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Voprosy onomastiki, 2019, Vol. 16, Issue 1, pp. 19–35

DOI: 10.15826/vopr_onom.2019.16.1.002

Language of the article: English

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Язык статьи: английский

DOI: 10.15826/vopr_onom.2019.16.1.002
UDC 811.444'373.4 + 39(=411) + 572

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ONOMASTICS AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST: RETHINKING TOTEMISM IN SEMITIC TRADITIONS

This paper addresses the theory that ancient Semitic proper names derived from animal names may testify to the culture of totemism. This theory, elaborated first in the works of William Robertson Smith in the late 19th century, has recently re-emerged in scholarly discussion. However, researching the onomastic material provided by historical sources in four Semitic languages (Amorite, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic), the author argues that the theory in question is highly implausible. Particular attention is given to Amorite compound names containing the element *Ditāna*, the Aramaic name *Ara/ām*, presumably derived from *ri'm* 'wild bull,' and to Arabic personal names of zoonymic origin which are sometimes considered as derived from tribal names. The paper finds that there is neither any evidence linking the names in question with the social groups known in these languages nor is there a single reference to animals as symbolic ancestors or the like. The author concludes that although in some modern "primitive" tribes or clans proper names are indeed related to their totem, this observation would not apply to proper names from other cultures, particularly the extinct ones, even if such names are semantically related, i.e. refer to animals or plants.

Key words: Semitic, Arabic, Amorite, Hebrew, tribe names, clan names, animal names, totemism, ancestor worship, anthropology.

1. Introduction¹

The Semitic family is a branch of the Afroasiatic language family. The primary division among the Semitic languages is between East Semitic, comprising the various dialects of Akkadian and Eblaite (both are extinct), and West Semitic, which includes everything else [Rubin, 2008, 62]. The classification scheme adopted by most scholars divides West Semitic into three sub-branches: Central Semitic (i.e., Old South Arabian, Northwest Semitic, and Arabic), Ethiosemitic, and Modern South Arabian [Huehnergard & Rubin, 2011].

Given the large number of animal names as proper names in Semitic languages, several scholars have considered them as remnants of totemism. This approach was proposed by Robertson Smith [1912] who drew upon anthropological data (mainly from North America). In principle, his theory is based on animal names in Arabic and Biblical Hebrew. Totemism has faded for decades but has recently re-emerged in scholarly discussion regarding onomastics [Lipiński, 1978; 2000, 582; 2001, 52] and the issue of ancestor worship, particularly in Northwest Semitic practices [Astour, 1973, 36–37; Lewis, 1989, 16; Annus, 1999, 20–22; Wyatt, 2002, 433, *fn.* 12].

The aim of this paper is to reconsider the totemic explanation of Semitic proper names derived from animal names and to see to what extent it agrees with the anthropological data. The paper deals with four languages in chronological order as follows: (1) Amorite, (2) Hebrew, (3) Aramaic, and (4) Arabic.

The theoretical background of our investigation is essentially inspired by Goldenweiser, a notable anthropologist who thoroughly discussed the main “supposed” features of totemism from a comparative viewpoint. According to his analysis, one can postulate a totemic origin of animal names only when there is sufficient information on a special association between the tribe/clan and the animal it is named after [Goldenweiser, 1913, 372]. The onomastic and literary data in this paper will show that such an association does not advocate a reading sympathetic to totemism.

2. Totemism: an overview

2.1. Historical debate

The earliest notion of totemism as a form of religion is found in McLennan’s writings, who argued that ancient peoples came through the totem stage, which has its typical representation among the aborigines of America and Australia [McLennan, 1869; 1870]. Yet, it was Frazer who gave totemism its classical definition. Elaborating on McLennan’s ideas and combining anthropological data from different places, he

¹ All Semitic names discussed here are written in *italic* and capitalized (except for those from epigraphic sources with /ʾ/ and /ʿ/ as initials). Akkadian, Amorite, and Ugaritic names written in syllabic cuneiform are transliterated according to the Assyriological conventions. The transcription used for Arabic names and terms is close to the DIN 31635 standard. Symbols: (f) = female name; (m) = male name.

defines the totem as “a class of material objects which a savage regards with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and altogether special relation” [Frazer, 1887, 1]. But in his treatment of Samoan and Fijian religion, Frazer confused the so-called “totem” with the family god [cf. Tylor, 1899, 142]. As for Durkheim, he labels the totem as “the clan transfigured and imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal.” It connects the profane coldness of isolated individuality and the sacred fervor of social interaction [Durkheim, 1912, 142 ff.].

Both Frazer and Durkheim based their theories on one of Boas’s arguments, in which he pointed to the analogy between totem legend and the guardian-spirit tale among the Kwakiutl tribe, British Columbia. Boas, however, disagreed with their conclusion, as it is “undoubtedly founded on their method of research, which has for its object an exhaustive interpretation of ethnic phenomena as the result of a single psychic” [Boas, 1916, 319]. In his view, the peculiarity of totemic phenomena is not to be found in the sum of totemic elements in any given tribe, nor in any individual element, but in the relation between elements, and totemism therefore is “an artificial unit, not a natural one” [Ibid., 321]. Inspired by him, Lévi-Strauss understood totemism as a natural taxonomy of social entities and analyzed it in view of the dualistic nature of the human thought, which is based on the contrast between nature and culture. In the case of “totemic people,” this contrast has served to exemplify differences and similarities between social groups, relations, and/or categories [Lévi-Strauss, 1966, 16–17].²

The debate on totemism does not end here. Some contemporary anthropologists still adhere to its classical definition, like Sahlins, who sees classical animism, totemism, and analogism as different organizations of the same animic principles: “Totemism is segmentary animism, in the sense that different nonhuman persons, as species-beings, are substantively identified with different human collectives, such as lineages and clans” [Sahlins, 2014, 281–282], an argument which has its foundations in Tylor’s writings [Tylor, 1899].³

2.2. Totemism and onomastics

Many anthropologists have taken onomastics, i.e., personal names derived from animal or plant names, as unarguable proof of totemism,⁴ a method which might reflect a cultural “projection”, as Goldenweiser suggested, since a totemic group does not necessarily bear the name of its totem. For example, The Black-Shoulder gens (the Inkesabe), British Colombia, has the buffalo as its totem, but its name is not derived from

² For an intellectual history of totemism since its emergence, see [Jones, 2005].

³ Totemism has not completely faded in contemporary anthropology as some recent studies show [Pedersen, 2001; Ingold, 2000, 111–131; Dakubo et al., 2008].

⁴ A cross-cultural inventory of “totemic” names is mentioned by Lévi-Strauss [1966, 173–177]; for more recent examples, see [Harrison, 1990, 52–55].

the name of that animal. Nor are the names of the three sub-genes derived from their totem, which also holds for many tribes in North America and Africa [Goldenweiser, 1910, 251–253]. The Iroquois, whose appellation derives from a plant name, have a system of proper names entirely distinct from the system of clan appellations. Their names most commonly consist of a verb with an incorporated noun or a noun followed by an adjective (verbal or nominal sentences): ‘In-the-Centre-of-the-Sky,’ ‘He-raises-the-Sky,’ ‘Beyond-the-Sky,’ ‘Hanging-Flower,’ etc. [Goldenweiser, 1913, 367]. Given these examples, one should be careful in dealing with animal names, especially when it comes to ancient cultures, such as the Near Eastern ones.

3. Animal names and totemism in ancient Semitic cultures

As mentioned in the introduction, we will deal below with four Semitic languages, in which proper names derived from animal names are thought to reflect remnants of totemism, that is, Amorite, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. Other languages, like Akkadian, Eblaite, Ugaritic, etc., are only cited to support the main arguments.

3.1. Amorite

Amorite, one of the earliest reflexes of Northwest Semitic, is a label which designates the language of all names (ca. 7 000, mostly personal) and loan words (ca. 90) in Akkadian and Sumerian cuneiform texts from the mid-3rd millennium BC until about 1200 BC that are Semitic but not Akkadian. Despite the absence of any Amorite texts, the Akkadian archives of the Amorite kingdoms, mainly that of Mari (Tell Hariri, Syria), provide us with valuable information on the Amorite people(s), i.e., their political and tribal structure, religion, customs, and so on.

Amorite onomastics exhibit many proper names referring to animals: one-word names, suffixed names, and compound names [Golinets, 2016; Dirbas, 2017b].

3.1.1. *Ditānu*: a totemic name?

Various words based on the Semitic root *ddn/dtn* have served as names of tribal units, geographical names, eponymous ancestors, and animal(s) (possibly mythical) [Michalowski, 2013]. As for animal references, Landsberger [1934, 94] connected Akkadian *ditānu* (Late Babylonian = Sumerian ALIM) ‘aurochs’ [CAD, 3, 164] or ‘wisent (?)’ [AHw, 1, 173] with Hebrew *dīšōn* ‘addax’.⁵ Given its late occurrence in Akkadian sources, *ditānu* is thought to be of West Semitic origin: < **daytan-* or **taydan-* [Marchesi, 2006, 9, fn. 23]. Durand [1988] makes an etymological connection between Akkadian *ditānu*, Hebrew *dīšōn*, and Mari *tīšānu*, which is mentioned in lists of exotic animals (UDU.ḪÁ *tī-ša-né*) and in a letter (*tī-ša-na-nu-um*), and is

⁵ On the zoological identification of Mendes-Antelope (*Addax nasomaculatus*), see [Donner, 1995, 249].

supposed to denote ‘chamois ou moufflon montagnard.’ Similarly, Streck [2000, § 2.114] proposes a Proto-Semitic root **dtn* for these three terms. Golinets [2016, 66], who also assigns Mari *tišān-* to Amorite, adopts a compromise: ‘sheep’ or ‘aurochs.’ For Militarev & Kogan [2005, 296], the correlation between the three terms is rather unlikely due to phonetic and semantic considerations. Some animal terms, among them Mari *tišānu* and Middle Babylonian / New Assyrian *te/ušēnu* ‘eine Art Büffel (?)’ [AHw, 3, 1352], possibly go back to **tayš-ān-*. On the other hand, Hebrew *dīšōn* is rather related to Akkadian *daššu* ‘buck,’ both belonging to **dayš-* [Militarev & Kogan, 2005, 297].

For Lipiński [1978, 105–109], *ditānu* should be a kind of antelope rather than an aurochs and thus compared with the symbolic animal of the god Amurru which is most likely a gazelle or an antelope. The tribal name, or sometimes-divinized eponymous ancestor, is attested in several Akkadian and Amorite names from Sargonic, Ur III and Old Babylonian times, like *Me-^dDitān* ‘The sacred power of D.,’ *’Ilī-Ditāna* ‘D. is my god,’ *Ammī-Ditāna* ‘D. is my (paternal) ancestor,’ *’Abī-Ditāna* ‘D. is my father,’ *Šumu-Ditāna* ‘Descendant of D.,’⁶ in addition to Ugaritic *Bn-Dtn* ‘Son of D.’⁷ Based on this, Lipiński [1978, 109] goes on to conclude that *Ditānu*’s figure is closer to the tribal totem than to a historical figure.

3.1.2. Discussion

Beside the fact that neither the etymology nor the zoological identification of *ditānu* is clear, three objections arise against Lipiński’s hypothesis:

1. Amurru and the antelope: this god, whose emblem was not only a crooked staff (*gamlu*) but also a large mouse (in later sources), was a purely Mesopotamian theological construct to symbolize the presence of Amorites [Beaulieu, 2005, 36–37, *fn.* 35].

2. Animals and cult in Mari texts: except for our information on the use of some animals as sacrifices at concluding treaties, i.e., the donkey and rarely the puppy and the goat⁸, there is no single reference to animals (real or mythical) as symbolic ancestors.⁹

3. The use of proper names as theophoric elements: this tradition is not confined to *Ditāna* or tribal names; it merely reflects an ancient Near Eastern name-giving

⁶ For these and more examples of *Ditāna*-names, see Gelb [1980, 126–127] and Marchesi [2006, *fn.* 28]. On the Amorite suffix *-a* in these names, see [Streck, 2000, 272].

⁷ A set of Ugaritic literary and religious texts refer to *Ditānu* as an ancestor of the kings [Vidal, 2006, 168–169]. For example, RS 24.272: 1–4 reads *kymgy ’adn ’lm rbn ’m dtn wys’al mīpt yld wy’ y nn dtn...* ‘when the lord of the great gods goes to Ditanu and asks (of him) the ruling of the child, then Ditanu answers him...’ [Pardee, 1983, 128–131].

⁸ An Old Babylonian letter from Mari reads: ‘In order to kill a donkey (i.e. to conclude a treaty) between the nomads and (the people of) Idamaraš, they brought to me a puppy and a she-goat, but I obeyed my lord and did not give (permission for the use of) a puppy and a she-goat. I caused a foal of a she-donkey to be killed. I established peace between the nomads and (the people of) Idamaraš’ [ARM II, 37, 6–14].

⁹ For the Amorite religious practices, particularly the use of stones and trees as cultic objects, see [Durand, 2005].

tradition without the necessity of totemism. As is known, names of some Sumerian and Old Babylonian monarchs were used as theophoric elements by either their officials or by the officials who served under their successors [Edzard, 1998, 109]. The following examples are from the Old Babylonian archives of Sippar: *Abī-ešuh-līdiš* ‘May (the king) Abī-ešuh become new,’ *Sabium-abī* ‘Sabium is my father,’ *Sabium-bānī* ‘Sabium is creator,’ *Samsu-iluna-nūr-mātim* ‘Samsu-iluna is the light of the country,’ and *Samsu-iluna-kīma-ili* ‘Samsu-iluna is like a god’.¹⁰ In the Mari archives we have, for instance, *Yaḥdun-Lîm-ilī* ‘Yaḥdun-Lîm is my god’ [Durand, 1984, 132]. In addition to these, there are names compounded with names of mortals or masters, like the Old Babylonian *Amat-Bēltani* ‘Slave-girl of Bēltani,’ *Awīl-ilim-erībam* ‘Awīl-ilim has restituted to me,’ and *Ea-tukultī-qarrād* ‘Ea-tukultī is a hero.’ *Bēltani*, *Awīl-ilim*, and *Ea-tukultī* are normal names but here they appear as if they had a divine status [Stol, 1991, 203]. Given these examples, the occurrence of *Ditāna* as a theophoric element seems to belong to an ancient onomastic tradition that does not necessarily reflect totemism.

3.2. Hebrew

Besides the Hebrew Bible, the main source of the language, and a few cuneiform transcriptions of names, the earlier Hebrew corpus consists of epigraphic material. This ranges from brief texts and occasional inscriptions from the 8th century BC to the earliest attested Bible texts found together with original compositions at Qumran and in the greater Dead Sea area (2nd c. BC — 2nd c. CE) [Sáenz-Badillos, 1993, 130–146; Gzella, 2011, 429]. Animal names are amply attested as proper names in the Bible and epigraphic sources [Rechenmacher, 2012, 170–171; Dirbas, 2017a, 128–134].

3.2.1. Animal names: individual or tribal?

As stated in the introduction, Robertson Smith [1912] was the first scholar to apply the concept of totemism to the Old Testament and pre-Islamic Arabia. His application resulted in postulating the totemic origin of the slain god, or “totemism as sacrament.” Since this concept was extensively analyzed by Jones [2005, 59–104], I will exclude it from my discussion and limit myself to the question of animal names.

Robertson Smith’s main argument is that animal names in the Old Testament are originally tribal names, but they survived later as toponyms and individual names. The other two pieces of evidence of totemism are: (1) echoes of an ancient system of kinship through women, and (2) the biblical theme about the Jewish worship of various creeping things and unclean beasts (Ezek. viii. 10, Deut. iv. 17, 18) [Robertson Smith, 1912, 477–479]. Based on this, he concludes that totemism was known in Moab, Edom, and the land of Canaan [Ibid., 475].

¹⁰ All these names are listed alphabetically in [Ferwerda & Woestenburg, 1998].

This theory was elaborated by two other scholars with some modifications. In his study of Hebrew proper names, Gray dedicated one chapter to animal names and totemism, concluding that the small numbers of animal names used as personal was due to the transition from a totem tribal to a national organization of society. In addition, the use of the names of “unclean” animals is due to the sacred character of these animals in totem worship [Gray, 1896, 86–114]. Similarly, Murison believed that animal names are originally tribal names, so he argued against the poetical interpretation (or the metaphoric theory): “To say that these names were given for poetical reasons fails to explain either their tribal use or why animal names are much rarer in later times, while animal symbolism is much more common” [Murison, 1901, 180].

3.2.2. Discussion

The totemic interpretation of animal names was not accepted by other scholars, who preferred to see them as metaphors and affective terms [Meyer, 1906, 247, 308; Glatz, 2001]. Yet these scholars did not consider the totemistic hypothesis from a comparative viewpoint, a task I will take below.

The foundation of the totemistic theory, i.e. the tribal origin of animal names, collapses when one considers other Northwest Semitic data, which undoubtedly show that they are either given names/nicknames or patronyms¹¹ (unless one establishes their tribal background somewhere in the pre-historic time). Even if one may find some tribal names referring to animals, it is very probable that they are originally individual (i.e. eponymic). An eponymic name in itself evokes nothing about the “totem,” unless there is apparent evidence of a symbolic association between the name and the element it derives from (regardless of whether it is an animal name or not). On the other hand, the epigraphic evidence supports the individual origin of animal names in ancient Hebrew. This is clearly reflected by some cylinder seals which have a picture of the animal whose name is born by the owner himself, i.e. *'bl* ‘Camel’ with the picture of a Bactrian camel [Deutsch & Lemaire, 2000, 165, № 149], *'Aazaryaw* (son of) *Hgbh* ‘Locust’ with the picture of a locust [Ibid., 17, № 11], *Š'l* ‘Fox’ (son of *Mky*) with the picture of a running fox [Ibid., 84, № 88], and *Y'l* ‘Ibex’ with the picture of an ibex.¹² Such an association between the owner’s name and the animal it refers to is symbolic (and most likely reflects certain qualities of the name-bearer). Thus, it seems more convincing to approach animal names in ancient Hebrew as metaphors, either in a descriptive sense or as a wish that the bearer will be like the animal mentioned. The not so flattering ones can be understood as ‘mocking’ nicknames [Noth, 1928, 229–231; Toporoff, 1995, 33].

¹¹ Ugaritic [Gröndahl, 1967, 28–29; Watson, 2007, 108], Phoenecian-Punic [Benz, 1972, 239], and Old Aramaic [Maraqten, 1988]. For an overview of animal names in these languages, see [Dirbas, 2017a, 137–163].

¹² Some images of these seals are available in [Glatz, 2001, 28].

The metaphoric use of animal names is reflected by several passages in the Old Testament. For example, the blessing of Jacob (Gen 49) uses a series of animals for characterizing the descendants of the twelve tribes, or the tribes themselves: Judah is a young lion, who would exercise power over his brothers; Issachar is a rawboned donkey, who would submit to forced labor; Dan is a snake, who would provide justice and protection for his people; Naphtali is a doe, who would bear beautiful fawns; and Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, who would devour the prey and divide the plunder.¹³ Similarly, the god is compared to strong animals: bull, horse, lion, and vulture [Korpel, 1990, 523–559; Borowski, 2002, 408–410]. In other places, animal terms (bull, lion, goat, and wild ungulates) designate leaders, princes, and warriors [Miller, 1970, 180–182]. Terms denoting domestic animals, especially the ones used for females, e.g. ‘*Eglā* ‘Heifer,’ *Lē’ā* ‘Cow,’ and *Rāḥēl* ‘Ewe,’ probably symbolized affection and fertility [Borowski, 2002, 297–298; Glatz, 2001, 28].

3.3. Aramaic

Aramaic, which has never ceased to be a living, spoken language, seems to have taken shape some time before the 9th c. BC. In the ancient period, names derived from zoonyms are found in Old Aramaic, Nabatean, Hatrene, Palmyrene, Dura Europos, and, less, in Syriac [see Dirbas, 2017a, 137–147, with relevant references therein].

3.3.1. Totemism and the question of *Aram/Arām*

According to Lipiński [2000, 52–54], the name Aram should be vocalized with a long vowel, i.e. *Arām*, denoting the “broken” plural of *ri’m* (in view of Arabic), meaning ‘wild bulls.’¹⁴ This is also supported by the iconography. The representation of the Storm-god Hadad in the Syro-Hittite art as standing on the back of a bull expresses the belief that the wild bull assists the “Aramaeans” totemic group. This argument is in line with Lipiński’s view concerning *Ditāna* in particular and animal names in Semitic languages in general: “They may have put the baby into what was conceived to be a proper relationship with the tribal totem” [Lipiński, 2001, 582].

3.3.2. Discussion

Leaving aside the doubted etymology of *Ara/ām*, the singular form *ri’m* itself (variations *rēmā*, *rā’ēmā*, *raymā*), from which this name is supposed to derive, is absent from Aramaic onomastics [see Dirbas, 2017a, *appendix*, § 35]. Importantly also, the iconographic evidence regarding the (wild) bull is not confined to the “Arameans” but is attested much earlier. This animal played a fundamental role in the ideology of the Neolithic period, as the bucrania of aurochs were found collected in deposits

¹³ A totemistic explanation of these terms seems unlikely, as they are clearly used as nicknames or titles.

¹⁴ On the etymology of **ri’m-* ‘aurochs’ in Semitic languages, see [Militarev & Kogan, 2005, № 186].

or displayed on the walls of houses in many sites in Syria [Cauvin, 1994, 166–168].¹⁵ Based on this symbolism, deities were depicted with bull’s horns.¹⁶ The image of the wild bull (*rīmu*) in Mesopotamian literature is as rich that the word was used as epithet of gods, heroes, kings, and temples [CAD, 14, 361; Watanabe, 2002, 57–75]. In Ugaritic literature as well as the Bible, a number of terms for cattle are used as epithets of divine power [Rahmouni, 2008, 318–329; van der Toorn et al., 1999, 180–181]. Yet none of the names of the social groups mentioned in the Akkadian, Ugaritic, or ancient Hebrew sources has an etymological connection with cattle terms. In other words, if the presence of the bull in the ancient Syro-Hittite art specifically or in ancient Near Eastern cultures in general did emerge from a totemic association, *ri’m* or any of the other terms for the bull (e.g. **tawr-*, **alp-*) would have appeared elsewhere as designations of social groups in other Semitic languages, which is not the case. All the examples we have are clearly individual names.¹⁷

3.4. Arabic

Arabic, a member of the Central Semitic category, is divided into five varieties: (1) Old Arabic (refers to the inscriptions in the Hismaic and Safaitic scripts as well as to other few texts in the Dadanitic, Nabataean, Nabataeo-Arabic, Old Arabic, and Greek script), (2) Classical Arabic, (3) Middle Arabic, (4) Modern Standard Arabic, and (5) Spoken Arabic Dialects [Macdonald, 2000, 30; Al-Jallad, 2018].

Classical Arabic exhibits the highest number of animal names compared to the older Semitic languages, and several of them have survived in contemporary name-giving practices [Nöldeke, 1904, 75–90; Littmann, 1949, 13–15; Dirbas, 2017a, 165–210].

3.4.1. Robertson Smith again: tribal or individual names?

In his study of kinship and animal worship in ancient Arabia, Robertson Smith gives a long list of animal names extracted from the narrative sources to support their totemic origin [Robertson Smith, 1907, 223–235]. His central argument is that these names belonged to sub-tribes or stocks, but they were considered individual by the Arabic genealogical system, which is inspired by the patriarchal theory. The latter, of course, does not match the system of totemism, where kinship is reckoned through the mother.

As for names in the plural form, like ‘Dogs’ (*Kilāb*), ‘Panthers’ (*Anmār*) and ‘Lizards’ (*Dibāb*), these presumably originate from names of tribes, where each member would call himself a Dog and a Panther, and thus “the idea of an ancestor bearing

¹⁵ For a comparative study on the symbolism of the bull in the ancient Near Eastern art, see [Rice, 1998].

¹⁶ Horns were also used as offering to the god of storm in Ebla: “20 shekels of silver (157 g) for the circular covering of the horns of 2 bulls, offering of the king (for) Hadda of Aleppo” (MEE 12, 36, quoted in [Archi, 2013, 218]).

¹⁷ On **ri’m-*, **alp-*, and **tawr-* in Semitic onomastics, see [Dirbas, 2017a, appendix, § 35, 54, 60 respectively].

the plural name is plainly artificial, invented in the interests of a system” [Robertson Smith, 1907, 222; 1912, 462].

Robertson Smith’s argument was adopted by other scholars [Caetani & Gabrieli, 1915, 87–88; Hān, 1937, 62–84; Al-Wuğūd, 1999, 55–57].

3.4.2. Discussion

In the following subsections, I will discuss the two main concepts of the totemic interpretation of Arabic proper names referring to animals, that is, their tribal origin and occurrence in the plural form. In addition, I will consult non-onomastic works concerning any probable symbolic association between tribal ancestors and animals.

3.4.2.1. Individual or tribal names?

A counter-argument to the totemic origin of animal names in Arabic was held by Nöldeke, who gave more examples of them from all Semitic languages known to him. His view is that these names emerged as individual and cannot be a trace of totemism, for they are only found among clans and sub-tribes (eponymic names) but not among large tribes. It was natural for a nomad living in the open air to name their children after the beasts of the field, with no relation to totemism, and some names could be merely nicknames [Nöldeke, 1886, 156; 1904, 73]. This point seems correct if we consider the following examples listed by Robertson Smith: *Asad* ‘Lion’ (a number of tribes), *Tawr* ‘Bull’ (a sub-tribe), and *Ḍabba* ‘Lizard’ (a sub-division) [Robertson Smith, 1912, 459–460].

From a sociological viewpoint, except the fact that all these names refer to animals, there is nothing in common between them which would allow one to put them in one category. Robertson Smith’s categorization is apparently based on the fact that all these names appear in *nasab* (meaning the type *banū-x* ‘sons/descendants of X’) or *nisba* (with the gentilic suffix *-ī*). To further illustrate the question of *nasab/nisba*, tribal names, and totemism, I will briefly draw on the Ancient North Arabian evidence, for many of the Arabic names mentioned in the narrative sources, including the ones referring to animals, are also attested in ancient North Arabian inscriptions (particularly Safaitic and Hismaic).¹⁸ In other words, classical name-giving practices represent, to a certain extent, a survival of ancient Arabian traditions.

Names of social groups are easily recognized in Safaitic and Hismaic through the phrase *q-l* ‘of the people/group/tribe of X,’ like *l s²hm bn ’dm bn bh’ q- l ḏf* ‘by S²hm son of ’dm son of Bh’ of the people of Ḍf.’ Less frequent is the gentilic suffix *-y*: *l rs¹l bn qdm h-ḏfy* ‘by Rs¹l son of Qdm the Ḍf-ite.’ Names other than those of peoples usually appear without the definite article, except for some cases, like *ḥrb h- mdy l rm b-bṣr* ‘the Persians plundered the Romans near Bṣr’ [Al-Jallad, 2015, 60]. Of all the names of the nomadic tribes in Safaitic inscriptions only three refer to animals, that

¹⁸ On this attestation, see [Dirbas, 2017a, *appendixes*, 220–280, under the abbreviations Saf. and His.].

is, *D'b* 'Wolf,' *F'rt* 'Mouse,' and *Nmrt* 'Leopard'¹⁹ [Al-Jallad, 2015, *Index of tribes*]. In view of the high proportion of animal names in Safaitic and Hismaic, it seems likely that these are originally personal (eponyms) and have no special association with the animals mentioned. Interestingly, quite similar to Safaitic inscriptions, the Qur'an uses two terms in reference to social groups. The first term is *Āl* (the same 'l), which is used in a theological sense in relation to the adherents of a certain figure (an adversary, a prophet, or as eponym): *Āl Fir'awn* (Q. 2: 49) against *Āl Mūsa* and *Āl Hārūn* (Q. 2: 248); *Āl Ibrahim*, *Imrān* (Q. 3: 33), *Ya'qūb* (Q. 12: 6), and *Lūṭ* (Q. 15: 59). The second term is *banū* 'descendants of' which occurs in two cases: *Banū Israel* (Q. 10: 90; 20: 40, 47, etc.) and *Banū Ādam* (Q. 7: 26–27; 17: 50). When referring to big nations, the Qur'an, like Safaitic inscriptions, also mentions them in the plural form: *al-Rūm* 'The Romans' (Q. 30: 2). Thus, in most cases the tribal (or group) name is eponymic, a fact which Robertson Smith denied because it does not match the idea that the totem is transmitted through the mother.

3.4.2.2. Animal names in the plural form

First of all, the plural form is not confined to the classical onomasticon. Ancient North Arabian names in 'QTL pattern could reflect the elative *af'al* or the plural *af'ul*, *af'āl*, such as Safaitic 's'd 'Lion(s),' 'd'b 'Wolf/Wolves,' 'klb 'Dog(s),' 'm'z 'Goat(s),' 'nmr 'Leopard(s)' [Harding, 1971], and Hismaic 's'šr 'Young Gazelle(s)' [King, 1990, 360]. None of these, as far as we know from the inscriptions, is related to any tribe or clan. Moreover, an examination of the classical onomasticon yields more names in the plural form than the ones mentioned by Robertson Smith, like *Arwā* (f) 'Mountain Goats' (pl. of *urwiyya*), *Ḍarr* 'Red Ants' (pl. of *ḍarra*), *Ġihāš* 'Foals; Young Asses' (pl. of *ġahš*), *Riyām* 'White Antelopes' (probably pl. of *ri'm*), and *Zabāb* 'Shrews' (pl. of *zabāba*).²⁰ All these names, which were not invented in the interests of a patriarchal system, are originally individual, and according to genealogical and gentile research [Caskel, 1966; Ibn Durayd, 1991; Al-Sam'ānī, 1980–1984], none of them is attested for any tribe or social group. On the other hand, the plural form is not confined to animal names in Arabic; it is also found in other types, like the classical name *Riyāh* 'Winds' [Caskel, 1966, 488], and much more in modern Arabic: *Amwāğ* (f) 'Waves,' *Ansām* (f) 'Breezes,' *Anhār* (f) 'Rivers,' *Sahāb* (f + m) 'Clouds,' etc. [Al-Hittī, 2003, 6, 34, 74, 75]. Such forms reflect an ancient onomastic tradition which can be explained through two hypotheses: these forms can be either (1) circumstantial or omen-names, i.e. the birth-giving was accompanied by the presence of a group of certain animals or the like,²¹ or (2) metaphoric designations/nicknames of amplification.

¹⁹ Mostly, both *F'rt* and *Nmrt* are masculine names ending in the hypocoristic suffix *-(a)t*.

²⁰ See all these names in [Dirbas, 2017a, 165–175].

²¹ According to the classical explanation, Arabs used to name their children after the first encountered animal [Ibn Durayd, 1991, 6–7], a custom which is also known in other cultures, such as India [Enthoven, 1924, 211] and the Mbeere people of Kenya [Katakami, 1997, 205].

3.4.2.3. *Animal ancestry?*

As far as we know from classical zoological literature [Al-Ġāḥiẓ, 1965; Al-Damīrī, 1992] and works related to name-giving practices [Ibn Durayd, 1991, 5–7] and religion and customs of Arabs in the pre-Islamic times [Ibn Al-Kalbī, 1995; Al-Alūsī, 1992], there is no clear mention of animals as symbolic tribal ancestors.²² According to Ḥān [1937, 70–80], however, traces of archaic animism or totemism are reflected by the reports regarding: (1) the association between animals and the jinn; and (2) the unlawfulness of killing or touching animals in specific conditions. Yet such an argument does not advocate totemism in the case of proper names derived from animal names, as we lack sufficient information on a special connection between the tribe/clan and the animal it is named after.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have examined the alleged totemic origin of proper names derived from animal names in four Semitic languages: Amorite, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic.

Regarding Amorite, the hypothesis that totemism is reflected by compound names containing the element *Ditāna* is unlikely. In addition to the fact that neither the etymology nor the zoological identification of this element is clear, there is no single reference to animals as tribal ancestors or the like. The same unlikelihood holds for Aramaic in the case of the dubious name *Ara/ām*, for the singular form, from which this name is supposed to derive, i.e., *ri'm* ‘wild bull,’ is absent from the Aramaic onomasticon. On the other hand, the iconographic evidence regarding the (wild) bull does not necessarily reflect any special totemic association between the “Armaeans” and this animal, as it appears much earlier than the Aramaic art (Neolithic art onward). Concerning Hebrew and Arabic, the assumption that animal names originated as tribal names (= totemic) and survived later as individual names seems incorrect in view of the epigraphic evidence (in Hebrew as well as the Ancient North Arabian languages). Also, neither Hebrew nor Arabic advocates the notion of animal ancestry.

Since proper names denoting animals in the languages in question do not offer sufficient evidence of totemism, it seems safer to own up to ignorance, rather than to attribute to ancient cultures psychological attitudes that may be ours, but that we have no guarantee were theirs. The same argument also holds for the alleged association between ancestor worship and totemism.

²² Modern Arab scholars [Ḥān, 1937, 70; Aġīna, 1, 282] tended to build a theory of animal ancestry on a classical report mentioning that a certain ‘Ubayd al-Kilābī attributed his love of camels to a maternal kinship (*hu’ūla*) between his tribe and these animals [Al-Ġāḥiẓ, 4, 53]. Such a single reference, however, is not sufficient enough in this context.

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Received 22 January 2018

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**ОНОМАСТИКА И РЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯ ПРОШЛОГО:
ТОТЕМИЗМ В СЕМИТСКОЙ ТРАДИЦИИ**

Настоящая статья посвящена анализу гипотезы, согласно которой древнесемитские имена собственные, образованные от названий животных, являются отражением существовавшего в семитской традиции тотемизма. Эта концепция, впервые возникшая в работах Уильяма Робертсона Смита в конце XIX в., недавно вновь стала предметом научного обсуждения. Основываясь на ономастических данных и анализе исторических источников на четырех семитских языках (аморейском, иврите, арамейском и арабском), автор приводит доводы против тотемистской гипотезы. Особое внимание уделяется аморейским сложным именам, содержащим элемент *Ditāna*, арамейскому имени *Ara/ām*, предположительно производному от *ri'm* ‘буйвол’, а также отзоонимным арабским личным именам, которые иногда рассматриваются как производные племенных названий. Автор приходит к выводу, что нет никакой информации о существовании в семитской традиции какой-либо связи между рассматриваемыми именами и какими-либо социальными группами, как нет никаких свидетельств почитания животных в качестве символических предков.

Даже если в некоторых ныне существующих «примитивных» племенах и клановых группах отзоонимные имена собственные действительно связаны с племенным тотемом, этот факт сам по себе не должен использоваться в качестве аргумента при изучении других культур, в особенности культур древности, несмотря на то, что с семантической и деривационной точки зрения существующие в них имена действительно могут быть связаны с названиями животных или растений.

Ключевые слова: семитские языки, арабский язык, аморейский язык, иврит, племенные названия, клановые названия, названия животных, тотемизм, почитание предков, антропология.

Рукопись поступила в редакцию 22.01.2018