



The Words for 'star' in Indo-European and Semitic

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Abstract

This article brings together two fields: (1) the traditional study of the lexicon of Proto-Indo-European (including the material culture and belief system of the prehistoric speakers of Proto-Indo-European) and (2) the traditional study of the lexicon of Proto-Semitic (also including the material culture and belief system of the prehistoric speakers of Proto-Semitic). In particular, this paper deals with the words for 'star' in Indo-European and Semitic. The main proposals concerning their possible origin are evaluated, and the most probable proposal is highlighted. In both cases, the underlying meaning for the words for 'star' turns out to be something like 'the burning, glowing, shining thing or object'.

Keywords: Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Semitic, prehistory, lexicon, words for "star", astronomical belief system.

That the older Indo-European languages share a common word for 'star' is clear from the following set of cognates: Hittite (nom. sg.) *ḫa-aš-te-er-za* 'star'; Vedic (instr. pl.) *stṛbhīḥ* 'stars' (stem *stár-*) (also Sanskrit *tārā* 'star', *tārā-ḥ* 'sparkling', *tāraka-m* 'star', *tārakita-ḥ* 'starry'); Avestan *star-* 'star' (dat. pl. *stərəbyō*); Greek *ἀστήρ* 'star' (also pl. *τείρεα* 'stars'); Armenian *astł* 'star'; Latin *stēlla* (< **ster-elā*) 'star'; Gothic *stairnō* 'star'; Old Icelandic *stjarna* 'star'; Old English *steorra* 'star'; Old Frisian *stera* 'star'; Old High German *sterno*, *sterro* 'star' (New High German *Stern*); Old Saxon *sterro* 'star'; Middle Dutch *sterne* 'star' (Modern Dutch *ster*); Old Irish *ser* 'star'; Old Welsh *serenn* 'star' (singulative); Old Cornish *stere* 'star' (singulative); Middle Breton *sterenn* 'star' (singulative); Tocharian A *šreñ* 'star', B *šcirye* 'star'; etc. On the basis of these cognates, the Proto-Indo-European word for 'star' can be reconstructed as follows: **H₂és-t(e)r-* [**H₂ás-t(e)r-*] ~ **H₂s-tér-*.

There have been several proposals concerning the ultimate origin of the Proto-Indo-European word for 'star'. For example, in their joint monograph published in Russian in 1984 and

translated into English in 1995, Thomas V. Gamkrelidze and Vjačeslav V. Ivanov attempted to revive an old theory that the Proto-Indo-European word for 'star', which Gamkrelidze and Ivanov reconstruct as *Hast[h]er-, could have been a borrowing from Semitic (Гамкрелидзе, Иванов, 1984, c. 685–686; Gamkrelidze, Ivanov, 1985, p. 41-42; Gamkrelidze, Ivanov, 1995, p. 591-192). The Russian Semiticist Igor M. Diakonoff, however, raised several objections against this theory (Diakonoff, 1985, p. 122-123). Diakonoff noted first that there are semantic difficulties involved since the basic meaning of the Proto-Semitic term, which Diakonoff reconstructs as *‘ač-tr_o- (traditional *‘attar-, fem. *‘attar-at-), appears to have been 'god(dess)' and not 'star', though later, as a secondary development in several Semitic daughter languages, it is used to designate the planet Venus. It may be mentioned here that the term is also used in the Semitic daughter languages as the proper name of a deity (in Akkadian it is identified with the Sumerian goddess dInana), namely, the deity of fertility and war, as in Phoenician (fem.) ‘štrt 'the goddess of fertility and war'. Next, Diakonoff notes that there are phonetic difficulties involved as well.

According to Blažek, on the other hand, Proto-Semitic *‘attar- was a compound (Blažek, 1996, p. 133-141), that is, *‘at-+tar-, that was originally used to designate the planet Venus, the so-called "Morning Star". This suggests that its use in this role was not a secondary development as Diakonoff tried to show.

In my opinion, we need search no further than within Indo-European itself for an understanding of the origin of the term for 'star'. Rather than being a borrowing from Semitic, it is simply a derivative of the root which Pokorny reconstructs as *ǵs- 'to burn, to glow' (Pokorny, 1959, p. 68-69), that is, *H₂ǵs- [*H₂ǵs-]. As noted above, the Proto-Indo-European form is to be reconstructed as *H₂és-t(e)r- [*H₂ás-t(e)r-] ~ *H₂s-tér- and originally meant something like 'the burning, glowing, shining thing or object' (Bomhard, 1986, p. 191-192; Wodtko, Irslinger, Schneider, 2008, p. 348-354), *h₂stér, *h₂ster-, with numerous references to the relevant literature; *h₂stér, -(e)r- (Mallory, Douglas, 1997, p. 543). Interestingly, Blažek also considers the Proto-Indo-European form to have been a compound (Blažek, 1996, p. 133-141), that is, *H₂és-+t(e)r- [H₂ás-+t(e)r-].

Now, let us look at the words for 'star' in Semitic. That the older Semitic languages share a common word for 'star' is clear from the following set of cognates: Akkadian kakkabu 'star'; Eblaite /kakkab/ 'star'; Ugaritic kbkb 'heavenly body, star'; Hebrew kōḫāḇ (kwkb) 'star'; Phoenician kkb 'star'; Aramaic kōḫāḇā 'star'; Syriac kawkāḇā 'star'; Mandaic kukba 'star'; Arabic kawkab 'star'; Sabaean kwkb 'star'; Šheri/Jibbāli kebkīb 'star'; Mehri kəbkīb/kəbkōb 'star'; Ḥarsūsi kebkīb/kebkōb 'star, planet'; Soqōṭri kībšib 'star' (pl. kībkub); Geez kokab 'star'; Tigrinya kokob 'star'; Tigre kokāb 'star'; Amharic kokāb 'star'; Argobba kokāb 'star'; Gafat kokoba 'star'; Gurage (Gogot) kwāk^wāb 'star'. On the basis of these cognates, the Proto-Semitic word for 'star' can be

reconstructed as follows: *kab-kab-, which became *kaw-kab- in several of the daughter languages. Clearly, this is a reduplicated form, the unreduplicated root being simply *kab-.

As with Indo-European, there have been several proposals concerning the ultimate origin of the Semitic word for 'star'. For example, Militarev reconstructed Proto-Semitic *kabkib 'star' (< 'a round object') and proposed derivation from *kVbb-, *kVbkVb- '(to be) round' (Militarev, 2014, p. 167). The problem with this proposal is that, cross-linguistically, the word for 'star' is typically associated with notions such as 'the burning, glowing, shining thing or object', as in the Proto-Indo-European form cited above (for the relationship, for example, of various Dravidian words for 'star' with notions such as 'the burning, glowing, shining thing or object' (Burrow, Emeneau, 1984, p. 98, 435, 499-500). Consequently, a better suggestion is that made by Moscati (Moscati, 1946, p. 269-272), who proposed derivation of the Proto-Semitic word for 'star' from *kab-ab- 'to burn', preserved in Akkadian kabābu 'to burn'; Jewish Babylonian Aramaic kbb 'to roast, to burn'; Arabic kabāb 'fried or boiled meat, meat roasted in small pieces on a skewer'; etc. A related form is found in Proto-Semitic *kab-ay- 'to burn (incense)', preserved in Sabaeen kbyt 'burning of incense', mkbyhw 'incense burner'.

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