TELLUS (‘earth’)

The noun tellūs-ūris is known to have a unique shape; therefore any theory of its origin is hard pressed to find parallels. There are two principal problems, the geminate ll and the constant long ū; and there is one perfectly clear characterizing feature, the correlation of the meaning with the first syllable tel-.

When we recall the semantics of Skt. prthivī ‘earth’ (: Greek πλατύς ‘flat, broad’, πλατεία ‘street, flat of the hand’, Πλάτωνα the place name, πλάτη ‘oar blade’, πλατταμόν ‘flat stone or beach’, πλάθεον, πλαθάνη ‘platter’, all from *plth-) and its gender, and the semantics and base of Old Irish talam ‘earth’), OCS tla Slovene tla (pl. tantum) ‘ground’, Armenian t'at ‘district’, t'alar ‘ear-

then\(^2\)), Skt. *talam* ‘plain, flat of the hand’, OPruss. talus ‘floor’, Latv. tilēs ‘floor­boards of boat’, ONorse *pila* OE *pel*, ‘plank’, it is clear that we will do well to derive the first syllable of *tellūs* (feminine) from *telH₂-* ‘support’ (:*tēλHHH, imper. τῆλητί), which early embraced the semantics of a flat location upon which one stood or found oneself.

The presence of the matching gendered pair *Tellūs* (fem.) and *Tellūmō* (masc.) gives the strong impression that a single concept with a single base, susceptible however of more than one derivational formation, has been mythologically allotted by a sort of mitosis to both male and female. It is easy then to understand how the medial consonantism (and the vowel?) of *Tellūmō* could have been assimilated to that of *Tellūs*. I assume therefore that we have been misled in seeking complex or exterior sources for *Tellūmō*; we have simply *Telūmō < *telamon– < *telH₂-mon– = τελαμόν (= πλαταιμόν in formation).

Likewise *meditullium* would have undergone contamination with *tellūs*, and must be the archaic formation, as Ernout and Meillet recognized, which we revise slightly as *medi-tol-iom*, with *telH₂–* in the o-grade.

This brings us back to *tellūs*. The only principled solution for both the geminate \(ll\) and the long \(u\) is the assumption of an old compound which resulted in a situation that produced syncope. I therefore propose *tela-lous* gen. *tela-lous-os > -es. The final element would be formed like *ius iūris* (= Avestan yaoz-dā), and must represent some ancient verbal noun. A possible cognate now offers itself in Hittite *lulwai–* ‘sustain’, *lulu* dat.-loc. *lulutu* ‘state of thriving’; on these lexemes see now the Chicago Oriental Institute Hittite Dictionary, vol. 3,1 (1980). We would therefore have in origin a feminized compound adjective ‘support-sustaining’ *vel sim*. It is possible even that the second element, the verb base, was reduplicated\(^3\) as in the Hittite forms, and then reduced by a Latin haplology\(^4\).

Thus, *telH₂ + lulVus– > *telalulVus– > *telalouls– > *tellous– > tellur–.

Semantically in this compound it is possible that the final element was intended to replicate the semantics, in large part, of *telH₂–*. Thus the resulting compound would have the structure of a transformed cognate accusative construction. The feminine gender of course matches that of Skt. prthivī; the gender of *Tellūmō* was determined by that of the noun formation.

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\(^2\) I have shown elsewhere that the regular Armenian reflex for Brugmann’s long syllabic resonant, i.e. *RH*, is *aRa*, and hence *aña* and *ata*. For another example note *k’alak* ‘city’, Annual of Armenian Linguistics 6, 1985, 52. For the present semantics note also *t’atel* ‘bury’ (← ‘earth’).

\(^3\) See T. Burrow, The Sanskrit Language (1959=1955) 212–3 for such formations with final verbal element.

\(^4\) For my formulation of the regularity of the Latin haplology rule see Journal of Indo-European Studies 1, 1973, 218.