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**On the “Absolute Genitive” of Old Nubian**

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Old Nubian, Genitive morphemes, absolute state, predicative state

Abstract:

Old Nubian has two morphemes of the genitive, namely endings *-n* or *-na*. It is generally assumed that *-na* is a combination of the first, *-n*, and the ending of the absolute or predicative state, *-a*. Here is an attempt to find more precise conditions for its use (as with genitives within a predicative phrase). On the other hand, it is obvious that there are cases that cannot be accounted for by such rules. It is assumed that the system of the absolute state is already in decay in the period of the language that is presented by the Old nubian texts.

The morpheme of the genitive in Old Nubian is either *-n* or *-na*. „Steht das Nomen zu einem anderen in genitivischem oder possessivem Verhältnis, so tritt an das regierte Nomen das Suffix -N oder -NΔ.“<sup>1</sup> On the relation between the two forms: „... mit nachfolgenden statischen Endungen [= status morphemes, case endings] ..., also subjektiv : *\*-n-i*, determiniert [*recte* subject case] : *\*-n-i-l*, prädikativ : *\*-n-a* ...“ (ibid.). This shows that Zyhlarz already interpreted *-na* as a combination of the genitive morpheme *-n* and the predicative morpheme *-a*. He says, however, „Die vorhandenen Beispiele machen ... den Eindruck, als ob im Falle, daß das Rektum bereits erwähnt oder als bekannt vorausgesetzt ist, das Suffix -N, im entgegengesetzten Falle jedoch -NΔ gesetzt würde.“<sup>2</sup> ... *give the impression* — not really a conclusive and convincing criterium.

Hintze, who critically reanalysed the attestations of the two genitive markers, did not find a much more conclusive result either. „1. Das Suffix *-n* bezeichnet eine enge, geschlossene Verbindung, die im Satzgefüge den Rang eines Nomens hat. ... 2. Das Suffix *-na* bezeichnet dem gegenüber eine weniger enge oder mehr offene Verbindung. Es steht, wenn das Rektum oder das Regens zusammengesetzte Ausdrücke sind ..., oder wenn die ganze Verbindung eine über sich hinausgreifende syntaktische Verklammerung im Satz hat.“<sup>3</sup>

In detail, he observed the following conditions for the use of *-na*.

- 2.1. the nuclear noun phrase [= the *regens*] is formed of noun plus adjective.
- 2.2. the nuclear noun phrase is a personal name plus apposition.
- 2.3. the nuclear noun phrase is complex, i.e. of more than two components.

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<sup>1</sup> ZYHLARZ 1928, 36.

<sup>2</sup> ZYHLARZ 1928, 38 § 91.

<sup>3</sup> HINTZE 1971, 291–293.



### The genitive phrase as nominal predicate with *-lo*<sup>8</sup>

The explanation of *-na* as a combination of genitive marker and predicative marker is most plausible. It is nicely illustrated in the Litany of the Holy Cross,<sup>9</sup> with numerous nominal sentences with the copula marker *-lo*, of the structure, #“cross”/subjective (= fronted/topicalised subject) — noun phrase/predicative — copula *-lo*#, where the predicative noun phrase contains a genitive construction.

- (2) ḲΤΔΥΡΟCḲ ΧΡΙCΤΙΑΝΟ[C]ΡΙΓΟΥΝΔ ΤΕΕΓ[Τ]ΔΛΟ  
*istaurosi-l christianos-ri-gu-na tegt-a-lo*  
 cross-SUBJ Christian-PLUR-GEN·ABS hope-ABS-COP

‘The cross is the hope of the Christians’ St. 18, 11–19,3.

- (3) ḲΤΔΥΡΟCḲ ΔΙΟΛΓΟΥΝΔ ΕΔΙΕΡΡΔΛΩ  
*istaurosi-l di-ol-gu-na ηayerr-a-lō*  
 cross-SUBJ die-PRET-PLUR-GEN resurrection-ABS-COP  
 (*ηaer*<sup>10</sup>)

‘The cross is the resurrection of the dead’ St. 19,3–5.

In some instances, however, the shorter morpheme *-n* is found in exactly the same construction.

- (4) ḲΤΔΥΡ<O>CḲ ΤΕΥΟΛΓΟΥΝ ΔΔΥΔΛΩ  
*istaurosi-l teu-ol-gu-n dau-a-lō*  
 cross-SUBJ err-GER.PRET-PLUR-GEN path-ABS-COP

‘The cross is the path of those who have gone astray’ St. 19,5–7.

- (5) ḲΤΔΥΡΟCḲ ὨΟΛΔΕΙΓΟΥΝ ΔΕCΙΑΕΡΔΛΩ ·  
*istaurosi-l ošonai-gu-n desi-der-a-lō ·*  
 cross-SUBJ slave-PLUR-GEN free·DEVERB-ABS-COP

‘The cross is the freedom of the slaves’ St. 20,9–11.

- (6) ḲΤΔΥΡΟCḲ ΔΙΔΒΟΛΔCḲ ΔΙCΔΡΤΔΛΟ  
*istaurosi-l diabolosi-n dihart-a-lo*  
 cross-SUBJ devil-GEN defeat-ABS-COP

‘The cross is the defeat of the devil’ St. 23,8–9.

- (7) ḲΤΔΥΡΟCḲ ΚΔΥΕḲΓΟΥΝ ΚḲΤΔΛΟ  
*istaurosi-l kauil-gu-n kitt-a-lo*  
 cross-SUBJ naked-PLUR-GEN dress-ABS-COP

‘The cross is the clothing of the naked’ St. 23,12–24,1.

<sup>8</sup> SATZINGER 1990, 200–205.

<sup>9</sup> BROWNE 1983 (a).

<sup>10</sup> BROWNE 1996, 198–199.

|     |                    |                   |   |
|-----|--------------------|-------------------|---|
| (8) | ĀΤΔΥΡΟCĀ           | ΧΡΙCΤΟCĀ          | ΕΔĪΕΡΔΕΡΔΛΛΟ  |
|     | <i>istaurosi-l</i> | <i>xristosi-n</i> | <i>ηayer-der-a-lo</i>   |
|     | cross-SUBJ         | Christ-GEN        | resurrection·DEVERB-ABS-COP                                   |
|     |                    |                   | ( <i>ηaer</i> - <sup>11</sup> ; <i>-der</i> - <sup>12</sup> ) |

‘The cross is the resurrection of Christ’ St. 27,1–3.

Of forty nominal sentences of this structure, with a genitive construction in the predicative phrase, thirty-five show the genitive morpheme *-na*, while five have only *-n*. The shorter morpheme *-n* is three times followed by *d-* (as the first letter of the nuclear noun phrase), once by *-k*, and once by *-η*. The longer morpheme *-na* may be followed by *-s* (St. 19,11; 21,2; 23,11; 25,5); by *-t* (St. 19,2; 20,7; 22,10; 22,12; 24,8; 26,2; 27,6); by *-p* (St. 24,6; 24,10; 25,14); by *-g* (St. 23,7; 27,4); by *-m* (St. 19,13; 26,7); or by a vowel (St. 19,8; 21,11; 22,2; 22, 4; 22,7; 24,3; 25,12; 26,5; 26,9; 26,12). But it is also met before *-d* (St. 24,12); or *-k* (St. 20,6); or *-η* (St. 19,4; 21,8; 25,7). This is far from being an unequivocal evidence; it may, however, not be mere coincidence that *-n* is found in three of five cases before the consonant *-d*, whereas *-na* (thirty-five cases) is found only once before *-d*. A convincing phonetic argument for the omission of the vowel between *n* and *d* cannot be seen, however.

It might be expected that the vowel of *-na* is elided before another vowel. But we find the full form *-na* quite often before a vowel (as just mentioned), though there is no case of *-n* under this condition, except in *au-n asi-* ‘hold of the ship’ in ex. (23).

### The genitive phrase in the address (“vocative”)

The absolute state of Old Nubian is not simply the form of the predicate. It is the quotation form of both nouns and verbs (though modern grammars and dictionaries do not make use of it for this purpose), and it is the form of the address (vocative function).

|     |                |                   |                                  |
|-----|----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| (9) | ΤΑΝΝΔCΩ        | ΔΠΟΝΔ             | ΤΔΡΟΥΔCCΔΓΟΥĒΚΕ                  |
|     | <i>tan-asō</i> | <i>apo-na</i>     | <i>taruas-s-a-gue-ke</i>         |
|     | come-IMPR      | my father-GEN·ABS | be blessed-GER·PERF-ABS·PLUR-2PL |
|     |                | ( <i>apol-</i> )  | ( <i>taruar-</i> )               |

“Come, you whom my Father blessed!” St. 29,10–12.<sup>13</sup>

|      |              |               |       |             |              |            |
|------|--------------|---------------|-------|-------------|--------------|------------|
| (10) | ΕΟΔΔ         | ΤΧΛΔ          | ΟΥΝΔ· | ΟΥΝ         | ΔΕΧΓΟΥΝΔΕΙΟΝ | ĒCΟΓΓΙΑΕΡΔ |
|      | <i>ηod-a</i> | <i>till-a</i> |       | <i>u-na</i> |              |            |
|      | lord-ABS     | god-ABS       |       | 2PL-GEN·ABS |              |            |

<sup>11</sup> BROWNE 1996, 198–199.

<sup>12</sup> BROWNE 2002, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by SATZINGERS

*u-n*                      *ail-a-gu-na-ion*                      *esoggi-der-a*  
 2PL-GEN              heart-ABS.PLUR-GEN·ABS-and              release·DEVERB-ABS

‘Our Lord and God, and release of our hearts!’ St. 7, 2.

Compare the postponed absolutive genitive *una* with *un*, in the normal position, and of non-predicative form, although part of a predicative phrase.

The absolute state of Old Nubian is comparable to the predicative case of Cushitic and also that of Berber (here traditionally called *état libre*), as also the absolute state of Akkadian.<sup>14</sup> The predicative case of Cushitic and Berber is, though, also the form of the object, for which Old Nubian has a specific form, namely the directive case.

As for the predicative function, it applies to the nominal predicate, in particular with the copular morpheme *-lo*, and to the predicative extension of all kinds of verbs of being and auxiliaries, of the verbs of naming, labelling, denoting, etc.<sup>15</sup>

(11) ΕΙΝΔΕ ΕἸΣΧΑΛΟ ΠΕΣΤΑΚΟΝΔ  
*in-de*              *ηiss-a-lo*              *pes-tak-ona*  
 this-and              holy-ABS-in              say-PASS-PRET·3SG·ABS  
 ‘and this is named the Holy.’ Heb 9.3 (L. 111.6)

The predicate phrase may consist of one single element (a noun, or a verb), or it may be complex, to any extent. Apart from frontal or backward extrapositions, it is only the subject phrase that is excluded from the predicate phrase. Nominal and adverbial complements, however, are part of it. In each and every nominal function within a predicate phrase, a genitival construction may be found. And this is precisely where the predicative genitive morpheme *-na* comes in.

### The genitive phrase in headlines

Headlines are a employment of forms of absolutive case, absolute state, bare noun, etc.<sup>16</sup>

(12) ΕΟΚΚΟΡΔ ΧΡΙΣΤΟCἸ ΜΑΡΤΥΡΟCΟΥ ΕἸCΟΥ ΜΗΝΔΝΔ ΔΥCΔΛΩ  
*ηokkor-a*              *Christosi-n*              *martyros-u*              *ηiss-u*              *Mena-na*              *au-s-a-lō*  
 miracle-ABS              Ch.-GEN              martyr-JUNC              holy-JUNC              M.-GEN·ABS              do-GER·PERF-ABS-COP  
 ‘A miracle which Mena, the holy martyr of Christ, performed’ M. 1.1-3<sup>17</sup>

### Absolute genitive as form of the subject of a part clause

Relativ clauses:

(13) ΚΟΥΜΠΟΥ ΕἸΝ ΤΑΝ’ΝΔ ΚἸCἸ

<sup>14</sup> SATZINGER 2007, 63-69; SATZINGER, *printing* (a); SATZINGER, *printing* (b).

<sup>15</sup> ZYHLARZ 1928, 32 §§ 70–71.

<sup>16</sup> SATZINGER, *printing* (b).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by SATZINGER 1990, 190 ex. 21; VAN GERVEN OEI 2015, 39 ex. 61.





It was already observed by Hintze<sup>22</sup> that *-n* is used for genitival compounds, whereas *-na* is several times the form of a genitival phrase of which one or both elements consist of compounds like those mentioned.

- (21) ἸΣΤΑΥΡΩ̄C ΟΥΡΟΥΕΙΓΟΥΝΑ ΛΟΚΙΤῆ̄Ν ΕἶΤΝΑΡΚΑΛΟ  
*istaurosi-l*      *uru-i.gu-na*      *ηokiti-n*      *itnark-a-lo*  
 cross-SUBJ      king-PLUR-GEN·ABS      glory-GEN      receiving-ABS-COP  
 (*ηokitin itnark-* ‘splendour’<sup>23</sup>)

‘The cross is the splendour of the kings.’ St 21.8

Obviously, the genitival phrase *ηokiti-n itnark*, “receiving of glory” is a fixed expression, “splendour”; its construction is stereotyped and does not follow the rules of a freely formed genitive; whereas is the genitive-absolute *urui-gu-na*, “is (the splendour) of kings” is such a freely formed genitive.

The following probably displays another fixed expression, in the form of the normal genitive construction. In the same time, it is an instance of an unexpected predicative genitive in a non-predicative environment.

- (22) ΕΙΕῆ̄Ν ΚΑΟΥΕΙΓΟΥΝΑ ΔΙΑΒΟΛΟCῆ̄Ν ΜΕΕΡΤΛΟΣΟΥΝ ΕCΚΙΤΑΚCῆ̄ΚΑ ΕΔΛΛΕΝΝΟΝ  
*eie-n*      *kau-i-gu-na*      *diabolosi-n*      *meert-lojun*  
 mankind.GEN      offspring-PLUR-GEN·ABS      devil-GEN      baseness-by  
*eski-tak-sik-ka*      *ηal-en-non*  
 conquer-PASS-GER·PERF-DIR      see-CIRC-and  
 (*eski-tak-sil-*)      (*-lon*)

‘and when he saw the offspring of mankind conquered by the baseness of the devil’ SC. 19.13-15.

It may be that both *eie-n kauigu-*, “the offspring of mankind,” and *diabolosi-n meert-*, “the baseness of the devil,” are fixed expressions. *Eie-n kauigu-na*, “the offspring of mankind,” is the subject of the passive gerund *eski-tak-sil* (assimilated to *-sik-* before *-k-*), “having been conquered” — the subject of the gerund is in the form of the genitive; but here is the predicative *-na* instead of the expected *-n*.

Browne<sup>24</sup> observed that the following main clause is lacking its verb, probably ΔΟΛΛΟΝΑ, “he wished” (ἐβουλήθη, ΔΦΟΥΩΩ); still, this predicative verb form cannot be expected to trigger a predicative genitive in a preceding clause of circumstance. It could be imagined that the use of *-na*

<sup>22</sup> HINTZE 1971, 291–92.

<sup>23</sup> BROWNE 1996, 79–80.

<sup>24</sup> BROWNE 1984, 126.

intends to stress the contrast of this free genitive construction (which is here the expression of the subject of a gerund) and the two adjacent fixed expressions with *-n*. This would, however, be a clear indication that the original motivation for the use of *-na* was already blurred.

- (23) ἌΠΟΓΓᾶ ΜᾶΝ ΚΟΥΜΠΟΥΚᾶ ἌΟΥΝ ἌCΝ ΤΟΥΝᾶ ΚΑΠΠᾶ CΕΥἘἌ ΠΙἘἺ ἘΛΛΕΝ  
*apoggi-l man kumpu-ka au-n asi-n tu-na*  
 skipper-SUBJ that egg-DIR ship-GEN hold-GEN belly-GEN·ABS  
*kapp-a seue-la pi-en ηal-en*  
 food-ABS rest-in.ABS be.SUBJ saw.CIRC

‘when the skipper saw that egg lying amongst the rest of the provisions within the hold of the ship’ M. 8,7–10

Again, *asin tu-*, lit. “belly of the hold,” may be a fixed compound expression, with *tu-* ‘belly’ on its way to become a postposition.

Two backward extrapositions, one with simple genitive, the other with absolute genitive:

- (24) ΟΥΝΝΟΥΤΑΚΟΝ ΒΗΘΛἘΜΗ ἸΟΥΔΑΙΝΝΟ ἢ ἩΡΩΔΗ ΟΥΡΟΥΝᾶ ΟΥΚΡΙΓΟΥΧΩ  
 [— —] *unnu-tak-on B. Iudia-n-no Ērōdē uru-na ukriгу-lō*  
 bear-PASS- PRET·3SG-when B. Judaea-GEN-in H. king-GEN·ABS day-PLUR-in  
 (-lo)

‘When (Jesus) was born in Bethlehem of Judaea, in the days of Herodes the king (behold, magi ... arrived ...)’ Matth. 2,1 (L. 113,2).

The core clause finishes with *unnutakon* ‘when ... was born’; it is followed by a locative expression with a simple genitive, ‘in ...,’ and a temporal one with an absolute genitive, ‘in the days of ....’ The explanation of the discrepancy is perhaps that ‘Bethlehem of Judaea’ is a fixed expression, whereas ‘in the days of ...’ is a free one.

### The genitive phrase as Object of a Gerund that Depends on a Predicative Verb Form:

- (25) ἸCΤΑΥΡΟCΟΥ ἘΟΚΚΟΝᾶ ἘἌΚᾶ ἘἌΔᾶC ΚΟΥΝᾶ ΚἌΔᾶΝᾶ  
*istauros-u ηokko-na id-k id-da kuni-l kid-dna*  
 cross-JUNC holy-GEN·ABS sign-DIR 2SG-with have-GER·PRES come-FUT·2SG·ABS  
 (-ka) (ir-) (kir-)

‘you will come having with you the sign of the holy cross’ St. 7.6.

### The genitive phrase governed by a postposition, in backward extraposition

A temporal part-clause, controlled by a postposition (*-lo*), is following on a complex main clause; its verb (*peššidden*) on its part being expanded by a complex postpositional phrase (with *-jōa*).

- (26) ἸCΚᾶΝἘCΟ ΠἘΩᾶΔᾶἘΝΝΩ ἘΟἌΟΥ ἘἺΝΟΥ ἸC ΧἘCἸΝᾶ ἸἺἺἺᾶἘ ἘἺΟΝΚᾶΝἘἺἘΚἘἺCᾶ

*tijkane-lo peššid-den-nō ḡod-u en-n-u i(ēsu)s kh(risto)ssi-n-a*  
 justice-in judge-FUT·3SG-in lord-JUNC 1PL-GEN-JUNC I. Kh.-GEN-ABS  
 (*peššir, -lo*)

*titti-l-de itonkane-l-dekel-jōa*  
 grace-SUBJ-and philanthropy-SUBJ-and-through

‘(We will hear that voice ...) when he will judge in justice — through the grace and philanthropy of our Lord Jesus Christ’ St. 30.6–11.

### Conclusion

The Old Nubian system of the absolute status is unique, and it is crystal clear. The predicative element receives the predicate marker *-a*, and so does every other member of the predicative phrase: an attribute, or a genitive (with *-na* instead of *-n*). But language is in permanent change: modern Nobiin does not know this feature anymore, although Reinisch found traces of it (at a time when Old Nubian was yet completely unknown !) in Kenzi and Dongolawi: „Im idiom von Kenzi und Dungula hörte ich die genitiv-partikel auch häufig wie *na* sprechen; z.b. *ai Illāhi-na rasūl ēri* ich bin der gesandte Allah’s; *Ali-na belled izai-re ?* Wo ist die heimat Ali’s ? *wārag-na ilba* schachtel für papier; *hibir-na dawāya* tintenfass u.s.w.“<sup>25</sup> In the period in which the Old Nubian language is attested, the usage of the predicative morpheme must have begun to become corroded; if not the predicate marker *-a* itself, then at least that of the absolute genitive, *-na*.

### Glosses

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 1SG       | 1st person singular  |
| 1PL       | 1st person plural  |
| 2SG       | 2nd person singular  |
| 2PL       | 2nd person plural  |
| 3SG       | 3rd person singular  |
| 3PL       | 3rd person plural  |
| ABS       | Absolute state, or case ( <i>-a</i> )  |
| CIRC      | marker of clause of circumstance ( <i>-en</i> ; BROWNE’S “expanded verbid” § 4.7.3c) |
| COP (-lo) | copula ( <i>-lo</i> )  |
| DEVERB    | deverbative morpheme   |
| DIR       | directive case ( <i>-ka</i> )  |
| FUT       | future   |
| GEN       | genitive ( <i>-n</i> )   |
| GEN·ABS   | absolute genitive ( <i>-n-a</i> )  |
| GER       | gerund (BROWNE’S “verbid”)   |
| IMPR      | imperative   |
| JUNC      | juncture ( <i>-u, -i</i> )   |
| PASS      | passive ( <i>-tak-</i> )   |
| PAST      | past ( <i>-a- / -o-</i> )  |
| PERF      | perfect ( <i>-s-</i> )   |

<sup>25</sup> REINISCH 1879, 25 § 110.

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| PRED  | predicative (i.e., main clause conjugation)   |
| PLACT | pluractional (- <i>j</i> -)                   |
| PLUR  | plural  |
| PRET  | preterite (- <i>a/o</i> -)                    |
| SUB   | subordinative (i.e., part clause conjugation) |
| SUBJ  | subject case (- <i>l</i> )                    |

### The Text Sources

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| Heb    | Hebrews (in L.)                           |
| IN I   | = PLUMLEY — BROWNE 1988                   |
| IN II  | = BROWNE 1989                             |
| K.     | See BROWNE 1983 (b)                       |
| L.     | See BROWNE 1982                           |
| M.     | See BROWNE 1994                           |
| Matth. | Matthew (in L.)                           |
| Ps. 31 | Psalms 31 (in PLUMLEY — BROWNE 1988, 8–9) |
| SC.    | See BROWNE 1984                           |
| St.    | See BROWNE 1983 (a)                       |

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