On the Nature of the Vedic Gods

by

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ON THE NATURE OF THE VEDIC GODS
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Catalin Anghelina

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“Zwei Dinge erfüllen das Gemüt mit immer neuer und zunehmender Bewunderung und Ehrfurcht, je öfter und anhaltender sich das Nachdenken damit beschäftigt: der bestirnte Himmel über mir und das moralische Gesetz in mir.”

—Immanuel Kant
FOREWORD

The goal of the present study is to find a new solution to the difficult issue of the nature and significance of the Rig Vedic main gods. Obviously, since such an objective is not only ambitious, but also utterly bold, it is necessary to explain the reasons that led me to take up this enterprise.

In the preface of his recent monumental study on the Rig Veda, T. Oberlies (1998) expresses his admiration for the “fascinating” world (“die faszinierende Welt”) of the Rig Veda. To the present author, given the level of current understanding of the Rig Veda, statements of this kind seem puzzling. How can an obscure and unintelligible text be “fascinating”? That such a natural question is neither illegitimate nor exaggerated is shown by the fact that, indeed, the obscurity of the Vedic text was seen many times by scholars as something intentionally created. To give some examples, one can start with A. Bergaigne who judged the Rig Veda as a “verbally and poetically sophisticated, indeed deliberately obscure text.” In more recent years, W. Doniger (1981: 15–6) mentions the Vedic “paradox” and “enigma” and argues that the obscurity of the Rig Vedic text leads to a divorce between words and meaning: “What does it mean? It means what it says.” Her conclusion is that the Rig Veda is “a book of questions, not a book of answers,” a book meant “to puzzle, to surprise, to trouble the mind.” These few examples undoubtedly show that, essentially, the Rig Veda is for many scholars an irrational text, or at least a text which contains many deliberately unintelligible passages. It appears then that the question above is more than a rhetorical one.

Statements such as those above, which concern the meaning of the Rig Veda, could lead to the conclusion that the obscurity of this book derives from the obscurity of many of its words, passages, and/or even myths. To give some very well-known examples: the Aśvins stop their chariot on the bull's head; the whale looks at the Aśvins' chariot; Agni, the god of fire, is born twice in the waters, and the waters feed him; Varuṇa plays with the sun as with a swing, Indra, the bull, drinks the juice Soma, and kills a dragon. The Rig Veda is full of such examples, which completely lack a plausible interpretation. Moreover, the hermeneutical attempts to solve riddles of this type often led to the

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1 Cf. Jamison & Witzel (1992: 52), who adhere to this idea.
replacement of *obscurum* by *obscurius*. A good example of this is the opinion that certain Vedic gods can be both different and identical to one another.²

To reduce the decipherability of the Vedic text only to the understanding of such passages is very deceptive. The *Rig Veda* is not just any text, but one that represents the most important religious text of a people at a certain moment in time. Given this, the quest for the meaning of the *Rig Veda* is and should be a quest for the meaning of the Vedic religion as well. The meaning of the *Rig Veda* can be reduced neither to the morphological, syntactical or semantic aspects of the Vedic lexicon and grammar nor to the interpretation of some passages; it is far more profound than that. This meaning hinges upon these questions: who are the Vedic gods that are worshipped in this religion, and what do they represent?

Certainly, the first part of the question above has an immediate and obvious answer, since the Rig Vedic hymns are transparently dedicated to the deities the Vedic people worshipped. There is, however, nothing more difficult to answer with certainty than the second part of this question. Let me amplify this by considering the three main gods of the Vedic pantheon: Indra, Agni, and Soma. The scholarly consensus is that Indra, the most powerful Vedic deity, represents the warrior god of the Vedic people; Agni would represent the deified ritual fire, whereas Soma would be a hallucinatory juice/drink, that is, a kind of drug that the Vedic people happened to worship as well.

In conclusion: a warrior, a drug, and fire are the greatest gods of one of the most elaborated religions ever created by mankind! If we add here the Ādityas, the other great Vedic gods, which are generally regarded nowadays as gods of social contracts, the picture that emerges appears to be that of an incomprehensible hodgepodge.³

Since the obscurity of the *Rig Veda* concerns not only certain linguistic aspects of the text, but the very core of the religion this text refers to, the interpretation of one obscure passage or the other in the *Rig Veda* cannot be regarded as an individual matter pertaining to that particular passage or to

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² E.g., Bergaigne's (1878–1883: I 13) analysis of the passages in which Agni is compared to the sun: "pour les poètes védiques la comparaison n'est pas éloignée de l'assimilation ... les deux termes d'une comparaison [i.e., in this case, Agni and the sun — my note] peuvent être identiques."

³ For a brief summary of the Vedic gods, see Jamison & Witzel (1992:52–55), who believe that "what is striking about the Vedic Pantheon is its lack of overarching organization."
the association of that passage with other similar ones, but should ultimately lead to the core of the Vedic religion, which contains the answer to the nature and significance of the Vedic gods.

The present study starts from the author's belief that the *Rig Veda* is not and cannot be an irrational text. In other words, to rephrase one of the scholarly comments above, my belief is that the *Rig Veda* is a book of answers, not a book of questions. The “spark” that generated this work is a study of mine published recently in *JIES*, in which I made the hypothesis that Viṣṇu, a Vedic god inferior to Indra, Soma, or Agni, is located at the North Pole of the celestial vault. That study opened up for me the path for a wholly new perspective on the Vedic gods, which was to see if other Vedic characters, especially the most important ones, are related to astronomical phenomena. Obviously, this type of approach belongs to the nature-mythology paradigm, which was popular among the scholars of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, and is, inexplicably, dismissed nowadays out of hand.4

The results of the present research are surprising even to the author. They show that, besides of course being a religious text, the *Rig Veda* may be said to be in many instances a manual of astronomy, and that the main features of the Vedic gods refer to celestial phenomena. In other words, the study shows that the Vedic people worshipped the starry sky. More importantly, the celestial phenomena worshipped in the *Rig Veda* are those that are the most visible to the eye of an observer from the northern hemisphere. From an astronomical standpoint, on the other hand, the stars and other celestial phenomena the Vedic gods represent are not just any celestial phenomena, but those that were the most likely to be worshipped by a primitive people. This astronomical significance concerns the keeping of time, which is pivotal for determining the cycle of the seasons in a primitive agricultural society.

The Vedic people worshipped their star-gods in the morning, at dawn, or just before dawn, when the last rising stars of the night appear on the eastern horizon; in astronomical jargon, this particular appearance of a star on the horizon is called the “heliacal rising” of that star. It is, therefore, of great importance to understand both why this worship was performed at dawn and what this had to do with the keeping of time. In the ancient societies, the months of the year and the regular cycle of

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the seasons were determined by watching the relative positions of the stars with respect to the sun and the moon. Even today, we still make use of expressions such as “the sun is in Pisces” or “I was born in Taurus,” which simply mean (beyond, of course, their astrological significance) the time (month) of the year when those events occurred. Thus, the statement “the sun is in Pisces” reflects the fact that during a certain period of the year (we call it a “month”) the sun’s trajectory in the sky appears to overlap with or to be identical to that of the constellation Pisces. To notice that the sun is in Pisces, however, requires that one can see both the sun and the constellation Pisces close to each other in the sky. Obviously, this is not possible during night time, since the sun is not present in the night sky. It is also not possible to do so during day time, since the constellation cannot be seen in the sun’s glare. The only time when the sun’s disk can be observed to “belong” to a certain constellation is either in the morning or in the evening. Thus, at early dawn, shortly before sunrise (one hour or so), there is always a constellation which appears “in front” of the sun and whose path the sun immediately follows. In the evening, about one hour after sunset, when the stars become visible, the same constellation will be seen as setting in the west in the sun’s path. In our particular case, we then say “the sun is in Pisces.” Mornings and evenings, therefore, are the only times of the day when these observations can be made. Thus, the Vedic worship of various stars at dawn during certain periods of time of the year is not an arbitrary religious rule, but has to do with one of the most important things for the survival of ancient man, which is the keeping of time. As with regard to the Vedic people’s preference for morning worship, this probably had to do with the importance of sunrise in the daily life of the agricultural communities.5

I have already mentioned that other attempts were made to interpret the Vedic gods as representing natural or even celestial phenomena (the so-called “natural mythology”). In this respect, the present study offers a fundamentally different perspective on the Vedic gods. The reason for this is that the main objective of this study is not only to show the association between certain Vedic gods and certain natural phenomena, but to answer the fundamental question about the meaning of the

5 The adoration of the (rising) sun (Sūrya) must have played a role in this as well; thus, it is well known that in Sanskrit the word for “south,” daksīna, also means “right,” which implies that the cardinal points were taken from the perspective of an observer facing east (sunrise).
Rig Veda. To put it differently, the nature of the Vedic gods is viewed here as being derived from a single premise, which is that the Rig-Vedic people's object of worship was the starry sky.

The present interpretation of the Rig Veda has also an indirect but, nevertheless, important consequence, which concerns the obscurity of many “metaphors” in the Vedic myths. The conclusion that emerges is that not only is this “metaphorical” language not obscure or deliberately obscure, but, in many cases, the “metaphors” are nothing else but plain language used in the absence of a scientific (astronomic) jargon. Thus, the “metaphor” of Agni being born twice, or that of the chariot stopping on the bull's head expresses nothing but what ancient man actually saw in the nocturnal sky. To make a vivid comparison, which will make my point clearer: if it had been possible for the Vedic man to see an airplane in the sky, it would not have been astonishing to hear him calling it “the bird with unmoving wings”; by doing so, he would certainly not have appealed to metaphorical language but merely described in plain language an otherwise indescribable phenomenon. On the other hand, the Rig Veda does contain metaphors, whose features are well known, but which do not particularly belong to the Vedic culture. These metaphors concern the widely spread custom in the ancient world of identifying stars and constellations with objects or characters from Earth. What the poets of the Rig Veda did then was to create their own mythology by appealing to this ancient “astronomical” jargon.

The intuition that certain metaphors in the Rig Veda merely describe in plain language celestial phenomena proved to be a powerful tool not only for decoding “obscure” passages, but also for the interpretation of entire Vedic myths. Thus, to mention just a few such myths, Indra's addiction to Soma, his cosmic fight with Vṛtra, the presence of Pūṣan at Sūryā's wedding procession, etc., do not represent myths invented by the Vedic poets ex nihilo, but are based on how Vedic man imagined celestial phenomena interacting with one another.

The present work, therefore, is dedicated to the astral nature of the main Vedic gods. Its aim is not to analyze to the smallest detail the contents of the Rig Veda. The passages I analyze throughout the work are exclusively dedicated to the astronomical meaning of the Vedic myths and gods. These passages, which are treated in a coherent and systematic way, show that the manner in which a Vedic god relates to a celestial object is not a matter of coincidence or priestly speculation, but is a particular expression of the general astral aspect of the Vedic religion. Certainly, there are many other passages in the Rig Veda that do not have astronomical features. It is beyond the scope of the present
work to interpret these passages or to determine how non-astronomical elements came to coexist or to be integrated within the whole of the Vedic (or Aryan) religion. It is also beyond its scope to deal in detail with other very important issues such as eschatological ones or the world’s creation; but touching upon some of these is unavoidable.

I divided this work into seven parts. The first concerns Indra and the gods associated with him: Soma, the Aśvins, the Maruts, and Rudra. The second concerns Agni. A third chapter is dedicated to the “solar aspects” of Savitṛ and Pūṣan. Another chapter treats the Ādityas, which represent a compact group within the Rig Veda. The sixth section treats the meaning of the presence of “bulls” and “cows” in the Rig Veda; this section also touches upon the Vedic eschatological issues. Finally, the last section treats the “universal myth” of the hero slaying the dragon in the Vedic mythology.

The translation I used for the Sanskrit text is Geldner’s (1951–1957) monumental scholarly version in German, which has been and still is an indispensable tool of Vedic research (scholars at Harvard are at work these days on a new translation of the Rig Veda in English, which, it is to be hoped, will supersede Geldner’s version). I also found it necessary to pair the Sanskrit text with the German translation. This is because I sometimes had to analyze Geldner’s version at a more detailed level and then give a new and different interpretation of the Vedic text. In the vast majority of the cases, however, I found that Geldner's translation was more than sufficient to express the ideas of the original text. The most important thing that will emerge from my research is the consistency of these ideas.

This consistency is twofold. On the one hand, the passages that refer to a particular god consistently describe the astronomical properties of a certain celestial phenomenon. These properties, which mainly concern either how that god interacts with the sun or its position in the nocturnal sky, lead to the identification of the god with that celestial phenomenon. On the other hand, what emerges with clarity from the present study is that the “astronomical” jargon used to describe different gods is the same. More explicitly, all Rig Vedic gods interact with the sun and/or are located in the sky. This shows that the Vedic gods must be considered as having the same nature, which is celestial. This latter conclusion extends to the Iranian religion, indirectly showing that the religion of the Indo-Iranians was astral as well. Obviously, a detailed treatment of the Iranian religion is beyond the scope of this study.
Thus, the present interpretation of the Vedic gods is meant to be more than a mere identification of these gods with certain celestial phenomena. My interpretation claims to be a powerful theory, according to which the Vedic gods, who are the essential part of the Vedic religious system, are treated in a systematic, coherent way with respect to their astronomical significance. Therefore, even if it could be shown that a god was wrongly identified with a certain star or constellation, the present theory implies that the nature of that god would still have to be considered celestial, and, therefore, one should find another star that better fits the description of that particular god.

To conclude: the Rig Veda is a book about certain stars and constellations, and, as will become apparent in what follows, these were stars rising heliacally between the winter and summer solstices. Today, the majority of these stars and constellations can be seen in the evening winter sky, when they shine in their entire splendor (they can be best seen between December and March). I confess that I watched the winter night sky many times after I started my research on the Vedic gods. First, I discovered Indra; then, the Aśvins and their chariot, the Maruts, and Rudra; then Pūṣan. And, one special night, when I felt that the final piece of the puzzle had fallen in its proper place, I went out and gazed into the sky again. The Rig Veda was there, in front of my eyes: the Vedic gods and their myths. For the first time, I could not help whispering to myself in the silent evening: the wonderful world of the Rig Veda!
Catalin Anghelina, "On the Nature of the Vedic Gods"
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ON THE NATURE OF THE VEDIC GODS
INDRA THE "BULL"

A. WHO IS INDRA?

Indra is the most important god of the Vedic pantheon. This is clearly shown by the fact that a quarter of the hymns in the *Rig Veda* are exclusively dedicated to him. He is the great warrior-god, the divine champion of the Vedic tribes. In a word, Indra is the “national” god of the Vedic world.¹ In the *Rig Veda*, this importance is paralleled only by that of Agni and Soma.

In spite of his importance, it has never been clear exactly who in fact Indra is.² Certainly, he is the god who slew Vṛtra and thus created the world by “releasing the waters.” He is, therefore, a creator god. In addition, it has been noted that this myth shows Indra not only as a creator god but also as a warrior god. The passages in which Indra is said to help the Aryans in their battle against the Dasyus seem to have contributed to this view.³ On the other hand, the fact that he “released the waters” by killing Vṛtra with his powerful weapon *vajra*, which has been seen as similar to Zeus’ thunderbolt,⁴ contributed to his image as a thunder or an atmospheric god.⁵ Aside from his image as a creator god, therefore, Indra seems to be a powerful thunder god, who brings down enemies and pours water over the land.

Indra’s personality, however, features another essential aspect, which is harder to reconcile with his being the thunder god. This is his solar aspect. Thus, Indra produced the dawn and the sun (RV 2.12.7, 21.4; 3.31.15, 32.8); he has made the dawn and the sunshine (RV 1.62.5); he placed the sun in the sky (RV 1.51.4; 52.8; 8.12.30); he gained the sun (RV 1.108.6, 18; 3.34.8). These traits of Indra, which I

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¹ Cf., e.g., Macdonell (1898: 54); Bhattacharji (1970: 249); Hillebrandt (1980: II 90); O’Flaherty (1981: 139–140).


³ Cf. RV 6.18.3; 4.26.2; see Macdonell (1898: 62).


⁵ Cf. e.g., Eliade (1972: 199), Macdonell (1898:54), West (2007: 245–247).
will explore in more detail below, show Indra as being closely associated with the sun.\(^6\) Therefore, Indra’s personality seems to have two aspects, which are apparently antithetical to each other. The first one associates him with rain and storm, the other one with the sun and its conquest. This dichotomy is hard to explain.\(^7\) Obviously, unless one finds a solution to it, there can be no complete understanding of Indra’s character.

One of the most striking facts about Indra in the *Rig Veda* is that he is constantly called the “bull.” The number of occurrences of this epithet for Indra in the *Rig Veda* is high. Bergaigne (1878–1883: II 169) notes that the epithet is “répété jusqu’à satiété.” Astonishingly, no special attention has been paid to this so far, although it has also been long noticed that the “bull” is Indra’s symbol and sacrificial animal, a fact that confirms that the epithet expresses Indra’s essential feature.\(^8\) The Sanskrit word for “bull” is, in the majority of these cases, either *vṛṣan* (cf. e.g., RV 10.28.7; 1.32.7, 1.85.7) or *vṛṣabhá* (cf. e.g., RV 3.31.18; 4.18.10; 10.28.2; 10.28.9; 2.12.12; 1.165.7). Sometimes both words are used in the same hymn (cf. RV 10.28.2; 7).

At first glance, there seems indeed to be nothing special about this epithet, which may only poetically underscore Indra’s strength and virility. Indra, however, is not just any kind of bull. As a corollary of his being the greatest god of the Vedic religion, Indra’s location is said to be in the sky. Indra, therefore, is a celestial bull, who is the master of the sky (*bṛhatáḥ pátir*; cf. 1.52.13). This idea is repeatedly expressed in the *Rig Veda*, e.g., in the following passages:

3.47.5. *marūtvantaṃ vṛṣabhāṃ vāyrdhānāṁ ākavāriṁ diviyāṁ śāsāṁ īndram visvāsāham āvase nūtanāya ugrāṁ sahodāṁ ihā tāṁ huvema*

3.47.5. Den erstarkten Bullen (*vṛṣabhá*) in Begleitung der Marutschar, der kein geiziger Herr ist, den himmlischen Gebieter (*diviyāṁ śāsām*) Indra, den Allbezwinger, den gewaltigen Siegverleiher, den wollen wir zu erneutem Beistand hierher rufen.

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\(^6\) Bhattacharji (1970: 267) talks about “Indra’s solar character.”

\(^7\) Cf. Hillebrandt (1980: II 91), who is aware of these dichotomies.

\(^8\) Cf. e.g., Hillebrandt (1980: II 132); for modern times, cf. Oberlies (1998: 261).
8.64.4.  
\[ \text{éhi préhi kṣáyo diví} \]
8.64.4.  
Wohl an, brich auf, der du im Himmel wohnst.

8.53.1.  
\[ \text{upamáṃ tvā maghónāṃ jyéṣṭham ca vrśabhánām} \]
8.53.1.  
Dich, den Obersten der Freigebigen und den Größten der Bullen ... (bitten wir) ...

One passage even calls him explicitly the “bull of heaven” \textit{vrśāsi divó}:

6.44.21.  
\[ \text{vrśāsi divó vrśabháḥ prthíryá vrśśā síndhúnām vrśabhá stíyānām} \]
6.44.21.  

Certainly, the Bull in this passage is not only the “Bull of heaven,” but also “the Bull of the earth” etc. The fact, however, that in other passages such as the ones quoted above the Vedic “Bull” is specifically called “the celestial master,” the “greatest of all the bulls,” whose location is in the sky, shows that the appellative “the Bull of heaven” is more than a mere epithet or an obscure metaphor; it shows that Indra is indeed a cosmic or celestial bull. This opens up the path for a wholly new hypothesis, which concerns the possibility that this “cosmic Bull” is not a poetical invention, but literally exists in the sky. From this perspective, there is nothing more natural than to ask whether this “cosmic bull” may have anything to do with the zodiacal constellation Taurus, whose name is, indeed, \textit{vrśabhá} in Sanskrit.\(^9\) That such inquiry is legitimate is also supported by the fact that, in Babylon, Taurus was indeed called the “the Bull of heaven.”\(^10\) Does Indra, therefore, represent the constellation Taurus in the \textit{Rig Veda}?

\(^9\) It is well-known that the Hindus used a different, moon-based zodiac until Hellenistic times, when they borrowed the twelve zodiacal constellations — among them Taurus — from the Greeks; see below.

Before starting to assess the validity of this new hypothesis, I will briefly mention some important facts about the history of the constellation Taurus. This is one of the twelve Babylonian constellations, which were borrowed by the Greeks from Mesopotamia as their zodiac sometime during the first millennium BC. The Babylonian twelve-constellation zodiac itself is an invention belonging to the first millennium BC.\(^{11}\) The invention of the Babylonian zodiac in the first millennium BC, however, does not exclude the possibility that some of the zodiacal constellations had been invented at a much earlier date. This seems to be the case with Taurus. Pictographic evidence shows that awareness of this constellation was present in the Mesopotamian world around 3,200 BC, if not earlier, during the times of the prehistoric settlers of Persia, Elam, and Mesopotamia in 4000 BC. The motif of the lion-versus-bull scene, especially, which has astronomical connotations, seems to emerge around that date.\(^{12}\) On the other hand, the Babylonian name of Taurus itself is of Sumerian origin (mul GU₄.AN.NA “bull of heaven”), which also indicates that the origin of the constellation is much older than the emergence of the twelve-constellation zodiac. Therefore, despite the fact that its actual origins are not entirely clear, it is likely that the constellation Taurus was known to the Mesopotamian world and beyond as early as the fourth millennium BC.\(^{13}\)

The astronomical importance of the constellation Taurus is that approximately during 4000 and 2000 BC it heliacally announced the spring equinox, which is one of two moments of the year when nights and days are equal in duration (cf. fig. 3). In layman’s language, this means that at the spring equinoxes of that period of time, Taurus was seen as rising from due east just before sunrise; in other words, it became visible at early dawn just before the appearance of the sun in the east, and then rapidly vanished from the sky when the sun’s disk approached the horizon line.\(^{14}\) The location of Taurus on the equinoctial circle during the above-mentioned period of time also means that this constellation was occupying the “middle” band of the sky.


\(^{13}\) With regard to the origin of Taurus, the claim has been made that it originates in Egypt; cf. Gundel (1936) 336; Gurshtein 2005 (103–50); also cf. Helck (1972–1992 VI, 16; Hartner (1965) 1–16 argues for Sumer.

\(^{14}\) In astronomical jargon, this is called the “heliacal” rising of a star/constellation.
The fact that Taurus does not announce the spring equinox anymore is due to the well-known astronomical phenomenon of precession. The "precession of the equinoxes" is due to the earth’s wobble around its rotation axis, which causes a shift in the apparent position of the constellations in the sky (cf. fig. 7). As a consequence of this shift, it takes about 26,000 years for one constellation to return to its previous position in the sky. If we take as a reference the twelve-constellation zodiac, then it takes about $26,000/12 \approx 2100$ years for a constellation to shift from its position to the position of the next constellation. Thus, during approximately 2000 BC and 0 the spring equinox was announced by Aries; today it is announced by Pisces, which replaced Aries as the constellation of the spring equinox (cf. fig. 3).

To sum up: The constellation Taurus is most likely much older than the Babylonian zodiac, being known in the Mesopotamian world during the fourth millennium BC. During the period of time between 4000 and 2000 BC, Taurus was located on the central band of the sky, which contains the equinoctial/equatorial circle. In this position, Taurus was the constellation announcing the spring equinox, which is one of two moments of the year when day and night are equal in duration.

An important issue, which needs special treatment, concerns the way those ancient people could determine the time of the year when days and nights were equal in duration. The precise day of the spring equinox is difficult to determine in the absence of a reliable scientific system of measurements. This is not the case at the solstices, which are easier to observe. At the solstices, the sun lingers several days in the same positions, which mark the limits in the sky between which the sun moves from north to south and vice-versa during the year. Therefore, there is no need for sophisticated astronomical computations. The situation is different in the case of the equinoxes. At that time of the year, the sun’s position is altering rapidly and, therefore, it is very difficult to show that one day rather than the other should be marked as the equinox. Therefore, to assume that the Hindus knew of the equinoxes seems to be an overstatement of their astronomical knowledge. Nevertheless, while it is true that the exact day of the equinox is hard to determine by simply

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15 In later Vedic literature, the sun’s paths (each of them lasting six months) between the solstices are called *uttarāyana* ‘the path upward’ and *dakṣināyana* ‘the path to the south’; cf. Bryant (2001: 253).

observing the position of the sun at its rising/setting, there was nothing that could have prevented these ancient people from approximating the time of the year when that event took place. On the one hand, the simple observation that the duration of days and nights vary between the solstices could very easily lead to the conclusion that such a moment of the year existed. On the other hand, the Hindus could calculate that moment either by simply dividing in two the distance between the two solstices, or, more likely, by counting 180 days from one solstice to another, since their year measured 360 days. Thus, to assume that the ancient Hindus did know about the existence of such a moment, when day and night are equal, is not a far-fetched hypothesis. Obviously, this does not imply that the precision of their observations was accurate to the day.

An additional difficulty, which the present study encounters from the outset when considering that the constellation Taurus was known to the Vedic Hindus, is the fact that the ancient system of Hindu constellations (nakṣatras) did not include Taurus among them. This system was a moon-based one comprising 27 or 28 constellations. The rationale of its existence is the fact that it takes 27.3 days for the moon to make a complete revolution in the sky. Therefore, the celestial sphere was divided in 27 or 28 parts, so that the moon could be observed as it was moving through each of these constellations. This system is completely different from the well-known solar-based system of zodiacal constellations, which takes into account the sun's yearly revolution. Since Taurus belongs to this latter system, it is legitimate to ask how or whether it was possible for the Vedic people to adopt Taurus as the marker of the spring equinox. Obviously, the fact that they had their own astronomical

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18 They could also determine the position of the equinox by observing the North Pole/Star, dhruva, which is the only fixed point on the rotating vault of the sky; this is shown by the fact that the sacrificial hearths of the Hindus were placed in the east, west and south respectively; cf. e.g. Hillebrandt (1980 (1): 66). The Egyptians must have done the same thing when they constructed the Great Pyramid at Giza (~2,500 BC) with amazingly great precision with respect to the cardinal points; cf. Gingerich (2000: 297–8).

19 See above n.14.


21 Obviously, such an import could have been possible either from the Mesopotamians or from some other people
system of constellations does not preclude their having known other constellations, which were popular throughout Eurasia; the case of the well-known seven Rṣis ‘Ursa Major’ is relevant in this respect. The next step then is to determine whether this was the case with Taurus.

As I noted above, one of the most intriguing aspects of the Rig Vedic Taurus concerns its solar aspect. I will show below that the Rig Vedic celestial bull, which is described as occupying the central part of the sky, has a close (astronomical) relation to the sun and not to the moon. This fact, which is unlikely to be coincidental, shows that the astronomical system of the Rig Vedic world was sun-based. As we shall see later in the present study, this conclusion is supported by the fact that other Rig Vedic star-gods are described in a similar way, that is, as interacting with the sun and not with the moon. All these observations strongly suggest that the Rig Vedic sun-based astronomical system precedes the well-known Hindu moon-based system of nakṣatras. To put it differently, it will appear that the astronomical system of constellations containing Taurus is not imported, but represents the older and original system, which was strictly related to the sun.

I present below the characteristics of the Vedic bull Indra that show that the Vedic supreme god is indeed a constellation heliacally announcing the spring equinox.

1) The hymns dedicated to Indra are sung in the morning. The following passages show that the celestial “golden” bull rises at early dawn and, along with the sun, brings light to the world. Moreover, it is specifically said that Indra “brings up” the sun to the world; this latter metaphor fits well the concept of a constellation rising heliacally (i.e., just before sunrise):

3.39.2.  
*divāś cid ā pūrviyā jáyamānā vi jāgrvīr vidāthe śasyāmānā*  
*bhadrā vástrāṇi ārjunā vásānā séyám asmé sanajā pūriyā dhūḥ*

3.39.2.  
Noch vor Tag geboren, frühwach, beim Opfer abwechselnd vorgetragen, in schöne, helle Gewänder gekleidet, ist dies unsere in alter Zeit entstandene väterliche Dichtung  
[the hymn to Indra is sung just before dawn — my note].

3.39.5.  
... *súryāṃ viveda támasi kṣiyántam*

3.39.5.  
... fand Indra ... die Sonne, die im Dunkel weilte.

Belonging to the same geographical milieu.
3.39.7. jyótir vrñīta támaso vijāṇánn ...
Das Licht zog er dem Dunkel vor, da er den Unterschied kennt.

3.44.2. haryánn ušásam arcayah súryáṃ haryánn arocayah
Gern hast du die Morgenröte erstrahlen, gern die Sonne leuchten lassen.

4.16.4. súvar yád védi sudřśikam arkaír máhi jyótí rrucur yád dha vástoḥ
andhá támāṃsi dúdhitā vicákše nřbhyaś cakāra nṛtamo abhīṣtau
Als das schön zu schauende Himmelslicht durch ihre Zaubergesänge gefunden war,
als sie das große Licht am Morgen leuchten ließen, da machte der Mannhafteste das
hartnäckige stockfinstere Dunkel in Hilfsbereitschaft für die Männer zum
Durchblicken.

2.21.4. ... índraḥ suyajñā ušásah súvar janat
... Indra, der Opferherrliche, erzeugte die Morgenröten, die Sonne.

1.16.3. índram prātár havāmaha
Indra rufen wir am Morgen ...

10.112.1. Indra, trinke nach Lust vom Soma; denn dein ist die Morgenpressung, der Ersttrunk.

3.44.4. jajñánó hárito vṛśā víśvam á bhātī rocanáṃ ...
Sobald der goldige Bulle geboren ist, erleuchtet er den ganzen Lichtraum.

8.50.8. Deine falben Wagenpferde ... mit denen du die Sonne einholest.

4.30.9. diváś cid ghá duhitáram mahán mahyámānām
ušásam indra sám piṇak
Die Ušas, die doch des Himmels Tochter, die sich groß tat, hast du, der Große,
zerschlagen, o Indra.
The last verse above, which describes Indra as “killing” the Dawn, was considered by Geldner as alluding to an “obscure myth”: “Ein seltsamer Mythos. Die Ursache ist nirgends angegeben.” The hypothesis that Indra is Taurus can perfectly explain this verse; the rising of Taurus at the equinox announces the sun, which, in turn, dissipates the dawn’s feeble light.

2) As the spring-equinox marker, which is positioned close to the sun, the constellation Taurus defines the succession of the seasons; it also defines the succession and length of the days and nights:


4.30.3. Auch alle Götter bekämpften dich darum nicht, O Indra, als du Tage und Nacht abgrenztest (yád áhá náktam átíraḥ).

2.19.3. Der mächtige Indra ... erzeugte die Sonne ... regelte die Reihenfolge der Tage durch die Nacht (aktúñá áhnáṁ vayúnáni sádhat).

6.21.3. sá ī támo avayunáṁ tatanvát súrīyena vayúnavac cakāra.

6.21.3. Er hat die ausgebreitete zeitlose Finsternis durch die Sonne zeitlich geregelt.


10.89.13. ánv áha másā ánu íd vánāní ánu óṣadhír ánu párvatásaḥ
ánu indraḥ ródasí vāvaśāné ánv ápo ajihata jáyamānam

10.89.13. Es ordneten sich die Tage, die Monate, es ordneten sich die Bäume, die Pflanzen, die Berge und willig die beiden Welthälften, die Gewässer dem Indra unter, als er geboren wurde.

3) Taurus’ location on the middle band of the sky is revealed in the metaphors that describe Indra as supporting the sky, or as having the sky set on his head:
... da hast du ... den Himmel gestützt (tād astabhnā utā dyām)

3.49.4. dhartā divó rájasas prṣṭā ūrdhvā rātho nā vāyūr vāsubhir nīyūtvān
kṣapām vastā janitā sūriyasya vībhaktā bhāgām dhiṣāneva vāyam


2.17.2. Šīrṣāṇi dyām mahinā práty amuñcata
2.17.2. ... er setzte den Himmel mit Macht sich aufs Haupt.

2.17.5. ... ástabhnān māyāyā diyām avasrásaḥ.
2.17.5. ... er stützte mit Zauber Macht den Himmel, dass er nicht herabfalle.

The following passages also show that Taurus is located in the middle of the sky, that is, on the celestial equator, which, as the greatest circle of the celestial spheroid,22 encompasses the whole universe:

1.61.8. pāri dyāvāprthivē jabhra urvā nā asya té mahimānam pāri ṣṭaḥ
1.61.8. ... Er hält Himmel und Erde umfasst, die weiten; nicht umschließen die beiden seine Größe.

1.108.12. yād indrāgni úditā sūriyasya mádhya divāḥ svadhāyā mádāyethe
1.108.12. Wenn ihr, Indra und Agni, im Aufgang der Sonne, in der Mitte des Himmels euch nach eigenem Ermessen ergötzet ...

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22 I use the term “spheroid,” because it cannot be irrefutably shown that the Vedic world conceived of the celestial vault as being a geometrically defined sphere. The shape of the vault, however, was seen as close to such shape; thus, in phrases like dhiṣāne samicīnē (RV 10.44.8, AV 2.34.3) or camvā samicī (RV 3.55.20), the vault is seen as a ‘bowl’; cf. Kirfel (1967: 6).
10.111.5. \( \text{indro divaḥ pratimānām prthivyā víśvā veda sávaná hánti śuṣṇam} \)
\( \text{mahīṃ cid dyām átanot sūryeṇa cāskāmbha cit kāmbhanena skābhīyān} \)

10.111.5. Indra wiegt Himmel und Erde auf; er kennt alle Somaopfer, er erschlägt den Śuṣṇa. Den so großen Himmel hat er mit der Sonne durchzogen und ihn mit der Stützte gestützt, der beste Stützer.

4) Taurus (Indra) precedes the sun or prepares the sun’s path; the sun appears for him, shines upon him. All these features point again to the heliacal rising of a constellation:

2.12.7. \( \text{... yāḥ sūryaṃ yā uṣásam jajāna} \)

2.12.7. \( \text{... der (Indra) die Sonne, die Uṣas erschaffen hat ...} \)

8.89.7. \( \text{... ā sūryaṃ rohayo divi} \)

8.89.7. \( \text{... die Sonne ließest du am Himmel aufsteigen.} \)

8.93.1. \( \text{ūd ghéd abhi śrutāmaṃgaḥ} \)
\( \text{vṛṣabhāṃ nāriyāpasam} \)
\( \text{āstāram eṣi sūrya} \)


8.98.3. \( \text{vibhrājaṃ jyótiṣā sūvar ágacho rocanāṃ divaḥ ...} \)

8.98.3. Im Licht erstrahlend gingst du zur Sonne, zum Himmelslicht ...

1.51.4. \( \text{... vrtrāṃ yād indra šāvasāvadhīr áhim ád īt sūryaṃ divi árohayo drśe} \)

1.51.4. \( \text{... Als du, Indra, den Drachen mit Kraft erschlagen hattest, da ließest du am Himmel die Sonne zum Schauen aufsteigen (cf. 1.52.8)} \)

1.52.9. \( \text{bhṛhát svāscandram ámavad yād uktiḥyam ákṛṇvata bhīyāsā róhaṇaṃ divaḥ} \)
\( \text{yān mānuṣapradhanā īndram ātāyāḥ sūvar nṛṣāco marútō 'madann ánu} \)
1.52-9. (Die Götter) machten mit Furcht den hohen Stieg zum Himmel, der selbstleuchtend, gewaltig, preisenwert ist, als die wie Menschen um den Siegerpreis kämpfenden Hilfen, als die Marut ihrem Herren folgend dem Indra als der Sonne zuzubelten. (Indra and the sun appear in the sky).

10.89.12. \textit{prá śośucatyā uṣáso ná ketúr asinvā te vartatām indra hetih}

10.89.12. Wie das Zeichen der erglühenden Uṣas soll, Indra, dein verschlingendes Geschoss hervorkommen ...

10.111.3. Indra versteht gewiss gerade dieses (Lied), um es anzuhören, denn er ist der siegreiche Wegbereiter für den Sonnengott ... (\textit{pathikṛ́t sū́riyāya}): Indra prepares the sun’s path.

10.112.3. \textit{hāritvatā várcasā sū́riyasya śrēṣṭhai rūpaś tanúvaṃ sparśayasva}

10.112.3. Lass dein Leib vom goldigen Glanze der Sonne, von der schönsten Farben berührt werden!

10.171.4. \textit{tuvāṃ tyám indra sū́riyam paścā́ sántam purás kṛdhi}

10.171.4. Bring, du Indra, diese Sonne, die hinten ist, nach vorn, selbst wider der Götter willen!

5.31.11. \textit{sūraś cid rátham páritakmiyāyām párvam karad úparam jājuvā́msam}

5.31.11. Auch der Wagen der Sonne, der vorausgeeilt war, brachte er im entscheidenden Augenblick ins Hintertreffen.

This last verse refers to the fact that, before the spring equinox, the sun rises indeed before Taurus in the morning sky (cf. “vorausgeeilt war”). Beginning with the spring equinox, Taurus rises on the eastern horizon earlier and earlier, and dawn sees it higher and higher in the sky before its disappearance in the sun’s light. The sun is left behind (\textit{úparam} “ins Hintertreffen”; cf. Grassmann).

That Indra is Taurus can be spectacularly revealed in the following passage from a Rig Vedic hymn dedicated to both Indra the “Bull” and the Aśvins (the Twin gods):
1.30.19. **ni aghniyásya mūrdháni cakrāṃ ráthasya yemathuḥ**  
**pári dyám anyád īyate**

1.30.19. Ihr (Aśvins) hieltet das Rad des Wagens auf dem Haupte des Stiers (aghnyā) an; das andere fährt um den Himmel.

The passage has remained unexplained to this day. The fact that the Aśvins stop their chariot on the bull's head seems indeed to be an absurd poetical invention. Geldner, who mentions some possible solutions, simply concludes that the passage is obscure: "Der Ausdruck 'Haupt des Stiers' ist nicht klar."

The hypothesis, however, that Indra represents the constellation Taurus can shed new light on this “obscure” verse. Thus, the fact that the whole hymn is dedicated to Indra shows that the bull in this passage (aghnyā) cannot be other than Indra himself, that is, given our hypothesis, the constellation Taurus. This automatically raises the possibility that the solution of the riddle has to be looked for in the sky. Who are then the celestial chariot and the twins that are close to Taurus?

There are only two known constellations that correspond to the description above. These are Gemini (the Twins) and Auriga (the Charioteer). Both of them lie in the proximity of Taurus, and their relative positions one to another are exactly as described in the passage above (see figs.1 and 2). Thus, Auriga is located between Gemini and Taurus, and it shares one of its stars with Taurus. This shows Auriga as located exactly “on Taurus’ head.” The Twins, on the other hand, seem indeed to stop the chariot represented by Auriga on the head of Taurus. The last piece of the puzzle seems to have fallen into its right place.

There are, however, two major problems with the solution above. The first one concerns the fact that, as its Latin or Greek names show, the well-known constellation Auriga represents a charioteer (Gk. ἡνίοχος) and not a chariot. In Mesopotamia, however, the stars that compose Auriga or

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23 Etymologically, aghnyā means “not to be slain”; the feminine aghnyā is also used with regards to the inviolability of the cow; cf. Macdonell (1897: 151).

24 The later Hindu name for the zodiacal constellation Gemini is Mithuná “the pair”; cf. Scherer (1953: 159); Grassmann. Gemini (Gk. Δίδυμοι) is an old constellation, which the Babylonians already knew; cf. Kidd (1997: 235).

25 This star is β Tauri, the tip of one of Taurus' horns.
parts of it were represented as a chariot. This solves the first difficulty. It remains now to overcome the second weak part of my argument, which concerns the initial identification of the Aśvins with the constellation Gemini. It is, therefore, necessary to analyze in more detail the nature of the Rig-Vedic Aśvins. Is the nature of these Rig-Vedic gods indeed celestial?

B. THE AŚVINS IN THE RIG VEDA

The Vedic Aśvins, the divine “Twins” or, as their name shows, the “possessors of horses,” are among the greatest gods of the Vedic world, with more than 50 hymns in the Rig Veda being exclusively dedicated to them, which means that they are, after Indra, Agni, and Soma, the gods most frequently celebrated in the Vedic world. Despite their importance, the nature of the Aśvins has remained an unsolved riddle. In other words, it has not been possible yet to find a plausible interpretation for these twin gods.

Several interpretations have been proposed for the Aśvins, all of which start from an analysis of their main mythological traits. The main characteristics of these gods can be summarized as follows. The Aśvins are helpers in times of trouble; they own a chariot; they appear at Dawn; they carry Sūryā, the sun’s daughter, in their chariot; they always appear together and are connected with the sun; and they are fond of Soma. Given these well-known traits, the Aśvins have been thought to represent a wide and disparate range of phenomena or characters, such as Vedic saints who help in distress, the morning and evening stars, rain gods, the constellation Gemini, or the sun and the moon.

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26 This was the constellation GIGIR (cf. fig.1); cf. Gössmann (1950: 29): “ein zweiräudiger Renn-oder Streitwagen,” which included ε, γ Geminorum and β, ζ Tauri; cf. also Horowitz (1998: 253).


28 The lack of plausible interpretations led many scholars to consider the nature of these gods as obscure; cf. Keith (1925: 113–119, esp. 117); Macdonell (1897: 49); Hillebrandt (1990: 36–47).

29 Cf. e.g., Macdonell (1897: 49–54).
The majority of these theories were rejected by Hillebrandt. Indeed, some of them are quite easy to dismiss. As Hillebrandt noticed, the interpretation of the Aśvins as Vedic/Indian saints does not cover the wide range of traits the Aśvins possess, among which the most important is their undeniable association with the Sun and Dawn. To see them as the evening and morning stars does not account for the fact that they always appear together, whereas these stars are always separated. Also, there are no compelling and obvious reasons to see them as the gods of rain, because one cannot account for the fact that they are two and not one, or, in fact, any number. The theory that they represent the sun and the moon goes back to the Vedic commentator Yāska, who tried in this way to explain the Aśvins’ obvious association with light, which is, indeed, pervasive in the Vedic hymns. Hillebrandt agrees that the sun and the moon can be associated with light, but he rejects the theory on the grounds that the sun and the moon cannot be regarded as “twins.” In addition, as is the case with the morning and evening stars, the sun and the moon do not appear conjointly in the sky the way the Aśvins do.

Among all these theories there is one that Hillebrandt’s arguments do not seem strong enough to dismiss. This is the theory that the Aśvins represent the constellation Gemini. It was proposed a long time ago, in the nineteenth century, by Weber and Brunnofer, who believed that the myth of the Aśvins had its origins during the astronomical era when Gemini announced the vernal equinox, that is, around 6000 B.C. These scholars thought that this was the best way to explain the Aśvins’ association with sunrise and dawn. Hillebrandt, however, expressed his skepticism about this theory, arguing that the dating of the myth back to such early era was not acceptable or plausible. Indeed, it is hard to believe that the *Rig Veda* could preserve the myth of Gemini announcing the spring equinox for such a long time. In addition, there is no evidence in the Vedic texts that the rising of Gemini

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31 The same objection can be raised against Dumézil (1968: 49–51), who interprets them as gods of healing and fertility.


34 Cf. Hillebrandt (1927: 53–54); another strong argument against this theory is the well-known fact that the Aśvins are not present in the Iranian religion.
occurred indeed at the spring equinox. It is, however, undeniable that numerous Rig Vedic passages show the Aśvins as belonging to the morning sky and related to the sun and dawn. This still needs to be explained. I give some of these passages below:

1.34.8.  ... tisráḥ prthivár upári pravá́ divó nákaṃ rakṣethe dyúbhir aktúbhir hitám
1.34.8.  ... Über den drei Erden schwebend bewacht ihr Tag und Nacht das errichtete Firmament des Himmels (divó nákaṃ).

1.46.11. Der rechte Weg ist bereit, um glücklich ans andere Ufer zu gelangen; die Straße des Himmels ist sichtbar geworden.

1.180.10. tám vāṁ ráthaḥ vayáṁ adyá huwema stómaír aśvinā suvitāya návyam áriṣṭanemim páři dyám iyánám vidyámeśaṃ vrjánam jirádánum

4.43.5.  urú vāṁ ráthaḥ pári nakṣati dyám á yát samudrád abhi vártate vām
4.43.5.  Weit überholt euer Wagen den Himmel, wenn er vom Meere (mit) euch herkommt.

4.44.5.  á no yātaṃ divó āchā prthivyá hiranyáyena suvṛtā ráthena
4.44.5.  Kommet her zu uns auf dem leichten goldnen Wagen vom Himmel, von der Erde ["by/travelling the earth" — my note; prthivyá is in the instrumental, divó is the ablative].

4.45.1.  esá syá bhānúr úd iyarti yujyáte ráthaḥ párijmá divó asyá sánavi...
4.45.1.  Da steigt jener Lichtstrahl (die Sonne; cf. Geldner) empor; der umfahrende Wagen wird auf dieses Himmels Rücken geschirrt.
5.74.1. *kāṣṭho devāv aśvinā adyā divō manāvasū*

Wo seid ihr Götter Aśvin heute, (ihr Söhne) des Himmels, ihr Gedankenreichen ...

5.74.2. *kūha tyā kūha nū śrutā divī devā nāsatiyā*

Wo sind die zwei? Wo im Himmel hört man von den Göttern Nāsatya's?

6.62.1. *stuṣé nārā divō asyā prasāntā aśvinā huve járamāṇo arkaīḥ yā sadyā usrā viūsi jmō ántān yāyūṣataḥ pári urá váráṃsi*

Ich preise die beiden ausgezeichneten Herren dieses Himmels (*nārā divō*), die Aśvin rufe ich als Frühbeter mit Preisliedern, die sogleich bei Aufgang der Morgenröte die Grenzen der Erde, die weiten Räume zu umspannen suchen.

8.8.4. Kommet vom Himmel her zu uns ... (*ā no yātaṃ divās pári*).

8.8.7. *divāś cid rocanād ádhi á no gantam suvarvidā*

Selbst von des Himmels Lichtraum kommet her zu uns, ihr Sonnenfinder, auf die Gebete hin ...


8.87.4. ... kommet vom Himmel zum Preislied wie Büffel an einem Rinnsal!

10.143.3. ... ihr Männer des Himmels (*divō narā*) ...

These passages leave little doubt that the Aśvins' place is in heaven, that is, on the sky's firmament. The Aśvins are invoked to come from the sky, from the realm of light. They reach the sky's firmament and go around the sky. They are the “men of the sky,” who find the sun and appear at
dawn. This last feature, which can be met with in numerous other passages, shows the Aśvins as clearly associated with dawn and sunrise.\textsuperscript{35} I give some additional examples below:

1.46.1. \[\text{eṣō uṣā́ ápūrviyā ví uchati priyā́ diváḥ} \]
\[\text{stuṣé vām aśvinā brhāt.}\]

Dort leuchtet die Morgenröte wie keine je zuvor auf, die liebe (Tochter) des Himmels.
Laut preise ich euch, ihr Aśvin.

1.46.7. Kommt auf dem Schiff unserer Gedanken, um ans andere Ufer zu gelangen. Schirret euren Wagen an, Aśvin.

1.46.14. \[\text{yuvór uṣā́ ánu śréyam párijmanor upácarat} \]
\[\text{ṛtā vanatho aktúbhīḥ}\]

Euer, der Umherziehenden, Schönheit zog die Uṣas nach. In den Nächten gewinnet ihr die rechten Wege.

1.47.6. ... Schaffet uns Reichtum vom Meere \(\text{(samudrád)}\) oder vom Himmel \(\text{(divás)}\) herbei, vielbegehrten!

1.46.7. \[\text{ā́ no nāvá matinám yātām pārāya gántave} \]
\[\text{yuñjáthāṃ aśvinā rátham}\]

Wenn ihr Nāsatya's in der Ferne oder wenn ihr bei Turvaśa seid, so kommest von da auf leichtem Weg zu uns her, zugleich mit den (ersten) Strahlen der Sonne!

1.118.11. ... denn ich rufe euch Aśvin an unter Opferspenden bei Aufgang der Morgenröte ...

1.157.1. \[\text{ábodhi agnír jmá úd eti súriyo ví uṣáś candrá mahí āvo arcíśā} \]
\[\text{áyuṣātām aśvinā yátave rátham prásāvid deváḥ savítá jágat prthak}\]

\textsuperscript{35} Cf. e.g., Oldenberg (1894: 207); Macdonell (1897: 50); Keith (1925: 115).
1.157.1. Agni ist erwacht, die Sonne steigt von der Erde empor; die schimmernde große Uṣas ist mit ihrem Strahl aufgeleuchtet. Die Aśvin haben zur Fahrt ihren Wagen angeschirrt …

1.183.2. Leicht rollt (euer) Wagen … Ihr seid in Begleitung der Himmelstochter Uṣas (divó duhitrā uṣásā sacethe).

1.184.1. Euch beide wollen wir heute, euch künftig rufen, bei aufluchtender Morgenröte …

2.39.2. In der Frühe ausziehend wie zwei wagenfahrende Männer …

2.39.3. … Am Morgen …, ihr Morgendliche, kommt heran wie Wagenfahrer, ihr Mächtige!

3.58.1. ā dyotáníṃ vahati śubhráyāmā uṣása stómo aśvínāv ajīgaḥ

3.58 1. (Uṣas) bringt in glänzender Auffahrt die Helligkeit. Das Loblied der Uṣas hat die Aśvin aufgeweckt.

3.58.4. … diese Süßränke … haben sie wie Freunde euch dargereicht vor Anbruch der Morgenröte.

4.44.1. tāṃ vāṃ ráthaṃ vayám adyá huvema prthuṛráyam aśvinā sāngatiṃ góḥ yáḥ sūrīyām vāhati vandhurāyúr gírvāhasam purutámaṃ vasūyúm

4.44.1. Diesen euren Wagen wollen wir heute anrufen, den breitbahnigen, ihr Aśvin, um die Zeit, da sich das Rind sammelt (cf. Geldner: “der Morgen”); der die Sūryā fährt, der viel Platz hat, vom Loblied gezogen, zum vielen Male auf Gutes ausgehend.

4.45.1. eṣá syā bhānúr úd iyarti yuyyáte ráthaḥ párjímā divó asyā sánavi

4.45.1. Da steigt jener Lichtstrahl empor; der umfahrende Wagen wird auf dieses Himmels Rücken geschirrt.
4.45.2. úd vāṃ prkṣāso mādhumanta īrate ráthā áśvāsa uṣásō víuṣṭiṣu
apoṇ rounded tāma å párvṛtam sūvar nā śukrām tanuvánta å rájah
Eure Wagen (und) Pferde, die stärkungs- und hönigreichen, fahren bei Hellwerden der Morgenröte aus, die ganz zugedeckte Finsternis aufdeckend, wie die helle Sonne den Raum durchziehend.

4.45.5. Mit schönem Opferwerk, mit Süßigkeit wachen die Feuer die Aśvin heran um das Hellwerden der Morgenröte, wenn mit gewaschenen Händen, fleißig, umsichtig (der Adhvaryu) den süßen Soma mit Steinen ausgepresst hat.

5.75.9. ábhūd uṣā rūśatpaśur ágnir adhāyi rtvīyāḥ
áyoji vāṃ vṛṣaṇ vasū rátho dasrāv ámartiyó mádhvī máma śrutaṃ hávam
Die Uṣas mit dem hellfarbigen Tier ("die Sonne"; cf. Geldner) ist erschienen, Agni ward zu rechter Zeit angelegt. Euer unsterblicher Wagen ward angeschirrt, ihr schätzereichen Meister. Ihr Süßesliebende, erhöret meinen Ruf!

5.77.1. Opfert den Frühkommenden zuerst; sie sollen vor dem missgünstigen Geier trinken, denn am Morgen empfangen die Aśvin ihr Opfer.

7.67.2. ásoci agnīḥ samidhānó asmé úpo adṛśran tāmasaś cid ántāḥ
áceti ketūr uṣāsaḥ purāstāç chṛiyé divó duhitūr jáyamānāḥ
Das entzündete Feuer ist bei uns entflammt; selbst der Finsternis Ende ist erschienen. Im Osten hat sich das Banner der Morgenröte, der Himmelstochter, bemerkbar gemacht, das zur Schönheit geboren wird.

7.68.9. Dieser sinnreiche Dichter ruft (euch) wach mit wohlgesetzten Worten, noch vor den Morgenröten munter.
7.69.5. Wenn dieser euer Wagen, ihr Wagenfahrer, im Frühlicht angeschirrt seine Umfahrt vollendet, so bringet uns auf diesem bei Anbruch des Morgens Glück und Segen zu diesem Opfer, o Aśvin!

7.71.1. Vor ihrer Schwester Uṣas weicht die Nacht, die Dunkle räumt dem rötlichen (Sūrya) den Weg.

7.71.3. Euren Wagen sollen am jüngsten Morgen die wohlwollenden Bullen(hengste) herfahren.

7.71.4. Der Wagen, der euch fährt, der dreisitzige, gutreiche, am Morgen ausfahrende, ihr Fürsten, auf dem kommt zu uns, Nāsatya’s, wenn der Allgestaltige (?) zu euch geht.

7.72.4. Wenn die Morgenröten aufliechten, o Aśvin, so tragen euch die Dichter ihre erbaulichen Worte vor.

7.74.1. Diese Frühopfer rufen euch Morgendliche, o Aśvin.

8.9.18. *yád uṣo yási bhānúnā sām sūrīyaḥ rocāse
á hāyám aśvino rátho vartīr yāti nṛpāyīyaṁ*

8.9.18. Wenn du Uṣas mit deinem Glanze kommst, so strahlest du mit der Sonne zusammen. Dieser Wagen der Aśvin beginnt (dann) seine männerschützende Umfahrt (*vartīr*).

8.35.10. *... sajóṣasā uṣāsā sūrīyaḥ ca úrjam no dhattam aśvinā*

8.35.10. ... kommet her und bringet Richtum, einträchtig mit Uṣas und Sūrya, bringet uns Kraft, o Aśvin![*]

* These numerous passages show clearly that, as was the case with Indra/Taurus, the Aśvins’ appearance at dawn, just before sunrise, is not coincidental, but represents one of their essential

[*] The idea is recurrent in several verses of this hymn: cf. 8.35.4, 9, 16, and 19.
mythological traits. In addition, the way this appearance is described in all these passages fits extremely well with the concept of heliacal rising, which is the moment of the year when a constellation rises from the east just before sunrise. The Aśvins show up in the sky along with the sun’s first rays. They travel on the sky's firmament. They are invoked along with Dawn and the Sun to bring prosperity to the worshippers.

We can see, therefore, that the Aśvins' features are similar to those of Indra with regard to the way they are related to the sun and dawn. This strongly hints at the Aśvins’ celestial nature. In other words, since Indra represents Taurus, the Aśvins must also represent a constellation. Which one?

The above-mentioned Vedic passage in which the Aśvins are said to stop their chariot on the Bull’s head strongly indicates that this constellation is, indeed, Gemini. Thus, the picture one can see in the sky (cf. figs.1 and 2) is spectacularly described in the Vedic myth. The twin gods, who travel through the sky and “pull” their chariot (Auriga) on the sky’s firmament, find a moment of rest on the Bull’s head.

I will now turn attention again to the Aśvins’ chariot (rátha), which I identified with the constellation Auriga. The chariot's constant presence next to the constellations of the Aśvins fully supports this interpretation. In addition, passages such as 1.180.10, 4.43.5, 4.44.5, 4.45.1 (cf. above) show without any doubt that, like the Aśvins, the chariot is indeed located on the sky's firmament.

The conclusion that the Aśvins' chariot represents the constellation Auriga also shows that the previous theories that the Aśvins' chariot represents the sun's chariot have no foundation. These theories are mainly based on the fact that the Aśvins are associated with the sun. It is also possible that the numerous passages that mention the sun's daughter Sūryā as being borne through the sky in the Aśvins’ chariot also contributed to the birth of such theories. Sūryā, however, is specifically said to be seated in the Aśvins' chariot, and not in the sun's chariot. This clearly shows that this chariot does not belong to the sun. Therefore, the Aśvins' chariot clearly belongs only to the Aśvins, and represents the constellation Auriga.

37 Cf. e.g., Bergaigne (1878–1883: II 509–10): “l’insistance avec laquelle on leur attribue un char ... le char du soleil et celui du sacrifice”; Hillebrandt (1990: I 369–70) also inclines to associate this chariot with the sun.

38 This is certainly a feminine noun derived from Sūrya, the word for “sun.”
To underscore the importance of the Chariot in the mythology of the Aśvins, I quote below other "enigmatic" passages which describe the Aśvins and/or their chariot:

1.30.18.  *samānāyojano hī vāṃ rátho dasrāv āmartiyah*

   *samudrē aśvinéyate*

1.30.18.  Denn euer unsterblicher Wagen fährt in einer Fahrt auf dem Meere (*samudrē*)39, Ihr Meister Aśvin.

1.46.8.  Eure Ruder ist breiter als der Himmel, euer Wagen (steht) am Landungsplatz der Flüsse (*tīrthé síndhūnāṃ*).40

1.47.2.  Auf eurem dreisitzigen, dreiteiligen, schönverzierten Wagen kommt, Aśvin.41

1.92.16.  Ihr Aśvin, bis zu uns (macht) eure Umfahrt (*vartīr*) ...

1.116.18.  Als ihr Aśvin ... die Umfahrt (*vartīr*) machtet, (die Rosse) antreibend, da brachte euer getreuer Wagen reiches Gut. Der Stier (*vṛṣabhā*) und das Krokodil waren daran gespannt.

1.180.1.  Eure lenksamen Rosse (durcheilen) die Räume, wenn euer Wagen um die (Meer)fluten (*árṇas*)42 fliegt.

1.182.2.  Denn ihr ... seid ... die besten Wagenfahrer (*rathiyā rathītamā*). Ihr lenket den Wagen, der mit Süßigkeit voll beladen ist (*pūrṇāṃ ráthaṃ vahethe mádhva ácitaṃ*).

39 Cf. 7.68.7, 69.7, where it says that Bhujyu was rescued by the Aśvins from the *samudrā*.

40 Grassmann translates *tīrthā* as "Furt des Flusses."

41 Cf. Geldner: the three seats are for the Aśvins and for Sūryā, respectively.

42 Cf. Grassmann: "strömende Flut der Gewässer."
5.73.3. īrmányád vápuše vápuś cakrám ráthasya yemathuḥ
páry anyá náhuṣā yugā mahná rájāmsi dyathāḥ

Das eine Rad des Wagens — zum Staunen erstaunlich — habt ihr zurück gehalten; (mit den anderen) flieget ihr über die anderen nahuschigen Geschlechter, mit Macht über die Räume hinweg.

8.22.5. rátho yó vāṃ trivandhuró híranyābhīśur aśvinā
pári dyávāprthiví bhūṣati śrutás téna nāsatiyā gatam

Euer dreisitziger Wagen mit den goldenen Zügeln, der Himmel und Erde umkreist, o Aśvin, der berühmte, auf dem kommet her, Nāsatya’s.

3.58.8. ... Euer Wagen, der zu rechter Zeit geborene, durch die Presssteine zur Eile getrieben, umfährt in einem Tage Himmel und Erde (pári dyávāprthiví yāti sadyāḥ).

7.67.8. In ein und derselben Fahrt gelangt euer Wagen über die sieben Ströme (sraváto), ihr Eilige. Nicht fallen die staatlichen gottgeschirrten (Rosse) ab, die euch in euren Jochen rasch bis ans Ziel fahren.

7.69.7. Ihr [the Aśvins — my note] holtet den ins Meer gestoßenen Bhujyu aus der Flut mit euren Flügelrossen [the Chariot’s horses — my note] ...

7.70.3. Welche Standorte ihr Aśvin eingenommen habt in den jüngsten Töchtern des Himmels …, wenn ihr auf dem Gipfel des Berges sitzet, (kommt von da) dem opfernden Menschen Labsal mitbringend!

7.71.5. … Den Atri erlöstet ihr aus Not, aus der Finsternis …

8.5.2. Auf dem männerfahrenden, gedankengeschirrten, breitgestaltigen Wagen folget ihr Meister Aśvin der Uṣas.
8.5.28.       *ráthaṃ híraṇyavandhuraṃ híraṇyābhīśumaśvinā*  
              *ā hí sthátho divispíṣam*

8.5.28.      Besteigt also den Wagen mit dem goldenen Sitz, mit goldenem Zügel, o Aśvin, der bis  
zum Himmel reicht!

8.22.4.      Das (eine) Rad eures Wagen eilt herum, ein anderes bleibt im Lauf zurück (cf. 5.73.3;  
1.30.19).

8.22.14.     An sie des Abends, an sie am Morgen, an die Herren der Schönheit, an sie bei ihrer  
Ausfahrt (with their chariot — my note), die in Rudras Bahn wandeln (cf. e.g. 10.39.11).

8.22.15.     *ā súgmiyāya súgmiyam prātā ráthena aśvínā vā sakṣāńi*  
              *huvé pitéva sóbharī*

8.22.15.      Ich rufe zu guter Fahrt herbei den gutfahrenden (Wagen) am Morgen, oder die Aśvin  
in Begleitung ihres Wagens ...

Anschirrrung des Himmels Tochter (Uṣas; cf. Geldner) geboren wird (und) die beiden  
schönen Tageshälften (i.e., cf. Geldner: “Tag und Nacht”) des Vivasvat!


10.41.1.     Diesen gemeinsamen Wagen, den vielgerufenen, preislichen, dreirädrigen, immer  
wieder zu den Trankspenden kommenden, herumfahrenden, weiser Rede würdigen,  
wollen wir mit Lobliedern bei Anbruch des Morgens anrufen!

10.40.1.     Wohin fährt eure Wagen, wer erwartet denn, ihr Herren, den glänzenden zu  
glücklicher Fahrt, den in der Frühe kommenden, der für jeden Clan zu haben ist, der  
jeden Morgen ausfährt, mit Dichtung und Werkdienst?
bṛhánteva gambháreṣu pratiṣṭhā́m pā́deva gādháṃ tárate vidāthaḥ

10.106.9. Wie zwei Hochgewachsene im tiefen Wasser festen Stand, wie zwei Füße sollet ihr für den Durchschreitenden Grund finden.

These numerous passages show the Aśvins' chariot as having certain characteristics, which are mentioned too often in the hymns to be considered merely incidental. Thus, the chariot is full of goods and brings richness (1.47.3, 6; 1.182.2), and has three seats (1.47.2; 8.22.5). As they drive their chariot, the Aśvins cross a body of water, and their chariot stops on the banks of the stream (1.46.8; 1.180.1). The Aśvins are said to stand in the water (10.106.9). The path of the Aśvins' journey is said to be circular, that is, a revolution/rotation (vartís); their chariot revolves around the earth and the sky in one day, through the mountain (10.39.13). The Aśvins' chariot is drawn by (winged) horses or by birds. As they cross the sea, the Aśvins save people who are about to drown or who live in darkness (e.g., Bhuju, Atri).

All these mythological traits of the Aśvins are still completely unexplained. The conclusion that the Aśvins and their chariot represent the constellations Gemini and Auriga, respectively, can explain much of this mythology.

The first enigma that can be immediately solved is the fact that the Aśvins and their chariot are said to rotate (cf. vartís above, which denotes a circular movement); indeed, the celestial bodies do move in this way.

Another recurrent story in the hymns is that the Aśvins stand in the water and that the chariot itself passes through a body of water, which is a river. In addition, the Aśvins have a connection with a celestial sea (samudrá), which seems to be different from the river they cross (cf. e.g., 1.30.18; 1.47.6 above). The mystery surrounding the water crossing can be explained in the following way. Thus, it is

43 The Sanskrit word is gādháṃ, which Grassmann explains as "Ort im Wasser, wo man festen Fuß fassen kann."


45 The idea of a celestial revolution is also present in 3.58.8 (cf. 8.22.5, above), where it is said that the Aśvins complete their revolution around the earth and sky in one day; obviously, this is perfectly applicable to any star or constellation.

46 Cf. above 1.30.18; 1.46.7; 1.46.8; 1.47.6; 1.180.1; 7.67.8; 10.106.9.
well-known that the Milky Way passes through Auriga and the lower part of the Twins' bodies, which are their legs (cf. fig. 2). In other words, the Āśvins are pictured in the sky as standing close to the bank of the Milky Way, with their legs just inside the starry stream of the Galaxy, while their chariot, i.e., Auriga, lies inside the Galaxy as well. This leads to the conclusion that, in all likelihood, the body of streaming water or river the Āśvins cross represents the Milky Way. That this is not merely speculative is shown by the fact that in other ancient cultures such as the Chinese, the Milky Way was called a “celestial river.” The Egyptian celestial “Winding Waterway” (Mr ṃ), which the dead pharaoh had to cross in a boat, is often mentioned in the Pyramid Texts, and also is assumed to represent the Milky Way. I will take up the pivotal issue of the Milky Way again below, in the section about Soma. Also, in the section about the Ādityas, I will analyze the significance of the samudrā, the celestial “sea,” from which the Āśvins travel, and which seems to be different from the “celestial river” (Skt. síndhu, sravāt; cf. e.g., 1.46.8 above).

Another spectacular passage, which can be perfectly understood in the context of the celestial relationship between Taurus and the Āśvins/Gemini, is the following:

\begin{verse}
1.116.18. \textit{yād āyātāṃ divodāsāya vartīr bharādvājāya āśvinā háyantā}
\textit{revād uvāha sacanō rátho vāṃ vṛṣabhāś ca śiṃśumāraś ca yuktā}
\end{verse}

1.116.18. Als ihr Āśvin für Divodāsa, für Bharadvāja die Umfahrt (\textit{vartīr}) machtet, (die Rosse) antreibend, da brachte euer getreuer Wagen reiches Gut. Der Stier (\textit{vṛṣabhā}) und das Krokodil (\textit{śiṃśumāra}) waren daran gespannt [Skt. \textit{yuktā} = “attached or yoked (to it)”; “concentrated (upon it)” — my note].

The verse is a splendid metaphor for the proximity of Taurus and Auriga in the sky (cf. fig. 2). Thus, the Chariot is full of goods, which Taurus, being close to the chariot (right underneath it),

\footnote{Cf. Kidd (1997: 239).}

\footnote{The Chinese called the Milky Way the “Sky River” or “Silver River”; cf. Schafer (1974: 401–7).}

desires. Most important, however, is that the other animal yoked to or desiring the goods of the Aśvins' chariot is the śiṃśumára, a Sanskrit word translated as “Krokodil” by Geldner, and as “Delphinus Gangeticus”50 by Williams (1899) and Grassmann (1872). Given the context of the present discussion, it is natural to look to see whether this “Krokodil” represents another constellation in the sky, which is close to Auriga and Taurus. Not very surprisingly, such a constellation exists. The constellation Cetus “whale, dolphin” is close to Taurus (right behind it) and seems indeed to “stare” at the Chariot (cf. figs. 2, 6). Cetus is an old constellation as well, whose origins are believed to go back to Mesopotamia.51 The Vedic verse, therefore, offers a very vivid picture of the relative celestial positions of Taurus, Auriga, and Cetus.52

One of the most difficult issues in the mythology of the Aśvins concerns the significance and nature of the sun's daughter Sūryā, who always travels across the sky's firmament in the Aśvins' chariot.53 The Aśvins, in fact, are said to possess Sūryā. I give below some of the most important passages concerning Sūryā:

4.43.2. ... rátham kám āhur dravádaśvam āśúṃ yáṃ sū́riyasya duhitávrñīta.
4.43.2. ... Welchen Wagen nennen sie den schnellen mit den raschlaufenden Rossen, den die Tochter des Sūrya sich erkor?

4.43.6. ... tád ū ṣú vām ajiráṃ ceti yánaṃ yéna pátī bhávathāḥ sūriyāyāḥ
4.43.6. ... Diese eure schnelle Fahrt machte fein Aufsehen, durch die ihr die Gatten [pátī = probably, “the possessors,” not “husbands” — my note; cf. Grassmann; cf. 7.68.3 below;
the meaning “husbands” would presuppose an unattested Vedic matriarchal polygamy!] der Sūryā werdet.

5.73-5. áyād vāṃ sūriyā rāthaṃ tīṣṭhadraghusyādaṃ sādā
pāri vāṃ aruśā váyo ghṛṇā varanta ātāpaḥ

5.73-5. Wann Sūryā euren Wagen besteigt, den immer schnell fahrenden, dann halten eure rötlichen (Vogel)rosse die Gluten von sich ab, dass sie nicht versengen.

6.63-5. ádhi śriyé duhitá sūriyasya rāthaṃ tasthau purubhujā śatōtim ...


7.68-3. prā vāṃ rátho mánojavā iyarti tiró rájāṃsi aśvinā śatótiḥ
asmābhyaṃ sūriyāvasā iyanāḥ

7.68-3. Euer gedankenschneller Wagen mit den hundert Gnaden setzt sich in Bewegung durch die Räume, o Aśvin, zu uns eilend, ihr Besitzer der Sūryā (sūriyāvasā).

Diesen euren Wagen wollen wir heute anrufen, den breitbahnigen, ihr Aśvin, um die Zeit, da sich das Rind sammelt (cf. Geldner: “der Morgen,” i.e., “in the morning”); der die Sūryā fährt, der viel Platz hat (yāḥ sūriyāṃ váhati vandhurāyūr) ...

That Sūryā is a very important character in the mythology of the Aśvins is shown by the fact that their chariot has three seats54; in all likelihood, these seats belong to the Aśvins and to Sūryā, respectively.55 But who, in fact, is Sūryā?

The constellation Auriga “the Chariot” can offer a spectacular solution to this issue as well. This solution concerns one of the stars in Auriga, which is among the brightest stars in the sky of the northern hemisphere. This is Capella, the “Goat” or α Aurigae, which is a first magnitude star with

54 Cf. above 8.22.5; 1.47.2.

55 Cf. above n.46 (Geldner); Keith (1925: 114); Hillebrandt (1990: I 369, n. 11) is opposed to this view.
regard to its brightness (cf. fig. 1). Capella is located right at the top of the Chariot, a position which perfectly accounts for the fact that Sūryā is seated in the chariot. Sūryā then represents Capella. The Sanskrit name Sūryā, which is obviously derived from that of the sun, wonderfully accounts for Capella’s brightness.

The celestial nature of the Aśvins and their chariot can explain other difficult passages as well. For example, stanza 1.30.19 (quoted above, in the section about Indra), which describes the Aśvins stopping their chariot on the bull’s head, contains an interesting metaphor, which is also present in 5.73.3 and 8.22.4; one wheel of the Aśvins’ chariot stops upon the bull’s head or “is left behind,” whereas the other one keeps on revolving in and around the sky: pári dyām anyād īyate. Geldner interprets these passages as meaning that one wheel remains in heaven whereas the other one comes on earth to the worshipper, who would prepare himself to sacrifice a bull for the Aśvins. Therefore, the bull in these passages would be, according to Geldner, a sacrificial bull. This does not seem to be a viable argument; why and how would a chariot stop on a real bull’s head? In addition, the name itself used for the “bull” in this passage, aghnyā, “not to be slain,” shows clearly that this is not a sacrificial bull.

Given that the Bull represents Taurus, I would give a different explanation for the passage above. Thus, the shape of the constellation Auriga lets us imagine the “front” wheel of the chariot, but not the one on the other side of the chariot (cf. figs. 1 and 2), which seems indeed to be hidden in the sky. The metaphor then may simply underscore this fact; the first wheel, that is, the front wheel of the chariot, rests on Taurus’s head; the second one, which cannot be pictured on the two-dimensional surface of the celestial firmament, keeps on revolving in heaven and ensures the motion of the chariot.

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57 Cf. also 5.73.3: īrmānyād vāpuṣe vāpuś cakrāṁ ráthasya yemathuḥ.
58 That this is the case is clearly stated in 10.85.16: “Deine zwei Räder, o Sūryā, kennen die Brahmanen genau, aber das eine Rad, das verborgen ist, das kennen nur die Wahrheitskenner”; cf. Geldner. In the passage it is also said that the chariot has three wheels, which is strange; this may have to do with the general three-fold form of the chariot (i.e., the three seats of the chariot; cf. above); obviously, the “front wheel” is represented by the tip of Taurus’s horn, i.e. β Tauri = γ Aurigae.
59 That this fact is enigmatic is expressed in 5.73.3: vāpuṣe vāpuś “zum Staunen erstaunlich.”
I would finally speculate about the meaning of two other passages, in which the Aśvins are invoked either to come down to earth from the top of the “mountain” (párvatasya mūrdhāni; cf. 7.70.3 above) or to make their celestial revolution through the “mountain” (párvatam; cf. 10.17.13). Since the Aśvins’ trip is through the sky, it is likely that this “mountain” is celestial as well. The most likely candidate for this is the celestial meridian, which defines the highest point in the sky a star reaches. Such a metaphor would not be as strange as it might first seem, since this is actually what happens in the sky; indeed, during its nocturnal course, a star is seen as “climbing up” in the sky until it reaches its highest point, which is the celestial meridian (“the mountain”); once it reaches this point, the same star is seen as “descending” towards its setting point in the west.

The fact that the Aśvins and their chariot represent Gemini and Auriga, respectively, raises another important issue, which concerns the transparent etymology of the Aśvins’ name. Thus, it is likely that the “possession of horses” that is implied by this name has to do with the Aśvins’ chariot. In other words, the existence of the chariot implies the existence of horses yoked to the chariot.60 Were these horses represented in the sky by stars or constellations? A clear answer to this question is not possible to give, but the issue is less important. What is important is that the Aśvins possess a chariot, which naturally has horses yoked to it.

* * *

In the above discussion I explored some of the most intriguing aspects of the Aśvins’ mythology including their nature; I showed that, in all likelihood, these gods represent the constellation Gemini. There is, however, one essential aspect that still remains to be explained. This concerns the fact that the Aśvins are — as the numerous passages above show — constantly invoked at dawn to bring their chariot laden with goods/wealth to earth. What is the significance of this wealth and why is their chariot laden with it? And, most importantly, why are they invoked at dawn?

To answer this question we need to go back to the discussion about Indra. It is impossible to fully grasp the role of the Aśvins in the Rig Veda without a complete understanding of Indra’s nature.

60 It has been noted many times, e.g., by Keith (1925: 114) and Macdonell (1897: 50), that sometimes the Aśvins’ chariot is drawn by birds (swans etc.). However, this may be only metaphorical language. The fact that the chariot is in the sky may have contributed to the idea that these horses were winged; in fact, this is how Geldner translates adjectives such as patatrin (cf. 7.69.7, “Flügelrossen”).
and role in this religion. Certainly, as the present study shows, Indra represents the constellation Taurus during an age when the constellation was announcing the spring equinox. He is the great celestial bull supporting the sky on his head, regulating the succession of the seasons or the alternation between day and night, preparing the sun's path at dawn. Indra's myth, however, has much more to offer. This concerns the most important aspect of Indra's mythology, which is the god's well-known fight with the demon Vṛtra. Therefore, Indra's role in the Vedic mythology cannot be completely understood without addressing the issue of this cosmic fight.

C. INDRA AND VṚTRA

The identification of Indra with the constellation Taurus immediately raises a pivotal issue, which concerns the significance of Indra's fight and victory against the demon Vṛtra. Therefore, given that Indra represents Taurus, who can Vṛtra be? Most importantly, why is there a fight between the two? Is this a meaningless myth?

A closer examination of some passages in the *Rig Veda* shows that, as is the case with Indra, Vṛtra's location is also in the sky, where he was placed by Indra:

10.138.6.  
etā́ tiyā te śrútiyāni kēvalā yād ēka ēkam ākṛṇor ayajñāṁ  
māsāṁ vidhānam adadhā ádhi dyāvi tvāyā vībhinnam bharati pradhím pitā

10.49.6.  
... ich der Vṛtratöter ... den sich auswachsenden, gehörig sich ausbreitenden (Vṛtra) am fernen Ende des Raumes im Himmelslichter verwandelte (*dūré pāré rájaso rocanákaram*). 

1.80.4.  
nīr indra bhū́miyā ádhi vṛtrāṃ jaghantha nīr divāḥ.

1.80.4.  
Du, Indra, hast von der Erde, vom Himmel den Vṛtra vertrieben.
Vṛtra, therefore, represents certain “lights” of the sky at the end of the celestial space (cf. above RV 10.49.6). As in Indra’s case, these lights function as regulators of the seasons/months, which show clearly that rocanā, the Sanskrit word for “lights,” does refer to “lights” located in the sky, that is, to stars. In other words, given that Indra is Taurus, these characteristics of Vṛtra strongly hint to the fact that, in all likelihood, Vṛtra represents another constellation in the sky. Surprisingly, however, Vṛtra is also said to have been banished from the sky by Indra; this seems to be in contradiction with Vṛtra's celestial nature.

To determine who the celestial Vṛtra is, it is important to notice from the outset that the cosmic fight between Indra and Vṛtra is about conquering the sun. Here are some relevant examples:

1.100.6.  
*sā manyumīḥ samādanasya kartā asmākebhīr nībhīḥ sūriyāṃ sanāt  
asminn āhan sātpatiḥ puruhūtō marūtvān no bhavatu índra ūtī*

1.100.6.  
Der Vereitler der bösen Absicht, der Erreger des Streits möge mit unseren Mannen das Sonnenlicht gewinnen, an diesem Tag vielgerufen als der rechtmäßige Herr — der Indra soll uns in Begleitung der Marut zu Hilfe kommen.

3.34.8.  
*satrāsāhaṃ váreṇiyaṃ sahodām sasavāṁsaṃ sūvar apāś ca devīḥ  
sasāna yāḥ prthivīṃ dyām utēmām índram madanti ānu dhāranāsah*

3.34.8.  
Dem vollständigen Sieger, dem vorzüglichen Siegverleiher, der die Sonne und die göttlichen Wasser gewonnen hat (sasavāṁsaṃ), der die Erde und diesen Himmel gewonnen hat (sasāna), dem Indra jubeln die Liederfrohen Beifall zu.

6.17.8.  
*ádha tvā visē purā índra devā ēkaṃ tavāsāṃ dadhīre bhārāya  
ádevo yād abhī aūhiṣṭa devān sūvarṣātā vrṇata índram átra*

6.17.8.  
Da stellten dich allein, den Starken, alle Götter an die Spitze, um (den Sieg) zu gewinnen, o Indra; als der Ungott sich über die Götter überhob, da erwählten sie im Kampf um die Sonne [sūvarṣātā = “in the fight for light” — my note] den Indra.

The fact that at the spring equinox Taurus “conquers” the sun by killing Vṛtra shows that the constellation Vṛtra is also related to the spring equinox. The decisive element for determining this
constellation is Vṛtra's location at “the end of the celestial space.” Thus, it is well-known that the constellation Scorpio is diametrically opposed in the sky to Taurus. This means that at the spring equinox the heliacal rising of Taurus occurs at the same time as the setting of Scorpio, which is indeed located at “the end of celestial space” with respect to Taurus. Vṛtra then cannot be other than Scorpio, a constellation that, like Taurus, functions as a “regulator” of the seasons (in particular, during the Taurus era, Scorpio announced the fall equinox!). The Vedic myth, therefore, captures a precise moment in the early-morning sky; this is the moment when, at the spring equinox, Taurus heliacally rises in the east, and, simultaneously, Scorpio sets in the west, disappearing from the sky. Metaphorically, the sun is “conquered” by Taurus-Indra, and Scorpio-Vṛtra is “banished” from the sky.

The identification of Vṛtra with Scorpio raises the important issue of how the Vedic people got to know this constellation. Scorpio is an old constellation, known by the Babylonians and, most likely, even before them by the Sumerians.⁶¹ Therefore, like Taurus, this constellation also seems to have been known in Mesopotamia as early as the third millennium BC. The Indo-Aryans then could have borrowed Scorpio either from the Mesopotamians, or from other people belonging to the same geographical milieu.

I would add here another strong element which undeniably shows that Vṛtra represents the constellation Scorpio. This is the fact that Vṛtra is often presented as a sort of dragon or snake (áhi).⁶² Given Scorpio’s shape in the sky (cf. figs. 9; 10), this is unlikely to be a coincidence. Indeed, Scorpio’s shape can be easily interpreted as either a scorpion or a snake/dragon. That this is not very speculative is shown by the fact that the Javanese people also imagine Scorpio as a snake.⁶³ Therefore, the interpretation of Scorpio as representing a dragon or snake is not only possible, but, in the context of the present argument, also very probable. Certainly, I do not mean by this that the Vedic constellation was identical to the zodiacal sign Scorpio as we know it. In fact, it is well-known that the

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⁶¹ The Sumerian name for Scorpio was “mul GIR.TAB”; cf. Hartner (1965: 3–5).

⁶² For references, cf. Grassmann (1964), the entry for áhi.

⁶³ Cf. Staal (1988: 225); the information comes from the Zeiss library of planetarium projections (cf. Staal xii); Scorpio is also pictured as a snake by tribes in Brazil; I did not, however, have access to the original source.
Babylonian constellation known as Scorpio included the constellation Libra as the scorpion's claws.\textsuperscript{64} It is clear, however, that the Vedic world imagined Scorpio’s general shape as representing a dragon or a snake.

Therefore, the battle between Indra and Vṛtra is a metaphor for the cosmic/astronomical event occurring at the spring equinox, when Taurus appears on the eastern horizon at dawn, and Scorpio sets in the west. Taurus “wins” the sun and “defeats” the dragon Scorpio.\textsuperscript{65} This interpretation of the myth points immediately to an additional and important issue. Thus, since the battle between Indra and Vṛtra ends at the spring equinox with Indra’s victory, could this possibly mean that the Vedic myth tells the story of the spring’s victory over the winter season? In order to answer this new question, other parts of the myth need to be explained.

One of the most important elements of the myth is represented by the metaphor of the “release of the waters,” which occurs through Indra’s victory over Vṛtra. The “release of the waters” has been interpreted in various ways.\textsuperscript{66} J. Muir (1868–1873 (5): 95) thought that Vṛtra was the demon of drought, whom Indra conquers in order to bring back the rain. The same opinion, with some variations, was supported by A. Ludwig (1876–1888 (3): 337), A. Bergaigne (1969–1972 (2): 207), and A. A. Macdonell (1897: 91). A. B. Keith (1925:127) also finds this opinion plausible. Recently, W. D. O’Flaherty (1981: 152) has explained the “release of the waters” in similar terms. H. Oldenberg (1913: 137), on the other hand, considers that the “waters” do not represent the rain, but the rivers spreading from the springs when the winter season is over. This opinion is shared by A. Hillebrandt (1990 (2): 104–105, 109), who believes that the myth of “the release of the waters” expresses a reality found in temperate regions, in which the rivers free themselves from ice during spring time.\textsuperscript{67} All these

\textsuperscript{64} Cf. Hartner (1965:15).

\textsuperscript{65} Oberlies (1998: 363–66, 369–70) argues that this myth is cosmogonic and that Vṛtra is the primeval dragon, who holds in himself the primordial waters. This observation is not in conflict with my hypotheses here; in fact, in 10.49.6 (see above) it is said that Indra placed Vṛtra in the sky after he defeated him, which makes this myth etiological as well; the “battle” between Taurus and Scorpio at the spring equinox then can be interpreted as the reenactment of the primordial battle between Indra and Vṛtra \textit{illo tempore}.


\textsuperscript{67} Hillebrandt’s hypotheses, however, have nothing to do with the astronomical event of the spring equinox.
hypotheses will prove to be extremely important to my argument here, because they bring up the issue of seasonal change from winter to spring.

The hypothesis that the myth of Indra slaying Vṛtra is a metaphor for the change of the seasons at the spring equinox, with Indra and Vṛtra representing the equinoctial constellations, hints indeed at the idea that the “release of the waters” may have to do with a shift in the weather pattern at the spring equinox. Is this shift related to the start of the rainy season?

It is well known that the rainy (monsoon) season in India starts in late June and ends in September/October. This period of time does not include the spring equinox. This is a great impediment to the theory of a rainy season beginning at the spring equinox. Hillebrandt's assumptions managed to get around this difficulty by assuming that the myth originated in a region in which the spring season could indeed determine such a change in the weather pattern. This is the case only in the northern, temperate regions of Asia. Moreover, Hillebrandt's argument, according to which the waters are generated by the melted ice, is not very compelling, since ice does not seem to play a role in the myth. Therefore, the solution I am proposing here is slightly different from Hillebrandt's; it combines Hillebrandt's argument with those relating the waters to the spring rain.

In the temperate regions of Eurasia the beginning of spring is associated with rain, which is essential for the development of the crops. I argue, therefore, that the “release of the waters,” which is the result of Indra’s victory over Vṛtra, represents the spring rain occurring at the beginning of the spring season in the temperate regions of Eurasia. In astronomical and meteorological terms, this means that Taurus’ equinoctial rising in March, when the fields start to germinate, brings rain to the land. This explains perfectly why Indra was so often invoked to bring prosperity to the Vedic tribes. The most important consequence of this argument, however, is that the myth must have been created in those regions in which the Indo-Aryans found themselves before they entered the Indian sub-

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68 Oberlies (1998: 419–24), drawing on post-Vedic evidence, relates Indra to the beginning of the Vedic new year, which started, in his opinion, at the winter solstice (the time when the sun “conquers” darkness); however, he eventually acknowledges that his theory cannot explain the “release of the waters.” One should note, however, that there is no certainty that the new year started at the winter solstice in the Rig Veda; cf. Bryant (2001: 253–54). The Iranian evidence shows that the pre-Zoroastrian new year began at the spring equinox; cf. Blois (1996: 48–49).
Catalin Anghelina, "On the Nature of the Vedic Gods"
*Sino-Platonic Papers*, 241 (October 2013)

continent. This must have occurred before 2000 BC, since Taurus announced the spring equinox between 4000 and 2000 BC.

The observation that the myth of Indra killing Vṛtra goes back to before 2000 BC raises an important question; can this astronomical myth be an Indo-Iranian creation? The answer to this question is apparently in the negative. On one hand, the status of Indra in the Avesta is not as prominent as in the *Rig Veda*; in the Avesta, Indra is only a minor deity. On the other hand, the demon Vṛtra is not present in the Iranian religion (Avesta), which means that this religion did not know the myth of Indra slaying Vṛtra. Therefore, this myth seems to be an Indo-Aryan creation.

A connection between the *Rig Veda* and the Avesta, however, does exist. Thus, in the Avesta there is a deity called Vṛṛagna. This immediately brings to mind that one of the most important epithets of Indra is Vṛtrahan “Vṛtra’s killer” (cf. Skt. han- = “to kill”). Given this, a natural question arises: what is the relation between Vṛtra and Vṛṛagna?

In his comprehensive study about Vṛtra and Vṛṛagna, Benveniste (1934: 177–199) argues that Vṛṛagna does not refer to a demon Vṛtra. His arguments are the following. First, as I have already pointed out, there is no mention of a demon Vṛtra in the Iranian texts. Secondly, the word Vṛṛagna in the Avesta has a different meaning from its Vedic counterpart, since it refers neither to a demon Vṛtra nor to Indra. According to Benveniste, the name of the god Vṛṛagna in the Avesta has its origin in the neuter noun vṝra, which derives from the root *vṛ- “to cover” and means “defense.” Therefore, the meaning of the word Vṛṛagna would be “the one who destroys the defenses,” and Vṛṛagna would be “the god of victory” in the Avesta. Benveniste concludes that the myth of Indra and Vṛtra is a purely Vedic creation that derives from an Indo-Iranian background; thus, starting from the Indo-Iranian character, the Indo-Aryans would have invented the demon named Vṛtra and the myth of Vṛtrahan (Indra) slaying it.

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69 The split of the Aryans into Indo-Aryans and Iranians seems to have occurred around or even before 2000 BC; cf. Mallory (1989: 38–39).

70 Cf. e.g., Macdonell (1897: 66); Hillebrandt (1980: I 257–59).

71 Benveniste also notices that a fight between a hero and a snake/demon does exist in the Avesta; these characters are Θraitaua and Aži Dahāka (cf. Skt. áhi). Benveniste argues that this myth, which represents the general IE myth of the hero fighting the dragon, continued to exist in the myth of Indra and Vṛtra. Therefore, the Indo-Aryans would have
Benveniste’s arguments are extremely interesting from the standpoint of comparative mythology. The absence of Vṛtra from the Iranian religion, however, does not exclude the possibility that the Indo-Iranian *Vṛtraghan, the “god of victory,” represented Taurus in Indo-Iranian times.\textsuperscript{72} Certainly, if Benveniste is right about the origins of Vṛtra, this would mean that the Indo-Iranians celebrated Taurus in a religious context lacking Scorpio. It would also mean that the further development of the myth, which contains the fight between Indra/Taurus and Vṛtra/Scorpio, was an Indo-Aryan invention dating back to at least 2000 BC, during the time when Taurus still announced the spring equinox.\textsuperscript{73} Even in such circumstances, which seem unlikely to me, the myth would still have to be seen as created outside India, in the more northern and more temperate Asian regions.\textsuperscript{74} I will take up these issues again in the section on the Ādityas.

\textbf{D. AN OLD AND FORGOTTEN THEORY}

The hypothesis that Indra represents a constellation is not new.\textsuperscript{75} E. M. Plunket (1903) was struck by the astronomical connotations of some of the passages in the \textit{Rig Veda} and thought that Indra was the god of the summer solstice and that Vṛtra represented the constellation Hydra. In her view, the victory adapted the character of Vṛtrahan to their new myth, inventing a demon Vṛtra, which they further used in the myth of the hero slaying the dragon.


\textsuperscript{73} In my opinion, the dating of this myth to before 2000 BC is unavoidable. Thus, Indra defines the succession of the seasons, and supports the sky on his head; these are transparent hints to his being located on both the celestial equator and the ecliptic. In addition, the existence of the Indo-Iranian Vṛtrahan, who is likely to be identical with Indra/Taurus, also supports the same dating, since the Indo-Iranian group must have existed only before 2000 BC. On the other hand, the myth of the “release of the waters,” which marks the beginning of the spring season, makes perfect sense only in respect to the spring equinox. In other words, if one assumes that the myth was created on Indian soil after 2000 BC, when Taurus rose heliacally in April, there is no way to reconcile the myth with the Indian monsoon season in June! Finally, it is worth noting that the mere fact that Indra is the greatest Vedic god means that he must have been astronomically important; this is the case of Taurus before 2000 BC.

\textsuperscript{74} For the chronological issues, also cf. Oberlies (1998: 152–62).

\textsuperscript{75} It is worth mentioning that Plunket was not a specialist in Vedic studies.
of Indra and the release of the waters would symbolize the beginning of the monsoon season in India, which occurs around or shortly after the summer solstice (late June). Plunket, therefore, tries to connect the myth of Indra with the seasonal cycle of the Indian subcontinent; obviously, for her this myth is a creation belonging to the Indian subcontinent.

This interesting idea, however, is unlikely to be true. The summer solstice at the time when the Vedic people arrived in India (most likely not before 2000 BC) was represented by the constellation Cancer. It is hard to see any connection between the “great Bull of the sky” and Cancer. Why would Cancer be the Vedic “great Bull of the sky” when Taurus had already been fulfilling this role in several cultures for thousands of years? This single objection renders Plunket’s theory and dating of the myth untenable. Another problematic aspect of Plunket’s theory concerns the identification of the dragon Vṛtra with Hydra. Thus, as I showed above, Vṛtra is a constellation indicating the seasons. Hydra does not fulfill this role, since it is not located on the ecliptic. Finally, as we shall see below, another strong argument against Plunket’s theory is that the identification of Indra with Cancer cannot account for the close relationship existing between Indra and Soma.

The arguments against Plunket’s theory are strong. It is worthwhile, however, to explore Plunket’s apparently strongest argument for the identification of Indra with the summer solstice constellation. This is based on those few passages in the Rig Veda in which Indra is said to “stop” the horses of the sun:

10.92.8. $\text{su}́r\text{a}ś \text{ci}d \text{á harít}ō \text{asya rímrad á káś cíd bhayate távīyaśaḥ}$

Selbst die Sonne hielt ihre falben Stuten an. Vor Indra als Stärkerem fürchet sich ein jeder ... (cf. Geldner's note: “Auch dem Svar brachte er seine Falbinnen zum Stillstand”).

1.121.13. $\text{tuvā mó sūro harít}ō \text{rámayo nīn}$

Du Indra hieltest die Falbinnen des Sonnengottes an den Männern (beistehend) ...

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76 Plunket does not seem to notice that Indra is the “Bull” par excellence.
The Sanskrit verb *ram* in these passages can indeed mean to "stop," as translated by Geldner (Germ. *halten* "to stop"). Plunket, who follows Griffith's English translation, in which the verb is translated as "to stop" as well, interprets this as a transparent allusion to the summer solstice, the time of the year when the sun's horses would "stop." 77

The passage Plunket mentions, however, can be interpreted in a different way. Thus, there are other Rig Vedic passages in which Indra apparently does not "stop" the sun's horses, but brings them behind/next to him.

5.29.5. ádha krátvā maghavan túbhyām devá ánu vísve adaduḥ somapéyam
    yát súriyasya harítaḥ pátantih puráḥ satír úparā étaše kāḥ

5.29.5. Da gestanden dir alle Götter nach Wunsch den Somatrank zu, du Gabenreicher, als du
des Sürya fliegende Falbinnen, die voraus waren (*puráḥ satír*) unter Etaša ins
Hintertreffen (*úparā*) brachtest.

8.50.8. Deine falben Wagenpferde, die ohne Unfall zu erleiden des Windes Kraft überholen,
mit denen du den Dasyu vor Manu zum Schweigen brachtest (?), mit denen du die
Sonne einholest (*yébhíh súvaḥ paríyase*).

The story of Indra catching up with the sun's horses then may be the same with that in the passage quoted by Plunket. If this is the case, then the meaning of the verb *ram* in that passage should be reconsidered. Monier-Williams gives one possible meaning of *ram*, as "to calm; to set to rest"; this seems indeed to have been one of the main meanings of *ram*, since in other Indo-European languages and in Sanskrit as well words derived from the same root have similar meanings (cf. Lith. *rimti* “to be calm”; Gk. *erēmos* “lonely”; Skt. *rāmā, rāmyā* “night” = “time for rest”). 78 It is then possible that the meaning of the passages Plunket alluded to is that Indra calmed the sun's horses so that he could catch up with them at the spring equinox. As I noted above, this is precisely what happens at the equinox. The verb *ram* in the passages quoted by Plunket then may mean “to calm down.” In fact, in

77 In fact, the sun's horses never stop, since the sun never stops.

the passage describing the Aśvins “stopping” their chariot on the bull's head, the word for “to stop” is ni-yam (cf. also 5.73.3), not ram.

To sum up: the Rig Vedic evidence that Indra represents the constellation Taurus makes the interpretation of Indra as the god of the summer solstice unlikely. Plunket’s merit, however, is incontestable, since she had the intuition that the Rig Vedic passages and myths express celestial phenomena.79

Indra’s myth, therefore, concerns the advent of the prosperous spring. It is in this context that one can best understand the Aśvins’ role in bringing wealth to the land/people. The heliacal rising of Taurus at the spring equinox (in March) implies that the heliacal rising of Gemini occurred in the second part of April. In the temperate regions of Eurasia, this is the time of the year when, after the rains of the early spring, the fields begin to produce the early green foliage, which will eventually become the crops to be harvested at the end of summer. The Aśvins’ wealth, therefore, is not an abstract notion. As was the case with the “release of the waters” in the myth of Indra, the invocation of the Aśvins’ chariot to bring wealth to the people has a clear correlate in nature. Therefore, since the worship of these gods most likely took place in April, there is no need to assume — as Brunnhofer and Weber assumed a long time ago — that the myth was created during a period of time when the Aśvins announced the spring equinox, i.e., between 6000 and 4000 BC.80 In addition, the probable absence of the Aśvins in the Iranian religion also shows that the myth was created later, after the separation of the Indo-Aryans from their Iranian brethren.81

79 Plunket also identifies other Vedic gods with known constellations. I do not find her hypotheses very attractive. To give an example: she identifies the Aśvins with the late Hindu nakṣatra Aśvinī, which represents β and γ Arietis. If this were true, the Aśvins’ chariot would be directed in the sky in a direction opposed to that assumed in the present paper. Aśvinī, however, is a feminine noun, and, therefore, cannot represent the Aśvins.

80 I explained above that the constellation announcing the spring equinox changes every 2000 years because of the “the precession of the equinoxes.”

81 The communis opinio is that the origin of the Aśvins is Indo-European, since similar twin gods can be met with in different IE cultures such as the Greek, Baltic or Germanic ones; however, this does not constitute a proof that the astronomical Aśvins were of Indo-Iranian origin, as e.g. Macdonell (1897: 53), Keith (1925: 117) or Hillebrandt (1990: 36) think. The Aśvins are not present in Iranian religion, although it is known that they are present in the Indo-Aryan branch
The Vedic religion, therefore, celebrated the advent of the spring through the worship of the constellations Taurus and Gemini in March and April, respectively. Before these months, these constellations were invisible in the sky for most of the night time. One can, therefore, easily understand why they were worshipped with such devotion; their sudden appearance in the morning sky coincided with the advent of the spring, the season of the year that brought prosperity to the land and its people.

The present astronomical interpretation of Indra and the Aśvins raises the possibility that other important Vedic gods might enjoy the same celestial status. The next gods who immediately come to mind as potential candidates for a celestial place are Indra's associates, the Maruts.

E. THE MARUTS

Among the most important deities in the Rig Veda are the enigmatic Maruts, thirty-three hymns being dedicated to them alone, seven at least to them conjointly with Indra, and one hymn with Agni and Pūṣan. The Maruts are intimately associated with Indra. Thus, they increase Indra's strength and prowess (3.35.9; 6.17.11), and they assist Indra in his fight against Vṛtra (8.65.2–3; 10.113.3); they even strike Vṛtra assisted by Indra (1.23.9). Their chief is Indra (1.23.8); they are accompanied by Indra (10.128.2). These associations with Indra made Macdonell (1897: 81) think they were, like Indra, gods of the storm. The hypothesis, however, that Indra is the constellation Taurus forces us to reevaluate the meaning of these gods and their mythological traits.

One of the most important qualities of the Maruts is their brightness, which lights darkness. The Maruts appear at dawn with the first sun rays. They are located in a place which is said to be the seat of the world order (ṛtāsya sādanesu). I give below these passages which describe the attributes of the Maruts.

1.37.2. ... von selbst glänzend (svabhānavah)

8ψ Cf. Macdonell (1897: 77).

42
1.37.4. ... die Heerschar von funkelndem Glanze

1.64.8. ... die Nächte belebend ... (kṣápo jínvantāḥ)

2.34.12. té dáśagvāḥ prathamā́ yajñám ūhire té no hinvantu uśáso víuṣṭiṣu
usá́ ná rāmír aruṇā́ir āporṇute mahó jyótiṣā śucatá góarṇasā

2.34.13. té kṣoṇībhir aruṇēbhir ná aṇījībhī rudrā́ ṛtásya sádaneṣu vāvṛdhuḥ
niméghamānā átyena pájasā suścandráṃ vārṇam dadhire supéśasam

2.34.12–13. Die Daśagva's haben zuerst das Opfer ausgeführt. Die sollen uns bei dem Aufgang der Morgenröte anspornen: Wie die Morgenröte mit ihrem rötlichen (Farben) die Nächte aufdeckt, (so deckten sie die Kuhhöhle auf) mit dem herrlichen, glühenden, rinderwogende Lichte./ Die Rudrasöhne [the Maruts are Rudra's sons — my note] sind mit ihren Scharen wie (die U ṣas') mit ihren rötlichen Farben an den Sitzen der Weltordnung (ṛtásya sádaneṣu) groß geworden. In Rossgestalt herabharnend nahmen sie ihre leuchtende, schöne Farbe an.

5.61.12. yéṣāṃ śriyā́dhi ródasī vibhrā́jante rātheṣu ā
dívī rukmā́ ivopári

5.61.12. Die durch ihre Schönheit auf ihren Wagen Himmel und Erde überstrahlen wie der Goldschmuck (i.e., the sun; cf. Geldner) oben am Himmel.

7.57.3. ... Himmel und Erde schmückend ...

8.7.8. Sie lassen mit Macht der Sonne den Zügel schießen, dass sie ihre Bahn laufe. (Zugleich) mit deren Strahlen haben sie sich zerstreut.

8.7.36. agnīr hi jā́ni pūrviyāś chándo ná súro arcīśā
té bhānúbhīr ví tasthire
8.7.36. Denn Agni ward als erster geboren; wie ein Verführer (lacht) die Sonne im Strahlenglanz. (Zugleich) mit der Sonnenstrahlen haben sie sich zerstreut.

Many passages show the Maruts as connected with the sky; they can appear in the night sky, travel along the sky, and come up in the sky. Most importantly, they are located in the sky.\textsuperscript{83}

1.37.7 Vor eurer Auffahrt weicht der Menschensohn ...

1.38.2. Wohin jetzt - was ist eure Reiseziel?

1.85.2. ... \textit{divi rudráso ádhi cakrire sádaḥ}

1.85.2. ... die Rudra(söhne) haben sich im Himmel einen Sitz erworben.

5.52.3 Sie springen über die Nächte weg wie die sprunglustige Stiere ...

10.77.2. \textit{śriyé máryāso aṁjóhr akṛṇvata sumárutam ná pürvár áti kṣápaḥ}

10.77.2. Zur Schönheit legten die Jünglinge ihre Zierraten an, wie ihr schönes Marutwetter über viele Nächte. Des Himmels Söhne haben sich wie Antilopen zusammengeschlossen ...

2.34.10–11. Diese eure wunderbare Fahrt, ihr Marut, ist denkwürdig ... Die großen, eilig gehenden Marut ...

7.58.1. ... sie kommen bis zum Himmel aus dem Reiche des Todes ...

5.53.8. Komm her, ihr Marut, vom Himmel ... \textit{(ā yāta maruto divā)}.

8.7.11. \textit{máruto yád dha vo diváḥ sumnāyánto hávāmahe} ...

\textsuperscript{83} In fact, they are literally called the heroes (\textit{vīrāḥ}) of heaven; cf. 1.64.4; 1.122.1; 5.54.10; Macdonell (1897: 78).
8.7.11. Ihr Marut, wenn wir euch vom Himmel rufen um Wohlwollen bittend ...

1.166.4. ... Wunderbar ist eure Auffahrt ...

5.55.7. ... ihr fahret um Himmel und Erde ... (utā dyāvāprthīvī yāthanā pāri)

5.61.1 Wer seid ihr Herren, die ihr als Allerschönste einer nach dem anderen aus fernster Ferne gekommen seid?

Like Indra, the Maruts are connected with the sun; they are the “men of the sun” who surround Indra; they prepare the path for the sun; Indra, the “Bull,” is their leader and brother (cf. e.g. 1.170.2 and 8.20.9):

1.166.11. ... sámmlā índre marútaḥ pariṣṭúbhaḥ

1.166.11. ... die Marut, dem Indra gesellt als seine Umjaucher [“attached to” — my note, cf. Grassman: “verbunden mit”].

5.57.5. ... divó arkā́ amṛ́taṃ náma bhejire.

5.57.5. ... des Himmels Chöre, wurden sie unsterblichen Namens teilhaft.

5.54.10. yán marutaḥ sabharasaḥ suvarṇaraḥ súrya údite mádathā divo naraḥ
ná vo áśvāḥ śrathayantāha sísrataḥ sadyó asyá ádhvanaḥ pārám aśnutha

5.54.10. Wenn ihr gleichgewichtigen Marut, ihr Sonnenmänner, ihr Mannen des Himmels bei Sonnenaufgang ausgelassen seid, so lassen eure Rosse in ihrem Lauf e niemals locker. An einem Tage erreicht ihr das Ende dieses Weges.

8.7.8. sṛjánti raśmíṃ ójasā pánthāṃ súryāya yátave
té bhānúbhir ví tasthire

8.7.8. Sie lassen mit Macht der Sonne den Zügel schießen (sṛjánti raśmíṃ), dass sie ihre Bahn laufe. (Zugleich) mit deren Strahlen haben sie sich zerstreut.
All these attributes of the Maruts, which underscore their association with the night (or early-dawn) sky and with Indra, point to their celestial origin and place. Since Indra is Taurus, who might these bright men of the sky be?

Given the context of the present discussion, the answer to this question seems to come from itself. The celestial Maruts, who accompany Indra, i.e., Taurus, their leader, cannot be other than a set of stars or constellations. Which ones?

A brilliant hypothesis concerning the nature of the Maruts was made long ago by Hillebrandt (1980: II 381), who believed that the Maruts represented the star-cluster of the Pleiades. Indeed, the Pleiades, which represent an asterism belonging to the constellation Taurus, are a very good candidate for being the Vedic Maruts. Thus, their proximity to Taurus perfectly explains why Indra is said to be the Maruts’ brother or leader and why the Maruts are able to help Indra in defeating Vṛtra; it also explains why the Maruts are said to “prepare” the path for the sun, since the Pleiades are, like Taurus, an equinoctial asterism; finally, it explains why the Maruts are said to bring rain to earth (the advent of the spring season).

The number of the Maruts, which is said to be either three times sixty, i.e., 180 (8.96.8), or thrice seven, i.e., 21 (1.133.6), reflects well the fact that the Pleiades appear in the sky as a cluster of many stars.

An interesting feature of the Maruts is that they are located rtásya sádaneṣu, that is, on the “seat of rtá.” The Vedic concept of rtá has remained obscure and unexplained to this day. Geldner translates it in very different ways such as “world order” (Germ. Weltordnung, as above), “truth”

84 The later Hindu name of this star-cluster is Kṛttikās; the renaming process of this constellation, therefore, seems to be similar to that of the Aśvins. Witzel (1999) analyzes the presence of the Kṛttikās in later literature (ŚB) and raises the possibility that this asterism (that is, Kṛttikās, not the Maruts!) was known to the Aryans in the third millennium B.C.

85 I would not exclude the possibility that the Maruts represent the Hyades (the head of Taurus), a constellation known by the ancient Greeks.

86 Cf.1.64.5: bhúmim pinvanti páyasá párijrayaḥ “... Sie überschwemmen herumfahrend die Erde mit Nass”; 1.85.5: cárnevodábhir vi undanti bhúma “Wie ein Fell begießen sie die Erde mit Wasser.”

87 Certainly these numbers do not represent the exact number of the Maruts. For the Greeks, for example, the Pleiades comprised seven stars, which were the most visible.
(Germ. *Wahrheit*), or “law” (Germ. *Gesetz*); the variety of these translations shows how difficult it is for scholars to interpret this concept.\(^{88}\) I do not see how “truth” or “law” could explain the passage in which the Maruts are said to reside on the “seat of ṛtá.” The interpretation of ṛtá as the “world order,” however, can perfectly explain the passage. Thus, as I noted above, the Pleiades are an equinoctial asterism; this means that they are located on the sun's path, that is, on the ecliptic. It is well known that in the ancient world the ecliptic was pivotal for the keeping of time. Given this role of the ecliptic, the interpretation of ṛtá as the “world order” makes perfect sense in the context above. The Vedic “world order” represents the order that refers to the keeping of time, that is, to the regular succession of days, months, seasons, etc. (that is, “Time”!). It appears then that the Vedic concept of ṛtá, the “world order,” refers to the ecliptic.

This interpretation of ṛtá can also explain why this concept is mentioned in 1.46.11 (quoted above in the section on the Aśvins), a verse that belongs to a hymn dedicated to the Aśvins:

1.46.11. \( \text{ábhūd u pārám étave pánthā ṛtáṣya sādhuyā} \)
\( \text{ádarśi ví srutír divāḥ} \)

1.46.11. Der rechte Weg ist bereitet, um glücklich ans andere Ufer zu gelangen; die Straße des Himmels [srutír divāḥ — a more accurate translation would be the “celestial stream” or “the stream of heaven” — my note] ist sichtbar geworden.

Geldner translates the first two lines as “Der rechte Weg is bereitet (sādhuyā), um glücklich ans andere Ufer zu gelangen (pārám étave).” This translation, however, is not accurate. The phrase pánthā ṛtáṣya “der rechte Weg” literally means the “way/road of ṛtá.” The conclusion that ṛtá represents the ecliptic (or the “cosmic order” derived from it) puts the whole passage into a completely different perspective. Thus, it is well known that, like the Pleiades, the constellation Gemini (i.e., the Aśvins) is also located on the ecliptic. Given this observation, the mention of ṛtá or of the “road of ṛtá” in the context of the Aśvins’ appearance in the morning sky makes perfect sense;

\(^{88}\) Cf. 7.64.2 (Mitra and Varuṇa are called ṛtáṣya gopā “the lords of ṛtá,” that is, “Herren des Gesetzes” for Geldner); 7.60.5 (Mitra and Varuṇa are said to grow in the “house of ṛtá” imá ṛtáṣya vāvr̥dhur duroṇé, “im Hause der Wahrheit” for Geldner).
indeed, the Aśvins, alias Gemini, “travel” on pānthā rtāsyā, that is, on the ecliptic. As with regards to srutīr divāh, which Geldner translates as “the heavenly road,” a more appropriate translation would be “the stream of heaven.” As I showed in the section on the Aśvins, this celestial river represents the Milky Way; it is the “river” in which the twin gods stand (cf. fig. 2).

The Aśvins and the Maruts, therefore, share the common feature of being located on the ecliptic (rtāsyā sādaneṣu ~ pānthā rtāsyā) which is described by the Vedic concept of rtā. It is well known, however, that other gods are even more intimately associated with rtā; these are the Ādityas. Therefore, I will take up the issue of rtā in more detail in the chapter on the Ādityas. Before that, however, in the section below on Soma, we will see why Soma is also associated with this Vedic concept.

The hypothesis that the Maruts represent the Pleiades opens up the path for another new and interesting possibility, which concerns the nature of Rudra, the Maruts’ father. Given the celestial nature of the Maruts, it is natural to ask whether Rudra is a celestial god as well.

F. R U D R A

Rudra’s essential feature is that he is a divine archer armed with a bow and arrows. This is clearly stated in the Rig Veda:

2.33.10. Mit Fug und Recht trägst du Pfeile und Bogen ... (ārhan bibharṣi sāyakāni dhānva)

5.42.11. Preise den, der guten Pfeil und guten Bogen hat ... (tām u śṭuhi yāh suisūḥ sudhānva)

7.46.1. imā rudrāya sthirādhanvane gīrah kṣipraiṣave devāya svadhāvane ...

7.46.1. Dem Rudra mit festem Bogen und schnellem Pfeile bringet diese Lobrede dar, dem eigenmächtigen Gotte ...

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89 Cf. RV 1.114.6, 9; 2.33.1; Macdonell (1897: 74); the Maruts are also called the Rudrāḥ; cf. e.g., Hillebrandt (1980: II 173–174).

90 Rudra is also a divine archer in the Atharva Veda; cf. 1.28.1; 6.93.1; 15.5.1–7; Macdonell (1897: 74).
These characteristics of Rudra hint at a constellation, one well known for its proximity to the Pleiades. This is Orion, the hunter. Orion is already present in Homer (λ 572–575), where his weapon is a club (ῥόπαλον) and not the bow. Certainly, this creates a difficulty in equating Orion with Rudra, which confers a speculative character upon this hypothesis. Some other facts, however, point in the same direction. Thus, Rudra is called sometimes paśupati “the shepherd” in the Atharva Veda,91 which reminds us of Orion's origins in Babylon, where he was called mul SIBA.ZLAN.A “the true shepherd of the sky.”92 In addition, the Chuckchee people in Siberia also seem to identify Orion’s weapons with a bow and arrows.93 The fact that the Aśvins’ journey with their chariot takes place close to Rudra’s path (8.22.14) also hints at the fact that Rudra is Orion; indeed, Orion neighbors Gemini in the sky.

Therefore, while there is no irrefutable proof that Rudra is Orion, the corroboration of all the elements above makes this hypothesis very attractive.94

The discussion about the origins of the Maruts started from the fact that they are said to be Indra’s associates in the sky. The Maruts, however, are not the only deities that are closely associated with Indra. Soma, one of the greatest gods of the Vedic religion, is also associated with Indra.

91 Cf. Macdonell (1897: 75); I could not verify this information.


93 Cf. Staal (1988: 63); I could not verify the original source; cf. above n.68.

94 Plunket (cf. above) identifies Rudra with Sagittarius, “the Archer,” which is a constellation opposed to Orion and the Pleiades in the sky. I can see no relationship between Sagittarius and the Pleiades, which may justify considering Sagittarius to be the “father” of the Pleiades.
The relationship between Indra and Soma is a very special one. Indra is the great Soma-drinker; his addiction to Soma, which is his favorite nutriment (RV 8.4.12), is unique among gods and men (RV 8.2.4). After he drinks Soma, Indra is capable of performing cosmic actions such as the slaying of Vṛtra (RV 2.15.1; 19.2; 6.47.1–2; 5.29.7; 6.17.11).

One can, therefore, say that, along with the slaying of Vṛtra, the other most important mythological trait of Indra is his association with Soma. This is also shown by Indra's frequent epithets somapā́ or somapā́van “Soma-drinker.” Given the present hypothesis that Indra represents the constellation Taurus, the association between him and Soma raises the possibility that Soma's place is also in the sky. This is the direction that I will further explore.

That Soma is located in the sky is clearly shown throughout Book 9 of the Rig Veda, which is entirely dedicated to Soma. Soma flows through the sky, being the “milk” of heaven or a stream in the sky; the rivers generated by Soma flow through the sky; Soma runs to certain places of the sky, which he loves the most; his place is in the lap of the stars, on the sky's firmament; Soma is as bright as the sun and holds up the sky, whose child he is; Soma was born in the sky and brought to earth from the sky; Soma is the “lord of the sky”:

9.3.7. Dieser durchreilt den Himmel (eṣá dīvam ví dhāvati).

9.12.8. abhí priyá́ divás padá́ sómo hinvānó arṣati
9.12.8. Zu den lieben Stätten des Himmels fließt Soma zur Eile getrieben ...

9.38.5. ... des Himmels Kind (díváḥ śíśuḥ), der Saft ...

95 Since it is well known that Soma has been interpreted so far as a hallucinatory drug/juice (“Soma-Rausch”), I will not repeat here what others said in this respect; for a synopsis, cf. e.g., Oberlies (1998: 149–52, 449–55).

96 Cf. e.g., Macdonell (1897: 56).

97 In fact, that the origin of Soma as celestial has been long recognized; cf. e.g., Hillebrandt (1980: 190); Macdonell (1898: 111). Astonishingly, the celestial aspect of Soma (see below) has sometimes been seen as being caused by the hallucinatory effect of imbibing the juice/drug Soma; cf. e.g., Oberlies (1998: 452–53).
9.48.1. tām tvā nṛmṇā́ni bíbhrataṃ sadhāstheṣu mahó divāḥ ...  
Dir da, der die Manneskräfte bringt an den Stätten des hohen Himmels ...

9.54.2. ayāṃ sūrya ivopadṛg ayāṃ sārāṃsi dhāvati  
saptá pravāta á dīvam  
Dieser ist ein Anblick wie die Sonne; dieser lässt Seen, sieben Ströme zum Himmel fliegen.

9.54.3. ayāṃ viśvāni tiṣṭhati punānó bhúvanopári  
sómo devó ná sūriyaḥ  
Dieser sich läuternde Soma steht über allen Welten wie Gott Sūrya.

9.61.10. uccá te jātám ándhaso diví śád bhúmi ā́ dade.  
In der Höhe ist deines Tranks Geburt. Den im Himmel befindlichen (Trank) nehme ich auf der Erde an mich.

9.66.30. yásya te dyumnávat páyah pávamānā́bhṛtaṃ diváḥ.  
Du Pavamāna, dessen glänzende Milch (páyas) vom Himmel gebracht wurde ...

9.73.4. sahásradhāre áva té sám asvaran divó náke mádhujihvā asaścátah ...  
Auf (die Seihe) mit tausend Abtraufen brausten sie herab, an des Himmels Firmament die Ströme ...

9.74.2. divó yá skambhó dharúṇah súātata  
Der die tragende schöngerichtete Säule des Himmels ist ...

9.76.1. Der Träger des Himmels (dhartá diváḥ) ...

9.88.8. Dein Gebote sind wie des Königs Varuṇa ...

9.86.11. ... des Himmels Herr (pátir diváḥ)
9.108.1. ... der himmlischste Rauschtrank (máhi dyuksátamo mádaḥ) [“a drink whose abode (Skt. kṣi = “wohnen”) is in heaven” — my note].


10.85.2. ... átho náksatrāṇām eśām upāsthe sóma āhitaḥ.
10.85.2. ... in den Schoß dieser Sternbilder ist Soma gestellt.\(^9\)

The idea that Soma is (celestial) milk, a white cream that shines brightly in the night sky, in darkness (cosmic light), can also be met with in the following:

9.54.1. asyá pratná̄m ánú dyután̄ śukrán̄ duduhre áhrayaḥ
páyaḥ sahasrasám ōśim
9.54.1. Seinem altbekannten Glanze gemäß haben die nicht Schüchternen aus dem tausendgewinnenden Ṛṣi die helle Milch (páyas) herausgemolken.

9.97.14. ... von Milch (páyasā) schwellend ...

9.107.13. Der Begehrenswerte hat sich in ein weißes Gewand gehüllt ...

9.108.8. sahásradhāram vṛṣabhám payovīdham priyám deváya jánmane
ṛtēna yá ṛtájāto vivāvṛdhē rája devá ṛtām bṛhát

9.108.12. ... der das Dunkel mit dem Lichte erglüht (pratápaṇ jyātiṣā támah)

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\(^9\) Geldner — probably following Hillebrandt’s well-known theory — interprets this passage as referring to Soma “the moon”; cf. Macdonell (1898: 113).
9.17.5. áti trí soma rocaná róhan ná bhrājase dīvam
iṣṇān sāryaṁ ná codayaḥ

9.17.5. Wie der über die drei Lichträume zum Himmel steigende (Sonnengott) erstrahlst du, Soma.

Soma shines and banishes darkness; he is the eternal light where people want to go; he is associated with ṛtá (cf. also 9.108.8 above):

9.66.24. pávamāna ṛtáṁ bṛhāc chukrāṁ jyótir ajījanat
kṛṣṇā tāmāṃsi jāṅghanat


9.70.3. té asya santu ketávo āṁrtyavo ādāḥiyāso janūśi ubhé ānu ...

9.70.3. Diese seine Lichtstrahlen, die unsterblichen, untrüglichen sollen zu beiden Geschlechtern dringen ...

9.113.7. yātra jyótir ājasraṃ yāsūn lokē sū̄var hitām
tāṃsī māṁ dhehi pavamāna ...

9.113.7. Wo das ewige Licht ist, in welche Welt die Sonne gesetzt ist, in diese versetzt mich, o Pavamāna ...

To sum up: Soma's place is in the night sky, where he shines brightly as an eternal light. He is often compared with milk (páyas), being called the “heavenly drink.” He is a white cream. He flows through the sky as a stream or river (of milk). He banishes darkness with his light. He is the master of the sky, a white and bright heavenly stream in the middle of the stars. He gave birth to light and ṛtá.

Soma's celestial nature as revealed in the passages above points transparently to a well-known astronomical phenomenon. In all likelihood, as a heavenly stream, Soma represents the Milky Way.99

99 The Chinese called the Milky Way the ‘Sky River’ or ‘Silver River’; cf. n.53 above.
Our Galaxy has all the properties that are attributed to the celestial Soma in the *Rig Veda*. Certainly, among its most important attributes are its brightness and resemblance to a river, which is similar to a milk stream. In fact, in Greek, the word *gāla*, which denotes the Milky Way, means “milk.”

Soma, therefore, is very likely to represent the Milky Way. It remains now to explain the close association of celestial Soma with Indra, who represents the constellation Taurus. The position of Taurus in the sky with regards to the Milky Way can give an answer to this issue. Thus, Taurus’ horns and head lie close to the band of the Milky Way (cf. figs. 1; 2; 10). Given this position of Taurus, the association of the two gods in mythology finds a reasonable explanation; Indra drinks Soma because Taurus’ head lies close to the band of the Milky Way. Interestingly, Soma is sometimes considered as being Indra’s bolt (*vajra*), with which Indra kills Vṛtra. This fact can also be explained

100 Witzel (1984) suggests that the Milky Way (*svargaloka*) is represented by the Vedic mythical river Sarasvatī, which has indeed the quality of being bright. This is an interesting suggestion, but the evidence for it is tenuous; the characteristics of Soma listed above clearly show this great god as being the best candidate for representing the great celestial phenomenon of the Milky Way.

101 An additional and, at the same time, interesting feature of the celestial Soma is that he wears a *drāpī*—“bright garment” (cf. 9.86.14: “Einen Mantel umlegen ...”), which encompasses the world. On the Iranian side, this garment is a belt embroidered with stars, which Haoma wears; cf. Hillebrandt (1980: I 258); Eisler (1910: 94–5, 99 n.3); it goes without saying that this belt perfectly fits the appearance of the Milky Way.

102 The earliest attestation of this metaphor for the Milky Way is in Parmenides (fr. 11.2), who calls our Galaxy *gāla t’ouránion* “the heavenly milk”; cf. Kidd (1997: 352–3).

103 Soma is not only “milk,” but also “divine sperm”; cf. 9.86.39 (Soma is *retodhā* “the one who places the seed”); 1.64.35 (Soma is *rétas* “seed”); 9.74.1 (Soma is called *dívō rétasā* “(through) the celestial seed/sperm”); cf. also Lüders (1959: 703); Oberlies (1999: 42–44).

104 In fact, the constellation Auriga, which shares one of its stars with Taurus (β Tauri, the tip of Taurus’ horn), is mostly located on the Milky Way; cf. Kidd (1997: 239).

105 That Soma as the Milky Way reaches Taurus is apparent in 9.86.16ab: *pró ayāsid índur índrasya nískṛtam/ sákha sákhyur ná pró mināti sangīram* “Der Saft hat sich auf den Weg zu Indra’s Treffort gemacht; der Freund bricht nicht die Abrede mit dem Freund.”

106 Cf. 9.72.7; 77.1; 111.3; it is known that Soma also receives Indra’s epithet Vṛtrahan; cf. Macdonell (1898: 109). Interestingly, in 6.47.28, the divine Chariot is also said to be Indra’s *vajra*; this makes sense, because Auriga is located both on Taurus’
in astronomical terms. Thus, it is well known that Scorpio's position in the sky is also on the band of the Milky Way (cf. fig. 10). Under these circumstances, Indra's weapon, the vajra, may be the part of the Milky Way that stretches from Taurus to Scorpio (cf. fig. 10). That this is the case is confirmed by the Rig Veda itself:

8.14.13. \[\text{apā́m phénena námuceh śíra indród avartayah} \]
\[\text{víśvā yád ájaya spṛ́dhah} \]


Thus, during the third millennium BC, the appearance of the dawn sky at the spring equinox must have been spectacular; starting from the horns of Taurus, the arch of the Milky Way stretched across the whole sky to reach the other side of the vault, where Scorpio was located (cf. fig. 10); it was the time of the year when Indra's vajra finally defeated the dragon, which slowly sank under the western horizon and thus freed the day sky from its presence.

The conclusion that Soma represents the Milky Way can also explain the relationship between Soma and rtá (see above). As I already showed in the section on the Maruts, the association between the Maruts (the Pleiades) and rtá strongly suggests that rtá refers either to the ecliptic or to the cosmic order (“Time”) derived from it. Since the Milky Way stretches from Taurus to Scorpio, the association between Soma and rtá becomes natural; during the age of Taurus, the Milky Way crossed the ecliptic near the equinoctial points (cf. fig. 10), thus defining or representing the “world order.”

We can see that the concept of rtá is pivotal for the Vedic religion. This concept will be fully explained in the chapter on the Ādityas, which are the gods of rtá.

I conclude the discussion on the association between Indra and Soma with some remarks on Soma’s relationship with the Āśvins. As I noted above, the great twin-gods also enjoy a special relation
with Soma, being often invoked to come down to the worshipper and drink Soma.\textsuperscript{108} Given that the Āśvins represent the constellation Gemini, their association with Soma is logical and natural, since this constellation is partly situated on the band of the Milky Way.\textsuperscript{109} In addition, the location of the Āśvins’ chariot on the Milky Way, in the “immortal” heavenly stream, explains why this chariot is “laden with wealth.” Finally, the position of Gemini on the other side of the Milky Way with regards to the Chariot may have contributed to their image as good seafarers and rescuers from all sort of difficult situations.\textsuperscript{110}

\textbf{H. PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS I}

The first part of the present study shows that the nature of some of the most important gods in the \textit{Rig Veda} is celestial. Indra represents the equinoctial constellation Taurus, which announced the spring equinox between around 4000 and 2000 BC. At the same time, Indra’s foe, Vṛtra, represents the constellation Scorpio, which is diametrically opposed in the sky to Taurus. The myth of the fight between Indra and Vṛtra represents the cosmic fight between darkness and light, which takes place between the fall and spring equinoxes.\textsuperscript{111} This fight ends with Indra’s victory at the spring equinox, when Indra “conquers” the sun (that is, the sun is in Taurus). Indra is helped in this fight by his close companions, the Maruts, who represent the asterism of the Pleiades.

The mysterious Āśvins represent the huge constellation Gemini; their divine chariot represents parts of the constellation Auriga, which seems to have been imagined as a chariot in ancient Mesopotamia.

\textsuperscript{108} Cf. above 3.58.4; 4.55.5; 7.67.4; 7.74.3; 8.87.1; for other examples, cf. Macdonell (1897: 50).

\textsuperscript{109} Cf. 1.46.11 quoted above (a hymn dedicated to the Āśvins), in which Soma is called \textit{srutír diváḥ} “the stream of heaven”; for the relationship between the Āśvins and Soma, see my discussion above, in the section on the Āśvins.

\textsuperscript{110} In other words, the Twins have already “crossed the river” safely.

\textsuperscript{111} That Vṛtra belongs to the fall season (Scorpio rises heliacally at the autumn equinox) is shown by the fact that his “fortresses,” which Indra destroys, are autumnal (\textit{púro śáradīr}); cf. 1.131.4; 1.174.2; 6.20.10; in other words, Scorpio’s domination begins in autumn.
Indra and the Aśvins are spring constellations, which were invoked to bring prosperity during the early spring season in the temperate regions of Asia. The heliacal rising of Taurus at the spring equinox announced the rainy season, which was essential for the development of the crops. The Aśvins were probably invoked during the next month (April) to bring wealth to the worshippers, which also meant rich crops; this was the time of the year when, in the Asian temperate regions, the seeds were starting to grow.

One of the greatest gods in the Rig Veda, Soma, represents the Milky Way, which in ancient times was the most conspicuous and spectacular phenomenon in the night sky. Its association with Indra and the Aśvins is due to its close proximity to Taurus and Gemini, respectively. Therefore, the “divine juice” of the Rig Veda does not have its origin in a specific plant, but in the sky. In fact, why would a plant or its juice be regarded as among the greatest gods of any religion? The conclusion then is that the well-known Vedic plant that produced “soma” must have been only a means to “metaphorically” represent the “celestial river” in the ritual (cf. 9.61.10 above).

Soma can also be met with in the Iranian religion (cf. Haoma). This shows that the myth about the “celestial river” must have been conceived at least during the Indo-Iranian period, a fact that supports the dating of these myths to before 2000 BC.

Since Taurus announced the spring equinox between 4000 and 2000 BC, this means that Indra’s astronomical myth was conceived during that period of time. This conclusion further implies that the Vedic religion was brought to India from the outside. In addition, the fact that the Aśvins apparently are not present in the Iranian religion suggests that the myths about them were invented after the Indo-Aryans split from their Iranian brethren. This possibly shows that the split must have occurred before 2000 BC.

The most important conclusion so far, however, is that the Vedic religion was not concerned with obscure or — from the modern perspective — unintelligible deities. The Vedic religion is essentially an astral religion, which means that its greatest gods are celestial with respect to both their origin and nature. The Vedic people who created or developed this religion watched the sky with great

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112 This is obviously an *argumentum ex silentio*. Given the changes that the Zoroastrian reform performed on the Aryan (Indo-Iranian) religion, the possibility that the Aśvins *alias* Gemini were known to the Indo-Iranians cannot be completely excluded; cf. above n. 86; Puhvel (1987: 41).
attention. The objects of their worship were those natural phenomena that have always left the human race in astonishment and will certainly continue to do so in ages yet to come.

With these things in mind, we can now explore the nature of the other important Vedic gods.
THE VEDIC AGNI

Agni is among the greatest and most celebrated gods of the Vedic religion. One of his most mysterious characteristics is his dual nature. Thus, on the one hand, the Vedic hymns show Agni as being the terrestrial fire, which is started during a mysterious early-morning ritual; this role is consonant with the etymological/semantic association of the word “agni” with the PIE or Sanskrit words for “fire.”113 On the other hand, the hymns of the Rig Veda leave little doubt that Agni does not represent merely the cultic terrestrial fire, but also a “higher” divine character, whose origins are celestial.

One of the most important issues in Vedic mythology has been to determine the relation between Agni’s two aspects. Interestingly, the celestial Agni has been treated so far as something secondary and derived from the fire cult. Therefore, it is not surprising to find Agni listed as a “terrestrial deity” in the major studies of the Vedic religion.114 In all these studies, Agni’s celestial role is completely overshadowed by his “terrestrial” role. The present study attempts, from a totally different perspective, to reassess the importance of the celestial Agni.

The most striking characteristic of Agni, which clearly relates him to the sky, has been long noticed and concerns Agni’s celestial origin and birth; this origin is reflected in the myth of the mysterious Mātariśvan, who, similarly to the Greek Prometheus, brings the fire (Agni) from heaven to earth.115 As I noted above, this celestial origin of Agni has not been seen as an indication of Agni being a celestial god in his own right;116 on the contrary, the worship of the celestial Agni has always been thought to have its origin in the worship of the “terrestrial” Agni, that is, in the fire cult. To mention

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113 The PIE word for fire was reconstructed as *hnĝni- (cf. Lat. ignis); cf. West (2007: 266); of course, in Sanskrit the common noun designates the fire.

114 Cf. e.g., Macdonell (1897); Keith (1925): “The appearance of Agni is clearly merely a description of the fire”; Oldenberg (1894: 102–105).


116 A notable exception is Geldner (1931–1957), who acknowledges that there are two distinct Agnis: "das Opferfeuer" and "der Himmelsgott" (n.1 on 1.44.8).
some previous theories, Bergaigne argued that fire became divine when the sacrificial fire started to be worshipped as an intermediary between gods and men: “L’attribution au feu terrestre du caractère divin s’expliquerait déjà par la puissance effective de cet élément. Elle serait mieux justifiée encore pour le feu du sacrifice par le rôle d’intermédiaire qu’il joue, ainsi que nous le verrons, entre les hommes et les dieux.” Oldenberg followed the same idea with some variations when he thought that the heavenly Agni would merely represent the personification of the force of the cultic fire. In a similar way, Hillebrandt also starts from the importance of the fire cult; Keith thinks that the god Agni is “intimately connected with the element of which he is the deity,” i.e., with the domestic/cultic fire; Macdonell argues that “Agni comes to be celebrated as the divine counterpart of the earthly priesthood.” Obviously, this latter opinion refers to Agni’s well-known feature of being a divine priest. I will return to this interesting characteristic later in the present study.

It is clear that the accounts above are all based on the firm belief that the fire-cult could generate the personification of the fire and, subsequently, the emergence of a fire celestial deity. At first glance, this does not seem to be implausible. We will see, however, that the worship of Agni in the cult contains elements indicating that Agni is more than a mere personification of fire and that his origins cannot be simply derived from the cultic fire. In fact, even the word “personification” is in this case somewhat misleading. Agni has, indeed, some characteristics such as being flame-haired, tawny-haired, butter-backed, with seven tongues etc, which could indeed describe individualized objects; these features of Agni, however, do not represent the description of any personified object but represent mere metaphors. To give a clear example, it is well known that Agni is imagined as representing very different beings such as a priest (hotr), a bird, a horse or a bull. All these attributes, which are irreconcilable with one another, must be considered as metaphors and not as properties of a person/being. In other words, they do not show Agni as being a persona.

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117 Cf. Bergaigne (1878–1883: I 12)


120 Hillebrandt (1990: 49) is aware of these issues.

121 Keith (1925: 154) noted that Agni is not anthropomorphic.
Among the elements that are hard to reconcile with the theory that the fire-cult is at the origin of the divine Agni, two seem to be of extreme importance. These are, on one hand, Agni’s associations with natural phenomena such as the sun or lightning, and, on the other hand, his mysterious birth in the water(s). In the first case, it is not plausible that the Vedic sun could be conceived as having its origins in the cultic fire, or as being a form of fire. Sūrya is a highly individualized figure in the Vedic pantheon and his traits do not seem to be derived from fire. In the second case, it is hard to see how one can derive fire and water from each other, since they are two completely different elements. I will take up these issues below one by one.

It has been argued that, in some Rig Vedic passages, Agni is to be identified with the sun. Bergaigne, for example, thinks that the sun is often seen as a form of Agni and that the identification of the two gods originates in the comparison between them: “pour les poètes védiques la comparaison n’est pas éloignée de l’assimilation ... les deux termes d’une comparaison peuvent être identiques.” He exemplifies his argument with two passages from 6.4.6 and 3.14.4. His first example, however, shows precisely the opposite, namely that Agni is different from the sun; we can see below that the comparison particle “ná” leaves no doubt that Agni and the sun are only compared with each other, being therefore different from each other: ā́ sū́ryo ná bhānumádbhir arkaír ágne tatántha ródasī ví bhāsā́. The translation given by Bergaigne “en qualité de soleil” is only a means to make the Sanskrit text fit his hypothesis. In the second case he quotes, however, there is no comparison particle present in the text and Agni is indeed said to be “the sun of men”; thus, the second hemistich of 3.14.4 goes as follows: yác chocíṣā [from śocís “flame” — my note] sahasas putra tīṣṭhā abhí kṣitiḥ pratháyan sū́ryo níñ “(Agni) dass du, o Sohn der Kraft, mit deiner Flamme aufstehen mögest, über die Länder, sie ausbreitend, die Sonne der Männer.” The passage, however, still does not show that Agni is to be

122 Cf. Bergaigne (1878–1883: I 13); in the same passage, talking about “l’identité d’Agni sous les différentes manifestations de la chaleur et de la lumière,” Bergaigne also asserts that “... certain traits ne permettent guère de douter que cet astre [the sun — my note] ne soit encore designé sous le nom d’Agni ... .” Bergaigne considers lightning to also belong to these categories.


124 Geldner rejects translations such as “als Sonne die Länder ausbreitend für die Männer,” which compare Agni with the sun.
identified with Sūrya. The phrase “the sun of men” seems to indicate as well that Agni is only compared with the sun and not identical to it. Otherwise, Agni would have been called simply “the sun,” and not “the sun of/for men.”\textsuperscript{125}

Oldenberg also notes that Agni and the sun are indeed in a very close connection. Unlike Bergaigne, however, he makes it clear that Agni is not the sun: “Agni, das irdische Feuer, das mit der Sonne am Himmel vielmehr verglichen als ihr gleichgesetzt wird.”\textsuperscript{126} To prove his argument, Oldenberg quotes 5.85.2, in which the sun is clearly different from Agni: “Im Herzen schuf Varuṇa den Willen, im Wasser den Agni, die Sonne am Himmel, auf den Felsen den Soma.”

Macdonell’s opinions on this issue, on the other hand, are not consistent with one another. Thus, in one place he says that “Agni is to be identified with the sun; for the conception of the sun as a form of Agni is an undoubted Vedic belief.” In the same passage, however, he seems to believe the opposite: “Agni is usually thought of in his terrestrial form, being compared rather than identified with the sun.”\textsuperscript{127} Therefore, in this latter quote he seems to share Oldenberg’s opinion.

Hillebrandt also thinks that the sun is a form of Agni.\textsuperscript{128} To support his argument he gives 10.88.11 as an example. This is a hymn dedicated to Sūrya and Vaiśvānara (Agni), which Hillebrandt thinks are the same. The verse in question runs as follows: “Als die opferwürdigen Götter ihn an den Himmel setzten, den Sūrya, der Aditi Sohn, als das wandelnde Paar erschien, da erst sahen alle Welten.”\textsuperscript{129} The exact meaning of this verse, however, is obscure. Different Vedic commentators such as Yāska (fourth century BC) and Sāyaṇa (fourteenth century AD) interpreted the passage differently. Thus, if Sāyaṇa thought that the pair referred to Sūrya and Vaiśvānara, Yāska assumed that the pair represented the dawn and the sun. Therefore, it is not clear at all that Sūrya and Vaiśvānara are to be identified with each other in this passage. In fact, that Sūrya and Vaiśvānara are different is proved by

\textsuperscript{125} Both Geldner and Bergaigne take nṝnas an abbreviated G.pl. of the usual form nṛṇām.


\textsuperscript{127} Cf. Macdonell (1897: 93).

\textsuperscript{128} Cf. Hillebrandt (1990: I 90).

\textsuperscript{129} In Sanskrit: yadēd enam ādadhur yajñiyāso divi devāḥ sūryam āditeyām/ yadā cariṣṇā mithunāv ābhūtām ād it prápaśyan bhāvanāni vīśvā.
other verses in the same hymn, e.g., by 10.88.2, in which it is said that the sun became visible when Agni was born: āväḥ sūvar abhavaj jātē agnaū; obviously, the passage would not make any sense if Agni and the sun were the same.

Another controversial issue concerning Agni’s mythology is his mysterious birth, growth, and hiding place in the (celestial) waters. There are different interpretations of this myth. The commonest position can be exemplified by Bergaigne and Macdonell, who both consider this myth as a metaphor for Agni representing lightning. The basis for such an interpretation is certainly the fact that lightning is associated with rain/water. From a somewhat different perspective, Hillebrandt thinks that the waters represent the rainy season which obliterates the sun (Agni). With this latter opinion, we are back to the identity Agni = the sun. Oldenberg, on the other hand, is more prudent when he states that “gewöhnlich wird er [Agni — my note], wo er mit dem Blitz zusammen gennant wird, mit diesem — oder dieser mit ihm — verglichen und eben dadurch von ihm unterschieden.” Agni and lightning, therefore, are in his vision different from each other. Consequently, Oldenberg proposes another interpretation, which is based on the obvious fact that fire in general can be extinguished by water. In his opinion, Agni’s “dwelling/hiding in the waters” would be just a metaphor for the quenching of fire with water. Furthermore, probably because he could not make the connection between the “quenching of fire” and the existence of a personalized deity, Oldenberg makes the hypothesis that the myth of Agni dwelling in the waters is the result of the contamination of two earlier myths/stories; the first one would be about Agni as the cultic fire, whereas the second one would be about a water-demon (called Apām Napāt in the Rig Veda) with whom Agni would have been later identified. The combination of these two myths then would have led to the story of Agni

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130 Cf. Macdonell (1897: 92); Bergaigne (1878–1883: I 15.16).
131 In verse 2.6.5 (see Geldner’s translation below), Agni is invoked to bring rain.
133 Cf. Oldenberg (1894: 112).
135 Cf. Oldenberg (1990: 120).
135 Cf. 3.9.1; Macdonell (1897: 76); see below for an ampler commentary about Apām Napāt.
dwelling in the water. The scenario proposed by Oldenberg is certainly not impossible, but the probability of its existence is, from the perspective of Occam’s razor, low.

All the theories above, regardless of the degree of plausibility some of them may have, ultimately fail to explain what is the fundamental nature of Agni and why Agni is celebrated as one of the greatest gods in the *Rig Veda*. In particular, the theory of Agni being originally the sacrificial fire fails to explain why it was this particular fire that needed to be celebrated, and not others, and why there should be a connection between the sacrificial fire and the sun or the waters. Last but not least, these theories fail to explain why fire was mainly celebrated at dawn. I do not see any reason for the celebration of fire at the beginning of the day. To my mind, evenings (dusks) are more appropriate times to celebrate fire.

Therefore, I think that Agni’s nature should be investigated from a totally different perspective. This perspective concerns a detailed analysis of Agni’s celestial nature and of his associations with phenomena pertaining to the sky. Below, I enumerate these celestial characteristics of Agni, which are revealed in numerous Rig Vedic passages.

The following verses show Agni as being a strong light connected with dawn:

1.79.1. ... hell strahlend [Agni — my note], der Vertraute der Uṣas ... (*śucibhrājā uṣāso nāvedā*)

1.94.5. Du bist der Hirt der Ansiedlungen; als seine Angehörigen kommen Zweifüßler und Vierfüßler während der Nächte. Du bist der prächtige große Vorgesicht der Morgenröte (*citráḥ praketā uṣāso mahāṅ asi*) ...

3.2.14. *śucīṃ nā yāmann isirāṃ suvardśaṃ ketūṃ divō rocanasthām uṣarbūdham agním mūrdhānam divō āpratiskutaṃ tām īmahe nāmasā vājīnam bṛhāt.*

3.2.14. Emsig wie die helle (Sonne) auf der Fahrt, sonnenaugig, des Himmels Banner, im Glanze weilend, am frühen Morgen wach, das unbestrittene Oberhaupt des Himmels, den siegewinnenden Agni gehen wir mit hoher Verbeugung an.

3.6.7. ... den vielen erglänzenden Morgenröten glänzest du nach ...
3.15.2. Sei du beim Aufleuchten dieser Morgenröte, du nach Sonnenaufgang unser Hüter!

3.20.1. Der mit den Lobliedern Fahrende ruft am Morgen den Agni, die Uṣas ...

4.3.11. ... ávih śūvar abhavaj jātē agnāū.

4.3.11. ... die Sonne kam zum Vorschein als Agni geboren war.

4.13.1. prāṭi agrīr uṣāsām āgram akhyad ... út sūryo jyōtiṣā devā eti.

4.13.1. Agni hat den Anbruch der Morgenröten erwartet ... Gott Sūrya geht mit seinem Lichtglanz auf.

7.6.7. Gott Vaiśvānara hat bei Aufgang der Sonne die Schätze der Tiefe an sich genommen ...

7.9.1. ábodhi jārā uṣāsām upāsthād.

7.9.1. Der Buhle der Morgenröten ist erwacht aus ihrem Schoße (auflieuchtend) ...

7.9.3. ... citrābhānur uṣāsām bhātī āgre apāṃ gārbhaḥ prasūva ā viveśa.

7.9.3. ... Er (Agni) leuchtet noch vor den Morgenröten in prächtigem Glanz; der Wasser Kind ist er in die sprossenden Pflanzen eingegangen.

10.3.5. svanā nā yāsya bhāmāsaḥ pávante rōcānāsya bhṛhatāḥ sudīvaḥ

10.3.5. Dessen Strahlen rein werden wie die Töne, wenn der Hohe erglänzt, der den schönen Tag (sudīvaḥ) bringt, der mit den vorzüglichsten, schärfsten, spielenden, höchsten Lichtern den Himmel erreicht.

10.3.3. bhadrō bhadrāyā sācamāna āgāt svāsāraṃ jārō abhī eti paścāt.

supraketaír dyūbhir agrīr vitiṣṭhan rūsadbhir vārṇair abhī rāmām asthāt
10.3.3. Der Löbliche ist in Begleitung der löblichen (Uṣas) gekommen; ihr Buhle geht er hinter der Schwester her. Mit den glückverheißenenden Tagen breitet sich Agni aus; mit seinen hellen Farben hat er das Dunkel bemeistert.

10.8.4. Denn du gehst jeder Uṣas voraus (uṣásám ety ágram), du Guter ...

10.88.12. víśvasmā agníṃ bhūvanāya devá vaiśvānaram ketúm áhnām akṛṇvan
á yás tatāna uṣáso vibhātīr ápo ūrṇoti támo arcīṣā yān

10.88.12. Für die ganze Welt machten die Götter den Agni Vaiśvānara zum Zeichen der Tage; der die aufleuchtenden Morgenröten ausgebretet hat, er deckt auch die Finsternis ab, wann er mit seinem Lichtstrahl kommt.

Agni, therefore, is born in the morning. He brings the sun up in the sky, anticipating the day; he appears at dawn, he is the dawn's lover; the sun rises after Agni appears. Most importantly, he is called the “head of the sky” (agním mūrdhānaṃ divó; cf. 3.2.14 above), which is an indication that Agni’s place might be in the sky. Numerous other Vedic passages confirm the idea that, indeed, the “celestial” Agni is located in the sky:

1.59.2. mūrdhā divó nābhir agníḥ prthóvyā ...

1.59.2. Das Haupt des Himmels, der Nabel der Erde ist Agni ...

1.96.5. ... Zwischen Himmel und Erde erglänzt er (wie) ein Goldschmuck (dyávaksámā rukmó antár vi bhāti). Die Götter erhalten (dhārayan) Agni, den Schätzespender.

1.108.12. yád indrágni úditā sūriyasya mádhye divāḥ svadhāyā mádāyethe
átah pári vrṣanāv á há yātām áthā sómasya pibataṃ sutásya

1.108.12. Wenn ihr, Indra und Agni, im Aufgang der Sonne, in der Mitte des Himmels euch nach eigenem Ermessen ergötzet, so kommest doch ja von dort her, ihr Bullen, und trinket vom gepressten Soma!
1.141.4. Wenn er vom höchsten Vater her geholt wird ... (vom Himmel; cf. Geldner)

1.143.2. Als er [Agni — my note] im höchsten Himmel geboren wurde (sá jáyamánah paramé viomani) ... / ... Als er nach seinem Ratschluss in (voller) Größe entflammt wurde, erleuchtete seine Glut Himmel und Erde.

1.150.3. Der Sterbliche ist glänzend, o Redegewaltiger, groß, der Höchste im Himmel (sá candró vipra mártiyo mahó vrádhantamo diví) ...

2.1.15. Du bist diese alle zusammen und wiegst sie an Größe auf und überragst sie noch, du edelgeborener Gott Agni, wenn sich deine Kraft hier in (voller) Größe entfaltet, über Himmel und Erde ...

2.2.1. Erbauet durch Opfer den Jātavedas, verehret den Agni mit Opfergabe, den himmlischen Hotṛ ...

2.6.5. (Bring) uns Regen vom Himmel ...

3.2.12. vaiśvānarāḥ pratnáthā nákam āruhad
divás prṣṭhāṁ bhándamánah sumánmabhīḥ


3.2.13. rtávānāṃ yajñiyāṃ vípram ukthiyām ā yāṁ dadhé mātarīśvā divi kṣáyam
tām citráyāmaṃ hārikeśam īmahe sudītím agnīṁ suvitāya návyase

3.2.13. Den wahrhaften, opfergewaltigen, redefertigen, preislichen, den Mātariśvan an sich nahm, da er im Himmel wohnte, ihn, dessen Auffahrt prächtig ist, den goldhaarigen, schön leuchtenden Agni gehen wir zu erneuter Wohlfahrt an.
3.6.2. Du erfülltest bei deiner Geburt die beiden Welthälften und du Opfersamer (?) ragtest auch noch an Größe sogar über Himmel und Erde hinaus, o Agni.

3.6.4. Der Große, der dauernd an seinen Platz gesetzt ist, (verkehrt) als Begehrter (hāryamānah) zwischen Himmel (und Erde) ...

3.13.4. Dieser Agni soll unserer (Götter)ladung seinen heilsamsten Schutz gewähren, daraus er das Gut im Himmel and im Wasser über unsere Lande ausschütten möge.

3.22.3. Agni, du gehst zur Flut des Himmels ...

3.25.1. Agni, du bist des Himmels kluger Sohn (ágne diváh sūnúr asi prácetás) ...

3.25.3. agnúr dyāvāprthiví viśvājanye á bhāti devī amṛte ámūraḥ

3.25.3. Agni beleuchtet Himmel und Erde, die allen Völkern gehörenden, unsterblichen Göttinnen ...

3.25.4. Agni und Indra! Kommet hierher in das Haus des Opferspenders ...

3.26.5. Die allbekannten Marut, durch Agni verschönt ...

3.26.8. ... er überschaute Himmel und Erde (... ád íd dyávāprthiví páry apasyat).

3.27.12. ūrjó nápátam adhvaré didivársam úpa dyávi
agním íle kavíkratum

3.27.12. Das Kind der Kraft, der bei der Opferhandlung zum Himmel leuchtet, den Agni rufe ich an, der Sehergabe besitzt.

136 This was seen as a “Paradoxon” by Geldner.
3.5.10. Durch das Brennholz sich aufrichtend hat Agni das Firmament emporgerichtet (úd astambhit samídha nákam ṛṣvó), indem er das höchste Lichter wird (agnír bhávann uttamo rocanánām) …

3.4.4. ... divó vā nábhā ní asádi hótā
3.4.4. ... im Nabel des Himmels hat der Hotṛ sich niedergelassen.

4.3.8. ... du den Himmel kennst (divó jātavedaś) …

4.5.1. vaiśvānarāya milhūse sajōsāh kathā dāśema agnáye brhád bháh
ánūnena bhratá vaksāthena úpa stabhāyad upamín ná ródhaḥ
4.5.1. Wie könnten wir einmütig dem Agni Vaiśvānara, dem Belohnenden, hohen Glanz verleihen? In vollkommenen, hohem Wachstum stützt er (den Himmel) wie der Pfeiler den Deich.

6.1.7. ... Du führtest die Clan leuchtend mit dem hohen Lichte des Himmels, Agni (tuvām viśo anayo dīdiyāno divó agne brhatā rocanēna).

6.7.1. Das Haupt des Himmels (mūrdhānām divó) …

6.7.6. vaiśvānarāsyā vūmitāni cákṣasā sánūni divó amṛtasya ketūnā
tāsyēd u viśvā bhūvanādhi mūrdhānī ...
6.7.6. Durch das Auge des Vaiśvānara, durch das Wahrzeichen der Unsterblichkeit sind die Höhe des Himmels ausgemessen. Auf seinem Haupte (stehen) alle Welten …

7.5.2. Im Himmel erstarkt ward Agni auf Erden eingesetzt …

7.5.7. Im höchsten Himmel geboren (sā jáyamānāḥ paramē viōman)

7.15.4. návam nú stómam agnáye diváh śyenāya jījanam …
7.15.4. Ein neues Lied will ich jetzt für Agni, den Falken des Himmels hervorbringen.
I shall now briefly summarize the main ideas present in the numerous passages above. Agni is the head of the sky and shimmers between the sky and the earth; both Indra and Agni are located in the sky; Agni is brought down to the earth from the sky (the well-known myth of the mysterious Mātārīśvan, the character interpreted as the Hindu Prometheus, who brings the heavenly fire to mankind);\(^{137}\) Agni was born in heaven, in the sky's navel; he is the sky's son or the sky's hawk; the sky and the earth received his light; Agni is mortal, but he is the highest in the sky; his strength reaches the sky and the earth; Agni lives in the sky, goes up in the sky; his place is eternal, and he is wanted both on earth and in the sky (3.6.4), a fact that Geldner thought to be a paradox; Agni goes to the celestial river; he lights up both the sky and the earth; he knows the sky and supports the sky's firmament as a pillar; he is the light of the sky and measures the height of the sky; all the worlds stand on Agni's head; he is the sky's master, guardian, and guide.

It is obvious that all these passages are not the result of some fancy views about Agni's relation with the sky. Their great number and consistency with one another show that not only is the celestial Agni born in/from the sky, but also that he is located in the sky itself. In particular, the verses 3.2.12, in which Agni climbs up the firmament on the sky's back, and 3.5.10, in which he becomes the highest light, leave no doubt that Agni is not the fire, but something else, which has to do with a certain light in the sky. Certainly, the case can be made again that, in all these instances, Agni, the great, divine

\(^{137}\) Oldenberg (1894: 122) calls Mātārīśvan "der Prometheus des Veda."
light of the sky, is the sun. We already saw that this was not likely. In fact, some of the passages above also show Agni as clearly different from the sun; thus, in 4.11.1 Agni shines besides the sun, and in 4.13.1, 10.3.2 Agni supports the sun. These examples are not isolated; other passages also make it clear that Agni is different from the sun:

1.148.1. ... prächtig [Agni — my note] wie die Sonne zur Schönheit erstrahlend (súvar ná citrāṃ vāpuṣe vibhāvam).

3.2.14. śucim ná yāmann iṣirāṃ suvardśaṃ ketāṃ divā rocanstham uṣarbūdham agnim mārdhānamā divā āpratiskutam tām ĭmahe nāmasā vājīnam brhát

3.2.14. Emsig wie die helle (Sonne) auf der Fahrt, sonnenaugig, des Himmels Banner, im Glanze weilend, am frühen Morgen wach, das unbestrittene Oberhaupt des Himmels, den siegewinnenden Agni gehen wir mit hoher Verbeugung an.

3.5.5. ... der Jüngste hütet den Weg der Sonne (pāṭi yahvāś cāraṇaṃ sūryasya).

3.3.5. Den schimmernden Agni ... der das Sonnenlicht findet ...

4.3.11. ... die Sonne kam zum Vorschein als Agni geboren war (āvīḥ súvar abhavaj jātē agnāu)

7.6.7. Gott Vaiśvānara hat bei Aufgang der Sonne die Schätze der Tiefe an sich genommen (á devō dade budhnīyā vāsūni vaiśvānarā úditā sūryasya) ...

Therefore, the celestial Agni is not the sun, although he is present in the sky. Agni is also different from lightning as the following verse clearly shows:

To sum up: Agni, which is neither the sun nor lightning, is consistently shown as a light in the sky, appearing at dawn, being inexplicably celebrated at dawn. All these facts change completely the perspective on Agni, and point in a transparent way to his real nature. Thus, as a bright light in the sky, Agni must be a star or a constellation. In fact, in 10.88.12–13, Agni is called expressis verbis a “star” (nākṣatram),” which casts away any remaining doubt about Agni’s celestial nature:

10.88.12. \( vīśvasmā agním bhúvanāya devá vaiśvānarām ketūm áhnām akṛṇvan \)
\( á yás tatāna uṣáso vibhātír ápo ūrṇoti támo arcīṣā yán. \)

10.88.12. Für die ganze Welt machten die Götter den Agni Vaiśvānara zum Zeichen der Tage; der die aufleuchtenden Morgenröten ausgebreitet hat, er deckt auch die Finsternis ab, wann er mit seinem Lichtstrahl kommt.

10.88.13. \( vaiśvānarāṁ kaváyo yajñíyāso agním devá ajanayann ajuryám \)
\( nákṣatram pratnám áminac cariṣṇú yakṣásyádhyašam taviṣám bṛhántam \)

10.88.13. Die opferwürdigen Seher, die Götter, erschufen den Agni Vaiśvānara, den alterlosen, das uralte, nie (die Richtung) verfehlende, wandelnde Gestirn (nākṣatram), den starken, hohen Aufseher des Geheimnisses.

The conclusion that Agni is a star/constellation is not unexpected, since in the previous chapter I showed that the main Vedic gods represent celestial bodies. It is then natural for Agni, one of the greatest Vedic gods, to be of the same kind. In fact, the way in which Indra/Taurus and Agni are invoked leaves, again, no doubt that Agni’s nature is identical to that of Indra, that is, celestial (star or constellation):

8.38.5. ... Indra und Agni kommt her ... 

8.40.8. \( yá núcśvetāv avó divá uccárāta úpa dyúbhiḥ \)

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138 Agni is compared to gold or has a golden body (e.g., RV 2.2.4; 7.3.6; 4.3.1; 10.20.9).

139 Indra, the Aśvins, and Soma represent Taurus, Gemini, and the Milky Way, respectively.
8.40.8. Die beide [Indra and Agni — my note] Weiβglänzenden, die unterhalb des Himmels Tag für Tag aufzugehen pflegen ...

1.108.3. ... Lasst euch vereint nieder, Indra und Agni; ihr Bullen, schüttet in euch vom bullenstarken Soma! (tā́v indrāgni sadhríañcā niśádyā vṛṣṇah sómasya vṛṣaná vṛṣethām ...)

Agni, therefore, represents a star or a constellation. This explains why Agni, like Indra and the Aśvins, is invoked at dawn and why he is said to appear at dawn. In other words, Agni is celebrated at dawn not because he represents the god of fire but because he is a star appearing on the eastern horizon just before sunrise, that is, in astronomical terminology, a star rising heliacally. The passages that describe Agni's appearance at dawn then describe the heliacal rising of this star.

It is obvious that, in order for him to receive such cultic importance, Agni must have been a special and astronomically significant bright star in the sky. To identify this star, I will first appeal to the other important aspect of Agni's mythology, which is his association with the waters (āpaḥ). Thus, the waters are Agni's abode (8.43.9; 5.85.2; 7.49.4; 10.9.6; 10.91.6); Agni's abode is in apāṁ upāståthe "the lap of the waters" (6.8.4), in the dark (6.9.7); strangely for his nature, Agni is kindled in the waters (10.45.1). Agni is called apāṁ gārbham "the germ of the waters" (3.1.12–13; 3.5.3; 1.70.3) and apāṁ nápāt "the son of the waters" (3.9.1), which is one of his mythical appearances (2.35). The hymn 2.35, in particular, is very important for the present discussion, since it is entirely dedicated to Apām Napāt, whom the poet associates or identifies with Agni. I quote below some relevant verses.

2.35.3. Während die einen sich vereinigen, münden andere (ins Meer); die Flüsse füllen den gemeinsamen Ozean. Diesen reinen, leuchtenden Apām Napāt umgeben die reinen Gewässer (apāṁ nápātam pári tasthur ápaḥ).

2.35.4. tám ásmerā yuvatāyo yuvānam marmṛjyāmānāh pári yanti ápaḥ
sá śukrébhīḥ śíkvabhī revād asmé didāyūndhmó gḥṛtānimírīg āpsú

2.35.4. Ohne (verschämt) zu lächeln, umkreisen (ihn) die Jungfrauen, die Gewässer, den Jugendlichen putzend. Mit seinen hellen, geübten (Gliedern) leuchtet er reichlich bei
uns, ohne Brennholz (leuchtet er) in den Gewässern, dessen Festgewand das Schmalz ist.

2.35.7. In dessen eigenem Hause die gutmelke Kuh steht, die schwelt seine Lebenskraft; er isst die gutbekömmliche Nahrung. Apām Napāt, der in den Gewässern kräftige Nahrung hat, erstrahlt, um dem Verehrer seine Schätze zu spenden (sō 'pāṃ nāpād ārjāyann apsu antār vasudēyāya vidhātē vī bhātī).

2.35.9. apāṃ nāpād ā hī āsthād upāsthām jihmānām ārdhvō vidyūtaṃ vāsānāh tāśya jyēṣṭham mahimānām vāhantīr hiranyavarṇāḥ pāri yanti yahvīḥ.

2.35.9. Denn Apām Napāt hat ihren Schoß bestiegen, aufrecht stehend, während sie quer liegen, in Blitz sich kleidend. Seine höchste Hoheit tragend umkreisen ihn die goldfarbigen Jugendlichen.

2.35.10. hiranyarūpāḥ sā hiranyasamudrg apāṃ nāpāt sēd u hiranyavarṇāḥ hiranyāyāt pāri yōner niśādyā hiranyadā dadati ānnam asmai

2.35.10. Goldähnlich (hiranyarūpāḥ), wie Gold ausehend ist der Apām Napāt, derselbe auch goldfarbig, nachdem er sich niedergelassen hat aus goldenen Schoße (kommend). Die Goldgeber geben ihm Nahrung.

2.35.11. tāḍ asyānikam utā cāru nāma apīcīyaṃ vardhate nāptur apām yām indhāte yuvatāyaḥ sām itthā hiranyavarṇaṃ ghṛtām ānnam asya

2.35.11. Dieses sein Antlitz und der teuer Name des Apām Napāt wird Heimlich groß, den die Jungfrauen hier entzünden. Goldfarbige Schmalz ist seine Speise.

2.35.13. sā śīṃ vṛṣājanayat tāsu gārbhaṃ sā śīṃ śiśur dhayati tām rihanti só 'pāṃ nāpād ānabhimlātavārṇo anyāsyeyehā tanuvā viveśa

2.35.14.  
asmín padé paramé tasthivā́ṃsan adhvasmábhir viśváhā didivā́ṃsam
ápo náptre ghṛtám ánnam váhantīḥ svayám átkaiḥ pári diyanti yahvih

2.35.14.  
Ihn, der an diesem fernsten Orte seinen Stand hat, der allezeit mit fleckenlosen
(Flammen) leuchtet und sich selbst mit Gewändern (bekleidet), umschweben die
jüngsten Gewässer, in dem sie dem (Apām Napāt) ihr Schmalz als Speise bringen.

2.35.15.  
áyāmsam agne sukšitíṃ jánāya áyāmsam u maghávadbhyah suvṛktím

2.35.15.  
Ich habe, o Agni, dem Volke, gute Wohnung gewährt, ich habe den Lohnherren ein
gutes Lied gewährt ...

The hymn dedicated to Apām Napāt is extremely important for the present argument because
it identifies Apām Napāt “the son of the waters” with Agni, as the last verse 2.35.15 clearly shows.140
This identification is also supported by the fact that Apām Napāt's attributes are strikingly similar to
those of Agni. Thus, Apām Napāt is surrounded by waters; he shines like lightning in spite of being lit
without firewood, and his food is in the waters; he resembles gold; he is the bright child of the waters,
who grows in the waters. Below, I present other significant passages about Agni, in which his
characteristics are similar to those of Apām Napāt in the hymn mentioned above (2.35):

1.65.9.  
Er zischt dasitzend wie der Schwan im Wasser (śvásiti apsú haṃsó ná sīdan) ...

1.67.9–10.  
viyó vīrūtsu ródhan mahitva utá prajá utá prasūṣv antāh
cūtir apām dáme viśvāyuḥ saúdeva dhārāḥ sammāya cakruḥ

1.67.9–10.  
Der in den Pflanzen mächtig wächst, sowohl das (neugeborene) Kind, als in den
befruchteten (Pflanzen), der Geist der Wasser, lebenslänglich im Hause. Wie der
Werkmeister ein Wohnhaus haben sie gleichmäßig seinen Sitz bereitet.

140 Cf. Geldner at 2.35.15; Macdonell (1897: 70): “the deity is invoked as Agni and must be identified with him.”
1.95.8. tveṣāṁ rūpāṁ kr̥nuta úttaram yāt saṃpr̥cānāh sādane góbhir abdhīh

Er nimmt seine funkelnde Gestalt an, die sein oberes (Gewand) ist, wenn er an seinem Platz mit (Kuh)schmalz, mit Wasser in Berührung kommt.

1.143.3. asyā tveṣā ajārā asyā bhānāvaḥ susāmdṛśaḥ suprātikasya sudyūtaḥ
bhātvakṣaso áti aktúr nā síndhavo agné rejante ásasanto ajārāḥ

Seine funkelnden alterlosen (Flammen), seine Strahlen, des schönleuchtenden, schön zu schauenden von schönem Angesicht, des lichtstarken Agni, zittern die Nacht über gleich dem Farbenspiel der Flüsse, nicht schlafend, nicht alternd.

1.149.4. abhī dvijānmā trī rōcañāni viśvā rājāṃsi śuśucānō asthāt
hōtā yājiṣṭho apām sadhāsthe

Der Zweigeborene hat flammend sich über die drei Lichträume, über alle Welten erhoben, der bestopfernde Hotṛ am Sammelort der Gewässer.

3.1.4. ávardhayan subhāgaṃ saptā yahvāḥ śvetāṃ jajñānám aruṣám mahītvā

Die sieben jüngsten (Ströme) zogen den Holden groß, den weiß und rötlich in voller Größe geborenen.

3.3.5. candrāṁ agníḥ candrāratham hārivratam vaisvānarām apsuśādām suvarvīdam
vigāhāṁ tāṁ tāviṣibhir āvṛtam bhūṁ devāśa ihā suṣrīyam dadhuḥ

Den schimmernden Agni mit schimmerndem Wagen, dessen Werk golden ist, den Vaiśvānara, der im Wasser wohnt, der das Sonnenlicht findet, den untertauchenden, zielerreichenenden, von Stärken umgebenen, ungeduldigen, herrlichen haben die Götter hierhergesetzt.

3.9.2. kāyamāno vanā tvaṃ yān mātṛr ājagann apāḥ
nā tāt te agne pramṛṣe nivārtanam yād dūre sānī ihābhavaḥ.
Wenn du, der du an den Hölzern deine Freude hast, in deine Mütter, die Gewässer, eingegangen bist, so sollst du, Agni, die Rückkehr nicht vergessen, (und) dass du, der in Ferne weilende, (früher) hier warst.

Vom Himmel wurde Agni zuerst geboren, ein zweites Mal von uns, der Jātavedas. Den zum dritten im Wasser (Geborenren), den nie Ermattenden entzündend, ruft ihn in guter Absicht der wie ein Herrscher Denkende wach.

Dich ... den im Euter des Himmels (Weilenden) ... dich, den im dritten Dunkelraum Weilenden, im Schoße des Wassers zogen die Büffel groß.

(Neu)geboren (tritt) der große Hotṛ vor, der Wolkenkundige; der unter Männern Sitzende saß im Schoße der Gewässer.

Als da die hohen Gewässer kamen, das All als Keim empfangend, den Agni erzeugend, da entstand er daraus ...
2. Den prächtigen glänzenden Stern Tištriya verehren wir, der friedliches Wohnen, gutes Wohnen gewährt, den hellen, leuchtenden, hervorblinkenden, umherstrahlenden, heilkraftigen, im Lauf schnaubenden, erhabenen, der mit leuchtenden, lauterem Schein weit umherstrahlt, - und das Wasser, das weite Meer bildet ...


4. Den prächtigen glänzenden Stern Tištriya verehren wir, den regenerzeugenden (afščiθram)\textsuperscript{141} erhabenen Helden, den kräftigen, in der Ferne blinkenden, erhabenen, übermächtigen; von ihm ... vom Wasserkind (sein?) Geschlecht (apqm nafəδrat hača čiθram) ...\textsuperscript{142}

5. Den prächtigen glänzenden Stern Tištriya verehren wir, nach dem sich Klein- und Großvieh sehnen, und die Menschen ... Wann wird uns der prächtige glänzende Tištriya aufgehen ... ?

7. Da half ihm der Weise Herr\textsuperscript{143}, der Schöpfer, da die Wasser und Pflanzen ...

8. Den prächtigen glänzenden Stern Tištriya verehren wir ... Zu der rossgestalteten wahrhaftigen Flut des kräftigen schöngeschöpften, tiefen Sees Vurukurta mit seinen weiten Wassern kommt er [Tištriya — my note] fürwahr herzu und lässt die Flut heranwogen ...

\textsuperscript{141} This is an Avestan word, which Darmsteter (1882) translates as “the seed of the waters,” and Panaino (1990: I 30, 92) as “the origin of rains” (cf. Lommel); Herzel (1947: 585–586) translates it as “kindred to water,” and considers it to mean “the son of Apqm Napāt.”

\textsuperscript{142} Bartholomae (1904) translates čiθram as “Ursprung, Herkunft, Nachkommenschaft,” namely “origin”; hača means “from”; therefore, literally, the passage can be translated as “whose origin/nature is from Apqm Napāt; cf. also Lommel (1927: 50); nafəδrat is another morphological form of Napāt (in the ablative here; cf. Skt. naptṛ-); cf. Bartholomae (1904); Grassmann (1964).

\textsuperscript{143} “Der weise Herr” is the supreme Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazdāh; cf. Panaino (1990: I 33, 59).
11. Wenn die Menschen mich dem Gebet, das meinen Namen nennt, verehren würden, so wie die anderen Götter mit Gebeten, die ihre Namen nennen, verehrt warden, so käme ich zu den wahrhaftigen Männern (zur bestimmen Lebenszeit?)¹⁴⁴ ...  

32. Von da an, o Spitāma Zarathuštra, steigt der prächtigen glänzenden Tištriya wieder aus dem See Vurukurta ...  

35. Den prächtigen glänzenden Stern Tištriya verehren wir, der von da an zugleich mit der strahlenden Morgenröte daherfliegt auf fernumbiegendem Weg auf der von den Göttern bestimmten Bahn, der vorgeschriebenen wasserreichen, zur Freude des Weisen Herr ...  

36. Den prächtigen glänzenden Stern Tištriya verehren wir, nach welchem die Jahresbestellung des Menschen und die raterteilenden Herrn und die wilden Tiere ... ausblicken, wenn er emporsteigt.  

37. Den prächtigen glänzenden Stern Tištriya verehren wir, der sich schnell dahinschwingt, der im Schwung dahinfährt ... zum See Vurukurta ...  

44. Den prächtigen glänzenden Stern Tištriya verehren wir, den der weise Herr zum Herrn und Aufseher über alle Sterne bestellte ...  


The Avestan passages strikingly echo the Vedic passages about Agni and Apām Napāt. Thus, Tištrya shines brightly in the sky and originates in the waters or has a close connection to them; the waters and the plants take care of it. It shines in the east and is venerated by men. It appears in the sky at dawn. It is the lord and overseer of all stars and is associated with the deity called Apām Napāt.  

These characteristics of Tištriya strongly indicate that this star is, in all likelihood, identical  

¹⁴⁴ “At the appointed time”; cf. Panaino (1990: 104).  
¹⁴⁵ Cf. Av. afšciθraēbiiō, which Panaino (1990: 135) translates as “among the rain-originators” (i.e. the stars).
with the star Agni. This conclusion is indeed bold, but, as I have shown above, it is not the result of a mere comparison between the Vedic and Avestan texts. Independently of the Iranian texts, the Rig Veda showed that Agni’s nature was celestial (stellar). On the other hand, the deity called Apām Napāt must be of Indo-Iranian origin, since he belongs to both the Vedic and the Iranian pantheons. Certainly, it is still unclear at this point whether this deity is identical with Tištriya /Agni or not. The clear association of Apām Napāt with both Tištriya and Agni, however, along with the similar jargon used to describe these stars, supports the hypothesis that Agni is, indeed, the star Tištriya.

The identity of Tištriya is a thorny issue. The scholarly consensus is that it represents the star Sirius, the brightest fixed star in the northern hemisphere. This identification is based on a passage in Plutarch (first century AD), who states that, in the Persian religion, the star Sirius was created by Horomazes (Ahura Mazdā) to be the guardian and scout for the other stars.

The theory that Tištriya is identical with Sirius encounters some difficulties. One of these concerns the fact that, as some Avestan verses above show, Tištriya is said to bring rain. As is well known, Sirius’ heliacal rising occurred in the middle of the summer heat. This is hard to reconcile with the idea of Sirius bringing rain to the land. Panaino’s theory (1995: 19–21) that the “rain” in such passages is to be identified with shooting stars or meteor showers, which would occur most frequently

146 Boyce (1982: I 40–48) identifies Apām Napāt with Varuṇa; her evidence is based on Yt. 13.95, in which Mitra’s association with Apām Napāt (invoked as “protectors of the lands”) would be similar to that between Mitra and Varuṇa in the Rig Veda. This theory is questionable. Unlike Agni, Varuṇa, who is indeed associated with the watery element, is never called Apām Napāt in the Rig Veda.

147 Sirius was well known in the ancient world; the Greeks called it ἄστερας “the Dog”; cf. Il. 22.27–30; Σέριος (cf. Lat. Sirius) is also used by the Greeks from ancient times (cf. e.g., Hes. Op. 417; 587; 609). Sirius was highly venerated in Egypt (as the goddess Isis), where its heliacal rising announced the flooding of the Nile.

148 Plut. De Is. et Os. 47: “He (Horomazes) set up among them [the stars — my note] one star, Sirius, before the rest, to be as it were a sentinel and a scout”; cf. Panaino (1995: 6); Panaino (2005); Boyce (1982: II 204–206); Scherer (1953: 113).


150 For the Greeks and the Romans, the heliacal rising of Sirius during the summer time announced torrid days, which could bring unbearable heat, with the subsequent parching effect on the crops, diseases etc. Since Sirius was part of the Canis Maior “the Dog,” the Romans nicknamed this star Canicula “the little dog,” a word which in Romance languages ended up meaning “burning heat” (e.g., Fr. canicule); cf. Kidd (1997: 306–08).
after the rise of Sirius (during the summer), is hardly credible.

The considerations above are an impediment to the theory that identifies Tištriya/Agni with Sirius. In spite of this, some of Agni’s mythological features can be explained through Agni’s identification with Sirius. Thus, it is well known that Sirius has a long period of invisibility in the sky, which is due to its position towards the south of the celestial vault. The rebirth of Agni then may be a metaphor for Sirius's reappearance in the sky after a long period of invisibility. Obviously, this period of invisibility would be able to account for why the Vedic people invoked Agni with so much fervor. It seems then that Sirius can still be considered a good candidate for a possible identification with Agni. The biggest obstacle against the identification of Agni with Sirius, however, lies elsewhere. Thus, the star Agni is said to “hide and grow” in the waters. I do not see how Agni’s possible identification with Sirius could explain this part of the myth.

To solve the riddle, I will appeal to verse 45 of the Tištriya hymn, in which it is said that the star Tištriya moves in the midst of the stars. At first glance, this seems to be strange, since a star does not move relative to the other stars. There are, however, stars that are not fixed; these are the planets. The possibility that Tištriya represents a planet gives an expected twist to the present argument. Thus, it is well known that, among the planets, there is one that represents the brightest object in the sky after the sun and the moon; this is the planet Venus, which is an object even brighter than Sirius and which has indeed the property of moving amongst stars. Is Agni alias Tištriya Venus?

That the hypothesis above is not without foundation is shown by the following Rig Vedic passages (10.88.13 already quoted above):

10.88.13. Die opferwürdigen Seher, die Götter, erschufen den Agni Vaiśvānara, den alterlosen, das uralte, nie (die Richtung) verfehlende, wandelnde Gestirn (náḵṣatram ... áminac cariṃṣtu), den starken, hohen Aufseher des Geheimnisses.

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151 Because of its location, which presupposes a shorter trajectory in the sky, Sirius is absent from the sky about 70 days before its heliacal rising in the summer; cf. Evans (1998: 3–5, 195–196).

152 The brightness of Venus also perfectly explains its association with fire (Agni).
Agni’s attributes in these two passages (or, at least, in the former one) point to his being a planet rather than a fixed star. Thus, Agni is a “moving” star (*cariṣṇū*); he is not “bound” and follows his own law. The hypothesis that Agni is Venus seems to be on solid ground.

In order to explain Agni’s mythological features it is necessary to mention some of the astronomical properties of Venus. Before this, however, it is worth noting the well-known fact that, in the middle of the first millennium B.C., the Iranian name for Venus was Anāhiti, “the Pure One.” This might be considered indeed an obstacle to the present theory, in which Venus is identified with Tištriya. The worship of Venus as the goddess Anāhiti, however, is not attested in the Avesta, but only in western Iran. The only deity with a similar name known in the Avesta is the one called *arə dvī sūrā anāhita* “the moist, mighty, pure one”; this deity, however, was not Venus, but the goddess of a mythical/celestial river. This shows that a possible presence of Venus in the Avesta implies a different name for this planet. Tištriya then remains a very good candidate for representing Venus.

The most important astronomical feature of Venus, which belongs to the planet Mercury as well, is that it is an “inferior” planet. Venus and Mercury are called “inferior” planets because their

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153 Geldner interprets this passage as referring to Sūrya (mentioned in the previous verse). This is, indeed, possible. However, since the whole hymn is dedicated to Agni, it is also possible that this verse refers to Agni. In fact, the same idea (Agni supports the sky) is expressed in: 4.5.1cd *ānūne ná brhata vakṣāthena āpa stabhāyad upamīn ná rōdхаḥ* “In vollkommenen, hohem Wachstum stützt er (den Himmel) wie der Pfeiler den Deich”; 3.5.10a *ūd astambhít samīdhā nākam ṛṣvō* “Durch das Brennholz sich aufrichtend hat Agni das Firmament emporgereicht.”


155 This hypothesis also answers Panaino’s concerns (1995: 67–68) that the Avesta reveals no apparent knowledge of the planets.
orbits lie between the orbit of the Earth and the sun, whereas the other planets, which are farther from the sun than the Earth is, are called "superior." Given that their orbits lie between the orbit of the Earth and the sun, Venus and Mercury are always seen close to the sun, which means that they can be seen either before sunrise (as morning stars) or after sunset (as evening stars). During the day, they obviously disappear in the sun's glare and cannot be seen.

Venus — and Mercury as well — has another extremely important property. Given that it can move to one side or the other of the sun, thus alternatively being either a morning or an evening star, during the year Venus twice becomes invisible in the sky. The period of invisibility occurs when, from the perspective of an observer from the Earth, the planet crosses the sun's disk. What is of crucial importance for the present argument is the fact that the passage from visibility to invisibility does not occur instantaneously but gradually. In astronomical jargon, this means that Venus has "phases" — like the moon — that is, its size increases or decreases depending on its relative position with respect to the sun and the Earth.

The astronomical characteristics of Venus can perfectly explain Agni's myth of "hiding and growing in the waters" or Agni's being born many times. Indeed, because of its phases, the planet Venus appears to either "hide in the waters" (when it becomes invisible), or "grow" (when it is born) and reach full brightness. I give below two more examples illustrating Agni's growth in the waters:

10.8.1. ... Im Schoße der Gewässer ist der Büffel groß geworden (apám upásthe mahiśó vavardha).

10.45.3. Dich ... im Schoße des Wassers zogen die Büffel groß (apám upásthe mahiśá avardhan).

I would also make the hypothesis that Mātaríśvan, whose name probably means "grown/growing in his mother" (cf. Macdonell (1897: 72)), and who is sometimes identified with Agni (cf. 3.26.2), symbolizes Venus's full phase, that is, the time when Agni "the fire" is "brought to earth" (this explains the apparent contradiction that Agni is both identical with Mātaríśvan and brought to earth by Mātaríśvan); cf. 3.29.11: Agni is called (ucyate) "Mātaríśvan" when he is undiminished in his mother mātaríśvā yād ámimīta mātári "wenn er in der Mutter sich bildete." Venus's new phase is probably represented by Narāśaṃsa (cf. 3.29.11: ... zum Narāśaṃsa wird Agni, wenn er geboren wird ... "). The intermediary phase of Venus is probably Tanūnapāt (cf. 3.29.11: tánūnápād ucyate gārbha).
The hypothesis that the Vedic people were able to observe Venus's phases is not as peculiar as it might seem at first. It is known that the Babylonians were able to record Venus's phases in the first half of the second millennium B.C.157

A difficult issue in Agni's myth is to establish the nature of the “waters” in which the star Agni hides and grows. One possibility is that they represent the sky's light-blue surface at early dawn. Another possibility, which is more plausible, is that the presence of the waters in Agni's myth is just a metaphor accounting for why Agni, that is, fire, gets extinguished. In other words, it is possible that these waters did not represent any visible celestial object, and that their presence in the sky was assumed only indirectly, through the phases of Agni/Venus. In fact, it may be that, in essence, Agni's waters are identical with those released by Indra at the spring equinox. This hypothesis can explain why Venus was invoked to bring rain; indeed, since it always “follows” the sun's path through the constellations, Venus can be seen as a seasonal marker and, therefore, invoked to bring rain at certain times.158

Agni's growth in the waters can also explain why he is called “Apām Napāt”; obviously, since he is “born in the waters,” Agni, the “child of the waters,” can rightly be called Apām Napāt. Apām Napāt then may represent the transition phases through which a planet passes before reaching its fully developed phase.159 It is then possible that, without representing a separate deity in the Indo-


158 Another possible interpretation for the “waters” would be that they represent the surface of the sky that is closer to the horizon, that is, the space in which Venus moves; in the section on the Aśvins, I interpreted the “mountain” the Aśvins climb as the celestial vault from the horizon to the celestial meridian; the “waters” then may represent the “inferior” part of this “mountain” since waters can be found at the base of any mountain; this can also apply to the “wood” through which Agni burns; cf. n.158 above. It may also be that these celestial waters are related to the “celestial Sea” (cf. the constellation Aquarius), which I will mention in detail in the chapter on the Ādityas; this latter hypothesis, however, would imply that this part of Agni’s myth was conceived when Venus was in certain places of the sky (in the “Sea”); I do not consider this hypothesis very attractive.

159 For the nature of Savitṛ, who is also called “Apām Napāt” (cf. 1.22.6; 10.149.2), see the next chapter of the present study.
Iranian religion, Apām Napāt was the generic name designating the inferior planets Venus and Mercury.\textsuperscript{160}

I will now turn attention to another important feature of Agni, which is that he is a priest (hotṛ).\textsuperscript{161} This feature may be explained as well through Venus's travel in the sky during the year. Thus, as the sun moves through the zodiacal constellations during the year, Venus does the same, that is, it moves through these constellations along with the sun. The fact that Taurus and Gemini, which are zodiacal constellations, are heavenly gods (Indra and the Aśvins, respectively) shows that, in all likelihood, the other (zodiacal) constellations were also considered to be celestial gods. This perfectly explains why in the myth Agni “the priest”\textsuperscript{162} serves or is received by different gods.\textsuperscript{163}

Interestingly, Agni “the priest” and Indra “the warrior” are the greatest gods of the Vedic religion. This means that, from a wider perspective, at the cosmic level, Agni and Indra reflect the most important functions of the Vedic society.

In addition to being a priest, Agni is also dūtō devā́nām “the gods’ messenger” (cf. e.g., 3.3.2; 6.15.9; 10.4.2); this feature can also be explained through Venus's movement from one constellation to another.

\textsuperscript{160} The characteristics of Apām Napāt (cf. 2.35) perfectly apply to the moon, which is obviously also a celestial body displaying phases; interestingly, Hillebrandt (1927 I: 365–80) already associated Apām Napāt with the moon, which he identified with Soma; however, his hypothesis has nothing to do with the moon’s phases. The moon in the Rīg Veda is candrámas (cf. Grassmann) and has no relationship to Apām Napāt.

\textsuperscript{161} Cf. 2.2.1 above, or, e.g., 8. 49.1; 6.16.1; 9.66.20; 10.7.5; Macdonell (1897: 96–97).

\textsuperscript{162} A less important Vedic “priestly” god is Bṛhaspati, who is identified with the planet Jupiter in later literature. Hillebrandt (1990: I 107–8) thinks this is the result of the transfer of the Vedic god’s name to the planet. Given the “priestly” nature of Bṛhaspati (puróhitaḥ; cf. 2.24.9), which is similar to that of the planet Agni, this god may indeed represent Jupiter. Other features that point to his celestial nature: Bṛhaspati was born in the sky (cf. 4.50.4: jā́yamāno mahó ĭ́vōtiśah paramé viōman), drives away darkness with his light (cf. 10.68.5: ápa ĭ́vōtiśā tā́mo antárikṣād ... ājat), climbs up in the sky (cf. 10.67.10: d ā́ dyā́m ā́rukṣad ī́ttārāṇī sā́dmā), shines “in the house” (cf. 5.43.12: dā́ma ā́ didivā́ṃsam); he is also invoked together with “the Bull” Indra (cf. 4.49; 7.97).

\textsuperscript{163} Cf. 1.95.6 above: “ ... Die Götter erhalten (dhārayan) Agni ... ”
That Agni is Venus is shown by other features of Agni. Thus, given that Venus is always perceived as close to the sun, it is appropriate to say that Agni/Venus guards the sun's path, precedes the day, or adds to the sun's brightness:

3.5.5. ... er [Agni — my note] hütet den Weg der Sonne (páti yahváś cáraṇam súriyasya).

10.3.2. ... indem er den aufgerichteten Strahl des Súrya stützt (ūrdhvám bhānúm súriyasya stabhāyán).

10.88.12. Für die ganze Welt machten die Götter den Agni Vaiśvānara zum Zeichen der Tage (ketúm áhnām akṛñvan, literally “the banner of the days”); der die aufleuchtenden Morgenröten ausgebreitet hat, er deckt auch die Finsternis ab, wenn er mit seinem Lichtstrahl kommt (already quoted above).

It is also appropriate for Agni to show up before sunrise, since the rising of Venus as a morning star occurs before sunrise (cf. also the many passages I quoted above):

2.1.1. “Du, Agni, (wirst) mit Tagesanbruch (geboren).”

4.3.11. ... die Sonne kam zum Vorschein als Agni geboren war.

These latter features are beautifully echoed in the Odyssey in a passage in which Venus is described astonishingly similarly to the Rig Vedic Agni (13.93–5):

Εὖτ᾽ ἀστήρ ὑπερέσχε φαάντατος ὅς τε μάλιστα
ἔρχεται ὄγγέλλων φάος Ἠοὺς ἠριγενεῖ ἑς...

At the time when shines the brightest star, which beyond others

\begin{quote}

Comes with announcement of the light of the young Dawn goddess...
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{164} Cf. Heubeck (1990: 169).
\end{flushright}
Another interesting feature of Agni is that he "organizes the times":

1.95.3. ... pūrvām ānu prá diśam pārthīvānām rtūn praśāsad ví dadhāv anuṣṭhū
1.95.3. ... Die östliche Gegend der irdischen Räume (kennend) hat er die Zeiten bestimmend richtig eingeteilt.

5.12.3. Der Gott (Agni), der der Hüter der Zeiten ist (ṛtupā) ...

6.7.7. ví yó rájāmsi ámimīta sukrātur vaiśvānaró ví divó rocaná kavih pāri yó vīśvā bhūvanāni paprathé ádabdho gopā amṛtaṣya rakṣitā
6.7.7. Vaiśvānara, der klugsinnige Seher, der die Räume ausgemessen hat und die Lichter des Himmels, der sich über alle Welten ausgebreitet hat, der untrügliche Hüter, der Wächter der Unsterblichkeit.

10.2.1. Stelle die verlangenden Götter zufrieden, du Jüngster; der (Opfer)zeiten kundig, du Herr der Zeiten, opfere hier! (vidvāṁ rtūṁr rtupate yajehā)

10.2.3. ... agnir vidvān sā yajāt sēd u hōtā só adhvarān sā rtūn kalpayāti
10.2.3. ... Agni is der Kundige, er soll opfern; er allein ist der Hotr, er soll die Opfer, er die Zeiten (ṛtūn) einteilen (kalpāyāti). 165

10.2.4. ... agniś ṭād vīśvam ā prṇāti vidvān yēbhir devāṁ rtūbhīḥ kalpāyāti.
10.2.4. ... so möge der kundige Agni das alles wieder gutmachen nach den Zeiten, auf die er die Götter verteilen wird (cf. Geldner: "bei jedem Gotte zu seiner Zeit").

Geldner argues that the “times” (Skt. rtū) in such cases are those when the sacrifices for different gods are due. 166 This is an interesting suggestion, which, in the context of the present

165 Skt. kalpāyāti can also mean "to organize" (Germ. "ordnen, in die richtige Ordnung bringen, verteilen"; cf. Grassmann).

166 Cf. Geldner at 10.2.3 above: "die Opferzeiten oder die Reihenfolge der Götter im Sinne der rtāvah."
argument, implies that the constellations representing celestial gods were worshipped when Agni/Venus passed through them. I would make, however, another hypothesis, which is slightly different from Geldner’s. This concerns again the fact that, during the solar year, Venus passes through all the constellations that are located on the sun’s path, i.e., through the zodiacal constellations.\(^{167}\) It is probably because of this astronomical feature that Agni/Venus was seen as “the guardian/lord (ṛtupā́) of the times.” Indeed, since in antiquity the stars/constellations on the sun’s path had the role of measuring time (or “the times”), the association between Venus and the constellations is an association between the planet and the “times” (of the year).

Another interesting feature of Agni is his well-known epithet of Vṛtrahán (cf. e.g. 1.74.3; 3.20.4). We saw that, although this epithet is intimately associated with Indra, other gods such as Soma may share it. Soma (the Milky Way) is called Vṛtrahán because of its relative celestial position with respect to Indra (Taurus) and Vṛtra. One can explain Agni’s epithet in a similar way. Thus, when Taurus announced the spring equinox (that is, when the sun was in Taurus at the spring equinox), Venus, which is always close to the sun, must have also been close to Taurus (perhaps even in Taurus, depending on when this myth was created). This made Agni/Venus a participant at the cosmic drama that was taking place in the sky at the spring equinox; consequently, like Indra and Soma, Agni was also called Vṛtrahán.

I conclude this section with a final word concerning the fact that Agni’s worship seems to have been mainly performed at dawn, which means that Venus was worshipped as a morning star. The question arises whether the Vedic people knew of the identity between Venus’s evening and morning aspects.\(^{168}\) The following passages show that these people worshipped Agni in the evening as well:

4.2.8ab. \(yās \text{ tvā doṣā́ yā uṣāsi praśāṃsāt priyāṃ vā tvā kṛṇāvate havīsmān} \ldots\)

\(^{167}\) The Babylonians considered that Venus, the sun, and the moon governed the zodiac; they also called Venus the “queen of heaven”; cf. Roscher (1965: 1478).

\(^{168}\) Not all peoples in antiquity knew that the two stars are one and the same; the Greeks for example attributed this discovery to either Parmenides or Pythagoras; the Babylonians or the Sumerians, on the other hand, knew about their identity; cf. Scherer (1953: 78); Waerden (1974: 56); Roscher (1965: 1478).
4.2.8. Wer dich [Agni — my note] des Nachts [evening — my note], wer am Morgen lobt oder dich mit Opfergaben zum Freunde macht ...

7.1.6. *úpa yám éti yuvatiḥ sudáksam dosá vástor havíṣmati ghrtáci*
*úpa sváinam arámatir vasúyúḥ*

7.1.6. Der Verständige [Agni — my note], dem die Jungfrau, die Schmalzkelle, abends und morgens mit der Opfergabe naht und Gutes wünschend die ihm gebührende Andacht.¹⁶⁹

It is not clear, however, whether Agni in such cases represents the “celestial fire” as well and not only the “terrestrial” one. Consequently, at this point it cannot be established with certainty whether the Vedic people knew of the identity between the two aspects of Venus. I will take up this issue again in the last chapter (“Bulls and Cows”) of the present study.

A. PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS II

The second part of the present study challenges the universally accepted idea that Agni, one of the greatest Vedic gods, mainly represents the sacrificial fire. It also challenges the idea that it was the sacrificial fire that generated the cult of the other aspect of Agni, which is essentially celestial.

The celestial Agni plays a well-defined role in the *Rig Veda*, and his worship at dawn has, as expected, nothing to do with the fire cult. It has also nothing to do with the sun or with lightning as it has generally been assumed; the evidence shows that Agni is only compared to the sun or to lightning, and is never identical to them. The celestial Agni is consistently shown as being located in the sky or on the sky’s firmament. He is a bright light in the dawn sky, which precedes the appearance of the morning sun. These characteristics clearly point to Agni being a star rising heliacally. That this is not merely speculation is shown by a Vedic passage in which Agni is specifically called a “star” (*náṣatra*). To determine the nature of this star I used evidence from the Iranian Avesta. This evidence shows that Agni is identical to the Avestan Tištriya. Drawing on both Avestan and Vedic evidence, I showed that

¹⁶⁹ Cf. also 2.8.3; 4.12.2; 7.3.5; Oldenberg (1894: 439); for the Agnihotra ritual performed both at dawn and in the evening, cf. Oberlies (1998: 313–14).
Agni or Tištriya are likely to represent the planet Venus, which is the brightest object in the sky after the sun and the moon. The identification of Agni with Venus can explain the myth of Agni hiding and growing in the “waters.” Thus, these mythological features “metaphorically” represent the phases of Venus. The planet Venus has a period of invisibility in the sky and a period of “growing” depending on its relative position with respect to the Sun and the Earth. The period of invisibility is described by the metaphor of Agni “hiding” in the celestial waters; the “growth” of Agni is related to Venus’s passage from the new phase to the full phase (after having been invisible).

Another very important conclusion of the present study concerns the relation between the celestial Agni, alias Venus, and the worship of the sacrificial fire. It is known that the Iranians venerated fire (Avestan Ātarš).\textsuperscript{170} The existence of the “terrestrial” Agni probably shows that this cult of fire goes back at least to the Indo-Iranian period. Obviously, the worship of Venus must also go back to Indo-Iranian times. Therefore, since the Iranians do not seem to have associated the fire-cult with the cult of Venus, the Vedic Agni’s origins are probably to be looked for in the conflation of two different cults, the fire-cult and the cult of Venus. Be it as it may, the association of Venus with fire and the further Vedic development of the myth is the result of a splendid metaphor, by which the brightest star in the sky came to be compared with fire.

\textsuperscript{170} Cf. Boyce (1987); the etymology of this name is unknown.
THE "SOLAR ASPECTS" OF SAVITR AND PŪṢAN

A. SAVITR

The nature of the important Vedic god Savitṛ has been a keenly debated issue. Despite the uncertainty surrounding this god’s origins, role, or significance, however, there has been a general agreement among scholars that Savitṛ’s most important characteristics relate him to the sun. Moreover, the “solar aspect” of Savitṛ caused many scholars to identify him with the sun. I will try to explore Savitṛ’s “solar aspect” in more detail and assess whether this god can be indeed interpreted as representing either an aspect of the sun or the sun itself.

Savitṛ, therefore, has been partially or totally identified with the sun-god Sūrya. This identification is old, going back to the ancient Vedic commentators. Thus, Yāska (fourth century BC) identified the sun with Savitṛ; Sāyana (fourteenth century AD) argued that the sun is called Savitṛ before his rising, but Sūrya from his rising to his setting. In modern times, similar opinions, with some nuances, were held by Muir (1872 V: 155–56), Bergaigne (1878–1883 III: 38), Macdonell (1894: 34), Hillebrandt (1990: 67–75), among others. It is important for the present discussion to examine the “nuances” of these arguments. Thus, in Muir’s opinion “There are two other gods … who are exact personifications of the sun, viz., Sūrya and Savitṛ. It is under these two different appellations that the sun is chiefly celebrated in the Rig-veda; and although it may be difficult to perceive why the one word should be used in any particular case rather than the other, the application of the names may perhaps depend upon some difference in the aspect under which the sun is conceived, or on some difference in the functions which he is regarded as fulfilling.” Along the same line of thought, Macdonell argued that “Savitṛ was originally an epithet of Indian origin applied to the sun as the great stimulator of life and motion in the world … but … as differentiated from Sūrya he is a more abstract deity. He is in the eyes of the Vedic poets the divine power of the sun personified, while Sūrya is the more concrete deity” … In Bergaigne’s opinion, “Le personnage de Savitṛ est dans un rapport

77 Cf. Yāska (Nir. 10.32); Sāyana (on 5.81.4); Macdonell (1897: 33).
particulièrement étroit avec les phénomènes solaires, quelquefois identifié au soleil (Sūrya)."  

Keith (1925: 105–106), on the other hand, drawing on the probable etymology of Savitṛ, defined the “solar aspect” as follows: “While Sūrya represents the concrete aspect of the sun, Savitṛ, the stimulator or instigator, seems to denote the sun as the motive power which drives men to action ... Savitṛ is one aspect of Sūrya, the most important aspect of the power which wakens man to his work and the priest to his sacrifice.”

Arguments such as those above, however, are not convincing. The reason for this is the existence of Vedic passages in which the two gods are clearly different and not merely aspects of each other. Thus, Muir (1872: 168–69) notes that the verse 1.35.9, in which Savitṛ is said to “bring or approach Sūrya” (veti sūryam), clearly shows that the two gods are different. Sāyaṇa’s explanation for this verse that it would show two different forms of the same god approaching each other is, obviously, artificial, to say the least.

In order to explain why Savitṛ and Sūrya seem to be both identical and different, Hillebrandt (1990:72) invents an evolutionary model, according to which these gods would have been originally identical but would have become differentiated over the course of time; the Rig Vedic passages then would reflect the different stages of this development. This theory should be rejected because it presupposes that an older and “rational” stage of the Vedic religion evolved to practically a nonsensical one. There is no evidence on which to postulate such a development.

The main difficulty in identifying Savitṛ with Sūrya, therefore, lies in that there are Rig Vedic passages in which the two gods are clearly distinct from each other. This was clearly stated by Oldenberg, who challenged the theory that these two gods should be seen as identical. For Oldenberg, Savitṛ is the personification of the abstract concept revealed by his name, which

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72 In another passage, Bergaigne (1878–1883 III: 51) is more prudent: “… [Savitṛ — my note] ne pouvait représenter purement et simplement le soleil, ainsi que l’entendent les partisans d’un naturalisme exclusive.”

73 The consensus among scholars is that the word “Savitṛ” is built on *sū “to stimulate, impel.”

74 Obviously, Keith refers to Savitṛ’s well-known features of waking up creatures in the morning and putting them to rest in the evening.

75 Cf. Oldenberg (1894; 1897; 1905).
etymologically means “the enliven, impeller, or stimulator”. “Das Wesentliche an der Conception des Savitar ist nicht die Vorstellung der Sonne, auch nicht die Vorstellung der Sonne in einer bestimmten Richtung, insofern sie nämlich zu Leben und Bewegung antreibt: sondern das Wesentliche ist der abstrakte Gedanke dieses Antreiben selbst. Er giebt sozusagen den Rahmen her, welcher den Savitar betreffende Vorstellungen umfasst.” This represents a new and totally different perspective on Savitṛ. According to Oldenberg, therefore, it is not the case that one of the sun’s aspects (Sūrya “the enliven”) became a separate god Savitṛ, as Hillebrandt assumed in his evolutionary model, but Savitṛ — originally an abstract deity, the “enliven” — was eventually identified with a concrete deity that is the “enliven” par excellence, that is, with the sun. Oldenberg calls the process by which the two gods came to be associated “Annäherung” (i.e. “approach”): “Dort (im höheren Altertum) finden wir eben nur Annäherungen an den Sonnengott, höchst begreiflich bei der natürlichen Verknüpfung des Antriebs zu Leben und Bewegung mit der Morgenstunde, bei der Kraft der Sonne, aufgehend die Welt wie Savitar zur Tätigkeit anzuspornen, untergehend sie wiederum wie Savitar zur Ruhe einzuladen.”

We can, therefore, see that, regardless of how they explain the historical relation between Savitṛ and the sun, all the previous theories acknowledge these two apparently irreconcilable facts: Savitṛ seems to be both identical to and different from the sun Sūrya. In addition, since the sun is obviously the more “concrete” deity, these theories explain Savitṛ as the more “abstract” god. This abstractness, therefore, would be revealed in the etymology of the word “Savitṛ.”

Oldenberg’s belief that an ancient and “abstract” deity could change with time into a “more concrete” one is not convincing. To put it differently, there is no reason to assume that “abstract” deities evolve to a more “concrete” stage. On the contrary, it seems more natural to assume the

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176 In Oldenberg’s own words “Gott Antreiber” (1897: 478).
177 Cf. Oldenberg (1894: 64; 1897: 473).
178 Cf. Oldenberg (1905: 264).
opposite. That Savitṛ's "solar" features are not younger than his "abstract" aspect but inherent to his character is clearly shown by Dandekar (1939), who keenly argues against Oldenberg's theory.

Oldenberg's theory, however, has a great merit. Thus, in Oldenberg (1905:259–63), which is directly intended to refute Hillebrandt's assumptions that Savitṛ is to be identified with the sun in some Vedic passages, Oldenberg unequivocally shows that Savitṛ is different from the sun everywhere in the Rig Veda. I give below three of these passages, which were considered by Hillebrandt as evidence for the identity between Savitṛ and Sūrya:

4.13.1–2. práti agnír uṣásām ágram akhyad vibhātinám sumánā ratnadhéyam
yatám aśvinā sukṛto duroṇám út sūriyo jyótiṣā devá eti /
ūrdhvám bhānūṃ savitádevó aśred drapsám dávidhvad gaviśó ná sátvā
ánu vratáṃ várūṇo yanti mitró yát súriyaṃ diví āroháyanti.


4.14.2–3. āváhanti aruṇār jyótiṣāgān ...

4.14.2–3. Gott Savitṛ hat sein Banner aufgerichtet, der ganzen Welt Licht bereitend. Sūrya hat Himmel und Erde, die Luft angefüllt, mit seinen Strahlen prangend./ Auf ihrer Herfahrt ist die Morgenröte mit ihrem Lichte gekommen ...

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179 This was clearly stated by Keith (1925: 106).

180 In fact, Dandekar (1939: 305) dismisses all the previous theories about Savitṛ: “... the explanations regarding the true nature of Savitṛ proposed by Oldenberg, Hillebrandt, Macdonell ... Bergaigne are either one-sided and incomplete or definitely beside the mark”; unfortunately, Dandekar’s own theory is also “beside the mark,” since he eventually identifies Savitṛ with Varuṇa; his arguments concern some putative “solar aspects” of these two gods.
5.81.2. \( \text{vísāvā rūpāṇi prāti muñcate kavíḥ prāśāvid bhadrāṃ dvipāde cátuṣpade} \)
\( \text{vī nākam akhyat savitā váreniyo ánu prayāṇam usáso ví rājati} \)


Oldenberg rightly argues that there is nothing in these passages that would justify the identification of Savitṛ with Sūrya. On the contrary, the mere fact that, in the first two passages, these gods bear different names shows them as being different from each other. In the third passage, on the other hand, Savitṛ’s appearance at dawn does not necessarily mean that he is the sun, although he is said, as if he were Sūrya, to bring light to the world. Oldenberg, who acknowledges that Savitṛ and Sūrya seem to have similar functions, argues that the passages above only show the approach (“Annäherung”) that took place between the “sun-god” and an original “enlivener god” (“Antreiber”), and not the identity between the two gods. In other words, Oldenberg’s belief is that Savitṛ borrows some of his characteristics from the sun, although he is originally completely different from this one. As we have seen above, it is difficult to explain why and how this process took place.

The association of Savitṛ with the sun does not seem to be, as Oldenberg thought, an addition to Savitṛ’s original character. As Dandekar noted, the god’s “solar aspect” is not the result of a later development, but an inherent feature of his character. What is more interesting, however, is that Savitṛ’s features concern not only the morning “solar aspects,” but also those of evening or night time. In other words, Savitṛ is also related to darkness.

The following passages make it clear that Savitṛ’s action, which is to put nature to rest, takes place during night time:

1.35.1. ... \( \text{hváyāmi rātrīṃ jágato nivéśanīṃ hváyāmi devāṃ savitāram ūtáye} \)
1.35.1. ... Ich rufe die Nacht, die alles Lebende zur Ruhe bringt, ich rufe den Gott Savitṛ zur Hilfe.

1.35.2. \( \text{ā kṛṣṇēna rájasā vārtamāno niveśayann āmrtaṃ mártiyam ca} \)
\( \text{hiranyāyena savitā ráthena á devō yāti bhúvanāni pāśyan.} \)
Indem er mit dem schwarzen Dunst sich heranbewegt und Gott und Mensch zur Ruhe bringt, kommt Gott Savitṛ auf goldenem Wagen, die Wesen beschauend.

Die weißfüßigen Rappen haben alle Menschen beschaut, während sie seinen Wagen mit der goldenen Deichsel ziehen. Allezeit ruhen die Menschenstämme, alle Welten im Schoße des göttlichen Savitṛ/ Drei Himmel gibt es, zwei sind der Schoß des Savitṛ, der eine ist in der Welt des Yama ...

Wer auf Gewinn ausgezogen war, kehrt heim; aller Wanderer Wunsch ging heimwärts. Jeder ließ die Arbeit halbgetan liegen und ist heimgekehrt nach dem Gebot des göttlichen Savitṛ.

Der Asura mit der goldenen Hand, der gute Weiser ... die Unholde und Zauberer abwehrend steht der Gott allabendlich da, der gepriesene.

Wer auf Gewinn ausgezogen war, kehrt heim; aller Wanderer Wunsch ging heimwärts. Jeder ließ die Arbeit halbgetan liegen und ist heimgekehrt nach dem Gebot des göttlichen Savitṛ.

In all these passages, Savitṛ, who is never said to be the sun, is a god appearing at night-time. Savitṛ, however, can appear both in the morning and at night or in the evening:
4.53.6. *bṛhátsumnaḥ prasavitā nivéśano jágata sthātur ubhāyasya yo vaśi*
sá no devāh savitā śárma yachatu asmē kśāyāya trivárutham áṃhasaḥ
Großes Heil bringend, aufweckend und zur Ruhe bringend, der Gebieter von beidem, was lebendig ist und was fest steht, dieser Gott Savitṛ möge unserem Wohnsitze den Schutz gewähren, der dreifach vor Not schützt.

4.53.7. *āgan devaḥ rtúbhir várdatu kṣāyaṃ dádhaṭu naḥ savitā suprajām iṣam*
sá naḥ kṣapábhir áhabhiś ca jinvatu prajávantaṃ rayím asmē sám invatu
Gott Savitṛ ist zu seinen Zeiten gekommen; er soll unseren Wohnsitz mehren, soll uns das Labsal guter Kinder gewähren. Er soll uns Nacht und Tag stärken und uns Kinderreichtum verschaffen.

5.81.4. *utā yāsi savitas tríṇi rocanā utā súryasya raśmībhiḥ sám ucyasi*
utá rátrim ubhayátaḥ párīyasa utá mitrō bhavasi deva dhármbhiḥ
Und du kommst zu den drei Lichtreichen, o Savitṛ, und wohnst mit den Strahlen der Sonne zusammen, und du umkreisest auf beiden Seiten (*ubhayátaḥ*) die Nacht, und du bist nach deinen Eigenschaften der Mitra, o Gott.

7.45.1. Gott Savitṛ ... die Welt zur Ruhe bringend und erweckend (*niveśaṇaḥ ca prasuvāṇaḥ ca bhúma*)

4.53.3. *āprā rájāṃsi diviyāni pārthivā ślókaṃ devāḥ kṛṇute svāya dhármane*
prá bāhū asrāk savitā sāvīmāni niveśāyaṇ prasuvāṇn aktúbhir jágat
Er hat die himmlischen, die irdischen Räume erfüllt, der Gott erlässt seinen Weckruf nach eigener Bestimmung. Savitṛ hat die Arme ausgestreckt, um anzuweisen, alle Nächte die Welt zur Ruhe bringend und (wieder) aufweckend.

In other passages, Savitṛ is said to appear with the sun at dawn, the time when he wakes up all beings:
10.139.1. süryaraśmir hárikeśaḥ purástāt savitā jyōtir úd ayāṁ ājasram.

10.139.1. Mit der Sonne Strahlen, mit goldigem Haare hat Savitṛ im Osten sein unverlöschliches Licht aufgesteckt.

5.82.9. yā imā víśvā jātāni āśrāvāyati ślókena prá ca suvātī savitā
der alle diese Geschöpfe mit seinem Weckruf anruft, wenn Savitṛ seine Weisung gibt.

Savitṛ has also another special relationship with the sun; thus, he drives the sun forward, and the sun listens to his command; this obviously shows that Savitṛ and Sūrya are different from each other:

1.35.9. híraṇyapāṇiḥ savitā vícarśaṇir ubhé dyāvāprthivé antár īyate
ápāṁvām bādhate věti sūriyam abhī krṣṇēna rájasā dyām ṛṇoti

1.35.9. Savitṛ mit der goldenen Hand, der Ausgezeichnete, fährt zwischen beiden, zwischen Himmel und Erde. Er vertreibt die Krankheit, treibt die Sonne an; er reicht mit den schwarzen Dunst bis an den Himmel.

7.45.2. úd asya bāhū śithirā bṛhántā hiranyāyā divó āntāṁ anaṣṭām
nūnāṁ só asya mahimā paniśṭa sāraś cid asmā ānu dād apasyāṁ

7.45.2. Seine gelockerten großen goldenen Arme haben sich bis zu den Grenzen des Himmels erstreckt. Jetzt sei diese seine Größe gepriesen; auch die Sonne ordnet ihre Tätigkeit ihm unter.

To sum up: Savitṛ is bright and has rays; he is different from the sun and appears with him at sunrise and (after) sunset; the sun is subordinated to him; importantly, Savitṛ can appear in the sky during night time (cf. 1.35.9 above).

Given all these features of Savitṛ, it is understandable why this important god was considered to be the sun or one of its aspects. Savitṛ, however, is clearly different from the sun and, at the same time, does not seem to be an abstract deity. That this is the case is clearly shown by his bright appearance at night time, which would be strange if Savitṛ were the sun or an abstract deity.
Savitṛ’s attributes, however, do point to a celestial object, which is not the sun; thus, Savitṛ’s features represent the main characteristics of the inferior planets, which are Venus and Mercury. Below I explain why this is indeed the case.

As I already mentioned in the previous chapter on Agni, the planets Venus and Mercury are called “inferior” because their orbits lie between the Earth’s orbit and the sun. In particular, Mercury is the innermost planet of the solar system, which means that Mercury is the nearest planet to the sun. The other planets, which are called “superior,” are farther from the Sun than the Earth is. Because their orbits lie between the Earth and the sun, the inferior planets are always seen close to the sun, which means that they cannot be seen for most of the night time, except for the short periods before sunrise and after sunset. Because of these features, these planets are either morning stars or evening stars. Their aspects as morning or evening stars depend on what side of the sun they are from the perspective of an observer from the Earth.

The periods of time during which Venus and Mercury can be seen before sunrise or after sunset depend on their elongations. This astronomical term is defined by the angle between the sun and the planet as viewed from the Earth. Thus, the greatest elongation of Venus is about 48°, whereas Mercury’s is about 28°. This means that, when, for example, Venus is at its greatest elongation, it appears at an angle of 48° from the just-rising sun. In such a case, obviously, Venus can appear at the eastern horizon even three hours before sunrise, during night time; the same goes for Venus as an evening star. For Mercury, this interval is shorter, less than two hours.

These characteristics of the inferior planets can easily explain Savitṛ’s features. Thus, Savitṛ “impels” nature to either wake up or go to rest/sleep because, as an inferior planet, it appears in the sky shortly either before sunrise or after sunset, respectively. It is also natural for Savitṛ to belong to the night sky, since he is a star. The fact that the inferior planets appear in the sky close to the sun (cf. 1.35.9; 7.45.2; 10.139.1 above) explains why Savitṛ is said to “drive” the sun forward; it also explains why night comes through the laws of the planet Savitṛ (cf. 2.58.3 above). Finally, Savitṛ’s features of being bright or having rays, which previously led scholars to identify him with the sun, also belong to all the stars.

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181 The celestial vault makes a complete rotation (360°) in 24 h, which means that it moves $360°/24 \text{ h} = 15°$ every hour.
Savitṛ, therefore, is likely to represent either the planet Venus or Mercury. In addition, Savitṛ’s attributes show that he represents both the morning and evening aspects of the same planet. ¹⁸² It remains now to try to determine which planet Savitṛ represents. ¹⁸³ Obviously, since Savitṛ’s features can apply to either planet it is hard to decide between the two. There is, however, a feature that can be helpful in making this decision. Thus, Savitṛ is said to wake nature up to life in the morning. This feature points to Savitṛ as representing Mercury rather than Venus. Indeed, given that Mercury’s elongation is much shorter than that of Venus (almost half of it), this planet appears in general closer to sunrise than Venus and, therefore, is a better candidate for being the “awakener.” It is then more likely that Savitṛ represents the planet Mercury, a fact which is consistent with my conclusion in the previous chapter that Agni represents Venus.

The identity between Savitṛ and Mercury can explain why, like Agni, this god is also called Apām Napāt (cf. 1.22.6; 10.149.2). Indeed, since it is, like Agni, an inferior planet, Savitṛ/Mercury also displays “phases,” that is, wanes and waxes according to his relative position to the sun.

The Vedic worship of Mercury is not as singular and strange as it might seem at first. It is well-known that other people in Asia such as the Babylonians did the same.¹⁸⁴

B. PŪṢAṆ

It is known that, like Savitṛ, the Vedic Pūṣan has been also long recognized as having a “solar aspect,” and thus identified with the sun. This theory found an echo among the majority of the scholars.¹⁸⁵ It is also well known that there have been other interpretations of Pūṣan, among which the most popular ones are those identifying him with a pastoral god or with the god of the paths.¹⁸⁶ The variety of these

¹⁸² Cf. above n.173.

¹⁸³ One can see that I establish which planet Savitṛ represents independently of the previous conclusion that Agni represents Venus.

¹⁸⁴ Mercury was represented by the god Nabu in Babylon; cf. Waerden (1974: 187).

¹⁸⁵ Yāska (Nir.7.9) held this view in antiquity; for modern views, cf. e.g., Atkins (1941: 14) who also summarizes all the interpretations of Pūṣan (cf. 2–30); Kramrisch (1961: 105); Hillebrandt (1990: II 208–09); Macdonell (1997: 37).

¹⁸⁶ Cf. e.g., Oldenberg (1897: 229–233).
theories shows how difficult it is to reconcile Pūṣan's features or aspects to one another. In this respect, Hillebrandt (1990: II 208–09), for example, rightly argued that it was not possible to account for Pūṣan’s "solar aspect" if he were originally a “lord of the paths,” and that it would be easier to assume the opposite.\(^{187}\)

As was the case with Savitṛ, the theories that identify Pūṣan with the sun encounter major difficulties. Thus, if Pūṣan is an aspect of the sun, it is hard to understand what this aspect is and why it was necessary to invent another sun-god besides Sūrya.

The hypothesis that Savitṛ represents not the sun, but the inferior planet Mercury puts the whole issue of Pūṣan into a new perspective. What if Pūṣan’s "solar aspect" is not related to the sun, but to the stars? To answer this question, I will reevaluate the passages in which Pūṣan seems to be connected with the sun.

One of the main reasons why Pūṣan has been thought of as representing an aspect of the sun is that he is invoked as \(\text{ā́ghṛṇi}\) “the glowing one.”\(^{188}\) Other possible “solar aspects” were identified by Atkins (1941: 11–14). I give below some of his examples:

\begin{verbatim}
6.58.1. Licht ist deine eine, opferwürdig deine andere (Form) (\(\text{śukrāṃ te anyád yajatāṃ te anyád}\)) ...

5.81.5. ... du bist der Pūṣan durch deine Fährten, o Gott (Savitṛ) ... (\(\text{utá pūṣā bhavasi deva yámabhīh}\))

2.40.2. Über die Geburt dieser beiden Götter [Soma and Pūṣan — my note] freuten sich (alle Götter); sie beseitigten die unerfreuliche Finsternis (\(\text{imaú támāṃsi gūhatām ájuṣṭā}\)) ...

2.40.4. Der eine (Pūṣan) nahm einen Sitz hoch im Himmel (\(\text{diví anyáḥ sádanāṃ cakrá uccá}\)), der andere (Soma) auf der Erde, in der Luft ...
\end{verbatim}

\(^{187}\) Also, cf. Keith (1925: 104).

\(^{188}\) Etymologically, \(\text{ā́ghṛṇi}\) is related to *ghar “glühen, warm sein” (“to glow with heat”); cf. Grassmann; Atkins (1941: 12).
Sino-Platonic Papers, 241 (October 2013)

2.40.5. Der eine (Soma) hat alle Wesen erschaffen, der andere (Pūṣan) wandelt alles
beschauend (vīśvam anyó abhicāśkṣaṇa eti). Soma und Pūṣan begünstiget mein
Gedicht ...

6.58.2. ... bhūvane vīśve ārpitaḥ
āṣtrāṁ pūṣā śithirāṁ udrvārvjat saṃcākṣaṇo bhūvanā devā ēyate
6.58.2. ... über die ganze Welt eingesetzt, die biegsame Gerte schwingend fährt der Gott
Pūṣan, die Welten überschauend.

These passages allow us to summarize Pūṣan’s “solar aspects” as follows: Pūṣan’s essence is
light, and darkness vanishes when he appears; Pūṣan’s place is in the sky, on the firmament, from
where he beholds all beings; Pūṣan is sometimes associated with Soma and Savitṛ.

The immediate conclusion that emerges from the summary of Atkins’ examples is that there is
nothing in the Rig Veda indicating that Pūṣan represents the sun in one way or another. To put it
differently, the evidence from the Rig Veda shows that there is neither a direct nor an indirect
association between Pūṣan and Sūrya, the sun-god.189 In fact, that Pūṣan and Sūrya are two different
entities may be revealed in the following passage:

10.139.1. sūryaraśmir hārikeśaḥ purástāt savitā jyōtir ēd ayāṁ ājasram
tāsyā pūṣā prasavē yūti vidvān sampāśyan vīśvā bhūvanāni gopāḥ
10.139.2. nrācāśā esa dēvo mādhyā āsta āpaprivān rōdasī antārikṣam
sā vīśvācīr abhi caṣṭe ghṛtācīr antarā pūrvam āparaṃ ca ketūm
10.139.3. rāyō budhnāḥ saṃgāmano vāsūnāṃ vīśvā rūpā abhi caṣṭe śācibhiḥ
devā ēva savitā satyādharṁ ēd nā tāsthau samarē dhānānām

189 Pūṣan’s well-known association with the sun’s daughter Sūryā, which, as I showed, represents the star Capella, certainly
does not imply that he represents an aspect of the sun; for this myth, cf. Kramrisch (1961: 114–15) and below. On the other
hand, Pūṣan’s association with Savitṛ does not indicate any relationship with the sun either, since Savitṛ is not the sun.

According to this passage, Savitṛ appears at dawn, in the east, together with the sun's rays; his appearance enlivens Pū ṣan. Since Savitṛ is not the sun, the passage reveals that Pūṣan and Sūrya are different from each other as they are also different from Savitṛ. Geldner's assumption that the demonstrative pronoun esáḥ in 139.2 refers to the sun is not very plausible, since the actors of the previous verse were Savitṛ and Pūṣan. In addition, verse 139.3 shows that the god indicated by esáḥ above belongs to the same category as Indra and Savitṛ, whose nature is stellar; this may be a strong indication that Pūṣan's nature is stellar as well.

The theory of Pūṣan’s “solar aspect” then is based on a misunderstanding, which is the fact that the sun is the only celestial body that can have the attributes of Pūṣan. The question now is to determine what star Pūṣan represents. Certainly, as is the case with Indra and Savitṛ, this star must be a significant one. In addition, Pūṣan’s epithet ā́ghṛṇi leaves no doubt that this star must be a bright one. All these attributes of Pūṣan, however, are still not enough to determine the star he represents. For this, it is necessary to take into account other aspects of Pūṣan’s mythology.

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190 Geldner assumes that the demonstrative esáḥ refers to Sūrya.

191 Atkins (1941: 12) argues that this passage would show the identity between Pūṣan and Sūrya in their midday aspect (the zenith); however, Sūrya is not the only celestial body that can reach the zenith; the stars can do it as well.

192 Cf. 8.29.6, in which Pūṣan is said to know the treasures: “er kennt die verborgenen Schätze.”

193 Oldenberg (cf. Geldner) assumed that the demonstrative referred to Pūṣan, which is more likely.
Pūṣan's identity may be revealed in the myth of Sūryā's wedding procession (cf. 10.85). The Aśvins, who are said to be Pūṣan's fathers, carry Sūryā in their chariot to her wedding with Soma. Pūṣan, who acts as an intermediary, is supposed to meet Sūryā and take her by the hand.194


1.184.3. śrīyē pūṣann iṣukṛteva devā nāsatiyā vahatāṃ sūryāyāḥ

1.184.3. Die Götter Nāsatya's (kamen) auf die Hochzeit der Sūryā, um ausgezeichnet zu warden wie Pfeilschmiede, o Pūṣan ...

10.85.26. pūṣā tvetō nayatu hastagrhyāa aśvinā tvā prá vahatāṃ ráthena


This spectacular wedding procession can be clearly seen in the sky (cf. fig. 2). The Aśvins, who represent the huge constellation Gemini,195 carry Sūryā, i.e., the bright star Capella, in their wagon, which is the Chariot constellation (Auriga). Since this procession is said to move forward (cf. prá vahatāṃ above), one of the key elements in determining who Pūṣan is must be the direction in which this procession “moves.” If my interpretation of the way the wedding procession moves forward is correct then there must be a significant star just in front of the Aśvins; indeed, this seems to be the case.

194 The meaning of this myth has remained obscure so far; for different interpretations, cf. Atkins (1941: 10); Geldner to 10.85.

195 See the first chapter of the present study.
Two significant stars can be said to be located “in front” of the Twins. These are Prokyon, the brightest star in the constellation Canis Minor (α Canis Minoris), and Sirius, the brightest fixed star in the sky, in the constellation Canis Major (α Canis Maioris). In all likelihood, one of these stars represents the destination of Sūryā’s wedding procession. In other words, one of them is Pūṣan.

Prokyon and Sirius are close to each other; they are located in front of each other, on the two banks of the Milky Way (that is, “the celestial river” Soma), respectively (cf. fig. 2). This explains well why Pūṣan is an intermediary between the Aśvins/Gemini and Soma/Milky Way. Both Prokyon and Sirius are bright stars. This accounts well for Pūṣan’s epithet ā́ghṛṇi.

At this point, it is necessary to mention some of the astronomical properties of these stars. I start with Sirius.

It is well known that in Greek and Roman times the heliacal rising of Sirius took place after the summer solstice during the summer heat (July). For the Greco-Roman world, the morning rising of Sirius during the summer time announced torrid days. Homer describes Sirius as a star “whose conspicuous brightness/ far outshines the stars that are numbered in the night’s darkening/ the star they give the name of Orion’s Dog, which is the brightest among the stars,/ and yet is wrought as a sign of evil and brings on the great fever for unfortunate mortals.” Virgil mentions how Sirius affected (“burned”) the Hindus: “... iam rapidus torrens sitientis Sirius Indos/ ardebat caelo ....”

All these features of Sirius are certainly consistent with Pūṣan being the “glowing one.” In the Rig Veda, on the other hand, the idea that the star Pūṣan brings heat to the land seems to be present in the following verse:

Cf. Arat. 450: “Prokyon shines brightly beneath the Twins”; Vitr.9.5.2: Geminos autem minusculus Canis sequitur; both Prokyon and Sirius were known to the Babylonians; for Prokyon’s characteristics, cf. Kidd (1997: 341–42).

The brightest “star” in the sky in general is obviously the planet Venus.

For Pūṣan’s association with Soma/Milky Way, cf. 2.40.

Cf. n. 155 above.

Cf. n. 152 above.

Cf. II.22.27–30; I used Lattimore’s standard translation.

Georg. 4.425–6.
1.42.8. Führ [invocation to Pūṣan — my note] zu guter Weide (abhí sūyāvasam naya), nicht komme zu der Reise (ādhvane) neue Aufregung (navajvārō) ...

In this verse, a prayer to Pūṣan is made that there be no heat to the crops. The word navajvārō is built on *jvar, which means "heat."203 This is consistent with Pūṣan's attribute ā́ghṛṇi, which also implies the concept of "heat." Therefore, like Sirius, Pūṣan is a star that can bring heat to the land.

Another well-known fact is that Sirius was of paramount importance for the Egyptians of the times of the pyramids because of its role in announcing the flooding of the Nile (Sirius also represented the Egyptian goddess Isis). This flooding took place around the summer solstice,204 and, therefore, Sirius's heliacal rising must have occurred shortly before the solstice, after its well-known period of invisibility in the sky.205 That Sirius rose heliacally before the summer solstice may be revealed in the following enigmatic Rig-Vedic verse (10.17.6):

10.17.6. prápathe pathā́m ajaniṣṭa pūṣā́ prápathe divāḥ prápathe prthivyāḥ ...
10.17.6. In der Ferne der Wege (prápathe pathā́m) ist Pūṣan geboren, in der Ferne des Himmels, in der Ferne der Erde ...

Geldner, following Grassmann's similar translation, translates the phrase prápathe pathā́m as "in der Ferne der Wege" ("at the far end of the paths"). Kramrisch (1961: 106) and Atkins (1941: 13), who believed that Pūṣan was the sun, interpreted the passage as referring to the sun's path, which, in this case, would be the winter tropic, the "farthest path" during the sun's yearly course; obviously, since Pūṣan is not the sun, this interpretation must be discarded. There is, however, one element in this interpretation that seems to be consistent with one of Sirius's astronomical properties. Sirius's

203 Cf. Grassmann.

204 The Nile, swollen by the monsoon rains in Ethiopia, flooded over the surrounding valleys every year between late June and September; cf. Shaw & Nicholson (1995: 203; the "Nile" entry).

205 In Greco-Roman times, Sirius's heliacal rising occurred later (in the middle of the summer) because of the precession of the equinoxes; today it occurs even later (late summer); cf. Kidd (1997: 306); West (1978: 262). The long absence of Sirius from the sky (about two months) is obviously due to its position towards the south of the celestial vault (cf. n.156 above).
trajectory is located towards the winter tropic, and, therefore, it would be plausible to say about Sirius that it is located “on the farthest (or far-away) path” (of the stars). However, this solution encounters a difficulty; this is the fact that Indra, that is, the constellation Taurus, is also related to prápatha. Indeed, Indra is called prapathín two times in the Rig Veda (6.31.5; 8.1.30) and one time prapathíntamam (1.173.7). Geldner’s translations, which are based on the meaning of the word prápatha in Grassmann’s dictionary, do not shed any light on the meaning of this epithet of Indra; more precisely, they do not seem to reflect the morphological structure of Indra’s epithet, which contains the possessive suffix — in. If, therefore, prápatha were related to the winter tropic, there would be no way to explain what Taurus has to do with the winter tropic.

I propose a new interpretation for prápathe pathā́; this phrase could mean “on the forward-leading path” and thus refer to the sun’s course between the winter and the summer solstices; during this half of the solar year, the sun ascends (“moves forward”) from the south to the north. What this passage may say, then, is that the birth of Sirius, that is, its reappearance in the sky after a long absence, takes place when the sun is still on its “forward-leading path” (that is, before the summer solstice). Obviously, this solution presupposes that the myth was created when Sirius was rising heliacally before the summer solstice, that is, around or even before 2000 BC (cf. the Egyptian case).

The interpretation of prápatha as referring to the sun’s course between the winter and summer solstices may explain Indra’s epithet. Thus, since Indra is located on the celestial equator and represents the equinox, it perfectly makes sense for him to be called prapathín “the one who holds the prápatha.” Taurus is, indeed, the most important constellation between the winter and summer solstices. We will see below, however, that this is not the only possible solution to the issue of prápatha.

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206 Sirius’s latitude today is about 16° south of the celestial equator, whereas the winter tropic is at about 23°. The Stellarium, which is a software used to determine the positions of the stars in antiquity, shows that Sirius was even closer to the winter tropic in ancient times; in 2500 BC, Sirius’s declination was -20° 42’ (the right ascension was 3h 24 min); in 2000 BC, -19° 17’ (RA 3h 47 min).

Sirius has also other properties that are consistent with the description of Pūṣan in the *Rig Veda*. Thus, Sirius’s well-known absence from the sky for more than two months before its summer heliacal rising can explain why Pūṣan “hides” (cf. below vavrī):

10.5.5d. *ichán vavrím avidat pūṣaṇásya*

10.5.5. ... ein Versteck (vavrím) suchend hat er [Agni — my note] das des Pūṣaṇa (Pūṣaṇásya) gefunden.\(^{208}\)

Sirius’s absence from the sky may be also alluded to in the following passage, in which Pūṣan is said to have been present (“following”; cf. Skt. sácā) when Indra was “leading” the waters:

6.57.4. *yád índro ánayad ríto mahēr apó vṛṣantamaḥ*

*tátra pūṣábhavat sácā*

6.57.4. Als Indra, der Bullenhafteste, die strömenden großen Gewässer (in ihre Bahnen) leitete (ánayad), da war Pūṣan dabei (tátra pūṣábhavat sácā).

As I showed in the first chapter of the present study, the myth of Indra alias Taurus releasing the waters is a metaphor for the advent of the rainy season at the spring equinox. Given this, the time when (Skt. *yad*) Indra “is leading” the waters is likely to represent the time period after the spring equinox. This last passage then may allude to the astronomical fact that during the rainy (spring) season Sirius was still present in the sky. Indeed, since Sirius’s heliacal rising at the summer solstice occurred after a period of invisibility of approximately two months, it means that Sirius was still present in the sky during late March and early April,\(^{209}\) when Indra was “leading” the waters.

Sirius’s characteristics, therefore, seem to account well for Pūṣan’s. There is, however, another possible solution to the issue of Pūṣan. This is the fact that an even better candidate for representing the direction in which the Aśvins’s procession moves is Prokyon (cf. fig. 2). The description of Prokyon

\(^{208}\) The word “Pūṣaṇa” is not clear; cf. Geldner.

provided by Aratus (cf. above n. 201) shows that this might be more than a subjective impression; Prokyon is indeed right in front of the wedding procession led by the Aśvins whereas Sirius seems to be at its left rather than in front of it. How are Prokyon’s astronomical characteristics different from those of Sirius?

Prokyon’s name means “before the Dog,” underscoring the fact that Prokyon rises in the east shortly before Sirius “the Dog” (Canis Major). This means that, like Sirius, this star also rises heliacally during the hottest time of the year (in a matter of days before Sirius’ heliacal rising). Therefore, most of Pūṣan’s astronomical and meteorological characteristics can be identified with those of Prokyon as well.

There is, however, a major difference between Sirius and Prokyon; this concerns their positions in the sky. Thus, while Sirius’ location is towards the winter tropic, Prokyon lies close to the celestial equator. An important consequence of this observation is that Prokyon and Taurus share the common astronomical feature of being located on the celestial equator.210 Given this, one can interpret Pūṣan’s birth on prāpathe pathā́m in a new way. Thus, since Indra/Taurus is also closely related to prāpatha (cf. prapathin), I advance the hypothesis that the Sanskrit word refers to the celestial equator. The meaning of this word then is probably not the “forward-leading path” or the “farthest path,” but, more likely, the “leading path.”211 This “leading path” (of the stars) may refer to the fact that the spring equinox (the celestial equator) marks the beginning of the year. Indeed, this does not seem to be a hypothesis without foundation. It is well known that the Babylonians started the New Year at the spring equinox; the Iranians apparently did the same;212 last but not least, the well-

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210 Prokyon’s declination today is 5° 13’, which means close to the celestial equator (0°). Since Prokyon is close to Gemini (“underneath” it), and Gemini was just above the celestial equator during the age of Taurus, Prokyon must have been even closer to the equator during that astronomical age. The Stellarium confirms this; in 2500 B.C. Prokyon’s declination was 4° 31‘ (RA 3h 39 min); in 2000 B.C. 5° 49’ (RA 4h 5min). The right ascensions of Sirius and Prokyon show that the rising of these two stars were separated through 15‘ of RA.

211 Perhaps even the “first path” or the “front path”; cf. Williams (1899), the entry prá.

known fact that Indra is the “leader” of the Vedic gods may also have to do with the beginning of the New Year at the spring equinox.

Pūṣan’s location close to the celestial equator, therefore, is able to explain in a satisfactory way why he was born on prāpathe pathám and why he is the “lord of every path” (pathás-pathah pāripatim; cf. 6.49.8). It seems then that Pūṣan is more likely to represent Prokyon and not Sirius.

This celestial location of Pūṣan may also be able to explain his possible relation to the dead. Thus, it is well known that some (few) Rig Vedic passages show Pūṣan as conducting the souls of the dead to the world of the Fathers:

10.17.3. pūṣā tvetāś cyāvayatu prá vidván ánaṣṭapāśur bhúvanasya gopāḥ
sá tvaitébhyaḥ pári dadat pitýbhyo agnír devébyah suvidatríyebhyaḥ


10.17.5. pūśémā́ áśā ánu veda sárvāḥ só asmá́h ábhayatamena neṣat

Pūṣan kennt diese Gegenden alle genau; er möge uns auf gefährlosestem (Wege) führen ...

The ideas behind these verses may have to do with an eschatological conception according to which the souls of the dead belong to the celestial region between the sun’s tropics. The following verse from the Soma hymn 9.113, in which the worshipper wants to reach that celestial region, seems to confirm this conception:

213 Cf. e.g., 1.131.1 (d; e) índraṃ víśve sajóṣaso devásār dadhire puráḥ ... “Den Indra stellten alle Götter einmütig an ihre Spitze”; cf. Oberlies (1998: 267).

214 Cf. e.g., Kramrisch (1961: 109).

215 Whether the Vedic world of the dead is generally located in the sky or not is a keenly debated idea; that some Vedic material shows the world of the dead as celestial is certain; cf. Oberlies (1998: 466–473). I will take up this issue again in the last chapter (“Bulls and Cows”).
9.113.7. *yātra jyótiḥ ájasraṃ yāsmiṁ loké súvar hitám*

tásmin máṁ dhehi pavamāna amṛte loké ákṣita

9.113.7. Wo das ewige Licht ist, in welche Welt die Sonne gesetzt ist, in diese versetze mich, o Pavamāna [that is, Soma — my note], in die unsterbliche, unvergängliche Welt ... 

If these assumptions are right, then Pūṣan's location in the sky, on the celestial equator, accounts well for his relation with the celestial world of the dead (he is “in the center” of this world).²¹⁶

Finally, I bring up a very interesting passage, in which Pūṣan is invoked to drive a wolf away from the worshipper's path:

1.42.2. *yó naḥ pūṣann aghó vṛko duḥśéva ādidešati*

ápa sma tám pathó jahi

1.42.2. Den bösen, unheilvollen Wolf (*vṛko*), der uns bedroht, o Pūṣan, den jage von dem Wege (*pathó*) fort!

This passage can be explained in celestial terms as well. The constellation Lupus, which is thought to be of Mesopotamian origin,²¹⁷ is located next to Scorpio and Libra (cf. fig. 9). This constellation is likely to represent the Vedic wolf that Pūṣan “drives away” from the path. Indeed, because of its relative position with respect to Scorpio, in the age of Taurus Lupus was close to the celestial equator as well; in other words, the “wolf” was in Pūṣan's way.

²¹⁶ This eschatological conception would not be singular in the history of religions. The Neoplatonist Porphyry (third century AD; in De Antr. Nymph. 22–28) mentions Pythagorean doctrines, in which the souls of the dead ascend to heaven (sky) through the (constellation of) the winter tropic, and redescend on earth (reincarnate) through the summer tropic; cf. Ulansey (1989: 61). I would also advance the possibility that the two well-known dogs of Yama (cf. 10.14.10–11) represent the constellations Canis Maior and Canis Minor (cf. fig. 2); these “dogs” may have played the role of preventing the souls of the wicked that were located south of the winter tropic to reach the “world of the Fathers”; cf. Macdonell (1897: 173).

PARTIAL CONCLUSION III

The “solar aspects” of the important Vedic gods Savitṛ and Pūṣan are not related to the sun but to the stars. Savitṛ, who always accompanies the sun, represents the planet Mercury; this identification explains why Savitṛ is always associated with either dawn or dusk. Pūṣan is likely to be Prokyon, the brightest star in Canis Minor. The mythology of Pūṣan reflects Prokyon’s celestial position in the Vedic times. Thus, Pūṣan is the “lord of every path” because Prokyon was close to the celestial equator in those times; this position may also justify his possible role as a psychopomp. Most importantly, Prokyon’s position close to the constellation Gemini (the Aśvins) is the reason for the close association between Pūṣan and the Aśvins; the celestial “wedding procession” led by the Aśvins seems to move towards Pūṣan, who is waiting for the celestial bride Sūryā (the star Capella).

There is no evidence that Pūṣan was present in the Iranian religion. Since, in all likelihood, the Aśvins are not present in that religion either, the myth of the wedding procession led by these gods must have been created after the Vedic tribes separated from their Iranian brethren.

It appears now that the main Vedic stellar gods are located “close” to one another and grouped around the main Vedic god Indra, alias Taurus, who represented the marker of the spring equinox before 2000 BC. These stars and constellations are Gemini (the Aśvins), the Pleiades (the Maruts), and Pūṣan (Prokyon), which can be spectacularly seen today close to one another in the winter evening sky. The planets Mercury (Savitṛ) and Venus (Agni), on one hand, and the great Vedic god Soma (the Milky Way), on the other hand, are also integrated in the mythologies of the main fixed stars and constellations.

It is time to turn attention to the last group of extremely important gods. This is the compact group of the Ādityas.
The Ādityas Mitra, Varuṇa, Aryaman

It is well known that the Vedic gods Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman form a divine triad sometimes called generically “the Ādityas,” which is reflected in the fact that they are often mentioned together; in particular, Mitra and Varuṇa are also often invoked together through the dvandva compound Mitrāvaruṇā. It is also well known that the generic name “Ādityas” applies to other deities as well, whose number in the Rig Veda is twice said to be seven. The importance of Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman in the Rig Veda, however, leaves little doubt that, of all the Ādityas, these three gods are the most significant ones, which is why the present study is dedicated mainly to them. On the other hand, any hermeneutical attempt at determining the nature of these three gods cannot pass over the other Ādityas in silence. The reason for this is obvious; there can be no complete understanding of Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman as the main Ādityas, unless one ultimately explains why these gods are called “the Ādityas,” and why other gods also bear this name. The title of the present study, therefore, makes it clear that Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman are treated in the context of their being “the Ādityas.”

The great importance Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman have in the Vedic pantheon is clearly underscored by the common cosmic role they play. Thus, these gods are associated with the concept of ṛtá, whose most common translation is “(cosmic) order”; more specifically, the three main Ādityas are the gods that maintain this cosmic order. An identical situation can be met with in the Iranian religion, in which Mithra and Ahura Mazdāh (probably identical to Varuṇa) are also said to

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218 Cf. 9.114.3; 10.72.8–9; there are also other passages in which the lists with Ādityas contain three (e.g., 7.60.4), five (8.18.3), or six names (2.27.1); it is, however, nowhere said that these lists are comprehensive; cf. Brereton (1981: 3–5).

219 In the chapter on Indra, I interpreted ṛtá as the celestial “world order” associated with the keeping of time (the ecliptic); Lüders (1927 II, e.g., 405) translates this concept as the “Truth”; we saw that sometimes Geldner translates it as the “truth” (Germ. Wahrheit); see below for a more detailed analysis of this concept.

220 Boyce (1984) does not consider Ahura Mazdā and Varuṇa to be originally identical, and, based on Varuṇa’s well-known association with the waters, identifies Varuṇa with Apām Napāt; given that there seems to be no relation between Apām Napāt and Varuṇa, I found this hypothesis unlikely; with regards to the identity between Ahura Mazdāh and Varuṇa, cf. Oberlies (1998: 261–64).
maintain the (cosmic) order (Av. \textit{aśa}). Given that Aryaman appears in the Iranian religion as well (Av. Airyaman), it is clear that these three gods must be considered as belonging to the Indo-Iranian pantheon. In addition, since these Indo-Iranian gods are responsible for preserving the *ṛtá, it is obvious that without determining the meaning of this Indo-Iranian concept it is not possible to solve the mystery surrounding the three main Ādityas, in particular, and the other Ādityas, in general.

There have been various interpretations of the nature of the three main Ādityas. Below, I briefly present the main ones, starting with Mitra, and continuing with Varuṇa and Aryaman.

\textbf{A. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOLARSHIP CONCERNING THE THREE MAIN ĀDITYAS}

\textit{Mitra}

One of the main interpretations of the Indo-Iranian Mitra is that he represents either the sun-god or one of his aspects. This opinion, which was current among the Western scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was based mainly on Mithra’s later role as \textit{Sol Invictus} in the Mithraic mysteries of the Roman Empire, but was also supported by the fact that both the Vedic Mitra and Avestan Mithra seem indeed to have “solar” aspects. Obviously, the interpretation of Mitra as the sun-god is essentially naturalistic, since it identifies the god with a natural phenomenon, which is the sun.

The traditional view that the Indo-Iranian Mitra represents the sun was challenged even early in the nineteenth century, and rejected. The rejection was based on the observation that, alongside the proper name Mitra, in Sanskrit and Iranian there is a common noun \textit{mitrá}, which can have different meanings such as “friend” or “contract.” This observation led scholars such as Bergaigne (1878–1883: III 110) and Gonda (1972:112–113) to interpret Mitra as the god of friendship. A different

\textsuperscript{221} Cf. Boyce (1984); Schmidt (2006); Gershevitch (1959: 6), who follows the theory of Lüders (cf. n. 224 above), translates Av. \textit{aśa} as the “truth.”

\textsuperscript{222} A useful overview is presented by Brereton (1981); Schmidt (1978).

\textsuperscript{223} In antiquity, Strabo 15.13.732 notes that the Persians worship Mithra as the sun: τιμῶσι τὲ καὶ ἥλιον ὃν καλοῦσι Μίθρην. For an overview of the whole issue, see Beck (2002); Schmidt (2006); also, cf. Lommel (1970: 366–67; 370–71); Brereton (1981: 16).
position is taken by Meillet (1907: 144–146), who argues that Mitra is the personification of the Indo-Iranian concept *mitra, whose meaning would be “contract.” In Meillet’s own words, the Indo-Iranian *Mitra would be “le contrat, la puissance mystique du contrat, et une personne.” Consequently, Meillet rejects the theories that consider Mitra to be the god of friendship. His argument is based on those passages in the *Rig Veda in which Mitra does not seem to be as friendly as a god of friendship should be; on the contrary, the Rig Vedic Mitra can be vengeful and full of wrath as well, which is irreconcilable with the character of a god of friendship.

Meillet’s position is also adopted by Brereton (1981: 43–45), who, refining Meillet’s arguments for the Vedic case, reaches the conclusion that Mitra is the god of alliances or of any other human relationships based on mutual obligations. On the Iranian side, Gershevitch (1959: 26–28) also follows Meillet’s theory and interprets Mithra as the god of contracts.

To sum up: the scholars who reject the naturalistic interpretations of Mitra interpret this god as the personification of an abstract idea, which is expressed by the common word *mitrá meaning “contract” in Indo-Iranian.

**Varuṇa**

The interpretation of Varuṇa has been, in Brereton’s words (1982: 63), “a forbidding task.” Indeed, Varuṇa has been interpreted so far as representing very different things such as the sky, the moon, the god of the waters, or even the personification of an abstract concept such as an agreement between persons. This wide spectrum of interpretations (obviously irreconcilable with one another) shows that it has not been possible so far to explain the complexity of Varuṇa’s character coherently. Below, I review these theories briefly.
Varuṇa’s identification with the sky was influenced by the putative linguistic equivalence of the Skt. váruṇa with the Gk. ouranós “sky”; this equivalence, however, was shown to be untenable by Wackernagel (1916: 296–297). The basis for equating Varuṇa with the moon was the theory that the Ādityas must represent, as the sons of Aditi “the unboundedness,” the planets; thus, since Mitra was identified with the sun, it appeared natural to see Varuṇa, who is associated with darkness in the later Hindu literature, as the moon. Finally, Varuṇa’s well-known association with the waters, which is clearly expressed in the *Rig Veda*, led to the conclusion that he must be the god of the waters (the “Vedic Poseidon/Neptune”). This latter theory, however, encounters a major difficulty, which makes it untenable; this is the fact that the Vedic waters seem to be connected with the sky rather than with any earthly waters.

As in Mitra’s case, there have also been anti-naturalistic interpretations of Varuṇa, an approach which is prevalent today. According to these views, Varuṇa is the god of bonds, oaths or contracts. One of the main reasons for this type of approach is Varuṇa’s close association with Mitra, who, as we have seen above, was already interpreted as the god of agreements. Thus, Thieme (1957: 60) argues that “If Mitra is the personification of an ethical abstract (‘contract, agreement, treaty’), Varuṇa must be the personification of a similar abstract.” Similar ideas have been put forth even earlier by H. Güntert (1923: 147–50), who believes that Varuṇa, along with Mitra and Aryaman, holds men in mighty bonds and determine how they should act. Unlike Mitra, however, who would represent the “friendly” god, Varuṇa would be the god punishing those who violate these laws. Variations on the same theme were proposed by Lüders (1951–1959 I: 28–40) and Brereton (1981:126–127). For Lüders, Varuṇa’s chief characteristics are his being the master of rtá, which Lüders translates

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227 Cf. e.g., 1.161.14 (*adhbhúti váruṇah samudraíḥ* “in den Wassern, in den Meeren geht Varuṇa”); 7.49.3–4; 88.3; 8.69.11–12; 9.90.2; 9.73.3; also, see Lüders (1953: I 9–13, 50–56), who clearly shows that one of Varuṇa’s essential features is his association with the celestial waters/ocean.

228 It is well known that Varuṇa became a sea-god in post-Vedic times; cf. e.g., Lüders (1953: I 9–13, 41–50).

229 Cf. Lüders (1953: I 9–13, 50–56); Macdonell (1897: 25); Keith (1925: 97); Oldenberg (1894: 202–203); Hillebrandt (1990 II: 11).

230 Cf. Brereton (1981: 66); Güntert argues that Varuṇa’s name can be derived from PIE *wer “to bind” (Germ. “binden, fesseln”).
as “Wahrheit” (“the truth”), and his dwelling in the waters; in Lüders' view, this latter characteristic has to do with the fact that oaths, whose master is Varuṇa, were sworn on water. Brereton, on the other hand, makes the connection between Varuṇa and the concept of vratá “commandment, authority,” which is often met with in connection with Varuṇa; according to Brereton, Varuṇa would be the god of authority, and this authority would extend over the whole world, including over waters, which are important because they bring prosperity to the earth in the form of rain.

It is difficult to accept these interpretations. Why would Varuṇa be the “god of authority”? Is it the case that he represents the “authority” and all the other gods are not (as) “authoritative”? Why would Varuṇa dwell in the waters if he was the god of oaths, and oaths were to be sworn on water? Or, why would those ancient people consider Varuṇa as having his dominion specifically in the waters, since this dominion extends to the whole world anyway?

**Aryaman**

The god Aryaman has been even more difficult to interpret, since there are not many passages in the *Rig Veda* that describe him. Among these passages, the most expressive ones are those mentioning the “path of Aryaman,” which cannot be transgressed. The existence of this “path of Aryaman” led to the opinion that Aryaman himself represents a celestial body such as the sun, the planet Venus, or the Milky Way.

There are also, as expected, non-naturalistic interpretations of Aryaman. They all start from hypotheses concerning the etymology of the word *aryamán*. The most notable ones are those of Thieme (1938: esp. 106) and Brereton (1981:62–163 and 181–82), who consider the word *aryamán* as ultimately derived from *arí- “stranger.” Thus, from *arí- one would derive *aryá- meaning “hospitable” (Thieme) or “civilized” (Brereton), and then *aryamán “hospitality” (Thieme) or “civility, customs” (Brereton). Aryaman, therefore, would be the god of hospitality (Thieme), or of customs (Brereton).

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231 Cf. above n. 224; 225.

232 Aryaman is called átīrtapanthāḥ “whose path cannot be transgressed”; cf. 1.105.6; 10.64.5; Hillebrandt (1990 II: 49).

233 In later Brāhmaṇic traditions, Aryaman was identified with the sun, and his path was seen as the sun’s path (the ecliptic); cf. Brereton (1981: 150 n.1). Oldenberg (1917: 190 n.1), who believes that the Ādityas represent the planets, thinks that Aryaman represents Venus; for Weber (1893: 138), Aryaman is the Milky Way.
For Brereton, in particular, Aryaman is, like Mitra and Varuṇa (already seen as gods of contracts and alliances), the god of a similar principle (customs) that governs society. The similar roles of these three gods then would justify their being mentioned together in the *Rig Veda*.

These non-naturalistic interpretations can be objected to in many particular ways. For example, it is not possible for the proponents of such theories to explain the solar aspects of the three main Ādityas. Indeed, if these gods were gods of sophisticated agreements, why would they be in close relation to the sun as some Rig Vedic passages make it clear? The main reason, however, why these interpretations are not convincing lies somewhere else. Thus, a religion whose three major gods represent “contracts, alliances and customs,” respectively, would be — to say the least — peculiar. In addition, the distinctions between such concepts seem to be rather bureaucratic and artificial. Last but not least, these theories ultimately fail to explain what the connection is between *ṛtá* interpreted as the “truth” and all these agreements that “govern” society.

I would like to make myself clear at this point by saying that I do not deny that Mitra and Varuṇa have indeed a connection with oaths or alliances. Some passages quoted by the proponents of such theories leave no doubt that these gods are sometimes invoked during the ceremonies of the closing agreements. What I question and reject here is the idea that these gods are the personification of such concepts. In fact, to make a comparison, arguing that Mitra or Varuṇa represent the contract/alliance itself would be the same with saying that the Old Testament Yahweh is the embodiment of the ten commandments, i.e., the ten commandments themselves.

It is in this context I would like to quote Gershevitch (1959: 28), who, in spite of adopting Meillet’s position with regards to the nature of Mithra and Varuṇa (that is, he thinks they are personifications of agreements), makes an interesting remark: “The question now to consider is whether the Avestan Mithra’s association with the contract is a secondary development due to a

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234 For these “solar” aspects, see the next section.

235 One can invoke in favor of this argument the Greek case, in which Dike or Themis are gods of justice; however, the Greek gods do not have the religious status the three Ādityas have; in addition, it is questionable whether the Greek gods are merely personifications of abstract concepts; cf. Kuiper (1976:36).

236 Lommel (1970: 369) adopts the same skepticism: “Diese Götter waren für ihre Verehrer lebendige Wesen, nicht abstrakte Begriffe; nicht Deifikation einer Idee (Vertrag, Bündnis) ... sondern Personen, die man kannte.”
fortuitous identity of his name with a word for ‘contract’, or represents a, or the, primary function of the god. Theoretically, the first position alternative is quite possible ... But obviously, unless the study of all ancient sources on Mithra/Mitra reveals that the god’s primary function cannot have been the guardianship of contract, or/and that another function of Mithra must be the primary one, it would be unreasonable to reject as not genuine the equation Mithra = contract ... ”

It is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate about the origin and etymology of the words Mitra and Varuṇa, or whether these words are derived from PIE roots having to do with contracts/commandments or anything of the sort. Gershevitch’s remark is interesting because it shows that, indeed, even for a scholar like him, who believes that Mithra/Mitra is the embodiment of contracts, there still exists the possibility — albeit a remote one — that these gods do not represent abstract concepts such as agreements, but something else, from which the concept of contract can be derived. This is the direction that the present study will explore further.

B. A RECENT NATURALISTIC VIEW ABOUT MITRA AND VARUṆA

In the brief historical overview above, I purposely left aside a relatively recent study, which treats Mitra and Varuṇa from a new perspective. This is Simson (1997:1–35), who took a radically different approach in explaining the natures of Mitra and Varuṇa. Thus, Simson does not focus on the relations the main Ādityas may have with the social agreements; rather, he starts from those passages that show Mitra and Varuṇa as related to celestial phenomena; in other words, Simson’s approach is naturalistic. His conclusion is that Mitra and Varuṇa represent the planet Venus at sunrise and sunset, i.e., they are the morning and evening stars. I will briefly present his main arguments because they will prove to be useful to the present study.

Simson provides evidence from the Rig Veda\(^{337}\) that Mitra and Varuṇa are related to different astronomical phenomena such as the sun, sky, seasons, dawn, and twilight. This would be difficult or impossible to account for if these gods were mere personifications of abstract concepts such as contracts or alliances. Therefore, Simson argues that all the connections between Mitra and Varuṇa,\(^{337}\)

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\(^{337}\) For all the Rig Vedic passages Simson relies on the translations of Lüders (1927); I use only Geldner’s standard translation of the Rig Veda.
on one hand, and the natural phenomena, on the other hand, can be explained through the identification of these gods with the planet Venus in its morning and evening appearances. In addition to the Vedic material, Simson presents evidence from the Avesta, which shows the Iranian Mithra as also related to celestial phenomena. One of Simson's main arguments relies on a passage from Herodotus (1.131), in which the Greek historian includes Aphrodite among the different gods the Persians of his time venerated; Herodotus relates that the Persians adopted Aphrodite from the neighboring Semitic peoples, and that Aphrodite's Persian name was Mitra.\textsuperscript{238}

Simson's perspective on Mitra and Varuṇa is extremely refreshing and shows that a naturalistic interpretation of these gods is not only possible but also probable. As we shall see below, these gods are so intimately related to celestial phenomena that it is not possible to interpret them other than as being celestial in origin. Before starting to interpret the Rig Vedic material, however, I will evaluate Simson's theory and show some of the shortcomings that actually make it untenable. This will not take away any merits from Simson's article, which is a clear advance toward the understanding of the astronomical significance of some Rig Vedic passages. My objections to the theory that Mitra and Varuṇa represent the planet Venus are the following:

- The theory cannot account for the association of Aryaman with Mitra and Varuṇa; in other words, this theory cannot give an explanation for why Aryaman is grouped together with the planet Venus. It also does not account for why these gods are called “the Ādityas.”
- The theory cannot explain one of Varuṇa's main traits, which is his association with the waters.
- It is known that Varuṇa's Iranian counterpart is Ahura Mazdāh. If the Iranian Mithra is the planet Venus, who is Ahura Mazdāh, a god whose function has been recognized to be similar, if not identical to that of Varuṇa?
- In the history of astronomy, it is assumed that the discovery of the identity between the morning and evening stars is preceded by the belief that these two stars are different from

\textsuperscript{238} Herodotus's statement was seen as a misinterpretation of the historical facts; cf. Benveniste (1929: 27–8); Simson (1997: 20–21 and n. 96).
each other. Simson assumes the opposite, namely that the Indo-Iranians knew of this identity and that later the Indo-Aryans considered them to represent two different gods/stars. Simson's theory, therefore, cannot account for why the Indo-Aryans had to split an original Mithra/ Venus into two entities.

These are the main reasons why I think Simson's theory is untenable. This theory, however, has the great merit of bringing to attention the close relation that exists between Mitra and Varuṇa, on one hand, and the astronomical phenomena, on the other hand. Starting from these considerations, below I analyze again those passages that connect the main Ādityas with such phenomena. I will try then to offer a new solution to the issue of the nature of the three main Ādityas.

C. THE “SOLAR” CONNECTIONS OF THE ĀDITYAS

Mitra and, especially, Varuṇa are closely related to the sun. These “solar” aspects are apparent in numerous Rig Vedic passages, a fact that excludes coincidences:

1.24.8. \[urúṃ hí rájā váruṇaś cakāra súryāya pánthām ánue tavā u\]
Denn König Varuṇa hat der Sonne den weiten Weg bereitet, um ihn zu wandeln.

1.25.8. \[véda māsó dhṛtávrato duvādaśa prajávataḥ védā yá upajá yate.\]
Er kennt die zwölf Monate mit ihrem Nachwuchs, der Gesetzvollstrecker; er kennt den, der nachgeboren wird.

7.87.5. \[... gṛ́tso rájā váruṇaś cakra etáṃ diví preṅkhám hiranyáyam śubhé kám\]
... Der geschickte König Varuṇa hat für sich diese goldene Schaukel [the sun — my note] zum Prangen an den Himmel gebracht.

8.41.3. \[sá kṣápaḥ pári śasvaje ní usró māyāyā dadhe\]  
\[sá viśvam pári darśatāḥ\]  
\[táṣya vénīr ánu vratám uṣás tisró avardhayan\]

8.41.3. Die Nächte hält er umschlungen; durch seine Zaubermacht hat er die Morgenröten eingesetzt; er ist rings um die Welt sichtbar. Nach seinem Gebote haben seine Liebenden die drei Morgenröten gro gezogen.

5.85.5. ... der (Varuṇa) in der Luft stehend wie mit dem Messstabe die Erde mit der Sonne abgemessen hat.

1.136.2. ádarśi gātūr uráve vārīyasī pánthā rtásya sám ayaṃsta raśmībhiś
cákṣur bhágasya raśmībhiḥ
dyukṣám mitrásya sádanam aryamṇó várūṇasya ca
áthā dadhāte hrhád ukthiyaṃ váya upastútyam hrhád váyah

1.136.2. Die weitere Bahn für das weite (Licht) [i.e., the sun — my note] ist sichtbar geworden, sein Weg ward durch die Zügel des Gesetzes gelenkt, das Auge durch die Zügel des Bhaga. Der himmlische Sitz des Mitra, des Aryaman und Varuṇa (ward sichtbar) und beide besitzen hohe preiswürdige Kraft, löbliche, hohe Kraft.

5.63.2. samrā́jāv asyá bhúvanasya rājatho mítrāvaruṇā vidáthe suvardṛśā

5.63.2. Als Allherscher herrschet ihr über diese Welt, Mitra und Varuṇa, in Weisheit, durch die Sonne sehend ...

5.63.7. ... rténa vísvam bhúvanam ví rājathaḥ súryam á dhattho diví citriyaṃ rátham

5.63.7. ... Mit dem Gesetz herrschet ihr über die ganze Welt; die Sonne setzet ihr an den Himmel als weitkenntlichen Wagen.

7.60.1. Wenn du heute, o Sūrya, die Schuldlosen melden wirst, so sollst du bei deinem Aufgang dem Mitra und Varuṇa die Wahrheit (melden) ...

7.60.4. úd vām prkṣáso mádhumanto asthur á súrīyo aruhac chukrám árnanḥ
yásma ádityá ádhvano rádanti mitró aryamá várūṇah sajósāḥ
7.60.4. Eure starken, honigreichen (Rosse) sind heraufgekommen; Sūrya hat jetzt das lichte Meer erstiegen, dem die Ādityas einträchtig die Wege vorzeichnen: Mitra, Aryaman, Varuṇa.

7.64.2. ... ihr Hüter des großen Gesetzes ... (ā́ rājānā maha ṛtasya gopā)

7.65.1. Ich rufe bei Sonnenaufgang euch beide wieder mit Liedern, den Mitra und den Varuṇa von lauterem Wollen ...

7.87.1. Varuṇa zeichnet der Sonne die Wege vor, (er ließ) die zum Meer gehenden Fluten der Ströme laufen wie ein abgelassenes Rennen die Rennstuten, den rechten Weg einhaltend. Er hat den Tagen die große Bahnen gemacht.

The main idea emerging from these passages is that, in all likelihood, the three main Ādityas, especially Varuṇa, are regulators of the sun's path. Thus, Varuṇa is the god who prepares the sun's path (cf. 1.24.8) and knows the twelve solar months. Varuṇa plays with the sun as if the sun were his swing; he measures the earth by using the sun, and sets the dawns in their places. The sun's path is regulated by Varuṇa's law, which represents the cosmic order. Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman placed the sun in the sky and show him its path. The sun's path is regulated by the cosmic order (ṛtá).

The succession of the twelve months that Varuṇa knows is closely and essentially associated with the cosmic order (ṛtá):

1.164.11. dūvādaśāraṃ nahī táj járāya várvarti cakraṃ pári dyām ṛtáṣya
á putrā agne mithunāso átra saptā śatāni vimśatiś ca tasthuḥ

240 Interestingly, Varuṇa also knows the intercalary month (cf. Geldner on 1.25.8 above).
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1.164.11. Dies zwölfspeichige Rad der Zeit (Ordnung) (ṛtásya) dreht sich immer wieder um den Himmel, denn nicht kann es sich abnutzen. Darauf stehen, Agni, die Söhne paarweise, siebenhundert und zwanzig.

Simson (1997: 14–15) notes very well that, in cases such as the ones above, Lüders’ translation of ṛtá as “the truth” is not appropriate. The succession of the months cannot be regarded as an expression of the “truth,” but as an astronomical phenomenon pertaining to the cosmic order. The same idea is expressed in the following passage, in which Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman regulate not only the succession of the months, but also that of the seasons and days, and, in general, the succession of time:

7.66.11. ví yé dadhúḥ śarádam másam ád áhar yajñám aktúṃ ca ád fcam
anāpiyáṃ váruṇo mitró aryaná kṣatrám rájána āśata

7.66.11. Die den Herbst, den Monat und Tag, das Opfer und die Nacht und die Strophe festgesetzt haben, (diese) Könige Varuṇa, Mitra und Aryaman haben die unerreichbare Herrschaft erlangt.

4.55.2. prá yé dhā́māni pūrviyā́ṇi árcān ví yád uchā́n viyotá́ro ámūrāḥ
vidhātā́ro ví té dadhur ájasrā ṛtádhītayo rurucanta dasmā́ḥ

4.55.2. Die die alten Satzungen ehren sollen, wenn die klugen Trenner (von Tag und Nacht?) aufleuchten, sie haben als unermüdlichen Ordner (die Zeiten) geordnet. Die Meister, die die Wahrheit erkannt haben, sollen erleuchtet werden.

The idea of “regulating” time also emerges in the following passage, in which Mitra und Varuṇa are said to bring the year to completion:

7.61.2. prá vāṃ sá mitrāváruṇāv ṛtává vípro mánmáni dirghaśrúd iyarti
yásya bráhmáni sukrauti ávátha ā yát krátvā ná śarádaḥ prnā́īthe

7.61.2. Auf euch, Mitra und Varuṇa, hebt der wahrhafte redekundige Sänger [“singer whose sacred songs are sung according to ṛtá” — my note] within hörbar seine Dichtung an,
dessen erbauliche Worte ihr Wohlwollende günstig aufnehmen möget, auf dass ihr seine Jahre vollzählig machete, wie er es im Sinn hat.

All these passages clearly show that ṛtá has a concrete astronomical significance. Other examples are also relevant in this respect. Thus, dawn is an important part of this cosmic order, and its daily appearance is also regulated by ṛtá:

4.51.8. तां आ तारण्ति सामनता पुरास्तात् सामानताः पाप्राथानाः
तास्य देवां हसदासो बुधानां गावां नासर्गाः उषाः जरानाः
Sie [Ušas — my note] kommen gleichmäßig aus Osten, von der gleichen Stelle aus gleichmäßig sich ausbreitend. Vom Sitze der Ordnung (ṛtá) erwacht sind die Göttinnen Ušas's früh munter wie die Schwärme der Kühe.

Similarly, the path of the stars is also connected to the cosmic order:

1.24.10. अमीया जशा निहतासा उच्च नाक्तम दाद्र्शे कुहा किंद दीवयुह
जने स्टर्न [जशा “the Bear(s)” represents the constellation of the Great Bear — my note; cf. Grassmann], die oben befestigt des Nachts erschienen sind, sie sind am Tag irgendwohin gegangen. Unverletzlich sind Varuṇa's Gesetze: Des Nachts wandelt Umschau haltend der Mond.

The association of Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman with the sun and the stars offers a strong hint as to their cosmic nature. Thus, as regulators of time connected with the sun's path, these gods are, in all likelihood, stars or constellations. In addition, the connection between them and the solar months show that Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman do not represent just any constellations in the sun's path, but the most important ones; these are the zodiacal constellations on the ecliptic. This leads to the conclusion that the Vedic ṛtá, “the world's order,” represents either the ecliptic itself or the “order”

241 The cosmic order in this case is Varuṇa's laws (Germ. “Gesetze”; Skt. vratāṇi).
directly deriving from it (“time” perhaps?). This conclusion is not unexpected. Independently of these latter considerations, the same conclusion on the nature of ṛtá was reached above, in the section about the Maruts. Thus, the two conclusions confirm each other.

The theory that the three main Ādityas represent the zodiacal constellations may at first seem far-fetched, and one could object to it by arguing that the succession of time can also be regulated by “abstract” deities such as the ones representing contracts, alliances etc. A strong argument against such objection, however, is that these gods are not said to regulate an abstract time-entity, but bits of time, represented by months, days etc., which are well known to be intimately related to the paths of the stars and the sun. Even so, a skeptical person's final objection would be that the connections between the Ādityas and the succession of months or seasons represent only a coincidence or even a figure of speech of the poetic arsenal. Therefore, it is necessary to put forth additional evidence in favor of the conclusion above.

The following passages doubtless show that, as was the case with the other Vedic gods, the nature of the main Ādityas is stellar. The three main Ādityas are bright and located in the sky; they ascend the sky with their chariots (with what else?!); they oversee earth and all the creatures from the sky. The language used to describe these gods is essentially the same as that used to describe Indra, Agni etc.:

5.63.1. \(ṛtásya gopáv ádhi tiṣṭhatho ráthaṃ sátyadharmāṇā paramé víomani\)

5.63.1. Ihr Hüter des Gesetzes \((ṛtásya gopáv)\), deren Satzungen gültig sind, ihr beide besteigt den Wagen im höchsten Himmel ...

7.82.10. \(asmé índro váruṇo mitró aryamá dyumnáṃ yachantu máhi śárma sapráthaḥ\)

7.82.10. Uns sollen Indra, Varuṇa, Mitra, Aryaman Glanz und ihren großen Schirm in ganzer Breite gewähren ...

6.67.6. \(tá hí kṣatráṃ dhārāyeti ánú dyún dṛmhēthe sánūm upamád īva dyóḥ\)

\(dṛḥó náṣatra utá viśvādevo bhúmim á atān diyáṃ dhāśínāyóḥ\)
6.67.6. Denn ihr behauptet eure Herrschaft Tag für Tag; ihr festiget die Höhe (des Himmels) gleichsam vom höchsten Himmel aus. Und das gefestete Gestirn, das allen Göttern gehört, hat Erde und Himmel mit dem Labsal beider gezogen.\[^{242}\]

8.25.7. \(ādhi yā́ brható divó abhi yūthéva pāśyataḥ\)
\(ṛtā́vānā samrā́jā námase hitā\)

8.25.7. Die vom hohen Himmel her (die Geschöpfe) wie die Herden überschauen, die gesetzhegenden Allkönige, recht für die Huldigung geschaffen.

These passages support the hypothesis that the main Ādityas, which are celestial bright objects, represent, as time-regulators located in the sky, stars in the sun’s path. The issue now is to try to determine with precision what stars or constellations the three main Ādityas represent. The considerations above leave little doubt that these constellations must bear great astronomical significance for the solar year. In other words, these constellations represent, in all likelihood, the most significant points on the sun’s path; obviously, the first remarkable points that come to mind are those defined by the two tropics (winter and summer) and the equinoctial circle. This means that Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman are stars or constellations associated with the solstices and equinoxes. Is it possible to refine this conclusion and determine which stars these gods represent?

It is well known that Varuṇa is associated with the “waters” and the “ocean.” The clearest examples occur in hymns 1.164 and 7.49, in which Varuṇa is said to move in the middle of the waters:\[^{243}\]

\[^{242}\] Geldner thinks that \(dṛḥhō náksatra\) (Germ. ‘das gefestete Gestirn’) refers to the sun; this does not seem likely since the sun is always in motion; I would conjecture that the “fixed star” refers to the pole star, which, in Vedic times (around 2000 BC and before) was represented by the star Thuban. What the verse says then is that the pole star “stretched the earth and the sky” (Skt. \(atān\)) through (establishing) the seats (Skt. \(dhāsīnā\) — instr. from \(dhāsī\)) of Mitra and Varuṇa. These stars therefore are important bounds that ensure the cosmic order and the spatial configuration of the cosmos.

\[^{243}\] For 1.164.14, cf. n.232 above; 7.49 is dedicated to the waters.
7.49.2. yā́ ápo divyā́ utá vá srávanti khanîtrimā utá vá yāḥ svayanjāḥ
samudrārthā yāḥ súcayaḥ pavākās tá ápo devī́há́ mā́m avantu

7.49.3. yásāṃ rā́jā váruṇo yā́ti mádhye satyānṛté avapāśyañ jánānām
madhuścútaḥ súcayo yāḥ pavākās tá ápo devī́há́ mā́m avantu

7.49.2–3. Die himmlischen Gewässer (ápo divyá́) oder die, welche fließen, die Gegrabenen oder Selbstantständenen, deren Ziel das Meer (samudrá) ist, die reinen, lauteren, diese göttlichen Gewässer sollen mich hier betreuen. /In deren Mitte König Varuṇa wandelt (yásāṃ rā́jā váruṇo yā́ti mádhye), Wahrheit und Lüge der Leute erspähend, die honigträufenden, reinen, lauteren, diese göttlichen Gewässer sollen mich hier betreuen.

Another passage in a Varuṇa hymn presents Varuṇa as the ocean itself (or as closely connected to the ocean), which is located on the sky's firmament; certainly, this is another strong indication that Varuṇa's place is in the sky:244

8.41.8. sá samudró apícóyas turó dyám iva rohati
nī́ yád āśu yájur dadhé
sá māyá arcínā padá áśtrṇān nákam áruhan ...

8.41.8. Er, der verborgene Ozean (samudró), steigt als Machthaber wie (die Sonne) zum Himmel, wenn er in ihnen den Opferspruch niedergelegt hat. Er brachte mit dem Strahl als Fuß die Zaubereien zu Fall; er hat das Firmament erklommen ...

Apparently, there is nothing special about Varuṇa's association with the celestial Ocean/Sea. The possible identification of Varuṇa with the solstices or equinoxes, however, gives an unexpected twist to the interpretation of this issue. Before exploring this in detail, it is necessary to make some observations with regards to the constellations announcing the solstices and equinoxes.

244 Lüders (1951: I 9–13) notes that Varuṇa's ocean is in the sky; cf. n.232 and 234 above.
It is well known that the constellations that defined the tropics and the equinoxes from about 4000 to 2000 BC (the “era” of Taurus) were Aquarius (the winter solstice), Scorpio (the autumn equinox), Leo (the summer solstice), and Taurus (the spring equinox). The constellations that announce the solstices and equinoxes today are different (Sagittarius, Virgo, Gemini, and Pisces, respectively) because of the well-known astronomical phenomenon of the precession of the equinoxes, which causes a constant shift of the stars’ position in the sky.

The reason I mentioned the constellations that announced the solstices and equinoxes between 4000 and 2000 BC is that the three main Ādityas are of Indo-Iranian origin; this means that these gods were invented during that period of time to represent the solstices and equinoxes.

The position of Aquarius in the sky bears a great importance to the present argument. Thus, it is known that Aquarius “the Water-pourer” is part of the area of the sky that the Greeks called Ὕδωρ “Water,” and the Babylonians the “Sea.” Aquarius itself corresponds to the Babylonian GU.LA “waterman.” The existence of a celestial sea in this part of the sky is clearly shown by the fact that all the constellations that populate this region represent marine creatures. Thus, in the vicinity of Aquarius we can find Capricorn “goat-fish,” Cetus “whale,” Pisces “fish,” which all belong, as marine creatures, to the Sea. The “existence” of a celestial sea in this sky-region is due to the vicinity of the winter tropic, which is the cause of rain and bad weather in general.

Aquarius then is located “in the sea.” Consequently, Varuṇa, who dwells in the waters, is likely to be Aquarius. The same conclusion applies to the Iranian Ahura Mazdāh, who is also known

\[\text{\footnotesize \text{\textsuperscript{245} Cf. Kidd (1997: 288).}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize \text{\textsuperscript{246} Cf. Kidd (1997: 288).}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize \text{\textsuperscript{247} The identification of Varuṇa with Aquarius may support the hypothesis that, in fact, Pūṣan represents Prokyon, the main star in Canis Minor (cf. fig. 2), towards which the wedding procession led by the Aśvins seems to move (cf. the section on Pūṣan, above). Thus, the Aśvins are said in 4.43.5 (quoted in the section about the Aśvins) to come from the sea: “Weit überholt euer Wagen den Himmel, wenn er vom Meere (mit) euch herkommt” (urú vāṁ ráthah pári nakṣati dyāṁ á yát samudrád abhi vártate vāṁ); as it can be seen in fig. 2, if the Aśvins come indeed from the Sea (Cetus), and cross the “celestial river,” they must go towards Prokyon, which is on the other side of the Milky Way from the perspective of a traveller “coming from the Sea.” In other words, the Aśvins cannot cross the Milky Way to reach Sirius.}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize \text{\textsuperscript{248} Witzel (1995) also had the intuition that Varuṇa may represent a star/constellation.}}\]
for being associated with waters. Varuṇa, therefore, represents the southern limit of the sun’s path during the year. As such, he is rightly said to be the regulator of time, the god who “knows” the months, the guardian of the celestial order.

The astronomical role of Aquarius is vividly expressed through the splendid metaphor of the sun being Varuṇa’s swing (Skt. preṅkhá; cf. 7.87.5 above). The god, who is located at the southern limit of the sun’s path, “pushes” the sun back to the summer tropic; the sun is indeed a swing, which, pushed by Varuṇa, oscillates back and forth between the tropics. The same idea seems to be expressed in the following passage, in which náksatram probably refers to the sun (cf. Geldner):

7.86.1cd.  
prá nákam ṛśvāṃ nunude bhántam dvitā náksatram papráthac ca bháma

7.86.1cd. Er [Varuṇa — my note] hat hoch nach oben den Himmel gestoßen, doppelt dem Himmelsgestirn (einen Anstoß gegeben), und er hat die Erde ausgebreitet.

Varuṇa’s role is not only to guard the sun’s path. Being located in the sky, Varuṇa supports the sky, keeps the firmament fixed in its place. Sometimes he is associated with Mitra in this task:

4.42.4.  
ahám apó apinvam uksámāṇā dhārāyaṃ dīvaṃ sādana ṛtásya  
ṛténā putrō áditer ṛtāvā utá tridhātu prathayad ví bháma


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249 In the oldest parts of the Avesta, the Iranian waters are called ahurānīš “daughters or wives of Ahura”; cf. Gershevitch (1959: 45). The Avesta also knows of a celestial sea called Vouru.kaša “with large bays” (cf. Bartholomae 1904), which brings rain to earth; cf. Oberlies (1999: 20, 25–27); the name of this Avestan celestial sea is strikingly echoed by Varuṇa (< I-Ir. *Vouruna).

250 Interestingly, Varuṇa is identified with winter in MS. 1.10.12:151.16 (hemantó hí várūṇah); cf. Oberlies (1999: 116 n.472). In Zoroastrianism, on the other hand, Ahura Mazdâh was celebrated during the month of December-January (i.e. around the winter solstice); cf. (Boyce 1984).

251 Varuṇa’s role, therefore, is to prevent the sun from sinking below the winter tropic.
Ihr festiget Himmel und Erde, Mitra und Varuṇa ... (ādhārayatam prthivām utā dyām mitrarājānā varuṇā máhobhiḥ)

Ich will das Werk (die Macht) von Mitra und Varuṇa preisen; ihr Eifer hält Himmel und Erde mächtig in Schranken ...

... der mit einem Pfeiler die beiden Welten auseinander (hält) und wie der Ungeborene den Himmel festigte (yā skambhéna ví ródasī ajó ná dyām ādhārayan).

That Varuṇa is located on the winter tropic (the limit of the sun's path) is also shown by the fact that the god's path cannot be “transgressed” (by the sun!):

Jenen Ādityaweg [Varuṇa's — my note; cf.1.105.15], der am Himmel als rühmliches (Werk) bereitet ist, den keiner übertreten (atikráme), ihr Götter...

The identification of Varuṇa with Aquarius (or with parts of it) opens up the path for determining who the other two main Ādityas are. Let us start with Mitra. It seems tempting to assume that, since Varuṇa is often invoked together with him, Mitra represents the constellation opposed to Aquarius in the sky; this is Leo, which was the summer solstice's marker between 4000 and 2000 BC. The Rig Veda, however, does not seem to offer additional evidence for this hypothesis. Fortunately, on the Iranian side, there is the famous Avestan hymn to Mithra (Yašt 10), which contains more information about Mithra's stellar nature than any of the passages in the Rig Veda. I quote below, in Gershevitch’s translation (1959), some of the passages that are relevant to the present argument.

Obviously, the sun also enters this category.

This is also the reason Simson (1997) quotes many passages from this hymn.
12–13. Grass-land magnate (vouru.gaoyaoitīm) Mithra we worship ... who is the first (paoiryō) supernatural god to approach across the Harā, in front of the immortal swift-horsed sun; who is the first to seize the beautiful gold-painted mountain tops; from there the most mighty surveys the whole land inhabited by Iranians.

49–51. Grass-land magnate Mithra we worship ... for whom Ahura Mazdāh, the creator, fashioned an abode above ... which (abode) the incremental Immortals (Aməšā Spənta) built, all in harmony with the sun ...

70–71. Grass-land magnate Mithra we worship ... in front of him flies Ahura-created Vərəθraγna in the shape of a wild, aggressive, male boar (varāza) with sharp fangs and sharp tusks ... as he (the boar) catches up with the opponents ... he knocks them ...

95–96. Grass-land magnate Mithra we worship ... who goes along the whole width of the earth after the setting of the glow of the sun, sweeping across both edges of this wide, round earth whose limits are far apart: everything he surveys between heaven and earth holding his mace (vazrəm) in his hand ...

99. Grass-land magnate Mithra we worship ... from whom all supernatural evil goods, and the concupiscent owners of Falsehood, recoil in fear. Along flies grass-land magnate Mithra, master of countries, over the right-hand (dašinəm) border of this wide, round earth whose limits are far apart.

142–3. Grass-land magnate Mithra we worship ... the well-created, very great god who in the morning (sūrəm) brings into evidence the many shapes ... as he lights up his body, being endowed with own light like the moon; whose face blazes like (that) of the star Sirius (Tištriya) ... (him) I will worship ... who shines like the majestic sun’s most beautiful creature, guides the star-decked, supernaturally fashioned chariot ...

144. ... we worship Mithra when he faces the country, we worship Mithra when he is between (two) countries, we worship Mithra when he is inside the country, we

254 Cf. Gershevitch (1959: 288): “the light Mithra brings is that which pervades the earth at daybreak.”
worship Mithra when he is above the country, we worship Mithra when he is below
the country, we worship Mithra when he makes the round of the country, we worship
Mithra when he is behind the country.

    145. ... we worship Mithra and Ahura — the two exalted owners of Truth (aša)
that are removed from danger —, as well as the stars, the moon and the sun ...

These passages reveal Mithra’s stellar nature through several metaphors. Thus, his
countenance blazes like that of the star Tištriya.\footnote{Tištriya has been generally interpreted as Sirius, the brightest fixed star in the sky; cf. Panaino (2005). I showed in the present study that both Tištriya and Agni represent the planet Venus.} Mithra has his own light and shines like the sun; when he appears at dawn, Mithra brings light to all creatures; his chariot is studded with stars (142–143); he is invoked along with other celestial bodies (145). All these features clearly support the hypothesis that Mitra’s nature is celestial. In addition, the comparison with Tištriya shows that Mithra is not a constellation, but a star. This observation may be of paramount importance in determining who Mithra is.

One of Mithra’s strangest features is revealed in verses 12–13. There, it is said that Mithra is the first (star) that appears before the sun.\footnote{This verse clearly shows that Mithra is different from the sun; Gershevitch (1959: 39–40) does not have an interpretation for this; he only assumes that “Mithra, as never-sleeping watcher of the covenant and its infringers, has to tour the earth incessantly.”} Simson (1997: 22) takes this as a proof that Mithra represents the planet Venus, which, indeed, as the morning star, appears before the sun. We saw, however, that Mithra was not Venus. Therefore, one needs to find another explanation for why the star Mithra is the first to appear in front of the sun.

As I already noted in the present study, the morning “appearance” of a star before the sun is called the star’s heliacal rising. Each morning the sun’s rising is preceded by that of a star, which is the last of the stars appearing on the eastern horizon before all the stars vanish in daylight. Obviously, there are many stars that appear before the sun during its yearly course. The Avestan passage, however, speaks about Mithra as being the first star that precedes the sun. Since there are many stars that precede sunrise, this metaphor seems at first to be without any natural foundation. There is,
however, an element that puts this whole issue into a new perspective. This concerns the heliacal rising of a star on the day that marks the beginning of the solar year. In that situation, the star rising heliacally can be indeed said to be the “first” to precede the sun. The beginning of the Iranian year in the pre-Zoroastrian era occurred at the spring equinox. This shows that the initial premise of the present argument that Mithra represents the star/constellation announcing the summer solstice needs to be changed. It appears now that Mithra represents the star announcing the spring equinox. As I noted above, given the precession of the equinoxes, such an important star must have belonged to the constellation Taurus, which announced the spring equinox before 2000 BC. This star is well known; it is one of the brightest stars in the northern hemisphere and represents the “Bull’s eye”: Aldebaran or α Tauri. Since Aldebaran located centrally with respect to the whole Taurus constellation, the time period during which this star announced the spring equinox must have been closer to 3000 BC than to 2000 BC. This possibly shows the antiquity of the Indo-Iranian religion.

The conclusion that Mitra is Aldebaran can provide an explanation for the verse 99 of the Avestan hymn, in which it is said that Mithra goes over the right side of the earth (dašinəm). The Iranian word dašinəm “the right side,” which is related to the Sanskrit word daksinā, can also mean “to the south.” The meaning “to the south” is due to the fact that the cardinal points are set from the perspective of an observer facing (due) east; for such an observer, the south is obviously to his right. These considerations perfectly explain the Avestan passage. Thus, it is well known that, for an observer facing due east in the northern hemisphere, the stars rise from the east and go over his head to the south, that is, to his right. The reason then why Mithra is said to go over the right side of the earth is that Aldebaran (or any star for that matter) goes indeed over the right side of an observer facing due east.

There now remains Aryaman, which, obviously, must be the star that announced the summer solstice around 3000 BC. As was the case with Aldebaran, such a star is also well known; it is Regulus.

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257 The first month of the year was called Frawardin in the Achaemenid inscriptions, and started at the spring equinox; cf. Blois (1996: 48–49).
258 In astronomical jargon, the designation of a star as α shows that that star is the brightest star in that constellation.
259 The later Hindu name for Aldebaran is Rohinī; cf. Scherer (1953: 117–18).
or α Leonis. The path of Aryaman, therefore, is the path of Regulus, that is, the summer tropic. As in Varuṇa’s case, it makes perfect sense to say that Aryaman’s path cannot be transgressed, since the sun never gets past the summer tropic in its course to the north.\(^\text{260}\)

Consequently, the three main Ādityas represent the stars/constellations that between 4000 and 2000 BC defined the sun’s yearly path; Varuṇa is Aquarius, Mithra is Aldebaran, and Aryaman is Regulus.\(^\text{261}\) These gods are obviously of Indo-Iranian origin, since they can be met with in both the Vedic and the Iranian religions. In addition — given their shared main characteristic of maintaining the cosmic order — it is likely that, despite some possible differences, the Iranian Ahura Mazdāh and the Vedic Varuṇa are originally identical.\(^\text{262}\) Therefore, whatever the origin of their two names may be, these two gods, who are associated with both *Mitra and the cosmic order, represent Aquarius, the constellation located in the “celestial sea.”

The stellar nature of the three main Ādityas shows that their association with certain types of agreements is only secondary and probably due to the fact that, as the main seasonal markers during the solar year, the three main Ādityas could be seen as gods of limits or of bounds. It is then their cosmic role that conferred upon them the characteristics of being gods of contracts, alliances etc, and not vice-versa. In other words, the invocation of these gods on the occasion of certain agreements within society is based on and derives from their being the enforcers and upholders of the cosmic order.

\(^{260}\) Cf. 10.65.5 Geldner “Aryaman, der seinen Weg noch nicht zurückgelegt ist”; the Sanskrit word that describes Aryaman as above is ātūrthapathan, which Geldner explains “... dessen Weg (von keinem anderen) zurückgelegt oder überholt wird” (cf. 1.105.6; n.237 above).

\(^{261}\) Certainly, if one considers the Avestan information as late or irrelevant, one can assign the summer solstice to Mithra; however, Plutarch (De Is. et Os. 46) notes that the Persians call Mithra mesîēs “mediator” and place him between Hōromazēs (Ahura Mazdāh) and Areimanios (cf. Oberlies (1998: 188 n.187)), which is a strong indication that Mithra represents indeed the equinox. Whatever the case may be, the three main Ādityas represent the solstices and the spring equinox.

\(^{262}\) For a discussion of the differences, see Gershevitch (1959: 44–58).
D. MITHRA AND VƏRƏΘΡΑΓNA

As I noted in the chapter on Indra, the Avestan Vərəθraγna is obviously related to Indra’s epithet vṛtrahan in the Rig Veda; this points to the existence of an Indo-Iranian deity *Vṛtraghan. 263 This identification between the Vedic and the Avestan gods raises a pivotal issue, which concerns the presence of Vṛtra in the Aryan religion. We saw that Benveniste argued against this possibility. For him, the creation of Vṛtra is secondary and derived from the Aryan concept of *vṛtraghan “victory.” More recently, Gnoli & Jamzadeh (1988) shared the same view; for them, the principal function of the Aryan *Vṛtraghan was not to slay the dragon Vṛtra, but rather to destroy the obstacle vərəθra that was blocking the flow of the primordial waters.

One of the arguments against Benveniste’s theory is the existence of an Armenian myth, in which the god Vahagn slays a dragon. The fact that Vahagn is certainly derived from the Iranian Vərəθraγna (probably through direct borrowing) was seen as implying that there was indeed a dragon (who else than Vṛtra?) in the old Iranian religion. 264 Benveniste, who mentions this myth, argues that this aspect of the myth is only secondary and due to local (Armenian) elements. There are, however, other elements in the Iranian myth that could possibly show that Benveniste was not right.

The Avestan hymn dedicated to Vərəθraγna (Yašt 14) does not seem to contain elements that would justify the complete identification of this god with Taurus. Interestingly, in 14.7, Vərəθraγna is imagined as a bull with golden horns:

14.7. Zu ihm [der Weise Herr, that is, Ahura Mazdā — my note] kam zum zweitenmal herbeigefahren der gottgeschaffene Sieg in der Gestalt eines schönen goldgehörnten Stieres; auf seinen Hörnern war sichtbar wohlgebildete, schön gewachsene Kraft; so kam der gottgeschaffene Sieg herbei ...


264 De Menasce (1947: 5–18) brings to attention Mazdean texts in which Bahram, that is, Vərəθraγna fights and defeats a dragon; he argues that the story is similar to the Armenian one; this possibly shows that the Armenian myth represents the older Iranian version of the Vərəθraγna myth (in the Iranian religion, Vərəθraγna eventually becomes Bahram, the great warrior god of Zoroastrianism; cf. Gnoli & Jamzadeh (1988)).
Vərəθraγna’s golden horns bring immediately to mind Virgil’s first Georgic:

*Candidus auratis aperit cum cornibus annum

*Taurus et adverso cedens Canis occidit astro. (1. 217–218)*

In these verses, the bright Taurus constellation opens the year with his golden horns while the constellation Canis Major (containing Sirius) sets in the west. It seems then tempting to see Vərəθraγna’s golden horns mentioned in 14.7 as an allusion to the presence of Taurus in the Iranian religion. Unfortunately, such conclusion would be far-fetched; the fact that in the same hymn Vərəθraγna takes various other shapes such as those of a horse (14.9), a bird (14.19–21), a boar (14.15) etc. shows that this argument is too tenuous to be taken into consideration.

A much more interesting issue, however, is the relation between the Avestan Mithra and Vərəθraγna. Thus, in two passages of the Mithra hymn (cf. verses 70–71 and 95–96 above), it is said that Vərəθraγna flies in front of Mithra (in the shape of a boar this time), who holds his weapon *vazrəm* in his hands. Obviously, Mithra’s weapon is identical to Indra’s weapon, the well-known bolt vajra, with which Indra kills Vṛtra. This identity has not been explained so far. Is it coincidental? The fact that Mithra represents the star Aldebaran in Taurus puts these latter issues into a new perspective. First, the association between Mithra and Indra’s weapon becomes understandable since Mithra alias Aldebaran belongs to Taurus. Secondly, the same association supports the identification of Mithra with Aldebaran, and not with Regulus (cf. above). Finally, the fact that Vərəθraγna flies “in front” of Mithra strongly hints to Vərəθraγna’s nature. Indeed, since Mithra/Aldebaran is located approximately in the middle of Taurus, Vərəθraγna cannot be other than Taurus, whose body always rises in the east “in front” of Aldebaran.

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265 Cf. Oldenberg (1894: 76 n.2).

266 In the chapter on Indra, I made the hypothesis that this weapon represents either Auriga or the section of the Milky Way that stretches from Taurus to Scorpio.

267 That Vərəθraγna is a constellation may also be revealed in Yt. 14.13, in which his eye (Aldebaran!) is said to shine in the dark night: “Ein hellfarbiger, dessen fernblickendes Auge in die Ferne leuchtet durch die dunkle Nacht ... ;” cf. Lommel (1927: 137). Also, the fact that Vərəθraγna *alias* Taurus is a constellation located on the celestial equator (“between the regiments of stars”) is possibly shown in 14.47: “Ahura-created Vərəθraγna we worship, who goes up and down between the
The most important conclusion of the present argumentation, however, concerns the presence of Vṛtra in the Iranian religion. The corroboration of all the elements above (the Armenian myth, the stellar natures of Mithra and Vərəθraγna, and Mithra’s vazrəm) shows that the associations between the Vedic and Avestan myths are not coincidental or meaningless. The Indo-Iranian celestial myth of the advent of the spring, which is symbolized by the “release of the waters,” and in which *Vṛtraghan/Taurus plays the main role, does not make any sense in the absence of Scorpio alias Vṛtra.

The astral nature of the three main Ādityas is essential in determining the natures of Vṛtra and Vərəθraγna. It remains now to determine who the other gods named “Ādityas” are.

**E. THE OTHER ĀDITYAS**

The “three main” Ādityas represent the main seasonal markers during the solar year. This conclusion may be helpful in determining who the other Ādityas are.

It has been difficult to establish the exact number of the Ādityas. The reason for this is that the lists with the names of the Ādityas in the *Rig Veda* contain different numbers of these gods. There are, however, two passages in the *Rig Veda* that give the number of the Ādityas as seven or eight. Below I quote the first of these passages in Brereton’s translation (1981: 4):

9.114.3. Seven are the directions, each one with its own sun. Seven are the ceremoniants and hotars. With these, who are the seven gods, the Ādityas, guard us, Soma.

Brereton thinks that the number of the Ādityas in this passage is meaningless. Oldenberg, on the other hand, whom Brereton actually mentions in his argument, believes that the number seven indicates the older and original number of the Ādityas. To support his position, Oldenberg cites 10.72.8–9, which I quote below in Geldner’s translation:

lined-up regiments. Together with Mithra ... he inquires right and left: who is false to Mithra ... ?

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269 Cf. n.223 above.

270 The Sanskrit original is: *saptá díśo nánásuryāḥ saptá hótāra rtvijah/ devā ādityā yé saptá tēbhiḥ somābhī rakṣa naḥ ...*
Another important Rig Vedic passage is 8.52.7, in which Indra is said to be tūrīyādītya “the fourth Āditya.” Brereton argues that this passage is also meaningless, and that the poet would have only placed Indra, the greatest Vedic god, among the original three main Ādityas. Brereton, however, does not explain why it was necessary to place Indra among the Ādityas.

It is also worth noting that in the Brāhmaṇas and later Hindu literature the number of the Ādityas is said to be twelve, which was interpreted as representing the number of months of the solar year. Brereton, who mentions these facts, argues that the number twelve is a late innovation and, therefore, not indicative of the original number of the Ādityas.⁷⁷¹ Certainly, in the context of Brereton’s theory that the Ādityas in general represent gods of contracts, alliances etc, these discrepancies in numbers do not mean anything.⁷⁷² The present study, however, showed that the nature of the main three Ādityas is not abstract. Given these circumstances, it is worthwhile to investigate whether the line of thought of the present study can also account for both the number of the Ādityas and their nature.

Let us go back again to the main Ādityas, Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman. These gods are — as their generic name shows — Aditi’s sons. It is well known that one of the commonest interpretations

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⁷⁷¹ Cf. Brereton (1981: 4); also, Keith (1925 I: 99). For the identification of the Ādityas with the twelve months of the solar year, cf. ŚB.11.6.3.8.

⁷⁷² Brereton (1981: 318–20) concludes that, given their common name, all the Ādityas are gods of agreements. I would say that Brereton’s conclusion should be a reason in itself for the rejection of his theory.
of Aditi's name is “boundlessness.”

Given the role of the main Ādityas, which is to preserve the cosmic order, this interpretation of Aditi's name can, in a simple way, explain why these gods are called Ādityas. Thus, the myth about the origin of the Ādityas is likely to be similar to other myths such as the Biblical one, in which the cosmic order appeared from chaos. The Ādityas, therefore, are likely to be — as primeval gods — the exponents of the cosmic order that emerged from the primordial state of “boundlessness.”

These considerations strongly hint to the nature of all the Ādityas. Thus, as primeval gods ensuring the cosmic order and time, these gods are likely to represent the zodiacal constellations of the solar year. In other words, the Ādityas Bhaga, Aṃśa, or Dakṣa (cf. 2.27.1) must be stars or constellations in the sun's path. It is then natural for Indra (Taurus) or the Maruts (the Pleiades) to also belong to this category, since they are constellations located on the sun's path. This conclusion also explains why the Ādityas ended up as being twelve, since this is the classical number of the zodiacal constellations marking the twelve-month solar year.

One can explain now why the seven Ādityas represent seven directions. Thus, in a zodiac such as the Western one, the number of zodiacal points between the solstices is seven; this number is

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273 Cf. e.g., Macdonell (1897: 122–23).

274 This conclusion is logical given the nature of the three main Ādityas.

275 Cf. Brereton (1981: 2). Interestingly, the Aśvins (Gemini), who are also on the ecliptic, are not mentioned among the Ādityas. This may have to do with their being added later to the Indo-Aryan pantheon.

276 That is, the Greco-Babylonian zodiac of the first millennium B.C.

277 Thus, between Sagittarius (the winter solstice today) and Gemini (the summer solstice), one can find five constellations, which are Capricornus, Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus; the total is obviously seven. The fact that the original Ādityas may have been seven is supported by a passage in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (2.1.3), in which we read: ‘now when he (the sun) moves northward, then he is among the gods, then he guards the gods; and when he moves southward then he is among the fathers, then he guards the fathers; the passage shows that only the constellations (the “gods” among which the sun is) between the winter and summer solstices (when the sun moves from south to north) were considered gods; it is likely that these gods were the Ādityas. There is also the case of the eighth Āditya, Mārtāṇḍa (cf. above 10.72.8–9), the “egg born dead,” which Geldner interprets as representing the sun. I would speculate that Mārtāṇḍa may be Vṛtra, i.e. the constellation Scorpio (cf. 10.49.6), who is “killed” by Indra (Taurus) at the spring equinox. Scorpio was not “among the gods” (the tabu of “the dead egg”) because he was located on the southern course of the sun.
likely to represent the seven directions mentioned in the Rig Vedic passage above.

The Ādityas represent more than the zodiacal constellations; in a more general way, they are the constellations marking the sun’s path. This is shown by the presence of Mitra (Aldebaran), Indra (Taurus), and the Maruts (the Pleiades) among them.\textsuperscript{278} These stars/constellations, which are on or close to the ecliptic, do not belong together to a “classical” twelve-month zodiac.

A special case is represented by Sūrya, the sun, which is frequently called Āditya (cf. e.g., 1.50.13, 163.3, 191.9; 8.101.11).\textsuperscript{279} His presence among the Ādityas can be explained through its role of maintaining the cosmic order. In this sense, it is not surprising to find the sun grouped together with the stars, since all of them participate in the preservation of the cosmic order, which includes the keeping of time.

\footnote{We remember that the Maruts are located on ṛtāsyā sādaneṣu “the seat of the world’s order” and that the Aśvins are connected to pānthā ṛtāsyā (however, cf. n.280); see the section on the Maruts above.}

\footnote{Cf. Brereton (1981:2).}
GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

In the last chapter of the present study I have argued against the theory that the three main Ādityas, Mitra, Varuṇa, and Aryaman represent personifications of abstract concepts such as contracts, alliances, or other social covenants. The connection between these gods and such agreements is only secondary and derived from the nature of these gods; this nature is stellar. The three main Ādityas represent the main star markers on the yearly path of the sun, that is, those that define the two solstices and the spring equinox (cf. fig. 5). Mitra is the star Aldebaran in the constellation Taurus, which announced the spring equinox around 3000 BCE; Aryaman represents the star Regulus in the constellation Leo, which was the summer-solstice marker; finally, the most important of the Ādityas and one of the most important Vedic gods is Varuṇa, who represents the constellation Aquarius, the marker of the winter solstice. Varuṇa’s cosmic importance is that he prevents the sun from sinking below the winter tropic. The other Ādityas are, with the exception of the sun, also stars and constellations on the sun’s path.

The Ādityas, among whom the sun is included, maintain the cosmic order (Skt. ṛtá, Av. aša), which includes the keeping of time. They are, as cosmic primeval bounds, Aditi’s sons, that is, the sons of “boundlessness.” The “world order” these gods “preserve,” namely ṛtá, refers to either the ecliptic or the time order derived from it (i.e. Time).

These conclusions open up the path for some considerations about the Indo-Iranian religion. The three main Ādityas are gods of Indo-Iranian origin, since they are also present in the Avesta.280 It is also likely that, given their role in the Iranian pantheon, they were supreme gods for the Indo-Iranians. The Indo-Aryans, on the other hand, introduced some innovations into the religion of their ancestors; they kept the main Ādityas among their most important gods, but, at the same time, they differentiated themselves from the Iranians by identifying Indra, who was only a minor deity in the Indo-Iranian pantheon, with Vṛtrahan, the great Indo-Iranian god representing the constellation

280 Thieme (1970) argues that the Ādityas in general are identical to the Zoroastrian Amoša Spota, which would mean that these “zodiacal” constellations are of Indo-Iranian origin; the problem with this theory is that Mithra does not belong to the Iranian group; cf. Lommel (1927: 63).
Taurus. The Indo-Aryans also added the Asvins (Gemini) and the Maruts (the Pleiades), which are spring constellations, to their pantheon as important divinities.

The Indo-Iranians also venerated the planet Venus, which the Iranians called Tištriya. The Indo-Aryans worshipped Venus as one of their greatest gods, whom they called Agni “fire.” This name reflects the fact that Venus is the brightest star in the sky. The general picture of the Indo-Iranian supreme gods is completed by the Milky Way (Skt. Soma, Av. Haoma), which, at that time, when electricity was not keeping people away from observing the celestial phenomena, must have been the most mysterious and spectacular phenomenon of the night sky.

The Indo-Iranian religion, therefore, is astral par excellence, which shows that those people of the third millennium BC had complex astronomical knowledge. The immediate question that arises concerns the origins of this knowledge. Certainly, its antiquity precludes it from being an import from the Babylonians. The older Sumerian culture, on the other hand, seems to be a good candidate for the origin of this putative import. This, in turn, would presuppose the existence of contacts between the Sumerians and the Indo-Iranians, a hypothesis that cannot be proved. The strongest reason, however, why such a connection is not possible is the fact that, while the Mesopotamian astronomical system is based on the moon, the Vedic system is based on the sun. The most plausible hypothesis, then, is that the Indo-Iranians got their astronomical knowledge from the shamanistic cultures of the Asian

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281 I would not exclude the possibility that the supreme god of the Indo-Iranians was, in fact, *Indra Vṛtrailhan. Obviously, this would mean that the Iranians demoted the Indo-Iranian *Indra to an inferior position in their religion (a religious or ethnic dispute? Zoroastrianism?); in such case, the *Rig Veda would represent better the Aryan religion.

282 There is no indication that the Iranians venerated the Pleiades and Gemini (cf. n.117 above); therefore, until new evidence is put forth, these gods belong to the Indo-Aryan pantheon.

283 Oberlies (1998: 345–47) defines these two aspects of the Vedic religion as the (older) “Āditya-Religion” and the (younger) “Indra-Marut-Religion”; this is an overstatement, since Indra and Vṛtraṅga represent the same constellation (Taurus).

284 Obviously, this means that the well-known moon-based 27–28 Hindu constellation-system was invented/adopted (Mesopotamia?) later than the Rig-Vedic system, which is clearly about the sun, and not about the moon (Skt. candrāmas; cf. Grassmann); this observation supports the idea that the Vedic religion was brought into India from the outside; Brennand (1896: 10; 17) argues that the prehistoric nomads of Central Asia used the solar zodiac before the luni-solar zodiac. Thompson (1989) discusses the sophisticated astronomical knowledge present in the Purānic literature (post-RigVedic and dealing with the luni-solar system).
steppes, whose mythologies reflect such knowledge;285 this hypothesis is supported by the fact that Indra’s myth of the “release of the waters” at the spring equinox reveals the temperate climate conditions of the Asian steppes.

It is, therefore, not possible to assess with precision the origins of the Indo-Iranian astronomical knowledge. On the other hand, the question itself about the origins of this knowledge may be unanswerable in general, since astronomical lore may have been available and common to many cultures in Asia.286 Certainly, one cannot exclude the possibility that the Indo-Iranians could get some of this knowledge by themselves. In any case, given the complexity of the associations between myth and astronomical knowledge, unrivaled in any other known religion, this religion seems to be a spiritual product elaborated by the Aryans themselves.

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285 The Altaic and Arctic peoples had astronomical knowledge; cf. Eliade (1972) 259–66.

286 Obviously, this conclusion seriously undermines the well-known belief that the oldest and most sophisticated astronomical knowledge in the region belongs to the Mesopotamian world.
BULLS AND COWS

A. BULLS

The nature of the Vedic gods, therefore, is celestial. The supreme god of the Vedic pantheon is Indra, who represents the constellation Taurus, the Great Bull of the sky, the greatest of all bulls (cf. e.g., 8.53.1: \textit{jyēṣṭhaṃ ca vrṣabhāṇām}), the bull par excellence, that is, the most representative bull (cf. e.g., 1.100.2: \textit{vṛṣantamaḥ}). The characterization of Indra/Taurus through such epithets seems to be the result of a deliberately prolix religious language. Indeed, passages such as the one below appear to confirm this idea:

5.36.5. \textit{vṛṣā tvūvā vṛṣanam vardhatu dyaūr vṛṣā vṛṣabhyāṃ vahase hāribhyāṃ}
\textit{sā no vṛṣā vṛṣarathaḥ susūpra vṛṣakrato vṛṣā vajrin bhāre dhāḥ}

5.36.5. Der bullenhafte Himmel (\textit{dyaūr vṛṣā}) soll dich, den Bullen, stärken. Als Bulle fährst du mit den bullengleichen Falben. Du bist unser Bulle mit den Bullenwagen, der Schönlippiger. Du Bullenmutiger verhilf (uns) als Bulle (Anführer) zur Beute, o Keulenträger!

Surprisingly, however, Indra's epithets represent much more than a matter of religious verbosity. Thus, the epithet of “bull” does not apply only to Indra, but, sporadically, also to the other main Vedic gods. This fact is totally unexplained. I give below some relevant cases:

\textit{Agni}:

10.8.1. \textit{prá ketūnā brhatā yāti agnír á ródasī vrṣabhó roravīti}
\textit{divāś cid ántāṅ upamāṅ úd ānaḷ apám upásthe mahiśō vavardha}

1.31.5. Du Agni bist ein Stier ... (tuvám agne vrṣabháḥ)

1.108.3. cakrā́the hí sadhríaṅ náma bhadrám sadhríciná vr̥traḥaṇá utá sthaḥ
táv indrágni sadhriaṅcā niśádyā vṛṣṇah sómasya vr̥saná vṛṣethám

1.108.3. Denn ihr habt euch vereint einen guten Namen gemacht und ihr seid vereint die
Vṛtratöter. Lasst euch vereint nieder, Indra und Agni; ihr Bullen, schüttet in euch von
bullenstarken Soma!

The Maruts:

1.37.5. prá śamsā gōsu āghniyam krīḻáṃ yac chárdho márutam
1.37.5. Preise das tändelnde marutische Heer, das unter Kühen der Bulle ist!

Soma:

9.2.1. ... Geh du, der Bulle, in Indra ein, o Saft [indo, i.e. the Soma drop — my note]! (índram
indo vṛṣā viśa)

9.19.3. Der Bulle, der sich bei den Āyu's läutert ... (vṛṣā punān áyūsu)

The Ādityas:

5.63.3. samrā́jā ugrā vr̥sabhá divás pátī prthivyá mitrávr̥uṇā vícarṣanā ...
5.63.3. Allherscher, gewaltige Bullen, Herren des Himmels und der Erde sind Mitra und
Varuṇa, die Ausgezeichneten.

The Aśvins:

7.70.7. iyám manīṣā iyám aśvinā gîr imám suvṛktín vr̥sanā juṣethām ...
7.70.7. Dies Gedicht, diese Lobrede (ist für euch), ihr Aśvin. Erfreuet euch an diesem
Lobpreis, ihr Bullen!
7.74.3. á yātam úpa bhūṣatam mádhvaḥ pibatam aśvinā
dugdhám páyo vrṣaṇā jeniyāvasū má no mardhiṣṭam ā́ gatam

7.74.3. Kommet her, machet euch fertig, trinket vom Süßtrank, Aśvin! Die Milch ist
gemolken, ihr Bullen, ihr Besitzer angestammten Gutes.

These examples show clearly that the characterization of Indra as “the greatest of all the bulls”
is not a matter of prolix language, but underscores the simple fact that Indra is, indeed, the “head” of
the Vedic bulls, that is, the most powerful god among the other Vedic gods. He is the (greatest) Bull
among the other bulls.

The fact that all the star-gods of the Vedic religion are called “bulls” point to a spectacular
conclusion. In all likelihood, this epithet refers to the celestial nature of the Vedic gods. The verse
1.108.3 quoted above, for example, supports this idea, since Indra and Agni are invoked together as
“bulls.” The celestial “bulls” then represent the main star-gods of the Vedic religion. Among them,
the greatest is Indra, that is, Taurus.

The conclusion that the Vedic main star-gods are “bulls” may provide the answer to the issue
whether the celestial Agni (Venus) was venerated as evening star as well. Thus, in the following
passage Agni’s worship is performed both at dawn and in the evening; the fact that he is specifically
called “bull,” that is, “star,” implies that the Vedic people knew of the identity between Venus’s two
aspects:

7.3.5. tám íd doṣá tám uṣási yāviṣṭham agním átyaṃ ná marjayanta náraḥ
nīśiśānā átíthim asya yónau didáya śocír ā́hutasya vṛṣnah

7.3.5. Ihn putzen die Männer abends, ihn am Morgen, den jüngsten Agni wie ein Rennpferd,
indem sie dem Gast an seiner Geburtsstätte Appetit machen. Es leuchtet seine
Flamme, wenn der Bulle (mit Schmalz) begossen ist.

The bulls are not the only extremely significant bovines in the Rig Veda; the Vedic cows are
very important characters as well in this religion.

287 The Sky Dyaus is also a “bull” (cf. 5.36.5 above); this is expected, since he is also “celestial” (sic!).
B. COWS

The “cows” considered as a collective noun represents an extremely important character in the myth of Indra slaying the dragon Vṛtra. It is well known that by slaying Vṛtra Indra released the “waters” and won/found the cows and the sun. These are the most important consequences of Indra’s victory over the dragon. The “cows” are mentioned very often in the hymns addressed to Indra. To give some examples:

1.33.10cd. \( yújaṃ vágrais vṛṣabhaś cakra índro nír jyótiśā támaso gá adukṣat \)
1.33.10. ... Indra der Bulle hatte die Keule zu seinem Verbündeten gemacht; durch Licht hat er die Kühe aus dem Dunkel gezogen.

2.12.3. \( yó hatváḥim árinaḥ saptá síndhùn yó gá udájad apadhá valásyà \)
2.12.3. Der den Drachen erschlug und die sieben Ströme laufen ließ, der die Kühe heraustrieb nach Beseitigung des Vala, der zwischen zwei Steinen Feuer erzeugte, der Spielgewinner in den Kämpfen, der, ihr Leute, ist Indra.

2.19.3. \( sá máhina índaro árṇo apám prá airayad ahiháchá samudrám \)
2.19.3. Der mächtige Indra, der Drachentöter, trieb die Flut der Gewässer hin zum Meere. Er erzeugte die Sonne, fand die Kühe; er regelte die Reihenfolge der Tage durch die Nacht.

3.30.9–10. \( ní sāmanám iṣírām indra bhúmim maháh apáram sádane sasattha \)
3.30.9–10. \( ástabhnaḥ dyáṃ vṛṣabhó antárikṣam árṣantu āpas tváyehá prásūtāh \)
3.30.9–10. \( alātṛṇó valá indra vrájó góh purá hántor bháyamáno ví āra \)
3.30.9–10. \( sugán pathó akṛṇon nirúge gáh právan vánih puruhútām dhámantih \)

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\(^{a88}\) Indra is the “lord of the cows” (pátor gávám; cf. below 3.31.4).

It has not been possible so far to find a satisfactory solution to the issue of the meaning of these cows. I mention here just two interpretations, which are the most important ones.\(^{289}\)

The first theory is that the cows refer to the “waters” Indra released. This interpretation is based on the fact that, indeed, in some Rig Vedic passages the waters are compared to cows. The following two passages are relevant in this respect:

\[ \text{1.32.2.} \]
\[ \text{áhann áhim párvate śiśriyāṇāṃ tvāṣṭāsmai vájraṃ svaríyaṃ tatakṣa} \]
\[ \text{vāśrā iva dhenávaḥ syándamānā āñjaḥ samudrām áva jagmur ápaḥ} \]

\[ \text{1.32.2.} \]
\[ \text{Er erschlug den Drachen, der sich auf dem Berge gelagert hatte. Tvaṣṭr hatte ihm die sausende Keule geschmiedet. Wie die brüllende Kühe (zu den Kälbern) eilend liefen die Gewässer stracks zum Meere.} \]

\[ \text{1.61.10.} \]
\[ \text{asyéd evá śávasā śuṣántaṃ ví vrścad vájreṇa vrtrám índraḥ} \]
\[ \text{gá ná vrāṇá avánir amunçad abhí śrávo dáváne sáctāḥ} \]

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Durch seine Kraft allein zerrieb Indra mit der Keule den wütenden Vṛtra. Die Flüsse, die wie die Kühe eingesperrt waren, befreite er, auf Ruhm (ausgehend), zu schenken einverstanden.

One can see, however, that in these passages the cows are not identified with the waters, but only compared to them (cf. Skt. comparative particles iva and ná). More precisely, the released waters are compared to freed or lowing cows. This fact raises doubts on the presupposed identity between the two. In fact, in many of the passages quoted above (cf. above 2.12.3; 2.19.3; 3.30.9–10; 10.89.7), the waters and the cows seem to be different from each other, since Indra is said to both release the waters and find/win the cows. To put it differently, the fact that these two deeds of Indra are mentioned together would certainly be strange, if they were identical.

That the waters and the cows are not identical²⁹⁰ but clearly different entities may be revealed in the following verse:

3.35.8.  
*imáṃ náraḥ párvatás tůḥyam ā́paḥ sám indra góbhir mádhumantam akran ...*

Diesen Soma haben die Männer, die Berge, die Wasser zusammen mit der Kühen für dich, Indra, zu einem Süßen bereitet ...²⁹¹

Another reason why the cows in the myth of Indra cannot be identified with the “waters” is their frequent association with Dawn, which would be hard to account for if these cows represented the waters. I give below some relevant passages, in which it is unlikely that the cows could be equated with the waters.

1.92.2.  
*úd apaptann aruṇā́ bhānávo vṛ́thā suāyújo áruṣīr gá ayuksata*

*ákṛann uṣásō vayúnāni pūrváthā rúśantam bhānúm áruṣīr aśiśrayuh*

²⁹⁰ Geldner remarks that in hymn 10.19, which is dedicated to the cows, the waters are not mentioned, in spite of the ancient traditions (Anukramaṇi) that considered the two as being the same thing. The same goes for 6.28, which is also dedicated to the cows.

²⁹¹ Geldner interprets the passage as referring to the preparation of the Soma-drink.
Die rötlichen Lichter sind plötzlich aufgeflogen; sie (Uṣas — cf. Geldner) haben ihre rötlichen leichtgeschirrten Kühen angeschirrt. Die Uṣas haben sie wie früher die Zeiten bestimmt; die Roten haben ihr helles Licht aufgesteckt.

Im Osten schimmerte die junge Frau [Uṣas; the hymn is dedicated to Dawn — my note] hernieder, sie schirrt die Reihe ihrer roten Rinder an. Jetzt möge sie aufliehten; ihr Banner soll vorausgehen: in jedem Hause stelle sich das Feuer an.

Dem Streiter schlossen sich die siegreichen (Scharen?) an; sie fanden das große Licht aus dem Dunkel heraus. Die Morgenröten erkannten ihn und kamen ihm entgegen aus (der Höhle). Indra wurde der alleinige Besitzer der Kühe.

Buntfarbig, rötlich wie eine Stute, die zeitige Mutter der Kühe, ist Uṣas die Freundin der Aśvin geworden.

Die Wahrhafte soll mit den Wahrhaften, die Große mit den Großen, die Göttin mit den Götter, die Opferwürdige mit den Opferwürdigen, die Verschlüsse erbrechen und Kühe verschenken. Die Rinder brüllen der Uṣas entgegen.

Die Wahrhafte soll mit den Wahrhaften, die Große mit den Großen, die Göttin mit den Götter, die Opferwürdige mit den Opferwürdigen, die Verschlüsse erbrechen und Kühe verschenken. Die Rinder brüllen der Uṣas entgegen.

Die Wahrhafte soll mit den Wahrhaften, die Große mit den Großen, die Göttin mit den Götter, die Opferwürdige mit den Opferwürdigen, die Verschlüsse erbrechen und Kühe verschenken. Die Rinder brüllen der Uṣas entgegen.
7.79.2. Sie färben das Dunkel an des Himmels Saum; wie kampfgerüstete Stämme wetteifern die U ṣas' miteinander. Deine Rinder rollen die Finsternis zusammen; sie halten das Licht hoch wie Savitṛ seine Arme.

In all these passages, no presence of a watery element can be detected. The cows are associated with the rising sun and dawn (1.62.5); dawn harnesses its ruddy cows (1.192.2; 1.124.11); dawn is the cows' mother; the cows low towards the dawn (7.75.7); finally, the cows roll up darkness and, like Savitṛ, hold (or stretch; cf. Skt. yam/yachanti) their arms (or light!) up.

Passages such as the ones above gave rise to the second important theory concerning the meaning of the cows. Thus, the cows would represent the ruddy rays of morning light, or the red morning clouds.292

This latter theory seems to explain well some passages in which the cows are associated with dawn. I do not see, however, how it can explain the fact that these cows “low” towards dawn. In addition, if these cows represented the beams of morning light, that is, dawn itself, it would make no sense for them to be invoked along with dawn (cf. above 1.62.5). Also, it cannot explain why Indra the “Bull” is called “the lord of the cows.” Finally, there seems to be no connection between Dawn and the waters.

To find a more powerful interpretation of the cows, I quote below a passage that shows that the cows are associated not only with dawn but also with the night.

3.34.3. \[\text{indro vrtram avrnoc chardhanitiḥ prá māyānām aminād vārpanitiḥ} \]
\[\text{āhan viamsam uśādhag vāneṣu āvīr dhēnā akṛṇod rāmiyāṇām} \]

Indra wehrte den Vṛtra ab durch das Mittel der Stärke; er vereitelte (die Listen) der Listigen durch das Mittel der Verwandlung. Er erschlug Vyāṃsa in den Hölzern gierig brennend. Er machte die Stimmen der Nächte offenbar.

Geldner’s translation of this passage (“he made the voices of the night visible”) is not very accurate. The last hemistich above (3.34.2d), \[\text{āvīr dhēnā akṛṇod rāmiyāṇām} \], literally means “he (Indra)

made the cows of the night visible.” Given the context of the present discussion, this new translation completely changes the perspective on the meaning of the cows.

Let’s sum up. Indra “the Bull” represents the constellation Taurus, which appears in the morning sky at the spring equinox and brings rain to the land. Indra is the “lord of the cows.” He finds/wins the cows by releasing the waters. The cows appear at dawn, and they low towards dawn. The cows also belong to the night. Indra makes the night cows visible after he defeats Vṛtra (and releases the waters). The cows are associated with light.

All these facts transparently hint at the real nature of the cows; in all likelihood, the “cows of the night,” whose “lord” is Indra, represent the stars.

The identification between the cows and the stars explains why Indra, the “lord of the cows,” “finds” the cows and makes them “visible”; it also explains why the cows are so often associated with the waters. Thus, the sky clears at the spring equinox when Taurus appears in the sky and provokes the spring rain to fall; in other words, this is the time of the year when the stars become visible again on the sky’s firmament. As for the cows of dawn, these must be the stars that rise from the east just before dawn; the splendid metaphor of the cows “lowing at the dawn” wonderfully describes the transition from night to day.

The fact that the cows do represent the stars may also be revealed in 4.52.2 (quoted above), in which Dawn is said to be “the ‘lawful’ or ‘law-abiding’ mother of the cows” (Skt. mā́tā́ gávā́m rtávarī́). The Sanskrit word rtávarī́ is derived from rtá “(cosmic) order,” which, as I have showed in this study, has to do with the keeping of time. The whole passage then makes perfect sense, since, indeed, the keeping of time in the Vedic times (and in antiquity, in general) was possible only through the observation of the positions of the stars at dawn.

There is also a special Cow whose role is pivotal in the cosmic creation. This Cow is Aditi, the “unboundlessness,” “die Ursprünglichkeit”:

8.101.15d. Tötet nicht die unschuldige Kuh, die Aditi! (má́ gá́m ánāgá́m áditíṁ vadhiṣṭa)

1.153.3a. Es strotzt Aditi, die Milchkuh (pípá́ya dhenúr ádití́r) ...

For Aditi, cf. Oberlies (1998: 231–34); see also the section above on the Ādityas.
Who Aditi is has remained a mystery so far, although it has been conjectured that this divine cow represents either the earth or the atmosphere, that is, the space between the sky and the earth.\textsuperscript{294} An additional and difficult issue concerns the interpretation of the phrase \textit{áditer upástha} “the lap of Aditi,” which appears in a few Vedic passages (cf. e.g., 7.88.7; 9.74.3; 10.5.7). Oberlies (1998: 232), who identifies Aditi with the earth, equates the lap of Aditi with the lap of earth. Let us consider the following passage:

\begin{verbatim}
9.74.5. árāvīd aṃśūḥ sācamāna ūrmīṇā devāvíyam mānuṣe pinvati tvácam
dádhāti gārbham áditer upástha áyéna tokám ca tánayam ca dhámahe
\end{verbatim}

Der Stengel (Soma plant) hat gebrüllt, sich mit der Woge vereinend; er schwellt für dem Menschen den göttereinladenden Schlauch an. Er legt in der Aditi Schoß den Keim, durch den wir Samen und leibliche Nachkommenschaft erlangen.

In this passage, Soma (that is, the ritualic plant that symbolizes the celestial Soma) puts his seed in the lap of Aditi. Soma’s seed eventually generates offspring for the human race. Soma, however, does not generate the human race only, but all beings in general; he is a Creator:

\begin{verbatim}
9.86.28. távemāḥ prajā dīviyasya rétasas tuvāṁ víśvasya bhúvanasya rājàsi
áthedáṃ víśvam pavamāna te váše tuvām indo prathamó dhāmadhá asi.
\end{verbatim}

Von deinem himmlischen Samen sind diese Geschöpfe; du herrschest über die ganze Welt, und in deiner Gewalt ist dieses All, o Pavamāna; du, o Saft, bist der erste Schöpfer.

The passages above clearly show that Soma “the bull” impregnates Aditi “the cow” (or Aditi’s lap) with his divine seed (sperm).\textsuperscript{295} Therefore, the creation of the Universe is the result of the divine union between the “bull” Soma and the “cow” Aditi.

There is, however, another sacred union that generates the world. This is that between heaven

\begin{verbatim}
\textsuperscript{295} Cf. n. 108 above.
\end{verbatim}
(Dyaus) and earth (Pṛthivī). It is well-known that the sky, which is a “bull” (cf. above), impregnates mother Earth with its seed. This latter union seems to be different from the former.

The conclusions of the present study, however, show that it is possible to reconcile these two apparently different sacred unions. I conjecture that these two versions symbolize the same process, which is the creation of cosmos through the sacred union between a bull and a cow. The common element of these sacred unions is the Sky. Indeed, since Soma represents the Milky Way (the divine sperm), whose place is obviously in the sky, the seed that generates the world is celestial. This seed belongs both to the Sky and to Soma.

It remains now to analyze the relation between the earth and Aditi. It seems clear that whatever Aditi might represent this thing must include the earth in it. The fact that Aditi’s name most likely means “unboundedness” seems to indicate that Aditi is more than the earth; this would mean that, in fact, Aditi represents the whole cosmos between the sky and the earth; this is the space that was ordered by the Ādityas. Given this, “the lap of Aditi” might represent the earth; this is, of course, conjectural.

The generation of cosmos through the celestial seed seems to have a spectacular eschatological correlate. This concerns the possibility that the Rig Vedic world of the dead is indeed celestial. The *Rig Veda* shows this world as located between the sun’s tropics, a celestial region that represents the “seat” of rtá (cf. fig. 5); this is the place in which the greatest Vedic gods are located. I requote below 9.113.7 (already quoted in the section on Pūṣan):

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297 Parjanya also enters this category; cf. above n.301.

298 See the section on Pūṣan (n.221); Oberlies (1998: 468–72, esp. 471 n.89) notes that the *Rig Veda* displays the eschatological belief that the dead reach (become) the stars; however, following some of Oldenberg’s hypotheses (1894: 546–48), he argues that this conception is late, appearing mostly in the tenth Maṇḍala; the example below shows that this conception is also present in the ninth Maṇḍala, which is older than the tenth; for a discussion about the age of the Maṇḍalas, cf. Oberlies (1998: 541–45); Bodewitz (1994). The eschatological conceptions do not appear in the “family” books (II-VII) probably because those mainly contain hymns dedicated to the Vedic main stars, and, therefore, are less likely to express concern for the world of the dead.

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9.113.7.  yátra jyó́tir ájasraṃ yásmūn loké súvar hitám
tásmín máṃ dhehi pavamāna amṛ́te loké ákṣita ... 

9.113.7.  Wo das ewige Licht ist, in welche Welt die Sonne gesetzt ist, in diese versetze mich, o
           Pavamāna [that is, Soma — my note], in die unsterbliche, unvergängliche Welt ... 

That the world of the dead is celestial emerges even clearer in 10.68.11, in which the (dead)
fathers are said to be stars that ornament the sky:

10.68.11.  abhí śyā́vām ná kṛ́śanebhir áśvaṃ náksatrebhiḥ pitáro dyám apimśan
           rátryāṃ támo adadhur fyótir áhan bṛhaspátir bhinád ádriṃ vidád gáḥ.

10.68.11.  Die Väter schmückten den Himmel mit den Gestirnen aus wie eien Rappen mit
           Perlen. Die Finsternis verlegten sie auf die Nacht, auf den Tag das Licht. Bṛhaspati
           spaltete den Fels, er hat die Kühe gefunden.

There are also other passages in which the same idea emerges; thus, in 10.107.2, the pious
(fathers) go to the sky, to the region between the sun's tropics:

10.107.2a.  uccá diví dákṣināvanto asthur yé aśvadāḥ sahá té súriyena

10.107.2a.  Hoch oben im Himmel haben die Dakṣināgeber ihren Stand, die Rosseschenker, die
            sind bei der Sonne.

10.154.5.  sahásraníthāḥ kaváyo yé gopāyánti súriyam
           ṛśin tápasvato yama tapojám ápi gachatá

10.154.5.  Die als Seher tausend Weise kennen, die die Sonne behüten [the tropics — my note!],
            zu den Kasteiung übenden Ṛṣi's, o Yama, zu den durch Kasteiung (neu)geborenen soll
            er gelangen!

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299 The Avestan Haoma is also a vehicle to the celestial world; cf. Oberlies (1998: 469 n.75).
That the pious sacrificer or the wise one goes to the celestial world (the place of the pious!) can be also revealed in the following:\textsuperscript{300}

1.31.15cd. \textit{... svādukṣádmā yó vasataú síyonakíj jīvayājām yájate sópamá diváh}

1.31.15cd. \textit{... Wer süße Speise vorsetzt, in seiner Wohnung ein gutes Lager bereitet und ein lebendes Tier opfert, der kommt zu oberst im Himmel.}

1.73.7. \textit{tuvé agne sumatím bhíkṣamāṇā diví śrávo dadhire yajñíyāsaḥ ...}

1.73.7. \textit{Indem sie von dir, Agni, sich die Gunst ausbitten, haben die Opferwürdigen im Himmel Ruhm erworben.}

1.125.5. \textit{nákasya prṣṭhé ádhi tiṣṭhati śritó yáh prṇáti sá ha devéṣu gachati}

1.125.5. \textit{Auf die Höhe des Himmels versetzt bleibt er da. Wer spendet, der kommt zu den Göttern.}

10.15.14. \textit{yé agnidagdhá yé ánagnidagdhā mádhye diváh svadháyā mádáyante}


10.56.1. \textit{idám ta ékam pará ū ta ékam trtýena jyótiṣā sáṃ viśasva}

10.56.1. \textit{Dies ist dein eines (Licht) und im Jenseits dein eines: mit dem dritten Lichte vereinige dich! Bei der Vereinigung mit einem Leib sei schön, den Göttern lieb in der höchsten Heimat!}

is correct, the Vedic religion is a coherent religion about reaching for the stars.\textsuperscript{304} The essence of the human race is purely celestial (stars); born from the stars,\textsuperscript{302} man goes back to the stars after death.\textsuperscript{303} Most importantly, the vehicle that brought him to earth is the same with the one that will take him back to the stars;\textsuperscript{304} this is Soma, that is, the Milky Way.\textsuperscript{305}

\textsuperscript{304} As the examples above show, not everybody reaches the celestial yonder world but only the pious (cf. Oldenberg (1894: 534)); evil (impious) people go to a place of darkness, some sort of cosmic gloomy pit, which is described by phrases such as ni\textit{ṛ}t\textit{er upāsthāt} (cf. e.g., 10.18.10d; 10.161.2c), tāmas (cf. e.g., 10.89.15c = 103.12d; 10.152.4d), kartā (2.29.6: " ... ihr Götter ... behütet uns vor dem Fall in die Grube"), vāvṛē (7.104.3: Indra und Soma! Stoßet die Übeltäter in die Grube ["hidden place" — my note] ... "); āṣat (4.5.14: anāyudhāṣa āṣatā sacantām "Wehrlos sollen sie (the impious) dem Nichts verfallen!"); Bodewitz (1994, esp. 24, 29–36) notes that there is no certainty that this place ("the Underworld") is the equivalent of hell since, in his view, judgment and punishment do not play a role ("moral aspects"). I would argue for the opposite; since the pious go to heaven (the "moral aspect"!), the impious must go to the opposite place; where this place is located is not certain, but, in any case, it is outside the region between the sun's tropics; the Vedic word ni\textit{ṛ}t\textit{ī} shows this clearly since it is opposed to r\textit{tā}, which is "the world of the sun." One can further speculate that, since this place is "hidden" and "gloomy," its location is towards the southern celestial pole (within the Antarctic circle), which can never be seen from Earth (the "dark" and "hidden" place!); for this celestial southern location, cf. above n.221; in ŚB. 13.8.1.5, it is said that the gate to the world of the Fathers is located in the south-east (the winter tropic!); cf. Oldenberg (1894: 547).

\textsuperscript{305} Cf. 1.164.33.ab: dyaūr me pitā janitā nābhīr ātra bāndhur me mātā pṛthivī mahāyām "Der Himmel ist mein Vater, der Erzeuger, dort ist mein Nabel; diese große Erde ist meine Sippe, die Mutter."

\textsuperscript{306} The way birth and death are related in the \textit{Rig Veda} (from the stars, \textit{back to the stars}) shows that, in all likelihood, this Vedic eschatological belief is not a later addition to this religion, but represents the original Vedic (Aryan!) conception of the afterlife. Therefore, this is not a conception that belongs to a non-Aryan, Dravidian influence, as some assumed; cf. Bodewitz (1994: 30, 37). The Underworld (Hell!) must also be seen as part of this Aryan conception (pace Bodewitz (1994: 25)); cf. Oldenberg (1894: 544).

\textsuperscript{307} The ritualic ascension to the stars is wonderfully described in 8.48.3ab: āpāма sōмam umśtā abhūma/ āgaṇma jyōtir āvidāма devān "Wir haben jetzt Soma getrunken, unsterbliche sind wir geworden; wir sind zum Licht gelangt, wir haben die Götter gefunden"; cf. also 10.95.18cd: pra\textit{jā te devān havīṣa yajāti suvargā u tvām āpi mādayāyē "Deine Nachkommenschaft wird die Himmlischen mit Opferspenden verehren. Und im Himmel wirst auch du dich erfreuen"; cf. Oberlies (1998: 468).

\textsuperscript{308} That Soma is related to the stars is shown in RV 1.91.22, in which Soma is said to have generated the stars ("the cows"): tuvāм imā ोśadhiḥ soma viśvās/ tuvāм apō ājanayas tuvāм gāhya/ tvām ā tatantha uru antārikṣam/ tuvām jyōtisā vi tāmo vavartha "Du hast alle diese Pflanzen, o Soma, du die Gewässer, du die Kühe hervorgebracht. Du hast den Luftraum
C. A NOTE ON YAMA

The existence of a celestial world of the dead raises the issue of the nature of Yama, the well-known Vedic king of the dead.306

It is important to note that, although there are only a few Rig Vedic passages that describe Yama’s location, there can be no doubt that Yama resides in the sky.307 Thus, in the verse 9.113.7 mentioned above, the worshipper invokes Soma to take him to the sky; the following verse (9.113.8) makes it clear that the sky is the place of Yama:

9.113.8. yátra rá́ja vaivasvató yátrāvarónaham diváh
yátrāmú́r yahvát ā́pas tátra mám aḿtaṁ kṛdhi
índrāyendo pári srava

Wo Vivasvat’s Sohn (Yama) König ist, wo der verschlossene Ort des Himmels ist, wo jene jüngsten Gewässer sind, dort mache mich unsterblich! Fließe für Indra ringsum ab, o Saft!

The same idea is present in the following verse:

10.14.8ab. sáṃ gachasva pit́bhih sáṃ yaména
ištápuríténa paramé víoman

Triff mit den Vätern zusammen, mit Yama, mit deinen Opfern und den (anderen) guten Werken im höchsten Himmel.

In other passages, it is said that Yama was the first to find the way that leads to the sky; this is the way the worshipper wants to take:

ausgespannt; du hast mit dem Lichte (Milky Way!) das Dunkel aufgedeckt; Soma’s light was seen as hallucinatory, that is, generated by a state of entusiasmós (!!!); cf. Oberlies (1998:495–96 and 495 n.181); also, Bodewitz (1994:39).

306 It is well known that Yama is Indo-Iranian (Ir. Yima); cf. Oberlies (1998: 487–89).

307 This was seen by Oldenberg (1894: 534).
To sum up: Yama is located in the sky\textsuperscript{308} along with the Fathers, whose king he is; the Fathers are stars; Yama was the first who ascended to the sky; Yama and Varuṇa are the two kings whom the dead man sees on reaching heaven.

Yama's characteristics hint at his celestial nature; as king of the stars of the Fathers, Yama must be a star as well. Given that the world of the dead is located between the sun's tropics, this star must also be related to the tropics. In addition, as the verse 10.14.7 shows, Yama must be close to Aquarius alias Varuṇa, which was located on the winter tropic in the Indo-Iranian times.

The significant star that is located on or close to the winter tropic is Sirius, the brightest fixed star in the sky (cf. figs. 2; 8–9). As I noted above, in the chapter on Pūṣan, this star was located very close to the winter tropic in 2000 BC (~ −20\(^\circ\) southern declination). In other words, Sirius' trajectory in the sky was the same as that of Aquarius. This accounts well for its being mentioned together with Aquarius as the first stars the deceased sees on reaching the celestial region between the sun's tropics.

\textsuperscript{308} An interesting passage is 1.35.6ab: \textit{tisró dyāvah savitūr dvā upāsthāh ēkā yamásya bhúvane virāṣāṭ} “Drei Himmel gibt es, zwei sind der Schoß des Savitṛ, der eine ist in der Welt des Yama, der männerbezwinger”; if Savitṛ is Mercury, then the “three skies” can be interpreted as the (starry) skies at dawn and dusk (the “lap of Mercury”; when the “star” Savitṛ can be observed), and the night starry sky (“Yama’s world”). I would also note that in later Pahlavi the planet Mercury was called Tīr; it is possible to see this Iranian word as derived from an Aryan *Savitṛ; the derivation from Tištriya is also possible, in which case Tištriya (Apām Napāt) would rather represent Mercury than Venus; cf. Waerden (1974:188).
It also accounts for why Yama was the first who found the “path” to the sky; this may be a reference to Sirius’s location at the edge of the celestial region between the tropics.\textsuperscript{309}

To conclude: Yama’s celestial nature shows that the Vedic eschatology is harmoniously integrated within the Vedic religious system.

**CONCLUSION ON “BULLS” AND “COWS”**

The final chapter of the present study is extremely important because it sheds some light on the development of the Vedic religion. Thus, it seems that the main Vedic divine characters acquired some of their most important features from Taurus, the Great Bull of the sky, which is an old constellation, probably older than the Aryan religion itself. The Vedic religion is an astral religion of the celestial Bovine,\textsuperscript{310} that is, a religion whose main characters or objects of worship are celestial bulls and cows. The divine bulls represent the main star-gods of this religion (the “heads”), whereas the cows represent the other stars; all these celestial characters have the “great bull” Indra as their supreme god. The Vedic star-gods are literally grouped in the sky around the constellation Taurus. In other words, the celestial region worshipped by the Vedic people (and by the Aryans in general) is not very extended; it represents that space around the constellation Taurus which, in Vedic times, appeared in the morning sky at and after the spring equinox.\textsuperscript{311} This shows once more that the Vedic religion was a religion of the spring season, which was essential for the survival of the primitive agricultural communities.

These general observations do not mean that the Vedic star-gods were worshipped as divine bovines from the moment of the conception of this religion.\textsuperscript{312} The worship of the stars was probably a

\textsuperscript{309} The identification of Yama’s dogs with Canis Minor and Canis Maior (cf. above n.221; 306) seems to fit the hypothesis that Yama is Sirius; indeed, as I noted above, Sirius is part of Canis Maior.

\textsuperscript{310} This reminds us of the well-known symbol of the taurine horns in the Egyptian religion; interestingly, Brennand (1896: 12) thinks that the worship of the bull in India has its origin in the worship of Taurus; cf. above n.13.

\textsuperscript{311} The Ādityas certainly represent an exception to this.

\textsuperscript{312} The Avesta does not seem to display such worship of the “bovines.”
religious practice that preceded the birth of the Vedic (or Aryan) religion.\textsuperscript{313} The Vedic religion, however, represents the spectacular culmination of these religious practices, through which disparate parts came to be integrated into what appears to be a highly coherent religious system.

\textsuperscript{313} The case of the earliest Mesopotamians is well known. The Egyptians also may enter this category.
A NOTE ON THE “UNIVERSAL MYTH” OF THE HERO SLAYING THE DRAGON

The theory that the myth of Indra slaying Vṛtra is essentially an astronomical one (the “cosmic fight” between Taurus and Scorpio) raises an important issue, which concerns the relation between the Vedic myth and the more general myth of the hero slaying the dragon.

The myth of the hero slaying the dragon is quasi-universal, that is, it can be met with in a vast number of cultures all over the globe; these cultures may or may not be related with one another. There are two main explanations for this fact: a. diffusion; b. derivation from structural characteristics of the human mind. Diffusion entails that common similarities between widely dispersed myths are the result of a process of gradual osmosis from one culture to another; however, given both the antiquity and the wide dispersal of such myths, it is not possible to determine the “universal” center of the dispersion. To overcome this huge obstacle, the other solution, which derives from Jung's theories on the human psychology, presupposes that the human mind is capable of creating such stories independently of time and space. Given these considerations, it is obvious that a complete understanding of the Vedic myth is not possible without looking for its possible origins in the larger context of the Indo-European mythology.

The Indo-European paradigm of this myth has been recently studied by Watkins (1995). In his study, Watkins argues that the language used to describe the slaying of the dragon in the myth is formulaic, being met with in many Indo-European languages. He therefore postulates a common Indo-European basic formula of the type HERO SLAYS SERPENT, which survived in the daughter-languages. This certainly raises the possibility that the Vedic myth is inherited in its essential aspect from the common Indo-European mythology.

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314 For a recent survey, see Witzel (2008); the myth can be met with in a form or another all over the globe: in Japan, the Americas, Eurasia.


Watkins's conclusions seem to contradict the present theory that the meaning of the Vedic (Aryan) myth is astronomical; the reason for this is obviously the fact that there is no indication that this myth has any astronomical significance in the other inherited forms.

The contradiction mentioned above, however, is only apparent. The Vedic myth has three essential peculiarities, which make it completely distinct from other possibly inherited myths. The first one, which was already noticed by Benveniste (1934: 182–84), is the presence of the mythical motif of the release of the pent-up waters. This part of the myth is purely Indo-Iranian. The second peculiarity is the one that clearly emerges from the present study: the Vedic “hero” that slays the serpent is not any hero, but a “bull”; Indra is a celestial bull. The third one is the presence of Soma in the Aryan myth; I do not see any connection between this fact and the “universality” of the myth of the hero slaying the dragon.

There is also a fourth argument in favor of my observation that the Vedic myth is very different from the other (possibly) inherited forms/motifs. This is the extreme importance this myth has in the Vedic religion. Indra’s slaying of the dragon is mentioned over and over again in the Vedic hymns dedicated to Indra; the Vedic religion itself is built around this motif/myth; this fact is unparalleled in any of the (possibly) inherited mythologies.

The observations above show that there is no contradiction between Watkins’ conclusions and mine. The general formula of the hero slaying the serpent may be Indo-European, but the myth of the Bull slaying the serpent may be not. The Vedic myth is fundamentally different from the others.

The conclusion is that, whatever the “original,” Indo-European myth/motif of the hero slaying the dragon may have been, the Vedic (Aryan) myth of the Bull slaying the serpent is likely to have a different and peculiar meaning, which, as I tried to show in the present work, is astronomical.

The most powerful argument in favor of my theory, however, is that the use of an initial mythological motif or folk tale to describe celestial phenomena is not something unusual. It is well known that the constellations we use even today to describe the night sky reflect the transposition of

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317 Cf. Watkins (1995: 298); West (2007:255–59) draws on some parallels from the Greek (Zeus and Typhoeus) and Norse myths, in which the dragons seem to associated with water. These associations are, in my view, doubtful; in the Greek and Norse myths, the waters are only alluded to and bear no special importance, whereas in the Vedic myth they are essential.

318 There is no indication of the presence of this Bull in other Indo-European mythologies.
mythological motifs in the sky. A famous example is that of the constellation Gemini. This
constellation, which is very old,\(^{319}\) is the celestial representation of the well-known “universal”
characters of the Divine Twins.\(^{320}\) The Greek Castor and Pollux and, as I showed in the present study,
the Vedic Aśvins reflect well this process. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to assume that the
myth/motif of the hero slaying the dragon, which is so pervasive throughout the globe in myths, folk
tales etc., underwent the same fate and that the Vedic (Aryan) myth reflects the transposition in the
sky of some Indo-European motif of the hero slaying the dragon.\(^{321}\) It is also worth mentioning that, in
other situations, it was the zoomorphic constellation that generated a mythological motif or even an
artistic representation; thus, Hartner (1965) analyzed the astronomical meaning of the Lion-Bull
combat (Leo vs. Taurus) represented on very old (fourth millennium BC) clay tablets from the Near
East; Ulansey (1989), on the other hand, showed that in the Roman Empire the well-known “myth” of
Mithra slaying the Bull was based on the celestial positions of the constellations Perseus and Taurus.

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The conclusion that emerges from the above is that the use of the comparative method in mythology,
albeit essential in many cases to the reconstruction of an original form, does not always lead to clear
and reliable results. In this respect, it is worth mentioning below a recent comparative treatment of
the myth of Indra slaying Vṛtra.

Janda (2010: 57–9), drawing on an old hypothesis of Adalbert Kuhn, equates the epithet
āśāyāna (Germ. darauf-liegend “lying upon”; cf. Greek keĩtai “to lie”), which characterizes Vṛtra in few
Rig Vedic passages (cf. 2.11.9; 5.30.6), with the Greek Ōkeanós, which, for the historical Greeks, was the
word designating the god of the cosmic river surrounding the earth. To support this hypothesis, Janda

\(^{319}\) It was known by the Babylonians; cf. Kidd (1997: 235).


\(^{321}\) I would not exclude the possibility that, in some cases, the astronomical myth may be at the origin of all the different
myth versions. This is, of course, conjectural and cannot be proven. This hypothesis seems to be more plausible in the case
of the Divine Twins, who are “sons of the sky” (cf. the Dioskouroi, who are the sons of Zeus in the Greek myth); Puhvel
(1987: 228–29) mentions the case of the Latvian divine horsemen (Dieva dēli “sons of the sky”) who woo the sun’s daughter
(Saules meita); certainly, this may mean that this myth is of IE date; however, the Latvian data does not seem to have any
astral connotations.
appeals to mythology and shows a picture of this god, in which Okeanos apparently is represented as having a snake-body (cf. *LIMC* 7/2, 22). In Janda's view, both the etymology and that artistic representation would point to the conceptual similarity between the god Okeanos and the Indic Vṛtra. The Greek god would have preserved the “demonic” nature/appearance of the original (Indo-European) dragon; at the same time, it would have used the original epithet *ō-kei̯-ṃ[h]no - as its new name.

There are two main objections to this theory; none of them concerns the alleged linguistic equivalence between āśāyāna and Ōkeanós. First, it is well known that one of the main/essential characteristics of Okeanos is the fact that he bears bull horns (cf. *LIMC* 7/2, also present in the picture given by Janda). If we wanted to use the comparative method, this fact would make this god more similar to the bull Indra than to Vṛtra. Does this mean that Indra and Okeanos have a connection with each other? The presence of the snake/dragon tail in the iconic representation of Okeanos may simply have to do with its aquatic nature. Secondly, the relation between Vṛtra and the waters is essentially different from that between Okeanos and the waters. Thus, it is nowhere said that Okeanos is “lying” on the waters. And even if he were, there is no indication that he obstructs them as Vṛtra does. In fact, the meaning of the Vṛtra myth is not that Vṛtra is “lying” upon the waters, but that he obstructs them. This is probably the reason why Monier-Williams translated āśāyāna not as “lying upon” but as “lying round/surrounding (waters).”

We can see, therefore, that, in mythology, the comparative method does not always produce trustworthy results. In the particular case of the motif of the hero slaying the dragon, this is actually what one should expect, since this motif is so widely and in so many forms spread all over the globe; in other words, heroes or gods slaying dragons represent favorite topics in many cultures, and it is not necessary to assume that they come from the same original source.322

Another comparison Janda makes is that between the Greek god Kronos and Indra (2010: 60–1). Thus, Indra would be similar to Kronos because in the creation story he, like Kronos, separates the sky from the earth; at the same time, the well-known fact that Indra releases the sun, Dawn etc. after

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322 To give some well-known examples: the Babylonian myth of Marduk slaying Tiamat; in Greek mythology, the case of Apollo slaying Pytho or of Zeus slaying Typhoeus or Herakles killing the Hydra; the Hittite myth of the serpent Illuyankaš etc.
he kills Vṛtra would also make him similar to Kronos, who frees his brothers - the Titans - from inside Gaia (the earth) where they were forced to stay by Ouranos (the sky).

My main objection to this comparison is the following. The Vedic myth is not a succession myth and Vṛtra is never a supreme god in the Vedic myth the way Kronos is in the Greek myth. Moreover, Vṛtra is killed by Indra, whereas Ouranos cannot be killed by Kronos because he is a god, that is, immortal. Thus, the circumstances of the two myths are completely different. I do not see, therefore, how these different myths can be reconciled with each other.

The conclusion of this short and last section of the present work is that the Vedic myth of Indra slaying the dragon has some features that are unlikely to represent the Vedic (Aryan) continuation of some “universal” (Indo-European) form of the myth. Whatever its ultimate origins may be, the Aryan myth is not a mere myth, but represents the backbone of a well-established religion, which is the Aryan religion. The astronomical interpretation of this pivotal myth, on the other hand, entails that, as I tried to show, the nature of the Aryan religion is, in all likelihood, astral.

323 Certainly, one cannot totally exclude from the discussion the hypothesis of the IE origin of the Aryan astral myth (cf. above the Latvian case of the divine horsemen); I do not see, however, how one can prove this with cogent arguments from the data we have.
THE MAIN VEDIC GODS AND THE STARS: SYNOPSIS

Indra: Taurus (before 2000 B.C.) = the Great Bull of the sky
Soma: the Milky Way
Agni: Venus
Aśvins: Gemini
Ratha:324 Auriga
Maruts: Pleiades
Rudra: Orion
Savitṛ: Mercury
Bṛhaspati: Jupiter
Puṣan: Prokyon (in Canis Minor); (less likely, Sirius [Yama?])
Vṛtra: Scorpio (not a god)
Sūryā: Capella
Ādityas the Zodiacal constellations (solar-based, before 2000 B.C.):
Varuṇa: Aquarius (winter solstice)
Mitra: Aldebaran (main star in Taurus; spring equinox)
Aryaman: Regulus (main star in Leo; summer solstice)
ṛta: the ecliptic or a concept derived from it (the cosmic order/Time)
Viṣṇu: the god of the celestial North Pole (the star Thuban)
Sūrya: the Sun
Dyaus: the Sky
Prthivī: the Earth
Aditi: probably the space between Earth and Sky (the Cosmos)
The Bulls: the Vedic star-gods
The Cows: the rest of the stars (or the stars in general)325

324 The Aśvins' chariot; not a god.
325 Another constellation mentioned in the Rig Veda may be Leo “the celestial Lion”; cf. 9.89.3 ab: simhām nasanta
mádhavo ayásaṁ hárîm aruśaṁ dívó asyá pátim “Die süßen (Milchkühe) [the Milky Way — my note] berühren [since the Milky Way does not “touch” Leo, nasanta has more likely a modal value (subjunctive): “may honey approach/unite with the Lion” — my note] den Löwen, den unverzagten, rotgelben Herrn dieses Himmel”; cf. also 1.95.5.
Fig. 1. The Chariot “stops” on the Bull’s head.
Fig. 2. The main spring constellations; the Milky Way; Cetus; the two "dogs" in the sky: Canis Maior and Canis Minor; Sirius
Fig. 3. The shift of the vernal equinox among the stars over time.

Fig. 4. Aquarius and the celestial "Sea".
Fig. 5. The sun's yearly path; the main Ādityas: Mitra (α Tauri = Aldebaran), Varuṇa (Aquarius), Aryaman (α Leonis).
Fig. 6. The zodiacal chart of the constellations; Cetus “watching” for the “Chariot” (represented as Auriga in the picture).
Fig. 7. The Earth’s precession cycle ("the precession of the equinoxes"); today the spring equinox occurs between Pisces and Aquarius.
Figs. 8–9. Today's constellations near the ecliptic (the dotted line) and celestial equator (the horizontal solid line).
Fig. 10. The Zodiacal constellations, the sun’s path (ṛtá), and the Milky Way.
### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes</td>
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<td>BEI</td>
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<td>Sacred Books of the East</td>
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<td>ŠB</td>
<td>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZDMG</td>
<td>Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft</td>
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