MERI-DIES ACCORDING TO LATIN AUTHORS FROM
CICERO TO ANTHONY OF PADUA: THE VARIOUS USES OF
A COMMONPLACE ETYMOLOGY*

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ABSTRACT

The etymology of *meridies* stands as a commonplace in the Latin literary tradition. The present article aims to expand on the evidence collected by Maltby in his 1991 *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies* – primarily by extending its historical scope into the Middle Ages – and to interpret and contextualise the body of source material thus established. It is shown that in the relevant sources (chronologically ranging from Cicero [born 106 BC] to Anthony of Padua [died 1231]), the *meri*-component is mostly reduced to *merus* or to *medius*, but that combinations and minor alternative explanations frequently occur. It also becomes clear that the etymology of *meridies* is discussed and put to use in a broad variety of text types, and in very diverse historical and cultural contexts. Lastly, it is argued that the case of *meridies* is illustrative of the difference between ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ conceptions of etymology.

Introduction

The etymology of *meridies*, ‘midday, noon, south’, has commonplace status throughout the Latin literary tradition, including technical genres and exegetical works. In Maltby’s presentation of the relevant source material, three possible accounts of the word’s history can be discerned. According to what seems to be the oldest etymology, the components *medius* and *dies* (a noun which may have masculine or feminine gender) were contracted to *medidies*, which was subsequently altered by dissimilation – for the sake of euphony – into *meridies*. An alternative etymology has it that *meridies*

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should be analysed as *merus dies*, the ‘purest’ or ‘brightest’ part of the day. A third explanation connects the *meri-* component to Greek μέρος, ‘part, share’.¹ On the basis of searches in online databases,² the present article aims (1) to supplement the series of relevant passages listed by Maltby by extending his historical scope, and (2) to interpret and contextualise the body of source material thus established: how do Latin authors etymologise *meridies*, and how do they put this etymology to use in their specific historical and cultural circumstances? It will become clear that the explanations listed by Maltby are not seldom combined, and that minor alternative explanations also occur.

Antiquity

At the origin of the series of relevant comments stands Cicero (106-43 BC),³ who explicitly connects the dissimilation occurring in *medidies* to the criterion of euphony. In *Orator* 157 (written in 46 BC) Cicero suggests that *medidies* was altered into *meridies* because the original form sounded less pleasant (*quod erat insuavius*) – most probably because of the repetition of the combination *di*.⁴ Only a couple of years later, the polymath Varro (116-27 BC), Cicero’s contemporary and acquaintance, claims to rely on his own, first-hand observation. At 6.4 of his *De lingua Latina* (presumably published between 45 and 43 BC), Varro notes that the word *meridies* comes ‘from the fact that it is the middle of the day (*medius dies*)’, pointing out that ‘the ancients (*antiqui*) said *d*, not *r*, in this word, as I have seen in Praeneste, engraved on a sundial (*ut Praeneste incisum in solario vidi*).’⁵ Praeneste was a city in Sabine territory, and in Varro’s opinion this probably added to the authority of his observation. Himself of Sabine provenance, Varro believed that the Latin language contained an old and important Sabine ‘substratum’.⁶

¹ Maltby 1991:381; and see the entry in *TLL* 8:839.

² Viz. the *Library of Latin Texts* (A and B), the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, the *Archive of Celtic-Latin Literature* (all these through the *BREPOLiS* Cross Database Searchtool), and the *Patrologia Latina Database*.

³ For the authors treated in the sections on Antiquity and Late Antiquity, biographical data are based on *Der Neue Pauly*, unless indicated otherwise.

⁴ Ed. Reis 1971:58.

⁵ Ed. Goetz and Schoell 1964:58; cf. Collart 1954:94-95; Pfaffel 1986:386; Adams 2007:170.

⁶ Collart 1954:99-100, 233-43. In a rather indirect way, the *medius* etymology is also suggested by an entry in the *De verborum significatu* written by M. Verrius Flaccus in the time of the emperors Augustus (63 BC-14 AD) and Tiberius (42 BC-37 AD) – at least as it has been preserved in the epitome made by the Carolingian

At some time during the reign of the emperor Nero (54-68 AD), the latter's *elegantiae arbiter* Petronius in §37 of his hybrid novel *Satyricon* has one of the characters claim that 'if she [Trimalchio's wife Fortunata] would tell him [Trimalchio] at bright midday (*mero meridiē*) that it is dark, he would believe it.'⁷ The *figura etymologica* on *meridies* in this quotation is probably the oldest (but less than explicit) evidence we have of the *merus* etymology.⁸ In his *Institutio oratoria* 1.6.30 the Roman professor of rhetoric Quintilian (c. 35-c. 100) cites the question whether one should say *meridies* or *medidies* for 'midday' [so, from *medius*], as an example of the use of etymology in 'distinguishing barbarisms from correct words' (*barbara ab emendatis ... discernere*), that is, in establishing linguistic correctness.⁹ From this time on, *meridies* and its possible etymologies find their way into the broader tradition of (primarily technical) Latin writings. The example is reiterated by Velius Longus, a grammarian from the time of the emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD), who in his *De orthographia* puts the case of *meridies pro medio die* on a par with *auriculae* deriving from *audiculae*.¹⁰ The grammarian Censorinus, author of a lost *De accentibus*, in his *De die natali liber* (dating to the summer of 238) at 24.3 simply reduces *meridies* to *medius dies*.¹¹

Late Antiquity: Early Christian authors

The etymology of *meridies* is dealt with rather frequently in the literature of Latin Early Christianity. Whereas the *permutationes litterarum* – that is, the operations of addition (*adiectio*), subtraction (*detractio*), permutation (*transmutatio*) and substitution (*immutatio*) of letters within a word¹² – remain implicit in the instances discussed so far, they are explicitly connected to the word history of *meridies* in a very specific, argumentative context. The anonymous exegete dubbed 'Ambrosiaster', active in the city

grammarian Paul the Deacon (c. 720/30-c. 800), a pupil of Alcuin, on the basis of the earlier abridgement by Sextus Pompeius Festus, which presumably dates to the 2nd century AD. The entry at issue reads as follows: '*medialis* they called a black sacrifice animal, which they slayed at midday (*meridiē*)'; ed. Lindsay 1978:111.

⁷ Ed. Buecheler 1963⁸:40.

⁸ Cf. ed. Guillaumin 2010:38 n. 159.

⁹ Ed. Radermacher and Buchheit 1965:44; cf. Von Fritz 1949:349; De Poerck 1970:209; Ax 2011:279.

¹⁰ Ed. *GL* 7:71.

¹¹ Ed. Sallmann 1983:59.

¹² Cf. Lausberg 1990³:250-54 §462; Ax 1987.

of Rome in the 370s and 380s,¹³ relies on the *permutationes litterarum* and quotes the case of *meridies* when arguing that *Hebraeus* as a glotto- and ethnonym derives from the personal name *Abraham* and not from *Heber*.¹⁴ The argument can be found in Ambrosiaster's *Commentarius in epistulas Paulinas Philippenses* 3.7.3 and reads as follows:

But the Hebrews are named after Abraham. For a letter was changed (*immutata est enim littera*) for the sake of euphony (*propter sonum*), so that they were called not *Abraei* but *Ebraei*, just as among the ancients (*ut apud veteres*), when people said (*cum diceretur*) *medidie* and it was harsh-sounding (*et esset absurdum*), a letter was changed (*immutata est littera*), so that people said (*ut diceretur*) *meridie*.¹⁵

The argument in the *Commentarius* is short and vague – vowel change¹⁶ is put on a par with consonant change, and *propter sonum* is in itself insufficient as an explanation – but becomes more evident when one looks at the elaborate (and therefore possibly earlier) version in Ambrosiaster's *Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti* 108.5. Unlike in the *Commentarius*, Ambrosiaster here for the sake of argument prefers the form *Habraham* over *Abraham*, although this may also be due to a later scribal intervention. The exegete first states the opinion of his adversaries, namely that the name *Heber* sounds more like *Hebrei* than *Habraham* does, 'because they are called *Hebrei* not *Habraei*.'¹⁷ However, he replies to this that 'they are called *Hebrei*, not *Heberei*, while he was called *Heber*, not *Hebrer*.' In order to demonstrate, now, how *Hebrei* can derive from *Habraham*, Ambrosiaster argues that

... for the sake of euphony (*propter sonum*) a letter was changed (*immutata est littera*), so that they were called *Hebrei* instead of *Habraei*, because that sounds better (*quia melius sonat*); for those from Iuda, too, are called not *Iudai* but *Iudaei*. For whenever something seemed harsh-sounding (*ubicumque enim absurdum visum est*), a letter was changed (*immutata est littera*), so that the word

¹³ Cf. Lunn-Rockcliffe 2007:16.

¹⁴ Cf. Denecker 2014:2-17; Eskhult 2014:318-21; and the discussion in Denecker 2017.

¹⁵ Ed. CSEL 81/3:152; cf. Marangoni 2007:81.

¹⁶ Viz. the one taking place in the first syllable, in the alteration from *Abraei* to *Ebraei*.

¹⁷ Unlike in the *Commentarius*, Ambrosiaster's observation here seems to concern the changes going on both in the first and in the second syllable, although scribal and editorial interventions may be involved in the alteration between *ae* and *e*.

would possess a suitable sound (*ut vox sonum compositum haberet*).
For we say *meridie* instead of *medidie* and there are many comparable cases.¹⁸

In both accounts, the at-first-sight transparent dissimilation of *medidies* to *meridies* is quoted to illustrate the alleged triviality of the fact that words change for the sake of euphony. Twice it is quoted at the end of the relevant exposition, which seems to suggest that it is a textbook example known, or at least intelligible, to everyone. According to Lunn-Rockliffe, Ambrosiaster ‘benefited from an education in the classics and forensic rhetoric.’¹⁹ He may thus have known the case of *meridies* from Cicero or Quintilian, or simply have been aware of its commonplace status via the broader school tradition.

Around the same time, Rufinus (died 410) – a native of Aquileia who pursued his scholarly activities in a monastery in Palestine – proposes the alternative explanation in §2 of his translation of the *Commentarium in Canticum canticorum* by the Greek Church Father Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-c. 253).²⁰ His occasion for discussing the etymology of *meridies* is the Biblical verse *Song of Songs* (*Cant.*) 1:6 (in the Vulgate), which contains the words *in meridie*. Rufinus describes *meridies* as ‘that time [of the day], when light is more copiously poured out over the world, and when it is mere day (*quo merus est dies*) and the light is purer and more flowery (*et purior ac florulentior lux*).’²¹ This appears to be our first explicit occurrence of the *merus* etymology – in the case of Petronius, it was only implied by the *figura etymologica*. Since Rufinus’ translation is the only form in which Origen’s commentary has been preserved,²² there may have been a ‘precedent’ for the etymology in Origen’s Greek, but Rufinus may well have introduced it himself. The North-African Church Father Augustine (354-430) returns to the version of Cicero and Quintilian when, in his *Locutiones in Hepta-teuchum* Genesis 177, he reduces *meridies* to *medius dies*, without further motivation.²³ In 6th-century Italy, the long-lived statesman and then monk

¹⁸ Ed. CSEL 50:254-55. The text portion quoted is integrated in §30 of the 8th-century *Commentarius Wirzburgensis in Matthaeum necnon et glossae*, which as such also reproduces the *meridies* example and its derivation from *medidies*. The electronic version of this Irish commentary in *ACL* is based on Köberlin 1891, which was controlled by Bischoff 1954:251-53 n. 22.

¹⁹ Lunn-Rockliffe 2007:62.

²⁰ Vogt 2002:528.

²¹ Ed. GCS 33:137.

²² Vogt 2002:530.

²³ Ed. CCSL 33:398.

and scholar Cassiodorus (c. 485-c. 580)²⁴ follows Augustine in doing so, namely in his *Expositio psalmorum* 54.18.²⁵

It is at some time between Augustine and Cassiodorus that our clearest evidence for Maltby's third category, the μέρος etymology, is to be situated. In a pseudo-Chrysostomian homily on Psalm 90, which cannot be dated to before the second half of the 5th century,²⁶ the following exposition is given: 'Meridies is so called because it divides the day. For *meros* [cf. μέρος] is a divided part of the day (*pars ... divisa diei*), so that as much seems to go by as there remains until the end of the day.' Contrary to what Maltby's entry suggests, the author of the homily with this explanation also combines the *medius* etymology, when he adds: 'So since the sun then stands in the middle of the sky, it is called *medius dies*.'²⁷ The homily belongs to a collection of 30 or 31 homilies that have been transmitted among those by the prolific Greek Church Father John Chrysostom (probably 349-407),²⁸ but were, in fact, composed by an unknown bishop in Africa or Southern Italy.²⁹ Interestingly, the unproblematic derivation of a Latin word from a Greek one does seem to suggest that these homilies were delivered in an environment where, at this relatively late date, a certain degree of Latin-Greek bilingualism was not uncommon, perhaps indeed Southern Italy.

Late Antiquity: the artigraphical tradition

More extensive comments can be identified in the tradition of Late-Antique grammars and literary commentaries. The famous Roman grammarian Aelius Donatus (born in Africa c. 310, died c. 380) in his commentary on Terence's *Adelphoe* – a commentary which has not preserved its original authorial form – at 5.3.62 ascribes the dissimilation to the *veteres* and observes that this was possible due to the 'affinity' which allegedly exists between the letters *r* and *d* (*propter cognationem inter se harum litterarum*) – thus adding a new element to the explanation.³⁰ Around the same time, the etymology is also commented upon by Nonius Marcellus, the language

²⁴ Bürsgens 2002:141.

²⁵ Ed. CCSL 97:494.

²⁶ Windau 2002.

²⁷ Ed. *PL* suppl. 4/1:787.

²⁸ Dünzl and Kaczynski 2002:378-80.

²⁹ Morin 1894:402 carefully suggested attributing this collection to John 'the Mediocre', Johannes Mediocris, Bishop of Naples around 533/5-553/5, but this suggestion is no longer maintained; cf. Windau 2002; Dünzl and Kaczynski 2002: 382.

³⁰ Ed. Wessner 1966:163.

scholar from Tubursicum Numidarum in present-day Algeria, whose *De compendiosa doctrina* is to be situated in the late-4th or early-5th century AD. In Book 1 of this work (*De proprietate sermonum*), the author notes on p. 60 M that ‘*meridies* is evidently the middle of the day (*manifeste medius dies*)’, referring explicitly to Cicero’s *Orator* 157 and thus integrating the euphony argument.³¹ Donatus’ and Nonius Marcellus’ contemporary, Macrobius, discusses the case in his *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* 2.5.19, when dealing with the four cardinal points. With regard to the south, he writes that ‘as if it were in a sense the *medidies*, with one letter changed (*una mutata littera*) it was called *meridies*.’³² In another work of his, the *Saturnalia*, Macrobius at 1.3.14 simply paraphrases *ad meridiem* as *ad medium diei*.³³

Some time later, the example is taken up by Priscian,³⁴ a native of Caesarea in Mauretania who was active as a professor of grammar in Constantinople until the first decades of the 6th century AD. In Book 1 of his major work entitled *Institutiones grammaticae*, Priscian mentions *meridies* as one of the cases where *d transit ... in r*.³⁵ In Book 4 of the same work, the grammarian points out that, in regard to the regular formation of deverbative adjectives on *-idus*,

... for the sake of alternation (*alternitatis causa*), which the Greeks call ἐπαλληλότης, one exception is made for *pando*, *pandus*, lest if we would say *pandidus*, the one *d* after the other (*alterna d*) in both successive syllables (*in utraque continua syllaba*) would sound bad (*male sonet*), and this both we and the Greeks usually shun in many cases (*quod in multis solent tam Graeci quam nos evitare*). They do not say Χαρύβδιδος, although the rule requires them to do so (*quamvis exigat regula*), but Χαρύβδεως. And the Romans, too, following them, do not say *huius Charybdis*, but *huius Charybdis*. Because of the same defect (*eiusdem vitii causa*) we do not say from that, what is *mane*, *manunine*, but *matutine*, from *vitis vinetum*, not *vitetum*, which seems, however, also to be derived (*videtur esse derivatum*) from *vinea*. Furthermore: *meridies* instead of *medidies*, from *medius dies*.³⁶

³¹ Ed. Lindsay 1964:84; cf. Solimano 1992.

³² Ed. Willis 1994a:113.

³³ Ed. Willis 1994b:12.

³⁴ For a collection of studies on Priscian’s life, works and legacy, cf. Baratin *et al.* 2009.

³⁵ Ed. *GL* 2:35.

³⁶ Ed. *GL* 2:136-37.

Here again, *meridies* is added at the end of a longer series of examples, as an at-first-sight transparent case known to all readers. The etymology of *meridies* features prominently in the highly influential *Etymologiae* by Isidore, the polymath archbishop of Seville in Visigothic Spain (c. 560-636).³⁷ At 3.42.3 (in ‘On the four parts of the sky’), 5.30.15 (in ‘On the days’) and 13.1.6 (in ‘On the world’) of his encyclopaedia, Isidore reduces *meridies*, by way of *medidies* (*quasi medidies*) to *medius dies*. However, in these three passages he also adds the alternative explanation – perhaps going back to Rufinus’ translation of Origen’s commentary on *Song of Songs* (see above) – that at this time of the day, ‘the sky shines brighter’ (*tunc purius micat aether*) or ‘the day is purer’ (*tunc purior dies est*) – *purus* being a synonym for *merus* (*merum enim purum dicitur*).³⁸ A peculiar case (possibly going back to a different source) can be identified at 20.3.3 (in ‘On drinks’), where Isidore implicitly juxtaposes both explanations when noting: ‘Hence we also believe that this time, which falls after the middle of the day (*post medium diem*), is called *meridies*, because it is bright (*quod purum sit*).’³⁹ A more elaborate discussion of the word’s history (which is reminiscent of Velius Longus’ exposition mentioned above) occurs at 17.7.2 of the *Etymologiae* (in ‘On the proper names of trees’), where Isidore observes on *laurus*, ‘laurel’, supposedly deriving from *laus*, *laudis*, that

... among the ancients (*apud antiquos*), however, it was called *laudea*; later (*postea*), with the letter *d* taken away (*d littera sublata*) and *r* substituted (*subrogata r*), it was called *laurus*; just as in *auriculae*, which were initially (*initio*) called *audiculae*, and *medidies*, which is nowadays (*nunc*) called *meridies*.⁴⁰

The Middle Ages: encyclopaedic works

With Isidore we have reached the dawn of the Middle Ages. For this period, one can distinguish four coherent ‘context clusters’ in which the etymology of *meridies* is discussed. Firstly, the etymology occurs in a number of encyclopaedic works, evidently due to the influence of Isidore’s *Etymologiae*. This is clearly the case in the *De universo* by Hraban Maur or Rabanus Maurus (c. 780-856), a native of Mainz, in former ages renowned as the

³⁷ Cf. Fontaine 1959-1983.

³⁸ Ed. resp. Gasparotto and Guillaumin 2009:103-5; Yarza Urquiola and Andrés Santos 2013:97-99; Gasparotto 2004:10.

³⁹ Ed. Guillaumin 2010:39.

⁴⁰ Ed. André 1981:81.

praeceptor Germaniae, who strongly relies on Isidore's *Etymologiae*.⁴¹ In *De universo*, the prologue of Book 9 ('On the world and its four regions') repeats the double explanation of Isidore's *Etym.* 13.1.6;⁴² Chapter 10.5 ('On the parts of the day') repeats that of *Etym.* 5.30.15;⁴³ Chapter 19.6 ('On the proper names of trees') that of *Etym.* 17.7.2 (printed above);⁴⁴ and Chapter 22.2 ('On drinks') that of *Etym.* 20.3.3.⁴⁵ In other words, Hraban always reproduces the etymology from the thematically corresponding entry in Isidore's encyclopaedia. Some centuries later, Honorius of Autostodunum (c. 1080-c. 1154) – who was taught by Anselm of Canterbury and active in a (probably Irish) convent near Regensburg⁴⁶ – in his *Imago mundi* 1.86 uses the standard phrase *meridies quasi medidies*,⁴⁷ while at 2.26 combining the two major explanations: *Meridies a media die; et dicitur quasi mera et pura dies*.⁴⁸ The etymology can furthermore be found in a reproduction of Isidore's *Etym.* 17.7.2 (see above) in Chapter 3.56 ('On trees') of a work entitled *De bestiis et aliis rebus*, the first two books of which were written by the Augustinian monk Hugo of Fouilloy (1100/10-1172/3),⁴⁹ the last two by anonymous authors.⁵⁰

The Middle Ages: grammatical works

Secondly, in the Middle Ages the etymology of *meridies* continues to be dealt with in the grammatical tradition, where the influence of Priscian's works is pervasive. The phrase *meridies dicitur quasi medidies* turns up in the commentary on Priscian's beginner's level *De nomine pronomine et verbo* by Remigius of Auxerre (c. 841-c. 908), the Carolingian grammarian and teacher active at the Benedictine school of Saint-Germain of Auxerre, and later at the cathedral schools of Reims and Paris.⁵¹ To this brief definition, Remigius, too, juxtaposes the alternative explanation that *meridies* is called so 'as if it were (*quasi*) *mera dies*, that is *pura dies*.' Unlike his predecessors, Remigius adds as an argument a mistaken equivalence between the Greek

⁴¹ Ziolkowski 2006.

⁴² Ed. *PL* 111:260.

⁴³ Ed. *PL* 111:290.

⁴⁴ Ed. *PL* 111:512.

⁴⁵ Ed. *PL* 111:595.

⁴⁶ Beyer de Ryke 2002.

⁴⁷ Ed. *PL* 172:141.

⁴⁸ Ed. *PL* 172:150.

⁴⁹ Bautz 1990b.

⁵⁰ Ed. *PL* 177:112.

⁵¹ Matter 1995.

μέρος and Latin *purum*: *meron enim Grece purum Latine*.⁵² The latter addition seems to go back to a confusion between the explanations respectively based on the Latin *merus*, ‘pure’ and Greek μέρος, ‘part’ (see above), which was possibly enhanced by a misinterpretation of Isidore’s *merum enim purum dicitur* (see above). A more straightforward account is found in an 11th-century glossed manuscript (Vat. Reg. Lat. 1578) of the same work of Priscian’s. On folio 27^r it is simply stated with reference to *dies* that ‘hence *meridies* is composed (*componitur*), that is, *media dies*.’⁵³ An exceptionally critical account is given by the teacher of grammar and rhetoric Peter Helias (c. 1100-after 1166), who was born near Poitiers and active in Paris.⁵⁴ In his *Summa super Priscianum* he states repeatedly (with minor variations) that ‘*meridies* is composed (*componitur*) of *medius* and *dies*, with *d* changed into *r* (*mutata d in r*)’, and that ‘what is also said, *meridies* as if it were *mera dies*, is an etymology rather than a compound (*etymologia potius est quam compositio*).’⁵⁵ Klinck quotes this passage in order to illustrate that in medieval grammatical discourse, the term *compositio* (like *derivatio*) was reserved for those word explanations that followed more or less established linguistic patterns, while *etymologia* covered looser explanatory strategies (see my concluding remarks).⁵⁶

Furthermore, the Northern-French grammarian Evrard of Bethune (died c. 1212)⁵⁷ – or, more probably, one of his close collaborators – writes in Chapter 2 (*De figuris barbarismi et solecismi*) of the versified *Graecismus* that ‘a word that sounds ugly (*dictio turpe sonans*) is itself called *cacemphaton* / as if one would say *Tytides* and *medidies*.’ This relatively vague statement is elucidated in a marginal gloss on the *Graecismus* which ‘was developed in the course of the 13th, and remained alive until the 15th century.’⁵⁸ In §2.3 on *cacemphaton* (within Chapter 2, *De vitiis*), this gloss reads as follows:

Likewise, if two syllables that are joined together (*due syllabe simul iuncte*) suffer an ugly sonority (*turpem patiantur sonoritatem*), as when one says *Tytides* and *medidies* – since according to correct analogy

⁵² Ed. CCCM 171:20.

⁵³ Jeudy 1992:64.

⁵⁴ Kneepkens 2006:512.

⁵⁵ Ed. Reilly 1993:1.133 (quotation from this page), 1.150 and 1.354. In his indices, Reilly 1993:2.1142 also refers to a divergent statement on p. 132 line 57, but unfortunately I have not been able to identify the passage referred to, as there is no line 57 on p. 132.

⁵⁶ Klinck 1970:29, 44 with n. 32.

⁵⁷ Cf. Grondeux 2000.

⁵⁸ Ed. CCCM 225:V (tr. mine).

(*secundum rectam analogiam*), that is, according to correct formation (*secundum rectam formationem*), we ought to say it so, because just as we say *Eacides* from *Eacus*, and just as *Eacus* has a *c*, so too *Eacides*, and just as *Priamus* has an *m*, so too *Priamides*, likewise we ought to say from *Tydeus* *Tyrides* and *medidies* as if it were (*quasi*) *media dies* – but for the sake of euphony (*causa euphonie*) we say *meridies* and *Tytides*.⁵⁹

The gloss again briefly touches on the case of *medidies* in the subsequent paragraph (2.4) on *euphonia*, now defining euphony as ‘when one letter is changed into another (*littera in litteram mutatur*) for the sake of beautiful sonority (*causa pulchre sonoritatis*), as when one says *meridies* for *medidies*, and *Tytides* for *Tyrides*.’⁶⁰ The appearance of the accurate terms *sonoritas* and *euphonia* in this gloss is noteworthy.

The Middle Ages: works on computus and the calendar

Thirdly, the etymology of *meridies* occurs in a group of works concerned with computus and the calendar. Chapter 8 (‘On the day’) of a *De divisionibus temporum*, perhaps composed by the Anglo-Saxon monk and scholar the Venerable Bede (c. 673-735),⁶¹ reduces the *meri*- component to *merus*, since midday is the purest part of the day, and ‘the ancients said *merus* for *purus*.’⁶² Hraban Maur (see above) in Chapter 20 (‘On the parts of the day’) of his *De computo* – like the previous one conceived in a question-and-answer (*magister-discipulus*) format – uses exactly the same words to reduce *meri*- to *merus*, but has this explanation preceded by the alternative explanation that *meridies* goes back to *medidies*.⁶³ This juxtaposition can also be found in Chapter 6 (‘On time calculation’) of another work in question-and-answer format, a *Disputatio puerorum per interrogationes et responsiones* perhaps to be attributed to Alcuin (c. 730/5-804),⁶⁴ the intellectual leader of the so-called Carolingian Renaissance,⁶⁵ as well as in an anonymous *De computo*.⁶⁶ Likewise, the Southern-French Guillaume

⁵⁹ Ed. CCCM 225:151.

⁶⁰ Ed. CCCM 225:153.

⁶¹ Brown 1998.

⁶² Ed. PL 90:657.

⁶³ Ed. CCCM 44:224.

⁶⁴ E.g. Brown 2006.

⁶⁵ Ed. PL 101:1115.

⁶⁶ Ed. PL 129:1307.

Durand the Elder (1230/1-1296)⁶⁷ in his *Rationale divinorum officiorum* 8.6.2 (in the book on computus and the calendar) simply combines the two alternative etymologies: *meridies dicitur quasi medidies, id est medius dies, vel quia tunc purior dies est.*⁶⁸ Isidore's *Etym.* 5.30.15 (part of 'On the days') is the evident ultimate source for all of these witnesses, but this is explicitly indicated only by the treatise perhaps to be attributed to Bede, by the anonymous *De computo*, and by Durand.⁶⁹

The Middle Ages: commentaries on *Song of Songs* (and some other ecclesiastical writings)

A fourth and last group of medieval works discussing the etymology of *meridies* consists of commentaries on *Song of Songs*, which presumably base themselves at least in part (directly or indirectly) on Rufinus' translation of Origen's commentary (see above). In the cases in point, one can discern a considerable degree of variation and innovation, an important new aspect being an allegorical interpretation of *meridies* as 'the brightest' or 'purest part of the day' with specific reference to spiritual purity or the 'brightness' of the Afterlife. A first clear instance of this approach can be found in the *Expositio in Cantica canticorum* by Honorius of Augustodunum (see above). At 1.6 in this commentary, Honorius reduces the *meri-* component both to *media* and to *mera*, explaining it, furthermore, as 'pure day (*pura dies*), when the sun shines bright (*clarus*) in the centre of heaven', and arguing that it symbolises 'the splendour of eternal clarity, in which Christ, the sun of justice, shines in the middle between the Father and the Holy Spirit.'⁷⁰ A remarkable case of the same approach can be found in Book 2 of the commentary on *Song of Songs*, probably authored by the 12th-century Cistercian monk Thomas of Vancelles.⁷¹ The exegete proposes a threefold exegesis of the *meridies* mentioned in *Cant.* 1:6, on the basis of a threefold etymology of the word, namely the apparently original *maerens dies*, followed by *media dies* and *mera dies*. Because of the new etymology at this late date and the innovative exegetical connections, the passage is here given in full:

⁶⁷ Thibodeau 2006.

⁶⁸ Ed. CCCM 140B:156.

⁶⁹ As for Durand, cf. the *apparatus fontium* in CCCM 140B:156.

⁷⁰ Ed. *PL* 172:372.

⁷¹ Madey 2000; cf. Klinck 1970:168 n. 22.

Also, there is a threefold midday (*meridies*), according to the threefold interpretation of this noun: the first is the clarity (*claritas*) of contemplatives who until now exert themselves in this [earthly] pilgrimage; the second is the clarity (*claritas*) of the saints who, freed from their bodies, are until now in expectation; the third, that of the angels and the saints who will see God more clearly (*clarius*) than the second, since [they see Him] face to face, having already celebrated their resurrection. The first midday (*primus ... meridies*) is so called as if it were *maerens dies*, since in it we mourn (*maeremus*) our sins, and we deserve (*meremur* [!]) the growths of virtues; the second midday (*secundus ... meridies*) is so called as if it were *medidies*, that is, *media dies*, since its clarity (*claritas*) is brighter (*clarior*) than the first, but more obscure than the third; the third midday (*tertius ... meridies*) [is so called] as if it were *mera dies*, since it is brighter (*clarior*) than the others.⁷²

It should be noted that the *maerens dies* etymology (intertwined with an implicit *mereri* explanation) is very ‘semantically’ oriented when compared to the other, more ‘formal’ ones, and that the threefold etymology serves as the basis for a model of three degrees of virtue, which is probably backed by the notion of Trinity. In Book 1 of the same commentary, the author had simply glossed the words *in meridie* as *in mera die*.⁷³

There are some further relevant cases within this ‘context cluster’. Aelred (1110-1167) – a Cistercian monk in Rievaulx (Yorkshire), where he became abbot in 1147⁷⁴ – in §12 of his *Sermo* 169 (on the assumption of Mary) alludes to *Cant.* 1:6. In doing so, he glosses the words *in meridie* as *mero et pleno et vero die*, and to this attaches a spiritualising interpretation: ‘where there is bright light and true peace and complete happiness.’⁷⁵ Likewise, Gilbert Foliot (c. 1110-1187) – a Benedictine monk who became Bishop of Hereford and later of London⁷⁶ – in his *Expositio in Cantica canticorum* 1.6 explains *meridies* as *dies medius*, while also attaching a notion of spiritual brightness to this explanation.⁷⁷ A little later, Peter of Celle (died 1182) – who became Abbot of the Saint-Remi monastery in Reims in 1162 and Bishop of Chartres in 1180⁷⁸ – in his *Sermo* 13 (on the purification of Mary) also quotes *Cant.* 1:6. He glosses *meridies* as *mera dies*, and interprets

⁷² Ed. *PL* 206:100-1.

⁷³ Ed. *PL* 206:60.

⁷⁴ Nouzille 2002.

⁷⁵ Ed. *CCCM* 2C:544.

⁷⁶ Brooke 2004.

⁷⁷ Ed. *PL* 202:1192-93.

⁷⁸ Zinn 1995.

this as an allegory for the eternal life, which is characterised by ‘the full and perfect clarity of the vision of God’s glory’ and ‘the full and perfect charity of God’s love’.⁷⁹

Apart from these passages, *meridies* is reduced to *medius dies* at 54.19 of the *Expositio psalmorum* by Bruno, Bishop of Würzburg (c. 1005-1045)⁸⁰ – this time only in passing and without specific argumentative value, as is the case in Cassiodorus’ work of the same title (see above).⁸¹ Lastly, an utterly confused version of the juxtaposition of *medius* and *merus* occurs at 1.5 of the sermon on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost by the Franciscan preacher and theologian Anthony of Padua (Fernando de Bulhoes, c. 1195-1231).⁸² The passage reads as follows: *Meridies dictus, quasi medies,⁸³ idest [sic] medius dies; vel quia meridies est, idest [sic] purior. Merum enim Graece, purum dicitur Latine.*⁸⁴ Because of the latter mistaken claim, the author may have drawn (directly or indirectly) on Remigius of Auxerre (see above), but the structure of the sentences quoted points towards a more direct Isidorian influence.⁸⁵ Here again, the confusion may have been enhanced (independently or not) by a misinterpretation of Isidore’s *merum enim purum dicitur* (see above). The ‘bookish’ and uncritical character of Anthony’s statement contrasts sharply with the pertinent observations by Cicero and Varro with which this survey began. This aligns well with the broader mediaeval conception of knowledge, which generally attaches greater importance to the quantity or accumulation of information than to its quality or critical strength.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, the etymology of *meridies* continued to be dealt with in the literature of the Early Modern period. However, for a solid investigation of the *meridies* question in this period, scholarship needs to await a fuller digital coverage and searchability of Neo-Latin texts. It should be emphasised that for the Middle Ages, too, the present investigation remains largely limited to the literary production insofar as it has been digitised. For now, this article has shown how the etymology of *meridies*, as an (at first sight)

⁷⁹ Ed. *PL* 202:674.

⁸⁰ Bautz 1990a.

⁸¹ Ed. *PL* 142:217.

⁸² Turley 2006.

⁸³ *Sic*, but according to the critical apparatus the reading *meridies* is also attested.

⁸⁴ Ed. Costa *et al.* 1979:2.255.

⁸⁵ Cf. Costa *et al.* 1979:2.255 n. 74.

transparent commonplace or ‘textbook’ example, circulated widely – historically and geographically – in Latin literature from Antiquity onwards, and how it was appropriated over and over again in different scholarly, theoretical and argumentative contexts, ranging from grammars and literary commentaries, treatises on computus (often in question-and-answer format) and encyclopaedic works, to exegetical commentaries and sermons. The strong connection between the etymology of *meridies* and a number of very specific text types is remarkable, as is the fact that the etymology apparently circulated ever more widely (almost ‘centrifugally’) and remained ‘productive’ through the Middle Ages.

Furthermore, the case of *meridies* aptly illustrates an important difference between ancient and modern conceptions of etymology.⁸⁶ In present-day historical linguistics, etymology is oriented towards the reconstruction of a historical root, via established sound laws; alternative reconstructions are therefore mostly seen as mutually exclusive.⁸⁷ To the contrary, in its ‘ancient’ conception – which endured into the Early Modern period at least – etymology had a strong ontological and epistemological relevance, but was also very speculative in nature.⁸⁸ It served as a rather loose heuristic strategy in establishing the essence of things and, hence, the ‘true’ grounds for their names.⁸⁹ Accordingly, alternative versions of a word’s history were not necessarily regarded as mutually exclusive, but could be seen as complementary, thus contributing to a better and more exhaustive understanding of the referent’s essence.

Abbreviations

ACLL = *Archive of Celtic-Latin Literature*

CCCM = *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*

CCSL = *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*

CSEL = *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*

GCS = *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte*

⁸⁶ Cf. Opelt 1965:797; Herbermann 1981; Swiggers 1996. For a broader discussion of etymology in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, see Amsler 1989; for the later Middle Ages, see Klinck 1970.

⁸⁷ This is illustrated by the fact that the etymology of *meridies* strongly divided 19th-century Latinists, most importantly J.M. Stowasser (*merus*) and V. Hintner (*medius*). For a brief survey of the debate, see Krebs 1962:2.77. The current standard work, De Vaan 2008:369, simply mentions *meridies* among the derivations of *medius*.

⁸⁸ Cf. Desbordes 1998.

⁸⁹ Herbermann 1991:358-59; Joseph 2000:79-81.

GL = *Grammatici Latini* (H. Keil)
 PL = *Patrologia Latina* (J.P. Migne)
 TLL = *Thesaurus linguae Latinae*

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