COMMENTARY: RAPTOR—EVOLUTION OF THE TERM

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The word raptor, or raptour in a Middle English spelling, in use up to ca. 1500 CE, descends from Classical Latin (75 BCE–3 CE, early to middle Roman Empire; Citroni 2006), specifically from the verb rapio (infinitive rapere), to “plunder, rob, ravish, abduct” (Oxford English Dictionary Online 2016a). Forming the root (in linguistics, a lexeme, the smallest meaningful lexical unit) of the noun raptor is rap-, which, in turn, ultimately provided the source for many other English words, as nouns (e.g., rapture), adjectives (e.g., rapist, rapid), and verbs (e.g., enrapture, ravish, rapt). Tracing lexemes to their proposed sources, historical linguists have reconstructed family trees similar to those used in phylogenetics and have posited a language, Proto-Indo-European (PIE), as the common linguistic ancestor of many human languages, including such diverse sub-groups as Celtic, Italic, Germanic (leading to English), Baltic, Slavic, Albanian, Greek, Armenian, Iranian, and Indo-Aryan (Mallory and Adams 2006). In attempting to reproduce the PIE vocabulary, linguists have hypothesized many original lexemes for words in use today; one of these, written h₁rep- (h₁ portion signifies a reconstructed consonant known as a laryngeal), is suggested to mean “snatch, pluck” (Mallory and Adams 2006). Over the course of time, as some portions of PIE speech provided the seeds for the Italic languages and some portions became germinal to the Latin-speaking community, h₁rep- transformed into the Latin lexeme rap-. Within Latin, the addition of the suffix -tor resulted in a noun denoting the performer of the verbal action: “one who snatches or plucks, a snatcher.”

The various meanings over the centuries for the modern English term raptor, a descendant of rap-, have generally negative moral connotations, serving to stigmatize birds of prey, who as predators were often already maligned for their manner of survival. Regardless of the dark side of its meaning, one might expect that the term raptor, as the now well-known synonym for bird of prey, had maintained that synonymy across time, possibly since its emergence from PIE languages. However, a review of early literature, especially since the days of the Roman Empire (Classical Latin), where the term most likely originated, suggests a different picture. It might surprise raptorphiles that in the massive library of monumental works in Classical Latin, raptor as a collective synonym for birds of prey does not appear often, if at all (although there were hints). Instead, even up to 18th and 19th centuries, one would be much more likely to encounter terms such as avium rapacium (Latin; literally, birds that “snatch, grab, or seize”; Benson and Sommer 1701, Harting 1891).

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED Online 2016a), the standard resource for etymology of words in English, lists three entries for the term raptor in chronological order of usage: (1) plunderer, robber (now obsolete), 1398 to late 1500s; (2) ravisher, rapist, abductor (now rare), 1592 to present; and (3) a. bird of prey, 1783 to present; b. dromaeosaurid dinosaur, 1924 to present. I will examine each of these in an effort to show the convoluted route raptor has taken into everyday English and offer alternative trajectories.

Raptor: First Appearance in English. According to the OED, the earliest English-language reference pertains to the now obsolete sense of raptor (= raptour, “plunderer” or “robber”; Middle English) encountered in a translation by John of Trevisa (1326–1412) dating to 1398 (Steele 1893), entitled De proprietatibus rerum (The Properties of Things). Trevisa, a clergyman and one of the foremost early translators of Latin into Middle English, and his contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer, are considered two of the main authors from which words in Middle English first make a written appearance (OED online 2016b). Rerum itself was authored ca. 1240 by Bartholomaeus Anglicus, an English clergyman scholar of the Franciscan order, but was not printed until 1492 (Steele 1893). This monumental tome, comprising a full 19 volumes, purported to cover the entire known universe of scientific thought at the time, from theology to astrology to geography to biology. Highly regarded and widely used in that period of history, tomes like these are now considered the prototypes of the encyclopedia. The above OED-referenced Trevisa passage, written in the original Middle English, reads:

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