Περίς, πηρίς and περίναιος
Περίς, πηρίς y περίναιος

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This article discusses the etymology of Greek περίναιος (also περίναιον, περίνεος, περίνεον) ‘perineum’. The etymological dictionaries endorse Meister’s derivation from the medical term ἰνάω ‘evacuate, purge’, but this is unlikely to be correct. Instead, it appears to be a derivative of περίς ‘penis’, with possible contamination from πηρίς ‘scrotum’.

Key words: Greek etymology; Greek vocabulary; medical vocabulary; semantic contamination; semantic development; word-formation; word-families; etymology in antiquity; ghost-words.

The etymological dictionaries of Boisacq, Frisk, Chantraine and Beekes give near-identical explanations for περίναιος (also περίναιον, περίνεος, περίνεον) ‘perineum’¹: they endorse Meister’s derivation from περί ‘around’ and the medical term ἰνάω ‘evacuate, purge’², and mention the possibility of secondary contamination with πήρα ‘pouch’ and its derivative πηρίς or πηρίν ‘scrotum’³.

Although Meister’s article contains various untenable claims – it goes on to allege a connection with ἰννός ‘mule’ and ἰνίς ‘child’, and is described by Frisk as «im einzelnen abweichend und verfehlt»⁴ – his explanation for περίναιον seems plausible

² Meister 1893, p. 141. More precisely, he takes περίνεον as a derivative of περίνος (Hesych.), which would in turn be derived not from ἰνάω itself, but from its lost nominal base.
³ Also noted by Meister 1893, p. 140.
⁴ Frisk 1972.
enough at first sight. Like ἰνάω itself, περίναιος is a technical term, and a connection with περι (perhaps as ‘area around the evacuator or genitals’)\(^5\) seems semantically appealing\(^6\), especially given the parallel with περιτόναιον ‘peritoneum’, another technical word which is found in close proximity to περίναιος in medical texts. However, a new piece of evidence makes Meister’s theory unworkable.

The new evidence comes from Löfler’s suggestion for a difficult and characteristically obscene fragment of Hipponax about a man who eats fruit and then masturbates. The line in question, fr. 78.14, is given in the editions as καὶ τῷ κυμάω τόν[δε] βίνα φοινίξα[ς], with Adrados’ restoration of τόνδε. Since βίς is feminine, the phrase was taken to mean «and staining this thing red at the tip with mulberry-juice», with τόνδε perhaps accompanied by a gesture to the crotch\(^7\). Löfler’s solution is to read τὸν [π]ερῖ α βινίξας, with the accusative of a masculine noun περίς or περίν. He notes the Hesychian gloss περίνος · περίναιον. τὸ αἰδοῖον. ἀφ’ οὗ καὶ τὸ περαίνεσθαι, which can be corrected to περίνα and may well refer to this very line of Hipponax, which now makes perfect sense as ‘staining his penis/genitals with mulberry-juice’\(^8\).

This new addition to the Greek lexicon, περίς περίνος m. ‘penis’ or ‘genitals’, instantly casts doubt on Meister’s suggestion that περίναιος is built to ἰνάω or its lost nominal base. Greek περίναιος can now be taken as a straightforward derivative of περίς, perhaps via a feminine περίνη (if περίναιος really is the original form, and not just a hypercorrection of the more common περίνεος). No such form περίνη has been preserved\(^9\), but there are traces of a masculine περίνος or περινός\(^10\), and in any case the suffix -αιος does not always imply a feminine base-form\(^11\). As a support for the connection with περίς, it is worth noting that περίναιος ~ περίνεος is used only

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5 Beekes 2010 takes the semantics differently, as «empty region». However, this seems less likely, and could conceivably even be a mistranslation of Chantraine’s «la région par où le corps se vide».

6 Cf. the Suda’s definition of ὄσχεος as ὁ περὶ τὰ αἰδοῖα τόπος.

7 West 1974, p. 143. This putative real-world reference would have to be generic rather than specific, since the stainer of the poem is not the poet himself. We can compare E., Cyce. 169, Ar., Au. 442-443, but there is no need for the tentative suggestion of West 1974, p. 30, that Hipponax must have performed the poem wearing a comedy phallus.


9 Meister 1893, pp. 140-141, posits a nom. sg. πέρινα on the basis of περίνα in Hsch. and πήρινα in Gal. 19.130. However, these are better taken as accusatives περίνα and πηρίνα.

10 Gal. 19.130 has περινός · τὸ περινέος, and there is the Hesychian gloss περίνος · τὸ αἰδοῖον. οἱ δὲ τὸν καυλόν, ἢ τὸ διδύμων δέρμα, ἤγουν ὁ ταῦρος, where the different translations support the idea that this was a genuine form.

11 Buck and Petersen 1944, p. 45, mention ὁδαῖος (Hom.+), δρομαῖος (S.+), εἰκαῖος (S.+), and the process becomes more productive in later Greek.
very rarely of female anatomy, and usually seems to be understood as a purely male body-part. Furthermore, in Aristotle’s Generation of Animals – one of the earliest attestations of the word – περίνεος appears to have a more general meaning ‘male genitals’, which would be yet more evidence against Meister’s etymology and in favour of a derivation from περίς.

For περίς itself, the simplest analysis is that it represents a derivative of the root *per- ‘pierce’, as found in πείρω, περάω, περόνη and περαίνω. As the aforementioned Hesychian gloss for περίνα shows, the verb περαίνω is sometimes used of sexual penetration (hence the proverbial line from comedy, οὐδείς κομήτης ὅστις οὐ περαίνεται). However, rather than ‘penetrator’, it is more likely that περίς originally meant simply ‘pointed object’, with a secondary meaning ‘penis’ (which in this case apparently ousted the primary sense). At least, this is what we usually find in the numerous parallels such as Eng. prick, yard, Danish pik, Breton kalc’h and the like.

We therefore have a new word περίς, complete with a plausible etymology. However, there is still the question of whether there was any contamination with πήρα and its derivative πηρίς ‘scrotum’. To investigate this possibility, it is worth looking at the two word-families together.

πήρα, Ion. πήρη, allegedly also πάρη f. (Od.+ ) ‘bag, pouch, purse’. πηρίς or πηρίν m. (Nic.) ‘scrotum’, but also glossed as ‘penis’, ‘tip of the...

περίς or περίν m. (Hippon.) ‘penis’, but also glossed as ‘perineum’.  

18 Vita-Scholium on Nic., Th. 586a: περίνα · ποτὲ μὲν τὸ ἄγγελον τῶν διδύμων, ποτὲ δὲ τὸ ἄκρον τῶν αἰδοίων, ἐξ ὧν αἱ προέσεις γίνονται; ibid. 586b: περίνα · τὸν ὀρχής; Suda περίνα, περίνος · τὸ αἰδίον; Gennadius Scholarius Grammatica 2.476.33: περίνα περίνος, τὸ αἰδίον; Hesych. περίς · περίναιον. τὸ αἰδίον. ἀφ’ οὗ καὶ τὸ περαίνεσθαι. As discussed above, we should probably read περίνα.

19 Hsch. περίνος · τὸ αἰδίον. οἱ δὲ τὸν καυλόν, ἢ τὸ διδύμων δέρμα, ἤγουν ὁ ταῦρος. Hdn. II 567.8: περίνος τὸ αἰδίον. A variant πέριλος or πέριλλος is also attested (Trapp et al. 2007, p. 1277, Daremberg 1854, p. 14), but in Sanguinatius Poem. de corp.part. 47 this refers to the female genitalia rather than the male.

20 Gal. 19.130: περινῷ · τὸ περινέῳ, endorsed by Foes 1588, p. 497.

21 Melet., De nat.hum. 98.31 τὸ δὲ ὑποκάτω τῶν διδύμων περίνον.

22 As discussed above, this is possibly a ghost-sense invented to explain the use of περίνεοι in Arist., GA 71633.

23 Tz., Schol. in Arist. Pl. 648: περαῖνειν δὲ καὶ τὸ συνουσίαξεν δήλοι. περίνα γὰρ πολλὰ μὲν ἄλλα σημαίνει, ἄλλα καὶ τὸ αἰδίον. Psell., Poemata 6.463: τὸ δὲ ἀνδρῶν μόριον περαῖνα που καλοῦσι (v.l. περίνα, πίρινα). In the spurious 61.30 this is used as a nominative περίνα or περίνα, which is also found in Sanguinatius, Poem. de corp.part. 46 in the form περίνα.

24 Ps.-Zonar. περίνος · τὸ αἰδίον.

The claim in Overduin 2015, p. 399, that περίς and πηρίς are variants of a single word seems to be incorrect, since in their actual attestations in Hipponax and...
Nicander their meanings are clearly different. However, there does seem to be some contamination at work. There are two possible signs of this: firstly, the apparent semantic crossing between the two word-families, and secondly, the fact that derivatives in -ίς -ίνος are not particularly common, which makes the co-existence of πηρίς and περίς somewhat suspicious.

It is worth noting that the best evidence for semantic contamination comes from the glosses of the scholiasts, grammarians and lexicographers, and the Byzantine confusion of περίναιος and περίνα. If we disregard these, the main piece of evidence is the fact that περίναιος seems to have been thought of as ‘the area by the scrotum’26. This does not seem conclusive in itself, since περίναιος could just mean ‘the area by the genitals’. However, the similarity of πηρίς and περίς, together with the evidence from the glosses, suggests that contamination may well have been involved both in the formation of πηρίς and in the semantics of περίναιος and περίναιος.

In all other respects, the morphology and derivational pattern of both word-families is entirely straightforward. The individual semantic developments involved are equally commonplace: for example, ‘pouch’ is cross-linguistically by far the most frequent etymological source for words for scrotum. Sometimes the word for scrotum is a derivative, as here for πηρίς from πήρα; in other cases the same word is simply reapplied, sometimes with a specification ‘pouch of the testes’. Further shifts in meaning from ‘scrotum’ to ‘testicle(s)’ or a more general ‘genitals’ are also common; an additional development to ‘penis’ is not unknown, but is considerably rarer27.

The following parallels show how widespread these developments are. From Latin we have scrotum itself, generally identified with scrautum ‘leather pouch for arrows’ and with some apparent connection to scortum ‘skin, hide’28; this illustrates an additional pathway, leather > leather pouch > scrotum, which is also found in Welsh cwd. ‘Leather’ was also the original sense of ON hredjar ‘scrotum’, which shows a further development to ‘testicle’ in Danish ræde. The development to ‘testicle’ reoccurs in German Hode, apparently cognate with Welsh cwd. Latin bursa ‘leather pouch’ (a loan from Greek βύρσα ‘leather’) provides a new word for scrotum in Romance languages, as seen in Port. bolsa ‘coat pocket, scrotum’ alongside bolsa ‘bag’. The further development to ‘testicle’ is seen in Rom. bos, boase ‘testicles’29. Polish mośnja and Slovene mošnja mean both ‘pouch’ and ‘scrotum’, but Russian has mošna ‘pouch’, mošonka ‘scrotum’, while in Serbian, ‘scrotum’ is

26 E.g. Melet., De nat.hom. 98.31 τὸ δὲ ὑποκάτω τῶν διδύμων περίνιον; Gal. 19.130: περινυό τῷ περινήῳ ἡμεῖς δὲ ὁ τόπος ὁ μεταξύ τοῦ ὀσχέου καὶ τῆς ἕδρας.
27 The development to ‘penis’ is occasionally found for Eng. cod and French couille; cf. dial. Hungarian mony ‘egg, testicle, penis’.
29 Adams 1982, p. 76.
mošnice. Icelandic has pungur ‘pouch, scrotum’; Norwegian kodd shows the full range of meanings ‘pillow, scrotum, testicle’, while OSw. kodde and Dutch kodde have become specialised as ‘testicle’. Early modern English cod ‘purse, scrotum’ also shows this additional development, as seen in the plural cods, coddes ‘testicles’. The same development is found in English cullions (from French couillons) and Spanish cojones from Latin côleī ‘testicles’, apparently related to culleus ‘leather sack’.30

Outside Indo-European, we have Finnish kivespussi ‘pouch of the testes’, but also the colloquial pussit ‘scrotum’ and munapussit, literally ‘egg-pouches’ (compare colq. English nut-sack, ball-bag). Northern Saami buđđá ‘scrotum, testicle’ is also from an original ‘pouch’; additional examples are Yurak Nenets pāda ‘pouch, scrotum’, and from the Kiranti languages of Nepal, Dumi phoksɨ ‘bag, scrotum’.

To conclude our collection of parallels for the development pouch > scrotum, we can note that Greek itself shows the same development for other words for pouch. For ὄσχη (also ὄσχεος, ὄσχειν, ὄσχεα), the technical term for scrotum in medical literature, there is the Hesychian gloss ὄσχεα· βαλλάντια, μαρσύππια ἤ τὸ τῶν διδύμων ἀγγεῖον, which suggests that the meaning ‘pouch’ was primary. The word βαλάντιον ~ βαλλάντιον is also cited as a term for the scrotum in Theophilus Protospatharius: περιέχονται οὖν οἱ ὄρχεις ὑπὸ τινος δέρματος έοικότος θυλάκῳ· τοῦτο βαλάντιον ὀνομάζεται, ὑπὸ δὲ τῶν ἀνατομικῶν ἰατρῶν ὄσχεος.33 Also, in the Hippiatrica we find κώρυκος and θυλάκη as words for the scrotum of a horse.34

Finally, an anonymous reviewer kindly points me to an article by Méndez Dosuna, where it is suggested that Aristophanes and Euripides play on an alternative meaning ‘scrotum’ for both πήρα and θύλακος.35

As mentioned above, there are equally convincing parallels for the development from ‘pointed object’ to ‘penis’, which supports the analysis of περίς as a formation from the root of πέρῳ ‘pierce’ and περόνη ‘pin’, with the same suffix seen in γλωχίς ‘pointed end or blade, barb’. It is conceivable that the later derivative περίναιος ~ περίνεος ‘perineum’ developed directly from περίς by means of a semantic weak-

30 The problem in the correspondence may be a sign that this is a loanword: de Vaan 2008, pp. 124, 150.

31 These last examples were gathered from the online databases at http://www.starling-rinet.ru.

32 Beekes 2010, p. 1122, charmingly translates this as «bags, purses or a sack of twins (sens. obsc.).». In fact, δίδυμοι is a regular term for the testes in post-Classical Greek, as in Plu., Alex. 57.

33 Theophilus Med., De corporis humani fabrica 5.28.20.

34 Hippiatr. 73.1.

35 Méndez Dosuna 2015, discussing πήρα at Ar., Pl. 298, θυλάκιον at Ar., Ra. 1203 and θύλακος at Ar., Ec. 820, V. 1087, E., Cyc. 182.
ening ‘penis’ > ‘genitals’; in this case, the attestations of περίνεος, περίνεοι ‘male genitals’ in Aristotle’s GA would provide the crucial missing link. However, it seems equally likely that the meanings of περίς and its derivatives were widened as the result of semantic contamination with πηρίς ‘scrotum’. This is mirrored by the Byzantine attestations of πειρήν (most commonly found as πειρήνα), which also means ‘penis’\(^{\text{36}}\) and is apparently also from the ‘pierce’ root (cf. πειρά ‘sword-point’), but is hopelessly confused with πηρίνα in the manuscripts\(^{\text{37}}\).

The other base-word of these two word-families, πήρα ‘pouch’, still has no clear etymology. The eta appears to be from *ē rather than *ā, since the dialect form is ā πήρα (if we can trust Theocritus, who is usually reliable in such matters). However, a supposed Ionic variant πάρη is mentioned twice by Eustathius, in his commentaries on the Iliad and Odyssey. This is puzzling, since the variation of πήρα, πήρη, πάρη does not fit any regular patterns of dialect correspondences. The only obvious comparison is the variation in ἀθάρη, ἀθήρα ‘gruel’, which even has a variant ἀθέρα (Phot.) or ἀθέρη (Gal.). However, the parallel is not exact, since we find ἀθάρη even in Attic (leading Beekes to posit *at‘arwā, with the same development as Att. δέρη, κόρη)\(^{\text{38}}\). As for the later variant ἀθέρα or ἀθέρη, this is apparently merely the result of folk-etymological contamination with ἀθήρ ἀθέρος ‘chaff, awn’ and its thematised derivative ἀθέρα (Arist. fr. apud Ath., Physiologus).

In fact, further investigation suggests that πάρη is probably a ghost-word. Both of its attestations in Eustathius refer to the grammarian Heraclides, who apparently explained δάκνω as the result of a characteristic Ionic shortening of eta to alpha also found in μεσαμβρία (sic), πάρη, λελακυῖα and μεμακυῖα\(^{\text{39}}\). The other forms mentioned here are all genuine, even if they do not form a coherent group as Heraclides believed. However, it is significant that when the same statement is repeated, without the ascription to Heraclides, in the Παρεκβολαὶ τοῦ μεγάλου ῥήματος spuriously attributed to Herodian, the pair πήρη πάρη is replaced by Πῆρις Πάρις\(^{\text{40}}\). This is presumably connected with the widespread ancient etymology explaining the name of

\(^{\text{36}}\) A quotation from Numenius in Ath., VII 74.6 mentions a fish or sea-creature called πειρήν, used as bait. This may be unrelated, or could be named after a perceived resemblance: compare pintle or pintle-fish (a Scottish word for sand-eels and other species of similar appearance), penis-fish (Urechis unicinctus) and piss-cock (a fishermen’s name for sea-squirts), all of which refer to small species used as bait.

\(^{\text{37}}\) Thus, in Ps.-Zonar. we find πηρίνος · τὸ αἰδοῖον. The confusion led Daremberg 1854, p. 14, to emend πηρίνα in Sanguinatius to πηρίνα and translate it as ‘scrotum, perineum’. However, as recognised by Trapp et al. 2007, p. 1253, it is more likely to be the same word as πειρήνα, πηρίνα ‘penis’ in Psell. and Ps.-Psell.

\(^{\text{38}}\) Beekes 2010, p. 28.

\(^{\text{39}}\) Eust. Comment. ad Il. I 47.1, Comment. ad Od. II 14.4.

\(^{\text{40}}\) Ps.-Herod., Exc. Verb. 23.34.
Paris from πήρα, supposedly from his being placed in a shepherd’s pouch as a baby, when his parents attempted to get rid of him to foil the prophecy that he would bring ruin to Troy. The form Πήρις, which is attested nowhere else, may have been created purely on the basis of this etymology.

It seems likely that the alleged Ionic πάρη was also an ad hoc creation to justify the etymology which connected Πάρις with πήρα, Ion. πήρη. This would explain why the author of the Παρεκβολαι apparently invented a form Πήρις, since if he had known of a variant πάρη the etymology would not have required any further justification. It is worth noting that the connection of Paris and πήρη is a well-known etymology which is frequently mentioned in the ancient commentaries, whereas the evidence for πάρη and Πήρις is restricted to the three passages mentioned above. It is also worth remembering that ancient etymologies were often made on the basis of very vague resemblances, so the discrepancy in vocalism between πήρα and Πάρις would not have been a stumbling-block. In other words, the etymology does not in itself support the idea that πάρη was genuine, and may even have been responsible for its invention.

The modern approach to etymology cannot help us to answer this question, since πήρα has no clear cognates apart from Latin pērō ‘a crude kind of boot (supposedly made from rawhide)’, which is generally taken to be a loan from Greek (or rather, a derivative of the Latin borrowing pēra), with a straightforward semantic shift from ‘leather pouch’ to ‘crude leather boot’. Apart from this, there are apparently no good candidates for relatives outside Greek: the resemblance between πηρίς πηρῖνος and Hitt. paršinuš ‘genitals’ is coincidental (the Hittite word’s primary meanings seem to be ‘cheeks, buttocks, hips’), and a connection between πήρα and Alb. porrc ‘cow’s stomach’ seems even less likely.

Since there is no apparent etymology, it is worth considering the suggestion that πήρα is a loanword, perhaps from a local substratum. The semantics of πήρα tie in rather well with this possibility, since from its first attestation in the Odyssey it refers to a beggar’s pouch or shepherd’s knapsack, which is not just a characteristic item of material culture (a field where borrowings are common), but one especially associated with rural life.

Furnée, who went even further than Beekes in his quest for substratum borrowings in Greek, not only identified πήρα as a classic example of a Pre-Greek word, but sought to connect it with βηρίδες, περιβάριδες, περίβάρα ‘a kind of shoes worn by women’. This would potentially bring Latin pērō back into the equation as a

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41 Orel 1998, p. 339, derives this from porr ‘oven’, although it is worth noting that it is also suspiciously similar to the Romani word for stomach, porr ~ perr, which is related to Hindi peṭ ‘stomach’.

42 Furnée 1972, pp. 151-152.
vital source of evidence, rather than a mere secondary loan from Greek. This is perhaps a step too far: not only is the phonological resemblance less compelling, but βηρίδες and περιβαρίδες are often connected to βᾶρις ‘a kind of boat or raft’, which would take them further from the semantic field of our word-family. Thus, it is probably not worth pursuing this line of investigation. However, the idea that πήρα is a loanword makes good sense. Words for ‘pouch’ are very often borrowings, as is the case with Latin bursa, pēra and perhaps also culleus. Another good example is English sack (a true wanderwort, passing from Semitic into Greek σάκκος into Late Latin saccus). The picture is repeated within Greek itself: there are several words for pouches and sacks (e.g. ἄσκος, βαλλάντιον, γυλιός, θύλακος, κίβις, κώρυκος, μάρσιππος ~ μάρσππος, σάκκος, φάσκωλος, not to mention Hesychian glosses such as θαλλίς · μάρσιππος μακρός; θάλλικα · σάκκου εἶδος; μανάνιον · σάκκος; σαγίς · πήρα; σύλαιον · θύλακον and the aforementioned ὄσχεα), but hardly any of them have a clear etymology, and there are often good reasons for thinking that they are borrowings. It seems likely that the same is true for πήρα.

This investigation of the Greek words for scrotum and perineum has confirmed that there are two separate word-families involved: one based on πήρα ‘pouch’, a word of unknown and possibly substratal origin, and another based on περίς ‘pe-nis’, apparently from the Indo-European root *per-. The medical term περίναιος / περίναιον appears to be a derivative of this noun περίς, with possible semantic contamination from πηρίς. This provides a much better explanation for the Greek word for perineum than the confused suggestions of Meister, which are given undue prominence in the existing etymological dictionaries.

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43 De Vaan 2008, p. 150.

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