

***R̥gveda* 7.95.2 and Karen Thomson**

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1. In her paper ‘A still undeciphered text’ (2009) Karen Thomson (KT hereafter) deals with several rigvedic issues, continuing with her idea that the *RV* needs a new approach. I agree with much of what she writes but find some errors of methodology and of fact. She sent me a copy of her paper in 2009 (together with the three Comments). I made some notes then but had to put the matter aside due to pressure from many sides. I am surprised the *JIES* referees did not spot the errors. Just as surprisingly, the three critical Comments on her paper also did not spot them. I shall confine my observations to these errors – without intending to demean the rest of her good work.

Before I deal with the passage 7.95.2 and *samudrá*, a few words on *árma(-ká)*, *vailastha-* and ruins (in 1.133.3), a subject that immediately precedes KT’s treatment of 7.95.2. I agree with her dismissal of Witzel’s (and others’) view that *armaká* means ‘ruin’. How scholars (e.g. Witzel 1995: 3-4; Rao 1991:32; Burrow 1963 *passim*) came to this strange conclusion is not difficult to understand since it appears in that sense in some post rigvedic texts and as final in compound names of old villages like *guptárma* ‘hidden, preserved’; also, initially, under the Invasion Theory, scholars thought the fiends and goblins mentioned in this stanza were the native enemies whom Indra had to destroy. However, hymn *RV* 1.133 has nothing that remotely suggests ruins. Moreover, stanza 6f states explicitly that invincible Indra ‘does-not-kill-men’ *ápūruṣaghna-* ! Certainly, there is a ghostly scene of frightful desolation with unfriendly she-fiends, goblins and demons (*yātumāti*, *piśāci* and *rākṣas*) but not a single mention of bricks, the chief building material of Harappan constructions, stone-slabs, fallen walls, beams or rafters and the like. In sharp contrast, the Old English poem *The Ruin* contains abundant persuasive details of the ancient remains (from Roman times?) so that some scholars think it refers to the town of Bath (Mitchell and

Robinson 1996:252-5).

KT rightly cites Mayrhofer (EWA, 2, p120) who gives for *árma-* the meaning *wohl Brunnen* ‘perhaps *spring*’ and connects the word with Tocharian *álme* ‘spring’ and names of European rivers like ‘Almus’ etc. This certainly seems to be so. The element of flow and moisture appears in the eye-disease called *arma* (in *Suśruta*). The word occurring in stanza 3 is very probably a (*guṇa*) development from \sqrt{r} (>*ár-ti*, *íy-ar-ti*, *r-ṇó-ti*, *r-cchá-ti*: 2nd, 3rd 5th and 6th class) with the sense ‘move’ (in the *Dhātupāṭha*, the native list of roots, *r=gatau* ‘movement’). Similar formations are *kr* > *kár-man*, or *dhr* > *dhár-man* etc. The word would therefore entail movement in its denotation – like ‘spring’, ‘flow’, ‘up or down’ and the like, not a static state of ruins. And, of course, in the *RV*, *armaká* is *hapax legomenon*; but consider similar formations *anta-ka* ‘ending’, *karma-ka* ‘action’, *reca-ka* ‘out-breath’, etc. I will come back to this.

In the same stanza 3, we find *vailastha* - and cognates which are also *hapax legomena*: *vailasthāna(-ká)* and *mahā-vailastha*. These are left as “uncertain” by KT (p 28), following Mayrhofer. But surely this need not remain so! The stem *vaila-* is clearly a (*vṛddhi*) development from a primary stem *vila-* (> *vet-* then > *vail-*) and a possible dhātu *vil*. Now, the native *Dhātupāṭha* has *vil* twice and for both the meaning *bhedane* ‘breaking, cleaving’. It is surely paradoxical that we have primary *bila* and secondary *vaila-* but not primary **vila* and secondary **baila-*. This suggests that the two stems are connected. Indeed, the Dictionaries have *vil* or *vila* but direct you to *bil* or *bila* because, as we know, the consonants *b* and *v* are often interchangeable (e.g. *varh* and *barh*, *vala* and *bala* etc). *bil* is not in the *Dhātupāṭha*, but is in the Monier-Williams Dictionary with the sense ‘breaking, cleaving’. The word *bila* means ‘cave, cleft, hole, opening, pit’ (*RV* 1.11.5 and 1.32.11 etc). So *vaila-* has to do with a cave or pit. Surely now, since we meet demons, fiends and sorcerers in this ghostly scene we can connect it with the great pit or chasm (*vavrá* in 7.104.3 and *pársāna* in 7.104.5) wherein are cast and destroyed evil-doers and fiends, as 1.133.5 says *sárvaṃ rákṣo ní barhaya* ‘[O Indra,] hurl down/in every demon’. So stanza 3 of hymn 1.133 prays to Indra (*maghavan*) to dash down (*áva-jahi*) this band of she-fiends/sorceresses in the ‘downrush/sweep/vortex (?=*armaké*) that-is-within-the-pit (*vailasthānaké*: in the place/room of the pit), in the downrush (etc) within-the

great-pit (*mahāvailasthe*)¹. The scene now is the pit of hell wherein are cast and dissolved fiends, sorcerers, witches and other evil-doers. (I am happy to consider any other reasonable suggestion – but not ‘ruins!’)

If this delusion about ruins falls in ruination, then the *RV* is seen not to know either Harappan towns or their collapsed remains. Is it not then legitimate to assume that it is pre-Harappan? I should think so – especially if this aspect is taken in conjunction with others. Our investigation leads us to this issue unavoidably.

2. While KT consulted Mayrhofer for *árma(-ká)*, she did not do so for *samudrá*. This is strange, surely. Had she done so she would have found that he gives for *samudrá* ‘confluence (*Vereinigung*) of two or more rivers’ and also (and for the *RV*) *Flut* ‘flood’ and *Meer* ‘sea’. She prefers her own ‘together-water’ which is etymologically correct but is not very helpful since it can denote anything from water in a cup, a puddle, a lake, to a cataract, rain, river, ocean. Here again she is right in exposing Witzel’s mistranslation and misrepresentation of “basic literary facts” regarding *samudrá* (Witzel 2001 §25, fn 204).

However, she abandons the awkward ‘together-water’ and translates 7.95.2 about the river Sarasvatī *súcir yatī girībhya ā samudrāt* as ‘pure, travelling down from the mountains, from the gathering-place of the waters’. And immediately one wants to ask how she knows that there was a “gathering-place of waters” up in the Himalayas. Why so?...A long line of vedicists, both Indians and Westerners, have invariably translated ‘pure, flowing from the mountains (*girībhyaḥ* ablative plural) to (*ā*) the *samudrá* (abl singular: confluence, ocean, sea and Witzel’s ‘terminal lake’). I am certain she knows that the ablative does not require the *ā* either as preposition or postposition to express “movement from” as Pāṇini makes it abundantly clear in the fourth chapter of his Book 1 of *Aṣṭādhyāyī*: e.g. *RV* 4.51.8c – *ṛtāsya devīḥ sádaso budhānāḥ* ‘the goddesses [are] waking **from-the-seat** (*sádaso* < *sádasah* ablative) of-Natural-Order (*ṛtāsya*)’.

KT opts to differ because she thinks that the two ablatives are parallel and the preposition *ā* (which she calls postposition and adposition) governs the first one, i.e. *girībhyaḥ* with the

¹Here I acknowledge my debt to Sethna’s comments in his 1992 publication, pp130-135.

sense ‘from’, and by extension the second one also with the same sense. She adduces the views of some comparativists in the Indo-European field (instead of Paṇini) and avers: “Indeed, some linguists have argued that adpositions were *invariably* placed after the word they govern” (p 32; my emphasis). Now why does she do this when she knows perfectly well that such a view is utterly untrue? Why refer at all to Indoeuropeanists and not to an acknowledged authority on Vedic?... All we need here is not pointless pedantry but a quick look at MacDonell’s *Vedic Grammar* which gives us the bare facts². Writing of prepositions *āti*, *ādhi*, *ānu*, *ā*, *ūpa* etc, this indisputable authority says: “As a rule these prepositions follow, **but also often precede** their case” (1916: 208; §176, 1: my emphasis) Then he adds: “*ā* with the abl., if following, means *from (on)*; **if preceding, up to**” (p209, §176, 2b: my emphasis). But he points out also in a footnote here that *ā* *sometimes* precedes with the sense ‘from’ (cf my example c, below). Indeed, the *RV* corroborates this with many such instances. Obviously one must use one’s reason and discrimination in every situation.

KT does give a similar example where the *ā* seems to follow its case and then govern with the same meaning a subsequent noun. This is it, with four more nouns in the ablative which are omitted for brevity’s sake:

ā yatu índro divá ā prithivyā, maksú samudrāt...
 ‘Come hither Indra from the sky or from the earth,
 Swiftly from the samudrá...’ (4.21.3)

Yes, but one could argue with much reason that the first *ā* goes with the verb *yatu* as is very common, the ablative *diváh* without the *ā* denotes the place from which emerges movement (and so do *samudrāt* and the subsequent ablatives) while the second *ā* governs *prithivyāḥ*: the meaning would now be ‘Let Indra come from the sky to earth [where I am], swiftly from the *samudrá...*’ (and so on with the other ablatives). This seems to me far more reasonable.

Here are some examples with the preposition preceding

²She refers to MacDonell’s *A Vedic Reader for Students* (1917 OUP), which cannot be understood without following up the teeming references to his own *Grammar*! She could also have consulted Wackernagel’s *Grammatik* which again she cites elsewhere! Thus she uses her sources and authorities selectively, as we shall see below, to suit her own notions.

its case:

- a) 1.30.2 : *vayám hí te ámanmahi á ántād á parākāt* ‘we thought of you both nearby and at a distance’.
- b) 1.151.5 with similar construction : *á nimrúca uśasaḥ* ‘until evening and until dawn’ (or ‘at evening...’ etc).
- c) 7.6.7, which is early : Agni Vaiśvānara received treasures *á samudrād ávarād á párasmād...* ‘from the lower samudrá and the upper [one].’
- d) 3.53.11, also early : *svastí á gr̥hébhya ... á vimócanāt* ‘wellbeing up to the houses ... until release/unyoking’.

In all these the *á* precedes and in every situation one has to use one’s common sense and textual content. And with the aid of Lubotsky’s *Concordance* one could cite dozens of other examples with *adhi*, *úpa*, *pári* etc. Take some examples: ‘[The Maruts] like birds sat upon [their] beloved barhis-grass’ *váyo na sídann ádhi barhíṣi priyé* (1.85.7d); ‘Eloquent you repeat upon the waters’ *suváco vādathana-ádhy apśú* (7.103.5d). ‘The eagle shook out from the mountain/rock the other’ *ámathnād anyám pári śyenó ádreḥ* (1.93.6) These examples should suffice. If the preposition invariably followed the inflected word it would be very difficult to have such compounds as *ádhy-akṣa* ‘eye-witness’, *anu-kāmá-m* ‘according to desire’, *pári-vatsará* ‘complete year’ etc, etc, etc.

To (wrongly) postulate invariable syntactic patterns (of this sort) for the *RV* is to show ignorance of Vedic and of poetry generally. (Consider the line from Eliot’s *Four Quartets* “In my end is my beginning” or the abrupt, startling reversal in John Donne’s “Thy beams so reverend and strong/Why shouldst thou think [O Sun]?” from *The Sun Rising*.)

Since the position of *á* in 7.95.2 is not anomalous, it is not surprising that generations of scholars have translated monotonously ‘from the mountains to the *samudrá*’. Moreover, KT’s rendering ‘gathering-place of waters’ has a serious difficulty with reality and common sense. There is no ‘gathering-place’ of ‘together-water’ on the Himalayan slopes. There are masses of snow, ice and glaciers and as soon as these melt they flow down as rivers. And the Vedics surely knew of the conditions on the Himalayas as they knew of the vast ocean far down south.

3. Many scholars doubt that the Vedics knew the ocean.

If KT had consulted the *Vedic Index* she would have seen that all the difficulties raised by modern indologists (e.g. Elizarenkova 1996-7; Klaus 1985) were dealt with adequately therein – except Witzel’s ‘terminal lake’ which is really a non-starter. The conclusion was that the Vedics did know the ocean. Using common sense again, also in the Invasion scenario, we can see that even if the Indoaryans had entered Saptasindhu, the land of the seven rivers, in N-W India from a landlocked region, they would have found out about the ocean from the natives, who engaged in trans-oceanic commerce with Mesopotamia. Since, always in the AIT scenario, they had so intrepidly trekked thousands of miles, they would have travelled down south either on boats on the Sindhu or with carts; there they would have seen the ocean. Surely, there is nothing extraordinary in this. So why all this fuss and denial of the Vedics’ knowledge of the ocean?... Reasoning must always be paramount.³

4. Could *samudrá* denote the ocean? Of course, frequently.

To speak of ‘together-water’ or ‘gathering-place of waters’ is unhelpful to say the least and, again, ignores common sense. A gathering place of waters in mass is a confluence or a river or a lake or the ocean. Now we know that there were several confluences, rivers and small lakes in Saptasindhu, but *samudrá* is usually in the singular, as all my citations herein show. Thus even if we accept “the gathering-place of waters”, we would expect a plural for the Himalayas, the valleys and the plains simply because there were many gathering-places of waters. And when Agni received treasures from the lower and the upper *samudrá* (*ā samudrād āvarād ā párasmād...*), we understand only one lower on earth and one upper in the sky. If it is one terrestrial *samudrá* it can only be the ocean since, otherwise, there are plenty of confluences, rivers, lakes and general gathering-places.

³I don’t really understand scholars who invoke scientism in the humanities (“scientific approach, method” etc). In Physics, Chemistry etc, scientists check their results against the realities of the material world, often with maths and always with reasoning. We can’t ignore the realities in our field (i.e. facts archaeological, grammatical and literary) and, most important, common sense.

However, I offer yet another passage – 7.49.2 :

*yā ápo divyā utá vā srāvanti, khañítrimā utá á vāyāḥ
svayamjāḥ; samudrā rthā yā ḥ śúcayaḥ pāvakā [h]* etc:
'The Waters that are heavenly, or flow in channels, or
arise spontaneously, [and] are clean and purifying, have
as their goal the *samudrá* etc.

The heavenly waters are the river or watermass in the sky and, of course, the rains; the waters flowing in channels are natural rivers or man-made ditches; these that arise spontaneously are springs, lakes and wells. Ditches, lakes and wells do not in ordinary terms aim for a larger gathering place: these we can ignore. Obviously the one gathering place of waters which rains, rivers and springs have as their ultimate aim is the ocean. Confluences themselves move on as larger rivers to the ocean (or a large lake); lakes have themselves arisen spontaneously (if not created and fed by rivers) and there are many of them. So the only watermass (in the singular) left is the ocean.

Let us take a final example. 1.116.4 says that the Aśvins saved Bhujyu from drowning and carried him for three nights and three days (*tisráḥ kṣápas trír áha-*) to the 'distant dry-shore of the watery ocean' (*samudrásya dhánvan ádrasya pāre*). Yes, we have a hyperbole which is common in the *RV*. But the poet has a specific intention here. Now, what "together-water" or "gathering-place of waters" is so large that the two gods, who fly on a car drawn usually by birds, would need three days and nights to traverse to reach its distant shore?...⁴ Only the ocean.

5 KT refers also (p33) to G. Possehl's 1998 paper and cites the passage: "it seems unlikely that the ancient Sarasvati flowed to the sea during those times. The absence of a river scar suggests that the same is true for later periods." (1998: 350) This is absolutely true. However, for reasons known best to herself, she does not divulge that "those times" are the centuries 1500-1000 BCE! She also does not tell us that with the very next sentence Possehl suggests "that the river once did flow to the sea, in very ancient times... (3800-3200 BC), but even this is not certain". She refrained perhaps because she wished to spare us Possehl's uncertainty. Nevertheless, the

⁴I discuss this issue very fully and give ten more examples in my 2009 publication, ch 5.

archaeologist thinks the river might have flowed to the sea but KT turns the archaeologist's hesitancy into certainty that the river did not reach the sea! A more thorough investigation would have revealed to her that Bridget Allchin, a most reputable British archaeologist, expert on Indian protohistory and the Indus Valley Culture, expressed no doubt about the river reaching the sea taking the Nara Nadi river beyond the Derawar Fort as the natural continuation of the ancient Sarasvatī (1999). In the same year L. Flam, another expert published independently an identical certainty about Nara being the continuation of Sarasvatī (1999). French archaeologist P-H Francfort had reached the same conclusion with certainty back in 1992 giving dates 3800-3600 and before. The doyen of Indian archaeologists, B.B. Lal, also expresses no doubt in his 2002 publication that the ancient Sarasvati flowed into the ocean through the Nara. And more recently, a team of reputable Indian scientists traced by satellite the course of the river (Possehl's "river scar") from the mountains to the ocean flowing into the Rann of Kachch or Kutch. (Sharma et al 2006).⁵

So the Sarasvatī, this *nadītamā* 'best of rivers' did flow into the ocean before 3500 (to give an average date), i.e. before, first, its tributary Sutlej was captured by the Sindhu and, later, the Yamuna was captured by the Ganges. This is the picture presented by the *RV* even in the hymns of the tenth and latest Book. So, again, when were these hymns composed?

6. Closely connected with the Sarasvatī is the word *ándhas* which occurs in *RV* 7.96.2 and also engaged KT's attention (p24). The word is in the dual: *ubhé yát te mahinā śubhre ándhasī, adhikṣiyānti pūrāvaḥ* (her translation: 'Since through your might, O bright one, The Pūrus inhabit both *ándhasī*'). Dismissing Griffith's translation "grassy banks" for *ándhasī* and Geldner's *Getränken* "drinks" (echoed also by Renou in French and Elizarenkova in Russian), KT goes off to examine the controversy between indigenists and invasionists and refers to the Bryant and Laurie book, *The Indoaryan Controversy* (2005) but not to the debate in the *JIES* (2002-3), which is in fact later, i.e. more recent, since the papers in Bryant and Laurie

⁵Most of this information except for the 2006 publication was presented in my 'Final Reply' in *JIES* 31, Spring (pp 228-9) but very few scholars bother to read nowadays, widely, attentively and impartially.

were written before 2002! Thus she offers no translation of her own and so, as with the *vaila*-group and *armaká*, the text continues to remain undeciphered. Let us see if we can sort this out.

Of course *ándhas* is well attested in the sense of ‘darkness (and blindness)’ ; also ‘bush, grass, plant, stalk’ (esp 1.28.7) and ‘(soma-)juice’. Mayrhofer, as many another before him, links *ándhas* with Greek *ἄνθος* ‘flower’ and with Friesian *ändul* ‘fine, tender grass’. (This is acknowledged by one Comment and KT in her second paper.)

The ‘bright one’ *śubhrā* addressed in the verse is Sarasvati. So we must ask what two things a river has: it has a beginning and an end; a surface and a bottom, the riverbed; and two banks. Common sense and the diction with the dual concord *ubhé...ándhasī* compels us to dismiss all notions except the “two banks”. The two banks are the only places where the tribe of the Pūrus could dwell (*adhikṣiyānti*). Obviously the “two drinks” of Geldner, Renou and Elizarenkova, despite the massive notes that accompany this rendition, make no sense at all (not even metaphorically), since there are many, not two, drinks from the river-water and since the fluid denoted by *andhas* is the specific soma-juice.

True, *ándhas* as ‘bank’ is not attested anywhere. But why should this matter? Are we to abandon the reality of the material world and our common sense for the sake of philological pedantry? After all, *RV* 8.22.17-8 says that king Citra and lesser-kings *rājaká*- dwell along the Sarasvati (– along its banks, obviously). The enclitic *te* in 7.96.2 ‘thy’ covers both *mahinā* ‘greatness, might’ and *ándhas*.

Moreover, there is the figure of speech called ‘synecdoche’ which uses the part in order to indicate a larger whole, as in “I counted ten heads” instead of “ten persons” or “ten sheep”. Similarly here, we have “both bushes/grasses” to denote the “grassy banks” of the river. There is nothing extraordinary about it. Griffith, not for the first or only time, proves more faithful to the spirit of the poet.⁶ And let us

⁶Consider 6.75.8 *tātrā rātham úpa śagnám sadema*. Geldner translated “...auf den wollen wir der Wagon setzen” and Witzel gave it in English “on this (*rathavāhana*) we wish to put the useful/strong ratha”; O’Flaherty too gives (1981:237) “on it let us place the working chariot”. But the verb *úpa-sad-* never means ‘place, put’; it means ‘sit by/near/on, revere, approach respectfully’ and the like. Only the causative form *úpa-sād-aya-* does mean

acknowledge the simple fact, that much of the *RV* is not just poetry, but great poetry!

7. Several more points could be made about KT's article but I decided to keep this paper short. As I wrote earlier, I agree with most of what she says questioning various established but probably wrong meanings. One general point of caution. India has excellent archaeologists (Lal taught in California; Chakrabarti D. teaches at Cambridge, U.K.) and, of course, unrivalled sanskritists. Some Western indologists deride them with terms like "quacks, Hindutva hacks" and the like; almost all tend superciliously to ignore Indian scholars thinking that only Western indologists (mainly comparativists) transmit the truth. This is a sad mistake.

By way of conclusion I present seven items, apart from ruins, that are not found in the *RV* but are common in the Harappan culture and are found in post-rigvedic texts, especially the Brāhmaṇas and Sūtras.

- i) bricks – *iṣṭakā*;
- ii) cotton – *karṣāsa*;
- iii) fixed altars or hearths;
- iv) iconography – relief or statuary;
- v) urbanization on a significant scale;
- vi) writing – *lipi* or *lekha(na)*;
- vii) dried up Sarasvatī. (There are more.)

Moreover, there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that the *RV* was composed c1200-1000 BCE - none other than fanciful theory and mechanical repetition. All the tremendous arsenal used once upon a time to support the Invasion scenario has now been reduced to horses and chariots: chariots for war and races did not exist before 2000 and horses appear in Saptasindhu only after c1500 – according to Prof. Witzel who has become the main spokesman for this theory.

The meagre evidence for domesticated horse at the Harappan sites often adduced in discussions, is a red herring. There is no significant increase of horse-remains after the period 1500 BCE. If there was an entry of Indoeuropeans

'make sit on, place upon'! Here again Griffith got it right - "let us here...honour the helpful Car". Of course, Griffith does make many mistakes but this is understandable when we consider that Vedic studies had only just begun.

bringing horses and chariots at c 1500 BCE, there should be masses of such remains. There is no such evidence until the centuries of the Common Era. KT, as others before, rightly points out (p36) that horses are not quite so common in the *RV*, as many scholars claim (see also Kazanas 2002: §VII,1 with many more references). She also shows that the much mistranslated and thus maligned *rātha* is not a “war-chariot”. In fact, in his translations in his *Vedic Reader*, MacDonell never gives the word ‘chariot’ but always ‘car’. The “chariot” is a legacy of classicism (Greece and Rome). Moreover, rigvedic cars are made from native timber (*RV* 3.53.19; 10.85.20). They have space or seating for three *trivandhurá* (*RV* 3.6.9; 6.47.9 etc) and one is a minibus *rātha* having space for eight *aṣṭāvandhurá* (late 10.53.7): they are drawn by oxen, donkeys, antelopes and rarely by horses! There is not a single mention of one- or two-spaced *rāthas*. Here again, actual remains of cars are found only after c 300 BCE. All this was discussed extensively in Kazanas 2002, §VII, 2-3. So the “war-chariot” is another red-herring.

I leave it to the readers to draw their own conclusion about the approximate date of the composition of (the bulk of) the *Ṛgveda*.

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