Animals, Gods and Men from East to West

Papers on archaeology and history in honour of Roberta Venco Ricciardi

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Animal names have been used as personal names in many civilizations. It is a phenomenon common to Indo-European and Semitic languages, for which we have numerous examples in the Roman Near East. This contribution discusses this phenomenon on account of a recently discovered inscription from Palmyra. It serves as a stepping stone for a discussion of parallels of this category of names across cultures. In addition, I shall discuss issues related to the translation or transcription of this category of names. Some Greek or Roman personal names have been widely adopted because they resembled Semitic names phonetically. Others have simply been translated, the equivalence being only semantic. Regarding the names of animals, however, examples of proper noun translations are very poorly studied in the vocabulary of the languages of the Near East. This article is a modest contribution to this field of study.

A new inscription from Palmyra

A recently discovered fragmentary inscription from Palmyra has the following text: ḫgw br | tymsw | br ḫgw | qwz’. It is inscribed on what are probably the poor remains of a funerary bust. The reading is quite clear, as is the translation: “Hagegu, son of Taimarṣu, son of Hagegu Ḷuṣa”. As Hagegu and Taimarṣu are very common names, it is not possible to identify him and his family. The last name, Ḷuṣa, refers to a membership of a clan, and almost equals a surname, a phenomenon which is common in Palmyrene inscriptions. Quza is not attest- ted yet in Palmyrene epigraphy, but another example has been found in a region not far away, on the Middle Euphrates, this time with a Greek transcription. Two papyri found in the Euphrates area (P. Euphr. 6–7) involve a sale of slave at Marcusopolis, in November 249. One of the protagonists, the brother of the seller, is called ‘vrsl qwz’ br ‘b’ in Edessene Syriac, transcribed in Greek as ΛΩΡΗΛΟΣ ΚΟΩΖΑΣ (l. 6 and 10, the genitive ΚΟΩΖΑ).

It is tempting to compare the personal name qwz’ with one of the names designating the weasel in Syriac qwz’. To this word, the Thesaurus Syriacus (col.3514) gives the Latin equivalent mustela Scythica. This animal, or one of the several species which may be designated by that name, is very common in Europe as well as in the Fertile Crescent. I will not go into details on the precise identification of the animal, yet attention needs to be drawn as well to the verb qwz’ “jump” and to one meaning derived from the name of the animal, denoting someone of very small stature (“pusillus” in Latin), and applied in a derogatory manner to Timothy, Patriarch of Alexandria. Understandably such a name can become an anthroponym and serve as clan name. A similar name also exists in Nabataean, in an inscription of Mada’in Salah (Hegra, CIS II, 320E). It is unclear if this is the same name; the Nabataean context makes an explanation by Arabic more likely. It is not impossible, however, that a Nabataean personal name may receive an explanation from Aramaic.

At the time of publication of P. Euphr. 6–7, Javier Teixidor offered another etymology of the name: “Le même nom, écrit kwz’, est attesté comme nom de clan dans une inscription syriaque d’Eski Sumatar, au 1er ou 3e s. Il semble apparenté au nom arabe de l’arc-en-ciel, Qozah, divinité associée au dieu iduméen Qôs.” This explanation raises several problems. First, it is difficult to establish the equivalence between kwz’ and qwz’ because the disappearance of an emphatic letter (q) is highly unusual. The Syriac anthroponym kwz’ indeed appears in inscriptions from Sumatar and Edessa. It is also attested in Nabataean and in the New Testament (Lk 8:3), for an officer of Herod. There, the transcription in Greek is ΧΟΥΔΑΣ as expected (usual equivalence between χ and k). In all cases, the etymology of kwz’ seems to be found in a word (of Iranian origin?) meaning “jar, jug”, which was incorporated into the vocabulary of Syriac and Arabic. Likewise the transformation of Qôs into Qôzā, which could certainly be a hypocoristicon (“Qôs has done this (that)”) is furthermore not obvious, since both the Semitic...
ic version and the Greek transcription of *P. Euphr. 6–7* have Qôza with ʔ, not s.10

A second objection against the theory proposed by J. Teixidor, is that the presence of the Idumean god Qôs in the Euphrates region, and by extension at Palmyra, is hard to explain. Except for some parts of the Nabatean kingdom, the worship of Qôs is rare.11 Consequently, proper names derived from this deity are not very common either. Half a century ago, J. T. Milik tried to gather evidence on this point. Most names date from the Hellenistic period, or earlier, and occur in a variety of languages and scripts (from cuneiform to ancient North Arabian). There are also some examples in Greek epigraphy and papyrology, as well as in Nabatean epi-graphy.12 Most of the time, people with those theophoric names have a very clear ethnic origin (Edomites/Idumeans, as Košerkoš, Malgůn Ιδουμαῖος in Cyrenaica, SEG 9, 743); most of them come from a fairly well-defined geographical area, which corresponds to ancient Edom, with offshoots in Egypt, where Idumean soldiers were rather numerous, and in the north of Arabia, which was part of the Nabataean kingdom. One may also note that the Greek transcription is generally KoΣ, rarely Koς; the use of ζ is very rare (which leaves open the question of the text of Josephus), and it is the same in Nabataean or in ancient Arabian.13 All this is geographically quite far from the banks of the Euphrates, which is a good argument to doubt the Idumean origin of the anthroponym attested at Palmyra, and in *P. Euphr. 6–7.*

**Animal names between Aramaic and Greek**

If one accepts the etymology here proposed, qws’ “weasel” belongs to a well-studied series where animal names are used as personal names. There is no need here to make reference to any kind of totemism. Since Theodor Nöldeke in the late nineteenth century, the list has somewhat grown. The annex to this article lists some possible examples in the Semitic epigraphy of Hatra and Palmyra. To this list, some examples of Greek personal names derived from animal names in the epigraphy of the Roman Near East can be added. The ancient Syriac onomastics offers, so far as I know, no examples, but the number of names in this language is rather small for the period that concerns us here.

Personal names of Semitic origin are liable to various etymological explanations. Greek names used by people of Syrian, Arabic or Mesopotamian origin are often a translation or an adaptation of a Semitic name. Thus Heliodōros (“Gift of Helios”) may reflect Lishamsh (“Blessing to Shamash”), as Waballat may become Athenodoros. I do not know if this type of phenomenon has already been spotted in the “animal onomastics” (see below for a possible case). A somewhat different case would be constituted by the name Bassus/bss, which in Semitic languages evokes the cat. In addition it is a fairly common Latin name that has no relationship with cats whatsoever. Geographical differences have to be underlined, with on the one hand, areas highly affected by the Arab influence (particularly Hauran and Southern Syria) where the name is very common in Greek. There the equivalence is highly likely: the name may be preferred because it has a meaning in Semitic languages but sounds like a Latin name. In the northern part of Syria, on the other hand, where Arab influences seem weaker it is perhaps simply the Latin name, devoid of associations with the animal.15 In other cases, as in Palmyra where we have only a few examples, the situation is even more complex, since this is a place of transition, where Arab and other influences are likewise felt. As a matter of fact, Greek onomastics based on animals were apparently not important at Palmyra. This obviously corresponds to the relatively limited importance of Greek onomastics in the city. I know of only one example of the Greek name of an animal used as a personal name. It is moreover transcribed in Aramaic: ῥαϝος (for ἄρκτος Bear)16, Inv XI, 5. The name appears in the last position of a genealogy, that of the former master of a freedwoman Ῥοδίη Ῥήσιν βασιλίς br m’nw br ῥαϝος. Curiously, the name is not attested as an anthroponym in Greek onomastics.18 Has it been used as a translation of a Semitic name? It is doubt-ful, if only because there seems to be no name with this meaning in Palmyrene Aramaic (debo ‘in Syriac).

A possible example of the translation of an animal name used as a personal name comes from Nazala (Qaryatain, between Palmyra and Homs), just outside Palmyra’s territory but in an area frequented by its population. The city hosted a colony of Palmyrenes as evidenced by an Aramaic text (*CIS* 3911 = *PAT* 0257). It reports the dedication of a building to the local “great god” (*ib’* ῬῸ *dznly “the great god of Nazala”) in July 146, by five brothers (zabalw w’lnwr wlnkw w’nwr wydyl’ bl bny bršm bzd’w “Zabdbiōl and ‘Atenûr and Malku and ‘Amru and Iedi’bel son of Barshamash son of Zabdibôl”) who describe themselves as “Palmyrenes that are at Nazala” (*tdmr y* dy *bznly*). A few years later, in the same place, another dedication to the same god (θαο μηγάλο μον Ναζαλην) is made by two brothers, Αβλαιος και Ἰαραι[ος] υ Ναζαλ[ος] υ Μοσχον (*IGLS* V, 2697). A high priest of the god is called Ζηνόφως Μόσχος Ναζαληνός Άργερεος (*IGLS* V, 2703). A fourth inscription reports that the father of this Moschos was called Ζαβδαιος (*IGLS* V, 2698). These names are not very rare, except for Αβλαιος, which is tempting to correct as Αβδαιος, despite the unanonymity of ancient copies.19 With this corre-

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10 As opposed to the examples in Milik (1958), p.239, with ʔ in all cases. See however, Josephus, Ant. XV, VIII, 9, §253: “a noble Idumean Kornroβαqoq belonged to the family of priests of the god KoΣ.”


13 Lankester Harding (1971), p.491

14 Nöldeke (1904) (I. Tiemenen als Personennamen, p.74–90), German translation (expanded) of Nöldeke (1902), col.3298–3299.


16 Examples of Bassus/bss from Palmyra, Stark (1971), s.v. For Greek onomastics, see the tables in Yon (2002), p.254–261, and onomastical index in *IGLS* XVII/1.

17 It could mean as well “North” or a kind of crab.

18 But as a derivative Αβδαιος.

19 See however P. drug 20: Βαβλίας θεαθιου του Αβδανου.
tion, we would have to do with names of a very local aspect—lariasos being typically Palmyrene (yrhv, hypocoristic, from the name of the Palmyrene god Iarhiböl)—with the exception of Moschos. The name Mórgos is very common in the Greek world, meaning “calf.” It is well attested in Nazala/Qaryatain (but probably for a single person), but rather rare in the Middle East (see also the diminutive Moryžov, SEG 7, 1033, from Southern Syria).

Moschos may be a translation of the very common Palmyrene name γ'γλυ, “Ogeilū” whose meaning is similar. 20 Obviously, it is also possible that, as suggested elsewhere by J. T. Milik, 21 Mórgos does not translate γ'γλυ but instead transcribes the well documented name mškw, which is most often transcribed Masechos, as at Bostra (IGLS XIII, 9001B) or Umm al-Jimal (I. Jordanie V, Index, p.369, s.v., more than twenty examples). We would have then an adaptation/transcription, made to resemble the Greek equivalent. However, examples of Masechos in its various spellings are geographically clustered in the southern part of the region (particularly Haur- ran) and the Arabic version mškw exists at Palmyra only in small numbers. So it is tempting to propose the equivalence Ogeilū/Mórgos as another example of translation of animal names, while acknowledging that this type of ambiguity is typical for the region.

As usual, when it comes to transcribing Semitic names, we have to propose a solution with some caution, both in the case of Mórgos and in that of qwz’. These possible explanations, however, draw the attention to an onomastic type that should not be overlooked when seeking the meaning of new and rare names. Moreover, the importance of context and regional specificities should be stressed again, when it comes to assign an etymology and/or an origin to an anthroponym.

Annex

At Hatra (from Abbadi [1983] with corrections): ‘rnh (Hare), brnk (Dog), br nšr’ (Eagle, Vulture), zg’ (Lizard), nšr’, ‘b’ (Lizard), ‘bnds’ (Cat), ‘bd ky’ (Calif), ‘g’, ‘gyly’, ‘gbrn (Scorpion), gwp’ (Monkey’), ‘mt’ (Gazelle’), hrbh’ (Male Ape), sh’ (Lion). Beyer (1998) proposes several changes of reading or interpretation. The above list is very inclusive, but undoubtedly questionable on more than one point.

At Palmyra (from Stark 1971): ‘bdy (Wild Ape), ‘zrryt (Starling), ‘wy (The Howler), pły (Young Camel), ‘rnw’ (Calif), ’d’w (Lion), bzy (Falcon), hkwv (Young Camel), bs’/hs (Cat), gwp’ (Locust), gwr’ (Young Lion), gml’ (Camel), bld’? (Mole), hmwnw (Louse), yqwfr (Frog), kl’ (Dog), mhr’t (Colt, foal), m’zyn (Goat), n’b’ (Raven), ns’ (Hawk), sws’ (Horse), ‘b’ (Lizard), ‘gy’ (Calf), ‘dwn (Beast of prey), ‘gbrn (Scorpion), spr’ (Bird), gwp’/gwpyn (Ape), gwp’ (Pelican), qr’ (Ape), rnh (Male Ape), sh’ (Lion), tww’ (Ox), tm’ (Bird?).

For the Safaitic personal names, ‘sd (Lion, Harding 1971, p.42); bs (Cat, Harding 1971, p.105); w’l (Antelope, Harding [1971], p.645)

One could find points of comparison in the Greek and Latin inscriptions (eg Taurus) of the Near East, surprisingly quite limited in number (except for the transcripts, e.g. Νασρος, Ακράβανης, as evidenced by the following list (non-exhaustive) of names of animals used as personal names in the epigraphy of the Near East (I give only one reference, but most of these names are attested several times). Δράκόντως SEG 7, 234 (Dragon, Serpent); Δράκων SEG 32, 1505; Ιππός IGLS III, 1213m (Falcon); Λέων SEG 7, 302 (Lion); Μικρέττη IGLS III, 1196 (Bee); Μόσχος I. Jordanie 2, 30 (see above for Qaryatain); Ταυρός SEG 7, 1066 (Bull, from Latin); Χέλαδων, Waddington, I. Syria 2114 (Swallow); Ψαρός/Ψαροκέ, Kéma 5, 1980, s.n.4, and I. Nécropole Tyr, nr.135 (Starling). 23 For many of these names, it is permissible to question the reasons that led to their adoption, the proximity of a Semitic name, or the celebrity of a character who wore it. With few exceptions, these are the most common Greek “animal” names in Rome also (Solin [2003], p.1125–1151).

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20 Well attested at Hatra as well, but very rare elsewhere.
22 However, this interpretation has been subject to debate: Abbadi (1983) prefers the meaning “Nacken;” “neck”; Beyer (1998) that of “Korb;” “basket” (referring to his own ATTM N 3yE 43); at Hatra, the reference of the inscriptions is H57 and H105.

23 One would like to add Σαυρίας, although Littmann (PAES IIIA, 324) prefers to interpret it as a transcription of the well-known Safaitic name (present as well in other ancient Arab scripts) šhr (with numerous derivative). It is true that Σαυρίας is very rare in Greek as a personal name (Pausanius VI, 21, 3 for a mythological robber; IGR II, 766 [partly restored]); however, derives as Σαυρίας are well attested (Bechtel [1917], p.586; see IG II, 1147 et 1557). The relative frequency of names derived from names of reptiles in Semitic onomastics could be an argument: see Nõldke (1904), p.86–87.
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