Two roots for 'woman' in Proto-Indo-European

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PIE possessed two roots that can be ascribed to the lexeme WOMAN, but their distribution in the daughter languages is not equal. One is widely attested from the far east (Indo-Iranian, Tocharian) to the far west (Celtic, Germanic) of the IE world, while the other is mostly restricted to compounds forms and a motion suffix.

*gʷen-

PROTEROKINETIC h₂-STEM
*gʷén-h₂- ~ *gʷn-éh₂-

Anatolian: *gʷóneH- > wānā- (CLuw.), kānā- (Lyd.)

Tocharian: *ćänā > śäṃ (A) śānā (B)

Indo-Aryan: *gnaHs > gnā- (Skt.)

Iranian: *gnaHh > gənā- (OAv.), γənā- (YAv.)

Greek: *gʷǝnā ~ gʷnā-ik- > γυνή, γυναικός (Att.), ku-na-ja (Myc.)

Slavic: *ženà > žena (OCS/ORu.) — through Cowgill's law

Baltic: *genaH > genno (OPr.)

Germanic: *kʷenǭ ~ kʷenōn- > qinō (Got.), kona (ON)

Celtic: *bena > bé, ben- (OIr.)

etc.
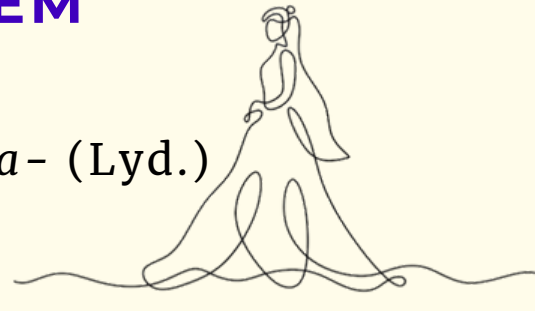
THE CASE OF INDO-IRANIAN AND GERMANIC

The forms found in Skt. jāni-, OAv. jā[i]ni-, conflated with Goth. qēns, OE cwēn, ON kvæn (PGmc. *kʷēniz) point to an acrostatic i-stem *gʷĕn-i-. However, the Indo-Iranian forms can also go back to *jʲanH- (with vocalized laryngeal) or an o-grade (like Greek) with analogical *jʲ- and Brugmann's law. The Germanic form has been suggested by Kroonen as a vrddhi-gerundive to a lost strong verb *kʷēnaną (< PIE thematic present), cf. ON participle úkvæntr 'unmarried', but this is highly speculative.

*gʷen- AS A ROOT NOUN?

Schindler and Harðarson have proposed a root noun *gʷṓn ~ *gʷén- on the basis of an OIr. invariable noun bé(n-), of restricted useage, and Hitt. MUNUS-(an)za, assuming the latter stands for /kʷāns/. I argue against this based on:

- Matasović's more economical account for the Irish form as the regular reflex of PCel. *bena (leaving ben, mná as an analogical formation with the ā-stems).

- Kloekhorst's suggestion that MUNUS-anza = /kʷānts/ < *gʷen-h₂+s by assuming the PIE to Hittite rule *VnHsV > VnzV also works in word final position (*VnHs# > Vnz but *Vns# > Vš). The acc. MUNUS-nan is analogical to the gen. MUNUS-naš (*gʷén-h₂-m > pre-Hitt. *kʷān > Hitt. kuwānan*).

AI-generated image of a Yamnaya woman. Made with https://openart.ai/.

All sources mentioned can be found by scanning this QR code.

*sor-

*swe-sōr ~ *swe-sor- ~ *swe-sr- 'sister'

From *swe 'own' + *sōr 'woman', i.e. 'woman from one's own (clan)'. Since IE society was gyno-exogamous, there was a need to differentiate the women tied to the clan by blood as opposed to those that are so by marriage.

Tocharian: *ṣaṣer > ṣar (A) ṣer (B) — from acc. stem, with haplology

Indo-Aryan: *swásr- > svásr-(Skt.)

Iranian: *hwāhar- > xᵛāŋhār (OAv.)

Greek: *hwéhōr > ἔορ (Att.)

Slavic: *sestrà > sestrá (ORu.)

Baltic: *swesrā > sèsuo (OLith.), swestro (OPr.) — in Slavic and Old Prussian, an epenthetic stop was inserted to break the sequence -sr-.

Italic: *swezōr > soror (Lat.)

Celtic: *swesūr > siur (OIr.), chwaer (Welsh)

Germanic: *swestēr > swistar (Got.), sweostor (OE), systir (ON) — Already in (pre-)PGmc., the stem seems to have been remodelled after the PIE kinship terms in -tēr (esp. *duhtēr)

NUMERALS IN INDO-IRANIAN AND CELTIC

In Indo-Iranian and Celtic, the numerals 'three' and 'four' have a distinct feminine form with a formant *-sr-.

	Vedic Skt.	Avestan	Old Irish	Welsh
3, m/n	tráyaḥ, tri-	θrāiiō, θrī	trí	tri
3, f	tiṣráḥ, tiṣr-	tišr-	téoir	tair
3, m/n	catvárah, catur-	caθβār-, catur-	cethair	pedwar
3, f	cátasraḥ, catasr-	cataŋrō, cataŋr-	cethéoir	pedair

Clearly, the first /r/ of the fem. numeral 'three' underwent dissimilation at an early stage. Harðarson resconstructs *treisor-~ t(r)i-sr-, but the daughter languages only show zero grade reflexes of this noun, implying the weak stem must have been generalized earlier.

ANATOLIAN MOTION SUFFIX

In Hittite, the root *ser- survives as a motion-suffix. It is attested in e.g. išhāššara- 'lady, mistress' from išhā- 'lord' or haššuššara- 'queen' from haššu- 'king'. This motion suffix is also attested in CLuw nānāšrā/i- 'sister' from nānā/i- 'brother'.

CUNEIFORM LUWIAN *ašra/i-

Derivatives like ašrula/i- 'female', ašrulāḫit- (n.) 'feminitiy' beg for the reconstruction of unattested C.Luw. *ašra/i- 'woman sim vel.'. I oppose Steer's reconstruction of an initial laryngeal in order to account for the anlaut vowel. Following Melchert the sequence #sR- was not phonotactically possible in Luwian, so the initial vowel must be prothetic.

OTHER ATTESTATIONS

The same root also appears as the second element of the Lat. compound uxor, uxōris, which Harðarson reconstructs as *h₁uks-sor 'housewife', with the compound form of *h₁euke/os- 'house, home' (cf. Skt. ókas- 'house'). The attempts to connect Gr. Ἥρᾱ and YAv. hāirišī- to this same root are unconvincing.

Reconstructing Semantics

The semantic distinction between the root *gʷen- and *sor- can be found in the function of each in the original lexicon. While *gʷén-h₂ referred to any adult woman of fertile age (as opposed to a pre-pubescent girl or an aged woman) and found its antonym in *wiHrós 'adult male' (Skt. vīrá-, Lat. vir, OIr. fer, Got. wair, Lith. výras, etc.), *sōr must have denoted the general quality of being 'female' as opposed to 'male'. The latter probably lacked a proper antonym, because the male gender was considered unmarked (cf. *dʰǵʰmṓn 'human (male or female)', a male noun in most daughter languages).