

# Old Nubian

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Old Nubian is the modern designation for a literary language attested in texts from the Nubian kingdom of Makuria (*see* DOTAWO, NUBIAN KINGDOM OF) in the Middle Nile Valley between the late eighth and fifteenth century CE. The first reference to Old Nubian in the historical record is found in a comment by Eutychius (Sa'īd Ibn Batriq), who became Melkite patriarch of Alexandria in 933 CE. Reproductions of Old Nubian inscriptions were first produced in the nineteenth century by François Gau and Richard Lepsius, after which decipherment was undertaken in the early twentieth century by Karl Schmidt and Heinrich Schäfer. A first grammatical outline was produced in 1913 by Francis Llewellyn Griffith. The main drive behind further advancements in Old Nubian studies were the salvage archeological missions to Nubia in the second half of the twentieth century, culminating in the work of Gerald M. Browne, who produced both a dictionary (1996) and a grammar (2003). An expanded reference grammar was published by Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei in 2021.

Old Nubian belongs to the Northern East Sudanic linguistic subgroup of the Nilo-Saharan phylum. It is based mainly on the predecessor of the currently spoken Nile Nubian language Nobiin, although lexical influences of the common predecessor to the current Nile Nubian languages Andaandi (Dongolawi) and Mattokki (Kenzi) are present as well. Old Nubian further shows the influence of a Northern East Sudanic substrate language possibly related to Nara and Meroitic (*see* MEROITIC LANGUAGE) (Rilly 2010). It also features a set of loanwords from Greek (*see* GREEK IN AFRICA), mostly relating to the sphere of Christianity. There are minor influences from other neighboring languages, including Late Egyptian/Coptic and the Cushitic Beja.

Old Nubian was used in a multilingual and multi-literate society next to Greek, Coptic, and, later, Arabic (Ochala 2014).

The Old Nubian corpus consists of both literary materials, comprising Christian texts such as homilies, lectionaries, and miracle stories, and documentary texts such as contracts, letters, and royal proclamations, as well as large amounts of visitor inscriptions and prayers left on the walls of churches and monasteries. Due to the area in which the UNESCO salvage-archeological excavations were conducted, the majority of extant texts have been found in Lower Nubia. Excavations currently continue in uninundated areas in Upper Nubia as well as Soba, in the vicinity of the Sudanese capital Khartoum.

Old Nubian is an SOV (subject-object-verb) language. It has postpositions and in general genitives precede noun phrases, while adjectives follow them. The verb is the most complex part of the Old Nubian sentence, with more than forty morphemes that can be suffixed to it.

## ALPHABET

The Old Nubian script is based on the Coptic alphabet (*see* COPTIC LANGUAGE) with the addition of three characters from the Meroitic alphasyllabary. The presence of the Meroitic letters provides evidence that the Old Nubian alphabet predates the Christianization of Nubia (*see* CHRISTIANITY, NUBIAN) and should be dated to the collapse of the Kingdom of Kush (*see* KUSH, MEROITIC PERIOD) in the third–fourth century CE. The great majority of texts are written in a slanted “Nubian-style” majuscule script originally developed in the White Monastery in Panopolis, near present-day Sohag in Upper Egypt around the seventh–eighth century CE (*see* MONASTICISM, NILE VALLEY).

The alphabet has twenty-nine characters (*see* Table 1) and two digraphs: *ai* [i, i:, j] and *ou* [u, u:, w, wu]. Vowel length

**Table 1** Old Nubian alphabet.

Character	Transliteration	Phonetic value
ⲁ	<i>a</i>	[a, a:]
Ⲃ	<i>b</i>	[b, w]
Ⲅ	<i>g</i>	[g]
Ⲇ	<i>d</i>	[d, r]
Ⲉ	<i>e</i>	[e, e:]
Ⲋ	<i>z</i>	[s]
Ⲍ	<i>ē</i>	[i, i:]
Ⲏ	<i>th</i>	[t]
Ⲑ	<i>i</i>	[i, i:]
Ⲓ	<i>k</i>	[k, g]
Ⲕ	<i>l</i>	[l]
Ⲗ	<i>m</i>	[m]
Ⲙ	<i>n</i>	[n]
Ⲛ	<i>x</i>	[(k)s]
Ⲝ	<i>o</i>	[o, o:]
Ⲟ	<i>p</i>	[b]
Ⲡ	<i>r</i>	[r]
Ⲣ	<i>s</i>	[s]
Ⲥ	<i>t</i>	[t]
Ⲧ	<i>u</i>	[i, u]
Ⲩ	<i>ph</i>	[b, f]
Ⲫ	<i>kh</i>	[k, g, h]
Ⲭ	<i>ps</i>	[(p)s]
Ⲯ	<i>ō</i>	[o, o:]
Ⲱ	<i>š</i>	[ʃ]
Ⲳ	<i>j</i>	[ʃ]
Ⲵ	<i>η</i>	[ŋ]
Ⲷ	<i>ñ</i>	[ɲ]
Ⲹ	<i>w</i>	[w]

is not indicated consistently. Old Nubian also adapted the Coptic supralinear stroke, usually indicating a preceding vowel /i/. For example, ⲧⲗⲗⲛ̄ /tillin/. Over a vowel it either indicates the beginning of a syllable or an /i/ before a preceding λ, n, p, or ⲃ: Ⲡⲕⲧⲁⲕⲛ̄ /oktagina/.

## PHONOLOGY

Old Nubian has a consonant inventory that is typical of Nubian languages (see Table 2). There is no phonemic contrast between voiced and voiceless for bilabial and palatal stops, and this contrast seems weak with velars. The voicing contrast between voiceless and voiced

alveolars was probably also a contrast of place, where the /d/ was articulated more behind the alveolar ridge.

There are five vowels, which can be both long and short (see Table 3).

## NOMINAL MORPHOLOGY

### Determiner

Old Nubian has a determiner -λ -l, which mainly appears on nominative-marked subjects. Indefinite noun phrases are unmarked, but may be accompanied by the numeral ⲟϥⲗ *ouel* “one.”

### Case

There are four structural cases encoding the basic grammatical roles in the sentence: a zero-marked nominative, genitive -ⲛ(ⲁ) -*n(a)*, dative -λⲁ -*la*, and accusative -ⲕⲁ -*ka*. Old Nubian is an accusative language, in which the subject of intransitive verbs and agent of transitive verbs is marked with the same case, the accusative. Direct objects are marked with the accusative, just like animate indirect objects. The dative is reserved for inanimate indirect objects. The genitive is used for possessors, but also for the subject in non-coreferential attributive relative clauses, which is a feature that Old Nubian shares with other SOV languages such as Turkish and Japanese.

Besides the structural cases, Old Nubian also has a number of lexical cases, such as the locative -λⲟ/λω -*lo/lō* and the allative -ⲕⲗ(ⲗⲉ) -*gil(le)*, and postpositions based on nominal and verbal roots, used for encoding adjuncts. Most postpositions can follow the locative.

### Number

Old Nubian has a singular, dual, and plural. The singular is unmarked, whereas the dual with -ⲁⲛ ⲧⲣⲓ -*an tri* is used only on a restricted number of nouns such as body parts that come in pairs. Plural is marked through a series of older suffixes ending in -ⲓ -*i*, which are lexically

**Table 2** Old Nubian consonants.

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	b		t d	ʃ	k g	
Nasal	m		n	ɲ	ŋ	
Fricative		f	s	ʃ		h
Trill			r			
Lateral			l			
Approximant	w			j		

**Table 3** Old Nubian vowels.

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i, i:		u, u:
Mid	e, e:		o, o:
Open		a, a:	

determined and obligatory. Otherwise the non-obligatory plural suffix *-rou* *-gou* occurs frequently.

### PRONOMINAL MORPHOLOGY

The Old Nubian language has a rich pronominal morphology, with two sets of personal pronouns, a defective set of kinship possessors, and three sets of subject clitics, one of which is defective and disappearing.

Pronouns come in both a long and short form and make a distinction between first-person plural inclusive (including the addressee) and exclusive (excluding the addressee) (see Table 4). The distribution of long and short forms of personal pronouns is syntactically determined.

Kinship possessors, only recorded in the singular, are phonologically reduced pronominal forms prefixed to kinship terms such as “mother” and “brother.” They are a widespread phenomenon in Nubian languages.

The three sets of person clitics (see Table 5) are linguistically the most interesting, as all currently spoken Nubian languages have developed a tense-agreement system. The regular set of non-obligatory subject clitics is used

for cross-referencing the person of the subject on the verb (Gerven Oei 2018). Additionally, there is a separate set of subject clitics for imperative forms, and two remaining “old” subject clitics for the second person which can be found in several relatively uncommon verbal morphemes.

Reflexivity is indicated with the accusative followed by the suffix *-ono* *-ono*; reciprocity is indicated with the reciprocal pronoun *ouerouel* “each other,” a reduplicated form of *ouel* *ouel* “one.”

Finally, Old Nubian has a set of honorifics often found in the opening formula of letters, such as *ein papkane* *ein papkane* “Your Fathership,” and *ein godkane* *ein godkane* “Your Brothership.”

### VERBAL MORPHOLOGY

The verb is morphologically the most complex part of the Old Nubian clause, encoding plurality, valency, aspect, tense, person, affirmation or negation, and sentence type. There are also a number of auxiliary and modal verbs.

The main distinction between nominal and verbal predicates in main clauses and those in subordinate clauses is the presence of the predicate marker *-a* *-a*, which also appears in the scope of universal quantifiers.

#### Pluractionality

Pluractionality, also called verbal number, is marked with the suffix: *-s* *-j*. Depending on the valency and context of the verb, it may indicate

**Table 4** Old Nubian pronouns.

	Long pronoun	Short pronoun
1SG	αιει, αιιογ <i>aiei, aiou</i>	αῑ <i>ai</i>
2SG	ειρι, ειρογ <i>eiri, eirou</i>	ειρ <i>eir</i>
3SG	ταρι, ταρογ <i>tari, tarou</i>	ταρ <i>tar</i>
1PL.EXCL	ερι, ερογ(?) <i>eri, erou</i>	ερ <i>er</i>
1PL.INCL	ογει, ογογ <i>ouei, ouou</i>	ογ <i>ou</i>
2PL	ογρι, ογρογ <i>ouri, ourou</i>	ογρ <i>our</i>
3PL	τερι, τερογ <i>teri, terou</i>	τερ <i>ter</i>

**Table 5** Old Nubian subject clitics.

	Subject clitic	Subject clitic (imperative)	“Old” subject clitic
1SG	-i <i>-i</i>		
2SG	-N <i>-n</i>	-i <i>-i</i>	-H/I <i>-ē/i</i>
3SG	-N <i>-n</i>	-i <i>-i</i>	
1PL	-OY <i>-ou</i>	-AM <i>-am</i>	
2PL	-OY <i>-ou</i>	-(Δ)N <i>-(a)n</i>	-KE <i>-ke</i>
3PL	-AN <i>-an</i>	-(Δ)N <i>-(a)n</i>	

a plural subject, direct object, indirect object, or event.

### Valency

There are three valency suffixes: transitive  $-(i)p/\Delta p$   $-(i)r/ar$ , causative  $-r(i)p/r\Delta p$   $-g(i)r/gar$ , and passive  $-\tau\alpha\kappa$   $-tak$ . The transitive suffix, which is etymologically a causative, adds a patient. The causative, an innovative morpheme built on the transitive suffix, adds a causee. The passive suffix, which is probably based on an incorporated personal pronoun, promotes the patient to subject.

### Affirmation

Affirmative verb forms are constructed with the morpheme  $-m$   $-m$  for the first and third persons, supplemented with special suffixes for the second person. Affirmative verb forms occur in specific syntactic contexts, such as the apodosis of conditional clause constructions. The same morpheme is also encountered in the jussive suffix  $-MH$   $-m\bar{e}$  and the vetitive  $-\tau\Delta MH$   $-tam\bar{e}$ .

### Negation

Negation may be expressed with the negative suffix  $-MIN/MEN$   $-min/men$  and in certain contexts with the suffix  $-\tau\alpha$   $-ta$ .

### Aspect and Tense

Old Nubian’s tense–aspect system appears to be in a transition from a system in which aspect was expressed by means of imperfective  $-i$   $-i$  and perfective  $-\epsilon$   $-e$  to the appearance of perfective morphemes based on incorporated verbs,  $-\oc$   $-os$  and  $-\epsilon\tau$   $-et$ . Old Nubian has a tripartite temporal division between present tense  $-\lambda$   $-l$  (often expressed as  $-\rho$   $-r$ ), past 1  $-\o\lambda$   $-ol$ , and past 2  $-\c$   $-s$ . Nobiin has collapsed both past 1 and past 2 into a single paradigm, which makes reconstruction of any semantic difference difficult. Their distribution is complementary in certain syntactical environments, such as relative clauses and in the scope of negation.

Other aspectual markers include the habitual  $-\kappa(\epsilon)$   $-k(e)$  and intentional  $-(\Delta)\Delta$   $-(a)d$ . There is also a rare perfective particle  $\tau\alpha$   $ta$ . An

innovative perfect tense  $-ko$   $-ko$  can be found in later texts.

### Person

Person on the verb is expressed by a series of subject clitics (see Pronominal Morphology above). During its recorded history, Old Nubian developed from a clitic language, in which cross-referencing of the subject on the verb was constrained to specific syntactic (so-called “subject-gap”) environments into an agreement language with obligatory cross-referencing with the subject, as is present-day Nobiin.

### TOPIC AND FOCUS MARKING

The Old Nubian language features a topic/focus-marking system that has been lost in present-day Nubian languages. The topic marker  $-eion$   $-eion$  always attached to the leftmost constituent of the sentence and marks information that is known to the speech-act participants. The focus marker  $-lo/\l\omega$   $-lo/\l\omega$  (not to be confused with the locative  $-lo/\l\omega$   $-lo/\l\omega$ ) marks new information. The focus marker is obligatory on nominal predicates and negative verbal predicates.

### SENTENCE TYPE

Old Nubian distinguished two main sentence types: declarative and imperative sentences. Whereas the former are zero-marked, the latter are marked with the command marker  $-co/c\omega$   $-so/s\omega$  on the right edge of the verb. There is also a rare question marker  $-za$   $-ha$ .

### SYNTAX

Old Nubian is classified as an SOV language, but the translated nature of many of its literary texts makes it difficult to establish syntactical generalizations. In those texts, several tactics are used to imitate Greek word order, including

moving any constituent to the left edge of the clause by marking it with the topic marker, and the possibility of moving affirmative-marked verbs to verb second position (to the right of the first constituent) (Gerven Oei and Tsakos 2020). Otherwise, Old Nubian appears to have several features that are widely attested in the linguistic literature, such as scrambling (variable word order between topic and verb), overt quantifier raising (universal quantifiers moving to the left edge), and incorporation (loss of accusative case-marking on verb-adjacent indeterminate objects).

### Coordination

There are several strategies for conjoining constituents and sentences in Old Nubian, which can all be divided into three general groups: those using the conjunction  $on$   $on$  “and,” the suffix  $-de$   $-de$ , and asyndetic coordination (without conjunction or suffix). Disjunctions with “or” are formed with morphologically complex, supposedly grammaticalized constructions.

### Subordination

Old Nubian has a rich inventory of subordinated clauses, including temporal, conditional, final, causal, and complement clauses. These are formed with a variety of verbal morphology, postpositions, conjunctions, and case marking. A shared aspect of all subordinate (except final) clauses is the absence of the predicate marker  $-a$   $-a$ .

SEE ALSO: Christianity, Nubian; Coptic language; Dotawo, Nubian kingdom of; Greek in Africa; Kush, Meroitic period; Meroitic language; Monasticism, Nile Valley; Nubia, history of; Nubia, medieval.

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