



# PROSODY I. REMNANTS OF PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN POETIC CRAFT IN IRANIAN

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Although some kind of poetic tradition seems to be attested among all human beings and thus in all probability is a universal phenomenon, the existence of poetry and of a special poetic language is commonly assumed for the Proto-Indo-Europeans (PIE), even if this only can be reconstructed by comparison of formulae and figures attested in the various historical languages which resemble each other by the use of cognate words. It goes without saying that this primeval poetry was exclusively oral until well into historical times. The first observations concerning such remnants of the PIE poetic language had been made in the middle of the 19th century, and the most comprehensive documentation of the relevant material is found in Schmitt, 1967 (cf. as an anthology of previous studies also Schmitt, 1968). But in the meantime, a supplement would be necessary with a collection of the more recent observations and scholarly discussions.

Particularly this PIE poetic language is reflected in formally (i.e., etymologically) and semantically cognate brief phrases (mostly those consisting of a noun with its epithet, of a noun plus an oblique genitive or of a verb with its object) attested in the cognate Indo-European languages and preferably in texts belonging to the most ancient layers of the poetical



tradition (the Vedas, parts of the Avestan corpus, and Early Greek epics, etc.). Among the best-known examples of such phrases and formulae are: Ved. *śrávaḥ ákṣitam* = Gk. *kléos áphthiton* “imperishable fame”; Ved. *máhi śrávaḥ* = Gk. *méga kléos* “great fame”; Ved. *dātā vásūnām* = Av. *dāta vaṇhuuqm* = Gk. *dōtor heáōn* “giver of goods”; Ved. *sūryasya cakráḥ* = Gk. *hēlíou kýklos* = Old Norse *sunnu hvél* “wheel of the sun”; Ved. *ásvāḥ āśávaḥ* = Av. *aspāṇhō āsauuō* (presumably inherited from Aryan and PIE epic poetry: see Schmitt, 1967, p. 240) = Gk. *ōkéēs híppoi* “swift horses”; Av. *pasu vīra* “cattle (and) men” (a merism for the totality of chattels) = Umbrian *ueiro pequo* “men (and) cattle”, altogether phrases from which PIE formulae like *\*kléuos \*h<sub>2</sub>d<sup>h</sup> g<sup>h</sup>itom* “imperishable fame,” and *\*mégh<sub>2</sub> \*kléuos* “great fame”, etc. may be reconstructed. The crucial point of such comparisons and reconstructions is the most exact possible etymological and semantic agreement between at least two syntactically connected words attested in at least two individual languages and preferably in poetic texts. In order to exclude spontaneous parallel origin of comparable phrases and figures it is important that formulaic and stylistic features of such kind appear in large numbers in the text in question; the “cumulative evidence,” as Thieme 1964, p. 593a aptly called it, is what counts.

Even the activity of the poet himself as a craftsman found its metaphorical expression in an obviously inherited formula: In both Indo-Iranian (Ved. *vácas- takṣ* “to shape words,” cf. Av. *vacas-tašti-* “verse, strophe,” literally “shaping of words”) and Greek (*epéōn téktones* “carpenters of words”) there are attested continuants of the phrase PIE *\*uék<sup>h</sup>esh<sub>2</sub> \*tetk̑* “to shape words,” as first [James Darmesteter](#) (1878) had recognized, who derived this metaphorical expression from the poetic diction of the Indo-European proto-language. Anyway, we find in this metaphor a piece of common PIE terminology of poetry itself. In a similar metaphor, Av. *vaf* “to weave” (from PIE *\*ueb<sup>h</sup>*) can be used for describing the poet’s activity (e.g., in Y. 28. 3a *vā... ufiiānī... apaouruuīm* “I’ll praise you in an unprecedented fashion”), in the same way as Gk. *hyphainō* or Old English *wefan*, too. Moreover, there should be mentioned also the phrase OAv. *garō dadəmahī(-cā)* “we offer praises” (cf. Ved. *gíraḥ dhā*) from PIE *\*g<sup>h</sup>ṛH-*



\*d<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>1</sub>, “to put praise,” on which the Celtic word for “bard” (\**bardos*) quite probably is based as well.

For assuming common heritage from the Indo-European proto-language several scholars do not concentrate on evidence of lexically cognate phrases, but include also those phrases and formulae, in which the comparison rests only on the semantic content of the comparable expressions (e.g., in various phrases for “dark earth” or in expressions reducing perpetual existence into “what was, what is and what will be”). Partly we may be allowed to reckon here with only lexical replacement of inherited words by synonymous or synsemantic ones, i.e., with lexical renovation as we find it frequently in all languages and in everyday language, too. Still less meaningful, however, for PIE reconstructions are those combinations of words, in which only semantics are similar. But this does not prevent some scholars from associating mere subjects, motives, or themes with one another in a genetic way (as, among others, did, e.g., Watkins, 1995). Altogether every attempt at reconstructing entire myths, stories, and the like for PIE poetry is without foundation so far as it is not based on the comparison of cognate linguistic and stylistic phenomena.

A good deal of such phraseological interrelations in the poetic traditions between the various ancient Indo-European languages is centered around the theme of “fame” (PIE \**kléuos*) as the quintessence of epic poetry as it can be assumed in the end already for the proto-language: Iranian evidence is included in phrases like Av. *vanhu-srauuah-* “good fame” = Ved. *vásu-śravas-* and Av. *hu-srauuah-* “possessing good fame” = Ved. *su-śrávas-* = Gk. *eu-kleés*. But we are allowed to reconstruct for the proto-language also other structural patterns like the *Aufreihlied* (enumerating as in a string of pearls, e.g., previous deeds or merits of the hymn’s addressee), which is typical of poems in praise of heroes and gods, or other themes and types of the invocation of gods, of prayers, or else various strophic forms and magic spells. Well-attested is the so-called *ring-composition* showing the same (or nearly the same) wording or phrase at the beginning and the ending of some longer text segment. Just this device, which is quite important in oral poetry, has left a number of traces in ancient Iranian poetry, above all in the *Gathas* (cf. Schmidt, 1968; 1974; 1985).



For Iranian, it is the bulk of at least Indo-Iranian parallel formulae and phrases (see [ARYANS](#)) that are of the utmost importance; it is a matter of expressions attested especially in the Vedas and the Avestan texts. (Regardless of whether they are of PIE or only of Indo-Iranian origin they altogether are best recorded in Schlerath, 1968, pp. 148-64; Gertsenberg, 1972, pp. 77-127; and Mayrhofer, 1992-96). Among this evidence of an Aryan poetic tradition and poetic language, which are continued by the Vedic singers and by Zoroaster, only some select examples may be quoted: Av. *ustānazasta- nəmaṅhā* = Ved. *uttānāhasta- nāmasā* “with hands outstretched in reverence”; Av. *zam- pərəθβī-* = Ved. *kṣám- pṛthivī-* “broad earth”; Av. *hūxta- vacah-* = Ved. *sūktá- vácas-* “well-spoken word”; Av. *haiθiia- mąθra-* = Ved. *satyá- mántra-* “true formula”; Av. *mąθrəm taš* = Ved. *mántram takṣ* “to fashion the formula”; Av. *zərədā(cā) manəṅhā(cā)* = Ved. *hṛdā mánasā* “with heart and mind.” Of particular interest is also the fact that the singer-poets expressed their pride of having made a song “as never before” (by which they implicitly admit that they follow the traditional poetic craft): Av. *apaouruuīm* = Ved. *ápūrvyam* “in an unprecedented fashion,” literally “without a previous one.” At least common Indo-Iranian heritage may be assumed also for stylistic figures like Av. *daṅhupaiti- daxiiunqm* “land-lord of the lands” (cf. Ved. *vásupati- vāsūnām* “wealth-lord of riches”) or even Av. *sraēšta- kəhrp- kəhrpqm* “the most beautiful body of bodies” (cf. Ved. *śréṣṭha- jyótiṣ- jyótiṣām* “the most beautiful light of lights”).

A special aspect of poetic phraseology is that poetical epithets or phrases show close relations to and apparently are on the basis of two-stem personal names expressing mostly ethical ideals: cf. e.g., OIr. *\*Hu-sravah-* “Possessing good reputation” (in Av. *Hao-srauua-* and OPers. *\*U-çavah-* [reflected in Elamite *Ú-iš-šū-ma*]) = Ved. *Su-śrávas-* = Gk. *Eu-kléēs*; Av. *Ērəzrāspa-* = Ved. *Ṛjráśva-* (cf. *ṛjrá- áśva-*) “Possessing swift horses” (see Schmitt, 1973; [PERSONAL NAMES, IRANIAN i.](#)).

*Metrics.* All attempts to reconstruct by comparing longer (11- or 12-syllable) or shorter (8-syllable) verse lines found in Aryan, Greek, etc. poems also metrical patterns and even a metrical system of PIE poetry did not yet come to convincing results which are commonly acknowledged. In any case one may think of quantitative meters with a fixed number of syllables (and a caesura within the line). Just in this respect things are



quite difficult, because by chance of the tradition within the individual languages, we are faced with quite different poetic genres (in particular, e.g., Vedic hymns in praise of the gods on the one hand and Homeric epics on the other), on which all such comparison has to be based.

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