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SEMITIC NAMES FOR UTENSILS IN THE DEMOTIC WORD-LIST FROM TEBTUNIS

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IN 1982, W. J. Tait published a fragmentary Egyptian text from Copenhagen (P. Carlsberg 41a), written in Demotic script of the Roman period (second century C.E.) and believed to have been found at Tebtunis in the south of the Fayyum.¹ The text is a list of vessels and tools—not an inventory but a word-list compiled for educational purposes.² A number of words in the text appear to be foreign loanwords. Tait has done a fine job of deciphering these words; he has succeeded in identifying some of them as Semitic, but others have remained obscure. In May 1998, the editor of the *Demotic Dictionary*, J. H. Johnson, asked me to examine these terms. The following note is my response to her request.³ It is not a complete study of the foreign words in the text; it treats only those terms for which I have a plausible Semitic interpretation.

As noted by Tait, the text exhibits two major phonetic peculiarities: Semitic *r* is rendered by Egyptian *l*, and Semitic *ś is rendered by Egyptian š.⁴ The first peculiarity, of course, reflects the Egyptian dialect of the Fayyum, where *r* merges with *l*, even in native Egyptian words. The second one is more interesting for the Semitist. It is not unknown in the Aramaic text in demotic script (P. Amherst 63), but it is rare there and probably reflects a spelling pronunciation.⁵ In the New Kingdom, it is also rare.⁶ In this text, it appears to be the rule; all three examples of Egyptian š treated below represent a reflex of Proto-Semitic ś, and all three reflexes of Proto-Semitic ś posited below are represented by Egyptian š.⁷ This suggests that the words may be Phoenician/Punic⁸ rather than Aramaic.⁹ It also implies that there is no reason to expect Demotic š to render a reflex of Proto-Semitic s.¹⁰

¹ W. J. Tait, "A Demotic Word-List from Tebtunis: P. Carlsberg 41A," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 68 (1982): 210–27, pls. 21–22.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 211–12.

³ I am indebted to her for answering a number of questions which arose during the preparation of this note.

⁴ Tait, "Demotic Word-List," p. 214.

⁵ S. P. Vleeming and J. W. Wesselius, *Studies in Papyrus Amherst 63*, Vol. 1 (Amsterdam, 1985), p. 27. For two examples, see p. 4 below.

⁶ J. E. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period* (Princeton, 1994), pp. 164–65.

⁷ For Proto-Semitic ś, see my monograph, *The Case for Fricative-Laterals in Proto-Semitic* (New Haven, 1977), and my article, "Addenda to *The Case for Fri-*

cative Laterals in Proto-Semitic," *Studies in Honor of Wolf Leslau* (Weisbaden, 1991), pp. 1499–1513.

⁸ For the assumed merger of *ś with *š in Phoenician, see Z. Harris, *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language* (New Haven, 1936), p. 22; *Development of the Canaanite Dialects* (New Haven, 1939), pp. 33–34.

⁹ Tait ("Demotic Word-List," p. 224) has "the impression that they come from North-West Semitic sources, possibly from Aramaic." In Aramaic, however, *ś merged with *s long before the Roman period. For evidence of the merger from the Persian period, see T. Muraoka and B. Porten, *A Grammar of Egyptian Aramaic* (Leiden, 1998), pp. 6–7. For an interpretation of that evidence, see my "Ketiv-Kere or Polyphony: The Ψ - Ψ Distinction according to the Masoretes, the Rabbis, Jerome, Qirqisānī, and Hai Gaon," *Studies in Hebrew and Jewish Languages Presented to Shelomo Morag* (Jerusalem, 1996), p. *174.

¹⁰ At first glance, Tait ("Demotic Word-List," p. 214) appears to disagree: "š may represent Semitic śin or sāmekh, as well as šin." He may, however, be using the term "Semitic sāmekh" to refer not to Semitic *ś but to Late Aramaic sāmekh derived from *ś.

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mglšt = Semitic *mgršt* > Syriac *mgrsyṯ*²¹ “mortar.”¹¹ This is a utensil used by grist-makers (Mishnaic Hebrew *grwswt* < **grwšwt*) for pounding grain into groats (Biblical Hebrew *grš*). In Arabic and Syriac, the root is used of pounding salt as well as grain.

bšwl, Coptic ⲃⲁⲩⲱⲮⲱⲢ “saw” = Semitic *mšwr* “saw.”¹² The relationship between this loanword, previously known only from Coptic, and the native Egyptian words for “saw” (*tfš* and *ḏšsw*)¹³ remains to be investigated. For the rendering of preformative Semitic *m-* with Coptic *b*, cf. Coptic ⲃⲣⲄⲟⲟⲩⲧ “chariot” < New Kingdom *mrkbt* < Semitic *mrkbt*.¹⁴

swst and *swst n ph šl* = Semitic *sws(w)t* “mares”; cf. Phoenician *ss* “horse,” Hebrew *sws* “horse,” *swsh* “mare.”¹⁵ If Tait is right in taking *n ph šl* to mean “for cutting wood,”¹⁶ *swst n ph šl* must mean “mares for cutting wood.” To what does this refer?

In English, the word *horse* can refer to any “horizontal board or beam resting upon two or four horizontal legs, and used as a support.”¹⁷ Horses used by carpenters to support boards being sawed are called *sawhorses*.¹⁸

Essentially the same metaphor can be shown to have been current at around the time of our papyrus. Thus, Latin *cantherius* “a horse, usually of poor quality” is used to refer to “a principal rafter” and to “a light prop for vines consisting of a horizontal rod supported at its extremities by two vertical ones.”¹⁹ At a later period, the Syriac word *swsyṯ* “horse” was used as a synonym of *ht*²⁰, which can refer to a pile bridge or a horizontal beam resting on pillars and used to support rafters.²⁰

A similar metaphor is found in the Hebrew of the Roman period, where the word for “trestle” is *ḥmwr* “donkey.”²¹ Thus, the blacksmith’s horse is called *ḥmwr šlnphym* “blacksmiths’ donkey” in the Mishnah.²² Even more to the point is the term *ḥmwr šlhršym* “sawhorse (lit. carpenters’ donkey),”²³ Referring to a Roman torture device, for example, *Genesis Rabba* 65 *ntnw* ²*wtw ḥmwr šlhršym whyw mnsryn*²⁴ ²*wtw/bw* “they put him on a sawhorse and sawed him.”²⁵ Arabic *ḥimār* “donkey” has similar uses.²⁶ It can refer to “the wooden implement of the polisher, upon which he polishes iron [weapons &c.]” and

¹¹ So Tait, *ibid.*, p. 216, followed by G. Vittmann, “Semitisches Sprachgut im Demotischen,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 86 (1996): 439.

¹² So Tait, “Demotic Word-List,” p. 220, followed by Vittmann, “Semitisches Sprachgut,” p. 439.

¹³ A. Erman and H. Grapow, eds., *Das Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* (Berlin, 1971), vol. 5, pp. 298, 527.

¹⁴ Hoch, *Semitic Words*, pp. 145–47.

¹⁵ Contrast Tait, “Demotic Word-List,” p. 220.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. H, p. 394, s.v. *horse*, meaning 7a.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, meaning 7b.

¹⁹ P. G. W. Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1982), p. 267, s.v. *cantherius*. Both meanings are attested by the first century C.E.

²⁰ Bar Bahlul, *Lexicon syriacum*, ed. R. Duval (Paris, 1901), col. 781, ll. 16–19. Based on this passage, R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus syriacus* (Oxford, 1879–1901), col. 2574, s.v. *swsyṯ*, gives the meanings *trabs transversa* “transverse wooden beam” and *pons sublicius* “bridge resting on piles.”

²¹ See A. Kohut, *Aruch Completum*, Vol. 3 (Vienna, 1926), p. 433, col. a, s.v. *ḥmr*.

²² *Kelim* 14:3.

²³ In the Mishnah, the qualifier *šlhršym* “of carpenters” is used with *ḥwt ḥmškl* “plumb line,” *yd ḥkwrns* “hammer handle,” and *nswrt* “sawdust.”

²⁴ This participle, of course, has the same root as Sem. *mšwr* “saw,” mentioned above.

²⁵ J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba* (Berlin and Jerusalem, 1903–36), p. 742; M. Sokoloff, *The Geniza Fragments of Bereshit Rabba* (Jerusalem, 1982), p. 152. The same term appears in a proverb in *Genesis Rabba* 70, which loosely translated means “even if you put a liar on a sawhorse you’ll never pin him down”; see Theodor and Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba*, p. 816 and Sokoloff, *Geniza Fragments*, p. 155. The proverb implies that the torture victim was completely immobilized.

²⁶ This was noted already in the Middle Ages; see Kohut, *Aruch Completum*, Vol. 3, p. 433, col. a: “Any instrument by which something is supported is called *ḥimār* in Arabic.”

to “three pieces of wood, or four, across which is placed another piece of wood; with which one makes fast a captive.”²⁷ In English, the word *donkey* can refer to “a workbench fitted with a frame on which is mounted a fine saw for cutting marquetry veneers.”²⁸

Another Hebrew term from the Roman period that seems to belong here is *kn̄tl* (vocalized *kan̄tēl* in reliable manuscripts of the Mishnah),²⁹ referring to some sort of contraption for carrying baskets. It comes from the Greek word for “packass,” *καρθήλιος*, whose Latin derivative, *cantherius*, has already been discussed above.³⁰ We may also mention Greek *κιλλίβας* “a three-legged stand for supporting anything” derived from *κίλλος* “donkey,” as well as French *baudet* “donkey, sawhorse” and English *easel* from a word meaning “donkey.”

We therefore suggest that *swst̄ n ph̄ š̄l* is the term for “sawhorses” (in the plural because two are often used for sawing)³¹ and *swst̄* is the word for “horses, trestles” in general. This interpretation fits the context very well, since the previous word in the list is *bšwl* “saw.”

Since our text is from the Roman period, it does not prove the existence of the sawhorse in earlier periods, even assuming that our interpretation is correct. All we can say is that a carpenter in pre-Roman Egypt who wished to saw a board to size must have laid it horizontally, with one end protruding, on something other than the ground.³²

Even if this device existed already in earlier periods, our chances of finding out what it looked like are slim. When Egyptian artists show men working with a saw, the piece of timber is always perpendicular to the ground or at a slight angle to the perpendicular,³³ and it is always being cut along its length (ripped). In other words, the operation depicted is timber conversion, the sawing of logs into boards. We may perhaps assume that artists chose to depict this operation because it was difficult and time-consuming.³⁴ The dialogue accompanying one such sawing scene supports this assumption. The man holding the log steady says to the man who is sawing: “Down as hard as you can, that it may be sawn before nightfall.” The sawyer replies: “Down it is. See, my saw has come down!”³⁵

In most of the aforementioned depictions, the log is lashed to a vertical sawing-post.³⁶ According to Goedicke, the word *dbt* in P. Lansing 5, 5–6 refers to that device.³⁷ He conjectures that the name may be derived from *dbt* “female hippopotamus.”³⁸ Goedicke’s

²⁷ E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London, 1863), p. 641, col. a.

²⁸ *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, p. 673, s.v. *donkey*.

²⁹ Para 12:9, according to *Faksimile-Ausgabe des Mischnacodex Kaufmann A 50* (Jerusalem, 1968), p. 519b and *Mishna Codex Parma “B”* (Jerusalem, 1971), p. 100b. See Maimonides’ definition in his commentary ad loc.

³⁰ One might even speculate that Hebrew got the donkey metaphor through a calque on Greek *καρθήλιος*, while Punic (> Demotic) got the horse metaphor through a calque on Latin *cantherius*.

³¹ Unless the word is Aramaic (*swsyf̄*², vocalized *sūsītā*), in which case this would be a singular emphatic form; however, see n. 9, above.

³² This is the opinion of P. O’Sullivan, the professional carpenter whom I consulted.

³³ P. Montet, *Les scènes de la vie privée dans les tombeaux égyptiens de l’Ancien Empire* (Strasbourg,

1925), pl. 23.1; A. Lucas, “Wood Working in Ancient Egypt,” *Empire Forestry Journal* 13 (1934): 213–18 (figure labeled “Use of Saw and Adze”); A. Lucas and J. R. Harris, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries* (London, 1962), p. 449; G. Killen, *Ancient Egyptian Furniture*, Vol. 1 (Warminster, 1980), p. 20; C. Müller, “Holz und Holzverarbeitung,” *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Vol. 2 (Wiesbaden, 1985), col. 1265; Killen, *Egyptian Woodworking and Furniture* (Buckinghamshire, 1994), p. 13; P. der Manuelian, “Furniture in Ancient Egypt,” in J. M. Sasson, ed., *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, Vol. 3 (New York, 1995), col. 1628–29. I am indebted to D. Bergman for referring me to Killen’s publications.

³⁴ I am indebted to S. Ocken for this suggestion.

³⁵ A. M. Blackman and M. R. Apted, *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, Part 5 (London, 1953), p. 28 and pl. 18.

³⁶ See the references in n. 33 above.

³⁷ H. Goedicke, “*Dbt* ‘work-bench,’” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 7 (1968): 128.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

conjecture dovetails nicely with my suggestion. Taken together, they indicate that the devices used by Egyptian sawyers for steadying timber were named after large female herbivorous hoofed mammals: the horse (*swst*) and the “river-horse” (*dbt*, Syriac *swsy*³⁹ *dnhr*³⁹).

rg^ct = rk^ct.³⁹ The root, attested in Phoenician, Hebrew, etc., refers to beating malleable metal into plates or sheets. In the absence of the preformative *m*-, our noun could easily refer to plates of beaten metal (cf. Hebrew *rk^cym*), but the context seems to require a tool, so it may refer to a metalworker’s hammer.

mnšlg = mšrk “comb (for hackling flax or carding wool)”; cf. Mishnaic Hebrew *mšrk/ msrk šlpštn* “flax comb” and *mšrk/msrk šlšmr* “wool comb” (contrasted with *mšrk/msrk šlr³š* “head comb”),⁴⁰ Biblical Hebrew *š-r-k* “to hackle,” Syriac *srk²* “comb, hackle.”⁴¹ Three lines below is the word for “winnowing fan,” so this must be an agricultural implement. The intrusion of *n* following preformative *m* is very common in P. Amherst 63, especially before sonorants and sibilants (for example, XVIII/2 *pMnššb^c* = *pmšb^c* “and to become satiated,” XVIII/13 *mānsšh³yt³* and XVIII/14 *māšššh³yt³* = *mšhyt³* “bath”).⁴² A different Semitic word for “comb” is represented by *mšd* = Akkadian *mušdu/muštu* in the Turin Necropolis Journal, where it follows *tšy šnw* “hair tweezers” in a list of funerary equipment.⁴³

³⁹ Contrast Tait, “Demotic Word-List,” p. 221: “no explanation of the word suggests itself.”

⁴⁰ Kelim 13:7–8. The (archaic) spelling with *š* is found in the most important manuscript of the Mishnah, Codex Kaufmann; most manuscripts have the (later) spelling with *s*.

⁴¹ Contrast Vittmann, “Semitisches Sprachgut,” p. 439 (based on Tait, “Demotic Word-List,” p. 222): “ein Spaltwerkzeug.”

⁴² R. C. Steiner and C. F. Nims, “Ashurbanipal and Shamash-shum-ukin: A Tale of Two Brothers from the

Aramaic Text in Demotic Script,” *Revue biblique* 92 (1985): 71–72; revised translation in my article “The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script,” in W. W. Hallo, ed., *The Context of Scripture*, Vol. 1 (Leiden, 1997), p. 323. This has nothing to do with Aramaic nasalization. The use of *n* as a silent letter appears to be the product of an earlier sound change in *Egyptian*; for details, see my forthcoming edition of P. Amherst 63. Cf. Tait, “Demotic Word-List,” p. 222: “the *n* has perhaps intruded for phonetic reasons.”

⁴³ Hoch, *Semitic Words*, pp. 164–65.