

The Survival of the Ancient Egyptian Word *htm* in Arabic

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Throughout the ages, Egypt underwent massive historical and political changes and experienced different cultures (Pharaonic, Coptic, Greek, Roman, etc.) and religions (principally, native Egyptian religion, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Despite all of this, Pharaonic patterns of cultural practices and linguistic features made their way into the culture and lifestyle of modern Egypt. These historical and political changes reflect the impact of the socio-political environment on the internal evolution of the language. The social culture of Egypt remains the same and this similarity manifests itself best through the language such as expressions and metaphors, which are inspired by the natural environment of the Nile Valley. The similarities of words in ancient Egyptian language in classical Arabic (Semitic) and in colloquial Egyptian Arabic begs the following questions: which language was borrowed from which? What is the relation of these languages to each other?

Arabic as One of the Southwest Branches of the Afroasiatic Phylum

The Afroasiatic phylum is composed of six families, and it represents one of the most widespread language families in the world.¹ Ancient Egyptian and Semitic languages are two families of the Afroasiatic phylum.² Ancient Egyptian was at one time the primary language

¹ “The geographic area of the Afroasiatic language families comprised, from antiquity to the present time, the entire area of the eastern Mediterranean, northern Africa, and western Asia”, Antonio Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

² “Semitic is the largest family of the Afroasiatic phylum. The term Semitic is driven from the anthroponym “Sem,” Noah’s first son and has been applied to languages spoken in ancient times in most of western Asian (Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria, Arabia), and in modern times, as a consequence of invasions from the Arabian peninsula in the first millennium CE in northern Africa”, Loprieno, 1.

spoken in Egypt, but it has become extinct. Arabic is one of the most widespread Semitic languages which overlies a variety of diversified spoken dialects and is the spoken language in Egypt today.³

The genetic relationship within the Afroasiatic phylum has been a subject of debate as several linguists proposed morphological and phonological pieces of evidence for the relatedness of the Afroasiatic languages.⁴ There are six divisions within the Afro-Asiatic phylum that are widely recognized by Linguists: Amazigh (Berber), Chadic, Cushitic, Egyptian, Omotic, and Semitic.⁵ These divisions vary in both the number of languages and the degree of genetic relationship as measured in terms of common inherited vocabulary and shared grammatical features.⁶

³ “Today, the Egyptian Arabic dialect is the means of communication among the vast majority of the population of Egypt. The sole means of writing in Modern Standard Arabic which diverges from the spoken language to a considerable degree”, Carsten Peust, *Egyptian Phonology: An Introduction to the Phonology of a Dead Language.*, vol. 2, Monographien Zur Ägyptischen Sprache (Göttingen: Peust & Gutschmidt, 1999), 29–30.

⁴ The morphological characteristics that are shared by the Afroasiatic families, e.g. Semitic and Egyptian, are identified in the means of adding subject markers to the verb, referred to as “prefix conjugation” and “suffix conjugation”. Another morphological features is the identity of possessive suffixes and object suffixes, Zygmunt Frajzyngier and Erin. Shay, *The Afroasiatic Languages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2–4; Marcel Cohen, *Essai comparatif sur le vocabulaire et la phonétique du chamito-sémitique*. (Paris: H. Champion, 1969); David Cohen, “L’hypothèse d’une laryngale dans la morphogenèse du système verbal des langues chamito-sémitiques,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 9 (2014): 11–20; Joseph H. Greenberg and Diedrich Westermann, *Internal A-Plurals in Afroasiatic: Hamito-Semitic. Diedrich Westermann Zum 80. Geburtstag Gewidmet* (Berlin: Akad., 1955).

⁵ Some authors, for lack of robust evidence for subclassification, still follow Greenberg by accepting five coordinate branches within Afro-Asiatic (or six, including Omotic in a separate family).

⁶ “Linguists use a set of methods with which they compare languages, both modern and ancient, in order to establish “genetically related” language groups. The application of such methods involves the systematic analysis of the phonologies (sound systems), vocabularies, and grammars of the languages in question, such as the hypothetical reconstruction of common sound of origin. Ways of proofing the genetically related languages are: Systematic matching in Phonology, vocabulary, and grammar that relates them to a protolanguage”, see H. Ekkehard Wolff, “Afro-Asiatic Languages,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., May 14, 2018), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Afro-Asiatic-languages>.

Even though ancient Egyptian shares many commonalities with Semitic, most scholars conclude that ancient Egyptian must have diverged from Semitic at an early point in time.⁷ Analyses of the verbal stems and conjugations in ancient Egyptian in an attempt to establish their relation to the corresponding Semitic stems have led some scholars to make the argument that some Egyptian words with a Semitic etymology are, in fact, loan words from the Proto-Semitic language.⁸ Semitic roots are mainly trilateral which consists of principal letters beside vowels such as *KaTaLa* in Arabic, which means “he or it killed,” and bears a resemblance to the ancient Egyptian root word system.⁹ Arabic as a Semitic language had penetrated Egypt’s culture as a non-native language which arrived with the Arab conquest.¹⁰ Therefore Arabic was not used in the comparative studies of the development of other historical languages in Egypt, especially in relation to the ancient Egyptian language.¹¹

⁷ Egyptian and Semitic have virtually the same principles of word order, nominal predicate and the verbal predicate, though not the adverbial predicate, cf. Helmut Satzinger, “The Egyptian Connection: Egyptian and the Semitic Languages,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 20 (2000): 232.

⁸ “Egyptian nominal stems are derived in similar ways as in Semitic; Arabic as a Semitic language has the nominative in -u, an accusative in -a and a genitive in -j, viz. in Akkadian and in Arabic. The case in -a is used for the objects of transitive verbs, but also as adverbial case (such as Arabic al-yam-a “today,” barr-an wa-bahr-an “on land and on sea,” gidd-an “very” _ literally, “with zeal or effort”_, “akbaru ailm-an” greater in respect to knowledge”, for the predicative noun after some verbs of being or becoming (Arabic: kana and its “sisters”), for the predicative noun in the “absolute negation,” Arabic la-ilah-a “there is no god,” and, in Arabic, under certain conditions for the vocative (e.g., ya abd-a llahi), cf. Satzinger, 236–37.

⁹ “The Semitic languages are characterized by root morphemes consisting of three consonants. Of course, there are morphemes that seems to have just one consonant (*bi ‘in, with’), other with just two (*On- ‘two’), and some with four or more (*parOuy- ‘flea’). But triconsonantal roots predominate numerically..”, Patrick R. Bennett, *Comparative Semitic Linguistics: A Manual* (Eisenbrauns, 1998), 62.

¹⁰ “Contemporary written Arabic (MSA) represents a direct continuation of the language of the Quran and of classical literature; inscriptions from northern and central Arabia in an earlier form of the language (called “pre-classical North Arabic”) are known from the fourth century BCE to the fourth century CE”, Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction.*, 2–3.

¹¹ Allen suggests that correspondents between Egyptian and contemporary Semitic languages are mostly of two kinds: Egyptian rendition of loan-words and proper names from contemporary Semitic languages, and renditions of Egyptian words in contemporary cuneiform texts, see James P. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Language: An Historical Study*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 31–33.

The Word *khetem*

The Semitic word *khetem*, vocalized *khetem* in Arabic and is translated as “seal”, will be the subject of the discussion of this paper, for two reasons: first for the survival of the phonetic and semantic affinity of this word between ancient Egyptian and Semitic, in particular Arabic, and secondly, for its association with the ancient Egyptian practice of sealing which has survived and is found in modern Egypt today.¹² Despite the discussion that has surrounded this word, its origin remains uncertain and its etymology remains obscure. The word *khetem* is found in ancient Egyptian, Biblical Hebrew, Ethiopic, Syriac, and Arabic. However, Semitists are divided on the issue of the origin of this word and whether it is of Semitic origin, Proto-Semitic or ancient Egyptian origin. Understanding the etymology of this word is a good example of the understanding of the affinities between ancient Egyptian and Semitic.

Etymological discussion of the word *khetem* can be divided into two groups: one that privileges the ancient Egyptian evidence and another that privilege the Semitic or Proto-Semitic evidence.¹³ The word *khetem* was either considered by some scholars as a cognate between Egyptian and Semitic or a very early loanword from Egyptian into Semitic, attesting a cultural and linguistic affinity between ancient Egyptian and the Southern Levantine seal culture.

¹² Today, when you go to a magazine store in Egypt to purchase something, you will get a stamped receipt sealed with what is called in Arabic *khetem*, which corresponds to the pharaonic Egyptian word *htm*, “seal; to seal,” that has the same root consonants, the same connotation, and the same practice. The person who oversees the Arabic *khetem* is known as *el-khattam* or *beta’a khetem* which means “the one who seals” or “to whom the seal belongs,” evoking the ancient Egyptian title *htmy*, “sealer” who was responsible for securing the *htmyt*, or “sealed chamber; document” in the ancient Egyptian language. The survival of this ancient Egyptian linguistic feature with its associated bureaucratic practice of using stamps to sealing official documents or treasuries in modern Egypt illustrates cultural continuity from Pharaonic times into modern Egypt.

¹³ Some Egyptologists think that *khetem* is a Semitic root word common to ancient Egyptian and that is still used in Arabic, see Josef Wegner, “The Evolution of Ancient Egyptian Seals and Sealing Systems,” in *Seals and Sealing in the Ancient World: Case Studies from the Near East, Egypt, the Aegean, and South Asia*, ed. Gregg Jamison et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 231.

Attestations of the Word *khetem* in Ancient Egyptian and Semitic Sources¹⁴

Ancient Egyptian			Semitic						English
Middle Egyptian	Demotic	Coptic							
			Arabic	Hebrew ¹⁵	Aramaic	Syriac	Ethiopic	Phoenician	
<i>htm</i>	<i>htm</i>	ⲕⲉⲧⲙ ⲕⲉⲧⲁⲙ ⲕⲉⲧⲙ	ختم root خ ت م (<i>k-t-m</i>)	חותם חתם בטעה טבעת	ܚܘܬܡܐ ܚܬܡܐ	<i>ḥātemā</i>	<i>maḥtam</i>	<i>htm</i>	A seal, signet ring (noun). To seal (verb).

The word *khetem* has been found extensively in Semitics: Arabic, Hebrew, Ethiopic, and Syriac, which gives the first impression that this word is of a Semitic origin.¹⁶ However, the cognate word in ancient Egyptian carries the same meaning of the Semitic word. Arabic as a Semitic language is an abundant source of occurrences of the word *khetem* as it was mentioned several times in the Quran.¹⁷ In Modern Standard Arabic, which is believed to be derived from

¹⁴ Thomas O. Lambdin, “Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament.,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 73, no. 3 (1953): 151.

¹⁵ “The “root” occurs in several texts from Arad. These particular texts are likely from the late 7th to the early 6th century BCE (Arad Stratum VI); the Hebrew verb is thought by some scholars to be derived from the Egyptian since the noun *chotam* existed in Egyptian (in Hebrew, the verb precedes the noun; the noun is formed by taking the three-letter root of the verb and adding a mem or a tav as the initial letter), see Thomas O. Lambdin, “Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament.,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 73, no. 3 (1953): 151.

¹⁶ Lambdin, 151.

¹⁷ From the root kh-t-m خ ت م, other variations were derived such as the verb *khātama* خَتَمَ “to seal” in verse 2:7, 6:46, 36:65, 42:24, 45:23, and the noun *khātim* or *khitām* in khātam ’n-nabīyīna خَاتَمُ النَّبِيِّينَ translated as “the seal/the last of the prophets” in reference to the prophet Mohammed in chapter 33 Verse 40; another variation is the passive participle *makhtūm* مَخْتُوم in verse 83:25.

the Quran, the word *khetem* is an established word that has a verb, noun, and adjective variations.¹⁸

***Khetem* in Quranic Arabic**

The verb *Khetem* and its derivative form *Khatem*, are probably an early borrowing derived from Aramaic or Hebrew, as quoted by Arthur, “The word is used in the technical phrase *khatam El nabeiiien* “the last of prophets”. On the surface it would seem to be a genuine derivative from *Kahtam* “to seal”, but a form *fa’el* is not regular in Arabic, and the verb itself, is denominative.”¹⁹

The Etymology of *khetem*; *khatam*; *hatam*; or *hotam* in Semitics

The literal meaning of the word can vary in Semitic, but all its meanings are associated with sealing such as “affix a seal” or “seal shut”.²⁰ The noun *khetem*, which is thought to be derived from the verb *htm*, originated from the root *htm* which is found in West and South Semitic.²¹ In Hebrew and Arabic in particular, the path of the evolution of the word *khetem* is not

¹⁸ Calabro thinks that there are other words that are associated with the similar meaning in Arabic, such as *sigil*, which means “scroll, register” which is thought to be derived from the Greek word *sigillon*, “seal” which in turn originates from the Latin *sigillum*; he adds that the variety of Arabic represented in the Qur’an are known to have borrowed heavily from Aramaic/Syriac, which in turn borrowed from Greek, which in turn borrowed from imperial Latin, see David Calabro, “Rolling out the Etymology of Northwest Semitic Sgl,” ed. Baldi Sergio, *UNIVERSITA DEGLI STUDI DI NAPOLI “L’ORIENTALE” Dipartimento Di Studi E Ricerche Su Africa E Paesi Arabi Centro Di Studi Magrebini VIII Afro-Asiatic Congress* (2004): 66.

¹⁹ Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’an* (Woods Press, 2008), 120–21.

²⁰ “The verb *khetem* is thought to be associated with *Chatan*; In Egyptian, the word *Khet* or *khut*= cut, means “to cut and seal”. *khetem* means “to enclose, bind, or seal” and is applied to sealing. The same root passes into Assyrian and Hebrew as *khatan*, *katam* or *Chatan*, with the same meaning. In Arabic, *Khatana* is “to circumcise”. Cutting and sealing are identical as the mode of entering into a Blood-Covenant. Circumcision was one form of the sealing, but there were various kinds of cuts employed, and different parts of the body were scarified and tattooed”, see H.P. Blavatsky and Mabel Collin, *Lucifer: A Theosophical Magazine*, vol. 5 (London, 1887), 220.

²¹ “The meanings *khatam* “to close” and “to seal” were in Egyptian synonymous; indeed, to place a thing “under seal” was an ancient expression equivalent to the modern one of keeping a thing “under lock and key; in Hebrew the word is **חותם**, which survives in the Arabic, *khatim*, “a signet,” or “signet ring.”, see Percy Edward Newberry, *Egyptian Antiquities: Scarabs ; an Introduction to the Study of Egyptian Seals and Signet Rings*. (London: Constable, n.d.), 5.

certainly understandable. Lambdin thinks that if this word was indeed a direct loan from ancient Egyptian, then the loan occurred very early in the evolution of Hebrew or its linguistic predecessor. He adds that the shift in the noun in the $\bar{a} > \hat{o}$ had already occurred prior to its use in Biblical Hebrew and therefore, presumably, in epigraphic Hebrew as well.²² In East Semitic however, the root *kh-t-m* does not appear, which raises the question whether the root is itself Semitic or represents a loan word in West and South Semitic.²³

***Khetem* in Akkadian and Ugaritic**

Even though the word *Khetem* is observed in several Semitic languages, it does not exist in Ugaritic and Akkadian. The word used for “seal” in Ugaritic *mišmn*, *mišmn* is understood to be likely a Hurrian loanword in Ugaritic, though most probably Semitic.²⁴ The common Akkadian word for “seal” is *kunukku*, “seal,” “cylinder seal,” a word of uncertain, perhaps substrate origin.²⁵

***htm* in Ancient Egyptian**

The Egyptian noun *htm*, “seal” is found as early as the Old Kingdom and is established in phonetic spelling from the Old and Middle Kingdom.²⁶ The noun was thought to be derived from the verb meaning “affix a seal”, found from the early period onwards. Ancient Egyptian has a phoneme *h* that corresponds etymologically to Semitic /*Kh*/; this correspondence for Semitic *kh* is usually taken as evidence of an early palatalization in Ancient Egyptian. Some scholars

²² Lambdin, “Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament,” 151.

²³ G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.*, trans. David E Green, vol. 5 (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 263–64.

²⁴ “Ugarit is farther removed from Egypt than the Hebrew kingdom and more properly within the cultural orbit of Mesopotamia than that of Egypt”, see Calabro, “Rolling out the Etymology of Northwest Semitic Sglt,” 72.

²⁵ Calabro, 72.

²⁶ Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Wörterbuch Der Ägyptische Sprache* (JC Hinrichs; Akademie-Verlag, 1921), 4: 379.

propose that the Egyptian word *htm*, which its consonants correspond to those of the Semitic word very neatly and according to regular consonant correspondences, represent the oldest version of this word and seems to be the origin to understanding the enigmatic Southwest Semitic word *khetem* which is believed to be denominative based on the fact that the Hebrew noun form *qatal*, on which the noun *chotam* must be based, is extremely rare.²⁷

Proto-Semitic/ Proto Afro-Asiatic origin of *khetem*

The word *khetem* for “seal”, or “cylinder seal” was shared between ancient Egyptian and an early Semitic language from a time very close to the beginning of the cylinder seal itself.²⁸ Lambdin argues that if *khetem* had been borrowed from Hebrew חֹתָם (*hôtām*) or Aramaic חֹתְמָא / ܚܬܡܐ (*hātāmā*, “seal”), it would probably have started with a / ḥ /, and that the initial /ḥ/ in the Arabic word suggests that it is derived from the same source as the latter. Lambdin argues that the uncertain chain of etymology of *khetem* and the widespread use of this word in Semitic might indicate an even earlier borrowing from a hypothetical reconstruction as Proto-Afro-Asiatic, **qatam-* (“ring, signet”), being the source of both the Proto-Semitic **ḥatm-* and Egyptian *htm*, *hotam*, “seal, signet ring,” and a secondary *hotemet*.²⁹

²⁷ Botterweck and Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 5:263–64.

²⁸ Calabro, “Rolling out the Etymology of Northwest Semitic Sglt,” 69.

²⁹ “The long *a* of the Syriac and Arabic forms points to a borrowing before c. 1200 B.C”, see Thomas O. Lambdin, “Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 73, no. 3 (1953): 151. Proto-Afro-Asiatic is a hypothetical dialect cluster that is thought to be an ancestor/ a parent language to all Afro-Asiatic languages, the location and period of time from which Proto-Afro-Asiatic has originated is uncertain, some scholars tend to place it in the Mesolithic Period at about 15,000-10,000 BCE. Diakonoff argues that it has originated in the Sahara, where several migrations took place after about 5000 BCE. From Proto-Afro-Asiatic language, individual daughter languages were developed such as Proto-Semitic or Proto-Egyptian”, see Wolff, “Afro-Asiatic Languages.”

Conclusion

I have summarized the discussion around the origin of the word *khetem* in Semitics and ancient Egyptian with two conclusions: either that it is of ancient Egyptian origin, or of Proto-Afro-Asiatic origin. Both conclusions are hypothetical and require additional study. Nevertheless, the examination of the etymology of this word is an example for the establishment of the hypothesis that ancient Egyptian and Semitics may not only have cultural affinities but also share additional linguistic affinities which need to be rediscovered and reanalyzed. If we accept these connections, this hypothesis could attest a cultural and linguistic continuity between two languages such as ancient Egyptian and Arabic, which were spoken in the same land, Egypt, by the same people, Egyptians.

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