"OVER TROUBLED WATERS": THE MEANING OF THE TITLE *PONTIFEX*

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> "Do whatever steps you want if / you have cleared them with the pontiff" . . . Tom Lehrer, "The Vatican Rag," *That Was The Year That Was* (Reprise Records 1965)

The Latin title *pontifex* appears to derive from *pons*, "bridge", and *facere*, "to make," meaning—quite literally—"bridge-maker."[1] Yet ever since at least the first century B.C. learned men have questioned and even disputed the widely accepted derivation of *pontifex* from *pons*. Their reason: the huge discrepancy between the paltry tasks and prestige implied by the term "bridge-maker" and the important duties and status accorded Rome's chief religious functionaries in historical times. After all, we hear from Dionysius of Halicarnassus (2.73.2) that the head of the pontifical college, the *pontifex maximus*, had a number of weighty responsibilities; Livy (1.20.5) and Plutarch (*Numa* 9.4–5) enumerate several of these tasks: expounding and interpreting divine will; directing sacred rites—both public ceremonies and private sacrifices; teaching what was requisite for worship of the gods and preventing any departure from established custom; supervising the Vestal Virgins.

In the following discussion, I would like first of all to review the age-old controversy over the meaning of the word *pontifex* and hopefully confirm the popular belief that the title signifies nothing more and nothing less than "bridge-builder." Next, I will try to establish that

[1] I have adapted the phrase "over troubled waters" from the song title "Bridge Over Troubled Water" by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, and from the record album of the same name (Columbia Records 1970). This paper was first delivered on November 3, 1969, at one of the Harvard University Dow Classical Luncheons. I would like to thank Professors Gregory Nagy, Zeph Stewart, Sheila Dickinson and Katherine Geffcken for their assistance and encouragement.

it is possible to reconcile the discrepancy between the literal meaning of the *pontifex*'s title and the nature of his official duties. We know of other instances in Greco-Roman society where a functionary's name, awarded in recognition of his earliest tasks, was retained long after his responsibilities had altered and increased drastically; we can easily prove, moreover, a connection between the *pontifex maximus* and the maintenance, both physical and spiritual, of one Roman bridge even in the period of the empire. Thirdly, and most important, I want to consider the etymology of *pons*, by relating the word to its Indo-European cognates. From a study of the oldest cognate, Vedic Sanskrit *pánthāh*, we can conclude that the root from which *pons* derives—and hence the term *pons* itself—is fraught with magical implications. Finally, I hope to show that the wooden *pons sublicius*, tended by the pontiffs and reputedly—in form if not in chronology—the oldest Roman bridge, was revered as if it possessed supernatural qualities. Such an observation in turn suggests that a bridge-maker was indeed a personage of awe-inspiring powers, one to whom it was altogether natural to assign ponderous spiritual responsibilities as the machinery of the Roman state religion developed.

The controversy over the etymology of *pontifex* begins with a statement made by Varro in *De Lingua Latina* 5.83. He reports that Quintus Scaevola, consul in 90 B.C. and *pontifex maximus* thereafter, derived *pontifex* from *posse*, "to be able" and *facere*, as if the term were a syncopation of *potentifex*. Varro then goes on to say that he himself plumps for a derivation from *pons*, inasmuch as the *pons sublicius* was initially built and frequently repaired by the pontiffs and since they perform elaborate sacrifices on both sides of the Tiber in connection with their task of bridge-maintenance. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, the next author to delve into the issue, sides with Varro, noting that the *pontifices* still keep up repairs on the wooden *pons sublicius* (2.73.1). He quickly adds, however, that the pontiffs have jurisdiction over the most important matters, thereby implying that he, like Scaevola, found the label "bridge-builder" somewhat misrepresentative and demeaning.

Two centuries later Plutarch (*Numa* 9.2) joins the ranks of dissenters by lightly dismissing the *pons* etymology (*to gelômenon tôn onomatôn*) in favor of that from *posse*. So convinced does he feel of the *posse* deriva-

tion, in fact, that he actually distinguishes between those scholars who take *posse* in its sense of "to be able" and those who interpret it to mean "to be possible," since the *pontifex* is only assigned possible functions. He does admit, however, that—at least according to those who accept the *pons* derivation—the pontiffs performed sacrifices of the greatest antiquity and the most sacred character at a bridge over the Tiber; he also mentions the fact that the custody and maintenance of the bridge belonged to the priesthood, ostensibly because the Romans deemed the demolition of this wooden bridge not only illegal (*ou themiton*) but actually sacrilegious (*eparaton*). Both of the other subsequent writers who discuss the derivation of *pontifex*—Servius, quoting the Salian songs (*ad Aeneidem* 2.166), and John the Lydian (*De Anno et Mensibus* 3.21) support and express no open reservations on the *pons* etymology. Nevertheless, the words of John the Lydian reflect some confusion over the correct derivation. Granted, he initially asserts that the Roman appellation *pontifex* for a high religious official finds a ready parallel in ancient Athens, where all those who interpreted traditional rites and had charge of all sacred offices were named "bridge-men" (*gephyraioi*), because on the bridge over the Spercheius river holy rites were performed in Pallas' honor. But he then proceeds to associate the *pontifices* with the *praxiergai*, whose title means "*perfecters*," and derive *pontifex* from "power in deeds" (*dynatou in ergois*). The link between *pontifex* and *posse*, originally forged by Scaevola or an etymologist of earlier date, apparently remained so strong in his mind that he could blatantly contradict himself without the slightest compunction.

Modern scholarship—hopefully more scientific than ancient speculation—almost without exception comes down on the side of Varro and others who derive *pontifex* from *pons* and *facere*. In the fourth edition of *Traité de Grammaire Comparée des Langues Classiques* (Paris 1966), for example, A. Meillet and J. Vendryes state that the word *pontifex* consists of the ancient suffix *fex* (later *ficus*, as in *munificus*), to be translated first, and *ponti*, accusative—in function if not ultimately in form—of *pons*.[2] Compounds of similar formation abound in the Latin language; the two most obvious parallels are *aurifex* and *carnifex*. Yet in spite of considerable linguistic evidence and in defiance of

[2] p. 432.

general scholarly opinion,[3] at least one highly respected etymological handbook questions the derivation of *pontifex* from *pons* by suggesting that it may be purely a "popular etymology."[4] Thus the debate over *pontifex* still continues, its flames fanned by those unable to reconcile the discrepancy between etymological form and official function.

Two important facts, however, aid one in effecting such a reconciliation. First of all, it is possible to cite several other situations in Greco-Roman society where a functionary's name, which was granted in recognition of his earliest activities, was retained long after his responsibilities had been augmented and revised. The *teichopoioi* in Miletus were technically called wall-builders, but by historical times they were concerned with financial matters. Rome's treasurer, the *quaestor*, had abridged his title from that of murderer-hunter, *quaestor paricidii*, his original role. Furthermore, the Roman aedile, once only in charge of Ceres' *aedes* on the Aventine, eventually widened his sphere of interest to include leadership of the *plebs* and organization of games.[5] To the above list of officials, who still kept their original names centuries after their tasks—and correspondingly, their status—had increased, one might also add the *gephyraioi* alluded to by John the Lydian. Unfortunately, we have only one other ancient reference to these Greek religious officials, a totally useless one in Herodotus 5.57; from what we can gather, though, their responsibilities appear to include far more than mere sacrificing in the whereabouts of a bridge.

In the second place, we have it from several good sources—Varro, Dionysius, Plutarch and the Salian chants quoted by Servius—that even in the imperial period the *pontifex maximus* maintained a formal connection with one particular Roman bridge, the ancient, all-wooden *pons sublicius*, a structure for all practical purposes replaced in 179 B.C. by the *pons Aemilius*, which spanned the Tiber on stone arches. Varro

[3] The three fullest discussions—and most ardent defenses—of the *pons* etymology in twentieth century Anglo-American scholarship appear in R. J. Kent, *CP* 8 (1913) 317–26; F. A. Wright, *CR* 35 (1921) 155; L. A. Holland, *Janus and the Bridge* (Rome 1961) 332–34, all discussed further below. Other contemporary supporters of the *pons* derivation include L. R. Palmer, *The Latin Language* (London 1961) 35 and R. M. Ogilvie, *A Commentary on Livy I-V* (Oxford 1965) 100 and 138.

[4] Ernout-Meillet (the same Meillet who authored *Traité de Grammaire Comparée*), *Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Latine* (Paris 1951) 521.

[5] I have taken these three examples from P. Kretschmer, *Glotta* 10 (1920) 212.

and Servius both argue that the pontiffs had originally built the *pons sublicius*. Lending credence to their word, moreover, are the testimonies, theirs and those of Dionysius and Plutarch, that the *pontifices* both kept up repairs and performed annual sacrifices on the bridge. The nature of these sacrifices, as related to us by Dionysius (1.38.3), suggests that great importance was attached to them: "On the Ides of May the *pontifices*, accompanied by the Vestal Virgins, the praetors, and whichever other citizens are lawfully entitled to be present at the rites, throw from the sacred (i.e., the Sublician) bridge into the current of the Tiber thirty effigies made in the likeness of men, which they call Argei." We should not forget, either, Plutarch's assertion that the Romans thought demolition of the *pons sublicius* to be utter sacrilege. On the basis of extensive ancient evidence, then, we may conclude that the Sublician bridge was carefully tended by the *pontifices* and thus invested with a certain religious significance. An investigation of those words in kindred languages sharing the same Indo-European root as the Latin word for bridge, *pons*, should provide us with an answer to the next logical question: *exactly what* did the term used to describe this unusual object originally imply?

The Indo-European cognates of pons include Vedic-Sanskrit *pánthāh*, classical Sanskrit *pathya*, Avestan *pantå*, Old Slavonic *pǫtí*, Old Prussian *pintis*, Greek *pontos* and Armenian *hun*. Different languages, however, use these words in different senses: Indo-Iranian, Slavic and Baltic to mean "road" or "path," Greek to mean "sea," Armenian "ford," and of course Latin—quite uniquely—to mean "bridge." Not surprisingly, scholars have attempted to search the most venerable works in the most ancient of these tongues, the Sanskrit Vedic texts, for a clue to the original connotations of the word. Earlier in this century, Roland J. Kent expounded in considerable detail the thesis that since the word *pánthāh* often means "path to the gods" in the *Rig Veda*, the Latin term *pons* must also signify the way by which an offering reaches the gods and the *pontifex* therefore merits authority in holy matters by reason of his creation of networks of communication between heaven and earth.[6]

[6] In "The Vedic Paths of the Gods and the Roman Pontifex," cited in note 3 above. Kent admits to have been originally influenced by the views of several 19th century German scholars, notably A. Walde, who, in *Gr.-Lat. etym. Wortb.* 1 (1877) 383 states: "pontifex Pfadbereiter, der zum Pfade der Götter leitet".

His article has enjoyed high scholarly esteem, yet its weak argumentation opens it up to justifiable criticism. For one thing, although the word *pánthāh* does appear in the *Rig Veda* 175 times, according to Kent's own count it only seems to mean "pathway to the gods" in approximately two dozen of these instances. Kent actually goes so far as to propose a broad definition of *pánthāh* based on all 175 of its occurrences in the *Rig Veda*—"the word applies to any kind of path, physical or figurative, on earth or in air"—but then blithely ignores this observation to tout the specialized sense of "path to the gods" as that belonging to Latin *pons*. In the second place, he himself translates *pánthāh* as "path to the world of the dead" and "path to the home of the blessed" in a few passages where he is attempting to prove that the word means "path to the gods." Thirdly, Kent not only maintains that *pons* initially signified "path to the gods" in Latin, he also puts great weight on the fact that a compound adjective *pathikṛ't*, "path-making," is applied to religious figures in the *Rig Veda*—Brhaspati and Indra—and connects this word with the Latin *pontifex*. But he fails to consider that nowhere in Latin do we find an attestation of *pons* in the sense of "path"—or, for that matter, anything other than "bridge." Such shoddy reasoning makes his ultimate conclusions—that after the meaning of *pons* in Latin changed from "path" to "bridge," the tasks of bridge maintenance were assigned to the *pontifex* in order to strengthen what wrongly appeared to be the significance of his title—sound all the more untenable.

A recent article by Émile Benveniste, however, provides us with further information on the connotations of the Vedic word *pánthāh*;[7] it thereby helps explain why the Latin cognate *pons* may have conveyed the idea of a magical object and subsequently have been attached to an artifact supposedly replete with supernatural powers. Concerned over the variety of senses expressed by the different Indo-European cognates of *pons*, and convinced, like Kent, that one could unearth the primordial meaning of the word by studying the implications of the Sanskrit *pánthāh*, Benveniste has first distinguished *pánthāh* from other Vedic

[7] "Problèmes sémantiques de la reconstruction" *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale* (Paris 1967) 296–98. Benveniste does not specifically refer to Kent—though his contentions refute Kent's resoundingly; he does not, moreover, make any connection between the meaning of *pons* and that of *pontifex*—hence my discussion.

terms for road and then formulated a general definition of the word and its nuances on the basis of all its appearances in ancient Vedic texts, *Pánthāh* is always differentiated from words for known, certain, well-trodden paths: *yāna*, the road of souls toward their abode; *mārga*, the path of wild animals; *adhvan*, a beaten track; *rathya* (cf. Latin *rota*), a chariot road. Benveniste's definition, here quoted in full, indicates that it describes treacherous, touch-and-go situations:[8] "Ce qui caractérise le *pánthāh* est qu'il n'est pas simplement le chemin en tant qu'espace à parcourir d'un point à un autre. Il implique peine, incertitude et danger, il a des détours imprévus, il peut varier avec celui qui le parcourt, et d'ailleurs il n'est pas seulement terrestre, les oiseaux ont le leur, les fleuves aussi.[9] Le *pánthāh* n'est donc pas tracé à l'avance ni foulé régulièrement. C'est bien plutôt un «franchissement» tenté à travers une région inconnue et souvent hostile, une voie ouverte par les dieux à la ruée des eaux, une traversée d'obstacles naturels, ou la route qu'inventent les oiseaux dans l'espace, somme toute un chemin dans une région interdite au passage normal, un moyen de parcourir une étendue périlleuse ou accidentée".

The word *pánthāh*, then, is more general and magical in its implications than Kent would have us believe. Its connotations of peril and mystery carry far more weight than the sense of communication with the divine.[10] If the word *pons* retains the ideas housed in *pánthāh*, it would follow that a *pons* provides a way of overcoming and competing

[8] Benveniste refers to—and draws quite heavily on—P. Thieme, *Der Fremdling im Rig Veda* (Leipzig 1938) 110–17, which gives numerous specific examples of how widely the term *pánthāh* can be applied. One interesting point made by Thieme, though neglected by Benveniste, involves the language used to describe the paths of Soma, a hallucinogenic plant, the juice of which was imbibed to facilitate communication with the gods. When the juice's physical properties are being emphasized and the liquid's destiny is unclear, its paths are referred to by *pánthāh*. The word cognate with English way and German Weg (*adhvan*) is employed when the juice's ideal and divine nature is stressed, because the juice's spiritual power and ability to reach the gods are well-known. Such a use of *pánthāh*, of course, completely destroys Kent's theory.

[9] So, as Thieme (see above, note 8) remarks, do the winds, stars, and sun—when they journey through a haze of unforeseen meteorological obstacles!

[10] We must also reject the theory of F. A. Wright (above, note 3) that the "*pontifices* were responsible for providing a passage through the religious boundary whereby dealings with the outer world are possible." It is an attractive idea, insofar as it takes into account the entire sphere of other worldly powers rather than merely anthropomorphic gods (as Kent's does); Benveniste's observations, however, show that communication was doubtless only a part of the *pontifex*'s function.

with numinous powers;[11] the bridge-maker must have originally gained the reverence of his fellow citizens by reason of his ability to create a concrete, tangible artifact which enables one to cope with dangerous, uncertain, otherworldly situations. In short, he possessed power not unlike that of the gods in the Rig Veda, who can make as well as have a *pánthāh*. The sacrifice of human forms from the *pons sublicius* in the festival of the Argei may thus function as a token apology for competition with the river spirits, the effigies in this case representing the lives which the waters would have taken if left unchallenged.[12]

Furthermore, the information available regarding the form of the *pons sublicius* affords us additional proof that the ancient Romans deemed the bridge allegedly constructed by the *pontifex* an awesome object. According to Dionysius (3.45.2)[13] and Plutarch (*Numa* 9), religious rules required that the bridge be fastened together by wooden bolts exclusively; the use of iron nails was absolutely forbidden. Though some might argue that the absence made the bridge more easily destructible in the event of an emergency attack,[14] the care continuously bestowed upon the *pons sublicius*—even after it had been superseded in its function by the *pons Aemilius*—and Plutarch's remark that demolition of the bridge was deemed sacrilegious suggest another reason for the prohibition: a religious taboo against iron, a superstition widespread throughout the Mediterranean world up until the early 7th century B.C., when the *pons sublicius* was reputedly

[11] As a *pons* is a crossing device in perilous situations, so its Greek cognate *pontos* originally refers to perilous crossing conditions, retaining the "dangerous circumstances" sense of Vedic Sanskrit *pánthāh* just as *pons* retains its "magic creation" sense. In Homer—as opposed to *thalassa*, which signifies coastal or well-known waters—*pontos* is applied to the open sea, the places where man-eating fishes dwell, the ocean with unknown limits (cf. the epithets *apeiritos*, *apeirôn* and *ichthyoeis* at *Od.* 10.195, *Il.* 1.350, *Od.* 3.158). Frequently it serves as a synonym for the perilous Euxine sea in Herodotus (1.60; 7.147). The supernatural connotations possessed by *pontos* in these archaic or archaized passages strongly suggest that the word *pons* initially had similar implications as well.

[12] Such is the theory of Sir J. G. Frazer, in volume 4 of his commentary on Ovid, *Fasti* V. 621–62 (London 1929) 91–109. For another explanation of the Argei's significance, see Holland (above, note 3) 313–31.

[13] Whose statement that the *pons sublicius* was constructed without brass or iron simply reflects confusion over why wooden beams alone held the bridge together.

[14] Holland (above, note 3) 335 and Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* 36.100) for example.

built.[15] The ban against iron was meant to retain the sanctity of an object or an individual; its application to the *pons sublicius* places the bridge in the category of holy items. The existence of such a taboo on the chief product of the *pontifex*'s craftsmanship no doubt paved the way for his ascendancy from the role of enabling people to tread safely to that of heading the state religion.

[15] From the Old Testament one can cite two instances where iron was interdicted from a holy building: I *Kings* VI.7 (on the temple of Solomon) and *Exodus* XX.25; at *Odyssey* 16.294 we hear an explanation for the common fears about iron which circulated after its introduction, that the metal itself casts spells on a man. Examples of the taboo in Roman religious practices abound. A bronze plowshare alone could be used in the practice of *colonia*, city-founding (cf. Servius *ad. Aen.* 5.755 and Plutarch *Romulus* 11.2). The Arval Brethren were compelled to atone for the use of an iron axe or pruning knife (*Acta Fratrum Arvalium*, ed. Henzen, 22 and 128 ff.). When a person in iron chains entered the house of the *flamen Dialis*, he had to be released and his bonds drawn up via the *impluvium* to the roof and out to the street (cf. Gellius 10.15.8; Servius *ad. Aen.* 2.57); in addition, the *flamen*'s hair could only be cut with a bronze knife (cf. Servius *ad. Aen.* 1.448; Macrobius 5.19.13; John the Lydian, *De Mens.* 1.131).