

**Old Nordic *herðr* ‘shoulder’ and Greek
κορσις ‘behind, buttocks, ass’:
Is there any etymological
relationship between them?**

ELWIRA KACZYŃSKA

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Abstract

The article discusses a possible relationship between the Proto-Germanic term for ‘shoulder’ (ON. *herðr* f., Far. *herðar* f. pl.; Elfd. *erde* f.; OHG. *harti*, *herti* f., MHG. *herte* f. < PG. **hardiz* f.) and the unexplained Greek gloss attested in the lexicon of Hesychius of Alexandria: *†κορσις· πυγή* (“*korsis*: behind, buttocks, ass”). It is suggested that the above-mentioned gloss comes from the Laconian dialect, which already in the Classical era (5th–4th c. BC) spirantized the Greek phoneme θ [t^h] > [θ] > Lac. σ [s]. The Laconian word *κορσις* goes back to the Doric appellative **κορθις*, which presumably derives from the Proto-Indo-European root **kerd^h-* ‘to fart, blow to, break wind’, secondarily ‘to stink, smell’ (cf. Ved. *sárdhate* ‘s/he breaks wind downwards’; Lat. *cerda* f. ‘dung’ attested in *mūscerdae* f. pl. ‘mouse droppings’, *ovicerda* f. ‘sheep dung’ etc.). The Laconian derivative has reliable semantic equivalents in other Indo-European languages (e.g. Skt. *śṛdhū-* f. ‘the anus, rump’, *śṛdhu-* m. ‘id.’). The Proto-Germanic term **hardiz* (gen. sg. **hardjōz*) ‘shoulder’ has no convincing etymology. Its juxtaposition with the Laconian word *κορσις* (< Doric Greek **κορθις* < IE. **kord^h-t̥-s* f.) seems phonologically indisputable. Doubts are raised only by the semantic part of the proposed etymology. The author assumes

that ancestors of the Germanic people originally used the term **hardīz* (< PIE. **kord^h-ih₂-s* f.) to describe an extremely smelly part of the human body, i.e. the armpit located near the shoulder. The suggested change ‘anus, rump’ > ‘a stinking part of the body’ > ‘armpit’ > ‘shoulder’ must have taken place already in the Proto-Germanic epoch.

Keywords

Ancient Greek, etymology, Germanic languages, Hesychius of Alexandria, human anatomy, Indo-European linguistics, Laconian dialect, parts of the body.

Staronordyckie *herðr* ‘bark’ i greckie *κορσίς* ‘zad, pośladki’: Czy istnieje jakaś etymologiczna relacja między nimi?

Abstrakt

W artykule rozważa się możliwą relację pomiędzy pragermańską nazwą ‘barku’ (stnord. *herðr* f., far. *herðar* f. pl.; elfd. *erde* f.; stwniem. *harti*, *herti* f., śrwniem. *herte* f. < pgerm. **hardīz* f.) a nieobjaśnioną dotąd głosą grecką, zachowaną w leksykonie Hesychiosa z Aleksandrii: *†κορσίς πυγή* („*korsís*: zad, pośladki, tyłek”). Autorka sugeruje, że grecka głosa pochodzi z dialektu lakońskiego, który już w epoce klasycznej (V–IV w. p.n.e.) przeprowadził spirantyzację greckiego fonemu θ [t^h] > [θ] > lak. σ [s]. Wyraz lakoński *κορσίς* sprowadza się do doryckiego apelatywu **κορθίς*, który przypuszczalnie jest pospolitym derywatem utworzonym od rdzenia pie. **kerd^h-* ‘pierzcieć, puszczać wiatry’, wtórnie ‘śmierdzieć’ (por. wed. *śárdhate* ‘pierzdzi’; łac. *mūscerdae* f. pl. ‘mysie odchody’, *ovicerda* f. ‘owczy kał’ itd.), posiadającym wiarygodne odpowiedniki semantyczne w innych językach indoeuropejskich (np. skr. *śṛdhū*-f. ‘odbyt, tyłek’, *śṛdhu*-m. ‘ts.’). Pragermański termin **hardīz* (gen. sg. **hardjōz*) ‘bark’ nie posiada żadnej przekonującej etymologii. Jego zestawienie z lakońskim słowem *κορσίς* (< gr. dor. **κορθίς* < ie. **kord^h-ĩ-s* f.) wydaje się bezdyskusyjne pod względem fonologicznym. Wątpliwości wzbudza jedynie semantyczna strona propo-

nowanej etymologii. Autorka zakłada, że przodkowie ludów germańskich pierwotnie określali terminem **hardīz* (< pie. **kordⁿ-ih₂-s* f.) wyjątkowo śmierdzącą część ciała, czyli leżącą w okolicy barku pachę. Sugerowana zmiana semantyczna ‘odbyt, zadek’ > ‘śmierdząca część ciała’ > ‘pacha’ > ‘bark’ musiała dokonać się już w epoce pragermańskiej.

Słowa kluczowe

język grecki, etymologia, języki germańskie, Hesychios z Aleksandrii, językoznawstwo indoeuropejskie, dialekt lakoński, anatomia człowieka, części ciała.

1. Introduction

In his *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic* Guus Kroonen (2013: 211) reconstructs the Proto-Germanic term for ‘shoulder’, **hardī-* f. (*ih₂-stem*), on the basis of the following lexical data:

1.1. ON. *herðr* f. ‘shoulder’, usually *herðar* f. pl. ‘shoulders’, Icel., Far. *herðar* f. pl. ‘id.’; Nw. dial. *herd* ‘shoulder’; Da. dial. *hærde* ‘id.’; OSw. *hærþ* f. ‘shoulder’; Elfd. *erde* f. ‘id.’; OHG. *harti*, *herti* f. ‘shoulder blade / Schulterblatt’, MHG. *herte* f. ‘id.’ < PG. **hardīz* (gen. sg. **hardjōz*) f. ‘shoulder’ (Hellquist 1939: 959; de Vries 2000: 223; Orel 2003: 161–162; Kroonen 2013: 211).

1.2. The Saami and Balto-Finnic languages borrowed this term from a North Germanic source, cf. Saa. (Northern) *harddo* ‘shoulder’; Fi. *hartia* (from 18th c.), *hartio* (pl. *hartiat*, *hartiot*) ‘shoulder, armpit / Schulter, Achsel’; Ingr. *hartia* ‘shoulder’; Kar. *hartie*, usually pl. *hartiet* ‘shoulders’; Lud. *hardod* pl. ‘id.’; Veps *hařgot* pl. ‘id.’; Vot. *hartšia* ‘shoulder’ (Kylstra 1961: 40, 70; Kylstra, Hahmo, Hofstra, Nikkilä 1991: 84; de Vries 2000: 223).

Kroonen does not explain the origin of the Proto-Germanic noun in question, giving only a hypothetical Proto-Indo-Euro-

pean archetype (PIE. **kort-ih₂-s*, gen. sg. **kort-iéh₂-s¹*) and a concise statement: „No further etymology” (Kroonen 2013: 211).² He tacitly suggests that PG. **d* goes back to the Proto-Indo-European voiceless dental stop **t* in the position before the stress, according to Verner’s law.

Theoretically, the same archetype may be suggested for the Ancient Greek gloss, which is attested in the late antique lexicon by Hesychius of Alexandria (created most probably by the end of the 5th century AD): *†κορσίς· πυγή* (“*korsís*: behind, buttocks, ass”) (Cunningham 2020: 650). In fact, the Greek word *κορσίς*, denoting a part of the human body, may represent the same or very similar Proto-Indo-European protoform (e.g. PIE. **kortih₂s*, **körtih₂s*, **kortís* or **körtís*). The phonological aspects of the comparison seem to be complete and regular, as the phoneme **t* [t] was early assibilated to [s] in the position before the front vowel **i* [i] or **ī* [i:] in all the Attic-Ionic dialects, as well as in East Aeolic (Lesbian) and Mycenaean Greek (Buck 2009: 57–58). The root vocalism (**-o-*), the original stem (*i*-stem or **ih₂*-stem) and the oxytone stress are wholly compatible. Also all consonants seem to fit one after another (PG. **h-* perfectly corresponds to Gk. *κ-* and PG. **-r-* to Gk. *-ρ-*; PG. **-d-* agrees with Gk. *-σ-*, as both may develop from the Proto-Indo-European consonant **-t-* in the position before the stressed vowel **i*; PG. final **-z* wholly suits Gk. **-ς*). The first problem related to the Germanic-Greek pair of possible equivalents is connected with the great semantic difference: ‘shoulder’ in the Germanic languages and ‘behind, buttocks, ass’ in Ancient Greek. The second question refers to the morphological structure and possible derivation of the noun, as well as the etymological explanation of the Germanic and Greek words (if they are, in fact, related). In my paper I would like to verify the suggested comparison, explain the

¹ I prefer an alternative reconstruction of the genitive sg. of the *ih₂*-stem nouns: PIE. **-iéh₂-es*, hence via a regular phonological development: **-iáh₂as* > **-iáas* > IE. **-iās* > PG. **-jōz*.

² Similarly de Vries (2000: 223): „Die Etymologie ist umstritten”. Orel (2003: 161–162) gives a concise overview of earlier etymologies.

dialectal character of the Greek gloss (Section 2), reconstruct the early history of the Ancient Greek dialectism (Section 3), as well as to propose a new etymology for the Germano-Greek bundle of words (Section 4).

2. The Laconian origin of the Hesychian

gloss *†κοροῖς· πυγή*

The Greek noun *κοροῖς*, preserved by Hesychius of Alexandria in his lexicon of literary, rare or dialectal words, was completely absent in all the literary works written in the Homeric or epic dialect, Attic, Ionic, as well as in the Hellenistic koiné. Thus, it cannot be an Attic-Ionic lexical item. It can hardly be considered an East Aeolic (or Lesbian) element due to accentual reasons, as it does not exhibit the characteristic Aeolic barytonesis.

It is highly probable that the Hesychian gloss (κ-3664): *†κοροῖς· πυγή* “*korsís*: behind, buttocks, ass” (Cunningham 2020: 650) represents a dialectal word taken from the Laconian vocabulary. It is worth emphasizing that the next Hesychian gloss (κ-3665): *κοροῖν· κορμόν* acc. sg. “*korsón*: log” (Cunningham 2020: 650) also belongs to the purely Laconian terminology (Kaczyńska 2023: 201, 206). Lac. *κοροῖς* is a straightforward reflex of Gk. Dor. **κορθός* m. ‘something cut, log’, which is etymologically related to the Doric noun *κόρθῶς* f. coll. ‘handfuls of harvested grain, swaths’ (Kaczyńska 2023: 206). The Laconian dialect, belonging to the group of Doric or West Greek dialects, introduced a number of unusual phonological innovations beginning from the sixth century BC. One of them was spirantization of the aspirated dental stop: Gk. *θ* [tʰ] > [θ] > Lac. *σ* [s], e.g. Gk. Lac. *ἀνέσηκε* = Gk. Att. *ἀνέθηκε* ‘s/he gave, donated’, Gk. Lac. *σιοφόρος* = Att. *θεοφόρος* adj. ‘who carries the god’ (Pisani 1973: 101–104; Buck 2009: 59; Bartoněk 2011: 126–130; Méndez Dosuna 2015: 454–455; Kaczyńska 2014: 66–68; 2021: 47–61). This is why I am convinced that the dialectal term *κοροῖς* (probably of Laconian origin) represents Gk. Dor. **κορθίς* f. ‘behind, buttocks, ass’.

3. Greek *κοροίς* ‘behind, buttocks, ass’ from the etymological point of view

Greek dialectal word *κοροίς* f. ‘behind, buttocks, ass’ (interpreted as a Laconian term) regularly goes back to Doric Greek **κοροίς*. In my opinion, it derives from the Indo-European root **kerdh-* ‘to fart, blow to, break wind’, secondarily ‘to stink, smell’ (cf. Ved. *śárdhate* ‘s/he breaks wind downwards’; Persson 1910: 167–169; Mayrhofer 1970: 310). It is related to Ved. *śárdhaḥ* m. ‘breaking wind, flatulence’ (< PIE. **kórdh-os* m.), Skt. *śardhanam* n. ‘the act of breaking wind’ (Monier-Williams 1999: 1058), *śṛdhū-* f. ‘anus, rump’, also *śṛdhu-* m. ‘id.’ (< PIE. **kṛdḥ-ū-*), as well as to Lat. *cerda* f. ‘dung’ (< PIE. **kerdh^heh₂* f. ‘a stinking thing’), attested in the compound nouns: *mūs-cerdae* f. pl. ‘mouse droppings’, *ovi-cerda* f. ‘sheep dung’, *sū-cerdae* f. pl. ‘pig dungs’). Two Sanskrit nouns *śṛdhū-* f. ‘anus, rump’, also *śṛdhu-* m. ‘id.’ (Monier-Williams 1999: 1088) seem to be semantic and etymological equivalents of Gk. Lac. *κοροίς* f. ‘behind, buttocks, ass’ (< PGk. **κοροίς*), deriving from the Proto-Indo-European verbal root **kerdh-* ‘to fart, blow to; to break wind; to stink, smell’.³ The Greek and Indo-Aryan nouns show an anatomical meaning: ‘behind, buttocks, ass, rump, arse’ (in Laconian Greek) and ‘anus, rump’ (in Sanskrit). Even if they are independent derivatives from the Proto-Indo-European verbal root **kerdh-*, then their semantic agreement seems to document a primitive meaning ‘±a stinking part of the body; anus, rump, behind, ass, arse’ (or the like), strongly connected with the primitive sense ‘to fart, blow to, break wind; to stink, smell’, attested in Indo-Aryan.

³ According to Persson (1910: 167–169), Skt. *śardhate* ‘to fart / farzen’ derives from PIE. **ker(H)-* ‘to shit / scheißen’ (Pokorny 1959: 947–948; Rix, Kümmel 2001: 327) by means of the verbal suffix **-dh-*. It is possible that the secondary root **kerdh-* (documented in Indo-Aryan, Greek, Latin and perhaps Germanic) appeared as early as in the (Proto-)Indo-European times.

4. A new perspective on the Germano-Greek comparison: phonological and semantic aspects

It cannot be excluded that both ON. *herðr* f. ‘shoulder’ (< PG. **hardiz* f.) and Gk. Lac. *κορσις* ‘behind, buttocks, ass, rump, arse’ (< Gk. Dor. **κορθις*) represent a common Indo-European heritage. Theoretically, they may go back to the Proto-Indo-European archetype **kord^h-ih₂-s* (f. ‘±a stinking part of the body; anus, behind, ass, rump, arse’) and derive from the verbal root **kerd^h-* ‘to fart, blow to, break wind’, secondarily ‘to stink, smell’. The phonological aspects of the suggested comparison seem perfect.

Furthermore, the semantic divergence (‘behind, buttocks, ass, rump, arse, backside’ vs. ‘shoulder, shoulder-blade’) is not an exceptional phenomenon in anatomical terminology. Note that Greek (Attic, Ionic) *πῶρη* f. ‘behind, buttocks, ass, rump, arse’, also ‘backside or tail (of an ape, of a dog)’ (Montanari 2018: 1857; Diggle 2021: 1238), i.e. the explanatory term in the Hesychian gloss κ-3664, is etymologically related to Pol. *pyza* f. ‘plump and fat cheek’, dial. ‘a man with the large and fat face, as well as with round cheeks’, *pyzy* f. pl. ‘fat and plump cheeks’, *pyzaty* adj. ‘full, fat, round’ < PSl. **pyza* f. ‘plump, fat cheek’ (Boryś 2005: 507) < IE. **pūgā*. It may be suggested that PIE. **puHġeh₂-* f. denotes ‘something bloated, swollen, round, greasy’, secondarily ‘a round and fat part of the body’, secondarily ‘buttock’ (in Greek) vs. ‘fat cheek’ (in Slavic).

The meaning, firmly registered in Ancient Greek (‘behind, buttocks, ass, rump, arse’), is to be treated as primitive, if the derivation of Lac. *κορσις* from PIE. **kerd^h-* ‘to fart, blow to, break wind’, secondarily ‘to stink, smell’ is correctly established, whereas the Proto-Germanic sense (‘shoulder’, also ‘shoulder-blade’) has to represent a semantic innovation. It is possible that the Proto-Germanic speakers in their north European homeland introduced a different notion of the most stinking part of the human body, thus they replaced the primitive meaning ‘anus, rump, behind, ass, arse’ attested in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit.

The semantic development in the Germanic languages can be reconstructed as follows: (PIE.) ‘anus, rump, behind, ass, arse’ > ‘a stinking part of the body’ > ‘armpit’ > (PG.) ‘shoulder’ > (OHG., MHG.) ‘shoulder-blade’.

5. Conclusions

The careful analysis of the Greek, Germanic, Italic and Indo-Aryan lexical data has led us to the following conclusions:

1. ON. *herðr* f. ‘shoulder’ and Greek *κοροίς* ‘behind, buttocks, ass’ seem to be related to each other, even if the Indo-European archetype **korti_h₂s* (f. *i_h₂*-stem), suggested by Guus Kroonen, cannot be accepted for a number of reasons (such as a lack of motivation, an unclear derivation, a semantic discordance).

2. The Greek noun *κοροίς*, preserved by Hesychius of Alexandria in his lexicon of literary, rare or dialectal words, was completely absent in all the literary works written in the Homeric (or epic) dialect, Attic, Ionic, as well as in the Hellenistic koiné. Thus, it cannot be an Attic-Ionic lexical item. It may hardly be treated as an East Aeolic (or Lesbian) ingredient for accentual reasons (it does not demonstrate the so-called Aeolic barytonesis). It is highly probable that *κοροίς* represents a dialectal word taken from the Laconian vocabulary.

3. Gk. Lac. *κοροίς* regularly goes back to Doric Greek **κοροίς* and derives from the Indo-European root **kerd^h-* ‘to fart, blow to, break wind’, secondarily ‘to stink, smell’, cf. Ved. *śárdhate* ‘s/he breaks wind downwards’.

4. There are Indo-Aryan and Greek nouns with an obvious anatomical meaning: Sanskrit *śṛd_hū-* f. ‘anus, rump’, *śṛd_hu-* m. ‘id.’ and Gk. Lac. *κοροίς* f. ‘behind, buttocks, ass, rump, arse’. Their semantics is very similar, though their morphological structure is somewhat different.

5. It is likely that both ON. *herðr* f. ‘shoulder’ (< PG. **hardiz* f.) and Gk. Lac. *κοροίς* ‘behind, buttocks, ass’ (< Gk. Dor. **κοροθίς*) represent a common Indo-European heritage. Theoretically, they may go back to the Proto-Indo-European archetype **kord^h-ih₂-s* (f. ‘±a stinking part of the body; anus, rump, behind, ass, arse’) and derive from the verbal root **kérd^h-* ‘to fart, blow to, break wind’, secondarily ‘to stink, smell’.

6. It is also suggested that ancestors of the Germanic tribes replaced the primitive meaning ‘anus, behind, rump, ass’ (attested in Sanskrit and Greek). The semantic development in Proto-Germanic can be reconstructed as follows: (PIE.) ‘anus, rump, behind, ass’ > ‘a stinking part of the body’ > ‘armpit’ > (PG.) ‘shoulder’.

Abbreviations

acc. – accusative; adj. – adjective; Att. – Attic (dialect of Ancient Greek); coll. – collective; Da. – Danish; dial. – dialectal; Dor. – Doric (dialect of Ancient Greek); Elfd. – Elfdalian (Övdalian); f. – feminine; Far. – Faroese; Fi. – Finnish; gen. – genitive; Gk. – Greek; IE. – Indo-European; Icel. – Icelandic; Ingr. – Ingrian; Kar. – Karelian; Lac. – Laconian (dialect of Ancient Greek); Lat. – Latin; Lud. – Ludic; m. – masculine; MHG. – Middle High German; n. – neuter; Nw. – Norwegian; OHG. – Old High German; ON. – Old Norse; OSw. – Old Swedish; PG. – Proto-Germanic; PIE. – Proto-Indo-European; pl. – plural; Pol. – Polish; PSl. – Proto-Slavic; Saa. – Saami (Laponian); sg. – singular; Skt. – Sanskrit; Ved. – Vedic; Vot. – Votic.

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Elwira Kaczyńska
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4545-1927
University of Lodz
Faculty of Philology
Department of Classical Philology
Pomorska 171/173
90-236 Łódź
Poland
elwira.kaczynska@uni.lodz.pl