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MEROITIC

اللغة المروية

Claude Rilly

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MEROITIC

اللغة المروية

Claude Rilly

Meroitisch
Méroïtique

The Meroitic language is known from more than two thousand inscriptions found in northern Sudan and Egyptian Nubia. Although it was written only during the time of the Kingdom of Meroe (c. 300 BCE – 350 CE), the language is attested in Egyptian transcriptions of personal names from as early as the second millennium BCE. Meroitic was written in two scripts, cursive and hieroglyphic, both derived from Egyptian scripts. The system is alphasyllabic and uses twenty-three signs, plus a word-divider made of two or three dots. The scripts were deciphered during the years 1907 to 1911, by Francis Llewellyn Griffith, but knowledge of the language itself remains incomplete. However, the linguistic affiliation of Meroitic has been recently established: it belongs to the Northern East Sudanic branch of the Nilo-Saharan phylum. Further advances in understanding Meroitic texts are expected from comparative linguistic research made possible by this discovery.

عرفت اللغة المروية من خلال أكثر من ألفي نقش عثر عليها في شمال السودان والنوبة المصرية. وعلى الرغم من أنها كانت مكتوبة فقط في عهد مملكة مروية (300 قبل الميلاد - 350 م)، ظهرت اللغة في الكتابات المصرية للأسماء الشخصية في وقت مبكر من الألف الثاني قبل الميلاد. وقد كتبت المروية بنوعين من الخط، الحروف المتصلة والمنفصلة، وكلاهما مستمد من النصوص المصرية. إنه عبارة عن نظام كتابة يستخدم ثلاثة وعشرين علامة، بالإضافة إلى علامات لتقسيم الكلمات (مقسم الكلمات) مكونه من اثنين أو ثلاث نقاط. تم فك رموز الكتابات في أوائل القرن العشرين، بين عامي 1907 - 1911 بواسطة فرانسيس ولين غريفيث، ولكن معرفة اللغة نفسها لا تزال غير مكتملة. ومع ذلك، فإن الانتماء اللغوي للغة المروية قد نشأ مؤخراً: حيث تنتمي إلى الفرع السوداني الشمالي الشرقي من أسرة اللغات النيلية الصحراوية. ومن المتوقع مزيد من التقدم في فهم النصوص المروية من خلال البحث اللغوي المقارن الذي أصبح ممكناً بفضل هذا الاكتشاف.

Meroitic was the main language spoken in northern Sudan not only during the time of the Kingdom of Meroe (c. 300 BCE – 350 CE), after which it is named, but probably from as early as the time of the Kingdom of Kerma (2500 – 1500 BCE), as is suggested by a list of personal names transcribed in Egyptian on Papyrus Golenisheff (Rilly 2007b). Similar

transcriptions of early Meroitic names are known from some Egyptian texts of the New Kingdom, but such names occur with particular frequency with the rise of the Kushite 25th Dynasty and its Napatan successor state (664 – c. 300 BCE), since the birth names of rulers and other members of the royal family were necessarily written in Egyptian documents. These Napatan

transcriptions in Egyptian paved the way for the emergence of a local writing around the second half of the third century BCE. However, Meroitic texts are not attested in great numbers before the end of the second century. The bulk of the corpus extends from the last decades BCE to the fourth century CE. The script actually outlived the fall of Meroe (c. 350 CE), for the latest known text is the inscription of King Kharamadoye from a column in the Kalabsha temple (REM 0094; i.e., as published in the *Répertoire d'épigraphie méroïtique*: Leclant et al. 2000), recently re-dated to 410/450 CE (Eide et al. 1998: 1103-1107). The Meroitic language itself disappeared, presumably in the early Middle Ages, and left no descendant language. It was superseded by Nubian, the language of the new elite, who originated from western Sudan and put an end to the Meroitic kingdom.

The corpus of Meroitic texts, as published in the REM (Leclant et al. 2000) and its appendices (Carrier 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003), includes some 1300 texts. The unpublished examples, mainly found at Qasr Ibrim and Musawwarat el-Sufra, amount to approximately 900. They are of various lengths, ranging from just a few characters to the 161 lines of King Taneyidamani's stele from Jebel Barkal (REM 1044). Half of the published corpus consists of funerary texts, written on stelae or offering-tables (fig. 1). The longest Meroitic documents are royal inscriptions. Unfortunately no more than two dozen of these have thus far been recovered. Temple inscriptions, mostly captions for royal cult scenes, are attested at Naga, Meroe, Amara, and Dangeil. Some 250 graffiti are known, mostly written by pilgrims in the temples of Philae, Kawa, and Musawwarat. A special category of 16 texts, written on various materials such as potsherds, papyrus strips, leather bands, or wooden tablets, comprises what are presumably the Meroitic descendants of Egyptian amuletic texts, which offered magical protection to their owners (Rilly 2000). Finally, some 70 ostraca, predominantly short texts with numbers, are the evident traces of administrative and commercial activities

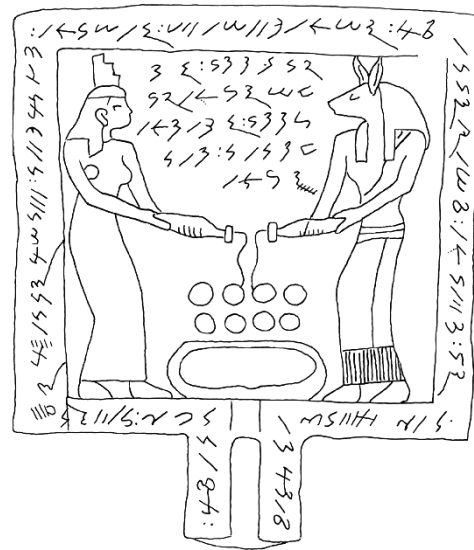


Figure 1. Meroitic funerary offering-table, from Sai Island (250 – 300 CE).

The Meroitic language is only superficially known, although both of its scripts (explained below) were deciphered a hundred years ago by the British Egyptologist Francis Llewellyn Griffith. The reason for our poor knowledge of the language is the lack of bilingual texts and, until recently, the isolated position of Meroitic among the African languages. Since Griffith's time, nearly all progress toward the translation of the texts was made through the painstaking procedures of the "philological method." This approach takes the rare known elements of texts (e.g., Egyptian loanwords, divine and royal names, words understood through their iconographic context) and attempts, through guesswork, to derive the meaning of the neighboring elements. Using this method, Griffith was able to establish approximate translations of the standard funerary texts, which are very numerous and highly stereotyped (Griffith 1911). In contrast, the royal texts include narratives that naturally utilize a richer vocabulary and possess more varied syntactic structures. For this reason, only rare stereotyped passages, such as initial royal protocols and lists of enemies killed in battle and of captured women and livestock, can be even partially understood.

Presently, no more than a hundred words can be translated with some certainty. The list includes several titles, mostly borrowed from Egyptian, as well as toponyms and gods' names, and very few basic words, although their number has recently been increased. After Griffith's work, considerable advances were made in the understanding of Meroitic grammar, especially by Hintze (1979) and Hofmann (1981), and most recently by the author (Rilly 2007a: 493-572), mainly pertaining to the syntax of nominal phrases and non-verbal predication. In contrast, verbal morphology remains mostly unknown.

The greatest advances in the decipherment of unknown ancient languages have resulted from the use of bilingual texts and from comparison with related languages—for example, Semitic languages and Akkadian, or Indo-European languages and Hittite and Tocharian. In contrast, if bilingual texts are scanty, the absence of related languages is a

major hindrance to full decipherment, as is the case with Etruscan. Therefore, the long-awaited identification of the linguistic family of Meroitic (Rilly 2008b, 2010; Rilly and de Voogt 2012) provides the best hope for understanding the texts.

The position of Meroitic within the Nilo-Saharan phylum, and more precisely in its main branch, East Sudanic, had already been assumed by Bruce Trigger in the 1960s, but without sufficient linguistic evidence (Trigger 1964). The present author recently confirmed Trigger's assumption. Meroitic belongs to a sub-group of East Sudanic, which I had termed "Northern East Sudanic," also comprising Nubian (a group of languages from the Nile Valley and western Sudan), Nara (a dialectal group from Eritrea), Taman (a dialectal group from the Chad-Sudan borderland), and Nyima (two languages from the Nuba Mountains in Sudan) (fig. 2).

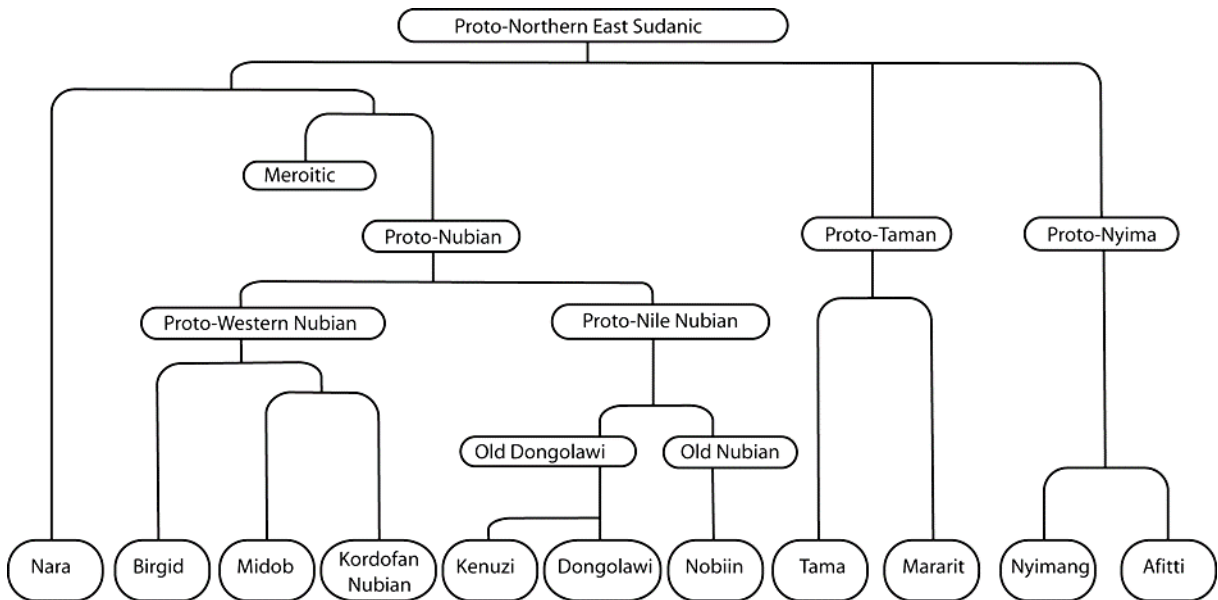


Figure 2. Genealogical tree of Northern East Sudanic languages, including Meroitic.

Correspondences between Meroitic and the above-mentioned languages involve both vocabulary and morphology, with resultant spectacular similarities, e.g., Meroitic *kdite* (pronounced /kadite/ or /kaditə/) “sister,” Proto-Nubian *kedidi, Proto-Nara *kadete; and Meroitic *-kwi* (pronounced /akawi/) “they are,” Old Nubian *-āroyē* (pronounced /ague/), Proto-Taman *agi. This major step in Meroitic studies, which has been recognized by the most prominent scholars in Nilo-Saharan linguistics (Dimmendaal 2007: 148), has resulted from progress made since Trigger’s contribution, not only in the knowledge of Meroitic, but also of related languages (for instance, Browne 1996 and 2002; Werner 1987 and 1993).

Meroitic Scripts

The Meroites used two scripts, cursive and hieroglyphic, both of which were deciphered between 1909 and 1911 by Griffith (Griffith 1911). The two scripts follow the same principles and differ only in the shape of their signs. Both sets contain twenty-three signs, plus a word-divider consisting of three dots in the early cursive and hieroglyphic scripts and two dots in the later cursive script (fig. 3). The hieroglyphic script was nearly exclusive to the royal sphere, in connection with the cult of the gods. It is attested in royal temples at Meroe, Naga, Dangeil, Amara, and El-Hassa, and upon royal objects such as funerary offering-tables and votive bowls. Surprisingly, in the only non-royal texts where hieroglyphs are present (graffiti REM 1046A and B, amulet REM 0704, funerary stela REM 0832), they are intermixed with cursive signs, as if to avoid infringement of a taboo. For all other purposes the cursive script was used, so that ninety percent of the current corpus, including royal chronicles and even some royal funerary texts, consists of cursive inscriptions.

Both Meroitic scripts were adapted from Egyptian counterparts. The cursive script is an offshoot of a local form of early Demotic. The hieroglyphic signs were derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs, partly recycling the signs that were already used for the transcription of 25th-Dynasty and Napatan names, such as $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ *te*,

which occurs as $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ *th* in the name of King Taharqo. Ironically, it is certain that the appearance of the cursive script predated the creation of the hieroglyphic script, which seems to have been a deliberate invention designed to provide a monumental counterpart to the cursive script. The first attempts to elaborate a hieroglyphic script can be dated to Taneyidamani’s reign, around 100 BCE (REM 1140: an inscription on a bronze cylinder), and not to that of his alleged predecessor, Queen Shanakdakhete (REM 0039: a wall inscription from Temple F at Naga), as is suggested repeatedly in the general literature. The earliest specimens of cursive texts are pilgrims’ graffiti from the temples of Kawa and Dukki Gel and can be dated to the beginning of the second century BCE (Rilly 2003), though two unpublished documents from Meroe and Musawwarat were possibly written half a century earlier.

The direction of writing is basically from right to left, as in Egyptian cursive inscriptions. Hieroglyphs, however, can be written from left to right, or in columns. Whereas Egyptian hieroglyphs are written to face the direction from which the text is read, Meroitic hieroglyphs are written in the opposite direction, to face the end of the sentence. This innovation seems to have been introduced to bring the gaze of the figures occurring in the inscription into line with the direction of reading: for instance *Amni* “Amun” is written $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ (right to left) or $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ (left to right).

The Meroitic writing system was phonetic. It was not an alphabet, but an alphasyllabary (Hintze 1973), comparable to Indic, Ethiopic, or Old Persian scripts. Each basic sign represented a syllable including a consonant plus inherent vowel /a/. For instance, $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ in cursive, or $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ in hieroglyphic, was read /ka/, though it is traditionally transliterated *k*. If the intended vowel was different from /a/, a special sign, more a vocalic modifier than a true vowel-sign, accompanied the basic sign: for instance, $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ / $\overline{\text{𓆎}}$ *nob* “slave,” hence “Nubian,” realized as /nuba/. Unlike the Indian scripts, this modifier was not written above or under

Cursive	Hieroglyphic	Transliteration	Phonetic Values
Ⲁ	𓀀	<i>a</i>	<i>initial a or u</i>
ⲁ	𓀁	<i>b</i>	ba
Ⲃ	𓀂	<i>d</i>	da
ⲃ	𓀃	<i>e</i>	<i>e, ə, or no vowel</i>
Ⲅ	𓀄	<i>h</i>	ɣ ^w a
ⲅ	𓀅	<i>i</i>	<i>modifier i</i>
Ⲇ	𓀆	<i>k</i>	ka
ⲇ	𓀇	<i>l</i>	la
Ⲉ	𓀈	<i>m</i>	ma
ⲉ	𓀉	<i>n</i>	na
Ⲋ	𓀊	<i>ne</i>	ne, nə or n
ⲋ	𓀋	<i>o</i>	<i>modifier u (maybe also o)</i>
Ⲍ	𓀌	<i>p</i>	pa or ba (?)
ⲍ	𓀍	<i>q</i>	k ^w a
Ⲏ	𓀎	<i>r</i>	ra
ⲏ	𓀏	<i>s</i>	sa
Ⲑ	𓀐	<i>se</i>	se, sə or s
ⲑ	𓀑	<i>t</i>	ta
Ⲓ	𓀒	<i>te</i>	te, tə or t
ⲓ	𓀓	<i>to</i>	tu
Ⲕ	𓀔	<i>w</i>	wa
ⲕ	𓀕	<i>x</i>	ɣa
Ⲍ	𓀖	<i>y</i>	ya
Ⲏ	𓀗	<i>:</i>	<i>word-divider</i>

Figure 3. Meroitic alphasyllabary.

the basic sign—it followed it. If a bare consonant was needed, particularly in consonant clusters, the basic sign was followed by the modifier ⲃ *e*, also used for /e/ or /ə/ (*schwa*). For example, Ⲙⲛⲃⲱⲓⲛ *Qoreti* “Qurta” (a place-name) was realized /k^wur^ti/, cf. Greek transcription Κορτη. Four additional signs had a fixed vocalic value: Ⲋ *ne*

(= /ne/, /nə/ or bare /n/), Ⲑ *se* (= /se/, /sə/ or bare /s/), Ⲓ *te* (= /te/, /tə/ or bare /t/), ⲓ *to* (= /tu/, maybe also /to/). A somewhat fluctuant system was created for the initial vowels: Ⲁ, transliterated *a*, was used for initial /a/ and /u/, whereas initial /e/ (or /ə/) and /i/ were written ⲃ *ye* and Ⲅ *yi* with a dummy *ye*. Some phonetic features like

geminate (doubled) consonants were left unrepresented (haplography): 𐎠𐎡 *ato* “water,” was probably pronounced /attu/ (< earlier Meroitic */asta/, as shown by the Greek transcription ἄστα- in the names of the Nile and its tributaries). In spite of these defects, Meroitic script can be seen as a remarkable achievement, especially now that a foreign influence on its elaboration can be ruled out. The syllabic nature of the system does not support the hypothesis of a Greek influence, and the chronology rules out the hypothesis of a Persian influence.

Scholarly sign-for-sign transliteration from Meroitic to Latin letters obscures the very nature of the Meroitic script. Created by Griffith, who considered the Meroitic writing system as a “defective alphabet” (Griffith 1911: 7), this transliteration, however, is convenient because it represents each sign by a single letter (or combination of two letters in the case of the special signs *ne*, *se*, *te*, *to*). For instance, 𐎠𐎡𐎢𐎣, the Meroitic name of the city of Naga, is transliterated *Tolkte* (from left to right *to+l+k+te*) but was probably pronounced /tulakat/.

Phonology

The phonology of Meroitic can be reconstructed in good part from surviving transcriptions into Egyptian, Greek, or Latin of several personal, place, and divinity names, and conversely from transcription into Meroitic of Egyptian, Greek, and Latin words (Rilly 2007a: 359-407). In intervocalic position, Meroitic *d* was transcribed in foreign languages as “r” (for instance Meroitic *Medeni*, later *Bedeni* “Meroe” = Eg. *Mrw.t*, Greek Μερών), evidencing that /d/ was realized as a retroflex [ɖ] between vowels. Similarly, Meroitic *s* is sometimes rendered in Egyptian with *š*, sometimes with *š*, which can be best explained if Meroitic /s/ was realized—as is the consonant “s” in several other Northern East Sudanic (NES) languages—as an alveolo-palatal [ç]. However, some uncertainty is due to the special conventions of Meroitic orthography. For instance, it is not positively known whether /p/ had a phonological status. It occurs mainly in Egyptian loanwords and can alternatively be spelt *b* in pure Meroitic words (e.g., *qorpse* or *qorbse* “of the rulers”). Similarly, *y* is used most of the time (if not always) as a dummy sign for initial vowels or vocalic sequences, so that its phonetic status is far from certain.

	labial	coronal	palatal	velar	labialized velar
voiced stop	<i>b</i> [b]	<i>d</i> [ɖ] ~ [d]			
unvoiced stop	<i>p</i> [p] (?) (< Egyptian ?)	<i>t</i> [t]		<i>k</i> [k]	<i>q</i> [kʷ]
fricative		<i>s</i> [ç]		<i>x</i> [χ]	<i>h</i> [χʷ]
approximant		<i>l</i> [l]	<i>y</i> [j] (?)		
trill		<i>r</i> [r]			
nasal	<i>m</i> [m]	<i>n</i> [n]			

The reconstruction of the vocalic system is still less certain. It clearly included /i/, /e/, /ə/, /a/, /u/. There was no specific sign for the phoneme /o/, and it remains questionable whether this vowel existed in Meroitic. It seems that long vowels existed, but their evidence is scanty.

Parts of Speech

The only word-categories clearly identified in Meroitic texts are substantives, adjectives, articles, postpositions, and verbs/copula. There is no grammatical gender, as there is in all other NES languages. If the speaker needed to emphasize natural gender, the word *kdī* “woman” was added to the substantive: *mk* “god” or “goddess,” *mkdī* (< *mk* + *kdī*) “goddess.” No specific plural form is known for substantives and adjectives. In all the instances where nominal plurality is expressed, it is conveyed by the article (sing. *-l* or *-li*, plural *-leb*): *mk* or *mk-l* “(the) god,” *mk-leb* “(the) gods.” As the role of the article is more syntactic than semantic, it cannot be excluded that it was obligatory for marking the plural (Rilly 2007a: 531-532).

Syntax and Morphology

Meroitic can be described as an agglutinative language—that is, it belongs to a morphological type in which morphemes associated with grammatical functions are concatenated one after the other. Meroitic displays a high propensity toward assimilative processes between words, so that word boundaries can be difficult to determine. The presence of a word-divider in the writing system is only moderately useful, since most scribes used it between phrases rather than between words.

Word order in Meroitic conforms perfectly with other NES languages. Sentences exhibit verb-final order (SOV: subject-object-verb); there are postpositions and no prepositions; the genitive is placed before the main noun; the adjective follows the noun. However, Meroitic created a second genitive, used for alienable relations, which is placed after the main noun and its article and is connected by a postposition *-se*. Compare, for example, *ant-li*

kdite “sister of a priest” (lit. “priest”-article + “sister”; genitive 1, inalienable relation) and *ant mk-li-se* “priest of the god” (lit. “priest” + “god”-article-postposition; genitive 2, alienable relation). This opposition can be compared with the two English genitives, Norman and Saxon.

In all likelihood, nominal cases originally existed in Meroitic just as they exist in modern NES languages. However, in the stage of the language available in inscriptions, the nominative is unmarked. In rare instances, the accusative/dative is still marked in nouns with a suffix *-w* or *-xe* (Rilly 2010: 394-395). The difference between these two variants might have been local, but both seem to derive from the Proto-NES accusative/dative suffix *g + vowel. In pronouns, the second suffix, *-xe* (archaic *-x*), is systematically used for the dative and less frequently used for the accusative. The object pronouns are integrated with the verb, as in Italian for instance, so that they are sometimes considered as “verbal dative markers,” although the distinction between singular and plural shows that they can by no means be confused with simple verbal affixes:

<i>pwrite</i>	<i>l-</i>	<i>x-</i>	<i>te</i>
noun object	verbal stem	dative suffix	imperative 2ps
life	give	to him	-
“Give him life!” (REM 1151)			

l-x-te is realized as |l-aŃa-t(Ē)|.

<i>pwrite</i>	<i>l-</i>	<i>b-</i>	<i>x-</i>	<i>te</i>
noun object	verbal stem	plur. obj. suff.	dative suffix	imperative 2ps
life	give		to him	-
“Give them life!” (REM 0018)				

l-bx-te is realized as |l-abaŃa-t(Ē)|.

The genitive 1, used for inalienable relations, is simply marked by juxtaposition and inversion of the head noun. As in Nara (a rather closely related NES language), the original genitive

marker *-n was lost. The locative is marked with a suffix *-te* (*Bedewi-te* “in Meroe”), and the vocative, with a suffix *-i* (*Wos-i* “O Isis!”).

Plurality is marked in the article and pronouns with a suffix *-b* (pronounced [ba]): thus the singular article *-l* or *-li* becomes the plural *-leb*. This suffix can be shown to have originated from a Proto-NES pronominal plural marker *-gu, with labialization of *g before *u and subsequent centralization of *u, as in *nob* (pronounced [nuba]) “slave” v. Proto-Nubian *nogu (Rilly 2008a: 218).

The Meroitic verbal morphology is still mostly unknown and assumptions in this matter remain highly speculative (Rilly 2007a: 552-569). It seems that the imperative was marked by *-te* in the singular (*l-x-te* “Give him!”)

<i>ant</i>	<i>Mnp</i>	<i>Bedewi</i>	<i>-te</i>	<i>-li</i>	<i>-se</i>	<i>-l</i>	<i>-o</i>
lexeme ₁	lexeme ₂	lexeme ₃	morpheme ₃	morpheme _{2a}	morpheme _{2b}	morpheme ₁	
			(locative)	(sing. article)	(genitive 2)	(sing. article)	(copula)
priest	Amanap	Meroe	in	the (one)	of	a	he was

“He was a priest of Amanap, the one (who is) in Meroe.”

As can be seen from the example above, the article plays a prominent role in nominal phrases, both as a connector and group boundary marker. Its presence is, for instance, obligatory when nouns are used in genitive and postpositional groups. In contrast, its value for expressing determination is weak and it is frequently best translated by the English indefinite article.

Predication is marked by the copula *-o* (sing.)/*-kwi* (plur.) added to the article if the predicated element is a noun. The singular form is more often than not followed by a suffixed element *-wi*, considered as an “emphatic marker”:

<i>ktke</i>	<i>-l</i>	<i>-o</i>
noun	article sg.	copula sg.
Candace	the/a	(she) is

“She is the Candace (queen-mother).”

and *-kete* in the plural (*p-tre-kete* “Offer ye!,” where *p-* could be an optative auxiliary and *tre-* the verbal stem “offer”).

Nominal Phrases and Type of Predication

A remarkable feature of Meroitic is the use of complex mirror structures in nominal phrases, including symmetrically all the lexemes in one half and the corresponding morphemes in the other half. This sort of structure occurs in other unrelated agglutinative languages such as Sumerian (Thomsen 1984: 91) and, with less complexity, in Old Nubian. The following example is taken from REM 0521, a funerary stela engraved for a deceased individual who held, between other titles, that of priest of Amanap, a hypostasis of god Amun:

<i>apote</i>	<i>-l</i>	<i>-o</i>	<i>-wi</i>
noun	article sg.	copula sg.	emphatic marker
envoy	the/a(n)	(he) is	

“He was an envoy.”
(The past tense is deduced from the funerary context.)

<i>pqr</i>	<i>-leb</i>	<i>yetmde</i>	<i>-leb</i>	<i>-kwi</i>
noun ₁	article pl.	noun ₂	article pl.	copula pl.
prince	-	nephew	-	(they) are

“They were nephews of princes.”
(The past tense is deduced from the funerary context.)

If personal nouns are predicated, the article is absent and predication uses the demonstrative pronoun *go* “this.” This construction is not attested in the plural:

Ammixeto go (< *go* + *-o*)
“This is Amanishakheto.”

Akilible qo-ni (<*qo* + *-o* + *-ni*)
“This is Akilibale.”

Lexicon

Basic vocabulary for which a translation is currently available is scanty: *abr* “man”; *asr* “meat, animal”; *at* “bread”; *ato* “water”; *kedī* “woman”; *kedise/kedite* “sister”; *ked* “kill”; *l-* “give”; *lx* “great, elder”; *mbe* “abundant”; *mlo* “good”; *mte* “child”; *sem* “wife”; *ste* “tutor” (common designation for “mother”); *st* “foot/feet”; *tre-* “offer”; and *wide* “brother” (often assimilated to *ni-* before the article). A number of additional words have recently been added to the list (Rilly 2010: 59-98): *ar* “boy”; *are-* or *dm-* “take/receive”; *dime* “cow”; *xre* “meal”; *xlbi* “bull”; *pwrite* “life”; *ke-* “to love”; *wle* “dog”; and *yer* “milk.” Cultural vocabulary comprises words such as *qore* “ruler” (male or female); *ketke* “queen-mother”; *pqr* “prince”; *nob* “slave”; and *teneke* “West.” Meroitic includes the following loanwords, among others, from Egyptian: *ant* “priest” (< Eg. *ḥm-ntr*); *apote* “envoy” (< Eg. *wpwtj*); *pelmos* “general” (< Eg. *p3-mr-mš*); *ssor* “scribe” (< Eg. *sš*); *tewiseti* “adoration” (< Demotic *t3-wšt.t*); and *nbr* “gold” (< Eg. *nbw*).

Prospective Considerations

The best hope for the future of Meroitic philology resides in linguistic comparison,

since all other approaches have thus far met limited success. Now that the affiliation of Meroitic is settled, the next generation of Meroiticists will ideally include scholars acquainted with Nubian and the other Northern East Sudanic languages—especially Nara, a little-known language from Eritrea which, along with Nubian, is the closest relative of Meroitic. This will require the earnest collection of data from the field, and in the shortest possible time, because most of these languages are highly endangered.

Excavations in the Sudan are likely to yield new Meroitic inscriptions. Bilingual texts would of course be most welcome, but it is doubtful that they ever existed, considering that there was apparently no important Greek or Egyptian community settled in the Kingdom of Meroe. However, any new Meroitic document adds a new piece to the puzzle. The limited nature of the Meroitic corpus, compared with the masses of texts unearthed in Egypt or other Near-Eastern sites, seems unnatural for a civilization where literacy played an important role. It is highly probable that the number of documents written in Meroitic will dramatically increase in the future, and this can happen in a single discovery.

Bibliographic Notes

An updated introduction to the Meroitic language and writing system is provided by Rilly and de Voogt (2012). Also helpful is Rilly (2007a) (in French). For a detailed demonstration of the linguistic affiliation of Meroitic, Rilly (2010) (in French) can be used by readers acquainted with historical linguistics. Although outdated in many respects, Griffith (1911) remains a useful volume, as much for the author’s brilliant decipherment of Meroitic scripts as for his translation of funerary texts. Recent publications of Meroitic texts (without translation) can be found in Hallof (2011 and 2014 – 2015). Finally, Breyer (2014) supplies a general outline (in German) of the history and linguistics of ancient Sudan.

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Figure 1. Meroitic funerary offering-table, from Sai Island (250 – 300 CE). (REM 1241.)

Figure 2. Genealogical tree of Northern East Sudanic languages, including Meroitic. (Chart by the author.)

Figure 3. Meroitic alphasyllabary. (Table by the author.)