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UFO UpDates Mailing List

Re: Heavenly Vedic Casket and Inverted Trees

From: Lawrie Williams <nemesis@fastinternet.net.au>
Date: Sun, 14 Feb 1999 00:42:51 +1000
Fwd Date: Sat, 13 Feb 1999 13:44:39 -0500
Subject: Re: Heavenly Vedic Casket and Inverted Trees

Electronic Journal Of Vedic Studies,
Vol. 1 (1995), issue 2 (May)

email: ejvs-list@shore.net (C) With the authors and the editors

Michael Witzel, Looking for the Heavenly Casket

To make a start, the editor presents a short article on an interesting topic of Vedic astronomy. The identity of the "Heavenly Bucket" has eluded us so far....

Abstract

Throughout Vedic literature, from the Rgveda to the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, reference is occasionally made to a "heavenly casket" (divya kosa), from which water is poured down towards earth. Several attempts have been made to locate this vessel in the sky. In the present article the relevant materials are presented a new solution is proposed which combines, according to the well tested philological approach, mythological facts with a keen observation of nature.....

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.....descriptions and interpretations of the phenomena of the night sky and its mythology were virtually absent until Kuiper's articles "The Three Strides of Visnu" and "The Heavenly Bucket" where (4) he pointed out that there also is another type of movement, of actual turning of the night sky.

As is now well known, at night, the great Vedic god Varuna holds the world tree, in the form of a large Asvattha, up-side down, its roots pointing upwards and its branches pointing downwards.

"In the unfathomable space king Varuna, he of purified intelligence, upholds the tree's stupa (RtuftS); they [the branches] stood directed downwards. May their rays be fixed in us" (RV 1.24.7) (4). This has become a familiar image that has occupied the imagination of Vedic seers, mystics, and poets for centuries. It occurs, again, in the Katha Upanisad 6.1, Taittiriya Aranyaka 1.11.5 (a text taken over from the Katha school) and in the Bhagavad Gita 15.1.

What does such an image entail? It means, as Kuiper posited, that at night the netherworld is situated above us, in the night sky. The earth thus turns around its horizontal axis or, rather, it slowly shifts its horizon (as "viewed" from the observer's position at the center of earth, sky and netherworld). This might seem a very strange image for us. However, the texts are clear enough and attention may also be drawn to a little known fact: the same idea can be found in a grave in W. Denmark. There, about one hundred years ago, a tomb was excavated in which a tree has been inserted, upside down, in a stone hand mill -- exactly the type of image Kuiper wanted to demonstrate for the Vedic night sky.....

(deletia astronomy)

In this upward region of the night sky another strange feature can be found - at least, in mythology. Kuiper pointed out some 20 years ago that Varuna as well as some other gods turn over or tip over a heavenly vessel, a casket or bucket (kosa) and empty its contents over the earth down beneath it, as can be seen in passages like the following. RV 5.85.3 "Varuna has poured out the cask, with its rim turned downwards, over heaven, earth and the interspace. Thereby the king of the whole world sprinkles the soil, as the rain (sprinkles) the barley." (10) RV 8.72.8 "With the ten (fingers) of Vivasvat, Indra has pulled up the heavenly bucket, with a threefold cord." (11) RV 8.72.10 "They (the hotrs) pour out with obeisance the inexhaustible source that goes round(?) with its bottom upwards (and) its rim downwards". (12).....

If one then were to try to find the heavenly casket in the night time sky, one cannot immediately discover, in the direct vicinity of the pole star anything which looks like a casket or a bucket. What then, could be this apparently "invisible" vessel? Some texts of the AV and of the Upanisads provide the key for an understanding. AV 10. 8.9 (17) runs as follows:

" A bowl (camasa) with orifice downwards, bottom-side up - in it is deposited glory of all forms; there sit together the seven seers, who have become the keepers of it, the great one"....

There is an even clearer version of this AV verse in BAUK 2.2.4 (SB 14.5.2.4) "There is a cup with its mouth below and its bottom up. In it is placed every form of glory. On its rim [tire] sit seven seers. Voice as an eighth is united with prayer (brahman)." [tr. HUME]

(the author goes on to argue that this humming inverted bowl is the big dipper)

.....I have tried to point out that many features of the Vedic Night Sky still are not understood well --and this means that we simply do not understand the meaning of some difficult passages of Vedic mythology, especially of those of the RV. In a wider context, this is of importance, too: If we do not pay attention to the counterclockwise motion of the Milky Way, we are not able to understand some complicated images of Vedic eschatology: why is there a path of the gods and a path of the ancestors, why is Yama's realm is both high up in the night sky and down below the earth as well as in the South. (25)

In short, we have to pay close attention to such images in order to grasp a large part of Vedic mythology and cosmography. Even now, after some 150 years of the study of Vedic texts, our understanding of the Vedic night sky still is in its infancy....

25. See BEI 2, n. 103: "with the ascent of Varuna to the zenith of the night sky, Yama and his paradise also move"; cf. Kuiper, Bliss of Asa, p. 119.

F. B. J. Kuiper,

The Heavenly Bucket, in: India Maior (Fs. Gonda),
Leiden 1972, 144-156. (repr. in: Kuiper, Ancient Indian
Cosmogony (ed. J. Irwin). Delhi: Vikas, 1983)

The Bliss Of Asa, IJ 8, 1964, 96-129. (repr. in:
Kuiper, Ancient Indian Cosmogony (ed. J. Irwin). Delhi:
Vikas, 1983)

The Three Strides Of Visnu, Indological Studies in
Honor of W.N. Brown , New Haven 1962)

In the next issue, a list of microfilms (some 40,000 fols.) made
in the Seventies in various parts of India and Nepal will be
published by M. Witzel. These include some rare Vedic texts
which are in need of study - something that cannot always be
carried out by just one person or at one location alone. It is
hoped that this kind of inventory will stimulate exchange and
cooperation which has, of course, always been extended on a
personal basis between some scholars in the field.....

<http://www.rz.uni-frankfurt.de/home/ftp/pub/titus/public.html>

It will function as a central web site for access to resources of
relevance to Comparatists, Indo-Europeanists and other interested
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