

The etymology of the Latin forum

There are at least two hypotheses of the Latin *forum* 'a market, public place': Ernout, Meillet (1985, 246) connect *forum* with *foris* 'a door' whereas Walde, Hofmann (1938, 537) connect it with *forus* 'a narrow platform, or gangway; a passage, path'. The two hypotheses imply different reconstructions on the Indo-European level: according to Walde, Hofmann *forum* and *forus* go back to the Indo-European **bhoros* 'a wooden broad, sawn wood'. This Indo-European preform must have given also the Latin *forāre* 'to bore through, pierce' and such Indo-European nouns as MHG *bar* 'barrier', Greek φάρος 'furrow'. Walde, Hofmann write on *forum*: «Wenn auch die angesetzte Gbd. Umplankung von *forum* durch tatsächliche Zeugnisse, wonach der röm. Marktplatz durch Planken, Barrieren abgegrenzt war, nicht gestützt wird (doch vgl. *macellum*), so lassen doch die verschiedenen Bdd. von *forum* (insbesondere auch f. 'vinarium' 'Bretterkasten für die Trauben') und das an *vallus* : *vallum* usw. ...gemahnende Nebeneinander von *forus* : *forum* eine andere Auffassung nicht zu.» (Walde, Hofmann 1938, 537). The semantic development, which Walde and Hofmann propose, has a drawback: admitting that the original meaning of *forus* was 'sawn wood' does not imply the same semantic evolution for *forum*. Indeed, there is no evidence that *forum* meant originally 'sawn wood' or 'something carved out of wood'.

Ernout, Meillet (1985, 246) propose for *forum* a semantically more plausible connection: *foris* 'a door' (more often used pl. *fores*). *Foris* has the following Indo-European parallels: OCS *двѣрь* 'a door' Greek θαιρός 'pivot of a door', 'a door', Lith *dùrys* (pl. t.) 'a door', OHG *turi* 'doors'. A different root vocalism (the full grade of the root) is represented in the examples: OCS *дворъ* 'praetorium', Lett. *dvars* 'idem', Avest. *dvarəm* (Acc. Sg.) 'a gate'. Lat *forum* semantically as well as phonologically (< **dhworom*) fits well with these parallels. A connection between such senses as 'a door, entrance' and 'a yard, public place' should be understood as a metonymical transfer: cf. coexistence of such pairs as OCS *двѣрь* 'a door' and *дворъ* 'praetorium', Greek θύρα 'a door', πρόθυρον 'front door, doorway', ἐπὶ θύρασι 'in the palace' and the metonymical transfer in such Greek adverbs as θύραζε = *foras*' 'towards

outside, outdoors', θύρασι = *foris* 'outside, outdoors'. De Vaan (2008, 237) proposes a similar semantic change: 'area at the doors' > 'entrance room, vestibule' > 'public room' > 'public space'.

There is a tendency that the zero grade root vocalism marks nouns meaning 'a door', whereas the full grade marks nouns meaning 'a yard, a space outside, a public place', cf.: the zero grade in Indo-European **dhwr̥-y-* > OCS *двьрьь*, Greek θαιρόζ (< * θαρ -y-όζ) 'pivot of a door'. This preform **dhwr̥-y-* contains a sequence of two resonants *wr̥* in which the resonant *r̥* becomes syllabic.

Other nouns with the zero grade show a different scenario of the phonological development: the resonant *w* is syllabic (hence represented as a vowel *u*) while *r* is non-syllabic: Indo-European **dhu-r-y* → Lith *dùrys* 'doors', OHG *turi* 'doors'.

The full grade vocalism (expressing the meaning 'a yard, a space outside, a public place') is represented in Indo-European by **dhwor* > OCS *дворьь*, Lett. *dvars*, Avest. *dvarəm* 'a gate, yard', Lat. *forum*.

Ernout, Meillet (1985, 246) posit the full grade vocalism for both *-foris* and *forum*. For the semantic and derivational reasons (i. e. because of the opposition of the senses 'a door' and 'a space outside, a yard' > 'a public area' which is supported by the phonological opposition in root vocalism) I would instead propose the full grade for *forum* and the zero grade for *foris*.

Thus Indo-European **dhwr̥-i-s* > **dhwor-i-s* > *foris* (cp.: **kr̥d-* > Lat. *cor*, **m̥rtis* > Lat. *mors*). The same phonological development is attested in OCS *двьрьь* < **dhwr̥-i-s* where the syllabic resonant *r̥* also is encountered in spite of being in a pre-vocalic position.

In sum, *foris* and *forum* represent two ablaut variants of the root **dhwēr-* / **dhwor-* / **dhwr̥*, and the zero grade ablaut was used mostly for the sense 'a door' while the full grade ablaut was used mostly for the sense 'an outside area, a yard'.

References:

1. . De Vaan Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages. Leiden, 2008.

2. Ernout A., Meillet A. Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Paris, 1985
3. Walde A., Hoffmann J.B. Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch: 3. Aufl.; Bd I—II, Heidelberg, 1938—1954.
4. Sommer F. Handbuch der lateinischen Laut- und Formenlehre. Heidelberg, 1902.