



Revisiting the Etymology of Greek μέγας, μεγάλη, μέγα

LUCIO MELAZZO

ABSTRACT

Despite the numerous attempts at clarification that have been made over the past hundred years or so, there are still many doubts surrounding the etymology of Gr. μέγας, μεγάλη, μέγα “big, great, mighty”, especially with regard to the relation between the Greek adjective and forms attested in other Indo-European languages. The paper follows a new track. By having recourse to É. Benveniste’s theory of the structure of the Indo-European root, a stem II **sm-eg-* is supposed in which **s-* could share the characteristics of the so-called ‘mobile *s-*’. Thanks to this hypothesis most of the pre-existing doubts are dispelled.

KEYWORDS: structure of the IE root, mobile *s-*, Gr. μέγας, μεγάλη, μέγα.

Despite the numerous attempts that have been made over the past hundred years or so¹, there are still many doubts surrounding the etymology of Gr. μέγας, μεγάλη, μέγα “big, great, mighty” especially with regard to the relation between the Greek adjective to forms attested in other Indo-European languages, as it seems unwise to doubt the connection between them. This article aims to identify the etymological conditions of this connection.

In order to explain the Greek adjective we begin with the form μέγα, perhaps an ancient neuter noun meaning “greatness” that later became an adjective. From μέγα the nominative and accusative singular masculine, μέγας and μέγαν, may have formed based on an adjectival model θῆλυ: θῆλυς θῆλυν “female” etc. The hypothesis is Brugmann’s (1879: 175; 1903²: 328; 1900³: 188): he proposed a derivation μέγα < **meǵh₂*, that some will consider improbable (see Walde, 1927: 257). Schmidt (1883: 408; 1885: 283; 1889: 247) and Bartholomae (1888: 565) hypothesized instead a procedure like

¹ In these conditions it is not surprising that the accumulated literature on the subject is really quite extensive. It has been examined entirely, but not everything is cited here. The quotations that are read in the text relate to the argument being advanced. Likewise, a boring quotation of all the related forms has been omitted. Only citations that are highly significant for the purposes of this argumentation have been reproduced.

μέγα <*meǵt in order to bring μέγα closer to Skt *mahāt* “great”. Prellwitz (1905²: 285) surmised μέγα <*meǵð establishing a comparison with Skt *māhi* (<*meǵhə) “great, big, strong”. Subsequently, Pokorny (1959² I: 708) will re-propose Brugmann’s idea. Frisk (1970 II: 190) and Chantraine (1980: 675) will instead continue in the direction of Prellwitz. Frisk will hypothesize an IE form *meǵð, that Chantraine will prefer to write *meǵð₂. In such forms, *ð and respectively *ð₂ represented the zero degree of -ā in Skt *mahā* “great, mighty, strong”, used as the first member in compounds. They too brought Gr. μέγα and Skt *māhi* closer and, recognizing the difficulty represented in this second form of the outcome -h-, one explained it on the basis of Hamp (1953: 136 ff.) and the other on the same American scholar and also Beekes (1969: 153), with the original presence of the laryngeal that, written *ð and respectively *ð₂, also aspired the dorsal *ǵ-. More recently, Beekes (2010: 917) moves in the same direction and supposes that the nominative mark was added to *meǵ-h₂- to form μέγας.

According to Walde (1927: 257) with respect to μέγα, μέγας and μέγαν, the feminine μεγάλη and the μεγαλο- of oblique cases of the masculine and neuter would be expanded along the lines of χαμαλός “low, near to the ground, on the ground”, but the accent of μέγα led to *μέγαλο- instead of to *μεγαλό-, while despite Brugmann (1906: 361f.), Osthoff (1910: 215) and, for Walde and Hoffmann (1972³ II: 11), Schulze (1933: 75) the similarity of *μέγαλο- with Goth. *mikils* “great” and with the other adjectives of the same type in the various forms of spoken German is first of all illusory in that, to Walde’s credit (1900: 92), the Gm. *mikilaz (> Goth. *mikils*) was dissimilated by *mikinaz². Pokorny (1959² I: 708) comes instead to identify a type *αλο- “growth, stature”, which is also recognizable in χαμαλός, in μεγάληο-, hypothesized on the basis of both the oblique cases in the masculine and neuter and the forms of the feminine μεγάλη. Thurneysen (1917: 61) had the idea for *mikilaz of a suffix -lo- also present in Goth. *leitils* and OHG *luzzil*, both with the value of “small”³. Frisk (1972: 190) speaks of an extension -l- whose purpose is to facilitate the flexion, and compares μεγαλο- not only with Goth. *mikils* but also with Lith. *didel-*

² However, forms without extension had to exist in Germanic, as shown by ON *mjok* (<*meku) made with a secondary *u on *felu (> got. *filu* “much”) “very”. A stem in -i exhibits however Hitt. *mekki-* “a lot” and a stem in -a is recognized in Arm. *mec* “great”.

³ The radical vowel of the Gothic form is not identical to that of the Old High German form. Closer to Goth. *leitils* are ON *litell* and MD *litel*. In agreement with OHG *liuzil*, *luzzil* are OS *lutil* and OE *lytel*.

is “great”, which is also coupled with Lith. *didis* “great”. Unlike Schulze (1933: 75ff.) and in agreement with Sieberer (1950: 113 ff.) the author believes that such an extension did not have augmentative value but diminutive. Chantraine (1980: 675) does not comment on this last point, but maintains that the Greek suffix *-αλο-* is independent of the German one. Finally Beekes (2010: 918) agrees with Frisk in bringing *μεγαλο-* closer to Goth. *mikils* and Lith. *didelis*. He also speaks of an extension **-l-* saying that its origin is obscure.

Leaving aside the question of the origin of the forms, no matter how they are suffixed, of the feminine and of the oblique cases of the masculine and neuter, the Greek adjective is still said to derive from a root IE **meg-* or, which is the same, **meg-* (Walde, 1927: 257; Pokorny, 1959²: 708; Wodtko, Irslinger and Schneider, 2008: 468 ff.; Boisacq, 1916: 617; Frisk, 1970: 190; Chantraine, 1980: 675; Beekes, 2010: 917; Walde and Hoffmann, 1972³: 11; de Vaan, 2008: 359). The possibility of such a root would certainly be convincing if we were not confronted by several forms, not only the Sanskrit forms mentioned above, which are forms that can be easily traced to the Greek adjective semantically, but not formally. It is thus worth trying to follow new paths.

It would be best to start from an established fact: in the Homeric poems the syllabic couple *μεγα-*, consisting of the two initial syllables of many forms of the paradigm of the Greek adjective and its derivatives and compounds, occurs very frequently in thesis to form a dactyl whose arsis exhibits a syllable with a vowel that is by its nature short. The following is a limited illustration of this⁴:

⁴ The occurrences of the phenomenon described above are certainly significant percentagewise and are found in formulaic contexts and/or in identical metric positions. Even if we limit ourselves to a few examples based on the *Iliad* there is plenty of choice in regard to cases that should be mentioned here. Thus, the formula *Τρῶες δὲ μεγάθυμοι* constitutes the first part of 5. 27, 11. 459, and 13. 737 until the caesura tritemimera. Furthermore, in *σθένει μεγάλῳ*, *-ī* forms with the *μεγά-* the third foot of 12. 224, and 13.193. Again a dactyl, formed exactly by those same elements and still used as the third foot of the hexameter, is recognized in the sequences *ξίφει μεγάλῳ* of 5. 146 and 20. 459, *ἄρχει μεγάλῳ* of 9. 9, *σάκεϊ μεγάλῳ* of 11. 571. In all these cases, the caesura heptemimera falls after *-λῳ* of *μεγάλῳ*. As regards *ἐνὶ μεγάροισι(ν)*, which has a high number of occurrences, *-ι* *μεγά-* represents the fourth foot of the hexameter in 3. 207, 5. 270, 22. 510, 24. 497, 1. 396, 5. 805, 7. 148, 19. 339, 21. 475, 24. 603, 24. 768.

- (1) ἔκ τε καὶ ὀψὲ τελεῖ, σὺν τε μεγάλῳ ἀπέτισαν (// 4.161)
- ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — — | — ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — ~
- νικῆσαι καὶ ἔπειτα διὰ μέγαθυμον Ἀθήνην (Od. 8. 520)
- — | — ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — —
- πολλάκι γὰρ σέο πατρός ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ἄκουσα (// 1. 396)
- ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — ~ ~ | — ~

In this case, the plausibility that linked the Greek adjective to an IE root **meǵ-* was most likely added to the consideration that the lengthening of the brief in arsis, so frequent in Homer, was in these occurrences justified by the fact that it was the first of three short syllables or was even found amidst five short syllables. The need was therefore felt to find a justification for the data that somehow contrasted with the above etymological proposition.

Precisely because of what has just been said Brugmann (1897: 750) downplayed the importance of the epigraphic attestation τῷ Μῆγαρ[εῖ] arguing that an initial sequence such as **sm-* could not be imagined for Gr. μέγαρον “large room, room, hall, house, penetralia of the temple”. Such a term, which Brugmann (1902: 147) thought was formed by haplology from **μεγαῖαρον* or **μεγαῖαρον*, i.e. from *μεγα-* coupled to a hypothetical term in Greek corresponding to Skt *ā-gara-m* “room, indoor space, dwelling”, would follow in the Homeric sequence ἐνὶ μμεγάροισι⁵ the influence of *μείρομαι* (< IE **smer-*) “I have in part, by lot” and its derivatives and compounds. Brugmann did not bother to specify what could have triggered such a process which, moreover, placed two terms together that were semantically very different, formally quite dissimilar and hardly intended for simultaneous use in frequently used syntactic contexts. For this reason, his hypothesis is not particularly convincing apart from the fact that the etymology he proposed for μέγαρον did not last long. On the other hand, some type of comparison and/or adaptation to μέγα today cannot be ruled out for μέγαρον, although

⁵ In this handwriting adopted by Brugmann, the gemination of initial *μ-* makes use of the choice made by Aristophanes of Byzantium against Aristarchus (see LA ROCHE, 1866).

it is considered a loan of the substrate (Frisk, 1970: 189; Chantraine, 1980: 674; Beekes, 2010: 917). But there is yet to be taken into account that the epigraphic sources testify a form *μῃεγαλου* (see Schwyzler, 1953³ I: 309-311), that must be taken into consideration. Of course we can always talk like Schwyzler (1953³ I: 311) of an exchange between etymological *μ-* and non-etymological *μη-*, assuming that a ‘simplified’ pronunciation *μ-* already co-existed for the etymological *μη-* (<*sm-), and that therefore the pronunciation *μη-* could occasionally be recovered even when this was not etymologically justified. It will however be best to verify the benefits of imagining that *μη-* has an etymological justification in *μῃεγα-*.

We can certainly try to think of a Proto-Indo-European root *sem- able to formulate the idea of “greatness, strength, power”. Based on the theory of the structure of the Indo-European root of Benveniste (1935) it is quite possible to suppose a stem II *sm-eǵ- in which *s- could share the characteristics of the so-called ‘mobile s’⁶. Thus Gr. μέγ-ας may have been formed from *(s)mēǵ-, while Lat. *mag-nus* might derive from *(s)m̥ǵ-nó-s with the application of the rule of Schrijver (1991: 479, 482-485): *RDC- > RaDC-. The hypothesis of the dorsal is neither strictly necessary for the Greek nor for the Latin adjective⁷. So, *(s)mēǵ- as a base would also explain it. However, if we

⁶ The interpretation proposed above could also be supported by other often problematic cases in which the graphic datum of the postposition of *H* at the beginning of the word constitutes an indication of a phonetic element. This needs to be tackled elsewhere. One could also remark that the lengthening of brief vowels in arsis also occurs independently of the supposed condition; in this case, the proposition would be weakened by the necessary supposition that the reconstructed stem II has treated the *s- as a mobile element; the form *μῃεγαλου*, cited above, could be explained in different ways as well. Certainly, the lengthening of the vowels in arsis can be justified by metrical requisites. The fact remains that, where possible, a phonetic motivation for the lengthening is doubtlessly more cogent than an explanation having recourse to an exception dictated by meter. However, it is not a problem that the reconstructed stem II can have treated the *s- as a mobile element, given that it is commonly admitted that stem I and stem II deriving from the same root have each had, so to speak, their own life independent of the other, and become an autonomous form that could exist under the normal conditions recognizable in other roots; neither can we doubt the existence of mobile *s- phenomenon in Indo-European. Lastly, it is worth noting that the form *μῃεγαλου* is not very isolated if, as many scholars believe, there is a link between μέγας, μεγάλη, μέγα and μέγαρον, among Greek speakers. Therefore, μεγάλη (μῃεγαλου) is sustained by μέγαρον of ἐνὶ μεγάροις quite frequent in Homer and taken into account by Brugmann in the above reasoning. Finally, it is worth mentioning that in *Il.* 11.811 and 23.715 the second half of the hexameter sounds δὲ νότιος ῥέεν ἰδρῶς where δὲ is lengthened in arsis, but this lengthening can be easily retraced to the nexus *σν- of the adjective νότιος that follows, if it is true – as is normally admitted (WALDE, 1927: 692-693; POKORNY, 1959²: 972; BOISACQ, 1916: 673; FRISK, 1970: 324-325; WALDE and HOFFMANN, 1972³: 147), pace CHANTRAINE (1980: 758) and BEEKES (2010: 1025), who are vague about the issue – that νότιος was made on *sn-ot-.

⁷ A dorsal has recently been hypothesized again by Ragot in BLANC, BRACHET and DE LAMBERTERIE (2004: 328-329) so as to connect Lat. *magnificus* (<*magn-o-fac-o-s) with Gr. ἀγαθός

rebuild **(s)meġh-* with the dorsal, both μέγ-ας and *mag-nus* can be compared to Ved. *maj-mán-*. Attested in the form of instr. sg. *majmánā* “in size, by size” in the *R̥g Veda* (3.46.3 and *passim*) and in that of loc. sg. *majmáni* in the sequence *-abhi majmáni* “above, beyond the size” in the *Atharva Veda* (13.1.14 and 37), this noun ceases to be a problem from the point of view of the etymology (see Mayrhofer, 1992: 292, 337-339).

We must resort to a stem II **sm-eġh-* > **(s)meġh-* to account for Skt *mah-* recognizable in several forms of weak cases of a very ancient type inflected with apophonic alternation. In this type, the weak forms of instr. sg. fem. and ntr. *mah-á*, dat. sg. *mah-é*, abl. sg. *mah-áh*, ntr. du. *mah-í*, acc. pl. masc. *mah-áh*, gen. pl. *mah-ám*, alongside which we can mention the nom. sg. fem. *mah-í*, with the value of “land” in the *Atharva Veda*, and the ntr. sg. *mahi* (<**(s)meġh-h₂*>), perfect match to Gr. μέγα. They are in contrast with the forms of acc. sg. masc. *mahām* and ntr. pl. *mahā* or *mahāni* because of their strong stem *mahā-*, also used as the first member of compounds. Furthermore, in one sense, a nom. masc. **mahā-s* can be obtained from the neuter *maháh* and, according to Wackernagel (1975²: 251), it may sometimes hide behind *mahán* connected to the stem *mahát-*, on the other the ntr. pl. *mahá* could contain the stem *mahā-*. On the other hand, *mahát-*, which is an extension of the stem *mah-*, exhibits three apophonic degrees (*-ānt-*, *-ant-*, *-at-*, with *-ānt-* in all strong cases) and in this aspect it differs from the participle in *-nt-*, which, with the exception of nom. and acc. pl. ntr. *-ānti*, shows only two apophonic degrees (*-ant-* e *-at-*) even though it may be linked to the original participle of the verbal root *mah* “succeed in, be able to”. Av. *maz-* “big, important” naturally has the same meaning and the same origin as Skt *mah-*, while Av. *mazant-*, *mazat-* “big, large, powerful” corresponds to Skt *mahánt-*, *mahát-*. There is again full correspondence between Sanskrit and Avestan in the comparative and superlative forms: to *mahīyas-* and *mahiṣṭha-* in one language correspond *mazyah-* and *mazišta-* in the other. Greek also formed the stem of the superlative μέγιστ- from **(s)meġh-*, but for the comparative, rather than assume like Osthoff (1910: 188 ff.) that μέλιζων was made in analogy to χείρων “meaner, inferior, worse”, we might conjec-

(<**mġh₂-dh(h₂)-ó-*>). According to that scholar, **fac-o-s* would presuppose **dhb₂-k-ó-* while **magno-* (<**mġ-no-*>) would have replaced **mġh₂-* (> ἄγα-). Moreover, the relation of ἄγα-θ-ός to τί-θη-μι / τί-θε-μεν would have faded away once **h₁-* preceding **ó-* had been dropped. In Latin, contrariwise, the addition of **-k-* to the root **dʰeh₁-* / **dʰh₁-* would have preserved the original structure of the compound. As a matter of fact, there exist different hypotheses on the origin of **-k-*, as can be read in MELAZZO (2014).

ture that -ιον- (<*is-on-) was added to *(s)meyǵ- (>*μειγ-), i.e. to a form with a formative *-ey- and extension *-ǵ-. The Ion. Dor. Arc. μέζων (<*μεγζων) and perhaps Myc. *me-zo* might instead derive again from *(s)meyǵ-.

In addition, a stem II **sm-eh₂-gh-* with formative **-eh₂-* an expansion **-gh-* might likely give rise to **(s)meh₂gh-/ (s)mh₂gh-*. Gr. *μήχος* with Dor. *μάχος* “means, expedient, remedy” and Gr. *μηχανή* with Dor. *μάχανά* “device, contrivance, artifice” could be derived from the full degree **(s)meh₂gh-*. Instead, Goth. *mag-an*, OS *meg-in*, OE *mæz-en*, OHG *mag-an*, *meg-in*, ON *mag-n*, *megin*, all with the meaning of “strength, power”, should be traced to the Ø-degree form **(s)mh₂gh-*.

The etymological hypothesis proposed here assumes that Greek is the only Indo-European language that conserves a trace of **s-* which originated from **sem-*. If, however, we cannot determine whether, for example, *μήχος* and *μηχανή* ever showed traces of this **s-*, we can be reasonably sure that Greek, too, had derived forms without the initial sibilant. This is the case of the intensive prefix *άγα-* (<*ǵh₂-), that can be found for example in *άγα-κλής* “illustrious, glorious,” and has a perfect match in Av. *aš-* of *aš-aojah* “extra strong”. Moreover, *άγαν* “very much”, which is usually considered a crystallized feminine accusative form, and *άζον-μέγαν, ύψηλόν* (Hesych.) are also to be linked to *άγα-*.

References

- BARTHOLOMAE, C. (1888), *Die arische Flexion der Adjektiva und Partizipia auf nt-*, in «Kuhns Zeitschrift», 29, pp. 487-588.
- BEEKES, R.S.P. (1969), *The Development of the Proto-Indo-European Laryngeals in Greek*, Mouton, The Hague.
- BEEKES, R.S.P. (2010), *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, 2 vols, Brill, Leiden.
- BENVENISTE, É. (1935), *Origines de la formation des noms en indo-européen*, A. Maisonneuve, Paris.
- BLANC, A., BRACHET, J.-P. and DE LAMBERTERIE, C. (2004), *Chronique d'étymologie latine*. N° 2, in «Revue de philologie, de littérature et d'histoire anciennes», 78, 2, pp. 315-341.
- BOISACQ, É. (1916), *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque étudiée dans ses rapports avec les autres langues indo-européennes*, C. Winter, Heidelberg.

- BRUGMANN, K. (1879), *Morphologische Untersuchungen auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen*, von Hermann Osthoff und Karl Brugmann, 6 Teile, S. Hirzel, Leipzig.
- BRUGMANN, K. (1900³), *Griechische Grammatik: Lautlehre, Stammbildungs- und Flexionslehre und Syntax*, 3. Auflage, Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, München.
- BRUGMANN, K. (1902), *Wortgeschichtliche Miszellen*, in «Indogermanische Forschungen», 13, pp. 144-163.
- BRUGMANN, K. (1902-1904), *Kurze vergleichende Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen auf Grund des fünfbandigen Grundrisses der vergleichenden Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen*, 3 Bde, Strassburg, Karl J. Trübner.
- BRUGMANN, K. (1903²), *Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen*, von Karl Brugmann und Berthold Delbrück, 6 Bde, Karl J. Trübner, Strassburg.
- CHANTRAINE, P. (1968-1980), *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots*, 2 vol., Éditions Klincksieck, Paris.
- FRISK, H. (1960-1972), *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3 Bde, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg.
- HAMP, E.P. (1953), *Indo-European Nouns with Laryngeal Suffix*, in «Word», 9, pp. 135-141.
- LA ROCHE, J. (1866), *Die homerische Textkritik im Altertum*, Teubner, Leipzig.
- MAYRHOFER, M. (1992), *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen*, 3 Bde, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg.
- MELAZZO, L. (2014), *Homeric k-Aorists and/or k-Perfects*, in BARTOLOTTA, A. (2014, ed.), *The Greek Verb. Morphology, Syntax, and Semantics. Proceedings of the 8th International Meeting on Greek Linguistics, Agrigento, October 1-3, 2009*, Peeters, Louvain-La-Neuve, pp. 209-225.
- OSTHOFF, H. (1910), *Morphologische Untersuchungen auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen*, von Hermann Osthoff und Karl Brugmann, 6 Teile, S. Hirzel, Leipzig.
- POKORNY, J. (1959²), *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2 Bde, Francke Verlag, Bern/München.
- PRELLWITZ, W. (1905), *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der griechischen Sprache*, 2. verbesserte Auflage, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.

- SCHMIDT, J. (1883), *Das Suffix des participium perfecti activi*, in «Kuhns Zeitschrift», 26, pp. 329-409.
- SCHMIDT, J. (1885), *Skr̥t. úpan-, úpa*, in «Kuhns Zeitschrift», 27, pp. 281-309.
- SCHMIDT, J. (1889), *Die Pluralbildungen der idg. Neutra*, Böhlau, Weimar.
- SCHRIJVER, P. (1991), *The Reflexes of the PIE Laryngeals in Latin*, Rodopi, Amsterdam/Atlanta.
- SCHULZE, W. (1933), *Kleine Schriften*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- SCHWYZER, E. (1953³), *Griechische Grammatik*, 3 Bde, C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, München.
- SIEBERER, A. (1950), *Das Wesen des Diminutivs*, in «Die Sprache», 2, pp. 85-121.
- THURNEISEN, R. (1917), *Irisches*, in «Kuhns Zeitschrift», 48, pp. 48-75.
- DE VAAN, M. (2008), *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the other Italic languages*, Brill, Leiden-Boston.
- WACKERNAGEL, J. (1975²), *Altindische Grammatik*, 3. Band, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- WALDE, A. (1900), *Die germanischen Auslautgesetze*, Niemeyer, Halle.
- WALDE, A. (1927), *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der indogermanischen Sprachen, herausgegeben und bearbeitet von Julius Pokorny*, 3 Bde, Walter De Gruyter, Berlin/Leipzig.
- WALDE, A. and HOFFMANN, J.B. (1972⁵ [1965⁴-1972⁵]), *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2 Bde, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg.
- WODTKO, D.S., IRSLINGER, B. and SCHNEIDER, C. (2008), *Nomina im indogermanischen Lexicon*, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg.

LUCIO MELAZZO
Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche
Università di Palermo
Viale delle Scienze - Ed. 12
90128 Palermo (Italy)
lucio.melazzo@unipa.it

