Victor Ghica

Sasabek and Beroth (NHVI,41,28–30): A Theonymic Mixed Marriage

Conditions d’utilisation

L’utilisation du contenu de ce site est limitée à un usage personnel et non commercial. Toute autre utilisation du site et de son contenu est soumise à une autorisation préalable de l’éditeur (contact AT ifao.egnet.net). Le copyright est conservé par l’éditeur (Ifao).

Conditions of Use

You may use content in this website only for your personal, noncommercial use. Any further use of this website and its content is forbidden, unless you have obtained prior permission from the publisher (contact AT ifao.egnet.net). The copyright is retained by the publisher (Ifao).

Dernières publications

9782724707519 Annales islamologiques 52
9782724707465 BIFAO 118
9782724707311 El Hawavish
9782724707571 Catalogue de la statuaire royale de la XIXe dynastie
9782724707151 La vie quotidienne des moines II
9782724706437 Guerre et paix dans le Proche-Orient médiéval (Xe-XVe siècle)
9782724707267 La vaisselle en pierre des reines de Pépy Ier
9782724707359 Ostraca de Krokodilô II

© Institut français d’archéologie orientale - Le Caire
The purpose of this paper is twofold: to discuss the names of two Gnostic archons, specifically their meaning and origin; to evaluate the results of this semasiological analysis from the perspective of the historical origins of *The Concept of Our Great Power* (*Great Pow.*), the Nag Hammadi treatise in which these hieronyms are attested.

The passage concerned is *Great Pow.* 41.28b–30a, the Coptic text and the translation of which are presented here according to the latest reading of the text:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{αὐγὸς \ ηλιτρις \ καὶ \ σασαβέκ \ αὐχεροτός} & \quad \text{(Cherix 1993)}^1 \\
\text{Et Il fut remis à Sasabék et Berôth. (Schenke 1985)}^2
\end{align*}
\]

Prior to Schenke, who proposes this reading in a review of Cherix’s study of *Great Pow.*, the interpretation of this passage was determined by the analysis of *βεροτό* as a variant of *BFSLA ḕαροτ / ḕαροτ* (var. Ṣ ḕαλοτ), “brass, bronze”, based on the analogy established by the first editor with Mt 26:15; 27:3:

This article is based on a paper presented at the Fifth Seminar of the Nordic Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism Network (NNGN), held in Helsinki, August 10–17, 2008. I am indebted to my colleague Professor Boyo Okinga who read the proofs of this article and made several useful suggestions.

---

3. The reference by Schenke to the “sieben Bronzemünzen” of Krause’s translation—who renders “neun”—is a typographical error.
Krause–Labib 1971 (editio princeps)

\[\alpha\nu\varphi\delta\alpha\upsilon\tau\alpha\mu\nu\varepsilon\tau\omega\upsilon\pi\acute{\omicron}\alpha\varsigma\varsigma\acute{\omicron}\varsigma\kappa\alpha\varsigma\kappa\beta\varepsilon\varsigma\kappa\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigma\varsigm
which resulted from the work of the Institute of Antiquity and Christianity of Claremont did not adopt them until 2007.\(^14\)

The only grammatically acceptable interpretation of the passage is that suggested by Schenke, who reads \(\lambda 2\varepsilon\text{I}\) as a variant of the preposition \(\Lambda\varepsilon\text{I}\), “and,” itself an alternative form of \(\Lambda 2\varepsilon\text{I}\): “Et Il fut remis à Sasabek et Berôth.”\(^15\) However, this reading requires some comments, which have already been expressed by W.-P. Funk. Whether it is a “vocalisation” of the preposition \(\lambda 2\varepsilon\text{I}\) or a “sahidisation” of the preposition \(\Lambda 2\varepsilon\text{I}\),\(^16\) the form \(\lambda 2\varepsilon\text{I}\) poses a dialectal problem in a text which —to an as-yet undetermined extent— can be defined as Sahidic. Indeed, \(\lambda 2\varepsilon\text{I}\) and \(\Lambda 2\varepsilon\text{I}\) are attested solely in the dialect \(L_4\), where the former is much better represented.\(^17\) The presence of \(\lambda 2\varepsilon\text{I}\) in *Great Pow.* is to be explained, according to Funk —and this analysis was not called into question—, by an \(L_4\) background of the text (qualified by Funk with a word that suggests a certain history of the text transmission: “traces”). The occurrence in the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles* (NH VI.1) of a preposition \(\varepsilon\text{Gn}\), variant of the \(S\varepsilon\text{I}\), could lend support to the first of the two solutions proposed by Funk for the \(\lambda 2\varepsilon\text{I}\) of *Great Pow.*, i.e. that of the re-vocalisation of \(\varepsilon\text{Gn}\). If elsewhere in the text of *AcPer12Ap* the preposition \(\varepsilon\text{Gn}\) maintains its classic form, in 6,23 it appears as \(\varepsilon\text{Gn}\) (6,23b–24a: \(\varepsilon\text{Gn} \varepsilon\text{I} \iota \text{po}\)), whereby \(\varepsilon\) notes an anaptyxis of \(\iota\varepsilon\) rather than a Northern written form of the *Murmelvokal*.\(^18\) However, Funk opts in this case for the former explanation, that of a Northern vocalisation, and draws a parallel between this form of \(\varepsilon\text{Gn}\) and that occurring in *AcPer12Ap*, which is all but Bohairic. The issue of \(\varepsilon\text{Gn}\) as a variant of the preposition \(\varepsilon\text{Gn}\) appears also in a graffito of the Dayr Muṣṭafā Kāšif monastery in Kharga Oasis. The graffito, still unpublished, begins with the invocation \(\varepsilon\text{Gn} \varepsilon\text{I} \iota \text{po}\), which is all but Bohairic. The issue of the vernacular Coptic dialect of Kharga Oasis will be dealt with in G. Roquet, V. Ghica, Bagawat. *Inscriptions et gravures coptes et copto-grecs*, forthcoming at the Institut français d’archéologie orientale.

These remarks are essential for the following discussions.

---


\(^15\) See *supra*.


\(^17\) Cf. *ibid.*, p. 25, n. 104.

\(^18\) In *F* it can be spelled \(\varepsilon\text{Gn}\) (in complementary distribution with \(\varepsilon\text{I}\), \(\varepsilon\text{I}\), \(\varepsilon\text{I}\) and \(\varepsilon\text{I}\)) and in *B* it is always written \(\varepsilon\text{Gn}\); cf. W.E. Crum, *A Coptic…* (*Act. cit.*), p. 683a.


\(^20\) See e.g. S. Giversen, “Acrostical St. Menas-Hymn in Sahidic,” *AcOr* (C) 23, 1959, p. 21; G.P. Sobhy, “Two Leaves in the Coptic Dialect of Middle Egypt (S F),” in *Mélanges Maspero*, vol. 2 (*Orient grec, romain et byzantin*), MIFAO 67, 1955, p. 246; W.C. Till, “Ein sahidisches Baruch-Fragment,” *Le Mémion* 46, 1933, p. 36 (11), 37 (13)\(^9\), 22, 38 (26). The preposition \(\varepsilon\text{Gn}\) appears also in a graffito of the Dayr Muṣṭafā Kāšif monastery in Kharga Oasis. The graffito, still unpublished, begins with the invocation \(\varepsilon\text{Gn} \varepsilon\text{I} \iota \text{po}\), which is all but Bohairic. The issue of the vernacular Coptic dialect of Kharga Oasis will be dealt with in G. Roquet, V. Ghica, Bagawat. *Inscriptions et gravures coptes et copto-grecs*, forthcoming at the Institut français d’archéologie orientale.
Prior attempts to explain this name relate it either to the Egyptian god Sobek\textsuperscript{21} or to “l’arbre de Sabek” (LXX Gn 22,13), symbole de la croix.\textsuperscript{22} An ad hoc Middle Persian etymology was also proposed, which interprets this name —pretending to stem from an unattested sās-ābīg— as “aqueous bug,” “a Gnostic Charon flowing in the waters of hell-river.”\textsuperscript{23} Even if vaguely formulated, the first hypothesis is not utterly unfounded. However, its lack of accuracy misleads research into the name’s origin and the possible role of this archon in Great Pow.’s economy. The case of Fr.E. Williams is telling in this regard. Williams considers that the Egyptian deity, that he characterises as being a “monster,”\textsuperscript{24} personifies “the worm that does not die” of Mt 9:48, as described by the Martyrydom of St. Macarius of Antioch. When attributing to the “snake which never slept” a crocodile head, this Coptic text calls, in effect, upon a symbolic bestiary well-known in Egyptian ascetic literature, whose inspiration is not drawn from the reptile class alone. There is no need to dwell on the numerous examples one can cite in this connection. It should simply be underlined that nothing in the Christian demonic imagery supports Williams’ assertion that “The crocodile-headed monster would (…) seem to be a combination of the worm that never dies and the crocodile Sebk.”\textsuperscript{25} It comes as no surprise that the monstrous Sobek depicted by Williams becomes in the latest French translation of Great Pow. “le dieu infernal égyptien Sebk.”\textsuperscript{26} Of course, the crocodile-god is in no way definable as an infernal deity, and his outwardly frightful aspect denotes only his power, identical to the strength of the animal which is his ba.\textsuperscript{27}

Sasabek is simply an Egyptian male name, one among many others in a long series of filionyms involving \(\omega\). Transmitted in various spellings (\(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\), \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\), \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\))\textsuperscript{28}, it is amply attested especially from the Middle Kingdom onwards\textsuperscript{29} and are too badly known to demonstrate the borrowing MP *sās-ābīg > cacabek.\textsuperscript{30} Nevertheless, several Persian etonyms prove that /g/ becomes in Sahidic Coptic /l/ (6) (S \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\) and var., B \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\) and var., “crystal, glass” < NP \(\text{k\textbullet\textbullet}\); S \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\) “ba” + NP \(\text{k\textbullet}\) “\(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\)”; \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\) and var., \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\) “hara” < NP \(\text{k\textbullet\textbullet}\) “\(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\)”; cf. J. Černý, Coptic Etymological Dictionary, Cambridge–London–New York–Melbourne, 1976, p. 3, 27, 67, 163; W. Westendorf, Koptisches Handwörterbuch, Heidelberg, 1977, p. 2, 73, 196, 495; W. Vycichl, Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue copte, Leuven, 1983, p. 32, 91a, 197a, 343b. It should also be noted that Albrile gives an erroneous reading of the passage 41,28–30 (“Oltre….” op. cit., p. 339). He actually retains the old ungrammatical reading of Krause-Labib because of “questioni mitografiche” (“Oltre….”, op. cit., p. 339) that I will not discuss here.


\textsuperscript{22} M. Desjardins, M. Roberge, “L’entendement….”, loc. cit.

\textsuperscript{23} E. Albrile, “Oltre le soglie di Ade. Un excursus mitografico,” Laurentianum 47, 2006, p. 346. The same interpretation is given in: id., “Coptica iranica,” Kervan 4–5, 2006–2007, p. 14. It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the methodological relevance of the comparative mythology applied in these two articles. However, two points ought to be made: t. MP *sās-ābīg* [\(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\) “\(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\)”, “\(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\)”] is not attested as such; 2. the phonetic rules that govern the transformations undergone by the few Middle Persian, Avestan or New Persian words adopted in Coptic are too badly known to demonstrate the borrowing MP *sās-ābīg > cacabek*. Nevertheless, several Persian etonyms prove that /g/ becomes in Sahidic Coptic /l/ (6) (S \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\) and var., B \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\) and var., “crystal, glass” < NP \(\text{k\textbullet\textbullet}\); S \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\) “ba” + NP \(\text{k\textbullet}\) “\(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\)” and var., B \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\) “hara” < NP “\(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\)” and only once \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\) “\(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\)” (SA \(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\), “earing” < NP “\(\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}\)”); cf. J. Černý, Coptic Etymological Dictionary, Cambridge–London–New York–Melbourne, 1976, p. 3, 27, 67, 163; W. Westendorf, Koptisches Handwörterbuch, Heidelberg, 1977, p. 2, 73, 196, 495; W. Vycichl, Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue copte, Leuven, 1983, p. 32, 91a, 197a, 343b. It should also be noted that Albrile gives an erroneous reading of the passage 41,28–30 (“Oltre….” op. cit., p. 339). He actually retains the old ungrammatical reading of Krause-Labib because of “questioni mitografiche” (“Oltre….”, op. cit., p. 339) that I will not discuss here.

\textsuperscript{24} Fr.E. Williams, Mental…., op. cit., p. 119.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} M. Desjardins, M. Roberge, “L’entendement….”, op. cit., p. 915.

\textsuperscript{27} For a recent summary and relevant bibliography, see J.-P. Corteggiani, L’Égypte ancienne et ses dieux. Dictionnaire illustré, Paris, 2007, p. 508a-510a.


\textsuperscript{29} For references, cf. H. Ranke, PN, loc. cit. To these occurrences may be added the following: N.K. Reich, “Eine ägyptische Urkunde über den Kauf eines bebauten Grundstückes. Eine Philologisch-Historische Urkunde,”
becomes frequent in Ptolemaic times under the form $\text{j}_{}\text{s}_{}\text{bk}$.\textsuperscript{30} It is also part of three composed anthroponyms — $\text{s}_{}\text{bk} \text{ṣ}_{}\text{ṛ}_{}\text{f}_{}$ (\textit{ḥοτεριας}, \textit{Σοῦχος}, $\text{s}_{}\text{bk} \text{w}_{}\text{ḥ}_{}\text{(.w)}$ (\textit{Σισοῦχος})\textsuperscript{31} and, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods when it is largely documented, it is rendered by Σισοῦχος, “the son of (the god) Suchos,” Σοῦχος being the Greek name of Sobek.\textsuperscript{32}

As a rather frequently attested personal name, it is impossible to connect Sasabek to any memorable figure who could possibly throw light on the association which may be the basis of the archontic theonym of Great Pow. However, the vocalisation with $\text{j}$ points to an archaic hieroglyphic source, which opens new perspectives for the study of the background of the text’s redactor or of one of its redactors. One should recall in this connection that Sobek haunts the memories long after his cult had fallen into abeyance. Indeed the name of Σοῦχος and several of his attributes are still known in the 6th century by Damascius, “the last of the Neoplatonists.”\textsuperscript{33}

Before questioning the inspiration behind this hieronym, we ought to draw attention to the expletive character of the tau. It is obviously a mere graphematic anomaly, a sort of “phonetic complement” which is not without parallels in Coptic.

The name and function of Beroth were related by Fr.E. Williams\textsuperscript{34} to those of Nimrod (\textit{₦ mrb}) of Gn 10:8–9, rendered by LXX as Νεβρώδ. It is well established that the LXX, which translates $\text{הנִּירָדָא}$ \textit{יִרְדָּא} (Gn 10:9) by γῆς κυνηγὸς ἐναντίον Κυρίου — probably under the influence of the Greek tradition about the giants’ revolt against the Olympian gods\textsuperscript{35}—, opens the way for the negative image that the hero of the post-diluvian times takes up to Dante\textsuperscript{36} and beyond.\textsuperscript{37} This is the main reason why, prior to Williams, F. Cumont\textsuperscript{38}...
and more recently A. Böhlig, Fr. Wisse, P. Labib, and G.A.G. Stroumsa already identified this biblical character with Namrael (mentioned in Theodor bar Konai’s Liber Scholiorum and Nebrūēl (known through Michael the Syrian, Priscillian of Avila, and the Gospel of the Egyptians – NH III, 57, 18; 2245), the consort, in one of the Manichaean anthropogenic myths, of Ašaqlūn (correlate of the Gnostic demiurge Saklas and mother of Adam and Eve. Following a well-represented tradition of scholarship, Williams goes further and finds another avatar of the re-mythicised Nimrod / Nebrod in the Mandean demonness Namrus (Rūhā), who, together with her sons — the seven planets —, embodies the evil forces of the creation. Yet it is just as true that the phonetic mutations implied by the identification of Βερουθ with Νεβρωδ remain unexplained.

Bereth is actually an ancient god of the Phoenician theogony, if we are to believe Philo of Byblos. According to his Phoenician History, Bērouth (Βηροῦθ) — that is the Greek rendering of the name — is the spouse of Elioun (Ἐλιοῦν), “called the Most High, (…) who settled the area around Byblos”. This primeval divine couple gives birth to Epigeius, or Autochton, and the area around Byblos. According to his Phoenician History, the consort, in one of the Manichaean anthropogenic myths, of Ašaqlūn (correlate of the Gnostic demiurge Saklas and mother of Adam and Eve. Following a well-represented tradition of scholarship, Williams goes further and finds another avatar of the re-mythicised Nimrod / Nebrod in the Mandean demoness Namrus (Rūhā), who, together with her sons — the seven planets —, embodies the evil forces of the creation. Yet it is just as true that the phonetic mutations implied by the identification of Βερουθ with Νεβρωδ remain unexplained.
the tutelary deity and the personification of the city of Beirut. The connection between the city and its patron goddess is reflected in the coins struck by the former under Elagabalus, on which Beroë is portrayed together with Poseidon, her paredros in Berytus’ mythology. The same scene is attested almost four centuries earlier, in the xenon belonging to the temple of the establishment of Poseidonists in Delos. It is the episode of Poseidon’s seduction of Beroë, a nymph daughter of Kythereia (Aphrodite) and Assyrian Adonis (Dionysiaca XLI.155), given by Zeus as bride to the Earth-shaker (Dionysiaca XLIII.372). The mosaic of Lillennebonne apparently displays the same motif. In any case, Philo’s and Nonnus’ assertions suggest a common origin for the toponym and the theonym. Now, the etymology of Beirut is well established: Akk. URU. be-ru-ta,58 KUR.bi-ru-tu,59 and KUR.bi-ru-ultu-ti60, as well as Can. Bērōt (MT dabir; sg. bēr [< *biʾr, MT dabir]),61 Eg. Bi-ru-ta (in syllabic writing 𓊄𓈖𓊊𓈖; P. Anast. I 20,8), 62

---


57 Cf. ibid., p. 227.


Gr. Βηρυτός and Βήρυθος, Lat. Beritus and Birito, Syr. بيروت, and Ar. بيروت, all stem from the Ug. Б’урт, “wells.”

The same toponym, Бєрют, designating however another town of the Canaanite-speaking region, is mentioned in Jg 9:17, 18:25, and 2 Sm 4:2. To return to the Can. бєрют of the derivational chain of Beirut, it implies the meaning “wells” for the hieronym Бєрouth and so the name transfer from the city to the goddess. Indeed it is not only the name of the nymph that is related to the water; among other details offered by the myth related by Nonnus, the iconography of Beroë systematically represents her bearing a pitcher. It is certainly not without reason that, in his Commentary on Dionysius Periegetes, Eustathius of Thessalonica connects the name of the city to the sea.

Two other hypotheses have been advanced concerning the meaning of the theonym Bєрouth, mentioned in the Phoenician History. For Ernest Renan, both Elioun and Bєrouth are definitely Semitic names: in the former he recognises — quite rightly — Бєрют, “the Most High” of Gn 14:19, translated by Philo "Παναρχής (PE 1.10.15), and in the latter Бєрют, a deity worshiped by the inhabitants of Sichem, according to Jgs 8:33, 9:4. Renan explains the translation Бєрют > Βηρούθ thus: “Le deuxième mot de cette appellation (i.e. Βηρούθ), étant féminin, a donné lieu de croire qu’elle s’appliquait à une femme.” This explanation was not accepted, and it is in effect weakened by the fact that the plural remains unexplained.

As for L.B. Paton, he considers Βηρούθ as an abbreviation of Βα’লατ Bєrth, “mistress of Beirut” — hieronym unattested —, in view of the fact that in Aramaic Bєrth would mean “cypress.” For precision’s sake, one should note that the Aramaic actually transmits two lexemes that correspond to this meaning, the spellings of which are Βєρούθ and Βєρουθ respectively. The Aramaic etymology this proposal invites is worthy of attention.

it is Бєрту [Бєрту], another toponym of Thutmose III’s Topographical List [no. 109], that stems from Бєрют. This identification was disputed by G. Maspero who locates Бєрту “dans la région que traverse le Jourdain à sa sortie du lac de Tibériade” (Études…, op. cit., p. 36). He recognises in this toponym the Бєрют designated by Josephus (Ant. 5.1.18) as location of the battle run by Joshua against the Canaanites, and identifies it with present ‘Ayyarat, in South Lebanon (Études…, op. cit., p. 125-126). H. Gauthier supports this identification and associates ‘Ayyarat with the Бєрют of Ez 47:16 (Dictionnaire…, op. cit., p. 2). A. Jirku considers that either Бєрту or Бєрту are to be related to the Бєрют of Jos 9:17, 18:25, and 2 Sm 4:2 (Die ägyptischen Listen palästinensischer und syrischer Ortsnamen in Umschrift und mit historisch-archäologischem Kommentar, Leipzig, 1937, p. 8).

W.F. Albright equals Бєрту with the ‘Pən’ūth (var. Pənathy) of the LXX version of Jos 19:19 (“The Topography of the Tribe of Issachar,” Zeitgescht für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 44, 1926, p. 229). R. Hannig (Großes Handswoerterbuch…, op. cit., p. 1137) distinguishes between Бєрют and Бєрют, which he identifies with al-Bīra, a locality in Syria-Palestine, and Βєрούθ, which he tentatively identifies with Berut, north of al-Sanamayn in Bashan.


68 Cf., i.a., “W.F. Albright, loc. cit.

69 E. Renan, Mémoire sur l’origine et le caractère véritable de l’histoire phénicienne qui porte le nom de Sanchuniathon, MAI 11, 1858, p. 269.

70 Cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, Preparatio evangelica, ed. cit., p. 86.

One has to observe that the etymon of the two aforementioned lexemes, the Akk. *bu-ra-šú* ([GIŠ.LI], [LI.GIŠ], *š-* *š-*/*š-*/, is outstandingly productive in the Semitic field, wherein it leaves lexical traces up to Ge’ez and Gurage. It even found its way into Coptic as the foreignism ṭḥʿ ṣpṛt. The derivation ṣḥḥḥḥḥḥḥḥḥ > ḫḥḥḥḥ would certainly have the phonetic advantage of accounting for the dental fricative /θ/ (whose presence in the hieronym —though not problematic— is not explained by the hypothesis of the etymon Can. Bērōt) and the semantic one of a theonymy related to one of the most notorious natural attributes of ancient Beirut’s region, “where —according to Nonnus— grow the big trees; theivy, in the air, marries the cypress” (Dionysiaca XLI.8–9). This etymology assumes however that between the goddess Bērouth and the city of Beirut there is no semantic connection, given that the meaning of the toponym is assured by its Akkadian forms written in the Amarna Tablets with the sumerogram PŪ meaning “wells” (*š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-* *š-*). In this case, to which no formal objection can be raised, the identification made, on the basis of the above mentioned passage of Philo, between the city of Beirut and the place where the goddess Bērouth would have established herself together with her paredros Elioun, would be erroneous.

The first etymology, that which relates the city of Beirut to the Phoenician deity Bērouth and lends to their respective names the same etymon, Can. Bērōt, “wells”, is the most persuasive one from a semasiologic point of view.

Last but not least, a short comment should be made about the sequence ΒΑΡΩΘ within a palindromic *vox magica* in the Apollonian invocation of *PGM* I.262–347: ΑΕΜΙΝΝΑΕΒΑΡΩΘΕΡΡΕΘΩΒΑΒΕΑΝΙΜΕΑ. Prima facie, one could be tempted to consider this a case of glossolalic abracadabra. This category and the ideologically founded preconception which fuelled its career from Epiphanius onwards—he is the first to charge the Gnostics with intentional βαρβαρωνυμία—are seriously called into question by several recent studies dealing with the *voces magicae* and *nomina barbara*. Regardless of the partisan approaches which either refuse any possible signification to these two categories or attach to them meanings at all costs, it is undeniable that these constructions may—and quite a few of them demonstrably do—contain meaningful elements. This is perhaps the case for this *vox magica*, in which the vocalic oscillation ι/ε does not stand in the way of the identification of Bērōth’s name.

---

70 For a detailed discussion on the circulation of this lexeme in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond, see V. Ghica, “Avatars méditerranéens de l’assyrien *burāšu*,” *BIFAO* 102, 2002, p. 231-245.
71 Ed. cit., p. 363.
Central to the argument of this paper is rather the Semitic, Eastern-Mediterranean origin of this hieronym, which is assured. *Báρφος* is, of course, not the only *nomen barbarum* of Semitic origin.73 Hybrid names, at once Hebrew and Greek or Coptic, are also present,76 as well as purely Greek77 or Egyptian names in the vein of *Σαρκοφάγος.*78 What does this Semitic theonymy, so close geographically and culturally to the Jewish-Palestinian world, tell us about *Great Pow.?* Not necessarily the Jewish origin of the treatise but far more than the diversity of the literature with which the Alexandrian intellectual circles which are the source of *Great Pow.* were familiar. The hand responsible for these two archon names in *Great Pow.* knows Philo’s *Phoenician History,* draws liberally from it a name which is, of course, exotic and barbaric but not meaningless, and marries it with an Egyptian one. The reasons for this marriage, which may appear curious, should be searched for in the personality and origin of the deities to which the names allude.

Indeed, the choice of these two infernal powers’ names in the range of a theonymy associated to Phoenician and Egyptian traditional cults could hardly be considered casual. *Great Pow.* gives these two archons, the only ones whose names are mentioned in the text, a significant

---


76 A good example of mixed theonomy is Aberamenthō, built of *יִשְׂרֶת* מָלָא + *תֵּו* (*Thot,* mighty of the waters); cf. M. Tardieu, “Aberamenthō,” in R. van den Broek, M.J. Vermaseren (eds.), *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions Presented to Gilles Quispel on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday,* EPRO 91, 1981, p. 416. Tardieu’s hypothesis is rejected by Jackson (“The Origin…”, op. cit., p. 78, n. 5) because of its more daring and innovative aspect, i.e. the mixed etymons. The Egyptian origin proposed by Jackson (*< *imntr, *amemtr;* ibid., p. 70) does not explain the first part of the name; it remains highly conjectural.

77 Two examples will suffice to illustrate the point: Phorbea and Chloerga (*Paraph. Shem* 44.16-21); cf. M. Roberge, “Paraphrase…,” op. cit., p. 1110, note at 44.6-45.8.

role in the Gnostic history of salvation. With “the ruler of Hades,” they are those to whom Jesus is delivered after his condemnation to death by Pilate and those over whom he triumphs (41,28–42,9). Sasabek and Beroth are the kingpins of the Darkness (37,30). Both names hint at water, the former relating to the Egyptian crocodile-god associated particularly with the Faiyum, the latter that of a Phoenician deity described by Nonnus as a nymph. And yet, as in ParaShem 1,36–2,1, the “immeasurable (and) incomprehensible” water (37,7–8) is in Great Pow. the symbol and the materialisation of the primordial chaos.

This hellish pair gets its symbolic significance probably not only from the original functions of the divinities to which the two names refer but also from their cultural and religious origins. Celsus leads us to believe that Phoenician cults, or at least Phoenician prophetism, were not the most esteemed religious traditions amongst the educated milieux during the second half of the 2nd century in Alexandria,79 where Ἀληθὴς Λόγος but also Great Pow.80 were written. On the other hand, among Alexandrian Jews the contempt for Egyptian idolatry is at least as old as the Wisdom of Solomon. Writings such as 3 Maccabees, the Letter of Aristeas, the Sibylline Oracles, as well as Philo81 express it openly. Another Nag Hammadi text, of Jewish or Judaising origin,82 The Thunder: Perfect Mind (16,6–7),83 mirrors the same rebuke of Egyptian idolatry. These two treatises, transmitted in the same codex, Great Pow. and Thund., inherit in a direct line the pre-Christian Jewish polemic over idolatry.

---

79 Origen, Contra Celsum VII,9, ed., trans. and notes M. Borret, SourcChr 150, p. 34-35.
80 Fr.E. Williams (Mental…, op. cit., p. lxii) places the origin of one of the sources of Great Pow.—the “Christian Instruction”— in Egypt. Albeit the distinction made by Williams between the sources of the Christian and Non-Christian material in Great Pow. remains to be proved conclusively (see the criticism expressed by J.-P. Mahé, M. Desjardins, M. Roberge, “L’entendement de notre Grande Puissance. Notice,” in J.-P. Mahé, P.-H. Poirier [eds.], Écrits…, op. cit., p. 902, n. 1), his argument for the Egyptian provenance of the treatise or of part of it (the etymology of Sasabek) is credible, yet inadequately handled, as I hope to have shown.