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Report on the standardisation of a Meroitic sign list for Unicode

For scholarly purposes, e.g. for computer aided studies, storage, exchange and the preparation of Meroitic texts for publication, several codes and transliteration character sets have been proposed (s. Hainsworth & Leclant 1978).¹ These character sets use mainly Latin characters in order to transliterate Meroitic texts, which is, taking into account that Meroitic script used principally 23 characters and a word divider, entirely sufficient for the scholarly use in general. The codes are based, with the exception of some characters like the word divider, on the phonetic value of the Meroitic letters. They do not take into account the appearance of the Meroitic characters written in antiquity.

The major advantages of this way are that: 1) palaeographic peculiarities of the texts are not considered; 2) the transliterated text passages are written from left to right; 3) the transliteration is understandable not only for scholars familiar with Meroitic language. Disadvantages of the character sets proposed so far, which cannot be discussed here in detail, concern for example that some very seldom written characters are not included in these fonts.

The creation of a Meroitic character set which concerns not the phonetic values but the written representation of characters of the hieroglyphic and the cursive scripts, however, must take into consideration that the palaeographical representation of the characters of both scripts changed through time. Thus, it is virtually impossible to create a standardised character set on this "graphical" level. In general, the palaeographic appearance of Meroitic characters is of scholarly interest for palaeographic studies only. As far as such studies are concerned, however, the use of photos and facsimiles is necessary in any case, because the scholar is interested in the study of the original appearance of a specific text. I.e., even in this case, a standardised character set would be useless.

With other words, a standardised Meroitic character set, for the hieroglyphic as well as the cursive script, would be of no importance nor any help in scholarly use. Thus, a standardisation like the one proposed for Unicode would be of interest on the popular-science level only. Instead, it would be much more important, to put the codes proposed so far for the transliteration of Meroitic texts into an international standard (or better: an internet standard).

However, leaving these general considerations aside and speaking about the creation of a graphic character set like the one proposed for a standardisation in Unicode, it would be of some importance to use the same internal coding like the one used for the transliteration fonts.

Some remarks to the "Names and codes table":

Although, as explained above, it is not possible to create a standard for the representation of a Meroitic character set, one could make the attempt, to create a character set which represents the most typical graphic features of the single characters of both, the hieroglyphs as well as the cursive characters. However, this is unfortunately not the case for some of the characters in the present set of the "Names and codes table". This concerns in particular the characters for i, p, m, n, l, g, x, z, k, q, t, to.

An example of a character set of the Meroitic script, which represents the typical features of the characters very well, was created by Prof. Dr. Karl-Heinz Priese already in the 1970ies (s. for example Hochfield & Riefstahl 1978: 93, fig. 67). I would propose to create a computer-based character set on the basis of the characters represented in this table. The original drawings are kept in the archive of the Seminar for Sudan Archaeology and Egyptology of the Humboldt-University of Berlin.

¹ See, e.g. Meroitic News Letter 19 (1978), 10.

In addition I would propose to add the following characters:

- a colon with three points as word divider in hieroglyphic texts,
- a special character developed from the Egyptian *š*,
- the character for "man" (Egypt. *rmṯ*),
- the ligature for *imn* (Amun).

Finally, since both Meroitic scripts developed out of the Egyptian resp. Demotic scripts (s. Priese 1973), an identification of some Meroitic hieroglyphs to originally corresponding Egyptian hieroglyphs is of course possible. However, the phonetic value and the "meaning" of corresponding characters of the Egyptian and the Meroitic scripts differ in some cases, because during the development of the Meroitic scripts, differences developed as well. We can only say that specific characters were developed from Egyptian characters, but not that they correspond to them. An identification of such "corresponding" Egyptian hieroglyphs may be useful. However, it is not at all necessary and can be misleading. Thus, I would propose not to keep the parenthetical links in the "Names and codes table".

Literature cited:

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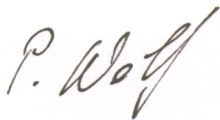
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