

B 500: The flag masts

Each of the two forward courts of B 500 was fronted by a pylon, estimated to be 18-20 m high. These pylons were rebuilt for the last time by the Meroitic royal couple Natakamani and Amanitore in the early first century AD. The front wall of each pylon had four deep vertical recesses, which were emplacements for wooden flag masts that would have stood perhaps up to 24 m high. Each mast was held in place against the pylon face by massive wooden clamps which projected from two levels of windows (**fig. 1**). At their summits the masts flew long banners or streamers, which were thought to reveal the presence of the deity by their movement in the wind, signaling the breath of the god. Egyptian texts tell us that the lower extremities of the masts were fitted with bronze and that their points were plated in electrum.

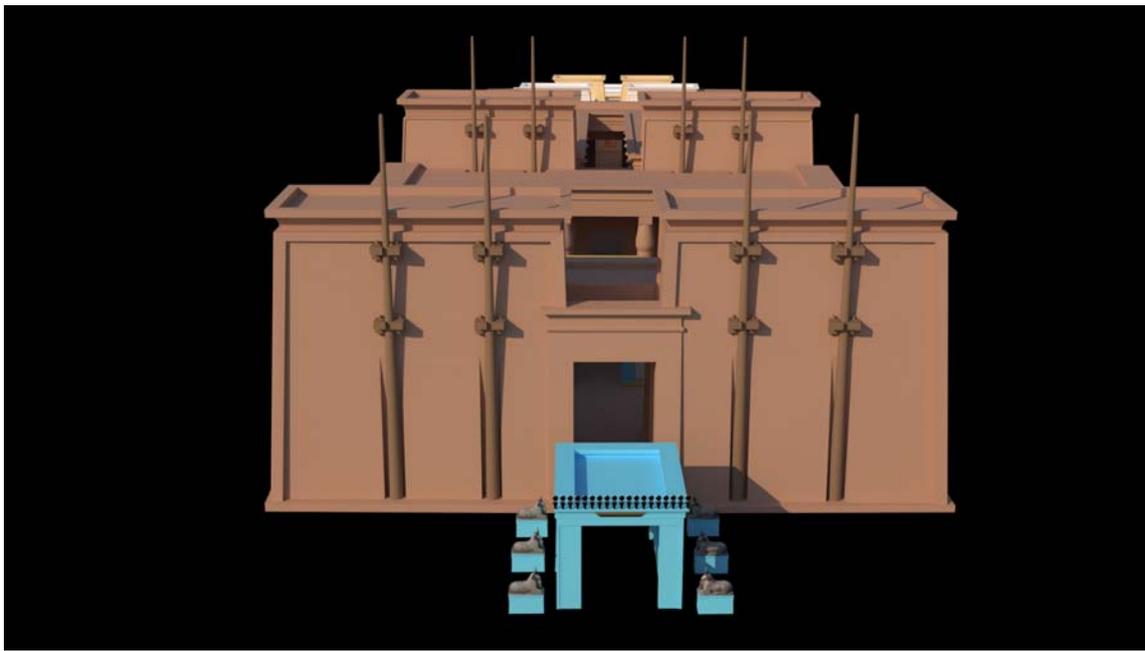


fig. 1. *The Meroitic facade of B 500, showing the flag masts and kiosk B 551 fronting the entrance.*

The flag masts in B 500 would have been made from the trunks of huge Cilician pine trees, cut in the mountains of Lebanon, shorn of their branches, shipped to Egypt, and floated 2000 km upriver to Jebel Barkal. That such complex, labor-intensive operations could be successfully completed proves that the Meroitic kingdom in the first century AD had friendly and cooperative relations with Roman Egypt.

Recent excavations of the flag niches in B 500 have revealed that each mast had a massive stone as a foundation and was capped at the bottom with a circular disk of heavy bronze, which was nailed to the wood (**fig. 2**). These disks, which still survive *in situ* in some of the niches, despite the loss of their wooden masts, were made from multiple overlapping plates of metal, fastened together with bronze nails along the straight edges. The larger nails survived only as traces of iron rust. These disks had evidently been intended to prevent rot, to inhibit wood-boring insects, and to prevent the bases from

cracking when the masts were raised. Their diameters, from .90 - 1.20 m, indicate the thicknesses of the masts.



fig. 2. *Bronze disk, made of overlapping plates of metal, originally nailed to the bottom of the flag mast. The photograph shows the disk, as found, in 1987, still in place in the second flag mast recess (from the left) of the second pylon of B 500. Meroitic renovation.*

Most surprising was the discovery that before the bronze disks were nailed to the bottoms of the masts, and before the masts were raised, small bronze plaques cut in the shape of bound enemy prisoners were ritually nailed to the mast bottoms (**fig. 3**). Each figure was inscribed in Meroitic script with the name of the particular enemy tribe it represented, and each was pierced through the chest or head with a bronze nail (**figs. 4, 5**). This ritual was obviously intended to kill the depicted enemies by sympathetic-magic.



fig. 3. *Bronze plaque in the form of a bound enemy prisoner, shown, as found, in 1987 on top of the bronze disk (cf. fig. 3). The figure had clearly been nailed to the bottom of the mast before the disk had been affixed to it.*



fig. 4. *Bronze plaque in the form of a bound prisoner, once nailed to the bottom of the a flag mast in B 500. Found in 1920 by G. A. Reisner. Ht. 6.8 x l. 9.4 cm x th. .3 cm.*

Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts Expedition. MFA 24.1791. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



fig. 5. Reverse of the bronze figure shown in fig. 4. The Meroitic text reads "Setelo," a word which is probably to be translated "The Nubian." Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

When the flag masts were finally raised to vertical by ropes hauled over the roof or through the windows of the pylon, their enormous weight would have rested on the enemy figures, as if to crush them eternally under the god's standards. The Egyptian hieroglyph of the flagpole, in fact, had the meaning "god." This association of the flag with God has come down to the present, for in the modern Sudan, flags are still put over sheikhs' tombs to mark them as holy places (**fig. 6**).



fig. 6: *Flags over a modern tomb of a Sudanese holy man. Photo: T. Kendall*