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MĀTARIŚVAN, THE VEDIC FIREBIRD

§ 1. The name *Mātariśvan-* (RV +, 27 occurrences in the RV) has remained so far an enigma, as for its original meaning and derivation. I will not review all the etymologies that have been proposed, and that are recorded in the handbooks¹. Most of the attempts² took for granted that *mātar-* was identical to “mother” (*mātrī-*), since the dual nom.-acc. *mātārā/-au*, loc. *mātróḥ* can designate in the RV, as being the “two mothers” of Agni, the two pieces of wood (dual *āraṇī*) or firesticks used for churning fire; they were made of wood of *aśvatthā-* tree (*Ficus religiosa*) covered by or grown on a *samī-* tree (*Prosopis spicigera*)³. This internal etymology is already given through paronomasia in

RV III.29.11 *tánūnápād ucyate gárbha āsuró, nárāsámso
bhavati yád vijáyate |
mātariśvā yád ámimīta mātári, vátasya sárgo
abhavat sárīmaṇi ||*

“He is called Tanūnapāt as the Asura’s germ. Narāśamsa he becomes when he is born, Mātariśvan when he has been shaped in the mother. And he has become the rush of the wind in his swift course.” (Oldenberg, *VH*, p. 303).

¹ *KEWAi* II, pp. 618-619 and III, p. 776; *EWAia* II, p. 346; in addition, H.-P. Schmidt, *Bṛhaspati und Indra*, Wiesbaden, 1968, pp. 68-71, according to whom *mātariśvan-* was originally an epithet of Agni.

² See for instance Grassmann, col. 1029.

³ Ch. Sen, *A Dictionary of the Vedic Rituals based on the Śrauta and Gṛhya Sūtras*, Delhi, 1978, p. 42.





In addition to this useless etymological connection, this passage takes *Mātariśvan-* as a secret name of Agni. This identification is warranted by some other passages. But in most occurrences of *Mātariśvan-* in the RV, he is distinguished from Agni⁴. His major action is to bring the fire from afar for the men, represented by primeval priests, the Bhr̥gu's, alternatively by Manu. He is not involved directly in the preparation of fire by churning or whirling, as it has been admitted for long, because of the mistaken confusion between the verb *mathi-* "to rob, to steal away", which is used with *Mātariśvan* as agent, and the verb *manthi-* "to stir or whirl round", in producing fire by friction of two dry sticks (*áranī*). Thanks to J. Narten⁵, these two roots and their derivatives are now distinguished. Therefore, *Mātariśvan* is not a primeval sacrificer, and he is involved only marginally in the first kindling of fire. His role is simply to provide from heaven an implement that makes the sacrifice possible on earth⁶. While being some non-mortal being, he never became a god, and there is no hymn dedicated to him. Therefore, since his action is some kind of theft, one may consider to equate him with Prometheus⁷, the Titan who steals away the fire from Zeus, and gives it to the mortals. By contrast, the genealogy of *Mātariśvan* is very poor, and he is not responsible for other major achievements related to the primitive times of mankind. From the AV onwards and

⁴ The material is presented objectively by A.A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, Strasbourg, 1897, pp. 71-72, although he tends to take him as the personification of a celestial form of Agni.

⁵ Cf. "Das vedische Verbum *math*", *IJJ* 4, 1960, pp. 111-135 (= *Kleine Schriften*. I, Wiesbaden, 1995, pp. 1-25); see also *EWAia* II, pp. 298 and 311-312. The two roots in question are now reconstructed as **meth₂-* or **math₂-* (LIV, p. 442) and **menth₂-* (LIV, p. 438), respectively. The connection with Gk. Προμηθεύς, the Doric form of Προμηθεύς, would speak in favor of the form **math₂-* for the root 'to rob', cf. J. Narten, *op.cit.*, p. 135 n. 40 and T. Gotō, in *Anusantatyai. Festschrift für Johanna Narten*, Dettelbach (MSS. Beiheft 19, N.F.), 2000, p. 110. But there is an internal Greek etymology of this name.

⁶ Valuable remarks are due to several authors: see among others H. Oldenberg, *Die Religion des Veda*, Stuttgart-Berlin, 1917, pp. 120-122; J. Charpentier, *Kleine Beiträge zur indoiranischen Mythologie*, Uppsala, 1911, pp. 69-83; A. Bergaigne, *La religion védique d'après les hymnes du Ṛg-Veda*, t. I, Paris, 1878, pp. 52-57.

⁷ Cf. R. Roth, *Jāskā's Nirukta sammt den Nighaṇṭavas*, Göttingen, 1852. Erläuterungen, p. 112; A. Kuhn, *Die Herabkunft des Feuers und des Göttertranks*, Gütersloh, 1886, pp. 8-19, 143-144, and other authors.





in later Vedic and Epic literature, *Mātariśvan* is taken as the personification of the wind. This identification is probably secondary, although it has been interpreted as favoring a naturalistic interpretation of him as a cosmic force related to the storm. In the present investigation, I leave aside the possible comparison of *Mātariśvan* with Prometheus⁸, although they have in common the action of “robbing” the fire. My main concern is to explain the name by internal arguments extracted from the Vedic hymns, and to restore a meaning of this name that would be in accordance with the features attributed to *Mātariśvan* by the poets.

§ 2. I may mention the solution proposed by St. Insler many years ago, who reconstructed an original governing compound **ātar-íśvan-* “master of the fire, ruling over fire”. The second member *-íś-van-* has a perfect match in Av. *isuuān-* masc. ‘ruler’ (OAv +), and it is further connected inside Indo-Aryan with the root of Ved. *īś-* ‘to dispose of, be master, rule over’. The first member would be the expected match of Av. *ātar-* masc. ‘fire’⁹. This name looks like a piece of Old Iranian, and further Indo-Iranian, poetic language kept in Ancient Vedic. This hypothesis requires to assume a deformation of **ātar-íśvan-* into *mātar-íśvan-* under the influence of the verbal root *mathi-* ‘to rob’, which belongs to the phraseology of *Mātariśvan* (see § 3 below), and in addition of the noun *mātṛ-* ‘mother’, the dual of which refer to the two firesticks (*áranī*)¹⁰.

⁸ For the interpretation of his myth in the Greek context, see J. Rudhardt, “Les mythes grecs relatifs à l’instauration du sacrifice”, *Museum Helveticum* 27, 1970, pp. 1-15 (with literature); J.-P. Vernant, “Le mythe prométhéen chez Hésiode”, dans *Mythe et société en Grèce ancienne*, Paris, 1981, pp. 177-194. For further references, see *Der Neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike. Altertum*, Bd. 10, Stuttgart-Weimar, 2001, col. 402-406.

⁹ See the paradigm in K. Hoffmann & B. Forssman, *Avestische Laut- und Flexionslehre*, 2., durchgesehene und erweiterte Auflage, Innsbruck (IBS, Bd. 115), 2004, p. 152 (§ 107). It is found in numerous compounds, e.g. *ātarə.čar-* “scattering fire”, *ātrə.kərət-* “working about fire”, *ātrə.čarana-* “stirring the fire”, *ātrə.vazana-* “fanning the fire”, *ātarə.friθita-* “dear to the fire”, *ātrə.saoka-* “flame of fire”.

¹⁰ This scenario has been reported by C. Watkins (*How to Kill a Dragon. Aspects of Indo-European poetics*, New York-Oxford, 1995, p. 256 n. 3), from a paper presented by St. Insler at the IVth East-Coast Indo-European Conference, Cornell University, June





Accordingly, Mātariśvan had been described originally as “the conqueror of fire”, which would make him again akin to Prometheus. To this clever scenario, it can be objected that Mātariśvan is never said to have complete control over fire: since he had to rob it, one should surmise that the fire was originally under the power of some other entity. In addition, since the meaning of the name had become obscured by the time of the composition of the hymns, due to the generalization of the verbal root under the form *īś-*, one does not recognize any motivation for the deformation of the noun. Actually, if the intention of the naming was to express the conquest of the fire, the RVic language would allow a perfectly transparent governing compound **ātar-máthi-* ‘stealing away the fire’, after the model of *urā-máthi-* (VIII.66.8a, the wolf) ‘stealing away the sheep’, *vastra-máthi-* (IV.38.5a, the thief) ‘robbing the garment’, *havir-máthi-* (VII.104.21b, the demons) ‘robbing the offering’. The most recent proposal that I am aware of is due to S. Scarlata, who analyzes the name as a governing compound *mātar-īś-van-*, meaning ‘who has power over the mothers’ (scil. of Agni), that is, over the firesticks that are used to kindle fire¹¹. The identification of the second member *-īś-van-* is based on the same premises as the theory of Insler, as reported previously. But the reconstruction of a PIE compound **meh₂t_ṛ-h₂ik-* as per Scarlata is somewhat anachronistic, and it is not based on any phrase involving this verbal root that could be found in the RVic hymns. In addition, it requires to adjust the expected outcome **mātiriś-* as **mātar-īś-* by influence of the locative singular *mātár(i)* of *mātṛ-* ‘mother’, alternatively¹² by the pause form **mātár # < *mātṛ #*. Leaving aside these formal points, the major weakness of this hypothesis lies in the attribution to Mātariśvan of the role of ‘fire-churner’, because of the mistaken interpretation of the root *mathi-*.

1985. As far as I know, St. Insler gave a paper on the same topic at the VIth World Sanskrit Conference, held at Philadelphia, October 1984. Since I did not attend these two events, I ignore the further details of the argument, and I can only follow the account given by Watkins, which is anyway sufficiently clear.

¹¹ Cf. *Die Wurzelkomposita im Rg-Veda*, Wiesbaden, 1999, pp. 540-541.

¹² *Op.cit.*, p. 541 n. 752.





Actually, the main role of Mātariśvan is to steal the fire from afar, presumably from some remote place, and to bring the fire on earth in some form, and the very task of kindling the fire is attributed to some mythical priests, such as the Bṛḡu's. It would be commendable to base any interpretation of the name on the minimal reading of the function which is proper to Mātariśvan, being different originally both from Agni and from a fire priest.

§ 3. A possible key for understanding the original conception of Mātariśvan lies in the phrases that encapsulate the main points of his mythical accomplishment. First of all, the main verb describing the act of Mātariśvan is *mathi-* 'to rob' the fire:

RV I.71.4ab *máthīd yád īṃ víbhṛto mātariśvā, gṛhé-
gṛhe śyetó jén(i)yo bhūt /*

“Wenn der Mātariśvan ihn (Agni) raubt, (und) / verteilt in jedem Hause weißleuchtend, siegreich (?) wird, da hat (...) der Bṛḡavāṇa (Agni) das Botenamnt erfüllt” (Witzel/Gotō, p. 130); differently Renou: “Quand Mātariśvan, s'étant transporté çà et là, eut dérobé (Agni pour l'amener sur terre, si bien qu') en chaque maison ce (dieu) lumineux se sentît comme chez lui” (*EVP* XII, p. 17).

RV I.148.1ab *máthīd yád īṃ viṣṭó mātariśvā, hótāraṃ
viśvāpsuṃ viśvādevyam /*

“Da ihn der (in den Himmel) eingedrungene Mātariśvan geraubt hat, / as Hotar, der allerlei Atemhauch hat, für alle Götter bestimmt ist,” (Witzel/Gotō, p. 274)

RV I.141.3cd *yád īṃ ánu pradívo mádhva ādhavé, gúhā
sántam mātariśvā mathāyāti //*

“wenn Mātariśvan ihn raubt, nachdem er ihn nach(gefunden)





hat, / der von alters her im Hinschütteln in den Honig (Soma) verborgen ist,” (Witzel/Gotō, p. 264)

RV III.9.5 *sasṛvāṁsam iva tmánā, agnīm itthá
tiróhitam /
áinaṃ nayan mātariśvā parāvato, devébhyo
mathitám pári //*

“He who had run as it were by his own might, Agni, who thus dwelt in concealment – him Mātariśvan brought hither from afar, when he had been robbed from the gods.” (cf. Oldenberg, *VH*, p. 256, modified for the translation of *mathitám*)

Some less specialized verbs with ‘fire’ (*agní-*) as direct object are *bhar-/bhr-* ‘to bear, bring’ (I.60.1d, I.128.2g, VI.8.4c), *á-bhr-* (I.93.6b) ‘to bring near’, *á-nī-* ‘to lead near’ (III.9.5c), *á-dhā-* (middle) ‘to take’, see next quotation:

III.2.13b *á yám dadhé mātariśvā diví kṣáyam /*

“(cet Agni) dont s’est emparé Mātariśvan, (alors qu’il avait) sa résidence au ciel” (modifying Renou, *EVP XII*, p. 52, after Geldner).

Two further components of the myth are also present in these passages and some others: before been found by Mātariśvan, Agni was concealed somewhere, kept in secret: *tiróhitam* (III.9.5b), *gúhā sántam* (I.141.3d, III.5.10c). He was then revealed first to Mātariśvan: I.143.2b *āvír agnír abhavan mātariśvane*, I.31.3ab *t(u)vám agne prathamó mātariśvana, āvír bhava*. Mātariśvan brought Agni, the fire, “from afar”, *parāvataḥ* (III.9.5c, I.128.2fg, VI.8.4d). To put it differently, Mātariśvan had the capacity to go quickly to a place which was far away from the human world, or the sacrificial place, and to come back with the precious gift, that is the fire. It is not said overtly that the access to the fire was forbidden by some hostile or malicious power. The phrase *devébhyo mathitám pári* (III.9.5d) means simply that the fire was kept in the world of the gods, in heaven (see also *diví kṣáyam* in III.2.13b, *diváh* in I.93.6b), in a place which cannot be reached by the mortals.





§ 4. A further decisive feature of the myth is concealed in the adjective *vībhṛta-* found in one of the passages that describe the act of Mātariśvan, and further about Agni:

RV I.71.4a *máthīd yád īṃ vībhṛto mātariśvā*
(see above some proposed translations).

Traditionally, *vībhṛtaḥ* has been understood as based on the verb *vī-bhr-* “to spread out, spread asunder, distribute” (*MW*, p. 979a), and it ought to mean accordingly “spread out, distributed”, German “verteilt”. The uses of the verb *bhar-/bhr-* with the preverb *vī* are described by Grassmann (col. 957) as follows: “1) ausbreiten, auseinander thun; 2) vertheilen; 3) an verschiedenen Orten (L., Lokaladv.) bringen oder vertheilen; 4) fortragen; 5) Intens. Weit ausstrecken (die Zunge); 6) Intens. den Rachen aufsperrn”¹³. In all other occurrences, the nom. sg. *vībhṛtaḥ* bears a relation to Agni:

RV I.144.2cd *apām upásthe vībhṛto yád āvasad, ádha*
svadhá adhayad yábhīr íyate //

“Als er verteilt im Schoße der Wasser wohnte, da saugte er die Eigenkräfte ein, mit denen er sich bewegt.” (Geldner, cf. “dispersed”, Oldenberg, *VH*, p. 160)¹⁴.

RV III.55.4ab *samānó rájā vībhṛtaḥ purutrā, śáye*
śayásu práyuto vánānu /

“Der gemeinsame König, auf viele Stellen verteilt, ruht in den ruhenden (Müttern) sich selbst überlassen in jedem Holze.” (Geldner)¹⁵.

¹³ These various meanings are found in 10 occurrences of finite verb forms.

¹⁴ Cf. Renou, *EVP* XII, p. 36: “dans le giron des eaux (où il était) réparti (en maints lieux)”.

¹⁵ Cf. Renou, *EVP* V, p. 15: “roi commun (à tous les êtres), diversement réparti en maint endroit”.





RV X.1.2ab *sá jātó gárbho asi ródas(i)yor, ágne cārur
vībhṛta óṣadhīṣu /*

“Du bist als das Kind der beiden Welten geboren, o Agni, als der Liebling, in den Pflanzen verteilt.” (Geldner)¹⁶.

The “mothers” (see also X.1.2d) refer to the two firesticks (áraṇī), that are in the event of being used to churn the fire. All these passages refer to Agni as he is not yet present in the human world as kindled fire. Nevertheless, the interpretation of *vībhṛta-* as meaning “spread out, distributed” quoted above can be supported by RV V.1.4b *agnūṃ náro ví bharante gr̥hé-gr̥he* “den Agni verteilen die Männer in jedem Hause” (Geldner). This means however that the god Agni is found in all human dwellings in the form of the single fires that have been kindled by individual priests. One should not take for granted the idea that all those fires spread from the original fire that was kindled with the help of Mātariśvan (*pace* Oldenberg, *VH*, p. 78), and that the fire was then carried from one place to the other. In any case, this extension of the fire to all the hearths and sacrificial places does not belong to the mythical act of Mātariśvan. As a matter of fact, it is precisely said elsewhere that this spread of Agni is due to the worship of the fire in many places, again by purely human activity:

RV I.70.10 *ví tvā náraḥ purutrā saparyan, pitúr ná
jívrer ví védo bharanta //*

“In many places men worship thee; they bring (thee) asunder as (the sons) [divide] the property of an aged father.” The simile means that each son takes away his share of the paternal wealth. As noted by K. Hoffmann¹⁷, the injunctive present in this passage expresses a repeated ritual action. According to a related commonplace

¹⁶ Cf. Renou, *EVP* XIV, p. 1: “Tu es né comme l’embryon des deux Mondes, ô Agni, (dieu) plaisant, réparti dans les plantes”. As a matter of fact, the locative pl. *óṣadhīṣu* can alternatively be constructed with *gárbhaḥ* of the preceding pāda, and parallel to *ródas(i) yoh*, compare III.22.2b, V.83.1d, VI.3.7b, VI.12.3d, X.51.3b, and also *gárbham óṣadhīnām* III.1.13a, VII.101.1c, *gárbho vírúdhām jajñīṣe* II.1.14d, about Agni.

¹⁷ *Der Injunktiv im Veda. Eine synchronische Funktionsuntersuchung*, Heidelberg, 1967, p. 127.





theme, Agni has many and diverse forms, he is *puru-rūpa-* (V.8.2c, 5a), *viṣu-rūpa-* (V.15.4d). This is expressed also by the adjective *vībhṛta-*, as epithet of *dhāman-* ‘state, form, appearance’:

RV X.45.2b *vidmā te dhāma vībhṛtā purutrā /*

“wir kennen deine Formen, die vielerorts verteilt sind.” (Geldner)¹⁸.

RV X.80.4d *agnér dhāmāni vībhṛtā purutrā //*

“Agni’s Formen sind vielerorts verteilt.” (Geldner)¹⁹.

Due to the internal chronology of the RV, the end of triṣṭubh line *vībhṛtā purutrā #* is probably an imitation of *vībhṛtaḥ purutrā #* in III.55.4a²⁰. In the latter passage, it is perfectly possible that *purutrā* was simultaneously constructed with *śāye* ‘he lies’ at the beginning of the next pāda, since Agni is present in all pieces of wood, in all plants, etc. Finally, *vībhṛta-* shows the expected meaning of the verbal adjective of *vībhṛ-* in X.79.1cd, in the description of Agni’s mouth, pointing precisely to his jaws: *nānā hānū vībhṛte sām bharete, ásinvatī bāpsatī bhūry attah* ‘Diversement ouvertes, ses mâchoires se rassemblent; sans se rassasier, en mastiquant, elles dévorent nombre (d’objets).’ (modifying Renou, *EVP XIV*, p. 18)²¹. The repeated opening of the jaws is also used as metaphor in I.28.7, with the intensive *vi-jarbhṛtāḥ*, for the movement of the stones pressing the soma plant²².

¹⁸ Cf. Renou, *EVP XIV*, p. 12: “nous connaissons tes fonctions distribuées en main endroit”.

¹⁹ Cf. Renou, *EVP XIV*, p. 20: “d’Agni les places-institutionnelles (sont) réparties en maint endroit”.

²⁰ On the whole, the book X is more recent than the book III. According to E.V. Arnold, the hymn III.55 belongs to the Normal period, whereas the hymns X.45 and 80 belong to the (more recent) Cretic period, cf. *Vedic Metre in its historical development*, Cambridge, 1905, pp. 275, 286.

²¹ Compare the translation of P. Thieme, *Untersuchungen zur Wortkunde und Auslegung des Rigveda*, Halle/Saale, 1949, p. 53: “die je für sich auseinandergenommenen Kinnbacken fahren zusammen”.

²² See Chr. Schaefer, *Das Intensivum im Vedischen*, Göttingen, 1994, pp. 163-164.





§ 5. Beside *víbhṛta-*, one knows a related adjective *víbhṛtra-* (4x) “sich verbreitend, sich ausbreitend” (Grassmann, col. 1287), “to be (or being) borne about or in various directions” (MW, p. 979a). The meaning is rather close to the one of a verbal adjective with deontic value. It can refer specifically to very young children, still unable to walk, that ought to be carried by their mother, as in

RV VII.43.3ab *á putráso ná mātáram víbhṛtrāḥ, sánau*
devāso barhíṣaḥ sadantu /

“Comme des fils (en âge) d’être portés (par) leur mère, les dieux veillent prendre place sur la surface de la litière ! ” (Renou, *EVP* V, p. 46, see also IV, p. 104)²³

The next passage is relatively difficult, due to the presence of *arí-*, who is ambiguous²⁴:

RV I.71.3ab *dádhan ṛtám dhanáyann asya dhūtím,*
ád íd aryó didhiṣ(ú)vo víbhṛtrāḥ /

“Sie stellen das Gesetz fest, sie brachten die Erkenntnis dieses im Umlauf. Seitdem sind die begehlichen (Gedanken) des Nebenbuhlers (wie) Kinder, die noch getragen werden.”

Geldner (I, p. 92-93) assumes that the thoughts of the rival (compared to children that do not yet run) are contrasted with the ones of the clever poet, that are without greed, and that move (*yanti*) to their goal without effort, as described in the second half of the stanza. The simile is not well established, however. This contrast is not seen by Renou, according to which the flames of the sacrifice are meant, while the connotation of *arí-* would be positive in the present context: “alors (les flammes), cherchant à gagner-la-faveur de l’homme-privilégié, (se sont) portées ça et là» (*EVP* XII, p. 17 and commentary p. 90). Again differently, *víbhṛtra-* has been taken

²³ Following Geldner (II, p. 224), one should assume that *mātáram* is an abbreviated formulation for *mātúḥ sánau*.

²⁴ It is left aside by P. Thieme, *Der Fremdling im Rgveda*, Leipzig, 1938, p. 11 n. 2.





with active (transitive) value for this passage: “able to carry away”: “Da gerade (kommen) dem (fremden) Sippenherrn allerlei habgierige, räuberische (Überlegungen).” (Witzel/Gotō, p. 130, see also p. 611). I would personally translate here *vībhṛtrāḥ* by “dispersed”, directed towards different objects, as qualifying the thoughts or the desires of the foreign master, that are not unified.

In the two following passages, *vībhṛtra-*, in the singular, refers to Agni:

RV I.95.2ab *dāśemām tvāṣtur janayanta gārbham,*
 ātandrāso yuvatāyo vībhṛtram /

“Les dix (doigts de l’officiant, ces femelles jointes) engendrent cet (Agni, le) nouveau-né de Tvaṣtar; (les dix) jeunes (femmes) infatigables (ont engendré le dieu) propre à être porté de place en place.” (Renou, *EVP* XII, p. 25, slightly modified).

In his commentary, Geldner (I, p. 123) considers the possibility of a double meaning of *vībhṛtram*, either “tragbar” for a little child (cf. VII.43.3a), or “to be brought in different hearths” (cf. VI.1.4b, quoted above, and the usual interpretation of *vībhṛta-*). Oldenberg has “widely spread” (*VH*, p. 114); the first option is accepted by Witzel/Gotō (p. 170). The second option is taken by Geldner for the next stanza: “der (auf die Feuerstätten) zu verteilende”, while Renou is more ambiguous:

RV II.10.2cd *śyāvā rátham vahato róhitā vā, utāruṣā*
 āha cakre vībhṛtraḥ //

“Deux (chevaux) bruns tirent (son) char, deux (chevaux) rouges, ou encore il s’est fait (pour attelage) deux (chevaux) fauves, (ce dieu) qui se laisse porter de place en place.” (*EVP* XII, p. 47)

A somewhat different reading is preferred by Oldenberg (*VH*, p. 217): “the wide-ranging one”, which is more or less taken over, but without explanation, by Witzel/Gotō (p. 364): “in (die





Höhe) ziehend”. In any case, this rendering remains isolated.

As a result of this survey, one may say that the uses of *vībhṛtra-* cannot be unified under a single concept, by contrast with the meaning of *vībhṛta-* as referring to Agni, and once to Mātariśvan. One may assume that *vī-bhṛ-tra-*, belonging to an adjectival formation that is not productive²⁵, has been created in order to have an adjective meaning specifically ‘to be carried/borne in different places’. While referring to Agni, it can mean that the fire is generated in different human places, then as quasi synonymous with *vī-bhṛ-ta-*. Consequently, the formation of *vī-bhṛtra-* was probably due to the inherent ambiguity of *vī-bhṛta-*, that could be interpreted differently, that is not as the verbal adjective of *vī-bhṛ-* with preverb *vī*, but as a determinative compound²⁶ with the noun *vī-* ‘bird’ as first member, *vī-bhṛta-* ‘brought by a/the bird’. As we shall see (§ 6), this quite different meaning has been suggested by K. Hoffmann to J. Narten in order to account for *vībhṛtaḥ* as epithet of Mātariśvan in I.71.4a. It is striking that this hymn contains in the preceding stanza (3b) an occurrence of *vībhṛtra-*, as based obviously on *vī-bhṛ-*, as we have seen. In my view, it entails that *vībhṛta-* and *vībhṛtra-* had originally quite different meanings.

§ 6. The alternative interpretation of *vībhṛtaḥ* in I.71.4a has been motivated by two different observations: 1) the nominative singular masc. *vībhṛtaḥ* is an attribute of Agni (I.144.2c, III.55.4a, X.1.2b), except in this passage; 2) another hymn to Agni contains a nearly identical line, I.148.1a, where *Mātariśvā* is preceded by an epithet, *viṣṭāḥ*, in a pāda that is too short by one syllable. It has then been proposed to correct this *viṣṭāḥ* into *vībhṛtaḥ* or into some other past participle having

²⁵ Debrunner, *AiGr* II/2, p. 707 (§ 519). As noted by Renou (*EVP* XII, p. 97), *vī-bhṛtra-* is the only example of this type of derivative with preverb that has passive meaning.

²⁶ The formation of such compounds with passive past participle as second member and agentive first member was quite productive and inherited in Vedic, cf. St. Jamison, ‘Remarks on the expression of agency with the passive in Vedic and Indo-European’, *ZVS (KZ)* 93, 1979, pp. 196-219.





three syllables (*viṣitaḥ*, *viṣṭhitaḥ*, etc.). But this correction is not warranted, since this hymn, composed in principle in triṣṭubh, shows other lines (1b, 2c, 4b, 5a, 5d) of 10 syllables²⁷. If one keeps *viṣṭáḥ* in the text, it can in theory be related either to *viś-* ‘to enter, penetrate’ or to *viṣ-* ‘to be active, work, perform’. On the other hand, since *víbhṛtaḥ* is otherwise the epithet of Agni, one would expect instead the accusative sg. *víbhṛtam*, connected to the preceding pronoun *īm* in I.71.4a. Instead of assuming also here a textual corruption, one can consider that *víbhṛtaḥ* bears through hypallage on the next word, *Mātariśvā*, as per Geldner (I, p. 93) and M. Bloomfield²⁸: since *Mātariśvan* somehow produces Agni, and since *Mātariśvan* becomes eventually a name of Agni, an attribute of Agni would be transferred by anticipation to *Mātariśvan*. According to a personal communication of K. Hoffmann to J. Narten²⁹, *víbhṛtaḥ* could be understood as “von einem Vogel (*ví-*) getragen”, and would concern properly *Mātariśvan* in I.71.4a, while *víbhṛtaḥ* would still mean “verteilt” as epithet of Agni. I would modify this proposal by going one step further: *ví-bhṛta-* meant originally “brought by a/the bird”, and it was applied to Agni, that was carried from heaven to earth by a bird. This bird was precisely named *Mātariśvan*. Since *Mātariśvan* could be imagined as a divine figure that was embodied in the shape of a bird, he was also possible to say that he himself is “carried by a bird”. In addition, this mythical character that brings the fire is potentially conceived as identical to the fire, and actually *Mātariśvan* will eventually be used as a further name of Agni. In other words, the usage of *víbhṛtaḥ* about *Mātariśvan* in I.71.4a reflects a step along the tendency to merge this figure with Agni himself. To conclude on this point, *ví-bhṛta-* (in the singular) has the same meaning, “brought by a/the bird”, in all its 4 occurrences of the RV, which is both consistent

²⁷ Cf. Arnold, *Vedic Metre* (*op. cit.* n. 20), p. 295. Oldenberg was first tempted by correcting the text of I.148.1 (*VH*, pp. 78 and 174), but he later preferred to admit the variation of formulation, cf. *Noten* I, pp. 74 and 147. See also the extensive discussion by M. Bloomfield, *Rig-Vēda Repetitions*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1916, pp. 90-91.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

²⁹ *IJJ* 4, 1960, p. 133 n. 38.





and economical. As far as the meaning of *viṣṭáḥ*, attributed to Mātariśvan in I.148.1a, is concerned, J. Narten (*ibid.*) makes a quite interesting and elegant assumption: it would be the past participle of *viś-*, with active meaning, as found in later texts, and it would mean “having entered, penetrated”, scil. the heaven, that is the place where the fire was kept. Although the point is not developed by the great scholar from Erlangen, it fits very well with other features of the myth (see above § 3).

§ 7. Therefore, one may consider the following scenario: there existed an adjective *ví-bhr̥ta-*, a compound meaning “brought by the bird”, that referred specifically to the fire in the frame of the myth of Mātariśvan. In the course of time, it came to enter into competition with *ví-bhr̥ta-*, the verbal adjective that could be formed at any occasion from the verb *ví-bhr̥-* “to spread out”. Since this adjective could also make sense in relationship with Agni, another adjective has been formed from *ví-bhr̥-*, that is *ví-bhr̥tra-*, that could be used without restriction about Agni, as spread among the human abodes, although it was not limited to this use. During the period of the RVic literary composition, the situation was not completely settled, since *ví-bhr̥tra-* was quasi synonymous with the verbal adjective *ví-bhr̥ta-*. Because of this competition, the original meaning of the specific epithet of Agni, *ví-bhr̥ta-* “brought by the bird”, that was not supported by any living phrase, came progressively into oblivion. This stage is reached in the book X of the RV. In the meantime, some contexts allowed both interpretations, as seen (§ 4) for III.55.4a and X.1.2b.

§ 8. The previous argument leads to the result that Mātariśvan was conceived, at the most ancient stage of RVic poetry, by the Vedic poets and their audience as the bird that brought the fire to the primeval priests. This mythical act is encapsulated in the epithet of Agni, *ví-bhr̥ta-*. There are other facts that make sense if they are connected with this hypothesis. We have previously noted the specific usage of the verb *mathi-* ‘to rob’





in describing the action of Mātariśvan. The same verb is also used for the robbing of the soma by the falcon (*śyená-*)³⁰, cf. I.93.6b, IX.77.2b, V.30.8b (= VI.20.6b, comparing the pulling out of the head of an enemy). Other verbs are also found with the falcon as subject³¹, as in the case of Mātariśvan: *bhar-/bhṛ-* in IV.26.4d, 7a, IV.27.2a, IX.48.3c, IX.68.6b, *á-bhṛ-* in VIII.82.9a, VIII.100.8c, IX.66.30b, IX.86.24c, etc. As further common points, it is said that the soma plant was brought from afar (*parāvataḥ* IV.26.6b, IX.68.6b), and through crossing the sky in haste (*passim*)³². There are of course some differences, because it seems that the soma plant was kept in a rock or a fortified enclosure, into which only a small animal could penetrate. I will not insist on this point, neither about some features proper to the myth of conquest of the soma plant, which is designed to prepare a beverage for Indra and the other gods. The ritual role of the soma is different from the one of the fire. Both are substances that were unknown and impossible to get by human means. Therefore, the first sacrificers, such as Manu in the case of the soma, had recourse to supernatural assistance. The parallelism of the two auxiliaries, Mātariśvan and the falcon, is expressed quite openly in the following half-stanza:

I.93.6ab *ányám divó mātariśvā jabhāra, ámathnād
anyám pári śyenó ádreḥ |*

“L’un (de vous, Agni), Mātariśvan l’apporta du ciel; l’autre (Soma), c’est le faucon qui le ravit de la montagne.” (modifying somewhat Renou, *EVP* IX, p. 72).

I consider that this parallelism, as well as the contrast between the rock (*ádri-*) and the sky (*dív-*) would be even more meaningful if Mātariśvan was a winged being: under this respect, he is similar to the falcon, which is a bird of prey, being sent by Manu in order to get the holy plant. Soma and fire were

³⁰ As for this identification, I accept the arguments of U. Schneider, *Der Somaraub des Manu*, Wiesbaden, 1971, pp. 31-37; see also *EWAta* II, p. 662.

³¹ Cf. Schneider, *Somaraub* (*op. cit.* n. 30), p. 5.

³² Cf. Schneider, *op. cit.*, p. 33-36.





both of extreme importance for the Vedic people. Since both had to be obtained by some mythical action, one cannot exclude that the two myths of robbing a precious substance have influenced each other to some extent. In later times, the association Agni-Soma became more frequent, and their respective rituals show some mutual connections. I guess that they were made easier by this common resort to birds in the mythology.

In addition, the notion of *Mātariśvan* as a divine bird would account easily for his later identification to the wind. The common features are obviously the moving in the air, between earth and heaven, and the speed. The reference to the swiftness of the birds is commonplace in the RV, see for instance *vī-patman-* “flying [as swift] as a bird”, *śyená-patvan-* “swift as the falcon”, *āśu-pátvan-* “flying quickly” as epithet of the falcon in IV.26.4b, *mánojavas-* “swift as thought”, as epithet of the same in IV.26.5b, *raghupátman-* “flying swiftly” in an epithet of *vé-/vī-* ‘bird’ in VI.3.5d, and further the numerous similes which involve birds, I.25.4c, I.88.1d, I.155.5d, I.183.1d, II.28.4d, II.31.1c, IV.40.3b, V.59.7a, VI.46.14c, etc. This may have been anticipated in III.29.11d (see § 1).

§ 9. Now, it has become clear that *mātariśvan-* is a learned formation that was coined to designate a bird, and precisely the bird that found the fire in a remote place of heaven. It was an item of the special poetic speech, and then of the mythological repertoire. In order to refer to this mythical bird, the poets did not resort to the name of a real bird of their environment. Since the epithet *vī-bhṛta-* of Agni contains the generic noun for “bird”, *vī-*, as referring to *Mātariśvan*, we should be consequent in assuming that *mātariśvan-* is based on a kenning³³ that meant simply “bird”. Of course, it was less transparent

³³ This figure is a periphrasis involving two nouns in non-copulative relation that refer together to a simple notion, cf. C. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon* (*op. cit.* n. 10), p. 44. While being frequent in North Germanic (Scaldic) poetry, it is found also in Vedic: e.g. *apām nápāt* “descendent of the waters” (= fire), *divó duhitā* “daughter of heaven” (= Uṣas, dawn), *gopá jánasya* “shepherd of the people” (= king), *devánām ánikam* “face of the gods” (= sun), *uṣó jārāh* “lover of Dawn” (= sun).





than the substantivized adjective *su-parṇá-* (RV +) “provided with good wings, well-winged”, as referring to the “eagle”, but the inspiration was basically the same. We are then in the situation of analyzing *mātariśvan-* in order to find morphemes, the combination of which would give the required meaning. It is relatively straightforward to surmise that *mātariśvan-* is a compound, as assumed previously under different accounts. As accented on the second member, it belongs to a quite productive type of governing compounds with agent noun in *-van-* (fem. *-varī-*) as second member³⁴, e.g. (RV) *vāja-dāvan-*, *vasu-dāvan-*, *suta-pāvan-*, *pūrva-yāvan-*, *pr̥ṣṭha-yājvan-*, *raghu-pátvan-*, *svayúgvān-*, *dru-śádvān-*, *bahu-śūvan-*, *talpa-śūvan-*. These agent nouns are also productive as simple adjectives. As seen already, Ved. *-iśvan-* is identical to OAv. *isuuān-* masc. ‘possessing, being master of’ < **h₂ik̑-uen-* on the root **h₂eik̑-* (LIV, p. 223). The related derivative Ved. **iś-vara-* as been remade as *īś-vará-* masc. (AV +) ‘master, lord’ on the new root *īś-*, which is issued itself from the weak perfect stem (< Indo-Ir. **Hi-Hić-*)³⁵. In Avestan, the short vowel of the verb *is-* ‘to be able, provided with’ has been introduced analogically after the nominal forms in *is-*, such as *isuuān-*³⁶. Conversely, the Vedic language featured in the RV has extended the allomorph *īś-* to the nominal derivatives, except in the compound *mātariśvan-*, because it had lost any motivation. It is not excluded that there existed besides a variant **mātariśvan-*, which was metrically identical to *mātariśvan-*, with feminine **mātariśvarī-* beside **mātariśvarī-*. The formation of the feminine followed the archaic pattern of *pīvan-* ‘fat’, fem. *pīvarī-* < PIE **piH-uon-* (cf. Gk. πίων), fem. **piH-uer-ih₂-* (cf. Gk. πειρα)³⁷. There is a secondary masculine *pīvara-* (from the Khilas of the RV onwards) back-formed from the feminine *pīvarī-*. In any case, *īśvará-* follows the same pattern and one can assume the previous existence of the feminine *īśvarī-* (or *īśvarī-*) based on **iśvan-*. The form **mātariśvan-* has been truncated

³⁴ *AiGr* II/2, pp. 894-895 (§ 716a) and 898-899 (§ 716f).

³⁵ *EWAla* I, p. 207.

³⁶ M. de Vaan, *The Avestan Vowels*, Amsterdam-New York, 2003, p. 249.

³⁷ Cf. A.J. Nussbaum, *Head and Horn in Indo-European*, Berlin-New York, 1986, p. 241.





as **mātarī-*, hence the popular form *mātalī-* masc., proper name attested in RV and AV³⁸. Alternatively, if one starts from *mātarīśvan-*, one would expect **mātalī-* and the form with suffix *-ī-* and *devī-* inflection requires some explanation³⁹. In RV X.14.3 (ŚS XVIII.1.47) it is the name of a person mentioned besides Yama and Bṛhaspati, that are associated with different groups of forefathers (*pitārah*): it can refer to Agni, through a form of his secret name Mātariśvan, or to a hero such as Kutsa⁴⁰. The two other occurrences of the ŚS (VIII.9.5, XI.6.23) do not afford much light: from the context, one can at least admit that *Mātalī-* was the name of a legendary person. Being the proper name of a male, it has been later remade as *Mātalī-* (MBh +), name of Indra's charioteer. Be that as it may, those short names do not afford any information about the original figure of Mātariśvan, while giving evidence for some popularity.

§ 10. The expected feminine form **mātar-īśvarī-* would have undergone a remodeling in once *mātar-ībhvarī-* (RV X.120.9c, to Indra, and AV, ŚS V.2.9, PS VI.1.9). It was made possible because there was no living verbal root **iś-* any more; in addition, at that stage *mātar-* was evidently understood as belonging to “mother”. This analysis of *mātar-ībhvarī-* is warranted by the meter, since the late caesura (in triṣṭubh line) falls after *mātar-*:

RV X.120.9 *evā mahān bṛhāddivo átharvā, (á)vocat
svāṃ tan(ú)vam índram evá |*

³⁸ This truncation has been assumed by Charpentier, *Kleine Beiträge* (*op. cit.* n. 6), p. 81, but he sets up the name as *Mātalī-* and does not explain the inflection.

³⁹ It is obviously parallel to other masculine proper names with *devī-* inflection of the RV, cf. *Pṛthī-* (truncated from a compound name with first member *pṛthī-* or *pṛthi-*), *Nāmī-*, *Tiraścī-*, *Sóbhari-*; see *AiGr* II/2, p. 407 (§ 252) and U. Remmer, *HS* 123, 2010 [2011], p. 157-166. I have explained in a paper read at the Arbeitstagung der Indogermanischen Gesellschaft in Erlangen (14-16.9.2011) that this peculiar formation is based on names of clans (*vīś-*), which are used to name a single male person.

⁴⁰ Cf. H.-P. Schmidt, *Bṛhaspati und Indra*, Wiesbaden, 1968, pp. 56-57.





*svāsāro mātariśbharī aripṛā, hinvānti ca
śāvasā vardhāyanti ca //*

“Also hat der große Bṛhaddiva [name of the poet of the hymn, in the last stanza] Atharvan zu ihm selbst, zu Indra gesprochen: Die unbefleckten Schwester, die bei der Mutter wohnen, treiben kräftig zur Eile und stärken ihn an Kraft.”(Geldner)

The AV versions have the same text, except for the pāda c, for which ŚS V.2.9c reads dual forms: *svāsārau mātariśbhvarī aripṛé*, which are contradictory with the following plural forms of the coordinated verbs.

Geldner gives the following commentary (III, p. 347), which I quote in full: “Nach Say. sind die Flüsse gemeint. Eher die Dichtungen. *m*^o nach Say.: auf der Erde Mutter befindlich. Nach Gr.: ‘bei der Mutter befindlich, unvermählt’. Das letzte gibt hier guten Sinn. Dazu paßt dann *aripṛāḥ* unbefleckt, jungfräulich oder sittsam. Die Flüsse oder Dichtungen treiben ihren Gemahl oder Buhlen Indra zur Eile und stärken ihn. Der Sinn ist also: Deine Geliebten erwarten dich.” This seems to me basically correct. There is general agreement about the “sisters” as metaphoric for the “poems” or “praises” of the poet Bṛhaddiva. As for the formation of the hapax legomenon *mātariśbhvarī-*, one has for long assumed the existence of a masculine **mātariśbhvan-*, that was somehow parallel to *mātariśśvan-*, interpreted (see above § 1) as “growing in the mother” (i.e., in the wood), and the second member of the latter was understood as based on the root *śavⁱ-/śū-* “to swell, grow, increase”; *-bhvan-* would have been a parallel formation based on the root *bhū-* “to become”, of similar structure⁴¹. This morphological analysis accounts for the translation of Grassmann (col. 1029: “bei der Mutter seiend”), Geldner (“die bei der Mutter wohnen”) or of Whitney (“blameless, mother-growing sisters”)⁴². It cannot be longer upheld. As an

⁴¹ This has been argued with much ingenuity by E. Benveniste, *BSL* 34, 1933, pp. 188-189 (“Les adjectifs latins en *-cundus*”, pp. 186-190).

⁴² *Atharva-Veda Samhitā*. Translated into English with a critical notes and exegetical commentary by W.D. Whitney. Revised and edited by Ch. R. Lanman, Cambridge (Mass.),





alternative, A. Griffiths (with the assistance of W. Knobl) has proposed a metrically conditioned haplological shortening of **mātari-ribhvarīr* “singing on Mother [Earth]”⁴³. This idea faces several difficulties. 1) There is no proof that the “mother” should refer to the Mother Earth, as elsewhere, and here to the ritual ground. 2) This requires to assume an agent noun **ribh-van-* derived from the root *rebh-/ribh-* “to shout, sing, praise”⁴⁴, but this root is the basis of a single nominal derivative in Vedic, the agent noun *rebhá-* masc. “praiser, celebrator”, which remained isolated. 3) The notion of a haplology *metri causa* is contradicted by the metrical segmentation as *mātarībhvarīh*, as noted above⁴⁵. Therefore, I would assume that *mātarībhvarī-* is actually based on **mātarīśvarī-*, the feminine of *mātarīśvan-*. The absence of any connection between *mātarībhvarī-* and *mātarīśvan-* would be counter-intuitive⁴⁶. If the hypothesis of *mātarīśvan-* as referring to a bird is correct, one may conceive the formation of a feminine **mātarīśvarī-* in order to refer to a female bird. Since birds do sing⁴⁷, this would fit for the designation of singing little sisters, actually the poems. A variant of the same scenario would be that, in this relatively late section⁴⁸ of the RV, *mātarīśvan-* was used already as referring to the fire, who is also a reciting priest (*hótr-*) and a poet (*kavī-*), as it is very frequently said about Agni in the whole RV. In order to explain the surface form *mātarībhvarī-*, one has to admit simply a pun by substitution of one single consonant ($\acute{s} \rightarrow bh$). This was made necessary by

1905, p. 224.

⁴³ *The Paippalādasamhitā of the Atharvaveda. Kāṇḍas 6 and 7. A New Edition with Translation and Commentary*, Groningen, 2009, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁴ *MW*, p. 880c; *EWAia* II, p. 461.

⁴⁵ This point has been correctly seen by Scarlata, *Wurzelkomposita* (*op. cit.* n. 11), p. 541, but his own etymology by a derivative of the root *yabh-* “to fuck, have sex”, from its zero grade *ibh-*, seems to me somewhat far-fetched: “die Schwestern, die sich [mit dem Indra] wie Mütter (d.h. wie Frauen, die es schon mindestens einmal getrieben haben) begatten, dabei aber unbefleckt bleiben”.

⁴⁶ This has been pointed out by Oldenberg, *Noten* II, p. 341.

⁴⁷ It is said sometimes that birds have the faculty of speech, and deliver oracles, cf. RV II.42 and 43, X.177.2a, 189.3b.

⁴⁸ The hymn X.120 belongs to the Popular (*) period according to Arnold, *Vedic Metre* (*op. cit.* n. 20), pp. 288 and 324.





the fact that *Mātariśvan* was a male figure of the mythology, deprived of any female counterpart, that would be named **Mātariśvarī*. There was a supplementary motivation, due to the context of the stanza X.120.9. These young women, still unmarried sisters, are not yet at the head of the house, as would be a lady (*-iśvarī-* = *iśvarī-*) and potentially (normally) mother, but they are subjected to their mother, as vassals (*ibhya-* [RV+], Pāli *ibbha-*, cf. also *ibha-* [RV+] ‘dependants, household’)⁴⁹ are to the king. The mother of these eloquent sisters could also be intended to refer to the art of speech (*vāc-* or *manīṣā-*). I would then translate this adjective as follows: “being in the retinue of [their] mother”, with the under-text “as [singing] she-birds”, which makes sense in the context, while being based on the deformation of a noun of a totally different meaning.

§ 11. Since *-iśvan-* is a correct formation of agent noun as second member, we are then left with *mātar-* as first member. I propose to identify it with the basis of Lat. *māteria*, *māteriēs*, fem. “wood as building material, timber”, later “substance, matter”, any substance of which a physical object is made. The etymological connection with *māter* “mother” is not satisfactory, despite its repetition in every Latin dictionary⁵⁰. New insights about the Proto-Indo-European nominal morphology have led A. Nikolaev⁵¹ to relate the basis of Lat. *māter-iēs/-ia* with the derivative in **-h₂-* of the root **dem-* ‘to build’, reflected by the following nouns: Gk. δέμας nt. ‘body’ < **dém-h₂-s*, Hitt. *dam(m)etar* “abundance”, Luv. *tamiḫit-* “abundance, prosperity”; these two latter nouns presuppose

⁴⁹ See C. Caillat, “Pali *ibbha*, Vedic *ibhya*”, in *Buddhist Studies in honour of I.B. Horner*, Dordrecht, 1974, p. 41-49 (= *Selected Papers*, Bristol, Pali Text Society, 2011, pp. 105-113); *EWAia* I, p. 194.

⁵⁰ See recently M. de Vaan, *Etymological dictionary of Latin and the other Italic languages*, Leiden-Boston, 2008, p. 367. Among the few dissenting voices, H. Osthoff proposed a connection of Lat. *māteriēs* with the root meaning ‘to build’, in the *Festgruss an Rudolf von Roth zum Doktor-Jubiläum*, Stuttgart, 1893, pp. 126-128.

⁵¹ “Indo-European **dem(h₂-)* ‘to build’ and its derivatives”, *HS* 123, 2010 (2011), pp. 56-96, especially pp. 58-75. The main purpose of Nikolaev is to show that the root “to build” has to be reconstructed as **dem-*, and not as **demh₂-*, as per *LIV*, p. 114; it was not homophonous with the root **demh₂-* “to bind, tame”.



a collective **dm-éh₂-* with hysterokinetic inflection (nom.sg. **dm-éh₂-*), internally derived from (proterokinetic) **dém-h₂-*, a neuter noun that would refer to “what is build, amassed, grown”. The stem **dm-éh₂-* can also be identified as the basis of **dméh₂-no-* > Indo-Iranian **dmāna-* “house, dwelling place” > OAv. *dəmāna-* nt., YAv. *nmāna-* nt., Ved. *māna-* masc. (RV +). In somewhat different form, the relationship of **dmāna-* with the root **dem-* is already admitted⁵², and shows the simplification of the initial cluster **dm-* in Indo-Aryan. The same sound law would work for Latin **māter-* as well as for Ved. *mātar-* in *mātar-ísvan-*. Nikolaev does not introduce into the discussion the case of Ved. *mātar-ísvan-*. As the source of Latin *māteriēs/-ia*⁵³, he sets up a form **dmātes-* < **dméh₂-tes-*, that would be a neuter abstract based on a verbal noun **dméh₂-to-*. Since the Latin word can be derived from **dmāter-* as well, and because of the possible connection with *mātar-(ísvan-)*, I would rather reconstruct an abstract **dm-éh₂-t(e)r-*, as enlarged form of the hysterokinetic stem **dm-éh₂-*. Alternatively, it can be understood as based on **dméh₂-to-*, after the model of **h₁éi-t(e)r-* “path, way” (cf. Lat. *iter*, Hitt. *itar*, further Toch. B *ytārye*, A *ytār*), beside the verbal noun **h₁éi-to-* in the full grade, vs. the zero grade **h₁i-to-* in the adjective. The nom.-acc. sg. of this neuter was in principle **dm-éh₂-tr̥*. The first member of *mātar-ísvan-* reflects probably a nom.-acc. sg. **mātar*, either by sound change⁵⁴ < **(d)mātr̥*, or under the influence of other neuter *r*-stems, cf. *ūdhar*, *vādhar*, *áhar*, *s(ú)var*, etc.

§ 12. My interpretation of the first member of the compound *mātar-ísvan-* does not add any supplementary item to the set of Indo-European reconstructions, since the stem **dméh₂-t(e)r-*

⁵² KEW*Ai* II, pp. 622-623 and EWA*Ai* II, p. 348.

⁵³ I shall leave aside in the present context the question of the formation of this type of Latin abstracts; I do believe that it is related to the feminine suffix **-ih₂-* with *devī-* inflection, with the scholars quoted by Nikolaev, *op. cit.*, n. 61, pp. 73-74.

⁵⁴ As I have assumed for one dialect of Ancient Vedic, in *Dialectes dans les littératures indo-aryennes*, ed. by C. Caillat, Paris, 1989, p. 45 (“Reflets dialectaux en védique ancien”, p. 35-96).



can also be assumed independently as the basis of a Latin noun. Furthermore, the meaning of Indo-Iranian **dmāt(a)r-* should be basically the same: “wood as building material, timber”⁵⁵. It remains to be seen if it can account for the meaning of *mātar-śśvan-*: literally, “who disposes of the timber, who rules over the wood”. This would be a brilliant kenning for referring to the bird as inhabitant of trees, and living effectively on the wood, and, in some cases, in the wood. It corresponds actually to standard descriptions of the birds in RVic poetry, that are transparent: the bird “sitting on the tree” is a motif reflected in a fixed simile, cf. VI.3.5d *vér ná druśádā*, IX.72.5d *vér ná druśád*, X.115.3a *vīm ná druśádam*; see further VIII.21.5a (the poets) *sídantas ... váyo yathā*, X.43.4ab *váyo ná vṛkśám supalāśám āśadan, sómāsa índram* “Wie die Vögel auf den schönbelaubten Baum, so haben sich die Somasäfte in Indra gesetzt” (Geldner), etc. The realm of the birds is not only the bulk of trees, the forest, but also the whole intermediate space (*antárikṣa-*) between earth and heaven, cf. RV X.80.5c *váyo antárikṣe pátantah* “les oiseaux volant dans l’espace-médian” (Renou, *EVP XIV*, p. 30). Among the animals (*paśú-*), the birds have the privilege to live “in the air” (*vāyav(í)ya-*) as told in the rough taxonomy of X.90.8cd. The birds are able to fly to the top of the trees, and even beyond, so as to reach a space that is not accessible to the pedestrian beings, such as the humans. As a consequence of this capacity, the mythical imagination could conceive that a bird, or some specific bird, was the best auxiliary to get a precious object that was understood to be located in heaven or in the top of some trees. Accordingly, *Mātariśvan* gave assistance to the first sacrificers by providing the fire, which he was the only one able to find and to bring on earth. In this sense, *Mātariśvan* could be designated as the bird “who disposes of timber”. It was understood that he knew the wood where the fire could be found. It would be too realistic to imagine that *Mātariśvan* brought effectively from heaven the pieces of wood that would be used to kindle the fire, much as the falcon (*śyená-*) brought to earth a stalk of the soma plant

⁵⁵ The wood was much used for the structure and for several parts of the Vedic house, cf. L. Renou, “La maison védique”, *JA* 231, 1939, pp. 481-504.





in its claws, according to RV IV.26.6. As told in later texts, the origin of fire lies in a heavenly tree that has its roots in the sky. From this tree are made the firesticks (*áranī*)⁵⁶. Then, the supernatural being that may fly to this remote place and sits on this tree knows by the same faculty the secret of fire. In other words, Mātariśvan is the provider of the fire, because he has control on the heart of the wood that contains it. Thanks to his wings, he goes to this heavenly place and returns to earth with the precious “matter”: such is the discourse of the myth. For this reason, I called him in the title of this article the “Fire-bird”, also as a modest homage to the masterwork (1910) composed by Igor Stravinsky for *Les Ballets Russes*.

ABBREVIATIONS

AiGr = Wackernagel (Jacob) & Debrunner (Albert), *Altindische Grammatik*. I-III, Göttingen, 1896-1957.

EVP = Renou (Louis), *Études védiques et pāṇinéennes*. I-XVII, Paris, 1955-1969.

EWAia = Mayrhofer (Manfred), *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen*. I-II (Ältere Sprache), Heidelberg, 1986-1996.

Geldner (Karl Friedrich) = *Der Rig-Veda aus dem Sanskrit ins Deutsche übersetzt und mit einem laufenden Kommentar versehen*. I-III, Cambridge (Mass.), 1951 (Harvard Oriental Series, Vol. 33-34-35).

Grassmann (Hermann) = *Wörterbuch zum Rig-Veda*, Leipzig, 1872-1875.

IEW = Pokorny (Julius), *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bern-München, 1959-1969.

KEWai = Mayrhofer (Manfred), *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*, Heidelberg, 1956-1976.

⁵⁶ Cf. H. Krick, *Das Ritual der Feuergründung (Agnyādheya)*, Wien, 1982, pp. 189-192, especially n. 476 p. 190.





LIV = Rix (Helmut), dir., *Lexikon der indogermanischen Verben. Die Wurzeln und ihre Primärstammbildungen*. 2., erweiterte und verbesserte Auflage bearbeitet von Martin Kümmel und Helmut Rix, Wiesbaden, 2001.

MW = Monier-Williams (Sir Monier), *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1899.

Oldenberg (Hermann), *VH* = *Vedic Hymns*. Part II: *Hymns to Agni (maṇḍalas I-V)*. Oxford (Sacred Books of the East, Vol. 46), 1897.

Oldenberg (Hermann), *Noten* = *Ṛgveda. Textkritische und exegetische Noten*.- I. Erstes bis sechstes Buch.- II. Siebentes bis zehntes Buch. Berlin, 1909-1912 (Abhandlungen d. königl. Gesellschaft d. Wiss. zu Göttingen. Philol.-hist. Klasse, Neue Folge, Bd. XI, Nro. 5 & Bd. XIII, Nro. 3).

Witzel/Gotō = *Rig-Veda. Das heilige Wissen. Erster und zweiter Liederkreis*. Aus dem vedischen Sanskrit übersetzt und hrsg. von Michael Witzel und Toshifumi Gotō unter Mitarbeit von Eijirō Dōyama and Mislav Ježić, Frankfurt am Main, 2007.

Texts: AV = Atharvaveda.

MBh = Mahābhārata

OAv = Old Avestan

PS = Paippalāda-Saṁhitā.

RV = Saṁhitā of the Ṛgveda.

ŚS = Śaunaka-Saṁhitā.

YAv = Young Avestan

