

Camping along the Ways of Horus: A Central Semitic Etymology for *pî ha-ḥîrot*

DOI 10.1515/zaw-2017-0017

pî ha-ḥîrot appears four times in the Hebrew Bible as one of the preliminary stops on the Exodus itinerary (Exod 14:2,9; Num 33:7,8) and was most likely located along the Egyptian military road known as the Ways of Horus.¹ While the approximate location of this site is clear, its etymology is not. In this note, I will review and critique the previous etymologies of *pî ha-ḥîrot* before proposing my own. I argue on the basis of Septuagintal and comparative Central Semitic data that *ḥîrot* is a plural Hebrew noun meaning »camps« and that *pî ha-ḥîrot* is best translated as a Hebrew construct phrase meaning »at the entrance of the camps«. *pî ha-ḥîrot* is thus not a toponym, but rather a descriptive term referring to the fortresses and military installations along the Ways of Horus.²

The Septuagint offers several important clues as to the etymology of *pî ha-ḥîrot*, which have not been adequately exploited. The Septuagint of Exodus translates this phrase as ἐπαύλις »farmstead, fold, camp, unwalled village«,³ while the Septuagint of Numbers transliterates the second component as Εἰρωθ. This transcription indicates that *ḥîrot* began with an etymological *h*.⁴ Furthermore, the Septuagint of Numbers 33:7 treats *pî* as a construct form of *pæh* »mouth«

1 *pî ha-ḥîrot*'s location can be inferred from its association with Migdol, which was located on the Ways of Horus. James K. Hoffmeier, »The Search for Migdol of the New Kingdom and Exodus 14:2: An Update,« *Buried History* 44 (2008): 6; 9f., provides the most recent information on the identification of Migdol in the New Kingdom and beyond.

2 For these military installations, see Alan H. Gardiner, »The Ancient Military Road between Egypt and Palestine,« *JEA* 6 (1920): 104–113; and Hoffmeier, »The Search for Migdol,« 8–10.

3 Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 463a–b. Wilhelm Spiegelberg, *Aegyptologische Randglossen zum Alten Testament* (Straßburg: Schlesier & Schwekhardt, 1904), 25f., suggests that ἐπαύλις is a translation of Hebrew *ḥašerôt* »unwalled villages« and reflects a different *Vorlage* than the Masoretic text.

4 As the transcriptions of proper names in the Septuagint indicate, the Hebrew letter *ḥêt* rendered two different inherited Semitic phonemes—*h* and *h*—until at least the 2nd century CE. The translators of the Septuagint rendered the etymological voiceless velar fricative *h* with Greek *χ* (e.g., *rāḥel* > Ραχηλ; compare Arabic *raḥīl* »ewe«) and the etymological voiceless pharyngeal fricative *h* with *θ* (e.g., *yishāq* > Ισοακ; compare Arabic *qahaqa* »to laugh«). For more on the

Article note: I would like to thank Konrad Schmid, Na'ama Pat-El, and Saralyn McKinnon-Crowley for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this note. Any remaining errors are my own.

*Kontakt: Aren Wilson-Wright, Universität Zürich / Schweiz, aren.wilson-wright@uzh.ch

and translates it as στόμα.⁵ This rendering suggests that *pî* and *hîrot* were separate components of a construct phrase meaning something like »the mouth of the farmsteads« or »the mouth of the camps.«⁶ Overall, a plausible etymology for this term must fit the phonology of the Hebrew form (including the partial transcription in the Septuagint of Exodus), the term's likely meaning as indicated by the Septuagint of Numbers, and its Egyptian context. Previous etymologies of *pî ha-hîrot* all fall short on one or more counts.

A common etymology of *pî ha-hîrot* is to relate *hîrot* to Akkadian *hîritu* »canal« and translate *pî ha-hîrot* as »the mouth of the canals.«⁷ This etymology makes good contextual sense—after all, the Ways of Horus did run parallel to a frontier canal for part of its length⁸—but it falters on phonological grounds. Akkadian *hîritu* is a *pirist* noun from the III-weak root *hêrû* »to dig« (*hîriyту > *hîritu*), while *hîrot* is a *qittat* noun from a II-weak root (*hîyrat > *hîrāh*; plural *hîrot*). Furthermore, the Akkadian term begins with an etymological *h*, while the Hebrew term begins with an etymological *h*. For these reasons, *hîrot* cannot be related to Akkadian *hîritu*.

The numerous Egyptian etymologies of *pî ha-hîrot*⁹ founder for a different reason: *pî ha-hîrot* ends with a final *-t*, but none of its proposed Egyptian antecedents would have ended in *-t* by the time Hebrew was an independent dialect. Some of these antecedents never ended in *-t* in the first place (e. g., *pr hwt hr*), while others originally ended with the final feminine *-t* (e. g., *p3-hwt-hr.t*). By the beginning of the New Kingdom (ca. 1550 BCE), the feminine *-t* had been lost from

polyphony of *hêt* in Hebrew see, Richard C. Steiner, »On the Dating of Hebrew Sound Changes (*Ĥ > Ĥ and *Ĝ > Ğ) and Greek Translations (2 Esdras and Judith),« *JBL* 124 (2005): 229–267.

5 The other three verses do not render this component of *pî ha-hîrot* in either transcription or translation.

6 The statement in Num 33:8 that the Israelites »set out from Hirot« (*way-yis'û mip-p'nê ha-hîrot*) also supports this conclusion, assuming *mip-p'nê* is not a scribal error for *mip-pî hîrot* or *mip-p'nê pî ha-hîrot*.

7 Manfred Görg, »Pi-Hahiroi »Mündung der Wasserläufe«, « *BN* 50 (1989): 7; James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence of the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 170; idem, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 105 f. William Foxwell Albright, »Exploring in Sinai with the University of California African Expedition,« *BASOR* 109 (1948): 109, was the first scholar to propose this etymology. Note, however, that he opted for a combination Akkadian-Egyptian etymology by arguing that *pî ha-hîrôt* transcribes an Egyptian toponym, but was later given a folk etymology on the basis of Akkadian *hîritu*.

8 Amihai Sneh, Tuvia Weissbrod, and Itamar Perath, »Evidence for an Ancient Egyptian Frontier Canal,« *American Scientist* 63 (1975): 542–548; Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 164–175.

9 Proposed Egyptian etymologies include *pr hwt hr* »temple of Hathor« (Gardiner 1922), *pr hrt* »temple of Hrt« (Albright 1948), *p3-hwjr* »the pelusiac branch of the Nile« (de Vaux 1971), *p3-h3r.tj* »the place of the widow« (Redford 1987), *p3-hwt-hr.t* »the upper mansion« (Redford 1987). A. H. Gardiner, »The Geography of the Exodus,« in *Recueil d'études égyptologiques dédiées à la mémoire de Jean-François Champollion* (Paris: Champion, 1922), 213; Albright, »Exploring in Sinai,« 109; Roland de Vaux, *Histoire ancienne d'Israël*, vol. 1 (Paris: Galbada, 1971–1973), 357; Donald B. Redford, »An Egyptological Perspective on the Exodus,« in *Egypt, Israel, Sinai: Archaeological and Historical Relations in the Biblical Period*, ed. Anson F. Rainey (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1987), 142.

all Egyptian nouns.¹⁰ The noun *tš-išb.t* »the stool«, for example, is transcribed into Akkadian as *tā-as-bu* in EA 368:9, which dates to the 14th century BCE.¹¹ Because of this morpho-phonological change, an Egyptian term could not generate the Hebrew form *ḥīrōt*, even if the Exodus itinerary does reflect a historical memory of Late Bronze Age Egyptian topography. This reason alone is enough to reject an Egyptian etymology for *pī ha-ḥīrot*. But there is another problem with the proposed Egyptian etymologies. Some of them begin with a *ḥ*, but Septuagint transcriptions of Egyptian names in the Hebrew Bible demonstrate that the Hebrew language distinguished between *ḥ* and *h* even in loanwords. Compare, for example, *Ψοθομοφανυχ* from *ḏd-pš-nfr-īwf-ḥḥ*¹² (Gen 41:45) and *Φινεες* from *pš-nḥšy* (e. g., Exod 6:25).

Where Akkadian and Egyptian etymologies for *pī ha-ḥīrot* fall short, a Central Semitic one proves more plausible. I suggest that *ḥīrot* and its presumed singular form **ḥīrāh* are related to Syriac *ḥirtā* »shepherd's camp, military camp«,¹³ Sabaic *ḥyrt* »camp, encampment«,¹⁴ and Arabic *ḥayr* »enclosure, fenced-in garden«. ¹⁵ Not only do the nouns in this cognate set match the

10 Antonio Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 60; Carsten Peust, *Egyptian Phonology: An Introduction to the Phonology of a Dead Language*, Monographien zur ägyptischen Sprache (Göttingen: Peust & Gutschmidt, 1999), 152; James P. Allen, *The Egyptian Language: An Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 49; 61. The toponym *pī-bæset* (< Egyptian *pr-bšst.t*) found in Ezekiel 30:17 does not provide a good counter example for the loss of feminine *-t* in Egyptian. The *t* found in the Hebrew form does not reflect the final feminine *-t* of the Egyptian, but rather its final root consonant. If *pr-bšst.t* had retained its final feminine *-t*, it would appear in Hebrew as ***pī-bastat* or ***pī-bastā*.

11 Anson F. Rainey, *El Amarna Tablets 359–379: Supplement to J. A. Knudtzon Die El-Amarna-Tafeln*, AOAT 8 (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1978), 38 f. Theoretically, the *-t* ending could have been added to *pī ha-ḥīrōt* after it entered Hebrew, but there is no evidence that foreign toponyms were ever sufficiently integrated into the Hebrew language to receive native derivational morphology.

12 The Egyptian etymology of this name is disputed, but interpreters are nearly unanimous in treating the final segment as a transcription of Egyptian *ḥḥ* »life«. In this article, I adopt Georg Steindorf's interpretation, which is widely accepted. Georg Steindorf, »Weiteres zu Genesis 41,45« *ZÄS* 30 (1892): 50–52. For an overview of scholarship on this name, see Yoshiyuki Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic*, SBL Dissertation Series 173 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 225 f.

13 Robert Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1878–1901), 1264; Carl Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1928), 230; Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 449.

14 A. F. L. Beeston, M. A. Ghul, W. W. Müller and J. Ryckmans, *Sabaic Dictionary (English-French-Arabic)* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters, 1982), 71. Sabaic also possesses a verbal root *ḥyr* »to camp«, but it is unclear whether this verbal root derived from the nominal form or generated it.

15 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Freytag, *Lexicon Arabico-Latinum*, vol. 1 (Halle: Schwetschke, 1830–1837), 450; Albert de Biberstein Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire arabe-français*, vol. 1 (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1860), 525; William Edward Lane, *Maddu-l-Kamoos: An Arabic-English Dictionary*, vol. 2 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1863–1893), 685.

semantics of Greek ἐπαύλις, they also begin with an etymological *h* as the Sabaic and Arabic terms show. Presumably the Proto-Central Semitic form of this word originally meant »camp« or »enclosure« as in Sabaic and underwent semantic narrowing in the other daughter languages. Because Greek ἐπαύλις can signify both a fold and a military camp, Hebrew **hîrâh* could denote either a shepherd's camp or a military camp. The second option, however, is a better fit for the Egyptian context of these verses since the Ways of Horus featured a series of fortresses and military installations. The Egyptian army used this road on its campaigns to the Levant and Syria and Egyptian soldiers would have camped along its length. *hîrot* thus most likely refers to a group of Egyptian military camps on the Ways of Horus.¹⁶

This leaves only *pî*. While the Egyptian noun *pr* »house« commonly appears as *pî* in Hebrew transcription as in Ezekiel 30:17 (*pî-bæsæt* < *pr-bîst.t*) and Exodus 1:11 (*pîtom* < *pr-îtm*),¹⁷ an Egyptian etymology for *pî ha-hîrot* is precluded by the presence of a final *-t* on *hîrot*. Since *hîrot* itself is a common Hebrew noun, as I have argued above, it is likely that *pî* also comes from Hebrew. And indeed, the translation of *pî* as στόμα in LXX Num 33:7 suggests that *pî* is the construct form of Hebrew *pæh* »mouth«. Although this noun usually designates the mouth of a human or an animal, it can also signify the entrance to a cave (Josh 10:18 *pî ham-mstârâh*) or city (Prov 8:3 *pî qârætl*). Taken together, *pî ha-hîrot* seems to be a Hebrew construct phrase meaning »the entrance of the camps«. Such an etymology fits the phonology, semantics, and context of this phrase.

Abstract: This note proposes a new etymology for *pî ha-hîrot*, one of the preliminary stops on the Exodus itinerary (Exod 14:2,9; Num 33:7,8). I argue on the basis of Septuagintal and comparative Central Semitic data that *pî ha-hîrot* is a Hebrew construct phrase meaning »at the entrance of the camps«, a topographical detail that fits the location of this site along an Egyptian military road.

Zusammenfassung: Die Mitteilung schlägt eine neue Etymologie für *pî ha-hîrot*, eine der Zwischenstationen im Exodus-Itinerar (Ex 14,2,9; Num 33,7,8), vor. Auf der Grundlage von Material aus der Septuaginta und semitischer Vergleichsdaten erörtert der Autor, dass es sich bei *pî ha-hîrot* um eine hebräische Constructus-Verbindung mit der Bedeutung »am Eingang der Lager« handelt. Dieses topographische Detail passt zu einer Lokalisierung des Ortes entlang einer ägyptischen Militärroute.

Résumé: Cette note propose une nouvelle étymologie pour *pî ha-hîrot*, l'une des étapes de l'itinéraire de l'Exode (Ex 14:2,9; Nb 33:7,8). Sur la base de la Septante et des données comparatives sémitiques, j'argumente que *pî ha-hîrot* est une construction hébraïque signifiant « à l'entrée des campements ». Ce détail topographique renvoie à une localisation du site en bordure d'une voie militaire égyptienne.

¹⁶ *pî ha-hîrot* could thus furnish a possible chronological anchor for the Exodus itinerary if Egyptian military camps could be identified in the archaeological record on the Ways of Horus near *pî ha-hîrot*'s presumed location.

¹⁷ As noted by Spiegelberg, *Aegyptologische Randglossen*, 27; Gardiner, »The Geography of the Exodus«: 213; Görg, »Pi-Hahiroth »Mündung der Wasserläufe«: 7; and Manfred Görg, »Pi-Hahiroth,« in *NBL*, vol. 3, ed. Manfred Görg and Bernhard Land (Zürich: Benziger, 1994–2001): 150.