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WHAT THE PENCIL AND THE SWEET FLAG HAVE IN COMMON OR THE MIGRATION OF WORDS AND MEANINGS*

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Abstract

The Gr. κάλαμος ‘cane, a thing made of cane: pen, rural pipe, fishing rod etc.’ is the primary source of certain terms for the sweet flag (*Acorus calamus* L.) and numerous names for a pencil in many different languages. Namely, the Greek word was borrowed by Latin in the form *calamus*, with the same meaning, whence originated many Germanic terms for the sweet flag. What is more, the dialectal Pol. *kalmus* is a loanword from the Germ. *Kalmus* ‘sweet flag’.

Additionally, the Gr. κάλαμος was borrowed by Arabic in the form *qalam*, whence the Osm. *kalém*. The forms in other Turkic languages are borrowings from Turkish. Some Albanian, Bulgarian and Macedonian terms for a pencil are also loanwords from the Turk. *kalem* ‘pen, thin brush, oblong bone’. The terms in many Caucasian languages are Arabisms.

Moreover, the Russ. карандаш ‘pencil’, as well as many other contemporary forms from Altaic, Uralic and other languages, which constitute new borrowings from Russian today, are in fact compounds consisting of *kalam* ‘cane’ and *daś* ‘stone’.

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1. Introduction

Etymological investigation convinces us that ostensibly distant words semantically speaking, as well as objects and notions which are not linked in the extralinguistic world, have a common origin, the same genesis. Thus, it is only a historical linguistic analysis that will lead us to the original source and the primary etymological meaning from which, by way of various semantic changes connected with morphological, phonological and phonetic modifications, the contemporary lexical items are derived.

At first sight a pencil and the sweet flag (L. *Acorus calamus*) do not appear to have much in common. A contemporary pencil is probably the most popular implement (for drawing and writing), whereas the sweet flag is a well known aromatic rhizome, a perennial from the Acoraceae family found growing at the banks of stagnant water (cf. e.g. Podbielkowski, Sudnik-Wójcikowska 2003: 471).¹ However, an in-depth etymological analysis of the words denoting both these elements leads us to the conclusion that a considerable number of them in various tongues have a common source. Let us trace the history and evolution of the semantics of these lexical items.

2. Gr. κάλαμος

The point of departure for all the words considered here which mean both the sweet flag and pencil appears to be the Greek noun κάλαμος ‘cane, sweet flag (?)’², but also ‘an object made of cane: reed-pipe, flute, fishing rod, tube, pin, pen,’³ etc. According to Frisk (GEW s.v.), it is “Altes Wort für ‘Rohr, Halm, Stroh’ mit Vertretern auch im Latein (*culmus* ‘Halm’⁴), im Germanischen, z.B. ahd. *halm*,⁵ im Baltischen und Slavischen, z.B. apr. *salme* ‘Stroh’, lett. *salms* ‘Strohalm’, russ. *solóma* [...] Alle Formen außer κάλαμος [...] können auf idg. **k’olamo-*, **k’olamā-* zurückgeführt werden; es liegt deshalb nahe, κάλαμος für **κόλαμος* [...] als sekundär [...] zu betrachten” (cf. also e.g. Chantraine 1970 II s.v. and Boisacq DEG s.v.). In other words, the Greek κάλαμος is close to the Proto-Slavic **solma* ‘straw’ (cf. Boryś SE s.v. *śloma*). Apart from that, it is also related to the Sanskrit *kalāmah* ‘writing reed, type of rice’ (Genaust 2005: 115).

¹ The plant reaches a height of one meter, has sword-like pointed leaves and from its rhizome an oil is produced, that has been used since antiquity in, for example, cosmetics, perfumery, and therapeutics; in earlier times its leaves were used as an underlay when baking bread; the plant itself came from Asia (Podbielkowski, Sudnik-Wójcikowska 2003: 471; Genaust 2005: 36, 115); cf. also Kwaśniewska et al. 1956: 170–171 and Kuźnicka, Dziak 1960: 112–113.

² After SG-P.

³ Originally presumably any ‘writing implement.’

⁴ The connection with the Latin *culmus* is corroborated both by other Greek etymological dictionaries and Latin dictionaries.

⁵ The relation to the German (more precisely the Germanic) *Halm* is confirmed by numerous etymological dictionaries, including, e.g. Kluge-Mitzka EW s.v. *Halm*, *Kalmus*, Falk, Torp 1960 s.v. *halm*, *kalmus*.

The polysemous Greek κάλαμος is the source of numerous derivatives quoted by Greek dictionaries as well as numerous compounds, especially in the field of botanical terminology. It is, for instance, attested in Herodotus (485 – ca. 425 B.C.), Theophrastus (372–287 B.C.) and Dioscorides (1st century A.D.) (Genaust 2005: 115).

3. Words denoting the sweet flag (*Acorus calamus* L.)

3.1. Lat. *calamus*

The Latin *calamus* ‘cane, cane stem, sweet flag’ and also ‘what is made of cane: writing reed, pen, arrow, fishing rod, walking stick, reed-pipe, fife’ is a loan from Greek, attested as early as the times of Plautus (250 – ca. 184 B.C.) and Pliny (24–79 A.D.) (more broadly: Walde-Hofmann LEW s.v., Ernout-Meillet DEL s.v., Genaust 2005: 115). As can be seen, the meanings of the Latin word are very close to the semantics of the Greek lexeme (cf. above). Thus, in the process of borrowing no significant semantic changes took place.

At this point it is worth citing in greater detail the botanical meanings of the Latin *calamus* provided by André (1956: 65): 1. ‘tige du roseau (importée de Grèce pour faire des flèches, des flûtes, et des calames [...] Par suite, tige droite des graminées, blé et orge [...] Par extension, tige d’autres plantes’, 2. ‘roseau, usuel’, 3. ‘greffon (taillé comme le roseau à écrire)’. The author of the monography also quotes the names of plants which are in fact compounds containing the base *calamus*: *calamus agrestis* (also *calamos agrios*), *calamus Alexandrinus*, *calamus arōmaticus* (< Gr. κάλαμος αρωματικός⁶) = *calamus odorātus* ‘roseau odorant, rhizome de l’Acore (*Acorus calamus* L.)’ etc. André (1956: 65) points out that the Romans did not know a sweet flag, which was introduced later as a result of the Mongol invasions,⁷ however, *calamus* in the sense of ‘sweet flag’ can be found as early as Pliny and Cato (234–149 B.C.) (Genaust 2005: 115). According to André (1956: 16–17), the name *acorum* (or *acorus*), referred to other plants, such as e.g. the yellow iris (*Iris pseudoacorus* L.), but was not used with reference to the sweet flag. This is, however, at variance with the views of Genaust (2005: 36). In point of fact, the scientific name *Acorus calamus* for the sweet flag was introduced to botany by Linnaeus (1707–1778).

3.2. Germ. *Kalmus* and its equivalents in Germanic languages

The German word *Kalmus* ‘sweet flag, *Acorus calamus* L.’ was borrowed from Latin. The first attestation of the Early New-High-German *kalmuß* dates back to 1485 (Kluge-Mitzka EW s.v.),⁸ when the meaning was restricted to the later botanical sense. This was, contrary to the semantics of the reflexes of the Latin *calamus* in some Romanesque languages, such as e.g. the It. *calamo* ‘common reed’ (*Phragmites australis*

⁶ The name attested in Theophrastus (Genaust 2005: 115).

⁷ The oriental (Tartar, i.e. Mongolian) origin of the plant is corroborated by its Polish names: the former *tatarskie ziele* (‘Tartar herb’), *tatarski korzeń* (‘Tartar root’) (cf. Symb. 117–118, Spólnik 1990: 101) and the contemporary *tatarak* (‘sweet flag’).

⁸ In Kluge-Seebold EW there is no entry *Kalmus*.

(Cav.) Trin.), writing reed (secondarily also feather pen)' (with also It. *calamo aromatico* 'sweet flag') and the Spanish *cálamo*, poetically 'pen'⁹ and 'reed-pipe.'¹⁰

The German *Kalmus* migrated as a borrowing with its form and meaning unchanged into Swedish, cf. the Sw. *kalmus* 'sweet flag' (Hellquist SEO s.v.), as well as Danish and Norwegian, cf. the Danish and the Norwegian *kalmus* 'sweet flag' (Falk, Torp 1960 s.v.). It is also worth noting the Dutch *kalmoes* here and – taken directly from Latin – the alternative (older) name for the sweet flag and a cane in English, namely the Eng. *calamus* (ODEE s.v., OED s.v.).

German has also affected Slavic languages in a similar manner. In Lower Sorbian we find *kalmus* 'sweet flag,' and in Upper Sorbian *kolmus*, which was taken from the Upper Saxon dialectal form *kâlmus* (cf. Lajnert 1954: 30 and Schuster-Šewc HEW s.v. *kolmus*). Moreover, the word *kalmus* 'sweet flag,' borrowed from German, is attested in Kashubian (cf., e.g. Hinze 1965: 255), and was also taken from German by the Polish dialects in the west and north of the country. *Kalmus* 'sweet flag' can be found in Greater Poland (cf. Köhler 1993: 62), Opole Silesia (also in the form *kolmys*, cf. Olesch 1958: 78), as well as Varmia and Masuria (cf. numerous attestations in the SGP card index¹¹).

In order to conclude these deliberations concerning the German influence on the sweet flag's name in Europe, it is also worth mentioning the Hungarian *kálmos* 'sweet flag.'

4. Words denoting a pencil

4.1. The Arabic *qalam* and the Turkish *kalem* 'pen, pencil'

The Greek κάλαμος was taken by Arabic in the form of *qalam*, originally 'a kind of a pen made of a dry cane,' today 'pen, pencil,' which in turn is the source of the Osman-Turkish *kalém* (cf. Frisk GEW s.v. κάλαμος).¹² Hence the contemporary Turkish *kalem* 'pen, penholder, stylus, pencil, etc.,' as well as 'an oblong bone, a thin paintbrush,' and even 'chancellery.' The Arabic and the Turkish forms have been introduced as borrowings into many languages in Europe.¹³

However, in the present discussion I will consider only those words (literary and dialectal) which mean 'pencil', using the data collected for the *Atlas Linguarum Europae* and my commentary on the map of *crayon*, to be published in fascicle 9 of the atlas.

⁹ Cf. the Fr. *calame* (hist.) 'penholder.'

¹⁰ As can be seen, Italian and Spanish continue to adhere not only to the form, but also to some of the meanings of the Latin word, modifying it only slightly.

¹¹ I am grateful to Professor Joanna Okoniowa, Head of the Department of Polish Dialectology in the Polish Language Institute at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Cracow for having given me the opportunity to check the incidence of the word *kalamus* 'sweet flag' in the card index of the *Słownik gwar polskich* (Dictionary of Polish Dialects).

¹² In the process of borrowing a shift *a > e* has taken place. It is a regular vocalic change, since in Turkish the vowels which followed *l* were interpreted as front vowels.

¹³ Extending as far as the Urals in the east, thus covering the Turkic, Uralic and Caucasian languages. Incidentally, it is worth adding that the Arabic *qalam* was also introduced into Persian.

In Turkish, apart from the form *kalem*, whose meanings include ‘pencil’, we also come across the form *k’alem*. The Bashkir *kalam* (cf. also the contemporary Bashkir *kalam*) and the Tartar *qalam* come from Turkish. The Tartar form is the source of the name for a pencil in certain Uralic languages, namely, the Mari *kälām* (the Finnish group) and the Udmurt *kaljam* (the Permiac group).¹⁴

The form *kalem* ‘pencil’ found in Albanian,¹⁵ Bulgarian,¹⁶ and Macedonian is a borrowing from Turkish (cf. Boretzky 1976: 73, BER II s.v. калѐм, as well as Filipova-Bajrova 1969: 97 and Argirovski GMJ 127).

Finally, it is worth noting the form *k’alam* ‘pencil’, which is found in numerous Caucasian languages, such as Avar, Andi, Botlikh, Chamalal, Bagvalal, Godoberi, Tindi, Bezhta, Tsez, Aghul, Dargi, Tsakhur, Rutul, Hunzib, Karata, and Hinukh, in which it is an Arabism.¹⁷

4.2. Compounds with the element *qalam*, *kalem* etc., meaning ‘pencil’

4.2.1. The Turk. *kurşun kalem*

The Turkish binomial compound *kurşun kalem*,¹⁸ in which the first part *kurşun* means ‘lead’,¹⁹ is used today as a term for ‘pencil’. It has been borrowed by Albanian in the form *kush’un kalem* (with a simplification of the consonantal cluster *rş > š*).

4.2.2. The Russ. карандаш

The Russian *karandaš* is an old Turkish borrowing. It appeared as early as the 15th c., when it meant ‘graphite,’ but since 1671 it has been attested in the sense of ‘pencil’ (cf. SRJ VII 73; cf. Also Dal’ TS s.v. карандаш). Earlier it was believed that it was a borrowing from Turkish that originated from the compound **karadaš* (where *kara* ‘black’, *daš* ‘stone, schist’) (cf. Preobraženskij 1959 s.v. карандашъ, Vasmer ES II 192, Vasmer REW s.v. карандаш – with further literature, Černych 1994: 379 and e.g. Lokotsch 1975: 87).

¹⁴ Based on the etymological commentary on the Uralic forms, drafted for the *Atlas Linguarum Europae*.

¹⁵ In Albanian there is also a form *kalam*, which may have come from the Turkish dialectal form *kalam*, or else be a phonetic variant of *kalem* (as a result of assimilation). I would like to express my gratitude to Dr L’ubor Králik CSc. from Bratislava for checking all the Albanian forms which were inaccessible to me in dictionaries.

¹⁶ The Bulgarian *kalem* has also retained its original meaning ‘cane’ and ‘a writing implement made of cane’ (more broadly BER II s.v. калѐм).

¹⁷ One needs to emphasise that in the Caucasian languages phonetic variants of the form *k’alam* can be found, for instance, the Lak and the Avar *k’alan*, the Archi and the Chechen *k’alum*, the Adige and the Lezgi *k’elem*, etc.

¹⁸ It is also possible to find the phonetic variant *kush’un kilém* (with a reduction of the unaccented vowel in the first syllable of the second element of the compound: *a > ə > i*).

¹⁹ For many years it was believed (until the time of the chemist, Karl Wilhelm Scheele, in 18th c.) that graphite (an allotropic form of coal) which constitutes the core of the pencil, was a form of lead, ‘lead ore’, etc. (there is wide-ranging literature on the subject). This is a belief to which all the words meaning ‘pencil’ in the various languages that are etymologically connected with ‘lead’ or its ores owe their origin, as e.g. the German *Bleistift* or the Slovak *ceruza*.

However, the Turkish **karadaş* is not attested anywhere. What is more, the appearance of the phoneme /n/ in *karandaş* is difficult to explain. In the 1960s N. Kolesnikov (1962: 169–172) and Gy. Németh (1966: 105–114, 1967: 211–221) presented – quite independently of each other – a far more convincing etymology of the word. I do not intend to present their reasoning and argumentation in detail here, but simply to outline the main points behind their conclusions. Both authors assumed the Turkish compound **qalam-taş* (**qalam-daş*) to be the source of the Russian word, where the first segment *qalam* meant ‘cane,’ and later ‘a writing implement,’ whereas the second segment – *taş* (*daş*) meant ‘stone’²⁰ (cf. also Šanskij ES II 64–65; Siatkowski 2004: 56, OLA VIII m. 36).

Admittedly, the compound **qalam-taş* (**qalam-daş*) is not found in the Turkic languages, however, the forms *taş-qalam* and *daş-qalam* have numerous attestations. Moreover, metatheses (transpositions of the elements) and further phonetic changes can easily be explained on the grounds of Russian-Turkish contacts.

It appears that the forms meaning ‘pencil’ in those languages which have had prolonged contact with Russian – seen in their phonetic form (with *r* instead of the expected *l*, especially in the Turkic languages) – constitute relatively new (direct or indirect²¹) borrowings from Russian. By way of illustration I include some examples, mostly dialectal alternations to native forms, but most importantly, words meaning ‘pencil’ from a number of language families:

- Indo-European languages: Slavic: the Belorussian and the Ukrainian *karandaš*, Romance: the Moldovan *karandaš*, Baltic: the Latvian *karandašs*; Iranian: the Tat *karandaš*, the Ossetian *k"randas*;
- Uralic languages: West Ugro-Finnish: the Mari, the Veps, the Komi-Permyak, the Komi-Zyrian, the Udmurt *karandaš*, the Erzya-Mordvinic *karandaš*, *karandas*, *karantaž*, *kryntaš*, the Moksha-Mordvinic *krandaš*, the Ingrian *karandašši*, *krandassi*, the Finnish *karantassi*, *karantaši*, *karantašu*, the Karelian *karantašša*, *krandaša*, the Lapp *karndaš*, the Estonian *krandas*, the Votic *krandašši*, *grandašši*, the Samoyedic Nenets *harandas*;

²⁰ N. P. Kolesnikov (1962: 169–172) presents the sources, the history of the use, and the literature concerning the origin of the Russian *karandaš*. He quotes designations of *pencil* from other Slavic languages. He believes that the word *karandaš* ‘pencil’ is present not only in Russian, but also in numerous Turkic (and other) languages. In connection with this he postulates a new etymology. According to him the Russian *karandaš* may be a lexical borrowing from the Turkish compound **kalamdaš* (*kalam* ‘reed’ and *daš* ‘stone’). Finally, he explains in detail all the phonetic issues: **kalamdaš* > **kalandaš* > *karandaš*. Gy. Németh (1966: 105–114) approaches the question of the etymology of the Russian *karandaš* by focusing on the Turkic languages. At the beginning he presents the form, the meaning, and the dissemination of the word *karandaš*. Then he critically analyses earlier conceptions concerning its origin. He expresses a belief that the Russian *karandaš* is a borrowing from the Turkish **qalam-daš*. In order to prove his claim the author lists numerous formally similar (but with a changed order of elements) compounds from the Turkic languages and explains the phonetic changes which have taken place in Russian.

²¹ For example, the Karelian *karantašša* is a borrowing from the Veps (the Ugro-Finnish group of Uralic languages), according to the Uralic commentary for the *Atlas Linguarum Europae*.

- Altaic languages: Turkic: the Tartar, the Gagauz, the Nogay *karandaš*, the Chuvash *kārantāš*, the Karachay-Balkar *karyndaš*²² (however, cf. the contemporary local *karandaš* and *karyndač*), the Kazakh *garyndaš*, the Mongolian Kalmyk *karndaš* (however, cf. *karandaš* with KRS);
- Caucasian languages: the Dagestan Tabasaran *karandaš*, Abkhaz-Adyghe languages: the Abaza *k"arandaš*, the Kabardian *k"erendašč*.

4.2.3. The Tat *g"alemdoli*

Doubtlessly, the Tat form²³ is a compound. The first element *g"alem-* constitutes an Arabism, while the second element *-doli* is probably a borrowing of foreign (i.e., non-Iranian) origin.

5. Recapitulation

The present paper discusses the results of an earlier etymological analysis of the words meaning ‘sweet flag’ and ‘pencil’, two designations which today are not connected with each other semantically. It considers their common source, which is the Greek noun κάλαμος, and demonstrates the range of the use of the derivatives. The above discussion enables us to draw the following conclusions:

1. the range of the forms stemming from κάλαμος, originally ‘cane,’ is uncommonly widespread – in principle, it covers the whole of Europe;
2. the forms meaning ‘sweet flag’ have generally been diffused via Latin and the Germanic languages in Central and Northern Europe;
3. the forms meaning ‘writing implement,’ and in particular ‘pencil,’ have proliferated thanks to Arabic and Turkish, and cover the whole of Eastern, and parts of Northern and Southern Europe, in fact stretching even further to the south and east.

It appears, therefore, that the Greek κάλαμος could be included in a group of so-called “cultural words,” although it originally only referred to ‘cane.’ On the basis of this modest example it can be seen how much semantic changes may accomplish in the course of history and how crucial borrowings are in a lexicon. We can appreciate how important the migration of words and meanings are in the history of languages, and therefore underline once again that etymology is indeed a fascinating branch of linguistics.

²² The vowel [y] in the latter two forms is a realisation of the unaccented reduced /a/, i.e., /a/ > [ə] > [y].

²³ The Tat language used in the Caucasus, belongs to the southern subgroup of Iranian languages, e.g. Persian, Tajik and Dari.

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