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Arabic Documents from Medieval Nubia

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13. LANGUAGE

The Arabic language of the documents occasionally exhibits deviations from Classical Arabic usage, often due to interference from the spoken vernacular language.

13.1. Phonology and Orthography

13.1.1. Loss of Interdental Consonants

The diacritics of *tāʾ* are often written where Classical Arabic would have the interdental consonant *t̪āʾ*, e.g.,

- (ثبات < 9r:22) 'a record' تبات
(ويحدثك < 22r:14) 'and he will tell you' ويحدثك
(وثبت عليه < 23r:12) 'and he persisted' وثبت عليه
(وثلاثة < 25v:12) 'and three' وثلاثة
(مثقال < 46v:14) 'standard weight' مثقال
(حدث < 49r:12) 'it was discussed' حدث

A related phenomenon is the occasional replacement of Classical Arabic *ẓāʾ* by *dād*, e.g.,

- (نظر < 38r:4) 'looking' النظر

13.1.2. *Tafkīm*

In a few cases, an emphatic consonant *ṣād*, *tāʾ* or *dād* is written where Classical Arabic has a plain *sīn*, *tāʾ*, *dāl* or *dāl*, reflecting suprasegmental pharyngealisation (*tafkīm*). This is attested in the environment of *rāʾ* and the labial vowel /ū/, both of which induce pharyngealisation in spoken vernacular Arabic, e.g.,

قرات < (29v:3 قراط عليك افضل السلام
qara'tu literally: 'I have read')

خوذة < (37r:19 'the helmet' *kūda* الخوذة)

13.1.3. Devoicing

The devoicing of a voiced consonant in contact with a following voiced consonant is reflected in the following orthography:

ادفو < (38r:9 'Edfu' اتفو)

13.1.4. Loss of *hamza*

Word-medial and word-final *hamza* are often omitted in the orthography, e.g.,

ادام الله علاه < (30r:3 'may God cause to endure his ascendance'
 (عَلَاءُهُ <

بقضائها < (30r:5 'by carrying them out' بقضاها)

The diacritics of *yā'* are often written where *hamza* on *yā'* would be expected in Classical Arabic, reflecting the loss of *hamza* in this environment in vernacular speech, e.g.,

القائد < (3v:3 'the leader' القايد)

حوائج < (9r:11 'needs' حوايج)

غائب < (16r:4 'absent' غايب)

In the following, a *yā'* is written where a *hamza* without a seat between two vowels would be expected in Classical Arabic:

احيا الله الملك وزريه < (23r:6 'May God keep the king and his viziers alive.'
 (وُزَرَءُهُ <

Alternatively, it may be that the singular form وزيره 'his vizier' was intended, but the scribe metathesised the *yā'* and the *rā'* when writing the word.

The orthography sometimes reflects the elision of word-initial *hamzat al-qat'* after a word ending in a vowel, e.g.,

ما عرف ايش يكتب 'I do not know what he is writing.' (21r:10)

13.1.5. Shortening of a Final Long Vowel

The omission of final *yā'* in the following orthography appears to reflect the shortening of unstressed final long vowels in vernacular speech:

ولدين من اولاد 'two boys from my boys', i.e., two of my boys (= sons; 21r:3 < اولادی 'awlādī)

13.1.6. Assimilation to a Cliticised Prepositional Phrase

The following orthography appears to reflect the assimilation of the final *bā'* of the verbal form to the *lām* of the following prepositional phrase:

وكاتب لى 'and write to me' (29v:4 < واكاتب لى *wa-kātib li*)

13.1.7. Final *yā'* Written for Final 'alif

ما انا الى شاكرك الله 'I am only grateful to God.' (35r:9)

Here the word الى corresponds to لا in Classical Arabic orthography.

In the following example, a final 'alif is written where Classical Arabic has final short /a/:

فَعِن اِيش تَكَلَمْت فِيا ‘and (I know) what you have spoken about me (< *fiyya*).’ (17r:8)

13.1.8. Non-Classical Plene Orthography

Occasionally, long *ā* is represented by *’alif* where Classical Arabic has defective orthography, e.g.,

ذَالِك ‘that’ (35r:4; Classical Arabic ذَالِكْ)

13.1.9. Two *’alifs* Represent Word-Initial *’ā*

اِجْلِه ‘its postponed portion’ (48r:7)

This is an unconventional orthography for اَاجْلِه.

13.1.10. Interchange of *dād* and *ẓā*’

يَقْبِضُوها ‘they cause to acquire’ (38r, margin, 3)

لِمُعْظَلَةٍ ‘to a misfortune’ (41:76)

In Classical Arabic orthography, these words are spelt with a *dād*, viz. مُعْضِلَةٌ, يُقْبِضُوهَا.

13.2. Morphology

13.2.1. Interrogative Pronoun *’ayš*

In several cases, writers use the inanimate interrogative pronoun اِيش rather than مَا or مَاذَا, e.g.,

فَعِن اِيش تَكَلَمْت فِيا ‘and (I know) what you have spoken about me.’ (17r:8)

فَايشْمَا كَانَ لَكَ مِنْ حَاجَةٍ ‘and whatever request you have’ (20r:11)

مَا عَرَفَ اِيش يَكْتَبُ ‘I do not know what he is writing.’ (21r:10)

13.2.2. Morphology of Fifth Form Verbs

An *'alif* is written before the *tā'* in the fifth form in the following, reflecting vernacular morpho-phonology:

اتسلموا 'they have received' (38r, margin, 2; Classical Arabic
(تَسَلَّمُوا))

13.2.3. Particle

The word سا is found in 23r:4, which I am interpreting as a vernacular form meaning 'now, immediately', derived from ساعة.

13.3. Syntax

13.3.1. Independent Genitive Exponent

The independent genitive exponent *mtā'* is attested in the following, where it is written connected to the preceding word in the orthography.

والقوسامتا ع درمس 'and the Qūsa (clan) of (the town of) Darmus'
(18r:7)

The *'alif* before متاع presumably reflects an epenthetic vowel (*wa-l-Qūsa imtā' Darmus*).

13.3.2. Non-Classical Usages of the Negator *lam*

On a few occasions, the use of the negative particle *lam* has been extended beyond the Classical Arabic construction of *lam* + jussive and is used with past suffix-conjugation verbs and future prefix-conjugation verbs. This is more characteristic of non-standard

written Arabic of the Ottoman period than medieval Arabic (Lentin 1997, 764–67; Wagner 2010, 141–50):

فانى لم لقينا ‘and I have not found’ (9v:20–21—Note that in this example the first person singular and plural pronominal subject indexes are interchanged.)

فان العسكر لم ينتظر ‘for the army will indeed not wait’ (22r:12)

In the last example, it seems that the negation is emphatic, which is a usage of *lam* that is still retained in Modern Egyptian Arabic (Rosenbaum 2002).

13.3.3. Non-Classical Usage of First Person Pronouns

In the following, a 1pl pronoun serves as the subject of a verb with a 1sg inflection:

لانا اريد ‘because I want’ (2r:8)

13.4. Lexical Items

The documents attest to a few lexical items that have forms or meanings that are not attested in the dictionaries, as far as I can establish:

بناك ‘nascaphthon (aromatic root)’ (15v:5): This is the meaning given by Dozy (*Supplément*, I:119) for the word *bunk*, also pronounced *bunak*. The orthography بناك may be a variant form of this word.

الغيسين ‘beauty’ (17r:11): This appears to be a variant of the adjective غَيْسَانِي/غَسَّانِي ‘beautiful’ (Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 3259; Hava, *Dictionary*, 517).

قريضة (24r:6): This may be a variant of the term فراض, which was used in the context of medieval commerce to refer to a business commenda type of partnership.

نعمى *nu'mā* (29r:13): literally 'pleasure, happiness', but here the word apparently has the sense of luxury goods. Dozy (*Supplément*, II:691) records a similar meaning for the related form النعم 'objects d'une grande valeur'.

تستأبوا 'they gape' (41:18): This is the 3sg.f prefix conjugation form of the root *t-ʿ-b*, although the dictionaries do not list the tenth form for this verb. The use of the tenth form is presumably a poetic licence for the sake of the metre. The final inflectional vowel would be short according to the rules of Classical Arabic (*tastaʿibu*), but has been lengthened for metrical purposes.

