

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 lewomphiq^{ue}

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 **slei*, "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 ὠρύομαι, 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.

³ Discussion by P. Thieme "Die Heimat der Indogermanischen Gemeinsprache", *Akademie der Wissenschaften in Mainz, Abhandlungen*, Fasc. XI, 1953, pp. 566-573.

"roar, howl", which would mean that here Sanskrit *r* reflects 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 λέων cannot be related to *rāuti* or ὠρύομαι.

Currently, a Semitic derivation seems more popular. Emilia Masson is favorable to a connection with Akkadian *lābu*, Ugaritic LB3, Hebrew *labîz*.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 *b* to Greek *w*.⁷ This postulated *b* to *w* 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 *lewōn* 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 *rūw* as

⁴ Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, (Bern, 1959), p. 867 (root **reu*).

⁵ Emilia Masson, *Recherches sur les Plus Anciens Emprunts Semitiques en Grec*, (Paris, 1967), pp. 85-87.

⁶ *Documents*, p. 346.

⁷ Edzard J. Furnée, *Die wichtigste Konsonantischen Erscheinungen des Vorgriechischen*, (The Hague, 1972), pp. 230, 346.

⁸ Michael Astour, *Hellenosemitica*, (Leiden, 1965), p. 338.

⁹ William Foxwell Albright, *The Vocalization of the Egyptian Syllabic Orthography*, (New Haven, 1934), (reprint by Xeroxgraphy by University

the word for 'lion'.¹⁰ As to the value of the phonemes /*ū*/ and /*ũ*/ 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."¹¹ 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 /*č*/ (traditionally transcribed as *t̥*),¹² which is derived from earlier **k*,¹³ before the original vowels *i* and *u*, but not before *a*. The syllable **ča* never came into existence in Egyptian,¹⁴ 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 [ü] 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 *ü* or *ö*, or even after 1300, *e*, though this is less likely in view of Pylos' date of ca. 1200, and the fact that *lewōn* has thoroughly Greek inflections and derivatives. They would have transferred the Egyptian *ü* or *ö* 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 *iw* must have been rare or entirely absent in Mycenaean Greek, but the

Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, 1964). This is a definitive work on this orthography.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹³ C. E. Sander-Hansen, *Ägyptische Grammatik* (Wiesbaden, 1963, # 24-25, pp. 17-18. An example: **ka* (2nd m. suffix, as in Semitic) stays *ka*, written *k*, **ki* (2nd, fem., as in Semitic) becomes *či*, written *t̥*. The plural 2nd suffix *in* is perhaps from **kun/m*, on Semitic analogy.

¹⁴ Albright, *Orthography*, p. 26.

combination *ew* was exceedingly common, and would doubtless be used for either Egyptian *iw* or *öw*.

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*,¹⁵ 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 *rāḥaṣ*, 'wash' with Egyptian *RHT* and Coptic *ρωρε* 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 *Λαε* and Hebrew *lāšōn*. 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.¹⁶ Clearer is the use of the LION sign for the value *l* in the Meroitic Hieroglyphic script.¹⁷ 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).

¹⁵ Walter C. Till, *Koptische Dialektgrammatik*, (München, 1961), p. 7.

¹⁶ Johannes Friedrich, *Die Entzifferung verschollener Schriften und Sprachen*, (Berlin, Heidelberg, 1954, 1966), p. 21, 22.

¹⁷ Hans Jensen, *Sign, Symbol, and Script*, (New York, 1969), p. 79.

Stronger by far is the evidence from Semitic, the relative of Egyptian in the Afro-Asiatic proto-family of languages, and from Coptic. Coptic Λαῖοι 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'.¹⁸ From this we have Hebrew *lāiš*, Akkadian *nēšu*,¹⁹ and Aramaic **layit*, whence the poetic Greek word λῆς, used side by side with λέων in the *Iliad*.²⁰ 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 *löw* or *liw*. The contacts between the Aegean world and Egypt are early and continuous, and are well known from archaeology²¹ 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).²² The opportunity to borrow the word was thus amply present.

As to the form, it has been shown above that *liw*/*löw*, would be

¹⁸ Masson, *Recherches*, loc. cit.

¹⁹ *nēšu* 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 Š 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 *ē* is a product of the contraction of Proto-Semitic **awi*, as is regular in Akkadian (Carl Brockelmann, *Grundriss der Vergleichenden Semitischen Sprachen*, Vol. I, p. 141, #51.a: **kawinu* > *kēnu*).

²⁰ Masson, *Recherches*, loc. cit.

²¹ See Frank H. Stubbings, *The Rise of Mycenaean Civilization, The Cambridge Ancient History*, Revised Edition of Volumes I and II, fascicle 18.

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 λέαινα, 'lioness' (from **lewanja*)²³ 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 *wāw* following the *w/b*, as in Semitic *LB₃/LBW*. In addition, such a borrowing is highly plausible historically.

²³ Ventris and Chadwick, *Documents*, p. 346, compare λύκος 'wolf' with λύκαινα 'she-wolf', ὄς 'swine' with ὕαινα 'hyena, sea animal', originally 'sow'.