



Poetics and Pronunciation

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POETICS AND PRONUNCIATION

Introduction

The poetics of the Ṛgveda have been extensively studied over the past few decades (Watkins 1989, 1995, Klein 2004-2011, among others). Equally so, the pronunciation of the Ṛgvedic verses have been investigated ever since Grassmann and Oldenberg (Thieme 1960, Holland and van Nooten 1994), and we know of older pronunciation not preserved in our Saṁhitā text redacted by Śākyā,¹ as codified in the late Vedic period. However, to the best of my knowledge, it has not been observed what some features of Ṛgvedic poetics can tell us about the pronunciation of Ṛgvedic at the time of the composers of the Ṛgveda. A small beginning to such a study ~~is~~ attempted in the following lines.²

§ 1. Alliteration

Alliteration is a well-known feature of the Ṛgveda, found in abundance all over the text. A typical example is Indra's description as 'son of strength':
3.28.3 *sahasaṁ sṁnur...*,³ 1.143.1 *sahasaṁ sṁnave*,
3.24.3 *sahasaṁ sṁnav...*, etc. A few examples of alliteration, some going beyond just two consecutive words—are given below.

1.23.19a *apsv antar amṁtam apsu bheṁajam*
1.28.6a *uta sma te vanaspate ḷ vṁto vi vṁty*
agram it
1.30.16d *sa naṁ sanitṁ sanaye sa no 'dṁt*
1.31.7a *tvaṁ tam agne amṁtatva uttame*
1.32.2a *aḥann aḥim parvate*
1.32.5ab *ahan vṁtraṁ vṁtrataraṁ vyaṁsam ḷ indro*
vajreṁa mahatṁ vadhena
1.36.13a *Ṁrdhva Ṁ Ṁu Ṁa Ṁtaye*

¹ I leave aside minor (late) changes to Śākyā's text, as discussed by Bronkhorst 1981.

² Present examples are limited to RV 1.1-1.50 and RV 3.

³ Accents are neglected for clarity of presentation and reading.

1.39.5a**b** pra vepayanti parvatān -| vi viñcanti
 vanaspatān
 1.40.6d vi₁ved v₂m₁ vo a₁navat ||
 1.41.5a ya₁ yajña₁ nayath₁ nara
 1.48.3a uv₁so₁ uch₁c ca nu

§ 2. Alliteration of long and short vowels: *u/ā*, *i/ī*

It is important to note that alliteration of vowels does not halt at the boundary of vowel length, which is immediately visible in the alliteration of *u/ā* and *i/ī*.

1.7.4c ugra ugrābhir ātibhi₁
 1.27.6b ārm₁ up₁ka
 1.36.13a ārdhva ā āu āa ātaye
~~3.1.12 ud usriy₁~~
 3.33.13a ud va ārmi₁
 3.30.22c ugram ātaye; 3.038.10c; 3.48.5c

However alliteration of *i/ī* is comparatively rarer, which is surprising given the relative frequency of *u* vs. *i* sounds.⁴

1.11.8a indram āānam
 1.165.10c indra id āāa eāam
 1.129.2f āānāsa iradhanta

Howwever, there are additional cases involving words not immediately adjoining:⁵

1.10.6a tam i₁t sakhitva āmahe
 1.6.10a i₁to v₁ s₁tim āmahe
 3.56.5a tr₁ āadhasth₁ sindhavas tri₁ kav₁nām

§ 3. Alliteration of *a/ā*

Having established the common alliteration of *i/ī* and *u/ā*, we can now also look at that of *a* and *ā*. Prima facie, this would run against the dictum of

⁴ Whitney 1879/1889~~8~~: 26 has these average frequencies: *i* 4.83, *ī* 1.19 :: *u* 2.61, *ā* 0.73. - Alliteration of short *i* is frequent, e.g. 3.12.5c indrāgn₁ i₁āa, etc.

⁵ The same is obviously true when involving consonants + *i/ī*: 3.56.5a tr₁ āadhasth₁ sindhavas tri₁ kav₁nām; 3.55.20c v₁ro vindam₁no.

Pāṇini that both sounds were not mere short and long versions of the same vowel but were realized differently: *a* was a mid central closed-vowel [ɔ] (“closed” as per Pāṇini), while *ā* was a very open (vivṛtta) central vowel-one [ɑ].⁶ Nevertheless, there are numerous examples where both vowels occur in alliteration.

3.1.5c ayur apā
 3.31.14c ava āganma
 3.33.7d ayann āpo ayanam
 3.39.5b — abhijñv ā
 3.43.2ab1a ām̐ |⁷ ārya āiā
 3.49.2d aminād ayur
 3.50.1cd — ebhir⁷ annair | āsya
 3.55.8c ayāt | antar
 3.56.4ab abhāka āsām ... |⁷ ādityānām ahve

It appears that at the time of the Ṛgvedic poets, hundreds of years before Pāṇini’s early Sanskrit, the pronunciation of *a* and *ā* must still have been very similar: *a* [a] and *ā* [ɔ].

§ 4. An Objection

This observation, however, seems to contradict~~un~~into the observation made by K. Hoffmann⁸ that the Pāṇinian pronunciation of *a* as [ɔ] was “*sehr alt*”. But, how old indeed? Hoffmann’s case is based on forms with lengthened *a* [ɑ] pronounced as [ɑ:, ɔ]:

TS 3.2.9.5 āśāś mōda-iva = *āśāś madeva
 KB 14.3 āśāś modaiva
 AB 3.12.1 āśāś modaivom, etc. (»recite! let us both enjoy!«).

The same pronunciation of lengthened *a* as [ɑ] is also found in the Śāmaveda:

⁶ Note the similar case of the Avestan pronunciation of *i/ī*: *ni: vīspa* (Ved. *viṽva*) etc., where *ī* does not indicate length but quality of the vowel involved, see K. Hoffmann 1991: 869.

⁷ For ←+e→+ pronounced as [ai] see below.

⁸ 1975-6: 552-554.

SV 1.1.1.9 agna ॠyॠhi vॠtaye
 sung as *gॠna*, ognॠ i¹⁰ ॠyॠhॠ3
 vॠitoyॠ2i toyॠ2i

It is clear, thus, that in *post-Ṛgvedic* recitation and singing, what is now written as <+a>, + was pronounced as [a] ---or perhaps also as [a:]--- and was lengthened to [a:], a sound that, which does not occur in post-Vedic Sanskrit and thus in the redacted texts was normalized in the redacted texts byas [a:], now written as <+o>, +, that is [o].¹¹

However, it must also be observed that in both cases adduced above the *a* of the initial syllable is lengthened, not that of+ the final one. In hieratic recitation one would expect **ṛṣo*, with the lengthening of the final syllable of the imperative *ṛṣa*. Lengthening of final syllables in imperatives is indeed common in the RV, when metrically required: 1.8.2 *sṛjat*, 1.8.3 *matsv*, 1.10.3 *yukv*, etc. Either the development of *a* > [a:] in recitation and singing is post-Ṛgvedic, or the initial and subsequent syllables were treated differently. The SV case does not decide the question (*vॠitoyॠ2i toyॠ2i*, not **vॠitoyॠ2i tॠyॠ2i*). Perhaps word-initial accent was involved: *agne*, *ṛṣa*? These+ questions need+ to be followed up with more examples from the SV Gṇas. At any rate, we can state the following for hieratic recitation and singing

a [a, a]	>	<+o>+	=	[a]	, but:
e [ai]	>	<+āi>+	=	[ai]	
ṛ	>	<+ṛ>+	=	[ṛ]	

⁹ RV 6.16.10 *agna ॠ yॠhi vॠtaye*, SVGrṇmageya-Gṇa 1.1.1-3, Calcutta ed. by Satyavrata Sāmaṇrami 1874-99, Vol. I, p. 94-95.

¹⁰ Reflecting a pre-Ṛkalya, non-Sandhi form **agnai*, the later *agne*. (See already B.R. Sharma 1990-91: 195). The same is seen in SV 1.1.1 *tॠyॠ2i*. (It is unclear why there is *to* as this appears in a non-initial syllable).

¹¹ Similar changes in the hieratic pronunciation of *a* are seen in some instances in the Avesta (though this text is not a SaṇhitṠpṠha, but a school text, a sort of PadapṠha): *anu* Y 32.16 = *anu*; *av* Y 29.7 = *av* "we two", *avd* Y 35.6 (s.v. *du*, Bartholomae, *Wörterbuch*, Sp. 321, 347) = pre-Avestan **anu*, **av*.

In sum, the present evidence indicates, again, that the pronunciation of *a/ā* in the poets' own time was [a], [ā], not yet that of Pāṇini's [ā], [ā̄].

§ 5. Older pronunciation of *e, o* as: **ai, *au*;
also: **ai, *au*

It is fairly well-known, though not accepted in printing RV texts, that the pronunciation of *e* was still ~~was~~ [ai] in Ṛgvedic times.¹² This pronunciation is indeed attested in writing for the period corresponding to the (early)¹³ Ṛgveda in the Mitanni and Hittite documents, where we find *aika-vartana*, etc. In addition, the earlier pronunciation is still preserved in the Śāmaveda, where *agne* is sung as [ognī].¹⁴ This situation is also still observable in the current Saṁhitāpāṭha, though generally all old [ai] have been changed to ī+e-ī+ in Pāṇini's version: its poetics reflects s the older situation. There is alliteration between words beginning with *e-* [ai], *o-* [au] and ~~-a-/ā-~~.

3.56.2a eko acaran < **aikaz...*
3.35.6a ehy arvā < **ai(d)hi...*
3.50.1cd ~~—~~ebhir annair ~~-ī+~~ āsya <
**aibhiz...*
1.14.1a aibhir agne duvo giro < **ā-*
aibhiz... (= *devebhis*)
3.54.4d vavandire ... vevidānā ||
3.32.13ab÷ arvāg ī+ aīnā
3.48.3a annam aiā
3.34.10a oādāhā asanod ahāni

¹² Thieme 1960, cf. Van Nooten and Holland 1994: iv, section 3 (*ayi* > ā); v section B 3 (-e -a). -- Note also *modaiva* (above, § 4, —) = *mada* + *iva*.

¹³ Cf. M. See MW where?? @@## only: RV Uebers. By Witzel/ T. Goto, *Rig-Veda*, Frankfurt 2007: 430; for RV -*edh-* see ÷: Mitanni *azd^h* in: -*mazd^ha*, —, cf. Mayrhofer, *EWAia* II 378, 569.

¹⁴ Gāna in Grāmageya-Gāna 1.1.1-3 (Calcutta ed. I:; pp. 94-95). The Ṛc version (SV 1.1.1) has the later Sandhi: *agna Dyahi*. On the pronunciation of <+e>+ as [ai] in Śāmaveda singing (*gāna*), see the discussion by my late friend B.R. Sharma 1991-92: 195, cf. p.192 sq. and his exposition of the so-called *gati*-diphtongs.

3.32.11^{ab} arDa |⁺ ojDyamDnaD

In sum, <+e>+ still was pronounced [ai], and [o] was [au] in Dgvedic times. Consequently, a revised Dgveda edition by van Nooten and Holland should have *ai* instead of *e*, etc., thus: *agnim iDdai puraz-hitaDm yajñasya daivam DtvijaD hautDraD ratnadhDtamam...*

§ 6. “Sound painting”

In addition to the overlap between poetics and original Dgvedic pronunciation, several diverse observations may be added. The first concerns a poetic pattern that -- as far as I see-- has not been noticed. One may call it *Lautmalerei*. It is a kind of impressionistic pointillism, to use a term from another art form,¹⁵ and concerns the overwhelming use of *one* particular vowel in a certain stanza. Typical cases are those of *i/D* in the following two stanzas of book 3.

3.30.01a ichanti tvD somⁱyDsaD sakhDyaD
suvanti somaD dadhati prayDsi |
titikDante abhiDastiD janDnDm
indra tvad D kaD cana hi praketaD ||

3.30.14a mahi jyotir nihitaD vakDaDsv
DmD pakvaD carati bibhrati gauD |
viDvaD svDdma sambhDtam usriyDyD
yat sDm indro adadhDd bhojanDya ||

Not surprisrisingly both stanzas are addressed to Indra. After what has been said about the Dgvedic pronunciation of *a/D*, one can expect to find the same kind of *Lautmalerei* involving these sounds, as seen in the following stanzas.

3.1.04a avardhayan subhagaD sapta yahvD
DvetaD jajñDnam aruDam mahitvD |
~~3.1.04c~~—DiDuD na jDtam abhy Drur aDvD

¹⁵ Cf. —Thieme’s Sprachmalerei and Lautmalerei (1972), which he describes as: “... ‘Lautmalerei’, d.h. die Möglichkeit, Geräusche, Töne, Tierstimmen der Wirklichkeit mit den Mitteln menschlicher Lautsprache anzudeuten oder stilisiert wiederzugeben”...—; cf. Witzel and T. GotD, *Rig-Veda*, Vol. II (forthc.) .-@@##

devso agni^o janim vapu^oyan ||

3.1.17a ^o dev^on^m abhava^o ketur agne
mandro vi^ov^oni k^ovy^oni vidv^on |
~~3.1.17c~~—prati martm^o av^osayo dam^on^o
anu dev^on rathiro y^osi s^odhan ||

Again not surprisingly, these stanzas with *a/ā* are addressed to Agni. The latter stanza would have had a reconstructed pronunciation as follows, which makes the abundance of *a/ā* even more obvious.

3.1.17 *^o daiv^on^m abhavas kaituz agnai
mandraz vi^ov^oni k^oviy^oni vidv^on
prati martn av^osayaz dam^on^o
anu daiv^on rathiraz y^osi s^odhan *

Though *a* and also *ā* are the most common vowels in Vedic,¹⁶ the latter case should be sufficient to indicate the presence in *Ṛgvedic times* of this device involving also *a/ā*.

§ 7. Older ~~than current~~ Sandhis

It is well known that the *s*-sandhis seen in *Ṛgveda* do not reflect those of *Ṛgvedic times*. In the sequel, a few cases from books 1 and 3 are adduced.

- *ā*+*a*

3.41.8a m^ore _asmad vi mumuco < m^oare, as indicated by meter.

- *ā* : *r*

It may be assumed that vocalic *ā* and consonantal *r* were regarded as being fit for alliteration, as in the following cases.

3.54.3a ^ota^o rodas^o

3.54.4b ^ot^ovar^o rodas^o

- *tri* : *try* [triy]

The older pronunciation of *y* in certain positions as [*i*]—seems to be indicated by these examples.

3.056.03a-c trip^ojasyo v^oabho vi^ovar^opa

uta tryudh^o purudha praj^ov^on |

~~3.056.03c~~—tryan^oka^o patyate m^ohin^ov^on

¹⁶ 19.78 and 8.19 in Whitney's account (1879/1889: 26).—

• u/v

Alliteration of *u* and *v* may reflect the older pronunciation of *v* as [u].

1.036.13c ṛrdhvo vṛjasya sanitṛ yad añjibhir |
vṛghadbhir vihvayṛmahe ||

§ 8. Retroflexion~~es~~

Retroflex pronunciation of *n*, *s* is not yet seen across word boundaries.

There are numerous examples in Ṛkalya's RV that indicate retroflex~~ion~~ across certain word boundaries, such as in *u ṛu*. However, this does not seem to have been the case in Ṛgvedic times as the following example with alliteration s—indicates~~s~~.

3.53.24c na nityaṛ |~~ṛ~~ ... pari ṛayanty ṛjau | Cf. also the (ambiguous) line

3.54.3b mahe ṛu ṛaṛ suvitṛya ... |

Obviously, we need more, unambiguous examples.

§ 9. Summary

In sum, the close comparison of Ṛgvedic poetics and the pronunciation of Ṛkalya's time~~ee pronunciation~~ leads to the recovery of earlier stages of pronunciation, those of the very composers of the Ṛgvedic hymns. They include the following vowels:

a [a] -- not yet [ṛ]
e [ai]
o [au]
ai [ṛi]
*au [ṛu] (not yet seen in the current data set);

further, o < [az] in certain Sandhi forms~~ṛ~~ and no retroflex pronunciation yet across word boundaries.

Finally, it must be observed that the poets' RV (c. 1200-1000 BCE) was different from the form it took in Kuru times~~s~~,¹⁷ from Ṛkalya's RV, Pṛṇini's RV,¹⁸ and from the Prṛtiṛkhyā's RV.

17 Witzel 1995.

18 Who, e.g., ~~—still knew of 3 different~~ traditional pronunciations forms of Abhinihita Sandhi of iṛ the RV, see Pṛṇ. 8.3.18-20.

Obviously, more data from across the whole of the RV need to be collected; the present paper is merely meant to point out the possibilities that the current approach can deliver.

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