

Midas or Mydas?

A contribution to Entomological Nomenclature,

by *C. R. Osten Sacken*.

The much-debated question of the spelling of the generic name *Mydas* or *Midas* (Diptera) affords an instance of one of the numerous difficulties connected with entomological nomenclature. The wisest course to pursue in such cases is perhaps that recommended by my late friend Dr. Leconte: „resist change“. In doubtful cases propose a change, but do not attempt to introduce it at once, before a thorough verification becomes possible. Such a verification on the spot is seldom possible, for want of time, of literature, of experience in criticism, and for other reasons. I have some right to speak in this strain as, in more than one instance, I have been the victim of error, in spite of my good will and diligence. The subject of this article is a case in point, and I feel bound to explain the reason of my apparent inconsistencies in its treatment.

In my paper „A List of the *Leptidae*, *Mydidae* and *Dasy-pogonina* of North America“ (Bull. Buffalo Soc. of Nat. Hist. Oct. 1874), I adopted the original spelling of Fabricius (*Mydas* and *Mydidae*), following the example of Dr. Gerstaecker in his monographic paper (Stett. Ent. Zeit. 1868, p. 65—103). In my later publications, for instance, in my Catalogue of N. A. Diptera (1878), I returned to Wiedemann's orthography *Midas*, because I had discovered in the meantime that Dr. Gerstaecker's premises were not well founded.¹⁾ I translate his argument in extenso:

„Fabricius has not explained the derivation or signification of the name *Mydas*, either in the Ent. Syst. IV, p. 252, where the genus was founded, or in the Syst. Antl., p. 60; the name is not found in Greek literature, and merely resembles alliteratively the

¹⁾ I did not allege any reason for the change at that time (1878), except that, on p. 235, note 138, I said: „About *Mydas* and *Midas* see in Gerstaecker, l. c. With Wiedemann and others, I prefer *Midas*.“

words *μυδῖω* (to be wet) and *μῦδος* (mute). Under such circumstances only two alternative suppositions, it seems to me, are possible: either we must suppose that the author has introduced what the French call „un nom sans aucune signification“, or we must have recourse to some Greek word that is nearest to the Greek-sounding „Mydas“. That Fabricius in using the expression „to be wet“, may have meant an allusion to the peculiar transverse folds which distinguish the wings of the genus, does not seem to me a too far fetched assumption; at any rate such an interpretation is not more artificial than that proposed by Duméril and accepted not only by Wiedemann, but as it seems, also by some modern authors. According to Wiedemann (*Mon. Gen. Midarum*, p. 32), Duméril (*Dict. Sc. Nat.* Vol. XXXI, p. 47 and XXXIV, p. 1) declared the name Mydas to be „orthographically incorrect“ and amended it into Midas, because, according to him, Fabricius intended an allusion to King Midas in Phrygia, whom Apollo gratified with asses ears, the occasion for the allusion consisting in the remarkably long antennae of the genus. Such an opinion cannot of course be directly refuted on the alleged grounds; but as soon as the emendation into Midas is proposed, it would seem more natural to derive it from *μυδᾶς*, an insect mentioned by Theophrastus, which devours beans and other leguminous vegetables. But after all, there is no necessity for such hypotheses to justify a change of name in the present case; it is selfevident that the Fabrician name Mydas, adopted by Latreille, Macquart and Westwood is the only legitimate name, by right of priority.“

I regret not to be able to agree with Dr. Gerstaecker either in his facts, or in the deductions he draws from them. It seems to me much more natural, in connection with Mydas, to think of a misspelling of the name of King Midas, than of a derivation from some little-known Greek word. In fact the majority of Dipterologists have taken this view, and Dr. Gerstaecker had no right to refer to Latreille, Macquart and Westwood in the way he did. I shall give the reasons for my statements in detail.

Latreille, *Précis* etc. p. 166 (1796) has Midas Fabr.; it is only later, in the *Hist. Nat.* etc. Vol. III (1802), in the *Genera* (1809) and in his other works that he followed Fabricius, in calling the genus Mydas. The reason is not given, but it seems evident that the first impression of Latreille was that Mydas was a lapsus calami on the part of Fabricius.

Macquart has Mydas from mere ignorance of Greek, and not on any principle of priority. This is proved by the passage in the

S. à B., Dipt. I, p. 273 (1834): „le nom de Mydas fait allusion à la longueur des antennes“. Dr. G. does not seem to have noticed this passage. Dufour and Bellardi accepted the spelling of Macquart evidently from inadvertence, and not on any principle.

Wiedemann, in his description of the first Mydas in Meigen's Syst. Besch. II, p. 130 (1820) writes Mydas, but in the Preface of his Monograph, p. 24 (1829) he has the following passage: „Potius ad Midas revertamur, et primo quidem ad Orthographiam, vel potius quae Fabricio placuit Cacographiam nominis gentilis Mydas, qui lapsus calami fuisse videtur. Nam etiamsi hoc mirum videri possit, quod errorem Entom. Systematicae in Systemate Antliatorum repetitum videmus, tamen frustra aliam hujus nominis derivationem quaesivimus, neque dubitari potest quin Regis Midae spatiosae aures, quibus porrectiores hujus generis Dipterorum antennae satis apte comparari possunt, huic nomen suum dederint, idque eo meliore jure, quo Physicis nonnullis auditus sensum in antennis sedem suam habere placuit. Quam ob rem nomen illud in posterum sit masculini et literam *y* cum litera *i* commutet!“

On p. 32 of the same work Wiedemann says: „In Dictionario scienc. nat. Tom. XXXI, 1824, p. 47 Duméril si minus in ceteris, tamen in iis, quae ad Orthographiam attinent, de Midis meritis est, nisi quod in eo erravit quod Latreillium primum hoc nomen generi alicui insectorum imposuisse dicit. Tom. XXXIV, 1825, p. 1 eadem repetuntur sub voce Mydas propter Orthographiam.“ I have found that Duméril in a still earlier volume of same Dictionary (which is commonly called Déterville's Dict. d'Hist. Nat. 60 voll. 1816–30) under the word Diptera (Vol. XIII, 1819) has Mydas, and it was later only that he followed Latreille's Précis (1796) where he found Midas. Wiedemann did not compare the Précis, and, for this reason, his criticism of Duméril about the latter's reference to Latreille was unfounded.

Westwood had Mydas in the Transactions etc. (1835) and in the Introduction etc. (1840), but in his Monograph of the Mydidae (Arcana p. 49, 1841) he adopted the view of Wiedemann and spelled Midas ever since. It is strange that Dr. Gerstaecker who must have often consulted Westwood's Monograph, does not seem to have noticed this change.

Schiner adopted Midas as a matter of course.

It is evident from this survey, that, in the majority of cases in which Mydas was adopted, it was from inadvertence only, and that, upon reflection, Midas was considered as the more correct spelling. Latreille is the only one who followed the opposite course, spelling

Midas at first, and Mydas afterwards. I shall attempt an explanation of his course in the sequel.

In the same passage in which Dr. G. refers (erroneously as I have shown) to Latreille, Macquart and Westwood as authorities for the spelling Mydas, there is another assertion which, in my opinion, is not sound doctrine. The passage says: „But after all, there is no necessity for such hypotheses" (about a derivation from Greek) „to justify a change of name in the present case; it is selfevident that the Fabrician name Mydas, adopted by Latreille, Macquart and Westwood, is the only legitimate by right of priority". By what right of priority? The most staunch adherent of the right of priority will not maintain that we should consider as sacred every kind of misspelling, and that, for instance, when Rondani called *Brachineura* a genus of *Cecidomyiidae*, we should burden our memory with this misspelling for ever? Dr. G. himself, in the Verh. Z. B. Ges. Wien 1863, p. 1033, has changed *Aulacephala* Macq. (Oestridae) into *Aulacocephala*. Is it consistent that a change on philological grounds should be admissible, but one on the score of the spelling, inadmissible? To justify the spelling Mydas Dr. G. should have proved that it was introduced by Fabricius with a deliberate intention, and that it was not a mere lapsus; and just this proof Dr. G. has not furnished. As soon as the intention can be proved, the spelling Mydas should be admitted, and the question whether Fabricius meant it for „un nom sans signification", or had derived it from some Greek word, becomes a secondary question. It was to this missing link in the argument that I directed my investigation when, recently, I took up the matter again. My attention was especially arrested by the following passage in Wiedemann's Preface: „Nam etiamsi hoc mirum videri possit, quod errorem Ent. Syst. in Syst. Antl. repetitum videmus, tamen frustra aliam hujus nominis derivationem quaesivimus". It would have been strange indeed if, in case Fabricius had misspelt the word Mydas, he should not have been made aware of it during the interval between his two publications, in 1794 and 1805. It occurred to me to inquire whether Fabricius had not used this mythological name in some other connection, for instance as a specific name drawn from Mythology. As I had been interested in Coleoptera in my early years, I happened to remember that mythological names occur among the coprophagous Lamellicornia, and this clue easily led me to the discovery of a *Scarabaeus* Midas, Syst. Ent. p. 21, 1774; and the same in Ent. Syst. I, p. 45, 1792. Afterwards I found in Syst. Antl. p. 124 (1805) an *Anthrax*

Midas, in the very same volume which on p. 60 contains the genus Mydas. This difference in the spelling is, I think, conclusive as to the intention of the speller, and his point being settled, the question of the derivation, as I have shown above, comes in the second line only. But even in this case a clue for a solution may be found. In his *Philosophia Entomologica* (1778) p. 110, §. 25, Fabricius proposes the following rule: „Nomina generica, quae characterem essentialem, habitum, aut proprietatem singularem insectorum sub genere militantium expriment, semper optima sunt.“ Now, in view of this rule, the derivation from the Greek verb „to be wet“, which I considered at first as „far fetched“, appears somewhat more plausible. It is strange, nevertheless, that, although Fabricius was not in the habit of explaining the derivation of his generic names, he should not have, in this instance, said a word about the characteristic wrinkled appearance of the wings of his *M. filata* in one of his descriptions. This is the only link which is still wanting for the proof of the proposed derivation.

It remains for me to explain why Latreille, who at first had Midas (1796), adopted Mydas in 1802? I venture the following supposition: In his speech at the opening of the Entomological Society in Paris in 1832 Latreille alludes to his friendly relations with Fabricius during the last years of the latter's life. Fabricius died in 1808, and it is quite possible that before this date he had called the attention of Latreille to his incorrect spelling in 1796. I cannot resist the temptation of quoting the whole passage of Latreille's speech, the more so as it contains a wholesome lesson of scientific courtesy: „Vous l'avouerez-je? Je me suis souvent repenti de la censure trop sévère que j'en avais faite (of Fabricius) dans mes premiers écrits. Ces reproches intérieurs ont été aggravés par les vifs sentiments d'amitié dont il m'honorait dans les dernières années de sa carrière. Que cette leçon, Messieurs, vous tienne en garde vous-mêmes dans vos premiers essais scientifiques. Soyez toujours vrais, mais toujours prompts à excuser, et vous conserverez ainsi l'estime de ceux dont vous aurez été contraints de divulguer les fautes, et qui ne sont souvent que l'effet d'une préoccupation involontaire.“¹⁾ That Latreille, with all his tenderness for Fabri-

¹⁾ Ann. Soc. Ent. de Tr. 1832, p. 25, at the bottom. The whole speech is well worth perusing. I will mention in passing that in Hagen's *Bibliotheca*, I, p. 220 (under J. C. Fabricius) we find: gestorben 3. März 1808 (gest. 3. Mai 1810 teste filio, cf. Westwood). The latter date is evidently erroneous, as Latreille's obituary notice of Fabricius is dated 1808. Compare Hagen, l. c. I, p. 454, No. 34 (under P. Latreille).

eius, was not blind to his errors, is proved by a passage in the *Genera* (1809): „Denominationem *Cyrtus* immerito respuit Fabricius, et hanc, *Acrocera*, insectis quae non novit genusque peculiare formantibus applicatam, male substituit“. This independence on the part of Latreille seems to me an additional proof that it is not without sufficient reason—that he abandoned in 1809 the spelling *Midas*, which he had considered as correct in 1796.

I have written a long story about a very small matter, but I wanted to vindicate both Dr. Gerstaecker and myself, and I hope now that the question is exhausted. The upshot of the discussion is that Dr. G. was right in the substance, but as his argument was not sufficient, I was, for a time, not able to follow him.

Heidelberg, May 1895.

Postscript.

Two months after I had written this article came the news of the death of Prof. Gerstaecker. And I deem it a fit occasion to express my regret that this distinguished Entomologist has not devoted more of his time to publications on *Diptera*.

Heidelberg, July 26 1895.

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