Ase: A Toponym and/or a Personal Name (Notes on Medieval Nubian Toponymy 3)

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Scholars studying textual heritage of Christian Nubia frequently found themselves in impossibility to decide whether a proper name occurring in a text is a personal name or a place name. Reasons for that lie in the very nature of Old Nubian (and Nubian Greek standing under a strong influence of the epichoric language), which is still rather unclear in this respect. An additional factor is our poor knowledge of various aspects of culture of the Middle Nile Valley in Christian times, including anthroponomastics and toponomastics. The present paper, devoted to the proper name Ase (ⲁⲥⲉ), is a good illustration of these problems.

As far as we are aware the proper name Ase has been attested eight times so far. Below we present all these attestations going from north to south.

1

Abu Oda, church of Saint Epimachos arranged in the rock temple of Horemheb. Visitor’s graffito in the vestibule of the temple, south wall, west end, to the east of the entrance to the south chamber. Dimensions not recorded. Lost. Old Nubian majuscules. The hand is trained but not very skilful.

*Editio princeps* after autopsy: Griffith, *The Nubian Texts of the Christian Period*, p. 67, no. 15e. A new edition after autopsy: Monneret de Villard, *La Nubia medioevale* I, p. 175, no. 1.

Cf. Beinlich, *Die Photos der Preußischen Expedition 1908–1910 nach Nubien* IV, no. B0744 (photo of the west end of the south wall of the vestibule with this and neighbouring inscriptions taken between

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1908 and 1910 by an expedition of the Berlin Academy under the direction of Heinrich Schäfer).

The date of the inscription is unknown. It is apparently late (13th–15th century) because of the dating of the entire complex.

The present edition was prepared after the photo taken by the Schäfer expedition.

† ἐγὼ ἀβραμὴ ἀσεν τότ’ ἧς τοῦ Ἰ(ησοῦ)ς διάκ(όνος) μέγ(ας) κ(αὶ) παλ(ας) γορτεο[α] κλ̣ι̣ρ̣[ικὸς] γρ[ά]ψ̣[ον].

1. ἦς διάκ(όνος) μέγ(ας): The title of “great deacon,” διάκονος μέγας, has been attested elsewhere in Christian Nubian written sources. Apart from this inscription and no. 2 below, it is found in a private letter from Qasr Ibrim (BROWNE, Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim III, no. 58, ii, l. 1: ἦς διάκονος), in a visitor’s inscription from Soba (JAKOBIELSKI, “The inscriptions, ostraca and graffiti,” p. 276, no. 2, l. 1: διάκονος μέγας[---]), and possibly also in a visitor’s inscription from Kulubnarti (ADAMS, Kulubnarti I, pp. 301–302, no. 41 c, ll. 1 & 2: ἦς διάκονος μέγας [read by S. Donadoni]). It is paralleled by the title πρεσβύτερος μέγας, “great priest,” on record in BROWNE, Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim III, no. 33, l. 19. We assume that διάκονος μέγας is the equivalent of ἀρχιδιάκονος and πρεσβύτερος μέγας of ἀρχιπρεσβύτερος. Both titles are probably Nubian inventions coined under the influence of Old Nubian, which constructs names of offices with the adjective ἀγαθῶν-, “great,” as, for example, “great priest” (ἱεροτὸ ἀγαθωρία: BROWNE, Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim III, no. 40, ll. 6–7) or “great scribe” (οικογινογια ἀγαθωρία: BROWNE, Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim III, no. 37, ll. 6–7). Another possibility is that a scribal mistake is at stake here and the correct reading would be ἦς μέγ(ας) διάκ(όνος), “deacon of the great (church of) Jesus,” “the great church of Jesus” being an otherwise well-attested name for a church (but note that inscription 2 advocates for the first solution).

1 We leave this word untranslated for reasons clarified below, in the general commentary to the entire group.
2. καὶ πάλιν is found frequently in visitors’ inscriptions in Christian Nubia as an element connecting various elements of personal presentation, especially names of offices held by a person or titles borne by him/her. It most frequently has a temporal meaning, expressing the chronological sequence of titles/offices, which may also be the case here.

The title of ṣⲟⲣⲧⲟⲇ (spelling varies) occurs often as element of personal presentation in both visitors’ inscriptions and documents on parchment and paper originating from the classical and terminal periods of Makuria (11th–15th century). It is frequently recorded as ṣⲟⲣⲧ(ⲓⲛⲓⲅⲟⲩⲛ)ⲟⲇ, which suggests an abbreviation, perhaps to be resolved as ṣⲟⲣ(ⲓⲛⲟⲩⲛ)ⲟⲇ or the like. As for its etymology, ṣⲟⲣⲧⲟⲇ should be translated “lord of elders.” What reality this title refers to is not known, however. One can suppose that it designated the president of a council composed of “elders,” that is most renowned members of a community, possibly heads of families or lineages.

κλι(ρικός) looks redundant as Abramē was already designated as δίακ(ονος) μέγ(ας) in line 1. The same redundant designation is found in another inscription of Abramē in Abu Oda (no. 2 below), which shows that it cannot be a mistake. One can speculate that Abramē wanted to underline that being a member of the clergy of the Church of Jesus was his only activity.

γράψον (probably the first person singular of aorist active with historical ending and augment omitted) is found regularly in visitors’ inscriptions from Christian Nubia to describe the process of leaving an inscription. Because of that we reconstruct it also here.

Abu Oda, church of Saint Epimachos arranged in the rock temple of Horemheb. Visitor’s graffito in the vestibule of the temple, south wall, west end, in the lower part of the wall. Dimensions not recorded. Lost. The hand is obviously the same as in the preceding inscription.

_Edito princeps_ after autopsy: Griffith, _The Nubian Texts of the Christian Period_, p. 67, no. 15 k. A new edition after the autopsy: Monneret de Villard, _La Nubia medioevale_ I, p. 175, no. 2.

Cf. Beinlich, _Die Photos der Preußischen Expedition 1908–1910 nach Nubien_ IV, no. B0746 (photo of the west end of the south wall of the vestibule with this and neighboring inscriptions taken between 1908 and 1910 by an expedition of the Berlin Academy under the direction of Heinrich Schäfer).
The date of the inscription is unknown. It is apparently late (13th–15th century) because of the dating of the entire complex.

The present edition was prepared after the photo taken by the Schäfer expedition.† κἀμὲ{α}

\[ \text{\textit{Abrami}} \]
\[ \text{\textit{\acute{a}ce to\textit{\acute{a}} di\textit{\acute{a}}}} \]
4 κο(νος) μέγα(ς) κλι(ρικός).

1. κἀμεא. Griffith and Monneret de Villard; note that both editors omit the initial cross

*Also me, Abramē, tot of Ase, great deacon, cleric.*

The inscription was obviously authored by the same man as the preceding one. In comparison with the latter, it omits his title of ἀρτιτολ., “lord of elders.” The omission is probably purely accidental.

1. κἀμἐ (κἀμοφ) is frequently found as an element opening visitors’ inscriptions in Christian Nubia; cf. remarks by Łajtar, “Wall Inscriptions in the Banganarti Churches,” p. 141. It obviously makes reference to other visitors’ mementos, already existing on the spot. The final α, if it really is a letter and not a crack of the plaster, must be a mistake of the scribe or an element of another inscription.

2. ἀκε: The photo shows a vertical stroke touching with its bottom the middle bar of ε. This suggests that the inscription might actually have had ἀκεν with the last two letters written in ligature. Another possibility is that the scribe omitted the final η and tried to correct himself in this way.

3

Faras. Graffito on a wall of the Rivergate Church. Exact position and dimensions not recorded. Judging from Griffith’s copy the hand seems to be the same as in two preceding inscriptions.

Unpublished.

Cf. Griffith, “Oxford Excavations in Nubia,” pl. LXIV, no. 4.

Date unknown, most probably late through comparison with the preceding inscriptions.

† ἐγὼ ἀβραμη ἀκεν ἀπίπη[η] θείαν Ἰ(ησοῦ)ς [διάκ(ονος)] μέγα(ς) - - -
I, Abramē, thegna of the town of Ase, great deacon of (the church of) Jesus [ - - - ].

Griffith’s copy suggests the reading άον,² but this is surely a mistake of the copyists rooted in the visual similarity of two round letters.

It is near to certain that the man mentioned in this inscription is the same as the one occurring in inscriptions 1 and 2. The designation άον τοτ in 1 and 2 has obviously the same meaning as άον οἐρνα in the present inscription; τοτ and οἐρνα are just language variants, the Nubian and the Greek one respectively, for the same notion, namely an office in the territorial administration of the Kingdom of Makuria. The reconstruction Ἰ(ησοῦς) [διάκ(ονος) μέγ(ας) - - - ] follows inscription 1.

Faras cathedral, sanctuary, wall between south-east pilaster and the first south pier, to the right of the entrance, north face. Dimensions: 11 × 33.5 cm. Graffito. Nubian-type majuscules. Elegant elongated letters. Found during the work of the Polish mission, inv. no. E196a.4, neg. no. 1083/62–3. Lost.

Unpublished.

Probably between the 11th and the 14th century (the inscription is on the latest, fourth layer of plaster).

The present edition is based on the photo and the inventory of wall inscriptions in the Faras cathedral prepared by Stefan Jakobielski during the 1962/3 season of work.

² On Griffith’s drawing there is a note that the word was erased. This is difficult for us to judge having only the drawing at our disposal.
Angidoul, priest of (the Church of) Jesus at Ase.

1–2. The name ⲛⲅⲓⲇⲟⲩⲗ borne by the author of this inscription occurs in another graffito from the Faras cathedral (inv. no. E202a.4), located on the same north face of the wall between south-east pilaster and the first south pier. Judging by the style of writing, both graffiti were left by the same man. As far as we are aware, the name ⲛⲅⲓⲇⲟⲩⲗ has not been attested elsewhere in Christian Nubia. It is obviously a name of Nubian origin, compound of two elements. The first element may be cognate with the verb ⲛⲅ-, ⲛⲕ-, ⲛⲨ-, “to remember, consider,” the second with the verb ⲛⲟⲩⲗ-, “to be, exist,” or ⲛⲟⲩ-, “to seek” or “to greet” (as a variant of ⲛⲧⲧ-) with the determiner -ⲗ. However, the exact formation and meaning escapes us. The first element occurs in other names, like ⲛⲟⲩⲧⲟⲩⲧⲏⲗ (Ruffini, The Bishop, the Eparch, and the King, no. 109, i, ll. 16–17), and ⲛⲧⲟⲩⲧⲣⲟⲩⲧⲏ (Browne, Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim III, no. 39, l. 10).

5

Faras cathedral, north aisle, second north pier, west face. Dimensions: 14 × 2 cm. Black ink. Nubian-type majuscules. Found during the work of the Polish mission, inv. no. D109d.3, neg. no. 1442/62–3. Lost.

Unpublished.

Probably between the 11th and the 14th centuries (the inscription is on the late, third layer of plaster).

The present edition is based on the photo and the inventory of wall inscriptions in the Faras cathedral prepared by Stefan Jakobielski during the 1962/3 season of work.
I, Mēnakourra, tot of Ase.

The name *mēnākōr̥r̥a* must be a variant, otherwise unattested, of the well-known name *mēnākoȳā*, literary “servant of (Saint) Menas”; for Nubian names with the element *-kouda*, see SATZINGER, “Das alt-nubische Namenselement *-kouda*: ‘Diener’?” The variant is a result of the substitution of ρ for ι (for which, see BROWNE, *Old Nubian Grammar*, § 2.2.2) and the gemination of the consonant in question. It is worth mentioning that another wall inscription in the Faras cathedral (inv. no. L41b.3; unpublished; preliminarily, see BROWNE, “Griffith’s Old Nubian graffito 4,” p. 20) contains the name *ī̄nōȳkoȳȳāȳa*. Note also the name *koȳȳāȳȳāx̄* (or *ōrōȳkoȳȳȳa*) occurring in a commemorative inscription from Amada (GRIFFITH, *The Nubian Texts of the Christian Period*, 62, no. 6).

Banganarti, upper church, northern column of the southeastern support, northern face, ca. 155 cm above the floor. Dimensions: 29.7 × 10.5 cm; h. of letters: 1.5 cm (ο) – 3.1 cm (ε). Graffito.

End of the 13th/first half of the 14th century.

The name *māṛṭ( )kōȳ(ō)ȳā* is attested in RUFFINI, *The Bishop, the Eparch, and the King*, nos. 67, ll. 5 & 12, and 69, ll. 4, 8, 12, & 19. Giovanni Ruffini expands this abbreviated name as *māṛṭ(γ̄ṛō)koȳȳāȳa*, however other solutions are possible too. Because of this we leave the name unresolved.
Banganarti, upper church, southern sandstone portal, western jamb, eastern face of the jamb, third course of blocks, 52 cm above the threshold. Dimensions: 22.7 × 4.8 cm; h. of letters: 1.1 cm (τ in line 2) – 2.2 cm (μ); letters in line 2 clearly are smaller than in line 1. Graffito.

ŁAJTAR, The Late Christian Pilgrimage Centre at Banganarti, no. 725.

End of the 13th/first half of the 14th century.

† TAMALEI AGEN
TOT.

Tamalei, tot of Ase.

1. TAMALEI may be a variant of the name TAMAL. The latter name occurs in another inscription in the upper church at Banganarti, also located on the southern sandstone portal (ŁAJTAR, The Late Christian Pilgrimage Centre at Banganarti, no. 723), which suggests that the same person may be at stake in both graffiti. Except for the two Banganarti cases, the personal name TAMAL (TAMALEI) has not been attested in Christian Nubian sources. It is probably cognate with the Old Nubian TAMANN-, “helper” vel. sim., both of them being derived from ḳḷ-, “to bind”; cf. BROWNE, Old Nubian Dictionary, 10, s.v. ḳḷ-;
see also Khalil, *Wörterbuch der nubischen Sprache*, [105], s.v. *tamāl*, “schleppen, stützen, helfen (beim Gehen).” Interestingly, Tamal(as) is attested as a name of a Blemmyan king of the late 4th/5th century CE; cf. Eide et al., *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* III, no. 310 (graffito in the Mandulis temple in Kalabsha); for this and other Blemmyan names see Satzinger, “Personennamen von Blemmyern in koptischen und griechischen Texten.” As the language used by the Blemmyes is virtually unknown, it is difficult to say anything certain about possible connections between the Blemmyan and the Nubian name Tamal.

8

Banganarti, upper church, northern column of the southwestern support, western face, 146 cm above the floor. Dimensions: 49.5 × 8.5 cm; h. of letters: 2.2 cm (α) – 6.5 cm (φ). Graffito. The inscription is found on the first layer of plaster. It partly overwrites an earlier text. Łajtar, *The Late Christian Pilgrimage Centre at Baganarti*, no. 918.

12th/13th century. The inscription, located on the first layer of plaster, predates the huge epigraphic production connected with the last layer of plaster and dated to the very end of the 13th and the first half of the 14th century.

\[\ldots \] τοῦ θ(εο)ῦ Ῥαφαήλ, ταῖς ἱκεσί<αι>ς ἐκτὸς ἐκτὸς
\[\ldots \] τοῦ θ(εο)ῦ Ῥαφαήλ.

1. In the lacuna at the beginning of the line, we expect a word in vocative governing the genitive τοῦ θ(εο)ῦ, e.g. \[\ldots ἀρχάγγελε\] τοῦ θ(εο)ῦ Ῥαφαήλ.

2. read πόλεως

\[\ldots \] of God, Raphael, \[\ldots \] supplications. \[\ldots \] thekna of the great town of Ase.

1-2. After ἐκτὸς, we expect a negation: “do not be indifferent towards our supplications” or something of the like.
2. The exact reading of this line may be a matter of controversy. We assume that Ⲣⲥⲛ is a complete word, genitive of Ⲩⲟⲩⲓ, depending on ⲥⲕⲧⲓ(ⲥⲉ). If so ⲩⲧⲓⲧⲓ(ⲥⲟⲩⲓ) ⲣⲥⲓ Ⲩⲟⲩⲓ(ⲥⲉ) must be an attribute of Ⲣⲥⲛ. Before Ⲣⲥⲛ one expects the name of the author/commissioner of the inscription. This reading was adopted by us in the edition above. It is possible, however, that Ⲣⲥⲛ is not genitive but nominative and is in fact the name of the author/commissioner of the inscription or part of his/her name. In this case ⲩⲧⲓⲧⲓ(ⲥⲟⲩⲓ) ⲣⲥⲓ Ⲩⲟⲩⲓ(ⲥⲉ) must be an attribute to ⲥⲕⲧⲓ(ⲥⲉ), and the entire sentence should be translated: “[I, - - -]sen, thekna of the great town.” The designation “great town,” without the name of the town specified, would probably refer to Dongola. It should be observed that the abbreviated notation ⲩⲧⲓ Ⲩⲟⲩⲓ ⲧⲟⲩⲓ Ⲥⲥⲛⲏ ⲧⲉⲧ Ⲩⲟⲩⲓ, “Sousapa Mataj, the ‘tot’ of Assē…” Giovanni Ruffini was of the opinion that Ⲩⲟⲩⲓ is the same as Ⲩⲟⲩⲓ, which was known to him through inscriptions 1 and 2. This is not excluded considering the orthographic liberty of Old Nubian, however, not entirely certain.

In inscription 3 Ase is definitely a toponym (cf. the designation ⲥⲧⲓ, “town”). As the author of this inscription appears to be also the author of inscriptions 1 and 2, the name Ase must refer to a place also in them.³ Judging by the syntax, Ase is a place-name in inscription 4 too. The same, though with a lesser degree of probability, holds true for inscription 8. In the remaining cases (5, 6, 7) the meaning of Ase is unclear because of the ambiguity of the word ⲩⲧⲓ/ⲧⲉⲕⲛⲏ (ⲧⲉⲕⲛⲏ), which may designate both “child, son,” and “village/town official” in Old Nubian and Nubian Greek.⁴ In all these cases, the expression Ⲩⲟⲩⲓ ⲧⲟⲩⲓ ⲧⲉ ⲧⲟⲩⲓ Ⲩⲟⲩⲓ(ⲥⲉ) can be translated as either “son of Ase” or “tot/thekna (thegna) of Ase.” Assē in Ruffini, The Bishop, the Eparch, and the King, no. 69, l. 7 must be a toponym because it is an element of the name of an office.

3 Thus the reference to these two inscriptions should be removed from the entry “Ase” in the list of Nubian personal names (available online at http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Names).

4 See Łajtar, “Christian Sai in Written Records,” pp. 94–98. It is worth noticing that ⲥⲕⲧⲓ (ⲥⲕⲧⲓ) is probably a modified transcript of the Greek τέκνον, “child.”
The etymology of the place-name Ase is unknown. The Old Nubian vocabulary as we know it thus far offers two words as possible sources of derivation: ⲁⲣⲓ-, “morning,” and ⲇⲃⲓⲣⲓ-, ⲇⲃⲓⲣⲓⲓ-, “to measure.” If the toponym Ase derived from the first of these two words, it probably made reference to the settlement’s location on the east bank of the Nile; if it was constructed on the basis of the second word, it may have reflected the measurement of land and the assignment of a portion of it for a settlement. It is rather improbable for Ase to be derived from ⲇⲃⲓⲣⲓ-, “daughter.” However, this word is a possible source of derivation for a personal name Ase as Old Nubian frequently constructs proper names out of terms of familial relationship. The above remarks are highly speculative and should be taken with much caution.

Ase from inscriptions 1, 2, and 3 has a good chance to be identical with Ase from inscription 4. The identification of this Ase with Ase from inscription 8 is not certain but possible. Assuming this is the case, one has to conclude that Ase was an urban centre (ⲇⲡ̄ⲡ̄- , πόλις μεγάλη), which boasted a church of Jesus. As far as the Kingdom of Makuria is concerned, the designation “town, city” (Greek πόλις, Nubian ⲇⲡ̄ⲡ̄-) has been attested with relation to its principal settlements such Qasr Ibrim (Silmi, Phrim), 7 Faras (Pachoras, Paras), 8 Sai (Zae), 9 and Dongola (Toungoul). 10 These “towns” occupied consider-
able space densely built with architecture of multifunctional character encircled by defensive walls. They played an important role as centres of political and cultural life as well as administrative capitals of both state and Church. On the other hand, the designation “town, city” is found also with relation to other settlement points such as Ikhmindi (Mohondi), Kelsei, Addo, Island of Michael, Timmea, and Nawe. Of them only Ikhmindi is known archeologically, and its remains truly resembled a town in urbanistic terms before they were submerged under the waters of Lake Nasser. The remaining “towns” remain unknown for us except for their names and this is also the case of Ase. We have no data at our disposal to connect the toponym Ase with archeological structures known to us or even to localize it within a broader area of the Middle Nile Valley. Findspots of the inscriptions are of little help in search for the localization of Ase. It is true that Christian Nubian cult places were frequented mostly by local population, but visitors from afar can also occur in them. Thus, for example, the upper church at Banganarti, in which our inscriptions 6, 7, and 8 occur, was visited by believers from the entire Makurian territory including Sai, Faras,
Additional one has to observe that the toponym Ase is found in inscriptions from both the north (1, 2, 3, 4) and the center (8) of Makuria. Modern toponomastics also provides no clue in the matter of the localization of Ase. As far as we can see, such a place name has been recorded nowhere in the Middle Nile Valley in the last two centuries. However, if Ase can be identified with Assē from Ruffini, *The Bishop, the Eparch, and the King*, no. 69, l. 7, the place must have been located somewhere in Nobadia.

The above discussion should be summarised as follows: There was an important urban centre called Ase in the Kingdom of Makuria that boasted a Church of Jesus, but its localization remains unknown. However, on the basis of the collected evidence, we cannot reject the possibility that the word may have also designated a personal name. It is only to be hoped that future textual discoveries will help us solve this question definitively.

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18 For the upper church at Baganarti as a pilgrimage centre, see Żurawski, *St Raphael Church I at Baganarti*, 365-385; see also Łajtar, "Wall Inscriptions in the Baganarti Churches," p. 144.
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