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An Old Nubian Letter from the Daughter of an Eparch

Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei and Alexandros Tsakos

Askut is a small island in the area immediately upstream from the Second Cataract, where Middle Kingdom pharaohs had constructed a series of fortresses to guarantee the safety of their southern frontier, safeguard trade interests, and help riverine communication in this very rocky landscape, which has accurately received the name *Batn el-Hajjar* (Belly of the Rocks). The Middle Kingdom fortress of Askut was occupied in subsequent periods too, and the excavations of the University of California at Los Angeles in the 1960s have revealed remains of Christian Nubian culture.¹

On January 18, 1963, the UCLA excavation uncovered a letter written in Old Nubian at the Northern end of the West Poemorium at 50 cm depth, near a group of late Christian period houses. At its present state, its entire length and most probably its entire width have been preserved. The publication of the letter was entrusted to Sergio Donadoni, but remained in draft form, like the rest of the publication on Askut prepared by Alexander Badawy. Together with the other Askut materials, the letter was kept at the University of California Los Angeles. In 2015, Stuart Tyson Smith from uc Santa Barbara, who took over care of the Askut material, entrusted the publication to the present authors. The following is an independent attempt to decipher this previously unknown Old Nubian letter, although Donadoni's notes have been consulted.²

1 Badawy, "Askut," pp. 124–25.

2 The authors would like to thank Dr. Stuart Tyson Smith from uc Santa Barbara and Dr. Wendy Teeter, Curator of Archaeology, Fowler Museum at UCLA, for granting the permission to publish this document.

Fig. 1, 2.
Photos by
the late
Alexander
Badawy
(Courtesy of
Stuart Tyson
Smith and
the Fowler
Museum at
UCLA).



Dimensions: ca. 20 x 5 cm, Nubian-type majuscules, black ink.
Date: 12th century (?) – see general commentary

Transcription

Recto

- + ΔΑΟΥΜΕΛΩ ΜΑΡΙΑΜΗ ΣΟΓΟΘΙΔΣΧ̄ [π]ἄρρε οὐ[εῶ]
2 ΠΗΚΗΤῆΚΑ ΕἰΝ ΚΑΡΤΕ ΑΡΡΙΚῆ[α] ΤΙΘῶΔΗ[α]
ΣΟ ΣΑΓΓΙΝΑῤῥΕ ΜΟΡΙῆ ΠΑΙΣΧ̄ ἤ[2-3]ΟΥ ῥ̄ . [2-4]
4 ΜΙΝΝΑ ΕΙΛΛΑΛΩ ΓΕΜΟΥ ΓΕΜΟΥ ἦΚΑ ΕἰΛ
ΕΙΤΚΑ ΤΙΘῶῆΜΕῆῆ ΠΑΡΕΚΑ Τῆ[κ]ῆΚΑ [τ]ῆῶῆ . [0-2]
6 ΚΕΛΛΩΚΑ ΠΑΠΗ ΓῶΔῆΚῶ ΠΕΣῆΝ Ἀῆῆῆῆῆῆ –

Verso

- + ΜΑΡΙΑΜ ΣΟΓΟΘΙΔΣΧ̄ ΧΑΗΛ ΣΟΥ[ΝΤΟ]ΥΟΥῆ [- - -]

Translation

Recto

I, eparch daughter Mariamē, greet (the owners of) the second plot of the share! Give (pl.) them this brought letter. He who writes without denial says that he does not (...) If for many years you didn't give the message to them, (and) if (?) you give the plot to them, may he say, telling everything to the son (?) of the elder.

Verso

Mariam, the eparch daughter, (to) Chael, the scribe (?)

Grammatical commentary

Recto

- 1 ΔΑΟΥΜΕΛΩ: unattested variant of the standard letter greeting ΔΑΟΥΜΕΛΟ “I greet you.” The usage of this verb suggests that the addressee has equal or lower status.
ΜΑΡΙΑΜΗ: proper name, “Mariamē,” elsewhere attested in P. QI III 41.3, 16; in P. QI II 21.5 we find ΜΑΡΙΜΗ. Note that in the address the name is spelled ΜΑΡΙΑΜ.

σοροῦιδ̄αλ: unattested composite title “daughter of the eparch” or “eparch daughter” based on σοροῦ “eparch” (OND³ 160) and ἰδ̄α “daughter” (OND 20), followed by the determiner -λ, possibly with supralinear stroke. Subject of 1 ΔΔΟΥΜΕΛΩ. The same title also appears in the address.

[π]ἄρρε: “plot, field” (OND 147).

οὔ[ελ]: “second” (OND 134).

2 πικητῆκα: previously unattested variant of πικτ “share” (OND 151), followed by genitive -ῆ and accusative -κα. [π]ἄρρε οὔ[ελ] πικητῆκα is the direct object of 1 ΔΔΟΥΜΕΛΩ (see discussion below). Perhaps the formulation is shorthand for “the owners of the second field of the share.”

εἰν: “this” (OND 70).

καρτε: “letter” (OND 85).

ἄρρικ[α]: participial form of ἄρρ- “to bring” (OND 17) followed by present tense -λ, regressively assimilated to -κ before accusative -κ[α]. Object of τῖδ̄αη[α]σο. εἰν καρτε ἄρρικ[α] refers to the letter itself.

τῖδ̄αη[α]σο: τῖ “to give” (OND 174) with pluractional marker -δ̄, referring to the indirect objects, who are different from the addressee. Note that the imperative suffix -αη[α]σο is a 2/3 plural form referring to the 1 [π]ἄρρε οὔ[ελ] πικητῆκα.

3 εαγγίναζε: previously unattested variant of εαγγίναγῆ “denial” (OND 194).

μοριῖ: perhaps from μορ “be without” (OND 120), followed by the present 2/3 singular -ῖν. Dependent on παῖαλ.

παῖαλ: παρ “to write” (OND 145), with past 2 -c and determiner -λ. Participle meaning “writing” or “the one who writes.” For the construction εαγγίναζε μοριῖ παῖαλ, cf. P.QI III 31.10 εαγγικῆφφαλοῦ παῖαλο “written without denial.”

4 μῖννα: possibly the negative verb μῖν “to not be” (OND 114), with progressively assimilated present tense -λ and predicate marker -α as a verb in a complement clause dependent on ελλαλω.

ελλαλω: possibly εἰλ “to say” (OND 68), with present tense -λ, predicate marker -α, and focus marker -λω. As no subject clitic is present, the subject must be overt, perhaps 3 παῖαλ. It is unclear who the subject or referent of this verb is, but it may well be another scribe (see commentary below).

γεμοῦ γεμοῦ ἡκα: attested variant of δεμ “year” (OND 27, 189), reduplicated. Whereas the first instance is unmarked, the second instance has genitive -ῖ followed by accusative ending -κα. This may indicate a duration of the form “for years and years, for

3 OND refers to BROWNE, *Old Nubian Dictionary*. Other textual sigla follow the standard abbreviation practices.

many years” vel sim. Browne translates a similar reduplication in Kanarti 2 ⲟⲓⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉⲙⲟⲩ with “yearly meal.”

ⲉⲓⲗⲉⲓⲧⲕⲁ: the letters at the end of line 4 are difficult to read and we follow Donadoni’s transcription here. Perhaps the same root as 4 ⲉⲓⲗⲗⲁⲱ, ⲉⲓⲗ “to say” (OND 68), with nominalizer -ⲉⲓⲧ, thus “message,” and accusative case -ⲕⲁ, as object of ⲧⲓⲟⲩⲙⲉⲛⲉⲛ. The content of the message, perhaps the same as 6 ⲕⲉⲗⲗⲟⲕⲁ “everything,” or perhaps “the whole story,” is only implied.

5 ⲧⲓⲟⲩⲙⲉⲛⲉⲛ: ⲧⲣ “to give” with pluractional marker -ⲟ, referring to the indirect object, negative suffix -ⲙⲉⲛ, and present 2/3 singular -ⲉⲛ. This appears to be the protasis of a conditional clause.

ⲡⲁⲣⲉⲕⲁ: a variant of ⲡⲁⲣⲣⲉ “field” (OND 147), possibly direct object of [ⲧ]ⲓⲟⲩⲓ. This is probably the same field as mentioned in l. 1.

ⲧⲉ[ⲕ]ⲕⲁ: accusative of 3 singular pronoun ⲧⲁⲣ. Very tentative reconstruction, indirect object of [ⲧ]ⲓⲟⲩⲓ.

[ⲧ]ⲓⲟⲩⲓ: remnant of a verb (perhaps ⲧⲣ as suggested by Donadoni) with a pluractional marker -ⲟ. Perhaps [ⲧ]ⲓⲟⲩⲓ[ⲛⲓ]?

6 ⲕⲉⲗⲗⲟⲕⲁ: ⲕⲉⲗⲗⲟ “all” (OND 88), with accusative, object of ⲡⲉⲥⲓⲛⲁ.

ⲡⲁⲡⲓⲛ: ⲡⲁⲡ “father” (OND 144), with genitive. Perhaps a more general meaning as “elder” is preferable here, as “son of the father” appears to make less sense.

[Ⲉ]ⲗⲗⲁⲕⲁ: very tentative reconstruction. Perhaps Ⲉⲗⲗ “son” (OND 196), with accusative case. Indirect object of ⲡⲉⲥⲓⲛ.

ⲡⲉⲥⲓⲛ: ⲡⲉⲥ “to say, speak” (OND 149), with present tense 2/3 singular -ⲓⲛ. Possibly a subordinate clause dependent on 6 ⲗⲗⲁⲕⲁ

ⲗⲗⲁⲕⲁ: perhaps ⲗⲗ “to say” (OND 11), with present tense 2/3 singular -ⲓⲛ, predicative -ⲗ, and command marker -ⲕⲱ. If correct, the meaning here may be jussive, “may you/he say.” As the addressees of the letter are plural, “he” seems the most plausible. The reconstruction is very tentative, and it may well be a single (unattested) verbal form ⲡⲉⲥⲓⲛⲗⲗⲁⲕⲁ vel sim.

Verso

1 ⲕⲟⲩⲧⲓⲗⲟⲩⲟⲩⲉ: ⲕⲟⲩⲛⲧⲟⲩⲟⲩⲉ “scribe” (OND 162).

General Commentary

The letter from Askut shows some particularities that to our knowledge are unique for Old Nubian correspondence. For example, this is the only letter where the greeting formula is followed by the name of the sender, a certain ⲕⲟⲩⲟⲩⲓⲗⲟⲩⲉ or “daughter of the *sohoj*.” Although this term has not been previously attested in the Old Nubian corpus, it appears analogous to the formation ⲈⲒⲒⲛⲁⲕ or “queen/royal

sister”⁴ and must refer to the daughter of an eparch (*sohoj*) under the Makuritan king.

Although the author of the letter is clear, its addressee(s) are less so. The address mentions as addressee the scribe Chael, but this does not seem to be the person greeted in the opening lines of the letter, 1–2 [π]ᾶρρε οὐ[ε]λ πικητῆκα “the (owners of) the second plot of the share.” As it is unsyntactical to interpret this phrase as anything but the object of 1 ΔΑΟΥΜΕΛΩ, the plural subject of the imperative 2–3 ΤΙΘῸΔΑ[Δ]CΟ must refer to them as well. The letter, although addressed to the scribe, thus appears to carry a message intended for a group of people who are the owners of a share in a plot of land, who then are requested to give 2 ΕΙΝ ΚΑΡΤΕ ΑΡΡΙΚΚ[Δ] “this brought letter” to an unnamed them. So based on the address and the people introduced in the first two lines, we are dealing with at least four parties related to the affair: princess Mariamē, scribe Chael, the owners of the second plot, and an unspecified fourth party.

Chael is only mentioned as addressee, while the letter itself is referred to in the text as “this brought letter.” This may support the idea that Chael was acting as an intermediary. If scribes had the authority to represent other parties, Chael was representing Mariamē, delivering her letter to the owners of the plot in question. It cannot be excluded, however, that he was initially representing the owners of the plot and after some contact with the princess he was asked to deliver her reply to them. Finally, he might have been representing a third party, for example the state or local authorities intervening in an affair related with land property, agricultural output thereof, or related affairs.

Scribes have been attested as representatives of other people, most interestingly in P.QI III 41, where a scribe Isakē is a representative (πικχ, lit. “speaker”) of Maia in a sale to a certain Mariamē.⁵ Although the office of Mariamē is not mentioned, it is a tantalizing possibility that we are dealing here with the same Mariamē as the author of the Askut letter. In P.QI III 41, scribe Isakē finishes the letter with the curse that

May whoever of Mariami’s scribes will disparage (me by saying)
“that which is after/behind me is not mine” become estranged from
God, and in the Apocalypse may the seventh seal(?) come forth upon
him.⁶

Could it be that Chael is one of the scribes of Mariamē that is warned here by Isakē? Also our letter may show the presence of

4 See VAN GERVEN OEI, “A Dance for a Princess,” pp. 123, 130.

5 See also RUFFINI, *Medieval Nubia*, p. 138.

6 BROWNE, *Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim III*, p. 41. Translation amended.

multiple scribes involved in the affair. The person ⲛⲁⲓϥⲗ “writing without denial” may very well be a scribe perhaps employed by the owners of the second share in the plot or their co-owners who are supposed to receive the “brought letter.” These may be the same people referred to as ⲛⲧⲉⲓⲕⲁ “them.” ⲛⲡⲁⲡⲓⲛⲓ ⲉⲗⲁⲗⲕⲁ “the son of the elder” may then refer either to the “owners of the second share,” or those who receive the “brought letter” from them.

No matter the identification of and precise relations between the different parties involved in this affair, both this letter and P.QI III 41 appear to imply that Mariamē, the addressees of the Askut letter, and Maia from P.QI III 41 had scribes like Chael and Isakē at their disposal to represent them in sales and other legal contexts. This leaves us with three possible scenarios:

1. It is a mere coincidence that both letters use scribes as representatives. Although this interpretation is difficult to refute, it is also highly unsatisfying.
2. Scribes were employed in Makuria as representatives in legal matters and were not simply the incidental “writers” of a document. In P.QI III 32.22–23, a scribe David describes himself as being part of the “retinue of the priest of king David George,” and as “assembling and sitting with [his] elders” in P.QI III 36.ii.6. Furthermore, scribes were often (high) members of the clergy and could hardly be expected to have had a mere administrative function. The letters of Princess Mariamē and Maia, however, clearly show that scribes had an active representative function in Makuritan commercial life.
3. The scribes are used as intermediaries because of the gender of authors, which would not allow them to enter into direct contact with, for example, men that are not family. One might think that in this scenario, Mariamē is somehow at a disadvantage, if she needed scribes such as Chael to mediate. This is, however, not in accordance with the general tone of the letter (e.g., the use of imperatives and the usage of ⲁⲗⲟⲩⲛⲓⲙⲉⲗⲟ instead of honorific ⲁⲟⲩⲕⲏⲙⲉⲗⲟ) and the way we generally understand women’s role in Christian Nubia, taking into account the fact that they could own churches and participate freely in cases of land-ownership.⁷ Thus Princess Mariamē belongs rather to a privileged social class of Christian Nubia rather than to an underprivileged gender in Makuritan society.

⁷ See RUFFINI, *Medieval Nubia*, pp. 1–2.

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