

The cradle of the Nubian Languages: myth vs. historical linguistics

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*Nubian languages are spread nowadays through a large part of the Sudanese territory, with an extension into Southern Egypt. They can be roughly divided into 5 major groups: (1) **Kenuzi-Dongolawi**, in Egypt and around Dongola in Sudan (Northern State), (2) Medieval “**Old Nubian**” and its modern offshoot, **Nobiin**, in Egypt and Northern Sudanese Nubia (Northern State), (3) **Birgid**, East of Nyala (Southern Darfur), (4) **Midob** in the Midob mountains (Northern Darfur), (5) **Kordofan Nubian** in the Gebel-el-Dair (Northern Kordofan) and the Nuba mountains (Southern Kordofan).*

Before serious researches were conducted on this topic in the early 20th century, the main opinion was to consider the Middle Nile Valley as the original cradle of the Nubian languages. Birgid, Midob and Kordofan Nubian were regarded as later developments of a proto-language once spoken in Nubia. Although linguistic studies by Meinhof, Zyhlarz, Thelwall, Bechhaus-Gerst and more recently by Jakobi and the present author have provided cogent evidence for the opposite theory (Kenuzi-Dongolawi and Nobiin came from the West), the myth of a Dongolese cradle is still vivid in Sudan. This myth can be explained by two different reasons. First, the prestige of the medieval kingdom of Dongola led many ethnic groups of Sudan to claim a Dongolese origin. Second, although not yet supported by archaeological excavations, evidence for a Dongolese occupation of great parts of Kordofan and Darfur can be deduced from numerous loanwords in various languages of these regions (including Midob and Kordofan Nubian).

Recent work by the author gives further evidence for the Western cradle theory. It can be shown that several realia from the Nile Valley were unknown of the earliest speakers of the Nile Nubian languages, so that they resorted to semantic innovation (for ex. for “hippo”, “crocodile”) or word borrowing (“palm-tree”, “wine”). Furthermore, Western Nubian languages have kept Proto-Nubian phonological and morphological features that were lost in Nile Nubian languages prior to the first Old Nubian texts (end of 8th century AD). Finally, inscriptions in the ancient Meroitic language show that Nubian tribes did not invade the Nile Valley before the end of Meroe, ca. AD 350. However, a Nubian kingdom was already present on the western border of the Meroitic state as soon as the 3rd century AD.

The cradle of the Nubian languages must therefore be placed very probably in Kordofan. I have shown elsewhere that Nubian belongs to a sub-group of Nilo-Saharan, “Northern East Sudanic”, which probably originated from the banks of the Wadi Howar, a former tributary of the Nile extending through Darfur and Kordofan, where pastoral tribes gathered together as a result of the dessication of Eastern Sahara. Contrary to other branches of Northern East Sudanic such as Meroitic, Tama and Nara, the early Nubian speakers probably did not undertake long migrations after the final dessication of the wadi in the third millenium BC, but remained in the vicinity of the Wadi Howar or the Wadi el-Melik, further south. The lexical proximity between the different Nubian languages, in spite of the considerable distance between them, shows that Proto-Nubian may have been spoken for a long time in a relatively restricted area. It is only in the first millenium BC that the Nubian became the “great people” (mega ethnos) mentioned by Eratosthenes in the 3rd century BC, possibly by incorporating neighbouring tribes. The split between the different branches of Nubian in all likelihood did not occur before this period.