

Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica I: A monogram of Abraham from Meroe

[*Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica I*: Un monograma de Abraham de Meroe]

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Resumen: Este artículo se ocupa de un monograma del nombre Abraham grabado en los muros de un antiguo monumento en Sudán, al tiempo que inaugura una serie de breves artículos titulada *Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica*, dedicada a fuentes olvidadas de la historia medieval de la Nubia cristiana.

Abstract: The present paper discusses a monogram of the name Abraham carved on the walls of an ancient monument in Sudan, and opens up a series of brief papers titled *Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica*, dedicated to forgotten sources of the Medieval History of Christian Nubia.

Palabras clave: Sudán. Nubia. Epigrafía. Monograma. Abraham.

Key words: Sudan. Nubia. Epigraphics. Monogram. Abraham.



Introduction

Literacy and multilingualism in Medieval Nubia have attracted the attention of scholars from quite early in the history of studies about the Christian Nubian civilization.¹

¹ P. L. SHINNIE, "Multilingualism in Medieval Nubia", in A. M. Abdalla (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Languages of the Sudan* (Khartoum, 1974); T. Hägg, "Some remarks on the Use of Greek in Nubia", in J. M. PLUMLEY (ed.), *Nubian Studies* (Warminster, 1982).

One very characteristic aspect of the use of scripts in Nubia that should be considered is the preference for the Greek alphabet. This is on the one hand logical, since Greek was the *lingua franca* of the Late Antique world, thus linked closely with the development of Christianity, the largest religion based on Holy Scriptures. However, on the other hand its use developed in a very particular way in Nubia, as can be seen, among other points,² by the extensive use of monograms and cryptograms in the corpus of Medieval Nubian epigraphics.³

In the present paper, I wish to discuss a very interesting inscriptional find that, as far as I know, has not yet attracted scholarly attention. This is a carving on the northern wall of the offering chapel in front of the pyramid of Queen Amanitore in the Northern royal cemetery of the Meroitic capital (Beg. N.1), west of the modern village of Bejarawiya in the Islamic Republic of the Sudan.⁴ As can be seen in the photograph, the carving is a monogram of the name Abraham. It occupies the space directly in front of the face of a figure venerating (?) the Queen, who is represented further west (left for the spectator), and above other unidentifiable graffiti. This inscription can be analyzed on three levels:

1. In relation to the particular space it occupies.
2. In comparison to other instances of the same monogram.
3. In search of an identification of the person referred to with the name Abraham.

1. The Meroitic Cemetery

In 1843, the first scientific recording of the visible monuments in the Meroe pyramidal cemetery was conducted by the Lepsius Prussian Expedition.⁵ Included

² A. TSAKOS, "Linguistic Notes on Two Funerary Stelae from Nubia", CCO 1 (2004), pp. 287-292.

³ J. M. PLUMLEY, "Nubian Christian Numerical Cryptograms: Some Elucidations", in Van Moorsel (ed.), *New Discoveries in Nubia* (Leiden, 1982); C. D. G. MÜLLER, "Schutzinschriften einer Grablege in Alt-Dongola", in S. JAKOBIELSKI & P. O. SCHOLZ, *Dongola-Studien* (Warsaw, 2001); A. TSAKOS, "Some Remarks on the Abbreviations of the name Ioannis and their coexistence with the title of (arch)presbyter", *Beiträge zur Sudanforschung* 9 (2006), pp. 113-118; IDEM, "On the Medieval Inscriptional Material from M.D.A.S.P.", *Meroitica* 23 (2007), pp. 235-246.

⁴ S. E. CHAPMAN, *Decorated Chapels of the Meroitic Pyramids at Meroë and Barkal* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1952), p. 4 and pl. 18D & 32A.

⁵ K. R. LEPSIUS, *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien nach den Zeichnungen der von Seiner Majestät dem Könige von Preussen, Friedrich Wilhelm IV., nach diesen Ländern gesendeten, und in den Jahren 1842-1845 ausgeführten wissenschaftlichen Expedition auf Befehl Seiner Majestät*, 13 vols. (Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1849 = rep. Genève: Éditions de Belles-Lettres, 1972).

in the grandiose volumes of the *Denkmäler*, published six years later, were reproductions of the reliefs from the chapel of Beg N.1 (the 20th pyramid of cemetery A according to the classification of Lepsius).⁶ However, no indication of the monogram under consideration in the present paper was reproduced.⁷ The figure, in front of whose face the monogram was carved, was identified as a priest.

More than a century later, Dows Dunham (in cooperation with Suzanne Chapman) re-published reconstructions of the reliefs based on the existing data from the pyramid chapels in Bejarawiya⁸ as part of the series publishing the excavations conducted by G.A. Reisner in the early 20th century at Meroe.⁹ Again, no reference to the monogram was made in it, nor was there any mention of the other graffiti carved in the same location, which, while also carved after the fall of the Meroitic Empire, were earlier than the graffiti under consideration.

In the second half of the 20th century the fate of the pyramids of Meroe has been closely linked with the activities of the late German architect, Dr. F. W. Hinkel. During the 1960s he was also responsible for the transport of antiquities from the area flooded by Aswan High Dam to the new National Museum in Khartoum, whose construction he designed and supervised. Later, he took over the laborious – but also highly meaningful for the cultural politics in the Sudan – task of rehabilitating this very important archaeological site along the Middle Nile and beyond, since there is no other place in the world with so many pyramids. Among his tasks, was the (re-) drawing and photography of all the pyramid chapel reliefs. His vast archive is still waiting publication. It is a praiseworthy undertaking of Professor J.W. Yellin who continues with the presentation of this material.¹⁰

In the meantime, it is possible to attempt an approach towards the decipherment of this carving.

2. The monogram of Abraham

I have previously referred to four instances of a monogram of Abraham being carved on the rock outcroppings of Medieval and obviously Christian sites in the Fourth Cataract region: Umm Qatātiyya of the Humboldt University Nubian

⁶ K. R. LEPSIUS, *Denkmaeler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien*, V, p. 310 (Textbände).

⁷ K. R. LEPSIUS, *Denkmaeler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien*, V, B1, 46 (Tafelwerke).

⁸ S. E. CHAPMAN, *Decorated Chapels*.

⁹ D. DUNHAM, *Royal Tombs at Meroe and Barkal* (Boston, 1957).

¹⁰ The paper has profited on many levels from contacts with J.W. Yellin.

Expedition concession area, and site coded 4-M-152 of the Sudan Archaeological Research Society of the British Museum in the Fourth Cataract.¹¹

Given the fact that the only other recorded instances of this monogram are to be found on ceramics from the monastery of Ghazālī,¹² I have suggested that the Fourth Cataract area, especially the region around Kirbekan where the four recorded finds were discovered, and the Wādī Abū Dūm, where the Ghazālī monastery is located, belonged to the same ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹³

The carving from the pyramid chapel in the Meroitic capital is different in comparison to these finds in regards to the very large A & M on the 'head' of the monogram. Whether this is a detail that can separate it from the other monograms chronologically and instead suggest a modern dating given the re-discovery of Beg. N 1 by Christians beginning with the 19th century is nonetheless rather doubtful; but whether its differences can suggest a different geo-political context to which it belongs is a question that should remain open – especially given the fragmentary state of preservation of the Ghazālī finds.

If the dating in the Medieval period is not to be doubted, then the ecclesiastical and/or political links between the areas under the influence of Old Dongola (the capital of the state of Makuria) which almost certainly includes Ghazālī, and the Meroitic heartlands, which are considered as part of Alodia (the southernmost Christian Kingdom of Medieval Nubia), should be reconsidered. However, one is justified to ask for which period would such an epigraphic instance be meaningful. This question is linked with the identification of the person referred to in the monogrammatic carving of the name Abraham.

3. The identification of the Nubian Abraham

All Nubian monograms of Abraham conform to the cruciform pattern of monograms, which is a Byzantine tradition developed from the 6th century CE for

¹¹ Cf. map below. See A. TSAKOS, "Some Remarks on the Abbreviations of the name Ioannis...", *Beiträge zur Sudanforschung* 9 (2006), pp. 113-118; IDEM, "On the Medieval Inscriptional Material from M.D.A.S.P.", *Meroitica* 23 (2007), pp. 235-246.

¹² P. L. SHINNIE & H. N. CHITTICK, *Ghazali – a Monastery in Northern Sudan*, «Sudan Antiquities Service Occasional Papers» 5 (Khartoum, 1961), pp. 97, fig. 35, no. 32 & 98, fig. 38, no. 85.

¹³ A. TSAKOS, "Some Remarks on the Abbreviations of the name Ioannis...", *Beiträge zur Sudanforschung* 9 (2006), pp. 113-118.

use on seals of individuals.¹⁴ This was a period of intensive contact between Nubia and Constantinople, due to the evangelization efforts promulgated by Justinian and Theodora. Research on Nubian literacy has shown¹⁵ that after the conquest of Egypt by the Arabs in 641 CE and the subsequent blockage of the Middle Nile Valley from contacts with the centers of Eastern Mediterranean Christianity, the Nubians were nevertheless inventive enough to coin their own titles and honorific epithets in Greek based on the ones inherited from the Early Byzantine court titular traditions. So, one can suggest that the monogram for Abraham was a similar inheritance from the 6th-7th century CE Byzantine presence in Christian Monophysite Egypt.

It is to the same period that the earliest instance of the commonest funerary prayer used on Nubian epitaphs can be dated. This prayer is the so-called Euchologion Mega-type of prayer for the dead, which is still in use by the Greek Orthodox Church, but which was only carved on tombstones in Medieval Nubia. The earliest known recording of the prayer is from a 7th century CE papyrus from Nessana in Palestine.¹⁶ Actually, the name Abraham is found in the vast majority of this prayer's occurrences in Medieval Nubian epigraphics,¹⁷ and precisely in the most characteristic formula of this prayer, in which God is asked to give rest to the soul of the deceased in the bosom of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac:

ΑΝΑΠΑΥΣΟΝ ΤΗΝ ΨΥΧΗΝ ΤΟΥ ΔΟΥΛΟΥ ΣΟΥ ΕΝ ΚΟΛΠΟΙΣ
ΑΒΡΑΑΜ ΚΑΙ ΙΣΑΑΚ ΚΑΙ ΙΑΚΩΒ

If, however, the Nubian monogram of Abraham was indeed a sort of inheritance from the personal use of such symbols in the Byzantine Empire, then this would rather mean that it refers to some individual active in the Medieval Nubian society, either in a royal or in an ecclesiastical milieu, and not to the Biblical Abraham. Actually, we do know of two kings of Makuria named

¹⁴ J. NESBITT, "Sigillography", in JEFFREYS, E. J. HALDON & R. CORMACK (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 151.

¹⁵ T. HÄGG, "Titles and Honorific Epithets in Nubian Greek Texts", *Symbola Osloensis* 65 (1990), pp. 147-177.

¹⁶ A. ŁAJTAR, *Catalogue of the Greek Inscriptions in the Sudan National Museum at Khartoum (I. Khartoum Greek)*, OLA 122 (Leuven – Paris – Dudley, Ma., 2003), p. xxi, n. 11.

¹⁷ Cf. A. ŁAJTAR, *Catalogue*, p. 228 (index).

Abraham:¹⁸ the first one reigned from Old Dongola for some years during the first half of the 8th century CE; the other had a very short reign in 1317 CE and his acts are linked with the fall of Old Dongola into the hands of the Mamluks who were then in control of Egypt. This king fled to a still unidentified kingdom, called al-Abwāb, at the border between Makuria and Alodia, in the area of the confluence of the rivers Nile and Atbara.¹⁹

In either case, and based on such hypotheses, I have suggested that the carving of the monogram of Abraham on rock outcroppings of the Fourth Cataract region and on vessels in use at the monastery of Ghazālī should be understood as parts of ‘texts’ that were meaningful for anybody who could interpret such symbols.²⁰ Perhaps, within the context of this information, the carving of the monogram for the name Abraham on the walls of the ancient pyramid offering chapel of Beg. N. 1 becomes more understandable.

Conclusions

What we can understand from these points is the following:

1. Some of the chapels were exposed to visitors before the first archaeological investigations took place. The Christian inhabitants of the Middle Nile Valley had certainly noticed such impressive monuments. Whether they had also a memory of their original function and religious identity is a question that should remain open. It is intriguing, however, to consider that a monogram, possibly of Abraham, the Patriarch of both Testaments, the holy figure who receives in his bosom all dead Christians, was carved in front of the face of the ancient figure; a space that was reserved in ancient imagery for very significant acts like the opening of the mouth ceremony during the mummification process.²¹ We cannot, though, be certain if this particular monogram indeed referred to the Patriarch Abraham.

¹⁸ D. A. WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia. Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile* (London: The British Museum Press, 2002), pp. 259-260.

¹⁹ According to al-Maqrīzī, in Fr. G. VANTINI, *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia* (Warsaw & Heidelberg, 1975), p. 693.

²⁰ A. TSAKOS, “Some Remarks on the Abbreviations of the name Ioannis...”, *Beiträge zur Sudanforschung* 9 (2006), p. 114.

²¹ E. OTTO, *Das Ägyptische Mundöffnungsritual* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960).

2. Archaeologists have not always placed the appropriate value on the medieval – or post-antique – traces of the monuments under investigation. Thus, no detailed recording of the life of the monuments after the fall of the societies in which they had a religious (and political) function has been preserved for us.²² It would be, however, tempting to offer some conjectures based on the aforementioned references to the two kings named Abraham:

2.1. either that in the reign of the first one (8th century CE), the area around Meroe was still to be Christianized and the carving of his monogram points precisely to such an action. However, this would suggest that an area traditionally ascribed to the territory of Alodia was Christianized by a Makuritan king;

2.2. or that in the later phases of Medieval Nubian history, the region around Meroe could have been part of the kingdom of al-Abwāb, and thus King Abraham of the 14th century fled there, in which case we should eventually be able to find more indications for such a geographic/political identification.

3. Of course, one can always suppose that a king of Alodia or another official/priest with the same name from that kingdom carved the monogram, or even that this monogram was made by a visitor/pilgrim. Without further fieldwork and/or published reports from existing material on the subject, however, everything has to remain hypothetical. All of the archaeological work conducted at the site has not been followed up with the necessary publications. So, if the records and photographs made by Dr. Hinkel could provide further elucidation to the issue under scrutiny here – or to other, perhaps even more important, issues – these will have to await the publication of his archival materials.

It is somehow in this scope that the present *Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica* series in CCO wishes to be seen: as a contribution to forgotten sources of the Medieval History of the Middle Nile Valley.

²² Cf. H. I. AHMED, “Life History of the Pyramids” (Unpublished Master Thesis at the University of Bergen, 2009).



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Photo by Alexandros Tsakos

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