The two ordinary words 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 by no means equal. While one is widely attested from the far east (Indo-Iranian, Tocharian) to the far west (Celtic, Germanic) of the IE world (left), the other appears in specific compounds or as a suffix, implying it must reflect an older layer of the proto-language.

*gʷen-

PROTEROKINETIC WITH h_2-SUFFIX

Paradigm: *gʷén-h₂- ~ *gʷn-éh₂-

Tocharian: śäm (A) śānā (B) < *ćänā

Indo-Aryan: gnāḥ, gnaḥ (Skt.) < *gnaHs

Iranian: gənāh, gənah (OAv.) < *gnaHh

Hellenic: γυνή, γυναικός (Att.), ku-na-ja (Myc.) < *gʷon- + -keh₂

Armenian: kin, knoǰ

Slavic: žena (OCS) < *génā

Baltic: genno (OPr.)

Germanic: qinō (Got.), kona (ON) < *kwenǭ (+ nasal suffix)

Celtic: ben, mná (OIr.) < *benā

Anatolian: wānā- (CLuw.) < *benā

ACROSTATIC WITH i-SUFFIX

Paradigm: *gʷḗn-i- ~ *gʷén-i-

Indo-Aryan: jāni, janyur (Skt.) < *ǰani-

Iranian: jaini (OAv.) < *ǰani-

Germanic: qēns (Got.), cwēn (OE) < *kwēniz

But note that the Indo-Iranian forms can also go back to *ǰanH- or an o-grade (like Greek) with analogical *j-.

POSSIBLE ROOT NOUN?

Harðarson (2014): *gʷōn ~ *gʷén-s

On the basis of OIr. neuter n-stem bé, ben and Hitt. MUNUS-anza, supposing the latter denotes /kʷāns/ but Jasanoff (1989) rather proposes bé < *gʷēn < *gʷen-h₂ (following a law that VRH# > V̄R# in PIE) and Kloekhorst (2008) explains MUNUS-anza as from *gʷen-h₂-os (i.e. *gʷen-h₂ + analogical -s) by assuming the Proto-Anatolian to Hittite rule *VnHsV > *VnzV also works in word final position.

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

*sor-

ATTESTATIONS

*swe-sor-~*swe-sr-

From *swe 'own' + *sor '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: ṣar (A) ṣer (B)

Indo-Aryan: svásṛ-(Skt.)

Iranian: xᵛāŋhār (OAv.)

Hellenic: ἔορ (Att.) 'cousin`s daughter'

Armenian: kʻoyr

Slavic: sestra (OCS)

Baltic: swestro (OPr.)

Germanic: swistar (Got.), sweoster (OE), systar (ON)

Celtic: siur (OIr.), chwaer (Welsh)

Anatolian: wānā- (CLuw.)

Young Avestan hāirišī- 'woman'

Harðarson (2014) derives this term from PII *sāirišī-, an i-stem *sēri ~ seri-, identical in form to *gʷēni- ~ *gʷéni-.

Latin uxor 'wife, married woman'

Harðarson (2014) reconstructs *h₁uks-sor 'house woman', with the first element being the compound-form for *h₁euke/os- 'house, home'. Pinault rather suggests it is a renalysis of the o-grade of a locative in -er : *h₁uk-s-ér >> *h₁uk-s-ór.

Cuneiform Luwian ašra/i-*

Attested in acc.sg. aš-ru-la-a-ḫi-šā /asrulahit/= ašrulahit- (n.) 'femininity' (n.) and acc.sg.c. aš-ru-li-en /asrulin/ = ašruli- 'female' (adj.). Harðarson (2014) reconstructs *h₁éh₁-sor- ~h₁eh₁-sr-´ with the first element being the ins.sg of the pronominal stem *h₁e- 'here'. This solution has good correspondence in YAv *āŋhairī- , thematic vrddhi-derivative *h₁oh₁-ser-o- > PII *ā-sar-a- > YAv. *āhara- 'female' (adj.) >> YAv. *āharī- 'female' (n.).

Anatolian motion suffix

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

Semantics

The semantic distinction between the root *gʷen- and *sor- can be found in the function of each in the lexicon. While *gʷen- referred to any adult woman (as opposed to a pre-pubescent girl) and found its antonym in *wiHrós 'adult male' (Skt. vīrá-, Lat. vir, OIr. fer, Got. wair, Lith. výras, etc.), *sor- 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).

Sources:

1. Harðarson, J. A. (2014). "Das andere Wort für 'Frau' im Urindogermanischen". Leiden: Brill, 23-55.
2. Jasanoff, J. H. (1989). "Old Irish Bé 'Woman.'" Ériu 40: 135–41.
3. Kloekhorst, A. (2008). Etymological Dictionary of the Hittite Inherited Lexicon. Leiden: Brill, 501-505