Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies

Volume 25 (2020), Issue 2

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ISSN 1084-7561

THE *AŚVAMEDHA*: IN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY SOUTH ASIAN SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

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The several spectacular congregational sacrifices or *yajña*s known from early first millennium B.C. South Asia, viz. the *rājasūya*, *vājapeya*, *gavāmayana* or *atirātra*, included numerous rites, rituals and customs with magical connotations[1], and also had significant political implications like reasserting a monarch's positions or promoting him through several stages of kingship. One such sacrifice, the *aśvamedha*, often referred to in the context of empires and metropolises *c.* 8–7th Century B.C., was rather spectacular, involving the letting loose of a horse, its military peregrination for one year, and its subsequent immolation in a rite involving mock necrophilia and bestiality. The many studies of the rites, procedure, and symbolism of *aśvamedha* are marked by two apparent gaps. The first of these is that most studies, apart from some notable works like of Puhvel or, more recently, Witzel[2], are preoccupied with the mature form of the *aśvamedha* and do not adequately consider the evolution of the rites, procedures and symbolisms. The second gap is that most studies, including the ones referred to above, concentrate on the various ritual symbolisms of the sacrifice, usually overlooking its 'military' aspect, i.e. the ritualised military context of the yearlong circuit, that had actually made the sacrifice so spectacular.

The aim of this paper is to go beyond the ritual and ceremonial aspects of the *aśvamedha* as known from its mature form, and seek the roots of its politico–military procedure far back in time in the nomad world of endemic warfare. With this as the research problem, the paper seeks to juxtapose the evolution of the sacrifice against the evolution of South Asian society and polity, paying special attention to its spectacular military demonstration. It will survey a large cross-

[1]Sympathetic magic of the *gavāmayana* assisted the Sun in turning around at the winter solstice.

[2]For some of the studies of the evolution of the rites, see Puhvel 1987 and Witzel 1999: 397–409.

section of studies on the subject in order to put the *comunnis opinio* in perspective, so that evolution of the sacrifice over a period long enough to entail significant metamorphosis in societal formats due to the changing environment the subject peoples is adequately understood.

Reconstruction of the Sacrificial Procedure

The *Ṛg Veda* is familiar with a horse sacrifice—without actually naming the *aśvamedha*, it described in vivid detail in a set of two closely associated hymns in Book I the immolation, carving and cooking of a sacrificial horse, and its consequent spiritual journey to the gods. It however makes no allusion to the sexual content of the sacrifice, which is a major component of the sacrifice.[3] Elsewhere, the *Ṛg Veda* mentions a horse by name, *Dadhikrāvan*, probably a champion horse belonging to a Pūru chief called Trasadasyu, which appears as the archetype of the *aśvamedha* horse. It is however doubtful if a favourite champion steed was actually ever immolated in a sacrifice; probably a 'stand-in' was sacrificed.

The procedure of the later 'classical' *aśvamedha* is outlined in the *Yajur Veda*, and is expanded in the much later *Brāhmaṇa* (*Śatapatha* or *Gopatha*) and *Sūtra* (*Kātyāyana*, *Sāṅkhyāyana* and *Aśvalāyana*) texts.[4] A gradual complexification of the sacrifice is noticeable in the literature. While the *Ṛg Veda* gives an impression of simple procedures involving only two animals, a horse and a dappled goat (*aja*), and does not talk of the year-long parading of the horse, the later texts, for instance the thirteenth *Kāṇḍa* (section) of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, give out complex rites and

[3]*Ṛg Veda*, hereafter *ṚV*, I: 162 and 163, see Jamison and Brereton 2014, I: 343–347. Interestingly however, *ṚV:* V.27 and VIII.68 mention a person, probably a Bharata prince, named Aśvamedha. See Jamison and Brereton 2014, II: 688 and 1158. Also, though the sexual context does not feature in the main body of the *Ṛg Veda*, it does appear in the *khila*s, a sort of appendix to the *Vedic* material, in the form of scripted poetic contests. See Witzel 1997a: 387–409, and as discussed below.

[4]*White Yajurveda* and *Atharva Veda* (hereafter *AV*). See Griffith 1899: 205–234, and Whitney 1905: XI, VII.7.

procedures involving numerous animals. A brief outline of these rites, which form the mature version of the *aśvamedha*, will be given in the rest of this section.

This mature form of the sacrifice has a preparatory phase of a year's activities, comprising ambulation of a stallion, and a month-long concluding phase comprising elaborate rites that end with the ceremonial immolation of the horse. The preparatory phase seems to commence in end-February[5], when a specially selected stallion[6] was purified with magical rites[7], dedicated to several gods, and left to roam at *free will*, accompanied by a hundred other horses[8] and an escort of a company of 100 warriors each from four classes—*rājaputra*, *kṣatriyaputra*, *sūtagrāmaṇiputra* and *kṣattar-putra*—i.e. a total of four hundred warriors.[9] All realms traversed by the horse would be deemed to acknowledge suzerainty of the performer; in case its passage was resisted, the escort would force it open or call up reserves to do so.

Meanwhile, daily offerings, including three *sāvitreṣṭi*s to the Sun and an evening *dhṛtihoma*, were made at the sacrificial ground by a set of priests. The evening offering was followed by musical and laudatory performances by two *Brāhmaṇa* and two *Kṣatriya* bards and lutists who extolled the valour and munificence of the patron, who had already given away 'four thousand cows and four hundred gold coins' to the priests on the first day of the sacrifice and was expected

[5]The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (hereafter *ŚB*) mentions the 8th day of the bright half *Phālguna*. See Eggeling 2014: *passim*.

[6]The horse was always male, and the victor of a race. As mentioned above, a horse called Dadhikrāvan, was famed in the *Ṛg Veda* and is taken as the epitome of the *aśvamedha* horse; at the end of the rituals the queen thanks the corpse addressing it by that name. *ŚB*, XIII: 1.6.

[7] As part of the purification rights, the horse was stood in a flowing stream, a dog despatched with a club by an 'outcast' (*āyogava*) and made to float below its belly in a rite reminiscent of making offerings to the manes. See *Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra*. 20.2.2. The right was repeated at the end of the year (see below).

[8] Sharma 1980: 103–04.

[9] See Teshima 2014: 19–38, and below, for a discussion on the composition of this escort.

to give more by its end.[10] There were also sessions of the *pariplavākhyāna*, i.e. Epic or Story Cycles (discussed later).

The concluding phase of the mature form of the sacrifice began when the animal returned on the *appointed day*, and comprised 10 days of *dīkṣākarma*, 12 days of *upasatkarma* and three days of *somayajña*. This main phase of the sacrifice would have lasted a month, which has often been taken as the sacrifice proper.[11] The *agniṣṭoma* was performed on the 25th day, when 22 victims were offered on 21 sacrificial stakes. There was also a significant ritual on this day which has generally been called the *annahoma* or food offering, an important night component of which has been pointed out by Teshima wherein very curious apparatuses including a stylised 'fort' and oversized 'carts' were used.[12] The apex of the *yajña* came on the 26th day, which began with the horse being given a ceremonial bath in a river, led[13] to the sacrificial ground and tethered alongside many other animals, viz. dogs, deer, asses and goats and some wild ones like the *gomṛga* (possibly *nīlgāi* or blue bull), each dedicated to certain gods.

Half-way through the rituals, the horse was wound up with a cord and the other animals attached to it. Thereafter, the other animals were killed one by one with copper or iron knives (though some were probably let free), till in the end (as per the literature) the horse was killed with a gold knife. Its corpse was then laid out, and in a controversial, little-understood ceremony involving the queens, one nominated virgin, and several other women, the chief queen or *mahīṣī*

[10]For Brahmanic praises, see *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (hereafter *TB*), III: 9. 14. 3–4; *ŚB*, XIII: 1. 5. 6, and XIII: 4. 2. 8, 11; for Kṣatriya praises, see *TB*, III: 9. 14. 4, *ŚB*, XIII: 1. 5. 6 and 4. 3. 5, and *Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra*: XX: 2. 8.

[11]Hazra 1955: 190–203.

[12] Teshima 2005: 1004–01.

[13] The horse was probably driven up to the sacrificial site by the chief, yoked to a chariot with other horses. See Puhvel 1970: 160. The horse was also given a ceremonial dip in the pond, driven thither in a chariot, which traces the earlier dip a year ago. See Teshima 2009: 1143–50.

simulated sexual intercourse with the corpse by lying with it under a sheet, accompanied by a highly obscene mock-banter and parrying of scripted lines between priests, conductors and the women (later the participants would pray that their mouths are washed of the filth). In the end, the horse was ceremonially carved, roasted, offered to Prajāpati, and consumed. The sacrifice would conclude with gifts and honorariums (*dakṣiṇā*), the performer's generosity duly stimulated by the yearlong efforts of the laudators (!).

The above outline is of the mature form of the sacrifice, whose rites and procedures, pregnant with complex symbolism from great antiquity, had evolved over time. Indeed, so intense is the symbolism that some scholars have suggested that the symbolic element in the *yajña* was paramount, and that there really never was much activity beyond a few staged acts. This paper will attempt to contextualise the evolution of all elements of the *yajña*—the congregational sessions, military campaign, killing of the horse, and mock necrophilia and bestiality. This will start with a quick review of the literary and historical instances of the sacrifice in the next section.

Aśvamedha in History and Legend

In addition to references in Vedic and liturgical references, and mentions in the *Mahābharata* and the *purāṇa*s, the *aśvamedha* is associated with several 'historical' rulers from the early times. References to it cease with the Maurya but reappear with the Śuṅgas, which might be related to the Maurya clampdown on the killing of animals and the Brahminical revival under the Śuṅga who performed the *aśvamedha* to mark victory over the Indo-Greeks. However, barring one instance of the sacrifice by the Kāṇva ruler Sarvatāta in the first century B.C., the sacrifice does not appear in references pertaining to the Śaka–Kushan period.[14]

[14]Sircar 1942: 91, 96, 186.

The hiatus ends with the Gupta monarchs. Samudragupta is reputed to have performed multiple *aśvamedha*s, including its most elaborate version—the *govitāta*—which had reputedly never been performed since the *Mahabharata*. His title of *cirotsanna aśvamedhāhartuḥ* meant restorer of a long-lost sacrifice *(cira-utsanna-aśvamedha-ahartuḥ*). The last mention of the *aśvamedha* in classical times is regarding Pulakeśin the Cālukya in the 6th Century A.D. There are references to the sacrifice being conducted by Deccan monarchs, such as Śivaskandavarman the Pallava or Nayanikā the Sātavāhana queen (who also performed several other congregational sacrifices like the *gavāmayana*, *gargātiratra* and *āptoryāma*), but the tradition seems to have petered out by late first millennium. It is barely known in Turco–Mongol records, while there are only two recorded instances of its performance, both by Jay Singh II of Amber (1699–1744).[15]

Undoubtedly, the political motivations of the various named, and unnamed, sacrificers varied with time. While Samudragupta was using the sacrifice to highlight his sovereignty over all that he had already conquered or stood to conquer, this certainly was not the motivation of Jay Singh II of Amber, who really was a vassal and *mansabdar* of the Mughals and was performing the sacrifice to establish his primacy among other such sovereign-turned-*mansabdar*s in the power-vacuum that had ensued due to rapidly declining Mughal power.[16] Though barely used later, the functional tradition seems to have survived—David Knipe reports a community of *Brāhmaṇa*s on the Godavari that has faithfully preserved the procedures and lore of the *aśvamedha*, in addition to those of other congregational sacrifices.[17]

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[15]For the gradual obsolescence of the sacrifices, see Pathak 1959: 218–230. Alberuni records that the horse became food for the *Brāhmaṇa* after the *aśvamedha*, but it is doubtful if he witnessed an actual sacrifice. However, that it did would still have been common knowledge till the time he wrote. See Sachau 1964: I: 156 and II: 139.

[16]Significantly, he had been recently granted the title of *Sawai* by the Mughals (the regnal title of the house till date), which means *one-and-quarter-times* (of his peers). See Sachdev and Tillotson 2002: 33.

[17]Knipe 2015: 237.

Component Aspects

The activities performed during the two phases of the *aśvamedha* can be together grouped into three aspects: military ambulation of the horse, dedications and performances at the sacrificial ground (concurrent with the perambulation of the animal), and the sacrificial immolation of the horse and drama over its corpse. The procedures, studied in different contexts by several others, will be inspected in this section again grouped into the three aspects—ambulatory, congregational, and sacrificial—but in reverse order to help build up towards understanding the germ of military activity that is the origin of the sacrifice.

Sacrificial Aspect

To Calvert Watkins, the *aśvamedha* is the principal Indo-European kingship ritual.[18] In Indo–Aryan mythology, the horse is symbolic of the Sun,[19] the Universe[20], and all existence.[21] The *Taittirīya Saṅhitā* adds a fertility aspect,[22] calling the testicles of the horse the earth and sky, its *membrum virile*, the pressing stone, and its seed, *soma*. With so much symbolism, it has been doubted if there ever was a real horse in a real sacrifice—Kak thinks that the sacrifice was symbolic in its original form, actual sacrifice of a horse being introduced only later.[23]

[18]Watkins 1995: 265. Also see Puhvel 1987: *passim* and Puhvel 1970: 159–72.

[19]*ṜV*, I: 163.2.

[20]*Vājasenayī Saṅhitā* (*VS*), 11.12.

[21]*ŚB*, XIII: 3.3.3 and XI: 2.5.4: the horse's head is the sacrifice, eyes the Sun, ears the Moon, its breath, wind, its ribs, the intermediate quarters, winking, day and night, and so on.

[22]*Yajurveda Taittirīya Saṅhitā* 1967, VII: 5.25.

[23]Kak 2001: 3. To Kak, the annual circuit of the horse represented a day of the Sun, and the queen sleeping with the horse's corpse represented the fire of the Sun preserved in the fire of the domestic hearth after it had set. In other words, the *aśvamedha* was once a domestic ritual, which later adopted regal connotations. This 'sanitised' view, that the sacrificial horse *was* the perceived universe, which was *sacrificed to itself* to *rejuvenate itself*, also rejuvenating the Sun (cause of time) and the king's rule in the process, does not adequately explain the politico–military and

The horse sacrifice was widely prevalent in the Eurasian and Mediterranean worlds. The Judeans dedicated horses and chariots to the Sun[24] (though whether for sacrifice or not is unclear), the Greeks sacrificed horses to the Sun on Mount Taleton,[25] and once each year the Rhodians drove a *quadriga* (four-horsed chariot) into the sea (where the Sun slept). In the steppes, the Scythians are attested by Herodotus to have sacrificed horses to their war-god (who he calls Ares),[26] while the *Choushu* Chronicles mention the Turks as sacrificing sheep and horses to Gök Tengri and to their fertility deities, as is still done by the Altai and Sakha people. In an old Sakha rite, the skin of a flayed horse, with skull, vertebra and hooves in place, was hoisted on poles to give the impression of flight.[27] In the *Deer Stone burials* of late second millennium B.C. Mongolia, three horse-heads each were buried in fixed orientation from stone steles, while the great *kurgan* mounds contained multiple horses, some yoked to chariots, ceremonially buried alongside the chieftain. The *Zhou Li* talks of the Zhou king sacrificing the yellow foal to the mountains and rivers of the Four Seas.[28] Several archaeological finds in China have yielded as many as a hundred horses, like the 2,400-Year-Old tomb complex of a noble family of the Zheng state at Henan in China, from the *Spring and Autumn* (770-476 B.C) and *Warring States* (475-221 B.C.) period.[29] The tradition of dedicating the *ema* boards/ placards to the Shinto deity *Kami* persists as stand-in for horse sacrifices that were common at one time. Horse-sacrifice as funerary companion of a departed chief was observed

societal influence of the sacrifice, for which one would examine evidences of horse sacrifices in other cultures.

[24]*The Bible,* King James Version, 2 Kings: 23, 11.

[25]Pausanias, 3.20.4, cited in Stutley 1969: 253–261.

[26]Herodotus 1986: Book I, 216 and Book IV, 59–64.

[27]Anthony and Brown 2000: 75–86 at 80–81.

[28]*Zhou Li*, trans. Xiang Wan, University of Pennsylvania, wanxiang@sas.upenn.edu, Paper 720, Juan 33.

[29] Medrano 2017.

among the Varangian Rus on the Volga by the Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan *c.* 921 A.D.; the chief was not entombed but floated away in a boat, Viking fashion. [30]

The horse sacrifice has been reported from Western and Northern Europe also. The Slavs dedicated their sacrifice to Volos or Veles, and the Balts to Vélinas or Vóls, which names have been shown to be cognate by Maria Gimbutas.[31] The Gallic name HPOMHDVOS (Epomeduos) is etymologically curiously similar to *aśvamedha*.[32] One of the most spectacular of the sacrifices was the Roman *October Equus*, which began with sacrificing to Mars the right-hand horse of the winning pair in a chariot race[33], and was followed by a mock battle between the 'home side' and 'outsiders'. If the home side won, the horse's head was placed on the walls of the palace, while the bleeding tail of the horse was rushed to the royal sanctum and allowed to drip on the altar.[34] Together, the rites are reminiscent of the *aśvamedha* in the *Mahabharata*, where the head was placed on the fire-altar.[35] Though associated with October, Polybius says that originally it was performed before all campaigns.

The actual mode of killing of the horse is important to understand the ritual in the Indian context. The *Brāhmaṇa*s say that the horse is to be despatched with a gold knife, by the queen. This is difficult to comprehend—the only way of killing a robust animal with a knife is to stab it in a vital part or haemorrhage it, but putting a horse in its death throes among the sacrificial

[30] Ibn Fadlan 2005: 63–71.

[31]Zaroff 2005: 75–86; Alexinsky 1983: 293–310; Gimbutas 1974: 87–92.

[32]Creighton 2004: 24; Puhvel 1970: 162, 167.

[33]*Equus bigarum victricum dexterior*, which seems to be similar to the *aśvamedha*, where the requirement for selection of the victim horse is that it *must excel on the right part of the yoke*. See West 2007: 418.

[34]Dumézil, Vol I 1970: 215–216 and 226–227.

[35]*MBh*, VII: 1.43.71, though Stutley says that this was possibly a late addition. Stutley 1969: 253–261.

paraphernalia would not be a convenient thing. Nor would its corpse be in a fit state for the queen to lie next to. Rather, we must look elsewhere for the mode of killing.

Given the crucial role of the queen in the subsequent part of the ritual, it is reasonable to assume that she was involved in the killing of the horse, at least symbolically. In the *October Equus*, the horse was speared to death by the queen.[36] On the reverse of Samudragupta's *aśvamedha* coins appears a standing woman with a spear, which was what may have been used to kill the horse on the obverse. Alternately, in a miniature illustrating the *Rāmāyaṇa aśvamedha* by the mid-seventeenth century artist Sahab Din, the queen (Kausalyā) appears on the left half of the panel as about to decapitate the animal with an upraised cutlass (the blade is too small to be called a sword). On the right half of the same panel she is seen lying with the now slain horse under a sheet; the other elements in the picture, including the several accompanying persons, are common. Depicting a sequence of events of one episode on different parts of one panel was a common technique in storytelling props used by medieval narrators in India. No doubt this panel represents the perception of *aśvamedha* as held in the days of the artist, which was coeval with the *aśvamedha* of Jay Singh II, and is closer in content to the *Brāhmaṇa*s in which the queen kills the horse with a *gold knife*.

We now have two modes of killing—spearing and decapitation—both of which have their associated problems. While spearing could also be extremely messy unless the spear was driven right into the heart, decapitation, though the common mode of despatching kids, cockerel or buffalos in Indian sacrifices today, would require a very robust stroke of a large blade. In modern Indian sacrifices the stroke is usually delivered by a specially selected, powerful male, usually armed with a large blade (*khukri* or *khaṇḍā*), as failure to decapitate in one stroke is considered inauspicious. It is doubtful if such a stroke could be delivered by a woman, that too by a small

[36]Zarroff 2005: 83.

blade as shown in the miniature; probably a woman was specially selected for her power, who then would not necessarily be the queen. Interestingly, in the *aśvamedha* described in the *Jaiminī Bhārata*, the horse is despatched with a sword by Bhīma, the strongest of the Pāṇḍava brothers.[37]

The fact that the head of the horse was placed by the altar in the *Mahābhārata* does not imply that the horse was beheaded—the head of the *October Equus* was also placed on the city wall after it was speared. Probably the horse was beheaded only in the most archaic stages of the rite, as in the unnamed *Ṛg-Vedic* sacrifice where the animal was tethered to the sacrificial post or *vanaspati* representing the world-tree linking the world of humans to that of the gods.[38] Later, decapitation was replaced by suffocation, and the horse was despatched in a special shed or cabin at a distance from the post.[39] The *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* mentions suffocation with a cloth.[40] A similar procedure was followed by the Altai Turks, who strangled the sacrificial horse with logs as late as around 1900 A.D. in a procedure also used by the Ainu in Japan for the bear sacrifice.[41]

It is possible that various styles of despatching of the horse were practiced by different peoples at different times, with a gradual preference of strangulation in the post-Vedic times by when the full paraphernalia of the rituals was developed. This desire to 'quieten' the animal by suffocating it[42] was probably due to the gradual pacification of religion which grew averse to violent episodes that would undoubtedly have been triggered by decapitating or spearing. Such preference is epitomised in the highly Krishnaic plot of the *Jaiminī Bhārata* where the horse is sacrificed to

[37] Koskikallio 1992: 111–119.

[38]Schmidt 1973: 1–39.

[39]Puhvel 1970: 161.

[40]*TB* 3.9.20. It has been suggested that the horse was suffocated with a cloth dipped in clarified butter which, like a plastic bag, denying fresh air to the animal. See Houben 1999: 118 n.21.

[41]Witzel 2012: 395 n.15, 399.

[42] McClymond 2008: 51–54.

Jagannātha and not the Vedic gods, with milk rather than blood flowing out of its neck and the head rising to the sun in a blaze of glory.

Probably the gold knife was ceremonially or symbolically used by the queen, the animal killed by strangulation, and the head removed and placed on the altar.

The killing of the horse was followed by the episode of simulated copulation with the queen, for which the horse had been 'prepared' by being kept away from mares for the entire period.[43] To Karmakar, the purpose of the *aśvamedha* was 'faithfully to preserve' the tradition of bestiality with the horse which, to him, was common and accepted in the ancient world.[44] However, common as bestiality may have been in the past (as it still is in certain parts of the world), it is unlikely that an entire sacrifice would be designed for the sole purpose of preserving it's memory. The mock copulative act with the horse certainly did not represent 'bestiality' as sexual preference but stemmed out of regenerative associations of the horse.

To Margaret Stutley, the sexual act was an old South Asian agrarian fertility ritual involving another local animal which had been replaced later by the horse.[45] Bhattacharya believes that, in its original form it was a priest who performed actual sexual commerce with the queen (to rejuvenate her fertility and thereby that of the realm which, as per Neolithic tenets, was 'owned' by her). Afterwards, the 'priest' was immolated; the horse later substituted the priest.[46]

However, fertility associations of its own were not foreign to the horse, as indicated in various IE material like the *Edda* in Germanic, Norse and Icelandic territory.[47] In Slavic folklore, Jarylo,

[43]Talley 1974: 157–168.

[44]Karmarkar 1949: 332–345.

[45]Stutley 1969: 257.

[46]Bhattacharya 1977: 42 and Bhattacharya 1975: 7–8, 17.

[47]Einarsdóttir 2013: Master's Thesis.

whose return marks the beginning of spring, is slaughtered in the form of a horse at the end of a fertility rite.[48] The Maypole festival at Padstow in Cornwall preserves a very old *Hobby Horse* custom wherein a man wearing a horse-head mask pursues women and drags them behind a large circular cloak, any woman thus taken being expected to conceive soon.[49] The horse's place in fertility symbology is suggested in the Hittite *Code of the Nesilim*, c. 1650–1500 B.C., which prescribes the strictest punishment for bestiality with all animals but not with horses or mules,[50] an exception that is seen as 'tantalising' by Puhvel. While in all the above themes it is the stallion that is involved, a curious 'inversion comes from Ireland where the *king* is involved in intercourse with a *mare* before it is killed, boiled and eaten.[51]

In contrast to the overweening sexual components of most of the horse sacrifices, the *October Equus* and the (unnamed) horse-sacrifice in the *Ṛg Veda* seem not to have any fertility allusions. However, a little examination suggests that the fertility symbology is only apparently absent—it has been suggested by Devereux that the tail, rushed to the altar and allowed to drip in the *October Equus*, was euphemism for the male organ. The tail has only little blood, which would clot by the time it reached the altar, whereas the male organ would become tumescent at the moment of death and retain sufficient blood if tied in time up with a tourniquet.[52] The absence of overt sexual references in the *October Equus* has been explained by Puhvel[53] as a Roman reaction to Etruscan

[48]Matasović 1996: 31–43.

[49]Alford 1968: 122–134.

[50]Zaroff 2005: 82.

[51]As per the *Topographia Hibernia* of Giraldus Cambrensis, the king bathed in the stew of the horse and slurped it up while still dipped in it. See O'Meara 1982: III, 102, for a development of the rite. Also, Puhvel.

[52]Devereux 1970: 297–301.

[53]Puhvel 1970: 168.

overindulgence, an entirely reasonable conclusion about a stern, military people intent on setting themselves apart from their sensuous and rather lurid predecessors.

The unnamed horse sacrifice in the *Ṛg Veda*, as also the *aśvamedha* in the *Mahabharata*, are devoid of any accompanying sexual or fertility allusions. However, Brereton and Jamison have suggested that these elements were very much in existence and only not recorded. This may indeed be a valid observation, as appears when seen *vis-à-vis* two other elements in Vedic material. The first of these is the lurid burlesque in Book X of the *Ṛg Veda*, very similar in structure to the *aśvamedha's* sexual episode, where the monkey Vṛṣākapi, a pal of Indra, copulates with Indra's wife Indrāṇī in her husband's presence in order to rejuvenate his appeal (i.e. to revive *soma* offerings which had been falling out of fashion), before being despatched to the gods.[54] The second is the scripted dialogue with intense copulative allusions appears in the *Ṛg Veda Khila*, like in the *Etaśa-pralāpa* passages (prattle of the sun–horse).[55]

Independently, pastoral communities following free-ranging pastoralism regularly culled or gelded young males, because stallions were difficult to control whereas geldings tended to be fatter, less restive and thus more tractable; killing off young males kept herds more disciplined and manageable. This strategy is supported by the fact that most remains of sacrificial horse across Eurasia and China, including those at Sintashta, were of younger males (and a few senescent females—however, horses are sexually not too dimorphic and some of the identifications may be erroneous). This automatically implies careful selection and preservation of quality males for siring purposes, at once making the stud an icon of fertility and the male horse an element in fertility rituals. Thus, the horse's fertility symbolism in the several mythologies surveyed above is borne out by practical considerations.

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[54] *ṚV*: X.86, see Jamison and Brereton 2014: vol I, 34 and 344, and vol III, 1525–1529.

[55] Witzel 1997a: 395–97.

However, two aspects that need further attention will be considered in the following paragraphs. First, both Book X and the *Ṛg Veda Khila*s are later than the core of the Vedic corpus and are very close or belong to what has been called the *Mantra* period, i.e. the undefined age of transition from the archaic *Vedic* period to that of the *Sūtra*.[56] This was the time when rites of the agrarian substrate were increasingly getting conflated with those of the Indo–Aryans. A direct giveaway of this is the domesticity of Indra in Book X. Indrāṇi appears at only one place outside of Book X, hailed together with several other goddesses in Book I.22, and the peaceable, domestic image of Indra with his wife in Book X is incongruous with the image of Indra as a brawny, beer-quaffing warrior across the *Veda*s, and rather anticipates his image in the later *Purāṇa*s.

It can indeed be said that it was from this substrate, rich in Neolithic fertility cults, that the elements of bestial queen–stallion intercourse was adopted. This Neolithic substrate was not limited to South Asia, and the age-old fertility theme of annual or periodic sacrifice of the priest–king after ritual copulation with a selected virgin or the queen[57] permeated most of populated Europe, West and South Asia. This theme did not have much to do with the horse but the bull—the cult of the Indian temple bull harks back to that of the Apis Bull, which had a copulative element of its own wherein the king slept with the queen next to the corpse of the bull. The bull Nandī is associated with that third of Śiva which is the Neolithic culture god.[58]

It is plausible to agree with Bhattacharya that the horse was later used to replace the priest, who in the most archaic stages of the sacrifice may have been killed after the sacred copulation. In fact, Willibald Kirfel posited that the horse ritual of the invading IA had fused with the extant sacrifice of the human, advancing to support his argument detailed physiological explanation that the organ

[56] Witzel 1997b: 267–68.

[57] As discussed in detail by James Frazer. See Frazer 1963.

[58] His two other thirds are associated with the Eurasian *shaman* Rudra, and the Tibetan or *Bod* ascetic.

of the sacrificed male, grown tumescent at the point of death by suffocation, was prevented from ejaculating with a tourniquet, and that the queen mated with the corpse for offspring.[59] This seems a bit farfetched, as the heavy investment of time and resources based on such a chance factor could easily be brought to nought if there was a misfire, unless a replacement victim was expeditiously found. However, the later killing of the horse by strangulation or asphyxiation holds a clue; asphyxiation causes a penile erection, which may have been the point of sexual intercourse between the queen and the earlier male (who was later replaced by the horse).

However, it would be incorrect to conclude that the sexual element was prima in the sacrifice, and that the *aśvamedha* was horse-oriented only in form but really pre-Aryan in ritual and sexual content. Puhvel posits that rather than the queen–stallion intercourse, the king–mare intercourse, as in the Irish theme described above, was the primary IE format.[60] The themes of the Celtic goddess Epona or that of the birth of the equestrian twins belong to the IE strata of mare veneration.

The Congregational Aspect

While the horse was left free to *roam at will* through the course of the year, several activities were performed at the sacrificial ground which included diurnal offerings to the gods, singing of lauds, and recitals of cycles of 'tales', the *pariplāvana*. In the *pariplāvana*, theoretically ten topics were discussed at the rate of one topic per night, 36 times over, i.e. each topic repeating itself every eleventh day. Some scholars have taken this last to represent the 'national character' of the sacrifice, as the 'ten topics' represented the lore of different communities—demoniac, human, semi-divine and divine—that comprised the nation.[61] This is nothing but a forced attempt to

[59] See Puhvel 1970: 162 for a summary of the argument.

[60] Puhvel 1970: 167. The man-and-mare theme appears sporadically in a few other contexts, like in a Bronze Age petroglyph in Sweden, or in the story of the birth of the Gallic goddess Epona or the IA Aśvins. See West 2007: 418. However, Dexter 1990: 303 n. 38 says that the absence of any finds of stallion bones in Irish archaeological remains may indicate that Cambrensis was really preserving an oral transmission of a pre-Irish date.

[61]Karmakar 1952: 26–40.

rationalise; one had rather delve into the more immediate question: people of what persuasion would have been willing to attend such a yearlong gathering. In other words, which groups participated in these procedures, and why.

The participants may be divided into four groups—priestly staff, laudators, storytellers and audience (if any). Of these, the first two can easily be identified as deputed persons, paid in cash or otherwise recompensed by the sponsor of the sacrifice. The other two groups require greater examination.

Stories and legends (*ākhyāna*s) were major components of entertainment, public instruction, and transactions around evening campfires, each specialised type—narrative, genealogy, didactic tale—serving a specific set of purposes. Stories and tales were supposed to be inviolate, and their transmission guided by strict protocols. And yet they tended to take on lives of their own, spawning variants, not only due to techniques of oral composition and improvisation by redactors to suit local audiences[62] but also due to inadvertent deviations during transmission. Substantial *epos* often grew around single themes. Allied contingents carried back their own experiences from a battle and had their bards, often combatants themselves, compose and use songs at their own courts and festivals, thus preserving versions that could be authentic. An episode of a court intrigue could be developed into a dramatized, didactic story by certain narrators, or a tactical manoeuvre in battle developed into an epiphany (as is quite common in the *Iliad*), by certain others.

Growth of such masses could necessitate periodic rearrangements of the repertories, streamlining stories by approving selected versions, discarding others, appending additional material (whether authentic or inauthentic), teasing material into corpuses, and often aligning with current political or social paradigms. Before democratisation of amusement through mass media, sponsoring of entertainment—ball, soirée, play or acrobatic performance—was a major component

[62]See Lord 1991: 72–103, for techniques of oral composition, and growth of the *epos* surrounding the *Iliad*.

of *noblesse oblige*, and often the main attraction of camps and courts. Such sponsorship could be extended to conclaves of rhapsodes, poets, minstrels, bards and other specialists, providing forums to specialists where they could come across tales from other parts of the world. Such conclaves, to which specialists willingly travelled, were opportunities for sponsored rearrangements and compilation. The *Mahābhārata*, otherwise silent on story-cycles associated with the *aśvamedha*, itself relates that an early version of the epic (the *Bhārata*) had been first recited by the *Sūta* (bard) Vaiśampāyana at Janamejaya's *aśvamedha* at Takṣaśilā;[63] it is reasonable to conclude that the *pāriplava* began as such congregations of narrative specialists.

The above accounts for the sacrificial staff and gathering of bards and travelling minstrels. But who were the audience of these stories? The texts provide one term, the *upadrāṣṭṛ* or onlookers, to be tolerated as long as they did not disturb the proceedings. Does this term suffice? While the rituals and oblations did not necessitate an audience, can we say the same of the laudatory procedures and story-telling cycles also? An examination of the term *medha* itself may help.

To Puhvel, the Gallic name *Epomeduos* was from **ekwo–medhu*, i.e. horse–mead (honey-drink), whereas *aśvamedha* is either from **ek'wo–mad-dho*, i.e. "horse–drunk" or **ek'wo–mey-dho*, or "horse-strength".[64] Putting together these terms associates the sacrifice with *ritual beverage*, and by extension, a sacrificial *libation*. Variously, it has been associated with 'offering, offered animal', 'oblation' or 'fat (*medas*)', rather than with intoxicating drink. The word has other associations, at least phonetically. *Queen Medb*, the Irish goddess of sovereignty whose name means 'one who intoxicates', who seduces a series of young heroes whom she grants sovereignty

[63] Hazra 1955: 190–203. I have discussed elsewhere how in the case of the *Mahābhārata*, unlike that of the *Iliad*, the entire *epos* was progressively compiled, creating the massive, chaotic and self-contradictory epic that we have today. See Bose 2018: 29–31.

[64] **mad-dho* or **mey-dho* (*mádati* – be drunk, or *máyas*, strength), see Puhvel 1970: 164, 167.

(boasting about them to her husbands).[65] This lore, which intrinsically associates drink, virility and sovereignty, is traceable in the curiously convoluted tale of Mādhavi in the *Mahābhārata*, where Mādhavi is a princess who mates with a series of kings (yet retaining virginity), in encounters accompanied by transaction of superlative horses. The tales take one to the legend recounted by Giraldus Cambrensis—the temporal ruler derives sovereignty through sexual association with a mare, or an entity or concept phonetically close to the word *medha* who are in turn associated with the horse.

Hazra had associated *medha* (and *yajña*) with mass-gatherings for revelry and even mass sex, going to the extent of suggesting that the epithet *yajña*-borne, as applied to several legendary personae, really indicates birth from such group-sex events. Communal sex, though gross to outsider eyes, had magico–religious significances like encouraging productivity of farms and grasslands through sympathetic magic and was common in the early world. One aspersion thrown at the Śaka or Scythians by conservative South Asia was that they indulged in *prakāśa-maithuna*. There were other instances of demonstrated public sex in popular gatherings, like in the midday pressing of Soma in one Soma ritual which also has a version of the bantering,[66] and new year celebrations which include, other than chariot races, public sex between two marginal characters, a prostitute and a *Māgadha* man.[67]

[65]Kinsella 1969: 53.

[66]Witzel 1997a: 394.

[67] See Jamison and Witzel 1992: 81, and Witzel 1997a: 398–401. Demonstrated sex was a common element in Neolithic fertility rituals, and survived in the subaltern festival of *caḍaka* (*charaka*) or *gājan* celebrated in many parts of India a month after the vernal equinox where a maypole-like tree was erected, with various apparatuses for swinging and whirling. Its various gory practices (discontinued by order of the government a century ago but still practiced in secret at places) included suspending the body with hooks attached to the flesh and being whirled around; often, a designated and feted couple so suspended copulated while being whirled around the tree.

However, there is not enough evidence to class the *medha* directly as a group sex event. And yet, large gatherings for revelry must not be ruled out—one such 'national' gathering was the ancient Turkic custom (which died out with Islam), wherein thousands of *aul*s (nomad-treks) gathered under their *beg*s and *noyön*s at the Khaqan's *horde* for the sacrifice to Gök Tengri, which included sacrifice of colt and sheep, lighting tens of thousands of fires on the plains, and pouring oblations into them.[68] Possibly in principle, the entire nation (including nobles, herdsmen, farmers and agro-pastoralists) as could make time from economic pursuits, would congregate at such *yajña*s, making the third and largest set of audience–participants.

Such national congregations were possible only in the nomad world of the Turks, that too for short periods when pastures could support them. In the sedentary South Asia where mobility was restricted, it is reasonable to suppose that the core staff of priests and laudators attended through the year, while minstrels and other professionals came and went as per convenience, working out the material. Those with 'nothing better to do'[69] would hang around—the *upadrāṣṭṛ* onlookers. At the end of the year, a larger audience would congregate in a festive culmination of the sacrifice. This model suits the Classical *aśvamedha*s of South Asia; whether this is also true for older periods, i.e. the Vedic and pre-Vedic, is key to understanding the sacrifice.

The Ambulatory Aspect

The third aspect of the *aśvamedha* was the stallion's being let loose to wander at will, attended by four hundred warriors. The manuals even provided for contingencies like sickness, injury, death and even escape; procedures of expeditious anointment of a replacement animal are provided. Repeated assertion that the horse *wandered at will* for a year has engendered the popular notion

[68]Bezertinov 2000: 71–95.

[69] Which of course always is a relative and subjective qualification (!).

that immediately after being let free, the horse galloped with the wind through kingdom after kingdom, ushering in a thorough revision in international relations.

In fact, far from this, a horse if left to its free will would not gallop through countries but graze and amble. If *it was a stall-bred horse owned by sedentary people*, it would not even drift far from its base, and if perchance it did drift away too far, it possibly would not *home* in again (though the horse does find its way back to its stables, it is not a sedentary animal and does not have a keen homing instincts). Thus, its *return* at the end of a year would be a matter of chance, and its return *on the appointed day* a near impossibility. This is a dead giveaway that its *course was guided* (by its escort), which translates thus: powerful rulers could ensure that the horse was driven into desirable lands, while parvenus make sure that it kept well away from hostile ones.

This aspect of the military perambulation of the horse is of utmost importance to understand the real nature and origin of the sacrifice, and will be the primary concern of the rest of this paper, which will try to contextualise the sacrifice to the various environs where it can reasonably be considered to have been conducted.

Contextualising the Aśvamedha

We have seen that the congregational and sacrificial aspects of the *aśvamedha* are well-accounted for by referencing the age-old Eurasian tradition of horse-sacrifice, fertility, and merry-making. However, the military ambulation of the horse for a year's duration seems unconvincing and presents us with a logical problem, as outlined above. To unravel this context and understand the hoary origin of the sacrifice, it is best to compare the evolution of the *yajña* with that of South Asian socio-political formats, which will be done from a closer to a more distant age in the next few sections.

The Aśvamedha in the 'Imperial' Age

As already seen, the late medieval *aśvamedha* of the Rajputana chieftain Jay Singh II of Amber was not the 'typical' *aśvamedha* of a sovereign aspiring to the next higher level of monarchy (by undermining the sovereignty of several other monarchs), but that of a feudatory looking for a semblance of primacy among his peers. In contrast, *aśvamedha*s conducted through most of the first-millennium B.C. up to the classical period, i.e. earlier half of the first millennium A.D., were more hegemonistic in intent, though *parvenu*s also performing the *aśvamedha* on the quiet cannot be ruled out. The beginning of this period saw progressive settlement on the Gangetic plains by peoples who had till recently been semi-pastoral; their *janapada* principalities now started extending on to the Gangetic plains.

The *janapada*s, originally with strong republican/ oligarchic formats, innovated upon authority, gradually developing several types of sovereignty with a tendency towards centralisation and monarchical formats. Among the *janapada*s there emerged the *śoḍaṣa-mahājanapada*s, i.e. the *big-sixteen*, which were more prominent than the others in the push towards grandiosity, and which would in time usher in the (perceived) *Imperial Age* by late first millennium B.C. Concomitant with these development was an increasingly complexifying sacrificial religion, elaborate liturgy and fastidious orthopraxy.

Witzel[70] has shown that these changes had started with, and were sponsored by, the Kuru 'state' associated with the *Mahābhārata*.It may be considered that the disturbed conditions associated with such changes had precipitated the war celebrated in this epic. Religious developments accompanying the changes centred on suppression of the unstable community of *shaman*s and

[70] Witzel 1995: 1–28.

emergence of regimented priesthood specialising in the orthopractic and sacrificial religion.[71] The *Sūtra* and *Brāhmaṇa* texts, manuals for this priesthood, outline the elaborate (and diffused) hierarchy of domestic and communal sacrifices, one of which, quite near the apex, was the *aśvamedha*.

The texts attempt to provide a progression of types of 'kingship'. One such gradation of rulership[72] cited by Kane includes *parameṣṭhyarājya, sāmrājya, bhaujya, svarājya, māhārājya, ādipatyanaya* and *sāmantipriya*.[73] One list of public sacrifices includes the *agnyādheya*, *pūrnāhuti*, *agnihotra*, *darśa-pūrṇa-māsa*, *agrayaṇa*, *cāturmāsya*, *paśubandha*, *agniṣṭoma*, *rājasūya*, *aśvamedha*, *puruṣamedha*, and *sarvamedha*.[74] Three of these sacrifices are intimately linked with progression of 'kingship'—the *rājasūya*, *vājapeya* and the *aśvamedha*, which elevated a ruler progressively from *rājan* to the *samrāṭ* or *cakravartin*. However, it doesn't take much to realise that there is no one–on–one correspondence between gradation of rulership and sacrifices. There is no one exhaustive list of rulership—the list cited by Kane leaves out *vairājya*, *dvairājya*, or *gaṇarājya*, all common political formats. Discrepancies appear in the sequence of promotion—while most texts attest that *rājasūya* elevates to *rājan* or *svarāja*, and *vājapeya* is performed *after rājasūya*, the *Aśvalāyana Śrautasūtra* (IX. 9.19) says that the *rājasūya* must be done *after* the *vājapeya*.

Another such contradiction is that while most texts inform that the *aśvamedha* elevates one to *samrāṭ* or *cakravartin*, and an advanced version of the sacrifice, the *govitāta*, further to

[71] See Bose 2018: 80–81, 108 for a summary of the various discussions on the process, at the end of which the four classes of priest–officiants, the *hotār, udgātṛ, adhvaryu* and *Brāhmaṇa* and the associated changes in political setup.

[72] The term sovereignty, often used by scholars in this context, is best avoided here, because there can be no gradation of sovereignty, all (the biggest and the smallest), being sovereign.

[73] List suggested by Kane. See Kane, III 1973: 136.

[74] *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa,* 5.7.

sārvabhauma,[75] the *Āpastambha Śrautasūtra* says that it was a *sārvabhauma* alone who could perform the *aśvamedha*.[76] Such contradictions make the political implications of the sacrifice suspect, and must be examined in their contexts.

The gradation of regnal titles enumerated above do not indicate only degree of authority, but also its type—there was never a single progression of authority, but several, all varying with time and space. Titles like *bhoja* or *virāṭ*, preferred by rulers of the west and north, indicate greater egalitarian and republican rulership, *samrāṭ*, the preferred title of the eastern realms, suggest greater monarchical authority, and so on. It is pertinent to note that the list of the *śoḍaṣa-mahājanapada*s also varies—later texts including more and more of eastern realms in the list than earlier ones, indicating an imperial tendency in the east. Further, political arrangements were not always geographically separated. Monarchs on the Gangetic plains, not necessarily hereditary, were based in cities[77] from where they maintained relation with the closely affiliated country elite but had sealed themselves off from much of their nomadic affiliates. This same nomadic population in the surrounding countryside could 'pool in' their power to degrees ranging from strongly 'oligarchic' to almost a-cephalous; if strong, they could easily resist the authority of the 'capital' which would fade away outside the city walls. Such a situation is observed in medieval Rajputana where, as Tanuja Kothiyal has shown, ruling classes based in fortress–towns had shrugged off their nomadic past by creating mythical lineages that downplayed their nomadic origins, while their

[75]Pandey 1972: 228–232.

[76]*Āpastamba Śrautasūtra*, XX: 1, 1.a.

[77]Erdosy 1985: 81–109, has shown how many of these cities started as camp–capitals of nomads, given permanency by additional of walls. It is reasonable that while large populations settled the gradually expanding farming tracts, while elite groups and their armies settled near the nodes where produce was exchanged, largely as sellers of protection. In time, their camps acquired permanency with addition of durable walls—Girivraja or Rājagṛha, the old base of the Magadhan monarch, was abandoned as the 'capital' was shifted close to the river, leaving only the walls and tower with scant indication of any civic structure within.

still-ambulatory ‘poor relations’ remained aloof in the Thar.[78] Even for more powerful monarchs who held several cities, the countryside could remain outside control, their authority extending only in tenuous bands along the highways joining these cities.

Such a situation prevailed in 17–18th Century India, when Mughal authority barely extended out of garrison-cities in a countryside largely under Rohilla, Jat and Sikh warbands.[79] Earlier, when their authority used to be more credible, the Mughals employed a curious technique to impress their power over the vast country—the ‘ambling peregrination’ of the imperial camp between the ‘capitals’, ensuring domination of the countryside by advertising authority, in addition to acting as a strategic reserve to fly to the aid of faltering provincial campaigns.[80]

In the age of ambitious *janapada* imperialism, monarchs anxious to extend their hegemony across wider and wider radii could let a specially consecrated horse hang around outside the fortress–capital attended by a well-turned-out escort, daring anyone to stop it. Such an act would indeed oblige powerholders in the countryside to declare their hand, i.e. at least outwardly acknowledge suzerainty and declare loyalty, or make a show of resistance. Their loyalty could be demonstrated through offering of prestation, permitting usufruct, citing sovereigns’ names in charters and land-grants, attending court periodically, and even accepting ceremonial submission. However, it does not take much imagination to see that only such monarchs as were confident of pulling such a manoeuvre off would attempt an *aśvamedha*—in other words, to be acknowledged

[78]Kothiyal 2016: *passim*.

[79]For a study of the complex relation between different types of collocated political structures, see Sharma 2018: 48–60.

[80]Gommans 2002: 101–02. Such peregrination aimed at ensuring continued exhibition of might, and was different in intent from the peregrination of courts for consumption of provincial revenues *in situ*, often necessary in an age when long distance transportation was restricted. This was practiced by many states—in the late first millennium, the Franconian and early German kings moved with their courts from one of his estates (administrated by a *maior*/ *meier* (English *mayor*) to the next.

as *samrāṭ*, one already needed to be a *samrāṭ* for practical purposes. This helps explain the apparent contradiction, as the composers of the texts could have been using either end of this viewpoint.

The argument can be easily furthered. The immense riches required for the sacrifice could be mustered by monarchs of the Gangetic plains more easily than from the more arid parts of the subcontinent. Highly competitive and intent on outdoing one another, they could commission *more complex versions* of the sacrifice, like *govitāta* or *aindra-mahābhiṣeka* (somewhat like the several *dan*s of the Black Belt!), but then again only if reasonably certain of success. Thus, a *sārvabhauma* would not really be *elevated* to that status by the *govitāta*, for he would have already attained that status by military and diplomatic prowess and now merely sought to be *confirmed* in that status. This explains not only the contradictory statement of the *Āpastambha Śrautasūtra*, but also the ceremonial and vestigial military procedure involved.[81]

Aśvamedha and Rājasūya during Early 'State' Formation

The *aśvamedha* in the sedentising and monarchizing context of the Gangetic *janapada*s entailed ritualised military manoeuvres, which is also reflected in another public sacrifice involving the horse, the *rājasūya*, also detailed in *Brāhmaṇa* literature.[82] Among the rites and rituals of the *rājasūya*, many with cosmic significance and including a *soma* sacrifice,[83] are some curiously military ones. Midway through the procedures the priest invites the sponsor to mount a chariot, which is then drawn over short distances once in each of the four cardinal directions. It is also briefly halted next to a herd of cows, one of which is touched with bow and arrow by the sponsor,

[81] Samudragupta of Magadha is associated with several advanced and extremely complex versions of the *aśvamedha*, which were interspersed between his several long-ranging campaigns (for which see Bose 2015: 174–77). These campaigns, directed against the Nāgas (probably Śaka–Kuṣāṇa remnants), Āṭavika kings of Central Indian forests, and rulers of the Deccan, were not directly associated with the *aśvamedha*s which would have been ceremonial affairs.

[82] *ŚB*, V.4.3.1.

[83] *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*: 4.4.

who also discharges an arrow lightly at a man. These motions are followed by yet another curiosity—the priest tosses 400 dice (rather, nuts or seeds), and hands five of these to the sponsor–performer, though the latter does not actually play with them.

It is obvious that these vestigial rites commemorate a cycle of chariot-borne raids to win cattle and wealth, fighting other humans, and distribution of spoils in a dice-game. [84] In classical literature the *rājasūya* is associated with *digvijaya*—conquest of the four quarters (*dig* or direction)—whose descriptions are however formalised, as can be expected in sedentary South Asia where the wide-ranging cattle-raid was difficult, while dicing as a means of determining distribution of spoils or taking other political decisions was obsolescent. The commemorative procedures of the *rājasūya* were retained to sympathetically transfer the pretend-play successes to the sponsor.

Kulke[85] has shown how the older tribal elite used a scaled-down version of the *rājasūya* to subdue the hinterland and surrounding *grāma*s and establish itself as *svarāja* or *own-ruler* in the Gangetic plains newly opened to agrarian settlement. A key concern of the elite was to prevent the highly volatile and migratory settlers from 'running away'. This process led to the elementary

[84] Bhattacharya 1975: 25–28. The aspect of 'dicing', not found elaborated in any textual material dealing with the *rājasūya*, is a fossilized memory of complex dicing procedures practiced among the IA, as by other IE peoples, for various purposes like selection of leader, distribution of property/ spoils and so on. See Haynes and Witzel 2018:1–26 for use of dicing for one such purpose—selection of the leader of the sodality. Such use of dicing is noted in the modern period also—East Ladakh nomads of the Rupshu and Kharnak highlands use dicing to select their seasonal headman or *gobā*, who thereafter uses dicing again to distribute pastures for use of different families. See Hagalia 2004: 12–13. The 'dice' referred to in the *rājasūya* procedure were possibly nuts (of the *vibhīṭaka* (mod. *baheḍā*) tree), or cowrie (*kapardaka*) shells, though in later times cuboidal dice with four operative profiles, with varying numbers of notches or *akṣa*s (eyes) on them, were used (as indicated in the *Mahābhārata*). See Bose 2018: 172–78. The *rājasūya* ritual talks of tossing, casting and handing around and counting the dice, never alluding to their chance property, that the *vibhīṭaka* nut has a nearly even probability of falling on one of its two faces (like the cowrie shell, or a minted coin), suggests that the gaming component in the ritual was obsolete by the time the rituals were codified.

[85]Kulke 1992: 188–198.

state-formation and entrenchment of the *Kṣatriya* feudal over the increasingly 'deracinated' *sva* or *viś*, i.e. the folk',[86] and resembled the late medieval Rajput *bhūmiyāvat*.[87]

Concomitant of these developments was the ouster of the freelancing and unstable *shaman*s, *kavi*, *muni* or *ṛṣi* by a regimented priesthood. Compiling the earliest material, a large part of which was used by the now ousted groups, into an hierarchised set of texts, this priesthood monopolised the lore and developed an elaborate progression of sacrifices from personal and domestic to societal and political. This progression, outlined in the *Sūtra* literature, was designed to promote sponsors from one state of being to another, in personal or political realms, with consequent enhancement in status. Witzel has convincingly shown how this orthopraxis was encouraged by the Kuru state associated with the *Mahābhārata* war, which sponsored the 'centralising' impetus to the sedentisation of the Gangetic plains.[88]

The *rājasūya* is associated with the *Mahābhārata* in a curious way. In the epic, it was a dice game that precipitated events leading to the war. The Pāṇḍavas protagonists, challenged to a game by their Kuru adversaries who were apparently cheating, appear keener to play on despite the stakes being unusually high and the odds ranged against them. Significantly, the game was being played at the concluding ceremony of a *digvijaya* campaign by the Pāṇḍava, which suggests a close relation between this dicing episode and the *rājasūya*.[89] While Shulman[90] has suggested that it was a case of a *rājasūya* ritual gone awry, trapping the Pāṇḍavas, I have elsewhere argued that rather than a ritual, the dice game in the *Mahābhārata*, and the *rājasūya* it was part of, were not yet

[86]Roy 1994: 47–48.

[87]Bose 2015: 199.

[88] Witzel 1997b: 309–13, 323 and Witzel 1995: 11–13. Also, Bose 2018: 275–283.

[89] Van Buitenen 1975: 16–21.

[90]Shulman 1992: 350–65.

ritualised but very real and living ones, and was being played for a share in the spoils of *real* raids.[91] Defeat in the game, allegedly by foul means, led to the reversal of the Pāṇḍavas to warband status, a common fate of nomadic peoples. This possibility, and the desire for share in the spoils of the *digvijaya* (which had been conducted by *Pāṇḍava* arms), would have been reason enough for them to have been keen on playing.

Now, as against the agrarian and rapidly sedentising Gangetic plains discussed in the previous section, the epic was centred on the Indo–Gangetic Divide and its west, an area of arid scrub and grasslands where semi-nomadic groups were more at home whereas on the plains their ambulatory propensities easily diluted, as seen in the transformation of the word *grāma* from its original meaning of *nomad trek* to that of settled village.[92] Sedentisation also meant the dying out of older practices of free-ranging, and animal husbandry transformed to operating out of fixed and satellite cow-pens. Thus, while in the sedentising zone including the Gangetic plains chariot-borne cattle-raids became obsolescent, closer adherence to such operations, increasingly formalised in the *rājasūya*, was feasible on the Indo–Gangetic Divide.

The *Sūtra* literature shows that these, and other sacrifices like the *gargātirātra*, were accompanied by major redistribution of wealth. Older sacrifices were also associated with such transfer of wealth, like the distribution of proceeds by dicing in the *rājasūya* and other *vidatha* ceremonies. However, while archaic *vidatha* potlatches were distributive, i.e. distribution of booty by the successful chief as decided by a game of chance,[93] the regnal sacrifices were more collective

[91]Bose 2018: 148. Probably, the Pāṇḍavas had been commissioned by the Kuru to lead the raids; it is the Kuru chief Duryodhana who presides over the concluding ceremony of the *digvijaya*.

[92]Rau 1957: 51.

[93]The *bhāgadugha*, i.e. sharer of the milk, and *akṣavāpa*, i.e. keeper of the dice, were key functionaries at court.

in nature, the participants first 'voluntarily' depositing wealth which was then redistributed by the king after probably retaining a part, usually a sixth.[94]

To recapitulate, both 'sacrifices' had acquired *regnal* significance on the Gangetic plains. The *rājasūya* was used at an elementary level of state formation, while various levels of the *aśvamedha* advanced aspirations of kings of these settlements to higher notches. Coevally, more archaic versions of the *rājasūya* were retained on the Indo–Gangetic Divide, where less territorial, socio-political structures were better supported. Realms on the Indo–Gangetic plains also performed the *aśvamedha*, but there is little to distinguish these from those of later times and on Gangetic Plains, except possibly in scale. Thus, though we can reasonably conclude that the *rājasūya* had emerged from old raiding procedures by pastoral nomads, the origin of the *aśvamedha* is yet unclear. However, an important lead in the case of the *aśvamedha* is that, unlike the *rājasūya*, it has territorial connotations. The next subsection will cast wider across the early Indo–European world, especially the world of the Eurasian pastoralist, whose representatives in South Asia were responsible for the development of these sacrificial procedures.

Aśvamedha and Rājasūya in the Pastoral World

Pastoral nomads living in the depths of the steppes offered animal products, and services like transport and protection, to settled communities at the edges of pastures, in return for grain and greens (for change in diet) and other luxuries. At times, they even tried to enforce better rates of exchange by *raiding* settled communities, which they even did for stocking up before onset of winters. The name *śāradi* or *autumnal* for the fortress of the aboriginal chieftain Śambara possibly

[94] Bose 2018: 125–26. One epithet of the chief was the *ṣaḍbhāgin*, retainer of the sixth; this may have started with the leader of the raid retaining a sixth of the proceeds, like the retention of a fifth of the proceeds by the Turkic chiefs (*khums*, *peñcik*).

indicates this predilection for raiding prior to winter. It may be said that the raid was the primary format of nomad violence known to the outside world, which was usually at its receiving end.[95]

However, nomads really had an entire range of violence unobserved by the 'outside' world. Much of this violence was endemic, i.e. *below the military horizon*, and included wife-stealing, ambushes and honour-killing for revenge, route, and so on. One glorified component of violence was cattle-rustling, common to all pastoral nomads, and celebrated as *gaviṣṭi* or *desire for kine* in the Vedas. This near-continual preoccupation of nomad was aided by the very ability of nomad wealth to *walk away*.

Conflict over pastures and water sources have also always been a major component of violence within nomads and between nomads and sedentaries. At a lower scale, such conflict involved groups trying to graze and water their herds on the sly on the ranges of other groups, till detected and chased away. This competition, necessitated by peculiarities of nomad ecology,[96] had an indirect territorial component, i.e. of pastures. Exploitation of pastures was determined by distinct pasturing characteristics of the five principle nomad animals—goat, sheep, camel, cattle and horse. Camels, which survive in drier areas and graze while on the move, are most suitable as pack animals. Cattle eat continuously (as they can defer the task of chewing the eaten grass) and also manure the grass. Horses, the nomad prestige animal, is less focused on eating but is very choosy, discarding stretches of rank grass. Weight of cattle and horses tend to damage grass, horses especially trampling moist areas where grass is usually better. Goats are well able to rise on their forequarters and eat the smallest leaves in low and dry undergrowth, making them better suited to

[95]It must not be assumed that all sedentary communities were 'foreign'; Herodotus mentions that only the Royal Scythians were nomadic and the rest largely sedentary. See Sulincourt 1986: Book IV, 18–20. Frachetti has shown how Bronze Age steppe societies were heterogenous and marked by local differences. See Frachetti 2012: 2–38. Roger Blench has discussed the network of exchanges—see Blench 1999: *passim*.

[96]Bose 2015: 240.

scrubland. Further, pastures grazed by cattle or horse can still be used for goat and sheep but not *vice versa*, as the former do not clip the grass too close, while the latter not only do so but also cut the turf with their sharp hoofs. Based on these, and other, considerations, nomad treks in any ecosphere select the optimal combination of animals they would specialise in.

In addition to determining the optimal combination and numbers that any pasture can support, pastures also require to be left un-grazed for certain periods, and at times burnt, so as to rejuvenate. Thus, pasture usage was carefully regulated, with sequence of passage of herds stage-managed. Groups developed migratory circuits, accessing pastures seasonally in the best suited order, along with visiting settlements for residual crops and trade. Various patterns emerged, like loops, oscillation and transhumance, each with variations, depending upon distances between pastures and size of sustainable herds. The rule of the thumb was: sparser the land, the longer the circuit and more dispersed the population.[97]

However, all this held the possibility of fierce and violent competition, nomad concern over land being not *ownership* but *freedom to move*. The idea is reflected in the preference for wide open space (*uru-gavyūti, u(ru)loka*), as opposed to discomfort with spatial narrowness represented in the word *aṁhas*.[98] Nomads have tended to react violently if they see this freedom under threat.[99] While movement of treks between pastures was led by family or clan heads guided by oracles, who could be the same individual, certain agencies enforced adherence to the protocol of pasture usage.

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[97]Khazanov 1994: 51.

[98]Gonda 1957: 33–60, and also Jurewicz 2010: 47–60. *Aṁhas*, close to the root of Germanic *angst* and Latin *angustus*, fell out of use in later Sanskrit literature. This discomfort and concomitant psychological disruptions are reflected in the concept of *diti* versus *aditi*, i.e. bound versus unbound earth, in Vedic literature, and preoccupation with *mukti*, i.e. liberation, that marks later South Asian philosophy.

[99] Ndebele disaffection with the fencing off of their grasslands led to the *Second Matabele War*. Even today, Fulani herdsmen driven southwards by climate-change to the marginal reaches of their traditional ranges find their grasslands taken over by southern farmers, and lock with them in deadly conflict (which is further intensified by the rapid growth of Islamism among the Fulani).

Among Mongols, this role was discharged by the *beg*s, who got the use of the best pastures in return. Along with the several 'appointments' in *Vedic* sources—*grāmaṇi*, *viśpati* or *jaspati*—, there also appears the *vrajapati* which translates as *master of pastures*, who possibly discharged a similar function. The arrangements made on sharing of pastures between and within groups were inviolate; among the IE it was taken as guaranteed by Mitra, lord of contracts or alliances and hailed as grass-land magnate. Adherence to commitments was essential for stability in the pastoral world where there was no formal policing, and stolen access to pastures, just as indiscriminate raiding, needed to be punished. Thus, while Mitra enforced verbal commitments on pain of extreme punishment, other 'personae' were also important to this sharing arrangements, viz. the Āditya-class social gods Bhaga (lot) and Aṁśa (share), who were also important in the dicing procedures.[100]

Powerholders that enforced pasture usage protocols were socially superior, but stratifications in pastoral society was never permanent due to perishable nature of nomad wealth. Nomad wealth, impossible to accumulate beyond a point, could get marked down, dispersed or destroyed easily, by one blizzard, attack of wolves, an epidemic,[101] famine or invasion.[102] Thus, while powerful families tried to retain their position and privileges (at times though usually not by brutal means), a pervading *equality of uncertainty* rendered pastoral society highly egalitarian, to the point of

[100] Foltz 2013: 161–87. This is also why nomad conquerors, down to the pre-modern age, never encouraged betrayal or treachery in their nomad enemies (though they did so among cities they were attacking). Traitors in the camps of nomad enemies were also tortured to death after victory, as proliferation of the habit of treachery would tear nomad society, built on covenants and unspoken agreements, to shreds. No wonder Mitra was always called upon to guarantee treaties. Genghis Khan brought the various tribes under the label of Mongol by outlawing cattle-raiding and modifying the ancient Mongol custom of blood-brother, the *nökör*, to create a dampening influence on tendencies to dispute his covenant. See Bose 2015: 242 for a summary of the discussions on the *nökör*.

[101] The 1967–68 blizzards killed 3.8 million head of cattle in Mongolia, altering overnight the fortunes, and social positions, of countless septs and families. See Staar 1970: 599.

[102] Jagchid 1970: 35–80.

being a-cephalous. This situation is reflected in Zarathustra's passionate decrial of the endlessly feuding nomads, evident in texts like the *Videvdad*. [103]

In this nomad world permitting endless feuding, anyone could aspire to status.[104] In Afghanistan, anyone as can gather five armed followers struts about as *malik*, while each valley has a 'commander' (equipped today with Kalashnikovs and SUVs as against bows and horses of yore), who considers himself equal to the greatest lords on earth. Such social conditions spurred pastoral groups to graduate to warband, then chiefdom and finally empire, all of which tended to be transitory and lose shape the moment promise of further gain from raids disappeared.[105]

We have seen that the elementary form of nomad violence was the cattle-raid or *gaviṣṭi*, and raid on settlements for goods (and may be also cattle). At the other extreme of the violence was the big 'empire-building' (in so far as extant communications systems and logistic sustainability at any age would permit) campaigns, prototypes of which is probably represented in the Vedic word *saṁgrāma*, i.e. coming together of the treks, when nations would jostle with one another. We will now see where the types of violence associated with the *aśvamedha* and the *rājasūya* feature on this spectrum.

In their original format, cattle-raids were conducted on foot with ancient herdsmen–hunter's weapons, viz. club, sling, bow and arrow.[106] More elaborate and sustained raids over longer ranges,

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[103] The religion preached by Zarathustra elevated Ahura Mazda, one of the early Iranic Trinity alongside Mithra and Anāhitā (or variously male gods like Aryaman in parallel traditions), to near monotheistic proportions. See Carnoy 1917: 58–78. It is significant to note that while Ahura Mazda was supreme deity of Zoroastrian Achaemenids, Iran became strongly Zoroastrian only under Sassanian encouragement since the third century. Several Iranian peoples remained marginal to Iranian society and far more nomadic and pastoral in nature. These groups, like the Parthians, retained the veneration of Mithra as their primary religious expression. See Foltz: 168.

[104]Kradin 1996: 11–15.

[105] See the discussion in Biran 2005: 45–47 *et passim* for such rapid rise and fall of nomad 'empires', based on the expériences of the Qara Khitai along the Chinese frontier.

[106] Boyce 1987: 513–14. These operations were possibly conducted on foot, as were similar cattle-rustling operations among Savanna groups, primarily sodalities like the Masai *Morani* or Turkana

their spoils (cattle and luxuries) apportioned by dicing in *vidatha* ceremonies,[107] would mean the rise of new *rājan*s or warlords. The emergence of such *rājan*s, a quintessential element of steppe polity, is acknowledged by the *rājasūya*, whose vestigial military rites including the *digvijaya* has a major role for the chariot. It would not be erroneous to posit that development of the raid and the consequent escalation of warfare above the military horizon (discussed earlier) were closely associated with the chariot, though these armies were yet far from matching the phenomenal operating ranges of nomad cavalries of the future.

The steppes did possess captive-wheel technology, as seen in finds of wagons, and chariot-relics *c.* 2200 B.C. in graves in Southern Urals. These early chariots were not sturdy, and probably used in ceremonial and ritual role including conveyance of the dead to the otherworld (in addition to numerous grave chariots coeval Eurasia, numerous petroglyphs of chariots have been found on boulders in high places across the Mongolian Altai which probably were sky-burial sites[108]). It is unlikely that these proto-chariots[109] could have been used for combat. In contrast, solid-bodied wagons with four wheels made of planks (not spokes), were already in military use in Mesopotamia. The tactical options available with these vehicles were limited to repositioning archers and infantry, or for mopping up routing infantry, because, drawn by equids like onagers and half-asses whose obstinacy, high-pain threshold and thick necks, coupled with the large signature of the vehicle itself, gave them restricted agility. However, they could easily provide the

nGingoroko. See Bose 2018: 87–88 for a review of such operations, which are still the main cause of violence in the Great Lakes region.

[107]For some discussions on the *vidatha*, see Kuiper 1975: 123–132.

[108] Lymner 2000: 311–321.

[109]The narrow axles and elongated superstructure of the Sintashta chariots entail poor fore–aft stability, and render sharp turns difficult.

idea of an equid-drawn *fighting* vehicle, which when carried across the Caucasus–Elburz frontier, would have rapidly proliferated across Eurasia leading to the militarisation of the steppes.[110]

Such militarisation is evident in two events in the second millennium, viz. social turmoil among the Zoroastrians whose ordered pastoral world is threatened by chariot-borne raiders,[111] and the rise of a series of chariot-borne powers in West Asia with significant ethnic component from the steppes at least among their elite. Against the light, speedy, horse-drawn chariots of these powers, the clumsy, four-wheeled wagons of Mesopotamia stood little chance. I have argued elsewhere that the Bharata elements in South Asian history were an outcome of the same process.[112] Against the backdrop, the horse, which was the motive-force behind this chariot-based 'military revolution', naturally became the prestige animal of the steppes. It was associated with prowess, authority and vitality; it became a *cash crop* whose use as food became ritualised, and it rather became an elite trade component.[113] It is in this development that the foundation of the *aśvamedha* is to be sought.

Though choosy eaters as mentioned above, the steppe horse is hardy and adapted to grazing, even able to sniff out underlying grass and twigs and dig through snow to get at them, things that stall-kept or paddocked horses could not do. However, requirement of pastures was large, each animal estimated to need 10 acres of grazing a month, that too if grass was succulent.[114] The impact

[110] This must be taken cautiously—the chariot was a resource-intensive structure, and though horse was widely available in the steppes, wood and metal were available in sufficient quantities only where the steppes marched with forests and mountains. Thus, the core areas of any chariot-based steppe powers had to be borderland regions—the Urals, the Elburz–Caucasus frontiers, North China, or Bactria—unlike later-day nomad cavalries that could emerge from the depths of the steppes.

[111] Boyce 1987: 508–526.

[112] Bose 2018: *passim*.

[113] The exchange strongly favoured the horse. Sinor has shown how the Uighur duped the Chinese in the horse trade. See Sinor 1972: 175–176.

[114] Clawson 1950: 55.

of this stupendous logistic requirement can be gauged from the experience of later nomad cavalries, whose operations, and even their very nature, were dictated by availability of grasslands. Access to pastures determined courses of operations—in the Mysore Wars, Tipu burnt all pastures on the appreciated approach route of the English, reserving certain concealed pastures for his own use, but Cornwallis got to these concealed pastures first and completely outmanoeuvred the Sultan. In Iran, the Il Khan repeatedly deferred his expedition to Syria as the pastures had been scorched by the enemy. Even composition of armies could change—Attila could not operate outside Hungary, the westernmost limit of the steppes, only as infantry,[115] while unable to find sufficient pastures, the Tatar Golden Horde had to evacuate Hungary expeditiously in 1303.

Pastures, in other words, were strategic resources. Mongol quartermasters marched ahead of their armies, requisitioning pastures.[116] In Zhou China, the *Mushi*, i.e. *chief of pasturelands*, ensured upkeep of pastures, presiding over their distribution to lower officials and controlling access to them. Animosities over pastures was a longstanding feature of various polities, and have continued to the present day—access to the Nawur pastures in Afghanistan is the real reason for the intense rivalry between the Pashtun *Kuchi* nomads and the Shia Hazara.[117]

Such competition over pastures can be expected to have gone back to before the great nomad cavalries, to a time when the horse, larger and stronger thanks to its plastic shape and effects of selective breeding, and yoked to the war-chariot, was increasingly becoming an elite status symbol. The fragile ecology of the steppes, ordered by the protocol guaranteed by Mitra (and associated entities) as discussed above, would now have come under increasing strain over the question of

[115]The Turks often relied on foot soldiers. See Sinor 1972: 171–183; Lindner has shown that the armies of Attila in Europe were no more a nomadic horse-archer army, but resembled the infantries of Europe with a small cavalry contingent. See Lindner 1981: 3–19.

[116]Sinor 1972: 181.

[117]Mohammad, cited in Ferdinand 2006: 193.

grazing protocols. One way of challenging extant protocols was to let loose a horse to *select* its own grass, its passage guaranteed by a band of warriors.[118] Groups able and willing to take military risks could realign their annual circuit of migration by following their free-ranging herds, or one ceremonially consecrated horse, from pasture to pasture. In this rearrangement of protocols of passage, adversarial groups and herds encountered in newly claimed pastures would not essentially ousted—total of horses and men any pasture could support was constant—but absorbed, bringing tribes into temporary, cosmopolitan conglomerations.[119] As groups with better control over the supplies of the strategic resource of the horse could be more pugnacious, they could launch further cycles of raids and spoilage.

Circuits of such annual peregrination of any tribe would culminate at its original pastures, bringing one back to the theme of year-long ambulation culminating at the starting point. At such times, the entire nation, jubilant if it had been successful in rearranging the pastures to its advantage, would congregate as in the case of the Turkic sacrifice to Gök Tengri, when the horse was offered up to the gods. Several aspects of the final sacrifice suggest that these two themes—the yearlong peregrination of the horse culminating in a congregation at the start point, and its ceremonial immolation—that were formalised as the *aśvamedha*. Firstly, it was not a single horse that was released, but a specially consecrated one accompanied by a hundred other horses. This arrangement can be reasonably taken to indicate, for the sedentary people of the Gangetic plains

[118]The best grasslands were already controlled by big men whose men guarded them. See Hyland 2003: 23. Also see Kelekna 2009: 113–16.

[119]Rearrangement of pastures and temporary hierarchy of tribal loyalties were the reasons for the endless kaleidoscopic shifts and renaming of tribal alliances that are discernible in early Vedic texts, as also seems to have occurred across medieval to pre-modern Central Asia. For instance, the Yue Chi was not one tribe at all but a conglomerate of several (possibly five) autonomous hordes or *yabghu*s, of which the Guishang/ Kiu-Shuang/ Kushan managed to oblige the others to *also use* the Kushan identity. See Bose 2018:141–142 *et passim* for a discussion on the subject.

who developed the rituals of the sacrifice into its final form, a memory of the entire free-ranging herd owned by the tribe, led by one specially consecrated horse.

The second pointer is the composition of the armed escort (*aśvagoptar*, *aśvarakṣitar*), which, as mentioned above, included a hundred warriors of four types—*rājaputra*, *kṣatriyaputra*, *sūtagrāmaṇiputra* and *kṣattar-putra*. The first two types indicate princes 'of the blood' who are likely to succeed and princes who are unlikely to succeed,[120] and the last two suggest fifty youngsters each from the communities of *sūta* (charioteers and (also) bards), *grāmaṇi* (trek-leaders who were *viś*, i.e. tribal commoners), *kṣattar*, i.e. flesh carvers, and *saṁgrahītar*s or charioteers (cf. *sūta*). The task of the escort was to prevent the horse from turning backwards (which would counter the purpose of the sacrifice), keep it from mating with any chance mare, and protect it from enemies who may try to arrest its progress. However, the briefest examination of the organisation of the escort as outlined in the texts reveals that it was tactically unviable. Not only are the tactics used for protection of the horse (if any at all) unclear, another reading of the text gives a formal, impractical, and rather meaningless description of the equipage—the *rājaputra*s were armoured, the *rājanya*s (the second class, another name) bore quivers, the third bore arrows and the fourth were armed with staves. If the first group wore armour, and the second and third carried the quiver and bows respectively, who carried the bow? If the first group carried the bow also, did they really require two more people to carry their quivers and arrows? Warriors certainly were accompanied by 'lances' to carry their equipment, and do other scouting or guarding work for them, but such high-profile companions do not indicate a lance. Also, if the second and third groups carried only quiver and arrows, i.e. ammunition, how were they themselves armed? So, the fourth group was armed with staves alone? And how were they even mobile?

[120] The *rājaputra* are called *talpya*, i.e. born in wedlock (Teshima 2014: 34). The second group has also been called *ugra-arājan*, i.e. not-ruler, and *n'ābhiṣecya* or unsuited for consecration. See *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra*, XVI:10.

That the construct is only formal and ritual is seen in the ritual actions of each group in sprinkling the horse with water from different directions during the dedication ceremony before setting the horse free (*aśvotsarga*).[121]

The situation is further confused by drawing references to the *ratnin*s, i.e. the twelve 'gems', or primary officials associated with the court.[122] It has been pointed out that in addition to the three classes of queens (who would participate in the mock-bestiality episode), the horse-guard draws on five more of the *ratnin*s, i.e. the *rājanya*, the *sūta*, the *grāmiṇi*, the *kṣattar* and the *saṇgrahitar*. Now, it is nowhere clear if by *ratnin* entire classes were meant, or identifiable individual appointment-holders, viz. *senāni* or *akṣavāpa*. It is likely that like the *senāni*, *akṣavāpa*, and the three queens, the others were also select individuals at the court of the chiefs, like the herald (*sūta*) or the chief's charioteer–buddy (*saṁgrahyātṛ*). By this logic, the *kṣattar*, *saṁgrahitar*, *sūta* and *grāmaṇī* were select individuals in the chief's *cabal*.[123] So, whence fifty individual *ratnin*s each of these four classes? Alternately, if fifty professional flesh carvers enrolled into the guard, how were they *ratnin*s?

It is obvious from the inconsistencies that in the mature form of the sacrifice, the escort only had ritual significance and vestigial military role; rivals would try to interrupt and 'pollute' the sacrificial venue rather than actually arrest the horse. However, the escort components can be

[121] Teshima 2014: 22–27, where the directions in which the four group stand in the water and sprinkle the horse with water as crucial significances.

[122] Twelve are usually counted; *TB*: 1.7.7, which includes the *brāhmaṇa*, *rājanya*, *mahiṣī* (chief queen), *vāvātā* (favourite queen), *parvṛktī* (discarded queen—how utterly embarrassing for her), *senāni* (army chief), *sūta* (bard/ charioteer), *grāmaṇī* (trek-leader), *kṣattar* (flesh carver), *saṁgrahyatṛ* (charioteer), *bhāgadugha* (food, more likely milk, distributor) and the *akṣavāpa* (dice super).

[123] *Saṁgrahyātṛ* was the charioteer, called so because he was expected to leap down and collect the spoils (armour, weapon, jewels) of an enemy whom his companion the warrior had just felled. The *kṣattar*, flesh carver, like the *bhāgadugha* (food/ milk distributor), were officials who distributed the shares, possibly determined through dicing under the presidency of the *akṣavāpa*.

viewed along two perspectives. Along the first, we see trek leaders under nobles, accompanied by charioteers and flesh carvers, indicate a representative sample of the tribe. Along the other line, we find the military nature commemorated by armour, quivers and arrows (and thus bows), chariots, and footmen with staves, a close image of a pre-cavalry nomad tribal host.

The third pointer to the tribal and migratory aspects of the *aśvamedha* is highlighted in a curious night ritual of the *Taittirīya School* that had been pointed out by Teshima, wherein food offerings were made using certain apparatus. A fort-like structure (*pur*, *devapur*) was constructed around and enclosing the fire altar, into which food offerings were made through the night by *Brāhmaṇa*s standing atop four carts (*indraṇas*, carts of Indra), with the help of elongated ladles. Both structures, fort and cart, are unconvincingly tall at 21 *aratni*s or eight meters,[124] but their very references are important. The concept of *pur* or *pura* has been alluded to above in the context of autumnal raids by nomads. Rau has suggested that the Vedic *pur* indicated circular (or oval) structures with concentric walls of mud and underbrush, which well-resembles the settlements of the Southern Urals with which the chariot graves of Sintashta are associated. Probably, such structures had started as hastily constructed defensible positions at times of conflict, becoming popular as warfare rocketed above the military horizon.

Stuhrmann has, in contrast, posited that *pur* were emplacements of the *enemies* encountered by the Aryan nomads, and were associated with swarthier settlers that determinedly resisted the advance of the nomads. He associates *pur*s with stone-built positions of the western mountains (Afghanistan today), and fortified cities of the Indus, which were of course built of wood and mud brick. Though stone was used in the construction of Afghan fortresses, most of the defensive walls in Afghanistan, including walls of villages, are of concrete-hard mixes of clay and gravel, locally

[124] Teshima 2005: 1003.

known as *pakhsa*.[125] However, before the nomads encountered these defences, they had to deal with another system of resistant fortifications at the Balkh frontier.[126] Curiously, the complex altars and hearths of many mature-period sacrifices, including *tantric* fire rituals, appear as microcosms of the complex layout of the BMAC fortresses, which is tantalising when seen in the context of a *pur* superimposed on a Vedic sacrificial hearth (grown increasingly large and complex during the *Mantra* period).

The exact meaning of the *pur* need not constrict any discussion. Both Rau and Stuhrmann are correct—the word *pur*, part of the vocabulary of people who had possibly innovated the concentric circular defences, would naturally be used by them, who were not philologists but herders, for any construction for similar purposes encountered, be it in the BMAC, Afghan mountains, or the Indus plains, just as the word 'fort' is being used easily for all formats of defensive architecture in this paper. The real question is, why would the offerings of food items into the fire be channelled through a fort-like structure—and is it rather not more logical that forts that were made offerings to were of the 'own side' than those of the enemy?

The exact nature of interaction between the *pur* and the cart, i.e. the significance of the offerings made from the top of the latter to the former, requires further enquiry, but closely point to the world of the nomads where entire nations followed their herds on carts and wagons, and had ambivalent relations with fortified settlements. The hundred horses, the tribal cross-section discernible in the curious (and unconvincing) composition of the horse-guard, and the association with fortresses and wagons in the night ritual (which was for some reason not developed much in

[125] Parpola 2002: 233–324 (esp 260–273). The constricted valleys of Afghanistan dominated by *pur*s are good candidates for the adjective *aṁhas* discussed above.

[126] See Bose 2018: 61–65 for a discussion on encounters with the Bactria–Margiana Archaeological complex (BMAC) and its fortresses like Dashli, Togolok, Gonur or Namazga.

alternate schools)[127], suggest the movement of the entire nomad tribe in the wake of their herd. That the *aśvamedha* did not specifically have military associations independent of the migration is seen in the formalised role of the chariot, which is once driven by the sponsor into the water in one of its culminating episodes. There is no apparent significance of this drive, unlike the chariot drives in the *rājasūya* and the *vājapeya*.[128]

Summary and Conclusion

In light of the preceding discussions, it may be said that priestly groups developed the complex ritual edifice of the mature *aśvamedha* by weaving together the indirect territorial aspect of tribal ambulation between pastures, with memory of attempts to realign the circuits of such migration, and generic procedures for dedicating and sacrificing horse[129] common across Eurasian cultures. This essentialist competition over pastures had grown more intense with the rise of the horse as a prestige animal, which was closely associated with the endemic steppe cattle-raid growing in intensity with proliferation of chariot technology. The diffused nature of leadership in steppe warbands grew more focused and organised, as seen in the age-old contest of African pastoralists.[130]

[127] The apparatus used in the night ritual are also unconvincing—an eight meter tall square structure superimposed over the altar would be narrow and highly unstable, as the altar, despite its appendages like the wing or the tail, would be far less than eight meters across. Also, it is unlikely that functional carts were ever eight meters high, and the ritual structures would have been closer in appearance to the pagoda of Jagannatha. Variously, the interpretation of *aratni* is wrong.

[128] Teshima 2009: 1145, 49.

[129] As recounted above, the horse was dedicated on many occasions with diverse purposes. See *ŚB*: XIII.5.4 enumerates several instances of horse sacrifices, each with diverse intent and purpose. Though all of these are called *aśvamedha* in the text, they need not have been the same procedure. Existence of such generic horse sacrifice is indicated in the vivid descriptions in two passages of the ṚV (I. 162 and 163) which do not specifically call them *aśvamedha*.

[130]Developed by Kelly and Evans–Pritchard. See Kelly 1985: *passim*, and Evans–Pritchard 1940: *passim*.

Once translocated to South Asia, the military environment changed. The expeditionary cattle-raid was possible on the arid Indo–Gangetic Divide where the *rājasūya* remained more relevant, as also discernible from the *Mahābhārata*. On the Gangetic plains, the *rājasūya* was used more for the early phases of establishment of 'states'. In contrast, the more 'territorial' aspects of competition over pastures was arranged into the *aśvamedha*, which was used by monarchs to dominate wider and wider stretches of country, anticipating the Mughal imperial peregrination. Later, even this changed, the ritual aspect of the sacrifice now overriding and the escort losing all semblance of a tactically viable military unit or formation.

Parallelly, the horse, which had fertility connotations of its own, amalgamate with the Neolithic fertility cults (bull, priest–king) popular in this agrarian realm, replacing the priest–king who was killed after ritual intercourse with the queen. Sacrifice of the male human stud had prevailed till recently in many agrarian realms, as discussed at length by Frazer. Till not many centuries ago, the Bishnoi allowed such a selected stud access to all women of the community for twelve years, after which he was killed, and a successor replacement installed. Indications of this comes from the *aśvamedha* horse's fertility aspect, and the *puruṣamedha*, a supposed version of the *aśvamedha* where a human was killed. To Puhvel, the *aśvamedha* was not the toning down of the human sacrifice as is often supposed, and the two sacrifices were independent, with human victims usable to upgrade the sacrifice. Puhvel cites and instance in which Caesar had some mutineers dispatched in a manner similar to that of the horse in the *October Equus*.

The changing nature of society on the Gangetic plains is also reflected in the congregational aspect of the *yajña*, which had celebratory and distributive components. In the sedentary, agrarian plains, wealth acquired greater non-perishable components (grain, stuff, precious metals, in addition to dairy products) and could increasingly be tapped off. The *yajña* now afforded opportunity for collection of revenues for *in situ* consumption by state functionaries and provincial

armies, thus actually aiding state-formations, as against the argument of experts like Romila Thapar to whom expensive sacrifices *impeded* state-formation by wanton destruction of wealth.

The 'state' here was, however, not as we know it, but closer to the Neolithic dispensation where sovereignty was held by priests who made it a point to underline their independence of the king whose authority they barely acknowledged. In the *rājasūya* manual, the priest proclaims: *This is your king, O Bhārata* [meaning here the subjects of the king], *but Soma is the king of us Brāhmaṇas*.[131] Indeed, priests considered it their duty to 'ensure' that kings discharged their duty of ensuring lasting prosperity of his subjects by performing increasingly complex *yajña*s, thereby making the *yajña* an end in itself, the *raison d'etre* of the universe to keep the universe going. Even later forms of the sacrifices are marked by this domination. Older versions of the *aśvamedha* were *Kṣatriya*'s sacrifice,[132] wherein dedication to Indra, i.e. *kṣatra*, preceded that to *Brahma*. However, deriding that such 'reversed' dedication was like a *pratiloma* marriage of *Kṣatriya* with *Brāhmaṇa*,[133] the ascendant class of priests replaced Indra (*kṣatra*) with Prajāpati (*Brahma*). In the new litany, Prajāpati 'assigned other sacrifices to other gods but assigned it [the *aśvamedha*] for himself'.[134]

Such ascendance of the priest resulted in the obsolescence of the *pāriplava*. Employment of *Brāhmaṅa* and *Kṣatriya* bards, a throwback to an age when bard–charioteers or *sūta* was an open calling, fell out of favour as *Brāhmaṇ*s grew too conscious of their position, considering it an affront to protocol to praise *Kṣatriya*s.[135] The *pratiloma* connotation of the original sacrifice

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[131]*TS*, I: 8.10, *VS*, 9.40.

[132]*ŚB*, XII: 4.1.

[133]Hazra outlines the convoluted series of justifications; see Hazra 1955: 200–201.

[134]*ŚB,* XIII: 2.1; Varuṇa was earlier the main deity of the *aśvamedha*, who had in turn taken it over from Dyāus, the Indo–Aryan Sky-God. See Eliade 1996: 96.

[135]Hazra 1955: 196.

(*kṣatra* before *brahma*) was now used to degrade the *sūta*'s social position—they were now rendered offspring of such a *pratiloma* marriage.

In this milieu, the king was made to graduate ritually through sacrifices, gaining not only in the political world but also in the otherworld, assured by the manuals that he would gain overlord-ship over and the merit of all that he heard in the story-cycles.[136] These developments were strongest in the affluent Gangetic heartland, where appeared extremely elaborate forms of the sacrifice, said to be capable of ruining the performer, i.e. *utsanna*.[137] At the same time, different political intents, compounded by diverse nature of 'kingship' and sovereignty, led to unsatisfactory and contradictory attempts by formulators in establishing a progression of the sacrifices. So important did the ritual aspect of the sacrifice become that rivals who wanted to prevent completion of a sacrifice now tried to do so not by militarily obstructing the horse, but by defiling the sacrificial ground. Needless to say, the reward for the intense complexity was the encouraged munificence of the king.

Such developments, a long way from the egalitarian world of the steppes, were shunned by the new ideals of the Axial Age in the early first millennium. This is reflected in the movements of the Buddha, the Jina and others of *sāṅkhya* persuasion which offered cheaper alternatives to salvation like penance, worship through flower, leaf and water, or an alternate heaven, *vaikuṇṭha*, which did not require expensive *yajña*s that were necessary to attain Indra's *svarga.* The *Mahabharata* recommends that it is better to sacrifice with grain or millet cakes.[138]

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[136]*ŚB*, XIII: 4. 3.1.15

[137]'Who knows ... if all is done or not done,' frets the sponsor–performer *TS,* VII:1.5 for how expensive and complex the sacrifice had become. Also see, *ŚB*, XIII:1.5.

[138]*Mbh*, XIV: 89–92.

The paper has not delved into the *vājapeya*, whose ritualised race of 17 chariots wherein king's chariot was made to win was a throwback to a hoary age, an amalgamation of the funerary chariot race and the requirement of chiefs to periodically prove their prowess.[139]

[139]In addition to homoeopathically rejuvenating the Sun's course, the *vājapeya* represented the funerary chariot race where the fallen hero's arms and equipment, said to have magical powers, were contested for. Also, Pelops won the hand of Hippodamia by defeating her father in a chariot race; the old gentleman had formed a habit of defeating all candidates for the hand of his daughter, cutting off their heads and displaying them in the arena.

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