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Atharvaveda-Shaunakiya 19.49.1 = Atharvaveda-Paippalada 14.8.1: An etymological note on Vedic ratri- 'night'

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РОССИЙСКАЯ АКАДЕМИЯ НАУК
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Вяч. Вс. Иванова*

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**ATHARVAVEDA-ŚAUNAKĪYA 19.49.1 =
ATHARVAVEDA-PAIPPALĀDA 14.8.1:
AN ETYMOLOGICAL NOTE ON VEDIC *RĀTRĪ*- ‘NIGHT’***

The origin of the Vedic word *rātrī*-¹ ‘night’ poses several problems for etymologists. In spite of the morphological transparency of the stem, which cannot be anything but an agent noun with the suffix *-tar-* + feminine suffix *-ī-* (i.e., *-tr-ī-*; see [Wackernagel, Debrunner 1954: 672, § 498c]), its semantic connections are controversial. Mayrhofer [EWAia II: 447] follows Insler [1974: 122 ff.] in explaining *rātrī*- as a derivative of the root *RĀ*³ ‘be still’ (‘ruhen, still sein’; Mayrhofer, [EWAia II: 443]). This hypothetical root is only preserved in its *l*-variant, attested in the non-causative *-āya*-present *ilāya-*ⁱⁱ ‘be still’ (< **(H)rH-eje-*)². The literal translation of *rātrī*- should be thus, according to Insler and Mayrhofer, ‘stiller, arrester’/‘still machende, beruhigende’³.

* I am thankful to Arlo Griffiths, Werner Knobl, Alexander Lubotsky and Eva Tichy for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ According to [Wackernagel 1930: 185 f.; Bloomfield, Edgerton 1934: 79 f.], after the Ṛgveda, *rātrī*- also occurs with the short vowel stem (*rātri-*). Note, however, that out of 18 occurrences of the accusative form in the Śaunakīya recension of the Atharvaveda (AV), consistently transcribed in all editions as *rātrim*, in accordance with mss. readings and pādapatha, three appear in metrically distinctive contexts. [By contexts that are ‘metrically distinctive’ for the second syllable of this form I understand those where (i) *-m* is followed by a vowel (that is, this syllable is not closed and therefore not necessarily long); and (ii) the metre requires either a long or a short syllable (i.e. is not indifferent with regard to the length).] All these three occurrences are attested in book 19 in contexts where we normally expect long syllables: AV 19.49.5a *śivām *rātrīm *ah_uvi sūryam ca*; AV 19.50.3a **rātrīm-rātrīm āriṣyantas*; and AV 19.55.1a **rātrīm-rātrīm āprayātam bhāranto*. The fourth syllable is usually long in 11 syllable pādas, as well as in the Atharvavedic variety of anuṣṭubh (see [Macdonell 1916: 439, with fn. 5]), which implies that we have good reasons to read **rātrīm* in all the three cases. Most likely, we have to revise the opinion that, from the Atharvaveda onwards, *rātrī*- appears with the short vowel stem. Apparently, in the AV it could still preserve the original length.

² On this present, see [Narten 1968; Jamison 1983: 48].

³ This interpretation parallels, to some extent, the Old Indian explanation of several words for night (such as *rāmī-*, *rāmyā-*, *rāmyā-*) in terms of the causative of the verb *ram* ‘rest, calm; be pleased, rejoice’, offered in Nirukta 2.18, as the one who pleases nocturnal creatures and puts the others to rest (*praramayati bhūtāni naktamcārīṇi | uparamayaṭitarāṇi*); see, in particular, [Sarup 1921: 32; Sköld 1926: 310; Michelini 1977: 109, fn. 27].

Although the semantic affinity between ‘the night time’ and ‘calming’ seems to lie on the surface, such an analysis is not without problems. First, we note that agent nouns in *-tar-* are rarely derived from intransitives, and, most importantly, they are never derived from non-agentive verbs (see [Tichy 1995: 32 f.]). Second, the transitive syntax of a *nomen agentis* derived from a fundamentally intransitive verb is hardly possible. Rather we might expect such a derivative to be based on intransitive usages of the verb: ‘being still, taking rest’ or the like. Cf., for instance, *gam* ‘go’: *gántar-* ‘going, moving’ (not *‘sending, setting into motion’)⁴. This problem was mentioned by Insler himself [1974: 123].

*RĀ*³ ‘be still’ is not the only root that might underlie the noun *rātrī-*. There is a homonymous root, *RĀ*¹ (in Mayrhofer’s notation) ‘provide, bestow, give’, which could be relevant for the origins of this formation⁵. The interpretation of *rātrī-* as a derivative of this root has been suggested by Schulze ([1966: 848]; see also [EWAia II, 447]), though in passing, without any argumentation; in fact, this interpretation goes back as far as Nirukta⁶. Schulze translates *rātrī-* as ‘die Gewährerin’, listing this noun among other Indic epithets of the night⁷.

In what follows, I will concentrate on a passage from book 19 of the Śaunakīya recension of the Atharvaveda (AV) which furnishes some interesting evidence for this latter etymological explanation of *rātrī-*. This is the opening verse of the hymn 19.49, which is also found in the Paippalāda recension of the AV (14.8) and forms a single ‘sense-hymn’ (*arthasūkta*)⁸ with the next hymn, 19.50. Together with the two preceding hymns, 19.47—48, they are employed in a ritual of worshipping the night. Hymn 19.49 is translated in [Whitney, Lanman 1905: 978 ff.], as well as in [Ludwig 1878: 466] and by Sani (see [Orlandi, Sani 1992: 192—194]).

Stanza 19.49.1 runs as follows in Śaunakīya manuscripts:

*īṣirā yōṣā yuvatīr dāmūnā ' rātrī devāsya savitūr bhágasya
aśvakṣabhā suhāvā sām̐bhṛtaśrīr ' ā paprau dyāvāpṛthivī mahitvā*

⁴ On the causative and non-causative syntax of the *-tar-*derivatives, see, in particular, [Tichy 1995: 179 f., 204 ff.].

⁵ The analysis of *rātrī-* as a derivative of the root *RĀ*² ‘bark’ can of course be ruled out as improbable.

⁶ Nirukta 2.18 allows for this explanation as an alternative to the (morphologically impossible) analysis of *rātrī-* as a derivative of the root *ram* (see fn. 3 above). According to Nirukta, the word *rātri-* may be derived from the root *rā* meaning ‘to provide’, since dew is provided in the night time (*rāter vā syād dānakarmaṇaḥ | pradīyante śyām avaśyāyāḥ*).

⁷ It is interesting to note that the etymological explanation of *rātrī-* as a word referring to an agent of an activity is indirectly supported by its usage in the R̥gveda. As [Micheli 1977: 101 ff., 109] argues, the noun *rātrī-* is more frequent than other words for night (*kṣāp-* etc.) in those contexts where the night is considered as an animate being, while other nouns are more common in those cases where the night is regarded as a temporal unit and/or an inanimate being (‘la notte in quanto entità temporale’ or ‘la notte in quanto entità atemporale inanimata’).

⁸ On the text division in terms of *arthasūkta*, see, in particular, [Griffiths 2003: 5 f.].

Pāda a lists the merits and virtues of the goddess of night (active, young, a housewife) and poses no problems. By contrast, the syntactic structure of pāda b (*rātrī devasya savitūr bhāgasya*) is unclear. The nominative form *rātrī* is followed by a sequence of genitives, which appear to be left syntactically «hanging». Whitney translates this pāda literally — ‘night, of god Savitar, of Bhaga’. Ludwig offers the same rendering, but with no comma between the nominative and genitives (‘Rātrī des gottes Savitar und Bhaga’s’)⁹. Neither translation gives any clue as to which kind of possessive relationships might exist between Night, on the one hand, and Savitar and Bhaga, on the other¹⁰. Sani leaves this pāda untranslated.

In fact, the connection between Night and Savitar is not uncommon. Like her sister Uṣas, Rātrī is mentioned a few times in the Ṛgvedic hymns dedicated to Savitar, in particular, at 1.35.1 (*hváyāmi rātrīm jágato nivéśanīm* ‘I invoke Night, who puts the world to rest’) and at 2.38.3, where she is called ‘Releaser’ (*ānu vratām savitūr móky āgāt* ‘the Releaser (sc. Night) has come according to the vow of Savitar’)¹¹. Yet possessive constructions similar to the one found in AV 19.49.1 are not attested in the Ṛgveda (RV). It is only in the Taittirīya-Saṃhitā (TS), one of the Saṃhitās of the Yajurveda, that we come across a comparable collocation: *yās te rātrīḥ savitaḥ || devayānīr antará dyāvāprthivīvyānti* (TS 3.5.4.1—2) ‘the nights of yours, O Savitar, which go, leading to the gods, between Heaven and Earth...’; see [Renou 1966 (EVP XV): 17].

The form *rātrī* may give an additional clue to the interpretation of the collocation in question. Alongside its standard translation (‘night’), it can be analyzed, in formal terms (as mentioned at the beginning of this paper), as the feminine agent noun derived from the verbal root *rā*. Consequently, the following genitives can be taken as the objects of this verb (*genitivus objectivus*)¹². The etymological explanation of *rātrī*— as a derivative of the root *RĀ*³ ‘be still’ (which poses some problems mentioned above) does not help here: an agent noun made from an intransitive verb cannot be constructed with a genitive¹³. It seems that a better sense obtains from the etymology which explains the meaning of *rātrī*— as ‘provider’. Under this analysis, the genitives must refer to objects of giving.

⁹ [Raghavan 1978: 269] even claims that «[hymn] 49 [...] describes her [= Night. — LK] [...] as belonging to the Sun», without offering any comment on the nature of these relations between Rātrī and Savitar.

¹⁰ Perhaps Rātrī can be considered as the housewife (cf. *dāmūnā* in pāda a) in Savitar’s household (W. Knobl, p.c.).

¹¹ Cf. [Renou 1966 (EVP XV): 18]: « la dételeuse ».

¹² On constructing agent nouns in *-tar-* with *genitivus objectivus*, see especially [Tichy 1995: 82 ff., 331 ff.]. Although the acrostic *-tar-*nouns (as well as their feminine pendants in *-trī-*) are typically constructed with accusative objects, we also find a few examples of constructions with genitive objects, cf. RV 1.124.5 *gāvām jānitṛī* ‘the mother of the cows’ (for details, see [Tichy 1995: 333 ff., 341]).

¹³ As mentioned above, the hypothetical transitive analysis based on the root *RĀ*³, suggested by Insler (‘calming the heavenly Savitar, Bhaga’), is syntactically unlikely. Furthermore, it makes little sense in the context.

The meaning of pāda b can thus be rendered as ‘the provider of the heavenly Savitar, of Bhaga’. ‘Providing Savitar’ should of course not be understood literally. It may refer to the fact that Night cedes to the day and thus, in a sense, provides the sun¹⁴. Bhaga (lit.: ‘share’) is a deity, which, in turn, is closely associated with providing people with goods, wealth etc. Both deities are often mentioned together and, sometimes, even identified with each other. Such an analysis appears very likely in the context of a hymn praising Night and listing her merits and virtues. In particular, in the next hymn, Rātrī is said to distribute goods¹⁵. It seems only natural that the author of a hymn dedicated to Night used the word-play ‘night’/‘provider’.

The syntactic analysis of pāda b is not the only problem posed by the verse under study. The next pāda, c, opens with an unclear sequence: the Śaunakīya manuscripts read *aśvakṣabhā*, whilst the Paippalāda has *aśvakṣatā* (in Orissa mss.) and *aśvakṣarā* (Kashmir ms.). Ed. Roth/Whitney suggests an implausible emendation ⁺*viśvavyacāḥ* (Whitney: ‘all-expanded’; likewise Ludwig). A perspicacious but hardly more probable interpretation of the variant attested in the Śaunakīya is given by Sani (who essentially follows the indigenous commentary): ‘la Notte che risplende di occhi veloci’; this analysis suggests the emendation ⁺*āśv-akṣa-bhā*.

The original reading might be ⁺*anykṣarā* ‘thornless, without danger’ (the second part of which is preserved in the reading attested in Kashmir ms. of the Paippalāda: *aśvakṣarā*) — an adjective which co-occurs at RV 1.22.15 with *nivésanī* ‘calming’, a common epithet of Night (emendation suggested by A. Lubotsky, p.c.)¹⁶.

The stanza AV-Śaunakīya 19.49.1 = AV-Paippalāda 14.8.1 can be tentatively rendered as follows: ‘The active young woman, housewife, the Night (/ provider) of the heavenly Savitar, of Bhaga, thornless, easily invocable, of perfect beauty¹⁷, has filled heaven and earth with greatness’¹⁸. The meaning ‘provider’, which «shimmers» through the standard semantics (‘night’), could be part of a deliberate word-play and appears to be relevant for the etymological analysis of this word.

¹⁴ Although the verb *rā* ‘provide, bestow, give’ does not occur with the accusative of Savitar, it is attested with the object *svār* ‘sun light, sun, day light’ (not identical but intimately related to Savitar, as one of his aspects) in RV 9.91.6: *evā punānō apāḥ svār gā ' asmābhyam tokā tānayāni bhūri | śam naḥ kṣétram urū jyōtīṃsi soma ' jyōn naḥ sūryam dṛśāye rirīhi* ‘thus becoming pure, (give) us waters, sun light, cows, children and abundant offspring; for happiness give us wide space, lights, O Soma, so that we could see the sun for a long time’.

¹⁵ *yād adyā rātri subhage ' vibhājanty āyo vāsu* (AV 19.50.6ab) ‘when you, O fortunate Night, will be distributing goods...’.

¹⁶ On this adjective see, in particular, [Griffiths 2004—2005: 257 f.].

¹⁷ Lit. ‘who has assembled beauty’; see, in particular, [Oldenberg 1918: 66 (= Oldenberg 1967: 861)].

¹⁸ Note that, as in TS 3.5.4.1—2, Rātrī appears here in the context of Heaven and Earth.

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