesy T. Kendall)

to foresee an access stairway, but a light ramp could suffice, perhaps for the climbing of donkeys on the western side.

On the contrary such monumental staircases (with over twenty steps) are a landmark of the most imposing palace B1500 built by (?) “Natakamani”. A similar pattern has been remarked in front of the temple of Isis at Philae, where it was probably an addition contemporary to that of Natakamani’s palace at Napata (end of 1st cent. AD): in front of Nectanebo’s gate and of the First Pylon built by Ptolemy VI.³ Both on this terrace at Philae and on three terraces of B1500 two statues of sitting lions were positioned; at Philae stood also a pair of obelisks. At any rate in B2400 three entrances are preceded by small terraces of variable size, which seem to be modest forerunners of the great access terraces in B1500.

Actually it is in correspondence with the south side of B2400 that something like a shrine or a court could be traced, namely the structure in which most probably the Greek architecture stood. It parallels an entrance leading directly to a hypostyle hall in B100, where it is not introduced by any kind of outer access.

³ Roccati 2011 b, 161-170.

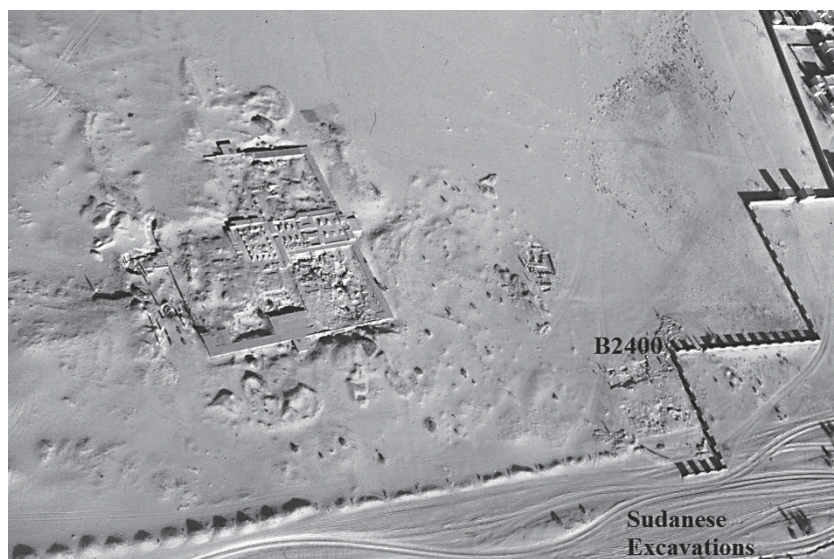


Fig. 6: Area of the Italian and Sudanese excavations (Photo Roccati)

In B100 two hypostyle halls in axis occur. In B2400 a large space corresponds to the second one, in the middle of the square plan, to be left roofless owing to its width. It was interpreted as a court, surrounded, however, by an original stone wall, which was completely removed. It is to the east of this court and of the Greek structure that the later paved road ran, covering the remains of the adjacent plan.

The mud brick walls of B2400 have in general large dimensions, suggesting that an upper floor must be envisaged, with stairs leading to it, as in B100. The location of stairways has to be reconstructed by the layout of walls. Until now two stairs were conjectured in correspondence with the western and northern accesses, while to the east all evidence may have been lost subsequently as a result of the laying of the road. In B100 the central hypostyle hall gave access to two staircases leading to an upper floor, in a way similar, though not identical, to the central system of B1500, which was rather scenic. Like B100, there are two halls in B1500, proceeding from the northern entrance; the outer one was interpreted as an open passageway with covered sides, the second one as a proper hypostyle hall. From this hall it was possible to recognize the access to a staircase to the west, and to the south a door opening into the central peristyle court. From this court two more staircases departed. The hypostyle

halls in B100 were separated by a winding staircase; instead of this in B1500 an apparently guarded gate is supposed to replace it. But the surface of B1500 is much larger (a square of 61 m side).

The eastern half of B2400 was severely damaged by the laying of a paved road in antiquity (a similar road can be noticed at the foot of the Jebel, in the direction of the pyramid field). Therefore the western half alone was submitted to careful investigation, but the southwestern part turned out to be heavily destroyed. It was possible to distinguish three

rooms, filling the space to the west of the peristyle hall. The northern part hosted apparently some long and narrow storerooms.

The excavation of B2400 is almost complete, and the results achieved until now (2011) bear an interest in that it seems to provide a link between a former pattern witnessed by B100 and the later layout of B1500 (Fig. 6). The Greek elements hint at a period before the Roman raid. In the last years (2011-2012) a team of the University of Karima made some training excavations in the middle of the road, a few meters to the east from the eastern side of B2400, with a rich archaeological harvest (Fig. 7). It is still early to draw any conclusions, whether there was any relationship between a building, where many jars were stored, with mud brick walls and perhaps a court, and B 2400. Its extent is unknown, but the



Fig. 7: A view of the Sudanese excavations next to B 2400 (Photo Bakovic)

orientation seems similar, so that both buildings may have been contemporary perhaps in an ancient (Napatan?) stage.

At the end all over this area a cemetery was laid, and a number of burials have been uncovered as far as B1500 and B2200, as well as those found by the Spanish Mission near a huge Meroitic building in the Abbasiya quarter of Karima.⁴

The reported works of this Mission were funded by the Universities of Rome “La Sapienza” and (subsequently) Turin and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Their success is due to the collaboration of some senior specialists in field work: Prof. Loredana Sist (Rome University), Prof. Grazyna Bakowska (Rzeszow University), Arch. Carlo Cataldi Tassoni, Arch. Giuseppe Caputo, Mr. Sergio Barberini (drawings), Mr. Giacomo Lovera (photography); beside some younger forces: Dr. Barbara Russo, Dr. Roberto Gozzoli, Dr. Maria Novella Sordi, Dr. Claudia Micari, Dr. Roberta Petrilli. Prof. Giorgio Martinotti (Turin University) with his team provided assistance in surveying. Prof. Alexandra Pudło (Gdansk University) examined the human remains.

Prof. Steffen Wenig worked also some time as a guest in the Mission, when it was directed by Prof. Sergio Donadoni, and I am pleased to address to him this last report of mine.

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4 Diaz-de-Cerio 2007, 433-442.

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TITELBILD: Säulenbasis mit Löwe, Große Anlage von Musawwarat es Sufra, Raum 108
(Foto: Claudia Näser)

FRONTISPIZ: Der Jubilar im Garten seines Hauses in Berlin-Karow
(Foto: Jane Humphris, Bildbearbeitung: Frank Joachim)

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DANK

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