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- 1 The geographical boundaries of modern Nubia extend from the 1st cataract (Dabôd village) in Egypt to Ad-Dabba between the 3rd and 4th cataracts in Sudan. After the construction of the High Dam in Aswan in 1964, a large part of Nubia has been flooded and the Nubians have been relocated around Kom Ombo in Egypt and around Halfa el Jadida in Eastern Sudan (Kassala State). In Antiquity and Medieval times, Nubia used to extend further to Soba (South of Khartoum in Sudan). The human settlement of Nubia goes back very far in prehistoric time (4th millennium BC) and the history of the area is well attested throughout the Pharaonic period, where Nubia and Egypt had a long and quite complicated relationship: at some periods, Nubia was independent and developed powerful kingdoms (cf. Kerma 2500-1560 BC, Napata 9th-4th centuries BC and Meroe 4th century BC- 4th century AD); Nubian kings even ruled Egypt (XXV dynasty). But Nubia has also been dominated and occupied by Egypt. During the Christian period, Nubia consisted of three main Kingdoms (Nobatia, Makouria and Alodia). Cultural contact between Egypt and Nubia has been very important and is reflected in many aspects of the cultural life such as the writing, the arts and the architecture.
- 2 Two indigenous languages developed in Nubia in written form: Meroitic and Old Nubian. The scripts of these two languages reflect the cultural influences of the period i.e. Egyptian hieratic script for Meroitic, Coptic script for Old Nubian. What language was spoken before the appearance of Meroitic will probably always remain an unanswered question (Shinnie, 1978).

Meroitic

- 3 Prior to the Meroitic period (3rd century BC - 4th century AD), Egyptian hieroglyphic had been in use for centuries in Nubia as a monumental and religious script (Millet, 1974). In the third century BC, wide-reaching changes took place. In the course of this cultural regeneration, Meroitic was granted an official status. A new script was devised

for the writing of the language with an alphabet of twenty-four characters. It is this alphabet, based on the Egyptian demotic signs, which was used throughout the Meroitic Empire south of the 1st cataract up to Soba. Other languages were spoken in the Empire, but we have no traces of any attempt to use the Meroitic script to render any of them.

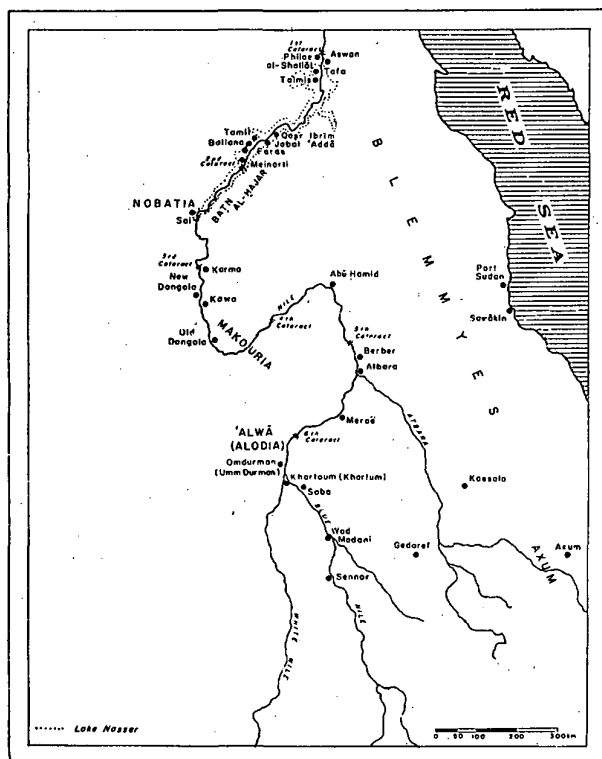
- 4 The Meroitic language is known from about a thousand texts. These are mainly funerary texts but also royal and administrative texts. First studies on Meroitic has been done by Griffith (1907, 1912, 1916-1929) but still very little is known. Meroitic has not yet been deciphered. The origin and affiliation of Meroitic has not yet been definitely ascertained, Trigger (1966) argued for an Eastern Sudanic affiliation and Griffith hypothesized that Meroitic was the ancestor of the Nubian language. However Hintze (1974) and Bender (1981) reviewed and refuted this hypothesis. There is not enough evidence to state that Meroitic was a Nilo-Saharan nor Eastern Sudanic language. But Meroitic may have had an influence on the local vernaculars and to quote Bender "it was influential on the speech of the precursors of a number of peoples of the Ethiopian-Sudan area, notably Nubians."
- 5 Literacy was quite widespread in the Meroitic Empire (Millet, 1974) and the ruling families were bilinguals in Meroitic and Egyptian. The period following the breakdown of Meroitic political control (4th century AD) seems to have been a period of cultural illiteracy. The change from Meroitic to old Nubian (7th-8th centuries AD) raises a very considerable problem as we don't know how and when the Nubian language appeared. The time gap between the latest Meroitic documents and the earliest Nubian ones is a matter of approximately four hundred years.

Old nubian

- 6 Contemporary Nile-Nubian language can be divided into two distinct groups of dialects:
 - the Mahas, which is spoken in the Central area of Nubia (from Korosko to Dongola);
 - the Kenzi - Dongolawi group, which is split into two dialects: Kenzi spoken in Northern Nubia and Dongolawi spoken in Southern Nubia,
- 7 Nubian belongs to the Nilo-Saharan family (Eastern Sudanic branch according to Greenberg's classification). Contemporary Nubian is a spoken language only. When its speakers want to write it they have to resort either to the Arabic or to the Latin alphabet (see for example Mohamed Mitwalli Badr, *Nobîn nog gery*).
- 8 During the Christian era of Nubia (6th -14th century AD), Nubian used to be written (Old Nubian) in the Coptic script to which a few signs¹ were added corresponding to sounds of Nubian unknown to Coptic. The first attested written documents date from the 8th century AD. During the 12th century AD the written form of Nubian was well established (cf. correspondence between the Nubian King and the Coptic Patriarch). It stopped being written when Islam replaced Christianity in the area (fall of Nubian kingdoms 13th-14th centuries). At this time however, the Coptic language became a dead language and Arabic was the written and spoken language of the majority of Egyptians, including the Coptic Church².
- 9 The existent manuscripts of Nubian are found in the British Museum and the Berlin Museum as well as in the Coptic Museum of Cairo. Most of the papyri's content is religious or legal (sales). Large archives were discovered at Qasr Ibrim.

- 10 The language was first discovered in 1906, when a German scientist called Karl Schmidt bought a manuscript (pergament) that he first thought was written in Coptic. But he soon discovered that the language used was different. From there started the research into the Nubian language which was developed by Griffith with his monumental edition of the texts then available (Griffith 1913), followed among others by Zyhiarz (1928), Vycichl (1958), Hintze (1971-1986), Smagina and Browne³. Browne (1991) provides a good review of Old Nubian studies. He notes that studies have concentrated mainly on the literary (mostly theological) texts for many of which we have the Greek equivalents. Far less has been done on the documentary materials. He also stresses the need to undertake a diachronic grammar which would treat the relationship between Old Nubian and the modern dialects.
- 11 But the question remains as to what preceded this written stage. When and how did Nubian come to the Nile Valley and displace Meroitic, or was it always there? One hypothesis (Trigger, 1966) is that Nubian was intrusive and came from the West sometime after the beginning of the fourth century, and replaced Meroitic which decayed at the same time as the Meroitic state came to an end (i.e. 350 AD). The counterview is that Nubian was a language of the Nile valley and that it spread west by immigration from the river. On this theory, Nubian would have been the main spoken language from at least as early as 500 BC and perhaps considerably earlier, Meroitic would have been a ruling class language (Shinnie, 1978).

Nubia



- 12 There is evidence that people South of the first Cataract had spoken a language different from Ancient Egyptian since the Old Kingdom. One indication is the nicknames of some rulers of Elephantine Island and the presence of translators who were acting as a link between the Egyptian rulers and the local population. Another is

that some of the surnames appear to be Nubian as well as some place names recorded in the New Kingdom.

- 13 Concerning the impact of the contact between Egyptian and Nubian, there are few attested Nubian loanwords in Late Egyptian (with syllabic writing). The main trend has been the integration of Egyptian loanwords into Nubian. However, loans were not made all at the same time, and the period at which a given word was borrowed can be induced by phonetic investigation (i.e, presence or absence of vowels).
- 14 There is also evidence that during the Christian Era, there was a North-South distinction (Adams, 1991). This distinction between Nobadia and Makouria had a linguistic basis and we may note that the boundary at the third Cataract corresponds very closely to the present-day linguistic boundary between the Mahas and Dongolawi dialects. Therefore, Nubian did not form a homogeneous linguistic entity. Nubian was certainly the dominant colloquial of the country, a fact that does not preclude the use of other indigenous vernaculars such as Meroitic and Beja.

Multilingualism in Nubia

- 15 Multilingualism in Nubia was widespread⁴ and Nubian was not the only written language of the country in medieval times. Archeological finding in Qasr Ibrim (the administrative centre of Nobadia Kingdom during the Middle Ages) have helped to shed light on the languages used in Nubia. Hundred of documents written in Meroitic, Hieratic, Demotic, Greek, Coptic, Old Nubian and Arabic were found (cf. Plumley, 1978). Meroitic texts are mainly letters. Coptic and Greek texts are mainly religious and literary documents with some administrative and commercial texts. Old Nubian texts are mainly legal documents with some religious and literary documents. As in Egypt literacy was not restricted to religious purposes, Coptic was widespread in Nubia, not only from the evidence of the gravestones but also from *ostraca*, graffiti and letters. It was the Monophysite church that was mainly responsible for the introduction of Coptic into the Sudan. But Coptic was also commonly used as a commercial language and Shinnie (1974) suggested that it may well have been the lingua franca of Lower Nubia at least. In some *ostraca* from Debeira West (600-1100 AD), the name of Mohammed appears several times written in Coptic letters. This fact suggests that transactions were being carried out in Coptic with Muslim and presumably Arabic speaking merchants. It seems that Coptic was sometimes used instead of Greek for official correspondence between the Governor of Egypt and the Nubian rulers which is quite surprising. One possible explanation is that the scribes employed by the Nubian rulers were recruited from Upper Egypt and would be more accustomed to Coptic (Plumley, 1978).
- 16 Greek spread extensively from the 6th to the 12th century in the kingdoms of Nubia and was used as a written lingua franca even between the Nubian Kings - cf. the Greek letter from a king of the Blemmyes to a king of the Nobatae⁵. The continued use of Greek up to the 12th century is a remarkable phenomenon since direct contact with the Greek speaking world must have been hampered after the Arab invasion of Egypt and the progressive elimination of Byzantine influence in that country.
- 17 There is now evidence for much more considerable use of Arabic that had been assumed. The presence of Muslim Arabic gravestones at Debeira East in cemeteries which are predominantly Christian suggest that Arabic speakers were dwelling in amity

with the local population and inscriptions found painted on the walls of dwelling at Debeira West suggest the same (Shinnie, 1974).

- 18 Did this multilingualism affect the language in contact and give birth to specific varieties? Also Coptic speakers, both merchants and monks, must have been common in Nubia, the Coptic language influence on Old Nubian seems to have been very limited (cf. Coptic month names : Shinnie, 1974). However, the Coptic cultural influence was marked and it is significant that it was the Coptic form of Greek alphabet that was developed for writing in Nubian.
- 19 The Greek which occurs in Nubian inscriptions, graffiti or documents is often described as "barbarous", "chaotic", "vulgar" (Hagg, 1978) and the hypothesis of a Nubian Greek variety or even a pidginized Greek has been advanced. However, there are different levels of Greek according to the material and the proficiency of the writer. Ecclesiastic Greek appeared to be free of influence from Old Nubian or Coptic but graffiti and inscriptions represent a more informal level. Many graffiti are a mixture of Greek and Old Nubian and reflect popular use. Greek was not the Mother tongue of the scribes who must sometime have been less than proficient. The question we should ask is whether Nubian Greek developed in relative isolation or kept pace with Byzantine Greek in general.
- 20 This paper is based on a preliminary account of the communication of Mokhtar Khalil on Old Nubian presented during the Round Table organized by the Cedej the 5th April 1996. Additional comments on Meroitic, link between Nubian and Meroitic and multilingualism, have been made by C. Miller.

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NOTES

1. For some authors, two of the Old Nubian characters were taken over, in both form and value, from Meroitic. This view is however not shared by others writers.
2. See the papers of Samuel RUBENSON and Sophia BJÖRNESJÖ in this volume.
3. A detailed bibliography on linguistic studies on Old Nubian can be found in BROWNE, 1991.
4. SHINNIE, 1974, 41: "It is becoming clear as more material is available that a number of languages were in use in medieval times in Nubia and that for some activities at least, Nubian society was a multilingual one."
5. SHINNIE (1974, 45) argues that "the use of Greek was more limited (than the use of Coptic) and its use for other than religious purposes cannot be demonstrated." HAGG (1978) argues for the opposite, i.e. Greek was an extended lingua franca.

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Mots-clés : linguistique, Nubie, nubien (langue), langues

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