

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

Характерной чертой всех растений, принадлежащих к семейству астровых, является сложное соцветие, внешне напоминающее звезду с отходящими от нее лучами (ср. лат. *Asteraceae*); именно эта внешняя особенность может быть отражена в латинском названии мать-и-мачехи: лат. (диал.) *farferum* < \**b<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>2</sub>s-o-b<sup>h</sup>or-o-* может быть сопоставлено с наименованиями утренней звезды в других и.-е. традициях, ср. др.-гр. Φωσφόρος, а также формульное выражение \**b<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>2</sub>es-* \**b<sup>h</sup>er-* ‘нести свет’, тесно связанное не только с Зарей / Эос, но и с Диоскурами / Ашвинами (Alc. 34.13 φάος φέρωντες), являющимися на небе в виде утренней и вечерней звезды.

*Ключевые слова:* близнечный миф, ботаническая номенклатура, латинский язык, Плавт, сравнительная мифология, этимология.

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)<sup>1</sup>. The botanical identification is supported by Plin. 24.135 (*chamaeleucen apud nos farfarum sive farfugium vocant*)<sup>2</sup> as well as by Late Latin glosses where *farfara* is defined as *ungula caballina* (CGL 3.563.47; 546.35), viz. ‘coltsfoot’<sup>3</sup>. 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<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of these attestations see Rost 1836: 225–228.

<sup>2</sup> 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>).

<sup>3</sup> *Alphita*, a Middle English glossary of herbs, translates *farfara* as *ungula caballina*, *angl. feldhoue* (Mowat 1887: 21).

<sup>4</sup> See Linnaeus 1753: 865.

The word *farferum* ( $\bar{a}/\check{a}$ ?) is isolated in Latin<sup>5</sup> and its etymology remains obscure<sup>6</sup>. The old idea that the word is a compound of *far* ‘grain, groats’ and *ferre* ‘carry’ is still found in some botanical handbooks<sup>7</sup>, but has rightly been discarded in etymological literature along with the similarly improbable derivation from Italic *\*farfa* ‘beard’ proposed by Bruch 1917 (see *LEW* 457; *DELL* 217)<sup>8</sup>. 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 substrate<sup>9</sup>; while in principle borrowing always remains a possibility, there is no independent support for this hypothesis<sup>10</sup>. Finally, it is worth noting that the vowel alternation in *farfĕrum* / *farfĕrum* 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* > *peperi*, *\*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 likely<sup>11</sup>.

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 start<sup>12</sup>. The main

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> See Andre 1956: 133–4; Ernout 1957: 215; Genaut 1996: 245 (“etymologie unsicher”).

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

<sup>8</sup> The form *farfugium* in Pliny (codd. *farrarifugium* 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’, βήχτιον 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).

<sup>9</sup> See Bertoldi 1937: 161; Alessio 1951: 127.

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

<sup>11</sup> This was already observed by Meier-Lübke 1884: 207.

<sup>12</sup> 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  $*b^he_2-$  ‘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 ( $*h_2eus_ōs$ ) in Indo-Iranian poetic language is ‘shining in all directions’: *uṣás-* *vibhātí-*, *uṣāñhām 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  $*d̥iu-b^he_2-es-$  ‘bringing the light to the sky’<sup>13</sup>; again, the connection with dawn is unmistakable (cf. Var. L. 7.76 *iubar dicitur stella lucifer*). In Greek, too, phrases like Ἡὼς εὐρυφάασσα, φαίνολις Ἀῶως, φαεννᾶς Ἄοος (Pi. N. 6.52) or φάος Ἡοῦς ἠριγενείης show a close tie between Ἡὼς and the root φα- ( $*b^he_2-$ ).<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, it appears that the *s*-stem  $*b^he_2e/os-$  (Vedic *bhās-*, Latin (*iu*)*bar*, Greek φάος<sup>15</sup>) was used together with the verb  $*b^her-$  ‘to carry’ in formulaic collocations of Indo-European date. In Greek we find this formulaic juncture not only in Homeric φάος φέροι ‘(Eos) brings light (to men and immortals)’<sup>16</sup>, but also in the name of the morning star, Φωσφόρος: the mythological representations of

<sup>13</sup> See Dunkel 1997 with references to his predecessors.

<sup>14</sup> See the recent collection of material by Calin 2017: 67–8.

<sup>15</sup> Greek φάος, φάεος (distracted φάως, contracted φῶς) goes back to Proto-Greek  $*b^haue/os-$  which, in turn, must be a replacement of an earlier  $*b^hæe/os-$  with a hiatus resulting from the loss of the laryngeal in  $*b^he_2e/os-$ , see Peters 1993: 106–7.

<sup>16</sup> Matasović 1996: 84 plausibly compared RV 1.92.13ab *uṣas táḥ citráṃ ā bhara* / *asmábhyaṃ vājinīvati* “o Uṣās, rich in horses, bring us that brightness” under the assumption that the word *citrá-* ‘light’ here is a substitute for *bhās-* (both roots are linked in Savitar’s epithet *citrábhānu-*).

the morning and evening stars are the Dioscuri who are described as φάος φέροντες in Alc. 34.13<sup>17</sup>.

We can now return to the Latin word for coltsfoot presumably named after its star-like shape<sup>18</sup>: the name of this species of *Asteraceae* may be analyzed as a counterpart of Greek Φωσφόρος and a continuant of Indo-European formula *\*b<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>2</sub>es-* *\*b<sup>h</sup>er-* ‘to carry light (of dawn)’. Under this hypothesis *farferum* is a neuter<sup>19</sup> of *\*farfer* ‘carrying light; morning star’, either a rural Latin word (with *-b<sup>h</sup>-* > *-f-*<sup>20</sup>) or a remake of expectable *\*farber* by analogy to other Latin compounds in *-fer* (first and foremost, its synonym *lucifer*).<sup>21</sup> The word can be back-reconstructed as follows: *\*farfer* / *\*farber*, *-a*, *-um* < *\*fārferos* (with vowel weakening) < *\*fārforos* (with Exon’s Law<sup>22</sup>) < *\*fāroforos* (with rhotacism<sup>23</sup>) < *\*fāsoforos*<sup>24</sup> < IE (transponate) *\*b<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>2</sub>s-o-b<sup>h</sup>or-o-*, a verbal governing compound with *\*b<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>2</sub>es-* ‘light (of dawn)’ as its first member.

<sup>17</sup> For mythological and poetic background of Alcaeus’ φάος φέροντες I refer to my earlier studies, Nikolaev 2012a and 2012b.

<sup>18</sup> It is possible that the word originally referred to all kinds of daisies.

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps originating in the ellipsis of *\*farferum grāmen* or a similar phrase.

<sup>20</sup> On sources of Latin word-medial *-f-* from *\*-b<sup>h</sup>-* see Weiss 2009: 75 n. 26.

<sup>21</sup> In theory it is also possible to explain *\*farfer* as the expectable outcome of *\*fasofoforos* either in Faliscan or in Sabellic since in these dialects word-medial *\*-b<sup>h</sup>-* 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.

<sup>22</sup> 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. *\*suī.no.ka.put* > *sinciput* ‘fool’.

<sup>23</sup> 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. *ornus* ‘ash tree’ < *\*osinos* (cf. Russian ясень). Therefore examples that may suggest that Exon’s Law operated before rhotacism (such as *\*ma.gi.so.mos* > *\*mag.si.mos* > *\*maksimos* > *māximus* ‘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. *\*uē.tu.si.nos* > *\*uē.tu.ri.nos* > *\*uē.te.ri.nos* > *veternus* ‘morbid state of torpor, old age’ or *\*di.uē.si.nos* > *\*di.uē.ri.nos* > *diurnus* ‘occurring in the day-time’.

<sup>24</sup> The length of the vowel in the initial syllable of *farferum* cannot be ascertained; of course, *\*b<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>2</sub>s-o-b<sup>h</sup>or-o-* with a zero-grade stem allomorph of *\*b<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>2</sub>es-* ‘light (of Dawn)’ would give *\*fasofoforom* > *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<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>2</sub>s-o-b<sup>h</sup>or-o-* ‘light bringer, morning star’ (~ Greek Φωσφόρος ‘morning star’). In Indo-European poetic traditions the formula *\*b<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>2</sub>es-<sup>h</sup>b<sup>h</sup>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.