THE ETYMOLOGICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF LITHUANIAN sárgas

In the preface to his Catechism of 1547, the first book printed in the Lithuanian language, Martynas Mažvydas entreats his fellow-countrymen to give up their heathen beliefs and practices and embrace the Christian religion. Among the supernatural beings of pagan Lithuanian mythology here mentioned we meet „the guardians of the fields“ (acc. pl. laukasargus Mž. 9). The etymology of their name is clear: laukasargas is a compound noun composed of the root of laūkas „field“, a link vowel -a- and the noun sárgas „watchman, guard“, this last containing the o-grade of the root whose e-grade appears in the verb sérgeti „to guard“.

The affinities of this root outside Lithuanian have many problematical aspects. On semantic grounds the relationship with Slavonic *storg/-sterg- is accepted in spite of the difficulties in reconciling the initial consonant of Lithuanian with the Slavonic variant. Most investigators seem to regard CS *st- as secondary and probably arising by the contamination of two Indo-European roots, although there is great diversity of opinion as to the precise roots involved. Vasmer lists four suggested conflations which would link the root of Lithuanian sérgeti with that of Greek στέργω „I love“; στέγω „I protect“; Slavonic *strag- or *ostrog-. In his article on Russian storoz Vasmer alludes to another possibility, namely that initial st- may have arisen by the metathesis of an earlier ts- (Фасм ер III 757, 768).

Further afield Lithuanian sérgeti is linked with Latin servo „I keep, I preserve“ and with the Iranian root seen in the Avestan verb niš-haurvaiti „he protects“ and the synonyms pasuš-haurvō, viš-haurvō. Ernout and Meillet’s etymological dictionary of Latin suggests a connection between the roots of servo and vereor „I fear“, postulating *ser-, *wer- and *swer- as variants of a single root (Ерноут, Мейл эт 620 s.v. servus). This would bring into the picture Greek (ϝ)οράω „I perceive, I see“ and φρουρός „guard“, from προσφόρος „one who looks forth“. It would also let in the prolific Germanic root seen in English beware, wary, German bewahren, Wahrung, warten and the numerous Romance derivatives of that root, the most notable of which, namely French garde, Italian guardia, has spread to most, if not all European languages, including the Slavonic, where direct borrowings from Germanic, such as varovati „to protect“, are also known.
Absent from the roll call of etymologically related Indo-European security men is the name of one of the best-known, if not most efficient guards of classical mythology. Nowadays, a jealous wife would engage a private detective to keep an eye on her erring husband. This method would have been dangerous and futile in the case of Zeus, a master of disguise and dissimulation. Hera, his long-suffering wife, decided to thwart the elusive polyphiloprogenitor by turning Io, the prey he was currently stalking, into a heifer and placing her under the watchful guard of the herdsman Argos.

The story is told in Aeschylus’ tragedy „The Suppliants“ in dialogue between King and Chorus:

King And what then was the end of this monarchic quarrel?  
Chorus The Argive Goddess changed her mortal rival to a cow.  
King And did Zeus then stop calling on the proud-horned heifer?  
Chorus He came to her, they say, disguised as a brawny bull.  
King What did the mighty spouse of Zeus do to prevent this?  
Chorus She put on cow-watch an all-seeing sentinel.  
King All-seeing sentry for a single cow! Who could this be?  
Chorus Argos, the son of earth, whom Hermes slew.

In another of Aeschylus’ plays „Prometheus bound“, the chorus of the daughters of Oceanus sing of the sufferings of poor Io:

Once more I feel the gadfly’s sting and dread the ghost of earthborn Argos – keep him far from me! I cannot bear to look upon that cowman with ten thousand eyes.  
He tracks me still in death. The earth cannot conceal his treacherous gaze,  
Awaking from the depths to haunt me, while I must roam this sandy waste.

The poet stresses the watchman’s remarkable qualifications for his task. He is an all-seeing custodian: τὸν πάνθ’ ὄροντας φύλακα; a panoptic cowman entrusted with a single beast: πανόπτην οἰδοβουκόλον; the herdsman with ten thousand eyes: τὸν μυρωσπὸν βοῦταν. No wonder the lexicographers have identified his name with the adjective ἄφγος „shining, bright, glistening“, seeing in the association a reference to the bright gaze of those everopen eyes. The same adjective, or its homonym, is frequent as a Homeric epithet in the phrase κόνες πόδας ἄργοι, which the dictionaries interpret as „dogs, fleet of foot“, regarding this as a secondary meaning, rapid movement being likened to a flash of light.

An animal which bore the name of Argos is Odysseus’ faithful hound, the first creature to recognise the wanderer on his return to Ithaca, in spite of his disguise. Although saddened by the ill treatment inflicted on his dog, Odysseus pretends not

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2 Προμηθεὺς δεσμώτης, lines 567–573, ibidem. The English versions are produced, with apologies to Aeschylus and his admirers, by the author of this article.
to recognise him and asks the loyal swineherd Eumaeus whether the dog had been a good courser or a mere lap-dog, such as a king might keep for show. In reply Eumaeus praises the erstwhile speed and hunting prowess of Argos. Here again we have an intimation that the Homeric poets associated ἀργός, name and adjective, with speed. However, we may doubt whether this is the correct interpretation of Argos as the name of Hera’s cowman, whose required virtue was the vigilance of a watchdog rather than the speed of a whippet. If the name was originally associated with his occupation we should examine the possible etymological connection with Lithuanian sargas.

The phonological difficulties in relating the two words lie in the smooth breathing of the Greek Argos, where a lost initial s- would normally leave a rough breathing, *hargos, and also in the vocalism of the root syllables where Greek and Lithuanian show the reflexes of Indo-European reduced grade and o-grade respectively. However, examples may be found to show that these obstacles are not unsurmountable. Loss of initial s- does not result in a rough breathing in the case of ἀλοχος „wife“ from *sm-logh-os „bed-fellow“; regular treatment of the pronominal root is seen in ἄμα „together, beside“ from *sama. Parallels may also be found for the alignment of o-grade forms in Baltic and Slavonic with reduced forms of the same root in other Indo-European languages. For example, Lithuanian (vieng) kartq corresponds to Sanskrit sa-kr̥t „once“; Common Slavonic *kortsko corresponds to Latin curtus „short“ from *kr̥to-.

Therefore the proposed affinity between the Lithuanian laukasargas, guardian of the fields, and Argos, guardian of the prize white heifer, Io, is reasonable not only on semantic but also on phonological grounds: Lithuanian sarg- is from *sorg-, while Greek arg- is from *srg-.