

**THE ETYMOLOGICAL MEANING OF
THE SURNAME “APICELLA”**

***(PREPARED FOR KIM APICELLA OF
THE SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM)***

by Francis Baumli, Ph.D.

This disquisition reflects the results of my scholarly delving (which involved about 10 hours) and my cerebral obsessing (which involved perhaps 100 hours—it is difficult to keep track of the time one invests in this latter activity, and it is an activity). Also I took opportunity for conferring with several native Italians about the meaning of this surname. While only two of these people were inclined toward a scholarly perspective or analysis, they at least were able to give worthy opinions about my own cogitations on the subject. From them I learned that “Apicella” is a quite common surname in Italy, and in fact, according to one woman I spoke with (a native Italian of professorial vintage), “Apicella” is well established in an Italian town called Biella (near Turin) because it has three pizza

joints, each bearing the name “Apicella” since this is the surname of the family that owns all three.

As an aside, I might mention that Apicello is also a common surname in Italy, although it does not seem to be quite as common as Apicella. A careless judgement might suggest that Apicella is feminine and Apicello is masculine, but this is not the case since the Italian word ape (for “bee”) which is the root word for either spelling of this surname is always feminine. Therefore, both Apicella and Apicello, as surnames, are grammatically feminine. Apicello is merely an alternate spelling for Apicella.

First, let us address the opinion of Kim Apicella’s father. His memory had it that the name means a hill—a high hill or a modest hill. As to this opinion, and certainly without suggesting one bit of disrespect, I am sure he was wrong. But I believe I know why he came to this opinion. In Italian, the word monticello (not montagna which means “mountain”) means what we would call a hillock, which is a well-defined hill, i.e., one that is somewhat high, well-rounded, and has a shape giving it a separateness from adjacent hills or hillocks. I suspect this gentleman took the second half of this word, cello, and thought of his surname Apicella from this perspective. I doubt he would have done this had he been searching books for the meaning. I

suspect he was highly aural in how he perceived language, and so upon hearing cello he immediately thought of monticello and thus formed his opinion. To his credit, though, he also wondered if the name might mean something which has to do with “bee.” Here he was on the right track.

A brother of Kim Apicella’s had heard an erudite opinion to the effect that the surname “Apicella” means “Little Bee.” This information was repeated by a gentleman who was at the Saint Louis Art Museum and had considerable schooling in Latin—sufficient that he could speak Latin. This phrase, “little bee,” has much to recommend it, but it has always been my penchant as a scholar, when I confront a literal meaning, to immediately back away from it and scout the alternatives. (Proceeding quickly to a literal meaning can lead one astray, or can yield results which are sparse or confusing. To put this in the language of logic such as philosophers use, the definiendum does not receive its due definiens. Or, to put this in more ordinary and accessible language, the full extent of what is meaningful does not receive the full exploration it deserves. If one is patient and persistent enough to go only a little further, one can get closer to the true and complete meaning.)

When I first heard “Apicella” presented as meaning “Little Bee,” it made sense, but I did not think it quite true. Or, more accurately, I did not think it was the complete truth. I will get to what I think is true, but first, let me relay a bit about the direction of my exploring.

The word cella in both Latin and Italian can mean a small room, especially as in a monastery, convent, or prison, e.g., “The monk stayed in his cell all day to meditate,” or, “The prisoner was thrown into his cell.” I knew that apis in Latin and ape in Italian mean “bee” and given this meaning of cella I thought it remotely possible that apicella might mean a small niche in a beehive, or even one of the single hexagonal structures that hold honey in a honeycomb since in English these single hexagonal units are often referred to as “cells.” So I did some research in both Latin and Italian, utilizing dictionaries and what few sources I could find which refer to bee-keeping, and I could find no reference to the word apicella with a meaning suggesting cells for holding honey. In Latin a beehive is referred to as alvearium or alveus or alvus but there are no references to individual cells of honey inside a honeycomb. I suspect this is because back before modern times, bees were animals to farm, not insects for entomologists to study. A similar situation emerged from the bookish delving I did with Italian on this subject and also from

what I gained from some native Italians I talked to. In Italian the words alveare or bugno mean “beehive,” but again, I could find no words referring to the hexagonal cells of honey in a honeycomb. I doubt not but that in modern entomological research Italians do have words for this, and I could likely have found these words with further research, but I avoided this route simply because what is done by modern science with bees has no bearing on the beginning of a surname which dates back many centuries. So I abandoned the possibility that cella in the surname “Apicella” might refer to “cells” in a beehive or honeycomb. I am quite sure of my decision here, and believe there is no association at all.

So I returned to the possibility of “Little Bee” which holds promise, because indeed it is a literal translation. However, there is a major problem with this literal translation. Namely, anyone who knows anything about Italian culture knows that “little bee” is not the sort of phrase which, under ordinary (sic) circumstances, would be given to someone as a surname nor is it the sort of name someone would take for themselves. It might make sense in Native American culture, but not in Italy. This, I concede, is a rather non-scholarly observation, but sometimes one has to unite common sensical experience of a culture and its language with the more rarefied

results of scholarship. For example, one finds surnames in North America such as “Crabapple” and “Applebee” and “Applegate” and we know that all three of these words, as is common both in England and in North America, stem from precisely how the family, bearing the surname, was once associated with the land or with their work. But if we were to encounter the name “Applejuggler” we would immediately think there is something awry. “Applejuggler” is not the sort of surname that would be given to a person of English descent. Nor is the name “Little Bee” the sort of name, under ordinary circumstance, one would give to someone of Italian descent even though the name “Apicella” seems to mean “Little Bee” literally and exactly. “Apicella” might possibly (the possibility being small) be given to a child as a “first name” because the child is cute or very active, but the practice of giving a child the name it will go by is not as involved as the process of assigning a surname. A first name, along with one or more “middle” names, is attached to an existing surname. My awareness of this small matter is precisely why I was reluctant to assent that “Apicella”—as a surname—means “Little Bee” even though I know it means this literally. This observation on my part, though not laden with scholarly trappings, is scarcely vapid nor does it entirely lack empirical grounding since, after all, an

observation based on a judgement which applies common sense to how we think about names, though quite personal and unabashedly subjective, can also be entirely empirical.

Let us now attempt to discover extenuations of meaning beyond the definition of “Apicella” as “little bee.” Here is an appropriate place for an exploratory excursion into the Italian language.

There is, in all oral languages, what is known as a “diminutive.” A diminutive is a modification of a word to make it appear little, cute, or an object of endearment. For example, take the name “James.” It might be shortened to “Jim” but if “Jim” becomes “Jimmy” that would be a diminutive; or if “James” became “Jamie” that would be a diminutive. Similarly “Susan” might be shortened to “Sue” which might then become the diminutive “Susie.” Diminutives often come into use when the person is still a child, but then they “stick,” and the person henceforth is called by that diminutive even into adulthood.

In Italian there are many diminutives. Perhaps the most common occurrence involves using the suffix, ino (masculine) or ina (feminine). For example, the famous song by Puccini called, “O mio babbino caro” uses the word babbino which stems from babbo which itself is colloquial for “daddy” or “papa.” When there is added the

suffix ino as in babbino it becomes a diminutive and means something like “dear sweet daddy.” Similarly, when libro, a “book,” is given a diminutive and becomes libretto, it means a small book or “booklet.” Each diminutive has words it can be applied to, and words it can not be applied to. For example, etto is a diminutive which would not be applied to api as apietto except perhaps by a punster or a poet. The diminutive for ape, which means “bee” in Italian, is cella although the diminutive that derives from ape is not apecella but rather apicella. Still, although apicella as a word can be defined as “little bee” or “cute little bee,” it does not make sense as a surname given that a surname in nearly every language reflects a person’s vocation, status, or lineage. In other words, a surname describes a person’s history: forbears and traditions. “Little Bee” is not saturated with tradition; it is personal, immediate, and conveys affection. Therefore it does not appear (sic) to reflect a trait about a person or that person’s vocation, and hence does not lend itself to being a surname.

However, the operative words just used are “does not appear.” As a surname “Little Bee” might come into existence not so much by reflecting an established tradition but because it was able to succeed in creating—serving as the primogeniture for—a new tradition, i.e.,

the person who first received this name as a familiar appellation somehow managed to make their given name succeed in becoming a surname. This might happen because the intrinsic loveliness of the name is so compelling as to gain notice and scrutiny, then appreciation and admiration, and finally the kind of acceptance that compels love and acceptance. If this social opprobrium toward the person and the name are fortunate enough to be in company with an individual who has a strong personality, then the name's presence in this small society of immediate companions is both persistent and insistent and thereby the name attains the stature, then the social status, and finally the legal standing of a surname. An example I have encountered in England was a man whose first name is Graham. He was renowned for his expertise in electrical engineering, and in the course of becoming a successful businessman, found it expedient to legally change his name so that both his first and last name were Graham. A man I knew in Canada was named Christopher Smith, went by "Chris" with friends, and was "Mister Smith" in business dealings even though he did not like the name. As his business became successful people began calling him Mister Christopher. Soon he found that it not only was simpler but also, from a business standpoint, more expedient to change his surname to Christopher.

On his identity papers he then was Christopher Secundo Christopher, his friends still called him Chris, and business associates still called him Mister Christopher. These two examples illustrate how, as a person's identity and position in his society change, his name can change too—because of what he himself does and how people respond to him.

So how does this discussion of how names begin, mutate, and establish a new and more secure identity apply to the Italian surname Apicella?

To answer this question a look into how Latin slowly gave way to Italian can prove helpful. Plus we must keep in mind the lifestyle and culture of Italy during its early years. In this modern day and age, with sugar cane so readily available (and artificial sweeteners too), it is easy to forget what a staple honey once was. Except for fruit—fresh or dried—honey was the only sweetener readily available (as is true in most primitive societies today) and therefore it was highly valued. Honey was a staple of every person's diet whatever their station in life. Beehives were ubiquitous—they were at monasteries, on farms, and in towns. Domesticated honeybees, in a sense, were a work animal, so valued they might have been treated as a kind of animistic deity were not Western Europe so theistic.

The bee was the sole producer of honey, and honey was valued, coveted, and esteemed. Its relationship to society and to individuals was an intimate one. The esteem it drew forth was not the kind of esteem one might have for God or extend to a work of art. The esteem given honey was a physically intimate esteem. (“Honeybee” in Italian is ape operaia—working bee, and ape domestica—domesticated bee. In other words, the honeybee was a working, domesticated animal as much a part of the countryside as a goat or a sheep.) Honey was handled carefully, or one might say, handled reverentially. Much care was given to protecting it from robbers, especially when it was being transported. It was given as a gift at a shepherd’s wedding and was a worthy gift for royalty. Honey was mixed with foods or consumed with foods. It was taken in to the body—it was savored in the mouth, on the tongue, alone or in company. It sweetened the palate, it sweetened occasions, it endeared people to the food they ate and to one another. Honey was the universal sweetener, and by poetic transfer, one might say that because it was loved by everyone it was the universal diminutive for all things, a fact which persists even in our culture and language to this day. We call a loved one, “Honey.” We say, “That’s a honey of a

car.” Or we say to a child we don’t even know, “Honey, you’d better stand farther back from the street.”

So how was “honey” used as a surname in Italian? The word for honey in Italian is miele, and when this appellation was used in a colloquial or endearing way miele was stated as carina (a feminine noun) meaning “darling,” “little loved one,” “sweetheart,” or as carino (a masculine adjective) meaning “pretty,” “dear,” “kind,” “treasured.” Thus the word “honey” already had its formal name (miele) and took on two diminutive or affectionate forms (carino and carina) as synonyms. The noun “honey” could also be used as an even more affectionate name by adding a diminutive to what was already a diminutive (carina), thus producing Carinetta—this surname appearing in Italy long ago. Meaning something like “little sweet honey,” Carinetta, though not nearly as common a name as “Apicella,” has a gorgeous lilt when spoken that gives it peerage with the name “Apicella.” Obviously the two names, “Apicella” and “Carinetta,” both reflect how the linguistic temperament of the Italian language inclines toward uniting etymological peregrinations with beauty.

Now, having looked at how the Italian word for honey produced Carinetta as a surname, we are proximal to seeing why “bee” might

serve as a surname since it was so closely associated with what it produced—honey. Still I must maintain, for the reason given already, that to give or adopt the surname “Little Bee” would be unlikely except in one scenario which I will presently explain. But first a brief digression:

We have noted that the surname is “Apicella” and not “Apecella.” The presence of the i instead of the e would suggest that this is a very old surname, since the i comes from the Latin apis for “bee” and not from the Italian ape for “bee.” This surname came into existence during those early centuries A.D. when Latin was still melded with the Italian which was just beginning to move away from (even rebel against) Latin. The result is that in this instance we have an Italian suffix which, because it is a diminutive, embodies endearment, whereas the prefix is still Latinate. (And note that if Latin were to define the entire surname, it could not do so as a single word, because while the Latin word for “honey” is mel, when “honey” is used as a term of endearment in Latin it becomes a phrase—or one of many possible phrases: mel meum, or melculum meum, or deliciae meae, or voluptas mea. In other words, the more rigid Latin did not readily lend itself to diminutives; Italian did. (And this is one example as to why Italian diverged from Latin; the Italian language and people

were seeking to shed the formal fetters of Latin as they attempted to escape the feudal tranny of the Italian monasteries.)

The purpose of this digression is to point out how “Apicella,” as a surname, is a melding of Latin and Italian. This melding means that the name was coined during the early emergence of the Italian language, and would likely date back to at least the 10th century A.D., probably back to about the 6th century A.D., and might have an even earlier date of emergence.

So now, having conceded that “Apicella” means “Little Bee,” there remains the mystery as to how such a phrase could become a surname. Here my scholarship begins to lose exactitude because I am looking back at least a millennium into history. However, scholarship is not entirely absent even here because we are keeping in mind the cultural practices of not only Italy but also of the other emerging European nations and the various romance languages they were forging, and we do know a considerable amount about these cultural practices.

During those often unhappy years of the medieval period (It was not called “The Dark Ages” for nothing.) there was what one might term a linguistic cottage industry: the naming of young war orphans (too young to know their own surname) and the naming of

foundlings (abandoned by mothers who were afraid of social stigma because they had sinned by conceiving a child out of wedlock). People then, as now, could be either brutish, kind, somewhere in-between, or choose to be uninvolved. War orphans might be taken into the family and treated as well as the other children, or treated as slaves in servitude. A foundling might be taken to a convent where it would be neglected and given rules instead of warm parenting; or that foundling might be taken in as a welcome addition to a loving family. (Such additions indeed were often welcome, given the high mortality rate for children at that time.) The child might be claimed as their own and given the family surname, or it might be given a new surname even when warmly accepted into the family. At that time most surnames in most languages reflected the labor of the patriarchs: “Bauman”—a common surname in German—derives from the word Baum for “tree” and usually means wood-cutter or orchard keeper; “Smith” in English usually stems from the fact that the father’s vocation involved being a blacksmith; when an orphan or foundling was named, feelings or circumstances rather than work-identity often dictated the name. For example, the Italian surname “**Indelicato**” referred to a bastard child raised by its mother since it did not bear the name of its biological father, but rather, came into

the world under circumstances that were not to be discussed in delicate conversation. Of course, this child might grow up, marry, and spawn many generations of children, all who would bear the surname “Indelicato,” their surname then reflecting not their own status when they came into the world but rather the status of an ancestor from long ago.

I suspect (and here I do speculate, although not vapidly and not without having pondered the historicity of this matter) that “Apicella” first came into being as a name given to either a foundling or a very young orphan the family welcomed, wanted to love, and felt an immediate affection for. In a situation such as this, christening the child with the surname “Apicella” makes sense if we keep in mind that here, in the phrase “little bee,” the word “little” means something somewhat different than “small” or “tiny,” and the word “bee” means something much more than being a bee. In other words, cella indicates someone who is sweetly cherished, and api indicates what a bee’s function and purpose is, i.e, what a bee does. In other words, the diminutive cella refers to the endearing affections extended toward this little person, and api refers, not to the sweetness of honey itself, but to the fact that now it is expected that this little person’s presence in the family will engender or make sweetness,

i.e., produce the sweetness of love. So the child thus is not named “honey,” but rather, is named “bee” because faith is placed in what the parents (or nuns) believe this child can and will do.

So thus we move beyond the elementary etymology that defines the name “Apicella” as “Little Bee” since this literal translation (as has been explained) does not make sense as a surname. Instead we discern an intimate domestic scenario which reflects the history of early Italy as it is embedded in the family. This scenario, borne from the bosom of domestic generosity, both suggests and explains how the name “Apicella” began. Examined metaphorically, “Apicella” means something much more extensive, (or, put more accurately, something much more intimately intensive). It means “Little Creator of Sweet Love.”

One might object that this is extending the literal meaning of the word too far into the metaphorical. But I must argue that the literal meaning of the word would never have suggested itself, much less qualified itself, as a candidate for a surname. Only its metaphorical meaning can do this, and having spent many hours pondering alternative scenarios and contexts, the one I propose not only is the most sensical, I believe it is the only one that makes any sense at all.

So thus it is established, albeit within the acknowledged finitude and fallibility that must accompany even the most careful, thorough, and responsible scholarship (in tandem with knowledge of the circumstances and domestic practices of medieval Italy) that the surname “Apicella” means:

“Little Creator of Sweet Love.”

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(This little essay brings to bear the foci of etymology, lexicography, and philology in an amalgam which might best be termed a philosophical excursion. It was researched, and written, as a favor to the person named in the essay; but the information, and perhaps even more, the methodology of this piece have significant scholarly breadth which surely can provide some degree of instruction for any student whose interest is inclined toward delving into the remote regions of language exploration.

There would be considerable justification for including this essay in the category for philosophy, but I include it in the literary section of these writings, aware however that the topic, scope, and implications of this piece are not readily amenable to any single category.)