

THE MEROITIC LANGUAGE AND WRITING SYSTEM

This book provides an introduction to the Meroitic language and writing system, which was used between circa 300 BC and AD 400 in the Kingdom of Meroe, located in what is now Sudan and Egyptian Nubia. This book details advances in the understanding of Meroitic, a language that until recently was considered untranslatable. In addition to providing a full history of the script and an analysis of the phonology, grammar, and linguistic affiliation of the language, it features linguistic analyses for those working on Nilo-Saharan comparative linguistics, paleographic tables useful to archaeologists for dating purposes, and an overview of texts that can be translated or understood by way of analogy for those working on Nubian religion, history, and archaeology.

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Preface

Since the beginning of this millennium, the study of the Meroitic language and writing system has seen substantial advances. The publication of the *Répertoire d'Épigraphie Méroïtique* in 2000 greatly facilitated the study of Meroitic epigraphy. With these volumes, two books by Claude Rilly from 2007 and 2010 stand out as well. The first provided a new analysis of the Meroitic language drawing all the insights on phonology, morphology, and syntax together and adding valuable paleographic tables of the Meroitic writing system that became immediately useful to archaeologists in Sudan. The second delivered a historical linguistic analysis of Meroitic and its closest relatives, leading the way for new advances with the help of historical reconstructions. All these studies together have provided a solid foundation for future study.

The present work addresses a problem of access. The study of Meroitic is multifaceted and includes epigraphy, paleography, and linguistics. Egyptologists, linguists, and Africanists are interested in the contents for a diverse set of reasons. However, the volumes mentioned earlier are neither introductory nor accessible to those who do not understand French. This excludes not only many Africanists but also many Sudanese scholars and students who wish to learn more about their cultural heritage. A translation of the thousands of pages that were generated in the last decade would undoubtedly be useful, but the field of Meroitic studies also lacks a synthesis that would be accessible to Egyptologists, linguists, and Africanists. This volume addresses this lack by focusing on the latest results rather than the debates that led to these results. Maps, figures, and a Glossary help the various users to gain insight in different ways. The result that is presented here is a book that is a complete resource, brought up to date in a field that is continuously developing. Where necessary, it refers to the important works of the last years for those who wish to review the analyses or access the data that have advanced the field to where it is today. It allows those with

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different backgrounds to gain substantial knowledge of Meroitic, the language of Kush, which is only slowly giving up its secrets.

The authors would like to stress that if the present volume is perhaps long enough to encapsulate the results of the two books in French (Rilly 2007 and 2010), it is still unable to give a detailed account of such points as the paleographical data, the semantic analysis of texts that led to new translations, and the discussion of all the particular words in Nubian, Taman, and Nyima in the lexical list given in the Appendix. For all these details, curious readers and specialists can refer to the original French books.

In addition to the two authors, a host of people have been important in making this book possible. We owe particular thanks to Connie Dickmeyer, who made many improvements to the text, and Jennifer Steffey, who generated most of the illustrations, including the cover drawing. Friends and colleagues, including Greg McDonald, Gabrielle Tieu, Jacki Lacey, and Vincent Francigny, were frequently bothered with questions of various kinds and always provided the moral support necessary for finishing a task that was overwhelming at the start and remained so close to the end. Finally, we thank the people at Cambridge University Press, in particular Beatrice Rehl, whose immediate and continuous support for this project has provided the rare energy to deliver this book within a reasonable time.