

“Diwéesi protí smínthoqoj” The oldest known Greek incantation

This article discusses the enigmatic phrase that has been discovered by professor José L. MELENA (University of the Basque Country, Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, Classics, Faculty Member), as it is described concisely in the following review of his book [1]:

“Learning LB may have required a mnemonic device for memorizing the syllabograms, like the Japanese iroha for the kana script. The string di-we-si-po-ro-ti-mi-to-qo repeats on three tablets (PY Aq 218v, Tn 316r, and PY Xa 412v); it may be a conventional school exercise (cf. T.G. Palaima, “Scribes, Scribal Hands and Palaeography,” in Y. Duhoux and A. Morpurgo Davies, eds., *A Companion to Linear B*. Vol. 2 [Leuven 2011] 51–2 n. 30)”.

For more detail, I quote J. Melena’s own words:) [2]

«Therefore, it might be possible to track down some of the consequences of this ‘scholastic’ training such as the unprompted writing of mnemonic sequences (iroha’s) on discarded slips, margins, etc. during leisure time. If this was a widespread practice, the occasional presence of careless writings should not be surprising. This may well be the case of the text inscribed on the back of PY Aq 218.v., which has no relationship to the document recorded on the diptych 64+218. This writing reads as follows:

di-we-si-po-ro-ti-mi-to-qo

in which no syllabogram is repeated. In spite of many attempts, this sequence defies¹ interpretation (DUHOUX 2011, 109-113) and, curiously enough, it appears also on the verso of another fragmentary tablet from Pylos (Xa 412), as read by Bennett: (BENNETT 1996-1997, 14off.; on Tn 316 cf. also DEL FREO 1996-1997, 157f.)

di-wę-[si]-po-ro-ti-mi-to-qo.

The tablet is a rather strange specimen showing the recto surface divided into five compartments by vertical bars; it is likely that it represented a training exercise, with the Mycenaean iroha written on its back. This training ambiance appears also in the loose checks of the sharpness of the stylus on PY Tn 316.

Nevertheless, to date, the textual sequences in the documents do not seem to reflect an ‘alphabetic’ arrangement, or at least a disposition based on the order of such a Mycenaean iroha, which is attested only at Pylos²».

The phrase “defies interpretation” is rather common (5 times) in the mentioned work [2], however this phrase, di-we-si-po-ro-ti-mi-to-qo sounds very familiar in Greek even at first glance; it took me only a few minutes to understand its meaning, and I don’t say that to show that I am good in Greek, but to give an idea of how common and familiar are these words, their meaning, and the culture behind them.

¹ I have not seen and do not know anything of those attempts of interpretation.

² (Highlighted by me).

The comparison to Japanese iroha is not really rational, for the following reasons:

The Japanese “iroha uta” (poem) uses all the Japanese syllabograms, each one for one time only, and while it is true that in the di-we-si-po-ro-ti-mi-to-go phrase too no sign is repeated, this is the only thing these two (the iroha... and the diwesi...) have in common; on the other hand, the iroha poem makes use of all the Japanese syllabograms, while the “diwesi...” uses only nine, that is about 1/10 of the Linear B signs inventory that we know; this is important, because using all the Japanese syllabograms once is the main concept of the iroha poem.

Another thing that makes the iroha fascinating, is that it makes good sense as a poem (something like “*Although its scent still lingers on, the form of a flower has scattered away; For whom will the glory of this world remain unchanged?* etc.”). The arrangement of the “kana” in the iroha (as also another Japanese poem, called Ametsuchi no Uta) utilizes every “kana” just once, and the same can be said of the Javanese Hanacaraka poem: it makes good sense as poetry and utilizes all the Javanese consonants. Such poems, if they did not utilize all the repertoire of letters, or if they did not make sense, would be useless, they would not even exist as mnemonic poems.

Therefore, even if the “diwesi” were only meant as a writing exercise, still the whole phrase must make good sense; the arrangement of syllables in the phrase did not fell from the sky at random. Moreover it is not an arrangement of syllables based on their phonetic values, a practice well known from Cuneiform students’ tablets with series of syllabic signs as “bu-ba-bi, tu-ta-ti, su-sa-si” etc.

And, if one thinks that the “diwesi” sequence is only a mnemonic device or a writing exercise, has a profound ignorance of the human mentality of past times – which remained unchanged in fact, until the recent years of the science revolution; before which, all people lived in a spiritual world, where everything is manifestation of spirits, envious or benevolent. There was no question of believing in God or not; in everybody’s mind this was the reality: “I live in a material world where every material thing, and especially every living creature, the more so every human, is a manifestation and a servant of a deity, and the envious are in a constant battle with the good. The evil have great power, but this power is only derived from falsehood and darkness. I know my personal deity, and I will always invoke it when the opposing powers endanger me. When I win, I will always thank my personal deity by giving some material present or at least eulogy”. This understanding of the world is easy to appear if only we read any literature of any nation or culture of past times. And it is this which makes it easy to understand the “diwesi poem”, as I reconstruct it:

“diweesi proti sminthoqj”

For the transliteration, I double the vowels to indicate their length. For what is commonly transliterated as k^w for IndoEuropean voiceless velar, I use simply “q”, and for the IndoEuropean voiceless palatal (shown by J. Melena and others as a “k” with an accent mark on it) I use simply k. As a whole, my system of transliteration for such phonemes is explained in this grid:

	velars	palatals
unvoiced	q	k
voiced	g	c

It is the same system I use since some decades for other languages too, including Sumerian (in which case “voiced” is replaced by “emphatic” and “unvoiced” by “aspirated”) and Turkic. I propose this system to be used for all languages where it can apply, at least with a little adjustment, as it has the advantage of using no diacritics, and it is in accordance to the use of the letters in the oldest alphabets (the Latin, Greek, and Phoenician), and some modern transliteration systems too, including the international transliteration of Linear B signs.

As for the labialization mark ^w commonly used for IndoEuropean q (unvoiced velar), I have to observe that it should not be compulsory; it did not always occur with the q, and when it occurred it was only to facilitate pronunciation, especially to make possible to pronounce velar consonant + front vowel (this combination is still impossible in Modern Greek, and in other languages like Turkic). In a few words the w did belong to the root: as in the word gwo- (βοῦς, ox), so there it could be written gwo- (not g^wo-) but even there note that Sanskrit has simply g (e.g. [gawax] =oxen), which again shows that the labialization of the velars was always perceived as secondary and unimportant in IndoEuropean languages.

Now, to explain the phrase

diwéesi protí smínthoqoj

diweesi is unfamiliar as plural, while the singular form di-we (Diwej, for classical Δί =to Zeus) along with di-wo (Diwos, for classical Διός) is attested on Linear B tablets. Of course the form diweesi does not imply that there are more than one Zeus, but here it means “all the Bright Gods”, obviously derived from the ProtoIndoEuropean root *dj(e)w “the light of sky; brightness, effulgence, as of lightning and of the heavenly bodies”. The form of diwéesi is locative case, plural.

“protí” is the well known Greek and generally IndoEuropean adposition, found in this form (protí) in Homer, and the same form was in ProtoIndoEuropean, as indicated by many languages, including Sanskrit “prati”. While in classical Greek such words, originally adverbs, are used as prepositions, in older IndoEuropean usage they were true adverbs, used like **postpositions**; such is the usage here too.

“smínthoqoj” (noun, in nominative plural, in Classical Greek it would have been *σμίνοθοποι) is easily explained from “smínthos” (a mouse, rat, with a connotation of harmful and disgusting) and the root h₃ek^w, to use the common system of transliteration as used by J. Melena, opere citato [2], page 37-38, where the author gives numerous occurrences of that root as last part of compound words. Such a compound word is also “smínth-oqoj”, meaning “those who have eyes (or face reminiscent) of harmful disgusting rats”. In Modern Greek, the word «ποντικομούρηδες» can give, more than the meaning, the style and feeling of “smínthoqoj”. It is important to remember in this context that god Apollo was named (already in Homer’s Iliad) Smintheus (Σμινθεύς), a word derived from smínthos (disgusting rat), and explained as “the (bright god) who rid(s) the people of noxious rats”. The Trojan high priest of Apollo invokes the god as “Smintheu” when he is in utter distress and seeks a remedy to the situation through Apollo taking revenge on his inimical people (not rats), and then Smintheus Apollo did take revenge by causing a severe pestilence, which must have started from rats, then was manifested in dogs and mules, and lastly affected people, the Achaeans, in Homer’s Iliad rhapsody A.

It has been tempting to render the word as “sminthooqój”, that is with long o in the second syllable, just analogous to many classical Greek words ending in -ωπός (e.g. σκυθρωπός, χαρωπός, and many in Modern Greek e.g. αγριωπός, κιτρινωπός), but I have concluded that it was really smínthoqoj and not “sminthooqój”, because those words in -ωπός are usual in classical Greek and even more in Modern Greek, so in thinking a form * “sminthooqój” I was influenced from my first language background; J. Melena, o.c. page 37-38, gives numerous occurrences of the root as a component of Linear B words, where it did not have the form -ooqós (ánthrooqos is of somewhat different and somewhat doubtful formation).

Another reason for smínthoqoj is metric. In all cultures, incantations and magic words have some distinct rhythmical pattern, as, for instance, the countless Sanskrit mantras (a mantra or “vidya” is never considered known if its meter is unknown). The phrase “diwéesi protí smínthoqoj” has a bacchic rhythm: ~~~~...³ which would be badly destroyed if the final syllables (which are the most critical for the meter) did not comply; with what appears like a cretic, the phrase closes very roundly, but if the penultimate syllable were long the (unpleasant) word * “sminthooqój” would be emphasized too much and abruptly out of rhythm.

The ancient Greeks were very sensitive to the rhythm of phrases, not only for incantations, but also in all kinds of inscriptions, and even in rhetoric a tendency to apply rhythmical patterns has been observed. I have noticed that even ancient Greek personal names were made so as to fit into a metrical pattern, for example a common type is choriambic names of 4 syllables⁴ (which fit well into a dactylic meter).

Therefore, the phrase is reconstructed as

diwéesi protí smínthoqoj

It is an incantation that the Mycenaean Greeks used when they encountered some bad omen, e.g. a crow, a dirty rat, or a person with some “darkness” in the countenance; “darkness” does not here refer to the color of eyes; it is rather a feeling gotten from an envious way of looking; eyes, regardless of color, have a brightness of expression, which is perceived by the feeling, and not by the sense of vision; if that brightness of expression appears too little, it is called “kem göz” in Turkish (in Old Turkic, kem is known as “sickness, adversity, calamity”; göz=eye); borrowed into Persian, “kam” means “insufficient, corrupt, vile (eye)”; such is the concept of the “evil eye”[3]. As we know from classical literature (e.g. Aristophanes), the ancient Greeks considered ugly the “simoi” (σιμοί, blunt nosed persons) and inauspicious the “pyriai” (πυρία, reddish hair persons).

Incantations were used in the ancient world for every purpose; an example is when Odysseus as a young boy was wounded in hunting by a boar, his companions stopped the bleeding by means of epawoidee (ἐπαοιδῆ, Homer’s Odyssey rhapsody τ [book 19], 457).

The real purport of incantations is not only in their literal meaning; even their very sound has profound esoteric meaning and feeling, that is why incantations must be pronounced with precision, or (it is believed that) they will have no (desirable)

³ (Bakkheios pous= ~~~)

⁴ for example Στησίχορος, Αρχίλοχος, Αντίοχος, Λαομέδων, and hundreds of other names in such a metric pattern.

effect; that is why a special alphabet had to be devised so as to precisely render the pronunciation of the sacred Avesta texts. The esoteric meaning and feeling of sound is important for understanding incantations or mantras; for example, the Hindu God Ganesha is addressed as “waqratu,n,da”⁵, not just because he is depicted “with a curved snout” (as waqratu,n,da literally means), but more importantly because the word waqratu,n,da gives a feeling of divine power, and also it includes within it “qratu” which in Sanskrit means a sacred or sacrificial ritual. While we keep in mind that also this phrase “diwéesi protí smínthoqoj” is a sacred incantation, which the Mycenaean Greeks had inherited from their distant past ancestors⁶, esoteric meanings of its sounds is not the scope of this work. I shall give its literal translation below:

“in front (to the presence) of the bright gods (go / are) all the rat-faced (creatures and people)”,

«στους φωτεινούς θεούς ενώπιον οι ποντικόφθαλμοι» (to render it word by word and quite literally), or

«μπροστά στους φωτεινούς αγγέλους οι ποντικομούρηδες» would be the exact counterpart in Modern Greek culture and language, also in a metrical form.

This type of wording was common in the ancient world, it is not unusual in the Bible (e.g. in Genesis it is described that “So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (here “from the presence” is millipnê in Hebrew, a form of the word “pān”, literally “face”). I will only cite a few lines from an Akkadian hymn to Šamaš (the Sun God) [4], which is very relevant, because Šamaš is the “bright god” par excellence, and the “divesi poem” mentions “the bright gods” in general; the whole hymn is relevant, but I focus on expressions of “facing” and “confronting”, (in Classical Greek “ενώπιον”) which is the main idea in the “diwesi” phrase: “the envious beings (powerful only by deceit and darkness) confront the (almighty) bright gods”:

“The man who constantly disguises his intentions with hypocrisy – his case is before you; (...) Those whose mouth says “No” – their case is before you. (...) The humble, the weak, the afflicted, the poor, she whose son is captive, constantly and unceasingly confronts you. He whose family is remote, whose city is distant, the shepherd amid the terror of the steppe confronts you, the herdsman in warfare, the keeper of sheep among enemies. Šamaš, there confronts you the caravan, those journeying in fear, the travelling merchant, the agent who is carrying capital. Šamaš, there confronts you the fisherman with his net, the hunter, the Bowman who drives the game, with his bird net the Fowler confronts you. The roving dead, the vagrant soul, they confront you, Šamaš, and you hear all. You do not obstruct those that confront you.... For my sake, Šamaš, do not curse them!

(The lines 55-58 serve like a summary of those above:)

....of arrangements prostrate themselves before you, before you the wicked and the just prostrate themselves. There is none but you who goes down to the deep, [...] you blaze abroad the judgments on the criminal and law-breaker”.

⁵ here commas before n and d signify that they are retroflex sounds.

⁶ The language in this talismanic phrase seems to be very old, perhaps quite old-fashioned compared to the everyday Greek language of Mycenaean times.

In all these lines cited from the Šamaš hymn, the Akkadian words for “facing / confronting / before you” all are made from the root: **maḥāru(m)** “to face, confront; oppose; receive”
G (*alu*, pret. NB also *inḥur*, Ass. also *iḥḥur*)
 [IGI] 1. “oppose”; “face” (an enemy = acc.); of which the basic meaning is “(in) front”[5].

So, such hymns to Šamaš, the Sun God, or to the bright gods in general, aim for the bright gods to confront the people, or for the people to face the bright gods, and while the righteous seek that confrontation, it is disastrous to the wicked.

We cannot know what inauspicious and frightening thing the scribes at Pylos saw (or heard) so that they had to recite, and record in writing too⁷, this *επαοιδή* (sacred incantation). Surely it was a troubled time, if we remember that the tablets were conserved only due to the fire that burnt the palaces in a violent raid that destroyed the Mycenaean Greek states and established new rulers.

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[3] For the etymology see: Nişanyan Sözlük. Available at: <http://www.nisanyansozluk.com/>

[4] From W. G. Lambert (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilfred_G._Lambert): Babylonian Wisdom Literature 1960. (221.849.2 L222). The hymn consists of 200 lines arranged in 100 couplets, I cite only from verses 123-148, pages 132-135, and verses 55-58, page 129.

[5] A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian, 2000, Harrassowitz Verlag.

⁷ That was like making, or starting to make, an improvised amulet.