

THE GENEALOGY OF THE HAGGIS

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Our standard lexicographical reference works have firm views about *haggis*. *Oxford English Dictionary* states categorically “derivation unknown”. *Middle English Dictionary*: “Prob. from *haggen* ... AF [Anglo-French] *hagiz* is no doubt from ME [Middle English]”. *Dictionary of the Scots Language*: “Orig. uncertain but prob. a deriv. of *HAG*, v¹, n¹, to chop”.¹ *OED* continues:

The analogy of most terms of cookery suggests a French source; but no corresp. F. word or form has been found. The conjecture that it represents F. *hachis* ‘hash’, with assimilation to *hag*, *hack*, to chop, has app. no basis of fact; F. *hachis* is not known so early, and the earliest forms of the Eng. word are more remote from it. Whether the word is connected with *hag*, vb., evidence does not show.

Would *OED* chief-editor Murray, a Scot, have been defending the ancestry of the haggis, deferring to Burns rather than philological evidence?

The first attestation of a haggis word noted by *OED* is from 1420. This is in *Liber Cure Cocorum* and the passage is worth quoting in full:

For hagese
Pe hert of schepe, þe nere þou take,
Po bowel nogt þou shalle forsake,
On þe turbilen made, and boyled wele,
Hacke alle togeder with gode persole,

Note

Isop, saveray, þou schalle take þen,
And suet of schepe take in, I ken,
With powder of peper and egges gode wonne,
And sethe hit wele and serve hit þenne,
Loke hit be saltyd for gode menne.
In wyntur tyme when erbs ben gode,
Take powder of hom I wot in dede,
As saveray, mynt and tyme, fullle gode,
Isop and sauge I wot by þe rode.²

Nere are kidneys and the *turbilen* is likely *court bouillon*. Unlike stock or broth, which might be used in an accompanying sauce, *court bouillon* was often discarded, and might have a higher salt or acid content. It was traditionally used in cooking offal, in particular organ meat.³ The insistence on seasoning —pepper plus fresh herbs in summer, dried and ground herbs in winter, no fewer than six of which are named— underlines the bland (or lightly unpalatable) nature of much organ meat and the practical, economical basis of this and comparable recipes. We note that there is no mention of the addition of grain or pulse, which would have served a similar practical purpose, to eke out the meat.

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This text then establishes the status of the dish at the court of Henry VI. And we cannot fail to note, whether intentional or unconscious, the juxtaposition of *hagese* and *hacke*. *MED* has a somewhat earlier instance: “Draweþ out þe hagys of þe posnet.” This is from *Femina*, a hybrid Anglo-Norman or Anglo-French text in several senses, that offers English verse paraphrases of didactic material from various French sources. It is dated to about 1400. The matching French verse is “estriez le hagyz du posnet”.⁴ The tract’s *posnet* is not a native English term and is rather a loan from Norman *possonet* ‘cooking pot’. There may be good reason to claim that *hagyz* is a similar loan. Before looking at *Femina*’s source in this regard, we may note that the first attestation of *haggis* in Scots is from 1699 and can then not help with etymology or early history.⁵

Femina draws on the *Tretiz* of Walter of Bibbesworth, who in about 1275 sought to provide a working vocabulary in French for the English-speaking mistresses of rural estates —or so the authorial conceit would have it—. ⁶ Walter provides invaluable insight into the late thirteenth-century vocabulary in French and English (here in the form of interlinear glosses, not full paraphrases) for such household operations as baking, dressing flax, spinning, and brewing but is more laconic as concerns actual processes.⁷ In a section entitled “Ore pur attirer bel la mesoun” (“Now [the French] for decorating the house [for a feast]”), Walter has a great deal to say about spreading layers of tablecloths —the cleanest on top— washing out drinking cups and bowls,⁸ and cutting fingernails with scissors, perhaps those of the servants! He enlivens the imagined scene with an apostrophe

to the scullion: “Va t’en, quistroun, ou toun avez Estrere le hakis del postnez” (vv 1035-36). *Havez*, elsewhere found as *havet*, means ‘meat-hook’ and the English gloss is appropriately *fleischhook*. *Estrere* is readily seen as allied to *extract*, and *postnez* we have already identified as a cooking pot. The verse then translates as “Off you go, cook’s boy, and bring the haggis out of the cooking pot with your meat hook.” A meat hook could be used for many kitchen tasks but here its immediate signification for haggis studies is that the object to be recovered is too large or heavy to be managed with a ladle, spoon, or tongs. We might imagine the scullion hooking the fork into a loop of the cord with which the casing was trussed up. Walter then goes on to exhort the kitchen boy to put an old bee-hive (Anglo-Norman *rouche*, Middle English *hivve*) under his pots and not a *ladle* (AN *louche*, ME *ladil*). Perhaps old coiled-straw bee-hives are being used to keep the fire going and the lad is being warned not to let the ladle slip into the fire. Whatever is meant here exactly —and it may just be the French word *rouche* being played off against *louch* — it seems unrelated to the retrieval of the haggis.⁹

Skeat proposed that *haggis* was derived from Old Norse *höggva* ‘to hew, strike’¹⁰ but even when found in a non-martial context, e.g. with reference to felling trees, its medieval use is not attested for cutting and mincing activity on the scale and in the domestic environment here envisaged.¹¹ Nor has the verb generated a name for any of the modern Scandinavian equivalents of the haggis: Icelandic *slátur*, Faroese *gartálg*, Norwegian *lungemos*, Swedish *pölsa*. Walter’s modern editor, William Rothwell (1984, 174), thinks the word a loan from English.

In medieval continental French, the verb *hacher* (var. *hagier*) is attested from about 1225 in the sense of cutting into pieces.¹² It is traced to a Frankish noun *hāppia*, a curved kitchen knife.¹³ Aside from Walter of Bibbesworth, the first example of its use in a culinary context is from the fourteenth-century household manual, *Le Mesnagier de Paris*.¹⁴ In the section on preparing the house for a celebration, Walter or a later scribe averages about one English gloss every two verses. While meathooks, ladles, and hives are all the object of such glossing, the French term *hakis* is not, suggesting that the word was well known to both speech communities, and even this is perhaps too categorical a phrasing for a landed aristocracy whose members might simply occupy differing positions on a scale of French-language competence. Walter’s French and its “absent” English gloss remain our earliest example of a reference to haggis. First attestations have little evidentiary value and in reality only establish *termini post quem*. We are not authorized to claim Walter’s *Tretiz* as the context for a first instance of *hakis* 125 years before the English verse of *Femina*, as noted in *MED*, but the lack of a gloss does point to the word having been in common currency.

As *OED* concedes, most culinary terminology and attendant cooking processes and products crossed the Channel in only one direction, from France to England. Given long-standing attitudes toward perfidious Albion, it is difficult to imagine the haggis, as minced organ meat mixed with grain and herbs and cooked in a sheep's stomach, being adopted from British to French dining halls. To look in the other direction, there is no need to assume a taste for haggis moving from northern England into Scotland, as ties between Scotland and France in these centuries were sufficiently close for such a dish to have been taken up directly from France. Innovative uses of the less prized cuts of meat—the heart, lungs, liver, intestines, brains, testicles—are a feature of most food cultures. In Iberia, for example, we find *camaiot* in the Balearic Islands, *chireta* in Aragon, *girella* in Catalonia, *buchos* in Portugal and Galicia, and doubtless many more. In medieval French and English haggis we may have something in the nature of a specific recipe—the kinds of meat chopped up, the choice of grains or vegetables incorporated, the nature of the seasoning, use of the stomach as casing—rather than a distinct dish.

To conclude, with reference to the historical dictionaries first cited, *haggis* is shown to have been a well understood term in a late thirteenth-century social context in which both Anglo-Norman French and English were used. The variety of early spellings, *hagis*, *hagiz*, *hagyz*; *hagays*, *agys*; plural *hegges*, *hacys*,¹⁵ suggests an origin in the French verb *hacher*, *hager* (derived from a Frankish verb meaning 'to hack') plus the suffix *-ëis*, yielding **hagëis* 'chopped, minced matter'.¹⁶ The term for the processing of the chief ingredient was then extended to the dish itself. English *pasty* offers a comparable development. This term for a seasoned meat pie (often of venison) is derived from Anglo-Norman *paste* 'dough', i.e., the pastry crust enclosing the pie. Just as the container of the pasty—the crust—gave a name to the dish as a whole, the status of the contents—minced—determined the name of the haggis.

Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary, OED Online*, s.v. *haggis*; *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *hagis*; *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, s.v. *haggis* (all three works consulted 10 May, 2008). Other English etymological dictionaries range from no entry at all (*The Barnhard Concise Dictionary of Etymology* 1995) to stating that the origin is unknown (Klein 1971) and on to a far-fetched and unsupported origin in Old French *agace* ‘magpie’ (*The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* 1969).

2. *Liber Cure Cocorum* 1862, 52-53.

3. *Middle English Dictionary* speculates that the term *turbilen* is probably drawn from Old French *torbillon* ‘whirlwind’, in the sense of a seething pot of liquid, but it is much more likely a distortion of *court bouillon*, literally ‘short boiled’. If this were true, it would be the earliest attestation of the phrase, albeit in garbled form, in either French or English. My thanks to Jennifer Sayers Bajger for differentiating for me between *court bouillon*, stock, and broth. See further *Larousse Gastronomique* 2001, 352.

4. *Femina* 2005, 74.

5. “He saw Carnegie himself have in his hand a hot sheep’s haggis”; *The Black Book of Kincardineshire* 1843, 94.

6. Walter of Bibbesworth 1990, 1.

7. See, as a representative study of a specialized vocabulary, Sayers, “Brewing Ale in Walter of Bibbesworth’s 13 c. French Treatise for English Housewives,” *Studia Etymologica Cracoviensia* (forthcoming).

8. Walter’s term for bowl is *queles* (v. 1033). *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* 1992 has an entry under the head-word *escuele* but seems not to have noticed this variant form.

9. On the kitchen as a frequent site for medieval humor, see Gordon 2007. At the end of the haggis episode, Walter returns to the vocabulary of bee-keeping; see Sayers, “An

Early Set of Bee-Keeping Words in Anglo-Norman French and Middle English” (forthcoming).

10. *A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* 1961.

11. *An Icelandic English Dictionary* 1969, s.v. *höggva*.

12. *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch* 1925-2001, s.v. *hacher*.

13. *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* 1928-, Vol. 16, 144-48, s.v. *hâppia*, at 146b. See further *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* 2005, II.932, s.v. *(s)skep, (s)kop* ‘to cut, split with a sharp instrument’. The *FEW* evolution—from a nominal formation, through a verbal form, to finally designate the end product of the verbal action—is rather roundabout. A more direct derivation would be from a Frankish verb cognate with Middle High German *hacken* ‘to hack into pieces’; *IEW* 2005, II. 537, s.v. *keg-/kek-, keng-/ken-*. *Dictionnaire étymologique de l’ancien français* 1974-, the most recent reference work to address the word *haggis*, has a disappointing entry s.v. *haguier*, which it would derive, with no justification offered, from a Middle Dutch *hacken* ‘to chop’. Its discussion of *haggis* reviews some earlier secondary literature but makes no effort to place the dish in a bilingual cultural environment.

14. *Mesnagier de Paris* 1994, 684, I. 1619.

15. *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* 1992, s.v. *hagis*.

16. See Lodge 1996, who recognizes the worth of Walter of Bibbesworth’s early testimony and speculates on possible medieval pronunciations of the haggis word in France and England, i.e. whether the intervocalic consonant(s) was pronounced *-g-*, *-dz-* or *-ch-*. But here too a discussion of the wider cultural context is lacking.

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