SOME OBSERVATIONS ON
THE VULGAR LATIN VERB PLICO

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Abstract. Scholars have found the discrepant meanings of the Latin verb plico puzzling. A possible solution is suggested positing the existence of two homonyms containing unrelated roots.

The brief etymologies given in the Oxford Latin Dictionary for the various compounds of the verb plico (con- + plico, ex- + plico, in- + plico, etc.) are undoubtedly correct for all with the exception of applico. The only entry for plico is the verb meaning “to fold, bend, twine, etc.” and the semantic connection between the simple verb and the compounds is obvious. In the case of applico (ad- + plico), however, the connection is not apparent. The meanings of this verb center around the notion of “motion toward, approaching, adding to, etc.” Plicare is generally assumed to be related to plectere (“to plait, braid, twine”) and to Greek πλέκω (“to twine, weave, etc.”),1 the form plic- being regarded as a back-formation from the vowel-weakened form of the compounds.

The verb applico was in general use in classical Latin. In the Vulgar Latin period another verb plico is first attested with the meaning “to approach, draw near, reach,” in sense closely related to applico. Four occurrences of this verb are known to me: three in the Itinerarium Egeriae2 and one in the manuscript containing the Glosas Emilianenses.3


2 O. Prinz (ed.), Itinerarium Egeriae (Peregrinati Aetheriae) (Heidelberg 1969) plicaremus, 2.4; plicanimus, 6.3; plicarent, 19.9. A. Souter (ed.), A Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A.D. (Oxford 1949) lists all three occurrences under the entry pleco.

3 Madrid, Biblioteca de la Academia de la Historia, cod. 60, fol. 66v, line 2 plicabitur. The text of the passage as published by S. Larragueta, Las Glosas Emilianenses (Logroño 1984) is as follows: Et post his temporibus exhibit qui dicitur Antichristus, album occultum scieat stella matutina. Et ambulabat ad mare mortuum et a mare maiore et non illi plicabitur aqua usque ad genua (“And after these times will come forth the one called Antichrist, (with) a white eye like the morning star. And he will walk to the Dead Sea and from the greater sea and the water will not reach his knees.”). It may be noted that the verb is here used as a deponent, whereas Egeria uses it twice reflexively and once as an active intransitive.
Since both this verb and its compound *applico* diverge semantically from *plico* ("to fold"), it would appear that we are here dealing with an entirely different root, one possibly related to the Slavic root *bliz-* ("near"). The affinity in sense between the Slavic *bliz-* and Vulgar Latin *plico* is evident. The Latin root *plic-* and the Slavic *bliz-* both consist of a labial, an *l*, a vowel, and a velar, the latter represented by a sibilant in the Slavic languages since they belong to the *satem* group.

Machek in his Czech etymological dictionary states that the origin of *bliz-* is unclear. He believes that it is most likely related to the Greek adverb πέλαξ ("near") and the adjective πλησιός ("near"), though he adds that the relationship is limited only to the *bl-*; he regards the voiced *b* as merely a softened form of *p.* There appears to be a small group of words with initial *p* and containing an *l* in the same syllable, in which the *p* undergoes voicing in Slavic. Examples that I have found are:

1. Latin *pulex*, *pulicis* ("flea")—Czech *blecha* ("flea").
2. Latin *palus*, *paludis* ("swamp")—Czech *bláto* ("mud"), Russian *bolóto* ("swamp"). Olivieri associates *palus* with Old Church Slavonic *blato* ("lake") and Lake Balaton, a shallow lake in southwestern Hungary.
3. Latin *pallidus* ("pale")—Czech *bledý*, Russian *bliédnyj*, Polish *bładny* ("pale"); Slavic with metathesis of the vowel and *l*.
4. Latin *plaga* ("blow, stroke"), Greek πληγή (Doric πλαγά; "blow, stroke"; cf. ἀποπληγήτωμα, "to be senseless," ἔμπληκτος, "stunned, senseless")—Czech *blázen* ("insane or crazy person"); cf. similar idea in ἔμπροντης, "thunderstruck, stupefied, stupid").

To the foregoing may probably be added the following, though the initial syllable does not contain a velar:

5. Latin *pellis* ("skin, hide"), Greek πέλλας (accusative plural; "skin, hide")—Czech *blána* ("membrane").

If similarly the Latin root *plic-* ("to approach") and the Slavic *bliz-* are related, it appears that Latin possessed two homonymous verbs *plicare*. This distinction is supported by the fact that *plicare* ("to approach") yields Spanish *llegar* ("to

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4 V. Machek (ed.), *Etymologický slovník jazyka českého* (Prague 1968) s.v. *blízký*.
5 D. Olivieri (ed.), *Dizionario etimologico italiano* (Milan 1953) 508 s.v. *palude*.
6 Machek [4] 55 s.v. *blázen* states that the origin of this word is unclear.
arrive, reach"),\textsuperscript{8} whereas *plicare* ("to fold, etc.") yields Spanish *plegar* ("to fold, to plait"). Since the latter does not follow the normal rules of phonetic development from Latin to Spanish (pl>ll), it is regarded as a semi-learned formation, a *cultismo*.\textsuperscript{9} Additional support for the distinction between the two *plicare*’s is afforded by the fact that Egeria (Aetheria), who probably antedates the seventh century, twice uses the verb reflexively (*plecaremus nos*, 2.4; *plicauimus nos*, 6.3)—undoubtedly a forerunner of Spanish *llegrarse*.

\textsuperscript{8} J. Corominas (ed.), *Breve diccionario etimológico de la lengua castellana* (Madrid 1983) 370.

\textsuperscript{9} Corominas [8] 463.