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The Meaning of Phoenician *ḥsp* in the Aḥirom Inscription

Abstract

There is no agreement on the etymology and meaning of Phoen. *ḥsp* in the Aḥirom sarcophagus inscription, but the corresponding Egyptian verb *ḥsb*, “to break”, may help to resolve both issues. In support, several other words where Eg. /b/ corresponds to Semitic /p/ are discussed.

Keywords

Aḥirom Inscription, devoicing, Egyptian, interchange of bilabials, loanwords, Phoenician.

1. The verb *ḥsp* in the Aḥirom Inscription

One of the curses in the Phoen. Aḥirom Inscription is *ṯḥtsp ḥṯr mšpṯh*, “may his legitimate sceptre” (KAI 1 = TSSI III, 4:2), where the precise meaning of the verb *ḥsp* is uncertain. The dictionaries are little more than hesitant and various translations are given, e.g. “(to) break, split, crack (of wood; from context)” (PPD, 192–193); “to strip, lay bare” (CSL, 220); “prob. meaning to be broken” (DNWSI, 393). The cognate usually given is Heb. *ḥsp*, “to strip off; to bare; to skim off” (HALOT, 359b), with references there to Arab. *š/saḥafa*, “to strip (off)”¹, which would require metathesis, and, surprisingly, to Arab. *ḥasufa*, “to pour water”.² Slightly differently, Tomback (CSL, 110) translates “be removed”, referring to Hebrew and Akkadian cognates (see below). In his textbook on Phoenician inscriptions, Gibson (TSSI III, 14) translates: “may the sceptre of his rule be torn away”, with the comment: “prob. to be connected with

¹ Meaning “he pared it, peeled it, off (of fat); he removed it, stripped it off (hair from skin)” (AEL, 1318), a reference not cited in any of the works consulted.

² However, no references to dictionaries of Arabic are provided (but see below). See also KAHAL, 189a.

Arab [ḥasifa], ‘sank, became emaciated’ but also ‘sunk (a well), humbled, tore off ... or Arab. [ḥasafa] ‘picked, culled’, form VII ‘to be smashed’, rather than with Hebr. ḤSP and apparently ... Ugar. *ḥsp*, ‘stripped off, skimmed’” (*ibid.* 16). The comment provided on *ḥsp* in KAI II (p. 4) is: “wohl «rüpfen, entblättern», vgl hebr. *ḥšp* «abschälen» (ugar. *yḥsp* 1Aqht 31 ?), wozu die Grundbedeutung von *ḥṯr* «Zweig, Reis» (Jes. 11,1) gut paßt”. In explanation they note that the symbol of sovereignty in Syria is a flower, while in Egypt it is the lotus, which would fit this imagery. Gevirtz (1961, 147 n. 2) commented that the Ugaritic parallel to this curse “does not warrant translating the verb ḤSP by ‘to break’”, preferring as cognates Aram. *ḥsp*, “to peel” and Akk. *ḥasāpu*, “to pluck out, tear off” (but see below). Gzella (2013, 190) translates “may it (his sceptre) become defoliated (or: break)”, with the comment “The exact meaning of this verb is controversial” (*ibid.* n. 45). Ultimately, then, the exact etymology and meaning of Phoen. *ḥsp* remain unknown.

2. Similar ANE curses

As is well known, this curse has parallels in Babylonian and in Ugaritic³. In the Epilogue to the Code of Hammurapi, the following curse appears: ^{GIS}PA(*ḥaṭṭu*)-*šū lišbir*, “(May Anu) break his sceptre” (CH xlii 51)⁴. Likewise, in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle, the following tricolon occurs twice (KTU 1.2 iii 17–18 // 1.6 vi 26–29):

<i>l ys^c ālt tḥtk</i>	Surely he will uproot the supports of your throne.
<i>l yhp^k ksā mlkk</i>	Surely he will overturn the throne of your kingship.
<i>l yṯbr ḥṯ mṯṯk</i>	Surely he will break the sceptre of your rule.

Clearly, as has been accepted, generally but not universally, Phoen. *tḥtsp* corresponds semantically to Bab. *lišbir*, from *šebēru*, “to break”. Likewise, it is equivalent to Ug. *yṯbr*, from *tḥr*, “to break”, in almost identical contexts, and in both cases in parallelism with the verb *hp^k*, “to overturn”⁵.

³ See, for example, Smith UBC I, 250–252. For other but less close parallels, see Gevirtz 1961, 147 n. 2.

⁴ Echoed in Šurpu VIII 56: *māmīti dūtum URU (āli) È (bīti) ^{GIS}PA(ḥaṭṭa) šebēru* etc. “curse (connected with) the secret place of the city (and) house, breaking a staff etc.”; cf. Reiner 1958, 42. See also the parallelism of similar verbs in the line “breaking (*šebēru*) a table, smashing (*ḥepū*) a cup” (Šurpu VIII 60).

⁵ The verb form is a Qal with a *t*-infix (Gt) and the two examples, unique to the Ahirom inscription, are both in the 3rd pers. fem. sing. imperfect passive: *tḥtsp* and the parallel *thp^k*, “may [the throne] be upset”. This isolated form in Phoenician may have equivalents in Old Aramaic (Tell Fekheriye Inscription line 23) and Moabite (KAI 181: 11, 15, 19, 32); cf. PPG³ §150; Gibson

3. Possible Semitic cognates to Phoen. ḥsp

Before considering the proposal to be made here, it is worth revisiting any plausible Semitic cognates⁶.

3.1 Arab. *ḥasifa* VII: “to shatter, crush” is cited both by Gibson (TSSI III, 16) and in HALOT, 359b under Heb. *ḥšp* III, but without any references to dictionaries of Arabic. In fact, the meanings given in Biberstein Kazimirski’s dictionary are: “monder, trier (des dattes) etc.” II: “raser (la moustache)”; V: “être arraché et voltiger dans l’air (se dit du poil)” and VII: “être cassé, broyé en petits morceaux” (DAF I, 426a).

3.2 Aram. *ḥasba*’, “sherd” (DJBA, 476) is considered to be a loan from Akkadian (cf. DJPA, 211a), implying something that is broken. Note especially יהו בחספי ומתברי להו “they used to break them [i.e. the jugs] into sherds” (cited in DJBA, 476a).

3.3 Akk. *ḥasāpu(m)*, “to tear away, off” (CDA, 109b), said of thorns, hair, hem, brick-courses; “abreißen” (AHw, 329b, with a reference to Heb. *ḥšp*)⁷. See also Arab. *ḥasafa*, “he rent, cut off” (AEL, 738); “déchirer, lacérer; couper, retrancher” (DAF I, 572); “to cut anything; to tear off anything” (Hava 109a). Possibly in the same semantic field – “to remove” – is Geez *ḥasāfa*, *ḥasafa*, “[to] be scabby, be scurfy, be covered with a rash; itch, peel, scratch, widen wound” (CDG, 266a)⁸.

3.4 Arab. *ḥasafa*, “it (a place) sank, went away” (AEL, 738); “to sink, sink down, give way, disappear” (DMWA, 239a)⁹; Mehri. *ḥsf*, “to be precipitous; to be destroyed (by God’s will)” (ML, 449) and Jibb. *ḥsf*, “to be destroyed (by God’s will)”; *ḥʿtsəf*, “to be humiliated; to disappear into the ground, be engulfed” (JL, 306).

TSSI III, 16. However, Gzella (2013, 190) prefers to consider the Gt-stem as serving “as a reflexive or medio-passive counterpart to the unmarked G-stem”, which was retained from an older stage of the language.

⁶ Unfortunately, this verb does not occur in the Ebla texts (p.c. Marco Bonechi 17.07.2019). Likewise, consultation of CED, CLD V and HSED did not yield any possible cognates in Hamito-Semitic (Afrasian).

⁷ There are two roots according to CAD H, 22a: “to pluck out (hair)” and “to remove (bricks)”, but in current opinion, only one; cf. AHw and CDA *ad loc.*

⁸ As Massimiliano Franci, who was kind enough to read a draft of this paper, pointed out to me (p.c. 10.07.2019).

⁹ See also Arab. *ḥasafa*, “to sink down (country); to be eclipsed (moon)”; “to sink (an unexhaustible well) in the rock; to humble and vex anyone; to confine (a beast) without food” (Hava 109a).

3.5 Ug. *ḥsp*, “to rot”, said of fruit in the vineyards (KTU 1.19 i 31; cf. DUL, 404–405), although it may be explained either by Hars. *ḥsf*, “to go bad” (HL, 142) or by the verbs given in the previous paragraph.

3.6 Ug. *ḥsp*, “to draw, collect water” (DUL, 368), Heb. *ḥśp*, “to skim off (water)” (HALOT, 359)¹⁰.

Clearly, the first verb (3.1) is the closest in meaning, but in Arabic only in the VII form, while the basic meaning refers to hulling and sorting dates. The second verb (3.2) may be derived from the basic meaning “clay” and so is not relevant¹¹, and the third (3.3) means “to tear off, cut” etc. but not “to shatter, break”, as required in our text. The fourth set (3.4, the same as 3.3, but with slightly different meanings) seems promising, but it is meant metaphorically rather than physically, especially in view of Arab. *ḥasf*, “wrong(doing), injustice” (AEL, 738); “baseness, ignominy, disgrace, shame” (DMWA, 239a). Fifthly (3.5), the Ugaritic verb *ḥsp*, means “to go bad, wilt”, said of vegetation, and cannot be applied to a sceptre being broken. And finally (3.6), as already noted by Gibson (see above), both Ug. *ḥsp* and Heb. *ḥśp* relate to scooping up water, and so are irrelevant.

4. An Egyptian cognate?

Another verb (besides Arab. *ḥasafa*, VII, see above) that seems to be close to Phoen. *ḥsp* in terms of meaning is Egyptian *ḥsb*¹². The dictionaries provide the following meanings for this verb: Eg. *ḥsb*, “zerbrechen” (Wb 3, 166.6); *ḥsb*, “brechen, zerbrechen”; Eg. *ḥsb*, [med] “(*glatter) Bruch, Fraktur (*des Knochens, wie bei einem Stab*)” (GHWb, 560b); *ḥsb*, “zerbrechen (*Flügel od. Hälse der Vögel mit dem Wurfholz*)” (GHWb, 561b) and Eg. *ḥsb*, “to break, smash” (FCD, 178)¹³ #van der Molen/. See also the derivative, Eg. *ḥsb*, “Bruch (eines Knochens)” (Wb 3, 166.7). In terms of semantics, the Egyptian verb, denoting bones being broken like a stick, certainly matches the Phoenician verb, which most probably refers to a sceptre being broken. However, the problem then becomes: can Eg. /b/ correspond to Sem. /p/? While this is not a regular feature in Egyptian, there are several examples that indicate it to be possible, as shown in the next paragraph¹⁴.

¹⁰ See also Emar Akk. */ḥaspu/*, “(a kind of wine)” (Pentiuc 2001, 58); Eg. *ḥsp*, “vineyard” (PL, 678).

¹¹ See also Aram. *ḥsp*, “clay, clay object” (Cook DQA, 88) and Emar */ḥissīpu/*, “clay vessel” (Pentiuc 2001, 68–69).

¹² My thanks to Gábor Tákaacs (p.c. 24 and 26.02.2019) for discussing this verb with me.

¹³ Cf. van der Molen 2000, 356 (cited from the TLA website).

¹⁴ Some of these examples are new.

5. Examples of Eg. /b/ = Sem. /p/

Due to devoicing¹⁵, occasionally Eg. /b/ can correspond to CS /p/¹⁶ as the following examples show¹⁷:

5.1 Eg. *3sb*, “brennen; glühend” (Wb I, 20.18; cf. PL, 21–22); “fierce, glowing”; Eg. *3sbyw*, “flames” (FCD, 5) – Sem. *ršp* (Ug. *ršp*, Heb. *rešep*): “Etymologisch mag man den Namen ... mit der in akkadisch *rašābu(m)* “schauer-, ehrfurchterregend sein” und *rašbu(m)* “ehrfurchtgebietend” bezeugten Wurzel in Verbindung bringen” (Müller 1980, 10). Cf. also Akk. *rašbu(m)*, “terrifying”, of a deity (CDA, 300a)¹⁸.

5.2 Eg. *b3gj*, “müde sein; matt, schlaff, lässig sein, nachlassen etc.” (Wb I, 431.2–10); “to be weary, languid, slack, remiss” (FCD, 79); “müde sein/werden, ermatten; matt, schlaff, (nach)lässig sein. etc.” (GHWb, 244a); Late Eg. *bg3*, “to be lazy, slack, indolent etc.” (DLE I, 142) – Sem. *pgr*, “to make someone idle” (DJBA, 887b)¹⁹.

5.3 Eg. *bḥbh*, “Hochmut, Frechheit” (Wb I, 472.15; GHWb, 259b) – Akk. *puḥpuḥḥū*, “quarrel, strife, contention” (CAD P, 485); “squabble, brawl” (CDA, 277b)²⁰, although the semantic overlap is not exact²¹.

5.4 Eg. *bsbs*, “Art Gans oder Ente” (Wb I, 477.1); “*Stockente (Anas platyrhynchos)” (GHWb, 261b) – Akk. *paspasu*, “duck” (CDA, 268b; CAD P, 222–224)²².

¹⁵ An example from toponymy is supplied by Franci (2007a, 77) in the spelling of “Byblos” in the Execration Texts, i.e. *Kbny*, which became *kpn* in texts from the New Kingdom; cf. also Franci 2017b, 243.

¹⁶ See Takács EDE I, 284–286; Franci 2014, 192 (a “correspondence considered occasional but acceptable”). It is significant that this interchange is not unusual in Late Punic, where /b/ can sometimes appear instead of /p/; cf. PPG³ §39 for examples.

¹⁷ The sequence here follows the Egyptian alphabet. These examples are due to devoicing; for the theoretical explanation cf. Loprieno 1995, 34 and Franci 2007b, 243.

¹⁸ Schneider 1997, 194 §4: “*3sb* “brennen”; *3sbjw* “Flammen”” with reference to Heb. and MHebr. *rāšāp*, Sam. *ršwp*, Jewish Aram. *rišpā*, “Flamme” (= mögliche Etymologie des Gottesnamen *Rašap*); cf. HALOT, 1297a. According to Takács (EDE I, 284) this etymology is “attractive and impressive”. Münnich (2014, 8) commented: “It is more probable to connect Resheph with the Akkadian verb *raš/sābu(m)* I meaning, “to crush, destroy, cut out” and with the adjective *rašbu(m)*, i.e. “terrifying, horrible”. This etymology would be connected with an angry threatening deity, which Resheph appears to be.” (further references *ibid.*, n. 4).

¹⁹ See discussion in EDE II, 101; according to Takács, *ibid.* this solution seems the most promising.

²⁰ Probably derived from Akk. *napāḥu*, “anblasen, entzünden” (AHw, 732; cf. *ibid.* 876).

²¹ For other possible etymologies see EDE II, 292–293.

²² Proposed in EDE II, 313–314; there Takács comments: “nearly perfect match of Sem[itic]”, and “despite the irreg[ular] labial correspondence, it is a safe etymology”.

5.5 Eg. *bsn.t*, “Grabstichel” (Wb 1, 477.5–6); “burin, chisel” (DLE I, 140) – Ug. *psl*, “engraver” (DUL, 674); Nab. *psl*, “sculptor” (DNWSI, 922–923); Heb. *psl*, “to hew” (HALOT, 949); Syr. *psl*, “to cut, hew” (SL, 1210b)²³.

5.6 Eg. *bkn*, “Exkremente (von Ziegen)” (Wb 1, 482.6) – Akk. *pi(q)qannu*, “droppings (of sheep, gazelle)” (CDA, 275a); “dung pellet (of sheep, gazelles etc.)” (CAD P, 385–386)²⁴.

5.7 Eg. *bt.w*, “Bösewicht” (Wb 1, 485.14) – Akk. *pīgu*, “lying, deception” (CDA, 274a); “trickery, deceit” (CAD P, 360a); cf. EDE II, 354.

5.8 Eg. *bḏ*, *bḏ.w*, “Kugel, Ball” (?) (Wb 1, 88.8; GHWb, 267)²⁵ – Akk. *pukku(m)*, “(a wooden ring or ball)” CDA, 278a); “(a ball?)” (CAD P, 502)²⁶.

5.9 Eg. *kb.wj*, “sole (of foot)” (Wb 5, 118. 1)²⁷ – Akk. *kappu(m)*, “hand, palm of hand; paw” (CDA, 147b); Mehri *kaf*, “palm of the hand” (ML, 204); Mand. *kapa*, “hand, palm of hand” (MD, 200a); Off. Aram. *kp*, “hand, palm etc.” (DNWSI, 528); Ug. *kp*, “palm (of the hand)” (DUL, 447)²⁸.

5.10 Eg. *tbn*, “single membrane drum, tambourine” (PL, 1133); “Handpauke” (Wb 5, 262.5); cf. *tbn*, “pauken” (Wb 5, 262.6)²⁹ – Ug. *tp*, drum” or “tambourine” (DUL, 861); Heb. *t(w)p*, “hand-drum, tambourine” (HALOT, 1771–1772); Aram. *twp*, “drum” (DJPA, 578a); Aram. *tp*, “musical instrument, timbrel” (DSA II, 958); Arab. *duff*, *daff*, “a tambourine” (AEL, 888)³⁰.

5.11 Eg. *tb*, “a vessel” (PL, 1161); *ṭ3b*, “a vessel” (FCD, 133; cf. Wb 5, 354.1–9); *tbt*, “a vase” (FCD, 134); *ṭbw*, “beaker, bowl” (DLE II, 228)³¹ – Akk. *kappu*, “(small) bowl” of wood, gold, silver (CDA, 147b); Syr. *kpt*, “dish, pan” (SL, 646a); *kp*, “a pan, bowl, saucer etc.” (CSD, 222a); Aram. *kp*, “vessel, dish” (DSA I, 403b).

5.12 Eg. *ḏb3*, “garment” (PL, 1230–1231; Wb 5, 560.10–11)³² – Ug. *sp*, “garment” (KTU 1.41:54); cf. Pun. *sph*, prob. “broad purple stripe” (DNWSI, 972)³³.

²³ See Takács EDE II, 314–315, who notes: “The correspondence of Sem. *p- and Eg. b- is irreg[ular]”.

²⁴ Cf. Takács EDE II, 339–340.

²⁵ Takács EDE II, 363–364

²⁶ This comparison is a new suggestion. However, Vermaak 2011 suggests that *pukku* actually means “game board”, but perhaps this is simply a case of metonymy.

²⁷ In the Pyramid Texts; see also Eg. *ṭbw*, “sole of foot” (DLE II, 228); “Sohle (des Fußes), Sandale, Fuß” (Wb 5, 316.9–363); “sole” (FCD, 304) and cf. HSED §1406.

²⁸ SED I No. 148. Cf. EDE I, 108, but note also Late Eg. *kp*, “sole (of foot)” (DLE II, 172).

²⁹ See also Late Eg. *ṭbt*, “drum” (DLE II, 228).

³⁰ This is a new suggestion.

³¹ “The earliest references to this vessel, from early D[ynasty] 18 ... write the word as *ṭ3b*, but from D[ynasty] 19 the usual spelling is *tb*. The vessel is a goblet without a foot for liquids and can be made of metal and perhaps glass” (Wilson PL, 1161).

³² “The word is derived from *ḏb3* [“to clothe, adorn”] and occurs from the MK where it seems to be a loin cloth or kilt... The exact nature of this cloth is difficult to determine, but it was probably white” (Wilson PL, 1230–1231).

³³ For other suggestions see Watson 2018, 362.

6. Conclusion

In view of similar imprecations, both Mesopotamian and Ugaritic, the meaning of Phoen. *ḥsp* in this curse on a sarcophagus seems to mean “to break” something physically and more specifically, to break a rod or sceptre, rather than to peel it or the like. This may be supported by verbs in Arabic and Egyptian. While the Arabic verb *ḥasifa* has the relevant meaning only in the VII form, the corresponding Egyptian verb *ḥsb*, “to break, smash”, is used of bones as broken or fractured³⁴. In support, several examples show that, occasionally but not too rarely, Egyptian /b/ can correspond to Semitic /p/. It is also worth mentioning that the sarcophagus with this Phoenician inscription is Egyptian in style³⁵, which strongly indicates contact with Egypt³⁶. The line in question *ṯḥtsp ḥtr mšpṯh* may therefore be translated: “may his legitimate sceptre break”.

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³⁴ It is uncertain whether we are dealing with a cognate or a loanword here; for a discussion of the problems in making such a decision, see Franci 2008.

³⁵ “The strong Egyptian influence in the scenes accords with the Egyptian shape of the sarcophagus” (Porada 1973, 361) and “Ahirom’s reliefs continue the iconographical traditions of Syria and Palestine as well as of the New Kingdom of Egypt, but they have assumed the simplified, heavy forms found in the reliefs of Carchemish and of Ashurnasirpal II of the ninth century B. C.” (*ibid.*, 364). Also, “the Ahirom sarcophagus shows definite Egyptian features” (Givon 1959, 58). Cf. also Tore 1995, 471–472.

³⁶ For Egyptian influence at Byblos see Helck 1994 and Scandone 1994. See also Calabro 2015.

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Abbreviations

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| AEL | E.W. Lane, <i>An Arabic-English Lexicon</i> , vols I–VIII (London/Edinburgh 1863–1893). |
| AHw | W. von Soden, <i>Akkadisches Handwörterbuch</i> , vols I–III (Wiesbaden 1965–1981). |
| CAD | I.J. Gelb et al. (eds), <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> , vols 1–21 (Chicago 1956–2010). |
| CDA | J. Black – A. George – N. Postgate (eds), <i>A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian</i> (Wiesbaden 2002 ²). |
| CDG | W. Leslau, <i>Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez</i> (Wiesbaden 1987). |
| CED | O. Stolbova, <i>Chadic Etymological Dictionary</i> (Moscow 2016). |
| CLD V | O. Stolbova, <i>Chadic Lexical Database, Issue V</i> (Moscow 2019). |
| CSD | J. Payne Smith, <i>A Compendious Syriac Dictionary</i> (Oxford 1903). |
| CSL | R. Tomback, <i>Comparative Semitic Lexicon of the Phoenician and Punic Languages</i> (SBLDS 32; Missoula 1978). |
| DAF | A. de Biberstein Kazimirski, <i>Dictionnaire Arabe-Français contenant toutes les racines de la langue arabe</i> (Paris 1860). |
| DJBA | M. Sokoloff, <i>A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic</i> (Ramat Gan/Baltimore 2002). |
| DJPA | M. Sokoloff, <i>A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period</i> (Ramat Gan 1990). |
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