

Birds of a feather? Latin *columba* ‘pigeon, dove’ and Greek κόλυμβος ‘grebe’

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The comparison between Lat. *columba* (-us) ‘pigeon, dove’ and Gk. κόλυμβος (-ίς, -άς) ‘diving bird, esp. grebe’ is as irresistible as it is problematic. While the formal agreement between these two bird-names seems perfect, the semantics are hard to reconcile – doves and grebes have little in common, except perhaps grey color. But as Lockwood (1990) pointed out, while doves are crosslinguistically often named after their color, grebes are not: their name usually refers to their characteristic diving behavior (e.g. Lat. *mergus* ← *mergō* ‘plunge, dive’). In fact, *columba* has been often traced back to PIE roots meaning ‘dark grey’ or the like, augmented with the suffixal complex **(o)n-b^h-o-* typical of animal names. The root could – but need not – be the one of Lat. *color* ‘(dark) color’ (on which see now Höfler 2015) and possibly Gk. κελαινός ‘dark, black’.

Lat. *palumbēs* ‘wild dove’, rather than a cognate of Arm. *alawni* (< **p_lh₂-b^h-n-?*) as suggested by Klingenschmitt (1982:68), is probably an inner-Latin creation after *columbus* from the root of *palleō* ‘be pale’, near-synonymous with but possibly distinct from (cf. Nussbaum 1999:190f.) the root **pel-* ‘grey’ giving names for ‘dove, pigeon’ in Greek (πέλεια, περιστέρα < **πελ-*) and Baltic (O.Pruss. *poalis*).

On the other hand, Proto-Slav. **golǫbъ* ‘dove’ strongly resembles *columba*, but the disagreement in anlaut points to irregular development (possibly for tabooistic reasons), borrowing, or parallel creations on different roots. The history of these words, included the hypothesis of a connection with Coptic *k^rroompe* ‘pigeon’ (Lefort 1931), will be discussed in the first part of my talk.

However, the semantics of Gk. κόλυμβος makes both common inheritance and a borrowing scenario unlikely. The main focus of my talk will be on a new etymological proposal for this Greek word. I start from a review of the attestations and their philological context, showing that κολυμβίς, κολυμβάς and κόλυμβος have all a generic meaning ‘diving’, ‘diver’, with ‘grebe’ only one of possible specializations; thus, the verb κολυμβάω ‘dive, swim’ is hardly derived from the bird-name, *pace* the standard etymological dictionaries.

I argue instead that κόλυμβος < **kolum-g^w(h₂)-o-* and the unattested **κολυμβᾱ-* < **kolum-g^w(h₂)-eh₂-* inferrable from denominative κολυμβάω arose from the univerbation of a syntagm **kolum g^weh₂* ‘to go covered’ (i.e. under the cover of water), with an adverbial accusative of the *u*-stem noun **kol-u-/kel-u-* ‘covering’ (← **kel-* ‘cover’: Lat. *cēlō* ‘cover up’, Goth. *huljan* ‘hide’, etc.) that also lies behind κέλῳφος ‘sheath’ (← **keluh₁ b^huH-*) and καλύπτω ‘cover, hide’ (← **k_llu-b^h-je/o-*) according to the recent analysis by Merritt (2019). A close morphological parallel can be found in κόρυμβος/-η ‘hilltop’, analysed by Balles (2009) as univerbation of **kor(h₂)um g^weh₂* ‘to go bent, make a curve’ → *korum-g^w(h₂)-o/-eh₂* ‘crooked, arched’, with adverbial accusative of **kor(h₂)-u-* ‘horn, bend’. More generally, the importance of such univerbated syntagms as a source of compounds and neo-roots has been increasingly recognized in IE linguistics (Hackstein 2012, Schutzzeichel 2014).

Semantic support for the proposed reconstruction comes from several crosslinguistic parallels, as well as from phraseological collocations of καλύπτω referring to (self-)submerging in water (e.g. *Od.* 4.402 μελαίνη φρικὴ καλυφθεῖς “hidden by the dark ripple”, or the Homeric verse-end formula (3x) κῶμ’ ἐκάλυπεν, of creatures disappearing beneath the sea), and even from later derivatives like καλυφῆ ‘submerged land’.

References

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