

A New Meroitic Inscription from Qasr Ibrim and a Tentative Reconstruction.

D. N. EDWARDS

During the 1984 season at Qasr Ibrim, a fragment of a Meroitic inscription¹ was found reused as a building block in Structure 297, a domestic building dating to the early Christian period².

This rectangular sandstone fragment was 14.7 cms. across and 15.6 cms. high. While broken at top, bottom and along the right side, the left side was tooled and dressed and this appears to have been the original edge of the inscription. The good smooth finish of the left side was also continued some 3.5 cms. onto the back of the block, while the rest of the reverse side was only poorly finished. The block was 9 cms. thick. This surviving piece of the inscription was relatively well preserved for five lines and parts of a sixth line can be discerned. The text is written between five horizontal incised lines (Plate I, Fig.1). No traces of paint were found on the block, whose surface was quite worn. The following line-by-line transliteration of the text can be made:

x+1	?] n o t e s e l w
x+2	?] i t e n e l i s e l
x+3	?] b i l i s e l w :
x+4	?] . t e p w r i t e :
x+4	?] s e : m l o l i s e l :
x+5	?] . . [5-6?] d o

Notes

Line 1, the final *w* is poorly preserved but can be confidently reconstructed. cf.1.3.

Line 2, the shape of the first letter suggests an *i* rather than an *l*.

¹ This inscription was registered in the field as QI 84.1.15/15 and subsequently registered by the E.A.O. as 84/182 and divided to Cairo. This text is published here with the permission of the Egypt Exploration Society.

² The fragment was built into the south wall of rooms 19 and 28 in Structure 287.

Line 3, the first *l* is very uncertain.

Line 5, the first *se* seems probable and perhaps a trace of the second stroke of the letter is visible at the extreme edge of the block.

Line 6, fragments of 2 signs are visible at the beginning of the line, possibly a *te*, or an unknown sign followed by an *o*. At the end of the line, the *d* seems probable and the next sign might be the single stroke of an *o*.

Initial comparison with known texts showed that this was not part of one of the common funerary inscriptions, of which a few fragments have previously been found during work within the settlement at Qasr Ibrim. There is however, a remarkable similarity to elements of the famous Kharamadoye inscription [REM 0094] from Kalabsha [Griffith 1912:27-32, Millet 1973]. Our first 3 lines duplicate parts of lines 4 and 5 of that inscription:

REM 0094: (4) *se: lw: qoreyi: tḥ: mnote: se: lw: tḥneyi: qr: aritenelise*

(5) *lw: qrneyi: sob: hḷbi: lise: lw: sobneyi: tḥ : mnoteselw:*

Using this text, we may confidently supply the missing letters to complete these words. Moreover, this duplication of three consecutive segments of REM 0094 raises the possibility that our text might have includes all of these same formulae. Following this hypothesis, an attempt can be made to reconstruct these lines of our text, using the Kalabsha text as a guide. The two sections of text linking our first three lines are of similar length, 9-10 letters plus word-dividers. If we can assume regular line lengths in the complete inscription, this regularity would provide us with a text 16-18 letters wide for both the lines concerned ³. Following this, we may suppose that the original inscription would have been something over 30 cms. wide in order to accommodate the suggested text. A hypothetical reconstruction of the text including these elements is given below:

x+1	[7-8? : t ḥ: m] n o t e s e l w
x+2	[t ḥ n e y i: q r: a r] i t e n e l i s e l
x+3	[w:q r n e y i:s o b: ḥ] l b i l i s e l w :
x+4	[s o b n e y i: 4?] t e p w r i t e :
x+5	[9-10?] s e: m l o l i s e l :
x+6	[9-10?]. . [4-5?] d o

³ The variable space requirements of different Meroitic letters will of course not allow us to be more precise.

While this reconstruction remains speculative, the formulaic character of the surviving text would certainly suggest something along these lines. As discussed by Millet [1968:276-8, 1973], the protocols at the start of the Kharamadoye inscription appear to contain the royal titles involving various relationships with the gods, and our text can shed no further light on these. After 3 lines, while diverging from the Kharamadoye stela our text may continue in a similar vein. Line 4 includes *pwrite*, probably a variant of *perite*, the well-attested officials title, usually rendered as the 'Agent'. In our reconstruction, with the absence of a word divider between the *-te* and *pwrite* we may perhaps have a composite title of some form, as perhaps with an example from an Arminna text where we have *pelmospwrite*⁴ as perhaps such a title. If *sobneyi* is correct, we have space for only a limited number of characters to complete the word.

Line 5 appears to contain a form of the adjective *mlo*, 'good/blessed'. In the same Arminna inscription, we find *mlolo*, as an epithet with titles, eg: *qore : mlolo*, *mklw : mlolo* :, *slw : mlolowi* and Trigger has already noted certain parallels between the phrasing of his text and the Kalabsha inscription [1970:42]. The epithet also occurs in the protocols of some standardized texts on ostraca, in these cases again associated with the names of gods [Millet 1977].

Hlbi is known only from a small number of inscriptions. In the texts REM 0064 and 0070 from Meroe, it was associated with numbers⁵. In REM 0132, it would appear to be a title among the descriptive phrases of a funerary text [Griffith 1912:57]. The word has also been encountered three times in an unpublished text from a small wooden plaque from Qasr Ibrim⁶. In its present context it seems probable that it is indeed a form of this otherwise uncommon title.

The meaning of the suffix *-selw* or *-se-lw* as an element of the formulae remains unclear. It is a construction rarely encountered in other texts, but its use in REM 0101 appears similar to our examples, again being associated with a title [Griffith 1912:39]. Millet, however, was unable to provide any further evidence with regards its meaning, but from its context suggested "on behalf of" as a possible translation [1973:41].

⁴ REM 1067, Arminna Text 4, lines 18-19. [Trigger 1970]

⁵ ie: hlbi 3 dime 4 kelw.

⁶ Text QI 84.1.17/45A.

One further point which may be noted is the variance between the two texts in the use of the word-dividers in writing the same words. In REM 0094, there is considerable more usage of the word dividers, but with little consistency apparent, thus we have:

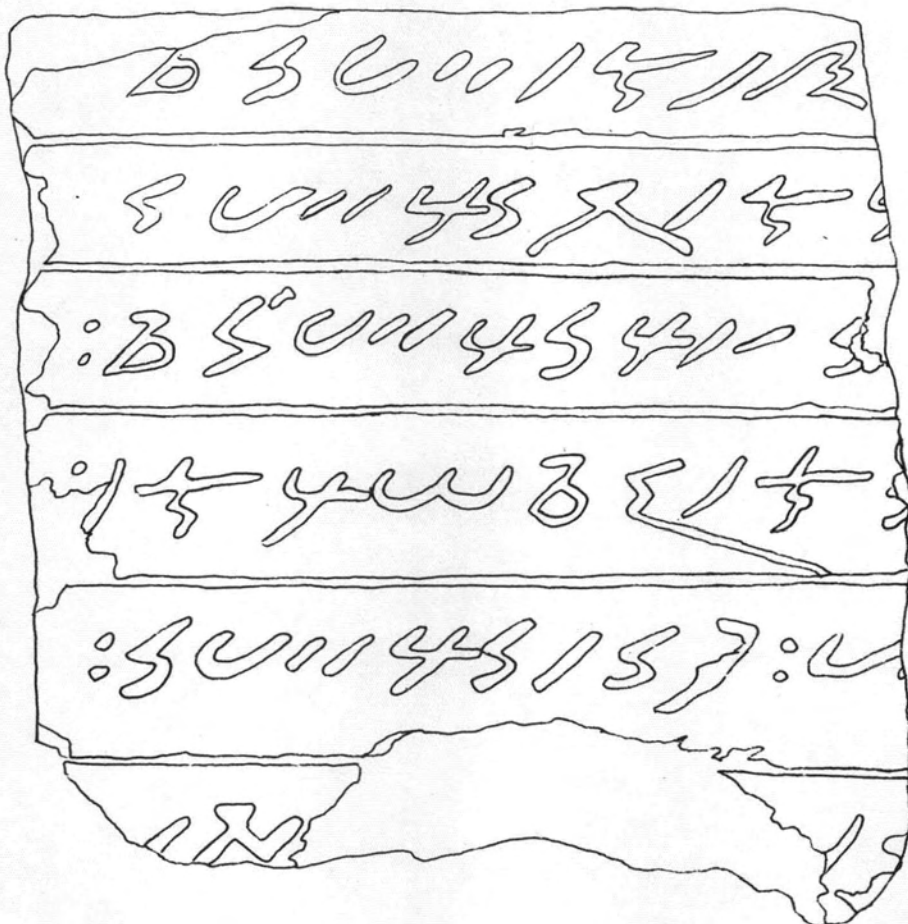
mnote: se: lw: and *mnoteselw*
ariteneliselw: and *ariteneliselw:*
hlbi: lise: lw: and *hlbiliselw:*

Conclusions:

The regularities between this text and the Kharamadoye stela confirm our reading of the more uncertain signs on this block and suggest a possible reconstruction of its first lines. Our knowledge of the Kharamadoye text indicates that our fragment may include only the introductory protocols of a significantly larger inscription. While we have no further means of confirming this hypothesis or of adding to our reconstruction of the text, it is undoubtedly interesting for the apparent duplication of formulae known otherwise only in association with King Kharamadoye. With the very limited number of non-funerary texts available for comparison it is perhaps inadvisable to lay too much stress on these similarities; however, in view of the very limited number of 'royal' inscriptions recovered in Lower Nubia, it is worth noting that our text might fall into this category.

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REM 1228. Fragment of sandstone from Qasr Ibrim.