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Indra-*kaví*

Ṛgvedic Lordship, Bovine Environment, and Onomatopoeic Poetry

ABSTRACT: The paper aims at illustrating the possible interconnection between Ṛgvedic poetry and the bovine environment in relation to which the proto-Vedic clan-based society ensured its own subsistence. Given that the protection of livestock was one of the functions attributed to chieftainship, especially during the phase of clan mobility (*yóga*), and that the figure of the proto-Vedic *kaví*, the so-called ‘sage poet,’ is correlated to the milieu of the lordship, it is most likely that the bovine imagery and rhetorical devices, particularly connected to sonority, stemmed precisely from that environment where the human and animal dimensions were symbiotically associated to ensure clan’s prosperity. Therefore, Ṛgvedic poetical expressions are not only the artful means to mark the liturgical language, but also a direct output of the expertise of the warrior-cowherd, identified especially with the mythological figure of Indra, who could, by way of sonorous enchanting of both, the livestock and the enemies, yoke the former and keep away the latter, guaranteeing subsistence to his own clan.

KEYWORDS: Ṛgvedic lordship, *vrātya* culture, bovine imagery, onomatopoeia, phonetical rhetorical devices

Introduction: Ṛgvedic poetry and bovine metaphor

The paper aims at probing possible interactions between Ṛgvedic poetry and the ecological context in which the Ṛgvedic hymns were composed and definitively collected, bearing in mind that such a form of textual canonization as carried out at least from the Middle Vedic Period onwards (Witzel 1995), in line with the emergence of the Kuru hegemony (1200–1000 BCE).¹ Ṛgvedic poetry is commonly considered a fruit of wisdom attributed to a category of sages traditionally called *ṛṣis* ‘seers,’ with roots in the Indo-Iranian tradition. Although it is ultimately a heritage of the Indo-European cultural complex, it may well have been influenced by the environmental context in which these cultures developed. In other words, one wonders whether Ṛgvedic poetry, that is the refined cultural product of the primordial *kavīs* who were endowed with poetical skills and inspired vision (*dhi*), may also be correlated to some material and environmental conditions of existence pertaining to the Vedic communities of the Old and Middle Vedic Period. In this sense, it is worth remembering that the subsistence of the proto-Vedic communities inhabiting the northwestern areas of the Indian subcontinent (Afghan mountains and Western Panjab) relied on a non-sedentary agro-pastoral economy: in fact, the alternation between temporary settlements (*kṣéma*) and mobility (*yóga*) was essential for rearing livestock, particularly cattle. Nonetheless, by the time of the Kuru hegemony (correlated especially to Eastern Panjab, Haryana and upper Doāb), an improved, more sedentary style of life had gradually come into being, based on the development of agricultural subsistence,² which mainly depended on village economy: this economic change was com-

¹ This research perspective has attracted scholarly interest only occasionally: cf. for example Lincoln’s work (1981) relied on the radical thesis that “culture is based in ecology” (Lincoln 1981: 173); Jamison’s article (1993), centred on the interpretation of the Ṛgvedic hymn 7.103, known as the frogs’ hymn, and its relationship with the *pravargya* rite, while Houben’s (2019) has recently focused on the Vedic ritual in general.

² Cf. e.g., Houben 2016: 180.

bined, first, with the transformation of a lineage-based society into a dynastic tribal confederation, and then into forms of monarchic states, especially in the middle Gangetic valley.³ Such a socio-political transformation is also associated with another crucial cultural Vedic evolution, that is Vedic ritualism, brought about by the so-called *śrauta* reform, promoted by the Kuru hegemony, and culminating in the Late Vedic Period (900–400 BCE): a change from a liturgy suitable for a single clan-based society to an ecumenical ritual the complexity of which might reflect the multi-clan confederation and ratify the primacy of the supra-tribal sovereign (Proferes 2003). This new Kuru model of a unique (*éka*) sovereign (*adhipatī/adhirājā*), able to overcome clan divisions,⁴ and consecrated through a specific royal ritual (*rājasūya*), was equated specifically with the sun, considered the supreme cosmic fire,⁵ as attested particularly in the Atharvavedic collection, which is in part directly related to the Kuru period:⁶ for example, in AVŚ 13.2.2–3 = AVP 18.20.6–7, the sun—Āditya/king is praised as a unique, shining cosmic being, endowed with magic powers (*māyā*) and a sort of knowledge (*prajñāna*):⁷

diśāṃ prajñānām [AVP *prajñānam*] *svarāyantam arcīṣā supakṣām*
āśūṃ patāyantam arṇavé |
stāvāma sūryam bhūvanasya gopāṃ yó raśmibhir diśa ābhāti sārvaḥ
 || 2 ||

(Him) shining with the brightness, the foreknowing of quarters, well-winged, flying swift in the ocean—we would praise the sun, the cow-herd of existence, who with his rays shines unto all the quarters.

³ As regards such a historical development, cf. Thapar 1991.

⁴ Cf. Witzel 1995: 13.

⁵ Cf., e.g., Tsuchiyama 2005; Proferes 2007: 78–91; in particular, p. 81ff: the king was provided with a solar body. As for the correlations between the institution of the *rājasūya* rite and the Kuru period, cf. Witzel 2005a: 29.

⁶ Cf. Witzel 1997: 276.

⁷ Whitney and Lanman agree with the emendation *prajñānam*, also attested in the AVP (Whitney and Lanman 1905: II.519). It is the nomen actionis of the root *prá-√jñā* ‘to discern in front, foreknow’. As regards these stanzas and the science of lordship, cf. Rossi 2023.

*yát prāñ pratyāñ svadhāyā yāsi śībhaṃ nā nārūpe āhanī kārṣi māyāyā /
tāt āditya māhi tāt te māhi śrávo yád éko víśvaṃ pári bhūma jāyase || 3 ||*

In that you go swiftly in front, behind, at will, (and) make by magic the two days of diverse form — that, o Āditya, (is) great, that (is) your great fame, that you alone are born about the whole world. (tr. Whitney and Lanman: 1905. II.719–720, slightly modified).

However, the epithet cowherd—*gopā* also characterises the nature of this solar sovereignty; and the bovine environment linked to sovereignty as “solarship” is also referred to in st. 30 of the same hymn (AVŚ 13.2.30 ≈ AVP 18.23.7), where the epithet *svarjít* or ‘conqueror of the sun,’ which connotes the overlordship, is attributed to a bovine being, the buffalo—*mahiśá*.⁸ Therefore, a peculiar connection between lordship, “solarship,” cowherdship and the bovine context in general appears to qualify the paradigm of Kuru sovereignty.

On the other hand, as one of the outcomes of the cultural policy of the Kuru hegemony itself,⁹ the R̥gvedic collection may mirror both the earlier and the middle Vedic phases. As is well known, it is possible to draw a diachronic line between its ten books, thus distinguishing the old core (family books) from the later R̥gvedic textual layers (part of the eight book, the ninth, and especially the first and the tenth books) which were more directly correlated to the Kuru hegemony.¹⁰ Nonetheless, such a textual stratification does not imply an evident discontinuity within R̥gvedic poetry: rather, the poetry

⁸ AVŚ 13.2.30 ≈ AVP 18.23.7: *rócase diví rócase antárikṣe | pátaṅga prthi-
vyām rócase rócase apsv àIntáh | ubhā samudráu rúcyā vy āpā itha | devó devāsi
mahiśáh svarjít* || ‘You shine in the sky, you shine in the atmosphere, O flying one; on
the earth you shine, you shine within the waters; both oceans you have penetrated
with your sheen; O god, you are the god, the sun-conquering buffalo’ (Whitney and
Lanman 1905: II.724, slightly modified). The compound *svarjít*, from the syntagm
svār√ji (Scarlata 1999: 161–162; 154: *svarjít*- ‘das Sonnenlicht gewinnend’) is
instead a later variant of the earlier R̥gvedic *svar-śá* ‘sun-winning, the winner of the
sun’, one of the epithets for the R̥gvedic Indra.

⁹ Cf. Witzel 1995 and 1997.

¹⁰ For diachronic reconstruction of the R̥gvedic collection cf. Witzel 1997.

appears to be characterized by a sort of expressive homogeneity, as a guarantee of uninterrupted and renewed prosperity for the community.¹¹ Thus, formulaic expressions came to be expanded and enriched, stylistic devices perfected, certain imagery improved, all without any apparent fissure between the former (*pūrva*, *pratnā*) and the present (*nūtana*) or the newer (*nāvyas*) compositions.¹² It is noteworthy that among the recurring poetical metaphors, there is one that travels across the whole collection, albeit with different nuances, that is the imagery connecting poetry with the bovine milieu.¹³ For example, in R̥V 5.44.13b, the poet is defined as ‘the udder, the ladle of all visionary thoughts’ (*viśvāsām ūdhaḥ sā dhiyām udāñcanaḥ*), thus evoking the analogy: poet : cow = poetry : milk.¹⁴ In two famous stanzas of the eighth book (R̥V 8.100.10–11), the milk-cow or *dhenū* itself is identified with *vāc*, the human voice, even speech, and ‘animals of all forms speak her’ (*tām viśvárūpāḥ paśāvo vadanti*: st. 11b): here sonority integrates the bovine environment into the human sphere in primis, since the root \sqrt{vad} means ‘to raise one’s voice,’ referring to every vocal expression. Likewise, in one of the most debated hymns, 1.164, in st. 41, the buffalo cow (*gaurī*) is correlated with the metrical system by means of the double meaning of the crucial term:¹⁵ *padā*, meaning both ‘foot’ and ‘metrical line’; moreover, the verbal form *mimāya*, which is the perfect of the root $\sqrt{mā}$ ‘to

¹¹ For the continuity of the R̥gvedic poetical tradition, cf. Elizarenkova 1995: 21–24, and Fortson 1998: 131.

¹² For the tendency towards the textual uniformity in the R̥gvedic collection, cf. Hellwig, Scarlata and Widmer 2021.

¹³ For the representations of cow in the R̥gvedic collection, cf., e.g., Srinivasan 1979.

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., Gonda 1963: 76, and Jamison’s *R̥gvedic Translation Commentary* at <http://rigvedacommentary.alc.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/V-10-4-21-1.pdf>, p. 81. As for this kind of imagery, see Gonda 1963: 126ff.

¹⁵ For the analysis of this hymn, especially this stanza, cf. Houben 2000a:

*gaurīr mimāya salilāni tākṣatī | ékapadī dvipadī sā cātuspadī |
aṣṭāpadī nāvapadī babhūvūṣī | sahāsrākṣarā paramē vyòman || 41 ||*

The buffalo-cow [=Speech] has bellowed, fashioning oceans. One-footed and two-footed, she is four-footed, having become eight-footed and nine-footed: she has a thousand syllables in the highest heaven. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 358).

bellow,’ is phonetically associable with derivatives of the root $\sqrt{mā}^2$ ‘to measure’ (e.g. *vimāya* ‘having measured’ [RV 10.114.6c], *māyā* ‘magic power’), thus suggesting a homology between bovine noises¹⁶ (*māyú* ‘bellow’ < $\sqrt{mā}^1$ ‘to bellow’) and a sort of magic sonority of the metrical resposion.¹⁷ The same connection, phonetically suggested by the paranomasia *māyā* / *māyú*, may be implied by the syntagma *mīmāti māyúm*, ‘(the cow) bellows her bellow,’ repeated in the same RV 1.164 (st. 28d and st. 29b): *mīmāti* from $\sqrt{mā}^1$ ‘to bellow’ is paranomasia of the middle verbal form *mimāte* ‘they two measure (the authority which is his own),’ from $\sqrt{mā}^2$ ‘to measure,’ mentioned in RV 7.82.6b with reference to the gods Indra and Varuṇa, who represent the two proto-Vedic complementary typologies of chieftainship.¹⁸ However, the hymn 1.164 is specifically associated with the ritual context, developed by the Kuru hegemony: in fact, on the one hand, the main poetic modality of the proto-Vedic phase must have been eulogistic poetry, the result of competitive oral performances (*vívāc*),¹⁹ during which the clan lordship dynamics were brought into play. However, on the other hand, the development of the sonic liturgy promoted by Kuru policy meant that the poetic performances came to be matched mostly with ritual performances, for the sake of an ecumenical sovereignty. Therefore, basically speaking, in the earlier R̥gvedic textual layer, heroic deeds and the munificent generosity of gods and clan-lords, warriors and patrons of the Āryan lineages were praised by the *kavīs*, whoever they were (bards, sages, royal

¹⁶ I prefer to use the expression ‘animal noises’ rather than the more common ‘animal sounds’ in order to make an evident difference between the animal sound as such and the ‘sound’ as poetic effect of the refined Vedic poetry.

¹⁷ It is worth noticing that *mimāya* is a homophonic of another two perfects: from the root \sqrt{may}^j ‘to diminish, to damage’, and from the root \sqrt{may} ‘to build, to fix, to fortify’; cf. Kümmel 2000: 367–369.

¹⁸ For the prototypes of chieftainship, pertaining to the alternating phases of settlement (*kṣéma*) and mobility (*yógá*) of the proto-Vedic clan-based society, and represented by Varuṇa and Indra respectively, cf. Schlerath 1960: 132–135; Schmidt 1992.

¹⁹ For the term *vívāc* and the meaning of the verbal contest in the R̥gvedic culture, cf. Kuiper 1960: 268ff.

members of the clan, etc.), in the presence of the clan fire, during somic symposia and public distribution of wealth (*vidátha*).²⁰ However, the Kuru reform defined liturgical priestly roles so that the task of uttering verbal expressions (*vāc*), sonorously and rhythmically connoted, came to be assigned mainly to two priestly categories, that is the reciter—*hótr* of the stanzas and, above all, the singer—*udgātṛ* of the melodies (*sāman*),²¹ and the role of *kavī* overlapped with the role of priest and ritual supervisor.²² In fact, the stanzas of the eighth R̥gvedic book are the main source of the Sāmavedic tradition,²³ and the R̥gvedic ninth book, which is entirely devoted to the Soma Pavamāna, offers a foretaste of a ritualized modality of poetry: it ‘measures’ (*√mā*²) the ritual space as cosmos, thus producing universal consonance, for example, in 9.97.13; 32 and 35:

*vṛṣā sóṇo abhikánikradad gāḥ | nadáyann eti pṛthivīm utá dyām /
indrasyeva vagnúrá śṛṇva ājaú | pracetáyann arṣati vācam émām || 13 ||*

The ruddy bull keeps roaring at the cows; bellowing he goes to
heaven and earth.
His voice, like Indra’s, is heard at the contest. He rushes, making this
speech perceptible here.

*kánikradad ánu pánthām ṛtasya | śukró ví bhāsy amṛtasya dhāma /
sá índrāya pavase matsarāvān | hinvánó vācam matibhiḥ kavīnām || 32 ||*

Ever roaring along the path of truth, gleaming you radiate across the domain of the immortal one [=sun?]. Providing the means for exhilaration, you purify yourself for Indra, spurring on your own speech with the thoughts of the poets.

²⁰ For example, in RV 6.45, which is dealt with below, references to such a cultural context may be found.

²¹ For the relationship between RV 1.164 and these ritual functions of the speech—*vāc* that involve chanting versified structures and singing them with specific vocal modulations, cf. Houben 2007.

²² Cf. Jamison 2007: 138–140; Köhler 2018: 121–124.

²³ Cf. Oldenberg 1888: 209–219.

*sómaṁ gāvo dhenávo vāvaśānāḥ | sómaṁ víprā matíbhiḥ prchámānāḥ |
sómah sutáḥ pūyate ajyámānaḥ | sóme arkās triṣṭubhaḥ sámnavante || 35 ||*

To Soma (go) the milk-cows bellowing eagerly; to Soma the inspired poets asking for him with their thoughts. Soma, pressed, is purified while being anointed [/driven]; to Soma the chants, the *triṣṭubh* verses cry out together. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 1339–1341)

In this case it is the sonic juice that is equated with the bull: its ‘constant bellowing’ (*kānikradat*) is homologised to the human voice—*vāc*, which appears to coincide with the speech of the poets; their inspired thoughts are excited by the *soma*—bull itself, like the milch cows, and their recitation and singing of the stanzas is equated with the bovine sonority. The liturgical context is clearly marked by sonority: bovine noises, highlighted by the participles *nadáyat* and *vāvaśāná*, and the *kavís*’ performances; the metrical structure of the chants (*arká*) corresponds to a sort of ‘shouting, bellowing’ (*navante*) that is the power of measuring (*māyá*) verbal expressions and which the non-verbal sonority (*māyú*) comes to coincide with.

Therefore, in such a scenario, one may wonder whether these recurring associations between poetry and bovine behaviour, especially in relation to sonority, must be considered a mere artful device for marking the liturgical language as other than the profane ordinary language, or whether they are also the token of the direct interconnectedness with the ecological background in which the Ṛgvedic man is absorbed. In other words, might the bovine imagery in which the human and animal dimensions overlap, stem from a specific stage of the Vedic culture where the anthropomorphic and the zoomorphic status were, to certain extent, fluctuating categories?

The Ṛgvedic Indraic lordship: Warfare, cowherdship and “solarship”

As is well known, the Ṛgvedic god Indra embodies one of the mythical prototypes of lordship which is represented throughout various

textual layers of the R̥gvedic collection. This may also reflect different models of lordship and thus correspond to both the pre-Kuru and the Kuru historical phases. In fact, the Indraic figure is entangled both in the proto-Vedic model of chieftainship and in the Kuru model of sovereignty: the former pertains to a clan-based society, the latter is more appropriate for the dynastic tribal confederation. Indeed, on the one hand, Indra as *svarāj* or ‘independent king’ (e.g., RV 3.49.2a) is the paradigm of a chieftainship committed to managing the seasonal movement of the clan’s livestock, with the connected warrior raids to collect cattle that characterised the semi-nomadic existence of the proto-Vedic period.²⁴ Such an Indraic leadership is associated with the so-called *vrātya* culture, which is an expression of the warrior context, of Indo-European matrix and possibly correlated to the forms of young warrior brotherhood / *Männerbund*, attested to in manifold Indo-European cultures.²⁵ This entailed “initiation” practices, aimed at introducing young male members of the clans into warrior adulthood, and more specifically, at turning them into leaders of the mobility phase (*yóga*), as personifications of the Indraic model.²⁶ They also were expected to be able to protect their own clan’s livestock, collecting and yoking cattle, thus leading the herds and the clan community along easily accessible, safe paths, and defending them from danger and enemies. The Indraic chieftain is a warrior-cowherd (*gopā*, *gópati*);²⁷ for example, in RV 3.43.5ab, Indra is evoked so that he might turn his *soma* drinking comrade (*sákhi*) into a *gopā-rājan* ‘cowherd-ruler’;²⁸ and in RV 8.62.7c, he is designated as *viśvasya gópati*—‘the herdsman of all.’ In fact, it is worth recalling that the title of *gopā*, literally meaning ‘protector of cows,’ refers to a cer-

²⁴ Cf. above, fn. 18.

²⁵ Cf. e.g., Kershaw 1997: 338ff.

²⁶ For this interpretation, cf. Selva 2019: 405.

²⁷ E.g., in RV 5.31.1c; 6.45.21c; 7.98.6c; 8.69.4a; etc.

²⁸ RV 3.43.5ab: *kuvīn mā gopām kārase jānasya | kuvīdrā jānam maghavann rjīṣin* | ‘Will you indeed make me your herdsman of the people; will you indeed (make me) king, you bounteous possessor of the silvery drink?’ (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 528).

tain idea of leader as ‘protector,’ as expressed by the root $\sqrt{pā}$ ‘to protect’ (< PIE $*pah_2$). The cowherd as ‘protector’ is a sort of ‘pastoral hero,’ a notion also well documented in the Indo-European traditions.²⁹ Also, the term *gópāti*, literary meaning ‘lord of cows,’ refers to a similar Indo-European milieu, inasmuch as the term *pāti* ‘lord, master’—widely attested in compounds—is cognate of YAv. *paiti*, Gr. *πόσις*, Lat. *potis*, etc. (< IE $*poti$).³⁰ It is evident that both the terms connote one of the functions of leadership: the cowherd is a ruler as such.³¹ However, in the case of the Indraic chieftainship, such a function of the leader must be supported by warrior skills: Indra himself is identified with a cowherd as ‘smasher of obstacles’ or ‘Vṛtra-smasher’; for example, in RV 4.30.22:

*sá ghéd utási vṛtrahan | samāná indra gópatiḥ | yás tā víśvāni
cicyuṣé || 22 ||*

And you are that same cowherd, o Indra, Vṛtra-smasher, who set all these things in motion. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 605, slightly modified)

Furthermore, Indra is recursively identified with bovine beings: in the peculiar hymn RV 6.45,³² Indra is defined as ‘cow’ (*gó*: st. 26b), and even ‘calf’ (*vatsá*: st. 25c). However, the image of Indra-as-bull is definitely more prevalent: in RV 5.40, the formulaic verse ‘bullish Indra, with your bulls, best smasher of obstacles’ (*vṛṣann indra vṛṣabhir vṛtrahantama*) is redundantly repeated in the closing of the first three stanzas; in st. 5 of RV 7.20, devoted to In-

²⁹ As for the PIE formulaic phrase $*u(h)_2ro pek_u-$ + $*pah_2-$ ‘protector of men and livestock’, well-documented in the Indo-European traditions: cf. Watkins 1979; Vassiliev 2011: 214–220, and the related bibliography.

³⁰ Cf. e.g., West 2007: 137–138.

³¹ Cf. expressions such as *jánasya gopā* or ‘cowherd of people’ (RV 3.43.5a) / *jánasya gópati* or ‘cowherd of people’ (RV 9.35.5c) / *viśám gopā* or ‘cowherd of clans’ (RV 1.94.5a). Cf. also fn. 36.

³² Cf. Jamison and Brereton’s Introduction in 2014: 829; cf. below.

dra, he is designated as a warrior-bull, ‘desirous’ of cows (*gavéṣaṇa*):

*vṛṣā jajāna vṛṣaṇam rānāya | [...] |
prá yāḥ senānīr ādha nṛbhyo āsti | ināḥ sátvā gavéṣaṇaḥ sá dhṛṣṇúḥ || 5 ||*

The bull begat the bull for battle; [...] He who as leader of the army stands out from the (other) superior men, a powerful warrior, he is the daring seeker of cattle. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 908)

Similarly, in R̥V 6.18.2, he is a ‘bellowing’ warrior (*nadanumát*), which refers here to warrior cries:³³

*sá yudhmāḥ sátvā khajakṛt samādvā | tuvimrakṣó nadanumām̐ r̥jīṣṭī |
bṛhádrenuś cyávano mānuṣīṇām | ékaḥ kṛṣṭīnām abhavat sahāvā || 2 ||*

He—the fighting warrior, creator of tumult, combat-hardened, the powerfully destructive, bellowing partaker of the silvery drink, with high-mounting dust—alone became the victorious rouser of the communities of the sons of Manu. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 797)

And his weapon is identified with a bull (*vṛṣan*) ‘constantly roaring’ (*kánikradat*: prs. prt. int. < √*krand* ‘to make noise, to bellow, to neigh, to thunder’), which ‘bellowed again and again’ (*ároravīd*: impf. int. < √*rav*ⁱ / *rū* ‘to roar, to bellow’) in R̥V 2.11.9d and 10a. It is worth noticing that the few textual examples referred to here already share an intriguing stylistic trait that is sonority. In fact, the verses of R̥V 5.40 and 7.20.5a are characterised by a peculiar sonic and rhythmical effect created by means of the repetition of /*vṛ*/ and /*an*/, which suggests bovine presence not only semantically, but also phonetically, through a sort of “subliminal” anagrams or “se-mantization of sound sequences.”³⁴ Likewise, the use of intensive

³³ Similarly, in R̥V 8.3.10.

³⁴ Cf., e.g., Klein 2012.

verbal forms, with their iterative function,³⁵ effectively contributes to emphasizing the noisy effect expressed by onomatopoeic roots meaning ‘to make noise’: it iconizes Indra-bull.

Moreover, the R̥gvedic Indra’s role as warrior-cowherd and warrior-bull overlaps with the role of ‘priest-lord’:³⁶ in fact, one of Indra’s epithets is Br̥haspati or ‘lord of the formulation’,³⁷ thus suggesting that Indra is also a sort of warrior-priest. For example, in R̥V 2.23.6a, Indra-Br̥haspati is *gopā pathikṛt* or ‘cowherd who makes paths,’ and in R̥V 4.50.5d, Br̥haspati bellows (*kānikradat*). This seems to be specifically related to the famous Vala myth, an Indo-Iranian and ultimately Indo-European mythical legacy,³⁸ according to which Indra discovers and releases the cows, equated with the sun and/or Dawns, hidden in a cave by the Vala demon. Whenever this episode is referred to in the R̥gvedic collection, Br̥haspati is also present as Indra’s counterfigure. Furthermore, the ‘lord of the *bráhman*’—Indra is supported by young warrior comrades, the Maruts, and/or the priestly troop of the Aṅgirasas, thus representing both warrior and priestly leadership. They, too, bellow and roar: e.g., in R̥V 5.45.8b, the Aṅgirasas roar (*návanta*: inj.

³⁵ Cf. Schaefer 1994: 72ff.

³⁶ Such a double role attributed to lordship may pertain to the proto-Vedic cultural stage as well. In fact, Varuṇa, the divine prototype of the other chieftain (*saṃrāj* or ‘sovereign king’), committed to managing the settlement phase (*kṣéma*) of the clan-community, is also associated with Mitra, thus representing the royal authority able to guarantee cosmic prosperity and mutual observance of the commandments. Both of them are also defined as *bhuvanasya gopā* or ‘cowherds/protectors of the living world’ in R̥V 5.62.9b. The fact that the Vedic lordship implies binary roles is a cultural phenomenon in line with a certain idea of Indo-European sovereignty: for instance, according to the Dumézilian theory of Indo-European functions, lordship must combine roles of priesthood and kingship, although in Indra’s case, sovereignty results rather from the association of priesthood with warfare. As is well known, Dumézil considers warfare as a separate Indo-European function. For a critical perspective of the Dumézilian theory, cf. Schlerath 1995, esp. 25ff.

³⁷ As Schmidt argues: 1968; cf. also Brereton 2004.

³⁸ For the Indo-European solar myths, cf. West 2007: 259–262; also, Witzel 2005b. For the Vala myth in the Iranian context, cf. Schmidt 1975.

< √navⁱ / nū ‘to roar, to shout, to bellow’) with the cows, and in R̥V 7.56.10b, the Maruts bellow (vāvaśāna: pft. prt. < √vāś ‘to bellow’).

Many R̥gvedic passages stress the fact that the weapons employed in the Vala deed are acoustic ‘devices,’ such as songs, chants (e.g., R̥V 10.68.6b *arká*), articulated voice (e.g., R̥V 4.15.1c *vācas daíviya*), and above all, that they are non-articulated sounds, that is animal and natural noises (e.g., thundering < √stanⁱ / tan).

On the other hand, cowherdship and rulership are frequently correlated to “solarship,” that is to say, the role of cowherd-ruler is combined with the solar imagery, and frequently designated by solar attributes, at times even identified with the sun itself. For example, in R̥V 5.63, Mitra and Varuṇa, called *ítasya gopā*—‘the cowherd of the truth’ (st.1), in the second stanza are evoked as sovereign kings (*saṃrāj*), and their epithet is the controversial compound *svarājś*, which can be interpreted both as ‘one who sees sun’ and ‘one who is visible/appears like a sun’.³⁹ The same epithet is attributed also to Indra in R̥V 7.32.22:⁴⁰ in fact, Indra is closely related to cowherdship and “solarship” in the Vala myth that focuses on the mythical role of Indra as warrior cowherd, discoverer and conqueror of the sun/cattle. However, in R̥V 7.32.22c, Indra is specifically celebrated as the lord of both the moving and the still world, and in R̥V 7.98.6a–c, the relationship between cowherdship, rulership, and “solarship” is evident:

*tāvedāṃ víśvam abhitaḥ paśavyāṃ | yát páśyasi cákṣasā sū ryasya |
gāvāṃ asi gópatir éka indra |*

Yours is all this (wealth in) livestock all around, which you see with the eye of the sun.

You alone are the cowherd of cows, Indra. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 1007)

³⁹ Cf. Scarlata 1999: 234ff.

⁴⁰ Cf. quotation and comment below in section “The poetry of the cowherdship.”

Here Indra is defined as the unique (*éka*) lord, clearly equivalent to the sun inasmuch as he is endowed with its eye: therefore, Indra is assumed to be the embodiment of “solarship”. Such an explicit reference to solar attributes of Indra is particularly attested to in the later Ṛgvedic sections, clearly coinciding with the Kuru phase, especially in the tenth book: Indra, called to participate in the sacrificial session as a great drinker of *soma*, represents the supreme sun-overlord, whose sovereignty is ritually ratified by the soma liturgy. For example, in RV 10.111.3, Indra is ‘the victorious path-maker for the sun’ and he is definitively combined with the personification of bull-cowherd, whose wife is the cow-Dawn: he thus becomes ‘lord of heaven’ (*pátir diváh*)

indrah kila śrútiyā asyā veda | sá hí jiṣṇúḥ pathikṛt sūriyāya |
ān ménām kṛṇvān ácyuto bhúvad góḥ | pátir diváh sanajā āpratītaḥ || 3 ||

Indra certainly knows of this, from hearing it. For he was the victorious path-maker for the sun, and after that, making a wife from a cow [=Dawn], he became the husband of the cow and lord of heaven, immovable, ancient born, unopposable. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 1578)

Therefore, the mythical motif of the warrior-cowherd, who is equipped with the power of the *bráhman*, is improved with the reference to Indra’s knowledge and the conquest of heaven: thus, Indra has become the unique lord who, like the sun, has no counterpart (*āpratīta*). The same role of cowherd-sun is mentioned in st. 3cd of the hymn RV 10.177, devoted to the sun—*pátaṅga* or ‘the flying one.’ In this case, the sun—*pátaṅga* is equated with ‘the cowherd, one who never settles down, roaming back and forth along the paths’ (*gopá- ánipadyamāna- | á ca párā ca pathibhiś carat-*),⁴¹ thus recalling the aforementioned Atharvavedic passages. Also, in the first Ṛgvedic book, Indra appears to be identified with the sun:

⁴¹ The same also in 1.164.31a. For the debate on the interpretations, cf. Houben 2000a: 508ff.

for example, in 1.52.9d, after celebrating Indra since ‘he fixed the sun in heaven to be seen’ (st. 8d *ád̥hārayo divi ā sūriyam dṛśé*), ‘the Maruts, in company with that hero, cheered on the sun’:⁴² this would mean that Indra, *nṛ́* and sun (*sívar*) are equivalent. Therefore, Indra comes to represent the new Kuru paradigm of supratribal sovereignty:⁴³ the new overlord is consecrated as sun ascending to heaven through the intermediate space;⁴⁴ there he is visible to the whole cosmos and from there he can see the whole cosmos. Lastly, in the Atharvavedic collection, whose compilation is indeed attributed to the Kuru period (Witzel 1997: 278), Indra himself is represented as a cosmic draft-ox: in the enigmatic AVP 3.25 (≈ AVŚ 4.11), Indra is a cosmogonic bovine-being, who/which, ‘milking out’ (*duhāna*), measures out (*mimīte*) universe:

anaḍvān indrah sa paśubhyo vi caṣṭe | trayāñ chakro apa mimīte
adhvanaḥ |
sa bhūtaṃ bhaviṣyad bhuvanaṃ duhānaḥ | sarvā devānām {bibhrac}
carati vratāni || 3 ||

Indra is the draft-ox, he looks out for the cattle / he appears from the cattle. The mighty one (Śakra, i.e. Indra) measures out the triple roads. He, milking out what existed, what will exist, what exists (i.e. the past, the future, the present), practices, {bearing [them, their burden]}, all the observances of the gods. (tr. Selva 2019: 367ff.)⁴⁵

⁴² RV 1.52.9c: *sívar nṛṣāco marútó ’madann ānu*. As regards this interpretation, cf. Jamison’s *Rigveda Translation Commentary* at <http://rigvedacommentary.alc.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/I.1-99-1-25-23.pdf>.

⁴³ The identification of Indra with the sun is even more explicit in the Black Yajurveda Samhitās: cf. Amano 2022.

⁴⁴ For such a rite of ascension to heaven in the *rājasūya*, cf. Heesterman 1957: 103ff.

⁴⁵ In fact, also in AVP 17.27–32 Indra, practicing the ‘observance’ (*vrata*) of the celestial draft-ox (*anaḍuh*), appears to be a supreme being. As regards the relationship between the celestial bull and the *govrata/godharma* correlated to the Pāśupatas, cf. Acharya 2013; for text, translation and comment of the Atharvavedic passages, cf. Selva 2019: 217ff.

Indra-kaví: A poet cowherd

It is worth to note some other crucial epithets that connote the figure of the R̥gvedic Indra, especially in the family books: in R̥V 3.31.7a, he is defined as *vípratama* or ‘the foremost inspired poet’;⁴⁶ in R̥V 8.16.7a, he is the ‘formulator’ (*brahmán*), and the ‘seer’ (*ṛṣi*), and in R̥V 5.29.1d, he is the ‘wise seer’ (*ṛṣi dhīra*) or one who is endowed with the insight of poetical vision (*dhī*). Finally, he is *kaví* or ‘sage poet’;⁴⁷ in R̥V 7.18.2b he is invoked as ‘one who knows, being preeminent poet’ (*abhi vidūṣ kavīḥ sán*);⁴⁸ finally, in R̥V 6.18.14b, he is ‘the best poet among poets’ (*kavítamakavīnām*). In fact, Schmidt has already noticed that the R̥gvedic Indra was not only a priest-king (1968: 238), but, as a *kaví*, he was also a king-poet, not far from the correlated role of the Young Avestic *kauui*.⁴⁹ Moreover, as clan-lord committed to managing the mobility of the clan, he is a leader inasmuch as he is a warrior-cowherd: warriorship, priestship, cowherdship and poetship are combined in the figure of Indra simply by his role in the Vala myth, as in R̥V 6.32.2–3:

*ā mātārā sūryeṇā kavīnām | āvāsayad rujād ádriṃ gr̥ṇānāḥ |
svādhībhir̥ ṛkvabhir̥ vāvaśānāḥ | úd usrīyāṇām asṛjan nidānam || 2 ||
sá vāhnibhir̥ ṛkvabhir̥ góṣu śásvan | mitājñubhiḥ purukṛtvā jigāya |
púrah purohā sākhibhiḥ sakhīyān | dṛḥhā rojo kavibhiḥ kavīḥ sán || 3 ||*

2. He made the two mothers of the poets shine with the sun; he broke the rock as he was being hymned. Bellowing [/being eager] along

⁴⁶ Indra is *vípra* also in R̥V 4.19.10a; 5.31.7a.

⁴⁷ For the etymological reconstruction, cf. Gonda 1963: 43ff.; as regards the controversial interpretation of this term in the Indo-Iranian cultural context, cf. Jamison 2007: 119ff.

⁴⁸ For this interpretation, especially as regards the morphological value of the participle *vidūṣ*, cf. Jamison’s R̥gvedic Translation Commentary at <http://rigveda.commentary.alc.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/VII-10-4-21.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Cf. Jamison’s conclusions: “The Indo-Iranian **kavi* was originally a prominent member of the royal entourage [...] this designation could be at some point interpreted as a royal title” (Jamison 2007: 137).

with the very attentive versifiers, he let loose the binding of the ruddy cows.

3. He, the doer of many deeds, triumphed every time when cattle were at stake, in company with the conveyors (of songs), the versifiers with their knees fixed. Acting as comrade along with his comrades, the smasher of fortresses broke the firmly fixed fortresses, being a poet along with poets. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 817)⁵⁰

In these two stanzas the warrior actions of Indra correspond to a poetic performance: the versified composition (*ṛkvan* < *ṛc*), as a eulogistic song (*gīr*) proclaiming (*gṛṇāná* pass. < *√gar*ⁱ ‘to sing, to proclaim’⁵¹) the heroic deed, is equivalent to the heroic deed itself, but above all ‘breaking’ (*rujāt/ruroja* < *√roj/ruj* ‘to break’) the rock/fortress coincides mainly with ‘bellowing’ (*vāvaśāná* < *√vāś* ‘to bellow’). This is even more evident in RV 4.50.5:

sá suṣṭúbhā sá ṛkvatā gaṇéna | valám ruroja phaligám ráveṇa |
bṛhaspátir usríyā havyasúdaḥ | kánikradad vāvaśatīr úd ājat || 5 ||

He with his troop possessing good sounds, possessing chant—he broke Vala, broke its bolt with his roar. Bṛhaspati drove up the ruddy (cows) who sweeten the oblation, who kept lowing as he was bellowing. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 634, slightly modified).⁵²

Here, too, breaking, bellowing and chanting are closely connected: Indra-Bṛhaspati, the main champion among the comrades, makes use of an acoustic weapon—bellowing/roaring (*ráva*)—to break the Vala cave;⁵³ its efficacy corresponds to the eulogistic sounding (*suṣṭúbh*) performance of his troops (*gaṇá*): *ráva* and *gaṇá* are morphologically equivalent (istr. *-ena*), and phonetically analo-

⁵⁰ As regards the interpretation of these stanzas, cf. Schmidt 1968: 151; Jamison’s *Rigveda Translation Commentary* at <http://rigvedacommentary.alc.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/VI.1%E2%80%939332-10-4-21.pdf>.

⁵¹ For the complex reconstruction of this root, cf. Gotō 1987: 153–156.

⁵² Cf. also Schmidt 1968: 217.

⁵³ Cf. Ronzitti 2001: 23.

gous (paranomasia). In fact, these stanzas are rich in sonority, not only metaphorically because of the reference to the Vala deed, but also effectively in terms of the actual performed utterance, in which manifold phonetic rhetorical devices are employed. For example, the perfect *ruroja* followed by the term *ráva* produces a sort of echo effect: the sounding sequence *ru-ro-rav-*, characterised by *guṇa*, reverberates onomatopoeically both as a repeated crushing and a repeated bellowing. Also, from a morphological perspective, the root $\sqrt{\text{rav}}^i/\text{rū}$ ‘to roar, to bellow’ (< PIE **h₃reuh* e.g. YAv *uruuant*, Gr *ὠρύουαι*, Lat *rūmor*), from which the term *ráva* is derived, evokes the root $\sqrt{\text{rav}}$ (< PIE **reu(H)* ‘to break’), without the velar enlargement: they specifically coincide on the intensive participle *roruvat*,⁵⁴ which sounds here as an alliteration of our phonetical sequence *ru-ro-rav-*, meaning both ‘keep on bellowing’ and ‘keep on breaking.’ Moreover, Watkins (1997: 250) considers RV 6.32.3cd a perfect example of that compositional technique of Indo-European poetry, based on the principle of recurrence, especially as phonetical respiration and phraseological concatenation: in *púraḥ purohā́ sákhībhiḥ sakhīyán / dṛḷhā́ ruroja kavībhiḥ kavīḥ sán* the alliterations / *ur* / *ru* / *ro* / combined with / *hā́* /, and / *sa* / *san* / rhyming with *-an* of *sakhīyán*, as well as the polyptoton of *sákhībhiḥ*, constitutes a complex sound weave, which iconizes the noisy mythical scene: breaking and bellowing are effectively the poetic performance in act, and the *kavī* is really the warrior chieftain, along with his comrades. Similarly, in RV 2.23.1ab, Bṛhaspati is invoked as both ‘lord of the troops’ (*gaṇā́nām gaṇápati*) and ‘the most-famed poet of poets’ (*kavíkaṇvī́nām upamáśravastama* lit. ‘the foremost poet, the one who has the highest fame (*śrávas*), amongst the poets’), a variant of the superlative structure *kavítamakavī́nām* in RV 6.18.14b:

gaṇā́nām tvā gaṇápatiḥ havāmahe | kavīm kavī́nām upamáśravasta-
mam |

⁵⁴ Cf. Narten 1964: 224–226.

*jyeṣṭharājāṃ brāhmaṇām brahmaṇas pate | ā nah śṛṇvānn ūtibhiḥ
sīda sādānam || 1 ||*

We call upon you, the troop-lord of troops, the most famous poet of poets, the preeminent king of sacred formulations, o lord of the sacred formulation. Hearing us, sit down upon your seat together with your help. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 433)

This stanza is characterised by rhythmical sounding iterations based on sequences of alliterations (/ *aṇ / ṇa / am / ma / av / va / ra / śṛ /* /), but they are further emphasized by lexical redundancy, and ‘yoked’ to morpho-syntactic constructions, aimed at focusing on the supreme role of the Bṛhaspati, the ‘Lord of sacred formulation.’⁵⁵ His lordship arises from loud-voiced evidence and must be well ‘audible’ as highlighted by the figura etymologica based on *śrávas* (< PIE **kleuos*) ‘glory, fame’ and the participle *śṛṇván* ‘hearing.’ In addition, in st. 5d and 6a of the same hymn, Bṛhaspati is invoked as ‘the good cowherd’ who protects (*sugopā rákṣasi*), and ‘the cowherd, who creates the paths’ (*gopāḥ pathikṛt*), as a sort of refrain.

Therefore, the Ṛgvedic stanzas are not only an imitation of animal noises, symbolically referring to them, but effectively bel-
lowing/roaring in an act of poetic performance, so that bovine noises ‘magically’ match the language of poetry: the poetic word of the proto-Vedic *kavī* is performative inasmuch as it iconizes the heroic deed, reproducing it sonorously, that is through its own zoomorphised voice. The recurring use of multiple onomatopoeic roots in the Ṛgvedic lexicon, where bovine noises in particular, are imitated, appears to confirm this.⁵⁶ Furthermore, sequences of sounds, rhythmically repeated as a sort of echo, are a symptom of onomatopoeic outcomes:⁵⁷ not only are the animal noises re-doubled and repro-

⁵⁵ For a stylistic commentary of this stanza, in relation to the Indo-European poetical inheritance, cf. Watkins 1995: 241ff.

⁵⁶ They can be listed as follows: *√kṛand*; *√nad*; *√navⁱ*; *√mā¹*; *√ravⁱ / rū*; *√vāś*.

⁵⁷ For the Vedic onomatopoeia and the reduplications, cf. Hopkins 1893; more recently, Hoffmann 1975; as to Indo-Aryan and Dravidian onomatopoeias, cf. Eme-
neau 1969.

duced vocally, but the rhythmic modality of the animal utterance is also reproduced. For example, the root \sqrt{krand} expresses the noises made by animals such as horses, bulls and wild beasts, and by natural phenomena, such as thunderbolts and flowing water,⁵⁸ that is non-humanized and non-verbal noises, but the soundmimicking effect is especially created in the intensive form. The *kánikradat* chieftain Indra-Bṛhaspati corresponds perfectly to the natural environment in which he acts as the leader of the mobility phase of the proto-Vedic semi-nomadic society, and he is particularly associated with the bovine milieu, both as bull and cowherd, able to lead the cattleherd. Similarly, the close relationship between the bovine environment and Indra, the bull-cowherd, as a representation of *yóga* chieftainship, is expressed by means of the verbal forms of the root $\sqrt{vāś}$ ‘bellow’ (< PIE **uaHk*). In the mythical scene, the eager cattle keep bellowing (*vāvaśat*) to Indra, while Indra-Bṛhaspati himself, who is also eager, keeps bellowing (*vāvaśānā*) together with his loud, versifying comrades. Nonetheless, in the corresponding poetic performance occurring during verbal contests, *vāvaśat* and *vāvaśānā* onomatopoeically reproduce the specific noise made by the cows while interacting with their calves,⁵⁹ also imitating their rhythm of utterance (/ *vā* / *va* / *vaś* /), by means of the participle of the intensive stem and the perfect stem of the same root, respectively:⁶⁰ such a kind of sound-mimicking of bovine noises, which is not merely restricted to bellowing as such, confirms the peculiar symbiosis between the animal and human environment. However, these redoubling sounds appear to be combined with the grammaticalized expression, thus coming under the control of the humanized linguistic sphere. In fact, it has also been hypothesized that $\sqrt{vāś}$ itself may be a secondary development of the root $\sqrt{vaś}$ meaning ‘to wish, de-

⁵⁸ Gotō 1987: 116 highlights that it particularly denotes the neighing and striding of horses.

⁵⁹ E.g., RV 2.2.2ab: ‘Nights and dawns have bellowed toward you, o Agni, like milk-cows in good pastures to their calf’ (*abhi tvā naktīr uśāso vavāšire / āgne vatsām nā svāsareṣu dhenāvah*).

⁶⁰ Cf. Schaefer 1994: 179–182.

sire',⁶¹ particularly with reference to maternal affection, as well as sexual desire, of which, albeit the bull is an expression. Thus, poetic polysemy is created, but this metaphoric semantic overlapping also suggests a human-animal hybrid relationship, as in RV 3.57.3c: 'milch-cows bellowing toward their child' (*putráṁ dhenávo vāvaśānāḥ*), and reversely in RV 6.45.25cd: 'they bellow out again and again [...] like mothers to their calf (*nonuvur* [...]) *vatsám ná mātáraḥ*). In any case, the shift from the zoomorphic dimension to the anthropomorphic one and vice versa is triggered by sonority: the roots $\sqrt{vāś}$ and $\sqrt{vaś}$ are semi-homophonic, whatever their morphological relationship may be. Thus, the utterance of non-verbal noises and especially bovine noises turns Indra-Bṛhaspati into the cow-herd-lord who can cope with the environment in which he moves, particularly as bull-leader of the herd, thanks to his ability to imitate animal noises. In fact, in a specific, controversial passage (RV 3.38.9c) Indra may be defined as 'one who has the tongue of the cowherd' (*gopājihva*),⁶² thus alluding to his ability to communicate like a cowherd, that is imitating herd noises. And in RV 5.45.9d, another debated phrase, 'a young poet, going amongst the cows' (*yúvā kavír* [...] *góṣu gáchan*) is used with reference to the rising sun:⁶³ in a ritual context Soma or Agni may also be referred to, but in mythical terms, the Indraic deed of the releasing of cattle/Dawns/sun is suggested. In fact, the Vala myth is explicitly quoted in st. 8, where the Aṅgirasas roar with the cows, as mentioned above, and this is again alluded to in the last stanza (st. 11), where the Navagvas or 'the nine-cowed,' correlated to the Aṅgirasas, are mentioned.

⁶¹ Although Kümmel apparently does not agree with this hypothesis, he finally proposes the following translation 'sehnsüchtig brüllen' as this root mostly refers to the behaviour of mother-cows towards their calves: cf. Kümmel 2000: 486 fn. 953.

⁶² Cf. Jamison's *Commentary*, at <http://rigvedacommentary.alc.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/III-10-4-21.pdf>, pp. 333ff., namely pp. 39–40. Cf. also below.

⁶³ Thus Schmidt 1968: 178ff.; Jamison prefers to consider *yúvan kaví* as an epithet of Agni, or even Soma, with reference to the ritual context: cf. Jamison's *R̥gvedic Translation Commentary* at <http://rigvedacommentary.alc.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/V-10-4-21-1.pdf>.

Therefore, the expression *yívan kaví* may also designate Indra in his double function of priest-poet, but particularly as cowherd-poet: he ‘shines’ on finding / releasing the sun or is even the very person that appears like the rising sun.⁶⁴ Therefore, it may also refer to the role of the Indraic leader, who is closely connected with the bovine environment, that is a *kaví* of the proto-Vedic clan society implied cowherdship.

The poetry of the cowherdship

Such an identity between poetic function and bovine behaviour is recursively highlighted in the family books of the R̥gvedic collection: the poets declare in first person that they are addressing their eulogistic hymns by ‘bellowing’ to Indra. For example, in R̥V 7.32.22, a bovine comparison is clearly expressed:

*abhí tvā sūra nonumah | ádugdhā iva dhenávah |
 íśānam asyá jágataḥ swardṛśam | íśānam indra tasthúṣaḥ || 22 ||*

We keep bellowing to you, o champion, like un milked cows—to you, Indra, who see (like) the sun, lord of this moving (world), lord of the still one. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 922)

In this case too, the sound effect is emphasized by the anaphoric *íśānam* and the intensive verbal form of a root $\sqrt{\text{nav}^i}$ / *nū* ‘to roar, to shout, to bellow,’ which belongs to the same onomatopoeic sonority as $\sqrt{\text{rav}^i}$ / *rū*.⁶⁵ Moreover, the equivalence between poets–un milked (*ádugdha*) cows also implies the reference to Indra as milker-cowherd, inserted into the same “solarship” as in R̥V 5.45.9d. Similarly R̥V 7.20.9a recites as follows: *eṣá stómo acikradad vṛṣāte* ‘this praise has bellowed, a bull to you’; no explicit comparison is expressed here, but *vṛṣan*—‘bull’ wholly embodies

⁶⁴ As regards Indra’s epithet *swardṛś* / *suwardṛś* interpreted both as ‘one who sees the sun’ and ‘one who is visible/appears like a sun’: cf. Scarlata 1999: 234ff.

⁶⁵ Cf. Gotō 1987: 198–220.

stoma—‘praise.’ Furthermore, in hymn 4.32, attributed to the *ṛ̥ṣi* Gotama, lit. ‘one who is the foremost bovine,’ traditionally correlated to the *Āṅgirasas*,⁶⁶ the poets of the Gotama clan ‘bellow’ (*√nav*ⁱ) repeatedly—needless to say—to Indra, as declared in st. 4:

*vayām indra tvé sácā | vayām tvābhī nonumaḥ | asmām̐-asmām̐ id úd
ava || 4 ||*

We in company with you, Indra—we keep bellowing to you: “Help us, only us!” (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 608)

In this example too, the characterising trait is the rhythmical repetitions of the sounds, through alliterations and even iterations of the same words (e.g., *asmām̐*, *vayām* [anaphor]), which produce a sort of echo effect, equivalent to the intensive value of the verb *nonumaḥ* itself. It is a sort of iconic stanza, whose sonority picturizes a poetic performance in an act that is a rhythmical sequence of bovine noises.⁶⁷ In st. 9, the aorist (*ānūṣata*) and the use of the third person denote that the performative utterance is now represented from another perspective, probably that of the audience; the bellowing has been recognized as a song (*gír*):

abhi tvā gótamā girā | ānūṣata prá dāvāne | indra vājāya ghṛ̥ṣvaye || 9 ||

The Gotamas have bellowed to you with their song, for you to give the thrilling prize, Indra. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 608)

Likewise, in RV 3.51, the first stanza which explicitly refers to Indra, it is declared that ‘lofty songs have bellowed to Indra’ (b: *īndram gīro bṛ̥hatīr abhyānūṣata*); in RV 6.38.3 the poet asserts, in first person, that he ‘has bellowed,’ once again using the aorist verbal form of the same root (*ānūṣi*):

⁶⁶ Cf. Macdonell and Keith 1912: I. 234–235.

⁶⁷ For the use of the *āmreḍita*, that is the peculiar iteration *asmām̐-asmām̐*, cf. Klein 2003: 786.

*tām vo dhiyā paramāyā purājām | ajāram indram abhy ānūṣi arkaiḥ |
brāhmā ca gīro dadhiré sām asmin | mahāṁś ca stómo ādhi vardhad
indre || 3 ||*

With my highest insight, with my recitations I have roared for you to ageless Indra, born of old. Not only have the sacred formulations and the songs together been placed in him, but in Indra the great praise puts strength. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 822)

Here, the role of the sage poet, endowed with the insight of poetical vision (*dhī*), is represented: his poetical compositions (*arkā*), recited publicly on the occasion of soma symposia or at a morning ritual,⁶⁸ consist of formulations (*brāhman*), songs (*gīr*) and hymns of praise (*stóma*); the aorist form combined with the phonetical play of alliterating sequences (/ *ara* / *ram* / *am* /; *dhi* / *adhi* /; *ra* / *re*) creates acoustic reverberation in the stanza, producing an iconic effect and culminating in the figure of Indra himself. In fact, in the last stanza of this hymn (st. 5) Indra is evoked as an inspired poet—*vīpra*, lit. ‘one who is trembling,’ alluding both to the vibration of the utterance as a ‘bellowing song’ and the body of a bull-singer: he is stirred by the effort of poetic inspiration. On the other hand, there is also an allusion to sexual excitement through the root *ā√van* ‘to love, desire’ (*āvivāsema* or ‘we would seek to attract’), used with the desiderative stem which phonetically sounds similarly to the intensive stem *vāvaś-* of the root *√vaś* ‘to wish, to love.’ The web of sounds connects the singer to the bull.

Finally, a peculiar hymn is worth mentioning: RV 6.45; here, Indra, praiser-singer (*stotṛ*) himself, is identified both with cowherd (*gopāti*) and cattle and, as in RV. 6.32.3, his comrades-poets (*sākhi*) praise and invoke him by means of ‘bellowing songs.’ Out of the 33 stanzas, the 4th, 7th, 21st, 25th, 28th and 29th, mentioned here in Jamison and Brereton’s translation (2014: 829–831), are particularly relevant:

⁶⁸ This is Jamison and Brereton’s interpretation (2014: 821) of the introduction of the hymn.

*sákhāyo bráhmavāhase | árcata prá ca gāyata | sá hí naḥ prāmatir
mahī́ || 4 ||*

Comrades, chant and sing forth to him whose vehicle is the sacred formulation, for he is great solicitude for us.

*brahmāṇam bráhmavāhasam | gīrbhīḥ sákhāyam ṛgmīyam | gā́m ná
doháse huve || 7 ||*

To the formulator whose vehicle is the sacred formulation, to the comrade worthy of verses do I call with my songs, as to a cow to be milked.

*sá no niyúdbhir á pṛṇa | kāmam vā́jebhir ásvibhīḥ | gómadbhir gopate
dhṛṣát || 21 ||*

(Coming) here with your teams, fulfill our desire with prizes of horses and of cows, lord of cows, acting boldly.

*imá u tvā́ śatakrato | abhí prá ṇonuvur gírah | índra vatsám ná
mātáraḥ || 25 ||*

These songs bellow out again and again to you, o you of a hundred resolves, like mothers to their calf, Indra.

*imá u tvā́ suté-sute | náksante girvaṇo gírah | vatsám gā́vo ná
dhenávaḥ || 28 ||*

These songs come near to you at every pressing, o you who long for songs, as milk-cows do their calf.

purūtámam purūṇām | stotṛṇām vívāci | vā́jebhir vājayatām || 29 ||

(You,) the first among many at the verbal contest of the many praisersingers, who compete for the prize with their prizes.

These stanzas appear to be structured as a sort of omphalos composition:⁶⁹ the bovine environment is progressively introduced through the bovine metamorphosis of Indra and the poets; it emerges as the focal point, between sts. 21–29, and then, in the last stanzas, is overshadowed, while the human nature of the poets-competitors and especially that of Indra reappears. Such metamorphic dynamics are realized mainly through sounding tokens: in fact, from chanting ($< \sqrt{rc}$) and singing ($< \sqrt{gā(y)}$) to their champion Indra, the singer-comrades turn themselves into cowherds, while invoking ($< \sqrt{hvā} / hū$) the cows to be milked. Finally, their bovine metamorphosis is fully realized by the bellowing ($< \sqrt{nav}^i / nū$), so that their songs become definitively bovine beings, and they themselves now correspond to the cows. On the other hand, Indra goes from cow to cowherd and is finally turned into the warrior-singer: he challenges the other praisers–singers at the verbal contest (*vívāc*), where the bovine noises are substituted by verbal speech (*vāc*). Here, too, the iconic effect evoked by the verb *nonuvuḥ*—an intensive form of the perfect stem of the root $\sqrt{nav}^i / nū$ ‘to bellow’—denoting the rhythmical resounding of the animal noise, is produced by redundant sounds that are not only the result of alliteration (e.g. / *mā* / *ma* / *vā* / *āv* / *va* / *av* /) and homoioteleuta (e.g. *purūnām/stotīnām*; *vājebhir/gómadbhir*), but mostly due to polyptota (e.g. *sákhāyah/sákhāyam*, *gāvah/gām*), paranomasias (e.g. *girvanah/gírah*, *gómadbhir/gopate*) and also *āmreḍita* (*suté-sute*). Furthermore, they do not unfold in a single stanza, but occur throughout the whole hymn, giving rise to a web of resounding correspondences, according to a vertical response: they depend on the use of identical terms, which are however morphological differentiated by endings, or, reversely, the same endings are used but combined with a different lexicon or different morphological stems.⁷⁰ Two of these phono-morphological responses are particularly worthy of note: firstly, the term *gír* ‘song’ is

⁶⁹ For the meaning of this term applied to the structure of the R̥gvedic hymns, cf. Jamison 2007: 80ff.

⁷⁰ As regards such rhetorical devices applied to the R̥gvedic poetry, cf. Klein 2000; 2005 and 2006.

recursively mentioned (st. 7; 13; 20; 28), especially as a first constituent of the compound *gīr-vaṇas*, ‘one who desires songs,’ an epithet of Indra and like a *fil rouge*, it weaves itself throughout the composition. The second example is the compound *brāhmavāhas* or ‘one whose vehicle is the sacred formulation’,⁷¹ which is echoed by the *brahmán* or ‘formulator’ and refers to Indra, thus alluding to his mythological counter figure, Bṛhaspati (cf. RV 2.23.1); but above all, this compound highlights the fact that the *brāhman* itself is a device that connects Indra to his comrades, allowing him to move and communicate with them, and that they are closely associated with him. In fact, the second constituent, *-vāhas* ‘vehicle,’ is an example of paranomasia of the term *-vanas* or ‘desire,’ used as the second constituent of *gīr-vaṇas*, thus alluding to the power of attraction of *gīr/brāhman*, that is the power of interconnection based on sonority.⁷² It is worth remembering that, alongside its ritualistic application, the term *brāhman* also refers to a sort of ‘magical formulation.’ In compliance with its Indo-European matrix,⁷³ it denotes the ability to ‘formulate’ utterances, both as linguistic signs and mere sonorous signifiers, thus acting magically on reality. This

⁷¹ Also, in st. 19c with the variant *brāhmavāhastama* ‘one who most has the sacred formulation’.

⁷² The same reference to a sort of seductive effect of the bellowing–songs is also suggested in RV 8.3.18:

*imé hi te kārāvo vāvaśūr dhiyā | viprāso medhāsātaye |
sā tvām no maghavann indra gīrvaṇo | venó ná śṛnudhī hávam || 18 ||*

For these bards, inspired poets, have bellowed for you for the winning of wisdom with their insight.

You, o bounteous Indra longing for songs—like a tracker listen to our call. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 1031)

The verbal form *vāvaśuḥ* may, ambiguously, be the perfect of both the roots *√vāś* ‘to bellow’ and *√vaś* ‘to desire, to wish’ (cf. Kümmel 2000: 478), thus suggesting the theme of desire, developed by the pun *gīr-vaṇas/vená*.

⁷³ The neutral term *brāhman* or ‘magical formulation’ is etymologically ascribable to PIE **b^hrég^h*—‘to formulate’, from which, for example, Old Irish *bricht* ‘magical spell’ is derived. Cf. Pinault 2016. As regards the other meanings of the term in the Vedic textual repertoire apart from the ritualistic and speculative one, especially in relation to heroism, cf. Neri and Pontillo 2014 [2015]: 178.

is an expertise possessed by a poet: Thieme (1952) already argued that the R̥gvedic *bráhmaṇ* is first of all a poetic formulation and that it only assumed a specific ritual value due to the development of the sacerdotal liturgical system. However, if the poet of the pre-Kuru Vedic phase is the king-cowherd, his performative power consists in orienting the clan's herds along the right paths, smashing obstacles, deceiving enemies and enchanting livestock, by means of the 'tongue of the cowherd' and 'songs,' imitating the noises of animals. Thus, in RV 3.38, probably the most debated hymn, a bovine being (st.7), both bull (*vr̥ṣabhá*) and milch-cow (*dhenú*), is defined as 'one whose tongue is a cowherd who surmounts the various forms.' Jamison comments on this verse as follows: "that is, he has (verbal) control over the differentiated forms of the second creation" (cf. fn. 62). The same stanza also mentions the *māyīns*, that is those who are endowed with *māyā́*, the magic power of assuming any form,⁷⁴ probably as an epithet for the poets: 'they all look upon the deeds' (*viśve paśyanti kṛtāni*) of this bovine-morphic being, which exists through every form, and, in this way, they imitate it/him, or better they 'measure out' every form from it/him.⁷⁵ Although it is not clear if this bovine-morphic being is equivalent to Indra, since even though the hymn is devoted to him, he is never named, the reference to "solarship" is found in st. 8, where Savitár, the Impeller of the sunrise, is mentioned. Moreover, *māyā́* as the power to assume any form, also represents the warrior mimetic strategy that is another of Indra's powers: by means of *māyā́* he defeats enemies/demons (e.g. RV 3.34.6; 4.30.21; 5.30.6; 6.44.22) who are equally 'cunning, tricky' as *māyā́vin* (e.g. RV 2.11.9).⁷⁶ It is also most likely that *māyā́*, which here (RV 3.38.7) is attributed to the poets, also implies the ability to reproduce all the 'vocal' forms, voices and noises, as a proteiform skill: this is in fact the warrior-cowherd Indra's power to enchant his herd, modulating his voice into animal noises, thereby

⁷⁴ Cf. Gonda 1959: 118ff.

⁷⁵ Cf. st. 7; the term *māyā́* is a derivative of the root $\sqrt{mā}^2$ 'to measure': cf. Gonda 1959: 118–125. *Contra* Kulikov 2009: 149.

⁷⁶ And also of the Maruts: RV 5.58.2.

fashioning and yoking reality.⁷⁷ And the *brāhman* as a primordial magic spell is the output of such a power.

The cowherdship poetry and the *vrātya* context

It is clear that ritual implications are already present in RV 6.45 ritual, and this hymn, like the other aforementioned stanzas, does not exclusively reflect the proto-Vedic culture, probably because of that trait of homogeneity, hinted at above. However, the functions of Indraic lordship as cowherdship and warfare are well defined and characterised by animal and warrior sonority. On the other hand, although bovine imagery is particularly common in the Indo-European mythological and poetical traditions,⁷⁸ and the cowherd-poet is a recurring figure in manifold ancient literary traditions, beginning from the representation of Apollo and Hermes in the Homeric hymn to Hermes, the bovine–man metamorphosis referring to the role of a poet is greatly emphasized in the *Ṛgvedic* repertoire, especially by means of those phonetical devices that sonorously iconize the bull-poet. One therefore wonders whether such expertise in correlating human and animal utterances, and more generally the human and natural environments, thereby dominating the dangers as a prototypic leader, may be the expression of a specific clanbased social context. A few pieces of evidence allow us to hypothesize that such an anthropo-zoomorphic dimension may be the outcome of those primordial initiation practices which trained the future Indraic chieftain. It is worth recalling that the other mythological entity involved in the *vrātya* practices, associated with Indra, is Rudra; he is committed to instructing the future warrior-cowherds, by means of an ascetic life in the wilderness that also entails zoomorphic prac-

⁷⁷ It may be worth noting that this might allude to the same iconizing effect based on phonetical iteration produced by means of onomatopoeia, as outlined in the *Ṛgvedic* stanzas analyzed above, but a more complex and refined connection is referred to: *māyā* and *māyū*. See also Kulikov 2009: 149.

⁷⁸ Cf. West 2007: 97–98; 184–185; 421; for the relationship between bovine context and heavenly or storm-gods, cf. namely 246.

tices.⁷⁹ Needless to say, this enigmatic figure, too, is associated with the bovine environment: he is a bull (*vr̥ṣabhá*, e.g., RV 2.33.6); the Maruts, Indra's mythological comrades representing the warrior brotherhood, are invoked as *rudríya* or 'offspring of Rudra' (e.g., RV 2.34.10c), and their mother is a cow, Pṛṣni (e.g., in RV 6.66). Finally, Rudra's name, the etymology of which is controversial,⁸⁰ may also be a derivative of the root $\sqrt{\text{rod/rud}}$, meaning 'to cry, to weep,' with reference to animal noises, particularly 'bellowing,' as a sort of a new-born baby/calf cries (Parpola 2016: 328); in addition, the name *rudra* may be cognate of *rudhirá* 'red, bloody,' not only alluding to his violence, but also to his brilliance, just like fire-Agni, and rising sun (Parpola 2016: 327). Thus, he may be the newborn, 'weeping'/'shining' sun: he recalls the image of *yúvan kaví* the 'young *kaví*' who 'shines' like the rising sun in the aforementioned RV 5.45.9. Similarly, in RV 4.3.1, Agni is invoked as *r̥ājan rudrá* (st.1), and in st. 11 the Vala myth and the role of the Aṅgirasas are also mentioned. In RV 4.5.3, Agni *vaiśvānará* is pictured as a turbulent bull (*vr̥ṣabhá túviṣmat*) whose flames are equated to a bull's tongue (st. 10: *vṛṣṇaḥ jihvā*) and correlated to the cow Pṛṣni: Rudra-Agni, 'having found the word hidden like the track of the cow' (3c: *padám ná gór āpagūlham vividvān*), utters the *sāman*—melody. Lastly, in the attestations belonging to the more recent Rgvedic sections, Rudra himself is explicitly equated to the sun in RV 1.43.5:

yáḥ śukrá iva sūryo | hīraṇyam iva rócate | śréṣṭho devānām vásuḥ || 5 ||

He who shines like the blazing sun, like gold, as the best of the gods,
as the good one (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 153)

In the same hymn (st. 4a), he is designated as *gāthapati*, a hapax conventionally translated as 'lord of songs,' and in RV 1.114.4b he is defined as a *kaví*: he is evoked as *vaṅkú kaví* or 'twisting po-

⁷⁹ For this interpretation, cf. e.g., Selva 2019, namely 405, and Lelli 2023.

⁸⁰ Cf. the survey of the interpretations in Parpola 2016: 323–325.

et',⁸¹ deceptive and seductive at the same time, which is a possible reference to that esoteric knowledge, pertaining to the warrior apprenticeship in the wilderness, of which Rudra himself is the preceptor. And his arrow is the weapon for smashing the haters of the *brāhman* (*brahmadviṣ*:- R̥V 10.125.6ab).⁸²

This would mean that the relationship between Indra-kavī, equated to a bull-cowherd, and the bovine environment is not just the fruit of an artful metaphor, aimed at sacralising ordinary verbal expressions: it must have been interpreted in such a way definitively by the development of the Kuru ecumenic liturgy, especially of the *rājasūya*, which is based on the *vrātya* culture inasmuch as it may legitimate the supremacy of the only one—*éka* overlord like sun ascending heaven.⁸³ But, in the pre-Kuru phase, it may mostly be the result of the Rudraic esoteric initiation within the *vrātya* institutions, to which the young males of the proto-Vedic clan-based society were subjected in order to become Indraic *yóga*-chieftains. It is worth noting that a similar initiation practice is attested in relation to a form of *brahmacarya*, that is studentship the purpose of which was to train the future officiant of the *pravargya* rite, the *avānta-radīkṣā*.⁸⁴ During this training, a specific focus was on speech: the young initiate was required to keep silent for a certain period of time before being introduced to the Brahmanical science; moreover, when he would start speaking, he would utter animal noises, as is attested in the famous 'frogs' hymn' (R̥V 7.103), which is a part of the *pravargya* rite.⁸⁵ For example, in st. 3, the term *akḥkhala* is an onomatopoeia imitating the noise made by a frog, probably also with reference to the didactic practice of repeating the sacred texts syllable by syllable (*akṣara*); however, in st. 6, the different ways of

⁸¹ For the interpretation of this expression, cf. Elizarenkova and Toporov 1979, and more recently Lelli 2023.

⁸² For the relationship between Rudra and this R̥gvedic verses, cf. Lelli 2023.

⁸³ For the figure of the lord in the *vrātya* culture, its relationship with Indra and the sun, cf. Dore 2015.

⁸⁴ Cf. van Buitenen 1968; Houben 2000a: 503, 511ff.

⁸⁵ Cf. Jamison 1993; Houben 2000b: 13; Maggi 2017.

uttering are equated with the ability to make specific animal noises on behalf of the future *brahmán*:

*gómāyur éko ajāmāyur ékaḥ | pṛśnir éko hárīta éka eṣām |
samānām nāma bibhrato vírūpāḥ | purutrā vācam pipiśur vādantaḥ || 6 ||*

One of them has a cow's bellow, one a goat's bleat; one is speckled, one green. Bearing the same name but different forms, they ornament their voice in many ways as they speak. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 1013)

Conclusions

The *vrātya* institutions were only partially integrated within the Brahmanical orthopraxy, but the relationship between poetry and zoomorphism, especially correlated to the bovine environment, was incorporated into liturgy, and assimilated within the process of ritualization. Moreover, the Kuru sovereignty is identified with the figure of the cowherd, especially the solar cowherd, but he restricts himself to shining, like the sun, and listening to the sonorous ritual performances. In fact, the ritual performance, already hinted at by a few of the aforementioned R̥gvedic stanzas, consists of versified structures (*ḥkvat* < *ḥc*), and *sāman* or 'melodies' (RV 4.5.3). Their sonority is suggested by means of terms such as *suṣṭubh* or 'well shouting, joyfully sounding' (RV 4.50.5), a compound of *stubh* or 'shout, exultation,' and the root noun of $\sqrt{\text{stobh/stubh}}$, meaning 'to cheer, to shout,' probably the outcome of an enlargement of the root $\sqrt{\text{stav/stu}}$ 'to praise'.⁸⁶ In this sense, it is, on the one hand, in compliance with the Vedic clan-based society's competitive poetry: sonorous expressions confer 'glory, fame' (*śrávas* < PIE **ḱleyos*) on warrior deeds, making them 'audible.' On the other hand, it preludes the development of the Kuru phase, which saw the enhancement of ritual and priestly roles, particularly that of the *udgātṛ*. This singer

⁸⁶ Cf. Gotō 1987: 332–333; Mayrhofer 1992–2001: II, 672.

priest of the *sāman* or ‘melody’ challenges himself by performing *stobhas*, vibrating and sonorous utterances consisting of the repetition of single syllables or interjections with no morphological and syntactic functions, but which are ritually extremely effective. In fact, the phraseology referring to the poet–bovine equivalence is particularly abundant in the Ṛgvedic section other than the family books, especially with reference to the priestly ritual roles of reciter and singer, though only a few examples have been mentioned here. For instance, in RV 10.67, the motif of the Vala myth is enriched with reference to animal noises other than bovine ones, such as the gabbling (*vāvadat*: int. prt.) of geese,⁸⁷ whereas the bellowing Bṛhaspati is both a praiser and a singer:

*hamsaír iva sákhibhir vā vadadbhir | aśmanmāyāni náhanā vyáśyan /
bṛhaspátir abhikánikradad gāḥ | utá prāstaud úc ca vidvām agāyat || 3 ||*

Along with his comrades, who were constantly gabbling like geese, while he was throwing open the fastenings made of stone, while he kept roaring to the cows, Bṛhaspati both started the praise song and struck up the melody, as knowing one. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 1489)

And in RV 1.190, the bull–Bṛhaspati’s tongue is mentioned once again: he is definitely the bellowing leader of the ritual songs, a precursor of the *śrauta udgātṛ*:

*anarvāṇam vṛṣabhám mandrájihvam | bṛhaspátim vardhayā návyam
gāthānyàḥ surúco yásya deváh | āśṛṇvánti návamānasya mártāḥ || 1 ||*

With chants I will strengthen anew the unassailable bull of gladdening tongue, Bṛhaspati, the brightly shining leader of song to whom the gods and the mortals harken as he bellows. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 395)

⁸⁷ Bird noises and bovine milieu are also referred to in the somic hymn RV 9.97.8.

Finally, one may assume that the poetry of cowherdship as an expression of the Indraic lordship of the pre-Kuru phase came to be absorbed within the later ritual context, particularly on account of the priestly role of the *udgātṛ*. It is likewise possible to assume that the bovine environment was also integrated into the classical liturgy: for example, the same *pravargya* rite entails the milking of a milk-cow (Houben 2000a: 504), and the ritual sounds *hiṁ/hiñ* that are frequently uttered during ritual performances, as is once again attested in RV1.164.28ab, referring to the milking scene of the *pravargya* rite:

*gaúr amīmed ánu vatsám miṣántam | mūrdhā naṁ hiññ akṛ ṇon mā
tavā u |*

The cow bellowed after her blinking calf. She made the sound *hiñ* against his head (for him) to bellow. (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014: 357)

Therefore, one may assume that cattle are also present at the ritual scene—not only as sacrificial victims—which appears to confirm the hypothesis that the bovine metaphor is not merely a poetic device but alludes to a specific interconnectedness between human and animal context. But study of the relationship between Vedic ritualism and the bovine environment goes far beyond the scope of this paper.

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