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POLISH (?) *BIGOS*. ABOUT THE THING AND ABOUT THE WORD

As is well known, the dish under the name of *bigos* belongs to the canon of Polish cuisine, and is generally viewed as a national dish. The thing itself, however, and its name, are both German borrowings. Based on scarce mentions in old texts, the author attempts to reconstruct the history of *bigos* – the thing and *bigos* – the name. With regards to the former, the original German recipe has been heavily modified in the Polish culinary tradition, resulting in a contemporary dish which bears very little resemblance to the German prototype. As for the name itself, an overview of the data cited in etymological dictionaries and in works analyzing the history of German borrowings in Polish (Brückner [= SEBr]; Bańkowski [= SEBań]; Linde [= SL-1]; de Vincenz, Hentschel [= WDLP]; Czarnecki 2014), has persuaded this author to support the hypothesis which derives Pol. *bigos* from MHG perfect participle *bîgossen*.

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In the stereotypical image of Polish cuisine, pierogi, żurek, and *bigos* take top places. Polish, Old Polish *bigos*? To a degree, yes, but both the word and the thing are actually among the many strangers in Polish that have been nativized and whose historical foreignness is no longer perceived today. One must consult the literature to realize that they are borrowings.



1. The thing

Based on the datation of forms (which is very modest in SPXVI, not to say symbolic), we may assume that the thing (the dish) arrived in Poland in the early 16th century. Or perhaps a little earlier? That the word *bigos* is missing from SStp-1 does not necessarily mean anything more than that it did not appear in texts on which this dictionary was based. We will not know for certain, but it seems unlikely because the scarcity of attestations in SPXVI, merely three between 1534 and 1588, suggests an as yet limited popularity of both the dish and its name at the time.

The above-mentioned dictionary cites the word *bigos* in two meanings: 1. ‘a hash, mince; a dish of chopped meat’, and 2. ‘a fish dish (soup, broth, sauce)’. The first is supported with the appropriate entry from Cnapius’s dictionary (Cnapius 1621):¹ “*bigos*, Minutal [...] *ferculum ex concisis carnibus, aliis Siekanka*”. The second is based on a quotation from Calepino’s dictionary (Calep 1586): “*Muria*, genus liquaminis, quod ex thynno pisce conficiebatur. *Bigos z ribi*”, which appears to be a nonce (secondary?) use of a name referring primarily to a different dish. In the source of the quotation, i.e. in Calepino’s dictionary, a clarification can be found in the German definition of the word *Muria*: “Germ. Ein Soss oder bruy von einem meerfisch gemacht”.

It is possible that Calepino simply took a word he happened to have at hand when explaining the word *Muria* in the Polish portion of the entry, instead of the more accurate synonym *polewka* (**polewka z ribi*) denoting both what later became known as *zupa* ‘soup’, and what came to be ultimately called *sos* ‘sauce’. (The difference was in thickness and function: a stand-alone dish vs *podlewka*, addition to the dish proper – “Ein Soss oder bruy...”.)

Finally, the earliest quotation from Stefan Falimirz’s work *O ziołach i o mocy ich* (1534):

Może też opłokawfzy płucza wilcze winem cziftem, potym ie wwarzić z **fiekawfzy na bigos** y okorzenieć pieprzem [...] á to iefć przez kielko dni. Ieft rzecz dofwiadczona na iedney bialey głowie (SPXVI-2),²

1 Grzegorz Knapiusz (born 1564) began work on his dictionary in the early 17th century.

2 One can also rinse wolf lungs in clear wine, then **chop them to bigos**, spice them with pepper and boil them [...] and eat this for several days. The thing has been tested on one woman.

does not so much indicate the dish itself as instructs how finely the wolf lungs are to be chopped for the preparation of the physic.

Thus, 16th century data are scarce and give us only an approximate picture of the dish under discussion.³ We may assume it was made of finely chopped meat, boiled or stewed into a thick sauce, perhaps similar (but only in consistency) to the modern bolognaise sauce.

Originally, cabbage was out of the question as an ingredient in bigos; its addition is a 17th century Polish modification whose purpose it was, at least at first, to cheaply increase the volume of the dish. This is why the expression *bigos z kapustą* (“Mieszają oraz i strony wiecznego pokoju – prawie **bigos z kapustą**”;⁴ 1665–1669, ESJ XVII–XVIII) was perfectly justified, the “canonical” bigos being made of only meat.

In Waław Potocki’s collection *Ogród fraszek* (1691) we find a brilliant story in which the protagonist, a Polish nobleman, is invited by an Italian to a dinner composed of dishes of Italian cuisine, which he leaves hungry, saying:

Zbieram nogi co prędzej do swojej gospody;
Już czeladź po obiedzie: „Złodzieje, czemuście Zjedli??
„Jeszcze została słonina w kapuście, Jest i **bigos cielęcy**.”
A ja krzyknę głosem: „Dawaj po włoskiej uczcie **kapustę z bigosem!**”⁵

(Pot.).

As can be seen, two separate dishes are mentioned here: **cabbage** boiled or stewed with **lard**, and **bigos of veal**. Both dishes, even when served together on one plate (in one bowl?), do not make bigos in its later and current form.

Attestations from the second halves of the 17th and 18th century inform us that bigos was not always prepared from fresh meat; sometimes also leftovers of roasted meats not eaten in time were used:

Bigos. Wczorajsza potrawá. Przygrzewánego/ przypiekánego co⁶
(1632, ESJ XVII–XVIII);

3 Cf. “Die deutsche und polnische Vorgeschichte von *bigos* ist unbekannt; es wird sich wohl um ein Speise- oder Soßenrezept handeln” (WDLP).

4 They confuse the sides of the eternal peace – almost **bigos with cabbage**.

5 I take to my heels and head for my own inn / The household has dined already, “Thieves, why have you eaten?” / “There is still some lard in cabbage left, and some veal bigos, too.” / And I cry out loudly, “After my Italian feast, give me **bigos with cabbage!**”

6 Bigos. Yesterday’s dish. Something warmed up / roasted.

Tu ksiądz na swój obiad prosi,
co naprędce, to przynosi:
Bigos z pieczeni wczorajszej
– i kapłon znać onegdajczy⁷

(1682, ESJPIXVII–XVIII);

BIGOS potrawa zroznych ostatkow pozostałych⁸

(1743–1745, ESJPIXVII–XVIII).

Thus, bigos could be prepared “from anything”, so long as the “anything” was meat (“Bigos záprawny z podrobkow kurzych kapłonich” [1745, ESJPIXVII–XVIII]). Whether the earliest form of the dish that reached Poland could be made from leftovers, or whether this was another local modification of the recipe is unknown.

It seems that bigos from the pre-cabbage era described above can be counted among such dishes as Sp. *olla podrida* or Fr. *ragoût* (in the wide sense of the word). Danet (*Nowy wielki dykcyonarz*) explains: “Diversorum ciborum miscellanea [...] BIGOS potrawa zroznych ostatkow pozostałych” (1743–1745, ESJPIXVII–XVIII);¹⁰

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- 7 Here the priest invites to dinner / brings whatever is at hand: / Bigos from yesterday’s roast / – and a capon, old, it shows.
8 BIGOS dish from various leftovers.
9 Spiced bigos of chicken (capon) giblets.
10 One might suspect that it is this mixture of ingredients that became the basis for the figurative meaning of the word *bigos* ‘confusion, mess’:

Poydziecieli wy zá nimi / iużeście zginęli ná wieki: bo Heretycy iuż są skazáni ná potępienie wieczne / to y wy znimi: poydąli oni zá wami do Schizmy / będzie **bigos** iákiś nowy z odszczepieństwá kácerskiego” (1633; ESJPIXVII–XVIII),

If you follow them / you are dead for ages: for Heretics are condemned to eternal damnation / and you along with them: if they follow you to the Schism / there will be a new kerfuffle of this heretic dissidence

and the phrase *narobić bigosu* ‘to mess things up’.

Simultaneously, the shape of meat prepared for bigos was the base for the meaning ‘bits, pieces’:

Nawet strychy zgrzybiałe, baby niewidome
I szpitalne kaliki niedołączne, chrome,
Ludzie chore, do smierci, nie życia podobne,
W ichże łóżach rąbali [Tatarzy] na **bigosy drobne**”.

(J.B. Zimorowic, *Sielanki*, 1857, ESJPIXVII–XVIII).

Linde proposes *bigos* as the counterpart of *der Ragout* and adds after Cnapius (1621): “nieświeża rzecz; ponieważ i resztki zdaią się na bigos”¹¹ (SL-1, see also WDLP, s.v. *bigos*). This was neither an elegant dish, nor one particularly valued. In the late 18th century, Jędrzej Kitowicz writes in his *Opis obyczajów za panowania Augusta III*:

W pierwszym zwyczaju staroświeckim, na początku panowania Augusta III jeszcze trwającym, nie było zbyt wykwintnych potraw. Rosół, barszcz, sztuka mięsa, **bigos z kapustą**, z różnego mięsiwa kawalcami, kielbasą i słoniną, drobno pokrajanymi i z kapustą kwaśną pomieszany, i nazywano to bigosem hultajskim.¹² (Kitowicz 1621).

It is the custom of adding cabbage (and other ingredients), along with proper cooking, and then reheating the dish time and time again that eventually transformed German bigos into a Polish dish. In his EStp-1, Zygmunt Gloger adduces s.v. *Bigos* the following description by Cezary Biernacki:

Bigos hultajski, podobnie jak barszcz lub zrazy, jest najlubiejszą potrawą kuchni polskiej. Przyrządza się z kapusty kwaszonej z drobno pokrajanem mięsiwem wołowym, cielęcym, wieprzowem, kielbasą, zwierzyną, słoninką w kostki pokrajaną lub grzybami. Zwykle bigos praży się tłusto i długo na węglach, a odgrzewany,

Even senile fossils and women blind
Hospital cripples, infirm and lame,
Ill people, to death alike and not to life,
In their beds were **chopped** [by Tatars] **to bigos fine**.

In this meaning, *bigos* was the base for the verb *bigosować* ‘to chop up a person with sabres’:

Stał się tedy srogi *fremitus* i trzaskanie szablami, pytając się: «Kto taki? Podajcie go nam sam, wnet go tu będziemy bigossowali» (J.Ch. Pasek, *Pamiętniki*; wolne lektury.pl/katalog/lektura/pamietniki.html; accessed March 28, 2016).

Then a huge uproar arose and slashing with sabres, [and they were] asking: “Who then? Give him alone to us, and we will chop him to bigos this instant”.

- 11 Something not fresh, since even leftovers are fit for bigos.
- 12 In the first old-fashioned custom, still alive at the beginning of king August III’s reign, dishes were not very refined. Chicken broth, borscht, a piece of boiled beef, **bigos with cabbage** and chunks of various meats, sausage, and lard, all finely chopped and mixed with sauerkraut, it was called rascal bigos.

nabiera w smaku większej wartości. Dlatego też Polacy wybierając się w dalsze strony, zabierali z sobą w drogę faskę kilkogarncową dobrze opieprzonego bigosu, który odgrzewano na popasach.¹³ (EStp-1).

One should note, however, that the EStp published at the turn of the 20th century (1900–1903), whereas Biernacki lived in the 19th century, so that the passage cited above does not only describe the Polish bigos as opposed to its German prototype, but also, one might say, the ‘noble’ bigos, as opposed to merely a way of salvaging leftover bits of meat.

2. The word

Samuel B. Linde, in his dictionary (1807–1815) s.v. BIGOS, offers the following as the etymon of the Polish word: “Cf. *Ger.* Beguß (< *begießen* ‘polać, polewać’)”¹⁴ (SL-1).

Aleksander Brückner provides an explanation that is both concise and surprising: “**bigos** (hultajski) ‘siekanina’ (...); z niem. *Beiguss* ‘kawałeczki ołowiu’”¹⁵ (SEBr). It is for two reasons that this makes a strange impression: firstly, what semantic path leads from ‘small pieces of lead’ to ‘a dish’; secondly, how to explain the phonetic difference between *Bleiguss* and *bigos*? So far as I can tell, there is no precedent for a German loanword in Polish with the sequence *-lei-* rendered as *-i-*. There is also no reason for such a substitution, unique as it may be, since the diphthong *-ei-* itself has been preserved in other borrowings (e.g. *majster*), and the group *-lei-* poses no difficulties in pronunciation. The change in word-final position, from G *-us* to Pol. *-os* is equally difficult to explain. I believe that this idea should be considered a figment of Brückner’s imagination.

A different formulation is to be found in Andrzej Bańkowski’s etymological dictionary:

13 Rascal bigos, similarly to borscht or meat roulade, is the favourite dish of the Polish cuisine. It is made of sauerkraut with finely chopped beef, veal, pork, sausage, game, lard in cubes or mushrooms. Typically, bigos is roasted on coals with a lot of fat and for a long time, and its taste only improves when it is later heated up. This is why when Poles went to farther places, they took with them a barrel several garnetz in volume, full of well-peppered bigos to be heated up during stopovers.

14 This directs one’s attention towards a similar derivation in Polish: *polewka* ‘soup; sauce’ (< *polewać, polać* ‘to pour’).

15 **bigos** (rascal bigos) ‘hash; mince’ (...); from G *Beiguss* ‘small pieces of lead’.

bigos (...) niejasne, wygląda na stare zapożyczenie z jakiegoś źródła niemieckiego (śr.-g.-nm.). Z powodu konsekwentnego w pol. **-os** nie można go wywodzić z nm. **beiguß** ‘sos’¹⁶ (od **beigießen** ‘dolać’), ani z nm. **beguß** (: **begießen** ‘oblać, polać’), w grę mogą wchodzić tylko part. **begossen** albo **beigossen** (SEBań-1).^{17,18}

The origin of *bigos* is repeated after Bańkowski in USJP-1 (with a question mark) and WSJP (with the comment “maybe”); ESJPIXVII–XVIII allows two possibilities: “może niem. *Beiguss* ‘sos’, może niem. *begossen* ‘oblany’”.¹⁹ The much earlier SJPD-1 follows SW-1 and says: “nm. *Beiguss* = sos”, but adds “(według Brücknera *Bleiguss*)”.²⁰

The authors of the dictionary of German borrowings in Polish (WDLP) offer two possibilities: “1) nhd. *Beguß* subst. m., ‘Übergießen mit Wasser’, 2) nhd. **Beiguß*.”

Nonetheless, I believe that Bańkowski’s proposition about the base being a participle is noteworthy. Let us inspect it.

- a. If one takes into account what the borrowed dish was, i.e. if one takes into account the reality of the thing, it is natural to embrace what Bańkowski rejects, the noun *beiguß* ‘sauce’ (see also WDLP). Naturally, not in the shape given by SEBań, but as MHD **bîguz* (“dt. *Beiguß* / mhd. **bîguz*”; Czarnecki 2014: 121, 137), admittedly, a reconstructed form. This is semantically justified, but it does not solve the problem of G *-us* : Pol. *-os*.
- b. It seems rational to accept Bańkowski’s suggestion that a perf. participle acted as the base for the borrowing (probably *beigossen* (< *beigießen*) rather than *begossen*), of course in its historical, and not in its modern shape, before the diphthongization of long *i*. The possible form is *bîgossen*. The relation G *i* : Pol. *i* does not require a commentary, but the question of the morpheme *-en* in the German base remains. However, if one takes into account that the vowel [e] was reduced in this position to [ə] (Szulc 1991: 129), hence [bîgossən], then

16 So SW-1: <Nm. *Beiguss* = sos, podlewa [‘sauce’]>.

17 I omit here Bańkowski’s further suspicion about a connection with It. *bigutta* ‘a pot for cooking chicken soup’ and about *bigos* being a Wanderwort, as neither refers directly to Pol. *bigos*.

18 **bigos** (...) unclear, appears to be an old borrowing from some German (MHG) source. Due to the consistent **-os** in Polish, cannot be derived from G **beiguß** ‘sauce’ (from *beigießen* ‘to pour, to supply or add water’), or from G **beguß** (: *begießen* ‘to pour over’); only the part. **begossen** and **beigossen** are possible.

19 Perhaps G *Beiguss* ‘sauce’, or perhaps G *begossen* ‘poured over, dowsed’.

20 G *Beiguss* = sauce | (according to Brückner *Bleiguss*).

a phonetic adaptation in Polish that involves deletion of the entire group [ən] becomes clear: [bigossən] > [bigos]. Likewise, the substitution G u : Pol. o, which was inexplicable in the case of *biguz > bigos, here disappears naturally, together with the variant *Beguß* > bigos which caused an even greater complication as it included apart from Pol. o the relation G e > Pol. i.

Abbreviations

Fr. = French; G = German; It. = Italian; MHG = Middle High German; Pol. = Polish; Sp. = Spanish

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