

Luca Weissenborn: The Entry *basin* in Beard's Trove

This project essay will examine dictionary entries of the Middle English (ME) word *basin*. This investigation will be based on the entry in Beard's Trove, which is a research project curating the legacy of Charles Rely Beard's *Historical Dictionary of Arms, Armour and Fashion*. The entry shall be further compared with those in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue (DOST), and the Middle English Dictionary (MED). The analysis of the word *basin* will encompass etymological, orthographical, phonological, and semantic information provided by the respective dictionaries. The aim of this project is to give an overview about the current state of research carried out on the ME word *basin*, to gather all the information offered by the dictionaries, to possibly reveal contradictions in the respective approaches, and eventually to contribute to the work of Beard's Trove.

Charles Rely Beard's manuscript describes ME *basin* as originating from the Old French (OF) word *basin* (Beard's Trove, *basin*), which became *bassin* in Modern French (OED, *basin*, n.). Both the DOST and the MED agree on this finding (DOST, *basin* n.; MED, *basin*, n.), which is typical for the ME period since OF had a significant impact on the evolution and expansion of the lexicon of the English language (Smith, 2005, p. 90). Beyond that, the OED gives a much more extensive insight into the word's etymology: since similar variants of the word are found in modern Roman languages, for example Spanish *basin* or Italian *bacino*, it is hardly surprising that OF *basin* derives from Latin, where the forms *bachīnus* and *bacchīnus* are found. Moreover, the Old High German form *becchin*, which has become modern German *Becken* and Dutch *bekken*, suggests a source of the word which affected both West Germanic and Italic languages. There have also been assumptions that the word might have a Celtic equivalent. However, the Celtic

bacc- ‘hook, crook’ “has no derivative with any approach to the sense of ‘basin’.” (OED, basin, n.) Nevertheless, it can be safely assumed that the word was indeed introduced from OF because this was the language which was used in official and thus military contexts (Stein, 2007, pp. 26-34).

Characteristically for the ME period, there was a large variation in terms of spelling although medieval written standards did exist. The degree of variation was dependent on the prestige of the vernacular at the time (Smith, 1996, p. 51). *Bacin* is a good example for ME orthography because it shows two phenomena that had emerged during this period: the interchangeability of <i> and <y> as well as the development of extra values of <c> in the grapheme-phoneme-relation (Smith, 2005, p. 93). Whereas Beard only mentions the form *bacin*, the OED additionally presents *bacyn* and *basyn* (basin, n.), which are good examples for the aforementioned phenomena. In the Old English (OE) period, <c> used to represent the plosive [k] and the affricate [tʃ]. However, with the advent of French, it would start to stand for [s] as well, not only in loanwords like *bacin* but also in native forms. In the case of <y> and <i>, both graphemes started to represent one vowel, namely [i]. In OE, <y> had stood for the close rounded front vowel [y], but in many dialects this vowel would be unrounded, resulting in a merger of <y> with OE <i> [i] (Smith, 2005, p. 93). Other interesting forms constitute those with a final <-e>, for example *bacine* (OED, basin, n.; MED, bacin, n.) and *basine* (MED, bacin, n.; DOST, basin n.). These forms start to disappear in the course of the fifteenth century while inflectional endings were being dropped, a change which is known as “the loss of the final <-e>” (Smith, 1996, p. 72). Some relics from the OE period in ME times are provided by the DOST in particular: the forms *bason* and *basson* suppose that the second, unstressed syllable was not articulated with weak vowels [ə] or [ɪ]. The problem that arises is, however, that the full articulation of unstressed syllables had already disappeared in late OE times (Smith, 2005, p. 95). One can assume now, especially in the Scottish context, that characteristics

from an earlier stage of the native language were applied to loanwords that had only lately become part of the lexicon. Conclusively, it can be stated that only a selection of spellings can be clearly explained by resorting to historical linguistic developments. Other spellings might be a result of the large orthographic variation in ME times.

In order to reconstruct the ME pronunciation of *bacin*, the articulation of Present-Day English (PDE) *basin* ['beɪsɪn] shall serve as a starting point. Since the ME consonant system was nearly identical to that of PDE (Smith, 2005, p. 95), the focus will be set on the vowels and the word's syllable structure.

The nucleus of the first syllable, [eɪ], is the result of the diphthongisation of Early Modern English (EModE) [ɛ:]. This long monophthong was raised from ME [a:] in the course of the Great Vowel Shift (GVS) (Smith, 2005, p. 129). This major sound change revolutionised the pronunciation of the English language because all long vowels of Late ME were either raised or, if they had already been in close position, diphthongised. The traditional argument behind this shift is a combination of two simultaneous processes: on the one hand, close vowels are assumed to have tended to produce diphthongal allophones; on the other hand, mid- and open vowels seem to have produced raised allophones. Apparently, the overall process happened in an ordered way and more or less thoroughly, depending on the region in the English-speaking area (Smith, 1996, pp. 67f.). This variation is particularly palpable in Scottish Standard English: in this case, EModE [ɛ:] was further raised instead of diphthongised, resulting in [e:] (Smith, 2005, pp. 128ff.). Thus, it can be stated that the ME pronunciation of the first syllable in *bacin* was [ba:-].

With regard to the second syllable, the vowel's quality and quantity are closely interconnected to both word stress and etymology. Being a loanword from OF, *bacin* did not underlie the Germanic Stress Rule (GSR), which assigned stress to the first syllable of lexical roots and which — as the term itself suggests — determined word stress in OE; the word was subject to the Romance Stress Rule (RSR). In the wake of the Norman

Conquest, this principle found its way into the English language. It operates from right to left and assigns stress on the basis of syllable weight. OF *bacin* ends in a VC syllable structure, which qualifies <-cin> as a “strong” syllable. According to the RSR, the primary stress of the word is therefore on this very syllable <-cin>, and, after having been imported into ME, the French loanword retained its stress at first (Bergs & Brinton, 2012, pp. 399f.). Consequently, a pronunciation of ME *bacin* like [baːsiːn] can be assumed, which is also found in the MED¹ (*bacin*, n.).

Notwithstanding, many of these stress patterns were considered “un-English”, which is why new loanwords were adjusted. However, they were not simply subjected to the GSR because this principle works on a morphological basis which would have been too difficult to be applied to French loanwords. Therefore, in order to assimilate the new words, the traditional GSR was not interpreted as a relation between stress and morphological structure but as one between stress and syllable — obviously heavily influenced by the RSR. The difference between French and ME in syllable calculation was, however, that ME was one of those languages which disregarded word-final consonants: <-cin> was transformed from a strong into a weak syllable. Consequently, the disyllabic word *bacin* gradually shifted its stress from the final syllable to the penult in the course of the ME period, resulting in [ˈbaːsiːn] (Bergs & Brinton, 2012, pp. 400f.).

The only outstanding point remaining in tracing back the pronunciation of PDE *basin* to its ME equivalent is [-ən]. The weakening of [i:] to [ə] (which is not even obligatory in PDE articulation anymore) seems to be the logical continuation of a pattern that had already begun in late OE times. The vowels of unstressed vowels started to lose their old qualitative distinctions, a process through which their inventory shrank to [ə] and [ɪ] in most cases (Smith, 2005, p. 95). To sum up the phonological characteristics of ME *bacin*, it could be made clear that the word was subject to a diphthongisation in the course of

¹ Actually, the MED suggests the pronunciation *bācīn* as it does not make use of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Nevertheless, after transcribing it into the IPA, the result is the same as the one presented above.

the GVS, an innovation of word stress distribution during the ME period, and finally the vowel weakening of its second, unstressed syllable.

With regard to the semantics of *bacin*, the entry in Beard's Trove will serve as a starting point for an extensive investigation of the word's different meanings. Step by step, the semantic information found in the OED, the DOST, and the MED will be presented, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding concerning the diversity of denotations of *bacin*.

Beard's manuscript begins with a detailed description of a *bacin*. He states that it is a head-piece and assumes that the word implies the primitive *bacinet*, which consists of a "skull-cap similar to that appearing on the Botiler slab" (Beard's Trove, *bacin*). Further elaborating on the word's denotation, it does not refer to a "more fully developed head-piece of which the back was prolonged downwards to protect the neck" (*ibid.*). Since he states that the word only appears in the early fourteenth century, it may be assumed that it was replaced by *bacinet*. Later in the entry, he also notes that both *bacin* and *basnet* were acceptable at the time. The earliest date which gives evidence of the word in Beard's manuscript is 1295. However, this occurrence still appears to be French. Also, in a document from 1313, which is linked to Richard de Gravesend, Bishop of London, the apparently Latin form *septem bacinis* 'seven basins' is mentioned. The first ME form Beard presents is *basyn*, mentioned in *Kyng Alisaunder* from 1300, whereas *Richard Cœur de Lion*, from 1325, names both the alternative spelling *bacyn* as well as the form *bacynet* (*ibid.*).

On the whole, the OED distinguishes between two large semantic areas of *basin*, the first of which refers to "a hollow circular vessel" (*basin*, n., I.); the second denotes a "hollow depression, natural or artificial" (*basin*, n., II.). In general, a *basin* is characterised by greater width than depth, sloping or curving sides, and the purpose of holding water and other liquids. The first ME usage of this meaning is recorded in 1220: "His twa

ehnen..brad as bascins.” (basin, n., I.1.a) From the nineteenth century onwards, it has also been possible to use the word to describe a quantity: “[She] made a basin of tea.” (basin, n., I.1.b) First found in 1525, this meaning was narrowed to a “similar circular dish for any purpose”. Interestingly enough, the occurrences of this meaning are constantly spelt *bason*, like in the following example from 1704: “Satura Lanx was properly a bason filled with all sorts of fruit.” (basin, n., I.2) Moreover, the word could soon be used for scale-dishes, with the first evidence occurring in 1413: “Lete hym put it in the ryzt bacyn of the balaunce.” (basin, n., I.3) Being used in the plural, it was applied to music, probably describing cymbals, as found in one of Geoffrey Chaucer’s works: “Forto rescowe þe moone [in eclipses] þei betyn hire basines wip þikke strokes.” (basin, n., I.4) The entry further notes that “the beating of metal basins was formerly part of the mocking accompaniment when infamous people were condemned to be publicly carted.” (ibid.) By far not as detailed as Beard, the OED describes a *basin* simply as a helmet. Its meaning, however, is declared obsolete, probably giving way to *basinet* (basin, n., I.6). Finally, *basin* was also applied to physiology, standing for the pelvis on the one hand (basin, n., I.7.a) and for a “funnel-shaped cavity situated between the anterior ventricles of the brain” (basin, n., I.7.b) on the other. The latter definition, however, is now obsolete. By the eighteenth century, the semantic spectrum of *basin* was extended to a “hollow depression, natural or artificial” (basin, n., II.), which made its way into the fields of shipping, geography, geology, and horticulture. Since this second field of meanings is chronologically irrelevant for this investigation, it shall not be taken into any further consideration. To sum up the OED’s work on the semantics of *basin*, the characteristics of its shape, namely its width and sides, have been applied in a logical way to other objects with similar shape. With regard to Beard’s research, the OED suggests the usage of *basinet* rather than *basin* when referring to this particular kind of helmet. This tallies Beard’s assumption which he underscores with the word occurring only in the early

fourteenth century within this military context. As the Botiler slab shows, the helmet the knight is wearing is indeed characterised by greater width than depth, which corresponds to the OED's description of a basin (Boutell, 1847, p. 159).

The DOST translates the Older Scots forms *basin*, *basing*, *bason* merely as PDE 'basin' or 'a basinful', the quantitative expression which is also found in the OED. All of the evidence presented, the earliest of which stems from the fourteenth century, show that the word was only used when referring to receptacles, frequently in the context of hygiene: "To vasche ther handis [...] in the bassine." (*basin* n., A [a]) Regarding military vocabulary, the DOST only refers to *basinet* or *basnet*, which denotes a "small light helmet or headpiece of steel" (*basinet* n.) The separation resembles the section in the OED, which suggests that *basin* was merely replaced by *basinet* (OED, *basin*, n., 1.6)².

The MED distinguishes three different areas of meaning for *bacin*. The first one is the understanding as a "large shallow vessel or dish" (*bacin*, n., 1. [a]), which can be specified to a wash-basin (*ibid.*). Furthermore, it could be used as a gong (*bacin*, n., 1. [b]). Apart from the scale dishes of a balance (*bacin*, n., 2. [b]), a *bacin* would also denote the oil reservoir of a lamp (*bacin*, n., 2. [a]). The third meaning eventually refers to a helmet, more specifically a *basinet* (*bacin*, n., 3.), and does not provide any more information than Beard's Trove does.

In conclusion, this project essay investigated the etymology of the ME word *bacin*, which was deviated from an OF word, but which also has cognate forms in other Italic and West Germanic languages. Moreover, the word's orthographic aspects were examined: it offers a variety of spellings which stands exemplarily for the ME period. With regard to phonology, it has been demonstrated that the word was subject to a diphthongisation due to the GVS, a shift in word stress, and the weakening process of unstressed syllables. Not least of all, *bacin* offers a wide spectrum of different meanings.

² The exact definition of *basinet* in the OED is as follows: "A small, light, steel headpiece, in shape somewhat globular, terminating in a point raised slightly above the head, and closed in front with a ventail or visor; when used in action without the ventail, as was frequently the case in England, the great 'helm,' resting on the shoulders, was worn over it." (OED, *basinet*, n.)

In the context of armour, however, it is Beard who gives the most detailed description of this particular kind of helmet. Whereas the MED and the OED give rather rough definitions, the DOST does not give any account on the military meaning at all. On the whole, all dictionaries agree on the replacement of ME *bacin* through *basinet*, which is underscored by Beard who states that the word only occurred in the fourteenth century (Beard's Trove, *bacin*).

(Word count: 2,577)

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