

Progress Report for the SNF Project “Vedic Places of Worship: A Study of Their Layout and Spatial Organisation”, 1st year (nov. 2011-nov. 2012)

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The first year of the project started by an extensive review of the epigraphical attestations of Vedic rituals. 3'698 inscriptions gathered in various corpuses of Indian epigraphical material were studied.¹ This survey turned up what seems to be the oldest references to Vedic ritual in India. These are: 1. the Nānāghāṭ cave inscription, 2. the Musanagar brick inscription, 3. the Hāthi-bāḍā inscription and 4. the Hāthīgumphā inscription.² These inscriptions bear no date but have paleographically been referred to a period between 150 BC (no. 2) to 50 BC (no. 3). One must however be cautious with the paleographic dating of such material, which should be allowed to be roughly 100 years younger than the estimates given by the editors.³ The date of 1. – an inscription bearing information crucial to our project – can reliably be assigned to *ca.* 60 BC. Taking into consideration the recommended margin of error in the case of inscriptions 2, 3 and 4, we may conclude that Vedic ritual starts to be historically attested in India around 60 BC.

As a matter of fact, this estimate is not based on the entire epigraphic material available in the Indian subcontinent and an older mention of Vedic ritual may exist somewhere. The amount of data reviewed is nevertheless hefty enough to assert that the date of 60 BC is a *terminus a quo* for the presence of remains of Vedic rituals in Indian soil.

The information gathered during this survey has been put into a relational database. This tool allowed to make statistical evaluations of the data and our analyses revealed a number of hitherto unknown facts about the history of Vedic ritual. With relationship to the aims of our project, the salient discoveries are the following.

The inscriptions mention 43 different types of *śrauta* rituals. The most frequently represented is, by far, the horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*) with 75 occurrences out of a total of 222 references to solemn sacrifices found in the survey (see Fig. 1, p. 3). The second most attested rite is the *vājapeya* (21 occurrences), followed by a particular form of eleven day *soma* ritual called *paunḍarīka* and the basic type of *soma* sacrifice known as *agniṣṭoma* (13 occurrences each). With the exception of *agniṣṭoma*, these rituals share an important characteristic: they have special ties to the royalty, both historically and structurally. The ideal sacrificer of an *aśvamedha* is a victorious king. Both the *vājapeya* and the *paunḍarīka* include material and symbolical features associating them to the military order.

These privileged links with kingship can be explained by the fact that 84% of the data related to Vedic rituals found in our survey comes from a special type of inscription called *agrahāra*, which are inscribed copper plates registering donations made by kings to Brahmins. These *agrahāras* always start with a description of the lineage and the biography of the donor king and continue with information about the donee and the donation. We are thus in the framework of a discourse produced by members of the royalty, not always free from panegyric intent.

This bias can however not obviate the fact that references to *śrauta* rituals overwhelmingly occur in the initial portions describing the donor, whereas the sections dedicated to the donee, if they give any information about his religious activities at all, mention in the vast majority only his performance of *grhya* sacrifices. This peculiarity, coupled with other facts found in the course of our investigation, indicates that the nobility gradually appropriated the solemn rituals, up to the point of becoming their sole sponsor. This taking of control of *śrauta* sacrifice by the martial elite started during the period which separated the fall of the Maurya empire (181 BC) from the advent Sātavāhana dynasty (*ca.* 100 BC). It peaked during the Gupta/Vākāṭaka age (280–550 AD) and surged now and then some centuries

¹ *Epigraphia Indica* Vols. 1–42 (1892–1978), *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* Vol. 2, Part 1 (1969), *ditto* Vol. 3

² Respectively edited by G. BÜHLER, *Archaeological Survey of West India*, Vol. 5 (1883), pp. 59–74; A. S. ALTEKAR, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 30 (1953–54), pp. 118–120; D. R. BHANDARKAR, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 22 (1933–34), pp. 198–205; K. P. JAYASWAL & R. D. BANERJI, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 20 (1929–30), pp. 71–89.

³ See Richard SALOMON, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages*, New York [etc.]: Oxford UP, 1998, pp. 168–170. Prof. Salomon was consulted on the dating of the aforementioned four inscriptions.

later before starting to fade at the beginning of the fourteenth century (see Fig. 2, p. 4). The discovery of this state of affairs is an important by-product of our investigation. It gives more precise timeline and extent to the results of recent research made by prominent indologists.⁴

If we look at the average number of attestations of *śrauta* sacrifices by 50 years' periods during the time span of our survey (1800 years, from 100 BC to 1700 AD), we find high values for the periods 100–50 BC, and the years 300–350, 500–550, 650–700, 900–950, 1050–1150 and 1250–1300 of the common area (Fig. 2, p. 4). There are also, surprisingly, pauses in the practice of ritual, lasting sometimes whole centuries (600–650 AD, 950–1050 AD, 1300–1500 AD, 1600–1650 AD).

Some of the apexes of *śrauta* activity correspond to important periods of Indian history: 100–50 BC is the height of the Sātavāhana rule on western Deccan, 300–350 AD is the beginning of the Gupta era, whereas 500–550 marks the transition between the Guptas and the Later Guptas, as well as the end of the Vākāṭaka dynasty. The gaps in ritual pursuit are however more difficult to explain. They may be the result of insufficient data coming from the far south of the subcontinent in our survey. 950–1050 AD corresponds to the rise of some important southern powers, among them the Coḷas who were known to support all forms of Hinduism. 1300–1500 AD sees the advent of the Bahmanī Muslim kingdom in the north and its violent feud with the southern Hindu empire of the Vijayanagaras. Whole schools of Vedic ritual are known to have fled to the south of the Deccan at this moment, and this could explain a cessation of ritual activity in a large part of the subcontinent. A destruction of references to heterodox practices by the Muslims could also be part of the problem.

Besides regal rituals, we found in our survey an unexpectedly high number of references to complex *ahīna* type of ceremonies, which are usually relegated to a secondary position by the manuals describing the Vedic cult, for example the *gavāmayana*, the *br̥haspatisava* (2 occurrences each), the *gargātīrātra* or the *mahāvratā* (1 occurrence each; see Fig. 1, p. 3). What is also strange in view of the importance taken by kingly rituals is the scarcity of attestations of the royal consecration (*rājasūya*). Only four occurrences of this ceremony have been found in our survey. A ritual like the piling of the fire altar (*agnicayana*), which attracted much attention and of which we have (so far) two archaeological attestations, is also seldom met with in the inscriptions (3 occurrences). Human sacrifice (*puruṣamedha*) is mentioned clearly once in an inscription of the Viṣṇukundins of Andhra Pradesh, dated 510–560 AD. This inscriptional evidence as well as ethnoarchaeological considerations induce us to believe that human sacrifice has indeed been practised in a *śrauta* context in ancient India, and that it may also have been related to royalty.

Some of the unsettled problems left by our survey will benefit from a geographical rendering of the data using a GIS software.

A first step in this direction has been made by producing a map showing the spatial distribution of *śrauta* rituals for different periods, when these rites could be located using the information provided by the inscriptions (Fig. 3, p. 4). This map reveals that the practice of Vedic religion was already well established on the Konkan coast, south of the Vindhya-Satpura Range, and on the opposite shore of the subcontinent, north of Andhra Pradesh, as early as *ca.* 100 BC. Vedic activity started earlier than expected south of the Deccan and continued there over a prolonged period with various degree of intensity. Most importantly for our project this map also points at places where it would be interesting to make some archaeological field survey.

The second phase of our project may now start with a study of the layout and spatial organisation of the *aśvamedha*, of the *vājapeya* and of the *pauṇḍarīka* sacrifices. Remains of these rituals not only have a better statistical chance to be found underground. Vedic ritual having a peculiar “russian doll” structure which entails that smaller rites are mandatory components of larger ones, to complete an *aśvamedha* one must accordingly build a sacrificial place for the *agniṣṭoma* and erect the great brick altar of the *agnicayana*. The design of an *aśvamedha*, *vājapeya* or *pauṇḍarīka* sacrificial place will therefore include features belonging to smaller rituals. The material aspects of the latter will also be integrated into the structures peculiar to larger ceremonies. By studying these lofty and regal sacrifices we will thus attain a quite comprehensive understanding of the layout of the Vedic sacrificial place.

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⁴ Particularly Michael WILLIS in his book: *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.

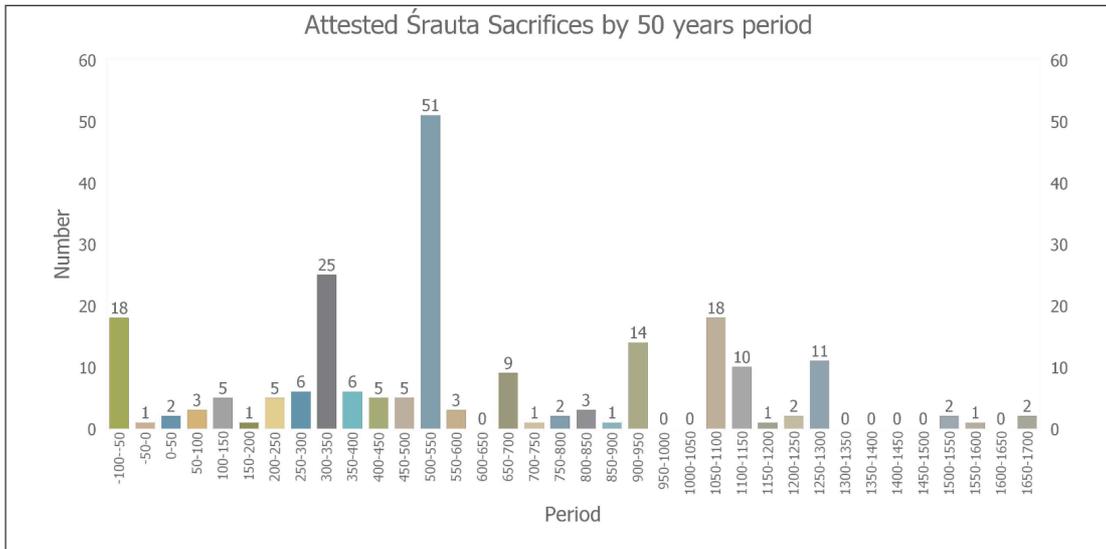


Fig. 2: Number of Attested Śrauta Sacrifices by 50 years period

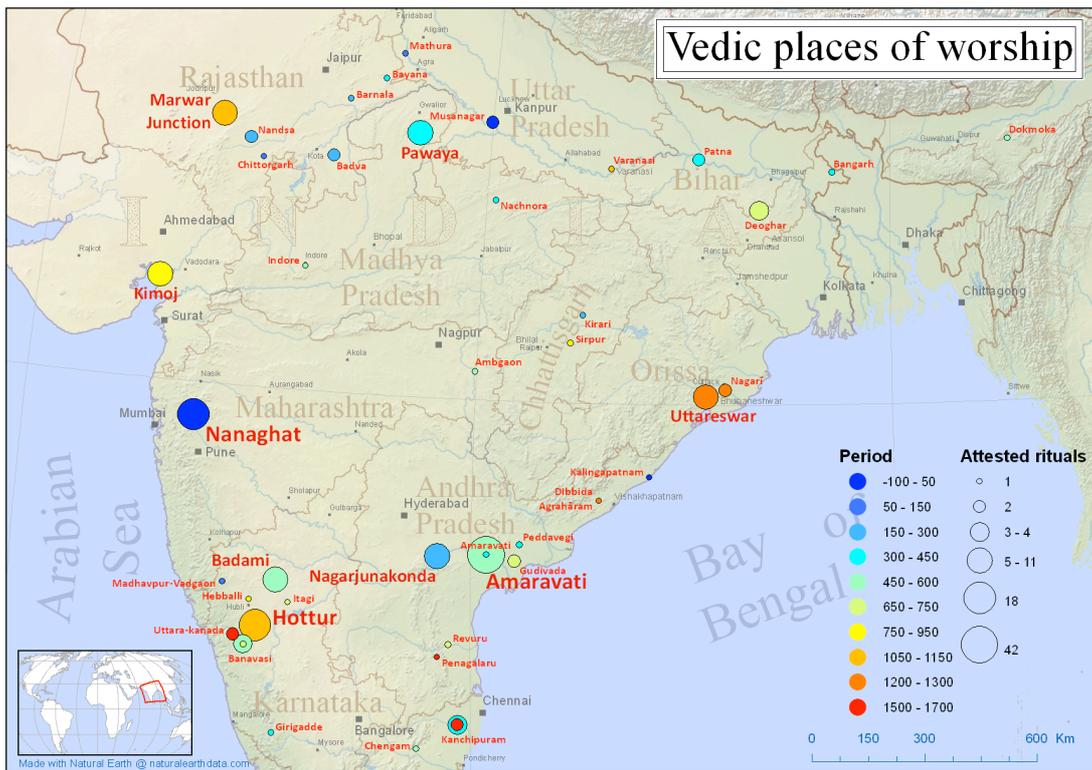


Fig. 3: Spatial Distribution of the Vedic Places of Worship by Period