Criteria for Evaluating Hypothetical Egyptian Loan-Words in Greek: The Case of \( \text{Αἰγυπτός} \)

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Jay H. Jasanoff and Alan Nussbaum, in their recent critique of the Egyptian etymologies for Greek words proposed in Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*, espouse an extreme form of positivism in evaluating (and largely rejecting) those proposals. They write that convincing examples of loan-words in Greek exhibit three features: “the semantic match between the Greek words and their Semitic and Egyptian counterparts is exact,” “the identity of meaning is correlated with a striking similarity of form,” and the loan-words “are for the most part completely isolated, not only in the sense that they lack convincing [Indo-European] etymologies but also in the sense that they are not visibly derived from other, simpler Greek words or roots.” Jasanoff and Nussbaum allow for a certain degree of phonetic naturalization during the borrowing process, but explain this by saying that “the sounds of the source language are replaced by their closest equivalents in the target language.”

When it comes to specific loan-words, they write that “under any reasonable standard of philological rigor, the only genuinely old Egyptian borrowing in Greek” is \( \text{Αἰγυπτός} \). They are not alone in considering \( \text{Αἰγυπτός} \), whatever its uniqueness in that regard, a virtually certain example of an Egyptian loan-word. Heinrich Brugsch’s conjecture is commonly, and

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2 Jasanoff and Nussbaum (previous note) 188.
with good reason, accepted\(^3\) that this word is derived from the Egyptian term, \(h(w)t-k3-pth\), \(h\text{hatkap\text{t}al}\), “the house of the \(ka\) (soul or spirit) of (the god) Ptah” (Book of the Dead, spell 15. 1 etc.), which is the religious name of \(Mn-nfr\), “(Pharaoh Phios 1) is established and beautiful” or Memphis, the capital city of Egypt some forty kilometres upriver from the Nile delta. This city-name appears as \(Hi-ku-(up-)ta-a\(\ldots\)\) in the Akkadian of the Tell El-Amarna Tablets (84. 37, 139. 8).\(^4\) That the word had been borrowed into Greek already in the Mycenaean period is proved by the existence in Linear B of the adjectival form, a man’s name, \(A\(_3\)-ku-pi-ti-jo\), \(Aiy\(\upsilon\)ptio\(\varsigma\), based on the adjective derived from \(Aiy\(\upsilon\)ptio\(\varsigma\) (KN Db 1105 + 1446).\(^5\)

The present article proposes to test Jasanoff and Nussbaum’s criteria for evaluating loan-words against the oldest example that they allow, considering in turn the semantics, the phonetics, and the degree of isolation of \(Aiy\(\upsilon\)ptio\(\varsigma\).

As to semantic content, while Egyptian \(h(w)t-k3-pth\) denotes a city, in Homer \(Aiy\(\upsilon\)ptio\(\varsigma\) denotes in the masculine the river Nile (Od. 3. 300 etc.) and in the feminine the land of Egypt (Od. 17. 448 etc.). In post-Homeric usage the word came to be used exclusively of the land and a new name had to be found specifically for the river. (The Linear B evidence suggests that this development had already begun in Mycenaean times: Aegyptius was an “Egyptian,” rather than a “Nilotic man.”) The Nile is an important landmark and so deserved a name, yet the Egyptians themselves did not give it one, calling it either simply “the river” (\(itrw\)) or, in the appropriate season, the annual “inundation” (\(h\text{\&py}\)).\(^6\) The Greeks named the river after the most important city upon it and, needing a name for the whole country, quite naturally—for Egypt is the gift of the river (Hdt. 2. 5)\(^7\)—applied that name in the feminine gender to the land as a whole. (Other peoples used other strategies: Akkadian calls it \(Mi-ig-ri-i\), “the border land”\(^8\) [cf. Hittite \(Mi-iz-ri\), Hebrew \(Mi\text{\&rayim},\) Genesis 12. 10 etc., Mycenaean \(Mi-sa-ra-jo\), KN F 841]; the Egyptians themselves called it various things, most notably \(Kmt\), “the black (land)” [cf. \(X\eta\mu\iota\alpha\), Plut. Mor. 364c], a term arguably

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familiar to the Mycenaean epic bards.) The ambiguity that resulted from applying the same term to both river and land was resolved by coining, perhaps from Egyptian n3 rsw-ḥlw(t), “the mouths of the front part,” the term Νείλος (Hes. Theog. 338, Solon fr. 28 West, Danais fr. 1 Davies, Bernabé) to designate the river. There is nothing strange in all of this. Cities can give their names to lands, and Homer uses Σιδόνιοι to refer to the Phoenicians in general; cities can also share their names with rivers, for Σύβαρις and Σίπης in the feminine denote cities and in the masculine the rivers on whose banks they stand. Semantically, therefore, the development from ḥ(w)t-k3-PTH to Αίγυπτος conforms perfectly to Greek usage. It falls far short, however, of Jasanoff and Nussbaum’s requirement of an “exact semantic match.”

The situation regarding the phonetics is probably similar, although complicated by our ignorance of the transmission-process. While in classical authors Egyptian words beginning with hwt are hellenized like 'Αθωρ (from Ht-hṛ) and Pth is transliterated as Φθά, in early borrowings the second-declensional ending is normal, both for masculines and feminines (Αίγυπτος was both, having a different gender for each of its two meanings). This is shown by many nouns with the pre-Greek -vθ- stem, e.g. ἡ ὀσόμυνθος (Mycenaean a-sa-mi-,το), ἡ Κόρινθος (Mycenaean ko-ri-to), and ο λαβύρινθος (Mycenaean da-pu₂-ri-to-jo). The -vτ- element in Αίγυπτος conforms perfectly to the Akkadian form, Hi-ku-(up-)ta-ah, its probable model. The gamma may be explained by postulating as a secondary intermediary language one of the pre-Greek tongues of Minoan Crete: From the fact that the Linear B signs ka, ke, ki, ko, and ku express both Greek /k/ and /g/ (so that, for example, ke-ra represents both κέρας and γέρας), we can deduce that the Minoan language originally expressed by the Cretan syllabic script made no phonological opposition between voiced and unvoiced stops. The only morphological puzzle is the first syllable, which for some reason combines the /a/ postulated for the vocalization of Egyptian ḥ(w)t and the /i/ into which it has been, again for unknown reasons, changed in the Akkadian form. The resultant diphthong has the happy effect of creating the considerable metrical flexibility, highly desirable in dactylic hexameter verse, revealed by Αίγυπτος, though both the rules of logic and the Mycenaean evidence preclude our thinking that metrical considerations caused this form. Thus, phonologically as well as semantically, the development is unexceptionable. But here, too, Jasanoff

11 P. Montet, quoted in Lloyd (above, note 3) II 4.
12 The word appears in the Odyssey in all the oblique cases except the vocative, including both the uncontracted and contracted genitive forms, and with the postposition -δε, and it is positioned with the foot-division falling before either the ultima or the penult.
and Nussbaum’s requirements are at fault, for there is anything but a “striking similarity of form” between /hatkap'ta/ and /aiguptos/.

When it comes to Jasanoff and Nussbaum’s third requirement, that of lexical isolation, we observe that there exists beside Αίγυπτος qua river-name, the simpler Greek root αίγ- closely related to it in form and meaning. Rivers are often associated with goats in classical Greek toponyms, cult, and myth. (None of our evidence for this association dates to the Mycenaean period, at which time Αίγυπτος had already assumed its classical form, but the nature of the Linear B texts virtually precludes their providing such information, and it is reasonable to assume that this connection is much earlier than its first attestation.) We have place-names such as the River Tragus in Arcadia (Paus. 8. 23. 2) or the roadstead of Aegospotami in the Thracian Chersonese (Hdt. 9. 119. 2), where the Athenians were finally defeated by Lysander (Xen. Hell. 2. 1. 18–19). Many other places near, in, or belonging to the sea have names formed from the αίγ- root—Aegae on Euboea, where the Greeks returning from the Trojan war suffered a great storm (Alc. fr. 298. 6 Voigt), Mt. Aegaleos in Attica, whence Xerxes watched the battle of Salamis (Hdt. 8. 90; this word is indirectly attested in Mycenaean as the name of the province on the other side of the homonymous Messenian mountain, pe-ra-ko-ra-i-ja, pe-ra-a-ko-ra-i-jo, Περαγολαλία, Περα-αίγολαλιοι), Aegina, the Aegean itself—and there is an obvious marine connection to the common nouns αἰγαλός and αἰγές, which means “waves” according to Hesychius and the Suda s. v. and Artemidorus, Onirocritica 2. 12 (120. 1–2 Pack). It is uncertain whether αἰγές is the survival of a pre-Greek word for “sea,”13 a metaphor of goats for waves, as whitecaps are the horses of Manannan Mac Lir in Irish myth,14 or a derivative, cognate with αἰξ, from ἀιξά, “to move with a quick shooting motion” (LSJ s. v.; cf. Sanskrit ējati).15 These marine words are relevant to rivers, because Greek makes no over-nice distinction between fresh-water and salt-, as both fall under the purview of Poseidon (Aesch. Sept. 310–11, Catull. 31. 3).16

In myth, too, horns are linked to rivers. A river’s branches are its “horns” (Hes. Theog. 789 etc.), and in the case of the Nile the Greeks were most familiar with its branches, the “mouths of the front part.” Amalthea, the goat (Aratus, Phaen. 163, Callim. Jov. 49), gave her cornucopia to Heracles in exchange for the horn that he broke off the river Achetous (Apollod. Bibl. 2. 7. 5), who, like other rivers (Eur. Ion 1261, Or. 1378, IA 275 etc.), is bull-formed (Archil. fr. 287 West, Soph. Trach. 10–14). Capricorn (Αἰγόκερως, originally *αἰγοκέρως), believed to be among the forty-eight constellations taken over by the Greeks from Egypt (cf. Lucian, De astrologia 7), has the form of a goat–fish hybrid (αἰγίπτων, Eratosth. Cat. 27). Interesting in this context is the αἰξ (Arist. HA 593b23), a waterbird whose flight—it has been suggested on the basis of German folklore surrounding the similarly named Himmelsgeist—was thought to presage storms.

In light of this evidence, I suggest that the Greeks connected the Nile with goats, the more so since Ptah himself is horned, his incarnation being the Apis-bull (Hdt. 2. 38, 153, 3. 27–30) and his function that of creation, like the ram-headed god, Ḥnmw. Late grammarians certainly explained the term Αἴγυπτος along these lines, either because Egypt has “fat goats” (αιγές πίνονες, Etym. Magn. 29. 10) or because the Egyptians worship them and so allow the Nile to be “drunk by goats” (αἰγίπτος, ibid. 29. 8–9). The Egyptian goat-cult, centred at bš-nb-Ḏdṯ, “ram (or soul) of Lord Ḏḏṯ,” or Mendes in the delta since the second dynasty (Manetho 609 F 2 [p. 20]

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17 R. B. Onians, The Origins of European Thought (Cambridge 1951) 237, 249. With this custom is to be compared the offering of human hair—another emanation of the head—to rivers (Il. 23. 140–51, Aesch. Cho. 6–7).


19 J. E. Harrison, Themis, 2nd ed. (Cambridge 1927) 206.


25 Lloyd (above, note 3) II 171, ad Hdt. 2. 38.

was striking to Greek eyes,\(^{27}\) not least because it included public sexual intercourse between women and goats (Pind. fr. 201 Maehler, Hdt. 2. 46, Plut. Mor. 989a).

We will never know whether the identity of the initial syllable of Αἴγυπτος with the αἰγ- root is a coincidence or—as I think more likely—a case of popular etymology,\(^{28}\) and modern philologists are not tempted by any derivation akin to those offered by the Etymologicum Magnum, both because the ending -υπτος, although it has completely transformed the original, has not produced a Greek word-forming suffix, and because by chance we can trace the word almost step by step as it enters Greek. Nevertheless, the word is not completely isolated from other, simpler Greek words, and if their influence (as opposed to coincidence) has indeed helped to determine its form, this naturalization has involved considerations quite different from a desire to replace the sounds of the source language by their closest equivalents in the target language.

The moral of this story is that Greek accommodated loan-words to its own native forms in ways rich in Volkspoesie.\(^{29}\) We must never forget, as Kenneth Dover has said in another context, that “aesthetic caprice must be included among the determinants of linguistic form,”\(^{30}\) nor should we be too quick to rule out as borrowings words that in sense, sound, and degree of isolation do not conform to the narrow expectations of a rigidly positivist approach to historical linguistics.

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\(^{27}\) The Greeks, for whom the gods were of one race with humans (Pind. Nem. 6. 1) and so ἀνθρωποφόροις (Hdt. 1. 131), always found the Egyptian theriomorphic conception of divinity remarkable (cf. Socrates’ oath μὰ τὸν κύνα τὸν Αἴγυπτιον θεόν, Pl. Grg. 482b5).

\(^{28}\) C. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Oxford 1995) 170, suggests that αἰγυπτικός, “vulture” (< ἀργυριός) is modelled on Αἴγυπτιος rather than the other way around.

\(^{29}\) Similarly, Greek arguably accommodated the Persian proper name *a(h)ura-pāta, “protected by Ahura (Mazda),” as ὀβροβάτης (Aesch. Pers. 1072, Bacchyl. Epin. 3. 48) from the phrase ὀβρὸν βαίνειν (e.g. Eur. Med. 1164); so M. Leumann in a private letter to B. Snell (see Bacchylidis carmina cum fragmentis [Leipzig 1963] 10–11, ad loc.); this suggestion has, however, been rejected by R. Schmitt, “Bakchylides’ ὀβροβάτας und die Iranier-Namen mit Anlaut ABPA/O-,” Glotta 53 (1975) 207–16.

\(^{30}\) K. Dover, *Marginal Comment: A Memoir* (London 1994) 25. W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution*, transl. by M. E. Pinder and W. Burkert (Cambridge, MA 1992) 35, writes that “the Greek language, at any rate the literary Greek that we know, absolutely rejects the use of unadapted foreign words; they are accepted only in perfectly assimilated form as to phonetics and inflexion.”