

Sacred mysteries

Why the *Rigveda* has resisted decipherment

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The place in literary history of the earliest Indo-European poems remains unrecognized. Composed long before Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, they form an anthology of over 1,000 songs of considerable merit and sophistication, celebrating the power and beauty of the natural world. Traditionally known as the *Rigveda*, these poems, in an archaic and unfamiliar language, were handed down in prehistoric India as a sacred mystery, and ancient assumptions about their subject matter played a vital role in the development of Indian religious thought. Translators, however, still have difficulty making sense of many of them. As with other supposedly religious texts, any challenge to fundamental beliefs is invidious. But I suggest that these important poems continue to appear not to make sense because a significant part of their vocabulary has always been mistranslated.

How and where they were composed is unknown. Believed to be of divine origin, this body of material was passed down by a priestly elite, its incomprehensibility, but highly metrical form and poetic style, making it ideally suited to ritual recitation. Many centuries later it was adopted by the new religion, Hinduism, as its most ancient sacred text.

The language of the *Rigveda* is the earliest surviving form of the Indian branch of the Indo-European family of languages. It is commonly known as Sanskrit, but the language described by the word "Sanskrit" came several hundred years later, and there are considerable differences. Classical Sanskrit is characterized by stylistic peculiarities that make it very different from the ancient languages of Europe, and from the vernacular of these poems. It was a scholarly language, written according to rules laid down by a grammarian, Pāṇini, who flourished some 400 years BC. Like medieval Latin, it was a lingua franca, and had to be studied and mastered. The name Sanskrit, which dates from Pāṇini's time, means "perfected, cultivated", as opposed to Prakrit, "natural, vernacular". Because its form had been prescribed at an early date, Sanskrit was unable to change and develop in the way that natural languages constantly do. Writers resorted to a range of contriv-

ances in an attempt to avoid the exigencies of a grammar that was no longer natural to them. The simple adjectival past participle came to be preferred as a way of representing past tense: not "I led the horse" but "the horse is having-been-led by me". Massive compounds, words strung together in stem form to avoid the necessity for inflection, became the mark of a highly developed literary style. The description of an eminent king at the beginning of the *Pañcatantra*, a collection of fables generally dated to around 300 AD, "his feet were reddened with the mass of rays from the jewels in the crowns of foremost kings", is a single adjective; the king is literally "foremost-king-crown-jewel-ray-mass-reddened-foot-paired". The very length of the compound is honorific. The analysis of such compounds calls for algebraic, rather than linguistic skill. "Classical" Sanskrit, in other words, is a somewhat misleading name. The language of what is regarded as the great period of Sanskrit literature lacks much of the grammatical sophistication that we associate with an ancient classical language.

The language of the *Rigveda*, as the earliest poetry is traditionally known, is very different. It was a rich and varied vernacular, with a wealth of nominal and verbal forms. Like ancient Greek, it had a musical accent, which no longer exists in Classical Sanskrit. Its compounds are of the familiar Homeric kind: "weapon-armed", "lovely-handed". Some of the words in its vocabulary survive into Classical Sanskrit, but a large number are unfamiliar to scholars of the later language. It is as different from Classical Sanskrit as the language of *Beowulf* is from modern English.

The endeavour to "wrench" sense from the text, as Professor Stephanie Jamison recently put it, is itself ancient. The earliest surviving attempt was composed around 500 BC. Its author, Yāska, quotes extensively from the poems, so that we know that they have remained unchanged for well over 2,000 years. He cites an assertion, made by a sceptic named Kautsa, that "the poems of the *Rigveda* have no meaning", which he tries to refute in his study.

Kautsa's opinion demonstrates that knowledge of later Sanskrit is of little help when it comes to understanding the Rigvedic lexicon and its forms, and modern Sanskrit scholars labour under the same difficulties as Kautsa did. Perhaps it is not surprising that pundits continue to echo the beliefs of antiquity about the indecipherability of the *Rigveda*, and to enjoin those who are inclined to its study to develop a taste for obscurity. But a taste for obscurity stands in the way of philological inquiry, and the *Rigveda* is, I suggest, far from indecipherable.

If this ancient text, in a complex early Indo-European vernacular, had been dug up from, say, the Caspian Sea ten years ago, its discovery would have generated considerable excitement. It would have provided an opportunity for ground-breaking research. Scholars would have pored over it, comparing passages, working out straightforward ones first and then applying what they learnt to the more difficult ones, little by little pinning down meanings – in other words, trying to decipher it in the way that texts in unfamiliar languages have always been studied. And by now we would have a fairly good idea of what it meant. But the *Rigveda* has been preserved for us, not by geographical accident, but by tradition.

There is a vast accretion of ancient scholarly material devoted to the *Rigveda*. This was an essential component of the Indian oral tradition. As H. T. Colebrooke had reported to Western readers at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, "it is a received and well-grounded opinion of the learned in *India*, that no book is altogether safe from changes and interpolations until it have been commented". That commentary then itself had a commentary, and the commentary upon a commentary was for the same reason commented on – studies piled back on back, ever further from the original, like Swift's fleas –

So, naturalists observe, a flea
Hath smaller fleas that on him prey,
And these have smaller yet to bite 'em,
And so proceed *ad infinitum*.

Not only was the text of the *Rigveda* preserved in this way, but assumptions made at a very early date about its subject matter and meaning were also rendered unassailable. Sanskrit scholars today are interested in the history of Indian culture and thought, often describing themselves as Indologists. As the opening sentence of the prospectus to Sanskrit Studies at the University of Oxford makes clear, "Sanskrit is the key to Indian civilisation, and it is in this spirit that it is taught at Oxford". When Indologists come to the consideration of this ancient and venerated text, whose influence on Indian religious thought has been so profound, they inevitably focus on that influence. The text is viewed, as it were, through a telescope backwards. Their translations struggle to make interpretations found in a mass of derivative scripture, known loosely as "the Veda", fit. But it is an impossible task. They don't fit.

Three beliefs are firmly held. The first is that the *Rigveda* is intentionally obscure, "designed to puzzle". The second, which grew out of the first, explains this obfuscation as the secret

encoding of ancient ritual procedure. The third is that the poems are fundamentally indecipherable, and that no satisfactory translation will ever be possible. I believe that all three of these are wrong. But the first two, in discouraging linguistic and critical attention from being paid to the text, help to uphold the third. The faithful transmission of this material, remarkable in the history of ancient literatures, has proved a double-edged sword.

To decipher a text is to discover its meaning. It is only when our translations make sense that we can be confident that we are making progress in decipherment. If our attempts to understand a passage were to lead us, for instance, to the Chomskian "colourless green ideas sleep furiously", we could not be sure that our understanding of any of the words in the sentence was correct. We might reasonably suspect at least four of them of being wrong.

Decipherment refines meaning by the comparison of contexts. Hapax legomena are often doubtful because they appear only once in a text. The more frequently a word occurs, the more likely it is that we will understand it correctly. If, for example, we have a sentence containing an unfamiliar verb, "Mothers [*verb*] their offspring" a number of possible translations suggest themselves: "adore", "protect" or possibly "indulge". But if the verb occurs again in another context, "We [*same verb*] the gods with our thoughts" we might feel that "protect" is less likely, and incline to prefer "adore". Another context could suggest a new translation for the word, one that had not previously occurred to us. As Stephen Ullmann stressed in *Semantics: An introduction to the science of meaning* (1962), "The meaning of a word can be ascertained *only* by studying its use. There is no short cut to meaning, through introspection or 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". This was not new; Wittgenstein had said the same in the *Philosophical Investigations*. "How a word functions cannot be guessed at. We must observe its usage and learn from that." But if we begin with the assumption that our text is deliberately puzzling, and characterized by bizarre collocations, decipherment is hamstrung from the start.

These ancient poems, averaging ten verses in length, were composed in a variety of metres whose rhythm is generally iambic in type. I have given the short poem to the wind in parallel text (see right) to show a typical metrical form. The relationship that the poets describe with their surroundings is a sophisticated one. Their poems serve as talismans, ensuring that the natural world will continue to provide welfare and shelter for man. The belief in the power of poetry pervades the *Rigveda*.

They indeed were comrades of the gods,
Possessed of truth, the poets of old;
The fathers found the hidden light
And with effective prayer brought forth the
dawn. (VII, 76, 4)

The forces of nature are vividly depicted, and frequently deified. The supreme god is Varuna, whose mysterious laws govern the universe.
That far off constellation set on high
That shows itself at night, where does it go by
day?

Inviolable are the holy laws of Varuna,
The shining moon goes radiant by night.
(I, 24, 10)

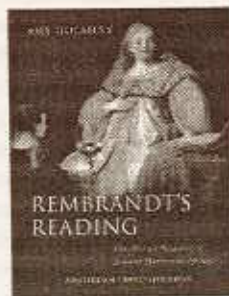


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COMMENTARY

The meaning of much of the *Rigveda* lies entangled in inherited mistranslations. But the following example of a word occurring in a context that is otherwise largely clear serves to illustrate how these poems have come to be understood as bizarre and unintelligible. Towards the end of III, 33, a poem that takes the form of a dialogue between the poet and the waters of two confluent rivers, the poet addresses the streams.

Swell forth, refreshing, bringing good gifts,
Fill full the fertile places, travel swiftly.

The word I have translated "fertile places" was assumed at an early date to refer to a part of the body. Its occurrence in the *Rigveda* is therefore rendered variously by translators as "belly", "womb", "breasts" or "udders". Although scholars have not been able to agree about which body part is intended, the interpretation, bolstered by the usage of a later text, is never questioned. The word occurs twelve times in the *Rigveda*, and its form is always plural. The belief that *vaksāṇā* describes a body part causes problems in nearly every occurrence of the word, but scholarship has not been able to cast it off. The eminent Viennese linguist Manfred Mayrhofer suggests "belly" in his recently published dictionary (reviewed in the *TLS*, February 16, 2001), with the comment "Not adequately explained". Linguists often have to work on the assumption that such perplexing but uncontested interpretations must be correct.

The current standard translation of the *Rigveda*, made by a German scholar in the 1920s, translates the word "udders" in this poem, with a footnote explaining that the streams are pictured in cows. But others understand it differently. A French version published in the 1960s offers "entrails": "emplissez (vos entrailles)". More recently, Peter Kwella, the author of a monograph devoted to III, 33, translates "womb" here, and argues that the invitation to the rivers to "fill up (their) womb" demonstrates that this apparently straightforward lyrical poem in fact has a solely ritual application, which operates through the medium of sexual imagery. The first two translators, at a blow, render the poem absurd; and the argument of the third guarantees that those for whom ritualism – and inapt sexual imagery – have little charm will turn their attention away from the text. Such translations, and such explanations, have always preserved the *Rigveda* from scholarly attention.

There is an underlying belief, which I do not share, that our remote predecessors were rude fellows, insensitive to infelicity in their compositions. A parallel with early Old English scholarship, before the application of "the new philology" in the 1830s, is hard to resist. John Mitchell Kemble, writing to his friend W. B. Donne in 1838, is characteristically forthright about similar infelicities in the translations of earlier Old English scholars.

Wilkins gives me an example: he represents it as a Saxon law that "no man shall kill another man except in the presence of two or three witnesses; and then he shall keep his skin for four days". Wilkins read *hwyðer*, and thought it meant other or another, which it does not: I had not yet told all these gentry that *hryðer* meant an "ox", familiar in its present new high-dutch form *Rind*; old high-dutch *Hrintar* &c. But still one marvels the utter absurdity of the thing had not struck him at once.

I have come to the *Rigveda*, not with an interest in primitive myth and ritual, as others have



"Alphabets of Nature", 1988, by Prabhakar Barwe; from *Indian Contemporary Painting* by Neville Tuli (Abrams. 0 8109 3472 8)

done, but out of curiosity about the poetic outpourings of our ancestors. I respect poetry, and am naturally disposed to find it meaningful. I find it hard to accept that highly structured verse can move from sophistication of conception in one passage to fatuity in the next. When I encounter the lines

Moving in formation like geese, clothed in light,

The [plural noun] have come to us, and am assured that the subject is "sacrificial posts" – my instincts revolt, and cry out that something is wrong. And often, quite clearly, something is wrong.

The beauties of these early poems remain hidden from view, like the Maltese Falcon beneath layers of black enamel. But the fact that this remarkable body of material is not yet deciphered has significant repercussions for other disciplines. In 1997, an article by Michael Witzel, Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard University, drew on evidence from the text of the *Rigveda* to provide a date for the arrival of the Indo-Aryans into northern India. Referring to recent findings in archaeology which suggest a date for the collapse of the Indus civilization, he concludes, "as the *RV* does not speak of cities but only of ruins (*armaka*), even larger ones, ([*mahā*-]*vailasthāna*), we may suppose that the Indo-Aryans immigrated, or rather, gradually trickled in, tribe by tribe and clan by clan, after

1900 BC". This is shortly to be repeated in a forthcoming volume, *Studies on Hinduism*, in an article written jointly with another American Indologist. The argument, which is available on Harvard's website, should be of great interest to historians and archaeologists. But the words cited as providing evidence for this date occur in one passage only, and the translations "ruins", or "large ruins" are simply a matter of opinion. Professor Mayrhofer's dictionary understands them entirely differently: he suggests "Brunnen", "spring", for *armakā*, with a possible parallel in Tocharian B, and describes *vailasthānā*, which is a hapax legomenon (**mahā-vailasthāna* does not in fact occur) as "without a certain interpretation". One day the *Rigveda* will be able to provide important information for scholars in other disciplines, but not until there is a better consensus about its meaning.

Modern scholarship has reason to be grateful to "the learned in India", whose attentions have preserved the text of these poems so faithfully. But ancient scholars did not have the resources now available to us, the concordances, the ability to make comparisons with other Indo-European languages. It is time for their guesses about what they contain to be set aside. A fresh approach to the decipherment of this ancient material is urgently needed, and the opportunity for exciting new research remains open.

To the breath of the Gods

(X, 186)

vāta ā vātu bheṣajām
śambhū mayobhū no hrdé
prā ṇa āyūṃṣi tāriṣat

utā vātā pitāsi na
utā bhrātōtā nah sākḥā
sā no jivātave kṛdhi

yād adō vāta te grḥé
amṛtasya nidhír hitāḥ
tāto no dehi jivāse

May the wind blow healing hither,
Kind, refreshing to us in the heart,
May it extend our lives.

Wind, you are to us a father
And a brother and our friend,
So equip us for life.

And if, Wind, there in your house
A store of immortality is laid,
Give some to us, that we may live.

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