

Considering Meroe and Meroë: Kush and Rome in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* opens with the speaker, Lucius, on the road to Thessaly when he encounters two other travelers. One of the men, Aristomenes, has piqued Lucius' interest with a fantastic story that his companion disdains as wildly untrue, but Lucius convinces Aristomenes with a free meal to tell the story anyway, which is the harrowing tale of his and his friend Socrates' encounter with two witches many years ago. One of the witches, the innkeeper Meroe, had kept Socrates enslaved to her in a long, destructive relationship. Though Aristomenes tried to help Socrates escape, Meroe and a younger witch Panthia kill Socrates through a mysterious blood-letting ritual and urinate on Aristomenes, trapped under his own bed.

This story and the character Meroe have been the focus of some scholarship, especially recently into the roles witches and magic play in the *Metamorphoses* as a whole. Previous authors have picked up on Apuleius/Aristomenes' comparison of her to Calypso at I.12 (especially Frangoulidis 2008 and Keulen 2006) and, indirectly, Circe, with the catalog of animals at I.9 that Meroe has turned former lovers and enemies into (Harrison 1990). Meroe is also compared to other magical women within the *Metamorphoses*, namely Pamphile and Photis. Despite it being widely accepted that the ancient authors of the Roman novel often chose *nomina omina*, or significant names, for their characters (Hijmans 1978), few scholars have discussed the possible origins and meanings of Meroe's name. Those that do are variously satisfying, and often relegate these considerations to a footnote.

The first, most often explained meaning of Meroe's name is as a nod to *merum*, a strong Roman wine. Michalopoulos (2006) elaborates on the character's "professional relationship with wine" and the literary trope of witches being associated with drinking and inebriation. Meroe's name is also addressed as a reference to the place-name Meroë; however, Hanson (1989) and Watson (2004) locate the city in Egypt, rather than in the kingdom of Kush.

In this paper, I argue that this is fundamentally an oversight of modern scholarship, reflective of an ignorance of the kingdom of Kush and its role in Africa during the Imperial period of the Roman Empire. Meroë was the capital city of the Kingdom of Kush, a state more or less contemporary with the mid-late Roman Republic and the Roman Empire (3rd century BCE-3rd century CE). At the state level, Rome and Meroë were in direct contact with each other over a long period, and Kush was a key player thereafter in the Red Sea and African slave trades with Rome. I further contend that a well-educated North African Roman, such as Apuleius and the audience of his *Metamorphoses* would also have been those were positioned to know, in at least broad strokes, about Kush and its capital city. To ignore the potential place-name reference of the character Meroe's name is thus missing a rich layer of connections that are illustrative of the dynamic North African environment in which Apuleius was writing.

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