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THE ETYMOLOGY OF LATIN *NIMBUS* (AND ITS IRANIAN COGNATES)¹

After a brief review of prior etymological attempts found in the literature, a complete, rule-governed etymology of Latin *nimbus* ‘rain cloud, sudden downpour, etc.’—including a precise explanation of the medial nasal—is propounded. It is based on the Indo-European reduplication process that produces nouns, as delineated by Cohen (2014; 2015; 2017), and on Latin sound laws given and exemplified by Weiss (2009).

Keywords: Latin *nimbus*, Iranian *nambV-, reduplication, instrument

L'ÉTYMOLOGIE DU LATIN *NIMBUS* (ET SES COGNACS IRANIENS)

Après une récapitulation brève des essais étymologiques antécédents, qui sont trouvés dans la littérature, une étymologie de latin *nimbus* ‘nuage de pluie, forte averse soudaine, etc.’ complète et d’accord avec règle – en comprenant une explication précise de la nasale médiale – est proposée. Elle est basée sur le processus indo-européen de reduplication qui génère les noms, comme décrit par Cohen (2014; 2015; 2017), et sur des lois phonologiques latines données et exemplifiées par Weiss (2009).

Mots-clés: Latin *nimbus*, Iranien *nambV-, reduplication, instrument

Traditionally, Lat. *nimbus* ‘rain cloud, sudden downpour, etc.’ has usually been taken as being derived in some fashion from the Proto-Indo-European root **neb^h*- ‘cloud’. What has never been settled, however, is the source of the medial nasal of *nimbus*. Thus, e.g.,

– Pokorny (1959 [1994]: 315), at the beginning of the relevant entry (for *enebh-*), gives as variants “*nebh-*, *embh-*, *mbh-* (Kontaminationsform *nembh-*)”.

¹ I am grateful to Michael Weiss for several important suggestions that have improved this paper immeasurably.

In the subentry for *nembh-* (p. 316), he gives “lat. *nimbus* ‘Sturzregen, Platzregen; Sturmwolke, Regenwolke’”, as well as “pehl. *namb*, *nam*, npers. *nem* ‘feucht, Feuchtigkeit’, pehl. *nambītan* ‘befeuchten’”.

– Ernout & Meillet (1932 [1959]: 434), in their entry for *nebula*, write

Lat. *nimbus* doit se rattacher à ce groupe [i.e., IE cognates of *nebula*], mais la forme fait difficulté ; y a-t-il eu déformation sous l’influence de *imber* ?

– Watkins (2000: 57 s.v. *nebh-* ‘cloud’) derives Lat. *nimbus* ‘rain, cloud, aura’ from a PIE “[n]asalized form **ne-m-bh-*”.

– de Vaan (2008: 409), in his entry for *nimbus* ‘rain-cloud, shower’, gives PIE **nébh-os* as the etymon, but then writes

Nimbus might be connected to *nebula* ‘cloud’ and *imber* ‘shower of rain’ < **n(e)bh-*. One might explain the *-m-* in *nimbus* by assuming that *nimbus* continues *nebh-os-* but was reshaped under the influence of *imber*, which has a similar meaning to *nimbus*. This is possible, but gratuitous.

– Martirosyan (2010: 50 s.v. *amp* ‘cloud’²) writes

Lat. *nimbus* ‘cloud’ and Iran. **nam(b)-* ‘wet, moist’ (cf. Pahl. *nam(b)* ‘moist’ > Arm. *nam* ‘id.’ ..., as well as Sogd. *nmp* [namp/b] ‘dew’ ...) point to **nembh-* and may be regarded as a reduplicated formation **ne-nbh-*, or **ne-n-bh-* ... with a nasal-infix ..., or simply with a nasal-epenthesis.³

– Glare (2012: 1296 s.v.) gives “cogn. w. Pahlavi *namb*, NPers. *nem*; cf. *imber*, *nebula*”. (I note that, rather surprisingly, Mallory & Adams (1997) make no mention of Lat. *nimbus* or its Iranian cognates.)

The idea of etymologizing *nimbus* as a reduplication—i.e., the first of Martirosyan’s three noncommittal suggestions cited immediately above—first came to my attention in a Jan. 7, 2016 proposal by Simões Lopes in a query to the *Language Evolution* blog (langevo.blogspot.com) moderated by Piotr Gąsiorowski. Gąsiorowski, noting that “... **nambV-* ‘moisture, dampness...’ is common in the Iranian languages”, accepted it as a possibility on that date.

It turns out that Lat. *nimbus* can be straightforwardly generated as a reduplicated noun based on the nominal root **nébh-* via the morphophonological process—which was originally (Cohen [2017: 130f]) termed “resultative” That process is emended slightly by Cohen (2014: 26; 2015: 65), and, importantly for

² Martirosyan (2010: 49ff) gives a long, detailed discussion of *amp* (and the variant *amb*), but never really selects any specific etymology out of the wide range of possibilities mentioned. Mallory & Adams (1997: 407 s.v. *RAIN*) list **ṇbh(ro/ri)-* ‘rain’ as etymon for this word, writing “Arm *amb* (< **ṇbh-*? ‘cloud’)”.

³ An anonymous reviewer notes correctly that Martirosyan’s diffident position here is unchanged from that of his doctoral dissertation (2008: 56).

the present paper, it is shown by Cohen (2014) that the process can generate instruments as well as resultatives (on this point, see, especially, the discussion on p. 38 of that paper). Semantically, it seems that a *nimbus* (i.e., a rain cloud) was conceptualized as an instrument for producing rain.

The relevant steps of the process are as follows:

1. Prepose a copy of the beginning of the full-grade of the root up through the vowel (and any immediately following laryngeal): **néb^h-* → **ne-néb^h-*.
2. Move the accent to the preposed syllable, thereby reducing the root syllable to zero-grade: **ne-néb^h-* → **né-nb^h-*.

Normal (pre-)Latin sound changes then yield *nimb-*:

3. (**-b^h-* > *-b-*; see Weiss [2009: 74]) **nenb^h-* > **nenb-*.
4. (**nP* > *mP*; see Weiss [2009: 173]) **nenb-* > **nemb-*.
5. (**e* > *i* / *_mb*; see Weiss [2009: 137]) **nemb-* > *nimb-*.

The philology appears to be unproblematical for such a derivation. Both de Vaan (*ibid.*) and Glare (*ibid.*) cite the poet and playwright, Marcus Pacuvius (220 BCE—ca. 130 BCE), for the earliest attestation of *nimbus*.⁴ As noted above, de Vaan glosses *nimbus* as ‘rain-cloud, shower’, though this is undoubtedly intended to serve for later uses as well. Glare explicitly associates the meaning ‘rain-cloud’ with the Pacuvius citation.

One final point: The existence of Iranian cognates is evidence that the reduplication under discussion was generated no more recently than the Late Proto-Indo-European stage.

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⁴ However, as Michael Weiss (8 Feb. 2019 email) has apprised me, there exists a slightly earlier citation for the Latin root *nimb-*: In Act 1, Scene 2 of Plautus’s play *Poenulus* (believed to have been written between 195 BCE and 189 BCE), a girl is referred to by the denominal adjective *nimbata*. The exact meaning of the word in context is not completely certain; it may be ‘stormy’, or ‘like a (passing) rain cloud’ and thus ‘inconsequential *vel sim.*’

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