

The Rig Veda

An Anthology

*One hundred and eight hymns, selected,
translated and annotated by*
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PENGUIN BOOKS

in purposely elliptic references similar to those used to refer to Agni in the Riddle of the Sacrifice (1.164; cf. also 3.31.1-3). This first appearance of Agni is then linked to subsequent appearances after he has been lost, occasions when he hides (10.5), usually in the waters (10.51), the place of his birth (2.35), or in the body of the arch-enemy of the gods (10.124). The birth and recovery of Agni are two aspects of a great mystery (4.5) that Agni himself inspires the poet to solve (6.9).

1.1 *I Pray to Agni*

Appropriately placed at the very beginning of the *Rig Veda*, this hymn invites Agni, the divine priest, to come to the sacrifice.

- 1 I pray to Agni, the household priest who is the god of the sacrifice, the one who chants and invokes and brings most treasure.
- 2 Agni earned the prayers of the ancient sages, and of those of the present, too; he will bring the gods here.
- 3 Through Agni one may win wealth, and growth from day to day, glorious and most abounding in heroic sons.
- 4 Agni, the sacrificial ritual that you encompass on all sides - only that one goes to the gods.
- 5 Agni, the priest with the sharp sight of a poet, the true and most brilliant, the god will come with the gods.
- 6 Whatever good you wish to do for the one who worships you, Agni, through you, O Angiras,¹ that comes true.
- 7 To you, Agni, who shine upon darkness, we come day after day, bringing our thoughts and homage
- 8 to you, the king over sacrifices, the shining guardian of the Order, growing in your own house.
- 9 Be easy for us to reach, like a father to his son. Abide with us, Agni, for our happiness.

NOTES

1. The Angirases were an ancient family of priests, often identified with Vedic gods such as Agni and Indra.

1.26 *Agni and the Gods*

This hymn emphasizes the close symbiosis between the sacrificer and Agni, on the one hand, and the sacrificer and



The sacrificial horse is identified with the sun and fire; here he is also identified with several other gods, as well as with the earthly racehorse (who is himself a figure with whom many gods are identified).

- 1 When you whinnied for the first time, as you were born coming forth from the ocean or from the celestial source,¹ with the wings of an eagle and the forelegs of an antelope – that, Swift Runner, was your great and awesome birth.
- 2 Yama gave him and Trita harnessed him; Indra was the first to mount him, and the Gandharva grasped his reins. You gods² fashioned the horse out of the sun.
- 3 Swift Runner, you are Yama; you are Āditya; you are Trita, through the hidden design.³ You are like and not like Soma.⁴ They say you have three bonds in the sky.⁵
- 4 They say you have three bonds in the sky, three in the waters, and three within the ocean.⁶ And to me you appear, Swift Runner, like Varuṇa, that is said to be your highest birth.
- 5 These are the places where they rubbed you down when you were victorious; here are the marks where you put down your hooves. Here I saw your lucky reins, which the Guardians of the Order keep safely.
- 6 From afar, in my heart I recognized your soul, the bird⁷ flying below the sky. I saw your winged head snorting on the dustless paths easy to travel.⁸
- 7 Here I saw your highest form eager for nourishment in the place of the cow.⁹ As soon as a mortal gets the food that you enjoy, the great devourer of plants awakens him.¹⁰
- 8 The chariot follows you, Swift Runner; the young man follows, the cow follows, the love of young girls follows. The troops follow your friendship.¹¹ The gods entrusted virile power to you.
- 9 His mane is golden;¹² his feet are bronze. He is swift

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as thought, faster than Indra. The gods have come to eat the oblation of the one who was the first to mount the swift runner.¹³

- 10 The celestial coursers, revelling in their strength, fly in a line like wild geese, the ends held back while the middle surges forward, when the horses reach the racecourse of the sky.
- 11 Your body flies, Swift Runner; your spirit rushes like wind. Your mane,¹² spread in many directions, flickers and jumps about in the forests.¹⁴
- 12 The racehorse has come to the slaughter, pondering with his heart turned to the gods. The goat, his kin,¹⁵ is led in front; behind come the poets, the singers.
- 13 The swift runner has come to the highest dwelling-place, to his father and mother. May he go to the gods today and be most welcome, and then ask for the things that the worshipper wishes for.

NOTES

1. A possible reference to the sun born in the ocean and also born from the waters in the sky.

2. The Vasus are a group of gods associated with the sun.

3. Perhaps the magic power of the sacrifice, or the secret power associated with the mysterious Trita, or simply the Vedic power of secret equivalences.

4. As Agni, he is both likened to and contrasted with Soma through the mechanism of parallel oppositions and the Vedic concept of liquid fire or the fiery liquid; as a sacrificial animal, he is joined with Soma in the ritual dimension.

5. The bonds are the three gods named in the first sentence of this verse.

6. The three bonds are multiples of the bond in each of three places named: the sky (v. 3, and the 'highest birth' in Varuṇa), the waters (v. 1, and perhaps also v. 5, where the gods bathed the celestial horse), and the ocean (v. 1, and also implicit in the birth from Varuṇa, god of the ocean).

7. The sun as a bird.

8. The paths that lead to the sun.

9. The cow on three levels: as a symbol of the sun in the sky; as

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the cows won by the victorious racehorse; and as the cattle won in raids on horseback.

10. A mysterious sentence. Agni, who devours plants (in forest fires), awakens man every morning (as the sun); the herbivorous horse also devours plants, and is awakened every morning to be fed. The worshipper who 'feeds' the sacrificial fire (or offers oblations to the sun) is 'awakened' when he arrives in heaven. All of these are possible (as the final 'him' must be supplied and has no clear referent).

11. A martial procession behind the war-horse; a sacrificial procession behind the consecrated stallion; a triumphant procession behind the racehorse.

12. The mane (literally, the 'horns') of the horse as a metaphor for the rays of the sun.

13. 'The one' would be Indra, rider of the solar horse according to verse 2, but here it would seem to designate the earthly king, the owner of the earthly horse.

14. Here the rays are scattered by the foliage.

15. Either a scapegoat for the sacrificial horse (cf. 1.162.2-3), or just a companion for the racehorse (as racehorses often have goats, to this day).

1.162

The Sacrifice of the Horse

Strikingly concrete in its detail, this hymn describes the ancient Indian horse sacrifice, beginning with the ceremonial procession of the horse with the scapegoat, leading to the actual slaughter (vv. 1-7). It then dwells upon the material instruments of the sacrifice which are to accompany the horse to heaven.

- 1 Mitra, Varuṇa, Aryaman the Active,¹ Indra the ruler of the Ṛbhus,² and the Maruts³ – let them not fail to heed us when we proclaim in the assembly the heroic deeds of the racehorse who was born of the gods.⁴
- 2 When they lead the firmly grasped offering⁵ in front of the horse that is covered with cloths and heirlooms, the dappled goat goes bleating straight to the dear dwelling of Indra and Pūṣan.
- 3 This goat for all the gods is led forward with the race-

- horse as the share for Pūṣan. When they lead forth welcome offering⁵ with the charger, Tvaṣṭṛ urges him on to great fame.
- 4 When, as the ritual law ordains, the men circle thrice, leading the horse that is to be the oblation on the path to the gods, the goat who is the share for Pūṣan goes first, announcing the sacrifice to the gods.
- 5 The Invoker,⁶ the officiating priest, the atoner,⁷ the fire-kindler, the holder of the pressing-stones, the reciter, the priest who prays – fill your bellies with this well-prepared, well-sacrificed sacrifice.
- 6 The hewers of the sacrificial stake and those who carry it, and those who carve the knob⁸ for the horse's sacrificial stake, and those who gather together the things⁹ to cook the charger – let their approval encourage us.
- 7 The horse with his smooth back went forth into the fields of the gods, just when I made my prayer. The inspired sages exult in him. We have made him a welcome companion at the banquet of the gods.
- 8 The charger's rope and halter, the reins and bridle on his head, and even the grass that has been brought up to his mouth – let all of that stay with you¹⁰ even among the gods.
- 9 Whatever of the horse's flesh the fly has eaten, or whatever stays stuck to the stake or the axe, or to the hands or nails of the slaughterer¹¹ – let all of that stay with you¹⁰ even among the gods.
- 10 Whatever food remains in his stomach, sending forth gas, or whatever smell there is from his raw flesh¹¹ – let the slaughterers make that well done; let them cook the sacrificial animal until he is perfectly cooked.
- 11 Whatever runs off your body when it has been placed on the spit and roasted by the fire, let it not lie there in the earth or on the grass, but let it be given to the gods who long for it.
- 12 Those¹² who see that the racehorse is cooked, who say, 'It smells good! Take it away!', and who wait for the

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- doling out of the flesh of the charger – let their approval encourage us.
- 13 The testing fork for the cauldron that cooks the flesh, the pots for pouring the broth, the cover of the bowls to keep it warm, the hooks, the dishes – all these attend the horse.
- 14 The place where he walks, where he rests, where he rolls, and the fetters on the horse's feet, and what he has drunk and the fodder he has eaten – let all of that stay with you¹⁰ even among the gods.
- 15 Let not the fire that reeks of smoke darken you, nor the red-hot cauldron split into pieces. The gods receive the horse who has been sacrificed, worshipped, consecrated, and sanctified with the cry of 'Vaṣat!'¹³
- 16 The cloth that they spread beneath the horse, the upper covering, the golden trappings on him, the halter and the fetters on his feet – let these things that are his own bind the horse among the gods.
- 17 If someone riding you has struck you too hard with heel or whip when you shied, I make all these things well again for you with prayer,¹¹ as they do¹⁴ with the oblation's ladle in sacrifices.
- 18 The axe cuts through the thirty-four ribs¹⁵ of the race-horse who is the companion of the gods. Keep the limbs undamaged and place them in the proper pattern. Cut them apart, calling out piece by piece.¹⁶
- 19 One is the slaughterer of the horse of Tvaṣṭṛ; two restrain him. This is the rule. As many of your limbs as I set out, according to the rules, so many balls I offer into the fire.¹⁷
- 20 Let not your dear soul burn you¹⁸ as you go away. Let not the axe do lasting harm to your body. Let no greedy, clumsy slaughterer hack in the wrong place and damage your limbs with his knife.
- 21 You do not really die through this, nor are you harmed. You go to the gods on paths pleasant to go on. The two bay stallions, the two roan mares¹⁹ are now your

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chariot mates. The racehorse has been set in the donkey's yoke.

- 22 Let this racehorse bring us good cattle and good horses, male children and all-nourishing wealth. Let Aditi make us free from sin.²⁰ Let the horse with our offerings achieve sovereign power for us.

NOTES

1. This may be an epithet of Vāyu or Agni, or the name of a distinct god, or an epithet of Aryaman.

2. The Ṛbhūṣ are the craftsmen of the gods.

3. This may be a list of five gods or of seven, depending upon whether one takes the adjectival terms as epithets or separate names.

4. Sāyana says the horse was born from the essential forms of many gods, a common form of mythological creation.

5. This almost certainly refers to the goat, though the commentary suggests that it might be the remains of the burnt offering made the night before.

6. The Invoker is the Hotṛ priest, often identified with Agni. Cf. 1.1.1.

7. This term may designate the priest who portions out the offerings or the one who performs expiations for ritual errors or personal misdeeds (cf. v. 17). Here, as in verse 1, there may be five or seven terms, depending upon whether one takes the adjectival terms (here the third and seventh) as descriptions or separate titles.

8. A piece of wood attached crosswise at the top of the stake.

9. These utensils would be the pot, the wood, etc.

10. Here the horse is directly addressed.

11. Cf. the hope that the human corpse will be made whole (10.16.6) and properly cooked (10.16.1-2).

12. These are the priests who eat the horse (cf. v. 5).

13. The cry that is made when the offering is presented to the gods. Cf. 10.14.3 for the use of Svāhā!, a similar call.

14. The Brahmins who repair the errors committed in the course of the sacrifice.

15. Thirty-four of the horse's ribs (he has thirty-six) are distributed, one to the sun, one to the moon, five to the planets, and twenty-seven to the constellations.

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16. The priest names each part as he cuts it, and declares the divinity to whom it is dedicated.

17. These are probably balls of rice that the wives of the king give to the stallion; they may also be balls of meat.

18. That is, do not be sad.

19. The two bay stallions are the horses of Indra, the two roan mares the horses of the Maruts, and the donkey belongs to the Aśvins.

20. This is both a general wish for expiation and a specific wish to be cleansed of the sin of killing the horse.

10.56

Requiem for a Horse

This hymn is a funerary farewell to a beloved horse. Against this interpretation, later Indian commentarial tradition suggested that the subject of the hymn was the poet's dead son, called 'Victorious Racehorse' (Vājin); and it is worthy of note that the horse is said to travel to heaven, put on a new body, and dwell happily there afterwards, just as the dead man does in another hymn (10.14). But the equine character of the verses is unmistakable. The hymn may refer to a particular ritual, possibly even to the immolation of a sacred horse; verse 3 opens with the exact phrase used at the beginning of the horse sacrifice. It may also be based upon the deification of a great racehorse, as is suggested by the hymn's recurring use of the metaphor of winning heaven as one wins a race (though here it must be noted that the *Rig Veda* often refers to other goals – wealth, sons, long life – won as one wins a race).¹ The idea of a hymn to a horse is not in itself un-Vedic; the *Rig Veda* knows other divine horses, such as Dadhikrā, Tārksya, and Etaśa. The horses of heaven are obliquely alluded to in verse 4, where they are said to have more powers than the Fathers and to have been given special mental power by the gods before taking on their heavenly bodies; verse 5 may even imply that all living creatures are somehow bound to or encompassed by the powers of these celestial equines, who gallop around a race-course made of the space between sky and earth.

Verses 1–5a describe the horse's translation to heaven,

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where the dead are fed and satisfied,⁵ there make me immortal. O drop of Soma, flow for Indra.

17 Where there are joys and pleasures, gladness and delight, where the desires of desire are fulfilled, there make me immortal. O drop of Soma, flow for Indra.

NOTES

1. The mountains where Soma is found.

2. *Tapas*, the heat generated by sacrificial activity (and, later, by asceticism).

3. The daughter of the sun is the wife of Soma; Soma is sometimes called a buffalo (or a bull or stallion); Parjanya, god of fructifying rain, makes Soma and other plants grow (cf. 5.83.1, 5.83.5, 5.83.10; 7.101.2, 7.101.6).

4. That is, the deeds done under the influence of Soma are true (cf. *in vino veritas*).

5. Yama, the son of Vivasvan, is king in the world of the dead, here (and elsewhere in the *Rig Veda*) thought of as being in heaven, where the dead are nourished by the offerings made to them by their descendants.

6. The cosmic waters born in heaven.

8.48

We Have Drunk the Soma

This hymn celebrates the effects of Soma, particularly the feeling of being set free and released into boundless open space, and the belief that the drinker is immortal.

1 I have tasted the sweet drink of life, knowing that it inspires good thoughts and joyous expansiveness to the extreme, that all the gods and mortals seek it together, calling it honey.¹

2 When you penetrate inside, you will know no limits,² and you will avert the wrath of the gods. Enjoying Indra's friendship, O drop of Soma, bring riches as a docile cow³ brings the yoke.

3 We have drunk the Soma; we have become immortal;⁴ we have gone to the light; we have found the gods. What

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- can hatred and the malice of a mortal do to us now, O immortal one?
- 4 When we have drunk you, O drop of Soma, be good to our heart, kind as a father to his son, thoughtful as a friend to a friend. Far-famed Soma, stretch out⁵ our life-span so that we may live.
- 5 The glorious drops that I have drunk set me free in wide space. You have bound me together in my limbs as thongs bind a chariot. Let the drops protect me from the foot that stumbles⁶ and keep lameness away from me.
- 6 In flame me like a fire kindled by friction; make us see far; make us richer, better. For when I am intoxicated with you, Soma, I think myself rich. Draw near and make us thrive.
- 7 We would enjoy you, pressed with a fervent heart, like riches from a father. King Soma, stretch out our life-spans as the sun stretches the spring days.
- 8 King Soma, have mercy on us for our well-being. Know that we are devoted to your laws. Passion and fury are stirred up.⁷ O drop of Soma, do not hand us over to the pleasure of the enemy.
- 9 For you, Soma, are the guardian of our body; watching over men, you have settled down in every limb. If we break your laws, O god, have mercy on us like a good friend, to make us better.
- 10 Let me join closely with my compassionate friend⁸ so that he will not injure me when I have drunk him. O lord of bay horses,⁹ for the Soma that is lodged in us I approach Indra to stretch out our life-span.
- 11 Weaknesses and diseases have gone; the forces of darkness¹⁰ have fled in terror. Soma has climbed up in us, expanding. We have come to the place where they stretch out life-spans.
- 12 The drop that we have drunk has entered our hearts, an immortal inside mortals. O fathers,¹¹ let us serve that Soma with the oblations and abide in his mercy and kindness.

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- 13 Uniting in agreement with the fathers, O drop of Soma, you have extended yourself through sky and earth. Let us serve him with an oblation; let us be masters of riches.
- 14 You protecting gods, speak out for us. Do not let sleep or harmful speech¹² seize us. Let us, always dear to Soma, speak as men of power in the sacrificial gathering.
- 15 Soma, you give us the force of life on every side. Enter into us, finding the sunlight, watching over men. O drop of Soma, summon your helpers and protect us before and after.¹³

NOTES

1. Here, as elsewhere in the hymns to Soma, honey is not a reference to the product of bees or the Indo-European mead made from it, but refers to the essence and sweetness of the ambrosia.

2. Inside the human body, the Soma becomes 'boundless' in the sense of producing a feeling of infinite expansion, a sensation characteristic of psychedelic drugs. But the word (*aditi*) may also be taken as the proper name of the goddess Aditi, for Soma is called the youngest son of Aditi and Aditi's function of liberating from sin might be relevant here: Soma, Aditi's son, purifies from within and pacifies the angry gods.

3. The term denotes an obedient female animal, probably a draught animal; it could be a mare or a cow. Cf. Dawn harnessing docile cows to her chariot in order to bring treasure to the singer (1.92.2). These animals, though naturally fierce in the Indo-European world, were also capable of being tamed.

4. The poet has a vision of what life in heaven would be like, a kind of vague, temporary immortality, lasting 'a long time'.

5. The verb means to cross in a forward direction, as one would cross a river, to push the farther bank of the life-span farther away. Cf. ŚB 11.1.6.6, in which Prajāpati sees the end of his life as one would see the farther bank of a river. The metaphor is repeated in vv. 7 and 10-11, and the idea of prolonging life (or of obtaining the limited immortality which consists in a full life-span) is central to the hymn. Cf. also the recurrent Vedic themes of 'stretching the thread' of the sacrifice and expanding in space.

6. The releasing effect of the drug described in the first part of this verse is immediately contrasted with a binding, perhaps by

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Soma, perhaps by someone else, and then with some sort of stumbling; this stumbling may involve actual injury, prefigured in the 'binding with thongs' and followed by the 'lameness' of the next phrase. The verse may also imply more metaphysical mistakes, but the literal meaning might refer to stumbling and falling in physical clumsiness as a result of the ecstasy induced by Soma.

7. Soma stirs not only the emotions of the drinkers but also the unpredictable emotions of the enemy mentioned in the next phrase.

8. Soma.

9. Indra, here as elsewhere identified with Soma. The singer approaches Indra to come 'for' Soma in the sense of 'in order to enjoy' Soma or 'in return for being given' Soma, but in any case to act, like Soma, to prolong life, or even to allow Soma to remain in the belly for a long time.

10. Personified as females.

11. The fathers, as drinkers of Soma, are called to witness.

12. 'Harmful speech' may mean injurious slander or may refer to the violation of the vows of remaining awake and silent in the rite of initiation into the Soma sacrifice. Cf. 10.18.14.

13. The worshipper asks to be surrounded and protected now and forever in his drug-induced vulnerability.

10.136

The Long-haired Ascetic

The long-haired ascetic (Keśin), an early precursor of the Upaniṣadic yogi, drinks a drug (probably some hallucinogen other than Soma) in the company of Rudra, the master of poison and a god who is excluded from the Soma sacrifice. The hallucinations described in the hymn are related to but not the same as those attributed to Soma-drinkers in 9.112, 10.119, etc.

- 1 Long-hair holds fire, holds the drug, holds sky and earth. Long-hair reveals everything, so that everyone can see the sun.¹ Long-hair declares the light.
- 2 These ascetics, swathed in wind,² put dirty red rags on.³ When gods enter them, they ride with the rush of the wind.

Burial Hymn

This evocative hymn contains several references to symbolic gestures that may well have been accompanied by rituals similar to those known to us from later Vedic literature. But the human concerns of the hymn are vividly accessible to us, whatever the ritual may have been.

- 1 Go away, death, by another path that is your own, different from the road of the gods. I say to you who have eyes, who have ears: do not injure our children or our men.
- 2 When you¹ have gone, wiping away the footprint of death,² stretching farther your own lengthening span of life, become pure and clean and worthy of sacrifice, swollen with offspring and wealth.
- 3 These who are alive have now parted from those who are dead. Our invitation to the gods has become auspicious today. We have gone forward to dance and laugh, stretching farther our own lengthening span of life.
- 4 I set up this wall³ for the living, so that no one else among them will reach this point. Let them live a hundred full autumns and bury death in this hill.⁴
- 5 As days follow days in regular succession, as seasons come after seasons in proper order, in the same way order their life-spans, O Arranger, so that the young do not abandon the old.
- 6 Climb on to old age, choosing a long life-span, and follow in regular succession, as many as you are. May Tvaṣṭṛ who presides over good births be persuaded to give you a long life-span to live.
- 7 These women who are not widows, who have good husbands – let them take their places, using butter to anoint their eyes.⁵ Without tears, without sickness, well dressed let them first⁶ climb into the marriage bed.
- 8 Rise up, woman,⁷ into the world of the living. Come here; you are lying beside a man whose life's breath has gone.

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- You were the wife of this man who took your hand and desired to have you.
- 9 I take the bow from the hand of the dead man,⁸ to be our supremacy and glory and power, and I say, 'You are there; we are here. Let us as great heroes conquer all envious attacks.'
- 10 Creep away to this broad, vast earth, the mother that is kind and gentle. She is a young girl, soft as wool to anyone who makes offerings;⁹ let her guard you from the lap of Destruction.¹⁰
- 11 Open up, earth; do not crush him. Be easy for him to enter and to burrow in. Earth, wrap him up as a mother wraps a son in the edge of her skirt.
- 12 Let the earth as she opens up stay firm, for a thousand pillars must be set up.¹¹ Let them be houses dripping with butter for him, and let them be a refuge for him here for all his days.
- 13 I shore up the earth all around you;¹² let me not injure you as I lay down this clod of earth. Let the fathers hold up this pillar for you; let Yama build a house for you here.
- 14 On a day that will come, they will lay me in the earth, like the feather of an arrow.¹³ I hold back speech that goes against the grain,¹⁴ as one would restrain a horse with a bridle.

NOTES

1. The hymn, that began by addressing death directly, now addresses the company of the mourners.

2. There may have been a ritual to erase the footprints of the mourners, or it may be a simple and straightforward metaphor for the end of mourning.

3. Perhaps a stone to mark the boundary of the world of death.

4. The mound over the grave.

5. Ritually purified butter would be used instead of mascara or eye-shadow to protect the women among the mourners.

6. That is, long before they climb into old age or the grave.

7. The wife of the dead man, who lay down beside him (perhaps

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miming copulation, as the queen later did with the dead stallion), until called back with this verse.

8. Probably only done when the dead man was a warrior.

9. That is, to any generous sacrificer, not merely to someone who makes offerings to the earth.

10. Destruction (Nirṛti) is the female personification of disorder and disintegration, in contrast with the orderly and peaceful aspects of death.

11. The metaphorical house built by Yama for the dead man, perhaps symbolized by the urn containing his bones (or his cremated ashes) placed in the earth.

12. The dead man is addressed again.

13. An elliptic metaphor, perhaps referring to the way the feather is stuck into the cleft made for it in the arrow, or as a feather floats gently down to earth when it is freed from the arrow.

14. Perhaps a reference to the poet's satisfaction in having made a good hymn, or his pleasure in returning now to more auspicious subjects, or a statement that the rest is silence. Most likely, a command to remain silent lest one say something ill-omened.

10.154

Funeral Hymn

The hymn begins with a distinction between levels of spiritual attainment and then asks that the dead man be sent to live among those who are distinguished in one way or another.

1 For some, the Soma is purified; others sit down for butter.¹ Those for whom honey flows² – let the dead man go away straight to them.

2 Those who became invincible through sacred heat,³ who went to the sun through sacred heat, who made sacred heat their glory – let him go away straight to them.

3 Those who fight in battles as heroes, who sacrifice their bodies, or those who give thousands to the priests – let him go away straight to them.

4 Those who first nursed Order, who had Order and made

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Order grow great, the fathers full of sacred heat, O Yama – let him go away straight to them.

- १ Those inspired poets who know a thousand ways, who protect the sun, the seers full of sacred heat, O Yama – let him go away to those who are reborn through sacred heat.

NOTES

1. A distinction between the foods of the gods and the dead fathers. Cf. 10.14.3. and 10.135.1. Though both groups eat both foods, Soma is ambrosia for the gods, while butter is human food for the semi-divine fathers.

2. As honey (Soma) is better than butter, the dead man hopes to go to the gods.

3. *Tapas*, the heat generated by religious activity. Cf. 10.190.

10.135 *The Boy and the Chariot*

Though this hymn is traditionally dedicated to Yama, Yama appears only in the first and last verses (which are closely related), framing an allegory of the secret of death. The plot, though obscure, seems to be something like this: The father of a young boy has died, and the boy mentally follows the journey of his father to the realm of Yama, grieving and trying to get him to return; the hymn does not necessarily imply that the boy himself dies or even wants to die. The voice of the father answers the boy, saying that the chariot that the boy has built in his imagination to follow his father is already, unknown to the boy, bringing him after the father. This chariot is the funeral sacrifice or the oblation or the funeral fire that 'carries' the corpse to Yama and the fathers.¹ It is, at the same time, a manifestation of the boy's own wish to see his father.² The final verse gives a vision of paradise, perhaps to reassure the boy.³

- 1 [The son:] 'Beneath the tree with beautiful leaves where Yama drinks with the gods, there our father, the head of the family, turns with longing to the ancient ones.'⁴

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- 4 He who through his power owns these snowy mountains, and the ocean together with the river Rasā,⁶ they say; who has the quarters of the sky as his two arms⁷ – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 5 He by whom the awesome sky and the earth were made firm, by whom the dome of the sky was propped up, and the sun, who measured out the middle realm of space⁸ – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 6 He to whom the two opposed masses looked with trembling in their hearts, supported by his help,⁹ on whom the rising sun shines down – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 7 When the high waters came, pregnant with the embryo that is everything, bringing forth fire, he arose from that as the one life's breath of the gods. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 8 He who in his greatness looked over the waters, which were pregnant with Dakṣa,¹⁰ bringing forth the sacrifice, he who was the one god among all the gods – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 9 Let him not harm us, he¹¹ who fathered the earth and created the sky, whose laws are true, who created the high, shining waters. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 10 O Prajāpati, lord of progeny, no one but you embraces all these creatures. Grant us the desires for which we offer you oblation. Let us be lords of riches.

NOTES

1. Cf. 10.129.6. Here and throughout these notes, numbers without a designated text refer to Rig Vedic hymns translated in this volume.

2. Cf. the birth of Dakṣa and Aditi from one another in 10.72.4.

3. Cf. 10.82.5–6.

4. This traditional cosmogonic act is often credited to Viṣṇu, Varuṇa, Indra, and other gods.

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5. This may refer to the world of gods and the world of humans, or it may have some subtler and darker metaphysical significance.

6. The river Rasā surrounds heaven and earth, separating the dwelling-place of men and gods from the non-space in which the demonic powers dwell. Cf. 10.108.2.

7. A reference to the cosmic giant, Puruṣa (cf. 10.90), whose arms are in that part of space which the four cardinal directions span.

8. This act of measuring out space, closely connected with the propping apart of sky and earth (cf. v. 1), is also attributed to Viṣṇu and Varuṇa, who are said to set up the sun and then to measure out a space for him to move through, a space which (unlike sky and earth) has no finite boundaries. The sun itself also functions both as a prop to keep sky and earth apart and as an instrument with which to measure space. Cf. 1.154.1 and 1.154.3.

9. This verse presents an image on two levels. The two opposed masses are armies, the polarized forces of gods and demons (Asuras) who turn to the creator for help (as in 2.12.8). But they also represent the parted sky and earth, who seek literal 'support' (the pillar to keep them apart). The images combine in a metaphor suggesting that sky and earth themselves form a phalanx in the fight between gods and demons.

10. Dakṣa represents the male principle of creation and is later identified with Prajāpati. As the embryo of the waters, he is identified with the seed or fire (v. 7), the latter then explicitly defined in this verse as the sacrifice, or sacrificial fire. Sacrifice is often an element in primeval creation (cf. 10.90.6-9).

11. In this verse, the abstract tone vanishes and the poet lapses back into a more typical Vedic fear (and particularly typical of book 10), the fear of a personified, malevolent god.

10.90 *Puruṣa-Sūkta, or The Hymn of Man*

In this famous hymn, the gods create the world by dismembering the cosmic giant, Puruṣa, the primeval male who is the victim in a Vedic sacrifice.¹ Though the theme of the cosmic sacrifice is a widespread mythological motif, this hymn is part of a particularly Indo-European corpus of myths of dismemberment.² The underlying concept is, therefore, quite ancient; yet the fact that this is one of the

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latest hymns in the *Rig Veda* is evident from its reference to the three Vedas (v. 9) and to the four social classes or *varṇas* (v. 12, the first time that this concept appears in Indian civilization), as well as from its generally monistic world-view.

- 1 The Man has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. He pervaded the earth on all sides and extended beyond it as far as ten fingers.
- 2 It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality, when he grows beyond everything through food.³
- 3 Such is his greatness, and the Man is yet more than this. All creatures are a quarter of him; three quarters are what is immortal in heaven.
- 4 With three quarters the Man rose upwards, and one quarter of him still remains here. From this⁴ he spread out in all directions, into that which eats and that which does not eat.
- 5 From him Virāj⁵ was born, and from Virāj came the Man. When he was born, he ranged beyond the earth behind and before.
- 6 When the gods spread⁶ the sacrifice with the Man as the offering, spring was the clarified butter, summer the fuel, autumn the oblation.
- 7 They anointed⁷ the Man, the sacrifice⁸ born at the beginning, upon the sacred grass.⁹ With him the gods, Sādhyas,¹⁰ and sages sacrificed.
- 8 From that sacrifice⁸ in which everything was offered, the melted fat¹¹ was collected, and he¹² made it into those beasts who live in the air, in the forest, and in villages.
- 9 From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the verses and chants were born, the metres were born from it, and from it the formulas were born.¹³
- 10 Horses were born from it, and those other animals that have two rows of teeth;¹⁴ cows were born from it, and from it goats and sheep were born.

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- 11 When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?
- 12 His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born.¹⁵
- 13 The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born. Indra and Agni came from his mouth, and from his vital breath the Wind was born.
- 14 From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear. Thus they¹⁶ set the worlds in order.
- 15 There were seven enclosing-sticks¹⁷ for him, and thrice seven fuel-sticks, when the gods, spreading the sacrifice, bound the Man as the sacrificial beast.
- 16 With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice.¹⁸ These were the first ritual laws.¹⁹ These very powers reached the dome of the sky where dwell the Sādhyas,¹⁰ the ancient gods.

NOTES

1. Cf. the horse as the primeval sacrificial victim in 1.162 and 1.163.

2. The dismemberment of the Norse giant Ymir is the most striking parallel, but there are many others.

3. This rather obscure phrase seems to imply that through food (perhaps the sacrificial offering) Puruṣa grows beyond the world of the immortals, even as he grows beyond the earth (v. 1 and v. 5). He himself also transcends both what grows by food and what does not (v. 4), i.e. the world of animate and inanimate creatures, or Agni (eater) and Soma (eaten).

4. That is, from the quarter still remaining on earth, or perhaps from the condition in which he had already spread out from earth with three quarters of his form.

5. The active female creative principle, Virāj is later replaced by Prakṛti or material nature, the mate of Puruṣa in Sāṅkhya philosophy.

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6. This is the word used to indicate the performance of a Vedic sacrifice, spread or stretched out (like the earth spread upon the cosmic waters) or woven (like a fabric upon a loom). Cf. 10.130.1-2.

7. The word actually means 'to sprinkle' with consecrated water, but indicates the consecration of an initiate or a king.

8. Here 'the sacrifice' indicates the sacrificial victim; they are explicitly identified with one another (and with the divinity to whom the sacrifice is dedicated) in verse 16.

9. A mixture of special grasses that was strewn on the ground for the gods to sit upon.

10. A class of demi-gods or saints, whose name literally means 'those who are yet to be fulfilled'.

11. Literally, a mixture of butter and sour milk used in the sacrifice; figuratively, the fat that drained from the sacrificial victim.

12. Probably the Creator, though possibly Puruṣa himself.

13. The verses are the elements of the *Rig Veda*, the chants of the *Sāma Veda*, and the formulas of the *Yajur Veda*. The metres often appear as elements in primeval creation; cf. 10.130.3-5 and 1.164.23-5.

14. That is, incisors above and below, such as dogs and cats have.

15. The four classes or *varṇas* of classical Indian society.

16. The gods.

17. The enclosing-sticks are green twigs that keep the fire from spreading; the fuel sticks are seasoned wood used for kindling.

18. The meaning is that Puruṣa was both the victim that the gods sacrificed and the divinity to whom the sacrifice was dedicated; that is, he was both the subject and the object of the sacrifice. Through a typical Vedic paradox, the sacrifice itself creates the sacrifice.

19. Literally, the *dharmas*, a protean word that here designates the archetypal patterns of behaviour established during this first sacrifice to serve as the model for all future sacrifices.

The Creation of the Sacrifice

The image of weaving the sacrifice (cf. 10.90.15) is here joined with explicit identifications of ritual and divine, ancient and present, elements of the sacrifice.

- 1 The sacrifice that is spread out with threads on all sides, drawn tight with a hundred and one divine acts, is woven by these fathers as they come near: 'Weave forward, weave backward,' they say as they sit by the loom that is stretched tight.
- 2 The Man¹ stretches the warp and draws the weft; the Man has spread it out upon this dome of the sky. These are the pegs, that are fastened in place; they² made the melodies into the shuttles for weaving.
- 3 What was the original model, and what was the copy, and what was the connection between them? What was the butter, and what the enclosing wood?³ What was the metre, what was the invocation, and the chant, when all the gods sacrificed the god?⁴
- 4 The Gāyatrī metre⁵ was the yoke-mate of Agni; Savitr joined with the Uṣṇi metre, and with the Anuṣṭubh metre was Soma that reverberates with the chants. The Bṛhatī metre resonated in the voice of Bṛhaspati.
- 5 The Virāj⁶ metre was the privilege of Mitra and Varuṇa; the Triṣṭubh metre was part of the day of Indra. The Jagatī entered into all the gods. That was the model for the human sages.⁷
- 6 That was the model for the human sages, our fathers, when the primeval sacrifice was born. With the eye that is mind, in thought I see those who were the first to offer this sacrifice.
- 7 The ritual repetitions harmonized with the chants and with the metres; the seven divine sages harmonized with the original models. When the wise men looked back along the path of those who went before, they took up the reins like charioteers.

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NOTES

1. Puruṣa, as in 10.90.
2. The gods who first performed the sacrifice. Cf. 10.90.14.
3. Cf. 10.90.15.
4. The circular sacrifice of the god to the god, as in 10.90.6, 10.81.5-6.
5. The metres alluded to in 10.90.9 are here enumerated and associated with particular gods.
6. Virāj, a female cosmic principle in 10.90.5, is here merely a metre.
7. Sages (*ṛṣis*) are seers as well as poets.

10.190

*Cosmic Heat*¹

- 1 Order² and truth were born from heat as it blazed up. From that was born night; from that heat was born the billowy ocean.
- 2 From the billowy ocean was born the year, that arranges days and nights, ruling over all that blinks its eyes.³
- 3 The Arranger has set in their proper place the sun and moon, the sky and the earth, the middle realm of space, and finally the sunlight.

NOTES

1. *Tapas*, the heat produced by the ritual activity of the priest, is equated with the primeval erotic or ascetic heat of the Creator.
2. *Ṛta*, cosmic order. Truth (*satya*) is, like *ṛta*, also a term for reality.
3. For blinking as a sign of a living creature, cf. 10.121.3.

10.81-2

The All-Maker (Viśvakarman)

These two hymns to the artisan of the gods speculate on the mysterious period of the ancient past, now veiled from the priests of the present (10.81.1 and 10.82.7). The Creator is imagined concretely as a sculptor (10.81.2), a smith (10.81.3), or