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**THE ORIGIN OF THE EUROPEAN
WORD FOR SABRE***

1.

There exist several proposals for the etymology of Engl. Fr. *sabre*, Germ. *Säbel*, Pol. *szabla*, Russ. *сабля*, etc. ‘sabre’. They can be divided into two groups: those which connect the origin of the word with Hung. *szablya* id. and those which do not, the former group being clearly predominant in modern etymological dictionaries. One of the etymologies in the latter group comes from Brückner (1927: 538), who suggests a connection with Slav. *sabl* ‘cock’, *sablica* ‘hen’, the tertium comparationis being the shape of a cock’s tail. As far as we know, his proposals were not accepted by other etymologists. However, another part of his explanation may prove very important for the discussion on the word’s borrowing channels in Europe. The Hungarian etymology is also totally ignored by Machek (1968: 604), who does not even mention Hung. *szablya* and, instead, takes this word to be a Slavic feminine derivative in *-ja* from the Turkic word *sap* ‘handle, holder, hilt’. This idea, however, does not hold water either. Its strong point is chronology: in Russian, the word is attested already in the 10th century (Machek *ibid.*; Černych 1993: II 134). Unfortunately, there are some weak points as well:

- [1] Neither **sap*, nor **sabja* are attested in Russian;
- [2] In Turkic, the word-final *-p* of *sap* always remains voiceless, even in the intervocalic position (as in Turkish *sap-ı* ‘its handle’; *sap-a*, Dat.) and before *-l* (e.g. *sap-la*, Instr.; *sap-lar*, Nom. Pl.);
- [3] The Russian etymon requires an assumption of an inorganic *-l-*;
- [4] A hilt is not characteristic of a sabre only; it is hard to believe that Eastern Slavs called a new object (*sabre*) after a feature (‘handle’) which was well-known to them because their swords and knives had hilts or handles, too.

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What was new to them was the curved form of the blade, and this is why Brückner's association with cock's tail seems even more convincing than a connection with *sap* 'handle, hilt'.

Similarly, a Semitic origin of the Slavic word (< Arabic *sajf*, Aramaic *sajpā* 'sword, sabre'), proposed by Menges (1951: 44) does not appear very convincing and, as far as we know, has never been generally accepted.

What de Vries (1967: 185) offers in his dictionary is totally erroneous: the Russian word *сабля* should, according to him, have come from «kirg. *sapy* 'sabel'», and the Hungarian source of this word (i.e. Hung. *szablya*) should, nowadays, be less probable. First, although the abbreviation "kirg." is lacking from the list of abbreviations, it most probably stands for Kirghiz. However, there exists no Kirgh. word *sapy* 'sabre'. The formation *sapy* is the 3sg possessive: 'its hilt' < Kirgh. *sap* 'handle; hilt'. Second, it is not clear why the Hungarian origin should be less probable nowadays. This formulation is surprising, since it is precisely the Hungarian etymology which is the explanation most often quoted in studies and dictionaries published both before and after that of de Vries', e.g. Bielfeldt 1965: 33, Onions 1966: 780, Mathieu-Rosay 1985: 454, Fasmer 1987: 541, Kluge 1989: 612, Müller 1995: 47 etc.

Still, there are good reasons to doubt the Hungarian origin of the word for sabre. First of all, morphological transparency of the formation of *szab+lya* can be questioned. Besides, there are semantic and chronological problems: the Hungarian verb *szab* 'to cut' originally had the meaning of 'bestimmen, anordnen'. It developed into 'zuschneiden = durch Schneiden irgendeine Form bilden' in the 13th century (EWU 1378), which is certainly connected with cutting, but not exactly in a sense suitable for how a sabre is usually used, whereas the meaning of 'ab-, zerschneiden' only appears in the second half of the 19th century, i.e. much later, indeed, too late to be the derivational stem of *szablya*, which was attested in the sense of 'sabre' already in the 14th century. Therefore, it is not surprising that the possibility of a Hungarian etymology of *szablya* is not even mentioned in EWU s.v., where, instead, the following information can be found:

- [5] Sabre is an object of Eastern European origin, and so should be the origin of its name; however, its etymon remains unknown;
- [6] As revealed by archaeology, sabre was used by the conquering Magyars in the 9th century;
- [7] The Slavic word for sabre may be a loan; the Western European words were also borrowed from Hungarian.

A contradiction can immediately be noticed. Whereas [6] suggests that the sabre was used by the Magyars already before the Conquest, i.e. that it was, consequently, brought by them from Asia to Europe, [5] calls Eastern Europe

the homeland of the sabre. As far as we know, it is Asia, not Europe, which is usually considered to be its original homeland.

However, the idea of the Hungarian origin of the word for sabre was so popular that we quoted it when discussing some Siberian words for sabre without noticing that an Oriental etymon of the Hungarian word is also possible, even if we mentioned words like Mong. *sel(e)me* and Arinian *sulema* id. (Stachowski 1996: 110; cf. also Anikin 2000: 510sq.) – an idea which appears self-evident since the object itself, probably, actually *is* of Oriental origin.

In a study recently published by V. Rybatzki (2002: 115) we also find other numerous words which belong to this word-family (e.g. Manchu *seleme* ‘am Gürtel getragenes Dolchmesser’, Evenk *sälämä* ‘eisern; Schwert’) and, first of all, a transparent Tungusic etymology of this word: < *sele* ‘iron’ + *-me*, a denominal nominal suffix (ibid.; see also SSTM 140b). This way of explanation of the Tungusic word was earlier suggested also by Menges (1983: 125), who, however, did not connect it with the European word for sabre, which, rather, he interpreted as a Semitic loan (see above).

Thus, the final source of the European word for sabre has been found. There remains, however, another complex question: through which channels was this word borrowed?

It is a Kipchak form (attested in Kirgh. as *selebe* ‘sabre’ [Rybatzki op. cit.; KRS II 143]) which most probably was the missing link between Tung. *m* variants and their European *b* reflexes (for this change in Turkic cf. now Schönig 2002: 263sq.).

There are three differences between the Kirghiz word *selebe* and its European reflex *sabla*, etc.:

[8] The sequence of consonants: *l – b* vs. *b – l*.

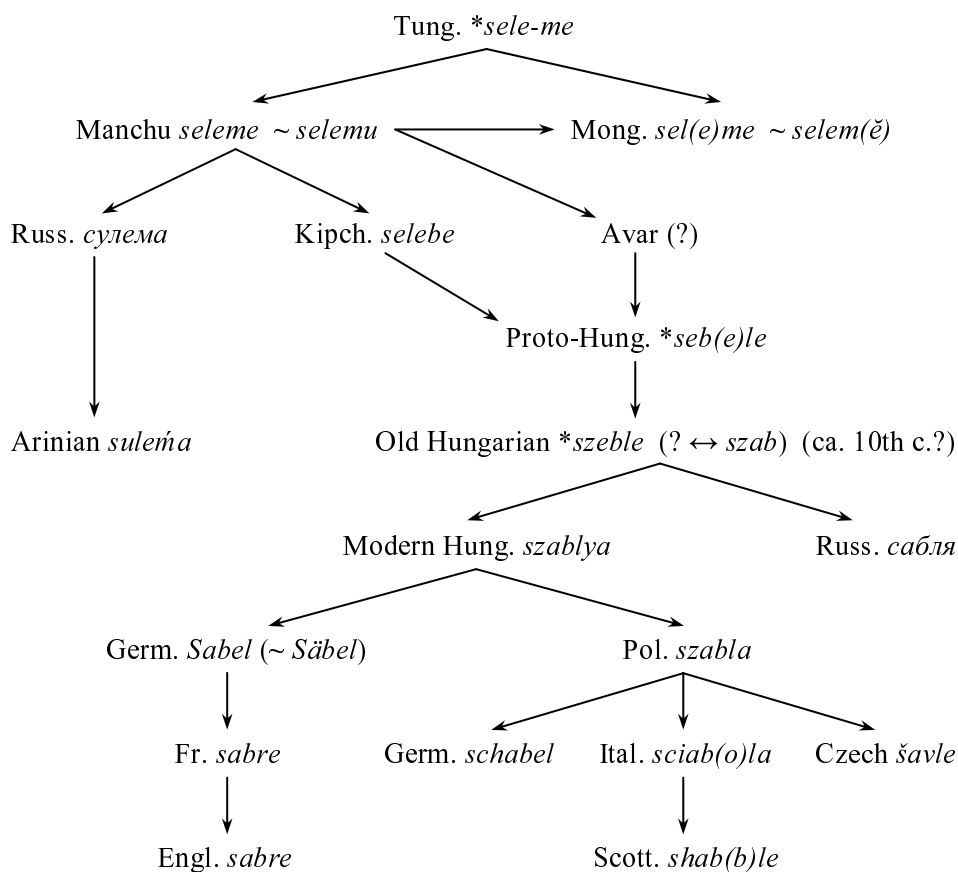
[9] The tongue advancement: *e – e* vs. *a – a*.

[10] The number of syllables: three in *selebe* vs. two in *sabla*.

The most problematic question concerns different consonant sequences: *l – b* and *b – l*. As far as we know, a *b – l* variant is not attested in any Kipchak language. Notwithstanding, if we assume a Kipchak metathesis (*selebe* > **sebele*), and possibly also a syncope (**sebele* > **seble*), which is quite usual in Turkic trisyllabic words (to be sure, mostly if the vowel of the middle syllable is narrow; however, wide vowels also sometimes undergo this change, as in Modern Turkish *nerde* < *nerede* ‘where?’, and so on), the final product of both processes: **seble* could then have been borrowed into Hungarian and later, owing to a contamination with Hung. *szab* ‘to cut’, altered into **sabla* > Modern Hung. *szablya* [s-].

Thus the conception of the Hungarian origin of the word for sabre is probably correct but simplified. What makes this explanation even more complex is that the European variants of this word form, in respect of the word-initial con-

sonant, two groups: one with *s-* (as Engl. *sabre*, Germ. *Säbel* [dial. *Sabel*], Dutch *sabel*, French *sabre* [earlier: *sable*, 1625], Russ. *сабля*) and one with *š-* (as Pol. *szabla*, earlier Germ. *schabel*, Czech *šavle*, Slovak *šabl'a*, Ital. *sciab(o)la*). Since the word-initial *s-* (the Germ. *z-* <*s-*> being merely a language-specific variation of *s-*) is quite usual in European languages, there was, in actual fact, no inevitable need to change it into *š-*. As it seems, the only explanation comes from Brückner (1927: 538), who suggests a hypercorrect alveolarization (Pol. *mylne odmazurzenie*) in Polish. The point is that some Polish dialects have *s*, *z*, *c*, *dz* in lieu of the literary *ś*, *ź*, *ć*, *dź*. If such a dialectal word is taken over by literary Polish speakers, its *s*, *z*, *c*, *dz* are automatically changed into *ś*, *ź*, *ć*, *dź*. It is obvious that an ordinary Polish speaker could not differentiate between *s* < *s* and *s* < *ś* in a loan-word and therefore corrected the *s* < *s* in Pol. dial. **sabla* into *ś*, i.e. into *šabla*, written <*szabla*>. This explanation was also accepted by Kniezsa (1955: 743), who differentiates between Germ. *š* variants borrowed from Polish, and German *s* variants borrowed from Hungarian. Machek (1986: 604) vacillates between Polish and German as the direct source language for Czech *šavle* but finally leaves the question open and does not refute the explanation proposed by Brückner. This apparently is the case with the German etymology, too, because we read in Kluge (1989: 612) that Germ. *Säbel* was borrowed from Hungarian, however, “teilweise über die polnische Entlehnung *szabla*”, which probably refers to some earlier German variants like *schabel*. Onions (1966: 780) quotes Ital. *sciab(o)la* or its Polish or Hungarian etymon as the source of Scott. *shab(b)le*. However, the Hungarian variant is out of the question in this context since it has *s-* (written <*sz-*>), not *š-*; moreover, for geographical, as well as historical reasons, the Polish language can scarcely be concerned as the direct source of the Scottish word. It is rather the Italian variant that should be accepted as its direct etymon. Because of the word-initial *sci-*, Menges (1951: 44) tends towards the Polish origin of the Italian word; however, maybe through a Czech mediation, “possibly through and after the Hussite wars”.



As can be seen, some details of the routes of borrowing taken by the word for sabre in Europe still remain difficult to settle. Notwithstanding, four evolutionary centres can be found:

- [11] Tungusic, where the word *sele-me* was originally formed;
- [12] Kipchak, where the $l - m > m - l$ metathesis, the $m > b$ change, and a syncope have probably occurred;
- [13] Hungarian, where contamination with the verb *szab* 'to cut' could have taken place;
- [14] Polish, where the word-initial *s-* was changed into *š-*.

2.

The newest linguistic research on the language(s) of the Avars makes also possible a somewhat different scenario. Since it seems highly imaginable that a part of the Avars spoke Tungusic (cf. Helimski 2000b, c; see also the introduction in Futaky 2001), the word for sabre could have also been borrowed into Hungarian from a Tungusic language of the Avars in Eastern Europe. This idea corresponds very well with our historical knowledge: from a historian's point of view, there can be no doubt about the Avar origin of the European sabre (cf. Göckenjan (1993: 176): "Awarische Reiterkrieger verbreiteten in Europa für die Militärtechnik so revolutionierende Neuerungen wie den Steigbügel und den einschneidigen Säbel"; for the importance of stirrup see also Wittfogel 1977: 23 sq.). However, as long as we do not know exactly what this word sounded like in Avar, the question cannot be definitely settled.

3.

Besides, Tung. *sele-me* survived in Manchu *seleme* ~ *selemu* and left some traces in Asia, too. The best known instances are such Mongolian words as *sel(e)me*, Kalm. *selmə*, Khalkha *selem*, Buryat *helme*. G. Doerfer's (1995: 19) conjecture that the Manchu word was borrowed through Mongolian into Tungusic lacks proof. It remains totally obscure why the Evenk word for sabre should have been a loan, even if both its stem and suffix are purely Tungusic, and its meaning is exactly the same as in Manchu. The Manchu variant *selemu* surely was the etymon of the dialectal Russ. *сулема* 'вид оружия', because of both the vowel *u* (after the metathesis: *e – u > u – e*) and the philological fact that *сулема* is attested as a name for the sabre used by the *bogdo*'s, i.e. the Manchu (Anikin 2000: 130, 510; interestingly enough, this word was lacking from an earlier work by the same author: Anikin 1990). The Russian word was also borrowed into Arinian *sulema* (Stachowski 1996: 110; at present, we agree with Anikin 2000: 510, who does not see a need to take into consideration a Mongolian mediation), and the Buryat variant *helme* was borrowed into Mator *helme* (Helimski 1997: 243; 2000a: 296).

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