POMEGRANATE IN MYCENAEAN GREEK

Abstract: The Greek appellative for ‘pomegranate (tree and fruit)’, Attic ῥοία, ῥοά, Ionic ῥοή, Aeolic ῥόα, Doric ῥοά f., is attested as early as in the Mycenaean times (cf. Myc. Gk. ro-a /rhoai/ = Homeric Gk. ῥοαί). It forms creates a number of derivatives (e.g. Myc. Gk. dimin. ro-i-ko /rhoiskos/ = Anc. Gk. ῥοίσκος), all following the well known principles of the Ancient Greek word-formation. In this paper a new etymological explanation of the Greek term for ‘pomegranate’ is suggested.

Pomegranate (’Punica granatum L.’) is a deciduous tree or shrub native to the Mediterranean (Hehn 1902: 242–243; Schradner, Nehring 1917–1923: 408; Sfikas 2001: 104). It is sometimes considered to have originated from Persia or India. However, the pomegranate tree has been cultivated in the Mediterranean region (Balkans, Near East, northern Africa) since ancient times. There are Semitic, Egyptian and Greek sources from the 2nd millennium B.C., documenting the cultivation of pomegranate-trees in the Near East, the northern Africa (esp. Egypt) and Greece.

The rind of the fruit is tough and leathery, protecting soft, juice interior. Pomegranate fruits contain “hundreds of tightly-packed pulp-covered granules” (Iatridis 1988: 78), separated by whitish, membranous walls. Each granule contains the sweet or slightly sour juice which is not only a refreshing drink, but also a rich source of vitamins, antioxidants, polyphenols and minerals. The juice is extremely nutritious and healthy – it can reduce inflammation, accelerate healing and relieve symptoms of many diseases (including dermal, sexual and digestive disorders). Because of their positive impact on physical and sexual health, pomegranates are considered as a symbol of fertility.

1. Mycenaean Greek evidence.

José Fortes Fortes (1984: 8) indicates (with a question mark) that the Greek phytonym ῥόα ‘pomegranate (tree and fruit)’ is attested in Mycenaean texts. His view is not accepted by other
scholars, such as Kazanskene and Kazansky (1986), Duhoux (1993) and Kaczor (2000).

As far as we can tell, pomegranate seems to be mentioned in the Mycenaean Greek texts as ro-i-ko (PY Va 482) ‘small pomegranate’ (so Palmer 1963: 368, 453; Bertolini Cebrián 1997: 15) and ro-a (KN Xd 148.1) ‘pomegranates (?)’ (so Stella 1965: 176). Both interpretations are far from being certain, according to Aura Jorro (1993: 260).

The botanical interpretation (‘Granatapfel(baum)’) of both attested forms is preferred by Bartoněk (2003: 173, 356, 600) in his Handbuch des mykenischen Griechisch. He correctly reconstructs the Mycenean Greek term ro-a as rho(h)ai (?), nominative plural ‘pomegranates’ (cf. Attic ῥοαί, Ionic ῥοιαί ‘id.’). Under the heading ro-i-ko he mentions the traditional derivation from Greek ῥοικός ‘gekrümmt, gebogen / crooked’ (Ventris, Chadwick 1956: 408), indicating the phonological difficulties connected with such an interpretation (the Greek adjective ῥοικός should be written **wo-ro-ko or **wo-ro-i-ko, as it clearly derives from PIE. *u̯roikos, cf. ME. wrāh adj. ‘twisted, wrong, stubborn’, MLG. wrīch adj. ‘crooked’, Du. wreeg ‘stiff’, Swed. dial. vrā adj. ‘awere, sulky, gloom’, Lith. rāšas, also raišas adj. ‘lame, limping’, Alb. rreth m. ‘circle, hoop, ring, rime (of a wheel)’, adv. ‘all around’ (Orel 2003: 470), as well as Avest. uruuaes- m. ‘vortex’ (Beekes 2010: 1286). Thus the Czech scholar thinks that Palmer’s interpretation is better (“besser”) (Bartoněk 2003: 600, ft. 240).

Let us now review the Mycenaean Greek testimony.

The term ro-a is attested in an unclear context. It appears only once in the fragmentary tablet KN Xd 148 written by scribe “124” in the Linear B script. The tablet was originally formed like a palm leaf, containing three lines of text. Unfortunately, only the left part of this Knossian tablet is preserved, both the central and the right parts being lost. Three or two Linear B syllabic signs are legible in two initial lines. The text runs as follows:

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.1  ro-a , ku[...
.2  qa-mo [...
.3  vacat  [
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The term ro-a opens the text in question and seems to refer to some unknown objects, possibly to cultivated trees and their fruits. Unfortunately, no ideogram is preserved, so the botanic interpretation of the tablet is far from secure. The plural interpretation of ro-a (= Gk. rhoai ‘pomegranates’) seems certain.
The word *qa-mo* denotes a Cretan place name (Aura Jorro 1993: 183–184) which should be identified with Bamos (now Vamos), a large village in the western Crete.

The term *ro-i-ko* is attested once in the Linear B tablet PY Va 482, which lists pieces of ivory (Myc. Gk. *e-re-pa* = Anc. Gk. ἐλεφας), both ‘unworked’ (*a-no-po*) and ‘incised, drilled, engraved’ (*qe-qi-no-me-no*):

‘*qe-qi-no-me-no*’

E-RE-PA , a-no-po , a-ko-so-ta ZE 1 e-wi-su-*79-ko 4 ro-i-ko 3

Tablet PY Va 482 has been interpreted as follows:

“Ivory … Aksotas”, pairs: four *evenly-matched, turned*, three crooked” (Ventris, Chadwick 1956: 348). The italics indicate an uncertain translation. Thus, two of the Mycenaean forms are translated: *qe-qi-no-me-no* (‘turned’) and *e-wi-si-zu?-ko* (‘evenly-matched’), whereas the term *a-no-po* is not translated into English.

“Aksotas [has issued] ivory to Anopos (a craftsman), one pair. Carved as *e-wi-su-*79-ko ‘Engraved’ 4, with small pomegranates 3” (Palmer 1963: 368–369).

The English translation could also be phrased as follows:

“IVORY to Aksotas ONE unwor ked PAIR, “engraved” FO-UR PAIRS *e-wi-su-*79-ko, THREE PAIRS with small pomegranates”.

The term *ro-i-ko* has been interpreted in two different ways:


2. Ancient Greek evidence from 1st millennium B.C.
The earliest attestation for ‘pomegranate’ in alphabetic Greek sources appears in the *Odyssey* (Autenrieth 1887: 250; Fortes Fortes 1984: 10). The great Greek poet mentions pomegranates twice in two similar passages:

> ἔνθα δὲ δένδρεα μακρὰ πεφύκασι τηλεθάοντα, ὁγχαι καὶ ῥοιαὶ καὶ μηλέαι ἀγλαόκαρποι συκέαι τε γλυκεραὶ καὶ ἐλαῖαι τηλεθόωσαι.

( Homer, *Od.* VII 114–116)

“Therein grow trees, tall and luxuriant, pears and pomegranates and apple-trees, with their bright fruit, and sweet figs, and luxuriant olives.”

(English translation by Murray 1919: 241)

> δένδρεα δ’ ὑψιπέτηλα κατὰ κρῆθεν χέε καρπόν, ὁγχαι καὶ ῥοιαὶ καὶ μηλέαι ἀγλαόκαρποι συκέαι τε γλυκεραὶ καὶ ἐλαῖαι τηλεθόωσαι.

( Homer, *Od.* XI 588–590)

“And trees, high and leafy, let stream their fruits above his head, pears, and pomegranates, and apple trees with their bright fruit, and sweet figs, and luxuriant olives.”

(English translation by Murray 1919: 429)


Ancient Greek derivatives:

[2] with the diminutive suffix *-iskos*: Anc. Gk. (dimin.) ῥοίσκος m. ‘small pomegranate’ = Mycenaean Greek *ro-i-ko* (KN PY Va 482) ‘id.’.

[3] with the suffixes *-id- and *-ewā*: Hellenistic ῥοϊδέα f. ‘pomegranate-tree’ (Liddell, Scott 1996: 1365);


[6] with the suffix *-ìtas: ῥοῖτης 'pomegranate-wine'.


4. Interpretations.

To our best knowledge, the Greek term ῥοᾶ ‘pomegranate’ has so far been explained in three ways: 1) as a Semitic loanword, 2) as a native (Greek) innovative formation based on a verbal root of Indo-European origin, and 3) as borrowing from an unknown Mediterranean substrate. A short presentation of these basic theories is given below.
4a. The Semitic theory.

Benfey (1842: 372) treated the Greek term ῥοιά f. ‘pomegranate’ as a borrowing from Hebrew rimmôn ‘id.’. The same etymology was also suggested by Vaníček (1878: 45), Keller (1891: 192-193) and Hehn (1902: 237, 243). Other linguists have correctly rejected the Semitic etymology for phonological reasons (Müller 1877: 279, 296–297; Muss-Arnolt 1892: 110–111; Lewy 1895: 25; Rosól 2013: 202). Schrader and Nehring (1917–1923: 408) likewise rejected the derivation of Gk. ῥοιά f. ‘pomegranate’ from a Semitic or Egyptian source (cf. Assyrian armānu, Akkadian lurmu, Hebrew rimmôn, Arabic rummān < Semitic *rimān- ‘pomegranate’; Egyptian (NK) rm.t ‘a kind of fruit’, Coptic erman, herman ‘pomegranate’) on the basis of phonological difficulties.

4b. Greek (or Indo-European) etymology.

An Indo-European etymology was proposed by Wharton (1890: 110), who tried to connect Gk. ῥοιά f. ‘pomegranate’ (also ῥοιάς ‘poppy’, ῥοῦς ‘sumach, Rhus coriaria L.’) with Skt. sravā f. ‘a kind of plant (or tree)’. Meyer (1902: 447) derives Greek (Aeolic) ῥόα f. ‘Granatapfel’ from the verb ῥέω ‘fliessen, strömen / to flow, stream’. Similarly, Strömberg (1940: 52) suggested a connection with the Greek verb ῥέω. In his opinion, the noun ῥούα (< IE. *sruyā f.) was used to denote the pomegranate fruit because of the richness of its juice. André (1956: 302–305) argued for the same etymology, pointing to the laxative character of the pomegranate fruit (“la caractere laxatif de la grenade”). Carnoy (1959: 231) followed the same reasoning, accepting the native (Greek and Indo-European) derivation from the Greek verb Gk. ῥέω and the Indo-European root *sreu- ‘to flow, stream’. Having

1 It should be emphasized that Orel and Stolbova (1995: 450) derive the Semitic and Egyptian appellatives from the Hamito-Semitic (Afro-Asiatic) archetype *rimān- ‘fruit’. A Semitic word appears in the codex Parisinus Graecus 2419 (26, 18): ποϊρουμάν · ἡ ῥοιά ‘pomegranate’ (Delatte 1930: 84) < Arabic rummān ‘id.’. This Byzantine codex, created in the 15th century AD by Georgios Midates, is a medieval copy of an earlier botanical lexicon (Delatte 1930: 59).

2 According to Monier-Williams (1999: 1274), the Sanskrit phytonym sravā f. or sravā f. denotes the following plants: ‘the plant Sanseviera roxburghiana’ (lex.) and ‘the tree Boswellia thurifera’ (lex.), whereas the compound form madhu-sravā f. means ‘Sanseviera roxburghiana’ (lex.), ‘Hoya viridiflora’ (Bhpr.), ‘a kind of date’ (lex.); cf. also madhu-srava- m. ‘the tree Bassia latifolia’ (lex.), ‘Sanseviera zeylanica’ (lex.).

3 Under the heading rhoa, rhoia the Belgian scholar wrote that Greek ῥούα „est un des noms du « grenadier » (punica Granatum [sic!]) et de son fruit très juteux, méritant bien de porter un nom dérivé de la racine de ῥέω « couler » (ind.-eur. sreu)” (Carnoy 1959: 231). He also refers to three different Greek
accepted Strömberg’s explanation, Frisk (1962: 660) derived the Greek term for ‘pomegranate’ from the Proto-Greek protoform *ῥωφία (ā-stem). He explained it as an “Ableitung” from ῥοῦς m. ‘stream, flow, current’ (< IE. *sróuos).

4c. Mediterranean (substrate) theory.

According to Schwyzer (1939: 61, 348, 469), the Greek noun in question is of foreign origin (“Fremd ist ῥοῖη”), being a borrowing from an unknown Aegean substrate. Chantraine (1977: 976) directed attention to the suffix -tā, accepting the loanword hypothesis (“Il serait plausible de penser que le mot est emprunté”). He points out that the Mycenaean evidence (Myc. Gk. ro-i-ko ‘small pomegranate’) demonstrates no trace of digamma (PGk. *ϝ), thus the connection with the verb ρέω (< PGk. *ρέϝω < IE. *sreu̯ō) should be rejected (“La parenté avec ῥέω, si elle était retenue, exclurait le rapprochement de myc. ro-i-ko [sans -w- intervocalique]”). Finally Beekes (2010: 1289) prefers the substrate origin of the Greek noun in question.

In our opinion, a different Ancient Greek term for ‘pomegranate’ (Ionic σίδη or σίβδη, Boeotian σιόδα f., Aeolic ξίμβα, dial. σιλβα and so on) should be viewed as a substrate borrowing, as it demonstrates a number of substrate features (Furnée 1972: 286; Witczak, Zadka 2014a: 121), e.g. [1] a nasalization; [2] an alternation between [ks] und [s]; [3] a secondary dental stop; [4] an epenthesis of λ. It has been proposed that this alternative appellative represents a borrowing from an Anatolian source, cf. Hittite GISsadduwa- ‘a kind of fruit-tree’ (Witczak, Zadka 2014b: 131–139).

None of the aforementioned substrate features appears in the set containing Mycenaean Greek ro-a, Ionic ῥοῖη, Attic ῥοία, ῥότα f. ‘pomegranate, Punica granatum L.’. The appellative in question forms a number of derivatives (e.g. Myc. Gk. dimin. ro-i-ko /rhoiskos/ = Anc. Gk. ῥοίσκος m. ‘small pomegranate’, see chapter 2), which follow the well known principles of the Ancient Greek word-formation. Therefore, the Ancient Greek term should be explained on the basis of a purely Hellenic development from an Indo-European archetype.

5. A New Indo-European Etymology.

The Greek appellative ροῖα ‘pomegranate’, as clearly evidenced by the Mycenaean data (Myc. Gk. ro-a, ro-i-ko), con-
tained no digamma (Gk. ϑ < IE. *y) in the initial and medial position. This is why the traditional derivation from the archetype *sroṣia (< IE. *srey- ‘to flow, stream’) is hardly acceptable. What is more, there is no reason to assume a Semitic or Mediterranean origin of the Greek phytonym.

In our opinion, the Greek term in question demonstrates a purely Greek formation and represents a straightforward reflex of the Indo-European archetype *rosiā́ f. ‘a juicy plant; fruit with juicy drops (granules)’ (perhaps also *rosā́, cf. Skt. rasyā́ f. ‘a name of two different plants (called rāsnā́ and pāṭhā́)’, as well as Skt. rāsá f. ‘name of various plants (including Clypea hernan-difolia; Boswellia thurifera; Panicum italicum; a vine or grape’ (Monier-Williams 1999: 870–871). The Sanskrit plant name rasyā́ unmistakably derives from the Old Indic adjective rasya- ‘juicy, taste, savoury, palatable’ (Monier-Williams 1999: 871) and the noun rāṣa- m. ‘the sap or juice of plant, juice of fruit, any liquid of fluid, the best or finest or prime part of anything, essence, marrow’ (Monier-Williams 1999: 869). Thus the Greek and Sanskrit phytonyms originally referred to the juicy nature of the plants or their fruits. In the case of the pomegranate it should be assumed that the Greek term ῥοία (representing PIE. *rosiā́) originally denoted the pomegranate fruit and denoted the richness of its juice (as it has been stressed by earlier researchers).

The Indo-European root *res- (with the apophonic variant *ros-) is attested not only in Greek and Sanskrit, but also in other Indo-European languages (see Pokorny 1959: 335–337). The Indo-European root noun *rōs- appears in Latin as rōs, gen. sg. rōris m. ‘dew, moisture’. It also denotes a plant (Lat. rōs marinus, spelled also rōsmarīnus m. ‘Rosemary, Rosmarinus officinalis L.’). The Latin verb rōrō (< *rōsā́i̯ō) ‘to let fall, drop, to distil dew; to drop, trickle, drip, distill; to bedew, to moisten, wet’ should be treated as a denominal formation.


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It is worth emphasizing that Skt. rāsnā́ f. denotes ‘the ichneumon plant’ (Suśr., SārūgS.) and ‘bdellium’ (Bhpr.), as well as other plants including ‘Mimosa octandra; Acampe papilosa’ (lex.), whereas Skt. pāṭhā́ f. means ‘Clypea heran-difolia’ (lex.).
OInd. rasā f. ‘moisture, humidity’ (< IE. *rosā f. ā-stem ‘dew, moisture’). What is more, the Sanskrit proper name Rasā f. also denotes ‘a mythical stream supposed to flow around the earth and the atmosphere’ (Monier-Williams 1999: 870). The Avestan texts also mention a mythical river called Raŋhā. The Old Indic hydronym Rasā and the Avestan river name Raŋhā evidently refer to an ancient river flowing in the hypothetical Indo-Iranian homeland. It is often considered equatable with the East European river called ‘Ρᾶ ( < Iranian *Rahā < Indo-Iranian *Rasā) in Greek texts and commonly identified as the Volga river (now in Russia). Finally, it should be added that the Iranian noun *raḥā f. also denoted a juicy plant, namely the Syrian or wild rhubarb (‘Rheum ribes L.’), which was called ῥᾶ ποντικόν (literally ‘the Pontic rha’) by the Ancient Greeks and rha ponticum ‘id.’ by the Romans (Carnoy 1959: 229; André 1985: 217).

6. Conclusions.

The final results can be summed up as follows:

1. The Ancient Greek term for ‘pomegranate, Punica graminatum L.’ is attested as early as in the Mycenaean times (cf. Myc. Gk. ro-a /rhoai/ KN Xd 148.1 ‘pomegranates’, ro-i-ko /rhoiskoi/ PY Va 482 ‘small pomegranates’).

2. The noun ῥοιαὶ f. pl. ‘pomegranate-trees’ appears twice in the Homeric poems (Od. VII 115; Od. XI 589). It is attested as ῥοῖ in Ionic and Epic, as ῥοῦ in Doric, as ῥόα in Epic Greek (< Aeolic), as ῥοῦ and ῥοὰ in Attic (with the meaning ‘pomegranate-tree; mulberry-tree’). The lexical evidence from the Byzantine, Medieval and Modern Greek sources is also included.

3. None of the etymologies proposed so far is acceptable. The derivation of the Mycenaean Greek term for ‘pomegranate’ (ro-a /rhoai/, dimin. ro-i-ko /rhoiskoi/) from the Proto-Greek protoform *ροιά (ā-stem) and IE. *sroujā seems impossible for phonological reasons (Mycenaean shows no traces of digamma). The suggested Semitic etymology, as well as a Mediterranean (“substrate”) explanation, must likewise be rejected.

4. The Ancient Greek appellative for ‘pomegranate (tree and fruit)’ seems to represent the Proto-Indo-European archetype

5 Derksen (2008: 438) reconstructs PIE. *Hros-eh f. ‘dew, drop, moisture, humidity’, but the Indo-Iranian reflexes show no lengthening of the vocalism *-o- in the open syllable (according to Brugmann’s law). The conclusion must be that the syllable *ros- was originally closed by a laryngeal. The Proto-Indo-European archetype has to go back to *rosH-eh or perhaps *HrosH-ehs. Note that Greek ἐρωή f. ‘rush, impulse, force, throw’ (Beekes 2010: 469) has nothing to do with the Indo-European term for ‘dew’.
* rosjā f. ‘a juicy plant; fruit with juicy granules’. The Greek noun undoubtedly refers to the richness of the pomegranate’s juice.

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