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The Etymology of the Toponym “Dorginarti” (Notes on Medieval Nubian Toponymy 6)

Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei and Alexandros Tsakos

The island of Dorginarti is situated south of Buhen in Northern Sudan and has now been completely submerged in Lake Nasser.¹

The place name Dorginarti² is composed of two elements, linked by a genitive *-(i)n*. The second element is *arti* “island,” and has been widely attested in other toponyms in Nubia. It is our suggestion that the first element is in fact a Nile Nubian word borrowed from the Greek *δορκάς* “gazelle.”

We have located three possible etymologies for *dorg(i)*, based on possible cognates from Nubian languages:

1. Midob *tòrká/tòrgá* “lightning”³
2. Old Nubian $\Delta\omega\tilde{\rho}\kappa$ “high king”(?)⁴
3. Old Nubian $\Delta\text{O}\Delta\sigma$ “ram”(?)⁵

Phonologically *tòrká/tòrgá* is very plausible because initial Midob *t-* consistently corresponds to Nile Nubian *d-*.⁶ The problem here is that Old Nubian already has attested $\pi\iota\lambda\epsilon\tau$ for “lightning,” a nominalized form of $\pi\lambda\lambda$ “to shine,”⁷ which has been preserved in both major branches of Nile Nubian.⁸ Yet there is no explicit reason why a synonym may not have persisted in the toponym.

1 The site report for the 1964 excavation is being edited and will be published under the *Oriental Institute Nubian Expedition* series, volume 14: *The Second Cataract Fortress of Dorginarti* by Lisa A. Heidorn, with contributions by Carol Meyer and Joanna Then-Obtuska.

2 <https://pleia.des.stoa.org/places/795802>

3 WERNER, *Tidn-Åal*, p. 133.

4 BROWNE, *Old Nubian Dictionary*, p. 49.

5 Ibid.

6 RILLY, *Le méroïtique et sa famille linguistique*, p. 221.

7 BROWNE, *Old Nubian Dictionary*, p. 152.

8 Andaandi *filitti(i)* “flash, glitter, sparkle, gleam, shine” (ARMBRUSTER, *Dongolose Nubian: A Lexicon*, p. 72); Nobiin *filit* “blizen, wetterleuchten” (REINISCH, *Die Nuba-Sprache*, vol. 2,

ⲁⲱⲣⲕ is a hapax and the context of P.QI A 3.4 suggests something like “occupant” or “the one sitting upon the kingdom/throne” (ⲁⲱ “upon,” ⲣⲕ “kingdom”) rather than “high king,”⁹ cf. ⲁⲱⲁⲟⲩⲗ “being upon (the cosmos)”¹⁰ for Greek ὑψιστος. This etymology poses a phonological problem, as the reduction of two subsequent vowels ⲁⲱⲣⲕ /do.irk/ > /dorg/ has not been attested elsewhere.

Finally, ⲁⲟⲁⲟ, another hapax, may perhaps offer the most plausible etymology. In Old Nubian the alternation /r/ ~ /d/ has been well attested, e.g., Old Nubian ⲓⲟⲁⲟⲩ-, Nobiin *górjò*, Andaandi *górjij* “six”; Old Nubian ⲟⲩⲁⲙⲁ, Nobiin *úrúm*, Andaandi *úrúm* “black (substance),”¹¹ as has the alternation *r* ~ *ð*, e.g., ⲓⲉⲙ, ⲟⲩⲉⲙ “year.”¹² Browne translates ⲁⲟⲁⲟ with “ram,” which would give us “island of the ram” as a possible meaning of Dorginarti. Browne’s translation, however, is dubious.

The Old Nubian word has been attested in Dong. 1.11–12 ⲁⲟⲁⲟⲩⲱⲩⲟⲩⲕⲁ in a translation from Psalm 103:18 (104:18),¹³ rendering Greek ἐλάφοις “stags,” which is again a translation of Hebrew *ye’elim* meaning “mountain goats.” Browne tried to normalize the Old Nubian translation by suggesting that ⲁⲟⲁⲟ is related to Andaandi *doñir*, which means “ram” and would therefore be more faithful to the Hebrew than the Greek. The etymological relation between ⲁⲟⲁⲟ and *doñir*, however, is difficult to maintain.

The Nubians translated from Greek,¹⁴ and therefore a word closer in meaning to Greek ἐλάφοις appears to be more appropriate. It may very well be that this word itself was a loan word from Greek, namely ⲁⲟⲁⲟ, which in our opinion derives from the word *δορκάς*. According to Liddell & Scott *δορκάς* refers in Greece to a “roe,” and in Syria and Africa to a “gazelle” or “*Antilope dorcas*.” It is not unthinkable that the Nubian scribe, faced with the in Nubia unfamiliar animal “stag,” tried to find a similar animal that would be more relatable to Nubian readers.

If our analysis of Old Nubian ⲁⲟⲁⲟ deriving from Greek *δορκάς* holds, we may perhaps suggest that this is a loan word that is older than the bulk of Greek loans in Old Nubian, which were all borrowed in the context of the Christianization of the Nubian kingdoms from the sixth century onward and are almost all explicitly related to liturgical or biblical contexts. In support of this idea, we should note the absence of any *variae lectiones* of Psalm 103:18 (104:18) in which

p. 43). Note that the Andaandi word is probably a loan word from Nobiin, otherwise we would expect an initial *b*- (cf. RILLY, *Le méroïtique et sa famille linguistique*, p. 219).

9 BROWNE, “Old Nubian Studies,” p. 291.

10 BROWNE, *Old Nubian Dictionary*, p. 49.

11 See RILLY, *Le méroïtique et sa famille linguistique*, p. 230.

12 BROWNE, *Old Nubian Dictionary*, p. 189.

13 BROWNE, “Two Old Nubian Texts from Old Dongola,” p. 77; Id., *Bibliorum Sacrorum Versio Palaeonubiana*, p. 75.

14 BROWNE, “Greek into Old Nubian,” p. 309.

δορκάσι appears instead of ἐλάφοις.¹⁵ It is therefore unlikely that δορκάς was transmitted to Old Nubian through a manuscript tradition. This early introduction of the Greek loan word would also explain the phonological change /-k/ > /-j/ and loss of final -as. Such phonological developments are not attested in the more recent stratum of Greek loan words, which are overall rather conservative.

This then brings us to a plausible etymology of Dorginarti, namely “island of the gazelle” or “gazelle island.”

¹⁵ RAHLFS, *Psalmi cum Odis*, p. 259.

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