

Chapter 11. Hēphaistos vs. Ptah

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Abstract. For the Greek theonym Hephaestus, an etymology is proposed to suggest that this god can be related to the Egyptian god Ptah. In a postscript, the analogy is considered with Martin Bernal's well-known, and contested, proposed etymology for the Greek theonym Athena from Egyptian **Ht-Nt*, 'House (Temple) of Neith'.

1. Greek theonym

The Greek theonym Ἥφαιστος was known already to Homer.² In other Greek dialects other variants appear: Doric Ἄφαιστος, Aeolic Ἰφαιστος.³ The theonym is attested already in Mycenaean *a-pa-i-ti-jo* (KN I 588.1),⁴ which reflects *Ἄφαιστιος or *Ἄφαιστίων (Aura Jorro 1985: 73). There is also the variant Ἠφαστος, attested on the Attic vases.⁵

1.1. Burning

There is perhaps the only semantically acceptable internal etymology of the theonym, viz. its derivation from ἀφή 'lightning, kindling'.⁶ The relation of the divine smith to fire is apparent, e.g. in the metonymic use of the name of Ἥφαιστος instead of πῦρ by Homer:

καὶ τὰ μὲν ἄρ σξίζησιν ἀφύλλοισιν κατέκαιον, σπλάγχνα δ' ἄρ ἄμπεύρατες ὑπέιρχον
Ἥφαιστοιο

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² Cf. *Ilias* XVIII, 397; VIII, 195 and *Odyssea* IV, 617 etc.

³ Frisk 1973-1991-1979: I, 646.

⁴ KN is a standard designation of the tablets in the Linear script B from Knossos.

⁵ Furnée 1972: 336; Chantraine 1968-1980: I, 418.

⁶ See Herodotus VII, 215 about the lamp-lighting time:

Ὀρμέατο δὲ περὶ λύχων ἀφὰς ἐκ τοῦ στρατοπέδου

'and they set forth from the camp about the time when the lamps are lit':

ἄπτω πῦρ 'I kindle fire', ἀφάω 'I handle' (Preller & Robert 1894: 174; see Liddell & Scott 1901: 657; Frisk 1973-1991-1979: I, 126.

‘These they burned upon the split logs of firewood, but they spitted the inward meats, and held them in the flames to cook’ (*Ilias* II, 425-26; translated by S. Butler 1923-26),

cf. also φλόξ ‘Ἡφαίστειο (*Ilias* XVII, 88) for ‘fire’, ἀνήφαιστος ‘fire that is no real fire’ (Euripides, *Orestes* 621). Concerning the hypothetical second component **aistos*, it seems possible to accept the idea forwarded by Carnoy (1957: 69) and to see here a derivative of the type of **ait^htos* from Greek αἶθω ‘I light up, kindle’, *cf.* αἶθος ‘burning heat, fire’.

1.2. Shining Aphrodite

The ugly and lame Hephaestus (see *Odyssea* VIII, 306-311) had the most charming wife on the Olympus, Aphrodite. Their marriage is already implicitly mentioned in *Odyssea* VIII, 267-70, where the perfidy of Aphrodite with Ares in the house of Hephaestus is described. Her name, Ἄφροδίτη, Cretan Ἄφορδίτᾱ, Cypriotic Ἄφοροδίτᾱ, Pamphylian Φορδίτᾱ, has been etymologized in numerous studies.⁷ I prefer the idea proposed by K. Witczak (1993: 118-20) who sees here the compound of **ab^hor-*/**ab^hro-* ‘very’ & **dītā* ‘shining’, hence ‘super-shining’, in agreement with one of her epithets, δῖα ‘bright’. Among numerous epithets of Aphrodite, it is possible to find the information about her ‘power’, expressed by the word μεγέθος ‘greatness, might, power’, when Hesiodus describes Alcmena and compares her with Aphrodite (Hesiod 1983: *Shield of Heracles*, verse 5).

2. Egyptian origin

The Egyptian origin of the theonym is at least comparably promising .

2.1. Temple in Memphis

In his *Historiae*, Herodotus (5th century BC) mentioned several times the Temple of Hephaestus in the Egyptian city of Memphis, the capital of what has been known since Manetho (3rd century B.C.) as the Old Kingdom:

[II, 3.1] ἤκουσα δὲ καὶ ἄλλα ἐν Μέμφι, ἐλθὼν ἐς λόγους τοῖσι ἱερεῦσι τοῦ Ἡφαίστου

‘I also heard other things at Memphis in conversation with the priests of Hephaestus’

[II, 99.4] ὡς δὲ τῷ Μῖνι τούτῳ τῷ πρώτῳ γενομένῳ βασιλεῖ χέρσον γεγονέναι τὸ ἀπεργμένον, τοῦτο μὲν ἐν αὐτῷ πόλιν κτίσαι ταύτην ἣτις νῦν Μέμφις καλεῖται, ... τοῦτο δὲ τοῦ Ἡφαίστου τὸ ἱρὸν ἰδρῦσασθαι ἐν αὐτῇ, ἐδὸν μέγα τε καὶ ἀξιαπληγῆτοτατον

‘Then, when this first king Min had made dry land of what he thus cut off, he first founded in it that city which is now called Memphis, ... and secondly, he built in it the great and most noteworthy temple of Hephaestus.’

⁷ These studies are summarized and briefly commented on by Witczak 1993: 115-16.

2.1.1. Ptah

Apparently, Herodotus' Hephaestus from Egyptian Memphis was the Egyptian god Ptah, because it is this god which is the main patron of the city and had a big temple here. It was only Cicero in his *De Natura Deorum* (III, 22.55f), who unambiguously identified Vulcan, the Roman counterpart of Hephaestus, with the Egyptian god Ptah:

‘Volcani item complures: primus Caelo natus, ex quo et Minerva Apollinem eum cuius in tutela Athenas antiqui historici esse voluerunt, secundus Nilo natus, Phthas ut Aegyptii appellant, quem custodem esse Aegypti volunt, tertius ex tertio Iove et Iunone, qui Lemni fabricae traditur praefuisse, quartus Memalio natus, qui tenuit insulas propter Siciliam quae Volcaniae nominabantur.’

‘There are also several Vulcans; the first, the son of the Sky, was reputed the father by Minerva of the Apollo said by the ancient historians to be the tutelary deity of Athens; the second, the son of Nile, is named by the Egyptians Phthas, and is deemed the guardian of Egypt; the third is the son of Jupiter and Juno, and is fabled to have been the master of a smithy at Lemnos; the fourth is the son of Memalio, and lord of the islands near Sicily which used to be named the Isles of Vulcan.’

2.1.2. Pataikos

In this regard, it is interesting to note what Herodotus (III, 37.2-3) wrote about the Phoenician god Pataikos, corresponding with Greek Hephaestus:

ὥς δὲ δὴ καὶ ἐς τοῦ Ἡφαίστου τὸ ἱρὸν ἦλθε καὶ πολλὰ τῷ ἀγάλματι κατεγέλασε· ἔστι γὰρ τοῦ Ἡφαίστου τῷγαλμα τοῖσι Φοινικηίοισι Παταϊκοῖσι ἐμπερέστατον, τοὺς οἱ Φοίνικες ἐν τῆσι πλώρησι τῶν τριηρέων περιάγουσι. ὃς δὲ τούτους μὴ ὄπωπε, ἐγὼ δὲ σημαίνω· πυγμαίου ἀνδρὸς μίμησις ἔστι. ἐσῆλθε δὲ καὶ ἐς τῶν Καβείρων τὸ ἱρὸν, ἐς τὸ οὐ θεμιτὸν ἔστι ἐσιέναι ἄλλον γε ἢ τὸν ἱερέα· ταῦτα δὲ τὰ ἀγάλματα καὶ ἐνέπρησε πολλὰ κατασκώψας

‘He [= Cambyses] likewise went into the temple of Hephaestus, and made great sport of the image. For the image of Hephaestus is very like the Pataeci of the Phoenicians, wherewith they ornament the prows of their ships of war. Of persons have not seen these, I will explain in a different way - it is a figure resembling that of a pigmy. He went also into the temple of the Cabiri, which it is unlawful for any one to enter except the priests, and not only made sport of the images, but even burnt them.’ (translated by George Rawlinson, *cf.* Herodotus 1872)

2.2.1. Etymology of Pataikos: ‘making’

The Phoenician theonym Pataikos has no parallels in the Semitic pantheon, although it could be etymologized on the basis of the verb $\sqrt{p-t-q}$: Akkadian *patāqu* ‘to shape, create, form’, particularly ‘to form brick, wall, building, statue’, ‘to create heaven, earth, mankind’, also ‘to cast metal’, *pitqu* ‘casting of metal’, *e.g.* *pitqu erî, kaspi* ‘cast copper, silver’;⁸ Post-Biblical Hebrew $\sqrt{p-t-q}$ ‘to cleave, split’, Syriac $\sqrt{p-t-q}$ ‘to cleave, split, break’, Arabic $\sqrt{f-t-q}$ ‘to tear, rip open, split, yield well’.⁹

⁸ Black & Postgate 2000 = CDA 270, 276.

⁹ See Klein 1987: 537; Takács 2001: 532.

2.2.2. *Pataikos*: artisans' patron

Alternatively the theonym *Pataikos* can represent an adaptation of the name of one of the most important Egyptian gods, *Pth*, patron of artisans, who was worshipped especially in Memphis,¹⁰ Demotic *Pth*, Coptic *Ptaḥ*. Significantly, there are the cuneiform transcriptions of this divine name: Middle Babylonian ^m*Si-ip-ta-ḥu* = *Z3 Pth* 'son of Ptah' and ^{ālu}*Hi-ku-up-ta-aḥ* = *Ḥ.t k3 Pth* 'house of the spirit of Ptah', *i.e.* the sacred name of Memphis; from the Boğazköy archive the name of the king Merneptah ^m*Mar-ni-ip-taḥ* = *Mry ny Pth* 'beloved by Ptah'; the latest one, from the Assyrian epoch, is

^m*Ip-ti-ḥar-ṭi-e-ṣu* = *Pth i-ṛ dy-sw*

'it is Ptah who gave it'.¹¹

It is apparent, the transcriptions from the 2nd mill. BC reflect the vocalization **Ptaḥ*, but the Assyrian record from the 1st mill. **Ptiḥ* is closer to Herodotus' Πάταικος not only in form, but also in time. The name of the Greek god could ultimately represent an adaptation of the idiom of the type Egyptian *Ḥ.t Pth* 'house / temple of Ptah', which may be vocalized as **Ḥā(t)-Ptaḥ-i* (**-i* is the genitive ending), *cf.* the name of the goddess Hathor, Egyptian (from the Pyramid Texts) *Ḥ.t Ḥr*, lit. 'house / temple of Horus', in the New Kingdom the fest, continuing in Coptic Sahidic *-at^hōr* 'third month of the Coptic year', Greek Ἀθήρ, Arabic *Hātūr*, in contrast to *Ḥ.t W^Cr.t* 'capital of the Hyksoses', lit. 'house by the leg', *i.e.* 'arm of the river', in Greek transcription Ἀῤαρις, without any traces of *-t*.¹² The preservation of the medial *-t-* has been explained variously:

- (i) depending on accent¹³ or
- (ii) in cluster with the following laryngeal.¹⁴

The following development is difficult to reconstruct, perhaps **Ḥā(t)-Ptaḥ-i* > **Ḥāpsta(h)i^o* > **Ḥāp^hstai^o* > **Ḥāp^hai^o*. The epenthesis of this type is known in history of Egyptian, *e.g.* Coptic Sahidic *noyt*, Bohairic *nōit*, Fayyumic *nait* 'flour', Demotic *nyt*: Middle Egyptian *ndy-w* 'flour'.¹⁵

2.3. Divine name

The most archaic attestation of the divine name *Pth* appears in the *Pyramid Texts*, namely in the Utterance 573, §1482c:

¹⁰ Erman & Grapow 1971 = *Wb.* I, 565; 329.

¹¹ Vycichl 1983: 166, 517; 1990: 80-81, 179-80, 191.

¹² Vycichl 1983: 317, 237.

¹³ Vycichl 1990: 251.

¹⁴ Egberts 1996-97: 159.

¹⁵ Erman & Grapow 1971 = *Wb.* II, 370; Vycichl 1983: 141: **nadyaw* > **nadyaw*.

‘Commend N. to *Wr-šps.f*, the beloved Ptah, the son of Ptah’,
 where the epithet *wr-šps* means ‘greatly noble’.¹⁶

2.4. Director

The theonym could be connected with the verb *pt-* ‘to form, create’, according to Erman & Grapow 1971 = *Wb.* (I, 565) attested only in the Greek-Romance period, yet included in the *Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* by Faulkner;¹⁷ these attestations continue in Demotic *pt-* ‘to carve’ = ‘sculpter, ciseler’ = ‘schnitzen, meisseln’, Coptic Sahidic *pōt-*, Bohairic *p^hōt-* ‘to carve, engrave’.¹⁸ Outside of Egyptian Hebrew *pattā-* ‘to engrave’, *pittūa-* ‘engraving, engraved decoration’, Jewish Aramaic & Phoenician *pt-* ‘engraving’ seem to be related.¹⁹ But Černý (1976: 130) supposed that the late Egyptian and Coptic verb was borrowed from West Semitic. The examples from other Semitic languages confirm **ḥ* in the position of the third radical: Akkadian *patāḥu* ‘to puncture, bore through’, Qatabanian *ftḥ* ‘to inscribe, engrave’, Sabaic *ftḥ* ‘decorated stonework’, Mehri (Jahn 1902) *fātaḥ* ‘Loch, Verwundung’ (Takács 2001: 532). This fact represents a very strong argument for its borrowing from a Semitic source characterized by the change **ḥ* > **ḥ*. This feature is typical for such languages as Hebrew, Phoenician or Aramaic. Vycichl (1959: 146) tried to connect the Egyptian verb with Akkadian *patāqu* ‘to shape, create, form’, particularly ‘to form brick, wall, building, statue’, ‘to create heaven, earth, mankind’, also ‘to cast metal’ (Black & Postgate 2000 = *CDA* 270). From the point of view of semantics this motivation looks very convincing not only for the verb ‘to carve, engrave’, but also for the god who was the patron of craftsmen. But the difference in the third radical is incompatible with the idea of common origin. And so from the point of view of historical phonetics the best etymology comes from connecting the Egyptian verb with Epigraphic South Arabian: Qatabanian *ft-* ‘to order, direct’, Sabaic *ft-* ‘to leave the decision to someone, authorize’; further *cf.* Himyaritic *fata-a* ‘to give judgment’ (Biella 1982: 412), Geez *fat-a* ‘to judge, decide, arbitrate’ (Leslau 1987: 170). Finally, the semantic development from the meaning ‘to order, direct, judge’ to the name of the god, who was a universal creator and demiurg, is quite acceptable.

2.5. Title high priest

The title of Ptah’s high priest *wr hrp(w) -mwt*, lit. ‘greatest of the controllers of

¹⁶ Translated by Samuel A. Mercer: *The Pyramid Texts*, New York: Longmans & Green 1952 – also see http://thepyramidtexts.blogspot.com/2007/09/texts-of-miscellaneous-contents_9035.html .

¹⁷ Faulkner 1981: 96; *cf.* also Hannig & Vomberg 1999 = *WPS* 519; the latter dictionary covers the Egyptian lexicon for the time interval 2800-950 B.C.

¹⁸ Vycichl 1983: 166.

¹⁹ Koehler & Baumgartner 2001: 985-86; Ricks 1989: 132.

craftsmen’ (Erman & Grapow 1971 = *Wb.* I, 565; 329), provides evidence of a relation of *Ptḥ* to craftsmen.

2.6. Big-bellied dwarf

Ptah is associated with the figures of dwarves in workshop scenes from mastaba tombs in the Old Kingdom. In the Late Period it was probably Ptah who was depicted as a big-bellied dwarf on magical stelae and as figurines, going back to the association with the craftsman-dwarves.²⁰

2.7. Ptah’s wife

The Egyptian tradition knew the spouse of Ptah. It was the goddess *Šḥm.t*, first appearing already in the *Pyramid Texts* and attested still in Old Coptic in the form *Sahmi* and in the Greek transcription Πετεσάχμις of an Egyptian toponym, lit. ‘that what was given by Sakhmet – (see Vycichl 1983: 203 who proposed the vocalisation **sāḥimat*). In Ancient Greek iconography, she was characterized by a lioness’ head. Her name was formed from the word *šḥm* ‘power’, hence ‘powerful’. This word also served as an epithet of the goddess Hathor (Erman & Grapow 1971 = *Wb.* IV, 249-50).

3. Ptah and Hephaestus compared

The common features of Ptah and Hephaestus and their spouses can be compared in the following table:

	Ptah	Hephaestus	Paragraph
Name	* <i>Hā(t)-Ptah-i</i> > * <i>Hāpsta(h)i</i> ^o > * <i>Hāp^hstai</i> ^o > * <i>Hāp^haist</i> ^o		2.2.
Specialization	Patron of craftsmen	Active craftsman	2.6.
Physical shape	Dwarf-like	Lame	2.6.; 1.2.
Wife	<i>Šḥm.t</i> ‘powerful’	μεγέθει dat. ‘power’	2.7.; 1.2.

Table 11.1. Comparison of Ptah and Hephaestus and their spouses

It seems, it is safe to conclude that the theonym *Ptah* could be adapted in the compound **Hā(t)-Ptah-i* ‘house of Ptah’ in Greek already in the 2nd mill. BC not only as a word, but also with basic features characterizing him and his charming and warlike wife.

²⁰ On this point, cf. [Jonsson, K.M.], 1998-2008, ‘The Egyptian Gods: their main centers of worship and some festival days’, at: <http://www.philae.nu/akhet/NetjeruP.html>.

Post scriptum in the light of the Black Athena debate²¹

The idea of so called ‘Black Athena’ has been widely discussed. It was originally proposed by Bernal²² who tried to etymologize the Greek goddess Ἀθήνη (e.g. by Homer with more archaic counterparts in Doric Ἀθάνα known from Argos or Phocis and Mycenaean *Atana*), on the basis of Egyptian syntagm *H.t (n) N.t* ‘temple of [the goddess] Neit’, used as the sacred name of *Sais*, the ancient city from the Western Delta. Bernal (1997a: 91) reconstructed the vocalization **Ĥat (Vn) Nāi.t*. The first component should be reconstructed as **Ĥāt*, originally contracted from **-āwi.t* ‘house’.²³

There are really some examples where the final *-t* in the first component in compounds is preserved, e.g. *H.t Hr*, lit. ‘house / temple of Horus’ (see §2.2.2. above), furthermore the ancient city from Lower Egypt *H.t-hry-ib* ‘house or temple situated in the middle’, known from the Assyrian transcriptions ^{ālu}*Hā-at-ḥa-ri-ba*, ^{ālu}*Hā-at-ḥi-ri-bi* from the time of Assurbanipal, c. 650 B.C., with a Greek adaptation recorded by Herodotus (II, 166) in the 5th century B.C. as Ἰαθριβίς, Ἰαθριβίτης νομός, and finally continuing as Coptic Sahidic *Atrēpe*, Bohairic *At^hrēbi*.²⁴

There are also the opposite examples, e.g. *H.t Wcr.t* ‘capital of the Hyksos’, lit. ‘house by the leg’, i.e. ‘arm of the river’, in Greek transcription Ἀῶρις, without any traces of *-t* (Vycichl 1983: 237), or *H.t k3 Pt-* ‘house of the spirit of Ptah’, serving as the sacred name of Memphis, known from the cuneiform transcription as ^{ālu}*Hi-ku-up-ta-ah* and even from the transcription in the Linear script B as *ai-ku-pi-ti-yo*²⁵ from the 13rd cent. B.C.²⁶

The double reflexes of the final *-t* in compounds does not have any unambiguous solution. Vycichl (1990: 251) explained it without reference to the position of accent in old compounds, while Egberts (1996-97: 159) mentioned that old *-t* is preserved only in the *sandhi* cluster with the following laryngeal.

The second component of the compound, the theonym *N(y).t*, is known from

²¹ I am indebted to Wim van Binsbergen for extensive critical comments (including the parallel between my Hephaistos etymology and Bernal’s Athena etymology) which prompted the present *Post scriptum*. However, the responsibility for this part of my text, as for the rest, is exclusively my own.

²² Cf. Bernal 1996-97a: 1-94 with older literature; cf. van Binsbergen 1996-97 (now in press as van Binsbergen 2010) and Egberts 1996-97, who rejected Bernal’s proposal.

²³ Vycichl 1990: 178.

²⁴ Vycichl 1983: 18; 1990: 182.

²⁵ The Greek toponym Ἀγυπτος is generally considered to derive from this name.

²⁶ Vycichl 1983: 5 reconstructed the first component as **-āyi.t*, easy derivable from **-āwi.t* reconstructed by him in Vycichl 1990: 178.

the Middle Kingdom. In the time of the New Kingdom the spelling *Nr.t* also appeared.²⁷ The vocalization of the goddess' name is preserved in several sources: Hebrew *‘Āsēnaṭ* (*Genesis* 41.45) = Coptic Sahidic *Asennet^h*, *Asennēt^h* ‘wife of Joseph’, reflexing probably the Egyptian female name *N-sy Ny.t* ‘she belongs to [the goddess] Neith’. Plato (*Timaeus* 21b) mediated the Greek transcription Νηῖθ, preserving the old diphthong which was already lost in the transcription Νίτωκρις of the name of the queen *N.t iqr.t* from the 6th century B.C., recorded by Manetho in the 3rd cent. B.C. (Vycichl 1983: 17; Waddell 1940).

Combining these sources, it is safe and reasonable to conclude that the Egyptian divine name would be vocalized as **Nāyi.t* or **Nā3i.t* (it is regularly derivable from still older **Nāri.t*, regarding the archaizing New Egyptian spelling). The Ionian-Attic change **ā > ē* would regularly transformed it in the form attested by Plato. Although the final *-t* in the Greek adaptation Νηῖθ of the feminine theonym *N(y).t* was preserved, there are many examples of dropping of the final *-t* in the Greek adaptations.²⁸

One of Bernal's weakest arguments is his explanation of origin of the second vowel in the theonym **At^hānā(i)*. In the compound *H.t N(y).t* there is no space for any middle vowel, cf. *H.t Hr*, *H.t-hry-ib*, discussed above. Bernal solves this puzzle by the genitive particle *n*, correctly *ny* in m. and *n.t* in f., vocalized as **niy-u* and **ni.t-u* respectively (Vycichl 1983: 134), from the Middle Kingdom already without final **-u*. But there are no traces of the prothetic vowel, neither in the genitive particle nor in the divine-name, as Egberts mentions (1996-97, 159). The genitive particle connecting two feminines should also be in agreement with the same gender. So the whole formation could be reconstructed as **Hā(yi)t-nit-Nā3it* around 2000 B.C., in the 1st millennium B.C. probably **Hā(t)ni(t)Nāyit*.

Summing up,

- on the one hand, the goddess Neith really represents a functional counterpart of Greek **At^hānā(i)*, which makes Bernal's hypothesis attractive and possibly an important support in argumentation about the proposed Egyptian origin of the Greek theonym Ἥφαιστος,
- yet, on the other hand, in the context of a specifically *philological* argument Bernal's hypothesis cannot be accepted without new arguments being advanced towards its linguistic vindication.²⁹

²⁷ Erman & Grapow 1971 = *Wb.* II, 198.

²⁸ Cf. the adaptations attested in the 5th cent. B.C.: χάμψα (Herodotus II, 69) ‘crocodile’ < Egyptian f. *hmz.t* id. (Erman & Grapow 1971 = *Wb.* III, 96) or κόμμι ‘gum’ (Herodotus II, 86, 96) < Egyptian *qmy.t* id. (Erman & Grapow 1971 = *Wb.* V, 39) - see Hemmerdinger 1968: 243; McGready 1968: 249-50; Fournet 1989: 62, 68.

²⁹ Still less convincing is the attempt to etymologize the name of the temple of Athena Παρθενών at the citadel at Athens on the basis of the Egyptian place name *Pr-t^hn*, lit. ‘house of glitter’, attested in Saïs (Bernal 1996-97a: 95-97). It would be rash to claim that the word is without any satisfactory etymology. It was Eric Hamp 1972 who separated it from the word παρθένοσ ‘virgin’ and proposed an

Perhaps to be preferred over Bernal's hypothesis is the Semitic etymology of the name of the goddess *At^hānā or Hurrrian etymology of the city-name *At^hānāi, both discussed in Blažek 2007.

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