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).
An Old Nubian Letter from the Daughter of an Eparch

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

Transcription

Recto

+ ΔΔΟΥΙΗΕΛΩ ΝΑΡΙΑΗ ΣΟΓΟΪΔΑΧ [ΠΔΡΕ ΟΥ[ΕΧ]
2 ΠΙΝΚΗΤΙΚΑ ΕΙΝ ΚΑΡΤΕ ΑΡΡΙΚ[Α] ΤΙΩΑΗ[Α]
3 ΣΟ ΓΑΓΙΝΑΓΕ ΝΟΡΙΗ ΠΑΙΔΗ Η[2-3]ΟΥ Α . [2-4]
4 ΜΙΝΝΑ ΕΙΓΑΛΛΑΩ ΓΕΝΟΥ ΓΕΝΟΥ . ΥΙΚΑ ΕΙΛ
ΕΙΤΚΑ ΤΙΩΗΜΕΝΗΠ ΠΑΡΕΚΑ ΤΕ[Κ]ΚΑ [Τ]ΙΩΩΙ . [0-2]
6 ΚΕΛΛΩΚΑ ΝΑΠΙΝ ΕΔΑΚΑ ΠΕΣΙΝ ΑΝΗΑΣΩ –

Verso

+ ΝΑΡΙΑΗ ΣΟΓΟΪΔΑΧ ΧΑΗ ΖΟΥΗΝΤΟΙΓΟΥΕ [- - -]

Translation

Recto

I, eparch daughter Mariamē, greet (the owners of) the second plot
do 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 ΔΔΟΥΙΗΕΛΩ: unattested variant of the standard letter greeting
ΔΔΟΥΙΗΕΛΩ “I greet you.” The usage of this verb suggests that the
addressee has equal or lower status.
ΝΑΡΙΑΗ: proper name, “Mariamē,” elsewhere attested in P. QI III
413, 16; in P. QI II 21.5 we find ΝΑΡΙΑΗ. Note that in the address
the name is spelled ΝΑΡΙΑΗ.
unattested composite title “daughter of the eparch” or “eparch daughter” based on ⲥⲟⲧⲟⲧⲗⲁ̄ (OND 3 160) and ⲉⲩⲧ ⲉⲧⲗ “daughter” (OND 20), followed by the determiner -ⲡⲣ, possibly with supralinear stroke. Subject of 1 Ⲭⲧⲟⲧⲓⲧⲇⲓⲧ. The same title also appears in the address.

ⲩⲧⲩⲧⲩⲧ: “plot, field” (OND 147).

ⲧⲧⲧⲧ: “second” (OND 134).

ⲧⲧⲧⲧ: previously unattested variant of ⲩⲧⲧⲧ “share” (OND 151), followed by genitive -ⲧ and accusative -ⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ. ⲩⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ is the direct object of 1 Ⲭⲧⲟⲧⲓⲧⲇⲓⲧ (see discussion below). Perhaps the formulation is shorthand for “the owners of the second field of the share.”

ⲧⲧⲧⲧ: “this” (OND 70).

ⲧⲧⲧⲧ: “letter” (OND 85).

ⲧⲧⲧⲧ: participial form of ⲩⲧⲧ “to bring” (OND 17) followed by present tense -ⲧ, regressively assimilated to -ⲧ before accusative -ⲧⲧ. Object of Ⲭⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ. ⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ refers to the letter itself.

ⲧⲧⲧⲧ: ⲧⲧ “to give” (OND 174) with pluractional marker -ⲧ, referring to the indirect objects, who are different from the addressee. Note that the imperative suffix -ⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ is a 2/3 plural form referring to the 1 ⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ. ⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ is the direct object of 1 ⲩⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ (see commentary below).

ⲧⲧⲧⲧ: previously unattested variant of ⲧⲧⲧⲧ “denial” (OND 194).

ⲧⲧⲧⲧ: perhaps from ⲧⲧⲧ “be without” (OND 120), followed by the present 2/3 singular -ⲧ. Dependent on ⲧⲧⲧⲧ.

ⲧⲧⲧⲧ: ⲧⲧ “to write” (OND 145), with past 2 -ⲧ and determiner -ⲧ. Participle meaning “writing” or “the one who writes.” For the construction ⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ ⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ, cf. P.QI III 31.10 ⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ “written without denial.”

ⲧⲧⲧⲧ: possibly the negative verb ⲧⲧⲧ “to not be” (OND 114), with progressively assimilated present tense -ⲧ and predicate marker -ⲧ as a verb in a complement clause dependent on ⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ. ⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ: possibly ⲧⲧ “to say” (OND 68), with present tense -ⲧ, predicate marker -ⲧ, and focus marker -ⲧⲧ. As no subject clitic is present, the subject must be overt, perhaps 3 ⲧⲧⲧⲧ. It is unclear who the subject or referent of this verb is, but it may well be another scribe (see commentary below).

ⲧⲧⲧⲧ: attested variant of ⲧⲧⲧ “year” (OND 27, 189), re-duplicated. Whereas the first instance is unmarked, the second instance has genitive -ⲧ and followed by accusative ending -ⲧⲧ. 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 δημωγ. δημογ. εολτογκας “yearly meal.”

ψευδωμα: 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 ειλλωνω, ειλ “to say” (OND 68), with nominalizer -ιτι, thus “message,” and accusative case -κα, as object of τιδωμεθα. The content of the message, perhaps the same as 6 ειλλωκα “everything,” or perhaps “the whole story,” is only implied.

5 τιδωμεθα: τι “to give” with pluractional marker -ο, referring to the indirect object, negative suffix -ις, and present 2/3 singular -εις. This appears to be the protasis of a conditional clause.

παρεκα: a variant of παρε “field” (OND 147), possibly direct object of [τ]ηδωι. This is probably the same field as mentioned in l. 1.

τε[κ]κα: accusative of 3 singular pronoun τα. Very tentative reconstruction, indirect object of [τ]ηδωι.

[τ]ηδωι: remnant of a verb (perhaps τι as suggested by Donadoni) with a pluractional marker -ο. Perhaps [τ]ηδωιι?

6 ειλλωκα: ειλλω “all” (OND 88), with accusative, object of πεσιη.

παππ: παπ “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.

[ε]λλακα: very tentative reconstruction. Perhaps ελλ “son” (OND 196), with accusative case. Indirect object of πεσιη.

πεσιη: πες “to say, speak” (OND 149), with present tense 2/3 singular -ιν. Possibly a subordinate clause dependent on 6 ανωκα.

ανωκα: perhaps αν “to say” (OND 11), with present tense 2/3 singular -ιν, predicative -α, and command marker -ωδ. 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 πεσιηαιωκα vel sim.

Verso

1 κογιντογοτε: κογιντογοτε “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 κογονιακις or “daughter of the sonoj.” Although this term has not been previously attested in the Old Nubian corpus, it appears analogous to the formation κογονιακις or “queen/royal
sister”⁴ and must refer to the daughter of an eparch (soŋoj) 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 [ⲡⲁⲣⲉ ⲧⲟⲩⲓ ⲧⲏⲕⲏⲧⲛ̄ⲕⲁ “the (owners of) the second plot of the share.” As it is unsyntactical to interpret this phrase as anything but the object of 1 Ⲩⲱⲙⲉⲗⲱ, the plural subject of the imperative 2–3 ⲧⲓⳝⳝⲁⲛ̣ⲧⲍⲟ 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 ⲥⲓⲛ Ⲥⲱⲣⲉ ⲧⲏⲣⲓⲕⲕ̣ⲧⲧ “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 (ⲡⲉⲥⲗ̄, 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 GERVER 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 3 ἔγγυπτος ἱορμή 
πᾶς “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 5 τῆς[κ]η “them.” 6 ἐὰν ἐκκα 
“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 dis-
posal 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 representa-
tives. 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 docu-
ment. In P.QI III 32.22–23, a scribe David describes himself as be-
ing part of the “retinue of the priest of king David George,” and as 
as “assembling and sitting with [his] elders” in P.QI III 36.ii.6. Fur-
thermore, scribes were often (high) members of the clergy and 
could hardly be expected to have had a mere administrative func-
tion. The letters of Princess Mariamē and Maia, however, clearly 
show that scribes had an active representative function in Maku-
ritan 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 ἀναγκαία instead of honorific 
ἀναγκαία) 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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