

### **The decipherable Rigveda: a reconsideration of *vakṣāṇā***

Interpreting the Rigveda has always posed enormous problems for translators. Words have in the past been assigned a broad range of meanings in order to make sense of the contexts in which they occur; and even then many of the contexts remain difficult, and some appear to resist interpretation altogether. Passages are explained as examples of the most recondite imagery, and often have to be supplemented to produce a meaningful reading. “It is discouragingly common to find passages in the *Rig Veda* that do not make sense without the silent supplying of additional material ... translators smoothe out the difficulties by supplying whatever will make an intelligible reading” (Jamison 2000:13).

Not only is it thought that the Rigveda is obscure and difficult, but the subject matter is perceived, as Jamison puts it, to be “hardly sublime ... Obscurity is okay, in fact preferable, but one should dimly perceive “Big Ideas” behind the mystical mists” (2000:3–4). Hardly surprising, then, that the earliest surviving Indo-European poetry has received little attention from translators. “For the most part ‘modern’ translations are incomplete, out of date, or lack scholarly respectability, and English has been particularly badly served.” (Jamison 2000:2)

This paper poses a simple, although controversial question. If it is possible to retranslate Rigvedic words in a way that can be applied consistently and meaningfully throughout the text of the Rigveda, removing the need for the usual explanations of polysemy, ellipsis, obscurity, incongruity and bizarre imagery, could these alternative translations be valid? They will differ from those traditionally offered, translations that may, significantly, be assumed to be correct in the usage of later texts. But is it possible that the traditional way of understanding the Rigveda, with all its irresolvable problems and frequently infelicitous obscurities, is simply wrong? And could it be that “Big Ideas” are in fact present in the text, hidden in mists that are not of the poets’ own making?

I have chosen the word *vakṣāṇā* as an example. It is just one of a large number in the Rigveda that have always frustrated the attempts of indologists to make sense of them in the contexts in which they occur. Mayrhofer’s entry for *vakṣāṇā* is based on the most recent study

of the word by Catharina Kiehnle (1979:101–109). “Bauch, Höhlung, Eingeweide; wohl auch ‘Flußbiegung’ u. ähnl. (RV, AV[P] u.a. ..)” (1992–1996). ‘Belly, hollow, entrails; probably also ‘bend of a river’ and similar (RV, AV[P] and others).’ His definition is accompanied by detailed notes. “Vermutlich ist von ‘Bauch’ auszugehen (mit Übertragungen wie ‘Eingeweide’ [auch als Entstehungsort der Kuhmilch], und allegorisch von Bergen, Flüssen, Pflanzen?), s. Kiehnle 102f ... als ‘Wachsmittel’, ‘Wachsort’ (~ *VAKS*) oder doch ‘\*Biegung, \*Krümmung’ (~ *VAÑC*, s. Kiehnle 105).” Following Kiehnle, Mayrhofer takes ‘belly’ to be the essential meaning of *vakṣáṇā* out of which a range of figurative applications arise. Kiehnle’s work supersedes the nineteenth-century study of *vakṣáṇā* by Pischel, which had reached a slightly different conclusion, that the word essentially meant ‘womb’ (1889–1901:I, 174–181). Geldner’s translation made in the first quarter of the twentieth century, which remains “the current standard” (Jamison 2000:4–5), offers a range of body parts for the word depending on the context – ‘flank’, ‘belly’ ‘udder’ and so on – and his translations are discussed in the course of this paper.

Whichever part of the body translators have decided upon as a the meaning of *vakṣáṇā*, its use in the majority of the contexts is understood to be figurative. The ‘belly’ or ‘womb’ belongs to a mountain or to the sky; or to Dawn, who is thought of as a cow. It represents, according to indologists, part of a river, or the inside of a wagon, or the stalk of a plant. Most of the translations that result are, as we will see, incongruous, and some are very obscure, and have to be explained by translators to demonstrate any sense.

Kiehnle opens her study with a quotation from Wittgenstein. “Wie ein Wort funktioniert, kann man nicht erraten. Man muß seine Anwendung ansehen und daraus lernen.” ‘How a word functions cannot be guessed at. We must look at its usage and learn from that.’ But in the case of *vakṣáṇā* this approach is inevitably hamstrung from the start. A comparison of contexts can be of only limited help in working out the precise function of a word, if its use is understood to be generally metaphorical.

It is not clear, however, from the text of the Rigveda, why translators are convinced that the word describes a part of the body.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> An explanation is suggested at the end of the paper.

existence of one passage of undisputed meaning, where the word *vakṣāṇā* unquestionably has a literal anatomical sense, might explain it. But there is no such passage. Nor are there compelling linguistic reasons. Mayrhofer identifies no obvious Indo-European cognates, and the interpretation of the word as ‘belly’ has only led to uncertainty about its derivation: its form suggests that it derives from the root */vakṣ* ‘grow’, but as the belly, unlike the womb, is not necessarily associated with growth, Kiehnle (with entrails in mind) suggests */vañc* ‘bend’ as an alternative. Mayrhofer, as quoted above, offers both as possible derivations.

More difficulties present themselves. The exact role of the body part that *vakṣāṇā* is understood to represent continues to be far from clear. “Es ist mir zwar nicht gelungen, eine Lösung zu finden, denn auch wenn man die vedischen Stellen im Einzelnen durchsieht, ist nicht auszumachen, unter welchem Aspekt der Körperteil ‘Bauch’, um den es sich mit einiger Sicherheit handelt, gesehen wurde” (Kiehnle 1979:102–103). ‘I confess that I have not succeeded in finding a solution, as even considering the Vedic contexts one by one it is not possible to figure out with any degree of certainty in what way the body part ‘belly’ was perceived.’<sup>2</sup> A complicating factor is the consistently plural appearance of the word. Böhtlingk and Roth (1855–1875) give it as plural in form with singular meaning, as does Grassmann (1873), but this is not followed by Monier-Williams (1899)<sup>3</sup> or Macdonell (1924), nor is it so described by Mayrhofer. But in four passages the plural is incongruous, as we shall see. In addition, the cross-reference given in the *Altindische Grammatik* (AiGr.), “*vakṣāṇā*- ‘Bauch’ (=v. *vákṣas*-)” (II, 2, 191), simply serves to highlight the lexical redundancy inherent in this translation.

My approach to the decipherment of the word is to compare the passages in which it occurs in the *Rigveda*. This produces a different interpretation, and one that is much more straightforward. Many of the problems are resolved. The meaning is no longer obscure, and

<sup>2</sup> Her predecessor’s conclusions were similar. “Ein Teil der Stellen, in denen *vakṣāṇās* vorkommt, ist leider sehr dunkel, so dass es schwer ist, die Grundbedeutung festzustellen.” (Pischel 1889–1901:I, 174)

<sup>3</sup> He lists it under the headword *vákṣaṇa*: “(āṇā), f. ‘the nourisher,’ the stomach, abdomen, interior, cavity; the sides, flank, RV.; AV.; Kauś(ika-Sūtra). (others also ‘udder’= *yoni*, lit. and fig., &c.)”

words do not have to be supplied to make sense of the passages. The requirement for footnotes to explain recondite imagery falls away. What is more, a consistency of sense begins to emerge that is sophisticated and poetic.

Lubotsky lists twelve occurrences of *vakṣáṇā* in the Rigveda, the first with a question-mark; if belonging correctly here it would be an irregular form.<sup>4</sup> There is in addition a compounded form, *vakṣaṇe-sthā*,<sup>5</sup> used once to describe Agni. All other occurrences of the word are feminine, and plural. I am taking the passages in the traditional order. Other difficulties of interpretation will be mentioned as they arise, but are only discussed in detail where they affect the argument of the paper. The apparent root of the word is */vakṣ* ‘grow’, and my suggested translation, in every passage, is ‘places of growth’, ‘fertile places’.

I, 32, 1: Indra splits open the *vakṣáṇās* of the mountains

*indrasya nú vīriyāṇi prá vocam*  
Of-Indra now the-strong-deeds (forth) let-me-speak

*yāni cakāra prathamāni vajrī*  
Which he-has-done, the first-ones, the-armed-one

*áhann áhim ánu apás tatarda*  
He-killed the-dragon, (*preverb*)<sup>6</sup> the-waters has-pierced

*prá vakṣáṇā abhinat párvatānām*  
(Forth) the-*vakṣáṇās* he-split of-the-mountains

The fifteen verses of this poem celebrate the cosmic achievements of Indra. The meaning of the context for the word in this passage is not

<sup>4</sup> The form is simply *vakṣáṇā*. “Unklar” (AiGr II, 2, 191). Kiehnle comments “Eine endgültige Lösung für diese Form habe ich nicht anzubieten.” (109–10) I am not incorporating this word in my study. Comparison of the line in which it occurs, *devāṁ áchā ná vakṣáṇā* (V, 52, 15) with the parallel *devāṁ áchā ná majmánā* at VIII, 103, 2 suggests that it might be an instrumental. The phrase *devāṁ áchā ná* ‘as to the gods’ occurs four times in the Rigveda, the line *devāṁ áchā ná dhītāyah* ‘prayers as to the gods’ concluding two long (*atyaṣṭi*) stanzas, I, 132, 5 and I, 139, 1.

<sup>5</sup> See AiGr. II, 1, 211 for the irregular ending of the first element.

<sup>6</sup> “Darauf, später, nach, ferner, entlang” (Mayrhofer).

disputed, although the evocative penultimate verb is hard to render. Renou suggests ‘entrails’ for *vakṣāṇā* in this passage, and his version attempts to give some sense of the preverbs *ānu* and *prá*. “[I]l a tué le dragon, il a percé (tout) au long (la voie pour) les eaux, il a fendu au loin les entrailles des montagnes.” Geldner’s translation is more concise: “Er erschlug den Drachen, erbrach die Gewässer; er spaltete die Weichen der Berge”. With mountains in mind he renders *vakṣāṇā* “Weichen” ‘flanks’, a translation that he uses only here.

Kiehnle categorizes this as an example of allegorical usage. “An solchen Stellen könnte oft der ganze Zusammenhang durch eine genaue Kenntnis der Wortbedeutung eine Erhellung erfahren. Das Umgekehrte, daß der Zusammenhang das Verständnis von *vakṣāṇā*-fördert, ist leider nicht der Fall.” (1979:107–8). ‘In such passages often an exact understanding of the meaning of the word can throw light on the whole context. The contrary, that the context furthers the understanding of *vakṣāṇā*, is alas not the case.’ But in my view the verse does help us to understand the meaning of *vakṣāṇā*. Indra, with his first heroic deed of killing the dragon *Vṛtra* and liberating the waters, made terrestrial life possible. “*Vṛtra* ... is the antithesis of creativity. For with his destruction Indra is able to bring the world into being.” (Maurer 1986:40). III, 34, verses 8 and 10, enumerate the many blessings that Indra procured for men by his *vīriyāṇi*: *sasāna yāḥ pṛthivīm dyām utémām ... índra óṣadhīr asanod áhāni / vānaspātīr asanod antárikṣam* ‘The one who won the earth and this sky (8c), Indra won the plants, the days / the trees he won, the atmosphere’ (10ab). Indra brought life and fertility into the world. I suggest the following translation.

Now let me proclaim the strong deeds of Indra  
The first ones he has done, the armed one:  
He killed the dragon, has released the waters;  
Split forth the fertile places of the mountains.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Compare the parallel description of Indra at IV, 21, 8: *ví yád vārāṃsi párvatasya vṛṇvé/páyobhir jinvé apám jávāṃsi* ‘When he opens up the broad spaces of the mountain, quickens the currents of the waters with vitality ...’

I, 134, 4: The Maruts born from/for the *vakṣāṇās*

*ájanayo marúto vakṣāṇābhiyo*  
You-brought-forth the-Maruts from/for-the-*vakṣāṇās*

*divá á vakṣāṇābhiyaḥ*  
Of/from-the-sky (*see below*) from/for-the-*vakṣāṇās*

The poem is addressed to Vāyu, the wind. Geldner translates “Du erzeugtest die Marut aus den Eutern, aus den Eutern des Himmels”. Renou’s version is similar, “Tu as engendré les Marut (hors) des mamelles, des mamelles du ciel.” The Maruts are the ‘lightning-speared’ gods of the storm, who bring rain. Both translators, with the sources of beneficent liquid in mind, interpret the body part as ‘udders’ in this passage, and understand that the sky is pictured as a cow. Geldner provides the necessary gloss to his translation ‘from the udders’, “den Wolken” ‘from the clouds’.

Macdonell’s reading of *vakṣāṇā*, and of the imagery in this verse, is slightly different. This is the passage to which he is referring when he describes the Maruts as “generated by Vāyu, the god of Wind, in the wombs of heaven.” (1917:21) His interpretation of the word, ‘wombs’, supplies a metaphor that is more accessible to a modern audience, although the plural jars slightly, as would ‘bellies’. My suggested interpretation of *vakṣāṇā* produces a more straightforward translation.

You [Wind] brought forth the storm gods from the fertile places  
From the fertile places of the very sky.

But a further possibility then suggests itself, and one which is more meaningful. Translators take *divás* as genitive and *vakṣāṇābhyas* as ablative, and presumably understand the particle *á* to be simply emphatic. But *divás* frequently occurs, in its ablative sense, with following *á* to mean ‘from the sky hither’, and this is how Grassmann understands it here (1873:169). And *vakṣāṇābhyas* is also dative.

The poem celebrates the effect of the wind on the earth. The previous verse had invited Vāyu to *prá bodhayā púramdhiṃ*<sup>8</sup> / *jārá á sasaṭīm iva / prá cakṣaya ródasī vāsayoṣasaḥ* ‘wake up abundance, like a lover a

<sup>8</sup> Another much-debated Rigvedic word. “[E]twa: Segensfülle, Reichtum” (Mayrhofer); “plénitude” (Renou).

sleeping girl; make both worlds visible, make the dawns light up'. There is a parallel context at V, 83, 4, where the verb, from the same root, /jan, is followed by the dative of advantage: *prá vātā vānti patáyanti vidyúta / úd óśadhūr jīhate pínvate súvaḥ / írā víśvasmai bhúvanāya jāyate / yát parjányah pṛthivīm rétasāvati*; in Macdonell's translation, "The winds blow forth, the lightnings fall; the plants shoot up; heaven overflows. Nurture is born for the whole world when Parjanya<sup>9</sup> quickens the earth with seed." (1917:106; my italics). As in that poem, in this verse the wind rouses the gods of the storm, bringing rain and fertility to the earth.

You [Wind] brought forth the storm gods for the fertile places  
Hither from the sky, for the fertile places.

I, 162, 5: Fill the *vakṣāṇās* full by/with *yajñā*

[*hótādhvaryúr āvayā agnimindhó*  
*grāvagrābhā utá śamstā súviprah*]

*téna yajñéna súaramkṛtena*  
By/with-that offering, well-prepared

*súṣṭena vakṣāṇā á pṛṇadhvam*  
Well-offered, *vakṣāṇās* (full) fill

The poem is traditionally understood to describe the offering of a wonderful horse, one that is *devájāta* 'god-descended' (verse 1), to the gods. Most translators take *vakṣāṇā* here to mean literally 'belly', although Pischel, understanding it to be synonymous with *yóni* 'womb' in all its senses, interprets the word in this passage, and in X, 28,8 (see below), as representing the seat of fire on the sacrificial altar (1889–1901:I, 181). Pischel, who considered the 'indogermanisch' approach to interpretation pioneered by Roth counterproductive, was convinced that later Sanskrit texts could throw light on apparently difficult passages, which he consequently often explains as having a ritual significance.

Geldner translates the verse: "Der Hotṛ, Adhvaryu, der Āvayāj, der Agnimindha, Grāvagrābha und der redegewandte Śamstṛ – füllet ihr

<sup>9</sup> The god of rain.

mit diesem wohlbereiteten, wohlgeopferten Opfer eure Bäuche!” He understands the main verb to be governed by the people listed in the first two lines of the verse, noting “Der Med. von *p̄r̄* verlangt reflexive Bedeutung”, although this is not necessarily so.<sup>10</sup> Kiehnle agrees: “mit diesem Opfer ... sollt ihr euch die *vakṣānās* füllen.” (1979:105) Wendy O’Flaherty, in the same way, suggests “fill your bellies with this<sup>11</sup> well-prepared, well-sacrificed sacrifice” (1981:90).

But there are difficulties with this interpretation. All have to supply a pronoun, “your”, “eure”, “euch” to the text, in order to relate the ‘bellies’ to the priests and singers in the first two lines. In addition, the priests and singers are in the nominative case, and should therefore take a 3rd person plural verb, but the imperative in the last line, *ā pr̄ṇadhvam* ‘fill’, is 2nd person plural. A further problem is that the word *yajñá* must then be understood to refer to a material offering, although in the Rigveda it usually describes the act of worship. In the only other occurrence of *yajñá* in this poem, in the last line of the verse immediately before, the *yajñá* is ‘announced’ to the gods: *yajñám devébhyaḥ pratedáyann ajáh*.

‘Fill bellies full with that offering’ may be a possible translation for this line. But if correct, it causes a problem for the translations of the word *vakṣānā* offered for the previous passage, ‘udders’, or ‘wombs’. Translators were agreed that the body part in that passage was used metaphorically to describe a generative source, which would be inappropriate here.

The same verbal form, *ā pr̄ṇadhvam* ‘fill’ occurs again with *vakṣānā* as object in III, 33, 12 (see below), although in that passage there is no accompanying instrumental. This suggests that the instrumental here should perhaps be understood as grammatically independent, and not to be governed by the verb. This is how Horace Hayman Wilson had understood it, following Sāyaṇa (Sāyaṇa usually gives ‘river’ for *vakṣānā*): “do you replenish the rivers by this well-ordered, well-conducted sacrifice”, which he explains in a note: “the consequence of sacrifice being rain and fertility”. The underlying thought is more sophisticated than “fill bellies full with that offering”, which, as Jamison would

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the middle form of the same verb at VII, 61, 2, *ā yád krátvā ná śarádas pr̄ṇáthe*, in his translation, “auf daß ihr [Mitra and Varuṇa] seine [the singer’s] Jahre vollzählig machet, wie er es im Sinn hat.”

<sup>11</sup> All translators render *téna*, more strictly speaking ‘with that’, ‘with this’.

say, is “hardly sublime”. But as will emerge in the course of this paper, the theme of the creative power of worship pervades the Rigveda.

By means of that homage, well-prepared,  
Well-offered, do you fill the fertile places full.

III, 30, 14: The great light of dawn in the *vakṣānās*.

*māhi jyótir níhitam vakṣānāsu*  
Great light down-placed in-the-*vakṣānās*

*āmā pakvám carati bíbhratī*  
The-raw / unripe (NOM.) cooked / ripe (ACC.) goes bearing  
*gauḥ*  
the-cow (NOM.).

“Ein großes Licht ist in ihren Euter verwahrt: die rohe Kuh wandelt die gekochte (Milch) tragend.” (Geldner); “Une grande lumière-de-feu (a été) déposée-en-secret<sup>12</sup> dans les entrailles (de l’aurore): la vache crue va portant le (lait) cuit.” (Renou). The traditional interpretation of the second line, ‘the raw cow goes bearing the cooked’, is both opaque and incongruous in the context, which is a description of the coming of dawn.

The previous verse told of dawn’s significance for men. ‘They long to see, at the coming of dawn, the great, bright face of the shining one. All know when she has come in her glory: the many deeds of Indra are well done.’ At dawn, the blessings Indra won for men are made apparent.<sup>13</sup>

Because indologists believe that *vakṣānā* in the first line (‘Great light down-placed in the *vakṣānās*’), is an anatomical term, they explain the two lines that follow in a way that seems unnecessarily complex. As dawn is being described, translators understand that the body part belongs to her. Dawn is regularly personified in the Rigveda, as

<sup>12</sup> “[D]e-feu” and “en-secret” are both elaborations based on the assumed meaning.

<sup>13</sup> The last line, *indrasya kárma sūkṛtā purúṇi* ‘the many deeds of Indra are well done’ is repeated at III, 32, 8 and again at III, 34, 6, where Indra’s good deeds are elaborated in a passage that I have already quoted: ‘The one who won the earth and this sky (8c), Indra won the plants, the days / the trees he won, the atmosphere’ (10ab).

in other early Indo-European poetry, and her ‘great bright face’, was mentioned in the verse before. But the word *gaiús* appears in the next line. Dawn, therefore, is understood to be pictured rather in an ‘animalized’ form. In the understanding of Geldner and Renou, dawn, like the sky in I, 134, 4 above, is depicted as a cow, and the interpretation of the *vaksánās* then as ‘udders’ resolves the problem of the plural form of the word.

The text, however, again needs to be supplemented for this interpretation to work. The possessives “ihren”, and “(de l’aurore)” have to be supplied to the first line. The word ‘milk’ is also supplied. The two lines, taken together, are then given an interpretation of considerable obscurity: dawn is a cow, in whose udders milk is ‘cooked’ by great light. Geldner explains *máhi jyótis* ‘great light’ in his footnote: “[d]as Licht des inneren, gar machenden Feuers”, and Kiehnle, while retaining her preference for ‘belly’ here, agrees. Renou supplies ‘of fire’, “une grande lumière-de-feu”, to his translation without comment. Could there be a simpler way of understanding the passage?

In the other four occurrences of the collocation *máhi jyótis* ‘great light’ the meaning is much more straightforward, and indeed poetic. In verse 4 of III, 31, the poem that immediately follows this one, it again describes dawn: *máhi jyótis támaso nír ajānan* ‘they brought forth great light out of the darkness’. At IV, 16, 4, similarly, *súvar yád védi sudṛṣīkam arkaír / máhi jyóti rurucur yád dha vástoḥ* ‘when the fair light was revealed through songs, when they caused great light to shine at break of dawn ...’ The first verse of X, 107, *vísvaṃ jīvám támaso nír amoci / máhi jyótiḥ pitṛbhir dattám ágād* ‘All life is released from darkness; the great light given by the fathers has come’, is clarified by comparison with VII, 76, 4: *gūḥám jyótiḥ pitáro ánv avindan / satyámantrā ajanayann uṣásam* ‘The fathers found the hidden light, and with true prayer brought forth the dawn.’ The belief in the efficacy of songs and of ‘true prayer’ lies at the heart of the poetry of the Rigveda, as in my translation of the last passage, ‘by means of that homage, well-prepared, well-offered, do you fill the fertile places full’.

The final occurrence of *máhi jyótis* is at X, 37, verses 8–9: *máhi jyótir bíbhrataṃ tvā vicakṣaṇa ... vayám jīvāḥ práti paśyema sūriya // yásya te vísvā bhúvanāni ketúnā / prá cérate* ‘Bringing great light, O far-seeing one ... may we living things look upon you, O sun, you by whose appearance all beings are set in motion’.

The meaning of *máhi jyótis* in the first line of III, 30, 14 is surely similarly straightforward. Wilson’s rendering of the two lines, following Sāyaṇa, once more seems more natural in the context: “A great light has been shed upon the rivers (*vakṣáṇāsu*) the cow yet immature grazes, charged with the ripe (milk)”. The interpretation of the second line needs attention, but with my suggested translation of *vakṣáṇā* the presence of the cow at any rate is explained. As dawn’s light falls on the meadows she is revealed to the view.

A great light cast in the fertile places

III, 33, 12: Streams fill the *vakṣáṇās*

*prá pinvadhvam iṣáyantīḥ surádhā*  
 (Forth) swell, *refreshing*,<sup>14</sup> bringing-good-gifts  
*á vakṣáṇāḥ prṇádhvam yāta śībham*  
 (Full) the-*vakṣáṇās* fill, go swiftly

This is the passage where the imperative in the second line, *á prṇádhvam*, echoes I, 162, 5 above. Geldner had commented in his note to that passage, “Dieselbe Redensart 3, 33, 12d, nur in verschiedener Anwendung.” But I suggest that the application is similar. The verse occurs in one of the most lyrical poems of the Rigveda. According to tradition it is offered in praise of Indra, and is specifically addressed to the rivers, released by Indra’s *vīryāṇi*, as they flow down from the mountains to the sea. This is the penultimate verse. Geldner translates, “(Ihr Flüsse), [s]chwellet an, erlabend, gabenreich! Füllet eure Euter an, gehet schnell!” ‘(O rivers), swell forth, refreshing, rich in gifts! Fill your udders, go quickly!’ He understands that the rivers are also imagined as cows in this verse, and notes “Hier ist das Bild der Kuh festgehalten”. Kiehnle considers this image unnecessary, and reverts instead to the other derivation of *vakṣáṇā* to explain the word in the context of rivers: “in Zusammenhang mit Flüssen vielleicht Flußbiegungen – also eher ‘sich krümmendes’ als ‘wachsendes’.” She gives Paul Thieme’s translation of the verse. “”Schwellt [wieder] an, Labung

<sup>14</sup> The meaning of this participle is debated: Mayrhofer gives “antreiben” for *iṣay-*. (Uncertain translations are indicated in my interlinear gloss by means of italics.)

führend, gute Gaben bringend! Füllet eure Bäuche! Fahret schnell dahin!” (1979:108) As in the last two passages, there is no textual authority for the possessive “eure” supplied by both Geldner and Thieme; and with the revised translation of *vakṣáṇā* it is no longer necessary.

(O rivers), swell, refreshing, bringing good gifts,  
Fill the fertile places full, go swiftly.

V, 42, 13: The great god creates the world in the *vakṣáṇās* of the daughter.

*prá sū mahé suśaraṇāya medhām*  
(Forth) then to-the-great, to-the-good-protector, wisdom

*gíram bhare návyasīṃ jáyamānām*  
A-song I-bring, newest born,

*yá āhanā duhitúr vakṣáṇāsu*  
Who, swelling, of-the-daughter in-the-*vakṣáṇās*,

*rūpā minānó ákrṇod idám naḥ*  
Forms varying made this for/of-us

This verse occurs in a poem to the *Viśve Devās*, the ‘All-Gods’, and praises the members of the pantheon in turn. The verses that precede and follow are addressed to different deities. Geldner translates: “Dem Großen, der gute Zuflucht gibt, trage ich die neugeborene Weisheit als Lobrede vor, der brünstig in den Leibern der Tochter seine Formen wandelnd diese unsere (Form) geschaffen hat.” Kiehnle again gives Paul Thieme’s translation (the first two lines are slightly abridged): “Dem von gutem Schutz (Gelder: *Tvaṣṭṛ*) trage ich das Lied vor, welcher schwellend im Bauch der Tochter seine Gestalten vertauschend (ändernd) diese unsere [Welt] gemacht hat.” (1979:104) Thieme, translating “im Bauch”, follows Böhtlingk and Roth in understanding *vakṣáṇā* to be singular in meaning despite its plural form, and Kiehnle apparently does the same; Geldner does not, and his translation as a result is slightly awkward.

The Meaning of *āhanás*, occurring in the same line as *vakṣáṇā*, is uncertain; elsewhere in the Rigveda it is understood to describe *sóma*. Renou notes: “*āhanás* est prob. ‘qui gonfle’ ... A partir du Livre 10,

‘voluptueux’ (à mi-chemin déjà 5. 42, 13 [this passage]).” In the context of a god described as ‘the great, the good protector’ in the first line, his translation, “salace” (hardly a ‘half-way point’ between ‘swelling’ and ‘voluptuous’) seems incongruous, as is Geldner’s ‘rutting’. Both derive however from the belief that *vakṣāṇā* represents a part of the body, leading them to a gross interpretation for the passage. Geldner notes “Die Schöpfung beruht ... auf einem Inzest.” Elizarenkova, similarly, notes to her recent translation into Russian: “Vozniknovenie vselennoi pripisyvaetsia intsestu” ‘the origin of the world ascribed to incest’ (1999:549).

The word *suśaraṇā* ‘good protector’, literally ‘good shelterer’, occurs only twice, here and at VII, 34, 22, where the good shelterer is identified as Tvaṣṭṛ: *suśaraṇó no astu / tváṣṭā sudátro ví dadhātu ráyah* ‘May he be a good shelterer for us, may Tvaṣṭṛ, the good giver, give out riches.’ The verse that follows enumerates these gifts, riches that are seen to protect man: *tán no ráyah párvatās tán na āpas / tát rā-tiṣṭāca ósadhīr utá dyaúh / vánaśpátibhiḥ pṛthivī sajoṣā / ubhé ródasī pári pāsato naḥ* ‘So for us riches, the mountains, and the waters; the ones accompanied by gifts, the plants and the sky; the earth in concert with the trees – may both worlds protect us on all sides.’<sup>15</sup>

Both Geldner and Thieme supply a possessive pronoun to the word *rūpā* ‘forms’ in our passage, translating “seine Formen” and “seine Gestalten”. But this is not necessary. Tvaṣṭṛ, “der Schöpfer, der Bildner lebendiger Wesen” (Mayrhofer), fashions the ‘Forms’ of existence; he is the artificer god. *tváṣṭā rūpāni hí prabhúh / paśūn vís-vān samānajé* ‘Tvaṣṭṛ indeed rules over the Forms, he has made perfect all the beasts’ (I, 188, 9). *ayám yáthā na ābhúvat tváṣṭā rūpéva tákṣiyā* ‘so that he may be at hand for us like Tvaṣṭṛ for the Forms that must be shaped’ (VIII, 102, 8). *tváṣṭā rūpāni piṁśatu* ‘may Tvaṣṭṛ fashion the Forms’ (X, 184, 1). *yá imé dyāvapṛthivī jánitṛī / rūpaír āpiṁśad bhúvanāni vís-vā / ... devām tváṣṭāram ihá yakṣi vidvān* ‘who fashioned this Heaven and Earth, the parents, with the Forms, all living things; .. worship here the god Tvaṣṭṛ, knowing this’ (X, 110, 9).

<sup>15</sup> V, 41, the poem immediately before the one in which the verse we are considering occurs, is also addressed to the ‘All-Gods’, and contains a similar list to that in VII, 34, 23: *āpa ósadhīr utá no avantu / diyaúr vānā giráyo vṛkṣakeśāh* ‘May the waters, may the plants favour us, / The sky, the woods, the tree-tressed hills’ (11)

The majority of the occurrences of the word *duhitṛ* ‘daughter’ in the Rigveda describe the ‘daughter of the sky’ or the ‘daughter of the sun’. Where the word appears on its own it is often cryptic. In I, 164, 33 Geldner explains that she is the Earth, who is there represented as both daughter and mother; see his cross-reference to that passage at I, 71, 5. All translators understand our passage, V, 42, 13, to be a description of the beginning of the world. Renou, like Thieme, spells it out in explanatory brackets, and once more both possessive pronouns are supplied to his translation: “... qui, altérant ses formes dans les entrailles de sa fille, a fait pour nous (le monde que) voici”. In the context of a creation myth I suggest that here too the ‘daughter’ is Earth herself, in whose fertile places the artificer god moulds “[d]ie vielfältigen Gestalten der Welt ... Diese Bauchgegenden brauchen allerdings nicht unbedingt weiblichen Wesen zuzugehören” (Kiehnle 1979:104).

So I offer wisdom, the newest-born song  
To the great one, the good protector,  
Who, *swelling* (?), in the fertile places of the daughter  
Varying the Forms made this for us.

VI, 72, 4: The cows in the *vakṣāṇās*

*indrāsomā pakvām āmāsu antār*  
O-Indra-and-Soma, the-cooked/ripe in-the-raw/unripe (within)

*ní gávām íd dadhathur vakṣāṇāsu*  
(Down) of-the-cows even you-have-placed in-the-*vakṣāṇās*

Geldner translates, “Indra und Soma! Ihr habt die gekochte (Milch) in die rohen Bäuche der Kühe gelegt.”<sup>16</sup>

The first line recalls the problematic second line of III, 30, 14 above. The context is however not the same; dawn is not being discussed in this verse (but see below; dawn is described in verse 2). Translators once more take the two lines together, understanding the feminine locative plural *āmāsu* to be in agreement with *vakṣāṇāsu* at the end of

<sup>16</sup> Elizarenkova’s translation is along the same lines: “O Indra-Soma, varenoe (moloko) v syrye / (Zhivoty) korov vlozhili vy” (1999:173). “Zhivoty” ‘bellies’ is presumably bracketed in error.

the second line. The resulting translation ‘in the raw bellies’, like the ‘raw cow’ of III, 30, 14, is troublesome.

The reason for taking *āmāsu* with *vakṣāṇāsu* is however far from compelling. Six of the eleven occurrences of *āmā* have the word in this feminine locative plural form, and in half of these (I, 62, 9; VI, 17, 6; and VIII, 89, 7) there is no noun with which it can possibly agree. The remaining two passages are II, 35, 6 and II, 40, 2. In II, 40, 2 *āmāsu* is understood, as here, to agree with a word occurring at the end of the next line, *usrīyāsu*, which is also then, in the context, translated ‘cows’.<sup>17</sup> Only in II, 35, 6 does *āmāsu* occur beside a noun, which is *pūr* “Wall aus Stein und Lehm, Verschanzung, Palisade” (Mayrhofer). The two words are translated together; but ‘in the raw fortifications’ for *āmāsu pūrṣú* is as unconvincing as ‘in the raw bellies’ in our passage.<sup>18</sup>

This poem, VI, 72, again describes the achievements of the gods in bringing light, water and fertility to the earth. A description of dawn and the coming of light is found in verse 2: *indrāsomā vāsáyatha uśásam / út sūriyaṃ nayatho jyótiṣā sahá... áprathatam pṛthivīm mātáram ví* ‘O Indra and Soma, you make dawn shine, you lead the sun up together with the light ... you spread out Mother Earth’. Verse 3 describes the liberation of the waters: *prá árñāṃsi airayataṃ nadínām* ‘you set in motion the floods of the rivers’. The traditional interpretation of the first line of the next verse is again incongruous, and needs to be reviewed. But I suggest that *vakṣāṇāsu*, at the end of the second line, is in the context clear. My translation of the rest of the couplet is only provisional, but as in the earlier passage, the cattle are on fertile land.

O Indra and Soma, *the ripe within the unripe* (?)  
You have laid even of the cows in the fertile places

<sup>17</sup> The word *usrīyā* elsewhere has the more literal meaning “Licht, Helle” (Mayrhofer).

<sup>18</sup> Geldner translates “in den rohen Burgen”, and Macdonell, “in unbaked citadels”, noting, “[t]hough every word is clear in this stanza the meaning of the whole is somewhat uncertain.” (1917:71–72). Renou, as often, supplements the text to explain it, “dans les forteresses (en briques) crues”, which O’Flaherty then silently incorporates in her translation, “in fortresses of unbaked bricks” (1981:105).

VIII, 1, 17: *Sóma* produced from the *vakṣáṇās*.

(*Sóma*) ...

*nír dhukṣan vakṣáṇābhiyaḥ*  
(Out) may-they-produce from-the-*vakṣáṇās*

The poem is an invocation to Indra. The verse preceding this one, verse 16, invites him to attend the *sadhástuti* ‘united worship’, concluding *ádhā te vaśmi sustutīm* ‘then I desire for you a fine song of praise’.

The traditional understanding of the whole of verse 17 is given by Geldner’s translation. “So presset denn den Soma mit den Steinen aus, spület ihn im Wasser! Gleichsam in Milchgewänder<sup>19</sup> ihn kleidend sollen die Männer ihn aus den Eutern herausmelken.” He notes to his translation of *vakṣáṇā* in the last line, “Die Euter sich die aufgequellten Soma-zweige” ‘The udders are the swollen soma-stalks’. Kiehnle agrees that this is what is being described, “[u]m Somastengel oder Teile von ihnen geht es wohl” (1979:109). This is a verse whose ‘meaning’, in the interpretation of indology, can only be explained as imagery of the most obscure kind, so that Geldner’s apparently far-fetched explanation, that the ‘udders’ represent the stalks of a plant, seems hardly out of place in the context.<sup>20</sup>

Kiehle, preferring ‘belly’ to ‘udder’, comments: “*Vakṣáṇā*- fasst Geldner hier wieder als Euter auf, aber ‘melken’ kann für das Herausbefördern von Flüssigkeit aus den verschiedensten Gegenständen benutzt werden” (1979:109). ‘Geldner understands *vakṣáṇā* as ‘udder’ again here, but ‘to milk’ can be used for the production of liquid from the most varied things’ Mayrhofer goes further, giving an abstract translation for the verb */duh* (*DOGH*) ‘milk’, ‘let stream out, give-forth’. Kiehnle had quoted the example of IX, 110, 8 in support of her argument, *diváḥ pīyūṣam ... mahó gāhād divá ā nír adhuṣata*, translating “des Himmels Schwellflüssigkeit (Soma) ... molken sie aus der großen Tiefe des Himmels heraus” ‘they have milked heaven’s swelling liquid ... from out the great depth of the sky’ (1979:109). The

<sup>19</sup> “Milch” here is a translation of *gavyā* “aus Rindern bestehend” (Mayrhofer). Geldner explains in a footnote, “D.h. mit Milch mischend”.

<sup>20</sup> Elizarenkova’s explanation is similar. “Nabukhshie v vode stevli somy sravnivayutsia s vymenem, polnym moloka” (1999:667).

source is indeed not anatomical at all, but chorographical, as in my translation here.<sup>21</sup>

May they produce (*sóma*) from the fertile places

The next verse, VIII, 1, 18, continues to celebrate the power of song to generate vitality from the earth or the sky. *ádha jmó ádha vā divó / br̥ható rocanād ádhi / ayā vardhasva tanúvā girá máma / á jātā sukrato pr̥ṇa* ‘So from the earth or from the sky, from the great brightness aloft, grow through this very<sup>22</sup> song of mine, O wise one, fill full living things.’

X, 27, 16: The mother carries the embryo in the *vakṣáṇās*.

*gárbham mātá súdhitam vakṣáṇāsu*  
The-embryo the-mother well-laid in-the-*vakṣáṇās*  
(ACC.), (NOM.), (ACC.)

*ávenantam tuṣáyantī bibharti*  
*The-unseeing* (ACC.), *content* (NOM.), she-carries

The poem in which this verse occurs is very obscure. Geldner explains in his introductory note that the first half takes the form of a dialogue, but “[v]on 11 ab scheint nur noch der Sänger zu sprechen, aber der Faden seiner Rede verliert sich mehr und mehr ins Dunkle ... im zweiten Teil so wenig Handhaben für das Verständnis vorhanden sind, [daß] wir auf das bloße Raten angewiesen bleiben.” Martin Kümmel, looking at X, 27, 16 with reference to the uncertain *tuṣáyantī* in the last line, concludes “Die Belegstelle erlaubt keine Entscheidung.” (Rix 2001:642) There seems to be no connection between these two lines and the lines that precede and follow them. Various explanations, some mythological, some cosmic, have been put forward for the many enigmatic references that the poem contains.

<sup>21</sup> There is only one other occurrence of *nís* + */duḥ* with an ablative, at I, 33, 10, where it is *támasas* ‘from the darkness’, again, not an anatomical source. (The form of the word here, *vakṣáṇābhiyas*, could also be dative, as in the second passage we looked at, but there is no other occurrence of *nís* + */duḥ* with the dative.)

<sup>22</sup> Geldner translates the instrumental of *tanū* (“Leib ... Selbst; Ausdruck des Reflexivums”, Mayrhofer) differently, and as if it were locative, “Wachse am Leib von diese Lobrede von mir”.

Geldner suggests for these two lines, “Die Mutter trägt wohlgeborgen an ihren Brüsten das Kind, das (noch) nicht sieht, es stillend.” The translation ‘breasts’ that he gives here for *vakṣāṇā* in the context of ‘mother’ and *gárbha* (“Leibesfrucht, Embryo, Neugeborenes” Mayrhofer), as with ‘flanks’ in the first passage, is not one that he uses elsewhere, but the plural *vakṣāṇāsu* with the singular mother is again awkward. As Kiehnle points out, however, this awkwardness is not resolved by the translation ‘breasts’, “wofür man jedoch eher Dual oder Singular erwarten würde” (1979:103). Jamison, while revising Geldner’s interpretation of *tuṣáyantī* in her study of the *-áya* formations of the Rigveda and Atharvaveda, nonetheless translates *vakṣāṇā* in the same way: “The mother, being content, carries well-placed at her breasts the child, who does not (yet) see.” (1983: 51) Both she and Geldner once again supply the possessive pronoun.

Only *gárbham mātā súdhitam bibharti* ‘the mother carries the well-placed embryo/child’, is of undisputed meaning in the sentence, although we do not know to what ‘the mother’ and ‘the embryo/child’ refer. The only strictly parallel passage in the Rigveda, in which the subject of the sentence ‘carries the embryo’, is VII, 4, 5, where the ‘embryo’ is Agni, and the subject the natural world, finally *bhūmi* ‘the earth’: *tám oṣadhīs ca vanínaś ca gárbham / bhūmís ca viśvād-hāyasam bibharti* ‘Him, the embryo, the all-sustaining one, the plants, and the trees, and the earth carries.’ Could this help with the interpretation of the passage?

Earth is portrayed as a mother throughout the Rigveda. In X, 18, 10 the collocation is with *bhūmi*, the word in the verse I have just quoted, *mātāram bhūmim etām* ‘this Mother Earth’. The collocation *pr̥thivī mātā* ‘Mother Earth’ is more frequent. The line *mā no mātā pr̥thivī durmataú dhāt* ‘may Mother Earth not place us into disfavour’ occurs in V, 42, 16 (verse 13, in which *vakṣāṇā* occurs, was discussed above) and is repeated in V, 43, 15. I have already quoted, from the second verse of VI, 72 (*vakṣāṇā* occurs in verse 4), the line describing how the gods cause the sun to rise and *áprathatam pr̥thivīm mātāram ví* ‘spread out Mother Earth’, and a similar line occurs at X, 62, 3, *áprathayan pr̥thivīm mātāram ví*. The word ‘earth’ itself is not always present. In the first verse of III, 8, *yád vā kṣáyo mātúr asyā upásthe*, Geldner supplies it to his translation: “oder wenn du im Schoße dieser Mutter (Erde) ruhen wirst.” I suggest that, in this passage, the ‘mother’ represents the Earth, and the ‘embryo’ may again refer to

Agni, as in VII, 4, 5 quoted above. The compound *vakṣaṇesthā*, which describes Agni, provides evidence to support this, and will be discussed towards the end of this paper.

The Mother carries the embryo,  
Well-placed in the fertile places

X, 28, 8: The gods place good wood in the *vakṣāṇās*.

*devāsa āyan paraśūṃr abibhran*  
The-gods came, axes they-carried

*vānā vṛścānto abhī viḍbhír<sup>23</sup> āyan*  
The-forests cutting-down, hither with-the-settlements they-came

*ní sudrúvaṃ dádhato vakṣāṇāsu*  
(Down) good-wood placing in-the-*vakṣāṇās*

*yátrā kṛpītam ánu tát dahanti*  
Where ?(h.l., *uncertain*) (*preverb*)<sup>24</sup> it they-burn

The translation of *vakṣāṇā* as some kind of body part evidently will not work here. Translators have resorted to a variety of explanations. Kiehnle hesitates between the two possible derivations. “Sollte tatsächlich auf das Holzfällen (so Geldner) angespielt sein, spräche dies für die Annahme von [Fluß]Biegungen oder auch ‘wachsenden’ Wogen, in denen man das Holz transportierte.” (1979:108) She understands the *vakṣāṇās* to represent bends of a river, or perhaps waves. Geldner translates ‘(wagon) interiors’: “Während sie (den Baum) von gutem Holze in dem (Wagen)inneren niederlegten, brennen sie da, wo Dürholz ist, (den Wald) nieder.” He refers for his translation to the authority of a later text. “Unter *vakṣāṇāsu* wird man ... den *rathopastha* oder *rathanīḍa* bzw. *śakatanīḍa* (*Āp. Śr.* 10, 27, 10) zu verstehen haben.” O’Flaherty in the Penguin selection offers ‘boxes’,

<sup>23</sup> Instrumental plural of *viś*. Geldner gives “mit ihren Dienstmännern”, a translation that is followed by O’Flaherty, “with their servants” (1981:147). The translation is improbable, and the possessive pronoun once more without textual authority.

<sup>24</sup> See footnote 6.

straying some distance from the translation ‘bellies’ that she gives elsewhere: “They laid the good wood in the boxes”. Her explanatory footnote suggests that she is however following Geldner, “they take [it] home in boxes on wagons” (1981:147-148).

This poem, X, 28, immediately following the last one discussed in this paper, is similarly full of obscurities, many of which are traditionally explained as riddles. Ludwig had commented with reference to this verse, “[E]s gibt kaum einen dunklern vers im ganzen R̥gveda, obwol der wortlaut eigentlich gar keine schwirigkeit bietet.” (1876-1888, V:497).<sup>25</sup> He suggests an interpretation, but is baffled by the third line. “Man wird wol nicht zu weit gehn, wenn man in disem fragmentarischen stück eine erinnerung an den process der urbar-machung des landes durch auszrodung der wälder findet ... Warum heiszt es aber sudṛvam nidadhuḥ vakṣaṇāsu?” His understanding of the first two lines makes sense; and the cause of his perplexity at the third disappears with my suggested translation of *vakṣaṇā*.

The gods came bearing axes.  
Cutting down the forests they came hither with the settlements.  
Laying good wood in the fertile places,  
Where *kṛpīta*, they burn it up.

X, 49, 10: The cows in the *vakṣaṇās*.

*ahám tád āsu dhārayam yád āsu ná*  
I that in-these I-hold which in-these not

*devás caná tváṣṭā ádhārayad rúsat*  
The-god and-not Tvaṣṭṛ held the-bright

*spārhám gávām údassu vakṣaṇāsu á*  
The-longed-for of-the-cows in-the-udders, in-the-*vakṣaṇās* in

This poem is spoken by Indra himself, and once more celebrates his heroic deeds. In the opening lines he gives due credit to the role of the worshipper: *ahám dām gr̥naté pūrviyam vásu / ahám bráhma kṛnavam*

<sup>25</sup> He does not use standard spelling or capitalisation.

*máhyam*<sup>26</sup> *várdhanam* ‘I shall give to the singer the ancient boon / I shall make prayer the means of growth for me’.

With udders already present in the line, Geldner here translates *vakṣāṇā* ‘belly’. “Ich erhalte in ihnen, was in ihnen nicht einmal Gott Tvaṣṭṛ festgehalten hat, die weiße begehrt (Milch) in der Kühe Euter, in den Bäuchen”.

The meaning of the first half of the verse in Geldner’s translation is unclear. Griffith supplements the text to explain ‘in these’: “I set within these cows the white milk which no God, not even Tvaṣṭṛ’s self, had there deposited, – Much-long-for, in the breasts, the udders of the kine”. But the supplied ‘cows’ to explain the repeated *āsu* is not a possible interpretation; the word is unaccented and so refers to the *saptá sravátas* ‘the seven streams’ of the previous verse. Both translators also supply ‘milk’ again to the second line, which Geldner acknowledges, Griffith does not.

These difficulties need to be resolved, but do not bear directly on the word in question. The problem which this passage poses for the traditional interpretation of *vakṣāṇā* is a specific and important one. If the word means ‘udder’, as Geldner regularly understands it, the text simply repeats itself: *údhassu vakṣāṇāsu* ‘in the udders, in the udders’. If, on the other hand, it means ‘belly’, as Kiehnle argues, this suggests that the poets of the Rigveda were vague – and apparently deliberately so – about anatomy. The difficulty is dismissed in different ways by scholars. “Pischel schließt aus dem Nebeneinander von *údhassu* und *vakṣāṇāsu* auf die Synonymität der beiden Begriffe” (Kiehnle 1979:107); “das bekannte rhetorisch wirksame Asyndeton” (Geldner). The words *gávām údhassu* ‘in the udders of the cows’ are clear. What then of *vakṣāṇāsu ā*?

The significant *ā* following *vakṣāṇāsu* is not mentioned by translators, and is, curiously, omitted by Kiehnle in her slightly abridged printing of the verse. But the construction, locative with following *ā* at the end of a line to describe ‘the place where’, is a familiar one. Compare, for example, *nadīṣu ā* ‘in the rivers’ at the end of the third line of VIII, 33, 12 and at the end of the last line of IX, 76, 1; and *samudrá ā* ‘in the sea’ at the end of the third line of IX, 85, 10. It is parallel to *váneṣu ā* ‘in the forests’ in III, 29, 6: *ásvo ná vājī aruṣó váneṣu ā*

<sup>26</sup> Van Nooten & Holland *máhya*.

‘Like a strong, ruddy horse in the forest’. And to *yávaseṣu á* ‘in the meadows’ in the second line of I, 91, 13, a line which provides a parallel to our passage (note the naturally occurring possessive pronoun *nas* with the body part in the first line):

... *rārandhí no hṛdí*  
*gávo ná yávaseṣu á*  
*márya iva svá okíye*

‘Be happy in our heart, like the cows in the meadows, like a young man in his own house.’ The line *gávo ná yávaseṣu á* occurs again at VIII, 92, 12. The presence of this construction, *vakṣáṇāsu á*, in X, 49, 10 confirms the translation of line-final *vakṣáṇāsu* suggested for passages III, 30, 14 and VI, 72, 4, above.

... the bright

The longed-for, in the udders of the cows in the fertile places.

V, 19, 5: (Agni) dwelling in a *vakṣáṇā*.

(Agni) *vakṣaṇestháḥ*

Kiehnle assigns the first element in this compound differently, to *vákṣaṇa*, on the basis of its singular form (1979:98). Mayrhofer agrees with Hoffmann (1975–1976:376) that it belongs to *vakṣáṇā*.

However, the translation ‘belly’ – or any other body part – once again cannot be made sense of here. Hoffmann suggests ‘hollow’, “(O Agni,) der du in der Höhlung stehest”, and Renou’s translation is similar, “(ô Agni) qui te tiens dans le creux!” Geldner abandons the case at this point, and does not translate the compound, merely noting that it is an ‘incomprehensible *hapax legomenon*’. Elizarenkova also omits it from her translation, with the comment “temny” ‘obscure’ in her endnote. But the interpretation of *vakṣaṇesthá*, and reason for the singular form of the first element, is now straightforward: Agni is ‘dwelling in a fertile place’. The compound is parallel to *parvateṣṭhá*, said of Indra at VI, 22, 2, “der auf dem Berge haust” (Geldner).

In the first verse of this poem, V, 19, Agni is described as *upásthē mātúr*, ‘in the lap of the mother’. This phrase, in III, 8, 1 quoted above, referred to the earth: *yád vā kṣáyo mātúr asyá upásthē*, in Geldner’s

translation, “oder wenn du im Schoße dieser Mutter (Erde) ruhen wirst.” Hoffmann suggests that the compound *vakṣaṇesthā*, which concludes the poem, is probably a variation of *upásthē mātúr*. “wohl *upásthē mātúr* (Vers. 1) ... variiert” (1975–1976:376), which seems likely. The lap of Mother Earth is the fertile place that Agni inhabits. It is where he rests, for example, at V, 1, 6: *ní asīdad ... upásthē mātúḥ surabhā́ uloké* ‘he rested ... in the lap of the mother, in the sweet-smelling place’.

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A comparison of passages leaves little doubt that ‘fertile place’ is what is meant by *vakṣáṇā* in the Rigveda, used in the plural to mean ‘fertile land’. Indeed, the function of the word is sensed by Professor Mayrhofer, although he does not so translate it: ‘Probably from ‘belly’ arises the use of the word to mean ‘means of growth’, ‘place of growth’.’ The ‘fertile land’ is the land which Tvaṣṭṛ, the artificer god, fills with a rich variety of forms of life in V, 42, 13, and where the gods laid down good wood at the first coming of men, as described in X, 28, 8. It is the land in which the ‘embryo’ of X, 27, 16 (which may, as I have suggested, again refer to Agni) is *súdhita* ‘well-placed’ and will flourish. These fertile places were first created by the divine exploits of Indra for the use and profit of men, for their crops and for their cattle. Their fertility is daily renewed with the coming of dawn’s light, and they are watered by the streams liberated through Indra’s continuing power. And it is the prayers and songs themselves of the poets of the Rigveda that help to make all this happen.

How is it that indologists see such a different text, one that is by turns characterised by bizarre imagery, banality, and apparently irresolvable problems? Catharina Kiehnle’s approach to the interpretation of *vakṣáṇā* gives an answer. Kiehnle also looks at every occurrence of the word, and she rearranges the passages, classifying them under headings. The first Rigvedic passage she looks at, however, is not one whose meaning might provide some helpful context. It is one that is generally understood to be obscure, verse 16 of X, 27. This is the poem of which Geldner had written, quoted above, “im zweiten Teil so wenig Handhaben für das Verständnis vorhanden sind, [daß] wir auf das bloße Raten angewiesen bleiben.”

Three of the poems in which the word *vakṣáṇā* occurs are relatively straightforward, and their subject matter is clear: I, 32, I, 134, and III,

33. But it is not with these that Kiehnle begins her study. This is not contrariness on her part, there is good reason for it. Her study is not confined to the usage of the word in the Rigveda, but concerns itself also with its occurrence in the Atharvaveda. She does not in fact begin with the Rigveda. In the search to discover “unter welchem Aspekt der Körperteil ‘Bauch’ ... gesehen wurde” she finds that “[d]ie anschaulichsten Beispiele beziehen sich auf dem Bauch der Mutter und entstammen hauptsächlich dem AV.” (1979:102–3). It is to two passages in the Atharvaveda that she first turns.<sup>27</sup> The passages are both textually doubtful, and Kiehnle explains the variant readings. They appear however to describe human (or divine) generation, and so lead her to look next at the only Rigvedic passage in which the word ‘mother’ occurs, which is the obscure X, 27, 16. The fourth example that she considers in her study is also from the Atharvaveda.<sup>28</sup> The meaning of this passage is unclear, and it also contains textual uncertainties, one of which lies with the word *vakṣāṇā* itself: “[b]eim ... Beleg ist der Bereich des Zeugens und Gebärens wohl angesprochen, allerdings kann man nicht entscheiden, ob *vakṣāṇā*- oder eine ganz andere Form von *vakṣ* vorliegt.” (1979:103–4)

She refers in all to eight passages from the Atharvaveda. One of the headings under which her study of *vakṣāṇā* is arranged is “*vakṣāṇās* als Stätte von Krankheiten” (1979:105). This section only contains passages from the Atharvaveda, from both the Śaunaka und Paippalāda texts, constituting half of the examples that she cites from the Atharvaveda. The existence of this category suggests that by the time of the Atharvaveda the word may indeed have been understood to describe a part of the body. But the contexts of these four passages are quite different from any in the Rigveda. During the course of this paper I have drawn attention to the numerous occasions where scholars have supplied a possessive pronoun, which one would expect to find with a body part, to the word *vakṣāṇā* in their Rigvedic translations. No such pronoun occurs with *vakṣāṇā* in the Rigveda, but it is found in half of the Atharvavedic passages.<sup>29</sup>

Kiehnle discusses the line occurring at Rigveda I, 32, 1, which describe the mighty exploits of Indra, under the heading “Allego-

<sup>27</sup> AVŚ. 14.2.14 (= AVP. 18.8.5) and AVP. 11.1.3.

<sup>28</sup> AVP. 11.1.14.

<sup>29</sup> AVŚ. 7.114.1 (= AVP. 20. 16.3) & 9.8.16; AVP. 11.1.3 & 11.1.14.

risches". These lines also appear in the Atharvaveda Paippalāda-Saṃhitā, at 13.6.1, and she compares the two texts towards the end of her study. They are identical, except in one significant respect: there is an error in the later text, and it occurs precisely with the word *vakṣāṇā* itself. Kiehnle notes, "AVP hat fehlerhaft vakṣamāṇā für vakṣāṇā ... Die bewußte Verwendung einen (einmaligen) Part. Präs. Ātm. ist, da weder Endung noch Metrum, noch Sinn stimmen, wohl nicht anzunehmen." (1979:108) This deliberate textual alteration is not simply the replacement of a noun which may have changed its meaning with another. Notwithstanding the requirements of the metre, the later editor has substituted a different part of speech, radically altering the syntax of the sentence, and indeed, as Kiehnle observes, producing meaninglessness. This suggests that the authors of the Atharvaveda may have been unclear, not just about the meaning of *vakṣāṇā*, but even about its grammatical form and function. If this is correct, a study that takes as its point of departure passages from the later text will inevitably fail to reach a satisfactory conclusion about the meaning of the word in the Rigveda.

Jan Gonda had suggested in 1957, in the course of another word study, 'The Vedic concept of Aṃhas', that the Vedic poets may not have understood their own language. "[A]re we right in the tacit assumption that the meaning of the words under discussion always admitted of exact definitions?; were they completely clear to those who used them?" (1957:33) The language of the Rigveda is consistent, meaningful, and highly poetic. But its meaning was often unclear to the authors of the later Vedic texts. Indology employs the word 'Vedic' – belonging to 'The Veda' – to describe the language of both the Rigveda and the later texts and commentaries, and its scholars continue to turn to the later texts for elucidation of the earliest, which is considered to be the most obscure and difficult. But this, I suggest, is the key to the problem. The Rigveda that we have inherited is the Rigveda as it was understood – or, more often, misunderstood – by these later texts. The unspecified use of the word 'Vedic' is crucially misleading.

At the beginning of the paper I referred to the passage from Wittgenstein with which Kiehnle opens her study. "Wie ein Wort funktioniert, kann man nicht erraten. Man muß seine Anwendung ansehen und daraus lernen." The quotation continues, "Die Schwierigkeit aber ist, das Vorurteil zu beseitigen, das diesem Lernen entgegensteht. Es ist kein dummes Vorurteil." (Kiehnle 1979:1) 'How a word

functions cannot be guessed at. We must look at its usage and learn from that. But what is difficult is to set aside prejudice, that stands in the way of this study. It is not stupid prejudice.” The belief that later texts should be able to help us understand the Rigveda is not an unreasonable one. But it is the reason why the Rigveda continues to resist decipherment. The continuous native scholastic tradition has bequeathed to us a working text of remarkable purity, but this tradition is a double-edged sword. I have referred above to Ludwig’s interpretation of X, 28, 8. As Vedic scholars have always done, he accepts that the third line in the verse is simply an example of Rigvedic obscurity. But if his insight into the meaning of the verse had instead led him to reconsider his view that “der wortlaut eigentlich gar keine schwirigkeit bietet”,<sup>30</sup> he might have made progress towards resolving the mystery of *vakṣāṇā* in the third line. But as Pischel comments, dismissing Ludwig’s interpretation of the verse, “Das ist indogermanische Auslegung des RV.” (1889–1901:I, 179)<sup>31</sup>

The sophistication of the text constantly gleams through. Can we be justified in unquestioningly accepting that poets who invite the wind to *prá bodhayā púramdhiṃ / jārā á sasaṭim iva / prá cakṣaya ródasī vāsayośasaḥ* ‘wake up abundance, like a lover a sleeping girl; make both worlds visible, make the dawns light up’ (I, 134, 3) would have been happy with the description of dawn that is attributed to them at III, 30, 14. ‘A great light placed in the bellies, the raw cow goes bearing the cooked’? Inherited assumptions about meaning – and, most importantly, about meaninglessness – need to be set aside if we are to make progress in uncovering the original Rigveda.

<sup>30</sup> A line that recalls Macdonell’s note to II, 35, 6 quoted above (footnote 18), “though every word is clear in this stanza the meaning of the whole is somewhat uncertain”.

<sup>31</sup> Pischel’s characterization scarcely applies to Ludwig’s approach overall: Ludwig was particularly committed to establishing what he saw as the Rigvedic ‘liturgy’ by means of the Brāhmaṇas. Pischel’s belief, that the word here, and in I, 162, 5 discussed above, represents “von Opferplatz die Mitte der Vedit” (1889–1901:I, 181), is based on readings in a multitude of later texts, which he cites: the Āpastamba, the Śrautasūtra, the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa, the Lāṭyāyana, the Kāṭyāyana, the Gṛhīya Brāhmaṇa, the Gṛhyāsamgraha, the Karmaṇadīpa, and the Atharvaveda.

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