

On the Origin of the Latin Cognomen *Piso*

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The Problem

THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE COGNOMINA among ancient Roman nobility is often difficult to trace. To take two well-known examples, *Marcus Tullius Cicero* and *C. Iulius Caesar*. In my *Latin Cognomina*, pp. 89 and 119, I argued that *Cicero* derived from the noun *cicer*, "chickpea," the suffix *-o* giving it the meaning "cultivator of chickpeas" and that *Caesar* was an ancient praenomen, of uncertain etymology, which had subsequently become a cognomen.

In that work I discussed only those cognomina which were of Latin origin, i.e. formed from Latin appellatives, from the place names or the mythological names of the Romans, from *nomina gentilicia*, the clan names, etc. But anyone who consults, e.g., the index of T.R.S. Broughton's "The Magistrates of the Roman Republic," will find a considerable number of cognomina which were very likely non-Latin: *Alimentus*, cognomen of a *praetor* 210 B.C. and of a *tribunus plebis* 204 B.C.; *Bala*, a monetary officer ca. 93/1 B.C., and an officer under Sex. Pompey; *Blasio*, a cognomen of several members of the *Cornelii*; *Centho*, a cognomen of the *Claudii*; *Gracchus*, a cognomen of the *Semproni*, etc.

I shall not treat here of all the non-Latin cognomina of the Roman nobility. The discussion of them would require a book. Instead I shall take up a cognomen which amply illustrates the difficulties encountered in interpreting names of that type, the cognomen *Piso*. The name is well-known to any one acquainted with Roman history. It was the cognomen designating one branch of the famous clan of the *Calpurnii*. The *Realencyclopädie für Altertumswissenschaft*, 3, 1374ff., counts 64 members of the clan bearing this cognomen (Nos. 57–100). The earliest *Calpurnii Pisones* are documented from the era of the Hannibalic War: one urban *praetor* 211 B.C. (No. 61), and an officer from about the same time (No. 68). During the second century B.C., many *Calpurnii Pisones* held consulships and other high offices, were prominent in the turbulent period of the break-up

of the republic, and during the Empire belonged to the highest aristocracy, being often ring-leaders in the struggle of republicanism against autocracy. The *Calpurnii Pisones* dropped out of history towards the middle of the third century A.D.

The cognomen *Piso* was occasionally found in other clans, too. *M. Pupius Piso Frugi Calpurnianus*, the consul of the year 61 B.C., had been adopted from the family of the *Calpurnii Pisones*.¹ PIR (= Prosopographia Imperii Romani) 2 p. 207 No. 322 records one *A. Iulius Pompilius Piso*, consul ca. A.D. 177, one *Rocius Piso*, A.D. 186 (3 p. 132 No. 55), and one *Cl(audius) Piso*, A.D. 207 (2² p. 232 No. 960).

A large number of the cognomina of the Roman nobility were hereditary, designating branches of clans, whereas the cognomina of the common people were almost without exception individual, equivalents of our Christian names. This was probably one reason why the cognomina of the Roman nobility were rather rare in the nomenclature of the common people. Ca. 200,000 Latin inscriptions have come down to us, but well-known cognomina of the nobility, *Cicero*, *Cinna*, *Gracchus*, *Nero*, *Sulla*, etc., were not numerous among the enormous number of cognomina recorded in them.

It was the same with *Piso*. I have found, mostly from inscriptions, 17 examples of *Piso* borne by non-senatorial people, but only one by a freedman.² There is, moreover, one freedman's son,³ one *tubicen*, "trumpeter,"⁴ and one centurion and his son,⁵ but their name is *Pison*, which may be of a different origin (see p. xxx). On the other hand, one of the examples belongs to a *tribunus equitum*, commander of cavalry troops,⁶ one to a Roman knight,⁷ and one to an otherwise well-known man.⁸ Moreover, PIR 2 p. 206 No. 311 records one *Iulius Piso*, apparently a local celebrity, and 2² p. 232 No. 961 *Ti. Cl(audius) Piso*, probably the grandfather of *Claudius Piso*, of senatorial rank, recorded above. The social position is undefinable in the other cases. In my *Latin Cognomina*, p. 29, I estimated that ca. 7.5 per cent of all Latin cognomina were borne by slaves or freedmen, and 3 per cent by persons of the senatorial rank. Moreover, 2 per cent of the material was from the republican

¹ *Realenc. f. Altert.*, 23.1987.

² *CIL [Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum]* VI. 9865.8 (Rome).

³ *Ibid.*, VI, 12623.

⁴ *Ibid.*, XIII, 7798, Germania.

⁵ *Ibid.*, X, 6800, Campania.

⁶ *Ibid.*, VI, 228, A.D. 205.

⁷ *Ibid.*, VI, 31864.

⁸ *Ibid.*, X, 7399 = PIR 3², p. 51, no. 158.

times, most of it from the nomenclature of the nobility. The above tabulation of the material shows that *Piso* was beyond doubt a cognomen of the higher social orders.

Besides the simple form *Piso*, we must consider its derivatives: *Pisonianus*, six examples, *Pisoninus/na*, three examples. In my *Onomastic Studies in the Early Christian Inscriptions of Rome and Carthage*, p. 69, I also recorded *Pisonis*: ICVR (= Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae) 1930 *Cassia Pisonis c(larissima) f(emina)*, born A.D. 316, died A.D. 346, arguing that the name was formed with the Greek suffix -ις. I now admit that I was probably wrong. Examples like CIL II 4999 (Hispania) [*C*]lodia T. f. [*M*]ontana *Pisonis*, and Inscriptions latines d'Algerie 1, 698: the father *Pisso* (= *Piso*), the daughter *Rufina Pisonis*, which no doubt imply *Pisonis (uxor)* and *Pisonis (filia)*, show that *Cassia Pisonis* should be understood *Pisonis (uxor)*. *Cassia* was the only name of the woman.

The vowel -i- of *Piso* is long. This is established by the Greek transcription of the name with ει, e.g. CIL I: 2, 2500, 38 (58 B.C.) Πείσω, and by prosody, e.g. Iuvenal 5, 109 *a Seneca, quae Piso bonus, quae Cotta solebat*. It is thus impossible to derive the name from the noun *pisum*, "pea," for this word has a short -i- vowel. But there are three other possibilities of explaining the origin of the name.

Piso = Etruscan ?

This is the current interpretation since W. Schulze's *Zur Geschichte der lateinischen Eigennamen*.⁹ Schulze derived the majority of Roman clan names, gentilicia, from the Etruscan, but he argued that a considerable number of early Roman cognomina were likewise of Etruscan origin. Though there is no equivalent of *Piso* in Etruscan material, its existence is deducible from the series of cognate gentilicia: *Pisenus*, *Pisinius*, *Pisius*, *Pisunius*, *Pisidius*, *Pisentius*, *Pisurius*, *Pisullius*, which Schulze describes as Etruscan.¹⁰ Moreover, the Etruscan place name *Pisae*, with a long -i-, may also be connected with *Piso*.¹¹

⁹ W. Schulze, *Abhandlungen der K. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Phil. hist. Klasse, Neue Folge*, V, 5² (Berlin, 1933).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 210. Schulze's etymology has been accepted by E. Fränkel in "Namenwesen," *Realenc. f. Altert.* 16.1653.66.

The cognomina in *-u* (= *-o/nis* in Latin transcription), were a significant element in Etruscan nomenclature: ca. one third of all Etruscan cognomina were of this type.¹² Moreover, these names were largely derived from Etruscan appellatives, and not taken over from the Italic.¹³ Since the great impact of Etruscan nomenclature upon the Roman cannot be called into question, it is possible that a number of the Roman cognomina in *-o* were of Etruscan origin.

Though cognomina like *Capito*, *Cato*, *Cicero*, *Fronto*, *Labeo*, *Naso*, *Stilo*, *Tabero*, etc., were of Latin origin, derived as they were from Latin appellatives (see my *Latin Cognomina*, p. 118ff.), there remain a considerable number of cognomina in *-o* which cannot be assigned to Latin or to Greek. The following examples are from the nomenclature of the republican nobility:

Blasio: a hereditary cognomen of the *Cornelii*, from 270 B.C.

Briso: *M. Antius Briso*, a *tribunus plebis* 137 B.C.

Caepio: a hereditary cognomen of the *Servilii*, from 253 B.C.

Centho: a hereditary cognomen of the *Claudii*, from 240 B.C.

Cerco: a hereditary cognomen of the *Lutatii*, from 241 B.C.

Fango: *C. Fuficius Fango*, a veteran of Caesar, later a senator.

Hispo: *P. Terentius Hispo*, a relation of Cicero.

Libo: *L. Iulius Libo*, a consul 267 B.C.; a cognomen of the *Marcii*, second and first centuries B.C.; a hereditary cognomen of the *Poetelii*, fourth century B.C.; a hereditary cognomen of the *Scribonii*, from 216 B.C.

Maso/Masso: a hereditary cognomen of the *Papirii*, from ca. 290 B.C.

Matho: *Q. Naevius Matho*, a *praetor* 184 B.C.; a hereditary cognomen of the *Pomponii*, from the turn of the third and fourth centuries B.C.

Molo: *L. Pomponius Molo*, a monetary officer ca. 95/1 B.C.

Mutto: *Q. Titius Mutto*, a monetary officer ca. 87 B.C.

Otho: *L. Roscius Otho*, a *tribunus plebis* 67 B.C.

Ruso: *Octavii*, a *praetor* by 91 B.C.; another, Horace, *sat.* 1, 3, 86.

Sabaco: *Cassius Sabaco*, a senator 115 B.C.

Saverrio: *Sulpicii*, a consul 304 B.C.; a consul 279 B.C.

Subolo: *P. Decius Subolo*, an envoy 168 B.C.

¹² H. Rix, *Das etruskische Cognomen* (Wiesbaden: 1963), p. 162.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 189ff.

Tappo: *C. Appulleius Tappo*, a praetor, late republic ?

Venno (or *Venox*): a hereditary cognomen of the *Plautii*, fourth century B.C.

Ugo: *Claudius Ugo*, a consular tribune 398 B.C. (uncertain)

Vulso: a hereditary cognomen of the *Manlii*, from 474 to the second century B.C.

With the exception of *Sabaco*, *Saverrio*, and *Ugo*, all these names were considered Etruscan by Schulze.

Schulze's "Etruscomania" has lately been severely criticized. Though the Roman gentilicia, which are often traceable to prehistoric times, were of Etruscan origin to a considerable degree, it is not at all certain that cognomina, which came into use much later, are equally derivable from the Etruscan. If we check the above list with the findings of modern scholarship in the book of Rix, we find that only a few of them correspond to cognomina documented in Etruscan material: *Maso*/*Masso* = *masu*, *Tappo* = *taqu*, *Venno* = *venu*, *Vulso* = *velsu*. Moreover, *Subolo* corresponds to *suplu*, but *subolo* "flute-player," was used in Latin as an Etruscan loan-word.¹⁴ This cognomen was thus, with all probability, derived from the appellative and not taken over from Etruscan nomenclature.

For all the other names, we are thrown back upon Schulze's arguments: since these cognomina resemble gentilicia which are claimed to be Etruscan, they were etymologically connected with them, hence Etruscan, too. His treatment of *Piso* illustrates this method. However, it is sometimes more ingenious than reliable. I shall give an example which may help us to expose its fallacy. Schulze, op. cit., p. 313 and p. 315, argued that *Cicero* was an Etruscan cognomen, and put it in connection with the gentilicia *Cicrius*, *Cicereius*, *Ciclius*. But as I remarked at the beginning of this essay, *Cicero* was derived from *cicer*. *Cicrius* (and *Ciclius*?) as well as *Cicereius* seem to have an etymological connection with *Cicero*, but if we remove their terminations, the stem will be *cicer*. It is thus possible that both the cognomen *Cicero* and the clan names *Cicrius* and *Cicereius* were of Latin origin. I shall not here dwell upon the thorny problem of the origin of the names in -o listed above. Many of them were no doubt Etruscan, though

¹⁴ Cf. Walde-Hofmann, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Lateinischen*, s.v. *subolo*.

Etruscan parallels have not come down to us; a few were obtained from the Italic dialects; others may have been ancient Latin individual names, which had been turned to use as cognomina (see *Latin Cognomina*, p. 42).

The above shows that the Etruscan origin of *Piso* is not beyond question. Before giving the final judgement, other possible etymologies must be considered.

Piso = Greek ?

This possibility has never been thought of. The name Πείσων, a short form of the names composed of Πείσι- < πείσαι, is documented as early as the sixth century B.C.¹⁵ and there are examples of the name throughout Greek history and in Greek epigraphy.¹⁶ Since -ει- was in Latin equivalent to -i- and -ων usually to -o-, *Piso* was the normal Latin form of the name. But the Greek ending was sometimes retained in the names of that type; e.g. Μύρων is normally transcribed as *Myro*, but the form *Myron* is not at all rare.¹⁷ The centurion and his son, quoted on p. 44, are both called *Ti. Cl(audius) Pison*. It is possible that their name was Πείσων and not the Roman *Piso* at all.

One could argue that the *Calpurnii* had adopted the Greek name Πείσων as a cognomen and that its Greek origin was subsequently forgotten. Greek cognomina were not unknown in the nomenclature of the Roman nobility, though most of the material naturally belongs to later times. But *Hypsaeus* was borne by the *Plautii* from the late second century B.C.; *Orestes* by the *Aurelii* during the second century B.C.; *Philippus* by the *Marcii* from the early third century; *Philo* by one *Pubilius* 399 B.C. (not certain), by another 339 B.C., and by the *Veturii* from the late third century; *Philus* by the *Furii* from the late third century; *Sophus* by the *Sempronii* from the late fourth century; *Thermus* by the *Minucii* from the turn of the third and second centuries B.C.

The appearance of Greek cognomina in Roman nomenclature long before the Hannibalic War and its aftermath, when Rome first

¹⁵ Cf. F. Bechtel, *Die historischen Personennamen des Griechischen* (Halle a. d. S.: 1917), p. 369.

¹⁶ Cf. Pape-Benseler, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Eigennamen* (Braunschweig: 1884).

¹⁷ Cf. Dessau, *ILS [Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae]* III, 1, p. 218.

came into contact with the Greek world of the East, raises many interesting problems. *Sophus*, for instance, was first borne by the consul of 304 B.C., and a story preserved in the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (Dig. I 2, 2, 37) tells us that the Roman people nicknamed him Σοφός, "wise," because of his excellence in jurisprudence. If we take this at its face value, it implies that the Roman people knew Greek more than one hundred years before the large-scale influx of Greek culture and Greek immigrants into Rome. The story is no doubt spurious. The ancients never tired of inventing legends to explain the origin of striking names, but these legends have seldom anything to do with the real origin of the names. The Greek nomenclature of the early times is more likely ascribable to the cultural and other contacts which Rome had with South Italy, then largely dominated by Greek colonies.

For two reasons, I think it unwise to label *Piso* as a Greek borrowing: Greek names were not very numerous as hereditary cognomina of the republican nobility; moreover, Πίστων was never a very popular Greek name.

Piso = Latin ?

Though the derivation from *pisum* is not possible, other Latin etymologies must be seriously considered. Pliny the Elder writes, "(cognomen) *Pisonis a pisendo*," i.e. from the verb *pi(n)sere*, 'to beat,' 'to pound.'¹⁸ Most ancient etymologies of personal names are nowadays discredited, and it is true that they are oftenest worthless: the science of etymology had yet to be born. Sometimes, however, the ancient etymologies have been unjustly dismissed. Pliny, *ibid.*, thought that *Cicero* implied an interest in the cultivation of chickpeas, and he was probably right here (see p. 47). Pliny's explanation of *Piso* as from *pi(n)sere* seems to be confirmed by the existence in Latin of the corresponding appellative, *pisio*, "mortar." We have only one example of the word, from a fourth century A.D. writer in medicine, Marcellus Empiricus: "*tundes* (scil. *radices*) *in pisone marmoreo*."¹⁹ but other Roman writers had probably not many opportunities to speak of objects like "mortars."

¹⁸ Pliny, *nat. hist.*, ed. Carolus Mayhoff (B. G. Teubner, 1892), III, 18.10.

¹⁹ Marcellus Empiricus, 8.32, in *Corpus medicorum Latinorum* V, ed. Max. Niedermann (B. G. Teubner, 1916).

Cognomina obtained from the names of objects were popular precisely in the nomenclature of the Roman nobility: ca. one third of all the examples, whereas only five per cent of all Latin cognomina belong to the republican or Imperial nobility (see my *Latin Cognomina*, p. 90 and p. 29). These names were in origin metonymical nicknames. A resemblance or an association between the object and a person was seized upon to coin a name of that type. The emperor *Caligula*, "little boot," earned his nickname because he as a boy used to dwell in military camps in a soldier's attire; *Cotyla*, "cup," a boon companion of Marc Antony, was notoriously fond of drinking (*Latin Cognomina*, p. 21), etc. Names of instruments were not rare, cf. *Dolabella*, "hatchet," *Falcula*, "sickle," *Malleolus*, "hammer," etc. (*Latin Cognomina*, p. 342). *Piso*, "mortar," is attributable to the same group.

Conclusion

Though three possible etymologies could be suggested for *Piso*, it was found that the second of them, *Piso* = Greek, was not a very likely one. The decision is to be made between the Etruscan and the Latin claims. The impressive number of the clan names beginning with *Pis-*, and the Etruscan place name *Pisae*, seem to argue for Schulze's thesis. Yet I am not certain that his explanation is acceptable. The resemblance between *Piso* and the gentilicia may be accidental and not etymological. One could go even farther than that. Above (p. 47) I remarked that the clan names *Cicrius* and *Cicereius*, which Schulze thought Etruscan, were probably derived from the stem-word *cicer*. Similarly, the gentilicia beginning with *Pis-* could derive from *pi(n)sere* and not from the Etruscan. The derivation need not be a direct one. There may have been an *x*, an ancient individual name, from which the later clan names were derived. This is one of the thorniest problems of Roman nomenclature, but it seems that Schulze's theses are in need of a revision in regard to gentilicia, too: a considerable number of the gentilicia which Schulze thought Etruscan, may in reality have been Latin. The first attempts to redress the balance have been made by Reichmuth,²⁰ but much remains to be done.

In my opinion, then, *Piso* was a Latin cognomen.

²⁰ J. Reichmuth, *Die lateinischen Gentilicia und ihre Beziehungen zu den römischen Individualnamen*, diss. Zürich, 1956.