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SILKO'S INSCRIPTION: PECULIARITIES IN THE USE OF KOINE GREEK AND REPRESENTATION

I. INTRODUCTION: KING SILKO AND THE WORLD OF DIOSCORUS

Archaeologists generally agree that Ancient Egypt had limited influence on most of the African continent; yet there was one part of Africa with which the Ancient Egyptians, and their Hellenistic successors, did have substantial contacts. This was Nubia, the land along the River Nile to the south of Egypt, the final frontier of the Hellenistic world, and most importantly the land where the local people, by absorbing different elements, developed their own distinctive cultures (Connah 2004, p. 64). The Ancient Egyptians, as traders, conquerors and colonizers had left their lingering cultural influence on an initially pagan, later Christianized and finally Islam-dominated environment. The period that will occupy our interest in this essay lies on the dawn of Christianity in Nubia, when the Nubian King Silko¹ orders a memorial for his victory against pagan enemies: the infamous Greek inscription carved on the west wall of the forecourt of the temple of Mandulis at Kalabsha (Hägg 2002, 289).

In our quest to frame the cultural conditions during which King Silko was having his name carved on stone, claiming his share of eternity, it would not be irrelevant to discuss the bilingual and transcultural world of a famous Copt, Dioscorus of Aphrodito. This father of Coptic letters lived and worked in Egypt almost at the same time as King Silko reigned in Nubia. In Egypt 'it was a time in which the two old cohabiting strains, Egyptian and Greek, variously interacted since Ptolemaic times, had evolved into equilibrium, really a blend, which gave rise to brilliantly original art forms' (Mac Coull 1988, 148). This was the fertile ground where Egyptian Christianity was exploiting the classical-pagan cultural heritage, giving a new texture to every detail; a New Greek language continued to be

created in Egypt, enriched with Christian theological and Roman bureaucratic terms, and the inevitable loans from Coptic (Mac Coull 1988, 148-149). The inherited Mediterranean education was not left unchanged. After all the arrival of Christianity was a major source of transformation. When we analyze the cultural milieu of Nubia two more aspects should be added to our syllogism: the relatively superficial Hellenization of the area and the profoundly rooted 'African lifestyle'.²

The evangelization of Nubia by missionaries sent by Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora took place in 541 A.D. (Vantini 1985, 59). According to certain scholars the impact of this event was so deep that 'it was as though a chasm had opened between the newly Christianized Nubian kingdoms and Nubia's long established and deeply rooted pharaonic traditions' (Burstein 2008, 55). One of the few 'elite culture'³ aspects that were retained in the new reality⁴ was the use of the Greek language. It is important to underline the fact that the Christian kingdoms of Nubia would use Greek as the official language of religion and government for most of their history (Burstein 2008, 56). Therefore, one should take into account the cultural frame of this transitional period, the switch from paganism to Christianity, when studying Silko's inscription.⁵ It was during this transition in Nubian history that King Silko took a moment to 'announce' his prestigious victory on stone; and using the linguistic heritage of the Hellenistic era, the Greek language, in a rather peculiar way. In this essay we will examine the peculiarities of Silko's use of Koine Greek, and its relation with the visual representation of the Nubian King. This meditation, on the analogies between the linguistic peculiarities and the representation of the King, will evaluate the impact of Christianization, if any, and

1 There is no substantial evidence proving that King Silko was either pagan or Christian. Most views are based on speculation. Writers, like Vantini and Letronne, though strongly support the hypothesis that Silko was a Christian King.

2 The pastoral lifestyle of the African peoples.

3 The 'official' culture of the more or less Hellenized courts of the area.

4 The arrival of Christianity.

5 One could suggest that the lines between pagan and Christian might appear blurred in such transitional times like the one studied.



the transformation of other cultural elements coming from the distant past.

2. NUBIAN GREEK: LINGUISTIC ANALYSES OF SILKO'S 'BARBARISMS'

According to Stanley Burstein the epigraphical texts found imply that Greek was at least one of the languages of government in medieval Nubian kingdoms and that their bureaucracy and religion broadly followed the Byzantine model (Burstein 1995, 221). To take matters further researchers that have studied the finds in Q'asr Ibrim have concluded that Greek and Nubian were used at the same time; equal numbers of religious documents were found in both languages and judging from their position, intermingled on the same level and in the same area, both languages were used at the same time (Frend 1978, 295-296). But the Nubians did not slavishly copy existing Monophysite liturgies; much verbal dissimilarity, possibly of Nubian derivation, can be found and some distant Coptic influences as well (Dragas, Frend & Kontoyiannis 1992, 134). The evidence already examined would suggest that the Nubians of the Kingdom of Nobadia, over which King Silko reigned, remained Monophysite throughout their Christian history; they retained contact with the Coptic patriarchate in Egypt and felt proud of their traditional Greek liturgical language (Dragas, Frend & Kontoyiannis 1992, 134). Despite the errors, the retention of the liturgy in the language of Byzantium should be interpreted as a source of pride for the Christian Kings of Nubia.

Silko's inscription presents a relatively grammatical use of the Greek language by the Nubians, especially when compared to the papyrus letter from the King of the Blemmyes to a King of the Nobades again named Silko (Hägg 1978, 105). Whether this Silko is the same as the one commemorated in the inscription carved on the west wall of the forecourt of the temple of Mandulis at Kalabsha remains a rather elusive question; most of the evidence leads to the conclusion that the letter is older than the inscription. There are contradicting theories, all of which duly concede the tentative character of these interpretations (Hägg 1986, 281). On paleographical grounds alone the letter has been dated to the middle of the 5th century; the use of Greek is chaotic however, with the endings of verbs and nouns creating serious problems of understanding (Hägg 1978, 105). It has been suggested that this rather incomprehensible letter was dictated by the King of the Blemmyes in his own native language to a scribe with a smattering

of Greek, who for each native word or phrase wrote down some Greek equivalent without much regard to such matters as person, case, number, or mood. If this hypothesis is correct, the Greek text would have been closer to an aide-memoire rather than a vehicle of direct communication (Hägg 1978, 105). The unofficial use of this letter would somehow account for the incomprehensible Greek. The linguistic peculiarities of the inscription, however, which was a permanent narration of an important war victory, were of another nature.

The most interesting feature of the documents found in the Christian kingdoms of Nubia is the use of Greek titles and honorific epithets, a practice that was inaugurated with the Kingdoms of the Blemmyes and Nobades of the proto-Christian period (Hägg 1990, 147). This is actually where Silko's most unique 'barbarism' is diagnosed. Βασιλίσκος⁶ is the word he chooses to characterize his status, directly translating from Greek as 'kinglet'. The phrase 'βασιλίσκος Νουβάδων και όλων των Αιθιοπών'⁷ would cause hilarity within the Grecophone Byzantine cultural milieu, first of all because the term 'kinglet' would rarely or never be used for a reigning King. Evangelos Chrysos, a Byzantinologist, refers to experts' opinions stating that the Greek who composed the inscription must have smiled to himself when he introduced the diminutive 'βασιλίσκος' (Chrysos 1978, 44). Chrysos rejects this syllogism as it presupposes Silko's ignorance of what the title really means; on the other hand he supports the opinion that this title was reserved for Silko and his royal colleagues in their communication with Byzantium, the only power that had the right to use the term 'βασιλεύς' (Chrysos 1978, 45). He finds it very probable that African kings would call themselves 'βασιλίσκος' as a necessary concession to the Byzantine Empire, since they belonged to the nations 'όσοι την Ρωμαιοῦν ασπάζονται δεσποτείαν'⁸ (Chrysos 1978, 45). This explanation is problematic, however, as the Byzantines officially adopted the title 'Βασιλεύς' during the reign of Emperor Heraclius, many decades after the estimated date of Silko's inscription. It would be highly improbable then that the adoption of the title kinglet signified an acceptance of a lower position in the international hierarchy of royals with the Byzantine Emperor standing above the kinglets of the small kingdoms in the periphery. It is worth mentioning that Silko refers to himself in the

6 Transliteration: Basiliskos.

7 Translation: Kinglet of Nobades and of all Ethiopians.

8 Translation: Those who accept the Romans (Byzantines) as their despots.



inscription as *βασιλίσκος* twice, once in relation to the kings, *βασιλείς*, he had defeated. If Chrysos's theory is correct, we have to wonder why Silko chooses the word *βασιλείς* for the defeated African kings, a term that was supposedly reserved only for the Byzantine Emperor.

There is of course the theory that Nubian Greek, the language of the inscription as well, is very problematic in general, with endings missing and others being mistakenly added. In general most Greek-Nubian texts feature an arbitrary grammar and phonetic orthography; also the Nubians seem to have evolved a system of accentuation in which long syllables are noted by two dots above the vowel (Frend 1978, 301). In some inscriptions all the mistakes are interpreted as results of the African pronunciation of Greek, and they testify to the extensive knowledge of Greek in Nubia; these findings afford us a great insight into what the Greek language used by Nubians would be like (Oates 1963, 164). The two languages, Greek and Old Nubian, differed in their morphology, and this could also interpret syntactical divergences from the Koine Greek canon, if any (Browne 1986, 309). Indeed the last lines of the inscription seem to be missing some endings and letters, and this could be attributed to phonetic orthography; the first part though, where the term *kinglet* makes its first appearance, is almost perfect. In addition we should not forget that the scribes, were equally likely to be Greek, Nubian or Egyptian, would naturally include uncommon, poetic words and even Copticisms in their Greek (Frend 1986, 68); anything that would make sense within the local cultural frame. In an endeavour to interpret the use of the word *'kinglet'* certain linguists have attributed the peculiarity of the inscription to a potential Copticism: the Coptic word for king is *'ouro'*, derived from the old Egyptian royal symbol, the cobra, and as the Greek word used for this *'royal snake'* was *βασιλίσκος*, it would be easy to imagine that the king who bore such insignia on his forehead would be called that himself, then of course without any diminutive implication (Häg 1990, 149). This view is supported by the *'African'* metaphors⁹ related to animals, the lion and the bear notably. One could argue about how *'African'* these metaphors are, as these two animals were not unknown in Greek representations of kingship.

9 In line 15 of the translation of the inscription Silko underlines his power: *'For I am a lion in the lower regions, and a bear in the upper regions'*. These two metaphors are important for comprehending the way Silko understood his victory.

But the choice of powerful animals to frame his royal power cannot sustain any notion of Silko being content with accepting a low position in the international hierarchy. He is strong like a bear and fearless like a lion.

3. SILKO'S INSCRIPTION AND REPRESENTATION

Immediately below Silko's inscription (fig. 3) archaeologists have discovered an engraving (fig. 1) that may have complemented, if not narrated, its content. In accordance with Lazlo Török's sketch of the engraving, we see the coronation of a ruler performed by a flying, Christian angel-like deity; the ruler is riding a horse, his regalia are *'native'* and his spear is pointing at the figure of a man, his defeated enemy possibly (Häg 1990, 154). Given the inscription's content, celebrating Silko's victory, we might conclude that the engraving played a complementary role. This choice reminds us of the Cleopatra's inscription (fig. 2), now exhibited in the Louvre in Paris, which is accompanied by a representation of the Hellenistic Queen of Egypt as the Goddess Isis. This analogy leaves room for speculation that the engraving and the inscription functioned together in a similar way to the Egyptian Hellenistic representation of Queen Cleopatra: royal power through religion and use of the Greek language. The Nubians might have been aware of this practice and adopted it; there are definite echoes of the Hellenistic ways of commemorating

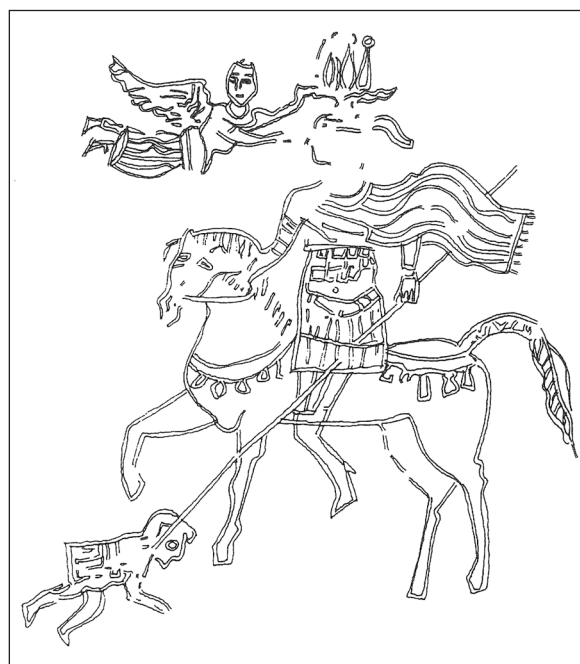


Fig. 1: Facsimile of the engraving under Silko's inscription (Courtesy of Dr. Lazlo Török).



Fig. 2: Cleopatra as Isis, Louvre (Courtesy of Eric Gaba).

in the case studied. This aspect supports the theory of ‘βασιλίσκος’ as Copticism: by referring to the uraeus serpent, worn by the Egyptian kings,¹⁰ Silko elevates his status to that of a Pharaoh (Hansen 1986, 205). The crown in the engraving seems Egyptian influenced as well, like most post-Meroitic Nubian crowns (colour-fig. 2).

The question underlined by the engraving is whether Silko was a Christian King or not. Linguists like Letronne supported the theory that Silko was Christian on the grounds of his references to ‘θεός’¹¹ giving him victory and to ‘είδωλα’¹² as his enemies’ sacred altars (Hägg 2002, 292). In order to understand the tensions between the proto-Christians and the pagans at that time we should refer to Emperor Justinian’s order to Narsete, commander of the prefecture of Egypt, to close the temple of Isis in

10 The uraeus serpent was worn, as we can see in fig. 2, by the Hellenistic rulers of Egypt.

11 Translation: God.

12 Translation: Idols. The Christians would refer to the pagans as people ‘worshipping idols’.

Philae and put an end to this pagan cult that was still very popular among the Blemmyes (Vantini 1985, 59). At the same time we should bear in mind that at Faras and other areas in Nubia brightly coloured paintings have been found by Polish archaeologists, depicting Christ, the Madonna and Child, and other Christian subjects, as well as Nubian kings, bishops and high-ranking government officials (Connah 2004, 67). The representation of kings as part of the religious imagery is not an uncommon phenomenon within the Nubian context. The frescoes found date from roughly the 9th century and later, centuries after Silko’s inscription and engraving. The representation of Silko could have been an early expression, without the distinctively Nubian style yet,¹³ of the religious framing of royal power. We could interpret the engraving as the equivalent of a Christian icon depicting the glory of a Christian king, defeating his pagan enemies. Frend has noted that the Q’asr Ibrim manuscripts provide the background in words to the religious art represented so finely in the frescoes at Faras and in other Nubian churches of the Classic Christian period; the soldier-saints of Byzantine hagiography, particularly Mercurius, played an important part in Nubian religious thought (Frend 1986, 70). When the engraving is compared with an 18th century¹⁴ Coptic icon of Saint Mercurius (colour-fig. 1) the similarities are striking. Saint Mercurius is depicted as killing Julian the Apostate, the last pagan, polytheist Roman Emperor, in a vision seen by Cappadocian Saint Basil. According to tradition Saint Mercurius was holding two swords, a military sword and a divine sword, the latter given to him by Archangel Michael. In the inscription Silko claims divine help for his victory, and of course we are shown his spear in the engraving. We would not easily suggest that the drawing exploits the myth of Saint Mercurius; more research is needed in this domain. We can imagine though how representations like this one could have paved the way to the Saint’s popularity in the area.

13 The frescoes at Faras have been categorized into the Violet, transitional, White, Yellow-Red and different multi-coloured styles. These styles are regarded as distinctively Christian Nubian.

14 This particular Coptic icon exemplifies the representation of the Saint during the centuries of Christian civilization. Within a Byzantine or Coptic context Saint Mercurius is always represented in a similar way to this particular icon; killing John the Apostate and being protected by Archangel Michael.

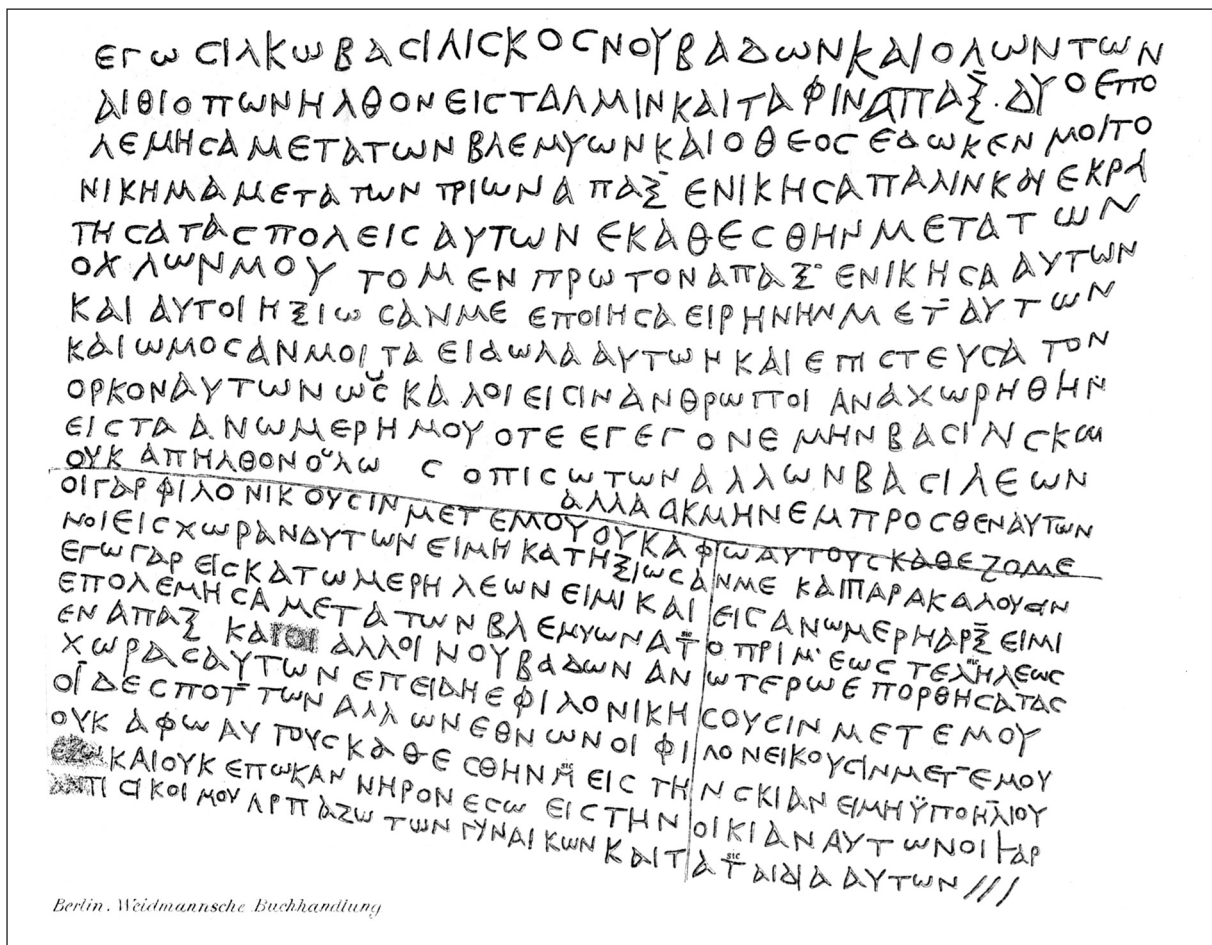


Fig. 3: Facsimile of Silko's inscription (Lepsius 1876, p. 129).

4. CONCLUSION

In this essay we have examined the linguistic peculiarities of a Nubian Greek inscription and its relation with a engraving found immediately below. We have meditated on the meaning of the 'barbaric'¹⁵ elements presented in Silko's Greek; apart from its strictly phonological deviations we have also referred to pagan metaphors using animals to refer to royal power and a specific Copticism related to the glory of the Pharaohs. We have analysed the elements in the representation of the victorious king in the Kalabsha engraving that endorse the hypothesis on the meaning of certain linguistic peculiarities. Our discussion touches on the diffusion of all the elements actively received by the Nubians; and therefore exploited for the creation of a hybrid visual and linguistic code of communication. The blend of Hellenistic, Ancient Egyptian and Byzantine elements must have been filtered by the Nubian character, which is that of a warrior having an angel of God on his side. Hägg

suggests that linguists can no longer discuss Silko's inscription in isolation from other Greek documents of the region (Hägg 2002, 298). We can only agree with him; and add that, wherever applicable, the modes of representation must also be taken into consideration for a more rounded view of Nubian culture and languages.

APPENDIX: TRANSLATION OF SILKO'S INSCRIPTION (according to FHN III, 317)

I, Silko, King (*basilikos*) of the Noubades and all the Aithiopians, came to Talmis and Taphis.

On two occasions I fought with the Blemmyes; and God gave me the victory. On the third occasion. I was again victorious and took control of their cities. I occupied (them) with my troops. On the first occasion. I conquered them, and they sued me for terms. I made peace with them, and they swore to me by their images, and I trusted their oath in the belief that they were honest people.

15 Within the Greek cultural context everything non-Greek was characterized as 'barbaric'.



I withdrew to my upper regions. When I had become king (*basiliskos*), I did not by any means proceed behind the other kings (*basileus*), but well ahead of them. For those who contend with me I do not permit to remain settled in their country unless they have beseeched me and entreat me. For I am a lion in the lower regions, and a bear in the upper regions. I fought with the Blemmyes from Primis to Telelis; on one occasion I ravaged the country of the others too, above the Noubades, because they contended with me. (As for) the rulers of the other peoples who contend with me, I do not allow them to sit in the shade, but in the sun outside, and they did not drink water inside their hous(es). For I rob my adversaries of their women and children. (Hägg 2002, 300).

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In diesem Artikel werden die linguistischen Spezifika der Inschrift des Königs Silko auf dem Kalabscha-Tempel zusammengestellt. Einige Elemente wirken "barbarisch" und sind mit dem besonderen kulturellen Hintergrund der Entstehung dieser Inschrift, einem Zusammenspiel aus griechischen, koptischen und lokalen Traditionen, zu erklären. Ebenso ist die unter der Inschrift befindliche Darstellung als Hybrid aus hellenistischen, altägyptischen, byzantinischen und nubischen Merkmalen zu interpretieren, die einen christlichen König, der seine heidnischen Feinde unterwirft, zeigt. Die königliche Macht wird in ihrem religiösen Rahmen gezeigt.