MILLIPED OR MILLIPEDE?

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A transatlantic dichotomy resulting in the two spellings "millipede" versus "milliped" has perplexed students of these animals (as well as innumerable editors and proof readers of scientific journals) for many years. The first usage, of course, enjoys a long historical priority in the British Isles and is the preferred form listed in most, even North American dictionaries. Since I essentially "grew up" with the second, now firmly ensconced in American literature, I accepted it as correct. Whilst occasionally wondering about the origin of the Nearctic mutation, I never actually looked into the matter until quite recently, to the extent possible resources at hand.

While chiefly concerned here with the debut of "milliped", I did notice whilst browsing old literature that the original French vernacular term was millepied and millepies (Gervais, 1847: 34) so the current "millepattes" must have had a more recent origin. In any event it is the word listed in my copy of "Mansion's Shorter French and English Dictionary (D.C.Heath, 1940). I leave exploration of this subject to our French colleagues.

Early American (by which I mean citizens of the United States) savants apparently never referred to Diplopoda with any kind of "common name". I have scanned the publications of Thomas Say, H.C.Wood, C.H.Bollman and O.F.Cook without seeing the word "millipede" OR "milliped" ever used during the 19th Century. The nearest concession to vernacular was always "diplopod", even in non-scientific papers; this resort to indirect reference lasted throughout the 19th Century and well into the 20th.

The first usage of "milliped" that I can find in any publication is in a paper by Cook, that appeared in the volume 40 of the Proceedings of the U.S. National Museum, dated 10 April 1911. This watershed event was heralded in the title ("notes on the distribution of millipedes in southern Texas") and the opening sentence ("The millipedes and other primitive types of humus inhabiting Arthropoda......"). Thereafter, in a few more papers by Cook, and all by his protégé, H.F. Loomis, the e-less spelling became permanent.

R.V.Chamberlin, who began writing about these animals in 1903, studiously avoided using any vernacular term for years, sticking with "diplopods" on the rare occasions that he referred to them at all in a general way. In 1918, two of his papers did use "millipede" in the title. For Chamberlin, the break-away came in 1922, with "The millipedes of Central America", coincidentally also appearing in the Proceedings of the U.S.National Museum. From that date onwards, the conversion to "milliped" was complete although he did continue to use "diplopod" on occasion, usually in the title of several papers.
I have no insights whatever regarding Cook’s first omission of the terminal “e”. Nor did Mr. Loomis, when I asked him about it in 1951. However, one possible explanation is that the initiative came not from Cook, but an anonymous U.S. Federal editor, either at the museum or the Government Printing Office. This at least would be consistent with Chamberlin’s first use, in the same serial.

It would be of interest to follow back the derivation of “millipede” itself. My dictionary (Funk & Wagnall’s Standard College Dictionary, 1963), used that spelling, saying that it derives from the Latin pes, pedis. The form cited by Gervais shows that the French did not use a terminal “e” on millepied in the early 19th Century, so its presence may be an Anglican innovation unless it became extinct in France following the Norman invasion and survived only in the islands. Oddly, the same dictionary uses the spellings “centipede” and “millipede” as first choice but only “biped” and “cirriped” for those items, even though citing “pes, pedis” as the source for all four examples.

However, another usage may impose a still different complexion to the matter. Referring to what I consider the ultimate reference for the origin and usage of scientific names (R.W. Brown, Composition of Scientific Words, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1956, 1959), I find the entry “millepeda” given as the Latin word for what Brown then anglicised as “millipede”! In light of Brown’s recognised authority in etymology, I cannot help believing that “milleped” must actually be the correct spelling of the term, and “millipede” and “milliped” should both be discarded in its favour/favor.

In contrast, I learn from my Latin dictionary that although when used as a noun, with such meanings as “containing a hundred, related to a hundred”, the Latin word is spelled with an “e”, as in centenarius, centesimus, but when joined with another word as a modifier, the spelling changes to “i”, as in centimanus, centipeda. So centiped adopts the “i”, but Brown gives the spelling without the terminal “e”.

As a concluding example of inconsistency, U.S. workers may spell the word without an “e” on the end, but pronounce it “millipeed”.

37