ON TWO OLD ITALIAN TURKISMS (1. cassasso 2. pettomagi/pettomanzi)

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explain the origin of two old Italian words of Turkish origin, cassasso ‘a Turkish police officer’ and pettomagi/pettomanzi ‘Turkish officer(s) dealing with the possession of the dead’. Contrary to a previous etymology of his, the author’s present opinion is that cassasso derives from the Ottoman-Turkish hasas, a spoken variant of the literary Arabism ‘ases ‘a guard, night-watchman, policeman’. As to pettomagi/pettomanzi, it is possibly a Turkish adaptation of Greek words as πεθαμός ‘death’, πεθαμένος ‘dead’ + nominal suffix -cl.

Keywords: etymology, diachrony, language contact, areal linguistics, linguistic history
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Abstract. The paper aims to explain the origin of two old Italian words of Turkish origin, cassasso ‘a Turkish police officer’ and pettomagi/pettomanzi ‘Turkish officer(s) dealing with the possesions of the dead’. Contrary to a previous etymology of his, the author’s present opinion is that cassasso derives from the Ottoman-Turkish hasas, a spoken variant of the literary Arabism ‘ases’ ‘a guard, night-watchman, policeman’. As to pettomagi/pettomanzi, it is possibly a Turkish adaptation of Greek words as πεθαμός ‘death’, πεθαμένος ‘dead’ + nominal suffix -cI.

1. Among the words of oriental origin of the old Italian vocabulary is cassasso, attested in the meaning ‘a Turkish police officer’. It is a rare word, as demonstrated by the fact that it was not included in the main Italian historical-lexicographical works such as DEI or S. Battaglia’s Grande dizionario della lingua italiana, 21 voll. (Torino 1961-2002). In fact it has only been found in a couple of 16th-century authors, Theodoro Spandugino and Luigi Bassano, who quoted the word (Bassano in the plural form cassassi) with reference to the Ottoman world:

Il simile dico del Cassasso il quale è colui che prende coloro che di notte vanno senza lume, et lo fanno punire al Cadi (Trattato di Theodoro Spandvgino Cantacvsino Gentil’hvomo Costantinopolitano de’ costumi de’ Turchi, in Fr. Sansovino, Historia universele dell’origine et imperio de’ Turchi, Venezia 1600, 2, 97);

I Turchi Cassassi, cioè, Birri (L. Bassano, I Costvmi, et i modi particolari de la vita de Turchi, Roma 1545, 39v);

E questi [bastoni] vsano anchora i cassassi e castaldi, i quali si chiamano muchtûr [cf. muchtûr ‘birro; mossa’ (Argenti 173) = literary Ottoman muhzhîr ‘an officer of a court of justice who summons persons and produces them in court’ (Redhouse 1890: 1764)] (id. 49r-49v).
In a paper published some years ago (Rocchi 2006: 65) I proposed that the Italian word derives from the Ottoman-Turkish kassas ‘an executor of the law of talion’ (Redhouse 1890: 1456) < Ar. kaṣṣās ‘shearer’ (Wehr 1979: 896), from the verb kaṣṣa ‘to cut; to shear’. I consider now this etymology as incorrect, both because the aforesaid meaning of the Ottoman word is rare (as far as we know, only the Redhouse’s dictionary records it) and for the strange semantic development shown by the Italian loanword if the supposed etymology were right.

In my present opinion cassasso clearly comes from another Ottoman Arabism, namely hasas, well recorded by various Transkriptionstexte, cf. hases (chasas) ‘sbirro’, hasas başı (chasasbası=i) ‘capitano di sbirri’ (Molino 1641: 375, 80), hasas (chasas) ‘boja; manigoldo; sbirro’ (Pianzola 114), ‘sibre, archer’ (Viguer 124). It is a popular variant of the literary Ottoman ‘ases ‘a guard, night-watchman, policeman’ (Redhouse 1890: 1300) < Ar. ‘asas ‘patrol (as a body of men)’ (Wehr 1979: 716). The rendering of the Arabic ‘ain with a glottal, velar or palatal fricative is a feature of certain varieties of the spoken Turkish. As to the popular pronunciation of Istanbul, Bonelli (1899: 308-309) reports several instances: hünnabi for ‘ünnabi ‘pertaining to the jujube’, zühum for zü’üm ‘mistaken supposition’, qanahat for kana’at ‘opinion, belief’, zenahat for zena’at ‘craft, trade’, taleh (taleh) for tali’ (modern Turkish tali) ‘luck, fortune’, iḥtibar for i’tibar ‘esteem, consideration’. Some of these were already pointed out by Filippo Argenti for the 16th-century spoken Turkish: dalīh (dalyh, daleh) ‘risicho, uentura’, (e)ḥtibar (echtibar et chtibar) ‘stima et conto che si fa d’una persona o d’una cosa’, hunnabi (chunabi) ‘giuggiolino’, zenaat/zenahat (xenaat, xanachat) ‘exercitio, arte’ (Argenti 75, 91, 122, 274).

With regard to the Italian adaptation, it is a matter of fact that in loanwords foreign aspirates, having no equivalents in the Italian phonemic system, are mostly replaced with the native velar stops /k/, /g/; as to borrowings from Turkish see f. ex. caraccio, caragio, carazzo ‘tributo pagato dai sudditi cristiani’ (Cardona 1970: 20-21) < harac/harac ‘id.; casnà ‘luogo del tesoro pubblico presso i Turchi, erario’, casnadàr ‘custode del tesoro’ (DEI 793) < hazna, haz(i)ne resp. haznadar ‘id.; ganzàr (Venetian dialect) ‘specie di pugnale che usano i Turchi’ (Boerio 1856: 199) < hancar/hancer ‘short curved dagger’. The same phenomenon is found in non-adapted quotations of Turkish words in old Italian texts, see f. ex. the Relazione dell’impero ottomano of the Venetian bailo Domenico Trevisano (1554), where one can read the phrase capigiler-chiетudasei (sic) [= kapiciler kethûdası] ‘capo del portiere di sua maestà’ (Documenti di storia ottomana del secolo XVI [= Relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al Senato, a cura di F. Alberi, serie III, vol I], Firenze 1842, p. 134).

2. The term pettomanzi appears as headword in Battisti and Alessio’s etymological dictionary, but the short entry offers very little explanation: ‘(XVI sec[olo]; Sansorino [recte Sansovino]); certi ufficiali turchi; [voce] turca’ (DEI 2886). In spite of DEI’s indication I have not managed to find the word in Sansovino; however, it is attested in Bassano’s cited work.