

Dariusz R. Piwowarczyk 
Jagiellonian University, Kraków

A Note on the Etymology of Latin *Caesar*

ABSTRACT: This article examines the etymology of the Latin cognomen *Caesar*, famously associated with Gaius Julius Caesar and later adopted as a title by Roman emperors. It reviews ancient folk etymologies – linking the cognomen *Caesar* to cutting (*caedere*), hair (*caesaries*), or eye color (*caesius*) – and contrasts them with modern linguistic perspectives, which emphasize the name’s uncertain but likely Italic origin. Additionally, it is pointed out that the term *caesaries* ‘hair’ might be the derivative of the original noun and its chain of derivation is reviewed. Though its precise origin remains unclear, the name *Caesar* underwent a significant semantic evolution, ultimately becoming a dynastic title and giving rise to imperial terms such as German *Kaiser* and Russian *Tsar*.

KEYWORDS: Latin etymology, Latin language, historical lexicology

1. Introduction

The Roman cognomen – the third part of the Roman *tria nomina* – *Caesar*, most famously borne by Gaius Julius Caesar (101–44 BC), holds a prominent place in Roman history and later political traditions. It appears as a cognomen of the Julian family (*gens Iulia*). The oldest known bearer of this cognomen was probably Numerius Iulius Caesar from *gens Iulia* dating back to the 3rd or 4th century BC.¹ Following the death of Gaius Julius Caesar in the year 44 BC and the subsequent rule of

¹ Safarewicz 1986: 84.

Octavianus Augustus, Caesar's cognomen became the official title of the Roman Emperors and was adopted in many languages as a synonym of 'emperor'.²

Yet the etymology of the cognomen remains uncertain and has been the subject of speculation since Antiquity. This article explores the principal hypotheses concerning the origin of the cognomen *Caesar*, both from ancient sources and modern linguistic scholarship trying to point towards the most probable solution.

2. Ancient etymologies

Ancient Roman writers themselves offered several etymologies for *Caesar*, often speculative or etymologically unsound.³ The most famous account is found in Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia* 7.5.2), who reports that the name derived from a Caesarean birth (*caeso matris utero*), i.e., "cut from the mother's womb."⁴ According to this tradition, an ancestor of Julius Caesar was born via abdominal incision, hence the name *Caesar* from the verb *caedere* 'to cut'. Other ancient sources suggested different origins – referring to Latin *caesaries*, meaning 'long, flowing, luxuriant hair',⁵ implying that the first Caesar was born with a full head of hair, to *oculis caesiis*, meaning 'with grey or bluish-grey eyes', referring to eye color or to *caesa* i.e. the alleged word for elephant in Punic, according to the story that Caesar's ancestor killed an elephant in battle, thus associating the name with military valor.⁶ While these etymologies reflect attempts to explain a prestigious name, they are generally regarded as folk etymologies, not linguistically sound by modern standards.

² Cf. Piwowarczyk 2013 for the later history of the term.

³ Cf. Maltby 1991: 93 for the description of the etymologies.

⁴ Maltby 1991: 93.

⁵ Cf. OLD.

⁶ Maltby 1991: 93.

3. Modern etymologies

Modern linguistics offers a more cautious but also more plausible set of hypotheses which at the same time may stem from the ones postulated in Antiquity.⁷ Thus, it may have certainly been a nickname which turned hereditary, perhaps originally describing a physical feature (e.g., hair or eye color) or an incident (e.g., a notable birth) and despite the problems with the etymology, the Latin verb *caedere* has also attracted attention in modern etymology. While the derivation of *Caesar* from *caedere* is unlikely by regular derivation processes – it would normally give something like **caesor*⁸ – it is still possible that the name was influenced semantically by the verb in folk reinterpretation, even if the original derivation lay elsewhere. However, the very presence of *-ār* in *Caesār* is difficult to account for in Latin since short /ā/ in this position in an inherited word should turn into /ě/, cf. *cāno* ‘I sing’ and *tibicēn* ‘flute player’⁹ and the /s/ into /r/ (rhotacism) which might have been blocked by the presence of a /r/ in the second syllable for euphonic reasons.¹⁰

Fairly recently, the French scholar Georges-Jean Pinault acknowledged that the stem **kaisar-* (as attested in the cognomen *Caesar*) might have been the basis for the derivation of *caesaries* ‘long hair, mane’ and tried to derive the term from the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European formation **kaikro-kseh₂-es* with the meaning ‘having a combing of the hair.’¹¹ The form would then, according to Pinault, develop into **kaikerksās* and through haplology into **kairksās* > **kairsās* > **kaisār* – thus giving the *r*-stem base of the formation. However, as pointed out by Michiel de Vaan in his etymological dictionary of Latin it is difficult to explain the haplology of **kaikerksās* into **kairksās* since the other examples of such development in Latin (e.g. *mediālis*, *fastīdium*, *sēmōdium*)¹² show a different type of change in non-initial syllables

⁷ Cf. Walde, Hoffman 1938: 133 and Ernout, Meillet 2001: 84–85 for the older hypotheses.

⁸ Cf. de Vaan 2008: 81.

⁹ Safarewicz 1953: 90.

¹⁰ Sommer, Pfister 1977: 146

¹¹ Pinault 1998.

¹² Cf. de Vaan 2008: 81.

and the meaning of the word ‘having a combing of hair’ does not necessarily mean the same as ‘the one having long hair.’¹³

It has also been proposed that the name may derive from a Sabine or Oscan root, possibly from a word cognate with *caesius* (‘bluish-grey’) or a regional form of *caedere* (‘to cut’), but these proposals remain speculative due to the lack of direct parallels in the surviving Sabellian languages – no definitive Italic root for *Caesar* has been conclusively identified.¹⁴ Still, Ernout proposed that the cognomen might be of dialectal origin and Oscan in particular.¹⁵ His hypothesis is, in my opinion, unnecessarily rejected by Pinault and other scholars. I would like to point out that there is a Sabellic word *casnar* ‘senex’ attested in a Paelignian inscription¹⁶ which is also present in Oscan, according to the ancient tradition – Varro writes in *De Lingua Latina* (7, 28) *senem, quod Osci casnar appellant* and Paulus ex Festo gives the entry in his dictionary (41) “casnar senex Oscorum lingua”. The word probably comes from Proto-Italic *kasno- ‘gray’ derived with the suffix *-āri,¹⁷ a cognate of Latin *cānus* ‘gray’ meaning ‘the one having gray hair’ → ‘old man’. The -ar present both in this word and in Caesar might point to the fact that Caesar is also a borrowing from Sabellic.¹⁸ If that is so, then Ernout’s hypothesis would seem correct and the word could be derived from *kaisaris ‘hairy’ (probably itself an adjectival derivative in *-āri of the root *kais- ‘hair’ visible also in the Old Indo-Aryan noun *kesara* ‘hair, mane’, possibly from *kesra < *kais-ro cf. below) with the loss of /i/ in final syllable (*kaisars) and the simplification of the subsequent *rs cluster (*kaisar). Then it might have been borrowed into Latin as *caesar* and in Latin the -iēs derivative *caesariēs* was created based on the familiar pattern of derivation: ‘hairy’ → ‘the one with long hair’ → ‘long hair, lock of hair’ as in e.g. *luxus* ‘extravagance’ → *luksuro- ‘extravagant, wealthy’ → ‘the one with wealth’ → *luxuria/luxuriēs* ‘indulgence, wealth’¹⁹ or *barbarus* ‘barbarous’ (loanword from Greek) → ‘the one who behaves like

¹³ De Vaan 2008: 81.

¹⁴ Ernout 1909: 132–133.

¹⁵ Ernout 1909: 132–133.

¹⁶ Zamudio 1986: 30.

¹⁷ Untermann 2000: 374.

¹⁸ Zamudio 1986: 119.

¹⁹ Cf. Weiss 2020: 305, 343; de Vaan 2008: 356; Piwowarczyk 2019: 27, 41, 47.

a barbarian' → *barbariēs* 'barbarity.'²⁰ It is interesting to note that there is also another Oscan loanword in Latin which was transferred into the *-iēs* inflection, namely *heriēs* 'wish, will' attested in Aulus Gellius as a 'deified attribute of Juno'²¹ Outside of Italic, the cognate of the word seems to be Old Indo-Aryan *kesara-* 'hair, mane' (itself probably from **kesra*) which is unnecessarily rejected by de Vaan²² on the basis of the existence of another word *keśa* 'hair of the head' which in turn cannot be cognate with the Latin one due to the presence of /ś/. However, as Mayrhofer has shown *kesara-* can be explained within Indo-Iranian and could be a viable cognate of Latin *Caesar* and *caesaries*.²³

4. Semantic development and later legacy

Regardless of its origin, it is clear that the name *Caesar* became very potent semantically. After Julius Caesar's dictatorship and deification, *Caesar* became a title used by the Julio-Claudian emperors and their successors. It has been consequently adopted as a dynastic title in the Roman imperial system (e.g., "Augustus and Caesar") and borrowed into later imperial traditions as German *Kaiser* and Russian *Tsar*, both meaning 'emperor.'²⁴

5. Conclusion

The name *Caesar* remains etymologically opaque, lacking a fully convincing derivation from Latin or Italic roots. Ancient folk etymologies connected it to birth methods, hair, or eye color, but these might have been more reflective of Roman cultural imagination than historical linguistics. Modern theories acknowledge the limits of our evidence but

²⁰ Cf. Piwowarczyk 2019: 25.

²¹ Cf. Nussbaum 1976: 250–252; OLD: 792; Untermann 2000: 321; Piwowarczyk 2019: 41.

²² De Vaan 2008: 81.

²³ Cf. Mayrhofer 1956: 268.

²⁴ On the possible later history of the term and problems connected with the exact chronology and its geographical expansion cf. Piwowarczyk 2013.

tend to see *Caesar* as an old Italic cognomen of uncertain, possibly descriptive, origin. What is clear is that the historical significance of the name soon eclipsed its origins, transforming *Caesar* from a family name into one of the most enduring titles of authority in world history.

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