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## THE ETHYMOLOGY OF LATIN *strix* BETWEEN INDO-EUROPEAN AND ROMANISTICS

1. The Latin ornithonym *strīyǵx* (f.), Which designates a nocturnal bird of prey, probably the 'barn owl' or a related bird, 1 has been the subject of extensive studies from the ethno-anthropological point of view, since the striga she appears in many texts of the Latin literary tradition as a demon molester of infants greedy for human entrails, a gloomy messenger of death and, on the other hand, as a nocturnal nurse who offers her generous breasts to children.<sup>2</sup> This latter aspect is by far a minority, <sup>3</sup> while the characteristic

1. On the ornithological classification, cf. André (1967: 146) and, above all, Capponi (1979: 467), for whom it is necessary to avoid univocity in identifying the referent: "In our opinion, the night bird *strix* can be identified only in the single ornithic contexts, since *strix* is a generic name and can indicate, as in the Italian vernacular, various species and subspecies of Strigiformi". The identification of the *strix* with the bat supported by Oliphant (1913) is now without foundation.
2. From this point of view, Alinei (1981) is fundamental; for the archaeological aspect see also Gimbutas (1990 [1989]: 31–41 and 190–195); for an integration of the two Dalbera perspectives (2006: 275–338).
3. In fact, it looks like a relic, witnessed with disbelief by Pliny (*Naturalis Historia* XI, 232): *fabulosum enim arbitror de strigibus, ubera eas infantium labris immulgere* 'I think it is a fantasy that striges hold their breasts to the lips of infants'. According to Se reno Sammonico (*Liber medicinalis* 1035–1036) the action is pernicious: *Praeterea si forte premit strix atra puellos / Virosa immulgens exertis ubera labris* 'Furthermore, if by chance the dark striga oppresses children by offering poisoned breasts to protruding lips'. In Dracontius (*Romulea* X, 302–310) an old *nutrix* is compared to a striga. The crucial testimony of Isidore (*Origines* XII, 7,42) is placed at a very late stage: *Strix nocturna: haec avis vulgo amma dicitur, ab amando parvulos; unde et lac praeberere fertur na scentibus* 'Nocturnal strix: this bird is popularly called *amma* (nurse) because it loves children; therefore he is also said to offer milk to infants.' In the interpretation of Alinei (1981) the maternal and positive characterizations of the striga are the very ancient relic of a totemic phase in which man perceives himself as a descendant, or even son, of a bird. The rich dossier collected in Gimbutas (1990 [1989]) shows that the Strigiformes, represented with female genitals and breasts, were prehistoric representations of the Great Mother. The process of demonization therefore takes place in successive phases (presumably in the Metal Age) and is already completed (with small residues by now incomprehensible) in the classical world.



borrowed from the Friulian the Slovenian *strije* 'indovina', 'black butterfly' and probably from the Venetian Serbo-Croatian *štri`ga* 'id.'. 8

The existence of the term *stri* (v g) x 'not turning bird' in Greek is uncertain: a fragment of conjuration is in fact the only attestation that is not strictly glossographical. Unfortunately, the edited text is the result of the heavy amendment of a Greek passage preserved by Festus (in the epitome of Paul the Deacon) and attributed to Verrius (Lindsay 1913: 414, 24–31). From the previous lines, in Latin, it is clear that the *striga* was considered a woman devoted to evil and capable of flying:

*The Greeks call strivga (as Verrius says) strivgga, because it is a name given to the female side of the female, which they also call winged creatures. Accordingly, the Greeks are wont to turn them away by these words, as it were,*

ÿStrivgg j ajpopevmpein, nuktibovan, ta; n strivgg j ajpo; law`nÿ, o [rnin ajnwnvmion wjkupovrou ~ ejpi; nh`a ~

'The striga, as Verrius says, the Greeks call it *strinx* and the name is attributed to malefic women who also say volaticians. In fact, the Greeks usually scare them with these words: let the striga go away that cries out at night, [go away] the striga from the people, the unmentionable bird on fast ships'. 9

Hesychius on the other hand reports the derivative *strivglo* ~ ÿ. . nuclear defeat, *kaleištai de; kai; nuktibovaÿ oiJ de; nuktikovraka.*

Even leaving aside the testimony of Festus (which is reconstructed), the name *strivglo* ~, with acute accent, implies a short tonic vocalism and therefore zero degree of the root.

In the Herodian grammarian (Lentz 1867: 396, rr. 26-27) the Greek root theme is attested in double form, with and without nasal infix (*strivx kai;*

*strivgx, ei`do ~ ojrnevou, o {per tine; ~ kai; dia; tou`l – gravfousi stlivgx);* 10 the new Greek has *strivggla* and *strivgla* 'evil woman', for which Andriotis (1971: 345)

hypothesizes the derivation from a Latin \**strigula* 'witch' (also reconstructed from the Sicilian *striula*, see *above*). The hypothesis is theoretically correct for *strivgla*, but unfounded for *strivggla*, since it is not clear why and at what point of the mutation process from Latin into Greek the internal nasal would arise (unless there was an infixed theme in the submerged Latin \**string* of which traces would have remained only in later Greek).

The problem is solved very simply if we consider the nasal as an infix; therefore \**strei-ng-* must be the root from which to start to motivate the name of the striga.

8. For neo-Latin developments, see Meyer-Lübke (1935: 686–687) and von Wartburg (1966: 301–302); for an updated comment on the Caprini-Alinei areal basis (2007: 176–177). For the South Slavic area Skok (1973: 417).

9. In the Latin text the reading *strivgga* was already the work of Mueller (1839: 314) in place of the betrayed *surria*.

10. Cf. also Teognosto (Cramer 1963: 41, 132) with three variants of the name: *strivx, stlivx, and trivgx.*

There is no need to hypothesize that the Latin terms are of Greek origin (thus André 1967: 146, accepted by Chantraine 1968: 1064); the opposite seems more plausible, as Meister had already seen, even before Andriotis (1916: 20, text in footnote); nothing prevents each of the two languages from having a parallel and independent formation.

Having established this, the possible etymologies are reduced to two: 2. \**streigj-* 'stiff, tense', 'spinning together, rope' and 3. \**(s) treigj-* 'screeching, hissing' (Pokorny 1959: 1036). Pokorny lemmatizes this second root together with \**stredj (h)* -, implying in fact the existence of a "Schallwurzel" \**strei-* with several extensions.

3. The means offered by comparative linguistics allow us to test the validity of both proposals which, on closer analysis, are not equivalent.

The etymological opinions circulating on *strix* are very influenced by what Ovid himself affirms, who in the *Fasti* (VI, 139-140) relates the ornithonym with the verb *strjydo: est illis (avibus) strigibus nomen; sed nominis huius / causa, quod horrendum screeching nocte solent* 'Those (birds) have the name strigi, but the reason for the name is that they usually screech horrible mind at night'. This relationship, well exploited by Latin authors, is legitimized by Isidoro in *Origines* XII, 7, 42: *Strix, nocturna avis, habens nomen de sono vocis. When enim clamat stridet.*

However, it is evident that one cannot prefer the expanded form in den tale \**stredj (h)* - to the one ending with voiced velar (3. \**streig-j*), which offers a correspondence on all radical phonemes. This root of noise (with initial "mobile" or optional sibilant) occurs historically in the Greek verb *trivzw* 'screech, squeak', pertinent from a semantic point of view and attested in some contexts of strong anthropological depth, since it designates the verse of bats-souls of the dead Suitors and the sound that the soul produces when exiting the body:

thŪ` rJ ja`ge Kinvhsa~, ear; de; trivzousai e(ponto).  
wJ ~ d oj {te nukterivde ~ mucw` aŪ "ntrou qespesivoio  
trivzousai potevontai, ejpei; kev ti ~ ajpopevshŪsin,  
oJrmaqou` ejk pevtrh ~, ajnav t allhvlhŪsin e "contai,  
w} ~ aiJ tetrigui` ai a "mjh" i> san

With it (the rod) [Hermes Cillenio] guided [the shadows of the suitors], moving them,

and those [him] followed squeaking.

Like when bats in the recess of a divine cave  
they flutter squeaking when one falls

11. For example Petronius (*Satyricon* LXIII, 8): *Subito stridere strigae coeperunt* (but *stridere* is an integration) and the late Dracontius (in the aforementioned *Romulea* X, in v. 306); others ace cyan the screeching of nocturnal and ill-wishing birds (see eg Stazio, *Thebais* III, 511).

from the rock [detaching] from the cluster and then again clinging to each other, thus squeaking [the shadows] went together. (*Odyssey* XXIV, 5-9)

yuch; de; kata; cgono; ~ hju? te kapno; ~  
w "ceto tetrigui The a ...  
soul went underground, screeching like smoke. (*Iliad* XXIII, 100-101)

In Greek, however, the verb is not specific to birds (from time to time it can designate the noises or cries produced by locusts, mice, 12 fish and even elephants), nor to animals (already in *Iliad* XXIII, 714 are the 'backs' <nw`ta < of the wrestlers who tetrigvei, 'crunch', during the fight).

Above all, where the quantity of the root vowel can be determined with certainty (i.e. before a simple consonant), it appears long: this is obtained from the Homeric forms of the perfect (Chantraine 1958: 426 and 431). If the long vowel of the perfect tetri-g- is native, this contrasts with the short of Greek stri (v g) x, strivglo ~ and of Latin *strýyx*, *strýyga*: 13 \**streigý-* 'stri dere, hiss' would then require / ýý /, or \* / i + H /, unlike what Pokorny reconstructs.

4. It remains therefore to consider the relationship with the root that Pokorny reports as 2. \**streigý-* 'rigid, tense', 'twist together, rope', to which, according to the authoritative scholar, it would be necessary to bring back the Latin *stringo* in the sense of 'squeeze'. Since the notion of 'suffocation, strangulation' is attested with considerable frequency in the demonic onomasiology of many peoples (the nocturnal and diurnal demons oppress the young victims by taking their breath away), 14 the proposal would be more than congruent on the motivational level.

On the other hand, the semantics of the Latin verb *stringo* is rather complex: it does not only mean 'to tighten', but also 'to pinch, strap apparently'. For this reason, and due to the presence of some derivatives not phonetically attributable to a single prototype, in the recent repertoire of Rix *et al.* \_ \_ \_

12. We point out a passage from the *Batracomiomachia* (v. 88) in which the paro-distic rereading of the Homeric texts is guessed: kai; cei`ra ~ e [unlucky kai; ojlluvmin ~ katevtrize 'And [the mouse] clenched his paws and squeaked sharply as he died'.
13. Recall that the / ýý / of *strýyx* and *strýyga* is explained by the regular closing of \* / ei / Indo-European in Latin and should therefore not be related to / ýý / of the Greek, unless you absurdly want to separate the Latin forms with a short vowel from those with a long vowel, which could then be related to trivzw.
14. Remember at least the Greek Sirens (for the para (?) Etymological link with seiraw 'rope', Caillois 1988: 26–31 and Bettini — Spina 2007: 94–98) and the Sfi nge (in relation to sfivggw 'hug, hug, oppress'; Frisk 1970: 832); the Sumerian-Semitic Lilith (chia mata *h.niqutá* and *wh.nqá* 'the one who clings' in Aramaic; cf. Gaster 1951–1952: 134–135 and in general also Hurwitz 1993); the Hittite Wišuriyanza, which derives its name from the verb *wešuriya-* 'to suffocate, to oppress' (Gaster, *ibidem*). For an even broader view, refer to the extensive documentation collected by Scobie (1978) and Johnston (1995).

Hofmann 1938: 604–605). 15 In particular, from \**streigŷ-* the nasal present would be formed \**stri-né / ng-*, from which the Latin *stringoŷ* 'berühren, wegreißen', formally identical to the thematic present of \**streng-*, that is I *stringŷ* 'schnüren, zusammenbinden'.

The network of etymological relationships then becomes wider and more complex: is the striga 'she who tears' or 'she who tightens' or, finally, both things together? Historical phonetics provides us with a univocal answer, at least in a diachronic perspective. If in Latin the present in nasal of \**streigŷ-* can come to coincide with the thematic one of \**streng-*, this does not happen for the nominal derivatives: from \**streng-* there cannot in any way be *strŷŷŷx / strŷŷŷga* (rather sto \**string*), 16 which must therefore necessarily be traced back to \**streigŷ-*.

From the semantic point of view, a confirmation comes from the contexts in which the striga is presented in the act of molesting its victims: it never suffocates or strangles, rather it tears off the internal organs to gorge itself on them. Let us take up again the fundamental Ovid testimony (*Fasti* VI, 135–138):

*Fly at night*

*and spoil the cradle with their stolen bodies*

*they're called suckling beaks*

*and they have a throat filled with blood.*

'They fly by night and look for children without a nurse;

and violate the bodies kidnapped from their cradles;

it is said that with the beaks they tear the entrails of infants

and their throats are full of the blood they have drunk.'

Note the intentional cruelty of that *carpenter* 'tear, seize', applied to the entrails still full of milk. The verb is usually used for flowers and fruit and in this comes close to *stringo*, which indicates the technical action of sfon giving a tree (Ernout-Meillet 1959: 657): *carpus* and *stringo* are found together in a Virgilian passage dedicated to plant pruning (*Georgica* II, 365–368) .17

15. If there were no Indo-European derivatives irreducible to a single prototype, nothing would prevent us from joining the two Latin meanings 'tighten' and 'tear' under a single root for a simple metonymic process; in this case, however, the continuators of other historical languages are discriminating: only to \**streng-* do the Greek *straggavh*, for example, date back 'rope' (from grade zero, with *stragg-* for *strag-*; cf. Frisk 1970: 805), Old Norse *strang* 'id.' (from grade \* / o /), Middle Irish *srengim* 'shot' (from grade \* / and / or zero), Khotanese (*pat-*) *stram*. j- 'I make rigid' (probable causative theme to degree \* / or /); only a \**streigŷ-* Old High German *strŷŷhhan* 'to pass the hand', Anglo-Saxon *strŷŷcan* 'strophes - nare' and the Old Church Slavonic witcher *ŷ* (*strisŷti*) 'cut'.
16. If we interpret the internal nasal of \**streng-* as a removable infix, from \**streg-* the Latin would give \**witch* and therefore the Tuscan form would sound \*\**stréga* instead of the attested *stréga*.
17. *The line itself is not yet to be tried with hooks, but with hooks / plucked leaves by hand, and pick them up. / From thence, when the elms have come out, clasping their strong stems, then strip your hair, and then clip your arms. Poi, when si saranno estese abbrac ciando gli olmi con ceppi vigorosi, allora sfronda le chiome, allora amputate le braccia'.*

Ovid is preceded by the grotesque Plautian description contained in the *Pseu dolus* (819–821), in which a cook, recalling that the striges tear the entrails, makes fun of the (in) culinary abilities of his rivals:

*To her men where they cook dinners when they are seasoning  
not with seasonings, but with owls  
the living guests eat the guts  
'When those guys cook dinners, when they put the seasoning  
not seasoned with condiments, but with strigi,  
to get the entrails out of the living diners'. 18*

The horrid is at the service of the comedian. Not so in Petronius (*Satyricon* LXIII, 8), where the same image is part of a dramatic episode (the premature death of a young man): 19

*He had no heart, no intestines, or anything;*

'He no longer had a heart, no entrails, nothing: by now the striges had certainly kidnapped the boy and had put a straw puppet in his place.' 20

And the second Petronian passage in which the striges are cited implies a proverbiality of the association with devouring. In fact, the old Pro seleno says to the spineless Encolpio: *Quae striges comederunt nervos tuos?* 'Which striges ate your nerves?' (CXXXIV, 1).

All the texts consistently point to the same semantic paradigm: not that of the demon that suffocates, but that of the demon that tears, snatches and kidnaps. Nor is it surprising that it is imagined as a bird: let's think of some onomasiological motivations, even banal ones, such as that of the Latin *vultur* 'vulture', corradicale di *gula* 'throat' or the Italian *rapacious* 'bird of prey', from the Latin *rapax* 'greedy, that kidnaps'. Similarly, the Old Indian adjective *gr' odhra-* 'greedy' has specialized in the sense of 'vulture' (from a root *gardh-* 'to desire'; Mayrhofer 1986–2001, I: 474) .21

Above all, we must remember the Greek Harpies ( *Arpui* ) whose name shows an evident albeit controversial relationship with the Greek verb *αὐραπάζω* 'grabbed' (a {*rph* is also the name of a bird of prey and of the

18. For a comment cf. Lowe (1985).

19. The story is told during the banquet by Trimalcione himself. A contextualization of the passage in Latin literature offers Giovini (2008: 218–219), who finds in the narrative a Gothic taste *ante litteram*.

20. According to Schuster (1930: 177) it must be understood that the demons emptied the corpse by replacing the internal organs with stuffing.

21. A paretymological correlation *in absentia* between *avis* 'bird' and *avidus* 'greedy' (cf. *aveo* 'desire') can be read in Plautus (*Persa* 409-410), which places the Latin adjective, containing the phonosemantic cell *avi-*, the name *accipiter* 'vulture': *pecuniae accipiter avide atque enide, / procax, rapax, trahax* 'vulture of pecunia, greedy and malevolent, luxurious, rapacious, robbery' (with insistence on the theme of robbery and with *accipiter* built with the genitive as *avidus*).



sickle; Frisk 1960: 148–149 and 151) .22 Precisely in the episode of the *Fasti* Ovid defines them as congeners to the striges: *sunt avidae volucres, non quae Phineia mensis / guttura fraudabant, sed genus inde trahunt* 'There are greedy birds [strigi] , not those who stole food from the tables of Phineus [the Harpies], but their race derives from them' (VI, 131-132). In the *Aeneid* (III, 209 ff.) These bird women steal and soil the food of the Trojans several times: a beautiful alliteration gives mutual importance to the ornithonym and the action of theft: *Harpylae*. . . *I would say piuntque dapes* 'The Harpies. . . they take away food' (vv. 226–227). It is based on the repetition of / r / and / p /, the same phonemes that appear in the passages of the *Fasti* (e.g. by *Harpylae* (Campana) *diripiunt*), as if Ovid certainly mindful of the Virgilian narrative, he wanted to evoke the most famous relatives together with the striges, but without naming them directly.

5. Comparative material is not limited to classical languages. The apophonic theme \* *strejzjy* / *strizjy* (\* *streig-* / \* *strigi-*), rendered in Russian *strizj* 'mouse (Riparia riparia)', Old Church Slavic *strizjy* 'ruler', Slovenian *stre .jic zy y* 'wren', belongs to the Protoslav *strizj* (Czech *striz* 'wren', Old Polish *striz* 'wren', Old Church Slavonic *strizj* 'ruler', Old Russian *strizj* 'wren') (Vas mer 1958: 27-28) .23 Since the comparison between Greek and Latin on the one hand and Slavic on the other cannot be explained in terms of loan, unlike the Romance mutations present in Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian (see par. 2. ), it goes back to a rather ancient Indo-European phase, in which various nominal themes formed by the same root meaning 'to tear' had already specialized in indicating different types of birds as (generically) 'birds of prey'.

More than one reason of interest arouses the corradicality between very distant ornithonyms such as 'wren' and 'striga'. In fact, behind the wren there is a very rich folklore, already studied by Frazer (1991 [1922]: 627–629; more recently cf. also Alinei 1983: 259–260): 24 the tiny animal gets the title of king of the birds by deceiving the eagle (hence the frequent dialectal motivation of 'reuccio'); it is also the subject of a 'sacred hunt' (Ireland, England, France), which ends with the ritual killing and a solemn burial. It had to be in contact with the kingdom of the dead, if during the Christmas period it was anxiously awaited by children as a bearer of gifts (tradition of Western Friuli; cf. Chiaradia 2006): the latter

22. Among others Voigt (1955: 1349) opportunely reminds that a "rph 'falce' and a" rph 'bird cello predatore' could be corradical like the Latin couple *falco* 'falcone' and *falx* 'falce' (for Isidoro, *Origines* XII, 7, 57, the falcon would receive its name *quod incurvis digitis sit*).

23. Mann (1984–1987: 1299) also reports a stem with \* / g<sup>h</sup> / instead of \* / g / in Czech *strizjlik* 'wren'.

24. See also, for the linguistic type 'little king' in the Tuscan area, the rich contribution of Giacomelli (1983).

thymus aspect, in significant opposition to the characteristics of the striga (feared because it torments and takes away children) would be worthy of further study, together with a detailed investigation into the Slavic world.

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A/S Jaberg—Jud 1928–1940

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