MILLET (Panicum L.) IN LITHUANIAN AND OTHER INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

Abstract: It is a well-known fact that Lithuanian demonstrates numerous archaic features. They are not only of the phonological or grammatical nature, but also of the lexical character. After discussing all the Indo-European terminology for ‘millet’ (genus ‘Panicum’), the author concludes that Lithuanian as the only one Indo-European language preserved the ancient distinction of two main species of ‘millet’ in a generally unchanged form, i.e. Lith. sóros ‘common millet’ versus málnos ‘Italian millet’. A possible trace of the third species seems to be present in Lith. dirvà ‘sown-field, corn-field’, thus showing a semantic generalization.


1. Introduction.

In the present paper I would like to present a comprehensive study of Indo-European terminology concerning the designation of millet (Panicum L.).

My description is not limited to a mere enumeration of relevant lexical material, but it is an attempt at reviewing the hitherto existing etymologies, as well as drawing possible lexical parallels from outside Indo-European languages, especially those belonging to the Nostratic superfamily. The designations of cereal plants have not only the value of a lexical unit in the Indo-European protolanguage, but they also constitute irrefutable evidence for the origines of human civilization, man’s pramaeval relationship with nature, the contacts of various developed agricultures as well as the cultural and ecological changes in human environment. Agriculture played an important or even dominant role in the life of Proto-Indo-European people. According
to the views expressed by historians of material culture, archeologists, ethnologists and as evidenced in the earliest written texts, agriculture among the various Proto-Indo-European peoples was at a relatively high level.

Some students of Indo-European problems, however, subscribe to the conviction about the typically ‘pastoral’ character of the Proto-Indo-Europeans. As a consequence, the results of the multilevel research into the history of agriculture will, to a great extent, be useful in further studies of the ethnogenesis and topogenesis of the Indo-European people.

Such a comprehensively viewed goal necessitates an interdisciplinary approach. With respect to methodology, I try to follow the tradition of cultural palaeolinguistics and the ‘Wörter und Sachen’ school. The present study is, as a result, an attempt at a systematic synthesis of all available data: linguistic, historical, archeological, botanical and ecological. Its bulk was created by analogy to dictionary entries which offer the following information according to a unified structure, assumed in advance:

(a) basic, botanical and ecological data concerning millet;

(b) evidence of millet cultivation, beginning with the first neolithic agricultures of the Middle East and Europe;

(c) protolinguistic reconstruction with respect to relevant terminology, comprising a detailed enumeration of forms in various branches of the Indo-European family arranged in the following order: Indo-Aryan (IA.), Kafir (K.), Dardic (D.), Iranian (Ir.), Tocharian (T.), Anatolian (An.), Greek (Gk.), Armenian (Arm.), Albanian (Alb.), Palaeo-Balkan languages (PB.), Italic (It.), Celtic (C.), Germanic (G.), Baltic (B.) and Slavic (S.). This lexical set is completed by basic bibliographical references;

(d) commentary concerning, as a rule, semantic and phonological problems. The morphological structure of plant names is analysed in cases where it is of special value in the reconstruction of the original meaning, etc.;

(e) the etymology of names, solved within the historical-comparative approach first and foremost (if not exclusively) on the basis of Indo-European linguistics;

(f) external lexical parallels taken from non-Indo-European languages together with a discussion as to whether we deal with a possible common Nostratic ancestry, as opposed to general-cultural terms adopted or borrowed, or with accidental correspondences;

(g) a short presentation of conclusions derived from the lexical material.

Among the enumerated entries, the first and foremost place is held by those names of cereal plants which show correspondences in at least two independant Indo-European language branches. In some cases, isolated terms are also considered, which are characterized by a limited territorial range and uncertain archaic nature. Special emphasis has been placed on those lexical data which are traditionally omitted
in etymological dictionaries (this concerns modern Indo-Aryan, Kafir, Dardic, Iranian languages, Albanian or Armenian, and among „dead“ languages – Tocharian, Anatolian and Palaeo-Balkan languages), as well as on analogies from the non-Indo-European area which are either entirely excluded from consideration or are frequently incorrectly or imprecisely cited.

2. General characteristics of the genus Panicum L.

The systematization and nomenclature of millet is characterized by a considerable confusion which is evidenced in the great number of synonyms concerning the various varieties of millet. On the whole, cereal grasses designated as millet belong to different genera of the grass family (Gramineae).

In the European system of cultivation we meet with two basic types of millet: common millet (Panicum miliaceum L.) and Italian millet (Panicum italicum L. vel Setaria italica Beauv.). Both these types are processed into groats and are also used as food for poultry or, less often, for cattle. The common millet is sometimes used for beer production and spirits distillation. Italian millet, similarly to its wild species (Setaria viridis L.), is also employed as fodder grass.

The wild ancestor of the common millet (Panicum miliaceum L.) is apparently represented by its Abyssinian relative Panicum callosum. Italian millet (Setaria italica Beauv.) is, on the other hand, derived from its wild green type Setaria viridis L., which is a common weed widespread on a vast area of middle and southern Europe, northern Africa and almost the whole Asia (Mówiszowicz, 1948, 57). The Berlin ethnologist E. Haähn (1894, 603–608; 1896, 410–416) regarded millet as the first cultivated corn. Such a conclusion is all the more probable that millet (as opposed to all other types of corn) can be cultivated in a way similar to garden plants through digging, which is a technique evolutionarily older than ploughing (Gansiniec, 1958, 6 and 10; Nowiński, 1970, 185).

3. The oldest centres of cultivation.

The common millet, as cultivated corn, finds its way to Europe already in early Neolithic Age via Anatolia and the Balkans as well as through Central Asia and northern coastal regions of the Black Sea (Galkirelidze - Ivanov, 1984, 658). The first archeologically retrievable traces come from Argissa (central Thessaly), see Renfrew (1969, 160). Further palaeontological findings of millet come from numerous neolithic settlements in central and eastern Europe (e.g. in what is today Hungary, Romania, Thuringia, Switzerland and Poland). In the Bronze Age millet also spreads over to the Appenine Peninsula (Renfrew, 1973, 99). The common millet is not known from prehistoric contexts in India but is known in China and
Egypt (Gansiniiec, 1958, 11). The earliest findings in Mesopotamia date back to around 3000 B.C.

The Italian millet was created, according to some researchers (e.g. Bertsch, 1949), as a mutation of Setaria viridis. It was used in Switzerland as early as the Neolithic Age and was also present in numerous finds south of the Danube, whereas its cultivated type Setaria italic a known as Italian millet appeared in Alpine palafittes as late as the Bronze Age, and for a long time coexisted with the native type.

Caesar, Pliny and Strabo describe Italian millet as the main corn of the Iberians, well known and valued in Rome, cultivated in Italy. In the north, the cultivation of Italian millet basically reached as far as the Danube. It is only fair to agree with Nowiński (1970, 190) that, similarly to the common millet, Setaria italic a „is one of the oldest plants cultivated by Aryan peoples, widely used for mash, caudle, pies and bread“ („ber jest to jedna z najstarszych roślin uprawnych ludów aryjskich, użytkowana na bryje, polewki, placki i chleb“).

In the times of Aristophanes, millet, with olive poured over it, was the normal food in the Athenian Prytaneion, for prytans and regular guests (Gansiniiec, 1958, 12–13). Similarly Pliny (Nat. H. 18, 24–25) informs us that millet was used to make porridge in Campania and that Sarmatian tribes’ staple food was mainly based on millet. He also mentions millet being used for mash and nonfermented wine making. In Bulgaria, fermented alcohol is still produced from millet, called boza. Reew (1973, 101) goes as far as to suggest that a similar beverage could have been made even in remote antiquity.

4. Lexical evidence.

The following lexical material has been gathered during our work connected with compilation of a new etymological and comparative Indo-European dictionary at the Indo-European Lexicon Project 1:


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1 I am very grateful to Prof. Dr. Ignacy Ryszard Danka (Łódź) for his help, comments and valuable criticism. Also I am deeply indebted to Dr. Piotr Stalaszczyk (Łódź), who has kindly read this paper and suggested numerous stilistic improvements. Understandably, I assume all the responsibility for any errors and shortcomings.
RomEW 456–457), hence OE. *mîl n., OHG. *mîlli ‘Italian millet, Setaria italica Beauv.’ | ON. *mîl, Icel. melur (m.) ‘lyme-grass, Elymus sabulosus L.’ | Mann IECD 751; differently Vries AnEW 383 | lit. *malna (f.) ‘Schwaden, Süßgrass, Kolbenhirse’, *malnos (f. pl.) ‘corn of Italian millet’ | SN I 504; WP II 287; IEW 718; IECD 751; Trautmann BSW 167; WH II 87–88; Fraenkel LEW I 402; Frisk GEW II 202; Chantraine DELG III 682; Sabaliauskas, 1958, 9.

Commentary: The adduced lexical material seems to indicate the original heteroclitic /n-stem (cf. Pokorny IEW 718: „ursprüngl. Flexion *mél-i-, -n-és-“). The semantic and morphological correspondence of Greek and Lithuanian data is significant. What we have here are feminines which are derived by means of the same suffix (IE. *-naH₂) and which denote the same type of millet (Setaria italica). These common features are not reflected in the Latin term (neuter of yo-stem, referring to ‘Panicum millaceum’ or ‘Sorghum vulgare’, see André, 1985, 161–162). The status of the Albanian equivalent is not clear (if it was not a Latin or Romance borrowing, then the single -l- could possibly document the consonantal group -ln-, which would reflect some correspondence with the Greco-Baltic direction of derivation). The Breton word seems to be rather a Latin or Romance loan-word (as opposed to Mann, 1968, 246; IECD 751), whereas the Icelandic words constitute an essential completing element here, which cannot be interpreted – because of their untypical meaning – as Latin loans. Maurizio states that lyme-grass (Elymus sabulosus L.), as an exponent of the grass family, was not only gathered but sometimes also cultivated. „In some areas it served, for centuries, for bread making, or as surrogate corn. Plentiful, must have been the crops if, according to documents from the year 1343, a single household had the obligation to supply the Kirkjubaer cloister with 120 pounds of flour a year, made from lyme-grass“ (Maurizio, 1926, 38). It seems that in the severe climate of Iceland lyme-grass was cultivated for grain and bread. At any rate, Maurizio (1926:38) cites a Leunius, who „in his well-known book tells us that bread is backed from lyme-grass in Iceland“ („w swej znanej książce mówi, że z Elymus wypiekają w Islandii chleb“).

Etymology: No generally accepted etymology. The divergent explanations of the Indo-European term appear in the literature:

(1º) Schrader (1901, 374; SN I 504) derives the designation of millet as ‘Mahlfreucht’, from the Indo-European root *mel(H)- ‘to mill, break up, grind’ (cf. Lat. molere, Lith. mälti), which seems to be a particularly popular solution, accepted by such researchers as Pokorny (IEW 718), Mann (1968, 246) or Gamkrelidze-

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2 „W niektórych okolicach służyła ona przez stulecia do wyrobu chleba, lub jako surogat zboża. Niemałe musiałaby być zbiorów, skoro według wiadomości z r. 1343-ego jedno gospodarstwo miało obowiązek dostarczania klasztorowi Kirkjubaer 120 funtów mąki z wydmuchrzycy rocznie“. 

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dze-Ivanov (1984, 658). Objections arise mainly from the fact that „gridding of millet is rather exceptional, especially in prehistoric times“ („mielenie prosa jest raczej wyjątkowe, zwłaszcza w epoce archaicznej“), and it is, thus, difficult to agree with the advanced supposition that „millet should be called grist“ („proso miało się nazywać przemiałem“) (so Gansiniec 1958, 12).

(2°) Chantaine (DELG III 682) prefers a connection with the adjective μελαξζ, αυς ‘black’ (PIE. *melH₂n-), cf. Fr. millet noir ‘common buck wheat / sarrasin’, G. Mohrenhirse ‘sorgo, Sorghum vulgare’ (Niedermann 1927, 113). It would be a case of semantic inversion with respect to the Gk. ἀλφός, Alb. elb ‘barley, Hordeum L.’ vs. Gk. ἄλφις, Lat. albus adj. ‘white’.

(3°) Z. Gansiniec (1958, 12) repeats the old solution of Hahn for the designation of honey (Gk. μέλαν, -τος n. < IE. *melit-), thus recognizing millet as ‘honey grain’. The basis for such a derivation would be the supposed association in the minds of primitive people, who were able to observe that "bees collected honey from millet during the time of florescence" („pszczoly zbierały miód z prosa podczas kwitnienia""). The etymology is, however, the least certain, although it might be supported from the morphological point of view 3.

Nostratics: No Nostratic solutions, which should not amaze, since the Italian millet is supposed to be a typically European achievement. This fact requires, then, the acceptance of some purely Indo-European etymology.

4.2. *swaH₂r-aH₂ (f.) ‘common millet, Panicum miliaceum L.’ (Ir., ?PB., B.)

Alanic huvar ‘millet’ (glossed as kovules, i.e. Hung. köles ‘millet’, see Nemeth 1959:16); Ossetic (Digoron) xwar ‘corn; grain; millet’, (Iron) xor ‘corn, barley, Hordeum vulgare’, also ‘rye’ in the dialects of the Anatolian Ostseians; Tadjik (dial.) xur ‘grain’, NPers. xwār, xurak, Pahl. xwar ‘food, nourishment’; Sogd. ywr ‘barley’, attested in the compound form ywrst’- [xwarastāna-] ‘barley-field’, all from Ir. *hwārā (f.) ‘common millet’ | Lith. sōra, sorā f., usually in plural sōros, dial. also sōrės ‘common millet’, Latv. sāre, dial. sūra f. ‘common millet / Rispenhirse’ || Fr a e n k e l LEW II 857; A b a e v IESOJ IV 215–216.

It is not impossible to suggest a derivative of the above-mentioned item, namely IE. *swr-no- ‘a collection of Italian millet’ > ‘storage for millet grain’ > ‘barn, granary’ 4, cf. Lith. svīna (f.), svīnas (m.) ‘Speicher, Vorratskammer’ (Fr a e n k e l LEW II 958) > Pol. dial. świren, świreń, Yidish (in Lithuania) svirne, Russ. sviren,

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3 For the designation of ‘honey’, J. Pukorny IEW 723 assumes a similar inflection: „meli-t, Gen. mel-nés ‘Honig’ n.“.

4 An analogical development is seen in Lith. jauja (f.) and jaujas (m.) ‘barn, granary’ < ‘storage for grain’ < Lith. jávas ‘Getreide’ (Illich-Svitych, 1979, 54).
sviron, etc. (Laucute, 1982, 22) | Thrac. σιρός (sirus) m. ‘unterirdische Getreidekammer’ (Detschew, 1957, 449) | Avest. x'arnə- ‘Nahrung’ < Ir. *h'arəna- ‘food, nourishment’, also borrowed in Slavic *chorna ‘meal, food’, also ‘defence, protection’ (Raczek, 1968, 85–94)

Commentary: The Indo-European term is reconstructed here for the first time. The semantic dispersion of the Iranian appellative is evidently secondary. A bev (IESOJ IV 215), being unaware of the existence of Baltic counterparts, observes: „The meaning ‘millet’ is very archaic. In his description of cereal plants, cultivated by Scythians – Ploughmen, Herodot (IV, 7) mentions millet“ [„Značenie ‘proso’ predstavljaja ves’ma drevnim. V perečne rastenij, vozdeluemyx skifami-paxarjami, Gerodot (IV, 7) nazyvaet proso“]. The opinion of a specialist in Iranian languages must be respected, especially that the meaning of ‘millet’ was registered not only with the Ossetians, but also in the archaic dialect of the Hungarian Alans. The set of ancient derivatives of the *swaH2r-aH2 appellative contains, most probably, the Lithuanian designation of a granary, created regularly on the zero-grade of the root⁵, as well as its Thracian and Iranian equivalents. This appears to indicate that the area of spread of the relevant cereal term also included, at least in part, the Ancient Balkans (Thracian area).

Etymology: Not having noticed the Iranian equivalents, Franckel (LEW II 857) claims that „Die Etymologie ist umstritten“. Schrader (1901, 374; SN I 504) derives Lith. sóra as ‘Saatfrucht’ from the Lithuanian verb sēti ‘to sow’, which is impossible for phonetic reasons⁶. Moczynski (1989, 32) repeats the old etymology offered by Niimen, according to which the Baltic terms for ‘common millet’ are continuations of the primitive archetype *psārā ‘grain for grinding’, cf. OInd. psāti ‘grinds in the teeth, chews’, Gk. ψάχω ‘I grind, crumble’. The above etymology is doubtful both from the point of view of phonetics⁷ and semantics. On the other hand, the presence of the exact semantic and structural equivalents in Iranian allows, incontrovertibly, for reconstructing the Proto-Indo-European appellative *swaH2rāH2 ‘common millet’. Thus, the origin of the Baltic terms must be considered in conjunction with the Iranian designations. They might be possibly associated with the Indo-European root *swer-, preserved on the Iranian ground in the form *x'ar- ‘to eat, to protect’, which would enable explaining *swaH2rāH2 as vṛddhi with the meaning

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⁵ Let us add here, for the sake of precision, that the Indo-European cluster *sw- is simplified in Baltic to s- in the position before a vowel (compare e. g. the Lithuanian and Indo-European terms for ‘sister’), but not before a sonant.

⁶ The oscillation of IE. *ā versus *ē is highly irregular.

⁷ All Baltic languages preserve the original *ps, as indicated by Moczynski in his discussion on the Baltic word for ‘fist’ (1989, 71–73).
of ‘that which is suitable for eating’. However, this type of derivation, although quite popular in Indo-Iranian languages, has a weak position in the Baltic languages, which is why I would be more inclined to seek the explanation on the Nostratic ground.

Nostratics: On the ground of Semito-Hamitic languages, we can find the following lexical parallels: Ugarite š'r ‘barley’, Aram. s'artā, sartā (collectivum), Hebr.  š'orāh, Arab. sa'r (all from Proto-Semitic *ṣu'ār-(at-) ‘barley’ (Fronzaroli, 1969, 296–297), ? Linear A sa-ru ‘a type of corn’ (Stieglitz, 1975, 109), Egyptian š't ‘barley’, Hausa carariya ‘a kind of bean’ (< Chadic *caHvr[a], see Orel-Stolbova, 1988, 76). Semantically closer terms also appear in Uralic languages: Mordv. E šuro, M šorā ‘corn, grain’, Cherem. šurāš ‘cereals, porridge’, Fin. suurima, suurimo (usually in the plural) ‘hulled, pearled grain; groats; grits’ (Collinder FUV 76), Yuriak Samoyed šoora ‘the seed of a coniferous tree’ (< Ur. *šōra). The phonetic correspondences between AA. *ša[r]a ‘corn, barley’, Ur. *šo ra ‘corn’ and IE. *swah - r - aH₂ ‘common millet’ seem regular and allow the reconstruction of the Nostratic protoform (Nos. *sāra). The similarity of Lith. sóra to Mordv. šuro is, in Jokis’s opinion (1973:60), quite accidental, which should be understood in the sense that both terms are not mutual borrowings but represent independent continuants of the Nostratic archetype.

4.3. *prokóm (n.) ‘common millet, Panicum miliaceum L.’ (B., S.)

OPrus. prassan (n.) ‘millet’ | OChSl. pros, SC. próso, Bulg. prosó, Slovene prosō, Czech, Slovak, Polish, LSorb. pros, HSorb. pšoso, Polabian pršū, Russ., Ukr., BRuss. pros, all from Slavic *prosō (n.) ‘common millet’ || IEW 820; Vasmēr REW III 378–379; Gluhak HER 506.

Commentary: The Old Prussian term for ‘millet’, prassan, is usually treated as an ancient loan from Slavic languages but the only (and quite insufficient) ground for this conclusion is the absence of the relevant term in the other Baltic languages. Even Levin, while mentioning the Old Prussian word in question among Slavic loans (1974, 98), puts a careful emphasis, in another part of his study, on the fact that „prassan could as readily be a cognate of Slavic *prosō as a borrowing. Millet was known to Prussian and their ancestors independently of any Slavic influence“ (Levin, 1974, 55). What we witness here, rather, is some ancient lexical isogloss which should be included among other similar types of correspondences occurring between Old Prussian and Proto-Slavic, it is enough to compare the term for ‘broad bean’: OPrus. babō, Slavic *bobō versus Lith. pupā, Latv. pūpa.

Etymology: Schradēr (1901, 374) gives a short but pointed comment: „Dunkel ist slav. pros, altpfr. prassan“. He is quite right in saying so. The derivation from the Indo-European archetype *prokóm (n.), suggested by Vasmēr (REW III 378–379), Pokorny (IEW 820), Golab (1982, 128) and Gluhak (HER 506), is one of
a few possible solutions. A much better impression is created by the connection suggested in a different article (S t a l m a s z c z y k - W i t c z a k, 1992) with the Indo-European term for ‘oats’, *kópr (n.), although it also seems to be semantically uncertain, and the possible metathesis *koprom > *prokóm remains in the sphere of unverifiable hypotheses. There have also been attempts at a common Slavic derivation of the word for ‘millet’ from the Indo-European root *per- ‘to hit, strike’ (PSL. *pěro, *pěrati) alternating supposedly with *pro- and expanded by means of the s-determinant. Millet would, thus, mean ‘something pounded, hulled’ > ‘the hulling of millet grain’ > ‘millet grain’ > ‘millet’ (S e d z i k, 1977, 11; S p ó l n i k, 1990, 78). Unfortunately, the variant with *pro- is not evidenced and remains in contradiction with our present views on the variability of the Indo-European root. It is, thus, just another (although not very likely) eventuality. Highly hypothetical, and uncertain from the point of view of phonetics and semantics, is H o l z e r’s suggestion (1989, 54–55), in which the Slavic word for ‘millet’ is derived as an alleged „Temamatisch“ (Kimmerian) loan originated from IE. *bhrso- ‘barley’.

Nostratics: No references.

4.4. *kers- ‘millet’ (An., ??Alb., It., G.)

Hitt. karas- ‘a kind of wheat’ | ?? Alb. thjer (m.) ‘acorn’, primarily perhaps ‘food’ < *kerso- | Sabine ceres (n.) ‘bread’ (C o n v a y, 1967, 362); Lat. Ceres, -eris, the Roman goddess of fertility and crops; Oscan caria ‘bread’ (C o n v a y, 1967, 231) | OHG. hirsi, hirso (m.) ‘common millet, Panicum miliaceum L.’, MHG. hirse, Hirse (f.), dial. der Hirse (m.) || SN I 504; WP I 408; IEW 577; WH I 204;

Commentary: The semantics of the German words – understood earlier as secondary (‘millet’ as ‘Brotkorn’) with respect to Italic data – is close to the chronologically earliest Hittite counterpart. Thus, the following semantic shift must be assumed, in this case, for common Italic: ‘a kind of corn’ > ‘bread’, which results perhaps from the fact that within Italy, according to reports by Columella and Pliny the Older, bread was popularly made from millet itself. In Albanian, there exists a different meaning ‘acorn’ which is commonly explained through the fact that acorns constitute, in times of poor crops and famine, an easily available source of food, substituting cereal meals. In ancient times, they were eaten with pleasure, and even ground to obtain flour. The semantic divergence is, in this case, considerable and besides that, the correspondence of the Albanian word thjer to Lat. cerras (f.) ‘Quercus cerris L.’ seems phonologically and semantically better grounded. On the other hand, the Indo-European word *kerso- ‘a variety of oak (and its acorn)’ could

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8 Latin cerrus is a source form of It. cerro, Roum. cer ‘oak’. Also Alb. k’ar can be treated as a loan from Balkan Latin (M e y e r - L ü b k e RomEW 177 No. 1838).
be derived from the same Indo-European root *ker- ‘to grow, feed’ (Pokorny IEW 577).

Etymology: Probably derivative from the Indo-European root *ker- ‘to grow’, cf. Lith. šėrti ‘to feed’ (Pokorny IEW 577).

Nostratics: No obvious Nostratic counterparts. The given word must, apparently, be considered as a neologism on the Indo-European ground.

4.5. *H₂orgwen- ‘a kind of millet, perhaps Italian millet, Setaria italica Beauv.’ (K., D., Ir., Gk., ?C.)

Ashkun azū ‘millet’, Waigali anjū, anjū, anzū, Prasun ījū, Kati awrī, all from Kafir *arjana- (Turner CDIAL 28, No. 636) | Dameli ārin ‘millet’; Pashai ārin; Gawarbatī ārin; Kalasha ārin; Chowar olin; Dumaki ārin < Dardic *arīn- (Turner CDIAL 11, No. 195) | Npers. arzan, Ormuri aṣan, Pashto ẓdan, Khotan Saka ēṣā ‘millet’ < Ir. *arjana- (Morgenstierne EVP 106) | Gk. ὑφίνη f. ‘straw of Italian millet’ (Cf. a gloss by Hesychios: ὑφίνην καλαμή μελίνης) | OIr. orbaind (nom. pl.) ‘corn’ || WP I 145; IEW 63 and 335 (in another way); Vendraes LEIA I A–85 and II O–28; Turner CDIAL 11 and 28; Morgenstierne EVP 106.

Commentary: The word *arjana- appears in contradistinction to the Iranian name *xārā- ‘Panicum miliaceum L.’ and at the same time is complementary of the latter, which suggests that it had, originally, designated a different variety of millet, most probably ‘Italian millet’. This suggestion finds ultimate support in the Greek term. The observed semantic divergence of ‘(Italian) millet’ (K., D., Ir.) versus ‘corn’ (C.) has perfect parallels and can be reconciled with the previously raised fact of early cultivation of millet with use of digging methods.

Etymology: The origin of the term in question remains unclear. The Old Irish word contains Celtic *b (derived from IE. *gʷ rather than *ghʷ) and, thus, the reference to the Indo-European *eregʷ- ‘eine Hülsenfrucht’ (WP I 145; Pokorny IEW 335; Witzack, 1986, 78) cannot be excluded.

Nostratics: No obvious reflections.


OInd. dūrvā- f. ‘a kind of millet, Panicum dactylon’, also dhārvā- f. ‘ts.’; Prakr. dūvā-, dūrvā- f. ‘Panicum dactylon’; Panjabi dubb f., dial. (Kangra) dūb m., West Pahari (Sodoci) jub; Kumaoni dūb, dubo; Nepal. dubo; Assam. dūb, dubari; Oriya dāba; Bihari dūb ‘Panicum dactylon’, dūbh, dubbhi ‘the grass Cynodon dactylon’; Maithili dūbi ‘Panicum dactylon’; Bhojpuri dūb; Hindi dūb f. ‘Panicum dactylon’, dubra m. ‘a kind of fodder grass’; Gujarati dhara, daro, daroi f. ‘sacred grass’ (> Marathi
durav, durū f. ‘the grass Agrostis linearis which is sacred to Gaṇapati’) | Gallo-Latin
dravoca f. ‘personacia, lappa’ (gloss), Welsh drewg, Bret. draoch, draok, dreok ‘Lolium
termulentum L.’, Fr. droué ‘id.’ | MDu. tar(e)we, Du. tarwe, dial. terwe ‘wheat’; ME.
tare ‘Lolch, Wicke’, E. tare | Lith. dirvà f. ‘sown-field, corn-field / Saatfeld,
Getreidefeld’; Latv. dirva, druva f. ‘field, crops’, rarely ‘fallow’ | Russ. dial. derevki
‘clearing in a forest’ < Sl. *děrva f. ‘clearing in a forest, ploughland, untilled land’;
Russ. derévnja ‘village’ and other East Slavic equivalents go back to Sl. *děrwn(j)a f.
‘clearing in the forest’, hence ‘farm on the clearing’ > ‘village’ (Ślawski SP V 56, 57–58) || WP I 803; IEW 209; IECD 1611; Mayrhofer KEWAi II 57; Turner
CDIAL 370–371 No. 6501; WH 1374; EM 184; Klein CEDEL 745; Fraenkel
LEW I 97; Ślawski SP V 56.

Commentary: The original semantics is highly uncertain. The Indic, Balto-Slavic
and Germanic data prove that we are dealing with an archaic agricultural term which
underwent depreciation on the Celtic, and partly Germanic ground, where it was
adopted as the designation of a fodder grass called rye-grass (Lolium termulentum L.).
In Baltic and Slavic languages, we apparently deal with a semantic generalization. It,
thus appears that it was only in Sanskrit that a meaning approximating the original
could have been preserved in this case. It must be added that Lolium termulentum is a
typical corn weed growing, in our parts, in oats and barley, whereas in Egypt and Asia
Minor mainly in barley. It contains tasty seeds and this is why it used to be collected
and consumed by prehistoric communities. Maurizio (1926, 96) establishes the
presence of the seeds of Lolium termulentum in the Alpine pellafitte settlements of the
Neolithic Age, as well as in the oldest Egyptian graves, in a similar form as they are
found nowadays. However, Maurizio quotes a sentence from the work by E. Neuweiler,
from which it appears that in the neolithic relicts of Western Europe, the seeds of Lolium
termulentum occur „in such strikingly huge quantities as to make the conclusion inevitable
that they were a stable food“ („w tak uderzającō wielkich ilościach, że narzucu się
wniosek, że były one stale spożywane“), see Maurizio (1926, 96).

Etymology: A name derived from the Indo-European root *der(H2)-, also preserved
in Greek (Thessal. δαρατος m. ‘bread’, Delph. δαράτα) and other Palaeo-Balkan
languages (Maced. δράμις  ‘bread’, Epir. δράμιζ), see Pokorny IEW 206–211.

Nostratics: No obvious parallels.

5. Conclusions.

Indo-European tribes came to know millet rather early and could, most probably,
differentiate between both cultivated varieties. At any rate, this possibility seems to
be supported by the fact of the preservation, in the archaic Lithuanian language,
of two ancient Indo-European designations for millet in distinct meanings (Lith. sóros
‘common millet / Rispenhirse’ versus mālnos ‘Italian millet / Kolbenhirse’). The same opposition must be postulated for Proto-Indo-European (*swaH₂raH₂ ‘Panicum miliaceum’ L.’ vs. *melHi ‘Setaria italica’ Beauv.’). Among some dialects (mostly Indo-Iranian) the name *melHi was replaced by the alternative term for ‘Italian millet’, namely *H₂orgʰeṇo-.

The distinction between ‘common millet’ [1] and ‘Italian millet’ [2] is preserved in most Indo-European languages, which had often lost or replaced one of the original terms or both of them, compare, e.g., Iranian *xārā-[1] vs. *arjana-[2]; Gk. κύχυρος [1] vs. μελίνη [2]; Slavic *prosò [1] vs. *bërè [2]; OInd. anu- [1] vs. priyáŋgu- [2]; also with semantic inversion Lat. pānicum [2] vs. miliyum [1], and so on. Modern languages differentiate between the two varieties by means of, most often, adjectival qualification (e.g. German Kolbenhirse [1] vs. Rispenhirse [2]; Pol. prosó zwyczajne [1] vs. prosó włoskie [2]), although even here there are collaterant names (e.g. German Fench, Fennich [2], Pol. ber [2]).

6. References:

a) Basic etymological dictionaries and lexicons:


IECD s. Mann IECD.

IEW s. Pokorny IEW.


b) Other books and articles:


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