ANTE MATAN
Juraj Dobrila University of Pula
Pula, Croatia
ante.matan@unipu.hr

UDC: 811.124′373.611

'SOLUTION DE LA QUESTION DU SUFFIXE -ĀRIUS'? REASSESSING THE GENITIVAL ANALYSIS OF PROTO-ITALIC -ĀSIi̯O-

Abstract. – Latin *-ārius* is among the most productive Latin derivational formations, yet its deeper prehistory remains disputed. Sabellic evidence shows that the suffix is not a specifically Latin innovation, but continues Proto-Italic *-āsii̯o-*. This paper reassesses three explanations of its first element: genitive singular *-ās* plus relational *-ii̯o-*; Prellwitz's locative plural *-ās(i)* plus *-ii̯o-*; and a pre-Italic possessive or relational adjective *-ah₂-so-* enlarged by *-(i)i̯o-*. The archaic NVMASIOI is excluded as a morphological false friend, while Oscan *purasiaí* provides particularly important evidence that *-āsii̯o-* had already been resegmented as an autonomous derivational formative and extended beyond ā-stem bases before the documentary period.

The genitive-based analysis cannot be demonstrated directly: no Italic form preserves a productive construction in which a living genitive in *-ās* serves as the base of *-ii̯o-* derivation, and Fortson's criticism of prehistoric decasuative analyses remains pertinent. Nevertheless, among the competing hypotheses the genitive account has a modest advantage in reconstructional economy, since both proposed components are independently recoverable and their combination is semantically compositional. The locative analysis requires additional bleaching of spatial and plural meaning, whereas the *-ah₂-so-* analysis depends on an additional reconstructed formative whose traditional Anatolian support has weakened. The evidence therefore favours a restricted prehistoric formation followed by resegmentation and analogical extension, rather than a generally productive Proto-Italic decasuative rule. Latin *-ārius* is consequently best understood as a Proto-Italic innovation assembled from inherited Indo-European morphological material.[1]

Key words. – Latin word formation; -ārius; Proto-Italic; -āsii̯o-; genitive; decasuative derivation; relational adjectives; resegmentation; Sabellic.

[1] An earlier version of this argument was presented at an international scholarly conference in 2010.

1. The question and its historiography

In 1893 Paul Marchot published a short contribution under the confident title *Solution de la question du suffixe -arius*. The question proved less easily solved than the title implied. Subsequent years saw further extensive treatments of the same formative, above all in the work of Cooper, Staaff and Olcott; much of this scholarship concerned the extraordinary productivity of *-arius* in popular and post-classical Latin and its Romance continuation. Marchot's title is nevertheless worth retaining, now with a question mark: the synchronic and post-Latin history of the suffix is comparatively well understood, whereas its deeper morphological prehistory remains considerably less secure.[2]

The problem can no longer be framed simply as a choice between an inherited Indo-European suffix and a specifically Latin innovation. The Sabellic evidence excludes the latter in any strict sense. The immediate historical starting point lies at the Proto-Italic level, for which the formative may be represented as: **-āsi̯o-*.

The notation is conventional; the literature also employs forms such as *-āsiio-* or the subsequent branch-specific *-āsyo-*. What matters here is the morphological sequence rather than a commitment to a single narrowly phonetic representation of every prehistoric stage.

The real etymological question lies one step further back: *What is the historical identity of the segment -ās- in Proto-Italic *-āsi̯o-?*

Three principal answers emerge from the history of the discussion:

-ās (GEN.SG.) + -ii̯o- | -ās(i) (LOC.PL.) + -ii̯o- | -ah₂-so- + -(i)i̯o-

All three are, at least formally, compatible with the Proto-Italic sequence. The historical reflexes of *-āsi̯o-* therefore cannot by themselves determine its deeper segmentation. The problem must instead be approached by distinguishing formal membership in the suffixal class from superficial phonological resemblance and by comparing the independent morphological motivation required by each reconstruction.

The idea that an inflected ā-stem form lies behind *-ārius* is itself more than a century old. Its historiography, however, is more complex than a single inherited 'traditional etymology'. Prellwitz's 1899 article *Beiträge zur indogermanischen Wortbildungslehre. Nomina aus casus* was explicitly concerned with the possibility that derivational formatives could emerge historically from case forms. For Latin *-ārius* he proposed a locative-plural source: an ā-stem form in *-ās(i)* enlarged by *-io-*.[3] Buck took a different view. In *A Grammar of Oscan and Umbrian* he treated several Italic formations in *-iio-* as historically complex, but distinguished

[2] Marchot 1893, 289–294; Cooper 1895; Staaff 1896; Olcott 1898.

[3] Prellwitz 1899, 94–106.

the formation corresponding to *-ārius* from those he connected with locatives. In §254 he suggested that *-āsiio-* may have arisen through the addition of *-io-* to the genitive singular of ā-stems.[4]

The modern genitive-based account thus represents one strand of an old debate, rather than an uncontested traditional derivation. Its later representatives include Haudry and Weiss, while Fortson's recent reassessment places the proposal within the broader and methodologically controversial category of decasuative derivation.[5]

The historiography therefore presents three analytically distinct possibilities: an inflectional genitive source, an inflectional locative source and a derivational adjectival source. The first two require a transition from inflectional material to derivation; the third avoids such a transition but reconstructs an additional pre-Italic formative.

2. Delimiting the class: NVMASIOI and the Italic corpus

Before the history of *-āsi̯o-* can be reconstructed, the morphological class must first be delimited. The archaic form NVMASIOI on the Praenestine fibula provides an especially useful control case because its surface *-asio-* resembles the later productive formative, while its internal history is different.

The form belongs to the onomastic family ultimately represented by Latin *Numerius*.[6] Nishimura sharpens the relevant phonological argument: the vowel of *Număsio-* must have been short, because the development reflected in *Numerius* involves the Latin reduction of medial short *a* before *r* < *s*; a long *ā* would not have undergone the same change. The formation therefore cannot simply be assigned to productive *-āsi̯o-*.[7]

Număsio- ≠ *-āsi̯o-*

The bilingual Umbrian-Latin material reinforces the methodological point. Adams cites Umb. *Numesier Varea Poleni*a beside Lat. *Nomesi Varia*, noting the Umbrian rhotacism of the inflectional ending while the internal segment of the name remains distinct.[8] NVMASIOI is therefore important not because it provides an early example of *-ārius*, but precisely because it does not. Phonological resemblance does not establish morphological identity. This likewise vindicates the older hesitation over mechanically combining long-vowel *-ārius* with short-vowel formations traditionally grouped under *-ĕrius*.

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[4] Buck 1904, 186, §254.

[5] Haudry 1982, 35; Weiss 2020, 297; Fortson 2020, 70.

[6] cf. de Simone 1991, 211–212.

[7] Nishimura 2020, 132–133.

[8] Adams 2003, 123–124.

Once superficial sequences in *-asio-* have been separated from the productive formation, the Italic corpus can be assessed more precisely. The surviving evidence is heterogeneous: some forms have transparent bases and are highly informative for the productivity of the suffix, whereas others are secure members of the formal class but lexically obscure. Not every form should therefore be expected to prove the same point. References to ST and Im.It. in Table 1 follow Rix (2002) and Crawford et al. (2011), respectively.

*Table 1. Selected Italic evidence for Proto-Italic *-āsiio̯-.*

Form	Context	What is comparatively secure	Evidential value
Osc. purasiaí	ST Sa 1 = Im.It. Terventum 34, l. 16; aasaí purasiaí	Relational adjective; generally connected with Italic pūr 'fire'	Primary evidence for generalisation beyond ā-stems and for relational adjectival function
Osc. Fluusasiaís	ST Sa 1 = Im.It. Terventum 34, l. 20	Formal member of the class	Early cultic specialisation / lexicalization
Osc. kerssnasias	ST Cp 29 = Im.It. Capua 26 (Capuan iúvila)	Ritual formation	Specialised ritual terminology
Osc. sakrasias	ST Cp 30 = Im.It. Capua 25 (Capuan iúvila)	Ritual formation	Specialised ritual terminology
Osc. degetasiús / deketasiúí	ST Cm 48 (Nola); ST Cm 1 = Im.It. Abella 1, A5	Secure derivational type; lexical etymology disputed	Productivity in institutional vocabulary
Umb. plenasier	ST Um 1; TI Va 2; Va 14–15	Secure formal member	Especially important for Sabellic phonology
Umb. urnasier / urnasiaru	ST Um 1; TI Va 2, 14–15; III 3	Formal member; lexical base uncertain	Distribution of the suffix only
Umb. sestentasiaru	ST Um 1; TI III 2	Formal member	Generalisation/productivity; not proof of a specific original base
Old Lat. [vi]asieis	lex agraria (111 BCE); restored form; cf. Crawford 1996	Archaic -āsi- formation; text partly restored	Secondary Latin witness, not a straightforward dating of rhotacism

The most important form for the morphological argument is *purasiaí*. In the *Tabula Agnonensis* it occurs in the sequence *aasaí purasiaí*. The form is regularly analysed as 'fiery, pertaining to fire'; Buck translated the phrase as *in ara igniaria*.[9]

Since its base belongs with Italic *pūr* 'fire',[10] *purasiaí* cannot itself be the direct result of a synchronically productive ā-stem genitive in *-ās*. The relevant structure at the historical Oscan stage is already:

pūr + **-āsi̯o-*

The form therefore provides a *terminus ante quem* for the resegmentation of the suffix, rather than direct evidence for the morphology of the construction before resegmentation.

The same distinction guards against overinterpretation of forms such as *degetasiús*, *urnasier* or *sestentasiaru*. These securely attest the formal type, but their lexical histories cannot independently identify the source of *-ās-*.

The documentary corpus begins too late to capture the emergence of the suffix. What it does establish is that, before the earliest relevant texts, the complex had already become an autonomous derivational unit and had spread beyond any original restriction to ā-stem bases.

3. Relational semantics and the genitive hypothesis

The semantic argument is best developed from the earliest recoverable relational function rather than from the mature Latin lexicon. Later Latin *-arius* is strongly associated with occupations, personal nouns, places, instruments and specialised technical vocabulary, but none of these meanings needs to be reconstructed for Proto-Italic.[11]

Arias Abellán describes the personal value of derivatives in *-arius* as essentially 'person who has to do with the object denoted by the derivational base',[12] from which the occupational value 'person who acts or works with that object' readily follows. She also distinguishes such personal substantivisation from substantivisation by ellipsis, which accounts for several non-personal types.[13] The historical semantic trajectory is therefore better represented as: relational adjective → substantivisation → lexical specialisation. Occupational meaning is secondary.

This matters for the reconstruction because it removes one of the strongest older motivations for the locative-plural hypothesis. If historical spatial, occupational and institutional meanings are secondary develop-

[9] Buck 1904, 186.
[10] de Vaan 2008, 500.
[11] For the historical semantic range of the formation, see also Nichols 1929, 40–63.
[12] Arias Abellán 1993, 119.
[13] Arias Abellán 1993, 116–117.

ments of a broader relational adjective, they should not automatically be projected backwards as evidence for an originally locative formative.

The earliest recoverable value need be no more specific than 'pertaining to / associated with X'. The genitive-based analysis identifies the first member of *-āsi̯o-* with the inherited ā-stem genitive singular:

**-ās (GEN.) + *-i̯o-*

The obvious semantic objection is this: if the genitive already expresses possession, dependency or appurtenance, why add another relational formative? The answer lies in morphosyntax rather than lexical semantics. A genitive expresses an adnominal relation as an inflected dependent noun. An adjective may express a similar relation while agreeing with the head noun in gender, number and case. The proposed operation is thus a categorial transposition:

GENITIVAL RELATION → AGREEING RELATIONAL ADJECTIVE

The lexical content need change little. What changes is the grammatical encoding of the relation. The first element supplies the relation 'of X'; the inherited adjectival element supplies adjectival status and agreement.

This interpretation is attractive because it makes the combination semantically compositional. It does not, however, solve the historical problem by itself. As Fortson stresses in his reassessment of decasuative derivation, prehistoric forms should not be segmented into case form plus suffix merely because such a segmentation is formally imaginable.[14] Secure decasuatives require independent motivation, and one must still ask why an inflected form rather than the ordinary nominal stem served as the derivational base.

That question cannot be answered directly for *-āsi̯o-*. No attested Italic form preserves a transparent stage in which a living genitive can actually be observed serving as the base for *-i̯o-* derivation. This is the principal weakness of the genitive-based hypothesis and should not be concealed.

4. From construction to suffix: resegmentation and its limits

The proposal advanced here should therefore remain deliberately narrow. It does not posit a generally productive Proto-Italic rule:

GENITIVE + *-i̯o-

Such a rule is difficult to motivate, especially in the absence of parallel productive formations from the remaining nominal paradigms.

[14] Fortson 2020, 82.

The proposal requires much less: a restricted set of formations containing the sequence

[X-ās] + [-i̯o-]

followed by a new segmentation:

X + [-āsi̯o-]

The lexical or syntactic circumstances under which the original sequence first arose are no longer recoverable. The historical claim begins at the point at which recurrent material became available for reanalysis.

Latin offers good structural parallels for this process. Benedetti shows how complex verbal formatives may arise when an element originally belonging to the nominal stem is reassigned through reanalysis to a derivational morpheme; once the new segmentation exists, it can be extended to bases in which the original structure was absent.[15] Her discussion of *-iga-* is therefore relevant as a parallel for the mechanism, not as evidence for the etymology of *-ārius* itself.

The proposed development can be summarised as: TRANSPOSITION → RESEGMENTATION → MORPHOLOGISATION → GENERALISATION. This formulation also accommodates Fortson's criticism. The genitive-based account is not offered as evidence for a freely productive Proto-Italic decasuative derivation. It is a historical analysis of the composition of a suffixal conglomerate whose internal structure had already ceased to be transparent before the documentary period.

Fortson's critique does not validate such an analysis. It does, however, leave theoretical room for prehistoric complex formations that were subsequently abstracted and generalised as derivational material. The documentary forms are precisely what such a later stage would be expected to look like.[16]

5. Competing analyses: locative plural and *-ah₂-so-*

Prellwitz's locative analysis shares much with the genitive-based account. Both derive *-āsi̯o-* from an inflected ā-stem form followed by *-i̯o-* and therefore require reanalysis from inflectional material to a derivational suffix. The difference lies primarily in the semantic starting point: under the genitive account, 'of X' is transposed to 'pertaining to X'; under the locative-plural account, a more specific relation such as 'at / among the Xs' must first generalise to the same broad relational value.

The latter development is possible, but it requires additional semantic bleaching. Both the spatial component and the plurality of the original case form cease to have observable function in the historical suffix.

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[15] Benedetti 1988.

[16] Fortson 2020, 95.

Nothing in the transparent early form *purasiaí* requires such a starting point. The form functions simply as an agreeing adjective 'pertaining to fire'. The same is true of the general relational semantics recoverable from the class.

Prellwitz's locative interpretation becomes most attractive if the strongly local, institutional and occupational meanings of historical Latin *-ārius* are taken to reflect the suffix's earliest semantics. Once those meanings are instead recognised as later specialisations of a relational adjective, the need to reconstruct an original locative relation largely disappears. The point is not that a locative origin is impossible. The locative hypothesis explains semantic material that the earliest reconstructible suffix does not require. The genitive-based model therefore has a limited semantic advantage over the locative model: it begins with a relation broad enough to cover appurtenance without requiring an unnecessary original spatial value.

The strongest alternative to a genitival source is not the locative plural but a pre-Italic relational or possessive adjective *-ah₂-so-* secondarily enlarged by *-(i)i̯o-*. Semantically, this proposal is well motivated. A relational or possessive adjective in *-ah₂-so-* followed by another adjectival formative readily yields the relational meaning reconstructible for *-āsii̯o-*.

Semantics alone, therefore, does not distinguish this hypothesis from the genitive-based one. Its advantage is also clear: it requires no transition from inflection to derivation. Its weakness lies elsewhere. The first member must itself be reconstructed as a pre-Italic formative; it is not independently recoverable within historical Italic morphology to the same degree as genitive *-ās*.

The once attractive Anatolian comparison no longer resolves this difficulty. Melchert (2012, 280) rejects attempts to derive the Anatolian possessive adjective *-assa/i-* from *-eh₂so/i-* and to use it as straightforward comparative support for such a formative. This does not prove that pre-Italic *-ah₂-so-* never existed; it means only that Anatolian can no longer serve as secure external confirmation.

The two principal surviving analyses therefore distribute their explanatory costs differently. The genitive-based account requires a historically unusual but attested type of process – case-based derivation followed by reanalysis – but uses two independently recoverable morphological elements. The adjectival account requires no such reanalysis but reconstructs an additional formative for which the strongest external comparison formerly adduced has been substantially weakened.

Economy is relevant here only as a criterion for comparing otherwise compatible reconstructions; it is not independent proof that the historically simplest scenario must have occurred.

6. Phonology and chronology

The morphological argument must also be compatible with the branch-specific phonological histories. The reconstruction *-āsi̯o-* belongs to a stage predating the differentiation of the documented Italic reflexes. Latin and Sabellic then treat the relevant sequence differently.

For Sabellic, Onishi's analysis is especially useful. He argues for an early development of adjectival *-iyo/ā-* to *-yo/ā-* before Proto-Sabellic and treats the sequence represented by Umb. *plenasier* accordingly.[17]

*-āsi̯o- → *-āsyo-

This environment preserves the internal sibilant in forms such as *plenasier* from the ordinary Umbrian rhotacism that would otherwise affect intervocalic *s*. *Plenasier* is therefore particularly important as a phonological witness to the second element of the formation. It tells us something about the history of *-i̯o-*; it does not determine whether *-ās-* was originally genitival, locative or adjectival.

The apparently parallel form Umb. *fararíur* must be handled differently. Onishi points out that regular native *-āsyo-* should preserve the sibilant, whereas *fararíur* shows *r*; he consequently treats Latin influence as a plausible explanation.[18] The form is therefore better regarded as a contact-sensitive anomaly than as primary inherited evidence for the phonological equation.

The Latin evidence requires equal caution. Old Lat. *[vi]asieis*, traditionally compared with later *viārius*, cannot straightforwardly be treated as a late pre-rhotacistic stage. The *lex agraria* dates to 111 BC, long after regular Latin intervocalic rhotacism had run its course.[19] The form is consequently better treated as an archaic, archaizing or otherwise exceptional survival of an older *-āsi-* formation rather than as a chronological intermediary between Proto-Italic *-āsi̯o-* and Classical *-ārius*.

The phonological evidence therefore supports the reconstruction of a common Italic formative, while also cautioning against treating every attested reflex as mechanically regular.

7. External comparisons and contact

Earlier discussions of *-ārius* also considered possible Germanic and Iranian comparisons. The Germanic case remains useful, but primarily as a methodological control.

Proto-Germanic *-ārijaz* has traditionally been explained as a Latin borrowing. Gąsiorowski argues that this view requires revision: the masculine Germanic suffix occurs widely on native bases and, in his analysis,

[17] Onishi 2021, 206.
[18] Ibid.
[19] cf. Leumann 1977, 178–180, §180.

has a native prehistory, although later convergence and reinforcement through Latin contact remain entirely plausible.[20] The Germanic evidence therefore illustrates how independent historical development combined with contact may yield formal and functional convergence without requiring direct suffix borrowing. Formal resemblance need not imply common inheritance or direct suffix borrowing.

Later Greek provides the opposite control case. Adams shows that Latin derivational formatives could enter Greek in borrowed vocabulary and subsequently become productive on Greek bases.[21] In the case of *-arius*, this provides a clear example of morphological borrowing: recurrent loanwords render the formative segmentable, after which new formations can be created within the recipient language. The distinction is methodologically important: productivity can result from inheritance, internal reanalysis, convergence or borrowing. It is therefore not, by itself, evidence for any one historical source.

8. The Latin career of *-ārius*

Once *-āsi̯o-* had become an autonomous derivational suffix, its later productivity no longer depended on speakers' awareness of its original internal structure.

Latin personal nouns offer the clearest example. Arias Abellán shows how relational adjectives in *-arius* can become substantivised as names of persons associated with the derivational base and subsequently specialise as occupational terms.[22] The same suffix also participates in a broad range of non-personal substantivisations, including places, instruments, containers, taxes and other specialised categories.

Technical Latin illustrates the mature stage especially well. Frontinus' vocabulary contains formations such as *plumbarii*, *castellarius*, *silicarius* and *aquarii*; at this stage *-arius* is already a fully productive element of technical nomenclature. Such forms cannot show how the suffix originated. They do, however, demonstrate how completely its earlier morphological composition had become synchronically irrelevant.

The historical development proposed here may thus be represented as:

[X-ās]GEN + [-i̯o-] → X + [-āsi̯o-] → Proto-Italic relational suffix → Latin -ārius → substantivisation and lexical specialisation

Only the first step is directly unrecoverable; the later stages become increasingly visible in the historical record.

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[20] Gąsiorowski 2017, 128–129, 141–142.

[21] Adams 2003, 495.

[22] Arias Abellán 1993, 119–120.

9. Conclusion

The secure starting point is not Latin *-ārius* but Proto-Italic *-āsi̯o-*. Sabellic evidence excludes a purely Latin origin, while external comparison provides no reason to reconstruct the entire suffix unchanged for Proto-Indo-European.

The remaining problem concerns the origin of *-ās-*. Three serious analyses have been considered.

Prellwitz's locative-plural hypothesis is formally possible and historically important, but it requires an initially spatial and plural relation whose semantic content is not required by the earliest recoverable function of the suffix. Much of the proposal's earlier appeal derived from later local and occupational meanings that can instead be explained as secondary specialisations.

The pre-Italic *-ah₂-so-* analysis is both formally and semantically plausible and avoids the difficulty of decasuative derivation. Its weakness is reconstructional: the formative itself is not independently recoverable in Italic to the same degree as genitive *-ās*, and the traditional Anatolian comparison can no longer provide secure external support.

The genitive-based analysis has its own important limitation. No attested Italic form preserves a stage in which a productive ā-stem genitive in *-ās* can be shown directly to serve as the base of *-i̯o-* derivation. The lexical circumstances that first permitted such a combination are unrecoverable, and no generally productive Proto-Italic rule of 'genitive + *-i̯o-*' should be reconstructed.

The hypothesis must therefore be understood historically, rather than synchronically. The proposal requires only that a restricted group of formations once contained [-ās]GEN + [-i̯o-] and that the recurrent sequence was subsequently resegmented as [-āsi̯o-]. Once that resegmentation had taken place, extension beyond ā-stem bases was no longer problematic. Osc. *purasiaí* is especially important precisely because it documents this completed state: its non-ā-stem base shows that the suffix had already become autonomous before the documentary record begins.

No single element of the argument proves the genitival source. The case is cumulative: genitive *-ās* is independently available in Italic; relational *-i̯o-* is independently inherited; their semantics are compositional; resegmentation is a known morphological process; and the earliest Sabellic evidence already shows the predicted generalised output. The alternatives remain possible but require either a more elaborate semantic history or additional reconstructed morphology.

The conclusion should therefore remain deliberately limited: Proto-Italic *-āsi̯o- is most economically analysed as containing inherited genital *-ās and relational *-i̯o-, although the derivational construction

through which those elements first came together cannot be recovered directly.

The hypothesis concerns the historical composition of the suffix, not the reconstruction of a productive Proto-Italic decasuative rule. The older opposition between Indo-European inheritance and Latin invention may therefore be abandoned. Latin *-ārius* is best understood as a Proto-Italic innovation assembled from inherited Indo-European morphological material. Marchot's *Solution de la question du suffixe -arius* may therefore remain an apt title for the problem – provided that, after more than a century, the question mark is retained.

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