

INDRA: A CASE STUDY IN COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGY

If the ancients' identification of Nergal with the planet Mars has a rational basis, it will provide us with an invaluable foundation upon which to launch a comparative analysis of ancient mythology. Nearly every ancient culture of which we have sufficient record has preserved traditions of a great war-god whose primary functions included leading the battle-charge and defending the kingdom against invasion and evil influences. The names of several of these gods, such as the Greek Ares and Latin Mars, are well-known. Other war-gods, if less familiar, were equally prominent in olden times. In this chapter we will focus our attention on the Vedic god Indra. Indra bears all the earmarks of great heroes elsewhere—dragon-slayer, champion of the gods, invincible warrior, glutton, great sinner, etc.¹ Indeed, with the possible exception of the cycle of myths associated with Heracles, Indra's cult offers the most complete body of materials we have for reconstructing the archetype of the warrior hero.

It is well-known that the cult of Indra, prominent at the time of the composition of the *Rig Veda*, waned considerably under the influence of post-Vedic religious reform. This diminution in Indra's celebrity coincided with the rise of cults associated with Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva, each of whom usurped some of the Vedic functions of Indra.² A similar demotion is apparent in Iran, where Indra became relegated to the status of a low-grade demon.³ Given the degeneration in Indra's status in post-Vedic times, it stands to reason that the *Rig Veda* offers the best guide in reconstructing the god's original cult. This is not to say that the traditions found in the *Atharva Veda*, *Mahabharata*, and numerous other texts are irrelevant to a discussion of Indra's mythus—far from it; only that one must beware of revisionist tendencies in these later texts. Puhvel's commentary on this state of affairs is most pertinent:

“Late Vedic and post-Vedic tradition, where Indra's godhead progressively declines with the onset and elaboration of Brahmanism, is still replete with increasingly

¹It is significant to note that the epithet *sura*, “hero,” is almost exclusively Indra's in the *Rig Veda*. See J. Gonda, *Some Observations on the Relations Between 'Gods' and 'Powers' in the Veda...* (s-Gravenhage, 1957), pp. 50-51.

²A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (New York, 1974), p. 66.

³A. Carnoy, “Iranian Mythology,” in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (Boston, 1917), p. 265.

submythological, epic, and folkloric Indra lore, some of it in direct succession and elaboration of the Vedas, other parts purveying potentially important ancient para-Vedic tradition, still others probably reflecting the fictional impulses of a later age.”⁴

Although the mythical deeds of Indra form a focal point of the *Rig Veda*, it is by no means a simple matter to interpret their original significance. Not unlike the Egyptian *Pyramid Texts*, the Vedic hymns typically present only the barest outlines of a particular myth, the details of the tradition, presumably, being thoroughly familiar to the audience. Moreover, although it forms the oldest body of Indian texts, the *Veda* itself is the product of numerous authors and bears every sign of having undergone a considerable evolution.⁵ Thus it is hardly surprising, in light of such a history, to find that the Vedic traditions—including those involving Indra—display various contradictions and secondary accretions. With specific reference to the Indra-traditions, Dumézil offered the following assessment of these ancient texts:

“The authors of the poems who give praise to Indra sometimes make multiple references to the most diverse parts of this tradition, sometimes exalt one particular point, but they do not trouble themselves to present an episode in full, or to establish, between their allusions to several episodes, a logical or chronological nexus; they do not even confine themselves to one variant...or balk at contradictions in the same hymn: what does it matter, when all the versions of these grand events work together for the glory, the ‘increasing,’ of the god?”⁶

It is with these bare “bones” of ancient cult that we must work if we are to unravel the origins of Indra.⁷ Here the comparative method represents an indispensable analytic tool. Like comparative anatomy in biology, comparative mythology allows for the recognition of parallels in seemingly diverse forms from different times and places and—once such parallels are established—the reconstruction of a god’s cult can begin, not unlike the reconstruction of a fossil hominid from a few teeth and an occasional bone. If a crucial link in the sacred dossier of Indra has been lost, perhaps

⁴J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore, 1989), p. 53.

⁵According to R. Crossland, “Immigrants From the North,” in the *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 1:2 (Cambridge, 1980), p. 851, Vedic literature “is not demonstrably older than c. 1000 BCE.” According to Jaan Puhvel, it stems from c. 500 BCE. See J. Puhvel, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁶G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 38.

⁷J. Puhvel, *op. cit.*, p. 42, refers to the Vedic traditions as “faithfully preserved linguistic petrifacts.”

it can be recovered from the dossier of some other hero. In this way, and in this way only, in our opinion, is it possible to arrive at a true understanding of the origins of Indra's cult, much of which has been lost or otherwise obscured with the passage of untold millennia.

A summary of Indra's career would include the following mythological themes: (1) his unusual birth and rapid rise to power; (2) the defeat of the dragon Vritra; (3) the winning of the sun and initiation of the dawn; (4) the ordering of the cosmos and the support of heaven; (5) his reputation as a great drinker of soma. We will summarize each of these events in short order.

INDRA'S BIRTH

Indra's birth, according to various accounts of the event, was an occasion of great commotion, the tumult extending to the domain of the gods themselves: "When he, yea, he, comes forth the firmset mountains and the whole heaven and earth, tremble for terror."⁸ The tumultuous nature of Indra's epiphany is also apparent in the following passage:

"Thou art the Mighty One; when born, O Indra, with power thou terrifiedst earth and heaven; When, in their fear of thee, all firm-set mountains and monstrous creatures shook like dust before thee."⁹

The unusual circumstances attending the war-god's birth have frequently drawn the attention of scholars. Ions, for example, observed that: "At the time of Indra's birth from Prithivi's side the heavens, earth and mountains began to shake and all the gods were afraid." The gods feared that Indra "was the herald of great changes in the divine order and possibly of their own doom."¹⁰

As we will discover, the gods had good reason to be alarmed.

Numerous passages relate that soon after his birth Indra assumed the form of a gigantic warrior whose body spanned the heavens. "Impetuous Indra in his might

⁸I:61:14 All quotes are taken from R. Griffith's translation of the Rig Veda unless otherwise indicated. See Ralph Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rig Veda* (Delhi, 1973).

⁹I:63:1

¹⁰V. Ions, *Indian Mythology* (London, 1968), p. 15.

exceedeth wide vast mid-air and heaven and earth together.”¹¹ A similar passage is the following: “Indra, Impetuous One, hath waxed immensely: he with his vastness hath filled earth and heaven.”¹² Most impressive, perhaps, is the following passage: “He filled the earthly atmosphere and pressed against the lights of heaven.”¹³

Throughout the *Veda* there is a decided emphasis upon the fact that Indra’s sudden growth to gargantuan proportions was nearly instantaneous with his birth:

“Deeming him a reproach, his mother hid him, Indra, endowed with all heroic valor. Then up he sprang himself, assumed his vesture, and filled, as soon as born, the earth and heaven.”¹⁴

The precocious growth and heaven-spanning form of the Vedic war-god constitutes a serious problem of interpretation, one which will occupy us later in this chapter.

THE DEFEAT OF THE DRAGON AND THE RELEASE OF THE SUN

Significantly, it was shortly after his birth that Indra battled and eventually slew the dragon Vritra. Vritra’s great crime lay in his concealment of the sun and imprisonment of the waters. In defeating the monster, Indra secured the release of the sun together with the life-giving waters. This primeval event is the subject of countless passages in the *Rig Veda*:

“Moreover, when thou first wast born, O Indra, thou struckest terror into all the people. Thou, Maghavan, rentest with thy bolt the Dragon who lay against the waterfloods of heaven.”¹⁵

Another typical passage celebrates Indra as follows:

“I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the Thunder-wielder. He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft the channels of the mountain torrents. He slew the Dragon lying on the mountain; his heavenly bolt of thunder Tvaster

¹¹III:46:3

¹²IV:16:5

¹³I:81:5

¹⁴IV:18:5 Indra’s rapid growth and rise to power is also apparent in the following passage: “Him who hath waxed by strength which none may conquer, and even at once grown to perfection.” *Ibid.*, V:19:2

¹⁵IV:17:7

fashioned. Like lowing kine in rapid flow descending the waters glided downward to the ocean.”¹⁶

Here, as so often in the Vedic texts, the cascading celestial waters are compared to cows.

Indra’s decisive role in the release of the waters is emphasized again and again in the Vedic texts: “Vritra he slew, and forced the flood of water forth.”¹⁷ A similar passage is the following: “Thou in thy vigor having slaughtered Vritra didst free the floods arrested by the Dragon.”¹⁸

It was the release of the sun, however, which marked Indra’s finest hour: “He who gave being to the Sun and Morning, who leads the waters, He, O men, is Indra.”¹⁹ Brown considered this to be Indra’s crowning achievement:

“The sun, it is stated many times, was won by Indra. It had been in darkness...His mighty deed is that he gains the sun, which he set in the sky after slaying Vritra.”²⁰

THE SUPPORT OF HEAVEN

Upon securing the release of the sun, Indra is said to have offered it some form of support.

“He who, just born, chief God of lofty spirit by power and might became the God’s protector. Before whose breath through greatness of his valor the two worlds trembled, He, O men, is Indra...He who fixed fast and firm the earth that staggered, and set at rest the agitated mountains, Who measured out the air’s wide middle region and gave the heaven support, He, men, is Indra.”²¹

Often it is simply stated that Indra raised the sun: “Indra hath raised the Sun on high in heaven, that he may see afar; He burst the mountain for the kine.”²² The following passage is of similar import: “When thou hadst slain with might the dragon

¹⁶I:32:1-3

¹⁷I:85:9-10

¹⁸IV:17:1

¹⁹II:12:7

²⁰W. N. Brown, “The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda,” *J. of Am. Oriental Society* 62 (1942), p. 97.

²¹II:12:1-4

²²I:7:2-3

Vritra, thou, Indra, didst raise the Sun in heaven for all to see.”²³ Here Griffith cites a gloss of Sayana, a celebrated commentator on the *Veda*: “Didst free the Sun which had been hidden by Vritra.”²⁴

Other passages hint at Indra’s participation in the separation of heaven and earth: “He stayed and held the heaven and earth asunder.”²⁵ This event is likewise said to have occurred shortly after his birth:

“Before the High God, at his birth, heaven trembled, earth, many floods and all the precipices. The Strong One bringeth nigh the Bull’s two parents.”²⁶

Here Griffith adds: “The meaning of the second line is, Indra brings near, but holds apart, the heaven and the earth, the parents of the mighty Sun.”²⁷

Indra’s involvement in the ordering of heaven and earth would appear to cast him in the role of creator or demiurge. This aspect of Indra’s mythos was duly emphasized by Brown:

“Most briefly he became lord of the cosmos. He released the Waters, generated the sun, the sky, the dawn or, as stated elsewhere, he and Soma made the dawn shine, led forth the sun with its light, supported the sky, spread out Mother Earth, having struck away Vritra from them. Or, again, having slain Vritra, he proceeded to creation. He is, therefore, called *visvakarman* “All-Maker, Creator” and lord over all creation.”²⁸

THE SOMA DRINKER

Indra was notorious for his thirst for Soma, and countless hymns allude to its immediate and dramatic influence upon the god.²⁹ Under the influence of the Soma, it is said that Indra’s body swelled to a gigantic size, filling heaven and earth. Consider here the following passage:

²³I:51:4

²⁴R. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rig Veda* (Delhi, 1973), p. 33.

²⁵V:44:24

²⁶IV:22:4

²⁷R. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

²⁸N. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 96. M. Bloomfield offered a similar interpretation in “The Interpretation of the Veda,” in *Am. Jour. of Philology* 17 (1896), p. 434.

²⁹As to the nature of the Soma, opinions vary enormously. Some see it as a climbing plant (*Sarcostema Viminalis* or *Asclepias Acida*), others an ambrosia-like herb, etc. In the *Rig Veda* it is explicitly identified with the milk of the celestial cows.

“High heaven unsupported in space he established: he filled the two worlds and the air’s mid region. Earth he upheld, and gave it wide expansion. These things did Indra in the Soma’s rapture. From front, as ‘twere a house, he ruled and measured; pierced with his bolt the fountains of the rivers, And made them flow at ease by paths far-reaching, These things did Indra in the Soma’s rapture.”³⁰

According to a tradition found in the *Atharva Veda*, Indra’s body “became a great mountain” upon consuming the Soma.³¹

Strangely enough, Indra seems to have developed this taste for Soma shortly after his birth:

“Many are Indra’s nobly wrought achievements,...He beareth up this earth and heaven, and, doer of marvels, he begot the Sun and Morning. Herein, O Guileless One, is thy true greatness, that soon as born thou drankest up the Soma.”³²

Indra’s precocious taste for Soma is also apparent in the following passage: “Even from his birth-time Indra conquered Tvaster, bore off the Soma and in beakers drank it.”³³ A similar passage is the following:

“The day when thou wast born thou, fain to taste it, drankest the plant’s milk which the mountains nourish. That milk thy Mother first, the Dame who bare thee, poured for thee in thy mighty Father’s dwelling.”³⁴

It was while under the influence of Soma that Indra accomplished his greatest deeds. The following passage is typical of this theme:

“Cheered by this meath Indra, whose hand wields thunder, rent piecemeal Ahi who barred up the waters, So that the quickening currents of the rivers flowed forth like birds unto their resting-places. Indra, this Mighty One, the Dragon’s slayer, sent forth the flood of waters to the ocean. He gave the Sun his life, he found the cattle, and with the night the works of day were completed.”³⁵

³⁰II:15:2-3

³¹9.4.3-6.

³²III:32:8-9.

³³III:48:4

³⁴III:48:2 This tradition might be compared to Heracles’ drinking the milk of Hera.

³⁵II:19:3

Macdonell, among others, emphasized the Soma's importance in the traditions surrounding Indra:

“Soma is sometimes said to stimulate Indra to perform great cosmic actions such as supporting earth and sky or spreading out the earth. But it characteristically exhilarates him to carry out his warlike deeds, the slaughter of the dragon or Vritra or the conquest of foes. So essential is Soma to Indra that his mother gave it to him or he drank it on the very day of his birth.”³⁶

Alas, the influence of the Soma was not always positive in nature. Thus it is elsewhere reported to have driven Indra to parricide.³⁷

SOLAR HERO OR STORM GOD?

Having recounted the most celebrated deeds of Indra, the question arises as to their ultimate origin and significance? Certainly there are some bizarre images involved. A hero who upon birth assumes a gigantic form; an infant who rescues the gods by waging battle with a sun-eclipsing dragon; a hero who pillars up heaven; etc. Were it not that such traditions conform to a widespread pattern associated with the birth of the warrior-hero, one might be tempted to regard them as the product of unbridled fantasy.

The most common interpretation of Indra's mythology would make of it a nature-allegory, with the war-god being regarded as a personification of the Sun, storm, or some other aspect of the physical world. Indra's combat with and victory over Vritra, according to the first view, signifies the Sun's victorious emergence from the all-encompassing darkness of night. This view is virtually synonymous with the name of F. Max Muller, Vedic scholar and outstanding pioneer of comparative mythology.³⁸

Muller's hypothesis is distinguished by the attempt to consider the Indra-cycle as a unified tradition, rather than as a conglomeration of isolated and originally unconnected episodes, each with varying explanations. Alas, Muller's valiant attempt to accommodate each aspect of Indra's myth by means of solar allegory was not always convincing. Muller would have the cows delivered by Indra signify the

³⁶A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (New York, 1974), p. 56.

³⁷*Rig Veda* 4:18:12. See also the discussion in V. Ions, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

³⁸M. Muller, *Selected Essays on Language, Mythology, and Religion* (London, 1881), pp. 479, 492.

clouds “which, from their heavy udders, send down refreshing and fertilizing rain or dew upon the parched earth.”³⁹ Hence Indra’s intimate association with fertility and fertilizing rains. Throughout the *Veda*, however, the cows themselves are intimately associated with the coming of light and dawn, a strange situation indeed if clouds were the original source of the bovine imagery.

If Muller’s solar-hero hypothesis represents the most ambitious attempt to accommodate Indra’s mythology, it was neither the first nor the last such attempt.⁴⁰ Others have seen in Indra a personification of the atmosphere—specifically the region between heaven and earth. This was the opinion of Griffith, for example:

“He is the God who reigns over the intermediate region or atmosphere; he fights against and conquers with his thunderbolt the demons of drought and darkness, and is in general the type of noble heroism.”⁴¹

Yet another hypothesis sees in Indra a personification of the thunderstorm, the god’s defeat of Vritra symbolizing rain’s overcoming the demon of drought.⁴² A. Keith may be cited as a leading proponent of this viewpoint:

“It is almost certain that in Indra we must see a storm-god, and that his exploit of defeating Vritra is a picture of the bursting forth of the rain from the clouds at the oncoming of the rainy season, when all the earth is parched, and when man and nature alike are eager for the breaking of the drought. The tremendous storms which mark the first fall of the rain are generally recognized as a most fitting source for the conception of the god, while the mountains cleft and the cows won are the clouds viewed from different standpoints. But Indra appears also as winning the sun, a trait representing the clearing away of the clouds from the sun after the thunderstorm, with which has been confused or united the idea of the recovery of the sun at dawn from the darkness of night.”⁴³

³⁹M. Muller, *Comparative Mythology* (New York, 1977), p. 121.

⁴⁰For a survey of the various interpretations, see the discussion in H. Oldenberg, *The Religion of the Veda* (Delhi, 1988), pp. 74-78.

⁴¹R. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 2. See also J. Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion* (1961), pp. 123-124.

⁴²E. Fay, “The Aryan God of Lightning,” *Jour. of Philology* 17:1 (1895), p. 11. See also A. Keith, “Iranian Mythology” in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (Boston, 1917), pp. 264-265.

⁴³A. Keith, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

As is apparent from Keith's discussion, it is difficult to account for the entire range of Indra's mythus by sole recourse to the imagery of the thunderstorm. Satisfactory in some areas, it is superficial or entirely inapplicable in others.

Macdonell ran into a similar impasse. He would interpret the myth of Indra's birth from the side of Prithivi as a reference to lightning: "This trait may possibly be derived from the notion of lightning breaking from the side of the storm-cloud."⁴⁴ The myth of Indra's separation of heaven and earth, however, Macdonell would trace to the illuminating effects of light: "Possibly the effect of light extending the range of vision and seeming to separate heaven and earth apparently pressed together by darkness, may have been the starting point of such conceptions."⁴⁵

Apart from the various "meteorological" interpretations, perhaps the most popular interpretation of Indra's mythology is the socio-cultural approach spawned by the work of Georges Dumezil, the leading practitioner of comparative mythology in recent years. Dumezil argued that ancient Indo-European society was distinguished by a tripartite structure—consisting of sovereign, warrior, and food-producing castes respectively—and that this tripartite structure was reflected in the myths and rituals of various Indo-European peoples. Indra, according to the thesis of Dumezil, is a personification of the warrior function and as such he should be considered the Indian homologue to the Greek Ares and Latin Mars.⁴⁶

As it turns out, there is some justification for each of the foregoing interpretations of Indra's mythology. That Indra represents some form of celestial power seems obvious. How else is it possible to understand the numerous references to Indra filling all of heaven or freeing the sun? The question, however, is which celestial power best suits the nature of Indra?

With regards to Muller's celebrated and much maligned solar-hypothesis, it must be concluded that it fails to provide a satisfactory explanation of the god's mythus despite the fact that there is a modicum of evidence for a solar Indra in the Vedic texts. For example, several passages identify Indra and Surya.⁴⁷ It is generally

⁴⁴A. Macdonell, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁶G. Dumezil, *Archaic Roman Religion, Vol. 1* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 207-209.

⁴⁷4:26:1. See here the discussion in A. Macdonell, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

agreed, however, that these passages occur in relatively late hymns and reflect the theoretical redactions of Vedic scribes; they would thus appear to offer little insight into the origins of Indra.

Muller's hypothesis, moreover, would appear to be directly contradicted by the numerous passages in the *Veda* which represent Indra as delivering the sun. Such traditions seem to confirm that Indra and the Sun (Surya) are two separate and independent entities. The same argument applies with respect to Indra's role in the support of the Sun. And these passages, needless to say, are of much greater antiquity than those which offer the equation of Indra and Surya (the situation is exactly analogous to that surrounding the Greek Apollo, who also became identified with the Sun in later times, but who originally had nothing to do with the solar orb).

With regards to the interpretation of Indra as the power inherent in the thunderstorm, here too it must be admitted that meteorological imagery pervades the mythus of Indra. Even Dumézil acknowledged this point:

“It is the destiny of the warrior gods, patterned on the terrestrial warriors, to be storm gods as well...Thor, the ‘thunder,’ with his hammer, like Indra with his thunderbolt, has obvious nature-god significance.”⁴⁸

Why a god patterned after a social caste would come to take on features of the natural world is not obvious and was left unanswered by Dumézil.⁴⁹

Yet the question is not whether Indra bears the characteristics of gods commonly regarded as storm gods. That he does is obvious to all. The question, rather, is whether these supposed storm gods have any relation to modern conceptions of the storm or whether they trace instead to some more formidable celestial power? As we will attempt to demonstrate, the evidence favors the latter hypothesis. At this point it is sufficient to note that the interpretation of Indra as the thunderstorm fares no better than the solar hypothesis, utterly failing to account for the mythus of the great warrior god. How is it possible to conceive of a thunderstorm as supporting the sun, for example? From whence derives the tradition of the infant Indra's precocious growth?

⁴⁸G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 160.

⁴⁹J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore, 1989), p. 60 likewise speaks of a coalescence of Indra's warlike and atmospheric figurations.

There can be little doubt, finally, that Indra represents the Vedic god of war. Yet this need not be seen as offering support for Dumézil's tripartite hypothesis, for Indra's relation to the warrior function is self-evident and might be accommodated by many different theories. It is well-known that numerous ancient cultures have analogous war-gods, despite the fact that many of these cultures are non-Indo-European in origin. Thus it may well be that some more universal explanation is required to account for Indra's mythus.

There are various other problems with Dumézil's tripartite hypothesis. Burkert, for example, observes that the expected tripartite structure is scarcely to be found in Greek tradition, despite the fact that Greek myth is the best documented of the Indo-European races.⁵⁰ Dumézil's leading disciple, C. Littleton, concedes that aside from the figure of Heracles, Greek myth represents "an otherwise rather barren field from Dumézil's point of view."⁵¹ Problems with Dumézil's tripartite thesis, however, do not weaken the strength of his identification of Indra as the Indian homologue of the Greek Ares and Latin Mars, based as it is on solid comparative research.⁵² Indeed it is my opinion that this identification offers the most promising base upon which to launch a new interpretation of the Indian god's mythology.

THE PLANET MARS

Throughout his vast writings on the subject of comparative mythology, Dumézil never once seriously considered the possibility that the gods of the warrior function—Ares, Mars, and Indra—might have a celestial component.⁵³ This is hardly to be wondered at given the fact that few other scholars of the twentieth century have been

⁵⁰W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 18.

⁵¹C. S. Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 125. Littleton elsewhere attempts to explain away the absence of a clear tripartite structure in Greece as a result of a merging of their traditions with those of pre-Indo-European peoples. See "Georges Dumézil and the Rebirth of the Genetic Model: an Anthropological Appreciation," in G. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1974), p. 177.

⁵²Other scholars have noticed the resemblance of Indra with Mars and Ares, of course. See E. Fay, "The Aryan God of Lightning," *Jour. of Philology* 17:1 (1895), p. 14; and G. R. Levy, *The Sword from the Rock* (New York, 1953), pp. 16, 93.

⁵³Writing of the religion of the Romans, Dumézil observed: "The sun and the moon have scarcely any role in their religion, while the stars have none at all, nor the firmament." *Archaic Roman Religion*, *op. cit.*, p. 177. Elsewhere, p. 209, Dumézil remarks of Mars' religion that: "He does not have a naturalistic aspect."

any more open-minded towards this possibility; influenced in this opinion, perhaps, by the disrepute associated with the solar-school of Muller and his followers.⁵⁴ Yet the fact remains that Ares and Mars were explicitly identified with the planet Mars by their respective peoples.⁵⁵ Ancient peoples from Babylon to China to the New World likewise regarded the red planet as embodying the warrior-function.

Consider also the case of Heracles. As a student of comparative mythology, Dumézil could not help but recognize the striking parallels which exist between Indra and Heracles.⁵⁶ Indeed, Dumézil devoted the better part of two books to the documentation of such parallels.⁵⁷ Here too, however, Dumézil ignored the identification of Heracles with the planet Mars. If this identification is valid—and we have found no reason to question it—the possibility arises that Indra likewise bore some relation to the red planet.

VERETHRAGNA AND VAHAGN

It has been known for some time, thanks to the pioneering researches of Benveniste and Renou, that Indra's chief epithet—*Vritrahan*, “smasher of resistance”—finds an exact counterpart in Iranian traditions surrounding the hero Thraetona, who was known by the epithet of *Verethragna*.⁵⁸ Regarded by many as

⁵⁴See the remarks of G. Larson in *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 3-4. Littleton, *op. cit.*, p. 2, suggests that the general failure of modern scholars to accept the merits of comparative mythology traces to the excesses of Muller's solar interpretation. In the last century it was common to seek a celestial component for Indra's cult. See E. Moor, *Hindu Pantheon* (London, 1810), p. 260.

⁵⁵Plato, *Epinomis* 987c.

⁵⁶The great classicist Wilamowitz had earlier called attention to the resemblance between Heracles and Indra, as did L. Schröder, but it was the groundbreaking article of F. Schröder—“Indra, Thor und Herakles,” *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 76 (1957), pp. 1-41—that fully documented the relationship. The latter scholar was particularly important with regard to the development of Dumézil's views.

⁵⁷G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970); *The Stakes of the Warrior* (Berkeley, 1983). Here Dumézil was influenced by the masterful analysis of Schröder, who showed that Heracles and Indra shared numerous attributes in common. For our discussion here it is enough to note that Schröder documented that both shared the following motifs in common: dragon-slayer, prolific appetite, intimately associated with the support of heaven, sinner, cross-dresser, womanizer, etc.

⁵⁸E. Benveniste & L. Renou, *Vrtra et Vrthragna* (1935). See the discussion in G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 115-138. See also S. Greenebaum, “Vrtrahan-Verethragna: Indian and Iran,” in G. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 93-97.

the Avestan Heracles, Thraetona received this epithet by virtue of his defeat of the dragon Azi Dahaka.⁵⁹

That various sacred traditions of the Indians and Iranians go back to a common source is well-known. The numerous correspondences between Indra and Thraetona are a case in point. Vritra's epithet *Ahi* ("serpent") is cognate with Azi, the name of the Iranian dragon; while Indra's *vajra* is cognate with *vazra*, the club-like weapon of the Iranian hero. Here Greenebaum observes: "These linguistic similarities, together with the epithets involved, and the similarity in themes would seem to indicate that a tradition of the slaying of Vritra Azhi Dasa was common to Indic and Iranian myths."⁶⁰

Who or what, then, was Verethragna? In texts dating to Sassanid times (AD 226-640), Verethragna stands as a name for the planet Mars.⁶¹ That the identification of the Iranian god and the red planet goes back to still more ancient times was maintained by B. L. van der Waerden:

"The identification of the planets with great gods must be a relict from an earlier period...As we have seen, the identification of planets with gods is fundamental for horoscopic astrology. Now this kind of astrology originated in the Achaemenid period (539-331 B.C.) and spread over the whole ancient world during the Hellenistic period (after 330 B.C.). Therefore it seems reasonable to assume that the identification of planets with Persian gods took place during the Achaemenid or early Hellenistic period."⁶²

The Iranian Verethragna finds a close homologue in the Armenian hero Vahagn (Vahagn is apparently the Armenian transcription of the Parthian name Verethragna), of whom little is known apart from the fact that he too was renowned as a dragon-slayer.⁶³ All that remains are a few fragments telling of his tumultuous birth as reported by Moses of Chorene, the leading historian of Armenian lore:

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁶¹B. L. van der Waerden, *Science Awakening II: The Birth of Astronomy* (Leiden, 1974), p. 187.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 188. There van der Waerden cites the Persian scholar Duchesne-Guillemin. As this author points out, the identification of Verethragna and Mars is found already in Antiochus (c. 62. B.C.).

⁶³His most common title is *Vishapakhagh*, "Reaper of Dragons." On this figure, see G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 122. See also A. Carnoy, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

“Heaven and earth were in travail, the purple sea was in travail; a red reed had its birth in the seas, from the stems of the reed came forth smoke, from the stems of the reed came forth a flame, and from the flame sprang a young man; this youth had fiery hair, also a beard of flame, and his eyes were suns.”⁶⁴

As Dumézil points out, this fascinating vignette compares well with several incidents in Indra’s career. Indra too, it will be remembered, had first sprang forth under similar conditions of universal distress:

“Indra, endowed with all heroic valor. Then up he sprang himself, assumed his vesture, and filled, as soon as born, the earth and heaven.”⁶⁵

Vahagn’s residence within the reed-stem Dumézil would compare to an episode in the *Mahabharata*. There Indra is represented as hiding in a lotus stalk upon assuming a minute form at the time of his battle with the dragon.⁶⁶ With regards to the traditions surrounding Vahagn and Indra, Dumézil wrote:

“Not only is there a parallel in events, but also a coincidence in name: these two scenes, so close in their overall plans, are bound up with the Armenian and Indian forms of one and the same figure. The most straightforward attitude, the one most respectful of the materials, is not to assume the convergence of two late and independent fantasies; rather it is to suppose that Iranicized Armenia has transmitted to us a form of Verethragna, still closely resembling his Indo-Iranian prototype which...was enabled to survive for a long time in more than one part of Iran, just as the *itihasa* [a sacred tradition], the source for the epic traditions, may have conserved the same material in India, outside the Vedic literature.”⁶⁷

Dumézil’s recognition of Indra and Vahagn as mythical homologues has generally gained acceptance. Lincoln summarized the current status of debate as follows:

“The first point which we must note is, as has long been known, the name Vahagn is a loan word into Armenian and is derived from Avestan Verethragna (=Skt. Vritrahan). The story of his birth from a flaming reed has been connected with an Indian *itihasa* tradition telling of the reenergizing of Indra. Thus we are virtually certain that Vahagn is

⁶⁴Moses of Chorene, *History of the Armenians* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 123. The first scholar to make this comparison appears to have been F. Schröder, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁶⁵*Rig Veda* IV:18:5

⁶⁶G. Dumézil, *op. cit.* pp. 124-125.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 129.

a dependent variant of the Indo-Iranian warrior-god, who was known as both *Vrtraghna, ‘smasher of resistance,’ and *Indra, ‘the manly, the strong.’”⁶⁸

As with the affinity of Vahagn and Indra, the resemblance between Vahagn and Heracles has long been recognized.⁶⁹ Thus, Moses of Chorene followed up his brief account of the hero’s birth with the observation:

“All sing of this one, I have heard it with my own ears; they thus recount in song along with cymbals, his battle with the dragon and his victory, and they sing of him in every way as of the heroic deeds of Hercules.”⁷⁰

In lieu of Vahagn’s resemblance to both Heracles and Verethragna, it comes as no surprise to find that he, too, was identified with the planet Mars.⁷¹ The explicit identification of these three heroes with Mars must command our attention. For even if it be granted that each of these identifications traces to a common astrological system—which is possible—the decisive point remains that three different cultures saw fit to identify their favorite hero with the red planet.

The ramifications of these identifications for an analysis of Indra’s mythus would seem obvious. Yet if we are to trace the mythology of the Vedic war-god to ancient beliefs associated with the planet Mars, it must be expected that this identification will enable us to explain various aspects of the god’s cult, such as his role in the support of heaven, the ability to assume a gigantic form, his reputation as a dragon-slayer, etc.

THE WORLD PILLAR

In seeking an explanation of Indra’s intimate association with the support of heaven, several scholars have speculated that ancient conceptions of the World Pillar pervade this aspect of his mythology.⁷² One of the most common themes in ancient cosmogony, the World Pillar—in addition to supporting heaven—was believed to connect the Earth with the kingdom of the gods, offering at the same time a means of

⁶⁸B. Lincoln, “The Indo-European Cattle-Raiding Myth,” *History of Religions* 16:1 (1976), pp. 50-51.

⁶⁹“Armenian authors regularly translate Heracles as Vahagn.” So wrote B. L. van der Waerden, *Science Awakening II: The Birth of Astronomy* (Leiden, 1974), p. 190.

⁷⁰Moses of Chorene, *History of the Armenians* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 123. B. Lincoln, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁷¹B. L. van der Waerden, *Science Awakening II: The Birth of Astronomy* (Leiden, 1974), pp. 187-190.

⁷²F. Schröder, “Indra, Thor und Herakles,” *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 76 (1957), pp. 5-7.

communication and travel between the various worlds. As to the objective reference of this Pillar, scholars typically point to the North celestial axis. Holmberg summarized this view as follows:

“The regular diurnal movement of the stars round an axis at the North Star, the reasons for which neverending rotation were earlier unknown, gave birth to an idea that their apparent center of the universe was formed by some object which could be represented in concrete forms, and which was, in addition, believed to support the roof of the sky.”⁷³

The World Pillar was associated with various symbolic forms by the ancient skywatchers, one of the most common of which was that of the Cosmic Mountain. Here the Hindu mount Meru offers a classic example: In addition to forming the support of heaven, Meru is said to have stood at the celestial axis, above which appeared the Pole Star.⁷⁴ Elsewhere, however, Meru was invoked as the support of the sun.⁷⁵ Indeed, it was said that the sun both rose and set upon Meru.⁷⁶

Analogous traditions surround *Mashu*, the Akkadian version of the Cosmic Mountain. Thus, in the *Gilgamesh Epic* it was claimed of this mountain that it presided over the rising and setting of the sun:

“The name of the mountain is Mashu...Which every day keeps watch over the rising and setting of the sun, Whose peaks reach as high as the ‘banks of heaven’, And whose breast reaches down to the underworld.”⁷⁷

Yet under the current arrangement of the solar system, it is impossible for the Sun to both rise and set over the same terrestrial mountain. Hence the anomaly presented by the universal theme of the Cosmic Mountain upon which the ancient sun-god was wont to “rise” and “set,” one of many clues that the ancients were describing a cosmos radically different from the one known to modern scholars.

Other symbolic forms associated with the World Pillar include the World Tree or Celestial Spring. Eliade offered the following summary of this symbolism:

⁷³U. Holmberg, *Finno-Ugric Mythology* (Boston, 1927), p. 333.

⁷⁴I. Mabbett, “The Symbolism of Mount Meru,” *History of Religions* (1983), p. 69.

⁷⁵*Epigraphica Indica*, 12:203 Cited in I. Mabbett, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁷⁶*Aitareya Brahmana* 14:6:44 I. Mabbett, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁷⁷A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1970), p. 65.

“The symbolism of the World Tree is complementary to that of the Central Mountain. Sometimes the two symbols coincide; usually they complement each other. But both are merely more developed mythical formulations of the Cosmic Axis (World Pillar, etc.).”⁷⁸

It is significant to find that Indra—in addition to being invoked as the support of heaven—is variously invoked in the forms of a tree, spring⁷⁹, and mountain.⁸⁰ In ancient ritual, for example, the god was specifically identified with a May-pole like tree—the Indra-tree.⁸¹ The embodiment of Indra in a pole-like form is also apparent in the following passage from the *Rig Veda*: “The priests have raised thee up on high, O Satakratu, like a pole.”⁸² Here Gonda observes: “The pole is explicitly identified with Indra himself who in one of the earliest references to these ceremonies (*MBH* 1, 57, 22ff.) is said to have promised his worshippers aid and support.”⁸³

In a discussion of the religious significance of Indra’s pole/tree, Gonda cautioned that its mythical prototype was in heaven: “It should however be borne in mind that the Indra tree like the sacrificial post (*yupa*) and similar stakes and other objects might be considered a representative of the great cosmic tree, and of the *axis mundi*.”⁸⁴ Thus, whether he is embodied in the Indra-tree or as the Atlas-like supporter of heaven, Indra cannot be divorced from ancient conceptions of the World Pillar (*axis mundi*).

In lieu of our finding that Indra’s homologues Verethragna and Vahagn were each identified with the planet Mars, it is significant to find that the red planet itself has been linked to ancient conceptions of the World Pillar by scholars investigating the

⁷⁸M. Eliade, *Myths, Rites, and Symbols* (New York, 1975), p. 380.

⁷⁹Vedic hymns compare Indra to a spring: “We will pour Indra forth as ‘twere a spring of wealth.” II:16:7. Indra is elsewhere said to have dwelt in a heavenly well of honey. See A. Keith, “Iranian Mythology,” in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (Boston, 1917), p. 29. Note also that Verethragna is associated with a fountain of manliness in Iranian tradition. See F. Muller, *The Zend-Avesta* (New York, 1898), pp. 238-239.

⁸⁰In the *Rig Veda* Indra is addressed as “Mount Indra.” I:121:12 This passage Gonda would compare to AVS 6, 87, 2: “Be thou just here; do not move away, like a mountain not unsteady; O Indra, stand thou fixed just here; here do thou maintain royalty.” Also relevant here is the tradition found in the *Atharva Veda*, quoted earlier, in which it is said that upon drinking Soma, Indra’s body became “like unto a mountain.” See N. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁸¹F. Schröder, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁸²I:10:1

⁸³J. Gonda, “The Indra Festival According to the Atharvavedins,” *JAOS* 87 (1967), p. 414.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 417. There Gonda adds: “The mythical prototype of the *Indradhvaja* was in heaven.”

origins of sacred symbols. Thus, in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Cirlot reports that: “The Tree of Life, when it rises no higher than the mountain of Mars...is regarded as a pillar supporting heaven.”⁸⁵

Additional support for Cirlot’s finding comes from the fact that many of the ancient war-gods identified with Mars are explicitly associated with a sacred mountain, tree, or spring identifiable with the World Pillar.⁸⁶ The Latin war-god Mars, for example, was identified with the Saxon god Irmin who, under the name of Irminsul, was worshipped as the universal column.⁸⁷

Analogous traditions surround Nergal. The epithet *Lugal-an-za-gar*, “Lord of the pillar,” would appear to have reference to the war-god’s connection to the World Pillar.⁸⁸ Another epithet—*Meslamtae*—thought to signify “he who issues forth from the Meshu-tree,” confirms that the planet-god bore an intimate relation to the World Tree (Meshu), described as follows in *The Poem of Erra*: “That pure tree...whose roots reached as deep down as the bottom of the underworld...whose top reached as high as the sky of Anum.”⁸⁹ Like the Mashu-mountain, the Meshu-tree extends from the depths of the underworld to the heights of heaven.

Nergal is elsewhere associated with the Cosmic Mountain. Thus, a Sumerian hymn relates that Nergal was given the mountain of heaven and earth on the day of his birth to serve as his special province.⁹⁰ Elsewhere it is said that Nergal/Mars bore a marked tendency to “rise in the mountain where the sun rises.”⁹¹ Under the current arrangement of the solar system, however, Mars cannot be said to rise in the East with

⁸⁵J. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York, 1962), p. 330.

⁸⁶See the discussion in E. Cochrane, “The Spring of Ares,” *Kronos* XI:3 (1986), pp. 15-21.

⁸⁷E. Polome, “Some Thoughts on the Methodology of Comparative Religion, With Special Focus on Indo-European,” in *Essays in Memory of Karl Kerényi* (Washington, D.C., 1984), p. 16. See also H.R. Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Syracuse, 1988), pp. 21-24. J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 1 (Gloucester, 1976), pp. 115-119.

⁸⁸K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Helsingforsiae, 1938), p. 390.

⁸⁹L. Cagni, *The Poem of Erra* (Malibu, 1977), p. 32. T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 17.

⁹⁰A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), pp. 51, 88. The name of the mountain in question is ‘ur-sag-an-ki-bi-da. For the identification of this mount with the Cosmic Mountain, see the discussion in S. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Philadelphia, 1944), p. 39; F. Bruschweiler, *INANNA. La deesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumerienne* (Leuven, 1988), pp. 84-86.

⁹¹A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 90, 106.

the Sun. Indeed, the Sun and Mars are never visible together in the sky at any one time during the latter's close proximity to the Sun. Rather, Mars only appears *after* the Sun has gone down. When Mars does appear in the East, it is always faint and typically invisible, being then on the other side of the Sun and thus hundreds of millions of miles away.⁹²

Nergal is also associated with the site of the sun's disappearance. Witness the epithet *Lugal-ki-du-šu-a*: "king of the site of the Sun-set."⁹³ A closely related epithet is *Lugul-du-šu-a*, "king who effects the Sunset."⁹⁴ What, if anything, does the planet Mars have to do with site of the sunset? If the mountain associated with the sun's rising was the same as that associated with the sun's descent—as the ancient texts relate in no uncertain terms—it stands to reason that Mars would be associated with both if with either one.

Two questions confront us at this point. How did the planet Mars come to be associated with ancient conceptions of the World Pillar? And, granted that it did, how does that finding contribute to our understanding of the mythology of Indra?

THE POLAR CONFIGURATION

In *Worlds in Collision*, Immanuel Velikovsky argued that the planets only recently settled into their current orbits, and that Venus, Mars, and Saturn were involved in spectacular cataclysms witnessed by ancient man the world over, who subsequently commemorated the terrifying events in countless myths and rituals. In that bold and highly controversial book, Velikovsky set the stage for a revolution in comparative mythology by suggesting that universally recurring mythical images—such as the war-god, fire-breathing dragon, and witch—reflect ancient man's attempt to commemorate terrifying cataclysms associated with planetary agents.

It was while researching *Worlds in Collision* that Velikovsky discovered that the planet Saturn played a prominent role in ancient mythology, a puzzling fact given its present modest appearance. This finding has since received substantial support from

⁹²J. Sawyer & F. Stephenson, "Literary and Astronomical Evidence for a Total Eclipse of the Sun Observed in Ancient Ugarit on 3 May 1375 B. C.," *BSOAS* 33 (1970), pp. 468-469 write: "When Mars is near the sun, it is faint and is never visible until about half an hour after sunset."

⁹³K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Helsingforsiae, 1938), p. 390.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 390.

the extensive researches of Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, who likewise found the planet Saturn to be a central figure in ancient mythology and religion.⁹⁵ While the authors of *Hamlet's Mill* favored a uniformitarian explanation of Saturn's prominence, explaining the cataclysmic imagery in ancient myth as a reflection of the ancients' preoccupation with the phenomena associated with precession of the equinoxes, Velikovsky explained Saturn's mythical status by speculating that the Earth had once moved in close proximity to the gas giant, with Saturn dominating the skies.⁹⁶

Following in the footsteps of Velikovsky, various researchers began to lay the foundation for a radical reconstruction of the recent history of the solar system, one in which Saturn assumed an all-important role.⁹⁷ According to the thesis offered by David Talbott, the planet Saturn once loomed large in the north polar skies, thereby forming the inspiration for the universal belief in a Golden Age whereby the gods lived close in view. During the period in question, Saturn and the Earth apparently shared a common axis of rotation, with the result that Saturn remained fixed in the sky. As Talbott has shown, Saturn was illuminated in such a way by the sun that it displayed a crescent, the latter of which appeared to circle around Saturn with the revolution of the Earth about its axis. The various phases of Saturn's crescent formed the visual, objective basis for the original cycle of the ancient day.⁹⁸

In recent years it has become apparent that other planets also participated in the configuration associated with Saturn.⁹⁹ According to the reconstruction offered by Talbott and myself, the planets Mars and Venus originally appeared in close proximity to Saturn, apparently sharing a common axis of rotation together with the Earth. As the Earth-bound observer looked upwards, he saw a spectacular image— Saturn dominating the sky, with the much smaller Venus and Mars set within it like

⁹⁵G. Santillana & H. von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1977).

⁹⁶See the discussion in I. Velikovsky, *Mankind in Amnesia* (New York, 1982), pp. 97-100.

⁹⁷D. Talbott, *The Saturn Myth* (New York, 1980); and D. Cardona, "The Sun of Night," *Kronos* III:1 (Fall 1977); "The Mystery of the Pleiades," *Kronos* III:4 (Summer 1978). See also the many articles by these two writers in *Kronos* and *Aeon*.

⁹⁸D. Talbott, "The Ship of Heaven," *Aeon* 1:3 (1988), pp. 57-96.

⁹⁹E. Cochrane, "The Spring of Ares," *Kronos* XI:3 (Summer 1986), pp. 15-21; D. Talbott, "On Models and Scenarios," *Aeon* I:4 (1988), pp. 5-15.

two concentric circles (see Diagram). Neolithic rock art, in fact, records just such an image, commonly interpreted as the ancient sun-god.¹⁰⁰

As this planetary configuration evolved through time, the positions of the respective planets were subject to substantial fluctuation. The ebb and flow in the positions of the various planets along and about the axis constitutes a vital chapter in the history of the gods and ultimately provided a primary source of inspiration for the world's mythical themes. Mars, for example, appeared early on to be in the center of Saturn, from which point it later descended to a position visually beneath Saturn. As Mars descended from Saturn/Venus, it became visibly larger, at the same time losing a significant portion of its atmosphere under the influence of the Earth's gravitational field. It was this ethereal debris strung out between Mars and Earth, apparently, which gave rise to the spectacular apparition of a fiery pillar spanning the heavens (see Diagram). Significantly, it is common to find the "sun-god" set atop a pillar-like apparition in ancient rock art (see Diagram).

INDRA'S INFANCY

If we avail ourselves of this simple outline, daily evolving and physically improbable though it may appear at first sight, the mythology of Indra begins to unravel and signs abound that its ultimate decipherment may be within view. The tumultuous occasion commemorated in the myth of Indra's birth had its objective reference in the descent of Mars from the near vicinity of Saturn along the axis towards Earth.¹⁰¹ Upon its initial displacement from Saturn/Venus, Mars appears to have moved perilously close to the Earth, looming large in the turbulent skies overhead (see diagram). Recall again the Vedic description of Indra's epiphany: "Indra, endowed with all heroic valor. Then up he sprang himself, assumed his vesture, and filled, as soon as born, the earth and heaven."¹⁰²

Indra's ability to assume a gigantic form is a decided point of emphasis in the Vedic hymns, more than one scholar calling attention to the prominent role of the root

¹⁰⁰See the extensive discussion in E. Cochrane, "Suns and Planets in Neolithic Art," *Aeon* III:2 (1993), pp. 51-63.

¹⁰¹D. Talbott, "Mother Goddess and Warrior-Hero," *Aeon* I:5 (1988), pp. 47-54; D. Talbott, "Servant of the Sun God," *Aeon* II:1 (1989), pp. 37-52.

¹⁰²IV:18:5

vrddh, “to increase, or swell,” in his mythus.¹⁰³ A stock epithet of the god—*pravrdhha*—emphasizes this ability to swell, signifying “swollen, enlarged, expanded, increased, violent.”¹⁰⁴

Indra’s propensity for swelling, according to the thesis offered here, refers to the simple fact that the planet Mars appeared to increase in size or “swell” as it moved towards Earth along the shared polar axis.¹⁰⁵ Such a scenario would present a dramatic spectacle to Earthly skywatchers, if true. It is from this vantage point, perhaps, that we are to interpret the Vedic reference to Indra’s precocious growth to the point where his body obscured the lights of heaven: “He filled the earthly atmosphere and pressed against the lights of heaven.”¹⁰⁶

Numerous other passages in the *Rig Veda* reiterate that Indra’s gargantuan form dominated the skies, extending from heaven to earth: “The heaven itself attained not to thy greatness when with one hip of thine the earth was shadowed.”¹⁰⁷ Griffith compares this passage to another in which Indra announces: “One side of me is in the sky, and I have drawn the other down.”¹⁰⁸ A similar scenario is described in hymn I:103:1, which likewise places a part of Indra in heaven and the other part on earth. Here Gonda points out that, “both parts combine so as to form a *ketu* (which may mean ‘ensign’, but also ‘an unusual phenomenon such as a comet or meteor’).”¹⁰⁹

If we take as our point of reference the image presented in Diagram X, it can be seen that as Mars descended along the shared axis towards the Earth it swelled to the point at which it dominated the sky. As Mars neared the Earth, its atmosphere and any free-floating asteroidal debris flowed along the shared polar axis (perhaps under the influence of the Earth’s gravitational field), producing a pillar-like apparition distended from Mars. The unusual apparition associated with Indra’s *ketu*, quite

¹⁰³See G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 126, who cites Renou and Bergaigne.

¹⁰⁴M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1872), p. 644.

¹⁰⁵Witness the Polynesian name for the planet Mars: *Horo-pukipuku*, “Quick-swelling.” See R. Williamson, *Religion and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia*, Vol. I (Cambridge, 1933), p. 194.

¹⁰⁶I:81:5

¹⁰⁷III:32:11-12

¹⁰⁸R. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 178, with reference to X:119:11

¹⁰⁹J. Gonda, *The Indra Hymns of the Rg Veda* (Leiden, 1989), p. 17.

possibly, had reference to the fiery comet-like train of debris which came to form the World Pillar, thus uniting, as it were, heaven and earth.

It was during this particular phase of the configuration's history that Mars appeared as a towering giant or pillar supporting heaven. Recall again the Vedic description of Indra's epiphany:

"He who, just born, chief God of lofty spirit by power and might became the God's protector...He who fixed fast and firm the earth that staggered, and set at rest the agitated mountains, Who measured out the air's wide middle region and gave the heaven support, He, men, is Indra."¹¹⁰

A comparable passage is the following:

"The hero who in the battles girded up his body, he placed, powerfully, heaven on his head."¹¹¹

Here Indra appears as a sort of Vedic Atlas, supporting heaven on his head. Of Atlas, Hesiod wrote that he "supports the broad sky of mighty necessity at the edge of the earth near the clear-voiced Hesperides, supporting it with his head and wearying hands."¹¹² Aeschylus described him in similar fashion, preserving the intimate relation between the strong-armed hero and the World Pillar: "He in the far western ways stands bearing on his shoulders the mighty pillar of earth and sky."¹¹³

It is the Egyptian god Shu, however, who offers the most complete portrait of the heaven bearer. Like Atlas, Shu was commonly depicted supporting heaven on his shoulders (See figure X).¹¹⁴ Although Shu formed a prominent fixture in ancient Egyptian cosmology, the objective reference behind the god has long puzzled scholars of Egyptian religion. Thus, Faulkner writes: "Shu is a deity about whom the standard works on Egyptian religion have comparatively little to say."¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰II:12:1-4

¹¹¹II:17:2

¹¹²Hesiod, *Theogony* 517-520.

¹¹³*Prometheus Bound* 356-358.

¹¹⁴Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, 41. See also the discussion in T. Hopfner, *Plutarch über Isis und Osiris* (Prague, 1940), pp. 23, 185. R. Roeder, "Schow," *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 571.

¹¹⁵R. Faulkner, "Some Notes on the God Shu," *JEOL* 18 (1964), p. 266.

Scholars have typically viewed Shu as a personification of the empty space in the atmosphere—the “void” or “air”.¹¹⁶ It can be shown, however, that few if any of Shu’s characteristics in ancient Egyptian religion are consistent with this interpretation. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that Shu is to be identified with the planet Mars, as Talbott and I have proposed.¹¹⁷ Thus it is that the *Coffin Texts* describe Shu as a “star,” a most peculiar situation if the conventional interpretation of the god as empty “air” is valid.¹¹⁸

According to the various Egyptian sources recounting Shu’s birth, the god is either spat out or otherwise expelled by the ancient sun-god amidst an immense outpouring of fiery material from whence derives the pillar-like support of the sun.¹¹⁹ Indeed, as Budge pointed out long ago, the Egyptian account of the emission of Shu preserves the explicit relation between the pouring out of the god and the pillar-like support, the word *ashesh*—expressing the idea of “pouring out” but also “supporting”—being used of Shu’s birth.¹²⁰

We will have reason to refer to Shu throughout the course of this book.

Certainly it is significant to find that Greek emigrants to Egypt early on identified their favorite hero with Shu, presumably because he too was intimately associated with the support of heaven.¹²¹ The pillars of Heracles, of course, were proverbial in Greek tradition. That they hark back to ancient conceptions of the World Pillar has long been noted. Cook, for example, offered the following observation: “The pillars of Heracles at one end of the Mediterranean...imply the belief that the sky rests upon

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 266. H. te Velde compares Shu to a “column of air”. See “Some Aspects of the God Shu,” *Jaarbericht ex Orient Lux* 27 (1981-1982), p. 27.

¹¹⁷D. Talbott, “On Testing the Polar Configuration,” *Aeon* 1:2 (1988), pp. 114-116; “Mother Goddess and Warrior Hero,” *Aeon* 1:5 (1988), pp. 42-65. See also E. Cochrane, “Heracles and the Planet Mars,” *Aeon* 1:4 (1988), pp. 101-105.

¹¹⁸3:334J in the Siut text. See the discussion in R. Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (New York, 1959), p. 44. Note also that Shu was elsewhere depicted as a red disc. See here E. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians* Vol. 1 (New York, 1969), p. 260.

¹¹⁹E. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians* Vol. II (New York, 1969), pp. 90, 299.

¹²⁰See also the discussion in D. Talbott, “Mother Goddess and Warrior Hero,” *Aeon* 1:5 (1988), pp. 48-49.

¹²¹On the identification of Heracles with Shu, see R. Roeder, “Schow,” *RML* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 566.

solid and tangible supports.”¹²² Indeed, Philostratus reported that Heracles’ pillars supported heaven.¹²³ That Heracles was held to have once assumed the burden of Atlas points in the same direction.¹²⁴

INDRA’S ASSAULT OF SURYA

In addition to presenting a terrifying spectacle in the skies, the propensity for “swelling” came to form an essential component of the furor which characterized the war-god’s customary demeanor, epitomized by the epithet *susmintama*, “most impetuous one.”¹²⁵ A passage cited earlier is typical: “Indra, Impetuous One, hath waxed immensely: he with his vastness hath filled earth and heaven.”¹²⁶

Indra’s impetuous nature inspired him to commit numerous excesses. More than one Vedic hymn, for example, alludes to some sort of assault directed against the gods. As we have seen, this an archetypal theme associated with the warrior-hero.

Countless hymns in the *Rig Veda* allude to Indra’s intimate relations with Surya, the ancient sun-god. Among the Vedic war-god’s most celebrated feats are his role in delivering the Sun from a prison-like darkness; preparing a space within which it could rise; and propping it up with a pillar. The following hymn may be taken as typical: “Ye found the Sun, ye found the light of heaven;...Ye stayed the heaven with a supporting pillar.”¹²⁷ It was on account of such traditions, as we have seen, that many investigators have sought to understand Indra’s mythus in terms of some sort of nature allegory.¹²⁸

It is probable that Indra’s peculiar relationship to the Sun/Surya in certain Vedic hymns can be traced to the appearance or movement of Mars along the polar axis (here Surya would be identified with the planet Saturn). Consider, for example, the following passage: “What time thou settest near the Sun thy body, thy form, Immortal

¹²²A. Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1965), pp. 422-423.

¹²³Philostratus as reported by Apollodorus 5:5.

¹²⁴Pherecydes in Scholia in Apollonium Rhodium 4.1936 FGH 1, 33.

¹²⁵J. Gonda, *op. cit.*, p. 61. Numerous other Martian figures bore a similar epithet. The Akkadian Nergal, for example, received the epithet *mamlu*, “impetuous.” See E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 61.

¹²⁶IV:16:5

¹²⁷VI:72:1-2.

¹²⁸A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (New York, 1974), pp. 54-66.

One, is seen expanding.”¹²⁹ How else but upon the astral nature of Indra is it possible to account for such imagery?

A recurring theme speaks of a violent confrontation of some sort between Indra and Surya. Several passages, for example, credit Indra with conquering the ancient sun-god. Other passages suggest that Indra’s assault of the ancient sun-god resulted in an eclipse-like disturbance. Consider the following passage: “For Surya in his own abode thou, Hero, formedst in fights even a Dasa’s nature.”¹³⁰ In his commentary upon this passage Griffith remarks:

“The second half of the stanza refers to an eclipse of the sun. Indra is said to have formed for Surya in his own abode, that is, in the eastern heaven, the nature of a Dasa, i.e., made him a slave or dark.”¹³¹

Another hymn possibly alluding to some type of disturbance of the Sun is the following:

“Not even all the gathered gods conquered thee, Indra, in the war, When thou didst lengthen days by night. When for the sake of those oppressed, and Kutsa as he battled, Thou stolest away the Sun’s car-wheel.”¹³²

This passage, if one accepts the plain meaning of the words, would appear to recount Indra’s participation in a great theomachy of some sort, during which the ancient sun-god was obscured or otherwise prevented from appearing at its scheduled time.¹³³

In addition to these hymns, Griffith cites a handful of others which appear to associate Indra with some sort of disturbance of the Sun. Included is the following

¹²⁹IV:16:14

¹³⁰V:33:4

¹³¹R. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 252. It is with reference to such traditions, perhaps, that we are to understand the epithet *asita*, “dark, black” applied to the planet Saturn in Hindu tradition. See M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1872), p. 105. The Babylonians likewise knew Saturn as the “Black Star,” *mul MI*. See the discussion in A. Scherer, *Gestirnnamen bei den indogermanischen Völkern* (Heidelberg, 1953), pp. 84-85.

¹³²IV:30:3-4.

¹³³See here the discussion in A. Macdonell & A. Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, Vol. 2 (Delhi, 1967), pp. 465-466. There the authors write: “This is possibly a reference to the obscuration of the sun by a thunderstorm.”

passage, discussed briefly in a previous chapter: “What time thou settest near the Sun thy body, thy form, Immortal One, is seen expanding.”¹³⁴

These Vedic hymns must be viewed in the context of analogous traditions surrounding Heracles, Erra/Nergal, and Reseph. Recall also the astrological omen from ancient Babylon: “If the Sun goes down (by a Darkness/Eclipse) and Mars stands in its place, there will be an Usurpator.”¹³⁵

Notice here that the placement of Mars within the immediate vicinity of the Sun offers a remarkable parallel to the Vedic tradition of Indra setting near the Sun: “What time thou settest near the Sun thy body, thy form, Immortal One, is seen expanding.”

These anomalous traditions of a disturbance of the Sun associated with the planet Mars demand an explanation. It is our contention that such reports preserve an actual historical reminiscence—albeit one that is typically couched in mythical language—of a profound disturbance of the ancient sun-god (Saturn) occasioned by the behavior of the planet Mars. Thus it is that Babylonian scribes expressly identified the “Sun” in these omen texts involving Mars with the planet Saturn!¹³⁶

THE YOUTH

A striking feature of the Vedic career of Indra is the fact that the god accomplishes most of his greatest feats while yet an infant. Strangely enough, this bizarre and wholly unnatural theme would appear to be universal in nature. Prominent examples include Heracles’ strangling of the serpents while yet in the cradle¹³⁷; Apollo’s slaying of the Python as an infant¹³⁸; Huitzilopochtli’s defeat of Coyolxauhqui and the 400 warriors immediately upon his birth¹³⁹; Horus’ slaughter

¹³⁴IV:16:14

¹³⁵P. Gössmann, *Planetarium Babylonicum* (Rome, 1950), p. 82. On Nergal’s tendency to rise to the place of the setting sun, see E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 35.

¹³⁶M. Jastrow, “Sun and Saturn,” *Revue d’Assyriologie et d’Archaeologie Orientale* 7 (1909), p. 165.

¹³⁷On Heracles and the serpents, see Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 1:33.

¹³⁸On the combat of Apollo and Python, see the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, lines 300-304.

¹³⁹For Huitzilopochtli’s exploits, see H. B. Alexander, “Latin American Mythology,” in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (New York, 1964), p. 60.

of the dragon of chaos while still a babe¹⁴⁰; and Cuchulainn's many exploits while yet a mere boy.

More than one of Indra's epithets emphasize the god's youthful nature. The epithet *Yuvan*, for example, signifies "youth."¹⁴¹

It can be shown that most ancient war-gods bear a similar epithet. The Indian war-god of the Epic period, Skanda—expressly identified with the planet Mars¹⁴²—was also known by the epithet of *Kumara*, which connotes a "youth."¹⁴³ The Armenian war-god Vahagn was called *patenekik*, "youth" or "child."¹⁴⁴ The Tamil war-god Murukan, similarly, was known as *muruku*, the "Young One."¹⁴⁵ In the *Edda* the Norse Thor bears the epithet *sveinn*, signifying a "boy" or "youth."¹⁴⁶ The Egyptian Horus was known as the "youth."¹⁴⁷ The same motif can be found in the New World, where the Aztec war-god Tezcatlipoca was known as *Telpochtli*, "the Young Male."¹⁴⁸

In countless hymns Nergal is described as a "youth," a stock epithet of the war-god being *šul*, "youth."¹⁴⁹ In his detailed analysis of Nergal's cult, E. Weiher concluded that the concept of "youth" could not be divorced from the concept of "hero."¹⁵⁰ Why this is so he could not divine. As the astral identification of Nergal suggests, the logical basis for these widespread traditions would appear to be the fact that the planet-god accomplished some of his greatest exploits shortly after his mythical "birth."

¹⁴⁰On the deeds of Horus, see *The Coffin Texts*, IV:219ff.

¹⁴¹M. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 820.

¹⁴²S. Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities* (Lewiston, 1995), pp. 40-41. See also G. Santillana & H. von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1969), p. 157.

¹⁴³M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1872), p. 237.

¹⁴⁴R. Hewsen, "The Birth of Vahagn: An Armenian Vision of Celestial Catastrophe?," *Kronos* 3:1 (1977), p. 42.

¹⁴⁵D. Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths* (Princeton, 1980) p. 280.

¹⁴⁶J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 4 (Gloucester, 1976), p. 1348. There Grimm called attention to the incongruity of this epithet: "Thorr, imagined as a son (in the *Edda* he is either a youth or in the prime of manhood), does not accord well with the 'old great-grandfather'...Are we to suppose two Donars, then?"

¹⁴⁷T. Allen, *Horus in the Pyramid Texts* (Chicago, 1916), p. 19. The epithet *hrd nhn* means "the young child."

¹⁴⁸B. Brundage, *The Fifth Sun* (Norman, 1983), p. 87.

¹⁴⁹E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 16.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*

CUCHULAINN

As we have seen, Indra's status as a child-hero has remarkable parallels throughout the ancient world. A comparative study of such figures will go a long way towards illuminating the tumultuous infancy of Indra/Mars, alluded to again and again throughout the *Rig Veda*, albeit in an elusive manner. Inasmuch as Dumézil documented several parallels between the Vedic god and the Celtic hero Cuchulainn, a brief look at this fascinating figure is relevant at this point.

Variouly described as “a little immature lad,” “a young bit of a little boy,” and a “beardless, hairless boy,” Cuchulainn's prowess as a warrior manifested itself at a very early age. Indeed, the youthful hero first came to the attention of his elders when, upon invading the city of Emania from afar, he routed 150 members of the king's boy-corps at various sports.¹⁵¹

It was the slaying of a monstrous hound which guarded the kingdom of Culann which marked Cuchulainn's greatest accomplishment and earned him his name, which signifies “the hound of Culann.”¹⁵² This Herculean feat was accomplished at the tender young age of seven.

Cuchulainn was renowned for the furor which would periodically overtake him, compelling him to extraordinary feats of valor and strength. On one occasion, for example, the hero performed the proverbial “hero's salmon-leap,” which propelled him across the bridge of the Scathach's netherworld kingdom.¹⁵³ On another occasion, the heat engendered by the hero's furor is said to have melted the snow around him for a distance of thirty feet.¹⁵⁴

In addition to the generation of intense heat, it was reported that while undergoing his furor Cuchulainn “became crimson all over,” shook violently, and assumed a

¹⁵¹See E. Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), pp. 136-137.

¹⁵²Because of his slaying of the hound, Cuchulainn was bound to take the hound's place as guardian of Culann's lands, hence the name. The hero's original name was Setanta.

¹⁵³E. Hull, “The Wooing of Emer,” in *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 75. For evidence that Scathach's domain was actually the underworld see E. Hull, *op. cit.*, p. 291. This episode is closely paralleled by the leap of Finn across the threshold of the Queen of the netherworld in Gaelic tradition. See J. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 133.

¹⁵⁴E. Hull, “Tain Bo Cuailgne,” *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 160.

gigantic form. The epithet *Riastradh*, “The Distorted One,” commemorates the radical distortion of features which distinguished the Celtic hero at such times. The *Tain Bo Cuailgne* describes the hero’s furor as follows: “It was then that, as before, Cuchullin’s distortion came on, and he was filled with swelling and great fulness, like breath in a bladder, until he became a terrible, fearful, many-colored, wonderful Tuaig (giant).”¹⁵⁵

Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, in her analysis of the traditions surrounding Cuchulainn, notes that various Celtic words for “hero” likewise signify a “swelling.” Summarizing her findings, Sjoestedt writes:

“We see that all the words for ‘hero’ express the notions of fury, ardour, tumescence, speed. The hero is the furious one, possessed of his own tumultuous and blazing energy.”¹⁵⁶

Yet if the child-hero’s furor aided him in the defense of the Irish borders, it also inspired him to commit numerous excesses, the frenzied slaughter of hundreds of men accompanying such outbursts on more than one occasion. A leading scholar of Celtic lore offered the following observation: “Now when Cuchulainn was distorted with anger and battlefury, he became gigantic in size, and made no distinction between friends or foes, but felled all before and behind equally.”¹⁵⁷

How are we to understand such peculiar traditions? Why would Celtic bards associate Cuchulainn—according to Sjoestedt the very “model of human conduct”—with indiscriminate slaughter? And what is the objective basis for the bizarre furor which distinguished the youthful hero?

Dumezil suggested that the myth of Cuchulainn’s distortion commemorated certain rites of initiation in which the warrior’s furor was intentionally aroused, whether through isolation, drugs, mutilation, deprivation, or some other mood-altering technique.¹⁵⁸ No doubt there is some basis for drawing these comparisons.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹⁵⁶M. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 75.

¹⁵⁷J. Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom* (London, 1898), p. 439

¹⁵⁸G. Dumezil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 135-137.

Unaddressed by Dumézil, however, is the question from whence derives the inspiration for the rituals themselves?

If we are to hold true to our thesis that the child-hero represents the planet Mars, we must seek the explanation of his strange furor—and of the rituals which sought to commemorate and humanize the phenomenon—in the ancient appearance of that planet. The emphasis on Cuchulainn’s crimson color, explicitly coupled with the ability to swell and assume a gigantic form, must recall the sudden swelling of the ruddy-colored Indra. As we will document in subsequent chapters, this swelling appears to represent an archetypal motif associated with the warrior-hero.

Recall further that it is in the cults of such gods as the Akkadian Erra/Nergal, Greek Ares, and Latin Mars that one meets with this strange berserker-like furor, where death is dealt out with an indiscriminate zest. In the *Poem of Erra*, for example, the god himself is made to announce:

“Like a scorcher of the earth, I slew indiscriminately good and evil. One would not snatch a carcass from the jaws of a ravening lion, So too no one can reason where one is in a frenzy.”¹⁵⁹

Ares, the god inherent in the savagery of war and battle, was invoked by Homer as “the manslaughtering, bloodstained stormer of walls.”¹⁶⁰ Ares’ demeanor was typically described by such epithets as *lyssa*, signifying “martial rage, raving, frenzy,” and *mania*, signifying “madness, frenzy.”¹⁶¹ His propensity for fighting first for one side, then for the other, earned him the epithet *alloprousallos*, “fickle.”¹⁶²

The Vedic war-god was likewise accorded a capricious nature, given to dealing out death and destruction at random. Oertel enumerates various examples of Indra’s

¹⁵⁹Translated in B. Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, 1995), pp. 160-161.

¹⁶⁰*Iliad* 5:31

¹⁶¹Sauer, “Ares,” *RE* (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), col. 658. See also H. Liddell & R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 909, 920. The word *lyssa* translates literally as “wolf’s madness,” and recalls the lupine nature so often ascribed to the Martian hero. Classic examples include Apollo *Lykeios*, Mars, and Lykurgos. See E. Cochrane, “Apollo and the Planet Mars,” *Aeon* I:1 (1988), pp. 58-59.

¹⁶²*Iliad* 5:831, 889. See also H. Liddell & R. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 66. Significantly, this word is said to be derived from the root *allomai*, signifying “to spring, leap, or bound.” This propensity for leaping has now been observed in the cult of Ares, Cuchulainn, Vahagn, and Indra. Suffice it to say that it forms an archetypal characteristic of the Martian hero.

bad faith, noting that the *Rig Veda* ascribed a fickle nature to the war-god: “It seems evident that such legends as these form the background for an occasional general allusion to Indra’s fickleness like RV 6, 47, 16; 17...‘wont to help on now the one now the other...he turneth away from his old friends and, changing, goeth with new ones.’”¹⁶³

Nor is it without interest, given our identification of Indra with the red planet, that Mars was ascribed a fickle nature in Indian astronomical lore.¹⁶⁴

The Latin god Mars was virtually synonymous with the rage and fury of war.¹⁶⁵ A frequent epithet coupled with Mars is *saevio*, “to rage, be fierce, vent one’s rage.”¹⁶⁶ As Dumezil observed, however, it is the epithet *caecus*, “blind,” which best captures the essence of the god:

“The ambiguous character of Mars, when he breaks loose on the field of battle, accounts for the epithet *caecus* given him by the poets. At a certain stage of furor, he abandons himself to his nature, destroying friend as well as foe...By virtue of these very qualities of furor and harshness, Mars is the surest bulwark of Rome against every aggressor.”¹⁶⁷

It is doubtless no coincidence that this description of Mars is equally applicable to the Celtic Cuchulainn. Cuchulainn, too, was equipped with the epithet blind, an ancient kenning stating simply “Cuchulainn the Blind.”¹⁶⁸

Fundamental to the blindness accorded the Latin war-god and Celtic hero—indeed to the concept of blind rage itself, which so often characterizes the rampage of the warrior-hero—is the fact that the planet Mars itself was deemed to be blind! De Santillana and von Dechend drew attention to this particular point in *Hamlet’s Mill*:

“There is a peculiar blind aspect to Mars, insisted on in both Harranian and Mexican myths. It is even echoed in Vergil: ‘*caeco Marte*’.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³H. Oertel, “Brahmana Literature,” *JAOS* 19 (1897), pp. 119-120.

¹⁶⁴S. Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities* (Lewiston, 1995), p. 186. There, Markel cites Santhanam, *Brihat Parasara Hora*, 1:31-33 to the following effect: “Mars has blood-red eyes, is fickle-minded...given to anger...”

¹⁶⁵Relevant here, perhaps, is the Greek word *margos*, signifying “raging mad, furious.” H. Liddell & R. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 921.

¹⁶⁶F. Leverett, *Lexikon of the Latin Language* (Boston, 1850), p. 789.

¹⁶⁷G. Dumezil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1970), p. 229.

¹⁶⁸E. Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 93.

Comparative scholars have long drawn on Celtic lore in their analyses of ancient myth, reasoning that inasmuch as the Celts became isolated early on from other cultures and remained relatively free from Latin influence, there is a strong likelihood that their sacred traditions have preserved archaic elements. This suspicion is confirmed with regard to the mythus of the warrior-hero by numerous passages in Celtic manuscripts. Consider the following description of Cuchulainn's furor from the *Tain Bo Cuailgne*:

“Then it was that he suffered his *riastradh*, whereby he became fearsome and many-shaped, a marvelous and hitherto unknown being. All over him, from his crown to the ground, his flesh and every limb and joint...quivered as does a tree, yea, a bulrush in mid-current. Within his skin he put forth an unnatural effort of his body: his feet, his shins, and his knees shifted themselves and were behind him...Then his face underwent an extraordinary transformation: one eye became engulfed in his head so far that 'tis a question whether a wild heron could have got at it where it lay against his occiput, to drag it out upon the surface of his cheek; the other eye on the contrary protruded suddenly, and of itself so rested upon the cheek. His mouth was twisted awry until it met his ears. His lion's gnashings caused flashes of fire, each larger than the fleece of a three-year-old-wether, to steam from his throat into his mouth...Among the clouds over his head were visible showers and sparks of ruddy fire, which the seething of his savage wrath caused to mount up above him...His hero's paroxysm thrust itself out of his forehead longer and thicker than a warrior's whetstone. Taller, thicker, more rigid, longer than a ship's mast, was the upright jet of dusky blood which shot upwards from his scalp, and then was scattered to the four airts.”¹⁷⁰

Is it possible to conjecture that the Tain's eerie account of Cuchulainn's furor preserves a figurative description of the great cataclysms which shaped the physiognomy of the planet Mars? In the grotesque contortions of the hero is it possible to see the convulsions of the planet Mars as it participated in a spectacular game of tug-of-war writ large in the skies?¹⁷¹ Being the smallest of the planets

¹⁶⁹G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1977), p. 176.

¹⁷⁰E. Hull, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-175.

¹⁷¹According to Hall, in fact, it is difficult to account for the radical distortion of the northern face of Mars by any other means apart from its participation in the polar configuration associated with Saturn. See F. Hall, “Solar System Studies: Part Two,” *Aeon* I:4 (1988), pp. 29-31.

participating in the configuration associated with Saturn, Mars must have suffered significant distortion of its atmosphere and tidal crust as it moved up and down the axis, periodically approaching the Earth and then Venus, waxing large and then waning.¹⁷² The tremendous tidal forces that would likely have been generated by such a situation would almost certainly have precipitated the spontaneous eruption of volcanoes of colossal proportions. Evidence of volcanic activity, of course, is abundant on Mars, which has some of the most spectacular volcanoes yet discovered in this solar system.¹⁷³ Whether it was volcanic activity or some other visual phenomenon associated with the polar configuration which provided the inspiration for the imagery of Cuchulainn's furor, one thing is clear—the sacred traditions of the Celts do not have reference to a mortal hero:

“Among the clouds over his head were visible showers and sparks of ruddy fire, which the seething of his savage wrath caused to mount up above him...His hero's paroxysm thrust itself out of his forehead longer and thicker than a warrior's whetstone. Taller, thicker, more rigid, longer than a ship's mast, was the upright jet of dusky blood which shot upwards from his scalp, and then was scattered to the four airts.”

SAMSON AND HODER

There is no shortage of blind heroes, several of whom offer intriguing parallels to the Celtic Cuchulainn.¹⁷⁴ A familiar example of the strongman gone amok is the Biblical Samson, himself a blinded berserker identified with the planet Mars, a primary manifestation of whose furor was likewise a “hot anger” and terrible

¹⁷²The closest parallel in the current solar system, perhaps, is offered by the tidal distortion of Io as it is buffeted about between Jupiter and Europa/Ganymede. The result is tremendous surface tension resulting in the release of untold volumes of volcanic debris.

¹⁷³It stands to reason that if the thesis presented here is correct—that Mars recently orbited in close proximity to Saturn and experienced great cataclysms of thermal distress—remanent magnetism will most probably be found in the rocks and lava of Mars. The situation is analogous to Velikovsky's own expectations with regard to the possibility of remanent magnetism on the Moon. If anything one might expect more dramatic results upon Mars, given that planet's perturbations while under the influence of Saturn's relatively powerful magnetic field. For a discussion of this aspect of Velikovsky's work see R. Treash, “Magnetic Remanence in Lunar Rocks,” *Pensee* 2:2 (1972), pp. 21-23.

¹⁷⁴The blind hero, frequently a great sinner against the gods, is a universal mythological figure. In addition to Hoder and Samson, one might cite Lykurgos, Keresaspa, Oedipus, Paris, and Bellerophon as blind heroes whose crimes earn the wrath of the gods.

“shaking.”¹⁷⁵ Who has not been captivated as a youth by the image of Samson slaughtering a thousand Philistine warriors while wielding the jawbone of an ass?¹⁷⁶ Equally compelling is the image of Samson renting a lion with his bare hands¹⁷⁷, or casting off his prisoner’s bonds as if they were waxen flax when in the throes of his furor.¹⁷⁸

If the routing of the Philistines represents the pinnacle of the hero’s career, his life is elsewhere marred by various excesses. Included here are the destruction of the Philistine cornfields in the sadistic incident of the burning foxes, which resulted in the death of his wife and father-in-law¹⁷⁹; the carrying off of the gates of Gaza¹⁸⁰; and the unprovoked murder of the 30 men from Ashkelon.¹⁸¹ Such incidents led Frazer to call attention to the glaring incongruities in the Biblical account of Samson:

“From first to last his story is that of an utterly selfish and unscrupulous adventurer, swayed by gusts of fitful passion and indifferent to everything but the gratification of his momentary whims. It is only redeemed from the staleness and vulgarity of commonplace rascality by the elements of supernatural strength, headlong valor, and a certain grim humor which together elevate it into a sort of burlesque epic after the manner of Ariosto. But these features, while they lend piquancy to the tale of his exploits, hardly lessen the sense of incongruity which we experience on coming across the grotesque figure of this swaggering, hectoring bully side by side with the solemn effigies of saints and heroes in the Pantheon of Israel’s history.”¹⁸²

¹⁷⁵*Judges* 16:20ff. For the identification of Samson with the planet Mars, see G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, *op. cit.*, p. 176. Cuchulainn’s distortion of form, perhaps, finds a certain parallel in the “bowing” of Samson under the strain of the Philistine pillars.

¹⁷⁶*Judges* 15:15. Here it is interesting to note that some scholars have compared this episode to Indra’s wielding the bone of a horse’s head to defeat 99 vritras. *Rig Veda* VI:4:13 See A. Palmer, *The Samson-Saga* (New York, 1977), p. 123. See also G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, *op. cit.*, p. 393.

¹⁷⁷*Judges* 14:6.

¹⁷⁸*Judges* 15:14. Here a close parallel is offered by the image of the infant Apollo, who is said to have burst his swaddling bands when he first tasted the divine ambrosia. See the *Homeric Hymn to the Delian Apollo*, 123-130. Cuchulainn, similarly, is said to have thrown off his various layers of clothes in order to prevent their bursting while under the throes of his furor. Heracles likewise bursts his bonds when held captive by the Pharaoh. See Apollodorus, II.5.11.

¹⁷⁹*Judges* 15:4-6.

¹⁸⁰*Judges* 16:3.

¹⁸¹*Judges* 14:19.

¹⁸²J. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament* (New York, 1988), p. 270.

In addition to Samson one might point to the Norse hero Hoder, a blind god renowned for his tremendous strength. As Saxo describes the youthful hero, one is reminded of the precocious-prowess accorded Cuchulainn: “While a stripling, he excelled in strength of body all his foster-brethren and compeers.”¹⁸³ Although Saxo depicts Hoder as an historical figure and in a relatively positive light, a dark pall hangs over the hero’s name in more ancient accounts. Snorri describes the blind warrior as follows:

“Höd is one of the gods. He is blind. He is immensely strong too, but the gods would rather there were no need to mention his name, since his handiwork will long be remembered amongst gods and men.”¹⁸⁴

Like Heracles, Lykurgos and various other heroes, Hoder is said to have assaulted the gods themselves, on one occasion putting them to flight.¹⁸⁵ Yet it is his role in the death of the beloved god Balder and the ensuing Ragnorak which earned the warrior-hero eternal infamy. Snorri describes the former god as follows:

“Another son of Odin’s is called Baldr, and there is [nothing but] good to be told of him. He is the best of them and everyone sings his praises. He is so fair of face and bright that a splendour radiates from him...He is the wisest of the gods...He lives in a place in heaven called Breidablik; nothing impure can be there.”¹⁸⁶

Tricked by Loki, Hoder killed Balder by firing a missile made of mistletoe within the confines of a sacred assembly-ground:

“Now Höd was standing on the outer edge of the circle of men because he was blind. Loki asked him: ‘Why aren’t you throwing darts at Baldr?’ He replied: ‘Because I can’t see where Baldr is, and, another thing, I have no weapon.’ Then Loki said: ‘You go and do as the others are doing and show Baldr honour like the other men. I will show you where he is standing: throw this twig at him.’ Höd took the mistletoe and aimed at Baldr

¹⁸³Saxo Grammaticus, *The Danish History*, Vol. I (London, 1905), p. 177.

¹⁸⁴Quoted from G. Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 59.

¹⁸⁵This tradition is alluded to by various authors, including Saxo. See *The Danish History*, Vol. I (London, 1905), p. 184.

¹⁸⁶Quoted from G. Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 59.

as directed by Loki. The dart went straight through him and he fell dead to the ground. This was the greatest misfortune ever to befall gods and men.”¹⁸⁷

If we are to judge by the popularity of his name, Hoder was worshipped by various Teutonic peoples. As Grimm points out, the etymology of the god’s name marks him as a warrior *par excellence*, being related to various words signifying *belli impetus* and fervor:

“In these words, except where the meaning is merely intensified, the prevailing idea is plainly that of battle and strife, and the god or hero must have been thought of and honored as a warrior. Therefore [Hödr]...expressed phenomena of war; and he was imagined blind, because he dealt out at random good hap and ill.”¹⁸⁸

Among the numerous puzzles surrounding the figure of Hoder, none is greater than his appearance as a great judge. This apparent incongruity in the ancient traditions prompted the following observation from Rydberg:

“Hoder, who both in name and character appears to be a most violent and thoughtless person, seems to be the one least qualified for this calling (peace-judge). Nevertheless he performed the duties of an arbiter by the side of Balder and probably under his influence. Saxo speaks of him as judge.”¹⁸⁹

As disconcerting as is the image of the Scandinavian strongman as peace-judge, it is no more so than Samson’s appearance as a judge in Israelite lore. Of Samson’s tenure on the bench, Frazer offered the following quip:

“Among the grave judges of Israel the burly hero Samson cuts a strange figure. That he judged Israel for twenty years we are indeed informed by the sacred writer, but of the judgments which he delivered in his judicial character not one has been recorded, and if the tenor of his pronouncements can be inferred from the nature of his acts, we may be allowed to doubt whether he particularly adorned the bench of justice.”¹⁹⁰

Here, too, the bizarre association of the warrior-hero with judgeship—far from muddying the waters—conforms to an archetypal pattern. Gilgamesh also, as we have seen, was described as a judge. An ancient text invokes the hero as follows:

¹⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁸⁸J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 1 (Gloucester, 1976), p. 223.

¹⁸⁹V. Rydberg, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 3 (London, 1907), p. 889.

¹⁹⁰J. Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

“Gilgamesh, perfect king, [judge of the Annunaki], wise prince...ruler of the earth...Thou art the judge, like a god who perceivest (everything). Thou standest in the underworld (and) givest final decision. Thy judgment is not changed, [thy] word is not forgotten.”¹⁹¹

Judgeship is also associated with many of the gods we have identified as personifications of the planet Mars. Nergal, as we have seen, was represented as the judge of the underworld.¹⁹² Dedications to the Latin war-god found in ancient Germanic regions invoke him as Mars *Thingsus*, god of the judicial assembly.¹⁹³ The temple of Apollo *Lykeios* at Athens, likewise, originally served as a court of law.¹⁹⁴ Consider also the intimate association of the Greek war-god with the Areopagus, “the hill of Ares” near the Athenian Acropolis upon which was held the highest judicial court.¹⁹⁵ Shu, similarly, reigned over the Ennead, the court of justice in Egyptian mythology.¹⁹⁶

In Babylonian texts, the planet Mars is invoked as the “star of judgment of the fate of the dead.”¹⁹⁷ Similar ideas prevailed in ancient China, where the red planet was known as “Bringer of Justice” and represented as a judge.¹⁹⁸

THE SHAKER OF HEAVEN

In the spectacle of Samson pulling down the pillars of Dagon, “shaking” while in the throes of his furor, it is possible to recognize the widespread theme of the warrior-hero shaking the foundations of heaven. Nergal, for example, according to various ancient hymns, is said to have once shook the world out of joint.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹¹A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1970), p. 5.

¹⁹²E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁹³G. Turville-Petrie, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London, 1964), p. 181. See also the discussion of G. Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna* (New York, 1988), pp. 125-126.

¹⁹⁴D. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-god* (McLean, 1991), p. 11.

¹⁹⁵Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 681ff. “Here to all time for Aegeus’ Attic host Shall stand this council-court of judges sworn, Here the tribunal, set on Ares’ Hill.”

¹⁹⁶Various passages in the *Coffin Texts* celebrate this aspect of the god: “I judge the entourage who are about the shrine.” See CT 1:391.

¹⁹⁷Quoted from S. Langdon, “Semitic Mythology,” in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (New York, 1964), p. 147.

¹⁹⁸G. Schlegel, *Uranographie Chinoise* (La Haye, 1875), p. 627.

¹⁹⁹J. Bollenrucher, *Gebete und Hymnen an Nergal* (Leipzig, 1904), p. 9.

Yet it is the Vedic war-god Indra who offers the most obvious example of this theme. Vedic hymns celebrate Indra as follows: “The ridges of the lofty heaven thou madest shake...”²⁰⁰ Indra is elsewhere invoked as the “Shaker of things firm.”²⁰¹ A similar passage is the following: “The Shaker conquers or slays in this way or that.”²⁰²

Again and again, Indra is described as shaking the foundations of heaven and earth:

“Indra with might shook earth and her foundation as the wind stirs the water with its fury.”²⁰³

“Through fear of thee, O Indra, all the regions of earth, tho naught may move them, shake and tremble.”²⁰⁴

“When he, yea, he, comes forth the firmset mountains and the whole heaven and earth, tremble for terror.”²⁰⁵

Yet another hymn recalls the commotion caused by Indra’s birth: “Thou art the Mighty One; when born, O Indra, with power thou terrifiedst earth and heaven; When, in their fear of thee, all firm-set mountains and monstrous creatures shook like dust before thee.”²⁰⁶

In the *Rig Veda* Indra’s stature as a “shaker” coalesces with his function as a storm-god. If mighty Indra shakes his fiery golden beard, it is a sign of “rain”:

“Shaking his beard with might he hath arisen, casting his weapons forth and dealing bounties...With him too is this rain of his that comes like herds: Indra throws drops of moisture on his yellow beard.”²⁰⁷

In a remarkable piece of scholarship, Schröder documented that this Vedic vignette has a close homologue in Norse traditions, where the red beard of Thor was a veritable icon. When the god was angry he blew into his beard and thunder could be

²⁰⁰I:54:4

²⁰¹V:18:5

²⁰²V:35:5

²⁰³IV:19:3

²⁰⁴V:34:5

²⁰⁵I:61:14

²⁰⁶I:63:1

²⁰⁷X:23:1,4.

heard.²⁰⁸ In the Norse poem *Thrymskvida*, Thor is represented as violently shaking his red beard and hair upon waking: “Wroth was he then, beard he took to bristling, hair to tossing.”²⁰⁹

As Schröder noted, the Old Norse word for the shaking of Thor’s beard, *dyja*, is apparently the same as that employed above in the Vedic account of Indra’s beard—Sanskrit *dhu*, “to shake.”²¹⁰ The meanings inherent in these words and their Indo-European cognates include “to rage, rave, storm, vibrate,” and are in perfect agreement with the stormy character typically accorded the warrior-hero. The fact that Norse poets employed the same language in their oral tales as the poets of the *Rig Veda*—despite the fact that the respective peoples had diverged from a common ancestor several thousand years previously—is ample proof of the power and longevity of the mythical imagery inspired by cataclysmic events.

²⁰⁸See the discussion in J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. I (Gloucester, 1976), p. 177.

²⁰⁹Strophe I. Quoted in J. Grimm, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

²¹⁰F. Schröder, “Indra, Thor und Herakles,” *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 76 (1957), p. 41. M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1872), p. 457. See also J. de Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden, 1977), p. 89.