



2018

A READER IN COMPARATIVE INDO-EUROPEAN
RELIGION

Ranko Matasović

Zagreb

2018

2. BASIC RELIGIOUS TERMINOLOGY OF PIE

GOD

Since we have been living in a monotheist society for centuries, the very meaning of ‘god’ in our modern languages has evolved: ‘god’ is the all-powerful being who is in charge of, ultimately, everything (or so many of us like to think). In societies unaffected by monotheist way of thinking, this definition will obviously not do. For our purposes, we can consider as gods all beings capable of entering into a religious bond with humans, so that they can be addressed in prayers and expected to assist humans, provided that appropriate rites are performed. It follows that it is not necessary to have a cover term for such a being, and indeed, there is little reason to believe that there was an all-inclusive term for ‘god’ in PIE. What we have is rather a list of terms covering various aspects of divine beings:

PIE *deywo- ‘caelestial god’: Lat. *dīvus*, Skr. *devás*, Lith. *diēvas*, OE *Tīw*, OIr. *dia*; this word denotes the deity as a celestial being, in opposition to the earth-bound humans, the name of which is derived from ‘earth’ in PIE (cf. Lat. *homo* ‘man’ < *d^hg^hom-on- vs. *humus* ‘earth’ < *d^hg^hom-o-, OIr. *duine* < *d^hg^hom-yo-). Its meaning probably does not include chthonic deities (Lat. *di inferi*), or deities belonging to the social sphere rather than to the cosmic sphere of existence.

PIE *d^heh₁s / *d^hh₁sos ‘divinely inspired being’: Gr. *theós* ‘god’, Arm. *di-k'* ‘gods’, Lat. *fānum* ‘consecrated place’ < *fasnom < *d^hh₁s-no-, *feriae* ‘religious festival’ < *d^heh₁s-, Skr. *dhiṣā* ‘with impetuosity’; this word did not necessarily refer to gods, but rather to any divinely inspired being, or (according to some etymologists), a religious rite or oblation. In Greek, *theós* took on the general meaning of ‘god’, while another word, *daimōn*, took the original semantic sphere of *d^heh₁s- (‘a divine power that may seize an individual’). In origin, *daimōn* is a derivative of *daiomai* ‘divide, share’ (< PIE *deh₂i-, Ved. *dáyate* cf. the similar semantic development of Slavic *bogъ* below). In principle, it would be possible to interpret *d^heh₁s- as an s-stem built to the root *d^heh₁- ‘to do, put, make’ (Lat. *facio*, OCS *děti*, etc.) in the sense ‘that which is established (by religious observance)’, but the semantic connection is weak.

*h₂nsu- > Hitt. *haššu-* ‘king’, OIc. *áss* ‘a kind of god’, Skr. *ásura-* ‘a kind of god’, Av. *ahu-* ‘lord’; I believe this word originally referred to divine beings in their social aspect. In the Rig-Veda, the Asuras (Bhaga, Mitra, Varuna, Aryaman) are notably the deities belonging to the social sphere of existence (in contradistinction to the ‘cosmic’ *devas*). In the later layers of the Vedas, they become demons, opposed to celestial gods, the *devas*. It is possible that the meaning ‘god’ developed independently in Germanic and Indo-Aryan, and that the original meaning is preserved in Avestan (‘lord’). Some linguists derive these words from the root *h₂ens- ‘to beget’ (Hitt. *hāši* ‘begets’, LIV 239), but this is quite uncertain.

*b^hh₂eg- (or *b^hag-) > Skr. *bhágā-* (one of the Asuras), Av. *baya-* ‘god’, OCS *bogъ*. Some linguists think that the Slavic word is an Iranian loanword, but I find that it is more probably inherited. The old derivative OCS *ubogъ* ‘poor’ testifies that the original meaning in Slavic was ‘share, lot’, as in Indo-Aryan. A further cognate might lie in Gr. *phágos* ‘a glutton’, but this is difficult for semantic reasons.

For the Germanic word for ‘god’ see below.

Gods are often represented as ‘bestowers of wealth’: Gr. Hom. *dotéres eáōn*, e.g. Od. 8.335, Ved. *dātā vásunām* RV 8. 51. 5 (cf. OCS *daždъbogъ*, Russ. *dažbog*). The PIE expression would have been *deh₃tores h₁weswom.

In many traditions, we hear about ‘many-named’ gods, PIE *polh₁-h₃nomin-o- > Skr. *puruṇāman-*, Gr. *polyónymos* (RV 8. 93. 17, AV 6. 99. 1, of Indra; *Hymn. Dem.* 18 and 32, of Hades; *Hymn. Ap.* 82, of Apollo). Gods have many names, but the correct name must be used in prayer, otherwise the prayer is void. The god’s names may be secret (*devānām gúhyā námāni*, RV 5. 5. 10) and Rome, according to legends, had a secret name known only to the initiated. A similar conception of many names of god is found in Islam.

The gods have their own language, different from the language of men, a conception found in the Sanskrit *Taittiriya-Samhitā* 5.25.5.2, in Homer (Il. 1.403f., Od. 10.305), etc., and the Norse *Alvíssmál* (9-34). A Roman prayer invokes Jupiter Optimus Maximus *sive quo alio nomine te appellari volueris* ‘or by whatever other name you wish to be addressed’ (Servius, *Aen.* II, 351). The gods are often called ‘the greatest’, or the highest’, cf. e.g. *Zeū kýdiste, mégiste* ‘Zeus, most glorious and greatest’ (Il. 2.412), ‘Indra, the highest one’ (*uttamá-*, RV 10.159.4), and Jupiter’s standing epithets *optimus maximus* ‘the best and the greatest’.

The gods are represented as a breed, or a race (PIE *g’enh₁os > Gr. *genus*, Skr. *jánas*), and the breed of gods (*deywōm g’enh₁os) is often contrasted to the breed of humans, or mortals (*mrtwōm g’enh₁os), e.g. RV 1.70 6b: *devānām jánma mártāmś ca* “the breed of gods and of mortals”, Pindar, Nem. 6.1 *hén andrōn, hén theōn génos* “One is the race of men, another of gods”, cf. also Virgil’s opposition between *hominum genus* and *di immortales* in *Aeneid* 1.542.

Finally, in contrast to us mortals, the gods are, of course, ‘immortal’, PIE *n-mrtōs deywōs > Skr. *devā amṛtās* RV 3. 4. 11, 5. 69. 4; Gr. *athánatoi* (Il. 1.520). In this case it is probable that Gr. *athánatoi* replaced the original epithet *ámbrotoi, which was etymologically cognate with Skr. *amṛtās*.

The proper seat of the gods is exactly that, PIE *sedos, derived from *sed- ‘to sit’ (Lat. *sedeo*, OCS *sěsti*, Eng. *sit*, etc.): in Homer’s Iliad (5.360, 367) the Olympus is called *athanátōn hédos* ‘seat of immortals’, and the same expression is used in Hesiod’s Theogony (128) of the sky (*ouranós*); in RV 3. 54. 5 we read that the gods abide in ‘seats’ (*sádāmsi*), and in 10. 96. 2 a heavenly (or divine) seat is mentioned (*diviyám sádas*). The Old Irish word for the mounds or hills where the ancient pagan gods live is *síd*, from PIE *sēdos- (apparently with the lengthened grade of the root).

It has been argued by George Dumézil and others (see Dumézil 1958a, Littleton 1982) that Indo-European gods were organized in a system of triads, to reflect the ‘tripartite ideology’ of Indo-Europeans. According to this ‘ideology’, society is ideally divided into three groups, or social ‘functions’: the priests, the warriors and the agriculturalists (or craftsmen). In India, these social functions evolved into a rigid caste system, consisting of *kṣatriyas* (warriors), priests (*brahman-*), and free craftsmen (*vaiśyas*), but, in Dumézil’s opinion, there are traces of this kind of social organization in other early IE societies as well: in Rome, the three original tribes (according to a legend preserved by Titus Livius) were *Ramnes*, *Luceres* and *Titienses*. The first of those were Romulus’ Latin companions, and they represented the priests (Romulus himself was a *rex-augur*). The second group, the *Luceres*, were warriors brought by

Lucumon, while the *Titienses* were the Sabines brought by Titus Tatius; they represent the agricultural fertility and *opes*, or abundance (they brought with them to Rome not just their agricultural skills, but also women, abducted by Romans). Dumézil saw a similar tripartite organization of society reflected in the traditional division of Ionians into four tribes representing three social functions, in the three original kin-groups depicted in Nart legends of the Ossetes (an Iranian people living in the Caucasus and having a rich oral heroic tradition), in the three original groups of the Scythians (as related by Herodotus), etc. According to Dumézil, each ‘function’ had a symbolic system associated with it, including a colour (white as the colour of priests, red as the colour of warriors, and black as the colour of the agriculturalists).

These three social groups (or ‘functions’) have their different gods assigned to their respective domains. In the Vedic pantheon, Indra (the thunderer) would be a typical god of the warriors, Varuṇa and Mitra would represent the priests, while the agriculturalists would be represented by Aryaman. In Rome, the three functions would correspond to the Capitoline triad of gods: Juppiter would be the god of the priestly function, Mars the warrior-god, and Quirinus the god of the third social group or function (the agriculturalists). This tripartite ideology would, in Dumézil’s opinion, be reflected not just in the way the gods were conceived (and in the myths associated with them), but also in the way they were worshipped, in the religious practices of Indo-Europeans. For example, the widespread practice of healing by word (magical charms), surgery and medicine would reflect the ideological division of proper actions for priests (speaking holy words), warriors (acting with instruments, including surgical instruments) and agriculturalists (procuring food and medicine).

It must be noted that the term ‘Indo-European ideology’ is not meant to reflect the real social organization of the society of speakers of PIE (or any other concrete society), but rather as a set of ideas determining the culture of early IE societies; there is certainly nothing particular about the languages of the Indo-Europeans or their genes that made them accept that particular system of ideas which was transmitted to their descendants by cultural, chiefly oral transmission: “*J'appelle 'idéologie' l'inventaire des idées directrices qui commandent la réflexion et la conduite d'une société et qui, bien entendu, n'impliquent pas je ne sais quelle organisation particulière des cerveaux*” (Dumézil 1985: 312).

Although intellectually bold and ingenuous, Dumézil’s ideas about the organization of PIE religion and mythology remain controversial. They are aprioristic, in the sense that almost any type of textual evidence can be made to fit a “tripartite” ideological scheme, hence the very hypothesis of a tripartite ideology of Indo-Europeans is strictly irrefutable. The same applies to Allen’s (1987) attempt to introduce a fourth ‘function’ to Dumézil’s system, that of the ‘other’, and to connect the social functions of early Indo-European societies with organizational schemes of kinship systems. Because of their inherent irrefutability, such theories will not be further mentioned in this book.

SACRED

To conclude from the number of preserved cognates, PIE had a rather rich terminology connected with the sacred sphere:

PIE *seh₂k-/ *sh₂k- > Lat. *sacer*, *sacerdōs*, *sācer* ‘worthy to be sacrificed’, TochB *sākre* ‘happy, blessed’, Lat. *sancio* ‘establish a law’, *sanctus* ‘sanctified’, Hitt. *šāklai* ‘rite, custom’.

3. ELEMENTS OF PIE MYTHOLOGY

SKY GOD

There are reasons to believe that PIE *dyēws ‘sky, Sky-god’ was the supreme deity of the PIE pantheon. He was certainly most often preserved in the individual pantheons, cf. Ved. *dyaú-*, Lat. *Dius Fidius*, Gr. *Zeús*, Hitt. *šiuš* ‘god’, ON *Týr*. He is commonly addressed as ‘father’, PIE *dyēws ph₂tēr ‘Sky Father’ > Lat. *Iuppiter*, Umbr. *Iupater*, Gr. *Zeús patér*, Skr. *Dyauṣ pitā*, Luv. *tātis tiwaz*, Latv. *Dievs debess tēvs*; cf. also ON *Óðinn Álföðr* ‘Odin, father of all’ and OIr. (*Echu*) *Ollathir* ‘(*Echu*) father of all’.

The sky god often bears the standard epithet ‘All-knowing’, or ‘All-seeing’: Gr. *eurýopa Zeús*, RV 6.70.6 *viśvávedas Dyaúṣ*.

DAWN GODDESS

The Vedas praise the Dawn as a young maiden, and Ved. *Uṣās* is clearly the same etymon as Gr. Hom. *ēōs*; this deity plays almost no role in Greek mythology, so it seems that several of her attributes were taken by other deities, chiefly *Aphrodítē* and *Helénē* < *welenā, from PIE *welh₁- ‘wish, desire, choose’ (Lat. *velle*, OCS *volja* ‘will’). Similarly in Lat. *aurora* is just an appellative, but the cult of the Dawn was preserved in the rites devoted to *Mater Matuta*. In Lithuanian dainas *Aušrinė* ‘dawn’ is a young maiden often represented as marrying *Mēnuo* ‘the moon’. Lasicius (a Polish writer of the 16th century, on Lith. *Aušra*): *Ausca dea est radiorum solis vel occubentis vel supra horizontem ascendentis*.

The Dawn was originally the ‘daughter of the Sky’, PIE *d^hugh₂tēr diwos > Ved. *duhitā divás*, Gr. *thygátēr Diós* (especially of Aphrodite, Helen, and the Muses); Aleman (Fr. 43 Edm.) begins his poem with the words: *Mōs' áge Kallíópa thygáter Diós* ‘come on Muse Calliope, daughter of Zeus!’. Since Dawn is associated with poetic inspiration in the Vedas, it is not too far-fetched to assume that the phrase *thygátēr Diós* was transferred to the Muse from *Eōs*, who plays an unsignificant role in Greek mythology. In the Latvian and Lithuanian dainas, the phrase *d^hugh₂tēr diwos (deywos) is also found, e.g. Lith. *Dievo dukrytė* (of Saule, the Sun goddess). *Uṣās* was a patron of the rishis, the Vedic poets, and the Old Irish goddess *Brigit* (*dea poetarum* according to bishop Cormac, who wrote in the tenth century) was born at dawn. Her name comes from PCelt. *brigantī < PIE *b^hrg'ntih₂ and from the same proto-form is derived one of the epithets of *Uṣas*, *brhatī* ‘the exalted one’. The common epithet of the PIE dawn was ‘Shiny Dawn’, with the adjective ‘shiny’ derived from PIE *b^heh₂-, cf. RV 3. 6. 7: *Uṣó vibhāti*, Gr. Hom. *phaeiné* (an epithet of Eos), Pindar Nem. 6.52 *phaennās Aóos* ‘of shiny Dawn’; she was the one who regularly opened the ‘doors of heaven’ RV 1. 48. 15: *dvārau divás*, Latv. *dieva durvis*, cf. RV 7.79.4 *vi dṛ̥haśya díro ádrer aurñoś* ‘you (*Uṣās*) have opened the gates of the closed rock’. As a beautiful young woman, she is often represented as smiling, cf. Ved. *Uṣās... smayate* ‘Dawn smiles’ (RV 3.4.6ab), Gr. (*Aphrodítē*) *meidiáiei* ‘Aphrodite is smiling’ (*Hom. Hymn.* 10.3); we mentioned above that there are reasons to believe that Aphrodite took over several of her attributes from the dawn goddess Eos, and in early Greek poetry Aphrodite’s standing epithet is *philo-mmeidés* ‘laughter-loving’ (e.g. Il. 5.375), where both Ved. *smáyate* and Gr. *-meid-* are from PIE *smey- ‘smile’.

MOTHER EARTH

Although it appears that the Earth was represented as ‘mother’ in most IE traditions, it is not generally represented as the spouse of ‘father sky’; the Earth is a deity in Ved., where she is called *Prthivi* (Gr. *plateia*, Gaul. *Litavi*, OE *folde*) < PIE *pltHwih₂ ‘The broad one’. Gr. *Gaia*, does not have a PIE etymology, but she is also called *Khthón* (Aesch. *Eumenides* 6, fr. 44. 1), and this is the Greek reflex of the PIE word for ‘earth’ (*d^heg^hōm). Gr. *Dāmātēr* is sometimes believed to be a personification of the same earth-goddess, but there is little evidence that *dā-* actually meant ‘earth’. Other deities that belong here are Hitt. *Dagan-zipas annas*, Lith. Žemyné, Latv. *Zemes Māte* (‘Mother of the Earth’), ON *Iörð* (Odinn’s wife), and perhaps Thracian Semele; in Old English we have *Folde*, *fīra modor* ‘Earth, mother of men’ (in a charm). Tacitus claims that the Germans worship ‘Nerthum, id est Terram matrem’ (*Germ.* 40. 2). Finally, OIr. *Anu* is called *mater deorum Hiberniensium* (by Cormac in the 10th century), cf. *Dá chich Anann* (in Killarney) ‘two breasts of Anu’. The etymology of the name *Anu* is unknown.

The standard epithets of earth is ‘dark’, cf. Hitt. *dankuiš tekan*, Gr. *khthón mélaina*, Russ. *Mat'* černaja zemlja, Lith. *juodoji Žemaitė*, *uoda Žemėlė*, perhaps OIr. *domunn donn* (where *domunn* means ‘world’, but *donn* is ‘dark’). Another common expression is ‘broad earth’: Hom. *eureía khthón*, RV 6.17.7. *kṣām urvīm*. Calin (2017: 75) mentions also Alb. *dhe tē zi* ‘black earth’ in Albanian folk-songs. In the Russian folklore, *zemlja* is commonly called *syraja* ‘wet, moist’, and the name of the Slavic goddess *Mokošь* (perhaps the consort of the thunderer *Perunъ*) is probably from the root of *mokrъ ‘wet’ (Croat. *mokar*, Russ. *mokryj*, etc.).

SUN-GOD AND SUN MAIDEN

The Sun is the only heavenly body that was worshipped by Indo-Europeans. In contrast to, e.g., the Semitic religions, the Moon plays a very modest role in Indo-European mythologies. The PIE word for ‘sun’, on the other hand, is a theonym in several traditions. PIE *seh₂wōl ‘sun’ is preserved as Ved. *Sūrya-* and *Sūryā*, Gr. *Hēlios*, Latv. *Saule* and *Saules meita*. As a common noun, it is preserved in Lat. *sōl*, as well as in OCS *slъnъce*, etc.

As a mythological creature, the Sun shares a number of epithets across several IE traditions; e.g. it is a ‘seer’, cf. Ved. *sūryam...spaśam*, RV 4. 13. 3 Gr. *Eēlion...skopón* ‘sun, the seer’; Also in Hymn to Demeter; since the sun is a ‘seer’, we can easily understand the semantic evolution in OIr., where *súil* means ‘eye’, cf. also Arm. *aregakn* ‘sun’ < ‘eye of the sun’. As the all-seeing deity, the Sun is the natural choice for the supervisor of oaths, and in several traditions we have records of oaths directed to the Sun (cf. Agamemnon’s oath in the Iliad 3.276f.). In RV, it is stated that *diśah sūryo ná mināti* ‘Sun does not infringe the directions prescribed’, where *diś-* ‘direction’ is from the same root as Gr. *dikē* ‘justice, divine law’. Heraclitus (B 92) states that the Sun does not overstep his measures, which implies that it always obeys the same divine rule.

Moreover, the Sun drives across the sky in a chariot. Hence the expressions Ved. *sūryasya cákram*, Gr. *Hēliou kýklos* ‘the wheel of the sun’ Aeschylus, *Persae* 504. Its course is ‘fast’, cf. Mimnermus fr. 11a. *ōkéos ēelioio* and AV 13.2.2 *āśíum Sūryam* < PIE *h₁ōk'u- *seh₂wōl ‘swift sun’. In several traditions, Sun’s horses are also invoked (PIE *suh₂los h₁ek'wōs), e.g.

RV 1.115.3a *áśvāḥ...sūryasya* ‘the Sun’s horses’, Pindar *Isth.* 5.1+5 *Aeliou hippoi* ‘the Sun’s horses’, Ovid *Met.* 2.154 *solis equi*, Latv. (LD 33627-10) *Saules zirgu* ‘the Sun’s horse’, etc. Of course, these are the horses drawing the Sun’s chariot, cf. Old Norse (*Grimnismál* 37) ‘(the horses) *Árvakr* and *Alsviðr* shall draw up the sun’.

Finally, there are reasons to believe that heaven, or the Otherworld of the blessed ones, is located at the end of the Sun’s path in the PIE cosmology, cf. RV 10.95.18d: ‘(after death) you shall rejoice in heaven (*svargé*). Skr. *svarga-* ‘heaven’ and Gr. *ólbos* ‘bliss’ can probably both be derived from a PIE compound *su(h₂)ol-g^wh₂o- ‘that which goes towards the sun’ (Janda 2005: 261f.).

STORM-GOD (THUNDERER)

The name of the PIE Storm-God is probably preserved in Hitt. *Tarhunt-*, ON *Pórr*, OIr. *torann* < PIE *torh₂-nt- ‘thunder’; we find a rather different etymon in Lith. *Perkūnas* and Russ. *Perún* (cf. also Gr. *keraunós* ‘thunder’, which may have been abstracted from Zeus’ epithet *terpsikéraunos* ‘delighting in thunderbolt’, perhaps from *perk^wi-perawnos ‘having a smiting bolt’). These names seem to come from PIE *per-k^w-u-no-. In this PIE form, we may have the amalgam of two distinct etymons, a word for ‘rock’ (cf. Hitt. *peruna-* ‘rock’, OInd. *parvata-* < *perwn-to-), and the word for ‘oak’ (PIE *perk^wu- > Lat. *quercus*, OHG *fereh-eih*), cf. also the ON theonym *Fjörgyn* ‘mother Earth’ which appears to be from PGerm. *fergunja- ‘mountain’ > Goth. *fairguni* ‘mountain’). The thunder is believed to be rocky (cf. the Byelorussian expression *kamen Peruna*, Lith. *perkūno akmuo*), and the oak is the tree most often hit by thunder, hence it is dedicated to the Storm-God. On the other hand, these theonyms are probably unrelated to Ved. *Parjánya-*, who is mostly associated with rain in the RV, and whose name is difficult to reconcile with the PIE proto-form *per-k^w-u-no- (which is problematic anyway). PSl. *Perunъ is probably originally ‘the Striker’, from the root *pertī ‘to strike’ (cf. the *figura etymologica* in Byelorussian charms *pjarun pjarec* ‘the Thunder strikes’). The suffix is probably Slavic *-umъ* used to form *nomina agentis* (as in OCS *běgumъ* ‘fugitive’ from *běgti ‘run’).

The standard weapon of the Storm-God is, of course, the thunder, which is often represented as some sort of mace, or hammer. Thus, Indra’s mace is called *vájra-*, from PIE *wag- ‘smash’ (or *weh₂g-, with wovel-shortening by Lubotsky’s rule), cf. Gr. *ágnymi* ‘smash’, TochA *waśir* ‘thunderbolt’. Thor’s hammer is called *Mjöllnir* in the Edda, and this is from the same root as Latv. *milna* ‘thunder’, OCS *mlъnъji* ‘thunder’, Luv. *maldani* ‘hammer’ and Lat. *malleus* ‘hammer’. In religious poetry and ritual, the Thunderer is often represented as a bull, e.g. Indra is said to be ‘the bull of heaven’ (*vŕṣā diváḥ*, RV 8.57.3b), while the Hittite storm-god Tarhuntaš is said to have become a bull (GUD.MAH *kīšati*, KBo III 41). In the Greek religion, the bull was one of the sacred animals of Zeus, who became the Thunderer (although he bears the name of the original sky-god), and in Latvian dainas one refers to ‘bulls of Dievs’ (*Dieva vērši*, LD 2221) who drink up a river.

DIVINE TWINS

The following mythological creatures are divine twins, a mythological conception of probably PIE origin: Gr. *Dióskouroi* (Castor and Polydeuces), Ved. *Aśvinā* (dual), also called *Nāsatyā*, Latv. *dieva dēli* (‘the sons of Dievs'). In the RV, the Aśvins are called ‘Descendents (or sons)

of the Sky': Ved. *divó napātā* RV1. 117. 12, 182. 1; they are often described as 'youthful', *yuvānā* (RV 1. 117. 14), and in Latin, Castor and Pollux (< Polydeucēs) are called *iuvenes* (Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.6).

They are associated with horses: Pindar (*Ol.* 3. 39) calls them *eúippoi*, 'having good horses', and RV 7.68.1 has *suásvā* 'with good horses'; Castor is usually called *hippódamos* 'horse-taming' in Homer. They are 'bright': RV 8.5.32 refers to the Aśvins as *púruścandrā* 'very bright'. The name of *Polydeukēs* is probably dissimilated from *polyleukēs 'with many lights' (cf. Gr. *leukós* 'white').

They are brothers of the Dawn (in the RV), and of Helen (in Greek Myth); in both the Greek and in the Vedic traditions they are invoked as the saviours, or helpers, Gr. *sōtéres*. Their Vedic name *Nāsatyā* probably also originally meant 'saviours', cf. Goth. *nasjands* 'Saviour, Christ'.

Some authors have proposed that traces of the Indo-European twin horsemen were preserved in the Anglo-Saxon legend about *Hengest* and *Horsa* (literally 'Stallion' and 'Horse', the brothers who allegedly conquered Roman Britain in the 5th century A.D. The legend is preserved by Bede the Venerable in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* and in the later Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

HORSE SACRIFICE

There is no doubt that horses played an important role in the Indo-European society. Consequently, the sacrifice of a horse is the mother of all sacrifices. Ved. *aśvamedha-* was a ritual of royal inauguration; after running around the kingdom freely for an amount of time, the queen was made to symbolically mate with it, and then it was butchered. The Vedic name of the ritual is sometimes compared with the Gaul. name *Epomeduos*, but this does not amount to much; more importantly, the coronation ritual of Ulster kings, as recorded by Giraldus Cambrensis in the 12th century also included the ritual slaughter of a horse, in whose broth the elected king was made to bathe. One important character in the Ulster sagas, *Medb*, is often seen as a sovereignty figure (she spends men quite ostentatiously, including several kings), and her name contains the same element (*med^hwo- 'intoxication') recognized in *aśvamedha-*. Finally, the Roman ritual October Equus (unsurprisingly held in October) involved horse racing followed by the sacrifice of a horse, whose head was put on a stake outside of the *Regia*. The ritual involved the *Rex sacrorum*, so it is quite possible that it had something to do with the consecration of a king in Rome's days of kingship. In the Slavic folklore songs studied by Radoslav Katičić, the hero whose return marks the beginning of spring (*Jarylo*) is slaughtered in the form of a horse at the end of the fertility rite.

Although horses are important in mythologies of several Indo-European peoples, it is by no means clear that the rite of horse sacrifice itself was inherited from PIE, as it could equally have spread at a later date. This depends, in part, on whether the speakers of PIE domesticated horses or not. The date of domestication of horses is debated in archaeology: the first culture to systematically herd horses was probably the Botai culture from Kazakhstan in the 4th millennium B.C, and it is not impossible that this culture was in contact with the speakers of PIE, who could have used horses for riding. However, the horse-drawn chariots that play an important role in Hittite, Indo-Iranian, Greek and Celtic cultures are certainly a post-Indo-European technological development.

THE DRAGON-SLAYING MYTH

It has been claimed that a PIE formula $*g^{wh}ent\ h_3eg^{wh}im$ ‘he slew the serpent’ can be reconstructed on the basis of the formulaic expressions such as the following: Ved. *áhann áhim* (of Indra, who slew the dragon Vrtra), Av. *janat ažīm* (of Thraetaona, who slew the nasty serpent Aži Dahaka, Hitt. *muš Illuyakan kuenta* (of the Storm God, Hitt. *Tarhunt-*), OIr. *gono mil* ‘I slay the beast’ (in charm texts). Homer also uses verbs from the same root, e.g. *épephnen*, when describing the slaying of several monsters. For example, in his description of how Bellerophontes slew the Chimaira (Il. 6. 179-186): *prōton mén rha Khimairan amaimakētēn ekéleusen pephnēmen... tò triton aū katépephnen Amazónas anianeiras* ‘first he decided to kill the terrible Chimaira... and thirdly he killed the Amazons, who were similar to men’. The same phraseology is used in Pindar’s account of the same myth (Ol. 6. 179-186): ‘So mounted, out of the cold gulfs of the high air forlorn, he smote the archered host of women, the Amazons, and the Chimaira, breathing flame; and the Solymoi, and slew (*épephnen*) them’. Another root often used in dragon-slaying texts is $*b^h eyd-$ ‘split’ (ví... *vrtrásya síro bibheda* ‘he (Indra) splitted the head of Vrtra’ (RV 8. 6. 6.). It is possible that the root $*b^h eyd-$ is just a variant of $*b^h eyH-$ (if $*H = *h_1$) ‘to strike’, which yielded OCS *biti*, OIr. *benaid*, OLat. *per-fines*. This verb is regularly used in the Slavic dragon-slaying myth preserved in the folk-lore texts (e.g. in Byelorussian *dyk tut Pjarun zabiv zmeja* ‘here the Thunder slew the dragon’, Katičić 2008: 136). The alternation $*d / *h_1$ would be parallel to the one in PIE $*med-$ ‘measure’ (> Lat. *medeor* ‘heal’, OIr. *midithir* ‘judge’) and $*meh_1-$ ‘measure’ (> OCS *měra*, Skr. *māti*).

The original dragon-slayer was probably the Storm-God, PIE $*torh_2nt-$, as in the Slavic myth, where the thunderer *Perunъ* slays the snaky dragon *Velesъ* (*Volosъ* in Russian sources). Note that there is still no consensus about the reconstruction of the PIE word for ‘snake’, the Storm-God’s opponent. While $*h_3eg^{wh}i-$ will serve to reconcile Ved. *áhi-*, Av. *ažī-* and Gr. *óphis*, Lat. *anguis* and OCS *qžь* point to a nasalized root, perhaps $*h_2eng^{wh}i-/ *h_2eg^{wh}i-$.

THE DRINK OF IMMORTALITY

Many IE traditions have a story about the drink and/or food of the immortals; this substance is often said to provide the consumer with immortality, cf. Ved. *soma*, Gr. *ambrosia* (the food of the gods, from PIE $*n-mrto-$ ‘immortal’), and *néktar*, the drink of the gods, from PIE $*nek'-terh_2-$ ‘death-overcoming’, with the regular loss of the laryngeal in compounds. Compare AV 4.35 *tarāni mrtyum* ‘I will overcome death’. In the Norse tradition, a parallel is perhaps represented by the story of Mímir’s well, a drink from which gives supernatural wisdom. The immortal drink of the gods is often represented as mead, PIE $*med^hu-$ (> Skr. *mádhu*, Gr. *méthy* ‘wine’, Lith. *medus*). The Norse tradition also teaches us that it was Odin who changed into an eagle, and then felw and spat the mead into the cauldrons of gods (*Skáldskaparmál* 6; this story has curious parallels in the Hittite rituals (KBo 6472 11ff) where the Storm-god receives the sacred water from eagles Rig-Veda, where it is the falcon (*śyená-*) who brought the mead (*mádhu-*) to the god Indra (RV 4.18.13d).

COSMOGONY

In a number of traditions, the origin of the world – either in its physical or in its social aspect – is connected with the myth of the ‘twin’ (PIE *(H)yemo- > Skr. *yama*- ‘twin’, Av. *yima*-, Latv. *jūmis* ‘pair (of fruits)’, OIr. *emon* ‘twin’, ON *Ymir*, perhaps also Lat. *Remus* (if from *yemos on the analogy with *Romulus*) and *geminus* ‘twin’ (with *g-* on the analogy with *gigno* ‘engender’). The root may be identical with the one in *imāgo* ‘picture’, Hitt. *himma* ‘imitation, substitute’. This primeval twin has, in all appearances, nothing to do with the divine twins, the sons of the sky (see above). In the Norse myth (*Grímnismál* 40-41) the giant *Ymir* is dissected and the mountains are formed from his skull, the trees from his hair, etc: *Ór Ymis holdi vas jörþ of sköpub, en ór sveita sér, björg ór beinum, bafmr ór hári en ór hausí himinn.* ‘From the flesh of Ymir the world was formed, from his blood the billows of the sea, the hills from his bones, the trees from his hair, the sphere of heaven from his skull’.

In Middle Persian *Bundahišn*, it is told how Ohrmazd created the first human, *Gayōmart* (from Av. *gaya*- ‘alive’ and *marətan* ‘dead’) together with an ox; both the ox and *Gayōmart* later died (partly due to the intervention of the evil demon Ahriman), and then the beneficial plants, animals and, ultimately, humans were created from the semen of the ox, while the metals (copper, tin, gold, iron) were created from various parts of *Gayōmart*’s body. According to a different tradition (*Bundahišn* 6.f7), the first human couple *Mašīa* and *Mašīānag* sprang from a rhubarb plant that grew from *Gayōmart*’s sperm.

Tacitus (in *Germania*, 2), tells how the Germans believe that they originate from a primeval *Tuisto* (originally ‘twin?’), who had a son called *Mannus* ‘man’. This is reminiscent of the Vedic myth, where Yama was the first mortal to die (RV 10.13.4d: ‘for the gods’s sake, he chose death’), and he was subsequently given the rule of the Otherworld. His brother, *Manu*-, the progenitor of the humankind, sacrificed him. Some comparative mythologists believe that the figure of Yama-/Yima- was replaced by Kronos, the castrated and deposed father of Zeus, in Greek mythology. According to Pindar (*Ol.* 2.68-73) he continued to reign in the Isle of the Blessed, one of the Greek variants of the Otherworlds. In Latvian dainas, there is a mythological figure of *Jumis* who has a sister *Jumala* (e.g. LD 28536: ‘Jumis took Jumala for a ride’), but there are no indication that they were ever considered the progenitors of humankind. Incidentally, in some Vedic hymns, Yama is given a twin sister *Yamī* (e.g. 10.10.7a: ‘I have been consumed by the love for Yama, Yamī’).

The legend of a miraculous birth of twins also lies in the legend of the foundations of *Emain Machae*, the ancient capital of Ulster in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle. In that legend, it is told how the goddess *Macha* raced as a mare with other horses while being pregnant, and gave birth to twins after the race. The tale is used to explain how *Emain Machae* ‘the twins of Macha’ got its name. The motif of the sacrificed twin may have its roots in the widespread infanticide of one of the twins in early societies, in which it was economically impossible for women to raise twins.

OTHERWORLD

There is no evidence for a consistent picture of the PIE otherworld. We do not know where it was, but it appears that the abode of the dead is reachable by boat, cf. OIr. *tír inna mban*, which is an island, as is the *tech Duinn* ‘the house of Donn’, to which the eponymous deity (“the dark one”) invited his descendants, the Irish people to come when they die (OIr. *co tech nDuind frisndálait mairb* ‘to the house of Donn where the dead have their tryst’). Likewise, the island of Avalon in the British legend is the resting place of heroes, such as King Arthur

(Welsh *Arthwr*). OCS *nauv* ‘the otherworld’ is derivable from the word for ‘boat’, PIE *neh₂u- (Lat. *nāvis*, Skr. *naú-*, etc.), and in the Greek belief, one has to cross the river Styx to reach the otherworld. The idea that one crosses the river is here combined with the other one, namely that the realm of the dead is underground; in the Old Irish sagas, you enter it via the fairy mounds, the *sid* (< PIE *sēdos ‘seat’). In a few traditions we find the idea that the dead abide in a wonderful meadow, rich in horses, cf. Hitt. *wēllu-* ‘meadow (of the otherworld)’, Gr. (*W*)ēlyśion pedion ‘Elysean fields’; in TochA the word *walu* ‘dead’ may be related, as well as ON *val-höll* ‘Valhalla’. Lith. *Vélnias* ‘devil’ may be from the same root, as well as the name of the Slavic god of the dead and cattle, *Velesъ* (Russian also *Volossъ*), but this is uncertain. If all of these words are indeed related, they point to a PIE root *welH-. The concept of a meadow, or pasture for the dead is also found in Vedic, e.g. RV 10.14.2: ‘this cow pasture is not to be taken away’, as well as in OIr. *mag mell, mag meld* ‘the plain of pleasure’, one of the euphemisms for the Otherworld (e.g. *Immram Brain*, 34, 39; the attribute *meld* is probably related to Lat. *mollis* ‘soft’). The Elysean fields in the Greek tradition are sometimes confused with the Meadow of Asphodelus (*Asphódelos leimón*), where souls of the dead wander to receive the blood sacrifices of the living (e.g. Od. 24.13-14).

In the Rig Veda, we find a belief that the realm of the deceased (‘the fathers’, *pitaras*) is in the sky, more precisely in the Milky Way (*svarga-*, which is compared to Gr. ólbios ‘blessed’ < *swel-gʷ(H)o-).

The otherworld may have been ruled by the original progenitor of mankind, *Yemo- (Skr. *Yama-*, Av. *Yima-*), see above. Caesar (*De bello Gallico*, IV: 18) says that the Gauls considered themselves descendants of Dis Pater, the god he identified with the Roman god of the underworld.

FIRE IN WATER (?)

A mythological fiery protector of waters is reconstructed on the basis of Lat. *Neptūnus*, Skr. *Apám Nápāt* (< *h₂epōm nepōt- ‘the descendant of water (*ap-*)’, identified with Agni, the fire), OIr. *Nechtan* (a mythical spouse of *Boand*, the river Boyne), cf. also ON *saevar niðr* ‘descendant of the sea’ (a kenning for ‘fire’). In the RV (e.g. RV 2.1.ab), it is stated that *Agni* ‘fire’ is born from the waters (*adbhyás*), and that his home is in the waters (*apsv àgne sádhiṣ tāva*, RV 8.43.9a). Pindar, in his famous first Olympian Ode (1.1) contrasts fire with water: *áriston mèn hýdōr, ho dè khrysòs aithómenon pŷr* ‘Water is best, while gold, like blazing fire (shines)’. All of this, however, is on a very shaky soil. *Neptūnus* is plausibly derived from PIE *neb^h-tu- ‘moisture’ (Av. *napta-* ‘moist’), and the name *Nechtan* may be from the root *neygʷ- ‘to wash’ (OIr. *nigid*).

THE WORLD-TREE

In a number of traditions we find a conception of a world-tree, growing through the three cosmic spheres: the earth, the middle sphere (Ved. *antárikṣa-*) and the sky. The most famous example is the Old Norse ash-tree *yggdrásil*. Here is its description in Grímnismál 32: *Ratatoskr heitir ikorni, / er renna skal /at aski Yggdrasils; /arnar orð /hann skal ofan bera /ok segja /niðhöggi niðr.* ‘Ratatosk is the squirrel who shall run on the ash-tree Yggdrasil; from above it bears the words of the eagle and tells them to Niðhogg (the world serpent) beneath’; the picture is repeated in Gylfaginning 16: ‘An eagle (*örn*) sits in the limbs of the Ash and

between his eyes sits the hawk called Veðrföllnir. The squirrel called Ratatosk... bears words between the eagle and the serpent Niðhöggr'. Similar motives are found in Slavic folk-lore and in the Celtic mythology (e.g. the wonderful tree on which the god Llew is sitting in the shape of the eagle in the Mabinogi). The first element of the name *Ygg-drasil* contains the root *IHwo- 'yew' which is also found in the name of the mythological world-tree of the Hittite myth (^{GIS}Eya-, KUB XVII, 10. IV 27-31: 'Before Telipinu stands an eya-tree, from the eya-tree a sheepskin is hung'). In Hittite, the tree is represented in the myth of the vanishing god Telipinu (who is discovered in his hiding by a bee), and it is said that sheep's wool (*hulana-*) and other valuables are hanging from it. In the Slavic folk-lore texts, the tree is represented as a fir-tree with roots in the water (a stream or a source), and a dragon is often depicted lying beneath it. Bees are found in its branches, and on its top there is a bird of prey (an eagle or a falcon) watching far away. In some East Slavic charms the wool is also found on its branches (in parallel to the Hittite motive mentioned above).

In Greek and Indo-Iranian, the conception of the world-tree seems to be missing, but we do have the idea that the sky is supported by props, or pillars (the pillars of Atlas, sometimes understood as his shoulders, e.g. in Ibucus, or Od. 1.52-4 (*kiones makrai*). In RV 8.41.10 it is said that Varuṇa holds the heaven with a pillar, and in RV 1.24. 7 it is said that 'Varuna is holding the top of the tree erected in the baseless space'. AV 5.4.3ab speaks of the *Āśvattha* tree 'in the third heaven above us... the seat of gods'. Many linguists see in the conception of the world tree an influence of the shamanistic traditions of Northern Eurasia, rather than PIE inheritance.

The heaven itself is considered to be made of stone; indeed, the word for 'heaven' in Avestan is *asman-*, from PIE *h₂ek'mōn, the reflexes of which mean 'stone' (Skr. *ásmā*, OCS *kamy*, Lith. *akmuō*). Note that in Greek we have a shadowy figure of *Ākmōn*, who is said to be the father of *Ouranós* ('the sky') in Alkman, (PMGF 61).

BATTLE OF GODS

In a number of traditions, we find mention of 'former gods', Gr. *theoi próteroi* (Hesiod, *Theog.* 424, 486, Ved. *púrve devás* (RV 1.164.50), Hitt. *karuileš šiuneš*. Also, in several traditions, we find the two generations of gods fighting each other for supremacy, like Ved. Asuras and Devas, Av. Daevas and Angra Mainyu versus Ahura Mazda (the supreme deity established by Zarathuštra), the Greek Olympian gods and Titans, OIr. *Túatha Dé Danann*, the *Fir Bolg* and the *Fomoire*, and the Norse *Aesir* and *Vanir*. These stories about the clash of two generations (or simply bands) of gods have actually rather little in common and it is unclear whether a common myth can be posited for PIE.

FATES

Most IE mythologies recognize three female divine figures in charge of the fates of men and, sometimes, also of the gods. In Greece they are known collectively as the *Moīrai* (from the root *smer- 'receive a share', Gr. *méros*), and their names are *Klōthó* (from the verb *klóthō* 'weave'), *Lákhesis* (from *lagkhánō* 'receive (by lot)' and *Átropos* ('the un-turning' from *a-* 'not' and *trépō* 'turn'), cf. Hesiod, *Theog.* 905; in Rome, they are the Parcae (from *parere* 'to give birth to'), and their names are *Nona* ("the ninth"), *Decuma* ("the tenth") and *Morta* ("the dead one" or rather a derivative of PIE *smer-, like *Moīrai*); *Nona* and *Decuma* are probably

called thus because children are born in the ninth or tenth month of pregnancy. In Old Norse the Fates are the three *Nornir*: *Urð*, *Verðandi* and *Skuld* (literally ‘the one which was, the present one and the one who shall be’, e.g. *Völuspá* 20, *Gylfaginning* 15). In Lithuanian Dainas, the goddess of fate is called *Laimė*, but sometimes she is represented in triple form, as the three fates, *Laima*, *Dalia* and *Giltinė*. In the Hittite mythology, there are the *Gulšeš* (from the verbal root *gulš-* ‘to write’, since they write down the man’s fate), but we do not know their individual names (in other contexts, when they are represented as spinners of destiny, fate goddesses are called *Ištuštaya* and *Papaya*). While it is curious that there are usually three female goddesses of fate, it is quite possible that we are dealing with a single mythological motive spreading from Anatolia and/or the Eastern Mediterranean, since we cannot exclude the possibility that the three Greek Moiras are the source of all the other goddesses of Fate. The motive of spinning the thread of a man’s life or destiny (e.g. Od. 7.195-198, Ovid, *Met.* 2.653-4, 8.451-457) can also have been ultimately borrowed from the Middle East via the Greeks.

A FEW OTHER MYTHOLOGICAL CREATURES

Gr. *Pān* and Ved. *Pūṣán-* < *pewh₂sōn (or *peh₂us-h₃on-, from the root *peh₂- ‘to herd’, cf. Lat. *pāstor* ‘shepherd’); both deities are protectors of cattle and are associated with wilderness and traveling. Pan is not attested in Homer, and his chief sanctuary was in Arcadia. Elsewhere in Greece his functions seem to have been taken over by Hermes. *Pūṣán-* is the mediator between gods and men, usually accompanied by goats (like Pan). Like Hermes in his function of the *psychopompos*, Pūṣan guides the dead on the ancestors’ path.

Skr. *r̥bhu-* and Gr. *Orpheús*; the Rbhūs are divine craftsmen in the Veda, and their art resembles the musical artistry of Orpheus; together with *Tvaṣtar*, their boss, they made the weapon of Indra, his *vájra*. The *r̥bhus* have also been related to Norse *Alfs* (dwarves), but that is even less convincing.

Skr. *Aryamán-* (Av. *airyaman-* ‘friendship’) and OIr. *Éremón* (son of Míl), Olc. *Iormönr* (a name of Óðinn); all three names could be derived from the alleged PIE ethnonym *h₂eryo- ‘the Aryan’.

‘The fire-thief’ Gr. *Promētheús* bears a name similar to Skr. *Māthava-*, a mythical king who had fire in his eyes. The root would have been PIE *meth₂- ‘to steal’ (Ved. *mathnāti*).

Gr. *ōkeanós* (a mythical river encompassing the world) has been compared to the Vedic epithet *ā-śáyāna-*, predicated of the dragon *Vṛtrá-* (e.g. RV 4.17.7), who captured the cows/rivers (for the mythical equivalence of cows and rivers compare also OIr. *Bóand* ‘the river Boyne < PCelt. *bow-windā ‘white cow’). And indeed, the Okeanos is represented with a dragon-tail on some early Greek vases.

The hell-hound, or the dog guarding the entrance to the underworld, is sometimes posited on the basis of the correspondence between Gr. *Kérberos* and Ved. *śábala-* (later also *śárvara-* ‘speckled’, but the epithet is applied to the two hounds guarding the otherworld). However, a proto-form *k'ērberō- looks distinctly non-Indo-European, so it is probable that both *Kérberos* and *śábala-* are loanwords from some unknown source.

VEDIC

Almost everything we know of the original Vedic religion has been transmitted orally from around the middle of the 2nd century B.C. until the present day in the form of *śruti*- or ‘what has been heard’. This oral tradition has been collected in the form of the Vedas (cf. Skr. *véda* ‘knowledge’), or four collections of hymns and ritual texts devoted to Vedic deities. These are composed in an early form of Sanskrit, the learned language of India, which is commonly referred to simply as Vedic, or Vedic Sanskrit. Since there are no manuscript from that period (the oldest inscriptions in India are Buddhist inscriptions of king Aśoka from the 3rd century B.C.), the datation of the core of the Vedic texts is estimated on the basis of philological arguments and the assumed rate of language change from the Vedic period until our earliest historical documents in India (chiefly related to the life of Buddha in the 5th century B.C.).

The oldest parts of the Vedas could have been roughly contemporary with the ‘Mitanni Contracts’, documents preserved in Hittite archives, in which the ruler of the Kingdom of Mitanni in Northern Mesopotamia swears by invoking Vedic deities Mitra, Indra, Varuna and the Nasatyas. We know, then, that the ruling caste of the State of Mitanni in the 14th century B.C. worshipped the same gods to whom hymns are devoted in the Vedic texts, and many of them, as we shall see below, have exact counterparts in the Iranian religion (note, however, that the names mentioned in the “Mitanni Contracts” are specifically Indo-Aryan, not Iranian or Indo-Iranian).

The four collections of Vedic texts (also called *samhitās*, from PIE *som- ‘together’ and *d^heh₁- ‘put, make’) are Rig-Veda, Sama-Veda, Yajur-Veda, and Atharva-Veda. The Rig Veda is certainly the oldest of them; the Sama-Veda and the Yajur-Veda contain mostly material taken over from the Rig-Veda, and the Atharva-Veda is a collection of magical chants and rituals, and it is generally believed to be the latest of all four samhitas. All of the samhitas have their own commentaries and texts based on them, especially the Brāhmaṇas and the later Upaniṣads. The texts of the samhitas were preserved within different priestly schools, or *sākhās* (literally ‘branches’). The Rig-Veda, which is of particular interest for comparative Indo-European religion, has been preserved in only one, but very conservative, school, that of Śākalya, which was active in Eastern India probably in the early 1st millennium B.C.

The Rig-Veda got its name from the Sanskrit word *rc-* ‘praise, verse’. It is divided into ten books, or *máṇḍalas* (from Skr. *máṇḍala*- ‘circular, circle’, of uncertain etymology). Each of the books contains several dozens of hymns, or *sūktas* (from *su-ukta*- ‘well recited, eulogy’), the total number of suktas in the Rig-Veda being 1028, which is the amount of text corresponding, roughly, to the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey” put together. The hymns are believed to have been “heard” by the mythical “seers” or rishis (Skr. *r̥si*- < PIE *h₂er-s-, cf. Lith. *arši* ‘violent’, MHG *rasen* ‘rage’, Arm. *her* ‘rage’), and they were chanted by the Vedic priests, the purohitas (Skr. *puróhita*-, from *purá-* ‘in front of, before’ and *-hita*- ‘put, placed’) during religious rituals. The so-called “family books”, attributed to various families of priests, are generally believed to contain the oldest material in the Rig-Veda. These are the books 2-7. The books 1 and 10 are, on the other hand, younger than the rest and contain traces of post-Vedic philosophical speculations and religious views. The book 9 contains only hymns dedicated to Soma, the divine intoxicating drink. The text of the Rig-Veda has been preserved in several versions. It is usually reproduced either as *padapatha*, with words isolated by pauses for better memorizing, or as the *samhitapatha*, in which words are generally joined by sandhi for easier reciting. The oldest surviving manuscript of the Rig-Veda, written in devanagari script, dates only from 1464.

The Vedic hymns are composed in a variety of isosyllabic metres, and the most common ones are the eight-syllable (composing the stanza called *gāyatrī* with three eight-syllable lines), the twelve-syllable (composing the *jagatī*, with four lines), and the eleven-syllable (composing the four line *triṣṭubh* stanza).

Many Rig-Vedic hymns mention various forms of sacrifice, the most prominent being the sacrifice of the holy drink, the *soma-* (from *suH- ‘to press’, since the drink was prepared from some plant that had to be pressed). There are also fire rituals, chiefly devoted to the fire deity (the *Agnihotra-*, or simple offering of milk to the fire twice daily, and the more elaborate *Agnicayana-*, the piling of the fire altar), the horse-sacrifice (*Āśvamedha*), the human sacrifice (*Puruṣamedha-*, which did not include the actual killing of a man), the seasonal sacrifices such as *Caturmasya-* and the royal consecration (*Rājasūya-*). Apparently, all rituals (including sacrifices) were performed in the open: there is no indication that there were any temples in the Vedic period. Likewise, there were no idols or images representing gods. All depictions of Hinduistic gods are of a much later date.

Vedic sacrifices are, as a rule, organized by *yajamāna-* or ‘sacrificer’, who orders the sacrifice actually performed by a priest, or a group of priests on his behalf. For this service, he pays the ‘priestly gift’, a *dakṣinā*. Many hymns end with a *dānastuti-*, praise of the gift expected by the priests as a reward for the sacrifice. Priests are of different kinds and specializations, the most important being the *hotar* (the chief priest who recites the Rig-Veda), the *udgātar* (who sings the verses of the Sāma-Veda), and the *adhvaryu* (responsible for reciting the formulas of the Yajur-Veda). The *rtvij-* seems to have been the chief operating priest.

In the later books of the Rig-Veda we also find accounts of Vedic cosmogony and eschatology. The famous Purusha-Sukta (RV 10.90) tells how the world was created from the body of the primeval Man, *Purusa-*, who had been sacrificed. The priest (*brāhmán-*) originated from his head, the warrior (*rājanyá-*) from his hands, the freeman (*vaiśya-*) from his hips, and the slave (*śūdrá-*) from his feet. Moreover, his spirit is the source of the Moon, the Sun was created from his eye, the Wind from his breath, and the Fire from his mouth. Thus both the social and the cosmic order originated from the same source. Hymns such as RV 10.18, recited during funeral ceremonies, give an account of the fate of the soul after death and cremation; the urn with the cremated remains was buried, and the family of the deceased was ritually purified, while the soul was thought to follow the celestial ‘path of the Fathers’ (*pitṛyāna*).

Besides the Vedas themselves, we also have a number of commentaries on the Vedas stemming from the Vedic period (roughly, before the 5th century B.C.). These are the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, and the Upanishads. Some of these texts comment on the Vedas and interpret the Vedic religious beliefs and practices, but there is ample evidence that the original function of the Rig-Vedic deities was significantly altered and ill-understood during the later Vedic period. This can also be seen in the later Sanskrit commentaries of the Vedas (e.g. in Yāska’s etymological compendium “Nirukta”, or in Sāyaṇa’s “Vedartha Prakasha”). Although they preserved some ancient lore, they are not completely reliable. After the Vedic period, the Aryan religion evolved slowly towards Hinduism, which is divided into a number of sects and schools of religious thought. However, all Hindu sects still share the belief in the sacred nature of the Vedas, which are considered to be holy texts by all the Hindus.

In contrast to the abundance of archaic Vedic texts, archaeology yields very little information about the earliest form of Indian religion. Archeological sites in Northern India attributable to the Indo-Aryans in the 2nd and early 1st millennium B.C. are few and contain very scarce

remains attributable to cultic practices or rituals. The remains of the “Painted Grey Ware” culture, which stretched from East Punjab to the Middle Ganges in the 1300-400 contain very little excavations of inhabited sites; houses were built from primitive wickerwork and mud, and simple red decorations on ceramic pots do not tell us anything about deities worshipped by Indo-Arians during that period. Depictions of later Hindu gods (see APPENDIX) certainly bear little resemblance to the Vedic originals. Earlier archaeological cultures possibly attributable to Indo-Aryans, such as the “Gandhara Grave Culture” in the Swat valley in Pakistan (in the early 2nd Millennium B.C.) have left us equally scarce remains.

Principal Vedic gods are the following: *Indra*- (of unknown origin, no relation whatsoever to OCS *jędrъ* ‘strong, quick’, Russ. *jadró* ‘kernel, core’) is celebrated in as many as 250 hymns, by far the largest number dedicated to any deity. He is the slayer of the dragon *Vṛtrá-*, and many linguists see in this a reflex of the Indo-European dragon-slaying myth. In Avesta, there is a minor daevid figure of *Indara*, about whom very little is known, but the form of his name, as well as the corresponding form *In-da-ra* in the Mitanni contracts, show that the Proto-Indo-Iranian form of the theonym was **Indara*- . Indra is also praised for having killed the demon Vala and set free the cows which he had hidden in a cave (RV 2.12.3, 2.158), a myth that has been compared to Heracles’ taking the cattle of the giant Geryon.

If Indra is a typical warrior god, *Mitra* is a much more peaceful figure. The name *Mitra*- comes from the abstract noun *mitrám* ‘contract’, from the PIE root **mey-* ‘exchange’, OCS *minqti* ‘pass’, Latv. *miju* ‘exchange’, Ved. *mi-* ‘exchange’. He is a deity with chiefly social function, closely parallel to Avestan *Miθra*. He is often associated with *Varuṇa*-, and only one hymn is dedicated exclusively to him (RV 3.59). On the other hand, *Varuṇa*- is a very important deity. He is the god who binds the souls of the dead, but he is also a healer and a watcher over the social order. He is the protector of the cosmic truth, the *rta*-, and a guarantor of oaths (RV 7.86-88). Since oaths are sworn near waters, Varuṇa is also a deity reigning over waters. His name probably comes from the root **wel-* ‘to close, cover, ensnare’, Gr. *élytron* ‘covering, case’, Skr. *vṛṇotि* ‘close, ensnare’; contrary to the opinion of many famous linguists, it bears no relation whatsoever to Slav. *Velesъ*. The *Aśvinā(u)* are the divine twins, comparable to Greek *Dioskouroi* Castor and Polydeuces. The adduced form of their name is the dual, literally meaning ‘horsemen’, from **h₁ek'wo-* ‘horse’, Skr. *āśva-*. They are called *nāsatyā* ‘true’ (perhaps originally ‘saviours), as they are the physicians of the gods and, more generally, the deliverers from all kinds of distress (for example, it is said that they rescued Cyavāna from old age and rescued Atri from darkness in RV 7.71.5). *Uṣas-* is the dawn-goddess and, apparently, the sister of the Aśvins, and her name is the word for ‘dawn’, PIE **h₂ewsōs*, Gr. *ēōs*, etc. She is one of rather few goddesses in a very macho Pantheon of Vedic India. Like her Greek relative Eos, she is called **potnih₂* ‘lady’ (e.g. RV 3.61.4b, *uṣāḥ... pátñī*, cf. Gr. *Hom. Hymn.* 5.223, 230 *pótñia ēōs*).

Rudrá- is the god of the disease (which, like Apollo, he disperses with his arrows, cf. RV 7.46.3ab), and of healing. His name may be derived from PIE *(H)rewd- ‘be coarse’ (Lat. *rūdis*), and he has been also connected with ORuss. pagan theonym *Ruglъ* (which may be from **Rudlo-*). In later Hinduism, he became one of the most important gods, *Śiva*- (originally an euphemistic attribute of Rudra, meaning ‘the auspicious one’). Rudra’s sons are the *Maruts* (RV 2.33), who often accompany Indra; their exact number is unknown, as they always form a troop (*sárdhas*) and they are armed with lightning spears (*r̥sti-vidyut*). Their name is still unexplained. Some linguists connect it with Lat. *Mārs* (though this is actually from older *Mavors*), while others connect it with the name of the young warriors, the *marya-*, or with the PIE word for ‘sea’ (**mori-* > Lat. *mare*); since the Maruts are connected with the wind, the form *mar-ut* could have originally meant something like ‘(the wind) from the sea-

side', but I don't find this very convincing. Otherwise, the god of the wind is *Vāyú-* (also the Sanskrit word for 'wind', PIE *weh₁-yu-, cf. Lith. *vėjas*, Lat. *vēnus*). In some hymns (e.g. RV 10.168) he is also called *vāta-* (< *weh₁-to-). The name of *Parjánya-* has unclear etymology; he is often connected to Lith. *Perkūnas* etc., but this may be just a chance correspondence; as a common noun, *parjánya-* means 'rain cloud', and the god Parjánya is most properly defined as a god of rain storm, 'roaring like a lion... and filling the sky with rain clouds' (RV 5.83). On the other hand, *Dyau-* is clearly the sky-god, and his name is also the word for 'sky', PIE *dyēws, cf. Gr. *Zeús*. *Agni-* is the deified fire (= *agni-* 'fire' < *ngʷni-, Lat. *ignis*), while *Rātrī-* 'Night' probably derives her name from the root *rā-* 'to bestow', *rātī-* 'gift' < PIE *(H)reh₁-, (cf. Lat. *rēs* 'thing, wealth'). There is an alternative etymology relating *Rātrī-* to Gr. *Lētō*, the mother of Apollo, but the semantic connection is too weak to support this. The name of the divine drink *Sóma-* literally means 'what is being pressed, from *sew- 'to press', Ved. *su-*. *Viṣṇu-*, who latter became one of the chief Hindu deities, bears a name of unclear etymology, despite attempts to derive it from *viś-* 'village', (Lat. *vicus*, OCS *vbsb*, etc.); he is said to have measured the world in three steps (RV 1.154.1), corresponding to the three spheres in the Vedic cosmology: the sky, the earth, and the space in between (*antárikṣa-*). The name of *Savitár-* has been rather plausibly interpreted as 'the impeller', from the root *sewH- 'to impel, drive' (Hitt. *šuwezzi* 'drive (to exile), Skr. *sauti*). All creatures are said to rest in his lap, which consists of two heavens (RV 1.35.5-6). The sun-god, *Sūrya-*, bears the name identical to the Vedic word for 'sun', from PIE *seh₂wōl- 'sun' (Lat. *sōl*, Lith. *saulė*, etc.); like his Greek counterpart, *Hélios*, he is often depicted as driving a golden chariot across the sky. The divine twins, *Yama-* and *Yamī-* derive their names from the PIE word for 'twin' (*yemo- > OIr. *emain*, perhaps Lat. *geminus*). Their mother is *Saranyū-* 'the swift one' (RV 10.17.1-2), and their father is *Tváṣṭar-*, the divine carpenter (his name is derived from *twerk- 'cut', cf. Gr. *sárks* 'meat'). Like Yama and Yamī, several deities in the Rig-Veda are usually mentioned as couples, e.g. *Mitrā-Varuṇā-* (or simply *Varuṇā*, in the dual) 'Mitra and Varuna', *Dyavā-Prthivī* 'heaven and earth', etc.

There are also abstract deities, such as *Vāk-* 'the Word' (cf. Lat. *vōx* 'voice, sound'), *Bṛhas-pati-* 'lord of the prayer' (praised together with *Vāk-* in RV 10.71), *Aditi-* 'liberty', literally 'un-binding', whose sons are generally called *āditya-* 'descendants of Aditi' (Varuna, Bhaga, Aryaman, and others). *Aryaman-*, who is interpreted as the personified Friendship, has been compared to OIr. *Éremón*, one of the heroes in the mythical account of the peopling of Ireland. The root of these names may be *h₂er-yo- 'friendly, trusty' (Skr. *aryá-* 'honourable, Aryan', OIr. *aire* 'noble', cf. also Av. *airyaman-* 'tribal network, alliance'). Finally, *Pūṣan-*, like Gr. *Pān*, is a protector of cattle, and his name may go back to PIE *pewh₂sōn, but the root of this formation is unclear (the connection with PIE *pews- 'thrive, succeed' > Skr. *pūṣyati* is improbable because this root does not contain a laryngeal; the connection with *pewH- 'to stink, rot' > Skr. *pūyati*, Lith. *pūti* is more promising; a compound *peh₂us-h₃on-, from the root *peh₂- 'to herd', is also possible).

1. The Praise of Agni, RV I.1

agnim īle purohitam yajñasya devam ṛtvījam |
 hotāram ratnadhātamam ||
 agnih pūrvebhir ṛṣibhir īdyo nūtanair uta |
 sa devāneha vakṣati ||
 agninā rayimaśnavat poṣameva dive-dive |
 yaśasam vīravattamam ||

IRANIAN

The Avestan religion, or Mazdaism, is the result of the first great reform in the mankind's religious history, due to the prophet Zarathuštra. The collection of religious texts stemming from his reform is known as the Avesta. The oldest part of the Avesta are the *Gāthās*, composed, at least in part, by the prophet Zarathuštra himself. The word derives from PIE *geh₂- 'to sing' (Ved. *gāyati*, *gāti*). It is only fair to say that we do not know the dates of Zarathuštra's life. According to some experts, he lived not too long before the founding of the Achaemenid Empire in the 7th century B.C., and it has even been claimed that the Kavi Vištāspa, the princely patron mentioned by Zarathuštra, was none other than Histaspes, the father of Cyrus the Great. However, another theory posits the period around 1000 B.C. as the more likely time of Zarathuštra's life,¹ and no consensus about this is in sight.

The *Gāthās* consist of seventeen hymns, but they are only a part of the great Zarathuštra's liturgy, the *Yasna*, which is the core of the Mazdaism's sacred canon. They are written in Old Avestan language, which must be significantly earlier than the language of other Avestan books, known as the Young Avestan.² The *Yasna* is a text with clear function in the Avestan ritual: it is recited during a ceremony performed in the fire-temple, which also includes the drinking of the sacrificial drink *haoma* (Ved. *sóma*-).

Zarathuštra was a prophet who undertook a thorough reform of the inherited Indo-Iranian religion with its dozens of gods, whose names were mostly preserved in the Rig-Veda. His religious message was summarized pregnantly by Helmut Humbach (1992: 3): 'A basic feature of Zarathustra's religion is the interdependence between material and bodily welfare, on the one hand, and mental or spiritual welfare, on the other. The prophet concerned himself equally with both, and taught maxims which also governed the social life of the Iranian tribes. Young Avestan texts suggest that he introduced new methods of cattle-breeding, and compelled his followers to accept new hygienic and ecological standards, and established rules for avoiding infection in the human body and pollution of fire, water, air, and earth. Further, he integrated all of these material postulates into a great universal religious concept, and in this respect he is unique among the great founders of religions in history'.

The (Younger) Avestan term for 'god' is *yazata-* (cf. Ved. *yajatá* - 'worthy of sacrifice') rather than the inherited Iranian term *baga-*, which occurs only rarely in Young Avestan, where it is attributed to the Moon (OPers. *baga* is used of Ahura Mazdā in the Achaemenid inscriptions). Zarathuštra himself does not use either of these terms in the *Gāthās*: he seems to have been quite obsessed with the divinity of the 'Wise Lord', the Ahura Mazdā, and there was no place for other divinities in his system.

The *daēvas* of the old Indo-Iranian religion have been reduced to demons, hence the unusual etymological equation of Av. *daēva-* 'demon' and Skr. *devá-* 'god'. The followers of the *daēvas* symbolize all that is bad and deceitful (*drəguuāñt*), while Zarathuštra's followers are elated as 'the truthful ones' (*aśauuan-*). The world is seen through eternal struggle between the good principle, represented by Ahura Mazdā and the 'Divine Immortals', but the struggle

¹ This view is more or less consistent with the dates transmitted by Greek and Roman authors, who relied on ancient Iranian sources, cf., e.g. Pliny, Natural History 30, 2, 3-4: "Eudoxus, qui inter apientiae sectas clarissimam utilissimamque eam intellegi voluit, Zoroastrem huc sex milibus annorum ante Platonis mortem fuisse prodidit, sic et Aristoteles. Most authors think that *sex millibus annorum* here is corrupted for 600 years.

² Besides the *Gāthās*, there are a few other short texts written in Old Avestan, such as the prose text of *Yasna Haptanhāiti*; Old Avestan is not the direct ancestor of Young Avestan, but rather a closely related and more archaic Iranian dialect.

is predetermined, as the Ahura Mazdā and the other Ahuras (later ‘Divine Immortals’), supported by the truthful ones, are certain to triumph in the end. Note that the original Zarathuštra’s conception seems to have been more monotheistic than dualistic: the arch-enemy of Ahura Mazdā, the ‘Evil Spirit’ (*Angra Mainyu*, later *Ahriman*) is not even mentioned in the Gāthās.

The Younger Avestan texts include the Yaštis, 21 hymns to Iranian deities that were included in the orthodox Mazdaism after Zarathuštra’s period, the Vendidad (a text used in ritual purification) and the Visprat (or Visperad), a collection of supplements to the Yasna.

Like the Vedas, the Avesta was initially transmitted orally, and there are reasons to believe that it was only written down during the Sasanid period (4th - 7th century A.D.). Large parts of the Avestan corpus - including commentaries on the original holy scriptures - exist only in Pehlevi, the Middle Iranian language spoken in the Sasanid Empire. These are the *Dēnkard*, the *Bundahišn* (a mythological history of the world), *Arda Viraf Namak* (a book containing elements of Mazdaist eschatology), and others. The Pehlevi parts of the Avesta are generally known as the Zend, or Zend-Avesta. To this day, the Mazdaist religion has been preserved in parts of Iran, where its followers are tolerated (but discriminated), while the largest numbers of them migrated to Bombay during Middle Ages. It is there that the extant manuscripts of the Avesta were preserved.

The chief divine being of Mazdaism, *Ahura*, bears a name (or title) related to Skr. *ásura-* ‘god’ and derived from Av. *ahu-* ‘life, existence’, which is from PIE **h₂ensu-* ‘god’ (see above); *Mazdā* ‘lord’ is from the PIE compound **mens-dʰeh₁-* (cf. Skr. *medhā-* ‘wisdom’; the name of the Muses (Gr. *Moúsaī*) is also usually derived from a similar compound (**mons-dʰh₁yo-*). *Aməša Spənta* ‘Holy Immortal’ is the Young Avestan term referring to the six companions of Ahurā Mazda; they are abstract deities introduced by Zarathuštra (he called them collectively Ahuras, the lords). *Aməša* is the negated participle of the verb **mer-* ‘to die’ (Ved. *amṛta-* ‘immortal’), and *Spənta* is from PIE **kʷ*wento- ‘holy’ (OCS *svētъ*, etc.). The six Holy Immortals are *Amaratatāt* ‘Immortality’, *Aṣa Vahišta* ‘the Best Truth’ (cf. Skr. *rta-* ‘divine order’), *Hauruuatāt* ‘Integrity’ (from PIE **solwo-*, cf. Gr. *hólos* ‘whole’, Lat. *salvus*), *Spənta Ārmaiti* ‘Holy Devotion’ (the second part of the name is parallel to Skr. *aramati-* ‘obedience’, from Skr. *aram* ‘enough’), *Xšaθra Vairiia* ‘Desirable Rule’ (from the Indo-Iranian word for ‘rule’, cf. Skr. *kṣay-* ‘to rule’, perhaps Gr. *ktáomai* ‘gain’; the second part of the name is from PIE **welh₁-* ‘desire’, Lat. *volo*, OCS *volja*, etc.), and *Vohu Manah* ‘Good Spirit’ (the first part of the name is from PIE **h₁wesu-* > Gr. *eū*, Olr. *fō-*, etc.).

Ajra Mainiu ‘the Evil Spirit’ is the chief enemy of Ahura Mazdā in the Zarathustrian conception; *Ajra* means simply ‘bad, evil’, and the etymology of this word is uncertain; some relate it to the PIE word for ‘blood’ (**h₁esh₂r* > Hitt. *ešhar*, Latv. *asins*, Gr. *éar*). *Mainiu* is of course the same word as Ved. *manyu-* ‘spirit’.

Of the Old Iranian deities that slowly infiltrated Mazdaism after Zarathuštra’s reforms, *Haoma* is of course the Avestan equivalent of the Vedic *Sóma-*, from the PIE verb **sew-* ‘press’ (Ved. *sunóti*, Av. *hunaoiti*), and *Vāyu-* ‘Wind’ is the Vedic *Vāyu-* (see above). *Apqm Napat* is a divinity connected with the waters (his name means literally ‘descendant of waters’ and is parallel to Ved. *Apām Napāt*, which is usually an epithet of Savitar or Agni, e.g. in RV II 35); *Ātar-* is the fire deified, derived from the root **h₂eh₁-* ‘to burn’ (cf. Hitt. *hašša-* ‘hearth’), and *Arəduuī Sūra Anāhita* is one of the very few goddesses in the Avestan corpus; her name means ‘strong (*Sūra*) and immaculate (*Anāhita*) *Arəduuī*’; since she is associated with the rivers, *Arəduuī* is usually related to Ved. *ardati* ‘moves, goes’. *Miθra* is an old Indo-Iranian

divinity, and his name is the same as that of Ved. *Mitra*- (see above). *Rašnu* is the divine judge presiding over the dead souls; his name is connected with Av. *rāzaiieiti*, Ved. *rājati* ‘rules’, from PIE *h₃reg'- ‘to stretch, direct, rule’. *Vərəθrayna* ‘Victory’ is a compound name parallel to Ved. *Vṛtra-hán-* ‘the slayer of Vṛtra’, which is an epithet of Indra. *Sraoša* ‘obedience’ is derived from PIE *k'lew- ‘to hear’ (Ved. *sru-*, Gr. *klyō*, OCS *slyšati*, etc.). *Tištriia* refers to the star Sirius, which is associated with rain in the Avesta; its name is related to Ved. *tisya-* ‘divine archer, Sirius’. Finally, *Yima* is the original Man, the ancestor of all the humans; his name is, of course, the same as Ved. *Yáma*- (see above).

Another important, although late, source for the study of Iranian religion are the legends of the Narts, preserved among the Iranian Ossetians on the Caucasus. These legends were collected by Russian and Soviet ethnographers only in the 20th century, but they show traces of a long history of oral transmission, and it has been claimed (especially by Georges Dumézil, the first western scholar who studied them) that they preserve many Indo-European motives. However, the names of all the leading Nart (e.g. the divine smith *Kurdalaegon*, the iron-bodied hero *Soslan*, the brave *Wazirmaeg*, and the lady *Satana*) are probably not Iranian. Since Nart heroes are also attested in Circassian folk-lore, as well as in the traditions of other Caucasian peoples, it is difficult to disentangle the various influences that shape them, both Indo-European and non-Indo-European.

1. Zarathuštra's metaphysical lament, Yasna 29 1-2

xšmaibiiā gə:uš uruuā gərəždā kahmāi mā θ̄barōdūm kə: mā tašaṭ
 ā mā aēšəmō hazascā rəmō [ā]hišāiiā dərəšcā təuišcā
 nōiṭ mōi vāstā xšmaṭ aniiō aθā mōi səstā vohū vāstriiā

 adā tašā gə:uš pərəsaṭ ašəm kaθā tōi gauuōi ratuš
 hīiaṭ hūm dātā xšaiiaṇtō hadā vāstrā gaodāiiō θ̄baxšō
 kə:m hōi uštā ahurām ya: drəguuō dəbīš aēšəməm vādāiiōiṭ

The soul of the cow complains to You: For whom did You shape me? Who fashioned me?
 Wrath and oppression, fury, spite and violence, hold me fettered.
 I have no other shepherd other than You. So appear to me with good pastoral work.

Thereupon the fashioner of the cow asks Truth: What is the nature of thy judgement for the cow?

When cow-milking zeal, together with forage, takes possession of her, o you ruling ones, whom do you wish to be her Ahura, one who might break through the wrath caused by the deceitful?

2. A Young Avestan hymn to Victory

GREEK

Many people think that Greek religion is thoroughly known and researched. After all, we have so many preserved temples from classical antiquity, we have detailed accounts of Greek mythology not only from Greek, but also from Roman sources, and we are familiar with the way the Greeks depicted their gods from thousands of preserved statues and pictures on Greek vases. Homer gave us vivid stories about the relationships of Gods and humans in his Iliad and Odyssey, and the whole history of the gods and the universe is presented in Hesiod's Theogony. We can also learn a whole lot about Greek's attitude to religion from the early lyrics and drama, especially from the solemn hymns of Pindar and the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

However, none of the works mentioned were actually recited or otherwise used in Greek temples during religious services. There is no Greek equivalent of the "Rig Veda", and we know virtually nothing about how the priests addressed their gods. Many ceremonies are known only from depictions on vases and scarce references in works of ancient authors. Indeed, many of the ceremonies were intended to be secret, and these were called 'mysteries', while their participants were the *mýstai* (from *mýō* 'to shut', cf. Hitt. *munnaezi* 'to hide, conceal'). Although we know a lot about what was happening during these ceremonies, we do not have any "sacred texts" that were recited during them. Apparently, the Greeks did not need any such texts, there was plenty of room for improvisation. If anything, Greek religion was non-dogmatic and not based on any form of holy scriptures.

The lack of a religious and mythological "canon" explains why we have so many versions of individual Greek myths. Moreover, the Greek mythology was transmitted to us mostly in late sources, especially in works of Hellenistic authors who sought to systematize and preserve ancient and half-forgotten traditions, such as Pseudo-Apollodorus' "Bibliotheca" (an anonymous account of Greek mythology from the 1st or 2nd century A.D.). We also have some accounts of Greek customs – including religious festivities – in the works of such authors as Herodotus (in his "Histories" from the 5th century B.C.), Pausanias (in his "Description of Greece" from the 2nd century A.D.), or even the Christian author Nonnus, the author of the metaphorical epic *Dionysiaca* (5th century A.D.). We also have thousands of inscriptions, including laws and contracts carved into stone monuments, public decrees and decrees of religious associations. These documents often record names of ceremonies, priests and priestly families.

Of all the cultic texts, only some fragments used in the Orphic mysteries were preserved. Orphic mysteries became very popular in Greece in the 5th century B.C. and after, but their teaching, involving the belief in metempsychosis and reincarnation, never belonged to the mainstream of Greek religion. Especially numerous are short instructions to the soul of the dead, written on gold leafs, and fragments of Orphic poems. In this field there have been some interesting new discoveries, such as the famous *Derveni Papyrus*, found in 1962 but published only in 1997. It contains a commentary on a mythological Orphic poem.

Our first written sources for the history of Greek religion are the tablets written in the syllabic Linear B script. These are almost exclusively lists of offerings to various sanctuaries (such as the sanctuary of *Pa-ki-ja-ne* near Pylos) and gods. Many theonyms found on the tablets are known from the classical period, e.g. Zeus, Hera (who appears to have been already worshipped as Zeus's consort), Ares, Enyalios, Artemis, Paian (later

Apollo), and, interestingly, Dionysos. There are, however, some theonyms that are unknown in later periods, e.g. Masana, the mysterious Drimios, son of Zeus, or the various female deities called *po-ti-ni-ja* (= *pótnia* ‘lady’), of which *A-ta-na po-ti-ni-ja* (the lady of Atana = *Athénē*) and *Da-pu-ri-to-jo po-ti-ni-ja* (the lady of the Labyrinthos) and *Po-ti-ni-ja i-ge-ja* ‘the lady of horses’ are prime examples. Items offered to the gods do not differ from those used in sacrifices in the classical period, e.g. grains, olive oil, wine and spices, but also sacrificial animals, e.g. the sheep, the bull, and the pig on one tablet, reminding one of Roman *suovetaurilia*. Interestingly, the Greeks seldom sacrificed horses, so there is no true Greek parallel to Vedic *aśvamedha-*. Besides blood sacrifices, there were, of course, libations; those made to the gods (Gr. *spondé*, usually involving wine, and *loibé*) were distinguished from those made to the dead (*khoé*), the latter including a mixture of wine, water, and honey and a strewing of twigs on the place of the libation (closely parallel to the *barhiṣ-* ‘sacrificial litter’, in the Vedic sacrifice). For the Greeks, the sacrifice included the ritual sharing of food of the slaughtered animal; the master of the sacrifice could, in principle, be anyone, there was no privileged priestly caste in charge of the sacred rites. The Greeks found it funny that the Persians could not sacrifice without a priest. This is not to say that certain individuals were not specialized in particular ways of communicating with the deities. Already in Homer we have evidence for the existence of seers (Gr. *mántis*, Il. I, 62), interpreters of sacrifices (*thyoskóos*, Il. XXV, 221), the flight of birds (*oiōnopólos*, Il. I, 69) and dreams (*oneiropólos*, Il. I, 62); there is also evidence for priestesses (Gr. *hiéreia*, Il. VI, 300). The gods loved to communicate with men through signs, and interpreting these signs (*thésphata* < *d^hh₁s-, as in *theós* ‘god’ and *b^hh₂-to-, as in *phēmí* ‘say’) required specialized knowledge. Oracles (Gr. *khrēstéria*) were places where specialized seers answered the questions asked by those willing to pay for the service. The most famous oracle was that of Apollo at Delphi, where the prophecies (*khrēsmoi*, a derivative of *khrē* ‘one must, one should’) were announced in a trance by a priestess, Pythia.

The sacrifices are publicly made in front of the temple, where the sacrificial fire is burnt; the temple itself is the place where the images and statues of gods are preserved, and the temple is seen as the house of god, just as in the Near Eastern religions. It has been stated that the classical temple evolved from the Mycenaean *mégaron*, or royal palace. In any case, the existence of temples in Greece is in sharp contrast to their lack in Vedic India, where sacrifices, for all we know, were performed out in the open. Moreover, as in the Hittite tradition, sanctuaries are tightly connected with particular places, e.g. the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, or of Zeus at Olympia. Gods are especially powerful in particular places, not necessarily everywhere, which is fairly typical for the religions of sedentary, agricultural populations.

Sacrifices had to be made according to strict rules: the sacrificed animal was brought to the altar in a procession, and it had to be without blemish; male animals were sacrificed to gods, and female to goddesses. The sacrificed animals had to be without blemish (*teléoi*). The sacrifice itself was preceded by ritual ablution of the sacrificer’s hands in a special vessel (*khérnips*, from *kheir* ‘hand’ and *nízō* ‘wash’), and usually some hair of the animal was burned before its throat was cut. The slaying of the victim was accompanied by loud cries of women. Only bones and skin, and maybe some fat was offered to the gods, and the rest of the meat and skin was divided among those present at the sacrifice. There were, however, instances where whole animals were burned in honour of gods, usually the underworld deities. This kind of sacrifice was called *holókaustos* (from *holós* ‘whole’ and *kaúō* ‘burn’). Some sacrifices were expiatory in nature, i.e. they were made to make good

for a committed sin (*miasma*, a derivative of the verb *miainō* ‘defile, stain’, without a PIE etymology). Every shedding of blood had to be expiated, often by blood of a sacrificed animal, especially pig.

Sacrifices were often made as part of more elaborate ceremonies, and some of them were, as we saw above, secret “mysteries”. Probably the most famous of the mysteries were the “Eleusynian Mysteries”, dedicated to Persephone and her mother, Demeter. Only the initiated could participate in the mysteries, but the initiated at some point included the majority of the citizens of Athens, and slaves and foreigners, as well as women, were also admitted. The “Eleusynian Mysteries” took place in the month of Boedromion (in late summer) and lasted for ten days. The festivities, only some elements of which are understood, involved a solemn procession to Eleusys along the ‘sacred way’ (*hierà hodós*), the consumption of a drink made of barley (*kýkeon*), an all-night vigil (*pannykhís*), and the revelation of the sacred objects to the initiates (*mýstai*) in the great hall called Telesterion; the initiates (*mýstai*) would recite: “I have fasted, I have drunk the *kykeon*, I have taken from the *kistē* (“box”) and after working it have put it back in the *kálatbos* (“open basket”). It is unknown what the contents of the box were (since revealing that secret was punishable by death), but Hippolytus of Rome, a Christian writer from the 3rd century, who could not care less about the pagan secrets, claims that the sacred object was “an ear of grain reaped in silence”. The celebration of the mysteries was administered by two families, the Eumolpidai and the Kerykes. The hierophant was always one of the former, and the sacred herald (*hierokéryks*) was one of the latter. There was also the priestess of Demeter, who lived in the sanctuary.

Other ceremonies are somewhat better known, especially those organized in Athens, such as the “Thesmophoria”, dedicated to Demeter, in which only women could participate, or the “Lenaia” and “Anthesteria”, dedicated to Dionysus. The “Great Dionysia” was a festival during which dramatic performances (both comedy and tragedy) were organized, but some were also held during the Lenaia. Thus, it is from these religious festivities that the Greek (and Western) drama originates.

Greek has a rich terminology for the sacred. The opposition between *hierós* and *hósios*, both of which mean ‘holy’, was already mentioned in the introductory part of this book. In Homer, almost anything that belongs to god, or to a divine sphere, can be *hierós*: votive gifts, temples, the days of ceremonies, a priest and a temple slave. However, gods themselves are never *hieroí*. The opposite of *hierós* is *bébēlos* ‘profane’ (from PIE *gʷeh₂- ‘to tread’, as the profane space may be accessed by anyone). The meaning of *hósios* is to be understood as that which is delimited, set apart, or transformed by some kind of divine or supernatural action. On the other hand, *hágios* reflects not so much the objective property of being ‘holy’ or ‘sacred’, but the attitude with which a man should properly respect that, which is sacred. The adjective *hagnós* is derived from the same root (PIE *yag'-, cf. Ved. *yájña-* ‘sacrifice’), and its meaning contains the implication of ritual purity: it applies to holy groves (*témenoi*, from the same root *temh₁- ‘cut’ as Lat. *téplum*), festivals, the sacrificial fire, etc. Its opposite is *miarós* ‘polluted’ (from the same root as *miasma* ‘sin’). Finally, there is the adjective *sebastós* which is usually rendered as ‘august, divine’, but its derivation from *sébas* ‘divinely inspired fear or awe’ shows the original meaning. The compound *eusébeia* ‘piety’ derives from *h₁su- ‘good’ and *tyegʷ- ‘retreat (from danger), shy away’ (Skt. *tyaj-* ‘abandon, retreat’) and it denotes the proper attitude of mortals towards gods: full of awe and respect, readiness to perform

the proscribed rituals and duties, but certainly not love. To Greeks, the idea that gods should be loved by mortals (or vice versa) would appear strange indeed.

The Greeks had very vague and contradictory ideas about the afterlife. In Homer's epics, the souls of the fallen heroes wander like zombies about the Underworld, and have some recollections about their former selves only after drinking sacrificial blood. The very word for 'soul', *psykhé* (of non-Greek origin), originally probably meant simply 'breath', i.e. that which last departs from a body at the moment of dying. Even the greatest heroes, such as Achilles, end up in the dreary Underworld, and lead a miserable existence. However, apparently not all fates of men after death were exactly equal. Already Homer tells us stories about the dead who have been punished by gods for their *hybris*, or transgressing pride, such as Sisyphus and Tantalus, and he knows about the deepest pit of the Underworld, *Tártaros* (of non-Greek origin), reserved for the fallen Titans. He also mentions the Elysian fields, where the souls of the blessed may live a happy afterlife. The dwelling of the dead is always surrounded by water: to reach the Underworld (called Hades, just like the god of the Underworld himself) one has to cross the river (or lake) *Akhérōn*, and in some sources this can be done by paying the ferryman, *Khárōn*. In some myths, the entrance to the Underworld is guarded by a three-headed dog, *Kérberos*. The Greeks' conceptions of one's destiny after death began to change in the 6th century B.C. with Orpheus and Pythagoras, who taught the doctrine of metempsychosis and rebirth, but these ideas were never so widespread as to affect the majority of the Greek world.

The chief god of the Greek Pantheon is, of course, *Zeús* < *dyēws 'sky' (Myc. genitive *Di-wo*); besides being the chief among the gods, he is also the thunderer (*terpsi-keraunós*) and cloud-gatherer (*nephelēgeréta*). His symbols are thunder, oak, eagle and bull. He is also the husband of *Héra* (Myc. *E-ra*), whom he cheated on with several gods and mortals (his illegitimate children include Artemis, Perseus, Heracles, Helen of Troy, etc., while his official offspring are Ares, Hebe and Hephaestus, by far the less interesting lot). The Mycenaean form of Hera's name shows that it cannot be related to the PIE word for 'year' (*yeH-ro- > Germ. *Jahr* 'year', Russ. *jar* 'warm part of the year'), because Mycenaean would have preserved the word-initial *y-. Therefore, the etymology of this name is unknown. She was the protector of marriage and the women in Greek society. Her sacred animal was a cow, and her standing epithet in Homer is *boōpis* 'ox-eyed'. The original wife of Zeus was probably *Diōnē*, who shared a sanctuary with him in Dodone. She was considered as one of the Titans in later Greek mythology, but her former importance is shown by her name, which is derived from the name of Zeus (PIE *diw-h₃en-). The noun *Títānes*, *Títēnes* is itself without etymology, just like the names of the gods belonging to this generation, e.g. *Krónos*, *Rhéa* (*Rheiē*) and *Gaia* 'Earth'.

If Zeus was originally the Sky-god, one would expect his consort to be the Earth; however, in Greek mythology things are never so simple. Gaia was actually an adversary of Zeus in the fight against the Titans. Another candidate for the earliest Earth goddess is Demeter (*Démétēr*, Doric *Dámātēr*). She was the daughter of Kronos and Rhea, and she bore Zeus the daughter Persephone. The second part of her name (-*mētēr*) means 'mother', but there is no indication that the first part (*Dē-*) ever meant 'earth'. Besides, she is primarily a fertility goddess associated with grain, rather than with the earth itself, and in at least some texts her consort is said to be Poseidon, whose name also contains the element -*dā-* (on which see below). In Arcadia, Demeter was called *Erīnýs* (Pausanias, 8.25.6), which is otherwise the name of the avenging, snake-haired goddess who pursues criminals. In the later Greek tradition, there are three Erynie, the children of Gaia born from the blood of Uranus; in Latin, they are called *Furiae*, from *furo* 'be mad, rave').

Although some linguists have tried to connect the name *Erīnys* to Ved. *Saranyū-*, the mother of Yama, this etymology is formally very difficult, and the connection with *éris* ‘strife, quarrel’ is no better (plus, the etymology of *éris* is unknown).

The castrated father of Kronos, *Ouranós* ‘sky’, may have originally been ‘the rainer’ (cf. Skr. *várṣati* ‘rains’). *Apóllōn* was the protector of the arts, especially poetry, but he was also the god of medicine and healing. He dispenses the plague on the Greeks in Illiad by shooting arrows. He killed the *Pythón* (< PIE *b^hud^h- ‘bottom’, cf. Ved. *áhi budhnya-* ‘the serpent of the abyss’), a mythical dragon, in Delphi, where his major sanctuary was located. Though his name (also attested as *Apellōn*) is sometimes compared to ON *afl* ‘strength’ its etymology is ultimately unknown; the name of this “most Greek of gods” is probably borrowed from Anatolian, cf. the theonym *Apalliunaš* attested in Hittite documents dealing with Wiluša/Troy. In Homer’s epics, he is the protector of the Trojans, and his cult was certainly very widely known in Asia Minor.

In contrast to the male-dominated Vedic religion, Greeks worshipped quite a number of powerful goddesses. *Athénē* was attested in Linear B tablets (Myc. *A-ta-na*), but it seems to have been the general noun, perhaps meaning ‘lady’. It is of pre-Greek origin. Athene was depicted as a virgin, the protector of arts, but also a warrior goddess dressed in full armour. Another independent-minded virgin of non-Greek origin was *Ártemis*, the hunter-goddess, (Myc. *A-ti-mi-te*, dat.), cf. Lyd. *Artimuš*, Etruscan *Aritimi*. Attempts to derive her name from Gr. *árktos* ‘bear’ are futile. The name was probably borrowed from some Anatolian language. Likewise, *Héphaistos*, the blacksmith god, has a name of unknown origin. Although he was certainly worshipped by the professional smiths, few of the myths about him have been preserved, and he is chiefly known as the husband of the unfaithful *Aphrodítē*, the goddess of love. Her name is also obscure, though her bimbo-like appearance and many attributes (e.g. *khryséē* ‘golden’, or *thygátēr Diós* ‘daughter of Zeus’) make her comparable to the Vedic Dawn Goddess, *Uṣás*. Aphrodite’s name bears no relation whatsoever with *aphró̄s* ‘foam’, despite the folk-etymology; the true origin of the name is unknown. Her cult seems to have spread from Paphos on Cyprus, where she had her oldest sanctuary, and Greeks sometimes called her Cypri, ‘the Cyprian’. On the other hand, the Greek Dawn Goddess, *Eós*, whose name is identical to *Uṣás*, is somewhat eclipsed already in Homer. She is mentioned rarely, though, and her name is often modified by the beautiful poetic epithet *rhododáktylos* ‘rose-fingered’. In Greek myth, she does not do much, except abducting young and pretty boys such as *Tithónós* (of pre-Greek origin), whom she kept as an eternally living but also ageing lover (allegedly, he turned into a cricket after all). *Árēs*, the god of war, is a personified abstraction – his name is obviously derived from *ará* ‘curse’. Likewise, *Hermás* (Myc. *E-ma-ha*) seems to have been, originally, ‘the binder’; his name has been derived from *ser- ‘fasten together’ (Gr. *eírō*, Lat. *sero* ‘link together’, *sermo* ‘speech’, Skr. *síṣarti* ‘stretches, extends’, which is often predicated of Mitra’s hands. However, the word formation of Hermes’ name is unclear. He can be compared to Varuna, who binds the sinners in the RV (Hermes is the *psychopomp* in the Greek religion), and also to Vedic *Pūṣan*, who is connected to cattle and cattle-raiding (it was Hermes who stole Apollo’s cattle). Hermes is also a god of boundaries and the protector of thieves and heralds. The daughter of Zeus and Hera, *Hébē*, was the cupbearer of the Olympian gods; her name simply means ‘youth’ (< PIE *yeh₁g^weh₂, cf. Lith. *jégà* ‘power’); *Baba Jaga*, a figure from the Russian folklore, has a similar name (*Jaga* may be derived from *yeh₁g^weh₂), but in many respects she is the very opposite of *Hébē* (she is an ugly old hag). *Poseidáon* (also *Poseidōn*, Myc. *Po-si-da-wone*, dat.), the lord of the sea and Zeus’ brother, was originally called *potey-dāwōn ‘the lord (*potis) of *dā, whatever that is; the comparison with Varuṇa’s epithet *páti- dānunas*

'the lord of waters' (RV 1.136.3) makes one think whether Poseidon was originally 'the lord of waters' as well. Besides ruling the sea, armed with a trident, Poseidon is also the earth-shaker (*elelikhthōn*) causing earthquakes. He is also connected with horses and honoured at chariot-races. According to one tradition, he was actually the progenitor of horses: he is said to have spilled his semen on a rock from which the first horse was shaped, and with his wife Demeter (or with the wrathful goddess Erynis) he fathered the famous horse Areion. In a rare account of horse-sacrifice among the Greeks, Pausanias (8.7.2) tells us how horses were drowned for Poseidon near Argos.

There were other gods who never made it to the Olympus. *Pān*, the protector of roads and shepherds, is probably related to Ved. *Pūṣan-*(*< *pewh₂son-*, see above), and the name of the god of wine, *Diónysos* (Myc. *Di-wo-nu-so*) is derivable from **diwos nuso-* 'the *nuso-* of the Sky', whatever *nuso-* originally meant. He is also called *Bákkhos*, but this name is also etymologically unclear. His sacred wand made of vine, *thýrsos*, may be a loanword from Anatolian (cf. Hitt. *tuwarša-* 'vine'), while the cult hymn in the praise of Dionysus, *thriambos* (whence Lat. *triumphus* and Eng. *triumph*) is without etymology. Finally, the name of *Órpheus*, the mythical divine singer, may be related to Ved. *Rbhu-*, the craftsman among the gods. Both names may go back to PIE **h₃rb^hew-*.

Persephónē was the abducted wife of the god of the underworld, Hades (Hesiod, Theog. 912f.. Her name is probably derivable from *peírein* 'pierce' and *phaós* 'light', but she is often called simply *Kórē* 'girl', especially in her function of a vegetation goddess (she was often depicted with a sheaf of grain); in Arcadia she was worshipped under the title of *déspoina* 'mistress'. The name of her spouse, *Haídēs*, according to some linguists, may be from **sm-wid- (?)* 'the place where one sees his ancestors again', but it is more probably from **Haywid- < *sh₂ey-w-*, cf. Lat. *saevus* 'cruel', from the root **sh₂ey-*'to bind', cf. Ved. *sétu-*, the fetter of *Varuna*. The name of the Muse, *Moúsa*, is from PIE **montyeh₂* (or **mon-d^hh₁yeh₂*) 'memory', from the root **men-* 'think' (Lat. *mens*, OCS *mъniti*, Skr. *mányate*, etc.). There was originally only one Muse, and their classical number of seven has been fixed only during the classical period. There are some other goddesses of lesser standing. The name of the domestic goddess *Hestía* is the word for 'fireplace, hearth', Gr. *hestía* < **westi-*, cf. Lat. *Vesta*, who is more important as a virgin keeper of domestic fire. The goddess of childbirth, *Eileithya* (earlier *Eleúthya*, Myc. *e-re-u-ti-ja*); her name is usually related to Gr. *élython*, *élthon* 'I came' (< PIE **h₁lewd^h-*, OIr. *luid* 'came'), because she comes to the help of women at childbirth, but this may be just folk etymology. The goddess *Hekátē* is not yet mentioned in Homer, and may have been imported from Asia Minor (her cult was widespread in Caria); she was the goddess of paths, but she has also ties with the underground, as the leader of ghosts and witches. The etymology of her name is unknown. The dark goddesses of death, *Kēres*, might be etymologically connected to OInd. *Kālī*, who becomes the goddess of death only in later Hinduism, but whose name was initially an epithet of *Rātrī*, the goddess of night.

1. An inscription in Linear B from Pylos (PY Fr 343-1213)

e-ti-we po-Jse-da-o-ne re-ke-to-ro-te-ri-jo OIL[

For Poseidon, festival of the Spreading of the Couch, oil perfumed with *e-ti-*