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Abstract

This study discusses the functions of the three *mahāvīra*-vessels in the Vedic *pravargya*-ritual. Some scholars have described the two vessels that are not employed in the *gharma*-offering as “spare vessels”, for use if the main vessel breaks, but this is questionable. It is suggested that their primary function is rather linked to the common Vedic theme of triads.

Aim of the study

The classical *pravargya*-ritual,¹ as described in the Vedic *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas*, and *Sūtras*, is centred around the fashioning of a clay-vessel, which is then consecrated and lauded as *mahāvīra* ‘great hero’. This vessel is used for making offerings of *gharma* ‘warm’ milk-and-*ghī* to the Aśvins, which is a ritual referred to already in the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*. But there are two more vessels/*mahāvīras* in the ritual: They look the same and are made in the same manner as the first one, but are not subject of laudation or used for the offerings. In the texts, the three vessels are referred to as “the first, the second, the third” (*prathamā* [...] *dvītiya* [...] *trītiya*) (*Kaṭhāraṇyaka* 3.219; *Āpastambaśrautasūtra* 15.4.1; *Bhāradvājaśrautasūtra* 11.2.24). *Kaṭhāraṇyaka* 3.219 also speaks about the *mukhya* ‘main/chief/head’ *mahāvīra* when referring to the first one. The texts are not clear about the function of the two other *mahāvīras*. Are they simply spare ones, to use if the first one breaks, as some have suggested, or do they have other functions? That is what the present brief study aims to determine.

What to do if a vessel is broken

Hillebrandt refers to the two other *mahāvīras* as “Reservetöpfe” (1897:135), Griffith “two inferior cauldrons kept in reserve” (1899:294), van Buitenen “spare pots” (1968:59), Houben “spare” vessels (*Taittirīyāraṇyaka* 1991:5, 55),² but such a function is not obvious from the Vedic literature. Eggeling writes that “[o]nly the first of the three pots is [...] actually used; unless it gets broken by accident” (1900:454), which is true for the account in *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (M 14.3.21f.), but the same text also states that a new *mahāvīra* must be made: The priest offers *ghī* with formulas; then he makes a new vessel from clay ‘lying near’ (*upa-śaya*),³ which is mixed with powdered clay.⁴ Then he should perform (the ritual) with a firm one ‘of the two (vessels) lying near (or ready for use)’ (*upaśayayor*) (14.3.2.21).

In *Āpastambaśrautasūtra* 15.17.8 we read that if (the main) *mahāvīra* breaks one should repair it by joining the pieces together with formulas (van Buitenen 1968:145), rather than use one of the other vessels. Similarly, *Bhāradvājaśrautasūtra* 11.17.10 and *Pañcaviṃśabrāhmaṇa* 9.10.1 states that the atonement for a broken *mahāvīra* is to touch the vessel and speak the formula. Nothing is said of using a “spare vessel”. *Bhāradvājaśrautasūtra* 11.17.11 even states that a *mahāvīra* that is not used for the offering should be replaced by another if it breaks: *yady apracaraṇīyaḥ saṃpadyetānyasmai sthānam apidadhyāt* “If the *mahāvīra* which is not being used falls down (and breaks), it should be substituted/replaced by another.” (modified Kashikar 1964)

¹ For an overview of the *pravargya*-ritual see van Buitenen 1968. For a discussion on the earliest form of *pravargya* (the *gharma*-offering) see Houben 2000a. For a study of the *pravargya*-complex in relation to “*vrātya*-culture” see af Edholm 2021.

² Compare Witzel 2004:87 for *Kaṭhāraṇyaka* 3.219. See also Mitra 1872:31. Kane speaks of a “principal”/“first” vessel and avoids specifying the function of the “two other” (1974:1148–1150).

³ *upa-śaya* ‘lying near at hand or close by, ready for use’ < *upa-*√*śī* ‘lie near/by the side’ (Monier-Williams 1899).

⁴ *atha taṃ copāśayāṃ ca piṣṭvā mārtsnayā mṛdā saṃsrjyāvṛtā karotyāvṛtā pacatyutsādanārtham* “Having pounded that spare (clay) and mixed it with powdered clay he makes (a pot) in proper form” (*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* M 14.3.2.21, Eggeling). Compare *upaśayāṃ mṛdam* in 14.3.1.19.

The making of the *ukhā*-vessel in *agnicayana* (*Baudhāyanaśrautasūtra* 10.1f.) is influenced by that of the *pravargya*-vessel (Ikari 1983; Parpola 2005:90–93). We read in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* that some state that there are two more *ukhā*-vessels made, apart from the vessel in which the fire is carried, “because there are three worlds and the *ukhās* are these worlds”, and also “for mutual expiation, because they think “If one will break we shall carry (Agni) in the other, and if the other (breaks) then in the other (third)””, but this is rejected by the author: The *ukhā* is triple and complete in itself, representing the threefold universe, so there is no need to make three vessels (*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* M 6.5.2.22, Eggeling; Vesci 1992:195). However, we later read that if the main vessel breaks, one should put the fire into one of the other two, but also make a new one, so that there are always three vessels (6.6.4.8–9). As Gonda notes, “three, not two”, vessels “are made by those who like to hold one in reserve.” (1976:61)

What the three vessels represent

Now, let us look at how the three vessels are treated in the classical ritual, according to *Āpastambaśrautasūtra*.

At the beginning of *pravargya*, one makes three vessels in the same manner, and each one is given the epithet *mahāvīra* (15.3.8). They are made from clay and a few other ingredients. The three *mahāvīras* are fumigated, each with the words *makhasya śiro 'si makhāya tvā makhasya tvā śīrṣṇe* “you are the head of Makha; you for Makha, you for Makha’s head!” (from *Vājasaneyisaṃhitā* M 37.8–9, modified Griffith 1899:294; Vesci 1992:244). Then they are addressed: the first/main *mahāvīra* with “you for the right [*rju*]”, the second with “you for the good [*sādhu*-]”, and the third with “you for the place of good abode [*sukṣīti*-]” (from *Vājasaneyisaṃhitā* M 37.10).

Then the three vessels are placed in an earth-pit in front of the *gārhapatya*-fire, in order to be baked. They are addressed with three different formulas: with *arcir asi* “you are flame/lustre” the *adhvaryu* puts down the first (*prathamam*) vessel, the second (*dvitījam*) with *śocir asi* “you are glow/radiance”, and the third (*trītījam*) with *jyotir asi tapo 'si* “you are light, you are heat” (*Āpastambaśrautasūtra* 15.4.1; *Bhāradvājaśrautasūtra* 11.3.14–15; *Vājasaneyisaṃhitā* M 37.11; Vesci 1992:245). When baked, goat-milk is poured on all three.

Each vessel is said to correspond to one of the three worlds (terrestrial, atmospheric, heavenly) and the three metres (*gāyatrī*, *triṣṭubh*, *jagatī*) (*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* M 14.1.2.22–24; *Kaṭhāraṇyaka* 3.219; *Bhāradvājaśrautasūtra* 11.2.24; compare *Taittirīyāraṇyaka* 5.3.3; Vesci 1992:242). In *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* M 14.3.1.19 it is said that there are three vessels because the head (of sacrifice) is threefold (*trivṛt trivṛddhīdam śirah*).

Then begins the special treatment of the *mahāvīra* that is used for the offering (*Āpastambaśrautasūtra* 15.6.11), by heating it and filling it with *ghī* and milk. The two *mahāvīras* that, if all goes as planned, will not be used are placed on the “*samrāt*-seat”, a rudimentary wooden structure in front of the *āhavanīya*-fire, on which a blackbuck-skin is spread, with the formula *deva puraścara saghyāsam* [...] (from *Taittirīyāraṇyaka* 4.3.3). In other words, all three vessels have a share in dignity.

At the final disposal of the ritual objects, which marks the end of *pravargya*, the priest places the objects so that they form an image of the sun, with the three *mahāvīras* at the center, or in the shape of a man, with the vessels as the head (*Kaṭhāraṇyaka* 3.183, 219; *Āpastambaśrautasūtra* 15.14–15; *Bhāradvājaśrautasūtra* 11.15.1). In the latter case, the three vessels form the “head of sacrifice” (*yajñasya śiras*), that is the *pravargya/gharma* itself, which is identified with the sun.

Thus, in *pravargya* (and *agnicayana*) there are always three vessels, and this is explicitly related to triadic symbolism: the threefold head of sacrifice, three worlds, three metres, and three forms of light/lustre (*arcis*, *śocis*, *jyotis*+*tapas*). One of the other two vessels may be used if the main one breaks, but this seems not to be its primary or sole function, and is even contradicted by certain texts. Although only the first vessel is used for the offering, the number three “is never brought into question” (Vesci 1992:242).

Triads in early Vedic text-passages

Can we find triadic symbolism in relation to the *pravargya/gharma* already in early Vedic literature? In *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 7.33.7 we read that “three produce semen in the world; three creatures belonging to the Ārya have light in front; three heats [*gharma*-] accompany the dawn.”⁵ Jamison and Brereton write that the three that produce semen may refer to the three *soma*-pressings, or to heaven (rain), *soma*, and man. The three “*ārya* creatures with light in front” may be the three ritual fires, or fire, sun, and dawn. The three heats may refer to the ritual fires, or to sun, fire, and *gharma*-drink (2014:923). According to Geldner (1897:141) “man könnte [...] an die drei *gharma* oder *mahāvīragefässe* des *Pravargya* denken”, but in the ritual the term *gharma* seems only to be applied to the hot offering (Kashikar 1993) or the main vessel containing the offering (Houben 2000).⁶

Śaunakīyasamhitā 8.9.13 too mentions three *gharmas* “going the way of semen”, and three females (dawns?) “going the way of *ṛta*”. Lüders suggests that they are three milk-streams in heaven, which the *pravargya* strengthens so that it rains (1959:367–368, 374). Three *gharmas* are also mentioned in an *Aśvins*-hymn (*Śaunakīyasamhitā* 9.1.8), which may refer to three cosmic forms of heat (Blair 1961:164).⁷ *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 7.101 is a hymn for the rain-period, like the following hymns 7.102 and the *pravargya*-related 7.103; it mentions a light (*jyotis*) of three *vartus* (=?), and three containers (*kośas*) that drip abundance of honey (compare the honey-deities *Aśvins* in *pravargya*) (Brown 1939–1940).⁸ 10.114.1 refers to *Mātariśvan* (*Agni* or *Vāyu*) and “two *gharmas* that have pervaded the threefold (world)”.⁹

As mentioned, the classical *pravargya* ends with the disposal of the ritual objects in the shape of a man (*puruṣa*): the head is made from all the three *mahāvīras*, and the ritual grass-brush (*vedā/vedāu*) are his tufts of hair (*késā/śikhā*) (*Kāthāranyaka* 3.183, 219; *Āpastambaśrautasūtra* 15.15.1; *Bhāradvājaśrautasūtra* 11.15.2).¹⁰ This is related to the practice during the initiation for *pravargya* (*avāntaradīkṣā*) of letting the initiand leave his hair uncut until the initiation is over, one year later (*Āpastambaśrautasūtra* 15.20–21). As Houben shows, the treatment of the initiand mirrors that of the (main) *mahāvīra* in *pravargya* (2000b). In this context it might be relevant to consider the “three (long)haired ones” (*trayaḥ keśinaḥ*) in the riddle-hymn *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 1.164, which deals with *pravargya* (Houben 2000b): “Three long-haired ones show themselves in due season; during the year one of them shaves; one of them surveys everything by means of his powers; of one the rushing is seen, but not his form.” (1.164.44, Houben 2000b) The classical solution to this riddle is that the three *keśins* are fire (burns away the vegetation), wind (invisible), and sun (all-seeing),¹¹ which also represent flame, lightning, and sun-ray, as well as to earth, air, and heaven (*Agni*, *Vāyu*, *Sūrya*) – a common Vedic triad (Gonda 1976:61). Perhaps the *keśins* also refer to ascetics who let their hair grow, as in the *keśin*-hymn *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 10.136, where fire, sun, and wind are mentioned in the same order of appearance as in 1.164.44. It could also be that *keśin* refers to the initiand

⁵ Jamison & Brereton 2014. See Geldner 1897:139f.

⁶ Blair (1961:164) suggests that the “three surrounded by *tapas*” (*Śaunakīyasamhitā* 5.28.1) allude to the ritual *gharma* (the offering or the vessel). Compare af Edholm 2021:8.

⁷ Compare: *Agni* identifies himself with “the chant of three parts [*arkās tridhātū*], which is the measure of space, the inexhaustible *gharma*, and the offering” (*Ṛgvedasamhitā* 3.26.7, modified Jamison & Brereton). On the threefold *Agni* see Gonda 1976:43f.

⁸ *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 7.103.9 mentions plural *gharmas* released at the rainy season.

⁹ In 10.106.8 the *Aśvins* are compared with two *gharmas*.

¹⁰ Compare Rudra with black tufts of hair (*nīlaśikhāṇḍa*) (*Śaunakīyasamhitā* 2.27.6, 6.93.1, 11.2.7, 20.132.16), who is connected with the *pravargya* (see af Edholm 2021).

¹¹ On fire burning the earth see *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 1.65.8, 6.6.4, 10.142.4. On the wind see 10.168.4. Verse 44 can be compared with verse 1 (Houben 2000b:524), which mentions an aged priest (*Agni*, the sun), his ravenous middle brother (lightning) and his *ghī*-backed brother (terrestrial fire, the vessel) (2000b:524). See also Haug 1875. According to *Bṛhaddevatā* 1.94 the *keśins* are three forms of *Agni*.

with unshorn hair, as in the *avāntaradīkṣā* mentioned above, before he shaves it off (compare Falk 1986:69–72; Oberlies 2012:467).

Thus, there are references to triads, but not three vessels, in *gharma/pravargya*-related early Vedic text-passages.

Conclusion

The reason for the existence of three *mahāvīra*-vessels, rather than just one vessel or two vessels, in the classical *pravargya*-ritual is not entirely clear. The main *mahāvīra* is used for the offering, but the other two are of some importance as well. If the main vessel breaks it is not enough simply to use one of the other two; instead, the broken one must be repaired, or a new one made. The same goes for the other two; there must always be three intact vessels. As the *śrauta* texts themselves state, the vessels represent three forms of light/lustre, the triple head of sacrifice, the three worlds, and the three metres. We find triads already in early Vedic *pravargya/gharma*-related text-passages, but not references to the three vessels. It is likely, therefore, that the simple *gharma*-offering of the earliest period made use of a single vessel, but the ritual also included triadic symbolism. The other two vessels were introduced later, during the *śrauta* reform, as an adaption to the triadic theme, but their function as “spare vessels” is secondary and not accepted by all ritualists.

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