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The Etymology of Coptic "Ashes": Chadic or Nostratic?

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A certain number of Late Egyptian, Demotic and Coptic nouns display an ending that resembles the suffix pronoun of the 3rd person singular, masculine -f, feminine -s. As a rule, those ending in -f are masculine, whereas those with -s are feminine. There is virtually always a doublet without the respective ending, at least in the old language, and often enough such a doublet is preserved until Coptic times. The vocalism reveals that the derivations in -f and -s, respectively, are not composed of the simple noun and a possessive pronoun. When the possessive pronoun is attached to a noun a characteristic change of the syllable structure will occur, and consequently one of the vocalisation; the derivations in -f and -s, however, do not show this change. Furthermore, the ending -s replaces the ancient feminine ending -t in the feminine derivatives, whereas a possessive pronoun would be added to it.

(1) Noun plus suffix pronoun

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>dr.t: *桂花 (dr) &gt; *桂花 (dr)</th>
<th>dr.f: *桂花 (dr) &gt; *桂花 (dr)</th>
<th>TΩC &quot;hand&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ράξ (PASC)</td>
<td>Ράξ (PASC)</td>
<td>&quot;his hand&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ράξ (PASC)</th>
<th>Ράξ (PASC)</th>
<th>SB ΡΑΝ, ALΜΡΕΝ, F ΡΕΝ &quot;name&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ράξ (PASC)</td>
<td>Ράξ (PASC)</td>
<td>F ΡΕΝ &quot;name&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The attachment of vowel-plus-consonant changes the syllable structure of the noun, in accordance with the Proto-Coptic syllable laws.

(2) Doublets ending in -f and -s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>zwr: *桂花 (zwr) &gt; *桂花 (zwr)</th>
<th>CW m. &quot;drinking&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ράξ (PASC)</td>
<td>Ράξ (PASC)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>swr-f (beginning of 1st mill. BC)</th>
<th>Swr-f (beginning of 1st mill. BC) &gt; CW m.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;drinking&quot;, &quot;carousal&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Σον (Son)</th>
<th>Σον (Son)</th>
<th>ΡΑΤÈ f. &quot;piece&quot;</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Σον (Son)</td>
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<td>ΡΑΤÈ f. &quot;piece&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The attachment of the endings -f and -s does not change the syllable structure and the quantity of the stress-bearing vowel. Obviously, it was effected after the mechanism of the so-called Proto-Coptic syllable laws had ceased to be operative. "Ebenso wie das Affix -f ist auch das Affix -s immer nur an den st(atus) abs(olutus) und nicht an den st. pron(ominalis) des zugrundeliegenden Femininiums angetreten", though it replaces the feminine ending -t.

One of these nouns in -s is a word meaning "ashes": Coptic SA KΡΜΕ, with a doublet without -s: ΣΚΡΜΕ (non-standard for *ΚΡΜΕ), ΑΚΡΜΕ, ΦΚΡΜΕ (non-standard for *ΚΡΜΕ), ΒΚΡΜΕ, m. and f. (!), "ashes, soot, dust" (Crum Dictionary 117a). In earlier idioms, only the form without -s is

1 Oising 1976 I, 325-332.
attested: hieroglyphic qrmt (New Kingdom), describing the state of burnt leather tents: probably "ashes"; "smouldering embers"; Demotic khr "ashes" or sim.

This hieroglyphic hapax is written in syllabic orthography, viz. The inscription is in vertical lines, in the normal right-to-left orientation. Note that the arrangement of the signs as given by Černý, Vycichl, and Hoch, is not entirely that of the original; this would read *qa/ra-ma-ta(*). The spelling which is actually attested points, however, to a reading *qi-ra-ma-ta(*).

The hieroglyphic and the Demotic-Coptic words are not the same; to hieroglyphic qi-ra-ma-ta, a Coptic *KPM(T)E or perhaps *KPM(T) would correspond, rather than *EPM(E), etc. This is not attested, though there is a noun *KPM(T)C "darkness" which looks like one of the doublets in -s mentioned above: Demotic qrmts "darkness", SA KPM(TC), B XPMT(CE) "smoke", "mist", "darkness", also "fire", with variant forms B XPM(TC), XEPM(TC), XEPM(TC), F KPM(TC), KPM(TC),8 all m. (!); it is probably related to Demotic qrmt, S KPM(TM) (m.) "smoke", and to KPM, B XPMT, F KPM(TM) (m.; in B once f.) "fire", "flame", and, with partially reduplicated stem (the typical stem-form of verbs with five consonants), S KPM(TM), A KPM(TM), "to be dark", and of course also to KPM(E) and *KPM(E) (etc.), "ashes, soot, dust".

The underlying root is obviously qrn (encompassing meanings like darkness, smoke, ashes, embers, fire). There is, however, no other word of this root attested in hieroglyphic. The syllabic writing of the New Kingdom is used for words that are new in the written language, and for which therefore no traditional consonantonic spelling was in use (and which, in addition, gives a hint at the vocalisation). Many of them are loans from foreign languages, in the main from the Semitic of Canaan. A priori, this possibility must be envisaged. A feature that advocates for a Semitic origin is the spelling of the final -t as this is regularly used for rendering the feminine ending -at- of Semitic nouns and proper names.

Crum compared an Arabic qurmās- with the Coptic lexeme. There is qirnis, var. qurmis, meaning "1. trou en terre, large à l’intérieur, avec une entrée très-étroite, où l’on se retire, pour se garantir du froid ou de la chaleur; 2. place faite dans les cendres pour cuire le pain; 3. nid de pigeon." The basic meaning is obviously "pit", and not "ashes". It is hardly the origin of Coptic *KPM(C). As Hoch, in his authoritative work on Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period, remarks, "It is uncertain whether the word means specifically 'ashes' ... or 'glowing embers' ... Perhaps cf. the root gmr: Ug(aritic) gmr 'burning coal'; TA [Talmudic Aramaic], JPA [Jewish Palestinian Aramaic] ... [gumartā] 'burning coal'; Syr. ... (gumartā) 'live coals'; Arab. ... (jamrats-) 'live coals; smouldering embers'; Akk. gumaru 'charred wood; charcoal.' Of course, the author is aware that, "if the derivation is correct, then there is metathesis of the second two consonants." It can be shown that in general the meanings embers, ashes, charcoal are very apt to interchange. Hierogl. qi-ra-ma-ta(1) "ashes or embers" might go back to a Semitic *gjumrāt-, though Demot./Coptic *gjrmt(s) points to another form, such as a late (1st millennium) Canaanite feminine noun *gilumrah. Another possibility is to assume that the New Kingdom word is originally a Semitic plural, *gjumrāt- of the same singular form *gjumrat- that underlies the later lexeme, Demotic qrm. Coptic *KPM(E). Nevertheless, the Semitic origin is not fully convincing. One of the reasons is that a root similar to QRM, with a range of meanings like "charcoal", "embers", "ashes", can be found in many languages and language families, whereas the metathetic *GMR is hardly ever found.

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2 Sic: with k, rather than q. In all Coptic idioms except Bohairic k and q have merged, either in K or, if palatalized, in Q [k].
3 KRI IV 9, 11: inscription of Memphites (ca. 1213 to 1203 BC). After LD III, 199a, column 19.
4 Hoch 1994 renders it, in his system, as *qamrsa, tentatively reconstructing a Canaanite source form *gumrsāa.
5 Hoch 1994, 503ff.
6 Unless one could advocate for *qarmta > *qarmata > *KPM(T) > *KPM(T)C or *KPM(T).
7 The forms without t are probably influenced by hieroglyphic kmn, Coptic KPHM, "to become black", and derivatives. Also note the Bohairic forms with k before the stressed vowels, a feature that regularly points to etymological k. rather than q (or g, as for that).
8 BK II 725. Similarly Belot 1899, 633, who has also a variant qirmās-, and a verb qarma, "entier dans son nid (pigeon)."
apart from Semitic. It would be strange to assume that Egyptian took over the secondary root form, GMR, and changed it back to the original form, viz. GRM – and that even twice: both in New Kingdom qrmt / qi-ra-ma-t(a) and in Demotic-Coptic qermv$). Furthermore, the mentioned multilingual root QRM seems to be derived from another multilingual root QR, meaning "to burn", "fire", "black", etc. This again advocates for assuming that QRM is the primary form, rather than QMR / GMR, as attested in Semitic. And the first radical is obviously not G, but rather Q.

The multilingual root Q-R (K-R) "to burn", "fire", "black", etc.\(^\text{10}\)

**Egyptian**

Root qqr- "burn":
qrr "Topfe brennen" (Wörterbuch V, 61, 9-10), attested since Pyramid Texts. Ember (ZÄS 51, 119) compares Akk. qararu "brennen, austrocknen".
qrr (qa-ra-ra) "Brandopfer" (Wörterbuch V, 61, 11), attested since late New Kingdom; cf. Coptic ΩΩΩ, id. (perhaps from Heb. קלח, id.).
qrr.t "Opferstelle (am Grabe, beim Begräbnis)" (Wörterbuch V, 61), attested since Old Kingdom; from the same root?

**Hamito-Semitic**

Orel & Stolbova 1995 mention the following roots:
No. 1552 *qar- "burn; fire": Egn. qrr "fire, glaze (pots)" [see above]; West Chadic *qar- "burn"; Central Chadic *kar- "fire."
No. 2062 *qawar- "burn": West Chadic *qawVr "roast (without oil)": H(au)s(a) kaurarâ; Rift *

\(^{10}\) According to Sergei Starostin’s databases (http://starling.rinet.ru/cgi-bin/main.cgi?root=confi), the following roots may be added: 1. Eurasian: *KWRV "to burn, bake"; Borean (approx.): *KVRV "to burn, bake". 2. Eurasian: *gllV "burn, hot coals"; Borean (approx.): *KVRV "burn, hot coals". 3. Eurasian: *gllV "ashes, coals". 4. Eurasian: *gllV "black”; Borean (approx.). *KVRV "black”. For Borean and Eurasian cf. ...

\(^{11}\) Cf. Sem. *gir- "fire; deity of fire": Akk. giru, giruru; Egn. qr "fire" (NB: according to Kössler’s system, d is emphatic, therefore possibly a reflex of *k* rather than of *g*; therefore rather from *

* "set fire"; Central Chadic *gFr- "hot"; Highland East Cush, *gir- "fire”: Sidamo, Darasa, Hadjya, Kambatta giru, Cf. Rift *gi-r- "embers" (Iraqw gil'i, Burunge, Alagwa gi’r). #931 *gir- "be hot": West Chadic *gir-gir "hot", cf. Hausa giru "set fire”; Central Chadic *gFr- "hot"; Highland East Cush, *gir- "burn". 
Indo-European

There is a wide-spread root, listed by Pokorny (1959, 571-572) as *ker- no. 3, meaning "brennen, glühen, heizen". Reflexes are, inter alia, Gothic *hauēr* "Kohle", Old High German *herd*, Anglo-Saxon *heorð* "Herd", Old Church Slavic *kuro*, *kuriti* sg "rauchen".


On Latin *carbō* see below.

Dravidian

According to S. Starostin's etymological website, the following roots can be compared: *kar-* "1. black, 2. to burn". South Dravidian protoform: *kar-; Telugu protoform: *kar-; Kolambi-Gadaba protoform: *kar-; Gondwart protoform: *kar-.

Starostin distinguishes a second protoform *kar-, meaning "to melt", and he produces numerous very similar protoforms, viz. *kan-, *kāt- (?), *kāl- (all "to burn"), *kād- and *kand- "burnt" (the second also "black"), *ker- "to warm by the fire", *kūr- "to boil", *k'ud- "to cook".

North Caucasian

There is, according to Starostin's published material, no protoform of the meaning "to burn" that would formally corresponds to Indo-European *ker-*, etc., but note the following: *karV "black; coal": Nakh protoform *karu; Lak Ḳaḷaṣ (kaḷaṣ < Ḳaḷaṣ); Lezghian protoform: *kar-; Abkhazo-Adyghe protoform: *ka. Note that again "black", the colour of charcoal, is a semantic variation, as with Dravidian *kar-. There is a further comparable protoform *kVwrV (?) "smoke". The Nakh protoform is *kar.

Altaic

According to Starostin's data, there is also in Altaic no protoform meaning "burn" that would formally correspond to Indo-European *ker-*, etc., though there, *kār* "black"; Türkic protoform *Kara; Mongolian protoform *kara; Japanese protoform *kuru-" actually kuroi). We will not adduce for comparison an Altaic form comparable in shape not with Q-R, though with Dravidian *kan- "to burn", and in meaning with Dravidian *kand- "burnt". Altaic *k eyV "to be burnt" is reflected by Mongolian protoform *kens-; Tungus protoform: *ksen(e)-gu). Also cf. Indo-European *kenk- (2) "brennen (dörren), weh tun; auch bes. von brennendem Durst und Hunger" (Pokorny 1959, 565).

Multilingual roots Q-R (K-R) and Q-R-M (K-R-M)

"charcoal", "embers", "ashes", etc.

Egyptian

Hieroglyphic (syllabic spelling) *qrn.t (qi-ra-ma-ta) "ashes" (?), 19. Dynasty, ca. 1200 BC. Demotic *krr "ashes" (with merging of q and k, typical of late Demotic), Coptie *Kām, *Kāmē, A Kāmē, F Kāpī, B Kāpī (m. and f.) "ashes, soot, dust" (< *qūrmV, *qūrmVys).

12 See http://www.indo-european.nl/cgi-bin/startq.cgi?flags=endlml&root=leiden&basename=%5Cdata%5Cie%5Cpokorny.
13 See http://starling.rinet.ru/Intrah.htm#bases.
Comparable words: 1. *SKɔM, B X̱ɔM, F ká̱M (reflecting an older *KVrámV) "fire, flame"; 2. Demot. qrm, Copt. kó̱M (*gárVm) "smoke"; 3. Demot. qmts "darkness", Copt. S A ḴM̱TC, B X̱̱M̱TC (from *KVr(m)ãMV) "smoke, mist, darkness", also "fire" (!), with variant forms B X̱M̱C, X̱̱M̱C, X̱̱M̱TC, F ḴM̱TC, Ḵ̱M̱̱TC (due to an interference of the root *k-m "black"); 4. Ḵ̱M̱̱M̱̱ (from *KVrãmV) "to be dark".

Egyptian has another root, with the basic meaning "charcoal" and a derived meaning "black" that seems to be quite different phonetically; nevertheless, it also contains the sequence of an original uvular sound, an original dental and a labial sound: according to the results of Otto Rösler’s research, Egyptian g derived typically from *k (q) by palatalisation, and Egyptian g corresponds to Afro-Asiatic *d, *d, *dz, or *č (Semitic *fl, rather than Afro-Asiatic *c. On this basis, Egyptian g̱b.t "charcoal" can be reconstructed as *kDb.t - a variant of *krb.t. Actually, there is a probable variant spelling g̱b.t in the early Middle Kingdom text corpus of the Coffin Texts. Incidentally, it cannot be excluded that Egyptian g̱b.t is an old loan, rather than an inherited Afro-Asiatic word.

Coptic X̱̱̱ḆC derives from metathetic *dib, another feminine doublet in -s, of old *díb: at. The attested Coptic forms17 are S X̱̱̱̱ḆC, X̱̱̱̱̱ḆC (non-lit.), X̱̱̱̱̱ḆC, X̱̱̱̱̱ḆC, X̱̱̱̱̱ḆC, X̱̱̱̱̱ḆC (from *KVṟdV), B X̱̱̱̱̱ḆC, X̱̱̱̱̱ḆC, F X̱̱̱̱̱ḆC; P X̱̱̱̱̱̱ḆC. Some vocalisations seem to be influenced by the word 2a(e)ḆC "lamp". The normal forms point to an origin in *díḇC, with certain umlaut effects on the stressed vowel. The last-mentioned form X̱̱̱̱̱ḆC, however, points clearly to a consonant between ð and ð. The primary hieroglyphic form – which does not yet display the metathesis – must be postulated as *díḇat, i.e. *hör(V)b.(a) < *kD(V)b.a., with a probable variant *ḏḇat, i.e. *hör(V)b.(a) < *kD(V)b.a., in which k cannot be excluded that Egyptian g̱b.t is an old loan, rather than an inherited Afro-Asiatic word.

**Hamito-Semitic**

Chadic: Orel and Stolbova (1995, #1421) have Hamito-Semitic *kalem/*kulem- "charcoal", with reflexes in Central and Eastern Chadic, and one in Rift (South Cushitic): Kwađa kalem-uko. The most widespread Chadic root for "charcoal" is, according to Jungraithmayr and Ibriszimow,19 *k-l-m. It is found in all three Chadic branches, and particularly in all groups of East Chadic. Of the other three roots for "charcoal", *nrn is found in three groups, in West and East Chadic; *gbl in five Central Chadic and two West Chadic groups (cf. Semitic GMR, below); *livin, etc. in one West Chadic group only. Interestingly they say, "we now consider the E(ast) C(hadic) reflexes SM (TUMK) gulSm, DM (DANG) kulmo, etc. as loans from Kanuri kulmi. This again goes back to a common Nigritic root, which appears, for example, in Sara-Bagirmi as kulu.'

On the other hand, there are roots with G as first consonant. According to Orel & Stolbova's Etymological Dictionary (1995), there is evidence of the simple root GR only: no. 986 *gur- "ash"; Sem. *gur- "hot ash"; Akk. gururu. Cf. Akk. kiruru id., "a secondary formation". WCh *gur- "ash":"
Sura kuur, Ang kur. ECh. *gur "coal": Ndm *gur. It is related to root no. 930, *gir "fire". Orel & Stolbova referred also to Rift *giir- "embers" (Iq gu'il, Bur gi'iru, Alg gi'iru).

Hoch refers to a metathetic Semitic root *gmr: Ug(aritic). gmr "burning coal"; TA (Talmudic Aramaic), JPA (Jewish Palestinian Aramaic) ... [gumartû] "burning coal"; Syr. ... (gwmurtû) "live coals"; Arab. ... (jamrat-') "live coals; smouldering embers"; Akk. gumāru "charred wood; charcoal."

In this context, also the Chadic root *gbl is remarkable. It has the same initial voiced stop as Semitic *gmr, and also the same sequence of postpalatal-labial-liquid. Another comparable instance is found in Saho: gombod "ashes". Together with the Semitic evidence, the Chadic forms seem to attest to a root *gmr/gbl, different from *qrn.

Nilo-Saharan

Very scant evidence for a root KLM; cf. Kanuri kólimi, mentioned above. In Kacipo-Balesi (Eastern Sudanic, Surmic; Southern Sudan & Ethiopia), there is a gilmf "ashes", Turkana has -kúr:n of the same meaning. Otherwise, the most wide-spread root for "ashes" is *bur-, e.g. Songhai: Tadaksahak, Zarma, Koyrabobo Semni, Gao; Saharan: Kanuri (Central); Central Sudanic: Keliko, Lugbara, Bongo, Bagirmi, Ngambay; East Sudanic: Nile Nubian, Meidob; Murle, Sur [Chai (Surmic)]; Shilluk, Lango, Bor, Alur, Achalik, Anywa; Berta.

Indo-European

Under *ker(a)- no. 3, as adduced above, Pokorny also mentions Lat. carbo, -onis m. "Kohle", though doubtfully. For more than one reason the word gives the impression to be a loan from an unknown language. Phonetically, Greek kēpawos "potter’s clay" and its derivatives may be compared, though it is semantically closer to "fire" and "to burn" than to "charcoal".

Altaic

In Starostin’s material there is a protoform *k’iru(mV) "ashes, soot"; Turkic Kurum (< *Kirum) "soot"; Mongolian k’iru-su; Tungus *kurum-sa; Korean *kur – this being the only form that is short of the extension -um, for what reason ever.

What is the relevance of all this for the origin of the Egyptian and Coptic word for "ashes", qrmt / qrms? A word of this meaning is not necessarily of the primordial stock; cf. Spanish/Portuguese ascura "embers", loaned from Gothic asgō "ashes". A Semitic origin of qrmt would be quite probable if a Proto-Semitic root, or lexeme, QLM or GLM (or, perhaps, with R instead of L, and/or B instead of M!) could be ascertained. Could the word be loaned from any other language of those mentioned above? Indo-European has much evidence of the simplex root KR "fire", "to burn", though only scanty evidence for an extension of this root with a labial consonant, yielding the meaning "ashes, embers, charcoal" (originally: "material burnt/to be burnt"). Egyptian contacts with Altaic languages may be excluded. Among the Nilo-Saharan languages, Nubian is the only one that may be considered from a historian’s standpoint, but evidence for the root in question is absent, both in Old Nubian and in the modern Nile and Mountain Nubian languages. There is, however, a branch that is genetically related to Egyptian, and that has unequivocal evidence of the root in question, and that is Chadic. It is, however, not conceivable that the Egyptian of the 2nd to 1st millennia BC took over words from a Chadic language, as there do not seem to have been any contacts between speakers of Egyptian and historical Chadic idioms. The only plausible assumption is that qrmt "ashes" is a good old Egyptian lexeme – one of the not so few isoglosses between Egyptian and Chadic – that is, by chance, not attested in the written sources of an earlier date than the New Kingdom. The first form attested may be a kind of collective noun in the form of a substantivised feminine nisba adjective, qrmti / *qrmti(t) (or *qrmti(t)?), derived from the noun qrmt / *qrmta(t) "ash(es)" which is on its part at the origin of...
Demotic \textit{qrm.t}, Coptic \textit{KPM€(C)}. It is most probably a lexeme that did not belong to the standard lexicon of Middle Egyptian. Instead, another lexeme is used for “ashes”, viz. \textit{ss} (sporadically attested in the Middle Kingdom), or \textit{ssf} (earliest attestation in the New Kingdom)\textsuperscript{23}; both seem to mean “to burn (trans.)”, in addition to “ashes”. It may of course be mere coincidence that \textit{qrm.t} is not attested earlier. When the word appeared for the first time, in the New Kingdom, there was no standard spelling available for it to the scribe, and he rather chose the syllabic writing.

A parallel story is that of the word for “charcoal”, Egyptian \textit{db.t} (*d\textit{b}b.at), Demotic \textit{db.t}, Coptic \textit{xBBC} / \textit{xABC}. It obviously originates in another layer of the proto-Egyptian idiom(s), with the late proto-Egyptian palatalisation of \*\textit{k} (\(k > ĝ\), analogous to \(k > ě\), \(g > j\)), and with a shift \*\textit{r} (or \*\textit{t}?) \(> \ast\textit{d}\). There is probably a doublet, or variant, \textit{d\textit{b}.t} (Middle Kingdom). In contrast to \textit{qrm.t}, however, \textit{d\textit{b}.t} is attested in the written tradition from the Pyramid texts of the Old Kingdom onwards.

\section*{Bibliography}

AECT = Faulkner 1973-78.

\textsuperscript{23} According to Owing 1976 I, 326, an early derivation in -\textit{s}. Texts of the Ptolemaic period have \textit{ssf} instead, as if the root were \*\textit{sf}.