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GOTHIC *balsagga**

Abstract. The Greek word *τράχηλος* 'neck' is, in the Gothic Bible translation, once translated with *hals* and once with *balsagga**. The paper deals with the question of the latter form: Can it make sense if taken as it is or is it a scribal error for intended **hals-agga*.
Keywords: etymology, Gothic, scribal error, neck.

Introduction

Gothic philology is significantly limited by the fact that there is but a single manuscript in each case being studied. The Gospels are found in the Codex Argenteus, or the "Silver Bible", as it is often called. For the most part, its text cannot be compared to other texts: only six verses are common to the Codex Argenteus and the manuscript fragment called Codex Ambrosianus C; therefore, if the Codex Argenteus offers a suspicious form, it is impossible to look into another manuscript to see if it contains a more "natural" reading. It is sometimes possible to compare parallel passages in the Gospels but, as they are all fragmentary, this often fails. One such example, concerning the concept 'neck', will be discussed here.[1]

The problem

It should first be mentioned that the Greek word *τράχηλος* 'neck' is translated into Gothic with *hals* in one instance, shown in (1):

(1) Luke 15:20
   *atta is … draus ana **hals** is*
   *ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ … ἐπέπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν **τράχηλον** αὐτοῦ*
   'his father … fell upon his **neck**'

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[1] An earlier Icelandic version of this paper was read at a conference, "Hugvísinda-þing", held at the University of Iceland in Reykjavík on 12 March 2011.

This is from the Parable of the Lost Son, which is not found in the other Gospels. The simplex *hals* is not found elsewhere in the Gothic corpus, but it is a part of the compound *freihals*, 'freedom, ἐλευθερία'. In addition, *hals* is supported by other Germanic languages, OE *heals*, OHG *hals* and OI *hals*, so there is no reason to doubt that *hals* was the word commonly used for 'neck' in Gothic.

In another instance, Gr. τράχηλος is rendered with a different and more suspicious Gothic word, *balsagga**. The occurring form is acc. sg., *balsaggan*, so this is a weak masculine noun, and it is found in the context that follows. Notice that the English in (2)b is meant to be a literal translation of the Gothic in (2)a:

(2)   Mark 9:42
       a   *goþ ist imma mais ei galagjaidau asiluqairnus ana **balsaggan** is*
       b   'good is for him more that were laid a donkey-quern on his **neck**'
       c   καλόν ἐστιν αὐτῷ μᾶλλον εἰ περίκειται λίθος μυλικὸς περὶ τὸν **τράχηλον** αὐτοῦ
       d   καλόν ἐστιν αὐτῷ μᾶλλον εἰ περίκειται μύλος ὀνικὸς περὶ τὸν **τράχηλον** αὐτοῦ
       e   'it is more good for him if a donkey-mill were put about his **neck**'

There are several things to consider here. To begin with, by using the word *asiluqairnus* 'donkey-quern', the Gothic text deviates from the Greek text it usually follows, i.e., the Byzantine text, which reads λίθος μυλικός 'millstone', cf. (2)c (Hodges/Farstad 1985). We do not know how λίθος μυλικός was translated into Gothic (a guess could be **qairnustains*, or possibly just *qairnus**). The Gothic text here is more similar to the Greek standard text, which reads μύλος ὀνικός 'donkey-mill', cf. (2)d (Nestle/Aland 1993) and its English translation in (2)e. It is possible that the Gothic text of Mark has been influenced by the parallel passages in Matthew 18:6 and/or Luke 17:2, both showing μύλος ὀνικός in the Byzantine text. Also, *ei* and *ana* are likely to have originated in the parallel passage in Matthew. Nevertheless, some Greek manuscripts, e.g., D(05), have ἐπί instead of περί in Mk 9:42. Expectedly, *ei* was to be translated to *jabai*, and περί to *bi*. This should be kept in mind.

The solutions

The form *balsaggan* is most frequently corrected to *halsaggan*, assuming that *hals* is the same as the *hals* discussed above. Nevertheless, two attempts have been made to explain the form *balsaggan* without any conjecture.

Uppström, in his edition of the Codex Argenteus (1854), rejected the conjecture in favour of the uncontroversial manuscript reading. On the other hand,

he made no attempt at explaining the form. Later, Uppström (1857: X) suggested an explanation, dividing the word into *bal-* and *sagga*. He considered the first part to be connected to Sanskrit *bhāla(s)* n. 'forhead, frons', but the second part to be connected to the verbal root Skt. *sañj* 'to connect, affigere'. Uppström believed the first part was used *pars pro toto* for the head, so the whole compound would have the meaning 'that which connects the head [to the trunk]', i.e., the neck. This explanation has not gained much support, as it involves two roots not otherwise known to be found in the Germanic vocabulary.

The second attempt was made by Ebbinghaus (1963). He suggested connecting *bals-* to PIE **bhel-* 'to bark, to speak', cf. OI *belja* 'to shout', OHG *bellen* 'to bark', etc. Ebbinghaus also mentioned Skt. *bhāṣa* f. 'language' and *bhaṣa* adj. 'barking'. Mayrhofer (1963: 498) found this last connection doubtful. With regard to the second part, *-agga*, Ebbinghaus gave it the meaning 'narrowing', with which the meaning of the compound became 'the narrowing for the voice (the narrowing in which the voice originates)'. He thought that *balsagga** was a compound of the same type as *baurgswaddjus* 'townwall' (referring to Sturtevant 1958). Ebbinghaus apparently viewed *bals* as a root noun (in the gen. sg.) rather than an old *s*-stem (cf. *ahs* 'ear of corn'). The root in question, however, appears not to be found in the Germanic languages with the meaning 'voice, to speak'.

Ebbinghaus (1963) took from Feist (1939: 242 [*halsagga*]) two possible explanations of the origin of *agga. He did not directly choose between them, but only indirectly with the translation 'narrowing'. The first possibility connects it with Go. *aggwus** 'narrow', PIE **aŋgh-*. Feist (1939: 242) added a question mark to this explanation, but Lehmann (1986: 60 B17, 175 H35) took it up again. This involved an attempt to let *agga** correspond to Greek (Aeol.) ἀμφήν 'neck', cf. also αὐχήν 'neck, throat', but according to Beekes (2010: 174), the nasal in the Aeolic form is a production of prenasalization; this also requires a PIE labiovelar (cf. Pronk 2010: 58-61) that should give *gw* in Gothic. As a matter of fact, *agga** cannot be derived directly from *aggwus**, as then there is no explanation as to why the *w* has disappeared, i.e., *aggwa, or even *aggwja, was to be expected (cf. Snædal 1993: 140-141).

The second possibility is based on PIE **aŋk-*/**oŋk-* (i.e., **h₂enk-*) and words meaning 'to bend, curve; fishhook, barb', but not directly 'narrow, narrowing'. These are words like Skt. *aṅká-* 'curvature', Lat. *uncus* 'curved', Gr. ὄγκος 'barb' < **h₂onk-o-* (Beekes 2010: 12, 1045). This corresponds, then, to OE *onga*, *anga* 'prickle, point', OHG *ango* 'prickle, fishhook', OI *angi* 'twig, sprout; prickle'. This explanation is considered by Feist (1939: 242) and Casaretto (2004: 216) to be more likely, but less likely by Lehmann (1986: 175 H35). However, he did not explain the disappearance of the *w* in connection with the first proposal.

Due to the use of Go. *hals* for 'neck, τράχηλος' in Luke 15:20 it is unlikely that *balsagga** simply had the meaning 'neck'. Rather, it referred to some part of the neck. Perhaps the translator was interpreting the Greek text or wanted to be more specific. This implies that *agga** had a broader meaning, but that *hals-* (or *bals-*) connected it to the neck. If *agga** was 'narrowing', it becomes unfeasible to change *bals-* into *hals-* because the content 'narrowing of the neck' is a tautology. However, if *agga** was 'bend, curve', the conjecture *hals-* is more feasible. In this case, the meaning of **halsagga* could be 'curve of the neck, back of the neck, nape of the neck', or possibly something like 'suboccipital region'. It is hardly possible that *agga** refers to the prominence above the *vertebra prominens*, as the Greek word in question does not have such a specific meaning.

If *agga** had the meaning 'curve, bend', Ebbinghaus's explanation of *bals-* is untenable, as the voice is hardly connected to the nape or back of the neck. Also, even though the meaning 'the narrowing for the voice' is not excluded *per se*, a word with that meaning is not likely to have become the common word for 'neck' in Gothic, as shown by *hals* in Luke 15:20. It is more likely that the translator thought that *hals* was too unspecific, or could not imagine how a millstone would be laid around someone's neck. Therefore, he confined the meaning to the nape of the neck; still, however, it is not clear how he may have imagined the 'donkey-mill' being laid on the nape. Presumably, with *asiluqairnus*, he is referring to the upper, larger millstone, 'the donkey-stone', rather than the entire mill.

All these things considered, it appears that the conjecture **halsagga* is still the best of the above options. This correction has its origin in the text of Stiernhielm's (1671) edition of the Codex Argenteus, but there it is most likely a typographical error. In the glossary (p. 22; it was published the year before, 1670), we find *balsagga* without a comment (cf. Ihre 1773: 29 and Zahn 1805). Gabelentz & Löbe (1943) then took this up as a conjecture and, ever since, the prevailing opinion has been that we are dealing in this case with a scribal error. Vollmer (1846: 311-312) is one among few who tried to explain how *balsaggan* came into being. He maintained that Wulfila "ohne allen Zweifel" wrote *ana hals is*. Some reader then wrote *aggan* in the margin as an explanation and, at last, that gloss was transferred into the text. This implies that *agga** either was the more natural expression for 'neck', or it was used in a parallel passage with the same meaning. Actually, Vollmer thought that *agga** should be *ag(g)ka*, cf. OHG *anka*, which has been preserved in Franconian with the meaning 'neck'. The initial *b* instead of *h* he explained by reference to *bnauandans* instead of *hnauandans* in Luke 6:1 (but see Lehmann 1986: 77 [B86]).

Although scribal errors are often not easy to explain, it would be preferable to be able to point to something in the context of *balsaggan* that could have brought about the error of writing a *b* instead of an *h*. This is obviously not

comparable to, for example, *ƕeilaƕairb jah ƕeiht* (2CorB 4:17), in which case the scribe wrote *ƕeiht* instead of *leiht* ('temporary and light, πρόσκαιρον καὶ ἐλαφρόν'), obviously influenced by the two preceding *ƕ*'s. It is possible, however, that *balsaggan* has a "natural" explanation. For this, we should again look at the parallel texts in Matthew and Luke:

(3) Matthew 18:6
    a ?? *batizo ist imma ei hahaidau asiluqairnus ana halsaggan is*
    b 'better it is for him that were hung a donkey-quern upon his neck'
    c *συμφέρει αὐτῷ ἵνα κρεμασθῇ μύλος ὀνικὸς εἰς τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ*
    d *συμφέρει αὐτῷ ἵνα κρεμασθῇ μύλος ὀνικὸς περὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ*
    e 'it is better for him that a donkey-mill were hung about his neck'

The text in (3)a is an attempt at translating the Byzantine text in (3)c into Gothic. Perhaps the Gothic text of Mark 9:42 borrowed from Matthew 18:6 the parts that disagree with the Byzantine text of Mark 9:42, i.e., *ei ... asiluqairnus ana halsaggan is*; however, *halsaggan* was coloured by *batizo* and became *balsaggan*. Greek *συμφέρει* is translated with *batizo ist* in four additional instances in the Gospels (Mt 5:29, 30; Jh 16:7, 18:14), and that translation also occurs in the Pauline Epistles. The standard Greek text is found in (3)d, and its English translation in (3)e. It should be mentioned that the Greek uncial D(05) and several minuscules read *ἐπὶ* instead of *περί*.

(4) Luke 17:2
    a ?? *batizo ist imma jabai asiluqairnus galagjaidau bi halsaggan is*
    b 'better it is for him if a donkey-quern were laid about his neck'
    c *λυσιτελεῖ αὐτῷ εἰ μύλος ὀνικὸς περίκειται περὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ*
    d *λυσιτελεῖ αὐτῷ εἰ λίθος μυλικὸς περίκειται περὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ*
    e 'it is more profitable for him if a millstone were put about his neck'

Here, the Gothic in (4)a is an attempt at translating the Byzantine text in (4)c. It appears natural to translate *λυσιτελεῖ* in the same way as *συμφέρει*, i.e., with *batizo ist*. Surely, *λυσιτελεῖ* is neither found elsewhere in the Greek text of the Gospels nor in the Pauline Epistles. In D(05), it has been substituted by *συμφέρει*.

It is possible that the text of Mk 9:42 was influenced by the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke – especially the former, because of the preposition (*ana* could hardly translate to *περί*); however, when did the error of *balsaggan* for **halsaggan* occur?

First, it is not excluded that the Gothic text simply mirrors its "Vorlage". The Greek text of Mark 9:42 was then more similar to the text of Matthew 18:6.

A Greek text corresponding exactly to the Gothic text of Mark 9:42 is not supported in the manuscript tradition, i.e., as far as it is available. A "Rückübersetzung" of the Gothic text into Greek would be as follows: *καλόν ἐστιν αὐτῷ μᾶλλον ἵνα περίκειται μύλος ὀνικὸς εἰς τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ*. The translator sought help in Matthew 18:6 but, because of *batizo*, he mistakenly wrote *balsaggan*.

This would mean that the error (if it was one) persisted in copies for a long while. It is more likely, however, that the text of Mark 9:42 in the scribe's exemplar was corrupt and he therefore looked at the parallel in Matthew for help, and then made the scribal error because of *batizo*.

Lastly, it is possible, if the scribe found *bi halsaggan* in the Gothic text of Luke 17:2, that he therefore accidentally wrote *balsaggan*. In any case, the substitution of a *b* for the *h* was not taken out of the blue, but was instead caused by *b*'s found in the parallel passages of Matthew 18:6 and/or Luke 17:2.

It should be stressed that *bals* is suspiciously similar to *hals*. This similarity most likely caused the typographical error in Stiernhielm (1671) mentioned above. Also, because of the similarity, it is hard to believe *bals* is completely unrelated to *hals*.

Conclusions

As mentioned at the outset, a problem of Gothic philology is that there is usually only a single manuscript for each text, and it is therefore impossible to look in another manuscript for a more natural reading. It has been explained in the present paper how it is possible that *balsaggan* could have emerged from *halsaggan*. On the other hand, if a manuscript with the reading *halsaggan* in Mk 9:42 were found, the question would arise as to whether or not we should, nevertheless, consider *balsaggan* to be the right form; in any case it is the more difficult reading, or *lectio difficilior*. It appears to be more likely that some scribe was tempted to change *balsaggan* to *halsaggan* rather than vice versa. Nevertheless, it has been illustrated here that the form in question is likely to be a scribal error; therefore, the principle of *lectio difficilior* would, in this case, be set aside.

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