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On Place Names Used by Nubians for Places outside Nubia (Notes on Medieval Nubian Toponymy 2)

Alexandros Tsakos

Introduction

Research on place names in Nubia may encompass a variety of aspects: from the distinction between macro- and micro-toponymy, through the comparison of place names in internal and external sources, to the Nubians' knowledge about places outside the Middle Nile region, the core area where the Christian Nubian culture of the Middle Ages developed. Given the preponderance of Christianity in the minds of the medieval Nubians, an important part of source material relevant for the latter point derives from sources of a Christian character and refers to central places of this religion. Therefore, it would be impossible to draw up a complete list of sites outside Nubia known to Nubians because such a list would have to include all the major biblical references for Christians, e.g., Bethlehem, Galilea, Jerusalem etc.

For a survey of the place names used by Nubians for places outside Nubia, some restrictions would have to apply. A major limitation should be that only texts witnessing the actual experience of the Nubians during the medieval era should be used in such a survey. This can be guaranteed because those texts were found in Nubia or perhaps also because they were written in Old Nubian. Moreover, it is important that the significance of a given locality for the religious life of the Nubians must be either known or predictable, in order to be able to evaluate the choice of the place name for that locality. Good examples are sites of pilgrimage, as well as important ecclesiastical centers.

In this framework, the present paper will discuss issues arising from the study of the place names for the pilgrimage center of Saint Mina at Mareotis, as well as for two of the Patriarchates with which Nubians had close contacts, namely Alexandria and Constantinople.

ΜΑΡΕΩΤΙΩ **against** ΜΑΡΕΩΘΗΩ

The Miracle of Saint Mina is an Old Nubian work set at the miraculous shrine of the saint at Mareotis, next to Alexandria.¹ The composition of this miracle narrative in the language of the Nubians pinpoints the significance of the Saint and his shrine for Christian Nubians. Further evidence of his cult in Nubia has been discovered.² In the text of the miracle the place name for Mareotis appears with a variant orthography, namely ΜΑΡΕΩΤΙΩ instead of ΜΑΡΕΩΘΗΩ, in both cases a locative.³ The study of such variants can prove insightful because we expect place names tend to have a normalized orthography against which deviations may be tested.

The Old Nubian Miracle may have been composed on the basis of either a Greek or Coptic original or by independent creation. In either case, the standard Greek orthography for the Greek toponym Mareotis was Μαρεῶτις, spelled with a T and not with a Θ.⁴ The scribe of the Miracle of Saint Mina uses both orthographies, changing in fact two letters, T for Θ and I for H. The latter variation can be explained by the very common phenomenon of iotacism in medieval Greek both inside and outside Nubia without any need to suggest an underlying phonetic (or semantic) difference between the two variants. On the contrary, the choice between T and Θ has already been proposed in scholarly literature as the result of how the Nubians read/pronounced the two letters.

In his study of a Greek funerary stela from Arminna in Lower Nubia, John Oates suggested that the variation was due to the conservative character of Nubian literacy which preserved Θ as an aspirate even after the ninth century when it had ceased to be aspirated in standard pronunciation of Greek.⁵ It has recently been doubted whether this was the result of Greek being a living tongue in Nubia,⁶ and it seems reasonable to sustain the argument that the Nubians did not use Greek in their everyday communication during the medieval centuries. They did, however, pronounce Greek words, when reading them aloud in the Gospels, singing them in hymns or

1 EL-GUZUULI & VAN GERVEN OEI, *The Miracle of Saint Mina*.

2 DEPTUŁA, "Inscriptions from Saint Menas' Church in Selib".

3 EL-GUZUULI & VAN GERVEN OEI, *The Miracle of Saint Mina*, p. 4, ll. 4–5 and *ibid.* p. 15, l. 7 respectively.

4 Cf. <http://www.trismegistos.org/place/5596>.

5 OATES, "A Christian inscription in Greek from Armenna in Nubia," p. 164.

6 Ochała, "Multilingualism in Christian Nubia," pp. 43–44 & n. 148.

incorporating them into their vocabulary. It is in fact the last alternative that makes it highly plausible that the Nubians did not distinguish the two letters phonetically: B.H. Stricker had pointed out that the Greek word *θρόνος* (meaning “throne” in English) is turned into *τρῶνος* in Old Nubian,⁷ and, half a century later, G.M. Browne proved the point by identifying in the Old Nubian word *τιμηᾶτῖρ*- the Greek word *θυμιατήριον* (meaning “censer” in English).⁸ In my opinion, the inverse cases of the title *θιμακιζ*- (OND, p. 63) and the name *θαπαρα*- (OND, p. 238) in Old Nubian (unknown precise meaning) are similar in that they are variants of the forms *τιμακκις*- and *ταπαρα*- respectively. Moreover, the adjective *ματτο* is also attested as *μαθο* (OND, p. 112), while more recently the Old Nubian toponym for the site Attiri has been identified in the word *λοιδαι < ατιδαι < ατιρι*.⁹ It is also unnecessary to try to list all the instances of Greek words that showcase the shift between T and Θ or Θ and T.¹⁰ They show that for the Nubians the sounds [θ] and [t] were interchangeable.

So why introduce Θ at all into words found only in the Old Nubian vocabulary?

It appears that beyond confounding the sounds of the letters T and Θ, the shifting orthographies may also find an explanation by looking more closely into the variety of contexts in which the Nubians used the letter Θ. Most instances of the use of Θ in Old Nubian occur in Greek loan-words, either common nouns such as *θαλας*- (OND p. 63) for the Greek *θάλασσα* (“sea”), or personal names, like *θαδεῶσι*-, *θεῶλωρε*-, *θαμα*- (OND, p. 238).¹¹ Apart from those loan-words, it is in titles and place-names that the use of the letter Θ appears more often in Old Nubian.

7 STRICKER, “A Study in Medieval Nubian,” p. 442, but I am not able to identify the reference to an Old Nubian text. On the contrary, see several examples of the orthography *θρονος* in BROWNE, *Old Nubian Dictionary*, p. 63.

8 BROWNE, *Old Nubian Dictionary*, p. 188. Henceforth, OND.

9 VAN GERVEN OEI ET AL., *The Old Nubian Texts from Attiri*, pp. 27 & 95.

10 Regarding the predictable question whether Θ could be found in a Coptic loan-word to Old Nubian, the answer is negative: in Coptic the letter Θ is used either in loan-words from Greek or as a monogram, “i.e. single letters that always express a combined pair of phonemes instead of a single phoneme. For purposes of grammatical analysis, a monogram is always understood to express two phonemes ... /p/ followed by /h/ φ, equivalent to ϣε” (LAYTON, *A Coptic Grammar*, 16). There is also a third question to be addressed and that is the possibility that the variant orthographies were due to copying faultily from Arabic texts where the letters *ta* and *tha* differ in only one dot and can easily be confused in Arabic paleography. Moreover, the phoneme /θ/ was pronounced /t/ in Middle Arabic (personal communication, Robin Seignobos). This seems, however, impossible to sustain in the case of funerary epigraphy or Old Nubian names and titles. The existence of Arabic *Vorlagen* for Old Nubian texts, though, remains to be proven.

11 An interesting detail is that Browne interpreted in OND, p. 238 the personal name *θεῶνοσι*- as a variant of the name *αἰῶνυσι*-, although he had initially suggested in the publication of the original text, namely P. QI 1 10.A.ii.5, that this was a variant (misspelling) of the name *θεῶλοσι*-. In between, he reworked his analysis of the passage in BROWNE, “Ad Ps.-Chrysostomi In Raphaelem Archangelum sermonem”, pp. 521–23. In p. 522, he characterized the form *θεῶνοσι*- as “an inadvertent conflation of *θεῶλοσι*- and *αἰῶνυσι*-.”

A plausible explanation for the fact that the Nubians introduced the letter Θ in words of Nubian origin, which would be pronounced with a [t] sound and could thus be graphically represented by the letter T was provided by Claude Rilly to Giovanni Ruffini in the context of the latter's study on "Idiom and Social Practice in Medieval Nubia," where he tackled the different orthographies for the same word in a single text, a case very similar to the double orthography for the word Mareotis in the Miracle of Saint Mina text we are discussing here. Rilly's suggestion was that a scribe may have been "deliberately employing various alternative spellings of a single word for variety's sake, to make a text more interesting".¹² I would like to conclude this section by attempting to nuance a bit further this desire for "variety" recognized in the scriptural codes of Nubian literates.

Another type of variation these literates were fond of was the use of multiple dating systems in a single document. This may be a sign of pure erudition or of a particular tradition promulgated by the Nubian (Makuritan) church in order to control time-reckoning, an essential administrative concern in any state.¹³ In either case, the persons controlling scriptural traditions in Makuria were the ecclesiastics. Their appearance in the lists of people guaranteeing the validity of a legal or fiscal document shows that there was a convergence, if not a virtual identity, between church and state hierarchies.¹⁴ Now, I have shown elsewhere that the Greek language in Christian Nubia had an aura of sacrality in itself that made it the most important linguistic vehicle for the propagation of religious ideas.¹⁵ The proximity of church and state in Makuria makes it very plausible that a religious aura was also to be expected in the nomenclature of the state apparatus. If this could be achieved by the use of the Greek language, and the letter Θ was among those recognized as representative of the Greek character of a word or a text, then it is not difficult to imagine why at least some of the Nubian scribes would deliberately employ the alternative spelling with Θ in titles and names whenever possible. After the formation of such a tradition, it would have become easier to shift between Θ and T also in common words (see for example, *P. QI 3 30.1* ΠΑΡΘΑΚΟΝΑ for ΠΑΡΤΑΚΟΝΑ, appearing in *P. QI 3 34.i.3*).

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the name Mareotis in the Miracle of Saint Mina was written both as ΜΑΡΕΩΤΙ- and as ΜΑΡΕΩΘΗ-. For the sake of variety indeed, the scribe shifted between the two

¹² RUFFINI, "Idiom and Social Practice in Medieval Nubia", p. 229 & n. 28.

¹³ ŁAJTAR, *Catalogue of the Greek Inscriptions*, p. 8; ΟΧΑΕΛΑ, *Chronological Systems of Christian Nubia*, pp. 345 ff.

¹⁴ RUFFINI, *Medieval Nubia. A Social and Economic History*, passim.

¹⁵ TSAKOS, "The Use and Role of the Greek Language in Christian Nubia"; Id., "Religious Literacy in Greek from the Christian Monastery at Qasr el Wizz, Lower Nubia."

possible orthographies. But in my opinion, the variant $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon\omega\theta\eta$ endowed the locality where the church of Saint Mina was to be found with an extra aura of sacrality because it was written with a letter Θ instead of the commoner T .

Greek $\alpha\lambda\epsilon\zeta\alpha\lambda\alpha\delta\rho\epsilon\iota\alpha$ **vs.** **Coptic** $\rho\alpha\kappa\omicron\tau/\rho\alpha\kappa\omicron\tau\epsilon$

The links of Christian Nubia with Alexandria are certain. The most eloquent evidence comes from the lists of Nubian bishoprics subordinated to the Alexandrian Patriarchate¹⁶; and again, one of the most characteristic witnesses of this subordination is a pair of documents discovered at Qasr Ibrim, the renowned scrolls accompanying bishop Timotheos in his tomb.¹⁷

The two scrolls are testimonial letters in Bohairic and Arabic sent by the Patriarch Gabriel to the Priests, Deacons, Subdeacons, Readers, Psalmodists and the People of Faras and Nubia to introduce their new Bishop Timotheus upon his enthronement in the see of Pachoras (Coptic name of Faras). In the Bohairic scroll the Coptic name for the city of Alexandria, $\rho\alpha\kappa\omicron\tau$, appears thrice. The first time it is mentioned is in the opening address by Gabriel himself, the other two in the two first of the four witnesses' autographs added in the end of the letter by or in the name of two bishops witnessing the enthronement. In all three cases, the language of the phrases in which the term $\rho\alpha\kappa\omicron\tau$ appears is Bohairic Coptic. Two bishops witnessing the testimonial letter of Gabriel also mention Alexandria, but their testimony is written in Greek so the term used is the Greek word $\alpha\lambda\epsilon\zeta\alpha\lambda\alpha\rho\epsilon\iota\alpha$. This distinction has nothing peculiar about it. The choice of the place name conforms to the linguistic context: $\rho\alpha\kappa\omicron\tau$ in the Coptic phrases, $\alpha\lambda\epsilon\zeta\alpha\lambda\alpha\rho\epsilon\iota\alpha$ in the Greek ones. However, this distinction does illustrate that the two options were well-known to the Nubians.

Indeed, another Nubian text preserving a toponym for the city of Alexandria confirms this picture. The Coptic letter from King Moses George to Apa Mark, Patriarch of Alexandria is followed by no less than three subscripts, one in Coptic and two in Greek. In the second Greek subscript the name of the city is reported as written in Greek, although this is impossible to control, since the document remains unpublished and there is no photographic reproduction of this postscript available.¹⁸

16 SEIGNOBOS, "Les évêchés nubiens: nouveaux témoignages."

17 PLUMLEY, *The Scrolls of Bishop Timotheos*.

18 For references, see DBMNT 610.

Finally, the version ρακοτε has been identified in an unpublished manuscript from Qasr el Wizz written in Sahidic Coptic and preserving a passage from an unknown work about or by Shenoute.¹⁹

There is, however, evidence for the use of the Greek name in a text written in Old Nubian. The attestation comes again from the *Miracle of Saint Mina* and offers insight into the fact that the Nubians referred to Alexandria by using the Greek name ἀλεξανδρε-. Moreover, the exact phrase of this attestation reads: εἴτοιγ οὔελλο Δῖππογ οὔελλα Δουῖρα· ἀλεξανδρεν ὠῖγογλα· which has been translated as “There was a woman living in a village in the district of Alexandria.”²⁰ The importance of this observation is that in the only text preserving the name Alexandria in the local language, we witness the Nubians calling the greatest city of Egypt, Africa, and the Christian world after Rome and Constantinople by its Greek rather than its Coptic name. It is, however, possible that this choice reflects the reference to the district and not the city itself.

In any case, I argue that this choice is significant, and that there are two alternative explanations for it: either that simply the Old Nubian text is a translation of a Greek text where the Greek name was kept; or that Alexandria in the mental geography of the Nubians was a locality that should be referred to in Greek under specific conditions. Given the analysis in the previous section about the sacrality of the Greek language in the context of Makuritan church ideology and state propaganda, I suggest that these conditions appeared when Nubians referred to Alexandria as the Patriarchal see to which the Nubian church belonged, rather the city itself as a human settlement. I do not intend, however, to indulge into any erratic speculation about a doctrinal significance in the use of the Greek in preference to the Coptic term. The point is not whether the Nubian church identified with the Chalcedonian rather than with the contra-Chalcedonian Patriarchate; the point is that in the minds of the Nubians rendering the place name for Alexandria in Greek placed the locality on a sacred pedestal of religious power.

It would have been interesting to check whether similar choices prevailed with the reference to other important cities, but the lack of difference between the Greek and the Coptic term for Antioch, Jerusalem, Rome, and Constantinople prevents further elaboration. Nevertheless, there are other important observations to make regarding the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, the city of Constantinople on the Bosphorus.

¹⁹ TSAKOS, forthcoming.

²⁰ EL-GUZUULI & VAN GERVEN OEI, *The Miracle of Saint Mina*, pp. 20–21.

ΠΟΛΙΣ VS. Δ᾿ΠΠΙ

In the corpus of Nubian texts that I have been able to check for this article, there are two instances of a reference to Constantinople:

1. In the opening lines of the Serra codex, the pseudo-Chrysostomian Sermon on the Cross, the longest text in Old Nubian known to date, the identification of the author names John Chrysostom as Archbishop of Κολῆτανπολῆ.²¹ The final η marks the genitive of the name of the capital of the Byzantine Empire, which in the transcription by Browne is given as Kol(i)stanpol(i)η. However, there is a ligature between λ and ῆ, and I suggest that the right-hand vertical bar of η was assimilated with the vertical back of the c following. As for the elision of the ι (or η) between λ and η, this is attested in another instance of the word ΠΟΛΙΣ from a manuscript from Qasr el Wizz where it is written as ΠΟΛῆ.²²
2. The second reference derives also from a pseudo-Chrysostomian text, this time *In Raphaellem Archangelum* found at Qasr Ibrim and edited by Browne as P. QI 1 10.A.ii.²³ The reference is found in line 25 and is very interesting because it combines a Greek genitive of the name for Constantine, namely ΚΟΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΥ and the Nubian word Δ᾿ΠΠΙ, which means “town”.

The question that logically arises is whether for the Nubians of the Middle Ages ΠΟΛῆ and Δ᾿ΠΠΙ described the same geographical and/or administrative entity.

The study of the graffiti from the site of Banganarti by Adam Łajtar seems to indicate that by the 14th century, when the bulk of the inscriptional material from that site can be dated, any distinction in the meaning of the two terms had lost its significance, since Dongola and Sai are two localities called both Δ᾿ΠΠΙ and ΠΟΛΙΣ/ΠΟΛΗ.²⁴ Therefore, the reason for translating the second component of the word for Constantinople (from ΠΟΛΙΣ to Δ᾿ΠΠΙ) should be sought elsewhere.

If we turn to the etymology of the word Δ᾿ΠΠΙ, it is seen to be related to the term *diffi* meaning in Nobiin a fortress, a town, a locality, a village and referring today in colloquial Arabic to a building made of mud bricks (cf. *deffufa*).²⁵ While it is certain that most of the structures in a Nubian settlement have always been made of mud bricks, the definition of the settlement itself as a Δ᾿ΠΠΙ should point to:

21 BROWNE, *Chrysostomus Nubianus*.

22 TSAKOS, forthcoming.

23 PLUMLEY & BROWNE, *Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim I*.

24 For a representative sample of attestations from Banganarti, see ŁAJTAR, “Christian Sai in Written Records,” pp. 91–104 (esp. pp. 94–96).

25 KHALIL, *Wörterbuch der nubischen Sprache*, p. 39.

1. The existence in the settlement of a large building that was termed a *diffi* in the manner of today's practice of calling a mud-brick tower attached to structures of some importance for the human landscape of the Middle Nile a $\Delta\bar{\pi}\pi$.
2. Fortification of a place raises it to the status of a $\Delta\bar{\pi}\pi$.
3. The existence of a city citadel that could be the *diffi* not only architecturally and as a special part of the urban layout, but also as the focal point of the functions of the given urban network. Interestingly, both Dongola and Sai are characterized by a fortified citadel with a city extending far beyond the limits of this $\Delta\bar{\pi}\pi$.

In any case, the characterization of a settlement as a $\Delta\bar{\pi}\pi$ should rank it in an important position in the administrative hierarchy of the Christian states of medieval Nubia. Although it is impossible to pinpoint the details of this hierarchy,²⁶ it is important to underline two things:

1. Alexandria is not called a $\Delta\bar{\pi}\pi$, although, as we saw, according to the Miracle of Saint Mina, *diffis* in the meaning of villages are part of the district of Alexandria. Obviously, Alexandria is understood as an ecclesiastical entity and not a secular, political, administrative one. In such a framework, any ecclesiastical district, like that of Alexandria, may contain several *diffis* or "towns". But a single settlement is either a $\Delta\bar{\pi}\pi$ or not.
2. As it appears in the Baganarti corpus the word $\Delta\bar{\pi}\pi$, when not accompanied by the name of the settlement, might best refer to the capital of the Makuritan kingdom²⁷; for the Nubian world Dongola is the $\Delta\bar{\pi}\pi$ *par excellence* just as Constantinople was the $\pi\acute{o}\lambda\iota\varsigma$ *par excellence* for the world of the Eastern Roman Empire, and subsequently for the entire Christian oecumene of the Middle Ages.

By translating the second component of the place name Constantinople from $\pi\omicron\lambda\iota\varsigma$ to $\Delta\bar{\pi}\pi$, the Nubians appropriated the capital of the Roman Empire and placed themselves in the same framework of mental geography as the rest of the Christians under the spiritual and cultural influence of Constantinople.

²⁶ But see Santos, "A Note on the Reconstruction of the Greek Text of the Nubian Miracle of Saint Menas and the Territorial Organization of Nobadia."

²⁷ In the same volume, we learn from the contribution by Eajtar and Ochała that similarly is treated Qasr Ibrim in the material deriving from that site (p. 249, n. 7).

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