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The Riddle of the *sp(h)ij-*: The Greek Sphinx and her Indic and Indo-European

Background

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Abstract: The name of the *Sphinx*, the Greek female monster who had fun killing passers-by who could not answer her riddle, has long been an etymological conundrum. On the basis of literary, linguistic, and anthropological evidence from, above all, Greece and India, this paper comes to a novel understanding of the Sphinx' origin, concluding that her oldest moniker, (Σ)Φίκ-, is related to a newly uncovered Greek noun φίκις 'buttocks' and to a Sanskrit word for the same body part, *sphij-*, a hitherto misunderstood form of which appears, in turn, in a riddle in the oldest Indic text, the *Rigveda*. This derivation situates the Greek creature squarely in the cross-culturally typically aggressive and sexually charged genre of riddling.

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The following paper, which was completed in August 2004 (the brief addendum on p. 22 was added in July 2005), is scheduled to appear in a volume of the series “Collection Linguistique de la Société de Linguistique de Paris” titled *Langue poétique indo-européenne* and edited by G.-J. Pinault & D. Petit. To judge from the proofs, the final published version will look different in a number of (fortunately minor) ways from what follows. I regret that I have not in this version been able to add dots under a number of Greek characters in quotations from papyri on pp. 3, 18, and 19; they will, however, appear in the actual publication.

This paper is about four words—two in Sanskrit, two in Greek—and the connections among them, which are not immediately obvious but which, once seen and if believed, are perhaps not so easily forgotten.* One of the Sanskrit forms, *sphij-*, is well enough known, whereas the other is a hapax; as for the Greek, one of them is infamous, the other until recently utterly obscure. In my contribution to the Festschrift for Jens Elmegård Rasmussen (Katz 2004), I argue that there is a formal relationship between *sphij-* and the obviously connected *sphigĩ-*, both standard (Vedic+) words for ‘hip’ or ‘buttock,’ and a phonologically vaguely similar and semantically effectively identical noun in Greek, $\phi\acute{\iota}\kappa\iota\varsigma$, translated as ‘buttocks’ or ‘anus’ whenever it is actually discussed, which is not often. My conclusion is that the Sanskrit and Greek forms go back to something like $*(s)p^h iK-(i)-$ in Proto-Indo-European; a very similar preform may also underlie such Germanic words as Mod. Germ. *Speck* ‘ham, bacon,’ whether or not these are all ultimately derivatives of the Proto-Indo-European root usually set up as $*sp^h eh_1(i^{[?]})-$ (cf., e.g., Skt. $\sqrt{sphā}$ ‘get fat’). The morphophonological details are not trivial, and the reader of the present paper should be familiar with my earlier discussion since the historical equivalence of *sphij-/sphigĩ-* and $\phi\acute{\iota}\kappa\iota\varsigma$ is taken for granted in what follows. I hope to demonstrate that acceptance of this etymology leads to unexpected and dramatic consequences, ones that go well beyond linguistics to the heart of culture: Indo-European poetics.

Since the Greek word $\phi\acute{\iota}\kappa\iota\varsigma$ and allied forms are so little known—they appear in the LSJ only in the *Revised Supplement* of 1996—it is worthwhile to begin with a quick summary of the evidence; further information is to be found in Katz 2004. The noun appears, undefined but apparently notable for its accentuation, in a treatise of the 2nd-century A.D. grammarian Herodian: $\tau\acute{o}\ \delta\grave{\epsilon}\ \phi\acute{\iota}\kappa\iota\varsigma\ \beta\alpha\rho\acute{\upsilon}\nu\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$ (1.88.35) ‘The word $\phi\acute{\iota}\kappa\iota\varsigma$ is not accented on the final syllable.’ Unfortunately, August Lentz, the editor of the standard edition of Herodian (*Gramm. Gr.* III), emended $\phi\acute{\iota}\kappa\iota\varsigma$ out of existence, changing it to Κίκίς , supposedly (as he explains in the apparatus) the name of one of Alcaeus’ brothers. Also in a mainstream published text is the verb $\phi\acute{\iota}\kappa\iota\omega$ in the late 10th-century A.D. *Suda* (ϕ 293 Adler); this, too, is undefined, though in view of what we now know about the base noun (see immediately below), there can be no doubt but that

* Longer and shorter versions of this paper have been presented at the 212th Meeting of the American Oriental Society (Houston, Texas, March 2002), the 21st East Coast Indo-European Conference (University of Pennsylvania, June 2002), the Institute for Advanced Study (School of Historical Studies, November 2002), the Louisiana State University (Interdepartmental Program in Linguistics, November 2003), and Princeton University (Program in the Ancient World, December 2003), as well as at the “Colloque de travail de la Société des Etudes Indo-Européennes: langue poétique indo-européenne” in Paris in October 2003. Colleagues and friends on each of these occasions responded with many helpful remarks, and it is a pleasure to acknowledge with thanks support of a different but likewise essential kind from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Institute for Advanced Study.

it means ‘wish to be screwed anally’ (see Bain 1983). The other three examples are all nouns in recently discovered papyri. The word received its proper recognition with the 1974 publication by P. J. Parsons of a vulgar 1st-century A.D. “letter” from Oxyrhynchus (*POxy.* 3070, “Indecent Proposal”) with the phrase ψωλή καὶ φίκις ‘erect cock and φίκις’ written around a crude diagram of the same (see Parsons 1974: 163f. + Plate VIII). The clear existence of a word φίκις with the meaning ‘buttocks’ or ‘anus’ then allowed scholars (in the first place Bain 1978) to make better sense of a previously published and significantly older (mid- to late 3rd-century B.C.) papyrus from Hibeh that lets loose a series of insults against a ruddy man, one of which seems to state, οὐ πρόσ]ωπον ἔχε[ι]ς, [ἀ]λλὰ παιδίου φίκιο[ν] (*PHeid.* 190 fr. 1.75) ‘That’s not a face you’ve got; it’s a baby’s bottom!’¹; it is possible that the last word should be read not as an (originally diminutive?) φίκιο[ν], but rather as the accusative of the base form, φίκιν (or, possibly, φίκιδ[α]). Last, another papyrus from Oxyrhynchus published by Parsons only in 1999—this time a 1st-century A.D. (?) rendering of five epigrams of Nicarchus—seems to attest the very word φίκιον (*POxy.* 4502.34) that we may have in *PHeid.* 190; I shall return at the end of the paper to the very interesting poem in question, noting for now only that the line with φίκιον appears also to contain a form of φαλλός ‘phallus.’

In a letter of 10 March 2004, Professor David Bain, the most prolific expert on φίκις (see Bain 1978, 1983, and 1999b: 132, as well as 1991: 69), kindly brought to my attention yet another instance of the word that has been lurking all but unnoticed in a Greek textual corner, this time in the second half of a compound in the *Etymologicum magnum*. In the course of describing the bird known as κίγκλις, the most usual form of whose name is κίγκλος, the lexicon states as follows: κίγκλις, ὄρνις λεγομένη, πυκνὰ τὴν οὐρὰν κινουῖσα, ἦν ἐν τῇ συνηθείᾳ ἔνιοι σεισοπυγίδα καλοῦσιν· εἴρηται διὰ τὸ συνεχῶς τὰ οὐραῖα πτερὰ ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ κινεῖν· ἢ παρὰ τὸ σεῖειν τὴν πυγὴν, ὃ ἐστὶ τὴν οὐρὰν· σεισοφίκης παρ’ ἡμῖν ὀνομάζεται (513.11-15 Gaisford) ‘The bird called κίγκλις, which rapidly moves its tail, some people customarily call σεισοπυγίς: it is spoken of thus on account of its continuously moving its tail feathers in the same way or because it shakes its rump, i.e., its tail; we give it the name σεισοφίκης.’ The bird in question is referred to in English as a *wagtail* (note also obsolete *wagstart*; cf. MLG *wagestert*), an archaic exocentric compound just like regional Fr. *hoche-queue* and *hausse-queue* (the usual word is *bergeronnette*) and very similar to what we find in Lat. *mōtacilla* (if really transformed from *moueō* ‘move’ + *cūlus* ‘anus,’ though this is probably only a folk etymology; cf. Var. *Ling.* 5.76 *motacilla*, ... *quod semper mouet caudam* ‘*motacilla*, ... because it always moves its tail’) and, in Greek, both σεισοπυγίς (i.e., σεῖω ‘shake’ + πυγὴ ‘buttocks’) and what can now be understood as its clear semantic equivalent, the hapax σεισοφίκης.² It is to be hoped that Bain will give this interesting word a full treatment elsewhere.

¹ Are we to think of a baby’s spanked behind (thus, very tentatively, Katz 2004: 281) or a case of diaper rash? Alternatively, perhaps παιδίον here means ‘slave-boy’ and the man’s face is being compared to a slave’s sexually violated anus or whipped backside. Note that it is perfectly possible for a word like φίκις or φίκιον to mean ‘buttocks’ in one context and ‘anus’ in another (or, for that matter, ‘hip’ and ‘buttock,’ as with Skt. *sphij-/sphigí-*): compare, e.g., Adams 1981: 232, 233, 235f., 239, 264, and *passim* and 1982b: 115f. (on shifts between adjacent body parts, see also the end of fn. 51 below).

² D. W. Thompson 1936: 140f. (κίγκλος and variants), 142 (κίλλουρος, literally “X-tail,” but the identity of the first element is unclear; see Chantraine 1999: 531), and 257f. (σεισοπυγίς and variants, including σεῖουρος)

Let us move away from posterior analytics now and toward poetics. The Sanskrit forms *sphij-* (first in *AVP* 16.148.1b) and the somewhat earlier-attested but derivationally probably secondary *sphigí-* (already in the *Rigveda*: 3.32.11d and 8.4.8a) are semantically straightforward, having basically the same referent as Gk. φίκις, but there is one other word in Indic that is usually connected to these with a cautious question mark: the hapax *upaspíjam*, found in *RV* 10.88.18c and unclear as regards both meaning and morphology (for a preliminary assessment, see Katz 2004: 283 n. 21). Certainly it looks like a compound, and on the plausible assumption that the second element is a root noun *spij-**, with the accusative ending *-am*, a link with *sphij-* ‘buttock’ may seem attractive. Leaving semantics aside for the moment, the obvious difficulty is that ‘buttock’ has a *-ph-* whereas the (second) labial in *upaspíjam* is unaspirated; this is the sole reason for the parentheses around the aitch in my title. It is hard to know how great a problem this actually is, though, given that *upaspíjam* is attested only once in the entire corpus of Sanskrit literature, and in (as we shall soon see) a striking and very likely slangy context.³ The comparison of *sphij-* with φίκις means that the preform must involve aspiration (*pace*, e.g., Hiersche 1964: 164), but I admit that I do not know of a non-*ad hoc* way to explain the discrepancy between *-ph-* and the lone case of *-p-*: on the one hand, it is hardly attractive to claim that *upaspíj-* has undergone some kind of low-level labial assimilation, from an original **upasphij-* (there are no parallels, despite numerous attested compounds that begin *upa-*, many with the common prepositional adverb *úpa*); on the other, pushing the matter back to Proto-Indo-European and imagining that the presence or lack of aspiration might have something to do with the (morphologically conditioned?) placement or non-placement of a laryngeal next to a primordial unaspirated **p* is even less enlightening (for one thing, it is difficult enough to conceive of the status of *sphij-* at this stage, much less also *upaspíjam*).⁴ There is, then, no satisfactory solution, but what remains is the question of whether we really need a solution in the first instance. Put otherwise, it may be that the best way to determine whether *upaspíjam* does indeed contain a slightly mangled form of our word *sphij-* is to see whether such an idea helps clarify the word’s meaning.

provides ornithological and textual details, specifically noting the existence of our form “σεισοφίκης (lect. dub.)” in the *Etymologicum magnum* (257); see also Henderson 1991: 179 and also 210. There is some confusion between the wagtail and the magical ἰυγξ/ἰυγξ-bird, about whose erotic power so much has been written and which one source describes as ἡ κιναιδίον ἢ φερωνύμως σεισοπυγίς καλεῖται διὰ τὸ πανταχοῦ στρέφειν καὶ λυγίζειν τὴν πυγῆν (Sch. Theoc. 2.17 Wendel); see D. W. Thompson 1936: 124-28 and 142, as well as Vox 1980: 175, with n. 8. (Note that κιναιδός ‘catamite,’ of which κιναιδίον is the diminutive, is etymologized in the *Etymologicum Gudianum* as follows: εἴρηται δὲ παρὰ τὸ κινεῖσθαι τὴν αἰδῶ· ἢ παρὰ τὸ κινεῖν τὰ αἰδοῖα [322.15f. Sturz]; compare also Chantraine 1999: 532.) In this connection, it seems reasonable to think that Vox 1980 is right to build on Troxler 1964: 160 and view the endocentric compound πυγοστόλος, a hapax in Hesiod (*Op.* 373) that literally means something like “arse-rigged,” as one of so many hidden animal names in the *Works & Days*, and specifically as a quasi-kenning for either ἰυγξ (thus Vox) or the wagtail (“quasi” because not a bird per se, but the “donna-uccello” whose poking around in one’s granary Hesiod cautions is not so innocent); I note that the ²*OED*’s definition 3b. of *wagtail* (obsolete, “[c]ommon in the 17th c[entury]”) is “A contemptuous term for a profligate or inconstant woman; hence, a harlot, courtesan.”

³ Mayrhofer 1988: 222 writes, “Für *-spij-* gibt es keinen Anschluß außerhalb dieses Belegs [...]; doch lehnt Old[enberg 1912:] 295f. eine Verbindung mit *sphij-* ‘Hinterbacke’ vielleicht zu apodiktisch ab, da wir die Motivation singularer Slang-Ausdrücke nicht kennen” (Oldenberg’s claim, which most scholars today believe is too hard-edged, is simply this: “Aenderung, die *upaspíjam* an *sphij* anschließt, scheint ausgeschlossen. Wir kennen jenes Wort nicht; es mag etwa ‘Vorwitz’ bedeuten” [295]).

⁴ For the latest—and decidedly skeptical—word on the idea that ***p + H_[29]* yields PIE **p^h*, see Elbourne 2000.

The precise sense of *upaspījam* is a notorious problem, though scholars who have studied the context in which it appears agree in general terms that it has to mean something like ‘trick question’ or, to use Geldner’s standard translation into German, ‘verfängliche Frage’ (Geldner 1951: III.283). The hapax appears near the end of a 19-stanza hymn, *RV* 10.88 (to Sūrya and Agni Vaiśvānara), immediately after a series of very short cryptic questions about the number of fires, suns, dawns, and waters—a certain, if much abbreviated, example of the riddling catechistic genre known as *brahmodya* (*brahmódyā-*), whose poetic and social mysteries Vedicists are particularly fond of explicating.⁵ This mini-*brahmodya* runs for the hymn’s final three stanzas (17-19), as follows (translations: Geldner 1951: III.282f. and Renou 1965: 24):

17	<i>yátrā vádete ávaraḥ páraś ca</i>	<i>yajñanyòḥ kataró nau ví veda </i>
	<i>á śekur ít sadhamádaṃ sákhāyo</i>	<i>nákṣanta yajñāṃ ká idāṃ ví vocat </i>
18	<i>káty agnáyaḥ káti sūryāsaḥ</i>	<i>káty uśásaḥ káty u svid ápaḥ </i>
	<i>nópaspijam vaḥ pitaro vadāmi</i>	<i>pṛchámi vaḥ kavayo vidmáne kám </i>
19	<i>yāvanmātrám uśaso ná prátiḱaṃ</i>	<i>suparṇyò vásate mātariśvaḥ </i>
	<i>távad dadhāty úpa yajñám āyán</i>	<i>brāhmaṇó hótur ávaro niśīdan </i>

- 17 Über den beide einen Wortstreit führen, hüben und drüben (sitzend): Welcher von uns beiden Opferleitern weiß es genau? Die Genossen haben die gemeinsame Trankfeier zustande gebracht, sie kamen zum Opfer. Wer wird Folgendes beantworten?
- 18 “Wie viele Feuer gibt es, wie viele Sonnen, wie viele Morgenröten, wie viele sind denn die Gewässer? Ich stelle euch keine verfängliche Frage, ihr Väter; ich frage euch, ihr Seher, nur um es zu erfahren.”
- 19 Noch ehe die beflügelten (Flammen) sich mit dem Abglanz der Morgenröten umkleiden, o Mātariśvan, stellt bei dem Opfer erscheinend der Brahmane auf die Probe, dem Hotṛ gegenüber Platz nehmend.

- 17 Là où deux (êtres) discutent, (l’un étant) de ce côté-ci, (l’autre) de l’autre bord, (disant:) lequel de nous deux qui conduisons le sacrifice connaît exactement (la clé)? / Les amis ont déployé-leurs-forces pour la symposion (des dieux), ils ont atteint l’(objet ultime du) sacrifice. Qui (d’entre eux) peut expliquer ce (qu’on va dire)?
- 18 “Combien (y a-t-il) de feux, combien de soleils, combien d’aurores et combien, à peu près, d’eaux?” / Je ne parle pas pour vous taquiner, ô pères, je vous questionne, ô poètes, afin de savoir.
- 19 Dans la même mesure où les (flammas) ailées revêtent (l’autel), comme (elles revêtent) la face de l’aurore, ô (Agni) Mātariśvan, / dans la même (mesure) le brāhmaṇe met (en jeu le thème poétique) tout en approchant du sacrifice (et) prenant place au-dessous de l’oblateur.

⁵ The most famous brahmodyic hymn is *RV* 1.164, which has 52 stanzas. For a generally clear and persuasive account of *brahmodya* in general, see G. Thompson 1997 (25 specifically on *RV* 10.88) and the references therein; the classic article is Renou 1949, and other important papers since then include Elizarenkova & Toporov 1987 and Witzel 1987.

The poem certainly “steht über dem Durchschnitt” (Geldner 1951: III.280), but the translations are almost as difficult as the Sanskrit. In brief, what is happening is that two rivals are engaged in a dispute over the cosmogonic mysteries of Agni Vaiśvānara, with one confronting the other with this set of simple-sounding but in fact devilishly difficult queries⁶ before stating that he does not actually mean to be malicious: *nópaspijam vaḥ pitaro vadāmi / pṛchāmi vaḥ kavayo vidmāne kām* (18cd) ‘I don’t tell you this *upaspījam*, o fathers; I ask you, o seers, so as to know.’⁷

In his recent general article on *brahmodya*, George Thompson discusses this “kleine Disputierszene” (Geldner 1951: III.282), noting that already Louis Renou pointed out (in Renou 1949: 36) that the “concluding protestation” is strikingly reminiscent of a turn of phrase in the *Vājasaneyi Samhitā* (23.49 *pṛchāmi tvā citāye ...* ‘I ask you in order to find out ...’)—part of the classic Vedic brahmodyic sequence *par excellence*, *VS* 23.45-62—and compared it (see Renou 1965: 93) to the “phenomenon of ‘over-questioning’ (*atipraśna*) in the *upaniṣads*” (G. Thompson 1997: 25).⁸ He continues as follows:

The key word here is *upaspīj*, a hapax legomenon without clear etymology. But the context suggests strongly that the term must mean something like “hostile, aggressive, treacherously deceptive” (cf. Sāyaṇa’s gloss, *spardhāyuktam vacanam* [‘rivalry-yoked word’]). By denying so adamantly that his questions are aggressive, the poet inadvertently demonstrates, I think, that such interrogation sequences are *typically* perceived to be exactly that: aggressive, hostile. The poet here claims that he genuinely seeks to know, implying quite clearly both that he does not know and that, *typically*, he is supposed to know. He wants, in spite of appearances and expectations, that his question be interpreted as a direct question, a sincere solicitation of information which he does not himself possess. We may choose to take him at his word, or not, but in either case it should be clear why he feels the need to deny an aggressive intent: for a *brahmodya* invites aggression.

Can an understanding of the etymology of *upaspījam* help with its semantics? The most recent and detailed discussion of the word’s possible morphological composition and meaning is Scarlata 1999: 664f., who leaves the matter open, though he considers it possible

⁶ We learn in *RV* 8.58.2 that there is in fact but one fire, one sun, and one dawn (nothing is said about the waters, though see Oldenberg 1907: 232, with n. 3). For the relationship between *RV* 10.88 and the first two stanzas of this fragmentary three-stanza hymn, see Oldenberg 1888: 516f., with n. 1, and 1907: 232, as well as Renou 1949: 36, with n. 1, and Geldner 1951: II.378f.

⁷ I am working on the assumption that the questions and statement in stanza 18 are addressed by one of the two sacrificers to the other, presumably (see 19) by the Brahmin to the “Reciter” (*hótar-*); unlike Geldner, I would therefore begin the direct speech already with 17b. Alternatively, 18 would be uttered by a third party—perhaps the poet himself—and directed at both sacrificers. (If I am reading rightly, Thompson 1997: 25 confuses the two possibilities; it is not clear to me why Renou puts quotation marks around only 18ab.) In both cases, the plurals *vas*, *pitaras*, and *kavayas* (18cd) are unexpected: the questions may be conventionally put to a general community of “the knowing.”

⁸ Compare Geldner 1951: III.282: “Diese kleine Disputierszene gehört noch in den Zusammenhang des Liedes und paßt zu dessen mehr spekulativem Charakter. Bei Gelegenheit des Opfers gaben sich, wie wir hier erfahren, schon zu *RV*.zeit die Hauptpriester dergleichen Rätsel, die sog. *brahmodyāni*, auf; vgl. *VS*. 23, 45-62.” Elizarenkova & Toporov 1987: 45-48 translate *VS* 23.45-62 in the course of their useful discussion of *brahmodya*; on ‘overasking’ in the *Upaniṣads*, see most notably Witzel 1987 (with a crediting nod to A. Wezler on p. 364 n. 5).

(“möglicherweise”) that the word is to be segmented as *upa-spíj-*, that is, with the prepositional adverb *úpa* ‘toward (+ acc.); near to, at (+ loc.)’ (cf., e.g., Gk. ὑπό ‘under’); as for ^o*spíj-*, if this is somehow the same word as *sphij-* ‘buttock,’ “[d]as Konzept ist auch dann unklar (etwa ‘am Arsch?’)” (664). He has other ideas as well, though, notably that the word might actually be *upas-píj-*:

Analysiert man *upas-píj-*, so müsste das V[order]G[líed] zum Subst. *upás-* ‘Schoss’, zu einer Ableitung von *VAP-(1,2)* ‘streuen; scheren’ oder allenfalls zu einem mit dem Adv. *úpa* gleichbedeutenden **upás* ← **upár* (cf. das Verhältnis von *áva* zu *avár* und sekundärem *avás* und auch *upári*) gezogen werden.

Die ersten zwei Annahmen geben nichts her. Unter Annahme eines adverbialen VG *upas*^o könnte das daraus resultierende H[inter]G[líed] ^o*píj-* vielleicht auf eine Wurzelvariante zu $\sqrt{PAYi-2}$ ‘schmähen, tadeln, beschimpfen’ zurückgeführt werden: $\sqrt{pej-H} \sim \sqrt{pej-k-}$ und vielleicht eben $\sqrt{pej-g-}$. Die letzte Variante sieht Pokorny [...] in lat. *piget* ‘es verdriessst’, *piger* ‘verdrossen’.

upaspíjam wäre dann Akk.Sg. zu einem N[omen]act[ionis] *upaspíj-* f., etwa ‘Verdross’ oder — trotz [Mayrhofer 1988: 222]— Inf. oder Absolutiv ‘zu verdriessen, zu befeinden; zum Verdriessen’: ‘Nicht spreche ich, euch zu verdriessen, {sondern} ich frage, um es zu wissen’. Zweifel bleiben bestehen. (664f.)

In short, Scarlata is most taken with the idea that *upaspíjam* is a compound of an (unattested!) by-form **upás*, with more or less the same meaning as *úpa*, and some (likewise unattested!) combining element ^o*píj-*, which he would see as an extended form of the Proto-Indo-European root found in Lat. *piget* ‘vexes’; in this case, the hapax would be the accusative of a noun that means ‘annoyance’ or, perhaps (compare notably Wolff 1907: 76), an infinitive ‘to annoy.’

Maintaining that *upaspíjam* is a compound of two otherwise unattested forms has obvious and significant drawbacks. I suggest a different interpretation: suppose that the second element is indeed a variant of *sphij-* ‘buttock’ and that the first element is the attested word *upás-* that Scarlata dismisses on the unexamined grounds that it “g[ibt] nichts her,” namely the *s*-stem noun for ‘lap; womb,’ which is securely attested already in the *Rigveda* (loc. sg. *upás-i* in 5.43.7c and 10.27.13c). From a morphophonological point of view, any of the following three analyses of the word (which I see as a root or *a*-stem noun in the accusative rather than a so-called “accusative infinitive” in *-am*) would probably be possible: **upas-spíj-* (with regular simplification of **-ss-*), *upa-spíj-* (with a bare form of the *s*-stem as the first element),⁹ or even *upas-píj-* (with ^o*píj-* ≡ *sp(h)ij-*, minus an *s*-mobile).¹⁰ Rather more interesting, of course, is what a compound that literally means “lap-buttock” does in fact signify. Surely this is a very special sort of dvandva (see Wackernagel 1905: 149-73), one in which the bipartite nature of a single entity becomes apparent only once one has recognized both its halves: simply put, *upaspíjam* is an iconic riddle-word, referring to a trick or double-edged query while itself actually being in form a two-sided puzzle. An aggressive riddle of this kind can be viewed and answered from

⁹ There are parallels in Indo-European for compounding forms of *s*-stems that do not have the *-s-* (see my brief remark in Katz 2001: 228f.), though there is no such evidence in Sanskrit specifically for *upás-* (Stüber 2002: 27-30 and *passim* ignores the matter entirely; further investigation is clearly called for).

¹⁰ There can be no firm rejection of any argument based on *s*-mobile, especially not when the very comparison *sphij-* ~ φικίς requires it (see Katz 2004: 283); for a related Greek form in σφ-, see below in the text.

two different angles, from both sides—a sort of Janus-question, only here what is at issue is not the head, but the tail.¹¹

Can anything else be said about *upaspījam* on the basis of the derivation I propose? It is generally agreed (see, e.g., G. Thompson 1997: 23-25) that the enigmatic Indic genre of *brahmodya* has parallels in cognate traditions that, taken together, point to agonistic riddling as part of Proto-Indo-European culture.¹² If the genre is thus inherited, we may permit ourselves to wonder whether there is any possibility of seeing in the two-sided compound *upaspījam*, and particularly in the second half of the word, ^o*sp(h)ij-*, a remnant of the same form that underlies the similar-sounding name of the two-sided *Sphinx* (Σφίγξ), the most infamous riddler in the ancient society most closely related to that of the Indo-Iranians. According to the standard version of the most famous of all Greek stories, that of Oedipus, the Sphinx, who is usually represented iconographically as having the head of a woman and the body of a crouching lion(ess), terrorized the inhabitants of Thebes with the following numerological engima¹³:

¹¹ Salvatore Scarlata points out to me that if the word is indeed a dvandva, we would expect the accentuation **upaspījam*, with the stressed formant *-á-* (see Wackernagel 1905: 160-64 and *passim*); this is not a critical blow to my argument, however, since the word, which seems to have been tampered with anyway (witness ^o*spij-* for expected ^o*sphij-*) and was not understood even within the Sanskrit tradition, would almost certainly have to have been interpreted as something other than a dvandva. Stephanie Jamison and Calvert Watkins have tried to convince me that the argument in this paper will work just as well if the first element is in fact simply *úpa*, which Jamison describes as the “preverb of intimacy”; although I am resistant to this, I shall certainly consider it a friendly amendment if anyone picks up my idea and modifies it along such a line (see also fn. 29 below).

¹² There is a vast body of secondary literature on competitive riddling both in Indo-European societies and elsewhere: some orienting encyclopedia entries are Welsh 1993 and Gärtner + Böck 2001. The most recent collection of essays on riddles, Hasan-Rokem & Shulman, eds. 1996, has a certain emphasis on India (both Indo-European and Dravidian); note the review article of G. Thompson 1999. For book-length accounts of the riddle in India (e.g., Skt. *prahelikā-* and *pravahikā-/pravahlikā-*), see Bhagwat 1965 and especially Sternbach 1975, as well as much work by Wendy Doniger (O’Flaherty), e.g., Doniger 1996; for Greece (ἀίνιγμα and γρίφος), see Schultz 1909, 1912, and 1914 (the last shows tremendous breadth and goes well beyond the Classical world) and Ohlert 1912 (and also now Ford 2002: 72-76 and especially Struck 2004: 21-76 and *passim* for a literary and cultural approach to riddling texts and allegory); for extrapolations about Proto-Indo-European, see most fully Bader 1989: 136-48 and *passim* and Jackson 1999: 49-147 and *passim*. Note that I am in this paper intentionally avoiding defining what exactly a “riddle” is; in other contexts this might not be wise, but I see no harm here in eliding the term with “verbal puzzle,” “wisdom question,” and a host of other phrases used, e.g., in the papers in Hasan-Rokem & Shulman, eds. 1996.

¹³ Even without Freud, the literature on Oedipus is immense. Since the monumental work of Robert 1915, the scholar who has done the most to increase our understanding of the morphology of the Greek tale and to trace its many folk-motifs throughout time and space—for the story of Oedipus has analogues the world over, including in India (see in the first place Aarne—Thompson type 931 [Aarne 1961: 328])—is Lowell Edmunds: see, among much else, Edmunds 1981a and 1985 and Edmunds & Dundes, eds. 1995 (which includes a revision of Edmunds 1981b on pp. 147-73 and A. K. Ramanujan’s “Indian Oedipus” on pp. 234-61) and most recently Edmunds 1996, all with detailed references; compare also Johnson & Price-Williams 1996. Although the Sphinx is certainly *the* Greek riddler, some scholars follow Edmunds (see especially Edmunds 1981b and Edmunds in Edmunds & Dundes, eds. 1995: 147-73, esp. 159-61, with 170f.) in believing that her riddle (which has many parallels across cultures: Taylor types 46-47 [Taylor 1951: 19-24]) is a secondary accretion in the story of Oedipus: the main link would presumably be feet, the subject of the Riddle of the Sphinx (see immediately below in the text) and a major motif in the life of Oedipus (Οἰδίπους), who bears the speaking name “Swollen Foot” (with folk-etymological overtones of wisdom because of Gk. οἶδα ‘know’; note also the historically incorrect, but salient, segmentation -δίπους). There are, however, plenty of Hellenists who are skeptical of Edmunds’s conclusion (see notably Bremmer 1987: 46f., with 55 n. 1 and esp. 57 n. 26, and now also Segal 2001: 33), and I expect that most Indo-Europeanists would be as well (Bader 1997: 51-53 and *passim* makes an especially strong statement, though without reference to Edmunds). Whether the Riddle of the Sphinx and Oedipus are an old pairing or a newer one, it seems worth pointing out that

ἔστι δίπουν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ τετράπουν, οἷα μία φωνή,
καὶ τρίπουν, ἀλλάσσει δὲ φύην μόνον, ὅσσ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν
ἔρπετὰ γίνονται καὶ ἀν' αἰθέρα καὶ κατὰ πόντον.
ἀλλ' ὅπταν πλείστοισιν ἐρειδόμενον ποσὶ βαίνῃ,
5 ἔνθα τάχος γυίοισιν ἀφαιρότατον πέλει αὐτοῦ.

There is something on earth with one voice that is two-footed and four-footed and three-footed. Alone among however many creatures there are on land and sky and sea, it changes its nature. But when it proceeds, supported by the most feet, then the swiftness of its limbs is weakest.¹⁴

another link between them is (deviant) sex: as we shall see, the riddle has a number of erotic interpretations, one of which is almost certainly alluded to already in Hesiod's τρίποδι βροτῶ ἴσοι (*Op.* 533) 'like a three-legged(/footed) man' (see fn. 42 below); the word πούς 'foot' often has a sexual connotation ("phallus" or "glans") in Greek literature (see, e.g., Henderson 1991: 126, 129f., 138, and 248: "The foot as a displacement for the phallus is very common as a structural symbol in myths and folktales, most notoriously in the story of Oedipous (swollen/knowledgeable foot/phallus)" [248]) and very clearly does so in the riddling Hesiodic passage just cited, which mentions two additional famous feet in a thinly veiled description of autoerotism, the one actually 'thick' or 'swollen' (496f. μὴ ... / ... λεπτή δὲ παχύν πόδα χειρὶ πιέζης 'lest ... you squeeze a swollen foot with emaciated hand' [translation: West 1988: 52]), the other too enigmatic to be translated in a footnote but part of what is surely the single most pored-over bit of Indo-European erotica (524 ὄτ' ἀνόστεος ὄν πόδα τένδει; see in the first place Watkins 1978 [= 1994: (II.)588-92] and 1995: 531, with n. 9, and also—to mention just a few of the larger-scale works—Bader 1989: 97-188 and 1997 [esp. 44-54] and Jackson 1996 and 1999: 97-126, with 141-47, and *passim*); and finally, Oedipus, having solved the riddle posed by a creature who has a thing for young boys (note the witty characterization of the Sphinx' taste in Vermeule 1979: 171 and 173), goes on of course to marry his mother, thus engendering the eponymous Complex. Edmunds 1981a: 233-38 weaves an interesting story about Oedipus' name, feet, incest, and kingship, commenting that the "first element of the name Oedipus can express [...] the swelling of the phallus. A Linear B tablet from Pylos has the proper name *o-du-pa₃-ro* (*Οἰδύφαλλος)" (236 n. 55); note, though, that the hapax name (PY An 261.5) is usually transcribed *o-du-^{*}56-ro* since the value of sign ^{*}56 has not yet been firmly established (see the very interesting discussion of Melena 1987). Doniger 1996: 211 and 216 mentions Oedipus and the Riddle of the Sphinx in the course of describing a couple of Sanskrit tales that combine enigmatic speech, mutilated or unusual feet, and non-standard sex; see also her striking observations about "The Mortal Foot" in Doniger 1999: 175-85.

¹⁴ This is Asclepiades of Tragilus' canonical (4th-century B.C.) hexametric version of the riddle (*FGrH* 12 F 7a Jacoby), preserved in Ath. 10.456b; cf. also, e.g., Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.5.8 and *AP* 14.64. There are as many slightly different versions as there are editions; mine is adapted from the one in Jacoby (who has no comma before ὅσσ' [2] and αὐτοῦ instead of αὐτοῦ [5]), but I have nothing invested in the details. Mastronarde 1988: 6f. has the fullest apparatus, himself favoring ἀνά τ' over καὶ ἀν' (3), πλεόνεσσιν over πλείστοισιν (4), and μένος γυίοισιν ἀφαιρότερον over τάχος γυίοισιν ἀφαιρότατον (5). The most recent edition is that of M. L. West, who suggests against the current fashion that "[t]here is a good chance that [Athenaeus] took it from the *Oedipodea*" (West 2003: 41 n. 1; note the change of heart since West 1978: 293), numbers it *fr.* 2* (see pp. 40f.; the asterisk indicates uncertain attribution), and prints the text as I have given it, only with κινεῖται instead of γίνονται (3) and μένος instead of τάχος (5). See also the important discussion of Lloyd-Jones 1978: 50 and esp. 60f. (= 1990: 323 and esp. 332-34), whose preference for τρισσοῖσιν in line 4 rather than πλείστοισιν rather changes the sense, though not in a way that affects anything under consideration here. The riddle is not found as such in the *Oedipus Rex* (Segal 2001: 32-37 and *passim* offers a recent interpretation of the role it nevertheless plays in Sophocles), though a different but unfortunately fragmentary version, likewise in hexameters and securely identified as part of Euripides' lost tragedy *Oedipus*, was discovered at Oxyrhynchus in the early 1960's (*POxy.* 2459 *fr.* 2.7-10 [4th century A.D.] = Eur. 83.ii.22-25 Austin); see Turner 1962 (esp. 84 and 86), as well as Lloyd-Jones 1963: 446f. and Vaio 1964. Other 5th-century allusions to the riddle, noted by West 1978: 293, come from comedy (Epicharm. 147

The Sphinx, it is said, put to death all men who could not answer (i.e., supply the second side of) her riddle—and that was all men before Oedipus came along and gave a simple response that made the (unnatural) two-part creature kill herself instead of him, namely ἄνθρωπος ‘man,’ a (natural) mono-morphic creature that is nevertheless on four feet as a baby, two as an adult, and three (with a walking stick) when aged.¹⁵ (As we shall see, this riddle, like so many, actually has more than one possible answer.)

Consider now the word Σφίγξ (gen. Σφιγγός). In the Greek popular imagination, this *Mischfigur* is clearly the “Strangler” and belongs with σφίγγω ‘bind, hold fast’ (see, e.g., Chantraine 1999: 1077),¹⁶ but her original name, M. L. West has argued forcefully, is Σφιξ,

Kassel—Austin), tragedy (Aesch. *Ag.* 80-82 and Eur. *Tro.* 275-77), and art (the famous Attic red-figure cup by the so-called Oedipus Painter and now in the Vatican [Musei Vaticani 16541: *ARV*² 451.1] has Κ]ΑΙ()ΤΡΙ[Π]ΟΥΝ painted between the Sphinx and Oedipus; it is often thought [see, e.g., Simon 1981: 28-31, esp. 30, with references] to portray a scene from Aeschylus’ lost satyr-play *Sphinx* of 467); see also Ar. 545 Kassel—Austin, one of a number of riddles whose context in Greek society Merkelbach & West 1965: 310 and *passim* explore illuminatingly. There is now incontrovertible evidence from the 6th century for the riddle and its association with the Sphinx: Moret 1984: 40 and 169 (+ Planche 23) gives a preliminary account of the fragments of an Attic black-figure hydria from ca. 520/510, now in Basel (coll. Cahn 855), which portrays the Sphinx on her column above a group of Thebans and a great deal of verbiage all around them, including (according to Moret 1984: 40) “τετράπους οἶ” and “καὶ τρι[?]”; this object, which was finally properly published by Kreuzer 1992: 86-88 (I owe the reference to Michael Padgett), deserves to be better known, and we may hope that the future will yield a proper understanding of all the many letters (I have quoted Moret directly because I cannot quite make out his readings from the photographs; neither, it seems, can Kreuzer, who writes, “Auf die Wiedergabe der Beischriften wird hier verzichtet [...]; sie sind bisher nicht gedeutet worden” [88]). For an allusion already in Hesiod’s *Works & Days*, see fn. 42 below, and note also the string of riddles, including one about tripods (τρίποδες) and four-legged tables (τράπεζαι), in the *Keykos gamos* (266 Merkelbach—West; see especially Merkelbach & West 1965: 307-11 and *passim*). Mastronarde 1994: 20 n. 3 makes the plausible suggestion that “It is not impossible that oral tradition carried several versions independent of literary context, verses that would be taught to children and recited in the symposium.” Also not impossible is that there was even at a very early date more than one verbal puzzle associated with the Sphinx, though this view is based more on speculation than hard evidence (see, e.g., Schultz 1912: 64-69, with special reference to G. Hüsing): from the 4th century B.C. we have the riddles in Eubulus’ *Sphingokarion* (one of which is mentioned in fn. 29 below) and two riddles (4 and 18 Nauck/Snell) of Theodectes, who famously enjoyed the genre (as Ath. 10.451e tells us; compare Xanthakis-Karamanos 1980: 97-102, esp. 97-100, and also Gauly *et al.* 1991: 292 n. 11); Theodect. 4, which presents night and day as sisters who cyclically give birth to each other (εἰσὶ κασίγνηται δισσαί, ὧν ἡ μία τίκτει / τὴν ἑτέραν, αὐτὴ δὲ τεκοῦσ’ ὑπὸ τῆσδε τεκνοῦται), comes from his tragedy *Oedipus* and has clear analogues in Sanskrit (Taylor type 1001 [Taylor 1951: 382-86]; see further, e.g., Katz 2000: 80f., with references).

¹⁵ For homologies between multiplex creatures and their multiplex riddles, see the perhaps over-ambitious words of Schultz 1909: 28f. and 1912: 60-73, who refers particularly to Hüsing’s work on the mythic background of the Riddle of the Sphinx.

¹⁶ It is easy to see why the Theban Sphinx would be considered a demon of death or Κήρ; it is important to note, though, that other, decorative, sphinxes are associated with death as well, being a common feature on tombs. The relationship between the Theban riddler and sphinxes in general has yet to be worked out (see fn. 20 below): Vermeule 1979: 171-75 (see also 69) does not carefully distinguish between the two, whereas Tsifakis 2003: 80 and *passim* is frankly skeptical that they can in fact be related. Hoffmann 1994 argues, in my opinion entirely unconvincingly, that the “connection between tomb monuments and the myth of the Sphinx [...] lies [...] obviously in the Sphinx’s riddle” (73): he makes much of the words “*kai tria*” [*sic*] on the Vatican cup (see fn. 14 above), suggesting that they allude to the custom of burying the dead on the third day, noting that the third foot is the “infirmity of old age” and so “the Sphinx’s terse *kai tria* is obviously a *memento mori*,” and more generally and cryptically stating, with reference to H. Usener, “The number three stands for transition, the overcoming of the

without the nasal, a form that has a further variant, without the initial sigma, in Φίξ*, her moniker in her very first literary appearance, verse 326 of Hesiod's *Theogony*, to which I shall return.¹⁷ Now, representations of “sphinxes” are found throughout Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Syro-Palestine, dating as far back as the middle of the third millennium B.C.,¹⁸ with none so famous as the Egyptian ones, and quite a number of scholars since B. G. Gunn have suggested that the very name Σφίγξ in Greek is adapted from the Egyptian epithet *šsp-’nh* ‘living image,’ used primarily of gods and kings (i.e., beings with which sphinxes are associated).¹⁹ But

duality represented by the number two [...]. This may explain not only the deeper meaning of the Sphinx's riddle but also its connection with Greek initiation and mortuary practice” (75).

¹⁷ Compare *inter alios* already Robert 1915: I.48, with II.17-21. West 1966: 256 neatly summarizes most of the evidence for Σφίξ (gen. Σφικός) and Φίξ (gen. Φικός), which are found side by side in Hdn.Gr. 1.396.25f. (Lentz). The former, which West writes is “probably” original, is recorded by the 9th-century patriarch of Alexandria Sophronius (*Gramm. Gr.* IV/2, 400.3f. Hilgard), as well as being found nearly a millennium and a-half earlier in a ca. 450 B.C. (?) *carmen epigraphicum* from Thessaly (120 Hansen) and, in the form ΣΦΙΧΣ, on a famous Attic black-figure cup from ca. 540 B.C. (Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlung und Glyptothek 2243: *ABV* 163f.2) and, it seems, on at least one other object besides (but note that Threatte 1980: 487 suggests that ΣΦΙΧΣ merely exemplifies the orthographic convention whereby a nasal is not represented directly before a stop). As for Φίξ, we find this not just in Hesiod (acc. Φικ’ (α) in *Th.* 326), but also in Plato (*Cra.* 414d ὥσπερ καὶ τὴν Σφίγγα ἀντὶ “φικός” [v.l. φηγός, φηγός, etc.] “σφίγγα” καλοῦσιν); note, too, adjectival Φίκιον τέρας ‘Phician monster’ in (ps.-)Lycophr. *Alex.* 1465, the Hesychian glosses Βίκας· σφίγγας (β606 Latte) and Φίγα· φῖκα· σφίγγα (φ436 Schmidt), and (most important of all) Φίκ(ε)ιον, the name of the Sphinx’ mountain home (first in [Hes.] *Sc.* 33; see for details, e.g., West 1966: 88, with n. 2, and Moret 1984: 69, with n. 1), which I shall have occasion to consider again at the end of this paper. According to the scholia to *Th.* 326 (Di Gregorio), Φίκα ὀλοήν· τὴν Σφίγγα λέγει. ... ἀπ’ αὐτῆς ἐκλήθη καὶ τὸ Φίκιον, ἔνθα διέτριβε [v.l. κατώκει]. Φίκα δὲ αὐτὴν οἱ Βοιωτοὶ ἔλεγον; but as West 1966: 88 notes, Φίξ cannot have been an exclusively Boeotian form in view of Lat. *Pix** (the *OLD* notes of the hapax *Picis*, a genitive in Plaut. *Aul.* 701, that it is “app. confused with a griffin and taken as masc.”; cf. also the gloss of the adjective *picatus** in Fest. p. 206M “*picati*” *appellantur quidam, quorum pedes formati sunt in speciem sphingum, quod eas Dori φῖκας uocant*). I have no opinion on the origin or nature of the apparent *s*-mobile in the name, on which see Strunk 1961 (esp. 162-67) and West 1966: 98f. and 256; as for the *Gutturalwechsel* seen in, e.g., Φίγα· φῖκα (see Furnée 1972: 280 and *passim*), it is tempting but risky to try to make something of this (see fn. 35 below).

¹⁸ Stadelmann 2001: 307 writes that the “sphinx is a purely Egyptian creation, first attested in the early fourth dynasty, about 2575 BCE” and gives a quick assessment of the line of transmission of the image of the sphinx from Egypt to Syro-Palestine and then to Greece. There is considerable variation in the details of hybridity, but the head is almost always human (often female, though not usually so in Egypt; see immediately below in the text) and the body always bestial (frequently leonine). The best-illustrated book of sphinxes from all places and times is Demisch 1977 (Rösch-von der Heyde 1999 provides a seemingly exhaustive list of modern representations); for an excellent recent account of Greek *Mischwesen* in general and their Near Eastern background, see Padgett, ed. 2003, the catalogue of a sumptuous exhibition at Princeton on the human animal in early Greek art (for sphinxes, see especially 127f. and 261-83; see also Tsiafakis 2003: 78-83, with 99-101).

¹⁹ Gunn’s idea has a curious history, having been first noted by Alan H. Gardiner, as follows: “An ingenious suggestion of Mr. Battiscombe Gunn is worth placing on record, though it can, I think, be proved almost with certainty to be wrong; he conjectures that the word Σφίγξ [*sic*] is derived from the epithet *šsp [sic] ’nh*” (Gardiner 1916: 161). Stadelmann 2001: 307 provides a recent cautiously positive assessment: “In Egypt sphinxes were generally associated with the sun god and with the king as a ‘living image’ (*šsp-’nh*); this word may well have been the origin of the Greek word *sphinx*, although in Greek this word had the meaning ‘strangler,’ perhaps in association with the Greek interpretation of the sphinx as a malign creature” (compare McGready 1968: 250); for a strong statement of the opposite view, however, see Zivie-Coche 2002: 12. As far as I can tell, Martin Bernal does not anywhere endorse this (or any other) etymology of Σφίγξ, though he does now build on the highly suspect “comparisons” that Velikovskiy 1960 has drawn between Oedipus and Akhenaten (accepted, curiously, by Maxwell-Stuart 1975: 42f.), writing that the “Greek legends have other Egyptian associations, such as the name Thebes and

Egyptian sphinxes are really very different from the (in the first place singular) Theban Sphinx both anatomically and symbolically, largely being beneficent male stand-ins for pharaohs rather than a spiteful mythological beast in her own right.²⁰ In addition, although scholars tend to push this under the rug, the fact remains that *šsp-’nh* refers to statues of all sorts and is by no means tied exclusively to sphinxes.²¹ Furthermore, the picture the Greeks had of their hybrid creature was not a direct adaptation of something Egyptian, a fact that Childs 2003: 64 emphasizes:

the Theban sphinx, whose riddle has striking solar associations that fit the role of the great Egyptian sphinx” (Bernal 2001: 336, with 446 n. 54, where he promises a “longer treatment of this topic in *Moses and Moses* (forthcoming)”). The Greeks’ decision to take the Boeotian toponym Θῆβαι (Myc. *te-qa-*) and apply it to the Egyptian town Waset (modern Luxor) has admittedly not received a satisfactory explanation, but (as Jasanoff & Nussbaum 1996: 192 rightly note and as even Bernal 1991: 504-7 would seem to be forced to admit) the existence of *te-qa-* in Mycenaean categorically rules out Bernal’s proposed Egyptian etymon/-a *dbt* ‘shrine; coffin’ and/or *db3t* ‘chest, box’ of both place names (see Bernal 1987: 51, 1991: 474f., with 624 n. 136, and now 2001: 154); see for further objections Jasanoff & Nussbaum 1996: 190f., with 204 n. 11, to which I add that I know of no evidence for Bernal’s *dbt* (I take it that he does not mean *dbt* ‘female hippopotamus’), though there is a rare word *db* ‘box,’ for which Erman & Grapow 1931: 434 make a cross-reference to *db3t* (which, in turn, is the word Egyptologists usually translate as ‘shrine; coffin’ and which is generally believed to be the indirect [see, e.g., É. Masson 1967: 76] or perhaps even direct [thus Fournet 1989: 73 and 80] source of Gk. θῆβις/θίβις ‘basket plaited from papyrus’ and a few similar-looking and likewise plainly foreign forms). As for the putatively “striking solar associations” of the two sphinxes, the Greek riddle in its standard form does not obviously have to do with sun (I imagine that Bernal is thinking of the tradition in which the number of legs depends on the time of day [Taylor type 47], on which see especially Taylor 1951: 19-24; compare also the riddle of Theodectes quoted at the end of fn. 14 above) and any claim that the Great Sphinx at Giza itself was built in accordance with solar phenomena is (*pace*, e.g., Demisch 1977: 16-21, 230-35, and *passim*) probably exaggerated (compare Stadelmann 2001: 310 and Zivie-Coche 2002: 39f.).

²⁰ Broad accounts can be found in the back-to-back entries of G. Roeder (“*Sphinx*, der ägyptische”) and J. Ilberg (“*Sphinx*, die griechische”) in Roscher 1909-1915: 1298-1408 and also in Demisch 1977: 16-39, 76-100, and *passim*; see also Lesky + Herbig 1929 and now Seidlmayer + Johannsen + Bähler 2001. For Egyptian sphinxes in general, see, e.g., Coche-Zivie 1984 (1144f., with 1147, on their status as royal symbols); Stadelmann 2001 and Zivie-Coche 2002 concentrate on the Great Sphinx. As for Greece and the Classical world, see most notably the *LIMC* entries of Krauskopf 1994 (esp. 1/3-9 + plates on pp. 2/6-14) and Kourou *et al.* 1997 (esp. 1/1149-65 + plates on pp. 2/794-808). It is true that I am here glossing over the distinction between the Theban Sphinx and generic representations of sphinxes in Greek sculpture and vase painting (compare fn. 16 above; note the separate entries for “Sphinx” and “sphinxes” in the Index to Padgett, ed. 2003, as well as the fact that sphinxes get their due in *LIMC* only in the Supplement, with the main discussion subsumed under “Oidipous”): on the one hand, while most Egyptian sphinxes fit the same basic mold (if size is eliminated as a factor), there is a world of difference between Oedipus’ interlocutor and the decorative creatures depicted on buildings, monuments, and objects of everyday use (see, e.g., Moret 1984: 3, as well as K. Manchester in Padgett, ed. 2003: 271); furthermore, if the etymology of Σφίγξ that I propose in this paper is correct, it probably follows that the name spread from the Theban creature to other hybrids (semantic widening, as posited by, e.g., West 1966: 257) rather than undergoing specialization (semantic narrowing seems to be many scholars’ default assumption).

²¹ Christiane Zivie-Coche has done the most to dispel the myth that *šsp-’nh* actually means ‘sphinx’: see Coche-Zivie 1984: 1140 and, for a less scholarly summary, Zivie-Coche 2002: 12. She writes as follows: “Quant au mot *šzp* [‘image’] ou à l’expression *šzp-’nh* [‘living image’], on a voulu y voir le nom égyptien du sphinx. Le terme est en fait un des nombreux mots qui servent à désigner la statue ou l’image d’un roi ou d’un dieu. Il est vrai que ce vocable a pour déterminatif dans un certain nombre de cas un sp[hinx] couchant, parfois posé sur un piédestal. Ce dernier signe avec ses variantes peut également être utilisé comme signe-mot pour écrire *šzp*. Enfin à l’Époque Ptolémaïque, la graphie du sphinx couchant tenant un signe *’nh* entre ses pattes est banale pour écrire *šzp-’nh*. Néanmoins l’analyse des exemples où le terme apparaît ainsi que l’examen de leur contexte n’autorise pas à traduire *šzp* ou *šzp-’nh* par ‘sphinx’ mais seulement par ‘statue’, ‘image’. Il ne semble pas qu’il ait existé un terme spécifique correspondant uniquement à notre concept limitatif de ‘sphinx’” (Coche-Zivie 1984: 1140, with bibliographical details in the omitted footnotes). Even though *šsp* and *šsp-’nh* are, then, clearly not connected exclusively to sphinxes, I do get the impression from the standard Hieroglyphic Egyptian dictionary that this is their primary association (see Erman & Grapow 1930: 536).

“Even though the sphinx had its origin in Egypt, it is clear that the Greeks learned of it from the Levant, where it was particularly popular with the Phoenicians [...]. This avenue of transmission is important because it emphasizes the minor role Egypt played in the Greek ‘Orientalizing revolution’” (compare fn. 18 above).²² And finally and most damningly, it is one thing to think that *šsp-’nh* might have been transformed into Σφίγξ but quite another to imagine that it became the nasal-less Σφίξ or Φίξ.²³ It may of course be, though, that *šsp-’nh* had some secondary influence on the development of the usual Greek name Σφίγξ, much as σφίγγω quite evidently did.²⁴ In any case, the story remains to be told of just how the Greek word came to be used for the Egyptian creature (as in so many languages today), but this is not the place to tell it.²⁵

I propose an entirely different etymology of our Greek monster. At a glance, (Σ)Φίξ, gen. (Σ)Φικός looks very much indeed like the Greek body part φίκις ‘buttocks; anus’ that I have suggested is cognate with Skt. *sphij-*. Is this merely a *Scheingleichung* or could they in fact somehow be underlyingly the same word? There is a potentially serious phonological problem: the iota in (Σ)Φικ- ‘Sphinx’ is long (cf., e.g., Hesiod’s Φικ’ (α), with circumflex and anyway in

²² What goes for art also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to language. There appear to be considerably more very early borrowings into Greek from Northwest Semitic (e.g., Hebrew and Phoenician) than from Egyptian: É. Masson 1967 surveys the Greco-Semitic evidence and Fournet 1989 gives the most recent sober account of linguistic contact between Greeks and Egyptians; see also Jasanoff & Nussbaum 1996: 187-89 and *passim*.

²³ Already J. G. Frazer suggested that the story of Oedipus and the Sphinx had an Egyptian origin, and Goedicke 1970: 264f. and *passim* proposes that it is connected specifically to the fragmentary Middle Kingdom “Story of the Herdsman,” in which a man meets a strange female creature, usually taken to be the sexually charged goddess Hathor, who can appear in her vengeful aspect as the half-woman half-lioness Sekhmet (there is, however, no evidence that the creature in this story is leonine); see now Parkinson 1997: 287f., with 295, for an authoritative translation and Parkinson 2002: 300 for a brief discussion of the tale, with references to the secondary literature. While it is, I suppose, possible that the Egyptian and Greek stories are somehow connected (I consider it nearly out of the question that there has been direct borrowing), the follow-up idea linguistic idea of Edwin L. Brown is extremely far-fetched: according to Brown 1974, *P3ht* ‘She who Scratches,’ the epithet of a leonine goddess (the usual determiner is a recumbent lion), is the source of Hesiod’s Φίξ (I note that the word *P3ht*, which Brown mistakenly writes “*P3qt*,” is not actually found in the Egyptian tale).

²⁴ Compare West 1966: 256: “The familiar form Σφίγξ may have arisen from popular etymology which connected the name with σφίγγω, or from the analogy of alternating forms like στρίξ/στρίγξ” (the last is usually said to be onomatopoeic: see, e.g., Chantraine 1999: 1064). I note in passing that Durling 1993: 308 claims that Galen employs a medical term σφίγξ ‘binding tight, contraction’ in 1.219.10 (Kühn). If this were true, the word would of course be a derivative of σφίγγω and, as a homophone of Σφίγξ, would merit its own entry in the LSJ; in fact, however, Durling’s “σφίγξ” is just a typographical error for σφίγξις, an otherwise attested term (see the following footnote).

²⁵ Zivie-Coche 2002: 10-12 gives a recent account. Since in my view the Greek word Σφίγξ ultimately has a Proto-Indo-European source, the issue is how and why a Hellenic term was applied to the Great Sphinx itself (first in a Latin source: Plin. *HN* 36.77) and other, less prominent, examples of Egyptian hybrid creatures (beginning with the plural ἀνδρόσφιγγες* ‘male sphinxes’ in Hdt. 2.175; σφίγγες τε καὶ γρῦπες ‘sphinxes and griffins’ in Scythian architecture are mentioned in Hdt. 4.79)—the opposite, in effect, of the idea that *šsp-’nh* was borrowed from Egyptian into Greek, where it was then adapted to Σφίγξ. (It is notable that once Greeks decide that the Great Sphinx is a σφίγξ, it is easy for them to play further linguistic games with σφίγγω and its derivatives, despite the fact that this makes little sense in the Egyptian cultural context: Jean-Yves Carrez-Maratray, building on a neglected idea of G. Kaibel, has written a delightful paper [Carrez-Maratray 1993] on a ludic, acrostic-containing poem from around the end of the 2nd century A.D. [?] that is actually inscribed on the base of the Great Sphinx and contains the word σφίγξις—literally ‘constriction,’ but here it conveys that the Sphinx, or at least this very piece of verse about the Sphinx, is itself a brain-squeezing puzzle or “casse-tête.”) See Katz 2003 for some further details (my n. 5 there should be lightly revised in view of Carrez-Maratray’s discussion, as should Zivie-Coche 2002: 109f.).

the “princeps” of the second foot of the hexameter),²⁶ whereas that in φικ- and (^o)*sp(h)ij-* is short.²⁷ As we shall see, this does not doom the idea. For the moment, though, let me concentrate on the apparent morphological-*cum*-semantic difficulty. Although it may seem patently absurd initially, there is in fact no *a priori* reason why *Sphinx* should not at some level mean ‘buttocks’: humans, at least, are frequently named after lower body parts,²⁸ and in iconography, the monster’s haunches are typically emphasized. On this interpretation, the name *Sphinx* might actually be connected to the creature’s riddling nature, as Georges-Jean Pinault cleverly points out to me: the greatest riddle of all is sex and the greatest sexual riddle the forbidden part of one’s own body that one cannot see, namely the buttocks or anus. There is cross-cultural evidence for the association between trickster figures and subcaudal body parts, including the anus, and taking the Sphinx to be an inherently sexual enigma is culturally plausible even just from the point of view of Greece, as I discuss below.²⁹ Alternatively, the existence of Skt. *upaspījam*, seemingly a compound “lap-buttock,” in a context in which the Greek creature would feel more or less at home raises the possibility of a Greco-Indic equation. Of course the Greek creature is not a “*Hyposphinx*” (~ *upaspīj-*), but it is not impossible to imagine that Σφίξ is a front-clipped form of an old name like “Lap-Buttock,” a compound that, having become opaque, lost its first element (which would presumably have been interpreted anyway as nothing more than the comparatively unexciting preverb ὑπο-)—all this perhaps under the influence of *šsp-’nh* or σφίγγω or something else entirely.

²⁶ There is, of course, no way to tell on metrical or accentual grounds that the vowel in the nominative singular, (Σ)Φίξ, is (naturally) long, but Hdn.Gr. 2.9.5 (Lentz) states that it is; see now Probert 2003: 84.

²⁷ I have little doubt but that the root iota in φίκις is short, and yet the evidence is flimsier than scholars make it out to be (see Katz 2004: 283 n. 22).

²⁸ The most detailed study of the phenomenon of anatomical *pars pro toto* focuses on Latin (Adams 1982a; see also Adams 1982b: Index [271] s.v. *pars pro toto*), where the considerable majority of cases are overtly sexual (e.g., *Mentula* ‘Mr. Prick’); for Greek (where the *locus classicus* is the seemingly abusive γαστέρες οἶον [*Th.* 26] ‘mere bellies’ in Hesiod’s *Dichterweihe*, for which a new interpretation is offered in Katz & Volk 2000), Bain 1994 makes a good start with his discussion of a graffito from ca. 400 B.C. about a man from Thorikos called ὁ πρωκτός ‘(known as) Asshole’ (compare Neumann 1999: 202-5 and see also Bain 1995 and 1999a). An apparent example of the reverse phenomenon—*totum pro parte* in the development of a word for ‘badger’ into something like ‘anus’—is treated in Katz 1998a and 2002.

²⁹ The most famous American trickster figure, the lecherous Mr. Coyote, is “grossly erotic” (Ricketts 1965: 327); see, e.g., Bright 1993: 65-83 and 146-51 and Erdoes & Ortiz 1998: 53-78. As for the backside, Erdoes & Ortiz 1998: 79-89 collect a number of funny tales about Coyote’s anus and artful farts, Bright 1993: 124-30 gives a version of a Kathlamet Chinook story in which Coyote and Badger “trade assholes” (but the really important anus here is Badger’s: see Katz 2002: 298 n. 9), and Hyde 1998: 29-31 (a reference I owe to James Tatum), building on work by Paul Radin, tells a couple of stories from the Winnebago Trickster Cycle in which the voracious hero’s genitals, anus, and intestines are very much on display (see Radin 1956: 136-46 for a psychological interpretation of the Trickster’s sex life). On the prophetic fart in *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* 296 of the leading Greek trickster figure, Hermes, see Katz 1999 (to the references, add Daniel 1985: 129f. and *passim* and Bain 1986); in that paper I cite a riddle of Eubulus about the resemblance between a man and his πρωκτός (106.1-9 Kassel—Austin = 107.1-9 Hunter). This riddle comes, as David Rosenbloom reminds me, from (of all places) the comic playwright’s *Sphingokarion* and may indeed have been one of a number of enigmas associated with the Sphinx (thus Schultz 1912: 67; compare the end of fn. 14 above); see Hunter 1983: 70 and 199-208, esp. 200-3, on the πρωκτός-riddle in particular and what we know about the play in general. Note also the recent (19th-century+) German verb *verarschen* ‘mock; trick,’ a clear derivative of the noun *Arsch* ‘arse,’ though according to Kluge—Seebold 1995: 854, the “Übertragungsmotiv [is] unklar.” The idea that the backside is itself associated with riddles and aggression would help with Jamison and Watkins’s view (see fn. 11 above) that *upaspījam* is simply *sp(h)ij-* plus the preverb *upa-*.

It can hardly be doubted that some aspects of the Theban Sphinx are based on Near Eastern cultural influence or, for that matter, on inner-Greek imagination. But the idea that she has a linguistic antecedent in Proto-Indo-European is perfectly plausible: to judge from Hesiod's genealogy (*Th.* 270-336), many of her relatives have good Indo-European names, including her probable mother the *Chimaera* (Χίμαιρα 'She-Goat' ← PIE *ǵ^h*im-r-*, a derivative of the word for 'winter': "one-winter-old animal"), probable grandmother the *Hydra* ("Υδρα 'Water Snake' ← PIE **ud-ró-*, a derivative of the word for 'water'), and certain great-grandmother the Echidna ("Εχιδνα 'Viper' ← PIE **h₁eg^h-* 'snake').³⁰ Furthermore, there are at least two other, and mutually independent, reasons to believe that the story of the Sphinx and her riddle, if not also her name, goes back to Proto-Indo-European or at least to the time when Greek and Indo-Iranian formed a unity. The one is Walter Porzig's demonstration that the riddle finds parallels in Indic and Italic phraseology, which suggests that it contains at least some inherited material (see Porzig 1953). Despite the acclaim his brief article has received (it is, e.g., reprinted in Schmitt, ed. 1968: 172-76), Porzig's bowdlerization of the riddle (its original form would be only the first verse of the five given above, opposing the two- and four-footed beings, i.e., humans and beasts) does not actually seem to have won wide acceptance, and I admit to not finding his comparison with Skt. *dvipác cátuṣpad asmákaṃ sárvam astv anāturám* (*RV* 10.97.20cd) 'may our two-footed (and) four-footed (ones) all be healthy' and Umbr. *ditu ... totar iouinar dupursus / peturpursus fato fito* (*Tab. Ig.* VIb 10f.) 'grant ... to the two-footed (and) four-footed (ones) of the Iguvine state (in) word (and) deed' an especially compelling demonstration of "indogermanische Dichtersprache."³¹

Much more interesting, in my opinion, is Toshifumi Gotō's comparison between the extremely rare Greek verb ἐλεφάρομαι*, attested only three times and apparently meaning 'bamboozle (*vel sim.*),' with Skt. *valh-* (almost always with either *úpa* or *prá*) 'confuse by means of riddles': the Proto-Indo-European root **uelh₁(-)^h-*, which he sees also in Lith. *vilbinti* (*vilbinu*) 'lure; mock,' makes a simple thematic present in Sanskrit, while an *r(/n²)*-stem noun **uelh₁^h-r* 'riddle' forms the basis for the Greek denominative in **-ié/ó-*.³² Gotō points out that the Sanskrit verb is used in *brahmodya*, including in *VS* 23.51 (*etád brahmann úpavalhāmasi tvā / kím svin naḥ prátivocāsy átra* 'This [i.e., previously uttered questions about the nature of man],

³⁰ For the genealogy, see West 1966: 244 and (for explanations of why I twice write "probable") 254f. and 256. Clay 1993: 113-16 and 2003: 159-61 argues that Hesiod's catalogue of monsters deliberately creates the "impossibility of ascertaining the precise parentage of some of its members" (1993: 115 and 2003: 160).

³¹ For further examples of the juxtaposition of two- and four-footed creatures, especially in Sanskrit but also elsewhere, see Schmitt 1967: 12f. and 210-13; for the Indo-European "folk taxonomy of wealth" into which this schema fits, see Watkins 1979: 275 and *passim* (= 1994: [II.]650 and *passim*) and 1995: 210f. Floyd 1992 accepts Porzig's basic argument and makes some interesting observations in the course of building on it; by contrast, the extra-Hellenic comparisons of Bader 1997: 51-53 and *passim* rely on the essential integrity of the riddle as transmitted. Ruben 1979: 362f. makes some tentative claims about the relationship between the Riddle of the Sphinx and some riddles in India, which he vaguely suggests "may be derived even from [the common Proto-]Indo-European tradition" (363). Knobloch 1980 adduces as a would-be Slavic analogue the Polish noun *kuternoga* 'bandy-legged one; cripple,' which he analyzes etymologically as "three-legged" (cf., e.g., Ukr. *trynih*, gen. *-noha*) plus a pejorative prefix.

³² See Gotō 1995 (briefly already Gotō 1987: 293f., with n. 695a) for the details, which are not phonologically entirely straightforward for Sanskrit; Gotō's conclusions are accepted by Mayrhofer 1995: 527 ("[w]ohl"), Werba 1997: 471 (also "wohl"), and M. Kümmel in Rix 2001: 678. Alan Nussbaum demurs, suggesting in a personal communication that the Greek verb is based on ἐλαφρός (< PIE **h₁l^hg^h-ró-*) 'light' (cf. the English idiom *to make light of*). In any case, Gotō's paper deserves much more than to be ignored by Hellenists (most recently by Clay 2003: 158).

o Brahmin, we present to you as a riddle. How, pray, will you answer us on this point?’), which, as noted above, is part of the classic brahmodyic sequence with which the Rigvedic context of *upaspījam* is regularly compared. As for the Greek, the very passage in Hesiod that first mentions the Sphinx (*Th.* 326-32), with the famous Boeotian form Φῖκ’ (α) (326), is one of the three loci of ἐλεφαίρομαι (330 ἐλεφαίρετο), where the verb describes what the Sphinx’ brother, the Nemean Lion, went about doing to the Cadmean countryfolk (translation: West 1988: 12f.)³³:

ἦ δ’ ἄρα Φῖκ’ ὀλοήν τέκε Καδμείοισιν ὄλεθρον,
 Ὀρθω ὑποδηθεῖσα, Νεμειᾶϊόν τε λέοντα,
 τόν ῥ’ Ἥρη θρέψασα Διὸς κυδρῆ παράκοιτις
 γουνοῖσιν κατένασσε Νεμείης, πῆμ’ ἀνθρώποις.
 330 ἔνθ’ ἄρ’ ὄ γ’ οἰκείων ἐλεφαίρετο φῦλ’ ἀνθρώπων,
 κοιρανέων Τρητοῖο Νεμείης ἠδ’ Ἀπέσαντος·
 ἀλλά ἐῖς ἐδάμασσε βίης Ἡρακλεΐης.

But she [probably the Chimaera], surrendering to Orthos, bore the baneful Sphinx [i.e., “Phix”], death to the people of Cadmus, and the Nemean Lion, which Hera, Zeus’ honoured wife, fostered and settled in the foothills of Nemea, an affliction for men. There it lived, harassing [= ἐλεφαίρετο] the local peoples, monarch of Tretos in Nemea and of Apesas; but mighty Heracles’ force overcame it.

That it is, according to Hesiod, the Nemean Lion who does the bamboozling, rather than his sister the half-lioness Sphinx herself, is obviously a matter that needs further discussion (see, briefly, Gotō 1995: 366 and 368 n. 10). Still, it is surely not difficult to imagine either that both siblings have a share in riddling or that a trait of the sister has here been applied to the brother.³⁴

Let me now summarize briefly the logical chain that I have tried to establish before turning to one final point:

(1) Skt. *sphij-/sphigī-* ‘hip; buttock’ is cognate with Gk. φίκις ‘buttocks; anus’ (see Katz 2004);

³³ Gotō 1995: 370 n. 15 does mention *upaspījam*, but very much in passing, and his comment about it is rather different from what I am trying to show in this paper. I note that *valh-* is usually accompanied by the “preverb of intimacy” *úpa* (see fn. 11 above), as in *VS* 23.51 *úpavalthāmasi*; as for the other preverb with which it is associated, *prá* ‘before, forth,’ note that the oldest Sanskrit term for ‘riddle’ (see fn. 12 above) is *pravalthikā-*, which commentators on the *Atharvaveda* consider synonymous with *brahmódya-* (see especially Sternbach 1975: 16 n. 2 and 34, with n. 68, and note also Gotō 1995: 367 n. 4).

³⁴ The other two instances of ἐλεφαίρομαι are in Hom. *Il.* 23.388 (ἐλεφηράμενος) and *Od.* 19.565, the latter in the famous riddling speech of Penelope to the disguised Odysseus about the gates of horn through which true dreams pass and the gates of ivory (564 ἐλέφαντος) that deceive (ἐλεφαίρονται). Gotō 1995: 369 follows the *communis opinio* in relating ὀλοφώϊος ‘destructive (*vel sim.*)’ (*Od.* 4x as neuter plural, e.g., of Circe’s δῆνεα ‘wiles’ in 10.289). He also brings into the discussion Ἐλεφήνωρ (leader of the Abantes: *Il.* 2.540 and 4.463), which he translates as ‘Männer [durch Rätsel] in Verwirrung bringend’ (369); I have no opinion on the correctness of this analysis, but his further suggestion on p. 370 that the Mycenaean personal name *e-re-pa-i-ro* (KN Vc 212) might be related cannot be right since (as Robert Plath points out to me) it would then be spelled **we-*.

- (2) *sphij-* is found, in slightly altered form, in the Rigvedic hapax compound *upaspijam*, which means ‘trick or two-sided question,’ a sense that can be explained if we understand its literal meaning to be “lap-buttock”;
- (3) *upaspijam* appears in a riddling brahmodyic context that has analogues in other Indo-European traditions;
- (4) The most famous riddler in the linguistically and culturally closely related Greek tradition is the *Sphinx* (in the first place (Σ)Φίξ, stem (Σ)Φῖκ-), who is associated with an agonistic enigma of a sort similar to the one in whose context *upaspijam* appears; and
- (5) The very name (Σ)Φῖκ(/γ)-³⁵ may be related to φίκις and thus be the same as the element ^o*spij-* (presumably ^o*sphij-*) in *upaspijam*, however the details are to be accounted for.

What this leaves unexplained is why (Σ)Φῖκ- has a long root vowel while φίκις and *sphij-/upaspijam* have a short one. The most likely solution is that (Σ)Φῖκ- shows “expressive lengthening,” a phenomenon that has been invoked to account for the unexpected phonology of names for other scary creatures as well.³⁶ While this scenario must remain speculative, it is interesting that within Greek culture, there is one piece of evidence that connects the Sphinx to the very root φικ- ‘buttocks; anus’—the “missing Sphinx,” as it were, and an association that is anyway in keeping with the Greeks’ view of this riddler. If we remember that riddles, even when uttered in serious contexts, cross-culturally very frequently have a bawdy element,³⁷ we

³⁵ It would be nice if the voiced -γ- in Σφίγξ and Hesychius’ Φῖγα (see fn. 17 above) were old, for the velar would then match the -j/-g- of Skt. *sphij-/sphigʰ-*. But there is no independent reason to believe in its antiquity.

³⁶ The classic example in Greek is ὄπις ‘SNAKE!’ rather than ὄφις (< **h₁ogʰh-*, with the same root as ἔχις/Ἐχιδνα, mentioned above in the text): the weightier form, with expressive gemination, finds support in both Homer and Hipponax (see, e.g., West 1974: 89f.; I note that West prints ὄπιον at 12.208 in the text of his new Teubner *Iliad*). Another case (see Katz 1998b: 328f. and *passim*) is the double -ll- in various words that go back to the Proto-Indo-European word for ‘eel,’ **(h₁)ǵl-*, e.g., the name of the Hittites’ fabled adversary, *illuy-ankaš* (literally “eel-snake”), Lat. *angu-illa* ‘eel’ (literally “snake-eel”), and Gk. ἔλλυες (which Hsch. ε2176 glosses as ζῶα ἐν τῷ Σμαράγδω ποταμῷ; Latte is wrong to obelize the lemma). For a recent survey of Greek expressive gemination, especially in onomastics, where it is particularly common, see O. Masson 1986 (= 1990: [II.]549-61) and now also Bain 1999a on the name Δριλ(λ)όμυς, a compound of δριλός ‘worm’ and μῦς ‘mouse’ (91 n. 5 on the possibility of “expressive gemination, a constant feature of Greek anthroponymy”). For another, and not mutually exclusive, approach to the long iota in (Σ)Φῖκ-, see fn. 45 below.

³⁷ See, e.g., Watkins 1978 (= 1994: [II.]588-92)—brief and very much to the point. Referring to Jakobson, Watkins 1978: 234f. (= 1994: [II.]591f.) cites a blatantly sexual riddling phrase in Old Czech that is associated with marriage rites, and in fact, the telling of bawdy jokes is cross-culturally common at weddings; compare Merkelbach & West 1965: 315f. and *passim* on the many riddles, including one about three- and four-footed objects, that Heracles recites at the wedding-feast of Ceyx in the fragmentary (ps.-)Hesiodic poem (see fn. 14 above). Furthermore, people everywhere tell tales about the man who gets himself a bride by solving a conundrum (or by outwitting a princess herself in competitive riddling: Aarne—Thompson type 851 [Aarne 1961: 285f.]), and it has not escaped scholars’ notice that, according to the usual version of the story, Oedipus is offered his mother’s hand precisely because he is able to get past the Sphinx (nevertheless, Edmunds 1981b and Edmunds in Edmunds and Dundes, eds. 1995 [esp. 147-55, with 168f.] argues forcefully that Oedipus originally married Jocasta on account of having slain the monster [Aarne—Thompson type 300 (Aarne 1961: 88-90)] rather than resolved an enigma; see fn. 13 above). In an article on 17th-century German “Hochzeitsrätsel,” Max Hippe cites a 1623 “Anspielung auf das sog. Sphinxrätsel,” a riddle with the answer “Mann” that contains such lines as *Auff Erden lebt ein Thier, je mehr*

will not be surprised to find in Greek artists and writers a tendency to turn the Sphinx, whose inherent eroticism Vermeule 1979: 171-75, with 248f., has rightly emphasized, into a figure of sexual satire.³⁸ As Schauenburg 1982: 233 puts it, “Ein eigenartiger Aspekt der Sage ist die Häufigkeit, mit der sie parodiert wurde. Kein anderer Mythos dürfte in so vielen antiken Landschaften in karikierender Form gestaltet worden sein.”³⁹ The most dramatic example has until recently been a 5th-century B.C. Corinthian cup of the Sam Wide Group in Oxford first published by Boardman 1970: a (male) Sphinx with an oversized penis masturbates on Oedipus from atop his column, “a very odd way,” as Boardman writes, “of expressing chagrin and disgust with Oedipus’ solution of the riddle” (194).⁴⁰

Now, however, we are in possession of another breathtakingly parodic Sphinx, and this time it is an anally oriented one. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, *POxy.* 4502, published only a few years ago (Parsons 1999), consists of five sexually explicit epigrams by Nicarchus, four of them hitherto unknown and one of these, eight verses long (30-37), titled by its editor “the Sphinx unriddled” (Parsons 1999: 53). While the reading of parts of the epigram and the precise interpretation are obscure even to some of today’s most distinguished Hellenists and papyrologists, it quite clearly provides a pederastic explanation of the Riddle of the Sphinx:

- 30 τήν] ἀρχὴν τί δίπουν τετράπουν τε τρ[ί]πουν τ’ ἐπὶ γαίῃ
οὐ]θεῖς εἶχε λέγειν. ἔστι δ’ α[.]. παθικός.
ο] τος ἔως ἔστη[ι]κε, δίπους· ἀπεραιο[ά]μενος δὲ
...]χερας ἀμφοτέρους κύβδα χαμαὶ τετ[ρ]άπους.
τῶι] φαλλῶι δαυτωιδε τρίπους το .εφικιοναυτ..
- 35 ὄν τ]ρόπον ἐν Θή[ι]βαις πλησίον ἐστὶ λέπας.
οὐ]κ ἂν τις διέλοιτο σοφώτερον· εἰ τόθ’ ὑπῆρχον,
ἄνδρες, ἐγώ[ι], Θήβας ἔσχον ἂν ἑπταπύλου[ς].

At first, no one was able to say what on earth is two-footed, four-footed, and three-footed. Well, it’s a pathic man. When he stands, he is two-footed. And supporting himself on his two hands, head down to the ground, he is four-footed. But with his phallus he is three-footed, and his φίκιον is like (explains the name of?) the rock nearby in Thebes. No one could interpret this more wisely: if I’d been there then, I’d have taken seven-gated Thebes.⁴¹

das Füß thut haben, / Dest langsamer es geht, vnd g’mach hinvon thut traben. / Je wenigere Füß hat, je schnellere lauffen thut, / Und führet seinen leib daher mit grossem mutt (Hippe 1933: 434, with n. 1).

³⁸ Note that the mid-4th-century B.C. comic poet Anaxilas refers to prostitutes as Theban sphinxes: Σφίγγα Θεβαίαν δὲ πάσας ἔστι τὰς πόρναις καλεῖν (22.22 Kassel—Austin); the line is followed immediately by a dirty riddle about four-footed, three-footed, and two-footed sexual positions (see, e.g., Henderson 1991: 180 and 250). A century earlier, Callias similarly called whores Μεγαρικά σφίγγες ‘Megarian sphinxes’ (28 Kassel—Austin, preserved in Phot. *Lex.* μ174 Theodoridis = *Suda* μ385 Adler).

³⁹ The most penetrating and detailed discussion of the satirical Sphinx, especially her (sometimes his ...) sexual characteristics, is in Moret 1984: 137-50 and 188f. (+ Planches 90-96), as well as 11 and 165 (+ Planche 3/2).

⁴⁰ See also, e.g., Schauenburg 1982: 233 and Moret 1984: 144-46 and 189 (+ Planche 96/1). It is unfortunate that we do not know more about Aeschylus’ satyr-play *Sphinx* (Simon 1981 gives a clear account that shows just how little we can surmise).

⁴¹ For the edited text, see Parsons 1999: 49. Parsons does not venture a complete translation; this is my tentative version, based on his notes and suggested emendations (see immediately below in the text, with fn. 43).

The poem begins by quoting a version of the familiar riddle, only to move swiftly into subversive territory by giving as the solution not “man,” but rather “pathic, passive homosexual”: note that the probable restoration in line 31, due to J. R. Rea, is ἀ[νῆ]ρ παθικός (see Rea and D. Obbink *apud* Parsons 1999: 54).

The critical line, 34, is unfortunately the one that is most difficult to account for (Parsons 1999: 54 writes that it is “[n]ot really understood”), but the third leg seems to be the phallus rather than an old man’s walking stick⁴²—Merkelbach & West 1965: 311 n. 31 do point out, after all, that a “word like τρίπους lent itself to use in riddles”—and we also find the sequence ...φίκιον..., which Parsons and Obbink (see fn. 43 below) propose refers simultaneously, in a punning way, to the well-known name of the Sphinx’ mountain, Φίκιον (derived from (Σ)Φῖκ- ‘Sphinx’ and likewise with a long -ī-; compare fn. 17 above), and to the unfamiliar body part φίκιον ‘(little?) arse’ (with a short -ī-), a derivative of our new vulgar friend φίκις. Of course the pun on the homosexual’s upended backside ignores the quantity of the iota (Parsons 1999: 54: “If there is a pun, it ignores quantity”), but of course this sort of thing is allowed and arguably even encouraged in puns. Since “φίκιον” makes up the fifth foot of a hexametric line (—υυ), the iota by rights scans long and so the word means in the first place ‘Mt. Phikion’; but at the same time, however the line is to be emended, there is a clear invitation to mount *phikion* as well.⁴³

Like many Hellenistic poets, Nicarchus enjoyed erotic wordplay,⁴⁴ and there is no reason to believe that his lewd and ludic ...φίκιον... reflects any awareness of an actual etymological connection between the name of the hybrid creature and the body part.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the link

⁴² I write “*seems* to be the phallus” because the first letter of φαλλῶι is maddeningly uncertain (see Parsons 1999: 54). Fraenkel 1950: II.90 (with reference to Wilamowitz; see also II. 50 and III.581f., with 582 n. 1) and Taylor 1951: 21 plausibly suggest that there may be a very early hint of the Greeks’ knowledge of the Riddle of the Sphinx in Hes. *Op.* 533 τρίποδι βροτῶ ἴσοι ‘like a three-legged(/footed) man’; see also, e.g., Jackson 1999: 99, with 141f. n. 217, and especially West 1978: 293, who gives a quick survey of similar evidence from the 5th century B.C. (see fn. 14 above), defends the reading βροτῶ over βροτοί, and cites *RV* 10.117.8, a virtuoso riddle about feet and numbers. This phrase appears in a section of the *Works & Days* whose sexually riddling character and emphasis on feet has received a great deal of attention (see fn. 13 above), and I attempt in a forthcoming paper to give a coherent explanation of why it is entirely reasonable to read τρίπους here with more than a soupçon of phallic innuendo. Parsons 1999: 54 does not cite Hesiod but does compare Theocritus’ description of Priapus as τρισκελής (*AP* 9.437.3) ‘three-legged,’ noting, however, that A. S. F. Gow in his edition (*Epigr.* 4.3 Gow = 20.3 Gow—Page) rejects the unanimously transmitted τρισκελής (codd.) as “improbable” (Gow & Page 1965: II.535: “The suggestion that the phallus counts as a third leg is grotesque”) and prints instead O. Jahn’s emendation ἄσκελής ‘legless’ (Franzoi 1998: 80 casts a recent vote for τρισκελής; Rossi 2001: 109f. and esp. 156f. gives a balanced, if somewhat muddled, discussion).

⁴³ Parsons 1999: 54 concludes, “How can these elements be combined? [...] I have no ideas that do not involve substantial emendation. Say, τῶι φαλλῶι δ’ αὐτός τε τρίπους, τὸ δὲ φίκιον αὐτοῦ ..., ‘He himself has a third leg with his phallus, and ...’. And then? If the next clause expands the same joke, it might perhaps mean ‘... and his backside (is) like the rock nearby in Thebes’ (sticking up in the air). But perhaps, as Dirk Obbink suggests, we should see it as a secondary joke of mythological pseudo-etymology: ‘... and his backside is (explains the name of) the rock Phikion near Thebes’.”

⁴⁴ For an appreciation of Nicarchus, see now Nisbet 2003: 82-97 and *passim*; noting that the poet is “noticeably ruder on papyrus” (82), Nisbet cites a forthcoming paper on the new poems (*POxy.* 4501 as well as 4502), which were published too late for him to take proper account of them.

⁴⁵ Similarly, Nicarchus’ cavalier attitude to vowel length cannot be used as evidence in the reconstruction of the original phonology of (Σ)Φῖκ- and φικ-. It cannot be excluded, however, that the cross-cultural tolerance of

between the Sphinx and the anal sphincter⁴⁶—a body part to which the final adjective in the poem, ἑπτάπυλος ‘seven-gated,’ alludes as well⁴⁷—holds no surprise to the comparative folklorist and may perfectly well reflect a historically deep tradition of sexual riddling.⁴⁸ Not

linguistic inexactitude in the context of riddles might have contributed to the unexpected, and presumably secondary, phonological form of (Σ)Φῖκ- (long vowel) and, for that matter, Skt. *upaspījam* (lack of aspiration).

⁴⁶ It is impossible to avoid thinking that there must be some sort of interesting connection between Σφίγξ and σφιγκτήρ ‘something that binds’ (compare “the Sphinx’ posterior sphincter” in fn. 48 below), just as there evidently is between Σφίγξ and σφίγγω (see above in the text, with fn. 24). From a strictly linguistic point of view, the two are not easily equatable, given the claim to antiquity of (Σ)Φῖκ- vis-à-vis Σφίγξ and the synchronically clear morphological relationship of σφιγκτήρ to σφίγγω (whose etymology Chantraine 1999: 1077 gives as unknown, though Kümmel in Rix 2001: 585 now tentatively catalogues a root “**sp^heig-* ‘zuschnüren,’” seen aside from σφίγγω “wohl in lett. *spaignis* ‘Krebsgabel’ [...] und Germanischem” [n. 1]; otherwise Furnée 1972: 280 n. 48). But this definitely does not mean that there cannot be a link at the level of folk linguistics. Sometimes a σφιγκτήρ (or σφίγκτωρ* in *AP* 6.233.2 [Maecius]) is just an ordinary band of one sort or another (for the hair in *AP* 6.206.3 [Antipater of Sidon, who seems to have died around 100 B.C.: see Cameron 1993: 50-52]; cf. also the Latin borrowing *sp(h)inter* ‘bracelet,’ which Plautus uses eight times in the *Menaechmi* [see Leumann 1949: 205 (= 1959: 172) and Gratwick 1993: 189], as well as σφιγγίου* ‘bracelet’ in Luc. *Apol.* 1), once it means ‘tunic’ (Hsch. σ2904 Schmidt), but otherwise it is what we today refer to as the anal sphincter: the last meaning (see Steinbichler 1998: 50-52, esp. 51) is, however, found only from the 2nd century A.D., when it is at home in the medical writers Soranus and Galen (cf., e.g., Gal. 2.888.18 Kühn) and found also at the head of a pederastic poem by the epigrammatist Strato of Sardis (*AP* 12.7.1 Σφιγκτήρ οὐκ ἔστιν παρὰ παρθένω ...), on whose date see Cameron 1993: 65-69 (compare now Steinbichler 1998: 17-23). (Durling 1993: 307 and others do not make it clear whether σφιγκτήρ is sometimes used as a *terminus technicus* for muscles other than the anal one, e.g., for the pyloric sphincter. To judge from André 1991: 150 and 205, Latin medical writers use the borrowed form *sphinctēr* exclusively of the anus and rectum, but it must be pointed out that if the ²*OED* presents a fair picture, then the nearly automatic association current speakers of English make between the word *sphincter* and the anus is a recent development in the language.) Note as well the rare noun σφίγκτης*, a word for someone ‘κιναιώδης’ used, according to Photius (*Lex.* 2.193.9 Naber = 560.22 Porson), by Cratinus (495 Kassel—Austin; cf. also Hsch. σ2903 Schmidt); this in turn is probably connected (see in the first place André 1971: 104f. and most recently Adams 2003: 420, with n. 15) with the curious Latin term *spintria** (pointed out to me by E. J. Champlin), whose precise meaning is disputed but which certainly is redolent of Tiberian lasciviousness on Capri (André 1971: 105 suggestively brings into the discussion Auson. *Epigr.* 43 Green/Kay, a riddle about the numbers one through four, on which see most recently Steinbichler 1998: 122-27 [in the first place on two similar Greek riddles by Strato: *AP* 11.225 and 12.210] and Kay 2001: 164-66, with further references).

⁴⁷ The noun πύλη ‘gateway’ can refer, or at least allude, to the anus (see, e.g., Henderson 1991: 202); the sexual sense of ἔχω ‘have’ is mundane (see, e.g., Adams 1982b: 187, who takes specific note of its use in homosexual encounters; see also Henderson 1991: 156, with reference to the LSJ). Note the recent etymology of Gk. πρωκτός (and Arm. *erastank*) in Lamberterie 2000: 127-31: it, too, is in origin a passage, though in the first place for exiting rather than entering (Adams 1981: 244f. and 250f. lists some synchronically clear Classical examples of the metaphors of doors and paths; see also Adams 1982b: 89).

⁴⁸ A 20th-century example is the following ditty, which I have had the unusual pleasure of having had sung to me by an august trio, first by Stanley Insler (Salisbury Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Philology, Yale University), many years later by John Logan (Literature Bibliographer, Princeton University), and most recently by Robert Anderson (Director Emeritus, The British Museum): “The sexual life of the camel / Is stranger than anyone thinks. / At the height of the mating season / He tries to bugger the Sphinx. / But the Sphinx’ posterior sphincter / Is clogged by the sands of the Nile, / Which accounts for the hump on the camel / And the Sphinx’ inscrutable smile.” In fact, all three gentlemen presented me with slightly different versions, and google searches for “Sphinx’[s] inscrutable smile” and the like reveal many, many more. I have seen it in print in (suitably enough) the infamously randy diaries of the queer playwright Joe Orton: “Nigel told me a most amusing limerick. ‘It’s an old army one,’ he said. ‘Surely you’ve heard it?’ He reported it in his clipped upper-class voice: The sexual urge of a camel / Is greater than anyone thinks / In moments of erotic excitement / It frequently buggers the Sphinx. / Now the Sphinx’s

only do riddles frequently have at least one obscene answer and not only are trickster figures often given to (anal) lusts (see above, with fn. 29), but the oldest allusion to the Riddle of the Sphinx in Greece, Hesiod's τρίπους βροτός (see fnn. 13 and 42 above), is in my view manifestly sexual. While there is some debate in the literature over whether any riddle ever has just one right answer, most scholars accept that an especially “important attribute of the riddle [is] its capacity for multiple solutions” (Ben-Amos 1976: 249)⁴⁹: in the case of the Riddle of the Sphinx, I do not deny that “man” has become the culturally accepted solution, but it does not follow from this that other responses, like “pathic man,” could not be equally appropriate or, for that matter, have just as great a claim to antiquity.⁵⁰

In conclusion, I have tried to establish that the following words all go back to something like PIE **(s)p^hiK-(i-)* and are thus etymologically linked: Skt. *sphij-/sphigī-*, Gk. φίκις (and derivatives), Skt. *upaspījam*, and Gk. Σφίγγξ. Although details remain unclear, these comparisons reveal some of the linguistic and social mysteries that lurk in riddles, one of the most obscure of literary forms, and thereby contribute to a better understanding of Indic, Hellenic, and Proto-Indo-European poetic culture. Nearly two centuries ago, Peter von Bohlen, in a two-volume work dedicated to August Wilhelm von Schlegel and Franz Bopp and devoted to demonstrating that the Indian civilization was older and more amazing even than the Egyptian, suggested that the Egyptian and Greek sphinxes had originated in India and even proposed a Sanskrit etymology of their name (see Bohlen 1830: II.205f., a reference I owe to Suzanne Marchand): the Indian hybrid figure “heißt entweder *Narasinhas*, Mannlöwe, oder schlechtweg *sinhas*, welches, *singhas* ausgesprochen, vielleicht dem Worte σφίγγξ seinen Ursprung gab, da

posterior passage / Is washed by the sands of the Nile / Which explains both the hump on the camel / And the Sphinx's inscrutable smile” (Lahr 1986: 190).

⁴⁹ Ben-Amos 1976 gives a good general account of how and why riddles have multiple solutions. The English riddle cited by virtually every scholar who discusses the question of ambiguity is “What is black and white and re(a)d all over?” (Taylor type 1498a [Taylor 1951: 624]), about which Ben-Amos 1976: 251f. writes that it is “by now so well known in American society that riddle solvers find little challenge in offering the conventional solution. Instead, people seek out ways which introduce humor and which would enable them to claim credit for wit. They do so by transforming the phonetic puzzle into a literal description of an object or a being, then replacing the ambiguity of the riddle with an oddity in the solution, as the following answers demonstrate. (1a) A chocolate sundae with ketchup on it. (1b) A sunburned zebra. (1c) A blushing zebra. (1d) A skunk with diaper rash” (footnotes omitted). The favored answer at my school when I was young was “A nun in a blender.”

⁵⁰ For discussion of a multiplicity of possible solutions to the Riddle of the Sphinx (but no mention of sex), see, e.g., Porzig 1953 (= Schmitt, ed. 1968: 172-76) and Floyd 1992, as well as Taylor 1951: 20f. Rokem 1996, too, argues that there are many ways to look at and answer the riddle, one of which is overtly sexual: “If we take the transformation of the number of legs very literally, what we see is sexual intercourse between man and woman. During the union itself there are four legs, while afterward there is a division into the two legs of the woman, and the three—the two legs and the sexual organ—of the man. Seen from this perspective, the riddle constitutes a symbolic reenactment of the primal scene. Sophocles' drama exposes the real origin of Oedipus from the sexual union of his two parents. [...] In the context of the solution of the riddle as a primal scene with the male sexual organ as a possible ‘third’ leg, the fact that Oedipus fails to look down at his own feet could also imply his failure to cope with some aspect of his own sexuality” (265, footnote omitted to Freud's follower G. Róheim). (I am deliberately shying away from the psychoanalytic literature on the riddle but do note the following skeptical remark by the distinguished psychiatrist Theodore Lidz: “Freud stated in two places [...] that the riddle of the Sphinx is the basic riddle of childhood—namely, ‘Where do babies come from?’—but he offers no explanation of his interpretation” [Lidz 1988: 48 n. 4]; Freud's and Róheim's own words on Oedipus may be read most easily in Edmunds and Dundes, eds. 1995: 174-78 and 197-202, respectively.) Comments on the fine line between innocent and sexually charged answers to riddles are found throughout Hasan-Rokem & Shulman, eds. 1996: see, e.g., 12 (in a paper by A. Kaivola-Bregenhøj), 97 (D. Pagis), and 193-96, 198f., and 205 (V. N. Rao), as well as *passim* in Rokem's paper just cited.

dieses weder von σφίγγω, noch aus dem Koptischen abgeleitet werden kann” (II.205). Bohlen was misguided, of course, but I hope to have shown that there is in fact a real and interesting “sphinky” connection between Greece and India. One function of riddles is to clarify something while at the same time opening up our eyes to new possibilities: I hope that my riddle of the *sp(h)ij-* is worthy of this tradition.⁵¹

Willis Goth Regier’s wonderful 2004 *Book of the Sphinx* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press) appeared only after this paper had gone to press. Regier’s emphasis is on the modern afterlife of sphinky figures, both Greek and Egyptian, but anyone who reads the work will see that he and I arrive at some complementary conclusions. Among the things I learned from Regier that I wish I had known earlier are that John Milton plays with the idea of the Sphinx’ anal sphincter and that the connection between *Sphinx* and Indian words for ‘lion’ is associated with none other than Sir William Jones. For a short review, see *American Journal of Archaeology* 109 (2005) 800-1.

David Bain died of a heart attack on 30 November 2004. He was only 59.

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⁵¹ In Katz 2004: 280 n. 11 I gave a negative assessment of Carlo Gallavotti’s idea that the obscene drawing around which the words φωλή και φίκις are written in *POxy.* 3070 (see above in the text) is a “gesto triviale” (Gallavotti 1978-1979: 368), specifically what is sometimes called in English a *fig*: “Non escluderei che il vocabolo ricompaia nella dantesca espressione dell’italiano antico (*Inf.* 25.2 [...]) e del latino medievale, *ficas facere uel monstrare nates*. Certo in greco non era inusitato, né tardivo” (368 n. 6). In particular, I wrote that it is “impossible” to connect φίκις and *fīca*, “in the first place because it is likely that the root vowel in φίκις is short [...] whereas that in *fīca* (cf. Classical *fīcus*) is certainly long.” John Logan and Gerda Panofsky have quite rightly pointed out to me that such an argument is vitiated by my claim in the present paper that (Σ)Φίκ-, with a long iota, and φικ-, with a short one, are in fact related; they have urged me to reconsider whether *fīca* might in fact be brought in after all. I leave this for the future, noting that a large number of basic questions need better answers than I can find in the secondary literature: is the gesture *fīca* (see, e.g., Sittl 1890: 102f. and 123; recent remarks are in Corbeill 2004: 12, 41f., and 49, whose excellent second chapter is called “The Power of Thumbs”) in the first place symbolic of the buttocks (cf. *monstrare nates*) or instead of heterosexual vaginal intercourse?; is the gesture *fīca* the same as *fīca* meaning ‘cunt’ or not?; is either *fīca* related to the fruit/tree *fīcus* ‘fig’?; and how does *fīcus* ‘anal sore (caused by sex),’ which probably is a metaphorical extension of the word for the fruit (cf. Gk. σῦκον ‘fig (fruit); sore’ and its derivative σύκωσις ‘sore’), fit in with the rest? See on all this Buchheit 1960 and Adams 1981: 246f., 1982a: 40f., with 44f., and 1982b: 15 n. 1 and 113f. Semantic fluctuation between front and back organs is wholly ordinary, witness, e.g., Eng. *fanny* ‘vagina (United Kingdom); buttocks (United States)’; for Classical examples (e.g., Hsch. κ4738 Latte κύσος· ἢ πυγή· ἢ γυναικεῖον αἰδοῖον), see Adams 1981: 237, 239, 246, and 262f. and 1982b: 96 (and the further pages cited there).

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