

NUBIAN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE

According to the system of classification devised by Joseph Greenberg, the languages spoken by the [Nubians](#) belong to the Eastern Sudanic family of the Nilo-Saharan stock. They are fairly closely related to several of the tribal languages of southern Sudan and Uganda, and are more distantly related to many other indigenous languages of east-central Africa.

The [Nubian](#) languages are believed to have evolved originally in what today are the provinces of Kordofan and Darfur, in western Sudan. Subsequently most of the Nubian speakers migrated eastward to the Nile Valley, displacing or absorbing an older population of Meroitic speakers. In the Middle Ages the Nubian languages were dominant in the Nile Valley at least from [Aswan](#) to the confluence of the Blue and White Niles. They were spoken and written in the medieval kingdoms of NOBATIA, MAKOURIA, and 'ALWA. Since that time the [Nubians](#) in their turn have been partly absorbed into the [Arabic](#)-speaking population of central Sudan, and Nubian languages survive in the Nile Valley only in the far northern Sudan and in southern Egypt. There are also surviving pockets of Nubian speakers at several places in Kordofan and Darfur, although these languages are rapidly dying out.

Today there are three [Nubian](#)-speaking groups in the Nile Valley: the Kanuz (sing., Kenzi) in the north, between [Aswan](#) and Maharragah; the Mahas or Fadija in the middle, between Maharragah and Karma; and the Danaglah (sing., Dongolawi), south of Karma. Kenzi and Dongolawi are actually dialects of the same language, while Mahasi is distinct and not intelligible to speakers of the other two. The Kanuz apparently migrated into their present, northern habitat in the late Middle Ages, but the linguistic frontier between the Mahas and Danaglah was noted by the tenth-century Egyptian traveler IBN SALIM AL-ASWANI.

In addition to the languages that still survive, one or more additional

[Nubian](#) languages were probably spoken in the kingdom of 'Alwa, around the confluence of the Blue and White Niles, where only Arabic is spoken today. There are also at least six surviving Nubian languages in Kordofan and Darfur. They are quite markedly distinct from the languages spoken along the Nile, and also from one another, suggesting a long period of separate existence.

Only one of the medieval [Nubian](#) languages was written down with any degree of regularity. It was the ancestor of modern Mahasi, although the medieval variant is usually designated as Old Nubian. It was written in a modified Coptic alphabet, with two added letters to represent sounds not found in Coptic. F. L. GRIFFITH believed that these characters were carried over from the old Meroitic alphabet, although no text in Old Nubian can be dated earlier than 795.

Surviving texts in Old [Nubian](#) are mostly of a religious nature. They include gospels, prayer books, [lives](#) of saints, descriptive legends for wall paintings, and a great many mortuary texts. In addition, much of the administrative and commercial correspondence found at [QASR IBRIM](#) is in Old Nubian. The same form of written language appears to have been used both in the territory of Nobatia, where Mahasi was also the spoken language, and in Makouria, where the spoken language was Dongolawi. Griffith believed that the few Old [Nubian](#) texts recovered from the more southerly kingdom of 'Alwa might represent a different language or dialect.

Old [Nubian](#) was not the only written language in medieval Nubia; both Greek and Coptic were also in regular use. For obvious reasons Coptic was the preferred language of the numerous Egyptians who served in the Nubian priesthood and monastic orders. However, the liturgical language that was originally introduced when Nubia was converted to Christianity was Greek, and even after they accepted the discipline of Alexandria, the [Nubians](#) were reluctant to abandon it.

In later centuries, when knowledge of Greek became increasingly imperfect, the tendency among the native clergy was to substitute Old [Nubian](#) rather than Coptic. Thus, according to Jakobielski's analysis, Coptic was the language only of the Egyptian clergy resident within Nubia, while Greek, increasingly augmented by Old Nubian, was used by the indigenous population. The surviving literature in Coptic and in Greek is almost exclusively religious, while Old Nubian was also used for administration and commerce. In the later Middle Ages there was much commercial correspondence in Arabic, since much of Nubia's trade was carried on by Egyptians.

It is not certain when the use of Coptic and Greek died out in Nubia; presumably it was when contact with Alexandria was broken in the fourteenth century. The latest known document in Coptic is the consecration scroll of Bishop Timotheos of Ibrim and Faras, written in 1372. It was buried beside him in his tomb at [Qasr Ibrim](#). Old [Nubian](#) persisted for a century longer as the written language of the Christian splinter kingdom of DOTAWO, which came to an end late in the fifteenth century. The last known document in Old Nubian bears the date 1484. Since their conversion to Islam, the [Nubians](#) have used Arabic exclusively as an instrument of written communication, though they continue to speak their indigenous languages as well as Arabic.

[See also: [Nubian Church](#) Organization; Nubian Inscriptions, Medieval.]

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