

Excavating language and reconstructing culture: on immortality in ancient Indo-European languages

1 Preliminaries: lexicon and phraseology in cultural reconstruction

One of the most challenging issues raised by the comparative method – besides the reconstruction of the proto-language – is the reconstruction of (aspects) of the Indo-European culture, as reflected in the early documentary stages of the individual languages.

Especially the reconstruction of non-material (“symbolic”) culture has reached remarkable achievements, progressively refining its methods since the pioneering works of Adalbert Kuhn and Max Müller (for an overview, cf. Bologna 1988). The old lexical-etymological approach has been fruitfully integrated with a textual approach, which on the one hand emphasises phraseology (rather than isolated lexemes) and on the one hand values not only “perfect” equations but also correspondences involving etymologically unrelated, but semantically equable units: “Lexical renewal of one or more components of a formula does not affect its semantic integrity nor its historical continuity.” (Watkins 1995: 10).¹

The topic of the present paper – concerning the representation of (im)mortality, – shows how the lexical-etymological and the textual approach can integrate and support each other. Furthermore, it represents a good instance of how a coherent reconstruction may be obtained by collecting pieces of evidence scattered across different language.

2 *Nektar* (and *ambrosia*)

2.1 *Nektar*, *ambrosia*, and immortality

In the Greek epics, as is well-known, *νέκταρ* (*néktar*) denotes, together with *ἀμβροσίη* (*ambrosiē*), a sort of divine food, not dispensed to humans.²

(1)

<i>néktar</i>	<i>t'</i>	<i>ambrosiēn</i>	<i>te,</i>
nectar-NOM	and	ambrosia-NOM	and

<i>tá</i>	<i>per</i>	<i>theoì</i>	<i>autoì</i>	<i>édousi</i>
DEM.REL	PTCL	gods-NOM	themselves-NOM	eat-3PL

‘**nectar** and **ambrosia**, which the gods themselves eat’ (Hes. *Th.* 631)³

(2)

<i>númphē</i>	<i>d'</i>	<i>etíthei</i>	<i>pára</i>	<i>pásan</i>	<i>edōdén</i>
nymph-NOM	PTCL	put-1SG.IMPF	nearby	all-ACC	food-ACC

<i>ésthein</i>	<i>kai</i>	<i>pinein,</i>	<i>hoía</i>	<i>brotòì</i>	<i>ándres</i>	<i>édousin</i>
eat-INF	and	drink-INF	such-ACC	mortal-NOM	men-NOM	eat-3PL

<i>autē</i>	<i>d'</i>	<i>antion</i>	<i>hīzen</i>	<i>Odussēos</i>	<i>theíoio</i>
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* Even though this paper is the outcome of joint work by the authors, for academic purposes the final editing is to be attributed to Marina Benedetti for Sections 1; 2; 4.2; to Beatrice Grieco for Sections 3; 4.1. Both authors are responsible for Section 5.

¹ On conceptual continuity behind lexical discontinuity, see Campanile (1977; 1993); García Ramón (2008; 2010).

² For an overview, cf. the lemmas “*Nektar*” (Stenger 2000) and “*Ambrosia*” (Graf 1996).

³ Abbreviated references to ancient authors and their texts follow the conventions of LSJ. Translations are from the Loeb Classical Library.

she-NOM	PTCL	in.front.of	sit-3SG.IPFV	Odysseus-GEN	divine-GEN		
<i>tēi</i>	<i>dè</i>	<i>par'</i>	<i>ambrosiēn</i>	<i>dmōiai</i>	<i>kaì</i>	<i>nēktar</i>	<i>éthēkan</i>
she-DAT	PTCL	by	ambrosia-ACC	maids-NOM	and	nectar-ACC	put-3PL.AOR
‘and the nymph [Calypso] set before him all kinds of food to eat and drink, of such sort as mortal men eat . But she herself sat opposite divine Odysseus, and before her the handmaids set ambrosia and nectar ’ (Od. 5.196–199)							

The connection between this divine food and immortality is explicitly stated in some Pindaric passages:

(3)

<i>athanátous</i>	<i>hoti</i>	<i>klépsais</i>	<i>halíkessi</i>	<i>sumpótai</i>
immortals-ACC	because	steal-PTC.NOM	of.same.age-DAT	companions-DAT
<i>nēktar</i>	<i>ambrosían</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>dōken</i>	<i>hoîsin</i>
nectar-ACC	ambrosia-ACC	and	give-3SG.AOR	REL-DAT
<i>áphthiton</i>	<i>thén</i>	<i>nin</i>		
immortal-ACC	make-3PL.AOR	him-ACC		
‘because he stole from the deathless gods the nectar and ambrosia with which they had made him immortal , and gave them to the companions who drank with him’ (Pi. O. 1.60–64)				

(4)

<i>nēktar</i>	<i>en</i>	<i>kheilessi</i>	<i>kaì</i>	<i>ambrosían</i>
nectar-ACC	in	lips-DAT	and	ambrosia-ACC
<i>stáksoisi</i>	<i>thēsontái</i>	<i>té</i>	<i>nin</i>	<i>athánaton</i>
drop-3PL.FUT	make-3PL.FUT	and	him-ACC	immortal-ACC
‘they shall drip nectar and ambrosia on his lips and shall make him immortal ’ (Pi. P. 9.63)				

2.2 Nektar: etymology

2.2.1 Paul Thieme’s hypothesis

Nectar and *ambrosia* represent a formulaic pair, widely attested across the Greek literature. Etymologically, the relationship to immortality is apparent in the noun ἄμβροσιή / ἄμβροσία (*ambrosiē / ambrosía*), connected to ἄμβροτος (*ámbrotos*) < **h₂-mr̥to-* ‘immortal’, a negative prefixed adjective from the root **mer-* ‘die’, with continuants in various Indo-European languages. In Greek, ἄμβροτος (*ámbrotos*) is an archaism, presumably inherited from Indo-European: the root **mer-* survives in Greek only in few noun derivatives,⁴ being otherwise replaced by **d^henh₂-* (properly ‘move’, ‘flow’; LIV), as in θνήσκω (*thnēískō*) ‘die’; θάνατος (*thánatos*) ‘death’.

On the contrary, *νέκταρ* (*nēktar*) is synchronically opaque. However, a connection with the semantic field of ‘death’, according to an hypothesis developed by Paul Thieme,⁵ is today widely accepted. This etymology traces *νέκταρ* (*nēktar*) back to a nominal compound **nek-t₂rh₂-*⁶ ‘death overcoming’ or ‘making overcome death’ (“den Tod überqueren lassend, über den Tod hinwegrettend”, Thieme 1952: 11). The reconstructed **nek-t₂rh₂-* is a determinative verbal compound

⁴ Besides the verbal form ἔμορτεν· ἀπέθανεν Hesych.; cf. LIV s.v. **mer*.

⁵ Thieme 1952 (following intuitions by A.F. Pott and J. Grimm).

⁶ For simplicity, the reconstructed **nek-t₂rh₂-* is here “modernised”, i.e. presented in the form commonly assumed today, with a laryngeal in the verbal root.

consisting of the root noun **nek-* ‘death’ (continued by Avestan *nas-*, Latin *nex*) and of the verbal root **terh₂-* ‘cross over, pass through, overcome, vanquish’ (well attested in Old Indian and in Hittite, and present in Latin compound verbs, such as *intrare*; cf. LIV s.v. **terh₂-*).⁷

As also stressed by Paul Thieme, *véκταρ* (*néktar*) must be an archaism: the root noun **nek-* does not survive into historical Greek:⁸ it is “eine dichterische Prägung” (Thieme 1952: 15), a rest of the Indo-European poetical language.

Paul Thieme quotes Vedic evidence in support to his etymology: the second member *-ταρ* (*-tar*), having no parallel in Greek, can be compared with Vedic *-túr* ‘crossing’, ‘passing across’, ‘overcoming’ in compounds such as *vr̥tra-túr-* ‘obstacles overcoming’ etc. (Scarlata 1999: 184–190). Furthermore, Vedic phraseology attests the combination of the verb *tṛ-* with nouns denoting adversities,⁹ e.g. *vr̥trá-* ‘obstacle’ (alongside the compound *vr̥tra-túr-*); *ámhas-* ‘narrow passage’,¹⁰ *dveṣāmsi* ‘hostilities’ (with Avestan parallels). So, Vedic provides evidence of a collocation [OVERCOME (*tṛ-*) + EVIL], based on the widespread metaphor of evil as a dangerous passage along the way.¹¹

On the other hand, Paul Thieme regretted the absence, in Vedic, of an expression conceptually corresponding to *véκταρ*, i.e. a combination of *tṛ-* with the noun ‘death’: “allerdings haben wir diesmal im RV nur in paralleler Weise zusammengefügte Bildungen, **keinen Ausdruck, der dem in véκταρ geformten Gedanken entspricht**” (Thieme 1952: 15; emphasis added). This absence, moreover, presumably reflects a core characteristic of the *Ṛgveda*, that is “the major and oldest part of the RV hardly refers to life after death.” (Bodewitz 2019: 96). It is clearly notable that all the occurrences of *mṛtyú-* are only in the last book of the *Ṛgveda*, the 10th book, which presents a language and a style very close to the later *Atharvaveda* (cf. Renou 1957: 31 and Hellwig, Scarlata & Widmer 2021).¹²

2.3 The formula “overcome death”

This gap was filled by Thieme’s student Rüdiger Schmitt (1961 [1968]), who pointed to the expression *mṛtyúm áti tṛ-* ‘to overcome death’ in a repeated formula of an Atharvaveda spell (here the means for overcoming death is, like nectar, a comestible, as stressed by Watkins 1995: 391).¹³

(5)

<i>ténaudanéna</i>	<i>áti</i>	<i>tarāṇi</i>	<i>mṛtyúm</i>
this.rice_mess-INS	over	overpass-1SG.PRS.IMP	death-ACC
‘by that rice-mess let me overpass death ’(AVŚ 4.35.1c) ¹⁴			

⁷ For **terh₂-* in mythical phraseology, cf. Watkins (1995: 343).

⁸ Cf. nevertheless the Hesychian gloss *véκες · νεκροί* (*nékes : nekroí*). The root **nek-* survives in suffixed nominal forms such as *νεκρός* (*nekrós*) ‘dead’, ‘corpse’, *νέκυς* (*nékus*) ‘corpse’.

⁹ Cf., besides Thieme (1952), Lazzeroni (1988), Watkins (1995).

¹⁰ Cf. Gonda (1957).

¹¹ The metaphor becomes a simile, e.g., in RV 6.2.4d *dviṣó ámho ná tarati* ‘he overcomes hostilities like *ámhas*’.

¹² According to Kuiper (1979: 68-69): “It has often struck scholars that Death, for instance, is rarely mentioned in the old family collections. It may be considered significant that in the tenth book of the Rígvēda there are fifteen occurrences of the word *mṛtyú*, whereas in the other books it does not occur at all, except in one of the latest interpolations inserted after the composition of the Padapāṭha”.

¹³ An additional occurrence of the expression *mṛtyúm áti tṛ-* is attested in a later passage from the *Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa*: *áti mṛtyúm tarāmy ahám* ‘I overcome death’ (TB 1.2.1.15.8). Similarly, in the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* of the *Atharvaveda*: *amṛtam vai praṇavaḥ / amṛtenaiva tan mṛtyum tarati* ‘The Praṇava is immortality; thus, by immortality he passes over death’ (GB 2.3.11fg, tr. Patyal 1969).

¹⁴ The translation of the *Atharvaveda Śaunaka* follows Whitney (1905) and that of the *Ṛgveda* Jamison & Brereton (2014). The evidence from the *Paippalāda* recension follows the critical edition and the translation of Zehnder, Hellwig & Leach (2020) for book 1; Lelli (2020) for book 15; Selva (2019) for book 17. For the present investigation, the data have been collected from the *Thesaurus Indogermanischer Text- und Sprachmaterialien* (TITUS, Gippert, Martínez García, Korn & Mittmann 2016), at <https://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/indexe.htm?texte/texte2.htm> (last accessed on 4.06.2023) and from

The Vedic expression *mṛtyúṃ áti tī-* offers a semantic (and partly lexical, cf. Table 1) parallel to the Greek compound *νέκταρ* (*néktar*), pointing to a presumably inherited collocation [OVERCOME (*tī-*) + DEATH] (a sub-species of [OVERCOME (*tī-*) + EVIL]) which must be ancient, maybe inherited, in view of the fact that none of the components of *νέκταρ* (*néktar*) is vital in historical Greek.

	OVERCOME	DEATH
Vedic	* <i>terh</i> ₂ -	* <i>mṛtyú-</i>
Greek	* <i>terh</i> ₂ -	* <i>nek-</i>

Table 1

Step by step, along these lines, the picture has been enriched by new elements, shifting the focus from the etymology of *νέκταρ* (*néktar*) to the cultural context which motivates it.

3 The bipartite representation of death: phraseology and lexicon

Our understanding of the metaphor [OVERCOME + DEATH] has been improved on the basis of Vedic passages which reveal a split in the Vedic representation of death: premature death (due to various accidents, including diseases) on the one hand and natural death (i.e. death of old age) on the other. Only the former is evil and can be averted (through spells and rites). Death by old age cannot be averted, and is not even evil.¹⁵

In an Atharvaveda passage quoted by Romano Lazzeroni (1988), [death by] old age is opposed to “the other deaths”, usually said to be a hundred and more:

(6)

<i>túbhyam</i>	<i>evá</i>	<i>jaríman</i>	<i>vardhatām</i>	<i>ayám</i>
you-DAT	just	old age-VOC	grow-3SG.PRS.IMP	this-NOM
<i>mémám</i>	<i>anyé</i>	<i>mṛtyávo</i>	<i>himsiṣuḥ</i>	<i>śatám</i>
not.him	others-NOM	deaths-NOM	harm-3PL.AOR.INJ	hundred-NOM
<i>yé</i>				
REL-NOM				

<i>mitrá</i>	<i>enam</i>	<i>váruṇo</i>	<i>vā</i>	<i>riśádā</i>
Mitra-NOM	this-ACC	Varuṇa-NOM	or	helpful-NOM
<i>jarámṛtyuṃ</i>		<i>kṛṇutām</i>	<i>saṃvidānau</i>	
having death in old age-ACC		make-3DU.PRS.IMP	in concord-PRS.PTC.NOM	
‘for just thee, O old age , let this one grow; let not the other deaths, that are a hundred , harm him; [...] Let Mitra or helpful Varuṇa in concord make him one that dies of old age [...]’ (AVŚ 2.28.1-2) ¹⁶				

As later Sanskrit texts note, ‘hundred and one deaths’ is a characteristic expression of the Atharvavedic formula. The *Suśrutasaṃhitā* (1.34.6ab) explicitly states *ekottaram mṛtyuśatam*

the *Digital Corpus of Sanskrit* (DCS, Hellwig, 2010–2021), at <http://www.sanskrit-linguistics.org/dcs/index.php>. (last accessed 4.06.2023). The *R̥gveda* is quoted from the *Saṃhitā-Pāṭha* version, edited by Ananthanarayana, Martínez García & Gippert (2000) on the basis of the edition by Aufrecht (1877). For the AVŚ, we used the edition of Orlandi (1991) and Roth & Whitney (1856).

¹⁵ Indeed, in the *R̥gveda*, the poets could invoke gods asking that death does not come until old age. This is precisely the case of RV 8.67.20 *mā no hetir vivāsvata ādityāḥ kṛtrīmā śaruḥ purā nū jarāso vadhūt* ‘O Ādityas, let the missile of Vivasvant, the finely made arrow, not strike us now **before old age**’.

¹⁶ The Paippalāda parallel occurs in AVP 1.12.1-2.

atharvāṇaḥ pracakṣate / tatraikaḥ kālasamṛyuktaḥ śeṣā āgantavaḥ smṛtāḥ ‘The hymns of the *Atharvaveda* declare that (there are) a hundred and one deaths. There, one is connected with time, all the others are considered to be accidental’ (cf. Bloomfield 1899: 64).

The “other deaths” are caused by accidents, injuries, or diseases and are consequently opposed to natural death from old age. In addition to (6), we find some other *sūktas* in the *Atharvaveda*, both *Śaunaka* and *Paippalāda* recension, in which natural death and premature death are evidently opposed. Again, gods are invoked to prevent man from “the hundred other deaths”, whereas old age (*jarás-*, *jarimán-*) – personified in (8) – is highly desired. See, for instance, the following passages:

(7)

<i>yé</i>	<i>devā</i>	<i>diví</i>	<i>ṣṭhá</i>	<i>yé</i>	<i>pṛthivyám</i>
REL-NOM	gods-VOC	heaven-LOC	be-2PL.PRS	REL-NOM	earth-LOC
<i>yé</i>	<i>antárikṣa</i>	<i>óṣadhīṣu</i>	<i>paśúṣv</i>	<i>apsv</i>	<i>ántáh</i>
REL-NOM	atmosphere-LOC	herbs-LOC	cattle-LOC	waters-LOC	within
<i>té</i>	<i>kṛṇuta</i>	<i>jarásam</i>	<i>áyur</i>	<i>asmaí</i>	<i>śatám</i>
these-NOM	make-2PL.PRS.IMP	old age-ACC	life-ACC	this-DAT	hundred-ACC
<i>anyán</i>	<i>pári</i>	<i>vṛṇaktu</i>	<i>mṛtyún</i>		
others-ACC	round	turn-3SG.PRS.IMP	deaths-ACC		
‘Ye, O gods, that are in the heaven, that are on earth, that are in the atmosphere, in the herbs, in the cattle, within the waters— do ye make old age the length of life for this man; let him avoid the hundred other deaths ’ (AVŚ 1.30.3) ¹⁷					

(8)

<i>abhi</i>	<i>tvā</i>	<i>jarima</i>	<i>ahita</i>	<i>gām</i>	<i>ukṣanām</i>
to	you-ACC	old age-VOC	place-3SG.AOR	ox-ACC	bull-ACC
<i>iva</i>	<i>rajjvā</i>	<i>vy</i>	<i>anye</i>	<i>yantu</i>	<i>mṛtyavo</i>
like	rope-INS	apart	others-NOM	go-3PL.PRS.IMP	deaths-NOM
<i>yān</i>	<i>āhur</i>	<i>itarāñ</i>	<i>chatam</i>		
REL-ACC	say-3PL.PRF	other-ACC	hundred-ACC		
‘ Old age has tied you up, like a bull with a rope. Let the other kinds of death, which they say are another hundred, go away ’ (AVP 1.61.2) ¹⁸					

Lazzeroni also points to the expression *jarámṛtyum kṛ-* ‘make [someone] one that dies of old age’ in a wishful *Atharvaveda* spell. Further evidence can be added, revealing the non episodic but formulaic character of this expression: in the *Atharvaveda Paippalāda*, *jarámṛtyu-* occurs depending on *kṛ-* twice in the same *kāṇḍa* (cf. Lelli 2020: 107; 182), here (9) and (10). Moreover, this formula seems semantically equivalent to *kṛṇuta jarásam áyuh* ‘do ye make old age the length of life’ attested in the example (7) above.

(9)

<i>pari</i>	<i>dhatta</i>	<i>dhatta</i>	<i>varcasemaṃ</i>	
around	place-2PL.PRS.IMP	place-2PL.PRS.IMP	splendor-INS.him	
<i>jarámṛtyum</i>		<i>kṛṇuta</i>	<i>dīrgham</i>	<i>āyuh</i>

¹⁷ This passage has its parallel in AVP 1.14.3.

¹⁸ Cf. AVŚ 3.11.5-8.

having death in old age-ACC	make-2PL.PRS.IMP	long-ACC	life-ACC
‘Wrap, cover this one with splendour, make [him] one who dies of old age , [make] his longevity long’ (AVP 15.6.1) ¹⁹			

(10)

<i>imaṃ</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>tvaṃ</i>	<i>jarāmr̥tyuṃ</i>	<i>puruṣaṃ</i>
this-ACC	me-DAT	you-NOM	having death in old age-ACC	man-ACC
<i>kṛṇuv</i>	<i>oṣadhe</i>			
make-2SG.PRS.IMP	herb-VOC			
‘O herb, make for me this man one who dies of old age ’ (AVP 15.16.2)				

As observed above, death of old age is a wish in the Vedic prayers and spells, as opposed to all other kinds of death (accidents, injuries, diseases) which can be conventionally subsumed, in modern terminology, under the comprehensive label “premature death”.

The split between premature death(s) (which are a variety, a hundred in the passage in (6), (7), (8), and also in AVŚ 11.6.16) and natural death (by old age), emerging from textual evidence, has no lexical support in Vedic: the noun *mṛtyú-* is unmarked, covering all sorts of death. In specific contexts, it may acquire a restrictive reading, as in the combination with *tṛ̃-*: *mṛtyúṃ tṛ̃-* can only be referred to the kind of death which may be overcome by humans, i.e. premature death (Lazzeroni 1988).

The lexical contrast between Vedic and Greek highlighted in Table 1 (**mṛtyú-* / **nek-*) has given impulse to further investigation, which in turn has called into question a third language, Latin. Whereas Greek has no lexical match to Vedic *mṛtyú-*²⁰ and Vedic has no lexical match to Greek νεκ- (*nek-*) (i.e. no root noun **nek-*),²¹ Latin has both: *mors* (**mṛti-*)²² and *nex* (**nek-*). The lexical contrast *nex* : *mors* reflects, according to Lazzeroni (1988), the contrast between premature and natural death. More precisely, in Archaic and Classical Latin, the root noun *nex*, in contrast to *mors*, specifically denoted the various kinds of premature death(s) (as observed above, in this paper, “premature death” is simply used as a conventionalized expression, following Lazzeroni 1988). *Mors* was the unmarked term of the couple, referring to death in general, but acquiring a restrictive reading (‘natural death’) when in opposition to *nex*. Projecting this lexical contrast into prehistory, Lazzeroni assumes that Greek νέκταρ (*néktar*) contains the marked noun for ‘premature death’, whereas Vedic *mṛtyúṃ áti tṛ̃-* has the unmarked noun for ‘death’. This lexical contrast does not pose any problem to Thieme’s etymology, for the reasons sketched above (§ 1).

However, a further element can be added to this picture. In fact, traces of the presence of **nek-* in the semantic field of ‘premature death’ are not absent in Vedic. These will be identified and discussed in the following section.

4 Traces of **nek-* in the semantic area of premature death in Vedic

4.1 The expression *nāṣṭrā atitāryāḥ*

The expression *nāṣṭrā atitāryāḥ* ‘*nāṣṭrā-* to be overpassed’ occurs in an Atharvaveda hymn devoted to prolong some one’s life through magical herbs:

¹⁹ The passage in (9) is quoted at HirGS 1.4.2 = ĀpMP 2.2.6, but with some adjustments: the later author renders the compound *jarāmr̥tyuṃ* with *śatāyusaṃ* (*kṛṇuta*) ‘let him have an hundred (years of) life’ (Lelli 2020: 107).

²⁰ On the lexical replacement of **mer-* by **d^henh₂-* in Greek. cf. § 2.2.1 above.

²¹ The IE root **nek-* survives in Vedic in verbal forms and in nominal derivatives.

²² With respect to Latin *mors* (<**mṛti-*), Vedic *mṛtyu-* (= Avestan *mərəθiiu-*) results from the contamination between *mṛti-* ‘death’ and its antonym *jīvātu-* ‘life’; Schmitt (1967: 69, quoting Antoine Meillet).

(11)

<i>yé</i>	<i>mṛtyáva</i>	<i>ékaśataṃ</i>	<i>yá</i>	<i>nāṣṭrā</i>
REL-NOM	deaths-NOM	one_hundred-NOM	REL-NOM	perditions-NOM
<i>atitāryāḥ</i>				
overpass-GVE				
‘the deaths that are a hundred and one, the perditions that are to be overpassed ’ (AVŚ 8.2.27ab)				

Nāṣṭrā- (rendered in Monier-Williams 1899: 538 as ‘danger; destruction; evil demon’) is a suffixed derivative from the root **nek-*, and *atitāryā-* ‘to be overpassed’ is the gerundive of *āti tṛ-* ‘overpass’;²³ hence, *nāṣṭrā atitāryāḥ* presupposes *nāṣṭrā āti tṛ-* ‘overpass *nāṣṭrā-*’. The notion of “premature death” is central in this verse, as confirmed by the strict parallelism between *yá nāṣṭrā atitāryāḥ* and *yé mṛtyáva ékaśataṃ* ‘the deaths that are a hundred and one’ (cf. *anyé mṛtyávo [...]* *śataṃ yé* in (6)).

Reference to death for old age occurs few verses before:

(12)

<i>kṛṇómi</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>prāṇāpānaú</i>	<i>jarāṃ</i>
make-1SG.PRS	you-DAT	breath_and_expiration-ACC	old_age-ACC
<i>mṛtyúṃ</i>	<i>dīrghám</i>	<i>áyuḥ</i>	<i>svastí</i>
death-ACC	long-ACC	life-ACC	welfare-ACC
‘I make for thee breath-and-expiration, old age as [mode of] death , long-time, welfare’ (AVŚ 8.2.11ab)			

The wish of a death for old age, and the wish of immortality, are not contradictory, in the light of what we observed above. Both *pādas* a and b (*yé mṛtyáva ékaśataṃ / yá nāṣṭrā atitāryāḥ*) specifically refer to premature death(s), i.e. the kind of death(s) which may be averted through prayers and spells, as observed above.

Nāṣṭrā āti tṛ- offers an remarkable parallel, with lexical variation, to *mṛtyúṃ āti tṛ-* ‘overpass *mṛtyú-*’, and at the same time an instance of the combination of the root components of Greek *νέκταρ* (*néktar*), **nek-* and **terh₂-* (cf. Benedetti 1989).

The evidence provided by *nāṣṭrā atitāryāḥ* in (11) is not isolated. In the *Atharvaveda Paippalāda*, we find two additional passages where *nāṣṭrā-* is combined with *tṛ-*, respectively, in a royal consecration ritual’s book (13) and in the treatment of the “observance of the draft-ox” (14).

(13)

<i>nāṣṭrās</i>	<i>tvam</i>	<i>sarvās</i>	<i>tīrtvā</i>	<i>bhrātr̥vyāṇām</i>
dangers-ACC	you-NOM	all-ACC	overcome-GER	rivals-GEN
<i>śriyaṃ</i>	<i>vṛha</i>			
glory-ACC	snatch-2SG.PRS.IMP			
‘ Overcoming all dangers , you snatch the glory of your rivals’ (AVP 10.2.5c) ²⁴				

²³ Cf. Whitney (1889: 463); Wackernagel-Debrunner (1954: II,2: 793) *ati-tāryā-* ‘zu überwältigen’.

²⁴ The Authors are grateful to Elisabeth Tucker for her generous help in the interpretation of this passage.

(14)

<i>atha</i>	<i>yad</i>	<i>aśya</i>	<i>pratīcīnaṃ</i>	<i>nābhyās</i>
moreover	REL-NOM	his	to the back	navel-ABL
<i>tena</i>	<i>mṛtyuṃ</i>	<i>nāṣṭrām</i>	<i>avarttaṃ</i>	<i>tarati</i>
this-INS	death-ACC	calamity-ACC	misfortune-ACC	overcome-3SG.PRS
‘Moreover the part [of his belly] to the back of his (the draft-ox’s) navel, with that he (the <i>vratin</i>) overcomes death, calamity, misfortune ’ (AVP 17.40.8)				

The second passage, here (14), is particularly noteworthy. The observance of the draft-ox guarantees that the *vratin* overcomes death and, consequently, that he does not die before old age, as said in the immediately following *kāṇḍikā*: *vyog jīvati sarvam āyur eti na purā jarasaḥ pra mīyate ya (evaṃ vidvān anaḍuho vrataṃ bibharti)* ‘He lives for a long time, he enjoys a whole lifespan, he does not die prematurely, he who (being initiated, “bears” the observance of the draft-ox)’ (AVP 17.41.6 tr. Selva 2019: 309).

The recurrent use of the formulaic expression *nāṣṭrā tṛ-* is further confirmed by four passages from the later *Kāṭhaka Samhitā* of the *Black Yajur Veda* (two in 7.10 and, similarly, two in 37.8). In all cases, *tṛ-* involves not only *nāṣṭrā-*, but also *mṛdh-* and *rakṣas-* which typically denote evil beings and demonic forces.

See, for instance, KS 7.10:72.10:

(15)

<i>sarvā</i>	<i>eva</i>	<i>mṛdhas</i>	<i>sarvā</i>	<i>nāṣṭrās</i>
all-ACC	indeed	hostilities-ACC	all-ACC	destructions-ACC
<i>sarvāṇi</i>	<i>rakṣāṃsi</i>	<i>tarati</i>		
all-ACC	demons-ACC	overpass-3SG.PRS		
‘ He overpasses all hostilities, all destructions (<i>nāṣṭrāḥ</i>), all demons’ (KS 7.10:72.10)				

Vedic *nāṣṭrā atitāryāḥ*, and the expression *nāṣṭrā tṛ-* offer a remarkable phraseological parallel to the Greek compound, with etymological identity of both components.

4.2 A formula for immortality: *dūṇāśa- ajāra-*

In the *dānastuti* (“praise of the gift”)²⁵ contained in final verses of the Ṛgvedic hymn 7.18, the Maruts are invoked to assist the king Sūdas Paijavana in the fulfilment of his wish, consisting in a lordly power (*kṣatrá-*) qualified as *dūṇāśa-* and *ajāra-*:

(16)

<i>aviṣṭánā</i>	<i>paijavanásya</i>	<i>kétaṃ</i>	<i>dūṇāśaṃ</i>
give aid-2PL.AOR.IMP	Paijavana-GEN	inspiration-ACC	difficult to destroy-ACC
<i>kṣatráṃ</i>	<i>ajāraṃ</i>	<i>duvoyú</i>	
lordly power-ACC	unaging-ACC	reward-ACC	
‘Give aid to the inspiration of Paijavana – lordly power <i>dūṇāśa-</i> ²⁶ and unaging – (as he) seeks (your) favour’ (RV 7.18.25cd)			

²⁵ For the *dānastuti* in Vedic literature see Patel (1929); Pinault (2019).

²⁶ *Dūṇāśa-* is translated as ‘difficult to attain’ by Jamison & Brereton (2014: 905), but see below.

The combination of *ajāra-* ‘unaging’ with *kṣatrā-* ‘lordly power’, ‘dominion’ also occurs at the end of RV 6.8.6, in which Agni is invoked for benefits:

(17)

<i>asmākam</i>	<i>agne</i>	<i>maghāvatsu</i>	<i>dhāraya</i>
our-GEN	Agni-VOC	benefactors-LOC	hold-2SG.PRS.IMP
<i>ánāmi</i>	<i>kṣatrām</i>	<i>ajāraṃ</i>	<i>suvīriyam</i>
unbending-ACC	dominion-ACC	unaging-ACC	abundance of heroes-ACC
‘Among our benefactors, o Agni, uphold dominion, unbowed and unaging , and an abundance of heroes’ (RV 6.8.6ab)			

In (17), the adjective making a couple with *ajāra-* is *ánāmin-* ‘unbending’.²⁷ Besides the partial lexical overlap, the expressions *dūñśaṃ kṣatrām ajāraṃ* and *ánāmi kṣatrām ajāraṃ* show affinities also in word order (with the adjectives symmetrically disposed around the head noun, *kṣatrā-*) and in the general content (qualification of expected).

The interpretation of *ánāmin-* as ‘unbending’ (cf. *nam-* ‘bend’, also in the sense of ‘submit’) is uncontroversial: the pair *ánāmin-* ‘unbending’ / *ajāra-* ‘unaging’ qualifies the desired *kṣatrā-* as being resistant to damage and decay.

We assume that a similar concept underlies the couple *dūñśa-* / *ajāra-* in (16).

As is well-known, the interpretation of *dūñśa-* is controversial. Scholarly opinions diverge on the association of the second element *nśa-* either with *naś-* ‘perish’ or with *naś-* ‘reach’ (the first element is undoubtedly the prefix *dus-* ‘bad’, ‘hard’). Accordingly, *dūñśa-* is interpreted as ‘hard to destroy’ or as ‘hard to reach’. In our view, the former option appears preferable. It easily accounts for the otherwise problematic long vocalism in the root²⁸ and fits better into the context: it offers a semantic correlate to the symmetric disposition of *dūñśa-* and *ajāra-*, thus qualifying *kṣatrā-* as exempt from destruction and decay.²⁹

The formal contrast in the prefixes (*dus-* / *a-*) does not seriously affect the symmetry between the two epithets: it can be easily accounted for as the effect of stylistic variation, rather than as expression of a semantic contrast. The strong affinity between the types of composita represented, respectively, by *dūñśa-* and *ajāra-* is in fact widely recognized in the literature³⁰. Formally, they both belong to a class of *a-* / *dus-* / *su-* prefixed *bahuvrīhis* with root-accented and *-a-* suffixed nomina actionis as second member (Tucker 2012: 233 with fn. 5). Semantically, expressions such as ‘hard (*dus-*) to X’ and ‘impossible (*a-*) to X’, though in principle logically distinct, can easily alternate, especially in poetic texts, depending on stylistic and metric variables.³¹ In the *Ṛgveda* a comparable asyndetic pair with *a-/dus-* variation is *áriṣṭa-* / *duṣṭāra-* ‘invulnerable/difficult to surpass’ referred to *sāhaḥ* ‘force’ in RV 2.34.7c.

What observed above invites to compare the couple *dūñśa-* / *ajāra-* with other bipartite formulas involving the asyndetic combination of ‘unaging’ (*ajāra-*, *ajuryá-*) with a lexically variable *a-* prefixed adjective:

²⁷ Which occurs in the *Ṛgveda* twice: here, referred to *kṣatrā-*, and in RV 3.62.5 referred to the semantically close *ójas-* ‘power’. Cf. Whitaker (2011: 141).

²⁸ In the hypothesis of a connection with *naś-* ‘perish’, the long vocalism is explained as depending on the transitive present *nāśayati* ‘make perish’, ‘destroy’: cf. Wackernagel-Debrunner (1954 II,2: 63); Tucker (2012: 233). Observe that all the nominal derivatives from *naś-* ‘perish’ have a long root vowel (Benedetti 1994).

²⁹ For an overview of the different translations and a more detailed discussion cf. Benedetti (1994).

³⁰ Fundamental remarks in Wackernagel & Debrunner (1905 II,1: 255; 294ff). Also all the other *Ṛgvedic* occurrences of *dūñśa-* (1.176.4; 6.27.8; 7.32.7; 9.63.11) allow a reading as ‘difficult to destroy’.

³¹ A similar phenomenon can be observed in Ancient Greek, in the relationship between the corresponding prefixes *δυσ-* (*dus-*) and *α-* (*a-*); cf. Fehling (1969: 176; 287).

(18)

<i>ajārāmṛtā</i>	<i>carati</i>	<i>svadhābhiḥ</i>
unaging.immortal-NOM	proceed-3SG.PRS	own customs-INS
‘unaging, immortal, she [= Dawn] proceeds according to her own customs’ (RV 1.113.13d)		

(19)

<i>ā</i>	<i>sūriyasya</i>	<i>duhitā</i>	<i>tatāna</i>	<i>śrávo</i>
towards	Sun-GEN	Daughter-NOM	stretch-3SG.PRF	fame-ACC
<i>devéṣu</i>	<i>amṛtam</i>	<i>ajuryá</i>		
gods-LOC	immortal-ACC	unaging-ACC		
‘(She like) the Daughter of the Sun has stretched (their [= the Jamadagni’s]) fame, immortal and unaging , to the gods’ (RV 3.53.15cd)				

(20)

<i>āskre</i>	<i>sapátnī</i>	<i>ajáre</i>	<i>ámṛkte</i>
united-ACC	cowives-ACC	unaging-ACC	indistructible-ACC
‘[Heaven and Earth], who are united cowives, unaging and indistructible ’ (RV 3.6.4c)			

(21)

<i>trinābhi</i>	<i>cakráṃ</i>	<i>ajáram</i>	<i>anarváṃ</i>
triple naved-NOM	wheel-NOM	unaging-NOM	unassailable-NOM
‘Triple-naved [=with three seasons?] is the unaging, unassailable wheel [of the Sun]’ (RV 1.164.2c) ³²			

We have here a bipartite phraseological pattern, which can be represented as [UNAGING (*ajára-*, *ajuryá*) + IMMORTAL / UNINDISTRUCTIBLE], forming a sort of polar expression covering all possible causes of death.³³

The complementary term to ‘unaging’, subject to semantic and lexical variation, may be the unmarked form for ‘immortal’, *amṛta-* or a prefixed adjective negating some destructive process, such as *ámṛkta-* and - with prefix variation - *dūñśa-*.³⁴

The lexical stability of the term ‘unaging’, as opposed to the lexical variety of the complementary term, may be put in relationship with the contrast between the unitarian character of natural death (old age) and the variety of accidents which are possible causes of premature death (cf., above § 3).

The inclusion of *dūñśa-* / *ajára-* among “immortality” formulas is perfectly consistent with its being referred to *kṣatrá-* ‘lordly power’, ‘dominion’. In the Vedic culture and phraseology, *kṣatrá-* belongs together with terms such as *śrávas* and *yásas*, forming with them a “conceptual cluster” associated, among the other things, to immortality: “The use of the word *kṣatrá-* is similar to the use

³² Cf. also AVŚ 13.3.18; AVŚ 9.9.2c. On the form *anarvá-* see Wackernagel-Debrunner (1954 II, 2: 903); (1930 III: 266).

³³ Cf., in Greek, with lexical renewal, ἀθάνατος καὶ ἀγήρωσ (*athánatos kai agéraōs*) ‘immortal and unaging’, differing from the Ṛgvedic formulas also for the presence of a coordinator (West 1988: 115 fn. 32; Nagy 1999: §10.23; Adams 2021: 95).

³⁴ On this patterns, which semantically “tends to express invulnerability”, cf. Adams (2021: 95).

of the words *śrávas* and *yásas* and, besides its main meanin of domination, it conveys the meaning of a state conceived as shining, lofty and beyond death” (Jurevicz 2010: 180).³⁵

The pair *dūñāśa-* / *ajāra-*, with the undelying contrast **nek-* / **gerh₂-* represents a further trace of the association of **nek-* with “premature death” in Vedic.

5 Conclusions

The data we have been discussing – on a limited dataset, essentially based on Greek and Old Indian, marginally Latin - contribute to the reconstruction of aspects of the Indoeuropean concept of immortality, revealing its essentially bipartite nature. This is related, in turn, to a bipartite concept of “death”: natural death (due to old age) as opposed to all possible sort of accidents which may prematurely interrupt the natural course of life.

Both lexical and phraseological elements contribute to this reconstruction, which received its initial impulse from the challenge posed by an etymological puzzle, namely that of Greek *νέκταρ* (*néktar*). Step by step, Thieme’s fascinating hypothesis, which reconstructs a prehistoric compound ‘overcoming death’, combining two elements no longer vital in Greek, received support from different kinds of evidence provided by Vedic and Latin. Vedic attests the locution ‘overcome death’ and the conceptual distinction between natural and premature death, but provides no lexical evidence of this distinction. On the other hand, Latin provides evidence of a lexical distinction between the two kinds of death, through the contrast *mors* / *nex*, but has no trace of the locution ‘overcome death’.

Each one of these languages brings its own and unique contribution to the general picture. As we have shown, a deeper investigation in the Vedic texts provides further elements to our reconstruction: traces of the association of the root **nek-* with “premature death” (an association attested in Latin and presupposed by the Greek opaque compound *νέκταρ* (*néktar*)) emerge in Vedic as well. This is proved on the one hand by the use of the noun *nāṣṭrā-* in the formula *nāṣṭrā (āti) tṛ-* ‘overpass destructions’ and on the other hand by the occurrence of the adjective *dūñāśa-* ‘difficult to destroy’ in the bipartite expression *dūñāśa-* / *ajāra-* ‘difficult to destroy’ / ‘unaging’, following a known formulaic pattern for immortality.

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³⁵ Cf. also “the *Ṛgvedic* poets created a general concept of a state expressed by the words *śrī*, *śrávas*, *yásas* and *kṣatrā-*. This concept unites the ideas of light, beauty, excellence, fame, and dominion. It is qualified as immortal and divine.” (*ibid.*).

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