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Problems and Strategies in the Decipherment of Meroitic

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This article offers a preliminary report on the evolution of the study of Meroitic language and on developing a strategy for expanding its translation from one or two dozen words to some greater number. The strategy is complicated by the essential absence of bilingual texts. Thus, this strategy seeks to synthesize a bilingual environment for the study of Meroitic inscriptions. The first part of this article will review the position of Meroitic in African language systems and discuss why so little progress has been made in the decipherment of Africa's oldest written language after Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The emergence of Meroitic "cursive" begins well after the end of XXVth Dynasty, and at about the time of the Kushitic withdrawal from Naptata to Merowe—i.e., ca. 300 B.C. at the earliest. In other terms, the emergence of Meroitic occurs about the time of King Nastasen (the last to be buried at Napata) or King Arkamani (who was the first to be buried at Merowe. It is believed that King Arkamani spoke both Meroitic and Greek. Meroitic writing ends essentially at the time of the conquest of Merowe by King Ezana of Axum in about 340 A.D. Thus Meroitic was written in one form or another for 500 to 600 years.

There are about 1,000 known inscriptions of Meroitic found scattered in an extensive region from Aswan to Alwa/Soba. But they are clearly concentrated in the region between Napata and Merowe, and are especially numerous at Merowe/Bejrawiyya. Some are very short, some formulaic, and some *stela* texts (free-standing stone tablets, usually commemorative) are relatively long.

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Historical Background

Although the study of Egyptian hieroglyphics dates back to the close of the 18th century, the study of the second oldest system of writing on the African continent, Meroitic, has only been initiated in the 19th century and was not very seriously advanced until the 20th century. Despite the rapid advance in the transliteration of the Meroitic alphabet, the study has been effectively stalled ever since.

The serious collection of Meroitic inscriptions begins with the first inscriptions recorded by Gau in 1819, or perhaps with Ferlini's 1834 raid on the jewels of the Meroitic pyramids. The father of serious Meroitic archaeology is typically considered to be Lepsius as a result of his 1844 fieldwork in the region. The first systematic work appeared in the *Denkmaler* of Lepsius in 1849, which includes the formal hieroglyphic form of this dead language. The Mahdist revolt in the Sudan brought the fieldwork to a temporary halt, but Lepsius's 1889 work on Nubian grammar advanced his interest in regional languages. At present, his estimate that Meroitic was Cushitic or Old Nubian is usually believed to be incorrect.

Archaeological excavations of Meroe by Garstang, Griffith, and Sayce from 1909 to 1911, and Garstang's return in 1912–13, deepened archaeological interest and added considerably to scientifically collected data. Then, the several works of Francis Llewellyn Griffith written between 1911 and 1922 made the scholarly public more aware of the collection of Meroitic inscriptions. He is properly credited with the system of transliteration that remains largely intact today. Nevertheless, my study of Meroitic already reveals letters or characters which do not easily fit his schema, varying either by the writing style of writer, or perhaps as additional letters. There is certainly more ambiguity in phonetic assignment than Griffith's transliteration scheme suggests. His important advance was accomplished with a bilingual ritual bark stand from Ben Naga written in Meroitic and Egyptian hieroglyphs. Griffith established that there were 23 Meroitic hieroglyphs for royal inscriptions. These are substantially derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs but simplified and somewhat different. There was also a "cursive" Meroitic which was both alphabetic and partly syllabic with dotted word dividers. Both languages were probably official and/or formal, but this needs further study.

The next major effort at translation came with Sayce in the period 1914–16 in the effort to understand the Stela of Amon-Renas. Formulaic invocations and common god names are probably correctly assigned, but very many questions were left unanswered. The 1916–1923 fieldwork at Merowe and Napata of George Reisner (and Firth), of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, brought Meroitic studies into this generation. Some additional activity took place during the colonial era, but it was mainly after the Second World War that such names as Shinnie, A. J. Arkell, J. Vercoutter, and Thabit Hassan Thabit appeared on the scene. The journal *Kush* began to be published in 1953.

Another surge in interest in Meroitic took place with the archaeological fieldwork of F. Hintze from 1958–59, which gathered more information. Hintze, from the German Democratic Republic, died in April 1993. The inscriptions were now sufficiently numerous; French researchers created a REM (Repertoire Epigraphique Meroitique) system in 1960 to begin to organize Meroitic data in a regular fashion for common reference and recording. Soon to follow were the questions about Nubian language taxonomy which appeared in Greenberg, 1963, *Languages of Africa*; and Trigger, 1966, *The Languages of the Northern Sudan*, (JAH 7, 1:19–25). The irregular publication of the *Meroitic Studies Newsletter* began in 1968.

A 1969 conference at the University of Marseilles presented the REM system to a wider audience of specialists. Additional conferences devoted to the study of Meroitic were held in Khartoum in 1970; among those attending were Jean Leclant, A. Heyler, P. Shinnie, N.B. Millet, B. Haycock, F. Hintze, A. M. Abdalla, and H. Bell. In the next years, conferences were held in Berlin in 1971 and in Paris in 1972 and 1973. A major UNESCO-sponsored conference was conducted in Cairo in 1974; attending were J. Vercoutter, Nicole Blanc, Theophile Obenga, and Jean Leclant.

In order to summarize this history, the following model of the study of Meroitic is offered:

- I. **Discovery Phase** (1819–1889): Gau, Ferlini, and Lepsius.
 - A. Achievement: Transcription
 - B. Limitation: No transliteration

II. **Transliteration Phase** (1909–1912): Griffith, Dow Dunham, Sayce, and Garstang. The birth of Meroitic Archaeology

- A. Achievement: Transliteration generally agreed (not always easy to apply)
- B. Limitation: Very limited translation

III. **Inventory and Coding** (1953–1969): LeClant, Vercoutter, Heyler, and Heintze

- A. Achievements: Development of REM and Meroitic Newsletter; Classification of source types; Meroitic data are computer-based
- B. Limitations: Translation does not advance; Limited study of comparative linguistics; No bilingual texts

IV. **Analysis—On Toward Translation**

A. *Ethno-Linguistic Taxonomy*

Disputes still exist about Meroitic as Proto-Nubian, as a member of the Eastern Sudanic language family, and relations to Ancient Egyptian, Kushitic, Nilo-Saharan, and Semitic languages. Its relation cannot be fully resolved since the language is still not known with reasonable confidence, and since it operated in a multi-lingual environment with considerable borrowing. The question of its linguistic taxonomy needs further work.

B. *Comparative Linguistics*

There can be realistic hope that a bilingual text can be discovered since the rulers of Merowe were in contact with the contemporary neighboring peoples (such as Greeks or Romans in Egypt) with their own writing systems. Meanwhile a strategy can rest upon the creation of bilingual context in a controlled linguistic environment. Such can include possible homologues in funerary and monumental stelae, graffiti, ostraca, and papyri found in Egypt and associated regions since there are some known relationships between Egyptian and Meroitic hieroglyphs.

An example of a controlled linguistic study of Meroitic exists with the *hetep*-shaped offering tablets. The *hetep* glyph could be used to mean “tribute” or the shape of the glyph was reformed as the actual offering tablet in funerary ritual. Likewise the *hetep* shape offered the floor plan of Meroitic pyramids. *Hetep*

tablet inscriptions are generally formulaic, and can thereby be compared for small contrasting variations. The texts on these tablets have known counterparts in Egyptian hieroglyphics as they are usually offerings or invocations to Osiris, Isis, Anubis, or libations and formulaic prayers offered to specific owner's names. Even if this comparative approach may yield only a few new lines of investigation it will be worthwhile for this poorly understood language.

Another approach that has already resulted in some advance has been found with the studies of Kharyssa Rhodes, an advanced undergraduate in anthropology at Rhode Island College, which have focused on comparative alphabet morphologies of neighboring writing systems. This helps to understand the degree of influence of neighboring writing systems. As such, it can point toward some potential loan words and semantic cognates. It is important to bear in mind that shared writing systems do not necessarily mean shared lexical or grammatical systems. In the absence of better knowledge, another step that can determine the affinities of different language systems is the comparative study of patterns of symbol frequencies in untranslated texts.

In the area of lexicon, the strategy will turn to topics that are discrete and well defined. These can include the number system, which is known to the extent that number and letter symbols are distinguished. These can be compared with the known number systems of Coptic, Egyptian, Ge'ez, Nubian, and others. Nubian place names are also known to have considerable continuity. The bulk of the lexical study will concentrate on comparative word lists with efforts made to discover semantic cognates, as is the normal technique in determining linguistic affinities.

Again, since Meroitic is so poorly known, it is probably useful to reexamine and compare a number of languages in the search for semantic linkages and loans. This search could include a standardized control word list looking for survival loan words in languages earlier than Meroitic such as Proto-Nubian Sudanic, the Semitic languages Hebrew and Phoenician with which Kushites had contact, and Greek and Latin as used in

Egypt as well as ancient Egyptian itself including its variant forms of hieroglyphic, demotic, and hieratic.

Other languages contemporary to Meroitic are also worth exploring by means of a comparative word list. These could include Coptic and conceivably reconstructed Nilo-Saharan. Languages that followed Meroitic such as Arabic, Old Nubian, Modern Nubian (Mahas, Kenzi, Sukkot), Ge'ez/Ethiopic, and Nilo-Saharan languages may likewise prove useful even if negative evidence is the result of these three dimensions of comparative lexical research.

Work in the area of grammar, and such matters as gender, verb structure, and number should be advanced but it is considered that this must play a secondary role until progress is made in other areas, especially lexicon. The easier access to lexical references not formerly available to the earlier researchers gives some degree of hope in this enterprise. Even more significant are the advances in computer technology, which allow for rapid searches of large data bases. Among several new computer software packages, there is now a special "Glyph" hieroglyphic program from the Utrecht University Center for Computer-Aided Egyptological Research (Faculty of Theology), which gives easier access to Egyptological material and may provide a model for the study of Meroitic.

Goals

The main goal is to add to the few known words in Meroitic that can be translated with confidence, and to develop and expand the Meroitic dictionary. From this, more advances can be made in related aspects of the study of Meroitic language which in turn, to the extent advances are made, will add to our understanding of comparative religion, comparative linguistics, Meroitic historical chronology, territorial markers, exchange, record keeping, historical figures, and events. Whatever the results—and frustrations—this work may reveal new correlations and can at least check conclusions reached a half century ago but not recently or systematically reexamined.