

Aspects of Vedic semantics and etymology

The interpretation of many items of Indo-Aryan vocabulary has frequently blended semantics and etymology. Accordingly, the translations given for several nouns of Vedic language are loaded with etymological prejudices, based on the purported connections with verbal roots. A case in point is the Vedic noun *vedhás-*, masculine, attested from the Rigveda onwards. The glosses given by the dictionaries and by the translators have been influenced by the connection with the root *vidh-*, which is itself secondary, originating from *vi-dhā-* ‘to distribute, apportion’ and ‘to put in order, arrange, dispose’, etc. This course is however forbidden by the Iranian match of *vedhás-* which is reflected by Old Avestan *vazdah-*. The analysis of this latter noun remains also unknown, despite various attempts. The common point between Vedic *vedhás-* and Old Iranian is the connection with the ‘truth’ (Ved. *ṛtá-*), cf. Ved. *vedhā ṛtásya*, Av. *Aṣāuuazdah-*, Old Persian **Ṛta-vazdah-* transposed by Gk. *Artábasdos*, Arm. *Artavazd*, etc. As a result, the two etymological dictionaries authored by Manfred Mayrhofer do not give any gloss for this lemma, and mention several connections without giving any clear preference. One will reopen the dossier of the meaning of *vedhás-* in the Rigvedic hymns. It refers basically to the ‘worshipper, sacrificer’. In the synchrony of the Rigveda, there is still a connection with the altar on which the fire is kindled, since Agni is most often called *vedhás-* and he is the *vedhás-* par excellence (*vedhástama-*). Therefore, one will explore a possible connection of *vedhás-* with the noun *védi-*, feminine, which designates the piece of ground serving as altar. The analysis of *védi-* is also difficult, although it has been plausibly connected with the root *sad-* ‘to sit’, through a compound **ṷa-zd-*. Now, a better appreciation of the phonological and morphological possibilities, according to recent researches about nominal derivation, would account for the relationship between *védi-* and *vedhás-*. The noun *védi-* has been restructured as an *i*-stem ; it ended originally in laryngeal (**h₂*). The Indo-Iranian noun **ṷazdhás-* is based on an action noun which is distantly related to **sadhas-* ‘seat’, cf. Ved. *sadhástha-*, *sádhiṣ-*, etc. Reformulating Kuiper’s analysis, the latter nominal derivative can be transposed as **séd-h₂-(e)s-* ; an allomorph **-sd-h₂-és-* would account for **ṷazdhás-* yielding Ved. *vedhás-* and Av. *vazdah-*. One can then define more precisely the meaning of this noun: it referred originally to the king-priest who was responsible for the foundation of the altar, and delineated the space that was kept apart for the sitting of the gods.