

## SUICIDAL SELF-SCORCHING IN ANCIENT INDIA

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India, like the other countries of the Eurasian cultural complex, witnessed a marked development in all aspects of life during the last two millennia BC. Archaeology shows us how an increasing number of metals appear: copper, gold and silver are being supplemented by iron, lead, tin and even zinc (Falk 1991). Excavations have also revealed a change in burial customs, from full-length burials to cremation, which was followed by urn-burials of selected bones and which later reverted to cremation (Falk 2000). Archaeological means are available to date the first townships after the Harappan civilization in northern India to the middle of the first millennium 700 BC (Allchin 1995).

Accompanying the finds we have works of literature, called the Veda, covering most periods of these two millennia. Here, in the texts, we find the same expansion of the use of metals; here, only the final cremation is referred to. Towns are known, but are either inhabited by alien populations or not recommended for visits.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the texts display a change in social terms from a rather flexible coexistence of several functional and ethnical groups to a tightly fixed order of four hereditary classes. Major changes concern religion and cult: in the oldest texts women, too, function as poets; religion centres around securing the basic needs of life, where the perennial waters certainly are in the focus of interest (Falk 1997). Ritual poetry in the beginning is spontaneous and dependent on the time of performance, which in my view is spring, with its recurring floods. This changed to a fixed, pre-manufactured poetry, used at sacrifices which are more or less independent of the crucial times of the year, which was used for kings who are mainly concerned about their own social elevation and seclusion.

During these two millennia the situation of law and order changed to a considerable extent, following or coming parallel to some of the evolutions hinted at

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<sup>1</sup> ĀpDhS 1.11,21 refers to the *snātaka: nagarapraveśanāni ca varjayet*.

above. Our idea of “law and order” has an equivalent in the Sanskrit term *dharma*, which denotes what each individual or group of men has to do, and which also denotes the agent who punishes those transgressing it: *dharma eva hato hanti dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ*, as the Manusmṛti 8,15 says. This rule seems to apply to all men; an older version (Mbh 3.31,7) sees only the king as the agent: *rājānaṃ dharmagoptāram dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ*, ‘Dharma, when protected, protects the king, who protects it’.

In a thoughtful survey, W. Rau has outlined the duties of a king in the Brāhmaṇa period (Rau 1957: 90). Firstly, the king has to look after the well-being of his people by magic, mainly to secure the yearly rains. Secondly, he should look after the maintenance of law and order (Rechtsprechung), and lastly, it is his duty to safeguard the subjects in his dominion.

When inspected at close range, this threefold duty is not without problems. The least problematical is point three: right from the outset of our observation period, the king is busy with the stabilization of power. He stands high above his subjects, and shines through his victories over all sorts of internal and neighbouring competitors. A study by B. Schlerath (1960) showed how this point was prominent through all early stages of Vedic literature. It also showed that point two, the care of civil law, is almost non-existent:

Die Begriffe, die wir bei einer höher entwickelten staatlichen Ordnung erwarten würden: befehlen, anordnen, richten, gliedern, ordnen, lenken, haben so gut wie keine Bedeutung (Schlerath 1960: 105).

He cites, in full, one instance to the contrary (RV 7.86,5 on p. 107), and refers the reader to Rau for further material (Schlerath 1960: 106). However, Rau is rather at a loss when trying to define civil law in the Brāhmaṇa period. He says:

Als ‘Hausvater’ seines Stammes dürfte der Monarch auch richterliche, besonders straf-richterliche Gewalt besessen haben, doch gestattet uns die Lückenhaftigkeit unserer Quellen nicht, deren Umfang genau zu bestimmen (Rau 1957: 93).

Some stray instances cited by Rau show how the king acted to maintain the basis of his power: priests, offering to deities without the king’s consent, were killed by him (JB 3.199–202; Rau 1957: 96). The place where he met his court and where he also regulated affairs, was called *sabhā*. Here, initially, the dominant figures of the kingdom assembled and regulated their own affairs. At that time, the *sabhā* was not yet a place where each and every civil case was pursued. Instead, most civil cases were regulated outside the fold of the king and the nobility. If a murder happened, instant revenge was possible, and one of the victim’s family could kill the murderer or one of his kin. In a case where the murder was legally regulated, the severest sentence seems to have been a verbal reproach, declaring him *abhiśasta*, and forbidding any social contact with him.

A similar idea seems to stand behind the “invention” of monarchy in the Aggaññasuttanta of the Dīghanikāya (DN 27.19–20): after theft occurred for the first time the people started to use reproach (*garahā*) and beating (*daṇḍādāna*). This spontaneous reaction fits the many cases in Vedic contexts where sudden revenge is inflicted by civilians on those guilty of theft, murder or rape. The king, on the other hand, who in the Aggaññasuttanta was introduced to provide institutional justice, knows just three forms of penance: 1) to humiliate the culprit (*khīyati*), 2) to censure him (*garahati*), and 3) to exile him (*pabbājeti*).<sup>2</sup>

This expulsion is suitable for a society which guarantees the survival of all members of the community who adhere to its code. Individuals were fully dependent on their group, and the expulsion of a criminal left little chance for him to maintain his status somewhere else. An *abhiśasta* was clad in the hide of a donkey or a dog; he had to live outside the village, with other expelled people. A murderer, for instance, had to carry a skull with him and constantly confess his deed. It is obvious that this practice prepared the ground for many of the ascetic groups still wandering through India these days. Their dress, their besmearing with ashes, their skulls echo the *abhiśasta* of bygone times.

Slowly, this state of affairs changed and the king was put in charge of passing sentences in all civil cases, dealing with simple abuse, theft and murder. Why was this so? Why was the old method of ritual purification in simple cases and of expulsion in severe cases not maintained? When we look at the examples given in the Vedic literature we see that it was the Brahmins who felt the strongest need to replace public law with the king’s law. In earlier times, anyone with certain abilities could present himself as a *brāhmaṇa*. He would prove his claim by producing poetry or ritual variants which forced the gods to fulfill their wishes, be it for water and rain or for health and riches.

As ritual poetry ceased to be produced spontaneously, the legitimation of being a *brāhmaṇa* switched from poetical prowess to the lineage of birth. After a period of uncertainty, when many people thought of themselves as being a *brāhmaṇa*, while they were labelled *abrāhmaṇa* by others, the process ended by the installation of the four fixed *varṇas* called *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra*.

This new practice led to a series of further changes. Noteworthy are the new recommendations aiming at preventing a brahmin from appearing ridiculous: He should not climb trees; he should not climb down into wells; he should not run when rain sets in, etc. His personal profile was also dependent on his wealth, notably his possession of gold. One of the new duties for a king was to pursue every thief of a brahmin’s gold.

<sup>2</sup> Just two penances, viz. scolding and exiling, are preserved in all the other Indian and Chinese versions (cf. Meisig 1988: 142–143), although with a change from exiling to arresting. Does this mean that, in the Pali version, *garahati* serves to explain *khīyati*?

We see that the old society, where the ruling clique stood high above the rest of the population, had changed to a series of four closed groups, of which the brahmins claimed to be the most superior. They tried to manipulate the *kṣatriya* group where the king was lodged. In olden times when communal areas were comparatively loosely defined,<sup>3</sup> it was sufficient to chase an *abhiśasta* away from the settlement out into the woods. Now, after the setting up of class barriers, those offending against a brahmin would, in most cases, not come from the brahmin group. This means that brahmins could still expel other brahmins, but offenders from the three other groups were outside their immediate grasp. Their declaring them *abhiśasta* was no guarantee for a resulting expulsion from the *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* or *śūdra* group.<sup>4</sup>

This must have led to the awareness that traditional expulsion had become insufficient to support the new status of independence and superiority claimed by the now hereditary *brāhmaṇas*. There was a need to have penances regulated by a superior agency, independent of the *varṇa* of the accused; and penances must be of such a nature that the other *varṇas* could not circumvent or boycott them. This necessity led to several changes:

- The king was now to regulate more and more civil cases, mainly offences against brahmins. In the case of conflicting evidence, he was to give preference to the statements produced by brahmins.
- Social penances like scolding or temporary expulsion were replaced by corporal punishment, from branding to decapitation.
- The king was not to be trusted in his judgement; if not of *brāhmaṇa* descent himself, he needed a brahmin to tell him how to impose the law. This brahmin is called *purohita*, and he keeps the king from judging *over* other brahmins (ĀpDhS 2.5.10,14–16).
- And, last but not least, there was an old notion that the *dharma* was closely linked to water.<sup>5</sup> This explains itself in the idea that good poetry in sacrifices and civil obedience together lead to the availability of enough water for agriculture and animals. The changes outlined above also led to a reworked definition of *dharma*: it is now a subject of the brahmins learned in the Vedas, who by their influence demand four forms of respect: reverence, gifts, the respect of not being plundered and the respect of not being put to death.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Everyone, for example, e.g. could try to become an overlord (cf. Khādiragrhya 4.3,12: *ādhipatyam prāpnoti*).

<sup>4</sup> The laws of different groups are recognized in GDhS 2.2(11),20–21.

<sup>5</sup> ŚB 11.1.6.24; cf. AB 3.6.4 (*āpaḥ satye [pratiṣṭhitāḥ]*) and JUB 3.1(1.10),10 (*satyam mahīr adhiṣṭhantya āpaḥ*).

<sup>6</sup> ŚB 11.5.7.1: *lokaḥ pacyamānāś caturbhir dharmair brāhmaṇam bhunakty arcayā ca dānena cājyeyatayā cāvadhayatayā ca*; cf. Horsch 1967: 51.

The same brahmins expand their old *gr̥hyasūtras* with passages dealing with public penances; they later produce a new genre with the *dharmasūtras*, and lastly they dismiss the limitations of Vedic *śākhās* by composing *dharmasāstras*, law books in the strict sense, to be used in full-fledged court sessions led by the king and supervised by his *purohita* and a set of brahminical judges called *sabhāsad*.

These points can be summarized in the thesis that the changes in ancient Indian law and order are directly related to the installation of the brahmins as their own hereditary group, which tried with all means to gain as much independence from others as possible.

Brahmins needed the king to impose their law on others. They put themselves outside the jurisdiction of the same king by declaring themselves subjects of king Soma, i.e. a ritual beverage, divine victim of sacrifice and moon at the same time. But Soma would not help them when a crime occurred inside their new and closed class; and to allow the king to judge over brahmins was dangerous too. So, in the case of inter-brahminical offences, the brahmins still followed the old habit of inflicting purification rites. In more severe cases, where a death sentence was felt necessary, the culprit was kept outside the authority of the king by ordering him to kill himself.

In the sequel I would like to present some cases from the *Āpastambadharmasūtra*, one of the oldest texts of this type. Although ascribed to a teacher named *Āpastamba*, it consists of several layers, glued together, preserving many parallel statements concerning the same offence. We can see how various views once existed in the same Vedic school, only to be combined at the time of the compilation. The double occurrences have hitherto been interpreted as referring to different occasions, but a comparison will show how parallel they are. Generally speaking, one set is found in *ĀpDhS* 1.24,1–26,9 and the second in *ĀpDhS* 1.26,10–28,21. The borders are not clear cut, but the cases speak for themselves.

Most numerous are the rules dealing with a killer of a brahmin. In *ĀpDhS* 1.9.24.6–11 we learn that whoever has killed a *brāhmaṇa* or a *kṣatriya* versed in the Vedas should go to the wilderness, build himself a hut, and keep silent. He should carry the head of a corpse and dress himself with just one cloth between knees and navel.<sup>7</sup> The rule is also extended to protect brahmins only by name. No king is involved and no death is expected. This is the old method of social expulsion; after living outside for 12 years and performing a purifying ceremony he may be permitted to live in his community again (1.9,20).

<sup>7</sup> *ĀpDhS* 1.9: *pūrvayor varṇayor vedādhyāyaṃ hatvā savanagataṃ vābhiśastaḥ*.6. *brāhmaṇa-mātram ca*.7. ... *tasya nirveṣaḥ*.10. *araṇye kuṭiṃ kṛtvā vāgyataḥ śavaśiradhvajo 'rdha-śāṅipakṣam adhonābhy uparijānv ācchādya*.11.

The second case is much more severe, in that following ĀpDhS 1.9,11, anybody but a brahmin who has killed a brahmin has to go to a battle-field, and there he has to place himself in between the lines and try to be killed by a passing warrior. Alternatively, he can also burn himself on a pyre.<sup>8</sup>

Here, capital punishment is ordained, but the king's hand is not necessary. Everything is left to the culprit himself.

The third occurrence (ĀpDhS 1.10,21) is parallel to the first, but now return is not granted anymore: the murderer wears a dog's or a donkey's hide and, as before, the skull of a man for drinking purposes. He walks around begging and declaring his deed; he lives in abandoned houses or under a tree, and he knows *na hi ma āryaiḥ samprayogo vidyate*, 'there is no contact for me with Āryan people' any more.<sup>9</sup>

The treatment of a thief is again twofold. In the first case (ĀpDhS 1.9,4), the thief with disheveled hair places a club on his shoulder and approaches the king and confesses his deed. If the king clubs him to death he is purified and can go to heaven.<sup>10</sup>

Here we have a first involvement of the royal agency. But it is noteworthy that the king does not summon the *sabhā*. He is not pursuing the culprit; instead, the thief is directed to take care of his penance himself. With this rule – shaped by brahmins – the king is forcibly involved in the case.

In the second instance (ĀpDhS 1.10,1), it is regulated that whoever claims the property of someone else as his own is regarded as a thief.<sup>11</sup> Some exceptions and differing views are cited, and no rule of sanction follows. The purpose seems to be to ward off demands from the nobility, who were notorious for their greedy demands against *brāhmaṇas* (Rau 1957: 62). By using the term "thief" criminality was hinted at for the first time.

The last case deals with a crime which would ordinarily only occur inside the brahminical fold. It is called *gurutalpa*, 'the bed of the Guru', and concerns sexual contacts between a Veda student and the wife of his teacher.

<sup>8</sup> ĀpDhS 1.9: *prathamam varṇam parihāpya prathamam varṇam hatvā samgrāmaṃ gatvāvatiṣṭheta, tatraīnam hanyuḥ.11. apī vā lomāni tvacaṃ māmsam iti hāvayitvāgniṃ pravīset.12.*

<sup>9</sup> ĀpDhS 1.9: *atha bhrūṇahā śvājīnaṃ kharājīnaṃ vā bahīrloma paridhāya puruṣa-śiraḥ pratīpānārtham ādāya.21. 1.10: kṣatvāṅgam daṇḍārthe karmanāmadheyam prabruvānaś caṅkramyeta ko bhrūṇaghne bhikṣām iti, grāme prāṇavṛttiṃ pratilabhya śūnyāgāraṃ vṛkṣamūlaṃ vābhyupāśrayen na hi ma āryaiḥ samprayogo vidyate; etenaiva vidhinottamād ucchvāsāc caret, nāsyāsmiṃ loka pratyāpattir vidyate, kalmaṣam tu nirhanyate.1.*

<sup>10</sup> ĀpDhS 1.9,4: *stenaḥ prakīrṇakeśo 'ṃse musalam ādāya rājānaṃ gatvā karmācakṣita, tenainaṃ hanyād vadhe mokṣaḥ.4.*

<sup>11</sup> ĀpDhS 1.10,1: *yathā kathā ca parapari-graham abhimanyate steno ha bhavatīti kautsahārītau tathā kaṇvapuṣkarasādī.1.*

A wife was generally suspected to have paramours, but precautions were taken already at the marriage stage that all her negative psychical traits were transferred on her eventual lover.<sup>12</sup> At least brahmins, knowing about this prophylactic magic, may have been held back from indecent behaviour, out of fear.

In the two parallel treatments of the *gurutalpa* offence given by the ĀpDhS, the first offers a double solution: the student should himself cut off his male organ together with the testicles, he should then take it into his folded hands and walk straight southwards without return, i.e. until he drops dead. Alternatively, he can also embrace a burning *sūrmī* and find death therewith.<sup>13</sup>

The second paragraph (ĀpDhS 1.10,15) dealing with this topic says that the student should creep into a hollow *sūrmī*, inflame it at both ends and thus burn himself.<sup>14</sup>

The second method, i.e. embracing a *sūrmī*, spelled *sūrmī* in older texts, is particularly intriguing because there is no unanimous view about the meaning of this term.

A 3rd-century dictionary, the Amarakośa, says in 2.10,35: *sūrmī sthūṅāyāḥ-pratimā*, and according to various commentators these three words denote an iron icon (*trīṇi lohapatimāyāyāḥ*).

The Petersburg Dictionary is more neutral with its paraphrases:

1. Röhre 2. ein röhrenartiges Gefäß als Leuchter dienend 3. eine (hohle) metallene Säule (durch deren Glühendmachung Verbrecher, insbes. Ehebrecher, zum Tode befördert werden).

All these points were obtained by pondering over the said *dharma* texts. In the context of *gurutalpa* the *sūrmī* to be embraced is called *jvalantī*, 'inflamed', in BDhS 2.1.1,14, GDhS 3.5(23),9 and ĀpDhS 1.9(25),2. The verbs used are *pariṣvaj-* or *śliṣ-*, both meaning 'to embrace', otherwise used for items about the diameter of a human being.<sup>15</sup>

The flames appear at both sides of the object, as is known from ĀpDhS 1.10(28),15 (cf. note 14), where the student inflames the *sūrmī* at both ends. This firing technique is also referred to in a Brāhmaṇa, PB 2.17,1, where a special re-arrangement of verses is taught: 9 verses are sung first, then follow 3 verses, and another set of 9 verses marks the end. This is likened to a *sūrmy ubhayata ādīptā*,

<sup>12</sup> ŚGS 1.16,4; HGS 1.24,5; BhGS 1.19,8; BGS 1.6,12; PGS 1.11,4.

<sup>13</sup> ĀpDhS 1.9: *gurutalpagāmī savṛṣaṇaṃ śiśnaṃ parivāsyāñjalāv ādhāya dakṣiṇāṃ diśam anāvṛttim vrajet.1. jvalitām vā sūrmim pariṣvajya samāpnuyāt.2.*

<sup>14</sup> ĀpDhS 1.10.28: *gurutalpagāmī tu suṣirāṇi sūrmim praviśyobhayata ādīpyābhidāhed ātmānam.15.*

<sup>15</sup> BDhS 2.1.1,14: *sūrmim vā jvalantim śliṣyet*; GDhS 3.85(23),9: *sūrmim vā śliṣyej jvalantim*; ĀpDhS 1.9(25),2: *jvalitām vā sūrmim pariṣvajya samāpnuyāt.*

and the commentator Sāyaṇa explains this by referring to a woman who is slender in the middle and broader at the extremities (*sūrmī kṛśā madhye sthūletarā*). More important is the statement in the next paragraph of the PB itself:

One desirous of spiritual lustre should in chanting practise it; the nine versed (*trivṛt*, thrice-threefolded chant) is gleaming splendour, man (*i.e.* the word *puruṣa*) is tri-syllabic; in that two nine-versed chants (*i.e.* two rounds, each of nine verses) are on both sides (*i.e.* before and after) and three [verses] are in the middle, the two nine-fold ones heat him, just as he would heat gold, for [obtaining] gleaming splendour and spiritual lustre. (Caland)<sup>16</sup>

The arrangement of the verses represents the picture of a man inside a *sūrmī*. This object is linked to fire at both ends. The picture of a *puruṣa* inside the *sūrmī* recalls the Dharmasūtra penance of heating the student, so that it seems possible that the author of the Pañcaviṃśabrāhmaṇa knew about this *gurutaḷpa* solution. To illustrate the context of the chanting the Brāhmaṇa tells us that this man is heated just like gold is smelted (*niṣṭap*). Since a device is not named in this simile it seems possible that gold too was heated in a *sūrmī*. This would allow us to interpret it as a furnace, a smelting device for metal ores.

In fact, furnaces look pretty much the same all over ancient Europe, tribal Africa or India. After the primitive hearth furnaces were given up – initially used for the production of both copper and iron<sup>17</sup> – a shaft furnace was developed. This is a hollow tube made of clay, standing erect over a cavity at the bottom. Shaft furnaces have an opening at the bottom and they are open at the top. When heated there are flames visible both at the firing hole and at the top. They can be big enough to hold a man inside, and they are not too big to be embraced. Their shapes differ considerably,<sup>18</sup> from straight to conical; some have globular forms in the lower or upper part; there are even some who would answer the explanation of Sāyaṇa, who compared it to a woman with a contracted middle and broader extremities. But it seems not advisable to build any conclusion on Sāyaṇa's guesswork.

JB 3.267 contains a story of how one Viśvamanas saw a certain melody. Without a furnace producing molten metal this story hardly makes sense:

Viśvamanas went for fire wood in the wilderness and hit on a bear. He wished he could ward off the bear. Then he saw this *sāman* and sang it. Indra then had a look on Viśvamanas and realized he had encountered a bear. He ran towards him. Because of [the bear's] heavy hissing he [nearly] fainted.

<sup>16</sup> PB 2.17,2: *brahmavarcasakāmaḥ stuvīta tejo vai trivṛt tryakṣaraḥ puruṣo yat trivṛtāv abhito bhavatas tisro madhye yathā hiraṇyamaṇi niṣṭaped evamaṇi trivṛtau niṣṭapatas tejase brahmavarcasāya*.

<sup>17</sup> For experimental smeltings of iron ore in such a furnace see Wynne & Tylecote 1958.

<sup>18</sup> For a pedigree of technological procedures see Forbes 1971: 128; for modern Indian types see Forbes 1972: 249; Ruben 1939: 133, Tfl. I, Abb. 4, with further literature.

He asked: “Viśvamanas, who is behind you?” “A Sūrmī, o munificent one!” He said: “Say it [again].” “A Sūrmī, o munificent one!” “Now, hit against her with a stick”, said [Indra, and] “Cut a small blade of grass and throw it gently upon [the *sūrmī*]!” He cut a small blade of grass and threw it gently upon [her]. This very moment Indra cast a *vajra*. This they<sup>19</sup> thrust upon the [bear].<sup>20</sup>

Because of the heavy hissing of the pursuing bear, Viśvamanas compares the animal to a *sūrmī*. The hissing weakens him to such an extent that he has to repeat his answer before Indra can understand it. Indra instructs the fading man to hit the bear with a simple blade of grass. Indra then “casts” a *vajra*, which did away with the bear.

We may expect the bear’s hissing to have been both close and hot, which explains why Viśvamanas thought of a furnace right behind him. The picture of the furnace may also explain why Indra “cast” (*vajram asiñcat*) the grass into a *vajra* instead of the usual *pra-har* or *ud-yam*, the usual verbs used for striking the weapon. The root *sic* is commonly used in contexts of metal casting (Rau 1973: 37, n. 44). This root then makes it clear that the metal smelted was copper. For both copper and iron the process of smelting is similar, but the resulting metals are very much different. Only copper can be cast; iron – up to the 15th century AD – needed to be forged.<sup>21</sup>

The blade of grass possibly explains a *hapax legomenon*. The term *visūrmikā* occurs only in BSS 3.1:69,4+13. It is made from *darbha* grass and functions as fuel, in an exceptional way, replacing ordinary firewood (*idhma*).<sup>22</sup> According to the commentator Bhavasvāmin (BSS III, index, p. 97), this term is equivalent to *kalāpa*, ‘bundles’, i.e. of grass or wood, often used in ritual contexts. Krick (1982: 517) expects “aus Darbha-Gras gefertigte röhrenförmige Stränge”, clearly under the influence of the dictionaries’ view of *sūrmī*. A sort of tinder made from dry grass seems more likely.

<sup>19</sup> The singers’ *sāman* functions as the weapon, cf. JB 3.43: *tasyaitenaive sāmā prāghnan*.

<sup>20</sup> JB 3.267, cf. Caland 1919: 290, § 208: ... *viśvamanasaṃ vai samiddhāraṃ paretam aranya ṛkṣo* 'vindat. *so* 'kāmayatāparkṣaṃ hanīyeti. *sa etat sāmāpaśyat. tad abhyaḡāyata. tam indro* 'paśyad *viśvamanasam ṛkṣo* 'vidad iti. *tam abhyādravat. tasyādravata śvasathāt prāvīyata. tam aprcchad viśvamanah kas tvaīṣa pareṇeti.*

*sūrmī maghavann iti brūhīty abravīt.*

*sūrmī maghavann ity abravīt.*

*aṅgaināṃ daṇḍenābhijahīti so* 'bravīt.

*ṛṇakam āchīdya śanair adhyasyeti. taṃ ṛṇakam āchīdya śanair adhyāsyat. tad evendro vajram asiñcat. tasyo tad eva prāghnan...*

<sup>21</sup> Regarding ancient iron furnaces see Gowland 1912: 278–282, also concerning colonial India.

<sup>22</sup> BSS 3.1:69,4ff: *sa upakalpayate punarṇiṣkṛtaṃ rathaṃ punarutsyūtaṃ vāsaḥ punar ut-sṛṣtam anaḍvāhaṃ darbhakulāyaṃ tisro darbhamayīr visūrmikāḥ. prajñātā āgnyādheyikāḥ saṃbhārāḥ ... yad amutra muñjakulāyaṃ tad iha darbhakulāyam. yo* 'mutredhmaḥ *praṇayanīyaḥ sa iha darbhamayīr visūrmikā*; for a translation with notes cf. Krick 1982: 517.

## THE ANTIQUITY OF THE TERM

How old is this term? Metal is referred to in the oldest parts of the Ṛgveda. *ayas* denotes copper, *āyasa* ‘made from copper’. Later, when iron appeared, it was necessary to distinguish between *lohītāyas* (‘red metal’, i.e. copper) and *kṛṣṇāyas*, (‘black metal’, i.e. iron) (Rau 1973: 21). Although the process of working the smelting products of both ores varies considerably, the furnaces for both ores cannot be differentiated by sight.

The earliest occurrence of *sūrmī* is found in two stanzas of the RV. They add nothing to our knowledge; on the contrary, with the furnace in view it is possible to improve the translations offered so far:

As first occurrence I want to cite RV 8.69,12:

*sudevó asi varuṇa yásya te saptá síndhavaḥ,  
anukṣáranti kākúdaṃ sūrmyàṃ suṣirám iva*

‘Du bist ein guter Gott, o Varuṇa, in dessen Schlund die sieben Ströme fließen wie in eine hohle Röhre.’ (Geldner)

The mouth of Varuṇa is compared to a hollow *sūrmī*, either because of the size of its upper opening, or because the poet thought of the buckets of ore and charcoal being poured into it, for hours during one smelting process. Geldner’s “hohle Röhre” is repeated in Elizarenkova’s *v poluju trubu* (1995: 404). Note that the same attribute *suṣira* was also used for the *sūrmī* in which the student is burned. The stanza is repeated in MS 4.7.8 (104:11) and AV 20.92,9.

The second occurrence is RV 7.1,3:

*prédho agne dīdhi purnó nó ’jasrayā sūrmyà yaviṣṭha,  
tám śāsávanta úpayanti vājāḥ*

‘Entzündet leuchte uns voran, Agni, mit einem unaufhörlich glühenden Schmelzofen, du Jüngster. Zu dir kommen die vielen Ehrengaben.’ (After Geldner)

‘Mit einem unaufhörlich glühenden Schmelzofen’ replaces Geldner’s ‘mit unverlöschlicher Feuersäule’. The sociative instrumental is taken as referring to the place of the fire possessed by Agni, being called “furnace” metaphorically. Annotation 3a to Geldner’s translation shows again how diverse the local interpretations were:

*sūrmī* nach Sāy[āṇa] Flamme, nach Uv[āṭa] zu VS. 17,76 Brennholz, nach Mah[īdhara] Brennholz oder mit der einer *sūrmī* gleichenden Flamme. “*sūrmī* ist eine glühend gemachte eiserne Säule und bezeichnet hier implicite die Flamme.” Letzte Erklärung, die die richtige ist, auch bei Sāy. zu TS 4,6,5,3.

Geldner's – or rather Sāyana's – 'Feuersäule' is repeated in Elizarenkova (1995: 178) with *ognennym stolpom*. The stanza itself is used many more times, e.g. KS 18.4 (269:5), 35.1 (51:1), 39.15 (132:21); SV(K) 1375; MS 2.10.6 (139:5), VSM 17,76, VSK 18.6.12 and TS 4.6.5.4.

These two oldest references to the term *sūrmī* thus give no reason to dismiss our previous explanation as a furnace.

## SŪRMĪ AND MAN

Being about the size of a man, it is understandable why there are some more metaphors connecting the two:

- The *gurutaḷpa* penance in the Sūtras presupposes a type of identification of the *sūrmī* with a woman: the student embraces the hot furnace like he embraced his guru's wife, just like a drinker of liquor has to drink heated liquor (ĀpDhS 1.25,3).
- In the context of the Agnicayana, the ŚB 8.7.3.3 advises that some loose soil should be thrown upon the perforated stone, *svayamātrṇā*. Loose soil means food and the perforated stone symbolizes vital breath. Vital breath is dependent on food; therefore, if there were no soil on this stone the sacrificer would reach heaven resembling a dry, hollow *sūrmī*: *yathā śuṣkā sūrmī suṣiraivaṃ ha so' muṣmiṃ loke sambhavati*. The 'dry' (*śuṣka*) state indicates the absence of anything fluid. Given the picture of the furnace this can only refer to liquid ore.
- Varuṇa, who gulps rivers like a *sūrmī* gulps ores, has already been cited from the RV.
- VādhūlaS 4.30:139–140 reports the sexual unification of male Prajāpati and the female *vāc*, presented as Sāman. The latter, trying to escape his advances, changes successively into a mare, into a she-camel, a goat, a female gazelle, etc. Then she hits upon a *sūrmī* with ears:

She approached that lying *sūrmī* with ears and thought it was a man. She entered it. Against him<sup>23</sup> she made her teeth into palisades. Prajāpati followed her, observing. "She has made her teeth into palisades against me!" Then Prajāpati assumed the shape of a rice meal of that goddess (i.e. *vāc*). She longed for that. He observed that she indeed was longing for him. Then he adorned himself by pouring [ghee upon himself]. She then longed much more intensively for him.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Read *ato* instead of *sato*? Cf. the corresponding ablative *mat* in the next sentence. Caland, *VādhūlaS*, p. 140, n. 2: "Verdorben; etwa *sātaḥ*?"

<sup>24</sup> *saitāṃ sūrmīṃ karṇakāvatiṃ śayānāṃ adhyagacchat puruṣam etaṃ vā eṣā. tāṃ prāviśat. sa to puro'kuruta yad dantāṃs. tāṃ anvagacchat prajāpatiḥ. sa aikṣata. puro vai kila mad akṛteti. sa etad rūpam akuruta yad odanasyaitasyai devatāyai prajāpatīs. tam abhyadhyāyat. sa aikṣatābhi vai kila māṃ dhyāyati. sa upasecanenālam akuruta. tam alaṃkṛtam*

As the story goes the female *sāman/vāc* is too eager to eat the rice, she wipes away the palisades and, with the consumption of the rice meal, Prajāpati/*yajña* and *Sāman/vāc* are united.

The shape of the *sūrmī* can thus be compared to that of a man, no matter whether it is a male or a female. The size and shape of a furnace permit this equation.

### THE *SŪRMĪ KARṆAKAVATĪ*

*Vāc* enters a *sūrmī karṇakavatī* in the text last cited. The author of the *Vādhūla* text might have thought of a furnace with some sort of protrusion, resembling ears, but there is a wide-spread story about this object, so that it seems possible that in the following contexts it refers to a different object altogether. Most cases occur in connection with the Agnicayana.

The stanza RV 7.1,3 (see above) is used in the Agnicayana, when the fire has been put on the brick construction. ŚB 9.2.3.40 deals with the branch of Udumbara:

The [Udumbara log] has ears (i.e. protruding sprouts). These ears mean cattle. Thus he makes [Agni] happy with cattle as food. ... He puts on [the log] with the Virāj: *préddho agne dīdīhi puró nó* ['*jasrayā sūrmīyā yaviṣṭha, táṃ śāśvanta úpayanti vājáh*]. [A stanza in] the Virāj [metre] means food;<sup>25</sup> thus he makes him happy with food.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to note that the stanza cited from the RV refers to the *sūrmī* as the place where Agni resides; in the ritual, however, a log of Udumbara wood is addressed with this stanza, and the idea could have arisen that the log was the *sūrmī* itself. Apart from an error of that sort, there is no apparent logical connection between a furnace (*sūrmī*) and the *karṇakavatī audumbarī*. So I assume that the 'eternal *Sūrmī*', *ajasrayā sūrmīyā* in the instrumental, was finally and erroneously regarded as a metaphor for firewood because of this stanza addressing a log of wood.

The second version is found in the KS 21.9:49,11. Here, the *Audumbarī* log is offered first with RV 2.9,3 for success (*ṛddhyai*). Then, a log of *Vikaṅkata* wood is

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*abhitarām avādhyāyat. tasmād utaitac chriyālaṃkṛtaṃ abhitarām iva dhyāyanti. saitāḥ purah̄h pram̄jya tam abhyagrasata. tam ādāya tenāntataḥ samabhavat. tato haivāpīdam etarhi sambhavatas. tan nu haitad eke 'śnanto bhāṣanta. etām u ha vai sa devatām abhyākrandati yo 'śnan bhāṣate...*

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Weber-Brosamer 1988: 93ff.

<sup>26</sup> *athaudumbarīm ādadhātī; ūrg vai rasa udumbara ūrjaivainamedrasena prīṇāti karṇakavatī bhavati paśavo vai karṇakāḥ paśubhir evainam etad annena prīṇāti yadi karṇakavatīṃ na vinded dadhidrapsam upahatyādadhāt tad yad dadhidrapsa upatiṣṭhate tad eva paśurūpam preddho agne dīdīhi puro na iti virājādadhāny annaṃ virāḍ annevainam etat prīṇāti ...*

offered for lustre (*bhās*); then – with our *sūrmī*-stanza – ‘a log of Śamī wood, for pacification, with the Virāj(-stanza), because this (*śamī*) is a *sūrmī* with ears’<sup>27</sup>

This means that in both texts on the Agnicayana, either dealing with a log of Udumbara or Śamī the Virāj stanza RV 7.1,3 arouses the association of a log being called *karṇakavatī*.

This strange term is then the object of a riddle, to be found in MS 3.3.9: 42.14,17, KS 21.9:49.11,12, TS 5.4.7.3–4, and – somewhat shorter – in TS 1.5.7.6.

After calling either the *audumbarī* (TS) or the *śamīmayī* (KS) a *kārṇakavatī sūrmī*, one priest, either Vāsiṣṭha Sātyahavya (MS) or Somadakṣa Kauśreya (KS), asks some others performing a Sattra: “Do you know the *Sūrmī* with ears?” The other reply:

Yes, we know her, the one in the woods (MS *vāneṣu*) / in the wilderness (KS *araṇye*), this one we know. The cattle are her ears; thus you take possession of cattle. The gods once pelted her as a hundred-killing *vajra* upon the asuras. With her the sacrificer lays down all adversaries.

The versions would deserve a detailed comparative treatment; here it may suffice to point out that the *sūrmī* with ears is correctly located in the woods or the wilderness, so that the questioner knows that the sattrins do not take the *sūrmī karṇakavatī* verbally for a furnace with ears, but in a ritually correct sense as a wooden log with sprouts symbolizing cattle.

## ETYMOLOGY

With regard to an etymology we get no elucidation from Mayrhofer’s latest EWAia (II, p. 742). The rendering as “Röhre, röhrenförmige Leuchte, Feuersäule” is neither new nor altogether wrong, but it misses the point slightly. It also offers an attempt for an etymology: “Vielleicht \**su-ūrmī*- \*Rundung < \*von schöner Woge (*ūrmī* ...)”, which goes back verbally to Oberlies 1994: 345. However, there is no “curvature” necessary. Yāska, in his Nirukta 5,27 was closer to the object when he analyzed *sūrmī* as *kalyāṇa-ūrmī srotas*, ‘a flow with pleasant waves’, leaving it to us to see a *bahuvrīhi* or a derivation of root *ṣr-*, ‘to flow’, or both. This is just what everyone expects from a furnace: a good flow of the metals out of the ore into the cavity or into the lumb.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> KS 21.9:49,11: *preddho agne dīdhi puro na / iti śamīmayīm śāntyai. virājāiṣā vai sūrmī karṇakavatī.*

<sup>28</sup> Oberlies (1994) missed the semantics, but following the analysis of Yāska he saw that there is no need to expect an extra-Aryan origin for this term, as did Kuiper (1991: 93, no. 379a).

## CONCLUSION

We have seen how the term *sūrmī*, furnace, appeared in the RV and then spread through the Brāhmaṇa and Sūtra periods. Its understanding was lost before the Amarakośa defined it as an *ayaḥpratimā*, a ‘figure (of a human) made in metal’. The author of this dictionary lived in the early centuries AD. At that time metal figurines may have been a common sight, but he was probably not aware of the fact that, after the Harappan period figurines cast in metal were not produced in India for almost two millennia.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Amara’s explanation can be dismissed for art-historical reasons as well. Between the Sūtras and Amara the term must have gone out of use and was given a new meaning.

It is a common phenomenon that old terms, when misunderstood, can lead to new customs. In our case the *sūrmī* – originally a firing place for smelting ores – was misunderstood to mean an artistic result of casting metal. In two old Dharmasūtras (BDhS 2.1.1.13; GDhS 3.5(23),8) there is a choice between putting the student guilty of *gurutalpa* on a heated iron-bed (*tapte lohaśayane*) or having him embrace a burning hot *sūrmī*. The same option is found in the younger Dharmasāstra of Manu.<sup>30</sup> In the Yājñavalkyasmṛti, however, the two options appear as a combination: *tapte ’yaḥśayane sārddham āyasyā yoṣitā svapet*, ‘He should lie on an iron bed together with a woman made of metal’. Maybe because of difficulties in procuring metal images a further development is found in the Aṅgiras-smṛti,<sup>31</sup> where the culprit has to sit on a hot stone or a woman made of metal: *gurutalpī śilāṃ taptāṃ āyasīm vā striyaṃ viśet*.

Finally, the relatively late Bhāgavatapurāṇa 5.26,20 describes the penances to be expected in yonder world by all those having intercourse with unfit partners. The

<sup>29</sup> According to Oberlies (1996: 134), a human figurine would be produced in *cire perdue* technique in the Śvetāśvataropaniṣad 2,14. In his translation, *upalipta* is taken to be “beschmiert (= ummantelt)”, whereas only the wax prototype could be daubed (= encased). The difficulties disappear when *tatsudhautam* (despite Gotō 2000: 269, where *sudhāṃta* looks like an old reading mistake) is taken to be a compound:

*yathaiva bimbam mṛdayopaliptam tejomayam bhrājate tatsudhautam,  
tadvāmatattvam prasamikṣya dehī ekaḥ kṛtārtho bhavate vītaśokaḥ.*

I translate: ‘As a [metal] figure full of lustre shines [only] when [first] daubed with [polishing] earth and [then] well cleaned from (or: by) that [earth], in the same way the *dehin* [well cleaned from impurities] realizes the true state of his self and becomes singular, has attained his goal and becomes free from sorrow.’

Figures can be produced in many ways. Since *upaliptam* refers to the finished product this stanza cannot be used as evidence for the *cire perdue* technique.

<sup>30</sup> Manu 11,103: *gurutalpy abhibhāṣyainas tapte svapyād ayomaye, sūrmīm jvalantīm svāśliṣyen mṛtyunā sa viśudhyati*; read *jvalantīm vāśliṣyan* with Medhātithi.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted from Parāśara-Smṛti, II–III, p. 255 (ed. Chandrakānta Tarkāṅkāra, Bibliotheca Indica 298, Calcutta 1973).

penances are for all sexes alike, so that women too are forced to embrace a metal figurine representing a male.<sup>32</sup>

These are all relevant<sup>33</sup> cases which shed some light on the nature of this hitherto misunderstood object. We have seen how it was used in regulating one single case, i.e. the ending of chastity by a Veda student with one of his teacher's wives. Technically there were two options for him: he could get inside the furnace and have it lighted, or he could simply embrace the furnace when it was lighted. Because of the 800 °C or more inside the furnace, he had little chance to survive the burns.

In another respect this case is not unique: the culprit has to punish himself. Our sources show that royal authority was initially not too much concerned with the regulation of civil cases. There was an old way for the community to have culprits either purify themselves or leave the settlement. Corporal punishment was avoided, if possible. If inevitable, however, nobody was interested in polluting himself by helping in its execution.

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<sup>32</sup> *yas tv iha vā agamyāṃ striyam agamyāṃ vā puruṣaṃ yoṣid abhigacchati tāv amutra kaśayā tāḍayantas tigmayā sūrmī lohamayā puruṣam āliṅgayanti striyaṃ ca puruṣarūpayā sūrmī.*

<sup>33</sup> JB 1.194 (Caland 1919: 77, § 73) is incomprehensible to me: *ubhābhyām evāhorātrābhyāṃ dviṣantaṃ bhrāṭṛvyam antareti ya evaṃ veda. yathā ha vai sūrmī atyādhāyaivaṃ ṣoḍaśī stotrāṇāṃ svarga-lokasya samaṣṭyai. pra svargaṃ lokam āpnoti ya evaṃ veda. ati-ā-dhā* would require an acc. and a loc. object (cf. ĀpŚS, passim), none of which is discernible here. Bodewitz's attempt to save this verb (Bodewitz 1990: 109) is not convincing. The Ṣoḍaśī seems to be compared to Indra's *vajra* (see JB 1.195), and Indra gets a *vajra* through a *sūrmī* which has to be "mentally brought near", as in JB 3.267 cited above. Therefore it seems more reasonable to expect a form of *ati-ā-dhyai*, like the gerund nom.sg.fem. *atyā-dhyeyā*; the corresponding abs. *atyādhāya* would create syntactical problems.

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