THE ORIGIN OF THE GREEK WORD ΛΕΩΝ

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The Greek word λέων, (genitive λέοντος), ‘lion’ is ultimately the ancestor of the words for this animal, Panthera leo, the proverbial King of the Beasts, in all the languages of modern Europe. The earliest occurrence of this Greek word is from the Linear B tablets of Pylos:

PY Ta 708.3: ta-ra-nu ku-te-se-jo a-ja-me-no e-re-pa-te-jo a-di-ri-ja-pi re-wo-pi-qe

Transliterated, it reads:

thrānus kuteseios aiaimenos elephanteiois andriamphi lewomphiqē

Translated: A footstool, ebony, inlaid (?) with ivory figures of men and lions (instrumental plural).

On Ta 722 we have the adjective re-wo-te-jo, lewonteiois, also instrumental plural, and showing that the stem was already in -(n)t-, and that the word was already very much at home in Mycenaean Greek.¹

The etymologists, however, are very uncertain as to the provenance of the word. Two older theories sought to explain λέων as derived from either the Indo-European root *sleī, “tear up” ² or from the same IE root as Sanskrit rāuti, ruvāti, ‘roar’.³ The first is disproved by the -w- in Mycenaean lewont-, the second is unlikely in view of the probable link between rāuti and Greek ἔφοιμαι, also

¹ For tablet, see Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., The Pylos Tablets, (Princeton: 1955), pp. 82, 187; for transliteration and discussion, see Michael Ventris, John Chadwick, Documents in Mycenaean Greek, (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 344, 346.
² First proposed by W. Schulze, Quaestiones Epicae, 1892, p. 70.
"roar, howl", which would mean that here Sanskrit *r reflectes IE *r not *l. 4 Sanskrit confuses *r and *l but Greek does not (the ambiguity of the Mycenaean writing system is due in all probability to the language of the Minoans, from whom these first Greeks borrowed their writing). Greek *l cannot come from *r, therefore λεὼν cannot be related to ῥαυτι or ὀφρόμαυ.

Currently, a Semitic derivation seems more popular. Émilia Masson is favorable to a connection with Akkadian Ṽabu, Ugaritic LB3, Hebrew labi3. 5 Ventris and Chadwick are of the same mind, though suggesting an Anatolian intermediary which added the -nt- suffix. 6 So is Edzard Furnée, though positing a "Vorgriechisch" intermediary, to which he attributes the apparent shift of Semitic o to Greek o. 7 This postulated o to o shift has caused one scholar, Michael Astour, to be rather skeptical about this derivation. 8 Since Astour is normally a staunch advocate of a strong Semitic presence in Bronze Age Greece, his hesitancy on this score should impose caution on all etymologists advocating this solution.

A better explanation for the origin of λεὼν is to be found, I believe, in the Egyptian word RW, 'lion', written usually with the pictogram LION which had the value RW generally in the Hieroglyphic script, and was often used for the consonantal value r/rw in many words. To establish the correctness of this, it must be proved that the R here stands for spoken *l in most of Egypt (one series of signs represented consonants *r and *l, for reasons explained below), and that the vowel, unwritten in the strictly consonantal orthography, was close to the Greek phoneme /e/.

To discern the original vocalization is not difficult. The LION sign, read RW in the consonantal script, represents ru/lu in the syllabic orthography utilized by the Pharaoh's scribes for foreign names and words. 9 From this, W. F. Albright reconstructs ῥῡw as

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6 *Documents*, p. 346.
9 William Foxwell Albright, *The Vocalization of the Egyptian Syllabic Orthography*, (New Haven, 1934), (reprint by Xeroxgraphy by University
the word for 'lion'.\footnote{Ibid., p. 25.} As to the value of the phonemes /ū/ and /ū/ in Egyptian, there are two good reasons for believing that they were pronounced as front, round vowels at the time (probably mid-second millennium) when the Greeks first came into contact with Egypt.

The first is that the two phonemes became /e/ and /ē/ "after 1300."\footnote{Ibid., p. 16.} To do this, they must have been rounded front vowels for a long period before. Further evidence of this fronted pronunciation can be seen in the occurrence of the phoneme /c/ (traditionally transcribed as ē),\footnote{Ibid., p. 26.} which is derived from earlier *k,\footnote{C. E. Sander-Hansen, Ägyptische Grammatik (Wiesbaden, 1963, #24-25, pp. 17-18. An example: *ka (2nd m. suffix, as in Semitic) stays ha, written k, *ki (2nd, fem., as in Semitic) becomes ēi, written ē. The plural 2nd suffix in is perhaps from *kun/m, on Semitic analogy.} before the original vowels i and u, but not before a. The syllable *ča never came into existence in Egyptian,\footnote{Albright, Orthography, p. 26.} presumably because *k was never palatalized to č before this back vowel (a later became o, showing its back articulation). In order to palatalize preceding k, u and i must have both been front vowels, one rounded, the other not.

It is fairly certain, therefore, that the phoneme /u/ was realized as [ū] even in the earliest dynasties. It is still transcribed by u in Akkadian, for example in the El-Amarna Letters, prior to 1300, because the cuneiform script, and most dialects of Akkadian also, had but one round vowel, u. The Greeks could have borrowed the word when the vowel was pronounced ē or ē, or even after 1300, e, though this is less likely in view of Pylos' date of ca. 1200, and the fact that lewôn has thoroughly Greek inflections and derivatives. They would have transferred the Egyptian ē or ē into Greek as a short, mid-high, front vowel, unrounded, for there were no rounded front vowels in the Greek of that era. There are two short, middle or high, front vowels from which to choose, e and i. Diphthongs in iu must have been rare or entirely absent in Mycenaean Greek, but the
combination ew was exceedingly common, and would doubtless be used for either Egyptian ëw or ëw.

With regard to the initial R of the written word for lion, it must be first established that the confusion between *r and *l in the orthography did not extend to most spoken dialects of Egyptian. The central Egyptian dialects showed a merger of original (perhaps proto-Afro-Asiatic) *r and *l, which was reflected in the orthography since the seat of government was usually at Memphis in the early period. Fayûmic, the Coptic dialect of the Fayûm, close to Memphis, continues this merger in Roman and Byzantine times. Fayûmic, in fact, writes l for both *r and *l, showing that probably the Hieroglyphic signs were pronounced with a sound closer to [l] than to [r], despite the conventional transcription of these with Latin letter r. The Greeks, however, probably did not borrow the word from Central Egyptian, but from the Delta dialects, so we must certify that the word had an initial *l.

Outside of Fayûmic, the Coptic dialects retained *l as l, and initial inherited *r as r. For *r we can compare Hebrew râhas, 'wash' with Egyptian RHT and Coptic poue of the same meaning. For *l we can adduce RS(W), 'tongue' (also NS(W)), with the value of the initial in spoken Egyptian secured by Coptic lâsôn and Hebrew lâsôn. The pronunciation of RW with initial *l over most of Egypt, including the Delta, is indicated by a number of items of evidence.

This evidence is of two sorts. First there is orthographic data, then second linguistic. Orthographically, the RW sign was often used in Hellenistic and Roman times to express the consonant l in Hieroglyphic transcriptions of rulers' names, e.g. those of Ptolemy and Kleopatra. However, it was also used to express r, in Roman times, as in Tiberius, so that no firm conclusions can be drawn. Clearer is the use of the LION sign for the value l in the Meroitic Hieroglyphic script. This writing, used by the Ethiopians (in the original sense) of the upper Nile for their public inscriptions, has values which are based on those in Egyptian for each sign (though confusion between similar signs seems to occur).

Stronger by far is the evidence from Semitic, the relative of Egyptian in the Afro-Asiatic proto-family of languages, and from Coptic. Coptic λαιος means 'lioness' and it is doubtless related to RW. It is probably descended directly, however, from the Egyptian RBW, also 'lion', seemingly an extended form of RW. RBW seems to go with Semitic LB3 mentioned above, while RW corresponds to the root LWT, also 'lion'. From this we have Hebrew λαίς, Akkadian nešu, and Aramaic *layit, whence the poetic Greek word λις, used side by side with λέων in the Iliad. All the words of this family show l- (except Akkadian), never **r-, so that we are compelled to assume that RW, too, was pronounced with initial l-.

Drawing all these pieces of evidence together, we see that the Egyptians of the mid-second millennium pronounce their usual word for 'lion' as lòw or lùw. The contacts between the Aegean world and Egypt are early and continuous, and are well known from archaeology as well as from history. Diodoros of Sicily (XL 3.1-3), basing his account on Hekataios of Abdera, a scholar at the court of Ptolemy I, tells of the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt, and says that some went with Kadmos and Danaos to Greece, while others went with Moses, and became the Hebrews. Similar stories come from Josephus (contra Apion 223-253) based on Manetho. We do not need to take these accounts with an absolutely literal interpretation to see that there is good evidence for strong Egyptian influence, perhaps including numbers of Hyksos refugees, in Greece at the beginning of Late Helladic (ca. 1580). The opportunity to borrow the word was thus amply present.

As to the form, it has been shown above that lùw/lòw, would be

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18 Masson, Recherches, loc. cit.
19 nešu shows the l to n change common in Afro-Asiatic languages (cf. Egyptian NS/RS 'tongue'), see for example Richard Steiner, "Why P.S. D Sometimes Shows Up as S in Aramaic" Paper read at North American Conference on Semitic Linguistics, Santa Barbara, California, March 24-25, 1973 (to be published). Interchanges between all the continuants (l, m, n, r) are common. The ñ is a product of the contraction of Proto-Semitic *aww, as is regular in Akkadian (Carl Brockelmann, Grundriss der Vergleichenden Semitischen Sprachen, Vol. I, p. 141, #51.a: *kawīnu > kēnu.
20 Masson, Recherches, loc. cit.
22 Ibid.
heard as lew by the Greeks. The pseudo-participial suffix-ōn, stem-
ont-parallels the -ās, -ant-, seen in elephant- (also attested in
Mycenaean) "ivory, elephant", like lewōn a loanword. The Greek
word λεων, 'lioness' (from *lewansa) 28 has a different suffix, and
has only the original lew in common with the word for the male of
the species.

In concluding, I would submit that the above etymology of
lewōn though it may contain small difficulties, is without serious
objection. Unlike the Semitic hypothesis, it accounts accurately for
the vowel, the w instead of b, and the lack of any aleph or waw
following the w/b, as in Semitic LB3/LBW. In addition, such a
borrowing is highly plausible historically.

28 Ventris and Chadwick, Documents, p. 346, compare λύκος 'wolf' with
λεων 'she-wolf', ὄς 'swine' with δαίμ 'hyena, sea animal', originally 'sow'.