

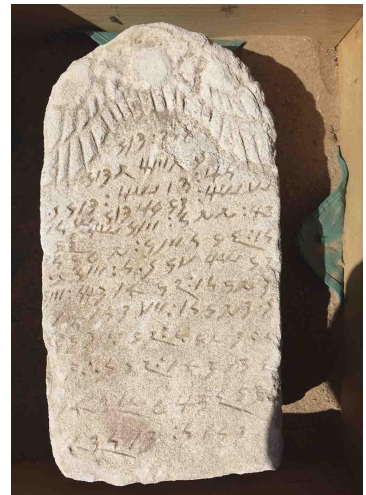
The Difficulty of Decoding an Unknown Language

To find the lost language of ancient Nubia, I sought out Claude Rilly, a linguist or person who studies languages. Rilly specializes in ancient languages. Rilly is waiting on the riverbank. A towering man with a weathered face and easy grin, he welcomes me by saying, “Here we are in the cradle of humanity — in the place where human beings have the oldest home.”

Unprompted, Rilly begins to translate Egyptian hieroglyphics etched into the sandstone columns of the temple at Soleb. Linguists are able to decipher Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics thanks to an artifact called the Rosetta Stone which contained translations.

But he is eager to show off his most valuable finds: stele, stone slabs engraved with Meroitic text from ancient Nubia. Rilly is one of only a few people who can translate any Meroitic text. It’s unrelated to Egyptian hieroglyphics. Rather, Rilly has found a few ties between Meroitic and a handful of languages spoken today by ethnic groups in Nubia, Darfur, and Eritrea.

He translates one recently discovered stele — an appeal to the gods that ends with a benediction: *“May you have plentiful water, plentiful bread, and may you eat a good meal.”*



To figure out what the words mean, he compares each precious tablet of text to another, searching for commonalities and themes. He lifts a recently discovered stele out of a wooden box, and squints at the letters. They fall into slants like heavy metal logos. He explains that the inscription begins with an appeal to the gods, and ends with a benediction: “May you have plentiful water, plentiful bread, and may you eat a good meal.” But there is a word in the middle of the gravestone that Rilly does not know. “It is guessing game,” he says, “I’m not sure if this adjective means supreme or anything else.”

In late 2016, Rilly found a painted stele that had fallen between the bricks of a funerary chapel at Sedeinga and was shielded from sand storms and rain. The top of the stone is decorated with a sun disk encircled by a pair of golden yellow cobras, and surrounded by a pair of red wings. An engraved line separating the illustration from the text is blue — a rare pigment. And the text includes a word Rilly has never before seen.

Based on languages spoken in the region today, he suspects it's a second term for the sun — one for the god of the sun as opposed to the physical sun, the star.

Rilly is desperate to find more text so that he can narrow down the meanings of more words, and decode the stories they tell about Nubian religion. He feels there must be a buried city near the temples, where their ancestors might have left notes on papyrus. Rilly also seeks the remains of a Kushite temple referred to in the stele he's decoded thus far. "There are at least 15 mentions of Isis, as well as the god of the sun and the god of the moon," Rilly says. "We know there was a Kushite cult here, and a cult cannot exist without a temple."

