

Greek σειρήν: a new etymology¹

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The word σειρήν ‘siren’ is attested in Greek since Homer.² It refers to a mythical hybrid being, half woman, half bird.³ The word is also attested in Mycenaean, since it is generally agreed that the sequences *se-re-mo-ka-ra-o-re* (PY Ta 707.2 and 714.2) and *se-re-mo-ka-ra-a-pi* (PY Ta 707.2), which appear in the description of the furniture of the palace of Pylos, refer to decorative motifs involving ‘siren heads’.⁴ They would be compounds of a first term *se-re-mo-* /seirēmo-/ ‘siren’ and a second term meaning ‘head’: /kara^horei/ or /kra^horei/ and /kara^happ^{hi}/ or /kra^happ^{hi}/, cp. Gk. κάρᾱ, κράς.⁵

Standard etymological dictionaries mention the two main traditional ways for which the origin of this word has been accounted.⁶ It has been suggested that the word σειρήν might be related to σειρᾶ ‘cord, rope’, which is well attested in Greek since the Homeric poems. Concerning the original meaning, this proposal involves that σειρήν must have meant ‘the one who binds or holds tight’, in Pierre Chantraine’s formulation, or ‘the ensnaring one’, as Robert Beekes puts it.⁷ Besides the morphological problems that we will mention below, the alleged semantic evolution is not cogent at all, and it seems that, if Greek speakers ever felt that there was a relationship between the words σειρήν and σειρᾶ, this could be better accounted for as a case of folk etymology.

The second alternative mentioned in the etymological dictionaries was put forward by Solmsen (1909: 126-128), who suggested that σειρήν could be related to the noun Σείριος ‘Sirius, the dog star’,⁸ which is visible in summer and is related to the time of highest heat. Solmsen came to this conclusion on the basis of a study by Kurt Latte in which he argued that the sirens must have been the demons of the mid-day blaze and the sea in calm. This etymology is very problematic, too, since it is not possible to find compelling arguments in the attestations of the sirens in the Greek literature that lead to the assumption of Latte’s interpretation, and without that basis, Solmsen’s proposal lacks any verisimilitude from the semantic point of view.

Furthermore, in addition to the semantic flaws of both proposals, in either case, we face a serious morphological problem: the derivation of the word is quite unexpected. The Mycenaean compounds *se-re-mo-ka-ra-a-pi/se-re-mo-ka-ra-o-re* now

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² There is a variant σῆρην on Attic vase inscriptions that was explained as an adaptation from a Ionian form with -ει- by Kretschmer (1920: 61-62).

³ In fact, in Homer, there are no physical descriptions of the sirens, for in the well-known passages of the *Odyssey* XII (Circe’s warnings [ll. 37-54], Odysseus’ report of her warnings [ll. 154-165], and the actual encounter with the sirens [ll. 166-207]), no information is provided about their actual shape. The first Greek writer who provides a description of the sirens as hybrid women-birds is Apollonius of Rhodes (IV 896-900), although there may have been an early attempt to identify the sirens with the harpies in Epimenides (fr. 47 Bernabé); see Bernabé (2001: 209) and Jiménez San Cristóbal (2012: 124).

⁴ See *DMic.*, s.uu. The proposal goes back to Mühlenstein (1957); see also Hart (1990).

⁵ For a comprehensive reevaluation of the meaning of the ‘sirens’ in the Mycenaean texts and their cultural context, see Luján, Piquero & Díez (in press).

⁶ *DELG*, s.u. σειρήν.

⁷ *EDG*, s.u. Bader (1994) has supported this etymology based on the existence of the zoonym σειρήν (a bird and a type of bee) and the alleged metaphoric use of the name for a group of poetesses-bees.

⁸ The word Σείριος first occurs in Hes. *Op.* 417.

prove that this word was originally an *m*-stem, and therefore, we would have to assume for it a suffix *-ēm*, which lacks any good parallels in Greek (or in Indo-European, given the scarcity of *m*-stems in the ancient Indo-European languages) and was certainly not productive.

W. Brandenstein and other scholars explored another possibility, for they argued that *σειρήν* must have been a Thracian loanword. This is also very unlikely. Brandenstein (1961: 169) based his argument on the gloss *Ζειρήνη· Ἀφροδίτη ἐν Μακεδονίᾳ* (Hsch.), which is no solid ground. First, the reading *Ζειρηνίς* seems to be preferable, but furthermore, the word is most likely related to *ζειρά*, a kind of garment worn by the Thracians and to the Thracian place-name *Ζειρηνία*, so that the Indo-European etymology favoured by Brandenstein (**ǵ^her-* ‘delight in’, cp. Gk. *χαίρω*) cannot be accepted either.

Nevertheless, before the Mycenaean documentation was available and *σειρήν* was still thought to be an *-ēn*-derivative, Chantraine (1933: 167) himself classified the noun *σειρήν* into the group of *-ην*-nouns of pre-Greek Mediterranean origin, together with *βα(λ)λῆν* ‘king’, *ἔσσην* ‘priest of Artemis’ and also ‘king bee’ or *κηφήν* ‘drone, vagabond’. In the case of *σειρήν*, the initial *s-* is, in fact, a clear hint to a non-Indo-European origin, for an Indo-European initial */s/* would be expected to evolve into */h/* (written as *spiritus asperus*) in Greek, and, since the Mycenaean evidence now clearly proves that this noun was originally an *m*-stem, it is much more likely that the word was borrowed from a neighbouring language, given the scarcity of Indo-European *m*-stems and its unproductivity inside the Greek language.

Quite surprisingly, standard etymological dictionaries of Greek do not mention the etymological proposals that have tried to connect the word *σειρήν* to the Semitic languages. All these etymologies have in common is that they have tried to find a link between this Greek noun and the Semitic root underlying Hebrew *šîr* ‘sing’. From the point of view of the meaning, this seems to be a promising beginning, given that, in the Greek tradition, the most salient characteristic of the sirens is the fact that they sing, especially terrific, lethal songs, as is well reflected in the *Odyssey*.

However, all the specific proposals that have been made to date suffer from any or other flaws. More than a century ago, Heinrich Lewy (1895: 205) proposed that *σειρήν* was a Hebrew phrase: *šîr ḥēn* ‘song of grace’, i.e. ‘enchanted song’,⁹ while Victor Bérard (1930: 22) argued in favour of *šîr ’en* ‘song of fascination’, with *’en* meaning ‘hold, fasten’.¹⁰ Martin Bernal (2006: 257) rejected this on the grounds that that root is only found in Aramaic and, since the word ‘siren’ appears on the Mycenaean tablets, a loan from that language must be totally excluded. Bernal himself also suggested starting from *šîr ’an*, but with a root *’an* meaning ‘groan, mourn’. In fact, none of these proposals can be accepted, given that it is not possible to think of a Hebrew loanword in Mycenaean for obvious chronological reasons. Furthermore, they

⁹ West (2011 : 428) mentions this proposal.

¹⁰ Bérard (1930 : 22): « L’aventure du héros et la formule du poète », « les Sirènes fascinent par le chant » entraînent, je crois, une étymologie de *Sir-ènes* ; c’est *sir-en*, « chant de fascination ». Le mot *en* est tiré d’une racine qui existe dans toutes les langues sémitiques. Les Arabes en font un usage fréquent pour signifier *attacher, retenir* (surtout *tenir et gouverner un cheval par les rênes*), mais aussi *nouer par des maléfices* (en particulier *nouer l’aiguillette*, comme disaient nos pères) : ils en ont tiré les mots *cordes, rênes*, et les mots *ensorcellement, impuissance sexuelle* ; ils en ont aussi tiré le mot *nuage* (les Latins emploient pareillement *fascia*). Les Hébreux, qui usent moins fréquemment de cette racine, en ont pourtant tiré, eux aussi, le mot *nuage* et un verbe, de sens plus obscur, qui paraît signifier *se livrer à des opérations magiques, soit de divination* (suivant les uns), soit de *fascination* (suivant les autres). Les Sirènes, tout ensemble, fascinent et connaissent toutes les histoires du passé et toutes les nouvelles du présent. »

relied on the word *σειρήν*, with a final dental nasal *-n*, as in the forms of 1st millennium Greek, but, as shown by the Mycenaean evidence, we have to look for a labial nasal, instead.¹¹

In spite of the difficulties, a connection to the Semitic root ŠYR, meaning ‘sing’, is extremely appealing, given the role played by the sirens in the *Odyssey*. From this perspective, an obvious candidate to look for the origin of a Semitic loanword in Mycenaean is Ugaritic, a Northwest Semitic language attested in the second half of the 2nd millennium B.C. and written on clay tablets in alphabetic cuneiform script.

It is now an established fact that there was a quite-close relationship between the Mycenaean kingdoms and Ugarit.¹² And, as a matter of fact, it has been argued that there might be several Ugaritic loanwords attested on the Mycenaean tablets.¹³

The Semitic root ŠYR is indeed highly productive in Ugaritic. It is well attested in several verbal forms found in literary and ritual texts,¹⁴ also with derivatives such as ‘song’ (*šr* /*šîru*/)¹⁵ and ‘singer’ (*šr*).¹⁶ The latter, *šr* ‘singer’, G participle (active) masc. sg. (/šârû/),¹⁷ could be a likely candidate to be the forerunner of the Greek word /*seirēm*/. Attested both in the singular and dual,¹⁸ it is mostly used in the masculine plural form *šrm* (/šârūma/) ‘singers’ (oblique case /šârīma/) in administrative texts (for instance, in lists of professions)¹⁹, where it clearly denotes some type of personnel linked to the cult.²⁰

The root ŠYR also exists in Ugarit in the Hurrianized noun *šahri*, used several times in a musical text written in (non-Semitic) Hurrian language to denote a type of music interval.²¹ The origin of this form may possibly be found in the noun *šeru* ‘song’ attested in an Akkadian ritual text from the ancient city of Mari (18th century B.C., in modern Syrian Arab Republic), conveying a type of song.²² In all probability, in this specialized context, the term was transferred as a loanword to Hurrian and, in general, to Hurrian religious culture, appearing later on in Ugarit, where Hurrian-origin cults play a central role.²³

Thus, in the 2nd millennium B.C., the Semitic root ŠYR is particularly productive in Ugarit, where it denoted, amongst other actions and facts, some type of

¹¹ In Luján, Piquero & Díez (in press) I wondered if a connection with the Semitic root found in Hebrew *‘eymah* ‘terror, dread’ could account for the second segment of the word, considering the sirens as ‘singers of the dreadful’.

¹² Cf. Rougemont (2009: 192-193), Rougemont & Vita (2010: 123-126), Sauvage (2012: 182-184).

¹³ See Bourguignon, 2012.

¹⁴ Del Olmo & Sanmartín (2015: 828, s.u. *š-r* (I)), Tropper (2008: 124, 161 s. 457), Tropper (2012: 451, 646, 647).

¹⁵ Del Olmo & Sanmartín (2015: 828, s.u. *šr* (I)), Tropper (2008: 122), Tropper (2012: 485).

¹⁶ Del Olmo & Sanmartín (2015: 828, s.u. *šr* (II)), Tropper (2008: 122).

¹⁷ Tropper (2008: 122), Tropper (2012: 649).

¹⁸ Del Olmo & Sanmartín (2015: 828, s.u. *šr* (II)), though they do not refer to the existence of a dual form. Tropper (2008: 122) rightly points out the existence of a dual form *šrm* (/šârāma/i/, oblique /šârēmi/).

¹⁹ Due to this, Del Olmo and Sanmartín (1998: 182, 2015: 828-829) propose ‘maker of musical instruments, luthier (?)’ as a second possible meaning of *šr*. This profession also appears in the Ugaritic text RS 94.2519, considered by the editors (though with hesitations) as a clerical type of text (Bordreuil & Pardee 2012: 44-48; see also Dietrich, Loretz & Sanmartín 2013: 584 s. 4.836), but that should be considered rather as a school text, as Roche (2008: 159) already pointed out.

²⁰ See, regarding this, Del Olmo & Sanmartín (1998: 182-183).

²¹ Richter (2012: 342).

²² Cf. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* vol. Š/2, 335; von Soden (1981: 1219); Richter (2012: 342).

²³ Cf. Del Olmo (2014: 63): “The influence of Hurrian religious, mythological and cultic tradition in Ugarit is extensive”.

personnel who played a significant role in the cultic sphere in relation to singing.²⁴ Throughout the following millennium, the use of this root continued, especially in the sphere of Northwest Semitic languages and, in particular, as explained earlier, in Hebrew.²⁵

Therefore, starting from Ugaritic *šrm* ‘singers’ (plural /šârūma/), oblique /šârīma/) or dual (/šârāma/i/, oblique/šârēmi/), we could envisage a loan into Greek as /seirēm/. For that, we would need to assume that the Greek speakers changed the Ugaritic palatal sibilant into a dento-alveolar, given that this was the only one existing in their language. Vowels are generally left unwritten in the Ugaritic alphabetic cuneiform script, but they are rendered when written in syllabic texts from Ugarit itself.²⁶ The comparison of the Greek word to the standard forms of the Ugaritic plural and dual shows, therefore, that the vowels have also undergone a change in their adaptation to Greek phonetics.

Concerning the morphology of the Greek word, two issues require further explanation. First, a plural or dual *šrm* ‘singers’ was borrowed as a singular /seirēm/ ‘siren’. This can be easily accounted for, and, in fact, we have a nice parallel in modern European languages of a similar situation: the plural of the Pashto word *ṭālib* ‘student’, that is, *ṭālibān* is very frequently used as a singular in English, French, or Spanish, languages in which it is not difficult to find texts where the new regular plural *talibans* (English and French) or *talibanes* (Spanish) is employed when a plural is required. In fact, reanalysis of borrowed plural forms as singulars is not rare: we can mention, e.g., English *chips* borrowed as a singular in Romanian, a language in which a new plural *chipsuri* ‘chips’ has been created,²⁷ or Swahili *ma-uwa* ‘flowers’ (plural, class 6), borrowed as a singular *ma’uuwa* ‘sunflower’ in Iraqw, a Cushitic language, in which a new plural *ma’uuwa-adu* is used.²⁸ This is especially frequent when the referents are generally found in groups, as typified by the presence of the reflex of the Spanish plural marker *-(e)s* in Q’eqchi’ (a Mayan language) loanwords, such as *wakax* ‘cattle’ (from Spanish *vaca-s*), *b’ooyx* ‘ox’ (from *buey-es*) or *patux* ‘duck’ (from *pato-s*).²⁹ Similarly, given that (Mycenaean) Greek speakers would not identify a final suffix *-em* as a plural marker, the original plural or dual *šrm* must have been reinterpreted as the basic form. It should be borne in mind that sirens always appear in groups (at least in pairs), and this can explain why the plural or dual, and not the singular, was borrowed into Greek.³⁰

Second, Ugaritic *šrm* is *masculine*, while sirens are usually considered hybrid beings with birds’ bodies and *women’s* heads. Let us recall first that most probably in Mycenaean the word /seirēm/ must have basically referred to the hybrid beings that

²⁴ Both the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* vol. Š/2, 144 and von Soden (1981: 1194) point to the existence of a Northwest Semitic term *šârūtu* ‘position of singer’ in line 29 of letter no. 1 from the Canaanite locality of Taanach. This line, however, must be read totally differently and the term in question does not exist; see in this respect Horowitz, Oshima, & Sanders (2006: 131).

²⁵ The root is also attested to in Phoenician (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995: 1130) as well as, much later, in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic (Sokoloff, 1990: 548; Del Olmo & Sanmartín 2015: 828, *s.u.* š-r [I], quite probably as a loan from Hebrew). In the first millennium B.C. the root does not seem to be particularly productive outside the sphere of Northwest Semitic languages, save for a few attested cases in Babylonian texts (cf. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* vol. Š/2, 335; von Soden 1981: 1219).

²⁶ Tropper (2012: 289-294), Huehnergard (2012: 38).

²⁷ Schulte (2009: 248).

²⁸ Mous & Qorro (2009: 117), with further examples.

²⁹ Wichmann & Hull (2009: 889), with further examples.

³⁰ In fact, dictionaries of Greek draw attention to the fact that the word is mainly attested in the plural or dual.

were known as sphinxes in 1st millenium Greek, as we have extensively argued elsewhere.³¹ In the Aegean art, even if the female sphinxes clearly outnumber the male ones, representations of hybrid beings having a lion's body and a human male's head are known. In fact, the first few Minoan sphinxes are mainly male and wingless.³² And later, Greek sirens (starting from the 8th c. BC), that is, birds with human heads, could be either male or female in earlier times. From the point of view of morphology, for a Greek speaker, the final suffix *-em* (opposed to feminine plural *-ōt*, in a Semitic language) was not identifiable as masculine, so that no restriction is expected when using the word for female beings, as well.

Summing up, the Ugaritic word *šrm* 'singers' (masculine plural or dual of *šr* 'singer') provides a nice solution for the etymology of Greek *σειρήν* 'siren' (Mycenaean */*seirēm*/). It also suits the cultural and chronological context in which the word is expected to have been adopted by the speakers of Greek in the 2nd millenium BC.

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³¹ Luján, Piquero & Díez (in press). There are no representations of hybrid beings with birds' bodies and women's heads in Mycenaean times, while the Mycenaean sphinxes frequently appear on vases and on various kinds of decorations. In Greece, the first representations of a being with a bird's body and a woman's head only date back to the 8th c. BC, during the Orientalizing period: the oldest siren in Greek art, in fact, seems to be the Praisos one, dated to the Orientalizing period (Hofstetter, 1997).

³² See Luján, Piquero & Díez (in press) for further references.

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ABSTRACT

Standard etymological dictionaries of Greek mention two possible etymologies for the word σειρήν ‘siren’: either a relationship to σειρά ‘cord, rope’ or else to Σείριος ‘Sirius, the dog star’, none of which is very convincing on semantic and morphological grounds. Mycenaean *se-re-mo-* shows that this was originally an *-m*-stem and both the scarcity of *-m*-stems in Greek and Indo-European and the presence of an initial *s-* that has not become an aspirate point to a non-Indo-European origin of the word. In the past, some scholars have proposed that this must be a Semitic loanword related to the root of Hebrew *šr* ‘sing’, but the actual explanations suffer from any or other flaws. However, Ugaritic *šrm*, dual or plural of the word *šr* ‘singer’ appears to be a good candidate as the source of the Greek word for ‘siren’. It also suits the cultural and chronological context in which it must have been borrowed by the speakers of Greek in the 2nd millennium BC.