

## The Sources of Greek ἵστωρ "Judge, Witness"

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*O. Summary:* The commonly accepted derivation of Greek ἵστωρ "judge, witness" from \**w(e)id-* "to see, to know" is problematic because of (1) the initial *h-*, (2) the zero-grade vocalism, and (3) the generally earlier attestation of the meaning "judge." A different derivation, from ἴζειν "to seat, to sit," is therefore preferable. The Homeric ἵστωρ was a "convener," who made others sit down to hear evidence; cf. the vignette of a ἵστωρ and assembled elders in just these terms at *Iliad* 18.501–505. Later uses of ἵστωρ (or *φίστωρ*) as "witness" probably resulted from folk-etymology.<sup>1)</sup>

*1. Some problems of phonology and morphology:* Although it is presented by current etymologists without cavil, the derivation of ἵστωρ "judge, umpire, arbiter; witness; knowledgeable (individual)" from \**w(e)id-*, which goes back to the Homeric Scholia, involves several problems in phonology and meaning.<sup>2)</sup> None of these would be insurmountable in itself, but their cumulative effect is considerable.

There is first of all the rough breathing, which is not found in the putative root. To be sure, our manuscripts of Homer show some variation regarding the breathing, and modern editors generally print the psilotic form, ἵστωρ.<sup>3)</sup> The form with the rough breathing predominates, however, in the ancient evidence (cf. Ludwich's apparatus for *Il.* 18.501 and 23.486) Moreover, even though it creates problems for an etymological connection of the word with εἶδω, the presence of the rough breathing in ἵστωρ is taken for granted in the Scholiast's discussion on *Il.* 18.501 c (= Herodian 2.108,32 L.).

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<sup>1)</sup> In a paper which touches on the ultimate source of the English word *history*, I should say a word about its own history, or prehistory. This paper owes its genesis to cogitations arising from a paper read at the University of Pittsburgh in November, 1987 by Prof. W. Robert Connor on Herodotus' and Thucydides' concepts of history, and behind it all, the Homeric use of ἵστωρ. Subsequently, my understanding of some of the problems dealt with here has been sharpened by conversation and correspondence with Prof. Connor and with Prof. Anna Morpurgo Davies; of course, neither is responsible for the particular form in which I have presented my ideas.

<sup>2)</sup> For the ancient etymology, see Erbse 4.536–537 (Scholion on *Il.* 18.501 c), and for the general acceptance nowadays of the connection of ἵστωρ with εἶδέ-*ναι*, Frisk 1.740–741 (s. v. ἵστωρ) and Chantraine 779 (s. v. οἶδα).

<sup>3)</sup> This is, for example, printed by Leaf, Ameis-Hentze, Monro & Allen, Mazon, Bruijn & Spoelder, Rupé, and Willcock. Paley, on the other hand, prints ἵστορ and ἵστορα at *Il.* 18.501 and 23.486 respectively, as does Ludwich.

According to the Scholiast, initial *ιστ-*, not followed by another consonant (as in *Ἰστρος*) regularly has a rough breathing. The initial *h-* of *ἵστωρ* is regularly printed by editors at Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 792.<sup>4</sup>) This is also the standard form of the word later on, and it has given rise to spellings with *h-* in derivatives in other languages such as French *histoire* and English *history*.

From one perspective, the rough breathing may not be that much of a problem. Various examples in Greek, such as *ἔσπερος* (cf. Latin *vesper*) and *ἑστία* (cf. Latin *Vesta*), indicate a regular development of initial *w-* to *h-* when the following vowel was followed by a consonant cluster involving /s/; cf. Lejeune 1972: 176–177, along with Schwyzler 1959: 226–227. This suggests that the rough breathing would be regular in a derivative from *\*w(e)id-tōr*, and although the effects of the rule must have been leveled out within a paradigm, with *ἴστε* and *ἵστω*, for example, following the rest of the verb *οἶδα* (instead of appearing as *\*ἴστε* and *\*ἵστω*), the agent noun, being relatively isolated from the verbal forms, might have developed differently from them.

If one considers just the rough breathing, then, the worst that could be said of the traditional etymology is that the ancient formulation by the Scholiast to *Il.* 18.501 c, in terms of a general rule concerning initial *ιστ-*, is a bit inexact, being based primarily on a comparison of *ἵστωρ* with the etymologically unrelated *ἵστημι*. Proceeding through the word, though, we find that the very next item in the phonology of *ἵστωρ*, viz., the vocalism of the stem, is also unexpected. Since the suffix *-τωρ* (*-τορ-* in the oblique cases) is unaccented, the accent is on the stem. General considerations of Indo-European ablaut would therefore suggest a form with full-grade *-ei-*, viz., *\*(F)είστωρ*, and this expectation is entirely borne out in the case of other Greek agent nouns in *-τωρ*, such as *δώτωρ* and *ἐπιβήτωρ*. Our word *ἵστωρ* would, in fact, seem to be the only coun-

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<sup>4</sup>) In contrast to the situation with Homer, the form with the rough breathing is printed in all the editions of Hesiod I have consulted, viz., by Rzach, Sinclair, Mazon, Solmsen, and West. Moreover, none of these lists any alternative form for the word in his critical apparatus. (It is, however, unfortunately the case that editors often do not give any very precise information concerning breathings in the manuscripts, and the true situation regarding the manuscripts of Hesiod may therefore be more complicated; in Homer's case, for example, most editors print *ἵστορι* and *ἵστορα*, with no mention in the critical apparatus and/or commentary of there being any other ancient reading.)

ter-example; cf. Schwyzer 1959: 531, n.5: "sonst steht zu primären Stämmen vor *-τωρ* Starkstufe."

Nor is it just the stem which provides problems for the traditional etymology. The function of the suffix in *ἴστωρ* is also not as straightforward as might appear to an uncritical observer. Benveniste 1948: 51–52, to be sure, confidently discusses *ἴστωρ* as neatly fitting into his now generally accepted analysis of Greek agent nouns. According to Benveniste's scheme (1948: 62), *-τωρ* designates the author of an action or one who is characterized by the possession of some accomplishment. The other agent suffix, *-τήρ*, on the other hand, will typically designate an office or function. In the opinion of Benveniste 1948: 51–52, a sense of "witness" is therefore eminently appropriate in the particular case of *ἴστωρ*, inasmuch as the witness knows only from having seen in a particular occasion. The quite different sense of "observer, spy," who is charged to observe on many occasions, is, on the other hand, properly expressed by *ὀπτήρ* or the compound *διοπτήρ*. A similar analysis of *-τωρ* and *-τήρ* is also adopted by Seiler 1986 a: 137–140 and 1986 b: 68–70. Seiler does not specifically discuss *ἴστωρ*, but his association of *-τωρ* with individuation or name-giving, in contrast to a more abstract or generalized use of nouns in *-τήρ*, is entirely consistent with an analysis of *ἴστωρ* as denoting a witness who has seen on one particular occasion.

Although it is generally illuminating, Benveniste's analysis of *-τωρ* and *-τήρ* is also undoubtedly a bit too limiting. At Sophocles, *Ichneutai* 77, for example, *ὀπτήρ* would seem to be quite specifically "witness," rather than "observer charged to observe on many occasions," as Benveniste's analysis suggests. As for *ἴστωρ*, the situation is also not so clear, inasmuch as one or two of the earliest uses of the word are difficult to reconcile with the idea of a witness who has seen some particular event. In *Il.* 18. 501, for example, the *ἴστωρ* seems to be either the man to whom the adjudication of a dispute concerning homicide is initially entrusted, or the one of a group of elders whose individual opinion prevails; cf. Willcock 2.270–271. Of course, a decision in the dispute might hinge on a witness or witnesses, but the run of the passage is strongly against the *ἴστωρ* himself fulfilling any such function.

A somewhat similar difficulty emerges from consideration of Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 792, in which the month's twentieth day is referred to as good for some association of a *ἴστωρ φώς* with begetting. Either this is the day on which such a man should beget a son, or the son begotten then will prove to be a *ἴστωρ φώς* (cf. West

1968: 357). In either case, it is more natural to refer this to a man possessing some general talent or attribute than to one destined to be a witness on some particular occasion.

One epic passage, on the other hand, may seem amenable to a sense of "witness" for *ἴστωρ*. At *Il.* 23.486, Agamemnon is referred to by Idomeneus as a *ἴστωρ* who could be chosen to judge between his and Aias' perceptions of the horse race. Even in this passage, though, a sense of Agamemnon as a respected man, with a general capacity to settle a dispute, is apparent in a way that is not entirely consistent with the usual force of derivatives in *-τωρ*.

2. *The semantic problem*: Common to the foregoing difficulties, both phonological and morphological, is the fact that *εἶδ-*, with its root meanings "see" and "know," seems awkward as underlying *ἴστωρ*. If the association was strongly felt, we might expect *ἴστωρ* to lose its initial *h-*, by analogy, just as we find with *ἴστε*, *ἴστω*, and the like. If, on the other hand, no strong connection of the agent noun with the verbal idea "see, know" was felt, the dissociation from the pattern of *εἰδέναι* is easily explained. Correspondingly, if the stem *εἶδ-* were not fully perceived in the agent-noun, this would make the lack of full-grade more intelligible. Separation from the semantic area of seeing or knowing (as a result of having seen) also seems indicated by the early use of *ἴστωρ* as "judge, umpire, arbiter" (rather than as "witness") in passages such as *Il.* 18.501.

Perhaps the most striking evidence, though, for a dissociation of *ἴστωρ* from the idea of seeing comes from the derivatives *ἱστορίη* and *ἱστορέω*, as they are used by Herodotus.

To be sure, Herodotus does not actually use the word *ἴστωρ*. Moreover, among writers of his time who do use the word, one can find quite a few passages which indicate an underlying sense of seeing or knowing for *ἴστωρ*. At Bacchylides 9.44, for example, the combination of *ἐγγέων* with *ἱστορες* clearly suggests knowledge of how to use weapons, Sophocles, *Electra* 850 uses *ἴστωρ* and *ὑπερίστωρ* to mean "knowing" and "knowing too well," and near the beginning of the Hippocratic *Oath* the gods are called on to be *ἱστορες*, i. e., "witnesses." Herodotus himself also uses *ἱστορίη* at 2.99.1 in a context in which it could be regarded as coordinate with the idea of seeing, inasmuch as *ὄψις* "sight," *γνώμη* "judgment," and *ἱστορίη* appear as a series in this passage. At 2.29.1, on the other hand, the noun *αὐτόπτης* "actual observer" and the participle *ἱστορέων* are presented as virtual opposites. According to this passage,

Herodotus' information concerning the course of the Nile is based on his own travels as far as Elephantine, but thereafter on *ἱστορίη*. Correspondingly, it would seem that the sequence in 2.99.1 should also be from that which most strongly involves the observer (*ὄψις*) through informed inference (*γνώμη*) to that which is dependent on inquiring from others (*ἱστορίη*) rather than being based on personal observation.<sup>5)</sup>

3. *The derivation from ἴζειν*: These various difficulties in the etymology of *ἴστωρ* will be mitigated by a derivation from *ἴζειν* "to seat, to sit."

At least within Greek, the root for this verb is *ἴζ-*. Both the rough breathing of *ἴστωρ* and the vocalism with simple *iota* will therefore be easy to explain in terms of an association with *ἴζ-*. The noun would then be formally exactly parallel to Homeric *μῆστωρ* or *σημάντωρ*, which are likewise from specifically Greek forms of a root, and an even closer parallel for the phonological development is provided by the later *κτίστωρ* (Pindar, fr. 105 a. 3, Sn.) from *κτίζειν*.

The Homeric usage of *ἴστωρ* is also indicative of such a derivation, for with a verb other than *\*w(e)id-* as our etymon, the inconsistency of *Il.* 18.501 with the sense of a witness, who has *seen* a crucial event on one particular occasion, disappears. With *ἴζειν* as the source, on the other hand, the *ἴστωρ* emerges as the man who has convened elders, or more literally, *made* them *sit down*, so as to hear the facts in a case. Such a nuance for the agent noun will also have the positive advantage of considerably clarifying the relationship of the *ἴστωρ* of 18.501 and the *γέροντες* "elders" of 18.503–508. From 18.508, it appears that the latter are somehow responsible for actually deciding the case.<sup>6)</sup> In view of the elders' evident importance, one therefore wonders why the disputants are first described as making use of the *ἴστωρ*, if he is simply another wise or knowledgeable man. With *ἴστωρ* as "convener," though, we now see that he is indeed more particularly concerned in the individual case. He is not just one of a number of elders, who might be available on any occasion, but instead his function is to convene a particular group which both sides in the dispute will respect.

<sup>5)</sup> Extensive discussion of *γνώμη*, *ἱστορία*, and other words of knowing is provided by Snell 1924; his discussion specifically of *ἱστορία* covers pp. 59–71.

<sup>6)</sup> Apparently, the elders offer various opinions, and the one whose judgment is straightest, i. e., most readily accepted by both parties, receives the two talents deposited by the disputants; cf. Hommel 1969: 26–32.

Confirmation for this analysis of *ἴστωρ*, as used on the shield of Achilles, may also be found in the fact that the postulated verbal concept is actually present at *Il.* 18.503–504, in the vignette of elders *sitting* on benches of polished stone to hear evidence in the case. The actual verb which is used at 18.504 is different, being *ἦατ'* (from *ἦσθαι*) rather than a form of *ἴζειν*. This, however, is no real problem, since *ἴζειν* and *ἦσθαι* are semantically so close that it is generally agreed that the phonology of *ἦσθαι* was influenced by *ἴζειν*.<sup>7)</sup>

Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 792 is not associated with any verb of sitting, nor indeed does the passage give any indication of the activity of a *ἴστωρ φῶς* beyond some association with begetting. It is therefore more difficult to make any positive analysis in favor of a specific connection with *ἴζ-* in this instance. A derivation from *ἴζ-*, though, seems more attractive than one from *εἶδ-*, since the man to whom Hesiod is here referring could more readily be regarded as one who, on a crucial occasion, is capable of convening others than as someone marked out to be a witness.

There is also a relevant passage from the *Odyssey*, viz., 21.26, which we have not yet considered. There, the compound *ἐπι-ἴστορα* is used to designate Herakles. The reference is either to the specific deeds which he does in the story being described, viz., killing Iphitos and keeping his mares, or to his being the sort of man who had performed great deeds on various occasions. Both analyses could be plausibly connected with a sense of “skilled in” or “knowledgeable concerning,” which would imply a connection of *ἐπίστορα* with *εἰδέναι*.<sup>8)</sup> An association with *ἐφίζειν* “set upon,” however, will work just as well. As it happens, neither compound verb (viz., *ἐφίζειν* or *ἐπιδεῖν*) is attested in a metaphorical sense in Homer. Homeric usage, though, suggests that *ἐφίζειν* would be the more readily associated with initiating some activity. At *Od.* 13.274, for example, *ἐφέσσαι* (from *ἐφίζειν*) is used of the Phoenicians’ setting Odysseus ashore (in the false tale which he tells Athene), while *ἐπιδεῖν* has a more passive association with receiving a sense impression (so *Il.* 22.61, where *ἐπιδόντα* is used of Priam’s observing the destruction

<sup>7)</sup> For the importance of *ἴζειν* or *ἔζεσθαι* in giving rise to the rough breathing of *ἦσθαι* (whose Sanskrit counterpart is *ās-*), cf. Frisk 1.633–634 and Chantraine 411–412.

<sup>8)</sup> For these interpretations, as well as for the association of *ἐπίστορα* with *εἰδέναι* which they imply, see Stanford 2.358.

wrought by the Greeks). As between these two sorts of uses, then, the sense suggested by *Od.* 13.274 seems more in keeping with the use of ἐπίστορα to refer to Herakles as actively initiating or undertaking great deeds.

The remaining Homeric passage is *Il.* 23.486. It might at first seem tempting to regard this in terms of an appeal to Agamemnon as a witness, but we have already noted that his role here is more that of someone able to judge impartially between others than someone who is himself fundamentally a witness. Moreover, in this passage, as in the scene from the shield of Achilles, a verb meaning "to sit" (again, a form of ἴσθαι, rather than ἴζειν) is present at 23.495, as Achilles tells the disputants that, *sitting down* (καθήμενοι), they should await the outcome of the race. There is the apparent divergence from the pattern of *Il.* 18.501–504 that the seating here results from Achilles' initiative, rather than that of Agamemnon, who is referred to as a potential ἴστωρ at 23.486. Achilles, though, as overseer of Patroklos' funeral games, is of course concerned that the various contests be properly conducted, and hence it is entirely fitting that he should step in to exercise the function which Idomeneus had momentarily suggested should be given to Agamemnon.

Finally, although he does not use ἴστωρ and nowhere associates ἴστορ- with a verb meaning "to sit," Herodotus' usage is also consistent with a derivation of the agent noun from ἴζ-, with a nuance, as in the *Iliad* passages, of somehow mediating between different interpretations of events. Following the proem (in which ἱστορίης is the third word), for example, Herodotus gives the versions of the Persians and then of the Phoenicians concerning the origin of hostilities between the Greeks and barbarians, while at 1.56.1 and 1.56.2, the participle ἱστορέων is twice used of Kroisos' inquiring among the various Greek states to ascertain which of them were the most powerful. The most diagnostic passage, though, is probably 2.29.1, in which ἱστορέων appears in a discussion of views concerning the upper reaches of the Nile. Herodotus, as he refers to inquiring of various sources—Egyptians, Libyans, and Greeks at 2.28.1, along with an allusion to those living upstream from Elephantine at 2.29.1—assumes a more positive role than the ἴστωρ of *Il.* 18.501 appears to have, or than Agamemnon emerges as actually having at *Il.* 23.486–498. Despite this shift in the role of the ἴστωρ, however, Herodotus' approach to the problem he is investigating (ἱστορέων) at 2.29.1 is clearly not a matter of his making actual observations himself, and we may instead imagine the historian's getting his

sources to *sit* down with him so as to share with him their knowledge concerning the Nile.<sup>9)</sup>

4. Also, *F(ε)ιδ-* after all: A derivation of *ἵστωρ* from *ἴζ-* will therefore deal satisfactorily with all the evidence from Homer and Hesiod, as well as illuminating Herodotus. This analysis of *ἵστωρ*, though, cannot be the entire story for Greek as a whole. By the fifth century, there are uses of *ἵστωρ* which clearly have a sense of “witness” or “knowing,” and later we even find a form with a digamma, viz., *φίστωρ* in Schwyzer 1923: no. 491 (Boiotian), in which the concurrence of meaning and phonology with *φειδ-* seems obvious.

One possibility would be to posit two different words, viz., an inherited *\*φείστωρ* (with *-ει-*) from *φειδ-*, alongside *ἵστωρ*, the latter being a specifically Greek formation from *ἴζ-*. Then, the chronologically later form *ἵστωρ* could have ousted *\*φείστωρ*, especially in view of the possibility that this could have gone to *\*εἴστωρ* by regular phonological development. In the case of Boiotian *φίστωρ*, however, the form from *φειδ-* would have persisted, although with influence from the vocalism of the derivative from *ἴζ-*.

Another, generally simpler explanation is to posit only one form, *ἵστωρ*, as underlying the various semantic and phonological developments, with folk-etymology eventually being responsible for a reinterpretation of its meaning from “convener” to other participants in a judicial process.

In light of the importance of eye-witnesses in adjudicating any dispute, the conditions for confusion between an individual who was called on to initiate an orderly process of decision and those who were involved in the actual proceedings would be readily at hand. Without claiming any particular influence from Homer on the etymological development, we may yet cite *Il.* 23.486 as a suggestive parallel. In this passage, Agamemnon is a potential *ἵστωρ* in a dispute between the competing eye-witness claims of Idomeneus and Aias, and although the passage eventually develops differently, it would not be impossible to regard Agamemnon’s role as constituting another, impartial witness.

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<sup>9)</sup> Of course, the contrast which Herodotus is presenting here is in no way dependent on whether it represents Herodotus’ actual method, as most scholars have thought, or is just his claim to have travelled extensively in Egypt and to have consulted knowledgeable authorities, when in fact he did not do so, as Fehling maintains. (For discussion specifically of 2.29.1, see Fehling 1971: 76–77 = 1989: 100–101.)



It is also easy to conceive of contexts in which the ἴστωρ, in his capacity as convener, used forms of εἰδέναι far more prominently than he did forms of ἴζειν. After asking the elders to *sit* (when he might use the imperative ἴζεσθε), the ἴστωρ could enjoin them to know clearly the facts in a case, or he could assure the two disputants that a group convened by him was trustworthy. In such contexts, it would be natural to use the plural or dual imperatives ἴστε or ἴστον. Then, from his use of such forms of εἰδέναι, it would be a natural step to associate the ἴστωρ with this verb, rather than with the etymologically prior ἴζειν. The association would be most likely to have begun in a psilotic dialect, but given the sporadic and irregular nature of folk-etymology, it is not really dependent on this. It is therefore no particular problem that the original *h-* remained part of the word even in its transferred usage, or that in Boiotian, where the digamma must have remained in *φειδέναι*, we find *φίστωρ* also.

Paradoxically, it is in the *Iliad*, where the sense of "witness" is belied both by the general contexts and by the actual presence of verbs meaning "to sit," that the psilotic form ἴστωρ (which suggests a connection with εἰδέναι) has been most generally accepted in the editorial tradition. This does, however, seem to be something imposed on the transmitted text, and we should undoubtedly be consistent in printing aspirated forms both in ἴστορι at *Il.* 18.501 and ἴστορα at 23.486 and in the semantically and phonologically related ἦατ' and καθήμενοι at 18.504 and 23.495.

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