

The Plight of the *Rigveda* in the Twenty-First Century

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In 2007, a collection of rare manuscripts of the text of the *Rigveda* was added to UNESCO's 'Memory of the World' register. This register is designed to honour and protect precious landmarks in the intellectual history of the world. Two years before, in 2005, Penguin had issued a second edition of its selection of translations from the poems by an American Sanskritist and professor of religion. For the past thirty years this slim volume has represented the *Rigveda* for the English reader. At the end of the book the editor supplies fragments of the text, albeit in an unaccented form that came centuries later, in an index of first lines. According to this index (Doniger 2005: 321), the opening word of the first poem is the mystical particle *om*. This particle, conveying religious awe, has been silently added by Professor Doniger from later Indian religious writings. It is not present in the first line, and is entirely unknown to the Rigvedic poems.

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

Why the *Rigveda* is not being studied

For most western readers – particularly if they have ever dipped into the Penguin selection – these poems are an impenetrable enigma. Simon Jenkins, one of our finest journalists and a writer of considerable scholarship, recently coined an elegant metaphor to describe the incomprehensibility of the medieval English church: “a church is a song without words, an architectural Sanskrit” (Jenkins 2000: ix). For the educated modern reader, Sanskrit is the one subject that he knows he doesn't know, and that he is not in the slightest bit embarrassed not to know. Its earliest poems embody this acknowledged, acceptable ignorance. Two of the three responses to my paper “A still undeciphered text” published last year in *JIES* were a reflection of this. Peter-Arnold Mumm is a professor of Indo-European linguistics, a discipline that owes its existence, and indeed its name, to the discovery of the relationship between Sanskrit and the classical languages of Europe. But he is not a Sanskrit scholar, and while undertaking to publish a reply

made no apology for not having read my word studies, which contain the linguistic evidence for my argument. Stefan Zimmer, similarly, chair of Indo-European Studies at Bonn, points out that he is not in a position to judge “the breadth and completeness of my critical survey”. No stigma, clearly, attaches to professors of Indo-European for unfamiliarity with the language of the earliest poems.

The *Rigveda* is a minority interest in Sanskrit circles. “Some chocolates can only be sold if they are wrapped up in gold-speckled papers. Books about the *Rigveda* will only be read through the medium of some fashionable theory.” (Staal 1982: 278) The ‘hermeneutic’ approach of the Vedic scholars whose province these poems are considered to be was the focus of my paper last year. And as far as traditional scholars in India are concerned, there is no debate: these poems should simply not be an object of study. What the *Rigveda* ‘means’ is of no concern, it is the tradition deriving from them that matters. As an Indian correspondent politely told me: “Scholars of traditional stamp would prefer that the text remains inscrutable. Western scholarship burrowing into the text is, all said and done, an annoyance.” Meanwhile it continues to be considered irrelevant to the work of most classicists. Caught like a fly in amber in the east, in the west this ancient poetry, unknown until the nineteenth century, has suffered the fate of a child joining school a year after everyone else, too late to find a niche. It is hard to imagine, therefore, who is going to find my linguistic arguments to be within his remit. Despite not having read the published evidence, Professors Mumm and Zimmer clearly regard as absurd my conclusion that these poems make as much sense as any other ancient literary composition. Professor Mumm is content to meet it with some derision: “Good luck for the project of explaining the whole RV literally!”. Professor Zimmer, similarly, while admitting his inability to assess my argument, is confident in disparaging it. Had I written “A still undeciphered text” a decade ago, impelled simply by the overwhelming sense that this is great poetry, and that the incoherence must lie in the translations rather than the original, it would be reasonable for scholars to be sceptical. But over the past ten years I have published a number of word studies whose retranslations transform the poems, discovering sense where before there was nonsense.

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

method of Augustin Dupin in his short story *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt*. Dupin is identifying the body of a girl:

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

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

The ‘German School’

At the beginning of “A still undeciphered text” I quoted the nineteenth-century linguist William Dwight Whitney’s remark, in an essay on the interpretation of the *Rigveda*, that the content of the poems “seems almost more Indo-European than Indian” (1873: 101). Whitney is comparing the approach of the ancient commentators, who regularly ascribe a diversity of meanings to the same word or phrase, with the scientific methods of what he calls “the German school”. He dismisses the work of the commentators so roundly that one would have thought it dismissed forever. On the other hand, he tells us that the linguistic approach of the German school had by 1873 already given the world “an essential part of its knowledge and conception of ancient times” (1873: 132). Professor Whitney would have approved of UNESCO’s recent tribute to the *Rigveda*.

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

One of the examples of a lexical entry given on their handout was the feminine form of the word *gáv-*, for which the Rivelex team give the following meanings: “cow; milk, butter; earth, dawn, cloud, bodies of water, sacrificial spoon, poetry, voice, bow-string”. They add the note: “These meanings are derived from the

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

What John Chadwick wrote in the 1960s in response to a suggested decipherment of the Indus Script by Asko Parpola and his team also holds good for the *Rigveda*. “To preserve an open mind is incredibly difficult, because we are either mesmerised into swallowing camels or so prejudiced we cannot manage the odd gnat... What we shall need is not more possible or even plausible interpretations... but the clearest possible demonstration that these meanings, and only these meanings, are correct” (Clouston and Chadwick 1969: 207). The first example given on the Rivelex handout at the conference was the compound *añjas-pā*, and comes from the part of their dictionary that has already been published (Krisch 2006). The Rivelex editors translate *añjas-pā*, “drinking an ointment; protecting an ointment; moving directly etc.”. Setting aside the solecism of giving three quite different meanings for a word that occurs only twice (at 10.92.2 and 10.94.13), continuing to put forward such bizarre interpretations stands firmly in the way of making sense of the text. The first element of this compound, *añjas*, contrary to what Rivelex tells us and its translation assumes, never means ‘ointment’ in the *Rigveda*.

añjas is a nominal derivative of the verb */añj*, which was included in my list of undeciphered words in “A still undeciphered text: the reply to my critics” (2009: 80). The verb continues to be misunderstood as meaning ‘smear with ointment, anoint’, in the *Rigveda*, although there are numerous occasions where this makes no sense. At the end of Lesson 10 of *Ancient Sanskrit Online* its Rigvedic usage was briefly discussed and illustrated (Thomson and Slocum 2006). The very different meaning that emerges for this important verb – not ‘smear with ointment’, but something like ‘cause to appear, make manifest’ – exemplifies how ritual

interpretations have for thousands of years obscured the *Rigveda's* conceptual sophistication, and how they continue to obscure it in the twenty-first century.

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