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Author

Ruffini, Giovanni

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Idiom and Social Practice in Medieval Nubia

Giovanni Ruffini*

The study of Old Nubian depends on the literary evidence. The fragments of Old Nubian biblical and other theological texts for which source texts or comparisons exist provide the foundation for our knowledge of the language. One consequence of this fact is that documentary Old Nubian is something of an ugly stepchild. The archaeologists who study medieval Nubia refer to that documentary evidence, but rarely make detailed analyses of it. Gerald Browne himself produced editions of the documentary evidence that were minimalist in their linguistic commentary. Indeed, he published fragmentary, even incomprehensible, documents as early as volume two of his editions of texts from Qasr Ibrim.¹ This gives the impression that when it comes to documentary Old Nubian, we have already scraped the bottom of the barrel.

In fact, quite the opposite is true. We have much left to learn from the Old Nubian documents, particularly those from Qasr Ibrim. The forthcoming *Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim IV* will double the number of Old Nubian texts published in this series, and will provide a substantial corpus of new material for the linguistic analysis of Old Nubian.² Because legal documents and financial accounts tend to be formulaic, Old Nubian personal letters are the closest thing we have to spoken medieval Nubian. One consequence of this fact is that Old Nubian letters tend to be much harder to understand. The problem is not limited to the predictable obscurity of references to daily affairs. Rather, the problem is compounded by Nubian idiom. Pub-

* I would like to thank the participants and audience members of the Nilo-Saharan Linguistics Colloquium's Old Nubian Panel, several of whom are thanked by name in references below, for their feedback on my paper. I would also like to thank the draft readers of P.Q1 4 (see note 2 below) for their suggestions, several of which improved the readings and translations presented in this volume. Citations herein employ the standards proposed in the "Guide to the Texts of Medieval Nubia" at <www.medievalnubia.info>.

1 Consider for example the fragmentary letters P.Q1 2.27 and 2.29.

2 Ruffini, *The Bishop, The Eparch and The King*.

lished and unpublished correspondence contains phrases, formulae and verbal habits which make little to no sense when taken literally or when considered in isolation. When taken as idiom, vernacular or slang, these features of Nubian correspondence reveal an otherwise hidden world of medieval social practice. Even minor details of grammar and spelling begin to reveal the nature of Nubian literacy and education.

Let us begin with several obscure but repeated phrases, starting with a mundane example regarding the nature of letters. There is now evidence indicating that letters frequently accompanied the shipment of goods, and that the letters themselves included verification systems for the delivery of those goods. We have two published letters containing some variation of the phrase “There is no empty letter,” i.e. *kart(e) sout(a) ment(alo)* in *P.QI 2.28.19-20* and *kart()* *soum()* in *P.QI 3.59.5*. In the unpublished texts, we now have another four examples.³ Why should a letter writer protest that a letter is not empty? What does it even mean for a letter to be empty? The context of *P.QI 4.96* seems to provide the best hint. There, the letter – which, if correctly understood, was delivered by a slave – continues with a further remark from the author, saying “I send one *komi* of wine.”⁴

Is the insistence that a letter is not empty intended to tell the recipient that something else accompanied it? If so, this phrase may in essence indicate proof of shipment for an item or message traveling with the main letter. The ending of letter *P.QI 4.95* is similar, but less explicit, making reference to an empty letter and two units of wine, the implication presumably being that the letter is not empty, as two units of wine accompany it.⁵ The ending of letter *P.QI 4.101*, although couched in unfamiliar vocabulary, may be similar.⁶ If understood correctly, it makes a reference to an empty letter and giving three units of an unknown commodity. In letter *P.QI 4.93*, if the reference to *kidealo* is understood correctly, we have similar reference to an accompanying commodity.⁷ This is perhaps indicative of potential difficulties with delivery and trustworthy letter-carriers, perhaps drinking or selling the wine on the way. We may have here a medieval system of trust but verify. Alternatively, this stock phrase may be a way for the sender to indicate to the recipient that the letter-carrier has already been paid for providing the delivery, and that no further gift or payment is required.⁸

3 *P.QI 4.95.v.1, 96.r.5, 101.24-25 and 104.v.8; P.QI 4.94.14* appears to be a comparable if incomplete use of the phrase.

4 *P.QI 4.96.r.5-6: kart(e) soumt() orpi | komi alo enirra outira eiterelo.*

5 *P.QI 4.95.v.1-2: kart(e) sout(amenalo) orpidaue|ki blo.*

6 *P.QI 4.101.r.24-25: kart(e) | soutamentama attra pouisi glo.*

7 *P.QI 4.93.r.14: karte soutaminna kidealo.* In the translation to the ed.princ., I take *kidealo* as “1 *gide*,” where *gide* is a known unit of food. Vincent Laisney (p.c.) suggests that *gide* might instead be *kitt-*, a previously attested Old Nubian word for “garment.”

8 A suggestion raised at the Cologne conference in May, 2013.

Another often repeated phrase sheds light on religious attitudes. In P.QI 3.55, a letter from Iêsou the priest to Eiongoka, part of the first line reads *tillillo oukka genno kounna*, which Browne rendered as “God is good to you [plural]. He has (or: you [singular] have) it.” The “it” here is implied, and what “it” might be is not at all clear. In this isolated instance, a papyrologist might simply assume that this is another irritating example of two correspondents knowing full well what “it” was, and leaving the modern reader in the dark. But two more examples now challenge that assumption. Unpublished letter P.QI 4.98 reads in line 2 *til eikka genno kounnalo*, “God is good to you [singular]. He has (or: you [singular] have) it.” And again, unpublished letter P.QI 4.124 reads *tillillo eikka genno kounna*, which is essentially the same phrase, with the singular used in both cases.

We thus have three different authors in three different texts using the same greeting. Clearly, *kounna* (“he has (or: you have) it”) is not referring to a concrete commodity known to the correspondents but unstated in the text. Instead, the verb must amplify on the meaning of the previous statement, “God is good to you.” It may be that “God is good to you” was often followed by “you will have” God’s (implied) goodness as a generic expression of goodwill. Perhaps even more abstractly, “you will have” whatever it is that you want, because “God is good to you.” Either interpretation allows us to resolve the grammatical ambiguity in *kounna* and take it as a 2nd person rather than a 3rd person form. Alternatively, but less likely, we may suppose it to be a 3rd person form, and take all three examples to mean, in essence, “God is good to you, and He (God) has” it, where “it” might be God’s goodness. Either way, the implication is clear: isolated verbs yielding little to no concrete sense may hide social or religious tropes, as we see in this case.

Analogous examples suggest themselves from the correspondence. In an earlier publication, I noted the Old Nubian *tillil ein jemilika dieigramê* (“May God increase your years”) and described it as a Nubian verbal tick.⁹ We have three unpublished letters in which the phrase appears twice per letter, with no apparent connection between the phrase itself and its immediate context.¹⁰ This repetition of “May God increase your years” and “God is good to you; you will have it” is a sure indication that both phrases must have been as ubiquitous in medieval Nubian as, say, *inshallah* is in modern Arabic. It is also possible to imagine “May God increase your years” as a transitional phrase in correspondence, a way for the letter-writer

9 RUFFINI. “May God Increase Your Years”

10 P.QI 4.93, 4.95 and 4.101. The phrase also appears in P.QI 4.114, but only once, as far as the surviving state of the text allows us to tell.

to indicate to the recipient that he is changing topics and moving on to something else.¹¹

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We may also use the Old Nubian documentary evidence for a new glimpse into medieval Nubian concepts of time. Grzegorz Ochała has studied the myriad ways in which medieval Nubians recorded the date at a formal level.¹² Three unpublished letters now give us a glimpse into a more idiomatic conception of time. In P.QI 4.93, an eparch of Nobadia asks his correspondent, *aïou astiko dipilogo tillika \eiddo/ okiriseinna*, “Do I call to God for you, at dawn and dusk?” In P.QI 4.115, the letter-writer instructs his recipient, *diploko astiko ton-nijeso*, “Seek (it?) at dusk and dawn.” In the final, striking example, P.QI 4.113, no less than King Mouses Georgios describes, in a fragmentary context, the actions of *diplokô astoukon eiti*, “a man at dusk and dawn.” Presumably these are not references to be taken literally. Rather, the phrase “at dawn and dusk,” perhaps rendered as “in the morning and in the evening,” could perhaps be seen as a medieval idiomatic way of indicating recurring action, of saying “repeatedly” or “again and again” or “for a long time.”

Next, I would like to draw attention to the terms for rejoicing, in letter P.QI 4.97: *êk|ka ñaddirelo*, “I rejoice for you”; and in letter P.QI 4.107: *kourre pkkon*, “After he has caused himself to rejoice” (which, in context, seems to mean “After he has satisfied himself”). We have different verbs, to communicate essentially the same idea, and presumably chosen in deliberate preference to the most common verb “to rejoice,” *piss-* or *pies-*. That verb for its part appears in five different documents: letter P.QI 2.23.6-7 *mor | m koni piseso*, “be glad that you have 40 artaba”; land sale P.QI 3.36.13 *eiril pissil*, “(I, Kapopi...) rejoicing and exulting”; letter P.QI 4.89 *touñilo | pelin pisseso*, “rejoice when you come out to your children”; and letter P.QI 4.123 *pisseso* and *pissiselo*, “Rejoice” and “I rejoiced.” In letter P.QI 4.119 *pisseso* appears no less than three times, and there we have a particularly interesting pattern. In all three cases the imperative to “rejoice” is followed by an explanatory clause based on a predicative verb and linked to the imperative with the copulative *-sin*. Thus, rejoice for *x* is happening; rejoice for *y* is happening; rejoice for *z* is happening.¹³ The English “rejoice” may itself constrain our translations: the verb in any of these cases may mean “enjoy” or “be glad” or any of a number of possibilities.

Since the stem *piss-* is used for Biblical occurrences of Greek forms related to *chairō*, we may wonder if the scribe is simply trying to sound biblical. Indeed, the last example (P.QI 4.119) has Biblical

11 I would like to thank Vincent Laisney (p.c.) for this suggestion.

12 OCHAŁA, *Chronological Systems of Christian Nubia*.

13 P.QI 4.119.1-3, 5: *pisseso ñodannil ineiakir|rasin pisseso eitl eišketieia eitil|kirrasin... pisseso piskanessin*.

parallel in Philippians 4:4: *ouelsin pesiresin pissanasô* (“again I say: rejoice” in P.QI 1.5), a passage we know from Qasr Ibrim. Thus the decision to choose *piss-* over other possible stems may be a result of scribal training based on or lived experience with Old Nubian biblical texts. This is plausible, but does not explain how to differentiate between multiple words rendered the same way in English. Why choose *piss-* or *kour-* or *ηadd-*? I can only offer a negative conclusion, that lexicography is not an exact science and can succeed only with a large supply of sample sources. Put another way, we must accept the possibility that much in our dictionary of Old Nubian is inexact, or even potentially incorrect.

From subtle distinctions between apparently identical words, we can turn to a series of cases in which words do not appear to have – or in fact, cannot have – their literal meaning. First, gulping. When is gulping something not really gulping it? In my study, *Medieval Nubia: A Social and Economic History*, I drew attention to a pattern of food vocabulary and food consumption in legal contexts, and suggested that “gulping dates” (*petika ηola*) might indicate some social practice for completing a legal transaction.¹⁴ But in text P.QI 4.89, a letter from Apapa to Ioannes the Great Bishop, I find use of the verb “to gulp” in which food cannot be at stake. Twice, Apapa instructs Ioannes to gulp: first, *eidña ηola dineso* (“give, gulping and keeping”) and next *eidña ηoleso* (“gulp, keeping”).

In the first case, *tereke* (a key) is the direct object. In the second case, no direct object is present. Clearly, you can gulp without having anything in particular to gulp. What could this mean? The general context of this letter involves grain shipments and deposits. Browne rendered *ηol-* as “gulp” on the basis of comparisons to modern Nubian languages, where *gol* appears as “swallow.” This may make sense when dates are at stake, but it cannot apply to every appearance of the term. Perhaps we have here something closer to “finish” or “put away,” in which the term indicates the completion of some transaction, business or exchange.

Second, sitting. When is sitting not really sitting? Bechhaus-Gerst’s study of the history of Nobiin talks about how *ak-*, *ag-* (“to sit” in Old Nubian) is “being desemantized and developing into a function word.”¹⁵ It is coming to no longer mean “to sit” but “could be ascribed the function of marking a habitual action.” Thus she is able to correct Browne’s translation of P.QI 3.36.ii.6: Mashshouda is not “sitting in assembly” with his Elders, but is in “a continuing situation... [of] belonging to a circle of elders.”¹⁶

14 RUFFINI, *Medieval Nubia*, pp. 98–102.

15 BECHHAUS-GERST, *The (Hi)story of Nobiin*, p. 164.

16 *Ibid.*, 168.

She is certainly right, and this is not the only place where we can correct Browne's translations. Consider P.QI 2.26 and its two instructions to sit: "do not be dejected (?), for I shall go. Sit together (?) and don't lose (?) heart when I go. Sit together: for (otherwise) I shall not sleep" (lines 3-7: *odño èattan|ke aisin jououresin touja | akana an jôen aekon | osatanke allijil akana|so aiou ñerimendresin*). In Browne's commentary, he notes that *touj-* may be taken as "to be secure." Thus, if *akana* and *akanaso* mark habitual actions, these phrases might instead be better translated as: "do not be dejected, for I shall go. Continue to be secure [or: remain secure] when I go and don't lose heart, continue to be secure [or: remain secure], for (otherwise) I shall not sleep." Consider also P.QI 2.21, in which Israel sits for two months after gulping dates. It is hard to imagine what this could mean, taken literally. But figuratively (or habitually), it may indicate that Israel took two months to complete the transaction, or that whatever he was doing after he completed the transaction took two months.¹⁷

Finally, when is getting dressed not really about getting dressed? P.QI 4.109 is an anonymous account containing several characteristics of a personal letter, including an extended first-person narrative of various financial transactions. This narrative includes references to *amiska kidditaka*, *kidditaka kamiaka*, and *amsitoron kidditaka*. The verb appearing in all three cases, *kidditaka*, is the verbal stem *kit(a) r-*, *kit(t)ir*, *kidd-* ("to cause someone to dress, to cause someone to put on; to be dressed") with the passive formant *-tak-* and a predicative ending. We would thus appear to have "the judgment being dressed," "the camel being dressed," and "Amsitoro's (?) being dressed." In context, this presumably has nothing at all to do with clothing, and seems much more likely to mean "being prepared" than "being dressed." True, a camel may be saddled or harnessed, and thus dressed,¹⁸ but the ultimate sense is the same: the camel is now ready, as is the judgment, and as is something – we do not know what – having to do with someone named Amsitoro.

Getting away from these abstractions and turning towards concrete conversational and cultural practices, we turn to letter P.QI 4.89, once again Apapa writing to the Great Bishop Ioannes, where we see the question *eiron minka mañikoskaneka aouadona*. I take this to mean, "And you will give whom an evil eye?" The crucial abstraction is *mañikoskaneka*, a directive-case compound from *mañ-* ("eye") and *kos(s)-* ("evil"), with the abstract-substantive formant *-kane-* attached. As far as I know, this is the first attestation of the age-old cultural concept of the evil eye in Old Nubian. But apotropaic magic

17 We may have a comparable situation with Browne's translation of P.QI 2.25, which includes the phrase "I... sitting (with her) examined her." Here, *tik-*, *ting-* is the verb for "sitting," but it may have a comparable meaning: "I was in the process of examining her."

18 An observation I owe to Vincent Laisney (p.c.).

texts are widely known from medieval Nubia, and from Qasr Ibrim more specifically.¹⁹ So the presence of this concept is not surprising. But why is the question addressed to a bishop? Is the letter-writer asking whether the bishop cast the stink eye on someone? Unlikely, I hope. Maybe the letter-writer is asking whether the bishop himself wrote one of these apotropaic texts. Did Ioannes write a magic talisman of protection against the *mañikoskane*, and if so, for whom? This seems like a plausible shorthand: we call the eye-shaped amulets designed to protect us from the evil eye, in moments of imprecision, the evil eye. Medieval Nubians may have made the same leap. This sort of shorthand or telescoping may have been one of the features of medieval conversational Nubian.

Finally, a word about the greetings sent between the senders and recipients of these texts. In P.QI 3.54 we see the phrase “I greet David the priest.” In P.QI 4 we see variations of this in surprising numbers: “I greet the priest” three times; “I pay homage to the priest” twice; “I greet the deacon” once; “I pay homage to Ezekias, the chief’s priest” once.²⁰ In a few cases the anonymous priests are the same individual, but identifications across all cases are unlikely, if not impossible. So it is striking how often Old Nubian letters instruct the recipient to greet unnamed third parties on the assumption that the recipient knew which person was meant. It is also striking how many of the anonymous greetings in the correspondence are directed at religious figures. Only rarely do we see the non-religious described by their titles or, on one occasion, by an ethnonym, “I greet the Sulu.”²¹

This habit of circumlocution or name avoidance is not limited to greetings; note P.QI 2.28, “You do not know what the son of Doue is like. May he not come and ruin you.” Why name Doue, but not his son? We see the same phenomenon in P.QI 4.106, in which Staurousingkitol, writing to Iêsoua, makes two references to *anen totil*, Ane’s son. Why name Ane, but not his son? And why refer to the priests, and not give their names? What can explain this peculiar pattern in some of these letters of not naming people by name? I think that there are two plausible explanations for the deliberate circumlocution we have here.²² The first is rooted in what we would consider a primitive superstition. The thing that can be named is a thing that can be killed. The anonymous greetings and anonymous references in so many of these letters may be analogous to the anonymity of

19 See RUFFINI, *Medieval Nubia*, pp. 225-30 with footnotes ad loc. for discussion of Nubian magic, including references to unpublished apotropaic texts.

20 I greet the priest: P.QI 4.87, 4.117 and 4.122; I pay homage to the priest: P.QI 4.119 and 4.123; I greet the deacon: P.QI 4.102; I pay homage to Ezekias, the chief’s priest: P.QI 4.114.

21 P.QI 2.26. For Sulu as an ethnonym see WESCHENFELDER, “The $\sigma\upsilon\lambda\upsilon\sigma$ in Old Nobiin Documents.”

22 In addition to the proposals I give here, Vincent Laisney (p.c.) suggests that such circumlocutions could suggest the influence of or be analogous to Arabic usage, in which someone might typically be described as “the son of” or “ibn So-and-So.”

Nubian magical scrolls. So often in those texts, the beneficiary of the magical protection is referred to only obliquely, as the son or daughter of so-and-so.²³ The habit may carry over into documentary texts produced for people in religious contexts. Alternatively, we may be witnessing here a culture of humility, in which it was considered impolite to draw attention to religious figures by name, in which religious figures may have considered anonymity more pious in the eyes of the Lord.²⁴ It may also be the case that “the priest” may simply refer by default to one’s local or parish priest,²⁵ and that greeting the recipient’s local priest was a standard politeness, even if the sender did not know that priest by name.

So far I have been focused on social practice at the higher levels of grammar and meaning in full phrases. We must also look at a lower, more basic level, that of spelling. Variable orthography in documentary evidence tells us about Nubian scribal practice and education. We may approach this question from two different directions. First, we have “non-standard” spelling, or spelling deviating from what appears to be the statistical norm. Second, we have scribes who do not adhere to their own standards, and produce multiple variations from one line to the next. In the first case, we see many predictable variations: gamma for kappa, upsilon for the *ou* diphthong, the diphthong *ei* for more the common epsilon, a terminal ēta for terminal alpha in genitive endings, and so on.²⁶ To my knowledge, no one has ever suggested any explanation for these variations beyond their phonetic equivalence. But the variations tell us something about Nubian education. We learn correct spelling by reading correct source texts.²⁷ The more narrow the statistical range of consistent spelling in Old Nubian, the more narrow the range of source texts in Nubian education must have been. Put another way, their duties required Nubian scribes to spell beyond their educational range on a regular basis.

But this does not explain the second case, of scribes who are internally inconsistent. Consider text *P.QI* 4.97, a letter from Mousi to Mashshouda, with erratic orthography: this letter produces several spellings for the second-person singular personal pronoun in the directive case; both *arou* and *irrou* for “one”; and *eitiresau*, *êtireso* and *eitireso* for “send.” And the visual impression of the text is equally striking: the scribe shows awkward ink control and a poor sense of the amount of space needed for the required text. Consider also text

²³ See n. 18 above.

²⁴ I would like to thank Adam Łajtar (p.c.) for the initial suggestion leading to this proposal.

²⁵ A suggestion I owe to Vincent Laisney (p.c.).

²⁶ See BROWNE, *Old Nubian Grammar*, pp. 15–20, and, in the unpublished material from Qasr Ibrim, note particularly *P.QI* 4.64, 4.67, 4.74, 4.93 and 4.97.

²⁷ I have suggested elsewhere that some of the ostraka from Meinarti are precisely such source texts. See RUFFINI, “The Meinarti Phylactery Factory.”

P.QI 4.117, a letter from Souksapa the Great Eparch to Dauti the *thel()* of Kaktine. This text spells the standard Old Nubian *daoummelo* greeting no fewer than three different ways in three lines.

We must suppose that this greeting – present in so many of the letters from medieval Nubia – came early in scribal training. The same is true of the common pronouns and verbs we see in the letter from Mousi. And yet we have scribes for high-ranking officials who do not produce it the same way twice. There are two ways to analyze this phenomenon. On the one hand, it may suggest a thin level of education for Nubian scribes, or – equally revealing – the possibility of career advancement without completion of the full level of education available to other scribes in your peer group. On the other hand, we may have a glimpse into a different concept of spelling and its purpose. We may be catching Nubian scribes deliberately employing various alternative spellings of a single word for variety's sake, to make a text more interesting.²⁸

To summarize: unpublished letters give us a more nuanced picture of language, literacy, idiom and society in medieval Nubia. One aspect of documentary Nubian's repetitive nature – the insistence on unempty letters – may reveal a method of communication and goods transfer in medieval Nubia. Other aspects of documentary repetition – God's goodness to us, and his increase of our years – likely mimic medieval Nubian conversational patterns. One aspect of documentary Nubian's obscurity – the tendency to avoid naming names – may reflect religious practice or superstition. Another aspect of documentary Nubian's obscurity – the orthographical variants hiding otherwise familiar forms – may reflect the relatively narrow range of medieval Nubian education or a concept of orthographical purpose very much unlike our own. Documentary contexts in which simple words – gulping, sitting or getting dressed, for example – do not seem to have their expected meaning may reflect hidden legal or social practices, or the slow process of language in motion, the birth of modern Nubian in its medieval cradle.

²⁸ I would like to thank Claude Rilly (p.c.) for this idea.

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