1. The notion that Rg-Vedic ā, besides functioning as a preverb and as an emphatic particle, may also serve as a conjunction identical in function with ca, utā, etc., is widespread in Vedic scholarship, and goes back to Böhtlingk and Roth’s citation of 11 supporting passages in the Petersburg Sanskrit-Wörterbuch of 1855. In 1873, Grassmann’s Wörterbuch zum Rig-Veda raised the total to 25. In his 1907 Der Rig-Veda in Auswahl: Glossar, Geldner rejected some of Grassmann’s instances, but added others of his own. The total number of passages for which a conjunctive value of ā has ever been asserted is 33, all in the RV.

The most recent contribution to this view was that of Neisser. While adding no new instances, Neisser did suggest distinguishing “mindestens drei Quellen” for this particle: ā as preverb, ‘ā expletivum’, which ‘auf die Kasusfunktion sich beschränkt’, and emphatic ā, ‘das einen Wortbegriiff hervorhebt’. This he directly equated with Homeric ἢ. He further proposed that the conjunctive function of ā developed from its emphatic use.

Neisser’s suggestions are unacceptable. First, a direct comparison of emphatic ā with Homeric ἢ is impossible, since emphatic ā is post-positive (as Neisser himself often insists), whereas Homeric ἢ is usually sentence-initial. Next, the distinction emphatic – expletive is gratuitous; ā simply lends prominence to the preceding word. Whether this emphasis affects the word’s lexical meaning or its grammatical function depends ultimately on the context. Finally, although Neisser has a distinguished predecessor in the attempt to derive a particle’s conjunctive force from an earlier supposed emphatic force in B. Delbrück, neither discussion convinces one that such a development is believable or necessary. Neisser himself had to admit that many cases of seemingly conjunctive ā could not be explained in this way. He ended his discussion in resigned confusion, appending a list of questions he could not answer.

2. A conjunctive value for ā has not, however, been universally accepted. Whitney, for example, makes no mention of such a function in his 1889 Sanskrit Grammar. Delbrück is totally silent on the subject in his Alttindische Syntax of 1888, and in vol. III of his Vergleichende Syntax, though ā in other functions is discussed at length. In vol. I of the latter work he says only that ā “erscheint ... auch noch als hervorhebende und verbindende Partikel, deren Verhältnis zur Präposition hier unerörtert bleiben soll”.

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Finally, a glance at the indices of Oldenberg’s Rgveda: Textkritische und exegetische Noten (Berlin, 1909–12) will indicate the depth of Oldenberg’s interest in the functions of Rg-Vedic ā; but not one of these numerous discussions makes any mention of a conjunctive use. In view of the authorities’ disagreement, and of the continuing uncertainty concerning the linguistic reality of conjunctive ā,8 a reexamination of the evidence as a whole seems in order.

3. My belief is that Rg-Vedic ā was in fact never conjunctive, i.e. never functioned as a conjunctive particle comparable to u, ca, et al. One reason for thinking so is the utter lack of agreement among the proponents of conjunctive ā as to its syntax. The alleged constructions are so diverse as to suggest that conjunctive ā had no syntax.9

But it is the actual examination of the passages themselves which provides the best proof that conjunctive ā is illusory. Let us begin with the most frequently attested instance of Grassmann’s most common construction, “ā zwischen die beiden zu verbindenden Worte gestellt” (type A ā B). This is the phrase divā ā prthivyāh ‘from heaven and earth’. Grassmann lists 5 occurrences of this phrase; its linguistic reality seems thus to be assured.

When we replace this phrase in its contexts, we note immediately that three of these passages involve the nominal conjunction process known as preverb repetition: the conjunction of a series of nouns by the repetition of a preverb before each of them (for details, see the work cited in fn. 1). These are:

4.21.3a  ā yātv īndro divā ā prthivyāh
“Let Indra ride here from heaven and earth”,
7.6.7cd ā samudrād āvārād ā pārasmād
āagnir dade divā ā prthivyāh
“Agni took for himself < the goods (= vāsūni in a) > from the nearer and further sea, from heaven and earth”,
7.39.5ab āagnie giro divā ā prthivyāh
mūrīm vaha vārṇam īndram āgnim
“O Agni, drive the songs from heaven and earth to Mitra, Varuna, Indra, Agni”.

For that matter, it is unclear why Grassmann omitted

3.61.4d ārntād divāh papratha ā prthivyāh
“<Uśas> has spread to the end of heaven and earth”, and
7.24.3ab ā no divā ā prthivyāh rjīśin
idām bariḥ somapēyāya yāhi
“Ride here from heaven and earth, O rjīśin-, to this strew, to drink Soma”.

In all of these passages, dyū- and prthivi- are indeed conjoined; not because ā means ‘and’, but because a preverb, which in this case happens to be ā (cf. 10.82.5a