

UC Berkeley

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society

Title

Etymology of Greek agalma, agallō, agallomai

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8xm381sr>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, 2(2)

ISSN

2377-1666

Author

Cohen, Gerald L

Publication Date

1976

Peer reviewed

Etymology of Greek agalma, agallō, agallomai

Author(s): Gerald L. Cohen

Proceedings of the 2nd Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1976), pp. 100-104

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

Etymology of Greek agalma, agallō, agallomai

Gerald L. Cohen

University of Missouri-Rolla

I. PREVIOUS ETYMOLOGIES

The Greek words agallomai (= to delight, exult in a thing; + dative) and agalma (= glory, delight, ornament; image; statue, etc.) have long been etymologically unclear. At least eight hypotheses have been set forth, but none has proved convincing. First, Ahrens (1868: 256) and later Prellwitz (1892: 1) derive agallomai from *mgaljo, a reconstructed variant of megalo- (= big, great). This view is rejected by Schmidt (1895: 152) and treated as highly doubtful by Frisk (1960: 1), while Chantraine (1968: 7) does not even mention it in his list of possible etymologies for agallomai. Except for Prellwitz 1892, Pokorny 1959 is the only etymological work that offers any support to Ahrens' hypothesis, but due to a confused presentation even this support is far from clear. On p. 366 Pokorny connects agalma with gelaō (= I laugh) et al., but on p. 708 he connects ('wohl') agalma with megalo-.

Secondly, Curtius (1879: 172) tentatively connects agallō with agamai (= I wonder, admire; envy), a view that has won clear support only from Szemerényi (1964: 155, 156), while Boisacq (1916: 5) acknowledges it as one of two possibilities. A third and related hypothesis is set forth by Hofmann (1950: 1; 'perhaps'), viz. that agalma and agallō are derived from aga- (= very). Frisk (1960: 6) and Chantraine (1968: 7) both regard this hypothesis as uncertain; Chantraine, for example, says: 'A connection with the family of aga-, agamai could be based on the meaning of complete satisfaction and abundance that is connoted by the most ancient words of the group. But this is just a possibility, and it is not supported by any evidence'.

A fourth possibility is that agallomai is derived from *agalos, as suggested by Schwyzler (1939: 725) and hesitantly approved by Frisk (1960: 6). Chantraine (1968: 7), however, is dubious about this suggestion, pointing out that *agalos is nowhere attested.

A fifth suggestion appears in Weber (1861: 49, 50), viz. that agalma et al. have a *Grundbedeutung* 'shine'. Persson (1891: 146), unaware of Weber's hypothesis but knowing of Danielsson's work (1888: 35) on gl- = bright, connects agalma et al. with this root. According to this view agalma is related to Lat. glōria (= glory; originally, according to Persson: shine) and Greek gelaō (= I laugh; Danielsson and Persson reconstruct 'shine'). Szemerényi (1964: 155, 156) presents essentially the same hypothesis, although he is apparently unaware of Persson's suggestion; Szemerényi connects agalma et al. with agla(w)os (= splendid, bright). Chantraine (1968: 12) acknowledges the possibility of agalma < *bright but is clearly not enthusiastic about it. This

proposed derivation involves positing a prothetic a-, which Brugmann (1875: 214, 311) finds unconvincing. And Wyatt 1972 (The Greek Prothetic Vowel) passes over agalma et al. in silence, thereby indicating an unwillingness to subscribe to the view that this word contains a prothetic vowel.

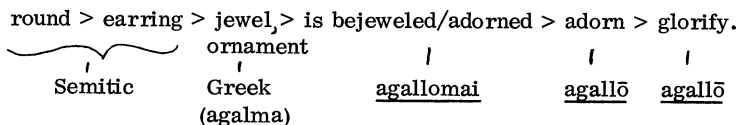
A sixth etymology, advanced by Pisani (1928: 396) is that agallō is composed of a- (= to; like Latin ad) and gall- (= call; as in Latin gallus (= rooster) and English call); semantically, agallō (= to glorify) originally meant 'to call to'. Walde-Hofmann (1965: I, 843) comment tersely: 'not convincing'. Pisani's etymology does not take into account that agallō was not the original form but is rather a back-formation from agallomai; see e.g. Szemerényi (1964: 156).

Seventh, Brugmann (1875: 214, 311) suggests that agallō arose from *gagallō, a partially reduplicated form of IE *gal- (= shine). Brugmann is here unaware that agallō is a back formation from agallomai, and his proposed etymology has been mercifully ignored by later scholars.

Finally Frisk (1960: 1) very tentatively connects agallomai with aganos (= mild, gentle) on the assumption of a possible 1-n alteration. This hypothesis is ignored by Chantraine 1968 however.

II. POSSIBLE SEMITIC ORIGIN OF AGALMA, ETC.

The search for an IE origin of agalma/agallō/agallomai has therefore proved inconclusive, and suspicion might therefore be aroused that perhaps we deal here with a borrowing. I would like to pursue this lead by first following Schwyzler (1939: 725) in reconstructing *agalos and by then suggesting that this form is a borrowing from Hebrew or an unattested Phoenician form. Biblical Hebrew presents 'agil (= earring; Ezek. 16: 12, Nu. 31:50), which is clearly based on the root 'gl (= round)¹.



The following points may be made here:

- (1) The semantic development 'round > earring' within Semitic presents no problems.
- (2) The semantic development 'earring > jewel > ornament' is plausible, even if Greek does not contain agal- with the specific meaning 'earring'. We deal here with a widening of meaning, examples of which can be found in any detailed treatment of semantics; see e.g. Bloomfield (1965: 426).

- (3) It is already recognized that agallō is a back formation from the passive agallomai; agallomai appears already in Homer, but agallō is first attested in Pindar (e.g. Szemerényi 1964: 156; also Hirt 1912: 470).
- (4) The possibility of agallomai deriving from a noun (viz. *agalos) has already been recognized by Schwyzler (1939: 725). At this point we see the possibility of: agallō < agallomai < *agalos.
- (5) Adorning the temple of a god was the equivalent of glorifying that god; hence, agallō: adorn > glorify. Also, if a god was adorned by certain jewels ('by' - takes the dative) he would naturally delight or exult in them (. . . agallomai + dat. = to delight in (a thing), exult).
- (6) Why did Schwyzler's *agalos disappear? The answer to this question may lie in the double meaning of agallomai (be adorned; delight in); we may plausibly deal with the following developments:
- Agallomai is derived from *agalos and originally meant only 'be adorned'.
 - When agallomai acquired the additional meaning 'be delighted in', *agalos underwent a change: -ma was added to the root agal- as if this new noun literally meant 'that wherein one delights'²; however the meaning of *agalos (viz. ornament) was retained. *Agalos therefore never really disappeared; it survives in agalma.
 - Agalma therefore arose from two sources:
 - as a nominal formation from agallomai.
 - from *agalos, which already meant 'jewel, ornament'. We deal here with multiple causation, a well recognized although thus far superficially treated linguistic feature; see Malkiel 1967.
- (7) The initial ayin in 'agil was not rendered by Greek. For a similar omission, cf. the Greek name Anna (< Hebrew Ḥanāh) with omission of the initial h-.
- (8) The second -a- in Greek agal- (vs. -i- in Hebrew 'agil) is frankly problematical. The modification of 'agil to agal- may have occurred under the influence of agamai (= I wonder at, admire) or aga (= very). Perhaps, though, we deal simply with the inaccurate rendering of a foreign word in Greek. Borrowed words frequently appear in a modified form in their new language, e.g. English shivaree (a noisy serenade) from French charivari (= hubbub) and Greek Ozumandias (an awkward rendering of the Egyptian Ramses).
- (9) The assumption of Greek agal- deriving from a Semitic root meaning round can help clarify the etymology of agallis (a plant; Liddell and Scott: the iris or flag), a word that is currently of unclear origin. Since the outer three perianth segments of the

iris droop down, the resulting curvature could plausibly cause roundness to enter into the name of the plant. The flag plant does not contain such curvature, and so agallis probably did not refer to this plant³.

NOTES

¹Within Hebrew, 'gl seems to be a blend of the roots 'g and gl, which both denote roundness.

²The suggestion that agalma literally means 'that wherein one delights' is found in Hesychius and echoed in Liddell and Scott.

³For a survey of the literature on Semitic borrowings into Greek, see Szemerényi (1974: 147-148) whose title, incidentally, dramatically calls attention to the importance of such borrowings. My article may be regarded as a small contribution in carrying out the detailed study of this subject that Szemerényi's article calls for.

REFERENCES

- Ahrens, H. 1868. Das alkmanische Partheneion des Papyrus. *Philologus* 27.241-285.
- Bloomfield, L. 1965. *Language*. New York: Holt. 2nd printing.
- Boisacq, E. 1916. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Brugmann, K. 1875. Über die sogenannte gebrochene Reduplication in den indogermanischen Sprachen. *Curtius Studien* 7.184-216, 273-368.
- Chantraine, P. 1968ff. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Curtius, G. 1879. *Grundzüge der griechischen Etymologie*. Leipzig: Teubner. 5th ed.
- Danielsson, O. 1888. *Grammatische und etymologische Studien*, I. Uppsala: Akademiska Boktryckeriet.
- Frisk, H. 1960. *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 1. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Hirt, H. 1912. *Handbuch der griechischen Laut- und Formenlehre*. Heidelberg: Winter. 2nd ed.
- Hofmann, J. 1950. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der griechischen Sprache*. Munich: Oldenburg.
- Liddell, H. and R. Scott. 1966. *A Greek-English lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon. 6th printing of 9th, 1940, ed.; revised by H. Jones and R. McKenzie.
- Malkiel, Y. 1967. Multiple vs. simple causation in linguistic change. *To honor Roman Jakobson*, 2. 1228-1246.

- Persson, P. 1912. Beiträge zur indogermanischen Wortforschung.
Leipzig: Harrassowitz.
- _____ 1891. Studien zur Lehre von der Wurzelerweiterung und
Wurzelvariation. Uppsala: Akademiska Boktryckeriet.
- Petersson, H. 1921. Studien über die indogermanische Heteroklisie.
Lund: Berling. (p. 265).
- Pisani, V. 1928. Miscellanea etymologica. Rendiconti della Reale
Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, serie VI, vol. 4, pp. 345-371.
- Pokorny, J. 1959. Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch.
Munich: Francke.
- Prellwitz, W. 1892. Etymologisches Wörterbuch der griechischen
Sprache. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck.
- Schmidt, J. 1895. Kritik der Sonantentheorie. Weimar: Nachfolger.
- Schwyzer, E. 1939. Griechische Grammatik, vol. 1. Munich: Beck.
- Szemerényi, O. 1964. Syncope in Greek and Indo-European and the na-
ture of Indo-European accent. Naples: Istituto Universitario
Orientale di Napoli.
- _____ 1974. The origins of the Greek lexicon: ex oriente
lux. Journal of Hellenic Studies 94.144-157.
- Walde, A. and J. Hofmann 1965. Lateinisches etymologisches Wörter-
buch. vol. 1. Heidelberg: Winter. 4th ed.
- Walde, A. and J. Pokorny 1930. Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der indo-
germanischen Sprachen. Berlin: Gruyter.
- Weber, H. 1861. Etymologische Untersuchungen. Halle: Waisenhaus.
- Wyatt, W. 1972. The Greek prothetic vowel. Press of Case Western
Reserve University.