

# The Origin of Indra as the Thunder God

Yūto Kawamura

*Résumé: L'arme d'Indra appelée vājra est souvent comprise comme étant la foudre, ce qui implique qu'Indra lui-même serait un dieu du tonnerre. Bien qu'Indra et son arme aient été conçus de cette manière plus tard dans la tradition hindoue, cette caractérisation n'est pas valable en ce qui concerne le Ṛgveda. La question qui se pose alors est : à quel moment Indra est passé du statut de dieu guerrier à celui de dieu du tonnerre ? Le but de cet article est de fournir une perspective sur cette question, en se concentrant sur un traité d'étymologie appelé Nirukta, composé par l'ancien linguiste Yāska (vers le v<sup>e</sup>-iv<sup>e</sup> s. avant notre ère). Un examen attentif nous amène à ouvrir la possibilité que c'est le point de vue de Yāska qui a servi à la tradition ultérieure considérant Indra comme un dieu du tonnerre qui brandit le foudre, le Vajra.*

*Mots-clés: mythes indiens, Indra, Vajra, dieu du tonnerre, coup de foudre, Yāska, Nirukta, étymologie, théologie.*

*Abstract: Indra's weapon called vājra is frequently understood as a thunderbolt and hence Indra himself as a thunder god. Although Indra and his weapon came to be conceived in such a way later in the Hindu tradition, this characterization is not valid as far as the Ṛgveda is concerned. The question to be asked then is: What is the starting point for the shift of Indra's form from a warrior god to a thunder god? The aim of this paper is to provide a perspective on this issue, focusing on a treatise on etymology called nirukta, composed by the ancient linguist Yāska (ca. 5th-4th c. BCE). A close examination leads us to open up a possibility that it is Yāska's view which served for the later tradition to see Indra as a thunder god who wields a thunderbolt, Vajra.*

*Keywords: Indian myths, Indra, Vajra, thunder god, thunderbolt, Yāska, Nirukta, etymology, theology.*

Among the various heroic deeds of the god Indra extolled in the religious poetry of the *Ṛgveda* (ca. 1200 BCE), the foremost one is the battle with Vṛtra 'obstacle', a gigantic serpent enclosing the waters. In this battle Indra kills Vṛtra with his weapon called *vājra* and releases the waters to the world. This weapon of Indra's is frequently understood as a thunderbolt and hence Indra himself as a thunder god.<sup>1</sup> Although Indra and his weapon came to be so conceived later in the Hindu

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1. In the past, for instance, Macdonell, 1897, p. 54 wrote: "He is primarily the thunder-god," p. 55: "His arms as wielding the thunderbolt are mentioned particularly often", and p. 55: "The thunderbolt (*vajra*) is the weapon exclusively appropriate to Indra. It is the regular mythological name of the lightning stroke." See recently, for instance, West, 2007, p. 246: "As a masculine, Vṛtrāḥ, it is usually the name of the demon or dragon that blocks the waters and is shattered by Indra's bolt, p. 246-247: "However, the Armenian national hero Vahagn, who developed from the Iranian Vərəθraγna-, was celebrated for fighting and slaying dragons, and he had the reddish beard that seems to be a distinguishing feature of the Indo-European thunder-god (Perkunas,

tradition, such characterization of the vajra and Indra is not valid as far as the *Ṛgveda* is concerned. The general consensus among the current Vedic scholars can be represented by the following statement of Jamison and Brereton:

His weapon is the *vájra*, the mace. In later tradition, when Indra was reduced to a storm god, the vajra became a thunderbolt. But in the *Ṛgveda* it was a weapon, which could be thrown at an enemy or smashed down upon him, and the principal means by which Indra asserted his power.<sup>2</sup>

While the Indo-Europeans are assumed to have had a god of thunder and lightning, with a hammer or a similar weapon in his hand,<sup>3</sup> there appears no god in the *Ṛgveda* whose most characteristic nature is thunder, lightning, or both. Indra is no exception and his vajra is hardly described as a thunderbolt in this poetry.<sup>4</sup> Generally, in Vedic culture the storm god Parjanya (*parjánya*) plays the role of bringing rain.<sup>5</sup>

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Perun, Indra, Thor)”, and Ogden, 2013, p. 16: “The Sanskrit *Rigveda*, perhaps composed between 1500 and 1000 BC, narrates the storm-god Indra’s defeat of Vritra. Vritra is the firstborn of the serpents, and he encompasses and dams up the world’s waters (his name signifies ‘blockage’, as the poem explicitly acknowledges). Indra smites him into pieces with a thunder-bolt fashioned for him by Tvastar, so that his body comes to resemble a series of logged branches lying on the earth.”

2. Jamison and Brereton, 2014, p. 38. See also almost the same remark by Jamison and Brereton, 2020, p. 69.

3. Fortson IV, 2010, p. 26: “The Indo-Europeans had a god of thunder and lightning, probably represented as holding a hammer or similar weapon; this is how the Baltic thunder-god Perkunas and the Old Norse god Thor are depicted (the name of the latter’s hammer, Mjöllnir, is cognate with words in Celtic and Balto-Slavic for ‘lightning’), and also in some representations the Anatolian Stormgod.”

4. Cf. Witzel and Gotō, 2007, p. 583: “Im RV kommt der Vajra als der Donnerkeil oder der Blitz kaum zur Sprache.” It should be noted that, already in an article published in the 1950s, Apte strongly argued that the vajra depicted in the *Ṛgveda* was never a thunderbolt. Apte, 1956, p. 292: “The *Vajra* in the *Ṛgveda* is no thunderbolt! The *Ṛgveda* has a different word: *vidyut*, for the lightning-stroke, which alone (not *Vajra*) is associated with Parjanya, *the proper and only rain-god of the Ṛgveda*. The epithets and other descriptions of the *vidyut* are not shared by the *vajra* and they are not associated (much less identified) with each other, in the *Ṛgveda*.”; see also p. 295: “. . . we are forced to the conclusion . . . that the *Vajra* is no thunderbolt but a *stable, metallic weapon firmly held in his hands* by Indra, the god of of (sic) light.”

5. It is to be noted in passing that Indra also is depicted as rainmaker in *ṚV* IV.26.2: *ahám bhūnim adadām āryāya hám vṛṣṭim dāsūṣe mártvya | ahám apó anayaṃ vāvasānā māma devāso ānu kētam āyan ||* (Jamison and Brereton, 2014, p. 600: “I gave land to the Ārya; I (gave) rain to the pious mortal. I led the bellowing waters. It is my will that the gods followed.”) This a rare case in the *Ṛgveda* in which Indra is characterised as rainmaker.

The question to be asked then is: What is the starting point for the shift of Indra's form from a warrior god to a storm/rain god? The aim of this paper is to consider this question by examining etymological explanations of the names *índra* and *vṛtrá*, given in Vedic literature and the *Nirukta*, a treatise on etymology composed by the ancient linguist Yāska (ca. 5th–4th c. BCE). Because these types of etymological explanations reflect peoples' understanding of the world, these explanations would afford a clue to clarifying how Indra and Vṛtra are viewed in each point in history.

How Indra is described in the Indian great epics, the *Mahābārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, has been investigated by John Brockington. He points out that the starting point for the shift of Indra's form to a rain god "is quite possibly to be seen in the image of showers of arrows occurring in battle contexts."<sup>6</sup> Another perspective will be provided below.

## Etymological Explanations of the name *índra* in Vedic Literature

### *The Ṛgveda and the Atharvaveda*

There is no such expression in the *Ṛgveda* and the *Atharvaveda* as clearly intended as an etymological account of the word *índra*. What we find there is poetic puns in which the word *índra* is associated with the word *índu* 'drop [of the Soma plant]', a word phonetically similar to *índra*.<sup>7</sup> Not only is there a similarity in sound between these two words, but there is also a connection between the objects they refer to: Soma drops are well known as a favourite of Indra. Take the following passage for example:

RV 1.139.6ab: *vṛṣann indra vṛṣapāṇāsa índava imé sutā . . . |*  
 "O bull Indra (*indra*)—these pressed drops (*índava*), the drink of a bull..."<sup>8</sup>

### *Brāhmaṇas*

Brāhmaṇas are known for an abundance of etymological explanations. In the following passage from the *Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa*, the word *índra* is etymologized in association with the word *indriyá* 'power, ability':

6. Notice that Brockington assumes the original form of Indra to be a thunder god, not a war god. Brockington, 2014, p. 71: "Thus, Parjanya occurs mainly in the earlier stages of both epics, whereas the references to Indra causing rain, so typical of Purāṇas, belong predominantly to the later stages; the starting point for the shift is quite possibly to be seen in the image of showers of arrows occurring in battle contexts. On the whole Indra is still the thunderer who wields the *vajra* with warlike intent (e.g. Mbh. 5.12.21) . . ."

7. See Deeg, 1995, p. 112 and p. 155–156.

8. The translation is based on Jamison and Brereton, 2014, p. 312.

TB 2.2.10.4: *kás ca nāsmín vā idám indriyám práty asthād íti | tād indrasyendratvám |*

“[It is said that] no one resisted this power (*indriyám*) under him (Indra). Such is the reason why Indra is called *índra*.”<sup>9</sup>

The following passage from the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* devises a two-step explanation: first, the name *índha* ‘kindler’ is introduced as a derivative from the verb *indh* ‘kindle’ and next, this word, *índha*, is connected to the name *índra* (*indh* → *índha* → *índra*).

ŚB 6.1.1.2: *yád áinddha tasmād índha índho ha vái tám índra íty ā cakṣate parókṣaṃ parókṣakāmā hí devās . . . |*

“From the fact that he kindled [the vital organs], he is Indha (*índha* ‘kindler’). That is to say, he is verily Indha. People call him Indra (*índra*) mysteriously. For, gods love what is mysterious.”

#### *Aranyakas and Upaniṣads*

A two-step explanation is also observed in the *Aitareya-Āraṇyaka*. In a passage from this work, the name *idandra* is first introduced as a derivative from the expression *idam adarśam* and next this name is connected to the name *indra* (*idam adarśam* → *idandra* → *indra*):

AĀ II.4.3: *sa etam eva puruṣaṃ brahma tatamam apaśyat | idam adarśam itīṣṃ | tasmād idandro nāmedandro ha vai nāma tam idandraṃ santam indra ity ā cakṣate parokṣeṇa |*

“He observed this very Puruṣa as the most extended Brahman. [He said] “I have just observed this” (*idam adarśam*). Therefore, he is Idandra (*idandra*) by name. That is to say, he is verily Idandra by name. Although he is Idrandra, people call him Indra (*indra*) mysteriously.”

There exists the same passage in the *Aitareya-Upaniṣad*.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in a passage from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad*, the word *índha* ‘kindler’ is connected to the name *índra*,<sup>11</sup> as in the passage of the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*<sup>12</sup>; and in a passage from the *Maitrāyaṇīya-Upaniṣad*, the word *indu* ‘drop [of the Soma plant]’ is connected to the name *indra*,<sup>13</sup> as in the *Ṛgveda* and the *Atharvaveda*.<sup>14</sup>

9. See Deeg, 1995, p. 213 for other Brāhmaṇa passages in which the word *índra* is associated with the word *indriyá*.

10. See Deeg, 1995, p. 366.

11. See Deeg, 1995, p. 366.

12. See the previous section *Brāhmaṇas*.

13. See Deeg, 1995, p. 367.

14. See the previous section *The Ṛgveda and the Atharvaveda*.

## Etymological Explanations of the Word *vṛtrá* in Vedic Literature

### *The Ṛgveda and the Atharvaveda*

As in the case of the name *índra*, there appears no etymological explanation of the word *vṛtrá* in the *Ṛgveda* and the *Atharvaveda*. On the other hand, the word *vṛtrá* is often used with phonetically similar derivatives of the verb *var/vṛ* ‘cover’.<sup>15</sup> Let me cite one example:

ṚV 1.32.11cd: *apám bílam ápihitam yád ásíd vṛtrám jaghanvám ápa tád vavāra ||*  
 “What was the hidden opening for the waters—that Indra uncovered (*ápa . . . vavāra*) after he smashed *Vṛtra* (*vṛtrám*).”<sup>16</sup>

### *Brāhmaṇas*

In the *Taittirīya-Saṃhitā* and the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* as well as in the *Ṛgveda* and the *Atharvaveda*, there are instances in which the word *vṛtrá* is associated with derivatives of the verb *var/vṛ*.<sup>17</sup> However, unlike in the case of the *Ṛgveda* and the *Atharvaveda*, these instances are clearly intended as etymological explanations of the word at issue. The following passage illustrates one type of such explanations:

TS 2.5.2.2; 2.4.12.2: *sá imám lokán avṛṇot | yád imám lokán ávṛṇot tád vṛtrásya vṛtratvám |*  
 “He covered these worlds. That he covered (*ávṛṇot*) these worlds is the reason why *Vṛtra* is called *vṛtrá*.”

In the *Taittirīya-Saṃhitā*, the word *vṛtrá* is also etymologized in connection with a derivative of the verb *vart/vṛt* ‘turn’

TS 2.5.2.1: *yád ávartayat tád vṛtrásya vṛtratvám |*  
 “That [*Tvaṣṭṛ*] made turn (*ávartayat*) [the remnant of Soma] is the reason why *Vṛtra* is called *vṛtrá*.”

### *Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads*

In the *Āraṇyakas* and *Upaniṣads*, there is no instance in which the word *vṛtrá* is connected to other phonetically similar words.

## Interpretations in the *Nighaṇṭu* and the *Nirukta*

As seen above, no etymological explanation is discerned in which Indra or *Vṛtra* is characterized by rain, thunderbolt, and the like. Now, let us turn to the examination of Yāska’s *Nirukta*.

15. See Deeg, 1995, p. 141 and p. 178.

16. The translation is based on Jamison and Brereton, 2014, p. 135.

17. See Deeg, 1995, p. 290.

vṛtrá

Yāska's *Nirukta* is a work that aims at revealing the structure and the meanings of etymologically difficult words of Vedic texts, listed in the *Nighaṅṭu*, a traditional thesaurus in five chapters. The author and the date of this thesaurus is unknown. In the *Nighaṅṭu* the word *vṛtrá* is included in the group of synonymous words denoting 'cloud' (*megha*) and in the group of synonymous word denoting 'wealth' (*dhana*).<sup>18</sup> It may be added in this vein that the word *áhi* 'serpent' too is included in the former group; this word is enumerated in the group of synonymous words denoting 'water' (*udaka*) as well.<sup>19</sup> It is perceivable that a semantic shift of the word *vṛtra* had already taken place at the stage of the *Nighaṅṭu*: from a gigantic serpent which dams up the waters to a cloud filled with water. If *Vṛtra* is a cloud, the waters encompassed by it are naturally to be identified as rainwater. Yāska inherits the idea that *Vṛtra* is a cloud: in *Nirukta* 2.16 he states that etymologists (*nairukta*) understand *Vṛtra* as a cloud (*megha*).<sup>20</sup> He continues to say that the word *vṛtra* is a derivative of the verb *var/vṛ* 'cover', *vart/vṛt* 'turn (circulate)' or *vardh/vṛdh* 'increase':

*Nirukta* 2.17: *vṛtro vṛṇoter vā | vartater vā | vardhater vā | yad avṛṇot tad u vṛtrasya vṛtratvam iti vijñāyate | yad avartata tad u vṛtrasya vṛtratvam iti vijñāyate | yad avardhata tad u vṛtrasya vṛtratvam iti vijñāyate |*  
 “[The word] *vṛtra* is from the verb *var/vṛ*, *vart/vṛt*, or *vardh/vṛdh*. It is recognized that the fact that he covered (*avṛṇot*) is, moreover, the reason why *Vṛtra* is called *vṛtra*. It is recognized that the fact that he turned (circulated) [*avartata*] is, moreover, the reason why *Vṛtra* is called *vṛtra*. It is recognized that the fact that he increased (*avardhata*) is, moreover, the reason why *Vṛtra* is called *vṛtra*.”

It seems that here Yāska is collecting etymologies of the word *vṛtra* which he knew as attested in *Brāhmaṇas* although the exact sources are untraceable, and that he avails himself of these etymologies to explain the word *vṛtra* as meaning 'cloud', regardless of the actual contexts in which these etymologies take place. The actions signified by the verbal forms, *avṛṇot* 'covered', *avartata* 'turned (circulated)', and *avardhata* 'increased', work in perfect harmony with clouds. According to Yāska, whatever is performed with physical power (*balakṛti*) is viewed as *Indra's* activities (*karman*). Among them, the prominent ones are

18. *Nighaṅṭu* 1.10, *Nighaṅṭu* 2.10. The assignment of the meaning 'wealth' to the word *vṛtrá* may be based on the assumption of the waters withheld by *Vṛtra* (cloud) to be wealth.

19. *Nighaṅṭu* 1.10, *Nighaṅṭu* 1.12. The assignment of the meaning 'water' to the word *áhi* 'serpent' may be based on the fact that the defeat of the serpent (*Vṛtra*, cloud) is the cause of the release of the waters pent up by this serpent (*Vṛtra*, cloud).

20. *Nirukta* 2.16: *tat ko vṛtraḥ | megha iti nairuktāḥ |* Etymologists appear to prefer allegorical interpretations. On this point, See Kahrs, 1998, p. 27.

‘the slaying of Vṛtra’ (*vṛtravadha*) and ‘the giving of liquids’ (*rasānupradāna*).<sup>21</sup> Needless to say, Yāska bears in mind Indra’s great feat of defeating Vṛtra and thereby releasing the waters, narrated in the *Ṛgveda*. Taking into account the etymologists’ (including Yāska) understanding that Vṛtra is a cloud, these ‘slaying of Vṛtra’ and ‘releasing of liquids’ specified by Yāska as the main activities of Indra should mean ‘the breaking of clouds’ and ‘the releasing of rainwater’, respectively.

### *indra*

It is thus deduced that Yāska holds to be Indra’s primary form the form of a rain god who defeats Vṛtra (cloud) and releases the enclosed waters (rainwater). This deduction is further supported by Yāska’s etymological explanation of the name *indra*.<sup>22</sup> In dealing with this name, Yāska offers five types of explanation. The second and third types make use of the noun *indu* ‘drop [of Soma plant]’ and the verb *indh* ‘kindle’.<sup>23</sup> The origin of the idea of associating these two words with the word *indra* is to be found in the Vedic literature referred to above.<sup>24</sup> The fourth type, shown as the theories of other scholars, associates the expressions *idaṅkaraṇa* ‘doing this’ and *idandarśana* ‘seeing this’ with the name *indra*.<sup>25</sup> The explanation using the latter expression may have originated in the *Aitareya-Āraṇyaka* and the *Aitareya-Upaniṣad* mentioned above.<sup>26</sup> The fifth type involves action nouns to etymologize the word *indra*.<sup>27</sup>

21. Nirukta 7.10: *athāsya karma | rasānupradānaṃ vṛtravadhaḥ | yā ca kā cit balakṛtir indrakarmaiva tat |*

22. While this name is listed in Nighaṅṭu 5.4, no explanation is provided in this thesaurus.

23. Nirukta 10.8: *indave dravatīti vā | indau ramata iti vā | indhe bhūtānīti vā | tad yad enaṃ prāṇaiḥ sam aindhaṃs tad indrasyendratvam iti vijñāyate |* (“Or [the name *indra*] means ‘[the one who] runs for the sake of the drops [of Soma plant]’ (*indave dravati*). Or [the name *indra*] means ‘[the one who] takes delight in the drops [of Soma plant]’ (*indau ramate*). Or [the name *indra*] means ‘[the one who] kindles entities’ (*indhe bhūtānīti*). [Or] it is recognized [in a Brāhmaṇa] that the fact that they certainly kindled (*sam aindhaṃs*) the person in question by the vital organs is the reason why Indra is called *indra*.”)

24. See the sections *The Ṛgveda and the Atharvaveda* and *Brāhmaṇas*.

25. Nirukta 10.8: *idaṅkaraṇād ity āgrayaṇaḥ | idandarśanād ity aupamanyavaḥ |* (“Āgrayaṇa says that [Indra is called *indra*] because of [his] ‘doing this’ [*idaṅkaraṇa*]. Aupamanyava says that [Indra is called [*indra*] because of [his] ‘seeing this’ [*idandarśana*].”)

26. See the section *Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads*. Hence, ‘this’ in ‘seeing this’ (*idandarśana*) is most probably meant to refer to Brahman or to the fact that Puruṣa is Brahman. On the other hand, it is not intelligible what ‘this’ in ‘doing this’ (*idaṅkaraṇa*) refers to.

27. Nirukta 10.8: *indater vaiśvavyakarmanāḥ | indaṅ chatrūṇāṃ dārayitā vā | drāvayitā vā | ādarayitā ca yajvanām |* (“[The name *indra*] is from the verb *ind*, which denotes an action relative to governing power. [To explain: ] [Indra] is the one who, being powerful, tears asunder the enemies (*indaṅ chatrūṇāṃ dārayitā*). Or [Indra] is the one who [, being

What one must pay a deep attention to is the first type of explanation. This type shows a close link to Indra's main activities defined by Yāska, 'the slaying of Vṛtra (cloud) and the giving of liquids (rainwater),<sup>28</sup> and is therefore the one that he most likely thought best describes Indra's character. The word *irā* 'refreshment' is utilized in this type.<sup>29</sup>

1. *irām dṛṇāti* '[one who] breaks open refreshments'
2. *irām dadāti* '[one who] provides refreshments'
3. *irām dadhāti* '[one who] puts refreshments'
4. *irām dārayate* '[one who] breaks open refreshments'<sup>30</sup>
5. *irām dhārayate* '[one who] holds refreshments'<sup>31</sup>

'Refreshment' (*irā*) can refer to a variety of things depending on the context, but given that Indra's main activity for Yāska, as we have seen,<sup>32</sup> is nothing less than breaking the clouds to bring rainwater, what is intended by 'refreshment' here that is in keeping with this character of Indra should be 'rainwater'. All of these five explanations can be understood in terms of the meaning 'the one who brings rainwater [by breaking the cloud]'. An example in which 'refreshment' (*īlā*) is intended as 'rainwater' is already found in the *Ṛgveda*.<sup>33</sup> *īlā*, *īdā*, and *īrā* are all variants with the same meaning.

This type of etymological explanation of the word *indra* is not traced in the Vedic literature before the *Nirukta* and seems to be a new theory of the etymologists (or of Yāska himself) reflecting the way Indra was understood at that time. The importance attached to the etymological explanation of this first type can be seen from the fact that, of the two verses which Yāska draws after giving the

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powerful,] puts [the enemies] to flight ([*indañ chatrūṇām*] *drāvayitā*). Or [Indra] is the one who respects priests (*ādarayitā . . . yajvanām*)." )

28. See the section *vṛtrā*.

29. *Nirukta* 10.8.

30. Whereas it is likely that the form *dārayate* in explanation 4 is a derivative of the verb *dar*<sup>(i)</sup>/*dṛ* 'split, break open', from which the form *dṛṇāti* in explanation 1 is also derived, it is uncertain what difference is intended between these two forms. If *dārayate* is a reflexive middle of the causative, various additional meanings can be expressed by this form (On these meanings, see Sakamoto-Gotō, 1993, p. 273). Alternatively, the difference in form alone is intended and not in meaning.

31. I interpret the meaning of the middle form *dhārayate* to be the same as that of the active form *dhārayati*. Cf. Jamison 1983, p. 95, note 40.

32. See the section *vṛtrā*.

33. See, for example, *ṚV* 7.65.4: *ā no mitrāvaruṇā havyājuṣṭim ghṛtaír gávyūtim ukṣatam īlābhiḥ | prāti vām ātra váram ā jánāya pṛñitām udnó divyásya cāroḥ ||* (Jamison and Brereton, 2014, p. 963 : "(Come) here to the enjoyment of our oblation, Mitra and Varuṇa! Sprinkle our pasture with ghee, with refreshments. At your wish, in this place and for our people, fill our wish from the beloved heavenly water.")



etymological explanations of *indra* as verses describing the characteristics of Indra, the first, *Ṛgveda* 5.32.1, describes the slaying of *Vṛtra* and the release of the waters. In addition, another fact that the verb *dar<sup>i</sup>/dṛ* ‘break open’, used in explanation 1 above: *irām dṛṇāti*, is also used in this verse suggests that this verse is one of the grounds for this etymology.

ṚV V.32.1: *ádardar útsam ásṛjo ví khāni  
tvám arṇavān badbadhānāñ aramṇāḥ |  
mahāntam indra párvatam ví yád váh  
sṛjó ví dhārā áva dānavam han ||*

“You violently split the wellspring; you reamed out its apertures. You brought to peace the floods, which had been hard pressed. When, Indra, you pried apart the great mountain, you set loose the streams; you smashed down the Dānava.”<sup>34</sup>

[Yāska’s Interpretation]

“You broke open the wellspring (*ádardar=adṛṇāḥ*). You widely reamed out its apertures. You brought to peace [the multitudes of clouds], which had been filled with torrents (*arṇavān=arṇasvataḥ*) and hence had been always hard pressed. When, Indra, you opened (*ví . . . váh=vy avṛṇoḥ*) the big cloud (*párvatam=megham*), you widely set loose (*sṛjó ví=vy asṛjaḥ*) the streams. You stroke down (*áva . . . han=avāhan*) the giver [of water] (=cloud) [*dānavam=dānakarmāṇam*].”<sup>35</sup>

Thus, this verse, cited to justify the first type of explanation, is interpreted by Yāska in the context of rainfall. This fact further substantiates the aforementioned idea that ‘refreshment’ (*irā*) in the five etymologies of the first type is meant for ‘rainwater’.<sup>36</sup>

## The phenomenon of Rainfall

Yāska deems the slaying of *Vṛtra* and the resultant liberation of the waters, depicted in the *Ṛgveda*, as the destruction of a cloud and the giving of rainwater; Indra, who kills *Vṛtra*, is viewed in his main form as a rain-giving god. At this stage a question comes to the fore: if *Vṛtra* and the enclosed waters correspond

34. The translation is based on Jamison and Brereton, 2014, p. 697.

35. The word *dānakarman* literally means ‘that whose action is to give [water]’. Nirukta 10.9: *adṛṇā utsam | utsa [utsaraṇād vā] | utsadanād vā | utsyandanād vā | unatter vā | vyasṛjo 'sya khāni | tvam arṇavān arṇasvataḥ | etān mādhyamikānt saṃstyāyān | bābadhyamānān aramṇāḥ | ramṇātiḥ saṃyamanakarmā | visarjanakarmā vā | mahāntam indra parvatam megham yad vyavṛṇoḥ | vyasṛjo 'sya dhārāḥ | avāhann enam [dānavam] dānakarmāṇam |*

36. Both terms *irā* and *īlā* are recorded in Nighaṇṭhu 2.7 as names for food (*anna*). What kind of food/substance/refreshment or something nourishing does Indra grant to human beings? It is rainwater in Yāska’s understanding.

to a cloud and rainwater respectively, then does Indra also correspond to some natural thing? Let us inquire into the following passage which explains the phenomenon of rainfall.

Nirukta 2.16: *apāṃ ca jyotiṣaś ca miśrībhāvakarmano varṣakarma jāyate | tatropamārthena yuddhavarṇā bhavanti | ahivat tu khalu mantravarṇā brāhmaṇavādās ca |*

“From the mixture of water and light comes rainfall. With the metaphorical sense concerning the [rainfall], there are various descriptions of the battle [between Indra and Vṛtra]. Moreover, as is well known, the descriptions [of Vṛtra] in the ritual formulas and the discourses [on it] in the Brāhmaṇas are like those of a serpent.”<sup>37</sup>

Yāska takes the accounts of the slaying of Vṛtra and the release of the waters, provided in the *Ṛgveda*, as metaphorical expressions (*upamā*) of the natural phenomenon of rainfall. According to Yāska, rainfall takes place when water and light are mixed together. This explanation is evidently based on empirical observation of a natural phenomenon in which water starts falling as rain from a cloud with occasional flashes of lightning. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that Yāska perceives the natural phenomenon of rainfall as consisting of three elements: a cloud, (rain)water, and lightning. Among these, the former two correspond to Vṛtra and the waters encompassed by it. Then, it is most natural to presume that in Yāska’s system lightning corresponds to Indra, who kills Vṛtra and releases the waters.

In sum, Yāska’s understanding is that the natural phenomenon of rainwater pouring down from a cloud in the midst of lightning is metaphorically represented in the *Ṛgveda* by the description of Indra slaying the serpent Vṛtra and releasing the water while wielding his weapon vajra. This understanding of Yāska’s provides a foundation for Indra’s weapon, the vajra, which originally meant ‘club or hammer’, to be associated with lightning. It should be noted, however, that under this interpretation of Yāska’s Indra himself is lightning. There is no place in the *Nirukta* where Yāska identifies the vajra as lightning or the like. It may be that at some stage Indra came to be regarded not as lightning itself, but as a deity who manipulates it, and that the vajra replaced lightning.

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37. As we have seen above (see Section *vṛtrá*), the word *ahi* is recorded in the group of synonymous words meaning ‘cloud’ (*megha*) and in that of synonymous words meaning ‘water’ (*udaka*) in the *Nigantḥu*. The question is whether Yāska uses this word in these senses or not here in Nirukta 2.16. I think it is unlikely that Yāska does so. For, if Yāska wanted to convey the meaning of ‘cloud’ or ‘water,’ here, he would have used an unambiguous term such as *megha* or *udaka*.

It is uncertain what in nature is the weapon vajra in Yāska’s system. Or did he think that Indra with the vajra in his hand as a whole symbolised lightning?<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Before the *Nirukta*, there was already an understanding of Vṛtra as a cloud, and hence of the waters trapped by Vṛtra as rainwater, in the time of the *Nighaṇṭu*. In the *Nirukta*, inheriting such an understanding, Yāska gives an etymological explanation of the word vṛtra in line with the meaning of ‘cloud’. Such a specific explanation is not found in the Vedic literature before the *Nirukta*. If Vṛtra is a cloud that holds rainwater, then Indra, who breaks it to release the water, is the god who brings rain. Yāska puts forward etymological explanations of Indra which characterise him as such (the first type of explanation). This type of explanation is also not found in the Vedic literature before the *Nirukta*. Furthermore, he suggests that such Indra corresponds to lightning. In Yāska’s system, Indra himself or Indra with the vajra as a whole is lightning. If Indra comes to be conceptually separated from the lightning and becomes the god who manipulates it, then the role of the lightning is transferred to the vajra.

We can conclude that one of the bases for the characterisation of Indra as ‘the thunder god’ may have been provided by Yāska (and other etymologists), who systematically presented, with the etymological explanations, the forms of Indra and Vṛtra that emerge from the assignment of the meaning ‘cloud’ to the word vṛtra, done in the *Nighaṇṭu*.

Hiroshima University (Hiroshima, Japan)

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38. Pirart, 2011, p. 16–17 presents the first word of *Nighaṇṭu* 2.20 as *vidyút* ‘lightning’ and states that the word *vajra* is given a naturalistic interpretation (“En plus de *kútsa*-, du *vajra* lui-même, de l’interprétation naturaliste qui en est fournie d’emblée (*vidyút*-«éclair»)). . .”). However, the reading adopted by Roth 1852 and Sarup 1920–1927 is both *didyút* ‘arrow’, not *vidyút* ‘lightning’, although Sarup, 1920–1927, p. 14 (note 17) also reports the *vidyut* (without any accent) as a variant reading. Hence the statement in Pirart, 2011, p. 118 which assumes that one of the meanings assigned by the *Nighaṇṭu* to the word *vajra* is ‘lightning’ (“*Kutsa*, en tant que *dyótana*- «éclatant de lumière», serait ainsi assimilable au *vajra* ou à la foudre comme le disait le *Naighaṇṭuka* des *vajranāman*.”) also lacks a philological basis. Both *didyút* and *kútsa* are just listed as synonyms of the word *vajra* in the *Nighaṇṭu* and their meanings are not specified there. Yāska in his *Nirukta* does not specify the objects to which these two words refer either, so that it is still unclear whether the vajra is understood as lightning in the *Nighaṇṭu* and the *Nirukta*.

- ĀĀ: *Aitareya-Āraṇyaka*. See Keith, 1909.  
 AV: *Atharvaveda*, Śaunaka-recension. See Roth and Whitney, 1924.  
 Nighaṇṭu: *Nighaṇṭu*. See Nirukta.  
 Nirukta: Yāska's *Nirukta*. See Sarup, 1920–1927.  
 ṚV: *Ṛgveda*. See Aufrecht, 1877.  
 ŚB: *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*, Mādhyandina-recension. See Weber, 1855.  
 TB: *Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa. Ānandāśramasamskṛtagranthāvaliḥ 37: Kṛṣṇayajurvedīyaṃ Taittirīyabrāhmaṇam. Śrīmat-sāyaṇācāryaviracitabhāṣyasametam*. 3 vols. Third edition. Poona: Ānandāśramamudrāṇālaya.  
 TS: *Taittirīya-Samhitā*. See Weber, 1871–1872.

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