



ná tám vidātha yás imā jajāna  
 anyád yuṣmākam ántaram babhūva  
 nīhāreṇa prāvṛtās jālpā ca  
 asu-tīpas uktha-śāsas caranti

You will not discover who created these –  
 Something else, dearer to you, has come into being.  
 Enveloped in fog and with meaningless words  
 The hymn chanters go about preying on life.  
 (*The last verse of a late poem, X, 82, 7*)

### Viewing the Rigveda differently

té id devānām sadha-mādas āsan  
 ṛtāvānas kavāyas pūrvyāsas  
 gūḍhām jyótis pitāras ānu avindan  
 satyā-mantrās ajanayan uśāsam

They indeed were companions of the gods,  
 Possessed of Truth, the ancient sages:  
 The fathers found the hidden light  
 And with true prayer brought forth the dawn.  
 (VII, 76, 4)

The earliest Indo-European poetry, with all its linguistic subtlety, metrical complexity, and conceptual sophistication – to say nothing of its historical importance – continues to be largely unknown, and remains undeciphered. It is trapped in a vicious circle. No one is studying the ancient language in which the poems were composed because it is generally assumed that they are a) deliberately obscure, and b) not worth reading. Both of these assumptions are incorrect.

Although the language in which they have come down to us is recognisably Sanskrit, this earliest recorded form of the language is morphologically much more complex than classical Sanskrit, and has a lexicon much of which is unfamiliar. Sanskritists, the majority of whom prefer to be known as indologists, are not primarily linguists. Most are quick to stress that they are not Rigvedic scholars.

A small specialist group of Sanskrit scholars focus their attention on the mass of early derivative and exegetical texts which owe their existence to the poems and the desire in ancient India to explain them. These texts are known collectively as ‘The Veda’, and its scholars call themselves ‘Vedic’ scholars. The poems which have been handed down to us with the traditional name ‘Rigveda’ are viewed as forming part of ‘the Veda’. Seen through Vedic eyes, however, they don’t make sense.

The first complete attempt at a translation into English for well over a century was published in 2014 by Oxford University Press, the joint endeavour of two American Vedicists. One of the authors, Stephanie Jamison, had fifteen years earlier, in a paper given at a conference at UCLA, prepared the public for what was eventually going to appear:

“The new text that will emerge will be, by its very nature, a much less fluent, readable, and accessible one for the general reader. The images are more striking but also more obscure; the lexicon is more specific but the combinations of words therefore more discordant. The more I read the Rig Veda, the harder it becomes for me – and much of the difficulty arises from taking seriously the aberrancies and deviations in the language. One can be blissfully reading the most banal hymn, whose form and message offers no surprises – and suddenly trip over a verse, to which one's only response can be ‘What??!!’ ”

The usual way of confirming that a translation is right is that it makes sense. John Chadwick in *The Decipherment of Linear B* refers to a misguided attempt by K. D. Ktistopoulos to translate the Phaistos Disk, and gives the following extract:

Supreme – deity, of the powerful thrones star,  
supreme – tenderness of the consolatory words,  
supreme – donator of the prophecies,  
supreme – of the eggs the white...

Chadwick comments: “It does not need the author’s apology for inexpertness in Semitic philology to make us suspect that something has gone wrong here.” Indeed; we “suspect that something has gone wrong” because the *meaning*, in Ktistopoulos’ version, is far from apparent. But this short extract makes considerably more sense than much of the translation of the poems of the Rigveda that was finally offered in 2014 by Professors Jamison and Brereton.

Their translation is not accompanied by any critical apparatus in which the ‘aberrancies and deviations’ they find in the text are discussed. Instead, their introduction refers the reader to the “full and informative” notes in Karl Geldner’s translation made in the 1920s. Geldner’s work was however in his own view far from definitive, and it was not published during his lifetime. As he explained in the selection of translations that he did publish, in 1923, “diese ist nur ein erneuter Erklärungsversuch, nichts Abschließendes... Wo dem Leser die Übersetzung dunkel erscheint, da ist auch mir der Sinn des Originals mehr oder weniger dunkel geblieben” ‘this is only a renewed attempt to make sense of it, nothing conclusive... where the translation appears dark to the reader, at that point the meaning of the original has also remained more or less dark to me’.

The reason for both the ‘banality’ and the ‘discordant combinations of words’ that Professors Jamison and Brereton find in the Rigvedic poems is, I suggest, straightforward. Vedic scholars, like the White Knight in Lewis Carroll’s poem, are madly trying to squeeze a left-hand foot into a right-hand shoe. The language in which the poems were composed was already archaic and not understood by the time of the later writers of the Veda. But for today’s scholars, apparently meaningless interpretations deriving from these later texts have been written in stone by centuries of subsequent religious tradition. They are inviolable, sacrosanct.

A number of years ago I published a short series of word studies to put some of these hallowed interpretations to the test. I argued, looking at all the contexts in which these words occur in the poems, that

- a noun of frequent occurrence which Vedic scholars believe means “ritual stone for pressing out the soma juice” in fact describes a man who is singing (*Journal of Indo-European Studies* 2001);
- a feminine noun which only occurs in the plural, for which the OUP translators give variously “udder” or “udders” / “belly” or “bellies” – with sacrificial ‘glossing’ in places where it’s clearly locational, for example “belly [= the hearth(s) of the ritual fires]” – means ‘fertile places’ (*Indogermanische Forschungen* 2004);
- a word translated “sacrificial rice cake” simply means ‘first gift’ (*General Linguistics* 2005);
- and that the word *tiró-ahnyam*, literally ‘across-day’, is a temporal adverb meaning ‘throughout the day’ (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2005). In the Vedic texts it is used adjectivally to describe a ritual substance, and is translated something like ‘a day old’.

My retranslations are in each case borne out by the formation of the words in question, and restore meaning and grammatical sense to the passages in which they occur. But they cannot possibly be entertained by Vedicists, for whom traditional interpretations, however bizarre, have

been rendered fixed and immutable. In the OUP translation of the Rigveda, nine years after the publication of my 2005 study on the adverb *tiróahnyam*, Stephanie Jamison discusses, at considerable length, the importance of the “ritual context” supplied by the use of this supposed adjective, while at the same time observing that it is “incongruous”; and puzzling over the interpretive difficulties it causes.

More than two millennia of derivative texts, and texts deriving from those derivative texts, of commentaries and commentaries upon those commentaries, now form a hedge of unfalsifiability. As Jamison wrote in 1991: “As the Brāhmaṇas tell us so often, ‘the gods love the obscure’.” Vedic scholars follow the commentators in believing that the hymns are meant to puzzle. Making sense of them is not the point, and my word studies are irrelevant. “*zif ich me holde in mine hegge / Ne recche ich neuer what þu segge*” (*The Owl and the Nightingale* ll.59-60).

I commented on the OUP translation in a review for the *TLS* in January 2016, and my criticisms are not repeated here. The three volumes are expensive, and safely sequestered in libraries. The version to which the majority of English-speaking readers have turned for the last forty years, and to which they continue to turn, is the selection of passages by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, first published by Penguin in 1981 and frequently reprinted. In the introduction to an earlier book, *Hindu Myths* (1975, reprinted in 2004), O’Flaherty had written: “The major sources of Hindu mythology in the ancient and medieval periods are a series of texts composed in Sanskrit, an Indo-European language closely related to Greek and Latin. The earliest source—and, indeed, the earliest known Indo-European document—is the Rg Veda”.

The fact that Sanskrit scholars in addition view the earliest known Indo-European document as a source for the study of Hinduism also stands firmly in the way of the decipherment of the poems. As long ago as 1873 the American linguist W.D. Whitney had observed that “the condition and manners depicted... are of a character which seems almost more Indo-European than Indian.” Whitney’s insight has profound potential interest for scholarship in general. Nobody questions that the poems were composed in the Indus Valley region.

The approach of Sanskrit scholars to the text not only hides the sophistication and poetry; it has wider repercussions. Historians and archaeologists base their dating of the Rigveda on its supposed content, and the relationship it is therefore assumed to have with the later corpus. Existing translations, however meaningless, are placed against the archaeological evidence. Far-reaching conclusions are drawn.

I discovered the Rigveda by chance in 1998. And I was gripped. It was apparent to me, coming from a very different background, not only that a substantial proportion of the interpretations of Sanskrit scholarship were wrong, but that traditional misunderstandings were obscuring poetry of remarkable quality. Two years later I wrote a detailed article for the *Transactions of the Philological Society* designed to show linguists without any knowledge of Sanskrit, which

continues to be the overwhelming majority, how these poems have been approached throughout their history. At the core of the article was an analysis of a sequence of seven verses in the Penguin selection. I sent a copy at the time to a linguist friend in Cambridge, Vivien Law, and received a Trinity College postcard in reply (this was 2000) in her distinctive small hand: “Many thanks for the copy of your article, which I read with all the greater interest given my brush with the O’Flaherty translation a few years ago when I was trying to work out what was going on in the hymn to Vāc. To this day I feel little the wiser, and from your article I begin to see that my bafflement had good grounds [...]”

Vivien was, however, the only linguist ever to read it. I couldn’t get it accepted for publication because it was sent to Sanskrit scholars for referral, and they were united in their view: the Penguin selection was simply not an appropriate target for criticism. “No Vedic scholar would take O’Flaherty’s translation seriously... This makes the exercise of a detailed criticism rather like that of kicking at an open door.” The second referee, an American Vedicist, wrote in even stronger terms: “The translation she chooses for extremely detailed examination (pp. 10-20) is that of Wendy O’Flaherty – a translation no Vedic philologist would use and whose casual relationship to Vedic grammar and syntax is well known. This is not a valid test – more like a straw man.” Another correspondent of the editor (who maintained his interest in my arguments over a considerable period of time and made strenuous efforts on my behalf), from the same English university as the first reader, was more direct, suggesting that there could have been a bit of a political angle here. “The idea of sending it to X is good if you want to scare KT off from submitting anything in the future (I imagine he would be opposed). X is, however, away until mid-Sept. so it wouldn’t be quick. I think it is easiest to say that there is not quite enough that is new linguistic insight in here for us, and it might be better in a journal dedicated to Indology such as the Indo-Iranian Journal [...]” (The Penguin selection was on the university’s undergraduate reading list at the time.)

My article, ‘Is the Rigveda Translatable?’ was not in fact intended specifically as a critique of the Penguin selection. Its main object was to trace the long history of ancient India’s puzzlement over the meaning of the poems, and to show that modern Sanskrit scholars are unable to shake off its influence. My target audience, as I explained to a correspondent at the time, was the scholarly reader who had no Sanskrit. Although repeatedly stressing to me that he was not a Vedicist, his reply echoed the view of his Vedic colleagues: “That does not affect the issue I was raising, which was the appropriateness of attacking the Penguin translation – indeed, if your intended readers can’t be expected to know the scholarly reputation of the translation you address, it is all the more important to make sure that it is a suitable one.”

But didn’t scholarship in general need to know the reputation of the Penguin translation? The Penguin Classics *Rig Veda* was reprinted four years later unchanged, apart from some additions to the bibliography, a new decorative cover depicting a painting of the Hindu god Krishna – a

god who first appears in a Sanskrit text at least a thousand years later than the Rigveda – and the change of the author’s surname to Doniger. Since then, as a quick survey of more than ten pages of Googlebooks reveals, dozens of writers from a wide range of disciplines, from Brian Greene to Amartya Sen, have used Wendy Doniger’s Penguin selection as their source of information about the Rigveda. In 2014 the historian Andrew Robinson, quoting from the introduction to the Penguin Rigveda selection in *India: A short history*, described Doniger as “the leading present-day Vedic translator”: “The leading present-day Vedic translator, Wendy Doniger, confesses: ‘Like the Englishman who announced that he preferred English to all other languages because it was the only language in which one said the words in the order that one thought of them, one feels that the *Rigveda* poets are not saying the words in the order that *they* thought of them, let alone the order that we would think of them.’” Doniger’s assumption, that the Rigvedic poets were themselves incoherent, goes back to ancient times.

We know that from the beginning the poems of the *Rigveda* were orally transmitted with scrupulous care. Their meaning appears to have been lost at a very early stage: Yāska, whose *Nirukta*, generally dated to about 500 BC, is the oldest surviving study of the *Rigveda*, quotes an assertion made by a sceptic called Kautsa that ‘the stanzas are meaningless’, “*anarthakā hi mantrāḥ*”. Kautsa’s view of the *Rigveda* makes clear that knowledge of later Sanskrit is no help when it comes to understanding the obscurities of the Rigvedic lexicon and its forms.

When the poems eventually came to be written down it was done in order to preserve an ancient mystery. The text was definitively edited from surviving manuscripts in the nineteenth century by Friedrich Max Müller, and Theodor Aufrecht’s 1877 transliteration of Max Müller’s edition remains the standard. The regularity of the text is engagingly conveyed by Nirad Chaudhuri in a story recounted in his biography of Max Müller, describing the printing out of the first sheets by OUP in 1847. “What surprised Müller when he was superintending the printing from London was that on the proofs many of his own mistakes on the copy were either corrected or queried. At last he asked if there were a Sanskrit scholar at Oxford who was doing this. He was told that there was none, but that it was the compositor himself, who did not know a word of Sanskrit, who was responsible for both. When at Oxford he asked the man how he came to make the corrections. “Well, sir, my arm gets into a regular swing from one compartment of types to another, and there are certain movements which never occur. So, if I suddenly have to take up types which entail a new movement I feel it, and I put in a query.” Hidden beneath the chaos of the traditional translations and their explanations lies a text that has been immaculately preserved, and is regular and consistent.

Unlike the authors of the 2014 OUP translation, Wendy Doniger provides notes to the Penguin selection. But as she explains in her introduction, she wishes to protect her audience from the difficulties she has encountered. “The skeletal nature of the critical apparatus is... intended to spare the reader a painful and confusing glimpse behind the curtain into the translator’s messy workshop, to gloss over a number of the agonized (and often unsatisfying) decisions that were

necessary... the notes, therefore, provide only enough glosses to allay the reader’s suspicion that something important may be missing or that something is wrong with the verse.” She does however give some indication of the battle she, like Stephanie Jamison, has had to engage in with the text. “One feels that the hymns themselves are mischievous translations into a ‘foreign’ language.”

The verses I had examined in the Penguin translation in my original paper, IV, 18 3-9, raised queries at every turn. The translation seemed to have little relationship with the text itself, and a great deal to do with her copious notes.

It was only later that I realised that Wendy Doniger was not looking at the text of the Rigveda at all. Her *Index and Glossary* lists very few words from the Rigvedic vocabulary, but it gives three entries for the word *paśú*, a word which can serve to illustrate what I mean. There is a primary glossarial entry, “*paśu*, see beast, victim” leading to two English headwords: “beast (*paśu*)” and “victim, sacrificial (*paśu*)”. (She omits the accent throughout in conformity with the later language.) In total she gives nine separate page references to the word.

The word *paśú* is cognate with Latin *pecus*, Umbrian *pequo*, Gothic *faihu* ‘money, moveable goods’, Old High German *fihu* ‘cattle’, ‘Vieh’, and occurs regularly in the poems. Doniger usually translates it “beast” or “cattle”, as for example in II, 38, 8:

*viśvas mārtaṅḍás vrajám ā paśús gāt* “Every bird and beast goes to his nest or pen;  
*sthaśás jánmāni savitā ví ā akar* Savitṛ has dispensed each creature to its proper resting-place.”  
 (Doniger p.196)

At its occurrence in I, 116, 23 (p.184), she renders *paśúm ná naṣṭám*, “like a stray cow”, which is loose; the word is never feminine, and is certainly not so here, with a masculine adjectival form in agreement. More importantly: neither of these two passages, nor two further passages where she translates the word “cattle” (on pages 102 and 180), is listed under any of her three index entries for the word. Conversely, in only two of the nine page references she gives for ‘*paśu*’ does the word *paśú* actually occur in the text. Four refer the reader to her translation “beast”, but the word she is translating is unrelated, *mṛgá*. Her index, in other words, is to her translation and notes, not to the text.

Doniger’s treatment of the word *paśú* exemplifies how the most extraordinary distortion to the meaning of the text can pass unnoticed. Her entry “victim, sacrificial (*paśu*)” refers the reader to the opening verse of V, 85 on page 211: “[the god Varuṇa spread the earth beneath the sun] as the priest who performs the slaughter spreads out the victim’s skin”. These twelve words, “as the priest who performs the slaughter spreads out the victim’s skin,” translate the three words *śamitā-iva cárma* ‘like a worker a skin’. The word “victim” is one of a number Wendy Doniger has supplied to give the passage a ‘sacrificial’ interpretation. The word *paśú* does not occur in the poem.

Her translation regularly appears to be following that of Karl Geldner. At II, 38, 8 quoted above Geldner had translated “Jeder Vogel ging (in sein Nest), das Vieh in dem Pferch.” Doniger has simply omitted Geldner’s brackets indicating supplied words; and despite the fact that there is no word for ‘nest’ in the text, she indexes the passage under her headword ‘nest’. It is also indexed under the headword ‘bird’, which is how she translates *mārtāṇḍá* here. The word *mārtāṇḍá* only occurs in two poems of the Rigveda: in this verse, II, 38, 8, and in X, 72, where she takes it as a proper name. She gives a long footnote about ‘Mārtāṇḍa’ on page 40 – as she explains, “The story of Mārtāṇḍa’s still-birth is well known in Hindu mythology” – and the mythical entity appears in her index: ‘Mārtāṇḍa (‘Born of a Dead Egg’)’. But this index entry doesn’t refer to the only other occurrence of the word *mārtāṇḍá* in the Rigvedic poems (where, in case the reader is by now understandably lost, she translates it ‘bird’).

In other words it’s not just a matter of a casual relationship to grammar and syntax. Attention to these only makes the Vedic approach to the poems even less viable, as Stephanie Jamison discovered: “The more I read the Rig Veda, the harder it becomes for me – and much of the difficulty arises from taking seriously the aberrancies and deviations in the language.” Most of what Doniger’s Penguin selection contains has nothing to do with the text of the poems themselves. The ‘mischievous translation into a foreign language’ is hers, not theirs.

In *The Argumentative Indian* (2006), Amartya Sen gives Doniger’s Penguin selection as his source for the Rigveda, and it is apparent from his allusion in a footnote to “hymn 34 of Rigveda”, by which he means X, 34, that he is not personally familiar with the text. At a significant point in his essay ‘On Inventing the Past’ Sen remarks that “the Vedas are full of references to horses”. But there are many fewer horses in the text of the Rigveda than there are in the translations. The entry ‘mare’ in Doniger’s index, for example, part of her ‘horse’ entry, refers to seven passages. But she is translating six unrelated words in these seven passages, five of which are simply adjectives with feminine endings. This proliferation is standard for Vedic scholars. There are at least thirteen unrelated words supplying the translation “mare” in the Jamison and Brereton translation. Sometimes these feminine adjectives are translated “cow”, or “sheep” instead; it’s a matter of choice.

Looking at the illustration on the cover of the 2005 reprint of Wendy Doniger’s Penguin selection sent me back to look more closely at the original edition. The 1981 cover had shown a manuscript which is described as “from a seventeenth-century birch bark manuscript from Kashmir of *The Rig Veda* ©The British Museum, London”. This was intriguing – I didn’t think there were any Kashmiri manuscripts of the Rigveda in London. So I set about trying to identify the passage, which proved not to be easy, and none of my Sanskrit scholar friends were any more able to read the script than I was. Eventually a contact from the University of Texas at Austin kindly supplied a partial transcription. The illustration on the front cover of the 1981 Penguin Rigveda isn’t from a manuscript of the Rigveda at all. The best suggestion I’ve received so far is that it’s part of a commentary on a Brāhmaṇa. I can’t read it – the language is different, and it’s full of vocabulary I don’t recognise.

At this point the scales fell from my eyes. We're talking about different things here. By the 'Rigveda', I have always meant the 1028 ancient poems whose immaculate preservation from remote antiquity has been shored up by the mass of reverential glossing handed down with them. But for Wendy Doniger this mass of exegetical material, of which the Brāhmaṇas form a significant part, is also 'The Rigveda'. And this indeed is now the prevailing view. The third paragraph of the Wikipedia article on the Rigveda (retrieved 17/03/2022), which is full of information unrelated to the poems themselves, spells it out. "The text is layered", it tells the reader. The poems are only the first 'layer', and the later prose commentaries known as the Brāhmaṇas, according to the Wikipedia article, are the second.

No wonder I couldn't make head or tail of Doniger's rendering of IV, 18. Max Müller in 1859 had been utterly perplexed by the complete misunderstanding of the poems shown by the writers of the Brāhmaṇas: "We can hardly understand how such an estrangement could have taken place, unless there had been at some time or other a sudden and violent break in the chain of tradition". Theodor Benfey, recipient of the Prix Volney for his lexicon of Greek roots before he ventured into uncharted waters and became professor of Sanskrit at Göttingen, had similarly observed that "between the genuine poetic remains of Vedic antiquity and their interpretations a long-continued break in tradition must have intervened". And Rudolph Roth, who was responsible for the early language in the seven-volume *Sanskrit Wörterbuch* published in St. Petersburg in the second half of the nineteenth century, echoed this when he described the break in tradition as a "grosse Kluft". Roth had already issued a stern warning against paying attention to Vedic tradition: "Die Wedenerklärung kann sich keine lästigeren Fesseln anlegen als den Glauben an die Unfehlbarkeit diese Führer oder eine wertvolle Tradition, in deren Genuss sie gestanden hätten"; 'Interpretation can lay upon itself no heavier fetters than by believing in the infallibility of these guides, or in the existence of a valuable tradition supposed to have been enjoyed by them'. I now understood why Doniger's index includes a number of Sanskrit words that aren't in the poems at all; some that are given in non-Rigvedic form, like 'dharma' for *dhárman* and 'karma' for *kárman* (the word means 'act, deed', and *kárma* is the nominative plural); and adjectives which I had puzzled over because inflected forms are listed as headwords (accusative 'dhruvam', feminine 'subhagā').

In conclusion I am quoting the passage below in parallel text to show what becomes of the poetry when viewed backwards through the Vedic telescope. (For any reader familiar with Sanskrit conventions I should explain that I am deliberately giving the text in a sandhi-free version for clarity.) This verse, III, 30, 13, was the final example in my 2006 'Ancient Sanskrit Online' course for Winfred Lehmann's Indo-European Linguistics Research Center at Austin. It was one of nine passages quoted to illustrate my argument that the verb *vanj* in the Rigveda doesn't mean 'smear with oil', but 'cause to appear, make bright' (the noun *aktú*, genitive *aktós*, in the first line is a nominal derivative; and note the plural *kárma* 'deeds' in line 4):

*dídṛkṣante uśásas yáman aktós*  
*vivásvatyās máhi citrám ánikam*

They long to see, at the coming of the glimmering light of dawn  
The great bright face of the radiant one;

*vísve jānanti mahinā yád ā agāt  
índrasya kárma sú-kṛtā purúñi*

All know when she has come in her glory  
The many deeds of Indra are well done.

(III, 30, 13)

*máhi jyótis níhitam vakṣáñāsu...*

A great light cast in the fertile places...

I've let the text run on here into the first line of verse 14. The word at the end of this line, *vakṣáñāsu*, 'in the fertile places', is the locative of *vakṣáñā*, a word that, although plural, is universally taken by Vedic scholars to be a body part, because this is how it is used in a later text called the Atharvaveda (it was the subject of the second of my word studies, published in 2004). The 20th-century scholar Louis Renou had therefore translated "dans les entrailles (de l'Aurore)" 'in Dawn's entrails'. Stephanie Jamison in 2014, taking it as plural in form but singular in meaning, renders the line "Great light was deposited in her udder" and both poetry and sense crash to the ground. It is not possible for Vedic scholars to set aside the authority of the Atharvaveda: as Renou wrote in 1928, "auprès du Rgveda, l'Atharvaveda est un document d'une parfaite limpidité".

This poem, III, 30, is not included in Doniger's Penguin selection. The word *vakṣáñā* occurs in three of her passages: in two she renders it "belly", passages that are duly listed under the headword 'belly' in her index. At its third occurrence, where the gods are described as *ní su-drívam dádhatas vakṣáñāsu* 'laying down good wood in the fertile places' (X, 28, 8), she offers 'boxes' for *vakṣáñā*: "they laid the good wood in the boxes". Her footnote makes no mention of the inconsistency, but explains, "they take [it] home in boxes on wagons". She is again presumably following Geldner, who had translated *vakṣáñāsu* in this verse "in dem (Wagen)inneren" 'in the (wagon)-interiors'; making reference, as his notes regularly do, to the authority of a later text. When Max Müller wrote, "Sanskrit texts have been edited, on which no rational man ought to waste his time", he was not talking about the Rigveda.

This verse, X, 28,8, is the passage I mentioned earlier where Jamison and Brereton explain the word *vakṣáñā*, which they translate "belly" here, "[= the hearth(s) of the ritual fires]". If you're a Vedic scholar you can choose: *vakṣáñā* can either mean 'udder(s)' or 'belly' and be interpreted as crude imagery; or it can be metaphorical for 'boxes' or for the innards of wagons; or, at the last resort, it's sacrificial code and means 'the hearth(s) of the ritual fires'. The hymns are, after all, meant to puzzle. Decipherment would be an act of hubris.

Because of its antiquity and size – older, we believe, than Homer, and as extensive as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined – the Rigveda has immense linguistic and historical importance. And it is highly sophisticated. Nearly a century before the first publication of Aufrecht's text in metrically restored form by Barend van Nooten and Gary Holland, Edward Vernon Arnold, Professor of Latin at the University College of North Wales, had reached a remarkable conclusion (1905):

“It must be plain that as works of mechanical art the metres of the Rigveda stand high above those of modern Europe in variety of motive and in flexibility of form. They seem indeed to bear the same relation to them as the rich harmonies of classical music to the simple measures of the peasant.”

I wish to nail my colours to the mast here. The poems which have been handed down to us encumbered with the traditional name ‘Rigveda’ are not about the preparation of an unidentifiable hallucinogenic drink: the word *sóma* is an abstract noun. There are no ritual spoons, sheep’s wool filters, boiled milk offerings, or oil-besmeared sacrificial posts in these ancient poems. And it is precisely here, in this cat’s cradle of mumbo-jumbo, that the most sophisticated thought lies hidden. Early Indian scholars were not good at recognising words of abstract meaning, and regularly assumed, when they didn’t understand them, that such words had a technical, ritual sense. Wendy Doniger continues to maintain that the word *sva-dhā*, literally ‘self-placing’, means “sacrificial drink”. The word is cognate, as Theodor Benfey had suggested in 1839 in his *Griechisches Wurzellexikon*, with Greek ἥθος ‘custom, own nature’, from which English *ethics* ultimately derives. I’ve written about Benfey’s remarkable postulation, made before he was able consult the text, elsewhere. But here in the Penguin selection remains the drink: “Svadhā, a sacrificial drink... *see also Soma*”.

I fully concur with the approach of the historian and erstwhile philosopher Stephen Bungay, writing some years ago about the impenetrabilities of Hegel: “[This essay] assumes that Hegel’s thought was coherent, and tries to find a way in which it makes sense, for the simple reason that finding a way in which it makes nonsense will always succeed and is therefore pointless.” I don’t know anything about Hegel, but in the case of the Rigveda the viability of this approach has been demonstrated. To quote from an article I published in 2010, ‘The Plight of the Rigveda in the Twenty-First Century’:

The only scholars I can reasonably assume to have read my word studies are the anonymous referees who approved them for publication. Their response was always: of course, yes, her argument about this particular word is correct, but she cannot draw the general conclusion that she does from just one study. But there is not just one study. What, of itself, would be no evidence becomes by its corroborative position, proof most sure. This sentence is not mine; it is taken from Edgar Allan Poe, describing, in 1843, the investigative method of Augustin Dupin in his short story *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt*. Dupin is identifying the dead body of a girl: “Each successive proof is multiple evidence – proof not added to proof, but multiplied by hundreds or thousands... it is not that the corpse was found to have the garters of the missing girl, or found to have her shoes, or her bonnet, or the flowers of her bonnet, or her general size and appearance – it is that the corpse had each, and all collectively.” In terms of my overreaching argument – that the text responds to

the scientific approach, and that it is possible to make sense of it – continuing to publish such proofs is not necessary. The point has been established.

At the end of the nineteenth century Arnold had spelled out his conclusion. “No satisfactory progress in our knowledge of the Rigveda is possible until a larger number of scholars, trained in the strict methods of study of the Greek and Latin classics, have the enterprise to invade the new world of literature which India has preserved for them.” I don’t know if classicists are the only possible saviours here, but Sanskrit scholars alas are shackled; they cannot do it. And deciphering the text will almost certainly lead to the conclusion that it is much earlier than currently supposed. In the introduction to the 2014 Jamison/Brereton translation the Brāhmaṇas are described as “prose texts not too much later than the Rigveda” – this is surely mistaken.

Max Müller, contrary to what the Wikipedia Rigveda article asserts, never produced a complete translation of the poems. In the introduction to his preliminary attempt (of forty-nine of the poems into English) in 1869 he was clear about what the task involved. “I mean by translation, not a mere rendering of the hymns of the Rig-veda into English, French, or German, but a full account of the reasons which justify the translator in assigning such a power to such a word, and such a meaning to such a sentence... a mere translation... will never lead to any solid results.” It might seem unnecessary to refer back to Stephen Ullmann writing in 1962, but not I think in this case. “The meaning of a word can be ascertained only by studying its use. There is no short cut to meaning, through introspection or by any other method. The investigator must start by collecting an adequate sample of contexts and then approach them with an open mind, allowing the meaning or meanings to emerge from the contexts themselves.” (in *Semantics: an Introduction to the Science of Meaning*).

I believe that we can prove the author of the verse I quoted at the beginning of this article wrong. A small research team, working without preconception as to meaning (perhaps now with the assistance of AI?), will be able to make substantial progress with the decipherment of this neglected ancient text in just a few years. Give the poems of the Rigveda sovereignty at long last, and the loathly lady may yet turn out to be beautiful.