

# ***Why the Rigveda Remains Undeciphered: The Example of puroḷāś***

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper argues, using a word study as an example, that Vedic scholars are unable to make progress in deciphering the *Rigveda* because they continue to be misled by the indological tradition. A fresh approach would resolve many of the traditional problems of Rigvedic interpretation, and reveal a more rational and sophisticated text.

## **1. Introduction**

In the course of a series of Rigvedic word studies Renou (1958:40) referred, in a tone of some exasperation, to “l’impossibilité de ‘sémantiser’ le vocabulaire ṛgvédique”. Vedic scholars continue to have difficulty pinning down meaning in the *Rigveda*. Wendy Doniger (1981:14) concludes that the best recourse for the translator is “to seek various English equivalents for single words along a broad spectrum of linked concepts”. Stephanie Jamison (2000:5, 8–9) expresses her preference instead for Paul Thieme’s “insistence on pinpointing precise and differentiated meanings in words”, but the consequence of this approach is that “images are more striking but also more obscure; the lexicon is more specific but the combinations of words therefore more discordant”. The discord that results opens up the possibility of interpreting the text in an apparently limitless variety of ways. Translators have always had to supplement the text to make sense of it. “It is discouragingly common to find passages in the *Rig Veda* that do not make sense without the silent supplying of additional material” (Jamison 2000:13).

This paper argues that there is a simple explanation for many of the perceived difficulties in Rigvedic interpretation. I have chosen the word *puroḷāś*

as an example of how inherited assumptions about meaning continue to mislead scholars and distort contexts in the *Rigveda*. What is more, these inherited assumptions reinforce the traditional belief that the text is naive and full of fussy detail of ritual practice, helping to preserve it from scholarly attention: ‘banal’ and ‘crass’ are both words Jamison uses of the *Rigveda* in the course of her recent paper quoted above. I believe that the banality and crassness lie in the traditional interpretation, not in the text itself.

## 2. Analysis

The meaning usually assigned to the word *puroḷāś* in its 21 occurrences in the *Rigveda* is the one found in later texts. Mayrhofer gives it, as *puroḍāś*,<sup>1</sup> together with the later form, *puroḍāśa*: “*puroḍāś*- m. Opferkuchen ... RV+; AV+ °*ḍāśa*-.” Translators agree: ‘Opferkuchen’ (Geldner), ‘cake’ (Griffith), ‘gâteau de riz’ (Renou), ‘risovaia lepushka’ ‘flat cake of rice’<sup>2</sup> (Elizarenkova). *puroḷāś* regularly appears in the context of other words whose traditional interpretation I consider to be questionable. Although their meaning does not affect the argument, I have sometimes left such words untranslated in my versions. The traditional interpretation is in each case provided by Geldner, whose translation is the current scholarly standard.

In two short poems of Book III the word *puroḷāś* is repeated in formulaic style throughout. It is described as an offering made progressively during the course of the day, at ceremonies traditionally understood to be devoted to *sóma*: the *prātaḥsāvā*, the *mādhyaṃdina sāvana*, and the *trītya sāvana*. III, 28 is addressed to Agni and III, 52 to Indra.

The word occurs in each verse of III, 28. The poem will appear straightforward until we reach verse 3.

- (1)      ágne juṣásva no havīḥ  
            puroḷāśaṃ jātavedaḥ  
            prātaḥsāvé dhiyāvaso

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<sup>1</sup> *l* takes the place of *ḍ* between vowels in the *Rigveda* (and *lh* of *ḍh*).

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Mike Falchikov of the University of Edinburgh for help with translations from the Russian.

“Agni, laß dir unsere Opfergabe, den Reiskuchen, bei der Morgenspende schmecken, o Jātavedas, du an Weisheit Reicher!” (Geldner)

The injunction *juṣāsva* is repeated in all verses of this poem except 3 and 5. Thinking of cake, Geldner translates it “laß schmecken”, but the root  $\sqrt{juṣ}$  strictly speaking carries a less specific meaning, “gern haben, Gefallen finden, genießen” (Mayrhofer). See, for example, III, 52, 3 below, where it refers to songs. My translations are centered for clarity.

Agni, enjoy our oblation  
The *puroḷāś*, Jātavedas  
At the morning offertory, O Dhiyāvasu.

(2) puroḷā agne pacatās  
túbhyam vā ghā páriṣṛtah  
tām juṣasva yaviṣṭhiya

“Der Reiskuchen ist gar, o Agni, oder vielmehr für dich zubereitet; den laß dir schmecken, du Jüngster!” (Geldner)

The *puroḷāś*, Agni, is cooked  
Or indeed for you prepared  
Enjoy it, O Yaviṣṭhiya.

The second pāda here appears to raise the question of whether the *puroḷāś* is cooked or not. This question will recur and is discussed later in the paper.

(3ab) ágne vīhí puroḷāśam  
āhutam tiróahniyam

“Agni! Hab nach dem geopfertem Reiskuchen Gelüst, der einen Tag alt ist.” (Geldner)

“Agni, enjoy the cake of meal and our oblation three days old.” (Griffith)

Agni, seek out the *puroḷāś*  
Offered *tiróahnyam*

There is a serious difficulty in the word *tiróahnyam*, which I have left untranslated. I shall return to the problem at verse 6, where the word is repeated, and concludes both verse and poem.

- (4ab) mādhyamdine sávane jātavedaḥ  
puroḷāśam ihá kave juṣasva

“Bei der Mittagspende laß dir, Jātavedas, hier den Reiskuchen schmecken, du Weiser!” (Geldner)

At the midday *sávana*, O Jātavedas  
Enjoy the *puroḷāś* here, wise one.

- (5ab) ágne tṛtīye sávane hí kâniṣaḥ  
puroḷāśam sahasaḥ sūnav āhutam

“Agni, so mögest du denn bei der dritten Spende den geopfertem Reiskuchen genehmigen, du Sohn der Stärke.” (Geldner)

Agni, pray take delight, at the third *sávana*,  
In the offered *puroḷāś*, O son of strength.

- (6) ágne vṛdhāná āhutim  
puroḷāśam jātavedaḥ  
juṣasva tiróahniyam

“Agni, dich stärkend, laß dir das Opfer, den Reiskuchen schmecken, der einen Tag alt ist, o Jātavedas!” (Geldner)

O Fire, growing, enjoy the offering  
The *puroḷāś*, O Jātavedas, *tiróahnyam*.

The appearance of the word *tiróahnyam* in verses 3 and 6, translated “one day old” by Geldner and “three days old” by Griffith, is an example of the kind of textual incongruity that Vedic scholars dread. “One can be blissfully reading the most banal hymn, whose form and message offer no surprises . . . and suddenly trip over a verse, to which one’s only response can be ‘What?!’” (Jamison 2000:10).

At all its other occurrences in the *Rigveda*, *tiróahnyam* (it occurs in the *Rigveda* only in the accusative) is understood by translators to be a word describing *sóma*. Indeed, when the word occurs elsewhere without a subject, at verses 19, 20 and 21 of VIII, 35, both Geldner and Griffith supply “soma” to their translations, as does Renou, noting “*tiróahnya*, dit du soma” (see 1955–1969, Vol. 16:6). Geldner’s footnote to the first occurrence of *tiróahnyam* at I, 45, 10 had explained the word. The detail, as he says, is drawn from later texts: “*tiróahnya* der gestrige (‘yesterday’s’) Soma, der über Nacht gegoren hat. Vgl. Śat[apatha Brāhmaṇa]. 11, 5, 5, 11 und Kāty[āna]. Śr[auta-Sūtra]. 24, 3, 42 mit Komm.” Böhtlingk & Roth, giving the same references, among others, translate it “*übertägig* d. h. *vorgestrig*, vom Soma, der zum Zweck der Gährung stehen geblieben ist”. But Geldner makes no comment on his translation at III, 28, which takes the word to describe the cake. Nor indeed does Renou, who translates, in both verses, “le gâteau de riz qui a passé la journée”.

Translators explain this apparent ‘discord’ in the text, that a word understood to describe *sóma* appears here to refer to a cake, in different ways. Geldner and Renou follow the commentators in understanding that there is an adjective *tiróahnya* in the *Rigveda* that describes a special preparation, a kind of vintage *sóma*. However, their translations suggest that they believe that the commentators failed to notice that this ageing process could also be applied to a cake.

Griffith and Elizarenkova, on the other hand, maintain that *tiróahnyam* must refer to *sóma* here, as it does elsewhere. The text is elliptical: words are missing. They resolve the problem however in different ways. Griffith supplies “and” to verses 1, 3, and 6 to allow him to take the poem to be describing two offerings. He then translates the past participle *āhuta* ‘beopfert’ (Mayrhofer) in verse 3 as a noun, ‘oblation’, translating “(and) our oblation three days old”. But he never translates *āhuta* in this way elsewhere. Elizarenkova, on the other hand, supplies “soma” to the text, in parentheses, in verses 3 and 6. The ‘rice cake’ is described as *āhutam tiróahnyam* in verse 3. This she translates (the Russian is slightly awkward) as “polituyu (somoj) brodyeshchim vtorye sutki”, ‘poured over (with soma) which has been fermenting for forty-eight hours’. But when *āhutam* occurs again in agreement with *puroḷāś* at III, 52, 6 she translates it differently: “(okazhi chest’ nashim) . . . pozhertvovannoi lepushke!” In verse 6 she once more pads out the translation, interpreting the single word *tiróahnyam* as “soprovozhaemyi pozavcherashnim (somoj)”, ‘accompanied by the day before yesterday’s (soma).’ This degree of supplementation assumes a seriously defective text. The range of translations offered for this verse, all of which are problematic, exemplifies the divergency in interpretation described at the beginning of this paper.

My solution to the problem is much more straightforward: the traditional translations of these two words cannot both be right. (They could however both be wrong.)<sup>3</sup> A different interpretation of *puroḷāś* would solve the problem. It is apparently offered in this poem, III, 28, at ceremonies traditionally thought to be *sóma* offertories, although the word *sóma* does not occur in the poem. In verses 3 and 6 it then appears with a word which is understood everywhere else to belong with *sóma*. The logical conclusion to draw is that the word *puroḷāś* here represents *sóma* itself.

The derivation of *puroḷāś*, from *purás* ‘before, in front’ and  $\sqrt{d}$  *dās* ‘offer, worship’ was explained by Debrunner & Wackernagel (1930:246): “*puroḷāś*-m. ‘Opferkuchen’ eig[entlich ‘originally’]. ‘Vorhuldigung’”. Salvatore Scarlata (1999:220) endorses the slight revision to this in a later volume (Debrunner & Wackernagel 1954:8): “‘Opferkuchen aus Reismehl’ (eig[entlich]. ‘zuvor dargebracht’)”, that is, ‘(something) first offered’. The original sense, something first offered, fore-offering, or ‘fore-homage’ (Macdonell), would get round the difficulty here. It would make possible the assumption that the supposedly adjectival *tiróahnyam* refers to *sóma* in this poem, as elsewhere in the *Rigveda*, without requiring any distortion to the text.

This suggested revised interpretation now needs to be tested in the other contexts in which *puroḷāś* occurs. The word reappears in III, 52, occurring in each verse with the exception of verses 1 & 7. As in III, 28, the *puroḷāś* is offered throughout the day, at the *prātaḥsāvā*, the *mādhyaṃdina sāvana*, and the *trīṭīya sāvana*. Also running through the poem is the feminine plural word *dhānā*, translated by Mayrhofer “geröstete Getreidekörner” ‘roasted grain kernels’.

The first verse, in which *puroḷāś* does not appear, contains a list of gifts, among which is indeed a cake; the word is *apūpā*.

- (1)      *dhānāvantaṃ karambhīṇam*  
           *apūpāvantaṃ ukthīṇam*  
           *īndra prātār juṣasva naḥ*

Geldner translates, “Indra! Genieße am Morgen unseren (Soma) nebst gerösteten Körnern, Brei, Kuchen und dem Loblied!” (“Soma”, as he acknowledges, is supplied.) The tangible offerings, *dhānā* ‘roasted corn’, *karambhā* ‘gruel’, and

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<sup>3</sup> See Thomson 2005.

*apūpā* ‘cake’, are accompanied by *ukthā* ‘holy song’. The first half of the poem continues:

- (2ab) *puroḷāśam* *pacatīyam*  
*juṣāsvendrā* *gurasva* *ca*

Enjoy the cooked *puroḷāś*  
 Indra, and speak your approbation

- (3ab) *puroḷāśam* *ca* *no ghāso*  
*joṣāyāse* *gīraś* *ca naḥ*

And consume our *puroḷāś*  
 And enjoy our songs

- (4ab) *puroḷāśam* *sanaśruta*  
*prātaḥsāvé* *juṣasva* *naḥ*

Enjoy our *puroḷāś*  
 At the morning offertory, O Sanaśruta

But the *puroḷāś* of these three verses is not mentioned in the list of offerings in the first verse. If we follow the traditional interpretation of the word, ‘rice cake’, the text is clumsy. Why does the poem switch, after the introductory verse, to speak about a different offering? In the first verse Indra is enjoined to take pleasure in a list of foods accompanied by song; but, by verse 3, the songs accompany only the rice cake.

If, on the other hand, we understand the word to have its original meaning, something like ‘fore-offering’, the poem makes much more sense: the word *puroḷāś* in verses 2–4 refers to the delicacies listed in the first verse. The question of whether the *puroḷāś* is cooked or not was raised at III, 28, 2, and it will arise again. But here the ‘first offering’, I suggest, is indeed cooked, as described in verse 2; it consists of the roasted corn and other foods listed at the beginning of the poem.

Geldner translates the next two verses, 5 and 6: “Laß dir die gerösteten Körner (und) den Reiskuchen der Mittagsspende hier munden” (*cārum* *kr̥ṣva*, ‘let it be pleasing’) (5ab), “Bei der dritten Trankspende tu unseren Körnern (und) dem Reiskuchen, der geopfert wird, Ehre an.” (6ab) He has supplied “and”, to

distinguish the ‘rice cake’ from the ‘grain kernels’. But this is unnecessary. The *dhānā́* constitute the chief part of the first offering, in these verses:

Let the roasted corn of the midday *sávana*, the first gift,  
here be pleasing (5ab);  
At the third *sávana* honour the corn, our first offered gift (6ab)

Geldner assumes that the text is elliptical in verses 5 and 6. But let us look back at verse 3. The repeated conjunction, *ca . . . ca*, “And consume our *puroḷāś* / And enjoy our songs”, does not leave any doubt that two distinct things are being described. The ellipsis assumed by Geldner in verses 5 and 6 is inconsistent with the clarity of the earlier verse.

In the final verse of the poem, verse 8, this revised interpretation resolves a traditional difficulty, and a word supplied to the text by translators is no longer needed.

(8)      *prāti dhānā́ bharata túyam asmai*  
Offer *dhānā́* (F. PL.) quickly to-him

*puroḷāśam vīratamāya nīṇām*  
The *puroḷāś* (M.) for-the-bravest of-men

*divé-dive sadṛśīr indra túbhyaṃ*  
Day-by-day such-things (F. PL.) O-Indra for-you

*várdhantu tvā somapéyāya dhṛṣṇo*  
May-they-strengthen you for-*somapéya*, O-Dhṛṣṇu.

Geldner translates the verse, “Bietet ihm rasch die gerösteten Körner an, den Reiskuchen dem heldenhaftesten der Männer! Tag für Tag sind die gleichen für dich, Indra, (bestimmt); sie sollen dich für den Somatrank stärken, du Mutiger.” He understands the *dhānā́* and the *puroḷāś* to be different things in the first two lines. But a problem then arises in the third. He comments, in a footnote, on the feminine plural *sadrśīs* ‘such things’:

“Sāy[ana]. ergänzt *stutayah* [‘praises’] als Subjekt. 3, 35, 3d zeigt aber deutlich, daß es die Körner sind. Offenbar sollten diese den Durst mehren.”



But the masculine word *puroḷāś* intervenes. If it is taken to represent a different offering, a cake, the sense jumps, and the feminine plural word *dhānā* needs to be supplied to the third line to make it clear that *sadṛśīs* refers to the corn, as in the two most recent translations: “Jour après jour que ces-mêmes (grains) pour toi, ô Indra, (soient offerts)” (Renou); “Kazhdyi den’ dlia tebia te zhe samye (zharenye zerna) o Indra” (Elizarenkova). Otherwise we might consider Sāyaṇa’s very different interpretation a valid alternative, if we happen to have missed the parallel of III, 35, 3 (and indeed it is followed by Griffith, who translates, “Indra, may hymns accordant with thee daily strengthen thee”). But there is no difficulty if *puroḷāś* is taken in its primary sense.

Quickly, offer him *dhānā*  
The first gift for the bravest of men.  
May such things, day by day for you  
Strengthen you, O Indra.

The word *puroḷāś* also has nine scattered occurrences, at I, 162, 3, III, 41, 3, IV, 24, 5, and 32, 16 (identical with III, 53, 3 above), VI, 27, 7, VII, 18, 6; and in three verses in Book VIII: 2, 11; 31, 2; and 78, 1.

In the first of these the original meaning of the word in the context is not disputed by any translator.

I, 162, 3.  
eṣā chāgaḥ puró ásvēna vājínā  
This goat, in-front, with-the-horse-mighty

pūṣṇó bhāgó nīyate viśvādeviyah  
Pūṣan’s portion, is-led, suitable-for-all-gods.

abhipriyaṃ yāt puroḷāśam árvatā  
Gladdening, when the *puroḷāś*, with-the-courser

tvāṣṭéd (tvāṣṭā íd) enaṃ sauśravasāya jinvati  
Tvaṣṭṛ-it-is him to-glory urges-forward.

“Dieser Ziegenbock, für alle Götter bestimmt, wird mit dem siegesge-  
wohnten Roß vorausgeführt als Anteil des Pūṣan. Wenn (sie den Bock)  
als willkommenes Voropfer mit dem Rennpferd (führen), so ermuntert  
ihn Tvaṣṭṛ zu rühmlichem Werke.” (Geldner)

In this verse *puroḷāś* clearly retains its original meaning, and Geldner translates it here, exceptionally, “Voropfer”, ‘fore-offering’ (he uses this translation in one other passage, as we will see). Renou does not translate this poem, but in his note to it (1955–1969, Vol. 16:84) interprets the word as “offrande” ‘offering’. Elizarenkova translates the word here, similarly, “predvaritel’ nuyu zhertvu” ‘preliminary victim’ without comment. The context makes the original meaning of *puroḷāś* incontrovertible in this verse. Even the medieval scholar Sāyaṇa had observed it; Wilson had noted to his translation, based on Sāyaṇa’s commentary, “*Puroḍāsam* is usually an offering of cakes and butter; but it is here explained, *purastād-dātavyam*, that which is to be first offered.” Indeed, it clearly echoes the word *purās* ‘in front’ in line 1.

I say that “the meaning of the word in the context is not disputed by any translator”. But this is not quite right. Geldner translates *puroḷāś* “Voropfer” here, as the context dictates. But he remains firmly convinced that the word nonetheless means ‘rice cake’. He explains the passage as an extraordinary metaphor.

“3c ist elliptisch. *puroḷāś* (die in einem Reisfladen bestehende Vorspeise bei dem Opfer, vgl. A[tharva] V[eda]. 9, 6, 12 [...]) wird hier auf den zuerst geopfertem Bock übertragen.”

‘3c is elliptical. *puroḷāś* (the appetizer consisting of a flat cake of rice in the ritual, see Atharvaveda 9, 6, 12 ...) is used here figuratively to describe the first-offered goat.’

The clear evidence of the context does not lead him to question his conviction that *puroḷāś* means ‘rice cake’, as his footnote, firmly referring the reader to the authority of a later text, is at pains to make clear.

The later literature on the subject of cake offerings is vast. In a comprehensive study Gonda (1987) discusses the *puroḍāśa* (the form in which the word occurs from the Atharvaveda onwards) throughout, with reference to over forty later Vedic texts. Sanskrit lexicography has always assigned to *puroḷāś* in the *Rigveda* the meaning given, in considerable detail, by these later texts. Böhtlingk & Roth explain: “aus Reismahl gebackener Opferkuchen, welcher in der Regel, in Stücke getheilt, in einer oder mehreren Schalen aufgesetzt wird”. Sāyaṇa’s note with reference to the passage we have just looked at is mentioned but dismissed: “nicht anders auch wohl 1, 162, 3”. Monier-Williams, similarly, describes “a mass of ground rice rounded into a kind of cake (usually divided into pieces, placed on receptacles; cf. *kapāla*) and offered as an oblation in fire,

RV &c. &c.” Macdonell’s definition, while explaining the formation of the word, continues in the same vein: “*puro-dāś*, m. (fore-homage:  $\sqrt{dāś}$ ) sacrificial cake of rice-meal (*usually offered in pieces in one or more dishes*); -*dāśa*, m. (*the more usual form of the above*).”

Gonda’s book is arranged according to the number of *kapālas* ‘dishes’ (Böhtlingk & Roth’s “Schalen”), involved in the ceremony, as his chapter headings, “Cakes on one to ten *kapālas*”, “Cakes on thirteen or more *kapālas*” indicate. Monier-Williams, in his definition of *purodāś* quoted above, cross-refers to his entry for *kapāla*. But the word *kapāla* is later; it does not occur in the *Rigveda*. Gonda refers only briefly, at the very beginning of his study, to Rigvedic *puroḷāś*: “Mention of the *purodāś* is made in several hymns of the *Rgveda*, but no information is given on its preparation, pieces of pottery and other particulars” (1987:1). All the detail, specifying the distinct role that the cake comes to play in the ritual, derives entirely from later texts. This ritual detail, when fed back into the *Rigveda*, often fits uncomfortably.

III, 41, 3.

imā bráhma brahmavāhaḥ  
kriyānta ā barhīḥ sīda  
vīhī śūra puroḷāśam

“Hier werden (dir) Erbauungen bereitet, der du die Erbauungen zu deinem Gefährt machst. Setz dich auf das Barhis, habe Lust zu dem Reiskuchen, o Held!” (Geldner)

These devotions, O Brahmavāhas  
Are made ready. Be seated on the *barhīs*  
O Hero, seek out the *puroḷāś*

The shift from the abstract ‘devotions’ (Mayrhofer suggests the sophisticated ‘Formulierung (der Wahrheit)’ for *bráhman*) to the traditional ‘cake’ can only be described as bathos. We might here interpret the word *puroḷāś* as abstract, something like Macdonell’s ‘fore-homage’, and as referring to the *bráhma* of the first line.

The invitation of the last line, *vīhī śūra puroḷāśam*, echoes *ágne vīhī puroḷāśam* in III, 28, 3 above. The verb is from  $\sqrt{vī}$ , which was the root that led to Renou’s vexed comment quoted at the beginning of this paper. The occurrences of the verb, he says (1958:40), are “flottants, indécis, et permettant dif-

ficilement de résorber la disparité de traductions possibles”. He charts its ‘floating, indecisive occurrences’, moving from the translation “agrée” ‘accept’, to “goûter” ‘taste’ for these two passages only. But this is unnecessary if we take the word *purolāś* in its original sense.

Scholarship today interprets  $\sqrt{vī}$  differently, Mayrhofer suggesting a range of meanings: “nachspüren, nachspürend suchen, auf etwas losgehen, nach etwas trachten, verfolgen, hinter etwas her sein, etwas heimsuchen”. In the context of a general word for homage or offering the sense is complex; but if *purolāś* is taken to mean ‘cake’ the picture conjured up is slightly absurd, an example of the ‘banal’ *Rigveda* that Stephanie Jamison writes about.

IV, 24, 5.

ād id dha néma indriyām yajanta

ād it paktīḥ purolāśam riricyāt (ab)

Geldner translates, “Dann opfern die andern dem indrischen (Namen), dann soll die Kochspeise den Reiskuchen überbieten”. He notes to his translation of the second line, ‘then cooked food should surpass [literally ‘may leave’] the rice cake’, “Die *paktī* ist offenbar das Bessere”, ‘cooked food is often better’; that is, presumably, better than an uncooked rice cake. But we have already seen two passages where the *purolāś* was described as ‘cooked’, in the second verses of III, 28 and III, 52. If we understand the word to mean ‘cake’, the text contradicts itself. A more general ‘first gift’ or ‘fore-offering’ can of course either be cooked or not. It depends what it is.

VI, 23, 7.

sá no bodhi purolāśam rārāṇaḥ (a)

As-such us ?(see below) *purolāś* [A.] giving

The verb, *bodhi*, is ambiguous; its form could be the imperative of  $\sqrt{bhū}$  ‘be’ or  $\sqrt{budh}$  ‘mark, observe’. Geldner provides both senses: “Achte auf unseren Reiskuchen (und sei) freigebig.” The first fits his understanding of the meaning of *purolāś*; the second the structure of the line. Griffith had opted for the former, changing the meaning of *rārāṇas* ‘giving’ to fit: “Mark well our sacrificial cake, delighted.”

Both Grassmann and Lubotsky, however, looking principally at the grammar, assign *bodhi* to  $\sqrt{bhū}$ . A literal translation then would be, “So be to us (Indra) giving the *purolāś*”. But for all translators, for whom the *purolāś* is a

sacrificial cake specifically offered to a god, not something received from one, this interpretation is impossible. Elizarenkova translates the line, like Geldner, “Zamet’ nashu zhertvennuyu lepushku (i) bud’ shchedrym!” ‘Observe our sacrificial cake (and) be generous!’ Grassmann had contrived to make the text fit the assumption by ascribing to the verbal form *rārāṇas* a sense unique to this passage: “jemandem [D.] etwas [A.] überlassen”, ‘leave someone something’. This, another familiar recourse for translators, again plunges the text into absurdity: “let us have some cake too!”

So be to us giving the first gift

(This is not the only occasion when the ‘first gift’ is sought from Indra: see VIII, 78, 1 below.)

VII, 18, 6.

puroḷā́ it turváśo yáksur āsīd  
rāyé mātśyāśo nīśitā āpīva (ab)

“Turvaśa, Yakṣu war das Voropfer. Die Matsya’s, die auf Reichtum versessen waren wie im Wasser die Fische (auf den Köder).” (Geldner)

“Eager for spoil was Turvaśa Puroḍās, fain to win wealth, like fishes urged by hunger.” (Griffith)

The meaning of the verse is obscure. Geldner’s version of the second line is doubtful: he translates *mātśyāśas* twice, both as a proper name and as ‘fishes’, and ‘in water’ for *āpi* is highly questionable. The context is understood to be the description of a battle. Griffith takes *puroḷāś* here to be a proper name, which is conceded as a possibility by Mayrhofer. But Griffith hesitates to call a warrior ‘rice cake’: “Turvaśa appears here as one of the enemies of Sudās. I follow, with much hesitation, Ludwig in taking Puroḍās as an appellative of Turvaśa.”

Once again, nothing can shake Geldner’s conviction — even though he translates the word here for the second time “Voropfer” — that *puroḷāś* means ‘cake’. His note explains instead that a bizarre metaphor is again being employed; a battle is being described using the language of ritual.

“Die Schlacht wird hier . . . mit dem Opfer verglichen . . . *puroḷāḥ* der Reisfladen (wörtlich das Voropfer) wurde vor der eigentlichen Somalibation geopfert.”

‘The battle is compared here . . . with the ritual . . . *puroḷāḥ* the rice cake (literally the fore-offering) was offered before the actual soma libation.’

Geldner observes that the formation of the word is ‘fore-offering’, “(wörtlich das Voropfer)”. But that is not to say that he stops believing that the word means ‘rice cake’. The detail that he gives, that “the rice cake was offered before the soma” seems irrelevant here. But he has deduced the fact from the formation of the word. And in his mind it explains the image: the cake is offered before the *sóma*, and the military Turvaśa is imagined as some kind of ‘offered-before-*sóma* cake’<sup>4</sup>. The logic may seem upside-down. But the translation ‘rice cake’ is hallowed by centuries of later use. To a Vedic scholar at home in the later literature, the word can have no other meaning.<sup>5</sup>

VIII, 2 11.

tām āśīram puroḷāśam  
indremām sómam śrīṇīhi  
revāntam hí tvā śrṇómi

“Misch diese, die Milch, den Reiskuchen und diesen Soma, o Indra, denn ich höre, du seiest reich!” (Geldner has again supplied the conjunction.)

The context here presents difficulties. Until a recent article by Johanna Narten (1987:270–296) the verb *śrīṇīhi*, from  $\sqrt{\text{śrī}}$ , which regularly occurs in collocation with the words *sóma* and *āśīr*, traditionally ‘(milk) admixture (for the soma juice)’, was understood to mean, as Geldner translates it, ‘mix’. The rice cake however does not usually belong to the blend, although the thorough ‘mixing’ is borne out by the word order, “Milch . . . Reiskuchen . . . Soma”. Geldner suggests two, alternative, explanations in the traditional manner; the first that the text is elliptical, the second that it is simple-minded. He notes,

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<sup>4</sup> Elizarenkova also translates *puroḷāś* here literally, and her footnote follows similar lines: “*Denotatom iavliaetsia lepeška, kotoruyu zhertvovali pered vozlianiem somy. Bitva zdes’ opisyyaetsia kak prinesenie vragov v zhertvu.*”

<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that rice itself is apparently absent from the text. Monier-Williams’s definition of *vrīhi* exemplifies the way in which later usage is imported into that of the *Rigveda*: “rice, pl. grains of rice (not mentioned in RV., but in AV . . .) RV. & &.”

“*śrīṇīhi* ist z.T. Zeugma: Mische Milch und Soma und genieße den Kuchen dazu. Oder der Sinn ist: Mische die drei genannten in deinem Bauch zusammen. Oldenberg will *a* elliptisch fassen.”

(Oldenberg had understood *tān* ‘these’ differently: “*tān* scheint mir ungezwungen nur auf die v. 10 besprochenen Somas beziehbar”.)

For linguistic reasons Narten reinterprets the verb as “vollkommen machen” ‘make perfect’. This helps to make more sense of X, 61, 3, where  $\sqrt{\text{śrī}}$  refers to an abstract noun, *ādis* ‘intention’. But it does not explain what the cake is doing in this passage, in the middle of this traditional ‘perfecting’ of *sóma* with milk. Mayrhofer follows Narten’s reinterpretation of the verb. However, Lubotsky firmly reinstates ‘mix’ as the meaning of  $\sqrt{\text{śrī}}$  in his concordance ten years later (1997:1418), and this is the translation that both Elizarenkova (this passage, again following Geldner’s explanation in her footnote) and Jamison (see, for example, 1996:130) continue to give.

Narten’s reinterpretation does not help to explain the last line here either, which is in a causal relation to the rest of the verse. She translates, “Mach diese, die Milchzumischung, den Reiskuchen, o Indra, und diesen Soma vollkommen, denn ich höre, daß du reich bist”, and notes, “Hier handelt es sich vielleicht um den Gedanken, daß die Opfergaben vollkommen sind, wenn Indra seinerseits Reichtum schenkt” (1987:280). As “vielleicht” acknowledges, the interpretation is strained. The difficulty here lies outside the interpretation of *puroḷāś*.

The word *āśīr* is found elsewhere in contexts that suggest that it too may have a more abstract sense.

éto nu índraṃ stāvāma  
Come now, Indra [A.] let-us-praise

śuddhām śuddhéna sāmanā  
The pure [A.], with-pure-song

śuddhaír ukthaír vāvṛdhvāṃsam  
With-pure-hymns (him)-magnified

śuddhá āśīr-vān mamattu  
The-pure [N.], having- *āśīr* [N.], may-delight (VIII, 95, 7)

VIII, 31, 2.  
*puroḷāśam yó asmai*

sómam rárata āśíram  
pād ít tám śakró áṃhasah

“Wer ihm Reiskuchen, Soma (und) Mischmilch spendet, den wird der Mächtige vor Not schützen.” (Geldner)

Who offers him the first gift,  
sómam āśíram,  
Him will the mighty one protect from trouble.

The last occurrence of *puroḷāś* in the *Rigveda* is at VIII, 78, 1. I give the translations first; the text, with an interlinear gloss, follows.

“Bring us a thousand, Indra, as our guerdon for the Soma juice:  
Hundreds of kine, O Hero, bring.” (Griffith)

“(Koste) unseren Reiskuchen zum Somatrank; Indra, bring Tausend und Hunderte von Kühen mit, o Held!” (Geldner)

“(Priniav) nashu zhertvennuyu lepushku k soku (somy),  
O Indra, prinesi tysiachu  
I sotni korov, o geroi!” (Elizarenkova)

In the course of this study we have seen two passages where Geldner has explained the presence of the word *puroḷāś* as an example of far-fetched imagery: a goat in verse I, 162, 3, and a warrior in VII, 18, 6, are each pictured as ‘rice cakes’. In addition, translators have made a number of alterations to the text to make the assumed meaning ‘rice cake’ fit. The conjunction “and” is regularly supplied. Elizarenkova fleshes out her translation of III, 28, 3 and 6 with a number of words for which there is no textual authority. A subject has to be re-introduced to the third line of III, 52, 8. At VII, 23, 7, Geldner and Elizarenkova give a verb two different meanings at once, and Grassmann gives another verb a meaning that it carries nowhere else. All these can be readily explained in the traditional manner by saying that the *Rigveda* is careless, obscure, banal and discordant. But all become unnecessary with the reinstatement of the original meaning of *puroḷāś*, and glimmerings of sense begin to creep back into the text.

However, in the first verse of VIII, 78 no assumption about the inadequacies of the source text can justify the distortion. Griffith resorts to poetic licence,



“... as our guerdon for the Soma juice” (the translation of *ándhasas*, which is either genitive or ablative but not dative, is loose). Geldner and Elizarenkova supply verbs, “Koste” ‘taste’, and “Priniav” ‘accept’, that are entirely unnecessary. The verb *ā bhara* ‘bring’ is repeated in each of the first three verses of this poem, which itemize the gifts sought from Indra. The verb alternates between the second *pāda*, in the first and third verses, and the first *pāda* in the second. There is no justification for supplying another verb to the first line. The meaning of some of the words here is uncertain, but *puroḷāś* heads the list.

- (1) puroḷāśam no ándhasa  
The first-gift to-us, of-*ándhas*

índra sahasram ā bhara  
O-Indra, a thousand bring

śatā ca śūra gónām  
And hundreds, O-hero, of-cattle

- (2) ā no bhara viāñjanam  
Bring-us *viāñjana*

gām áśvam abhiāñjanam  
Cattle, horse, *abhiāñjana*

sacā manā hiranyáyā  
Together-with *manā* of-gold

- (3) utá nah karṇasóbhanā  
And to-us ear-ornaments

purūṇi dhr̥ṣṇav ā bhara  
Many, O-Dhr̥ṣṇu, bring

tuvām hí śṛṇviṣé vaso  
For you are-renowned, O-Vasu.

### 3. Conclusion

Vedic scholars have always approached the *Rigveda* through the later texts

and commentaries, which are viewed as a resource without which we would have little chance of understanding it at all. After detailing the difficulties of Rigvedic interpretation Stephanie Jamison (2000:7) breathes a sigh of relief:

“However, we are in luck, in that Rigvedic ritual is clearly closely related to the ritual system found in the classical *śrauta* ritual ... the challenge is to figure out exactly how similar the two systems were ... With due caution, we can read the results back into the Rigvedic material.”

The debate, then, revolves around non-linguistic matters, concerning the mysteries of ritual practice. Why, for example, is the ‘rice cake’ offered throughout III, 28 at ceremonies traditionally understood to be *sóma* offertories, although the word *sóma* does not occur? To avoid drawing attention to this, Geldner changes his usual translations of the word *prātaḥsāvā* and the collocations *mādhyaṃdina sāvana* and *trītya sāvana* in this poem, to remove any reference to pressing or drinking<sup>6</sup>. The question nonetheless remains in his mind. What is the cake doing here? He concludes, as we have seen, that it was an offering made before the *sóma*. Gonda (1987:2), while agreeing that “the cake seems to have been particularly used in the *soma* ritual” disputes this: “[there is] no conclusive evidence of a practice of offering a (or the) cake before the soma juice.” (1987:2 note 6). Fuel could be added to the debate, or water poured onto it, by observing that the word *puroḥāś* does not occur in Book IX, the volume containing all but eight of the 122 poems traditionally understood to be addressed to *sóma*.<sup>7</sup>

Such debate obfuscates the real problem, and keeps scholars for whom such

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<sup>6</sup> In the first verse of III, 28 Geldner translates the locative *prātaḥsāvé* “bei der Morgenspende”, as he does again in III, 52 in the context of the *puroḥāś*, but at the only other occurrence of *prātaḥsāvā*, at X, 112,1, he translates the word more traditionally as “die Morgenpressung”. Similarly, the collocations *mādhyaṃdina sāvana* and *trītya sāvana* he translates “die Mittagsspende”, and “die dritten Spende” in this context, although elsewhere the second word in the collocation is always either “Trankspende”, “Trankopfer”, or “Somaspende”; see, for the first, III, 32, 1 and 3, IV, 35, 7, V, 40, 4, VI, 47, 6, VIII, 37, 1, and X, 179, 3, and, for the second, I, 161, 8, IV, 33, 11, IV, 34, 4, IV, 35, 9, and VIII, 57, 1 (and III, 52, 6, but the word *sóma* appears in verse 7 of this poem).

<sup>7</sup> Nor, indeed, does the word *prātaḥsāvā*, or the collocations *mādhyaṃdina sāvana* and *trītya sāvana*.

arcane questions have few charms from paying the text the close attention that it urgently needs. Vedicists continue to try to read back into the *Rigveda* what the later Vedic texts, composed at a time when the meaning of the *Rigveda* was already lost, thought it might mean. But it doesn't work. During the brief history of western Rigvedic scholarship two schools of thought have arisen in the attempt to make sense of it, reflected in the quotations given at the beginning of this paper. You can either simplify the lexicon and complicate the thought (Bergaigne, Thieme, Jamison) or simplify the thought and complicate the lexicon (Sāyaṇa, Grassmann, Doniger). In other words, scholars either produce translations that could just about fit all contexts but fit none of them particularly well; or they supply a range of meanings from which one can be selected for any given passage, but which will nonetheless probably not quite manage to accommodate every occurrence. The fundamental problem, however, is that much of the vocabulary is mistranslated, and these mistranslations are so bolstered by the later tradition that they cannot be questioned by scholars brought up in that tradition. Comparative linguists are led to believe that interpretations so vigorously defended must be correct,<sup>8</sup> and in trying to work out the exact sense of important roots like  $\sqrt{śī}$  and  $\sqrt{vī}$ , mentioned in the course of this paper, they have an impossible task.

Linguists would no doubt approach the text with a different set of assumptions. They would, for example, probably start with the premise that the word discussed in this paper means, as I have argued it does, something like 'fore-offering'. The formation of the word *puroḷāś* (*puro-dāś*) is a familiar one in the *Rigveda*, and Debrunner & Wackernagel list a number of parallel forms.

"Weiterhin finden sich Verbindungen mit allen möglichen Indeklinabeln, sowol solchen ausgesprochen präverbialen Charakters, als auch andern z.B. v. *purah-sād*- 'vorgelagert' *puro-yā-van*- 'vorangehend' *puro-yodhā*- 'Vorkämpfer' *purah-sthā-trī*- 'Vorsteher' *puró-hita*- 'vorgesetzt' ..." (1905:197).

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<sup>8</sup> As, for example, in Salvatore Scarlata's discussion of the word *puroḷāś* in his recent important study of *Wurzelkomposita*: "*puroḷāś*- m. 'Opferkuchen' ... allem Anschein nach Npat. 'zuvor dargebracht.' Das Kompositum war zunächst adjektivisch und wurde in der Folge elliptisch verwendet und schliesslich substantiviert. Möglicherweise war es zunächst Beiwort zu *apūpā*- m. 'flacher Fladen'" (1999:220–221).

But as we know, the only way of determining the meaning of a word in a text is to look at its use.

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