On Place Names Used by Nubians for Places outside Nubia (Notes on Medieval Nubian Toponymy 2)

Alexandros Tsakos

Introduction

Research on place names in Nubia may encompass a variety of aspects: from the distinction between macro- and micro-toponymy, through the comparison of place names in internal and external sources, to the Nubians’ knowledge about places outside the Middle Nile region, the core area where the Christian Nubian culture of the Middle Ages developed. Given the preponderance of Christianity in the minds of the medieval Nubians, an important part of source material relevant for the latter point derives from sources of a Christian character and refers to central places of this religion. Therefore, it would be impossible to draw up a complete list of sites outside Nubia known to Nubians because such a list would have to include all the major biblical references for Christians, e.g., Bethlehem, Galilee, Jerusalem etc.

For a survey of the place names used by Nubians for places outside Nubia, some restrictions would have to apply. A major limitation should be that only texts witnessing the actual experience of the Nubians during the medieval era should be used in such a survey. This can be guaranteed because those texts were found in Nubia or perhaps also because they were written in Old Nubian. Moreover, it is important that the significance of a given locality for the religious life of the Nubians must be either known or predictable, in order to be able to evaluate the choice of the place name for that locality. Good examples are sites of pilgrimage, as well as important ecclesiastical centers.
In this framework, the present paper will discuss issues arising from the study of the place names for the pilgrimage center of Saint Mina at Mareotis, as well as for two of the Patriarchates with which Nubians had close contacts, namely Alexandria and Constantinople.

The Miracle of Saint Mina is an Old Nubian work set at the miraculous shrine of the saint at Mareotis, next to Alexandria. The composition of this miracle narrative in the language of the Nubians pinpoints the significance of the Saint and his shrine for Christian Nubians. Further evidence of his cult in Nubia has been discovered. In the text of the miracle the place name for Mareotis appears with a variant orthography, namely ṭⲉⲡⲧⲓⲱ instead of ⲑⲧⲡⲱⲧⲓⲱ, in both cases a locative. The study of such variants can prove insightful because we expect place names tend to have a normalized orthography against which deviations may be tested.

The Old Nubian Miracle may have been composed on the basis of either a Greek or Coptic original or by independent creation. In either case, the standard Greek orthography for the Greek toponym Mareotis was Μαρεῶτις, spelled with a T and not with a Θ. The scribe of the Miracle of Saint Mina uses both orthographies, changing in fact two letters, T for Θ and I for H. The latter variation can be explained by the very common phenomenon of iotacism in medieval Greek both inside and outside Nubia without any need to suggest an underlying phonetic (or semantic) difference between the two variants. On the contrary, the choice between T and Θ has already been proposed in scholarly literature as the result of how the Nubians read/pronounced the two letters.

In his study of a Greek funerary stela from Armenna in Lower Nubia, John Oates suggested that the variation was due to the conservative character of Nubian literacy which preserved Θ as an aspirate even after the ninth century when it had ceased to be aspirated in standard pronunciation of Greek. It has recently been doubted whether this was the result of Greek being a living tongue in Nubia, and it seems reasonable to sustain the argument that the Nubians did not use Greek in their everyday communication during the medieval centuries. They did, however, pronounce Greek words, when reading them aloud in the Gospels, singing them in hymns or

1 El-Guzuuli & Van Gerven Oei, The Miracle of Saint Mina.
2 Deptula, “Inscriptions from Saint Menas’ Church in Selib”.
3 El-Guzuuli & Van Gerven Oei, The Miracle of Saint Mina, p. 4, ll. 4–5 and ibid. p. 15, l. 7 respectively.
4 Cf. http://www.trismegistos.org/place/5596.
5 Oates, “A Christian inscription in Greek from Armenna in Nubia,” p. 164.
6 Ochała, “Multilingualism in Christian Nubia,” pp. 43–44 & n. 148.
incorporating them into their vocabulary. It is in fact the last alternative that makes it highly plausible that the Nubians did not distinguish the two letters phonetically: B.H. Stricker had pointed out that the Greek word θρόνος (meaning “throne” in English) is turned into τρόνος in Old Nubian, and, half a century later, G.M. Browne proved the point by identifying in the Old Nubian word τιμιάτριον the Greek word θυμιάτριον (meaning “censer” in English). In my opinion, the inverse cases of the title θιμικις- (OND, p. 63) and the name θιμαρα- (OND, p. 238) in Old Nubian (unknown precise meaning) are similar in that they are variants of the forms τιμικκις- and ταμαρα- respectively. Moreover, the adjective ματτα is also attested as μαστο (OND, p. 112), while more recently the Old Nubian toponym for the site Attiri has been identified in the word δαιλι < χτιλι < χτιρι. It is also unnecessary to try to list all the instances of Greek words that showcase the shift between T and Θ or Θ and T. They show that for the Nubians the sounds [θ] and [t] were interchangeable.

So why introduce Θ at all into words found only in the Old Nubian vocabulary?

It appears that beyond confounding the sounds of the letters T and Θ, the shifting orthographies may also find an explanation by looking more closely into the variety of contexts in which the Nubians used the letter Θ. Most instances of the use of Θ in Old Nubian occur in Greek loan-words, either common nouns such as θαλας- (OND p. 63) for the Greek θάλασσα (“sea”), or personal names, like θαλεος-, θελωρ-, θωνα- (OND, p. 238). Apart from those loan-words, it is in titles and place-names that the use of the letter Θ appears more often in Old Nubian.

7 Stricker, “A Study in Medieval Nubian,” p. 442, but I am not able to identify the reference to an Old Nubian text. On the contrary, see several examples of the orthography φορος in Browne, Old Nubian Dictionary, p. 63.
8 Browne, Old Nubian Dictionary, p. 188. Henceforth, OND.
9 Van Gerven Oei et al., The Old Nubian Texts from Attiri, pp. 27 & 95.
10 Regarding the predictable question whether Θ could be found in a Coptic loan-word to Old Nubian, the answer is negative: in Coptic the letter Θ is used either in loan-words from Greek or as a monogram, "i.e. single letters that always express a combined pair of phonemes instead of a single phoneme. For purposes of grammatical analysis, a monogram is always understood to express two phonemes ... /p/ followed by /h/ Φ, equivalent to τρ" (Layton, A Coptic Grammar, 16). There is also a third question to be addressed and that is the possibility that the variant orthographies were due to copying faultily from Arabic texts where the letters ta and tha differ in only one dot and can easily be confused in Arabic paleography. Moreover, the phoneme /θ/ was pronounced /t/ in Middle Arabic (personal communication, Robin Seignobos). This seems, however, impossible to sustain in the case of funerary epigraphy or Old Nubian names and titles. The existence of Arabic Vorlagen for Old Nubian texts, though, remains to be proven.
11 An interesting detail is that Browne interpreted in OND, p. 238 the personal name ωθοικις- as a variant of the name Διονυσις-, although he had initially suggested in the publication of the original text, namely P. QI 110.A.ii.5, that this was a variant (misspelling) of the name θεολογος- In between, he reworked his analysis of the passage in Browne, "Ad Ps.-Chrysostomi In Raphaelem Archangelum sermonem", pp. 521–23. In p. 522, he characterized the form Θνοικις- as "an inadvertent conflation of Θεολογος- and Διονυσις-."
A plausible explanation for the fact that the Nubians introduced the letter Θ in words of Nubian origin, which would be pronounced with a [t] sound and could thus be graphically represented by the letter T was provided by Claude Rilly to Giovanni Ruffini in the context of the latter’s study on “Idiom and Social Practice in Medieval Nubia,” where he tackled the different orthographies for the same word in a single text, a case very similar to the double orthography for the word Mareotis in the Miracle of Saint Mina text we are discussing here. Rilly’s suggestion was that a scribe may have been “deliberately employing various alternative spellings of a single word for variety’s sake, to make a text more interesting”. I would like to conclude this section by attempting to nuance a bit further this desire for “variety” recognized in the scriptural codes of Nubian literates.

Another type of variation these literates were fond of was the use of multiple dating systems in a single document. This may be a sign of pure erudition or of a particular tradition promulgated by the Nubian (Makuritan) church in order to control time-reckoning, an essential administrative concern in any state. In either case, the persons controlling scriptural traditions in Makuria were the ecclesiastics. Their appearance in the lists of people guaranteeing the validity of a legal or fiscal document shows that there was a convergence, if not a virtual identity, between church and state hierarchies. Now, I have shown elsewhere that the Greek language in Christian Nubia had an aura of sacrality in itself that made it the most important linguistic vehicle for the propagation of religious ideas. The proximity of church and state in Makuria makes it very plausible that a religious aura was also to be expected in the nomenclature of the state apparatus. If this could be achieved by the use of the Greek language, and the letter Θ was among those recognized as representative of the Greek character of a word or a text, then it is not difficult to imagine why at least some of the Nubian scribes would deliberately employ the alternative spelling with Θ in titles and names whenever possible. After the formation of such a tradition, it would have become easier to shift between Θ and T also in common words (see for example, P. QI 3 30.1 παρακονα for παρτακονα, appearing in P. QI 3 34.1.3).

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the name Mareotis in the Miracle of Saint Mina was written both as ⲑⲁⲣⲟⲩⲛⲂⲧⲓ and as ⲡⲢⲣⲉⲑⲏ. For the sake of variety indeed, the scribe shifted between the two

12 Ruffini, “Idiom and Social Practice in Medieval Nubia”, p. 229 & n. 28.
13 Łajtar, Catalogue of the Greek Inscriptions, p. 8; Ochała, Chronological Systems of Christian Nubia, pp. 345 ff.
14 Ruffini, Medieval Nubia. A Social and Economic History, passim.
15 Tsakos, “The Use and Role of the Greek Language in Christian Nubia”; Id., “Religious Literacy in Greek from the Christian Monastery at Qasr el Wizz, Lower Nubia.”
possible orthographies. But in my opinion, the variant Ṣⲁⲗⲉⲝⲁⲛⲇⲣⲉⲓⲁ endowed the locality where the church of Saint Mina was to be found with an extra aura of sacrality because it was written with a letter Θ instead of the commoner T.

**Greek ἀλεξανδρεία vs. Coptic ᱡⲕⲟⲩⲗ/**<ⲥⲏ>ⲓⲁ

The links of Christian Nubia with Alexandria are certain. The most eloquent evidence comes from the lists of Nubian bishoprics subordinated to the Alexandrian Patriarchate; and again, one of the most characteristic witnesses of this subordination is a pair of documents discovered at Qasr Ibrim, the renowned scrolls accompanying bishop Timotheos in his tomb.

The two scrolls are testimonial letters in Bohairic and Arabic sent by the Patriarch Gabriel to the Priests, Deacons, Subdeacons, Readers, Psalmists and the People of Faras and Nubia to introduce their new Bishop Timotheos upon his enthronement in the see of Pachoras (Coptic name of Faras). In the Bohairic scroll the Coptic name for the city of Alexandria, ᱡⲕⲟⲩⲗ, appears thrice. The first time it is mentioned is in the opening address by Gabriel himself, the other two in the two first of the four witnesses’ autographs added in the end of the letter by or in the name of two bishops witnessing the enthronement. In all three cases, the language of the phrases in which the term ᱡⲕⲟⲩⲗ appears is Bohairic Coptic. Two bishops witnessing the testimonial letter of Gabriel also mention Alexandria, but their testimony is written in Greek so the term used is the Greek word ἀλεξανδρ<ε>ια. This distinction has nothing peculiar about it. The choice of the place name conforms to the linguistic context: ᱡⲕⲟⲩⲗ in the Coptic phrases, ἀλεξανδρ<ε>ια in the Greek ones. However, this distinction does illustrate that the two options were well-known to the Nubians.

Indeed, another Nubian text preserving a toponym for the city of Alexandria confirms this picture. The Coptic letter from King Moses George to Apa Mark, Patriarch of Alexandria is followed by no less than three subscripts, one in Coptic and two in Greek. In the second Greek subscript the name of the city is reported as written in Greek, although this is impossible to control, since the document remains unpublished and there is no photographic reproduction of this postscript available.

---

16 Seignobos, “Les évêchés nubiens: nouveaux témoignages.”
17 Plumley, *The Scrolls of Bishop Timotheos*.
18 For references, see DBMNT 610.
Finally, the version ḫaxote has been identified in an unpublished manuscript from Qasr el Wizz written in Sahidic Coptic and preserving a passage from an unknown work about or by Shenoute.\(^{19}\)

There is, however, evidence for the use of the Greek name in a text written in Old Nubian. The attestation comes again from the Miracle of Saint Mina and offers insight into the fact that the Nubians referred to Alexandria by using the Greek name ἀλεξανδρεία. Moreover, the exact phrase of this attestation reads: εἶτοι οὐκέλλο ἀνίποι οὐγέλλα ἄογάρι ἀλεξανδρεία ωκτόγιελα: which has been translated as “There was a woman living in a village in the district of Alexandria.”\(^{20}\) The importance of this observation is that in the only text preserving the name Alexandria in the local language, we witness the Nubians calling the greatest city of Egypt, Africa, and the Christian world after Rome and Constantinople by its Greek rather than its Coptic name. It is, however, possible that this choice reflects the reference to the district and not the city itself.

In any case, I argue that this choice is significant, and that there are two alternative explanations for it: either that simply the Old Nubian text is a translation of a Greek text where the Greek name was kept; or that Alexandria in the mental geography of the Nubians was a locality that should be referred to in Greek under specific conditions. Given the analysis in the previous section about the sacrality of the Greek language in the context of Makuritan church ideology and state propaganda, I suggest that these conditions appeared when Nubians referred to Alexandria as the Patriarchal see to which the Nubian church belonged, rather than a human settlement. I do not intend, however, to indulge into any erratic speculation about a doctrinal significance in the use of the Greek in preference to the Coptic term. The point is not whether the Nubian church identified with the Chalcedonian rather than with the contra-Chalcedonian Patriarchate; the point is that in the minds of the Nubians rendering the place name for Alexandria in Greek placed the locality on a sacred pedestal of religious power.

It would have been interesting to check whether similar choices prevailed with the reference to other important cities, but the lack of difference between the Greek and the Coptic term for Antioch, Jerusalem, Rome, and Constantinople prevents further elaboration. Nevertheless, there are other important observations to make regarding the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, the city of Constantine on the Bosporus.

\(^{19}\) TSAKOS, forthcoming.

\(^{20}\) EL-GUZZULI & VAN GERVEN OEI, The Miracle of Saint Mina, pp. 20–21.
In the corpus of Nubian texts that I have been able to check for this article, there are two instances of a reference to Constantinople:

1. In the opening lines of the Serra codex, the pseudo-Chrysostomian Sermon on the Cross, the longest text in Old Nubian known to date, the identification of the author names John Chrysostom as Archbishop of Kolōstānīnōn. The final n marks the genitive of the name of the capital of the Byzantine Empire, which in the transcription by Browne is given as Kol(i)stanpol(i)n. However, there is a ligature between λ and η, and I suggest that the right-hand vertical bar of n was assimilated with the vertical back of the c following. As for the elision of the i (or η) between λ and n, this is attested in another instance of the word πολις from a manuscript from Qasr el Wizz where it is written as πολ. 22

2. The second reference derives also from a pseudo-Chrysostomian text, this time In Raphaelem Archangelum found at Qasr Ibrim and edited by Browne as P. QI 1 10.A.ii. The reference is found in line 25 and is very interesting because it combines a Greek genitive of the name for Constantine, namely konstantinov and the Nubian word ḏīm, which means “town”.

The question that logically arises is whether for the Nubians of the Middle Ages πολις and ḏīm described the same geographical and/or administrative entity.

The study of the graffiti from the site of Banganarti by Adam Łajtar seems to indicate that by the 14th century, when the bulk of the inscriptive material from that site can be dated, any distinction in the meaning of the two terms had lost its significance, since Dongola and Sai are two localities called both ḏīm and πολις/πολῆ. Therefore, the reason for translating the second component of the word for Constantinople (from πολις to ḏīm) should be sought elsewhere.

If we turn to the etymology of the word ḏīm, it is seen to be related to the term diffī meaning in Nobiin a fortress, a town, a locality, a village and referring today in colloquial Arabic to a building made of mud bricks (cf. deffufa). While it is certain that most of the structures in a Nubian settlement have always been made of mud bricks, the definition of the settlement itself as a ḏīm should point to:

21 Browne, Chrysostomus Nubianus.
22 Tsakos, forthcoming.
23 Plumley & Browne, Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim I.
24 For a representative sample of attestations from Banganarti, see Łajtar, “Christian Sai in Written Records,” pp. 91-104 (esp. pp. 94–96).
25 Khalil, Wörterbuch der nubischen Sprache, p. 39.
1. The existence in the settlement of a large building that was termed a *diffi* in the manner of today’s practice of calling a mud-brick tower attached to structures of some importance for the human landscape of the Middle Nile a Δphinx.

2. Fortification of a place raises it to the status of a Δphinx.

3. The existence of a city citadel that could be the *diffi* not only architecturally and as a special part of the urban layout, but also as the focal point of the functions of the given urban network. Interestingly, both Dongola and Sai are characterized by a fortified citadel with a city extending far beyond the limits of this Δphinx.

In any case, the characterization of a settlement as a Δphinx should rank it in an important position in the administrative hierarchy of the Christian states of medieval Nubia. Although it is impossible to pinpoint the details of this hierarchy,26 it is important to underline two things:

1. Alexandria is not called a Δphinx, although, as we saw, according to the Miracle of Saint Mina, *diffi* in the meaning of villages are part of the district of Alexandria. Obviously, Alexandria is understood as an ecclesiastical entity and not a secular, political, administrative one. In such a framework, any ecclesiastical district, like that of Alexandria, may contain several *diffis* or “towns”. But a single settlement is either a Δphinx or not.

2. As it appears in the Banganarti corpus the word Δphinx, when not accompanied by the name of the settlement, might best refer to the capital of the Makuritan kingdom27; for the Nubian world Dongola is the Δphinx *par excellence* just as Constantinople was the πόλις par excellence for the world of the Eastern Roman Empire, and subsequently for the entire Christian oecumene of the Middle Ages.

By translating the second component of the place name Constantinople from πόλις to Δphinx, the Nubians appropriated the capital of the Roman Empire and placed themselves in the same framework of mental geography as the rest of the Christians under the spiritual and cultural influence of Constantinople.

---

26 But see Santos, “A Note on the Reconstruction of the Greek Text of the Nubian Miracle of Saint Menas and the Territorial Organization of Nobadia.”

27 In the same volume, we learn from the contribution by Łajtar and Ochała that similarly is treated Qasr Ibrim in the material deriving from that site (p. 249, n. 7).
Bibliography

BROWNE, Gerald M. *Chrysostomus Nubianus: An Old Nubian Version of Ps. Chrysostom, In venerabilem crucem sermo*. Rome & Barcelona: Papyrologica Castroctaviana, 1984.

———. “Ad Ps.-Chrysostomi In Raphaelem Archangelum sermonem.” *Orientalia* 59 (1990): pp. 521–53.

———. *Old Nubian Dictionary*. Leuven: Peeters, 1996.

———. “The Epitaph of Bishop Martyrophoros.” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 111 (1996): pp. 187–88.

DEPTUŁA, Agata. “Inscriptions from Saint Menas’ Church in Selib.” In *Nubian Voices II: New Texts and Studies on Christian Nubian Culture*, edited by Adam Łajtar, Grzegorz Ochała, and Jacques van der Vliet. Warsaw: Raphael Taubenschlag Foundation, 2015: pp. 119–35, figs. 1–7.

VAN GERVEN OEI, Vincent W.J., Vincent Pierre-Michel LAISNEY, Giovanni RUFFINI, Alexandros TSAKOS, Kerstin WEBER-THUM, and Petra WESCHENFELDER. *The Old Nubian Texts from Attiri*. Earth: punctum books, 2016.

EL-GUUZULI, El-Shafie, and Vincent W.J. VAN GERVEN OEI. *The Miracle of Saint Mina*. The Hague & Tirana: Uitgeverij, 2012.

KHALIL, Mokhtar M. *Wörterbuch der nubischen Sprache (Fadidja/Ma-has-Dialekt)*. Warsaw: Schriftsatz hergestellt bei Raven, 1996.

ŁAJTAR, Adam. *Catalogue of the Greek Inscriptions in the Sudan National Museum at Khartoum (I. Khartoum Greek)*. Leuven, Paris & Dudley: Peeters, 2003.

———. “Christian Saï in Written Records.” *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 36 (2006): pp. 91–104.

LAYTON, Bentley. *A Coptic Grammar: With Chrestomathy and Glossary*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harassowitz Verlag, 2000.

OATES, John F. “A Christian Inscription in Greek from Armenna in Nubia (Pennsylvania–Yale Excavations).” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 49 (1963): pp. 161–71.

OCHAŁA, Grzegorz. *Chronological Systems of Christian Nubia*. Warsaw: Raphael Taubenschlag Foundation, 2011.

———. “Multilingualism in Christian Nubia: Qualitative and quantitative Approaches.” *Dotawo: A Journal of Nubian Studies* 1 (2014): pp. 1–50.

PLUMLEY, John Martin. *The Scrolls of Bishop Timotheos: Two Documents from Medieval Nubia*. London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1975.

——— and Gerald M. BROWNE. *Old Nubian Texts from Qasr Ibrim I*. London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1988.
Ruffini, Giovanni. *Medieval Nubia: A Social and Economic History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
———. “Idiom and Social Practice in Medieval Nubia.” *Dotawo: A Journal of Nubian Studies* 1 (2014): pp. 221–30.
Santos, Diego M. “A Note on the Reconstruction of the Greek Text of the Nubian Miracle of Saint Menas and the Territorial Organization of Nobadia.” *Beiträge zur Sudanforschung* 10 (2009): pp. 113–16.
Seignobos, Robin. “Les évêchés nubiens: nouveaux témoignages. La source de la liste de Vansleb et deux autres textes méconnus”, In *Nubian Voices II: New Texts and Studies on Christian Nubian Culture*, edited by Adam Łajtar, Grzegorz Ochała, and Jacques van der Vliet. Warsaw: Raphael Taubenschlag Foundation, 2015: pp. 151–229, figs. 1–3.
Stricker, B.H. “A Study in Medieval Nubian.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 10/2 (1940): pp. 439–54.
Tsakos, Alexandros. “The Use and Role of the Greek Language in Christian Nubia.” In *Archaeology & Arts: Sudan Archaeology from a Greco-Roman Perspective*, edited by Alexandros Tsakos and Henriette Hafsaas-Tsakos, 2016. http://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2016/03/28/sudan-archaeology-greco-roman-perspective-part-5/.
———. “Religious Literacy in Greek from the Christian Monastery at Qasr el Wizz, Lower Nubia.” In *Graeco-Africana et Afro-Byzantina, Proceedings of the International Conference on Graeco-African and Afro-Byzantine Studies at the University of Johannesburg (27 October-1 November 2014)*, edited by Thelka Sansaridou-Hendrickx and Benjamin Hendrick [Supplement to *Ekklesiastikos Pharos*]. Johannesburg, 2016: pp. 220–30.
———. “Textual Finds from Qasr el Wizz.” In *Excavations at Qasr el-Wizz, George T. Scanlon, Director*, edited by Artur Obłuski with contributions by Katarzyna Danys-Lasek, Artur Obłuski, Alexandros Tsakos, and Dobrochna Zielińska. Chicago: The Oriental Institute, forthcoming.