

## *Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica II:* Languages and scripts in the Kingdom of Alwa\*

[*Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica II:*  
Lenguas y escrituras en el Reino de Alwa]

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**Resumen:** Este artículo reabre la discusión sobre la situación lingüística en el reino más meridional del Sudán medieval, Alwa (o Alodia). El punto central es un graffito procedente de Musawwarat es Sufra, un antiguo lugar que posteriormente formó parte de Alwa, que representa un testimonio elocuente por el interés de la situación lingüística en esta área.

**Abstract:** This article re-opens the discussion about the linguistic situation in the southernmost kingdom of Medieval Sudan, Alwa (or Alodia). The focal point is a graffito from Musawwarat es Sufra, an ancient site that later became part of Alwa. It is an eloquent testimony of the interest of the linguistic situation in this area.

**Palabras clave:** Sudán. Nubia. Alwa. Epigrafía. Nubio antiguo.

**Key words:** Sudan. Nubia. Alwa. Epigraphics. Old Nubian.



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\* The paper has profited on many levels from contacts with Cornelia Kleinitz, Claudia Näser, Pawel Wolf, and Adam Łajtar.

### Introduction

The Medieval period in Northern Sudan in general, and along the Middle Nile in particular, has been identified as the era of political supremacy of Nubian speaking populations.<sup>1</sup> They seem to have arrived in the Nile Valley at the end of the so-called Meroitic era,<sup>2</sup> that is in the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, when the fall of the Empire – centered at Meroe (cfr. map), whose origins can be traced to the middle of the first millennium BCE – is traditionally dated. Subsequently, and in any case before the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, there were at least three kingdoms formed along the Nile in Northern Sudan (cfr. map):<sup>3</sup> Nobadia between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Cataracts of the Nile, with its capital possibly at Faras; Makuria between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> Cataracts with its capital at Old Dongola; and Alwa (or Alodia) between the 5<sup>th</sup> Cataract and the regions south of Khartoum (about which very little is known) with its capital probably at Soba. Makuria had annexed Nobadia by the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, while it is probable that at some point around the year 1000 CE, both Makuria and Alodia were ruled by the same family.<sup>4</sup> However, it remains an open question whether people of the same origins ruled over these three kingdoms. In other words, it has been doubted – and this already by Arab writers of the Medieval centuries<sup>5</sup> – whether the Nubians were indeed the dominant anthropological element as far south as the lands of the Alwan kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. D.A. WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia. Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile* (London: The British Museum Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. C. RILLY, “Enemy Brothers. Kinship and Relationship between Meroites and Nubians”, in W. GODLEWSKI & A. ŁAJTAR (eds.), *Between the Cataracts: Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> Conference for Nubian Studies*, Part One: Main Papers, Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean, Supplement Series, vol. 2, part 1 (Warsaw, 2008), pp. 211-225.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Fr. G. VANTINI, *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia* (Warsaw & Heidelberg, 1975), pp. 44-45, 333.

<sup>4</sup> Fr. G. VANTINI, *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia*, pp. 130, 168.

<sup>5</sup> Fr. G. VANTINI, *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia*, pp. 52, 345, 447-448, 608, 724.



Map prepared by Henriette Hafsaas Tsakos

The lack of abundant linguistic evidence, contrary to the situation further north in the Middle Nile world during the Middle Ages, seems to have corroborated the argumentation against such a common origin for the population of the Christian kingdoms of Medieval Sudan. The excavations of the British Institute in Eastern Africa at the town of Soba,<sup>6</sup> as well as the finding of some secondary inscriptional material from the Alodian region,<sup>7</sup> seem to change this impression. The second paper of our *Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica* will strengthen even more the new idea about the belonging of the southernmost medieval Sudanese kingdom to the Nubian world. It will discuss one of the Christian inscriptions from the intriguing site of Musawwarat es Sufra.

### **The Great Enclosure and other features of Musawwarat es Sufra**

The site of Musawwarat es Sufra lies c. 150 km northeast of Khartoum (cfr. map) and has been the focus of archaeological activities of the Humboldt University in Berlin. Working there since 1969, the German mission has surveyed, excavated, partially consolidated, and restored substantial parts of the Meroitic (c. 500 BCE – 500 CE) monuments of the site, namely the Great and Small Enclosure, with their ramps and temples, the impressive water basins and the various quarries, the statues and other stone works, as well as some graves of the post-Meroitic period (c. 500 – 700 CE), and even a possible church.<sup>8</sup> Despite the progress in the understanding of

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<sup>6</sup> D.A. WELSBY & C.M. DANIELS, *Soba. Archaeological Research at a Medieval Capital on the Blue Nile* «British Institute in Eastern Africa Memoir» 12 (London, 1991); D.A. WELSBY, *Soba II. Renewed excavations within the Metropolis of the Kingdom of Alwa in Central Sudan* «British Institute in Eastern Africa Memoir» 15 (London, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> A. TSAKOS, “Addenda and Corrigenda to the Khartoum Inscriptions (I. Khartoum Copt and Greek)”, *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology* XXXIX (2009), p. 209, nos. 17 & 18; pp. 211-212, no. 25 & fig. 4.

<sup>8</sup> An overview of the archaeological activities of the Humboldt University at the site of Musawwarat es Sufra can be gained by consulting a series of articles in the periodical publication *Der Antike Sudan*, *Mitteilungen der Sudanarchäologischen Gessellschaft zu*

Musawwarat's complex character,<sup>9</sup> the identification of the function of these antique monuments remains, in my opinion, an unsolved riddle.

From quite early in the exploration era in the Middle Nile, which coincides with the invasions of Sudan by the Ottoman-Egyptian armies led by the brother of Mohamed Ali (1820s), Musawwarat attracted the attention of many visitors. A group of graffiti left by those visitors on the back (western) wall of the so-called "Central Temple" in the Great Enclosure (among other places) confirms magnificently the truth of the above statement. However, those graffiti are a minuscule percentage of the totality of c. 2,500 pictorial and inscriptional carvings made on the walls of the various monuments of Musawwarat es-Sufra from the Meroitic period onwards. A renewed effort aimed at the documentation and publication of this unique graffiti corpus is currently underway at Humboldt University.<sup>10</sup> In the meantime, and as a small contribution to the knowledge and understanding of the rather neglected Medieval period of this site, which is considered as a most valuable treasure of Sudan's past, I will present today one graffiti from the Christian corpus thereof.

#### **'Jesus is here'**

On the face of the northern wall of ramp 514, northwest of the main temple of the Great Enclosure and overlooking a large courtyard, there are a couple of graffiti written in Greek letters. Among those, a single word attracts the attention of the passer-by with its clear use of the name of

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Berlin, volumes 1-20 (for an online version of the first 14 volumes, see : [http://www.sag-online.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=77&Itemid=71](http://www.sag-online.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=77&Itemid=71))

<sup>9</sup> P. WOLF, "Toward an Interpretation of the Great Enclosure of Musawwarat es-Sufra, Sudan", in T. KENDALL (ed.), *Nubian Studies : Proceedings of the Ninth Conference of the International Society of Nubian Studies, August 21-26, 1998* (Boston, Mass, 2004), pp. 436-445.

<sup>10</sup> C. KLEINITZ, "Neue Arbeiten zu den Sekundärbildern der Grossen Anlage von Musawwarat es Sufra", *Mitteilungen der Sudanarchäologischen Gesellschaft zu Berlin* 19 (2008), pp. 27-38.

Jesus. Actually, the first to present the graffito was Richard Lepsius, who visited the site in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

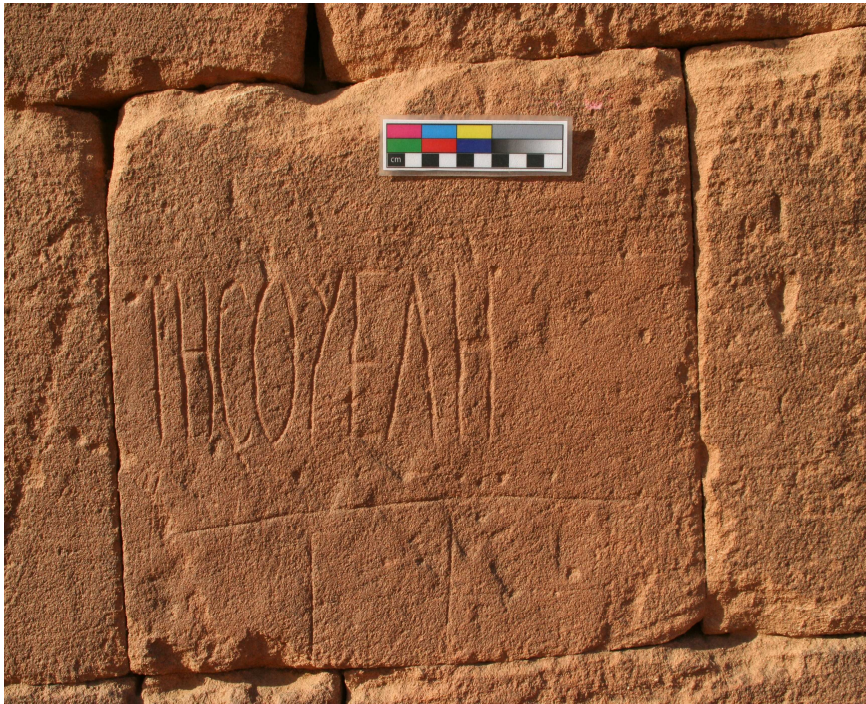


Photo by Cornelia Kleinitz

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<sup>11</sup> 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, repr. Genève: Éditions de Belles-Lettres, 1972). Abth. VI, Bl. 11, no. 62.

The reading is clear: ΙΗCOY€ΛΗ. The meaning, however, is a much more complicated affair.

1. One possibility is that the wording is not only in Greek letters, which are used by both Coptic and Old Nubian, but in the Greek language too. This would mean that we are dealing with a phrase “ΙΗCOY €ΛΗ”, which would translate “the swamps of Jesus”. A very interesting reference to swamps in the Holy Scriptures can be found in the reading of Isaiah’s prophecy, which is used in the Great Blessing of the Theophany in the Greek Orthodox Church.<sup>12</sup> There it is prophesized that the divine judgment will make the desert into swamps promising fertility instead of sterility. Given the role of water in the Butana, the drainage and water supply systems developed by the Meroites, it is tempting to see this first suggestion for the decipherment of the Musawwarat graffito under scrutiny here as a possible reference to the degradation of these systems at the end of the Meroitic era and the promise by the new authorities for a similar abundance in the life-giving waters, stagnant like swamps in the hafirs of Musawwarat, this time through the intervention of the new Lord, Jesus Christ. Interestingly enough, the reading from Isaiah’s prophecy concludes with the phrase that “there will cease any pain and sorrow and mourning”, which is used in the most popular prayer for the dead, the so-called Euchologion Mega type, carved on tombstones in Medieval Nubia.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the option of reading the graffito as a Greek phrase finds support in linguistic criteria, historical interpretation, and scriptural traditions befitting the Nubian reality of the Christian era. Nevertheless, I doubt that one should expect the locals using Greek so far upstream in the Middle Nile Valley.

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<sup>12</sup> Μικρόν Ευχολόγιον, Εκδόσεις Αποστολικής Διακονίας 1988.

<sup>13</sup> For a presentation of this prayer, cf. A. ΛΑΪΤΑΡ, *Catalogue of the Greek Inscriptions in the Sudan National Museum at Khartoum (I. Khartoum Greek)*, «Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta» 122 (Leuven – Paris – Dudley, Ma., 2003), pp. xxi-xxiii.

2. The same must apply with the other “foreign” language used in Medieval Nubia, namely Coptic. Moreover, the wording  $\text{IHC}\text{OY}\epsilon\lambda\text{H}$  gives no obvious meaning in the Coptic language.
3. Thirdly, as suggested by Adam Łajtar in a personal communication on 8 May 2010, Oriental Christian traditions may support the identification of the word  $\epsilon\lambda\text{H}$  with the Aramaic expression articulated by Jesus on the cross –  $\epsilon\lambda\iota\ \epsilon\lambda\iota\ \lambda\alpha\mu\alpha\ \sigma\alpha\beta\alpha\chi\tau\alpha\mu\iota$ . This expression is attested among the very rich corpus of graffiti from the Late Christian church at Banganarti (no. 631),<sup>14</sup> and would translate the graffito as “Jesus, my God”. The problem is that in the Nubian texts known to date, Jesus the Christ is always referred to as  $\text{IHC}\text{OY}\text{C}$ , while  $\text{IHC}\text{OY}$  is the name given to humans. But is it really necessary that the “Nubians” of Alwa (where Musawwarat would belong in the Christian era) were using the same Nubian dialect as the Nubians much further downstream?
4. Thus, a fourth option is to read the graffito as an Old Nubian wording. Four are the possible alternatives:
  - a.  $\epsilon\lambda\text{H}$  is an adverb meaning “today”.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, this adverb is not attested used as a suffix. Anyhow, if the phrase can function as such, it would mean “Jesus (is here) today” giving quite a metaphysical overtone to the wording, thus unfitting, according to the initial restriction for the use of the name  $\text{IHC}\text{OY}$  in the known Old Nubian texts. However, if the syntactical problem is overseen, then the wording can also mean that an individual called  $\text{IHC}\text{OY}$  is attesting his own passing from the locality.
  - b. A similar idea might be suggested for a predicative copulative suffix –  $\lambda\text{H}$ ,<sup>16</sup> which would mean, “Jesus is here”. There appears then a problem with the “ $\epsilon$ ” between the name and the verbal suffix that could only be explained in this frame through a suggestion of a

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<sup>14</sup> A. ŁAJTAR, *The Inscriptions of Banganarti*, in print.

<sup>15</sup> G.M. BROWNE, *Old Nubian Dictionary* (Louvain: Peeters, 1996), pp. 56-57.

<sup>16</sup> G.M. BROWNE, Introduction to Old Nubian «Meroitica» 11, (Berlin, 1989), p. 29.



particularity of a local dialect (?) of the (Old) Nubian language. The scarcity of written sources from Alwa has rendered such studies even more difficult than the situation that epigraphists and linguists face further north (downstream) in the Medieval Nubian world.

- c. A third alternative would see the whole wording as a name formed precisely on the basis of the verbal structure described above (4b). In Baganarti again, there are indeed attested names coined from preterit verbal forms.
- d. There is, however, the possibility of a very different and much simpler reading:  $\text{IHC}\text{OY}\epsilon\lambda$  - H. In this case, the name is  $\text{IHC}\text{OY}\epsilon\lambda$  (a local variant of the rare name  $\text{IHC}\text{OY}\text{H}\lambda$ ) and the morphological element “H” (or “I”) a “normal” for Old Nubian onomastic suffix. Adam Łajtar, in a personal communication, confirmed the existence of such names listing apart from  $\epsilon\text{I}\Gamma\alpha\lambda\text{H}$ , names as  $\alpha\text{N}\epsilon\text{N}\text{I}\text{K}\text{O}\lambda\text{I}$ ,  $\alpha\text{C}\text{T}\text{I}\Gamma\epsilon\lambda\lambda\text{I}$ ,  $\text{I}\text{C}\rho\alpha\text{H}\lambda\text{I}$ ,  $\text{M}\epsilon\Gamma\alpha\lambda\text{I}$  etc.

### Concluding remarks

It has been questioned whether the Nubians of Lower Nubia and the Nubians of Upper Nubia were indeed speaking the same dialect of the Nubian language; or whether they were already in Medieval times divided in at least the two groups that the Third Cataract today divides the Nubian speaking populations of the Middle Nile Valley into, namely the Danagla and the Nobiin (cfr. map).<sup>17</sup> Was there another linguistic borderline between Makuria and Alwa, where different dialects of a Nubian language would be used? In the North, and precisely around the Third Cataract, deviations from the core norms of the Nobiin dialect create the variations in the tongue of the tribes of the Sukkot and the Mahas. Could it be that something similar exists in Central Sudan, in the vaguely understood political and linguistic patterns of the Nile Valley upstream from the Fourth Cataract? I believe that options 3, 4b, 4c, and perhaps even 4d, for the

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<sup>17</sup> Cfr. D.A. WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, p. 7.

reading of the graffito under scrutiny here are eloquent testimonies of the existence of at least a particular *use*, if not a particular *dialect*, of the Nubian language among the inhabitants of Alodia.

Moreover, at the present state of our knowledge of the linguistic situation in Alwa, an analysis of a single inscription or graffito may be based on the experience gained by working with the epigraphic material from the rest of Medieval Sudan. Thus, I could suggest that the reading of our graffito in Old Nubian seemed more plausible than one in Greek. The inscriptions from Alwa will start becoming more meaningful, and the interpretations of their contents more securely ascertained, only when corpora of inscriptions from specific localities with numerous related finds are studied in their totality and published. In this sense, the graffito presented here raises finally the question of the character of the space in which it was carved. Could the open area in front of ramp 514 have been a holy space, like a church or chapel, during the Christian occupation of the Musawwarat compound(s)? A synthesis of the results from excavations and the publication of the pictorial and the inscriptional material from this and other parts of Musawwarat can give us the key to the understanding of the particularities of the cultural and linguistic realities in these southernmost (?) limits of the Medieval kingdoms of Nubia.

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