

A Still Undeciphered Text, continued: the reply to my critics

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The lack of response from indologists working on the *Rigveda* to the arguments in the first part of 'A Still Undeciphered Text' is understandable. Proponents of competing paradigms operate in such different worlds that debate may seem impossible. In view of this silence I am grateful to Professors Mumm and Zimmer, linguists who have grown up with the Vedic approach to the earliest Sanskrit poetry but whose main research areas are in other fields, for stepping into the breach.

Professor Zimmer acknowledges that he cannot comment on "the breadth and completeness of my critical survey", and this must be true of almost all of my readers. The attempt to convince this overwhelming majority, which includes Sanskrit scholars, remains a significant challenge. Mumm and Zimmer are representative of most Indo-European linguists in believing that the *Rigveda* has received, and continues to receive, the kind of scientific attention accorded to other early Indo-European texts. The comments of Asko Parpola, an expert on the later ritual texts, provide evidence of the ways in which this is not the case, and of the different kind of attention accorded to the *Rigveda* by Vedic scholarship.

In 2004, at the end of my Commentary piece in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 'Sacred Mysteries: why the *Rigveda* has resisted decipherment', I expressed the view that "one day the *Rigveda* will be able to provide important information to scholars in other disciplines" (2004b: 15). But it needs to be studied before this can happen, and indologists do not believe that any further progress can be made with it. As an American scholar wrote in a letter in response to my *TLS* article, "the text has been pumped dry". Indologists have turned instead to the derivative texts, just as their Indian predecessors did, in the hope that the immense Vedic corpus will be able to throw light on the meaning of this ancient poetry.

Volume 37, Number 1 & 2, Spring/Summer 2009

Viewed through the eyes of native tradition the *Rigveda* is an unattractive text. The recently published translation of Books 1 and 2 by a team of Vedic scholars under the editorship of Michael Witzel and Toshifumo Gotō, which was in the press when I wrote ‘A Still Undeciphered Text’, exemplifies this lack of appeal, and examples of their translations will be given in the course of this reply. Scholars in other fields who would be well-equipped for its study, such as classicists, repelled by the apparent mumbo-jumbo, have no interest in studying the *Rigveda*. Linguists confine their attention to technical details, searching for etymologies or debating irregular accentuation. Attention to the meaning of the earliest Indo-European poems has however fallen out of every curriculum.

Mumm and Zimmer

Professors Mumm and Zimmer in their comments raise interesting issues about methodology, but both have failed to take on board my primary point. Peter-Arnold Mumm writes that looking at the context of words “has already been extensively employed by earlier scholars!”, and Stefan Zimmer apparently believes the same, but what I have been arguing for the past ten years is that Vedic scholars have been looking at contexts with their hands hopelessly tied behind their backs. Both Mumm and Zimmer continue to maintain that the *Rigveda* is “difficult”, and “enigmatic”. But to go back to my crossword metaphor (which, *pace* Professor Zimmer, I am indeed using to illustrate an entirely new “aspect to the discussion”), this is because major clues have always been filled in incorrectly, making it impossible to solve the rest.

As none of the three respondents has read my previous publications, it seems appropriate to reiterate here the reasons for writing them. The first, ‘The Meaning and Language of the *Rigveda*: Rigvedic *grāvan* as a test case’ (Thomson 2001b), was not simply a word study. At the beginning of the paper I outlined why reviewing the interpretation of the *Rigveda* by looking closely at one important word could be a useful exercise. The word *grāvan* was chosen as an example of one of the ‘major clues’ in my metaphorical crossword. The traditional translation, ‘ritual stone for pressing out soma juice’, is central to the Vedic understanding of the text as largely devoted to describing, in incongruous and endless detail, the ritual preparation of a sacrificial drink. While scholars struggle to

make sense of much of the text, they have not a scrap of doubt that this is correct: all the derivative Indian texts confirm it.

At the beginning of the paper I referred to Aurobindo Ghose's comparison of the efforts of the medieval commentator Śāyaṇa and modern scholarship to understand the poems.

“Both of them present one characteristic in common, the extraordinary incoherence and poverty of sense which their results stamp upon the ancient hymns. The scholar in dealing with his text is obliged to substitute for interpretation a process almost of fabrication. We feel that he is not so much revealing the sense as hammering and forging rebellious material into some sort of sense and consistency.” (1956: 4-5)

Both Professors Mumm and Zimmer think that the native tradition constitutes a valid starting point for interpretation. Professor Mumm writes that “*if* we decide against the later Indian reading of a word, we have to *demonstrate* that it misses the original Rigvedic meaning”, and Professor Zimmer believes that “more than two millennia of Brahmanic scholarship” have contributed usefully to our current state of understanding. But the nineteenth-century linguists had no doubt that this immense tradition was not only irrelevant, but entirely misleading. I had also quoted, in the introduction to my paper on *grāvan*, Hermann Oldenberg's strictures on “Śāyaṇa und Konsorten”:

‘Here, too, the assertions of Śāyaṇa and consorts are *quantité négligeable*; some of them are false; where on the other hand they are correct, we can only recognise them as such after we have worked out for ourselves what is correct, and so will not consider them to be correct on the authority of Śāyaṇa, but solely for reasons of our own.’¹ (1900: 611).

¹“Die Angaben von Śāyaṇa und Konsorten sind auch hier *quantité négligeable*, zum einen Teil sind sie falsch; wo sie zum anderen Teil richtig sind, können wir erst hinterher herauserkennen, nachdem wir unsererseits des Richtigen uns bemächtigt haben, und dann werden wir sie nicht um der Autorität des Śāyaṇa willen, sondern allein aus unseren eigenen Gründen als richtig betrachten.”

In a letter in response to my *grāvan* paper the eminent Viennese linguist Manfred Mayrhofer agreed, describing the quotation from Oldenberg as “sehr beherzigenswert” ‘important to take to heart’. Professor Mayrhofer’s nineteenth-century predecessor in the attempt to construct a Rigvedic lexicon, Rudolph Roth, had put it even more strongly than Oldenberg half a century earlier, at the end of his edition of Yāska’s *Nirukta*:

‘Interpretation can lay upon itself no heavier fetters than by believing in the infallibility of these guides, or in the existence of a valuable tradition supposed to have been enjoyed by them.’ (1852: 219)²

Parpola: ‘Heaven and Earth’ or ‘ritual pressing planks’?

I was referred to the work of Asko Parpola by the Cambridge Department of Sanskrit in 2002, when I visited them in search of someone with whom I might be able to discuss the Rigvedic lexicon. Professor Parpola is by background a scholar of the later ritual texts, and is a confident disputant, giving two instances where he claims that I am “clearly quite wrong”. The first is the case of the word *grāvan*, the subject of my 2001 word study. The second will be discussed in Appendix B.

I did not, as Parpola puts it, “accuse other scholars of sloppy research and cocksureness”. But dismissing my very different interpretation of the word *grāvan* on the basis of the brief summary published here, without having read the arguments contained in the paper in which I review all of its fifty-six occurrences, surely comes close. Parpola makes no apology for repeatedly resorting to the later tradition in defence of the usual interpretation: “in later Vedic texts... takes place in later Vedic ritual... known from the later ritual... the counterpart of the later Grāvaṣṭut... in the later Soma sacrifice”. But is he actually looking at the text of the *Rigveda*? He quotes the first two lines of 1.28, gives the traditional interpretation, then continues: “The next verse speaks of the two planks used in soma pressing (*adhīṣavanīyā*). The last verse of the hymn describes taking the remaining Soma from these

²“Die Wedenerklärung kann sich keine lästigeren Fesseln anlegen als den Glauben an die Unfehlbarkeit dieser Führer oder an eine werthvolle Tradition, in deren Genuss sie gestanden hätten”.

pressing planks...” But the dual form in the last verse is from *camū*, a word that is entirely unrelated to *adhīṣavanīyā*, the *hapax legomenon* that he refers to in verse 2. In the only other occurrence of the word *camū* in the first two books of the *Rigveda*, at 1.164.33, the Witzel/Gotō translation follows Geldner in explaining the same form, *camūvos*, as “Himmel und Erde” ‘Heaven and Earth’. So does *camūvos* mean ‘Heaven and Earth’, or Parpola’s rather different ‘two pressing planks’? The word *camū* is included in my appended list of words, whose meaning, I suggest, is in need of review.

Linguists who have read my study of the contexts in which the word *grāvan* occurs have been more open to argument. Winfred Lehmann wrote in reply to the paper: “You have made your point fully. After your detailed examination of the occurrences of *grāvan*, it is quite clear that the previous translations were wrong. I fully agree with your interpretation” (*pers. comm.* 2002). Parpola refers, in defence of the traditional interpretation, to Professor Manfred Mayrhofer’s entry for the word in his *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen*. But Mayrhofer’s dictionary was published some years before I wrote my paper. Professor Mayrhofer had read the paper before I submitted it for publication (I mentioned above his endorsement of Oldenberg’s strictures). He described it as ‘very necessary and useful’, and, more importantly, invited me to take the argument further. It was as a result of Manfred Mayrhofer’s encouragement that I drew the major conclusions to which the study of this important word inevitably leads.³

Mumm: Sophisticated Poetry or Ritual Riddle?

Professor Mumm’s comment demonstrates the reaction of an established scholar to a new approach.

“It seems absolutely impossible and almost ridiculous to deny the riddle and multilayer character of many hymns and the metaphorical character of nearly all hymns in the RV.”

³“Ich glaube, daß Ihre ‘reconsideration of the traditional interpretation’ von *grāvan* – sehr nötig und nützlich ist; Oldenbergs Worte über ‘Sāyana und Konsorten’ sind sehr beherzigenswert. Ich glaube, es ist sehr wichtig, daß Sie *tunnó abhīṣtutaḥ* in RV 9,67,13 als ‘grammatically parallel’ aufzufassen versuchen. Darf ich anregen, daß Sie an das Ende dieser so ausführlichen Darlegung noch ein SUMMARY anfügen?” (*pers. comm.* 2001)

Professor Mumm is somewhat at a disadvantage in not having read my earlier publications (although I was pleased to see that he uses our online text in quoting from the *Rigveda*). While consistently arguing that Vedic scholarship is mistaken in its belief that this sophisticated poetry, compiled over many centuries by many different authors, is deliberately puzzling, I am far from denying the metaphorical nature of its language. It is precisely as a result of the inability of the earliest scholars to recognise subtle and abstract use of language that they misunderstood a large proportion of its vocabulary, and consequently the fundamental nature of the poems. The use of the verb, in particular, was regularly misinterpreted as belonging to the external, physical world, rather than to the internal world of sensation and intellect. This, while appearing to uphold the traditional ritual interpretation of parts of the text, has rendered much of it incomprehensible. In my *grāvan* paper I gave examples of the metaphorical use of a number of verbs, among them \sqrt{bhur} , \sqrt{bhr} , \sqrt{nas} , \sqrt{grabh} , \sqrt{yuj} , and \sqrt{tud} , and the passages that I quote illustrate how the traditional insistence upon a literal interpretation of the verb consistently turns conceptual sophistication into nonsense (Thomson 2001b: 306, 312-313, 315, 331-333, 333-339, 343-344). Further examples of this, from $\sqrt{pā}$, $\sqrt{pī}$, \sqrt{duh} and $\sqrt{añj}$, are given in the last lesson of my course on the language of the *Rigveda*, *Ancient Sanskrit Online* (Thomson & Slocum 2006a). Professor Mumm criticizes ‘A Still Undeciphered Text’ because “the *Rigveda* is seen only in a negative way”. But this is far from being the case. I am seeing sophisticated poetry, where Vedic tradition has only ever seen a puzzling collection of ritual enigmas.

Mumm’s preference for the translation ‘sacrificial drink’ for *svadhā* at 1.144.2 illustrates the point. He embraces the ritual interpretation of Indian tradition, even though no modern translator agrees with him.⁴ He finds it difficult to accept the word in its abstract sense, something like ‘unique

⁴Professor Mumm may not be aware of the contextual reason for this consensus in the last verse of this poem, in the word *svādhāvānt* (the accent is irregularly placed):

*agne juṣāsva prāti harya tād vāco
māndra svādhāva ṛtajāta sūkrataḥ*

O Agni, enjoy, delight in this address,
Pleasant one, having *svadhā*, born of Truth, all-wise.

powers',⁵ in the context of the verb $\sqrt{dhā}$ 'suck'. "What is", he asks, "the exact meaning of this word in the context of Agni, water and sucking?"

But literature is full of the sucking of abstract qualities. The *OED*'s entry for *suck* gives a rich range of metaphorical uses in English, from both poetry and prose: writers through history have sucked patience, knowledge, advantage, experience, wisdom, atheism, light, courage, strength. Sometimes the parallel with the literal sense of the verb is spelled out, "Were not I thine only nurse,/ I would say thou had suck'd wisdom from thy teat" (*Romeo and Juliet*), and sometimes not: "In travailing in one Country he shall sucke the Experience of many" (Bacon's *Essays*). Nor of course is the metaphor confined to English: Cicero famously sucked error, and Professor Mumm's countryman Friedrich Schiller rose to particularly synaesthetic heights in *Die Freundschaft*:

Muß ich nicht aus deinen Flammenaugen
Meiner Wollust Widerstrahlen saugen?

In the case of the example that Professor Mumm gives, *Rigveda* 1.144.2, the parallel with the literal meaning may underlie the sense: Agni is described several times as *apām gárbhaḥ* 'the offspring of the waters', as well as *ūrjáyann apśú antár* 'gathering strength among the waters' (2.35.7). I suggest the translation,

When he dwelt diffused in the lap of waters
Then he sucked in the unique powers by means of which he goes

Professor Mumm however prefers to understand the passage to mean "Agni sucked in the sacrificial drinks", and who am I to argue with him? But it should be stressed that in making this choice he is the one who is denying the metaphorical sophistication of the text, not me.

There are other places in the *Rigveda* where the use of the verb $\sqrt{dhā}$ is similarly abstract. In the first verse of 1.95 the poet again depicts Agni as nourished by his environment, here *náktoṣāsā*, the goddesses Night and Dawn. The form of the

⁵'Godlike powers' Griffith, 'pouvoirs autonomes' Renou, 'sobstvennye sily' Elizarenkova, 'Eigenkräfte' Geldner, 'Selbstbestimmungskräfte' Witzel/Gotō.

verb is causative, with preverb *úpa*. Note *svadhávant* ‘with unique power’ in the third line (see footnote 4 above):

duvé vírūpe carataḥ suárthe
anyányā vatsám úpa dhāpayete
hárir anyásyām bhávati svadhávāñ
chukró anyásyām dadṛṣe suvárcāḥ

Two, different in form, follow a noble course.
 One first, and then the other, they nourish the yearling.⁶
 Of the first he is golden, with unique power,
 Of the other appears ever pure-bright, radiant

The *duvé vírūpe* ‘two different in form’ are described a number of times in the *Rigveda*. They are sisters:

aruśáya duhitārā vírūpe
stíbhīr anyā pípiśé súro anyā

Daughters, different in form, of the flaming one,
 One adorns herself with stars, the other is the sun’s
 (6.49.3)

Supplying ‘cows’ to the first line of 1.95, as the recent Witzel/Gotō translation does,⁷ and then having to explain in a footnote that Night and Dawn are pictured as cows, is an example of the unfortunate outcome of an overly literal interpretation of the verb.

Other parts of Professor Mumm’s comment are puzzling. He says that he has not read my word studies, but then that my argument about the meaning of *vakṣáñā* requires me “to explain how this meaning fits into the various contexts”, which is what my paper on the subject does (Thomson 2004a). He urges me to refer to the recent Witzel/Gotō translation, but dismisses its interpretation in the only example that he gives. He believes, as I do, that “only a careful and cautious discussion of each single detail will lead to a better understanding of the *Rigveda*”, yet is apparently happy to accept my very different translations of *puroḷás* and *tiróahnyam* on the basis of the summaries presented in my latest paper.

⁶For *vatsà* see Appendix A.

⁷“Zwei ungleichfarbige (Kühe) wandeln, einem schönen Ziel folgend, Eine um die andere säugen sie ihr Kalb (den Agni).”

And despite accepting my arguments about the meaning of these two words, he continues to maintain that “without the autochthonous Indian tradition European scholars would never have managed to get an understanding of the Rigveda at all.” But that tradition has led western scholars hopelessly astray in these two cases. If, like Professor Mumm, you accept my arguments about the meaning of *puroḷās* and *tiróahnyam*, you have *ipso facto* to accept that Indian tradition can be seriously misleading. Look what nonsense the traditional interpretation of *tiróahnyam* makes of the poetry of 8.35.19-21, quoted in my paper.

Professor Mumm agrees that “only study of the use of a word can determine its meaning”, then suggests that there is another way, which is etymology. But while etymology may help by suggesting a possible meaning, its suggestions always need to be confirmed by the contexts. Benfey’s postulation about *svadhā* was only of value because it was confirmed by Max Müller’s discovery that the abstract sense fitted the Rigvedic contexts; and it was only necessary because scholars had previously been totally misled by the native tradition. Professor Mumm’s example of the apparent cognateness of Homeric *ἄνθος* and Rigvedic *ándhas* illustrates etymology’s limitations. The parallel, and ultimate etymon that he suggests, is no help in either of the passages, 8.78.1 and 7.96.2, that I cite in my paper. Jean Aitchison’s first published paper was a study of Homeric *ἄνθος* (Aitchison 1963), predating the paper Mumm mentions by fifteen years. Professor Aitchison, now Emeritus Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication at Oxford, had also concluded that looking at the cognates was unhelpful, and she was puzzling over the meaning of the Greek word, not the Sanskrit one. She lays out her method at the beginning of the paper with a quotation from Benveniste: “Les notions sémantiques... appellent d’abord une description des emplois qui seuls permettent de définir un sens” (1954: 264). Here are yet two more eminent linguists urging that only a review of the contexts can determine meaning.

Professor Mumm, finally, appears regularly to accept my arguments, and yet to miss the point of those arguments. He agrees, for example, that there is little evidence for Rigvedic ruins, but asks “what is to be deduced from this scarceness?” The point I am making is that Professors Witzel and Parpola

have drawn a significant conclusion from the supposed ruins, that has had a profoundly misleading influence on Indo-European scholarship at large. Mumm similarly agrees with me that *samudrāt* in 7.95.2 means ‘from the *samudrā*’ not ‘to the *samudrā*’. He apparently finds this obvious. Why, then, has nobody stepped in, long ago, to put a stop to heated argument, including argument appearing in the pages of this journal, about whether or not this verse provides evidence that the ancient Sarasvati flowed to the sea? Archaeologists and historians who have been citing this passage for decades, including eminent scholars like the retired Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, B.B. Lal, and the Harvard Professor of Sanskrit, Michael Witzel, would surely have been grateful to have had the mistranslation put right, after centuries of misunderstanding.

Zimmer’s Challenge

As Professor Zimmer writes, he is not personally involved in what he calls “Vedic research”, and therefore does not comment on the detail of my arguments. But he throws down a gauntlet. “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.”

Professor Zimmer might like to look, for retractions of ‘dark’ passages, at the ninety-seven examples contained in my four published word studies (2001b, 2004a, 2005a, 2005b); and for continuous text in translation, at my ten-lesson online course, in which each lesson is based on a passage from the *Rigveda* (Thomson & Slocum 2006a).⁸ Providing a meaningful translation of a whole poem ‘of average darkness’ would have little value in itself. If a poem currently appears ‘dark’ it is because it contains mistranslations. The retranslation of these words would need to be accompanied by studies of all the contexts in which they occur in order to convince the

⁸From a three-verse poem in Lesson 1, to eleven verses in Lesson 10. There are also retractions of ‘dark’ passages among the 360 examples used in illustration of the grammar points described in the lessons. Professor Zimmer might also be interested in reading the introduction to our online text, to see the kind of corrections that needed to be made to the metrically restored text (and see footnote 13 below).

sceptical reader. Such word studies would almost certainly have to include studies of similarly mistranslated words, occurring in the other contexts. The work would grow exponentially. It would become enormous. If, on the other hand, the new translation were to be part of a meaningful and consistent retranslation of the complete text, there would be no need for 'pièces justificatives', as Max Müller described them (1891: x). The text would be liberated to speak for itself.

My response to Professor Zimmer's challenge, therefore, consists of two examples. The first is only two lines long, but even in the course of retranslating these two lines the requirement for extensive 'pièces justificatives' will be apparent. The second example, however, is different. All the necessary evidence will be placed before the reader.

Professor Zimmer refers to Witzel and Gotō's recent publication as "the most important event in R̥gvedic Studies since decades". I am therefore using it to supply the 'dark' interpretations of Vedic tradition. It operates entirely within the current paradigm, viewing the *R̥gveda* through the medium of the later ritual texts. Perhaps the simplest indication of this is their plate number 7, the photograph of two sacrificial drinking vessels, with the caption "*āśvina graha*". This collocation, *āśvina graha*, comes from the text known as the *Śathapatha Brāhmaṇa*. It is not to be found, and would have no place, in the poems of the *R̥gveda*.

The Witzel/Gotō translation inevitably takes no account of my word studies. My explanation of *tiróahnyam* as an adverb, for example, may convince the impartial reader because it makes sense of the contexts, but this radical departure from tradition cannot be entertained by Vedic scholarship. If you accept any of my arguments, then you have also to accept that the scientific approach has validity, and that it is possible that the *R̥gveda* makes sense. At the earliest occurrence of the word *tiróahnyam* in the poems, therefore, Professor Witzel translates the last line of 1.45, *tám pāta tiróahniyam*, in the traditional way, "trinkt ihn, der einen Tag über!" 'drink it, that a day long!' He provides the usual explanation from the *Kātyāyana Śrauta Sūtra*, "*tiróahnya-* ist der Soma, der über die Nacht gestanden hat und den Aśvins geopfert wird" '*tiróahnya-* is Soma that has stood overnight and was offered to the Aśvins'. Neither the fact that this translation fails to make sense, nor that 1.45 is addressed to Agni, not to the Aśvins, is

considered material.

My first ‘dark’ example is the first two lines of 1.22.14. The Witzel/Gotō translation is given alongside, together with an English version below their translation.

*táyor id ghytávat páyo
vípṛā rihanti dhítibhiḥ*

“Nach deren butteröliger Milch
lecken die begeisterten (Dichter) durch ihre
Eingebungen.” (Witzel/Gotō)

*‘At their butter-oily milk
The enthused (poets) lick with their inspirations’*

(A brief explanation of the context is necessary here. The first word, the demonstrative *táyoḥ* [*táyor* when followed by a vowel] ‘of those two’, refers back to *mahí dyaúḥ pṛthiví ca* ‘great heaven and earth’ in the previous verse. The emphatic particle *id* is untranslated in the Witzel/Gotō version. The last word in the passage, translated “Eingebungen” ‘inspirations’, is the instrumental plural of *dhítí*, literally ‘thought’.)

Translations of this kind pervade the Witzel/Goto version, but I find them remarkable both for meaninglessness, and for lack of poetic charm. They stand out as bizarrely improbable in the context of the contemplative lyricism of the poems. Like Chomsky’s “colourless green ideas sleep furiously” (1957: 15), although grammatical, they don’t make sense. I respect poetry, and am naturally disposed to find it meaningful. How can poets ‘lick with their inspirations?’ And what is this ‘butter-oily milk’ of great heaven and earth? How likely is it that this is what our ancient poetic predecessors intended?

The apparent obscurity of these two lines is the result of three mistranslations, mistranslations that have never been questioned by Vedic scholars. The belief that *páyas* means ‘milk’ is based on the assumption that the verb \sqrt{pi} , from which the noun derives, has the specific cow-related sense of the later ritual texts, ‘swell with milk’. In section 50.2 of *Ancient Sanskrit Online* (Thomson & Slocum 2006a) I quoted some examples of the different, abstract use of this verb in the Rigvedic poems, ‘swell with plenty, yield abundantly’. The first line of the text of Lesson 3 in the course, in which two

mountain streams are described as ‘swelling with *páyas*’, supplied an example of the use of the noun. The *páyas* ‘plenty’ of the river Sarasvati, similarly, is described in the last verse of 6.61, quoted at the end of ‘A Still Undeciphered Text’.

The word *ghṛtá* in the first line (*ghṛtá-vaṭ* means ‘possessing *ghṛtá*’) does not mean, despite the insistence of Vedic tradition, ‘ghee’ (Witzel’s “Butteröl”) in the *Rigveda*. This might be apparent to the unprejudiced reader simply on the basis of the passage quoted, but since *ghṛtá* is a word of frequent occurrence it illustrates the need, described above, for a complete word study in defence of any retranslation. The word occurs both nominally and adjectivally. Scholars without access to the text itself, but armed with the recent Witzel/Gotō translation, might like themselves to review the contexts in the first two books for the traditional translation ‘ghee’. The occurrences are at 1.72.3b, 1.84.18a, 1.85.3d, 1.87.2d, 1.93.8b and 10b, 1.110.6b, 1.125.4d and 5c, 1.127.1f, 1.134.6g, 1.135.7d, 1.153.1c, 1.157.2b, 1.164.47d, 1.168.8d, 1.188.5c, 2.3.4c and 11ab, 2.5.6b, 2.10.4a, 2.35.11d and 14c. Professor Zimmer might himself like to perform this exercise. He will then be in a position to reach his own conclusion about the probable meaning of the word *ghṛtá* in the poems. I suggest ‘productivity’.

The Rigvedic verb \sqrt{rih} does not mean ‘lick’. I referred in passing to this mistranslation in my *Times Literary Supplement* article (2004b: 14.) The translation ‘lick’ is based on theory, not on a study of the contexts: \sqrt{rih} is believed to be the equivalent of the later root \sqrt{lih} ‘lick’. But the form in which it most frequently occurs is the third person plural, *rihānti*, as in the passage quoted, and the usual subject of this form is either ‘thoughts’, or, as here, ‘poets/singers’ (with thoughts).⁹ Comparison of the contexts suggests an entirely different interpretation, not the bizarre and alienating ‘lick’, but something like ‘reach out to’ or ‘delight in’. I suggest the translation:

⁹The subject is *matáyas* ‘thoughts’ at 1.186.7, 3.41.5, 9.85.11, 9.86.31, and 9.86.46. In addition to the passage under discussion, where the subject of the verb is *vīprās* (*dhītībhis*) ‘poets (with thoughts)’, the subject is *vāṇīs* ‘singers’ at 10.123.3, and *vīprās* (*matībhis*) ‘poets (with thoughts)’ at 10.123.1. ‘Poets’, the *vīprās* of verse 39, appear similarly to be the subject of the verb at 9.86.43.

In the productive plenty of those two (heaven and earth)
Poets indeed delight with their thoughts

Professor Zimmer, in challenging me to demonstrate my approach, called for me to give, in addition, a “comprehensive interpretation” of my new translation. But none of course is necessary where the translation makes sense.

My second example is even shorter. The example that I have just given requires full word studies of the three retranslated words, *páyas*, *ghrtá*, and \sqrt{rih} , to be convincing. But the next example needs no such word studies. It concerns just two words of a three-word simile. The other two occurrences of the first word are given below; the second is a *hapax legomenon* and the meaning is unknown, although I suggest a possible translation at the end of this discussion.

The simile is from the fourth verse of 1.92, a poem addressed to the goddess Uṣas.

ádhi pésāṃsi vapate nṛtúr iva
ápomute vákṣa usréva bārjaham

“Sie legt sich wie eine Tänzerin Farben auf.
Sie deckt ihre Brust auf wie eine rötliche (Kuh) ihr
Euter.” (Witzel/Gotō)

‘She puts on colours like a dancer.
She uncovers her breast like a reddish (cow) her udder.’

I would translate *pésas* in the first line differently (they give the same translation, ‘colour’ for the different word *rūpá* in 1.95.1, quoted above in footnote 7). But this is a minor matter. My concern is with the last three words in the passage, *usréva* [*usrá iva*] *bārjaham*, in the Witzel/Gotō translation, “like a reddish (cow) her udder”. The particle *iva* ‘like’ introduces the simile, and the last word, *bārjaha*, occurs only here. No translator has ever questioned the strange juxtaposition of the two images in this verse: the first of Dawn adorning herself like a dancer, the second, less engagingly, of the goddess as a cow displaying her udder.¹⁰ Is it possible that

¹⁰“Like a dancing girl, she puts on bright ornaments; she uncovers her breast as a cow reveals her swollen udder” (O’Flaherty); “Elle met sur elle des ornements comme une danseuse; elle découvre sa poitrine comme une vache sa mamelle” (Renou - the reference to his translation in the index in the

these translations, ‘reddish (cow)’ and ‘udder’, could be incorrect?

The first word of this simile, the nominative singular feminine form *usrā*, comes from the Sanskrit root *ṣvas* ‘shine’, and is closely related to Dawn’s name, Uṣas. M.L. West, in his recent study *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, describes the Indo-European etymology of these two words:

“Dawn, like the sun, has names in many languages that continue an Indo-European prototype. It is based on a verbal root **h₂us/*h₂eus* meaning ‘glow (red), flame’ (also seen in Latin *aurum* < **ausom*, Old Prussian *ausis*, ‘gold’), extended by a suffix *-ós* or alternatively *-rós*. From these come Vedic *uśás* and *usrā*... Greek *ἄως*, *αὔως*, *ἠώς*, *ἔως*, Latin *aurora* (**ausōs-ā*)... and so on.” (2007: 217)

The root is a productive one in Ancient Sanskrit, generating not only *uśás* and *usrā*, but also other feminine forms, *ús*, *uśā*, *uśí*, and *usríyā*, all with subtle gradations of meaning relating to the light of dawn.

The word *usrā* occurs most frequently in the plural, as at 2.23.2, which is addressed to the god of prayer:

*usrā [usrās] iva sūriyo jyótiṣā mahó
vísveṣām íj janitá bráhmaṇām asi*

As the mighty sun with light the morning rays
So you are indeed the source of all prayers.

The nominative feminine singular form *usrā* occurs three times altogether in the *Rigveda*. Other occurrences of *usrā* listed in Lubotsky’s concordance are dual forms, with the exception of the plural in 2.23.2 quoted above, which is included incorrectly.¹¹

Witzel/Gotō translation (2007: 880) is incorrect; the poem is in volume 3 not volume 8 of *Études Védiques et Pāṇinéennes* (and something has gone rather wrong with their printing of the title on p.879, “paṇinéennes”); “Sie legt sich wie eine Tänzerin bunte Farben auf; sie enthüllt ihre Brust, wie die Kuh das volle Euter.” (Geldner); “She, like a dancer, puts her broided garments on; as a cow yields her udder so she bares her breast” (Griffith). “[Dawn] bares her bosom as a cow yields her udder” (Wilson).

¹¹Perhaps because Aufrecht, exceptionally, omits to give the Pada text’s analysis of the sandhi here.

The verse under discussion, 1.92.4, is the first appearance of the form. The second is a passing reference in a poem that Grassmann (1876-1877) considered to be a collection of fragments, although this is not necessarily the case:

*usrā veda vāsūnām
mārtiyasya devī āvasaḥ*

The morning ray (or Dawn), the divine one,
Knows of the benefits, mankind's help (9.58.2)

The third occurrence is in verse 4 of 10.35, a poem of considerable beauty describing the worship of the poets at the first light of day. I am giving verses 4 and 5 for context; *usrā* is in the first line. The refrain runs through ten verses of the poem.

*iyāṃ na usrā prathamā sudevīyaṃ
revāt sanībhyo revātī vī uchatu
āre manyūṃ durvidātrasya dhīmahi
suastī agnīm samidhānām imahe*

*prā yāḥ sísrate sūriyasya rāsmibhir
jyótir bhārantīr uśāso víuṣṭiṣu
bhadrá no adyá śrávase vī uchata
suastī agnīm samidhānām imahe*

May this first, treasure-laden morning ray
Richly shine out to us, the fortunate, a heavenly boon.
May we keep far from us the anger of the envious.
We approach the kindling fire for wellbeing.

Dawns, that stream forth with the sun's beams
Bringing light at break of day,
May you shine out today good things for glory to us.
We approach the kindling fire for wellbeing.

At the first appearance of *usrā*, however, at 1.92.4, Vedic tradition tells us that the word describes a cow. The reason for this, other than feminine gender, is unclear. There is a similar tendency among modern scholars to translate another word from the same verbal root, the secondary formation *usríyā*, also as 'cow'. An example arose in the Lesson 4 text of my online course, 7.81, another poem addressed to Dawn. At the beginning of the second verse the sun is described as sending

out *usríyās* as it rises. Vedic scholars understands this to mean ‘cows’: “Die Sonne treibt gleichzeitig die Kühe aus” (Geldner); “Le soleil émet les vaches en même temps qu’il se lève” (Renou); “korov” ‘cows’ (Elizarenkova). This is perhaps the outcome of growing familiarity with the later Vedic texts, in which cows figure largely. The nineteenth-century English translators, Horace Hayman Wilson and Ralph Griffith, had followed Sāyaṇa in translating *usríyās*, as I do, ‘beams’, or ‘rays’. To quote my translation in the online course:

The sun, at the same time, sends out beams,
Rising, a flaming star.

But to go back to *usrá* in 1.92.4. I have chosen this example because it shows that neither the comparison of contexts nor etymology – and least of all probability – carries any weight with Vedic scholars in their translations of the *Rigveda*, compared with the native tradition.

The word *usrá*, as we have seen, comes from the Indo-European root that means ‘glow (red), flame’, and elsewhere means ‘morning ray’. The meaning of *bárjaha* is unknown, but could this be an occasion where etymology might, as Professor Mumm suggests, ‘give an hint’? In the *Altindische Grammatik* Albert Debrunner suggests a derivation for *bárjaha*: “v. *bárjaha*-aus -*bha*- zu *brhánt*-, also “hoch”?... sonst als “Euter” erklärt.” (1954: 747). Professor Mayrhofer, similarly, hazards a derivation from **bherǵh* ‘hoch’ for *bárjaha*. This proposed etymology, with the underlying sense ‘high’, of course founders on the traditional translation, ‘udder’. One can only guess at the meaning of *hapax legomena*, but I would like to propose a different translation for this simile. How about

Dawn reveals her breast, as the morning ray Mount Barjaha

This translation follows etymology, and is consistent with the other occurrences of *usrá*. It also makes sense. Indeed, the sense that it makes could be described as appropriately poetic. In my view, finding the numerous cows of Vedic tradition somewhat wearisome, this guess is better than the other. Which does the impartial reader prefer?

Scholars in other fields

At the beginning of this reply I wrote that “attention to

the meaning of the *Rigveda* has fallen out of every curriculum". It is not only Vedic scholars who unquestioningly accept the traditional interpretation. The translation by the Oxford classicist M.L. West of the simile discussed above demonstrates this. Despite having, seven pages earlier in *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, explained the Indo-European derivation of the word *usrá*, Professor West gives the usual translation, almost apologetically: "I have cited a Vedic passage in which Uṣas arrays herself like a dancer (RV 1.92.4). The verse then takes a turn that we might not consider tasteful: 'she uncovers her breast as a cow her udder.'" (2007: 224). I agree that we do not consider this translation to be tasteful. I suggest that, like a large number of translations inherited from Vedic tradition, it is simply wrong.

The same unquestioning acceptance holds for the interpretation of \sqrt{rih} . The mid twentieth-century Vedic scholar Louis Renou had translated 9.86.46c, *aṃśúm rihanti matáyah pániṣnatam*, "les pensées-poétiques lèchent la tige miraculeuse" 'poetic thoughts lick the miraculous stalk'. The Oxford linguist Elizabeth Tucker renders the line in a similar way, "The poems lick the wonderful plant" (2002: 23). Professor Tucker explains this strange translation: "just as mother cows (in other words, the frequent RV equation *dhenú* : *mat-*) stimulate their calves by licking." This perplexing 'equation' is an example of what Professor Mumm understands to be the "riddle and multilayer character" of the poems. But the supposed Rigvedic equation of cows with thoughts is simply the result of inherited mistranslation.

Although the Vedic interpretation of \sqrt{rih} requires the acceptance of this bizarre equation in the nine passages listed above, and elsewhere leads to typically despairing cries from translators: "I can see no meaning in the verse" (Max Müller, on 8.20.21), "this stanza is very obscure" (Griffith, on 10.79.3), the translation has never been questioned. Scholars in other fields simply accept it as correct. The Cambridge classicist James Clackson, for example, in his recent introduction to Indo-European linguistics, gives "*réh-*" as the Sanskrit form in reconstructing the PIE root **leigh-* (2007: 53).

Alienating translations of this kind are not occasional, rare occurrences, they are all-pervasive. Dr. Clackson seldom refers to the *Rigveda* in his book, but he quotes, on page 166, perhaps the most familiar of Rigvedic lines, the very first:

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agním īle puróhitam, giving the traditional translation, ‘I praise Agni the domestic priest’.

The word *puróhita*, which Dr. Clackson translates ‘domestic priest’, is the past participle of the verb $\sqrt{dhā}$ ‘place’ *hitá*, with the adverb *purás* ‘in front’,¹² literally ‘placed first, set in foremost place’. Agni is regularly ‘set in foremost place’ in the poems, in various forms of the verb: (*agním*)¹³ *purás dadhé* at 1.139.1, 8.44.3 and 10.140.6, (*agním*) *dadhíre puráh* at 3.2.5 and 5.16.1, (*agním*) *purás dadhídhvám* at 6.10.1,¹⁴ as well as in the past participle, *puróhita*. The author of 5.16 explains why in his opening verse:

brhád váyo hí bhānáve
árcā deváya agnáye
yám mitráṃ ná práśastibhir
mártāso dadhíre puráh

Since there’s great vital power in light
 Sing praises to the God of Fire;
 Who, as their friend, with eulogies
 Mortals have set in foremost place.

There is no reason for the strange translation ‘domestic priest’ that Dr. Clackson gives for *puróhita* in 1.1.1, other than Vedic tradition. Where, of anywhere in the *Rigveda*, is this verb, $\sqrt{dhā}$ with *purás*, more likely to mean ‘placed first’, than in the very first line of the very first verse of the very first poem?

I praise Agni who is placed first

Approaches to decipherment

Professor Mumm believes that “if we decide against the later Indian reading of a word, we have to *demonstrate* that it misses the original Rigvedic meaning”. This approach, having to work away at Professor Roth’s fetters with a nail file, is in my view entirely mistaken. But in attempting the decipherment of this ancient poetry it is not the fetters – or the blinkers –

¹² Past participles combine with preverbs or prefixes to form compounds and lose their accent: see section 35.2 of my online course.

¹³ Incorrectly *agním* in 1.139.1 in the van Nooten and Holland text, following a misprint in Aufrecht.

¹⁴ In 5.86.5 Agni and Indra are ‘placed first’ together.

that are the chief problem. The main problem, I suggest, is lack of interest in the scholarly community at large. To quote again from my *TLS* Commentary piece:

If this ancient text, in a complex early Indo-European vernacular, had been dug up from, say, the Caspian Sea ten years ago, its discovery would have generated considerable excitement. It would have provided an opportunity for ground-breaking research. Scholars would have pored over it, comparing passages, working out the straightforward ones first and then applying what they learnt to the more difficult ones, little by little pinning down meanings – in other words, trying to decipher it in the way that texts in unfamiliar languages have always been studied. And by now we would have a fairly good idea of what it meant. (2004b: 14)

Researchers from India to America dream of deciphering the Indus script, although without expectation that the meaning of the writing on the seals is going to prove in itself to be of interest. In the *Rigveda* we have a body of highly structured poetry, from the same geographical area and probably of around the same date; poetry, that is, that predates the work of Homer by a thousand years. And yet nobody, neither in “the land of its birth” to quote the nineteenth-century Ādi Brahma Samāj again, nor anywhere else in the Indo-European speaking scholarly community, is applying scientific method to its interpretation.

Max Planck famously wrote in his autobiography that “a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.” (1950: 33-34). In the case of these ancient Indo-European poems scholarly death is not necessary. The fresh approach of a different academic group, such as classicists, would lead to significant progress with their decipherment. William Dwight Whitney had observed, quoted at the beginning of ‘A Still Undeciphered Text’, that the content of the poems “seems almost more Indo-European than Indian.” (1873:101) As scholars despair at the lack of evidence for anything in the text, they may be missing the biggest piece of evidence of all: that this is highly sophisticated poetry, and that those who came later to the Indus Valley were entirely unequipped to understand it.

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Deciphering a text is not so different from deciphering a script, or a code for that matter. It is a challenge, and the potential rewards are high. “If you think of it as a sort of crossword technique of filling in what it might be [...] You would have to work at it very, very hard and after you had done it for a few hours you wondered, you know, whether you would see anything when it was before your eyes because you were so snarled up in it. But then of course, the magic moment comes when it really works... It just feels marvellous, absolutely marvellous. I don’t think there is anything one could compare to it.” (A member of Dilly Knox’s team of cryptanalysts at Bletchley Park, quoted in Smith 1998: 31).

I came upon these ancient poems by chance, having an interest in ancient poetry and its translation. I am not furthering an academic career in writing about the *Rigveda*: I do not know of any university department in which research into its interpretation could currently belong. This extraordinary anthology should, in my view, be a respected part of our Indo-European heritage. For the moment, most of its artistry and craft lies hidden from us.

The existing lacuna in scholarship, meanwhile, affects research in other fields. Edwin Bryant, in the conclusion to *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture*, remarks on “the extreme malleability of the ‘evidence’ involved” (2001: 303). Professor Parpola’s arguments, discussed in Appendix B below, exemplify this “malleability of the ‘evidence’”.

Appendix A: List of words.

This is intended as a starting point for further research, not as a comprehensive list. The contexts in which these forty words occur in the *Rigveda* suggest that the traditional interpretation is incorrect. I have not included *hapax legomena*, as their meaning will in most cases only be reached by the study of adjacent words.

The revised interpretation of a number of words in the list has been discussed in my earlier publications. Others will become clear in due course. As Max Müller wrote in 1891, “We have to advance step by step, nay, inch by inch... My principle therefore has always been, let us translate what we can, and thus reduce the untranslatable portion to narrower and narrower limits.” (xi-xii). The crossword puzzle metaphor continues to apply.

The central and overbearing mistranslation lies in the continuing belief that the important abstract word *sóma* describes a sacrificial drink. This ancient belief draws many obscure words in the Rigvedic vocabulary into its orbit. When that major clue has been correctly retranslated, the decipherment of the text will be able to proceed more rapidly.

<i>aṃśú</i>	<i>dákṣiṇā</i>
√ <i>añj</i>	<i>dróna</i>
<i>ádri</i>	<i>dhána</i>
<i>adhvará</i>	<i>dhīśāṇā</i>
<i>ándhas</i>	<i>dhénā</i>
<i>ávya</i>	<i>nemí</i>
<i>āśír</i>	<i>paví</i>
<i>āsán</i>	<i>pavíttra</i>
<i>kaláśa</i>	<i>púr</i>
<i>kukṣí</i>	<i>médha</i>
<i>kṣírá</i>	<i>vatsá</i>
<i>khá</i>	<i>vāra</i>
<i>gábhastiyos</i>	<i>vidátha</i>
<i>gó</i> (parts of the declension)	√ <i>su</i>
<i>gotrá</i>	<i>sóma</i>
<i>gharmá</i>	<i>srúc</i>
<i>camasá</i>	<i>sruvá</i>
<i>camú</i>	<i>svádhiti</i>
<i>jaṭhára</i>	<i>sváru</i>
<i>juhú</i>	<i>svásara</i>

Appendix B: Parpola's Chariots.

Professor Parpola writes in his comment that “it is incorrect to say that the Rigveda has no evidence for the militaristic use of the chariots”, but I made no such assertion. I stressed, at the beginning of Part 2 of ‘A Still Undeciphered Text’, that I have no partisan stance in the current political controversy surrounding these ancient poems. What I wrote was that Parpola’s sentence – “When the Rigvedic tribes invaded northwestern India, they drove (*vah-*) in war-chariots (*ratha-*)” – was misleading. My concern was to draw attention to the ways in which it was misleading, and to the circumstances that allow such statements to pass unchallenged.

Parpola considers that only two examples from the text are necessary to prove his thesis that there is “strong

evidence” that the chariot was used for military purposes by the Rigvedic people. These are presumably the examples that he thinks most strongly bear out his case.

The first is 10.174.

“In Rigveda 10,174, the king asks Bṛhaspati (the charioteer of Indra) to help him ‘roll over’ his rivals.”

The god Bṛhaspati is addressed only in the first verse of 10.174, and only by his alternative name, *bráhmaṇas páti* ‘lord of prayer’. Parpola, picturing him, somewhat differently, as a chariot driver, translates the imperative in the last line literally as ‘roll over’. But he has not looked at the context. Here is the whole verse:

*abhīvar̥tēna havīṣā
yēnéndro abhīvāvṛté
tēnāsmān brahmaṇas pate
abhī rāṣṭrāya vartaya*

Forms of the verb in the last line, √*vṛt* ‘turn’ with preverb *abhī*, run through the verse: *abhī-var̥tēna* (the instrumental of an adjective coined from the verb) in line 1, *abhī-vāvṛté* (the third person singular perfect middle) in the second, concluding with *abhī vartaya* (the second person singular causative imperative) in the fourth line. Such elegant variation is a familiar poetic device. If Parpola hopes to translate the verb in the last line literally as ‘roll over’ – thinking of ‘war-chariots’ – he would have to render the verse:

With the rolling-over outpouring
With which Indra rolls over,
With it, O Lord of Prayer
Make us roll over to dominion.

While this might not stand out as particularly meaningless in the context of other Vedic translations, there is a more likely way of interpreting this passage. Monier-Williams in his dictionary explains the verb “‘to render victorious in,’ place over (dat.), RV. X, 174, 1”, and translators of the *Rigveda* have always been in agreement, understanding the use of √*vṛt* with *abhī* here to be figurative, and as meaning something like

‘triumph over’. The context makes this indisputable.¹⁵

There is no mention of a ‘chariot’ in 10.174. But the Rigvedic *rātha* does occur in the second passage Professor Parpola cites, 10.103.4. In this verse the poet appeals to the same god Br̥haspati, *asmākam edhi avitā rāthānām* ‘be helper of our *rāthas*!’ The *rātha*, usually a heavenly vehicle, is clearly not so in this case.

Again, however, Professor Parpola needs to consider this passage in its Rigvedic context. This is not the only place in which the possessive *asmākam* ‘our’ is found with *rātha*. The two words also occur together at 1.102.5, 2.31.1, 4.31.14, 7.32.11, 8.45.9 and 10.26.9. In one of these, 7.32.11, *rātha* is again in the plural. But in all the others it appears in the singular, ‘our *rātha*’. This makes Professor Parpola’s military interpretation rather less apparent.

Geldner notes to his translation of *rātha* in the last of these six passages, 10.26.9: ‘the chariot, as frequently elsewhere, is to be understood figuratively as of the official role of the singer’.¹⁶ This observation dates back to 1893, when Ernst Windisch, in a study of *Rigveda* 2.31, the second occurrence of the collocation, had concluded that ‘the terms relating to a wagon journey are to be understood only figuratively... the word *ratha*, occurring in most verses, is a figurative term for *stoma* (‘praise-song’)’ (1893: 139).¹⁷ Geldner agrees with Windisch, noting “der Wagen ist das Loblied” ‘the chariot is the praise-song’, to his translation of 2.31.1. In the 2007 Witzel/Gotō translation the majority of the notes are taken from previous translators, and they quote Geldner’s note to this verse.

The first appearance of the words *asmākam* and *rātha* together in the *Rigveda* is at 1.102. In this poem, as Geldner explains, “Die vielen Hinweise auf Kampf und Sport sind wohl

¹⁵“Eyu stelai nas, o Brakhmanaspati, prevoskhodiashchimi (vse) – dlia gospodstva!” ‘With it, O Brahmanaspati, make us transcending (all) – for dominion!’ (Elizarenkova); “mit dem gib uns, Brahmanaspati, zur Herrschaft die Oberhand!” ‘with it give us, Brahmanaspati, the upper hand for power!’ (Geldner); “with this, O Brahmanaspati, let us attain to royal sway” (Griffith).

¹⁶“Der Wagen wie oft bildlich zu verstehen von der Amtstätigkeit des Sängers”.

¹⁷“die auf eine Wagenfahrt bezüglichen Ausdrücke nur bildlich zu verstehen sind... das in den meisten Versen auftretende Wort *ratha* is ein bildlicher Ausdruck für *stoma*.”

nur bildlich zu verstehen” ‘the many references to battle and sport are probably only to be taken as figurative’. Witzel and Gotō, once again, repeat this comment in their footnote. Professor Parpola’s passage, 10.103.4, is the final occurrence of the collocation in the text. In this verse, in which it is Bṛhaspati, the god of prayer, who is invoked to ‘be the helper of our *rāthas*’, it needs to be borne in mind that the context may be similarly metaphorical.

As it happens, however, Professor Parpola’s interpretation of these two passages derives from a later text, as the paper to which he refers in his comment (Parpola 2004-05) makes clear. I am quoting his description of the later Vedic passage at some length, because it also helps explain why scholars steeped in the later texts insist that the past participle *purohita* describes a priestly figure: “The Āśvalāyana-Gṛhyasūtra (3,12) details the royal *purohita*’s duties in the battle. Standing behind the chariot, he makes the king put on the coat of mail [...]. Then the *purohita* mounts the chariot and makes the king repeat the hymn Rgveda 10,174, in which the king asks Bṛhaspati to help him roll over his rivals. In the battle hymn called *apratiratha-*, which the *purohita* recites next, Bṛhaspati, the charioteer and *purohita* of Indra, the king of the gods, is asked to ‘fly around’ in his chariot, warding off enemies and helping our chariots.” (Parpola 2004-05: 16) Once again, the authors of the later Vedic text failed to understand the poetry and metaphorical sophistication of the *Rigveda*. In addition, this passage explains the source of Parpola’s puzzling depiction of Bṛhaspati as “Indra’s charioteer”: the description is not to be found in the *Rigveda*.

This is not to say that Bṛhaspati’s *rātha* is not portrayed by the poets. The image is explained in the third verse of 2.23, one of the eleven poems devoted entirely to his praise. I’m giving the first three verses for context (the second verse, as it happens, contains the plural occurrence of *usrā* ‘morning ray’ mentioned earlier):

*gaṇānām tvā gaṇāpatiṃ havāmahe
kaviṃ kavinām upamāśravastamam
jyeṣṭarājam brāhmaṇām brahmaṇas pata
ā naḥ śṛṇvānn ūtibhiḥ sīda sādānam*

*devās cit te asuriya prācetaso
bṛhaspate yajñīyam bhāgām ānaśuḥ*

*usrā iva sūriyo jyōtiṣā mahó
vísveṣām ij janitā brāhmaṇām asi*

*á vibádhyā parirápas támāṃsi ca
jyōtiṣmantam rátham ṛtasya tiṣṭhasi
bṛhaspate bhímám amitradámbhanam
rakṣoháṇam gotrabhídam suvarvidam*

Great lord of hosts, we call upon you
Wisest of sages, most famed of all,
Best king of prayers, O Lord of Prayer,
Listening, be seated here with helps for us.

Even the observant gods, O Lord Bṛhaspati,
Through you find a share of worship.
As the mighty sun with light the morning rays
So you are indeed the source of all prayers.

Having banished evasions and shadows
You ascend the luminous chariot of Truth –
A formidable, foe-quelling chariot, Bṛhaspati,
Fiend-destroying, *gotrá*-cleaving¹⁸, finding the light of day.

The third verse is clearly echoed (*amitradámbhanam rakṣoháṇam / rakṣohámítrāṃ apabádhamānah*) in 10.103.4, the late poem to which Parpola refers.¹⁹ The ‘chariot’ of the Lord of Prayer is a *ṛtasya ráthah*, ‘a chariot of Truth’ that brings light where before there was darkness. It is by prayer that Bṛhaspati helps us to overcome our enemies, not by “rolling over” them. His chariot is a figurative chariot: *ráthas* in the *Rigveda* often are.

I leave aside Professor Parpola’s arguments drawn from archaeology, which have no place in a discussion of the Rigvedic evidence. But I disagree with his interpretation of the passages from the *Rigveda* that he lists at the end of his comment (1.40.7; 1.131.5; 1.165.8; 2.21.5; 10.49.9 and 10.104.8) which he instances as giving evidence of the authors of the poems “taking possession of the rivers one by one.” He is referring specifically to 1.131.5, where the poet describes mankind’s winning of the rivers *anyām-anyām* ‘one after the other’ with the help of Indra. There is another way

¹⁸For *gotrà* see Appendix A. The traditional translation is ‘cow stall.’

¹⁹Both Parpola’s examples, 10.103 and 10.174, belong to the “Popular Rigveda”, poems added later to the original collection.

of understanding this ‘winning of the rivers’, which is that it describes the liberation of the streams for mankind from the monster Vṛtra, Indra’s most celebrated deed. In one of the verses that Parpola lists, 1.165.8, it cannot be interpreted in any other way. The speaker is Indra:

*vádhīm vṛtrám maruta indriyéṇa
svéna bhámena taviṣó babhūvân
ahám etá mánave viśváścandrāḥ
sugá apás cakara vájrabāhuḥ*

I slew Vṛtra, O Storm Gods, with Indra-might,
Being strong with my own power;
It was I, weapon-armed, who made for man
These all-gleaming, easy-running waters.

But even for the reader who prefers to see the historical, military sense that Parpola urges in 1.131.5, there is no indication that ‘one by one’ means moving from west to east, which is his reason for referring to the verse. It could just as well mean from east to west. The orientation, as Parpola says, depends upon “the old hypothesis of King Divodāsa’s birth in Arachosia (cf. *Rigveda* 6.61)” – a hypothesis that Arthur Berriedale Keith described, nearly a century ago, as “resting on too weak a foundation to be accepted as even plausible.” (1922: 87)

Parpola’s reference to *Rigveda* 6.61 at this point, the poem to the river Sarasvati from which I quoted towards the end of ‘A Still Undeciphered Text’, is puzzling. There is no mention of Arachosia anywhere in the *Rigveda*. Is Professor Parpola perhaps confusing *Rigveda* 6.61 with the ancient reference to the city of the Arachosians, “Arachosiorum oppidum”, in 6.61 of Pliny’s *Historia Naturalis*?

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