

A Still Undeciphered Text: How the scientific approach to the *Rigveda* would open up Indo-European Studies

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For Winfred Lehmann (1916-2007)

Part 1. The Problem and its History

The earliest surviving poetic anthology in an Indo-European language, to which the name *Rigveda* was given at a remote time in prehistoric India, remains largely undeciphered. This is not because Sanskrit scholars, whose preserve it has always been, are unaware of its importance; it is because they, like their ancient predecessors, believe that the poems are deliberately obscure, and therefore inherently indecipherable. Today's indologists, as modern scholars describe themselves, are convinced that where their translations do not make sense it is not because they are wrong: apparently meaningless and bizarre sequences of words are, they maintain, complex riddles deriving from primitive ritual procedures, which need to be explained by experts. As Stephanie Jamison puts it, "Many of the most obscure images and turns of phrase in the *Rig Veda* make sense as poetic realizations of specific ritual activities [...] every apparent barbarity in syntax, in word choice, in imagery is deliberate and a demonstration of skill whose motivation I must seek." (2000: 7, 9)

Not surprisingly, the interpretation of this substantial body of poetry, which long predates the work of Homer, has become a minority concern. It is the exclusive province of a handful of specialist scholars within the field of Sanskrit studies, whose detailed knowledge of ancient ritual praxis comes from a mass of derivative texts known loosely as the Veda, or 'knowledge, (ritual) lore'.

In other words, the *Rigveda* has returned to much the same position that it occupied in India through the millennia, when it was a closely guarded secret held by a priestly elite, without whose exegesis it could not be understood. It was not always so. When western scholars first discovered this ancient

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poetry, their approach was different. Where the poems appeared not to make sense scholars wondered if the interpretations that had been handed down to them by native tradition might be incorrect. Nineteenth-century linguists thought that they could apply scientific methods of decipherment – primarily, the comparison of all the contexts in which a word occurs – to discover meanings that had become lost over time. They suspected that they could do without the mediation of the multitude of native glosses and commentaries. Modern indologists, however, are much more focused on the importance of the Indian tradition, and take a different view. “Early scholars were confident – to modern eyes, overconfident – of their ability to discover ‘original’ meanings through philological acumen unmediated by native gloss and comment... we are today, on the one hand, less confident of our ability to recover ‘original’ meanings of ancient documents and, on the other, more aware of the importance of the history of the reception, understanding, and interpretation of texts within the native traditions” (Olivelle 1998: 173)¹

The history of the interpretation of ancient texts undoubtedly has its own particular value and interest. But nineteenth-century scholars had very soon reached the conclusion that, when it came to understanding the poems of the *Rigveda*, native tradition was entirely misleading. In the introduction to the seven-volume *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch* published in St. Petersburg between 1855 and 1875, the German lexicographer Rudolph Roth had made a point of stressing that, although the authors of the commentaries might throw useful light on later theological works, when it came to the songs of the most ancient poets they were “untaugliche Führer” ‘unfit guides’ (Böhtlingk and Roth 1855-75: v). The poems stood out as being of a very different nature. As the American William Dwight Whitney observed, the content of the poems “seems almost more Indo-European than Indian” (1873: 101), and the native commentators were very much at sea. The German linguist Theodor Benfey, writing in 1858, had been clear that “anyone who has carefully studied the Indian interpretations knows that absolutely no continuous tradition between the composition of the Vedas and their

¹These general remarks introduce a discussion of the textual transmission mediated by the commentators, with particular reference to the *Upaniṣads*.

explanation by Indian scholars can be assumed; that on the contrary, there must have been a long, uninterrupted break in tradition between the genuine poetic remains of Vedic antiquity and their interpretations” (1858: 1608).²

Benfey had already, quite by chance, scored a notable victory for nineteenth-century linguistics by coming up with the correct interpretation of the misunderstood word *svadhā* even *before* he was able to consult the text. In 1839, in his *Griechisches Wurzellexikon*, he had postulated the existence of an abstract compound *sva-dhā* (literally ‘self-placing’) in Sanskrit on the analogy of Greek *ἔθος*, *ἦθος* ‘custom, own nature’, from which English *ethics* ultimately derives (1839, 1842: I, 373 and II, 352). His working copy of the book, with marginal notes recording his thought processes, is preserved in the Bodleian Library. The formation and meaning of Rigvedic *svadhā* had been misunderstood by native scholars at a very early date, and the word was accorded an entirely different interpretation by the authors of the *Brāhmaṇas*, ‘sacrificial drink offering’.³ Early Indian scholars were not good at recognising sophisticated words of abstract meaning, and regularly assumed, when they didn’t understand them, that such words had a technical, ritual sense.

When, some years later, Max Müller undertook the considerable task of publishing the *Rigveda* from the manuscripts, he discovered numerous occurrences of the word *svadhā* in the abstract sense that had been postulated by Benfey. The discovery was highly gratifying for the man who was to become Oxford’s first Professor of Comparative Philology. He proclaimed Benfey’s postulation as a triumph for linguistic science: “its true meaning in many passages where native tradition had entirely misunderstood it, has really been restored by means of its etymological identification with the Greek *ἔθος* or *ἦθος*” (1869: 20).

Indologists however do not start with a clean slate, and

² “Wer die indischen Erklärungen sorgfältig studirt hat, der weiß, daß absolut keine continuirliche Tradition zwischen der Abfassung der Veden und ihrer Erklärung durch indische Gelehrte anzunehmen ist, daß im Gegentheil zwischen den echten poetischen Ueberresten des vedischen Alterthumes und ihrer Erklärung ein langdauernder Bruch der Tradition existirt haben muß.”

³Böhtlingk and Roth refer to the *Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa*: “Im Ritual *eine gewöhnliche Schmalzspende*, oft nur *ein Rest des Havis* TBr. Comm. 2, 665,19”; ‘In the ritual a usual offering of melted fat, often just the leftovers of the oblation’.

the influence of native tradition is tenacious. Even Max Müller had continued to apply a ritual interpretation of *svadhā* in a number of passages, as for example its occurrence at 2.35.7, and the three occurrences of the word in 10.15 (1869: 23-24). Arthur Macdonell corrects the first of these in his *Vedic Reader for Students* (1917: 72), but not the second (1917: 178 & 185). Hermann Grassmann in his concordance had done the reverse (1873: 1624).⁴ Manfred Mayrhofer, in his recent dictionary of Old Indo-Aryan (1992-1996), still lists *svadhā* as having these two very different meanings in the *Rigveda*. But the ritual interpretation is simply an inheritance, and a highly misleading one.⁵ The misunderstanding clearly dates from the earliest period, as, unlike other *sva-* ('self-') compounds, the word is left undivided, in all its occurrences, by the Pada text. The implications of this are far-reaching. Scholarship can have faith in the careful oral transmission of the poems, but not necessarily in the way in which they were first interpreted, and then, much later, written down.⁶

Max Müller's work in publishing, for the first time, the complete text of the *Rigveda* as first collected and edited perhaps around 1000 BC (all dating in early India remains uncertain) was valued as much in Indian scholarly circles as it was in the west. The Committee of the Ādi Brahma Samāj wrote to him on its completion: "By publishing the Rig-Veda at a time when Vedic learning has by some sad fatality become almost extinct in the land of its birth, you have conferred a boon upon us Hindus, for which we cannot but be eternally grateful." (Max Müller 1883: 163). This paper, in discussing the influence of the native tradition on modern Rigvedic

⁴Grassmann lists two separate words (*sva-dhā* and the traditional *svadhā*), continuing to assign the ritual interpretation to five passages (1.144.2, 1.168.9, 1.176.2, 2.35.7, 10.157.5).

⁵ The traditional interpretation can be dispensed with for all Rigvedic occurrences. In all but one of Grassmann's five 'ritual' contexts the word is translated according to Benfey's etymology by Geldner (1951). In the remaining passage (1.176.2) Geldner leaves the word untranslated, but it had already been explained as 'custom' by Bloomfield (1917: 17). For the mass of references in later Vedic texts to "eine Schmalzspende für die Ahnen" see Mylius (1995: 139).

⁶On the misreading at 1.70.7 of *carātham* 'moving' as two words, *ca rātham* 'and a chariot' (?) (see Thomson and Slocum 2006b, Introduction), Max Müller wrote: "[t]he very mistake is instructive, as showing us the kind of misapprehension to which the collectors of the Vedic text were liable" (1891: lxxiv).

scholarship, will suggest an explanation for why it had become almost extinct in India by the middle of the nineteenth century (see the end of Part 1, The Process of Disentanglement).

The chair of Comparative Philology was created for Max Müller in 1868. But if the electoral system of Oxford professors in the middle of the nineteenth century had been different, and Max Müller had instead been appointed to the Boden chair of Sanskrit which had fallen vacant eight years before, western Sanskrit scholarship might have taken an entirely different course. Colonel Boden's bequest, however, had stipulated that the main aim in teaching Sanskrit in the west should be to make progress in converting the heathen of India. This, it was argued at the 1860 election, would best be achieved by focusing on the later, Classical language and the texts with which Indians were familiar. Classical Sanskrit, with its much-simplified verbal system and long compounded nominal forms designed to avoid the necessity for inflexion, is quite different from the highly inflected ancient form of the language in which Max Müller was the acknowledged expert – expertise which had led him, and others, to assume that he was the obvious candidate for the Oxford chair. A handbill (Bodleian MS. Eng. c. 2807) distributed towards the end of the vigorous campaign that took place must however have told him that the writing was on the wall:

The Professorship is not for Oxford alone.
It is not for 'The Continent and America'.
It is for India.
It is for Christianity.

A Classical Sanskrit scholar, Monier Williams, was appointed in 1860 to the Boden chair. The creation of the chair of Comparative Philology for Max Müller eight years later was some compensation for the disappointment, but the work involved took him away from his Ancient Sanskrit studies (see Macdonell 1901: 19-20).

Most Sanskrit scholars today are, like Monier Williams, primarily concerned with the later language. In the autumn of 2006, when the Cambridge University administration decided in its wisdom that undergraduate Sanskrit courses were no longer to be taught, the concern of the head of department,

as expressed to *The Times of India* (12th October) at least, was not for the future of early Indo-European studies, but that when he retires “Cambridge may be left with no one to teach this liturgical language of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism”. And knowledge of the later language is of little help when it comes to understanding the Rigvedic lexicon and its forms. The text remains as puzzling for today’s Sanskrit scholars as it was for their predecessors: already by the first century BC the scholiast Yāska was having to deal with a sceptic’s assertion that “the Vedic hymns have no meaning” (Sarup 1927: 16). As the Jesuit traveller Père Calmette wrote in 1733: “these books, of which the ablest doctors among them understand hardly half, which a Brahman would not venture to explain to us for fear of getting into trouble with his own caste, and of which a knowledge of Sanskrit does not yet give us the key, because they are written in a more ancient language, – these books, I say, are, in more than one sense, sealed books for us” (quoted by Max Müller 1871: I, 178).

The small and courageous band of indologists who have taken on the mantle of explaining the earliest Sanskrit text are, like their ancient predecessors, primarily concerned with hermeneutics. “As the Brāhmaṇas tell us so often, ‘the gods love the obscure’, and in investigating Vedic matters we must learn to cultivate at least that divine taste.” (Jamison 1991: 41) Stephanie Jamison explains how her sense of connection with the *Brāhmaṇas* came about. “I am not a poet: I can enjoy the talents and artistic sincerity of a Rig Vedic poet, but I cannot emulate it or imagine how it feels to be part of this creative tradition. I am a scholar (though not a theologian), and I can appreciate internally the intellectual effort and acuity employed to make sense of the religious traditions that confronted the scholar of the Brāhmaṇa period. I would hope to have in some measure the same controlled intelligence, the flashes of insight, and the empathy that these ancient scholars brought to bear on the tradition they were trying to explain, and I would also hope that they would appreciate the fact that this tradition remains an absorbing intellectual puzzle to this day.” (1991: xiv-xv). Professor Jamison’s respect for the attempts of the authors of the *Brāhmaṇas* to understand the poems is however entirely at odds with the views of the nineteenth-century linguists. W.D. Whitney, in particular, was forthright in his opinion of their “misapprehensions and

deliberate perversions of their text, their ready invention of tasteless and absurd legends to explain the allusions, real or fancied, which it contains, their often atrocious etymologies” (1873: 110). Max Müller had expressed the same point of view somewhat more mildly, when he described them as being “affected with a kind of voluntary blindness” (1859: 434).

The Outcome of the Hermeneutic Approach

What are the implications for interested scholars outside indology? As recommended in 2005 in the Blackwell *Companion to Ancient Epic* edited by Professor John Foley, “until Joel Brereton and Stephanie Jamison come out with their long-awaited translation of the entire *Rigveda*, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s 1981 Penguin edition of some of the major hymns is the place to start” (2005: 30). Although designated “for people, not for scholars” (1981: 11), Wendy Doniger’s versions are recommended and used by her indologist colleagues.⁷ Before the ax fell at Cambridge they were the only reading relating to the *Rigveda* suggested by the department to prospective undergraduates. For over a quarter of a century this small selection has represented the *Rigveda* for the English non-specialist reader.⁸ After numerous reprintings, a second edition came out in 2005.

Professor Doniger is however firmly in the tradition of explaining a text that she assures the reader is “meant to puzzle” (1981: 15). Here remains, for example, the traditional misunderstanding of *svadhā*, among a host of others of a similar kind. The word has an entry in her index: “Svadhā, a sacrificial drink” (1981: 341). Her extensive commentaries are permeated by enigmatic glosses “to allay the reader’s suspicion that something important may be missing or that something is wrong with the verse” (1981: 15). The purpose of her glosses is to reassure the reader that the interpretation that she gives, however bizarre, is correct. The note she gives to the

⁷Frits Staal, for example, acknowledges her help, together with that of the Yale Professor of Sanskrit Stanley Insler, in translating passages from the *Rigveda* for his study of the Vedic fire ritual (Staal 1983: xxix).

⁸Karl Geldner’s German translation of the complete text, published posthumously in 1951 (he died in 1929), is the current scholarly standard. The French translation by Louis Renou (1955-1969) is respected, but incomplete. The most recent attempt into a modern language is into Russian (Elizarenkova 1989-1999), and the last complete translation into English appeared at the end of the nineteenth century (Griffith 1896-1897).

occurrence of the word *svadhā* in verses 30 and 38 of 1.164 is characteristic: “The dead one who ‘wanders with the sacrificial drink’ (30, 38; cf. 10.16.5) ... is the soul of the mortal (or of the mortal sun) whose wandering and rebirth are dependent on the enduring qualities of his nature” (1981: 75). Her appended bibliography refers to the writings of nineteenth-century linguists. But this is not to say that Doniger shares their approach. She lists (1981: 308) an 1892 article by Rudolph Roth on these same two verses, ‘Two Maxims about Body and Soul’, in which he takes an earlier translator, Martin Haug, severely to task for continuing to give the ancient ritual explanation of the word *svadhā* in 1.164. 30 and 38 – just as Doniger herself does, over a century later. And there is so little discernible meaning in the Penguin *Rigveda* that nobody appears to have noticed, in all the reprintings, that although this is how she ‘explains’ the two occurrences of the word *svadhā* in this poem, and although she cross-refers to 10.16.5 where she does indeed offer the translation ‘wanders with the sacrificial drink’ (1981: 49), her gloss to the word at 1.164 verses 30 and 38 is in fact unrelated to her translation, which follows Geldner (1981: 79, 80).

Will the long-awaited Brereton/Jamison translation be an improvement? In terms of scholarly care, undoubtedly. But not in terms of sense. As Stephanie Jamison made clear at the Eleventh UCLA Indo-European Conference at Los Angeles in 1999, the result of their care will be that the translation that they publish will be a “much less fluent, readable, and accessible one for the general reader” (2000: 8). Here, as a foretaste, is a suggested translation of two verses⁹ from a recent article by Professor Brereton: “These dappled (cows) yield ghee (and) the milk-mix for you, Indra, / (and also) this, (a milk-mix) of truth, (since they are) swelling (with truth),/ - (they, the) fruitful (cows), that have made you (their) new-born by (their) mouth, (are) around (you?) like foundations (around) the sun” (2004: 470). Despite all Brereton’s supplied words, here in brackets, the meaning is distinctly elusive, as he

⁹ *imās ta indra pīśnayo*
ghṛtām duhata āśīram
enām ṛtāsya pīpyūsiḥ

yā indra prasūvas tuvā
āsā gārbham ācakrīran
pāri dhārmeva sūriyam (8.6. 19 & 20)

is fully aware: “With the understanding that any interpretation of this verse is a risky enterprise, I understand it in the following way. The insights embedded in the hymns are the ‘dappled’ and ‘fruitful’ cows... ‘Their mouth’ is the mouth of a cow licking clean a new-born calf, and the mouth of the priest who recites the hymns.”

Professor Brereton does not question that his translation is correct: the difficulty that he perceives is how to interpret it. But is ‘interpretation’ what is primarily required here? The cows, for example, have no textual authority, in these two verses or in adjacent verses – they are all supplied. There are many feminine adjectives in the *Rigveda* that are traditionally understood to describe female animals, cows being a favourite choice (see Part 2). But at the bottom of the very page quoted above Brereton explains the feminine adjective *prasūvas* “fruitful” in another passage, 2.13.7, quite differently, not as ‘cows’ but as ‘plants’ (2004: 470). Similarly, the instrumental form *āsā*, which Brereton translates literally, and perplexingly, “by mouth”, is usually adverbial in the *Rigveda*, as Grassmann had observed in 1873: ‘As an independent noun it occurs only in the abl. and the instr., and in fact almost always in a purely adverbial sense’¹⁰ (1873: 190, and column 1754 for his adverbial translation of *āsā* in this passage). The word is related to Latin *os*, and Böhtlingk and Roth had drawn attention to the close parallel with Latin *coram* (*com-* + *os*) ‘face to face’ (1855-1875). Professor Mayrhofer suggests the translation “vor Angesicht, sichtbarlich”, ‘in the face of, visibly’ for *āsā*. This would make much easier sense, and to ignore it seems reminiscent of the ‘kind of voluntary blindness’ that Max Müller found to be afflicting the *Brāhmaṇas*. How compelling, then, is the translation that Professor Brereton gives, requiring such a tortuous interpretation?¹¹ As with Wendy Doniger’s gloss on *svadhā* at 1.164, 30 and 38, the commentary does not serve to make the translation any more convincing; what both, however, importantly do is stress that Professors Brereton and Doniger have few doubts about the authority of the strange translations that they offer.

¹⁰ “Als selbständiges Nomen kommt es nur im Abl. und Instr., und zwar fast nur in rein adverbialer Bedeutung vor.” The abstract meaning of *āsā* in the *Rigveda* had been noticed as early as 1866 by the Edinburgh scholar John Muir (1866: 328).

¹¹ For the ritual translation ‘milk-mix’ (?) for *āsūr* see Thomson 2005b: 52-54.

Oxford's department of Sanskrit is in a happier state than the beleaguered Cambridge department, and has recently appointed a new professor to the Boden chair. Christopher Minkowski, in his inaugural lecture in March 2006, set himself the question "what should the study of Sanskrit at Oxford be for?" (2006: 3). The question is not, he hastens to add, a "rhetorical shadow cast by the upraised budgetary axe"; he asks it because it is useful for all scholars to reflect on the part their discipline can play in the work of the university as a whole. Professor Minkowski ably defends the study of Classical Sanskrit on the basis of today's requirement for global understanding, at the same time referring to the need for "making headway against the enormous mass of unexamined manuscript material, before this material is lost to worms, mildew, and other hazards." (2006: 18). But he makes no mention of the ancient vernacular language of the *Rigveda*, with its primary importance for archaeologists, linguists, and historians of world literature.

Minkowski does however refer to the interpretation of the *Rigveda* in a forthcoming paper, *Nilakaṇṭha Caturdhara and the genre of Mantrarahasyaprakāśikā*, first read at a Vedic conference in 1999. The seventeenth-century brahmin Nilakaṇṭha, a commentator on the Sanskrit epic, had attempted in his *Mantrarahasyaprakāśikā* – the length of the compound is typical of Classical Sanskrit – to find predictions in Rigvedic verses of stories that first occur in the later epics. In his paper Professor Minkowski suggests that there may yet be a parallel between Nilakaṇṭha's admittedly misguided attempt and the struggle of today's Vedic scholars to find meaning in the poems. "A student in a class of mine once pointed out that the *Rigveda* will probably always be the darling of Vedists exactly because it is just understandable enough to look solvable and just hard enough never finally to be so." Professor Minkowski, it appears, does not believe the text is decipherable. His final paragraph describes, and sanctions, "the possibility without conclusion that a future reader of the *Rgveda* might have glimmering after glimmering of interpretative notions, flashes of comprehension like distant summer lightning, and occasionally, the torrential brainstorm of interpretative insight. And long may the brainstorms rage." (1999: 30)

The Influence of the Veda

Why are today's indologists resigned to being unable to decipher the *Rigveda*? The Indian scholastic tradition has ensured that we have unparalleled confidence in the oral transmission of the text. But 'flashes of comprehension like distant summer lightning' are a long way from the scientific techniques of decipherment which were already in the nineteenth century being recommended as "well-established and tested methods of modern critical research" (Whitney 1873: 132). Why do modern methods of critical research fail? And fail they certainly do. As a Cambridge linguist wrote in 2000 in response to a paper of mine on the word *vidátha*: "Having at times tried to establish word-meanings in Vedic from comparison of passages I know how difficult and frustrating the exercise can be. As to the question of getting to the true meaning of the Veda, I am afraid that I remain among the pessimists."

This is an extraordinary state of affairs. We have a text that, as Stephanie Jamison writes, "might as well have been generated by computer last week, without the years of unsung philological labor often required to put a text in half-way readable shape" (2000: 2), and yet modern scholars accept that, unlike any other text, it is simply not possible for us to discover its "true meaning". As Aurobindo Ghose wrote in the introduction to his book *On the Veda*, the scholar who makes the attempt "is not so much revealing the sense as hammering and forging rebellious material into some sort of sense and consistency." (1956: 5) Wendy Doniger expresses the frustration of Vedic scholars precisely: "one feels that the hymns themselves are mischievous translations into a 'foreign' language" (1981: 16).

Vedic scholarship may be right. A possible answer could be that these ancient lyrical poems are deliberately puzzling and inconsistent, mischievously designed to prevent those outside the cabal from being able to penetrate to their meaning. And if so modern scholars can be excused from devoting much attention to their study, which might still be construed in some quarters as a prying, hubristic activity. This was certainly how they were perceived through the centuries in India. As Père Calmette wrote in the eighteenth century, quoted above, "a Brahman would not venture to explain [them] to us for fear of getting into trouble with his own caste... these books, I say,

are, in more than one sense, sealed books for us.”

But for several years I have been arguing that there is a much more straightforward answer to the problem. There is an alternative explanation for the apparent indecipherability of these early Indo-European poems that, far from acting as a dissuasive to scholarly attention, would encourage and stimulate it.

The linguistic differences between the poems and the later works of the Veda have long been recognised. A notable example is the use of the particle *nā* ‘like’, which, though occurring well over a thousand times in the *Rigveda*, has almost entirely disappeared by the time of the *Atharvaveda*. E. Vernon Arnold, in the introduction to his historical analysis of Vedic grammar, describes the “broad gulf” that separates the language of even the latest of the poems from the prose of the *Brāhmaṇas* (1897: 205). Much of the archaic vocabulary of the *Rigveda* reappears in the later texts. But the word studies summarised below suggest that a significant proportion of this vocabulary was seriously misunderstood by the time of composition of the derivative texts and commentaries. Throughout the transmission of the text in prehistoric India these misinterpretations were so bolstered by the usage of the mass of dependent material that it was not possible for scholars brought up in that tradition to question them. And scholarly ‘comprehensiveness’ is returning modern western scholarship to much the same position. The *Rigveda* has the appearance of a rational text, of being, as Professor Minkowski’s student remarked, “just understandable enough to look solvable”. But with major pieces of the jigsaw puzzle firmly in the wrong place from the earliest times, the rest inevitably refuses to fit. The continuing belief that there is a single language that can be called ‘Vedic’, in other words, is crucially misleading.

The words ‘Veda’, and ‘Vedic’ have in fact always been used in two distinct senses in the west. Because of the significance of the *Rigveda* for Indo-European studies, these words were regularly used by nineteenth-century scholars to refer specifically to the earliest poems alone: this is the sense in which Max Müller was using the word when he called for “a critical study of the Veda” (1891: xxvii). As W.D. Whitney had explained, “The term *Veda*, literally ‘knowledge’, originally designates the whole immense mass of the earlier religious literature, metrical and prosaic... the collection of hymns

constituting the Rig-Veda proper, in [a] narrower sense, so far outranks the others in importance as to be, in our view, almost by itself *the Veda*" (1873: 101-102). But as modern scholars continue in the laborious task of editing more and more of the dependent texts and commentaries, "making headway", as urged by Minkowski, "against the enormous mass of unexamined manuscript material", the use of the words 'Veda' and 'Vedic' has shifted back again. Professor Minkowski, for example, suggests that scholars today have an advantage over Nīlakaṇṭha in the attempt to understand the *Rigveda* in having "access to more and more of (extant) Vedic literature in, at least in principle, better and better text-critical editions" (1999: 28). As the context makes clear, by the word 'Vedic' he is referring to the whole of the earlier material, from which, in this particular instance, the *Rigveda* itself is specifically excluded.

This imprecision of terminology is inevitably echoed by scholars in other fields. Whether the poets of the *Rigveda* were intrusive to the area they describe, the fertile valleys of the Indus and Sarasvati, is a matter of considerable interest to Indo-European scholars in general, and some of the points at issue will be discussed below (see Part 2, The Evidence of the *Rigveda*). In reviewing the question Edwin Bryant, in his even-handed survey of the debate published in 2001, concludes: "Everything hinges on the date of the Vedas" (2001: 238). This is the opening sentence of his twelfth chapter, entitled, slightly differently, *The date of the Veda*. So which date is the one on which everything hinges? The date of [all of] the Vedas? Or the date of 'the Veda' in Whitney's first sense – meaning the same thing, the "whole immense mass of the earlier religious literature, metrical and prosaic"? Or the date of 'the Veda' in Whitney's narrower sense, referring to the most important earliest poetry only? Bryant's concluding sentence suggests that it is the last of these: "Indigenists, then, must demonstrate that the Ṛgveda could be at least a thousand, fifteen hundred, or even two thousand years older than has been generally accepted." (2001: 239) Being clear about this is essential – not least because the traditional dating of the *Rigveda*, crucial to the debate, largely derives from its supposed temporal relationship with the rest of the 'Vedic' corpus.

Professor Bryant concludes, later in the same chapter, "One would have difficulty on philological grounds... in

placing the Ṛgveda too much earlier than the Atharvaveda, since the language of this text, although later, is not sufficiently different to warrant an interval of too many centuries.” (Bryant 2001: 247) The apparent similarity of the language of the derivative texts of the Veda has always misled scholars, as the examples in the next section will show.¹²

Test Cases

puroḷás

The word *puroḷás* is the Rigvedic form of later *puroḍāśa*, found from the *Atharvaveda* onwards.¹³ It has always been understood by Vedic scholars to have the specific ritual sense that *puroḍāśa* has, ‘sacrificial rice cake’. Monier-Williams’s¹⁴ definition is characteristically precise: “puro-ḍās (or -ḷás, nom. -ḷás), m. a mass of ground rice rounded into a kind of cake (usually divided into pieces, placed on receptacles; cf. *kapāla*) and offered as an oblation in fire, RV. &c. &c.”

This translation simply reduces most Rigvedic contexts from poetry to ritualism: “O Agni, attend to the sacrificial cake which is offered, which has stood for a day.” (Brereton 1985: 250, translating 3.28.3). But it causes major problems in others, as, for example, in 7.18.6, where the word appears to refer to a heroic figure. In verse 1.162.3, where it clearly describes a goat, Karl Geldner, whose translation made in the 1920s remains the current scholarly standard, explains, ‘3c is elliptical. *puroḷás* (the appetizer consisting of a flat cake of rice in the ritual, see A[tharva] Ve[da] 9, 6, 12...) is used here figuratively to describe the first-offered goat’.¹⁵ The clear evidence of the context does not lead him to question his conviction that *puroḷás* means ‘sacrificial rice cake’, as his footnote, firmly referring the reader to the authority of a later text, is at pains to make clear. Like Professors Doniger and Brereton in the examples quoted earlier, Geldner does not doubt the correctness of his translation, despite the fact that portraying a goat as a cake of rice is certainly alienating to the

¹²These four test cases originate in detailed word studies published over the last seven years.

¹³In the Rigvedic dialect *ḷ* stands in the place of *ḍ* between vowels.

¹⁴Monier Williams assumed the added surname “Monier” in 1887.

¹⁵“3c ist elliptisch. *puroḷás* (die in einem Reisfladen bestehende Vorspeise bei dem Opfer, vgl. A[tharva] V[eda]. 9, 6, 12 [...]) wird hier auf den zuerst geopfertem Bock übertragen.”

modern reader – an example of the ‘barbarity in imagery’ that Stephanie Jamison writes about, as quoted at the beginning of this paper.

Why are indologists convinced that translations of this kind *must* be correct? Why is it that, confronted by contexts in which the traditional interpretation fails to make sense, they adopt this convoluted approach, rather than subjecting the questionable interpretation to review? The answer lies, I suggest, in the vast accumulation of derivative material with which Vedic scholarship has to deal.

In the case of *puroḍāśa* the later material has been subjected to exhaustive study. Jan Gonda, in *Rice and Barley Offerings in the Veda*, refers to over forty texts in his discussion of the ritual uses of the ‘rice cake’. Joel Brereton’s review for the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* gives the flavour of the work. “This book is an examination of the offerings of *puroḍāśas*, rice cakes, prepared on pieces of earthenware (*kapālas*). Within the Vedic sacrificial system, these *puroḍāśas* form the principal offerings of *iṣṭi* rites.” (1990: 369) This ‘Vedic sacrificial system’ however has nothing to do with the earliest poems. Gonda’s only reference to the *Rigveda*, on the first page of the book, is to dismiss it as a source: “Mention of the *puroḍāś*¹⁶ is made in several hymns of the Ṛgveda, but no information is given on its preparation, pieces of pottery and other particulars” (1987: 1). Indeed: the chapters of Gonda’s book are arranged according to the numbers of *kapālas* ‘pieces of earthenware’ that are used to present the cakes. But the word *kapāla*, to which Monier-Williams cross-refers in his dictionary definition of *puroḍāś*, is later; it is not to be found in the *Rigveda*.

Brereton’s familiarity with the later ritual material makes him well qualified to criticise Gonda’s work when it comes to detail. Referring to the directives of the *Bhāradvāja* and *Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtras*, that the *puroḍāśas* should not be made as high, or as large, as other cakes, Brereton comments: “The issue of the shapes of the *puroḍāśa* and the *apūpa*, which was raised by the passage he cited at the beginning, is hardly considered” (1990: 370). Similarly, he observes that “Gonda paraphrases a rule that the *adhvaryu* should take one less portion from the cake than he took for the principal offering.

¹⁶Correctly *puroḍāś*, see footnote 13 above (and accented). Scholars more familiar with the later Vedic texts regularly misquote the Rigvedic forms.

In doing so, however, he never explains that that rule is given in this indirect manner because the number of portions taken for the principal offering is variable...” (1990: 370).

But none of this wearisome ritual prescriptiveness has anything to do with the earliest Indo-European poems. A review of all the contexts in which *puroḷāś* occurs shows that, in the *Rigveda*, the word is used simply in an abstract sense, to mean ‘fore-offering, first gift’ (Thomson 2005b). What constitutes the first gift varies: at 3.41.3 it is *brāhma* ‘prayers’. This translation makes sense: there is no need for puzzling explanations. And this is the meaning that the formation of the word, from *purās* ‘in front’ and $\sqrt{dās}$ ‘offer, worship’, clearly suggests.¹⁷ Although only study of the use of a word can determine its meaning, as with *svadhā*, western linguists would have been able to reach the correct interpretation of *puroḷāś* more quickly without having the *Rigveda*, together with its highly misleading inheritance, in front of them at all. In this case, contrary to what Professor Minkowski suggests, “access to more and more of (extant) Vedic literature” seems to have been far from an advantage for modern scholars.

The misunderstanding inevitably has repercussions for scholarship at large. The continuing belief that *puroḷāś* means ‘sacrificial rice cake’ in the *Rigveda* has not unreasonably been taken by some as an indication that its authors cultivated rice, although rice is otherwise absent from the poems: “[Rice] appears first (as *vrihi*) only in post-RV texts (AV, c. 1200 BCE), though it probably was an ingredient in the RV offering[s] *puroḷāśa* ‘rice cake’” (Witzel 1999: 26, giving the later, and unaccented, form of the word).¹⁸ It is perhaps for the same reason that Monier-Williams’s dictionary assumes that *vrihi* was in the Rigvedic vocabulary, despite the fact that it is, as he says, “not mentioned”: “rice, pl. grains of rice (not mentioned in RV., but in AV...) RV. &.”

vakṣānā

In the attempt to understand the poems scholars continue to turn for help to the later texts of the Veda, without which it is thought that there would be little chance

¹⁷The derivation is given in the *Altindische Grammatik* (*Ai. Gr.* 1930: 246): “*puroḷāś*-m. ‘Opferkuchen’ eig[entlich ‘originally’]. ‘Vorhuldigung’”.

¹⁸Elsewhere Witzel gives the word, also incorrectly, as *puroḷāśa*, with reference to *Rigveda* 8.78.1 (1997: 265 note 30).

of understanding them at all. Catharina Kiehnle, in a study published in 1979, takes passages from the *Atharvaveda* as her starting point in the attempt to identify the precise meaning of the word *vakṣāṇā*. As Renou had written in 1928, “auprès du Rgveda, l’Atharvaveda est un document d’une parfaite limpidité” (1928: 35). But the usage of the word in the *Atharvaveda* is different from its Rigvedic usage. Indeed, it appears that the compilers of the later Vedic text simply did not understand what the word meant. The Rigvedic verse 1.32.1, describing the heroic exploits of the god Indra, is quoted in *AVP*¹⁹ 13.6.1 with only one variation: the noun *vakṣāṇā* is given as a participle, *vakṣamāṇā*, making nonsense of the verse and destroying the metre (see Kiehnle 1979: 108). This suggests that the later editors of the *Atharvaveda* were not only unclear about the meaning of *vakṣāṇā*, but also about its grammatical form and function.

Under the influence of the later text the word *vakṣāṇā* has always been believed to describe a part of the body. Kiehnle’s predecessor, Richard Pischel, had concluded that it was best translated ‘womb’. But he remained puzzled, not least because of the consistently plural form of the word. ‘A number of the contexts in which *vakṣāṇās* occurs are unfortunately so unclear that it is difficult to lay hold of the underlying meaning.’ (Pischel and Geldner 1889-1901: I, 174).²⁰ Kiehnle reaches a slightly different conclusion, that the basic sense of *vakṣāṇā* is ‘entrails, belly’. But she, too, finds the underlying meaning hard to grasp. “I confess that I have not succeeded in finding a solution, as even considering the Vedic contexts one by one it is not possible to figure out with any degree of certainty in what way the body part ‘belly’ was perceived”²¹(1979: 102-103). This is an illustration of how ‘difficult and frustrating’ the attempt to establish word meanings in Vedic remains for scholars.

A survey of the occurrences of the word *vakṣāṇā* in the *Rigveda*, setting aside the later usage, reveals an entirely different, and significant, meaning, ‘fertile place’, used in the

¹⁹The *Paippalāda* recension of the *Atharvaveda*.

²⁰“Ein Teil der Stellen, in denen *vakṣāṇās* vorkommt, ist leider sehr dunkel, so dass es schwer ist, die Grundbedeutung festzustellen.”

²¹“Es ist mir zwar nicht gelungen, eine Lösung zu finden, denn auch wenn man die vedischen Stellen in Einzelnen durchsieht, ist nicht auszumachen, unter welchem Aspekt der Körperteil ‘Bauch’, um den es sich mit einiger Sicherheit handelt, gesehen wurde.”

plural to mean ‘fertile lands’ (Thomson 2004). This not only makes sense, but its plural form, which was a problem for the ‘womb’ interpretation advocated by Pischel, is explained. Its apparent formation, from the verbal root $\sqrt{vakṣ}$ ‘grow’, which in turn posed a problem for the ‘entrails, belly’ interpretation, follows the regular pattern of Sanskrit nominal formation.²²

The attempt to fit some kind of body part, albeit again as bizarre imagery, into a variety of topological contexts leads to a wide range of translations: ‘bellies’ (Geldner, Elizarenkova, Doniger), ‘udders’ (Geldner, Elizarenkova and Renou) and ‘entrails’ (primarily Renou), – to which Geldner adds ‘flanks (of the mountains)’ and Elizarenkova ‘bowels (of the earth)’ for 1.32.1, the passage that had perplexed the Atharvavedic editors. This imprecision presupposes that the ancient poets were remarkably vague about anatomy. And Geldner’s translation ‘at (her) breasts’ for the locative plural *vakṣāṇāsu* at 10.27.16 again raises the issue of number: as Kiehnle points out (1979: 103) the form should then surely be dual. The same translation is however still being offered by Stephanie Jamison for *vakṣāṇāsu* in this passage four years later (1983: 51).

Finally, as with *puroḷās*, the traditional misunderstanding presents an insuperable problem in some contexts. At 5.19.5 the god Agni is described as *vakṣāṇesthā* ‘being in a *vakṣāṇā*’ (the suffix *-sthā* does not mean literally ‘standing’; compare *rocanasthā* ‘being in the sphere of light’, another description of Agni). Renou, departing from his usual ‘entrails’ here, translates ‘hollow’, “(o Agni) qui te tiens dans le creux!”, and Karl Hoffmann agrees: “der du in der Höhlung stehest” (1975-1976: 376). In the most recent attempt at a complete translation, into Russian, Tat’iana Elizarenkova simply leaves the problematic compound untranslated, noting “temny” ‘obscure’. Similarly, at 10.28.8, where the gods are described as *nī sudrūvaṃ dādhatō vakṣāṇāsu* ‘placing good wood in the *vakṣāṇās*’, Wendy Doniger offers ‘boxes’, straying some distance from the ‘bellies’ that she gives elsewhere. Her

²²The suffix *-ana* is appended to many verbal roots to form both nouns and adjectives: compare *jān-ana* ‘producer’ from $\sqrt{jān}$ ‘produce’, *cār-ana* ‘movement’ from \sqrt{car} ‘move’, *vac-ana* ‘speaking’ from \sqrt{vac} ‘speak’, and, like *vakṣāṇā* with feminine ending, *man-ana* ‘thought’ from \sqrt{man} ‘think’ (see Thomson and Slocum 2006a: §49). With ‘entrails’ in mind Mayrhofer had proposed, following Kiehnle, an alternative derivation from $\sqrt{vañc}$ ‘bend’.

footnote makes no mention of the inconsistency, but is again designed to reassure the reader that the translation must be right: “they take [it] home in boxes on wagons.” (1981: 147-148). This somewhat fanciful note suggests that she may again be following Geldner, who translates “(Wagen)inneren”, ‘(wagon)-interiors’ at this point, once more with reference to a later Vedic text.

grāvan

Earlier in this paper I gave the example of how Vedic tradition had misunderstood the abstract word *svadhā* to mean a kind of sacrificial drink. Some of the most alienating passages in the *Rigveda* continue to be thought to relate to another sacrificial drink, made from what is understood to be a plant called *sōma*, “which, strangely, later scholars have not identified precisely” (Renfrew 1987: 179). This ‘sacrificial drink’ is prepared, the Veda tells us, by priests pressing out the juice of the plant with stones. The usual word for this ‘stone’ is *grāvan*. Klaus Mylius gives the Vedic definition in his 1995 dictionary: ‘*grāvan* m, pressing-stone for the soma stalk; at the time of the RV and AV there were only two, later four or five.’²³ Monier-Williams’s definition is similar: “Grāvan, m, a stone for pressing out the Soma (originally 2 were used, RV. ii,39,1; later on 4 [Śaṅkh. Brāhmaṇa xxix, 1] or 5 [Sch. on Ś. Brāhmaṇa &c.]”.

But only Indian tradition leads us to a translation that is ‘without any apparent verbal or nominal basis’ (*Ai. Gr.* 1954: 902-903).²⁴ A review of the fifty-six contexts in the *Rigveda* in which this masculine word occurs suggests an entirely different interpretation (Thomson 2001b). In the concluding verse of 1.83 the *grāvan* is described as *kārūr ukthīyas* ‘a poet worthy of praise’; *grāvans* are *vīprās* ‘inspired’ at 8.42.4 and draw the gods *dhībhīs* ‘with thoughts’; and in 10.76.6 *grāvāno vācā divītā divīmatā*, they are ‘of radiant voice reaching up to the sky’. They consistently exhibit a range of other human characteristics (being friendly, standing up), but what *grāvans* do, above all, in the *Rigveda* is speak and sing.²⁵ They have

²³ “*grāvan* m, Preßstein für die Somastengel; zur des Zeit des RV und AV waren es nūr zwei, später vier oder fünf.”

²⁴ “[O]hne deutliche verbale oder nominale Grundlage”.

²⁵ They speak and sing in verses 1.135.7, 2.39.1, 5.31.12, 5.37.2, 8.34.2, 9.67.19, 10.36.4, 10.94.1; they exhibit other human characteristics at 6.51.14, 10.85.4,

none of the characteristics of stones – they are not heavy or light, large or small, rough or smooth, hard, round, given or taken, found, cleaned, or polished. And, in spite of the tradition of the Veda, reflected in the definitions of both Mylius and Monier-Williams quoted above, there are never two of them.²⁶

Whatever the meaning assigned by later ritual texts to the word *grāvan*, in the *Rigveda* it describes a man – a man whose primary role is singing and praising. Translating the word as the contexts dictate rather than according to theory also suggests for the first time a possible verbal derivation, from the root \sqrt{gr} ‘sing’. I am grateful to Winfred Lehmann for revising his previous etymology (Lehmann 1986: 44)²⁷ on the basis of my word study, and for suggesting parallel Sanskrit formations: “Among other evidence, the masculine ‘inherited nouns’ made with *-van-*, refer to animate beings, as in those cited in Wackernagel’s *Ai.Gr.* II 903, e.g. *āthar-van-* ‘priest’. And the same is true of the masculines created in Indic, e.g. *sātvan-* ‘warrior’.”²⁸

tiróahnyam

There is a large vocabulary that is believed to have a specific ritual sense relating to the preparation of ‘soma’, of which the minor word *tiróahnyam*, occurring eight times in the *Rigveda* and only in this accusative form, is an example. It has always been understood to be the accusative singular of an adjective **tiróahnya*, a compounded form of *tirás* ‘through, across’ and *āhan* ‘day’. The explanation is given in one of the commentaries, as quoted by Hillebrandt: ‘The commentary to Kātyāyana states very precisely what is to be understood by Soma tiroahnya; its explanation corresponds with what we can understand from the word itself; it is Soma pressed the day before... This is in accordance with the ṚV’ (Hillebrandt 1927-29: II, 475-6).²⁹

and 10.92.15; and they are compared to other men, usually singers, at 4.3.3, 5.36.4, 9.113.6, 10.94.2 and 10.108.11.

²⁶Or indeed any specified number. The isolated occurrence of the dual at 2.39.1, to which Monier-Williams refers, derives solely from the context, as both Geldner and Renou comment in their notes; it is “unwesentlich” ‘not significant’ (Hillebrandt 1927-29: II, 408).

²⁷The supposed relationship with Welsh *breuan*, Breton *breo* ‘mill’ etc.

²⁸*Pers. comm.* 2002.

²⁹“Der Kommentar zu Kātyāyana sagt sehr genau, was unter Soma tiroahnya zu

But on the contrary, this very precise ritual definition is not in accordance with the *Rigveda*. In the third and sixth verses of 3.28, for example, the only noun with which the supposed adjective could possibly agree is the word *puroḷāś*, discussed above. I have already quoted Joel Brereton's translation of 3.28.3, in which he takes the 'day-olddness' to be transferred to the 'cake': "O Agni, attend to the sacrificial cake which is offered, which has stood for a day" (1985: 250).

Even more problematically, in three consecutive verses of 8.35 there is no noun with which the supposed adjective can agree at all. The verses are parallel in structure, the verb in the first line varying from verse to verse. Verses 20 and 21 contain striking imagery (quotations from the *Rigveda* are taken from van Nooten and Holland's metrically restored text):

átr̥er iva śṛṇutam pūrviyástutim
As-of-Atri, hear the earliest-praise...
áśvinā tiróahnyam
O-Aśvins, *tiróahnyam* (19)

sárgāṁ iva sṛjatam suṣtutír úpa
Like-floods, shed-forth the eulogies (*preverb*)...
áśvinā tiróahnyam
O-Aśvins, *tiróahnyam* (20)

raśmīm̐r iva yachatam adhvarām̐ úpa
Like reins, reach-out-to the holy-offices (*preverb*)...
áśvinā tiróahnyam
O-Aśvins, *tiróahnyam* (21)

For Vedic scholars the repeated last line of these three verses simply doesn't make sense: 'O Aśvins – yesterday's!'. All translators therefore supply both the noun "soma" to all three lines, and a verb to govern it, "drink".³⁰ This is another necessary resort for the approach of Vedic scholarship. "It is discouragingly common to find passages in the *Rig Veda* that do not make sense without the silent supplying of additional material" (Jamison 2000: 13).

verstehen ist; seine Erklärung entspricht der, die man aus dem Wort selbst entnehmen kann; es ist Tags zuvor gepresster Soma... das stimmt mit dem RV überein."

³⁰"(Peite somu,) (brodiashchego) vtorye sutki, o Ashviny!" (Elizarenkova); "(trinket) den gestrigen (Soma), o Aśvin!" (Geldner); and, silently, "drink juice, O Aśvins, three days old" (Griffith).

Study of the contexts in which *tiróahnyam* occurs in the *Rigveda* shows that the ancient belief that the word was an adjective describing a sacrificial drink was wrong. The word is not an adjective at all, but a temporal adverb, like *náktam* ‘by night’, meaning ‘throughout the day’ (Thomson 2005a). It has no specific ritual sense. The syntactic problems that the misunderstanding imposes on the text necessitate significant ‘hammering and forging of rebellious material’. And in the three verses of 8.35 quoted above, it not only presupposes an improbably defective text, it turns lyrical song into mumbo-jumbo. But the ritual interpretation is promulgated in a vast accumulation of later texts.³¹

The Process of Disentanglement

The example given above of the supposed ‘barbarity in syntax’ that Stephanie Jamison finds in the text is far from atypical. The interpretations of Vedic tradition regularly compel scholars to conclude that the text is hopelessly deficient in sense. My final example is the first verse of 8.78, and it relates not only to the word *puroḷás* already discussed, but also to *ándhas*, another word that is traditionally believed to belong to the technical vocabulary of sacrificial drink offerings.

The poem, 8.78, petitions Indra for gifts, and the first three verses are again parallel. The poet’s requests are various, but ‘bring to us’ is repeated in each verse, supplying the parallel structure. That *puroḷás* ‘the first gift’ heads the list at the opening of the first verse now makes sense. But the traditional interpretation of the two words *puroḷás* and *ándhas* is given in the interlinear gloss below to show the problem that this first line poses for Vedic scholarship.

<i>puroḷásam</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>ándhasa</i>
The ‘rice cake’	to-us,	of-‘soma-juice’(?)
<i>índra</i>	<i>sahásram</i>	<i>á bhara</i>
Indra,	a thousand	bring
<i>śatá</i>	<i>ca</i>	<i>śūra gónām</i>
Hundreds	also,	hero,
		of-cattle

‘The rice cake of soma juice’ could be explained, as in the goat

³¹ Among others, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, the *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa*, *Lāṭyāyana’s Sūtra*, and the *Kātyāyana Śrauta Sūtra*.

passage described earlier, as an example of bizarre Rigvedic imagery reflecting ritual practice. But there is an additional, and insurmountable, problem here for Vedic scholars. The tradition of the Veda dictates that *puroḷās* ‘rice cake’ and *āndhas* ‘soma juice’ are sacrificial offerings made by the poets to the gods. They cannot therefore be gifts sought by a poet from one.

To get round this, both Geldner and Elizarenkova supply an additional verb to the first line “(Koste)” ‘enjoy’ / “(Priniav)” ‘take’.³² In doing so the parallel poetic structure of the first three verses is destroyed. And to resolve the difficulty of the apparently dependent word *āndhasas*, a form that can only be genitive or ablative, both resort once more to the assumption of ‘barbarity in syntax’, rendering it as if it were dative (“zum Somatrank” / “k soku (somy)”). In other words, what the text itself says, its poetic structure, and the highly regular grammar and syntax of Ancient Sanskrit, are all sacrificed on the altar of the assumed ritual meaning.

I have used the metaphor of a jigsaw with pieces in the wrong place earlier in this paper, and previously as the title of a review article (Thomson 2001a). The analogy of a crossword puzzle is also valid. If a long clue is filled in incorrectly at the beginning it will almost inevitably lead to guesses at intersecting clues being wrong. If correct, however, it sets the solver onto the right track with others. Putting a mistaken answer right helps others to fall into place. My study of the word *puroḷās* arose out of a much larger study of the word *vidātha*. The two words occur together at 3.28.4. I have argued that this important word does not mean ‘something like ceremonial allotment’,³³ but, as is borne out by its regular formation, ‘knowledge, wise judgement’.³⁴ My reconsideration

³²“(Koste) unseren Reiskuchen zum Somatrank; Indra, bring Tausend und Hunderte von Kühen mit, o Held!”; “(Priniav) nashu zhertvennyu lepushku k soku (somy), O Indra, prinesi tysiachu I sotni korov, o geroi!”

³³“[V]ed. Wort von umstrittener Übersetzung; vielleicht dem Bereich von ‘(festliche) Zuteilung’ angehörig.” (Mayrhofer). A range of interpretations along these lines are offered for this word, and various attempts then to explain its formation. Mayrhofer refers to Harold Bailey’s translation ‘distribution place’, but not to Stanley Insler’s ‘service’ (Insler 1975: 200). The word *vidātha* occurs most frequently in the locative, a case that was regularly taken by early editors to indicate some kind of rite.

³⁴The root √*vid* ‘know’ with suffix *-tha* and connecting vowel. For the many parallel formations see Thomson and Slocum 2006a: §49.

of the Vedic interpretation of *tiróahnyam*, in the same way, emerged from the study of *puroḷás*. To use another metaphor, pulling any thread clear of the tangle helps others to loosen.

The verse discussed above, 8.78.1, suggests that the traditional understanding of the word *ándhas* similarly needs review. Vedic scholarship has always understood that there are two identical neuter nouns in the *Rigveda*, *ándhas* ‘darkness’ and *ándhas* ‘plant, soma plant, [also] juice of the plant’. But neither of these can accommodate, for example, the dual at 7.96.2, a verse addressed to the river Sarasvatī:

*ubhé yát te mahiná śubhre ándhasī
adhikṣiyánti pūravaḥ*

Since through your might, O bright one,
The Purus inhabit both *ándhasī*

Scholars without access to the text searching for geographical information in the *Rigveda* frequently quote this verse in Griffith’s translation, “the Pūrus dwell on (thy) two grassy banks”. But they are unaware that this translation, ‘grassy banks’, exists solely to fit this particular context. “Grassy bank” is not an interpretation of *ándhas* applicable in any of its other hundred or so occurrences. Geldner translates, “Since through your might the Pūrus dwell at both drinks”,³⁵ with a long footnote referring to later texts, and the translations of Renou and Elizarenkova are similar. But as Geldner confesses, ‘Although the Sarasvatī plays a part in the Sautrāmaṇī, it is difficult to make ritual fit into the Rigvedic context.’³⁶ Indeed it is.

Time devoted to the mass of later ritual texts and commentaries, in other words, is not just time that is *not* spent in the attempt to decipher the *Rigveda*. It buries the text. It misleads scholars. It reinforces the belief that these ancient Indo-European poems are unintelligible, inconsistent, banal and frequently absurd. Decipherment becomes impossible, and has ceased to be the objective. The handful of indologists who include the *Rigveda* in their Vedic researches are engaged in a very different pursuit, as quoted at the beginning of this

³⁵ “Da durch deine Macht die Pūru’s bei beiden Getränken wohnen”.

³⁶ “Obwohl die Sarasvatī eine Rolle in der Sautrāmaṇī spielt, ist das Ritual schwerlich in die R.V.-Stelle hineinzuziehen”.

paper: “Many of the most obscure images and turns of phrase in the *Rig Veda* make sense as poetic realizations of specific ritual activities [...] every apparent barbarity in syntax, in word choice, in imagery is deliberate and a demonstration of skill whose motivation I must seek.” (Jamison 2000: 7, 9).

But this is a potentially circular argument. In prehistoric India the incomprehensibility of this archaic material, together with its poetic form, made it ideally suited to ritual recitation by a priestly elite. Thought to be of divine origin, it was religiously preserved, from generation to generation, as a sacred mystery. Over time much of its unfamiliar vocabulary came to be understood as belonging in some way to the rites into which it had been incorporated. “The authors of the *Brāhmaṇas* evidently imagined that those ancient hymns were written simply for the sake of their sacrifices, and whatever interpretation they thought fit to assign to these acts, the same, they supposed, had to be borne out by the hymns.” (Max Müller 1859: 432)

For Max Müller, belief in the bizarre explanations of the *Brāhmaṇas* had “vitiating the whole system of Indian exegesis.” (ibid.) This, indeed, was the fatality that had rendered Rigvedic scholarship “almost extinct in the land of its birth”, as described in the letter from the Ādi Brahma Samāj quoted at the beginning of this paper.

Today’s scholars owe a significant debt of gratitude to their early Indian predecessors, whose attentions have preserved the text of the poems so faithfully. But the native scholastic tradition is a double-edged sword. If the *Rigveda* is to play its part in future Indo-European studies, ancient guesses about its subject matter and meaning need to be firmly set aside.

Part 2. The Evidence of the *Rigveda*

“Given its enigmatic style, the *Rig Veda* has very little direct evidence for *anything*.” (Jamison 2001: 303). The “enigmatic style” I suggest lies not in the original, but in translations that remain hopelessly entangled in early assumptions about ritual meaning. But the belief that the *Rigveda* “has very little direct evidence for anything” then completes the fatal circle: modern scholars are less and less concerned with looking at the poems themselves, and more inclined to turn for information to the later texts of the *Veda*.

Many important arguments that appear to derive from the *Rigveda* are in fact based on the later texts.

In 1987 Colin Renfrew, in his challenging book *Archaeology and Language: the Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, proposed a significantly earlier date than the consensus for the dispersal of the Indo-Europeans from their unknown homeland. This opened up the possibility that ancestors of the Rigvedic poets could have been already settled in the Indus Valley, the area that they describe in their poems. The theory that the great cities of the ancient Indus Civilisation came to their sudden end around 1900 BC as a result of invading Indo-Europeans – as put forward notably by Sir Mortimer Wheeler (1947: 78-82) – needed to be revised, as archaeology has turned up no evidence of invasion. Professor Renfrew concludes, after a careful reading of the *Rigveda* in the translations available to him: “As far as I can see there is nothing in the *Hymns of the Rigveda* which demonstrates that the Vedic-speaking population were intrusive to the area: this comes rather from a historical assumption about the ‘coming’ of the Indo-Europeans” (1987: 182).

Whether or not the authors of the *Rigveda* entered the Indus Valley from outside has become a subject around which debate rages, and the controversy is no stranger to these pages. It is not my concern to enter the lists. What I shall endeavour to show is that statements on both sides of the debate that appear to derive from the earliest Indo-European poems themselves may be misleading. I am focusing on assertions that have two essential ingredients. Firstly, they are made so emphatically, or repeated so frequently, that they are taken by scholars without access to the text as incontrovertible. And secondly, they refer specifically to the text. Generalized statements abound, but only if particular reference is made, either to passages in the *Rigveda* or to words in its vocabulary, is it possible to evaluate the evidence on which they are based.

Rigvedic ruins

In a recent publication edited by Edwin Bryant and Laurie Patton, *The Indo-Aryan Controversy*, scholars were provided with a forum in which to put forward their opposing arguments. Michael Witzel, the Wales Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard, is foremost in presenting the case that the poets came to the

area from outside, and his arguments from the *Rigveda* form a basis of evidence for the consensus view among western Indo-European scholars. Laurie Patton summarizes the arguments presented by each contributor to the book in an introductory chapter:

“Michael Witzel begins by examining the positive evidence for the scholarly views currently agreed upon by Indo-Europeanists. The *Rgveda* does not know of large cities but only ruins and forts; thus we can argue that the text is later than the disintegration of the cities.” (Bryant and Patton 2005: 10)

Professor Witzel’s argument that the *Rigveda* does not speak of cities but only of ruins has been repeated many times since 1992, when it appeared online in a joint publication with Stephanie Jamison. I am quoting an example in which he refers specifically to words in the text. “As the RV does not speak of cities but only of ruins (*armaka*), even larger ones ([*mahā*]-*vailasthāna*), we may suppose that the Indo-Aryans immigrated, or rather, gradually trickled in, tribe by tribe and clan by clan, after 1900 B.C.” (Witzel 1995: 3-4).

The lyrical poems of the *Rigveda* are devoted to singing praises to the gods, in return for which the gods provide the poets with protection and a fertile environment. It is not therefore necessarily to be expected that the *Rigveda* would contain regular references either to cities or to ruins. But to imagine that the words from which Professor Witzel draws such a major conclusion occur frequently in the 1,028 poems of the *Rigveda* would be wrong. The word *armaká* is the primary one here (“*mahāvailasthāna*” does not in fact occur), but it is found in only one place, the third verse of 1.133:

ávāsām maghavañ jahi
śárdho yātumátinām
vailasthānaké armaké
mahāvailasthe armaké

Fend off, gracious Indra,
 The band of these sorceresses,
 In the *vailasthānaká*, in the *armaká*
 In the great **vailastha*, in the *armaká*.

That is the sum total of the *Rigveda's* use of the word *armakā*. It occurs only in the locative singular, *armaké*. Even if Professor Witzel's understanding that it is a plural noun meaning 'ruins' is correct, it seems a fragile piece of evidence on which to base the most important of the scholarly views currently agreed upon by Indo-Europeanists, that is, that the poems postdate the disintegration of the Indus cities.

What is more, the passage in which this verse occurs, the first five verses of 1.133, is one of very few that Arnold in his chronological study of the *Rigveda* identifies as of doubtful authenticity: "These stanzas have the character of a charm: but it is very unusual to find such verses *prefixed* to one of the hymns of the ordered collection" (1905: 42).

And it is far from certain that Witzel's understanding of the meaning of the word *armakā*, apparently based on a 1981 article on the later word *ārma*, is correct. Others disagree. Manfred Mayrhofer, in his recent dictionary of Old Indo-Aryan (1992-1996) offers a very different translation for *ārma* and *armakā*, following a 1987 study: '**ārma-** m. (TS, TB +) dazu *armakā-* m. (RV [1, 133,3]+... 'probably 'spring' – If correctly interpreted, then identical with Tocharian B *ālme* 'spring' (and European river names like *Almus*, *Alma* and so on).³⁷ And when it comes to the Rigvedic word group *vailasthānā*, *vailasthānakā* and *mahāvailastha* (misquoted by Professor Witzel as "mahāvailasthāna", and translated 'even larger ruins'), which are also only to be found in this passage, Mayrhofer refrains from guessing, simply describing them as "ohne sichere Interpretation". Given the incantatory nature of 1.133.1-5 the meaning of the *hapax legomena* it contains must be uncertain.

Professor Witzel is however firm about his interpretation, and what he can deduce from it. "In the dry bed of the Hakra many potsherds (*kapāla*) used in ritual could be found (Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa 25.10); they belonged to the given up settlements (*arma*, *armaka*; Falk 1981), of the late Harappan and post-Harappan period (cf. above, Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa 2.4.6.8)." (2001: §25).

(The fact that the Vedic word *kapāla*, Witzel's 'potsherds

³⁷ "**ārma-** m. (TS, TB +) dazu *armakā-* m. (RV [1, 133,3]+... wohl 'Brunnen' (Bedeutungsbestimmung nach K.T. Schmidt, StIdgW 290 ff.). – Wenn richtig bestimmt, dann identisch mit toch. B *ālme* 'Brunnen' (und Flußnamen Europas wie *Almus*, *Alma* usw.)"

used in ritual', is also absent from the *Rigveda* has already been mentioned in this paper in another context, the discussion of the meaning of the Rigvedic word *puroḷās.*)

The meaning of the word *samudrá*

In later Sanskrit *samudrá*, literally 'together-waters', is the usual word for 'ocean, sea'. But does it mean this in the *Rigveda*? The word has become important in the debate partly because of a much quoted line in verse 7.95.2, which is traditionally interpreted as meaning that the river Sarasvati flowed 'from the mountains to the sea'. Scholars who believe that the Indo-Europeans entered India from the north-west sometimes suggest that the Sarasvati of the poets is the modern Helmand River of Afghanistan – a river that does not enter the sea. So how to explain 7.95.2? Michael Witzel carries considerable weight when it comes to references to the text of the *Rigveda*, and his pronouncements are made with authority. On the question of the meaning of *samudrá* he draws attention to what he calls "basic literary facts".

"The basic literary facts, however, are the following: the sarasvatī is well known and highly praised in the RV as a great stream. Once it is called the only river flowing from the mountains to the samudra (RV 7.95.2). Samudra indicates a large body of water... or just a 'confluence of rivers' (RV 6.72.3). Note that RV 6.72.3 speaks even of the (three or more!) samudras of the rivers, samudrāṇi nadīnām." (Witzel 2001: §25 and footnote 204)

Professor Witzel accepts that 7.95.2 describes the Sarasvati as 'flowing to the *samudrá*'. But he argues that to translate the noun *samudrá* invariably as 'sea' is simplistic, and turns for evidence to verse 6.72.3, in which, he tells us, the word clearly means "confluence". This is reinforced by his footnote drawing attention to the fact that the verse describes *samudrás* in the plural: "(three or more!) samudras of the rivers, samudrāṇi nadīnām."

But it should be pointed out that his interpretation of 6.72.3 goes against the structure of the verse, and that no translator is in agreement with Professor Witzel on this "basic literary fact". The verse rehearses one of the mythological deeds of the god Indra: the slaying of the dragon who originally impeded the waters, here with the help of another

divine power (the verbs are in the dual), liberating them for the use of mankind. The last two lines, to which Professor Witzel is referring, conjure up a powerful image:

prá árṇāṃsi airayatam nadīnām
 Forth the floods you-caused-to-move of-the-rivers
á samudrāṇi paṣrathuḥ purūṇi
 Up the *samudrás* you-have-filled many

The text does not read “*samudrāṇi nadīnām*”, as Witzel takes it, it reads *árṇāṃsi nadīnām* ‘the floods of the rivers’, a collocation that also occurs at 7.87.1. I have already mentioned the fact that scholars more familiar with the later Vedic texts tend to quote the text of the *Rigveda* in unaccented form, as Professor Witzel does. This may have contributed to his misreading of this verse. Had he been using an accented text it would have been clear that the two lines, each with its own, unaccented, main verb, are parallel sentences, as reflected in the translations: ‘You set the floods of the rivers in motion, and you have filled up many seas’ (Geldner); ‘You set the streams of the rivers flowing, and enlarged many seas’ (Elizarenkova);³⁸ “You have urged on the waters of the rivers until they have replenished numerous oceans” (Horace Hayman Wilson); “Ye urged to speed the currents of the rivers, and many seas have you filled full with waters” (Griffith).

Professor Witzel’s note drawing attention to the plural form of the word *samudrá* (“three or more!”) is also strangely beside the point: the text clearly describes *samudrāṇi purūṇi* ‘many *samudrás*’.³⁹

“Did the Sarasvati ever flow to the sea?” (Possehl 1998)

What of the first of Professor Witzel’s “basic literary facts”? The title of an article by the archaeologist Gregory Possehl provides a convenient heading at this point.

Professor Possehl, drawing on the archaeological evidence, concludes that it did not. But 7.95.2, in which it is believed that the *Rigveda* says that the Sarasvati flowed to the *samudrá*, has become perhaps the most quoted passage in the

³⁸ “Ihr setzdet die Fluten der Flüsse in Bewegung und viele Meere habt ihr angefüllt” (Geldner); “Techeniia rek vy priveli v dvizhenie / Sdelali shirokimi mnogie moria” (Elizarenkova).

³⁹ He makes no comment on the exceptional neuter gender of the word in this passage, which is perhaps under the influence of *purū* (see *Ai. Gr.* III, 9).

debate, and it is regularly referred to by scholars on both sides of the argument.

“RV 7.95.2, a hymn of the middle Rgvedic period, indeed speaks of the sarasvatī flowing to the samudra.” (Witzel 2001: §25)

“Again, as categorically mentioned in the following verse of the *Rigveda* (7.95.2), the Sarasvatī rose from the mountains and fell into the ocean.” (B.B. Lal in Bryant and Patton 2005: 54)

Neither side of the debate has any doubt about this translation, as “indeed” on one side, and “categorically” on the other, make clear.

The line in 7.95.2 describes the river Sarasvati as

śúcīr yatī girībhya ā samudrāt
 pure, travelling from-the-mountains ā (preposition) samudrāt

However, the fact that it continues to be unquestioningly maintained by both sides of the debate that this means that the Saravati ‘flows from the mountains to the *samudrā*’ is surprising.

The word *girībhyas* (the final s is dropped before a vowel) could be dative or ablative, and is understood here to be ablative – ‘from the mountains’. But the form in which the word *samudrā* occurs in this line, *samudrāt*, is also, and uniquely, ablative. In other words, in the context of the regular grammar of an early Indo-European language it should mean ‘from the *samudrā*’, not ‘to the *samudrā*’. The word *samudrāt* (*samudrād* when followed by a vowel) occurs sixteen times in the *Rigveda*, and in all its fifteen other occurrences has the ablative sense that linguists would expect. It is regularly parallel with other ablative forms:

ā yātu índro divá ā pṛthivyá
maḡśú samudrād utá vā púriṣāt
súvarṇarād ávase no marútvān
parāvátō vā sádanād ṛtásya

Come hither Indra, from the sky or from the earth,
 Swiftly, from the *samudrá* or from the source.
 From brightness, with storm gods for our aid,
 From far away, or from the seat of Truth. (4.21.3)

The much-quoted line from 7.95.2 contains what I have described in my interlinear gloss as a preposition, the particle *á*. Linguists however distinguish between ‘prepositions’ which precede the word to which they relate, and ‘postpositions’, which follow it, referring to both, technically, as ‘adpositions’.

In modern English, where the verb in the sentence usually comes between subject and object (“The cat (**S**) admired (**V**) the mat (**O**)”), adpositions like *on* generally precede the word they govern, and are indeed ‘prepositions’ (“The cat sat *on* the mat”). They rarely follow it (“The cat sat the mat *on*”). But this was not the case in Ancient Sanskrit, where the verb generally followed the object in the sentence. “Languages with **V(erb)-O(bject)** order have prepositions rather than postpositions. If, on the other hand, objects precede their verbs (**OV** languages), the order in these constructions is reversed.” (Lehmann 1992: 102) In other words, ‘adpositions’ in Ancient Sanskrit usually follow the word they govern, not precede it; they are postpositional. “Anatolian and Vedic have almost exclusively postpositions and not prepositions... Avestan and Sabellic have a mixture of prepositions and postpositions.” (Fortson 2007: 139) Indeed, some linguists have argued that adpositions were invariably placed after the word that they govern in Ancient Sanskrit: “Delbrück assumed only postpositions for early Vedic; Hittite supports the conclusion that adpositions were postponed in the proto-language.” (Lehmann 1993: 207). In other words, the adposition *á* should naturally belong with preceding *giríbhyaḥ*, not with following *samudrát*. The postposition *á* is regularly used in the *Rigveda* simply to reinforce the ablative sense. The line would then describe the Sarasvati as ‘pure, travelling down from the mountains, from the *samudrá*.’

For the earliest Indian scholars, however, for whom *samudrá* meant ‘sea’, this was impossible. Given a context in which a river is described as having some relationship with mountains and sea, the interpretation was incontrovertible. What is more, the later idiomatic construction, *á* followed by an ablative to mean ‘up to, until’, was familiar to them from its frequent occurrence in the *Brāhmaṇas*. But it is remarkable

that modern scholars have not been able to shake off this assumption of “syntaxe irrationelle”,⁴⁰ as Renou describes it, particularly given their observation of a broader sense in the Rigvedic word *samudrá*. The very first translator of the *Rigveda* into English, the first Boden Professor of Sanskrit Horace Hayman Wilson, was closely following the native interpretation, and therefore translated the line in the traditional way. But he nonetheless observed the grammatical and syntactic anomaly, and made a note of what the text in fact reads in a footnote.

Here, then, is the clearest evidence for Witzel’s argument that *samudrá*, ‘together-waters’, doesn’t exclusively mean ‘sea’ in the *Rigveda*, although it seems that he has not observed it. In 7.95.2, if one has faith in grammar and syntax, the text describes the Sarasvati as “pure, travelling down from the mountains, from the gathering-place of waters.”

Gregory Possehl refers in passing to this verse in the usual translation, but comments that it “has to be treated critically, not literally” (1998: 348). But I suggest that, if correctly translated, it can be taken literally. It turns out that what the *Rigveda* tells us is not out of line with the evidence of archaeology, as concluded by Possehl: “Based on the presence of the Derawar Fort inland delta that was densely settled in Hakra Wares and Mature Harappa times, along with the lack of physical evidence for a dry river bed between Derawar Fort and the Raini/Wahinda, it seems unlikely that the ancient Sarasvati flowed to the sea during those times. The absence of a river scar suggests that the same is true for later periods.” (1998: 350)

The Rigvedic chariot and the Rigvedic horse

Professor Asko Parpola of the University of Helsinki is the acknowledged authority on the Indus script and its decipherment. His research is summarized in his major book published in 1994 by Cambridge University Press, *Deciphering the Indus Script*. Over three decades Professor Parpola has built up an extensive corpus of Indus inscriptions, providing an invaluable research tool. Despite the title of Parpola’s book, however, little progress has been made with the decipherment apart from the identification of some numeric symbols. His

⁴⁰Even W.D. Whitney, whose grammar included the language of the *Brahmanas*, followed this assumption (see 1889: 98).

attempt is based on the conviction that the script represents a form of Dravidian, a family of non-Indo-European languages dominating the southern third of India. He is convinced that neither the Rigvedic poets nor their ancestors could have been the people of the Indus Civilisation. As Professor Parpola is by background a Vedic scholar, who has published extensively on the ritual texts known as the *Śrauta Sūtras*, his arguments deriving from the *Rigveda* are taken as authoritative.

One of these, which he gives at the beginning of his book, is the familiar ‘Vedic ruins’ argument discussed earlier in this section.⁴¹ Another is the ‘horse and chariot’ argument.

“When the Rigvedic tribes invaded northwestern India, they drove in war-chariots with two wheels, an axle and a thill, and drawn by horses [...]. The horse and chariot can thus with good reasons be expected to be physically and ideologically present in the archaeological cultures identified as Aryan. [But] when we turn to the Indus Civilisation, there is no evidence of the horse whatsoever, either osteological or representational.” (1994: 158-159)

General references to the horse-drawn chariots of the Rigvedic tribes are common, but fortunately for the purposes of this paper Professor Parpola supplies the Sanskrit words to his first sentence. “When the Rigvedic tribes invaded northwestern India, they drove (*vah-*) in war-chariots (*ratha-*) with two wheels (*cakra-*) ... and drawn by horses (*aśva-*)”. Although the invasion that this sentence presupposes has long been rejected by archaeologists, because Parpola is quoting from the vocabulary of the *Rigveda* the reader is given the distinct impression that evidence for invasion is to be found in the text itself. This is not so.

Nor, contrary to what is implied, do the other statements that Parpola makes derive from the text. His firm assertion, for example, that the Rigvedic *rātha* had two wheels is not what a study of the poetic conceptions of the *Rigveda* would lead us to

⁴¹ “Flourishing from about 2500 BC, [the Indus civilisation] collapsed around 1900 BC and was soon totally forgotten. All that remained were the mounds of deserted towns and cities, which are even today up to 30 metres high. The earliest documents of India, Vedic texts dating from c. 1200-500 BC, speak of ancient ruin mounds (*arma*) in various ways...” (1994: 4-5). The word *arma*, as already mentioned, does not occur in the *Rigveda*.

conclude. There are three passages⁴² in which the *rátha* indisputably has two wheels, but in two of these⁴³ the heavenly ‘wheels’ are specifically described as moving independently of each other. And these examples are outnumbered by the seven passages in which the *rátha* is described as having three wheels.⁴⁴

More importantly, the verb \sqrt{vah} is never used in the *Rigveda* to describe men driving in *ráthas*. Like its Latin cognate, *veho*, the use of \sqrt{vah} is most often transitive: ‘convey, bring’, usually gods or their gifts to men, as in the last line of the example that follows. In the total of nine passages⁴⁵ in the *Rigveda* in which the words \sqrt{vah} , *rátha*, and *áśva* occur together, the *ráthas* are imaginary, heavenly vehicles, drawn by imaginary, heavenly *áśvās*. Parpola’s specific translation “war-chariot” for *rátha* is misleading. In none of these passages is the *rátha* a vehicle of war. All but three of them describe dawn and her attendant deities:

á vāṃ ráthaṃ yuvatís tiṣṭhad átra
juṣṭvī narā duhitá sūriyasya
pári vāṃ áśvā vápuṣaḥ patamḡá
váyo vahantu aruṣá abhīke

Joyfully the youthful daughter of the sun
 Ascends your *rátha*, heroes, here;
 Around are marvellous *áśvās* flying,
 May the flame-coloured birds *bring* you to us (1.118.5)

This is far from being a militaristic use.

⁴²1.30.19, 8.5.28-29, and 8.22.4. In all three the *rátha* belongs to the heavenly twins who accompany dawn. The daughter of the sun’s marriage vehicle described in 10.85.11-12 & 16 is not a *rátha* but an *āno manasmāyam* ‘an imaginary *ānas*’. The translation “like the two wheels of a chariot” that Wendy Doniger gives for *ráthiyā-iva cakrá* in verses 7 and 8 of 10.10 (1981: 248) assumes a duality of form (and therefore masculine gender) with which others (Grassmann, Geldner, Elizarenkova) disagree.

⁴³1.30.19 and 8.22.4.

⁴⁴The simple compound *tri-cakrá* ‘three-wheeled’ at 1.118.2, 1.157.3, 1.183.1, 4.36.1, 8.58.3 and 10.41.1, and *trī cakrá* at 1.34.9. Also *éka-cakra* ‘one-wheeled’ in 1.164.2, and *saptá-cakra* ‘seven-wheeled’ in 2.40.3. ‘Two-wheeled’ does not occur.

⁴⁵1.118.4-5, 1.164.2-3, 4.14.3-4, 6.63.7, 7.71.2-3, 7.75.6, 7.78.4, 10.70.3, and 10.107.11. There are no passages in which all the words he lists (\sqrt{vah} , *rátha*, *áśva*, *cakrá*, and *ákṣa* ‘axle’ and *īṣá* ‘thill’) occur together.

Colin Renfrew encounters the same mismatch between received opinion and the text. Searching through the *Rigveda* for a suitable passage to illustrate what he, too, understands to be its prevailing theme, the “association of horses and chariots with the heroic practice of war” (1987: 182), he selects one ten-verse poem, 1.130, which he quotes in its entirety (1987: 179-182). Even in the translation that he uses the interpretation is hard to seek. The only reference in the poem to human strife has *svàr* ‘sunlight’ as its prize, which is won for mankind with Indra’s help (verse 8), and *ráthas* only occur in poetic similes describing streams running down to the sea (verse 5) and men composing a song (verse 6). Most importantly of all, however, unknown to Renfrew and to his readers, the word *áśva* is absent from 1.130. The words ‘horse’ and ‘steed’ in the translation in each occurrence represent different adjectives in the original.⁴⁶ “Adjectives,” as Humpty Dumpty observed, “you can do anything with”. There are many fewer horses in the text of the *Rigveda* than there are in the translations. Indeed, when the word *áśva* is present it often appears simply to describe something that moves swiftly in the *Rigveda*, like the birds in 1.118.5 quoted above.⁴⁷

What, then, of the Rigvedic horse? “Although [the domestic horse] has occasionally been recovered from Harappan sites, for example Surkotada and Kalibangan, no one would credit the earlier Harappan culture as exemplifying the horse-centred culture of the Vedic Aryans” (Mallory 1989: 46). As Renfrew put it in his archly-titled review of Mallory’s book – ‘They ride horses, don’t they?’ – the horse has assumed “an almost mythical significance in traditional Indo-European studies” (1989: 845). But how horse-centred was the world of the poets?

⁴⁶The adjective *harít* in verse 2, and *vājín* ‘possessing strength’ and *átya* ‘going’, in verse 6.

⁴⁷The linguistic connection between *áśva* and *ású* ‘swift’ had been early suggested by Bopp (see *Ai. Gr.* II 2, 870), and has been recently revisited by Eric Hamp (Hamp 1990). The relationship between the two words in the minds of the poets is apparent in this passage. The first two lines of the previous verse are parallel:

á vāṃ śyenáso áśvinā vahantu

ráthe yuktása áśávaḥ (N. PL. áśú) patamgáḥ

May eagles, Asvins, bring you hither,

Yoked to the *rátha*, the swift ones, flying (1.118.4ab)

The same parallel occurs in 8.5.7, another passage in which the *rátha* of the Asvins is drawn by birds.

Edwin Bryant summarises the arguments. “As we have seen the term *aśva* ‘horse’ is a word with Indo-European credentials... Macdonell and Keith ([1912] 1967) conclude from one Vedic verse (RV viii. 55, 3), which mentions a gift of four hundred mares, that the animal could not have been rare in the Vedic world... The horse, as a result, is presently ‘the most sought after animal in Indian archaeology’” (2001: 170). But in the Rigvedic verse to which Professor Bryant refers the word translated “mares” is not a feminine form of the word *áśva*. It is not related to *áśva* at all. It is the adjective *áruṣī* – a feminine form of *aruṣá* ‘flame-coloured’, which, as it happens, occurred in the last line of the verse about dawn quoted above. It is used elsewhere in the poems to describe fire, the sun, lightning, and dawn herself. As mentioned earlier in this paper, there are many feminine adjectives in the *Rigveda* that were anciently assumed to refer to female animals, and modern translators continue to interpret them, in some contexts, in the same way. In Wendy Doniger’s Penguin selection, for example, the entry for ‘mare’ in the index, immediately following the ‘horse’ entry, refers to seven passages. But in five of the seven the sources for her translation are five different words, all of which are unrelated to *áśva*.⁴⁸ None of them is *áruṣī*, which Doniger understands elsewhere to describe cows (1981: 179).

So does *áruṣī* mean ‘mare’ in 8.55.3, the verse from which Macdonell and Keith had concluded that the horse was common in the world of the poets? Griffith is confident that it does (1896-1897). Geldner thinks not, supplying ‘sheep’ in parentheses. Elizarenkova suggests ‘cows’, again in parentheses. Translators cannot agree. But in hazarding a guess, whether or not they acknowledge that they are doing so, all three are incorporating the equivalent of a gloss into their translation. A more literal version, without the interpretative assumption – particularly since there is no consensus – would be less misleading for scholars looking for practical information in the text. Michael Witzel, for example, unquestioningly accepts that the word in 8.55.3 describes a

⁴⁸Forms of the adjectives *pīśant* (1.162.21), *suvená* (h.l., 10.56.3), *árvant* (10.5.2), *hárit* (1.50.8), and (?) the noun *viśpālā* (supplied to the translation from the following line. A proper name? 1.116.15) (Doniger 1981: 91, 94, 117, 190, and 183)

horse.⁴⁹

Despite the lack of archaeological or textual evidence for either invasion or large-scale immigration, with or without horses and/or chariots, the belief remains unshaken among western scholars that the Indo-European poets of the *Rigveda* must have entered the Indian subcontinent from outside, some time after the Indus Civilisation had come to its abrupt end. Benjamin Fortson, Assistant Professor of Classics and Historical Linguistics at the University of Michigan, in his recent introduction to Indo-European linguistics and culture, gives the prevailing view when he writes that

“Indic tribes entered India probably during the early to mid-second millennium BC, migrating from the Iranian plateau northwest of present-day Pakistan into the Punjab in eastern Pakistan, northwest of modern India.”

He then turns to the all-important text of the *Rigveda* for evidence.

“One of the hymns of the Rig Veda (1.151) alludes to a legendary journey that may be a distant memory of this migration” (2007: 183-184).

But there is no allusion to a legendary journey in *Rigveda* 1.151. As Colin Renfrew correctly observes, there is nothing in any of the 1,028 poems that make up the collection to suggest that their authors were incomers to the area that they describe in their poems.

Rather the opposite. Many verses celebrate the might of the ancient river Sarasvati, *nah priyá priyásu* ‘dearest of all our dear ones’ (6.61.10). The word *priyá*, described by Winfred Lehmann as a reflexive adjective (1993: 207), like Homeric Greek φίλος has the sense of ‘one’s own, that one is used to, or attached to’.⁵⁰

yásyā anantó áhrutas
tvesás carisñúr arṇaváh
ámas cāratī rōruvat

⁴⁹“Horse and donkey are clearly distinguished... compare between 8.55.3 and 8.56.3.” (ListServ 14.4)

⁵⁰“[W]ie φίλος bei Homer auch, das, was Einem eigen ist, woran man gewöhnt ist, woran man hängt.” (Böhtlingk and Roth).

Whose limitless, unbroken,
Fearsome moving billowing
Force goes roaring (6.61.8)

The poem in which these lines appear concludes:

*sārasvati abhī no neṣi vāsyo
māpa sphariḥ pāyasā mā na ā dhak
juśāsva naḥ sakhīyā veśīyā ca
mā tvāt kṣétrāṇi āraṇāni ganma*

O Sarasvati, lead us on to better,
Do not spurn us, do not deprive us of your plenty;
Rejoice in our company, and that we're neighbours,
Let us not go away from you to foreign fields (6.61.14)

There doesn't seem to be much doubt that the poets themselves regarded this part of the world as their home.

The need for a new approach

The ambition of Max Müller in the 1840s had been to produce the first edition of the text of the *Rigveda*, and in this he succeeded. But the difficulty of his self-appointed task was multiplied many times over by the intervention of the eminent French orientalist Eugène Burnouf. "I met with the strongest remonstrances from Burnouf. Not only the text, but the commentary too, he maintained, if they were to be published at all, should be published in their entirety." (Max Müller 1849-1874: VI, vi) Convinced by Burnouf of the necessity of printing the vast commentary of the fourteenth-century scholar Sāyaṇa together with the poems, Max Müller embarked on a combined editorial endeavour that took twenty-five years to complete. As a result, the accumulated product of centuries of native exegesis was delivered up to western scholars together with the text. Burnouf's intervention guaranteed that indologists would not be able to start with a clean slate.

The need for a new belief system in science, what Thomas Kuhn identified as a 'paradigm shift', is usually signalled by the presence of anomalies that cannot be resolved. The Vedic approach to the *Rigveda* constantly produces such anomalies. "The more I read the Rig Veda the harder it becomes for me – and much of the difficulty arises

from taking seriously the aberrancies and deviations in the language... One can be blissfully reading the most banal hymn, whose form and message offer no surprises (I have come to cherish such coasting) – and suddenly trip over a verse, to which one's only response can be 'What??!!'" (Jamison 2000: 10). I suggest that the existing paradigm fails.

Quoting the historian Herbert Butterfield, Kuhn describes the reorientation needed as "picking up the other end of the stick" (1970: 85). The required methodology in this case is clear. As Stephen Ullmann stressed in *Semantics: an Introduction to the Science of Meaning*, "The meaning of a word can be ascertained *only* by studying its use. There is no short cut to meaning, through introspection or by any other method. The investigator must start by collecting an adequate sample of contexts and then approach them with an open mind, allowing the meaning or meanings to emerge from the contexts themselves" (1962: 67). I believe that a small research team, working without preconception as to meaning, would be able to make considerable progress with the decipherment of this important ancient text in just a few years.

Thanks to the vision and encouragement of Winfred Lehmann of the University of Texas at Austin, together with funding from the Salus Mundi Foundation, tools for that approach are now online at the UT Linguistics Research Center (LRC). Professor Lehmann was involved as early as the 1970s in the production of an electronic version of the *Rigveda* at Texas (now preserved as text 0589 at the Oxford Text Archive), and in 2006 the complete text was made available, in metrically restored form, on the LRC website (Thomson and Slocum 2006b). As I have mentioned earlier, the written form in which the poems have been handed down is misleading in a number of ways. Most importantly, the complex range of metres in which they were composed was entirely obscured by later Indian editorial conventions. The publication in 1994 of van Nooten and Holland's attempted reconstruction of the original poetic form of the text constituted a watershed in Rigvedic studies (the electronic version that they issued on an accompanying disk in part derived from Professor Lehmann's 1970s project). The metrically restored text has however met with a mixed reception from Vedic scholars, and van Nooten and Holland's

book has long been out of print.⁵¹

A new course on the language of the *Rigveda* (Thomson and Slocum 2006a), the first since Professor Macdonell's of 1917, is also available on the LRC website, as part of Professor Lehmann's series Early Indo-European Online. In the introduction to the series he explains his reason for putting the collection together. "Recent advances in determining the origin of western civilisation and the settlement of Europe are based especially on findings in genetics, archeology and linguistics... While these three sciences all provide information on the settlement, only through linguistics can the people involved be identified. Yet linguistics dealing with the early period is least advanced of the three." Begun in 2002, complete courses on fifteen early Indo-European languages are now on the site, among them not only Ancient Sanskrit, but also Hittite, and, as of 2008, the first two lessons of Tocharian.

The earliest Indo-European poetry has been preserved for us by a remarkable and precious accident of history, in the form of the ancient Indian theological tradition. This tradition, however, carries with it freight that is not easily discharged. The bizarre interpretations of indology are adhered to with tenacity. Yet the imaginative sophistication of these Ancient Sanskrit poems constantly gleams through. Can scholarship be justified in unquestioningly accepting that poets who invite the wind to

*prá bodhayā púramdhim
jārá á sasatīm iva
prá cakṣaya ródasī vāsayośasaḥ*

Wake up abundance
Like a lover a sleeping girl,
Make both worlds visible, make the dawns light up (1.134.3)

⁵¹Lubotsky's concordance, published in 1997, was made possible by the electronic version. But it was the unrestored source text, also on the disk, that Professor Lubotsky used as the basis for his concordance, and Stephanie Jamison is clear in her review that this is how she prefers to read the text. "Although the concordance is based on the e-text of Holland and van Nooten, he has not 'restored' the meter, as they did – a decision of Lubotsky's that I, for one, applaud." (Jamison 1999: 349). Michael Witzel takes a contrary view: "it presents the text, for the first time, in the form in which we have desired to see it for more than one hundred and twenty years" (van Nooten and Holland 1994: [v]).

would have been happy with the description of dawn attributed to them at 3.30.14: ‘A great light held in the udders, the raw cow wanders carrying the cooked’?⁵²

The *Rigveda*, as Indian tradition has named this collection of poems, merits a fresh approach to its decipherment. The text that will emerge will be very different in character from the one that scholars have come to accept.

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⁵² “Ein großes Licht (ist) in (ihren) Eutern verwahrt: die rohe Kuh wandelt die gekochte (Milch) tragend.” (Geldner).

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