

Orpheus and Rbhu Revisited

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Previous arguments in favor of an etymological connection between Greek Ὀρφεύς and Vedic ṛbhū have for the most part failed to carry conviction. In this paper I offer two new pieces of evidence for such a connection. First, the paternal traditions of the two figures are cognate: each can be shown to be descended from both an "Archer" and a "Cudgel-Bearer." Second, Orpheus and Rbhu participate in the respective Greek and Vedic versions of the same Indo-European mythopoetic formula. This formula involves the root *teks, which is specially suited to poets and craftsmen.

In this paper I will reconsider the question of an etymological connection between Orpheus, the archetypal singer of Greek mythology, and the Rbhus, the divine craftsmen of the Rigveda. ("Rbhu" is an individual, the eldest of a trio known collectively as the "Rbhus," *rbhāvah*, from the plural of his name.) The formal equation of Greek Ὀρφεύς and Vedic ṛbhū was first proposed, I believe, by Christian Lassen in the middle of the nineteenth century (Lassen 1840: 487), and has been mentioned by various scholars at various times since. Perhaps the most distinguished linguist to accept it was Ferdinand de Saussure (Saussure 1879: 262n), who mentions it in passing when discussing the reflexes of PIE *r. To the best of my knowledge, the only scholar to attempt a comparative study of the two myths in any detail was Max Müller (Müller 1881: 435-6), who saw in this myth, as in most others, a solar allegory.

The Orpheus-Rbhu connection is probably not widely accepted. The phonological fit is possible; it would show the same correspondence of initial Greek ὀρ- and Vedic r- that is seen in ὄρρυμ / ṛnóti. But a possible phonological fit means only that the two words may be cognates, not that they must be. In the absence of any apparent similarity between the two figures (Müller was not convincing), it is certainly reasonable to decline to consider them to be related.

In this paper I will argue that there are in fact connections between Orpheus and Rbhu which may point to a common past. In each tradition much independent development has occurred, and the names

have become attached to other stories. It has been recognized, for example, that the figure of Orpheus is a "complicated amalgam" (Robbins 1982: 4), "a patchwork of separate elements" (Edmunds 1990: 200). Various scholars have attempted to trace the origins of certain aspects of the myth. The visit to the underworld, for instance, has been explained as an "intrusion of shamanistic elements into Greek myth and legend" (West 1983: 5), and Orpheus' severed but still singing head has been shown to continue a very common Indo-European mythical tradition (J. Nagy 1990: 209-228).

The observable connections between the two figures are subtle, and they involve not what are generally regarded as the salient features of each myth but rather some that have survived in minor details. Nonetheless these connections considered together make a stronger case than has been made before for the cognate relationship of Orpheus and the Rbhush.

I am certainly not attempting here any sort of "recovery" of the "original myth." Other elements of the Orpheus myth (e.g., the severed head which continues to speak) may well be far older than the points that I will discuss in relation to the Vedic evidence, but simply not connected with the name "Orpheus" until after the separation of the Orpheus and Rbhush traditions, and thus not part of the shared Orpheus/Rbhush tradition. The features that Orpheus will be shown to have in common with the Rbhush are not in any way more central to the Orpheus myth than any of his other features. From the point of view, for instance, that the singing head is an integral part of the "Orpheus myth," the name "Orpheus" itself may be a late addition to that myth.

Parentage

Orpheus and Rbhush have similar paternal traditions. Briefly, it may be observed that each has two fathers: an "Archer" and a "Cudgel-Bearer." Both of these traditions are established for each figure.

The cudgel and the bow are two of the most common Indo-European heroic weapons, wielded by heroes in many Indo-European traditions. Consider in the Greek tradition the figure of Heracles, the consummate hero, who is usually depicted in art with both club and bow (LIMC 5:1.183-6). Consider further the multitude of epithets that mean essentially "cudgel-bearer" or "archer": Vedic *vajrin*, *sudhanvan*, etc.; Homeric *κορυνήτης*, *έκηβόλος*, etc.

I believe that the evidence for the respective paternal traditions of Orpheus and Rbhush suggests that an earlier common Orpheus/Rbhush figure regularly received, in the Indo-European poetic tradition, the

patronymic epithets “son of the cudgel-bearer” and “son of the archer.” These two epithets have produced two distinct paternal traditions each for the Rbhus and for Orpheus.

To consider the Rbhus first: they are called most commonly *saudhanvanáh*, “sons of Sudhanvan” (transparently “he who has a good bow”), which continues the “son of the archer” tradition, but they are also addressed collectively as *indrasya súno*, “son of Indra” (with whom in general they are very closely associated), which continues the “son of the cudgel-bearer” tradition: they have been made sons of the cudgel-bearer par excellence. There are, admittedly, other references to the lineage of the Rbhus besides the two mentioned here, but they are less important. They are once called “children of Manu,” *mānor nāpatah*, just a reference to their mortal birth; they are sometimes called “children of might,” *sávaso nāpatah*, a purely figurative reference; and sometimes general reference is made to their “parents,” *pitára*, who are unspecified but seem distinct from the other traditions.

Orpheus is sometimes said to be the son of Apollo and sometimes of Oeagrus (Οἶαγρος). Just as Indra’s close connection with the cudgel motivates the tradition that the Rbhus are his sons, so Apollo’s close connection with the bow motivates the tradition that Orpheus is his son, continuing the inherited “son of the archer” tradition. That both Orpheus and Apollo are musicians surely facilitated this link.

And Οἶαγρος? Various etymologies have been proposed for this name, from “lone dweller in the fields” (Kern 1920: 23) to “owner of sheep and lands” (Kern 1920: 16) and even “wild sheep” (Linforth 1941: 23, on the analogy of ὄναγρος “wild ass”). I propose that the name means simply “cudgel-bearer,” having as its first element the same root seen in οἶσω, the suppletive future of φέρω, and as its second element *φαγρος (=Vedic *vágrah*) “cudgel,” which has been shown to have survived elsewhere in Greek in the name Μελέαγρος “he who cares for the cudgel” (Watkins 1995: 408-413). The name Οἶαγρος is thus exactly parallel to the name Μελέαγρος, with a different first element (“he who bears...” vs. “he who cares...”).

It is necessary that I explain this etymology in accordance with the rules of Greek compound formation. The root which underlies οἶσω is most likely *οισ or *οι (Chantraine 1968: 788). Observing such compounds as φερένικος, ἀρχέλαος, etc., we would expect that a compound consisting of *οισ or *οι and *φαγρος would have the shape *οισέφαγρος or *οιέφαγρος (compare Μελέφαγρος), from neither of which can we get to Οἶαγρος without difficulty. Another approach is needed. Many compounds are formed with the connective element -σι-: στησίχορος, κρυψίνοος, σωσίπολις, etc. Either *οισ or *οι connected

by *-σι-* to **φαγρος* would give, after the loss of digamma, **οἰσίαγρος*. Such a word could never become *Οἶαγρος* through phonetic change; instead we must invoke analogy. Some compounds exist in two forms, one with the connective element *-σι-* and one without it; consider *ταλασίφρων* and *ταλάφρων*. The existence of such pairs would make possible the analogical creation of *Οἶαγρος* from *Οἰσίαγρος*:

ταλασίφρων : *ταλάφρων* :: *Οἰσίαγρος* : X

where X would be *Οἶαγρος*.

If this etymology is correct, then the Greek myth provides as father to Orpheus a generically-named “Cudgel-bearer” as a continuation of the “son of the cudgel-bearer” paternal tradition, whereas the Vedic myth makes the Rbhus sons of the cudgel-bearer Indra. On the other hand, as a continuation of the “son of the archer” paternal tradition the Vedic myth provides as father to the Rbhus a generically-named “Archer,” whereas the Greek myth makes Orpheus son of the archer Apollo. Both traditions, however, clearly present evidence for two separate traditions of heroic descent, from a cudgel-bearer and from an archer.

Descent from a heroic cudgel-bearer or archer might suggest some sort of heroic side to the Rbhus and Orpheus. For the Rbhus, traces of this perhaps remain in such epithets as *sávaso nápatāh* “children of might” (*RV* IV.37.4) (cf. Indra’s epithet *sávasah sūnú* “son of might”) and *nárah* “heroes” (passim). They are also asked (in *RV* VII.48), together with Indra, for assistance in conquering enemies. Orpheus, too, has something of a martial side; for example, in a fragment of Euripides’ *Hypsipyle* (frag. 64:101-102), Euneus describes what Orpheus did for him and his brother:

*μοῦσάν με κιθάρας Ἀσιάδος διδάσκειται,
τοῦτον δ’ ἐς Ἄρεως ὄπλ’ ἐκόσμησεν μάχης.*

This couplet is remarkably similar to the famous Archilochian couplet in which that poet asserts his dual nature as both warrior and poet. (The martial side of Orpheus has been discussed in detail in my Ph.D. thesis for Yale University.)

A Mythopoetic Formula

The following two passages both describe the invention of the lyre:

The Journal of Indo-European Studies

Ἑρμῆς τοι πρώτιστα χέλυν τεκτῆνατ' αἰοιδόν

- Homeric hymn to Hermes, line 25

πρῶτος ποικιλόμουσος Ὀρ-
φεὺς χέλυν ἐτέκνωσεν

- Timotheus Persae lines 221-222

These two passages are very similar. The basic action of the first is Ἑρμῆς χέλυν τεκτῆνατο; of the second, Ὀρφεὺς χέλυν ἐτέκνωσεν. I suggest that these two passages are examples of one and the same poetic formula, with different subjects (I will argue in a moment that Orpheus as subject is traditional, and Hermes an innovation). The verbs also differ; I suggest that τεκτῆνατο is older than ἐτέκνωσεν, both because the sense is more natural (“built the lyre,” vs. “begot the lyre”) and also because it is possible to see ἐτέκνωσεν as a metrically conditioned variant. τεκτῆνατο would not fit in that position in the line, a pherecratic, and so the poet used the similar-sounding ἐτέκνωσεν. This perhaps had the further advantage of renewing the old formula, replacing the bland “built” with the figurative “begot.”

Orpheus, the archetypal singer, is more closely connected with the lyre than is Hermes, and is therefore more likely to have been the original subject of this formula, which was subsequently extended to Hermes in the Homeric hymn to that god as one in a series of examples of his ingenuity. We may thus infer an original basic subject-verb formula Ὀρφεὺς τεκτῆνατο. The verb is a denominative from τέκτων, which in turn comes from the IE root *teks “fashion.” The Vedic cognate *taks* is very commonly seen in collocation with forms of the noun *rbhú* “und ist gerade für die Rbhu’s charakteristisch” (Ryder 1901: 28). The Rbhús, the craftsmen of the gods, perform a number of miraculous deeds of skill, and the verb which describes the action is often a form of *taks*:

táksan pitr̥bhyam rbhávo yivad váyah (RV I.111.1c)

dhenúm tataksúr rbhávo yé ásvá (RV IV.34.9b)

agnáye bráhma rbhávas tataksur (RV X.80.7a)

These are just a few out of many examples that can be adduced. In them we see the formal equivalent of our Greek Ὀρφεὺς τεκτῆνατο. In Greek, primary verbal derivatives of the root *teks have died out, but the formula has continued with the denominative verb τεκτῆνατο, maintaining the inherited link between Orpheus and the root *teks.

The IE root *teks had two essential meanings, one literal, one figurative (Schmitt 1967: 296-298). Literally, the root means "fashion" and is used of carpenters, etc. Figuratively, it means "compose" and is used of poets. I suggest that once the Orpheus/Rbhu myth split and the two figures went their separate ways, the Vedic tradition realized the root in its literal sense, developing a myth of craftsmen, whereas the Greek tradition understood the root in its figurative sense, thus rendering Orpheus a poet. The Vedic myth, however, can occasionally use the verb in its figurative sense, as in *RV* X.80.7a quoted above, where its object is *bráhma* "prayer;" likewise the Greek myth can use the verb in its literal sense, as in the inferred formulation Ὀρφεὺς χέλυν τεκτῆνατο, in which Orpheus fashions the object that is always associated with his poetry. But the fact that the Rbhhus are craftsmen and Orpheus is a poet suggests that in both the Vedic and Greek myths there occurred a general fixing, respectively literal and figurative, of the sense of the verb.

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