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*e before nasal clusters in Latin

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It is tiresome that our handbooks state so many facts of Latin so badly.¹

1. *e before m + labial stop

Leumann, Neuausgabe 1977, 45 §42c, lists good evidence to support the view that *e became i before labial nasal + stop: imber < *embris < *mbhris (: Osc. anafriss 'Imbribus'), simplex (: semel) < *sm-, simpuvium 'a kind of dipper' (: Lith. semiù sénti?), limbus 'ribbon, band' < lembus, nimbus (: nebula, crossed with imber?). The exceptional Nouimber may be simply a chance happening of unclear cause; the normal December etc. were surely protected through their obvious relation to the numeral simplexes. Leumann modifies his derivation with the vague specification "sporadisch vor r l, vielleicht dialektisch."

R. Pfister, in his revision of Sommer's Handbuch (1977) 54 §53 1,b, has the change e > i "in einigen Fällen". His examples are imber, limbus (compared to Indic lāmbate 'hängt herab', an inherently weak comparison in view of the required IE *b), nimbus (but Balūcī namb is a far-fetched comparandum), to which he adds simbella 'half pound' < *sembella < semi(lī)bella. Pfister concludes that since "nempe, tempus usw." fail to show the change the development must have held true only before mb; he correctly notes that the month names would have been protected by the simple numerals. Pfister reports Hoffmann's and Niedermann's view that simplus and simplex reflect the change in position before m + a cluster whereas semper had only single p. While one obviously cannot reach certainty on the point, it seems equally possible that semper reflects nothing more than a levelling of the vocalism from forms such as semel; but see below for a more principled proposal. Pfister speculates that stlembus is dialectal, while noting that Leumann sees -imb- as reflecting dialect; in fact, stlembus shows a unique initial, which renders the question undecidable.

For membrum Leumann observes that the br represents *sr and that the e is to be derived from *ē, but he draws no formulated conclusion. Pfister explicitly, and I think correctly, reasons that the long *ē of *mēms- was shortened later than that of simbella and too late to participate in the change *e > i.

Leumann reports the opinion that the p in exemplum < *ex-em-lo-m was developed after the change *e > i. Pfister, while recognizing the same pre-form, is far less explicit in his statement of the development. The chronology must be as Leumann has stated it for this word.

This brings us to templum, which Pfister regards as having an old -mp- + l-, as does also Leumann 213 §216a.² I simply do not understand how these scholars can have persisted, in the face of

phonetic difficulty, in resisting the solution seen so clearly by Ernout and Meillet DELL (s.y.) and bequeathed to us by the ancients and in particular by Varro. When we relate templum to Greek ΤΕΜ-ΨΩ 'cut' we have *tem-l-o-m, with precisely the same phonetics and morphology that is generally agreed for exemplum, i.e. no original *p.

Turning now to nem-pe and sem-per, we find that these offer no basic difficulty whatever, since -pe and -per here are easily regarded as old enclitics. In other words we have the reflex either of an old morphological seam of a different order, or else a different chronology of concatenation.

Our one remaining problem is now tempus; for this there is no agreed etymology. However, the semantics seem to lead us to an association at bottom with templum. In contrast with other expressions, for 'time', tempus meant a delimited space or segment of time, 'epoch, season, time of day, etc.' A derivation once again from *tem- 'cut' seems, I submit, obvious; the semantic parallel to Greek καίρος (: κείρω 'cut') is exact. Thus one possible source of the p in tempus is an association with the earlier near-synonym templum, i.e. 'a cut, slice'. But another possibility is to be seen in the phonetic development expected in the ancient compounding or derivational form *tem-s- which must be supposed once to have existed. Thus *tems- > *temps- just as sūmō : sūmpsī, temnō : tempsī etc. Finally, we may perhaps see our source verb concealed under the notorious polysemy of temptō. It seems possible that at an early date by a convergence of phonetically developed p in formations with following l, s and t, the stem of *tem- may have been revised to temp- throughout; or at least a doublet of this configuration would help explain the resolution in the replacement by temptō. I propose therefore that tempus temporis was originally *temos temes-os (→ *tem(p)-os-es), with no *p.

The regular development of *e before original *mp and *mb, then, was Latin i. That is,

*e > i / ___ *m + labial stop.

The apparent counter-instances therefore vanish.

2. iuvencus

Leumann 1977, 45 §42a Note, reports "unerklärt ist das e statt i von iuvencus idg. *yuwnkos ...; vielleicht bleibt e nach v erhalten wie in iuvenis; unwahrscheinlich ist Entlehnung aus umbr. iuenga." R. Pfister, 4th revised edition of Sommer's Handbuch 1977, 54 §53, 1, a, has a different version: "behält e bei nach iuvenis, iuentus (Hoffmann, a.a.O.) oder ist Dialektform;" he then compares Umbrian and other matters. The first point that must be made is that it is regrettable at this late date that reports of our knowledge of Latin should be so much at variance.

In fact, Leumann 90 §94 suggests reasonably, in a paragraph of more general and more principled purport, that the more open vowel quality arises systematically after a glide. The mechanism here would be one of phonetic dissimilation.

We may in turn ask how the glide arose. It seems likely that in this word at an early time there was a hiatus, as I have described KZ 84, 1970, 1. The pre-form, then, was *H^u-Hn-ko-.

With this form explained, we may now say on the basis of the remaining well known examples that without exception *e became Latin i before velar nasal; or

*e > i / [-ŋ].

A preceding glide either blocked this development or returned the vowel to a mid quality by dissimilation.

3. *e before grave nasal clusters

It is well known that IE *e, and e developed from syllabic nasal, remained Latin e in position before n + dental stop, with just two exceptions: the syllabic of the negative prefix in- and the forms of in 'in'. In these two instances it is easy to see that a special accent/stress condition obtained, since here the context is that of a pretonic.

We are now in a position to generalize our findings. IE *e, or more precisely Proto-Latin *e, was raised to i before a clustered grave nasal. That is to say,

$$* [-hi] > [+hi] / ([-glide]) \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{V} \\ \text{-grv} \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{+grv} \\ \text{+nas} \end{array} \right] C$$

We have, in short, an interplay between diffuseness and gravity. This seems clearly to be the case before the labial. If, however, the labial and velar contexts marked two separate prehistoric events, it is possible then that the velar had a palatalizing effect, such as we find for velars next to front vowel at other stages of Latin.

We note here, in any event, another instance of the usefulness of gravity in formulating a phonetic behaviour.

* * *

Finally, let us emphasize how much work remains to be done on rudimentary aspects of a language even so well known as Latin.

NOTES

¹Cf. Romance Philology 36, 1982, 28-9 esp. fn. 2.

²This opinion is documented by Walde-Hofmann LEW₃ I (1938) 426 s.v. exemplum: "nicht jedoch templum." Under templum, ibid. II (1952) 660, we read "vlm. von *temp-lo- auszugehen."

³The notion of the templa of the heavens being originally augurs' "sections", or "cuttings", and of a templum in the forest being a "clearing" is productively elaborated by Maher 1978 (originally presented 1973) 476-7.

⁴LEW₃ II (1952) 657 rejects a relation with Greek τέμνω, preferring a dubious ancestry "wohl aus *temb-no"... < *ste(m)b/p-. This last would however violate our rule of *e > i; I therefore reject this hypothesis without even investigating its dim sources among IE roots.

⁵The claimed derivation, LEW₃ II (1952) 662, of temptō as being an iterative to *temp(i)ō fails on the same argument as that advanced in note 4.

⁶I have motivated Godel's account of *-os- in such forms (in place of the expected *-es- > -er-), Incontri linguistici in press.

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