

A syntactic collocation in the *Atharvaveda* and the Indo-European concept of immortality: *nāṣṭrā́ (áti) tī-* ‘overpass destructions’¹⁰⁸

Abstract. This paper focuses on the Indo-European concept of immortality by introducing new lexical and phraseological elements, attested in particular in the *Atharvaveda*, that reveal the bipartite nature of death in the ancient IE languages (Greek, Old Indian, marginally Latin): natural death (due to old age) as opposed to premature death. A collection of passages from the *Atharvaveda* (*Śaunaka* and *Paippalāda*) reveals the existence of a distinction between death by old age (*jarāmṛtyu-*) and premature deaths, usually said to be ‘a hundred (and other)’ (AVŚ 1.30.3; AVŚ 2.28.1; AVP 1.61.2). In particular, we show that traces of the association of $\sqrt{*nek-}$ with “premature death” – attested in Latin and presupposed by the Greek opaque compound *νέκταρ* – emerge in Vedic as well. This is shown by the use of the noun *nāṣṭrā́* ‘danger, destruction, evil demon’, a suffixed derivative from the root **nek-*: *nāṣṭrā́*- (which first appears in the *Atharvaveda*) in the formula *nāṣṭrā́ (áti) tī-* ‘overpass destructions’ (AVŚ 8.2.27; AVP 10.2.5; AVP 17.40.8).

1. The etymology of *νέκταρ*

In the Greek epics, as is well-known, *νέκταρ* denotes, together with *ἀμβροσίη*, a sort of divine food, not dispensed to humans:¹⁰⁹

- (1) **νέκταρ τ’ ἀμβροσίην τε, τά περ θεοὶ αὐτοὶ ἔδουσι**
‘nectar and ambrosia, which the gods themselves eat’ (Hes. *Th.* 631)¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ 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 Section 1; to Beatrice Grieco for Sections 2-3. Both authors are responsible for Section 4. The current article significantly revises and expands Benedetti (1989) and Benedetti and Grieco, *forth.*, delving deeper into important aspects of Vedic (especially Atharvavedic) evidence.

¹⁰⁹ For an overview, cf. the lemmas ‘Nektar’ (Stenger 2000) and ‘Ambrosia’ (Graf 1996) in *Brill’s Neue Pauly*.

¹¹⁰ Abbreviated references to ancient Greek authors and their texts follow the conventions of LSJ. Translations are from the Loeb Classical Library.

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

- (2) ἀθανάτους ὄτι κλέψαις
ἀλίκεσσι συμπόταις
νέκταρ ἀμβροσίαν τε
δῶκεν, οἷσιν ἄφθιτον
θέν νιν

‘because he stole from the deathless gods **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)

Nectar and *ambrosia* represent a formulaic pair, widely attested across the Greek literature.

The connection with immortality is transparent in the etymology of ἀμβροσίη / ἀμβροσία, from ἀμβροτος < **h₂-m₁rto-* ‘immortal’ (a negative prefixed adjective from the root **mer-* ‘die’).

On the other hand, the etymology of νέκταρ has long been disputed, until the brilliant hypothesis developed by Paul Thieme,¹¹¹ – now widely accepted – which connects νέκταρ with another root belonging the semantic field of ‘death’, namely **nek-*. According to this etymology, νέκταρ goes back to a nominal compound **nek-trh₂-*¹¹² ‘death-overcoming’ or ‘making overcome death’ (“den Tod überqueren lassend, über den Tod hinwegrettend”, Thieme 1952: 11). As also stressed by Paul Thieme, νέκταρ must be an archaism: neither the root noun **nek-* (cf. Avestan *nas-*, Latin *nex*) nor 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-*)¹¹³ survive into historical Greek.¹¹⁴

The reconstruction of **nek-trh₂-* finds support in Vedic: the second member -ταρ, having no parallel in Greek, can be compared with Vedic -*túr* ‘crossing’, ‘passing across’, ‘overcoming’ in compounds such as *vṛtra-túr-* ‘overcoming obstacles’ etc. (Scarlatà 1999: 184–190). Furthermore, Vedic phraseology attests to the combination of the verb *tṛ-* with nouns denoting adversities,¹¹⁵ e.g. *vṛtrá-* ‘obstacle’ (alongside the compound *vṛtra-túr-*); *ámhas-* ‘narrow passage’,¹¹⁶ *dveṣāmsi*

¹¹¹ Thieme 1952 (following intuitions by A.F. Pott and J. Grimm).

¹¹² For simplicity, the reconstructed **nek-trh₂-* is here “modernised”, i.e. presented in the form commonly assumed today, with a laryngeal in the verbal root.

¹¹³ On **terh₂-* in mythical phraseology, cf. Watkins (1995: 343).

¹¹⁴ Cf. nevertheless the Hesychian gloss νέκες · νεκροί. The root **nek-* survives in suffixed nominal forms such as νεκρός ‘dead’, ‘corpse’, νέκυς ‘corpse’.

¹¹⁵ Cf., besides Thieme (1952), Lazzeroni (1988), Watkins (1995).

¹¹⁶ Cf. Gonda (1957).

‘hostilities’ (with Avestan parallels). Also a noun for ‘death’, *mṛtyú-* occurs in these contexts, as highlighted by Thieme’s student Rüdiger Schmitt (1961 [1968]), who pointed to the expression *mṛtyúm áti tī̄-* ‘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):¹¹⁷

(3) *ténaudanéna áti tarāṇi mṛtyúm*

‘by that rice-mess **let me overpass death**’ (AVŚ 4.35.1c)

The Vedic expression *mṛtyúm áti tī̄-* offers a semantic parallel to the Greek compound *νέκταρ*, pointing to a presumably inherited collocation [OVERCOME (*tī̄-*) + DEATH] (a sub-species of [OVERCOME (*tī̄-*) + EVIL]) which must be ancient, maybe inherited, in view of the fact that – as we observed – none of the components of *νέκταρ* is vital in historical Greek.

A deeper understanding of the conceptual background underlying the formula ‘overpass death’ was offered by Romano Lazzeroni (1988), who put it in relation with a split in the representation of death emerging in Vedic texts. On the one hand, premature death, conceived as evil and avertable through spells and rites; on the other, natural death, i.e., death in old age, which is neither avertable nor considered evil.

The kind of death which can be ‘overpassed’ (**terh₂₋*; cf. Greek *νέκταρ*, Vedic *mṛtyúm áti tī̄-*) is premature death, which may appear in different forms: accidents, injuries, diseases, etc.

As suggested by Lazzeroni (1988), the bipartite representation of death has lexical reflexes in Latin, where the contrast *nex* : *mors* corresponds to 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). *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*: “Nel latino classico e arcaico tutti i valori di *nex* hanno un tratto in comune: l’indicazione della morte prematura. *mors*, invece, indica la morte naturale o la morte in generale” (Lazzeroni 1988: 186).

¹¹⁷ Occurrences of the expression *mṛtyúm áti tī̄-* are found in later texts. For examples, in the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*: *áti mṛtyúm tarāmy ahám* ‘I overcome death’ (TB 1.2.1.15.8); in the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa amṛtaṃ vai praṇavaḥ / amṛtenaiva tan mṛtyum tarati* ‘The Praṇava is immortality; thus, by immortality he passes over death’ (GB 2.3.11fg, tr. Patyal 1969).

2. “Overpass death” and the bipartite representation of death

2.1. Our understanding of the metaphor [OVERCOME + DEATH] has been improved on the basis of Vedic passages, which reveal a split in the representation of death: premature death, and natural death, i.e., death in old age. (Death by) old age, in fact, represents the full life span that a human being is meant to live (see *infra purāyusaḥ*).

This distinction already appears in the *Ṛgveda*. Specifically, poets there ask gods to prevent death before old age: for example, RV 8.67.20 invokes the Ādityas to avoid being struck *purā jarāsaḥ*.

- (4) *mā no hetīr vivāsvata*
ādityāḥ kṛtrīmā śāruḥ
purā nū jarāso vadhīt
‘O Ādityas, let the missile of Vivasvant, the finely made arrow, not strike us now **before old age**’ (RV 8.67.20, tr. Jamison & Brereton)

This conception is further developed in the *Atharvaveda*. As already pointed out by Lazzeroni (1988), the expression *jarāmṛtyum kṛ-* ‘make [someone] have death in old age’ became a wishful formula in the *Atharvaveda* spells.¹¹⁸ Its formulaic character seems confirmed by its multiple attestations in both recensions. Further evidence can be added, for instance, from the *Paippalāda Saṃhitā*, where *jarāmṛtyum* appears twice in construction with *kṛ-* in the 15th *kāṇḍa* (cf. Lelli 2020: 107, 182).

- (5) *pari dhatta dhatta varcasemaṃ*
jarāmṛtyum kṛṇuta dīrgham āyuh
‘Wrap, cover this one with splendour, **make [him] one who dies of old age**, [make] his longevity long’ (AVP 15.6.1, tr. Lelli)
- (6) *imaṃ me tvam jarāmṛtyum*
puruṣaṃ kṛṇuv oṣadhe
‘O herb, **make** for me this man **one who dies of old age**’ (AVP 15.16.2, tr. Lelli)

These invocations semantically correspond to *śatāyusaṃ kṛ-* ‘make a life of a hundred years’, as glossed by later texts: *śatāyusaṃ (kṛṇuta)* ‘let him have a hundred (years of) life’ in HirGS 1.4.2 ≈ ĀpMP 2.2.6, when quoting *jarāmṛtyum* from AVP 15.6.1.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ In later texts, *jarāmṛtyum* is treated as a *dvandva* compound ‘old age and death’, see KV *ad* A. 6.2.37.

¹¹⁹ Vedic prose texts explicitly say that living a life of 100 years guarantees heaven (ŚB 10.2.6.7).

Comparable expressions reinforce the same idea of the wish for a death from old age. Formulas such as *jarádaṣṭim kṛ-* ‘make one to reach old age’ appear in a hymn for prolonging life:

(7) *mā bibher ná mariṣyasi*

jarádaṣṭim kṛṇomi tvā

‘Be not afraid; thou shalt not die; **I make thee one who reaches old age**’ (AVŚ 5.30.8, tr. Whitney)

Similarly, *jarásam āyuh kṛ-* ‘make old age the length of life’ occurs in an invocation to the gods requesting protection from harmful deaths, which the poet refers to as the “hundred other deaths” (*śatám anyān mṛtyūn*). These hundred other deaths must be averted.

(8) *yé devā divi śthá yé pṛthivyāṃ*

yé antárikṣa óśadhīṣu paśúṣv apsv àntáh

té kṛṇuta jarásam áyur asmaí

śatám anyān pári vṛṇaktu mṛtyūn

‘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 ≈ AVP 1.14.3, tr. Whitney)

2.2. The expression ‘hundred and one deaths’, as later Sanskrit texts noted, is characteristic of the Atharvavedic formulary. The hundred refers to *āgantavaḥ* ‘accidental’ deaths, while natural death is singular and bound to time (cf. also Hellwig 2008 for *āgantavaḥ*).¹²⁰

(9) *ekottaram mṛtyuśatam atharvāṇaḥ pracakṣate / tatraikaḥ kālasamṛyuktaḥ śeṣā āgantavaḥ smṛtāḥ*

‘The Atharvans declare that (there are) **a hundred and one deaths**. There, **one is connected with time**, all the others are considered to be **accidental**’ (*Suśrutasaṃhitā* 1.34.6ab)

This split between the (singular) natural death and multiple premature deaths, which are said to be a hundred, appears in a few hymns of the *Atharvaveda*. Comparable cases are found, for instance, in AVP 1.61.2, example (10), and AVŚ 2.28, example (11), revealing its non-episodic character. See also AVŚ 2.28.1 and AVP 15.14.9 ≈ AVŚ 11.6.16 for further attestations.

¹²⁰ Uncountable harming entities linked to premature death are said to be 101 in the *Atharvaveda*: 101 are the *pāśā* of Death (AVP 19.23.5) and the diseases (*viṣkandhāni*, AVŚ 3.9.6).

(10) *abhi tvā jarimāhita*

gām ukṣaṇam iva rajjvā

vy anye yantu mṛtyavo

yān āhur itarāñ chatam

‘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. ed. Zehnder, Hellwig and Leach 2020)

(11) *túbhyam evá jariman vardhatām ayám*

mémám anyé mṛtyávo himsiṣuḥ śatām yé

‘This Child, **Old Age!** shall grow to meet thee only: none of **the hundred other deaths** shall harm him’ (AVŚ 2.28.1ab, tr. Whitney)

In all these cases, again, Old Age is personified and invoked as the destined cause of death, as opposed to the alternative causes, the “other hundred deaths”. These hundred deaths are associated with accidents, injuries, diseases, and perhaps even suicide, as suggested by *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (10.2.6.7): *tásmād u ha ná purāyusaḥ svakāmī práyāt* ‘Hence one ought not to yield to his own desire and pass away before (he has attained) the full extent of life’ (tr. Eggeling).

The poets wish that their enemies may die *ante diem* (*purā diṣṭāt*, ‘before what is appointed’) and thus fail to reach the completion of their lifetime (*purāyusaḥ*), since only the attainment of old age corresponds to the fulfilment of life.¹²¹

(12) *tāms tvám prá chindhi varaṇa*

purā diṣṭāt purāyusaḥ

‘Them, O *varaṇá*, do thou cut off (*pra-chid*), **before what is appointed** (*diṣṭá*), **before [the end of] their life-time**’ (AVŚ 10.3.16ab, tr. Whitney)

If textual evidence suggests a clear distinction between the (hundred) premature deaths and natural death (i.e., death in old age), a further question arises: does the Vedic tradition employ a specific term or formula to denote premature or avertable death?

3. Vedic *nāṣṭrā* and premature death

3.1. The Vedic formula identified by Schmitt (1961 [1968]), *mṛtyúm áti tī-*, offers a semantic (but only partly lexical) parallel to the Greek compound *νέκταρ* (*néktar*). At the lexical level, the

¹²¹ The idea of old age as the fulfilment of lifetime is reaffirmed, for instance, in *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 8.25.2: *nainam purāyusaḥ prāṇo jahāty ājarasaṃ jīvati sarvam āyur eti* ‘life leaves him not **before his time**, up to **old age** he lives, he lives a full life’, tr. Keith.

equivalence only involves the verbal part, *terh₂-*, whereas the nouns for ‘death’ are etymologically unrelated: *mṛtyú-* in Vedic, *vék-* in Greek.

A comparison with the Latin pair *mors* : *nex* suggests that Vedic *mṛtyú-*, like Latin *mors* (except in opposition with *nex*, see above § 1) is unmarked, i.e. unspecified with respect to the distinction of different kinds of death, whereas *vék-*, like Latin *nex*, is the marked term for premature death.

A closer parallel to Greek *vέκταρ*, involving not only the semantic but also the lexical level was discovered by Benedetti (1989), who observed that a variant of the formula [OVERCOME (*tī-*) + DEATH] substitutes *nāṣṭrā-* for *mṛtyú-*. This variant appears in an Atharvaveda hymn aimed at prolonging life through the use of magical herbs:

(13) *yé mṛtyáva ékaśataṃ*
yá nāṣṭrā atitāryāḥ

‘the deaths that are a hundred and one, **the perditions that are to be overpassed**’ (AVŚ 8.2.27ab, tr. Whitney)

*nāṣṭrā-*¹²² (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 tī-* ‘overpass’:¹²³ hence, *nāṣṭrā atitāryāḥ* presupposes *nāṣṭrā āti tī-* ‘overpass *nāṣṭrā-*’.

nāṣṭrā āti tī- offers a remarkable parallel, with lexical variation, to *mṛtyúm āti tī-* ‘overpass *mṛtyú-*’, and at the same time an instance of the combination of the root components of Greek *vέκταρ*, **nek-* and **terh₂-*.

This invites further scrutiny of the hypothesis of a connection between *nāṣṭrā-* and premature death.

The noun *nāṣṭrā-* makes its first appearance in the *Atharvaveda*, while it is absent from the *Ṛgveda*. Its attestations are limited to only five occurrences in both the recensions, four in the *Paippalāda* and only one in the *Śaunakīya*. Except for a single passage discussed below (example 14) and of the adjective *anāṣṭrā-* (see ex. (15)), every attestation is found within the formula *nāṣṭrā (āti) tī-* (cf. Benedetti 1989), thereby confirming its earliest use in spells for overcoming evils.

Before turning to the passages in combination with *tī-* (§ 3.2), it is first necessary to consider two contexts in which *nāṣṭrā-* and *anāṣṭrā-* occur independently.

¹²² A term best glossed as “something which causes destruction”. In the hypothesis of a connection with *naś-* ‘perish’, the long vocalism is in fact explained as depending on the transitive present *nāśáyati* ‘make perish’, ‘destroy’ (cf. Wackernagel-Debrunner 195, II,2, p. 63; Tucker 2012, p. 233). Note that all the nominal derivatives from *naś-* ‘perish’ have a long root vowel (Benedetti 1994).

¹²³ Cf. Whitney (1889: 463); Wackernagel-Debrunner (1954, II,2, p. 793) *ati-tāryā-* ‘zu überwältigen’.

Hymn 5.37 of the *Paippalāda Saṃhitā* is a charm for the birth of a son and for protecting pregnant women from demons and witchcraft: in stanza 2, Agni is invoked to destroy (*apa hantu*) these *nāṣṭrā*.

- (14) *yady asyāḥ prajā varuṇena guṣpītā*
*durṇāmāno vā ṛtviyam asyā *rihanti*
*dveṣāt *sāpatnād yadi cakrur asyā*
ayaṃ tū nāṣṭrā apa hantv agniḥ

‘If her progeny is entangled by Varuṇa, or the demons lick her procreative fluid, if [her rivals] have performed [witchcraft] against her out of rivalrous hatred, **let this Agni destroy these perditions**’ AVP 5.37.2, tr. Lubotsky)

In another hymn of Book 5, the negative adjective *anāṣṭra-* ‘not dangerous’ denotes sacrificial food that must not be harmful to human beings. In this context, *anāṣṭraṃ annam* may be better understood as equivalent to *aviṣaṃ* ‘not poisonous’ (cf. *sa naḥ sarvam annam aviṣaṃ kṛṇotu*, AVP 11.11.4).

- (15) *yau te daṃṣṭrau sudihau ropayiṣṇū*
nir hvayete dakṣiṇāḥ saṃ ca paśyataḥ
anāṣṭraṃ naḥ pitaras tat kṛṇotu
*yūpe baddhaṃ *pramumucimā yad annam*

‘Your two well-smearred lacerating tusks call out the priestly fees and see everything. O fathers, **let him (Agni) make** the (sacrificial) food **not dangerous** for us, which we have loosened after it was bound to the sacrificial post’ (AVP 5.28.2 ≈ VaitS 10.17, tr. Lubotsky)¹²⁴

In the Vedic prose texts, further occurrences are found in which *anāṣṭrā-* typically appears in combination with evil forces such as *rākṣas* (ŚB 1.1.2.4, 3.3.3.16, 3.6.3.8, 6.3.1.29, 7.3.2.5, cf. Benedetti 1989: 83), where it qualifies a path that leads to well-being (*svastī*) free from demons (see also passage (23) below).

3.2. The remaining four attestations of *nāṣṭrā-* in the *Atharvaveda* occur in combination with *tī-*.¹²⁵ As noted above, Benedetti was the first to draw attention to the expression *nāṣṭrā atitāryāḥ* ‘*nāṣṭrā-*

¹²⁴ *sudih-* ‘well-smearred, polished’, but, another possibility – as suggested by one of the reviewers – is ‘smearred with poison’ in light of the contextual evidence.

¹²⁵ More broadly, the *Atharvaveda* has several passages expressing the idea that “crossing over” hostile forces grant access to heaven. See, for instance, AVP 5.13.6 = AVP 14.5.10 *rakṣāṃsi sarvā tīrtvā-* ‘*athā roha divaṃ tūvam* // ‘Having passed beyond all demons, rise then up to heaven’, tr. Lubotsky.

to be overpassed’ as a trace of the association of $\sqrt{*nek-}$ with “premature death” also in Vedic, and as a parallel to Greek νέκταρ. As we have seen, this formula appears in a hymn of the *Śaunakīya* recension devoted to prolonging a person’s life by means of magical herbs (cf. Benedetti 1989, p. 79) and it is closely linked to the motif of the “hundred other deaths”.¹²⁶ A wish for death in old age, by contrast, occurs a few verses earlier in the same hymn:

- (16) *kṛṇómi te prāṇāpānaú*
jarám mṛtyúṃ dīrghám áyuh svastí
 ‘I make for thee breath-and-expiration, **old age as [mode of] death**, long-time, welfare’ (AVŚ 8.2.11ab, tr. Whitney)

With the recent editions of several books of the *Paippalāda*, it has become possible to add further occurrences to the collection. Additional evidence for this formula comes, indeed, from the *Paippalāda* recension, in a royal consecration ritual’s book (Book 10).

- (17) *tvam vaśī satyākūtaḥ*
satyadharmā gaveṣaṇaḥ
nāṣṭrās tvam sarvās tīrtvā
bhrātrvyānām śriyaṃ vṛha
 ‘You are powerful, of true intention, with laws that hold true, a striver after cattle. **Having overcome all calamities**, wrest the magnificence from your rivals!’ (AVP 10.2.5, ed. Zehnder, Hellwig and Leach 2023)

One more passage occurs in the treatment of the “observance of the draft-ox” in Book 17. The observance of the draft-ox guarantees that the *vratin* overcomes death and, consequently, that he does not die before old age (*purā jarasaḥ*), as said in the immediately following *kāṇḍikā*, here in (19).

- (18) *atha yad asya pracīcīnaṃ nābhyās tena mṛtyuṃ nāṣṭrām avartim tarati*
 ‘Moreover the part [of his belly] to the back of his (the draft-ox’s) navel, with that he (the *vratin*) **overcomes death, calamity, misfortune**’ (AVP 17.40.8, tr. Selva)
- (19) *jyog jīvati sarvam āyur eti na purā jarasaḥ pra mīyate ya (evam 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)

¹²⁶ The same passage has its parallel in AVP 16.5.8.

The recurrent use of the formulaic expression *nāṣṭrā́ tī-* is further confirmed by four passages from the later *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* of the *Black Yajur Veda* (two in 7.10 and, similarly, two in 37.8).¹²⁷ In all cases, *tī-* involves not only *nāṣṭrā-*, but also *mṛdh-* and *rakṣas-*, which typically denote evil beings and demonic forces (Benedetti 1989, p. 80).

- (20) *sarvā eva mṛdhas sarvā nāṣṭrās sarvāṇi rakṣāṃsi tarati*
 ‘He **overpasses** all hostilities, all **destructions** (*nāṣṭrāḥ*), all demons’ (KS 7.10:72.10)

The pairing *nāṣṭrā- rakṣas-* is well attested across Vedic literature, even outside its occurrence within the formulas involving *tī-*. Numerous passages from later Vedic prose texts attest to this pairing in connection with verbs such as *pā-* ‘to protect’ and (*āpa*)*han-* ‘to repel’.¹²⁸ See, for instance, (21) – (22), and in particular (23), where overcoming the *nāṣṭrāḥ* guarantees the attainment of well-being.

- (21) *agnīḥ purástān nāṣṭrā́ rákṣāṃsy apaghnánn eti*
 ‘Agni marches in front **repelling the evil spirits**’ (ŚB 3.6.3.11b. tr. Eggeling)
- (22) *sáma hí nāṣṭrā́ṇāṃ rákṣasām apahantā*
 ‘for the Sāman is a repeller **of the evil spirits**’ (ŚB 4.4.5.6b, tr. Eggeling)
- (23) *devā́ bibhayāṃ cakrur yán na imám antarā́ nāṣṭrā́ rákṣāṃsi ná hanyur iti tá eténa svasty átyāyaṃs*
 ‘The gods were afraid (thinking): “May the fiends, the Rakṣas **do not slay** on the way this (Agni) of ours”. By means of this they **passed through well-being**’ (ŚBK 4.3.3.13, ed. Caland)¹²⁹

Nāṣṭrā́- does not survive beyond the Vedic period, and our understanding of the term rests largely on the aforementioned passages from the *Atharvaveda* and the later Vedic prose texts, where

¹²⁷ In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (1.8.1.3b), there is also an attestation of the compound *atināṣṭró* in the meaning ‘**be beyond destruction**’. According to Delbrück (1888, p. 72), this form means: “Das Eigentümliche des Ausdrucks beruht darin, dass nicht die Gefahr im sing. oder die Gefahren im plur., sondern der Begriff der Gefahr gemeint ist, und dass nicht ein augenblicklicher Vorgang oder Zustand, sondern eine Eigenschaft bezeichnet werden soll”. Benedetti also noted the correspondence between *atināṣṭrá* and *átyāmaḥ* ‘beyond the reach of evil or distress’.

¹²⁸ See Benedetti (1989, p. 82, n. 17) for additional passages attested in the Vedic prose literature in which *nāṣṭrā-* is used.

¹²⁹ The ŚBM (6.7.1.5) reads instead: *etád vái devā́ abibhayur yád vái na imám iha rákṣāṃsi nāṣṭrā́ ná hanyur iti*.

it is closely associated with evil deaths and occurs in contexts where the notion of “premature death” is central. As such, it provides a crucial piece of evidence for reconstructing early Indo-Aryan conceptions of death and (im)mortality.

4. Conclusions

This paper has re-examined the Indo-European concept of death and immortality, starting from the etymology of Greek *véκταρ* proposed by Thieme, and focusing on Vedic evidence, in particular from the *Atharvaveda*. The analysis confirms that early Indo-European traditions show a bipartite representation of death, opposing natural death in old age to a plurality of premature, avertable deaths. The Atharvavedic material makes this distinction especially explicit. On the one hand, death from old age (*jarāmṛtyu-*) is conceived as the proper and desirable end of human life, regularly invoked in wishful formulas and immune from ritual intervention. On the other hand, premature deaths are multiple, harmful, and subject to magical and ritual control; they are consistently conceptualized as “the hundred (other) deaths”.

Within this framework, the formula *nāṣṭrā́ (áti) tī-* ‘to overpass *nāṣṭrā́-*’ emerges as a crucial piece of evidence. Its restricted distribution, formulaic character, and close association with the sphere of avertable evils show that *nāṣṭrā́-* belongs to the semantic domain of premature death. As a suffixed derivative from the root **nek-*, *nāṣṭrā́-* thus provides the first clear Vedic trace of the association between **nek-* and premature death, an association otherwise well attested in Latin (*nex* vs. *mors*) and presupposed by the Greek opaque compound *véκταρ*.

The Atharvavedic collocation *nāṣṭrā́ (áti) tī-* therefore offers not only a semantic but also a lexical and phraseological parallel to Greek *véκταρ* (< **nek-trh₂-*). While Vedic more commonly uses the unmarked noun *mṛtyú-* in expressions of “overcoming death”, the *Atharvaveda* preserves a marked lexical choice that aligns closely with the Indo-European opposition between natural and premature death. More generally, this study highlights the importance of the *Atharvaveda*, both *Śaunaka* and *Paippalāda* recensions, for Indo-European poetics and cultural reconstruction.

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