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THE STORY OF *Caesar* REVISITED

Abstract. This article investigates the story of the origin and the expanse of the term *caesar* in the Indo-European languages. A hypothesis on the non-existence of the diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ in Gothic is used to show that the borrowing into Gothic occurred from Greek and renders the Greek spelling practice. Due to additional facts concerning the monophthongization of the diphthong /ai/ in Greek and Latin it is hypothesized that they might already represent not a diphthong but a single vowel. Counter-evidence is also stated, as the precise way of the borrowing still remains unknown.

Keywords: etymology, Latin, Indo-European, Caesar, diphthong, monophthongization, spelling, borrowing.

1. It is obvious that the widely known Roman cognomen *Caesar*, the exact etymological source of which remains obscure, was the source of the later term for ‘emperor’ in the European languages. Even more obvious is the story of the very influential man who bore this cognomen, Caius Iulius (101-44 BC). Following Caesar’s death and the beginning of the rule of Octavianus Augustus (i.e. *Caius Iulius Caesar Octavianus*, later *Augustus*) the term became the usual name assumed by his successors and further, around the middle of the 1st century AD, the official imperial title for the ruler of the Roman Empire. After its fall in 476 AD, the term became synonymous with the word ‘emperor’ and spread within the languages of Europe and even further into Arabic and Turkish.

2. However, the linguistic origins and wanderings of this term do not seem as clear as the historical ones. The name originated in the 3rd or even 4th century BC with Numerius Iulius Caesar from *gens Iulia*, who probably first bore that cognomen (Caesar’s father was also named “Iulius Caesar” and his predecessors had commonly used the cognomen Caesar, cf. Safarewicz 1986: 84), and several etymologies have been proposed – either a derivative of the adjective *caesius* ‘grey-eyed’, or connected with the word *caesariēs* ‘long hair’ as ‘hairy’ or ‘having long hair’ (**kaikro-kseh₂-es-* ‘having a combing of the hair’ > **kaikerksās-* > **kairksās-* > **kairsās-* > *caesār-*, cf. de Vaan 2008: 81, *r*-stem derivative after Pinault 1998 but with doubts), or perhaps connected with the verb *caedō* ‘to cut,

fall' (Ernout-Meillet 1951: 148) as the Ancient writers did: "a caeso matris utero" (Pliny 7,47). Safarewicz points to the fact that the vowel /ā/ is unchanged in the name *Caesār*, gen. sg. *Caesāris* like in *anās* 'duck', gen. sg. *anātis*, contrary to the expected weakening to /ĕ/ as in *canō* 'I sing' but *tībīcĕn* 'flute player', and considers the forms as dialectal (Safarewicz 1953: 90).

3. From Latin it made its way to Greek, giving the form *καῖσαρ*, with the velar pronunciation of the Latin ⟨C⟩ and probably the diphthongal value of ⟨AE⟩ /aɛ/ (coming from earlier /aj/ ⟨AI⟩, cf. Old Latin ⟨AIDILES⟩ but 2nd century BC ⟨AEDEM⟩, Meiser 1998: 58), which was later monophthongized in Latin around the 1st century AD. But the process of monophthongization was even earlier in Greek *koiné* where we find discrepancies in spelling between ⟨ε⟩ and ⟨αι⟩ in papyri as far as the 2nd century BC (Lejeune 1972: 230-231) and such forms like *ἐκτέτατε* instead of *ἐκτέταται*¹ (cf. Rix 1976: 46). It is then thinkable that the ⟨αι⟩ in *καῖσαρ* was already a monophthong by the time of the borrowing. In rural Latin the monophthongization of /aj/ is also very early, cf. inscriptional 2nd century BC attested ⟨CEDITO⟩ for ⟨CAEDITO⟩² (Meiser 1998: 61-62). However, the exact and ultimate monophthongization was carried out later, probably at the beginning of our era,³ though some would like to see it even later, e.g. Safarewicz 1953: 47 would opt for 3rd or even 4th century AD for final monophthongization in cultural Latin. We also have an inscribed coin attested from around 27-23 BC with ⟨CAISAR⟩ written on it (OLD: 254). I cannot say if it is historical writing, an error or rendering of an actual pronunciation. Therefore I am not sure if that single form could be used as counter-evidence for early monophthongization of /aj/ in Latin. We have to bear in mind that the sign ⟨AE⟩ did not denote strictly phonetic /aj/ but probably /aɛ/ as evidenced by the change in spelling from ⟨AI⟩ to ⟨AE⟩ at the beginning of the 2nd century BC (Meiser 1998: 58).

¹ The process of monophthongization was even earlier in Greek dialects – in Boeotian already in the 4th century BC we find forms like *χῆρε*, compare Attic *χαῖρε* (Rix 1976: 46).

² The process of monophthongization of both /aj/ and /au/ was quicker outside Rome, both in Latin and in the other languages of Ancient Italy, cf. Umbrian *PRE, OTE* and Latin *prae, aut* (Meiser 1998: 61). Consider also the famous pun of the satirist Lucilius about the praetor Caecilius, who pronounced /ĕ/ instead of /aɛ/: *Cecilius pretor ne rusticus fiat* 'Let Cecilius not be a rustic praetor', cf. Weiss 2009: 474.

³ There is a Welsh word *praidd* 'booty' attested as a borrowing from Latin *praeda* evidencing the diphthongal pronunciation of the Latin ⟨ae⟩ grapheme. The date of the borrowing could probably be around the 1st century AD since then Romans conquered the south of Britain.

4. The term went then further into Germanic as we have such forms like first and foremost Gothic *kaisar*, later Old English *cāsere*, Old High German *keisar*, *keisor*, *cheisur*, Old Frisian *keiser* and Old Saxon *kēsur*, *kēsar* (cf. Feist 1939: 305). It has been widely assumed that the Gothic word *kaisar* has been borrowed directly from Latin with its diphthongal pronunciation (so e.g. Lehmann 1986: 214 after Corazza 1969: 35-38, and Szulc 1991: 76-77). Yet, the claim about the existence of diphthongs in Gothic (cf. the modern transliteration of Gothic diphthongs as ⟨ái⟩ and ⟨aí⟩ found especially in German handbooks) is based strictly on etymology. Gothic follows the orthographic practice of late Greek in using the grapheme ⟨ai⟩ for /e/ and additionally ⟨au⟩ for /o/ which is an innovation of Wulfila's writing system. Examples include the renderings of Greek words like *ἐκκλησία* as Gothic *aikklesjo* /ekklēsjō/ 'church' or *ἀπόστολος* as *apaustaulus* /apostulus/ 'apostle'. As Jasanoff has put it in his excellent sketch of Gothic: "there is little basis for the view, rooted in a coincidence of Germanic etymology and Greek orthography, that 'long' *ai* and *au* actually represent synchronic diphthongs in Wulfila's Gothic. The only true diphthong is /iu/" (Jasanoff 2004: 886 in Woodard 2004).⁴ It might then be possible that Gothic borrowed this term from Greek with its peculiar spelling (so already Meillet: "Le got. *kaisar* peut être une simple transcription de gr. *καῖσαρ*", Meillet 1924: 110), rather than directly from Latin at the time when the diphthong was still pronounced. The later West Germanic forms surely attesting the diphthongal phonetics (cf. Modern German *Kaiser* from Old High German *keisar* just like Modern German *heil* from earlier */ai̯/, cf. Gothic *hails*) would then have to be either written borrowings (so already Luft: "Die Westgermanen ihrerseits können *cheisar*, *keisar* erst relativ spät entlehnt haben, wobei sogar gelehrte einflüsse mitspielen können", Luft 1897: 295-296) or very early borrowings from Classical Latin into West Germanic, independent of East Germanic, all of course after the operation of Grimm's Law⁵ (cf. Szulc 1991: 76-77). Another scenario would include the preservation of the archaic pronunciation of this word due to the fact that it denoted a very high ranking official but that is also doubtful. Meillet presents a very compelling hypothesis that the West Germanic form became fixed in the kingdom of the Franks where Charlemagne, viewing himself as the heir

⁴ But we also have to reckon the Runic Gothic forms *hailag* (Ring from Pietroassa, ca. 401-450) and *u(n)thf(i)nthai* (Charnay, ca. 551-600) as arguments in favour of the diphthongal value of ⟨ai⟩, at least in Gothic written with runes. On these forms and the phonetic value of the diphthong, see now Nedoma 2010: 43-44, 58, but note also the counterarguments of Braune-Heidermanns 2004: 40. I am grateful to Stefan Schaffner (Brno) p.c., for turning my attention to those facts.

⁵ If it had come to Germanic before Grimm's Law, it would have gone through it and we would have a form like **χaisar* instead of the attested Gothic *kaisar*. As Schmidt points out: "kein einziges lat. Lehnwort im Germ. ist von der ersten Lautverschiebung betroffen worden" (Schmidt 1976: 37).

to the Roman Empire, called himself 'emperor' in the Roman imperial tradition (Meillet 1924: 110). The West Germanic form **kaisar* with the diphthong preserved would thus be explained as a written borrowing at the time of the Carolingian Renaissance, a period during which multiple attempts were made to recreate and revive the previous culture of the Roman Empire. Rix, on the other hand, postulates that the term went into Germanic around 37-41 AD, during the reign of Caligula, who had Germanic warriors in his guard (Rix 1993: 13-14). The fact is further complicated by other borrowings from Greek or Latin into Gothic like *Kreks* 'Greek' (from Greek or Latin *Graecus*) or *paida* 'tunic' (most probably from Greek *βαίτη* and this from Anatolian, Lehmann 1986: 221). Several different ways were suggested for the former word, including a possible Illyrian or even Etruscan middle source (cf. the discussion in Lehmann 1986: 220-221). I would opt for *Kreks* as being borrowed from Latin and *paida* from Greek, just like *kaisar*, witnessing the same rendering of the underlying diphthong. Whereas it is not impossible that the term *caesar* was borrowed into Germanic (both East and West) around the beginning of our era as many scholars would like to pose, I would like to point out that it is only in the 3rd century AD that the Roman army started to rely heavily on barbarian troops, especially from the Germanic tribes, who in the course of the 4th century assumed command of some of the senior posts in the Roman military (Todd 1992: 59). They must have learnt Latin and borrowed certain terms into their own languages. The borrowing might have also occurred earlier but certainly on a smaller scale. I find it impossible to decide. But the Gothic form seems to me a perfect borrowing from Greek with the spelling included.

5. It has been widely assumed that the word went further into Old Church Slavic. Gothic is here mentioned as the possible direct source (cf. Lehmann 1986: 214). It could either be borrowed with the diphthongal pronunciation and then the diphthong was monophthongized and the word underwent the second palatalization: Goth. *kaisar* → Sl. **kaisari* > **kěsari* > **čěsari* > OCS *čěsari* or, if we deny the existence of the diphthong /aj/ in Gothic, then the borrowing occurred after the first palatalization and monophthongization of diphthongs but before the second palatalization. The /k/ was then automatically palatalized before /ē/ to /č/.⁶ A different form **čisari*, occurring in South and East Slavic with shortening as Old Russian *carī*, is usually explained as a second variant of the borrowing or with irregular reduction of the vowel due to the frequency of occurrence in official titles (cf. Boryś 2005: 52, SP II: 82-83).

⁶ I owe this remark to Zbigniew Babik (p.c.).

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