

Looking for the Heavenly Casket

Abstract

Throughout Vedic literature, from the Rgveda to the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, reference is occasionally made to a "heavenly casket" (divya kosa), from which water is poured down towards earth. Several attempts have been made to locate this vessel in the sky. In the present article, the relevant materials are presented a new solution is proposed which combines, according to the well tested philological approach, mythological facts with a keen observation of nature.

Note: The following paper is given without diacritics, with the exception of a few Sanskrit passages which follow the Kyoto-Harvard convention of 1990. A list of Sanskrit words is given at the end of the paper, following this particular style of transcription.

Kyoto-Harvard transcription:

a A i I u U R RR L LL e ai o au M H k kh g gh G
c ch j jh J T Th D Dh N t th d dh n p ph b bh m y r l v
z S s h

Anunasika w, Vedic accents are placed after the vowels)

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The Vedic night sky has remained somewhat of a neglected stepchild of cosmological and cosmographical studies. (1) Certain of its properties have escaped the sharp eye of the protagonists of nature mythology at the turn of this century who identified most heavenly bodies with one or the other Vedic god. However, the night sky as such had not been regarded with such detail if we forget, for the moment, the long controversy of the last century about the origin of the Indian, Arabian and Chinese nakshatras.

Even in Kirfel's detailed analysis (2) of the heaven and the stars, an explanation of the nature of the night sky is missing. He reported, of course, two different types of movement of the sun, one -- as we all can see -- from east to south to west, and at night its return towards the east through some underground passage; the other type of movement is based on a more rarefied theory of some Brahmins only in the Brahmana texts, about the sun's movement from east to west in the daytime, and at night its return, with the sun's dark side pointing towards earth, to the east, where the sun disk would flip over again in the morning to point its shining side towards us.

This observation of Speijer and Sieg (3), actually, could have set the stage for some more detailed observations of the night sky. However, the study of Vedic mythology and cosmology has seen advances, since the Twenties, especially though not exclusively in the extensive and seminal work on the Adityas carried out by Paul Thieme, N.W. Brown, F.B.J. Kuiper, and their immediate predecessors such as H. Lueders. It is not surprising therefore that descriptions and interpretations of the phenomena of the night sky and its mythology were virtually absent until Kuiper's articles "The Three Strides of Visnu" and "The Heavenly Bucket" where (4) he pointed out that there also is another type of movement, of the actual turning of the night sky.

As is now well known, at night, the great Vedic god Varuna holds the world tree, in the form of a large Asvattha, up-side-down, its roots pointing upwards and its branches pointing downwards. "In the unfathomable space king Varuna, he of purified intelligence upholds the tree's stupa (RtuftS); they [the branches] stood directed downwards. May their rays be fixed in us" (RV 1.24.7) (4). This has become a familiar image that has occupied the imagination of Vedic seers, mystics, and poets for centuries. It occurs, again, in the Katha Upanisad 6.1, Taittiriya Aranyaka 1.11.5 (a text taken over from the Katha school) and in the Bhagavad Gita 15.1.

What does such an image entail? It means as Kuiper posited, that at night the netherworld is situated above us, in the night sky. The earth thus turns around its horizontal axis or, rather, it slowly shifts its horizon (as "viewed" from the

observer's position at the center of the earth, sky, and netherworld). This might seem a very strange image for us. However, the texts are clear enough and attention may also be drawn to a little known fact: the same idea can be found in a grave in W. Denmark. There, about one hundred years ago, a tomb was excavated in which a tree has been inserted, upside down, in a stone hand mill -- exactly the type of image Kuiper wanted to demonstrate for the Vedic night sky. (5) In fact, we have to distinguish between two types of movement of the night sky. One is the turning over that has just been described and the other one is the familiar movement of the stars in the sky. However, even this movement is not as simple as we might think.

Ancient people were well aware, of course, that the stars, just like the sun and the moon, rise in the east and set in the west. However, they also knew that if one looks northwards, towards the region where the polestar (Polaris) is seen now (6) all stars close to it turn around Polaris in a counter clockwise fashion. The polestar is situated at c. 28° north at Delhi, at 35° at Tokyo, at 42° in Boston, and at 52° north at Frankfurt: its exact position depends on the observer's location (latitude) on earth.

That the Vedic Indians, as well as the Iranians, actually paid a lot of attention to this fact is obvious from the following: The north pole as the single fixed point in the night sky is and was a favorite way to find one's way at night in open country as well as on sea. Now, among the Indo-European peoples who all orientated themselves towards the east, (7) the rising point of the sun, the Indo-Iranians alone exclude the northern direction from the scheme: while the east is "in front", the west "backwards", and the south "on the right", -- the north is "upwards": ut-tara, literally, "on the upper sideS, in Vedic, upara in Avestan (8) and 'brg in Middle Persian. (9)

In this upward region of the night sky, another strange feature can be found - at least, in mythology. Kuiper pointed out some 20 years ago that Varuna as well as some other gods turn over or tip over a heavenly vessel, a casket or bucket (kosa) and empty its contents over the earth down beneath it, as can be seen in passages like the following. RV 5.85.3 "Varuna has poured out the cask, with its rim turned downwards, over heaven, earth, and the interspace. Thereby the king of the whole world sprinkles the soil, as the rain (sprinkles) the barley." (10) RV 8.72.8 "With the ten (fingers) of Vivasvat, Indra has pulled up the heavenly bucket, with a threefold cord." (11) RV 8.72.10 "They (the hotrs) pour out with obeisance the inexhaustible source that goes round(?) with its bottom upwards (and) its rim downwards". (12)

It is interesting to note that the kosa is symbolized in the Mahavrata ritual by kumbha-s carried by young women on their heads. (13) However, the identity of this heavenly casket has escaped us for many years. Some ten years ago, when I wrote on the Vedic and Iranian concepts of the Milky Way and its movement

through the night sky (*Sur le chemin du ciel*, BEI 2, 1984, 213-279), I pointed out that the idea of the inverted netherworld and the inverted world tree can be understood very well if one takes into account the movement of the Milky Way. At that time, I thought that the heavenly bucket must be situated at or near the top of the night sky, near the zenith. More recently my friend Joel Brereton has written on this topic as well. He thought that the kosa was inside a rather close circle around the pole circumscribed each year by the Seven Rsis, the Geat Wain. Ursa Maior. (14) However, I think we both were not correct in our interpretation.

In fact, the matter is so simple that I hesitated to propose it for publication, -- but then, the question of the Vedic night sky as such is interesting enough to point out what kind of work still could be done, in spite of the recent book on the middle Vedic cosmography by K. Klaus.

The steps to be undertaken are clear enough: From the passages quoted above, it is clear that the Heavenly Casket is situated at the top of the sky. This can mean two things: One, the actual top of the sky, that is the zenith (right above the observer). However, this is a region of the sky that seems constantly to move, along with the other stars. (In this case one would have to look out for an asterism which looks like a casket and which would turn over, right on top of the observer in the Panjab. I have found none).

A second possibility is one of which I thought of some ten years ago when I was fascinated by the Milky Way itself, namely the region near the highest point, which the Milky Way reaches once every night (as well as once in the course of the year when observed at the same time every night). This is, as I thought at the time, a location near the highest point of the Milky Way, which might be indicated by the word *naka*.

However, another possibility, which I did not take into account at the time, is the actual highest, but unmovable point in the night sky, the region near the polestar or the polestar itself. As is well known, the star Polaris became our polestar only by c. 500 B.C.E. Before this time, the location of the pole was between three other stars in that region (since the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E.)

Now, the fundamental question to be raised here is whether every item found in mythology actually must have its counterpart in the daytime or the nighttime sky. Certainly, not every item. We do not know what Varuna could be, if he indeed should be represented by a star, a planet, a group of stars, etc. On the other hand, we now know that certain stars represent Vedic mythological figures, for example, Orion (*mrga*) is regarded as a form of Dyaus/Prajapati, shot by the arrow Isu Trikanda of Rudra, when Dyaus/Prajapati, in the form of a deer (*mrga*), pursued his

own daughter Usas. In this myth, Rudra is represented by Sirius (Tisya = Avestan: Tistriia), as Forssman has shown. (15) Yet other mythological items remain altogether invisible, as for example the heavenly tree that is turned upside down by Varuna. In fact, it must be invisible as it can only be situated, as JB and VadhPiS state, (16) at the center of the earth and of the sky. It is represented on earth by the mythical tree Plaksa Prasravana, situated at the source of the mundane river Sarasvati (in the foothills of the Panjab Himalayas) -- while at night, it is the axis that runs right through the pole star and the center of the earth (the observer's position): it is the invisible axis around which the night time sky turns.

If one then were to try to find the heavenly casket in the night-time sky, one cannot immediately discover, in the direct vicinity of the pole star anything that looks like a casket or a bucket. What then, could be this apparently "invisible" vessel? Some texts of the AV and of the Upanisads provide the key for an understanding. AV 10.8.9 (17) runs as follows:

"A bowl (camasa) with orifice downwards, bottom-side up - in it is deposited glory of all forms; there sit together the seven seers, who have become the keepers of it, the great one"

(tiryA'gbilaS camasa' Urdhva'budhnas
 ta'smin ya'zo ni'hitaM vizva'rUpam
 ta'd Asata R'SayaH sapta' sAka'M
 ye' asya' gopA' mahato' babhUvuH)

There is an even clearer version of this AV verse in BAUK 2.2.4 (SB 14.5.2.4)"There is a cup with its mouth below and its bottom up. In it is placed every form of glory. On its rim [tire] sit seven seers. Voice as an eighth is united with prayer (brahman)." [tr. HUME]

(arvA'gbilaS camasa' Urdhva'budhnas
 ta'smin ya'zo ni'hitaM vizva'rUpam
 ta'syAsata R'SayaH sapta' tI're
 vA'g aSTamI' bra'hmaNA saMvidAna')

The "commentary" that is given by the author of the Upanisad on this passage is still more enlightening as it even identifies the very Rsis:

"On its rim sit seven seers ... these two are Gotama and Bharadvaja, ... Visvamitra and Jamadagni, ... Vasistha and Kasyapa, ... and Atri."

From this passage, clearly, it appears that the verse is understood, at least by the Upanisadic thinker, as referring to the asterism sapta rsayah, the seven Rsis, or in our parlance, Ursa Maior, The Great Bear, Wain, or Wagon.

The names given by the Upanisad are, of course, those of the traditional Seven Rsis, but also the names of the actual stars of the Great Wain. (18) Further, the passage actually says that the seven seers sit right on the rim (tire) of the heavenly casket. In fact, we could not wish for a clearer identification -- and it is strange that it has eluded us for so long.

If one actually pays attention to the movement of Ursa Maior one can easily see that this asterism actually turns upside down every night. (Apart from actual observation of nature, I suggest to take a look at such computer programs as Voyager II for the Mac or EZC (Easy Cosmos) for the PC to observe the rotation of the Great Bear, the sapta rsayah, once per night, and similarly, once per year-- Such figures will be included in the WWW version of this paper).

Observation shows that the Great Wain has the form of a big spoon that is emptied out every night: it slowly turns around, scooping up the heavenly waters (19), and then releases them over the earth lying beneath it. (The same is the case at summer solstice but in a different position, so to say, upside down.-- A picture of this movement may be included in the WWW version of this paper.)To conclude: The heavenly casket, the great ladle on which the seven Rsis sit according to BAU, turns round every night, emptying its (mythological) contents, the heavenly waters.

Actually, this image actually is not so rare as we might think. It has its similarities in Japan (Hokuto shichisei, the seven stars of the "northern spoonS). One of the early generations of Japanese gods (coming after Izanagi/Izanami) in the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki also represents a name of this meaning. (20) Also, in North American English, the Great Wain is called "the Big Dipper" - an expression which is close to the Japanese one. In South America where the Incas regarded the Milky Way as a river, (21) the god of thunder, Inti, was seen at night in the asterism of the Great Bear, where he scooped water from the Milky Way, in order to wet the earth. (22) This image is close to the Black North American image of the Great Bear as a "drinking gourd." The slaves who in the 19th century tried to escape to the northern US and to Canada used the code words in their songs: "follow the drinking gourd! S (23) These similarities which go beyond the idea of a Heavenly River and a Big Ladle or Spoon should alert us for more striking similarities in myth, spread all over the American and Eurasian area. (24)

All of this, however, is not our immediate concern here. Rather, I have tried to point out that many features of the Vedic Night Sky still are not understood well --and

this means that we simply do not understand the meaning of some difficult passages of Vedic mythology, especially of those of the RV. In a wider context, this is of importance, too: If we do not pay attention to the counterclockwise motion of the Milky Way, we are not able to understand some complicated images of Vedic eschatology: why is there a path of the gods and a path of the ancestors, why is Yama's realm is both high up in the night sky and down below the earth as well as in the South. (25)

In short, we have to pay close attention to such images in order to grasp a large part of Vedic mythology and cosmography. Even now, after some 150 years of the study of Vedic texts, our understanding of the Vedic night sky still is in its infancy.

End notes

1. K. Klaus, *Die altindische Kosmologie. Nach den Brahmanas dargestellt*, Bonn (Indica et Tibetica Verlag) 1986.
2. W. Kirfel, *Die Kosmographie der Inder, nach den Quellen dargestellt*. repr. Wiesbaden 1967.
3. Speijer, *JBBRAS* 1906, p. 723; Sieg, *Der Nachtweg der Sonne*, *Nachr. d. Kgl. Ges. d. Wiss. Goettingen*, 1923, *Caland WZKM* 26, 1912, 119; see author, *Sur le chemin du ciel*, *BEI* 2, 1984, 213-279, n. 112.
4. Kuiper, *The three strides of Visnu*, *Indological Studies in Honor of W.N. Brown*, New Haven 1962, 137-151; *The heavenly bucket*, *India Maior* (Fs. Gonda), Leiden 1972, 144-156; -- *The bliss of Asa*, *IJJ* 8, 1964, 117; all reprinted in: Kuiper, *Ancient Indian Cosmogony* (ed. J. Irwin). Delhi: Vikas, 1983.
5. Author, *Sur le chemin du ciel*, n. 103; Feddersen, *Aarboger f. nord. Oldkynlighet og Historie*, 1881, 360.
6. Where it could be found, due to precession, since c. 500 B.C.E.
7. See author, *MSS* 30, p. 183, n. 19 and p. 176, n. 5.
8. See *MSS* 30, p. 163 sqq., esp. p. 183, n. 19 where this is explained as indicating the RupperS direction where the Great Bear is visible.
9. Found in Turfan manuscripts, cf. *MSS* 30, p. 191, n. 49.
10. Cf. also RV 5.83.8 "Scoop up the large bucket, pour it out at its proper place (ni), let the rivulets, set free, run forwards!"

11. For the meaning of kheda "cord" see A. Wezler, *Zum Verstaendnis von Chandogya-Upanisad* 5.1.12. *StII* 8/9 (1982), 155-188. This could mean that the sun (or here, Indra, the brother of the sun god Vivasvant) pulls up the kosa during its night-time movement, as a sort of counterweight.
12. Thus Kuiper, *The heavenly bucket*, 154; Geldner, *RV transl.*, ad loc., thinks of the Soma vessel.
13. JB 2.404 \$165: the head is the symbol of the sky (*divo rupam yan murdha*). Cf. author, *Sur le chemin du ciel*, n. 97, and Bereton, *Cosmographic images in the Brhadaranyakopanisad*, p.7.
14. J. Brereton, *Cosmographic images in the Brhadaranyako-panisad*, *IIJ* 34, 1991, 1-17.
15. KZ 82, 1968, 37-65. Other, unidentified stars are, e.g., Prajapati's feet. For many other unidentified asterisms, see BEI 2, 238, notes 10-11.
16. See author, *Sur le chemin du ciel*, p.223; to be precise, the center of heaven and earth is exactly "one span north of it".
17. Actually quoted by me in my article on the Milky Way (BEI 2) in 1984.
18. See J. E. Mitchiner, *Traditions of the Seven Rsis*, Delhi 1982.
19. See BAU 3.6, with Gargi's question stating that the earth is woven on water, etc.
20. Ame.no ku-hiza-mochi.no kami 'Heavenlyly water drawing gourd possessor', and as usual in this list, with his mundane counterpart: Kuni.no ku-hiza-mochi.no kami 'Earthly water drawing gourd possessor'.
21. Differently, the dark spots in the Milky Way were regarded by the Incas as certain animals, while actual asterisms, as for example a group of stars in Lyra, symbolize animals such as the llama. See A. F. Aveni, *Sky Watchers of Ancient Mexico*, Austin 1980, A. Metraux, in: Pierre Grimal, *Mythen der Voelker*, Hamburg (Fischer) 1967, Bd. III, p. 200; cf. author, BEI 2, n. 18.
22. A. Metraux, *Mythen der Voelker*, III, p. 201.
23. This was meant as secretly giving the directions (pointing out the North) of the "underground railway", bringing slaves from the south to the northern abolitionist states and into Canada before the Civil War of 1861.
24. See my forthcoming article: *Vala and Iwato: The myth of the hidden sun in India, Japan, and beyond*. (Conf. on Mythology, Hamilton, Ont., 1993).
25. See BEI 2, n. 103: "with the ascent of Varuna to the zenith of the night sky, Yama and his paradise also move"; cf. Kuiper, *Bliss of Asa*, p. 119.

Abbreviations and literature

A. F. Aveni, *Sky Watchers of Ancient Mexico*, Austin 1980

AV Atharvaveda (Saunaka version)

BAU Brhadaranyaka Upanisad

BEI Bulletin des Etudes Indiennes, Paris

J. Brereton, *Cosmographic images in the Brhadaranyakopanisad*,

IJJ 34, 1991, 1-17

B. Forssman, *Apaosa, der Gegner des Tistriia*, KZ 82, 1968, 37-65

IJJ Indo-Iranian Journal, Dordrecht

JB Jaminiya Brahmana

JBBRAS Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic
Society

W. Kirfel, *Die Kosmographie der Inder, nach den Quellen*

dargestellt, repr. Wiesbaden 1967K. Klaus, *Die altindische Kosmologie. Nach
den Brahmanas*

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F. B. J. Kuiper, *The heavenly bucket*, in: *India Maior* (Fs. Gonda),

Leiden 1972, 144-156. (repr. in: Kuiper, *Ancient Indian*

Cosmogony (ed. J. Irwin). Delhi: Vikas, 1983)

-----, *The Bliss of Asa*, IJJ 8, 1964, 96-129. (repr. in:

Kuiper, *Ancient Indian Cosmogony* (ed. J. Irwin). Delhi:

Vikas, 1983)

-----, *The three strides of Visnu*, *Indological Studies in Honor
of W.N. Brown*, New Haven 1962, 137-151

KZ Kuhns Zeitschrift = Zeitschrift fuer vergleichende
Sprachforschung

A. Metraux, in: Pierre Grimal, *Mythen der Voelker*, Hamburg

(Fischer) 1967

J. E. Mitchiner, *Traditions of the Seven Rsis*, Delhi 1982

MSS Muenchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft

RV Rgveda

SB Satapatha Brahmana

StII Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik, Reinbek

VadhPiS Vadhula Pitṛmedha Sutra (in Ms. of Vadhula Sutra,
Govt. Library, Madras, see author in StII 1)

M. Witzel, Sur le chemin du ciel, BEI 2, 1984, 213-279

<NB.: Partial English translation available with the author>

WZKM Wiener Zeitschrift zur Kunde des Morgenlandes

A list of sanskrit terms

(according to the Kyoto-Harvard convention)

iSu trikANDa

RSi

KaTha UpaniSad

Kazyapa

koza

tiSya

tiStriia

tIra

TaittirIya AraNyaka

divo rUpam yan mUrdhA

nakSatra

nAka

plakSa prAsravaNa

BharadvAja

MahAvrata

mRga

VaruNa

VizvAmitra

VasiSTha

saptarSayaH

stUpa

hotR

The Kyoto-Harvard Convention (1990)

a A i I u U R RR L LL e ai o au M H

k kh g gh G

c ch j jh J

T Th D Dh N

t th d dh n

p ph b bh m

y r l v

z S s h

Anunasika = w

Vedic accents are placed after the vowel