

The Vanished Language:
Whatever Happened to Meroitic?

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William O. Beeman

Earl J. Heinrich

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The fate of Meroitic and the people who spoke it has been a source of much speculation. The abrupt shift from the Meroitic kingdom to the succeeding kingdoms of Christian Nubia (with a period of Aksumite domination in between) has led to many theories of what may have happened to them. That the culture is on the fringes of the fields of History, Ancient Near East Studies, Egyptology, and the principle means of study has, at least to the present, been primarily through archaeology means that there are a variety of sources to draw upon. Despite this, the study of this culture has primarily been viewed as ancillary to Egyptology and rarely addressed on its own (Edwards, 2004). The fact that no known group speaks what may be a descendant of Meroitic further adds to the mystery. Egyptologist Barbara Mertz (writing under her pseudonym Elizabeth Peters) used the vanished Meroitic culture in two of her Amelia Peabody mystery novels (*The Last Camel Died at Noon* and *Guardian of the Horizon*), using the theory that they had emigrated to a “lost oasis” in the western desert where they had maintained their culture into the Victorian Era (Peters, 1991; Peters, 2004). DNA tests might provide conclusive results for a comparison of Meroitic remains and living populations, but such a study has yet to be done. So the question remains, who were these people, where did they come from and what happened to them (and their language)?

The People

That the speakers of Meroitic had little in common linguistically with their neighbors in the Nile Valley has posed a problem for explaining their origins as well as deciphering their writings. Attempting to track down their origins, which would also help with decipherment, has proved a long and complicated task since the first attempts were made by the Prussian

Egyptologist Lepsius after he rediscovered the remains of Meroe in 1843. Recent work summarized in Rilly and de Voogt (2012) has brought this quest closer to completion.

Origins and Antiquity

The cultures in Egypt and Nubia arose around the same time, but the Egyptians united first and sought to keep the Nubian polities divided and weakened (Malek, 2000). This is demonstrated in the trade/political/military expeditions of Harkhuf and his father (among others), governors of Elephantine, into the southern lands of Wawat, Irtjet and Kush (O'Connor, 1993; Lichtheim, 1975). Throughout most of the Egyptian Old Kingdom this policy was pursued, but with the decline that accompanied the long reign of Pepi II (r. c. 2284-2184 BCE) and the divisions of the First Intermediate Period, this policy was no longer in force and a more powerful Nubian state could emerge that would be "Egypt's Rival in Africa" (O'Connor, 1993; Malek, 2000; Kemp, 1983).

Kerma Period

Until recently it had been believed that the Meroitic language was used only in the later Napatan and Meroitic kingdoms in Nubia. The research compiled by Rilly and de Voogt (2012) demonstrates that an early form of the Meroitic language was in use by the people of Kush, likely centered at Kerma (O'Connor, 1986), ruler's names recorded in Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period texts are referred to as proto-Meroitic and often contained the names of Meroitic gods such as Mash (a solar deity) and Apedemak (the lion-headed war/creator god) (Rilly & de Voogt, 2012). The emergence of a powerful polity on the southern border of Egypt is evidenced by the construction of numerous fortresses along the Nile River from the 1st Cataract to just south of the 2nd Cataract (Kerma was just south of the 3rd Cataract) (Callender, 2000).

Rilly and de Voogt (2012) summarize the research done (primarily by French scholars and published previously in French) that has identified the Meroitic language as being part of the North Eastern Sudanic division of the Nilo-Saharan Group of African languages. Because the language appears to have had numerous words for forms of cattle (including sheep and goats) as well as cattle products but no words for crocodile (referred to as river hyena) or hippopotamus (referred to as river cow), both prominent animals in the Nile Valley environment of Kerma, Napata and Meroe, the point of origin was sought in a place where cattle herding was practiced and this language group was prominent in the late prehistoric period. The desertification that accompanied the advance of the Sahara Desert had led to the drying up of what had been a number of previous tributaries of the Nile, including the Wadi Howar, which fit the profile of being in the area of this language group and having a large number of herdsmen living there as the river went from a constant source (referred to by some as the Yellow Nile) to an intermittent source to a dry river bed. The Wadi Howar was cut off from the Nile Valley and the region became uninhabitable after c. 1100 BCE, with major populations having left sometime previous to this. A portion of this population is regarded as being the speakers of proto-Meroitic and forming the nucleus of the state founded at Kerma, perhaps with other local groups (Rilly & de Voogt, 2012). This study, connecting Meroitic with a known language group and locality and pushing its first appearance back by centuries has been a major breakthrough in the study of the language and the culture.

Kerma came to be an expansionist culture, which extended its reach up to the 1st cataract during the 2nd Intermediate Period when Egypt was divided and weakened, as well as down to the 4th Cataract near the future capital of Napata. The tombs of their rulers were large mounds built near the site of the original settlement (the city site having been moved due to changes in

the course of the Nile) and excavations revealed large numbers of human sacrifices which were interred with the deceased (Judd & Irish, 2009). No inscriptions or writings from this period have been found in Meroitic, its use is only attested to in Egyptian sources.

Kerma became part of an existential threat to the indigenous Egyptian dynasty (Dynasty 17) that was centered at Thebes and was in conflict with the Hyksos invaders who occupied the northern portion of Egypt when they were discovered to be in negotiations with the Hyksos to form an alliance against the Theban kings. This led to campaigns against them by Kamose (last king of the 17th Dynasty as well as his brother Ahmose I (founder of the 18th Dynasty) and the destruction of Kerma and termination of its independence by Thutmose I (Fisher, Lacovara, Ikram, & D'Auria, 2012; Bourriau, 2000; Bryan, 2000).

Egyptian Domination

The Egyptian conquest of Nubia continued after Thutmose I sacked Kerma and brought its rulers head back to Egypt (as related in the autobiography of Ahmose son of Ebana in Lichtheim, 1976), eventually reaching to the vicinity of the 5th Cataract (just north of Meroe) in the time of Rameses II. Egyptian temples and other administrative centers were established throughout Nubia (one principle one, associated with the god Amun was established at the future Nubian capital of Napata), spreading Egyptian culture, values and the concept of writing and literacy. The Egyptians wanted direct and unimpeded access to the Nubian gold fields (see Figure 2) and other imports from the interior of Africa, including ebony, ivory and other exotica. In the approximately 500 years of Egyptian occupation (c. 1550-1069 BCE) the elites (and possibly members of the general population as well) came to adopt Egyptian culture and religion, worshipping the principle Egyptian gods (Amun, Isis, Osiris, Horus, etc.) alongside their own native deities (Apedemak, Mash, etc.) and learning to speak, read and write Egyptian, although

the Meroitic language still survived this greatest test that many other languages have failed to (O'Connor, 1983; Weiss, 2015).

Panehsy and the End of Egyptian Dominance

Following the long reign of Rameses II (1279-1213 BCE) only three kings had reigns longer than seven years; his son Merneptah (1213-1203 BCE), Rameses III (1186-1155 BCE), and Ramses XI, the last ruler of Dynasty 20 (1107-1077). This is a symptom of decline with local rulers, especially the High Priest of Amun at Thebes, becoming hereditary rulers in their own right and in some cases, such as the High Priest Amenhotep, usurping the roles of the king and royal officials, even having the audacity to portray himself as equal in size to the king (Rameses XI). Conflict broke out and the Viceroy of Kush, Panehsy (various spellings possible) intervened from his southern province with Nubian troops to restore order, resulting in the suppression of the High Priest Amenhotep. Eventually Panehsy's continued presence in Upper Egypt became a problem for other ambitious officials such as the general Herihor, who got appointed as High Priest and proceeded to oust the Nubian troops from Egypt, but was unable to secure his authority (or the continuance of Ramses XI's) in Nubia itself, which became independent and beyond Egyptian control under Panehsy's leadership. He is thought to have died in peace in his provincial capital (O'Connor, 1983; van Dijk, 2000, Morales, 2001). After this events in Nubia remain dark until the emergence of Alara in c. 800 BCE.

Rise of Napata

The cult center of Amun established by the Egyptians at Napata formed the center for the development of a new state in Nubia; the first ruler whose name is known is Alara, who was regarded as the dynastic founder by his successors. Whether there is any connection between Alara and Panehsy's revolt of 150 years earlier is unknown. Alara united Upper Nubia using the

cult of Amun as a rallying point, having his daughter made God's Wife at the temple in Napata. His successor and brother Kashta exerted enough influence at Thebes in Upper Egypt to have his daughter installed as God's Wife at the temple there, establishing the beginnings of a Nubian claim to rule in Egypt.

Conquest of Egypt

Kashta's son Piye took advantage of the disunity of the fragmented Egyptian state(s) to march north and unify the country under his rule in the name of Amun. His family ruled a united Egypt as Dynasty 25 from 760-656 BCE, creating the largest kingdom in the history of the Nile Valley in ancient times, stretching from well south of Meroe up to the Nile Delta and eastwards along the coast into Libya and up through Palestine. Both high and low points of Nubian rule in Egypt came in the reign of Piye's son, Taharqa (690-664 BCE), which saw several victories over the Assyrian armies of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, prosperity and a peak in temple building, but also defeats by Assyrian armies of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, which resulted in the loss first of Lower (Northern) Egypt with the sacking of Memphis and eventually the loss of Upper (Southern) Egypt and the sacking of Thebes shortly after Taharqa's death (O'Connor, 1993; Edwards, 2004). The period of domination of Egypt, while brief, had a long-lasting impact on the culture of the speakers of Meroitic.

Aftermath of the Loss of Egypt

Despite being driven from Egypt by the Assyrians, the rulers of Napata (and later Meroe) continued to use the titlature and iconography of the pharaohs, claiming to be kings of Upper and Lower Egypt. This continued ambition to reclaim their lost glory led them into repeated conflicts with those in control of Egypt for centuries to come. Whenever there was a change or perceived weakness in Egypt they were ready to try to reassert control.

Conflict with Psamtek II. Psamtek I (664-610 BCE) succeeded in reuniting Egypt under Egyptian control, eventually throwing off the Assyrian yoke (he had been installed by Ashurbanipal to succeed his father Necho I, who had been killed by the last Nubian Pharaoh, Tanutamani), even becoming allies with the declining Assyrian Empire in its fights with the growing powers of Media and Chaldea. His son Necho II (610-595 BCE) continued this alliance and was defeated by the Chaldeans led by Nebuchadnezzar II at Carchemish in 605 BCE. Perhaps due to this perceived weakness on Egypt's part there appears to have been a rebellion in Nubia during the reign of Necho II and his son, Psamtek II (595-589) led a major invasion of Nubia supposedly to forestall an invasion from the south. Evidence of this invasion has been found in destruction layers at Kerma (which included several Napatan royal statues, including Taharqa and Aspelta, who is believed to have been king at this time) and in the vicinity of the capital of Napata (no remains of the actual city/settlement of Napata have been found, just the temples and tombs, with hieroglyphs). Psamtek II employed Greek mercenaries among his forces, a practice begun by his grandfather, Psamtek I. This was the first setback for Napatan ambitions to retake Egypt, but not the last (Lloyd, 2000; Edwards, 2004).

Conflict with Cambyses II and the Persians. Cambyses II of Persia conquered Egypt in 525 BCE and sought to extend his rule further south, sending a force against the Napatan kingdom. His army was defeated and retreated with great losses (Leclant, 1981; Welsby, 1996). A later king, Irike-Amanote (c. 431-405 BCE) tried unsuccessfully to wrest control of Egypt from the Persians, who also frequently made use of Greek mercenaries (Fisher, Lacovara, Ikram, & D'Auria, 2012).

Conflict with the Ptolemies. From the beginnings of Greek rule in 332 BC there may have been potential conflict with Nubia. Alexander the Great is said to have sent an expedition

to Nubia, whether exploratory (some sources say it was a search for the source of the Nile) or strictly military in nature is unknown. Although busy for much of his reign in Egypt with fighting the other Macedonian successors of Alexander the Great, Ptolemy I is thought to have sent an expedition against Nubia in c. 315 BC. His successor Ptolemy II sent an expedition there which was heralded (inaccurately) as the first contact between the Greeks and Nubians. Various embassies between the Nubian rulers and Alexander and his successors are also recorded. There would continue to be border skirmishes, but commerce began to flow northwards (and to some extent southwards, as Greek wares found their way to Napatan territory and even further afield) and the contact of cultures caused one Napatan king to be termed “philhellene” (lover of the Greeks or of Greekness/Greek ways) (Török, 2009; Burstein, 2008).

Conflict with Rome. Again when rulership changed in Egypt with Cleopatra VII’s defeat and the absorption of Egypt into the Roman Empire under Augustus the Napatan rulers (under Queen Amenirenas and her son Prince Akinidad, who sought to reassert their right to rule in Egypt. The Roman Prefect Petronius campaigned against Nubia twice, in 25 BCE and in 22 BCE. During the first conflict Petronius sacked the capital of Napata and in the second one Amenirenas was forced to sue for peace. Subsequent to this peaceful relations and trade resumed, now with the wider market of the entire Mediterranean Basin (now under Roman control) open for goods transported from or through the territory of the Meroitic speakers (Edwards, 2004; Török, 2009).

Decline and Fall of the Meroitic Empire

Although the central authority of the Meroitic state may have been significantly damaged by the confrontation with Rome and the sacking of Napata by Petronius, the Meroitic state continued on, although King Natakamani, a successor of Amenirenas, who ruled from about 15

BCE to about 15 CE was the last great builder restoring and building a number of temples. Subsequently the size and quality of royal tombs and the amount of building activity decreased markedly, as did the lengths of reign of many of the rulers. However prominent local people began to also build pyramid tombs, indicating a weakness of central authority and perhaps the beginning of the breakup of the Meroitic state (Oliver & Fagan, 1975; Powell, 2013)

Closely tied with the Roman Empire due to trade relations, the decline of Rome in the 3rd century CE amid a series of civil wars directly contributed to the decline of the Meroitic Empire in the upper Nile Valley. Their withdrawal from the frontier opened the way for the incursions of tribes that the combined forces of Rome and Meroe had held at bay, which Meroe itself, in economic difficulties, was ill prepared to repel (Edwards, 2004). The rise of Aksum and its expansion in taking the port of Adulis and territory up to the borders of Meroitic territory and establishing overland routes from their territory to that of Rome that bypassed that of Meroe were a further cause of the decline and eventual disappearance of the Meroitic kingdom, civilization and language (Burstein, 1981).

Aksumite victory stela. The erection of a victory stela and part of a monumental throne by an Aksumite king (Ezana before his conversion to Christianity or one of his “pagan” immediate predecessors) marks the end of the kingdom of Meroe, at least as an independent entity. The Aksumite king(s) whose monuments were erected at Meroe style themselves as kings of the Kasu (thought to be a term for Kush/Meroe). The power of the Meroitic kingdom was broken and any temporary survival would likely to have been as tributary rulers under the Aksumite aegis (Burstein, 1981; Eide, Hägg, Pierce, & Török, 1998).

Meroitic survivals. Although the Meroitic culture and language appears to vanish without a trace in the aftermath of the end of the Meroitic kingdom, there were some survivals. Among

these was the continued popularity of worship of the Egyptian god Amun at temples in Meroitic territory which continued to be worshipped for several centuries, until the full conversion of the successor states by Byzantine missionaries (Weiss, 2015). Another survival was the adoption of certain terms for government and rulership in the successor states, the people of whom may have previously been unfamiliar with some of these concepts and adopted the terminology of the previous regime (Rilly & de Voogt, 2012).

A Commercial Enterprise

As has previously been mentioned, the Meroitic kingdom became a major conduit in trade with the Mediterranean world in both materials and resources from within its boundaries and items which were transshipped through its territory from West, Central and East Africa. These goods included gold, iron, ivory, ebony and other exotica. These became in increasing demand during the periods of Ptolemaic and especially Roman dominance in Egypt, when the Mediterranean was opened up as a market for these items.

Trade with Greece and Rome

Much of what was traded to the Mediterranean world from the Meroitic state would appear to have been raw materials and exotica which were unavailable or scarce in that area, as was the case with Greek and Roman trade in other areas such as Northern Europe and the Black Sea (Cunliffe, 1988; Cunliffe, 2008). Goods sent in return were often manufactured items such as metal jewelry, utensils, and other items, pottery, and glassware, which have been found in Meroitic burials (Edwards, 2004). Although the majority of this may have been from initially for the ruler in Meroe to distribute, as the central authority weakened and local leaders became wealthier this system may have changed (Powell, 2013).

Indian Trade

Although the Meroitic state (and its predecessor at Kerma) did not control a port on the Red Sea or Indian Ocean, they did participate in this trade via the Red Sea port of Adulis, at least until the port came under the control of the Kingdom of Aksum around 500 CE. Adulis had been in existence from at least the third century BCE and was the terminus of several overland trade routes from the interior of Africa. Elephants and ivory from the interior were among the exports from Adulis and there is evidence that trade goods and perhaps emissaries came to the interior from Adulis, perhaps even from as far away as India (Haaland, 2014; Bowersock, 2013).

African Trade

The Nubian kingdom (in both incarnations) was a conduit for exotic materials being imported into Egypt and later the wider Mediterranean world. Initially gold and slaves were the principle commodities sent north, but by late Meroitic times there were a large number of exotica that were exported, including live animals, gold, iron, ebony and ivory obtained from further up the Nile or in the interior of the continent. Several large Meroitic sites such as Naqa (home of the Roman Kiosk) and Musawwarat es Sufra have been found to have had warehouses which still held the remains of stockpiles of ebony and ivory when excavated, even after all the intervening centuries (Haaland, 2014; Welsby, 1996).

Iron Works

Meroe became a center for iron production in the area and may have been the source of the spread of iron technology to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. The six slag heaps on the outskirts of town demonstrate the importance of the processing of this commodity was to the area and its prosperity (Oliver & Fagam, 1975). Sayce had referred to Meroe as the “Birmingham of Africa” in 1912 and the annual output of processed iron has been estimated at 5-

20 tons. Despite this prodigious production, finds of iron goods have been primarily limited to tools, spears and arrowheads (Edwards, 2004). This may explain why their armies fared so poorly against Greek and Roman troops, who used iron armor and shields as well as weapons.

Language Death

Language death, rather than evolution or change, can be brought on by a variety of factors impacting the speakers of the language. Some of these are more drastic and have an impact outside of strictly affecting the language itself.

Population Death

The death of the population which speaks a language obviously leads to the extinction of the language itself, although it may or may not survive in written form or use by others in some way. An example of this would be the ending of James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, in which there is only one member of the tribe (Chingachgook) remaining after the death of his adult son in battle. He is the last of his tribe and the last native speaker of Mohican (Wikipedia, 2015). This would not appear to have been the ultimate fate of the speakers of Meroitic, who were numerous and spread over a large area of the Nile Valley, making the annihilation of the population unlikely.

Conquest

The conquest of a people by outsiders can lead to the death of a language or of its written form. The Arab conquest of Egypt in 639 CE has resulted in the extinction of Ancient Egyptian as a spoken language (being replaced by Arabic) and resulted in the written language being undeciphered until after the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799. The languages of the Maya and Aztec inhabitants of Mexico has been similarly impacted by the Spanish conquest begun by

Cortez in 1521, being largely supplanted by the use of Spanish and the written form of the languages being forgotten and becoming incomprehensible to the native speakers.

Conquest may have played a part in the disappearance of the Meroitic language, as the erection of the victory stela of Ezana of Aksum outside of Meroe and the establishment of independent areas by the Nobatae and others in succeeding generations indicate. But the language had survived for several millennia through Egyptian conquest and occupation and succeeding conflict with its neighbors without being lost, although it was heavily influenced.

Exposure to More Advanced Cultures

Exposure to a more advanced culture can have an impact on language and even lead to its abandonment in favor of a more useful or prestigious language, as is the case in Kenya today, with smaller languages being abandoned in favor of the more universally accepted Swahili (Brenzinger, Heine, & Sommer, 1991). Latin, the language used by the Roman Empire, has had an impact on many of the languages of the territory that was within or adjacent to the Empire due to its prestige, the dominance of the Roman culture (even beyond its physical boundaries) and due to its continued use by the Roman Catholic Church in the centuries since the end of the Roman Empire.

This cause would not appear to be of significant impact with regard to the extinction of the Meroitic language. The speakers of Meroitic had been conquered and occupied by the Egyptians during the New Kingdom for several centuries and had maintained their own language, albeit with significant impact (including writing) from the Egyptians. The language continued to be used for over a millennium after the Egyptians left Nubia and there was no other significant contact with a culture that could be termed “superior” or more advanced aside from occasional skirmishes and fighting with their northern neighbors.

Environmental Changes

Environmental changes, whether sudden and drastic or gradual, can lead to stress which leads to population changes and migration and possibly the extinction of a language. A small group could be exterminated by a catastrophic event such as a volcanic eruption, massive flood or meteor impact, which would affect their locality. More gradual changes such as increased desertification in the Sahara or the Southwestern United States can push groups into migration or conflict with neighbors as likely happened with the Hohokam and Anasazi groups in the American Southwest (Tainter, 2006; Dean, 2007). Man-made or induced changes such as likely brought about the collapse of the Maya civilization in Central America through over-usage of the land can also be a factor (Turner, 2006; Tainter, 2006).

Such changes had been taking place in Northern Africa for centuries with the gradual advancement of the Sahara Desert and drying up of what had been major waterways and sources of the Nile (including Wadi Malik and Wadi Howar). Indeed this was part of the reason the Meroitic speakers themselves had arrived in the Nile Valley originally. The continued desertification decreased the available arable land and caused pressure from other surrounding peoples who sought to move in to the still useable lands of the Nile Valley which were under Meroitic control. This very likely contributed to the decline of the Meroitic culture and language but would not have been primarily responsible for its extinction.

Economic Changes

Economic changes can place extreme pressure on a governmental system. The decline of the Roman Empire due to civil and external wars and the rise of the Kingdom of Aksum in the Ethiopian highlands and their control of overland routes and the port of Adulis led to a decline in trade in commodities supplied by or transshipped through Meroitic territory. This decline in

revenues from trade would directly impact the State's ability to fulfill its roles in defense and systems maintenance (irrigation, roads, communication, temples, etc.). A decline in upkeep of the irrigation system would lead to further economic problems as harvests would decline, as they had in Dynasty III of Ur (Tainter, 2006) or at the end of the Egyptian Old, Middle and New Kingdoms. Declines in defense, roads and communication would contribute to fragmentation of the kingdom as local rulers would assert themselves as being better able to handle local affairs and outsiders would move in to undefended or underdefended areas. This is perhaps the principle cause of Meroitic decline, as their integration into the economic system of the Greco-Roman world left them vulnerable when that region went into a significant decline. This could cause the formerly dominant language and culture to be supplanted by that of the newcomers who had gained the ascendancy.

Political Changes

Political and religious changes both within a cultural group and in its surroundings can have an impact on the language and culture. The spread of Islam resulted in the adoption of Arabic by people in many regions who had previously spoken other tongues, such as in Egypt, where the native language became extinct. Also weak and sickly rulers who have short reigns (like Tutankhamen) or long-lived rulers (such as Rameses II and Pepi II) can result in political upheaval upon their death (Malek, 2000; van Dijk, 2000). Many of the last rulers buried at Meroe (quite a few of whom remain anonymous due to unfinished or damaged tombs) had reigns of just 5-15 years, likely symptomatic of the internal and external stresses (Török, 1997). The rise of the competing Kingdom of Aksum and its conversion to Eastern Orthodox Christianity further complicated the continued existence of the Meroitic culture and language, especially

when Aksum occupied the entire area for a period. Meroitic, being associated with the old regime and the worship of the old gods may have gone out of favor in this new environment.

Cultural Changes

Changes in culture can have a significant impact on language survival. The Meroitic culture had survived and adapted to the Egyptian conquest and had flourished due to its contact with the Greco-Roman world and its cultural influences. They had adopted the principle Egyptian gods as their own alongside Apedemak and other native deities and eventually adapted the Egyptian writing system to use with Meroitic, which had previously not been a written language. However, the occupation of the region at the end of the Meroitic period by the newly Christian Aksumites may have been the final blow to their language and culture. Burial practices were different (no more pyramids, the use of which had spread to even middle-class individuals (Powell, 2013)) and religious intolerance, especially of “pagans” had become the norm, as demonstrated by activities in Egypt to the north (Bury, 1958; Canfora, 1987; Durant, 1950; Gibbon, 2010). After the withdrawal of Aksum, the kingdoms that emerged in Nubia were Christian and had little in common with the Meroitic past, religiously, culturally, politically or linguistically.

Language Decipherment

After Lepsius’ work and the site and publication of material (including drawings) attempts to decipher the script used to write the Meroitic language began. As the language had only been used in written form late in the Meroitic period and there were few parallel texts and those were of a brief nature, advances came slowly. Initial efforts by Archibald Sayce and Heinrich Brugsch were unsuccessful (Rilly & de Voogt, 2012).

Griffith

Francis Llewellyn Griffith made the first major steps in decipherment in the early 20th century by collecting a large number (100+) of texts and making a systematic comparison. Some of these texts had writing in both Egyptian and Meroitic hieroglyphs, which enabled him to deduce the values of the signs in the Meroitic writing system and determine that it was written in the opposite direction for the Egyptian writing. The meaning of the strings of letters/symbols remained a mystery, however, aside from the names of people (usually kings or rulers), gods and places (Rilly & de Voogt, 2012).

Hintze

German Egyptologist Fritz Hintze was a leading figure in Meroitic studies for thirty years following World War II. He made attempts to use comparisons of funerary texts to develop a translation of the Meroitic script, but the success of this endeavor was greatly limited. As no related language that could be help in the decipherment had been discovered, study of the language itself declined, with focus instead on the culture and archaeological discoveries (Rilly & de Voogt, 2012).

Répertoire d'Epigraphie Méroïtique

Rilly and de Voogt themselves are part of a program begun in conjunction with the UNESCO Nubia Salvage Project in 1960's and early 1970's. Jean Leclant and André Heyler began the work of entering the Meroitic texts into a computer database that would aid with comparison and hopefully aid in translation. This project has continued, although it stalled for a time after Heyler's death in 1971, to be revived with newer and better technology in 2000. It was the efforts of this program which resulted in a successful comparison of Meroitic to languages

originating in the upper Wadi Howar region (now dispersed to various regions in Central/East Africa) enabling further advancement in translation (Rilly & de Voogt, 2012).

Other Attempts

As the language remained untranslated, attempts have been made at times to put forth theories which have not gained wide acceptance. In the 1930's Austrian Egyptologist Ernst Zyhlarz put forth a theory classifying Meroitic as part of the Hamitic language group instead of the more primitive Negroid Group (a classification system which has since been discarded). His efforts at translation were of limited value and in large part have been viewed to have been in error (Rilly & de Voogt, 2012).

Winters. In 1999 an educational linguist named Clyde Ahmad Winters claimed to have deciphered the Meroitic language in a discussion on the ANE listserv from the University of Chicago Oriental Institute. He alleged that he had done this by comparing the Meroitic language of the people of Kush with the Tocharian language used by the Kushan people of Central Asia. The fact that these two languages were separated in first use by centuries and in physical location by thousands of miles proved no obstacle to his proposal of this relationship. Despite the total lack of support for his theory from others on the ANE list (member Miguel Carrasquer Vidal took issue with both Winters' use of Tocharian grammar and claim that these people called themselves Kushana) or the wider Meroitic Studies community (University of Chicago Oriental Institute, 1999), he has since (2013) published a book on the subject (*Meroitic Writing and Literature*) in conjunction with the Uthman dan Fodio Institute in Chicago in which he reiterates and elaborates his theory.

Conclusion

The long life (circa 3,000 years) of the Meroitic language and the mystery surrounding its disappearance make it an interesting area of research. The variety of approaches used to attempt to decipher this “dead” language and hopefully unlock the mysteries of its disappearance have spanned two centuries, but are hopefully coming to a successful conclusion due to the efforts of the French REM team and others now that a related group of languages and a point of origin have been identified. Being finally able to read the Meroitic inscriptions may (or may not, depending on what the available inscriptions and writings say) add detail to the ultimate fate of the Meroitic language and culture and which factors contributed to its disappearance.

A variety of factors likely played a role in the disappearance of the Meroitic language and culture. Their integration with the trade routes of the Roman Empire via the Nile River left them vulnerable to economic decline when the Romans withdrew from their portion of Nubia after a period of political and economic instability. The loss of the trade with Rome likely resulted in reductions in spending on defense and maintenance, leading to internal political disruption and incursions and invasion by outside peoples (such as the Nobatae or Aksum). With Aksum gaining the ascendancy in the region its religion (which was the same as that now practiced by the Romans) and culture would become preeminent over the old ways and religion which was represented by Meroe and its language. Another factor that weakened the Meroitic Culture was the continued desertification caused by the relentless spread of the Sahara. The original homeland of the early Meroitic speakers had been overcome by the desert 2,000 years before, and then it had advanced on Kerma, Napata and by 300 AD it was beginning to affect the area near Meroe as well. With all of these factors against them the disappearance of the Meroitic kingdom, its culture and language is not a surprise. What became of the people, whether their

descendants are still in the area or whether then migrated elsewhere to the east, west or south remains a mystery that can really only be solved by DNA comparisons between the remains of known Meroitic bodies and existing populations in Africa.

Chronology

Primarily after Derek A. Welsby *The Kingdom of Kush: The Napatan and Meroitic Empires*.
pp. 207-209.

c. 2450 BCE	Beginnings of Kerma state	
c. 1550 BCE	Egyptian Conquest of Kerma and Occupation of Nubia	
c. 1090 BCE	Nubian Viceroy Panehsy ousts Theban High Priest and eventually rebels	
Alara	c. ?-760 BC	
Kashta	c. 760-747 BC	
Piye [Piankhi]	c. 747-716 BC	
Shabaqo [Shabaka]	c. 716-702 BC	
Shebitqo [Shebitko]	c. 702-690 BC	Sennacherib in Palestine (701 BC)
Taharqo [Taharqa]	690-664 BC	Esarhaddon in Egypt [1 st] (674 BC)
		Esarhaddon in Egypt [2 nd] (671 BC)
		Ashurbanipal in Egypt [1 st] (667 BC)
Tanetamani	664-656 BC	
		Ashurbanipal in Egypt [2 nd] (c. 663)
Atlanersa	c. 653-643 BC	
Senkamanisken	c. 643-623 BC	
Anlamani	c. 623-593 BC	
Aspelta	c. 593-568 BC	Campaign of Psamtik II (593 BC)
Arametelqo	c. 568-555 BC	
Malonaqen	c. 555-542 BC	
Analmaaye	c. 542-548 BC	
Mani-natake-lebte	c. 538-519 BC	
Karkamani	c. 519-510 BC	
Amaniastabarqo	c. 510-487 BC	
Siaspiqa	c. 487-468 BC	
Nasakhma	c. 468-463 BC	
Malowiebamani	c. 463-435 BC	
Talakhmani	c. 435-431 BC	
Irike-Amanote	c. 431-405 BC	
Baskakeren	c. 405-404 BC	
Harsiyotef	c. 404-369 BC	
? unknown ruler	c. 369-353 BC	
Akhratan	c. 353-340 BC	
Amanibakhi	c. 340-335 BC	
Nastasen	c. 335-315 BC	

Aktisanes		
Aryamani		Ptolemy I in N. Nubia (319/8 BC)
Kash ... merj Imen	c. 315-270 BC	Campaign of Ptolemy II (274 BC)
Irike-Piye-qo		
Sabrakamani		
Arkamani-qo	c. 270-260 BC	
Amanislo	c. 260-250 BC	
Aman ... tekha	c. 250-235 BC	
Arnekhamani	c. 235-218 BC	
Arqamani	c. 218-200 BC	
Tabirqo	c. 200-190 BC	
? unknown king	c. 190-185 BC	
? unknown king	c. 185-170 BC	
Shanakdakhete	c. 170-150 BC	
? unknown king	c. 150-130 BC	
Naqyrinsan	c. 130-110 BC	
Tanyidamani	c. 110-90 BC	
? unknown king		
? unknown queen	c. 90-50 BC	
Nawidemak		
Amanikhabale	c. 50-40 BC	
Teriteqas		Augustus in Egypt (30 BC)
Amanirenas	c. 40-10 BC	Campaigns of Petronius (25 & 22 BC)
Akinidad		
Amanishakheto	c. 10-1 BC	
Natakamani		
Amanitore		
Arkihankharer	c. AD 1-20	
Arikakahtani		
Shorkaror	c. AD 20-30	
Pisaker	c. AD 30-40	
Amanitaraqide	c. AD 40-50	
Amanitemmemide	c. AD 50-62	Nile expedition of Nero (c. 62 BC)
Amanikhatashan	c. AD 62-85	
Teritnide	c. AD 85-90	
Teqerideamani	c. AD 90-114	
Tamelerdeamani	c. AD 114-134	
Adeqetali	c. AD 134-140	
Takideamani	c. AD 140-155	
Tarekeniwal	c. AD 155-170	

Amanikhalika	c. AD 170-175	
Aritenyebokhe	c. AD 175-190	
Amanikhareqerem	c. AD 190-200	
Teritedakhatey	c. AD 200-215	
Aryesbokhe	c. AD 215-225	Rome leaves Nubia (c. AD 217/8)
? unknown king	c. AD 225-246	
? unknown king	c. AD 246	
Teqerideamani II	c. AD 246-266	
Maleqorobar	c. AD 266-283	
Yesbokheamani	c. AD 283-300	
? unknown queen	c. AD 300-308	
? unknown queen	c. AD 308-320	
? unknown ruler	c. AD 320-?	
Victory inscription of Ezana of Aksum at Meroe (c. AD 350)		

Figures



Figure 1 Ancient Nubia
From O'Connor, 1993, p. x

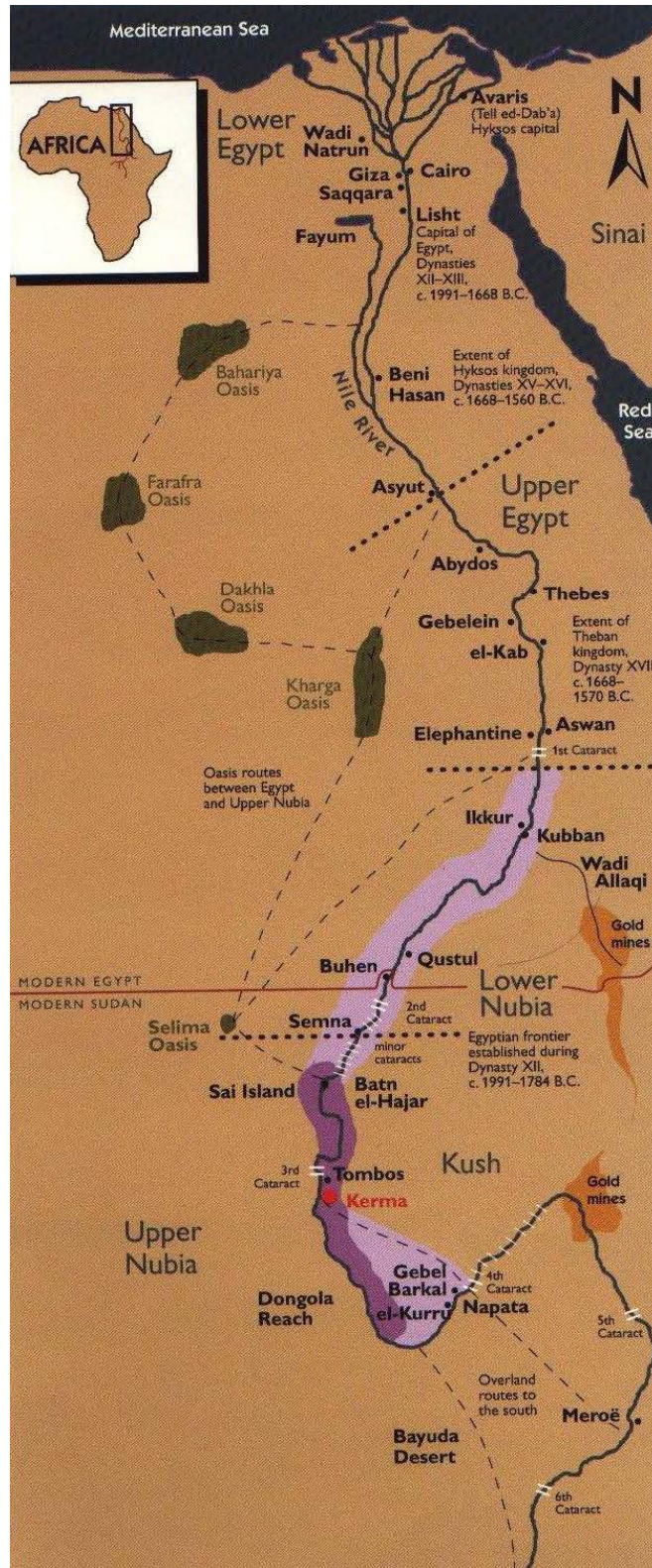


Figure 2 Kerma, Nubia and Egypt

From Kendall, 1997, p. xvi

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