Iranian *zganda- 'mounted messenger', *zgad- 'to ride' and Greek σφαδάζω*

Alexander Nikolaev

Boston University,
745, Commonwealth avenue, Boston MA, 02215, USA; alexander.s.nikolaev@gmail.com

This article argues that Greek σφαδάζω 'struggle, toss one's body about' is etymologically related to Proto-Iranian *zgad- 'to ride, gallop' and *zganda- 'messenger', the source of loanwords σαγγάνδης and ἀσγάνδης in Greek. Iranian nominal stems *zgandá- 'rider, mounted messenger' and *zgánda- 'riding' (reflected in Sogdian non-finite forms) suggest the reconstruction of a Proto-Iranian root *zgand-, the zero-grade form of which is found in *tudáti*-type verbal stem *zgadá-ti 'rides, gallops' (*zgad- < *zgn̥d-). The correspondence between Greek σφ- and Iranian *zg- is unproblematic, since these are regular reflexes of PIE *sgʷʰ- in both languages, compare Younger Avestan zgərəsna- 'round, circular' vis-à-vis Greek σφαῖρα 'sphere, ball, globe'. Importantly, in its earliest attestations Greek σφαδάζω is used to refer to horses that are prancing, struggling, and moving violently: the application of the verb to human agony is demonstrably secondary. The Greek verb is best analyzed as a denominative *σφαδαι-ιζω derived from an unattested adjective *σφάδαιος, itself made from a nominal stem *σφάδη or *σφαδή, cf. ματάζω 'speak foolishly' ← μάταιος 'foolish' ← μάτη 'foolishness'; the underlying unattested noun, whether *σφάδη 'kicking, tossing' or *σφαδή 'kick, toss', is based on a thematic verbal stem *σφαδε/ο- 'to kick, toss, move swiftly (of horses)' identical in origin with Proto-Iranian *zgadá-ti. On the basis of these forms, a new PIE root *sgʷʰend- / *sgʷʰn̥d- 'to move quickly (of horses)' can be reconstructed.

Keywords: etymology, Ancient Greek language, Iranian languages, Avestan, Khotanese, Sogdian, derivational morphology, denominative verb.

In a tightly argued and richly documented article, Rosół (2021) plausibly explained Greek σαγγάνδης and ἀσγάνδης 'messenger' as Iranian loanwords going back to *zganda- 'messenger' (cf. MPers., Parth. ʾjgnd, Sogd. žγnt (Chr.), zγʾnt(t) (B.), ʾzγʾnty (S.)).[1] In his article, Rosół advanced compelling arguments in favor of viewing the Iranian word for messenger as belonging to the inherited lexical stock and not as (ultimately Mesopotamian) *Kulturwort*.[2] Following earlier scholarship, Rosół accepted an etymological con-

---

[1] "Chr." = Christian Sogdian in Syriac script, "M." = Sogdian in Manichaean script, "B." = Buddhist Sogdian in Sogdian script, "S." = Sogdian in Sogdian script. See Durkin-Meisterernst 2004, 85; Gharib 1995: 91, 458–9; Sims-Williams & Durkin-Meisterernst 2012, 45–46; Sims-Williams 2016, 244.

[2] See Rosół (2021) for a discussion of Mandaic *ašganda*, Syriac *izgandā* 'messenger', etc.

nection between the noun *zganda- and the Iranian verbal root reconstructed by Cheung (2007, 473–4) as *zgad- 'to gallop, mount a horse'.[3] This etymology is plausible and there is an additional argument that can be marshalled in its favor: several ancient sources specifically indicate that Achaemenid elaborate communication service, the ἀγγαρήῐον, used relays of *mounted* messengers.[4] The present note seeks to make a modest refinement to this analysis by challenging Cheung's assertion that Iranian *zgad- has no Indo-European cognates.[5]

If the Iranian noun *zganda- 'messenger'[6] is related to the verbal root *zgad-, the only way of explaining the word-internal -n- in the noun is to reconstruct the root as *zgand-. Additional evidence in favor of this reconstruction comes from Sogdian where beside the finite verbs βγγδ- (M.), bžgd- (Chr.), pret. βγγst 'to mount (a horse)' (< *abi-zgad-[7]) and ʾwjγδ- (M.), ʾwzγδ- (Chr.), pret. ʾwjγst 'to get off a horse' (< *au̯a-zgad-), we find infinitives βγγnd (M.) and ʾwjγnd (M.) going back to virtual Proto-Iran. *(-)zgánd-āi̯.[8] The same Proto-Iranian allomorph *zgand- is found in causative ʾnzγynt 'to cause to cross over' (Chr.) contrasted with intransitive ʾnzγδ (S.) 'to cross over' (< *ham-zgad-). These forms continue a full grade of the root *zgand- which alternates with zero-grade *zgad- (-a- < *n̥) in accordance with familiar rules of Indo-European ablaut.

Formally, Iranian *zgand- may go back to six different Proto-Indo-European preforms, since Iranian *g may continue PIE *g, *gʷ or *gʷʰ (before PIE *o, *a, or *N̥), while Iranian *d may represent either PIE *d or *dʰ. Specifically, Proto-Iran. *zgadá-ti may be back-reconstructed as a *tudáti*-type present stem *sg^{(w)(h)}n̥d^{(h)}-é/ó-, the causative *zgand-ai̯a-ti would continue *sg^{(w)(h)}ond^{(h)}-éi̯e/o-, while the nominal forms would go back to virtual *nomen agentis* *sg^{(w)(h)}ond^{(h)}-ó- 'rider' and *nomen actionis* *sg^{(w)(h)}ónd^{(h)}-o- 'riding'.[9] *Contra* Cheung 2007, 474, there is an Indo-European cognate that can be established on the basis of these transponates.

One of possible preforms, namely, PIE *sg^{wh}end- / *sg^{wh}n̥d- allows reconciling the Iranian verb with Greek σφαδάζω[10] which has hitherto been etymologically isolated.[11] Pho-

---

[3] This idea was first floated by Gershevitch 1954, 52 n. 1; it was accepted by Happ 1962, 198 and Huyse 1993, 276.

[4] An Elamite tablet from Persepolis mentions the amount of grain given to the horses in the express service (PF 1672, see Hallock 1969, 460). Cf. Hdt. 8.98 τοσοῦτοι ἵπποι τε καὶ ἄνδρες διεστᾶσι κατὰ ἡμερησίην ὁδὸν ἑκάστην ἵππος τε καὶ ἀνὴρ τεταγμένος "so many are the men and horses that stand along the road, each horse and man at the interval of a day's journey"; Xen. *Cyr.* 8.6.17 ἐποιήσατο ἱππῶνας […] καὶ ἵππους ἐν αὐτοῖς κατέστησε "[Cyrus] erected post-stations […] and equipped them with horses"). At the beginning of Aeschylus's *Persians*, the leader of the chorus longs for the arrival of a messenger defined more precisely as a mounted courier (ἱππεύς, *Pers.* 14) and the book of Esther (8.14) likewise refers to the king's messengers as *hārāṣîm rōkĕbê hārekeš* "the posts who rode on horses", rendered in the Septuagint by ἱππεῖς.

[5] Cheung 2007, 474: "the root is exclusively Ir[anian]."

[6] Probably oxytone *zgandá-, a "τομός-type" agent noun.

[7] Possibly *abi-žgad- with *z > ž in the position after *i by the *ruki*-rule.

[8] The troubling -n- of these Sogdian forms was first pointed out by Henning (1937, 60), while Gershevitch (1954, 52 n. 1) proposed the reconstruction *zgn̥d-.

[9] It is traditionally assumed that in Proto-Indo-European voiced *z was a positional allophone of *s in the vicinity of voiced stops.

[10] The spelling (σφαδάζω / σφαδᾴζω) is discussed below.

[11] Frisk 1960–1972, 2, 825 calls σφαδάζω an "expressives Wort ohne überzeugende Erklärung" and Chantraine follows suit. Semitic origin (root *spd* 'mourn, wail') was suggested by Bernal 2006, 322–333. Beekes's (2010, 1426) comparison with σπάω, σπαδών and recourse to the theory of substrate origin is a counsel of despair, not only for methodological, but also for semantic reasons, since in the case of σφαδάζω the reference to spasms is clearly secondary (see the main text above). Older dictionaries register the com-

nologically, Greek σφαδ- fits Iran. *zgad- as though dovetailed: for the initial consonant cluster one may compare YAv. zgərəsna- 'round, circular' vis-à-vis Gk. σφαῖρα 'sphere, ball, globe' (< *sg^{wh}r̥-).[12] The meanings of Iranian *zgad- and Greek σφαδάζω can also be shown to be quite similar to each other.

In Greek literature σφαδάζω is applied nearly exclusively to horses: specifically, the verb is used to describe how horses prance, struggle, and toss their body about. For instance, in Atossa's dream (Aesch. *Pers.* 194) one of the women imagined as horses yoked under Xerxes's chariot began to move violently (ἐσφάδαζε), tore the harness, and smashed the yoke in half. Similarly, Soph. fr. 848 (*via* Plut. *Quest. Rom.* 71.280) compares a person who tosses and turns on account of overeating to a prancing horse: σὺ δὲ σφαδάζεις πῶλος ὣς εὐφορβίᾳ "you toss yourself about like a colt from glut of food." In Eur. fr. 818c Kannicht (*Phrixus* or *Athamas*?), the speaker says that if he had the energy, he would prance around like a newly-yoked colt that has just taken the bit: εἰκὸς σφαδάζειν ἦν ἂν ὡς νεόζυγα πῶλον χαλινὸν ἀρτίως δεδεγμένον. Xenophon (*Cyr.* 7.1.37, paraphrased by Long. 1.25) uses the verb to describe the movement of a wounded horse that throws its rider (Cyrus) off: ὁ δὲ ἵππος πληγεὶς σφαδάζων ἀποσείεται τὸν Κῦρον.

The verb σφαδάζω is occasionally used of people, referring either to general restlessness (Hp. *Mul.* 1.38, 5th–4th cent. BCE) or to spasms and convulsions in agony, whether real (Aesch. *Ag.* 1293 (Cassandra wishing for death), Soph. *Aj.* 833[13], Eur. fr. 1020 Kannicht) or psychosomatic (Pl. *Rep.* 9.579, about a tyrant living in fear for his life), but as Ceschi (2009, 110) recognized, this usage is secondary to the "hippological" meaning of the verb.

In Iranian languages, the descendants of Proto-Iranian *zgad- refer to a quick motion of various kinds. Importantly, in Middle Iranian several reflexes of prefixed forms refer to horseback riding: *abi-zgad- > Sogdian βjγδ- 'to mount a horse' (M.), *aua-zgad- > Sogdian ʾwjγδ- 'to get off a horse' (M.), Khotanese vaysgasta- 'dismounted', *fra-zgad- > Old Khotanese hayzgasta 'went forth'; *ham-zgad- > Sogdian ʾzγd 'to leap up' (S.). In Modern East Iranian the meaning was generalized to 'move quickly', cf. Pashtō zγāst- / zγāšt- 'to run' and Yidga zəγast- 'to run away'.[14] There are no known reflexes of *zgad- in Old Persian, but in Avestan the root denotes fast movement of various sorts,[15] for instance, Vd. 9.46 *aipi tā nasuš zgaθaite yaθa išuš x^{v}āθaxtō* "then that dead flesh will rush back, like an

---

parison with Skt. *spanda-^{te}* 'throb, shake, quiver; kick (of animals)': the latter meaning of the Sanskrit root could in theory be aligned with the meaning of σφαδάζω (note *áspandamāna-* referring to a bull who is not bucking at RV 4.3.10 and *spandaná-* used of a kicking cow at AVŚ 8.6.17), but the phonetic difficulty (σφ- vs. sp-) has been insurmountable despite the efforts by Hiersche 1964, 204–206 (di Giovine 1990, 219 calls the comparison between σφαδάζω and Skt. *spand-* "il […] più interessante […] per quanto non scevro di difficoltà di ordine fonologico", while Mayrhofer 1986–2001, 2, 773 discards it as "ohne Wahrscheinlichkeit"). Certainly unrelated is Gk. σφενδόνη 'sling': *contra* Beekes 2010, 1430 and 2014, 123, Lat. *funda* and Gk. σφενδόνη do not have to be viewed as loanwords from a common Mediterranean source, but may go back to PIE *(s)b^{h}end^h-: Lat. *funda* < *b^{h}ond^{h}ā- with analogical -u- from the verb *fundere*, while σφενδόνη < *sp^{h}end- (Miller's rule: -V́ND- < *-V́NDh-) < *sp^{h}end^h- (Siebs's Law) < *sb^{h}end^h-, see Steinbauer 1989, 233 n. 13.

[12] This comparison was made by Scheftelowitz 1927, 229; Nikolaev 2017 added Luw. *šūrit-* 'ball' to the etymological equation.

[13] Where the scholiast paraphrased ἀσφαδάστῳ by σπασμὸν μὴ ἔχοντι.

[14] See Morgenstierne 2003, 101.

[15] Hintze 1994, 285: "eine schnelle Bewegung verschiedener Art"; Kellens 1984, 21: "se précipiter (à cheval)"; 108: "aller à cheval"; Kellens 1995, 69: "galoper". The injunctive ⁺*zgaθaṯ* is glossed as ⁺*yst* 'leaped' in FiO 20 (see Klingenschmitt 1968, 185–186).

arrow well shot" or Yt. 5.96 where the form *frazgaδaite* refers to the waters of Arəduuī Sūra Anāhita streaming from the mountain tops; at Yt. 5.131 we find a past passive participle *uzgastō* (< **ud-zgasta-*) clearly used in the meaning 'mounted': *auruuaṇtəm / yō aŋhaṱ āsuš uzgastō* "(I ask for…) a courser who would be fast when mounted."[16] Cheung's reconstruction of the meaning of Proto-Iranian **zgad-* as 'to go on horseback; to gallop' (2007, 473–4) appears fully adequate.[17]

As clearly emerges from the facts just discussed, the common semantic denominator of Iranian **zgad-* and Greek σφαδάζω is 'to move quickly (of horses)', whence 'to ride, to gallop' in Iranian and 'to prance, to toss the body around' in Greek. The Greek and the Iranian verb can thus be formally and semantically reconciled with each other.

The morphological make-up of Greek σφαδάζω requires a brief comment. While both the verb and its derivatives (σφαδασμός, (-)σφάδαστος, etc.) are often found in the mss. spelled with a plain α in the medial syllable, Herodian (2.929.14–15 Lentz) advocated the spelling σφαδάιζω with an iota,[18] and ἐσφαδάιζον is written in POxy. 1381.99 (2nd cent CE). If this information is reliable,[19] then the Greek verb is best analyzed as a denominative *σφαδαι-ιζω derived from an unattested adjective *σφάδαιος, itself made from a nominal stem *σφάδη or *σφαδή, cf. ματάζω (ματάιζω) 'speak foolishly' ← μάταιος 'foolish' ← μάτη 'foolishness' or ὡράζω (ὡράιζω) 'be / make in the prime of youth, beautify' ← ὡραῖος 'of the right season' ← ὥρᾱ 'season.'[20] The accent in the hypothetical noun *σφαδη cannot be determined with certainty: it may have been an oxytone result noun *σφαδή 'kick, toss' of the type λαβή 'hold', λιτή 'supplication', ἀφή 'touch' (Dieu 2016, 75–78) or a barytone abstract noun *σφάδη 'kicking, tossing' of the type πάθη 'suffering', ἄλη 'wandering' (Dieu 2016, 83–101).[21] Both types are well attested in Greek and their derivational ties to zero-grade verbal stems (present or aorist) are likewise well established:

as a parallel to hypothetical *σφαδή ← *σφαδε/ο- cf. φυή ← φυε/ο-, ἀρχή ← ἀρχε/ο-, γραφή ← γραφε/ο-, τριβή ← τριβε/ο-;

as a parallel to hypothetical *σφάδη ← *σφαδε/ο- cf. πάθη ← παθε/ο-, μάχη ← μαχε/ο-, τύχη ← τυχε/ο-.

One may therefore derive the hypothetical noun *σφαδη (→ *σφάδαιος → σφαδάζω) from a thematic verbal stem *σφαδε/ο- 'to kick, toss, move swiftly (of horses)' identical in origin with Iran. **zgada-* 'to ride, to gallop': both stems go back to PIE **sg^{wh}ṇd-é/ó-*.[22]

---

[16] Translation by Skjærvø 2011, 63; see also the discussion by Dresden 1970, 135–6.

[17] H. W. Bailey (*apud* Cheung 2007, 474) tentatively added to the dossier of **zgad-* Modern Persian *jastan / jah-* 'to jump', Balochi *jist / jih-* 'to flee': the initial *j* in these forms may reflect metathesized **zg-* > **gž-*, as David Buyaner kindly points out to me, drawing my attention to the fact that Mid. Pers. plwtyhyt(') / *frōt-ǰahēt* translates YAv. *frazgaδaite* (Yt. 5.96, cited above) in *GrBdh.* 9.7 = *IndBdh.* 12.5.

[18] The same spelling is advocated by several other ancient authorities, see Finglass 2011, 383 for references.

[19] The historical quantity of the second α in the verb cannot be ascertained. Note the position of skepticism taken by Chantraine 2009, 1036 according to whom the form σφαδάζω "ne doit pas être admise".

[20] It may, however, be the case that Greek had both σφαδάιζω and σφαδάζω, the latter being a denominative verb made directly from the noun *σφάδη or *σφαδή 'kicking, tossing, prancing' on the model of δικάζω ← δίκη, ἀγαπάζω ← ἀγάπη, τυρβάζω ← τύρβη, etc. In theory, σφαδάζω can also be a replacement of older *σφαδάω (with aor. σφάδασ- serving as a *Scharnierform*), compare e. g. πελάζειν *Il.* 5.766 backformed to aor. πέλασα and replacing old πίλναμαι.

[21] Barytone abstract nouns often acquire a concretized meaning, e. g. μάχη 'fighting' > 'battle'.

[22] As a parallel to a *nomen actionis* with a zero grade of the root next to a *tudáti* present stem cf. e. g., Av. *aka-* 'hook' and Ved. *acá-ti* 'to bend' (Indo-Iranian **Hank-*).

A new PIE root *$sg^{wh}end$-* 'to move quickly (of horses)' can thus be reconstructed on the basis of Iranian *$zgad$-*[23] and Greek σφαδάζω.[24] A *tertium comparationis* is yet to be discovered.[25]

References

Bailey H. W. Second Stratum of Indo-Iranian Gods, in: J. R. Hinnells (ed.) *Mithraic Studies*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1975, vol. 1, 1–20.

Beekes R. S. P. *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*. Leiden — Boston, Brill, 2010.

Beekes R. S. P. *Pre-Greek. Phonology, Morphology, Lexicon*. Edited by S. Norbruis. Leiden, Brill, 2014.

Bernal M. *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilation*. Vol. III. New Brunswick N. J., Rutgers University Press, 2006.

Ceschi G. *Il vocabolario medico di Sofocle: analisi dei contatti con il Corpus Hippocraticum nel lessico anatomo-fisiologico, patologico e terapeutico*. Venezia, Istituto veneto di scienze lettere ed arti, 2009.

Chantraine P. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots*. Nouvelle édition. Paris, Klincksieck, 2009.

Cheung J. *Etymological Dictionary of the Iranian Verb*. Leiden — Boston, Brill, 2007.

di Giovine P. *Studio sul perfetto indoeuropeo. Pt. 1: La funzione originaria del perfetto studiata nella documentazione delle lingue storiche*. Roma: Dipartimento di studi glottoantropologici dell'Università di Roma "La Sapienza", 1990.

Dieu É. *L'accentuation des noms en *-ā (*-eh₂) en grec ancien et dans les langues indo-européennes: étude morphologique et sémantique*. Innsbruck, Universität Innsbruck, 2016.

Dresden M. J. Indo-Iranian Notes: 1. Avestan *ravō.fraoθman-*; 2. Avestan *uzgastō*; 3. Iranian Optative Forms, in: M. Boyce and I. Gershevitch (eds) *W. B. Henning Memorial Volume*. London, Lund Humphries, 1970, 134–139.

Durkin-Meisterernst D. *Dictionary of Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian*. (Dictionary of Manichaean Texts, Vol. III/1). Turnhout, Brepols, 2004.

Finglass P. *Sophocles. Ajax*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Frisk H. *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Heidelberg, Winter, 1960–1972.

Gharib B. *Sogdian Dictionary*. Tehran, Farhangan Publications, 1995.

Hallock R. T. *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1969.

Happ H. Zu ἀσγάνδης, ἀσκανδής, ἀστάνδης = "Bote". *Glotta* 1962, 40, 198–201.

Henning W. B. *Ein manichäisches Bet- und Beichtbuch*. (*Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, phil.-hist. Kl. 1936/10). Berlin, Akademie der Wissenschaften, in Kommission bei W. de Gruyter, 1937 (reprinted in *Selected Papers*. Téhéran — Liège, 1977, vol. 1, 417–557).

Hiersche R. *Untersuchungen zur Frage der Tenues aspiratae im Indogermanischen*. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1964.

Hintze A. *Der Zamyād-Yašt: Edition, Übersetzung, Kommentar*. Wiesbaden, Reichert, 1994.

Kellens J. *Le verbe avestique*. Wiesbaden, Reichert, 1984.

Kellens J. *Liste du verbe avestique*. Wiesbaden, Reichert, 1995.

Klingenschmitt G. *Farhang-i ōīm: Edition und Kommentar*. Inaugural-Dissertation, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, Erlangen — Nürnberg, 1968.

Mayrhofer M. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen*. Heidelberg, Winter, 1986–2001.

Morgenstierne G. *A New Etymological Vocabulary of Pashto*, compiled and edited by J. Elfenbein, D. N. MacKenzie, and N. Sims-Williams. Wiesbaden, Reichert, 2003.

---

[23] The root must have been lost in Indo-Aryan (see Bailey 1971, 7).

[24] In Greek, the *o*-grade of the root reconstructed in this article would give σφονδ- (< *$sg^{wh}ond$-*), but while Greek σφόνδυλος 'vertebra' may indeed be analyzed as a derivative of *σφόνδος (see Beekes 2010, 1432), this word hardly belongs to the dossier of PIE *$sg^{wh}end$-* for semantic reasons.

[25] As Norbert Oettinger kindly points out to me, there is an array of other PIE roots referring to the quick motion of animals (e. g., *$ḱenk$-*, *$(s)kek$-*, *$(s)ḱel$-* and *$skeHt$-*) which would have competed with *$sg^{wh}end$-* reconstructed in this article and may have replaced it in individual IE branches; for this reason, the search for a cognate in a third branch may not be expected to be successful.

Rosół R. The Messengers are Called Sangandai: The Greek σαγγάνδης and its Relationship to ἀσγάνδης/ ἀστάνδης. *Philologia Classica* 2021, 16, 40–49.

Nikolaev A. Luvian ^(SÍG)*šūrita* 'Balls of Yarn', in: B. S. S. Hansen et al. (eds) *Usque ad radices: Indo-European Studies in Honour of Birgit Anette Olsen*. Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2017, 567–574.

Scheftelowitz J. Idg. zgh in den Einzelsprachen. *ZVS* 1927, 54, 224–253.

Sims-Williams N. *A Dictionary: Christian Sogdian, Syriac and English*. Wiesbaden, Reichert, 2016.

Sims-Williams N. and Durkin-Meisterernst D. *Dictionary of Manichaean Sogdian and Bactrian.* (Dictionary of Manichaean Texts, Vol. III/2). Turnhout, Brepols, 2012.

Skjærvø P. O. *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism*. New Haven — London, Yale University Press, 2011.

Steinbauer D. H. *Etymologische Untersuchungen zu den bei Plautus belegten Verben der lateinischen ersten Konjugation. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Denominative*. Inaugural-Dissertation, Universität Regensburg. Altenhof bei Bamberg, Gräbner, 1989.