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# DEMILITARIZING THE ṚIGVEDA: A SCRUTINY OF VEDIC HORSES, CHARIOTS AND WARFARE

Michel Danino\*

## Abstract

In this paper, I propose to critique the conventional view of the Ṛgveda as a text constantly praising Vedic gods and their horse- and chariot-driven “Aryan” allies for waging war against “black-skinned” autochthons ensconced in their forts, in effect reading into the *Ṛgveda* a glorified account of the Āryan’s military conquest of native north-west India.

**Keywords:** *Ṛigveda*, *Veda*, Ārya, Aryan, horse, wheel, chariot, warfare.

## Background

The Aryan myth in its 19th century European roots and developments has been thoroughly dissected in recent decades (Poliakov 1974; Olender 1992; Trautmann 1997; Lincoln 1999; Arvidsson 2006; Demoule 2014), even though historians and other scholars in India remain largely ignorant of such analyses, or, at any rate, rarely discuss them. The Indian facet of the myth, commonly referred to as the Aryan Invasion or Migration Theory (henceforth AI/MT), has also been analysed and debated for over a century and remains the mainstream, politically correct version (though with many variants) of India’s protohistory (among its recent proponents: Kosambi [1956] 1975; Thapar 1966; Sharma 1995; Sharma 1999; Kochhar 2000; Witzel 2001; Thapar 2003; Thapar et al 2006; Parpola 2015; Joseph 2018; Thapar et al 2019). It has, however, been contested almost since its inception; while some of its detractors have been content to point the flaws in the AI/MT without attempting to construct an alternative (Vivekananda [1901] 1947; Aurobindo [1914–20] 1998; Ambedkar 1946; Shaffer 1984; Leach 1990; Deo &

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Kamath 1993; Talageri 1993; Kennedy 1995; Chakrabarti 1997; Bisht 1999; Elst 1999; Lal 2005; Danino 2006; Chakrabarti 2008; Danino 2010; Malhotra & Neelakandan 2011; Shaffer & Lichtenstein 2013; Danino 2016; Danino 2019; Danino in press-a), others have used textual and linguistic evidence to make a case for an “Out of India” theory (Talageri 2000; Frawley 2001; Rajaram & Frawley [1995] 2001; Elst 2007; Talageri 2008; Kazanas 2009; Kazanas 2015; Lal 2015; Elst 2018); yet others have proposed different counter-theories (Sethna [1980] 1992; Dhavalikar 2007; Dhavalikar 2018). Very few studies have adopted a neutral stance or tried to bring the two camps into a dialogue of sorts (Bryant 2001; Bryant & Patton 2005; Trautmann 2005; Tripathi 2005; Majumder & Nanjundiah 2019).

The Aryan issue, whether in India or in the rest of Eurasia, is inherently complex owing to a number of disciplines having a claim in its solution: linguistics, archaeology, textual studies, comparative mythology, anthropology, archaeoastronomy, agriculture, metallurgy, and a few more. The ultimate solution to the problem, if there ever is one, will have to reconcile all of them. Central to textual studies is the *R̥gveda*, India’s earliest text. Since the mid-19th century, it has been repeatedly mined for literary, religious, historical, racial, anthropological or archaeological data, yet has proved so recalcitrant to such extractions that the process has been rightly described as “text-torturing” (Trautmann 1997: 206). In this paper, I propose to examine the conventional view of the *R̥gveda* as a text constantly praising Vedic gods and their horse- and chariot-driven “Aryan” allies for waging war against “black-skinned” autochthons ensconced in their “forts” (*purs*), in effect reading into the *R̥gveda* a glorified account of the Aryans’ military conquest of native north-west India. I will, however, not discuss here the racial reading of the text, as it has been critiqued by scholars such as Schetelich (1990), Erdosy (1994: 230–232), Trautmann (1997), Hock (2005: 288–290), Danino (forthcoming), among others, effectively rejecting any ethnic, racial, colour-based definition of the Dasyus, Dāsas and Paṇis, as the Āryas’ enemies are called, although those colonial stereotypes continue to people our textbooks. Also, I will only marginally touch upon the question of those enemies’ so-called forts or fortifications, as Erdosy (1994), Kazanas (2009: 148–160), among others, have shown that those structures, variously interpreted as clouds, small temporary structures of mud and stone, or entire cities, actually belong to the realm of mythology as occult devices invoked for protection; there is no way to ascertain what their material counterparts would have looked like.

*Aśva in the Ṛgveda*

Such misreadings, I submit, extend to almost every aspect of the society, life and culture the Ṛgvedic hymns emerged from. The horse (*aśva*) offers a case in point.<sup>1</sup> AI/MT proponents have viewed the animal as the chief instrument of the early Indo-Europeans' victory over non-Indo-Europeans across much of Eurasia: to Wendy Doniger (1981: 239), for instance, the quadruped was “the supreme symbol of the victorious Indo-Europeans [...] whose domestication enabled the Indo-Aryans to conquer the Indo-European world”. In particular, the said Indo-Europeans are thought to have introduced the horse into India around 1500 BCE and used its speed to crushing advantage in order to subdue the native, ox-driven populations; some versions of the scenario include among the latter the Harappan civilization (2600–1900 BCE), from which the horse is allegedly absent, and which therefore must be pre-Vedic and non-Aryan. By contrast, the *Ṛgveda*, a “horse-centred” text, as R.S. Sharma (1995: 65) puts it, reflects a “horse-centred culture” (Mallory 1989: 46), since the word *aśva* or its synonyms (such as *arvat*, *atya*, *haya*, *sapti*, *vājīn*, etc.) occur hundreds of times. Altogether, there can be no doubt, in D.D. Kosambi's opinion (1975: 108), that the animal is an “Aryan beast”, since, asserts A.L. Basham (1963: 27), the Aryans “had learned to make full use of the swift and terror-striking beast of the steppes”.

The absence of horse remains and of depictions in the Indus civilization has been contested (Gupta 1996: 159–163; Lal 1998: 109–112; Danino 2014). Suffice it to say here that experts have identified horse (also wild and domesticated ass) remains from the Neolithic to the early second millennium BCE in the subcontinent at a dozen sites or so, and that such remains continued to be identified afterwards, with no more than a slight gradual increase, and with few depictions of the animal until the Mauryan age. Most pro-AI/MT scholars have sweepingly rejected such evidence for pre-1500 BCE periods (i.e., before the Aryans are supposed to have streamed into the subcontinent), but accepted similar evidence post-1500 BCE even though it was often the work of the very same experts (Danino, in press-b). Nevertheless, they have been unable to show any marked increase in remains of the horse or of chariots, or in depictions of either after 1500 BCE.

More important is to assess the depiction of the horse in the Veda and whether it is faithful to the text's descriptions and intention.<sup>2</sup> To begin with, it would be absurd to take the numbers of horses mentioned in the hymns at face value, as some scholars

(e.g., Macdonell & Keith [1912] 2007(1): 42) propose to do when they encounter, for instance, references to “four hundred mares” (8.55.3). When a hymn (2.18.4–6) invokes Indra, asking him to come to the poet or the sacrifice with two, four, six, eight, 10 horses, then 20, 30, and so on up to 100 horses, are we to understand that Aryans commonly or ever yoked such numbers of horses to their chariots? Rudolf von Roth seemed to grasp this point when he wrote, “It should be noted that the Veda does not know the Steppe’s herds of horses; the horse is a rare and valuable animal, which is not owned and given away like cattle by the hundreds and thousands, but in single pairs or at least in moderate numbers” (Roth 1881: 686).

There is no dispute on the cosmic symbolism of the Ṛgvedic horse, who emerges from the sea in the *Ṛgveda* (1.163.1) and in the Puranic myth of the churning of the ocean, which produced Uchchaisravas, a divine seven-headed horse; the horse as a symbol for the sun is also well understood (1.163, etc.). But there is much more to the Vedic symbolism of the horse. As early as 1912–14, a decade before the discovery of the Indus civilization, and thus long before the controversy over the “Harappan horse”, Sri Aurobindo in his study of the *Ṛgveda* and the *Upanishads* concluded that “the word *ashva* must originally have implied strength or speed or both before it came to be applied to a horse” (Aurobindo 2001: 277). More specifically:

The cow and horse, *go* and *ashva*, are constantly associated. Usha, the Dawn, is described as *gomati ashvavati*; Dawn gives to the sacrificer horses and cows. As applied to the physical dawn [1.48.2, 1.92.14] *gomati* means accompanied by or bringing the rays of light and is an image of the dawn of illumination in the human mind. Therefore *ashvavati* also cannot refer merely to the physical steed; it must have a psychological significance as well. A study of the Vedic horse led me to the conclusion that *go* and *ashva* represent the two companion ideas of Light and Energy, Consciousness and Force (Aurobindo [1914-1920] 1998: 44).

Were we to accept a literalist reading, we would have to describe Ushas, the Dawn, as full of or “rich in cows and horses” (1.92.14 J&B), a rather jejune statement, but one made unhesitatingly by most translators of the *Ṛgveda* to this day. If, on the other hand, the Vedic poet meant to praise Dawn as “rich in light and energy,” the verse takes on a wholly different and much likelier significance. Similarly, should the Dawn be invoked as the “mother of cows” (*mātā gavām*, 4.52.2 J&B) or the “mother of light”? Should she be prayed to “establish in us a mass of cows and of horses” (1.48.12 J&B) or a “mass of light and energy”? Surely, it is equally bizarre to have the poet pray

Indra to “ornament our hymns with cows and horses” (7.18.2 J&B).

Vedic scholars do acknowledge, of course, that the language of the *R̥gveda* is a metaphorical one, whose symbolism constantly operates at several levels; they are well aware of constant *double entendre*, multiple meanings, metaphors, similes, riddles and puns in the hymns. “Vedic thought moves on several different planes, each fact being susceptible of more than one interpretation,” wrote Renou (1971: 54). “An essential characteristic of the vocabulary of this text is polysemy,” argues Tatyana J. Elizarenkova (1995: 285), who notes that double references create “serious obstacles for our comprehension of the text [...] In a large group of Vedic words this polysemy acquires a symbolic character.” According to Jamison and Brereton (2014) who, in a monumental work of scholarship, recently produced a new English translation of the entire *R̥gveda*:<sup>3</sup>

the first rays of light at dawn are homologized to cows, [...] and therefore the goddess Dawn is called “the mother of cows” and images of ruddy cows overrun the hymns to Dawn. [...] The light brought by the goddess Dawn disperses not only the physical darkness of night but also the “powers of darkness,” the dangerous forces at work within the world (Jamison & Brereton 2014: 23–24, 36).

I believe it is the hypnotic construct of the horse-driven Aryan conquest (or at least the epic journey from their *Urheimat*) that has prevented Vedic scholars from extending such “homologies” to the horse, even though the mythological context of *aśva* is the same as the cow’s, and from giving the *go-aśva* pair (which occurs at least thirty times, if we include synonyms) its due meaning. Most Vedicists acknowledge that the word *go* refers both to the animal (the cow) and to the light (or a beam of light); so do Sanskrit lexicographers: Monier Williams, for instance, offers “herds of the sky”, “the stars”, “rays of light”, “the sun’s ray”, “the sun”, “the moon” among the many translations for this word. However, the same Vedicists (with a somewhat timid exception in Srinivasan 1973) have suppressed such a dual meaning for *aśva*, even when it plainly cannot refer to the actual animal: it would be the height of absurdity for the juices emerging from the pressing of Soma, the divine elixir, to yearn “for cows and for horses” (9.64.4) or to be praised as “cow-winning [...] horse-winning” (9.2.10 J&B). Soma itself is a “cow-finder [...] horse-finder” (9.55.3), is asked to bring in “wealth in thousands of cows and of horses” (9.62.12 J&B), and so forth. If, on the other hand, Soma longs for light and energy, finds, wins and brings light and energy, such passages carry full sense.



Sri Aurobindo elaborated:

For the ritualist the word *go* means simply a physical cow and nothing else, just as its companion word, *ashva*, means simply a physical horse. [...] When the Rishi prays to the Dawn, *gomad viravadv dhehi ratnam ushvaavat*, the ritualistic commentator [Sāyaṇa] sees in the invocation only an entreaty for “pleasant wealth to which are attached cows, men (or sons) and horses.” If on the other hand these words are symbolic, the sense will run, “Confirm in us a state of bliss full of light, of conquering energy and of force of vitality” (Aurobindo [1914–20] 1998: 123–24).

This reading of the Veda rejects a rigid equation *aśva* = horse. Indeed, Yāska, the composer of the *Nirukta*, would have agreed: for him, as Lakshman Sarup explains, “Every being who performs a particular action should be called by the same name, e.g. every one who runs on the road should be called *asva* (runner), and not the horse alone” (Sarup [1920–27] 1998: 68). Thus, it is no surprise to find the word *aśva* repeatedly associated with the notion of speed or energy: *aśva* is “as swift as thought,” as swift as Indra himself (1.163.9); he sometimes flies (1.118.5), has “the two wings of a falcon, the two forelegs of an antelope” (1.163.1), both of them instruments of speed. Again, the *Aśvins* – the “horse-riding” twin gods – are designated as birds (4.27.4, 4.43.3). As regards energy, let us hear the poet’s praise of Indra: “When they say, ‘he came from a horse,’ I think of him rather as born from strength” (10.73.10 J&B). But is he not rather reflecting, “When they say that Indra was born from speed/energy, I think of him rather born of power,” that is, emphasizing Indra’s aspect of might over that of speed or energy (which would be more characteristic of the Sun or Agni)?

Examples can be multiplied. Indra’s horses are “fashioned by the mind” and “yoked by speech” (1.20.2). Dawn, again, is often said to be “rich in prize mares” (1.48.16, 1.92.13, 4.55.9, etc. J&B), as are the *Aśvins*, who also win or bring “prize mares” (8.9.4, 8.22.18, 8.101.8, 10.40.12, etc.). The goddess *Sarasvatī* is prayed to for “providing prize mares along with prizes” or else is “rich in prize-winning mares” (1.3.10, 2.41.18, 6.61.4, 7.96.3). Did the *rishis* actually expect horses from *Sarasvatī* (with some scholars concluding that the *Sarasvatī* region was rich in horses!), or did they not rather pray the river-cum-goddess to fill them with energy, because she herself is rich in energy, as are Dawn and the *Aśvins*? There is nothing artificial or far-fetched in such a translation; it is far more consistent with other hymns, as for instance when *Sarasvatī* is asked to bring joy (1.89.3) or to purify the supplicant (10.17.10). And as often, thankfully, the *Rgveda* at some

point chooses to lift the veil and do away with metaphors: Sarasvatī's gift of energy is made perfectly explicit in "let Sarasvatī establish this vital energy for the singer" (10.30.12 J&B) – so those "mares" were indeed energy and vigour, not physical animals. In confirmation of this, the Sanskrit word rendered as "rich in mares" is almost always *vājīnīvatī* or *vājīnīvasū*, from *vājīn*, whose primary meanings are "swift", "spirited", "heroic", "strong", from *vāja*, "energy" or "vigour".

In several hymns, too, the horse is specifically associated with *ātman*, which in the *Ṛgveda* mostly refers to the life-breath or life-energy. Thus, in the magnificent hymn "in praise of the Horse" (1.163), the poet intones, "With my mind I recognized your lifebreath from afar, a bird flying below heaven" (1.163.6 J&B). It is symptomatic that the same hymn declares, "The chariot (goes) after you, [...] after you the cows" (1.163.8 J&B). It is not every day that one can spot cows following a winged horse's chariot dashing through the heavens, but that posed no difficulty to the Vedic seers.

Karen Thomson echoes Sri Aurobindo's views on *aśva*, blaming most translators for the confusion: "There are many fewer horses in the text of the *Ṛgveda* than there are in the translations. Indeed, when the word *aśva* is present it often appears simply to describe something that moves swiftly in the *Ṛgveda*, like the birds in 1.118.5" (Thomson, 2009a: 36). Thomson shows how a number of scholars (Macdonell and Keith, Doniger, Witzel ...) choose to read "horse", "steed" or "mare" in what are generic words with a broad range of meanings; a case in point is the word *āruṣi*, often rendered as "mares" (as was the case with the "four hundred mares" cited earlier), but sometimes as "sheep" or "cows". The word is actually "used elsewhere in the poems to describe fire, the sun, lightning, and dawn herself" (Thomson, 2009a: 37).

Louis Renou, after a brief exposition of the "allegorical character" of horse races in the *Ṛgveda*, added this perceptive comment: "A study of the theme of 'horses' in the *Ṛgveda* would hold some surprise in store for those who *a priori* believe in the realism of Vedic images" (Renou 1955: 20). Mechanically translating *aśva* as "horse" will be as often misleading as translating *go* as "cow"; the horse as the actual animal is much less frequent in the *Ṛgveda* than we have been told. This conclusion, which runs against conventional but uncritical scholarship, received in 1990 indirect support from a wholly different angle, that of the anthropologist Edmund Leach, who warned against a literalist reading of the Veda and the simplistic picture of a horse-rich Ṛgvedic society:

The prominent place given to horses and chariots in the Rig Veda can tell us virtually nothing that might distinguish any real society for which the Rig Veda might provide a partial cosmology. If anything, it suggests that in real society (as opposed to its mythological counterpart), horses and chariots were a rarity, ownership of which was a mark of aristocratic or kingly distinction (Leach 1990: 240).

If Sri Aurobindo, Thomson and Leach are right, each from their own perspective, then the word *aśva* only occasionally refers to the actual horse, and its frequent appearance in the Vedic hymns is no indication that the animal had a proportional physical presence. Indeed, at most periods of Indian history, despite having been imported for many centuries, the horse has remained a relatively rare animal, invisible in most villages (Doniger 1999: 946–950).

Vedicists have of course discussed the imagery of the horse in the context of the *aśvamedha* (1.162 and 1.163, amplified in later Vedic literature), or when the animal explicitly takes on a cosmic dimension (1.164, echoed in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad*'s celebrated opening), but they have failed to integrate the evident Rgvedic symbol of swiftness or energy.

### Is *Aśva* only Aryan?

Let us now unveil one of the best kept secrets of Vedic scholarship. The fundamental assumption behind the horse argument is that *aśva*, in the *Rgveda*, is a purely “Aryan” animal. But is that what the text actually says? No doubt, numerous references place *aśva*, whatever the word means in the *rishis*' mind, squarely on the side of the gods, the *rishis* or their helpers. But it turns out that there are quite a few revealing exceptions: the Dasyus and Paṇis also possess *aśva*-s, generally together with cows and treasures.

Thus, Indra-Soma, by means of the truth (*eva satyam*), shatters the stable where Dasyus were holding “horses and cows” (*aśvyam goh*, 4.28.5). Indra's human helpers obtain “the Paṇi's herds of horses and cows” (1.83.4). After smiting two Dāsas, he distributes the vast bounty seized from them, which includes “ten horses, ten casks, ten garments [...] ten chariots with side-horses, a hundred cows” (6.47.23–24). Destroying the Dasyus, he “gained possession of the sun and horses [...] and the cow of plenty” (3.34.9). “Indra conquered all cows, all gold, all horses” (4.17.11), he boasts of “winning cows and horses” (10.48.4) with his weapon; won over from his enemies, they were initially not his. Repeatedly, Indra is invoked as a bringer or conqueror of horses and cattle *together*: “Break open for us cattle and

horses in their thousands” (8.34.14), “split apart the enclosure of the cow and the horse like a stronghold for your comrades” (8.32.5). Elsewhere, he “found the cattle, found the horses, found the plants, the forests and the waters” (1.103.5). Indra, in short, is “the best winner of horses” (1.175.5) and the “finder of horses” (9.61.3). But in all these hymns, why should Indra have to “find” or “win” horses since his clan, we were told, is supposed to have brought them into India? The premise is wholly inconsistent with the text of the *Ṛgveda*.

Just as revealing is the famous dialogue between the divine hound Saramā, Indra’s intransigent emissary, and the Paṇis, after she has discovered their faraway den, where they jealously hoard their “treasures”. Saramā boldly declares Indra’s intention to seize those treasures, but the Paṇis are unimpressed and threaten to fight back; they taunt her: “O Saramā, see the treasure deep in the mountain, it is replete with cows and horses and treasures (*gobhir aśvebhīr vasubhīr*). The Paṇis guard it watchfully. You have come in vain to a rich dwelling” (1.108.7). Every verse makes it clear that all these treasures – “horses” included – belong to the Paṇis (the Paṇis’ or Dasyus’ “wealth” is spoken of in other hymns, such as 1.33.4). At no point does Saramā complain that they were stolen from the “Aryans”: “I come in search of your great treasures” (10.108.2), she declares upfront, yet asserts that Indra is fully entitled to them. Which is precisely what some of the above verses implied too, such as Indra or his helpers finding or winning the Paṇis’ or Dasyus’ “horses and cattle”.

Two important conclusions ensue. The first is that the Dasyus’ or Paṇis’ theft of cattle or horses from the Āryas is a stubborn 19th-century colonial invention (one of the many “submyths” of the invasion theory). Stubborn, because it remains repeated *ad nauseam* even today. Jamison and Brereton assert that Saramā “on Indra’s behalf tracked down the cows *stolen by the Paṇis* and retrieved them” (Jamison & Brereton, 2014: 947, emphasis mine) when the text says strictly nothing of such a theft. For Romila Thapar, who provides no reference, “the panis are said to be cattle-lifters” (2003: 112). D.N. Jha, also without references, writes that the Paṇis “stole cattle from the Aryans” ([1977] 1998: 44). Mallory expounds a whole “cattle-keepers myth” (1989: 138, building on Bruce Lincoln), one element of whose cycle is the “*dāsa* enemy who steal” the cattle from the Aryans, but untypically fails to provide a single reference to that effect. Parpola, again without reference, comments on “the cattle *captured by the enemy*, especially the demon Vala, who keeps the cows in a cave” (Parpola 2015: 107, emphasis mine), when there is no

such notion in any of the hymns that mention Vala or his equivalent Vṛtra, both of whom keep “cows” or waters or rivers in a cave deep in the mountain. Why do all these scholars (I could cite a dozen more) insist on a literalist reading of the hymns, which fails at every step, and forget to supply a single reference pointing, or even alluding, to a theft of cattle or horses by the Paṇis or Dasyus? Because there is none. At no point in the *Ṛgveda* is such a theft blamed on those creatures of darkness. There are several mentions of thieves from which protection is prayed, but those thieves are never explicitly identified as the Paṇis or Dasyus. Yet it is certain that the hymns would have made that identification clear if those (supposed) enemies had been daring enough to steal (supposed) cattle and (supposed) horses from the (supposedly) conquering (supposed) Aryans. In fact, every one of the dozens of references to so-called “raids” for cattle is a raid led *by* India, Agni or their allies against their “enemies”, never the other way round. We will see later what those “raids” actually refer to.

And delightfully, it is Indra and his allies whom the hymns identify as the cattle thieves: cleaving apart the cave where the cows are “nurtured”, Indra “stole the cows” (10.67.6–7), he seeks out the wealth of the Paṇis “to steal it” (5.34.7). Agni and Soma together “stole the cows from the Paṇi” (1.93.4), and so on. Were we, again, imprudent enough to insist on a historical reading of the *Ṛgveda*, we would have to conclude that it is the “Aryans” who are the “cattle-lifters”. (In other hymns, Indra steals the “wheel of the sun”, Soma, or the waters; these “thefts” ultimately are one and the same myth; they have nothing to do with cattle or horses.)

The second conclusion is that a historical reading of the *Ṛgveda* would also compel us to acknowledge that the Dasyus and Paṇis, regarded, then, as the Aryans’ indigenous victims, had horses of their own – which would of course negate the whole idea of the animal having been introduced by the Aryans. Nor would it explain why horses “enabled the Āryas’ mobility and contributed to their success in battle” (Jamison & Brereton 2014: 6), when the Āryas’ enemies were themselves “full of horses”: what we should rather expect is a mighty clash of two cavalries! The verses cited above, and many more, make this colonial myth untenable – verses that proponents of the AI/MT carefully avoid discussing, as they are at a loss to deal with them: it does look as if the Veda’s equine landscape is getting a little overcrowded.

To understand the Dasyus’ and Paṇis’ “horses” in their proper context, we need to return to the Vedic symbolism proposed by Sri Aurobindo: the demons possess or conceal lights (cows) and energies

or powers (horses), but, as misers, keep them for themselves, neither for the gods nor for humans. In the Vedic view, this is a transgression of the cosmic law, *ṛtam*. The duty of the *rishi* (or the Ārya, if we are careful to use the term in its strict cultural sense) is to reconquer those “treasures” with the gods’ help and to put them to their true purpose; only then will the cosmic order be re-established. This is certainly more interesting than tribal clashes of primitive cattle and horse thieves. In fact, the *Ṛgveda* itself makes this symbolism transparent: in the last verse of the dialogue between Saramā and the Paṇis, the narrator concludes, “Go away, you Paṇis! Let out the cows which, hidden, infringe the Order!” (10.108.11) This “order” is *ṛtam*, the cosmic law or order, the Truth. It is infringed not because the Paṇis hide “cows” and “horses” inside a cave (a most impractical and unrealistic method of herding which no autochthons ever practised), but because they misuse their lights and powers and do not offer them up as a sacrifice. That is why Indra is entitled to their treasures – not because he is a thief or a greedy clan leader out to expand his territory and cattle wealth. Such is the meaning of the riddle: Indra “does not steal what belongs to him” (6.28.2 J&B). That is why, also, Indra can shatter the demons’ dens only “by means of the truth”. In further confirmation, another hymn summarizes Saramā’s expedition by reminding us that she “found the cows along the path of truth” (*ṛtasya pathā*, 5.45.8 J&B); translating *ṛtam* as “truth” is fine (although the word has a much broader semantic range), but the implication should follow: what Saramā found by following this path of truth was the light, not cattle (and horses). In another remarkably transparent hymn, Saramā is missing; it is now the “truth-possessing poets”, who, upon reaching “the Paṇis’ most distant treasury, hidden away, after observing the [Paṇis’] untruths again, from there mounted the great paths” (2.24.6–7 J&B). There is no obscurity in this whole motif. Nor is it confined to Vedic culture: it is found in Mesopotamian and Greek mythologies, at least; the former speaks of the “theft of the ‘powers’ from the monster by the helpers” (Penglase 1994: 163), which is precisely what we read in hymn after hymn of the *Ṛgveda*.

The literalist approach to the *Ṛgveda* robs it of much of its wealth (as does the ritualistic one). While the Dasyus and Paṇis also had *aśva*-s, which therefore cannot be used as a marker for immigrating Indo-Aryans, it is not as if they were horse-breeders. The only way out of such self-inflicted conundrums is to abandon colonial readings of the Veda and look deeper into what “horse”, “bull”, “cow” and “treasure” really stood for in the Vedic poets’ mind.



### The Chariot in the Ṛgveda

And the “chariot”. At first sight, it presents another ironclad argument for the arrival of Indo-Aryans. Let us hear, at random, how “Aryan warfare was based on the use of swift, horse-drawn battle-chariots, carrying a warrior armed with a bow and driven by a charioteer” (Piggott 1950: 273); north-west India, thus, witnessed in the second millennium BCE “the arrival [...] of the horse and the chariot with a spoked wheel, both of which were new to the subcontinent” (Thapar, 2003: 88), and “the horse and the chariot with spoked wheels were the defining features of the Aryan-speaking societies” (Mahadevan 2015). The chariot and the spoked wheel were thus as much “Aryan” artefacts as the horse was an “Aryan” animal.

Once again, we must question the premise: Is the *Ṛgveda* so precise about light chariots with spoked wheels? That its hymns imply a vehicle (*ratha*) with two wheels (but sometimes more), a central pole on either side of which the animals were yoked, and some seated space for two people (but also up to eight), seems clear enough. Beyond this, there are divergences among scholars, some of whom, such as Piggott (1950: 276 ff.) or Sarva Daman Singh (1989: 26 ff.), attempted a detailed reconstruction of the vehicle from the hymns. While most of them want the Vedic chariot to have been “a small-sized, two-wheeled vehicle”, with an “exceedingly light” body (Chakravarti 1941: 27), others prefer a much larger one. Sparreboom (1985: 11–12) leaned towards the latter view, but was candid at the same time: “The reconstructed picture of the Vedic *ratha* is not yet complete. A number of technical terms are not fully or not at all understood.” Indeed, the text ensures that they will never be; Kazanas sums up the situation thus:

[...] the Rigvedic *ratha* “vehicle” is said to be not only *prthu* “broad” (1.123.1) and *brhat* “tall, big” (6.61.13), but also *variṣṭha* [...] *vandhura* “widest [...] box/seating space” (6.47.9), *trivandhura* “three-seated” (1.41.2; 7.71.4; etc) and *aṣṭavandhura* “eight-seated” (10.53.7)! The only real-life, not mythological, *ratha* in a race we know is mentioned in 10.102 and this is pulled by oxen. Nowhere in the 1000 hymns of the *Ṛgveda* is there one single mention of a real-life battle with horse-drawn *rathas*. Nor is there mention of a slim, light, two- or one-seated vehicle. (Even the Aśvins’ car, *anas*, in 10.85.10,12, takes at least three!) The scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century translated the Rigvedic *ratha* (or *anas*) as “chariot” thinking of Greece and Rome, and the notion stuck (Kazanas n.d.: 2).

So should every occurrence of the word *ratha* be taken to mean an actual chariot? The allegory of Dawn’s or the Sun’s chariot rising

through the heavens is obvious enough – but Dawn does not merely have her own chariot, she also showers “cattle, horses and chariots” (7.77.5) on her supplicants, among other treasures; by now, those cattle and horses are understandable (as light and energy), but what are those chariots? Likewise, while a poet transparently compares fast-flowing rivers to chariots (1.130.5, 10.75.8, etc.), or the composition of a hymn to the fashioning of a chariot by a carpenter (1.130.6; see also 5.73.10), it is less clear why those chariots should also stand for the juices of Soma (9.10.2, 9.22.1, etc.). “The R̥gveda, in fact, offers countless examples of such metaphors, where the chariot stands for the word, the well-composed hymn of praise, the ritual ceremony or the sacrifice as a whole” (Sparreboom 1985: 20), and Sparreboom proceeds to give a series of examples, some of them drawn from later Vedic literature. They culminate in the cosmic symbolism of the chariot, illustrated for instance by the lovely image of Indra supporting or propping heaven and earth apart just as the chariot’s axle supports and keeps the two wheels apart (Sparreboom 1985: 25, with reference to 10.89.4). Jamison and Brereton (2014: 24) explain that “the ritual itself, or the praise hymn specifically, is often identified with a chariot, and the crafting of poetry is homologized to chariot-making.” For Gonda, “chariot drives and other races have often the function of regenerating the productive forces in nature,” while the gods “are described as driving swift horses [10.92.6 ...] as approaching the sacrificers in their chariots [1.84.18, 7.2.5]” (Gonda 1965: 72, 98). In that context, “the ‘chariot of the gods’ is identified with, compared to, equated with and used as a metaphor for ‘sacrifice’ in general” (Sparreboom 1985: 27). Not merely equated, for the gods’ chariot fulfils other functions: the Aśvins’ “threefold chariot” is “‘swifter than a mortal’s thought’ (I.118.1) or than the wink of an eye (VIII.73.2). Their chariot is drawn by various animals including bulls, buffaloes, and horses, but also by birds (I.119.4), geese (IV.45.4), or falcons (I.118.4). Their chariot flies to many places and makes the Aśvins present in many spheres: in heaven, earth, and the sea, in the flood of heaven (VIII.26.17), among plants, and at the peak of a mountain (VII.70.3)” (Jamison & Brereton 2014: 48). This, incidentally, explains how the gods’ chariots are the prototypes for their animal *vāhanas* (i.e., vehicles) in later, classical Hinduism, as Gonda (1965: 71 ff) argued with his usual wealth of material. And we can trace today’s temple rituals of taking deities out on magnificent and sometimes colossal chariots all the way to the Vedic concept. Of course, gods have chariots in several other mythologies; this is the case, for instance, of most Greek gods and goddesses, their chariots



being drawn by a wide variety of mammals and birds.

In their eagerness to turn the Vedic hymns into some kind of primitive battle songs, Vedicists and Indo-Europeanists have often spotted “war chariots” in the *Rgveda*: Jamison and Brereton render *ratha* in 6.26.4 as “battle-chariot”; Geldner (in 7.74.6) as “*Kriegswagen*”; Doniger (1981: 238) speaks of “war-chariots”. So do Renou (“*char de guerre*” for 8.91.7 in Varenne 1967: 151) and Bloomfield (1908: 76). Sarva Daman Singh (1989: 32 ff, 168) has a long discussion on Aryan war-chariots. And so on. All of these are a gratuitous inference, as the Sanskrit word is invariably *ratha* and has, *a priori*, no military connotation. Indeed, Karen Thomson takes issue with Parpola’s “military interpretation” of certain hymns, in particular his translation of *ratha* in a Vedic verse as “war-chariot”: “In the total of nine passages in the *Rigveda* in which the words √*vah* [driving], *rātha* [chariot], and *āśva* [horse] occur together, the *rāthas* are imaginary, heavenly vehicles, drawn by imaginary, heavenly *āśvas*. Parpola’s specific translation ‘war-chariot’ for *rātha* is misleading. In none of these passages is the *rātha* a vehicle of war” (Thomson 2009a: 35). To her, the god Bṛhaspati’s chariot is “a figurative chariot: *rāthas* in the *Rigveda* often are.” It is indeed figurative, as it is not merely *ratha*, but *ṛtasya rathah*, “‘a chariot of Truth’ that brings light where before there was darkness,” in Thomson’s words (2009b: 84, with reference to 2.23.3). Indeed, it is not just the chariot that is associated with the Truth (*ṛtam*), but also the charioteer himself: *rathār ṛtasya*, or the charioteer of the truth, as Pūṣan is praised (6.55.1), sometimes of the “vast truth” (*ṛtasya brihato*), as is Agni in two hymns (3.2.8, 4.10.2). Agni is also the “charioteer of the Wondrous” (1.77.3) and a restrainer (*yama*) of chariots (8.103.10).

The metaphors for the chariot soon take us to a higher level. Frits Staal reminds us of three special chariots. First, the composer of a hymn describes himself as “he who constructs the high seat of the chariot in his mind” (with reference to 7.64.4). The second instance comes from the famous hymn of the wedding of Sūryā, daughter of the Sun (Sūrya), which “relates how travels in a chariot made of mind (*manas*), whether it is to her future husband, immortality or the abode of Soma” (with reference to 10.85). The third comes from a deeply enigmatic dialogue between a (possibly dead) father and his (possibly alive) son; the former tells the latter about “the new chariot without wheels, which you boy have made *manasā*, which has one draught pole and goes in all directions, standing on it you are seeing nothing” (with reference to 10.135). (Jamison’s and Brereton’s translation is rather different: “The new chariot without

wheels that you made with your mind, lad, the one that has a single shaft but faces in all directions – without seeing it, you mount it.”) Staal’s interpretation of such chariots made of, or by, the mind is unexpected: “The tribes who spoke Indo-Aryan imported such chariots into the subcontinent through their oral tradition that is: *through their minds*” (Staal 2008: 36–37). Observing correctly that driving chariots across the rough Afghan terrain and through the Khyber Pass (as Aryans are often said to have done) would have been rather awkward, if not impossible, Staal proposes that the said “tribes” carried the spoked-wheel chariot’s design in their minds, which enabled them to replicate it once arrived in the Indus plains (2008: 36–37). Staal’s conjecture may appear clever, but is not in consonance with the totality of the Ṛgvedic imagery built around the chariot as briefly outlined above.

And as often in the Ṛgveda, the poet drops the robe of metaphor at some point, letting its real meaning shine in splendid nakedness (I am almost using a Ṛgvedic allegory here). This happens when we are told of the two Aśvins’ “mind-yoked horses” (5.75.6), or when they accompany Dawn with their “mind-yoked chariot” (8.5.2). The horses (99 of them) that draw Agni (1.14.6) or Vāyu’s chariot (4.48.4) are also “yoked by the mind”. The word common to those “mind-yoked” horses and chariots is *manoyuja*, which occurs at least seven times in the hymns. Thomson is on the right track, I believe, when she argues that the Vedic chariots are mostly “imaginary, heavenly vehicles, drawn by imaginary, heavenly” horses. But we can, perhaps, be more precise. The symbolism behind the Vedic “chariot” – in quotation marks, since *ratha* is as rarely a physical chariot as *go* is an actual cow or *aśva* an equid – operates at several levels: at that of the gods, it is their vehicle (later their *vāhana*), allowing them to move swiftly across the cosmos so they may perform their functions without delay; at our human level, it is the vehicle of our offerings (i.e., the sacrifice) which creates for us a path to heaven, also the vehicle of our thoughts and prayers, standing ultimately for the mind itself, or its higher levels.

Otherwise, we would be hard put to explain the bizarre image of a cow “yoked as the draft-horse of [the Maruts’] chariots” (8.94.1 J&B) or Dawn yoking “ruddy cows” (1.124.11) to her chariot: grotesque on the physical level, but perfectly sensible if we ask our mind (the chariot) to be led by the light (the cow), and consistent, too, with Brihaspati’s “effulgent chariot of truth” (2.23.3). Jeanine Miller, who sought to interpret the Veda’s spiritual experience, was, in my opinion, more faithful than Staal to the spirit of the hymns when she

proposed that “the rite is often considered a ‘ship’ or a ‘chariot’; it is a means of communication, of bringing closer the two shores, that of the hither or terrestrial realm, and that of the beyond, or godly realm” (Miller 1985: 214). Without such an understanding, we could often end up blaming the Vedic poets for indulging in hopelessly mixed metaphors (after Bergaigne (1936: 61), who complained of “the cacophony of the [hymns’] discordant metaphors”): what is this “ship” in which the Aśvins are invoked to take the supplicants to the “far shore”, while at the same time they are asked to keep their chariot yoked and ready to cross? (1.46.7–8) Are they supposed to load their chariot onto a ferry, perhaps? But it is, says the hymn, the “ship of our prayers” (1.46.7) (or hymns or beliefs), and the only way to the yonder shore is the “path of the truth” again (1.46.11).

Finally, let us recall that the smashing of two enemies’ *pur-s* yielded, among other treasures, “ten horses [...] *ten chariots* with side-horses”. Elsewhere, Dabhīti, probably a hero, found himself surrounded by Dasyus; Indra smashed them, rescued Dabhīti and “brought him together with cows, horses, *and chariots*” (2.15.4 J&B, emphasis mine). We saw Indra and Soma “winning cows and horses” from their enemies, but Soma occasionally wins chariots too (9.78.4) (besides the Sun and waters ...). Here too, a literalist reading would force us to conclude that the Dasyus and Dāsas, besides horses, possess “chariots”, defeating the dogma that chariots were brought (physically or mentally) by the Aryans. And again, as with the case of cattle and horses, any suggestion that these Dasyu chariots were first stolen from the Aryans (along with horses and cows) would be gratuitous and unsupported by the text.

By the time of the *Kaṭha Upanishad*, the metaphor of the horse (and the chariot, to which we will turn shortly), though slightly altered from the Ṛgvedic imagery, had become perfectly explicit: “Know the self (ātman) to be the chariot’s master, and the body, the chariot itself; know the intellect (*buddhi*) to be the charioteer, and the mind (*manas*), the reins” (1.3.3); the horses, the Upanishad continues, are the five senses (*indriya-s*) which must be reined in by our intellect and (higher) mind, and ultimately the self. The chariot, here, stands for the body or our external being. When the yoga teacher B.K.S Iyengar (2001(2): 47) writes, “The consciousness is like a chariot yoked to a team of powerful horses. One of them is breath (*prāṇā*), the other is desire (*vāsanā*),” he simply builds on the same tradition. Images and symbols travel, or just as often emerge independently, and of course mutate in time or space: we find Plato (in *Phaedrus*) comparing the soul to a chariot drawn by two winged horses, one as

fine as the gods' horses, the second of the opposite character – an elegant way of pointing to our internal gods and demons.

### The Spoked Wheel

Thomson goes further and questions the notion that “the Vedic people [...] moved around on chariots with spoked wheels [...] There is no evidence of this in the poems. ‘Chariots’ in the *R̥gveda* usually belong to the gods, and their wheels range in number from one to seven; they travel through the sky accompanied by winged horses or drawn by birds.” Taking issue, now, with Jamison’s and Brereton’s new translation of the *R̥gveda*, Thomson notes: “Strangely, though, ‘spoked wheels’ have been introduced twenty-two times into this translation, as a new interpretation of the word *arati*. This epithet of the fire god was previously understood to mean ‘servant’ or ‘messenger’,” and she refers to Louis Renou’s endorsement of “messenger”. Concludes Thomson, “Given the current frantic search for evidence of ‘spoked wheels’ in the remains of the Indus Valley Civilization, the translation could even be considered irresponsible” (2016: 4).

Thus, instead of Agni becoming the “spoked wheel of the two world-halves” (1.59.2 J&B) or of “heaven and earth” (7.5.1 J&B), he now becomes their messenger; rather than being the “the spoked wheel of the earth” (6.7.1 J&B), he is the “messenger of the earth” (to the heavens, as he indeed is); he is “installed as the spoked wheel (of the sacrifice)” (1.128.8, 4.1.1, 4.2.1, 6.3.5, etc. J&B), but should really be the messenger of the sacrifice; he is not the “spoked wheel of heaven” (2.2.2 J&B), but heaven’s messenger; not the “spoked wheel of the gods” (2.4.2 J&B), but their messenger. Agni is not the “spoked wheel of the descendants of Manu” (7.10.3 J&B), but simply their messenger – and, more to the point, “the messenger of humankind”. And so on: “spoked wheel” makes no sense in such hymns, while “messenger” does. That is the meaning of *arati* adopted by a few earlier translators of the *R̥gveda*, such as Griffith (who uses “messenger”) or Sri Aurobindo (“Traveller”); Oldenberg rendered the word as “steward”, but notes that this translation is “only approximative and conjectural” ([1897] 1964: 48). And should any doubt remain, it ought to be removed by verses that explicitly praise Agni as a messenger using the more common word *d̥uta* (1.12.1, 4.9.2): “Agni is characteristically a messenger as an intermediary between heaven and earth,” explains A.A. Macdonell ([1917] 1976: 102). There must be a shade of meaning distinguishing *arati* and

*dūta*, but they are in the same semantic range (and indeed it is common to find in the Ṛgveda synonyms in the same hymn or even mantra).

Ruling out *arati*, then, are we left with any spokes? There is, indeed, an accepted word for “spoke” – *ara*; it appears 11 times in the entire Ṛgveda, and every time in a clearly allegorical context: Indra rules over and encompasses all people as a rim encompasses the spokes (1.32.15), an image repeated twice for Agni (1.141.9, 5.13.6). Indra also hammers two demons as one hammers spokes into a [wheel’s] nave (8.77.3). Of the many fierce Maruts none is the last, just as none of [a wheel’s] spokes is the last (5.58.5, 8.20.14). Although I have inserted “wheel” in the last two examples for clarity, there is no guarantee that this was the intended meaning: in the entire Ṛgveda, *ara* surprisingly occurs only once in conjunction with *chakra* or wheel. I quote the three relevant verses (11–13) found in one of the most famous and enigmatic hymns, the 164<sup>th</sup> of the first Maṇḍala:

The twelve-*spoke wheel* of truth revolves about the heaven unwearied.  
Seven hundred and twenty sons in pairs stand on it, O Agni.

They call the full one in the upper half of heaven the “Father with five feet and twelve forms”. These others call him “the far-seeing one mounted below on seven *wheels* and six *spokes*”.

On this ever-revolving five-spoked *wheel*, all creatures take their stand. Its axle, though bearing a heavy load, does not get hot, nor has its nave ever broken apart for ages.

The common interpretation is that the wheel stands for the wheel of time, more specifically the lunar year of 12 months, or perhaps the zodiac; the 720 “sons” are then the 360 days and 360 nights of the lunar year, while the “Father” is the sun. His “five feet” are, perhaps, the seasons (which are six in early astronomical literature, beginning with the *Vedāṅga Jyotiṣa*), or the five years of the early *yuga* (the period over which the lunar and solar years are reconciled through the addition of an intercalary month); his 12 forms might be the months again, or the solar zodiac as some have suggested. It is not so clear what the seven wheels, the six and then five spokes stand for, nor does it affect our main point: this “wheel of truth” and its spokes are completely allegorical.

Even more surprisingly, the spoke (*ara*) occurs only once in conjunction with a chariot (10.78.4), again in a metaphorical context, and those “spokes of chariots” have no wheel! It looks as though the Vedic *rishis* enjoy teasing us: we expected a text full of

horses, chariots and spoked wheels, and the closer we look at it, the farther away they fade. Indeed, *not once in the entire Ṛgveda do we have a mention of a chariot with spoked wheels*, these three elements together in a realistic context (whether on earth or in heaven).

This is wholly unexpected and quite extraordinary. A few Ṛgvedic hymns appear to know of a spoked wheel, but they *never explicitly mention chariots with spoked wheels*. How can we then legitimately speak of “the use of the horse drawn chariot in sport and war during the RV [Ṛgveda]” (Witzel, 2001: §21)?

### Warfare in the *Ṛgveda*

The keyword here is “war”. “The historical data of the hymns show that the Indo-Aryans were still engaged in war with the aborigines, many victories over these foes being mentioned. [...] One of the chief occupations of the Indo-Aryan was warfare,” asserts Macdonell ([1917] 1976: xxvii). For Piggott (1950: 272), “The main purpose behind the Rigveda is the sterner stuff of war.” Jamison and Brereton (2014: 49) refer to “the frequent warfare depicted in the Ṛgveda”, while Witzel (1995: 24) saw in Vedic society “small tribal chieftainships of the Ṛgvedic period with their shifting alliances and their history of constant warfare, though often not more than cattle rustling expeditions.” Such has been the originally European and colonial, and still now mainstream, lens through which much of the *Ṛgveda*’s content has been viewed. However, some scholars would have liked the said warfare to have taken place on a somewhat larger scale than mere “cattle rustling expeditions”; let us hear David N. Lorenzen: “The Rg-veda evidence is sufficiently clear to show that the Aryas were organized into large tribe-clans each probably containing several thousand warriors and that these clans fought major battles with large groups of Dasas or Dasyus. For instance, [...] Rg-veda 4.16.13 mentions Indra’s defeat of 50,000 ‘blacks’ and the breaking of their forts. In Rg-veda 8.96.13-15, the 10,000 warriors of the ‘godless tribes’ of the warrior Kṛṣṇa (‘Black’) are defeated by Indra” (Lorenzen, in press). As briefly mentioned at the outset, the “blacks” and their “forts” (*pur-s*) are not physical entities. As regards numbers, they are invariably metaphorical: Indra smashes one *pur* or sometimes ninety (1.130.7), ninety-nine (1.54.6, etc.), a hundred (4.30.20, etc.) or more; he kills one enemy or thousands in just the same way. Reading “several thousand warriors” in such contexts is nothing but crude literalism and is bound to lead to the most serious misinterpretations.

But what remains of the alleged “frequent warfare”? If “forts”, “dark-skinned enemies”, “chariots” and “spoked-wheels” are almost always metaphors for beings and devices operating in the supra-physical spheres, the counter-argument is that a metaphor nevertheless implies and presupposes a physical counterpart. The question, therefore, is whether the text offers a few non-metaphorical descriptions of battles, however embellished they may be. No doubt, the *R̥gveda* is full of violent language: Indra, Agni, several other gods and various *rishis* are constantly asked to smash, destroy, kill, though sometimes merely disable, the enemies, and are abundantly praised for such heroic deeds. That the said enemies are non-physical is made perfectly clear, in my opinion, by the poets’ multiple devices in dozens if not hundreds of hymns: the multiplicity of the conquering gods or rishis or “fathers” as agents of that great victory; the multiplicity of shapes the “enemy” takes (various Dasyus, Dāsas and Paṇis, the serpent Vṛtra, Vala as either the keeper of the “cows” or the cave itself); the multiplicity of the gods’ or heroes’ means of splitting the mountain or the cave and achieving victory (Indra’s weapon, the *vajra*, a hymn, a prayer, a “mantra of truth”, or simply “the truth”); and the multiplicity of the conquered goods that had been hidden in that “cave” in the mountain (cows, horses, treasures, waters and rivers, dawns, the “sun dwelling in darkness” (1.117.5, 3.39.5), or simply the “hidden light”, *gūḍham jyotiḥ*, 7.76.4). Jamison and Brereton (2014: 40) observe, “The details of these battles are too sketchy to provide much in the way of narrative mythology.” Why “sketchy”, when they themselves remark (Jamison & Brereton 2014: 22), “the story of Indra and the Vala cave is essentially a story of the power of the truth”? Taken together, those “details” do add up to a perfectly coherent and precise myth: the release of the light and powers from the dark realms of the cosmos and of our being, a release effected by means of the truth, prayer or the mantra. The *R̥gveda* repeatedly makes it clear that this is not a physical battle – not once does it provide anything coming close to a realistic description, even an embellished one.

Nevertheless, in standard scholarship, the so-called “Battle of the Ten Kings” (*dāśarājña*; it often escapes notice that the word “battle” is an addition in the English) is regarded as a historical event taking place near the Paruṣṇī river, that is, today’s Ravi in Punjab. In three hymns (7.18 for the main “descriptive” account, 7.33 and 7.83 for additional allusions and details), we learn that King Sudās and his Bharata followers, supported by Indra, vanquished an alliance of ten kings. Anyone expecting a workable, even partial or “poetic”



narrative of this event, on which so much historical reconstruction has been attempted, will be disappointed: instead of a narrative, a series of deliberately disjointed and obscure statements awaits us, such as Indra making the waters fordable for Sudās, or (again) splitting open seven fortified places, Sudās’s adversaries diverting the course of the Ravi river (how and to what end?), and the Yamunā river coming in out of nowhere to “help Indra” (7.18.5, 8, 13, 19). There is no attempt to even allude to an actual battle, no mention of any sort of weapon or clash of armies; horses and chariots, which we were told were part essential to the Aryans’ war machine, are absent. In fact, one wonders whether there is any “battle” at all: the enemies are “gathered together but without a zeal to sacrifice, the ten kings gave no fight to Sudās” (7.83.7 J&B). All that we know is that through Indra’s miraculous intervention, 6,000 members of the Anu and Druhyu clans “fell down to sleep” (7.18.14 J&B). Referring to the first of the three hymns, Jamison and Brereton note that it “has long been used as a major source for the reconstruction of Ṛgvedic history, perhaps somewhat too credulously, as the description of the battle is anything but clear and is also clearly full of puns, derisive word plays, phonological deformations of the names of opponents, and other poetic tricks, all couched in slangy language” (Jamison & Brereton 2014: 903).

This has not disheartened scholars keen to extract history from the *Ṛgveda*. For Jan E.M. Houben (2011), the *dāśarājña* is one of the text’s “rare action-oriented accounts [...], which no doubt goes back to some historical event.” Rainer Stuhmann sees Sudās’s opponents “cut the dykes [on the Ravi], as to inundate Sudās and his army”; in his opinion, “much points to non-Aryan indigenous tribes settled on the banks of the Ravi River and belonging to a ‘hydraulic’ civilization that had mastered the knowledge and tools necessary to affect a river system [...] in other words: the Indus civilization” (Stuhmann 2016: 1–2). But there is no mention of dykes in the text, nor is there any evidence that the Harappans, with all their “hydraulic” expertise, ever tampered with sizeable rivers such as the Ravi (Stuhmann also forgets that his Aryans are supposed to have arrived in this region a few centuries after the disintegration of the “hydraulic” Harappan civilization, but that is a detail). Witzel (1995: 335) finds that the account of the “battle” reflects “a look back at the immigration of the Bharatas” in their eastward movement, after they “won [the war] by breaking a (natural) dyke on the river,” and before finally reaching the Yamunā. But it is Sudās’s enemies who are said to divert the Ravi, not the Bharatas (“The ill-intentioned



ones without insight, causing Aditi to abort, diverted (the course of) the (river) Paruṣṇī,” 7.18.8 J&B), and there is no mention of an eastward movement, which Witzel invents by clubbing together unconnected hymns. He, however, rightly draws attention to a later hymn (1.53) which evokes a “battle of 20 kings and 60,099 warriors,” apparently as an echo of the Battle of the Ten Kings; instead of Sudās it is now Sushravas whom Indra helps (although, enigmatically, with a “chariot wheel and a lame (horse)”, 1.53.9 J&B). If this second hymn does refer to the same “battle”, then it takes us even farther away from a reconstructible historical event.

R.D. Dandekar, who subscribed to the Aryan migration model, proposed a fairly sober reconstruction of the Battle of the Ten Kings, but was more honest in admitting, “I must hasten to add that the Dāśarājña has nowhere in the Vedic literature been described in a consistent and connected narrative. [...] I have collated the relevant material from the various versions of the Dāśarājña, have tried to eliminate the inconsistencies and deficiencies in them as far as possible, and have reconstructed a plausible history mainly with the help of constructive imagination.” He was also not sure that the number “ten” should be taken literally; it “has to be understood as being only generally descriptive rather than definitive” (Dandekar 1981: 97, 96).

Scholars opposed to the Aryan paradigm, such as Shrikant Talageri (1993: 319 ff; 2000: 204–205, 420–424) or Koenraad Elst (1999: 4.6.4, 5.3.10), have also read the Battle of the Ten Kings as a historical event, but one that resulted, on the contrary, in a westward migration of Vedic clans from the Northwest towards Iran (Talageri 2000: 213–214). Their arguments are as well or better constructed than those of the invasionist school, but I will let the reader assess them, as I find all historical interpretations of the hymns inherently risky. It is not my stand that the *R̥gveda* has no historical backdrop whatsoever: it no doubt mentions many clans (not “tribes”), names leaders or chiefs or kings, alludes to matters of territory, rivalries and possible clashes. I am convinced, however, that reconstructing this backdrop can only be done on three strict conditions: First, all colonial reading of the *R̥gveda* – from “forts” held by dark-skinned enemies to caves full of cows and horses, from war chariots to “cattle-rustling” – must be swept out once and for all; it is a grave injustice done to the hymns to stick to these primitive notions, which contain their own built-in conclusions and render the hymns as primitive as themselves. Secondly, there should be no preconceived notions (as to migrations in one direction or another, for example), so that the text should be allowed to speak for itself, if at all it is willing to do

so; and if it is not, it should be left alone. Thirdly, any reconstruction will require a rigorous textual analysis that includes late Vedic literature, such as the Brāhmaṇas, Śrauta Sūtras, Anukrakraṃāṇīs, but keeping in mind that while those texts may contain much of the original Vedic tradition, they also reflect at times later conceptions and interpretations that may turn out to be misleading; this is much more the case when we move to the later Epic and Puranic genres, although they still hold nuggets from the earliest times.

At the end of this exercise, we find remarkably little warfare in the *Rgveda*: probably just one battle, of which next to nothing is precisely known. If we wish to read the mind of the *rishis* who composed those hymns, we need to demilitarize them; in this I concur with Karen Thomson. If anything, it is the Truth (which she rightly capitalizes) that is the *Rgveda*'s obsession, not war: it seeks "the light of the Truth" (*ṛitasya jyotis*, 1.23.5), which is to be reached through the "path of the Truth" – *ṛitasya pathā*, a phrase that occurs some twenty times in the *Rgveda* (1.46.11, 1.124.3, 1.128.2, 4.35.3, 5.45.8, 5.80.4, 7.44.4, 8.22.7, 8.31.13, 9.73.6, 10.31.2, 10.66.13, 10.70.2, etc.). The Truth often yields its place to the light, the cosmic order, the Soma, the crossing over to the other shore of this life, the quest for immortality. These central concerns, which ultimately are facets of a single quest, have been pushed to the periphery by a blinkered scholarship. Over a century ago, Sri Aurobindo sought to dismantle this colonial apparatus, which he found no better than the "surprising inconsistency" of India's traditional commentator Sāyaṇa:

It is impossible to read into the story of the Angirases, Indra and Sarama, the cave of the Panis and the conquest of the Dawn, the Sun and the Cows an account of a political and military struggle between Aryan invaders and Dravidian cave-dwellers. It is a struggle between the seekers of Light and the powers of Darkness; the cows are the illuminations of the Sun and the Dawn, they cannot be physical cows; the wide fear-free field of the Cows won by Indra for the Aryans is the wide world of Swar, the world of the solar Illumination, the threefold luminous regions of Heaven (Aurobindo [1914–20] 1998: 223).

Almost every other mythology in the world has been interpreted along such symbolic, cosmic or supraphysical lines, so why not the Vedic world too?

### The Vedic Bull

Contrary to what is often stated, the horse (or its symbol) is not the *Rgveda*'s foremost animal: that honour goes to the bull, a symbol of power and might, as in many other ancient cultures. The bull makes

his appearance over 400 times in the *R̥gveda* alone; every powerful Vedic god – Indra, Agni, Varuna, Vishnu, Rudra, etc. – is praised as a “mighty bull”, very rarely as a horse (except for Agni, which is understandable given the swift and energetic nature of fire). Indra is, thus, often the “best of bulls,” for his “bullish powers”; he is the “bullish bull of heaven and of earth, the bullish bull of the rivers and of the standing waters” (6.44.21 J&B). He tears asunder his enemies’ “strongholds” (*purs*) as a “sharp bull” (1.33.13 J&B). Agni is a “bull of powerful neck” (5.2.12 J&B), a “bull of a thousand horns” (5.1.8 J&B), while the Maruts are the “lofty bulls of heaven” (1.64.2 J&B). There are countless other such invocations. Oddly, in quite a few hymns (1.36.8, 1.54.3, 1.94.10, 3.35.3, 6.45.26, 8.33.11, 8.46.29, etc.), the bull and the horse are side by side, as though they were seen as complementary – but it is power and speed-energy, of course, that are complimentary. If not, the Vedic bull would be a strange animal: it has “three groins and three udders [...] three faces” (3.56.3 J&B) and various hues.

The *R̥gveda*’s use of the bull as a symbol of massive, crushing divine power, is transparent. In this, the animal joins the cow, but also the horse. Unless they – and other animals such as the buffalo, the elephant or the falcon – are treated as such a level, as they would be in any other mythology, we will inevitably fall back on flawed naturalistic readings of tribal clans warring over cattle.

It is curious that the bull, as either animal or metaphor, receives so little attention from Indo-Europeanists; J.P. Mallory’s and D.Q. Adams’s monumental *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* has no entry for the bull, while it devotes six pages to the horse (Mallory & Adams 1997: 273–279).

### The Path Ahead

The *R̥gveda* tells us strictly nothing of a large horse population in Vedic society, and may instead suggest its rarity; the animal was important in qualitative and symbolic, not quantitative, terms. The *R̥gveda* is equally silent on Aryans hurtling down from the Afghan passes in horse-drawn chariots and crushing or conquering indigenous populations. The hymns are, however, quite clear that the noble animal, or whatever it symbolizes, is not the exclusive preserve of the Āryas, but belongs as much to their adversaries (again, whether real or figurative ones); such is the case with the chariot, too.

The last point above, on its own, is enough to puncture the whole horse argument: if we accept the invasionists’ literalist reading of

the R̥gveda for a moment, then India's natives already had horses before the Aryans' supposed arrival. Our chief conclusion, however, is that once again, we shall not progress unless we move away from tenacious but illegitimate colonial stereotypes, best exemplified by Witzel's grandiloquent echo of 19th-century racist depictions of supposedly glorious colonial conquests: "The first appearance of [the invading Aryans'] thundering chariots must have stricken the local population with a terror, similar to that experienced by the Aztecs and Incas upon the arrival of the iron-clad, horse riding Spaniards" (1995: 114). No such thing happened in India's second millennium BCE; it only happened in the fevered imagination of some scholars.

Thapar also perpetuates colonial stereotypes when she writes, "The earliest religious ideas of the Aryans were those of a primitive animism where the forces around them, which they could not control or understand, were invested with divinity and were personified as male or female gods" (Thapar 1966: 43). Between warfare and "primitive animism", how will we ever account for the *rishis'* quest for the light, for "that Truth" (*tat satyam*, 1.1.6, 1.98.3, 8.93.5), or "that One" as a single divine reality (*tad ekam*, 5.62.1, 10.129.2)? How shall we understand a "wave of honey" rising from the ocean (4.58.1), an "ocean of the heart" from which "rivers of ghee" also rise (4.58.5), a "well of honey covered by the rock" (2.24.4)? Can Agni be no more than a physical fire laboriously lit by primitives when it is described as "the child of the Waters" (3.1.12), present "even in the stone" (1.70.2), a child that gives birth to its own mothers (1.95.4)? What is this *satya mantra* (7.76.4) or true incantation that has the power to reveal the "hidden light" and give birth to the Dawn? And we saw the great single myth of the release of the sun, the dawns, the waters, rivers, treasures, lights and powers.

A few scholars have tried to look beyond those blinkers. Renou found that the R̥gveda "develops a web of symbols in which language has been bent to subtle processes of a mythico-ritual imagination. Almost all Indian works have an esoteric side, the Rig-Veda more than any other" (Renou & Filliozat, [1947] 1985: 275). Gonda (1975: 65–67) emphasized the "inspired vision of the universal order" expressed in the hymns, in which a "ṛṣi seeks, or enters into contact with, divinity or transcendent reality." Or as Thomson points out, "The bizarre interpretations of indology are adhered to with tenacity. Yet the imaginative sophistication of these Ancient Sanskrit poems constantly gleams through" (Thomson, 2009a: 41).

Indeed, a hymn (4.3.16) teases us (in Sri Aurobindo's translation) with its "secret words ... words of seer-knowledge that express their

meaning to the seer.” A literalist reading of the *R̥gveda* is bound to fail us, and is unjustifiable when, again, other mythologies, from the Babylonian to the Egyptian to the Greek, have long been explored at figurative and symbolic levels. A decolonized and demilitarized *R̥gveda* will not instantly yield all its keys and secrets, but will at least set us on the right path towards them – a *ṛtasya pathā* of Vedic scholarship.

### Notes

1. Much of this paper is an adaptation of a part of a chapter on the horse in (Danino, forthcoming).
2. Unless otherwise mentioned, translations from Vedic hymns are my own arrangements of various translations into European languages (e.g., chronologically, those of F. Max Müller, R.T.H. Griffith ([1896] 1973), H. Oldenberg, K.F. Geldner (1951), Sri Aurobindo, A.A. Macdonell, J. Gonda, L. Renou, J. Filliozat, S.W. Jamison & J.P. Brereton (2014)), guided by my own limited understanding of the original. Translations quoted from Jamison and Brereton are marked with “J&B” after the hymn number. English translations of quotations from works in French or German are mine. I have used standard diacritics, except for a few common words, such as “Upanishad”, “Puranic”, “rishi”, etc.. Cited authors’ use (or non-use) of diacritics has been kept unchanged.
3. For all the vast scholarship and painstaking research behind it, this English translation is by no means final, as the translators themselves make clear (Jamison & Brereton 2014: 75 ff, and repeatedly in their introductions to a number of obscure hymns). Nor could there ever be a “final” translation into any language. Jamison’s and Brereton’s translation has been welcomed by many scholars and will remain a major contribution; it has also been sharply criticized by Karen Thomson as “an incoherent mix of mumbo-jumbo and misplaced obscenity, most of it apparently meaningless” (Thomson 2016: 3).

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