

HIC RHODUS!

A brief comment on Karen Thomson, A still undeciphered text: how the scientific approach to the *Rigveda* would open up Indo-European Studies

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Already the heading of K. Thomason's article is sure to secure highest interest from Vedicists and Indo-Europeanists alike. Occasionally, her uneasy feelings with the tradition seem rather strong, and her verdicts may in part be hard to swallow for those attacked. But even if one might be able to share her misgivings on very many details of our present (non-)understanding of the Ṛgveda, and to accept her use of metaphorical language, it seems an exaggeration to speak of 'a still undeciphered text', and to imply that all former scholarship was not 'scientific'. More than two millennia of Brahmanic scholarship and nearly two centuries of modern philology, based on both the Indian tradition and Comparative Grammar, have produced a solid basis for serious discussion. The attempt to understand an old and difficult text is always, of course, a never-ending process, and so, still further discussion of all aspects of Vedic Studies is constantly needed. Every fresh attempt, if reasonably presented, may be sure to be very welcome. But alas, the reader's expectations are disappointed here. Some scholars are criticized, explicitly or implicitly, for either rejecting the Indian tradition or relying too heavily on it, for suggesting meanings of words based on alleged contexts only or on comparative linguistics alone. The metaphors of 'jigsaw' and 'crossword puzzle' add no new aspects to the discussion, nor does the warning against the danger of circular argumentation. All this is part of philological

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basics. Not being personally involved in Vedic research, I cannot judge upon the breadth and completeness of Thomson's critical survey. I was struck, however, by the strange fact that the most important event in R̥gvedic Studies since decades, viz. Witzel and Goto's new translation and commentary (2007), seems to have escaped the author's notice. In her article, she again expresses her belief 'that there is a much more straightforward answer to the problem' than all endeavours by former scholars. That is a bold claim indeed, and may be so – but where is that answer? One would very much like to learn more about her proposed 'new approach'. What is it, more textual criticism or more comparative grammar, or both? The author is kindly invited to present, as soon as possible, an example of her 'scientific approach' by giving us just one single hymn (of average 'darkness') with her new explication of all details, and her comprehensive interpretation. Asking good questions, and falsification of hypotheses submitted for discussion is the only way of progressing. Many eyes will be looking forward to the 'text that will emerge' from the author's pen. Is it the 'metrically restored' text by Van Nooten & Holland, 'corrected' by Thomason & Slocum referred to? The scholarly community is eager to be persuaded that her text "will be very different in character", and to be enlightened how that venerable body of hymns finally should be understood. Personally, I would enjoy to see Indo-European Studies "opened up", i.e. made more widely known and revealed as important for the understanding of both the R̥gveda and the modern world.

Reference

- Witzel, Michael, and Toshifumo Gotō (eds.)
 2007 *R̥g-Veda. Das Heilige Wissen. Erster und zweiter Liederkreis*. Frankfurt am Main und Leipzig: Verlag der Weltreligionen.