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# The *Liber Institutionis Michælis* in Medieval Nubia

Alexandros Tsakos

## 1. Introduction

The 11th Nilo-Saharan Linguistics Colloquium (NSLC) was dedicated to the study of Nubian languages with a special panel on Old Nubian. This was the first NSLC after the passing away in 2004 of the renowned scholar in Old Nubian, G.M. Browne, and it is no surprise that there were high expectations about new input on various aspects of Old Nubian grammar, translations from mainly Greek *Vorlagen*, lexicography and vocabulary, Old Nubian in the frame of multilingual Christian Nubia, as well as the paleography and codicology of Old Nubian manuscripts. With many more texts in Old Nubian at hand to work with, and a century of experience gained since the first publications on the Old Nubian language, the group that gathered at Cologne formed, in my opinion, a diverse and dynamic panel. We used interesting examples from the corpus of religious literature and documentary texts in Old Nubian and discussed issues that went beyond the natural focus of the NSL colloquium on linguistics.

In my own contribution, I presented some first results of a study of one of the literary works preserved in Old Nubian, namely the *Liber Institutionis Michælis*.<sup>1</sup> The Nubian corpus of the *Liber Institutionis Michælis* illustrates several of the main problems of the current state of affairs in the study of Old Nubian language and literacy: inaccuracies in the related bibliography; a unique case of a Greek *Vorlage* of an Old Nubian literary text; thought-provoking observations about the codicology of Nubian manuscripts; unpublished textual material belonging to the literary corpus about the archangel

1 I would like to thank the organizers of the colloquium and of the panel on Old Nubian for their kind invitation, warm hosting and fruitful discussions. Moreover, I would like to thank Robin Seignobos and Henriette Hafsaas Tsakos for comments during the preparation of this paper.

Michael; and concrete examples of the way modern research can identify Nubian agency behind the creation of religious literature in Nubia in languages other than Old Nubian, namely Greek.

My empirical basis consists of five manuscripts discovered at four sites in Lower Nubia:

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1. A fragment of a parchment sheet from Qasr Ibrim with an Old Nubian version of the *Liber Institutionis Michælis*.<sup>2</sup>
2. A fragment of a parchment sheet found at Serra East with a Greek text identified as the Vorlage of the Qasr Ibrim Old Nubian version of the *Liber Institutionis Michælis*.<sup>3</sup>
3. An almost complete parchment sheet found at Qasr el Wizz, inscribed in red letters on only one side and containing a Greek text dealing with the naming, the election, and the establishment of Michael.<sup>4</sup>
4. A fragment of a parchment sheet that preserves a Greek text on four pages. It was discovered at Qasr el Wizz and it deals with the creation of Michael and his receiving of the Spirit of the Trinity.<sup>5</sup>
5. Three pages of a parchment codex from the site of Attiri. The Old Nubian texts remain unclear to me and I cannot identify the literary work (or works?) that they preserve. The topic, however, surely concerns the archangel Michael.<sup>6</sup>

Studying the first two fragments, I noticed an anomaly in the references concerning the *Liber Institutionis Michælis* in Nubia, and this anomaly led me to address problems of bibliography regarding Old Nubian in general. The two fragments from Wizz relate to the identification of the literary sources upon which the *Liber Institutionis Michælis* has been compiled, as well as to the way scholarly work can identify Nubian agency behind the particularities in a given text of a 'foreign' language in Nubia – such as Greek. In this paper, I will focus on the last issue. Finally, the pages from Attiri enlarge the corpus of works on the archangel Michael, but since the content cannot be identified, they are for the time being only interesting because of the paleographical and codicological information that they have preserved for us. This information provides some ground for an intriguing hypothesis.

2 BROWNE, "A Revision of the Old Nubian Version of the *Institutio Michælis*"; Ibid., *Literary Texts in Old Nubian*, pp. 60–2; Ibid., "An Old Nubian Version of the *Liber Institutionis Michælis*"; Ibid., "Old Nubian Literature", p. 382; Ibid., "Miscellanea Nubiana (II)", pp. 453–4.

3 BROWNE, "A Revision of the Old Nubian Version of the *Institutio Michælis*"; TSAKOS, "The texts from Cerra Matto."

4 TSAKOS, "The texts from Qasr el Wizz."

5 Ibid.

6 The manuscripts from Attiri have been photographed by the author at the Sudan National Museum, their provenance identified and a preliminary edition prepared. After contacting David Edwards, who is responsible for the publication of the material from that site, the author has put the manuscripts online where they can become the object of a cooperation between all the participants of the Old Nubian panel at Cologne.

## 2. The *Liber Institutionis Michælis* in Nubia and problems of bibliography regarding Old Nubian

The *Liber Institutionis Michælis* is attested in two Coptic manuscripts from Hamouli in Egypt (one complete in Sahidic and one incomplete in Fayumic)<sup>7</sup>; in two bifolia from the IFAO-Cairo collection of Coptic manuscripts written in Sahidic and probably coming from the White Monastery<sup>8</sup>; in a single parchment fragment with a text in Old Nubian discovered at Qasr Ibrim<sup>9</sup>; and in another parchment fragment from Lower Nubia, namely from Serra East – renowned for the discovery of the longest text in Old Nubian (a praise of the cross by Pseudo-Chrysostom)<sup>10</sup> – preserving a Greek text, which matches, almost word for word, the text of the Old Nubian Qasr Ibrim version. The Greek manuscript from Serra East has therefore been considered as the Vorlage of the Old Nubian Qasr Ibrim text.

Until now, this unique coincidence has not been exploited to its maximum potential, in matters of either content or form. For example, Michael is often called in both the *Liber Institutionis Michælis* and in other sources as ἀρχιστράτηγος. This Greek word appears in the Greek text from Serra and is translated in the Old Nubian text from Qasr Ibrim as ⲘⲟⲘⲟⲥ ⲁⲁⲮⲠⲁ. This is the Old Nubian term used in documentary sources to describe the Greek word ἑπαρχος, the title of the head of the Makurian administration of the former kingdom of Nobadia. To what extent can we use this significant choice of words in the translation from Greek to Old Nubian, in order to understand better the (military?) role of the representative of the Makurian state in Lower Nubia?

Furthermore, the manuscript remains officially unpublished, because Bozena Rostkowska, who first identified it, never proceeded to a complete edition, in spite of the fact that Browne (then married to Rostkowska) did produce a parallel edition of the Old Nubian and of the Greek fragments in an article from 1988.<sup>11</sup> A researcher unfamiliar with the variety of venues where these studies were presented or published would be unable to trace the scholarly input on such a topic, since the first identification of the Old Nubian Qasr Ibrim version was presented during the Warsaw Congress of Coptic Studies in 1984, the proceedings of which were only published in 1990 without a reference to the above-mentioned 1988 article, in which the relation between the Old Nubian Qasr Ibrim and the Greek Serra East manuscripts was analyzed. Positive developments in the direc-

7 MÜLLER, *Die Bücher der Einsetzung der Erzengel Michael und Gabriel*.

8 TIBET, *The Investiture of Michael*.

9 BROWNE, "An Old Nubian Version of the *Liber Institutionis Michælis*."

10 *Ibid.*, *Chrysostomus Nubianus*.

11 *Ibid.*, "A Revision of the Old Nubian Version of the *Institutio Michælis*."

tion of updated and searchable reference lists have taken place over the last years, thanks mainly to the Database of Medieval Nubian Texts (DBMNT) prepared by Grzegorz Ochała.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Religious literature in Greek about the archangel Michael discovered at Qasr el Wizz

The Oriental Institute Nubian Expedition's excavations at Qasr el Wizz in the 1960s unearthed two manuscripts in Old Nubian and four in Greek among more than two hundred manuscript fragments in Coptic.<sup>13</sup> Two of the four Greek manuscripts belong to religious literature relating to the archangel Michael with specific affinities that link them closely to the *Liber Institutionis Michælis*. These manuscripts have the registration numbers 65-10-59 and 65-11-99.<sup>14</sup>

#### 3.1 Ms. 65-10-59

This manuscript is a parchment leaf discovered in the fill of the floor of a room in the monks' quarters. It was inscribed on only one side and exclusively with red ink. The text narrates the naming (ll. 3-5), the election (ll. 6-7), and the creation (ll. 8-10) of the archangel Michael, and I suggest that it is preserved almost complete with only a couple of lines with an introductory phrase missing. There are a couple of interesting remarks regarding the content of this manuscript: First, there is the dating of the election and creation of Michael to the 12th of the month Choiak, a hitherto unattested commemoration; and second, the event of Michael's creation is placed together with the creation of many other angels. Leaving aside for the moment details of language that will be discussed in the last section, it should be stressed that the closest parallel to this textual tradition is none other than ms. 65-11-99 discovered in another archaeological context of the monastic site at Qasr el Wizz.

#### 3.2 Ms. 65-11-99

This manuscript is a fragment of a bifolium found in the storage facility coded 11-R. The main preserved text consists of an explanation

<sup>12</sup> The DBMNT can be accessed online at <<http://www.dbmnt.uw.edu.pl/>>

<sup>13</sup> For preliminary reports on the excavations, see SCANLON, "Excavations at Kasr el Wizz: A Preliminary Report I"; *Ibid.*, "Excavations at Kasr el Wizz. A Preliminary Report II"; SEELE, "University of Chicago Oriental Institute Nubian Expedition: Excavations between Abu Simbel and the Sudan Border, Preliminary Report."

<sup>14</sup> These are the registration numbers of the two manuscripts. They mean that one was the 59th find to be registered from the University of Chicago Oriental Institute Nubian Expedition (OINE) digs in October 1965 and that the other the 99th from November of the same year, the only two months that OINE worked at Wizz. Earlier in 1964 a reconnaissance visit and dig were conducted under the direction of Seele. The full edition of these manuscripts will appear in the 14th volume of the OINE series where the entire archaeological record from the site will be published by a team of researchers headed by Dr. Artur Obłuski from the University of Warsaw.

that Jesus is giving to his disciples about the creation of the archangel Michael. The closest literary parallel to this text is the *Liber Institutionis Michælis*, but there are variations between the manuscript from Wizz and the versions known from Hamouli (in Sahidic and Fayumic), the White Monastery (Sahidic) Qasr Ibrim (in Old Nubian), and Serra East (in Greek). The variations in the content can be summarized in the following two points: first, the creation of the angels in the *Liber Institutionis Michælis* starts with the creation of Saklataboth or Mastema, the one to become the fallen angel, and continues with Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and the rest, while in the Wizz manuscript the creation of all the angels is narrated together, only to be later focused on the creation of Michael; and second, the creation of the angels and of Michael is precisely dated as taking place on the 12th of Choiak, while in the *Liber Institutionis Michælis* there is no distinction of day between the creation of the angels and the rest of the events narrated, culminating in the Fall of Mastema (on the 11th of Hathor) and the Enthronement of Michael (on the 12th of Hathor).

The lack of any parallels to these two variations among the literature relating to Michael in Egypt indicates that these were Nubian creations.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the question arises whether it is possible to identify the ethno-linguistic identity of the individuals responsible for the creation of such a textual tradition. In order to achieve that, we will turn to a couple of details of the language used in the manuscripts from Wizz.

### 3.3 *The language of mss. 65-10-59 and 65-11-99*

It seems superfluous to suggest that deviations from the norms of medieval Greek koiné would indicate the non-Greek ethnic origins of a given scribe, since the use of Greek was widespread in the entire Eastern Roman Empire and the ethno-linguistic background of the peoples inhabiting these regions varied significantly. The use of Greek as the language of administration, high culture or religion did not stop the local population from using their own languages, as the example of Egypt clearly shows. Similarly, the use of Greek and Coptic in Christian Nubia should not be understood as an indication that these were the every-day languages used by the Nubians themselves. It is rather the inscribed material in Old Nubian that should be considered as the closest attestation to what the language used in Christian Nubia would have sounded like. Although variations would surely exist between dialects, regions, social classes, and so

<sup>15</sup> However, it is worth investigating further the relation between the dating of the creation of Michael on the 12th of Choiak and the fact that the ancient Egyptian Khoiak festival was traditionally beginning on the 12th day of the fourth month after the Nile floods, which is precisely the 12th of the month Choiak.

on, there were surely linguistic norms surrounding the structure of the Old Nubian language in both its oral and written forms.

One such norm is the word order in a sentence. Old Nubian belongs to the category of *sov* languages,<sup>16</sup> whereas Greek is mainly *svo*, although other word orders appear as well. The difference between *sov* and *svo* languages means that a transposition of the object in phrases of a given text can reveal the ethno-linguistic origins of the author. So, a Nubian scribe composing a text in Greek may tend to set the object between the subject and the verb, while someone closer to the Greek language would rather keep the word order *svo*, unless special reasons prevent him or her from doing so. For example, the object of a sentence in Greek is positioned as the first constituent of a given phrase for reasons of topicality.

There is one such case in ms. 65-10-59, where the demonstrative pronoun *τοῦτον* is placed before the verb so as to make explicit that it is the archangel Michael who is the main topic of the following phrase too. More interesting is another case from ms. 65-11-99, where two verbs, namely *ἐνεφύσαμεν* and *ἐνεπλήσαμεν*, have the same subject, namely *ὁ πατήρ μου καὶ ἐμοῦ καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ἁγίων* – in other words, the Holy Trinity. The object of both verbs is the nominal phrase *τῷ πνεύμα ἑμῶν*, complemented by the prepositional phrase *εἰς τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ*. However, this seems to fit only with the first verb, since the second verb (*ἐνεπλήσαμεν*) needs a direct object in the accusative (*τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ*) and an indirect object in the dative (*τῷ πνεύματι ἡμῶν*). Interestingly, although as a subject the Holy Spirit is preceded by the definite article in the nominative/accusative form (*τὸ*), when it is used as an object, it is preceded by the article in dative (*τῷ*). This awkward sharing of objects between the two sentences, as defined by the two verbs, indicates that the scribe did not feel very much at home with this syntactical difficulty and allowed patterns of his/her own language to intrude into the structure of his/her phrase. In a Nubian context, it might therefore be legitimate to suggest that the scribe was not simply copying a text before him (or her), but was rather compiling a text by memory based on knowledge of a literary tradition stemming from the one to which belonged the *Liber Institutionis Michælis* as preserved in Sahidic and Fayumic Coptic. Thus, the Nubian scribe may in fact be identified as the author of the text at hand.

The positioning of the object in the case study of the previous paragraph is an observation that only weakly illustrates the point that I am trying to make, namely that the author of the Wizz manuscripts about Michael was a Nubian. It is possible that such an awkward solution to the difficult problem of linking two verbs with



the same object but needing different cases in each instance might have been the result of the influence of some other colloquial tradition, in Egypt or in other regions of the Eastern Christian world; perhaps even the result of a corruption of the text independent of influences 'foreign' to Greek, but inherent in the evolution of the language itself.

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Another example from the same manuscript might help us identify the ethno-linguistic origins of the author better. To achieve this, we should turn attention to the way the Holy Trinity is defined: ὁ πατήρ μου καὶ ἐμοῦ καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ἁγίων. In the passage preserved in the bifolium from Wizz, Jesus Christ is addressing his disciples. Therefore, the collective reference to the Trinity is made with the verbs in the first person plural. Consequently, when the reference is to the Father, the possessive pronoun is the genitive of the first person singular, and one would expect that Jesus is referring to himself by using the nominative of the first person personal pronoun. Nevertheless, the personal pronoun used is the genitive of the first person, namely ἐμοῦ. The use of ἐμοῦ instead of ἐγώ is a trait characteristic of many graffiti registered on the walls of secular or religious buildings in Nubia, as for example at Banganarti.<sup>17</sup> There, the people mentioned in the graffiti more often than not have a Nubian name. Of course it is an open question whether the person named in a graffito and the scribe are the same, but it is more than probable that at 14th century Banganarti, a person with a Nubian name or a scribe working at and for the religious institution there was a Nubian.

One more example that strengthens the idea that the ethno-linguistic identity of the author of the texts in the two manuscripts from Wizz is Nubian is a case of peculiar subject/verb syntax. The verb is ἀγαλλιάσεις and the subject is τὸ πνεῦμα μου. While the verb is clearly a second person singular, the subject would normally be followed by a verb in the third person singular. In that case, the verb should have been ἀγαλλιάσσει. Although this variation may well be accounted among the innumerable cases of debased Greek grammar in medieval literacy, it is striking that one of the most marked characteristics of Old Nubian is precisely the use of the same ending for the 2nd and 3rd person singular of the verb.<sup>18</sup>

With these three case studies, I have demonstrated that it could be fruitful to examine similar phenomena in other Greek (and Coptic?) texts found in Nubia, with the purpose of identifying the origin of the scribe, his/her independence from any originals during the creation of a literary work, and eventually the degree to which such

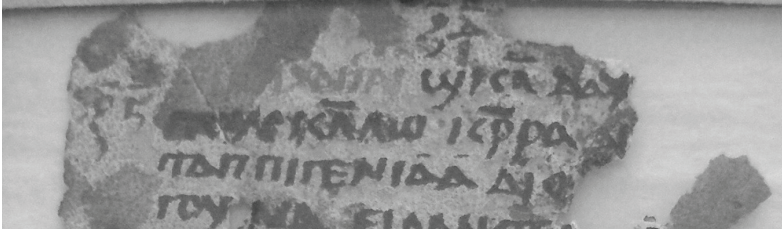
17 LAJTAR, "Late Christian Nubia through visitors' inscriptions from the Upper Church at Banganarti," p. 322, fig. 1; p. 327.

18 BROWNE, *Introduction to Old Nubian*, p. 24.



Fig. 1: Detail from a ms. about the archangel Michael from Attiri (Sudan National Museum, SNM 23045)

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Nubian literates were not just scribes but in fact authors of religious literature that during some specific period of Nubian Christianity was written and read in Greek rather than Coptic or Old Nubian.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. The unpublished manuscripts from Attiri: From the *Liber Institutionis Michælis* to Nubian literature about Michael

Fourteen manuscript fragments have been unearthed at Attiri.<sup>20</sup> At least three of them seem – on the basis of content, paleography and codicology – to one or more works relating to the archangel Michael. If one looks closer at the illustrated detail of one of the manuscripts from Attiri (fig. 1), we see that in the margin to the left of the first line of text, two letters and traces of a third one have been written. The two letters still visible clearly have a supra-linear stroke and this indicates that they are numbers in the ancient Greek numeral system. They form the number 66 and if the reading of the letter preserved very partially as a P (*rhō*) is correct then the number is 166. What is the significance of this?

First of all, it should be pointed out that this is not the pagination of the manuscript because this can be seen on the top of both pages of this fragment (pp. 64 and 65). Moreover, it cannot be the numbering of the quires in which the codex was bound, because it is impossible to get 64 or 65 pages in 166 quires (or even 66 if, for the sake of the argument one would like to doubt the reading of P before the other two letters). Luckily, such notes of numbers have been found in the margins of the text in another Nubian manuscript, specifically the manuscript preserving the Old Nubian version of the *Liber Institutionis Michælis* identified by Browne among the manuscripts from Qasr Ibrim.<sup>21</sup> There, two numbers can be discerned: 136 and 137, on the same page and with 9 lines of distance between each other, in both cases left from a line where the name of the archangel Michael has been written. Browne suggested that the scribe was number-

19 A major inspiration for this type of work has been the presentation by ŁAJTAR, “The Greek of late Christian inscriptions from Nubia.”

20 For a short introduction to the site, see TSAKOS, “Miscellanea Epigraphica Nubica III,” pp. 243–4.

21 BROWNE, “A Revision of the Old Nubian Version of the *Institutio Michælis*,” p. 78.

ing each instance that the name of the archangel appeared in the text,<sup>22</sup> which would mean that by page 65 the name of Michael had appeared 136 times.

This explanation fits the instance observed in the Attiri manuscript in two ways: First, in the only instance where the left margin is preserved next to a line where the name of Michael is written, the number 166 appears exactly next to this line. The left margin is unfortunately not preserved next to the other lines where the name of the archangel is written. And second, the name of the archangel seems to have been written with a nearly similar, albeit not identical, frequency in the two codices, since in 63 pages of the Attiri codex there would have been 165 occurrences, while in 65 pages of the Ibrim codex no more than 135.

These observations have two additional implications. First, that all the works in the two codices were in one way or another related to Michael; and second, that these works were not the same – or not arranged in the same sequence – in the two codices. An intriguing hypothesis for the reconstruction of both codices appears: if we are to suppose that a complete codex would contain at least 300 pages,<sup>23</sup> then the 64th, 65th, and 66th pages are to be placed between  $\frac{1}{4}$  and  $\frac{1}{5}$  of the entire volume of the hypothetical codex.<sup>24</sup> Then, if we again suppose that the occurrences of the name of Michael are to a certain degree evenly distributed, then by the end of the codex we would expect to have seen 4 to 5 times 151 occurrences (the average of 136 and 166) of the archangel's name. In total, this means 675 occurrences. This number comes very close to number 689, the value of the cryptogram XIIΘ used as the 'magical' cipher of the name of Michael (M=40, I=10, X=600, A=1, H=8, and Λ=30, so  $40+10+600+1+8+30=689=XIIΘ$ ).

Thus, we arrive at the following plausible conclusions: based on Browne's suggestion that the numbers in the margins kept track of the number of occurrences of the name of Michael and on the different numbering appearing in the margins of pages with coinciding page numbers in the two different codices from Ibrim and Attiri, we can suggest that there was a tradition of compiling codices with works related to Michael, but either not necessarily the same works or not necessarily ordered in the same sequence. And based on a hypothetical average volume of a codex and a guess as to the distribution of the occurrences of writing the name of the archangel in such a volume, we can surmise that the total number of occurrences was

22 BROWNE, "Old Nubian Literature," p. 382.

23 TURNER, *The Typology of the Early Codex*, pp. 82-4.

24 This is against the idea of Browne in "Old Nubian Literature" that the fragments from Ibrim and Serra come from the middle of the original codices and therefore were the ones preserved.

689, equalling the cryptogrammatic value of the name of Michael and thus imbuing the entire codex with the powers of the archangel as would be expected to appear when the 'mystical' number was formed, the cryptogram was written, and the archangel's apotropaic powers were invoked.

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## 5. Conclusions

The present paper has opened with a brief discussion of the problems relating to the organization of the data available about literature in Christian Nubia. This discussion was inspired by my study of the literary tradition in Nubia about the archangel Michael, and more precisely the work, obviously very important for the Nubians, of the *Liber Institutionis Michælis*. The identification among the texts discovered at the monastery at Qasr el Wizz of two manuscripts in Greek belonging to the tradition of the *Liber Institutionis Michælis* offered the opportunity to recognize the Nubian origin of the scribes of texts in Greek discovered in the Middle Nile Valley. The richness of the Nubians' literary traditions and the creativity of their erudite work upon these has been illustrated by a codicological reconstruction of compilations of works on Michael, based on the manuscripts found at the site of Attiri. Although preliminary, the observations presented in this paper constitute a valuable first approach to ideas about religious literacy in Christian Nubia that have not previously attracted the attention of the scholarly community working with the literary traditions of the Christian communities along the Middle Nile Valley.

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