

Linguistic notes on two funerary steles with the “Euchologion Mega” type of prayer for the dead from Christian Nubia*

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Resumen: Este artículo busca ofrecer algunas observaciones sobre el uso del griego en la Nubia cristiana, basándose para ello en el estudio de dos estelas funerarias inscritas con el ‘Euchologion Mega’, un tipo de oración para los muertos. El artículo se centra en cinco consideraciones procedentes del examen del mencionado material. La conclusión extraída subraya la necesidad de estudiar las variantes individuales de la fórmula oracional y apuesta por la continuidad de investigaciones en esta línea.

Abstract: The aim of this article is to make some observations concerning the use of the Greek language in Christian Nubia, based on the study of two funerary steles inscribed with the ‘Euchologion Mega’, a type of prayer for the dead. The article focuses on five remarks derived from the examination of the aforementioned material. The conclusion drawn underlines the need for a study of the individual variants of the prayer’s formula and pleads for the continuation of similar research.

Palabras Clave: Griego. Nubia. Estelas funerarias. ‘Euchologion Mega’.

Key Words: Greek language. Nubia. Funerary Steles. ‘Euchologion Mega’.



Introduction

My communication in the “9th International Congress on Graeco-Oriental and African Studies” concerned the study of two Christian funerary steles in Greek with the Euchologion Mega type of prayer for

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the dead from the Nubian sites of el-Usheir¹ and Goshabi². Due to the thematic core of the Congress (“Mediterranean Ports”), my elaboration of the subject was basically focused on the discernment of the historical background against which one can estimate the role of the Greek language in Christian Nubia (5th-14th centuries)³.

Scholar interest has for the main part been expressed in favour of a more systematic approach to the linguistic aspects of the research concerning the corpus to which belong these two inscriptions. Up to this point the works by J. Oates⁴, M.G. Tibiletti-Bruno⁵, J. Kubínska⁶, T. Hägg⁷ and A. Lajtar⁸ are the most fundamental for the understanding of the function of the “Nubian” prayer for the dead that

¹ Large, left-hand side fragment of Terracotta Funerary Stele with arched topping, found near the Church of the island el-Usheir (Lat. 18°29'N, Long. 33°41'E). It was acquired (25.03.2000) by the Director of Excavations in the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums in Sudan, Mr. Salah Omer Al-Sadig, and is now kept in the Sudanese National Museum (Entry No. 31102). The fragment (Length: 0,24 m., Width: 0,17 m., Thickness: 0,052 m.) preserves a Greek inscription with twelve lines of the Euchologion Mega type of prayer for the dead, clearly marked by incised lining. The cutting of the letters is quite careful, but the bad condition of preservation (partly burnt and defaced surface) of the stele makes reading harder. No precise dating seems possible.

² Small, top right hand side fragment of Terracotta Funerary Stele, with arched double rim (Width: 0,35m.) decorated with a cross. It was found in Goshabi (Lat. 18°N, Long. 31°06'E), acquired (06.1999) by the Director of Excavations in the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums in Sudan, Mr. Salah Omer Al-Sadig, and is now kept in the Sudanese National Museum (Entry No 31103). The fragment (Length: 0,17 m., Width: 0,13 m., Thickness: 0,025-0,040 m.) preserves a Greek inscription with four lines of the Euchologion Mega type of prayer for the dead. The writing of the letters is large, careful and easy. No precise dating seems possible.

³ Cfr. Alexandros TSAKOS, “Δύο Επιτύμβιες Στήλες στα Ελληνικά από τη Χριστιανική Νουβία”, *Graecoarabica* (forthcoming issue).

⁴ John OATES, “A Christian Inscription in Geek from Armenna in Nubia”, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 49 (1963), pp. 161-171.

⁵ M.G. TIBILETTI-BRUNO, *Iscrizioni nubiane* (Pavia, 1964).

⁶ Jadwiga KUBINSKA, *Inscriptions grecques chrétiennes, Faras IV* (Warszawa, 1974), espec. pp. 69-86 (Commentaire de la “Prière Nubienne”).

⁷ Among several excellent works on the use of Greek in Nubia, cfr. especially the highly elucidating T. HÄGG, “Two Christian Epitaphs in Greek of the ‘Euchologion Mega’ Type”, in T. SÄVE-SÖDERBERGH, G. ENGLUND & H.-Å. NORDSTRÖM (eds.), *Late Nubian Cemeteries; Scandinavian Joint Expedition 6* (Solna 1981), pp. 55-62

⁸ Among a series of articles by Adam LAJTAR, concerning the use of Greek in Christian Nubia, and especially the study of the Euchologion Mega type of prayer for the dead, cfr. the general remarks of his “Greek Funerary Inscriptions from Old Dongola: General Note”, *Oriens Christianus* 81 (1997), pp. 107-126.

has remained in use in the Greek Orthodox Church up to nowadays⁹. This short paper will try to discern the information that these inscriptions provide for the use of Greek in Christian Nubia.

1. The linguistic status of Christian Nubia

It has been established that the use of Greek in Kush was a result of the influence of the Mediterranean empires (Hellenistic and Roman) reinforced by a spirit of adoption and recreation that was constantly leading the peoples from the Middle Nile Region to an imitation of the scripture that was in use in their northern neighbours' state, whether this be Pharaonic (Hieroglyphs-Demotic) or Graeco-Roman (Greek) Egypt. What seems striking at first sight is the fact that the Meroitic script —that developed during the last centuries before our era—, ceased to be in use by the inhabitants of Kush by the end of the 4th century A.D.

⁹ Cfr. Jacques GOAR, *Euchologion sive rituale Graecorum*, Venice 1730 (Graz 1970, p. 424). The text transmitted reads as follows:

ὁς Θεοῦ τῶν Πνευματικῶν καὶ παρὰ σαρκὸς, ὅς τῶν θανάτων καταπατήσας, τὴν δὲ διαβολὴν καταργήσας, καὶ τὴν ζωὴν τῷ κόσμῳ σου δωρησάμενος, αὐτὸς Κυρία ἀναπαύσον τὴν ψυχὴν τοῦ κεκοιμημένου δούλου σου, τοῦδε, ἐν τοῦ ἀπὸ χλοερῶ, ἐν τοῦ ἀπὸ ἀναψυξέως, ἐνθα ἀπερὶ οὐδύνη, λύπη καὶ στεναγμῶν. Πάντα ἁμαρτήματα τῆς παρανομιᾶς ἀφ᾽ ἑσέως, ἐν λογῶν, ἢ ἐργῶν ἢ διανοιᾶς, ὧς ἀγαθὸς καὶ φιλανθρώπος Θεὸς συγχωρήσας, ὅτι οὐκ ἐστὶν ἀνθρώπος ὃς ζῆσεται καὶ οὐχ ἁμαρτήσας. Σὺ γὰρ μόνος ἐκτοῦ ἁμαρτίας, ἡ δὲ δικαιοσύνη σου δικαιοσύνη εἶς τῶν αἰώνων, καὶ ὁς λογῶν σου ἀληθεία. Ὅτι σὺ εἶς ἡ ἀναστασις, ἡ ζωὴ καὶ ἡ ἀναπαύσις τοῦ κεκοιμημένου δούλου σου, τοῦδε, Χριστέ ὁς Θεὸς ἡμῶν καὶ σοὶ τὴν δόξαν ἀναπαύομεν σὺν τῷ ἀναρχῶ σου Πατρὶ καὶ τῷ παναγιῶ καὶ ἀγαθῷ καὶ ζωοποιῶ σου Πνεύματι νῦν καὶ ἀεὶ, καὶ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων, Ἀμήν.

“God of spirits and all flesh, You who have trod under death and have rendered ineffectual the devil, and have given life to Your world, rest the soul of Your departed servant (NAME) in a place of verdure, in a place of refreshment; therein grief, pain, and mourning have fled. Pardon every sin done by him in word, or deed, or thought, since You are a good God and love mankind, because there is no man who will live and will not sin. For You alone are outside sin, Your justice is justice for ever, and Your word is truth, because You are the resurrection, the life and the repose of Your departed servant (NAME), Christ our God, and to You we send up glory with your everlasting Father and the all-holy and good and life-giving Spirit, now and always and for ever. Amen”.

Although it is possible that some people might have been speaking the Meroitic dialect in the Middle Nile Region even after the fall of Meroe in the hands of Ezana, the christianised king of Axum, and apart from the fact that Meroitic is considered to have been one of the main elements in the process of formation of the old Nubian script (which appeared during the 8th century), it is generally accepted that at least since the time (6th century) of the Byzantine missions in the kingdoms to the south of the First Cataract (Nobatia, Makuria and Alwa), Greek was the official language of the region.

The Arab conquest of Egypt (middle of the 7th century) led to dramatic changes in the Nile Valley: Nubia was isolated from the rest of the Christian world, dependence on the Coptic Patriarchate of Alexandria was accentuated and at least until the period of the Fatimid rule in Egypt (969-1169 A.D.) the only contacts with other Christians seem to have been limited to those exchanged (possibly through the kingdom of Alwa) with Ethiopian Christianity. Consequently, the continuation of the use of the Greek language until the 14th century, although by the 10th century Greek was no more used in Egypt¹⁰, seems to be a paradox: why did not the Coptic language substitute Greek in liturgy since Copts have been settling in great numbers in Christian Nubia after the islamisation of Egypt, controlling at the same time from Alexandria the ecclesiastical affairs in the Nile Valley against the Melkites? How can the use of a Greek-Melkite (?)¹¹ prayer be explained in such a historical context, which has even led to the conclusion that “there is no doubt that by the middle of the eighth century all the kingdoms of Nubia, from Aswan to Soba, belonged to the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria”¹²? Could the inscriptions from Goshabi and el-Usheir help in the clarification of these peculiarities?

¹⁰ The paradox is accentuated by the fact that the number of steles found in Christian Nubia with the Euchologion Mega type of prayer for the Dead rises dramatically between the 10th and the 12th centuries A.D., cfr. Alexandros TSAKOS, “Δύο Επιτύμβιες Στήλες στα Ελληνικά από τη Χριστιανική Νουβία”, *Graecoarabica* (forthcoming issue), Table 1.

¹¹ The question on the (doctrinal) origins of this prayer is still to be answered; cfr. J. KUBINSKA, “La prière nubienne pour les morts et la question de son origine”, *Nubia. Recentes Recherches*, 1975, pp. 83-84.

¹² Giovanni VANTINI, *Christianity in the Sudan* (Bologna, 1981), p. 77.

2. Linguistic remarks about the two inscriptions

1. One of the commonest peculiarities of the Greek language, as it was used in Christian Nubia, consists of a number of iotacisms that have already attracted the attention of modern scholars: in the longer of the two inscriptions, that from el-Usheir, we come across such a phenomenon in the adjective *φωτινά* and in the noun *διάνιαν*. The fact that the same peculiarities are also found in the earliest version of this prayer in a papyrus from Nessana in Palestine (6th-7th centuries A.D.)¹³, strengthens the hypothesis that they should be accounted for as a result of the late Greek pronunciation¹⁴, and not as a result of a special use of the Greek language in Christian Nubia¹⁵.

2. This seems to be the case also with the confusion of “ο” sounds, as with the noun *τόπω* in the same inscription. Such trivial phenomena can be met with everywhere independently (due again to the late Greek pronunciation) as it is proved by their occurrence in the early Palestinian example.

3. The aberrations *φωτινά* and *στεναγμοίς* from our longer inscription should be considered as proper mistakes of the engraver, but the occurrence of the latter in another terracotta funerary stele from Makuria may point to an orthographical-linguistic tradition of the Middle Nile Region created in the course of the centuries that Greek was in use in this isolated part of the Christian world.

4. In our shorter example from Goshabi we read *καταργέσας* that differs from the “normal” form of the participle *καταργήσας*. Still, this grammatical phenomenon is once again attested in the papyrus from Nessana, and thus does not seem to be of any help for the discernment of a special use of the Greek language in Christian Nubia.

5. In the first line of the same inscription, the engraver has gone over the margins of the flat floor prepared for the inscription, in order to fit in the article *των*. This mistake, given the position of the article in a place where a decorative mood can be observed in the positioning of the words so as to imitate the shape of the stele, could signify either that there was one more Cross from the left-hand side of *ὁ θεός*, or, more probably, that the engraver had omitted the article, and after

¹³ C.J. KRAEMER, *Excavations at Nessana*, vol. III, *Non-literary papyri* (Princeton, 1958), pp. 309-310, n° 96.

¹⁴ Personal communication by T. Hägg.

¹⁵ In this context a study of contemporary Byzantine linguistics (both of the capital and of the eastern territories of the empire) would be of paramount importance.

having finished his work, checked the text once again and filled in with the missing word. This might point to some kind of knowledge of the Greek language by the engraver, although it is equally possible to assume that it was precisely his lack of knowledge that led him to a second lecture of the original he was copying from in order to avoid such mistakes.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, our two examples of the Euchologion Mega type of prayer for the Dead are too short and cannot be of much help in the effort of forming an idea of how Greek was spoken in the Kingdoms of Christian Nubia. Although it would be reasonable to assume that the Greek language was understood by part of the population in the Middle Nile Region, it must be accepted that “such formulaic usage”, as seems to have been the case with the Euchologion Mega type of prayer for the Dead, “says little about the level of understanding and use of that language by the stone carver or the inscriber of ceramic tombstones, or indeed of their clients”¹⁶.

It is thus safer to study the individual variants of the prayer formula or certain syntactical and morphological peculiarities. In this direction, the presentation by Adam Lajtar and Robert Haasnoot¹⁷ of all the artifacts bearing some Greek inscriptions from the storehouses of the National Museum in Khartoum seems to be a very promising task. Such work needs to be continued through thorough investigations of all the hidden treasures from museums and private collections worldwide. This, together with new finds —especially from the rescue work to be undertaken during the construction of a dam near the Fourth Cataract- might help us to elucidate existing questions and even open up new paths of speculation concerning the use of the Greek language in Christian Nubia.

¹⁶ D. A. WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia. Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile* (London: British Museum Press, 2002), pp. 237-238.

¹⁷ Adam LAJTAR & Robert HAASNOOT, *Catalogue of the Greek Inscriptions in the Sudan National Museum at Khartoum*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 122 (2003).