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ISSN 1803-7402 (print); ISSN 2336-4424 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): [https://doi.org/10.5817/GLB2023-2-2](https://doi.org/10.5817/GLB2023-2-2)
Stable URL (handle): [https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79113](https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79113)
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Access Date: 28. 01. 2024
Version: 20240108

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Greek γαῖα & γῆ ‘earth’ and corresponding theonyms in etymological perspective

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Abstract
This article analyzes the published etymologies of Greek γαῖα & γῆ ‘earth’ with special attention to the Semitic etymology. The Canaanite origin seems to be the most promising solution.

Keywords
Greek; Semitic; theonym; appellative; etymology
0. A purpose of the present contribution is to summarize and evaluate the existing etymological attempts to explain Greek γαῖα & γῆ ‘earth’ and corresponding theonyms in perspective of both the internal and external etymology.

1. Documentation

1.1. The word was identified already in the Mycenaean texts, probably in the function of both appellative and theonym:

\( \text{kā-ja} \) [PY Un 1314.3B], interpretable as the gen.sg. γαῖς ‘land, territory’ (cf. Aura Jorro 1985: p. 306);

\( \text{diwe ... ma-ka} \) [KN F 51], interpretable as the dat.sg. Diwei ... Māt(rei)-Gāi ‘to Zeus ... to Mother Earth’; similarly ma-ka [TH Fq 126] = Māt(rei)-Gāi (Bartoněk 2003: pp. 530−531).

The same syntagm μᾶ Γᾶ ‘mother Ga’ was used also in the classical period, namely by Aeschylus, in his Suppliant women 890:

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{885} & \text{οἱοί, πάτερ, βρέτεος ἀρος} \\
\text{886} & \text{άτα μ᾽: ἄλαδ’ ἄγει} \\
\text{887} & \text{ἄραχνος ὡς βάδην.} \\
\text{888} & \text{όναρ ὧναρ μέλαν,} \\
\text{889} & \text{ότοτοτοῖ,} \\
\text{890} & \text{μᾶ Γᾶ μᾶ Γᾶ, βοᾶν} \\
\text{891} & \text{φοβερόν ἀπότρεπε,} \\
\text{892} & \text{ω πᾶ, Γᾶς παῖ, Ζεῦ.} \\
\end{align*} \]

‘Alas, father; the help of the sacred images deludes me. Like a spider, he is carrying me seaward step by step – a nightmare, a black nightmare! Oh! Oh! Mother Earth, mother Earth, avert his fearful cries! O father Zeus, son of Earth!’

1.2. In the first mill. BCE the literary and epigraphic documentation is already very rich. The following examples should serve only for illustration:

1.2.1. γαῖα

Iliad

2.109 ὕφευγαμεν σὺν νησὶ φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαίαν;

2.111 ού γὰρ ἥτις Τροίην αἱρήσομεν εὐρύάγυιαν.

‘Let us flee with our ships to our dear native land; for no more is there hope that we shall take broad-wayed Troy.’

7.99 ἀλλ’ ύμείς μὲν πάντες ἤδωρ καὶ γαῖα γένοιοι

7.101 Ἱμενοὶ αὕτη ἐκαστοὶ ἄκηρίοι ἁκλεῖς αὐτῶς:

‘Nay, may ye one and all turn to earth and water, ye that sit there each man with no heart in him, utterly inglorious’

23.255 ἀμφί πυρήν: εἶθαρ δὲ χυτήν ἐπὶ γαίαν ἔχευαν

1 Transl. by H. W. Smyth (1926).
‘Then they traced the compass of the barrow and set forth the foundations thereof round about the pyre, and forthwith they piled the up-piled earth.’

Odyssey
8.555 \(\varepsilonίπὲ\) δέμοι γαῖαν τε: τεὴν δῆμον τε πόλιν τε
‘And tell me thy country, thy people, and thy city’

12.404 ἀλλ᾽ ὅτε δὴ τὴν νῆσον ἔλειπομεν, οὐδὲ τις ἄλλη
12.404 φαίνετο γαίας, ἀλλ᾽ οὐρανὸς ἢ δὲ θάλασσα
‘But when we had left that island and no other land appeared, but only sky and sea’

1.2.1.1. Doric γαία
E.g. the epiclesis of Poseidon in the Laconian Damonon inscription Πασφόχ (IG V I.213; 5th cent. B.C.) or the inscription from Naples – see: ΤΡΕΙΝΑΚΙΑ ΓΑΙΑ ΜΕ ΑΟΧΕΥ-ΜΑΤΟ ...

1.2.2. Γαῖα
Hesiod, Theogony
39 ..... τῶν δ᾽ ἀκάματος ῥέει αὐðή
40 ἕκ στομάτων ἤδεια: γελά δὲ τε δώματα πατρός
41 Ζηνὸς ἐριγδοῦποι θεὰν ὑπὶ λειριόσσῃ
42 σκιδναμένη: ἤχει δὲ κάρη νυφόντος Ολύμπου
43 δώματα τ᾽ ἄθανάτων. αἰ δ᾽ ἀμβροτον δόσαν ἑισαί
44 θεῶν γένος αἰδοίοι πρώτον κλείουσιν ἀοιδῆ
45 ἐξ ἀρχῆς, οὐς Γαῖα καὶ Οὐρανὸς εὐφύς ἔτικτεν,
46 οἵ τ᾽ ἐκ τῶν ἐγένοντο θεοί, δωτῆρες εάων.
‘Unwearying flows the sweet sound from their lips, and the house of their father Zeus the loud-thunderer is glad at the lily-like voice of the goddesses as it spreads abroad, and the peaks of snowy Olympus resound, and the homes of the immortals. And they, uttering their immortal voice, celebrate in song first of all the revered race of the gods from the beginning, those whom Earth and wide Heaven begot, and the gods sprung of these, givers of good things.’

1.2.3. γῆ
Odyssey 13
13.235 καὶ μοι τοῦτ’ ἀγόρευσον ἐτήτυμον, ὄφρ᾽ ἐδ᾽ εἰδὼ:
13.235 τις γῆ, τις δῆμος, τίνες άνέρες ἐγγεγάασιν;
13.235 ἦ ποῦ τις νῆσων εὐδείελος, ἥ τις ἀκτή
13.235 κεῖθ᾽ ἄλλα κεκλιμένη ἐρυπώλακος ἤπειροιο;

2 Transl. by A. T. Murray (1924).
3 Transl. by A. T. Murray (1919).
4 Transl. by H. G. Evelyn-White (1914b).
'And tell me this also truly, that I may know full well. What land, what people is this? What men dwell here? Is it some clear-seen island, or a shore of the deep-soiled mainland that lies resting on the sea?'

1.2.4. Γῆ
Iliad

19.258 ύστω γάν Ζεὺς πρῶτα θεῶν ὑπατος καὶ άριστος
19.259 Γῇ τε καὶ Ἡλίος καὶ Ἐρινύες, αἱ θ᾽ ὑπὸ γαῖαν
19.260 ἀνθρώπους τίνυται, ότις κ᾽ ἐπίορκον ομόσση,
'For Earth and Sun, and for Zeus we will bring another'

19.259 ζήτω νῦν Ζεὺς πρῶτα θεῶν ὑπατος καὶ άριστος
19.259 Γῇ τε καὶ Ἡλίος καὶ Ἐρινύες, αἱ θ᾽ ὑπὸ γαῖαν
19.260 ἀνθρώπους τίνυται, ότις κ᾽ ἐπίορκον ομόσση,
'Be Zeus my witness first, highest and best of gods,
and Earth and Sun, and the Erinyes, that under earth
take vengeance on men, whosoever hath sworn a false oath.'

1.2.5. Doric γᾶ
Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannus

665 ἀλλὰ μοι δυσμόρῳ γᾶ φθινάς
666 τρύχει ψυχάν, τάδ᾽ εὶ κακοῖς κακά
667 προσάψει τοῖς πάλαι τὰ πρὸς σφών.
'But my unhappy soul is worn by the withering of the land, as well as by the thought that
our old sorrows should be crowned by new ones arising from the two of you.'

Pindar apud Plato, Theaetetus

[173ε] χόες. Καὶ ταῦτα πάντ᾽ οὐδ᾽ ὁτι οὐκ οἶδεν, οἶδεν: οὔδε γὰρ αὐτῶν ἀπέχεται τοῦ εὐδοκιμείν
χάριν, ἀλλὰ τῷ οὗτο τὸ σῶμα μόνον ἐν τῇ πόλει κεῖται αὐτῶ καὶ ἐπιδημεῖ, ἢ δὲ διάνοια, ταῦτα
πάντα ἡγησαμένη σιμκρά καὶ οὔδέν, ἀτμάσασα πανταχῇ πέτεται κατὰ Πινδαρον 'τὰς τε γᾶς
ὑπένερθε' καὶ τὰ ἐπίπεδα γεωμετροῦσα, οὐρανοῦ θ᾽ ὑπὲρ ἀστρονομοῦσα
'And all these things the philosopher does not even know that he does not know; for
he does not keep aloof from them for the sake of gaining reputation, but really it is only
his body that has its place and home in the city; his mind, considering all these things
petty and of no account, disdains them and is borne in all directions, as Pindar says,
"both below the earth," and measuring the surface of the earth, and "above the sky,"
studying the stars, and investigating the universal nature.'

1.2.6. Cypriot ζᾶ (uncertain)
In the inscriptions from Idalion (Cyprus) written in the Cypriot syllabic script there were
attested the following forms (Egetmeyer 1992: p. 215; Hintze 1993: p. 93):

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5 Transl. by R. Jebb (1887).
6 Ed. by J. Burnet (1903).
7 Transl. by H. N. Fowler (1921).
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2. Internal reconstruction and internal etymology

Various scholars speculate about the Common Greek protoform already 140 years:


2.4. Carnoy (1957: p. 60): *gāui̯a < *gi̯e-aui̯a < *gi̯e-aui̯a, whose components should be connected with ζῆν ‘to live’ and αἶα ‘earth, land’ [Il.], but also glossed as αἶα ὑπὸ Κυρηναίων τηθὶς καὶ μαῖα, καὶ ἀδελφὴ Κρήτης καὶ φυτόν τι. ἐτι δὲ ὁ καρπὸς αὐτῶ ὁμόνυμος [EM 27.24], comparable with Latin avia ‘grandmother’.


2.7. Peters (1994: p. 206): *gahia < *gasia < *gansia < *gh₂nsia from *gah₂- ‘to light, shine’, cf. gâvos ‘brightness, sheen’ [Sapph. 127], ‘gladness, joy, pride’ [A. Ag. 579], γανεῖν · λευκαίνειν (Hesychius). This solution was anticipated already by Pisani (1925: p. 640), who connected γαῖα with γηθέω [Il.], Doric γάθει [Theoc.] ‘to rejoice’.

2.8. Willi (2007: pp. 171, 178): γῆ/γά < *gâ < *geh₂ < *(s)teh₂- ‘covering’, which should be nomen actionis from the root *(s)teg- ‘to cover’.

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8 Cf. Plato, Timaeus 18b: ἀναλίσκειν τε δὴ κοινῆ καὶ συνδιαιτώμενος μετὰ ἄλληλων γῆν / ‘they should spend their wage in common and live together in fellowship one with another’ (Transl. by W. R. M. Lamb 1925).
3. Etymological attempts based on comparisons with other Indo-European languages

Standard etymological dictionaries are sceptical concerning the etymology:

But several etymologies operating with external comparisons have been proposed:

3.1. Čop (1971: pp. 23–24), projecting γᾶ/γῆ and γαῖα into *guəsiə (see §2.5.), compared it with Tocharian B acc.sg. kwaṣai ‘village’ (nom.sg. kṣiye; see Adams 2013: pp. 198–199, who convincingly connected it with Germanic *hūsa- ‘house’; Adams’ solution excludes any relation of kwaṣai with γᾶ/γῆ and γαῖα).

3.2. Furnée (1972: p. 391) judged that the synonymous pair γαῖα and αἶα implies a sub-stratal origin of both lexemes, but without any specification of this hypothetical sub-strate. Let us mention that e.g. Woodhouse (1994: p. 99) derived αἶα from *sauṣiə ‘dry land’, analogous to the semantic motivation corresponding to Latin terra.

3.3. Georgiev (1981: p. 101) also saw in γῆ & γαῖα an adaptation of a sub-stratal form, concretely from his version of Pelasgic, a pre-Greek, but Indo-European language, where the Lautverschiebung of Germanic type was realized. This assumption allowed him to connect γῆ & γαῖα with Gothic gawi, gen. gauja ‘χώρα’, i.e. ‘country’, Armenian gavaṛ ‘region’, and Greek proper χάος ‘space’ (cf. Pokorny 1959: p. 449).

4. Etymology based on comparison with non-Indo-European languages

ge ‘country, land, village’ (Leslau 1979: p. 254). It was already Marcel Cohen (1933: p. 34), who compared Geez ge with Hebrew and Arabic, but also with Greek γῆ. The original pattern in a hypothetical donor-language of the Canaanite type9 would have been *gayyā or *gaya?. It is necessary to stress that ‘river valley’ in the Near East implicitly means ‘a fertile soil in a river valley’ vel sim. Tempting is to mention that Pindar [Pythian 9.101–102; see Appendix] used for Γᾶ the epithet βαθύκολπος. It has been translated as ‘deep-bosomed’, but the second component also means ‘valley, vale’, cf. Pindar, Olympian 9.87: καὶ Νῆμας ... κατὰ κόλπον: ‘and ... in the vale of Nemea’.10

4.2. There is still one Semitic lexeme, which could take part in a creation of the mythical function of Greek Γῆ & Γαῖα, namely West Semitic *gawy-a(t) ‘kinswoman’, which would continue in the hypothetical Canaanite donor-language as *gayyā. It is reconstructible on the basis of Hebrew gōyā ‘gentile woman’ (Klein 1987: p. 94). Together with Official Aramaic gw ‘female slave’? (DNWS 217) these words are the feminine from the better documented Semitic masculine *gawy ‘people, tribe’ (DRS 107) > Eblaitic proper name Gayyum ‘clan, tribe’ (Pagan 1998: p. 212); Amorite *gayyu11 ‘clan’; Phoenician, Punic gw ‘community, corporation’, Biblical Hebrew gōy ‘people, nation; persons’, frequently ‘pagan people’ (HAL 182–183), Epigraphic Hebrew pl. g姚明 ‘the heathens’ (DNWS 221); Sabaic gw-m, gwy ‘community group’ (Beeston et al. 1982: p. 50); West Semitic > Akkadian of Mari gâʔu ‘group, gang (of workmen)’ (CAD 5, 59) = gâʔum or gâwum ‘people’ (AHw 284).

4.2.1. This alternative etymology of the Greek theonyms Γῆ & Γαῖα can be supported by their epithets (Bruchmann 1893: pp. 71–73). Besides the most frequent ‘mother’, the goddess was also known as ἄλοχος ‘wife’ [Homeric hymns 30.17], ἄνασσα ‘lady’ [Euripides, Electra 678] or ‘queen’ [Euripides, Phoenissae 686], πότνια ‘queen’ [Homeric hymns 30.6], etc. (see Appendix).

9 With the characteristic change of Proto-Semitic *w > Canaanite *γ (Lipiński 2001: p. 121, §11.13).
11 The masculine *gayyu(m) is preserved in such proper names recorded in the Old Babylonian period as Ba-aḫ-lu-ga-ji-īm, Ba-aḥ-lu-ga-i-im, Ba-aḥ-lu-ga-i, representing the genitive syntagm /bašlu-gayyu(m)/ ‘lord of a clan’, besides Ba-aḥ-lu-ga-ju and Ba-aḥ-lu-ga-a-ju /bašlu-gayyuy/ ‘lord is a clan’ (Streck 2000: pp. 89, 321). But the spelling ga-a implies better the feminine *gayya (cf. Streck 2000: p. 312: Um-mi-ṭa-ba = /ṭummi-ṭaba/ ‘my mother is good’) than the endless masculine *gayy. The name A-na-na-ga-a, interpreted by Streck (p. 183) as /ḥanana-gayy/ ‘Gnädig ist der Clan’, should be reinterpreted as /ḥanana-gayya/. If /gayya/ is the feminine to /gayy/ ‘clan’, it is quite natural to ascribe to /gayya/ the meaning ‘clan-goddess’ and the whole name would mean ‘gracious is the clan-goddess’. In this perspective it is possible to reinterpret some other names too: Ba-aḥ-lu-ga-a and A-hi-ga-a are interpreted as /bašlu-gayy/ ‘lord is a clan’ and /ʔabhi-gayy/ ‘my father is a clan’ respectively by Streck (2000: p. 183). If the second component is the feminine theonym *Gayya, the names should mean ‘lord of Gayya’ and ‘my father of Gayya’ respectively, expressing so that they belong to Gayya. The final -a indicates the genitive in such the syntagm, cf. Su-mu-ba-ta / šumu-bašša/ ‘descendant of a lady’, Su-mu-di-ta-na /šumu-Dirāna/ ‘descendant of Diānu’ (Streck 2000: p. 274).
4.3. Both the hypothetical Semitic sources of the Greek theonym presented in §§ 4.1. & 4.2. would be inconvincing, if there was none Semitic theonym generated by one of these two etymons. They can really be identified:

4.3.1. Eblaite Ga-ù / Ga-u₃ / Ga-um / Ga-a-a!-ù is connected with the etymon proposed in §4.2. (Mander 2005: p. 77). This theonym is apparently masculine, but it is no problem – in the Semitic pantheon there are deities which are masculine in one tradition and feminine on other tradition or even both genders are represented in one and the same tradition. Symptomatic is the pair of the Semitic theonyms *ʕaṭṭar- and *ʕaṭṭar-at, cf. Old Babylonian Ištar f. = Sumerian goddess Inanna, ištaru(m) f. ‘goddess’, Young Babylonian ištaru f. id. (remodelled according to pl. ištarātu – CAD 271–274); Eblaite aš-dar f. / qaṭṭar/ = ḫInana (Krebernik 1982: p. 31); Ugaritic deities fsṛ m. & fsṛ f. (DUL 190–192); Phoenician fsṛt f. ‘goddess of fertility and war’, Hebrew ḫaṣṭēr ⁄ ḫaṣṭēr f. ‘the goddess of Sidonians’; Epigraphic South Arabian fsṛ m. ‘male deity connected with East’ etc. (Blažek 1996: p. 133).

4.3.2. Ugaritic Āgy, syllabic A-ga-ia, Nuzi A-ga-ia (Watson 2012: p. 324; DUL 28), if the initial syllable represents the Semitic prefix *ʔa-, forming the elative in Ugaritic, e.g. ālīy ‘very strong’: Akkadian le’ēḫ ‘to prevail’, le’ēḫ ‘able’ (DUL 51; cf. Lipiński 2001: pp. 221–222, §29.16). Separating *ʔa-, the root proper can be connected with both the etymons analyzed in §4.1. and §4.2.

5. Conclusion

Summing up, it seems the Greek forms originated as the adaptation and merging of two Canaanite (quasi-)homonyms reconstructible as *gayyā, one designating ‘{fertile soil in a} river valley’, second ‘female representative of a clan’. At least one of these lexemes was also used as a divine name in the hypothetical donor-language, perhaps close to Amorite.

Appendix

Homer ὕμνοι 30 (to Earth), v. 17:

17χαῖρε, θεῶν μήτηρ, ἄλοχ’ Οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος,
18πρόφατον δ’ ἀντ’ ὕδης βιοτόν θυμήρε’ ὅπαξε:
19αὐτάρ ἐγὼ καὶ σεῖο καὶ ἄλλης μνήσου’ ἀοιδῆς.

‘Hail, Mother of the gods, wife of starry Heaven; freely bestow upon me for this my song substance that cheers the heart! And now I will remember you and another song also.’

12  Transl. by H. G. Evelyn-White (1914a).
Euripides, *Phoenissae* 686
kaὶ διώνυσι θεάι, Περσεφόνη καὶ φίλα
685Δαμάτηρ θεά, 
πάντων ἀνασσά, πάντων δὲ Γᾶ τροφός, 
kτήσαντο — πέμπτε πυρφόρους 
θεᾶς, ἀμφοῖ τάδε γαῖ: 
pάντα δ’ εὔπετή θεοῖς.13
‘and the goddesses of twofold name, Persephone and the kindly goddess Demeter, the queen of all, Earth the nurse of all, won it for themselves; send to the help of this land those torch-bearing goddesses; for to gods all things are easy.’14

Euripides, *Electra* 678
καὶ Περσέφασσα καὶ φίλα 
Δαμάτηρ θεά, 
χεῖρας ὥς δίδω μ᾽ ἐμ᾽ ἀρά 
15‘And Lady Earth, to whom I give my hands’16

*Homeric hymns* 30, 6
γαῖαν παμμήτειραν ἀείσοτειραν, ἠνθέμεθολον, 
πρεσβίστην, ἥ φέρβει ἐπὶ χθόνι πάνθ᾽ ὑψόσ’ ἐστίν, 
ἡμέν ὡσα χθόνα διὰν ἐπέρχεται ἡδ’ ὡσα πόντον 
ἡδ’ ὡσα πωτῶνται, τάδε φέρβεται ἐκ σέθεν ὀλβου. 
ἐκ σέο δ’ εὐπαίδεσ τε καὶ εὐκαρποί τελέθουσι, 
πότνια, σεῦ δ’ ἐχεῖς δοῦναι βιον ἡδ’ ἀφελέσθαι 
θηνητοῖς ἀνθρώποισιν: ὅ δ’ ὀλβιος, ὃν κε σὺ θυμῷ 
πρόφρων τε καὶ εὐκαρποί τελέθουσι, ὡσα πάρεστι. 
13 Ed. by A. T. Murray (1913b).
14 Transl. by E. P. Coleridge (1938b).
15 Ed. by A. T. Murray (1913a).
16 Transl. by E. P. Coleridge (1938a).
Κούρους δ´ Οὐρανίωνας ἐγείνατο πότνια Γαῖα,
oùs δὴ καὶ Τιτήνας ἐπίκλησιν καλέουσιν,
oùνεκα τισάσθην μέγαν Οὐρανόν ἀστερόεντα.

‘...and Ouranos, by his union with Ge, begot females, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos; and males, the hundred-handed Cottys, Gyges, Briareus, and the Cyclopes Brontes, and Steropes, and Argos, whom also he bound and hurled down to Tartarus, having learned that he was to be ejected from his government by his children; whereupon Ge, being enraged, brought forth the Titans.

‘The godlike Gaia bore to Ouranos Sons who are by the name of Titans known, Because they vengeance took on Ouranos Majestic, glitt’ring with his starry crown.’

Pindar, Pythian 9.101–102

17 Transl. by B. P. Pratten (1885).
18 Ed. by J. Sandys (1937).

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Acknowledgement: I would like to express my thanks to John D. Bengtson for correction of English and first critical reading.

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