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SOME GLIMPSES ABOUT THE SEMANTIC DOMAIN  
OF *VĪRA* IN INDIAN CULTURE

The concept of bravery can be detected in such Sanskrit words as *śūratā*, *śaurya*, *vīratā*, *parākrama*, *vikrama*; the most significant words rendering the meaning of “brave” are probably *śūra*, *vīra*, *pravīra*, *parākrānta*, *vikrānta*, *nirbhaya*, *dhṛṣṭa*, *sāhasika*, *sādhu*, *uttama*, *praśasta*, *udāra*. The term upon which we will mainly focus our attention in this paper is *vīra*.

If we look for the occurrences of *vīra*<sup>1</sup> in the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*,<sup>2</sup> we find it in a significantly high number of passages. This fact prevents a word-for-word exam of all relevant passages: this task would need a large monograph on its own.<sup>3</sup>

A preliminary list of the occurrences comprehends such passages as

*maṇḍala* passages (hymn, verse)  
1 1.3; 3.2; 12.11; 18.4; 30.5; 30.17; 31.10; 32.06;

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<sup>1</sup> Both as a single word and as a member of a compound, or used together with some prefix, suffix or morpheme, excluding only purely verbal forms such as *vīrayadhvam* in 10.103.6 and 10.128.5.

<sup>2</sup> Reference Edition: Van Nooten - Holland 2012.

<sup>3</sup> An inaccurate file, not adequately checked by me, provoked a false result in a previous phase of this research: I apologize for the inconvenience with the colleagues who heard my reading during the conference. For the same reason we exclude from our limited horizon the upaniṣadic corpus: particularly some *saṃnyāsopaniṣads* could bear witness to a relevant problematisation of *vīra* and related terminology within ascetic culture. A keen analysis of the complex relations between *śramaṇa* and *brāhmaṇa* ascetic traditions is to be found in Bronkhorst 1986, 1993.

- 34.12; 40.03-04; 51.15; 52.13; 53.05; 53.11; 61.05;  
64.15; 67.09; 73.03; 73.09; 81.02; 85.01; 85.12;  
86.04; 91.19-20; 92.08; 96.08; 104.04; 105.19;  
106.04; 111.02; 113.18; 114.01-03; 114.08; 114.10;  
116.05; 116.25; 117.25; 118.02; 122.01; 122.08;  
125.01; 125.03; 164.43; 166.07; 188.04; 190.08
- 2 1.16; 2.13; 3.04-05; 3.09; 4.08-09; 11.13; 11.21;  
12.15; 13.11; 13.13; 14.01; 14.07; 14.12; 15.10;  
16.09 [= 17.09; 18.09; 19.09; 20.09]; 23.19; 24.15-  
16; 25.02; 26.02; 27.07; 27.13; 27.17; 28.03; 28.11  
[= 29.07]; 30.04; 30.11; 32.04; 33.01; 33.04; 33.15;  
35.15; 39.02; 39.08; 40.06; 42.02-03; 43.03
- 3 4.09; 8.02; 24.05; 29.09; 31.10; 36.10; 51.04; 53.01;  
53.07; 54.13; 55.18; 55.20-21; 56.08; 62.03
- 4 11.03; 15.05; 17.04; 23.02; 24.01; 25.06; 29.02;  
32.12; 34.02; 34.10; 35.06; 36.09; 44.06; 50.06;  
50.10
- 5 4.11; 20.04; 30.01; 41.09; 42.08; 42.18; 43.17;  
44.06; 48.02; 50.04; 53.15; 54.14; 57.07; 58.04;  
61.04-05; 76.05; 77.05; 79.06; 85.04
- 6 4.08; 5.07; 6.07; 7.03; 10.07; 12.06; 13.05-06;  
14.04; 16.29; 17.13; 17.15; 21.01; 21.06; 21.08;  
22.03; 23.03-04; 24.02; 24.10; 26.07; 32.01; 32.04;  
35.02; 44.13-14; 45.06; 45.08; 45.13; 45.26; 47.16;  
47.26; 49.07; 49.12; 49.15; 50.06; 50.09; 53.02;  
63.10; 65.03-04; 65.06; 66.10; 75.09
- 7 1.04-05; 1.15; 1.21; 1.24; 2.09; 4.06; 15.05; 15.07-  
08; 15.12; 18.14; 18.16; 20.02; 23.06; 24.06; 25.06;  
29.02; 32.06; 34.06; 34.20; 36.08; 37.06; 41.07;  
42.02; 42.04; 56.05; 56.24; 61.04; 75.08; 80.03;  
90.01; 90.05-06; 91.05; 92.03; 99.05; 104.15
- 8 2.21; 2.23; 2.25; 5.10; 19.07; 19.10; 19.30; 23.14;  
23.19; 23.21; 24.15-16; 26.07; 32.24; 33.16; 40.09;  
43.15; 46.14; 47.12; 48.14; 49.06; 50.06; 71.06;  
84.09; 86.04; 91.02
- 9 9.09; 23.05; 30.03; 35.03; 42.06; 44.05; 61.06;  
61.23; 61.26; 63.18; 64.18; 68.10; 86.39; 86.48;  
90.03; 96.11; 97.21; 97.26; 97.44; 101.15; 106.13;  
110.07
- 10 10.02; 15.11; 17.05; 18.01; 18.09; 27.15; 27.17;  
28.12; 36.10-11; 36.13; 40.13; 45.12; 47.04-05;

52.05; 61.05; 67.02; 68.12; 73.01; 76.04; 77.03;  
 77.07; 80.01; 80.04; 85.44; 86.09; 91.15; 92.09;  
 93.10; 95.03; 95.05; 103.01; 103.05; 103.07; 103.11;  
 104.01; 111.01; 113.04; 115.08; 122.03; 128.03;  
 132.05; 159.06; 167.01; 188.02

Within this context the term *vīra* has certainly a literal meaning, having to do with bravery in battle, manly vigour, virile heroism and so on; however a metaphorical application of the term is not entirely absent. The term is applied both to the domain of divine characters (*devas*, *asuras*) and to the humane world.

It is possible to detect a feeble trend, not particularly significant because it is present only in a limited number of passages, from the more recent strata of the *corpus*,<sup>4</sup> *maṇḍalas* 1 and 10: *vīravattamam* (1.1.3); *śavīrayā* (1.3.2); *vīravatīm* (1.12.11); *vīro* (1.18.4); *vīra* (1.30.5); *śavīrayā* (1.30.17); *suṅvīraṃ* (1.31.10); *mahāvīraṃ* (1.32.6); *suṅvīraṃ* (1.34.12); *ekavīraḥ* (10.103.1); *pravīraḥ* + *abhivīro* (10.103.5); *vīraḥ* (10.103.7); *vīrā* (10.103.11); *vipravīrā* (10.104.1); *vīro* (10.111.1); *vīro* (10.113.4); *suṅvīrā* (10.115.8); *suṅvīreṇa* (10.122.3); *suṅvīrāḥ* (10.128.3); *vīrān* (10.132.5); *vīrasya* (10.159.6); *puruvīrām* (10.167.1); *vipravīrasya* (10.188.2). Within this context, first of all, nowhere is the term *vīra* used with reference to an *asura*. Secondly, when the god invoked is Agni (1.1.3, 1.12.11, 1.31.10, 10.115.8, 10.122.3, 10.188.2), the main intermediate between gods and men, the term *vīra* is mainly used in reference to men; whereas when the god invoked is Indra (1.30.5, 1.30.17, 1.32.6, 10.103.1, 10.103.5, 10.103.7, 10.103.11, 10.104.1), the king of gods, the warrior par excellence, the term *vīra* is mainly used in reference to gods (indeed, to Indra himself). Thirdly, the term *vīra* is mainly used in reference to vigour, bravery, heroism in battle and so forth, but in two passages it is used as an epithet not strictly bound to the semantic field of war (1.34.12; 10.104.1). It would seem as

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<sup>4</sup> And not from the section 1.51-191, which is commonly considered the most ancient one in terms of their redaction after books 2-7. See e.g. Witzel 1995.

if in the more recent *strata* of the *corpus* the semantic field of *vīra* is still in search of its *ubi consistam*: the specialization of the term in reference to war, and expressly to the figure of the human hero, has still to be coined; metaphorical and symbolic uses are already present, at least *in nuce*.

If from the *rigvedic* context we shift our focus to the field of the epics, *itihāsa* (lit. “thus indeed it was”), we may concentrate our attention on the major epic poem, the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>5</sup> A study by Kevin McGrath<sup>6</sup> has already provided some good preliminary work, useful for our research. A preliminary working definition of the epic hero within the Indian context, bound to its Indoeuropean counterparts, is according to our author “a martially and verbally gifted figure with some degree of divine genealogy who is separated or isolated from his community and is returned to that community only after death, via the medium of praise and lament”.<sup>7</sup> Karṇa fits this definition more aptly than other possible candidates.

As far as the study of possible keywords in this context is concerned, some reflections impose a clear light on the theme. We could attempt to isolate some areas such as the two covered by *vīra* and *śūra* for “hero”, or by *yaśas* and *kīrti* for “fame”, but the excessive number of occurrences and the potential synonymy of the terms are two obstacles that will frustrate our attempt.<sup>8</sup> The very presence of what might be two synonymous terms for “hero”, namely *śūra* and *vīra*, is far from being a purely lexical fact. First of all, McGrath preliminarily distinguishes for *śūra* the acception “hero”, as distinct from

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<sup>5</sup> We exclude from our review the *Rāmāyaṇa*, because there is no available tool for this text as McGrath 2004 for the *Mahābhārata*. For similar reasons, and because such a titanic task would again require a large monograph on its own, we neglect the *Purāṇas*.

<sup>6</sup> McGrath 2004.

<sup>7</sup> McGrath 2004: 1. See also McGrath 2004: 3 f.: “He is the most heroic due to his lineage, his divine and intrinsic armour, and his complete devotion to the honour of kṣatriya ideals. It is this *unevolved* quality of Karṇa’s heroism that drew me into making this study: he appears to present an unalloyed version of an ‘original’ epic hero” [italics by the author].

<sup>8</sup> “I spent an enormous amount of time pursuing the instance and context of such terms, but eventually abandoned my inferences for want of resolute conclusion”, McGrath 2004: 23.

*vīra*, meaning more properly “warrior”,<sup>9</sup> but successively he is compelled to admit that in fact they are practically synonymous: “In terms of understanding the verbal form of epic, the two words that we have for hero/warrior, *śūra* and *vīra*, do not tell us too much etymologically. The epic word *śūra* is contextually linked with ancestors; that retrospective connection between ancestor and hero is a frequent one in the Mahābhārata. [...] After long and detailed analysis of the two words, employing the *pratīka* Index and also doing computer searches to check every instance of *vīra* and *śūra*, I had to abandon any thought of conclusion simply because the evidence was insufficient to enable me to argue for a forceful case of difference between these words. Synonymity once again wins out, although I presume this was not always the case”.<sup>10</sup> This feeling of a substantial synonymy of *vīra* and *śūra* could possibly be enforced by two further considerations, not taken into consideration by McGrath. First, the two terms are metrically equivalent, both being composed of the succession of a heavy plus a light syllable (*guru* + *laghu*, ˉ + ˘). Secondly, both words end with a phoneme bound to a strong characterization in terms of phonosymbolic value: the sound *ra*, characterized by roughness, harshness, starting from its very technical name, *repha*, meaning “rip” (the term *-kāra*, valid for all other syllables, from *akāra* to *hakāra*, is not attested for *ra*: *\*rakāra* is not a term current within *vyākaraṇa* context).

In fact the imperfect synonymy between *śūra* and *vīra* is a problem in McGrath’s essay, as it will appear by the simple juxtaposition of two significant passages drawn from the closure.<sup>11</sup> We may remember that, from the aesthetic point of

<sup>9</sup> McGrath 2004: 28 n. 8.

<sup>10</sup> McGrath 2004: 55 f., square brackets are mine.

<sup>11</sup> “Heroes, being neither mortals nor deities, are strange figures who brush up against certain aspects of immortality and yet, as mortals, die. They are liminal figures, exemplified by this ambivalence between the two terms for hero and also for that which heroes stand for, fame. The *śūra* is closer to the world of the dead, that is the divine world, than the *vīra*; and *kīrti*, is more allied with the former than is *yaśas*. Heroes exist on this margin between the divine and the mortal and so partake of this binary existence” (McGrath 2004: 219); “This ambivalence is most deeply manifest in the fact that we have two principal words for warrior/hero, *vīra* and *śūra*. Despite the high degree of similitude between these two terms

view, quasi-synonymy is an essential tool for the toolbox of the poet (*kavi*). The imperfect interchangeability between *śūra* and *vīra* within the epic context perhaps will merit further research, if we wish to detect its efficiency from the point of view of the mytographer's toolbox. Has this quasi-synonymy a conscious use as a mythopoeitic tool or not?

Be that as it may, the concept of hero in the epics is surely bound to physical and ethical manly courage, to virile bravery, to the hero's capacity to accomplish heroic deeds, and as such to be celebrated by poetic lauds, preferably after his death. Perhaps this undertone of meaning retrieves some themes connected to the institution of the so-called male league (*Männerbund*), which in turn is bound to such features as the *vrātya*.<sup>12</sup>

In time, the martial connotation of *vīra* was to produce a further development in the process that led to the forming of a monastic order within the *smārta* tradition, comparable to the Buddhistic community (*saṅgha*). The system of the "ten names of the renouncers" (*daśanāmīsamnyāsī*), ascribed to Ādiśankara, is furtherly perfected with the institution of the medieval courts or arrays of ascetics, the *akhārā*-s (this MIA and NIA term being derived from AIA *akṣavāṭa* or *akṣapāṭa* "wrestling ground"). From its very name this system of the *akhārā* has as its model a military organization, a context of manly vigour and bravery, still surviving in the sometimes fierce competitions between rival *akhārā*-s in occasion of public feasts such as the *kumbhamelā* or similar mass gatherings. We may suggest that the semantic field of *vīra* has survived within the context of *samnyāsa* orders, shifting from a literary meaning to a metaphorical one, involving such features as the need to contrast effectively such competitors as the monastic Buddhist order, and successively the islamic penetration, in order to preserve the *smārta* tradition from concurrent threats and external dangers.<sup>13</sup>

From the rhetorical point of view, in the biunivocal correspondence of a single emotion (*bhāva*) to a single aesthetic

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they are not altogether synonyms, but demonstrate, on occasion, two different meanings which touch upon a division between the mortal-immortal world" (McGrath 2004: 220).

<sup>12</sup> For this figure see Pontillo 2007; Pontillo in print; Dore 2014.

<sup>13</sup> See Clark 2006; Dei Rossi 2014.

sensation (*rasa*) according to Bharata, *utsāha*, “courage” corresponds to *vīra*, “hero”.

From the strictly religious point of view, the term *vīra* appears to be deeply rooted in two different, both equally significant contexts. Here its connotation has to do with virile resolution, strong adherence to truth in opposition to untruth. First, the very name of the founder of *jaina* religion, Vardhamāna, the 24<sup>th</sup> *tīrthaṅkara*, is Mahāvīra, “great hero”; “capacity to act” (lit. “heroism”), *vīrya*, is one of the four perfections of the living principle, *jīva*, the other being vision, knowledge, happiness (*darśana*, *jñāna*, *sukha*); and *vīra* “hero” is the name of the evolutive stage at which the devotee achieves mastery over himself. Secondly, the term *vīra* appears in the name of a famous *śaiva* sect, the *vīraśaiva*, “heroic devotees of Śiva”, *alias liṅgāyata*, whose literary production is composed mainly in *kannaḍa*, but even in Sanskrit. Within the *vaiṣṇava* tradition, five figures of the clan of the Vṛṣṇis are celebrated as *vīra*: Vāsudeva (i.e. Kṛṣṇa), Saṃkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, Sāmba, Aniruddha; in the *śaiva* tradition, the name of the personification of Śiva’s wrath after his exclusion from Dakṣa’s sacrifice is Vīrabhadra (lit. “excellent hero”), and Śiva himself is celebrated as Vīreśvara, “Lord of heroes”. The drink offered to warriors in order to stimulate their bravery is *vīrapāna*, “beverage for heroes”. In all these uses, the shifting from a literal meaning having to do with bravery in the battlefield, towards ethical and spiritual bravery in the moral field (*dharmakṣetre kurukṣetre* as in the *incipit* of the *Bhagavadgītā*) is continuous.

Finally, in the tantric context, the term *vīra* plays an important role in a taxonomy of the three ideal types of devotees. Tantric adepts in *śākta* schools, particularly from Bengala milieu, are classified, from lowest to highest level, as *paśū*, cattle-like, *vīra*, hero-like and finally *divya*, god-like. The first type is characterized by a predominance of *tamas*, the second by the predominance of *rajas*, the third one by the predominance of *sattva*. The principal difference between *paśu* and *vīra* in practical ritual behaviour is that the former considers the so-called five practices whose names begin with “m”

(*pañcamakāra: māṃsa, madya, matsya, mudrā, maithuna*) to be metaphorical, whereas the later considers them as literal, thus generating two different attitudes, what are known as the so-called right-hand and left-hand ritual practices;<sup>14</sup> “the divya, the god-man of purest sattva, on the other hand, is far, far beyond both the ‘substitutional’, safe-and-sane sādhanā of the pious lamb, but also beyond the fearless, chivalric experience of the hero”<sup>15</sup>.

This short and incomplete review, a mere proposal for further research, simply intends to underline, within the compass of a bird’s eye view, a possible semantic shift of the term *vīra* from a (Vedic) literal context, mainly related to bravery in battle, manly heroism and so on, towards a (Tantric) metaphorical context, having to do with a certain number of undertones, where the concept of bravery is declined into a religious milieu. As usual in Indian culture, the previous literal meaning of the term is not entirely obliterated, but it assumes richer shades of meaning, within the range of its new field of application, full of symbolic values, pertaining to the sphere of the religious experience.

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<sup>14</sup> See Zimmer 1951: 581-595; Avalon 1952: 59-65, 115-126; Banerji 1988: 398.

<sup>15</sup> Zimmer 1951: 591. A text particularly dedicated to the description of these practices is the *Niruttaratantra* (chapters 4-5, 15): see Goudriaan 1981: 82 footnote 30. For *Niruttaratantra* see Miśra 1909. Hints for further research: Shiva Prakash 2001; Arora 1995; Hara 2001; Harlan 2003.



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