The etymology of Latvian näkt ‘to come’

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It is attractive to compare näkt with kakt ‘to come to an end’, kacēt ‘to try to reach’, tapt ‘to become’, rast ‘to find’. Lith. kākti, tāpti (preterit tāpē beside tāpo), rāsti, which Stang (1966, 346f.) has identified as original perfects.

In the new Latvian etymological dictionary (Karulis 1992, 616) we read about näkt ‘to come’, Lith. nōkšt ‘to grow ripe’: “Vārda cilme ir neskaidra”. A similar judgment is found in Stang’s comparative grammar (1966, 335): “Die Etymologie des Wortes ist unsicher”.

Endzeltn’s (1935) connection of the word with Gothic neh(a), Old High German nā(h) cannot be correct because the Baltic root vowel points unambiguously to *-eH₂-, which is incompatible with the Germanic vocalism. We must evidently start from a meaning ‘to reach’, cf. bērns jau nāca liels, viņš nāca it labi vēcs (Mühlenbach 1925-27, 699), Lith. also ‘to pursue’, e.g. Aš bēgau tuo tāvēs, tu mane nokei ir ieeškojai (Žodynas 1970, 854).

From a morphological point of view, the verb näkt differs from the usual pattern of intransitive verbs because it has an ē-preterit nāca, which is also found in Lithuanian dialects. It follows that the preterit cannot be derived from a thematic aorist (cf. Stang 1966, 379). As Lithuanian has a derived present nōksta, nokią, it is improbable that root of the verb represents an original present stem. It is therefore attractive to compare näkt with kakt ‘to come to an end’, kacēt ‘to try to reach’, tapt ‘to become’, rast ‘to find’, Lith. kākti, tāpti (preterit tāpē beside tāpo), rāsti, which Stang (1966, 346f.) has identified as original perfects.

The closest relative of the verb näkt now seems to be the Old Irish preterit t-ánaic ‘(he) came’, which represents a reduplicated perfect that can be identified with Vedic ānāśa, āśur ‘(he, they) reached’ from *H₂eH₂noka, *H₂eH₂nkr (cf. Beekes 1979, 18). The same verb may underlie the Old English perfect present geneah, genugon ‘suffice(s)’ (cf. Kortlandt 1992, 106). It must be separated from the Greek reduplicated aorist ēveγκέιν, which represents *H₁neH₁nke/o-, the root of which is reflected in Latvian nest, Lith. nėšti ‘to carry’. This leaves us with a number of questions.

First of all, it must be clarified why the final consonant of the root is reflected as -k-, not -s- (Lith. -š-). This does not seem to be a major problem. The original palatovelar was regularly depalatalized in Balto-Slavic before
the nasal present suffix which is attested in Vedic asnoti ‘obtains’ (cf. Kortlandt 1978, 241). Since the root *H₂nek- ‘reach’ was in danger of merging with the root *H₁nek- ‘carry’ when the distinction between the initial laryngeals was lost, the generalization of the difference in the final consonant was an obvious analogical development.

A second question concerns the way initial n- was restored in a Proto-Baltic perfect sg. *ānak-, pl. *ānk-. I see three possibilities:

1. The perfect stem could simply be replaced by *nāk- on the basis of a full-grade alternant stem *nek-, which is attested in Vedic, especially because sg. *-na-, pl. *-n- looked like a nasal present infix. Note that the analogical elimination of an apparent nasal infix is in fact attested in segt ‘to cover’, Lith. sėgti ‘to fasten’, cf. Polish siegać ‘to reach’, Vedic sajati ‘hangs’, perfect sasañja, which has a non-initial nasal in the root.

2. The initial nasal could be taken from a preceding prefix, as in nemt beside jemt ‘to take’. Here Old English genugon ‘(they) suffice’ from *gan-ung- offers a parallel.

3. The reconstruction of a paradigm *ānak-, *ānk- may be wrong. Since Gothic has full reduplication in ga-staistald ‘(he) possessed’, skaiškaidun ‘(they) severed’, we may have to start from *H₂neH₂noke, *H₂neH₂nkr, which yielded Proto-Baltic *nānak-, *nānk-. If this is correct, the initial nasal was never restored, but the apparent nasal infix was eliminated.

In fact, the forms with an apparent nasal infix may not have been eliminated immediately. It is equally possible that the paradigm was reinterpreted as a present tense beside a preterit without a nasal infix. The nasal present was then eventually replaced by the simple thematic present in Latvian and by the sta-present in Lithuanian.

A final point to be noted is the fixed stress in nākt (cf. Büga 1924, 250f.). It is probable that the stress became fixed on the initial syllable when the alternating paradigm was eliminated. This accentuation is in accordance with the usual fixed stress in intransitive verbs.

The Lithuanian pair of derived presents nōksta, nōkia has a perfect analogue in Latin nanciscor, nanciō ‘(I) obtain’. The medial nasal in these forms is usually explained from a nasal infix (e.g., Schrijver 1991, 491). The Baltic analogue now suggests that the present may have been built on a perfect stem *nānk-. This stem relates to Old Irish i-ánaic ‘(he) came’, which reflects *H₂eH₂nonke, in the same way as Latvian nākt relates to Vedic ānāsa ‘(he) reached’ from *H₂eH₂noke. Thus, we may have to reconstruct an Italo-Celtic perfect sg. *ānok-, pl. *ānk- which developed like Baltic in Latin and like Vedic in Celtic; note especially the analogical replacement of Vedic ānāsa by ānamsa, which is seemingly identical with the Old Irish form.
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REFERENCES


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