THE INDO-EUROPEAN ORIGIN OF LATIN LEX

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EL ORIGEN INDOEUROPEO DEL APELATIVO LATINO LEX

RESUMEN: La autora acepta la etimología tradicional de acuerdo con la que el apelativo latino lex deriva del verbo legō (‘recoger, leer’), designando originariamente ‘la colección (de principios jurídicos)’. Comparte el mismo origen la palabra del sánscrito sraj- ‘corona de flores, guirnalda, corona que se lleva en la cabeza’, originariamente ‘colección (de flores)’. Ambos sustantivos abstractos (nomina abstracta), documentados en latín y en sánscrito, se reducen al mismo arquetipo *sleğs (f.), que se formó a partir de la raíz indoeuropea *sleğ- ‘recoger’ (la cual se reconstruye de modo erróneo como *leğ-). Las formas afines griegas y albanesas confirman la derivación sugerida de la raíz indoeuropea *sleğ-.

PALABRAS CLAVE: etimología latina; lex; nombres raíz indoeuropeos

ABSTRACT: The author accepts the traditional etymology according to which Latin lex (f.) derives from the verb legō ‘to gather, take off, tear off, pick, roll up, look through, read’, denoting originally ‘collection (of legal rules, principles)’. The same origin is suggested for Sanskrit sraj-(f.) ‘wreath of flowers, garland, chaplet worn on the head, any wreath or garland, circle, series, chain’, orig. ‘collection (of flowers)’. The two abstract nouns, attested in Latin and Sanskrit, must be treated as the same identical root formation *sleğs (f.), derived from IE. *sleğ- ‘to collect, to gather’ (and not *leğ-). Also the Greek and Albanian forms document the suggested derivation from IE. *sleğ-.

KEYWORDS: Latin etymology; lex; Indo-European root nouns


I. INTRODUCTION

The Latin word lēx, gen. sg. lēgis f. ‘(legal) formula; contract, arrangement, law; resolution; regulation, rule’ probably represents the root noun whose original meaning was ‘collection (of legal rules, principles)’, relating directly to the
Latin verb *legō* ‘to gather, take off, tear off, pick, roll up, look through, read’. The foregoing derivation is not ruled out by the etymologists; for instance, the French linguists Ernout and Meillet 1951: 631, s.v. *lēx*, state: “Il est possible, mais non évident, que ce nom appartienne à la racine de lat. *legō*”. A similar position is maintained by Walde and Hoffmann 1938: 789, s.v. *lēx*, who nonetheless voice reservations about the semantic aspect. De Vaan 2008: 337 accepts the original meaning ‘collection’, adding the following comment:


Following De Vaan and others, I accept the traditional etymology, which derives Latin *lēx* from the Latin verb *legō*. The verb in question represents an Indo-European heritage, cf. Greek λέγειν ‘to gather, select, count, calculate’, secondarily ‘to speak, call’3 and Albanian mb(ë)ledh ‘to gather, clean up crops’ (Aor. *mblodh*). The Indo-European root is commonly reconstructed as *leǵ-* ‘to gather / sammeln, auflesen’4.

In my paper I would like to demonstrate that (1) the Latin noun *lēx* has a precise cognate in Sanskrit; (2) the root noun *(s)leģ*-s existed already in Indo-European; (3) the reconstruction *sleģ-* is more acceptable than *leģ-.*

2. Latin *lēx* and Sanskrit *sraj-*


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2 De Vaan 2008: 337.


4 See Pokorny 1959: 568; Rix 2001: 397.

5 Buck 1905: 199; Weiss 1993: 15-22; Untermann 2000: 434-435. See also Oscan *ligatús* (nom. pl.) ‘legati’, *ligatúis* (dat. pl.) ‘legatis’, as well as the Oscan goddess’s by-name *liganakdíkeí* (dat. sg. f.) ‘legiferae’. According to Weiss 1993: 22, the Samnian phrase *legu tanginud* ‘by the decree of the laws’ seems to contain a clear Latinism.


7 See especially Mayrhofer 1964: 553; 1996: 784.
indicate ‘garland, wreath’ as a ‘collection (of flowers)’. Manfred Mayrhoffer considers the etymology of the Sanskrit word to be doubtful. The suggested comparison is completely accurate from the view-points of the word-formation, semantics and phonology. Firstly, both Latin and Sanskrit terms represent the root formations (based on IE. *leģ- or *sleģ- ‘to collect, gather’), both are nouns of feminine gender, both belong to the abstracts (‘collection’). Secondly, both refer to the verbal root denoting the activity of ‘collecting, gathering’, though Latin lex denotes a ‘collection of rules’, Sanskrit sraj- means ‘wreath, garland’ i.e. ‘a collection of flowers’. Thirdly, the correspondences between Lat. l and Skt. r (as if from IE. *l), Lat. e/ē and Skt. a/ā (as if from IE. *e/ē), Lat. g and Skt. j (as if from IE. *g) seem certain. Fourthly, the presence of s- in Sanskrit is not troublesome, though it requires some important comments (see No. 3-6).

The original declension should be reconstructed as follows:

nom. sg. *slēģs (cf. Lat. lēx, but Skt. sruk is formed analogically);
gen. sg. *sleģ-ēs (cf. Skt. srajás, but Lat. lēgis with an analogical lengthening);
dat. sg. *sleģ-ēi (cf. Skt. srajē, but Lat. lēgī instead of *lēgī),
acc. sg. *sleģ-ṃ (cf. Skt. srājam, Lat. lēgem instead of *lēgem);
loc. sg. *sleģ-ī (> Skt. srajī);
instr. sg. *sleģ-ēh (> Skt. srajā́);


The long vocalism of Latin lēx (gen. sg. lēgis) seems expectable in the nominative singular, but it cannot be treated as original in the oblique cases (Sanskrit sraj- f. demonstrates only the short vowel -ā- in the root). Thus the lengthening should be regarded as resulting from the nominative case (by analogy) or alternatively from a long-grade verbal form. In fact, the long-grade ē-root variant *lēģ- (or *sleģ-) is well attested in the Latin perfect tense lēgī ‘I gathered’ and the Albanian aorist mblodh ‘id.’ (as if from Proto-Albanian *ambi-llēdh- < IE. *h₂mbhi-sleģ-). Thus it is obvious that the long-vowel preterite form *(s)lēģ- was inherited from the parent language.

Though there are no traces of the verb *srājati in Old Indic, the nouns sraj- and srajā (f.) seem to demonstrate that Old Indic preserved a pair of derivatives of

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10 According to Weiss 1993: 23, the lengthened grade of the root may be related to the Narten verbal paradigm. He adds that “such a root Narten ablaut originally extended through all verbal and nominal formations”. 
the Indo-European root *(s)leğ- ‘to gather, collect’. In any case, Sanskrit sraj- (f.) ‘wreath, garland’ (orig. ‘a collection of flowers’) should be regarded as an exact cognate of Latin lēx f. ‘law’ (orig. ‘a collection of rules’).

3. The problem of the initial *s-

The Sanskrit root noun sraj- (f.) differs from the Latin and Italic cognates in that it contains the initial sibilant *s-. This difference might be explained in two ways:

1. The Sanskrit form sraj- contains the so called s-mobile added to the Indo-European root *leğ- ‘to collect, gather’. The movable *s- occurs in the initial position of some Indo-European verbal and nominal roots, but it is absent from other examples. It is frequently explained as an addition created in the sandhi environment by the false decomposition.

2. It is not impossible to suggest that the initial *s- was originally present in the Italic subgroup of languages, as well as in Greek. The initial cluster *sl- has been simplified to l- in Latin and to λ- in Greek, cf. Lat. līmus m. ‘slime, mud, dirt’ vs. Old Norse slīm adj. ‘thin, slim’, Old Eng. slīm, Old German slīmen ‘clean’ (< *sleimos); Lat. līmāx (m. and f.) ‘snail’, Greek dial. (Hesych.) λείμακες ‘naked snails’ vs. Pol. ślimak ‘snail’ (< PIE. *slei-meh2k-s).

The former possibility allows us to reconstruct the Indo-European verbal root *(s)leğ- (with the ‘movable’ *s-), the latter one seems to suggest that the reconstruction *sleğ- (and not *leğ-) might be correct.

Below I intend to discuss the problem. It is obvious that the Latin and Italic examples are completely ambiguous (e.g. Lat. legō may derive both from *leğ- or *sleğ-). The Sanskrit sraj- contains the initial s-. Whether it represents s-mobile or not, the answer is uncertain.

In this situation we should review the Greek and Albanian lexical data, which demonstrate many verbal forms of the Indo-European root *leğ- or *sleğ- and a number of derivatives.

4. The Greek evidence for the cluster *sl

The Greek lexical material indicates quite convincingly that the Indo-European root began with some consonantal cluster (e.g. *sl-). Let us consider consecutively the confirmed forms:

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A. The Aeolic form ἐπίλλογος m. (Alcaeus, Fr. 204, 2)\(^{12}\) corresponds to the Attic-Ionic form ἐπίλογος. The Aeolic geminate -λλ- remains inexplicable if the word in question stems from the traditionally reconstructed Proto-Indo-European pre-form \(*_{h1}epi-logos\). The gemination in the Aeolic dialect must represent some consonantal cluster (\(*_{\sigma\lambda}\), or \(*_{\phi\lambda}\)). So, in our attempt to clarify the origin of the Aeolic ἐπίλλογος, it is necessary for us to assume the archetype \(*_{h1}epi-slogos\). Thereby, the Indo-European root must have sounded \(*_{sle}\). The Aeolic form rules out the traditional reconstruction \(*_{leg}\).

B. The perfect form εἴλοχα might be derived from the reduplicated pre-form \(*se-slo\-h_{x}\)\(^{13}\), which goes back to the Proto-Indo-European root \(*_sle\), showing a regular apophonic variant (with the vocalism \(*_{-o}\)) as well as the aspiration of the velar consonant \(*_{\dot{g}}\) in the proximity of the laryngeal sound \(*_{h_{2}}\). The aforementioned derivation of εἴλοχα is fully understandable in the light of the perfect form εἴληφα (Doric εἴλάφα), which is a continuation of the pre-form \(*_{he-hilpha}\) (< Proto-Indo-European \(*se-sleh_{2}\-h_{x}\)). There is absolutely no doubt that the perfect forms λέλεχα and λέλεγα are secondary both in their structure and meaning (referring only to the sense ‘to speak’). The regular perfect form, derived from the root \(*_{leg}\), would sound **λέλοχα (< Proto-Indo-European **le-lo\-h_{2}h_{x}\)), which form is not in fact attested. Therefore, the perfect form εἴλοχα should be deemed original and archaic, whereas the forms λέλεχα and λέλεγα – secondary and analogical\(^{14}\).

C. Greek Ionic-Attic ἀμφιλέγω, Doric ἀμφιλλέγω 'to dispute, dispute about' can be explained in two different ways: on the one hand, it may contain the rare Greek prefix ἀμφίς adv. ‘from both sides, on both sides, around, round, from all sides’ (e.g. cf. Attic ἀμφισ-βητέω, Ionic ἀμφισ-βατέω ‘to go separate ways, disagree’), while on the other hand – the Greek common prefix ἀμφί adv. ‘on both sides, around, round’ (< Proto-Indo-European \(*_{h_{2}}mbhi\)). The geminate -λλ-, confirmed in the Doric dialect, needs clarification. Unfortunately, we have no possibility of deciding whether the Greek verbum compositum goes back to the Proto-Indo-European \(*_{h_{2}}mbhis-leg\-h_{x}\) (according to the traditional interpretation, that is what the universally accepted pre-form would look like), or \(*_{h_{2}}mbhi-sle\-h_{x}\). The Albanian counterpart mb(ë)ledh ‘gather, clean up crops’ does not resolve the problem of the alternative, either, although there is no doubt that the Albanian -l- goes back to a kind of geminate.

My conclusion is: The internal analysis of the Greek material shows that there are such Greek forms as, e.g., Aeolic Greek ἐπίλλογος, Attic εἴλοχα, which clearly evidence that the onset of the Greek verb λέγω included originally a consonantal

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\(^{13}\) After Rix 1992: 256 and Beekes 1995: 238 I reconstruct the 1 sg. perfect ending as \(*_{-he}\) (and not \(*_{-hm}\)).

\(^{14}\) See especially Kaczyńska 2011.
cluster (e.g. *sl- or *vl). The Proto-Indo-European verbal root *leǵ- ‘gather’ is therefore hard to keep up in the light of the Greek data. The alternative reconstruction *sleǵ- is much better-grounded.

5. **Albanian evidence**

For the Greek λέγω and Latin legō, the etymologists quote tertium comparationis in the form of the Albanian compound verb (verbum compositum) mb(ê) ledh ‘to gather, clean up crops’ (Aor. mblodh)\(^{15}\), demonstrating the Albanian prefix mbë corresponding to the Greek ἀμφι- and Latin amb- (from IE. *h₂mbhi- ‘around’). So, the Albanian verb is synonymous with the Greek ἀμφιλέγω, Doric ἀμφιλλέγω ‘to dispute about, dispute, question’\(^{17}\). The Albanian counterpart is of great importance to the reconstruction of the original form of the Indo-European root as it shows the palatal character of the voiced guttural appearing in the root (Albanian dh < Proto-Indo-European *g). Besides, unlike the Greek verbum compositum having the figurative sense, the Albanian verb preserved the original meaning ‘to gather’. Therefore, both the phonetics and semantics provide sufficient evidence that the Albanian word was not a borrowed verb.

The Albanian phoneme l (pronounced like [l] or [ļ]) stems from the geminate *ll in intervocalic position, as found in numerous Latin loan-words (e.g. Alb. njalë ‘eel’ < Lat. anguilla; Alb. bulë f. ‘bud’ < Lat. bulla; Alb. kål (Rom. kal) m. ‘horse’ < Lat. caballus; Alb. gelë ‘priest’s house’ < Lat. cella; Alb. fjalë f. ‘word, speech, tale’ < Lat. fabella; Alb. giel ‘cock’ < Lat. gallus, etc.), whereas the Albanian phoneme ll (a velarized alveolar lateral, pronounced like the English w) comes from the single liquid consonant in the same position (e.g. Alb. engjëll (dial. ejill) ‘angel’ < Lat. angelus; Alb. prill ‘April’ < Lat. aprilis; Alb. buell ‘bull’ < Lat. būbalus; Alb. qiell ‘sky’ < Lat. caelum; Alb. kallm ‘reed, straw’ < Lat. calamus; Alb. kallënduor ‘calendar’ < Lat. calendārium; Alb. këndellë ‘candle’ < Lat. candēla, etc.).\(^{18}\) The pre-Albanian geminate *ll (whence Alb. l) could point to an original consonantal cluster (e.g. *sl-, *vl-), also *ln or *lģ\(^{19}\)), however not to the single Proto-Indo-European phoneme *l.

The obvious conclusion is that the Albanian lexical data give a positive evidence to reconstruct the Indo-European root *sleģ- (and not *leģ-).

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\(^{16}\) Beekes 1995: 221. See also Skt. abhi-, Av. aibi-, aïwi-, OIr. imb-, OHG. umbi.

\(^{17}\) Liddell-Scott 1996: 92.


\(^{19}\) Demiraj 1997: 52, 55 derives the Albanian intervocalic -l- from IE. *-ln- (e.g. Alb. dal ‘to go out’ = Gk. θάλλω ‘to bloom’ < IE. *dhalnō), as well as from IE. *-lģ- (e.g. Alb. mjel ‘to milk’ = Gk. ἀμέλγω ‘id.’ < IE. *h₂melgō).
6. **INDO-EUROPEAN *sleg-* ‘TO GATHER, COLLECT’**

The Latin lexical material offers no possibility of determining the original form of the Indo-European root (Lat. legō may continue not only the Indo-European root *leģ-, but also *sleģ- or *uleģ-). For this reason, the Greek, Albanian and Sanskrit data must be taken into consideration.

The Greek and Albanian data indicate the initial cluster *sl- (or alternatively *ul-), whereas the Sanskrit nominal forms contain the cluster sr- (as if from *sl-). Thus we reach to the final conclusion that the Indo-European verbal root denoting ‘to gather, collect’ should be reconstructed as *sleģ-. It is necessary to conclude that the traditional reconstruction *leģ- should be treated as obsolete (out of date).

7. **THE ROOT NOUN *sleg-s F. ‘GATHERING, COLLECTION’**

The Italic languages (namely Latin, Marrucinian and Oscan) demonstrate the root noun *lēgs which seems to come back to the archetype *slēģ-s (gen. sg. *sleģés). This root noun had to be created as early as in the Indo-European times, if my hypothesis, according to which the Sanskrit appellative sraj- (f.) ‘wreath, garland’ corresponds to the Latin word lēx (f.) ‘law’ and refers to the verbal root *sleģ-, appears to be correct.

**REFERENCES**


