

of Uśanā Kāvya (a name with a shadowy attestation also in Avestan mythology), to receive some aid or advice, preliminary to slaying Śuṣṇa, the often-mentioned opponent of Kutsa.

Indra has a number of other named adversaries. In one striking whiff of a narrative, Indra, aided by Viṣṇu in some versions, shoots a boar named Emuṣa, enabling him to acquire a special mess of rice porridge hidden in or behind a mountain (see esp. VIII.77; also VIII.69.14–15, I.61.7). This myth is further developed in Vedic prose. Another myth with more presence in later texts involves Indra's slaying of Namuci by beheading him (e.g., V.30.7–8). In the later versions Indra accomplishes this by trickery, and part of the trick (using the foam of the waters as weapon) is already mentioned once in the R̥gveda (VIII.14.13). The names of other victims of Indra include Śambara, Pipru, Dhuni and Cumuri, and Varcin, inter alia. The details of these battles are too sketchy to provide much in the way of narrative mythology.

Like a number of other gods, Indra has his characteristic draft-animals, and his are especially prominently featured in the text. His pair of fallow bays (*hārī*) conveys him everywhere, especially to and from the sacrifice. They have their own food offered to them at the sacrifice (roasted grain, see, e.g., III.35), and hymns were even devoted to a libation made when the pair was hitched up for the return journey after the sacrifice (see I.61–63). The mention of the fallow bays is sufficient to signal that Indra is present in the context, and *hārivant* “possessing the fallow bays” is a standing epithet of Indra.

#### E. AGNI “FIRE”

The word *agnī* is both the common noun meaning “fire” and the name of the god who is deified fire. As with *sóma* (see below), it is often difficult to draw the line between these uses. The sacrificial system of the R̥gveda (and later Vedic texts), like that of the cognate Old Iranian Avestan texts, is focused around the ritual fire. The sacrificial ground is defined by the presence of sanctified fire(s), oblations are made into them, and the gods and priests gather round them. Thus, first and foremost, Agni is the god always present at our ritual performances and the immediate recipient of our offerings. He is the most prominent of the R̥gvedic gods after Indra, and all the Family Books and most of the smaller bardic collections open with their Agni hymns.

Agni as ritual fire is both recipient of oblations in his own right and the conduit of oblations destined for other gods, which are offered into the ritual fire. He is therefore regularly called the mouth of the gods, and his role as the middleman between the human offerers and divine recipients is often emphasized. The flames and especially the smoke of the fire carry the oblations to heaven, but also, perhaps more often, serve as a means for the gods to come to earth to our sacrifice: Agni is said to be the conveyor of the gods many, many times in the text. He is a middleman in another sense, as a *god* who nonetheless dwells intimately among *mortals*. For us

he is both ally and messenger to the more distant gods, and since he is not one of us but a divinity, he is viewed as and often called our guest.

But the ritual fire is not the only form of Agni. The poets emphasize both the divine aspects of Agni and his purely physical form, often intermingling references to different forms of fire in the same hymn. As a god he is often identified with the sun, the celestial form of fire: blazing hot, shining bright, and appearing at the same time of day, namely dawn when the sun rises and the ritual fire is kindled. But the fire on our sacrificial ground is also clearly kin to the fire on our domestic hearth; indeed in later śrauta ritual the fire from which the other ritual fires are taken out is called the Gārhapatya or “householders’ (fire).” Agni is therefore also praised for his contribution to daily life and the pleasures of home and family.

The potentially destructive aspects of fire are not forgotten, however. Many of the most inventive descriptions in Agni hymns are of the wild, uncontrollable rampages of forest fire, spreading across the land and “eating” everything in its path. We seek to harness this destructive power of fire, to turn it against our enemies and other threats to our safety, and Agni, sometimes with the epithet *rakṣohán* “demon-smasher,” is urged to turn his relentless flames against opponents we name. A subtype of destructive fire is the funeral fire, the “flesh-eating” fire of cremation, which is both welcomed and feared (see esp. X.16).

The paradoxical nature of physical fire also provides some part of the god Agni’s personal qualities. That fire is fueled by plants, especially wood, contributes to the belief that Agni lives concealed within the plants, even very juicy ones, until his birth. Agni also comes to be identified with a minor divinity going back to Indo-Iranian times, Apām Napāt “child of the waters,” who was probably originally separate—a glowing fiery being concealed and nurtured in the waters, probably configured in part as lightning.

The creation or birth of the ritual fire from the kindling sticks, his parents, is a major subject in Agni hymns, with intricate descriptions of the first stirrings of flame and smoke as the friction of the kindling sticks produces sparks that finally catch. The just-born Agni is depicted as a tender babe, who quickly grows to become stronger than his parents and to devour the plants from which he was born.

Many aspects of Agni are expressed through the variety of names and epithets applied to him. Agni is Jātavedas as the fire established at the beginning of the rite that continues to its end. As an unbroken presence in the ritual, Agni Jātavedas also oversees the succession of generations, ensuring that a family’s lineage will continue. Agni Vaiśvānara is the fire become the sun. As the sun, this fire sees everything and governs everyone. This form of Agni is especially associated with the king, who like the sun stands above and reaches all beings. The word *vaiśvānarā* means the one “relating to all men.” Agni is also Tanūnapāt and Narāśaṃsa. One or another of these names—or sometimes both (I.13.2–3)—appear in the Āprī hymns, which are recited in an animal sacrifice, and they both occur outside of the Āprī hymns as well. The word *tánūnápāt* describes Agni as the “son of himself,” and *naráśaṃsa* as the one “who embodies men’s praise” of the gods. As Agni Kravyād,

the “flesh-eating fire,” Agni is the fire of the funeral pyre that consumes the body of the deceased and transports it to heaven. Mātariśvan is sometimes identified as Agni himself, but he is more properly the one who brought the fire from heaven.

Agni participates in almost no narrative mythology, in strong contrast to Indra. Besides the very sketchy account of Mātariśvan’s theft of fire from heaven, there is one, ritually connected, tale—of Agni’s flight from the sacrificial ground and his self-concealment in the waters, to avoid his ritual role as bearer of oblations to the gods. The gods find him in his hiding place and coax him back by promising him a share of the oblations. This myth is treated most fully in the late sequence X.51–53, but there are glancing mentions of it elsewhere. The story may have in part been generated by the conflation of Agni with the originally distinct divine figure Apām Napāt “Child of the Waters,” on which see II.35.

## F. SOMA

Like Agni, Soma is both a god and a crucial ritual substance, and the boundary between them is not always clear. As has already been discussed, the juice of the soma plant (whatever that may have been), pressed from the plant and elaborately prepared, is the chief offering of the most important complex of rituals, the soma sacrifice. This sacrificial substance and its ritual preparation go back to the Indo-Iranian period, since Avestan attests to the substance *haoma*, an exact cognate to Sanskrit *sóma*, and to its pressing and offering (see especially the so-called Hōm Yašt, Y 9–10). In both traditions the substance is also deified.

The “Soma Maṇḍala” of the Ṛgveda, Maṇḍala IX, contains 114 hymns dedicated to Soma Pavamāna “Self-Purifying Soma.” These hymns focus entirely on a single ritual moment, the pressing of the plant, the straining of the juice by pouring it over a sheep’s fleece to trap the impurities (twigs and the like), the mixing of the juice first with water and then with milk, and the pouring into containers prior to offering it to the gods, especially Indra. These actions are often presented metaphorically, with Soma conceptualized as a king making a royal progress across the filter and into the cups, a progress that can be compared to the conquering of territory. Or as the Sun in his journey through the cosmos. Or, quite often, as a bull racing to mate with a herd of cows, who represent the milk with which the juice will be mixed. Soma is thus regularly presented as having agency in the many descriptions of the purification of the liquid.

Besides this dynamic deification especially characteristic of the IXth Maṇḍala, there is little narrative mythology involving the god Soma. The most important tale is the theft of Soma from heaven, where he was confined in a citadel guarded by an archer called Kṛśānu. A falcon stole him and brought him to earth, successfully evading serious injury from Kṛśānu’s arrow, to deliver him to Manu, the first sacrificer. This exploit is mentioned a number of times in the text, but is most fully described in IV.26–27.

Though one characteristic of Soma in later texts, a commonplace already in middle Vedic, is his identification with the moon, this equation is only attested in