

MEDIEVAL NUBIAN INSCRIPTIONS

Literary records of medieval Nubia are few and fragmentary, but archaeology has yielded a large number of short written texts, mostly of a religious nature, that were inscribed on house and [church](#) walls, on pottery vessels and fragments, and on tombstones. There are medieval texts in at least four different languages: Coptic, Greek, Old Nubian, and Arabic.

An enormously rich source of inscriptions was the buried cathedral at FARAS. On its walls, along with about 200 [mural](#) paintings, there were found over 400 inscriptions of varying length. These were tabulated and classified by S. Jakobielski as follows: sixty-one descriptive legends to mural paintings; thirteen inscriptions commemorating individuals who commissioned paintings; forty portions of prayers; six lists of names of clergy; eighty-one signatures of persons visiting the cathedral, sometimes preceded by a short invocation; sixty-four single names, mostly of saints; two portions of lists of movable feasts; nine single dates; six school exercises; thirty monograms; forty-four single letters; and ninety-two fragments of undeciphered graffiti. Some of these were painted on the walls and were part of the official program of NUBIAN [CHURCH](#) ART; others were the incised graffiti of visitors, made with or without permission. Similar inscriptions have been found on the walls of a great many other Nubian churches.

Another important source of inscriptional information, also at Faras, was an ancient Egyptian rock tomb that in the eighth century had served as the domicile of a solitary anchorite named Theophilus. He had adorned the walls of his makeshift dwelling with a rich assortment of texts in Coptic, painted in black on a white background. Among them were the Nicene Creed, texts relating edifying anecdotes and sayings of the early saints, amuletic texts comprising the beginnings of the four [Gospels](#) inscribed within contiguous circles, the apocryphal letter of Christ to King Abgarus of Edessa, the list of the forty martyrs of Sebaste, the

names of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, and the familiar Latin palindrome *sator arepo tenet opera rotas* (meaning unclear), here rendered with several misspelling. In the midst of the other inscriptions was a short prayer for “Theophilus, this least of monks, who wrote these writings on my dwelling,” with a date equivalent to A.D. 739.

Owners’ names or monograms and cabalistic protective formulas were often incised on pottery vessels, and sometimes also on house and [church](#) walls. An especially popular formula involved the analysis of names into their constituent numerical equivalents (every letter in the Coptic, Greek, and Old Nubian alphabets stood for a number as well as for a sound), the summation of the individual numerical values for the [letters](#) in any given name, and the rendering of the final sum in letter form. In accordance with this formula the very popular name MICAHL was analyzed as $M = 40 + I = 10 + C = 600 + A = 1 + H = 8 + L = 30$, making a total of 689, which was then written as CPQ. This combination of three letters occurs over and over again on pottery vessels and on house walls.

Ostraca (writings on potsherds) were another common form of inscription in medieval Nubia. Many of them were memoranda and receipts; others were school exercises. Still others were religious or magical formulas.

Hijabs (amulets) comprised of religious or magical texts on paper, tightly folded and then sewn into ornamental leather covers, were very common in medieval Nubia. They usually had tie thongs so that they could be worn for protection by individuals, or attached to valued objects or to the harnesses of animals. A great many of these have been found in the excavations at QASR IBRIM, but the texts have not yet been systematically analyzed.

Nubian tombstone inscriptions were either in Coptic or in Greek.

In the latter case they sometimes had a line or two of Old Nubian at the beginning or the end, or both. The texts were usually a dozen or more

lines in length, and involved any of several popular literary formulas. The most common was the well-known Byzantine prayer formula known as the *euchologion mega*:

[Jesus](#) Christ, Light of Life. Through the providence of God, the ruler of all, He that said unto Adam, the first man, "Earth thou art, to earth again shalt thou return"; even thus did [such-and-such person] on [such- and-such date]. And may God the good and benevolent give rest unto his soul in the heavenly kingdom, and place him in the bosom of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, in the paradise of joy, whence weeping and grief and sighing do fly away; and may he cause the good Archangel Michael to watch over his bones; and cause him to hear the blessed voice which shall say, "Come, ye blessed of my father, and inherit the kingdom which has been prepared for you since the foundation of the world." For thou art the rest and the resurrection of thy servant [so-and-so], and unto thee we send up praise, unto the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost, now and forever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

[See also: Nubian Languages and Literature.]

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