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The Arabic Element in Scots Lexis

Abstract: Detailed study of individual lexemes can open up interesting angles on the cultural underpinnings needed for the understanding of linguistic history. This paper surveys that element of Scots vocabulary that has been flagged as derived, even if at several removes, from Arabic. To do so, it draws primarily on the materials supplied by the *Dictionaries of the Scots Language* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, supplemented by wider contextual analysis.

Keywords: Scots, Arabic, etymology, *Dictionaries of the Scots Language*, *Oxford English Dictionary*

1. The study of the Scots lexicon

The Scots lexicon has attracted many distinguished scholars ever since at least 1710, when the great Latinist, librarian, publisher and editor Thomas Ruddiman (1674–1757)¹ published his edition of Gavin Douglas’s Older Scots translation of the *Aeneid*, including “A Large Glossary, Explaining the Difficult Words: Which may serve for a Dictionary in the Old SCOTTISH Language”. Successors to Ruddiman include John Jamieson (1759–1838), friend of Sir Walter Scott, whose first edition of *An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* appeared in 1808; Sir William Craigie (1867–1957), who inspired the creation of what were to become the *Scottish National Dictionary* (SND, 1931–1976) and the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (DOST, 1931–2002), covering the periods after and before around 1700 respectively; and these dictionaries’ later editors, including perhaps most significantly David Murison (1913–1997, SND) and A. J. (Jack) Aitken (1921–1998, DOST). In 2004, SND and DOST were reformatted digitally and mounted online as the *Dictionaries of the Scots Language/Dictionaries of the Scots Leid* (DSL), allowing inter alia for online searching within and across the two

resources. A 2005 supplement to SND was added shortly afterwards, and revisions of DSL in 2014 and 2022 have since increased the resource's functionality very considerably.² Lexicography would seem to be a triumph of a distinctively Scottish approach to research, with roots in the Enlightenment; it is no coincidence that the greatest editor of the OED was one Scot, Sir James Murray (1837–1915), and Murray was himself succeeded in this role by Craigie, another.³

These developments, especially the creation of DSL as a digital resource, allow for numerous new possibilities, not least new modes of analysing the lexicon, e.g. a projected new *Historical Thesaurus of Scots*.⁴ It is also worth recalling that, like other historical dictionaries such as the mighty *Oxford English Dictionary*⁵, DSL provides a large corpus of citations, with associated metadata; through searching this massive body of data it is possible to undertake extensive surveys of etymologies, and in qualitative terms to drill down into the textual basis for the lexicon. This corpus can in turn be linked to other large bodies of data, e.g. the Scots and Scottish-English texts to be found in such resources as *Early English Books Online*, now being developed as a searchable corpus through the Text Creation Partnership, and the *Corpus of Modern Scottish Writing* (CMSW).⁶

Although research harnessing these resources has been undertaken for English, e.g. the *Linguistic DNA* (LDNA) project linked to the *Historical Thesaurus of English* (HTE)⁷, Scots remains, perhaps rather surprisingly, comparatively unexplored in such ways. Indeed, still the most comprehensive and sophisticated quantitative survey of the Scots lexicon remains Macafee and Anderson (1997), which drew upon a random sample – one lexeme in forty – from DOST, in order “to provide a quantitative overview of the sources of Older Scots vocabulary, and of the chronology of borrowing” (1997, 247).

Macafee and Anderson's figures are very illuminating as to the sources of the Scots lexicon. Thus, they demonstrate that 34.6% of the lexemes in their sample are inherited from Old English; 46.7% are taken from the Romance languages, including Latin, with 27.6% from varieties of French; 8.4% are derived from Norse varieties, and 2.2% from Low German (including Dutch). Very small components derive from Celtic (0.8%), and from Greek (0.1%); remaining lexemes are referred to in Macafee and Anderson's tables as “onomatopoeic”, “proper names” or “unknown” (e.g. 1997, 256-7). Of course, such figures only tell part of the story, in that they do not capture the frequency with which such lexemes are deployed in the Older Scots written record; some words derived from Norse for instance, such as the third-person plural pronouns *thay/thair/thaim*, are extremely common.

Even so, the findings of such research remain valuable for constructing a distinctive narrative about the history of the Scots lexicon. In their overview, Macafee and Anderson concluded as follows:

... the vocabulary of Older Scots, on the evidence of our sample, is broadly similar in composition to English, with words of Old English origin eclipsed by loans of

Romance origin, particularly French. However, French loans are more numerous than Latin ones, whereas this is not the case for English. A detailed comparison for the period 1500-1700 shows not only a lesser role for Latin loans (but a larger proportion of verbs borrowed), but the absence of any upsurge in affixation in the 17th century, suggesting that the fashionable neologising of Early Modern English was not in vogue in Scots. Borrowing from the languages of North Sea and Scandinavian trading partners was more important in this period in Scots, whereas English was turning towards the New World. (1997: 277-8)

In sum, with regard to the lexicon the history of Scots is close to – but subtly distinct – from that to be found in standard surveys of the history of English.

However, such broad-brush quantitative surveys, although of considerable importance for general framing of narratives, suffer from occluding some of the smaller eddies in linguistic history, where detailed study of individual lexemes can open up interesting angles on the cultural underpinnings needed for the understanding of linguistic history. In this paper, an area untouched by such research as that just reported will be investigated in qualitative terms, drawing on a very small part of the data supplied by DSL: the materials in the Scots lexicon which have been flagged as derived, even if at several removes, from Arabic.

One of the many powerful features of DSL, massively enhancing its usefulness for research, is its “Advanced Search” function, which allows *inter alia* the full text of entries to be searched, including etymologies. This process identifies twelve lexemes in DOST⁸ that are explicitly linked etymologically to Arabic, and nine in SND, as follows:

DOST: *actoun, alphine, mummye, raket, ribup, saphena, sattwell, scarlet, sinny, sophy, tabie, trunchman*

SND: *admiral, caraff, cartoush, carvey, colf, cramasie, gundy, mutch, tass*

This list seems very small in comparison with the 534 lexemes with claimed Arabic etymologies in OED, of which 286 are recorded in English texts from 1800 onwards. This large increase in the Arabic element in English vocabulary over the last two centuries, especially in the period 1800–1849, seems to correlate not only with later imperial expansion or military engagement, but also with a Romantic attraction to the Middle East, perceived by writers in English as exotically distinct but also accessible to travellers and literary figures (see further Leask 2002).

Of course, it is entirely possible that the explicit flags in DSL of Arabic etymologies underreports the extent of their appearance, and thus misses some specialised Scots usages. We might notice for instance *sipher, sifer* (and other variant forms), cf. English *cipher* which in present-day usage means primarily ‘a secret or disguised manner of writing’. *Sipher* is not flagged as of Arabic origin in DSL, which simply presents a series of Middle English cognates, viz. *siphre*; but

OED's entry relates the word not only to Old French *cyfre* (cf. present-day French *chiffre*) and medieval Latin *cifra*, but derives all such forms from Arabic *sifr*, "the arithmetical symbol 'zero' or 'nought'". And there are some distinctively Scots developments in the lexeme's history. Thus, in Early Modern English and Scots, the word could be used not only to refer to any arithmetical symbol as well as to zero, but also figuratively, to a person worth nothing; intriguingly OED's earliest citation for this meaning is from a satirical dream-vision of c. 1507, *The Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*, by the Scottish poet William Dunbar (d. after 1513). And a distinctively Older Scots use of the lexeme was to refer to musical notation, cited by DSL from c.1550-1580, viz. *The Art of music collectit out of all ancient doctouris of music*, in London, British Library, MS Additional 4911: a manuscript "probably produced for the Edinburgh Sang School" (DSL).

Nevertheless, even the words that DSL explicitly records as having Arabic-related forms, though few, are of some interest, indicating how lexemes from the southern Mediterranean world arrived in a language-variety on the northern edge of the European continent; they are also interesting for the contexts in which they were deployed. In the following notes, the DOST and SND lists are combined, with the lexemes being discussed presented in alphabetical order. In almost all cases there is a corresponding entry in OED, mostly with overlapping but distinct citations, that will also be brought into consideration. This paper concludes with some general comments on the findings outlined.

2. The Arabic element in the Scots lexicon: a survey of lexemes and sources

(1) *Actoun* is defined in DSL as "A stuffed jacket worn under the mail", with the earliest citation given from Andrew Wyntoun's *Chronicle* (c. 1420). The form is recorded as a technical term in Middle English from the beginning of the fourteenth century, and the first English literary citation offered in OED is in Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, dating from c. 1400. According to OED, the word seems to have entered both English and Scots from Anglo-Norman, cf. *aketoun*, beside Old French *auqueton*. However, DSL flags "Arabic origin" for the form, and OED gives more detail, suggesting that the form arrived in French via the obsolete Spanish *alcoton*, itself a borrowing from Spanish Arabic *al-quṭūn* "cotton". The OED citations are dominated by Scottish sources or connexions, from at least the sixteenth century. Indeed, the most recent quotation, from a reference work on medieval warfare dated 1999, refers explicitly to how "A front-line Scottish pikeman might have been equipped in mail haubergeon or quilted aketon". The citation from Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) may not be that surprising, given that Scott is for cultural reasons the third most-cited author in OED. However, it is almost certain that Scott, as an avid antiquarian, derived his knowledge from a reading of Wyntoun; we know, for instance, that he owned a copy of David

Macpherson's 1795 edition of the *Chronicle*, which included a helpful glossary that Scott explicitly referred to in his edition of the Middle English romance *Sir Tristrem*, which – believing (erroneously) that it was a Scottish work – he had published the previous year (1804).⁹

(2) A similarly distinctive path seems to have been taken by Scots forms of the lexeme **admiral**. Various forms are recorded in DSL from before 1700, including, in addition to *admiral(l)*, *almeral* and *awmerale*, *amerale* and *amirall*, all with separate entries though simply defined as “An admiral”. DSL's etymological note is rather sparse: “Fr[ench] *amiral*; Arabic *amir al(bahr)* = prince of the (sea)”. However, a fuller picture can be obtained through consulting the much longer – and recently revised – entry in OED. OED breaks down the various forms into groups, noting the intermediate derivation from varieties of French, but also a distinctively Scottish distribution of forms with initial *al-*. Such forms, according to OED, deploy “alteration of the first syllable after the Arabic definite article *al-* (which is frequently borrowed into European languages as part of loanwords from Arabic; compare e.g. alchemy *n.*)”; cited examples include Spanish *almirante*, early Catalan *almirall*.

(3) The prefix *al-* also appears in **alphine**, defined by DSL as “The bishop in chess”, first cited for Scots from *The Buik of Alexander*, a work usually dated to 1438. OED gives further information, noting a derivation from medieval Latin *alpinus*, attested in thirteenth-century sources, and ultimately from Arabic *al + fil* ‘elephant’ (cf. Persian *pīl*): “The chess piece was so called because originally (in the Indian, Chinese, and Persian forms of the game) it had the shape of an elephant”. In this case, the *al-* prefix is also found in English texts. OED offers two Scottish citations, witnessing the forms *alpinis* in the *Book of Chess* in Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS 16500 (the Asloan manuscript, from 1500–1525), and a much later attestation of the form *aphens* in the *Holy Songs* of the Church of Scotland minister, one-time Glasgow University principal, and poet “of dubious merit” (ODNB) Zachary Boyd (1585–1653). Given that the remaining citations from English texts all retain <l>, this last form in Boyd's poetry reflects what seems to be a distinctive Scots development, the operation of the Older Scots sound-change known as *l*-vocalisation that began to emerge in Scots from the end of the fifteenth century onwards.

(4) DSL's definition of **caraff** starts by citing Jamieson's definition in the 1825 edition of his dictionary: “A decanter for holding water, a word which does not seem to be used in E[nglish]”. DSL considers the lexeme to be an adoption of French *carafe*, itself borrowed from Italian *carafia*, “which [it claims] is of Arabic origin”. OED's entry for *carafe*, only partially updated, suggests a derivation from (inter alia) Arabic *gharafa* “to draw or lift water”, and confirms that “The word

has long been in common use in Scotland; in England it is of later appearance"; the earliest citation in OED is from *The Lounger* of 1786, a journal edited by Henry Mackenzie (1745–1831), a well-known novelist and prominent member of the Edinburgh literati of the period. Judging by OED's citations, the lexeme only appears in English texts from the 1860s onwards; from the beginning of the twentieth century the term began also to be used in North America to refer to an insulated flask used for hot beverages, or for a jug that is part of a coffee-making apparatus.

(5) *Cartoush* – along with what DSL refers to as a “corruption” of the form, viz. *cottoush* – is defined in DSL as “a short coat worn by a woman”, with the earliest citations dating from the beginning of the nineteenth century. OED adds little, stating that the word is restricted to Scots. The form is, according to DSL, derived from French *court* “short” + *housse*; present-day French *housse* is a cover typically used to protect furniture from dust, but DSL cites Randle Cotgrave's *A Dictionarie of the French and English tongues* (1611 and later editions): “a short mantle of course cloth (and all of a peece) worne in ill weather by countrey women, about their head and shoulders”. DSL suggests that *housse* is derived from Arabic, citing Hatzfeld and Darmesteter (1895), who link French *housse* (Old French *houce*) “sorte de mantelet couvrant le cou et les épaules” to Arabic *ghouchia*, albeit accompanied by a qualifying “peut-être”; other etymologies are, however, possible.

(6) Scots *carvey* or *carvy* corresponds to English *caraway*, the umbelliferous plant that produces seeds used in cooking. According to OED, the Scots form derives from Spanish *carvi*, itself descended from Arabic *al-karawiyā*; the English form seems to have a distinct derivation from medieval Latin *cerui*. OED considers the form *carvy* to be distinctively Scottish, and, with the exception of the earliest, which is from the writings of the English poet, courtier and natural philosopher Kenelm Digby (1603–1665), all the citations are from Scottish sources. Scots *carvey* is also distinguished from English *caraway* is that it seems to refer directly to the seed of the plant, or to a sweetmeat made from these seeds. The Scottish writer Susan Ferrier (1782–1854) is cited in DSL from her novel *Inheritance* (1854): “Pretty! — what makes her pretty? — wi' a face like a sooket [i.e. sucked] carvy”. And CMSW draws attention to an entry in one of the Edinburgh writer John Wilson's (1785–1854) contributions, as “Christopher North”, to the series *Noctes Ambrosianae* of 1864, who refers to *carvey* as “the smallest kind of sweetmeats, generally put on bread-and-butter for children”.

(7) The form *colf*, with variants including *calf*, *calfin* and *calfat*, is another lexeme that is restricted to Scots, as flagged by both DSL and OED. The latter authority has various technical meanings, including “stuff(ing),” “wad(ding)”. The earliest

citation in DSL is from 1534, when the accounts of the Scottish royal treasury refer to the purchase of “iiii stanis [i.e. stones] of calfyne”; a related verb appears in the Edinburgh burgh records of 1566-1567, referring to a purchase of cement to “calphat the guttaris,” presumably to prevent leakage. Both noun and verb appear in a citation from 1613 refers to “calfing to calfat the schip,” i.e. a caulking-process to keep a ship watertight. The immediate source of the verb is French *calfater* “caulk,” but this form is, according to OED, derived from Arabic *qalafa* “to caulk a ship with palm-tree fibre”. Later the word develops further senses, such as meaning “wadding” (as in the wadding used for a gun), and figurative uses have also emerged. Thus, in the distinct variety of Scots developed in Ulster, *colf* can mean “a generous meal” (i.e. “stuffing”), with a citation from 1936: “For a good colf, give me a pot of well-made oatmeal stirabout [porridge] and a bowl of new churned buttermilk”, while DSL records a Dees-side use from 1917, where *colf* is “an opprobrious name for a slovenly woman”.

(8) *Cramasie* “crimson” appears in OED under the headword *cramoisy*; OED considers the lexeme to be archaic and “[i]n earlier use, chiefly *Scottish*”: a slightly misleading statement, in that all OED’s citations for the form, save for an early reference to *crymysy velvet* in the wardrobe accounts of Edward IV (1480), and another from Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel *North and South* (1855), are from Scottish sources.¹⁰ DSL offers citations for *cramasie* and variant spellings ranging from Scottish exchequer records dated to 1436 through deployments in novels and short stories from 1993. DSL derives the word immediately from Old French *cramoisi*, both as a noun and an adjective, and flags an ultimate derivation from Arabic without going into details. However, OED is more thorough, indicating that the French usage derives from Arabic *qirmazi* “of or belonging to the *qirmiz*”, the insect that when crushed and dried is the source of food-colourings such as cochineal.

(9) The form *gundy*, by contrast, seems to be much more recent, with DSL’s earliest citations from the end of the nineteenth century, and the connexion with Arabic is frankly much more tenuous. The word in Scots refers to a kind of toffee or butterscotch. The Scots form seems to have no connexion with the lexeme *gundy* recorded in OED, which can mean either “Of the eyes: full of gound or matter; bleared” (the latest citation from 1684, in a glossary of Yorkshire usage), or a variant form of *gunyah*, an Australian word recorded from the nineteenth century onwards meaning “hut”, itself a borrowing from what the unrevised OED entry describes as “An Australian Aboriginal language”. DSL is itself sceptical: “[Prob. orig. a (child’s) variant form of *candy*. The phonetics however suggest that the word may have been borrowed direct from some eastern form, e.g. Arabic or Tamil.]”; however, neither an Arabic nor a Tamil form is offered in DSL to justify this suggestion.

(10) The Arabic connexion for *mummye*, by contrast, is much stronger. The term now refers to mummified bodies, but a specialised use, “the medicinal preparation orig[inally] made from mummified bodies” (DSL), is common both to Older Scots and Middle and Early Modern English. DSL’s earliest Scottish record is in the accounts of the royal treasury for 1525-1526, when two shillings Scots were expended “For j unce of mummye to the maister kuk”; whether this substance was used to cure the cook, or whether the cook was supposed to use the mummy as part of a recipe (medicinal or otherwise) is unclear. The form seems to derive immediately in both Scots and English from French *momie*, but the form is also recorded as *mumia/mumia* in post-classical and medieval Latin. However, according to OED, its ultimate derivation is from Arabic *mūmiyā* “bitumen, resinous substance used medicinally” (cf. also *mūmiyā qubūrū* “sepulchral bitumen”, which OED describes as “found in Egypt and believed to be used by the Greeks for embalming (13th cent.)”).

(11) The noun *mutch*, meaning a head-dress worn by a woman, a baby’s bonnet, or a night-cap, is identified by both DSL and OED as a distinctively Scots form, including in Ulster Scots; OED also suggests that the form is found in northern England, but only one very early citation is offered to attest to that area, in records from the city of York dating to 1438. The form seems to have entered Scots from Dutch or Low German, as suggested in DSL’s etymological note: “O[lder] Sc[ots] *much*, a night-cap, 1473, Mid[dle] Du[tch] *mutse*, *mutsche*, a covering for the head, *nacht-mutse*, a night-cap, ad. med[ieval] Lat[in] *almutia*, and p[erhaps] ultimately of Arabic orig[in]”. Latin *almutia*, medieval Latin *almussa* seem to be the source of *amice*, a specialised term referring to a hood worn as part of academic or clerical robes. However, this claim of an Arabic etymology is based on the appearance of the *al-* prefix in *almutia*, and OED, in its entry for *amice* (n.2) is sceptical: “The initial *al-* has sometimes been taken to represent the Arabic definite article *al*, but no likely Arabic etymon has been found”. The word is strongly evidenced in CMSW, especially in literary writings from the nineteenth century, e.g. Robert Louis Stevenson, in *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), refers to “A footpad that kills an old granny in a woollen mutch with a dirty bludgeon, and that for a shilling”.

(12) The lexeme *raket*, meaning either a racket or bat used in games such as tennis, or (in the plural) the game of rackets, is earliest recorded in DSL in the Bannatyne manuscript of Scottish verse, usually dated to 1568: “Sa mony rakkettis, sa mony ketch-pillaris, / Sic ballis, sic nackettis”.¹¹ The form is recorded with this meaning in CMSW, including two occurrences in Wilson’s *Noctes Ambrosianae*. DSL relates the word to French *rchette*, Spanish *raqueta*, and – the reason for including the form in this list – Arabic *rāha* “palm of the hand” (Hatzfeld and Darmesteter 1895 cite the form *rahat*, with <ṭ> as their transliteration of the Arabic symbol for a glottal stop).¹² As played in the early modern period, tennis – now known as

real (i.e. “royal”) tennis – was an aristocratic pursuit, played in a specially-built enclosed court; significantly, given the meaning of the Arabic word, the alternative expression for the game in this format is in French, viz. *jeu de paume*.

(13) **Ribup** – the spelling *riupe* is also recorded – is defined in DSL as “A stringed musical instrument”, citing Carter 1961, who offers a further gloss: “related to the rebeck, but larger”. DSL’s etymology is explicit: “[Middle English] *rubybe*, *rybibe*, *rebibe* (v.rr. of *rubible*, Chaucer *Miller’s Tale* 145), [Old French] *rebebe* ... from Arabic *rabāb*”; OED, in a recently updated entry, supports this etymology, while offering a slightly extended and modified definition: “A medieval three-stringed instrument resembling a violin”. The lexeme is first attested in Scots in *The Buke of the Howlat*, by the poet and household chaplain Richard Holland (c.1410–c.1480-5; see Hanna 2014, 10). In OED’s entry for the related form *rebab*, with variants *rabab*, *rubab*, and *robab*, the “vowel in the first syllable reflects dialectal variation in Arabic”, while the appearance of a spelling indicating a front vowel, e.g. in the variants *rabeb*, *rebebb*, “probably reflects fronting of *ā* to *ē*”. OED’s list of cognates for *ribibe* include Old French *rubeb* and Old Occitan *ribeba*, which indicate a similar set of developments. The deployment of <u> in the second syllable of the Older Scots form is therefore worthy of comment, since alone among the medieval European languages it would seem to have retained a back vowel. It is therefore just possible that the Older Scots word was a direct borrowing from Arabic, in the same way as *rebab* was later re-introduced to English, as is witnessed in OED’s citations from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, by contemporary travellers and antiquarians.

(14) During the medieval period, Islamic medicine was considerably more developed than in the Christian west, deriving benefit not only from its inheritance from the Greek and Roman worlds but also from contact with Persian and Indian traditions. Writers such as al-Razi (“Rhazes,” b. 856 CE) and Ibn Sina (“Avicenna,” fl. 10th-11th centuries CE), both Persian-born but writing in classical Arabic, were key figures of influence in medical development throughout the medieval world. It is therefore not surprising to find the form **saphena** “saphena or saphenous vein” amongst DSL’s lexemes “of Arabic origin”; OED confirms the etymology, gives the Arabic form, viz. *çāfin*, and offers numerous examples from non-Scottish sources. DSL identifies the immediate source of the word as Old French *saphène*, medieval Latin *saphena* (an early 11th-century usage), *sophena* (in use after c.1250); OED, in addition, offers encyclopedic information on *saphena*: “the distinctive name of two veins in the leg”. The word is current in both English and Scots from the end of the fourteenth/beginning of the fifteenth century onwards, being deployed by John Trevisa in his translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De proprietatibus rerum* (1398), and in Lanfranc’s *Cirurgie* (c. 1400). The word is commonly recorded in medical works curated in EEBO-TCP, ranging from *The historie of man sucked from the sappe*

of the most approved anathomistes (1578) by John Banister (1532/3–?1599) to *Child-birth or; The happy deliuerie of vvomen* (1612), a translation of a work by the “French kings chirugion”, Jacques Guillemeau (?1550–1613). The earliest Scottish citation is from the *Register* of the Abbey of Kelso (the *Liber Calchou*, for which see still Innes 1846), in the entry for 1420: “The vayn that is ewin vnder the anklet, that is callyd the sophene”.

(15) Given the appearance of *saphena* in DSL, it is no surprise to see *sattwell* also in DSL’s set of Arabic words; DSL’s first definition of the word is “root of the East Indian plant *Curcuma Zedoaria*, used as a drug,” while its second considers it to be a word for valerian, still commonly used for medicinal purposes. OED groups this form with *setwall*. *Settwell* is much more commonly known as *zedoary*, and OED’s discussion demonstrates how the word developed from Arabic *zadwār* in many European languages, including French, which seems the most likely route for the form’s transference to English and Scots.¹³ The principal difficulty is the *-al* ending, which OED accounts for as deriving from the substitution of classical Latin *-alis* in place of an earlier addition of a Latinising suffix *-aris*. The replacement of *-wall* with *-well*, however, which judging by citations in OED as well as in DSL seems to be prototypically Scots rather than English. The replacement of *-wall* with *-well* seems to be an analogous formation driven by folk etymology, on the model of *speedwell* (i.e. “succeed well”), the veronica plant (which also possesses medicinal properties).

(16) The lexeme *scarlet* is one of the oldest-recorded words in DSL, being cited from pre-literary Scots sources, viz. an entry for 1230 in the episcopal register for the bishop of Aberdeen, where “Vna vlna scarleti” is recorded in a list of purchases. Latin *ulna*, now referring primarily to the bones of the forearm, was also used to translate *ell*, the unit of length, and thus the reference here is to a measure of scarlet cloth, probably imported from Flanders; throughout the medieval and early modern periods, and later in the writings of archaistic authors such as Alfred Lord Tennyson, *scarlet* could refer to a rich red cloth as well as the colour.¹⁴ The form probably entered Scots through French, with apheresis of initial *e-*, but is ultimately both Persian and Arabic; DSL cites Old French *escarlante*, medieval Latin *scarlata*, Persian *saqirlāt*, and “ancient Arabic *siqilāt*”. The OED entry, currently not yet fully updated, is more sceptical of an Arabic connexion and omits the “ancient Arabic” reference, although accepting the link to Persian; OED considers “that Old French *escarlante* is an alteration of Persian *saqalāt*, *siqalāt*, *suqlāt*, a kind of rich cloth ... The form *saqirlāt*, given in some Arabic dictionaries, is modern and probably adopted from some European language”. Intriguingly, the first Scots entry predates a little the OED’s earliest citation, dated to “c. 1250”.

(17) The earliest record of the form *sinny* “senna plant, used for medicinal purposes” in DSL dates to 1585, in the documents known as the *Edinburgh Testaments*: “xvij pund of synny price of the pund xxj s. iiij d.”; the *Elgin Records* from 1596 offer a vivid snapshot of the plant’s use: “Scho gaiff spurge and pouder cinnie to William Youngis barne”.¹⁵ The word *sinny* thus joins *saphene* and *settwall* as another demonstration of how Scots medical vocabulary owes a debt, albeit at one or two removes, to Arabic. DSL cites Old French *séné* and medieval Latin *sene*, with an ultimate etymology “[from] the Arabic”; OED distinguishes between *sene* from the French, which was used for Maryland senna first distinguished by travellers to the New World in 1586, and *senna* immediately from Latin, but ultimately from Arabic *sanā*, for the plant known in Islamic medicine. *Sinny* with <i, y> in stressed position seems to be a distinctively Scots form, not attested in OED, which later developed as *seenie*. DSL has a Glasgow record from 1972, albeit recording usage from the 1930s: “For lazy bowels, my mother’s favourite cure was senna pods, or ‘seenie pods’ as we called them”.

(18) There is only one citation for *sophy* in DSL, from an anonymous fragmentary court masque *Ane Litill Interlud of the Droichis part of the Play*¹⁶, surviving in the Bannatyne and Asloan manuscripts of Older Scots verse: “Sophie and the sowdoun strang ... Owt of thair boundis hes maid me gang”. DSL derives the word from Persian *Safi*, the surname of Persia’s ruling dynasty from 1500 onwards, describing the word as “[from] the Arabic”. OED offers a fuller discussion: “derived from the Arabic epithet *ṣaḥī-ud-dīn* ‘purity of religion’, given to an ancestor of Ismail Saḥī, the founder of the dynasty”. The earliest citation in OED is from the correspondence of Thomas Cromwell, dated to 1539. Although the Bannatyne manuscript can be dated to 1568, the Asloan manuscript¹⁷ – where the form appears as *Sopheia* – is older, roughly contemporary with the poet; thus the lexeme’s appearance in Scots would seem to predate its appearance in English.

(19) The form *tabie*, with variants such as *tabby*, *tabine* and so on, is much more commonly attested in Older Scots, and again Scots forms predate the first citation in OED. The earliest sense of the word, according to DSL, is “a variety of cloth, probably a type of silk”; DSL’s earliest citation dates from 1612, when the form *Tabins* is recorded alongside *Silk stockingsis* and *Taffateis* in *The Book of Customs and Valuations of Merchandises of Scotland*.¹⁸ The earliest citation in OED with this sense dates from 1638.¹⁹ DSL derives the form from Old French *atabis*, itself “[from] the Arabic”. OED’s etymological note is fuller, citing both *atabis* and (with apheresis of *a-*) *tabis* in Middle French (i.e. French from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries),²⁰ with Spanish, Portuguese and Italian cognates, and also medieval Latin *attābi*. OED “apparently” considers the ultimate ancestor of the lexeme to be “Arabic ‘*attābiy*, [the] name of a quarter of Bag[h]dad in which this stuff was manufactured, named after ‘*Attāb*, great-grandson of Omeyya,” i.e. of

the founder of the Ummayyad caliphate. *Tabby* is a fairly common word in Early Modern English for this material; EEBO-TCP records 67 matches in 61 records, including, interestingly, in *The Travels of Sir John Chardin into Persia and the East-Indies* (1686).

(20) OED describes *tass* “cup, goblet” as “Now chiefly *Scottish*”, and the word with this meaning is earliest recorded by DSL in the account-books of the Scottish royal treasury for 1505-6: “For vij cowpes xvij tasses l goblatis and tua laweris of glas of sindry pricis”. The entry in which this citation appears derives from DOST, and the etymology given simply refers to the use of the form in contemporary Late Middle/Early Modern English, and to Old French *tasse*. However, there is another entry for the lexeme in DSL, taken from SND, which adds to this etymology the cryptic comment “from Arabic”.²¹ OED gives more detail, citing not only Old French *tasse* but also Provençal, Catalan, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian cognates, ultimately derived, again “apparently” from Arabic *ṭass*, *ṭassah* “basin,” itself “usually held to be” from Persian *tast* “cup, goblet”.²² OED’s only English as opposed to Scots entry for *tass* meaning “cup, goblet” is from Caxton’s *Dialogues in French and English*, otherwise known as *The Table of this Prouffitable Lerynyge*: an early form of a French-English dictionary-cum-thesaurus, in which *tasse* appears alongside other forms of *marchandises*. However, contrasting with much of his practice elsewhere in this gloss, Caxton simply transfers the French word *tasse* across to his English column without modification, casting doubt on how far the word has actually been assimilated to English use at the time.²³ The word has subsequently become a particularly marked shibboleth of Scots usage, e.g. in the writings of Scots language activists; David Purves (1924–2015), for instance, for many years *preses* (president) of the Scots Language Society, regularly uses the expression “tass o wyne” in his verses.²⁴

(21) The earliest records in DSL of *trunchman*, “an interpreter or translator”, date from the end of the sixteenth century, in a satirical poem, anonymous but from a Roman Catholic perspective, called *Ane Admonition to the Antichristian Ministers in the Deformit Kirk of Scotland*: “To geneue haist vith speid. Bot 3it 3e vant 3our trunscheman be the vay ...”.²⁵ DSL cites a sequence of cognates: Early Modern English *tourchemen* (with a range of variant spellings), Old French *trucheman*, and medieval Latin *turchemannus*, all described as “[f]rom the Arabic”. OED give a little more information about the Arabic origins of the form, i.e. *turjamān* (also *tarjumān*, *tarjamān*). In both Scots and English, this form seems to be restricted to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with only sporadic appearances later, both by nineteenth-century writers keen to burnish their learned credentials;²⁶ in English usage, the word was replaced by *dragoman*, a form based on a different dialect of Arabic, with which it had competed since the end of the fifteenth century.

3. Implications

This short, and thus limited, survey of words in Scots with Arabic origins is of course in danger of being simply a presentation of curious knowledge, with (in the case of such forms as *gundy* and *mutch*) some minor modification of the entries in DSL. Moreover – as the example of *sipher* shows – further detailed analysis of all the OED entries claiming Arabic ancestry, with cross-referencing not only to DSL but to resources such as CMSW, SCOTS, and EEBO-TCP, would undoubtedly produce further examples. However, enough information has perhaps been presented here to allow certain patterns to be identified.

First, and most obviously, it seems fairly certain that almost all these forms – *ribup* is a possible exception – were not transferred directly from Arabic but were mediated either through medieval Latin or varieties of French. But in notional terms these words nevertheless fall – perhaps rather unsurprisingly – into specific semantic fields that indicate the specialised areas of culture that were particularly impacted by Islamic/Christian interactions. Thus, several of these words refer to medical issues (*mummye*, *saphena*, *sattwell*, *sinny*), to special substances or materials (*carvy*, *colf*, *cramasie*, *scarlet*, *tabie*), to items of specialised clothing (*actoun*, *cartoush*), and to luxury items or activities associated with court-culture (*alphine*, *caraff*, *raket*, *ribup*, *tass*). Two lexemes refer originally to particular kinds of oriental potentate (*admiral*, *sophy*), and another refers to a figure likely to have been countered in any encounter between Arabic-speakers within Islam and the Christian world (*trunchman*). Such a notional classification of the uses of these forms captures something of how the ripples of the encounter between Islamic and Christian cultures, primarily around the Mediterranean littoral, reached the shores of a country almost at the edge of the world known to Europeans. Scotland may have been peripheral, but Scots, the language spoken by many of those living in the south and east of early modern Scotland, has never been parochial.

Similarly worth noting is what the history of these forms tells us about the divergence of Scots usage from that of English, its near and in many ways dominant neighbour. It will be observed that several of the lexemes cited are restricted to Scots (e.g. *cartoush*), reflecting the different paths that borrowing took place in that variety, or have even (e.g. *carvy*) developed distinct meanings. The appearance of some lexemes predates (as far as we can determine) English usage (e.g. *caraff*), presumably because of the distinct way in which the intermediate language, viz. French, interacted with Scots. Even more subtly, there are forms which demonstrate the operation of distinctively Scots sound-changes, e.g. the forms *aphens* (for earlier *alphine*), and *sinny/seenie* (for *senna*). In sum, this survey of the Arabic element in the Scots lexicon offers, in miniature, a glimpse of how a distinct language-variety emerges and evolves over time and space.

Notes

- 1 For biographical details of all persons cited in this article, see in the first instance the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB), <https://www.oxforddnb-com/>, last cited 14th July 2022.
- 2 See <https://dsl.ac.uk/>, last consulted on 14 July 2022.
- 3 See further the essays in McClure and Macleod 2012; for Jamieson, see most importantly Rennie 2012.
- 4 Preliminary work on such a resource was undertaken in 2014-15 by Susan Rennie, for which see <https://scotsthesaurus.org/>, last consulted on 14 July 2022. A comprehensive version, modelled on the most recent version of the *Historical Thesaurus of English* (for which see <https://ht.ac.uk/>, last consulted 14 July 2022), is currently under development, led by Marc Alexander (Glasgow University) and Rhona Alcorn (DSL Ltd). For a smaller *Scots Thesaurus* classifying some 20,000 words, see Macleod et al 1999; this publication drew on the first edition of DSL's *Concise Scots Dictionary* (1985), now replaced by a second edition (2019).
- 5 See <https://www-oed-com>, last consulted on 14 July 2022.
- 6 See <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup/> and <https://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/cmsw/>, last consulted on 14 July 2022.
- 7 See <https://www.linguisticdna.org/>, last consulted on 14 July 2022.
- 8 Excluding *sv. Arabik*.
- 9 Scott's library, now maintained by Edinburgh's Faculty of Advocates, can be searched through an online catalogue; see https://advocates.ent.sirsidynix.net.uk/client/en_GB/public, last consulted 14 July 2022. For Scott as an antiquarian and editor see Matthews 1999, Smith 2020.
- 10 It seems to me very possible that the 1480 citation should be more plausibly assigned to the related but distinct lexeme *crimson* (from Anglo-Norman *cremosin*, Latin *cremosinus*), which would account for the stressed vowel represented by <y>. If this derivation is accepted, the omission of final -n in *crymysy* is easily accounted for as related to a missing final minim-mark.
- 11 The poem is ascribed in DSL to William Dunbar, and the citation is there taken from the main version of the Bannatyne manuscript, dated to 1568; the poem, now known as *A General Satire*, is Poem 11 in Priscilla Bawcutt's authoritative edition (1998: 71–74; the line appears on p.73, line 66). Bawcutt uses the “draft” version of the Bannatyne manuscript as her base witness for this poem, so the lines read differently: “Sa monye rackattis, sic caicharis and sic gillaris,/ Sic ballis, sic knackattis ...” (DSL is baffled by *gillaris*, offering a question-mark as a gloss; OED does not include the word). According to DSL, a *keche-pillar* – there are various other spellings, e.g. *cachePELLAR* – is an official charged with keeping or attending at a tennis-court (cf. Old Flemish *caetsspell* “game of hand-tennis”); a *nacket* (*knacket* in Bawcutt's edition) is

- a young servant, though DSL again cites Randle Cotgrave, who supplies a specialised meaning: “The boy that serues, or stops the ball ... at Tennis; a ... Tennis Court-keeper’s boy”. OED considers the form to be “*Scottish and Irish English* (northern). Now *rare*,” deriving it from Middle French *nacquet*; OED’s citation with the specialised reference to tennis is the same as DSL’s. For a discussion of Arabic connexions to tennis, see Schmitt 1996.
- 12 OED makes no reference to any Arabic connexion for *racket*, and is thus presumably sceptical as to such an etymology. However, the editors do cite (without detail) a view that the word may rather derive from Middle English *rachas*, a hapax legomenon from 1405, cf. the verb *rechase* from Old French *rachacier* in a specialised sense “to return a ball”. The form *chacier* derives ultimately from classical Latin *captāre*, a frequentative form of *capere* “catch, seize”, and, in the entry for *chase* (v), OED cites a work linking the element *capt-* to the Arabic form, which it presumably considers to be an Arabic borrowing from Latin.
 - 13 EEBO-TCP has no records of *sattwell* (or variants), but no fewer than 932 matches on 172 records of *zedoary*.
 - 14 See the entry for *ell* in <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopedia-of-medieval-dress-and-textiles>, last consulted 11 July 2022. For the citation from Tennyson’s medievalizing Arthurian poem, *Idylls of the King*, see OED: “Then the trumpets blew/ Proclaiming his prize, who wore the sleeve/ Of scarlet, and the pearls”.
 - 15 *Spurge* is, as its name suggests, a purgative plant of the genus *euphorbia*, so the unfortunate child (*barne*) was treated to a double dose of emetics or cathartics, presumably designed to ease constipation.
 - 16 This text is ascribed to Dunbar in DSL, but this authorship seems no longer accepted; see Fisher 1999.
 - 17 Now Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS 16500. The manuscript is named after its scribe, John Asloan (or Sloane). A *droich* (from Old English *dweorh*) is a dwarf, one of many employed as entertainers in early modern European courts.
 - 18 Now Edinburgh, National Archives of Scotland, MS E76/3.
 - 19 The term *tabby* seems to have been first used to refer to a striped cat, adjectivally as in *tabby cat*, at the end of the seventeenth century.
 - 20 Hatzfeld and Darmesteter 1895 offer citations from Christine de Pisan (1364–1430) and Eustache Deschamps (1346–1406/7), who witness *atabis* and *tabis* respectively. Judging by the discussion, not yet fully updated (last consulted 14 July 2022), OED would seem to have drawn on the entry in Hatzfeld and Darmesteter’s French dictionary, albeit with a slight caveat flagged by its introduction of the qualifying adverb “apparently”.
 - 21 As flagged at the beginning of this paper, SND was originally completed as a distinct publication from DOST, and this difference occasionally throws up

inconsistencies in DSL. SND states that the earliest Older Scots form dates from 1513, probably referring to the occurrence of the form in the translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* by Gavin Douglas (c.1474–1522), usually dated to 1513: “The cowpys gret and drynkyn tassis fyne”.

- 22 The relevant OED entry for *tass* (n.2), like that for *tabby*, is not yet fully updated (last consulted 14 July 2022). From the phrasing of the etymological discussion, it seems likely that the OED editors (and possibly those for SND) had again consulted Hatzfeld and Darmesteter 1895, which authority refers without qualification to the lexeme as “Emprunté de l’arabe thaça” [*sic*].
- 23 See Bradley 1900, 21, line 32.
- 24 As cited in the online *Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech* (SCOTS), <https://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/search/?word=tass&search=Search>, last consulted 14 July 2022.
- 25 See Cranstoun 1891, 341.
- 26 Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800–1882), the great theologian, clergyman in the Church of England and leading figure in the traditionalist Oxford Movement; Charles Montagu Doughty (1843–1926), explorer, travel writer and poet, whose *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888) was a seminal (if in many ways now problematic) work of specialised ethnography.

Abbreviations

CMSW = *Corpus of Modern Scottish Writing*: <https://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/cmsw/>

CSD (first edition, Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1985); CSD (second edition, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019) = *Concise Scots Dictionary*

DSL = *Dictionaries of the Scots Language*: <https://dsl.ac.uk/>

EEBO-TCP = *Early English Books Online – Text Creation Partnership*: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup/>

HTE = *Historical Thesaurus of English*: <https://ht.ac.uk/>

LDNA = *Linguistic DNA*: <https://www.linguisticdna.org/>

ODNB = *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: <https://www-oxforddnb-com>

OED = *Oxford English Dictionary*: <https://www-oed-com>

SCOTS = *Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech*: <https://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/>

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