

[0698]

DOES ENGLISH PRAWN HAVE COGNATES?

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The part of the entry for *prawn* in the Second Edition of the *OED* (1989) which deals with etymology and cognate forms in other languages is identical to the one in the first edition (1933). It reads:

"ME. *prayne*, *prane*, of unknown origin. No similar name found in other langs."

This suggests that during the past decades nothing new has been found as far as the history of *prawn* is concerned. And what we know is next to nothing. In 1882, Skeat, in his *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (EDEL)* writes:

"**PRAWN**, a small crustacean animal, like the shrimp. (Unknown) M.E. *prane*, ... Of unknown origin"

The revised and enlarged new edition of this dictionary (1879-82) is no more informative:

"**PRAWN** ... (Scand?) M.E. *prane*, ... Of doubtful origin ..."

And a hundred years later (1982), S.M. Kuhn's *Middle English Dictionary (MED)* heads its entry:

"**prane** n. Also **praine** [Origin obscure]. The European prawn (*Leander serratus*)..."

The etymological connexions suggested by the above dictionaries are as follows:

(a) with Latin *perna*

In the first edition of the *EDEL*, Skeat comments:

"If *prawn* is from Lat. *perna*, there must have been an O.F.¹ *parne** or *perne**".

¹ . O.F., abbrev. for: Old French
 prov. E., abbrev. for: provincial English
 afr., abbrev. for: altfranzösisch.

This explanation is dismissed in the revised edition:

"But we cannot connect *prawn* with L. *perna*",

a comment corroborated by the entries in the *OED* (1933, 1989):

"A suggested connexion with L. *perna* ... is opposed at once to the sense and the phonology"

(b) with English *prance*

Skeat (*EDEL*, rev. ed.) gives the following explanation:

"We find also prov. E.¹ *prankle*, a prawn, and *prankle*, to prance (Isle of Wight). This suggests a connexion between *prawn* and *prance*; with a possible allusion to its bright appearance or quick movements..."

(c) with Latin *praedōnem*

Holthausen suggests:

me. *prane* < afr.¹ **praon*, *preon* < l. *praedōnem*

The quotations for *prawn* go back to the 15th century. The first recorded usage occurred in 1426:

"*Court Rolls Maldon*, Bundle 16 m. 2 bk. Item dicunt q^d Margareta vxor Rob^{ti} Seyken forstalláuit in foro praynes qu... emit in foro de Iohanne Gyrlfader ..." (*OED*, 1989).

This leaves open whether the word existed in OE or was borrowed from another language.

In this paper, I will not attempt to reconstruct any form that may have preceded the ME word-forms. Rather, I want to suggest that there are similar forms in modern languages. Thus we find:

- (1) "**Porr** (*poa*) und *Purr* (*pua*) meist im Plur. *P-en* f. "Krabbe", "Garnele", Crangon vulgaris ... Die Form mit *o* ist in Eid. Nordfr. Pellw. Hus. gebräuchlich, die mit *u* (neben *Kruut*) in Dtm. ..." (Mensing)
- (2) "... fries *Porr* (Wiedingharde, Amrum)..." (Mensing)

- (3) "**porr**, -n f. Garnele, Granat, *zool.* palaemon squilla" (SchmidtPetersen)
- (4) "**por** f. Garneele, Krabbe; plur. *porne*" (P. Jensen)
- (5) "at por, -en (det), Krabbe" (O. Wilts)
- (6) "**porre**, **poarre**, s. voor: *crangon vulgaris*, garnaal, gebruikelijk op de Friesche Noordzeekusten, als Dokkumer-Nieuwezijlen, Peasens, Roptazijl enz. en de eilanden. Ook in Noord- en overdr. in Oost-Friesland..." (W. Dijkstra)
- (7) "**poarre**, s., garnaal..."
"**porre**, s., garnaal" (Zantema)

The examples show that forms resembling *prawn* and denoting small types of crustaceans occur both in Low German (no. (1)),² West Frisian (nos. (6) and (7)) and North Frisian (nos. (2) to (5)).³ It may be interesting to note in this context that the word-form also appears in Flemish, but with a different meaning:

"**POER** ... In Vl. België naam voor een makreelachtigen visch ..." (WNT)⁴

². Examples of the occurrence of *Porr(en)*, *Purr(en)* in Schleswig-Holstein in the 18th and 17th centuries are given by H. Seehase (pp. 39, 71), who refers to

Camerer, Joh. Fr., "Vermischte histor.-pol. Nachrichten der Herzogtümer Schleswig und Holstein", 1762

and

Caeso Gramm, "Chilonium novus Holsatiae Parnassus", Schleswigae 1665.

(I am indebted to Dr. O. Vries, Groningen, for drawing my attention to Seehase).

There are, besides *Porr: prawn*, Low German words which exhibit analogies in form and meaning with English words and which have no parallel forms in Standard German, such as *Brägen: brain*; *Elamm (Aulamm): ewe lamb*; *Fenn (pasture): fen*; *Häven: heaven*; *Mööt (he keem mi in 'ne Mööt): meet*; *rädi: ready*; *Schinn (scurf): skin*; *Wier: wire*; *Woi: whey*; *Kluuster-(nelke): cluster*.

³. In East-Frisian, *Porr* is used only in a figurative sense: cf. quotation (4): "... en overdr. in Oost-Friesland." Similar words denoting someone/something small occur in cognate languages /dialects such as:

PURR ... 2. Anything very small (Wright); **PARRICH** ... 1. A person of small stature ... 2. A term of endearment for an infant or young child (Wright); **PIRR** ... 3. Anything very small of its kind (*SND*); **PURRE** *noget small ell. ringe, no. dial. purv. lille ... person (Ordbog)*; **poarre** klein, nietig persoontje (Dijkstra); **poarre** klein, nietig persoontje ... (Zantema).

⁴. Words consisting of *p* + vowel + *r* or *p* + *r* + vowel (+ ...) often denote sea creatures in countries surrounding the North Sea:

PAR(R) ... 1. A young salmon ... 2. The piltock or sillock (Wright)

PEER ... 1. A sea-slug ... 2. A minnow ... Norw. dial. *pir*, a small fish ... (Wright)

PIRR 1. The codling (*SND*)

PRAAV A sea-worm ... (Wright)

PRANKLE A prawn (Wright)

PRINKLE ... A young coal-fish (Wright)

PRIM ... A very small smelt (Wright).

One difference between *prawn* and the forms quoted is the relative position of the *r* and the vowel. This can be explained as a case of *r*-metathesis, a sound change that occurs relatively frequently before *n*.

The second difference is the occurrence, in *prawn*, of the final *-n*, which is absent in the other singular forms. This *-n* can perhaps be accounted for as a former plural allomorph (the forms under (1) to (7) have the plural ending $[(\Theta) n (\Theta)]$), which would imply that *prawns* is a double plural.⁵

This interpretation is corroborated by one of the quotations under *prawn* (I.1.) in the *OED*:

"c 1400 *Prompt. Par.* 411 Prane, fysche, stingus",

where the three nouns could be plurals, and by the following entries:

- (8) "poorn, - subst. f. Krabbe/reje" (Jørgensen, 1955)
- (9) "Krabbe, die poorn, jü" (Jørgensen, 1981)
- (10) "Krabbe (Garnele) ju poorn, de poorne" (Lorenzen),

where the form with *-n* is, like English *prawn*, singular.

What is still left open, now that the similarity between *prawn* and its equivalents in congeneric languages has been shown, is the etymology of *prawn* and its counterparts.⁶ They may be reflexes of a common older form, or *prawn* may have been adopted from one of the languages mentioned. This is not borne out by the relevant literature, but possible:

"This intercourse [between England and the people of Flanders, Holland and northern Germany] extends from the days of William the Conqueror

⁵. Other double plurals are, e.g., *kine*, *children*, *breeches*.

⁶. Mensing makes a suggestion for *Porrr*; he connects it with *purren* ("stechen", "stochern"), *to poke*, and *Purr* ("Stachel"), which are cognate forms of dialectal English *purrr* (Wright). Outzen regards "Porren" as "without doubt" derived from the Frisian verb *porre* ("stechen", etc.) and draws a parallel to the words *Pôrt* ("Stachel") and *Porrr(Purr)haber*, a special type of oats (cf. Outzen's entries for *Porre* and *Porren*). In contrast to this, it would not be impossible to assume Indo-European *breuq*, "to spring", "to flick", which produced Greek βροῦκος, "grasshopper" / "locust" (Pokorny), as a source of *prawn* and the cognate forms mentioned in this paper.

... down to the eighteenth century" (Baugh, p. 226)

If *prawn* is a loanword, it would have been borrowed as a plural, which, from the author's own experience and according to Mensing (cf. (1) "meist im Plural"), is the usual form.

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