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11. AKKADIAN-EGYPTIAN LEXICAL MATCHES

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11.1. Introduction

There are a number of lexical matches between Akkadian and Egyptian, at least some of which the present author regards as loanwords. Most of the examples analyzed below have been adduced in previous studies (especially in HSED), but almost none of them was treated as borrowing. Some of the examples were postulated as probable loans in Militarev 1984, but the publication was in Russian and remains unnoticed.

The examples discussed below can be conventionally divided into two broad groups — isolated matches in Akkadian and Egyptian and matches in Akkadian and Egyptian with Afrasian parallels. The former group can be subdivided according to the direction of influence — presumed Akkadian loans into Egyptian, presumed Egyptian loans into Akkadian, instances of borrowing with unclear direction, and uncertain cases.

11.2. Isolated Matches in Akkadian and Egyptian

11.2.1. Presumed Akkadian Loans into Egyptian

11.2.1.1. Akkadian [Old Babylonian] nemsêtu “washbowl” (CAD N/2 165), namsû “washbowl” (CAD N/2 245) < mesû “to wash, to clean” [Old Babylonian] (CAD M/2 30) < Semitic *msw “melt, dissolve, flood” (HALOT 604; Leslau 1987: 368).

Egyptian [Pyramid text] nms.t “Art Krug” (Wb. 2.269); compared to “babylon. namåa” (Wb. 2.269).

A deverbal origin of the Akkadian term implies an Akkadian loan into early Egyptian.

11.2.1.2. Akkadian [Old Babylonian on] åappu “(a container)”; Sumerian loan word written syllabically and as ( DUG.)ÅAB (CAD Å/1 479); otherwise related to Semitic *åap- “basket” (< *åpy “weave, sew”): Arabic saff-at- “panier, corbeille, etc., fait de feuilles de palmier” (Biberstein-Kazimirski 1860: 1.1096); Tigrinya säf “flat basket” (Kane 2000: 792), säf ÷ i “kind of sieve” (ibid. 798), Tigrinya säf œ ÷ , Amharic séf, Gurage säf “wicker basket” (Leslau 1979: 537); Soqoøri m-séfi “panier” (Leslau 1938: 289).

Egyptian [Eighteenth Dynasty] sp.t “ein Gerät aus Gold” (Wb. 4.97).

There are no visible parallels for the Egyptian term besides the Akkadian one, and the former’s relatively late attestation speaks against its genuine origin. The Akkadian term, on the contrary, is attested in the early period of Akkadian and is either a Sumerian loan or an inherited Semitic word; in any case, it is etymologically motivated. Unless a chance look-alike, the present example represents an Akkadian loan into early Egyptian.

11.2.1.3. Akkadian [Old Akkadian] æubåaåû “(a bottle or cup)” (CAD H² 215).

Egyptian [Greek period] ḥbs “Art Krüge für Myrrhe” (Wb. 3.257).

Compare as cognates Afrasian *æubVs- “vessel” (HSED no. 1366).

The precise correspondence of the triradical roots in both languages makes the possibility of a chance look-alike very low. In addition, the lack of parallels in other Afrasian languages and the late attestation of the Egyptian term as opposed to the early attestation of the Akkadian term suggests an Akkadian loan into Egyptian.

11.2.1.4. Akkadian [Old Babylonian] makurru (makkuru, magurruru) “deep-going boat”; Sumerian loan word; written syllabically and as (GIŠ)MÅ.GUR₃ (CAD M/2 141). An alternative interpretation of the Akkadian noun is its secondary formation with ma- prefixed, compare kåruru “embankment, quay-wall, mooring place, harbor” [Old Akkadian on] (CAD K 231); cf. also Gešeš kwara “steer a ship” (Leslau 1987: 300) and Arabic (South Arabia) kawwara “place a boat in the water” (ibid.; regrettably, Leslau does not specify the dialect and source).

Egyptian [Twenty-second Dynasty] mkr “Art Schiff” (Wb. 2.163).

This is a very likely Akkadian loan (of Sumerian or Semitic origin?) into Egyptian.

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11.2.1.5. Akkadian [Old Akkadian on] kirû (kiriw) “garden, orchard, palm groove” (CAD K 411); < Sumerian KIRÎ (AHw 485).

Egyptian [Middle Kingdom; Late Egyptian] kôr “Gärtner” (Wb. 5.108).

Is this an Akkadian term of Sumerian origin borrowed into Egyptian? Otherwise both derived from Afrasian *kwr ~ *kôr “to cultivate” *kîrîw “garden, cultivated field” (Militarev 2002).


Egyptian [Medical texts] snûmn.w “ein vierfüßiges Tier” (Wb. 1.186).

This is a special case, which does not entirely fit into this section. The Akkadian forms, compared to the Egyptian word in HSED no. 1122 as cognate < Afrasian *sun-sam- “animal,” are more likely to continue Semitic *hwemwâm “large wild feline” (cf. also âunu “ein Mythischer Löwe” [AHw 1420]), see Militarev and Kogan 2005: Arabic hâwwâm “lion” (Biberstein-Kazimirski 1860: 2.1460), Tigrinya hâmâm “leopard” (Littmann and Höfner 1956: 7); compare also North Cushitic: Beja hiâm “cheetah” (Hudson 1996), yiham “leopard” (ibid. 1996). In this case only the Egyptian term is to be treated as an isolated form. A semantic and structural affinity between Akkadian and Egyptian is too strong to be accidental. Is this an Akkadian loan in Egyptian with Akkadian *h- > t rendered as õ- in Egyptian?

11.2.2. Presumed Egyptian Loans in Akkadian

11.2.2.1. Akkadian [lexical lists] diûarru “(a wild growing cereals)” (CAD D 160).

Egyptian [Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom] dîr “Körner (roter Farbe?)” (Wb. 5.491; likely < dîr “red”).

These words are compared in HSED no. 720 with a note that it may be “a cultural loanword?” Unless a chance coincidence, the Akkadian term is a loan word from Egyptian.

11.2.2.2. Akkadian [Old Babylonian, Mari, Standard Babylonian] ašahhu “storehouse” (CAD A/2 411); “eine Art Speicher in bût a.” (AHw 78).

Egyptian wsh.t (1) “Transportsschiff für Lasten” [Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom] (Wb. 1.366); (2) “Halle, Hof (Raum im Palast, Tempel)” [Pyramid text] (ibid.); probably < wsh “weit sein, weit” (Wb. 1.364).

Akkadian ašahhu and Egyptian wsh.t “hall,” št.w “wide space, yard” are compared, together with West Chadic Kirfi šoko “house,” as cognates forms < Afrasian *sâq- “house” in HSED no. 2200 (note that the very reconstruction of the Afrasian affricate *q and its reflexes in various Afrasian languages are so highly hypothetic that the Kirfi example may be disregarded). The Egyptian nouns are likely of deverbal origin from wsh “(to be) wide” with the meaning “spacious (ship, premises),” in which case the Akkadian term is a tenable loan from Egyptian.

11.2.2.3. Akkadian [Ur III, Standard Babylonian] ëâwû (ëbabû, ëarûû; a kind of cloth); Akkadian loan word into Sumerian; the kô- cloth is used as a seat cover for thrones (CAD H 162–63).

Egyptian [Pyramid text] ëhw.t “Platte mit Undersatz, Opferplatte; Altar” (Wb. 3.226); ëwy.t “Art Altar” [Middle Kingdom; Eighteenth Dynasty] (Wb. 3.224).

Akkadian ëâwû is compared to Egyptian ëhw.t in HSED no. 1308 as cognates < Afrasian *hâqš?*haw- “altar, throne”; however, such a meaning (and the corresponding object) could hardly exist in tenth millennium, to which I date the common Afrasian language. Unless a chance look-alike, perhaps a somewhat earlier Egyptian term with a broader meaning was borrowed into Akkadian.

11.2.3. Tenable Borrowings with Unclear Direction

11.2.3.1. Akkadian [Old Babylonian, Mari] širmû “(a container)” (CAD Š/3 339).

Egyptian [Old Kingdom] šm.w “Art grosser Krug” (Wb. 4.411), possibly <*cVrVm-. HSED no. 574: “Probably, a Wanderwort.”

The lack of other Afrasian parallels makes a common Afrasian origin unlikely, while the correspondence of the triconsonantal root skeletons speaks against a chance look-alike. Hence, a loan hypothesis is more tenable, though an early attestation in both languages gives no hint as to the direction of borrowing.

11.2.3.2. Akkadian [Neo-Assyrian] pagalu “a libation vessel” (AHw 808).

Egyptian [Middle Kingdom] pûs “Schale, Napf” (Wb. 1.563), possibly <*pVgVl-.

These words were compared in HSED no. 1922 as cognates < Afrasian SIC! *pagal- “vessel.” This example is similar to the previous one, the only difference being an earlier attestation of the Egyptian term as an indirect argument for borrowing from Egyptian into Akkadian.

2.3.3. Akkadian [Neo-Babylonian] šiddatu “(a stand for a large vat)” (CAD Š/2 402); “ein Behälter,” Late Babylonian “ein Holzgefäss” (AHw 1230); compared ibid. to Mishnaic Hebrew šiddâ, Jewish Aramaic šiddatû- “Kiste,” Syriac šêddat “Kruguntersatz” (West Semitic forms are likely Akkadisms).
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Egyptian [Medical texts, Middle Kingdom] šdy “Art Behälter” (Wb. 4.568).
These words are compared in HSED no. 553 as cognates < Afrasian *cid- “vessel.” However, the lack of available parallels in other Afrasian languages speaks against the common Afrasian status of the Akkadian-Egyptian terms.

11.2.4. Less Certain Cases (loans or look-alikes equally possible)

11.2.4.1. Akkadian inimmū “a cup” (synonym list: i-nim-mu-u = ka-a-su; CAD I 148).
Egyptian [New Kingdom] nm “Grosses Gefäss (Wb. 2.264).
These words are compared in HSED no. 1875 as cognates < Afrasian *nim- “vessel.” No other Afrasian parallels are adduced. However, there is only a partial coincidence in the root composition (note that Egyptian n- may reflect *n- or *l-) and meaning; the Akkadian term attested in a synonym list alone is not quite reliable.

11.2.4.2. Akkadian [Old Babylonian] suâdu, suâdû, sumâdu, sumându, sumâdu (an aromatic plant, probably Cyperus esculentus; CAD S 338).
Egyptian [Book of the Dead, Middle Kingdom] ḥsd.t “Art heiliger Baum in Heliopolis” (Wb. 1.136).
A partial coincidence in the root composition if suâdû is the main Akkadian protoform (note also that Akkadian s continues Semitic st < Afrasian st while Egyptian ṣ reflects Afrasian lateral s). The fact that the meanings are not well specified does not completely rule out a possibility of a common areal term, but rather speaks for a chance look-alike.

11.2.4.3. Akkadian [Middle Babylonian, Standard Babylonian, Middle Assyrian] lammu “almond tree; sapling”; Sumerian loanword GIS.LAM (CAD L 67).
Egyptian [Pyramid text] im “ein Fruchtbäum: die männliche Dattelpalme?” (Wb. 1. 79).
Unless a chance look-alike, the Egyptian word can be an Akkadian loan, if the underlying form in Egyptian is *IVm-(which is only one of several opportunities) and the Akkadian term is indeed a Sumerism.

11.2.4.4. Akkadian [Standard Babylonian] šallapānu (šallabānu) “(a plant)” (CAD S/1 247); [Middle/Young Babylonian lexical list] “ein Sumpfgrass?” (AHw 1148).
Egyptian [Middle Kingdom] s/p.t “Lotusblatt” (Wb. 4.18), [New Kingdom] srp.t (Wb. 4.195); can go back to *sVlVp- or *sVrVp-.
These words are compared as cognates < Afrasian *salap- “plant” in HSED no. 2183. This comparison is questionable because of more than one possibility for reconstructing the underlying form of both terms, as well as the fact that the meaning in Akkadian is not well defined. Compare Arabic salab- “écorce de l’arbre ou du roseau; fibres d’un arbre particulier à l’Yémen dont on tresse des cordes” (Biberstein-Kazimirski 1860: 1.1118), which, if related to the Akkadian term, points to šallabānu hardly being comparable with the Egyptian example. If, however, the correct reading in Akkadian is šallapānu and - in the Egyptian form reflects -I-, then it is more likely an areal term, with the direction of borrowing unclear.

11.2.4.5. Akkadian [Old Akkadian on] nāḫu “lard” (CAD N 142).
Egyptian [New Kingdom] nh “öl” (Wb. 2.302).
These words are compared in HSED no. 1836 with the note “a cultural word?” As for consonantal correspondences, note that Egyptian n reflects Afrasian *h, which is considered to regularly yield θ in Akkadian but in quite a few cases also yields h. On the other hand, the two terms may have a different origin. To Akkadian nāḫu, nāḥtu compare Arabic nh-, nūḥūt- “moelle” (Biberstein-Kazimirski 1860: 2.1219), and to Egyptian nh “agiter le lait dans un vase pour en faire du beurre” (Biberstein-Kazimirski 1860: 2.1218). Anyway, the possibility of an Akkadian loan into later Egyptian cannot be ruled out completely.

11.3. Matches in Akkadian and Egyptian having Afrasian Parallels

There are cases of Akkadian-Egyptian matches having parallels in other Afrasian languages which are likely to be treated as cognates going back to a common Afrasian protoform. However, in view of a series of obvious Akkadian-Egyptian cultural isoglosses (above), inter-borrowing even in such cases is possible. A few examples follow.

11.3.1. Akkadian [Old Akkadian, Standard Babylonian] buâstu (bûstu, or puâstu, pûstu; an implement; CAD B 303: “If the OIP 14 52 ref. is to be connected with the lexical and bilingual evidence, the meaning may be narrowed down to a spatula or a spoon”); bûstu, buâstu “ein Gerät aus Holz u Metall” (AHw 135).

Egyptian [Medical Texts] bûšt.t “Schopfloß (zum Schöpfen von öl)” (Wb. 1.432). Among other possibilities, the word may reflect *bûl.
These words are compared as cognates in HSED no. 299 under the reconstructed protoform *boʔVd-, together with East Chadic: Mokilko boode, Bidiya booda “gourd.” Compare also Berber: Qabyle a-buyeddu “pot spécial pour servir le bouillon de couscous (et le beurre fondu)" (Takács 1999: 106 after Dallet 1982).

The connection of the Akkadian and Egyptian terms as cognates in HSED was criticized in Takács 1999: 105 (“The common origin…is more than dubious. The meaning of the Akkadian word is obscure”). However, the comparison seems to me not unlikely.

Though both Akkadian and Egyptian terms may, together with Mokilko boode, Bidiya booda and Qabyle a-buyeddu, continue Afrasian *buʔ-d-, a specific meaning “spoon/dipper” of the Egyptian and probably of the Akkadian term is better explained as borrowing of the forms from the other, any of which may well be inherited from the Afrasian protoform. The direction of borrowing is a tangled issue: on the one hand, the Akkadian term is isolated in Semitic, which makes its priority problematic; on the other hand, it is attested since a much earlier period than the Egyptian one.

11.3.2. Akkadian [Old Babylonian, Ras Shamra, El Amarna, Nuzi, Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian] dūd- “kettle” (CAD D 170); Ugaritic dd “medida de capacidade; recipiente” (DLU 129); Hebrew dūd “cooking pot; basket” (HALOT 215); Syriac dūdā “olla” (Brockelmann 1928: 144), Jewish Aramaic dūdā “boiler, caldron, pot” (Jastrow 1950: 283), Mandaic dūdā “cauldron” (Drower and Macuch 1963: 104); Goggot dūdīyā “kind of jar” (according to Leslau 1979: 199, < Somali diddo; rather an inherited Semitic word).

Egyptian [Old Kingdom] dd.t “Schale; Topf für Bier, Salbe” (Wb. 5.502).

West Chadic: Angas dādā “a small bottle-shaped calabash” (Foulikes 1915).

These words are compared as related forms in HCVA 5: 13. Either the words are common Afrasian or the Akkadian word was borrowed into Egyptian.

11.3.3. Akkadian [Middle Babylonian] rību “(a vessel)” (CAD R 323).

Egyptian [late] rb “Art Topf (aus Kupfer)” (Wb. 2.414) <*rvb- or *rv-. Central Chadic: Zime-Batna rəbu (Sachnine 1982), Mada ērbe-š (Barreteau and Brunet 2000), Mofu rəba-š (Barreteau and Bléis 1990) “pottery clay” (-s- suffixed in Mada and Mofu?).

In HSED no. 2110, Akkadian, Egyptian and Central Chadic Margi rība are compared as cognates < Afrasian *rib- “vessel.” One wonders whether the Akkadian and Egyptian words are Common Afrasian or a chance look-alike, or the late Egyptian is an Akkadian loan.

11.3.4. Akkadian [Standard Babylonian, lexical list] uppunu, uppuntu “a vessel” (AHw 1400).

Egyptian [Old Kingdom] hbn.t “Art grosser Krug” (Wb. 2.487).

West Chadic *Hvyan-/*bWy-an-: Mupun heèn “bottle gourd,” Sura hēen “gourd” (HSED no. 1205). East Chadic *bVn- “pumpkin”: Gabri bi-bini, Kabalai tə-boní, Kwang bone < Afrasian *bVben- (ibid.).

In HSED no. 1121, the Akkadian form uppunu is compared to Egyptian [Greek period] ifn “ein Gefäss” (Wb. 1.183) and West Chadic: Ngizim fànà “calabash,” Central Chadic: Tera fenan “calabash,” Mbara fànay “pot.” All are treated as cognates < Afrasian *śuʔan- “vessel.” This comparison is problematic not only because in the Akkadian term, *ś- in the Anlaut and -pp- in the Inlaut, corresponding to -f- and -f- in the Egyptian match, represent only one of the possibilities (my comparison faces the same difficulty), but also because the Chadic forms hardly go back to *śuʔan- as they are expected to preserve some traces, at least vocalic, of the initial *ś-. At the same time, Egyptian hbn.t is compared (in HSED no. 1205) with Akkadian ḫabannatu “(a container)” (occurring in Mari, El Amarna, Standard Babylonian, and as an Akkadian loan word in Hitite) (CAD I 7), West Chadic *Hvyan-/*bWy-an-: Mupun heèn “bottle gourd,” Sura hēen “gourd” and East Chadic *bVn- “pumpkin”: Gabri bi-bini, Kabalai tə-boní, Kwang bone < Afrasian *bVben-. However, it is Akkadian uppuntu (but not uppuntu) which exactly corresponds to Egyptian hbn.t and the latter Chadic forms, unlike Akkadian ḫabannatu with ḫ- reflecting *ś- or even *t- but not *h-.

If reading of the Akkadian word as uppuntu is the correct one, a common origin of the quoted Akkadian, Egyptian, and Chadic forms from Afrasian *hVbVn- is quite tenable, though a borrowing of the later Akkadian term (isolated in Semitic, at that) from Egyptian cannot be ruled out.

11.3.5. Akkadian [Babylo-nian lexical lists] tannu “wooden bowl” (AHw 1391).

Egyptian [Greek period] tn.w “Korb (aus Binsen)” (Wb. 5.310).

West Chadic: Polchi tāŋ water pot.”

These words are compared in HSED no. 2368 as cognates < Afrasian *t-an- “container.” An isolated Chadic form does not seem sufficient to grade this root as Common Afrasian. It may well be an Akkadian loan into late Egyptian.
11.3.6. Akkadian šadûppu (a basket) < Sum DUB + ṭûppu; lex. ša-du-ub = GÂxDUB ša-du-up-pu Ea IV 286.

Variant of pisandûppu (CAD S/1 61).

Egyptian [New Kingdom] sdf “Art Mass für Feigen” (Wb. 4.370).

Central Chadic: Mofu šidef “pot” (HSED no. 2161).

These words are compared as cognates < Afrasian *saduf-*siduf- “container” in HSED no. 2161. It appears to be an Akkadian loan (< Sumerian) in late Egyptian (then borrowed into Mofu?).

11.3.7. Akkadian [Old Babylonian] ŝaššûgu (šuššûgu, šuššûqu) “(a tree)” (as wood used for frames, doors, wheel rims, etc.; CAD S/2 176).

Egyptian [Pyramid text] ssd “Art kostbaren Holz (aus Syrien), als Material für Geräte (Möbel u.ä.)” (Wb. 4.279).


The Akkadian, Mafa, and Somali forms are likely <*sag”(sag”)-, while the Egyptian term (costly wood from Syria!) looks like a loan from Akkadian.

11.3.8. Akkadian [Neo-Babylonian] hâlliµu “a k. of raﬁ” (only plural hâllimânû; CAD H 45).

Egyptian [Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty] ḫmn.ty “Art Schiff” (Wb. 3.283), metathesis < *ẖûmVl?-.

Central Chadic *ẖi/hulum- “boat”: Mbara ḫâlûm (Tourneux et al., 1986); Musgu ḫâlûm, hûllum (Lukas 1941).

Is this a common Afrasian or an areal term?

11.3.9. Akkadian kûkkû “darkness (as a name for the netherworld)” lex. < Sumerian (prob. KU10-KU16; CAD K 498).


West Chadic *kwâni-: Mupun kûó kûû (Frajzyngier 1991); Sura kûô (Jungraftmayr 1963–64); Ankwe kwo “darkness” (Kraft 1981). Angas kâkwi “absolutely dark” (Foulkes 1915), Bokkos kikyaω “became black” (Jungraftmayr 1970).

This is a most entangled case. There is an obvious cultural influence reflected in a specific meaning related to the netherworld. One wonders whether it can be an inherited Egyptian term (cognate to Chadic) borrowed into Akkadian (whence into Sumerian)?

11.4. Conclusions

A relevantly large number of specific Akkadian-Egyptian lexical isoglosses listed and discussed above can hardly be a result of chance coincidence. Since most of them can neither be well explained as Afrasian terms of common origin, inter-borrowing is the most plausible explanation. In most cases, the direction of borrowing seems to be from Akkadian into Egyptian, though there are several cases of presumably the reverse direction. The above presumptions, if true, testify to cultural contacts between the Akkadian-speaking area and Egypt starting from the earliest written period, and not only in the first millennium before the common era. In terms of semantics it is worth mentioning that out of twenty-six presumed Akkadian-Egyptian contact terms, thirteen (50%) refer to vessel names, and five (almost 25%), to plant names.

It would not be prudent for a linguist to speculate about extra-linguistic issues such as the significance of this or that semantic class of linguistic borrowing for elucidating cultural influences or about historical periods, concrete events, and locations which may have served as the historical background for the assemblage of data adduced in the present study, especially when the history of both parties of the claimed contacts has already been studied adequately. In presenting instances of possible cultural contact between ancient cultures, my goal is to direct the attention of the historians of the ancient Near East to this linguistic phenomenon.

As for comparative Afrasian linguistics, distinguishing between inherited and borrowed lexical items is one of the most sophisticated and delicate problems. It is sufficient to mention cases of generally accepted Sumerian loanwords in Akkadian whence they are thought to spread in other Semitic, some of which, on closer analysis, turn out to be Akkadianisms in Sumerian, supported by reliable Semitic and even Afrasian cognates. There are other cases of seemingly well established Cushitic loanwords in Ethiopian Semitic, to which reliable Arabic and other Semitic parallels happen to be found thus posing the question: are they, on the contrary, Semitisms in Cushitic or should they be treated as common Afrasian lexemes? The established Egyptian-Semitic inter-borrowings, besides several isolated Egyptian loans in Ugaritic, Aramaic, Arabic, Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian, are mostly limited to a three dozens well-adapted Egyptian loans in Biblical Hebrew pointing to rather early close contacts between Egypt and the Canaanite populations and several hundreds lexical items of...
presumably West Semitic origin attested in Egyptian literature of the New Kingdom, with a small group of still earlier loans from what seems to be the West Semitic language area. If the data adduced in the present contribution (dedicated to my good old friend Professor Gene Gragg, with his unusually wide scope of linguistic interests), and their interpretations by the author hold water, the long-lasting Akkadian-Egyptian lexical contacts will add new dabs to that picture.

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