

THE RIGVEDIC SVAYAMVARA? FORMULAIC EVIDENCE

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The form of marriage known as the *svayamvara* or '[maiden's] self-choice' is familiar to every lucky student of introductory Sanskrit whose first experience with Sanskrit literature is the justly celebrated Nala-episode from the Mahābhārata, in which the princess Damayantī exercises such a choice. Yet, although this institution deeply imprints itself on the minds of beginning students who labor over its translation, the evidence for it outside of narratives of the epic and classical period is not as abundant as we might expect. The eight-fold typology of marriage found throughout the dharma texts has no place for the *svayamvara* in its schema, and the Vedic evidence is slight, scattered, and hard to interpret – even though it is likely that the *svayamvara* was inherited from Indo-European and has counterparts in Iranian and other Indo-European societies.¹

The Rig Veda has very little, if any, direct evidence for the *svayamvara*. This is hardly surprising: given its enigmatic style the Rig Veda has very little direct evidence for *anything*. However, close attention to signature words, verbal formulas, and archetypal configurations allows us to assemble a fair amount of indirect evidence for the *svayamvara*, and to conclude that this institution was not only known to the Rig Veda, but that it already had a fixed verbal expression there. Elsewhere (Jamison, forthcoming) I have treated the Rigvedic word *vrā-*. Following a

¹ The most important recent treatment of the *svayamvara* is that of Schmidt 1987, which is fundamental to what follows. Schmidt both states that "In the Veda proper we have no explicit and certain reference to any of the three forms of *svayamvara*" (Schmidt 1987: 76) and that the institution is an inherited one. I discuss some legal and ritual aspects of the *svayamvara* in the context of 'maidenly self-determination' in Jamison 1996a: 236–250, and in Jamison 1999: 227–258 I treat the Greek parallels (especially those in the *Odyssey*). I also give a brief overview of the eight forms of marriage in 1996a: 207–235. On Rigvedic marriage in general and the *svayamvara* in particular, see also Oberlies 1998: 316–325, esp. 319. – Besides the passages treated in this paper and in Jamison forthcoming, note that the wedding of Saranyu in X.17.1 was clearly a *svayamvara* as well.

suggestion of Ickler's (1976: 109–110), I analyze this word as syncopated from a feminine **varā-*, corresponding to masc. *varā-* 'suitor, chooser' belonging to marriage vocabulary, and I suggest that it refers specifically to a "female chooser", i.e. the maidenly protagonist of the *svayaṃvara*. In that paper I examine all the contexts in which *vrā-* occurs, to show that other features of the *svayaṃvara* can be identified in those passages.

The conclusion can be drawn that the *vrā-* is so called because she 'chooses for herself', and that there is already in the language underlying the Rig Veda a fixed expression **svayám sá vṛñīte*² 'she chooses for herself' referring to the maiden's action in an already ritualized social institution.³ In this paper I wish to demonstrate that the Rig Veda knowingly rings changes on the proposed formula in passages describing or alluding to *svayaṃvaras* – even though the formula itself never appears complete on the surface of the text. To anyone familiar with the style of the Rig Veda, this acute awareness on the part of the poets of formulaic deep structure and their clever twisting of it will come as no surprise.

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The most important body of evidence for the Rigvedic *svayaṃvara* is the marriage of Sūryā, daughter of the sun. This mythical marriage occupies a large part of the RV marriage hymn, X.85, as a divine model for human marriage, and it is also frequently mentioned elsewhere in the text, especially in the hymns of Kakṣīvant (I.116–126), one of the most skilled poets in the RV and one who specializes in vivid sketches of female figures. It is no accident that half of the 6 occurrences of *vrā-* are also found in his brief hymn collection. Kakṣīvant seems to have had a particular interest in the *svayaṃvara* and its verbal expression.

Now H.-P. Schmidt, in his sober assessment of the Rigvedic evidence for the *svayaṃvara*, acknowledges but sets aside the testimony of the marriage of Sūryā. Though he agrees "that features of the *vīryaśulka svayaṃvara* have found their reflex in this myth", he argues:

Since here we are completely in the mythological sphere and there is probably some cosmic symbolism behind it, no inferences about human conditions can be drawn from it with great confidence (Schmidt 1987: 78).

² Probably in this order, rather than **sá svayám ...* A glance at Lubotsky's indispensable *Rgvedic Word Concordance* (Lubotsky 1997, s.v.) shows that *svayám* is ordinarily *pāda* initial, and when it cooccurs with a subject pronoun, the pronoun follows. See, e.g., X.27.12 discussed below.

³ On the unsurprising absence of the nominal form *svayaṃvara* before Manu, see Jamison forthcoming, note 22.

This is certainly true: it would be foolhardy to present an anthropological or legal account of exactly how any social institution worked in Vedic India on the basis of the typically cryptic mythological references in the Rig Veda. But one of the striking features of the Sūryā myth in the RV is the way it continually circles around the same fixed verbal elements – elements which recur in later, more prosaic treatments of the institution. This shared formulaic language suggests that the more fanciful mythic treatment in the RV is anchored to the base of an already existing human institution, whose parameters were already fixed.

In what follows I will not attempt to reconstruct the “plot” of the myth, which is somewhat baffling in its details, but will concentrate on its verbal formulations.⁴ Nonetheless, a few words on the participants and other elements are in order. Sūryā’s most constant companions in this adventure are the twin gods, the Aśvins. The Aśvins are sometimes called ‘woosers’ (*vará-*, in other words the masculine equivalent of our putative **vará*, which yielded *vrá*), i.e. assistants to the bridegroom, and also often identified as the groom(s) themselves. Most important, it is their vehicle that serves as the wedding conveyance: the vehicle that conveys the bride home is a central preoccupation in wedding ideology,⁵ and the mounting of the vehicle by the bride symbolizes her choice, as we will see. Other figures besides the Aśvins are sometimes mentioned: Pūṣan as suitor, Agni as some sort of attendant, Soma sometimes as bridegroom, Savitar as bride’s father/officiant, etc. But Sūryā and the Aśvins are the fixtures, whatever the Aśvins’ precise role, and the wedding is quite clearly of svayaṃvara type, in which Sūryā exercises her choice, with the verb *vr-*.

The clearest expression of this is found in a Kakṣivant passage, which I will render awkwardly but literally:

I.119.5cd *á vām patitvám sakhyáya jaḡmúṣī*
 yóṣāvṛṇīta jényā yuvám páti

‘The young girl, of worthy birth (?)⁶, having come to the *husbandship* of you two, for partnership, *chose* you two as *husbands*.’

This is almost ludicrously explicit and straightforward, at least for Rigvedic diction, as if the poet once wanted to lay bare the foundation for his formulaic variations⁷ –

⁴ For discussion see Schmidt 1987: 77–78 and Pischel 1889: 28–29.

⁵ See Jamison forthcoming, with n. 25, and Jamison 1994: passim; 1996a: 222–226.

⁶ The meaning and etymology of the word *jénya* are unclear (see EWA, s.v.): the two most likely candidates are ‘worthy to be born, noble’, from $\sqrt{jan-}$, and ‘worthy to be won’, from $\sqrt{ji-}$, neither of which is free of difficulty linguistically. In this context *yóṣā ... jényā* reminds me of a phrase containing *vrá-* in nearby I.126.5 (also a Kakṣivant poem): *viśyāḥ ... vráḥ*, where it seems to refer marriageable girls belonging to the proper clans, and so I am inclined towards the first alternative. See Jamison forthcoming. Cf. also *jánya-*, literally ‘belonging to the people’, which comes to mean ‘groomsman’ (already in RV IV.38.6, very clearly in AV XI.8.1–2).

though of course since Soma is elsewhere the bridegroom, the clarity of this passage may be illusory. The postulated verb of my formula, *vṛṇīte* ‘chooses’, is here, with a female as subject, and the object is the clear *pātī* ‘[two] husbands’, further specified by *pativám* ‘husbandship’ in the preceding *pāda*.

The all-important chariot of the Aśvins (*yuvāyújaṃ rátham* ‘chariot yoked by you two’) is the subject of the first half of the verse. And now we come to the first set of variations on our basic formula, those involving the chariot. As I noted above, the “mounting” of the chariot is one of the most significant acts in the ancient Indian wedding, and it is given extended treatment in the *gṛhya sūtras* and in narrative literature (Jamison 1996a: 222–226). The Rigvedic wedding hymn (X.85) has more to say about the wedding vehicle than any other single element of the marriage (probably including the bride and groom). In the Sūryā myth, her mounting of the chariot is regularly described, as in the following Kakṣivant passage:

I.118.5 *ā vām rátham yuvatís tiṣṭhad*
 átra juṣṭvī narā duhitá sūryasya

‘The young woman, the daughter of the Sun, *mounted the chariot* of you two, you men of mark, taking pleasure in it.’

Cf. I.116.17 (also Kakṣivant), I.34.5, I.167.5–6, V.73.5, VI.63.5, VIII.8.10, as well as X.85.12, where she mounts an even more characteristic wedding vehicle, *ánas-* ‘wagon’.

But in addition to these straightforward descriptions of this action, we have a group of passages in which Sūryā does not ‘mount’, but rather ‘chooses’ the chariot.

I.117.13 *yuvó rátham duhitá sūryasya*
 sahá śriyá nāsatyāvṛṇīta

‘The daughter of the Sun *chose the chariot* of you two, Nāsatyas, along with [your] splendour.’

IV.43.2 *rátham kám āhur dravádaśvam āśúṃ*
 yám sūryasya duhitāvṛṇīta

[Aśvin hymn] ‘Which *chariot* do they call the swift one with fleet horses, which the daughter of the sun *chose*?’

On the surface, this expression seems to present us with a picture of Sūryā in an automobile show-room, shopping for a car, a somewhat comical image. But clearly in these “*chose your chariot*” variants we have a conflation of formulas: the “chariot” from the mounting formula (*sá rátham átiṣṭhad*), the “choose” from the self-choice itself. This combination is indicative of two things: 1) the central importance

⁷ For the likely reason for this unusual clarity, see discussion of I.119.3 below.

of the vehicle at the wedding: to “choose” the chariot is to choose its owner as husband, 2) the utter familiarity and banality of the *svayám (sá) X pátiṃ vṛñīte* formula: ‘she herself chooses X as husband’ must have been so embedded in the rhetorical culture that it can be played upon by poets. This is what I mean by “formulaic slippage”, the substitution of a non-synonymous term, which is nonetheless part of the cultural complex in question (“chariot” for “husband”), i.e. the figure known as “metonymy”. This can only work if the verb *vṛñīte* with feminine subject is sufficient by itself to signal the meaning ‘marriage’.⁸

We get a sort of double slippage in another “choice” passage:

VII.69.3c *ví vāṃ rátho vadhvā yádamānáḥ ...*

VII.69.4ab *yuvóḥ śríyam pári yóṣāvṛñīta*
sūro duhitā ...

‘Your *chariot*, being united with the bride ...’

‘The daughter of the sun *chose* the splendour of you two.’

The chariot, already the substitute for the husband in the “choose the chariot” passages, has an almost sexual role in 3c: it *unites* with the bride. Its substitute in turn is the *śrí-* of 4a, object of the signature verb ‘choose’, while the Aśvins hover in pronominal oblique cases. Note that *śrí-* was also found, in conjunction with the Aśvins and their chariot, in I.117.13, where it was a sort of secondary object (‘she chose the chariot along with the splendour’) in the instrumental.⁹ So we have a sequence of substitutions for the object of ‘chose’ in the *svayaṃvara* formula:

pátiṃ → *rátham* → *śríyam*.

⁸ There is a different play on the mounting formula in another passage:

VIII.22.1 *ó tyám ahva á rátham*
adyá dáṃsiṣṭham útáye |
yám aśvínā suhavā rudravartanī
ásūryáyai tastháthuḥ ||

I have called upon this most wonderful *chariot* today for help,

Which, o Aśvins, easy to call, following Rudra’s course, *you two mounted for Sūryā*.

On one level, this simply describes the prior mounting of the Aśvins in preparation for their journey to Sūryā’s *svayaṃvara*, but given the frequency of the formula ‘Sūryā (subject) mounted the chariot of the Aśvins (oblique)’, I think we can also see here a mirror-image formulaic play, with the grammatical identity of the protagonists switched: ‘the Aśvins (subject) mounted the chariot for Sūryā (oblique).’ For another example in which abstract grammatical categories are manipulated in formulaic play, see Jamison 1998: 296–298.

⁹ The word *śrí-* is also found elsewhere in the chariot mounting formula: I.116.17 (chariot mounting in pāda a), pāda d: *sám u śriyá nāsatyā sacethe*; VI.63.5 *ádhi śriyé duhitā sūryasya, rátham tasthau purubhujā śatótim*. That *śrí-* can refer specifically to the charms of the suitor/bridegroom is suggested by the compound *márya-śrí-* ‘having the splendour of a dashing young man/suitor’ (II.10.5). As we will see below, in the discussion of X.27.12, *márya-* specifically refers to the suitors attending a *svayaṃvara*.

It is also worth observing that in almost all of these passage *avṛṇīta* is pāda final: this is a feature it shares with five of the six occurrences of *vṛá-* and is another reason to connect the two words. The two references to the Aśvins as ‘woosers’ (*vará*) in the wedding hymn are also pāda final (X.85.8c, 9b). The placement of these three derivatives of the same root *vṛ-* in the prominent pāda- (and usually half-verse-) final position highlights the central theme: the *choice*.

Formulaic slippage of another sort can be identified elsewhere in the Sūryā passages. In the wedding hymn Sūryā never chooses anyone or anything, but the verb is not absent from the hymn – it is just assigned elsewhere.

X.85.14 *yád aśvinā pṛchámānāv áyātaṃ*
 tricakréṇa vahatúṃ sūryáyāḥ |
 vísve devá ánu tád vām ajānan
 putráḥ pitárāv avṛṇīta pūṣá ||

X.85.15ab *yád áyātaṃ śubhas patī*
 vareyám sūryám úpa

‘When, Aśvins, asking (for her for yourselves), you drove with your three-wheeled [chariot] to the wedding of Sūryā,

All the gods assented to this of you two; Pūṣan, the son, *chose* [you two] as fathers.’

‘When you drove, o lords/husbands of beauty, to Sūryā
to the choosing/to choose/woo.’

The 3rd sg. imperfect *avṛṇīta*, regularly used with Sūryā as subject (see passages above), has the apparently irrelevant Pūṣan as its subject here, but the appropriate objects, the Aśvins, in a different kinship role (fathers) (14d *pitárāv avṛṇīta pūṣá*). The verb is sandwiched between two occurrences of Sūryā’s name (14b, 15b), however, and the desired role, ‘husband’, surfaces in the next pāda (15a) in the vocative *patī*, which is probably used in its more general value ‘lord’ here (though since the root noun *śúbh-* is feminine, ‘husband’ is not out of the question). The “choice” motif is again asserted in the pseudo-infinitive *vareyám* (15b), to a rare verb *vareyá-*, derived from *vṛ-* ‘choose’, which means specifically ‘woo’. Sūryā is directly adjacent to this word and in the same case. So, though Sūryā is not the agent of either of these verbal forms, the lexical associations bring the maidenly self-choice to mind.

An even more distant play on the formula is found in another Kakṣīvant passage, which contains the Aśvins, their chariot, the choice, and the journey – but not Sūryā, at least directly.

I.119.3 *yuvór áha pravaṇé cekite rátho*
 yád aśvinā váhathaḥ sūrím á váram

‘Your chariot keeps appearing in precipitous motion, when, Ásvins,
you convey the patron at will.’¹⁰

The familiar elements – chariot and Ásvins – are there, as we have seen them in other Kakṣivant passages (I.116.17, 117.13, 118.5), and the clearest example of the self-choice formula, the almost crudely straightforward I.119.5 which we examined above, occurs two verses later. But here, after the verb *váhathaḥ*, the standard verb used for the wedding journey and indeed for the wedding itself, the pāda ends with the rather baffling *sūrím á váram* ‘the patron at will / a choice thing to the patron’, which has nothing to do with the myth in question. Or rather, it has nothing to do with the myth *semantically*, but it encodes the two missing elements phonologically: *váram*, of course, is the “choice” part of the svayaṃvara. Note that it is placed in pāda-final position, just as *avṛṇīta* usually is, as well as *vrá-*. And *sūrím* is a close phonological match to the expected *sūryám*. In fact the immediately following preverb *á* almost invites a scrambling and reassemblage of the phonemes:

sūrím á → *sūri-á-m*¹¹

That this phrase is probably a play on the Sūryā myth was suggested already by Oldenberg (1909, ad loc.), and Geldner goes so far as to interpret *sūrím* as a feminine (‘die Herrin’) in its play with Sūryā. This seems unnecessary: Kakṣivant is not working on the level of semantics and reference here, but that of phonology. This devilish little encoding of the key figure and key verb of the myth may account for his blunt directness two verses later. Having shown how subtly he can allude to the theme, he provides the implicit answer to the riddle, for those too obtuse to have noticed.

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Let us now leave the dossier of passages concerning Sūryā’s self-choice, in order to treat at length the formulaic evidence in a non-mythical passage that has been taken as referring to a svayaṃvara (rightly, in my opinion).¹²

X.27.12 *kíyatī yóṣā maryató vadhūyóḥ*
 páripṛitā pányasā váryeṇa |
 bhadrá vadhúr bhavati yát supésāḥ
 svayám śá mitráṃ vanute jáne cit ||

¹⁰ Or ‘a choice thing to the patron’.

¹¹ Keep in mind that *sūryá-* is ordinarily read trisyllabically, i.e. as *sūriyá-*.

¹² See e.g. Geldner 1951, ad loc.; Oberlies 1998: 319, n. 826.

This verse is the second of a pair that contrast the fortunes of an undesirable girl and a desirable one on the marriage market. Verse 11 concerns the “flawed girl given in marriage” (on which see Jamison 1996b: 197–199) and the possible recourse for those who have been duped by her father. The last pāda (11d) identifies those unfortunates as *yá īm vāhāte yá īm vā vareyāt* ‘who will marry her or who will woo her’ (with the *vareyá-* we met in X.95.15). The favored maiden in vs. 12 by contrast is described

‘How different is the maiden, gratified all around / on all sides by an admirable (gift) worthy to be chosen, from a bride-seeking (man) from among the young bloods.

She becomes a fortunate bride, when she is well-adorned. She wins herself an ally/friend/spouse in public.’

Geldner already suggested that *cd* concerns the “Gattenselbstwahl”. However, Schmidt disputes this interpretation.

The inference to be drawn from the last pāda is not that the woman makes the choice independently but rather that she attracts suitors also from foreign places through her beauty. The praiseworthy gift in the second pāda refers to the brideprice or morning-gift, and this indicates rather that she goes to the highest bidder. (Schmidt 1987: 77.)

I think, however, that the verbal clues in this verse point strongly to the *svayaṃvara*, not simply to the ordinary betrothal of an especially attractive maiden. Consider first the *páripṛitā* of pāda b. This combination of preverb and verb is uncommon, and the preverb surely contributes to the semantics of the verbal expression. The implication seems to be that she is ‘gratified’ or ‘wooed’ on all sides, that there are suitors surrounding her, competing for her favor. The presence of more than one of them is suggested by the hapax adverb *marya-tás*, whose nuance seems to be ‘from among the maryas’. The other occurrence of *páripṛita-* confirms my analysis, describing an ally (*mitráḥ*) who is equally beloved to all sides (I.190.6b: ... *páripṛito ná mitráḥ*).¹³ The compound *pariprī-* (IX.72.1) likewise indicates a circle of friends surrounding soma: it is emphasized that there are a number of them (1d: *puruṣtutásya káti cit pariprīyaḥ*).¹⁴

Pāda c of X.27.12 seems to reflect the “display” motif of the *svayaṃvara*: she becomes a fortunate bride when she is *well-adorned*. As I have discussed elsewhere (Jamison 1999: 248–249; Jamison, forthcoming): the girl to be married at a classical *svayaṃvara* is richly adorned and ritually displayed to the suitors before her choice is made.

¹³ Cf. Schmidt 1968: 75: ‘wie ein allseits geliebter Vertragsfreund’; Brereton 1981: 41: ‘like an ally who is universally dear’.

¹⁴ Scarlata (1999: 337–338) first renders the compound as ‘rundum erfreuend, rundum erfreut’, but considers this equivalent merely to “sehr lieb”, but the burden of proof lies on those who would empty the preverb of its lexical meaning.

But it is pāda d, through its verbal configuration, that gives the strongest evidence for the svayaṃvara in this verse: the pāda-initial *svayám* with the verb *vanute* ‘wins (for herself)’, which is phonologically, morphologically, and semantically similar to the expected *vṛñīte*.

d: *svayám sá mitráṃ vanute jáne cit*

The underlying presence of the root *vṛ-* ‘chose’ has already been signalled by the pāda-final *vareyát* in the immediately preceding companion verse, 11d, and by the pāda-final *váryeṇa* ‘[gift] worthy to be chosen’ in the first half line (12b).

11d: ... *vareyát*

12b: ... *váryeṇa*

12d: *svayám ... vanute ...*

Just as in X.85.14–15 a web of verbal echoes imposes the verb phrase **svayám sá vṛñīte*, which remains tantalizingly non-overt.

We must, however, determine what the remainder of this pāda contributes to the picture: the object *mitráṃ* and the locative phrase *jáne cid*, for it has been taken as evidence against the svayaṃvara interpretation. Schmidt (1987: 77) translates ‘she wins herself an ally even among the foreign people’, and Brereton (1981: 33) similarly ‘She wins for herself a spouse even among [another] people.’ But the “foreign” or “another” is not expressed, nor is it a feature of the regular semantics of the locative of the stem *jána-* ‘people’. Instead, on the one hand, *jáne* (without further qualifying adjective) is regularly used of the community or body of people among whom fame (of mortals, gods, or deeds) is proclaimed or procured. Cf. e.g.

VII.62.5 *á no jáne śravayatam yuvānā*

‘Make us famous among the people, o youths.’

X.39.5 *purāṇá vāṃ vīryà prá bravā jáne*

‘I will proclaim your ancient manly deeds among the people.’

(Cf. IX.61.28, X.22.1–2, etc.) The people among whom we proclaim or receive fame are presumably not foreign or other ones, but “our” people, broadly conceived.¹⁵ In this sense *jáne* can almost be translated ‘in public’, and in X.27.12 it may convey the very public nature of a svayaṃvara. One is reminded of the insistent refrain of II.12: *sá janāsa índraḥ* ‘That, people, is Indra’, in which the *jána-* ‘people’ are the required audience for the extravagant enumeration of Indra’s mighty deeds and qualities.

On the other hand, our phrase cannot be separated from the occurrences of the phrase *mitrá- ná jáne* in the RV, a topic which requires a digression. This phrase is several times used of Agni:¹⁶

¹⁵ At its broadest, this is humans as opposed to gods: *mānuṣe jáne* (cf. I.48.11, V.14.2, V.21.2, VI.16.1, VIII.64.10).

II.4.1 *mitrá iva yó didhiṣáyyo bhūd*
 devá ádeve jáne jātávedāḥ

‘Who, *like an ally*, has become one desirable to be placed, as god,
 among the god-directed *people*, Jātavedas.’

VIII.23.8 *mitráṃ ná jáne súdhitam ṛtávani*

‘*Like an ally* well-placed among the truthful *people*.’

In the first instance this must refer to Agni’s role as go-between, as messenger between gods and men: he is not really *of* us because he is a god, but he lives among us as the most visible representative of the gods on earth, the living embodiment of our alliance with them. So he is *placed* among the people, as “guest of the nation” – hostage or ambassador, as you please

But Agni in this role can then be assimilated to other types of go-betweens, such as those that negotiate marriages, and Agni as Mitra/mitra is specifically associated with marriage, as in the following passage:

V.3.2 *añjánti mitráṃ súdhitam ná góbhīr*
 yád dámpatī sámanasā kṛṇóṣi

‘They anoint [you] with cows[’ milk] *like* a well-placed *ally*, when you make the household pair of one mind.’¹⁷

And other gods can be compared to Agni in this role (who is in turn being compared to Mitra), as in the following passage, where Bṛhaspati (=Agni) = Mitra:

X.68.2 *jáne mitró ná dámpatī anakti*

‘[Bṛhaspati], *like* [Agni in his role as] *ally among the people*,
 [ceremonially] anoints the household pair.’

The fire in these passages must be specifically the fire around which the wedding ceremony takes place.

¹⁶ There is also a curious mixture of the two usages in a passage referring to Indra:

X.22.1ab *kúha śrutá índraḥ kásmīn adyá*
 jáne mitró ná śrūyate ...

‘Where is Indra famed? Among what people is he today being famed like Mitra/an ally? ...’

X.22.2 *ihá śrutá índro asmé adyá, stáve ...*
 mitró ná yó jáneṣv á, yáśaś cakré ...

‘Here is Indra famed; among us today is he praised ...

Like Mitra/an ally he has made his own glory among the peoples ...’

We have the full phrase *jáne(ṣu) mitró ná* in two adjacent verses, but there seems to be no reference to Agni, even indirectly. Instead the emphasis is on fame among the people, as in the first set of passages discussed.

¹⁷ See Brereton 1981: 31–32 on this passage, on X.68.2, and the usage generally. Also Schmidt 1968: 218–219 and Geldner 1951, ad X.68.2.

This digression allows us now to understand the purport of X.27.12d *svayám śá mitráṃ vanute jáne cit* ‘she wins herself an ally/alliance among the people’. On the one hand, the *mitrá* she wins/chooses may be the bridegroom himself or the institution of marriage, and the *jáne* is the public before which she performs her choice. On the other, we may have another instance of metonymy: she wins the “ally among the people”, i.e. the ceremonial marriage fire, which stands for the marriage itself and indeed for the groom.¹⁸

Thus, the cumulative evidence from X.27.12 depicts a formal, ritualized scene: a well-decorated bride-to-be, wooed by many, of whom one is favored, chooses for herself a husband in front of a company of people and gains a wedding at the ceremonial fire. The formal self-choice which lies behind this verse is signalled by verbal cues. As in the Sūryā passages discussed before, an underlying **svayám śá X pátiṃ vṛñite* has invited formulaic variation and verbal play, and this verbal play is again indirect evidence for the fixed, stereotyped nature of the formula, hence of the reality of the institution it designates.

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I will end with a little coda, a different and very distant possible twist on our formula, by returning to Sūryā’s self-choice. As we saw, this is by far the most prominent marriage in the Rig Veda and provides the clearest evidence for the svayaṃvara in that text. We also saw that the constant features of this myth are the bride, Sūryā, and the twin gods, the Aśvins, who fulfill several different, sometimes incompatible roles. As is well known, the Aśvins have counterparts elsewhere in the Indo-European world, namely the Greek Dioskouroi ‘divine twins’. The principal woman in their lives is their (half-)sister Helen,¹⁹ and they in fact play an important role in her marriage (at least in some sources), a marriage which seems to have been of a svayaṃvara type (again, in some sources).²⁰ In the fragmentary Hesiodic Catalogue of Women, there is a long account of the wooing of Helen, with a list of her suitors,²¹ and Kastor and Polydeukes appear several times as the recipient of envoys from the hopefuls (fr. 198, 199) and once (fr. 197) as attempting to impose a particular match. In Euripides’s *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the account of Helen’s

¹⁸ We might also keep in mind that, like Agni, a god set among mortals as hostage or ambassador, the wife-to-be is about to be placed in an alien household as the symbol of an alliance between two separate groups (her family and that of her bridegroom). See Jamison 1996a: 255.

¹⁹ On the Dioskouroi in general and this relationship in particular, see Gantz 1993: 318–328.

²⁰ See Gantz 1993: 564–567. Also Oberlies 1993: 175–176 and n. 22, for brief remarks on the Greek/Indic parallels.

²¹ See West 1985: 114–119; Merkelbach & West 1967: fr. 196–204.

multiple, competing suitors (49–71) ends with her father giving her permission to *choose* the one she loved:

IA 68–71 δίδωσ' ἐλέσθαι θυγατρὶ μνηστήρων ἕνα,
 ὅτου πνοαὶ φέροισεν Ἀφροδίτης φίλαι
 ἢ δ' εἴλεθ' ὅς σφε μήποτ' ὄφελεν λαβεῖν,
 ἸΜενέλαον.

'He granted to his daughter *to choose/take*²² the one of the suitors,
 Towards whom the dear breath of Aphrodite carried (her).
 She *chose/took* the one who ought never to have been taken –
 Menelaos.'

It is not merely that Helen is given a choice in this admittedly late text. She seems *etymologically* to be “the chooser”. In a Lakonian inscription, dated probably to late 7th century, with a dedication to Menelaos and Helen, her name is spelled with initial digamma (φελεναί).²³ Thus, her name is likely derived from the same IE root (**uelh₁*) as Skt. *vr̥h̥itē*. So the Vedic trio of the maiden Sūryā, whose only function is *to choose* her husband, and the Aśvins may be matched on the Greek side by Helen “the chooser” and the Dioskouroi. If so, not only the institution but the phraseology for it reaches back into the greatest antiquity.

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²² Unfortunately ἐλέσθαι is not etymologically related to *vr̥h̥itē*.

²³ See Jeffery 1990, Pl. 75, no. 2, with transcription, p. 417 (Lakonia 3a), and description and dating of the object, p. 446 (3a).

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