

# Viṣṇu's Highest Stride

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Despite the fact that there are few Vedic hymns dedicated to him, Viṣṇu has always been considered as one of the most important gods in Hinduism. Viṣṇu's importance is apparent in the well-known Vedic myth of the three strides. This myth, in which the god divides/measures the universe, practically shows Viṣṇu as a supreme creator-god. Through this divine act, Viṣṇu reaches the highest point in the universe. Later (purāṇic) traditions explicitly show Viṣṇu as dwelling at the North Pole of the celestial vault. The Vedic evidence shows that these traditions are older, going back to the Vedas themselves. Thus, Viṣṇu's last stride reaches the North Pole of the sky. At the same time, the other two strides represent a partition of the sky into regions with eschatological importance. These are the *pityāna* and *devayāna*.

## 1) Viṣṇu's Seat in the Universe

It is well known that, in comparison to Indra, Soma, Agni, or even Varuṇa, Viṣṇu, who is a divinity of the highest rank in Hinduism, is celebrated but in few hymns of the Rig Veda.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, despite this statistical subordination, some of Viṣṇu's traits make him more important than it might appear. One of the most striking features of his personality, which is not infrequently mentioned or alluded to in the Rig Veda, is that he takes three strides in the creation or measuring of the universe.<sup>2</sup> These three strides encompass the whole Cosmos, and the third one is said to be the highest (e.g., 1.155.5, 5.3.3, 7.99.1, 10.1.3). The place of this last step is likened to an eye fixed in the sky (1.22.20-1), which shines down greatly (1.154.6), and the poets pray for reaching it (1.154.5).

Another divine act of Viṣṇu, which is closely associated with the three strides, is that by which he sets up the *skambha*

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<sup>1</sup>RV 1.154-6, 6.69, 7.99-100; cf. Macdonell (1898: 37); Gonda (1954: 1); Indra, for example, is celebrated in more than 300 hymns; cf. Macdonell (1898: 54).

<sup>2</sup>Among the most recent discussions on this topic, cf. Gonda (1954: 55-80); Kuiper (1962, 1983); Bhattacharji (1970: 284-286).

in the sky in that place where his dwelling place is situated. This is made clear in *RV* 1.154.1 where we read: “let me now sing the heroic deeds of Viṣṇu, who has measured apart the realms of earth, who propped up (*askabhāyad*) the upper dwelling-place (*uttaram sadhastham*), striding far as he stepped forth three times.”<sup>3</sup> The verb *skabh-* is obviously related to *skambha*, which is the *axis mundi*. Therefore, Viṣṇu’s act represents the setting up of the *skambha* in the sky.<sup>4</sup> The act of propping up the sky and keeping it apart from the earth belongs also to Indra and Varuṇa.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it is only Viṣṇu who has his dwelling place along the axis, more precisely on its top. The sole fact that this place is the highest in the universe has been rightly considered sufficient to make Viṣṇu one of the most important gods even in the Rig Veda.<sup>6</sup>

One of the strangest features of Viṣṇu’s strides is that they both encompass the whole universe and reach its highest place. This makes it extremely difficult to localize them. In fact, Oldenberg (1894: 229) simply rejected any speculation about the places Viṣṇu could have stepped over. In his opinion, the number ‘three’ in this case is the result of a poetic fantasy and does not have any special meaning, whereas the epithet ‘highest’ (*paramam padam*) would be only a metaphor for Viṣṇu reaching the absolute.

At this point, for a better understanding of what these strides represent, I will briefly present below some of the myth’s most important elements in the Rig Veda. These passages were classified and summarized by Macdonell (1895: 171) and Kuiper (1962: 139). They give a general picture about how and where these strides took place.

Viṣṇu strode with three steps over the earthly regions (1.154.1-3; 1.155.4; 6.49.13; 7.100.3-4) and fixed the upper sphere while stepping thrice (1.154.1-3). He also traversed the triple world (*tridhātu*) with these three strides (1.154.4). His last step is the highest one, to the place where the gods

<sup>3</sup>The translation belongs to O’Flaherty (1981: 226).

<sup>4</sup>*AV* 10.7 is dedicated entirely to *skambha*. In the Rig Veda, *skambha* appears as the *axis mundi* in 1.34.2, 8.41.10, 9.74.2, 9.86.46, 10.5.6, 10.44.4.

<sup>5</sup>To Indra: cf. 2.17.5; 10.89.4; 5.29.4; 6.44.24; to Varuṇa: cf. 6.70.1; 7.86.1; 8.41.10; 5.62.3 (with Mitra). It seems natural that Indra or Varuṇa keep the sky asunder from the earth. Indra is the creator-god, who actually separated the sky from the earth, whereas Varuṇa as the sky (-god) has to stay apart from the earth.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Gonda (1954: 2).

rejoice (1.155. 5; 7.99.1; 8.29.7).

Despite these peculiar features of Viṣṇu's mythological character, the myth from above has not been explained satisfactorily so far. Leaving aside the issue of the number of strides, there has been no agreement about the signification of Viṣṇu's divine act in measuring/dividing/creating the Universe. Thus, it has been widely assumed that the steps represent either the tripartite division of the universe, i.e. sky, earth and the air in-between, or the rising, ascension and setting of the sun.<sup>7</sup> These assumptions, however, do not seem plausible. The problems arise when the myth talks about Viṣṇu's three strides as taking place both on earth and in the heavenly sphere (that is, over the whole the triple world, *tridhātu*), which seems to make no sense. Another problem is Viṣṇu's last step, which brings him to the 'highest' place in heaven, where the gods rejoice. The mortals can see only the first two steps (1.155.5, 7.99.1), and can only pray to attain that dear highest abode, where Viṣṇu put his third step (1.154.5). Because this third step is the highest, Kuiper (1962: 141) thinks it represents the sun's zenith. The fact, however, that Viṣṇu's third step brought him to the highest place is incompatible with the notion of the sun's daily path, which starts from the rising and ends at the setting, after passing through the zenith. The third step should be at the setting place and not at the zenith.<sup>8</sup> Besides, it is hard to understand how Viṣṇu's strides encompassed the whole universe if they represented only points along the sun's daily path. This daily path is not the same during the year while the sun moves from one tropic to another. More probable appears the hypothesis regarding the division of the universe into earth, heaven and air. As we shall see below, this hypothesis is not very well founded either. The initial question, therefore, remains: where could these steps be?

The answer to the above question should be twofold. First, one needs to explain what the triple-partition represents. This means to find out if in the Vedic tradition there are relevant cosmic places, which may be able to divide the universe into three parts. Second, this needs a connection to the *skambha* reaching the highest point in the sky, which is

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Macdonell (1898: 37-38); Kuiper (1962: 137-151, esp. 140); O'Flaherty (1981: 225-7); *RV*1.154 is dedicated entirely to Viṣṇu's three strides.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Macdonell (1898: 38).

the place of Viṣṇu's last step. Only these mythological elements taken together can give a satisfactory answer to the riddle.

A tradition such as the one presupposed above exists in the Hindu world. This tradition emerges in the epic text of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, and concerns Viṣṇu's dwelling place. There Viṣṇu's seat is explicitly stated to be located at the North Pole (Skt. *dhruva* 'the Pole Star') of the celestial vault. The passage in question runs as follows: "The space between the seven *R̥ṣis* (Ursa Major-my note) and *Dhruva*, the third region of the sky, is the splendid celestial path of Viṣṇu (*Viṣṇupada*), and the abode of those sanctified ascetics who are cleansed from every soil, and in whom virtue and vice are annihilated. This is that excellent place of Viṣṇu to which those repair in whom all sources of pain are extinct, in consequence of the cessation of the consequences of piety or iniquity, and where they never sorrow more. There abide *Dharma*, *Dhruva*, and other spectators of the world, radiant with the superhuman faculties of Viṣṇu, acquired through religious meditation; and there are fastened and inwoven to all that is, and all that shall ever be, animate or inanimate. The seat of Viṣṇu is contemplated by the wisdom of the Yogis, identified with supreme light, as the radiant eye of heaven. In this portion of the heavens the splendid *Dhruva* is stationed, and serves for the pivot of the atmosphere. On *Dhruva* rest the seven great planets, and on them depend the clouds. The rains are suspended in the clouds, and from the rains come the water which is the nutriment and delight of all, the gods and the rest; and they, the gods, who are the receivers of oblations, being nourished by burnt-offerings, cause the rain to fall for the support of created beings. This sacred station of Viṣṇu, therefore, is the support of the three worlds, as it is the source of rain".<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* makes it clear that Viṣṇu's seat is located at the North Pole of the celestial vault. This may come as a surprise and be interpreted as a later Purāṇic invention. The myth of a supreme deity dwelling at the North Pole, however, is not something peculiar to the Purāṇic tradition only. Altaic people in Siberia also believe that their supreme god lives on the top of a mountain that reaches the North Pole of the sky.<sup>10</sup> Also, in a recent article, Anghelina (2008)

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Wilson (1972: 187-188, Book II, viii)

<sup>10</sup>See Holmberg (1923: 39-41).

made the suggestion that the prehistoric Greeks may have adopted a religion in which the supreme god was located at the celestial North Pole. These pieces put together raise the hypothesis that the above Purāṇic tradition may be older than it seems. The issue now is to determine how old this tradition may be and whether it may go back to the Vedas.<sup>11</sup> In fact, this is not trivial since Pingree (1990: 274-280) claimed that the above cosmological structure is the result of late Babylonian and Greek influences.

The proof that the Purāṇic tradition is not a recent invention may be found in three passages from the Atharva Veda. These passages unequivocally and consistently state that Viṣṇu's region in the cosmos is 'immovable', in Sanskrit *dhruvā dik*.<sup>12</sup> This led Kuiper (1962: 144-145) to believe that Viṣṇu is positioned in the center of the universe. *Dhruvā* is, of course, an adjective in this phrase, but the corresponding noun, *dhruva*, means clearly the North Pole of the sky. Both words derive from the root *dhṛ*, which means 'to be fixed, immovable' in its intransitive use. Thus, the Purāṇic tradition may put Viṣṇu's region in the cosmos in a completely different perspective. The Vedic Viṣṇu is positioned not in the center of the Universe, but on the axis about which the universe revolves, more precisely on its top, at the North Pole. An additional proof for the existence of a Vedic *Viṣṇupada* can be met with in *RV* 10.82.2, where the creator-god Viśvakarman is said to live in the sky region beyond the *saptaṛṣis* 'the seven sages', who metaphorically represent the constellation Ursa Major.<sup>13</sup> This place, which is also said to be the *caḥṣus* 'eye' of heaven, is obviously the *Viṣṇupada*.<sup>14</sup> All this confirms again the cosmological structure in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, which, therefore, must go back to the Rig Veda itself.

Let us go back to the three strides. Viṣṇu's third step is the highest one. In addition to this, *RV* 1.154.6 reveals that the footprint of this final step is the place where Viṣṇu propped up the sky with the *skambha*. The picture is completed by the fact that, after having separated the sky and

<sup>11</sup>Penner (1966: 283-99, esp.297), attributes the cosmogonic myth (the cosmic egg) in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* to the Vedic tradition; he makes no reference to the issues treated here.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. *AV* 3.27.5, 12.3.59, 15.14.5.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Geldner (1951).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *RV* 1.22.20-1 and 10.82.1

the earth, Viṣṇu dwells on top of the *skambha* (RV 1.154.1), which is the *axis mundi*. The cosmic place of this *axis mundi*, however, has been elusive in the interpretation of this myth. Thus, the *skambha* has been seen as reaching the zenith, since it has been thought that it is there where Viṣṇu's third and highest stride brings him. The conclusions reached above leave no room for such interpretation. There is no rationale for the *skambha* to reach the zenith. At the same time, it would be hard to accept that people who could notice the North Pole of the sky could see the *axis mundi* as passing through the zenith.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the *skambha* cannot be anything else but the 'real' *axis mundi*. The *axis mundi* is an archaic mythological element and is met with in several cultures, especially in those from the steppes of Asia. Interestingly, in these Asiatic cultures the *axis mundi* is explicitly said to pass through the North Pole of the sky.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, as in some of these northern Asiatic traditions, the Vedic *skambha* is not different from the apparent axis, which connects the North and South Poles of the celestial vault. This is the axis about which the heaven turns in its daily apparent motion. Also, geometrically, from an earthly standpoint, the highest point of the celestial spheroid is its North Pole, not the zenith.<sup>17</sup> It makes sense then for Viṣṇu to put there his highest step.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, however younger than the Vedas the Purāṇas may be, the concept of the North Pole is indeed old and goes back to the Vedas themselves.<sup>19</sup>

## 2) The Vedic Cosmogonic Myth

It would be interesting to see if Viṣṇu's location at the North Pole can be related to the Vedic cosmogonic myth.<sup>20</sup> In

<sup>15</sup>This assumes that *dhruva* was known as the North Pole during the Vedic period (cf. Vedic *dhruvā dik*). A clear reference to the Pole Star is attested only later, in the Purāṇas; cf. West (2007: 352).

<sup>16</sup>This seems to be the case among the Altaic or Arctic peoples; cf. Eliade (1972: 259-266).

<sup>17</sup>The use of the term 'spheroid' is a neutral one, since one cannot be sure whether the Vedic world believed the world to be a sphere from a strictly geometrical point of view.

<sup>18</sup>Viṣṇu is also associated with the sacrificial post *yūpa*; this is another representation of the *axis mundi*; cf. Gonda (1954: 81-84).

<sup>19</sup>Wilson (1972: vii) thought that "The theogony and cosmogony of the Purāṇas may probably be traced to the Vedas".

<sup>20</sup>For discussion, cf. e.g., Kuiper (1983: 9-23); Kramrisch (1963: 140-175); Brown (1965: 23-34).

this myth, the creation of the world takes place as a result of the well-known cosmic fight between Indra and the demon Vṛtra. This myth, which is the basis of Indra's nature<sup>21</sup>, is told in *RV* 1.32. Vṛtra's slaying has as its effect the release of the Waters (1.32.2). This is one of the most important features of Indra's myth and what the Waters represent has been a mystery.<sup>22</sup> In any case, as a consequence of this act Indra generated the sun, the sky and the dawn (1.32.4). Elsewhere, he is said to have supported the sky or spread out Mother Earth (6.72.2; 10.62.3; 2.13.5). As a consequence, he is called *viśvakarman* 'the All-Creator' (8.98.2; 9.63.7) and is the lord over all creation (8.98.2; 10.153.5). Indra also set the sun in the sky (1.51.4; 1.52.8).<sup>23</sup>

The Vedic myth is similar to the Greek myth of creation. In the Hesiodic cosmogonic myth, the earth and the sky are the result of a development which had its roots in Chaos (Gk. *Χάος*).<sup>24</sup> At the beginning, loving Ouranos covers (*καλύπτουσι*) Gaia entirely from all parts (*ἀμφὶ Γαίῃ*).<sup>25</sup> Then, since Ouranos' covering of Gaia did not allow their children to come out, Kronos castrates Ouranos (*Th.* 168-182). So far, the myth does not talk about a separation of the sky and earth. The second part of the myth, however, presupposes this when it talks about the pillars that keep apart the sky and earth, which are obviously a metaphor for the same *axis mundi*. This is the well-known story of Atlas supporting the sky. As it was the case with the Vedic myth, the interpretations of the Greek myth had always difficulties in establishing the location of this *axis mundi*. Thus, the place of the cosmic pillars has been seen in the West, because Atlas, who upholds the sky, is said to be close to the garden of the Hesperides.<sup>26</sup> From a cosmic

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Macdonell (1898: 58).

<sup>22</sup> Macdonell (1898: 59) sees them as 'heavenly'; Hillebrandt (1929: II 145) believes the waters are earthly; cf. Bhattacharji (1970: 259). Brown (1942: 97) sees them as forming the atmospheric Ocean. I would suggest that the waters are a metaphor for the act of giving birth, which, in the case of humans (and other mammals, in general), is preceded by the 'release' of water (the break of the amniotic sac).

<sup>23</sup> For the discussion, see Brown (1942: 96-97).

<sup>24</sup> The Greek and Vedic myths display some differences as well. In the Vedic myth, Sky and Earth are created by Tvaṣṭṛ (cf. Brown (1942: 94), whereas in the Greek myth Gaia is Ouranos' mother.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Th.* 127, 176.

<sup>26</sup> The Greek etymology of the 'Hesperides' is usually associated with that of

perspective, there is no rationale for Atlas being located in the west. How can the sky be held up in its place only from the west?

The pillars which are held by Atlas stretch on both sides of the earth (*ἀμφίς*), as the passage at *Od.* 1.50-4 seems to show: ἔχει δέ τε κίονας αὐτὸς | μακράς, αἱ γαῖάν τε καὶ οὐρανὸν ἀμφίς ἔχουσι. In all likelihood, the above covering on all sides ended by a separation of the earth and sky on both sides of the earth. Interestingly, the same idea of primordial covering appears in both the Greek and Vedic myth. In the former, the sky ‘covers’ from all sides the earth, in the latter, *Vṛtra* envelops with his body everything which the universe is made of. In fact, the etymology itself of the name *Vṛtra* shows this.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the Greek and the Vedic creation started from a state of affairs, in which everything was held obstructed and hidden. The parallels between the two myths do not stop here. In a recent paper, Anghelina (2008) argued for the Greek Olympus as echoing a prehistoric mythology where the seat of the supreme god, Olympus, was located at the North Pole of the celestial vault. The argument of that article is based on the fact that Olympus is named in the Greek epic ‘the immovable seat of the gods’ (*ἔδος ἀσφαλὲς θεῶν*), which seems to be a direct allusion to the North Pole.<sup>28</sup> The argument further implies that the *axis mundi* should be considered as passing through the poles of the heavenly sphere and that Tartarus, the lowest region of the ‘Underworld’, should be considered as the region under the South Pole of the celestial vault.

If the above hypotheses hold true, then the Vedic and Greek myths share some essential features: the separation between the earth and the sky, the *axis mundi*, about which the sky revolves, the supreme deity dwelling at the North Pole. In other words, one can say that the Vedic myth is practically

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ἑσπερος ‘evening, western’.

<sup>27</sup>Root *vr̥* ‘to cover’; cf. Macdonell (1898: 159). The idea is already found in *ŚB* 1.1.3.4-5: “*Vṛtra* in truth lay covering all this which here extends between heaven and earth. And because he lay covering all this, therefore his name is *Vṛtra*”; cf. Bhattacharji (1970: 257-258).

<sup>28</sup>Olympus is a ‘mountain’ in the Greek myth. Interestingly, *Viṣṇu* dwells also on a mountain; this is shown by his epithets *girikṣit-* (*RV* 1.154.3), *giriṣṭhā-* (2) etc; cf. Kuiper (1983: 55). This mountain then may be the North Pole of the sky, the ‘highest’ cosmic point.



identical to the Greek myth in its essential aspect, that is, from a cosmological perspective. One should also recall, however, that Indra is the supreme god of the Vedic world. This makes the Vedic story different from its Greek counterpart, where Zeus, as the supreme god, is located at the North Pole. In the Vedic case, it is Viṣṇu and not Indra who is located there. Indra is never said to have his dwelling place at the North Pole despite the fact that he is also in some passages associated with the *skambha*. In such mythologies, however, the North Pole cannot be other than the seat of the supreme god. This may show that initially the supreme god of the Indo-Aryans was not associated with the North Pole. If this is so, then the Vedic myth may display the archaic, non-Indo-European version of the myth, in which a pre-Indo-Aryan god, namely Viṣṇu, was associated with the axis as the supreme god of the world.<sup>29</sup> The Hindus took over the myth and, while they kept Viṣṇu associated with the axis, transferred some of the attributes of the pre-Indo-Aryan god to their supreme god Indra.<sup>30</sup> This may also be the explanation why Viṣṇu became eventually the main god of Hinduism. It is his position at the North Pole, the eternally immovable point in the universe, which led to it.<sup>31</sup> This is also why he eventually became identical with Brahman, the Absolute (cf. e.g., the episode of the *sahasranāma* 'thousands names' of Viṣṇu in the *Mahābhārata*).

The existence of a supreme deity dwelling at the North

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<sup>29</sup>Dumézil (1968: 230-237) argues for Viṣṇu's myth as being of Indo-European origin. This hypothesis is based on the comparison between Viṣṇu and the Scandinavian god Viðarr, who would share some common features. None of these similarities, however, concern Viṣṇu's three strides or his association with the *skambha* and the celestial North Pole; moreover, the Scandinavian god is not a supreme creator god.

<sup>30</sup>Interestingly, in the myth, Viṣṇu is Indra's friend; cf. Macdonell (1898: 39); Bhattacharji (1970: 14). For the discussion about Viṣṇu's non-Aryan character, cf. Kuiper (1962: 138); Przyłuski (cf. *Archiv Orientalni* 4 /1932) sees Viṣṇu as originally Dravidian. Indra is at least an Indo-Iranian deity; cf. West (2007: 245-246).

<sup>31</sup>It is also interesting to notice that Viṣṇu's iconic representations show him with four arms, which hold a mace (*gadā*), a shell (*śaṅka*), a lotus (*padma*), and a wheel (*cakra*), respectively. Given that Viṣṇu is the god of the axis, the four arms cannot be other than the four cardinal points of the celestial vault. As for the objects Viṣṇu holds, they may symbolize the rotating vault (the wheel), the axis (the mace), the originally covered universe (the shell), and the moment of the creation (the lotus). All these attributes hint to an originally supreme creator-god.

Pole calls for an inquiry regarding the opposite cosmic place, which is the South Pole of the vault. We have seen above that, in the Greek myth, there are elements that allow seeing the location of Tartarus at the South Pole of the celestial vault. The existence of a concept of hell in the Vedic world, however, is very difficult to detect. This is because there are very few passages referring to hell or to some other equivalent.<sup>32</sup> The most complete set of hints is contained in *RV* 7.104. Thus, Vṛtra is situated in the lap of destruction (*nirṛti*) (9), under the three earths (*tisraḥ pṛthivīr adho astu viśvāḥ*) (11). Indra is asked to smite the enemies and put them below all creation (*viśvasya jantor adhamas padīṣṭa*) (16), in the endless pits (*vavrān anantān ava sā padīṣṭa*) (17), in the abyss (*paśāṇe*) (5) or in the bottomless darkness (*anārambhāṇe tamasi*) (3). Those who reach this place are anti-divine creatures: Vṛtra, all the *asuras* and *dasyus* (cf. *AV* 9.2.18), *rakṣasas*, sorcerers (7.104.23) etc.<sup>33</sup> Brown (1941: 79-80) rightly noticed that the place of hell is contrasted with the ordered universe. The latter consists of earth, sky and operates by the *ṛta* 'order', whereas the former, that is, 'beneath the earth', is only the lap of Nirṛti 'destruction, non-order'. This is consistent with the creation hymn *RV* 10.129, where the original chaos, the non-existent *asat*, is contrasted with the ordered creation *sat* or *ṛta*.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, this latter Vedic hymn is more abstract than Indra's story of creation. One could say with Brown (1941: 80) that it may represent a later stage, which reshaped a rather 'concrete' myth in more abstract terms.

In conclusion, the Vedic myth does not say anything about the heavenly South Pole. The only indication regarding the cosmic location of 'hell' is that it lies under the 'three earths'. Interestingly, this place is not one of extinction for ordinary mortals. In fact, these do not go there, but to Yama's abode, which is clearly located in heaven (*svargaloka*).<sup>35</sup> The Vedic world's goal was a happy life on earth and its continuation in heaven. This was supposed to be obtained by

<sup>32</sup>For the discussion that follows, cf. Brown (1941: 76-80); Macdonell (1898: 169-170); also cf. Bhattacharji (1970: 66-69), who analyzes how the concept of hell changed in the later Hindu cosmic systems.

<sup>33</sup>All these mentioned in *RV* 7.104.

<sup>34</sup>The *sat* was covered by the *asat* (*kim āvarīvaḥ*) (*RV* 10.129.1); the verb for 'cover' has the same root *vṛ*.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Macdonell (1898: 167, 169-172); Witzel (1984: § 3).

respecting the ritual.<sup>36</sup>

The above description of the Vedic Underworld is similar to the Greek Tartarus. Tartarus is close to Chaos and is a huge chasm (Gk. *χάσμα*) hidden in misty gloom (Gk. *ζόφω ἠερόεντι*).<sup>37</sup> It is the place where the Titans were imprisoned by Zeus and where Atlas upholds the sky with his head and hands (*Th.* 746-747). The Titans are, of course, the equivalent of the *asuras*.<sup>38</sup> Anghelina (2008) made the hypothesis that this place represents a space of some sort under the South Pole of the sky. In fact, this seems plausible since Atlas holds up the sky in that place. In the Vedas, however, the similarities between the Greek myth and the Hindu one do not go any further.

Fortunately, there is a tradition in which the analogy with the Greek myth is complete. This is, again, the tradition from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. There hell is antipodal to the highest heaven: "The gods in heaven are beheld by the inhabitants of hell as they move with their heads inverted".<sup>39</sup> This is also the place of the cosmic serpent, Śeṣa Ananta 'infinite', which is located in the lowest part of the Underworld, and on which Viṣṇu sleeps during the intervals of creation. On its head, Śeṣa upholds the worlds with both their inhabitants and the gods themselves: "Below...is the form of Viṣṇu called Śeṣa...; Śeṣa bears the entire world like a diadem upon his head..."<sup>40</sup> In this way, the cosmic snake is located symmetrically to Viṣṇu's place, in a position which reminds one of Greek Atlas. The passages in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, however, which talk about the different levels in hell, seem to refer to places inside the earth. Therefore, although Śeṣa is diametrically opposed to Viṣṇu, thus being located on the *axis mundi*, the lowest hell seems to be situated inside the earth. This is an obstacle to the above theory, which anticipated the Vedic hell as being located at the South Pole of the celestial vault. Certainly, one cannot say how far the earth stretches below its surface and whether its lowest corner reaches the heavenly vault again. I think,

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Bodewitz (2002: 221).

<sup>37</sup> *Th.* 740 and 729, respectively.

<sup>38</sup> The *asuras* are the offspring of Prajāpati (therefore, they are gods); cf. Macdonell (1898: 156); also Varuṇa was originally an *asura* (cf. Greek Atlas); cf. Bhattacharji (1970: 24).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Wilson (1972: 172 (Book II vi)); also cf. Warren (1905: 86).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Wilson (1972: 169, 170 (Book II v)).

however, that the answer needs to be looked for elsewhere. This has to do with the metamorphosis of Yama's character from the time of the Rig Veda to the later times of the Purāṇas. In the Rig Veda, it is clearly stated that Yama's kingdom is in heaven, and that Yama is a benevolent god who presides over the Fathers. In the later period, another eschatological conception emerges: Yama becomes the king of a kingdom where he judges and punishes the dead with torments. His celestial and full-of-light figure becomes degraded to that of a dark god of the underworld.<sup>41</sup> The change in Yama's role and character may offer a clue about a change which may have occurred in Hindu eschatology. This change may reflect the confluence of two different religions. The celestial one of the Vedas, where the dead and Yama's kingdom were located in the sky, and a 'chthonic' one, for which the world of the dead was located inside/under the earth.<sup>42</sup> This latter religious belief could explain Yama's change of place and function. It may also explain why the concept of hell of the earlier religion became associated with the interior of the earth, and why it continued to be diametrically opposed to Viṣṇu's place.

The cosmic picture from above becomes coherent for both the Greek and Vedic cosmological myths. These myths conceive of the universe as a spheroid revolving about the *axis mundi*. This axis passes through the northern and southern poles of the spheroid. At the North Pole is the seat of the supreme god. The South Pole is the place of the gods' cosmic enemies.

### 3) Viṣṇu's Three Strides

Another issue, which still remains to be elucidated, is the one from which this whole discussion started. This concerns the significance of Viṣṇu's three strides. So far it has been shown that Viṣṇu's third step reached the North Pole of the sky, which is the 'highest' place in the universe/sky. Where could the other two be located?

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<sup>41</sup>Several passages in the Hindu epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* talk about these; cf. Bhattacharji (1970: 66-67); Bodewitz (2002: 221-222) thinks that the dark and dreaded Yama is the original character, which continued to exist outside the Vedic eschatology; the Vedic celestial Yama would be a more recent creation. The theory I am proposing here is, of course, totally opposed to this view.

<sup>42</sup>Pingree (1990) argues for a Babylonian influence.

The information that Viṣṇu's three strides divided the sky/world in three parts is met with often in Hindu texts. In the Rig Veda it is clearly stated that Viṣṇu traversed the triple world *tridhātu* (1.154.6).<sup>43</sup> In *ŚB* 5.4.2.6, we read that "Viṣṇu's three steps are these (three) worlds; thus having ascended these worlds, he is high above everything here".<sup>44</sup> 'Above everything' in this context cannot mean anything else but Viṣṇu's presence at the North Pole. The triple division of the sky is also specifically mentioned in the Rig Veda in many hymns.<sup>45</sup> It is in one of these where one can get a clue about how the division is made. In *RV* 9.113.9 the poet prays for reaching the place where one can walk freely in the triple sky and firmament (*caraṇaṃ trināke tridive divaḥ*). Here *trināka* clearly indicates that the division is made not on a vertical axis, but on the sky's vault itself (*nāka*). This is at odds with the commonest interpretation that the division represents different levels on the vertical axis which leads to the zenith, that is, earth, air and sky (*pr̥thivī, antarikṣam, dyauḥ*).<sup>46</sup> I cannot find, however, any convincing evidence for this interpretation.<sup>47</sup> In fact, there is no Vedic passage in which it is said that Viṣṇu's three strides divide the universe into earth, air and sky. What all these passages say is that Viṣṇu encompasses the above regions. For example, in the Yajur Veda, *TS* 2.4.12.3, we read: "Viṣṇu deposited himself in three places, a third on the earth, a third in the atmosphere, a third in the sky, for he was afraid of his growth".<sup>48</sup> This does not necessarily mean that his strides were put in these places separately, but only that they encompass all these places. In other words, the passage does not say that one step is in heaven, one on earth and one in the air, but simply that each of these places represents a third of Viṣṇu. Again, in *AV* 7.26.8, it is said that Viṣṇu should behold the patrons of the sacrifice (*sūri*) "from the sky, from the earth and from the wide atmosphere" *divo vā viṣṇav uta vā pr̥thivyā maho vā viṣṇav uta vā*

<sup>43</sup>This may mean 'in a triple way'; cf. Kuiper (1962: 141).

<sup>44</sup>Cf. Gonda (1966: 92).

<sup>45</sup>Cf. e.g., *RV* 1.164.10; 2.27.8; 3.56.2; 4.53.5; 5.60.6; 5.69.1; 7.87.5; 7.101.4.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. e.g., Kramrisch (1963: 149, 151, 275); Kuiper (1962: 140).

<sup>47</sup>Certainly, it is still possible that these later interpretations alluded indeed to the division of the world into earth, atmosphere and sky. This does not change my argument for an original partition of the vault itself.

<sup>48</sup>This is one of the examples given by Kuiper (1962: 140) to support the interpretation of the triple division of the universe into earth, air and sky.

*'ntarikṣād*. The ablatives in this passage do not show that the god put his steps on earth, air and sky, but only that he is ubiquitously present in all these places, encompassing them.

The above arguments strengthen the hypothesis that the triple division of the sky is not on the vertical axis, but on the firmament itself. In addition, this division should have its highest point represented by the North Pole of the celestial vault, or by the region that surrounds it (*Viṣṇupada*). With regard to the other parts of the division, the most relevant passage can be met with in the Rig Veda itself. In *RV* 1.35.6, which is a hymn dedicated entirely to Savitṛ, we read: “There are three skies: two of them are the lap of Savitṛ (*upasthām*), and the last one is the one who controls men, in the world (*bhuvana*) of Yama. Immortal things rest on him like a chariot wheel on a lynch-pin”. In this passage we deal explicitly with the ‘three skies’ (*tisro dyāvah*), which hints explicitly to the fact that the sky is divided in three parts.<sup>49</sup> In addition, the sun is said to be held in the lap of two of the three skies. This may be a very important hint regarding the location of these parts of the sky. It is very likely that this metaphor implies that these two skies, the sun’s ‘lap’, are identical with or include that part of heaven between which the sun moves during its yearly course, that is, the sky between the summer and winter tropics. Passages in the Veda show that the ancient Hindus knew that the yearly course of the sun is determined by the two extremities represented by the winter and summer tropics. This knowledge is transparent at *RV* 1.105.16, 3.30.12, where it is said that the sun cannot go beyond some regions of the sky; obviously, these are the tropics.<sup>50</sup> The sky region between the tropics, however, does not represent the whole sky outside the *Viṣṇupada*. This means that this region rather represents the middle part of another, wider sky division, which is very important as well in the Hindu tradition.

This division comes up clearly in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, in the same passage from above, in which the *Viṣṇupada* was defined. In this passage it is said that there are two ‘paths’ in the sky. The path of the fathers, *pitṛyāna*, lies approximately south of the celestial equator. More precisely, it is said that it lies north of the constellation Agastya (today’s Canopus, which is located

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *RV* 3.56.2; 7.87.5.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Kirfel (1920: 26); Homeric Greeks also had this knowledge (cf. *Od.* 15.404, τροπαὶ ἡελίου); cf. Heubeck (1989).

towards the south of the celestial vault, practically opposed to Ursa Major in the sky), and south of the line of the Ajavīthī (Scorpio and Sagittarius). The path of the gods, *devayāna*, on the other hand, lies to the north of the sky's vault, between Nāgavīthī (Aries and Taurus) and the seven Ṛṣis (Ursa Major).<sup>51</sup> That the equator played a role in this division is shown by the fact that, between about 4,000 BC and 2,000 BC, the equinoxes, which represent precisely the celestial equator, were represented by Taurus and Scorpio.<sup>52</sup> The above passage then may describe this astronomical situation. The constellations which are mentioned, however, are not exactly diametrically opposed in the sky, although they are very close to being so.<sup>53</sup> This may show that the equatorial division of the sky was not made 'perfectly' from a geometrical and astronomical standpoint. If, however, one considers that the above constellations represent the first constellations beyond the celestial equator in the two halves of the sky respectively, then the division of the sky can be considered perfectly symmetrical. Thus, the above considerations show that the sky was indeed divided in the middle. The three skies then that result from this division are *pitṛyāna*, *devayāna* and *Viṣṇupada*.<sup>54</sup>

The above argument about the *pitṛyāna* and *devayāna* relies on passages from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, which is a later text. This may be, again, an obstacle to the theory. The fact, however, that the division of the sky must have occurred within the above time-frame shows that *pitṛyāna* and *devayāna* must be older. This conclusion is also supported by the Vedic evidence. Thus, the tradition of the two paths is preserved in

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Wilson (1972: 187); also see Kirfel (1920: 140-141).

<sup>52</sup> The constellations representing the equinoxes shift in time due to the astronomical phenomenon of precession. Today the equinoxes are represented by Pisces and Virgo.

<sup>53</sup> The border between Scorpio and Sagittarius corresponds to the border between Taurus and Gemini.

<sup>54</sup> Witzel (1984: § 5) suggested that *pitṛyāna* and *devayāna* represent portions of the Milky Way south and north of the celestial equator. The division points from above, which are located between Taurus and Gemini, on one side, and Scorpio and Sagittarius, on the other, may point to this fact, since the Milky Way passes through these regions. This does not change my argument here about Viṣṇu's three strides as having to do with the division of the sky itself. Therefore, Viṣṇu's first two steps can be still seen as dividing the vault approximately in the middle. It is also worth mentioning that the Ursa Major (*devayāna*'s northern limit) does not lie close to the Milky Way, which may be an argument against Witzel's theory.

RV 10.2.7 and 10.88.15. The latter passage mentions both of them: “Zwei Wege, so hörte ich von den Vätern, (gibt es) für die Götter und die Sterblichen. Auf diesen beiden kommt all dies Lebendige zusammen, das zwischen dem Vater (Himmel) und der Mutter (Erde) ist”.<sup>55</sup> This conception can be also seen in the Upaniṣads, where it has to do with the cycles of reincarnations. People who follow *devayāna* reach Brahman and do not return to the earthly existence, whereas those who follow *pitṛyāna* continue their existence cycles. This shows that the *pitṛyāna* and *devayāna* may be relevant not only from an astronomical point of view, but also from an eschatological one.<sup>56</sup>

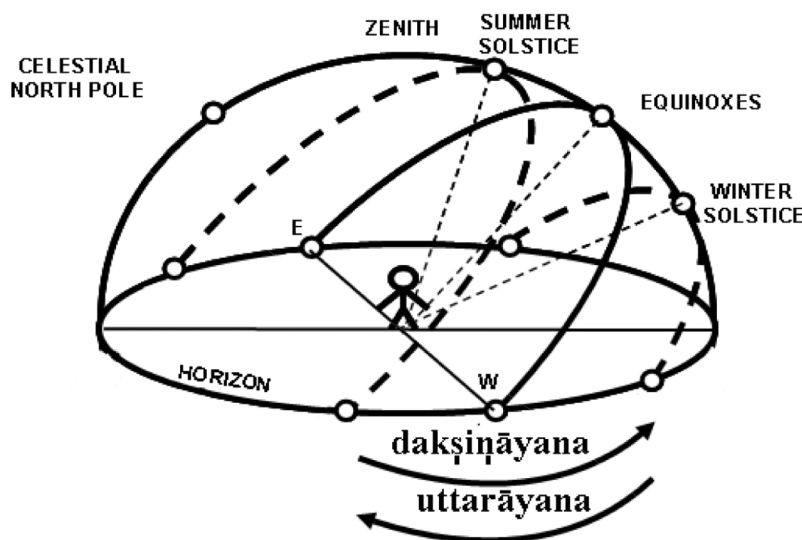


Figure 1: The yearly path of the sun between the solstices.

The Hindu world also knows a similar distinction between two other ‘paths’. These have to do with the sun’s yearly

<sup>55</sup>This is Geldner’s translation (1951); the original Sanskrit runs as follows: *dve sruti aśṇavam piṭṛṇām ahaṃ devānām uta martyānām/ tābhyām idaṃ viśvam ejaṭ sam eti yad antarā pitaram mātaram ca.*

<sup>56</sup>Cf. *KB* 19. 3; *ŚB* 2.1.3.1; *BU* 6.2.2, 15-6; also, cf. Kirfel (1920: 26). This is also the meaning the commentators assumed for 10.88.15; cf. Geldner (1951). In *ŚB* 2.3.4 it is said that the ‘fathers’ did not have evil dispelled from them by the sun and die before they attained the fully measure of life, whereas the gods have evil dispelled from them by the sun. This may also be able to explain the name of the Ursa Major ‘the Seven Ṛṣis’: these are the ancestors who followed the *devayāna* and reached a place close to Viṣṇu’s. In fact, Viṣṇu’s place is the one which everybody desires to get to (cf. *RV* 1.154.5).



course between the tropics. The two movements of the sun, which are defined by the two limits in the sky represented by the tropics, are called the two *ayanas* 'paths'. The ascending path, when the sun moves from the winter tropic towards the northern summer tropic, is called *uttarāyana* 'the path upward' (Figure 1). The reversed, descending path is called *dakṣiṇāyana*, literally the 'path to the south'.<sup>57</sup> These are clearly mentioned in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (2.1.3), where we read: "now when he (the sun) moves northward, then he is among the gods, then he guards the gods; and when he moves southward then he is among the fathers, then he guards the fathers".<sup>58</sup> It is interesting that the two sets of 'paths' have been considered identical.<sup>59</sup> The above considerations seem to show something different. While the *uttarāyana* and *dakṣiṇāyana* are strictly related to the sun's yearly course, the *pitryāna* and *devayāna* are relevant from an eschatological point of view and represent a partition of the sky, in which the celestial equator (or, better said, the middle of the sky) plays an important role (Figure 2).

If, therefore, the above hypotheses hold true, then Viṣṇu's first two strides represent those divisions of the sky which constitute *pitryāna* and *devayāna*. From these astronomically and religiously important celestial regions, Viṣṇu leaped further up, to the spherical cap defined by Ursa Major and the North Pole (*Viṣṇupada*).<sup>60</sup> This is Yama's region (*yamasya bhuvana*) as well (*RV* 1.35.6), which is in the *parame vyoman*, the 'highest sky' (*RV* 10.14.8). Moreover, it is called *devamāna* the 'house of the gods' (*RV* 10.135.7) and, therefore, it seems natural for Agni to have his place here as well, in the *parame vyoman* (*RV* 6.8.2). It is also this place which is mentioned in *ŚB* 4.3.4.27: "he who sacrifices, sacrifices with the hope: 'may there be a place for me in

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<sup>57</sup>A parallel, but not identical case can be found in the Babylonian astronomy/mythology. There Marduk draws *miṣrātu* 'boundary lines' in the sky, which represent the sun's yearly motion through the 'paths/skies' of Enlil, Anu and Ea. These paths represent a symmetrical tripartite division of the sky, which includes the tropics; cf. Horowitz (1998: 165).

<sup>58</sup>The translation belongs to Eggeling (1882).

<sup>59</sup>Cf. e.g., Bryant (2001: 251-258); for discussion, cf. Kay (1981: 27).

<sup>60</sup>A very plastic episode is described in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (cf. Wilson (1972: 188): Viṣṇu's toe, from which the river Ganges flows down, is located at the North Pole.

Yama's world'''.<sup>61</sup>

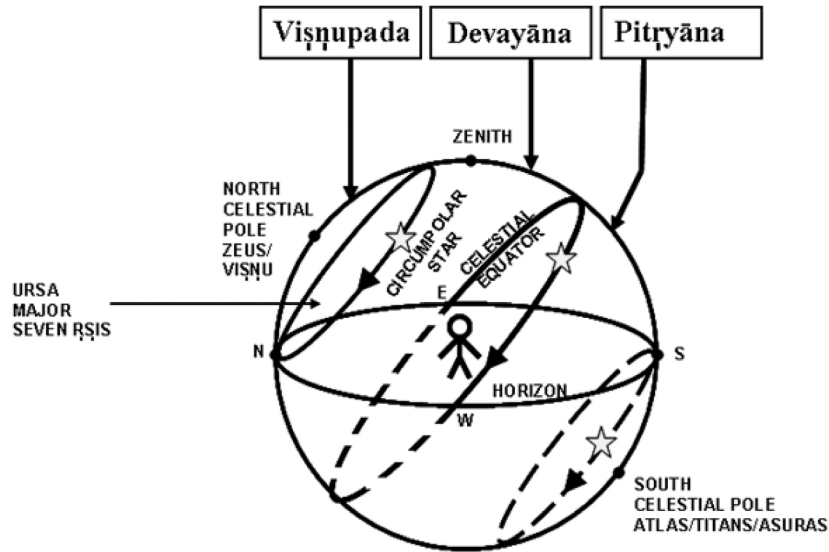


Figure 2: The Vedic division of the celestial vault.

The description of the ‘three skies’ or, as they are called sometimes, *lokas* is now completed. An exhaustive discussion, however, on all the instances where these three *lokas* or skies appear in texts is beyond the scope of this paper and certainly needs additional work. Gonda (1968) summarizes all the important passages in this respect. It suffices only to mention three other relevant passages, which may show that the location of these *lokas* has to do with the firmament of the sky.<sup>62</sup> The first example comes from *JB* 3.341ff., where it is clearly stated that different *lokas* belong to different gods. In this passage, Prajāpati, after creating the gods, goes upwards to different celestial *lokas* and substitutes the gods with himself in each of them. He thus unites all these *lokas* into a single one, which is called *nāka-*, the celestial firmament. This shows once again that the *lokas* should not be considered divisions on the vertical axis, but only regions in the sky. The second example comes from the *skambha* hymn. In *AV* 10.7.29 it is said that “In the *skambha* the worlds (*loka*), in the *skambha* penance, in the *skambha* right is set...” If the *skambha* is

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Gonda (1966: 65).

<sup>62</sup> Sometimes there are more than three *lokas* mentioned; cf. Gonda (1966: 56, 58). These may also be considered portions of the sky vault.

indeed the apparent axis about which the sky turns, then these *lokas* cannot be anything else than portions of the sky, that is, heavenly stripes, which revolve, of course, about the *skambha*.

The last passage belongs to *RV* 1.164.48 where we read: "Twelve fellies, one wheel (*cakram*), three naves (*trīṇi nabhyāni*) - who has understood this? Three hundred and sixty are set on it like poles that do not loosen." This passage has been generally assumed to represent the year divided by twelve months and 360 days, which seems indeed to be the first explanation at hand.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, the tripartite division here has been interpreted as representing the seasons, which is somewhat problematic.<sup>64</sup>

This riddle, however, can be explained in a slightly different way. Since in ancient times any time measurement was based on the observation of the sky, the above passage can be interpreted in astronomical terms. The wheel here is the wheel of the cosmos, the sky of the fixed stars, which perpetually rotates about the poles. The twelve months correspond to the twelve full moons of the year, each month being a thirty-day period from one full moon to another.<sup>65</sup> This may also be the case with the 360 'poles' attached to the wheel, which could represent the yearly successive phases of the moon. Under these assumptions, the 'three hubs' can also have a plastic and astronomical representation. They may represent precisely the three *lokas* from above, the tripartite division of the sky wheel. This hypothesis would describe more appropriately the original meaning of the Sanskrit word for 'hub', *nabhya*.

#### 4) Conclusion

The conclusion of this paper then is that the cosmic structure of the Vedic world seems to be different from what previous theories proposed. The Hindu cosmos is a huge wheel which rotates about its axial poles. These are metaphorically represented by the *skambha*. At the North Pole is located the

<sup>63</sup>Cf. O'Flaherty (1981: 81); Geldner (1951); Skt. *trīṇi nabhyāni* means literally 'three hubs'.

<sup>64</sup>Other Vedic texts talk about five or six seasons (Skt. *ṛtu*); cf. Bryant (2001: 341); cf. Kirfel (1920: 26). Geldner talks about 'drei Doppeljahreszeiten', which also does not seem very plausible.

<sup>65</sup>This is called *tithi*; the lunar month (called synodic month in scientific astronomy) has 30 *tithis*, and the lunar year 360; cf. Bryant (2001: 340 n.23).

supreme god, who has around him all the other gods in the 'house of the gods'. The opposite, symmetrical pole is the place where the celestial gods drove down their enemies, who are also gods. Also, the Vedic sky is divided in three parts, which have eschatological importance. The southern sky, *pitryāna*, belongs to the ordinary dead (the 'fathers'). The northern one, *devayāna*, belongs to those who had a fulfilled life and, probably, escaped the reincarnation cycles. It is in this region where we find the seven Ṛṣis (Ursa Major), that is, those sages who managed to get the closest to the gods. Finally, above the Ursa Major, the last sky is *Viṣṇupada*, the above-mentioned 'house of the gods', which 'controls men'.

Thus, the Vedic myth confirms previous hypotheses that, on the other side of the Indo-European world, the Greek cosmos may echo a similar structure. Moreover, this confirmation does not come as an additional hypothesis only, but is expressed in the Hindu tradition more clearly than in its Greek counterpart. Basically, one can say that, despite inherent variations, the Greek and Vedic myths represent one and the same myth. Such an assumption certainly raises the issue whether this myth is of Indo-European origin. The fact that the master of the axis is Viṣṇu and not the Vedic supreme god, Indra, may be an indication that the myth does not have an Indo-European origin. In addition, since traces of this myth can be found among the shamanistic cultures of the Altaic peoples in northern Asia, it may be the case that the origins of the myth are to be found there. Be it as it may, the myth shows that these ancient peoples were not fabricating preposterous stories, but were trying to express their understanding of the cosmos while being amazed by its mystery. And this is, in fact, what we as humans must never cease doing.<sup>66</sup>

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