

Pigeons, cows and April in Lithuania

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Abstract

We consider: *balandis* (1) 'pigeon', (2) 'April', (3) 'hornless cattle'; *karvelis* (1) = *balandis* (1) and (2). Both pigeon terms are metaphors. The etymology of *balandis* is {bal-}, 'white'. The term *balandis* was an epithet singling out an unattested **galambis* marked by some white patch. Compare *balandė*, *balandis* 'hornless cattle', e. g., with a bare or white head.

Re *karvelis*: The pigeon (both sexes) is the only bird that feeds milk to its young (Lith *balandžio pienas*). It is milk, not meat, that connects *karvė* 'cow' and *balandis* 'pigeon' to support the metaphor *karvelis* 'little cow'. Why is April the pigeon's month? Migration is unlikely. The term *balandis*, March and April in OLith, was used for February in Latv. A month early in the year was named for typical bare or snowy patches on the ground. Thus all three meanings reflect the same meaning, having a white or bare patch. The association of April and 'pigeons' is a later folk etymology.

There is a curious cluster of forms and meanings in Lithuanian: *balandis* (1) 'pigeon, wild dove', (2) 'April' (the 4th month of the year), and (3) (*balandis*, -ė) 'hornless cattle' (*visojo apylinkėj tik viena karvė balandė...* (LKŽ); *karvelis* (1) = *balandis* (1) and (2). In modern standard Lithuanian the two terms for pigeon are more or less synonymous, with *balandis* slightly more elevated, e.g., closer to English 'dove'. Only *balandis* is used in the term 'dove of peace' (*taikos b.*), but *karvelis* is used as the denotative common term for all species of the genus *Columba*, e.g., *C. domestica*, *C. livia*, *C. palumbus*, including those for which 'dove' is used in English. However, in most dialects

only one or the other term is found. *Balandis*, found in Žemaitian and old East Prussian Lithuanian, is also attested in Latvian. It is clearly older and East Baltic. *Karvelis* is newer, and specifically Aukštaitian.

Both terms for pigeon are originally epithets, metaphors, and therefore we may assume a preexisting arbitrary pigeon term. The etymology of *balandis* is undoubtedly {bal-}, 'white', e.g., a color term. The use of color terms for the pigeon is not unprecedented. Latin *columba*, CSI **golǫbъ* are also originally color terms, the color being slate blue, the natural color of the beautiful forest pigeon still found in the Baltic area, *C. palumba*, as well as the wild rock dove *C. livia*, from which the European domestic pigeon is descended. (Now of course this enormously successful species is found all over the world). We therefore propose as the starting point in Baltic an unattested **galambis* or **galumbis* 'pigeon, dove', cognate with Slavic and Latin.

Although this was originally a color name, it was no longer felt as an indexical sign, that is, it was understood as an arbitrary sign. (This etymology may not be without problems, cf. Toporov under *golimban*. One also cannot exclude the possibility of onomatopoeic shaping of the term. Compare SRuss dialect [ɣul'uška] as the fem of [ɣolup].) Even if East Baltic had some other term, the principle remains, that the two existing terms cannot be "original".

In order to understand how these two forms could come together with the above-enumerated meanings through the semiotic process, some non-linguistic realia must be considered:

1. White pigeons. Whiteness is not a natural coloring in *Columba*. In wild or natural colored pigeons a few white feathers may occasionally appear. This trait is dominant and can quickly result in all-white offspring, but only through deliberate human-caused inbreeding and selection, since in the wild state it is a survival disadvantage. The whiteness ranges from pure white to various mixed patchy whites. The term *balandis* thus appears as an epithet singling out that **galambis* which is also marked (and therefore stands out) by some white patch. Compare *balandē*, *balandis* 'hornless cattle', e.g., one with a bare or white head. Note the association of whiteness and blankness/bareness attested elsewhere for {bal-}.

We therefore propose an original syntagm **galambis balandis* 'the pigeon, the white-marked one...' (like the attested *karvė balandē*). This was a general East Baltic development, and it implies the appearance (as a feral species?) and domestication of *C. livia* in that area. The domestication and spread of

C. livia throughout the Middle East and Europe, as a domestic fowl living in extensive cotes, or as a feral species living in close association with human communities, took place in antiquity, and whiteness certainly appeared from the beginning.

2. White as a sign. In nature white coloring is rare, but when humans began to practice selective mating of domesticated species, it began to appear. The new things that appeared early in civilization as a result of humans acting upon and affecting the natural world, like bread and wine, were charged with special meanings, since they were profoundly inexplicable. To the extent that they were felt "unnatural", they partook of the sacred, the divine. (This is quite different from the modern notion that the works of human beings are diminished by being "unnatural".)

Thus the presence of white color is extremely significant metaphorically and mythically. It is always the white dove that is invested with the positive significant values associated with *Columba*, cf. Lith *taikos balandis*. The white dove and the city pigeon (described by one non-admirer as 'feathered rats'), with their widely divergent images, are the same species. Note the differing associations of ermine and weasel in English.

For these reasons a descriptive **balandis galambis* 'white-marked pigeon' became the more esteemed *balandis* 'white-marked one', which then eventually became forgotten as an epithet, and simply came to mean 'dove, pigeon'. (Now even a colored pigeon is *balandis*.) This was a general East Baltic process.

3. Pigeons as 'little cows'. Just as whiteness is associated with domestication, so also is the second pigeon term to consider, *karvelis*. This term is interpreted as a diminutive of *karvė* 'cow', i.e., the pigeon is metaphorically the 'little cow'. We accept this etymon, although it should be noted that *karvelis* is masc. (like *balandis* and the reconstructed **galambis* !?), and the form **karvelė* as a diminutive of *karvė* is not cited in the LKŽ. There are no good explanations for this metaphor, except the popular notion that pigeons as a food source were the poor man's cow. But was beef anyone's daily staple in heavily forested North-Eastern Europe? The source of animal protein for those with the means was undoubtedly the pig, the most efficient converter of inedible nutrients into protein. Cows were kept primarily for milk. It is this fact that provides the link between signata that is the necessary prerequisite for the metaphor.

The pigeon is the only bird that feeds milk to its young (Lith *balandžio*

pienas). The cock pigeon (in all species of genus *Columba*) is the only male vertebrate which normally produces a milk for his young. Perhaps lactation in the male pigeon even explains why the fem *karvė* could so readily become a masc *karvelis*. The hen pigeon is the only feathered female which lactates. This characteristic sets pigeons and doves apart from all other feathered bipeds. (All the details on the biology and breeding of pigeons are taken from Levi 1941 and Stefferud 1966.) Contrary to one's reasonable assumption, pigeon milk is not some regurgitated milky substance like milk. All pigeons and doves produce this creamy substance, with a make-up very similar to rabbit's milk, in their crops. It is rich in calcium and in vitamin A, B, and B1. Even more remarkably, the same endocrine mechanisms are involved both for pigeons and mammals. The milk of pigeons and mammals comes from fatty cells shed from the epithelial tissues in either the bird's crop or the mammal's mammary glands. If prolactin from the anterior pituitary gland is injected experimentally into these animals, both crop and mammary glands will begin producing milk. Not only will the crop walls of the pigeon begin functioning, but the pigeon will exhibit broodiness and protective care of eggs and young.

Until recently pigeons were raised in small family farms for food, as well as by fanciers, and their ability to lactate was observed and known to ordinary folk. The pigeon as a feathered milk-provider was probably known throughout the ancient Mediterranean. Clay dove-cotes are common in Holy Land archeological sites, and the Talmud refers to dove breeding in various places. Only *Columba* is associated with the four-footed livestock in Temple sacrifices, and a dove or pigeon could replace a lamb as an obligatory offering after giving birth. (One function of this offering was of course to ensure the health of the infant, which in ancient times would have been strongly dependent on the mother's healthy lactation.) One reads in Ctesias (4th c. BCE) that the goddess Darketo (Atagartis) had a love child (girl) with a fair youth, killed him, exposed the child in a rocky desert and threw herself into a lake (near Askalon). But the child survived, nurtured by doves on milk and cheese. (Ingersoll 1923) That is, with milk, as they fed their own young! Perhaps the cheese was taken to be the mixture of seeds and milk that the squabs are fed after the fifth day.

Thus it is milk, and not meat, that establishes a connection between *karvė* 'cow' and *balandis* 'pigeon' that would support the metaphor, the parallelism, implied in the epithet *karvelis* 'little cow'. We therefore propose

that *balandis*, and later *karvelis* in the Aukshtaitian area, arising in association with domestication, (and therefore not "original") eventually drove out the original **galambis*, came to be understood as unanalyzable symbols, and were used for all wild and domestic varieties of *Columba*.

Why should **galambis* disappear? The original color term is poorly attested in Lith, and a similar root {gala-}, {galan-}, 'end' is well represented. The forms *balandis* ~ **galambis* are similar enough so that they could have been reinterpreted as competing forms, a situation that lends itself to one form disappearing, as happened with *namas* ~ **damas*, *lizda* ~ **nizda*, where presumably doublets also once existed.

Finally, why is April the pigeon's month? Here again the traditional folk explanation is that pigeons return in the spring, and their appearance is a good omen. The problem with this is that the pigeon terms are indices of the domesticated pigeon, the only white pigeon, and which were only secondarily extended to all varieties of *Columba*. And *C. domestica* doesn't migrate – whether domesticated or feral around human habitats, they stay around through the winter, and may even breed! (The pigeon was also a symbol of fecundity in antiquity.) Therefore April cannot be the month in which they return.

A closer examination of month terms in Lithuanian and even Latvian supports this even more strongly. The modern month names in the standard language represent the recent fixing of 12 terms for the Western calendar months. Over 3 dozen terms in popular usage, even into relatively recent times, have been recorded (Skardžius 1930). Many of the terms, which are true metaphors or indexical terms for real seasonal phases rather than the calendar months, are used for more than one month. Thus the term *balandis* is used for both March and April in Old Lithuanian, and in Latvian, it was used for February! Since it is unlikely that even the migratory *C. palumbus* would return earlier in the year to Latvia than to Lithuania, or that it would change its migration time through the centuries, the migration explanation must be discarded.

The explanation lies with the literal meaning of *balandis* – 'white, bare, blank'. I assume that along with pigeons and hornless cows, a month in the early part of the year was designated by the same epithet, referring either to its bare patches, or to patches of white snow. In Northern European countries this season extends well into April – the snow is melting, leaving behind white patches and bare ground. Especially in forests, white patches

of snow may remain in shady places until late in the spring. The Latvian epithet for February, *baložu mēness*, is associated with another term, *sērsnu*, translated as 'hoarfrost', or 'crusty snow', e.g., *sērsnu* or *baložu mēness* = February. Here the proposed "original" meaning of 'bare patch' or 'snowy patch' is preserved in association with a similar meaning.

POSTSCRIPTUM. In view of this proposed etymon for 'April', a rethinking of the traditional Baltic calendar may be in order. Here are the standard Lith month terms with their conventional etymology: Jan *sausis* 'dry month'; Feb *vasaris* 'spring-month' (no one understands this etymon); Mar *kovas* 'jackdaw-month'; Apr *balandis* 'pigeon-month'; May *gegužė* 'cocoo-month'; June *birželis* 'birch-month'; July *liepa* 'linden-month'; Aug *rugpjūtis* 'rye-cutting-month'; Sept *rugšėjis* 'rye-sowing-month'; Oct *spalis* 'flax-stalk-month'; Nov *lapkritis* 'leaf-fall-month'; Dec *gruodis* 'frozen-ground-month'.

Here is a reconstructed set of terms for the five winter months, incorporating suggested etyma of Fraenkel *inter alia*, as well as the proposed explanation for the month *balandis*. Month terms are approximate seasons starting in the late fall:

Nov *gruodis* 'frost with snow', used for Nov in the oldest Pr Lith sources; a calque from OR *gruden* 'Nov', or Pol *grudzień*, 'Dec'.

Dec *sausis* 'dry weather', older Dec and Nov, now Jan.

Jan *vasaris* 'windy, blustery weather'; *vasarius* was the older name for January. Fraenkel connects the word with 'south wind', thus explaining the connection with winter. Is the root here in fact to be connected with {vė-}?

Feb *kovas* 'battle time' [= Ger *Schlagzeit*] (the weather is combative, stormy). Feb in Pr Lith ... at the base of this month name is *kautis*, *kovoti*, only afterward was it associated with *kovas* 'jackdaw'.

Mar *balandis* 'white or bare patch time'.

This model is consistent with my proposed explanation for *balandis*. All winter month names cohere in reasonable sequence of weather terms. The association of April and 'pigeons' is later, a reinterpretation, like *kovas*, the modern term for March. Thus in Aukshtaitian *balandžio mėnuo* is also *karvelio mėnuo*.

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