

The Plight of the *Rigveda* in the Twenty-First Century Response to N. A. Kazanas

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In 2007, a collection of rare manuscripts of the text of the *Rigveda* was added to UNESCO's 'Memory of the World' register. This register is designed to honor and protect precious landmarks in the intellectual history of the world.

Two years before, in 2005, Penguin had issued a second edition of its selection of translations from the poems by an American Sanskritist and professor of religion. For the past thirty years this slim volume has represented the *Rigveda* for the English reader. At the end of the book the editor supplies fragments of the text, albeit in an unaccented form that came centuries later, in an index of first lines. According to this index (Doniger 2005: 321), the opening word of the first poem is the mystical particle *ōm*. This particle, conveying religious awe, has been silently added by Professor Doniger from later Indian religious writings. It is not present in the first line, and is entirely unknown to the Rigvedic poems.

These two very different ways of showing respect to the earliest Indo-European poetry pull in irreconcilably different directions.

Why the *Rigveda* is not being studied

For most western readers – particularly if they have ever dipped into the Penguin selection – these poems are an impenetrable enigma. Simon Jenkins, one of our finest journalists and a writer of considerable scholarship, recently coined an elegant metaphor to describe the incomprehensibility of the medieval English church: “a church is a song without words, an architectural Sanskrit” (Jenkins 2000: ix). For the educated modern reader, Sanskrit is the one subject that he knows he doesn't know, and that he is not in the slightest bit embarrassed not to know. Its earliest poems embody this acknowledged, acceptable ignorance. Two of the

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three responses to my paper “A still undeciphered text” published last year in *JIES* were a reflection of this. Peter-Arnold Mumm is a professor of Indo-European linguistics, a discipline that owes its existence, and indeed its name, to the discovery of the relationship between Sanskrit and the classical languages of Europe. But he is not a Sanskrit scholar, and while undertaking to publish a reply made no apology for not having read my word studies, which contain the linguistic evidence for my argument. Stefan Zimmer, similarly, chair of Indo-European Studies at Bonn, points out that he is not in a position to judge “the breadth and completeness of my critical survey”. No stigma, clearly, attaches to professors of Indo-European for unfamiliarity with the language of the earliest poems.

The *Rigveda* is a minority interest in Sanskrit circles. “Some chocolates can only be sold if they are wrapped up in gold-speckled papers. Books about the Ṛgveda will only be read through the medium of some fashionable theory.” (Staal 1982: 278) The ‘hermeneutic’ approach of the Vedic scholars whose province these poems are considered to be was the focus of my paper last year. And as far as traditional scholars in India are concerned, there is no debate: these poems should simply not be an object of study. What the *Rigveda* ‘means’ is of no concern, it is the tradition deriving from them that matters. As an Indian correspondent politely told me: “Scholars of traditional stamp would prefer that the text remains inscrutable. Western scholarship burrowing into the text is, all said and done, an annoyance.” Meanwhile it continues to be considered irrelevant to the work of most classicists. Caught like a fly in amber in the east, in the west this ancient poetry, unknown until the nineteenth century, has suffered the fate of a child joining school a year after everyone else, too late to find a niche. It is hard to imagine, therefore, who is going to find my linguistic arguments to be within his remit.

Despite not having read the published evidence, Professors Mumm and Zimmer clearly regard as absurd my conclusion that these poems make as much sense as any other ancient literary composition. Professor Mumm is content to meet it with some derision: “Good luck for the project of explaining the whole RV literally!”. Professor Zimmer, similarly, while admitting his inability to assess my argument, is confident in disparaging it. Had I written “A still undeciphered

text” a decade ago, impelled simply by the overwhelming sense that this is great poetry, and that the incoherence must lie in the translations rather than the original, it would be reasonable for scholars to be skeptical. But over the past ten years I have published a number of word studies whose retranlations transform the poems, discovering sense where before there was nonsense.

These studies continue to be largely unread. The only scholars I can be relatively sure have read them are the anonymous referees who approved them for publication. Their response has always been: of course, yes, her argument about this particular word is correct, but she cannot draw the general conclusion that she does from just one study. But there is not just one study. What, of itself, would be no evidence becomes *by its corroborative position*, proof most sure. This sentence is not mine: it is taken from Edgar Allan Poe, describing, in 1843, the investigative method of Augustin Dupin in his short story *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt*. Dupin is identifying the body of a girl:

“Each successive proof is multiple evidence – proof not *added* to proof, but *multiplied* by hundreds or thousands... it is not that the corpse was found to have the garters of the missing girl, or found to have her shoes, or her bonnet, or the flowers of her bonnet, or her general size and appearance – it is that the corpse had each, and all *collectively*.” (Poe 2006: 59)

In terms of my overreaching argument – that the text responds to the scientific approach, and that it is possible to make sense of it – continuing to publish such proofs is not necessary. The point has been established.

The *Rigveda* as political football

The possibility of attracting others to the academic study of this ancient poetry is however not increasing, it has seriously diminished in recent times. The circumstances that surround it, and contribute to maintaining its neglect, have become much worse. A vitriolic political debate has arisen between a voluble and largely unchallenged western post-colonial coterie, and a beleaguered native party with the instinctive feeling that they are being bullied, but who are unsure how to defend themselves. Any trace of impartial

scholarship, particularly in India, is effectively held to ransom. Scholars are compelled, as my correspondent put it, “to remain silent unless they can support currently popular notions.” And not just in India. I, too, it seems, should have steered clear of such controversial matters as rivers flowing to the sea, and people living on river banks.

Nicholas Kazanas is a sincere man, driven by commitment to what he, like me, observes to be an important and highly poetic text, and a desire to come to the aid of a browbeaten underdog. But he helps his case not at all by insisting upon traditional translations that are built on sand. It is important to be clear about what these cornerstone translations for him and his party are:

1. Kazanas insists that 7.95.2 provides clear and crucial evidence that the river Sarasvati flowed to the sea, despite the fact that the word for sea in the line is ablative. Although he does not dispute that *samudrāt*, in all its other occurrences in the text, means *from*, not *to* the sea, he refuses to countenance any doubt being cast on this traditional translation;
2. He argues that *ándhas* in 7.96.2 must mean ‘grassy bank of a river’, although he agrees that it cannot possibly mean that in any other of its 100 or so occurrences.

Along the way he devotes at least half of his paper to red herrings, which cast considerable dust in the eye of the reader. I did not write that prepositions like *á* are invariably postpositional in Ancient Sanskrit, that was Delbrück. I said that they usually are: “adpositions’ in Ancient Sanskrit usually follow the word they govern” (Thomson 2009: 32). This is not in question: Kazanas quotes Macdonell saying the same. His impassioned digression on the poetic flexibility of prepositions has no bearing whatever on the argument: whether *á* belongs with following *samudrāt* or with preceding *giribhyas*, *samudrāt* remains ablative. And, as I wrote at the time, I quoted the title of Gregory Possehl’s 1998 article “Did the Sarasvati ever flow to the sea?” (2009: 30), because it provided a convenient heading for that section. I refer throughout to the implications of the lack of textual scholarship for scholars in other fields. The archaeological arguments however I leave to the archaeologists; mine relate only to the text of the *Rigveda*.

One of Kazanas's misunderstandings warrants fuller attention, because it leads to further evidence, if such evidence were needed, for the interpretation of 7.95.2, which is his primary concern. He is wrong to think that I avoid translating the word *samudrá* in this paper because I am of the camp that believes 'sea' is an inappropriate translation. By leaving it untranslated, I was hoping not to have my grammatical argument obscured by the political imbroglio. However, if pointing out that *samudrát* is ablative is insufficient to throw doubt on the traditional translation 'to the sea' in 7.95.2, there is a wealth of complementary evidence: rivers flow regularly to the *samudrá* in the poems, and, as any linguist might anticipate, their destination is in the accusative, *samudrám*. The context is usually Indra's paramount achievement in releasing earth's streams from the primordial dragon:

1.32.2a,d

áhann áhim párvate śiśriyāṇám...
He-slew the -dragon on-the-mountain lying

áñjah samudrám áva jagmur ápah
*áñjas*¹ to-the-samudra down went the-waters

Streams are similarly dispatched to an accusative *samudrá* in verses 3.36.6 and 6.17,12, and, with the preposition *áchā* 'towards' (which takes the accusative) at 1.130.5, 2.19.3, 3.33.2, and 6.30.4. The image is also used in similes: worship goes to the gods like streams to the *samudrá* in 1.71.7, 1.190.7, and 3.46, 4. The word *samudrá* is in the accusative in all these passages. Once, exceptionally, the context of the simile compels the dative, *samudráya*:

8.44.25:

ágne dhṛtávratāya te
Agni, whose-laws-are-firm, to-you

samudráyeva (samudráya-iva) síndhavaḥ
Like -to-the-sea rivers

gíro vāśrása irate
The-songs roaring go

¹The word *áñjas* is left untranslated for reasons that will be explained below.

None of this of course provides the kind of information that historians and archaeologists are looking for, in this case whether the poets did or didn't know the ocean. Only deciphering the text will be able to do this. The riches its decipherment will yield up to the important minority of classicists with an interest in comparative Indo-European poetics, notably Martin West at Oxford, are also unknown.

Without a proper scholarly edition and translation of the text, arguments such as those Nicholas Kazanas adduces continue to be bandied back and forth, their validity generally unverifiable, interested scholars groping for handholds in a quagmire. To give a brief example, Kazanas cites 7.49.2 as a passage that speaks of rivers and springs going to "one gathering place of waters". His point is the supposed singularity of the word *samudrá* in this passage: "the only watermass (in the singular) is the ocean". But *samudrá* is not in the singular, it is the first element of the compound *samudrártha* (*samudrá-ārtha* 'sea-purposed') and is in stem form. Whether you interpret it as singular, plural, or dual is up to you – and, in the current political context, the argument you are trying to urge.²

The 'German School'

At the beginning of "A still undeciphered text" I quoted the nineteenth-century linguist William Dwight Whitney's remark, in an essay on the interpretation of the *Rigveda*, that the content of the poems "seems almost more Indo-European than Indian" (1873: 101). Whitney is comparing the approach of the ancient commentators, who regularly ascribe a diversity of meanings to the same word or phrase, with the scientific methods of what he calls "the German school". He dismisses the work of the commentators so roundly that one would have thought it dismissed forever. On the other hand, he tells us

²He refers, similarly, in defending his 'river-banks' argument, to another passage about Sarasvati for its supposed historical evidence: "after all, RV 8.22.17-18 says that King Citra and lesser-kings dwell along the Sarasvati (– along its banks, obviously)". But this information is not in the text either, there is no verb in the lines he is citing. Not only are the river banks supplied ("obviously", according to Kazanas), but also the verb "dwell", and the justification for supplying it is questionable. Kazanas should have checked the text before drawing his parallel (and if he had done so he could also have corrected his reference; the passage in question is the last two verses of 8.21, not 8.22).

that the linguistic approach of the German school had by 1873 already given the world “an essential part of its knowledge and conception of ancient times” (1873: 132). Professor Whitney would have approved of UNESCO’s recent tribute to the *Rigveda*.

The approach of the German school to the text has changed since Whitney was writing. At the Fifth International Conference on Historical Lexicography and Lexicology (ICHLL5), held in Oxford in June 2010 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the online *Oxford English Dictionary*, a presentation on a projected new *Rigveda-Lexikon*, under the general editorship of Thomas Krisch, was an unexpected contribution. “Rivelex: The structure of a dictionary to an ancient corpus (Rigveda): morphological, syntactic, and semantic information”.

One of the examples of a lexical entry given on their handout was the feminine form of the word *gáw*, for which the Rivelex team give the following meanings: “cow; milk, butter; earth, dawn, cloud, bodies of water, sacrificial spoon, poetry, voice, bow-string”. They add the note: “These meanings are derived from the context.” But this ‘derivation from context’ is of an entirely different order from the *OED*’s continuing focus on defining meaning through usage. These multiple ‘meanings’ do not represent any kind of scholarly consensus: no two translators, for example, are in agreement in understanding the word in any context to mean ‘sacrificial spoon’ (the suggestion comes from Geldner’s footnotes to 3.7.2 and 10.65.6; others, for these two contexts, offer ‘sacrificial cow’, ‘sacred sound’, ‘speech’, ‘la Vache’, and ‘thunder’). Such lists of meanings derive from the ancient reverential tradition of ‘glossing’ the text rather than attempting to decipher it. Sanskrit dictionaries are full of entries of this kind, which are hold-alls into which anything can be made to fit, like Harry Potter’s friend Hermione’s handbag. It is not the case that the Rigvedic poets could not distinguish a cow from a cloud or a spoon or a bow-string. There is an underlying problem with the traditional interpretation of this word that needs to be sorted out.

What John Chadwick wrote in the 1960s in response to a suggested decipherment of the Indus Script by Asko Parpola and his team also holds good for the *Rigveda*. “To preserve an open mind is incredibly difficult, because we are either

mesmerised into swallowing camels or so prejudiced we cannot manage the odd gnat... What we shall need is not more possible or even plausible interpretations... but the clearest possible demonstration that these meanings, and only these meanings, are correct” (Clauson and Chadwick 1969: 207).

The first example given on the Rivelex handout at the conference was the compound *añjas-pā*, and comes from the part of their dictionary that has already been published (Krisch 2006). The Rivelex editors translate *añjas-pā*, “drinking an ointment; protecting an ointment; moving directly etc.”. Setting aside the solecism of giving three quite different meanings for a word that occurs only twice (at 10.92.2 and 10.94.13), continuing to put forward such bizarre interpretations stands firmly in the way of making sense of the text. The first element of this compound, *añjas*, contrary to what Rivelex tells us and its translation assumes, never means ‘ointment’ in the *Rigveda* (see its occurrence in 1.32.2 quoted above, where it is usually taken as adverbial).

añjas is a nominal derivative of the verb $\sqrt{añj}$, which was included in my list of undeciphered words in “A still undeciphered text” (2009: 80). The verb continues to be misunderstood as meaning ‘smear with ointment, anoint’, in the *Rigveda*, although there are numerous occasions where this makes no sense. At the end of Lesson 10 of *Ancient Sanskrit Online* its Rigvedic usage was briefly discussed and illustrated (Thomson and Slocum 2006). The very different meaning that emerges for this important verb – not ‘smear with ointment’, but something like ‘cause to appear, make manifest’ – exemplifies how ritual interpretations have for thousands of years obscured the *Rigveda*’s conceptual sophistication, and how they continue to obscure it in the twenty-first century.

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