



PETRA WESCHENFELDER

NUBIAN PLACE NAMES ON MOGRAT ISLAND, SUDAN

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mograt Island Archaeological Mission (M.I.A.Mi.) community archaeology project in Maqall in January 2018 included an ethno-historical study on how the communities of the Sudanese Middle Nile island Mograt and in the village of Maqall specifically perceive their local history and how the archaeological monuments tie in into this history (cf. Weschenfelder & Becker this volume). Some archaeological projects pointed out that perhaps with the exception of Nubian groups in the North (see below), Sudanese communities often seem to be more concerned with their Islamic heritage and might feel rather disconnected from the peoples and cultures of the periods preceding Islam (cf. Humphris & Bradshaw 2017: 211). Yet, the insight from the communities in Maqall during the research and from a public presentation by M.I.A.Mi. team members in Maqall secondary school is quite different (cf. Weschenfelder & Becker this volume chapter 4). While a disinterest in non-Islamic sites might be the case if people are asked in general for their perception of archaeology the results can differ when discussing individual sites. Hajer Maqall community members relate to the potentially medieval fort in their centre via ethnohistorical links to the Mahdiya period. Women of the elder generation retold the stories of their grandparent's generation. These stories re-interpret the site in a way that is meaningful for the community members who live around the fortress today by connecting the family stories with the site (cf. Abu-Khafajah & Rababeh 2014: 72). This is of course a part of Islamic history. Nevertheless, people do not neglect the previous period, i.e. the Christian period. Instead, they reconstruct other meaningful links to that period. The connections however, were again less archaeological, material or architectural but rather once more related to speaking, storytelling and even to linguistics.

2. MAQALL COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND THE NUBIAN LINKS ON THEIR ISLAND

Several elder people remembered that until the 1960s people on the island generally believed that their

home and their history are to be found in Arabic Islamic history only. Abbas Sid Ahmed (1971: 21-23) who investigated the archaeology of Mograt Island in 1969 tells that Mograt was believed to be an Arabic expression for 'Places of the Holy Men' (*mograt al salihin*). However, Ahmed questioned the etymology of this explanation on the one hand because there is no local tradition to high ranking holy men or any well-known *qubba* (grave monument of an Islamic sheikh) on the island and on the other hand because several place names on the island sounded rather like Nubian than Arabic to him. He especially mentions modern Maḥas and Dongolawi Nubian and discusses the idea that the first part of the word *mug-* meaning dog, or *mogur* meaning he-goat. Ahmed does not tell whether he had discussed such possibilities with the local communities on Mograt.

Yet, this might have well been possible since in 1966 the island received the famous Nubian singer Mohammed al-Wardi on their island. Al-Wardi told people living on the island that the island's name and several place names there seem to rather point to their Nubian origin. As people from Maqall and neighbouring villages now recall it, according to him the name of the island could mean something like 'the lying/ reclining dog'. Many people of the island, who had accepted that etymology, explained that it would refer to the shape of their island.

It seems intriguing how the people changed the mono-cultural storyline of an Arabic Islamic background into a multi-cultural one by adding a layer of Nubian heritage that relates to the Christian period when the three Nubian kingdoms of Nobadia, Makuria and Alwa dominated the length of modern Sudan. This addition might have been triggered by several factors. Rather than a top-down approach of centralised teaching the explanation was integrated into a story - that of the dog-shape. Moreover, the insight was not provided by a foreign scholar but by a famous Nubian singer who people did not reject to be associated with.¹ Furthermore, while archaeology

¹ The impact that famous singers can have on mediating culture was recently demonstrated by the US-singer Beyonce. In the videoclip for the song "I can't believe we made it (apeshit)" she and her husband, the rapper Jay Z, walk through the Louvre. Due to that video the Louvre received



especially in the beginning of research remains rather vague when it comes to definite facts like chronology or inclusions of the island into the wider history of Sudan (cf. Weschenfelder & Becker this volume), the linguistic insight could provide more satisfying answers for the communities of the island.

Much research in Sudanese studies was dedicated to Nubian place names and their meaning. However, this research mostly focused on the area of modern Nubia and was undertaken in events of resettlements² or currently under the threat of language endangerment³. In this context scholars seem to forget that during the medieval period Nubian languages might have been used in a wider area than Nubian languages are spoken more recently. Archaeological investigations in the 4th cataract area immediately downstream from Mograt Island brought to light Old Nubian texts (Näser & Tsakos 2014: 981-2). Old Nubian is a Nubian language that was spoken and written in the medieval Sudanese kingdoms. Furthermore, discussions with community members in Tanqasi opposite of El Kurru at the other end of the 4th cataract showed that the elder generations could point out the Nubian origin of local toponyms and tool names.⁴

It is particularly interesting that community members of Maqall, wider Mograt or Tanqasi would point us into this direction given that scholars tend to expect the communities' disinterest in the medieval history. Yet, it would be such local interest that would create the notion of cultural heritage, in this

case the intangible heritage of historical memory conserved in and revitalisable through local place names.

The storyline of the people of Maqall however suggests that a lot of the tales relating to the medieval part of the island's history are now lost or at least hidden. To (re)create meaningful connections it might also be of value to have a further look into Old Nubian and modern Nubian languages to get an idea about the potential of place names to recreate the historical landscape of Mograt Island.⁵

3. FURTHER POSSIBLE NUBIAN LINKS IN LOCAL TOPONYMS

Indeed, the term $\mu\omicron\gamma\tau$ - for *dog* is even attested in Old Nubian.⁶ As for the verb 'to lie, recline' however, in a participle form would be $\alpha\tau\text{-}\lambda$ or $\alpha\tau\text{-}\epsilon\mu$ in Old Nubian. In the compound 'laying dog' one would expect $\mu\omicron\gamma\tau\alpha\gamma\iota$ or $\mu\omicron\gamma\tau\alpha\gamma\epsilon\mu$.

The ending $\text{-}\alpha\tau(\tau)$ at the name of the island occurs in Old Nubian as a grammatical formant that turns verbs into substantives or adjectives, or forms substantives with abstract meaning (Browne 2002: 26). This explanation would not work if the name really relates to the word *dog*. Yet, Old Nubian in its written form often assimilated consonants and sometimes omitted vocals (Browne 2002: 17-23). It could therefore be that a part of the word was lost or reinterpreted during the course of history. Ahmed (1971: 22) even suggests that the original name was Mogurnarti - Island of the he-goat, which was, according to him reduced to Mograt since the current Rubatab Arabic speakers tend to reduce words in general by not sounding the last letter or letters of a word.

Another option from the Maḥas dialect of Nubian is $\mu\omicron\tau\text{-}\alpha\tau$ - taming, appeasement (Khalil 1996: 69). With the abstract formant it could turn into $\mu\omicron\tau(\alpha)$ $\rho\alpha\tau$ meaning *calm*, even *tranquility* which could refer to the islands relaxing scenery (see below) or to it providing calmer waters after or before the 4th cataract depending on which direction one comes from. In the same dialect a word $\mu\omicron\tau$ could also

more online feedback in a short time than all the Louvre's outreach and community engagement projects taken together (Anne-Myrtille Renoux, Head of the Documentary and Editorial Resources Division at the Louvre in her paper at the conference „Kulturelles Erbe: Communities und Besucher im heutigen digitalen Umfeld“ Berlin 19.06.2018). The Louvre now offers a tour through the museum based on the video, cf. <https://www.louvre.fr/en/routes/jay-z-and-beyonce-louvre> (accessed September 2018).

2 Extensive research already started in 1911 when Hermann Junker, Heinrich Schäfer and Samuel Ali Hiseen recorded toponyms and stories in the area submerged by the Aswan Low Dam (Junker & Schäfer 1921; 1932). For the impact of this research see Pierce (2018: 35-36).

3 Most recently number 4 of the journal *Dotawo. A Journal of Nubian Studies* was dedicated to Nubian Place names, with several contributions addressing the issue of the endangerment of the toponyms.

4 During an ethno-archaeological research in the El-Kurru - Tanqasi area in 2015 the author met several especially elder people active in the repair shops in Tanqasi market who were knowledgeable about Nubian words. They told about a Nubian speaking trader, who used to come to the market in past times and with whom they discussed these names.

5 From the modern Nubian languages Maḥas, Kenzi and Dongolawi will be quoted here since they are spoken in the Nile Valley and could have a closer connection to the history of Mograt than those Nubian languages that are spoken in the western mountains of Sudan. However, one example from Kordofan will be quoted from a community member.

6 Browne (1996: 120) has $\mu\omicron\gamma\tau$ as *dog*. However, he lists only two examples, both occurring in plural with attached $\rho\iota\text{-}\tau\omicron\gamma$ as $\mu\omicron\gamma\tau\text{-}\rho\iota\text{-}\tau\omicron\gamma$. Modern Maḥas has reduced the plural to /mugri / (Lepsius 1880: 365).



be interpreted as ‘to leave behind’, which together with a causative $-r(i)p-$ and the $-\lambda\tau(\tau)$ could mean $\mu\sigma\rho(\rho)\lambda\tau$ ‘departure’. However, both words are not attested in the Old Nubian texts published so far. If they indeed existed during the medieval period they could have related to travel along the Nile as well as pointed towards the desert route to Egypt that starts north of Mograt. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the name could have held several meanings at the same time depending on the context the people used the name in.

The same could be true for one of the small island north of Mograt - the island Kiggi. One of our consultants told about a tv show that introduced Mograt and its surrounding islands as places of beauty, relaxation and tranquility (!). In the show a Nubian speaker from Kordofan phoned and explained that they have a modern word *kidjidji* meaning ‘little sister’ that could account for the name of the island. If one sees the small island in relation to Mograt this name would make sense. Another option from Old Nubian concerning the etymology could also refer to geographical relations: $\kappa(\lambda)-r\dot{r}$ could mean ‘near the border’.⁷ However, this combination is not attested in Old Nubian texts so far either. Nevertheless, one should not exclude that both meanings are possible and could even have coexisted in the medieval period highlighting different aspects of the islands’ setting in the landscape of the middle Nubian Nile.

Another small island to the north of Mograt could point into the same direction. The name of the small island Kurta/Kourti north of Mograt could be translated as ‘joint’ (of knee or elbow) or as ‘small stone’.⁸ It is difficult to decide for one or the other without any story behind the name. In relation to the name however, another point can be raised. Interestingly enough, a medieval Arabic source of the 10th century names a place ‘koursī/kursā’ that marks the border area between the Christian kingdoms of Makuria and Alwa.⁹ It would of course be purely hypothetical

here and for now to assume that the medieval reference would relate to Kourta/Kourti especially with the much bigger island of Mograt so close. Nevertheless, the island of Kurta/Kourti features a substantial medieval fortress with an adjacent Christian cemetery (Rees, Lahitte, Näser 2015: 181–182) and it is quite possible that the still unexcavated fort could have served administrative functions related to custom traffic along the river but also towards the desert road that connects the Abu Hamed area adjacent to Mograt on the mainland with Egypt.

4. CONCLUSION AND PROSPECTS

This thought game is inspired foremost by the interest that inhabitants of Mograt Island voiced on the Nubian heritage that could hide behind the name of their island. The discussion of place names tentatively pointed towards their potential to historically integrate Mograt and its surrounding islands into the Nubian speaking world during the medieval period. As Bell & Şabbār (2017: 9) have pointed out “Toponyms are guideposts to cultural history and also to the riverside environment where the Nubian languages have flourished.” Therefore, a further look into the various place names on the island could be a fruitful enterprise to find more hints for the Mograt’s placing and functions in the medieval Nubian kingdoms. However, this remains rather speculative for the moment and seems rather challenging. Most projects that were and are undertaken concerning Nubian languages are situated in areas where people actually speak Nubian today. They even start to integrate Nubian perspectives and interpretations of archaeological sites in Nubian.¹⁰ This is not the case on Mograt Island where people speak Arabic and Nubian speakers are not present. Yet, an exchange of thoughts with these Nubian speaking communities could provide the people of Mograt with more ethno-historical insight and could contribute to a better understanding of local Sudanese history. Together with more recording of ethno-historical data, wider research in medieval geography and historiography, as well as archaeological investigations such insights could help to highlight Mograt Island’s setting in the historical landscape of the middle Nubian Nile.

7 Lepsius (1880: 341) lists *kel* for ‘Grenze, Gebiet, Land, Provinz’ in the Maḥas dialect, while Browne (1996: 87) gives *kel-* as ‘limit, fullness’ in Old Nubian. For *rṛ* ‘to be near’ see Browne (1996: 28).

8 In Maḥas, Kenzi and Dongolawi as ‘joint’ (of knee or elbow) (Lepsius 1880: 351). Khalil (1996: 61f.) offers the same translation but furthermore lists for Maḥas *kōpṛi* ‘Steinchen; Erdkrümel, die sich im Getreidekorn abgelagert haben’.

9 Ibn Ḥawqal (ca. 977), *Kitab sūrat al ard*, (in Vantini, *Oriental sources concerning Nubia*, p. 163). However, the reading is not entirely clear due to the missing diacritica. Moreover, Ibn Ḥawqal seems to have used similar names for further places in Alwa, (ibid. p. 164). Due to the specific tradition of Islamic citation Ibn Ḥawqal’s works were hardly included in later works (Weschenfelder 2012: 221f.) so that it is difficult to retrace the original diacritics.

10 A podcast in a Modern Nubian language by Fekri Hasan Tah (2018) describes the archaeological fieldwork of the British Museum at Amara West (cf. Fushiya & Spencer 2018).



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Während der community archaeology Kampagne 2018 auf der Insel Mograt wurde nicht nur die Archäologie der Festung von Hajer Maqall untersucht und die jüngere Nutzungsgeschichte, die von den Bewohnern der Festungsumgebung tradiert wird aufgezeichnet. Die jüngere Geschichte und die Erzählungen der community verweisen auf Begebenheiten in der islamischen Geschichte. Darüber hinaus wurde jedoch deutlich, dass viele Bewohner der Insel auch an ihrem möglichen Nubischen kulturellen Erbe interessiert sind. Ebenso wie für die Festung scheint dieses Interesse weniger auf das konkret Materielle bezogen zu sein als eher auf orale Traditionen. Seit der Anregung eines berühmten nubischen Sängers Mitte der 60er Jahre des 20. Jhs. verbreitet sich auf Mograt die Ansicht, der Name der Insel ist nubischen Ursprungs. Um das Potential der möglichen nubischen Toponyme für eine Rekonstruktion lokaler Geschichte zu überdenken wurde hier der Name Mograt selbst sowie der Name einer Nachbarinsel mit möglichen Bedeutungen aus dem Alt-nubischen, einer Schriftsprache der mittelalterlichen sudanesischen Königreiche, sowie aus modernen nubischen Sprachen verglichen. Obwohl die Namen durchaus Hinweise auf die historische Verortung der Insel enthalten könnten, kann erst durch ihre Einbettung in archäologische, historische und ethno-historische Erkenntnisse einen tieferen Einblick in die Bedeutung der Insel vor der islamischen Zeit geben. Die Ortsnamen können jedoch durchaus mögliche Richtungen aufzeigen und sollten in der Untersuchung nicht ausgespart werden. Bei tiefergehendem Interesse von Mitgliedern der community auf Mograt könnte eine Zusammenarbeit mit Nubisch Sprechern aus dem Norden angeregt werden. Dort engagieren sich einige Nubisch Sprecher in der Vermittlung lokaler Geschichte und der Ergebnisse eines Grabungsprojekts in nubischer Sprache.