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## Defining the Apsaras and her Indo-European background

**1**. Ved. *apsarás-* (RV +), fem., more information in the AV, especially on their abode in waters. Grassmann: 80. Bezeichnung einer Klasse von Geistern, die in der Luft schweben und den Gandharven vermahlt sind. Macdonell (1897: 134-136): celestial water nymph, consort of a genius named Gandharva; endowed with great beauty, in indefinite number; their love is enjoyed not only by the Gandharvas, but occasionally also by men.

**2**. Previous etymologies, cf. Neisser 1924: 61, KEWAi I: 40-41, III: 629; EWAia I: 89-90.

PW I: 381. 1) *ap-sarás-* 'running in water', cf. *sar-* 'to run, rush' (pres.act. *sisarti*), PIE *\*sal-*, cf. EWAia II: 703-704. Yāska, *Nirukta* 5.13 *apsarā apsāriṇī*. Taken over by Oldenberg 1917: 251, and MW (59c): 'going in the waters or between the waters of the clouds'. No thinkable connection with *sáras-* nt. (RV +) 'pond, lake' (cf. Gk. ἕλος).

2) *a-psarás-* 'gestaltlos'. Grassmann (80) 'ursprünglich wohl nicht speisend, nicht der Speise bedürfend', cf. *psáras-*. But *psáras-* nt. means 'delight, enjoyment', cf. EWAia II: 198.

3) Some connection with *ápsas-* nt. (RV +) 'breast, forehead, face'. No derivational link.

4) *a-psarás-* 'shameless', according to Wackernagel (1916: 159-160), cf. YAv. *fšarəma-* masc. 'shame, pudor' ('Schamgefühl' Bartholomae 1904: 1029) cf. MP *šarm* 'id.', Khot. *kṣārma-*, Oss. *æfscærm*, *æfsarm* 'shame, diffidence, observance of decency' (Cheung 2002: 157). This Iranian lexeme has no further etymology. A priori connection, because the prototypical female, a Lilith of sorts, as figure of the sexual enjoyment, ought to reveal her charms. No basis in the Vedic phraseology.

**3**. The Apsaras has unmistakable connections with waters and with sex; she is sometimes featured as bird-like. These immortal beings are the female partners of the Gandharvas. No light is brought by the mythical figure of the Gandharva (*gandharvá-*, masc. RV 20x), whose etymology is itself obscure, except that it belongs probably to the Indo-Iranian substratum, from a basis *\*Gandhar*, cf. YAv. *gandarəba-*, masc. kind of demon (with suffix < *\*-bʰa-* of animals), also PN, Pers. PN *\*gand(a)rva-* *in Elamite transmission. Cf. EWAia I: 462.

**4**. Review of the telling older occurrences.

RV 10.136.6ab    *apsarásāṃ gandharvā́ṇām, mṛgā́ṇāṃ cáraṇe cáran /*
'Ranging in the range of the Apsarases and the Gandharvas, of the wild birds, / the long-haired one ins their sweet, most exhilarating comrade, who knows their will.' (Jamison-Brereton 2014: 1622)

RV 10.10.4    *ná yát purā́ cakṛmā́ kád dha nūnám, ṛtā́ vádanto ánṛtaṃ rapema /*
                   *gandharvó apsv ápyā ca yóṣā, sā́ no nā́bhiḥ paramáṃ jāmí tán nau //*
[Yama:] 'What we have not done before, should (we do it) now? While proclaiming truths, we would [/should we] murmur untruth? / The Gandharva in the waters and the watery maiden – that is our umbilical tie, therefore our kinship is of the highest.' (Jamison-Brereton 2014: 1382)

RV 10.11.2ab    *rápad gandharvī́r ápya ca yóṣaṇā, nadásya nādé pári pātu me mánaḥ /*
'The Gandharvī is murmuring, and let (that) watery maiden protect my mind all around at the bellowing of the bellowing (bull) [= Soma]' (Jamison-Brereton 2014: 1384)

Figure of the Apsaras Urvaśī, once married to the mortal Purūravas. She counts herself among immortal women, RV 10.95.4a. The Apsarases in crowds are compared to ducks preening their own bodies, 9cd.

RV 10.95.10    *vidyún ná yā́ pátantī dávidyod, bhárantī me ápyā kā́myāni /*
                   *jániṣṭo apó náryaḥ sújātaḥ, prórváśī tirata dīrghám ā́yuḥ //*

[Purūravas:] 'She who in her flight kept flashing like lightning, the watery (maiden) bringing me the delights of love, / (a son) belonging to men, nobly born, was born from the water – Urvaśī extends Āyu his lifetime long.' (Jamison-Brereton 2014: 1550)

The *soma*, personified as male figure, is mixed with the female waters:

RV 9.78.3  *samudríyā apsaráso manīṣíṇam, ā́sīnā antár abhi sómam akṣaran /*

*tā́ īm hinvanti harmyásya sakṣáṇim, yā́cante sumnám pávamānam ákṣitam //*

'The Apsarases belonging to the sea, sitting within, have streamed toward Soma of inspired thought. / They spur him on, the conqueror of the secure house; they beg the imperishable self-purifying one for his grace.' (Jamison-Brereton 2014: 1312)

Apsaras as female lover:

RV 10.123.5  *apsarā́ jārám upasiṣmiyāṇā́, yóṣā bibharti paramé vyòman /*

*cárat priyásya yóniṣu priyás sán, sī́dat pakṣé hiraṇyáye sá venáḥ //*

'The Apsaras, the maiden smiling coyly at her lover, bears him in the highest distant heaven. / He roamed among the wombs of the dear one [masc.], himself being dear; he sat in the golden wing – he is the Seeker.' (Jamison-Brereton 2014: 1596)

The poets of the Vasiṣṭha family approached the Apsarases (RV 7.33.9d), and their ancestor, the *ṛṣi* Vasiṣṭha (*vásiṣṭha-* masc.) was born from the Apsaras Urvaśī, cf. RV 7.33.11-12.

**5.** Out of 15 occurrences of RV *áp(i)ya-* 'belonging to the water(s)', all feminine ones apply to the watery maidens. Then, *áp(i)yā yóṣā* vel sim. 'watery maiden', as periphrasis for *apsarás-*.

**6.** Some connection of *apsarás-* with water has been hinted at by the Indian tradition. But the phraseology does not provide any support for the connection with *sar-* 'to run, rush'. Since the Apsaras has no connection with clouds nor rain, it does not seem appealing to trace the first member of any compound to *\*abh-*, cf. *abhrá-* nt., YAv. *aβra-* < *\*ṇbʰ-ró-* 'rain cloud', and *nábhas-* nt., OAv. *nabah-* 'vapor, cloud, mist' < *\*nébʰ-es-*, see EWAia I: 94, II: 13.

**7.** Analysis *ap-sarás-* 'water-woman', with second member related to *\*sáris-* nt. 'womanhood', matched by the basis of YAv. *hāiriši-* fem. 'woman' < *\*hăriš-ī-* (Oettinger 1986). The latter is related, as per Oettinger, to the PIE noun for 'woman, female'. Reconstructed by Pinault 2013 as *\*sór-/\*sér-/\*sr-*, latter weak stem issued from *\*sṛr-é/ós*, through reshaping of the theoretical genitive *\*sér-s*, according to acrostatic inflection.

**8.** Found barely as second compound member, as marker of the feminine in Anatolian, type Hitt. *išḫa-šš(a)ra-* 'mistress, lady', vs. *išḫa-* c. 'master, lord', Hitt. *ḫaššu-šš(a)ra-* 'queen' vs. *ḫaššu-* c. 'king'. Based on apposition, i.e. *\**'master+female', at the time when PIE had no feminine gender, hence no feminine suffix. See Hackstein 2010, Pinault 2013, with previous literature.

**9.** See the feminine of 'three' and 'four', PIE *\*tisrés* < *\*tri-sr-és* (< *\**'three+female') vs. masc. *\*tréi̯-es*, *\*kʷétesr-es* vs. masc. *\*kʷetu̯ór-es*. PIE *\*su̯é-sor-* 'sister' < *\**'own+female', coined at the time where the feminine *\*su̯é-h₂* of the adjective *\*su̯ó-/\*seu̯ó-* based on the reflexive pronoun did (could) not exist yet.

**10.** Pattern *\*-sarás-* 'woman' vs. *\*sáris-* 'womanhood' parallel to *tavás-* adj. 'strong, powerful' vs. Av. *təuuiš-* 'power' = Ved. *\*taviṣ-*, basis of *taviṣá-* adj. 'powerful', abstract fem. *táviṣī-* 'power' = Av. *təuuišī-*, and *-mahas-*, animate, as second compound member (e.g. RV *mitrá-mahas-* 15x 'having the might of Mitra', *prámahas-* 3x 'whose greatness goes forward') vs. *máhas-* nt. (YAv. *mazah-*) 'greatness', and *\*máhiṣ-*, basis of *máhiṣī-* 'lady, first wife' ; *mahiṣá-* adj. (RV +) 'great, powerful', (< *\**'provided with greatness', parallel to *taviṣá-*), masc. 'buffalo' (< *mahiṣá- mṛgá-* 'the powerful beast'), cf. EWAia II: 340.

**11.** The neuter reflected by Ved. *máhas-* belongs to the Caland system of the adj. *mahā́-/mah-* 'great', nt. *máhi*, suffixed *mahā́nt-* 'id.', cf. Rau 2009: 121. As for *\*máhiṣ-*, it can be understood as the reshaping, through crossing with the neuter *\*máĵʰi* (< *\*méĝ-h₂*, cf. Ved. *máhi*, Gk. μέγα), of the older abstract *\*máĵas-* nt. 'greatness' < *\*méĝ-e/os-*, related to the prefix Av. *aš-* 'great' < *\*ṃĝ-s-* 'with greatness', as per Schindler (1987: 345-346).

**12**. RV *mahás* (13x) adv. 'greatly' (especially in predicative function with *dhā-*, *kr̥-* 'to make something/someone great') does not presuppose an adjective *\*mahás-* 'great'; it was based on the neuter with accent shift, cf. Debrunner 1954: 227, Renou 1952: 325, 337. Therefrom issued the sporadic use of *mahás* as attributive, with a neuter noun, e.g. *mahó árn̥ah̥* 'great flood' (RV 1.3.12a). Besides *tavás-* adj., second compound member *-tavas-* in *svá-tavas-* (12x) 'self-powerful, self-strong', *prá-tavas-* (2x) 'whose strength goes forward, projecting strength'.

**12**. Indo-Ir. *\*táu̯iš-* (after RUKI) < *\*táu̯bs*, with laryngeal vocalization at word final, from the proterokinetic neuter < *\*téu̯H-s*. Compare Ved. *kravíš-*, nt. '(piece of) bloody flesh' = Gk. κρέας < *\*kréu̯bs* < *\*kréu̯h₂-s*. Cf. Nussbaum 1986: 119, 127, 140, 150-151.

**13**. Same type in YAv. *stairiš-*, nt. 'layer of straw' < *\*stérh₃-s*, Gk. γέρας 'gift of honor' < *\*ĝérh₂-s* 'aging, old age'. As internal derivative of the latter, Ved. *jarás-* (RV 5x), fem. 'old age', probably original collective with amphikinetic inflection, cf. Stüber 2002: 83-84, 253, Rau 2009: 74, 133, 134.

**14**. Inside Indo-Ir., the pattern *\*CáCiš-* nt. vs. *\*CaCás-* animate has been replaced by *\*CáCas-* nt. vs. *\*CaCás-* animate, once the reshaping of the neuter as nom.-acc.sg. *\*CáCas* (type Ved. *mánas-*, Av. *manah-*, Gk. μένος) occurred in the laryngeal-less roots, and was later extended. See RV *yáśas-* nt. 'glory' vs. adj. *yaśás-* 'glorious', *ápas-* nt. 'work' vs. adj. *apás-* 'active, at work'; cf. Debrunner 1954: 222--223 .

**15**. Those adjectives in °*ás-* are best interpreted as extracted originally from bahuvrīhi compounds, with second member based on a sigmatic neuter, see RV *s(u)v-ápas_* (RV 14x, superlative *svápastama-* 2x) 'having (making) good work, working well', masc. 'good worker', Av. *huuapah-* adj. 'working well'. See Stüber 2002: 27, 42. Those had originally final accent, as shown by the numerous compounds with negative prefix, *arepás-* 'spotless' vs. *répas-* nt. 'spot, stain', *arādhás-* 'not liberal' vs. *rā́dhas-* nt. 'favor, grant, liberality', and some relic forms, such as *su-prayás-* 'well-regaled' vs. *práyas-* nt. 'pleasure, delight', *su-pīvás-* 'very fat' vs. *pī́vas-* nt. 'fat, fatty substance'. In the majority, the accent on the second member has been extended from the frequent neuters, e.g. *su-mánas-* (Av. *humanah-*) vs. *mánas-* nt. 'thought, spirit'. See Pinault 2022: 131-134, with discussion of previous literature.

**16**. Scenario: as based on the root noun *\*sár-*, the abstract Indo-Ir. *\*sáriš-* was built after the model of *\*táu̯iš-*, *\*máĵʰiš-*, etc.. This item triggered in Indo-Aryan the making of an animate *\*sarás-*, which did replace *\*-sár-* as second compound member in *ap-sarás-*. The underlying compound *\*ap-sár-* was somewhat unpractical, because the expected nom.sg. was *\*apsā́* < *\*apsā́r*, and the expected gen.sg. was *\*apsrás*. The model of *svásar-* (sg. nom. *svásā*, acc. *svásāram*, gen. *svásur*, etc.) could not serve for this purpose, because this noun, which had adopted the inflection of kinship terms in °*tar-*, was no longer analyzable.

**17**. The restored definition of Ved. *apsarás-* fem. as water nymph complies with similar female deities found in several mythologies, especially in Europe (Baltic, Slavic, Germanic, Celtic): 'supernatural females who hand the lonelier parts of land, especially the waters, the trees, and the mountains' (West 2007: 284-292, see also Friedrich 1978: 28-30). They bear different names in the respective countries and are found in many narratives and popular traditions, especially in connection with dancing and in adventures of these characters with mortal lovers, see Barber 2013.

**18**. The back-projected PIE compound would be *\*h₂ép-sor-/\*-s(e)r-* 'water-woman'.

**19**. Gk. Ἀφροδίτη (Il.) Aeol. Ἀφροδίτα. Not found in Mycenaean documents. The name has no forms with -αρ- or -ρα- in Ionic-Attic or West Greek. It would be a relic of the Aeolic poetic tradition, which was later disseminated. No yet cogently explained, cf. Pirenne-Delforge (1994:9), Beekes (2010: 179). Review of literature by Dugand (1974, claiming a Semitic origin), Witczak (1993).

**20**. The main trend among historians of religion leads to some Near Eastern connection, due to the localization of Cyprus, a major place in the cult and mythology of the goddess, and of some

influence of the cult of Astarte/Ishtar on that of Aphrodite, and even on the narrative of her birth. Cf. Burkert 1985: 152-153, 408 n. 18; West 1997: 56-58, 291-292. But West (2000) has dismissed any link of her name with Phoenician 'Aštart, which was the name of the goddess whom the Greeks called Aphrodite. As put by West, Ἀφροδίτη does not have a Semitic-looking structure. Nonetheless, West argues (2000: 137-138) for Ἀφροδίτη as an adaptation of a Northwest Semitic (Canaanite) phrase meaning 'She of the pigeon', which he deems himself as speculative.

**21.** The alternative interpretation is based on the identification of Aphrodite, as 'daughter of Zeus' (Gk. Διὸς θυγάτηρ= Ved. *divó duhitā́*) with Dawn (Ved. *Uṣás-*, Gk. Hom. Ἠώς, Sappho αὔως, Att. ἕως, etc., PIE *$h_2áu̯sōs$*), as goddess of light and love, characterized by her smiling face (Gk. φιλομμειδής), and common erotic associations, cf. Dunkel 1988: 8-11, on the tracks of Boedeker 1974. These poetic connections are put into service for interpreting in IE perspective the myth of Gk. Ἀφροδίτη as 'born from the foam', precisely from the foam mixed with the seed of Ouranos, whose genitals have been cut and thrown into the sea by Kronos (Pirenne-Delforge 1994: 437). This narrative would even be the reflex of an IE myth, as per Janda 2005: 331-360, 2010: 65, 2014: 96, 99, 103. The etymological connection played upon by Hesiod (*Theogony*, 188-198, approved by Plato, *Crat.* 406c and others) between her name and ἀφρός ought to be taken as based on IE phraseology: 'shining up from the foam' (G. 'die im Schaum (des Meeres) aufleuchtet'), the second member *-dī́tā* being traced back to the feminine of *$dih_2$-tó-*, the expected verbal adjective of *$dei̯h_2$-* 'to shine' (LIV[2]: 108), cf. Gk. Hom. δέατο. There is no such phrase in Vedic, nor in any other text in an IE language. The Greek narrative does not match the familiar image of RVic Uṣas emerging from the darkness of the night, her sister, not from clouds, however smiling and radiating.

**22.** As an aside, the traditional connection of Gk. ἀφρός (Il. +) masc. 'foam, slaver' with Ved. *abhrá-* nt. 'cloud', lat. *imber* 'rain' does not make much sense, as it has been recognized for long (cf. Beekes 2010: 179). The foam can be defined as 'the visible thing at the surface of the vivid water'. De-locatival derivative *$h_2ep$-s-r-ó-* 'at the water(s)', based on *$h_2ep$-s-ér*, a secondary adverbial locative based on the genitive-ablative *$h_2ep$-é/ós* 'of/from the water', somehow parallel to Ved. *vatsará-* masc. 'year', based on *vats-ár* 'in the year' < *u̯et-s-ér*, with reinforcement of the locatival sense of the genitive of 'year', cf. Vine 2009: 213-220. Differently, Willi (2004) derives several Gk. words from a root *$h_2eb^h$-* 'to flow': in addition to ἀφρός, also ἄφαρ, adv. 'forthwith, immediately', ἄφνω, adv. 'suddenly', nt. ἄφενος 'wealth'.

**23.** Arguing on the basis of the dialectal variants (Cret. Ἀφορδίτα, Cypr. PN *A-po-ro-ti-si-jo*, Pamphyl. Ἀφορδισιυς) and of the metrical distribution of Ἀφροδίτη in Homer, van Beek (2022: 315-318), makes a case for a proto-form *$Ap^h$r̥-dī́tā*, the first member issued from *$h_2éb^h$r̥* (> Gk. ἄφαρ 'swiftly, forthwith'). The latter point is based on Witczak (1993), who deemed the theonym as an original epithet of the planet Venus, as the brightest object in the morning or evening sky: 'sehr glänzend', but the evidence for a prefix *$ab^h$ro-* 'very' remains dubious. While keeping the second member as *-dī́tā*, feminine of *dī́to-* < *$dih_2$-to-*, verbal adjective of *$dei̯h_2$-* 'to shine' (see above § 21), van Beek glosses *$Ap^h$r̥-dī́tā* as 'the one who appears (shines) forthwith', i.e. after sunset (2022: 318). This astrological interpretation may have some external support. The transition from 'quickly, suddenly' to 'immediately afterwards' is, however, not self-evident, since the planet Venus is not bound with a brief appearance in the night. Besides, *$h_2éb^h$r̥* does not seem further defined.

**24.** Starting from *$h_2apsr̥$-C° > *$h_2apsrə$-C°*, the cluster *-psR-* would yield *-$p^h$R-*, hence Aeol. ἀφρο-C°, with regular vocalization, and generalization of the aspirate -φ- to the variant outcome in ἀφορ-C°, instead of *ἀψορ-C°. A weaker alternative would surmise a thematic form *$h_2apsr$-ó-* of *$h_2ap$-s(e)r*, as doublet in first compound member.

**25.** Reconstruction *(H)apsr̥-dītaH*, as a determinative compound 'flying watery maiden', based on the association of these female deities with birds and with dance. Hence, the second

member would be based on *$dih_1$-tó-, verbal adjective of *$deih_1$- (LIV²: 107), cf. Gk. δίεται 'to rush', and ved. $day^i$-/$d\bar{\imath}$- 'to fly' (RV pres. act. *dī́yanti*, part. *dī́yant-*), said of birds, horses and gods, cf. Grassmann: 608 and EWAia I: 700. Aphrodite is definitely associated, in her cult and imagery, with birds, especially the dove or pigeon (περιστερά). She is shown as riding also a goose or a swan (cf. Pirenne-Delforge 1994: 415-417). These associations do not constitute any etymological proof, because the Gk. theonym had become for long totally opaque.

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