

Interpreting the Rigveda: Comments on Karen Thomson's approach

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Karen Thomson has summarized here a number of her earlier papers, which maintain, like the title of her present article, that the Rigveda is "a still undeciphered text". According to her, the current interpretations have been grossly misled by their uncritical resort to the later Vedic ritual tradition and its terminology. And yet some pioneers of the nineteenth century were already on the right track, as they wanted to interpret the Rigveda on the basis of comparative Indo-European evidence rather than the later Indian exegesis. She presents a few examples, and believes to have shown, to quote the latter part of her title, "how the scientific approach to the Rigveda would open up Indo-European Studies."

In her detailed examples she accuses other scholars of sloppy research and cocksure belief in their own translations and hypotheses. But we all make mistakes, and picking up a few lapses does not entitle one to label the entire work of the criticized savants as abortive. I am afraid she is herself equally guilty of the things for which she blames others, although I do admit that some of her criticism is justified and contains interesting new suggestions. But in several cases she is clearly quite wrong.

Let me take as an example the case of the word *grāvan-*. In later Vedic texts, it denotes the stony pestle with which juice is pressed out of the stalks of the soaked Soma plant. According to Thomson, who refers to her lengthy paper published in JIES in 2001, "a review of the fifty-eight contexts in the *Rigveda* in which this masculine word occurs suggests an entirely different interpretation." "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 $\sqrt{\text{gr}}$ 'sing'." Here

Thomson seems to be rather sure of the correctness of her own interpretation, and she appears to believe in the suggested new etymology as well: “I am grateful to Winfred Lehmann for revising his previous etymology (Lehmann 1986:44) on the basis of my word study...” The etymology previously adopted by Lehmann, as Thomson observes in note 27, connects it with Welsh *breuan*, Breton *breo* ‘mill’, etc. The latter is the standard etymology supported by many authorities, among them Manfred Mayrhofer in his *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen* (1992:I,508): Mayrhofer is sure (*sicher*) that *grāvan-* is connected with PIE **g^wʔH₂-ú-* ‘heavy’ (Sanskrit *gurú-*), and quotes a number of further cognates, such as ON *kværn* ‘hand mill’.

According to Thomson, the *grāvans* “have none of the characteristics of stone — they are not heavy or light, large or small...” But in Rigveda 1,28,1, “where the *grāvan* with a broad bottom is raised up for pressing (Soma), may you Indra eagerly gulp down of the (Soma) pressed in the mortar” (*yātra grāvā pṛthūbudhna ūrdhvó bhāvati sótave / ulūkhalasutānām āvéd u indra jalgulaḥ //*)

The next verse speaks of the two planks used in soma pressing (*adhiṣavanīyā*). The last verse of the hymn describes taking the remaining Soma from these pressing planks and putting it in a sieve (*úc chiṣtām camūvor bhara sómam pavitra ā sṛja*): filtering the pressed Soma through a sieve (*pavitra*) takes place in later Vedic ritual as well. Rigveda 3,42,2 speaks of Soma which has been pressed by means of the *grāvans* and been placed on sacrificial grass for Indra to consume (*barhiṣṭhām grāvabhiḥ sutām*), and Rigveda 1,15,7 makes clear that the priests in a sacrifice hold the *grāvan* in their hands (*grāvahastāso adhvarê*). Indeed, in an enumeration of priestly officiants (including the Hotṛ, the Adhvaryu and the Fire-kindler known from the later ritual) RV 1,162,5ab calls the counterpart of the later Grāvaṣṭut as ‘Grāvan-holder’ (*hótādhvaryúr āvayā agnimindhó grāvagrābhá utá sámstā súviprah*). In Rigveda 10,76, a hymn recited by the Grāvaṣṭut priest in the later Soma sacrifice, the *grāvan* pestles are said to make a loud sound that reaches up to the sky, while men ‘milk’ the desired Soma (6 *bhurāntu no yaśasaḥ sōtu āndhaso grāvāno vācā divitā divitmatā / nāro yātra duhaté kāmīyam mādhu āghoṣāyanto abhīto mithastúraḥ*) — such references sufficiently explain why they are thought to ‘speak’ or ‘sing’ —; in the

very next verse 'stones' are said to press the Soma (7a *sunvānti sōmam ... ādrayo*).

Now to the significance of the fact that the horse (*āśva-*) and the chariot (*rātha-*) and the deities associated with them (*aśvīnā, aśvīnau*, etc, *nāsatyā*, etc.) are mentioned hundreds of times in the Rigveda (see A. Lubotsky, *A R̥gvedic Word Concordance I-II*, New Haven 1997, s.vv.). They do constitute strong evidence for an outside of India origin of the Rigvedic language and culture. Brief remarks are sufficient here, as I can refer to a long paper where I have discussed the topic in detail ("The Nāsatyas, the Chariot, and Proto-Aryan Religion", *Journal of Indological Studies*, Nos. 16 & 17, 2004-2005, pp. 1-63). It is incorrect to say that the Rigveda has no evidence for the militaristic use of the chariots. In Rigveda 10,174, the king asks Bṛhaspati (the charioteer of Indra) to help him roll over his rivals. In the battle hymn Rigveda 10,103, Bṛhaspati is asked to "fly around" in his chariot, warding off enemies and helping "our chariots" (verse 4 *bṛhaspate pāri diyā rāthena rakṣohāmītrām apabādhamānaḥ / prabhañjān sēnāḥ pramṛṇō yudhā jāyann asmākam edhy avitā rāthānām //*).

It is true, however, that the chariots are mainly spoken of in two contexts: (1) chariot races and (2) myths connected with the divine twins possessing horses and wooing or marrying the goddess of dawn. I have argued that there is Rigvedic evidence also for a funeral association of the chariots and chariot races. It is significant that in all these respects we have counterparts in the Greek (or rather Doric) and Baltic religion, but not all over the Indo-European world. The post-PIE origin is suggested by the archaeological evidence, which strongly points to the Pontic-Caspian steppes as the region where the horse was first yoked to a two-wheeled chariot. The Sintashta-Arkaim culture, which has supplied the earliest evidence in the form of chariot graves, is dated to *c.* 2200-1800 BC. (Cf. Andrej Epimachov & Ludmila Korjakova, "Streitwagen der eurasischen Steppe in der Bronzezeit: Das Wolga-Uralgebiet und Kasachstan", pp. 221-236 in: Mamoun Fansa & Stefan Burmeister (eds.), *Rad und Wagen: Der Ursprung einer Innovation*. Mainz 2004). In northwestern South Asia, the region where the Rigveda was composed, the first archaeological culture that has yielded evidence of the horse is the "Gandhāra Grave" culture of Swat and surrounding regions, dated *c.* 1600-900 BC. The horse is not depicted in the seals

of the Indus Civilization, though many other animals are, nor have any bones found in South Asia pre-2000 BC been identified as those of the domesticated horse with certainty. There is some doubtful evidence, which is likely to come from the local wild ass or onager.

When mentioning terms associated with the horse and the chariot, I did not refer to any particular hymn where these terms would occur together. The presence in the Rigveda of such words as *vah-* ‘to convey’ and *cakra-* ‘wheel’, is in itself highly significant. Both have changed quite a lot from their PIE source forms, **weǵh-* and **k^wek^wlo-*. These are much older terms associated with the invention and spread of the ox-drawn wheeled vehicles. According the archaeological evidence, this took place in the Late Tripolye culture in Moldavia and western Ukraine between 4000 and 3500 BC. While the Late Tripolye and the archaeological cultures genetically related to it best explain the dispersal of all the Indo-European languages, the first clear evidence of wheeled vehicles in South Asia is much later, namely the cart models of the Kot-Diji culture dated to *c.* 2900-2600 BC. The evidence is discussed in detail in my paper “Proto-Indo-European Speakers of the Late Tripolye Culture as the Inventors of Wheeled Vehicles: Linguistic and archaeological considerations of the PIE homeland problem”, pp. 1-59 in: Karlene Jones-Bley, Martin E. Huld, Angela Della Volpe, and Miriam Robbins Dexter (eds.), *Proceedings of the 19th Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference, Los Angeles, November 2-3, 2007*. Washington, D.C. 2008.

There are also passages in the Rigveda which have with good reason been taken as reminiscences of the coming of the Rigvedic Aryans from the west (Afghanistan) and their gradual taking possession of the Punjab. I refer to the old hypothesis of King Divodāsa’s birth in Arachosia (cf. Rigveda 6,61), and to the references of the fights between the Dāsa and the Ārya, represented by their forefathers Dasa and Manu respectively. The Dāsas had fortresses, the Āryas did not. With the help of the ‘wall-breaker’ Indra, the latter stormed these fortresses and took their riches. Indra helped the Āryas to win in battles and showed the way to Manu, thus enabling the Āryas to take possession of the rivers, one by one, and make the lands inbetween their domicile (see especially Rigveda 1,40,7; 1,131,5; 1,165,8; 2,21,5; 10,49,9; 10,104,8).