The Anatolian Origins of the Words ‘Olive’ and ‘Oil’ and the Early History of Oleicultrue

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Introduction

A note on etymologies in culinary history. About 150 years ago a renowned scholar, whose grave lies but a few hundred yards from the place where the Oxford Symposium convenes, wrote the following:

Voltaire defined etymology as a science in which vowels signify nothing at all, and consonants very little. ‘L’éymologie,’ he said, ‘est une science où les voyelles ne font rien, et les consonnes fort peu de chose.’ Nor was this sarcasm quite undeserved by those who wrote on etymology in Voltaire’s time, and we need not wonder that a man so reluctant to believe in any miracles should have declined to believe in the miracles of etymology.

At the time Max Müller (1864:238) wrote these words, he was looking back at a field of inquiry which had enjoyed a quasi-independent and respected status from classical times on – one recalls, for example, Plato’s Cratylus and Isodore’s Etymologie – but the fruits of which were rapidly being understood to have been little more than exercises in free association of meanings and sound-shapes rather than any elucidations of actual word histories. Müller, as a student of Sanskrit and the then-rising field of Indo-European, was keenly aware that from then on, the real place of etymology would be not as part of the field of philosophy, as it had been, but of the science of language, of historical linguistics, with its foundation in the comparative method.

Precisely the sort of etymology that Voltaire held in such low regard is, despite the establishment of linguistics at every major university in the world, still widely practised. And one of its most solid bastions is the field of culinary studies, a field in which etymologies are potentially very important pieces of historical evidence but also one in which few trained linguists are active. As a consequence, food studies are bedevilled by the invention and propagation of particularly egregious flights of unrestrained etymological fancy. Worse still, one finds too often that a thoroughly unscientific culinary etymology becomes then the basis from which an otherwise unsupported historical tale is spun.

Ironically, in the culinary world, where there is an especially strong popular interest in the origins of foods and prepared dishes and their names, those names often present particularly thorny problems for the would-be etymologist: hypocoristic or sound-
symbolic reformatations, reanalyses on the basis of folk-etymologies, complex histories as Wanderwörter which have passed through multiple languages. Consequently, in many instances, where scholars are forced to declare a given word or name etymologically untraceable by sound linguistic principles until new evidence is uncovered, less scientifically constrained writers on food feel empowered to apply the methodology whereof Voltaire spoke.

The problem of the origins of Greek ἑλαία and ἑλαιον. Among the more important and ancient foods that bear a name generally considered by scholars to be without an ultimate etymology is the ‘olive’; the word ‘oil’ shares the selfsame root as ‘olive’ and so too is equally bereft of a proper etymology. Now, both of these English words are unproblematically traced back through intermediaries to the classical Latin words *oliva* and *oleum* and these in turn back to the Greek ἑλαία (eláia) and ἑλαιον (élaion) respectively. It is here that scholars have arrived at the etymological impasse, for these two Greek forms have hitherto resisted analysis as words built on lexical material directly inherited from the Indo-European mother language and it has, moreover, been hitherto impossible to find a source from which the Greeks may have borrowed one or both of the terms: in the attested and deciphered languages of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, no candidate with the appropriate combination of semantic and phonetic properties has been identified that could plausibly have been the source of the Greek ἑλαία and ἑλαιον.

In this paper, I argue that ‘olive’ and ‘oil’ can, in fact, be traced back beyond Greek and specifically to the Indo-European languages of ancient Anatolia. While much of the argumentation naturally focuses on matters of historical linguistics, the solution to the problem also crucially involves the historical context of early oleiculture and in turn has further implications for how we view the development and spread of this quintessential aspect of Mediterranean life.

A brief outline of the development of oleiculture
The olive, both wild and domestic, is the quintessential Mediterranean plant, not only in that it has so long played a particularly important rôle in the cultures of the Mediterranean peoples but also in that it is exclusively native to and so intimately associated with the specific environment of that great sea and its immediately surrounding lands. The olive can thrive only in an area in which the so-called Mediterranean climate obtains: a temperate climate with a dry and not excessively hot summer and a wet winter with a bit of a chill but no excessive or prolonged cold spells. It is thus generally restricted to lower altitudes and so is very much at home along almost the entire coast and islands of the Mediterranean, and in some more or less extensive inland areas in the Maghreb, Iberia, Italy, Greece, Anatolia and the Levant.

There can be little doubt that as the last glacial period receded and both olive trees and humans emerged from their refuges and eventually spread out to occupy the same
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spaces around the Mediterranean, the humans must have exploited the fruit of the olive
trees in many, if not all, parts of the region. Since the olive fruit is generally intensely
bitter without prolonged curing, it may have been only a minor food source for hunter-
gatherer groups but it was surely also used for medicinal purposes; in particular, its oil
was likely much appreciated as a salve.

The first evidence for the development of agriculture in the western world has been
found in the Fertile Crescent, the swath of land that runs from southern Mesopotamia
north-westward toward southern Anatolia and thence southward across the length of
the Levant. More specifically, the very earliest evidence of agriculture is found in the
western part of the Fertile Crescent, the Levant, and points to the initial stage being the
gradual cultivation and domestication of annuals, especially grains and pulses, in the
period starting roughly around 8,000 BC. Subsequent expansion of agriculture across
the Fertile Crescent and into adjacent areas likely involved various modes of direct and
indirect influence, as well as some independent or parallel development of innovations,
especially regarding the exploitation of new technologies and different kinds of food
sources.

Of particular relevance here is the development of arboriculture, the exploitation
of woody plants that produce fruits and nuts, of which the earliest to be exploited
in the Near East and Mediterranean region were the date-palm, olive, fig, and grape.
The cultivation of these plants differs markedly from that of annuals in a number of
ways. Most obvious is the fact that they are perennials but one also notes that under
domestication, the lag time of several years before these plants bear fruit demands
long-term planning and not just sedentism but also considerable social stability. Their
propagation involves, moreover, a very different method from that of the annuals: these
fruit trees, in order to be genuinely productive, all require vegetative propagation by
means of the use of cuttings from individuals that are known to yield ample crops of
the desired quality.

The archaeological evidence for the earliest development of arboriculture in the Near
East strongly implies that there was an original horticultural ‘package’ exploited early
on in the southern Levant (Zohary & Hopf 2000:142ff., 248–9). This package included
four core items: grape, olive, fig and date-palm, but of the four only the olive and the
fig have wild progenitors in this area, whereas the other two wild progenitors are found
only in nearby regions: the grape on the fringes of the northern Levant and in southern
Anatolia, and the date-palm on the southern fringes of the Levant. In light of these facts
and that, of the four fruits of the early horticultural package, the one most robustly
represented in early archaeological sites in the southern Levant is the olive, we can
conjecture that in that region, arboriculture may well have begun with the cultivation
and domestication of the olive, probably in a gradual process spanning the Chalcolithic
period, late 5th to late 4th millennium BC. Furthermore, given that the evidence for
intensive exploitation of the olive from the Levant predates any such evidence elsewhere,
we can conclude that oleiculture was first practised there. Since two members of the
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horticultural package in the Levant were not native to the region, however, it seems likely that arboriculture had found independent beginnings elsewhere, to wit, in the Lower Mesopotamian Basin, with the cultivation of the date-palm (Zohary & Spiegel-Roy 1975:323), and in eastern Anatolia or the Transcaucus, with the cultivation of the grape (McGovern 2003:19ff., 299ff.).

As background for the following etymological discussion of Greek élaiá, we summarize the key points regarding the early development of oleículture:

- 5–4th millennium BC: The earliest evidence for intensive exploitation of the olive, including pressing of the fruit to extract oil, is found in sites in the southern Levant from the Chalcolithic period; cultivation and domestication must have been well underway at this time.
- 3rd millennium BC: By the early Bronze Age, oleículture was well established throughout the Levant, including in the north whence oil was apparently exported from North-west-Semitic speaking communities such as Ebla to cities in Mesopotamia. Exports of olives and oil from the Levant to Egypt are amply attested from later in the Bronze Age.
- 2nd millennium BC (a): Oleículture continued to be widely practised throughout the Levant, in some areas quite intensively. During this time, we also find direct evidence from cuneiform tablets for the practice of oleículture and the consumption of olives and olive oil in Anatolia among the Indo-European peoples settled there, especially among the Hittites and presumably also the Luvians.
- 2nd millennium BC (b): Evidence for substantial production of olive oil on Crete is generally acknowledged, though precisely when such production began and how substantial it was remains to a degree controversial. Nonetheless, textual evidence of the Linear B tablets from the Mycenaean period establishes both that the Greeks of that time practiced oleículture and that the classical Greek words for ‘olive’ and ‘olive oil’ had already entered the language.

The Anatolian origins of Greek élaiálélaión

The classical Greek word for both the olive tree and its fruit is élaiá, a feminine noun, which appears alongside various derived forms for related words referring to olive products, their properties, olive-related activities, etc. Of these, note especially the neuter noun élaión ‘olive oil’. A dialectal form of interest is Cypriot é lifon ‘olive oil’, which preserves the intervocalic -w- lost in other dialects. That the -w- was indeed present in the original form of the word is made manifest by the forms attested in the very earliest Greek texts, namely, in the tablets inscribed with the Linear B script from the Mycenaean period, ca. 1400–1200 BC. These forms are: e-ra-wa, representing élaiwa, and e-ra-wo, representing élaiwon, with r appearing in place of l, the diphthong ai rendered with just the first vowel and the final n left off, all regular features of the rendering of Greek in the syllabic spelling system of Linear B which was so ill-suited to
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represent the language. The original presence of the -w- is also clearly indicated in the Latin words for ‘olive’ and ‘olive oil’, which were borrowed into Latin from a dialect of Greek which still preserved the glide at the time of contact. We can then take as the starting point for examining the etymology of classical Greek ἠλαία the presumed early Greek form *elaiwa.²

Previous views. Greek, like other branches of Indo-European, has many lexical elements that do not readily find a plausible etymology in terms of the language family’s attested and reconstructed collective word-hoard. According to most scholars, the Greeks – or more accurately, the pre-Greeks, the speakers of the Indo-European dialect that would eventually emerge as Greek – migrated into the Aegean area from the Balkan peninsula and upon doing so, entered an already populated area, in which they encountered many unfamiliar natural and cultural items. The olive, limited in its range of natural occurrence to the lands immediately surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, was surely unknown to the pre-Greeks before they migrated south. Given that, they would have perforce had either to invent a new word for the tree and its fruit, apply some old word (perhaps without a good referent in the new environment) to the new item(s), or else borrow a word from an indigenous people. Modern scholarly consensus opinion remains very much unsettled upon the third of these possibilities, namely, that the pre-Greeks borrowed a word for the olive from an unidentified language present in the Eastern Mediterranean region and that word was, at least as adapted into pre-Greek speech, *elaiwa. As Chantaine (vol. II:331) puts it: ‘Un emprunt méditerranéen est universellement admis.’ In effect then, the etymology is generally considered to be simply unknown.

An Anatolian source. My proposal takes as its starting point the analysis of *elaiwa as a compound, of which the first element is *el- and the second *aiwa. We leave aside for the moment the question of the identity of the first element and focus on the second.

A root of the form *aiwa with plausibly related semantic value is not found in the inherited IE lexicon of Greek but we do find a Greek word, relating to a fruit-bearing tree, that can be derived from an IE base-form *oiwa. Looking across other IE daughter languages, we find clear cognates of that Greek form which together bear an obvious semantic kinship:

- Lat. uva ‘bunch of grapes’
- Arm. aygu ‘grapevine’
- Grk. ὀᾶ, οῖη, οἶ ‘service berry, service tree’

These words are all from an Indo-European root with suffix *h₂oty-u- and are, moreover, all fitted out with the IE nominal stem in *-eb (Grk. ἄ, ἡ, in classical Greek characterizing the first noun declension, to which ἠλαία belonged). Regarding
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the semantics, note that all three pertain to woody fruit-bearing plants and in two of the languages the word refers to both the fruit and the plant itself. Also noteworthy is the fact that these languages form a neat geographical grouping, with Latin and Greek directly on the Mediterranean and Greek and Armenian standing like brackets on the two flanks of where the Anatolian languages were formerly spoken.

Another set of cognates in a subset of the Indo-European daughter languages needs to be considered here, namely, those forms which reflect the e-grade of the same root just discussed:

- Celtic: OIr. eo, Welsh ywew, OCor. hiuin, Brt. ivin, Gau. ivo- ‘yew’
- Germanic: OE iu, ëw, OHG iuva, OCl. yr ‘yew’
- Baltic: OPsrs. iuvis ‘yew’, Lit. ieuva, Lt. ieuva ‘bird cherry’
- Slavic: OCze. jiva ‘yew, willow’; Rus. iwa, Srb.-Crt. iwa ‘willow’

As was the case with the reflexes of *htoy-w-, the languages with reflexes of *htey-w- form a geographic group, ranging from north-western Europe eastward; note that the easternmost of these languages deviate from the application of the term to the ‘yew’, with the westernmost members of the Baltic and Slavic branches (Old Prussian and Old Czech respectively) agreeing with Celtic and Germanic in this respect, while those to the east have ‘bird cherry’ or ‘willow’. Botanically, the distribution makes sense: the more easterly and northerly Baltic and Slavic languages are spoken in regions where the yew is less prevalent or does not occur. It seems most reasonable to take this evidence as indicating an original use of *htey-w- to refer to the yew tree, with subsequent shift or reapplication of the word to other trees in dialects spoken in zones in which the yew was rare or absent.

Another apparent reflex of the IE root *htey-, though seemingly without the suffixed _w-, is found in the best-attested of the Anatolian languages, Hittite. The word, of neuter gender, appears with a mixture of n-stem forms – eyanaš, eyani, eyanit – and a-stem forms – eyal, eya, eyaz; the attested nom./acc. form eyan could be either. This word eyan appears in cuneiform texts with the Sumerogram determinative for ‘tree, wood’ (also ‘fruit’) giš and from the contexts in which it occurs, it is clear both that the word refers to a kind of tree and, furthermore, that this tree was for the Hittites imbued with religious and legal symbolic significance. It seems, moreover, almost certain that the eyan tree was both cultivated and an evergreen, leading Friedrich (1970:124) to conclude that the Hittite word, like the reflexes of the IE root *htey-(w-) in Celtic, Germanic and to a degree also in Baltic and Slavic, indicated specifically the yew tree.

As noted above, the languages with reflexes of IE *htey-, setting aside Anatolian Hittite, comprise a coherent geographical group ranging across northern Europe. The odd outlier of the group, however, occurs amongst the group of Indo-European dialects in southern Europe and neighbouring south-west Asia in which reflexes of *htoy- occur, as discussed above. The question then naturally arises: is there a possible reflex
of *btoyw- attested in Hittite or any of the other languages of the Anatolian branch of Indo-European?

According to Kimball (1994:22), Hittite displays '[m]onophthongization of IE *oi, *ai, *au and perhaps *ou but only in a limited set of phonological environments: in absolute final syllables, medially before *h, and perhaps before stops.' Under this formulation, we would expect a noun with the root *btoyw-(w-), thus with the diphthong not in final position due to the appearance of the following stem vowel, to yield Hit. *taw(w)a, with the first element of the diphthong reflecting the general development of IE *o in Hittite to a.

No such simplex is attested in Hittite, nor does there appear to be any obvious dialectal reflex of *btoyw-(w-) elsewhere in Anatolian. However, a possible occurrence of the posited Hittite *taw(w)a is found as the second element of a compound, namely, allayani-. This word appears with the aforementioned Sumerogram determinative gii ‘tree, wood, fruit’ – e.g. gii-al-la-ya-ur-ul (acc. pl.) (Neu 1980:226) and from the contexts in which it appears, one concludes that allayani- is indeed the name of a bush or tree. Interestingly, Puhvel (1984:26) says of this word: ‘Probably a culture tree, possibly olive, usually gii-szertum, often listed with hassikka- “fig-tree”, in which case one may entertain an affinity with Gk. ἵλαξ, Lat. olea, oliva “olive-tree”, Arm. ird.’ He offers, however, no discussion of the possible ‘affinity’.

The tentativeness of Puhvel’s suggestion is justified, as there are some obvious problems which require explanation in order to link Hit. allayani- to early Grk. *elaiwā. For one problem, namely, the presence of an extra suffix _ani- on the Hittite form, Puhvel himself offers a possible, though tenuous, resolution: ‘The suffix _ani- resembles Arm. _eni forming tree names, e.g. _ati “boat”: _estani “alder-tree”’ (p. 26). From our perspective, however, allayani- should be considered alongside Hit. ury, which shows _n- in some forms, being sometimes treated as an n-stem; (all)-aya may likewise have been treated as an n-stem, thus allayan-. The final _i may then be best seen as an instance of the phenomenon of i-mutation, found in Hittite as a result of Luvian influence (Hoffner & Melchert 2008:86; Rieken 1994:44); on this, see further below.

A second problem is that of the seeming lack, from a Greek perspective, of the medial _w- in the Hittite form. This lack of congruence cannot be reasonably accounted for morphologically, for if we claim that Hittite ury and allayani- reflect forms originally built without the _w- suffix (*btoyw/*btoyw-), we must still posit some further dialect in which the suffix did appear in these forms to serve as the source for Greek *elaiwā: the problem is thus not solved but merely displaced. We must therefore look for a possible phonological explanation of the absence of _w- in the two Hittite forms. In addition, we would have to account for the irregular maintenance of _y- in ury and allayani, for between vowels _y- was regularly lost in Hittite and Luvian.

Given the relatively limited number of secure Indo-European etymologies we have for Hittite and the other Anatolian languages, it is not surprising that lexical reflexes of sound sequences comparable to IE *_oiwā- are not readily found. We therefore can only
tentatively suggest that there may have been a loss of _w- in the forms under discussion by phonological rule; in effect, we suggest a phonotactic instability of the cluster of glides _yw-, perhaps resolved here by loss of the _w-. So far, the only analogous sound sequences I have found are first-plural forms of verbs with roots ending in _ai; since the first-plural ending was _weni/-wani (present) and _weni (past), the sequence posited in *aiwa occurred regularly in these verbal forms. Counter to the just proposed sound change of *aywa to ayu we find verbal forms in Hittite such as paiwani ‘we go’, paiwen ‘we went’, naiwani ‘we turn’, da’weni ‘we put’, etc. (Hoffner & Melchert 2008). We also find, however, variants in which this sound sequence is absent, of which some cases can be attributed to morphological factors, especially the use of a different root formation, e.g. neywani alongside naiwani (p. 223) or tiywen alongside da’weni (p. 224). In other instances, however, there are variants which suggest the possibility of the phonotactic instability of _yw- posited above, e.g., pāwēni alongside paiwēni and pāiweni, pāwen alongside pāweni. In such forms as pāwēni the reduction of the glide cluster has apparently been achieved through loss of the _y- but this differing path of resolution may have been brought about by the paradigmatic stability of the desinences _weni etc. Forms without reduction of the glide cluster could then be straightforward analogical restorations, reflecting the natural tendency for speakers to reconstruct the combination of roots in _ai with the otherwise stable first-plural desinences. From this perspective, one notes that the seemingly anomalous lack of _w- in Hittite eyan may be the result of the same instability of the cluster _yw- suggested here to explain its absence in allayani- and the verbal forms such as pāweni. In other words, Hittite eyan may well ultimately reflect the same IE *hney-w- ‘yew’ attested in the northern branches.

The last issue to consider here regarding Greek *elaiwa and Hittite allayani- involves the first element of the compound. The correspondence of Greek el- to Hittite all- looks peculiar in light of, for example, the correspondences in the reflexes of IE *melit- ‘honey’, Grk. μέλι, Hit. milit-: both the vowel quality and the geminate l seemingly point to a mismatch and so, if Greek borrowed the word for ‘olive’ from an Anatolian dialect, as we are proposing here, the actual form borrowed was clearly not identical with the attested Hit. allayani-. Indeed, in light of the two issues discussed above, it seems clear that we must posit the borrowing either from a dialect in which the -ani suffix was not in place on the word and the suggested loss of -w- had not occurred or the borrowing had occurred early enough that these processes had not altered an earlier form *el-aiwa.

As for the meaning of this first element, I propose that it reflects the IE root *hnelu-or, in compounds, *hnel-, meaning ‘(dull) red’, ‘reddish brown’ (cf. English elk) (Mallory & Adams 2006:332). From this perspective, I suggest that what we see attested in Hittite could itself well be a borrowing from Luvian, a sister Anatolian language which was long in close contact with Hittite: in Luvian, the inherited sequence *ēl- develops to all-, as in the aforementioned word for ‘honey’, Luv. mallit- (Melchert 1994:238); the occurrence of i-mutation – the _i- in allayaniš – in this noun also points toward it
possibly being a Luvian borrowing into Hittite. It should be further noted that there is
a more general correspondence between Greek ἠ and Luvian (or Luvian-like Anatolian
dialects) a, as seen in such place names as Ephesos/Epasa, Perge/Parha, Lesbos/Lazpa.
With regard to the plausibility of a borrowing of a word for ‘olive’ into Hittite from
Luvian, this would in fact be a very reasonable thing to expect, insofar as the historical
centre of the Hittites was in the highlands of central Anatolia, where the olive does
not grow, whereas their cousins, the Luvians, inhabited territories to the south of the
Hittites, from the Konya Plain to the area of south-eastern Anatolia known then as
Kizzuwatna and later Cilicia, where the olive thrives (Yakubovitch 2008:124). But we
should note too that both the Hittite and Luvian heartlands lay well to the east of the
Aegean and any place where the pre-Greeks were likely to have been in contact with
Anatolians in their earliest period of settlement in the Aegean area.

In concrete terms then, we must posit the borrowing of *el-aiwa not directly
from the Hittite and Luvian dialects as attested in cuneiform texts from central and
south-eastern Anatolia of the eighteenth or seventeenth centuries BC but rather from
an Anatolian dialect of the Aegean area, in which at the time of contact – sometime
from the twenty-first to nineteenth centuries BC – the Anatolian word for ‘olive’ had
not yet undergone any dialect-specific developments – addition of _ani, loss of _w_,
development of el- > all- – other than the early (and almost universal in Anatolian)
development of *o to *a. The posited form, seen in the perspective of the other IE
reflexes of *h1oy-, fits into a pattern of use observed in the other southern branches to
use the root in the names of fruits or fruit-bearing plants of especial prominence in the
southern lands. Anatolian *el-aiwa may well then have originally meant ‘reddish-brown
berry tree’ or ‘reddish-brown berry’, an apt description of the ripe olive.

To sum up, early Greek *eldiwa is a prehistoric borrowing from an Anatolian dialect
of a word that is in fact attested in a different Anatolian dialect from at least a few
centuries later, namely, the Hittite allayani. The Greek word ultimately reflects a form
from early on in the post-Proto-Anatolian, i.e., early (western) dialectal period, which
the Greeks acquired in the Aegean area upon their arrival there from the Balkans.

Conclusion
A proper etymology must account for all the phonological, morphological, and semantic
aspects of the posited development; the preceding discussion, though condensed, does
address all the relevant linguistic issues. But an etymology, especially one in which
borrowing is invoked, should also make sense in terms of the broader sociohistorical
context in which the transfer is posited. In this regard, the present proposal not only
makes sense in terms of the form of the borrowed item and the time and place of
borrowing but also sheds light on the history behind the form allayanis in Hittite,
which, according to my analysis, itself may be a borrowing from Luvian; such a scenario
harmonizes linguistic facts with sociolinguistic facts and further with the facts regarding
the distribution of the olive in Anatolia.
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There are two further issues omitted here due to space considerations but which I will explore in subsequent publications:

1) The implications of this etymology for the religious significance of the olive among the Greeks. Specifically, I argue that after the migration of Indo-European groups into the Mediterranean area, where the olive flourishes and the yew does not, the olive in effect took over several aspects of the symbolic and cultic rôle of the yew.

2) The implications of this etymology for the history of arboriculture and, in particular, of oleiculture. While there are excellent reasons to believe that intensive exploitation and cultivation of the olive developed first in the Levant, the proposed etymology, seen in the broader context of early agricultural developments in the Transcaucasus and eastern Anatolia, suggests that oleiculture in Anatolia was developed independently or quasi-independently from the Levantine developments. The Greeks' introduction to Mediterranean arboriculture is to be seen then as another aspect of the increasingly appreciated relationship between the early Greeks and their Anatolian cousins.

Notes
1. Due to space limitations, I offer here an extremely condensed treatment of the subject; the topic will be discussed in extenso in Buccini (forthcoming). Thanks to Amy Dahlstrom and Craig Melchert. Usual disclaimers apply.
2. There have been some attempts to give *elətwa an Indo-European etymology but they have found no general support.

References
Müller, Max, Lectures on the Science of Language (Second Series), London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1864.