

## Comment on “A still undeciphered text”

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**1. Objective.** The paper aims at a new approach to the study of the Rigveda (RV) in a very fundamental way. It alleges not less than “that a small research team, working without preconception as to meaning, would be able to make considerable progress with the decipherment of this important ancient text in just a few years”. This presupposes that the scientific approach to the RV up to now has not been truly scientific. And several times the author criticizes without clear counter-argument other scholars for being too confident in their results. The value of the author’s claim depends on the proposed method and the given pieces of evidence.

**2. Programmatic character.** The author largely refers to older publications of herself. A thorough comment would have to consider these, too. And in fact it would have to be a detailed monograph. So I confine myself here to an examination of the proposed method and some selected pieces of evidence.

**3. Method.** The author correctly points out that there is a gap between the language and the world of the RV on the one hand and the language and the world of the later ritualistic Brāhmaṇa prose on the other hand. And she nicely shows the difference between the autochthonous Indian access to the RV relying mainly on the later ritualistic citations and interpretations of the RV and the European access which since Max Müller has seen the difference and has tried to understand the RV on its very own. The author clearly decides in favor of the European way of the 19th century and insists on the idea that “only study of the use of a word can determine its meaning”. This is correct - but nevertheless not exhaustive. Besides the study of the *word’s use* also *etymology* has, often successfully, been exploited for determining the meaning. And, in fact, without the autochthonous *Indian tradition* European scholars would never have managed to get an understanding of the RV at all. We have not to choose between a “right” and a “wrong” method on the whole, we

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rather have to combine these methods. And in each single case we have to decide which of these methods leads us how far. And if we decide against the later Indian reading of a word, we have to *demonstrate* that it misses the original Rigvedic meaning. If such a demonstration is *not* possible, we have to leave the question *open*.

**4. The case of *svadhā*.** Etymologically (literally) ‘self-placing’, later ‘sacrificial drink’. According to the author “the traditional (i.e. later) interpretation can be dispensed with for all Rigvedic occurrences” (note 5). Well - it *can* be dispensed with, for all contexts allow the literal meaning without remarkable clash. But has it to be dispensed with? If the later reading is also possible, why is it to be excluded? Look at 1.144.02: *apām upásthe víbhṛ to yád āvasad / ádha svadhā adhayad yābhir īyate* (Text taken from <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/lrc/RV/RV01.html>) “Als er (Agni) verteilt im Schoße der Wasser wohnte, da saugte er die Eigenkräfte ein, mit denen er sich bewegt” (Geldner), “Selbstbestimmungs-kräfte” (*Rig-Veda. Das heilige Wissen. Erster und zweiter Liederkreis*. Hg. von Michael Witzel und Toshifumi Gotō. Frankfurt am Main und Leipzig 2007: 270 - by the way a publication the author should quote). Here Geldner and the newest translation decide for the abstract, literal meaning. But it stands in collocation with *adhayad* ‘sucked’. Couldn’t this be a bridge between the earlier and the later meaning? Isn’t it possible that the ritual meaning of the ‘sacrificial drink’ is exactly this ‘Eigenkraft’ or ‘life-force’ (for the latter note the occurrence of *svadhā* in funeral hymns!) and that the creation of this sacrificial drink has developed exactly from the wish of giving a ritualistic *pendant* to the abstract ‘life-force’? Is the later reading really just a “misunderstanding” of a word whose meaning had become totally obscure to Brahmana poets? - It is very simplistic to believe that the RV can be securely “deciphered” by looking at the context of the words - this method has already been extensively employed by earlier scholars! It’s true, there may be further progress by a thorough employment of the context method. But definitely not by a harsh and insurmountable opposition between original literal and later ritualistic meaning. The author does not waste a word on the *ritualistic identifications* between physical and spiritual things in the Brāhmaṇas. Isn’t it possible that these ritualistic identifications have a predecessor in the RV, especially in the

*enigmatic style* of the RV? The author seems to believe that the enigmatic style of the RV is not a feature of the RV itself but just a matter of wrong interpretation (p. xxx and explicitly p. xxxf.). Good luck for the project of explaining the whole RV literally! What is, to begin with *svadhā*, the exact meaning of this word in the context of Agni, water and sucking? What is 'self-placing' standing for? What had the Rigvedic poet in mind? - It seems absolutely impossible and almost ridiculous to deny the riddle and multilayer character of many hymns and the metaphorical character of nearly all hymns in the RV.

**5. The case of *ándhas*.** Traditionally '1. soma plant, soma juice; 2. darkness' (without clear connection of these two meanings). The author cites 7,96,2 where the dual *ándhasi* denotes an inhabitable place - a crux for the exegesis up to now. The author criticizes (p. 17) Geldner's translation 'both drinks' (with long footnote) as too complicated and Griffith's translation 'grassy banks' as *ad hoc*. But she offers no better translation. Instead she continues the Philippika against a ritualistic interpretation of the RV. This is not satisfying. Maybe *etymology* can give a hint. Hartmut Katz, "Avθos (*Études Finno-Ougriennes* 15 (1978/79), p. 179-188, reprinted in: Hartmut Katz: *Kleine Schriften*. Unter Mitarbeit von Veronika Mock herausgegeben von Peter-Arnold Mumm, Gerson Klumpp und Dieter Strehle. Bremen (Hempfen) 2007, p. 183-192), argues for the etymological identity of *ávθos* and *ándhas* (related to old frisian *ándul* etc.) and ultimately for an etymon *\*h<sub>2</sub>énd<sup>h</sup>os-* 'sprout, young green plant'. This should at least be taken in consideration when the different proposals for the Rigvedic meaning of *ándhas* are discussed.

**6. Other words.** *svadhā* and *ándhas* are just two examples. They have been chosen in order to show the main methodological issues. Other words (partly discussed in other articles not checked by me):

*puroḷás*: Insisting on the abstract sense 'fore-offering, first gift' for the RV seems correct.

*vakṣánā* (see IF 109): If the meaning is, as proposed, 'fertile place', the author has to explain how this meaning fits into the various contexts. And for the suffix and the accent (paroxytonon!) the parallels from *Altindische Grammatik* II, 2, p. 191f. have to be discussed.

*grávan* (see JIES 29): If, as proposed, from the underlying root GAR<sup>1</sup> ‘sing, praise’, why not <sup>†</sup>*gīrvan* with normal zero grade of the root - (see *Altindische Grammatik II*, 2, p. 894ff.)?

*tiróahnyam*: The explanation as adverb like *náktam* seems convincing.

Vedic ruins: The Rigvedic evidence is indeed scarce. But what is to be deduced from this scarceness?

*samudrá*: It is correctly observed that the ablative *samudrāt* in 7,95,2 denotes the origin, not the goal of rivers. But it remains unclear again what is to be deduced from this observation for the meaning of *samudrá* and for Vedic archeology.

**7. Conclusion.** The paper suffers from a severe shortcoming: it ignores - or at least doesn't like to accept - the metaphorical and often enigmatic nature of the Rigvedic text. It simply presupposes that there is a “plain” reading which just has to be found. This radical position is not corroborated by any considerations about the general character of the Rigvedic hymns and their social and religious environment. The RV is seen only in a negative way: it is **not** like the later ritualistic texts. The arguments against the traditional and for the new readings of the single words are often too weak and too one-sided.

But nevertheless the paper is interesting. It shows quite clearly and convincingly the conflict between the ritualistic and the ‘immanent’ interpretation, and its basic approach to separate both wherever it is possible is basically correct and fruitful. The author should dismiss the futile polemics against Witzel, Jamison, Brereton et al. and should concentrate on the positive results strived for. These results (or hypotheses, respectively) should be better elaborated, with full discussion of the etymology and morphology, of the context meaning and the possible meaning developments from an old and perhaps metaphorical meaning to a new and ritually identifying meaning. Only a careful and cautious discussion of each single detail will lead to a better understanding of the Rigveda.