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THE MEANING OF *MICARIUS*

Martti Nyman

When resuming the banquet after a sobering bath, Trimalchio calls attention to one of his slave boys who celebrating his first shave:

hodie servus meus barbatoriam fecit, homo praefiscini frugi et micarius. itaque tangomenas faciamus et usque in lucem cenemus (Petr. sat. 73,6).

Except for the ever-problematic *tangomenas* (on which see Wilmi 1981: 128), the interpretation of this passage has not been subject to much discussion. The word *micarius* is a hapax, but it has been almost unanimously glossed as 'crumb-gatherer, crumb-saver', as a metaphorical characterization of a thrifty person, "qui micas panis colligit et victum sibi parce comparat" (Forcellini, s.v.).¹ Certainly *micarius* here connotes a frugal man, but I doubt that Petron ever denoted a "crumb-gatherer" by the word *micarius*. By way of congratulating my distinguished friend and wishing him continuing progress in his career I should like to call attention to some matters of fact that are apt to make *micarius* appear in a new light.

¹ Besides a couple of facile conjectures, viz. Scheffer's *mi carus* and Jahn's *amicarius*, there is Bücheler's ingenious proposal to consider *micarius* as a derivative of the verb *micare* 'sortiri digitis': "*micarius est fidus, tanquam quicum etiam in tenebris mices*" (1862/1958:87); cf. Cic. off. 3,19,77 *iam tritum est vetustate proverbium; cum enim fidem alicuius bonitatemque laudant, dignum esse dicunt cuicum in tenebris mices*. However, the idea of frugality and thriftiness prevails in this passage. Furthermore, the suffix +*arius* tends to attach to nominal bases; witness *oracularius* (43,6), *pullarius* or *puellarius* (43,8), *caligarius* (74,14), *sestertarius* (45,8 and 11), *dupundiarius* (58,5; 74,15), *venerarius* (39,11); cf. Perrochat (1952:55).

Mica panis was a very frequent syntagm in late Latin, and in Christian authors *mica* in fact stands for crumb of bread:² Vulg. Matth. 15,27 *catelli edunt de micis, quae cadunt de mensa dominorum*; Vulg. Marc. 7,28 *et catelli sub mensa manducant de micis puerorum*; Vulg. Luc. 16,21 *cupiens saturari de micis*; Hier. epist. 11,2 *de dominorum micis canes edunt*. Given this, the interpretation of *micarius* as a "crumb-gatherer" comes out as a natural solution. Yet there is one problem: *micarius* qua "crumb-gatherer" is likely to involve an anachronism. The use of *mica* to denote crumb of bread cannot really be established before the 3rd or 4th c. A.D., despite the passage in Petr. sat. 42,5, in which Seleucus regrets his dead friend Chrysanthus: *quinque dies aquam in os suum non coniecit, non micam panis*. As seen by Stefenelli (1962:71f.), this passage ushers in the evolution of *mica* to a negative particle; cf. Fr. *ne ... mie*. Here *mica* forms a NEGative syntagm with *non*, and *panis* is colligated with the NEG-syntagm as a whole (i.e. {[*non* + *micam*] *panis*}), not with *mica* alone. So, *non micam panis* is virtually the same as *nihil* (<**ne bilom*) *panis*.

There are two matters of fact that jointly bear on the semantic definition of *micarius*. First, from the most ancient attestations on, the typical syntagm is *mica salis* (see TLL VIII 927,81—928,9). This is probably an epiphenomenal reflex of the original context of situation where the word *mica* was created and used: A careful semantic-etymological analysis reveals *mica* to be a technical term of salt-mining (Nyman 1985). It is most likely, indeed, that the meaning component SALT was encapsulated in the semantic representation of the lexeme *mica*. Given this, it may not be sheer accident that Cato uses *granum turis* (agr. 70,1) but *mica salis* (70,1; 156,3). Rather this points to a "wesenhafte Bedeutungsbeziehung" in the sense of Porzig (1934) between *sal* and *mica*. Indeed, *mica* and *sal* were well-nigh interchangeable, as appears from Ovid. fast. 2,24 *cum mica farra* = 1,28 *farra mixta sale* = 3,284 *salsa farra*; cf. also Hor. carm. 3,23,20 *mollivit aversos deos farre pio et saliente mica*.

Second, a thrifty way of living was considered to consist in eating *salem cum pane* (Plin. nat. 31,89; cf. Hor. sat. 2,2,17—18), and "salt-licking"

² Notice that the context of situation is the same in all of the examples adduced. In Prud. apoth. 718 *bis senos micarum molibus implent ... cophinos*, the *micae* refer to bread as well as to fish.

(*salem delingere*, ἄλα λείχειν) stood figuratively for this kind of low standard of living (Blümner 1920:2092): Diog.Laert. 6,57 ἀλλὰ βούλομαι ... ἐν Ἀθήναις ἄλα λείχειν ἢ παρὰ Κρατέρῳ τῆς πολυτελοῦς τραπέζης ἀπολαύειν 'I should rather lick salt at Athens than enjoy sumptuous fare of Kraterus' table'; Plaut. Curc. 562 *apud me numquam delinges salem* 'at my house you shall never lick salt' (cf. Plaut. Pers. 430 *numquam delinget salem*).

In the light of the above, it is evident that the lavishing Trimalchio, who "started with little" (sat. 71,12 *ex parvo crevit*), approvingly called his young slave a "salt-licker" — one who is fit to start out frugally, knowing that one as is the starter of millions.

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