

REVISITING LATIN *exilis*

In a recent paper on «Una palabra difícil: Lat. *exilis*», Emilio Nieto (1987) offers a novel etymology of the Latin adjective *exilis* 'thin'. Whereas I completely agree with his critique of earlier attempts¹, I find Nieto's own proposal unconvincing. The reasons for my verdict will become evident in the bulk of the present paper.

1. *Nieto on exilis.*

According to Nieto, *exilis* comes from the proto-word **eks-sy(e)id-slis* 'apartado de la suerte o pujanza que proporcionan los astros' (p. 350), which is supposed to be a derivative of the proto-form of *sīdus* 'star'. The original context of situation that suggests itself, according to Nieto, involves the *augurium*.

1.1. **Phonology.** Given the proto-word **ekssyēidslis* 'starless', it is not clear at all that the regular outcome by sound-laws would have been *exilis*, the moot question being whether the string /syei/ yields /sī/. Only two cases in point are adduced by Hamp (1975), who is keen on assuming that *sy-* went to *s-* virtually before any [-low] vowel:

- (1) a. *sī* 'if' < **syēi* (from the stem **syō-*);
- b. *sīdus* < **syēidos/es-* (from the root **syēid-*).

Neither (1a) nor (1b) are clear cases, though. As to (1a), the reconstruction of an initial **sy-* seems to be called for by the existence of Oscan *svai* and Umbrian *sve* 'sī', which reflect an old feminine locative **svai* (Hamp 1975, p. 64). Notice, however, that the Latin conditional conjunction, whether or not with an initial **sy-*, is an old masculine/neuter locative. This morphosyntactic discrepancy entails distinct proto-

¹ Nieto's inventory of earlier etymological proposals is rather complete. However, there is one serious omission, namely Nyman (1981).

forms in any event for Latin and Osco-Umbrian, respectively, thus undermining the cogency of the **suei* reconstruction. It is simpler to equate Latin *sī*, *sei* with Volscian *se* (in *se pis* 'sī quis'; e. g., Pisani 1953, p. 118 [par. 55]) and trace both back to an old masculine/neuter **se-i*. As to (1b), alternative etymologies have been proposed. Pârvulescu (1977; 1980) relates *sīdus* to the verb *sīdo* (< **si-zd-o*) 'to sit, get down', suggesting that the original meaning of *sīdus* was 'fixed star' (< **sīdos/es*- 'that which is fixed')². More plausible is Rix's (1985) proposal to relate *sīdus* to the PIE root *sīdh-* 'gerade, aufs Ziel gerichtet'. Nyman (1990) presents a wholesale rejection of Pârvulescu's (1980) etymology and a novel explication of the semantic relation between *sīdus* (< **sīdh-*) and *considerare*, *desiderare*.

The string /suei/ is set-theoretically subsumed by /swe/. For the latter, Hamp (1975, pp. 65-66) posits the following steps of change:

$$(2) \text{ /sue/} > \text{ /suo/} > \text{ /so/}.$$

What (2) says, in effect, is that the /e/ and /o/ phonemes were neutralized after /su/ in pre-Latin. Accordingly, the PIE root **sueis-* was deemed to give pre-Latin **suid-* which, in turn, went to Latin *sūd-* (< **soid-* < **suid-*). Given the neutralization process formulated in (2)³, it is easy to see that Latin *sīdus* cannot possibly be the reflex of PIE **sueid-*. Indeed, there are other considerations as well which speak for *sūdor* 'sweat' being the Latin reflex of PIE **sueidōs/sueidos* > Greek *εἶδος* (occurring in the psilotic and itacistic shapes *εἶδος* and *ἰδος* only) 'heat; sweat'; see Rix (1985). It goes without saying that the relation between Latin *sūdor* (< **sueidōs*) and Greek *εἶδος* (< **sueidos*) is the same as that between Latin *decor* (< *-ōs*) and *decus* (< *-os*).

If rule (2) is accepted as such without a right-context restriction—and there is no independent reason for such an additional constraint—it follows that Nieto has to look for another base-form. This is no problem, to be sure, because all he needs is the proto-word **eks-sīd-slis* or **eks-sīdh-slis* instead of **eks-sueid(h)-slis*, and the desired base is provided by Pârvulescu (1977), Rix (1985), and Nyman (1990).

1.2. Morphology. Nieto states: «El supuesto **ekssu(e)idslis* ofrece una estructura morfológica conocida, con una ampliación -s- tra-

² On Pârvulescu's etymology, see Nyman (1990).

³ Of course, rule (2) could be formulated so as not to allow *sue-* > *suo-* if a glide follows. However, there is evidence indicating that Latin diphthongs behaved on a par with a VC string in a closed syllable; witness **en+kaid+o* > *inceido* (> *incido*), **en+fak+tom* > *infectum*. Cf. also Szemerényi (1960, p. 235) on Latin vowel contraction.

dicionalmente propuesta (...) que no es sino el grado reducido del sufijo -es/-os presente en el propio *sīdus*» (p. 350). If *sīdus* could be traced back to PIE **sueidos/es-*, it would be possible, indeed, to posit the zero-grade stem **sueids-*, to which various derivational suffixes could be attached. Nieto's proposal and his examples (*iūmentum* [*< iougsmentum*], and *auxilia* [*< *aug-s-*]) suggest that the proto-word be analyzed not as **eks-sueid-slis* but as **eks-sueids-lis*. However, even if the above discussion were forgotten for the sake of argument, it would be arbitrary to push whatever historically underlies Latin *sīdus* back to PIE, because it obviously lacks a cognate equivalent which would clinch the case for its being traceable back as far as to PIE. What *sīdus* reflects is not a PIE word but a PIE word-type, based on the -os/es- pattern. This is an important methodological point, I think, which tends to be neglected by Indo-Europeanists. The existence of Lat. *genus generis* = Gk. γένος γένεος = OIA *jānas jānasas* as cognate equivalents warrants the reconstruction of **ĝenos *ĝénesos* as a PIE word, and of course as a direct exemplification of the pattern. Whatever underlies *sīdus* must be judged as a pre-Latin word.

Whatever etymologically underlies *exilis* must also be considered a pre-Latin formation. At this stage («état de langue»), however, the zero-grade of the -os/es- nouns was no longer alive as a derivational-morphological device. That is: the tripartite pattern -os/es/-s- was inherited into Latin as -os/es-. The zero-grade -s- was reanalyzed as part of the suffix, giving rise to a wealth of suffix variants (-lis/-slis, -men/-smen, etc.). Although the «psychological reality» of the suffixal reanalysis has never been established beyond any reasonable doubt, the secretional variants -slo- and -sli- have nevertheless been wielded to create etymological miracles, like e. g. *prēlum* 'press' < **prem-slom*; see Nyman (1981, p. 94) on *prēlum*, *scālae*, *mālae*, *quālus*, *ancīle*, *mantēle*. I surmise Nieto's **eks-sueid-slis* involves a proposal of that ilk.

But rather than the form -slis I am worried about the morphological value of the suffix. Nieto does not explain what kind of morphological pattern he thinks that underlies his **eks-sueid-slis*. At first blush, one is tempted to compare **amb-kaid-sli* and **man-terg-sli*, which are usually posited (e. g. by Leumann 1977, p. 208) as underlying *ancīle* 'oval shield' and *mantēle* 'towel', respectively. These are nouns, however, and probably formed on past participle stems (**amb + kais + li* [cf. *caesum* /kais + um/, **man + ters + li* [cf. *tersum* /ters + um/]; Nyman 1981, p. 94). Nieto makes a vague suggestion that his **eks-sueid-slis* is a derivative of an older substantive **ekssu(e)idslom* > **eksīlum* (p. 350), but this is of no help. He also points to the adjective *extorris* 'exiled' as a

parallel. However, the parallelism is confined to the *ex-* prefix. A clear identification of the morphological pattern remains lacking.

1.3. *Semantics*. On the original context of situation Nieto concludes: «Se trataría, pues, de un vocablo más de precedencia rural y augural extendido fuera de su extricto ámbito originario» (p. 350). However, there is nothing to establish augural provenience: firstly, at the time when *exilis* was coined, the *augurium* had nothing to do with stars; and secondly, *exilis* does not occur in augural contexts, even if «augural» were given such a liberal interpretation as that obviously intended by Nieto.

According to Nieto, «el significado originario de *exilis* es casi antónimo del de *felix* y aplicado a *ager terra*, etc.» (p. 349). More or less synonymous with the adjective *infelix* 'unproductive' (originally colligated only with *arbor*; Flinck 1921, pp. 48-50), *exilis* «habría sido aplicado en principio a *ager, solum*, etcétera, con el significado de 'apartado de la suerte o pujanza que proporcionan los astros'» (p. 350). This proto-meaning is supposed to reflect an augural context of situation.

Nieto postulates augural origin obviously in order to rationalize his etymology «*exilis* a *sidere*». Because he is so inexplicit, we do not know, whether or not Nieto has in mind the *augurium canarium*, which involved, according to Flinck (1921, p. 23), a magical⁴ elimination of the heat of the sun and the dryness brought about by the Sirius (*canis, canicula*). However that may be, it has been made quite evident by Neumann (1976) that originally —and certainly at the time when *exilis* was formed— the task of the *augures* was to interpret bird-signs. This etymology presupposes a close conceptual and functional relation between the *auspicium* and the *augurium* in that the task of the *auspex* (< **ai*+*spek*+) was to observe birds and their signs, and that of the *augur* (< **ai*+*gus*) was to interpret bird-signs (Neumann 1976, p. 226)⁵.

Insofar as the task of the *augures* was to interpret celestial signs, these signs were believed to be causally related to external climatic fac-

⁴ Flinck's (1921) views on the magical character of the *augurium* are now generally rejected (see e.g. Catalano 1960; Linderski 1986). Flinck also entertains an implausible etymology of *augur*. Connecting this word with the verb *augere*, he looks upon *augures* as 'increasers'. A time-honored etymology derives *augur* from **awi*+*gus*, in which the element *gus* is the zero-grade of the root **geus*+ 'select; observe, consider, weigh', the morphological pattern being the same as in *con*+*iux* (from the root **ieug*+). See Neumann (1976).

⁵ To be sure, this was not the case at the republican period (see Cipriano 1983, p. 103 and Linderski 1986, col. 2190-2225).

tors conditioning the prosperity of the crops (heat of the sun, dryness, etc.)⁶. As far as I have been able to verify⁷, *exilis* does not occur in syntagms witnessing such contexts. It is true that in a couple of passages *exilis* is opposed to *ferax* and *laetus*,⁸ both of which are roughly synonymous with *felix*, but nowhere seem climatic factors or 'star-blight' (*sideratio*)⁹ to be involved. The meaning referred to by the syntagm-type «{ager, solum, terra, etc.} + *exilis*» surfaces quite nicely in Cic., *Leg. agr.* II 67 *quod solum tam exile et macrum est, quod aratro perstringi non possit*. Thus, *exilitas soli* involves an inherent material quality of the soil, and this was something not causally linked, in the ancient belief-system, to augural or celestial signs. Quite simply, *solum exile* means 'thinly-layered soil'. Although this syntagm has etymologically transparent semantics, the proto-syntagm must be sought elsewhere.

2. *Unriddling the etymology of exilis.*

I agree with Nieto (p. 349) that the meaning development of *exilis* must be assumed to have gone from concrete to abstract. Very often, though not unexceptionally — witness e.g. Stern (1931, pp. 352-354) on the origin of Engl. *bead* 'bead' < 'prayer' —, this is a workable heuristic principle. I also agree that the origin of *exilis* was rural. But I do not believe that syntagms like *ager exilis* or *solum exile* represent the proto-syntagm.

A look at the examples of the *solum exile* type syntagms given in *ThLL* V 2, 1482, 8-24 (Beutler) reveals that *exilis* is mostly opposed to *pinguis* and *crassus*, and used as a synonym of *ieiunus* and *macer*. What this suggests is that *solum exile* came about as a metaphor, not unlike *solum ieiunum* 'starving soil' (cf. Colum., V 5,1 *ieiuno atque exili agro*).

⁶ This is summarized by Flinck: «So würden wir zu dem Schluss gelangen, dass den Auguren die Aufgabe gehörte, die der Bodenkultur günstige Witterung hervorzubringen. Das *caelum*, welches sie beobachteten, wäre also ursprünglich = 'Wetter', 'Witterung' und *signa caelestia* = 'Witterungszeichen' gewesen» (1921, p. 29).

⁷ Admittedly I have not tried very hard, since I think the *onus* lies on Nieto. It is remarkable, indeed, how cavalierly he dismisses a philologically substantiated semantic explication.

⁸ Stat., *Theb.* VII 306-8 *hi deseruisse feruntur / exilem Glisanta Coroniamque feracem / messe Coroniam, Baccho Glisanta colentes*; Colum., III 1,8 *optimum est solum (...) nec exile nec laetissimum, proximum tamen uberi*.

⁹ A characterization of *sideratio* is given by Pliny the Elder (*Nat.* XVII 222). As one peculiar type of star-blight he adduces the heat brought about by the Sirius: *proprium tamen siderationis est sub ortu canis siccitatum uapor, cum insita ac nouellae arbores moriuntur, praecipue ficus et uitis*.

This impression is strengthened by the fact that, among the agricultural writers, this syntagm-type is not attested until Columella. Varro nowhere colligates *exilis* with nouns designating 'soil'. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that the syntagm-type *solum exile* was not adopted to technical usage—which is bound to be relatively conservative—until the 1st c. A.D. Besides phonology, morphology, and semantics, Nieto runs into difficulties with chronology.

Given rural origin as the premise, the natural thing to do is to consider the use of *exilis* in earlier agricultural writers. Interesting data is provided by Varro:

- (3) a. *Rust.* II 4,4 *sues* (...) *potius ex his locis, ubi nascuntur amplae quam exiles, pararis*;
- b. *Rust.* II 4,13 *porci* qui nati hieme, fiunt *exiles* propter frigora et quod matres aspernantur propter exiguitatem lactis;
- c. *Rust.* 2,12 et hic *aprum* glas cum pascit empticia, facit pinguem, illic gratuita *exilem*.

It is certainly significant from the etymological point of view that Varro colligates *exilis* invariably with nouns designating 'pig' (*aper*, *porcus*, *sus*), whereas for 'thinly-layered soil' he would most probably have chosen to use *solum tenue* (cf. *Rust.* I 23,2 *rectius enim in tenuiore terra ea quae non multo indigent suco* [sc. *seruntur*]). It is not unreasonable to hypothesize that *exilis* was originally a porcine adjective denoting a lean pig. From this proto-syntagm the use of *exilis* was then extended to characterizing lean bodies and body-parts in general¹⁰.

In Nyman (1981, esp. pp. 96-98) I have argued for the age-old «*exilis* ab *ex* + *ilis*» etymology, adducing French *efflanqué* as a semantic and

¹⁰ Witness, e.g., Colum., VI 1,1 *Campania plerumque boues progenerat albos et exiles*; VI 2,15 *sed tam uitium est bubulci pinguem quam exilem bouem reddere*; Lucil. 332-3 *quod deformis senex arthriticus ac podagrosus / est, quod mancus miserque, exilis, ramite magno* [see Nyman 1981, pp. 96-97]; Cic., *Nat. deor.* I 123 *neque enim tam desipiens fuisset, ut homunculi similem deum fingeret* (...) *exilem quandam atque perlucidum*; Moret. 35 (custos) *cruribus exilis*; Vitruv., I 6,3 *aer agitato (...)* *efficit ea* (sc. *vitiosa corpora*) *exiliora*; Hor., *Epod.* VIII 9-10 *femur tumentibus / exile suris additum*; Prop., II 22,21 *sed tibi si exiles uideor tenuatus in artus, / falleris*; Ov., *Pont.* I 10,27 *paruus exiles sucus mihi peruenit in artus*; Ov., *Met.* V 433-4 *nam levis in gelidas membris exilibus undas / transitus est*; VI 143 *in latere exiles digiti pro cruribus haerent*; Sen., *Epist.* LXXVIII 8 *maximi dolores consistunt in macerrimis corporis partibus: nerui articuli et quicquid aliud exile est*; Stat., *Theb.* XI 642 *illius exili stridentem in pectore plagam*; Plin., *Epist.* III 6,2 *exile collum*; Cic., *Diu.* II 30 *sed si eadem hora pecudis iecur nitidum atque plenum est, aliae horridum et exile, quod declarari possit habitu extorum et colore?*; II 37 *contactum aliquo morbo bouis exile et exiguum et uietum cor*.

morphological analogue (cf. also Italian *sfiancato*). *Exilis* (i.e., *ex* + *ilis*) is phonologically problemless, and it represents a well-established morphological pattern, namely *ex* + NOUN + *is* 'NOUN + less' (*exanimis* [*anima*], *ēnervis* [*nervus*], *exsanguis* [*sanguis*] — and *exilis* [*ilia*]). As far as semantics is concerned, «*ilia* refers precisely to that part of the body in which obesity and leanness is most conspicuous» (Nyman, 1981, p. 97).

To conclude, Nieto's (1987) etymological proposal cannot possibly supersede the etymology which connects *exilis* with *ilia*¹¹.

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¹¹ For further details, I refer the patient reader to Nyman (1981).