

OLD NUBIAN

النوبية القديمة

Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei

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Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei

Altnubisch
Vieux-nubien

Old Nubian is the modern designation for a literary language attested in texts from the Nubian kingdoms of Nobadia and Makuria in the Middle Nile Valley between the late eighth and fifteenth centuries CE. It belongs to the Nilo-Saharan linguistic phylum and is written in an alphabetic script based on Coptic, with the addition of several characters from the Meroitic alphasyllabary. Old Nubian was written in a multiliterate context, alongside Greek, Coptic, and Arabic, and its materials encompass documents and inscriptions of both a religious and secular nature.

اللغة النوبية القديمة هي التسمية الحديثة للغة الأدبية الموثقة في نصوص الدولتين النوبيتين نوباديا ومكوريا في وادي النيل الأوسط بين أواخر القرن الثامن والخامس عشر الميلادي. وهي تنتمي إلى فئة اللغات النيلو- صحراوية وتكتب بخط أبجدي مستند إلى اللغة القبطية، مع إضافة عدة أحرف من اللغة المروية. تمت كتابة اللغة النوبية القديمة جنباً إلى جنب مع اللغة اليونانية والقبطية والعربية، وتشمل النصوص المتبقية وثائق ونقوش ذات طبيعة دينية ودنيوية.



Old Nubian is the modern designation for a literary language attested in texts from the Nubian kingdoms of Nobadia and Makuria in the Middle Nile Valley between the late eighth and fifteenth centuries CE. The first reference to Old Nubian in the historical record is found in a comment by Eutychius (Sa'id Ibn Batriq), who became Melkite patriarch of Alexandria in 933 CE (Vantini 1975: 108). Reproductions of Old Nubian inscriptions were first produced in the nineteenth century by François Gau (1822) and Richard Lepsius (1849, vol. VI), after which decipherment was undertaken in the early twentieth century by Heinrich Schäfer and Karl Schmidt (1906). A grammatical outline was produced in 1913 by Francis Llewellyn Griffith (1913), while Ernst Zyhlarz (1928) provided a first extensive grammatical description. Further work by B. H. Stricker (1940), Ernst Vycichl (1956, 1958, 1961), Fritz Hintze (1971,

1975a, 1975b, 1977, 1986), and Eugenia Smagina (2017 [1986]) provided additional insights into the language, but the main drive behind further advancements in Old Nubian studies were the salvage archaeological missions to Nubia in the second half of the twentieth century held in the context of the building of the Aswan High Dam, which led to the forced expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Nubians from their ancestral lands. The textual materials found during these excavations were studied extensively by Gerald M. Browne, who produced both a dictionary (1996) and a basic grammar (2003) of the language. A reference grammar was published by the present author in 2021, incorporating recent insights into Nubian linguistics and linguistic typology.

Old Nubian belongs to the Northern East Sudanic linguistic subgroup of the Nilo-Saharan phylum. It is based mainly on the predecessor of the currently spoken Nile

Nubian language Nobiin, although lexical influences of the common predecessor of the current Nile Nubian languages Andaandi (Dongolawi) and Mattokki (Kenzi) are present as well. Old Nubian further shows the influence of a Northern East Sudanic substrate language possibly related to Nara and Meroitic (Rilly 2010). It also features a set of loanwords from Greek, mostly relating to the sphere of Christianity. There are minor influences from other neighboring languages, including Late Egyptian/Coptic and the Cushitic Beja. Old Nubian was used in a multilingual and multi-literate society alongside Greek, Coptic, and, later, Arabic (Ochafa 2014).

The Old Nubian corpus consists of both literary materials and documentary texts, as well as abundant visitor inscriptions and prayers left on the walls of churches and monasteries. The literary material, which appears to have been mainly translated directly from Greek rather than Coptic, comprises diverse texts witnessing a flourishing African Christian medieval culture, including homilies such as Pseudo-Chrysostom's *In venerabilem crucem sermo*, lectionaries that provide church readings tailored to specific days on the ecclesiastical calendar, and miracle stories of popular saints such as St. Menas/Mina and St. George. The documentary texts also cover a wide range of types, including land sale contracts, letters between religious and state functionaries, and royal proclamations, giving great insight into Makuritan society. Due to the area in which the UNESCO salvage-archaeological excavations were conducted, the majority of extant texts have been found in Lower Nubia. Excavations currently continue in areas that were not submerged by Lake Nasser/Nubia in Upper Nubia as well as Soba, in the vicinity of the Sudanese capital Khartoum, producing a steady stream of new, mainly epigraphic materials written on walls. Manuscripts have not been found in recent decades.

Paleographically, the textual corpus of Old Nubian is relatively homogenous, with little discernible variation in the handwriting throughout the centuries in which it has been attested. A rough periodization of Old Nubian may, however, be established based on grammatical features. Early Old Nubian comprises texts produced during the first wave

of Nubian literacy spreading from Coptic monasteries in the seventh/eighth century. They show various types of morphology that are less present, or absent, in later texts. None of the original texts from this period remain, but there are prominent copies such as the manuscript of Pseudo-Chrysostom's sermon *In venerabilem crucem sermo* found in Serra East (Van Gerven Oei and Tsakos 2019). Archaizing Old Nubian is characterized by a highly stylized language often close to Greek archetypes and is frequently bilingual in nature. All these texts can be dated to around the turn of the twelfth century CE. Late Old Nubian is attested mainly in non-literary texts from the twelfth century onward, and often appears to be closer to spoken language. To date many details of its morphological developments remain unclear. Middle Old Nubian contains all texts produced in the interval between Early Old Nubian and Late Old Nubian not exhibiting any of the features of either period. Middle Old Nubian texts form the main basis of the grammatical description of the language, since most long literary texts have been provisionally assigned to this category. The lack of archaeological context for these literary manuscripts, often acquired under dubitable circumstances around the turn of the twentieth century, make any precise dating difficult, though they are conventionally dated to the tenth to twelfth centuries CE. The earliest datable Old Nubian text is a graffito from Es-Sebū' from 795 CE.

Alphabet

The Old Nubian script is based on the Coptic alphabet with the addition of three characters from the Meroitic alphasyllabary. (In an alphasyllabary, each sign represents an initial consonant sound plus a default vowel, which can be changed by additional signs or diacritics. Contemporary examples are the scripts of Hindi and Amharic.) The presence of the Meroitic characters provides evidence that the Old Nubian alphabet predates the Christianization of Nubia and should be dated to the collapse of the Kingdom of Kush in the third/fourth century CE. The great majority of texts are written in a slanted "Nubian-style" majuscule script originally developed in the White Monastery in Panopolis, near present-

day Sohag in Upper Egypt, around the seventh/eighth century CE.

The alphabet has twenty-nine characters (see Table 1) and two digraphs: **ϵΙ** [i, i:, j] and **οΥ** [u, u:, w, wu]. Vowel length is not indicated consistently, but can sometimes be inferred from spelling variations or modern Nubian cognates. There appears to be free variation between **ο** and **ω** [o, o:].

Character	Trans-literation	Phonetic value
α	<i>a</i>	[a, a:]
β	<i>b</i>	[b, w]
γ	<i>g</i>	[g]
Δ	<i>d</i>	[d, r]
ε	<i>e</i>	[e, e:]
ζ	<i>z</i>	[s]
η	<i>ē</i>	[i, i:]
θ	<i>th</i>	[t]
ι	<i>i</i>	[i, i:]
κ	<i>k</i>	[k, g]
λ	<i>l</i>	[l]
μ	<i>m</i>	[m]
ν	<i>n</i>	[n]
ξ	<i>x</i>	[(k)s]
ο	<i>o</i>	[o, o:]

Character	Trans-literation	Phonetic value
π	<i>p</i>	[b]
ρ	<i>r</i>	[r]
σ	<i>s</i>	[s]
τ	<i>t</i>	[t]
Υ	<i>u</i>	[i, u]
φ	<i>ph</i>	[b, f]
χ	<i>kh</i>	[k, g, h]
Ψ	<i>ps</i>	[(p)s]
ω	<i>ō</i>	[o, o:]
ϖ	<i>š</i>	[ʃ]
δ	<i>j</i>	[j]
ϛ	<i>η</i>	[ŋ]
ψ	<i>ñ</i>	[ɲ]
Ϙ	<i>w</i>	[w]

Table 1. Old Nubian alphabet.

Old Nubian also adapted the Coptic supralinear stroke, a horizontal stroke or dot placed over a letter, usually indicating a preceding vowel /i/ rather than Coptic schwa: for example, **τλλῖ** /tillin/. Over a vowel it either indicates the beginning of a syllable or an /i/ before a preceding **λ, ν, ρ,** or **δ**: **οκτακῖνα** /oktagina/.

Phonology

Old Nubian has a consonant inventory that is typical of Nubian languages (see Table 2). There is no phonemic contrast between voiced and voiceless for simple bilabial stops [b ~ p] and palatal ones [j ~ c], and this contrast seems weak with velars [k ~ g]. The voicing contrast between voiced and voiceless alveolars [d ~ t] was probably also a contrast of place, where the Δ was articulated more behind the alveolar ridge.

	B	L	A	P	V	G
Plosive	b		t d	ʃ	k g	
Nasal	m		n	ɲ	ŋ	
Fricative		f	s	ʃ		h
Trill			r			
Lateral			l			
Approximant	w			j		

Table 2. Old Nubian consonants:
B=bilabial; L = Labiodental; A=Alveolar;
P=Palatal; V=Velar; G=Glottal.

There are five vowels, with a phonemic distinction between long and short vowels (see Table 3).

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i, i:		u, u:
Mid	e, e:		o, o:
Open		a, a:	

Table 3. Old Nubian vowels.

Nouns

Determiner

Old Nubian has a determiner -λ -l (roughly corresponding to the English definite article

“the”), which appears mainly on subjects marked with the nominative case, but also before certain postpositions, e.g., Δελ-λ ΔγΔ “within the heart.” (It should be noted here that all Old Nubian examples presented hereinafter are taken from the Old Nubian corpus but simplified and edited where needed. The morpheme that is relevant in a particular example is separated by a hyphen.) Both the locative -λο/λω -lo and dative -λα -la cases etymologically contain the determiner. Indefinite noun phrases are unmarked, but may be accompanied by the numeral ΟΥΕΛ *ouel* “one.”

Case

There are four structural cases encoding the basic grammatical roles in the sentence: a zero-marked nominative, genitive -N(Δ) -n(a), dative -λα -la, and accusative -κα -ka. Old Nubian is an accusative language, which means that the subject of intransitive verbs and agent of transitive verbs are marked with the same case, the nominative. Direct objects are marked with the accusative, just like animate indirect objects. The dative is reserved for inanimate indirect objects.

The genitive is used for possessors, but also for the subject in non-coreferential attributive relative clauses, which is a feature that Old Nubian shares with other SOV (subject–object–verb) languages such as Turkish and Japanese, e.g., ΜΑΡΙΟΝ ΙΗ̄ΣΟῩΣ-̄Ν ΔΟῩΕ̄Σ̄Ν ΓΟῩΛΛΟ ΚῙΕ̄Ν “When Mary came to the place where Jesus had stayed....”

Besides the structural cases, Old Nubian also has a number of lexical cases, such as the locative -λο/λω -lo/lō, the superessive -ΔΟ/ΔΩ -do/dō, and the allative -Γ̄Χ(ΛΕ) -ḡil(le), used for encoding adjuncts. There is also a series of postpositions based on both nominal roots, such as ΚΑΛΟ *kalo* “downstream, after” and Ο̄ΡΟ *oro* “upstream, before,” and on verbal roots, such as ΚΟ *ko* “by, through” and Τ̄Ω̄Ο *tijo* “with, from.” Whereas the latter always follow a locative case, postpositions based on a nominal root may have been attested to follow a determiner, genitive, dative, or locative.

Number

Old Nubian has a singular, dual, and plural. The singular is unmarked, although there is clear evidence for a proto-Nubian singulative

marker **(i)*, which in Old Nubian survives as a nominalizer (e.g., **πιστεγε-ṯ** *pistene-it* “belief” from **πιστεγε** *pistene* “to believe”).

The dual **-(Δ)Ν ΤΡΙ** *-an tri* appears to be composite in nature and innovative, with no known cognate in other Nubian languages. It is used only on a restricted number of nouns such as body parts that come in pairs (e.g., **ḡε-ṯ** *tri oein tri* “(pair of) feet” from **ḡε** “foot”).

On a limited number of nominal roots, the plural is marked through a series of older suffixes ending in **-ι -i**, which are lexically determined and obligatory (e.g., **αποστολοC-ṽ** “apostles”; **τι-νι** “cows”; **ογκρ-ṽ** “days”). These plural suffixes may co-occur with the widely attested, non-obligatory plural suffix **-ρογ -rou**, which is used for all nominal roots (e.g., **αποστολοC-ṽ-ρογ** “apostles”; **ογκρ-ṽ-ρογ** “days”; and also **ογρογ-ρογ** “kings”; **ḡαρη-ογρογ** “heavens”).

Pronouns

Personal pronouns and clitics

The Old Nubian language has a rich pronominal morphology, with two sets of personal pronouns, a set of kinship possessors only attested on a handful of nouns, and three sets of subject clitics used on verbal forms, one of which is defective (missing certain forms in the paradigm) and disappearing.

Pronouns come in both a short (e.g., **ṯαṽ** “he, she, it”) and long form with additional vowel **-ει/ογ -i/u** (e.g., **ṯαρογ**) and make a distinction between first-person plural inclusive (including the addressee) and exclusive (excluding the addressee) (see Table 4). The distribution of long and short forms of personal pronouns is syntactically determined. In general, long forms of the personal pronoun are used in emphatic contexts and forms of address. They are also used as the basis for dative (e.g., **ṯαρι-ḡ**) and locative forms (e.g., **ṯαρι-ḡ**), and the innovative long genitive forms (e.g., **ṯαρι-ṽ**). The short forms are used otherwise (e.g., accusative **ṯακ-κα** and regular genitive **ṯαν**).

	Long pronoun	Short pronoun
1 SG	αιει, αιιογ <i>aiēi, aiou</i>	αι <i>ai</i>
2 SG	ειρι, ειρογ <i>eiri, eirou</i>	ειṽ <i>eir</i>
3 SG	ṯαρι, ṯαρογ <i>tari, tarou</i>	ṯαṽ <i>tar</i>
1 PL EXCL	ερι, ερογ(?) <i>eri, erou</i>	εṽ <i>er</i>
1 PL INCL	ογει, ογογ <i>ouei, ouou</i>	ογ <i>ou</i>
2 PL	ογρι, ογρογ <i>ourī, ourou</i>	ογṽ <i>our</i>
3 PL	ṯερι, ṯερογ <i>teri, terou</i>	ṯεṽ <i>ter</i>

Table 4. Old Nubian pronouns.

Kinship possessors, only recorded in the singular, are phonologically reduced pronominal forms prefixed to kinship terms, such as **ṽ-ṽο** *ṽpo* “your father.” They are a widespread phenomenon in Nubian languages. In Old Nubian, they have been attested only with singular possessors.

The three sets of person clitics (see Table 5) are linguistically the most interesting, as all currently spoken Nubian languages have developed a tense-agreement system in which tense and agreement morphemes have fused into fixed paradigms, which means that tense and agreement marking can no longer be morphologically separated. Old Nubian shows an earlier stage, in which tense and agreement are still represented by separate morphemes, agreement being indicated by person clitics (reduced forms of personal pronouns, as in English “gotcha” < “got you”).

	Subject clitic	Subject clitic (imperative)	“Old” subject clitic
1 SG	-i -i		
2 SG	-n -n	-i -i	-h/ı -ē/i
3 SG	-n -n	-i -i	
1 PL	-ou -ou	-am -am	
2 PL	-ou -ou	-(a)n -(a)n	-ke -ke
3 PL	-an -an	-(a)n -(a)n	

Table 5. Old Nubian subject clitics.

The regular set of subject clitics is used for cross-referencing the person of the subject on the verb (van Gerven Oei 2018). Their appearance usually coincides with the presence of a so-called “subject gap,” a syntactical situation in which an explicit subject is either absent or has been topicalized, i.e., moved to the first position in the sentence and made its “topic” (cf. English, “that guy, I saw him yesterday”). Additionally, there is a separate set of subject clitics for imperative forms, which include one of the two remaining “old” subject clitics for the second person, -h/ı -ē/i “you (sg.)” and -ke “you (pl.),” the latter being related to the Meroitic second plural marker -k(e), used in imperatives and optatives (Rilly 2020). Besides appearing in the imperative, the “old” subject clitics appear in jussives -mh/nke -mē/nke (translated with “let...” or “may...”), vetitives -tamh/tanke -tamē/tanke (translated with “don’t...”), and affirmatives -lh/lke -lē/lke and -ci/ske -si/ske (no special translation, but appear in specific syntactic positions), as well as in appeals and questions (van Gerven Oei *fc.*).

Reflexivity may be indicated with the accusative followed by the suffix -ono -ono. Reciprocity is indicated with the reciprocal pronoun ouerouel ouerouel “each other,” a reduplicated form of ouel ouel “one.”

Finally, Old Nubian has a set of honorifics often found in the opening formula of letters, such as eñ papkane ein papkane “Your Fatherhood” and eñ godkane ein godkane “Your Brotherhood.” No pattern has so far been

distinguishable in when particular honorifics are used.

Demonstrative pronouns

There are two demonstrative pronouns in Old Nubian, proximal ein ein “this” and a distal pronoun man man “that.” They have irregular plural forms, respectively einn einn “these” and mann manin “those.” The proximal demonstrative pronoun is used in certain texts as a relative pronoun, although this is most likely a literary innovation influenced by Greek.

Verbs

The verb is morphologically the most complex part of the Old Nubian clause, encoding pluractionality (also called verbal number), valency, aspect, tense, person, affirmation or negation, and sentence type. There are also a number of auxiliary and modal verbs.

The main distinction between nominal predicates (“Mary is a carpenter”) and verbal predicates (“John sings a sea shanty”) in main clauses and those in subordinate clauses is the presence of the predicate marker -a -a. Main clauses are defined by the presence of the predicate marker, e.g., tlll dmckad-a “God is a judge.” By contrast, subordinate clauses, as a rule, have none, e.g., apogtl pesen “When The boatsman said.”

The predicate marker is different from other Old Nubian morphemes, in that it is not phrase final but distributive. Thus, all nouns and adjectives in a predicate-marked nominal predicate are marked with this suffix, e.g., tlll dmckad-a dlekatp-a tweekatp-a deekatp-a “God is a judge, truthful, powerful, and patient.” Besides being used for marking predicates in main clauses, the predicate marker also appears on purpose clauses (e.g., tōdikonno-ā “in order to give to them”), on noun phrases in lieu of the vocative (ē tlll-a “Oh God”), and within the scope of universal quantifiers such as “all, every” (e.g., oukr-a mōwanno “on every day”).

Pluractionality

Pluractionality, also called verbal number, is marked with the suffix -j -j. On intransitive verbs, it refers to a plural subject (e.g., ouadankatla doug-d-ılgol “those who exist in the darkness”). On transitive verbs, it

refers to a plural object (e.g., Εῤ̄C̄C̄OY TOYCKONFOYKA AYOC-Ḑ-ICNA “he saved the three holy ones”). On ditransitive verbs that take both a direct and indirect object, it usually refers to an accusative-marked indirect object (e.g., MYCTHPOYKA OYKA ΠΛΛIΓP̄A ΔEN-Ḑ-ICNA “he revealed the mystery to us”). If the indirect object is inanimate and therefore dative-marked, the plural action marker refers to a plural object (e.g., K̄C̄C̄EΛA T̄Ḑ-Ḑ-ICNA “he gave them to the church”). The plural object occurs frequently but does not appear to be obligatory, nor is co-occurrence of plural marking with -ΓOY *-gou* on the noun phrase obligatory. The plural action suffix rarely indicates a plural event.

Valency

There are three valency suffixes: transitive -(t)P/ΔP *-(i)r/ar*, causative -Γ(t)P/ΓΔP *-g(i)r/gar*, and passive -TAK *-tak*. The transitive suffix, which is etymologically a causative, adds a patient/causee (e.g., TONΔEFOYKA OYPI-ΔP-PA “he overthrows the altars,” from OYPI “to fall”). The causative, an innovative morpheme built on the transitive suffix, adds a causee (e.g., TAN ΔEΛKA ΠAḐEIPAḐI-ΓΔ-ΔNA “he will cause his soul to be examined”). The passive suffix, which is probably based on an incorporated third-person pronoun, promotes the patient to subject (e.g., T̄LLIΛO ḐOḐ OK-TAK-OL “the one who has been called by God”).

Affirmation

Affirmative verb forms are constructed with the morpheme -M *-m* for the first and third persons, supplemented with special suffixes for the second person based on the old subject clitics (e.g., ΠC̄C̄-IM-ME “I rejoice”; ΓΔΔAP̄-ΛH “you will see”). Affirmative verb forms occur in specific syntactic contexts, such as the “then” clause of an “if...then” (conditional clause) construction. The same morpheme is also encountered in the jussive suffix -MH *-mē* “let...” and the vetitive -TAMH *-tamē* “don’t....”

Negation

Negation is usually expressed with the negative suffix -MIN/MEN *-min/men* (e.g., ΠEC-MIN-NA NA “they don’t speak”). To express negation in the past, only the past 2 tense can be used. There is a limited set of monosyllabic roots such as EIP *eir* “can” that allow for the formation of

negative forms with -MEN-TA *-men-ta*. These forms do not bear any tense or agreement morphology and supposedly represent an older stratum of negative formation. The same suffix -TA *-ta* also appears in the vetitive -TAMH *-tamē* “don’t....”

Aspect and tense

Old Nubian’s tense–aspect system is a system in transition. The textual evidence shows a wide variety of forms over time in which several morphological and phonological developments occur in parallel. The aspectual system appears to be in a transition from a system in which aspect was expressed by means of imperfective -I *-i* (for incomplete actions) and perfective -E *-e* (for complete actions) integrated with tense marking to the marking of perfective aspect by means of the separately incorporated verbal roots, -OC *-os* and -ET *-et*, originally meaning “to take.” This is, for example, apparent in forms of the verb AYΛ *aul* “to save,” which in earlier texts appears as perfective AYΛ-E and in later texts as AYΛ-OC.

Also the tense system is undergoing development as over time it integrates more closely with agreement morphology in the form of subject clitics. As explained above, subject marking on verbal forms was initially not obligatory, being instead syntactically conditioned. Old Nubian thus shows evidence of a transition from an integrated tense–aspect system with optional agreement (e.g., ΠEC-C-N-Ḑ/ΠECAPA “he said,” past tense respectively with and without agreement) to a purely tense-based system with fused agreement suffixes and aspect expressed as optional verbal suffixes, as we still find in present-day Nobiin (e.g., *n̄er-īs* “I slept,” where *-īs* encodes both past tense and first person singular).

Old Nubian has a tripartite temporal division between present tense -λ *-l* (often surfacing as -P *-r*, and possibly etymologically related to the determiner -λ *-l*), past 1 -OL *-ol*, and past 2 -C *-s*. There does not appear to be any semantic distinction between past 1 and past 2 or a phonological condition on the appearance of one or the other suffix. Nobiin has collapsed both past 1 and past 2 into a single paradigm, further suggesting that their meaning may have been similar. There are, however, some morphological and syntactic constraints on the

past tense morphemes: only past 2 can co-occur with the negative suffix (e.g., ΔΕΚΚΙΓῚ-ΜῚ-ϸ-ΕΛΟ “I did not conceal”); past 1 is restricted to coreferential attributive relative clauses (where the subject of the relative clause is the same as its antecedent, e.g., ΤΑΔΑΔΩ ΟΛΛ-ΟΛ “he who hung upon it”) while past 2 is restricted to non-coreferential attributive relative clauses (where the subject of the relative clause and the antecedent are different, e.g., ΟΥΝ ΕῚ-ϸῚ “what we received”); and in verbal predicates past 2 always co-occurs with a subject clitic (e.g., ΠΕϸ-ϸ-Ν-Ḍ “he said”). Later Old Nubian texts also see the development of a separate perfect tense by means of the suffix -ΚΟ -*ko* (e.g., ΔΣΟϸ-ΚΟ-ΝΑ “he became”).

In addition to the innovative perfective markers -Οϸ -*os* and -ΕΤ -*et*, aspectual markers include the habitual suffix -Κ(Ε) -*ke*(*e*), used for habitual actions (e.g., ΓΕΚῚ-Κ-ΟΝΑ “he frequently worked”), and the intentional suffix -(Δ)Δ -(*a*)*d*, which indicates an intention and is often used to render the Greek future tense (e.g., ΔΟ-Δ-ΡΑ “he will go”). There is also a rare perfective particle ΤΑ *ta*.

Person

Person on the verb is expressed by a series of subject clitics. During its recorded history, Old Nubian developed from a clitic language, in which cross-referencing of the subject on the verb was constrained to specific syntactic (so-called “subject-gap”) environments, into an agreement language with obligatory cross-referencing with the subject.

Auxiliary verbs

There are five attested auxiliary verbs: causative auxiliary ΓΑΡ *gar*; negative auxiliary ΜΙΝ *min*; inchoative auxiliary ΔΓ *aj*; progressive auxiliary ΔΟΥΡ *dour*; and copular auxiliary ΕΙΝ *ein*. In Old Nubian auxiliary constructions, the auxiliary verb is considered the main verb, encoding tense and person, while the meaning-carrying verb is also marked for tense (e.g., ΟΥΚΚΑ ΕΙḌΡ-Ḍ ΓΑϸ-ϸ-Ε “I caused you to know”). The previous example shows that the tense marking on the auxiliary and meaning-carrying verbs is not always congruous, as ΕΙḌΡ-Ḍ is marked with the present tense and ΓΑϸ-ϸ-Ε with past 2. The fact that both verbal forms are marked for tense is what distinguishes auxiliary constructions from converb constructions, in

which only the main verb carries tense marking.

Not all auxiliary verbs are equally common. The progressive and copular auxiliaries, especially, appear to be relatively unproductive. Both the causative and negative auxiliaries are also relatively rare and have developed into suffixes; the same process is underway with the inchoative auxiliary. This is another example of language change that can be seen in the Old Nubian corpus, where presumably older auxiliaries develop into proper suffixes.

Modal verbs

Four modal verbs have been attested in Old Nubian: ΕΙΡ *eir* “can”; ΔΟΛΛ *doll* “want”; ΔΟΛΛΙΤΑΚ *dollitak* “need” (consisting of ΔΟΛΛ *doll* “want” with the passive suffix); and ΜΟ(Υ)Ν *mo(u)n* “not want.” Modal verbs have been attested with infinitival complements, marked with -Ι -*i* or complement clauses marked with the accusative case (e.g., ΕΙḌΡ-Ι ΔΟΛΛΙϸΝḌ “you wanted to know”).

Topic and Focus Marking

The Old Nubian language features topic- and focus-marking suffixes that have been lost in present-day Nubian languages. These suffixes represent the information structure of a discourse, indicating what is the topic of conversation and what is new information, respectively. They are usually the right-most suffixes on a noun phrase. The topic marker -ΕΙΟΝ -*eion* is always attached to the left-most, topicalized constituent of the sentence and marks information that is known to the speech-act participants (e.g., ΜΑΝ ΔΠΠΙΛΑ-ΕΙΟΝ ΚῚϸΕΛΟ ΓΟΝḌΑΡΑ “In that village stood a church,” where ΜΑΝ ΔΠΠΙΛΑ-ΕΙΟΝ “that village” has been mentioned in the previous sentence and is thus known to the readers).

The focus marker -ΛΟ/ΛΩ -*lo/lō* (distinct from the locative -ΛΟ/ΛΩ -*lo/lō*) marks new information (as in ΚῚϸΕΛΟ “a church” above, which is new information to the readers). The focus marker is obligatory on nominal predicates (e.g., ḌΤΑΓΡΟῚ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΟϸΟΥΝ ΤΕΕΙΤΑ-ΛΟ “the cross is the hope of the Christians”) and negative verbal predicates (e.g., ΔΕΚΚΙΓῚ-ΜῚϸΕ-ΛΟ “I did not conceal”). A sentence can contain at most one focus and one topic marker.

Besides the topic and focus marker, there is also an affirmative marker **-m** *-m* and the emphasis marker **-cñ** *-sin* that can appear in the same slot. The former is used occasionally instead of the focus marker. The latter marks a constituent or sentence as emphatic (e.g., **ειρ καπαρα-cñ** “behold, you ate!”). It may also be used to mark leftward-moving constituents, such as antecedents of relative clauses and question words (e.g., **ο̄μιλ̄αγο̄ε-cñ ε̄ταγρο̄σαγ̄λλε πιστε̄γολ̄ογ̄α** “everyone who believes in the cross”).

Sentence Type

Old Nubian distinguishes two main sentence types: declarative and imperative. Whereas the former are zero-marked, the latter are marked with the command marker **-co/cō** *-so/sō* on the right edge of the verb (e.g., **ᾱικα Δ̄ινε-cō** “give to me!”). In imperative sentences the verb is usually marked with imperative subject clitics (e.g., **ᾱικα Δ̄ιν-ε-cō** “give to me!”). There is also a rare question marker **-za** *-ba* and direct discourse marker **-a** *-a*, indicating a quotation.

Syntax

Despite the translated nature of many of the literary texts, some generalizations can be made as regards Old Nubian syntax and word order. Typologically, Old Nubian is a subject–object–verb (SOV) language. It has postpositions rather than prepositions, and in general genitives precede noun phrases, while adjectives follow them. The verb is the most complex part of the Old Nubian sentence, with more than forty morphemes that can be suffixed to it in different combinations, some of which have been treated above.

In Old Nubian, a topic-marked constituent occupies the leftmost position, even before the subject. Adjuncts (in English usually prepositional clauses such as “in the park,” “at noon,” etc.) may appear both to the left and right of the main verb.

Inside the noun phrase, adjectives and attributive relative clauses usually follow the noun. When they precede the noun they have an inalienable and restrictive reading, which means that they describe an essential aspect of the noun (e.g., **γᾱακ̄φ̄ει ᾱφελ̄ κ̄ε̄μ̄ω̄γ̄α**

“the four incorporeal animals,” in which **γᾱακ̄φ̄ει** “incorporeal” precedes the noun because it is an essential aspect of the **ᾱφελ̄** in this case).

Genitives generally precede the noun, but may also follow it with no difference in interpretation, though the genitive morphology may change and become a so-called “long genitive” (e.g., **σ̄μ̄ῑπ̄το̄γ̄ τ̄ᾱρ-̄ν̄ν-̄λ** “his foundation” instead of **τ̄αν̄ σ̄μ̄ῑπ̄τ̄λ̄**).

In double object constructions, in which both direct and indirect object are marked with the accusative case, both the order direct object–indirect object and indirect object–direct object have been attested.

In Archaizing Old Nubian texts, several strategies are used to imitate Greek word order, including moving constituents to the left edge of the clause by marking it with the topic marker, and moving affirmative-marked verbs to verb-second position (to the right of the first constituent) (van Gerven Oei and Tsakos 2019). These syntactical strategies are employed purely to imitate Greek SVO word order and thus render a more “faithful” translation.

Coordination

There are several strategies for conjoining constituents and sentences in Old Nubian, which can all be divided into three general groups: those using the independent conjunction **on** *on* “and” (e.g., **τ̄αν̄νᾱc̄ñ̄ ε̄οκ̄λ̄ on τ̄ω̄ε̄κ̄λ̄** “his is the glory and power”); the suffix **-δε** *-de...-δε̄κε̄ρ* *-deker* (e.g., **τ̄αν̄νᾱc̄ñ̄ ε̄οκ̄λ̄δε̄ τ̄ω̄ε̄κ̄λ̄δε̄κε̄λ̄**); and asyndetic coordination with neither conjunction nor suffix (e.g., **τ̄αν̄νᾱc̄ñ̄ ε̄οκ̄λ̄ τ̄ω̄ε̄κ̄λ̄**). Disjunctions with “or” are formed with morphologically complex, supposedly grammaticalized constructions. Sentences are rarely coordinated, but rather employ topic–focus marking to establish the relation between them.

Subordination

Old Nubian has a rich inventory of subordinate clauses, including temporal, conditional, final, causal, and complement clauses. These are formed with a variety of verbal morphology, postpositions, conjunctions, and case marking. A shared aspect of all subordinate (except final)

clauses is the absence of the predicate marker -**α** -*a*.

Temporal clauses may be formed with bare verbal forms marked for tense and person, without the predicate marker -**α** -*a*. They may be extended with the locative marker -**λο/λω** -*lo/lō* and several conjunctions such as **κονο** *kono* “after” and **καλο** *kalo* “since” (e.g., **ε̄νω τογκρε-ν** “while you depart from here”; **ε̄νω τογκρε-ν-νο** “when you depart from here”).

Conditional clauses are mainly formed in two distinct ways. The first way is constructed by a bare verbal form such as that used in a temporal clause, combined with the adverb **ᾱλεσ̄ν** *alesin* “if” (Van Gerven Oei and Ferrandino 2020) (e.g., **ᾱλεσ̄ν ε̄νω τογκρε-ν** “if you depart from here”). The second way applies mostly to non-coreferential conditional clause constructions, in which the subject of the protasis (if-clause) is different from that of the apodosis (then-clause). In that case, the suffix -**κο/κα** -*ko/ka* is used, together with person marking and a locative (e.g., **ε̄νω τογκρογ-κοννο** “if you depart from here”).

Final clauses are formed like conditional clauses followed by a predicate marker (e.g., **ε̄νω τογκρογ-κοννο-ᾱ** “so that you depart from here”).

Causal clauses are also based on a bare temporal clause, usually followed by a postposition such as **δογν** “because” (e.g., **ε̄νω τογκρε-ν-νο δογν** “because you depart from here”).

Converbs

Converbs are non-finite, adverbial, and subordinate verb forms formed by directly attaching a predicate marker -**α** -*a* to a root (valency and pluractionality may be marked additionally). As such, they are not marked for tense and agreement, which they share with the main verb. They are often used to describe a sequence of consecutive or coinciding actions (e.g., **γογλαν-α κι-α ογογ-α πεσσενα** “he ran, came, shouted, and spoke.”)

There are two applicative verbs, **τῖ** *tir* “to give to you/him/her/them” and **δεν** *den* “to give to me/us,” that when combined with an adjacent converb introduce an additional argument, either a recipient or beneficiary (e.g., **ογκα πλλιῖρ-α δεν-δαρα** “you have revealed to/for us”; **τεκκα πλλιῖρ-α τιδ-δαρα** “you have revealed to/for them”).

Bibliographic Notes

The most recent grammar of Old Nubian is van Gerven Oei (2021), which includes hundreds of examples analyzing Old Nubian sentences from a wide variety of sources. Browne’s (1996) dictionary should be used with moderate caution, as some of the readings, reconstructions, and analyses proposed by the author are doubtful. Because it provides extensive references to text published before 1996, which comprises the vast majority of the Old Nubian corpus, it remains, however, a key reference work. For an understanding of Old Nubian as part of the wider Nilo-Saharan family, Rilly (2010) is indispensable, while Jakobi (2020) provides a thorough comparative analysis of the verbal morphology of Nubian languages, including Old Nubian. Browne has edited most of the Old Nubian corpus, including the major literary texts *The Miracle of Saint Mina* (Browne 1994), *Pseudo-Nicene Canons* (Browne 1983a), *Stauros Text* (Browne 1983b; van Gerven Oei and Tsakos fc.), *Lectinary* (Browne 1982), and Pseudo-Chrysostom’s *In venerabilem crucem sermo* (Browne 1984; van Gerven Oei and Tsakos 2019). He has also published three volumes of materials from Qasr Ibrim (Plumley and Browne 1988; Browne 1989; Browne 1991), the fourth volume edited by Giovanni Ruffini (2014). More recently, notable collections of texts have also been published from the sites of Attiri (van Gerven Oei et al. 2016) and Baganarti (Łajtar 2020).

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