

Sir and Sar

This letter was addressed to Isaac E. Mozeson, author of *The Word, The Dictionary that Reveals the Hebrew Source of English*, SPI Books, New York, 2000. The following has major editorial changes since I last mailed it to him.

Isaac:

I was fascinated by your suggestion that the Hebrew word **sar** was somehow related to the words we now know as **sir**, **sire**, and **surlly**.

A simple vowel transformation leads directly from **sar** to **sir**. Of course, many linguists may object to such simple phonetic change.

But you said:

SIR, SIRE and SURLY are traced to French *messieur*, Old French *sieur* (a master) and somehow on to Latin *senior* and the IE "root" *sen* (old - see SENILE").

If this is true, the word **sir** does not come from **sar** but from an IE root **sen**. Indeed, this is the usual idea of how the **sir** words came to us. Everyone seems to accept that the Old French **sieur** is the path from the Latin **senior**, with a loss of the "n" in the transmission. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the Old French **sire** is from an earlier ***sieire** which is from a Latin ***seior**, and that, in turn, is from a Latin **senior**. They cite the oblique case in Old French **sieur** from ***seior-em** for **senior-em**.

Note that the "*" is a suggested path but apparently has no written attestation. In other words, the idea that **sir** comes from the **sen** root may be pure invention.

Other persons have noted the difficulty of this etymology.

Significant Etymology; or, Roots, Stems, and Branches of the English Language, James Mitchell, William Blackwood and Sons, 1908, Digitized Dec 27, 2007 by Oxford University.

- **Sire** and **sir** were the despair of the old etymologists. They even wrote it **cyre**, to make it look like (the Greek) **kurios**, a lord; but these words are really a contraction of **senior** (elder), the comparative of **senex**, an old man, which, through the respect shown to age originally, had gradually come to be associated with honour and dignity, so that as early as the sixth century **senior** had established itself in the sense of lord and master; and it has given us the Italian, **signore**, **signora**, and **signorina**, the Spanish **senor**, the Portuguese **senhor**, the French **sieur**, **sire**, and **seigneur**, and the English **sir** and **sire**, both of which are borrowed from the French **sire**, so that **sir** corresponds to the French **sieur** in **monsieur** (my sir). This title, as its etymology indicates, was used first as a mark of respect to old age, afterwards as a mark of respect to everybody, in obedience to the apostolic injunction, "honour all men."

Even though Mitchell would give **sir** the usual derivation he notes that it caused considerable trouble for the "old etymologists." When we introduce the evidence of the other Romance languages we find an equal confusion about the sense of someone who is treated with respect, and someone who is merely old. Elsewhere we find a fumbling around with these words.

A Glossary of Obscure Words and Phrases in the Writings of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries Traced Etymologically to the Ancient Language of the British People as Spoken Before the Irruption of the Danes and Saxons: Traced Etymologically to the Ancient Language of the British People as Spoken ..., Charles Mackay, S. Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1887. Original from Harvard University, Digitized Feb 10, 2006.

- **Sir** and **Sirrah** are applied only to men; but Shakespeare applies the first of them to women. All the Dictionaries derive **sir**, the French **sieur**, from **senior**, an old man, or elder, in the same way as they derive **seignor**, **senor**, and **seigneur**, a lord or senator, from the same root. But as **sir** is a title of respect for young men as well as for old, and as Shakespeare represents Cleopatra as using the word for a title of courtesy to the young women, her maids of honour and personal attendants, it is to be suspected that the ordinary etymology may rest on a false basis, and that **sir** and **senior** are derived

from different roots. . . . But resolution, and the briefest end in rejecting **senior**, old, or older, as the origin of **sir** and **sieur** (as in monsieur), and basing the new inquiry on the application of the word to young men as well as to girls and women, the Keltic language offers an instructive and interesting etymology in the word **sar**, where it means **free**, pronounced as nearly as possible to **sir**, the Irish **sor**. In the days of slavery and serfdom in Europe, no one could become a handicraftsman (other than a farm labourer or hind) unless he were transmuted from slavery or serfdom. . . . **Sirrah** is an ancient amplification of the word **sir**, used contemptuously according to examples that abound in the old dramatists. It is often heard in the United States in the form of **sirree**, and is from the Keltic **saoradh**, a burgher, a citizen, a shopkeeper; one emancipated from serfdom and at liberty to keep a shop. **Sir**, therefore, means free (**saor**), and not old (**senior**), and in this sense was appropriately applied by Cleopatra, to her maids of honour, who were not slaves, but free women of the upper class . . .

While we would consider that Shakespeare may have exercised artistic freedom in applying **sir** to the Cleopatra and her female attendants, we note that the word **sir** was used for all ages, and not merely someone who was old. Elsewhere Mackay goes on:

The Gaelic Etymology of the Languages of Western Europe: And More Especially of the English and Lowland Scotch, and Their Slang, Cant, and Colloquial Dialects, Charles Mackay, published for the author by N. Trübner and Co., 1877. Original from Harvard University, Digitized Feb 20, 2008

- **SIR**.—A title of respect applied to a man; also a title of personal or hereditary nobility, as in Knighthood and Baronetage.
- This word is generally supposed to be a corruption of **senior** or **elder**, though applied to young men as well as to old; which it certainly seems to be in the French **seigneur**, a lord; the Italian **signor**, and the Spanish **Senor**. It may be questioned however, whether the English **sir** and the French **sieur**, are not of Keltic origin, and traceable to a different root from **senior**, or to the idea either of old age or paternity.
- Gaelic **Saor** (the *ao* pronounced like the French *eu*), means to act free, to redeem, to deliver, **saor** (adjective), free, ransomed, delivered, exempt; **saorsadh**, freedom. In the days when thralldom, bondage, serfdom, or slavery was permitted, the title of **saor** or free, would be one of respect, and not to be applied to any person belonging to these inferior classes. . . . (In France **le sieur**, is distinguished from **mon sieur**, a person of lower social rank.)
- Another possible derivation of the English **sir**, and the Celtic-French **sieur**, and **monsieur**, is the Gaelic **Sar**, a hero, a prince, a superior person. . . . a lord, a master, the head of a nation, a tribe, or a household; a hero; a great father.

Mackay notes that **SIRE** is a Father, a title of respect used for a king, emperor, or other monarch. Mackay here applies the Gaelic **saor, saorsadh, and sar** words to men of nobility, not to ordinary men. This **regal** definition is important and appears elsewhere. Throughout this book Mackay notes the use of the word Gaelic **sar** as argumentative toward anything of excellence, or a great degree of quality, and cites the German *sehr-schon* meaning *very beautiful*. So here, without further ado, Mackay proposes the possibility of **sir** coming directly from the Gaelic **sar**. Both he and Mitchell note the "trouble for the old etymologists."

Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, W. Blackwood, 1862, Item notes: v.91 1862 Jan-Jun, Original from the University of Michigan, Digitized Jul 29, 2005
, has a paper entitled *Captain Clutterbuck's Champagne* in which the author persistently uses the word **sar** for **sir**. Apparently the Scotch also had trouble with this word.

The Principles of Gaelic Grammar: With Definitions, Rules, and Examples in English and Gaelic ..., John Forbes, Edition: 2, Published by Oliver and Boyd, 1848, Original from Oxford University, Digitized Oct 9, 2006
, shows **sar** as meaning excellent. Again the implication is one of **regal** status.

Eric Partridge, in *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, Greenwich House Publishers, New York, several editions (1983), notes that:

- Early Modern French to French **seigneur**, a gentleman, a noble, influenced by Latin **dominus**, whose French derivatives it has largely displaced. As address, on levels below the titled, displaced in the 16th century by Medieval French **monsieur**, for **mon sieur**, my lord, with **sieur** a contraction of **seigneur**. Old French-French, **monseigneur**, now only Ecclesiastical, has perhaps suggested the Italian **monsignor**.

Here again we see an attempt to understand why the French **sieur** has no "n" in the etymology. Partridge admits that the Latin **dominus**, a definite **regal** title, has been displaced by **seigneur**, a **non-regal** title, and believed that a contraction of **seigneur** led to **sieur**.

Since **sir** comes from **sire**, and since the lexicographers define **sire** as an archaic word meaning a person of authority, a man of high rank, and as a title of respect used in addressing a king, equivalent to "your majesty," we must examine the elements of the etymology, and not merely accept the common understanding of origin in a Latin word that means **old**. (**Surly** also comes from this word, where the sense of **surly** is derived from the arrogance and superiority displayed by **Sires**. See OED. Again this denotes a **regal** definition, not merely one of high social respect.)

I explored several IE **sen** forms. I found:

Lithuanian **senas** = old, ancient, aged, elderly, hoary, etc.
Gothic **sinista** = most senior, eldest, an elder; ***siniza** = senior servant.
Sanskrit **sanas** = old, ancient
Etruscan **san** = ancestor
Old Irish **sean** = old.

With a well-known phonetic change we have in several languages:

Breton **hen** = old
Avestan **hano** = old
Greek **henos** = old

Other languages could be cited.

Finally, Latin shows several forms:

Senex, senis = old, aged, old man
senectus = old age, dotage
senium = decay, decline, deterioration
seneo = to be old
senilis = of or belonging to old people, aged, senile
senium = the feebleness of age, decline, decay, debility
senior : lord, elder, from which we get directly our English word senior

As someone said, "Like the **Roman senator** he was so called, not on account of his age, but because of his wisdom and dignity." As someone else has said: "The **Roman Senate** (Latin *Senatus*) was a deliberative body which was important in the government of both the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire. The word *Senatus* is derived from the Latin word *senex* ('old man' or 'elder'); literally, 'Senate' is understood to mean something along the lines of 'council of elders'." Thus the origins of the familiar word **senator**.

Latin developed the word **senior** with the sense of a social superior, perhaps implying a Lord. But this development does not imply a **regal** difference, merely a respectful social difference based on chronological age. This development is where the confusion lies in our common understanding of the origin of the English **sire**.

Clearly, the IE root **sen** is the source of all the forms listed above. In all cases it means **old**, or **elderly**, or **eldest**. (The vowel "e" may shift to "a" or "i", but the root **s*n** remains the same.) Latin developed words to show linguistic nuances associated with chronological age.

We can now turn back to our original question, did **sir** somehow derive from **sar**? Does the derivation imply a **regal** difference? The nagging question is the so-called reduced form in Old French. How did we lose the **"n"** from Latin **senior** to the Old French **sieur**? Can we trust the derivation shown in the OED and the several investigators?

As Mackay said: "it is to be suspected that the ordinary etymology may rest on a false basis, and that **sir** and **senior** are derived from different roots. . . ."

Importantly, the OED gives a definition to **sire**:

- **one who exercises dominion or rule, a master or sovereign.**

We saw this also from the several investigators.

This is a **regal** definition, not merely a social definition based on chronological age. This **regal** definition is an important clue to the origin of **sir**.

Note that vowel shifts account for the change from **sire** to **sir**, or **surly**. Similar vowel changes could cause

sir or **sire** to originate in **sar**. The Irish and Scotch Gaelic showed how this transformation may take place.

But this definition is virtually identical to the one for **sar** found in the Bible, someone who exercises **dominion** or **rule**, a **master** or **sovereign**. You may find these definitions in the *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, Expanded Edition*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 2001. Entry #8269 for **sar** gives **prince, chief, captain, ruler, governor, keeper, chief captain, lord, steward, master**.

If we use the definitions of these words, **sar** and **sire (sir)**, we cannot escape the conclusion that they must come from the same linguistic source. In contrast the IE **sen** root means merely **old**, not someone who exercises dominion or rule.

You then go on to define **sar**, and its several forms. I continue to quote you here:

שר Sahr is a chief, leader, captain, minister or ruler ("officer" in *Jeremiah 17:25*). שרר sarar is to rule; שררה sirarah is dominion; שרת shayrait is to minister (Numbers 1:50). The סריס sareeys, sometimes translated "eunich," is a royal officer or minister. Both כתר keser (Esther 6:8) and זרזר zer (Exodus 25:11) mean a crown.

Reversing שר shin-resh is another leader: ראש roash, head (Exodus 6:14). Resh-shin-hey, רשה rashah, is to authorize: what a sin-resh שר or resh-shin רש official can do.

From your presentation I must assume that you hold these two *different* words, the IE root **sen**, and the Semitic **sar**, to be of the same origin. While you intuitively understood the word **sir (sire)** to have the same meaning as **sar**, you quoted the OED **sen** without understanding the discrepancy and without exhaustive examination, as I have now done.

Neither did the authors of the OED understand this discrepancy. They could not see the contradiction in their sources, and hence introduced hypothetical roots to support their notion. (Oh! what scholarly sins we create with "*".)

We can conclude that **sir** comes from **sar** and that it is a modern memory of that ancient form.

You list several cognates of **sar**. I have shown some of these in my paper **How Did The Kaiser Get His Title? See:**

<http://www.world-destiny.org/caesar.htm>

BRANCHES: The last element in Balshazzar is from Babylonian *usar* (king). *Sar shifts liquids to Lord* in Hittite, an ancient Indo-European language. *Sar* is the "king" element in Sumerian and Akkadian. The loftiest position in human anatomy is SR reversed, as roas(h) means "head." *Sar* is head in Persian, as found in English words like SARABAND and SIRDAR.

The Sin-Resh of rulership continues with the keser (crown) of CAESAR -- see "CZAR." SRs from French are monsieur and messieurs (gentleman...men of honor).

The SIRE (lord) is usually (A)sheeyr (rich) and no rahsh (poor person). See "SERF" for SR antonyms. *Shri* and *sri* are honorifics in India. *Usoro* is rule in Igbo, Nigeria. *Sori* is a Japanese president or prime minister. *Sluz-aca* (maid, servant) in Polish (similar in all Slavic) is a fricative-liquid-fricative of the Shin-Resh-Sahf etymon above, and שרות shairoo(s), service. Another ruling fricative-liquid-dental is at "SULTAN."

James Curtis Hepburn, *A Japanese-English and English-Japanese Dictionary*, Tōkyō, A.P. Maruya & Co., Ltd; New York, Trübner & Co., 1907, shows that Japanese **sori** = manager, administrator, controller; **suru** = to manage or control affairs. The word, in typical Japanese manner, was also applied, **sori** = to curve backwards, of swords, **sori** = to shave.

To limit this page I do not examine all of your suggested cognates, some of which are not correct.

I hope this will help bring clarity to your work.

Ernest

PS: In my studies I came to recognize that the IE original language contained elements of the Semitic base, from which the ancient people worked when they did their IE design. While I would like to trace back **sens** and other sources, it would consume a large part of my time.