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THE ORIGINS OF ENGLISH *GUINEA PIG* AND GERMAN *MEERSCHWEINCHEN* AGAIN

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Abstract

This is a note to support and expand recent work on the etymology of German *Meerschweinchen*, English *guinea pig*, and related forms with a body of dated evidence, including new first attestations for English *guinea pig* and Polish *świnka morska*.

“Is the English *guinea pig* a pig from Guinea, and the German *Meerschweinchen* a piggy from the sea?” Marek Stachowski has asked (Stachowski 2014), returning to the question with a supplemental note on English *guinea pig* (Stachowski 2018). As he points out, “one cannot but wonder why this small animal, so utterly different from a pig, is nevertheless called a pig, as well as why it should be a pig from Guinea if it does not live in Guinea at all” (Stachowski 2014: 221). Its names in English and German are indeed puzzling. Stachowski’s masterly presentation and analysis of the evidence can, I think, be taken even further by a consideration of the dates at which some of the evidence is attested.

Let us begin with the second element, *pig*. Stachowski (2014: 222) notes that “the animal is called a pig also in quite a few other languages (e.g. German *Meerschweinchen* ...)”, and discusses the possible relevance of German *Meerschwein* ‘capybara’. The capybara is roughly the size and shape of a small pig, justifying the second element of *Meerschwein*.¹ The guinea pig, like the capybara, is a furry South

¹ Cf. Marcgraf (1648: 230): “figura pene porcorum habet”; Labat (1731: 3.298): “Il diffère [sic] peu des cochons terrestres”.

American rodent which feeds by grazing, so an observer already accustomed to calling the capybara *Meerschwein* might see the guinea pig as a miniature capybara, *Meerschweinchen*. Some at least of the New World porcupines are likewise of a similar shape to the capybara, their distinctive quills only being erected when they are alarmed. Hence, Stachowski (2014: 224) argues, “the meaning ‘capybara’ yielded both ‘porcupine’ and ‘guinea pig’”.

An argument against this sequence from *Meerschwein* ‘capybara’ to *Meerschwein* ‘porcupine’ and *Meerschwein* ‘guinea pig’ is that the sense ‘capybara’ appears to be attested later than the other two. I have not found *Meerschwein* in this sense earlier than the *Onomatologia historiae naturalis* of 1761.² There are earlier references to the capybara as a pig, for it is called *cochon d’eau* in Labat (1731: 3.298); it is probably the *Verken* which lives in the water mentioned in Berkel (1695: 119); and it is said to be a pig of the rivers – “porcus est fluviatilis” – in Marcgraf (1648: 230). However, as I will now show, not only are *Meerschwein* ‘porcupine’ and *Meerschweinchen* ‘guinea pig’ attested earlier than *Meerschwein* ‘capybara’, but also, the porcupine and the guinea pig are compared to pigs significantly earlier than the capybara.

In 1551, Conrad Gessner remarked in his discussion of the Old World porcupine in the first volume of his *Historia animalium* that it is called *morska szwijnija* in Polish – confirming Stachowski’s argument (2014: 227) that Polish *świnka zamorska* is likely to be a later form than *świnka morska* – and added that the Polish form is probably after a German form which he gave as *ein meerschwyn*.³ Even if we had attestations of *Meerschwein* ‘capybara’ from the first half of the 16th century (European names for a uniquely South American animal could be no earlier), it would be unlikely that this name would have been transferred to the New World porcupine and then to the Old World porcupine in time for it to be a familiar designation of the latter by 1551. The *porc-* of *porcupine* is widely attested in western European languages from the 13th century onwards (see *OED* s.v. *porcupine*), the resemblance to a pig being perhaps its rounded outline and the Old World porcupine’s habit of foraging for food on the ground.

As for the guinea pig, it is first noticed by Gessner in his *Icones animalium*, published in 1553, where its picture is accompanied by four designations meaning ‘Indian rabbit’ – Latin *cuniculus Indicus*, Italian *conigli dell’India*, French *connin d’India*, and German *Indianisch Künele* – but by no other text (Gessner 1553: 63). It is not described in the *Historia animalium* itself until the appendix to the first volume, published in 1554, where the picture from the *Icones animalium* reappears with the heading “De cuniculo uel porcello Indico”, “of the Indian rabbit or little pig” (Gessner 1554: 19). The accompanying text remarks that “its voice is rather like the voice of piglets”.⁴ In the second edition of the *Icones animalium*, published

² *Onomatologia* (1761: 2 col. 381): “die Indianer: *Capybura*, die Europäer aber *Meerschwein* nennen”. Of the 25 sources for the early nomenclature of the capybara quoted by Donndorff (1792–1798: 1.412–413), this is the only one which has the form *Meerschwein*.

³ Gessner (1551: 633): “Polonus quidam interpretatur *morska szwijnija*, imitatus puto Germanos, qui porcum marinum nominant, *ein meerschwyn*”.

⁴ Gessner (1554: 19): “Vox nonnihil ad porcellorum vocem accedit”.

in 1560, Gessner adds that this is why “some people prefer to call it ‘Indian piglet’ in the vernacular”, and gives the Swiss German form *Indisch Seüle* ‘Indian piglet’ (Gessner 1560a: 106; cf. Faber 1572: 996, where Gessner is quoted but the standard German form *Indianisch Schweinchen* is given).⁵ Gessner’s explanation is confirmed by the testimony of Georg Marcgraf (1648), who remarked a century later that “they become so tame that they ask for their food by grunting (*grunniendo*)”: Marcgraf was not trying to make a point about their name, but the word for a pig’s grunting seemed to him to be the perfect noise for the voice of the little animals as he heard it.⁶ At the end of the 17th century, John Ray (1693) likewise called the guinea pig “American and Guinean rodent or rabbit, with the coat and voice of a piglet”, but his reference to Guinea shows that he was trying to explain English *guinea pig* rather than making an independent observation about the noise which the animal makes.⁷ We note finally that German *Meerschweingen* (= *Meerschweinchen*) ‘guinea pig’ was a familiar word by 1672, when it is used casually in a novel by Christian Weise (1672/2006: 233).

It has, by the way, been said that “The first mention of the Indian guinea-pig (del chanchito de la India) was by Oviedo in 1547” (Weir 1974: 437), and it is apparently on the basis of these words that certain online sources attribute the form *chanchito de la India* ‘little pig of India / the Indies’ to Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdés. But Weir does not say that the Spanish form is actually used by Oviedo, and her source (Cabrera 1953: 53) says explicitly that the animal is now called *chanchito de la India*, while Oviedo called it *corí*.⁸ Nor indeed does the form *chanchito de la India* occur in Oviedo’s pioneering description of the guinea pig (Fernandez de Oviedo 1547: fo. 99r). What does occur there is the observation that the guinea pig is good to eat, and that may provide another motivation for it to be called a pig. So, in one of the first occurrences of the English word, in Edmund Gayton’s *Pleasant notes upon Don Quixot* of 1654, a person who has a supply of “Guiny Pigs” is imagined as saying “dresse me that Squeaker for my breakfast” (Gayton 1654: 179).⁹ Calling the guinea pig a *squeaker* suggests awareness of its acoustic and gastronomic affinity with a little pig.

In this case, just as the pig-like quality of the Old World porcupine had been remarked on since the Middle Ages, and the pig-like quality of the capybara was observed independently by travellers to South America, so the pig-like quality of the guinea pig seems also to have been observed independently. The pig was, after all, an animal to which many others were compared, as Stachowski (2014: 223) points out;

⁵ Gessner (1560a: 106): “Vox nonnihil ad Porcellorum vocem accedit: unde aliqui uulgo Porcellum Indicum appellare malunt”. For Swiss German *Seüle* ‘piglet’, see *SchwId* s.v. *Süw*; *Indisch Seüle* is cited *ibid.* 7 col. 1500 from a German translation of Gessner of 1563.

⁶ Marcgraf (1648: 224): “Mansuescunt ita ut grunniendo cibum petant”; see also Weir (1974: 438).

⁷ Ray (1693: 223): “Mus seu cuniculus Americanus & Guineensis, porcelli pilis & voce”.

⁸ Cabrera (1953: 53): “La primera mención del chanchito de la India, como vulgarmente llamamos a este roedor, se debe a Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, quien a mediados del siglo XVI lo describió, bajo el nombre de ‘corí’”.

⁹ The quotation is misunderstood in *OED*’s current, unrevised, entry for *squeaker*, sense 2a.

as well as the porpoise, known by names such as Latin *porcopiscis* and Old High German *meriswîn* from the earlier Middle Ages onwards (*OED* svv. *porpoise*, *mereswine*), the seal might be called *porcus maris* (*DMLBS* s.v. *porcus*, sense 3, quotation of 1512), and the hippopotamus was not only *Wasserrossz* ‘water-horse’ and *Wasserochss* ‘water-ox’ but also *Wasserschweyn* in the mid-16th century (Gessner 1560b: 355).

We now turn to the element *meer-* in three German words for which we have dates of their first traceable attestations: *Meerschwein* ‘porcupine’ [1551], *Meerschweinchen* ‘guinea pig’ [1672], and *Meerschwein* ‘capybara’ [1761]. Gessner’s explanation of its occurrence in the first of these forms is that persons who live far from the sea tend to assume that all marvels come from over the sea.¹⁰ The range of the Old World porcupines does not extend north of Italy, and so they seemed like exotic imports in German-speaking Europe. *MhdWb* (s.v. *mer*) concurs, that Middle High German compounds in *mer-* may indicate that an object is exotic rather than that it is directly connected with the sea. So it is that Old World monkeys were called by names such as Old High German *merikazza*, *merkazza* (cf. German *Meerkatze*, and see *OED* s.vv. *mercat*, *meerkat*).¹¹ This provides a neat explanation of all three words which is fully compatible with the sequence in which they are attested.

We turn finally to the element *guinea*. Stachowski (2014: 221–226) rightly and helpfully clears some past conjectures out of the way. There is, he notes, no evidence that the animal ever cost a guinea, or twenty-one shillings. There is no reason to suppose that *guinea pig* is a variant of an unattested **Guyana pig*. There are no parallels to support the suggestion that objects brought from South America by traders on a triangular voyage from England to Guinea, South America, and back – *Guinea men*, as they were called by 1689, a little later than the first attestation of *guinea pig* (Pitman 1689: 13; cf. Hartlib 1651: 96) – were themselves associated with Guinea. Finally, there is no merit whatsoever (though Stachowski kindly refrains from saying this explicitly) to the suggestion that guinea pigs might have been thought to resemble the young of *Potamochoerus porcus*, the red river-hog of West Africa, which is called *porcus Guineensis* in a 17th-century source (Marcgraf 1648: 230); in fact, the young of this animal are piglet-shaped, not guinea-pig-shaped, and are “dark brown in color with a distinctive pattern of yellowish longitudinal stripes and spots” (Leslie, Huffman 2015: 21, with a photograph), nothing like a guinea pig.

Stachowski’s own suggestion that the forms in Romance languages – and, as we have seen, in early modern German and Latin – which associate the animal with India are relevant to the English form is, I think, quite right. I do not follow him so far as to postulate a sequence from Portuguese *da-india* vel sim., by way of hypothetical

¹⁰ Gessner (1551: 633): “porcum marinum nominant, *ein meerschwyn*. Ea nimirum ratione qua uulgus in mediterraneis, a mari remotum, incognita & peregrina pleraque marina & transmarina uocat”.

¹¹ I am not convinced by *OED*’s suggestion (originating no doubt in Bradley 1889, which appears to be independent from Keller 1887: 13), that a Sanskrit form *markaṭa* ‘ape’ is etymologically relevant (*OED* s.v. *mercat*): the cercopithecus monkeys called *Meerkatze* are from Africa, not India. Nor, as Palander (1899: 22) points out, has it been explained how the Sanskrit form could have found its way, scarcely altered, into Old High German.

**Dindy* and **Dinny*, to *Guinea* (Stachowski 2014: 225; Stachowski 2018). Instead, I remark that confusion of *India* and related forms with *Guinea* was common in English in the years before the first attestation of English *guinea-pig* in 1651, and I gratefully accept his suggestion (pers. comm.) that it was motivated by phonetic similarity. The confusion is demonstrated, and discussed, in the following quotations:

Butts (1599: sig. K5r): “It may be, the vulgar for Indy Cock, miscall it Ginny-Cock”.

Pory (1600: 361): “The graine of India, or Ginnie wheate”.

Cowell (1607: sig. Kk3r): “*Ginny peper* (*piper de Ginnea*) is otherwise called *Indian peper*, of the place whence it commeth”.

Winslow (1624: 62): “*Indian Mays*, or *Ginny-Wheate*”.

Gerard (1633: 364–366): “Of Ginnie or Indian Pepper ... These plants are brought from forrein countries, as Ginnie, India, and those parts ... in English it is called Ginnie pepper, and Indian pepper: in the German tongue, *Indianischer Pfeffer*: in low Dutch, *Bresilie Peper*: in French, *Poiure d’Inde*”.

Gerard (1633: 1554–1555): “*Nucula Indica racemosa*. The Indian, or rather Ginny Nut ... the tree whereof this nut is the fruit grows in Ginny”.

Parkinson (1640: 358): “All these sorts of Pepper, came first from the *West Indies*, called *America*, and the several parts thereof, *Brassile* being reckoned as a parcell thereof ... although we in *English* from others false relation, give it the name of *Ginny Pepper*, as though it originally came from thence”.

The contrast between Gerard (1633) and Parkinson (1640) is interesting: Gerard is unsure as to whether the Guinea pepper comes from Guinea or India / the Indies, whereas Parkinson knows that it is from the West Indies, and that *Guinea* is a misnomer, although he is too wise to try to correct common usage.

Seeing the alternation of forms in *Guinea* and *Indian*, we might expect to find the guinea pig called *Indian pig* in 17th-century English sources, and indeed we do. The first reference to it in English is in a work based on Gessner’s *Historia animalium*, where it is called the “Indian little Pig-Cony”, a somewhat awkward translation of Gessner’s “*Cuniculus sive porcellus Indicus*” (Topsell 1607: 112). A translation of the zoological compendium of the Scots-Polish naturalist Joannes Jonstonus refers to creatures which “they call Indian-Pigs”, translating *porcellos Indicos* in the original Latin (Jonstonus 1678: 87; cf. Jonstonus 1650: 161). A translation from French at the end of the century refers to the agouti as “very like those creatures we call *Indian Pigs* in *France*”, translating French *Cochons d’Inde* (Raveneau de Lussan 1698: 17; cf. Raveneau de Lussan 1690: 24). So *Indian pig* was a possible form; but it was primarily used in translations.

In this respect, we may remark that when the anatomist William Harvey made the second known printed reference in English to “Ginny-pigs” (Harvey 1653: 527), he was translating Latin *sucula Indica* and *porcellus Indica* (Fabricius 1600: 5). He was no doubt using what he knew to be the normal English word; *Guiney-pigs* is used casually by Samuel Hartlib in a list of animals with saleable fur (Hartlib 1651: 96), and there are several attestations in the next two decades (Gayton 1654: 179; Hartlib

1655: 152 [distinct from the use in Hartlib 1651]; Power 1664: 16; Wilkins 1668: 158, 164, and folding table after 442; *Devil upon Dun* 1672). But just as Parkinson accepted the form *Ginny pepper* although he knew that the plant was not from Guinea, so Hartlib, Harvey, and their contemporaries may have been bowing to popular usage when they wrote *guinea pig*. It is striking that the word occurs in Gayton's *Pleasant notes upon Don Quixot* as part of a speech which Gayton puts into the mouth of Sancho Panza, referring to "Guinea" as "that fat and plentiful Kingdome, (whence the *Ginny Pigs* come)" (Gayton 1654: 179). I do not think that Sancho Panza is being presented as well-informed in this speech, but as the sort of ignoramus who might suppose that guinea pigs really do come from Guinea. A little later in the passage, "Mr Curate told him, these *Guinea Pigs* which he meant, were Shelves of gold ... made into wedges, Pigs and Bars" (Gayton 1654: 179): does the spelling make a pointed distinction between the "*Ginny Pigs*" which are not from Guinea and the "*Guinea Pigs*", pigs or ingots of gold, which really could be shipped from Guinea?

"Is the English *guinea pig* a pig from Guinea, and the German *Meerschweinchen* a piggy from the sea?" Up to a point. From Gessner onwards, western Europeans who called today's *cavia porcellus* a little pig do appear to have thought that its squeaks and grunts, if not its rounded body and palatable flesh, made the title appropriate. The *Meer-* of *Meerschweinchen* 'guinea pig' identified the animal as exotic, as did the *Meer-* of *Meerschwein* 'porcupine', and as did the *Guinea* of *guinea pig*. But as early as Gessner, it was possible for an educated person to distinguish *Meer-* 'marine' (as in *Meerschwein* 'porpoise' and *Meerschäum*) from *Meer-* 'exotic' (as in *Meerschwein* 'porcupine' and *Meerkatze*). Likewise, educated users of English in the 17th century knew that not everything named for Guinea comes from Guinea, though they also knew that trying to persuade the less educated English-speaking public that Guinea and the Indies are not the same place was a hopeless cause.

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