

<https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2026.15.07>

A quest for a pest: A Historical and Etymological Exploration of Termite-Related Terms in Modern Persian

Katayoon NAMIRANIAN , Mohsen MAHMOUDI 

Shiraz University, Iran

Abstract: *This study aims to conduct an etymological and comparative analysis of several terms used to refer to termites in Modern Persian, as well as to explore the naming of this insect and its historical development within Indo-Iranian and Indo-European. Termites have annoyed humans throughout history, primarily due to their role in the destruction of organic materials, particularly wood. Consequently, the terminology associated with this insect not only reflects its biological and behavioral traits but also reveals cultural attitudes embedded in its naming. Employing historical and comparative linguistic methods, this research examines the words used to designate termites in Persian from both structural and semantic perspectives. The data for the study have been sourced from Dehkhoda's Great Persian Dictionary, historical lexicons, and Indo-European etymological references. The etymological analysis reveals that concepts such as "eating," "cutting," and "destruction" are directly inspired by termites' biological characteristics and are mirrored in their linguistic representation. The findings indicate that some of the terms associated with termites have been shaped by the historical interaction between the Persian language and local dialects. Additionally, the study highlights the influence of ancient religious beliefs on the naming of creatures like termites, which are often perceived as pests. These results illuminate the broader relationship between language and human interaction with nature, contributing to the understanding of historical linguistics and the cultural underpinnings of terminology.*

Keywords: Etymology, Indo-Iranian languages, insects, New Persian, Proto-Indo-European, termite

Introduction

The vocabulary of any language serves as a mirror of its speakers' history, culture, and worldview, encapsulating the collective experiences and attitudes of a society. Within this framework, the naming of fauna – particularly animals and insects – offers a unique lens through which to understand human interactions with the natural

* Corresponding author. Email: katayoon.namiranian@saadi.shirazu.ac.ir

environment. These names often reflect cultural attitudes, practical concerns, and even the scientific and social understanding of the time. Termites, for instance, have historically been a significant biological challenge for humans due to their destructive impact on buildings and objects made of organic materials. It is therefore unsurprising that the terminology for termites frequently draws on their biological and behavioral traits, while also embodying human attitudes and beliefs about this pest.

A comparative study of termite-related terminology in Indo-European, middle and ancient Iranian languages reveal the processes underlying the formation and evolution of these words in Modern Persian. Using an etymological and comparative approach, this research investigates how termites are named in New Persian, considering historical and cultural contexts. Historical linguistic methods enable the reconstruction of older forms of the relevant words, while analyses of ancient texts and historical dictionaries yield insights into their origins and subsequent developments.

This study seeks to address several key questions. How was the nomenclature of termites formed in New Persian, and what transformations has it undergone over time? To what extent do these terms reflect the biological and behavioral characteristics of termites? How have cultural and religious factors shaped the creation of words for this insect? These questions are particularly significant because termite-related vocabulary has been relatively underexplored from an etymological perspective in New Persian. By answering them, this research enriches our understanding of Persian etymology and provides a deeper appreciation of the historical and cultural dimensions embedded in its lexicon.

A reliable approach to uncovering the etymology of words related to termites – pests that damage wood and other organic materials – is to examine the etymological structures of insect names in related languages. This comparative method allows for insights into shared linguistic roots and cultural perceptions across Indo-European languages.

One relevant example is the Proto-Germanic word **amaitjō-*, reconstructed as the term for “ant.” This word has a cognate in Ancient Greek, *μίδας* (*mídas*), which refers to a type of grain pest.¹ Similarly, Proto-Germanic provides another term, *mītōn*, meaning “tick,” which is cognate with the verb *mītōn* (“to cut, sting, pierce”).² Such connections highlight the linguistic association between these insects and their biting or piercing behaviors.

In Tocharian B, the word *peṣele* denotes “a kind of worm or insect” and reflects the Proto-Indo-European root **bhosēlo-* or **bhēsēlo-*, meaning “devourer, eater.” This term, in turn, derives from the Proto-Indo-European root **bhes-*, which signifies

¹ Kroonen, 2013: 24.

² Kroonen, 2013: 370.

“to grind, chew, or swallow”.³ The semantic connection to chewing or destruction is also evident in Ancient Greek, where the verb *δάκνω* (*daknō*) means “to bite” or “to sting” and traces back to the Proto-Indo-European root **denk-*, meaning “to bite”.⁴

Further examples include the Proto-Celtic term **tārāko-*, meaning “bug” or “tick,” which derives from the element **tar-wo-* “to destroy, to strike”. This term itself evolved from the Proto-Indo-European root **terh₁-*, meaning “to pierce” or “to grind”.⁵

These examples highlight a recurring linguistic pattern: the naming of insects, particularly those that are wood-eating or otherwise destructive, often reflects their biological behaviors and interactions with human environments. Through the analysis of such patterns, this study uncovers the profound linguistic and cultural associations tied to termites and similar species. Notably, the insects referenced – each regarded as a pest – derive their names from roots associated with concepts such as “cutting,” “grinding,” and “piercing” across various Indo-European languages. This semantic connection emphasizes the tendency to name these creatures based on their destructive actions, a reflection of how humans perceive and experience their impact.

Building on this observation, the conceptual framework used in these linguistic constructions offers a valuable method for tracing the etymology of terms studied in this research. By searching for similar notions of “cutting,” “grinding,” and “piercing” within the words examined, it becomes possible to identify their linguistic roots and uncover their historical development. This approach not only enhances our understanding of the words associated with termites but also sheds light on the broader patterns of word formation within Indo-European languages. It illustrates how human interactions with nature are encoded in language, revealing a shared cultural and cognitive framework that spans across linguistic boundaries. Therefore, the pattern obtained can also be utilized in the etymological analysis of the words examined in this study.

Literature Review

The study of Indo-European insect etymology is a relatively underexplored field. Existing research is primarily found in thematic etymological works on Indo-European languages rather than as standalone studies. This section reviews the most significant sources relevant to the topic of this article.

One of the foundational works in thematic Indo-European vocabulary is Buck’s Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Major Indo-European Languages.⁶ This comprehensive resource provides extensive data on synonyms in Indo-European

³ Adams, 2013: 429.

⁴ Beekes & van Beek, 2010: 299.

⁵ Matasovic, 2009: 370.

⁶ Buck, 1988.

languages, offering valuable insights into their etymological development. Buck's approach focuses on the semantics of terms across related languages, shedding light on how names were thematically evolved and adapted from Indo-European roots. This work is indispensable for understanding the cultural and linguistic mechanisms that influenced the naming of various entities, including insects.

The comprehensive work by Ivanov and Gamkrelidze⁷ further complements earlier research. Their entries explore the origins and transformations of animal names in Indo-European languages, identifying patterns of linguistic change that are highly relevant to this study.

Another crucial source is the work of Mallory and Adams,⁸ which offers a detailed framework for examining the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) linguistic system. This system serves as the foundation for numerous modern languages, including Persian. Mallory and Adams provide reconstructions of PIE roots and their associated semantic fields, which are essential for tracing the etymological origins of insect names in Iranian languages. Their thematic analysis of environmental and cultural factors in Indo-European language communities helps contextualize why specific terms were coined and how their meanings evolved.

Finally, Rezai-Baghbidi⁹ contributes directly to the Persian context. In his article, he explores the etymology of the vernacular Persian word *tarda* and its connections to other Indo-European terms, including Latin. His analysis, closely aligned with the present study, provides a direct link to the broader Indo-European etymological framework, making it an essential reference for this research.

These sources collectively provide a robust foundation for understanding the etymology of insect-related terms in Indo-European languages, bridging gaps between linguistic evolution, cultural factors, and the naming practices in Persian and its related languages.

Etymological discussion

In this section, we will undertake an etymological analysis of ten Modern Persian terms used to denote “termite,” as documented in the Dehkhoda Persian Dictionary,¹⁰ widely regarded as one of the most authoritative and comprehensive modern Persian dictionaries. These terms include *dīvāk*, *kerm-e čūbxār*, *lanbak*, *mūrča-e sefid*, *mūrd/yāna*, *rīshmīz*, *rīvanja/u*, *rīvča*, *tarda*, and *tāfšak*. Each entry will be examined in detail to uncover its linguistic origins, semantic development, and potential

⁷ Gamkrelidze & Ivanov, 1995.

⁸ Mallory & Adams, 2006.

⁹ Rezai-Baghbidi, 2011.

¹⁰ Dehkhoda, 1998.

connections to cultural, historical, or environmental factors. These words are reviewed in alphabetical order.

dīvak

An almost obsolete term listed in the Dehkhoda Persian Dictionary for termites is *dīvak*, along with its derivative form *dīvča*.¹¹ This word has also been occasionally used to refer to other pests, such as the wool moth (a pest that feeds on wool), various species of tree/wood caterpillars, and even leeches. The etymology of *dīvak*, a diminutive form of *dīv*, meaning “tiny demon”, traces its roots to ancient Iranian beliefs and cultural perceptions of harmful creatures.

In Zoroastrianism, which is based on the duality of the two forces of good (Ahura Mazda), and evil (Ahriman), in the universe, this world is a place of confrontation between these two forces and their creations. Therefore in their belief, insects such as ants and termites were categorized as harmful, demonic entities known as *Xrafstar* “vermin”. These *Xrafstars* were believed to be the creations of Ahriman, the malevolent spirit, and encompassed a wide range of creatures, including frogs, reptiles, scorpions, ants, wasps, and even predatory animals like wolves. Within this religious framework, all beings associated with Ahriman were referred to as *dīv* “demon”, tasked with disrupting and harming the creations of Ahura Mazda, the supreme deity. Consequently, *Xrafstars* were also viewed as demonic or malevolent entities.¹²

Given this theological and cultural context, it is reasonable to surmise that the term *dīv*, in its diminutive form *dīvak*, would have been applied to creatures such as termites, leeches, and wool-eating moths – organisms associated with destruction and decay. This usage highlights the interplay between linguistic expression and the ancient cultural and religious views that shaped the naming of pests, underscoring the symbolic association between destructive creatures and demonic forces in Zoroastrian thought.

In the *Bundahišn*, a renowned Zoroastrian Middle Persian text, the term *dēwōk* appears once to describe a *Xrafstar* – a demonic creature categorized as harmful to plants. While the exact identity of this *Xrafstar* remains uncertain and it is unclear whether it refers to an herbivorous caterpillar, a termite, or another type of creature, nevertheless, there is no ambiguity about its classification as a pest. The text explicitly identifies *dēwōk* as a being that causes damage to vegetation, aligning it with the Zoroastrian tradition of associating such harmful entities with the demonic creations of Ahriman. This singular mention provides valuable insight into

¹¹ Dehkhoda 1998: v.8, 11450, 11445.

¹² Hinnells, 1997: 56.

the linguistic and cultural framework used in ancient Iranian texts to describe and classify destructive organisms:

5.3. *andar-iz gētīg: tom ō āsmān, tišn āb, hixr ud xrafstar ud wazay ō zamīg, dēwōk ō urwar suy, ud tišn gōspandān marg ud sēj* (Pakzad, 2005: 72).

5.3. Also, in the material world, darkness against the sky, thirst against water, filth, vermin, and toads against the earth, caterpillar/termite(?) against plants, hunger and thirst against animals.

In this text, the form *dēwōk* (instead of **dēwak*) likely represents a dialectal variation that, with the addition of suffix -ak/-ōk (or -ag/ōg),¹³ serves as a diminutive of the Middle Persian *dēw*, meaning “demon” or “monster”. The Modern Persian word *dīv* evolved from Middle Persian *dēw*,¹⁴ which itself derived from Old Persian *daiva*.¹⁵ The Avestan equivalent of this term is *daēva*.¹⁶ In Sanskrit, the cognate form *dēvā-* carries the absolute meaning of “heavenly god”.¹⁷ This reflects a stark contrast to the beliefs of the ancient Iranians, as in ancient Indian religion, *dēvā-* referred to a group of benevolent deities.

The origin of this term traces back to the Proto-Indo-European period, where it appears across the major languages of this family. It ultimately denotes a sky deity, known by the reconstructed name **dieu-* or **deīuo-*.¹⁸ However, in the Iranian branch of the Indo-European languages, the word underwent significant semantic change. It evolved from signifying a “god” to representing “the gods of enemies”, then “false gods”, and eventually “demons” or “evil creatures”.¹⁹ This transformation illustrates the profound cultural and religious divergence within the Indo-Iranian linguistic traditions. In light of the above, it seems logical to call a harmful creature such as a wood-eating termite or a wool/fiber-destroying moth “little demon”. The sound change of this word can be shown as follows:

Old Iranian: **daiva-ka-* > Middle Persian: **dēwak/g* > New Persian: *dīvak*

Old Iranian: **daiva-ča-ka-* > Middle Persian: **dēwčak/g* > New Persian: *dīvča*

¹³ Weber, 2007: 955

¹⁴ MacKenzie, 1971: 26.

¹⁵ Schmitt, 2014: 163.

¹⁶ Bartholomae, 1904: 667.

¹⁷ Mayrhofer, 1992: 742.

¹⁸ Pokorny, 1959: 183-187.

¹⁹ Hinnells, 1997: 44.

Dehkhoda's dictionary lists three additional words for termites that appear to have a more recent structure compared to the previously mentioned terms and therefore do not necessitate etymological analysis,²⁰ as their components are straightforward and readily comprehensible to Persian speakers. Nonetheless, these words hold significance because they reflect how Persian speakers conceptualize and perceive these vermin, offering insight into the linguistic and cognitive frameworks used to describe such pests.

Regarding the term *kerm-e čūbxār* "woodworm", an important observation is that termites are conceptualized as worms. Given the existence of various types of woodworms, all of which were considered pests by the ancient Iranians, it seems that termites and woodworm larvae were regarded as the same due to the similar nature of the damage they inflicted. The Modern Persian word *kerm* "worm, caterpillar, larva" evolved from the Middle Persian *kirm* "worm, snake"²¹ and is closely related to the Sanskrit form *kṛmi-* "worm, fly larva".²² Both terms reflect the Proto-Indo-European root **kwr̥mi-*.²³

The middle component of the term, *čūb* "wood", is derived from the Middle Persian word *čōb*.²⁴ However, tracing its etymology beyond this point is not feasible. The final part of the compound, *xār* "eater", corresponds to the infinitive of the Middle Persian verb *xwardan* "to consume, eat".²⁵ This verb evolved from Old Iranian **hvar-*¹ "to eat",²⁶ which in turn reflects the Proto-Indo-European root **suel-* "to swallow".²⁷ This analysis demonstrates how the components of the term *kerm-e čūbxār* collectively describe the biological behavior of termites, while also highlighting the linguistic evolution of each part within the Indo-European language family.

The term *čūbxārak* is a more concise variant that has been transformed into a diminutive adjective. Additionally, the word *xora*, which in this context refers to termites, is also used in Persian to denote a leper. This dual usage likely draws on the destructive nature of leprosy, which damages the skin tissue of the body in a manner analogous to how termites degrade the structure of wood. The Middle Persian antecedent of this word can be reconstructed as **xwarak/g*, reflecting its historical linguistic roots.

²⁰ Dehkhoda 1998: v.7, 10097; 6, 8309; 12, 18290.

²¹ MacKenzie, 1971: 51.

²² Mayrhofer, 1992: 394.

²³ Pokorny, 1959: 649.

²⁴ MacKenzie, 1971: 23.

²⁵ MacKenzie, 1971: 95.

²⁶ Cheung, 2007: 147.

²⁷ Rix, 2001: 609.

lanbak

Lanbak is another term used to name termites in Persian dictionaries. In the Dehkhoda Dictionary, this word appears under the entry for *tāfšak*.²⁸ Another variant, *rə/amma*, is likely a modified form of the same term.²⁹

For the etymology of *lanbak*, if we interpret the phoneme “l” as having evolved from the older “δ” or “d”, its original form can be reconstructed as **δambak*. This reconstruction, due to the presence of the phoneme “d/δ”, suggests its origin lies in the Southwestern Iranian dialects. Consequently, the Old Persian form of this term was likely **dambaka-*. The Old Persian root **√damb* stems from the Old Iranian **√zamb*², meaning “to bite, to crush”.³⁰ This root, in turn, traces back to the Indo-European **√gembh-*, meaning “to tear, to crush”.³¹

The nasal phoneme “n” in *lanbak* appears to have been changed due to the assimilation of the labial “m” in proximity to “b”. In the variant *ramma*, the initial phoneme shifts to “r”, and the merging of adjacent phonemes “-mb-” results in the aggravate form “-mm-”. The phonetic transformations of these two terms can be diagrammed as follows:

Old Persian: **√damb-* ~ Old Iranian: **√zamb-* “to cut, to gring”

Old Persian: **dambaka-* > Middle Persian/ Early New Persian: **δambak* > Early New

Persian: **lambak* > *lanbak*

**lamba(k)* > **ramba* > *ramma*

mūrča-ī sefid

In New Persian, the term *mūrča-ī sefid* is also used to refer to termites.³² This compound word consists of two parts: *mūrča* meaning “(small) ant” (see *mūryāna*) and *sefid* or *safid* meaning “white,” which corresponds to the English term “white ant” with the same meaning. The second part, *sefid*, is also recorded in the older form of New Persian as *se/apīd* and existed in Middle Persian as *spēd* meaning “white”.³³ It is also found in Avestan texts as *spaēta-* and *spita-*.³⁴ The Sanskrit equivalent of this term is *śvetá-*,³⁵ which ultimately evolved from Proto-Indo-European **k̑eito-* meaning

²⁸ Dehkhoda 1998: v.4, 6277.

²⁹ Dehkhoda 1998: v.4, 12245.

³⁰ Cheung, 2007: 463.

³¹ Rix, 2001: 162.

³² Dehkhoda, 1998: v.14/21776.

³³ MacKenzie, 1971: 76.

³⁴ Bartholomae, 1904: 1609, 1623, 1625.

³⁵ Mayrhofer, 1996: v.2, 679.

“bright, white”.³⁶ If we assume that this word has a Middle Persian origin, it may have been constructed by analogy with terms such as *hōm ī spēd*.³⁷

mūryāna

In the Dehkhoda dictionary, the most common Persian term *mūryāna*, along with its various dialectal forms – *mūrāna*, *mūrdāna*, *mūrčāna* – is clearly derived from the word *mūr* meaning “ant”.³⁸ This derivation is logical given the apparent similarity between the two insects. The term *mūrča*, a diminutive of *mūr*, evolved from Middle Persian *mōr*,³⁹ and in Avestan, it appears in the forms *maurvay-* and *maoirī-*.⁴⁰ According to ancient Zoroastrian texts, ants are considered harmful, demonic creatures, classified as part of the *Xrafstars* (i.e., vermin). In Iranian languages, this insect, along with its various name forms, shares an Indo-European origin with the inflected Sanskrit forms *vamrá/ī-* and *valmīka-*,⁴¹ stemming from Proto-Indo-European **moru-o/i-*.⁴²

No term for termites appears in the surviving Avestan texts or any other ancient Iranian source. However, in New Persian, the construction of *mūryāna* suggests that a derivative of the word *mōr* was used to name this insect, a construction likely present in ancient times. This term was also used for iron rust, due to the similar damage caused by both rust and termites – ancient peoples viewed rust as having a destructive effect on iron, much like the damage termites cause to wood.

In certain dialects, such as *Khānsāri*, a central dialect of Iran, *mūryāna* is pronounced *mūrdūnā*.⁴³ While this form retains the original “d”, it likely represents an older form of the word in early new Persian as **mūrdāna*. Given that the conversion of “d” to “y” (*d > δ > y*) is a known phonological change in new Persian, this form may reflect an older variant, suggesting that *mūryāna* evolved from the Middle Persian **mōrdānak* and Old Iranian **maurīdānaka-*. Examples of the conversion of the “d” consonant to “y” in Middle and New Persian include the evolution of words like *pād/δ > pāy* “foot”, *mēd/δān > mayān* “middle”, and *mād/δak > māya* “matter”.

The presence of the word *dāna* “grain, seed” in the second part of *mūrd/yāna* evokes the Avestan compound *dānō.karš-* “seed puller”,⁴⁴ used as an adjective for ants as grain pests. However, given that termites are typically wood pests rather than grain

³⁶ Pokorny, 1959: 628.

³⁷ Agostini & Thrope, 2020: 91.

³⁸ Dehkhoda, 1998: v.14/21776.

³⁹ MacKenzie, 1971: 56.

⁴⁰ Bartholomae, 1904: 1109, 1152.

⁴¹ Mayrhofer, 1996: 507.

⁴² Pokorny, 1959: 749.

⁴³ Hasandoust, 2014, vol. 4, 2657.

⁴⁴ Bartholomae, 1904: 734.

pests, this adjective likely reflects the termite's similarity in color, shape, or size to grains such as wheat.

Although the structure of the word *mūrčāna* suggests it is formed by combining *mūrča* with the adjectival suffix *-āna* (a remnant of Middle Persian *-ānag*,⁴⁵ it appears that this word was created by analogy with *mūrd/yāna*.

rīšmīž

This word, primarily used in New Persian specially in southern regions of Iran, is commonly employed to refer to termites,⁴⁶ although it is occasionally used to describe the wool moth. The first syllable of the word is familiar to Persian speakers and evokes the word *rīša* meaning “root”. This component, *rīš-*, evolved from the Old Middle Persian form *rēšak/g* meaning “root” or “fiber”, which refers to the root of a plant.⁴⁷ The root of this term derives from the Old Iranian form **√(u)rais*⁴⁸ and ultimately reflects the Indo-European root **√ureiǵ-* meaning “to turn around, wind”.⁴⁹

Given the feeding habits of termites (or wool moths), which have historically been regarded as pests by human societies, and considering that the names of pests typically reference the type of damage they cause, it can be inferred that the meaning of *rīšmīž* is likely related to damage to roots or fibers (of plants). Therefore, the second part of the word must complete this concept. If we interpret the final syllable of *rīšmīž*, *-iz*, as a diminutive suffix, we can hypothesize that the root of the remaining part, *-mī-*, stems from the Old Iranian root **√maiH* meaning “destruction, damage”.⁵⁰ This root also appears in Avestan in the compound *vīmītay-* meaning “damaged, destroyed”.⁵¹ Finally, the morphology of the word *rīšmīž* can be analyzed as follows:

rīš (< Middle Persian: *rēš(ag)*) + *-mī-* (< Old Iranian: **√maiH* “to destroy”) + *-iz* (Old Iranian: < **-iča*)

Therefore: *rīšmīž*: “Root/fiber destroyer”.

rīvanja/u

It seems more likely that this is a dialectal word that has made its way into Modern Persian. Variants such as *rīvanja*, *rīvanju*, *ravanju*, *ravanjak*, *ranjak*, and *rīvča* are

⁴⁵ Rastorguyeva, 1966: 30.

⁴⁶ Dehkhoda 1998: v.8/12089.

⁴⁷ MacKenzie, 1971: 72.

⁴⁸ Cheung, 2007: 437.

⁴⁹ Rix, 2001: 699.

⁵⁰ Cheung, 2007: 258.

⁵¹ Bartholomae, 1904: 1450.

vernacular forms recorded in the Dehkhoda dictionary.⁵² Notably, another form of this word is also documented in the dictionary as *rīvča*, which provides insight into the etymology of the first part of the word. In the phonetic and historical development of Persian, the transformation of the original dental stop “d” into the resonant “l” and later into “r”, through the fricative consonant “ð”, is a known process (see *lanbak*). Examples of such phonetic transformations can be observed in the following New Persian words:

- *dord* > *lo/erd* “residue, sediment”
- **daxša* > *laxša* “flame”
- **dīva* > *līva* “deceit”
- **kādīv* > *kālīv* “lunatic, foolish”

Although the transformation of “l” (from “d/ð”) to “r” in this case appears to be rare, the presence of the form *rīvča* strengthens the likelihood that this is a dialectal change. Therefore, the transformation of the first part of *rīv* from *dīv* can be illustrated as follows:

Middle Persian: *dēw-* > **d/δīv-* > **līv-* > New Persian: *rīv-*

The second part of the word can be linked to the New Persian verb *anjīdan*, meaning “to pierce, to chop, to carve,” which is cognate with the Parthian verb *hanjīdan/hanjīn-* meaning “to chop”⁵³ and the present participle of the Manichaean Middle Persian verb *hanzīn-* meaning “to cut into pieces”.⁵⁴ Two theories have been proposed regarding the origin of this word. Horn suggests that it is an archaic form **han-čay-*⁵⁵ derived from the Old Iranian root **√č/kai-* meaning “to pick, separate”,⁵⁶ while Henning proposes that it originates from the Old Iranian root **√zai(H)* meaning “to destroy; to take away, deprive of”,⁵⁷ which in turn reflects the Indo-European root **√gieH-* meaning “to seize by force, deprive”.⁵⁸

The evolution of this word can be illustrated as follows:

Early New Persian: **dēwanjak* > Early New Persian: **d/δīvanjak* > Early New Persian: **līvanjak* > New Persian: *rīvanja/uk*

⁵² Dehkhoda 1998: v.8/12496.

⁵³ Boyce, 1977: 46.

⁵⁴ Durkin-Meisterernst, 2004: 182.

⁵⁵ Horn, 1893: 27.

⁵⁶ Cheung, 2007: 299.

⁵⁷ Henning, 1977: 600.

⁵⁸ Rix, 2001: 167.

rīvča

The analysis of this word is given under the entry for *rīvanja/u*.

tarda

This word, still used today in central Iranian dialects such as those of Yazd and Kerman to refer to termites, appears in Dehkhoda as *tardak*, meaning “wheat worm”,⁵⁹ and is also found in early New Persian texts. Rezai-Baghbidi has compiled a detailed account of the textual evidence for this word and has proposed the Old Iranian root **√tard*, meaning “to pierce, to cut,” derived from the Indo-European **√terd-* with the same meaning. This interpretation seems plausible, given the evidence from Persian and Sanskrit.⁶⁰

As mentioned in the introduction, the concept of “to pierce, to cut” is a common theme in words for termites, wool moth larvae, various types of woodworms, and other plant pests, making such an analysis reasonable. This concept is reflected in the root of the Latin word *tarmes*, meaning “woodworm,” which comes from the Proto-Indo-European root **√terh₁* meaning “to grind, to pierce”.⁶¹ The archaic form of this word can be assumed to be the Old Iranian form **tardaka-*.

tāfšak

The word *tāfšak* “termite”, has a separate entry in the Dehkhoda dictionary.⁶² Given that termites are pests of wood, the etymology of this word likely relates to the meanings of “to grind” or “to carve.” It is evident that the *-ak* suffix at the end of the word is a diminutive noun ending, and in the main part of the word, the consonant cluster *-fš-* may represent a sound change of *-xš-*. This phenomenon is also seen in the Persian word *drafšīdan* “to cast rays, shine”, which corresponds to the original form *draxšīdan*. Consequently, the *tāfš-* part could be a modified form of *tāxš-*, a lengthened form of the Old Iranian root **√ta(x)š-* meaning “to carve, to make, to fashion.” This root is also found in the Avesta and other Iranian languages, where the consonant cluster “*xš*” merges into “*š*”, appearing as *√taš-*.⁶³ However, there is evidence of the root form *√taxš* in Old Persian, notably in the present participle *ham(a)taxš-* meaning “to work with”.⁶⁴ Since the consonant cluster “*xš*” is unique to

⁵⁹ Dehkhoda, 1998: v.5/6117.

⁶⁰ Rezai-Baghbidi, 2011: 29-30; Cheung, 2007: 380.

⁶¹ de Vaan, 2009: 616.

⁶² Dehkhoda, 1998: v.4/6277.

⁶³ Bartholomae, 1904: 644.

⁶⁴ Schmitt 2014: 253.

Old Persian and merges into “š” in other Iranian language branches, it appears that *tāfšak* evolved from the Old Persian form **tāxšaka-*.

The Sanskrit equivalent of this root, *√takṣ*, with meanings such as “to shape (by cutting), to prepare, to make, to carve”, preserves the original consonant cluster of the Indo-Iranian “*kṣ*”.⁶⁵ This root is also found in Ancient Greek in the word *téktōn* meaning “carpenter”,⁶⁶ as well as in the Balto-Slavic languages, such as the Old Bulgarian verb *tesàti* meaning “hew, to cut”⁶⁷ and the Common Baltic *tašýti* meaning “hew, cut”,⁶⁸ both preserving the meaning of carving. Ultimately, these forms trace back to the Indo-European verb **√tetk-* meaning “to make by cutting”.⁶⁹ A remnant of this root is found in New Persian in the verb *tirāšīdan* meaning “to scrape,” with an added non-derivative “r”.⁷⁰ Thus, *tāfšak* translates as “scraping insect.”

Conclusion

One of the key achievements of this research is the clarification of the phonological and semantic changes in words related to termites. The etymological study of these terms reveals that they derive from the Proto-Indo-European roots and ancient Iranian languages, particularly Avestan, Old Persian, and Middle Persian. Furthermore, the concept of “destruction,” which is similarly used in Indo-European languages such as Latin, the Germanic languages, and Tocharian-B to name this insect, is also reflected in the historical development of the Persian language.

In particular, terms related to termites (see Tab. 1) are often based on concepts such as similarity to ants, as seen in the words *mūrdāna*, *mūrčāna*, and *mūryāna*, as well as in the verbs “to eat”, “to make holes”, and “to destroy”, found in words like *lanbak*, *tāfšak*, *tarda*, *rīšmīž*, *kerm-e čubxār*, *čubxārak*, and *xora*. These words reflect human understanding of the nature and function of this insect within both biological and cultural contexts. Additionally, terms like *dīvāk*, *dīvča*, *rīvča*, *rīvanja*, and *rīvanjū*, which are derived from the word *dīv* “demon”, reflect the influence of ancient Iranian beliefs stemming from Zoroastrianism, which regarded harmful creatures as a type of demon created to harm human life. The words *dīvča* and *dīvāk* are also used to describe other harmful creatures, such as wool moths and leeches.

In terms of word formation, *mūrdāna*, *mūrčāna*, *mūryāna*, and *mūrča-ī sefid* are extensions of the word *mūr* “ant”. The words *tāfšak* and *lanbak*, based on their phonological structure, indicate their evolution from Old Persian. Although the words

⁶⁵ Mayrhofer, 1992: 612.

⁶⁶ Beekes & van Beek, 2010: 1460.

⁶⁷ Derksen, 2008: 491.

⁶⁸ Derksen, 2015: 459.

⁶⁹ Rix, 2001: 638.

⁷⁰ Cheung, 2007: 385.

rīšmīž, *tarda*, and *rīvča* are not used in standard Persian, they remain in use in various dialects.

Tab. 1. Conclusion of the studied words.

New Persian Word for “Termite”	Older Form(s)	Literal Meaning	Origin	Connection to the Synonyms
dīvak/dīvča	MP <i>dēwok</i> < * <i>dēwak</i> < OIrn. * <i>daivaka</i> -	“tiny demon”	PIE; OIrn.; MP; NP	<i>rīvča</i> , <i>rīvanja/ũ</i>
lanbak	OP * <i>dambaka</i> -	“tiny grinder”	PIE; OP; MP; NP	_____
mūryāna	Related to “mūrdāna”	“ant which resembles to a seed”	PIE; NP	<i>mūrdāna</i> , <i>mūrčāna</i> , <i>murče-ye sefid</i>
mūrdāna	MP * <i>mōrdānak</i> < OIrn * <i>marvidānaka</i> -	“ant which resembles to a seed”	PIE; OIrn.; MP; NP	<i>mūryāna</i> , <i>mūrčāna</i> , <i>murče-ye sefid</i>
mūrčāna	Related to <i>mūrdāna</i> through analogy	“like an ant”	PIE; NP	<i>mūryāna</i> , <i>mūrdāna</i> , <i>murče-ye sefid</i>
rīšmīž	Early NP/MP * <i>rēšmīž</i>	“root/fiber destroyer”	PIE; Vernacular NP	_____
rīvča	Related to “ <i>rīvanja/ũ</i> ”	“tiny demon”	PIE; Vernacular NP	<i>dīvak/dīvča</i> , <i>rīvanja/ũ</i>
rīvanja/ũ	Early NP * <i>dēwanjak</i>	“boring demon”	PIE; OIrn.; MP; NP	<i>rīvča</i> , <i>dīvak/dīvča</i> ,
tarda	OIrn * <i>tardaka</i> -; MP <i>tardak/g</i>	“penetrative, grinder”	PIE; Vernacular NP	_____
tāfšak	OP * <i>tāxšaka</i> -	“scraper, pricker”	PIE; OP; NP	_____
- kerm-e čubxār - čūbxārak - xore	MP - * <i>kirm ī čōbxwār</i> - * <i>čōbxwārak</i> - * <i>xwarak</i>	“- wood eater worm; - tiny woodeater; - eater, erosive”	PIE; OIrn.; MP; NP	_____
murče-ye sefid	MP? * <i>mōr ī spēd</i>	“white ant”	PIE; MP; NP	<i>mūrdāna</i> , <i>mūrčāna</i> , <i>mūryāna</i> ,

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

No funding information.

Acknowledgments

It is appropriate here to express our gratitude to Dr. Katayun Mazdapour for her years of efforts in educating several generations of students and for her scientific guidance. We are truly appreciative of her expertise and dedication, which greatly enhanced the quality of this research.

ORCID

Katayoon NAMIRANIAN  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7516-1913>

Mohsen MAHMOUDI  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8506-9001>

Data availability statement

<https://zenodo.org/records/21486927>

To cite this article: Namiranian, K., Mahmoudi, M. (2026). A quest for a pest: A Historical and Etymological Exploration of Termite-Related Terms in Modern Persian. *Historia i Świat*, 15, 141–156. <https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2026.15.07>



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