

Hephaestus and Agni: gods and men on the battlefield in Greek and Sanskrit epic

If Homer is a foundational text for Greek culture and hence for the whole European literary tradition, the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (which includes a compressed version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story) is of comparable status within the Hindu tradition. Given that Greek and Sanskrit are moderately close cognate languages within Indo-European, the hypothesis of a common origin for the two epic traditions is an obvious one, and it is surprising that detailed comparisons between the two traditions have been so relatively few and slight. Most of the present essay is devoted simply to such comparison, but towards the end I try to assess the methodology. How convincing are such comparisons, and what conclusions can be drawn from them?

Both epic traditions are so extensive that holistic comparison, at a useful level of detail, is out of the question, and it is not obvious how to go about selecting what to compare with what. The present essay originated as follows. Having become interested in comparing Greek and Sanskrit views on the elements (Allen 2005), I was reading an article by Wathelet (2004) on the conflict of Hephaestus and Scamander in *Iliad* book 21, and was reminded of the final section of book 1 of the *Mahābhārata*.

As I came to realise, both texts combine the following four themes:

- A god of fire fights a god associated with water.
- Gods *en masse* participate in the conflict.
- The central hero of the respective epic is allied with the god of fire.
- Fire prevails.

The fire-water conflict remains at the heart of this essay, but it is only a starting point. The comparison becomes more convincing if its scope is extended. We shall cover essentially *Iliad* 18-22 and a whole subparvan, ‘The Burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest’ (*Mbh* 1,214-225).¹

In view of the genesis of the paper I have so far put references to Greece before those to India, but for various reasons I henceforth reverse the order and consistently put India first. A long précis of the two texts is unnecessary since the important points will emerge in the course of comparison. However, brief summaries are indispensable.

Mbh 214: Leaving their capital, Arjuna and Krishna make a pleasure outing. A brahmin approaches. 215: The brahmin is the god Agni (*agni* means ‘fire’), and wants to burn the forest, but the Indra (king of the gods and god of war) protects it with rain. Arjuna will help Agni, but needs weapons. 216: Agni procures the weapons and the fire begins. 217: While the heroes hinder escapes, Agni burns the forest and its inhabitants. Indra takes note, and rains. Fire and water are opposed. 218: Arjuna counters Indra, who escalates the conflict. Krishna kills demons. Other

¹ *Mbh* 1,220-225.4, ‘The Śārngakas’, is a distinct substory, of limited use here. I use the Critical Edition (for translation see van Buitenen 1973: 412-431). This edition relegates a good deal of text to footnotes or to Appendix 1. Such material is not translated by van Buitenen, but some of it (‘The Vulgate’) can be found in Ganguli 1993. Unless specially mentioned, all references are to *Mbh* 1.

gods join in, but the heroes turn them back. 219: The massacre continues. Indra and his troops return to heaven. The fire goes on consuming. In all, six beings escape, including the four Śārngaka birds (...). 225: After six days Agni is satisfied. Indra rewards the heroes.

Iliad book 18: Achilles learns of Patroclus' death. His mother Thetis visits him. She will help him take revenge, by getting him new armour, made by Hephaestus. Helped by Athena, Achilles frightens the Trojans, showing them that he is rejoining the fray. 19: Thetis brings the armour. The reunited Greek army mobilises. 20: Calling a divine assembly, Zeus tells the gods to join in the fighting, though they do not yet fight each other. Achilles kills various Trojans, but two major foes are saved by divine intervention. 21: Many Trojans flee into the Scamander.² Becoming angry at the bloodshed and corpses, the river attacks Achilles, whose life is in danger. Hera summons Hephaestus to attack the river, who yields. The other gods fight each other, or contemplate doing so. Achilles goes on fighting on the plain. 22: He kills his arch-enemy Hector.

The two stories differ greatly, but let us leave differences until we have explored similarities. To present the similarities in an organised fashion, I divide each story into six successive phases (A-F), the main Fire-Water conflict coming in D. The phases – to be understood only as a rough and ready framework – do not correspond precisely to chapters (*adhyāyas*) in the Sanskrit or to books in the Greek. It will also be convenient to devise labels for the two sides. Let us take them from the main elements involved. Simplifying to the maximum, we can thus write:

Sanskrit	side F(ire)	side W(ater)
	Agni	forest and its inhabitants
	Arjuna (and Krishna)	Indra (and his troops)
Greek	Greeks	Troy and Trojans
	Achilles, Hephaestus	Scamander (and Simoeis)

Clearly, in each column, only certain entries are intimately linked with the elements used as labels.

We can now work through the phases of the two stories, collecting rapprochements. For brevity I avoid intra-epic comparison (Sanskrit-Sanskrit or Greek-Greek).

Phase A. Background conflict

Sanskrit. Agni develops a passionate desire to consume the forest, but is prevented by Indra.

Greek. The Greeks have long been fighting the Trojans. Achilles withdraws. When he loses Patroclus, he develops a passionate desire to kill Trojans, esp. Hector.

Shared. *A long-standing background conflict precedes our episode. A member of side F conceives an intense desire to destroy a component of side W.*

A1. Arrogant king, disaffected subject(s)

² I use this name throughout, though the gods' name for the river is Xanthus.

A certain king Svetaki indulges excessively in sacrifice. He shows lack of consideration and judgement by overworking his brahmins, who eventually refuse to serve him, and he also overworks Agni, who falls ill, losing colour and appetite (Appx 1.118).

The leader of the Greeks, King Agamemnon, shows arrogance and lack of consideration for his followers. Achilles refuses to serve him, withdraws his troops (the Myrmidons), and temporarily loses his appetite for fighting.

A2. Intense emotion

Agni learns from Brahmā the remedy for his depression: he must consume the Khāṇḍava forest and the fat of its inhabitants. Seven attempts fail because the fire is doused by water, either sent by Indra in the form of rain or brought by the inhabitants of the forest. Brahmā advises Agni to call on Arjuna and Krishna [henceforth A & K] and thereby satisfy his intense hunger.

The Greeks attempt to defeat the Trojans but fail (as Zeus has promised and ensured). When Patroclus dies, Achilles' profound grief leads on to fury and restores his passion for fighting.

A3. A male-male friendship

One or other side is strongly influenced by a personal friendship. Indra (side W) says he wants to protect the Pāṇḍava forest because it is the home of his dear friend, the snake Takṣaka. Achilles (side F) wants to kill Trojans to avenge his dear friend Patroclus. Neither friend is physically involved in our episode: Takṣaka is elsewhere (at Kurukṣetra), and Patroclus is dead.

A4. Divine helper

There are two heroes in Sanskrit and only one in the Greek, but the difference is misleading. Krishna, who is less prominent than Arjuna in this episode, is far more divine than he is (cf. *Bhagavad Gītā*); and the Arjuna/Krishna relationship often parallels the relationship of the central hero of a Greek epic (Achilles or Odysseus) to Athena (a huge topic!). Krishna's help to Arjuna here parallels Athena's help to Achilles, e.g. at 21.304.³

B. Preparation

A & K get ready to help Agni to consume the forest and its inhabitants.

Achilles prepares to resume fighting for the Greeks.

In order to (re-)join the background conflict the hero(es) prepare for battle.

B1. Deity visits hero

Agni visits A & K in the form of a red blazing brahmin (214.29f); and Thetis with her sea nymphs visits Achilles (18.65-72). This visit marks the transition from the background to our episode proper.

B2. Need for military equipment

³ Achilles is also helped by other gods, by Poseidon (21.284) and by Hera (21.327).

Agni explains his situation and desires. As a Hindu warrior should be, Arjuna is willing to help a brahmin in need, but points out that he himself needs equipment (bow, arrows, chariot, horses), and that Krishna too needs an appropriate weapon (215.1-19).

Thetis hears from Achilles of the death of Patroclus and the loss of the armour that he had lent to his friend; unless he can kill Hector, Achilles threatens suicide. Thetis promises to deal with the procurement (18.73-144).

B3. Deity procures equipment

Agni thinks of Varuṇa, who at once presents himself and supplies Arjuna's needs. Agni himself gives Krishna a disk and club. Thetis goes to Mt Olympus, to the home of Hephaestus, who forges the armour (including the famous shield) in his smithy.

Varuṇa, Guardian of the Western Quarter, lives in water as its lord (*jaleśvara*, 216.1). Hephaestus recalls spending nine years working amid the Ocean, when Hera threw him from heaven (18.394-403).

B4. Craftsman god

The divine arms for A & K are described, but it is only the chariot whose making is referred to: it was created by Prajāpati Viśvakarman, drawing on his ascetic powers (*tapas*). Viśvakarman is a craftsman – like Hephaestus.⁴

B5. Missile returned to thrower

Krishna's discus kills the enemies at whom it is thrown and then returns to Krishna's hand (216.24, 219.7). A comparable motif appears three times in the Greek. In phase C Achilles casts his spear at Aeneas, who parries it; but Poseidon draws it from Aeneas' shield and returns it to the feet of Achilles (20.324). Only a little later, when Hector (side W!) casts at Achilles, Athena makes the spear return to the feet of Hector (20.441); but when Achilles casts at Hector, who dodges, Athena returns the spear to Achilles (22.277).

B6. Chariot and horse

Arjuna's divine chariot is drawn by silver horses, harnessed in gold (216.8). Having circumambulated the chariot, he uses it to cover one end of the forest (217.1, early phase C); but thereafter no reference occurs to either his chariot or Krishna's. Nothing is said of their dismounting, but in the last line of the book (225.17) A & K are sitting on a river bank.

Achilles mounts his chariot (19.392-7), and talks to his divine horses (who are enabled to speak by Hera), but he soon seems to be on foot and has certainly abandoned his chariot by phase D. So in both cases, the chariot is prominent at first but fades out later.

B7. Terrifying shout

The chariot carries a magnificent golden flagpole. On it perches 'a divine monkey, marked with the signs of lion and tiger, which seemed to roar out'. On the banner are various large creatures whose roars make enemies swoon (216.13f).

While Thetis is fetching the armour, a struggle is in progress for the corpse of Patroclus. To frighten off the Trojans, Achilles shows himself on the trench in front

⁴ Another supernatural craftsman appears at the end of the episode, the asura Maya, who is allowed to escape the fire. He describes himself as the Viśvakarman of the demons (2,1.5).

of the Greek wall and shouts furiously, his voice reinforced by Athena's. His thrice repeated shout causes confusion and dismay among the Trojans, who abandon Patroclus' body (18.215-233). Achilles also utters a fearful cry when he calls the Greeks to the assembly (19.41).⁵

B8. Cheerful scenes in town and country

The subparvan opens with an account of peaceful and orderly life in the Pāṇḍava capital (214.1-13). Then comes an equally idyllic daylong excursion to the countryside. Accompanied by friends and womenfolk, A & K enjoy a luxurious picnic before withdrawing a little to tell each other stories.

The shield made by Hephaestus illustrates, firstly, more or less normal city life, then rural life. Despite including a depiction of a city at war, the general tone is cheerful, and of the scenes showing human activity both the first and the last depict dancing.

In India the eating, drinking and garlanding is followed by a distribution of costly garments, and some of the women dance rapturously (214.22f). On the shield, in the second dance scene, the maidens are clad in fine linen and have beautiful garlands (18.595-7).

C. The conflict begins

A & K start helping Agni by killing creatures who try to escape.

Achilles starts fighting. He abortively engages Aeneas and Hector, but kills other Trojans.

Side F starts destroying side W, but the watery component of W is not yet actively involved.

C1. Escapees thrown to destruction

When the animals try to jump out of the forest, Arjuna laughingly dismembers them with his arrows and throws them back into the fire (217.11). When Lycaon tries to escape from the river, he beseeches Achilles to spare him. However, the hero mockingly kills him with his sword and flings him back in the river (21.35-127, phase D).

C2. Flames reach sky

The huge flames jump up to the sky and cause consternation among the gods (217.14). The gods bring the fire to Indra's attention, and he becomes involved.

The motif of flames (or their gleam) reaching heaven appears in three Greek similes. (i) When Thetis leaves to procure the armour, Hera instructs Achilles to frighten the Trojans by showing himself. Athena makes him blaze, and the gleam goes towards heaven. It is as when a city is under siege and at sunset the beleaguered citizens light beacon fires and the glare shoots aloft; the citizens hope that neighbouring islanders may sail to help them (18.202-227, phase A). The islanders who potentially respond to the flames parallel the Sanskrit gods who actually respond. (ii) When Achilles arms himself, the gleam from his shield resembles that of a fire high in the mountains, seen by sailors caught in a storm (19.3273-80, phase B). (iii) After the gods retire from the battle, Achilles continues killing Trojans and their

⁵ Loud sounds frequently recur in both texts and might repay more systematic attention.

horses. The suffering he causes is as when the smoke rising from a burning city 'reaches broad heaven' (21.522, phase F), and the anger of the gods drives it on.

C3. Forest fire

Agni's hunger is probably more for the forest's inhabitants than its trees, but he wants to destroy both. Achilles wants above all to kill Trojans (and their allies), but this is part of a larger undertaking of destroying the city where the Trojans live. In this sense the forest corresponds to Troy.

The Sanskrit is of course explicitly about a forest fire (one that – naturalistically – lasts six days, 225.15), and the Greek too alludes to such fires, albeit primarily in a simile (cf. C2). After Apollo saves Hector in phase C, Achilles continues his slaughter, and is compared to a wondrous-blazing fire raging through deep forests in the glens of parched mountain-sides, driven on by the wind (20.490-94).⁶ In the story proper, Hera tells Hephaestus to burn the trees along the banks of the river and he obeys (21.337f, 350-2) – though such trees hardly constitute a forest.

C4. Aquatic beings

In Khāṇḍava forest the watery places (streams, marshes, ponds?) come to the boil, and turtles and fishes die in their thousands (217.9).

Fishes, with or without eels, appear several times in Greek phase D. Trojans cowering from Achilles are like fishes cowering from a dolphin (21.22-24). When Achilles throws Lycaon into the river, he exults: fish will lick blood from Lycaon's wounds and eat his white fat (21.121-7). The body of Asteropaeus is left on the bank, and eels and fishes pluck and tear the fat around his kidneys (21.203f). But the closest comparison, because of the heat, is when Hephaestus torments the eels and fishes in Scamander's eddies (21.353).

C5. Hither and thither

Very shortly before the reference to the turtles and fishes the creatures of the forest are described as 'darting hither and thither' (*tatra tatra vighūrñantaḥ*, 217.7). Tormented by Hephaestus, the eels and fishes 'plunge this way and that' (*kubistōn entha kai entha*, 21.354).

D. Conflict of elements

Indra joins in to protect the forest, using rain, thunder and rocks; but the heroes prove invincible.

Some Trojans flee into Scamander, who attacks Achilles. Hera calls on Hephaestus to help the hero, who survives.

Side W is reinforced, but side F resists successfully.

D1. Element-linked new participants

The new figures who now join the battle add to its scale and give it a certain cosmic resonance. Let us start with the more important of the new participants – all of them individuals closely linked with elements. As we know, Indra uses water in the form

⁶ The Trojans who flee from Achilles into the river are compared to locusts fleeing a fire who shrink into a river (21.12-16). Although this is not specifically a forest fire, and may have been lit to protect crops (Richardson 1993: 55), the locusts may parallel the aggressive birds that Arjuna kills (218.19-25, phase D).

of rain, but when he rouses a storm he is assisted by Vāyu, the wind god, whom I see as representing air. Fire is of course already involved. In the Greek, water is represented by the river (giving the curious Indra-Scamander correspondence). Fire is represented by Hephaestus, who in this phase is no longer a craftsman. Wind is present to support side F, for to help Hephaestus Hera rouses from the sea the fierce blasts of the West and South winds (21.334).

Two similes can also be cited. Hera's intention to mobilise winds is perhaps reflected a few lines later when the parching of the Trojan plain is compared to the parching of a freshly watered orchard by the North wind (21.346). The comparison of Achilles himself to a forest fire driven by the wind has already been cited (C4).

In the Greek cases the wind supports side F, while Vāyu was supporting Indra on side W. However, the Sanskrit also says clearly that Agni (side F) has wind as his charioteer (*agniḥ...vātasārathiḥ*, 219.36). We shall come back to the inconsistency. The point here is simply the involvement of beings linked with the three mobile elements.

D2. A list of gods

A second class of new participants is more numerous, and (at least within this episode) its members are associated with elements only indirectly, via the sides they join. When Arjuna has countered Indra's thunderbolt, he is attacked by several categories of more or less supernatural beings, including gods, demons and snakes (218.23). Soon after this we find a list of some fifteen gods who accompany Indra, each with their individual name and weapon (218.31-35). One final shloka lists groups of gods, such as Rudras, Vasus and Maruts.

The Greek does not mention either demonic beings or collectivities like Rudras. However, in the divine assembly Zeus decrees that the other gods are to join in the fight, choosing whichever side they prefer (20.22-5); and we soon learn the choices made by individuals, who are presented in five pairs. The first is pro-Greek Poseidon, matched with pro-Trojan Apollo, and last comes Hephaestus with Scamander (20.67-74, phase C). But it is only now in phase D that the latter pair fight, and it is not till E that the others do so. They are differentiated scarcely by their weapons, more by their personalities.

D3. Escalation

The participation of new figures is part of a general escalation of the conflict. In phase C there is no effective resistance to side F, only attempts to flee, and the only emotions are the terror of the victims and the happiness of Agni. It is now that anger appears. When Indra joins in on side W and his rainshafts are evaporated by Agni, he is furious. When Arjuna counters first his thunderstorm and then his blazing missile, the enraged Indra mounts his divine elephant and charges, wielding his thunderbolt. Finally Indra tries a rain of rocks and a mountain peak – all to no avail.

During phase C, although Achilles is frightened by Aeneas' spear-cast (20.262), he meets little effective resistance. But when he throws Lycaon's corpse into the Scamander with an insulting speech, the river becomes angry (21.136, cf. 145f). Slightly wounded by Asteropaeus, Achilles starts killing the latter's followers, and Scamander now loses patience: taking a human voice he warns him off. Apollo encourages the river to be more aggressive, and when Achilles jumps in, the river attacks him. Almost losing his footing, the hero jumps out and is pursued by the river across the plain. The heaven-fed river beats on his shoulders from above (*kathuperthen*, 21.269). Exhausted, and anticipating drowning, he prays to Zeus.

Poseidon and Athena encourage him and give him strength, but the river is still furious (305) and towers up, calling on his brother river Simoeis to help. Frightened that they will succeed, Hera involves Hephaestus. Now the balance of power shifts to side F.

D4. Hero almost killed

When Indra charges, he announces to the gods that the two heroes are dead (215.29). We must understand ‘as good as dead’ – it is a threat, heightening the tension, not an erroneous statement of fact.

Achilles thinks he is about to drown (21.281-3), and later Hera thinks the same (326-9).

D5. Rescued by a god

Although the snake Takṣaka is not in the forest, his son Aśvasena is. Arjuna’s arrows prevent Aśvasena from escaping, and the snake’s mother tries to save him. Arjuna beheads the mother, but Indra decides to save the son. Using his powers of illusion (*māyā*), the god dazes Arjuna with wind and rain, and the snake escapes. When he recovers, Arjuna with his allies angrily curses the snake and, understanding what the god has done, Arjuna attacks him angrily.

Poseidon is usually pro-Greek, but when Aeneas rashly decides to confront Achilles, the god feels sorry for the Trojan hero. Shedding mist over the eyes of Achilles, he whisks Aeneas up and away to safety, warning and advising him. He then restores vision to Achilles, who is upset, realising that he has been thwarted by some god (20.75-350).

There are two comparable cases. Soon after Aeneas, Hector too decides to confront Achilles (20.419-454). This time it is pro-Trojan Apollo who comes to the rescue, snatching up Hector and shrouding him in mist. Late in our episode Apollo similarly rescues the Trojan Agenor, snatching him up, covering him in mist and removing him from the battle (21.544-611). In the case of Aśvasena/Aeneas it is the side F hero whose cognition is impaired by the god, while in the cases of Hector and Agenor it is the potential victim who is rendered invisible. On the other hand, of the three Greek cases only in Agenor’s is the god described as using something akin to Sanskrit *māyā*, namely his ability to deceive (*dolōi*, 599, 604). Apollo takes the form of the Trojan, and by running away from Achilles lures him away from the gates of the city.⁷

In the Sanskrit Aśvasena is given as one of the six beings from the forest who are not burnt. Another is Maya, the craftsman already mentioned in B4. When Maya darts forth from Takṣaka’s dwelling, Agni and Krishna are ready to kill him, but he appeals to Arjuna for help. Arjuna reassures him, and the others let him live. Finally there are the four Śārngaka birds, brothers sharing a single story. Their father, an ascetic, praises Agni, and the four fledgelings also sing brief hymns to the god. Agni agrees to spare them and the whole family survive.

The three Sanskrit cases and the three Greek ones apparently need to be examined as a set. The Maya and Śārngaka stories are not a matter of the gods on side W making positive moves to rescue someone, but simply of a side F god showing mercy. Poseidon is a side F god who does actually rescue.

D6. Rock thrown by deity

⁷ Such divine trickery is not always associated with a rescue. Hector complains of Athena deceiving him during his final duel with Achilles (22.299).

As we saw in D3, when Indra fails with rain and thunder, he attacks with a rain of rocks, then with a larger one, and finally with a peak of Mt Mandara, together with its trees. In each case Arjuna shatters the rocks with his arrows. The shattered peak, crumbled into a thousand chips, falls on the forest and kills many of its inhabitants – so presumably it falls over a large area (218.44-50).⁸

Here are three comparisons. Just before being whisked away, Aeneas seizes a large stone to attack Achilles (20.285-7), and when Ares attacks Athena, the goddess seizes a large old stone boundary marker and fells her assailant. As he falls, Ares covers a large area (21.400-408). But Aeneas, though like Indra he is on side W, is only a mortal, while Athena is on side F. The best comparison is from the conflict between Scamander (god, side W) and Achilles. Scamander urges Simoeis to raise a great wave and stir up ‘a mighty noisy mix of tree-trunks and stones’ (21.313f); the aim is to bury Achilles deeply under this, and under sand and shingle, so that the Greeks cannot even find his bones.

D7. A god is happy

Both our traditions share a curious air of light-heartedness, of being not quite serious. Indra may be a friend of Takṣaka, but he is the divine father of Arjuna, and their relations are normally excellent. The anger ascribed to him as the conflict escalates can only be simulated (or at most a subordinate component in a mixture of emotions). What the god is really doing is testing his son, as the text makes clear. When the heroes successfully resist the gods en masse, Indra sees and is greatly pleased (*paramaprīto*, 218.43), and he sends a rain of stones as a further test of Arjuna’s bravery (*vīryam jijñāsuḥ*, ‘desiring to know’ it). When he sees the gods retreating, Indra’s good mood is confirmed (*avastithaḥ prītaḥ*) and he praises the two heroes (219.11). At the end of our episode Indra offers the hero boons, mentioning his satisfaction at their achievement (*tuṣṭo ’smi*, 225.8).

When Zeus calls the assembly and tells the other gods to join the fight, he explains his attitude to Poseidon: he himself will stay sitting on Olympus, whence he will look on and enjoy himself (*phrena terpsomai*, 20.23). The gods are to go and fight since otherwise the Trojans may too easily yield to Achilles and allow him to destroy the city walls before the time that is destined. This seems a flimsy excuse, comparable to Indra’s alleged friendship with Takṣaka. In any case, when the Hephaestus-Scamander conflict ends and the other gods begin to fight, Zeus’s plan is fulfilled: as he sits on Olympus his heart within him laughs for joy (*egelasse... gēthosunēi*, 21.289f).

E. Conflict contracts again

Side W gods accept defeat and retreat. A Voice tells them to go back to heaven.

Scamander yields to Hephaestus and Hera. After half-hearted fighting most gods return to heaven.

The reinforcements to side W accept defeat and withdraw.

E1. Divine hierarchy

⁸ Tvaṣṭar, another craftsman god (cf. B4), grasps a mountain as his weapon (218.33), but its use is not described.

Seeing the retreat of his gods and satisfied with his son, Indra might well depart spontaneously, but in fact he is requested to do so by a disembodied Voice (*vāg aśarīriṇī*, 219.12). Speaking with a deep rumble, the Voice tells him that Takṣaka is not in the forest, that the heroes are invincible, and that they are really divine sages. So he should return to heaven, along with the gods in his train, and watch from there the destruction of the forest, ‘which has been ordained’ (it is *diṣṭa*, 219.18). Indra recognises the truth of the utterance, and obeys the instruction. It is clear that the Voice somehow outranks Indra, though its precise nature is unclear.

Conceivably the Voice is that of the god Brahmā, or of a spokesman for him. It was Brahmā who twice advised Agni, first to consume the forest as medicine, than to call on the heroes to help him (cf. A2). In the wider context of the epic, it is Brahmā, the Creator, who ordained the birth of Arjuna and the other heroes with a view to the destruction of the excess population weighing down the goddess Earth. One could perhaps argue that Brahmā is close to personifying the Destiny hinted at by the word *diṣṭa*. Brahmā is not among the named gods who follow Indra into battle, and one would not expect him to be – he rarely fights.⁹ In any case, however the Voice relates to Brahmā, its superior authority is recognised by Indra. He sheds his (ostensible) anger and withdraws. Seeing this, the other gods follow.

In certain (limited!) senses Indra corresponds to Scamander (see D1), and Indra’s withdrawal corresponds to Scamander’s. Unlike Indra, Scamander suffers physically from the fire, but like Indra, he recognises the situation. As he puts it, none of the gods can match the Fire God or vie with him (*antipherizein*, 21.357). This parallels Indra praising the two heroes (219.11d – his words are not given), but it also parallels the words of the Voice, who states that the heroes ‘cannot be vanquished in any world’ (219.13). The river’s conciliatory approach is apparently ignored by Hephaestus (who is following Hera’s instruction in 21.338f). It then prays to Hera, asking her to control her son, which she does, and promising to stop fighting if she wishes it. So Scamander is recognising not only her maternal authority over Hephaestus but also her superior status to himself – she is Zeus’s consort. Possibly a Voice-Hera correspondence could be argued for by emphasising the sex of the goddess Vāc (Voice) and exploring her theology (she is sometimes the consort of Brahmā). But my point here is simply that the deescalation of the conflict is verbally sanctioned by divine authority higher than that of Indra or Scamander.

E2. Pacification

After hearing the voice, Indra ‘sheds his wrath and indignation’ (219.19c). When Hera tells Hephaestus to stop he extinguishes his fire, and Scamander ‘quells his fury’ (*damē menos*, 21.383).

E3. Hero like lion

When the gods depart, the heroes emit a lion’s roar (*siṃhanādaṃ vinedatuḥ*, 219.21). We have seen already that Arjuna’s pennant is linked with lions and roaring (B7).

As Aeneas approaches him, Achilles is compared to a lion in a lengthy simile (20.164 – no roar is mentioned). He himself, when rejecting Hector’s proposal of an agreement concerning the corpse of whichever of them is killed, asks how agreements

⁹ In that he stands above the fray, Brahmā parallels Zeus. Zeus sometimes parallels Indra, sometimes Brahmā, and Indra sometimes parallels Scamander, sometimes Zeus. Such complications are normal in *Mbh*-Homer comparison.

can be made between lions and men (22.262), evidently comparing himself to the former.

E4. Escalation reversed

The scaling up of the conflict between phase C and D gives way to a scaling down as we move on from D to E and F. This is an instance of ring composition. The configuration of the two sides in F is as it was in C.

F. End of conflict

The heroes go back to simply helping Agni. Agni is satisfied.

Achilles continues to kill Trojans and finally takes his revenge on Hector.

Now that side W has lost its temporary reinforcements, side F fulfils the desire it conceived in phase A.

F1. King of gods watches

The Voice tells Indra to watch the forest fire (*anupaśya*, 219.18), and we can be sure that he does: when Agni is satisfied, Indra descends from heaven to reward the heroes. As we saw in D6, Zeus plans to enjoy watching the gods bicker on the plain of Troy and he does indeed watch (the verb is the ordinary *horaō*, ‘to see’, 20.23, 21.390). With the other gods he also watches the final conflict with Hector (*horaō* again, 22.166f). In this context then, Indra corresponds not to Scamander, who is now flowing normally, but to Zeus. The correspondence between the two kings of the gods is unsurprising.

F2. Shelter under banks

In phase F the killing continues much as in C. Desperate to escape, the forest inhabitants seek shelter behind banks (*rodhaḥsu*) but find none (219.28). The Trojans who jumped into Scamander cower beneath its steep banks (21.25), but presumably few survive.

F3. Hot fat

Although Agni sometimes says he wants to consume the forest as such (e.g. 215.11), what he really wants is its inhabitants, their flesh and blood, and above all their fat. According to Brahmā, it is the fat that will restore Agni to normality (Appx 1.118 line 108). The fat is clearly liquid – so, heated. References are made to ‘floods of fat’ (*medhaughair*, 219.32), to the elixir or nectar (*sudhā*, 219.34) fetched by A & K, to rivers (*kulyās*, 225.6) of fat and marrow, to eating flesh and drinking fat and blood (225.16).¹⁰

When Scamander asks Hephaestus to stop the attack, his fair streams are seething. Now comes a simile. It was as when a cauldron is set on a fierce flame and the lard of a fatted hog melts in it and bubbles vigorously (21.361-4).

F4. Satisfaction and closure

If our episode began in an atmosphere of cheerful contentment (B8), it ends similarly. Agni is completely sated and appears before Arjuna. Indra also descends,

¹⁰ If Agni consumes meat, Achilles wishes he could carve up Hector and eat him raw (22.347; cf. also the hero’s assimilation to a lion, D3).

surrounded by Maruts, and offers the heroes congratulations and boons. Separating from the gods, A & K, with Maya, sit down on ‘the lovely river bank’. No doubt the river is the Yamunā, where they went for their picnic, and near which they were chatting when Agni arrived.

When Achilles kills Hector in book 22, his desire for vengeance against Hector is still not satisfied, and he continues to express it by mistreating the body. It is only in Homer’s final book that Achilles comes close to achieving peace of mind: he hands over the corpse to Hector’s father Priam, agrees to a truce, and clasps Priam’s hand (24.669-672); even the Trojans enjoy a glorious feast (24.802). The war will of course continue, but the mood is one of relative reconciliation. The ring composition apparent in both epics thus has one layer more than we recognised in E4. The ending of the Sanskrit *parvan* (book) parallels the ending of Homer’s epic.

Differences

In a ‘full comparison’ (if this is a meaningful goal), similarities would have to be weighed against differences, both globally and for each particular similarity – thirty-two of which were presented above. But many differences have already been implied, and a list of them would be both indefinitely long and of doubtful use. So I try to concentrate only on those that are particularly helpful in assessing the similarities.

That the two texts are in different languages and metres, and have different names and geographic/cultural settings can be taken for granted. A more significant issue is how our particular episode is situated within the whole epic story line (whether the Greek whole is ‘Homer’ or ‘The Epic Cycle’). The burning of the Khāṇḍava forest is quite a minor event that occurs long before the central epic war among mortals (*Mbh* books 6-10), while our Greek episode is a major event *within* the corresponding Greek war.¹¹ One consequence of the difference is that the motif of testing the hero makes sense in the Sanskrit but would not do so in the Greek. Arjuna is being tested with a view to the Great War (D7); Achilles is already fighting it.

As regards personnel, we can start with the central figures linked to the elements. Theologically, it would be easy to contrast Agni, with his vast cultic significance from the Vedas onwards, and Hephaestus, whose cult is a minor one; and Agni is scarcely a craftsman. Also, within our episode, Agni is active throughout and consumes living beings, while Hephaestus (as Fire) is involved only in phase D and only consumes corpses or heats water. However, the contrast is mitigated if we think more broadly of side F – in other words, if we compare Agni not with the Greek god but with the hero whom the god helps. Within our episode Achilles is consistently ‘fiery’. Richardson (1993: 138, on 22.317-21) lists eleven earlier passages in which Achilles is somehow assimilated to fire, starting from 18.205 (Arjuna is not particularly fiery in this sense). Like Agni, Achilles is active throughout and kills humans; and like Agni he enters the story because of royal arrogance (A1). A thorough analysis of Achilles would have to unravel many aspects of a complex persona, but in this episode he corresponds partly to Agni.

Indra’s control of rain no doubt relates to his mastery of thunderbolts (hence of storms) and to his Vedic association with the atmosphere, and hence clouds. Theologically, such a prominent deity contrasts markedly with the minor local figure of Scamander who, though he attends Zeus’s assembly (20.7), is normally tied down to the plain of Troy and to the physical form of a river – and anyway rain and rivers

¹¹ For the correspondence between the two wars, based on their pentadic structure – reflected in the four or five successive leaders of the losing side, see Allen (2006a, in press).

are rather different. Moreover, while Indra acts of his own free will, Scamander is obeying Zeus's instructions; admittedly he is provoked, but like the other gods he was told to fight.

Another comparison that may have seemed surprising linked the forest plus inhabitants with Troy plus Trojans.¹² One might almost say that it linked the zoological and botanical with the human, were it not that the forest is home to demons and perhaps other types of being, as well as to wild animals (219.1f). An associated difference concerns audience affect: the sympathy of the listener or reader is scarcely elicited for the victims of Agni, but one feels for the Trojans and their tragedy. Again, this relates to the narrative context: the victims of Arjuna in the Great War do elicit sympathy.

A different type of difference emerges if we shift focus from the agents to the conflict itself. The forest fire foreshadows the Great War, and the Great War itself has cosmic overtones. It is an episode in the ever-renewed cosmic battle of gods and demons, and it represents a break in cosmic time – specialists debate whether the break separates *yugas* ('ages') or *kalpas* (sequences of *yugas*). Greece knows of cosmic battles, such as the Titanomachy, and of cosmic sequences or cycles (Hesiod's five 'ages'), but they do not impinge in our episode, which does not mention demons.

A difference that merits mention but cannot be treated properly concerns theories of Indo-European ideology. Dumézil's trifunctionalism is by now well known, but it can be argued that the ideology in fact had a more inclusive pentadic structure, of which the five elements are one expression (Allen 2005). Fire, air and water would represent the traditional functions in the standard order – F1, F2, F3, while ether and earth (essentially immobile) would represent respectively F4+ and F4-. The Sanskrit story conforms reasonably to this schema. Agni, appearing as a brahmin, represents F1 and opposes water, which Dumézil already linked with F3 (fertility, etc). F2 is represented by air or, as here, by wind or its god, whose position seems intermediate or ambiguous: Vāyu assists Indra's brief storm, but he is also, and more enduringly, Agni's charioteer. A comparable ambiguity affects Indra. Publicly he joins side W and uses water, but personally he is delighted by the success of his son on side F. In other words, both Vāyu and Indra are basically allied with Agni – giving us the classic Dumézilian structure F1+2 versus F3. But these are not the only figures in the story. Above the fray is Brahmā the Creator, representing F4+, and at the other end of the hierarchy are the demons – F4-. These are supernaturals. Among mortal beings, the Indian heroes represent F4+, the wild animals (subhuman) F4-.

A similar analysis of the Greek would at best be partial. One can argue for Zeus F4+, winds F2, 'twinning' rivers (recalling Simoeis) F3, Trojans F4-, but without using the hypothetical element-function linkage (which would be circular), I see no grounds for interpreting Hephaestus or the 'fiery' Achilles as representing F1.¹³

Comments on method

The logic of the argument is that, despite the differences, the similarities identified above are sufficient to demonstrate that the two stretches of epic in question go back to a common origin in a proto-epic or proto-narrative. The argument assumes that the similarities are genuine – that the texts say what has been alleged and that the 'shared features' are indeed shared (they are indicated not only in the discussions but also in

¹² None of these are particularly 'watery'.

¹³ The approach in terms of functions could be enriched by bringing in eschatological battles from Scandinavia, where the fiery Surtr fights and kills third-functional Freyr, and from Iran, where the fiery Aša Vahišta fights Indra (here demonic).

the bulleted list at the start, in italics in the introduction to each phase, and in the titles of each rapprochement). But it also assumes that rival explanations of the similarities can be ruled out, i.e. that the similarities are not due to independent invention within societies having comparable cultures (technologies, institutions...), and that they are not due to direct influence of one epic on the other (as if the *Mbh* derived from Alexander taking Homer to India). The direct influence hypothesis seems so implausible that I shall ignore it here. Rejection of the independent invention hypothesis has to be based on the quantity and quality of the rapprochements, taken in the light of the differences, and this will be my focus.

Differences as such are not an obstacle to common origin theory. They are just what one expects if oral traditions are passed on independently over long periods, and provide part of the argument against direct influence. For instance, if the Sanskrit can be viewed as reflecting the Indo-European pentadic ideology and the Greek (strictly speaking) cannot, this is not disconcerting. It provides further support for the widespread view that, despite the dates of our texts, early Greece has moved away from its Indo-European roots to a greater degree than classical Hinduism has.

Synchronic differences can often be explained by just such diachronic processes. A particular character or episode in one tradition will often represent the fusion of two or more characters or episodes in another. Consider B8, which linked the scenes on Achilles' shield and the scenes in *Mbh* 1,214. At first sight the differences are so great that one might hesitate to accept the similarity. Furthermore, a rapprochement has been proposed elsewhere between the shield and a well known image from Buddhist sacred art (Allen 2006b, cf. also 2007). However, the two proposals are perfectly compatible. Greek tradition will have fused two pieces of ancient tradition that have remained separate in the East. There is no need for hesitation.

The persuasiveness of the common origin theory depends ultimately on the quantity and quality of the rapprochements. Precise numbers mean little. The analyst can often divide a single rapprochement into two (cf. B3; or wind might be split from fire plus water in D1); or separate ones can be combined (B7 and E3? C4 and C5?). Nevertheless, thirty-two is a decent total. Moreover, the six phases and two sides can be added; the texts offer scope for at least half a dozen comparisons not included here; and *Mbh*-Homer comparisons published elsewhere strengthen the whole case.

In any case, similarities are not all on one level. Some are of broad scope: they may apply to a substantial chunk of text (as do the phases); they may interlink chunks (F4, the ring composition); or they may pervade the whole comparison (as do the two sides; cf. too the twelve passages associating Achilles with fire and hence with Agni). Broad-scope similarities are specially interesting, not only for their persuasiveness but also for the scale of what they imply about the proto-narrative. At the other end of the scale are tiny details such as E2, Pacification, or C5, Hither and thither, which turns on the repetition of a single adverb and could be rejected as coincidence. Such detailed comparisons gain weight if they appear in corresponding phases, or if – a point not studied here – they are unique or rare within their respective epics.

As we have seen, quite often something from the Sanskrit main story corresponds to something in a Greek simile (e.g. C3, Forest fire).¹⁴ This seems to be a common phenomenon (cf. Allen 1996). No doubt, as with the pentadic ideology, the Sanskrit is the more conservative tradition – comparatively, Homeric similes are unusual. Though the similes usually provide only small-scale similarities, they can be very

¹⁴ Cf. also the comparison between Sanskrit main story and Greek ephrasis (B8).

persuasive. My favourite example is F3, Hot fat: the simile reads oddly within its Homeric context, but makes perfect sense comparatively.

The conclusion must be that, barring perhaps the odd case of independent invention, all the shared features were present in the protonarrative, albeit naturally in more concrete forms, which we cannot hope to reconstruct with any precision.

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