

## **An Indo-European Night Raid?**

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The night-raid motif offers convincing examples for the argument that the epics of Indo-European peoples share a common heritage. Book 10 of the Mahābhārata, the Sauptikaparvan, shares a significant number of similarities with the Iliad's Doloneia as well as stories stretching across a range of Greek and Latin epic. Significantly, these similarities are deeper and more nuanced than more publicised similarities which exist between Hellenic and Semitic stories, despite the geographical distance, and apparent lack of mutual knowledge which existed between the Indian and Hellenic cultures at that time.

The idea that there could be a shared Indo-European heritage for Indian and Greek epic is not widely popular. However, this article will offer evidence to support this theory by comparing book 10 of the Mahābhārata (the Sauptikaparvan) with both book 10 of the Iliad (the Doloneia) and the sack of Troy. Hopefully this new evidence will challenge a common assumption that similarities between cultures' epics are mere borrowing, especially when seen in the light of the numerous other patterns and parallels which have been demonstrated by scholars such as Dumézil and Allen. These night raid stories are expressed with different emphases and result in different consequences for each epic; however, I believe that within the texts it is possible to see very real parallels.

### **The Tale of the Night Raid: Oral Tradition and Context**

The Greek night raid in book 10 of the Iliad has been often discussed for its doubtful origin and many see it as an unoriginal intrusion. Danek, (1998: 20-47) has shown that the phraseology is Homer's and that there is no real linguistic difference from the rest of the Iliad. However, Nagler (1974: 136) complains bitterly of this episode, calling the Doloneia 'a disaster stylistically, because of the folkloristic departures from normalcy; heroically, because of the disgraceful conduct

exhibited by Odysseus and Diomedes; thematically, because it takes place in the dead of night; and structurally, because it leads to an Achaean victory.’ Furthermore its position after book 9 is peculiar, particularly since Diomedes has just advised everyone to get a good night’s rest and they have agreed. Nevertheless, at the start of book 10 many people are awake.

Whether the book fits successfully in the epic as a whole is not in debate here. Rather it is its very nature as dubious which makes it interesting, in so far as it offers us a glimpse of how the Greeks adapted inherited tales and recycled them. Knowing that epic was inherently flexible, using basic themes and individual stories in the way music uses notes, could we see book 10 of the Iliad as evidence of this? The fact that it is not a natural development from the rest of the Iliad narrative suggests it was a story in its own right. The Indian version, in contrast, fits well and is a vital part of its epic, as will be shown later.

Though the purpose of this article is primarily to show the similarities between the two night raids, it is also important to note their differences. First and foremost the Greeks are the ‘goodies’ of their epic, and destined for success, while *Aśvatthāman* and his companions are the ‘baddies’, and destined for failure. Also, the appearance of the night raid in the *Mahābhārata* could not be more different in scale from its appearance in the Iliad. Whereas in the Iliad the night raid is fairly irrelevant to the greater plot, but included probably because it is simply a good story, in the *Mahābhārata* it is the crucial climax to all that has come before, both in terms of narrative and meta-narrative. In fact, the *Sauptikaparvan* brings about the necessary end of the age.<sup>1</sup> The next age, or

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<sup>1</sup>The premise for the whole Kuru versus Pāṇḍava war was that the earth had complained to the gods that it could no longer support the weight of so many people and demons overrunning its surface, and so the gods must contrive to bring about the death of most souls and the end of this age. It is an interesting side point that in the *Cypria* we also find this as the reason for the Trojan War, suggesting more comparisons within the epic cycles of both cultures. West (1997: 482) ‘can hardly avoid the assumption that the overpopulation motif used in the *Cypria* has its source in Babylonian epic’, however I would argue that the Indian evidence points to a rather different conclusion (Vielle 1996: 114-123). An epic fragment (West 2003: 80–82) tells us that the earth was weighed down by the masses of men, and so Zeus took pity on her and decided to decrease their number by means of the Trojan war. So Stasinus tells us:

the kali yuga, is prepared for by this scene, and so the violence and imagery depicted is correspondingly apocalyptic, and comparable to the fall of Troy.

For these reasons we find an altogether different degree of seriousness in the actions of the Sauptikaparvan. So for example, though both Odysseus and Aśvatthāman sacrifice to the gods, the importance for the character and for the story as a whole is far greater in the Sanskrit version, as indeed is the promised offering, and therefore the text is far more elaborate in its description. The Iliadic version understandably does not present the same gravity in its depiction as the context does not call for it.

Diomedes and Odysseus, while certainly not light-hearted, enter into their escapade in a different mood from that of Aśvatthāman, who would be more comparable to Achilles in the way he reacts to loss and feelings of revenge. While it is interesting to see the similarities in the basic story structure of the night raids, it is equally intriguing to note how each society has adapted the tale to different contexts within their respective epic, and to the culture of their respective society.

### **Details of Comparison**

#### *1) Context: A low point for one side*

To start with the context in which the stories come: in both epics the night raid is conceived as a plan after a heavy defeat. It might be objected that the Greeks are of course the eventual victors of the war whereas Aśvatthāman and his colleagues are the losers. However, the Doloneia comes at a time when the Greeks have been routed by the Trojans, and for the first time in the war Hektor and his men are confident enough to be encamped on the plains. Furthermore in book 9 Achilles has just refused to return to battle and by so doing save his comrades from their destruction.

In the Mahābhārata the Kurus have just suffered a great humiliating defeat in battle with the Pāṇḍavas. Furthermore in both epics the losing sides are currently in the position of fighting a losing battle as they are both fated to be beaten, albeit temporarily in the Greek case rather than permanently, as in the Indian case. Achilles' curse upon the Achaean army

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Διὸς δ' ἔτελείετο βουλή

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has had the sanction and affirmation of Zeus. In Greek thought, Zeus and Fate are mysteriously intertwined. While Achilles' will cannot prevent the Greeks from eventually destroying Troy, he can delay it indefinitely since Zeus can postpone the inevitable if he so wishes. So when we read book 10, we must keep in mind that the Achaeans at this point are doomed until Achilles should rally to their cause, and in light of his outright refusal to come to their aid in book 9 the Greeks must feel deep despair just as Aśvatthāman does.

### 2) *Sleeplessness*

Both defeated sides find that they cannot sleep for shame at their recent failure. Aśvatthāman is humiliated and cannot sleep like his companions, just as the Greek leaders, Agamemnon and Menelaos, are also unable to find rest while other heroes sleep.

ἀλλ' οὐκ Ἀτρεΐδην Ἀγαμέμνονα ποιμένα λαῶν  
ὑπνος ἔχε γλυκερὸς, πολλὰ φρεσὶν ὀρμαίνοντα. (10. 3-4)

'But sweet sleep did not hold the son of Atreus,  
Agamemnon, the shepherd of the people, who was  
greatly troubled in his mind'

ὦς δ' αὐτῶς Μενέλαον ἔχε τρόμος, οὐδὲ γὰρ αὐτῷ  
ὑπνος ἐπὶ βλεφάροισιν ἐφίζανε, ... (10. 25-6)

So in the same way fear gripped Menelaos, nor did  
sleep sit upon his eyelids  
*khrodhāmarśavaśaṃ prāpto Droṇaputrastu Bhārata*  
*naiva sma sa jagāmātha nidrāṃ sarpa iva śvasan* (1.32)<sup>2</sup>

'But the Son of Droṇa overcome by shame and anger could not sleep, o Bhārata, and lay there hissing like a snake.'

### 3) *Structure of Attack Party*

Once the plan is decided the night raid protagonists must be established. In both cases the size of the attack party is very small: two people in the Doloneia and three in the Sauptikaparvan. Diomedes answers the challenge in the Greek camp and chooses Odysseus as his partner.

<sup>2</sup>All sanskrit references are from the Sauptikaparvan, book 10 of the Mahābhārata.

Νέστορ, ἔμ' ὀτρύνει κραδίη καὶ θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ  
 ἀνδρῶν δυσμενέων δύναι στατὸν ἐγγὺς ἐόντων,  
 Τρώων· ἀλλ' εἴ τις μοι ἀνὴρ ἄμ' ἔποιτο καὶ ἄλλος·  
 μᾶλλον θαλπωρὴ καὶ θαρσαλεώτερον ἔσται. (10.220-4)

'Nestor, my heart and proud spirit urge me to penetrate  
 the camp of our enemies, the Trojans, who are lying so  
 close to us. But if another man would go with me that  
 would be a comfort and bring greater confidence.'

πῶς ἂν ἔπειτ' Ὀδυσῆος ἐγὼ θείοιο λαθοίμην, (10.243)

'How could I ignore godlike Odysseus?'

And in the Sauptikaparvan Aśvatthāman takes both  
 his remaining companions.

*ity uktoā ratham āsthāya prāyād abhimukhaḥ parān  
 tam anvagāt Kṛpa rājan Kṛtavarmā ca Sātvataḥ* (5.36)

'So speaking, he mounted his chariot and set out  
 towards the enemy. And Kṛpa  
 And Kṛtavarman the Sātvata both followed him, my  
 king.'

The structure of the party is comparable in both epics. Diomedes takes only one partner, Odysseus. Aśvatthāman takes both Kṛpa and Kṛtavarman, but they act as one person. Kṛpa speaks for both throughout the book and when they follow Aśvatthāman into battle they stay together and fulfil the same function. Just as Odysseus waits while Diomedes slaughters Rhesos and his men, so Kṛpa and Kṛtavarman wait while Aśvatthāman carries out the slaughter. In fact Kṛtavarman might as well not be there for all the impact he makes upon the scene. Therefore it is not a problem that one scene depicts a pair and the other three men, as the Indian protagonists effectively form two units in the same manner as in the Greek version.

#### 4) Deceit

The choice of Odysseus is interesting as he is the one Greek hero especially known for his artifice and deceit. He is also given Meriones' boar-toothed helmet which had been stolen from Amyntor.

Μηριόνης δ' Ὀδυσῆϊ.... ἀμφί δέ οἱ κυνέην κεφαλῆφιν ἔθηκε  
ῥωοῦ ποιητήν· (10.260 – 2)

'Meriones put his well made leather helmet on Odysseus'  
head'

τήν ῥά ποτ' ἐξ' Ἐλεῶνος Ἀμύντορος Ὀρμενίδαο  
ἐξέλετ' Αὐτόλυκος... (10.266-7)

'Autolykos once stole it from Amyntor son of Ormenos,  
(breaking through his strong house) in Eleon'

He is now properly dressed for an untrustworthy mission.  
Aśvatthāman for his part claims that

*chadmanā tu bhavet siddhiḥ* (1.46)

'through deceit success may come.'

This shows how both expeditions to the enemy camps are seen right from the outset as devious and somewhat dishonest. In fact the Sauptikaparvan specifically raises the issue of the attack's morally questionable nature. In a work which is for a great part concerned with Dharma, and known as the 5<sup>th</sup> Veda, it is only natural that the Mahābhārata contains much discussion of what course of action is correct and which will incur resulting bad karma. For example, in arguably the most famous part of the Mahābhārata, the Bhagavadgītā, we find discussion of what the warrior's duty is, and what can be condoned when it is one's duty. Aśvatthāman eventually convinces his companions despite the fact that he is not following the proper path as advocated by Kṛṣṇa.

##### 5) *The Omen of a Bird*

Both epics present the hero being sent an omen of a bird. They differ slightly in so far as Odysseus and Diomedes are sent a heron by Athene,

τοῖσι δὲ δεξιόν ἦκεν ἐρωδιὸν ἐγγυς ὁδοῖο  
Παλλὰς Ἀθηναίη· (10.274-5)

'Pallas Athene sent them a heron on their right, close to the path.  
but Aśvatthāman sees an owl destroying crows which gives him the idea for the raid.'

*Supteṣu teṣu kākeṣu viśrabdheṣu samantataḥ*  
*so >paśyat sahasāyāntam ulūkaṃ ghoradarśanam (1.36)*

'But as those oblivious, trusting crows slept on, Aśvatthāman saw an owl; terrible, sight-rending, and sudden in its fell approach.'

However both birds inspire the heroes and fill them with confidence for their expedition.

#### 6) *Prayer and Promise of Sacrifice*

Both heroes pray to their respective gods for help and strength and promise sacrifices as recompense. Diomedes prays to Athene and asks her to be with him as she was with his father Tydeus, and promises to sacrifice a young heifer with horns covered in gold.

*κέκλυθι νῦν καὶ ἐμείο,.....σοί δ' αὖ ἐγὼ ῥέξω βοῦν ἦνιν*  
*εὐρυμέτωπον,*  
*ἀδμήτην, ....χρυσὸν κέρασι περιχεύας. 10.284-94)*

'Now hear me also,....And then I will sacrifice to you a heifer, a yearling, broad across the brow, unbroken, ... with her horns covered with gold.'

Aśvatthāman prays to Śiva and offers himself up as a sacrifice saying

*so >ham ātmopahāreṇa yaksye tripuraghātinam (7.2-5)*

'I shall offer myself in sacrifice to the destroyer of the triple citadel.'

As discussed earlier, the Indian version of the story is far more dramatic and developed. The description of the prayer of sacrifice to Śiva covers all 66 verses of chapter 7. Whereas the Greek model is fairly standard in so far as the hero prays for help in return for a material offering to be given later, the Indian version is far more extreme and the offering is actually

given there and then rather than promised for a later date.

7) *Immediate Answer to Prayers*

Both heroes find that their prayers are answered. Athene and Śiva in varying degrees enter their favoured humans and give them divine strength.

ὧς φάτο, τῷ δ' ἔμπνευσε μένος γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη,  
(10.482)

'So he spoke, and grey-eyed Athene breathed strength into him.'

*evam uktvā maheṣvāsaṃ bhagavān ātmanas tanum  
āviveśa dadau cāsmāi vimalaṃ khadgam uttamam  
athāviṣṭo bhagavatā bhūyo jajvāla tejasā  
varśmanavāmsī cābhavad yuddhe devasṛṣṭena tejasā* (7. 64-5)

'With these words Lord Śiva gave the warrior a spotless sword and entered his body. Then, being possessed by God, Aśvatthāman blazed with divine energy, and with that fiery, god-engendered power, he was transformed into the embodiment of battle.'

Here again we see that the Mahābhārata develops the idea with greater drama. The Greek hero is merely given strength by Athene, as many heroes are helped throughout the epic. In the Sauptikaparvan however, Aśvatthāman receives a sword from Śiva, forms a union with him and is entirely possessed by him.

8) *Supplication and Refusal*

The Doloneia is so called due to Diomedes' and Odysseus' chance encounter with Dolon, a Trojan spy, on their way to the enemy camp. Realizing he is outnumbered and in trouble, Dolon, having helped the Greeks and already offered a great ransom, puts out his hand to supplicate Diomedes by taking hold of his chin, but in response Diomedes decapitates him. Dolon's head falls in the dust as it had just begun to speak.

ἦ, καὶ ὁ μὲν μιν ἔμελλε γενείου χειρὶ παχείῃ  
ἀψάμενος λίσσεσθαι,.....  
φθεγγομένου δ' ἄρα τοῦ γε κάρη κούησιw ἐμίχθη· (10.454-7)



‘And he was about to take his chin in his huge hand to supplicate him, (when he struck him in the middle of the neck, having lunged at him with his sword)... and his head was mixed with the dust as it had begun to speak.’

This type of behavior is despicable in the Iliad. It is a theme explored variously throughout the epic both in Agamemnon’s cruelty when Menelaos is about to ransom Adrestos,

*τῶν μὴ τις ὑπεκφύγοι αἰπὺν ὄλεθρον  
χειρὰς θ’ ἡμετέρας, μηδ’ ὄν τινα γαστέρι μήτηρ  
κοῦρον ἐόντα φέροι, μηδ’ ὄς φύγοι,.... (6.57-9)*

‘Not one of them must escape harsh destruction at our hands, not even the boys still carried in their mothers’ wombs – not even they must escape.’

and in Achilles’ resigned pity.

*αὐτίκ’ ἀπὸ θρόνου ὤρτο, γέροντα δὲ χειρὸς ἀνίστη,  
οἰκτείρων πολλῶν τε κάρη πολλῶν τε γένειον, (24.515-6)*

‘Straightaway he stood up from his chair and raised the old man by his hand, in pity for his grey head and grey beard,’

In the Indian epic we find Dhṛṣṭadyumna begging at least to die like a warrior by being killed with a worthy weapon. Instead Aśvatthāman beats him to death, kicking and stamping on him.

*ācāryaputra śastreṇa jahi mā mā ciraṃ kṛthāḥ  
tvatkṛte sukṛtāṃ! lokān gaccheyam dvīpadāṃ vara  
tasyāvuyaktāṃ tu tāṃ vācam saṃśrutya Draṇir abravīt  
ācāryaghātīnām lokā na santi kulapāṃsana  
tasmāc chastreṇa nidhanaṃ na tvam arhasi durmate (8.19-20)*

‘Son of the teacher, best of men, kill me with a weapon. Quickly! Strike! So by your hand I may reach the worlds of those whose deeds were good. Hearing those garbled words, Droṇa’s son replied There are no worlds for those who kill their teachers, defiler of your race,

And that is why, bad-minded man, you do not deserve death by the sword.'

Again this is considered to be dishonorable behavior in his respective society.

9) *The Exhausted, Unarmed and Sleeping Enemy*  
Both sets of heroes find their enemy sleeping.

οἱ δ' εὐδον καμάτῳ ἀδηκότες, ἔντεα δέ σφιν  
καλὰ παρ' αὐτοῖσι χθονὶ κέκλιτο, εὖ κατὰ κόσμον,  
τριστοιχί· (10.471-3)

'They were asleep, worn out with exhaustion, and their fine armour was lying neatly piled beside them on the ground in three rows,'

*tathaiṅva gulme saṃprekṣya śayānān madhyagaulmikān  
śrāntān nyastāyudhān sarvān kṣaṇenaiṅva vyapothayat* (8.38)

'Thus seeing the men sleeping, exhausted, in two divisions on their bed with their weapons cast aside...'

The two heroes then naturally fall to the slaughter of their enemies.

10) *The Dream*

Next we find one of the more striking correspondences. Both enemy camps have had some kind of premonition of their impending doom. While he sleeps, Rhesos has a nightmare about Diomedes, which is said to be of Athene's devising,

κακὸν γὰρ ὄναρ κεφαλῆφιν ἐπέστη  
τῆν νύκτ' Οἰνείδαο πάις, διὰ μῆτιν Ἀθήνης. (10.496-7)

'There was a nightmare at his head that night, of the son of Tydeus, through Athene's devising.'

and the Pāṇḍava camp had dreamt of

*kālīm .... kālarātriṃ ... suptān nayantīm tāṃ ...  
ghnantam Drauṇim tu nityadā* (8.64 – 6)

‘Kālī, the night of all-destroying Time....leading the sleepers away – and Droṇa’s son forever killing them.’

Again we see that the Indian version is more intense for the text continues

*Yataḥ pravṛttaḥ saṃgrāmaḥ KuruPāṇḍavasenayoḥ  
tataḥ prabhṛti tāṃ kṛtyām apaśyan Drauṇim eva ca (8.67)*

‘Ever since the war between the Kuru and Pāṇḍava hosts began, they had dreamt of that baleful goddess and of Droṇa’s son.’

This image of the prophetic dream has many counterparts in other traditions, which West (1997: 188, 375) sees as comparable to Rhesos’ dream in book 10. For example, Dumuzi, a character in Sumerian tradition dreams of his death. In Gilgamesh the eponymous hero dreams of many things including the coming of Enkidu. Kessi in the Hittite tradition has seven symbolic dreams in one night, and in the bible the Pharaoh has prophetic dreams.

However all these seem different to me, since in these cases all the dreams are then interpreted. Crucially the dreamers wake up and can make use of their visions. In this sense they are separate from the examples of Rhesos and the Pāṇḍavas. Their dreams came at the very moment of their destruction and are therefore of no help. It is true that the dream of the Pāṇḍavas is said to have been a recurring one. However it is not mentioned prior to this episode and so we could see this claim as merely an exaggeration to intensify the drama. Certainly, if we accept that it was recurring, they did not interpret it, and it is telling that it appears once again for the last time at the moment of their death.

These dreams and that of Rhesos are tragic in their function, rather than useful. This last warning, given at a time that it can bring no hope or help but merely despair, emphasizes the pathetic nature of their doom. The news comes too late, and is therefore nothing but a source of further desolation and frustration. So the prophetic dreams, which West sees as comparable to that of Rhesos, seem instead to be quite separate.

11) *Lack of Protection*

An additional point of comparison can be seen when we ask how this slaughter could have come about. In the *Sauptikaparvan* it is made abundantly clear how this could be possible. After the bloody description of the massacre, Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks Saṃjaya why Aśvatthāman could not have achieved this feat earlier in the war. He replies that the Kuru hero was afraid of the Pāṇḍavas and that it was because they were not present, nor Kṛṣṇa, their supporter, that this was possible.

*na hi teṣāṃ samakṣaṃ tān hānyād api Maruṭpatiḥ* (8.147)

‘For in the presence of those heroes, no one could have killed them, not even the lord of the Maruts (Indra) himself.’

In the Greek version too, Diomedes and Odysseus had no intention of risking attacking the Trojans with Hektor at their head. It would not have been successful. At the start of the *Doloneia* Nestor suggests spying on Hektor to hear their plans, or perhaps killing a straggler, but there is no suggestion of widescale slaughter since it would not be feasible with the great Trojan Hero in their midst. But Rhesos’ camp was without a notable Hektor figure and so it was possible. Also, just as the Pāṇḍava camp lacked its champion god, Kṛṣṇa, so this camp too was without divine protection: Athene reminds Diomedes that he cannot stay killing indefinitely, or one of the other gods will arrive to protect the enemy.

*...μή ποῦ τις καὶ Τρῶας ἐγείρῃσιν θεὸς ἄλλος.* (10.511)

‘Lest some other god may awaken the Trojans’

Ordinarily the gods and primary heroes are involved with battle and oversee its course in both epics. Here however it is strikingly unusual and significant that the normal circumstances of war have been altered. This fits in with the fact that the slaughters take place at night. This whole episode in both epics depicts a battle in which the basic conditions for war have been inverted: it is night instead of day; one side is unaware of the encounter; and there is no structured battle array or defence from heroes and gods.

Of course, on a basic level, as Saṃjaya adds,

*etad īdrśakam vṛttam rājan suptajane vibho* (8.148)

‘Besides, this was only achieved because the men were sleeping, o king’

This is one of the primary reasons for the morally questionable nature of the episode.

As the book continues, we see that the mass slaughter depicted in the Sauptikaparvan is not checked as in the Iliad, but becomes the climax of a long war. The imagery is violent and destructive. The end of the world is acted out, with descriptions of fire and devastation.

It is here that the comparison with the Doloneia comes to an end, and instead it is comparable to the eventual sack of Troy, which is foreshadowed in the Iliad. This is a theme which has been explored<sup>3</sup>. However I will include a few examples to show the progression.

### The End of an Era

#### 1) Images of destruction

We find depictions of wailing women in the Sauptikaparvan which reinforce the image of a captured city:

*rājānam nihataṃ dr̥ṣtvā bhṛśam śokaparāyaṇāḥ  
vyākrośan kṣatriyāḥ sarve Dhṛṣṭadyumnasya Bhārata* (8.27)

‘Having seen King Dhṛṣṭadyumna killed, all the kṣatriya wives, violently and completely taken in grief, were screeching, O Bhārata.’

The Iliad of course does not cover the sack of Troy, though we find references in the epic cycle and in the Aeneid:

*quis cladem illius noctis, quis funera fando  
explicit aut possit lacrimis aequare labores?  
urbs antiqua ruit multos dominata per annos;  
plurima perque vias sternuntur inertia passim*

<sup>3</sup>Allen argues that the Mahābhārata and Iliad both have five phases of the war and for the final phase he identifies the sack of Troy with the Sauptikaparvan. This is not something which I wish to argue against. The flexibility of oral epic could well mean that both theories are valid, or indeed further comparisons.

*corpora perque domos et religiosa deorum  
limina.*

‘Who could describe the slaughter of that night? What tongue could describe the deaths or who would be able to equal their toils with their tears? An ancient city, dominant for many a year, fell. Streets, homes and thresholds of the gods’ temples were strewn with a vast number of motionless corpses.’

In the Mahābhārata, the entire Pāṇḍava line is destroyed since Draupadī’s sons are all killed. At the end of the night, when Aśvatthāman returns covered in blood, he has essentially annihilated the entire enemy army. After this very physical battle, Aśvatthāman and Arjuna, with the advice of Kṛṣṇa, fight on the spiritual level, releasing their ‘ultimate weapons’. The destruction of the entire world is avoided, but Aśvatthāman is not spiritually pure enough to retract his missile and so instead diverts it to the wombs of all the Pāṇḍava women, thus ensuring the full ruin of the line.

*Tataḥ paramam astraṃ tad Aśvatthāmā bhṛṣāturaḥ  
Dvaipāyanavaçaḥ śrutvā garbheṣu pramumoca ha (15.33)*

‘So with Dvaipāyana’s words ringing in his ears, Aśvatthāman, convulsed with suffering, released that ultimate weapon into their wombs.’

## 2) *A single surviving savior*

This, one might think, would conclude the tale. However, just as in the story of Troy Aeneas escapes, providing hope for the Trojan line and its future dominion, so when Aśvatthāman has seemingly cancelled all hope, Kṛṣṇa promises to revive the unborn child of Virāṭa’s daughter, uttering the prophecy:

*Parikṣiṇeṣu Kurusu putras tava janīsyati  
etad asya Parikṣitvaṃ garbhasṭhasya bhaviṣyati (16.3)*

‘When the Kurus have been destroyed, you shall bear a son. This child you Carry in your womb shall be called Parikṣit.’

The resulting son, Parikṣit, is destined to rule the Kurus for sixty years.

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Here again we find that both traditions, the eastern branch of India and the western branch of Greece, (later influencing Rome), contain this idea of ultimate destruction of an entire line being prevented by one man who will save the race and bring them future prosperity. Though the Iliad itself does not explore Aeneas' fate, and we only find that story much later on in Virgil's Aeneid, the Iliad does mention the prophecy of Poseidon which states that Aeneas will continue his line and rule the Trojans in times to come.

*μόριμον δέ οἱ ἔστ' ἀλέασθαι, .....  
νῦν δὲ δὴ Αἰνεῖας βίη Τρώεσσιν ἀνάξει  
καὶ παίδων παῖδες, τοί κεν μετόπισθε γένωνται. (20.302-7)*

'It is fated that he should survive, ....and now the mighty Aineias will be king over the Trojans, and his children's children born in the future.'

This shows us that this theme was already realized and accounted for within the Iliad itself. So we see that while some parallels may only be concerned with small details such as the omen of a bird, or a prophetic dream which comes too late, we can also discern elements of the basic framework which underlies the epics themselves.

Overall however, the Indian apocalyptic account of the massacre at night develops into the final solution of the war, showing similarities to the destruction of Troy. When compared to the Iliad, far from giving us cause for doubt as to its common origin, it rather goes to prove the flexibility of the oral tradition and its ability to be moulded to seemingly infinite situations.

We thus see many correspondences between the tales. While each epic has clearly dealt with the theme very differently, the composition of the night raid shares many common elements. This suggests to me that both epics were taking a long-known legend and manipulating it to fit their needs. It is not, however, surprising to find divergence in style and development. The entire tone of the Mahābhārata is very different from that of the Iliad.

### **Further Parallels**

This is not the first time that the night raid story in the Iliad has been explored comparatively. Krenkel (1888: 27) and

Fries (1904: 235) saw parallels respectively in the Biblical stories of Gideon in Judges 7.10-15 and David in the Book of Samuel 26(6-12).

In these versions we again see a primary hero with a companion, but there are significant differences. In the book of Judges Gideon is told to attack his enemies the Midianites by god in the night. However Gideon takes the 300 men who had previously proved themselves worthy, and instead of attacking a sleeping enemy he and his men blow trumpets which makes the enemy flee in terror. The enemy is not sleeping, and there is no deceit involved.

In the Davidic account, which seems more comparable, his companion is Abishai, who suggests slaughtering the sleeping enemy. David however, refuses, although he does take Saul's spear and water jar as prizes.

The Greek and Indian versions thus have more direct points of comparison with each other than with the Jewish tales. Interestingly, the various versions diverge according to their purpose in the overall narrative and the conventions of each respective society.

The Greeks steal the famous horses, return to the camp and are praised by the rest of the Achaeans. They have won glory and of course, critically, prizes: the crucial physical manifestations of their success. So in this version of the night raid, though perhaps it is seen as an unexpected and unnecessary intrusion into the overall narrative of the Iliad, we see that the action still conforms to the values of the world in which it is set.

In the Mahābhārata we find less emphasis on material gain as an important symbol of victory. The world in which the Sauptikaparvan is set is concerned with dharma and sees virtue as its own reward, at least for the present, as the rewards it brings will come about in the next life. Aśvatthāman is motivated by revenge and the idea of fulfilling what is deserved rather than the pursuit of glory. For this reason the corresponding night raid in the Sauptikaparvan has different emphases, but they too are suitable for their context.

When studying the night raid motif without proper consideration of the Indian version we can only see part of the picture. Once we involve the Sauptikaparvan in the process, a broader heritage for the tale is revealed. Without it in mind it would be easy to assume, as some have, that the Greeks



borrowed a Semitic story. However, now that assumption seems less clear. It is entirely possible that the tale was Indo-European and, just as in the case of Alpamysh,<sup>4</sup> it spread to nearby cultures. Also, since Semitic ideas influenced other Near Eastern cultures, it was most likely a two way process, and so one could just as easily argue that the Semites borrowed the idea from the Indo-European cultures. We simply do not have strong enough evidence to decide with certainty.

If we look at the other possibility of borrowing due to much later access to the literature of other cultures, we find limited details from Herodotus (III: 98–105, VII: 65, 70, 86), or even the Indica of Ctesias (McCrindle 1882: Fragment I. 25 and Fragment I. 31), which includes outlandish tales of the red-headed and blue-eyed unicorn, and a tribe which had giant ears which reached as far as their elbows, while their great expanse covered their backs so both ears touched. All in all it presents a rather absurd picture of India.

From the little the Greeks knew of the Indians it would seem unlikely that their cultures had shared much information in the past. For this reason and from the bulk of comparative evidence that has been assembled over the years it seems the theory of inherited oral tradition is a definite possibility.

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<sup>4</sup>Zhirmunsky, (1966: 267–86), compares the Uzbek / Central Asian epic of Alpamysh with the Odyssey. Details of the Odyssey's archery competition are thought to have been borrowed and integrated into the Uzbek epic.

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