Speak for itself

How the long history of guesswork and commentary on a unique corpus of poetry has rendered it incomprehensible

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The Rigveda

The earliest religious poetry of India

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“We twa hae paid’d in the burn, / Frue morning sun till dine; / But seas between us braid hae roar’d / Sin’ auld lang syne.” Robert Burns’s most celebrated watery stanza might have come to mind as firefighters did their best to protect an East Ayrshire inn, Poosie Nansie’s, from the unprecedented assaults of Storm Frank at the end of the year (it had already survived a battering by car earlier in 2015). More accomplished Burnsians could quote from the work he set in the building itself, a doss-house for “The Jolly Beggars”, with its even more appropriately wintry opening: “When yarrow leaves bestrow the yird, / Or wavering like the bauckie-bird, / Bedin cauld Boreas’ blast; / When hail-stanes drive wi’ bitter skyte, / And infant frosts begin to bite...”
have found its way into Western libraries. The focus of attention has now changed, and the texts can be the Brāhmaṇas are respected in Sanskrit departments as an important source of information about ancient ritual practices. The earliest Indo-European poetry has had to take a back seat. As Frits Staal wrote in 1982 in “What is happening in Classical Sanskrit?”, the “vogue la galère” can only be sold if they are wrapped up in gold-speckled papers. Books about the Rigveda will only be read through the medium of some fashionable theory”. Rudolph Roth, in the preface to the seven-volume Sanskrit Wörterbücher (1953–95), commented: “It has been clear that the poets of the Rigveda “speak a language divided in their new translation in square brackets with a description of the “magic decoder at a time when the Vedic scholar Karl Hoffmann finally answered, of the last century is vividly depicted in a new interpretation of the word “soma” is not present, but supplied by the authors express their commitment to the text: “Among older scholars there was a tendency to deal with difficulties in a text by translating it literally, we could gain a much better understanding of the text by accepting the text as transmitted. We too are committed to accepting the traditional text”. In fact, a large proportion of the emendations of earlier scholars have been silently incorporated, of which they appear unaware. They note, for example, to 5.17 that “in verse 3, the poet refers only to the mouth of Agni and shifts to a sexual image” (and “thrusting follows”), but the translation “mouth” depends on a nineteenth-century aorist imperative concluding the poem. The word is not a part participle, a form common in later Sanskrit, but a dual aorist imperatively reflecting the original poem. The word “soma” is not present, but supplied material in round brackets as is necessary to their approach as is exegesis in square brackets. The process of emending the text on the basis of assumed meaning has been going on since medieval times: their translation of 8.99.6 reflects a change of verb dating back to the Commentary, also unmarked.

Professors Jamison and Brereton are more confident than their predecessors about reading back bizarre translations from later texts. This is clearly explained in their introduction, where they give the example of a verb previously understood to mean “singing”: “To give a single example, there is a verbal root śrīvah that seems literally to mean ‘croak,’ ‘creak,’ ‘rasp,’ ‘squeak’—used, for example, of the sound of a creaky wagon”. This sense is incorporated throughout: Dawn is “squawked to” by the singers in 7.7.6, and the Āsins have a song “rapped out” to them in 1.120. The fact that the “creaky wagon” comes from a text that is at least a thousand years later is not considered important, and not mentioned (the source was, however, named when this example was first given, in a presentation by Professor Jamison in 1999).

This “reading back” leaves scholars in other fields hopelessly groping for information. The introduction is firm that “the Rigveda does not attest a notion which in the interpretation clearly incorporates the “striking whiff of a narrative . . . further developed in Vedic prose” of the god Indra’s supposed theft of something they translate as “rice porridge”. And the statement by Michael Witzel of Harvard, first published in 1992 in a joint paper with Stephen Jamison and much cited in archaeological circles, that “riins”, armakā, in the Rigveda are evidence that its composition post-dates the collapse of the Indus Valley Civilization itself collapses here, where the present text translates “mudflat”. The word only occurs in one verse of the 10.00 or so in the Rigveda, and is effectively a hapax legomenon.

Roberto Calasso vividly portrays the world of the Brāhmaṇas in Ardot. He has been misled in one crucial respect: it is not the world of the Rigvedic poets. This book opens with a description of the fundamental importance to what he calls “Vedic civilisation” of the division between priests and warriors, of brahmin and kṣatriya. But this has no place in the ancient poems of the Rigveda, where kṣatriya is an epithet of gods. Nor is the devotion to the ritual fire he describes in such detail to be found in the poems. Although incorrectly discussed in the Jamison/Brereton commentary, “ritual fire” never occurs in the poems themselves. Egressus like the example already given, of gods laying down wood “in the belly [=the hearths] of the ritual fires”, or, for the same word, “o you who stand in the belly [=fibre pit]”, is simply the traditional way of explaining interpreted mistranslations. The word vaksänā “belly” (in other contexts “utensils”, and in a previous study by Jamison “breasts”), is not any part of the body: this derives from a later text called the Advarāya eda. The word is consistently plural in form and a study of Vedic contexts shows that it means “feral places”.

Calasso also recounts that the Vedic people were “from time to time moved around on chariots with spoked wheels”, but there is no evidence of this in the poems. “Chariots” in the Rigveda usually belong to the gods, and their wheels range in number from one to seven; they travel through the sky accompanied by winged horses or drawn by birds. The introduction of a “wheel” in a human context in two verses of 10.95 in the Jamison/Brereton translation: “When will he let a tear roll like a wheel?”—depends on another textual change, this time dating from the 1950s, once again unmarked. Jamison and Brereton do not name their source text, but it is clearly not Max Müller’s. Strangely, though, “spoked wheels” have been introduced twenty-two times into this translation, as a new interpretation of the word arati. This epithet of the fire god was previously understood to mean “servant” or “mes-senger”; Böhtlingk and Roth had compared it with Greek hypérētēs. The translation doesn’t relate to any of the contexts in which the word occurs: “the powerful spoked wheel, now kin-dled, has appeared”. But their explanation is characteristic. The poet’s pet word for Agni, “spoked wheel”, presumably originally referring to the spoke of the fire-place. The trans-