A Fern by Any Other Name. . .
by John Knouse

Ferns have been a lifelong fascination of mine, but they're not the only one. Linguistics has been among my other fascinations, and I've naturally wondered where the word "fern" comes from — not only in English, but in a variety of languages.

Surveying European languages, we find disparate words for fern such as fougère (French), paprotnik (папоротник; Russian), helecho (Spanish), rannoch (Scots), raten (Breton), ormbunke (Swedish) and pteris (πτερις; Greek). These would seem to be completely unrelated words, but I hope to show that they are all related but for one — and the language of that word (ormbunke) has a related word, nonetheless (bräken, meaning bracken in Swedish).

There are four groups of words in which relationships can be fairly clearly shown: Germanic, Celtic-Scandinavian, Latinic (Romance), and Slavic-Greek.

The Germanic languages are easy to connect, being quite similar to one another:
English: fern
German: Farn
Dutch: varen (fahr-en)
Afrikaans: varing (fahr-ing)

These are all easily traceable through the ancient Germanic word farn to the Sanskrit parna, or feather. Here we seen not only vowel shifts, but the first phonemic consonantal shift, from "p" to "f". These are closely-related letters. A highly plosive "p" sounds much like "f". It might be noted that the Lithuanian word for wing is sparna.

The Slavic words are also easy to connect. These include:
Latvian: paparde
Lithuanian: papartis
Ukrainian: paporot' (папороть)
Russian: paporotnik (папоротник)
Polish: paproĉ
Czech: kapradina
Slovak: praprađ
Hungarian: páfrány
Bulgarian: paprat (папрат)
Serbo-Croatian: paprat (папрат in Serbian)
Slovene: praprot (прапрот)
Makedonian: paprad (or papra or paprat; папрад or папра or папрат)

It's easy to see relationships here, and a common root can be deduced that might be something like paprat or paparat. Note the phonemic shift in Czech from the initial "p" to "k", "p" being a voiceless plosive in the front of the mouth and "k" being a voiceless plosive in the rear of the mouth. These all appear to be related to the Sanskrit: pattraka. The derivation of paprat from pattraka actually involves a consistent phonemic shift, with two voiceless plosives simply being shifted to the next position forward in the mouth (t->p and k->t). Note that páfrány is an introduced word into Hungarian, which is actually not an Indo-European language but a Finno-Ugric language with originally a much different word for fern.

The Greek pteris (πτερις) might seem to stand alone, but in fact is closely related to the above group. This word derives from the Greek word pteron (πτερov), or wing. This word apparently derives from a form in which the initial "p" and "t" were separated, as in the Old Indian patram (the related Greek verb for "to fly" still has the separated "p" and "t"), and here we start to see an obvious relationship with the Sanskrit pattraka. These Sanskrit/Indo-European words are also presumed to be related to parna, feather.

Then there's the Latinic group:
Latin: filix (fee-leeks)
French: fougère (foo-zhair)
Spanish: helecho (eh-leh-cho)
Italian: felce (fel-che)
Portuguese: feto (Brasíl: samambaia, unrelated)
Romanian: ferigä
Catalan: falguera
Friulian: falét

To understand this group, it helps to understand that there was a difference between classical Latin and vulgar Latin. While the word was filix in classical Latin, the word was filicaria in vulgar Latin. To understand the further shift from filicaria to something like filicicula, in which the first "c" is pronounced as "ch", and then to the modern Italian felce, in which the "c" is also pronounced as "ch", it's important to understand that many Latin words experienced a similar "k" to "ch" shift as Italian developed as a separate language. This also resulted in the soft "g" (zh) in French. The derivation of most of the Latinic derivations listed is actually well-documented, and is given in the outline. The etymologies in the chart of the word in all languages but Rumanian are from documented sources.

Where did filix come from? All the dictionaries that I checked either were mute on the subject or simply noted it as "unknown". I suggest that it came directly from the Greek pteris. First, note that the Albanian (Shqiperi) word for fern is fier, apparently derived from the Greek. If the "p" is highly plosive and the "t" is de-emphasized, there's an easy transition to the voiceless fricative "f", resulting in feris, a short step away from fier.

Remember that our English "r" pronunciation is the exception in the linguistic world. Most languages, including Greek, pronounce "r" in a much different way, a sort of click of the tip of the tongue. This phoneme is intimately related to the "d" sound, and, indeed, even to the "l" sound. In fact, in my own genealogical research, I've conclusively proven the same phonemic shift in 18th century Virginia in an ancestral name, from Croudas (Crowdis) to Cloudas (Clowdis). Similarly, we can see this shift right in Greek in the word ptelea (πτελεα), meaning wing. So, it's easy to assume that pteris (πτερις) became ptelis (πτελις)). Let's assume that a "k" sound made its way into the word so that it became ptelix then felix, a short step away from filix.

The last group of words, the Celtic-Scandinavian, includes two subgroups that at first blush don't seem to be related:
   Group One:
      Icelandic: burkni
      Danish: bregne
      Norwegian: bregne
      Swedish: (meaning bracken; the word for fern, ormbunke, literally means "worm bowl")
      English: bracken (and the apparently-derived brake)
   Group Two:
      Gaulish: ratis (Old Gaulish: pratis)
      Welsh: reden (Old Welsh: rhedyn)
      Breton: raden (Old Breton: raten)
      Gaelic: raineach (Old Gaelic: raithneach)
      Irish: raith (Old Irish: raithneach)
      Scots: rannoch

The first of the two groups can be traced back to the old Old Norse brachen. The second group, as can be seen from the old Gaulish, originally had an initial "p" but dropped it. Thus, we have the presumed root praten, from which brachen can easily be derived. "B" is simply the voiced version of "p" and "t" and the diphthong "ch" (actually "t-sh") are closely related. It can be seen that praten is very close to the presumed Greek root petran, requiring little more than a switch of two consonants, which frequently happens in language evolution.

I have not cited sources in this article because there are too many to list for the available space.

OUTLINE OF FERN WORD DESCENT
Bold words are known forms; words not in bold are my conjectures. Where appropriate, pronunciations are given in parentheses.

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patra (Sanskrit)
 |-> pattraka (Sanskrit) -> patrak (presumed Slavic root) ->
 |      '-> paprat (presumed Slavic root and Modern Bulgarian & Serbo-Croatian (папрад))
 |              |-> paprany (presumed Hungarian root)
 |              |      '-> pafrany (Hungarian)
 |              |-> paparte (presumed Baltic root)
 |              |      |-> paparnite (Lett)
 |              |      |-> paparde (Latvian)
 |              |      '-> papartis (Lithuanian)               < SLAVIC GROUP
 |              |-> paporot (Ukrainian (папорот))
 |              |      '-> paporotnik (Russian (папоротник))
 |              |-> kaprat (presumed Czech root)
 |              |      '-> kapradina (Czech)
 |              |-> papraď (Slovak)
 |              |-> paprad (Macedonian (папрад; also папра and папрат))
 |              |-> praprot (Slovene)
 |              '-> paproč (pah-proach; Polish)
 |
 '-> patram (Old Indian)
        |-> petra (Indo-European root; or petran or petromai)
        |      '-> ptera (Later Indo-European root; or pteran or pteron)
        |              '-> pteron (πτερον; Classical Hellenic/Greek for wing)
        |                      '-> pteris (πτερις; Classical Hellenic/Greek)          < GREEK
        |                              |-> ptere (πτερε; Modern Hellenic/Greek)
        |                              |      '-> fiere (Shqiperi/Albanian)
        |                              '-> ptelis -> p'elis -> p'elix -> felix (Possible Greek to Latin progression)
        |                                      '-> filix (fee-leeks; Latin)
        |                                              |-> filik (synthesized Esperanto)
        |                                              '-> filica (presumed transition to vulgar Latin)
        |                                                      |-> fereca (presumed Rumanian root; reversion shift to "r" from "l")
        |                                                      |      '-> feregä (Modern Rumanian)
        |                                                      '-> filicaria (vulgar Latin)
        |                                                              |-> feucharia (conjectured transition form)
        |                                                              |      '-> feucherie (Old French) -> feuchiere (Old French) -> fougiere
        |                                                              |         (foo-zhee-air; Middle French) -> fougère (foo-zhair; Modern French)
        |              LATINIC GROUP >                                 |-> falcara (conjectured Catalan root)
        |                                                              |      '-> falguera (Catalan)
        |                                                              '-> filicetum (newer Latin; ending shift)
        |                                                                      '-> filictum (even newer Latin)
        |                                                                              |-> filicicula (fee-lee-chee-koo-la; Old Italian)
        |              GERMANIC GROUP                                  |      '-> filicicchia (fee-lee-chee-kee-a; Middle Italian)
        |                      V                                      |      '-> filce (conjectured transition form)
        |                                                             |              '->felce (fel-che; Modern Italian)
        |-> parma (presumed Sanskrit root)                           |-> falét (Friulian)
        |      '-> parna (Sanskrit)                                   '-> filictu (Iberian root)
        |              '-> farn (German)                                      |-> felecho (Old Spanish)
        |                      |-> fearn (Anglo-Saxon)                        |      '-> helecho (eh-leh-cho; Modern Spanish)
        |                      |      '-> fern (English)                      '-> feeito (Old Portuguese)
        |                      '-> varn (farn; Middle Dutch)                          '-> feito (Galago)
        |                              '->varen (fahr-en; Modern Dutch)                       '-> feto (Modern Portuguese)
        |                                      '-> varing (fahr-ing; Afrikaans)
        |
        '-> praten (presumed Celtic root)
                |-> brachen (Germanic root)
                |      '-> braken (Germanic root)
                |              |-> bracken (Old & Modern English)
                |              |      '-> brake (English)
                |              |-> bräken (Swedish)                           < SCANDINAVIAN GROUP
                |              '-> brakni (Old Norse)
                |                      |-> burkni (Icelandic)
                |                      '-> bregne (Norwegian and Danish)
                |
                |-> pratis (Old Gaulish
                |      '-> ratis (Gaulish)
                '-> raten (Old Breton)
                        |-> raden (New Breton)                               < CELTIC GROUP
                        '-> rhedyn (Welsh)
                                '-> raithneach (Gaelic)
                                        |-> rannoch (Scots)
                                        '-> raineach (Irish)
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