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Toponymic Strata in Ancient Nubia Until the Common Era

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The civilizations of the Middle Nile are considered as largely illiterate until the Napatan period and the emergence of the Meroitic alphasyllabary later in the end of the first millennium BCE. Elsewhere, isolated epigraphic material exists in Ethiopia as early as 800 CE, but longer texts in the Horn of Africa are generally a much later phenomenon of the first millennium CE. For reconstructing the linguistic history of the Middle Nile then we are largely reliant on two chief data points: 1) contemporary Egyptian records pertaining to Nubia and 2) the epistemologically more difficult method of retrojecting later historical traditions or even modern linguistic material onto a map of ancient Nubia.

This article attempts to make a contribution not so much to the location of toponyms in ancient Nubia, as is the preoccupation of most philologists and historians, but rather outline the various linguistic strata of toponyms present in ancient Nubia and what they tell us about the linguistic history of the Middle Nile. Toponyms not only provide key insights into the historical geography of ancient cultures, but are also linguistic artifacts in themselves. They can spatially demonstrate linguistic boundaries, and in some cases can also illustrate linguistic migrations. While most of Northeast Africa outside Egypt is terra incognita from the point of indigenous toponymic textual data until the emergence of Meroitic, Old Nubian, and Ge'ez, toponyms enumerated in hieroglyphic Egyptian sources provide some of the earliest insights into the history of Sudan and its "linguistic map."

The picture of Nubian toponyms and historical geography, however, is one of great linguistic change and heterogeneity. A careful study of Nubian place names can be used as a record of the linguistic geography of Sudan, but caution must be placed in this approach due to the great linguistic complexity present in Northeast Africa.

Figure 1.
Postulated
linguistic map of
Sudan and Nubia
in the Second and
First Millennium
BCE with major
placenames
mentioned in text.
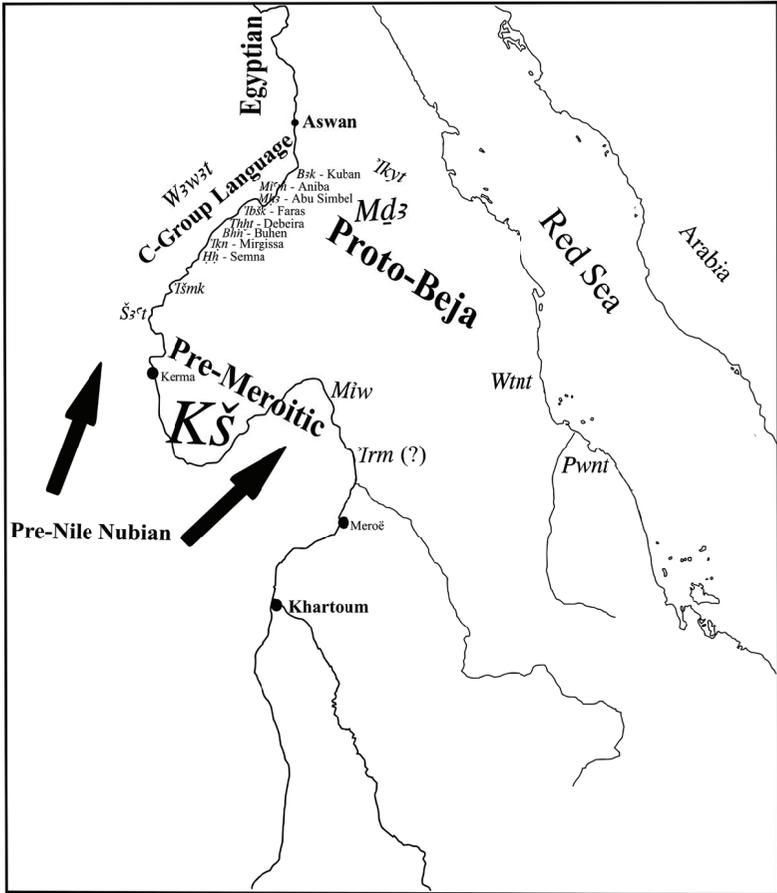
In modern Sudan alone, Ethnologue lists 78 languages,[1] and the Sa-
helian environment is well-known in African linguistics as a zone of
extraordinary ethno-linguistic diversity, almost unparalleled else-
where in Africa.[2] The overwhelming majority of contemporary Su-
danese languages are impossible to trace this far back in history due
to a lack of indigenous written records. The most comprehensive
review of the linguistic geography of Sudan from Egyptian records
is a recent contribution of Karola Zibelius-Chen, which proposed
broadly identifying the linguistic groupings of Meroitic (Eastern
Sudanic) and Cushitic (chiefly Beja) in the northern Sudan.[3] This
article will serve to further explicate this picture using regional to-
ponymy.

1   https://www.ethnologue.com/country/sd/languages.
2   On the linguistic diversity in Kordofan and the Nuba Mountains, and Sudan in general, see
    DIMMENDAAL, *The Leopard's Spots,* pp. 25–55.
3   ZIBELIUS-CHEN, "Sprachen Nubiens in pharaonischer Zeit," pp. 267–309.

The Linguistic Map of Sudan

Even where some of these languages may be recorded in onomastic data in various epigraphic traditions, the sheer number of languages in Sudan makes identifying etymologically a single language from toponyms difficult and often impossible. Furthermore, the difficulty of locating most place names in ancient texts with certainty makes it difficult to create a base map from which one can measure linguistic change. This "map" (fig. 1) is constantly changing from period to period, the change of toponyms often reflecting linguistic changes, perhaps, but not always, attributable to migratory episodes in historical Nubia. The contemporary linguistic map of Sudan is dominated by two different linguistic phyla, Afroasiatic and Nilo-Saharan; with a small number of Niger-Congo and other isolate languages in Kordofan and southern Sudan. Most linguists and archaeologists place the migration of Niger-Congo out of West Africa at some point in the first millennium CE, so these are not generally relevant to the discussion of ancient Sudan contemporary to pharaonic Egypt.

The center of gravity of Nilo-Saharan languages is to the west of the Nile Valley, so it is generally argued that all these languages migrated south and east during antiquity, including the large subgrouping in South Sudan and East Africa known as Nilotic.[4] This is particularly relevant to this discussion because languages such as Meroitic and Old Nubian must have arrived on the Nile Valley from the west at some point in antiquity. Such migrations might be detectable not only in the toponymic textual record but also possibly in the archaeological material. Other North-Eastern Sudanic and Nilo-Saharan languages, known contemporarily but not in ancient documentation, such as Nara and Kunama now located in the Atbara and Gash catchments east of the Nile, must also have presumably been spoken along the ancient Middle Nile, although we are lacking any positive documentation of these languages in ancient texts.

In antiquity, Afroasiatic languages in Sudan belonged chiefly to the phylum known as Cushitic, spoken on the eastern seaboard of Africa and from Sudan to Kenya, including the Ethiopian Highlands. The longest traceable member of Cushitic in Sudan is Beja, although other branches such as Agaw and Highland East Cushitic are sometimes mentioned in discussions on the ancient peopling of Sudan.[5]

4   DIMMENDAAL, "Eastern Sudanic and the Wadi Howar and Wadi el-Milk Diaspora," pp. 37–67; RILLY, "Enemy Brothers: Kinship and Relationship between Meroites and Nubians (Noba)," pp. 214–15.

5   See BREYER, *Einführung in die Meroitistik*, 202; EL-SAYED, *Afrikanischstämmiger Lehnwortschatz*, pp. 49–50; BECHHAUS-GERST, *Nubier und Kuschiten im Niltal*, pp. 30–80. For an archeological perspective of Cushitic peoples on the Nile Valley, see HAALAND, "Fish, Pots and Grain: Early and Mid-Holocene Adaptations in the Central Sudan," pp. 59–60.

These languages are meant to have undergone major geographical contractions due to pressure from other linguistic groupings, most notably Ethiosemitic.

The Egyptian language, unique amongst Afroasiatic phylum in having only one constituent language, was spoken by a limited population in Northern Sudan. The majority of Egyptian speakers were Egyptian colonists and their associated administrative and religious personnel and apparatus, but the later, indigenous Napatan dynasty seems to have also used a "dialect" of Egyptian as an elite dialect, possibly representing a case study of "elite emulation" until the advent of Meroitic as a written language.[6] A limited amount of Egyptian probably also circulated in Meroitic archives and amongst learned scribes in Nubia.[7] Given the absence of Egyptian in documentary texts of Napatan Nubia, it must be presumed that the population at large spoke a variety of indigenous languages.

Other Afroasiatic languages like Berber and Chadic may have had a limited impact in the western regions of Sudan. Berber, in particular, has been evoked in many arguments as the origin of several African words in Egyptian texts, although these hypotheses rest on shaky lexical and phonetic arguments.[8]

Old Kingdom

The oldest record of Nubian place names in Egyptian texts derives from the Old Kingdom. Ignoring the very generic place names such as *Tꜣ-sty*, the record of Nubian toponyms in the Old Kingdom is rather small. The expedition narratives of Aswan nobles are the richest source of data, recording place names such as *Wꜣwꜣt*, *Irtt*, *Zꜣtw*, *Mḫr*, *Trrz*, and *Iꜣm*.[9] All these toponyms have been the object of comprehensive studies relating to the identification of their location, but relatively little consideration is given to the linguistic origin of these words.[10] Indeed, a marked feature of all these words is that many of them are reducible to Egyptian roots. *Irtt* is the common Egyptian word for "milk," while *Zꜣt.w* can mean both "ground" and "libation-stone." *Mḫr* is a word for silo or low-lying land, comprised of an Egyptian *m*-prefix attached to the preposition *ḫr* "under." There is then the problem of whether these designations are prosaic Egyptian terms for local geographical features, or rather were attempts

6   For Napatan-Egyptian, see PEUST, *Das Napatanische,* passim.
7   WELSBY, *The Kingdom of Kush,* pp. 189–99.
8   For the problems of the existence of Berber in antique Sudan, see the arguments in KOSSMANN, "The Names of King Antef's dogs," pp. 79–84 and other issues identified by ZABORSKI, "The Problem of Blemmyes-Beja: An Etymology," p. 176, n. 1.
9   ZIBELIUS, *Afrikanische Orts- und Völkernamen,* pp. 78, 88, 101, 128, 153, 176.
10 An argument by the present author suggested linking *Iꜣm/Iꜣm* with the Teda word *emeri* "highland," see Cooper, "Reconsidering the Location of Yam," p. 4.

at phonetically matching place names from local Nubian languages (a linguistic phenomenon known as "phono-semantic matching"). This phonetic matching has been proffered on a number of names in Egyptian history in the context of Nubia, but is not easily provable, especially when the linguistic identity of A-Group, C-Group, and *Kerma ancien* speakers is far from certain.

Of these Old Kingdom place names, *W₃w₃t* and *ʾI₃m* seem to be the only names that were passed on into texts of the Middle Kingdom and later; even *ʾI₃m* is found only sparingly in later contexts and has become obsolete by the New Kingdom. The word *W₃w₃t* has been related to a Beja word for "dry" by El-Sayed, which might give us a clue to the linguistic geography of Lower Nubia (A- & C-Group speakers), but none of the other place names are easily matchable to any root in known languages of Sudan.[11] It might well be that an as yet unidentified branch of Cushitic was spoken in Lower Nubia before the arrival of North Eastern Sudanic languages, such as Meroitic, in the Middle Nile Valley. A fragmentary relief from Userkaf's funerary temple records some elsewhere unattested place names *B₃t*, *Ḫzt* and *Sn(s)h*, all of which must be foreign names.[12] These names are listed under the heading of *t₃ nbw ḏ'm* "land of gold and electrum," so it is plausible that they refer to auriferous zones in the Second-Third Cataract region or, alternatively, regions of the Eastern Desert.

Middle Kingdom

Middle Kingdom texts witness to the arrival of the ubiquitous toponym "Kush," a term which came to designate the Nubian polity centred at Kerma. The emergence of this toponym in roughly the same period as the ascendency of Kerma has been linked to the arrival of a new ethno-linguistic group in Dongola Reach and the Third Cataract. There is some disagreement amongst philologists as to whether this place name at first designated a geographical entity, only after which it later designated a polity centred at Kerma.[13]

With the coming of Kush, a new series of place names was recorded in the late Middle Kingdom Execration Texts, by far the most informative source for the geography of the Middle Nile in this period.[14] Concurrently, several place names known from Old Kingdom

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11 EL-SAYED, *Afrikanischstämmiger Lehnwortschatz,* p. 178.
12 GRIMM, "*T₃-nbw* 'Goldland' und 'Nubien,'" p. 26.
13 O'CONNOR, "Locations of Yam and Kush and Their Historical Implications," pp. 39–42; ZIBELIUS, *Afrikanische Orts- und Völkernamen,* 166–69.
14 For the longer Middle Kingdom Execration Texts see POSENER, *Princes et Pays d'Asie et de Nubie;* SETHE, *Die Ächtung feindlicher Fürsten, Völker und Dinge auf altägyptischen Tongefässscherben des Mittleren Reiches;* KOENIG, "Les textes d'envoûtement de Mirgissa," 101–25. A good summary of the issues involved in the localisation of place names in the texts is presented in WILLIAMS, "Some Geographical and Political Aspects to Relations between Egypt and Nubia in C-Group and Kerma Times, ca. 2500–1500 B.C.," pp. 62–75.

expedition texts, most notably ꜢIrṯt and Zꜣṯw, disappear from the texts. Senwosret I's stele at Buhen also records a list of new Nubian place names such as ꜢIšmk (probably the Dal Cataract), Šꜣꜥ.t (from which the modern name Sai derives), and Yam amongst others – unfortunately the stele is badly damaged and this causes many problems in the readings of these toponyms.[15]

Given the similarity between the archeological material at Kerma and Sai in *Kerma moyen* and *Kerma classique,* it is plausible that the polity of Šꜣꜥ.t, first mentioned in the Middle Kingdom, was also dominated by speakers of a Meroitic-like language. This places most of the Nile Valley south of Sai firmly in the sphere of North-Eastern Sudanic languages, with a very uncertain southern boundary. Lower Nubia still belonged to a different linguistic group, with the boundary probably being within the Batn el-Hajar.

The African corpus of the Execration Texts deal, as far as we can ascertain, with the region of the Middle Nile and the Eastern and Western Deserts of Egypt and Sudan. The majority of the place names in this corpus are given to represent centers along the river, although a good deal of place names designates polities in the Eastern Desert such as Ꜣwšḳ and Wbꜣt-spt.

The personal and place names in the corpus have been subjected to a linguistic study by Rilly, who has shown the roughly similar phonetic inventories of Sai (Šꜣꜥ.t) and Kush (Kš).[16] The toponyms and personal names according to Kush and Sai lack any of the extensive pharyngeal consonants so common in Afroasiatic languages, and it is therefore likely that we are dealing with North-Eastern Sudanic languages, quite likely a pre-Meroitic tongue, although any number of North-Eastern Sudanic languages is possible. These data show that by the Middle Kingdom (at the latest) the region from Dongola reach to the Batn el-Hajar was linguistically dominated by North-Eastern Sudanic, i.e., Nilo-Saharan languages. How far south this branch extended cannot be ascertained, but the presence of Kerma culture as far as the region of Abu Hamed might argue for an extension as far as this region, although we cannot preclude that other Eastern Sudanic languages dominated the Nile south of that point including the Atbara River.

15   For the reading of the stele see Bush, "The Yam Jam and Florence Stela 2540," pp. 23–25. For the place name ꜢIšmk in Middle Kingdom documents, see also Davies, "The Inscriptions of Senwosret III at the Dal Cataract," p. 14. An additional instance of the place name with the phonetic alternation of ḫ/š (Ḥmyk) is present in the Topographical list of Thutmosis III, Urk. IV, 802 no. 149.

16   Rilly, "Le nom de Saï et ses occurences dans le textes méroïtiques," pp. 303–12.

New Kingdom

With the emergence of an energetic and imperialistic adminis-
tration in the early New Kingdom and the dominance of Nubia by
Egypt, a great deal of new toponyms enters the Egyptian geographic
repertoire. Among the new entries in the lexicon are the frontier
entities of *Mỉw* and *Ḳry* as well as the distant land of Irem (*Ỉrm*). The
place name *Ỉkyt*, corresponding to Wadi Allaqi and replacing the Old
and Middle Kingdom toponym *Ỉbht*, appears first in a topographical
list of Thutmosis IV after which it becomes the standard designator
of the goldmining region east of Lower Nubia, a region which also
became a center of rebel activity and boasted its own chief (*wr*).[17]

New place names of Egyptian origin at Kerma (*Pr-nbs* "House of
the Christ's thorn") and at Gebel Barkal (*Ns.wt-tꜣ.wy* "Thrones of the
two lands") possibly encode "similar-sounding" indigenous place
names although it is very difficult to prove these scenarios and some
caution should be taken in this approach. Egyptian-founded estab-
lishments in Nubia such as Soleb (*Mnn.w ḫꜥỉ-m-mꜣꜥ.t*) and Sedeinga
(*Ḥw.t-Ty*) bear Egyptian names, a common trait of Egyptian-built
"colonial" establishments in frontier regions, as is also found in
the names of the Lower Nubian fortresses. The temple at Sedeinga,
Ḥw.t-Ty, is even recognizable in the modern name for the site, *Ad-
eye*.[18]

The richest source of Nubian toponyms in this period are the so-
called "Topographical Lists," lists divided into two sections, Asiatic
(Northern) and African (Southern), with the African section con-
taining well over 200 toponyms. Despite some smaller studies of
these lists, the overwhelming majority of place names in the African
section has proved difficult to locate. A number of headwords mark
the regions which these lists cover: "Kush" (Upper Nubia), "Wawat"
(Lower Nubia), "Irem" (Fifth Cataract?), "Punt" (Eastern Sudan/Er-
itrea), "Medjay" (Eastern Desert), and other supra-regional entities
such as "Tjehenu" (Libya) and "Wetenet" (somewhere along the Red
Sea).[19] Put simply, these lists cover almost the entirety of the north-
ern and eastern part of Sudan known to Egyptians.

The land of Irem, quite likely somewhere in the region of the Fifth
Cataract or Shendi Reach, probably delineates the southernmost ex-
tension of Egyptian interest on the Nile Valley in the New Kingdom,
with the Egyptians marking their border somewhat further north at

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17 This place name is discussed extensively in Zibelius, "Die Kubanstele Ramses' II.: und die
    nubischen Goldregionen," pp. 411–17. For the first instance of this place name, see El-Razik,
    "Luxor Studies," p. 222.
18 Leclant, "Recherches sur la toponyme méroïtique," p. 161.
19 Urk. IV, 796–800.

the rock of Hagr el-Merwa near Kurgus.[20] Wetenet, a shadowy land mentioned in solar hymns and cosmographies, is known from a few expedition texts as a source of ebony along the Red Sea, probably to be located in the environs between Port Sudan and Tokar.[21] This may have designated a region encountered on route or in the environs of Punt.

An investigation of the languages present in the toponyms of the New Kingdom Topographical Lists has formed part of the author's doctoral dissertation.[22] By using phonological and morphological features as identifiers of specific linguistic groupings, it was possible to produce a broad picture of the peopling of the Middle Nile in the New Kingdom. Like the earlier Execration Texts, the Kush-list of place names in the New Kingdom lists presented a somewhat homogenous unit of place names with typical North-Eastern Sudanic phonemic repertoire (e.g., many stop consonants, lack of pharyngeals). The Irem-list also provides a similar inventory to Kush, placing this firmly in an Eastern Sudanic zone. These Irem/Kush-lists are distinctive from the Wawat-, Medjay-, Punt-, and Wetenet-lists, which provide sounds typical to Afroasiatic languages.

These data provide a number of key criteria in reconstructing the historical geography of the region, namely that Wawat was still dominated by Afroasiatic speakers, contradicting the argument that Nubian languages had arrived in the region. This also presents the first evidence that Irem was dominated by Eastern Sudanic speakers too, perhaps suggesting some geographic contiguity with Kush. A small number of place names on this list might be present in contemporary toponyms. The name *Srnyk*, listed in the Kush section, might be modern Sedeinga, the site of the Tiye Temple of the reign of Amenhotep III (Egyptian *r* could represent foreign /d/).[23] Priese argued that the place name *Gwrwbw* is still identifiable in modern Kulb (more commonly Kulubnarti), but as Bechhaus-Gerst has suggested it is possible that this is the general Cushitic root for "knee" (*glb/grb*) giving the possibility that such a generic place name could be duplicated in a variety of toponyms and locales, and not necessarily identical to the modern place name Kulb of the Batn el-Hajar.[24]

20 For the Egyptian frontier at Kurgus and the inscriptions at Hagr el-Merwa, see Davies, "Nubia in the New Kingdom: The Egyptians at Kurgus" (in press).

21 For *Wtnt*, see Kitchen, "Further Thoughts on Punt and Its Neighbours," p. 178 ; Assmann, *Der König als Sonnenpriester,* pp. 50–52.

22 Cooper, *Toponymy on the Periphery,* pp. 284–87. An analysis of these place names will also appear in the proceedings of the 13th International Conference of Nubian Studies, Neuchâtel.

23 See Khalil, *Studien zum Altnubischen,* p. 17.

24 Priese, "Orte des mittleren Niltals in der Überlieferung bis zum Ende des christlichen Mittelalters," pp. 484–97; Bechhaus-Gerst, *Nubier und Kuschiten im Niltal,* p. 120. Another issue with matching *Gwrwbw* with Kulb is the fact that this place name, no. 15 in the list of Thutmosis III, is squarely in the Irem section of the list which can hardly involve the Batn el-Hajar.

C-Group language

The language of C-Group speakers, who occupied most of Lower Nubia, and presumably the identity of some Nubians living in Middle Kingdom Egypt, has been the object of speculation but not concerted study. Behrens championed a now criticized view that the C-Group people spoke a variety of Berber, but this thesis rests on somewhat sketchy and numerically insufficient lexical evidence.[25] Nilo-Saharan languages have also been entertained based on the macro-migratory movement of Eastern Sudanic languages eastward across Sudan.[26] Lower Nubian place names of the Middle and New Kingdom most likely accord to "C-Group speech," although there is no guarantee of linguistic homogeneity across this corpus despite a unified material culture in Lower Nubia.[27] The input of the Pan-Grave people in the Nile Valley might have also contributed in changing this situation, although no place name can be specifically connected with this culture in Lower Nubia:

- ▸ *W3w3t* – Wawat (Lower Nubia)
- ▸ *Wtt* and *Wtk* (possibly same name explained by palatization of k)
- ▸ *ỈbšK* – Faras
- ▸ *Ỉḳn* – Mirgissa
- ▸ *Bhn* – Buhen
- ▸ *B3k* – Kuban
- ▸ *Miˁm* – Aniba
- ▸ *Mḥ3* – Abu Simbel
- ▸ *Ḥḥ* – Semna
- ▸ *Ỉisti* – Unknown location
- ▸ *Ṯḥḥt* – Debeira

A cursory glance at this data suggests that C-Group speakers cannot have spoken a Nilo-Saharan language. The presence of pharyngeal phonemes like *ḥ* and *ˁ* within this list secure this corpus as belonging to the Afroasiatic macro-family. Thus, Pre-Meroitic Lower Nubia cannot have been occupied by speakers of an allied Nilo-Saharan language but must have been occupied by speakers of a wholly different language. There are a number of phonetic difficulties present in the list, namely the old problem as to whether Egyptian *aleph*

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25 BEHRENS, "C-Group-Sprache – Nubisch – Tu Bedawiye: Ein sprachliches Sequenzmodell und seine geschichtlichen Implikationen," pp. 17–49.

26 RILLY & DE VOOGT, *Meroitic Language and Writing System*, p. 80.

27 This group is not designed to be exhaustive, and names in the Batn el-Hajar, for instance, between the interface of Upper and Lower Nubia have been for the time being ignored as the presence of C-Group speakers in this area is less evidenced than regions further north and therefore might not reflect a C-Group homeland or habitation area. For these toponyms, see ZIBELIUS, *Afrikanische Orts- und Völkernamen.*

represents a phonetic /r/ or a vowel in foreign words; as well as the
realisation of *ayin,* variably considered to represent /d/ in older Old
Kingdom loans or more probably /ʕ/. A few cursory etymological
suggestions might be proffered for these toponyms. The name *Miʕm*
might be reflected in Beja *maiyyam* "low lying land," presuming the
loss of a pharyngeal in Beja at some point in antiquity.[28] The Cataract
fortress at Mirgissa, *ʾĪkn*, might possibly be reflected in Beja *kwan*
"spate, torrent."[29]

These observations are not meant to identify this language spe-
cifically as Beja, but rather it is proposed to search in Beja lexical
material for the closest common ancestor and thence delineate the
possibility of a Cushitic language existing in pre-Meroitic Lower
Nubia. These place names do not present any prefixing or suffixing
pattern consistent with any one language. A final *–t* morpheme, con-
sistent amongst Cushitic languages is found in *Tḥḥt*, *Wȝwȝt*, and pos-
sibly *Tīstī*. The disappearance of the C-Group language is somewhat
of a mystery. It is possible that with successive phases of Egyptian,
Kushite, and Meroitic suzerainty in Lower Nubia that this language
became demographically and politically marginalized well before
the arrival of Nile Nubian speakers.

Meroitic and North Eastern Sudanic

While "Meroitic" toponyms are well-known philologically from
many Meroitic epigraphic texts, identifying toponyms as specifical-
ly "Meroitic" linguistically is difficult, due to the as yet incomplete
lexical reconstruction of Eastern Sudanic. Demonstrable "Meroitic"
place names are known in Aborepi (*ʾĪpbr*) for Musuwwarat el-Sufra,
likely relating to the Meroitic word for "Elephant."[30]

The date of the arrival of Nubian languages in the Nile Valley is
an ongoing debate. The identification of the center of gravity of Nu-
bian languages in Kordofan and other regions west of the Nile Val-
ley demonstrates that Nubian languages must be relatively recent
arrivals to the Nile Valley, although exactly when this happened
is open to question. There are roughly two opposing views in this
debate, an early date somewhere in the New Kingdom, and a late
date in the Graeco-Roman and Meroitic period. Favouring the late
date, there is some key epigraphic evidence, namely an inscription
at Meroe mentioning the presence of a "Nubian" (*nob*) king (*qore*),

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28 For this word, see Blažek, "Natural Phenomena, Time and Geographical Terminology in
    Beja Lexicon: Fragment of a Comparative Etymolgoical Dictionary of Beja (II)," p. 412.
29 Ibid., p. 404.
30 Rilly & de Voogt, *Meroitic Language and Writing System,* p. 102. For a map and list of
    Meroitic place names, see now Breyer, *Einführung in die Meroitistik,* p. 34.

as emphasized by Rilly.[31] This narrative would harmonize well with the picture given in classical sources of an emerging group called the Nobades who became the Romans' chief enemy on the southern frontier and fought a war with the Eastern Desert Blemmyes for suzerainty over Lower Nubia.

The earlier date for Nubian speakers in the Nile Valley is comparatively tentative, but is based on etymological evidence deriving from place names and a few loanwords identified by Hofman, Tomandl, and Zach.[32] Certain loanwords like *tgr* "ring" (< Nubian *tigli*) and place names such as *Irṯkr* (< Nubian *arti* "island") are purported to demonstrate this early date of Nubian speakers. They also identified the toponymic formant *kul* "Erdloch" or *kole* "Brunnen" in an Irem-place name dating to Seti I.[33]

This debate cannot be solved here in its entirety, but the toponymic evidence is rather negative in respect to an early date of arrival for an extensive number of Nubian speakers in the Nile Valley. There is no place name of obvious Nile Nubian (Nobiin, Kenzi, Dongolawi) origin in Lower Nubia in Pharaonic Egyptian records, so, if Nubian languages had arrived in the Nile Valley, they must have arrived in places well outside the regular zones of contact in Lower Nubia, possibly in the Bayuda or the deserts west of the Nile (e.g., Wadi Howar, Wadi el-Malik). Place names like *Isdrst*, well-known to contain the Nubian word for "water" *asti*, suggest the presence of Nubian speakers on the Nile, but this root *asti* also belongs to several other branches of North-Eastern Sudanic languages, so caution should be placed in specifically identifying this word as "Nubian" rather than Eastern Sudanic.[34] These data rather tends to favor the thesis of Rilly, namely that the Nubian-speaking population arrived in Northern Sudan roughly in the Ptolemaic/Meroitic period.

The Eastern Desert and Beja

Toponyms in the Eastern Desert are relatively difficult to isolate. The place name *Ibh(ꜣ)t* known from the biography of Weni and the Semna Dispatches designates a region of the Eastern Desert near Lower Nubia.[35] The Middle Kingdom place names *Iꜣhtb* and *Idꜣht* in the environs of Wadi Hammamat designate the northernmost foreign place names in the Eastern Desert in Egyptian texts.[36] The

31 Rilly, "Enemy Brothers: Kinship and Relationship between Meroites and Nubians (Noba)," pp. 216–23.
32 Hofmann, Tomandl & Zach, "Beitrage zur Geschichte der Nubier," pp. 271–76.
33 Ibid. See also discussion in Zibelius-Chen, "Sprachen Nubiens in pharaonischer Zeit," p. 294.
34 Rilly, *Le méroïtique et sa famille linguistique,* p. 179.
35 Zibelius, "Die Kubanstele Ramses' II.: und die nubischen Goldregionen," pp. 411–17; El-Sayed, *Afrikanischstämmiger Lehnwortschatz,* pp. 141–42.
36 El-Sayed, *Afrikanischstämmiger Lehnwortschatz,* pp. 131–32, 172.

Execration Texts mention two regions definitively in the Eastern
Desert, the kingdoms of *Wbȝt-spt* and *ȝwšḳ*.[37] Further south, the place
name of *ꜥmw* designates a gold region probably near the Egyptian
frontiers at Kurgus. Many of these names are easily identifiable
with Beja lexical material. *Ỉdȝht* is a perfect match for a still common
place name formant in the Eastern Desert *adar* "red" (*Adarot* with a
postpositional *–t*). The goldfields of *ꜥmw* might contain the botani-
cal term *ama* "tamarisk." Other place names like *Ỉwšỉ* (Beja *yuwaš*
"dirty") or *Ỉb* (Beja *ʾAbba* "wadi") from the Eastern Desert (Medjay
& Wetenet) section of the Topographical lists also suggest the pres-
ence of Beja speakers in the desert.[38]

Nile Cushitic

The contemporary presence of Highland East Cushitic and Agaw
languages in nearby Ethiopia, as well as Beja (so-called "North
Cushitic") in Eastern Sudan, makes it likely that these languages
were present on the Middle Nile in antiquity, but mapping and iden-
tifying Cushitic toponyms has proved elusive.[39] It has been argued
that a few African loanwords such as *dȝng* "pygmy" could originate
in a Cushitic language.[40] A placename written as *Ỉrhb* – from the so-
called supplementary texts of the New Kingdom Book of the Dead
– seems to be related to a Cushitic root *rob* "rain" following an anal-
ysis of Takács.[41] The possibility that the C-Group spoke a Cushitic
language should be seriously entertained, although specific Cushitic
lexical isoglosses are not apparent in the aforementioned list of C-
Group toponyms. The place name *Kȝȝw* from the biography of Weni
might be represented in the Pan-Cushitic root *kwer* "valley, basin."[42]

Conclusion

The toponymic data in Egyptian texts has broadly identified at least
three linguistic blocs in the Middle Nile region of the second and
first millennium BCE, each of which probably exhibited a great de-
gree of internal variation. In Lower Nubia there was an Afroasiatic
language, likely a branch of Cushitic.

By the end of the first millennium CE this region had been en-
croached upon and replaced by Eastern Sudanic speakers arriving

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37 EL-SAYED, *Afrikanischstämmiger Lehnwortschatz*, pp. 126, 179–80.
38 For these names, see COOPER, *Toponymy on the Periphery*, pp. 233, 297, 294.
39 For this see the discussion in BECHHAUS-GERST, *Nubier und Kuschiten im Niltal*, pp. 30–80
40 BREYER, "Zwerg-Wörter und ägyptisch-kuschitischer Sprachkontakt bzw. –vergleich: Zur
    sprachlichen Situation im mittleren Niltal des 3.-2. Jts. v. Chr," pp. 99–112.
41 TAKÁCS, "Nubian Lexicon in Later Egyptian," p. 571.
42 EL-SAYED, *Afrikanischstämmiger Lehnwortschatz*, pp. 266–67.

from the south and west, to be identified first with Meroitic and later migrations attributable to Nubian speakers.

Further south in the Middle Nile, with a northern border in the Batn el-Hajar, there was a sphere dominated by Eastern Sudanic speakers, certainly Meroitic speakers but also likely other branches of Eastern Sudanic. In the Eastern Desert, and possibly parts of Lower Nubia, the Beja language was dominant.

Unfortunately, the toponymic data and present state of linguistic analysis does not allow for a more nuanced picture than this, but this must represent the most basic framework for continuing lexical study of African lexical material in Egyptian texts. It is even quite likely that further philological and linguistic research will identify new languages in Ancient Sudan both along the Nile Valley and in the adjacent deserts.

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