

Interpreting a Rigvedic Word as a Fossil from Indo-Iranian Mythology

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§ 1. The Saṁhitā of the Ṛgveda (henceforth RV) consists of hymns which contain few narratives. The absence of the extensive telling of any myth of the Rigvedic religion is kind of frustrating. In many cases, fundamental myths have to be reconstructed from bits and pieces which have been inserted in poems devoted mostly to the praise of the gods. Even one of the best-known myths, the killing of the serpent Vṛtra by the god Indra, is never told in a way which would ideally include all the steps of this major fighting of the warrior god against a demonic figure (*vṛtrá-* masc.) which represented the forces of chaos, while embodying the obstacle (*vṛtrá-*, nt.) to the flowing of waters, and more generally to the living of the world.¹ Actually, the whole myth is summarized in the phrase *vṛtrám han-* ‘to kill Vṛtra’, which had become a formula, with Indra as agent, at the surface syntactic level the subject of this phrase. This phrase is also the basis of the compound agent noun *vṛtra-hán-* which qualifies Indra as the ‘killer of Vṛtra’ and ‘smasher of the obstacle’.² The myth is then condensed in its crucial point, and the agent noun could be used for referring to the god himself in short. One would like to know more about the chain of events which preceded and prepared this action, about other possible actors, and about the sequels. It happens that a complete myth can be so to speak encapsulated in a single word. The previous example is of course well-known and much commented on. This approach may lead to pause on some isolated words which resisted until now any interpretation, and to search the key for their understanding in a myth or mythical motif which left some testimonies in parts of the Rigvedic text.

1 Oberlies 2012: 198–200. Two hymns (RV 1.32, 1.80) tell the Indra-Vṛtra battle with some extension, but they are far from covering the whole myth, which would state the causes of this contest and the promotion of Indra as champion and hero for gods and mortals.

2 Watkins 1995: 297–323 and *passim*.

§ 2. A case in point is the word *uśádhak*, whose grammatical status is not even clearly ascertained, and which is totally isolated in the whole Indo-Aryan literature. It is attested only in the RV, where this form has 3 occurrences: 3.6.7c, 3.34.3c, 7.7.2d. On the tracks of the glossing given by Sāyaṇa at 3.6.7c (*kāmayamāno dahanś ca*), this word has been traditionally registered as a Karmadhāraya compound, whose two members have been connected with the roots *vaś-/uś-* ‘to desire, wish’ (MW: 929a; EWAia II: 527–528) and *dah-* ‘to burn’ (MW: 473b; EWAia I: 712–713) respectively. This would be based on a stem *uśá-dah-* ‘burning with desire or intensely’ (MW: 219c), in all occurrences in the nominative singular, masculine (with °*dhak* < *°*dhagh-s*).³ In theory, from the phonological point of view, the second member could be based as well on the root *dagh-* ‘to fall short of, to reach’ (MW: 466b), but the connection with *dah-* ‘to burn’ is based on two facts: the word occurs twice in hymns to Agni, and in all occurrences it is followed by a form of *vána-* nt. ‘wood’, locative plural *váneṣu* (3.6.7c, 3.34.3c), accusative plural *vánāni* (7.7.2d).⁴ From this etymological account derives the gloss given by Grassmann (266): ‘mit Begierde vernichtend, verzehrend’, and by the two etymological dictionaries authored by Mayrhofer: ‘gierig verbrennend/burning intensely’ (KEWAi I: 112), ‘begierig brennend, gierig verbrennend’ (EWAia I [Lieferung 3, 1988]: 233), even though the latter states with caution that this meaning is just ‘likely’, despite some difficulties of exegesis for which it is referred to the previous translations and commentaries. Accordingly, *uśá-dah-* would be a verbal governing compound, with first member being an adverb or a derivative with adverbial meaning: ‘gierig verbrennend’ (Wackernagel 1905: 221, § 91.f.γ, with question mark), however with abnormal accent, since the expected form would be **uśa-dáh-*. One cannot

3 Geldner, who based also his interpretation on Sāyaṇa (quoted 1907: 36b and 1909: 44), took the word as uninflected, however. A first version of this paper, written in 2022, has been read in the Veda section of the 18th World Sanskrit Conference, Canberra, 9–13 January 2023, held online.

4 As underlined by Neisser (1924: 177). In any case, the alternative connection with *dagh-* ‘to reach’ (present *daghnóti*, aor.inj. *dhak*, etc., EWAia I: 691) does not allow any promising interpretation of the occurrences. As an isolated claim which had no success, one may mention the connection with *dhā-* ‘to suck, drink’ (present *dháyati*, aor. *ádhāt*, etc., KEWAi II: 93), combined with the same interpretation of the first member, according to PW (I: 1008): ‘gierig schluckend, lustig schlürfend’. The tracing back of the second member to *°*dhaj-* (sic), as allomorph of *dhā-*, was arbitrary, although it was meant for avoiding the contextual difficulties residing in the connection with the root *dah-*, which was surmised by the indigenous commentaries.

deny that this gloss makes some sense in relationship with Agni, the personified fire, who is eager to burn, to crush or to eat the wood with his flames, compared to the jaws of a beast. Nonetheless, this faces some difficulties: 1) the word could be thus interpreted in isolation, while ignoring the contexts; 2) the first member is totally isolated, if it had ever the alleged meaning. Concerning the second point, there is no free form **uśa-* or **uśan-* as derived from the root *vaś-/uś-*. It has been taken for granted that *uśa-* in *uśá-dah-* was related in one way or the other to the present participle *uśánt-* (RV +) of the verb in question. Alternatively, it would be based on an *an-*stem from the same root, which would be set up entirely ad hoc. Renou, while connecting *uśá°* to *uśánt-*, stated that the form of the compound *uśádhak* was puzzling.⁵ It would be costly to set up an *-an-*stem **uśan-* from the root *vaś-* only for accounting for *uśá-dhak*. In Indo-Aryan the *-an-*suffix does not serve to make primary agent nouns, nor primary action nouns, which would be neuter.⁶ I cannot follow the backwards projection, as per Scarlata (1999: 199) of *uśá-dah-* into Proto-Indo-European, as a compound of the shape **uk̑-n-d^heg^{uh}-* ‘willig heiss werdend’, with a derivative from the root **uek̑-* as first predicative member. While the participle *uśánt-*, fem. *uśatī-* is certainly inherited (PIE **uk̑-é/ónt-*, see Av. *usant-*,

5 EVP XIII (1964): 143, ad RV 7.7.2.

6 Debrunner 1954: 175–179. Prof. Konrad Klaus has drawn my attention (in a message of November 28, 2023, for which I am most grateful) on the controversial passage of Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa 3.11.8.1, which reads: *uśán ha vái vājaśravasáh sarvavedasám dadau*, idem – without accents – at the beginning of Kāṭhaka- (alias Kāṭha-) Upaniṣad, 1.1 (prose). Here *uśan* has been understood routinely, following Śaṅkara, as the participle present ‘willing, wishing, desirous’, nom.sg. masc. in apposition, as it is found in the RV (12 x, out of which 10 x at pāda beginning). In the narrative featuring the father of Naciketā, one would expect some direct object of the participle (heaven, fruit of the sacrifice, or rewards for the priests), as surmised by several translations, compare : ‘Vājaśravasa, desirous (of heavenly rewards), surrendered (at a sacrifice) all that he possessed’ (Müller 1884: 1); ‘Willig gab einstmals Vājaśravasa [bei einem Opfer] seine ganze Habe dahin’ (Deussen 1921: 266); ‘Begierig [nach einem Weiterleben im Himmel] gab Vājaśravasa [nach einem Allopfer (*sarvamedha*) seine] ganze Habe [den Priestern zum Lohne]’ (Rau 1971: 160). The alternative interpretation as proper name has been preferred by Renou: ‘Uśant fils de Vājaśravas fit don de tout son avoir’ (1943: 5); ‘Uśan, the son of Vājaśravas, once gave away all his possessions’ (Olivelle 1998: 375, see also 600). This is actually more cogent in view of the numerous instances of the sequence ‘X [proper name] *ha vái*, son of Y ...’ Then, one should assume that a proper name *Uśánt-* (as set up correctly by Renou) was based on the present participle, unless **Uśá*, the regular nom. sg. of **Uśán-* (cognate with the first member of RV *uśádhak* and with the proper name RV *Uśánā*, see below § 6) had been reshaped as **Uśán* under the influence of the participle, and through paronomasia with *uś-*, from the root *vaś-*. In any case, this should be added to the already recorded peculiarities of this Upaniṣad, which has a heterogeneous text, built with different layers.

Gk. ἐκόντ-), there is no reflex of a PIE stem **uk̑-e/on-*. This kind of gratuitous and extremely speculative reconstruction is not based on any inherited phraseology. In that case, one does not know two comparable lexemes which would be associated in that way in other Indo-European languages. One may wonder if such a phrase, supposed to mean ‘burning willingly’, could be meaningful at all outside of the RVic poetry. If one keeps the connection with the participle *uśánt-* ‘willing, wishing, desiring’ (RV 51 x), weak stem *uśat-*, fem. *uśatī-* (RV 27 x), one may conceive the existence of an adverb **uśát*, meaning ‘willingly, at will’, after the type of *dravát* ‘quickly, speedily’ (RV 7 x) vs. *drávant-* ‘running’, *stāyát* (AVŚ 4.16.1, 7.108.1) ‘stealthily, furtively’ vs. *stāyant-* ‘stealing’.⁷ Then, one would expect **uśád-dah-* meaning ‘burning at will’,⁸ according to the translation favored by the reference translations, see the next paragraph. The idea of some kind of truncation of the first member into *uśa*^o before the following stop does not have any parallel, however.⁹

§ 3. Leaving aside this issue of derivational morphology, the standard translations of the RV have adopted the gloss given by Grassmann. I give thereafter the text of the three stanzas followed by German and English translations. Except for the pādas where *uśádhak* occurs, the interpretation of these stanzas looks as reasonably safe:

RV 3.6.7

*divás cid ā te rucayanta rokā, uśó vibhātīr ānu bhāsi pūrvīḥ /
apó yád agna uśádhag váneṣu, hótur mandráśya panáyanta devāḥ //*

‘Bis zum Himmel sogar leuchten deine Leuchten; den vielen erglänzenden Morgenröten glänzest du nach, während deiner gierig in den Hölzern brennenden (?) Tätigkeit, des wohlredenden Hotṛ, die Götter Beifall spenden, o Agni.’ (Geldner, RV I: 343).

‘Bis zum Himmel sogar lassen deine Leuchten aufleuchten; den Morgenröten, den weitstrahlenden, vielen, strahlst du nach, wenn, o Agni, in den Hölzern begierig brennend (*uśádhak*), des erfreulichen Hotar Werk die Götter bewundernd preisen.’ (Witzel in Witzel/Gotō II: 25)

7 For the latter case, see EWAia I: 643 and II: 759.

8 As surmised explicitly by Ludwig IV[1881]: 298, in his commentary of 3.6.7.

9 Pace Renou (1952: 116, § 158 note).

‘Your shining rays shine here even to heaven; you become radiant along with the many far-radiant dawns, / when, o Agni, the gods marvel at your busy burning at will among the wood, (the burning) by the delightful Hotar.’ (Jamison-Brereton I: 477).

RV 3.34.3

*indra vṛtrám avṛṇoc chárdhanītiḥ, prá māyínām aminād várpañītiḥ /
áhan vyāmsam usádthag váneṣu, āvīr dhénā akṛṇod rāmyāñām //*

‘Indra wehrte den Vṛtra ab durch das Mittel der Stärke; er vereitelte (die Listen) der Listigen durch das Mittel der Verwandlung. Er erschlug den Vyāmsa in den Hölzern gierig brennend. Er machte die Stimmen der Nächte offenbar.’ (Geldner, RV I: 374–375).

‘Indra wehrte den Vṛtra ab durch (seine) Stärke als Mittel; er minderte (die Wunderkräfte) der Wunderkräftebesitzer mit (seiner) Scheingestalt als Mittel. Er erschlug den Vyāmsa, in den Hölzern gierig brennend. Offenbar machte er die Redeströme der Nächte.’ (Witzel in Witzel-Gotō II: 66).

‘Indra obstructed the obstacle [Vṛtra] through control of his troop [= Maruts}; he beguiled (the wiles) of the wily ones through control of forms. / He smashed the one whose shoulders were spread [= cobra]. Burning at will in the woods, he brought to light the nourishing streams of the nights.’ (Jamison-Brereton I: 516).

RV 7.7.2

*ā yāhy agne pathyā ánu svā, mandró devānām sakhyām juṣānáḥ /
ā sānu súṣmair nadāyan pṛthivyā, jámbhebhīr víśvam usádthag vānāni//*

‘Komm, Agni, deine gewohnten Wege, willkommen, der Freundschaft der Götter dich erfreuend, den Rücken der Erde mit deinem Ungestüm erdröhnen machend, mit den Zähnen alles (verzehrend), die Bäume gierig verbrennend.’ (Geldner, RV II: 187).

‘Hierher fahre, o Agni, deinen eigenen Pfaden folgend, als Erfreulicher, die Genossenschaft mit den Göttern gern habend, indem du den Rücken der Erde mit (dauerndem) Schnauben erdröhnen läßt, mit den Zähnen alles, die Bäume gierig verbrennend!’ (Gotō in Witzel/Gotō III: 161).

‘Journey here along your own paths, o Agni, as the delighting one who takes pleasure in companionship with the gods; / (journey) here along the back of the earth, bellowing with outbursts, burning everything, burning the wood at will with your jaws.’ (Jamison-Brereton II: 892).

Renou did follow basically Geldner’s translation: see ‘brûlant à son gré dans les bois’ (3.34.3c, EVP XVII[1969]: 76), ‘brûlant à ton gré’ (7.7.2d, EVP XIII[1964]: 57), ‘ô Agni qui brûles volontiers dans les bois’ (3.6.7c, EVP XII[1964]: 55). The same doctrine is endorsed by Witzel and Gotō: 3.6.7c ‘in den Hölzern begierig brennend’,¹⁰ 3.34.3c ‘in den Hölzern gierig brennend’,¹¹ 7.7.2d ‘die Bäume gierig verbrennend’,¹² while conceding that *usádhak* is ‘obscure’,¹³ referring to Oldenberg’s discussion, see further below (§ 4). These hymns are dedicated to Agni (3.6, 7.7) and Indra (3.34) and do not belong to recent parts of the RV.¹⁴ The stanzas in question are not affected by textual or metrical problems.

§ 4. The above translations conceal several difficulties pertaining to the interpretation of *usádhak* in each passage, while not providing a unified treatment of this word. There have been in the past alternative constructions of the contexts, based on issues which have been ably surveyed by Scarlata (1999: 197–199) in the latest comprehensive discussion of this word. Scarlata himself lists *usá-dah-*, glossed ‘begierig brennend’ (following the received tradition,¹⁵ however with question mark), among the RVic verbal governing compounds with root noun as second member, while conceding (1999: 199) that the definitive assessment of this form has not been reached yet. In 3.6.7cd, the syntagm *apás (...) usádhak* is apparently the direct object of the injunctive *panáyanta*. Oldenberg¹⁶ took *apás* as equivalent of *apas*, neuter, ‘work, activity’, which was modified by *usádhak*, also accusative nt., hence ‘die

¹⁰ Witzel-Gotō II: 25.

¹¹ Witzel-Gotō II: 66.

¹² Witzel-Goto III: 161.

¹³ Witzel-Gotō II: 361.

¹⁴ According to the classification done by Arnold (1905: 275, 279), 3.6 and 3.34 belong to the “normal” (N) period and 7.7 to the “strophic” (S) period.

¹⁵ Endorsed decidedly by Witzel-Gotō III: 458.

¹⁶ Noten I: 228. Following basically Ludwig I [1876]: 333, who translated as follows: ‘dasz des heitern hotars in den hölzern girig brennende tätigkeit loben die götter’. Compare Ludwig (2019: 361): ‘that, o Agni, the gods may praise (admire) the work of the glad *hotar* [that consists in his] eagerly burning in the woods’.

Tätigkeit, die in den Wäldern gierig brennende'.¹⁷ But this is not applicable to 3.34.3c, where *uśádhak* follows *vyàmsam*, accusative masculine: in that passage, *uśádhak* could be nominative masculine, in apposition to the subject, Indra (*áhan vyàmsam* 'he killed V.'). In 7.7.2, instead of *uśádhag váneṣu*, one finds *uśádhag vánāni*, following *viśvam*, the whole phrase being apparently the direct object of an implicit verb meaning 'to eat, devour', or 'to crush', or 'to burn'. One may admit that the latter (*dah-*) did not surface because it was understood in *uśádhak*. A further problem resides in the sequence *viśvam (...)* *vánāni*, either with singular collective ('all, everything') followed by plural ('the woods'), or instead of *viśvā(ni) vánāni*, due to metrical constraint.¹⁸ In any case, the construction is not the same as in 3.6.7cd and 3.34.3cd, so that one cannot explain this as kind of formulaic variation, by assuming that *vánāni* replaced somehow *váneṣu*.¹⁹ All these expedients fail to convince. I will rather follow Scarlata (1999: 199) by taking *uśádhak* as a neuter substantive, which refers to something which is 'among the woods' or 'in the forests' (*váneṣu*, 3.6.7c, 3.34.3c), which is active, at work (*apás* 3.6.7c, being epithet or apposition), and which is combustible, because it can be on the same level as *vánāni* (7.7.2d): direct object in 3.6.7 and 7.7.2, and possibly also in 3.34.3. For the latter passage, Jamison (in her commentary, put online in 2020) argues for seeing a shift to Agni phraseology, so that *uśádhag váneṣu* should be constructed with the next *pāda*, against all previous translations, while taking *uśádhak* as nominative, in apposition to the subject, Indra. This complies with the tradition that holds *uśádhak* as a nominative elsewhere. One may consider that Indra is described as producing himself light, through killing a demon who had locked up the dawns, the sun, the waters, the cows, and other goods, as it is told in the next stanza:

RV 3.34.4

*indrah svarṣá janáyann áhāni, jigāyośtgbhiḥ pṛtanā abhiṣtīḥ /
prārocayan mánave ketúm áhnām, ávindaj jyótir bṛhaté rāñāya //*

17 This interpretation of *apás* is rather forced, and it has not been endorsed by Jamison-Brereton (I: 477, see above § 3).

18 Oldenberg, *Noten* II: 9. On this problem, see also Renou (EVP XIII: 143): 'tout, (y compris) les bois'. The alternative interpretation by 'jedes einzelne, die Bäume', according to Witzel-Gotō (III: 458) is not compelling.

19 As accepted by Neisser (1930: 45).

‘Indra, der Sonnengewinner, der die Tage schuf, der Überlegene gewann mit den Uśij die Schlachten. Er ließ für Manu das Wahrzeichen der Tage aufleuchten; er fand das Licht zu großer Freude.’ (Geldner, RV I: 375).

‘Indra, das Sonnenlicht gewinnend, die Tage schaffend, hat mit den Uśij die Gefechte gewonnen, der Überlegene. Er ließ für Manu das Wahrzeichen der Tage aufleuchten; er fand das Licht zu hoher Freude.’ (Witzel in Witzel-Gotō II: 66).

‘Indra winning the sun, begetting the days, conquered in the battles along with the fire-priests, as superiority (itself). / He made shine for Manu the beacon of the days [= sun], he found the light for lofty joy.’ (Jamison-Brereton I: 516).

Alternatively, *uśádhak* (3.34.3c) can be understood as direct object of *āvīr* (...) *akṛ̥ṇot* (d), on the same level as *dhénāḥ*. This would not affect the sequence of the mythical imagery. Jamison (*op.cit.*) insists on the thematic connection with the preceding stanza, which is reinforced by the phonetic echo linking *uśíg-bhiḥ* (4b), instrumental plural, with *uśá-dhak* (3c). I propose to go a step further, by assuming that this surface effect is based on a deeper relationship between **uśán-*, basis of the first member of *uśá-dhak*, and *uśij-*, masc. which refers to priests (Uśij) helping Indra in his conquest of light, on the model of the support which the Aṅgiras (*āṅgiras-*), mythical priests, gave by their chanting to Indra in the myth of Vala, the demonized cave which contained the vital goods. As far as Indra liberates all the lights in this primordial exploit, his action corresponds to the one of Agni, acting on the ritual ground in the morning, at sunrise. Effectively, some traits of Agni as god of fire, light, sun, etc. are superimposed here on Indra, which accounts for the fact that *uśádhak* is otherwise found in hymns to Agni, which describe burning of woods and plants (7.7.2cd) or his work as priest (Hotar, 3.6.7d), precisely shining along the dawns (3.6.7b). One may even assume that the phrase *uśádhag váneṣu* has been imported from 3.6.7c by a poet of the same family (Atri), in order to be adapted to a different context in 3.34.3c, while being set at the same place in the pāda.

§ 5. Going back to the formal analysis of *uśádhak*, I take on Scarlata’s analysis as the substantivization (*uśá-dah-*), through accent retraction, of an adjective, which was a verbal governing compound, **uśa-dáh-*, but with a different syntactic analysis: the second member was an agent noun with passive value, so that the compound meant ‘burnt by Uśan’. This compound was a kind of

kenning (periphrasis) referring to some stuff which was found in the woods, or among the woods, and which could be burnt by the fire, precisely the ritual fire. This may have been some implement used for the kindling of fire. The underlying term with neuter gender would be *tṛṇa-* ‘grass’ (Grassmann: 547), ‘grass, herb, straw’ (MW: 453a), or *parṇá-* ‘leaf’ (MW: 606b). The former noun (RV 6 x) is found once as direct object of *dah-* in 3.29.6d: *tṛṇā dáhan* ‘burning the grasses’, again in the Atri’s maṇḍala. The presence of *apás* in 3.6.7c is quite decisive, because this adjective refers usually to someone ‘active, busy, industrious’ for the ritual.²⁰ The plant burnt by the priest and by Agni, the personified fire, the divine equivalent of the fire-priest, becomes ritually ‘active’ and efficient once the fire has been kindled. Taking stock of the previous assumptions, I propose the following translation of the three passages: 3.6.7cd ‘when the gods marvel at the active one burnt by Uśan among the woods, belonging to the delightful Hotar, o Agni’; 7.7.2cd ‘along the back of the earth, bellowing with outbursts, (devouring) with your jaws the woods, every (grass) burnt by Uśan’; 3.34.3cd ‘(Indra) killed Vyāmsa (the cobra). He brought to light the burnt one by Uśan (for the morning fire), the nourishing streams of the nights’. In the latter passage, ‘the burnt one’, evoked through metonymy the flame rising up on the ritual altar at dawn,²¹ since the kindling element – grass or plant of sorts – has been so to speak absorbed by the fire itself. In all passages, *usádhak* features as direct object. From the derivational point of view, the interpretation of the stem *usá-dah-* (originally **usá-dáh-*) as a verbal governing compound with passive second element is perfectly acceptable,²² see the following examples from the RV: *madhu-pṛc-* ‘mixed with honey’, *yuvā-yúj-* ‘harnessed by you (two)’, *hiranya-vī-* ‘wrapped in gold’, *annā-vṛdh-* ‘strengthened by food’, *payo-vṛdh-* ‘strengthened by milk’, *girā-vṛdh-* ‘grown strong through song’, *ṛtā-vṛdh-* ‘strengthened by the truth’, etc. There are well-recorded instances of the first member standing for an instrumental with value of agent or means.²³

20 See for instance RV 1.31.8c, 3.1.3d, 11d, 3.2.5d, 7b, 3.8.5c, 3.60.3b, 8.4.14b, 9.72.6b, 9.107.13c. Agni himself is called the best workman (*apástamaḥ*, 10.115.2a).

21 Actually, Scarlata (1999: 199) suggested that *usádhak* was based on some circumlocution for *śociṣ-*, neuter, ‘flame’ (RV +). But this would not work for the passages where *usádhak* refers to some material which is burnt by fire, as in 3.6.7cd, 7.7.2cd, not to the fire itself.

22 Scarlata 1999: 738–739.

23 Scarlata 1999: 747. See also Wackernagel-Debrunner 1930: 212–213.

§ 6. The next issue is about accounting for the lexical status of **uśán-* found in the first member of *uśá-dah-*. It was a proper name, matching Avestan *Usan-*. This mythological figure is far from being unknown in the Indo-Iranian area, under the complex form Av. *Kauui Usan* (in later sources, continued by Middle Persian *Kay Us*, Persian *Kay Kā'us*), Ved. *Uśánā Kāvya* (known in secondary literature as *Kāvya Uśanas*).²⁴ In Younger Avestan the nom. sg. is *Usa*, besides a by-stem *Usađan-* that underlies the acc. sg. *Usađanəm*, gen. sg. *Usađanō* (var. *Usađānō*), whose precise origin remains unclear.²⁵ Leaving this latter stem aside,²⁶ the basic name points to an animate (masculine) *-an-* stem, whose expected nom. sg. would be Ved. **uśá*, together with an acc.sg. **uśánam*, following the type of *ukśán-* ‘young bull’ (*ukśá*, *ukśánam*), *vṛśan-* ‘bull’ (*vṛśá*, *vṛśánam*), and of names such as *aryamán-* (*aryamā*, *aryamánam*), *pūśán-* (*pūśá*, *pūśánam*).²⁷ In Indo-Aryan, the stem is registered as *uśanas-*,²⁸ but this form appears relatively late, in middle Vedic period, and becomes standard by the Epic stage. In the RV, the name occurs in 17 passages, under a restructured form, which points to the older *-an-* stem. According to the lexica and grammars,²⁹ this noun had in the RV an abnormal paradigm, stemming from a single form *uśánā*, used potentially for different cases, with forms of accusative, dative and locative which have been so to speak improvised on demand: nom. sg. *uśánā* (14 x), acc.sg. *uśánām* (10.40.7b), dat.sg. *uśáne* (6.20.11b), loc. sg. *uśáne* (1.51.11a). This has been cogently explained³⁰ by the collocation of the name with the title of this character, which was originally *kaví-* (matching Av. *kauui-*) and currently *kāvya-* (alternatively *kāvya-*), the latter being evidently based on the former, see the phrases *kavír uśánā* (4.26.1d), *uśánā kāvyaáh* (1.83.5c, 8.23.17a), *kāvya uśánā* (1.121.12c), *kāvya uśáneva* (9.97.7a), *uśánā kāvyaena* (9.87.3b), *uśáne kāvyaé* (1.51.11a), *uśáne kāvyaáya* (6.20.11b). Then, *uśánā* owes its peculiar shape to the addition of °*ā* to the stem *uśán-*, after the older nom.sg. **kavá* (< **kauáj*), matching Old

24 Lommel 1939 (= 1978: 162–167), Macdonell-Keith 1912, I: 103; Jamison 2007a: 124–137.

25 Mayrhofer 1979: 84–85 (Nos. 322 and 323), with previous literature; de Vaan 2003: 128–129.

26 Whichever was the model of this form, Av. *Usađan-* kept the inflection of an *-an-* stem. One may consider that **usad-* was kind of variant or reshaping of the priestly title *usij-* (see below § 7) or that it contained a substantivizing suffix *-ad-*, akin to the one found in Ved. (RV) *samád-* ‘meeting, battle’, see Debrunner 1954: 175 (§ 78).

27 Wackernagel-Debrunner 1930: 267; Macdonell 1910: 204–206; Gotō 2013: 38.

28 MW: 219c; EWAia I: 234.

29 Wackernagel-Debrunner 1930: 285; Renou 1952: 195 (§ 243, note 4).

30 See Jamison 2007b.

Avestan *kauuā* (also in *kauua-cā*, with pre-clitic shortening), according to an inflectional pattern of *-i*-stems which has been abandoned in Vedic for the “normal” inflection of the type sg. nom. *kaviḥ*, acc. *kavim*, etc.³¹ This awkward nom.sg. *uśánā* for a masculine name has been eventually reanalyzed as belonging to an ^o*as*-stem, nom.sg. *uśánās*, with loss of the final *-s* before voiced sounds, hence a new acc.sg. *uśanas-am*, etc.³² This stem *uśán-* is also presupposed by the vr̥ddhi derivative *auśana-* ‘belonging to Uśan, coming from Uśan’, which gives the name of several melodies (*sāman-*).³³ Accordingly, the first member of the compound *uśá-dah-* shows the expected form of the weak stem allomorph of *-an*-stems, compare RV *vṛ̥ṣa-parvan-*, *vṛ̥ṣa-nābhi-*, *vṛ̥ṣa-pāñi-*, *pūṣa-rāti-*, etc.

§ 7. The correspondence between Old Iranian and Vedic points to a figure of Indo-Iranian mythology, even though their roles are manifestly different: Av. *Kauui Usan* is a king and warrior while Ved. *Uśanā Kāvya* is a wise priest and a sage. The issue of the ultimate meaning and function of Indo-Iranian **kauūāi-/*kauūi-* ‘sage, expert’ (Av. *kauui-* and Iranian cognates, Ved. *kaví-*)³⁴ lies beyond the scope of the present paper. Which is immediately relevant for our purpose is the role of *Uśanā* in the RV. It occurs mainly in allusions to two narratives, which are sometimes intertwined: the saga of the fight against the demon Śuṣṇa, and the Vala myth.³⁵ The first tale has to be reconstructed from bits and pieces, but its basic content is as follows: Śuṣṇa is a kind of serpent, a Vṛtra-like creature, which Kutsa defeated with the help of Indra, both driving the same chariot; Indra, together with his companion, is welcomed by the sage *Uśanā Kāvya*, who supports him in this contest with an offering of *soma* drink, and an efficient weapon.³⁶ The Vala myth tells the opening of the primeval mountain or cave (*valá-*), enclosing cows and other goods, by Indra (or Br̥haspati, alternatively Indra supported by Br̥haspati), with the decisive support of priests and singers, the *Aṅgiras* (*āṅgiras-*).³⁷ In addition, *Uśanā*

31 Gotō 2013: 29.

32 As assumed by Macdonell 1910: 226 note 5.

33 MW: 240a; Jamison 2007b: 163–164 and note 26.

34 Thoroughly discussed by Brereton (2004: 333–337), Jamison (2007a: 120–148), Köhler (2011).

35 Bergaigne II: 328–341; Jamison 2007a: 131–135.

36 Macdonell 1897: 147; Oberlies 2012: 213. See RV 1.51.10–11, 1.121 (stanzas 9–12), 4.16 (stanzas 9–14), 5.29.9, 5.31.8, 5.34.2, 10.22.6.

37 Macdonell 1897: 146; Oberlies 2012: 200–207. See RV 1.83.5, 4.16.2, 8.7.26, 9.87.3.

Kāvya is mentioned as founder of the first sacrifice, together with Atharvan, and as instrumental for establishing Agni as the primeval priest (*hótar-*) of the sacrifice, see especially

RV 1.83.5

*yajñáir átharvā prathamāḥ pathás tate, tátaḥ sūryo vratapā vená ájani /
ā gā ājad uśánā kāvyāḥ sácā, yamáśya jātám amṛtam yajāmahe //*

‘With sacrifices Atharvan first stretched the paths. Thereupon was the sun, the protector of rules, the tracker, born. / Uśánā Kāvya drove the cows together. We sacrifice to the immortal birth of Yama’. (after Jamison-Brereton 2014: 211, slightly modified for the translation of *vratá-*).

RV 8.23.17

*uśánā kāvyás tvā, ní hótāram asādayat /
āyajīm tvā mánave jātávedasam //*

‘Uśánā Kāvya set you [Agni] down as Hotar – you to win (goods) by sacrifice for Manu as Jātavedas.’ (Jamison-Brereton 2014: 1077).

These actions are in accordance with the presence (§ 4) of *Uśan*, alluded to by *uśá-dhak*, in passages pertaining to Agni as the kindled fire (7.7.2), pleasant to the gods, at dawn (3.6.7), and to Indra, as victorious over Vṛtra, as killer of the serpent (cobra) Vyāmsa, in a passage which alludes simultaneously to the personified dawns emerging from the night and to the cows liberated from the darkness of the cave, at dawn (3.34.3). As we have noted above, the hymn 3.34, to Indra, mentions the *uśij*-priests after *uśá-dhak*, in the immediately following stanza (3.34.4). This can be explained by the occasional substitution³⁸ of *uśij*-priests for the Aṅgiras in the telling or recalling of the Vala myth: the symbolic connection is ensured by the notion of the first appearance of light in early morning. Those mythical priests (and possibly poets) are considered as responsible for the original kindling and tending of the fire: they attend on Agni, they install him as priest (*hótar-*) of ritual fire (5.3.4d, 7.10.5a, etc.), and Agni himself is called an *uśij*- (1.60.4a, 3.2.4c, 3.3.7d, 8b, 3.11.2b, 3.27.10c, 10.45.7a), following the rule, the duty (*vratá-*) of the *uśij*- (1.128.1b), the

38 Noted by Schmidt (1968: 59).

sage-poet (*kavi-*) of the fire-priests (10.92.12a). The *uśijaḥ* belong to the ancient race of the Bhr̥gu (*bhṛ̥gu-*, nom. pl. *bhṛ̥gavaḥ*), primeval priests which are connected with the communication of fire to men, and with the first production of fire for the sacrifice.³⁹

§ 8. The noun *uśij-* itself does not have any internal analysis in Old Indo-Aryan. The translation by ‘fire-priest’ (thus consistently by Jamison-Brereton 2014) does not entail that it contained a lexeme related to ‘fire’. It may have been a title or an epithet of priests, going back to Indo-Iranian, and matching Avestan *usij-* (nom.sg. *usixš* Y. 44.20), which refers to enemies of the religion of Zaratuštra.⁴⁰ Now, the RVic contexts point to an intriguing relationship between *uśij-*, *uśánā-* (in the complex name *Uśánā Kāvya*) and finally, as implied by *uśádhak*, **uśán-*, while the latter is matched by Avestan *usan-*, and has been reshaped in Vedic as *uśánā-*.⁴¹ One cannot escape the hypothesis that Indo-Iranian **uć-* was a lexeme corresponding to some mythical or ritual notion. It would be rash to suppose that it meant simply ‘fire’ or ‘rite’. In any case, this noun may have had an origin foreign to Indo-Iranian, and featuring two alternative forms. The form **ućan-* is worthy of notice, because it recalls strikingly the form of another *°an-*stem of Indo-Iranian descent, which has been also variously reshaped in Ancient Vedic: the priestly title **karpan-*, known in Old Avestan under the form *karapan-*, designating religious adversaries of Zaratuštra, mentioned together with *kauui-* (Y. 46.11) and *usij-* (Y. 44.20). On the RVic side, it occurs under secondary adaptations, as dative sg. *kṛpāne* (10.99.9b), *kārpān-é* (10.22.10b),⁴² accusative sg. *kṛpam* (8.3.12c), locative sg. *kṛpe* (8.4.2a), presupposing a nominative sg. **kṛpaḥ*, reshaped from **kṛpā*, on a stem **kṛpan-*.⁴³ This RVic *kṛpan-/kārpān-* appears among protégés of Indra, and again in the tale of Śuṣṇa where Indra together

39 Bergaigne II: 307, 322–323; Macdonell 1897: 140; Oberlies 2012: 123.

40 EWAia I: 234; Witzel-Gotō I, 850, II: 670, III: 680.

41 The relation between *uśij-* and *Uśánā (Kāvya)* has already been hinted at by Bergaigne (II: 341), who stated correctly that the analysis of the two nouns remained obscure. This careful approach was better founded than the routine etymological connection of all these terms to the zero grade *uś-* of the root *vaś-* ‘to wish’, which has been entertained without any semantic control for a long time, see references in KEWAi I: 112, 113, III: 170 ; EWAia I: 233, 234–235, II: 527. Accordingly, *uśij-* was glossed ‘heischend, eifrig strebend; zugethan, bereitwillig’ by PW I: 1009.

42 Jamison 2007b: 111–117.

43 Pinault 2019: 160–161. This may entail that **karpan-* had originally or secondarily a paradigm with mobile accent, see Jamison (2007b: 117).

with Kutsa visits the sage Uśanā.⁴⁴ It remains impossible to decide which was the basic form, between *uśán- and uśíj-, both inherited from Indo-Iranian. Although the name Ved. *Uśán- remains partly opaque, it reflects certainly a constellation of Indo-Iranian figures which had a significant role in ancient myths, surfacing as stray fragments in our texts.

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44 Jamison 2007b: 114–116.

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