SPAILPÍN ‘SPALPEEN’ AND OTHER WORDS BEGINNING IN SP-

It is argued here that three separate words have been conflated to a greater or lesser degree in Modern Irish dictionaries under the lemmata speilp and spailp. These will be distinguished below as (i) speilp, spailp ‘covering, surface, space; bout, turn’, a borrowing of Latin peplum; (ii) speilp ‘wealth, luxury’, a borrowing of English ‘pelf’; and (iii) spalp ‘burst forth, erupt, rattle off, swear’, of uncertain derivation, probably an imitative word. The derivation of spailpín from (i) is also discussed.

Derivation of Irish speilp from Latin peplum was previously suggested by T. F. O’Rahilly (without citing particular instances), in an article in which he analyzed a number of alleged examples of Gaelic words with original sp-. In this article he proposed the rule ‘that every word in Gaelic beginning with sp- (sb-) is either (1) borrowed, or (2) is a native word originally beginning with b or (rarely) f, to which s- has been prefixed’. This rule would seem to hold in the case of the three words discussed here.

The following definition is given for Latin peplum in the Oxford Latin Dictionary: ‘A full-length upper garment worn by Greek women’. Ir speilp glosses cooptorium (‘garment, covering’) in the tract on Latin declension found in TCD ms H 2. 13 which was edited by Whitley Stokes. It is impseilp is the term given to one of six types of tonsure listed in Cormac’s Glossary: Imspelp (v.l. impespel) dano i. bid folt ceechár na dá lethch[end] ɣ bid imröt rēd ōthā ind ētān corrici in clais in dá chuladh. This may be translated as: ‘Imspelp then, i.e. there is hair on each of the two sides of the head and there is a smooth path from the forehead as far as the hollow of the two back-sinews’. In the text titled Pasio Domini nostri Iesu Christi which is found in the Leabhar Breac and which is based on a Latin original, speilp appears as the equivalent of Latin fascia. The definitions of fascia in the Oxford Latin Dictionary include

1 I am indebted to Professor Pádraig A. Breathnach, and an anonymous reader, for helpful comments and advice on an earlier draft of this article.


3 Ibid. p. 28. In addition, a small number of words with initial sp- may be accounted to the interchange of initial sm-/sp-, on which see Tomás de Bhaldraithe, ‘Nótaí ar Focail’, Éigse 24 (1990) 124–9, at pp. 127-8 (‘9. smuilcín’). It should be noted that the etymology of these words is not known in all cases.

4 Whitley Stokes, A medieval tract on Latin declension, with examples explained in Irish . . . and a selection of glosses from the Book of Armagh (Dublin: Irish Archaeological Society), 22 § 730. Stokes noted that John O’Donovan dated the tract to ‘about 1500’; that Eugene O’Curry considered it ‘somewhat older’; and that his own opinion was that the scribe’s original ‘was produced at a period considerably before the transcription’ (ibid. p. 1).


6 Robert Atkinson, The passions and homilies from the Leabhar Breac (Dublin 1887) 114, line 2603: Dochóid na cursúr i fhail i ra-ba Ísu, γ ro-adair hé, γ ro-slécht dó, co r-scáil in speilp boí imme . . .
'any long and narrow surface' and ‘a long strip or band’. I suggest that Irish *spéilp*, which, as we have seen, is found as the equivalent of Latin *fascia*, could also mean ‘a long strip or band’, or ‘any long or narrow surface’. A meaning akin to the first of these seems to be implicit in the following reference to a portion of work done by a scribe, found in a fifteenth-/sixteenth-century vellum manuscript: *Tadhg mhac Uilliam dorinne sbeilp do so.* I suggest that the second meaning is implicit in a text taken from a manuscript written in 1851, which speaks of legs stretched out *ar spéilp leac an tinntean* ‘on the surface of the hearth’.

The vocalism of *spáilp* in this last instance merits comment. As Thurneysen pointed out, in *Old Irish* *e* is often replaced by *a* before palatal consonants, with this change occurring consistently in some words (e.g. nom. acc. dat. *daig* ‘fire’ but gen. sg. *dego*, *tega*, Celtic stem *degi-*), while in certain other words there is fluctuation between *e* and *a* (e.g. *elit*, *ailit* ‘hind’, *ainech* ‘face’). Instances of such fluctuation may also be cited from *ModIr*, e.g. *aileaster* and *soileaster* beside (*f)aileastram and *seileastram* ‘iris, yellow flag’ (*OIr aileestar, ailestar*); *ailbhín* beside *eiltbhín* ‘little flock’ (*OIr ailtbín*, diminutive of *alam* ‘flock’); *soile* (earlier *saile*) beside *seile* (*OIr seile*, *saile* from Latin *saliva*); *sailéar* (also *soiléar*) beside *seiléar* ‘cellar’ (English or Romance loan-word). Consequently I submit that both *spéilp* and *spáilp* may be taken as reflexes of Latin *peplum*.

The semantic shift from *spéilp*, *spáilp* in an areal meaning to *spáilp*, *spáilp* in a temporal meaning is small; one may compare English ‘space’ which has both meanings. Thus, the phrase *spáilp cairde*, explained by Dinneen as ‘a credit accommodation’, exemplifies *spáilp* in the temporal meaning.

Similarly, *spáilpín* ‘spalpeen’, a word that has not been satisfactorily explained, is a diminutive of *spáilp* ‘bout, turn’. In her study of the Irish migratory agricultural worker, Anne O’Dowd noted that the word has been in use ‘since at least the first half of the eighteenth century’. The earliest recorded examples in the Royal Irish Academy’s electronic *Corpus na Gaeilge 1600-1882* derive from the Irish diary of SeanChathal Ó Conchubhair (Charles O’Conor), which he wrote in the period 1736–41. For instance, the entry for 31 January 1741 reads *spáilpin do chur aniu dhamh re báisle eorn*,

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7 RIA ms 23 Q 6 (no. 1243); cf. T. F. O’Rahilly et al. (ed.), *Catalogue of the Irish manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy* (Dublin 1926–70), Fascicule 27, p. 3445.

8 Dubhghlas de hÍde, ‘Eachtra na gConnachtach’, Lia Fáil 1 (1927), 153–60, at p. 159, line 27. The full sentence is: *Piileam-sa ar m’ais arís go raibh mé a ttigh na cailligh a bhí a bhritzí na ngéacha, agus ar amharc isterach damh, cia chidhim acht Seón Bán Ua Raghaillídh, ’na shuidhe stoigh ar bhulcán, a dhá gheár-mhása ar spéilp leac an tinntean, agus an sughlach a bhí silt as na géacha bhí ar bior, thomfadh sé a dhorann ann, agus dhingeadh ann a bhéal é, ionnus go raibh sé fá ghréis agus fá bhealadh ó chlíais go chúais.*

9 Rudolf Thurneysen, *Grammar of Old Irish* 53–4 (§ 83); see also p. 191 (§ 302)

10 On the derivation of all these forms from Celtic *elestro*—see O’Rahilly, ‘Notes, mainly etymological’, Ériu 13 (1942) 144-291, at pp. 172-3 (§ 20).

‘a spalpeen to be sent by me today with a bushel of barley’. As O’Dowd points out, the earliest individual identified with *spailpíneacht* appears to be the Irish writer Seán Ó Neachtain. Born around 1640 or 1650, in his youth he is said to have left his home in Co. Roscommon to work as a *spailpín* in Leinster. The earliest instance of the anglicized form of the word is in Arthur Young’s *Tour in Ireland*, published in 1780. Young gives an etymology that must be dismissed as fanciful: ‘Connaught labourers: they are called spalpeens: *spal* in Irish is a scythe, and *peen* a penny; that is, a mower for a penny a day’. Nonetheless, employment for a fixed term would seem to have been characteristic of the *spailpín*. As O’Dowd notes: ‘... the names the workers were called depended, among other things, on the work being done and many of the names describe the job for which the worker was employed. The term *spailpín*, however, does not give any indication of the work being undertaken. The word literally means a short spell and, by implication, a worker who stays working in a place only for a limited period ... As such the job for which he was hired was only of a few weeks’ duration’. The word ‘literally’ is potentially misleading in that it might suggest that *spailpín* is based on English ‘spell’. Derivation from *spailp* in the sense ‘bout, turn’ suits the meaning suggested by O’Dowd, while also accounting for the medial -*p*.

It remains to account for the use of *spailpín* of a person since the underlying form is not a common noun for a person, and the word is thus unlike forms such as *buachaillín*, *caillín*, *éigsín*, etc. True, the diminutive -*ín* can be added to common nouns and adjectives to form proper nouns (e.g. Caimín, Cinnín, Bricín, etc.), and one also finds -*ín* in borrowed words and names whose endings have been assimilated to the Irish diminutive -*ín* (e.g. *caiptín* from ‘captain’; *póilín*, an exceptional formation based on *póilíos*, English ‘police’; *Aibhistín* from ‘Augustinus’). But aside from such cases it is not usual to find words ending in -*ín* employed as common nouns for a person. The case of *spailpín* may be explained by reference to Irish *fear gaimbín*, English ‘gombeen(-man)’. Irish *gaimbín* derived from Middle English *cambie* ‘exchange, barter’ and is well attested in Irish as *gaimbí*, *gamba* and *gaimbín* in the meanings ‘a small amount, a little extra bit; usury, interest’. From the use of phrases such as *fear gaimbín* and ‘gombeen man’, often no doubt


13 *Ag so sios mur leannas cuid de Shuirighidh Shean ui Neachdain, mac fir-duithe bhi na chomhnaigh a bpiorraisd Druma agus do ghluais an togha am toganach a cuireachta baodhaichiillidh eille as an ait: togbhail fomhair na Spailpineacht go cuige Laidgion ...* This derives from a prefatory note to Ó Neachtain’s poem *Rachuim fón cocoill leat*, a mhaighdeann na n-órighbh, written by the scribe Brian Ó Fearghail (RIA ms 23 O 35, p. 48). The note was published and discussed by May H. Risk, ‘Seán Ó Neachtúin: an eighteenth-century Irish writer’ *Studia Hibernica* 15 (1975) 47-60, at pp. 52–4.


15 O’Dowd, *Spalpeens*, 44.

in a bilingual context, ‘gombeen’ on its own became established in English as a common noun to describe the individual. However, ‘gombeen’ in this application was not borrowed back into Irish as gaimbín.\textsuperscript{17} The hiring of farm-workers for a fixed term often occurred in a bilingual context also. I suggest that the use of fear spailpín in Irish led to the introduction of ‘spalpeen man’ and ‘spalpeen’ into English, but with the further development that ‘spalpeen’ was borrowed back into Irish as spailpin.

Both Dinneen and Ó Dónaill give secondary meanings for speilp which are difficult to reconcile with a derivation from peplum. Dinneen has ‘super-abundance, luxury, wantonness’, while Ó Dónaill has ‘worldly goods, wealth’. I suggest that these meanings should be referred not to the form derived from peplum but to a homonymic speilp, and that this word derives from English pelf. The latter was borrowed into Middle English in the fourteenth or fifteenth century from Anglo-Norman pelf, a variant of Anglo-Norman pelfre, meaning ‘booty’. In English, its original meaning became obsolete, being replaced by the still current meaning ‘money, riches (esp. viewed as a corrupting influence); lucre’: cf. Oxford English Dictionary. The word-final variation between a voiceless fricative (-lf) and a voiceless plosive (-lp) is instanced in English shelf > Irish seilp, English coif > Irish caidhp, etc.

A further set of meanings, this time associated with the verb spalp, seems impossible to account either to speilp < peplum or to speilp < ‘pelf’. This includes ‘burst forth, erupt, blurt out, rap out, rattle off, utter vigorously, swear recklessly, kiss’ (cf. Ó Dónaill s.vv. spalp and spalpadh, Dinneen s.vv. spalp-adh, spalpaim, and spailp, and DIL s.vv. spailp and spalpaide). The verb spalp is commonly used of the sun bursting out, or of speech-acts such as swearing oaths, telling lies, rattling off English, etc. As speech acts predominate in the usage of spalp, there is a case for regarding the verb as an imitative one. In view of O’Rahilly’s rule regarding Irish words with initial sp-, its origin is to be sought in a loan-word, or in a native word originally beginning with b or f, to which s- has been prefixed. English imitative words such as ‘blab’, ‘babble’ and ‘slap’ come to mind, but no one of these provides a combination of formal and semantic aspects that would argue for deriving Irish spalp directly from it. It is noteworthy that the agent-noun spalpaire has distinct positive and negative connotations: ‘a strong, well-formed man; a spruce fellow, a beau; an intruder, a swearer; anything big’ (Dinneen s.v.); ‘1. Spalpaire (fir), big strong man. 2. Swearer; witless talker; loud-mouth’ (Ó Dónaill s.v.). Irish balpóg ‘a plump person’ (Ó Dónaill s.v.) points to the possible existence of spalp (balp with prefixed s-) in a roughly similar sense (e.g. ‘a big strong man’). At the same time, spalpaire in its negative meanings seems unlikely to be based on this.

It may be that elements of more than one word are combined in the verb spalp. While this question cannot be resolved here, it seems clear at least that this verb was not formed from the Irish nouns deriving from peplum and pelf.