

ORIGIN OF THE GREEK WORD PHOINIX

J.-Chr. Billigmeier

University of California, Santa Barbara.

The Greek word φοῖνιξ has an extraordinary range of meanings. The LSJ Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford, 1968) gives, besides the ethnic signification "Phoenician", twelve other general meanings for φοῖνιξ, some of which are really a cluster of correspondences not clearly related to each other, (cf. III 1 "dwarf palm" vs. III 3 "a sea-plant" and III 4 "rye grass"). Basically, these twelve can be reduced to four distinct and seemingly unconnected semantic sets: (1) "purple", "crimson" (I, also VIII, IX, XI, XII); (2) "date palm", *Phoenix dactylifera* (II, also III 1-2, VII); (3) "guitar-like instrument" (IV); (4) "fabulous bird", "phoenix" (V). How do these relate to each other and to the *ethnikon* Phoinix?

Herodotos says (4.192) that the "guitar" *phoinix* is so called because the instrument was invented by Phoenicians, which seems plausible (cf. our "French horn"), though there is a better explanation, as shall be seen.

The traditional explanation, as represented for example by J. B. Hofmann in his *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, was to derive the word for *phoenix* from the Egyptian *byn*, a correct etymology in my opinion. φοῖνιξ in its manifold other meanings was derived from φοινός "blood red" (from φόνοϛ "murder"). From "blood red" came the name of the red or purple dye. The Phoenicians were named *Phoinikes* either because they made the dye or because they had red skins, acquired, presumably, while sailing around the Mediterranean under the hot sun without benefit of suntan lotion. The date palm and the musical instrument were named *phoinix* because they were found in Phoenicia, or were brought by Phoenicians to Greece.

This etymology collapsed when Linear B was deciphered. At Pylos, *phoinikes* (*po-ni-ke*, instrumental pl. *po-ni-ki-pi*) were living things, plants or animals, whose representations figured, along with those of men, horses, octopuses and lions, as decorations on chairs

and footstools, *po-ni-ke-a* (*phoinikea*) was an adjective of color, probably already "crimson".¹ The initial labials made a connection with φοινός impossible, for this word had an original labiovelar, as can be seen by comparing φόνος with θείνω and Sanskrit /han "slay"; labiovelars were preserved in Mycenaean Greek, and φόνος itself is found as *-go-no* in several personal names.

James Muhly has proposed in *Berytus*,² partially supported in a recent article in *Kadmos* by Caroline Murray and Peter Warren,³ that the original meaning, still preserved in Mycenaean *po-ni-ke* (Pylos Ta 722.1), was "murex"; from there *phoinix* came to mean "dye from murexes", then people who make the dye, i.e. Phoenicians, then the "Phoenician tree", the date palm. (He does not seek to explain the name of the fabulous bird). The problem with this view is that *phoinix* never was applied to the murex animal itself, only to the dye. Further, there is not the slightest indication that Mycenaean *po-ni-ke* meant "murex" at all.

More probably, *phoinix* "palm" was the earliest meaning of the word in Greek (except for φοῖνιξ "phoenix" and "stringed instrument" which have independent origins). There are many places on the Aegean coast named *Phoinikous* (e.g. the port of Kythera, cf. Xenophon, *Hellenika* IV 8.7) or *Phoinix* (e.g. port on the south coast of Crete, cf. Strabo X 4.3; *Acts* 27:12); though the above examples are ancient, there are places given that name in medieval times which bear them today (cf. the village of *Phoinikia* on the north side of Thera). Obviously, they cannot have been named after Phoenicians in the Middle Ages; rather these places were named for their groves of date palms.

The practice of naming places after palm trees is familiar to us Californians; we have Palm Springs, Palm Desert and Twenty-nine Palms. It is certainly amply attested in the Old Testament. One reads of places named Tamar (*Ezek.* 47:19), Ba'al-Tamar (*Judges*

¹ Anna Morpurgo, *Mycenaeae Graecitatis Lexicon* (MGL), (Rome: 1963) pp. 252-253, s.v. *po-ni-ke* (PY Ta 722.1), *po-ni-ki-pi* (PY Ta 714.2-3), *po-ni-ke-a* (KN Se 8.80) and *po-ni-ki-ja* (KN Sd 0404+).

² J. D. Muhly, "Homer and the Phoenicians; the Relations between Greece and the Near East in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages", *Berytus* 19 (1970), pp. 19-64.

³ Caroline Murray, Peter Warren, "Po-ni-ki-jo among the dye-plants of Minoan Crete", *Kadmos*, 1976, 15 (1), pp. 40-60.

20:33) and Hazazon-Tamar (*Genesis* 14:7); *tamar* signifies "date palm". Jericho was known as the "city of the date palm" (*Deut.* 34:13; *Judges* 1:16). Thus, it would be in accord with both Greek and Levantine practice if *Phoinikē* "Phoenicia" meant originally "land of the date palms". *Phoinix* "Phoenician" would be a simple back-formation from *Phoinikē*. Palm trees are native to Phoenicia, as they are generally to South-West Asia and North Africa, whereas their presence in the Aegean is due to man. The Greeks probably first saw them in Egypt, then, plentifully, in the Levant, which they then named after the trees.

There is a tradition which supports this etymology. In an *Oracle on Tyre*, quoted in the *Greek Anthology* and in the romance *Kleitophon and Leukippe* by Achilles Tatius, it is explained that Tyre is *phytonomos*, "named from trees", because Tyre "is an island belonging to the Phoenicians and the date palm (*phoinix*) is a tree" (ὁ δε φοῖνιξ φῦτον). Obviously, what is meant is that Phoenicia, not Tyre, is named from trees.

The dyestuff was therefore named after the country, as our *siena* is named after the Italian city Siena. (I know no examples of places being named after dyes, as Muhly would have it!).

For the origin of the word for *Phoenix dactylifera*, the date palm, for the word for the fabulous phoenix, even for the instrument *phoinix* (despite Herodotos), it might be wise to look to an Egyptian etymology. The Egyptians were in close contact with both Minoans and Mycenaeans from earliest times; there are certainly palm trees in Egypt, there are stories of fabulous birds (Herodotos locates his *phoinix* in Arabia, but the Egyptians have similar tales); musical instruments of "guitar" shape were used in Egypt.

Such a search is rewarding for the etymologist. For the "guitar" *phoinix*, there is Coptic **BOINE**, Hieroglyphic *bint*, "harp". For the fabulous bird, there is Hieroglyphic *byn* (whence perhaps Coptic **BHNE** "swallow"). Most importantly, for "date palm", the Hieroglyphic Egyptian is *bint*; Coptic has **BÑNE** (Sub-Akhmimic and Akhmimic), **BEN** (Bohairic), **BHNI** or **BHNNI** (Fayumic) and **ḲN** (Sahidic). Crum (*A Coptic Dictionary*, Oxford: 1953, s.v. the letter **Ḳ**) says that Coptic **Ḳ**, descended from Hieroglyphic *B* (as we transliterate it), often corresponds to Greek φ , /ph/. Thus the equation of Greek words with initial *ph* and Coptic/Hieroglyphic

words with initial *ϑ*/*B* is in line with established correspondences.

That these terms were borrowed at an early date by Greeks from Egyptians, and not the other way around, is proved by the greater antiquity of the Egyptian words, but also by two linguistic arguments. First, since the Greek words are all phonologically identical, their Egyptian reflexes, if borrowed, should be also, but the word for "phoenix" differs from those for "date palm" and "harp", and the word for "date palm" originally had a final *r* which "harp" lacked. Rather than assume that the Egyptians borrowed phonologically identical words and twisted them into different shapes, we are safer in assuming that the Greeks borrowed three separate words and pronounced them all *phoinix*. Second, *bint* "harp" and *bint* (or *binr*) "date", "date palm" are difficult to separate from *bin* "sweet"; if this derivation is accurate, they are native Egyptian words and could not have been borrowed.

As to the date at which these words entered the Greek language, it must have been extremely early. The Greeks began to have close contacts with the Egyptians at the beginning of Late Helladic and that is probably when the words were borrowed. By the time the first Linear B tablets were written, *phoinix* and its derivatives must have had many meanings already, and they were thoroughly Hellenized in form.

I would add here that in my opinion, the *phoinix* portrayed on Pylian footstools was a palm tree.⁴ Palms are well known in Aegean art; they appear, for example, on the beautiful frescoes from Akrotiri on Thera.⁵ That they were admired for their beauty can be seen in the Odyssey VI 160-168 when Odysseus compares Nausikaa to a palm:

οὐ γάρ πω τοιοῦτον ἐγὼ ἶδον ὀφθαλμοῖσιν,
οὔτ' ἄνδρ' οὔτε γυναῖκα· σέβας μ' ἔχει εἰσορώντα.
Δῆλ' ὃ δὴ ποτε τοῖον Ἀπόλλωνος παρὰ βωμῶ
φοίνικος νέον ἔρνος ἀνερχόμενον ἐνόησα·

⁴ This is also the opinion of Anna Morpurgo. She says (MGL, p. 253, s.v. *po-ni-ke / po-ni-ki-pi*): "potius quam avis palma significari videtur".

⁵ For example, Spyridon Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera VI* (1972 season), (Athens: 1974), p. 55. These frescoes are now on display at the National Museum in Athens; one, the "Tropical Landscape", shows a river along which grow plentifully palms of several different species.