Aśvamedha - A Vedic horse sacrifice

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The article investigates the ancient Vedic ritual of horse immolation, known as Aśvamedha. The ritual spans in time from a dawn of Hindu history to the early modern times. It explores its origins, and its cultural and social functions. As there is evidence that horses sacrifice was known among the Romans, Celts, Scythians, Slavs and other Indo-European people the paper examines possible common conceptual origin of these and similar rites.

Introduction

Aśvamedha - the sacrificial killing of a horse was one of the four most important rites in ancient Vedic tradition. The other three were: *Agnikitya* -building of a fire altar, Rajasuya - royal inauguration, Vajāpeya - a soma sacrifice.[1] The major historical source for *Aśvamedha is Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* compiled around 900-700 B.C.E. It is a collection of ancient Indian hymns and ritual formulas providing a vivid and lengthy description of this ancient rite. But it is worth remembering, that the ritual of horse immolation, hymns and religious formulas recorded in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* are much older than the written sources themselves, and go well back into second millennium B.C.E. The term is first mentioned in the oldest Indian written source, *Ṛg Veda*, in the hymn devoted to Indra.[2] From the context of the text, it seems that the term *Aśvamedha* refers to a person. Nevertheless, as the term literally means "horse sacrifice", it is evidence for antiquity of the ritual. On the other hand, there is evidence that it was performed as late as the twelfth century C.E. Although, no doubt some of its meaning, symbolism and elements must have changed over time. Nevertheless, the survival of this ancient tradition for so long is indeed impressive. The importance of this ritual is clearly acknowledged in Śatapatha *Brāhmaṇa*.[3] In fact in some periods it might have been the most important rite, far superior to the others.

It was a royal ritual to assure the prosperity and good fortune of the king and his kingdom. The associated ceremonies and rites were complex, elaborate rituals that lasted for a full year. Its culmination was the sacrifice of a horse, where the king was the sacrificer.[4] No doubt it was also a military celebration as stated: "*Aśvamedha* is the *kṣatriyā's* sacrifice".[5] At the same time the ritual expresses universal characteristics by its close as-

[1] SB, Book VI.6.1.1.
[2] RV VIII.57.
[3] SB, Book VI.6.1.1.
[4] For the preparations and the rite of Aśvamedha, see: SB, Book XIII.
[5] ibid., XII.4.1.

sociation with Prajāpati - the lord of creation. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* says that Prajāpati assigned other sacrifices to the other gods, but Aśvamedha to himself.[6] In another passage it says, "*Aśvamedha* is Prajāpati",[7] and its holistic, universal and cosmic significance is also expressed by the phrase "*Aśvamedha* is everything".[8]

The *Aśvamedha* as described in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* is very complex ritual full of symbolism. Furthermore, at first appearance the sources may create the impression of being inconsistent in their association of various deities, symbols and meanings with the ritual. This initial impression of inconsistency may, to a large extent, be attributed to the fact that ancient Indian sources were a compilation of various hymns, chants and sacred formulas preserved as an oral tradition, and often from different times and regions. Hence the analysis of the *Aśvamedha* poses serious difficulties due to the complexity of this symbolism-laden ritual. In this context, it is apparent that there is no single or simple explanation for its meaning and symbolism. The following work will address only three aspects of the *Aśvamedha*. That is, a universal religious dimension, political meanings and implications, and its common Indo-European background.

Universalist Aspects

With *Aśvamedha* representing military, royal and pan-Indian aspects, it was only one step from acquiring a Universalist and cosmologic dimension. Religious conceptual monism as an integral part of Indian culture made this even easier to be incorporated into the ritual. Here again it is hard to determine when this development took place. But it appears to be reasonable to assume that it must have occurred before the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* was compiled.

This new dimension of the rite could be understood only in the context of the Indian concept of kingship. Like among other Indo-Europeans, the tribal assembly known as *samiti* elected Indian leaders from among the most prominent people. In those earliest times the leader was a military commander, and his authority was limited to the duration of the conflict. In this context, the Indian kingship that evolved from this tribal leadership, retained many military aspects. In fact kingship was perceived as the extension of a warrior class, *kṣatriyā*.[9] This background fashioned the way that Indian kingship developed during the later Vedic times. In those early kingdoms, although kingship became hereditary, certain symbolic elements of the old elective system were retained.[10] Kings could be deposed; and their accession had to be confirmed by the assembly. However, by that time, the assembly, for practical reasons, must have included only the prominent people rather than the entire general populace.[11] At the same time, the common background of the kingship facilitated the emergence of the view that the state is a single organism, where the king as well as all the social classes interact with each other in reciprocal manner.[12] In this context, the king was expected to fulfil certain obligations towards his people and

[6] ibid., XIII.2.1.
[7] ibid., XIII.2.2.
[8] ibid., XIII.4.1.
[9] S.D. Singh, "Monarchy in the Vedic Age", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 1989, p. 340.
[10] K.P. Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, p. 186.
[11] election of kings: K.P. Jayaswal, p. 187.
[12] K.P. Jayaswal, p. 188.

domain.[13] A good and just king could assure the well-being of his subjects by up-keeping old traditions and performing relevant rites.[14] It was believed that a bad king would bring calamity and the demise of his subjects.[15] The king possessed some divine attributes and was identified with gods, but rather through the virtue and the nature of his function. A sort of higher degree of divinity than that of his subjects in a monistic mould of reality resulted from the royal inauguration ceremonies; and was maintained through proper the performance of rites and rituals. In this context, Indian kingship remained basically secular. It was a contract between the king and his subjects.[16]

In such a setting, the performance and strict observance of the ritual procedure of sacrifice was of utmost importance. Hence, the *Aśvamedha*, and as a matter of fact many other rituals, acquired a universal dimension and became a strong cohesive socio-political element. The evidence in this respect is overwhelming. For example, during the rite three knives were used for dismembering the horse. They were made of gold, copper and iron. Those three knives clearly symbolized the division of society into royalty, nobility and peasantry.[17]

Furthermore, there is no surprise that with the specific nature of Indian kingship, and perception of the state as a mini-universe, the *Aśvamedha* also became a rite, which helped maintain not only the social order and well being of the state, but also the cosmic order. These cosmologic and universal elements of the rite are clear from the numerous references, in the sources, linking the horse and its sacrifice with the god Prajāpati, the "lord of creation".[18] The first reference to this deity is most likely a hymn from *Ṛg Veda*, which deals with creation. There, an un-named deity creates the universe from the "Golden Embryo".[19] Although Prajāpati is not mentioned by name, the story's similarities with later sources suggest that the hymn referred to Prajāpati.[20] Whatever the case, Prajāpati appears in the *Ṛg Veda* to be a deity of relatively minor importance in comparison with Varuṇa, Mitra, Indra, Agni or Sūrya. Hence the ascendancy of Prajāpati can be attributed to the later Brahmanic tradition, where for example, in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, he is treated as a supreme deity.[21] He is credited with the invention of all the sacrifices and with being the first to perform the horse-sacrifice.[22] It appears that in the Brahmanic period Prajāpati was conceptually fused with the primordial man Puruṣa.[23] Originally, according to *Ṛg Veda*, he was a cosmic giant who was dismembered by the gods. The Universe as well as humanity was then created from his bodily parts.[24] The Indians of the Vedic period saw Puruṣa as the ultimate sacrificial victim whose sacrifice was a requirement for the act of creation. In this new dimension of the rite, the sacrificial horse becomes an incarnation

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[13] S.D. Singh, pp. 341-342; and also in B. Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice*, p. 12.

[14] TS, IV.4.12; and in: J. Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View*, p. 69.

[15] J. Gonda, p. 3.

[16] L. Dumond, *Religion/Politics and History in India* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1970), pp. 71, 73.

[17] SB, XIII.2.2.

[18] TS, V.5.23 and SB, XIII.2.2.

[19] RV, 10.121.

[20] W.D. O'Flaherty in RV, pp.26-27.

[21] A.B. Keith in TS, pp. cxxvi & cxxix.

[22] J. Gonda, *Prajāpati's relations with Brahman*, Bṛhaspati and Brahmā (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1989), p. 25.

[23] A.B.Keith in TS, p. cxxxiv.

[24] RV, 10.90.

of the god Prajāpati.[25] And consequently the horse-Prajāpati is voluntarily sacrificed to himself. However, the focus of the sacrifice, like in the immolation of Puruṣa, is not on the death of the horse, but on the forces released during the sacrifice: the forces that rejuvenate and renew the cosmic order. On the human level, as it has already been stated, a properly performed sacrifice renews and secures social order and prosperity.[26]

It is also worth noting that the hymns recited during the horse sacrifice, and recorded in *Taittirīya Samhitā*, are clear indications of the universal and cosmological nature of the rite. The continuous hailing of endless objects and aspects of life, as well as hailing the opposite extremes of things or phenomena leave no doubt about the monistic and holistic nature of the ritual.[27] Moreover, the other associated hymn specifically compares the horse with the Universe.[28] In addition, the part of *Aśvamedha* which involves dismembering of the horse, also resembles the sacrifice of Puruṣa. This part of the ceremony is very complex and follows precise rules and instructions, being constantly overlooked by a priest known as *Hotṛ*, the Invoker. He, during the dismembering of the horse, invokes a multitude of deities; and different parts of the body are assigned and offered to particular deities.[29]

Therefore, we may conclude that these universal aspects of the rite correspond to the ancient Indian view of kingship with all its privileges and social responsibilities. Where the kingdom is viewed as a micro-Universe, and proper performance of the ritual assures not only the stability and continuity of the state, but also maintains the cosmic order.

Political Aspects

When the ancient Indian society crossed small tribal boundaries and evolved into larger kingdoms, the ritual acquired a new element and meaning. As kings replaced tribal leaders, the ritual shifted to be more and more a celebration of a royal power as, for example, the ritual was seen as one that "bestows light on royal office".[30] Some other elements also changed, and for example the queens replaced wives of the leader; but the part played by them remained basically the same. Nonetheless, it still retained its strong military aspects.[31] The symbiosis of warfare and royalty is clear from one of the hymns recited during the *Aśvamedha* where a divinity is asked for military skills and proves for the king.[32]

The model for an Indian king is probably best described in the Hindu epic of *Mahābhārata*. Where a legendary primordial king, Pāthu, is a victorious warrior, a mighty conqueror, but also a just provider and protector for his people.[33] As this notion was widely accepted in Indian society, the kings and emperors were expected to expand their domains. This idea was expressed in the term *digvijaya*, meaning conquest in all directions.[34]

Hence, at least from the middle Vedic times, this ideal found strong reflection in *Aśvamedha*. As a part of preparation for the sacrifice, the horse was let loose to wander for

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[25]SB, XIII.2.2; also in TS, V.3.2 & V.3.7.

[26] J.E. Talley, *Runes, Mandrakes and Gallows*, pp. 163-164.

[27] TS, VII.5.11 -12.

[28] TS, VII.5.25.

[29] TS, V.7.11-13.

[30] SB, XIII.2.2.

[31] SB, XIII.1.6.

[32] S.D. Singh, *Ancient Indian Warfare* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965), p. 140.

[33] J. Gonda, p. 129.

[34] J. Gonda, pp. 101, 104; and in: S.D. Singh, *Ancient Indian Warfare*, pp, 154,170.

a year, but was also guarded by the warriors. If the horse entered a foreign land, the king could make territorial claims against the ruler of that land.[35] It is not difficult to imagine that this could have been easily manipulated. For many Indian kings, a "wandering horse" must have been a convenient way to sanctify and legitimise conquest and expansion. Consequently, the *Aśvamedha* itself became a celebration and manifestation of the royal power of successful and victorious rulers. The sacrificer in real or symbolic terms was the ruler himself. It was no doubt a symbolic and prestigious celebration of royal power, as a number of Indian kings over time performed the sacrifice. In the Vedic period it became an elite rite with strong royal aspects and symbolism.[36] The ritual has been performed since then until modern times. Its popularity and meaning varied from time to time.[37] The ritual continued to be popular among many later Indian rulers. Members of the Bhāradiva dynasty, of the third century C.E., are credited with performing ten *Aśvamedhas*.[38] The ritual was extremely popular among the kings of southern India; and there is evidence of the rite being performed there in the early fourth century C.E.[39]

Summarising this part, we can say that the Aśvamedha sacrifice, while retaining most of its military aspects, evolved toward becoming a predominantly royal rite. The royal, expansionist and pan-Indian aspects of the ritual corresponded to the evolution of the Indian concept of kingship, to be discussed in more detail in the following section. It is worth noting that that *Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra*, a later Vedic source, stated that: "A king of all the land may perform the *Aśvamedha*".[40] Therefore, it is evident that only the strong, powerful and successful monarchs, who also conquered other lands, performed the ritual. It is also clear that Aśvamedha was an important element in legitimising territorial expansion and maintaining the monarch's prestige.[41]

Indo-European Background

As already mentioned, there is no doubt that the concept of horse sacrifice is older than available written sources. It is worth noting, that horse sacrifice is mentioned on a number of occasions in *Ŗg Veda* and *Atharva Veda*, written down around 1500-1200 B.C.E, but the term *Aśvamedha* itself was used only once in *Atharva Veda*.[42] Hence the immolation of the horse as described in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* must have been the product of a long evolution and must have already represented an amalgamation and accumulation of various concepts, rites and traditions. It has to be remembered that non-Dravidian languages of the Indian sub-continent belong to the Indo-European family of languages, that evolved from closely related Bronze Age dialects collectively termed Proto-Indo-European.[43] On the premise of this common linguistic background it could be assumed that the Indo-European people should also share many cultural elements, and among them some common conceptual religious aspects.

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[35] SB, XIII.1.6.
[36] P. Banerjee, *Early Indian Religion*, p. 23.
[37] P. Banerjee, p. 119.
[38] P. Banerjee, p. 129.
[39] P. Banerjee, pp. 130-131.
[40] A. B. Keith in TS, p. cxxxii.
[41] J. Gonda, p. 110.
[42] AV, XI.VII.7.
[43] M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs* (London: Thames And Hudson, 1971), p. 16.

So, in this context, by the analysis and cross-examination of various Indo-European rituals involving a horse sacrifice some common elements of the Indo-European ritual could be revealed. In turn, this will provide us with core elements of the ancient Indian *Aśvamedha*, and at the same time a framework for further analysis.

The military aspects of this Indian rite are clear from previously cited references to the god Indra and the warrior class *kṣatriyā*. It is worth noting that the following first three verses of an ancient *Ṛg Vedic* hymn devoted to Viśvedevas were recited during the *Aśvamedha sacrifice*[44]:

We will, with Indra and all Gods to aid us, bring these existing worlds into subjection. Our sacrifice, our bodies, and our offspring, let Indra form together with Ādityas. With the Ādityas, with the band of Maruts, may Indra be protector of our bodies.[45]

There are numerous other hymns recited at different stages of the ritual with a strong military context, full of praise for mighty and brave warriors.[46]

The object of sacrifice, the horse, also points in the same direction. It was an animal associated with war not only among the ancient Indians, but all the other Indo-European peoples. The horse was not a beast of burden pulling cartloads or ploughs. Oxen did this. Horses were expensive and valuable military resources to be ridden, or yoked to war-chariots. It therefore comes as no surprise that they were regarded by ancient Indians as the highest animal.[47]

An interesting insight into the ritual comes from the other side of the world, and from different times. In ancient Rome the sacrificial killing of a horse was known as *October Equus* - an October Horse. In many respects this ritual conceptually resembles its Indian counterpart. The ritual is well attested in writings of Plutarch, Polybius, Paulus and Festus. It was clearly associated with warriors and the warrior deity - Mars, as the sacrifice takes place on the "Field of Mars". After a mock battle the horse was killed with a javelin. Like in India, the sacrificed horse was a stallion that won a chariot race. According to Polybius, a second century B.C.E. Roman historian, it was also performed in ancient Rome before war or major battles. Moreover, it had a royal aspect also. As a part of the ritual, two groups of people fought a mock battle for the head of the sacrificed animal. One group symbolically representing the local people tried to place the horse's head on the walls of Regia, while the others, representing the alien people, tried to prevent it. At the same time the bleeding tail was carried to Regia itself to the altar with a royal hearth.[48]

Furthermore, in the Indian ritual, three queens marked the body of the animal to be sacrificed with *ghee* into three parts. At the same time, while symbolically dividing the horse's body into front, middle and rear sections, they were invoking the sky, atmosphere and the Earth, respectively. This also seems to be the most ancient element of the rite. According to *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, it was done to secure spiritual and physical strength and material well being, respectively, for the king.[49] There are some conceptual similarities in

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[44] R.T.H. Griffith, in RV p. 596n.

[45] RV X.CLVII.

[46] TS, IV.6.6 & IV.6.8.

[47] Horse as a war animal: B. Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 3, 156, and as a highest animal: TS, V.4.12.

[48] Equus October ceremony: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion* (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1970), vol 1, pp. 215-216 & 226-227. and the horse being a race winner India - RV I.162 & 163 and SB, XIII.1.6.

[49] SB XIII.7.6.

the Roman sacrifice, where the horse's head and tail are severed. Although in the Latin version it has a slightly different meaning, it still appears to be a conceptual division of the immolated animal into three parts. In this respect, it appears that both Indian and Roman traditions preserved the original Indo-European idea. It is worth noting that the common Indo-European worldview shared a tri-partite functional division. The first function is sacred power and knowledge. The second is associated with war. Finally, the third function covers economic activities, such as agriculture, animal husbandry and others.[50] Moreover, this spiritual system is reflected in an organised social hierarchy, which found its greatest expression in the original class division of India. There, society was divided into: the priestly class of *brāhmaṇa*; the warriors - *kṣatriyā*; and the farmers - *Vaiśya*.[51] In a similar fashion, the functions of principal deities were divided into three main spheres of sovereignty, warfare and economic activities.[52]

There is also evidence from other parts of Europe. In the twelfth century Ireland, in Kenelcunill, in Ulster province, during the inauguration of a newly elected king, a white mare was sacrificially killed. It was a communal event in which a large number of people participated. According to Giraldus Cambrensis the king-elect had intercourse with the mare. Whether the intercourse was real or symbolic is hard to determine. The sacrificial mare was killed afterwards, cooked and some parts ritually consumed by the king and the gathered people.[53] It is worth noting that in India, the sacrificial horse was also cooked and ritually eaten. It is generally accepted that the priest participating in the sacrifice consumed it.[54] However, the passage in the *Ṛg Veda* is not clear and it may be interpreted to mean that other participants ate it.

The Irish ritual shows close parallels with the Indian tradition, in which the wives of the king also participated. As a part of the ritual, one of the queens lay down next to the freshly killed animal.[55] This symbolic sexual union with the animal was performed to assure the fertility and well being of the king, his people and the entire domain. These sexual connotations emphasise the perpetuation of life through the release of life-giving forces at the moment of ritual death of the sacrificial animal. It is worth noting that in India as a part of preparation, the horse was prevented from intercourse with mares to gather and strengthen the same life-giving forces.[56] It appears that this element of the ritual was lost in Roman tradition. Among the Celts the fertility elements were retained, but twisted around, where the sacrificial horse was a mare; and a king instead of queens was involved in the symbolic or real intercourse with the mare.

Recently professor Andrej Pleterski pointed out that a similar ritual might have existed among the ancient Hittites. *The Code of the Nesilim*, written between 1650-1500 BCE, stated that intercourse with animals such as dogs, pigs or cows should be punished by death,

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[50] G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 192-195.

[51] Dumézil, G., *Gods of Ancient Northmen* (Berkley: California University Press, 1973), p. 16.

[52] G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, pp. 161, 279: also in: G.J. Larson, *Myth in Indo- European Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 10.

[53] Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topogrphia Hibernia*, in J.J. O'Meara trans. *The History and Topography of Ireland* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities press, Inc., 1982), III.102.

[54] RV I.162.5.,and O'Flaherty interpretation in: W.D. O'Flaherty in RV, p. 92n.

[55] J. Gonda, pp. 141-142.

[56] J.E. Talley, 'Runes, Mandrakes and Gallows', in G.J. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 164.

but such encounters with horses or mules should go unpunished.[57] This strange distinction definitely reflects a different perception of horses, and suggest such acts took place between the Hittites and horses. If the Hittites practiced Aśvamedha-like rituals in the past, it would explain such an oddity in the later law code. Even if such a ritual was long abandoned and forgotten by 1650-1500 BCE, it could still affect the perception of intercourse with a horse in the Hittite tradition. This could easily find reflection in their law and moral code.

Other Indo-European peoples also preserved the tradition. According to ancient Greek historian Herodotus, the Scythians performed a horse sacrifice to a number of deities, including the sun god. However, the most important sacrifice appears to be to their war god of unknown name, who was called Ares by Herodotus. Like in India, the horse was smothered.[58]

From the Eastern Slavs also comes evidence for horse sacrifice. According to the work of 19th century Russian ethnographer Sergei Maksimov, at the outbreak of the cattle disease peasants carrying icon of Saint Blasius would push horse, and also a sheep and lamb, together with sick animal, into ravine or ditch. The animals were stoned and to death and then burnt. The ritual was reported in modern times, and was corrupted to the extent that the ancient pre-Christian elements are hard to distinguish.[59] However, the antiquity of the rite is evident. The association with Saint Blasius points to the Slavic deity of Volos (sometime called Veles).[60] The position of Volos in Slavic religion is controversial, but there is no doubt that he was one of the most important gods.[61] There is also evidence that pre-Christian Balts sacrificed horses, bulls and he-goats to their god Vélinas, who is sometimes also called Velnias or Vóls, no doubt a cognate deity with Slavic Volos.[62] Communal aspect of the ritual in the times of menance or threat, and sacrifice of most valuable animal points to a strong social cohesion function of the rite. An aspect clearly visible in more elaborated Vedic ritual. In Slavic and Baltic cases, who both were small tribal farmers, the ritual must have lost its military and political aspects over time. Nevertheless, a distant echo of common Indo-European tradition was preserved in the form of horse-sacrifice to one of the supreme deities.

In the light of all this evidence it can be assumed that the common Indo-European elements of the rite were as follows. The ritual had a strong and undeniable military aspect, and was primarily if not exclusively dedicated to the war deity - Indra in the Indian case. The horse had to be the finest one, and a winner of a chariot race. It was performed before military conflict to assure Indra's favour and victory over the enemy. As ancient warfare was conducted in summer time, it must have been performed most often in late spring or early summer. As Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa stated:

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[57] A. Pleterski, *Mitska stvarnost koroških knežjih kamnov* (Ljubljana: Slovenian Academy of Science, 1997), pp.39-40. *The Code of the Nesilim*, c. 1650-1500 BCE, Ancient History Sourcebook, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/1650nesilim.html

[58] Herodotus, *The Histories*, in A. De Sulincourt transl., & A.R.Burn ed. (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986), Book I.216. And to the War god: Ibid., Book IV.59-64.

[59] G. Alexinsky, ''Slavonic Mythology'', in P. Grimal, *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology* (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1983), p. 298.

[60] There is a general agreement between the scholars that the cult of Volos was replaced by that of St. Blasius. Some elements of pre-Christian cult were incorporated into Christianity after convertion of Kievan Rus: M.N. Tikhomirov, "The Origins of Christianity in Russia", *History*, Vol. XLIV, 1959, p. 204.

[61] A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1982), pp. 52, 112-114.

[62] M. Gimbutas, 'The Lithuanian God Velnias', in G.J. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 90.

for summer is a kṣatriyā's season and truly this-to wit, the Aśvamedha is the kṣatriyā's sacrifice.[63]

Warfare was always associated with leadership; and so was the ritual. In fact, in horse sacrifice, warfare and leadership were inseparable and inter-linked elements, and the sacrificer was a ruler. In its earliest times it was a tribal leader, and later a king. The involvement of the leader's wives, and symbolic intercourse with the sacrificial animal had a strong leadership and communal aspect. The meaning of this is clear in the context of the Indian concept of leadership. A leader, and in later times king, was responsible for the well being of his people, and the fertility of their land and cattle. Overall, the ancient society was perceived in organic terms as being an organism. The symbolic intercourse with the horse was a necessary rite to maintain the existing order and to assure prosperity of the entire society. It is very likely the cooked sacrificial animal was eaten communally, symbolising the unity of the people. Similar communal banquets and consumption of sacrificial animals are known from among many other Indo-European and non-Indo-European peoples.[64] Overall, it was a ritual to strengthen social bonds, assure military victory and well being of the community. The way of killing the animal was most likely smothering, a method preserved in Indian and Scythian tradition. On the other hand, it appears that originally a javelin might have been used as an implement. In ancient Roman tradition, the horse was speared to death; and there is some circumstantial evidence that the ancient Indians might have used the same way to kill their horse. One of the coins of the Gupta Empire, from around the fourth century C.E. depicts a horse by a sacrificial stake, while on the reverse a queen holds a sacrificial spear. A text on the coin reads: "*Aśvamedha-parākramah*", clearly linking the queen to the ritual.[65] Although the coin comes from relatively late times, the use of a javelin may be an echo of an ancient tradition, preserved locally, and revived again after the rise of the Guptas. Whatever the case, the spear as an implement of war seems appropriate for a common Indo-European military ritual.

One more issue remains an open question. In some Indian sources the horse was sometimes associated with Varuna,[66] and sometimes also sacrificed to this god.[67] Varuna was one of the supreme deities of the Vedic pantheon closely associated with heaven and the sky, deification of political and religious sovereignty, and the guardian of oath.[68] It has been postulated by some scholars that the horse was initially Varuna's sacrificial animal. This seems to be a reasonable assumption; taking into consideration that the sacrifice of the most important animal to a supreme deity is the logical thing to do. On the other hand, this view does not contradict the association of the Indo-European horse-sacrifice with a war deity, that is *Aśvamedha* with Indra in the Indian context. This is so, because the horse sacrifice to Varuna might belong to an even more ancient stratum of Indo-European beliefs,[69] that found a reflection in Baltic and Slavic horse-sacrifices to Vélinas and Volos respectively.

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[63] SB, XIII.4.1.

[64] The Eastern Slavs are known to retain pre-Christian custom of communal eating of the sacrificial animal well into the Christian era: E. Warner, *Heroes, Monsters and other Worlds from Russian Mythology* (London: Peter Lowe, Inc., 1985), pp. 15, 17.

[65] R.K. Mookerji, *The Gupta Empire* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973), p. 35.

[66] TS, II.3.12.1.

[67] SB, V.3.1.5 & VI.2.1.5.

[68] G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 199.

[69] A.B.Keith in TS, pp. cxxxvi-cxxxvii & cxxxix.

Summarising, the above analysis clearly shows that Indian Aśvamedha as described in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* preserved most of the common Indo-European elements of the ancient ritual. However, at the same time, the rite acquired a new dimension and meaning in accordance with local Indian socio-political and cultural developments. Finally, it has to be acknowledged that the above presented reconstruction is a partial one, and far from providing a full picture. Hence, it should be viewed as a broad framework for further analysis of this complex rite.

Conclusion

The evidence presented indicates that Indian horse sacrifice - *Aśvamedha*, as known from the Vedic period, evolved from a common Indo-European tradition. It was basically a military ritual, and the choice of a horse as the sacrificial animal clearly indicates the importance of the horse in Indo-European culture and warfare: a significant factor in the widespread expansion of Indo-European peoples. Many of the conceptual elements of the rite were preserved in religious cults among various Indo-European peoples. Over the millennia of separation and development under different conditions, and as a result of contact with other peoples and cultures, many aspects changed their meaning; some elements were added; some others abandoned.[70]

In the Indian context, during the Vedic times marked by the evolution of large kingdoms, the sacrifice became more royal in its nature. Nevertheless, it never lost its strong military connotations. With the emergence of the pan-Indian concept, the ritual acquired a new dimension. It became a rite legitimising and symbolising the expansionist and unification aspirations of many rulers. Furthermore, on many occasions it was a legitimation and manifestation of royal power, and served a prestigious purpose for the successful kings and emperors.

On the social level, the ritual was perceived as necessary to maintain social and political cohesion as well as the fertility and prosperity of the kingdom. In the context of the Indian notion of kingship, proper performance of the ritual was a royal responsibility. It also shows the common conceptual tri-partite division of the world and society.

Its evolution and the inclusion of a universal dimension could be demonstrated by the fact that in the *Ŗg Veda* only two animals were to be sacrificed, while in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* as many as fifteen different creatures are involved, each of them dedicated to a different deity, although, most likely not all were killed.[71] Moreover, the association of the *Aśvamedha* with Prajāpati shows the ideological culmination of the rite, reaching a high intellectual level. The ritual became an integral part of the cosmic order, where its proper performance was vital for the rejuvenation of cosmic forces and of the Universe itself.

Furthermore it has to be acknowledged, that although the ritual changed some meanings over time, and acquired new dimensions, its survival over the millennia is impressive, and indicates its vitality and importance in Indian tradition. This is clearly evident from the Gupta coins commemorating the performance of the *Aśvamedha* sacrifice, depicting the queen;[72] which brings to mind the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa's* description of the rite and the role kings' wives played during the sacrifice.[73]

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[70] B. Lincoln, Death, *War and Sacrifice*, p. 3.
[71] RV, I.162 and SB, XIII.2.2.
[72] R. K. Mookerji, *The Gupta Empire*, p. 35.
[73] SB, XIII.2.6.

Finally, it has to be admitted that the division of the ritual into three major stages: Indo-European, royal and universal, is an artificial historical construct. It does not claim to be a full explanation of the rite, but rather a working tool for a better understanding of the ritual, and a basic premise for further research and analysis.

Abbreviations

AV - *Atharva Veda*
RV - *Ṛg Veda*
SB – *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*
TS - *Taittirīya Samhitā*

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Aśvamedha - vedsko žrtvovanje konja
Roman Zaroff

Razprava kaže, da je Aśvamedha nastala kot plemenski obred in kot obred zgornjega družbenega razreda, pri čemer so bili močno poudarjeni vojaški in oblastni vidiki. Povezava istih družbeno-kulturnih sestavin z žrtvovanjem konja pri Rimljanih, Keltih in Skitih močno nakazuje, da je ta obred starodavno, skupno indoevropsko izročilo. Skozi čas in različne prostore se je razvijal tako, da je ustrezal različnim družbam in ljudstvom. Vendar je obred skozi čas in prostor obdržal svojo skupno indoevropsko konceptualno osnovo. Pri Slovanih in Baltih je obredno žrtvovanje konja manj izrazito, vendar vsekakor prisotno in povezano z božanstvom najvišje vrste. Slovani so ohranili družbene vidike obreda, katerega namen je bil vzdrževanje družbenih vezi ter rodovitnosti in blagostanja skupnosti. Če upoštevamo, da razprava sega skozi tisočletja in preko obširnih prostranstev, je treba priznati, da problema ne obdela do podrobnosti. Vendar pa odpira pot njegovim nadaljnjim in bolj podrobnim raziskavam.