

A Minoan deity from London Medicine Papyrus

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Abstract

In London Medicine Papyrus, in incantation against *samuna ubuqi* illness there are two names of Minoan deities. One of them is determined as Maja that evidently is correlated with Maia of ancient Greek mythology. Maia of ancient Greek mythology is the oldest of seven Pleiades. Pleiades were connected with seafaring since the season of navigation in Mediterranean region began with their heliacal rising. Minoan Maia could be protector of sailors; use of name Maja in an incantation against a disease is completely logical since seafaring was very important of Minoan people, and so a deity that was protector of sailors evidently was considered as a mighty one and could also be an effective protector against other troubles. The fact that name Maja is written with determinative “god”, but not “goddess” in the incantation while in Greek mythology Maia is goddess, hints that initially Maja could be androgynous/bigender deity.

Keywords: London Medicine Papyrus; Minoan deity; Minoan language; Minoan; Kaftiw

1. Introduction

The London Medicine Papyrus (pic. 1) is an ancient Egyptian papyrus from British Museum. The papyrus is a collection of recipes, descriptions of magic means and incantations. First it was published by Walter Wreszinski (Wreszinski 1912). The papyrus is dated to about 1629 – 1628 BC (Friedrich et al. 2006). It contains some incantations in languages other than ancient Egyptian: in Semitic, Nubian and in so called Kaftiw/Keftiw¹ (Haider 2001: 479).

There are two Kaftiw incantations in the papyrus.

In current paper attention is paid to the incantation that is conventionally named: incantation against *samuna ubuqi*² illness. This incantation is the most interesting Minoan part of the papyrus since it contains enough words belonging to different grammatical classes/categories. The incantation is recorded by so called group-writing with the use of determinatives (pic. 2), so it is possible to reconstruct original sounds; and determinatives help to see borders of words and to determine classes of words and sometimes even say something definite about lexical meaning.

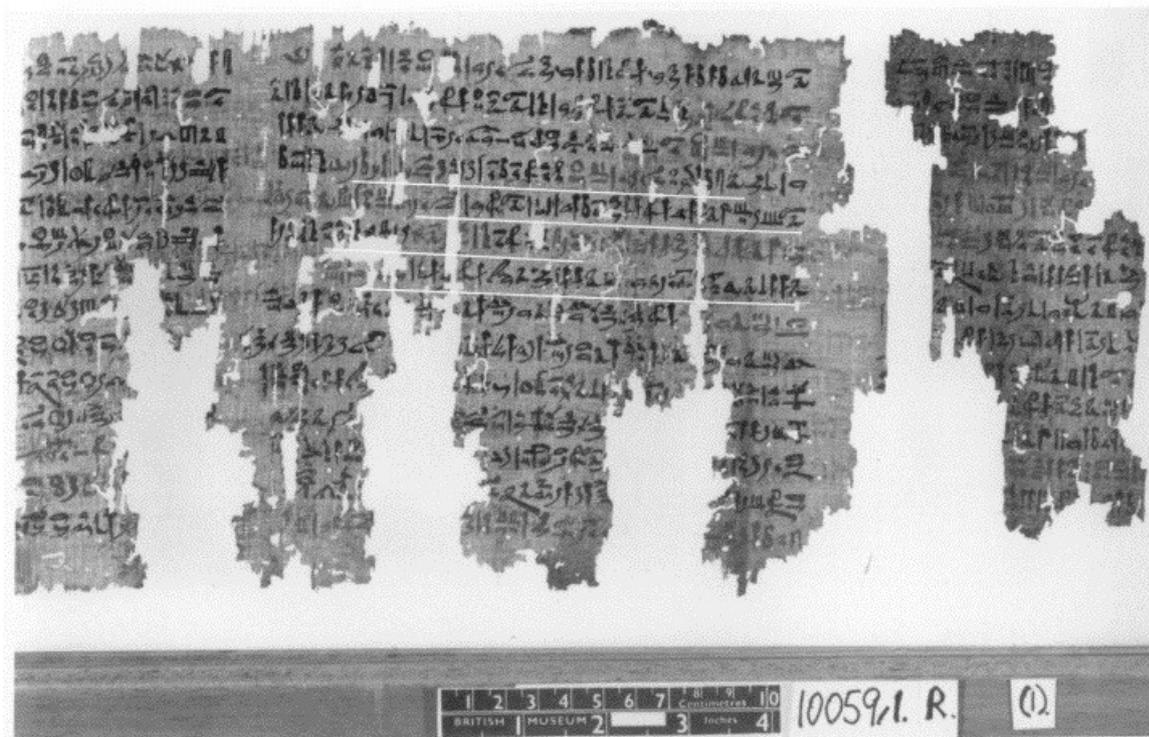
The transliteration³ of the text of incantation is the following:

šntw Det. “to speak” (“to eat”/ “to drink”, “to think”) *nt s3mꜥwn3* Det. “illness” *wbkj* Det. “illness”
s3t Det. “bread” Det. “land” (?), Det. “plurality”
s3bwj3jjd33 Det. “to go” *hwmꜥk33tw* Det. “to speak” (“to eat”/ “to drink”, “to think”) *rp33j* Det.
 “god”
p33 wrj Det. “to speak” (“to eat”/ “to drink”, “to think”) *mꜥj3* Det. “god” *dd tw r3 4*.

¹ Kaftiw/Keftiw (*K3fjw*) was ancient Egyptian name of Crete and Cretan people.

² The incantation is usually named “incantation against/for *samuna* illness”, however, as far as the text of incantation begin with words: *samuna* and *ubuqi* which both have determinative of “illness” I suppose that name of illness is formed by these two words and so it is more accurate to name it “incantation against *samuna ubuqi* illness” (for more details see Akulov 2017).

³ The transliteration made by Haider (Haider: 480) contains many mistakes, so it isn’t satisfactory for interpretations and so a completely new transliteration of the incantation has been made.



Pic. 1. London Medical Papyrus; fragment of text with Kaftiw incantations is marked by white lines (source: Kyriakidis 2002: 215)



Pic. 2. *Samuna ubuqi* illness incantation hieroglyphs transliteration (source: Kyriakidis 2002: 214)

In the text of the incantation there are two names of deities: *rp33jj* (pic 3) and *m^cj3*. (pic. 4).



Pic. 3. The name of *rp33j*



Pic. 4. The name of *m^cj3*

Both names are written with determinative “god” (pic. 5)



Pic. 5. Determinative “Seated god” (A40 sign according to Gardiner’s sign list)

It is important to point on the fact that this determinative has the meaning of “male god”. First name is hard to determine while the second one evidently is name Maja [maja]⁴.

2. Maja/Maia in ancient Greek mythology

For the interpretation of this Maja deity I suppose it can be perspective to look at Greek mythology since certain Minoan myths and gods evidently could be borrowed by ancient Greeks. Some Minoan deities could become second-ranked deities in ancient Greek mythology.

For instance Tethys seems to have been originated from Minoan deity Tetija whose name was found upon the Phaistos disc (pic. 6), for more details see Akulov 2016: 19 – 20.

According to ancient Greek mythology Tethys was a Titan daughter of Uranus and Gaia, and the wife of her brother Titan Oceanus, and the mother of the river gods and the Oceanids.

Despite Tethys had no active role in ancient Greek mythology and had no established cult, but it seems that she was one of the most ancient deities.



Pic. 6. The name of Tetija (Tethys) as it is written in the text of Phaistos disc

In ancient Greek mythology there is a deity named Maia. This Maia of Greek mythology is the daughter of Atlas and Pleione the Oceanid, and is the oldest of the seven Pleiades. Also Maia was mother of Hermes.

In ancient Greek language Μαῖα means “mother, “nurse”.

It would be rather illogical and unnatural to suppose that Maja of Minoan and Maia of ancient Greeks were unrelated since names of these two deities are completely the same and they existed in cultures which were connected.

The most important fact for current consideration is that Maia is connected with Pleiades and that she is the oldest of the seven Pleiades.

3. The meaning of the name Pleiades

It is noteworthy that Pleiades were connected with sailing.

The idea that the name of Pleiades has been derived from the name of their mother, i.e.: name Pleiades means “daughters of Pleione”. However, in reality the name of the star-cluster seems to

⁴ Right now it’s hardly possible to say something definite about the character of initial stress in this word.

have been derived from ancient Greek verb πλεῖν “to sail” because of the cluster's importance in delimiting the sailing season in the Mediterranean Sea: “the season of navigation began with their heliacal rising” (Pleiades).

The idea that Pleiades has been derived from the name of Pleion is nothing else, but a very naïve attempt to explain the origin of the name and actually it is nothing else, but so called folk etymology (Hard 2004: 518).

4. Possible interpretation of Maia/Maja deity

The fact that Maja name is mentioned in the text of incantation against a disease means that the deity evidently was considered as healer and defender by Minoan people.

The fact that Maja is connected with Pleiades in ancient Greek mythology means that initial Minoan Maja could also be protector of sailors.

In this context use of name Maja in an incantation against a disease is completely logical since seafaring was very important activities of Minoan people, and so a deity that was protector of sailors evidently was considered as a mighty one and could also be an effective protector against other troubles.

The fact that name Maja was written with determinative “god”, but not “goddess” in Egyptian papyrus while in late Greek mythology Maia is a goddess can inspire certain speculations about initial gender of the deity.

There can be the following possible interpretations:

- a) Egyptian who wrote down the incantation simply didn't care much about initial gender of this Minoan deity;
- b) Egyptian who wrote down the incantation thought that such serious deity, i.e.: protector of sailors and healer could be only god, but not a goddess;
- c) Maja was male deity in Minoan culture and changed gender in Greek mythology (such cases are known in the history of mankind, for instance: bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was male in India and became female in China and in Japan);
- d) Maja of Minoan culture was androgynous deity; this version seems to be the most probable since androgynous (bigender) deities were rather well-known in Mediterranean region in ancient times.

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