Finding Old Nubian, or, why we should divest from Western tongues

Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei
Independent Scholar, The Hague, Netherlands.

Abstract In this essay, I venture to describe my own trajectory, through linguistics and continental philosophy, to becoming a philologist specialized in the Old Nubian language, in tandem with a broader analysis of the destabilizing powers of philology that resonate in both deconstruction and psychoanalysis: the problem of the material carrier of writing as that which eventually determines the reading, the humbling idea that the most abstract thought of Plato can be traced to a crumbling fourth-century papyrus. In parallel, I also address the current state of Nubiology and how I have inserted myself into the field as an advocate of both accessible scholarship and a re-anchoring of the scientific field within the local political and social context of Egypt and the Sudan.

postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2020) 11, 301–309.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41280-020-00182-9>

Even if one could bypass all institutions, all academic apparatuses, all schools [...], all disciplines, all (public or private) media structures, recourse to language is indispensable for the minimal practice of philosophy. This massive and trivial evidence must be remembered not for itself but for the conclusions to which it should lead, and which we do not always draw

– Jaques Derrida.

As long as a single person must pay to be able to speak with others and to read and listen to them, language and philology are not free

– Werner Hamacher

My parents had a friend called D. He possessed a magical book containing a collection of writing systems from around the world: *Alphabete und Schriftzeichen des Morgen- und des Abendlandes* (Bundesdruckerei, 1969). Each time we visited D., he would give me a copy of an alphabet, and write my name in it: **ВЫНСЕНТ**, **वन्सिन्त्**, **ピンセント**. I collected coins, stamps, and labels, matching them with their respective writing systems. I started experimenting with adapting non-Latin scripts to write Dutch: Armenian, Hangul, Katakana, Arabic, Devanāgarī. I dreamed of writing systems. I invented languages.

Xargas hixnam,
sèxanrouzau sègers,
avananr arxarerus, [...]

This is a poem I wrote in a language whose name I can no longer recall. I also lost the translation. But according to my marginal notes, *-am* in *hixnam* is a locative singular and the final *-s* in *sègers* an adjectival second singular marker. This language is supposed to have derived from an older language called Martrar, in which the same poem would start as follows: *Ktarkh's sèkñ'mī / tsākraktš sàkhos / tph'nerak rkareros* / [...]. There were sound laws describing the change from one to the other, inspired by a book I had found in my local library discussing the development of Indo-European. The Internet came. I discovered Marc Okrand's (1992) *Klingon Dictionary*. I found other people doing the same thing, creating homepages dedicated to conlangs (constructed languages) on Geocities. I learned about logical operators in Danovën, evidentiality in Degaspregos, and the large Lojban community.¹ There are many reasons to invent a language, but one of them is to explore the frontiers of speech, writing, and communication. By skirting the edges of what is incomprehensible, we can deepen our understanding of what may seem familiar.

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Tracing, transcribing, reconstructing, collating, emending, establishing texts. This is the work of a philologist and a foundation of the craft of historians, classicists, medievalists. Philology is a precondition of reading, while reading itself is a form of philology, too.² Philology is a precondition of philosophy as well, which I learned in grad school when I discovered the work of Pierre Aubenque. Through a meticulous reading of Book K of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Aubenque proves that it is a spurious text, a later addition. This is a crucial find, because Book K is the site where 'being-qua-being' (the object of ontology) and divine being are equated (Aubenque, 2009, 192), which has provided the means for the absorption of Aristotle within Christian theology. That entire philosophical trajectory has now been destabilized owing to a single, careful, philological inspection of the 'Aristotelian' 'text.'

1 See, for example, Yaguello (2006) and Okrent (2009). Rasula and McCaffery (1998) remains a necessary starting point.

2 For a lineage of this argument see De Man (1986), Hamacher (2019). See also van Gerven Oei (2014a, b, 2015), where I explore some of these themes.

The corpus of Western philosophical texts, from the most ancient scraps of Democritus to the letters of Nietzsche or the archives of Derrida, are subject to the practices of the philologist, who provides critical editions, *Gesamtausgaben*, and all kinds of other purportedly stabilized textual products. Grand edifices of thought are erected on top of textual foundations whose punctuation shifts with the slightest tremble, whose many holes caused by insects, decay, or even the ink itself, are provisorily plugged with crafty emendations, and whose totality is based on the whim of *sui generis* filing systems. Deteriorated manuscripts and illegible handwriting are miraculously standardized with an army of sigla and the apparatus of the footnote, while variant readings proliferate in the margins. Upon all of this, the academic stakes their career.³ It should not be surprising therefore that when deconstruction – itself an heir of the philological tradition – made its entry onto the academic scene by addressing the blatant instability of any ‘text,’ it was met with intense hostility. It threatened the ‘seriousness’ and ‘productivity’ of philosophy (Habermas, 1990, 210), and not only that.⁴

Because I was interested in the caustic effects of philological praxis on philosophy (and other ‘major’ disciplines such as history), I found Old Nubian.

* * *

Old Nubian is a Nilo-Saharan language written in the African states of Nobadia and Makuria from the fifth century until about the fifteenth century CE in an area currently comprising southern Egypt and northern Sudan.⁵ It gained renewed attention in the century as a result of Western European expeditions to the region, and became increasingly understood as the twentieth century progressed (Griffith, 1913; Zyhlarz, 1928; Smagina, [1986] 2017; Browne, 2002; van Gerven Oei, 2020). The corpus of texts comprises both literary material, mainly of a Christian nature, documentary material such as letters and contracts, and considerable amounts of epigraphy. It is one of the few historical African languages of which we have a written record.

Apart from a language that is important from a linguistic and philological perspective, Old Nubian is a close relative of Nobiin, Andaandi, and Mattokki,⁶ three contemporary Nile Nubian languages, as well as several Kordofan Nubian languages in the Nuba mountains and Meidob in Darfur, Sudan. Not only are these living languages essential for an understanding of Old Nubian, they also bear the visible traces of this language. For example, the Kordofan Nubian language Dilling preserves the word *kirege* for ‘Sunday’ (Gr. κυριακή, *kiriakî*) (Kauczor, 1930, 364), perhaps the southern-most loanword from Byzantine Greek, while Meidob, hundreds of kilometers from the Nile valley, preserves several unique loans from Old Nubian, including the word *téllí* ‘God’ (ONτῆλῆ, *tilli*) (Rilly, 2010, 193).

At the same time, Nubian-speaking communities – being an ethnic minority in both Egypt and Sudan – have been the target of oppression and cultural genocide since the colonial period. In the twentieth century, speakers of Nile Nubian

3 A notable, early exception to scholars’ trust in the stability of the manuscript is Friedrich Nietzsche, who started his career as philologist intensely engaged with pre-Socratic texts and an obsession for Democritus. See Porter (2000) and Swift (2008).

4 See, for example, the exchange with John Searle documented in Derrida (1988). More recently, new and speculative materialism(s) have flourished based on a rejection of deconstruction as an avatar of ‘correlationism’ (Meillassoux, 2008). However, the main proof for the existence of an ‘absolute’ independent of thought/language, a *sine qua non* for this rejection to hold, falls prey to fundamental misunderstanding regarding the nature of the sign and the task of the epigraphist (van Gerven Oei, 2014a).

5 This falls squarely in what Artur Obluski (2014, 9) has termed the ‘Two Kingdoms Period’ (c. 700–1450 CE) to avoid the eurocentric terms ‘Middle Ages’ or ‘Medieval period.’ The first written evidence for Old Nubian are a graffito from Es-Sebu’ from 795 CE (Jakobielski, 1995) and a gravestone for the priest Stephanos Eñitta from 797 CE

(Eajtar, 1992, 112–29, no. 1). Because of the presence of Meroitic signs in the Old Nubian alphabet, its invention must be dated to the end of the Meroitic period, in the fifth century c. (Rilly, 2008, 191). The latest documents in Old Nubian are from Gebel Adda (e. g., Eajtar, 2014, 951), many of which remain unpublished.

6 Nobiin was first coined as name for the closely related dialects of Mahas and Fadicca. Andaandi is also known as Dongolawi and Mattokki as Kenzi/Kunuzi. See for other terms and orthographies Jakobi and Kümmerle (1993, 21–4).

7 See for an account by a Sudanese administrator, Dafalla (1975). The exodus of the Nubian people has had severe effects on their communities; see, for example, Fernea & Kennedy (1966) and Paesler (2018).

8 See, for example, Hafsas-Tsakos (2011).

9 Despite the unfathomable destruction of cultural heritage, UNESCO insists on calling the campaign ‘a complete and spectacular success’ (UNESCO, n.d.).

10 See for a second-generation testimony El-Melik (2017).

languages have been forcibly displaced by the construction of the Aswan Dam⁷ and other dams in the Nile.⁸ Their ancestral lands were flooded, and only a fraction of their cultural heritage was saved during the salvage-archeological campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s, the great majority being lost forever.⁹ In Egypt, the Nubians’ constitutional right to return to the shores of the Nile continues to be denied. Warfare in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains has wreaked havoc on Nubian and other minority communities in those regions. Nubian languages are not recognized as official minority languages, are banned in schools,¹⁰ and several of them are under threat of extinction.¹¹ The Sudan Uprising of 2019 has created some hope for change, but at the time this paper was written the situation remains fragile and uncertain.

At the same time, ‘Nubian’ has also become an important trope in Black empowerment and nationalist struggles (Fluehr-Lobban and Lobban, 2009, 316–7), influencing everything from the Nuwaubian Nation sect to hip-hop artists such as Brand Nubian. It also became a keyword in Afrocentric scholarship, following the work of Frank Snowden (1970; 1983) and Martin Bernal (1987–2006).¹² For both authors, Nubian peoples played a prominent historical role, either as the ‘Ethiopians’ of the Greeks, or the ‘Black pharaohs’ of the 25th Dynasty. The question of what is Nubian, of Nubian cultural and political heritage, therefore does not only concern the philologist or medievalist in their narrow field of specialization: Old Nubian, an African language spoken by Makuritans a thousand years ago that I started to investigate out of an interest in philology’s destabilizing properties, turns out to be important inflection point, influencing both the debate surrounding African American identity politics and the toxic discourse of whiteness in classics, while at the same time being culturally and politically affirmative for those who are living in oppressive political climates, longing to speak and write their native tongues freely.

This particular case shows the urgent need, especially for those identifying as medievalists of color but certainly not only, to shift away from the canonical, Western topics and languages in Medieval Studies and turn their attention to the rest of the world, which may inflect geographies and temporalities in radically different ways, and profoundly refigure the concepts of ‘middle’ and ‘ages.’ The easy alternative of the Western imperialist gesture claiming the Middle Ages to be ‘global’ does very little to decenter and divest from eurocentric paradigms, as it fetishizes the ‘global’ other and continues to rely on Western historiographical traditions and languages while simply expanding their geographic reach.

A poignant example is a description found in a 2009 article by Geraldine Heng of an Indologist at a US research institution reading from the R̥gveda during a Global Middle Ages course: ‘As the *ancient syllables* rolled off his tongue, accompanied by *head movements and facial gestures* we did not associate with this senior university administrator, the class held its collective breath, *mesmerized*, till the recitation wound to an end. We, a critical

community that relentlessly questioned the past, its locations, uses, and presence in our time, found ourselves *pulled along, spellbound*, in a dilated instant in which that past suddenly materialized, in *incomprehensibly magicalized* form, to disturb yet transport our classroom community' (Heng, 2009, 209, my emphasis). The orientalist hues of the phrases I emphasized are, I hope, obvious, and don't bode well for the type of 'globality' Heng envisions. This is confirmed by her later work. In *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, Heng writes: 'Because we work within the fields of our training (however broadly conceived), where we can hope to have some competence, *it is up to others* – Indologists, Japanologists, Sinologists, Asianists, Africanists, Islamicists, Eurasianists, Mesoamericanists, etc. etc. – *to extend the work* on premodern race as they see fit or not, in their own fields of training and competence' (Heng, 2018, 19, my emphasis). In Heng's work on the 'global' Middle Ages, it appears always to be peripheral 'others' (supposedly including the author of the present article) who are invited to 'extend the work,' while those in the centers of academic power graciously await our hard-won results, to then incorporate them into their master narratives.¹³ What is even more outrageous, is that Heng later suggests that studying the non-European medieval past is not only some kind of 'extension,' but even a 'luxury': 'After long processes of credentialing, few euro-medievalists (and the large majority of contributors to this volume are euromedievalists) have the *luxury of appending* years in which to learn, say, Uighur-Mongolian or Pali, to the scholarly resources they might need for larger projects' (Heng, 2019, 287, my emphases).

If those tenured euromedievalists blessed with 'larger projects' that come with academic privilege refuse to allocate some of their no doubt precious time to 'Uighur-Mongolian¹⁴ or Pali,' then who will? Which untenured academic will have the possibility to risk their non-existent career within departments (including Heng's) that first and foremost value 'euromedievalism'? It is precisely those within the positions of power, tenured professors like Heng, who should be complicit in the struggle for a reality in which studying Pali (which has a massive literature spanning more than two millennia) is not a mere 'appendage' but one of the many *cores* of a medievalist training. This means *diverting* the academic resources left in the neoliberal university. This means being generous to scholarship *outside* the academy. This means *reschooling*. And this means *reimagining*, not merely expanding, what it means to study a roughly thousand-year period in the history of humankind.

An 'embrace' of the non-Western other without decentering the West is as toothless as affirmative action that expresses itself as tokenism. This comes, naturally, at a cost. Not only of research time, but of real financial commitments. But as long as Old and Middle English, Old and Middle High German, Latin, and Byzantine Greek remain the staple tongues of medieval departments instead of Classic Ch'olt'ian, Ge'ez, and Middle Tamil, no real progress toward a truly 'inclusive' and generous field is to be expected. We have

- 11 The Darfur Nubian language Birgid has died out in recent decades. All Nubian languages have an EGIDS (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) level of 6b (threatened) or worse. EGIDS 'measure[s] the status of a language in terms of endangerment or development.' See Ethnologue (n.d.).
- 12 According to Asante, the 'Afrocentrist seeks to uncover and use codes, paradigms, symbols, motifs, myths and circles of discussion that reinforce the centrality of African ideas and values as a valid frame of reference for acquiring and examining data,' (1990, 6; quoted in Winters, 1994, 170), which also provides a recapitulation of the Nubian trope (178–88).
- 13 I will not address the politics of citationality in Heng's book, which, even though professing to understand race 'differently from its definition by canonical twentieth-century race theories' (2018, 3), completely ignores a cornerstone of critical race theory such as Kimberlé Crenshaw. See Tomlinson (2018), who speaks in this context of 'powerblindness.'
- 14 Uighur and Mongolian actually belong to two distinct language families.

to destabilize and undermine Europe, rather than strengthen the ambit of its imperial historical languages. Philology may help us to do so.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my editor, Afrodesia McCannon, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for their valuable input to this brief essay.

About the Author

Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei received his Ph.D. in Media & Communications from the European Graduate School and Ph.D. in Modern Thought from the University of Aberdeen. He is a philologist and director of scholar-led open-access publishing platform punctum books. He is a specialist of the Old Nubian language and managing editor of *Dotawo: A Journal of Nubian Studies*. His publications include *A Reference Grammar of Old Nubian* (Peeters, forthcoming 2020) and *Cross-Examinations* (MER. Paper Kunsthalle, 2015). His three-volume work *Lapidari* (punctum books, 2015) provides the first complete overview of socialist monumentality in Albania. As a translator, he works mostly with anonymous Makuritan Nubian scribes and more recent authors such as Jean Daive, Hervé Guibert, Werner Hamacher, Dick Raaijmakers, Avital Ronell, and Nachoem M. Wijnberg. His writings have appeared in *Afterall*, *Glossa*, *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology*, *postmedieval*, and *Theory & Event*, among other venues (E-mail: vincent@vangervenoel.com).

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