

APOLLO

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche developed the aesthetic dialectic of the Apolline and the Dionysiac, concepts which were to leave an indelible imprint on our culture. For Nietzsche the Apolline force symbolized all that was light, harmonious, rational, and orderly, the form-giving force apparent in the best of Greek architecture and sculpture. The Dionysiac force, in contrast, represented that which was dark and wild; epitomized best, perhaps, by the reckless abandon and mystic ecstasy of the Dionysian rites described in Euripedes' *Bacchae*.

The modern conception of Apollo—including scholarly research into the origins of the god's cult—has been much influenced by Nietzsche's analysis. Witness the following assessment of Apollo's cult by Jane Harrison: "Apollo has more in him of the Sun and the day, of order and light and reason."¹ W.K. Guthrie offers a similar opinion in *The Greeks and Their Gods*:

"He is the very embodiment of the Hellenic spirit. Everything that marks off the Greek outlook from that of other peoples, and in particular from the barbarians who surrounded them—beauty of every sort, whether of art, music, poetry or youth, sanity and moderation—are all summed up in Apollo."²

From such statements, one would assume that Apollo generally bore a positive reputation among the ancient Greeks. Yet this is far from true. The further back in time that one traces the cult of Apollo, a completely different picture begins to emerge—that of a god devoted to bringing pestilence and plague, delighting in the ravages of war.³

That the *Iliad* generally depicts Apollo in an unfavorable light is well-known. Apollo is represented as the leading god of the Trojans, after all. Homer's Apollo is preeminently a god of plague and pestilence, and one of the poet's favorite epithets of Apollo—*hekebolos*—"the far-shooter," is thought to refer to Apollo's propensity for causing plague with his "arrows." The following passage from the *Iliad* is

¹J. Harrison, *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion & Themis* (New York, 1962), p. 443.

²W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Boston, 1966), p. 73.

³See here the discussion of J. Solomon in K. Kerényi, *Apollo* (Dallas, 1983), pp. 63-67.

representative of the archaic Apollo, being in fact the first Apolline epiphany in Greek literature:

“Down he strode, wroth at heart, bearing on his shoulders his bow and covered quiver. The arrows rattled on the shoulders of the angry god as he moved; and his coming was like the night. Then he sat down apart from the ships and let fly a shaft; terrible was the twang of his silver bow. The mules he assailed first and the swift dogs, but thereafter on the men themselves he let fly his stinging arrows, and smote; and ever did the pyres of the dead burn thick.”⁴

It is the plague-bringing Apollo, in fact, whom Homer blames for the outbreak of the Trojan War.⁵

Apollo’s darker nature can also be glimpsed in the *Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo*. There a curious passage hints of an assault upon Olympus, during which Apollo is said to have once caused the gods to tremble and jump from their seats:

“I will remember and not be unmindful of Apollo who shoots afar. As he goes through the house of Zeus, the gods tremble before him and all spring up from their seats when he draws near, as he bends his bright bow.”⁶

There the god is ascribed a haughty nature: “They say that Apollo will be one that is very haughty and will greatly lord it among gods and men all over the fruitful earth.”⁷ It is in this light, perhaps, that we are to understand the report of Aeschylus that Apollo was exiled from heaven, presumably because of his offenses against the gods.⁸

As our earliest Greek source, Homer’s testimony is especially valuable in reconstructing Apollo’s original nature and cult. And while the nature of Apollo’s crimes are only hinted at by Homer, Aeschylus, and the author of the *Homeric Hymns*, it is clear nonetheless that the archaic Apollo was hardly the god of light and order described by modern scholars.

⁴ *Iliad* I:44ff.

⁵ *Iliad* I:8-10.

⁶ *Hymn to Delian Apollo*, 1-5ff. Quoted from *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns, and Homeric* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 325.

⁷ III:65-70

⁸ *Suppliants* 214. See also L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 141.

FROM WHENCE APOLLO?

Apollo's origins remain a mystery. Here Guthrie has observed: "His original nature cannot be discussed with profit, since it is too deeply wrapped in obscurity."⁹ Strutynski concedes that Apollo is "particularly difficult to categorize," lamenting that there are apparently at least a handful of different gods by this name.¹⁰ Faraone, in a recent and most provocative discussion of the god's cult, offered the following opinion: "Apollo is a multivalent and polymorphic deity who has to my mind successfully resisted any all-encompassing description or label."¹¹ Inasmuch as we will here be offering a comprehensive theory of Apollo's origins and cult—one capable of explaining the vast majority of the god's characteristic features—a brief summary of the god's cult is in order.

The depth of the mystery surrounding Apollo is complicated by the inability of scholars to agree upon the meaning of his name. With Aeschylus, several scholars have proposed a derivation from *ollynai*, a Greek word meaning "to destroy." Such a derivation would appear perfectly appropriate for the god of war, pestilence, and plague described by Homer, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, yet modern scholars regard it as unlikely on linguistic grounds.¹²

To those scholars who viewed Apollo as a god of light and culture, this etymology did not sit well. W. Max Muller, for example, a pioneer of the solar school of mythology and firm believer in the solar nature of Apollo, offered the following objection:

"The ancients derived Apollon from apoll-yni in the sense of destroyer...Phonetically there is nothing to be said against it. But we cannot decide on an etymology by means of phonetic laws only. The meaning also has a right to be considered. Now we have no right to say that from the beginning Apollon was a destructive god."¹³

With this declaration the clear testimony of Homer and Aeschylus was thrust aside, and Muller proceeded to derive Apollo from a Sanskrit form **Apa-var-yan*,

⁹W. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁰U. Strutynski, "Ares: A Reflex of the Indo-European War God?," *Arethusa* 13 (1980), p. 217.

¹¹C. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (New York, 1992), p. 126.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹³Quoted in R. Brown, *Semitic Influence in Hellenic Mythology* (Clifton, 1966), p. 17.

meaning “the Opener,” a reference to the sun’s role in opening the gates of heaven.¹⁴ Needless to say, it would be difficult to find a single supporter of Muller’s etymology today. Nor is there any evidence that the aboriginal Apollo was related to the Sun, as we will see.

Other scholars point to a relationship between Apollo and the archaic word *apellai*, signifying an assembly of some sort. This view has been championed by Burkert, among others: “The name in the earlier, pre-Homeric form is scarcely to be separated from the institution of the *apellai*, annual gatherings of the tribal or phratry organization such as are attested in Delphi and Laconia, and which, from the month name *Apellaios*, can be inferred for the entire Dorian-northwest Greek area.”¹⁵

Scholars are also divided on the question of Apollo’s original homeland. The two leading theories are those which trace the god’s cult to the North and, alternately, to Asia Minor. The proponents of the northern hypothesis cite as a decisive clue the intimate relation of Apollo to the Hyperboreans—“those who dwell beyond the North Wind.”¹⁶ From these hypothetical Hyperborean origins, scholars assume a transmission of Apollo’s cult to mainland Greece via one of the early migrations, that of the Dorians for example.¹⁷

Those who seek the god’s original homeland in the Near East, on the other hand, can point to the antiquity and prevalence of Apollo’s cult in Asia Minor.¹⁸ Apollo was especially revered in Lycia and Caria, for example, sites of the famous temples at Didyma and Klaros.¹⁹ Faraone recently reviewed the controversy surrounding the god’s original homeland:

“Since Wilamowitz, scholars have searched high and low for an ‘Asiatic’ or ‘oriental’ origin for Apollo, whose favorite number (seven), strong pro-Trojan sympathies in the *Iliad*, and odd manifestations (for example, *Smintheus*) seemed to be alien to Hellenic

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁵W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1985), p. 144.

¹⁶A leading proponent of the Northern Apollo was R. Harris, “Apollo at the back of the North Wind,” *JHS* 45 (1925), pp. 229-242. There (p. 233), Harris refers to a “consensus of opinion” that “Apollo is not a Greek god at all, but a Northern migration or importation.”

¹⁷W. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

¹⁸G. S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths* (New York, 1974), p. 257; L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

¹⁹W. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.

sensibilities. As is the case with the early depictions of Heracles, Apollo's bow has also caused suspicion, because although it is a royal weapon of great prestige in Egypt, the Near East, and native Anatolian cultures, it seems to have been snubbed by the Greeks from the start as a somewhat unheroic weapon efficient for neither hunting nor warfare."²⁰

Indeed, if one were looking for parallels to the Iliadic god of pestilence, the ancient Near East would seem a good place to start, Reseph, Erra, and Nergal each offering striking parallels to Homer's Apollo.

RESEPH

Reseph, like Apollo, was notorious for his "plague-bringing" arrows, and in early Syrian and Egyptian iconography he is depicted with quiver and arrows (as was Apollo in Greek art).²¹ An early epithet of the Canaanite god, in fact, was "he of the arrow."²² Familiar from the Biblical passages in which he appears as an attendant of the Hebrew god (*Habakkuk* 3:5 for example), Reseph is believed to have originated in Syria, but ultimately his cult made its way from Mari to Egypt, where it prospered during the 18th and 19th dynasties. Later, in the wake of the wide-ranging voyages of the Phoenician seafarers, Reseph's cult became established throughout the Mediterranean area, but especially in Cyprus, Carthage, and Spain. Upon the island of Cyprus, in fact, where evidence of the god's cult is plentiful, several early inscriptions identify Reseph with Apollo.²³

Why the early Greeks identified Reseph with Apollo is an intriguing question, the answer to which is central to recovering a portrait of the archaic Apollo. Several reasons present themselves. The most obvious, as we have seen, is Reseph's intimate association with pestilence and plague. In the Keret text from Ras Shamra, for example, Reseph is said to gather one-fifth of Keret's offspring to himself, an apparent reference to death by pestilence.²⁴ This theme alone would have inspired the Greeks to suspect an affinity between the two archer-gods. There are also indications

²⁰C. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (New York, 1992), p. 125.

²¹W. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Resep* (New Haven, 1976), p. 50.

²²M. Schretter, *Alter Orient und Hellas* (Innsbruck, 1974), p. 151.

²³W. Fulco, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

²⁴*Keret* 15-20. Fulco, in fact, compares this very passage with the Iliadic epiphany of Apollo.

that Reseph played the role of dragon-slayer in Ugaritic myth, much like Apollo in the Delphic myth of Python. In Ugaritic Text 1001, for example, Reseph appears as the defender of Baal during the latter's battle with a giant dragon. It is Reseph's arrows which finally dispatch the monster, apparently rescuing Baal and the heavenly kingdom in the process (this Ugaritic text is frequently cited as an early prototype of *Habukkuk* 3:3-15, where Yahweh fights the sea; and it is in *Habukkuk* 3 that Reseph appears as Yahweh's satellite).²⁵

In other Ugaritic texts, Reseph is identified with the Akkadian Nergal, the pestilence god *par excellence* of the Mesopotamian region.²⁶ As we have seen, Nergal was identified with the planet Mars by ancient Babylonian skywatchers, and the same identification appears to distinguish Reseph in Ugaritic texts.²⁷ Does this imply that Apollo likewise had some relationship to the red planet?

MARS

In light of Apollo's resemblance to various Oriental gods identified with the planet Mars, it is significant to note that the Greek god's close resemblance to the Latin god Mars has long been acknowledged. Well over a hundred years ago, Roscher documented that the cults of Apollo and Mars were fundamentally analogous.²⁸ Roscher pointed to a host of features shared in common between the two gods, including the following: (1) each was associated with the first month of the year; (2) each was identified with certain animals and sacred trees; (3) each was regarded as a patron of migrations and founder of cities; (4) each was associated with colonizing ventures as exemplified by the Latin *ver sacrum* rite.

²⁵J. Day, "New Light on the Mythological Background of the Allusion to Reseph in Habukkuk III 5," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1977), pp. 353-354.

²⁶M. Dahood, "Ancient Semitic Deities in Syria and Palestine," in S. Moscati ed., *Le Antiche Divinita Semitiche* (Rome, 1958), p. 84. See also E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), pp. 90-91. Several scholars, in fact, have suggested that Reseph originally split off from Nergal, *rashpu* being one of the latter's epithets. See H. Thompson, *Mekal* (Leiden, 1970), p. 119.

²⁷W. K. S., "Reschef," *Reallexikon der Agyptologie*, Vol. 4 (Berlin, 1977), p. 244.

²⁸W. Roscher, *Studien zur vergleichenden Mythologie der griechen und romer: Apollon und Mars* (Leipzig, 1873), pp. 51-68. For a similar opinion, see H. S. Versnel, "Apollo and Mars One Hundred Years after Roscher," *Visible Religion* 4 (1986), pp. 132-72. There Versnel writes: "Roscher was right: Mars and Apollo present undeniable structural similarities, but his sun has blinded subsequent investigators." H. Rose, in *Some Problems of Classical Religion* (Oslo, 1958), pp. 14-15, likewise acknowledged the fundamental affinity of Mars and Apollo.

Apollo, like Mars, was invoked as a great warrior to fend off the hostile neighbors.²⁹ An early Greek prayer invokes Apollo as follows: “Send a far-darting arrow from your bow against the enemy. Strike, O Paian!”³⁰ Indeed, the Athenian army appears to have been under the direct patronage of Apollo.³¹

Both gods were associated with the advent and warding off of pestilence and disease. The name *Isminthians*—signifying that god who sends, but also averts, plagues of mice (*smintheus* is an ancient Cretan word meaning “mouse”)—is one of the Latin god’s oldest epithets.³²

Yet the very same epithet was applied to Apollo in Asia Minor.³³ This fact, if it does not support the identification of Apollo and Mars, at least supports the view that the two gods were functionally analogous in ancient cult. The fact that the cult of Apollo *Smintheus* has yet to be found on mainland Greece—but only upon the outlying islands of Crete and Rhodes, sites of archaic Greek colonies situated between mainland Greece and Asia Minor—is an indication, perhaps, that Apollo’s cult originally came to Greece from the ancient Near East.³⁴

An unusual feature of Mars’ cult is the war-god’s identification with a wolf. This motif is attested very early and, as the epithet *lupus Martius* attests, would appear to be central to the mythology and iconography surrounding the Latin god.³⁵

As Apollo *Lykeios*, the ancient Greeks understood Apollo as a wolf-god (*lykeios* is from a Greek stem meaning “wolf”).³⁶ As the chorus of Aeschylus’ *Seven* attests, Apollo the wolf was conceived as a warrior: “Lykeios, lord, be wolvisch toward the enemy’s army.”³⁷ Wolves were sacrificed to Apollo at Argos and elsewhere on the Greek peninsula (this in spite of the fact that wolves were extremely rare animals in

²⁹Aeschylus, *Hepta* 144-146.

³⁰Fragment 13 of Timotheus as quoted from C. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (New York, 1992), p. 120.

³¹See the discussion in M. Jameson, “Apollo Lykeios in Athens,” *Archaioignosia* 1 (1980), pp. 234ff.

³²H. Wagenvoort, “The Origin of the Ludi Saeculares,” in *Studies in Roman Literature, Culture and Religion* (New York, 1978), p. 219.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 219. See also R.F. Willetts, *Cretan Cults and Festivals* (New York, 1962), p. 269.

³⁴L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

³⁵W. Roscher, *op. cit.*, col. 2430.

³⁶L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-117. See also D. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-god* (McLean, Virginia, 1991).

³⁷145-146. Translation by D. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-God* (McLean, 1991), p. 16.

Greek cult), and in Argive ritual a wolf was pitted in combat against a bull, this latter rite said to symbolize Apollo's combat with Poseidon.³⁸ Although scholars have observed that Apollo's lupine-characteristics belong to the most archaic stage of his cult, an explanation of the significance of Apollo *Lykeios* has not been forthcoming.³⁹

Roscher's otherwise impeccable research was ultimately undermined by his hypothesis that Apollo and Mars were originally solar gods, a view much in vogue at the time but now known to be without merit.⁴⁰ Aside from the rather dubious testimony of Macrobius, who had a marked tendency to identify nearly every ancient god with the sun, there is little evidence that the Latin war-god bore any relation to the sun. Classical scholars, likewise, have found that Apollo's identification with the sun evolved comparatively late in Greek religion. Astour's opinion is representative of the latest scholarship: "Apollo usurped Helios' place quite late; in the *Odyssey*, in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter and other older works, Apollo has no relation to the sun."⁴¹

Criticisms of the solar school notwithstanding, many of Roscher's arguments have great merit, particularly with regard to the supposition that some formidable natural force must lie behind the respective cults of Mars and Apollo. Indeed, a strong argument for identifying Mars as a celestial body is provided by philology, Mars tracing to the root *mar*, one meaning of which is "to shine."⁴² This etymology, however, need not refer to the sun—it could apply equally well to a planet.

That the worship of Apollo and Mars might have been grounded in ancient traditions associated with the planet Mars seems never to have been suspected.⁴³ Yet this is clearly a hypothesis well worthy of consideration, given the nexus of traditions

³⁸L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-115, and 255.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 117. See now D. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-God* (McLean, 1991).

⁴⁰G. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 3-4.

⁴¹M. Astour, *Hellenosemitica* (Leiden, 1967), p. 286. See also K. Kerényi, *Apollo* (Dallas, 1983), p. 52; W. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 74, and L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

⁴²W. Roscher, *op. cit.*, col. 2437.

⁴³That various aspects of Apollo's cult might trace to the planet Mars was proposed by M. Theodorakis, "Apollo of the Wolf, the Mouse and the Serpent," *Kronos* 9:3 (Summer 1984). Working independently of Theodorakis, I defended the same position in a series of articles distributed privately in the fall of 1981.

shared by Apollo and the Latin war-god, coupled with the explicit identification of the Latin Mars, Babylonian Nergal, and Ugaritic Reseph with the red planet.

The planetary origin of the cults of Mars and Apollo can resolve many of the most difficult questions surrounding the worship of these gods while suggesting clues towards deciphering others. Consider the lupine form shared by Apollo and Mars. Here, too, it is possible to detect a celestial dimension: According to Babylonian astronomical records, the wolf was preeminently the animal associated with the planet Mars, the latter being known as the “wolf-star.”⁴⁴ This Babylonian tradition was apparently taken over by the Greeks and Romans, who likewise assigned Mars the wolf as sacred animal.⁴⁵

APOLLO AND ERRA

In *Hesiod and the Near East*, Walcot documents the substantial influence Oriental ideas had on Greek religion and mythology. A subject of discussion was Apollo’s stormy entrance into Olympus:

“The hymn to Apollo opens with a description of how the gods react when Apollo arrives at the house of Zeus. They tremble and all dash from their seats as Apollo enters, stretching his bow...The apprehension felt both by the other gods and by the island is hardly what we expect of a god often said to be the most Greek of all the Olympians, and a rumor which suggests that he was destined to usurp the prerogative of Zeus is more than a trifle surprising. It has been argued, therefore, that such ideas must be referred to an oriental source.”⁴⁶

Walcot goes on to compare this passage with the *Enuma Elish*, proposing that Marduk was the Oriental prototype of Apollo. There Walcot cites Marduk’s role as a dragon-slayer and the fact that he could be found equipped with a bow. This hardly seems a sufficient amount of evidence on which to trace a connection, however.

It would appear that Walcott overlooked the most obvious Oriental parallel to the passage in the *Delian Hymn to Apollo*—namely, the *Poem of Erra*. Marduk’s rising from his seat upon the assault of Erra offers a remarkable parallel to the gods of

⁴⁴P. Gössmann, *Planetarium Babylonicum* (Rome, 1950), p. 65.

⁴⁵A. B. Cook, *Zeus*, Vol. I (New York, 1970), p. 626. See also W. Roscher, “Planeten,” *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 2534.

⁴⁶P. Walcot, *Hesiod and the Near East* (Cardiff, 1966), p. 48.

Olympus rising from their seats upon Apollo's approach.⁴⁷ In each case the gods are said to tremble before the intruder. We would also call attention to Erra's boast: "I want to attain the seat of the King of the gods so that his counsel be not forthcoming." Is this not a precise parallel to the rumor that Apollo would usurp the prerogative of Zeus?

Why Walcott overlooked the *Poem of Erra* in his search for Oriental influences upon the *Delian Hymn to Apollo* is not easy to say. Certainly the aboriginal Apollo, being a god much involved with the ravages of war and plague, bears a strong resemblance to Erra.⁴⁸

RUDRA

It has long been acknowledged that the ancient Indian war-god Rudra bears a striking resemblance to the Homeric Apollo.⁴⁹ The original basis behind their similarity, however, remains a mystery.

Various Vedic hymns speak of the destruction and pestilence associated with Rudra's "arrows" or missiles, which rain forth from heaven, slaying men and cattle alike. Consider the following hymn:

"To Rudra we bring these songs, whose bow is firm and strong, the self-dependent God with swiftly-flying shafts...the Conqueror whom none may overcome, armed with sharp-pointed weapons: may he hear our call...May thy bright arrow which, shot down by thee

⁴⁷The *Hymn to Delian Apollo* begins as follows: "I will remember and not be unmindful of Apollo who shoots afar. As he goes through the house of Zeus, the gods tremble before him and all spring up from their seats when he draws near, as he bends his bright bow."

⁴⁸Since this was written (1988), Faraone has arrived at much the same conclusion, calling attention to the very same passage in the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*. See the discussion in *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (New York, 1992), pp. 119-127. There (p. 126) Faraone points to the Hittite god Irra as a possible mediating factor between the cults of Apollo and Erra: "Although it is probably true that Reshep, a very popular pan-mediterranean deity, had a great effect on the development of Apollo in Cyprus, Crete, and the Peloponnesus, he is most likely not the main source of inspiration for the plague god who is called Apollo Smintheus in the *Iliad*. Because of his Anatolian roots, the bow-bearing Hittite god Irra probably has equal if not greater claim as the eastern model for Homer's archer-god. The name Irra, probably derived from or assimilated to the old Babylonian plague god Erra, means something like 'scorched earth'..., a suitable enough name for a god connected (like Reshep) with plague and famine, often in a military context."

⁴⁹H. Gregoire & R. Goosens, *Asklepios, Apollon Smintheus, et Rudra* (Brussel, 1949). I have yet to obtain a translation of this work.

from heaven, flieth upon the earth, pass us uninjured by...Slay us not, nor abandon us, O Rudra.”⁵⁰

Apparent here is the ominous specter of the god, dealing out death indiscriminately with his heaven-hurled shafts or “arrows.” Recall again the earliest epiphany of Apollo in Greek literature:

“Down he strode, wrath at heart, bearing on his shoulders his bow and covered quiver. The arrows rattled on the shoulders of the angry god as he moved; and his coming was like the night. Then he sat down apart from the ships and let fly a shaft; terrible was the twang of his silver bow. The mules he assailed first and the swift dogs, but thereafter on the men themselves he let fly his stinging arrows, and smote; and ever did the pyres of the dead burn thick.”⁵¹

Throughout the *Rig Veda* and later Vedic tradition, Rudra’s malefic nature is everywhere apparent. And, as was the case with Apollo, Rudra’s wrath threatens the gods in heaven as well:

“Malevolence is frequently attributed to Rudra in the R.V.; for the hymns addressed to him chiefly express fear of his terrible shafts and deprecation of his wrath. He is implored not to slay or injure...to avert his great malevolence and his bolt from his worshippers...His ill will and anger are deprecated...He once even receives the epithet ‘man-slaying’...Rudra’s malevolence is still more prominent in the later Vedic texts...He is invoked not to assail his worshippers with celestial fire and to cause the lightning to descend elsewhere. He is even said to assail with fever, cough, and poison...Even the gods were afraid of the strung bow and the arrows of Rudra, lest he should destroy them. Under the name of Mahadeva he is said to slay cattle...His hosts, which attack man and beast with disease and death receive the bloody entrails of the victim...as their peculiar share of the sacrifice.”⁵²

The following passage from the *Rig Veda* captures the essence of the god:

“To the strong Rudra bring we these our songs of praise, to him the Lord of Heroes, ...Him with the braided hair we call with reverence down, the wild-boar of the sky, the

⁵⁰*Rig Veda* VII:46:1-4

⁵¹ *Iliad* I:44ff.

⁵²A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (New York, 1974), pp. 75-76.

red, the dazzling shape...Far be thy dart that killeth men or cattle: thy bliss be with us, O thou Lord of Heroes.”⁵³

Who or what, then, is Rudra?⁵⁴ As the red boar of heaven, Rudra is to be identified with the planet Mars.⁵⁵ His very name reflects his color—relatively rare among prominent celestial bodies—the most likely etymology tracing it to an ancient word for “red” or “ruddy.”⁵⁶ As I have documented elsewhere, numerous ancient gods identified with Mars were named with a word signifying “red.”⁵⁷ Here the Celtic war-god Rudiobos/Rudianos (The Red) offers a case in point: In addition to being identified by the ancients with the Latin god Mars, the name of the Celtic god shares a root in common with Rudra.⁵⁸

It is noteworthy that Rudra’s darts are specifically linked to the death of cattle. Indeed, Rudra’s intimate association with the destruction of cattle was proverbial in Vedic and later Indian tradition.⁵⁹ Is it a coincidence, then, that the very same calamity is associated with Mars and Martian meteorites in Babylonian omens? Witness the following omen from Old Babylonian times: “If Salbatanu [the planet Mars] flames up and destroys the cattle.”⁶⁰ The following omen is also of interest: “If in the sky a meteor (train) from a planet [*Mustabarru mutanu*=Mars] appears: destruction of cattle will occur in the land.”⁶¹ According to Jastrow, one of the most common omens associated with the red planet was “destruction of cattle.”⁶²

⁵³I:114:1-10

⁵⁴For a survey of previous scholarship bearing on the original nature of Rudra, see V. Macheck, “The Gods Rudra and Pusan,” *Archiv Orientalni* 22 (1954), pp. 546ff.

⁵⁵That Apollo shared a special affinity with the boar is indicated by the fact that he was offered that animal as a sacrifice. Apollo is also said to have assumed the form of a boar when he murdered Adonis. See here the discussion in L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), pp. 133ff.

⁵⁶M. & J. Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (London, 1977), p. 253. See also the discussion in E. Arberman, *Rudra: Untersuchungen zum altindischen Glauben und Kultus* (Uppsala, 1922), p. 274, and A. Macdonell, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁵⁷See A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), pp. 169-171.

⁵⁸M. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 27.

⁵⁹A. Macdonell, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76.

⁶⁰E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 34.

⁶¹J. Bjorkman, *Meteors and Meteorites in the Ancient Near East* (Tempe, 1973), p. 120.

⁶²M. Jastrow, “Signs and Names of the Planet Mars,” *Am. Journal of Semitic Languages* 27 (1910/1911), p. 65.

The resemblance between Apollo and Rudra goes far beyond their mutual association with pestilence and missiles thrown from heaven. As Rudra was regarded as a “boar of heaven,” so too was Apollo viewed as a “boar.”⁶³ As Apollo was depicted as an aniconic pillar (as *Agyieus*)⁶⁴, the same was true of Rudra.⁶⁵ As Apollo was associated with the mouse in his name of *Smintheus*⁶⁶, so too did a mouse form the special attendant of Rudra.⁶⁷ As Apollo was thought to have originally been at home in the North⁶⁸, so was Rudra known to be a “dweller in the north.”⁶⁹ As Apollo served as a god of song and music in the Homeric period⁷⁰, so, too, was Rudra a god of music and singing.⁷¹ As the Athenian army appears to have been under the direct patronage of the warrior-Apollo⁷², Rudra was invoked as the protector of warriors.⁷³ As the ancient Greeks understood the name of Apollo to signify a “destroyer,” Rudra appears as the destroyer *par excellence*, one hymn placing the following words in the god’s mouth: “I stand as the destroyer.”⁷⁴ As Apollo was invoked to aid in the growth of trees, vegetation, and the harvest⁷⁵, so also was Rudra.⁷⁶ And as Homer remembered Apollo as a great healer—indeed, as the physician of the gods—so, too, was Rudra invoked as the greatest physician of the gods.⁷⁷

⁶³See here the discussion in L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), pp. 133ff.

⁶⁴L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 149ff.

⁶⁵*MBh.* 7.173.92; *Skanda Purana*, 7.2.9.13-14. See also the discussion in S. Kramrisch, *The Presence of Siva* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 119-122.

⁶⁶M. Schretter, *Alter Orient und Hellas* (Innsbruck, 1974), pp. 174-182.

⁶⁷S. Bhattacharji, “Rudra From the Vedas to the Mahabharata,” *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 41 (1960), p. 88.

⁶⁸L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁶⁹*Satapatha Brahmana*, 2.6.2.17. See also S. Bhattacharji, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁷⁰L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 243ff.

⁷¹S. Bhattacharji, “Rudra From the Vedas to the Mahabharata,” *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 41 (1960), p. 94.

⁷²See the discussion in M. Jameson, “Apollo Lykeios in Athens,” *Archaiognosia* 1 (1980), pp. 234ff.

⁷³*Taittiriya Samhita*, 4.5.2; 4.5.8, 9.

⁷⁴*Skanda Purana*, 7.2.9.13-14.

⁷⁵L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. IV (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 124ff.

⁷⁶S. Bhattacharji, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 87.