LATIN FARFERUM ‘COLTSFOOT’: A TRACE OF INDO-EUROPEAN POETIC LANGUAGE IN LATIN PLANT NOMENCLATURE?

The rare Latin word for coltsfoot (Tussilago farfara, мать-и-мачеха) is variously transmitted as farferum (Plaut. Poen. 478), farfarum (Plaut. fr. 62 de Melo) or (certainly corrupted) farfenum (Fest. Paul. 78.25 Lindsay)\(^1\). The botanical identification is supported by Plin. 24.135 (chamaeleucen apud nos farfarum sive farfignum vocant\(^2\)) as well as by Late Latin glosses where farfara is defined as ungula caballina (CGL 3.563.47; 546.35), viz. ‘coltsfoot’\(^3\). Descendants of the Latin word are still preserved in the dialects of Toscana and Emilia Romana (REW 3195), and thanks to Linnaeus the form farfara has been canonized in modern botanical nomenclature\(^4\).

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\(^{1}\) I would like to thank Brent Vine (UCLA) and Michael Weiss (Cornell University) for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. Naturally, all errors of fact or judgment are solely my own responsibility.

\(^{2}\) For a detailed discussion of these attestations see Rost 1836: 225–228.

\(^{3}\) For the identification of Gk. χαμαιλεύκη (Lat. chamaeleuce) as coltsfoot cf. Ps.-Dsc.3.112 (Fol. 102v of illuminated “Salamanca Dioscorides” (Salamanca, University Library, 2659) is available online: http://dioscorides.usal.es/p2.php?numero=515).

\(^{4}\) Alphita, a Middle English glossary of herbs, translates farfara as ungula caballina, angl. feldhoue (Mowat 1887: 21).

See Linnaeus 1753: 865.
The word *farferum* (ālā?) is isolated in Latin5 and its etymology remains obscure6. The old idea that the word is a compound of *far* ‘grain, groats’ and *ferre* ‘carry’ is still found in some botanical handbooks7, but has rightly been discarded in etymological literature along with the similarly improbable derivation from Italic *farfa* ‘beard’ proposed by Brüch 1917 (see *LEW* 457; *DELL* 217)8. Since medial -f- ostensibly points to a non-Roman provenance of the word, and plant names are easily borrowed, the origin of *farferum* has been sought in Etruscan substrate9; while in principle borrowing always remains a possibility, there is no independent support for this hypothesis10. Finally, it is worth noting that the vowel alternation in *farfĕrum* / *farfārum* does not necessarily point to a substratum word: -e- is the expected outcome of any short vowel in non-initial open syllables in the position before r (*peparai > peperī, *kenises > cineris*, etc. – see Weiss 2009: 116; Kazansky 2017: 49–50), but since the consonants in the first and second syllables of the word are completely identical in our case, vowel assimilation leading to a creation of fully reduplicated form is very likely11.

Nothing in principle stands in the way of searching for an Indo-European etymology of *farferum*, and the physical appearance of the plant provides a potentially promising place to start12. The main

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5 Ever since antiquity, the word for coltsfoot has been compared with the river name *Farfarus* (*Ov. Met.* 14.330), latinized as *Fabaris* in *Verg. Aen.* 7.715 and likely related to Faliscan gentilic *Fafarn*- (see Giacomelli 1963: 191). That the river is named after a plant is possible yet unprovable; under any analysis the potamonym does not stand in the way of the proposal advanced in this paper.


7 See, for instance, Madaus 1938; hence also the Russian term *муконосница* (Kaden, Terent’eva 1975: 66, 158).

8 The form *farfugium* in Pliny (codd. *farrarfugium* vel *farfarfugium*) is best analyzed as a product of learned etymology: since Latin and Greek names of the plant refer to its medicinal use in relieving cough (*tussilago* to *tussis* ‘cough’, βήξιον to βήξ ‘id.’), the compound in -fugium was supposed to convey the same idea of escaping cough, cf. the herb-name *febrifugia* (this word is first attested in Ps.-Apul. *Herb.* 35, which makes an actual contamination between Plautine *farferum* and Late Latin *febrifugia* unlikely, pace Bader 1962: 75).

9 See Bertoldi 1937: 161; Alessio 1951: 127.

10 For a skeptical assessment of the Etruscan loanword theory see Breyer 1993: 505 n. 38.

11 This was already observed by Meier-Lübke 1884: 207.

12 On the connection between a plant’s name and its outer appearance see Grosheva 2009: 324.
feature of coltsfoot is its radially symmetrical arrangement of flowers in a pattern resembling a star or sun; in fact, this is true for all members of the large family of Asteraceae, the floral heads of which are characteristically star-shaped. The uncanny similarity between the rays of the sun and the “petals” of another member of Asteraceae is reflected in its name sunflower (Helianthus / подсолнечник / Sonnenblume). Based on the hypothesis that Latin farfarum / farferum reflects the same semantic idea, I propose that the first member of this compound goes back to Indo-European *bʰeh₂- ‘to shine’ (LIV 68–69).

This root shows very distinct poetic properties across several traditions. As E. Campanile has shown, the standing epithet of the goddess of the Dawn (*h₂eusōs) in Indo-Iranian poetic language is ‘shining in all directions’: uṣás- vibhāt-, uṣāḥyəm viuuaitīm (Campanile 1987). His results were confirmed by U. Roesler who has shown in her careful study that the verbal root bhā- ‘to shine’ and its nominal derivatives (such as Vedic s-stem bhās- ‘light’, metrically: bhaas-) are very closely associated with Uṣas in the Rigveda (Roesler 1997: 83–90). As we step outside Indo-Iranian, we find an exact cognate of Vedic bhās- in Latin poetic word iubar ‘first light of day; morning star’ from *diu-bʰeh₂-es- ‘bringing the light to the sky’; again, the connection with dawn is unmistakable (cf. Var. L. 7.76 iubar dicitur stella lucifer). In Greek, too, phrases like Ἡώς εὐρυφάασσα, φαίνολις Αὔως, φαεννᾶς Ἀόος (Pi. N. 6.52) or φάος Ἡοῦς ἠριγενείης show a close tie between Ἡώς and the root φα- (*bʰeh₂-).

Furthermore, it appears that the s-stem *bʰeh₂e/os- (Vedic bhās-, Latin (iu)bar, Greek φάος) was used together with the verb *bʰer- ‘to carry’ in formulaic collocations of Indo-European date. In Greek we find this formulaic juncture not only in Homeric φόως φέροι ‘(Eos) brings light (to men and immortals)’, but also in the name of the morning star, Φωσφόρος: the mythological representations of

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13 See Dunkel 1997 with references to his predecessors.
14 See the recent collection of material by Calin 2017: 67–8.
15 Greek φάος, φάεος (distracted φόως, contracted φῶς) goes back to Proto-Greek *bʰaue/os- which, in turn, must be a replacement of an earlier *bʰae/os- with a hiatus resulting from the loss of the laryngeal in *bʰehe/os-, see Peters 1993: 106–7.
16 Matasović 1996: 84 plausibly compared RV 1.92.13ab úṣas tāc citrām ā bhara / asmābhyaṃ vājinīvati “o Uṣās, rich in horses, bring us that brightness” under the assumption that the word citrā- ‘light’ here is a substitute for bhās- (both roots are linked in Savitar’s epithet citrāḥbhum-).
the morning and evening stars are the Dioscuri who are described as φάος φέροντες in Alc. 34.13\textsuperscript{17}.

We can now return to the Latin word for coltsfoot presumably named after its star-like shape\textsuperscript{18}: the name of this species of Asteraceae may be analyzed as a counterpart of Greek Φωσφόρος and a continuant of Indo-European formula *\textsuperscript{b}h\textsubscript{eh}\textsubscript{2}es- *\textsuperscript{b}h\textsubscript{er}- ‘to carry light (of dawn)’. Under this hypothesis farferum is a neuter\textsuperscript{19} of *farfer ‘carrying light; morning star’, either a rural Latin word (with -\textsuperscript{b}h- > -f-\textsuperscript{20}) or a remake of expectable *farber by analogy to other Latin compounds in -fer (first and foremost, its synonym lucifer).\textsuperscript{21} The word can be back-reconstructed as follows: *farfer / *farber, -a, -um < *fārferos (with vowel weakening) < *fāroforos (with rhotacism\textsuperscript{22}) < *fāsfoforos\textsuperscript{24} < IE (transpone) *b\textsuperscript{h}eh\textsubscript{2}s-o-b\textsuperscript{h}or-o-, a verbal governing compound with *b\textsuperscript{h}eh\textsubscript{2}es- ‘light (of dawn)’ as its first member.

\textsuperscript{17} For mythological and poetic background of Alcaeus’ φάος φέροντες I refer to my earlier studies, Nikolaev 2012a and 2012b.

\textsuperscript{18} It is possible that the word originally referred to all kinds of daisies.

\textsuperscript{19} Perhaps originating in the ellipsis of *farferum grāmen or a similar phrase.

\textsuperscript{20} On sources of Latin word-medial -f- from *-\textsuperscript{b}h- see Weiss 2009: 75 n. 26.

\textsuperscript{21} In theory it is also possible to explain *farfer as the expectable outcome of *fāsfoforos either in Faliscan or in Sabellic since in these dialects word-medial *-\textsuperscript{b}h- likewise gives -f-; however, the relative chronology of rhotacism and various rounds of syncope both in Faliscan and in Sabellic is too unclear to warrant this hypothesis.

\textsuperscript{22} See Exon 1906; Sihler 1995: 70, cf. e.g. *dek.si.ter.os (Gk. δεξιτερός) > dexter ‘right’; for syncope after a long initial syllable cf. *su̯ī.no.ka.put > sinciput ‘fool’.

\textsuperscript{23} As is well known, no strict rules can be written for Latin syncope different rounds of which happened at several times in the history of Latin; in particular, Weiss 2009: 123 points out that rounds of syncope operated both before and after rhotacism, citing pōnō ‘put’ < *posinō (cf. sinō ‘let’) vs. ormus ‘ash tree’ < *osinos (cf. Russian aceh). Therefore examples that may suggest that Exon’s Law operated before rhotacism (such as *ma.gi.so.mos > *mag.si.mos > *maksimos > maximus ‘the greatest’) do not invalidate the solution proposed in this paper. It is also worth noting that in a tetrasyllabic word with two internal open syllables syncope targets the syllable that has a liquid consonant in the onset, including r < *s by rhotacism, even if it is the third and not the second syllable, cf. *\textsuperscript{ue}.tu.si.nos > *\textsuperscript{ue}.tu.ri.nos > *\textsuperscript{ue}.te.ri.nos > veternus ‘morbid state of torpor, old age’ or *\textsuperscript{di}.ue.si.nos > *\textsuperscript{di}.ue.ri.nos > diurnus ‘occurring in the day-time’.

\textsuperscript{24} The length of the vowel in the initial syllable of farferum cannot be ascertained; of course, *b\textsuperscript{h}h\textsubscript{2}s-o-b\textsuperscript{h}or-o- with a zero-grade stem allomorph of *b\textsuperscript{h}eh\textsubscript{2}es- ‘light (of Dawn)’ would give *fasofo> farferum.
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**Summary**: this paper argues that Latin *farferum* ‘coltsfoot; Tussilago farfara’ owns its name to its symmetrical arrangement of floral heads in a pattern resembling a star or sun, characteristic of all members of the family of *Asteraceae*; it is proposed that the (rustic) Latin word goes back to *b’hēr-s-o-b’or-o- ‘light bringer, morning star’ (≈ Greek Φωσφόρος ‘morning star’). In Indo-European poetic traditions the formula *b’hēr-es-* *b’h er-* ‘to carry light’ is used of the Divine Twins, visualized precisely as the morning and evening stars.

**Keywords**: botanical nomenclature, comparative mythology, Divine Twins, etymology, Latin, Plautus.