

LA STRATIFICAZIONE DEL LESSICO NELL'ANTICO NUBIANO

LEXICAL STRATA IN OLD NUBIAN

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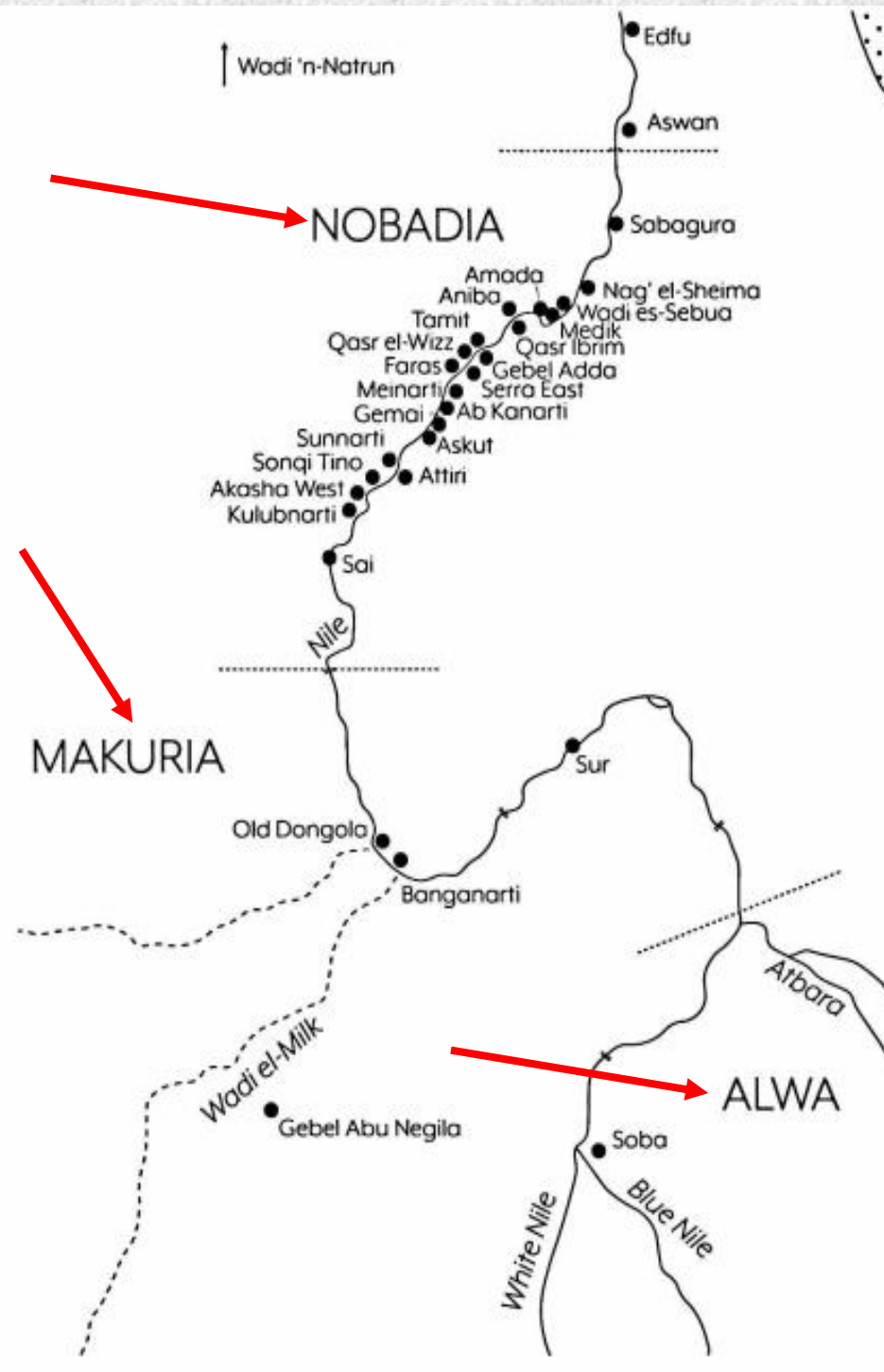
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British Museum Or. Ms 6805
fol. 1B.

Old Nubian (ON) documents begin in the 7th-8th century CE, while the latest datable document is from 1485. ON has been used:

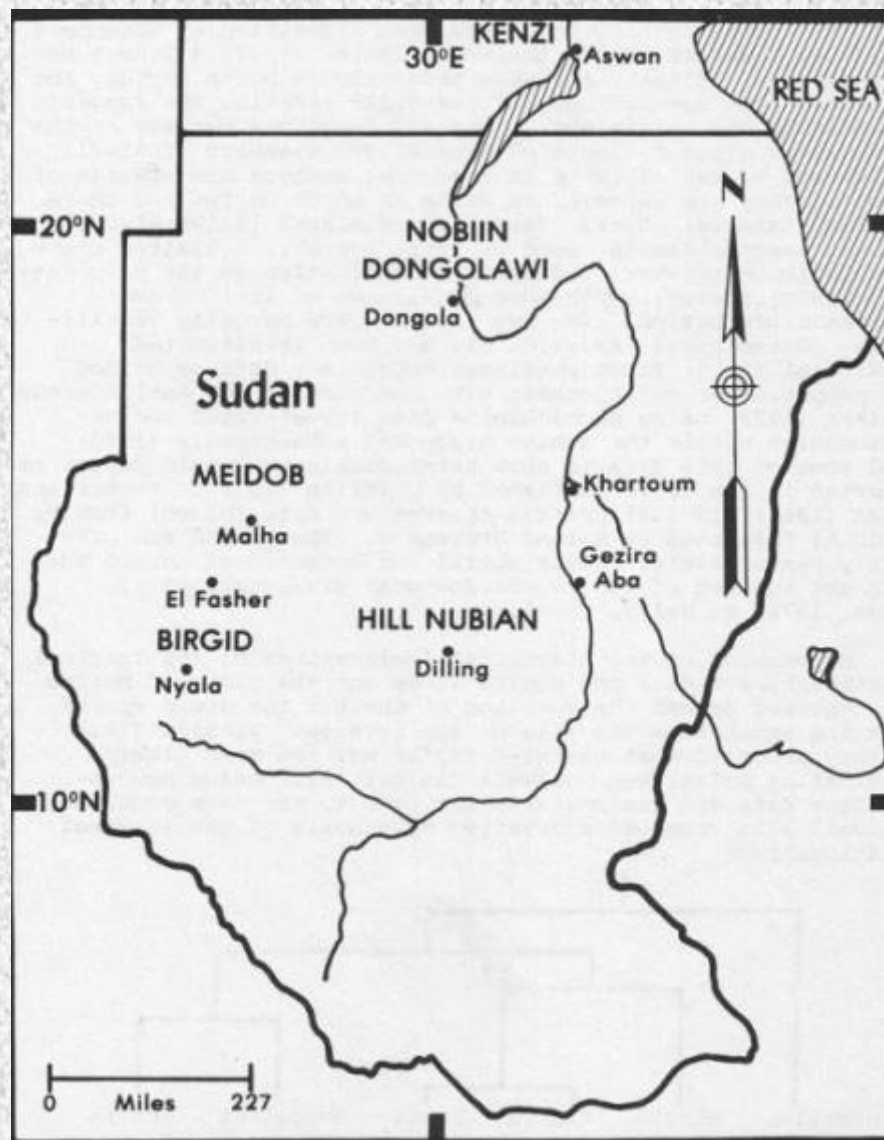
- a. as a religious language for translations from the Old and New Testaments, homilies and sermons, lectionaries, &c.;
- b. for secular documents such as contracts, private letters, the correspondence of government officials, but also informal graffiti and more formal inscriptions of different genres or kinds.



The bulk of the ON documents are from the 10th-12th c., and from Lower (i.e., northern) Nubia, possibly because it is the best excavated region.

A smaller number is from the old capital of the kingdom of Makuria and Middle Nubia. Very few are from the south, i.e., the former kingdom of Alwa.

The middle Nile Valley with the approximate locations where ON documents have been found (from van Gerven Oei 2021)



Present-day distribution of the Nubian languages.

Linguistically, ON is rather homogeneous, and appears to be particularly close to present-day Nobiin (*aka* Mahas). [Notice that much of the former Nobiin heartland has been flooded since the mid-60s by the Aswan High Dam.] Yet it also includes some seemingly archaic forms as well as forms from other Nile Nubian varieties, especially Dongolawi (*aka* Andaandi).

Van Gerven Oei (2021) suggests “Old Nubian literacy developed earliest in Nobadia through its contact with the monastic culture of Upper Egypt ... After Nobadia was incorporated as eparchate around 700 CE, the elite of the Makurian kingdom adopted Old Nubian as the language of culture and religion, and therefore prestige.”

	1SG	2SG	3SG	1IN	1EX	2PL	3PL
Old Nubian	ⲁⲓ	ⲉⲓⲠ	ⲧⲁⲠ	ⲉⲠ	ⲟⲮ	ⲟⲮⲠ	ⲧⲉⲠ
Nobiin	<i>ày</i>	<i>ìr</i>	<i>tàr</i>	<i>ùu</i>		<i>úr</i>	<i>tér</i>
Dongolawi	<i>ay</i>	<i>er</i>	<i>ter</i>	<i>ar</i>		<i>ir</i>	<i>tir</i>
Kunuz (<i>aka</i> Kenzi)	<i>ay</i>	<i>er</i>	<i>ter</i>	<i>ar</i> ~ <i>ari</i> ~ <i>argu</i>		<i>ir</i> ~ <i>iri</i> ~ <i>irgu</i>	<i>tir</i> ~ <i>tiri</i> ~ <i>tirgu</i>

The subject pronouns in Nile Nubian:

ON and Nobiin still have similar pronouns (NB: the ON script didn't mark tones.)

The three main modern varieties don't distinguish between IN and EX forms for the 1PL. Nobiin generalized the old 1EX, while Dong./Kun. seem to have gone the opposite way.

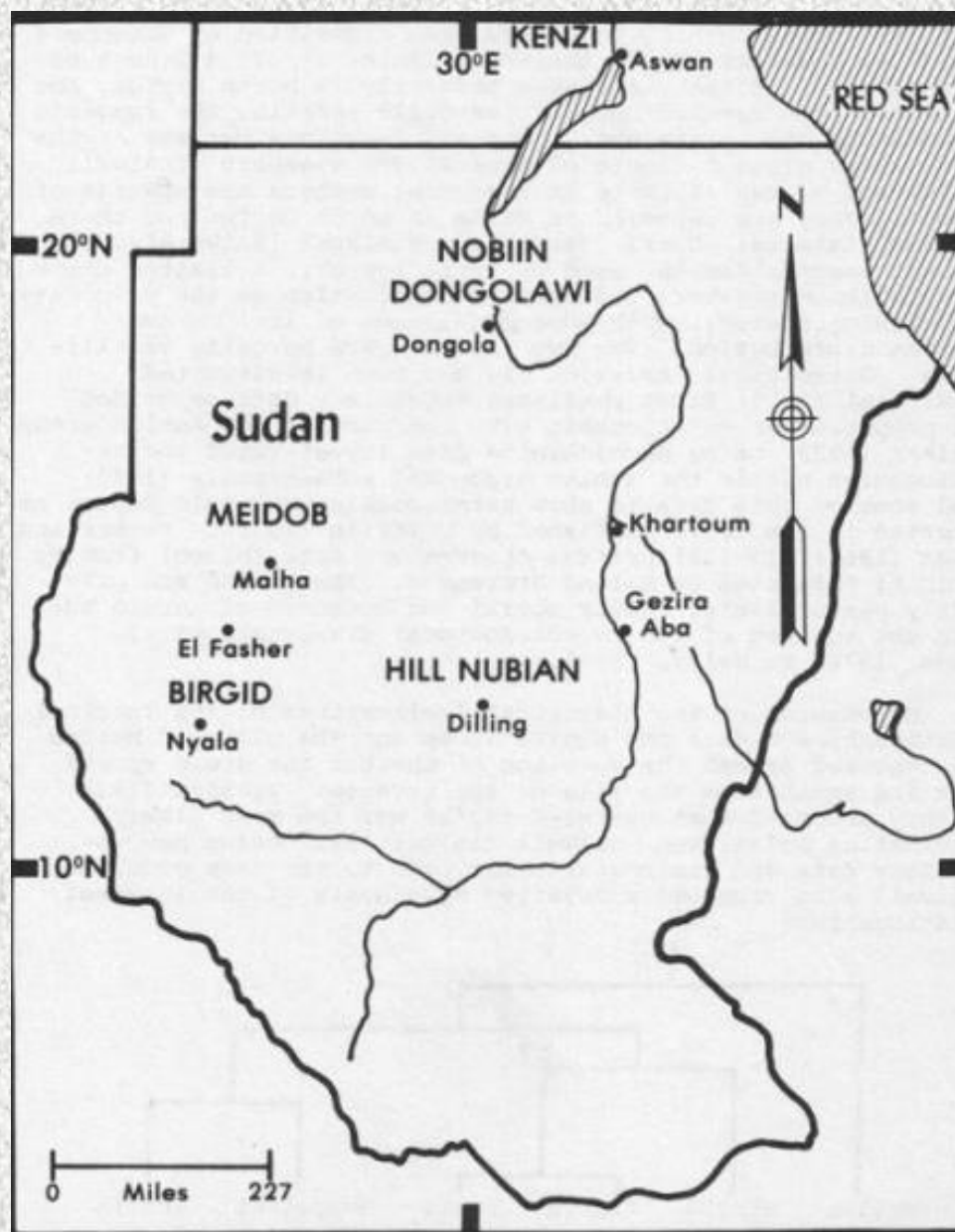
Dong. and Kun. are very similar to each other, but Kun. can add nominal PL suffixes to the Dong. forms.

Nobiin now is sandwiched between Kun. and Dong. The likely reason for the similarity between Kun. and Dong. is provided by Arab historians such as Ibn Ḥaldūn († 1406):

When the Christian kingdoms of Nubia were collapsing, the Moslem Arab-Beja tribe of the Banū Kanz took control of Makuria, and many Nubian women were given in marriage to its men. They assimilated into the Nubian culture and language, but their way of life remained Islamic.

During the late 14th and early 15th cs. pressure from the Hawwāra tribe sent against them by the Mamlūk sultan displaced the Banū Kanz from Dongola, and they had to retreat to the area around Aswān. The Nubian-speaking Kunuz are their descendants.

- A few personal names and other lexical and grammatical features in some ON documents appear to be nearer to Dongolawi Nubian. For instance, NOYKOYT for $\text{KOY}\Delta\text{H}$ 'servant', TIKAN for EKTOY 'sheep', or accusatives and genitives in $-\text{I}$. This appears to show that older forms of Dong. (**Old Dongolawi**) were also spoken in Middle and Lower Nubia.
- A small group of inscriptions from Upper Nubia, the old kingdom of Alwa, are in a slightly different and little understood variety, called *Südnubisch* by Zylharz (1928: 190 ff.). They use the same Graeco-Coptic script as ON, but the number of additional letters borrowed from the Meroitic script is higher than in ON. *Südnubisch* seems also to include some lexical features from Hill Nubian, that are absent from ON.



Present-day distribution of the Nubian languages.

The **Nubian group** doesn't include only the Nile Nubian languages today. More to the south and west there are also small pockets of other Nubian languages in Dār Fūr and Kordofān.

The Nubian group is part of the **Northern East Sudanic (NES)** family of the Nilo-Saharan phylum.

NES is formed by:

- the **Nile Nubian** languages,
- **Nara** in western Eritrea,
- the **Nyimang group** in Kordofān,
- the **group of Tama** in western Dār Fūr and eastern Chad.
- the extinct **Meroitic**.

The main Meroitic sites (from Rilly & De Voogt 2012)

Meroitic documents start from the 2nd c. BCE, and use a quasi-alphabetic script derived from the Egyptian one in two registers: hieroglyphic and cursive. The latest datable inscription is from king Kharamadoye (REM 0094) from 420 CE ca. (Rilly 2010; Rilly & de Voogt 2012).



Meroitic is only partly understood. Recently Rilly has interpreted several new lexical items and grammatical structures on a solid philological and textual basis. (Rilly & De Voogt, 2012: 183 f., list 76 Meroitic identified words, apart from names.) Rilly has also strongly argued that Meroitic belongs to NES. He did this mostly with comparative lexical arguments, even though the numerals, most of the personal pronouns and of verb morphology are still unknown.

Meroitic was thus the major local language written in Nubia before the appearance of written ON. As argued, e.g., by Rilly (e.g., 2014, 2019) Nubians were already present when Meroitic was used as a written language. Its memory was still alive when ON started to be written, because some of its letters were incorporated in the ON script, like:

- ς for [η],
- ψ for [η].

Rilly (2010, 2014) has also suggested a number of possible Meroitic loanwords in ON, such as:

- μαωαλ ‘sun’ < Mer. *Mas* ‘Sun God’ (with the *-l* determiner),
- μετε ‘generation’, ‘offspring’, γενεά < Mer. *mte* [mate] ‘child, son’.
- σιλε ~ σηλε ‘every’, ‘everyone’ < Mer. *-se-l* ‘every’ (e.g., Mer. *kdi-se-l* ‘every woman’).

Egyptian has been written in Nubia before the introduction of written Meroitic, and its more recent stage, i.e., **Coptic** continued to be used there until the late 12th c. CE. Van Gerven Oei (2021) recently surveyed Egyptian and Coptic loanwords in ON, distinguishing early borrowings like:

- γαπερ ‘gold’ < Eg. *nb* ‘gold’, Copt. νογβ ‘id.’;
- σεγ- ‘blow’, ‘breathe’ < Eg. *šw*.

Loanwords from Coptic are many, in several semantic fields:

- time keeping, e.g., κογᾶει ‘month’;
- agriculture, e.g., ορπ- ~ ερπ- ‘wine’;
- religion, e.g., αρπαῆ ~ αρφαῆ ‘temple’ < Sahidic ρπε, Bohairic ερφει ‘id.’

According to Van Gerven Oei (2019), “the first significant influence of **Greek** on Old Nubian must be dated to the Christianization of Nobadia in the 6th c. CE, when a large set of words related to Christianity was imported into the language”. For instance:

- αγγελος ‘angel’ < ἄγγελος;
- θαλας ‘sea’ < θάλασσα;
- λιχχιιν.Διν ‘lampstead’ < λυχνίδιον;
- ψαλ(λ)- ‘sing psalms’ < ψάλλω ‘sing (to a harp)’.

Notice that the majority of Christian Greek loanwords are found in Coptic as well, and may thus be indirect loanwords for Nubian.

An indirect loan from **Latin** is probably to be seen in:

- ριγερῆ ~ ρυγερῆ ~ ριγελῆ ~ ρυγελλει ‘sealed/certified document’ < σιγίλλιον < *sigillum*

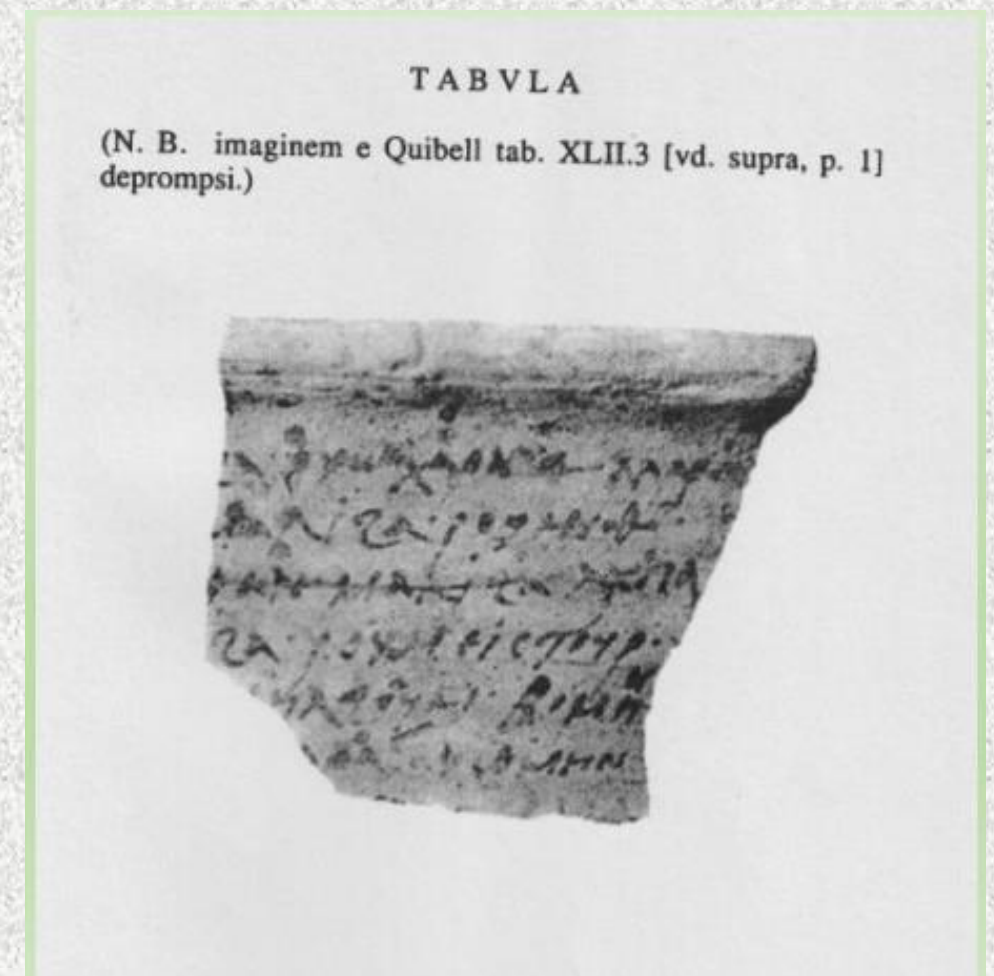
In Classical and Late Antiquity the inhabitants of the Eastern Desert were called Gr. Βλέμ(μ)υες, Demotic Eg. *Blhmw* ~ *Blhlm* ~ *Blhw*, Sah. Copt. βλμμοογε (βαλζμογ SG), Boh. Copt. βαλνεμωογι. They frequently attacked caravans and the settlements along the Nile. Egyptians called them *Md3j*, with late variants such as *Mdd* and *Mdy*. There is a general consensus that they should be identified with today's **Beja** who inhabit the same area from eastern Egypt till northern Eritrea, and speak a Northern Cushitic language.

Their present name already occurs in Axumite sources from Late Antiquity, e.g., as Βουγαειτῶν in one of the Greek inscriptions of King 'Ezana (reigned ca. 330-370 CE). Arab sources call them *Baġa* (or *Baga!*) since the 8th c. CE. **NB:** Beja is not a self-designation. Usually they identify themselves by different tribal names (e.g., Haḍandowa, Arteyga &c), but call their language *Biḍaawiyeet* or *Tu-Bḍaawi*.

Very little is known about the language(s) of the *Md3j* and Blemmyes, beyond lists names in Egyptian, Coptic, Greek, and Meroitic documents. A vast literature on this subject is partly reviewed in Rilly (2014, 2019).

A fragmentary text on an ostrakon from Saqqara has been regarded by Browne (2003) and Wedekind (2010) as the only textual remain of Blemmyan. According to their interpretation it is part of Psalm XXIX in an archaic form of Beja, in Graeco-Coptic script.

If they are right, this would confirm that at least part of the Blemmyes spoke one or more older forms of Beja.



Van Gerven Oei (2021) identifies just a couple of Beja loanwords in ON, $\Delta\omicron\Upsilon\tau\rho\alpha\pi \sim \Delta\epsilon\iota\tau\rho\alpha\pi$ ‘fowl’, and $\kappa\alpha\pi\omicron\pi$ ‘pearl’, but doesn’t mention the source nor the Beja forms.

Neither does he mention a paper by Blazek (2014), which discusses 22 Beja-Nubian “lexical parallels” trying to identify the direction of the borrowing. For several of them he suggests Nubian > Beja, for other ones Beja > Nubian. In several other cases he is uncertain about the direction.

Some of these are striking Nubian > Beja loanwords like:

- Beja *ay* ‘hand’, ‘arm’, ‘5’ < ON $\epsilon\iota \sim \bar{\epsilon}$ ‘hand’ (with good NES cognation).
- Beja *asa-* ‘5’ in compound numerals like *asa-rama* ‘7’ (5+2), *asa-mhay* ‘8’ (5+3) &c < **esi* ‘hand’ in several other Nubian languages (same root as ON $\epsilon\iota \sim \bar{\epsilon}$).
- Beja *isin* ~ *asin* ‘hippo’ < Dongolawi *essi-n-ti* ‘id.’ (lit. ‘water’s cow’) with *essi-* < Nubian **es-ti* ‘water’.

An interesting Nile Nubian - Beja isogloss is:

- ON $\kappa\alpha\mu$ 'camel', Nob. & Dong. *kam* (Nob. PL *kamr-ii*) vs. Beja *kaam* 'id.'

Obviously the two words derive from Sem. *gamal* 'id.', but not directly from Arabic, because Nile Nubian and Beja usually keep **g* and **k* apart. Rather, as I suggested in (1993) they probably derive from a Coptic pronunciation of *gamal* as [kamal] or [kaml]. Not from the Coptic word that was Sahidic $\beta\alpha\mu\omicron\gamma\lambda$ ~ Bohairic $\chi\alpha\mu\omicron\gamma\lambda$.

Linguistic contacts between Nubian and Beja have thus occurred. But it was not only Nile Nubian that was involved, as shown by Beja *asa-* '*5' < Nubian **esi-* 'hand', which developed into ON $\epsilon\iota$ ~ $\bar{\epsilon}$, Dong. *ii*.

Arabic words appear in ON documents at first in personal names.

Other loanwords are mostly restricted to non-literary and, especially, legal documents, like:

- ON κ̄κι ‘ornament’ < *ṣīġa* صيغة ‘jewelry’;
- ON τῖραμι ‘dirham’ < *dirham* درهم ‘dirham’, ‘drachma’ (< δραχμή).

As time went by, the contact with Arabic and its pressure on the Nile Nubian languages has increased dramatically.

ON replaced the inherited Nubian word for ‘water’ with:

➤ ON $\lambda\mu\alpha\eta$ ‘water’, Nob. *aman*.

The inherited Nubian word $\epsilon\text{cci} \sim \lambda\text{cci}$, Dong. *essi* < **əsti* also occurs in ON documents. In Nob. it still survives in compounds such as *as-kalee* ~ *es-kale* ‘water wheel’.

Aman* is also the common **Berber word for ‘water’. This similarity has caused a heated debate about the possibility of a Berber substrate or adstrate for ON.

Twenty years ago Jakobi & Kossmann (J&K) wrote a much-mentioned paper “On Berber borrowings in Nubian”, which remains unpublished till now. They looked at 21 cases of items belonging from the so-called basic lexicon where a Nubian or Nile Nubian word had possible parallels in Berber, i.e., meanings such as:

- ‘daughter’, ‘sister’,
- ‘sheep’,
- ‘meat’, ‘onion’, ‘water’ &c.

They concluded very cautiously that “most of them cannot be considered convincing parallels at all” and “are probably due to chance resemblances”.

This was taken over by Rilly (e.g., 2008, 2014) in order to strengthen his case of a mainly NES “Pre-Nile Nubian substratum”, consisting in (i.) Meroitic and (ii.) a “Pre-Nara”, i.e., “an offshoot of Proto-Northern East Sudanic ... closely related to Nara”.

Also Starostin (2020) stuck to Jakobi & Kossmann’s stated “inability to find any additional Nobiin-Berber parallels with the same degree of phonetic and semantic similarity” as ON $\lambda\mu\lambda\eta$ vs. Berber **aman*.

However, if one reads carefully J&K’s paper, one finds several instances where their actual claim is different, as shown in the following slide.

For instance, for “onion” they conclude “we think that the Berber forms and the Nubian forms look remarkably similar and are probably related”. The forms are:

Berber: Siwi *afəllu*, Ahaggar Tuareg *efəlēli*, &c.;

Nubian: ON $\pi\alpha\lambda\iota$, Nob. *fille* ~ *felii*, Dong. *bille* ~ *belee*.

In the other Nubian languages the term for ‘onion’ is a loan from Ar. *baṣal* بصل ‘id.’, while in western Berber it is from the same Semitic root, either from Arabic or, earlier, from Punic. In Coptic it is $\mu\chi\omega\lambda$, Demotic *mḡl*, from the same Semitic root, but NOT from Arabic.

The series ON π — Nob. *f* — Dong. *b* regularly occurs in common Nubian words; **p* is also preserved in western Nubian languages like Midob. In this case this shows that it is a Nile Nubian term that spread from Lower Nubia to Eastern Berber, probably through the trans-Saharan trade, in relatively recent times.

The tradition of Nubian studies has strong roots in Reinisch (1879a, 1879b) and Lepsius (1880). The historical reconstruction of the Nubian group and of Nile Nubian in particular has seen recent important contributions by Bechhaus-Gerst (e.g., 1984, 1996, 2011), and by Rilly (e.g., 2010, 2012). Starostin (2020) recently reviewed and discussed in good detail several lexical items from the basic lexicon of Nile Nubian, distinguishing what is clearly inherited and has plausible cognates in other branches of Nubian, from what is instead restricted to Nile-Nubian, or exclusively to Nobiin.

There is no time to discuss this here, suffice it to say that he confirmed the strong lexical autonomy of Nobiin, that will be briefly outlined in the next slides.

Bechhaus-Gerst (1989a) pointed out that, in a list of 102 items of so-called basic lexicon, Nobiin shared only 70% with Dongolawi and Kunuz in spite of the strong grammatical similarities of the three languages. In most cases, Nobiin had different items that diverged from the inherited proto-Nubian items of the other languages for such “core” items as:

- ‘blood’, ‘fat’, ‘hair’;
- ‘meat’, ‘water’;
- ‘dog’, ‘louse’;
- ‘heavy’, ‘white’;
- ‘eat’.

In the same paper, she pointed out that Nobiin also diverged from Dongolawi and Kunuz in several items of cultural vocabulary, of terms denoting the Nile fauna, as well as in the words for ‘iron’ and ‘horse’.

In (1989b) she developed this issue, discussing several of these items, also including words related to agriculture, suggesting for many of them etymologies that linked them with Agaw, Highland East Cushitic and Omotic, which are now spoken in Eritrea, and northern and western Ethiopia.

Rilly (2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2019) strongly opposed her arguments: “the list of supposed Cushitic loanwords is not conclusive” (2008: 220b). His thesis, already mentioned above, is that the “Pre-Nile Nubian” and specifically pre-Nobiin substratum is a complex of at least two NES languages:

- i. Meroitic, and
- ii. a “Pre-Nara”, i.e., “an offshoot of Proto-Northern East Sudanic ... closely related to Nara.

To this purpose, he suggests new NES etymologies for basic lexicon items such as those seen in the previous slide, but very few cultural items.

Table 5. Lexicostatistics for the Northern East Sudanic linguistic family

(PNNS = Pre-Nile Nubian Substratum, 51 items preserved in Nile Nubian, the sample for Nara and Nyima includes 200 items, for Taman 195)

	NUBIAN	PNNS	TAMAN	NYIMA
NARA	56%	47%	39%	39%
NUBIAN		39%	42%	44%
PNNS			33%	41%
TAMAN				32%

PPNS / Nara:	24/51, i.e., 47%
/Proto-Nubian:	20/51, i.e., 39%
/Taman:	17/51, i.e., 33%
/Nyima:	21/51, i.e., 41%

Tables from Rilly (2008: 221, 222)

These are the lexicostatistical figures on which Rilly's Pre-Nara hypothesis is based.

Obviously, his etymological suggestions and those of Bechhaus-Gerst have to be checked again on the basis of the new tools for historical reconstruction that are now available.

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Thank you!