



INDRA

INDRA, the name of a demon (*daēwa*) in the Avesta. In sharp contrast to the Indra of the Ṛgveda [RV], the most celebrated god (*devá*) of the Vedic pantheon, whose defeat of the Snake of cosmic obstruction, Vṛtra, is an act of creation, the Indra of the Avesta is a relatively insignificant *daēwa*, mentioned only twice in conjunction with other demons, most significantly Saurwa (Ved. Śarva) and Nāṅhaiθya (Mitanni ^{d.mes}*na-ša—at-ti-ia*, Ved. Nāsatyā *dual*). The reason for this inversion of roles can be sought in Indo-Iranian groupings of deities, the most prominent of such groupings being the **daiwás* (Av. *daēwa*-/OPers. *daiwa*-, Phl. *dēw*; OInd. *devá*-) and the **ásuras* (Av., OPers. *ahura*-; OInd. *ásura*-). For reasons that are not altogether clear, the *ásuras* were eventually demonized in India, while in Iran the *daiwas* generally appear as the demonic beings. Thus, if Indra's role as chief of the *devás* were in play for Indo-Iranian society, it would not be difficult to see how, as the Iranian tradition evolved, he became a demon, were it not for the fact that many of his most prominent features in the Ṛgveda are found with ahuric deities, notably Miθra and Wərəθ-rayna, and with the hero of Iranian legend, Θraētaona.

The name "Indra" has no certain etymology. Most plausibly it may be a primary derivative of a PIE * $\square H_3eid$ - "to swell" with nasal infix, thus, **i-n-d-rā*-adj. "strong" > *indra*- subst. n. pr. with secondary accent shift. A connection with PIE **H₂ner*-, Iir. *nar*- "man" is morphologically impossible. Although the RV shows a frequent trisyllabic *indara*-, especially in the vocative, this is not necessarily parallel to Mitanni ^d*in-da-ra* /^d*in-tar*-.



In the Indo-Aryan tradition. The oldest dateable occurrence of the name is in the famous 14th-century Hittite-Mitanni treaty from Boğazköy, where the Mitanni invoke as divine witnesses, in order, Mitra-Varuṇa, Indra, and the Nāsatyā. As already mentioned, Indra is the most celebrated of the gods in the RV. Some 250 hymns are dedicated to him, while he shares honors with other deities in 50 hymns and is mentioned in a great many more. That is, a third of the collection of hymns is preoccupied with him. While his epithets and descriptions cover a broad range of characteristics, for the most part his physical prowess and martial skills, as well as his capacity to drink *soma*, are emphasized. Most relevant to Iranian religion are his favorite weapon, the bronze *vājra*- “mace” (Av. *wazra*, Pahl. *warz*, NPers. *gorz*; with epithets *vājrabāhu*- “mace in arm,” *°hasta*- “mace in hand,” *°dakṣiṇa*- “mace in his right [hand],” *vajrabhṛ́t*-, *°vāh*- “mace-carrying,” *vajrín*- “mace-possessing”) and the epithet *vṛtrahán*- (Av. *wərəθrajan*-) “slaying, smashing *vṛtrā*.” Although a number of his myths and legends are mentioned in the Vedic hymns, the most celebrated is a complex myth involving single combat with the great Snake (*áhi*-, Av. *aži*-), further defined as a cobra (*víam̐sa*-). The hymns of the Ṛgveda, composed over several centuries by various poets, contain many variants of the myth. Nevertheless, the features of a basic myth can be reconstructed on the bases of the multitude of scattered references. The cosmic situation is that the world has been created, with mountains and rivers; and it is populated by gods, humans, and demonic beings. The problem is that the rivers are dammed up in the mountains in the coils of the snake, whose name is Vṛtra, in such a way that they cannot flow forth for the benefit of man (*mánu*). There appears to be no one capable of releasing the rivers from Vṛtra until the miraculous birth of Indra. No sooner is he born than he swells to prodigious size, filling heaven and earth and forcing his mother to leave him an orphan. In fact all the gods seem to abandon him save Viṣṇu, his wide-striding friend, whose three strides through the cosmos open space for Indra to wield the vajra which Tvaṣṭar, the Artisan, has fashioned for him. With the mace, ribbed with blades or covered with spikes, Indra bludgeons and hacks the Snake to pieces, and in so doing releases the rivers, along with the sun and dawns. Typologically this belongs to widely found “dragon”-slaying myths. However, it is more than merely a hero’s adventure. On the one hand, it is a creation myth, in the sense that Indra has brought into actuality the physical world of the Vedic Aryans by releasing the water and defeating the anti-cosmic forces. On the other hand, it has a sociological or ethnic dimension. Vṛtra is the arch *dāsá*. The *dāsas*, along with the *dásyus* (cf. OPers., Av. *dahyu*- “country, people”), are the demonized natives with whom the



Aryans are engaged in a struggle for land and resources. In this regard the myth of Vṛtra overlaps with another myth, that of Vala and the Paṇis, which is a version of an IE complex of cattle-raiding myths, where the Aryans steal cows in the illegitimate possession of barbarians. Also associated with Indra is a somewhat obscure figure Trita Āptya, who, among other things, slays the three-headed Viśvarūpa and either alone or in consort with Indra slays Vṛtra.

In the Iranian tradition. Turning to the Iranian traditions, preserved chiefly in the Avesta, but also in the Pahlavi books and the *Šāh-nāma*, we find no trace of a myth involving Indra, or any other deity, with a snake named *Wṛθra. In the context of its preoccupation with dynastic succession, the Iranian tradition presents two pairs of characters, Θrita (Ved. Trita), whose son Kərəsāspa slew the monstrous Horned Snake, and Āθβya (cf. Ved. Āptya), whose son Θraētaona (Pahl. Frēdōn, NPers. Feridun) slew the three-headed usurper, Aži Dahāka (MPers. Aždahāg, *Šāh-nāma* Daḥḥāk; NPers. *aždahā* “dragon”). The evidence shows that the oldest stratum of associated snake-slaying myths is represented by the complex involving Θrita / Āθβya / Θraētaona / Kərəsāspa on the Iranian side and Trita Āptya on the Indo-Aryan. Abundantly attested in the Avesta is the abstract noun *wərəθra-* n. “resistance, defense, obstruction” along with derivative compounds: *wərəθrayna-* n. “the smashing of resistance; victory,” masc. name of a god; *wərəθrajan-* (Ved. *vṛtrahán-*) adj. “smashing of resistance; victorious;” *wərəθra.taurwan-*, °*wan(t)-* adj. “defeating resistance.” This leaves the myth of Indra and Vṛtra as a Vedic innovation created out of the older myths and concepts. Further, Vedic Indra shares martial attributes with two closely related Iranian deities. One is Wərəθrayna who is the embodiment of the *concept* acted out in Vedic Indra’s mythic struggle with Vṛtra, and, who shares with Vedic Indra the ability of change form. The other is Miθra. The descriptions of his violent enforcement of covenants, especially with his bronze mace (*wazra-*), closely resemble those of Indra in the Ṛgveda, while in the Veda Mitra is remarkably devoid of martial qualities. In the attempt to reconstruct Indra’s history within the two Indo-Iranian branches one might suppose that he was demonized in Iran because, after Zaratuštra’s reform, the violent traits of his character were deemed offensive, being worthy only of a daēwa. However, that hardly explains why those very traits would have been simply parceled out to other “ahuric” deities. Alternatively, and more probably, one could imagine Indra as a relatively minor deity who, in his ascent among the Indo-Aryans, gradually appropriated traits from other deities at their expense. Impossible to substantiate is the notion that Iranians, in cultural conflict with Indo-Aryans, demonized their chief god. Wherever the



truth in these matters lies, one should bear in mind that the universe of mythic imagination is not usually laid out in clear, straight lines. One further tangle in the web of associations is Iranian Indra's close connection to two other demonized gods, Saurwa = Ved. Śarva and Nāṅhaiθya = the dual Nāsatyā. In the Vedic literature, Śarva is a somewhat sinister figure in the sphere of Rudra, while the Nāsatyā (identified with the Aśvinā) are benevolent and among the most frequently invoked deities.

Indra is mentioned only twice in the Avesta. At Vd. 10.9, following instructions on Gathic verses to be recited to combat the Nasu Druj (demon of putrefaction), one should say "I hostilely engage Indra (... Saurwa, ... Nāṅhaiθya)." At Vd. 19.43 Indra stands second in a list of demons after Anra Mainyu, perhaps an indication of his importance in the demonic hierarchy, and this place immediately after Akōman, rather than Ahriman, is repeated in the Pahlavi Books (*Bundahišn* [TD₂] = Gr.Bd., p. 15.9). According to Gr.Bd., p. 227.4, at the *ristāxēz* Ohrmazd will seize Ahriman, Wahuman Akōman, and Urdwahišt Indar (spelled in Pahl. 'ndl, also *yndl*). Again, in a long enumeration of the specific forms of mischief perpetrated by the *dēws*, Gr.Bd., p. 182.10-13 places Indar after Gannāg Mēnōg (= Ahriman) and Akōman. At *Dēnkard*, p. 836.9 ff., Indar appears third in the trio of Akō-man's seed together with Waran (Concupiscence) and Āz (Lust). One wonders whether it is accidental or whether there is a real connection with the debauched Indra of Indian myth. In any case, Indar's chief role is that of seducer who perverts men's minds, leading them to abandon proper worship and practices, such as wearing the *šabīg* and *kustīg*.

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