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Indo-Iranian *nabh- 'to be wet'

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aṭ hōi aōjī zaraṭuśtrō paōuruuīm

¿Habló Zaratustra?

Homenaje a Jean Kellens en su 80º aniversario

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Alberto Cantera
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Indo-Iranian **nabh-* ‘to be wet’

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ABSTRACT: *In my paper I argue that the Sanskrit verb *nabh-*, which is usually glossed as ‘to burst’, rather means ‘to be wet’ and can thus be connected to the Iranian forms of a similar meaning.*

KEYWORDS: Indo-Iranian, Vedic, formulaic diction, etymology

1.

The Sanskrit verbal root *nabh-* occurs only a few times in our texts. It is found in two refrains in the Ṛgveda, in a rain mantra attested in the Atharvaveda and in the Yajurvedic texts, in a prose passage in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, and in the very late Bhaṭṭikāvya (Rāvaṇavadha). The Dhātupāṭha (18.13) glosses it with “himsāyām”, thus indicating that its meaning belongs to the category of ‘hurting, violence’. A similar gloss (“vadhakarman”) is given at Naighaṇṭuka 2.19. Western scholarship followed suit (with rare exceptions, for which see below), usually rendering *nabh-* with meanings like ‘to burst, tear’, cf. our major lexica:

- BÖHTLINGK/ROTH 1855–1875: ‘bersten, reissen; beschädigen, verletzen, + *ud* caus. aufreissen, öffnen; + *pra* bersten, sich spalten’
- MONIER-WILLIAMS 1899: ‘to burst, be torn or rent asunder; to hurt, injure; caus. to cause to burst, tear open; + *ud* to tear open, open; + *pra* to burst, split, cleave’
- MAYRHOFER 1986–1996: ‘bersten, zerspringen, entzweigen; caus. bersten machen’

It is my contention, however, that this meaning is mainly based on a wrong interpretation of the refrains of the Ṛgveda (the general sense of which is not so clear), and that the root rather means ‘to become wet’ and is related to *nābhas-* ‘cloud’. The renderings given by the indigenous grammarians do not have much weight in this case because the verb disappeared in the later language and they had to guess its meaning just like we have to. The passage of Bhaṭṭikāvya (14.33-2 *sugrīvaḥ praghasaṃ nebhe* ‘Sugrīva injured Praghasa’) serves as an illustration of difficult perfect forms for a student and is totally dependent on the meaning found in the grammatical treatises. We thus have to rely on the analysis of the three pieces of evidence from the Vedic texts: the refrains of the RV, the rain charm and the AB passage.

2.

Before considering the refrains of the Ṛgveda, let us first look at the rain charm. The text of Atharva Veda Śaunakīya hymn 7.18 reads as follows:

7.18.1.

prá nabhasva pr̥thivi, bhinddhīdām divyām nábhaḥ |
udnó divyāsya no dhātar, īśāno ví śyā dṛtim ||

7.18.2

ná ghrāms tatāpa ná himó jaghāna, prá nabhatām pr̥thivī jīrādānuḥ |
āpaś cid asmai ghṛtām ít kṣaranti, yātra sōmaḥ sādām ít tátra bhadram ||

WHITNEY 1905 translates:

1. Burst forth, O earth; split this cloud of heaven; untie for us, O Dhātar, that art master, the skin-bag of the water of heaven.
2. Not heat burned, not cold smote; let the earth, of quick drops, burst forth; waters verily flow ghee for him; where Soma is, there is it ever excellent.

The second stanza is otherwise found only in Atharva Veda Paippalāda 20.4.7 (Orissa) = 20.3.7 (Kashmir), which reads *pra *sarsṛte*¹ ‘keeps extending’ instead of *prá nabhatām*, but the first stanza is a popular verse used in many other texts, with variants that are for the most part unimportant for our purpose. I here give the parallels in the oldest texts:

AVP 20.8.3

ún nambhaya pr̥thivīm, bhindhīdām divyām nábhaḥ |
ūdhno divyasya no dhātar, īśāno ví śyā bilam ||

TS 2.4.8.2,4=f

ún nambhaya pr̥thivīm, bhinddhīdām divyām nábhaḥ |
udnó divyāsya no dehi-, -īśāno ví śjā dṛtim ||

MS 1.3.26:39,11-2

ún nambhaya pr̥thivīm, bhindhy ādó divyām nábhaḥ |
udnó divyāsya no dhātar, īśāno ví śyā dṛtim ||

KS 11.9:156,11-2

ún nambhaya pr̥thivīm, bhinddhīdām divyām nábhaḥ |
udno divyasya no dehi-, -īśāno ví śyā dṛtim ||

What unites all these variants is that they start with the transitive construction *ún nambhaya pr̥thivīm* instead of the intransitive *prá nabhasva pr̥thivi* of the AVŚ.

The hymn represents a request to Dhātar for rain, and it is absolutely unclear why the Earth should burst or why Dhātar should let the Earth burst. Of course, we might speculate that the author of the hymn had the outburst of vegetation in mind, but if this were the only occurrence of the verb, everybody would translate *ún nambhaya pr̥thivīm* with ‘Make the earth wet / Soak the earth!’ and *prá nabhatām pr̥thivī* with ‘Let the earth become wet!’. In other words, this rain charm provides a strong argument that the verbal root *nabh-* means ‘to become / make wet’.

The only scholar (to my knowledge) who translated the rain charm along these

1 Thus emended by BHATTACHARYA (2016: 1636) from the attested readings *saras(t)rate* (Orissa), *sadasyate* (Kashmir). The same emendation was suggested by KUBISCH (2012: 39).

lines was Keith in his translation of the TS: ‘Flood the earth, Break this divine cloud; Give to us of the divine water, Ruling loosen the water bag.’²

3.

Now we can turn to the two refrains, which are attested in the late portions of the R̥gveda, one in book 8 and one in book 10. The former reads as follows:

8.39-42

nābhantām anyaké same

‘All die anderen Schwächlinge sollen entzweigen!’ (GELDNER 1951)

‘Let all the other squirts burst!’ (JAMISON-BRERETON 2014)

‘Zerstieben soll der Feinde Schwärm.’ (GRASSMANN 1876–1877)

This group of hymns, 8.39–42, is attributed to the poet Nābhāka, who names himself in 8.41.8 and refers to his ancestor Nabhāka in 8.40.4 and 5. As noticed in many previous translations, the refrain contains a pun on the poet’s name, which already makes it difficult to exactly determine its meaning. Moreover, the refrain looks “slangy” (thus JAMISON-BRERETON 2014: 1107) because of the diminutive suffix *-ka-* in *anyaká-*, which expresses the author’s contempt towards these others.³ Given the derogatory register, it seems more attractive to interpret *nābhantām* in the sense of ‘let them become wet’, i.e., ‘let them wet themselves’ rather than ‘let them burst’, although the latter cannot of course be excluded.

The second refrain is:

10.133

nābhantām anyakéṣām jyākā́ ádhi dhánvasu

‘Die Sehnen der anderen Schwächlinge sollen an dem Bogen entzwei gehen!’

(GELDNER 1951)

‘Let the little bowstrings of the other squirts burst on their bows.’ (JAMISON/BRERETON 2014)

‘zerreißen soll den anderen die Sehne, die den Bogen spannt.’ (GRASSMANN 1876–1877)

It is presumably because of this refrain that the indigenous grammarians and Western scholarship have opted for the original meaning ‘to burst’. Nevertheless, here, too, we have a derogatory register with two diminutive suffixes *-ka-*, *anyaká-* ‘a little other one’ and *jyākā́-* ‘little bowstring’, and it would be logical to expect a wish of something comical rather than dramatic, e.g., a wish that the bowstrings become flabby. Incidentally, exactly this happens when bowstrings get wet, since they were made of natural materials (sinews, bowels, hide). As soon as your bowstring gets wet you cannot fire well, if at all.

2 It is obvious that *nabh-* is used in parallel to *nābhas-* in order to reinforce the magic, but this does not change the argument.

3 Cf. also the following comment on hymn 8.39 (JAMISON-BRERETON 2014: 1108): “The hymn in general has a benign tone and high discourse level, and so the flippantly bloodthirsty refrain rests oddly in it.”

4.

It is not quite clear whether the 6.24 passage in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa has something to add to the discussion about the original meaning of *nabh-*. This is a typical Brāhmaṇa text composed in order to justify or to memorize a specific order of chants during the worship, here the Nabhāka-tṛca at the morning pressing followed by the Vāḷakhilyās and the Ekapada verse at the third pressing. The chances are that the author of the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa did not actively use *nabh-* and only coined the verb *nabhayati* in order to etymologize the Nabhāka verses, just as he presumably etymologized the Vāḷakhilyās as the ‘cave [vala] hammering [khid-]’.

AB 6.24 (*Aufrecht*)

1. *devā vai vale gāḥ paryapaśyaṃs, tā yajñenaivepsaṃs, tāḥ śaṣṭhenāhnāpnuvaṃs. teprātaḥsavane Nabhākenavalamanabhayaṃs. taṃyadanabhayā3n/aśrathayann evainaṃ tat. ta u tṛtīyasavane vajreṇa vāḷakhilyābhir vācaḥ kūtenaikapadayā valaṃ virujya gā udājaṃs* 2. *tathaivaitad yajamānāḥ prātaḥsavane Nabhākena valaṃ nabhayanti. taṃ yan nabhayantī3ṃ, / śrathayanty evainaṃ tat. tasmād dhotrakāḥ prātaḥsavane nābhākāṃs tṛcāñ chaṃsanti.*

‘The gods saw the cows in a cave; they sought to win them with the sacrifice; they obtained them with the sixth day. At the morning pressing with Nabhāka’s (hymn) they tore open (*nabh*) the cave; in that they tore it open, verily thus they loosened it. On the third pressing having destroyed the cave with the Vāḷakhilyās as the thunderbolt and (the verse) of one Pada as the hammer of speech, they drove out the cows. Verily thus also the sacrificers tear open the cave at the morning pressing with Nabhāka’s (hymn); in that they tear it open, verily thus they loosen it. Therefore the Hotrakas at the morning pressing recite triplets by Nabhāka.’ (KEITH 1920)

It is in any case obvious that Keith’s translation of *nabh-* ‘to tear open’ cannot be correct. The sequence of events — the gods tore the cave open, thus loosening it, then broke it and drove the cows out — does not make sense: you do not tear something open in order to loosen it, and once you have torn the cave open, why don’t you immediately drive the cows out? Furthermore, the verb *vi ruj-* means ‘to break open, apart’, often specifically referring to the cave containing the cows, cf. the following passages from the Ṛgveda: 6.39.2c *rujād ārugṇaṃ ví valāsyā śānum* ‘he breaks apart the unbreakable back of the Vala cave’ (JAMISON-BRERETON 2014), 8.64.5 *tyāṃ cit párvataṃ girīm, śatāvantaṃ sahasrīṇam | ví stotṛbhyo rurojitha ||* ‘This very mountain, this peak, which holds a hundred, a thousand (cows), did you shatter apart for your praisers’ (JAMISON-BRERETON 2014).

This means that the gods succeeded in opening the cave only later, whereas the *nabh-*ing was intended to loosen the construction.⁴ If the author of the AB had the parallelism with *nābhas-* in mind, he may have intended that the gods first made the cave closure wet in order to loosen it. Alternatively, he may have remembered the rendering given by the grammarians and created the causative *nabhaya-* with the approximate meaning ‘to make a crack (in the wall of the cave)’.

4 HAUG’S (1863: 417) translation ‘They bored at the morning libation the cavern with the bore mantra (*nabhāka*)’ is more logical, but the meaning ‘to bore’ for *nabh-* is difficult to reconcile with the other passages.

5.

We may conclude that the Vedic rain charm provides a strong indication for the meaning ‘to be(come) wet, to soak’, whereas the other contexts are more or less ambiguous. The refrains of the RV do not have a logical connection with the preceding lines within a stanza, so that their meaning remains uncertain. Nevertheless, their derogatory and “slangy” character does not accord well with the meaning ‘to burst’, although it remains an option.

We may now add the etymological considerations. Skt. *nabh-* ‘to burst’ is listed in MAYRHOFER 1986-1996 and in LIV (s.v. 2. **neb^h*- ‘bersten, zerspringen’) as having no known cognates. Thomas ZEHNDER, the author of this lemma in the LIV, explicitly writes: “Zusammenhang mit 1. **neb^h*- [‘feucht werden, bewölkt werden’] ist reine Spekulation”, referring to the attempts like that of GRASSMANN (1873: 708) where we read: “Die Bedeutung ‘bersten’, welche man wol als Grundbedeutung annehmen muss, hat sich schon in der indogermanischen Urzeit zu dem Begriffe des ‘Hervorbrechens, Hervorquellens’ gestaltet, wofür nabhanú, nabhanía, nábhās (véφος u. s. w.), das zendische napta feucht, sowie der lat. Göttername Neptunus Zeugnis ablegen”.⁵

However, if we assume that the meaning of the Sanskrit root *nabh-* is ‘to become wet’, we can identify it with Iranian **nab-* ‘to get wet’, reflected in YAv. *napta-* ‘moist’, *aīβi.naptīm* abs. ‘moistening’, Sogd. (Buddh.) *nβt^hk* ‘moist’, (Man.) *nftt* ‘naphtha’, MP (Pahl.) (Man.) *npt /naft/* ‘moist, damp; naphtha’, Parth. **nft /naft/* ‘id.’, NP *naft* ‘id.’; Khwar. *nβdk* ‘moist, humid’; Yi. *nov-/nīvd*, M. *nav-*, *nīv-/nīvd-* ‘to rain’, Wa. *nv-/novd* ‘to moisten, make wet’, etc. (cf. further CHEUNG 2007: s.v. **nab*). Together with the Greek forms συν-véφει, ἐπι-véφει ‘is cloudy’, this Indo-Iranian root **nab^h*- is then likely to reflect the verbal basis for the Indo-European nouns for ‘cloud, fog’, i.e., **neb^h-os-*, **nb^h-ro-*, **neb^h-el-*.

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5 In MAYRHOFER 1956–1980, s.v. *nābhate*, we still read: “Es ist aber zu fragen, ob ‘bersten’ und ‘Wolke’ (und ‘hervorquellen’) nicht in ältester Zeit zusammengehörte”. SANI 1994 also seriously considers this scenario, but eventually opts for the secondary semantic development within Sanskrit (‘to be wet’ → ‘to burst’).

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