ON THE (IM)POSSIBLE LATIN ETYMONS OF POLISH JARMUŁKA (‘YARMULKE, SKULLCAP’)

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Abstract

The etymology of the Polish word jarmułka has become a subject of discussion in LingVaria (1.15: 113–124). Catalyst for the discussion was a paper written by B.A. Struminsky (1987), in which the author puts forward a thesis concerning the Latin origin of the word. The present paper constitutes a commentary in which the lexical status of the Latin word forms suggested as potential etymons of jarmułka, both in Struminsky’s paper and in the other works concerning the subject, published in the issue of LingVaria mentioned above, is interpreted from a Latinist’s perspective. Moreover, reference is also made to a paper by W.G. Plaut (1955), in which the author postulated the Latin etymology of jarmułka 30 years prior to the work of Struminsky.

This year’s LingVaria, a half-yearly periodical, contains some interesting papers concerning the etymology of the Polish word jarmułka (‘yarmulke, skullcap’). The incentive behind it was the paper by B.A. Struminsky entitled „On the etymology of Polish jarmułka,” published in 1987 in the Jewish Language Review 7 (200–201), together with comments by D.L. Gold, editor-in-chief of the periodical (Gold 1987). Due to the fact that this publication failed to generate the expected discussion concerning the origin of the Polish jarmułka, a decision was made that both texts should be reprinted in LingVaria (1.15: 115–118), a periodical which is more accessible to Polonists and Slavists. These were supplemented with an introduction by D.L. Gold (Gold 2013) and a paper by M. Stachowski entitled “Uwagi o jarmułce” (“Comments on jarmułka”, Stachowski 2013) that presented the view of a Turkologist, since a crucial element of the initial paper by B.A. Struminsky was a thesis that, contrary to widespread
opinion, the genesis of the word jarmulka should be looked for not in the Turkish (Turkic) lexis, but in Latin one. As well as D.L. Gold, M. Stachowski, too, referred to Latin words as possible etymons of jarmulka, at the same time signalling the need for them to be verified by other specialists. In response to M. Stachowski’s appeal, as a Latinist rather than an etymologist, I intend to comment on the lexical status of the Latin word forms discussed in the works mentioned above in the context of their likelihood of being a source of jarmulka.

When considering its attestation in a 15th c. document from Germany, B.A. Struminsky assumes that a medieval Latin word almunicum ‘canon’s cap’ is the etymon of the oldest forms of the word in question, which in 15th c. Polish sources was written as jalmurky and yelmvncha. On the other hand, he derives the (parallel) variants jałmurka and jarmulka (through intermediate stages: jarmurka < *jarmucka) from the Latin form armutia ‘long cap worn by the clergy,’ recorded in files from the 1314 synod of Ravenna. He claims that according to Du Cange’s dictionary (1840) both word forms, i.e. almunicum and armutia, constitute variants of the base lexeme almucium.

While also stressing the need to verify the relevant Latin terms, D.L. Gold for his part indicates yet another medieval Latin word, i.e. almutia ‘cowl, hood’, as a derivative of the Arabic al-mustaka ‘fur-lined cloak with long sleeves,’ which would suggest an Oriental (although not Türkic) provenience for jarmulka, with a Latin transmission. M. Stachowski, in turn, recognises Gold’s conjecture to be plausible, in conclusion, however, he refers to B.A. Struminsky’s suggestion and states that a Latin term “of the almunicum or almunica type (pluralis or femininum under the influence of the almucia–armutia)” is a probable source of jarmulka.

With reference to the Latin lexemes discussed above one needs in the first place to state that the word almunicum, noted by B.A. Struminsky and quoted by the two other scholars, is not attested in such a form in medieval Latin. However, it would be possible to surmise that in this instance the reference is rather to the word almunicium, recorded in a 1447 document and provided in Du Cange’s dictionary (1840) with a cross-reference to the entry almucium; as a result, the lexeme almunica, whose possible existence was considered by M. Stachowski, is also not attested. On the other hand, both of the other word forms, i.e. armutia indicated in Struminsky’s text and almutia suggested by D.L. Gold, have attestations in medieval texts quoted in Du Cange’s dictionary (1840), and not only the former, but also the latter is classified in the dictionary as a variant of the base lexeme almucium, which was to mean a short cape covering the head and arms used by monastic and diocesan clergy as well as lay persons. Moreover, this lexeme, still in the same dictionary, is also ascribed other variant forms, i.e. almutium, almucia, aumucia, almussa, amussa, that are attested in medieval documents. Słownik (1953–, vol. 1, fasc. 3, s.v. almucium) registers also the variants almutium and almucium. It is worth emphasising, however, that oppositional pairs of the almucium/almutium or almucia/almutia type should be treated as purely orthographic, and not phonetic, variants, as in the period between the 3rd and 5th c. AD, as a result of the consonantalising of the originally vocalic /i/ in the pre-vocalic position, both the preceding stop /k/ (written with the help of the letter c) and /t/ were palatalised and assimilated to the dental affricate /c/ (/tʃ/) or /c/ (/tʃ/). Evidence of
this is seen in the inscription spelling of the VINCENTZVS (= Vincentius) type (3rd c. AD), as well as in the later numerous mistakes on epigraphic relics and in manuscripts, in which -ci- was used in place of -ti-, and vice versa, e.g. terciae (= tertiae), definiciones (= definitiones), conditio (= condicio ‘contract, condition’), condicio (= conditio ‘spicing of dishes’). In medieval Latin an orthographic variation of this type, i.e. an alternative spelling of the interchangeable -ti/-ci-, is quite common (cf. e.g. Słownik 1953-, vol. 8, fasc. 8, s. v. simulatio / simulacio, solacium / solatium, etc.).

With regard to the discussion in LingVaria it is perhaps also worth noting one more fact. In his 1987 commentary on B.A. Struminsky’s paper D.L. Gold states in passing (1987: 203) that as regards a possible etymon of jarmułka Plaut mentions the form almucia, that is another of the variants mentioned above of the word almucium, one, however, which differs from that noted by himself (i.e. almutia), as well as from that noted by B.A. Struminsky (i.e. armutia). Although D.L. Gold does not refer to any specific publication, undoubtedly he must have had in mind W.G. Plaut’s paper (1955). In that work W.G. Plaut does indeed indicate the form almucia, or its diminutive derivatives: almucella/armucella, as potential roots of jarmułka. Due to the absence of W.G. Plaut’s paper in the LingVaria’s “jarmułka album” I will quote the final fragment that begins with a question related to an earlier section, in which the author casts doubts on earlier attempts to clarify the origin of jarmułka on the grounds that they failed to take the religious nature of the headgear into consideration. Thus, he asks (and answers):

What was the comparable church garment which the Jewish cap resembled, without, of course, duplicating it? It was the amice (or almuce), a cape which covered the shoulder and which was worn by the priest until he arrived at the altar. […] It appears most likely that in later days it gave rise to a Jewish word – our yarmulke.

The Latin word for amice (or almuce) was almucia. Most scholars agree that the German Mütze is derived from almucia or its related forms aumucia, armutia. […] The word almucia had a diminutive form almucella or armucella. It should be born in mind that the Latin pronunciation of the ‘c’ varied considerably, and was quite often consistently pronounced as a ‘k’. It is suggested, therefore, that ‘the small amice’, or armucella, gave rise to the use of the word yarmulke. The transposition of the ‘l’ and ‘c’ is a common phenomenon in linguistic derivation. It appears plausible to assume that almucia was an often-used term in medieval Germany; hence its adoption into everyday language, taking later the form of Mütze. This same process then gave rise also to calling the small Jewish cap by this term; and the Jews who took their medieval German with them to Eastern lands probably also took the word armucella along. With them it travelled as far east as Turkey; and we suggest that the Osman term came from the West – either through the mediation of the Jews, or more directly in some similar way. It is entirely possible that the ultimate adoption of the word in its present popular form was hastened by a re-inoculation from Slavic or other languages; and it is equally possible that the word yarmulke came into prominence amongst the Jews because their neighbours used it to describe the Jewish cap.

To sum up: in our opinion all previous explanations fail to establish the connection between the term and the specific Jewish and religious use of the cap. We suggest that the religious headgear of the clergy, called almucia (or armucella), which
gave rise to the German Mütze, the Portuguese mursa, and the Scotch muth, also was the source for the Jewish yarmulke, the Slavic yermolka and probably also the Osman yarmuluk.

I will add two comments whith reference to the Plaut’s text. The first concerns the diminutive form of the word almucia adduced by W.G. Plaut, i.e. almucella or armucella. In the related footnote the author refers to the Deutsches Wörterbuch by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1885, vol. 6, 2839, s.v. “Mütze”), however, this dictionary only mentions the form almucella. Similarly, Du Cange’s dictionary (1840) quotes the diminutive almucella, as well as almuzella and aumucella, yet it does not record the form armucella. The second comment is connected with the suggestion that in the form armucella/almucella the letter c could stand for the phoneme /k/. This, however, seems rather unlikely, due to the fact that the previously-mentioned assibilation to the dental affricate /c/ around 4–5th c. AD also covered /k/ when placed before the front vowel /e/. This is even testified in the articulation of Romance words constituting continuations of words such as, e.g. centum ‘a hundred,’ with a dental or alveolar fricative/affricate (and not velar) in the word onset.

In the recently initiated discussion concerning the etymology of jarmułka it is worth remembering, however, that the root of this word was situated in medieval Latin over 30 years before the publication of B.A. Struminsky’s paper, which has become the reason for the present discussion.

References