

Interpreting Rigvedic *uśádhak* as a fossil from Indo-Iranian mythology

The Rigveda has 3 occurrences (RV 3.6.7c, 3.34.3c, 7.7.2d) of the word *uśádhak*, which has been deemed as unclear until now, being totally isolated in the whole Indo-Aryan literature. This word is always followed by a plural form of *vána-* ‘wood’, loc. pl. *váneṣu* (2 x) and acc. pl. *vánāni* (7.7.2d). The passages (from hymns to Agni [3.6, 7.7] and to Indra [3.34]), do not belong to recent parts of the RV. The last comprehensive discussion of the problem and of the alternative constructions of the contexts is due to S. Scarlata (*Die Wurzelkomposita im Ṛg-Veda*, Wiesbaden, 1999: 197-199), with review of the previous literature. Nonetheless, this word has been customarily registered as a compound meaning ‘burning with desire or intensely’ (MW: 219c), ‘mit Begierde vernichtend, verzehrend’ (Grassmann: 266), ‘begierig brennend, gierig verbrennend’ (Mayrhofer, *EWAia* I [1988]: 233) and translated accordingly, see for instance ‘gierig brennend’ (Geldner, 1951), ‘burning at will’ (S.W. Jamison and J.P. Brereton, 2014). This is ultimately derived from the root etymology of the two members, from *vaś-/uś-* ‘to desire, wish’ and *dah-* ‘to burn’ respectively, which goes back to Sāyaṇa’s gloss of *uśá-dah-* as a Karmadhāraya compound: *kāmayamāno dahanś ca*. To be fair, this analysis does not give a cogent interpretation of any of the passages, and the hypothesis is bound with contradictory interpretations of their syntax, leaving aside the fact that there is no stem **uśán-* besides the well-known verbal adjective *uśánt-/uśat-* ‘wishing, desiring’. The paper will discuss afresh the issues, and explore the alternative connection of the second member *°dhak* with the root *dagh-* ‘to reach’, i.e., by coming first, being beforehand. The contrary value ‘to come short, lag behind’ is found in the negative contexts of the RV, and in the compound *á-paścād-daghvan-* ‘who does not lag behind’ (RV 6.42.1, about Indra). Following immediately the mention of the killing of a malicious demon in RV 3.34.3, the phrase *uśádhag váneṣu* would mean ‘while reaching Uśan among the woods’, involving a verbal governing compound with a proper name as first member, identical to Avestan *Usan-* (known currently as Kauui Usan, king and warrior, nom. sg. *usa*, with alternative stem *usadan-* for the other cases). On the Vedic side, the name **uśán-* has been remade as *uśánā-*, in the phrase referring to the sage Uśanā Kāvya (RV *uśánā kāvyáḥ, kavīḥ*, etc.), according to formal processes which have been traced in detail by S.W. Jamison, “Vedic Uśanā Kāvya and Avestan Kauui Usan: On the morphology of the names”, in: *Verba Docenti. Studies in historical and Indo-European linguistics presented to Jay H. Jasanoff*, ed. A.J. Nussbaum, Ann Arbor-New York, 2007: 155-168. The original RVic context of *uśádhak* referred to the decisive visit of Indra and Kutsa to the wise priest Uśanā K., who gives eventually to Indra, in addition to the offering of *soma*, counsels and a magic weapon for overcoming the demon Śuṣṇa. In association with Indra, the hero Kutsa manages, by resorting beforehand to the advice of Uśanā K., to anticipate the attack of the demons against the sun. The ‘woods’ allude possibly – and simultaneously – to the abode of Uśanā K. in a remote forest, to the vessels containing the *soma* and to the fortress of Śuṣṇa. Then, the word *uśádhak* encapsulated a phrase which belonged to the narrative of the complex and much discussed myths of Śuṣṇa and Kutsa, which are alluded to in several passages of the RV, see Macdonell (*Vedic Mythology*, Strassburg, 1897: 146-147, 160-161) and especially Geldner (*Vedische Studien*, II, Stuttgart, 1897: 155-179); Sieg, “Sonnenrennen im RV” [1928, repr. *Kleine Schriften*, Stuttgart, 1991: 394-412]; Jamison, in *The Rig-Veda between two worlds*, Paris, 2007: 124-139. Because this phrase concerns the winning of the sun, it could be transferred to hymns dedicated to Agni (RV 3.6 and 7.7). The paper will provide a new translation of some passages of the RV and an additional piece of evidence to the figure of an Indo-Iranian mythical priest, to with Av. Kauui Usan and Ved. Uśanā Kāvya.