

**Henry John Walker:** *The Twin Horse Gods: The Dioskouroi in Mythologies of the Ancient World*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2015, 271 pp.

This work, written by a classicist who in recent years has undertaken a study of Vedic religion, is the first book-length comparative study of the Indo-European twin-gods since the heyday of Georges Dumézil and his school from the 1960s to the 1980s. Two young men, sons of the sky-god, riding horses, and typically said to come to the aid of mortals in peril, these gods are found in Vedic, Graeco-Roman, and Baltic mythologies. Divided largely into two parts, the book deals first with the Vedic twin-gods, the *Aśvins* or *Nāsatyas*, tracing the development of their myths and cult through Vedic literature, then with the *Dioskouroi*, their counterparts in Greek and Roman religion. Walker makes skilful use of recent research, such as the archaeologist David Anthony's work on Indo-European origins and the domestication of the horse, and the Sanskritist Michael Witzel's outlining of the social and political development of the Vedic priesthood and rituals.

The author's central thesis is that the twin gods originated in the early phase of Proto-Indo-European horse domestication, before the invention of the spoked wheel and the war chariot. Drawing on the work of Anthony mentioned above, Walker notes that horse riding at this early stage was probably not an activity of high-ranking warriors and no-

blemen; its primary use appears to have been in cattle herding. Keeping watch over herds was probably a low-status activity; in many Indo-European societies (ancient Greece, Iran, India) it was undertaken by young men who had yet to enter a settled married life and were not full members of society. The riding twin gods, envisaged as youths, were divine counterparts of these cattle herders, and their position in the pantheon was correspondingly low. Their mythical roles as helpers, healers, and rescuers from peril are also ascribed to their servile nature.

By contrast, when the war chariot was invented in the late third millennium BCE, it became the symbol of status *par excellence*. The gods and heroes of Greece and India are frequently pictured as driving chariots; riding is seldom mentioned. In accordance with their lower position, the *Dioskouroi* alone among the Greek gods continued to ride on horseback; and although their Vedic counterparts have been updated and are envisaged in the Vedic hymns as driving a three-wheeled chariot, Walker seems to be correct in considering the Greek (and Baltic) situation to reflect older conditions.

The author takes issue with the theory of 'universal Dioscurism' (the term used by Donald Ward in his 1968 study of the Indo-European twin gods), which attributes the place of twins in myths and religious customs to the pre-modern notion of the double paternity of twins: a double birth being the result of two men having fathered offspring with

the same woman. Connected with this idea is the attribution of different sets of characteristics to mythical twins: the notion that one of the Dioskouroi was immortal, begotten by Zeus of Leda, and the other mortal, the son of King Tyndareos, is one famous example. Dioscurism has also been used to explain the ambiguous status of twins in various cultures: while often considered sacred, and figuring in myths, rites, and festivals, they have also been regarded with suspicion and dread, sometimes being killed or exposed on birth.

Looking to more recent ethnological studies for support, Walker brings the universality of Dioscurism into question: the notion of double fatherhood is not the dominant theory of the cause of twin-births in early cultures; nor are twins everywhere surrounded by taboos. There is no evidence that either ancient Indian or Greek culture knew the theory of a dual paternity of twins. Reviewing the sources concerning the birth and parenthood of the Dioskouroi, Walker points out that the idea that one of the twin gods was the immortal son of Zeus, the other one mortal and fathered by Tyndareos, first appears in the 6th century, and seems to be an attempt at syncretising older, conflicting accounts found in the Homeric epics. Originally, there was no difference between the two; both were immortal, while not enjoying the same status as the Olympian gods, and both were sons of Zeus. Their separate characteristics, though –

Castor being a famed horse-breaker, Polydeukes a boxer – are already to be found in Homer.

The author maintains that the Vedic twins, unlike the Dioskouroi, had no separate characteristics. This accords with his attempt to show that the twinhood of these Indo-European gods was of minimal importance. But while Walker succeeds in raising doubts about the theory of Dioscurism, he offers no explanation of why the gods were conceived as twins. If they originally had no individual characteristics, what would have been the purpose of imagining two horse gods rather than one? Admittedly, their twinhood is a problem scholars have tackled from various angles since the 19th century. The possibility of their being the morning and evening stars, which would account for their connection to twilight, has been discussed by Donald Ward, as well as by Thomas Oberlies in his volumes on the religion of the *Ṛgveda* (not cited), but receives very little consideration in this book; nor does Douglas Frame's suggestion that they represent the twilights. 'Nature mythology' is briefly discussed and dismissed as a 19th-century fantasy. Of course, gods may represent natural phenomena while at the same time being modelled on social types; and I think this is the case with the divine twins, whose family, indeed, consists entirely of nature deities.

The 'Dumézilian' theory of the twin gods saw them as embodiments of different social functions. First proposed by Stig Wikander in

1957, it was elaborated by Dumézil, Ward, Frame, and Hildebeitel. Wikander (whose work is not cited) observed that Nakula and Sahadeva, the Aśvins' twin sons in the Mahābhārata, are assigned different characteristics, one being warlike, the other wise. While this evidence is late, Wikander saw that it was foreshadowed in some Ṛgvedic stanzas; a comparison has also been made with the Dioskouroi, one of whom is a boxer, the other a horse tamer – in the Mahābhārata, Nakula figures as a horse doctor. While it is a sound principle to treat ideas not clearly found in the oldest sources as being probably later, it seems too unlikely a coincidence that these separate characteristics should have developed independently in Greece and India.

In his treatment of the Vedic twin gods Walker shows that their 'outsider' status is expressed in ritual: in the soma sacrifice their offering is given separately from those of the other gods. The *pravargya* offering, dedicated to them, differs from the elaborate soma sacrifice, being a simple offering of hot milk which reflects the gods' humble origins as divinities of riding cowherds.

The book presents a detailed discussion of the myth of Dadhyañc, the Atharvan seer who revealed the knowledge of the 'honey' to the Aśvins; as Indra had threatened to cut off his head should he impart this knowledge to anyone, they switched his head for that of a horse, which was then cut off. Drawing on the work of Witzel, Walker suggests

that the origin of this story is to be found in a Central Asian cultural substratum, from which the *soma* cult also originated. Noting that Vedic *atharvan* and *aṃśu* (the name for the soma plant) are substrate words of presumably Central Asian origin, he suggests that the soma cult was introduced to the Indo-Iranians by the priesthood of the substrate culture, who were eventually assimilated as the Atharvans. As evidence for a North-Central Asian origin of the myth itself, Walker adduces the find of a headless human skeleton with a horse skull in place of its human head in a bronze-age grave in Potapovka. David Anthony and N. Vinogradov reported this find in 1995. However, in an endnote in his book *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language* (2007) – on which Walker draws extensively – Anthony has revised his initial report, noting that radiocarbon dating has now placed the skeleton between 2900 and 2600 BCE, and the horse skull about a thousand years later, different strata having collapsed into each other (p. 501, n. 17).

Nor is it clear that the 'honey' (*madhu*) in this myth originally referred to soma. Though soma is often called *madhu* in the Ṛgveda, the Aśvins are frequently connected with a 'honey' which is clearly not soma, but 'bee-honey' (*mākṣika madhu*), which may once have formed part of their sacrificial offerings. True, in Middle Vedic retellings of the myth the honey is identified either with soma or with the *Pravargya* (included in the soma sacrifice),

and the story tells how the *Aśvins*, having been originally excluded, were able to gain a place in the soma sacrifice. But no rite that may have been connected with the *Ṛgvedic* myth can be identified. Some scholars, notably, van Buitenen in his study of the *Pravargya* (1968) and Oberlies have suggested on the basis of some Vedic stanzas that the *Pravargya* offering may originally have included honey.

As for ancient Greece, Walker shows that, as in India, the rites associated with the twins are of an unusually simple and archaic kind: the *theoxenia* is a guest offering reminiscent of the oldest forms of Vedic sacrifice, in which the gods were invited to partake of the food and drink offered to them; the twin gods were thus thought to come to their worshippers, in keeping with their habit of walking the earth and associating with mortals. They were in fact 'not fully gods', but 'ambiguously positioned between gods and men' (p. 133).

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