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A MEROITIC TOMB INSCRIPTION
FROM TOSHKA WEST

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The Meroitic inscription presented herewith is the only funerary inscription to have been discovered by the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania—Peabody Museum of Yale University Expedition to Egypt in the large cemetery (called TW-A) just north of the winter Post Boat station at Toshka West. The cemetery is in the north part of Toshka opposite Gebel Agg, and lies between the river and the hamlet of Duki Dawur. It was found to contain several hundred graves of the late Meroitic, X-group, and Nubian Christian periods. No reference to this cemetery is found in Emery's and Kirwan's (1935) report on their archaeological survey of this region. A description of the cemetery and of the work done there in 1961 and 1962 can be found in two preliminary reports on the work of the expedition written by its director, Professor William K. Simpson of Yale University. These have appeared in the *Illustrated London News* (1961) and in *Expedition*, the bulletin of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania (1962). The inscription, which was found during the 1962 field season, is illustrated on page 38 of the second article and on the cover of the issue.

The stela, on which the inscription was carved, was found face up and reused among the blocks in the largely denuded superstructure of a Christian grave numbered TW-A 198. The superstructure was of the type found by Monneret de Villard (1935: 132-141) at er-Rammal. Without much question the stela had been plundered from one of the Meroitic graves nearby for use as a building block. Since none of the Meroitic superstructures were preserved, however, it is impossible to discover from which grave it came. Funerary inscriptions were generally written either on offering tables or on stelae, more commonly the former. The stelae have a variety of shapes and apparently were set up in little shrines which projected from the front walls of the Meroitic superstructures (Griffith, 1911: 29). Sometimes representations of the deceased were painted or carved on these stelae, but more often there was only a text.

The Toshka West inscription is engraved on a block of grey, fine to medium grained Nubian sandstone. It has been given the Pennsylvania—Yale expedition number TW-A 198.2, and was assigned to the expedition for a subsequent division of finds between the University Museum and the Peabody Museum. The block is roughly rectangular, though the left side tapers slightly toward the base. Its measurements are: height 52 cm, width 40-45 cm, thickness 6.5-11 cm. The inscribed surface undulates slightly but is smooth except for some ridges in the lower right hand corner. These antedate the inscription. There is no evidence that this face was artificially worked, and it seems to be merely the natural, sand-scoured surface of a local rock exposure. This contrasts sharply with the carefully leveled surfaces of the fragments of two funerary stelae found by the expedition at Arminna West. The block was apparently quarried by scoring it along the sides and top edge and then prying it horizontally along the lines of natural bedding. The back is domed where large flakes were knocked marginally from the top and sides in order to lessen its weight. The sides were then smoothed near the upper face though traces of the scoring and prying still remain visible underneath. The upper edge, which suffered accidental chipping at a later time, was probably meant to be convex. Below the inscription the face of the block was quite rough, and no attempt was made to square this sec-

tion. Presumably when the stela had been set up this part was covered over with mud plaster.

The rows of letters, which read from right to left, are separated by incised lines 2 mm wide and 2.5-4.5 cm apart. The ninth line from the top appears to have been engraved from both sides. The letters, which average about 1.5 cm in height (omitting tails) are engraved to a depth of 1 to 1.5 mm, about the same depth as the lines. The lines and the letters still have traces of the red paint used to accent the text. The whole surface of the stone, especially towards the bottom, is reddened, the coloration being clearly artificial and distinct from the natural pink color found in some of the Nubian sandstones. This no doubt represents the working out of pigment from the letters rather than a deliberate coloring of the whole surface of the block. A pronounced red line under the final row of letters, where presumably the stone was embedded in the superstructure, marks the termination of this reddening. This suggests that the pigment had been weathered while the stone was still *in situ*.

The similarity of some Meroitic letters, particulary *e* and *l*, and *m*, *š*, and *ḫ* creates a danger of error in transliteration, although a comparison of the form of letters found in recognizable phrases and words clears up most cases of uncertainty. The greatest margin of doubt must remain in the transliteration of personal names. Meroitic tombstones do not carry dates. Nevertheless, changes in the style of the letters may offer clues as to the general date of the inscription. Griffith (1911: 17-21) was able to distinguish three stages in the development of cursive Meroitic, and Hintze (1959), working on materials from Meroë, has recently published a more detailed paleographic table which gives the forms of letters associated with various reign dates. Although the study of Meroitic paleography is not yet sufficiently advanced to provide a real basis for dating inscriptions, the conclusions resulting from a comparison of this inscription with the forms given by Griffith and Hintze are of some interest. The form of the letters showing the most marked changes through time (Griffith 1911: 11) all belong to the later stages of the writing. In general, the letters most closely resemble the forms found in Griffith's columns 14

and 16. Column 14 belongs to the Transitional phase and is dated 25 B.C. to A.D. 250; 16 is Late and is dated A.D. 250 to 400. The rather equal distribution of resemblances suggests a date close to A.D. 250. Hintze's system provides a greater variety of forms, so much so that different forms of the same letter on our stone can often be placed in several columns. The temporal distributions of these placements are not, however, such as to be damaging to Hintze's system. The majority of
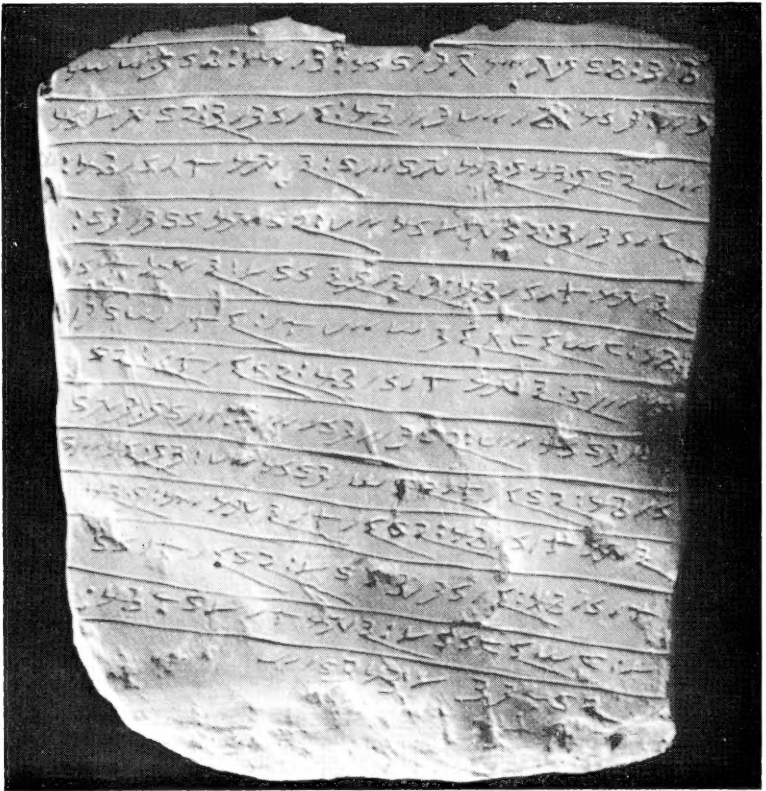
forms are to be found in the columns dated A.D. 170-350 and A.D. 246-266. This dating seems in accord with the conclusions reached using Griffith's system. Two of Griffith's (1911: 33; 1912: 57) paleographically dated inscriptions which also bear the same introductory formula as does this one are dated to

the late period. Although a detailed report on the material
from the Toshka cemetery has not yet been prepared, a date in
the third century A.D. would not seem out of keeping for many
of the Meroitic graves there.
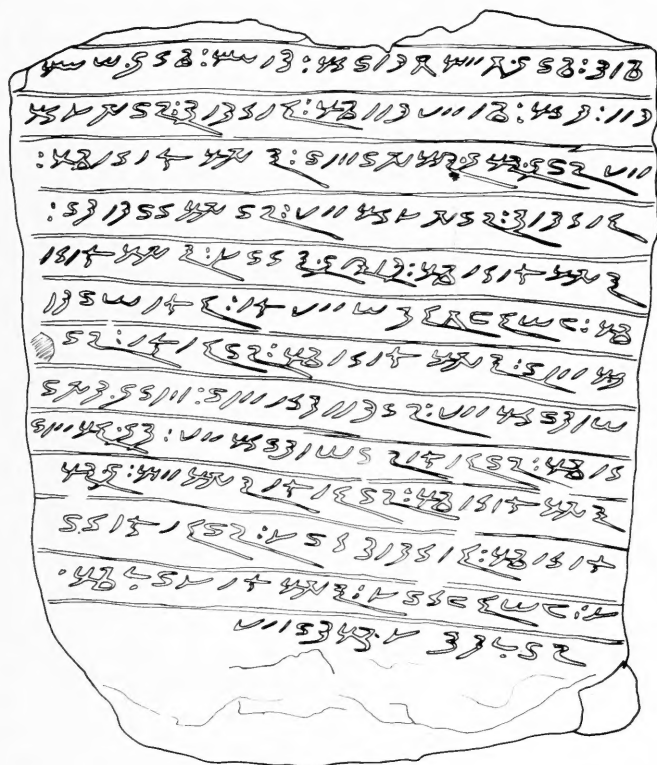
TWA 198.2
WKS-87 1962

TRANSLITERATION AND COMMENTARY

The following transliteration of the text follows Hintze's
system. The arrangement of lines is that of the original. Words
which are carried over from one line to the next are indicated
by a hyphen. The colon is used to represent the Meroitic word
divider. The text is divided into sections, each of which is de-

noted by a letter of the alphabet. These sections will be dis-
cussed individually in the commentary.

1.	(a)	*wêš : wetñyiñqli : šêri : wetrri*
2.	(b)	*qê : mli : wês qêwi :* (c) *pêlmêš : adbli-*
3.		*s atkitnideye : kditelêwi :*
4.	(d)	*pêlmêš : adblis : adilemême :*
5.		*kditelêwi :* (e) *qntkleb : kditelê -*
6.		*ẉi :* (f) *ḥrpḫ̃pẖrste : pteremê*
7.		*tiye : kditelêwi :* (g) *apête : a -*
8.		*rêmelis : aqê̱ẖlêye : yetmde -*
9.		*lêwi :* (h) *apête arêmelis : ẖtpiye*
10.		*kditelêwi :* (i) *apêtekdiyi : tki -*
11.		*telêwi :* (j) *pêlmêšleb : apêtele -*
12.		*b : ḥrphleb : kditebetêwi :*
13.	(k)	*atêmšb : ẖ/š - i - ẖ/š - es*

Like all funerary texts this one consists of three sections,
1) an invocation usually addressed to Isis and Osiris, 2) the
name and description of the person commemorated, and 3) a
terminal formula or formulae, sometimes called a benediction.

Section (a) constitutes the introductory invocation. It is
longer than the usual *wêši : šêreyi* (Isis, Osiris), since each of
these god's names introduces another phrase terminating in *li*
or *i*, which are believed to be vocative particles. The interven-
ing phrases are apparently adjectives describing Isis and
Osiris but their meaning is unknown (Griffith 1911: 34). There
is a similar invocation on a stone of unknown provenience now
in the Cairo Museum (Griffith 1912: 57). Another example oc-
curs on funerary inscription 76 from Karanog, although here
the second *ñ* is written *nê* and one stroke has been left out of
the fifth letter of the second word. The first substitution is quite
common, however, (Griffith 1911: 14) and in writing *yi* one
stroke is commonly omitted (*ibid.*, 33). The alternative read-

ing *wetñêêinêqeli* is impossible (*ibid.*, 13, section 3). A variant also occurs in inscription 4 from Faras (Griffith 1922: 570) in the second half of which *mklẖ* [Great God? (Griffith 1912: 57)] replaces the name of Osiris.

Section (b). This section gives the name of the deceased, which is referred to in the literature as the A name. As in some other inscriptions the name is introduced by the expression *qê*, which Griffith renders tentatively as "the honorable." The expression *qêwi* regularly follows the name of the deceased and it is not often separated from it by a word divider. Hence the name is *Mli-wês*, the prefix *mli* indicating that it is a woman's name (Griffith 1911: 55). This prefix is often separated from the rest of the name by a word divider.

Following this we find eight parallel phrases listing people who stand in some sort of relationship to the deceased. In their fullest form these phrases consist of a title, the person's name, and a word describing the relationship between him and the dead person. Griffith (1911: 38) called this last word the descriptive phrase. Grammatically it stands in apposition to the name of the deceased. The terminal particle *lêwi* (which sometimes replaces *qêwi* in the preceding phrase may either represent a copula or be for emphasis (*ibid.*, 35). Two descriptive phrases which very frequently occur in funerary inscriptions are absent here. These are *tedḥelêwi* and *terikelêwi*. The former follows the name of the mother (the B word) of the deceased, and the latter that of his father (the C word) and they seem to give a reading: A borne by the woman B, begotten of the man C. On the other hand six of the sections in this inscription contain the descriptive phrase *kditelêwi* which is unrecorded in Griffith's word lists. Griffith (1911: 38, 39) lists two forms beginning with *kdi* (which is believed to mean "woman"), *kdisbetêwi* and *kditêwi*, both of which are associated with feminine A names. Taking the forms which are known, it would seem to be composed of *kdi* (woman?) and *telêwi* (the locative particle plus the copula? *lêwi*). *Telêwi*, however, seems to be added only to place names (Griffith 1911: 23, 40). If, as conceivably might be the case, *te* was written here as a variant for *tê*, the genitive suffix, then this word might be closely related to *kditêwi* and be read "a woman? of A." But this sort of comparison,

which has constituted the main approach to the study of
Meroitic grammar so far, tends to provide little in the way of
satisfactory solutions to such problems in the absence of a
more fundamental break-through in the study of the language.

Sections (c) and (d). Despite the lack of a divider, the ini-
tial *s* in line 3 undoubtedly belongs with the final word on the
preceding line. *Pêlmêš*, a variant *of plmêš* or *pelmêš*, is derived
from the Egyptian *pꜣ ỉmy-r mš'* meaning *strategos* or com-
mander. The form *pêlmêš adblis* does not appear in the word
lists but seems to be a variant of *pelmêš adblitê*, with a genitive
particle *s* substituted for the alternative (?) genitive particle
tê. The expression is translated "commander of the land" or as
Zyhlarz (1956: 33) has suggested "commander of the deserts."
The closely related term "commander of the water" is written
pelmêš atêlis and *pelmêš atêlit* (Griffith 1912: 64). The last
portion of the name *Adilemême* is the same as that of the name
Arlemême occurring in inscription 24 from Faras (Griffith
1922:583).

Section (e). *qntkleb* may be a person's name or it may con-
sist of the root *qntk* plus the plural particle *leb*. Neither form
could be located elsewhere. The *leb* ending would seem to make
a personal name less likely.

Section (f). *ḫrpẖñ* and variants, a civil title believed by
Griffith (1922: 567) to refer to the governor or leading person
of a community, in rank inferior to a *paqar* and a *pesatê*. *pẖrs*
(Pachoris) is the old name of Faras; *te* is the locative particle.
Hence "a civil official in Pachoris."

Sections (g) and (h). *apête*, from the Egyptian *ỉpwty*, mes-
senger or envoy; *arêmelis*, "of (the) Rome." Presumably the
so-called *s*-genitive here has the force of a dative, as Griffith
(1911: 72) himself has suggested. The considerable number of
people holding this title would suggest that it is applied to
individuals having dealings with Roman Egypt, perhaps to
government sponsored traders. Hence the title may mean some-
thing like "agent to the Romans." *yetmdelêwi* is a common des-
cripive phrase rendered as "cousin of" or "kinsman of" (Grif-
fith 1912: 65).

Section (i). The first word seems to consist of *apête* plus *kzi*
which is sometimes added to a noun to give it a feminine form.

Hence it would appear to read "a female ambassador." Here, however, it may well be used as a person's name as Griffith (1911:59) shows a variant to be used elsewhere. The terminal *yi* is unaccounted for. *tkitelêwi* seems to be another unlisted descriptive phrase.

Section (j). The first three words have been made plural by the addition of the suffix *leb*. This list of titles may either be resumptive or refer to *Mli-wês's* relatives (?) in general. The descriptive phrase used here would seem to be a plural form, since it contains a *b*-infix. But such a form has occurred only once before in an inscription commemorating a single person. This is in inscription 99 from Karanog, and Griffith (1911: 70) believed it to have been written inadvertently. Moreover the *têwi*-ending normally becomes *tebkwi* in the plural. Hence a completely different word or form may be involved. The ending *betêwi* occurs in inscriptions 89 and 125 from Karanog (See Griffith 1911: 40).

Section (k). The form *atê* introduces the terminal formula Type A, the commonest and invariably the first of a number of such titles. *atê* is rarely separated by a divider from the following letters, which in almost all the variants of this formula are *mš*. *mšb* is found in Type Ae (Griffith 1911: 46) but here any resemblance between our inscription and any of the varieties listed by Griffith ceases. The second word is very carelessly written and may be read several ways. It does not bear resemblance to any other of the types of terminal formulae, except perhaps a crude and unconvincing one to type F (Griffith 1911: 52), and hence it would appear that we have here only one formula. Griffith (*ibid.*, 46) suggests that the general meaning of this phrase is "abundant water may you drink," this wish being made on behalf of the deceased for his afterlife. The formation of the various forms is exceedingly speculative and no purpose could be served in discussing them here

CONCLUSIONS

As can easily be seen in the preceding discussion, there exists at present only a rudimentary understanding of the Meroitic language. The sound values of the letters have been generally

established, names can be read, and certain loan words, mostly from Egyptian, have been recognized. The meaning of a small number of native words and some of the basic elements of grammar have also been established. Griffith's lexicons, which systematically arrange the known forms, should someday provide a substantial base for further work. But until either bilingual texts are discovered or the linguistic affiliations of Meroitic are worked out so that known cognate languages can provide a sound basis for systematic investigation, the hope of much progress in the understanding of Meroitic appears dim indeed. Until such a time the "translation" of even relatively simple and well-studied formulae such as appear on tomb inscriptions must remain an identification of known words and grammatical forms eked out with many others of vague or uncertain meaning as well as with guesses and blanks. With these limitations in mind we offer the following translation of the Toshka inscription:

(a) O (unknown adjective) Isis! O (unknown adjective) Osiris!

(b) (the honorable) *Mli-wês* (is here commemorated)

(c) a kinswoman of the commander of the deserts (land?) whose name is *Atkitnideye*

(d) a kinswoman of the commander of the deserts *Adilemême*

(e) a kinswoman of *Qntkleb* [or of *qntk*s]

(f) a kinswoman of the governor [or civil official] of Faras *Pteremêtiye*

(g) a kin [or a cousin] of the envoy to the Romans *Aqêhlêye*

(h) a kinswoman of the envoy to the Romans *H̱tpiye*

(i) a relation (?) of *Apêtekdiyi* [or of a female ambassador],

(j) a relation (?) of commanders, envoys, and governors (?)

(k) (Abundant water may you drink in the afterlife.)

Despite plundering and reuse, this Meroitic funerary inscription from Toshka West has been preserved virtually intact. It appears to date from the third century and commemorates a woman whose name was *Mli-wês*. She has no specific titles, although this is often the case when women are commemorated. Her name is followed by a list of the names and titles of a number of individuals whom we presume to be her relatives. In spite of orthographic peculiarities all the titles which are listed are known, with the possible exception of *qntk*, if it is a title. Although close parallels exist for the name *apêtekdiyi*, we are not sure that it is here being used as a personal name. A search of the literature has failed to turn up occurrences of the other personal names in the inscriptions from the Meroitic cemeteries at Karanog, Shablul (Griffith 1911), and Faras (*ibid.*, 1922). The inscription is somewhat unusual in that the formulae giving the names of the parents of the deceased are lacking. Also several new descriptive phrases are found here.

This text is of interest since it one of the very few Meroitic funerary texts to have come from the Toshka-Arminna region, and the only one preserved intact. Junker (1925: 104) found a few fragments of broken funerary inscriptions in the Meroitic cemetery at Arminna East, and a few more have been found by the Pennsylvania-Yale expedition at the village site at Arminna West. These are as yet unpublished. Apart from a few graffiti scratched on rocks and a number of inscribed potsherds from both Toshka and Arminna, these constitute the entire corpus of Meroitic writing from this section of Lower Nubia.

Yale University, and the major part of the work on this inscription was accomplished while he was the recipient of a Predoctoral Fellowship of the Canada Council.

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