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# Multilingualism in Christian Nubia: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

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Grzegorz Ochała\*

## 1. Introduction

From the beginning of interest in studies on Christian Nubia, the question of multilingualism has been one of the most frequently debated issues. Many scholars who dealt with written sources originating from the Middle Nile Valley and dated between the sixth and fifteenth century expressed their opinion on the use of as many as four different languages (Greek, Coptic,<sup>1</sup> Old Nubian, and Arabic) or at least made some remarks on the others' opinions.

The first to touch upon the question of the simultaneous existence in Nubian funerary epigraphy of Greek and Coptic was Hermann Junker in his classic article on Nubian grave stelae published in 1925.<sup>2</sup> But it was only in the 1960s, during the Great Nubian Campaign, that sources of various types in all four languages started to come to light in substantial numbers, on the one hand allowing for a better understanding of the phenomenon and on the other posing even more perplexing questions. Two archaeological sites were particularly important in this respect: Qasr Ibrim and Faras, producing

\* The present article has come to life as result of my postdoctoral fellowship in 2013/14 in the Unité de l'Égyptologie et de Copte of the University of Geneva in the framework of the Scientific Exchange Programme NMS-CH granted by the Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities (Sciex-Project 11.239: 'LangNub: Language and literacy in Christian Nubia'). I would like to express here my utmost gratitude to Philippe Collombert and Nathalie Bosson for hosting me in Geneva and creating perfect conditions for scholarly work. I would also like to thank Nathalie Bosson and Adam Łajtar for reading and commenting upon a draft of this article.

1 Here and throughout the present article the term 'Coptic' designates the Sahidic dialect of this language, as the only one attested in Nubia.

2 JUNKER, "Die christlichen Grabsteine Nubiens," pp. 144–6.

hundreds of texts and thus allowing the scholars dealing with them to form their views on the multilingualism of the Nubian society.<sup>3</sup>

However, despite this apparent interest in the subject, only one study (not very substantial, to be frank) has appeared so far devoted solely to the question of using different languages in Christian Nubia: this is an article by Peter Shinnie published in 1974.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, although the number of sources available at that time had already been significant, nowadays scholars have at their disposal a far larger assemblage of texts, acquired thanks to both the ongoing and new excavations and the publication of previous finds. This alone seems to be a sufficient reason to reapproach the question of Nubian multilingualism.

Another reason, perhaps even more important, is that no one has ever made an effort to count all the attestations of particular languages in the Middle Nile Valley. The only calculations that were made pertained to the two above-mentioned sites, Qasr Ibrim and Faras. General theses concerning the whole territory were based on rough estimates or general impressions. This is completely understandable, as there exist no corpuses of Christian Nubian sources, and even comprehensive publications of particular museum collections, categories of texts, or textual finds from one archaeological site are something of a rarity; a great many texts are available only in the form of photographs (very often of poor quality), tracings, or plain descriptions included in archaeological reports, accounts of travels, various articles, etc.

Now, thanks to the creation of the Database of Medieval Nubian Texts, gathering instances of Nubian literacy in one place, this task is possible.<sup>5</sup> However, the reader must always remember that the DBMNT is far from being complete and thus the numbers presented below are only tentative. The database in its present stage contains 2926 records, which are almost exclusively items available in publications, be they editions of texts, descriptions, mentions, photographs, or drawings. A great many texts, perhaps as many as another

3 For Faras, see JAKOBIELSKI, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras on the Basis of Coptic Inscriptions*, pp. 14–15; id., “Inscriptions,” pp. 281–2; and KUBIŃSKA, *Inscriptions grecques chrétiennes*, p. 74. For Qasr Ibrim, see PLUMLEY, “The Christian period at Qasr Ibrim,” pp. 103–4; ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Late Mediaeval Period*, pp. 219–22; and id., *Qasr Ibrim: The Earlier Medieval Period*, pp. 243–5.

4 SHINNIE, “Multilingualism in medieval Nubia.”

5 The idea of creating the Database of Medieval Nubian Texts (DBMNT, available online at <[www.dbmnt.uw.edu.pl](http://www.dbmnt.uw.edu.pl)>) first occurred six years ago, when I started to prepare my doctoral dissertation. At first, the database included only the sources that contained dating elements, but it had been designed with the intention to grow to finally become the ultimate source of reference for all texts ever written in Christian Nubia (see OCHAŁA, *Chronological Systems of Christian Nubia*, pp. 26–7, quoted further as *cscn*). Thanks to my postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Geneva, I have been able to increase the number of records from the original 730, used as source material in *cscn*, to nearly 3000. Hopefully, by the time this article is published, a major online update of the DBMNT will have already been launched.

er 3000, remain unpublished, like, for example, Coptic manuscripts and documents from Qasr Ibrim, Old Nubian wall inscriptions from Faras, documents from Gebel Adda,<sup>6</sup> etc. Some of these groups, although important in themselves, should not have any significant impact on the figures presented below and their interpretation. Others, however, like over a thousand wall inscriptions from Baganarti and Dongola,<sup>7</sup> 150 rock inscriptions from Gebel Maktub, on the outskirts of Qasr Ibrim,<sup>8</sup> or over 100 manuscripts found on the Island of Sur,<sup>9</sup> will certainly change our view on the typological and topographical aspects of the Nubian literacy. Nevertheless, it seems worthwhile to present some general statistics drawn from the current state of the DBMNT and to try to test the existing common opinions about Nubian multilingualism against raw numbers and charts.

This is in fact the main purpose of this article. The other purpose, no less significant, is to show the richness, diversity, and complexity of Nubian literary culture, not always apprehended and rightly evaluated, especially outside Nubian studies.

## 2. Methodological problems

However, the task at hand is not free from difficulties. I have already mentioned the question of the incompleteness of the database, which may have some impact on the results. Other problems pertain to individual sources, their identification, classification, and, essential for the present article, the recognition of their language.

First and foremost, labelling a text as ‘Nubian’ is not always as obvious as it may seem.<sup>10</sup> There is, of course, no doubt in the case of sources written in Old Nubian, be they found in Nubia or in Egypt,<sup>11</sup> but some texts, or even some categories of sources, are not unproblematic, even if they were discovered on Nubian soil. The most obvious cases are, for example, two famous texts found at Qasr Ibrim, both originating from Egypt: the letters testimonial of Bishop Timotheos in Bohairic Coptic and Arabic<sup>12</sup> and the Arabic letter from a governor of Egypt to a king of Makuria.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, serious doubts arise as to the provenance of Coptic literary manuscripts

6 The Coptic material from Qasr Ibrim is studied by Joost Hagen, Old Nubian inscriptions from Faras by Adam Łajtar and myself, and the Gebel Adda texts by Adam Łajtar (ŁAJTAR, this volume).

7 Both in preparation for publication by Adam Łajtar.

8 In preparation for publication by Adam Łajtar and Jacques van der Vliet.

9 In preparation for publication by Alexandros Tsakos.

10 See CSCN, pp. 23–4.

11 CSCN, pp. 46 and 50 (note that the two Arabic documents from Edfu mentioning King Siti were wrongly taken as being in Old Nubian [see MONNERET DE VILLARD, *La Nubia Medioevale I*, p. 23]).

12 PLUMLEY, *The Scrolls of Bishop Timotheos*.

13 Id., “An Eighth-Century Arabic Letter to the King of Nubia.”

found at the same site. The palaeography of many of them seems to point to Egyptian scriptoria, but we can also imagine that the Nubians had their own skillful scribes copying manuscripts on the spot.<sup>14</sup> The attribution of wall inscriptions – a more secure issue, it would seem – also poses some difficulties. For example, a group of legends to the earliest paintings in the Faras cathedral (beginning of the eighth century) may have been the work of a non-Nubian artist<sup>15</sup>; also some visitor's inscriptions may have been executed by foreigners during their pilgrimage to a holy place, as is proven by a Provençal graffito discovered in Banganarti.<sup>16</sup> As most of these doubts are unsolvable, I have decided to exclude from the DBMNT only the most evident cases.

Secondly, the identification of many texts poses difficulties, in most cases caused by technical issues: the state of preservation, the quality of photographs, or the inability of persons preparing the drawings to render exactly the shape of letters.<sup>17</sup> Another factor is our still insufficient knowledge of the Old Nubian language, a fact that makes many texts, especially wall inscriptions, at least obscure if not completely incomprehensible. This is reflected in a high percentage of sources labelled as 'unidentified,' circa 11% of the whole collection.

Thirdly, the typological assignment of certain texts is quite troublesome. While creating the DBMNT, I tried to come up with as plain a typology as possible, including only a limited number of general categories, those that are attested at least several times. In some cases, I have introduced subcategories facilitating the identification of sources. The result is the following list of text types:

- ▶ alphabet
- ▶ catalogue<sup>18</sup>
- ▶ colophon
- ▶ commemorative inscription
- ▶ date
- ▶ dedicatory inscription
- ▶ document (economic, legal, letter, list, official)
- ▶ epitaph
- ▶ foundation inscription

14 There are also examples of Coptic manuscripts written in what appears to be a 'Nubian' hand (personal communication of Joost Hagen).

15 HÄGG, "Some Remarks on the Use of Greek in Nubia," p. 103. Cf. JAKOBIELSKI, "Inscriptions," pp. 284–5.

16 ŁAJTAR & PŁÓCIENNIK, "A Man from Provence on the Middle Nile." Cf. HÄGG, "Some Remarks," p. 104.

17 This pertains mainly to old publications, like GAUTHIER, *Les temples immergés de la Nubie*; SAYCE, "Inscriptions et papyrus grecques d'Égypte"; or even, to some extent, LEPSIUS, *Denkmäler aus Ägypten und Äthiopien*.

18 The term is used here in its epigraphic meaning, denoting lists of different types inscribed on durable writing materials.

- ▶ invocation
- ▶ legend
- ▶ literary (apocryphal, biblical, hagiography, homiletic, patristic)
- ▶ liturgical (hymn, lectionary, prayer)
- ▶ name
- ▶ name of divine entity (i.e. God the Father, Jesus Christ, archangels)/saint
- ▶ official inscription
- ▶ other<sup>19</sup>
- ▶ owner's inscription
- ▶ private prayer
- ▶ subliterate (horoscope, magical)
- ▶ school exercise
- ▶ tag
- ▶ unidentified
- ▶ visitor's inscription.

However, the choice of a category is not always easy and sometimes has to be made arbitrarily. Some sources have an ambiguous character and could be ascribed to two different types. For example, alphabets may be classified, depending on their context, as either 'subliterate: magical' or 'school exercise'; monograms and cryptograms of Archangel Michael, so frequent in the Middle Nile Valley, classified by me as 'name of divine entity/saint,' may as well be interpreted as 'subliterate: magical.' It is especially difficult to classify inscriptions consisting only of personal names, occurring frequently on walls and rocks as well as on pottery: for example, inscription from Musawwarat el-Sofra reading 'Merkourios' (DBMNT 1468) could be classified as 'visitor's inscription' left by a certain Merkourios,<sup>20</sup> or 'name of divine entity/saint,' referring to St Merkourios, known to have been venerated in Nubia.<sup>21</sup> Of course, the problem does not pertain to apparently Nubian names, like Phōsipa (DBMNT 1701) or Kosmakouda (DBMNT 2154 & 2155),<sup>22</sup> but as far as universal Christian names derived from biblical figures or various saints are concerned, we are practically helpless.

A special case of inscriptions consisting only of names are monograms and cryptograms, of which the Nubians appear to have been particularly fond: while the latter were used exclusively for holy names, the former seem to have been used for both personal (e.g.

19 This category includes texts hard to assign to the remaining types and those attested only once or twice.

20 The name is not very frequent but it is attested as personal name in nine texts (DBMNT 32, 67, 97, 197, 531, 628, 744, 1037, 2849); once as Merkouriosphoros (DBMNT 557).

21 See, e.g., his paintings in Abd el-Qadir (MONNERET DE VILLARD, *La Nubia medioevale I*, p. 216, no. 20) and Tamit (ibid., p. 157, no. 28), with legends (DBMNT 1715 & 2327, respectively).

22 Although a shadow of a doubt always remains as to whether we are not dealing with local Nubian saints in such cases.

the monograms of Bishop Georgios from Dongola [DBMNT 1498] and Bishop Pilatos from Faras [DBMNT 1822]) and holy ones. However, besides the easiest and the most obvious ones, Nubian monograms remain undeciphered. Although they could be interpreted otherwise, they are conventionally classified as ‘names’ in the DBMNT.

6

Another type of source meriting attention is visitor’s inscriptions. It is sometimes very hard to distinguish between them and other types of texts inscribed on walls and rocks. One such situation has already been mentioned and concerns inscriptions consisting only of a personal name: by default, even if the name is ambiguous (that is, it could belong to both a private person and a saint), it is treated as visitor’s inscription in the DBMNT, unless archaeological context or presence of other texts indicate different interpretation. Two examples can be cited: a graffito from the church at Sabagura reading ‘† Senouth’ (DBMNT 1049) most probably refers to St Shenoute, who is the addressee of three, and possibly even four, private prayers incised on the walls of the same building (DBMNT 993, 1048, 1052, 1057); a dipinto reading ‘Petros’ (DBMNT 2603) from room 34 of site R-8 at Debeira West in all likelihood denotes Peter the Apostle, because it is executed in white paint<sup>23</sup> and is accompanied by other inscriptions of religious character, a monogram of the Archangel Michael (DBMNT 2604) and a decorative cross.<sup>24</sup> Although in some cases monograms containing names may be interpreted as visitor’s inscriptions, unless their meaning is completely clear, I refrain from classifying them in this way.<sup>25</sup>

Somewhat less troublesome, but far from being an easy choice in many cases, is distinguishing between visitor’s inscriptions and private prayers. How to classify a dipinto from Wadi el-Sebua (DBMNT 1397) consisting of a prayer to St Peter in Old Nubian followed by a subscription in a mixture of Greek and Old Nubian identifying the author of the inscription as one Petro, a priest, who prays for himself? Because of the extent of the prayer and the fact that the inscription was painted, which positions it higher than typically scratched or incised visitor’s inscriptions, the text has been identified as a

23 There are other instances of white-painted inscriptions from Nubia. All of them come from apparently secular buildings (or at least buildings not explicitly identified as churches) and all of them are of religious character (Trinitarian formulae, names of Archangels and saints). The list includes 10 inscriptions from Kulubnarti (DBMNT 1183–92), 15 from Meinarti (DBMNT 1226–9, 1231–4, 1236–8, 1256, 1260–2), 1 from Soba (DBMNT 1892), 1 from the island of Kulme (DBMNT 2444), and 3 from Debeira West (DBMNT 2603–4, 2609). They most probably fulfilled apotropaic functions.

24 The building to which this room belonged was used in later period for domestic purposes, but its primary function is unknown. However, judging by the quality of architecture, it could have been a public or religious edifice (SHINNIE & SHINNIE, *Debeira West*, pp. 6–7). It is impossible to state whether the decoration belonged to the original decoration of the room or was added later.

25 All the names and monograms followed by a description of function (deacon, priest, cleric, etc.) are naturally treated as visitor’s inscriptions.

private prayer.<sup>26</sup> The same arguments could be also valid for a dipinto from the Faras cathedral with a prayer for King Ioel (DBMNT 734) and perhaps for another Faras dipinto executed by priest Chael beginning with the invocation of the Virgin Mary (DBMNT 1863). In the remaining cases, however, the basic distinction between the two categories is the formula employed by the scribe: the texts containing the phrase 'I so-and-so (have written this)' are classified as visitor's inscriptions and those with the formula 'hear, help, guard, etc. so-and-so' as private prayers.

Finally, the question of language of the texts, which is one of the most difficult issues in dealing with Christian Nubian sources. There is obviously no problem with monolingual texts. Similarly the bilingual ones in which parts written in different languages are clearly distinguishable hardly cause any doubts. Among the most evident examples one can name the Greek/Old Nubian epitaph of King Georgios from Wadi el-Natrun (DBMNT 558), fragments of Greek/Old Nubian psalters from Qasr Ibrim (DBMNT 1002, 1003, 1009, 1010), the Greek/Coptic epitaph of one Elisabeth from Sakinya (DBMNT 178), or the fragment of a Greek/Coptic liturgical typikon from Qasr Ibrim (DBMNT 2769).

Similarly, all the texts containing meaningful phrases in other languages, even if it is one short sentence, are classified as bilingual<sup>27</sup>: Greek/Coptic, Greek/Old Nubian, and Coptic/Old Nubian.<sup>28</sup> Hence, Greek epitaphs with dating formulae and/or formulae stating the age of the deceased in Old Nubian (e.g. DBMNT 5, 6, 533) are considered Greek/Old Nubian; a fragmentary Greek epitaph from Qasr Ibrim with the insertion of 'he died' in Coptic (DBMNT 673) is Greek/Coptic; the Coptic document from Kulb starting with the Trinitarian formula in Greek (DBMNT 2395) is Greek/Coptic; Old Nubian documents from Qasr Ibrim beginning in the same manner or including the address in Greek (Trinitarian formula: DBMNT 2827; address: e.g. DBMNT 592, 1017, 1019) are Greek/Old Nubian, and so on.

A real difficulty is to indicate the language of a text into which words from another language are inserted in the middle of phrases, without a clear division into meaningful parts. Such instances of 'code-switching' are abundantly represented in the corpus of Christian Nubian sources.

It has been pointed out many times that the Greek epitaph of (I)stephanou also called Eñitta from Dongola (DBMNT 74), dated to

<sup>26</sup> I owe this suggestion to Adam Łajtar.

<sup>27</sup> So far, I have been able to identify only two trilingual texts from the Middle Nile Valley, a dedicatory inscription with a prayer for one Mariankouda (DBMNT 716), and the list of bishops of Faras (DBMNT 97), both from the Faras cathedral.

<sup>28</sup> There are only two instances of the last category, both most probably originating from Egypt (DBMNT 1148 and 1395).



797, is the first appearance of Old Nubian, with its use of the words  $\epsilon\iota\varphi\tau\tau\alpha$ ,  $\mu\alpha\rho\alpha\varphi\alpha$ ,  $\chi\omicron\iota\alpha\kappa\bar{\omega}\omega\lambda$ ,  $\delta\omicron\kappa\eta\alpha\bar{\omega}\omega\lambda$ , and  $\rho\omicron\gamma\omega$ . While this is demonstrably the first attestation of the Old Nubian alphabet, with its characteristic enchoric letters, the first Old Nubian word ever to occur in writing is  $\varsigma\alpha\mu\alpha\tau\alpha$ , attested in the Coptic foundation inscription from Dendur (DBMNT 517), dated to the second half of the sixth century.<sup>29</sup> But does this fact make these texts bilingual? The answer must be negative, because the words are inserted in otherwise Greek and Coptic phrases, which do not bear even the slightest traces of Old Nubian syntax. Moreover, those words belong to two very specific categories of nouns: personal names (Eiñitta and Maraña) and names of offices/titles (*choiakiššil*, *joknaiššil*, *samata*),<sup>30</sup> and it was clearly impossible for the redactors to use Greek/Coptic substitutes for them.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, all the texts in which insertions consist of words designating personal names, offices, titles, toponyms, or the like are classified as monolingual in the DBMNT.

As may be expected, in this respect the visitor's inscriptions are the hardest to tackle. A typical visitor's inscription is formed according to the model<sup>32</sup>:

29 Since the word does not contain any of the Nubian enchoric letters, it cannot be treated as the evidence of the existence of the written form of Old Nubian already in the sixth century. The situation may be compared, however, to the development of the Coptic writing system which in its pre-Old Coptic state (3rd c. BCE–2nd c. CE) used only Greek letters to transcribe Egyptian words (QUAEGBEUR, "Pre-Old Coptic"). One can easily imagine that the redactor of the Dendur inscription, who was most probably an Egyptian, decided to transcribe the native word unknown to him in the familiar alphabet. Cf. MILLET, "Writing and literacy in ancient Sudan," p. 54, who supposes that the invention of the Old Nubian script might have taken place around CE 600, when the inhabitants of the Middle Nile Valley could still read and understand Meroitic. The evidence of the inscription from Dendur, so far unnoticed, may thus be seen as a 'missing link' in his theory of development.

30 The only exception is the word  $\rho\omicron\gamma\omega$ . Its exact meaning is unclear, but it appears that it could designate both 'week' and a particular day of the week (see CSCN, pp. 332, 335). Interestingly, the Greek word for 'week,'  $\acute{\epsilon}\beta\delta\omicron\mu\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ , is nowhere attested in the corpus of Christian Nubian sources in a dating context (it may exist, however, in literary texts, but at present I am unable to verify this). Could this clear preference to stick to the native form (even if it was derived from the Sahidic Coptic  $\rho\omicron\gamma\omega\omega$ ; see *ibid.*, loc. cit.) suggest a different understanding by the Nubians of the conception of the week? The evidence is too scarce to allow any speculations, however.

31 According to our knowledge, the titles *choiak-* and *joknaiššil* never had Greek/Coptic counterparts (cf. RUFFINI, *Medieval Nubia*, pp. 46–56). As for the title *samata*, much later sources (12th–13th c.) show that this title was equivalent to the Greek term  $\delta\omicron\mu\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\iota\kappa\omicron\varsigma$ . Judging from the fact that the redactor of the Dendur inscription was able to successfully employ other Greek and Coptic terms to describe other persons' functions, it would seem that either he was unaware of the existence of such an imperial office matching the native function (this, however, would require the assumption that he was a Nubian) or the *samata*'s duties were so distinct that none of the imperial titles was appropriate at that time and only later were they changed to fit those of the *domestikos*.

Another apparently early attestation of Old Nubian is an inscription on a 6th–7th century plate from Dongola (DBMNT 1316), containing only one word, 'God,' Old Nubian  $\tau\chi\lambda\text{[ ]}$ . The inscription, however, may be later than the vessel itself.

32 The following analysis is the extension of the discussion in LAJTAR, "Wall Inscriptions in the Banganarti Churches," pp. 140–1.

‘(I) + name (+ son of + name) (+ office/title) (+ have written)’

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

From among these elements personal names and names of offices/titles (2, 4, and 5) can be excluded right away as indicators of language.<sup>33</sup> As for the remaining elements, they can take different forms in different languages:

9

- ▶ (1) – the 1st person singular pronoun can be expressed by the Greek forms ἐγώ, μέ, ἐμέ, μου, ἐμοῦ, μοί, ἐμοί, κάμέ, κάμοῦ, the Coptic ⲁⲛⲟⲕ (once as ⲁⲛⲅⲓ [DBMNT 2055]),<sup>34</sup> and the Old Nubian ⲁⲓ, ⲁⲓⲓ, and ⲁⲓⲟⲩ<sup>35</sup>;
- ▶ (3) – the patronymic can be introduced by the Greek οὐός, written Ⲯⲟ, as if it were a *nomen sacrum*,<sup>36</sup> or two Old Nubian genitival phrases -ⲛ ⲧⲟⲧ and -ⲛ ⲉⲗⲗ; once the Coptic phrase ⲡⲱⲉⲛ is attested (DBMNT 2265);
- ▶ (6) – the verb is normally expressed either by forms derived from the Greek γράφω<sup>37</sup> (occasionally attested as the 1st person singular of aorist active ἔγραψα [e.g. DBMNT 451, 554], but more often as forms apparently meaningless from the point of view of Greek conjugation, like γράφα [e.g. DBMNT 563], γράφου [e.g. DBMNT 1580], or, most frequently, γράψον<sup>38</sup> [e.g. DBMNT 1437, 1703, 1848, 2166, 2173]) or by the Old Nubian ⲡⲁⲓⲉⲥⲉⲗⲟ, from the verb ⲡⲁⲣ-, ‘to write, inscribe’; in two instances (DBMNT 92 and 980) the Coptic verb ⲉⲗⲁⲓ, ‘to write,’ is attested.

As can be seen from the above, Coptic is relatively rarely attested in visitor’s inscription. It needs to be added, however, that one can sporadically identify some non-lexical Coptic elements within the structure of inscriptions.<sup>39</sup> For example, in a graffito from the so-called Anchorite’s Grotto in Faras (DBMNT 1673) one Petrou identifies himself as ⲁⲓⲁⲛⲅⲓ ⲛⲟⲩ ⲛⲡⲁⲗⲟⲩⲡ[---], ‘deacon of (the church of) Jesus of Pachoras,’ the two ‘of’s being represented by the Coptic genitival phrase.<sup>40</sup>

33 Toponyms, which not infrequently occur in visitor’s inscription, are obviously excluded too.

34 Adam Łajtar informs me that the visitor’s inscriptions from Gebel Maktub frequently start with the Coptic pronoun.

35 See also ŁAJTAR, “The Greek of Late Christian Inscriptions from Nubia,” p. 759.

36 The abbreviation through contraction is normally limited to *nomina sacra* in Nubian sources. In secular words, on the other hand, the abbreviation through suspension is the most common method. It would thus seem that the abbreviation Ⲯⲟ originally referred to Jesus as the Son of God, and only later did it start to be employed in filiation.

37 Other verbs are attested occasionally, for example ⲧⲁⲧⲧⲱ and ⲭⲁⲣⲁⲥⲟⲩⲱ

38 ŁAJTAR, “The Greek of Late Christian Inscriptions from Nubia,” p. 760, suggests that this form can be explained on the grounds of normative Greek grammar as created by adding the endings of Greek historic tenses to the stem of the sigmatic aorist with the simultaneous disappearance of the augment.

39 See JAKOBIELSKI, *A History*, p. 15.

40 Note that the graffito starts with the Greek pronoun ἐγώ.

There are, of course, many inscriptions that go beyond this simple model. They may contain a variety of invocations, acclamations, and prayers in all three languages, in which case the identification of language is easier.<sup>41</sup>

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As a matter of fact, assigning visitor's inscriptions, especially the short ones, to any language group is highly doubtful, because the fact that someone uses a Greek or Coptic pronoun does not mean that he knows anything more than that about these languages.<sup>42</sup> The abundance of 'un-Greek' forms of the verb γράφω is especially eloquent in this respect. This phenomenon most plausibly resulted from the Nubian epigraphic habit, where the choice of particular forms was deeply rooted in the tradition and it certainly does not reflect command of a given language.

One may therefore argue that in such instances the language should be labelled as 'unidentified.' However, for the sake of the statistics, I have decided to indicate all instances of the use of Nubian languages, even in highly fossilised and sometimes even unintelligible forms. This not only serves to show the extent of the phenomenon, both spatial and chronological, and its cultural significance in terms of numbers, but also may help us to understand the reasons behind such an outstanding persistence of Greek and, to a lesser extent, Coptic, even after their disappearance from other categories of Christian Nubian written sources.

To close this methodological section, one more explanation is due. I have mentioned above that I distinguish three categories of bilingual sources: Greek/Coptic, Greek/Old Nubian, and Coptic/Old Nubian.<sup>43</sup> Such a labelling is purely arbitrary and must not be taken as designating the predominance of the first language in the pairs. Hence, for example, both Greek epitaphs with dating formulae in Old Nubian and Old Nubian letters with addresses in Greek are labelled as 'Greek/Old Nubian,' regardless of the proportion of the languages. The decision was also motivated by the fact that in some texts, like Greek/Old Nubian psalters or visitor's inscriptions, no language can be indicated as predominant, making the choice completely impressionistic. Such a classification also allows us to avoid multiplying the categories and makes the statistics more lucid. Besides, the question of the proportion of the languages in par-

41 Although those elements may also be written in a mixture of languages.

42 This, of course, does not pertain to more substantial texts, such as epitaphs, which bear information at least about the redactor's level of knowledge about the grammar and vocabulary of a given language.

43 There are also three texts in the DBMNT labelled as 'Old Nubian & Arabic': DBMNT 1197 (unpublished Arabic document with one line of Old Nubian, from Kulubnarti), 1218 (unpublished theological [?] text with unknown proportions of the languages, from Qasr Ibrim), 2829 (Old Nubian letter with one line in Arabic, from Qasr Ibrim). In both unpublished texts the content and interrelation of fragments in both languages are unknown; in the third example, the line in Arabic remains undeciphered.

ticular sources seems rather marginal for the present article. This, of course, does not mean that it is unimportant for the study of the Nubian multilingualism. Quite the contrary, but the proper understanding of this phenomenon requires a case-by-case analysis of bilingual Nubian sources, which certainly exceeds the scope of this paper.<sup>44</sup>

### 3. Nubian multilingualism in numbers

#### 3.1 *Media and types of texts*

For the time being, the DBMNT contains 2926 Nubian texts,<sup>45</sup> which are classified according to two main categories: ‘medium,’ that is the vehicle on which the text was written, and ‘type of text.’<sup>46</sup> The two tables below present a general distribution of sources in these categories.

medium	number of texts	percentage
stela/plaque	980	33.49%
wall & rock <sup>47</sup>	938	32.05%
pottery	382	13.05%
manuscript <sup>48</sup>	296	10.12%
architectural element & stone block	98	3.35%
ostrakon	80	2.73%
lamp	51	1.74%
sepulchral cross	27	0.92%
stamp	19	0.65%
brick	16	0.55%
small objects <sup>49</sup>	16	0.55%
tablet	8	0.27%
mudstopper	8	0.27%
textile	7	0.24%

Table 1. Nubian written sources according to medium.

44 When available, the precise information about the proportion of languages in each bilingual text can be found in the DBMNT.

45 The total number of records is 2930, but three of them, DBMNT 496, 500, and 538, must be excluded, because they are most probably not Nubian (contrary to what I believed while preparing the CSCN volume in 2011) and the fourth one, DBMNT 475, has been recently identified as identical with DBMNT 474 (it was published by LEFEBVRE as two separate objects,

*I. Lefebvre* 609 and 610). Nevertheless, the records have not been deleted from the database in order to retain the continuity of catalogue numbers and their consistency with the CSCN.

46 The texts are also divided according to the material and technique of execution, but these divisions are marginal from the point of view of this article and their detailed description is thus omitted.

47 Because of their typological proximity, ‘wall’ and ‘rock’ as well as ‘architectural element’ and ‘stone block’ are counted together.

48 Under this heading I include all the texts written on non-durable writing materials (papyrus, paper, parchment, leather), be they documentary, literary, or subliterate.

49 Under this heading I include several smaller categories: jewellery (5 objects), figurine (3 objects), metal object (2 objects), cross (2 objects), coin weight (1 object), other (including all identifiable objects not belonging to the remaining groups; so far only 1 find has been thus classified, a leather case with an impressed monogram from Abkanarti [DBMNT 2459]), and unidentified (2 objects).

Table 2. Nubian written sources according to type of text.

12

type of text	number of texts	percentage
epitaph	995	34.01%
name of divine entity/saint	331	11.31%
unidentified	326	11.14%
visitor's inscription	278	9.50%
document	192	6.56%
literary	133	4.55%
legend	129	4.42%
owner's inscription	116	3.96%
private prayer	70	2.39%
subliterary	70	2.39%
name	65	2.22%
liturgical	59	2.02%
commemorative inscription	38	1.30%
invocation	27	0.92%
school exercise	19	0.65%
dedicatory inscription	17	0.58%
foundation inscription	14	0.48%
alphabet	10	0.34%
other <sup>50</sup>	10	0.34%
date	9	0.31%
catalogue	8	0.27%
tag	5	0.17%
official inscription	3	0.10%
colophon	2	0.07%

It comes as no surprise that the tables confirm the existing opinions about the character of Nubian literacy: the commonest media are stelae and the surface of walls and rocks, both bearing the most popular types of texts, namely epitaphs, visitor's inscriptions, legends, and a repertoire of holy names.<sup>51</sup> However, while the number of stelae and epitaphs in the DBMNT should most probably be considered as nearly complete, since all the major collections have already been published and the probability of discovering a large cemetery with a considerable assemblage of tombstones is very low, the number of wall and rock inscriptions is going to increase significantly with the publication of the material from, for example, Banganarti and Faras. It is estimated that their number will at least double, completely changing the proportions.

<sup>50</sup> To this group belong all the texts whose contents is identifiable but hard to classify.

<sup>51</sup> It should be kept in mind that the media and types of text do not always overlap. It is true that the lion's share of epitaphs was executed on stelae, but there are also examples of tombstones painted on the walls or incised on the surface of a rock. On the other hand, not all of the stelae are epitaphs, as we know several inscriptions of official character.

But the tables also bring to light the importance of a category so far underestimated, neglected, or even completely ignored, namely inscriptions on pottery.<sup>52</sup> It appears that this medium is the third most popular in the Middle Nile Valley, with almost 400 attestations. Moreover, although the DBMNT collects all instances of inscribed vessels available in publications, it may be expected that many objects still remain unpublished, hidden in the storerooms of museums and archaeological missions.<sup>53</sup> This situation most surely results from the fact that this is a very difficult material to study, very often completely unintelligible. Yet, if taken en masse, it shows the Nubians' respect for the letters almost as forcefully as the epitaphs and visitor's inscriptions do. The most numerous types of text connected with this medium are holy names and owner's inscriptions.

The fourth most popular medium are the manuscripts, containing various types of texts: documentary, literary, liturgical, and subliterary.<sup>54</sup> These texts are obviously connected with the religion, economy, and administration; there is a relatively low number of documents of private character, like private letters, but in most cases they either deal with economic matters or are exchanged between state and church officials.<sup>55</sup> This makes the Church and the state the main producers of the written sources on the one hand, and the main consumers of the writing materials on the other. This is nothing new, indeed, but it seems worthwhile to take a closer look at the statistics of use of particular writing materials (graph 1).

Although graph 1 reflects mainly the situation in Qasr Ibrim, whence the bulk of our sources comes (232 out of 295), the manuscripts from other places appear to fit the tendency already observed for that site.<sup>56</sup> Hence, the use of leather (mainly from gazelle, but occasionally also from crocodile) is restricted to documentary texts, but only those of a legal character (land sales, manumissions, loans, etc.).<sup>57</sup> Parchment, on the other hand, was used almost exclusively for the production of religious texts, both literary and liturgical. In addition, the fact that the vast majority of literary and liturgical texts are most probably loose pages from codices makes parchment

52 But see WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, p. 238.

53 For example, Adam Łajtar informs me that around 100 such objects are in the storeroom of the Polish mission at Dongola.

54 The number of manuscripts in the DBMNT will increase significantly after the Coptic and Arabic texts from Qasr Ibrim have been published. Also, a substantial collection of texts from the island of Sur (personal communication of Alexandros Tsakos) will certainly contribute to changing the proportions.

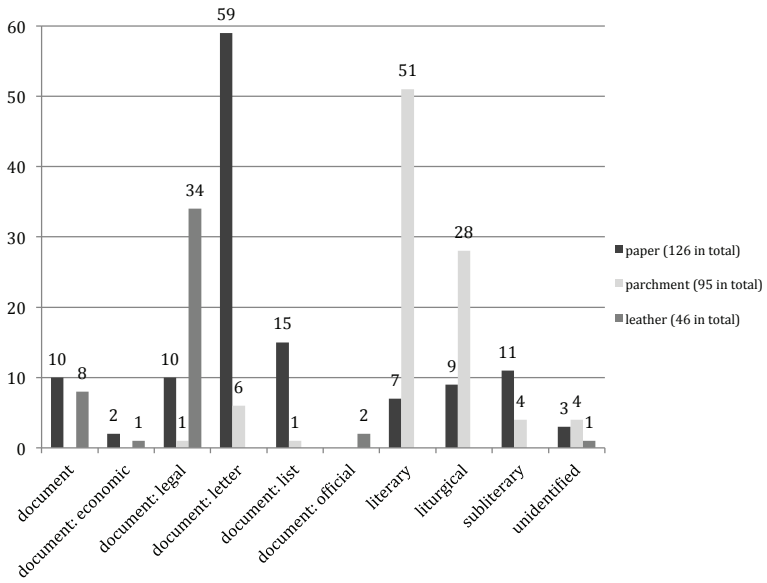
55 For examples of such a correspondence, see p. QI III and IV. Another category of private documents are magical texts serving for personal protection, but their number is low, with only 12 examples registered as manuscripts in the DBMNT.

56 PLUMLEY, "The Christian period," pp. 103-4; ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Late Mediaeval Period*, p. 219, t. 14; id., *Qasr Ibrim: The Earlier Medieval Period*, p. 242.

57 Observed already by PLUMLEY, "The Christian period," p. 104.

Graph 1. The use of non-durable writing materials.<sup>52</sup>

14



the main material for the production of books. And as for paper, it is the only material found in similar proportions throughout most of the categories. This may indeed be linked to its popularisation in the late period (13th–14th century) and the gradual replacement of other writing materials,<sup>59</sup> but its outstandingly predominant use for the production of letters should rather be explained otherwise, for example in economical terms.

While it is rather doubtless that leather was a ‘native’ Nubian writing material,<sup>60</sup> no sources, be they written or archaeological, give us any hint as to whether the Nubians could produce paper and parchment themselves. It is therefore safer to assume that both materials were imported. We obviously have no idea what the prices of the writing materials were, but based on the quantitative and typological diversification of their uses we may assess their relative value: paper appears to have been the cheapest medium, used for private letters or amulets without much concern; parchment was

58 Papyrus is lacking from the graph, because only 3 instances of its use have so far been registered in the DBMNT (1395, 2453, 2640). However, ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Earlier Medieval Period*, p. 242, with t. 11, reports 73 papyrus fragments found at Qasr Ibrim dating from the early Christian period (6th–9th c.), including 8 Greek, 59 Coptic, and 6 unidentified texts. None of these texts have been published. It is also uncertain how many of the paper (28), parchment (53), and leather (6) documents listed by Adams remain unpublished.

59 ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Late Mediaeval Period*, p. 219; p. 220, t. 11, where the impressive number of 630 texts on paper is given, of which only a small portion has been published so far.

60 A Trismegistos survey reveals that there are only 31 leather texts from Egypt dating between the 6th and 15th century. However, among them there are as many as 13 Blemmyan (hence, not exactly Egyptian) texts from Gebelein.



certainly more expensive (perhaps even much more expensive), out of reach of most private persons and accessible almost exclusively for the Church; finally, a limited number of texts on leather suggests that this medium was the most valuable. On the other hand, the clear association of the last two media with particular kinds of sources may point to their possible symbolic significance: parchment as the only material appropriate for religious writings, and leather as the sign of prestige through which legal acts gain importance or even become valid.

Provided the above reasoning is credible, it is somewhat surprising that ostraka, being the cheapest possible writing material, did not earn popularity in the Middle Nile Valley. One would expect their omnipresence, if only because of close contacts with Upper Egypt, where ostraka were a regular means of communication. Interestingly, the largest Nubian collections of ostraka with documentary texts, the ones from Debeira West<sup>61</sup> and Abd el-Qadir,<sup>62</sup> are most probably a direct result of Egyptian-Nubian contacts. It is even possible that their authors were Egyptians.<sup>63</sup> This would explain the almost complete absence of such texts from other places in the Middle Nile Valley: the Nubians did not feel the need to (or did not have to) record on potsherds all these smaller and bigger texts so commonly produced by the Egyptians.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.2 Chronological distribution of sources

A general problem with any chronological consideration of Christian Nubian written sources is that a huge majority of texts cannot be precisely dated. In fact, only 163 texts (5.6%) contain dating formulae establishing their annual date.<sup>65</sup> For a further 298 sources (10.2%) a date within a single century can be established. As many as 461 texts (15.7%) can be dated more or less precisely within two centuries and 588 within three centuries (20.1%). For the remaining 1416 texts (roughly a half of the assemblage) only a broad dating, extending throughout four or more centuries, can be proposed, which is why they will not be taken into consideration in this section.<sup>66</sup>

In order to get a clearer perspective on the chronological distribution of sources, the four groups mentioned above are presented in four separate graphs.

61 SHINNIE & SHINNIE, *Debeira West*, pp. 95–101.

62 RUFFINI, "Nubian Ostraka from the West Bank Survey."

63 CSCN, pp. 114, 159–60. See also OCHAŁA, "The Era of the Saracens in Non-Arabic Texts from Nubia," pp. 154–5.

64 Adam Łajtar informs me that there is a collection of ostraka, mainly literary, from Dongola and several magical ostraka from Gebel Adda.

65 See CSCN, pp. 7–23 with t. 4.

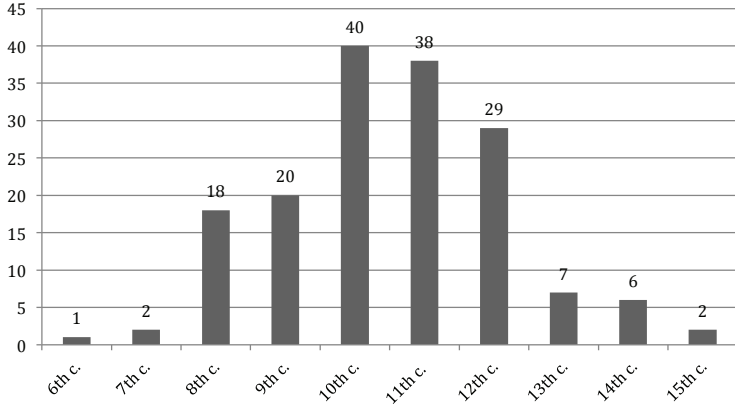
66 It is to be hoped that the future study of Christian Nubian palaeography will give us means for greater precision in establishing the age of Nubian sources.



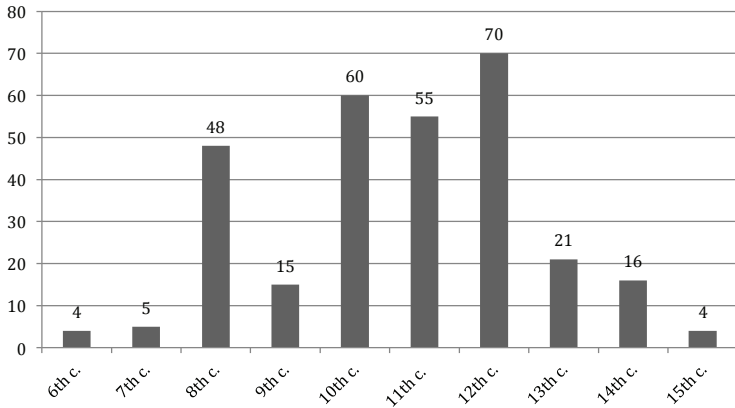
## Ochała

Graph 2.  
Chronological  
distribution of  
precisely dated  
texts.

16



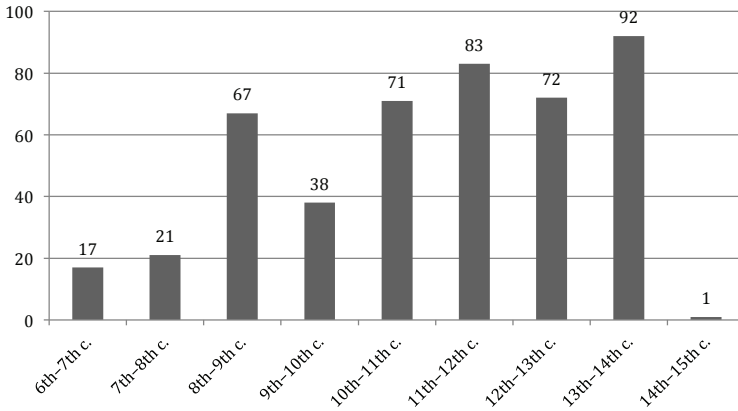
Graph 3.  
Chronological  
distribution of  
texts dated within  
one century  
(except those in  
graph 2).



Graphs 2 and 3 display a strikingly similar pattern, with a sudden outburst of production of texts in the eighth century,<sup>67</sup> after two centuries scarce in written sources. The high rate of production seems to have been retained in the ninth century, but the following three hundred years, from the tenth to the twelfth century, are the peak of Nubian literacy, which starts to die out in the thirteenth century. A similar situation may be deduced from graph 4, with a remarkable difference in the period of the thirteenth–fourteenth century. This is caused by the increased production of visitor’s inscriptions, especially at the sites of Banganarti and Sonqi Tino. As for graph 5, although the tendency for later centuries is less clear, the rapid increase of text production in the eighth century is ap-

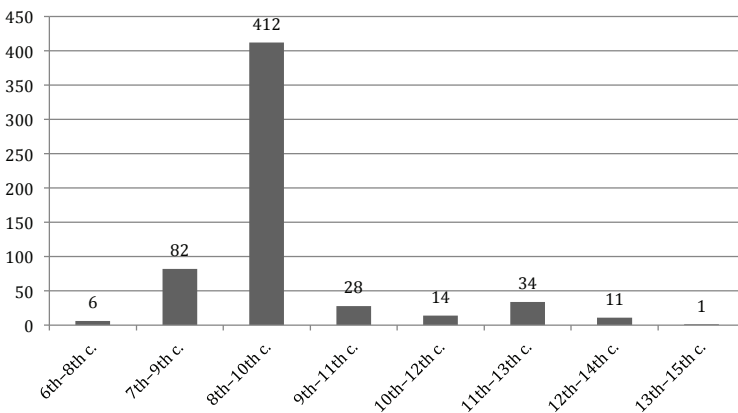
<sup>67</sup> One has to admit, however, that most of the texts dated to the 8th century (graph 3) come from Faras, 38 in total, from among which as many as 29 come from a single place, the famous Anchorite’s Grotto on the outskirts of the city.

## Multilingualism in Christian Nubia



Graph 4.  
Chronological  
distribution of  
texts dated within  
two centuries.

17



Graph 5.  
Chronological  
distribution of  
texts dated within  
three centuries.

parent in the columns representing the seventh-ninth and eighth-tenth centuries.<sup>68</sup>

Of course, these particularities may be explained by the state of preservation of sources, the state of their publication, or the state of archaeological investigations, but the correspondence between the graphs is too striking to blame it all on such factors. Instead, the explanation should most probably be sought in the political and cultural history of the Middle Nile Valley.

The first period of increased production of written sources, in the eighth-ninth century, should most probably be viewed as reflecting political changes in the state. This is the time of two powerful kings of Makuria, Merkourios (696/7-after 710) and Kyriakos (746/7-after

<sup>68</sup> It must be remembered, however, that from among 82 texts in the 7th-9th century range as many as 54 come from the cemetery of Ginari, and from among the 412 dated to the 8th-10th century, as many as 307 come from Sakinya; cf. *cscn*, pp. 20, 45-46.

770). The former appears to have initiated great changes in both the Makurian Church and the administration of the kingdom, to the extent that he was dubbed the 'New Constantine' by contemporaries.<sup>69</sup> As for the latter king, he continued the reforms of his predecessor, reinforcing the country; he was even the first Makurian ruler to be able to invade Egypt.<sup>70</sup>

Those reforms must have created a perfect environment for the rapid development of text production, and perhaps even incited them. This is clearly seen in the typological diversity of sources present in table 3, where the types of sources attested in the sixth and seventh centuries are juxtaposed with those appearing in the eighth.

Table 3.  
Typological diversity of dateable Nubian sources according to periods (only the figures from graphs 2, 3, 4, and 5 are taken into account).

type of text	6th– 7th c. <sup>71</sup>	8th– 9th c. <sup>72</sup>	10th– 12th c. <sup>73</sup>	13– 15th c. <sup>74</sup>	total	% of all texts of type <sup>75</sup>
alphabet	–	–	1	1	2	20%
catalogue	–	–	–	1	1	13%
colophon	–	1	1	–	2	100%
commemorative inscription	7	1	20	2	30	79%
date	–	–	5	–	5	56%
dedicatory inscription	1 <sup>76</sup>	–	12	–	13	76%
document	1 <sup>77</sup>	22	113	14	150	78%
epitaph	5	99	158	2	264	27%
foundation inscription	8	4	1	1	14	100%

69 According to John the Deacon, quoted by Severus of el-Ashmunein, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria III*, ed. EVERTS, p. 140 (available online at <[http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/severus\\_hermopolis\\_hist\\_alex\\_patr\\_03\\_part3.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/severus_hermopolis_hist_alex_patr_03_part3.htm)>, accessed 28 January 2014; cf. translation in VANTINI, *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia*, p. 40). For a comprehensive assessment of Merkourios' policy and achievements, see GODLEWSKI, "The Rise of Makuria," pp. 65–7.

70 For his rule, see GODLEWSKI, "The Rise of Makuria," pp. 67–9.

71 Figures include the first two columns of graphs 2, 3, and 4.

72 Figures include the third and fourth columns of graphs 2, 3, and 4.

73 Figures include columns five through seven of graphs 2, 3, and 4, as well as column five of graph 5.

74 Figures include columns eight through ten of graphs 2 and 3, eight and nine of graph 4, and eight of graph 5.

75 The last column of the table serves to show the difficulty in precise dating of certain categories of texts. Regrettably, the rate is particularly low in the most numerous types: epitaphs, legends, literary and liturgical texts, names of divine entities/saints, owner's and visitor's inscriptions. Had we the means to assign dates to them more accurately, the image presented here could change, a caveat that has to be kept in mind constantly.

76 This is a bronze vessel with an inscribed dedication in Coptic (DBMNT 1457). It was reportedly found in Soba but it seems probable that it was imported from Egypt.

77 This is a papyrus in Fayumic Coptic and Old Nubian (DBMNT 1395), containing a list of names and the beginning of a letter. Its provenance is unknown: it may have been written down by a Nubian travelling in Egypt (Fayum?) as well as by an Egyptian travelling in the Middle Nile Valley.

Multilingualism in Christian Nubia

type of text	6th- 7th c. <sup>71</sup>	8th- 9th c. <sup>72</sup>	10th- 12th c. <sup>73</sup>	13- 15th c. <sup>74</sup>	total	% of all texts of type <sup>75</sup>
invocation	–	–	4	2	6	22%
legend	–	12	34	1	47	36%
literary	–	28	32	7	67	50%
liturgical	–	2	20	2	24	41%
name	1	3	6	1	11	17%
name of divine entity/saint	10	4	25	8	47	14%
official inscription	–	1	–	–	1	33%
other	3	–	–	1	4	40%
owner's inscription	2	2	29	1	34	29%
private prayer	1	5	8	25	39	55%
school exercise	–	–	1	4	5	26%
subliterary	–	7	19	6	32	45%
tag	–	–	2	–	2	40%
unidentified	7	12	23	17	59	18%
visitor's inscription	4	3	18	54	79	28%
total	50	206	532	150	938	

19

Especially striking is the appearance in the eighth-ninth century, and already in substantial number, of documentary and literary texts, respectively representing the secular and religious spheres of life. This came, most obviously, as a result of the above-mentioned changes in the administration of the state and the Church.

On the other hand, the radical increase in the number of epitaphs suggests that the changes did not affect only the more official elements of the Nubian life. Perceived as the means to express private piety, they show that Nubian society as a whole became more religiously conscious or richer or, simply, its methods of expressing personal piety changed.

The beginning of the second period of increased production of written sources, in the tenth century, coincides with a supposed great administrative reform, elements of which were the introduction of Old Nubian as the official language of the kingdom of Makuria,<sup>78</sup> the final formation of the so-called 'official Nubian protocol,' and the complete change of the dating practices.<sup>79</sup> It is in this period that Makuria flourished and became the most powerful in its history. Makurian kings were able to conclude a personal union

<sup>78</sup> See GRIFFITH, "Christian documents from Nubia," pp. 17–18; KHALIL & MÜLLER, "Das unternubische Rechtswesen im Mittelalter," p. 18.

<sup>79</sup> cscn, passim, esp. pp. 347–9.

with Makuria's southern neighbour, the kingdom of Alwa, which most probably took place in the first half of the eleventh century. In this way one strong political organism was created in the Middle Nile Valley. Undoubtedly, peaceful relations with the Fatimids in Egypt contributed to the economic and cultural development of the state.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, it is hardly surprising that this development was accompanied by such a high rate of text production.

Finally, the late period in the Christian Nubian history (13th–15th century) is marked by a drastic decrease in the number of written sources. This is caused, on the one hand, by an apparent change of burial customs, which no longer demanded funerary stelae,<sup>81</sup> hence the total disappearance of this type of texts from the material in the second half of the thirteenth century. On the other hand, the political situation is again at stake: the second half of the thirteenth century was the starting point for constant power struggle within the Makurian royal family, fuelled by the Mamelukes and used by the Arab tribes to gain influence.<sup>82</sup> Admittedly, the administration of the kingdom somehow made it through the hard times, which is confirmed by the existence of two legal documents (DBMNT 644 & 700) dating to the very end of the fifteenth century and enumerating all of the most important state and Church officials, but it was no longer able to execute its influence or work as efficiently as in the 'golden age.' An economic factor may also underlie the decrease in text production: one can easily imagine that the state of permanent war (or at least conflict) must have led to periodic limitation or even cessation of foreign trade, which, as has been pointed out earlier, seems to have been the only source of non-durable writing materials in the Middle Nile Valley. In such conditions only a limited number of sources on paper and parchment could be produced. Notably, of the six literary texts dated to this period, five are on ostraka and one is a wall inscription; similarly, of the four subliterate texts, two are on ostraka and two on textile. The only group that was consistently written on paper and leather are the documents (there is only one ostrakon from among the 33 texts of this period).

It is also worth noting that although (sub)literary and documentary production diminished in the final centuries, less representative genres, such as visitor's inscriptions, private prayers, and holy names seem to have retained or even increased their rate. Especially if we think about all the unpublished wall inscriptions from Baganarti and other places dating to this very period. Adam

80 For the political history of this period, see GODLEWSKI, "Introduction to the Golden Age of Makuria"; and id., "Bishops and Kings."

81 The latest securely dated epitaph is from 1257 (DBMNT 614); see CSCN, p. 44.

82 For the history of the period, see, e.g., WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, pp. 242–5. See, however, RUFFINI, "Newer Light on the Kingdom of Dotawo," for a critical approach to the question of the 'Kingdom of Dotawo.'

Łajtar has observed that the inscriptions from Banganarti bear only very slight allusions to the current political troubles, presenting an image of a peaceful and prospering society and giving an impression of a strong and secure state.<sup>83</sup> Sources from other places, even the two latest documents mentioned above, appear to confirm this impression.

Indeed, the religious character of those texts may reflect a generic human behaviour expressed in the Polish proverb 'When in fear, God is dear,' even if the authors do not allude to troubled waters of their time. But such an explanation seems too simplistic, especially in view of the fact that since the beginning of the Christian period the Nubians had demonstrated a high reverence for all the divine entities and saints. Therefore, the phenomenon of a late 'popular' literacy should rather be perceived in terms of a deeply rooted tradition and a belief in the religious and/or magical power of letters, which evolved thanks to a long period of developed literary culture, and cultivated in spite of the decline of the literature of a higher register.

### 3.3 *Topographical distribution of sources*

It is equally interesting to take a closer look at the topographical distribution of sources. The task is as difficult as it is worthwhile. A comprehensive archaeological map of the Middle Nile Valley in the Christian period is still lacking and the available publications and the Internet are of little help in some cases. Because the precise location of many sites remains beyond my reach for the time being, the lists and maps presented below should be understood as provisional. It should be added here as well that in contrast to the number of texts registered in the DBMNT, the list of sites with textual finds seems to be complete or nearly complete: to the best of my knowledge, the unpublished material still lacking in the database comes only from the sites that are otherwise present in the DBMNT.

Judging by the number of sources (see t. 4), it appears that the northern part of the Middle Nile Valley up to the Third Cataract, corresponding to the territory of Nobadia, was more developed in terms of literacy than the south, the heartland of Makuria between the Third and Fifth Cataracts.<sup>84</sup> Still farther to the south, in Alwa, the rate of production of written sources appears to have been even lower. Such a situation is plausibly explained by historical circumstances, because it was northern Nubia that was most exposed to

83 ŁAJTAR, "Late Christian Nubia through Visitors' Inscriptions from the Upper Church at Banganarti," p. 326.

84 The exact extent of the kingdom is unknown, but for the sake of convenience the Fifth Cataract may be assumed to be its southern border. See EDWARDS, *The Nubian Past*, pp. 223-4, for a summary of archaeological evidence on the extent of the kingdom of Alwa.

the cultural influence of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, with its highly developed tradition of writing in Greek and subsequently in Coptic.<sup>85</sup>

22 Table 4.  
Topo-  
graphical  
distribution  
of sources.

region	no. of texts	%	no. of sites with textual finds	%
Nobadia	2064	70.54%	84 <sup>86</sup>	60%
Makuria	674	23.04%	46 <sup>87</sup>	33%
Alwa	140	4.78%	8	6%
outside Nile Valley <sup>88</sup>	2	0.07%	2	1%
Egypt <sup>89</sup>	9	0.31%	n/a	n/a
unknown	37	1.26%	n/a	n/a

However, such a large disproportion between the regions seems to result mainly from the state of archaeological research in particular parts of the Middle Nile Valley: because of and, however controversially this sounds, thanks to the flooding of Lake Nubia, which engaged hundreds of archaeologists, the territory of Nobadia remains the most extensively studied Nubian region, the function of which is the number of textual finds. How important this factor is for our analysis has been recently shown during an analogous undertaking connected with the erection of a dam on the Fourth Cataract: the region extending upstream from Merowe that had previously been considered as archaeologically barren provided tons of data, completely changing our view.<sup>90</sup> These data also include some texts, 38 in total.<sup>91</sup> This may seem very small a figure in comparison to the extent of the archaeological work, which covered some 200 km of the Nile Valley on both banks. However, if one takes into account the fact that before the salvage campaign the region was considered completely devoid of written sources, the number appears to be significant, if not impressive.

Another important factor, but pertaining almost exclusively to non-durable writing materials (papyrus, parchment, leather, wood, textile), are the natural conditions. Hence, at Qasr Ibrim the dry cli-

85 This was already observed by JUNKER, "Die christlichen Grabsteine," p. 145.

86 In addition, there is a group of 25 texts that on various grounds are identified as 'Lower Nubian,' i.e. Nobadian.

87 There is also a group of 3 texts whose provenance is described as '4th Cataract,' without pinpointing their exact findspots.

88 Two apparently Nubian texts have been found outside the Nile Valley: an Old Nubian rock graffito from Gebel Abu Negila in Kordofan (DBMNT 690) and an inscribed brick from Goz Regeb, located on the Atbara river, north-west of Kassala (DBMNT 2368).

89 For the question of identifying texts from Egypt as Nubian, see CSCN, pp. 23-24, 46 and 50; see also above, pp. 3-4.

90 For results of this research, see, e.g., NÄSER & LANGE, *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Archaeology of the Fourth Nile Cataract*.

91 To them one should add over a hundred manuscripts found on the island of Sur, in preparation for publication by Alexandros Tsakos.

mate and the absence of termites, consuming everything that contains cellulose, allowed the preservation of a quantity of sources written on such media incomparable with any other Nubian site.<sup>92</sup> On the other hand, the fact that Dongola, the capital of the Kingdom of Makuria, has scarcely yielded any such texts is most probably due to the natural conditions, including the presence of insects.<sup>93</sup>

If we now look at the number of sites with textual finds, we will notice that the disproportion in these figures is much less striking: Nobadian sites are slightly less than twice as numerous as Makurian ones. This reflects the state of investigation: until the salvage campaign at the Fourth Cataract, excavations at Christian sites in the heartland of Makuria were a real rarity. In fact, some findspots are represented only by stray finds and others are stated as places of acquisition of particular objects; in both cases no regular works have ever been carried out there (for example, el-Khandaq, Amantogo, or Khalewa, all located not too far north of Dongola, where Christian settlement must have been substantial). But these figures also seem to bring us a bit closer to the truth as far as the commonness of writing is concerned, showing that the rate of text production could have been more or less the same in both regions, since even such seemingly godforsaken places as villages and islands deep in the Fourth Cataract were inhabited by people who knew how to read and write.<sup>94</sup>

For the reader's convenience, I present here a full list of sites found in the DBMNT. The sites are arranged topographically, from the north to the south. I have been unable to verify the location of the toponyms accompanied by a question mark; therefore their position on the list should be considered tentative.

Nobadia	no. of texts	Makuria	no. of texts	Alwa	no. of texts
Biga	3	Hannek	1	el-Usheir	2
Debod	1	Mushu	15	Bauga	1
Kertassi	1	Koya	1	Meroe	2
Hindawi	1	Kudi	1	Begrawiya	2
Ginari	54	Qasr Wadi	1	Musawwarat	15
		Nimri		el-Sofra	
Tafa	17	el-Khandaq	2	Soba	114
Bab Kalabsha	3	Nawi	1	Geteina	3
Kalabsha	26	Amantogo	1	Abu Haraz	1

Table 5. List of Nubian sites with textual finds, arranged from the north to the south.

92 WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, p. 241.

93 However, the citadel of Dongola (the so-called Kom A) still remains largely unexplored, and it cannot be excluded that archaeological work will one day bring to light a more substantive number of sources of this kind.

94 Cf. HÄGG, "Some Remarks," p. 104, for the distribution of Greek sources in Nubia.



<b>Nobadia</b>	<b>no. of texts</b>	<b>Makuria</b>	<b>no. of texts</b>
Nag' Marsa Kuleig	1	Khalewa	1
Nag' el-Gama	1	Sheikh Arab Hag	1
Dendur	2	Hambuklol	7
Sabagura	21	Gebel Ghaddar	1
Hamadab	1	Dongola	183
Dakka	1	Banganarti	76
Ofedunia (Maharaqa)	1	Tangasi Island	2
Ikhmindi	2	Selib	7
Nag' el-Sheikh Sharaf	4	Abkur	2
Nag' el-Sheima	18	Goshabi	1
Nag' el-Oqba	3	Ganetti	2
Sheima Amalika	7	el-Arak	1
Wadi el-Sebua	13	Gebel Audun	1
Amada	20	Bakhit	1
Derr	7	el-Zuma	14
Karanog	1	Debeiba	1
Masmas	2	Merowe	1
Aniba	3	Ghazali	256
Qasr Ibrim	426	Umm Ruweim	3
Sinesra	1	Gebel Barkal	6
Kolotod	2	Nuri	2
Sakinya	315	4th Cataract	3
el-Ramal	7	Kasingar	1
Tokor	1	Suegi	2
Arminna	45	Turkab	1
Tamit	68	Umm Usher island(?)	2
Gindinarri	1	Dar el-Arab	2
Abdallah-n Irqi	33	el-Doma	9
Abu Oda	20	Kenisa	1
Gebel Adda	22	Kirbekan	5
Qasr el-Wizz	12	Boni island	1
Qustul	1	Umm Qatatia (?)	4
Sheikh Gebel	5	Us island	6
Faras	465	Sur island	1

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<b>Nobadia</b>	<b>no. of texts</b>	<b>Makuria</b>	<b>no. of texts</b>
Adindan	1	el-Ganaet(i)	1
Aksha	12	Gebaliya island	1
Serra	15	Mograt island	4
Ashkeit	5	Karmel	1
Debeira	36	el-Koro	30
Komangana	5	Khor Dam el-Tor	7
el-Donga	1		
Argin	1		
Nag' el-Arab	4		
Sahaba	3		
Wadi Halfa	4		
Abd el-Qadir	43		
Meinarti	72		
Kor	1		
Abkanarti	7		
Figirantawu	1		
Qasr'antawu	1		
Tunkid (?)	1		
Attiri	1		
Shirgondinarti island	1		
Diffinarti	1		
Semna	9		
Sunnarti	4		
Sonqi Tino	37		
Ukma	6		
Akasha	1		
Kulb	18		
Kulubnarti	47		
Kulme island	1		
Amara	1		
Sagiet el-Abd	2		
Missiminia	2		
Sai	46		
Toshkei	1		
Nilwatti island	1		
Sedeinga	2		
Tondi	1		
Gebel Gorgod	1		
Gebel Noh/ Kajbar	1		

Nobadia	no. of texts
Nauri	1
Fagirinfenti	1
Masida	2
Lower Nubia	25

It is also interesting to investigate how the topographical distribution of sources changed over time. Regrettably, only a limited number of sources can be dated with a relative precision (see the previous section), which makes the picture largely incomplete. For the reasons already stated above, only the texts that can be dated within a maximum of two and occasionally three centuries are taken into account. Thus, a number of sites for which only a broad dating is possible are lacking from the maps, but trying to ascribe them to a particular century or even period would only obscure the picture. In presenting the material, I follow the periodisation established in the previous section (map 1: 6th–7th c., map 2: 8th–9th c., map 3: 10th–12th c., map 4: 13th–15th c.; all overleaf).

Looking at these maps, two things become immediately apparent. Firstly, the topographical distribution of texts appears to depend on the intensity of their production: maps are densest for the eighth and tenth–twelfth centuries, the two periods characterised by the most developed culture of writing. Secondly, the three most important cities of the Middle Nile Valley, Qasr Ibrim, Faras, and Dongola, are present on each map, a fact that underlines their leading position in the region.<sup>95</sup> It is therefore most natural to consider them centres of production of written sources, whence the tradition diffused to other places. Other than that, the maps do not reveal any particular pattern of development of writing in the Middle Nile Valley.<sup>96</sup>

### 3.4 Languages of Christian Nubia

Table 6 below presents the general statistics of the use of languages in Christian Nubia, as shown by the 2926 texts from the DBMNT. They are arranged according to the number of attestations of particular languages and their possible combinations.

Table 6. Language of Nubian written sources.

language	no. of texts	percentage
unidentified	928	31.7%
Greek	892	30.5%
Coptic	662	22.6%

<sup>95</sup> Although Soba, the capital of Alwa, must have been a very important centre as well, we still know too little about its political and cultural role in the region.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. HÄGG, “Some Remarks,” p. 104, for the distribution of Greek sources in Nubia.

language	no. of texts	percentage
Old Nubian	232	7.93%
Greek/Old Nubian	117	4.00%
Greek/Coptic	45	1.54%
Arabic	43	1.47%
Old Nubian/Arabic	3	0.10%
Coptic/Old Nubian	2	0.07%
Greek/Coptic/Old Nubian	2	0.07%

In order to simplify the graphs and tables, texts written in combinations of languages are not included in the attestations of particular languages. This, however, should not influence the general picture, because the number of bi- and trilingual texts is relatively low (169 examples = 5.77%). Moreover, the nature of particular types of sources in these two groups (e.g. epitaphs, documents, visitor's inscriptions) and, not infrequently, of individual texts requires a case-by-case analysis of the code-switching, to which another study will be devoted.

In the following subsections the three most important languages, Greek, Coptic, and Old Nubian, are compared from the point of view of their typology, chronology, and topographical distribution. The number of Arabic sources is so low that a characterisation of its usage will not be provided.<sup>97</sup>

Let us first take a quick look at the opinions concerning the status of the languages. Nubian Greek is usually perceived as the language of the Church or, more broadly, of religiousness, be it official or private.<sup>98</sup> Some authors believe that it was also spoken at least by a part of the population (e.g. by the clergy).<sup>99</sup> Finally, some scholars believe that Greek was the official language of the court at Dongola.<sup>100</sup>

Coptic in Nubia, on the other hand, was until quite recently perceived as the language of literary works, especially, or even exclusively, biblical and homiletic.<sup>101</sup> This view, however, has started to change thanks to a more thorough investigation of the Coptic ma-

97 See, however, *CSCN*, pp. 165–76, for the general character of Arabic sources from Nubia dated according to the Era of the Hegira.

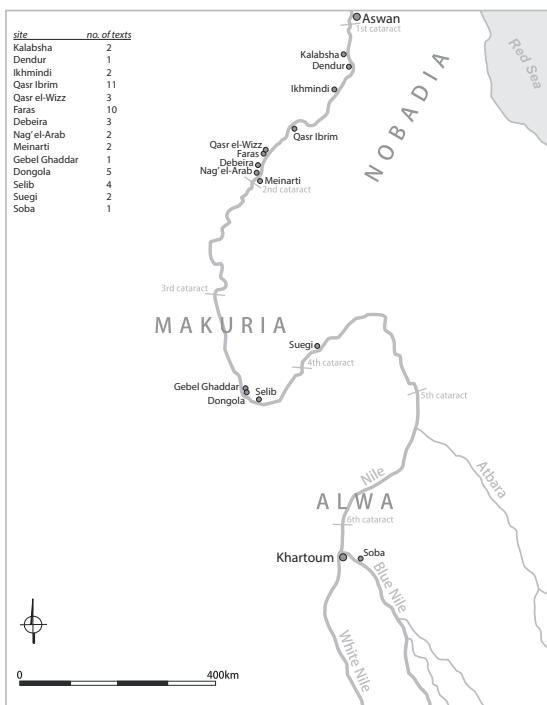
98 Thus, e.g., SHINNIE, "Multilingualism," pp. 45–6; ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Late Mediaeval Period*, p. 220; id., *Qasr Ibrim: The Earlier Medieval Period*, p. 243; HÄGG, "Uses of Greek in the Nubian Kingdoms," p. 756.

99 E.g. JAKOBIELSKI, *A History*, p. 15; KUBIŃSKA, *Inscriptions*, p. 74; SHINNIE, "Multilingualism," p. 46; WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, p. 238; BURSTEIN, "When Greek was an African Language," pp. 57–8. But see ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Earlier Medieval Period*, p. 243, who excludes such a possibility.

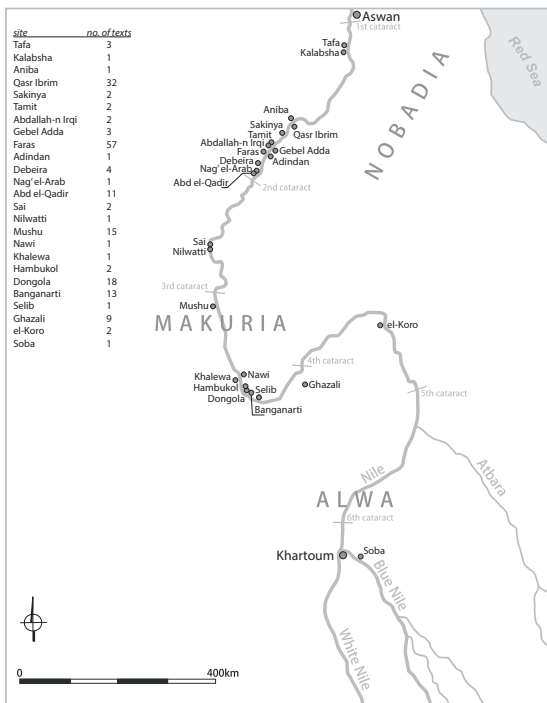
100 JAKOBIELSKI, *A History*, p. 15; id., "Inscriptions," p. 281; KUBIŃSKA, *Inscriptions*, p. 74; ŁAJTAR, "Greek Funerary Inscriptions from Old Dongola," p. 238; BURSTEIN, "When Greek Was an African Language," p. 56.

101 PLUMLEY, "The Christian period," esp. p. 104.

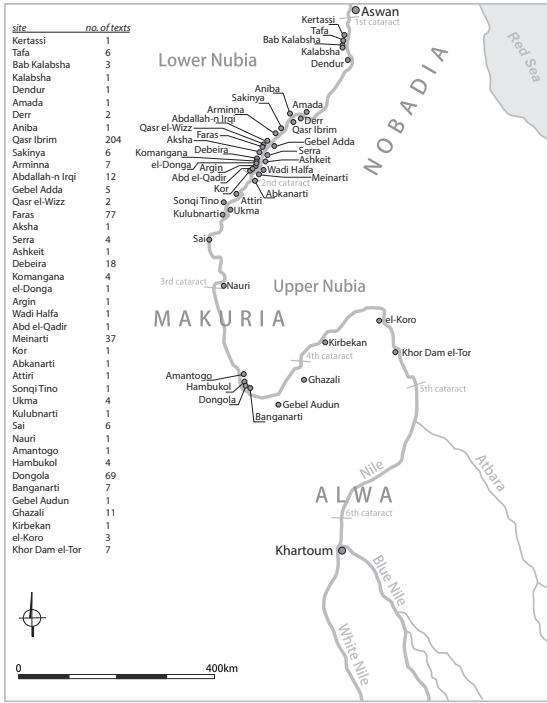
Map 1. Sites with textual finds from 6th–7th century (all maps digitally prepared by Szymon Maślak, Grzegorz Ochała, and Dobrochna Zielińska).



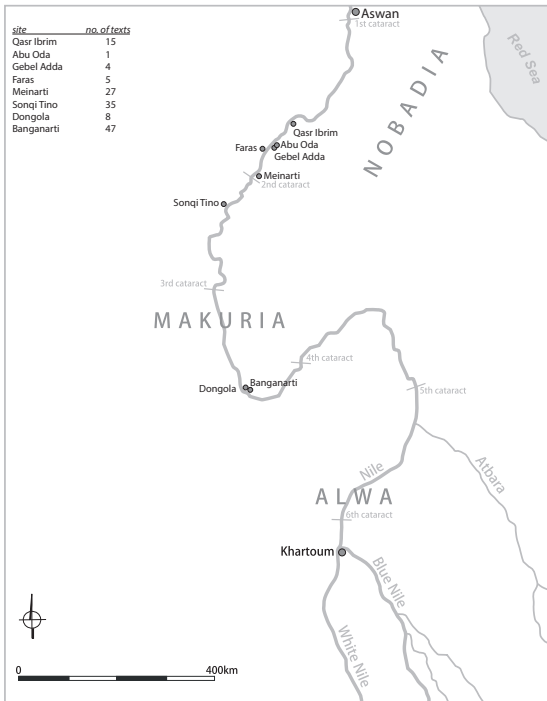
Map 2. Sites with textual finds from 8th–9th century.



# Multilingualism in Christian Nubia



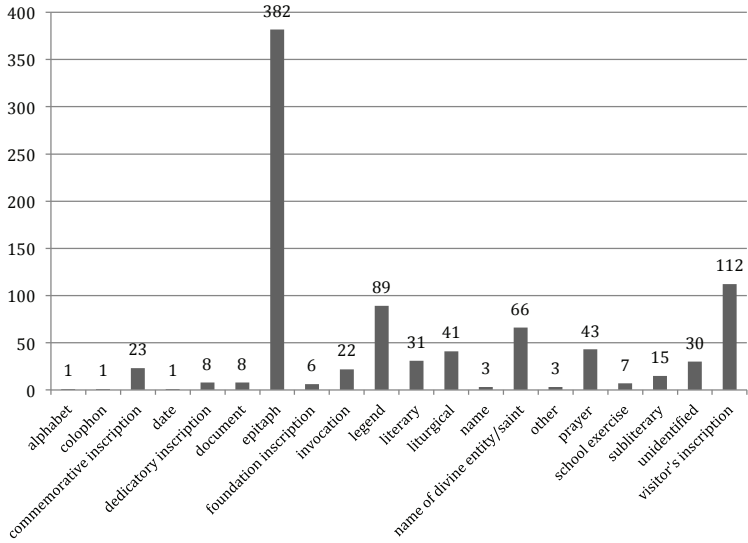
Map 3. Sites with textual finds from 10th-12th century.



Map 4. Sites with textual finds from 13th-15th century.

Graph 6.  
Typological  
diversification  
of Greek sources  
from Nubia.

30



terial from Qasr Ibrim.<sup>102</sup> According to this new insight, it appears that it is justified to call Coptic a documentary language as much as literary one. The alleged literary status of this language in Nubia constituted the foundation of the common opinion that, unlike Greek, Coptic had never been a spoken language in the Middle Nile Valley; moreover, its occurrence is often associated with the presence of Coptic-speaking migrant groups of Egyptian origin, especially with monks.<sup>103</sup>

The case of Old Nubian seems to be the least problematic. It appears that from the moment of its popularisation (or even its institutionalisation, see above, p. 19) at the turn of the tenth century, it started to be employed without distinction in both religious and secular texts<sup>104</sup> to become a 'principal medium of written communication.'<sup>105</sup>

Could all these statements be verified by the means of numbers? Let us first consider the typological diversification of Nubian sources. Table 7 below presents general statistics for the three languages (multilingual and Arabic texts are excluded). The figures from par-

102 HAGEN, "A City That Is Set on a Hill Cannot Be Hid"; and VAN DER VLIET, "Coptic as a Nubian Literary Language."

103 JUNKER, "Die christlichen Grabsteine," p. 146; JAKOBIELSKI, *A History*, p. 15; PLUMLEY, "The Christian period," p. 104; ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Late Mediaeval Period*, p. 222; WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, p. 238; EDWARDS, *The Nubian Past*, p. 239. But see VAN DER VLIET, "Coptic as a Nubian Literary Language," p. 766, for opposite opinion.

104 ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Earlier Medieval Period*, p. 245.

105 *Id.*, *Qasr Ibrim: The Late Mediaeval Period*, p. 222.

ticular columns are subsequently repeated in graphs 6, 7, and 8, in order to better visualise certain relations.

type of text	Greek	Coptic	Old Nubian
alphabet	1	6	–
catalogue	–	–	3
colophon	1	1	–
commemorative inscription	23	3	1
date	1	–	–
dedicatory inscription	8	1	–
document	8	37	92
epitaph	382	477	1
foundation inscription	6	5	–
invocation	22	2	3
legend	89	–	1
literary	31	61	26
liturgical	41	3	6
name	3	–	–
name of divine entity/saint	66	2	2
official inscription	–	3	–
other	3	1	1
owner's inscription	–	3	–
private prayer	43	6	11
school exercise	7	2	–
subliterary	15	8	9
tag	–	–	2
unidentified	30	17	40
visitor's inscription	112	24	34
<b>total</b>	<b>892</b>	<b>662</b>	<b>232</b>

Table 7.  
Typological  
diversification  
of Nubian  
languages. 31

As can be observed in table 7 and graph 6, among the 892 Greek sources only a handful appear to be not connected with religion. Among the possibly 'secular' types of sources are documents, dates, foundation inscriptions, and school exercises. Let us now consider them one by one:

- ▶ The Greek documents present in the graph are exclusively written on ostraka and are kind of accounts connected with deliveries of corn. Seven of them (DBMNT 625, 695–8, 711, 1280) come from Abd el-Qadir, a site that might have served as an entrepôt.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, the palaeography of the texts, especially five of them written by a single scribe, Markos (DBMNT 625, 695–8), suggests that they were written by an Egyptian or at least a Nubian edu-

<sup>106</sup> ADAMS, *The West Bank Survey from Faras to Gemai*, pp. 182–3.



cated in Egypt.<sup>107</sup> The eighth ostrakon (DBMNT 2618) belongs to the collection of nineteen such objects from Debeira; this is the only Greek text, the remaining are in Coptic (15) and in Arabic (3). The character of those texts, as well as a number of other factors, strongly suggest that the town was a place of commercial activities between Egyptians and Nubians.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, it cannot be excluded that the authors of at least some of those texts were Egyptians.<sup>109</sup>

- ▶ The only date in this assemblage (DBMNT 88) is the name of the month inscribed on the wall of the Faras cathedral and therefore most probably expresses either the date of a pilgrim's visit to the church or the date of a religious feast.
- ▶ Foundation inscriptions are in fact the only official texts from Nubia written in Greek. Notably, three of them (DBMNT 67, 68, and 531) concern the erection of churches and one the foundation of a town (DBMNT 458); the purpose of the remaining two (DBMNT 739 and 740) is unknown.
- ▶ Of the six school exercises in Greek, at least two (DBMNT 975 and 2734) are religious in character, comprising a list of Christian virtues and an invocation of the Archangel Michael, respectively; and two more are lists of words known from the Bible (DBMNT 2308 and 2732). Moreover, none of the remaining can be verified as 'secular.'

Thus, even the majority of texts that seem secular at first sight turn out to be connected one way or another with religion and/or its institutions. This seems to result from the fact that the art of writing was the domain of clergymen. It is certainly not accidental that seventeen out of nineteen school exercises (this is the total number of such texts; see above, table 2) have been found inside or on the walls of monasteries and churches. This makes the Nubian Church not only the main producer and user of texts but also the disseminator of literacy.<sup>110</sup>

On the other hand, the real secular texts, the documents on ostraka, cannot be unquestionably verified as Nubian: they appear to be a product of an Egyptian community in the Middle Nile Valley or at least to be inspired by close contacts with this community.

This makes the foundation inscription of the town of Ikhmindi (DBMNT 458) the sole certain example of a non-religious official

<sup>107</sup> RUFFINI, "Nubian Ostraka," p. 232; and CSCN, p. 114, where another indicator of the Egyptian character of the ostraka is given, namely the use of the 'numeral + indication' pattern, characteristic for Egyptian documents and virtually absent from Nubia (*ibid.*, pp. 111-15).

<sup>108</sup> SHINNIE, "Multilingualism," pp. 44-5.

<sup>109</sup> See above, p. 15.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. JAKOBIELSKI, *A History*, p. 15.

Nubian source in Greek.<sup>111</sup> But it must be emphasised that the text dates from the sixth century and mentions a king of Nobadia, a fact that leaves Makuria without a single official document in this language.<sup>112</sup> In fact, only three texts known to date can be directly related to the court at Dongola: two royal decrees (DBMNT 581 [12th century] and 642 [14th century]) and an official letter to the Coptic patriarch (DBMNT 610 [12th century]). The first two are in Old Nubian and the last one is essentially<sup>113</sup> in Coptic. In this light, the hypothesis of the official status of Greek in the Kingdom of Makuria is hard to defend. The evidence, although very meagre, suggests that in the tenth–eleventh century Old Nubian became the official language of the court in internal matters.<sup>114</sup> In foreign affairs, on the other hand, Coptic was used as well as, most probably, Arabic.<sup>115</sup> But until earlier documents of Makurian origin have been discovered, the question of the official language of the Dongolese court prior to the eleventh century will remain unsolved.

The hypothesis of Greek's official status originates at least partly from the fact of the total predominance of this language in Makuria (except the monastic milieu, see below), especially in Dongola and its vicinities, which can easily be noticed in tale 9b. There is no evidence, however, that the use of Greek was governed by any top-down directives of the court and/or the Church.<sup>116</sup> Instead, in view of the character of the sources, this should rather be interpreted in terms of a deeply rooted attachment to Greek as the 'holy' language of the Scriptures and the liturgy, an attachment that survived beyond the thirteenth century, when the last more substantial Greek sources came to existence, in wall inscriptions employing very often formulaic and fossilised but certainly not meaningless Greek words and phrases.<sup>117</sup> The extraordinary prestige of the language might have been indirectly reinforced by the absence of Coptic

111 One cannot exclude, however, that the foundation of a town included a religious ceremony, but the text mentions only civil officials (king, exarch, curator) as if no ecclesiastic was present during the event.

112 Cf. ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Earlier Medieval Period*, p. 243, who notes the total absence of 'secular communications in Greek from the Christian period' at Qasr Ibrim.

113 Note, however, that the document contains two Greek subscriptions on the recto, being in fact a very elaborate form of address: the so-called '1st Greek subscript' states that the addresser is King Moïse Georgios and the '2nd Greek subscript' contains the addressee, Patriarch Mark III (see the translation of the text in ADAMS, *Qasr Ibrim: The Late Medieval Period*, pp. 228–9). This appears to correspond very well with the habit of addressing Old Nubian documents in Greek (cf above, p. 7).

114 See CSCN, p. 348, and above, p. 19.

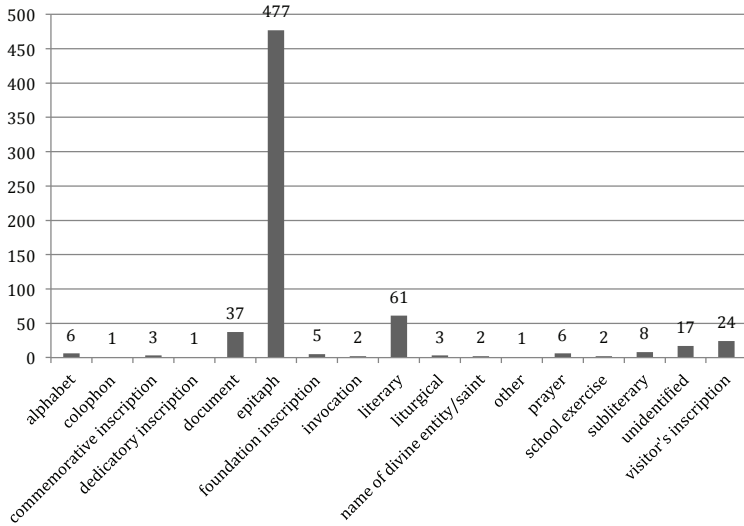
115 This is indicated by the letter from a governor of Egypt to a king of Makuria (PLUMLEY, "An Eighth-Century Arabic Letter"). Regrettably, we know no Arabic correspondence in the opposite direction, from the king to the governor, but it can be assumed rather safely that there were persons able to read and write in Arabic in the royal chancery.

116 The use of Greek and Coptic can by no means be associated with the Dyo- and Monophysite denominations, respectively (see VAN DER VLIET, "Coptic as a Nubian Literary Language," p. 767, pace JAKOBIELSKI, *A History*, p. 15).

117 ŁAJTAR, "The Greek of Late Christian Inscriptions from Nubia," *passim*.

Graph 7.  
Typological  
diversification  
of Coptic sources  
from Nubia.

34



(see below) resulting from the distance from the Egyptian border<sup>118</sup> and the putative isolation of Makuria from external cultural and economic influences.<sup>119</sup>

Unlike Greek, Coptic in Nubia presents a relatively limited spectrum of uses, as can be seen in table 7 and graph 7. Moreover, for many text types, particularly those connected with expressions of private piety, Coptic is attested by a single example or a couple of them at most (commemorative and dedicatory inscriptions, invocations, holy names). In two other categories, prayers and visitor's inscriptions, the disproportion between the Greek and Coptic attestations is similarly striking. This testifies that Coptic, although present in one form or another in private religiousness, had never gained any significance in this field in the Nubian society. The only category connected with this sphere of life in which Coptic outnumbers Greek are the epitaphs. This, however, results mainly from the fact that as many as 245 Coptic grave stelae come from a single site, the cemetery of Sakinya. But this may not be as decisive a factor as it would seem at first sight, because when one compares the rate of Coptic and Greek tombstones from various Nubian cemeteries, it appears that in many of them (Ghazali, Qasr Ibrim, Faras, Sai, Arminna) the former language was predominant.<sup>120</sup> At the present

118 See ŁAJTAR, "Greek Funerary Inscriptions," p. 116. Cf. also JUNKER, "Die christlichen Grabsteine," p. 146; and EDWARDS, *The Nubian Past*, p. 240.

119 Known from the account of an Arab traveller, Ibn Selim el-Aswani, transmitted by Maqrizi (books XXX–XXXIV and XXXVI–XXXVII of Maqrizi's *Khitat* [translation in VANTINI, *Oriental Sources*, pp. 601–54]).

120 OCHAŁA, "Multilingualism in Christian Nubia."

state of research, it is impossible to explain this phenomenon in terms other than that of personal preferences or local customs.<sup>121</sup>

Setting aside the doubtful question of epitaphs, let us now consider two remaining predominantly Coptic categories of sources, namely literary and documentary texts. As for the former, the numbers (61 Coptic<sup>122</sup> to 30 Greek and 26 Old Nubian examples) appear to confirm the hypothesis that Coptic was a literary language. Interestingly, when one compares the contents of these literary works (t. 8), it occurs that the use of Greek was limited to only a few literary genres and that it was indeed Coptic that covered the widest spectrum of texts, which further supports this statement. After its disappearance in the eleventh–twelfth century, this role was evidently taken over by Old Nubian. In fact, this function of Coptic must have been so prominent that the language also forced its way into the sphere of Nubian wall painting, which was otherwise the domain of Greek (see ‘legend’ in t. 7). While legends to paintings were almost exclusively executed in the latter language,<sup>123</sup> biblical quotations occasionally accompanying the depictions were sometimes written in Coptic.<sup>124</sup>

contents	Greek	Coptic	Old Nubian
Old Testament	10	5	–
New Testament <sup>125</sup>	7	18	11
hagiographic	4	18	3
patristic	–	1	4
homiletic	–	3	2
apocryphal	–	1	1

Table 8. Language of different genres of Nubian literary texts.<sup>127</sup>

As for the position of Coptic as a documentary language, the situation is not so clear. It is true that the number of Coptic documentary texts is far larger than their Greek counterparts, but it must be pointed out that among them are fourteen ostraka from Debeira and

121 See *ibid.* for a discussion of the prevalence of Coptic in the monastery of Ghazali.

122 It must be noted, however, that as many as 19 of them were written on the walls of the Anchorite’s Grotto in Faras.

123 Occasional intercalations in Coptic are attested in four cases, all from the Faras cathedral (DBMNT 1840–2, 2103).

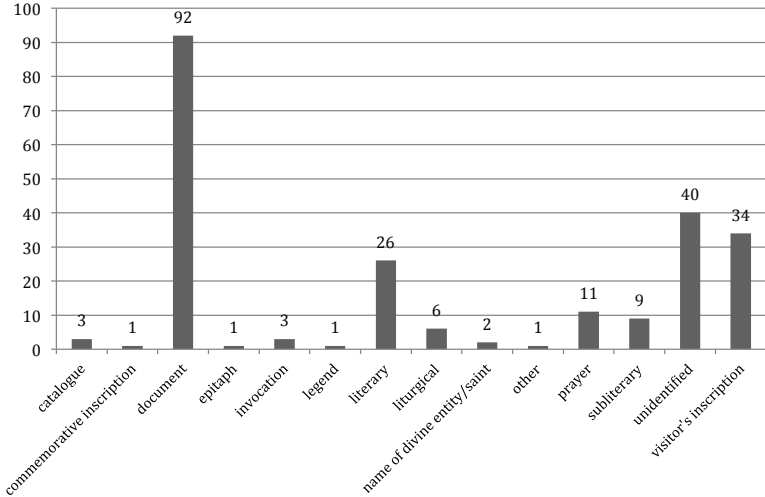
124 See JAKOBIELSKI, “Some Remarks on Faras Inscriptions,” p. 30. Three such examples are recorded in the DBMNT: John 20:27 accompanying the painting of Christ and doubting Thomas (DBMNT 1825), John 1:1–2 written on the pages of an open codex held by the enthroned Christ (DBMNT 1843), both from Faras, and John 1:1 accompanying the same representation in Tamit (DBMNT 2323). The only Greek example is John 1:1–5, 21:25, accompanying a bust of Christ found in house A at Dongola (DBMNT 2006).

125 The table includes only those texts that can be identified and ascribed to particular genres.

126 The number of Old and New Testament fragments is lower here than in reality, because it does not include the passages found in Nubian liturgical books (lectionaries, psalters); for Nubian lectionaries, see OCHAŁA, “Kalendarz liturgiczny Kościoła nubijskiego w świetle zachowanych fragmentów nubijskich lekcjonarzy”; and HAGEN & OCHAŁA, “Saints and Scriptures for Phaophi.”

Graph 8.  
Typological  
diversification  
of Old Nubian  
sources.

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two from Abd el-Qadir, sites that are suspected of strong Egyptian presence and influence (see above, p. 31). The remaining twenty-one documents are undoubtedly Nubian; they all come from Nobadia and are dated in the period between the eighth and eleventh centuries. It is certainly not their number but rather the total absence of Greek texts of this kind that has led to the supposition that Coptic might have been the official language of Nubia prior to the introduction of Old Nubian in the eleventh century.<sup>127</sup> While the force of such an *argumentum ex silentio* is rather low, one cannot deny that Coptic appears at least as the language of law and business in the northern part of the Middle Nile Valley.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, as the example of the Egypto-Nubian community from Debeira shows, it might have even fulfilled the role of a *lingua franca* in the region.<sup>129</sup>

As can be seen from table 7 and graph 8, the role of Old Nubian was certainly not as specialised as was the case of the other two languages. The native language of the Middle Nile Valley<sup>130</sup> appears to have entered the most important spheres of the Nubian life<sup>131</sup>: religious, both official (literary and liturgical sources) and private (prayers, visitor's inscriptions), and civil activities (legal, economic, official documents). Also, for the first time in their history we see the Nubians communicating with one another by means of private

<sup>127</sup> CSCN, p. 349.

<sup>128</sup> See also, SJPENSTEIJN, "Multilingual Archives and Documents in Post-Conquest Egypt," pp. 115–16 (non vidi); VAN DER VLIET, "Coptic Documentary Papyri after the Arab Conquest."

<sup>129</sup> OCHAŁA, "The Era of the Saracens," pp. 154–5; CSCN, pp. 159–60.

<sup>130</sup> I do not differentiate here between ancient dialects of Nubian, traces of which can be seen in the material: the most numerous are attestations of the ancestor of modern Nobiin, but there is also evidence of ancient Dongolawi, as well as of a dialect of Alwa.

<sup>131</sup> Or, more correctly, the more visible from the perspective of the written sources.

letters. Thus, Old Nubian completely took over the most distinctive functions of Coptic and found its place beside Greek in the types of texts so far apparently reserved for it.

Having discussed the status of the three languages, it is time to take a closer look at their topographical and chronological distribution, as such an analysis may also help understand their position in the Middle Nile Valley.

Table 9a–c below presents in topographical order all the sites for which written sources are attested.<sup>132</sup> When one compares the occurrences of Greek and Coptic throughout the Middle Nile Valley, it comes as no surprise that the former language is omnipresent in the region and the latter is largely limited to its northern part, a fact noticed already by Hermann Junker in 1925 on the basis of Nubian grave stelae.<sup>133</sup> One could even risk setting the border of the common use of Coptic at the island of Sai<sup>134</sup> or perhaps a bit farther south, at Mushu, right after the Third Cataract. South of the cataract, the language is extremely rare but certainly not unknown, which finds confirmation in its attestations in the region of the Fourth Cataract and Soba. A special case is the monastic cemetery of Ghazali, the only Makurian site where Coptic is overwhelmingly more popular than Greek, but this reflects the tendency of this milieu to use this particular language rather than any general pattern.<sup>135</sup> As has already been noted above, the absence of Coptic in Makuria and even to a higher degree in Alwa must have been caused at least partly by the distance between them and Egypt and the low percentage of Coptic users in comparison with Nobadia.

And as for Nobadia, although Coptic occurs there far and wide, it seems to concentrate in the region between Qasr Ibrim and Faras, while Greek appears as more evenly distributed. Notably, the northernmost part of Nobadia appears to be devoid of Coptic, which may be explained by the fact of the long occupation of the territory of the Dodekaschoenos first by the Ptolemies then by the Romans. The prolonged presence of a Greek-speaking population could have exerted influence on the local people, realised in the attachment to the language of the occupiers. Also to the south of Debeira Coptic texts become progressively rarer (with the exception of Sai). In view of such a distribution of sources, one could argue that the Qasr Ibrim/Faras region was indeed a cultural centre in Nobadia, where the use of Coptic, concentrated and whence it spread to other areas.

<sup>132</sup> The list does not include the sites from which come only texts in unidentified language; it also omits bi- and trilingual texts.

<sup>133</sup> JUNKER, "Die christlichen Grabsteine," pp. 144–6. See also HÄGG, "Some remarks," p. 104.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. TSAKOS, "Medieval Funerary Inscriptions from Sai Island," p. 329.

<sup>135</sup> OCHAΛA, "Multilingualism in Christian Nubia"; it certainly has nothing to do with the presence of Egyptian monks in the monastery (*l. Khartoum Copt.*, p. 104).

It is hard to say anything conclusive about the topographical distribution of Old Nubian sources, because their number is much lower than that of the remaining two languages. Nevertheless, it seems that the use of the native Nubian language was fairly widespread and its attestations can be found throughout the Middle Nile Valley.

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Table 9a.

Topographical distribution of languages in Nobadia, from the north to the south.

site	Greek	Coptic	Old Nubian
Biga	3	–	–
Debod	1	–	–
Ginari	54	–	–
Tafa	7	–	–
Bab Kalabsha	3	–	–
Kalabsha	16	6	–
Nag' el-Gama	–	–	–
Dendur	–	1	–
Sabagura	3	1	5
Hamadab	–	1	–
Dakka	1	–	–
Ofedunia (Maharaqa)	–	1	–
Ikhmindi	1	1	–
Nag' el-Sheikh Sharaf	1	1	–
Nag' el-Sheima	2	8	–
Nag' el-Oqba	–	1	1
Sheima Amalika	–	2	–
Wadi el-Sebua	2	2	–
Amada	2	3	2
Derr	1	3	–
Karanog	1	–	–
Masmas	–	2	–
Aniba	1	–	–
Qasr Ibrim	86	93	114
Kolotod	1	–	–
Sakinya	65	245	–
el-Ramal	2	4	–
Arminna	7	12	–
Tamit	25	5	5
Gindinarri	–	1	–
Abdallah-n Irqi	10	6	–
Abu Oda	5	–	6
Gebel Adda	4	4	7
Qasr el-Wizz	2	2	–
Sheikh Gebel	–	1	–
Faras	166	80	17
Adindan	1	–	–

Multilingualism in Christian Nubia

site	Greek	Coptic	Old Nubian
Aksha	–	2	–
Serra	3	–	4
Ashkeit	1	–	–
Debeira	5	16	–
Komangana	2	–	–
el-Donga	1	–	–
Argin	1	–	–
Nag' el-Arab	2	1	–
Sahaba	2	–	–
Wadi Halfa	1	1	1
Abd el-Qadir	23	2	4
Meinarti	25	4	4
Kor	1	–	–
Abkanarti	–	–	1
Figirantawu	–	–	1
Qasr'antawu	–	1	–
Shirgondinarti island	–	1	–
Semna	3	1	3
Sunnarti	1	–	2
Sonqi Tino	23	–	6
Ukma	3	1	–
Akasha	–	1	–
Kulb	1	–	–
Kulubnarti	25	–	5
Kulme island	1	–	–
Sagiet el-Abd	1	–	–
Missiminia	–	2	–
Sai	5	18	–
Nilwatti island	–	1	–
Gebel Gorgod	–	1	–
Nauri	–	–	1
Masida	1	–	1
Lower Nubia	7	17	–
<b>total</b>	<b>611</b>	<b>556</b>	<b>190</b>

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site	Greek	Coptic	Old Nubian
Mushu	–	6	–
Koya	1	–	–
Kudi	1	–	–
Qasr Wadi Nimri	1	–	–
el-Khandaq	2	–	–
Nawi	1	–	–

Table 9b.  
Topographical  
distribution of  
languages in  
Makuria, from the  
north to the south.



site	Greek	Coptic	Old Nubian
Amantogo	1	-	-
Khalewa	1	-	-
Sheikh Arab Hag	1	-	-
Hambukol	7	-	-
Dongola	87	5	11
Banganarti	40	-	14
Tangasi island	1	-	-
Selib	6	-	-
Goshabi	1	-	-
Ganetti	1	-	-
el-Arak	1	-	-
Gebel Audun	1	-	-
Bakhit	1	-	-
el-Zuma	2	-	2
Debeiba	1	-	-
Merowe	1	-	-
Ghazali	34	75	-
Umm Ruweim	1	2	-
Gebel Barkal	3	-	-
Nuri	2	-	-
4th Cataract	-	1	-
Kasingar	1	-	-
Umm Usher island(?)	2	-	-
Dar el-Arab	1	-	-
Kenisa	1	-	-
Kirbekan	4	-	-
Gebaliya island	1	-	-
Mograt island	3	-	-
el-Koro	22	7	-
Khor Dam el-Tor	6	-	-
<b>total</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>27</b>

Table 9c.  
Topographical  
distribution of  
languages in Alwa,  
from the north to  
the south.

site	Greek	Coptic	Old Nubian
el-Usheir	1	-	-
Bauga	1	-	-
Meroe	1	-	-
Begrawiya	-	-	2
Musawwarat el-Sofra	1	-	4
Soba	11	2	3
Abu Haraz	1	-	-
<b>total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>

The final issue that will be discussed here is the chronology of the use of the Nubian languages. The three graphs overleaf (9–11) show the linguistic change that Nubian literacy underwent over time. Again, only sources written in a single language have been taken into consideration and only those whose dating can be established within two centuries at most.

The graphs appear to confirm what has been noticed already long ago and has so far been repeated many times in scholarly literature. While Greek was present, with varying intensity, throughout the whole Christian period in the Middle Nile Valley, Coptic and Old Nubian had distinct periods of usage, only slightly overlapping in the eleventh–twelfth century. Having in mind the fact that in the mid-eleventh century Coptic stopped to be used as ‘a living language of written communication,’<sup>136</sup> one wonders how this fact could be connected with the subsequent extinction of the language in Nubia.<sup>137</sup> Did the fact that Coptic lost importance in the north trigger the rise of Old Nubian as the official language of Makuria, or vice versa, did the introduction of Old Nubian into literary and documentary texts cause the decline of Coptic in the kingdom?

As a matter of fact, both these hypotheses are probable. Moreover, they are not mutually exclusive and could each have their part in the process. As Jacques van der Vliet has recently put it, by way of becoming the language of the liturgy in eleventh-century Egypt, ‘in opposition to Arabic, Coptic had become the marker of a distinctive religious identity, symbolizing adherence to Egypt’s glorious Christian tradition.’<sup>138</sup> This ‘patriotic’ value of Coptic was obviously absent in Makuria; nothing suggests that the language could have served as a means of personal identification, be it religious or national.<sup>139</sup> Quite the contrary, the typological differentiation of Coptic Nubian sources points to its more ‘practical’ employment, especially when one acknowledges the role of Coptic as a *lingua franca* in Nubadia in the preceding centuries. Thus, it would seem natural that when Egypt started to run out of Coptic users, there was no longer a need in Nubia to cultivate the knowledge of this language.<sup>140</sup> On the other hand, it is perhaps not accidental that Old Nubian emerged as a literary and documentary language in this very period; analogous phenomena can be observed in other regions, most notably in the West, where vernaculars started to substitute Latin in the eleventh

136 ZAKRZEWSKA, “A bilingual language variety’ or ‘the language of the pharaohs?’”

137 VAN DER VLIET, “Coptic as a Nubian literary language,” pp. 768–9.

138 VAN DER VLIET, “Coptic documentary papyri”; see also ZAKRZEWSKA, “A bilingual language variety’ or ‘the language of the pharaohs?’”

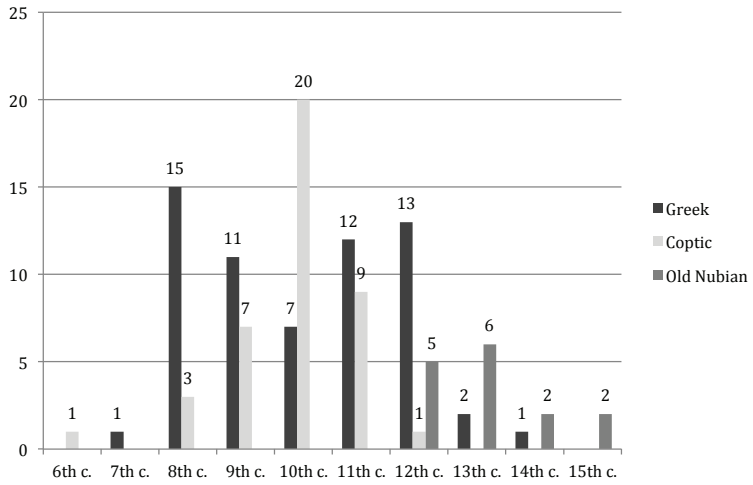
139 See above, p. 33, n. 116. Cf. CSCN, pp. 76–81, esp. p. 79, for a discussion on the emergence of the Era of the Martyrs in Egypt and Nubia in the 10th–11th century and its religious connotations.

140 The only exception was the official correspondence of the highest authorities, as exemplified by the letter of King Moïse Georgios to Patriarch Mark III (see above, p. 33, n. 113).

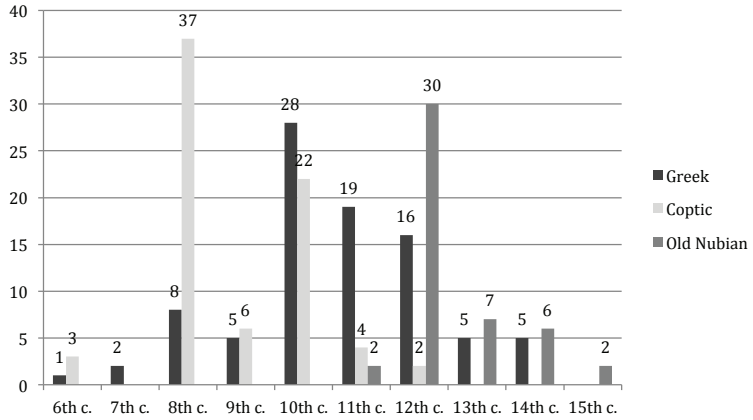
## Ochała

Graph 9.  
Chronological distribution of Nubian languages in precisely dated texts.

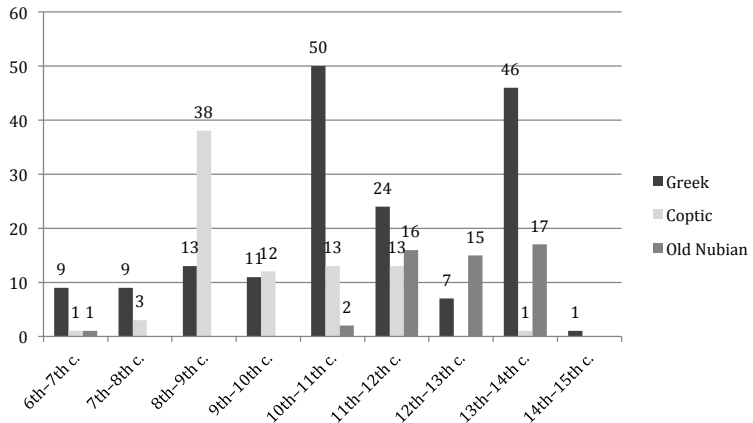
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Graph 10.  
Chronological distribution of Nubian languages in texts dated within one century.



Graph 11.  
Chronological distribution of Nubian languages in texts dated within two centuries.



century. This emphasis on the development of the indigenous language, possibly incited by a broader phenomenon and most surely strongly supported by the Makurian authorities, combined with the radical change of status of Coptic in Egypt lead to a quick decline of the latter language in the Middle Nile Valley.

The above discussion, provided the reasoning is credible, may bring us a bit closer to understanding the difference between status of Greek and Coptic in Nubia. While it would seem that Nubian Coptic could not exist without the support of Egyptian Coptic, Nubian Greek apparently managed to survive even though the language had already been obsolete in Egypt (apart from literature and liturgy) for a few centuries.<sup>141</sup> This, on the one hand, seems to confirm the different statuses of those languages (Greek as a 'sacred,' 'magical,' or 'divine' language and Coptic as a more 'practical'/'human' one) and on the other may bring us a step further. If Coptic in Nubia indeed needed a Coptic-using population to sustain its existence, one might risk an opinion that it was a living language understood and written<sup>142</sup> by at least a part of the Nubian society.<sup>143</sup> The fact that the persistence of Greek in Nubia appears to be totally independent of external influence, indicates, in turn, that it was a 'dead' language used only because of its prestige and symbolic value.<sup>144</sup>

However, such considerations are purely hypothetical and must not be pushed too far, because of the very nature of the Greek and Coptic written sources that we have at our disposal, which are as a rule very formulaic.<sup>145</sup> Admittedly, enough examples exist showing that some Nubians had an active command of Greek with a decent knowledge of the Greek grammar and rich vocabulary, at times even displaying classical literary overtones,<sup>146</sup> which enabled them to create more or less sophisticated texts from outside of the standard repertoire or variations of the existing patterns.<sup>147</sup> There are, how-

141 It is true that Greek was still a living language in the Eastern Empire. While the Nubians could indeed retain contacts with Byzantium (see, e.g., ROŚTKOWSKA, "The Visit of a Nubian King to Constantinople in AD 1203"), it is impossible to verify if and to which degree this could have influence Nubian Greek.

142 See ZAKRZEWSKA, "A bilingual language variety' or 'the language of the pharaohs'?" for the opinion that Sahidic Coptic was an artificial construct used in writing for prestigious purposes but never spoken as a vernacular.

143 The existence of a fragmentary typikon from Qasr Ibrim, where the rubrics are in Greek and the quotations from the Scriptures in Coptic strongly suggests that the liturgical readings could have been read in the latter language so that the faithful could better understand them (HAGEN & OCHALEA, "Saints and scriptures for Phaophi," pp. 279–80).

144 Note, however, a Greek postscript by Bishop Athanasios of Qus in the Coptic scroll of Bishop Timotheos dated to the 14th century. The will of the Egyptian bishop to express himself in this language, otherwise obsolete in Egypt, could suggest that Greek was still actively used in the Nubian Church (PLUMLEY, *The Scrolls of Bishop Timotheos*, pp. 24–5).

145 DONADONI, "Les inscriptions grecques de Nubie," p. 591; ŁAJTAR, "The Greek of Late Christian Inscriptions from Nubia," p. 759.

146 See, e.g., I. *Khartoum Greek* 18, ad l. 16; and ŁAJTAR, "The Greek of Late Christian Inscriptions from Nubia," p. 761.

147 *Ibid.*, p. 759.

ever, no traces of any colloquial or idiomatic expressions characteristic of a living tongue.<sup>148</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

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The present article does not bring any revolutionary changes in our understanding of the Nubian multilingualism, but this is not its purpose. Quite the contrary, this is one of the basic studies still surprisingly lacking in Nubiology, aimed at systematising the existing knowledge about the Christian kingdoms of the Middle Nile Valley. Instead of building sophisticated theories about the sociocultural and, to a lesser degree, historical reality of Nobadia, Makuria, and Alwa, very often impressionistic and intuitive, one should rather concentrate on constructing a set of basic tools and studies allowing more efficient research in more complicated subjects, tools that are normally and successfully used in studying, for example, classical or Egyptian antiquity.

The quantitative and qualitative approaches employed in this preliminary study of the Nubian multilingualism have helped verify the existing common opinions about the status of the three Nubian languages. As has been demonstrated, most of those theories should be considered valid. Also, earlier arguments appear to be generally correct. Nevertheless, thanks to a meticulous survey of the Nubian sources, much more precision can be obtained, introducing nuances that have so far gone unnoticed. Moreover, the article adds some new arguments to the already existing explanations, thus reinforcing previous judgements.

The three Nubian languages can therefore each be characterised in three areas, typological, topographical, and chronological:

1. Greek:
  - ▶ language of official religion and private piety,
  - ▶ used throughout the whole territory of the Middle Nile Valley,
  - ▶ used throughout the Christian period;
2. Coptic:
  - ▶ language of literature and documents; possibly also language of written (and oral?) communication with Egyptians on both private and official levels,
  - ▶ commonly used only in Nobadia, but not totally unknown in Makuria and Alwa,
  - ▶ functioning only until the twelfth century;

<sup>148</sup> The argument first put forward by OATES, "A Christian Inscription in Greek from Armenna in Nubia," pp. 170–1, that the orthographic errors in Greek sources from Nubia reflect current standards in the pronunciation of this language means no more than that: it would have been pronounced in this way as either a spoken or written/read language (pace SHINNIE, "Multilingualism," p. 46).

3. Old Nubian:

- ▶ language of literature, documents, official religion, and private piety,
- ▶ used throughout the whole territory of the Middle Nile Valley,
- ▶ written form developed already in the eighth century, but commonly used only from the tenth–eleventh century.

Yet, it must constantly be kept in mind that the study presents only a tentative state of research. The Database of Medieval Nubian Texts is still largely incomplete; it is estimated that even as many as 3000 sources remain unpublished, a statistically significant figure. The speedy publication of texts is therefore a *desideratum* without which further progress is impossible. Another, no less important *conditio sine qua non* is the development of palaeographic studies, necessary for achieving a greater precision in dating Nubian texts, which would also markedly enhance our abilities in examining Nubian multilingualism as well as other unclear questions of Christian Nubian history.

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