

The Meroitic language and writing system

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The preface of this volume explains that it fills a gap in the market in regard to the study of the Meroitic language making it “accessible to Egyptologists, linguists and Africanists.” This is certainly true, as the Meroitic language is one that is not greatly published and this volume is a valuable addition to the bookshelf of scholars of these different disciplines.

The book is separated into six sections which examine, in detail, different aspects of the Meroitic language as it is understood today. It is clear that the language is still in the process of being deciphered and reinterpreted and therefore there is a certain level of uncertainty in some of the translations and discussions. The different ideas and theories are explained well, and with suitable references enabling the reader to identify how the information we have has been obtained.

The book starts with the interesting history of the written language, which was used between approximately 300 BCE and 400 CE in the area of modern Sudan or Egyptian Nubia. The authors describe how this language has been deciphered and the current work being carried out in order to further our understanding of this script. A particularly interesting section compares the structures and demographic of different Nilo-Saharan languages and dialects indicating that the origins of the Meroitic language can be found here.

One section discusses the available Meroitic texts of which there are a limited number, and new folios of text are not as regularly published as with hieroglyphs for example. In the 1960s and 1970s when the Nubian monuments were threatened by the construction of the Aswan Dam there was a period of recording and collecting as many Meroitic texts as possible, even though they could not be translated, in an attempt to preserve them for future study. The lack of images of any of these inscriptions in this section, lessens the impact of the detailed discussion a great deal. The structure of the language is described in reference to the different types of inscriptions (e.g. funerary texts) giving an interesting theoretical introduction to stylised Meroitic texts, but there is a certain amount of expectation that the reader is familiar with a number of the texts discussed.

There are three sections in the book which focus on the structure of the language, including the syllabic nature of the script, phonology, and grammar. Each section is divided into separate sub headings where the linguistical structure is discussed in great detail giving the reader an understanding of the details of the language, although not necessarily enabling them to be able to read inscriptions. As much of the history of the Meroitic language was

vocalised rather than written, the phonemes and pronunciation are the primary focus of these sections.

At the end of the volume there is a three page glossary of known Meroitic words, although strangely this section does not provide images of the words, only the phonetics and the English translation.

Studies of the vocabulary available to the ancient Meroite community have given certain insights into their culture, for example there are numerous words for livestock (such as sheep, goat and milk) but very limited vocabulary associated with agriculture (no common word for field or irrigate), telling us the ancestors of the Meroites were livestock rather than agricultural farmers. An appendix of over 200 phonetical terms is also provided which form a comparison across the different north-eastern Sudanic languages.

Through the study of the origins of the language scholars have been able to identify that the proto North-Eastern Sudanic community (ancestor of the Meroite population) were probably not Nile dwellers originally, but slowly dispersed over a wide area. Through the study of the Nilo-Saharan languages and the archaeological evidence this movement can be traced.

I was expecting (or hoping) this book would provide the tools for learning to read Meroitic texts, but this was not its purpose. Rather than providing a guide about how to learn to read Meroitic this book provides a detailed analysis of the theory behind the structure and form of the language and would be a particularly useful resource for comparative language scholars interested in language development, rather than those interested in reading the inscriptions themselves.

The authors state the book is “a complete resource” and enables people of “different backgrounds to gain substantial knowledge of Meroitic”, but I am not sure that as an Egyptologist I agree with this as I felt I needed other books to supplement the information provided in this volume.

The main problem is a lack of images. In particular, there are no photographs or illustrations of any of the inscriptions discussed, meaning the reader needs other resources to fully benefit from the discussions and information provided.

There are a few useful tables which have the Meroitic hieroglyphics and cursive script and the phonetic value but these are not easy to follow and there are no signs written in the body of the text, only the phonetic value and an accompanying discussion. For example:

“The signs for 10, 20, 40 and 50 resemble the late but unusual hieratic equivalents, and, for instance, those for 6, 40, 100, and 300 are more similar to the late but common hieratic signs.” (p.57).

Whilst the meaning is clear, the reader either needs to be an expert in late Egyptian hieratic (the common and unusual) or they need to have a hieratic reference book to hand to cross check. Images of the signs inserted into the text would have helped this book to become a more accessible total resource for the subject as the authors intended.

Therefore, whilst this book is an important text for the study of the Meroitic language it is not the only book you will need to study the subject. Whilst the reader should have a background in linguistics to fully appreciate the discussions in this book it could also be an interesting and useful addition to the bookshelves of Egyptologists and Africanologists.