# The Meroitic inscriptions in Egypt*

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The Nile flows in two great bends through six cataracts from Khartoum near the center of Sudan to Lake Nasser and Aswan on the modern border between Sudan and Egypt. This vast area is known to archaeologists as Nubia. In ancient times, it was the kingdom of Kush, a word of unknown origin, with its principal city of Meroe on the east bank of the Nile between the 5th and the 6th cataracts.

The Kushite or Meroitic civilization was one of the most important early states of sub-Saharan Africa, despite being regarded until quite recently as an inferior appendage of ancient Egypt. Its archaeological origins go back to the 3rd millennium BCE, but it enters history-through references to it in an Egyptian hieroglyphic inscription only in the 8th century BC. From 712-656 BCE, Kushite kings conquered Egypt and were accepted as its 25th dynasty, 'black pharaohs' ruling an empire stretching from the central Sudan to the borders of Palestine (their leader Taharqo received a passing mention in the Bible, as Tirhakah.) Thereafter, they were forced to withdraw and rule only in Nubia-suffering periodic intrusion from the Egyptians, the Persians and later the Romans (who called the Kushites, confusingly, Ethiopians, meaning 'burnt-faced person'- until the 4th century CE, when Kush finally disintegrated for reasons unknown into three smaller kingdoms which were converted to Christianity. These were eventually supplanted by the Islamic sultanate of Funj Sennar in the 14th and 15th centuries.

The people of Meroe used the Egyptian hieroglyphs as late as the 1st century CE, but they increasingly appeared along the Meroitic script, or were displaced by it. In the royal cemeteries at Meroe, Egyptian hieroglyphs were employed exclusively in some inscriptions, while in others Meroitic hieroglyphs were used for the royal name and the Egyptian script for the rest of the text, and yet other inscriptions were written entirely in Meroitic hieroglyphs. In due course, a 'cursive' version of Meroitic was used even for the majority of royal text.

The earliest examples of Meroitic cursive inscriptions, recently found by Charles Bonnet in Dukki Gel (REM 1377-78), can be dated from the early second century BCE.[1] The latest

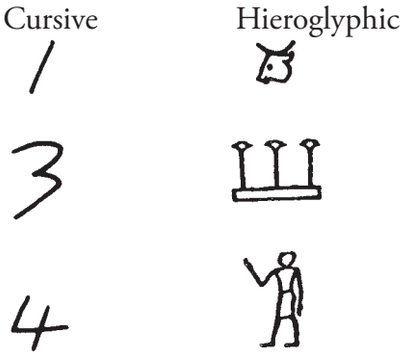
text is still probably the famous inscriptions from Kalabsha mentioning king Kharamadēye (REM 0094) and dated from the beginning of the 5th Century CE.

The decipherment of both the Meroitic hieroglyphs and this cursive script was the work of a British Egyptologist, Francis Llewellyn Griffith, with a touch of Champollion's genius. Earlier scholars, notably the pioneering German archaeologist Karl Richard Lepsius (who had helped to prove Champllion's decipherment), made a start, but it was Griffith, with access to a mass of newly excavated inscriptions from Meroe and other sites in Sudan, who 'cracked' the script in the period 1909-1911.

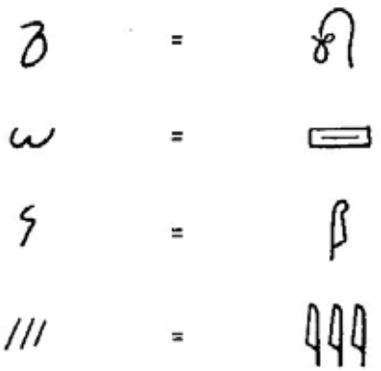
It was already clear from the signs undertaken in the 19th century that there were about 23 signs with allographs in the Meroitic hieroglyphs, in other words an 'alphabet' and not a logosyllabic script like Egyptian hieroglyphic. Also clear was that the cursive Meroitic script was written from right to left, like almost all Egyptian cursive script. Somewhat in the manner of Thomas Young, the decipherer compared between the cursive and hieroglyphic Meroitic script and soon realized that he could draw up equivalences between the cursive and hieroglyphic signs. The key turned out to be a cursive inscription found written around edges of flat altars or offering tables at Meroe and elsewhere:

Griffith recalled a similar altar from Meroe in Berlin (collected by Lepsuis) inscribed in hieroglyphic:

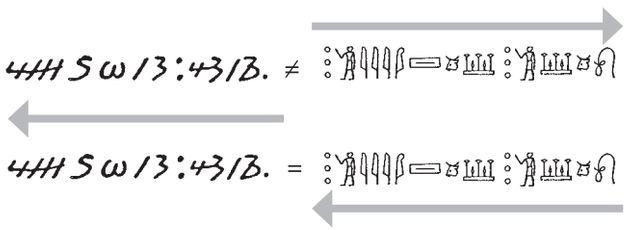
Making a reasonable guess that the two inscriptions might mean the same, he equated them letter for letter. Thus the three which are repeated twice in each word appeared to be equivalent:




Equivalences could also be made for four more signs:



In doing this analysis, Griffith had also proved that the direction of reading of the Meroitic hieroglyphs was the same that of cursive script, right to left, like the direction of Egyptian hieroglyphs. For if the Meroitic hieroglyph reading direction had not been the same as the Egyptian, the repeated signs would not have occurred in the same positions in the cursive and hieroglyphic script:



However, Meroitic hieroglyphs could be seen to differ from Egyptian hieroglyphs in that they faced in the direction of reading, whereas Egyptian hieroglyphs face in the opposite direction.

During the sixth century of its existence, Meroitic script underwent dramatic changes. The main features of its evolution are the following:

1. The stocky shape of many archaic signs became more and more slender.
2. The upright aspect of the archaic writing progressively slanted to the left.
3. The tail of signs a, k, n, p grew longer, running under the line in the late period.
4. Many originally different signs became increasingly similar.

Although we know almost nothing about the sociological aspects of writing in the Meroitic kingdom,[2] this evolution can be explained by the influence of professional scribes on the techniques of writing and spreading of literacy, for example:[3]

1. Slender signs could be written closer together and allowed the scribes to save precious material such as papyrus, which shows also that papyrus was a more widely used material than we can judge from the scanty examples so far discovered.
2. Slant handwriting is very common among persons used to writing often and quickly.
3. The long tails of some signs, although involving a certain loss of time, show a tendency to calligraphy that could be imitated from official documents written in ink. These three features suggest that the teaching of writing was in the hands of professional scribes whose techniques were increasingly reflected in the handwriting of the rest of the population.
4. Finally, weakly differentiated signs can hinder reading only for people who have to read letter by letter, but not for good readers who can instantly recognize a word just from its overall aspect, as if it were a ideogram. This last feature shows that speed reading was common in the late period: contrary to generally accepted ideas, it seems that the last centuries of the kingdom of Meroe were by no means a period of intellectual decline, but on the contrary the golden age of Meroitic literacy.

The Meroitic inscriptions were found in various places in Egypt; in Elephantine, Philae and in Kalabsha.

In Philae island, they occur particularly in the Mammisi. Other inscriptions were found on the north face of the west side of the South pylon. The largest ones were placed on the outer (western) face of the Gate of Hadrian. This amount of inscriptions could be argued by the greater number of pilgrims from Ethiopia to the Temple of Philae.[4]

We do infer to two famous inscriptions:

(REM 0119). The inscription belongs to the king Yesbokhe-Amani. According to its paleography, it goes back to 300/350 BCE. There is an identical inscription on the opposite wall, and the two inscriptions decorated the pilgrimage passage of the king in the temple of Isis at Philae.[5] (Fig. 1)

(REM 0121). It is an adoration inscription dedicated to Isis, by a certain named Yebye, who is ascribed as the messenger of *Wp Wawt*. According to its paleography, the inscription dates back to the 4th century CE. (Fig. 2)

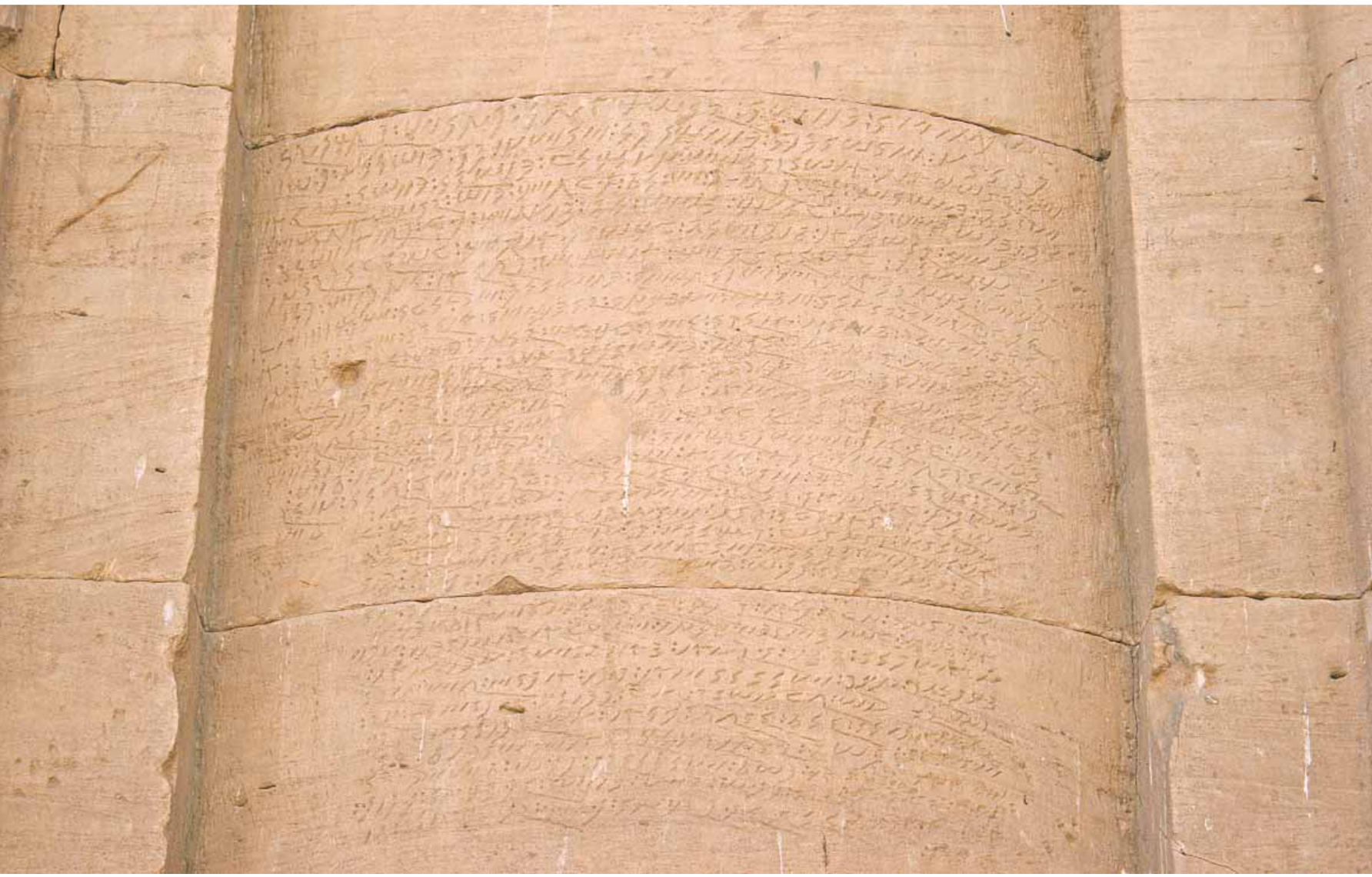
Concerning the great inscription of Kalabsha, (REM 0094) it belongs to the king Kharamadēye. This text was regarded by Griffith as of Late Meroitic date. The text relates some facts: firstly, the king regarded himself as a king in the Meroitic tradition, who ascribed his victory to the Meroitic state gods. Secondly, a number of other kings are referred to in the text, as either hostile, subject, or allied. Thirdly, among the numerous other persons mentioned in the text, many have titles of some types, and among these titles the old familiar ones of the Meroitic administration of Nubia are conspicuous by their absence. There is mentioned-apparently as an enemy, although it is not certain-a 'chief king' named Yisameniye/e. If this be regarded as a Meroitic rendering of a foreign name, the final –ye can be omitted, since it is a common termination of Personal names and often omitted in variants of a particular name. The name would be then something like Yisáměni or Isáměni, which corresponds very closely to the name Isemne of a king who

(Fig. 1) King Yesbokhe-Amani's inscription, Philae Island. (REM 0119)

(Fig. 2) An adoration inscription dedicated to Isis, by a certain named Yebye, Philae Island. (REM 0121)

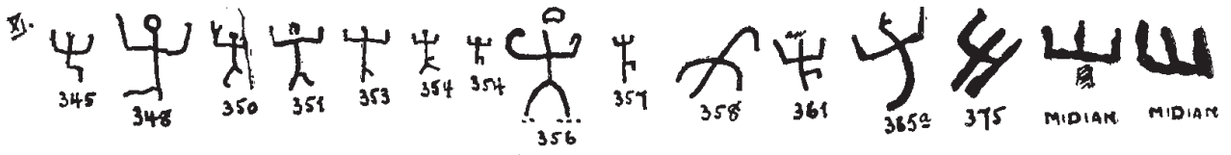
is mentioned in a rough Greek inscriptions on one of the column-bases of the same temple. According to Maspero, this name belong to a Blemmeye ruler, and he suggests a date in the 5th and early 6th century, but Millet suggests its date as early of 4th century.[6]

Worthy mentioning that Meroitic has paleographic resemblance to Protosinaitic. Leibovitch mentioned that 'hence the authors of Protosinaitic inscriptions are from hemitic origin, it is possible that they used hamitic language, and thus probably near to Meroitic'.[7]



(Fig. 3) king Kharamadēye inscription, Kalabsha Temple.

He noticed some resemblances between Meroitic and Protosinaitic, for example the sign 𓃒, which exists in both writings: hieroglyphic Meroitic and Protosinaitic, in addition to its resemblance to the hieroglyphic sign 𓃒. Also, we have the sign which 𓀁 represents a praying man. This sign and its variants resembles to the demotic Meroitic sign 𐦤, in addition its phonetic value corresponds to the Meroitic hieroglyphic sign 𓀁 Leibovitch suggests that the different poses of the feet in the Protosinaitic sign has laryngeals phonetic nuances.[8] (Fig. 4)




(Fig. 4) The sign representing a praying man. See: Leibovitch, *Les inscriptions Protosinaitiques*, 40.

## Notes

* The editor would like to thank Dr. Andrew Robinson for his courtesy to permit publishing this article.

1 Claude Rilly, 'Les graffiti archaïques de Doukki Gel et l'apparition de l'écriture méroitique', *Meroitic Newsletter* 30, (2003) 46-48.

2 N. B. Millet, 'Writing and literacy in Ancient Sudan' in A. M. Abadalla (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Languages of the Sudan, the second international colloquium on language and literature in the Sudan 7-12 December 1970*, (Khartoum, 1974), 49-53.

3 http://www.arkamani.org/arkamanilibrary/meroitic_conference_paris/rilly_paleography.htm#2.2.%20Examples%20of%20signs%20evolution#2.2.%20Examples%20of%20signs%20evolution

4 David Frankfurter, *Pilgrimage and holy space in Late Antique Egypt*, (Leiden, 1998), 252.

5 My sincere thanks are tendered to Dr. Claude Rilly for his assistance in identifying these inscriptions.

6 Millet, in A. M. Abadalla, (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Languages of the Sudan*, 54-55.

7 J. Leibovitch, *Les inscriptions Protosinaitiques,* (Cairo, 1934), 35.

8 Leibovitch, *Les inscriptions Protosinaitiques,* 40, 41, 60, 61, 62.