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Notes on the Wolf in the *Ṛg-veda*

Abstract

This paper discusses the meaning of *vṛka* ('wolf') in the *Ṛg-veda*. This substantive is of Indo-European origin and there are parallels to it with the same meaning in many ancient and modern Indo-European languages. This analysis reveals the deep primordial human fear of a wolf – the embodiment of danger. It also shows the problems of understanding some *Ṛg-vedic* stanzas, the context for which can be found only in a diachronic search in the field of Indo-European linguistic and conceptual parallels. (JJ/Eds)

The wolf was known in the *Ṛg-veda* (RV) well enough, though his name was not very frequent in the hymns: *vṛka*- m. 'wolf' – 30 times, *vṛkī*- f. 'she-wolf' – 6 times. Four times among these cases, *vṛka*- is not the name of a wild beast, but makes a part of a proper name of a certain institutor of a sacrifice (*yájamāna*-) – *dásyave vṛkaḥ* "wolf for the dasyus", which is found only in the latest hymns of Vāṅhilya included into maṇḍala VIII (VIII, 51, 2; 55, 1; 56, 1 and 2). The word *vṛka*- is met both in the ancient "family" maṇḍalas (9 times), and in the rest of them, which are later.

The substantive *vṛka*- is of Indo-European origin, there are parallels to it with the same meaning (name of a wild beast) in many ancient and modern Indo-European languages, e.g., Av. *vəhrka*, Goth. *wulfs*, Lith. *vilkas*, Lett. *vilks*, Ancient Russ. *volkъ*, etc. (Mayrhofer 1955: 570-571).

The word *vṛka*- has a complete paradigm in the sg. in the hymns of the RV – 27 times (except the L. sg.), and 3 times in the pl. The rare form of the f. *vṛkī*- has no pl. forms at all, and is represented in the sg. by the N. – 2 times, Acc. – 1 time, Dat. – 3 times. It should be noticed that 3 times out of 6 cases *vṛkī*- is used with *vṛka*- in sentences like X, 127, 6: *yāvāyā vṛkyāṃ vṛkam* | *yāvāyā stenām* "Ward off the she-wolf and the wolf; ward off the thief" (O'Flaherty 1981: 200). As to those three cases when *vṛka*- is used in the pl., the grammeme of the pl. is of a general, and not of a concrete

character. Such are the forms of the N. pl. in the dialogue of Purūravas and Urvaśī – X, 95, 14: [á]dhainam vṛkā rabhasāso adyūḥ – “... or if the ferocious wolves should eat him?” (O’Flaherty 1981: 254); X, 95, 15: mā tvā vṛkāso áśivāsa u kṣan – “... do not let the vicious wolves eat you” (ib.); G. pl. in VIII, 67, 14: té na āsnó vṛkāṇam | ādityāso mumocata – “Release us from the jaws (sg.) of wolves, O Ādityas!”

One has an impression that the authors of the hymns really had no idea about the pack of wolves as such. One wolf was a reality, and his name could be used metaphorically, as it will be clear later, or it was a couple: a he- and a she-wolf.

The N. sg. is the most frequent case in the paradigm of vṛka- (12 times). It functions mostly as the subject of a sentence, and the predicate is represented by a verb of quite a definite semantics: ‘to threaten’, ‘to pursue’, ‘to devour’, ‘to attack’, etc.

For instance I, 42, 2:

yó naḥ pūṣann aghó vṛko
duḥśéva ādideśati |
āpa sma tám pathó jahi ||

“The Evil, vicious wolf who threatens us, Pūṣan, chase him away from the path.” (O’Flaherty 1981: 194)

I, 183, 4:

mā vām vṛko mā vṛkír ā dadharṣīn

“Let neither he-wolf nor she-wolf dare to attack you!” (to the Ásvins).

Being used in the predicative function, the N. sg. of vṛka- denotes usually an enemy. E.g. VI, 51, 14: jahí ny àtrīṇam pañīm vṛko hí śáh – “Smash the Atrin, the Paṇi – for he is a wolf!” (to Soma); IX, 79, 3: utá svásyā árātyā arír hí śá | utányasyā árātyā vṛko hí śáh – “(Protect us) both from your own hostility – for he is a rival, and from the hostility of a stranger – for he is a wolf!” (to Soma). This way vṛká- acquires metaphorically the meaning ‘enemy’.

The word vṛka- in the Acc. (3 times) functions as a direct object governed by the verbs, meaning ‘to drive away’, ‘to catch’, ‘to hold back’, ‘to kill’. E.g. VII, 38, 7: jambháyantó ’hiṃ vṛkām rákṣāṃsi | sánemy asmád yuyavann ámīvāḥ – “Catching the snake, the wolf, the rakṣases, let them release us completely from illnesses!” (to All-the-Gods); I, 105, 11: té sedhanti pathó vṛkaṃ | tárantaṃ yahvátīr apó – “They will drive away the wolf from the path, who is crossing the young waters” (Trita in the well). “They” in this context are the sun-rays (this is the description of the dawn, and the wolf can mean a demon, who wants to swallow the sun (Renou 1967: 82).

The D. sg. (3 times m., and 3 times f.) is used in two types of contexts. First, in contexts expressing warnings against the wolf, as, for instance, in VI, 13, 5, where

Agni is asked to give riches to his worshippers: *ṛṇóṣi yác chávāsā bhūri paśvó | váyo vṛkāyārāye jásuraye* – “if you create with your power great energy (of resistance) of the animals against the wolf, the hungry enemy”. Or VI, 51, 6: *má no vṛkāya vṛkyè samasmā | aghāyaté rīradhatā yajatrāḥ* – “Do not subject us either to a he-wolf or to a she-wolf, or to anybody intending to injure (us), O you worthy of worship!” (to All-the-Gods).

The other type of contexts connected with the Áśvins does not reveal a negative attitude towards the wolf, and the D. sg. of this word expresses simply a person to whom something is given. For instance VII, 68, 8: *vṛkāya cij jásamānāya śaktam* – “You two helped even the wolf, losing his strength.” One should also mention here a myth about a man named Ṛjṛāśva, who gave one hundred rams as a meal to a she-wolf. His father made him blind because of this, and the Áśvins restored his eyesight. I, 116, 16: *śatám meṣān vṛkyè cakṣadānám | ṛjṛāśvaṃ tám pitāndhám cakāra* – “When Ṛjṛāśva carved up a hundred rams for the she-wolf, his father made him blind” (O’Flaherty 1981: 183); I, 117, 17: *śatám meṣān vṛkyè māmahānám | támaḥ práñītam áśivena pitrá | ákṣi ṛjṛāśve áśvināv adhattam* – “You have given the eyes to Ṛjṛāśva, O Áśvins, who had bestowed on the she-wolf a hundred rams, (and) had been brought into darkness by his cruel father.” The next verse of this hymn, where *vṛká-* in the N. sg. is used in a positive context, is also connected with the same myth – I, 117, 18: *śunám andhāya bhāram ahvayat | śá vṛkír áśvinā [...]* – “This she-wolf, O Áśvins, called happiness (and) success upon the blind one”.

The only Abl. sg. case of *vṛka-* has the usual meaning of keeping away from, removal – I, 120, 7: *pātām no vṛkād aghāyóḥ* – “Protect us from the malicious wolf!” (to the Áśvins).

The two cases of *vṛka-* in the I. sg., which have raised a lively discussion among the interpreters, are of special interest. Both of them are found in the hymns dedicated to the Áśvins. These are the following verses.

I, 117, 21:

*yávaṃ vṛkeṇāśvinā vāpant[ā]
 íṣaṃ duhántā mánuṣāya dasrā |
 abhí dásyūm bákureṇā dhāmant[ā]
 urú jyótiś cakrathur áryāya ||*

“Sowing the grain, (ploughing) with the wolf, milking refreshment for the man, O wonderful ones, blowing away the dasyu with the help of *bákura*, you have created broad light for the Aryan.”

The verb *vap-* means ‘to sow’. One restores “ploughing”, implying here an ellipsis (cp. VIII, 22, 6). Geldner translates it: “Indem ihr mit dem Wolfe Korn sätet” (Geldner 1. T. 1951: 159). Oldenberg comments: “Gemeint wohl: säend, nachdem mit einem angespannten Wolf gepflügt worden war.” (Oldenberg 1909: 113)

VIII, 22, 6:

daśasyántā mánave pūrvyám diví | yávam vṛkeṇa karṣathaḥ

“Rewording the man in the very beginning of the day, you two plough the grain with the wolf.”

There are no doubts about the meaning of the verb *karṣ-* ‘to make furrows’, ‘to plough’, and it is just this clear context that gives grounds to suppose an ellipsis in I, 117, 21. The wolf, according to Sāyaṇa, is a plough.

J. Bloch in his article dealing with the Vedic plough, notices in connection with these two verses from the ṚV that it is impossible to conclude if this “wolf” is a denomination of an instrument the name of which is derived from the same root as the Lith. *velkù* ‘to drag’, Gr. ἐὐλάκω ‘the plough’. And he puts a question in conclusion, whether there was a plough in ancient India with the help of which one could sow (Bloch 1985: 309).

M. Mayrhofer having enumerated all the possible etymological connections of the word *vṛka-*, nevertheless states in his conclusion: “Doch ist es sicher auch an diesen beiden Stellen *vṛ* als “Wolf” aufzufassen.” (Mayrhofer 1968: 240)

The G. sg. of the word *vṛka-* is characterized by the expression “from the jaws of the wolf” (3 times out of 4). For instance I, 116, 14: *āsnó vṛkasya vārtikām abhīke | yuvám narā nāsatyāmumuktam* – “You manly Nāsatyas released the quail right out of the mouth of the wolf” (O’Flaherty 1981: 183) – similar contexts are found in I, 117, 16 and X, 39, 13. The meaning of G. subj. is met in II, 29, 6: *trādhvam no devā nijūro vṛkasya* – “Save us, o gods, from being devoured by the wolf.”

Such is the paradigm of cases of the words *vṛka-/vṛkī-* in the ṚV. There remain no doubts in general that the attitude towards the wolf in the ṚV was particularly negative; people were afraid of him, regarded him as their enemy, tried to save themselves from him, and asked the gods to help them to do it. A few cases when there is no protest against the wolf: he is fed, people plow with him and sow grain, make an exception. These cases are met only in hymns dedicated to the Aśvins.

The substantive *vṛka-* is defined in the hymns by a number of epithets. These are *aghá-* ‘bad’, ‘dangerous’; *ásiva-* ‘unkind’; *duḥśéva-* ‘malevolent’; *rabhasá-* ‘fierce’. All these epithets give a negative moral characteristic of a wolf, never of his appearance. There is one exception to it in the hymn “Trita in the well” I, 115, where verse 18 says: *aruṇó mā sakṣd vṛkaḥ | pathā yántam dadarśa hí* – “Once a tawny wolf saw me, when I was going on my way.” Geldner supposes in his comment that the wolf functions here as a bad omen (Geldner 1. T. 1951: 139). One of Sāyaṇa’s explanations is that the tawny wolf represents the moon. Oldenberg also refers verses 16-18 of this hymn to the sun, moon and planets (Oldenberg 1909: 100-101). Though it is difficult to give here a simple interpretation, it seems to be most probable that the “tawny wolf” is a metaphor and not a real description. It is only once that the wolf in a hymn to the Aśvins is defined by an epithet without a negative meaning – VII, 68, 8: *vṛkāya cij jásamānāya śaktam* – “You

two helped even the wolf, losing his strength.” The feminine gender substantive *ṛkī-* is not defined by epithets at all. Thus one cannot find out anything from the epithets of the wolf in the ṚV about his appearance. It may be that it should be explained by taboo.

There exist a few substantives in the ṚV derived from the stem *ṛka-*. This is an abstract noun *ṛkātāt-* f. ‘the state of a wolf’ in II, 34, 9: *yó no maruto ṛkātāti mártyo | ripúr dadhé vasavo rákṣatā riśáh* – “That treacherous mortal, O Maruts, who has placed us in the state of wolves – protect us from injury!” Geldner translates it: “Wenn uns, ihr Marut, ein böser Sterblicher unter Wölfe fallen ließ.” (Geldner 1951 (1. T.): 319) It is also an agent noun *ṛkāti-* ‘a robber’ in IV, 41, 4: *indrā yuvám varuṇā didyúm asminn | ójīṣṭham ugrā ní vadhiṣṭam vājram | yó no durévo ṛkātír dabhītis* – “O Indra and Varuṇa, strike him down with the missile, with the most violent vajra, O (you) violent ones, who is an ill-disposed robber for us, an injurer!” There is also an adjective *ṛkāyú-* ‘fierce’ in X, 133, 4: *yó na indrabhító jáno | ṛkāyúr ādideśati | adhaspadám tám īm kṛdhi* – “What fierce folk are aiming to threaten us from all the sides, tread upon them, o Indra!”

Apart from this, there is one compound word *ṛka-* *dvaras-* with a problematic meaning “running (?) like a wolf” in II, 30, 4: *bṛhaspate tāpuśśneva vidhya | ṛkadvaraso ásurasya vīrān* – “O Bṛhaspati, injure with heat, as with a missile stone, the men of Asura who run like a wolf (?)!”

All these words show the hostile relation towards *ṛka-*, and they are not met in hymns dedicated to the Áśvins.

It should not escape one’s attention that the words *ṛka-* / *ṛkī-* in the ṚV are often met in contexts connected with the Áśvins: either directly addressed to them, or somehow taking part in a myth, dealing with them (*ṛka-* 8 times, *ṛkī-* – 4). According to Dumézil, the Áśvins are deities representing the third function – that of fecundity and material abundance (Dumézil 1958). They are connected with riches, honey, prosperity of the cattle, tillage, they are rescuers of people who got into trouble. It should be stressed once more that if a he-wolf or a she-wolf is not blamed in the ṚV, it is usually in the Áśvin hymns, a fact that needs explanation. It is difficult to explain this peculiarity from the synchronic viewpoint. The parallels in many Indo-European languages, where the words corresponding to *ṛka-* / *ṛkī-* denote also a wolf, are of no help either. It seems that one should look for a deeper etymological motivation which has been mentioned above. According to Vasmer’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language* the Russian *волк* should be connected with the verb *волочить* ‘to drag’, whence “furrow” and “plough” originate (Фасмер 1964: 338) – cp. the above mentioned parallels: Gr. *εὐλακά* ‘the plough’, Lith. *velkù*, *vilkti* ‘to drag’, ‘to draw’ (Mayrhofer 1968: 240). Though this etymological motivation has been suggested several times before (Specht, Porzig and the rest), the exegetes of the ṚV insist that in those two passages where the Áśvins are ploughing with the wolf, the word *ṛka-* should be translated as “wolf”, and not as “plough”. They may be right in their interpretation of these two passages, but at the same time the effort to explain the connection of *ṛka-* ‘wolf’ with the Áśvins, deities of the third function, with the help of this diachronic etymological motivation seems to be not senseless at all.

The description of the functioning of the word *v̥ka-* in the RV in these notes was mainly synchronic, though diachronic excursions were sometimes also necessary. The most ancient traces of wolf, as was shown by Gamkrelidze-Ivanov (Гамкрелидзе-Иванов II, 1884: 492-497), date from the border-line between the VIII-VII millennia B.C. over a very wide territory inhabited by the Indo-European tribes, and the cult of wolf played an important part in the history of these tribes. The wolf was denoted by several lexemes at this time, and one of them goes back to the root **ueit'-(n)-* 'to know'. The wolf functions in some traditions as a personification of positive qualities (Hittite), and the race of wolves is a model for the warriors. In the German tradition warriors are depicted dressed in wolf skins. Many folks and regions have "wolf" names. The cult of wolf brings together the Indo-European tradition and the South-Caucasian one.

There was no cult of wolf in the RV, as has been shown above, the pack of wolves was not known, and the attitude towards the wolf was particularly negative.

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