

Chapter 17. Hephaestus and Agni

Gods and men on the battlefield in Greek and Sanskrit epics

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Abstract. Indo-European languages have received an enormous amount of comparative study, for which Greek and Sanskrit (with Latin) are often regarded as the fundamental pillars. One might expect, then, that the comparison between Greek and Sanskrit epic would be well advanced and that by now some consensus would have been reached on the question of how much, if any, of their narrative content goes back to a common origin in early Indo-European times. However, this is not the case, and in practice most students of one epic simply proceed as if they could take for granted that the other was of no relevance or interest to them.

After a brief mention of various other reasons for this unsatisfactory situation, I focus here on the apparent differences in modes of involvement of gods in the struggles of mortals. A typology of such modes in Homer might include gods who father warriors, gods who fight mortals or intervene in their fights (violently, or with material help, or with advice), and gods who fight other gods in the course of human battles. Examples of all these modes can in fact be found in the Mahabharata, though not necessarily in the great eighteen-day war that forms the centrepiece of the epic. For instance, the best example of gods fighting gods comes in the episode of the Khandava Forest Fire (Book 1), where Agni (= Fire), assisted by Arjuna, opposes Indra (here = rain, *i.e.* water). The comparison is with Iliad book 21, where Hephaestus (here = fire), assisting Achilles, opposes the river Scamander. The rapprochement involves not only the elements, and several deities other than those mentioned, but also many details, including some similes.

The similarities are naturally accompanied by many differences (context, course of events, personnel, motivation...), and the major theoretical issue is how one can attempt to demonstrate that the traditions are in fact cognate and derive from an early common origin. The aim here is not so much to contribute to an understanding of the two epics, but rather, in a case where the prehistory is somewhat less long and obscure than in many cases studied by comparativists, to give a convincing example of how much can be preserved by oral tradition over a period of the order of two millennia.

1. Introduction

If Homer is a foundational text for Greek culture and hence for the entire European literary tradition, the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (which includes a compressed version of

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the *Rāmāyaṇa* story) is of comparable status within the Hindu tradition. Both grew from oral traditions, Homer reaching written form around 700 BC, while the Sanskrit epic emerged around the turn of the eras. The Sanskrit epic is about seven times as long as the two Greek epics combined. Greek and Sanskrit are of course cognate languages within the Indo-European (IE) family, so the hypothesis of a common origin for the two epic traditions (in a ‘protonarrative’) is an obvious one. However, surprisingly few people have presented a detailed comparison of the two traditions, and I shall spend most of this paper simply doing that. At the end I shall try to assess the methodology, asking how convincing are such comparisons, and what conclusions can be drawn from them.

Both traditions are so extensive that exact comparisons at a useful level of detail are impossible, so how does one choose what to compare with what? I will not provide a general answer to this question here, but instead will reveal how the present essay originated. After having become interested in the similarities between Greek and Sanskrit theories about the elements, I was reading an article on the conflict between the fire god and the river god in *Iliad* Book 21 (Wathelet 2004), when I was reminded of the final section in Book 1 of the *Mahābhārata*. I soon recognised that both texts combine the following four themes:

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

The fire-water conflict remains at the heart of this paper, but the comparison becomes more convincing if its scope is extended. We shall focus centrally on *Iliad* Books 18-22 (only glancing at 23-24) and on the subparvan called ‘The Burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest’ (*Mbh* 1,214-225).²

In view of the genesis of the paper I have so far referred to Greece before India, but for various reasons I shall now 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 their 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 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 starts his fire. 217: While the heroes prevent the inhabitants of the forest from escaping, the fire rages. Indra takes note, and rains, so fire and water

² Within the subparvan, ‘The Śārṅgakas’ (1,220-225.4) forms a distinct substory, labelled as such in some of the manuscript colophons; it is of only limited use here. I use the Critical Edition, which is translated by van Buitenen (1973: 412-431, including the substory). This edition relegates a good deal of text to footnotes or to its *Appendix 1*. Such relegated material is normally omitted by van Buitenen, but some of ‘The Vulgate’ can be found in Ganguli (1993: 432-455). Unless specially mentioned, all references are to *Mbh* 1.

are now opposed. 218: Arjuna counters Indra, who escalates the conflict. Krishna kills demons, and other gods join in, but the heroes turn them back. 219: Indra and his troops return to heaven, and the fire goes on burning. In all, only six beings escape the fire, including the four Śārṅgaka birds (...). 225: After six days Agni is satisfied. Indra rewards the heroes.

Iliad 18: Achilles learns of Patroclus' death. His mother Thetis visits, and will help him take revenge: she will get 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, and 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 Skamander.³ Becoming angry at the bloodshed and corpses, the river attacks Achilles, whose life is at risk. 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.

Let us start with an overview of the parties involved in the conflict.

Table 17.1. Parties in the epic conflict involving Hephaestus and Agni

	protagonists	side F(ire)	side W(ater)
Sanskrit	gods	Agni	Indra (and his troop of gods)
	humans	Arjuna (and Krishna)	Khāṇḍava forest and its inhabitants
Greek	gods	Hephaestus	Skamander (and Simoeis)
	humans	Greeks, esp. Achilles	Troy and Trojans

Annotations to this schema: Agni (Sanskrit *agni* is cognate with Latin *ignis*) is god of Fire. Indra is king of the gods (like Zeus in Greece). Arjuna is the central hero of the *Mahābhārata*, friend of the incarnate god Krishna, and son of Indra. Khāṇḍava is north of Delhi. Following the abduction of Helen, the Greeks attack Troy. Hephaestus is a craftsman god, and can also appear as fire. Achilles is the central hero of the *Iliad*. Skamander is a river near Troy, as is Simoeis.

The two stories differ greatly, but let us explore the similarities before the differences. To do this in an orderly way, I divide each story into five successive phases (A-E), with the main Fire-Water conflict emerging in phase D. Each phase is introduced with a summary of the Sanskrit and Greek, and an italicised statement of what the two phases have in common. We can now work through the phases, collecting rapprochements. For brevity, I minimise intra-tradition or intra-epic comparisons (*i.e.*, Sanskrit-Sanskrit or Greek-Greek) – even though they are sometimes very interesting.

³ I use this name (its 'human name') throughout, though the gods call the river Xanthus.

2. Rapprochements

2.1. Phase A. Background conflict

Sanskrit: Having developed a passionate desire to consume the forest, Agni has repeatedly been prevented by Indra from doing so.

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

Shared: A long-standing background conflict precedes our episode. Someone on side F conceives a craving to destroy a component of side W.

A1. Arrogant king causes disaffection

A certain King Śvetaki indulges excessively in sacrificing. He shows a lack of consideration and judgement by overworking his brahmins, who eventually refuse to serve him, and he also overworks Agni (the sacrificial fire), who falls ill, losing colour and appetite (*Appendix I.118* of the Critical Edition, see footnote 2).

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

A2. Intense desire

Agni learns from the supreme god Brahmā that the remedy for his depression is to consume the Khāṇḍava forest and the fat of its inhabitants. Seven attempts fail because the fire is doused by water (either rain sent by Indra or water brought by the forest's inhabitants). Brahmā now advises Agni to call on Arjuna and Krishna to help him satisfy his intense hunger.

Deprived of their best warrior, the Greeks fail in their attempts to defeat the Trojans. However, when Patroclus is killed by Hector, Achilles' profound grief leads on to fury and, more precisely, to a determination to kill Hector.

A3. Absent male friend

One or other side is strongly influenced by a personal friendship. Indra (side W) wants to protect the Khāṇḍava forest because it is the home of his friend, the snake Takṣaka (215.7). Achilles (side F) wants to kill Trojans to avenge his dear friend Patroclus. Neither friend is physically involved in our conflict: Takṣaka is elsewhere (in fact at Kurukṣetra), and Patroclus is already dead.

A4. Divine helper to central hero

Although the Sanskrit has two heroes and the Greek only one, the difference is misleading. Krishna is not only less prominent than Arjuna in this episode, but he is also far more of a god (as is clear in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which is part of *Mbh* Book 6). In fact, Krishna often relates to Arjuna as Athena relates to Achilles or Odysseus (a huge topic!). Krishna helping Arjuna here parallels Athena helping Achilles, as (*e.g.*) at 21.304.

2.2. Phase B. Preparation

Arjuna and Krishna help Agni prepare to consume the forest and its inhabitants.

Achilles prepares to resume helping the Greeks against the Trojans.

To join or rejoin the background conflict the heroes prepare for battle.

B1. Deity visits hero

Agni visits the heroes 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, and is one of many cases where the rapprochement is based on the action, not the agent. The similarity between Agni and Thetis is limited to this context and therefore can be referred to as ‘fleeting,’ when compared with more consistent and lasting resemblances.

B2. Heroes need military equipment

When Agni explains his situation and desires, Arjuna is happy to help him, but he needs equipment (bow, arrows, chariot, horses) – as does Krishna. Agni agrees to provide it.

Thetis hears from her son of the death of Patroclus and of the loss of the armour he had borrowed from Achilles. Thetis promises to obtain what is needed (18.73-144).

B3. Deity obtains equipment, which is welcomed

Agni thinks of Varuṇa, who at once appears and supplies Arjuna’s needs. Agni himself gives Krishna a disk (used as a weapon) and a club. Thetis goes to Mount Olympus and visits Hephaestus, who promptly makes the panoply, including the famous shield.

When the equipment arrives, a dialogue takes place between the supplier and the hero. Agni and Thetis both praise the equipment, and the respective heroes are enthusiastic. Arjuna expresses his gratitude (216.26-9), as does Achilles (19.18f).⁴

B4. Craftsman god

The divine arms given to Arjuna and Krishna are described, but it is only the origin of the chariot that is mentioned. It was created by Prajāpati Viśvakarman. Viśvakarman is a craftsman god like Hephaestus.⁵

Varuṇa, Guardian of the Western Quarter, lives in the water as its lord (*jaleśvara*, 216.1). Hephaestus recalls spending nine years working amid the Ocean, when

⁴ Arjuna then urges Agni to burn vigorously (216.30), and the fire starts straight after this. Just before the start of the fire-water battle in the Greek, Hephaestus receives similar encouragement from his mother (221.333).

⁵ Another supernatural craftsman appears at the end of the episode, namely the asura Maya, who is allowed to escape the fire. He describes himself as the Viśvakarman of the demons (2,1.5).

Hera threw him from heaven (18.394-403). So in both cases a deity who supplies arms lives or has lived in the sea.

B5. Missile returns to thrower (so that it can be reused)

This motif applies to Krishna's discus (216.24, 219.7) and to three missiles in the Greek (20.324, 20.441, 22.277).

B6. Chariot and horses

Arjuna's divine chariot and horses are described when he receives them but they fairly soon disappear from the text. Nothing is said about the heroes dismounting, but by the last line of the book (225.17) they are sitting on a river bank.

Similarly, Achilles' chariot and divine horses are mentioned early in the episode, but the hero soon seems to be on foot and has certainly abandoned his chariot by phase D. The chariot and horses simply fade out.

B7. Fearsome noise helps side F

On the flagpole of Arjuna's chariot there perches 'a divine monkey... which seemed to roar out', and on the flag itself large creatures are portrayed whose roars make enemies swoon (216.13f). When Arjuna strings his bow, its twang causes fear (216.19), while Krishna's club roars like a thunderbolt (216.25).

While the Trojans are trying to take the corpse of Patroclus, Achilles utters furious shouts, his voice reinforced by Athena's. The sound causes consternation among the Trojans, who abandon Patroclus' body (18.215-233).⁶

B8. Happy scenes in town and country

The subparvan opens by describing the peaceful and orderly life in the Pāṇḍava capital (214.1-13). Arjuna and Krishna then leave the town with a crowd of women to enjoy a luxurious picnic in the countryside, after which they meet Agni. Achilles' shield is ornamented by Hephaestus with scenes, first of city life, then of rural life.

At the Indian picnic the women wear garlands, receive fine clothes and dance rapturously (214.22f). On the shield, the country scenes end in a dance, involving garlanded maidens clad in fine linen (18.595-7).⁷

2.3. Phase C. Conflict begins

Arjuna and Krishna start helping Agni by killing the creatures that try to escape. Achilles starts fighting. His duels with Aeneas and Hector are abortive, but he kills other Trojans.

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

⁶ Achilles also utters a fearful cry when he calls the Greeks to the assembly (19.41). Loud noises are frequent in both texts and may call for more systematic study.

⁷ For further comparative work on the shield see Allen 2006, 2007.

volved.

C1. Victims thrown to destruction

When animals try to jump out of the forest, Arjuna laughingly kills them and throws them back in the fire. In phase D,⁸ Lycaon tries to leave the river and escape; when he begs for mercy, Achilles mockingly kills him and flings him back in the water (21.35-127).

C2. Flames reach sky

Agni's flames rise to the sky and worry the gods, who then involve Indra. When Achilles frightens the Trojans (B7), 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 upwards; the citizens hope that neighbouring islanders may sail to help them (18.202-227, phase B). The islanders who potentially respond to the flames parallel the Sanskrit gods who actually respond.⁹

C3. Fire burns forest

Agni's activity finds another parallel within a Greek simile. Achilles (on side F), as he continues his slaughter, is compared to a fire raging through deep forests, driven on by the wind (20.490-94). In the main story too, Hephaestus, instructed by Hera, burns the trees on the banks of the river (21.337f, 350-2).

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). In the Greek phase D, fishes are mentioned several times (21.1211-7, 203f), but the closest comparison is when Hephaestus, acting as Fire, torments the eels and fishes in Skamander's eddies (21.353).

C5. Hither and thither

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

2.4. Phase D. Conflict of elements

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

⁸ Comparisons that straddle phases are presented according to their position in the Sanskrit.

⁹ Cf. also a later comparison: the suffering Achilles inflicts on the Trojans is as when the smoke rising from a burning city 'reaches broad heaven' and the anger of the gods drives it on (21.522, phase E).

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

Side W receives divine reinforcement, 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 cosmic resonance. The most important among them are individuals closely linked with elements. As already implied, Indra's rain represents water, being opposed to Agni (Fire), who is already involved. In Greece the new participant is Hephaestus (here in the role of fire, not as a craftsman); his opponent is Skamander, who is already involved.

In both epics the new participant is assisted by wind (the mobile and macroscopic form of the element air). Vāyu, the wind god, assists Indra in raising the rain-storm, and to help Hephaestus, Hera rouses the West and South winds (21.334). So the winds help side W in India, side F in Greece. However the wind also helps Agni, by serving 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. Other divine participants are listed

There is also a less important class of new participants. When Arjuna has countered Indra's thunderbolt, he is attacked by several types of supernatural entities, including snakes, demons and gods (218.23). In fact some fifteen gods are listed as accompanying Indra, each with his own name and weapon (218.31-35). One final verse (36), lists groups of gods, such as Rudras, Vasus and Maruts.

In Greece, Zeus calls a divine assembly, attended by individual gods and by two groups, namely rivers and nymphs. He tells the gods to choose one or other side to support on the battlefield, and the text gives us five pairs of names, one pro-Greek god paired with one pro-Trojan. Hephaestus and Skamander come last in that list, though they actually fight first.

D3. Side-W[ater] birds

During this phase birds (*garuḍas*), resembling thunderbolts, fly down from the sky to attack the heroes (218.20), but are killed by Arjuna. Much later, just before Achilles kills him, Hector darts down like an eagle swooping through the clouds to seize a lamb or hare (22.306-311).

D4. Side-W[ater]'s anger and aggression

The new participants contribute to an escalation of the conflict. In Sanskrit phase C side F encounters no opposition, and the only emotions mentioned are the terror of victims and the happiness of Agni. We now meet anger. When Indra's rainshafts are evaporated by Agni, and his initial attacks are countered by Arjuna, Indra is enraged and charges furiously on his elephant, wielding thunderbolt, rocks and a mountain peak.

In Greek phase C, Achilles meets little resistance. But after the hero kills Lycaon and Asteropaeus, Skamander loses patience and, with Apollo's encouragement, starts to attack him. He pursues Achilles across the plain, beats down on his shoulders and, still furious, calls on his brother river Simoeis to help.

D5. 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, and Hera recognises this danger (21.281-3, 326-9).

D6. Rescued or spared

Six beings escape from the forest fire. Indra rescues the son of the snake Takṣaka (see A3); Arjuna spares the palace-building demon Maya (see fn.4); and Agni spares the four Śārṅgaka birds.

The comparable cases in the Greek are Aeneas who was saved by Poseidon (20.75-350); Hector who was temporarily saved by Apollo (20.419-454); and Agenor who was also saved by Apollo (21.544-611). In both epics the three instances of rescue are dispersed across the episode.

When saving the snake, Indra uses his *māyā*, his power of deception, and dazes Arjuna with wind and rain (218.9f). When saving Aeneas, Poseidon sheds mist over the eyes of Achilles (20.321, 341). Both heroes react emotionally to the god's action.¹⁰

D7. King of gods 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. His anger (noted in D4) can only be simulated (or perhaps a minor component in a mixture of emotions). As the text makes clear, what the god is really doing is testing his son. When the heroes successfully resist the gods, Indra is delighted (*paramaprīto*, 218.43), and he sends a rain of stones as a further test of Arjuna's bravery (*vīryam jijnāsuḥ*, 'desiring to know' it, 44). 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 tells the assembled gods to join in the fighting, he tells Poseidon that he himself will stay on Olympus and enjoy the spectacle (*phrena terpsomai*, 20.23). He also explains that the gods are to fight in case the Trojans yield too easily to Achilles, but this seems a flimsy excuse, comparable to Indra's alleged friendship

¹⁰ When Apollo saves Agenor, he too uses a trick (*dolos*, 599, 604), but of a different kind. Arjuna tells Maya not to be afraid (219.38), and Poseidon says the same to Achilles (21.288).

with Takṣaka. In any case, when the gods do begin to fight, Zeus's heart within him 'laughs for joy' (*egelasse... gēthosunēi*, 21.289f). Here then, Indra resembles not Skamander, but Zeus.

2.5. Phase E. Conflict contracts and ends

Side W gods retreat. Voice tells them to return to heaven. Agni is finally satisfied. Skamander yields to Hephaestus and Hera. After half-hearted fighting most gods return to heaven. Achilles continues killing Trojans and finally kills Hector. *Reinforcements to side W accept defeat and withdraw. Side F fulfils original desire.*

E1. Combatants obey higher power

Having enjoyed his son's success, Indra might have departed spontaneously, but in fact a disembodied Voice (*vāg aśarīriṇī*, 219.12) instructs him to do so, mentioning that the forest is destined for destruction. Indra accepts the authority of the Voice, and Agni is implicitly allowed to continue.

Having failed to conciliate Hephaestus, Skamander prays to Hera, who stops both the gods from fighting. In prompting the de-escalation of violence, Hera's authority parallels that of the Voice. Possibly this Voice-Hera correspondence finds extra support in the sex of Vāc ('Voice'); this goddess is sometimes said to be the consort of Brahmā, as Hera is the consort (wife as well as sister) of Zeus.

E2. Undefeatable, so calm down

The Voice states that the heroes 'cannot be vanquished in any world' (219.16), and after hearing it, Indra 'sheds his wrath and indignation' (*kopāmarṣau*, 19). In conceding defeat, Skamander remarks that Hephaestus cannot be matched (*antipherizein*, 21.357) by any of the gods, and on Hera's instructions the river's 'fury is quelled' (*damē menos*, 21.383).

E3. Hero like lion

When the gods depart, the heroes emit a lion's roar. Although no roar is mentioned, Achilles is compared twice to a lion. The comparison is made once by the poet in a lengthy simile during the fight with Aeneas, and again by Achilles himself in his final dialogue with Hector.

Lions tend to kill deer, and deer appear on side W. A list of the forest inhabitants includes *mṛgās* (219.2), and the twelve Trojan princes captured by Achilles are compared to frightened fawns (*nebrous*, 21.29).

E4. King of gods watches

The Voice tells Indra to watch the forest fire, and no doubt he does. As he has planned (D7), Zeus enjoys the sight of the gods bickering on the plain of Troy, and he also watches the final Achilles-Hector duel (22.166f).

E5. Shelter under banks

Desperate to escape, the forest inhabitants seek shelter behind banks (*rodhaḥsu*, 219.28). The Trojans who jumped into Skamander cower beneath its steep banks (21.25).

E6. Hot fat

Although Agni sometimes says he wants to consume the forest as such (*e.g.* 215.11), what he most desires is its inhabitants – their flesh and blood, and above all their fat. According to Brahmā (A2), it is the fat that will restore Agni to normality (Appx 1.118 line 108). Fat becomes liquid when heated, and references are made to ‘floods of fat’ (*medhaughair*, 219.32), to the elixir or nectar (*sudhā*, 219.34) procured by the heroes, to rivers (*kulyās*, 225.6) of fat and marrow, to eating flesh and drinking fat and blood (225.16).¹¹

When Skamander gives in to Hephaestus, his fair streams are seething – as when a cauldron is heated and the lard of a fatted pig melts and bubbles.

E7. Satisfaction of initial desire

Our episode began in an atmosphere of contentment (B8), and it ends similarly. Agni is completely satisfied and Indra returns to congratulate and reward the heroes. At the very end of the book, Arjuna and Krishna are sitting on ‘the lovely river bank’ and chatting constructively with Maya, one of those spared from the fire (D6).

Like Agni, Achilles achieves in Book 22 – by killing Hector – the vengeance that he so passionately desired at the start of the episode (A2). However, he only achieves peace of mind in Book 24 when he hands over Hector’s corpse to Priam. Though the war will continue, for the moment the mood is one of reconciliation.

E8. Closure

In the Sanskrit our episode forms a demarcated textual unit, an *upaparvan*. Introducing his commentary, Kirk proposes (1985: 45f) that the most natural division of the *Iliad* may be into three ‘movements’. The second would end with the death of Patroclus and the third would open with Achilles’ return to battle. The *upaparvan* corresponds to the third movement.

This comparison can be reinforced in three ways. Firstly, in both epics the distinct or distinguishable episodes we have been studying are situated just before a major break in the narrative. In other words, looked at simply in terms of form, the end of *Mbh* 1 corresponds to the end of the *Iliad*.

Secondly, within this short section of the narrative, but towards its end, we encounter subordinate parts which are distinct in character and introduce new individuals and themes. The Śārṅgaka subepisode narrates the response of Agni (see D6) to the plight of four birds. A sage who wants children becomes a bird, mates accordingly

¹¹ 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 (E3).

with a wife in the Khāṇḍava forest, and produces four fledgelings. He leaves his nest for a new partner (Lapitā), but when Agni spares his offspring he returns (for a more complete summary and discussion see Hildebeitel 2007: 118-123). The story is still about Agni's forest fire, but it concentrates on the family relationships between seven newly introduced characters, all of whom are named.

Even though the war remains in the background, *Iliad* Books 23 and 24 are not about fighting but about the fate of two corpses. Patroclus, killed by Hector in Book 17, is now cremated and his death is marked by the funeral games; Hector who was killed by Achilles in Book 22 is now ransomed by his father Priam and cremated by the Trojans. The new characters (new relative to our episode) include competitors at the games and the women who mourn Hector.¹²

Thirdly, both epics display a similar ring composition. In phase A, Agni and Achilles conceive their desire. After the preparation phase B, they start consuming and killing in phase C. In phase D, the climax, they meet and overcome 'watery' opposition. Phase E starts by deescalating the conflict so that the participants are as in phase C, then moves towards a degree of closure, both emotional and narratological.

3. Differences

It is useless to aim for a 'complete' comparison, since similarities need to be weighed against differences, and the differences are so many and so large that a long list would be of questionable use. A certain number of differences have already been implied, and I shall now list a few more, ignoring (among much else) the different languages, metres, names, and geographical / cultural settings.

1. The two episodes are differently situated within the story line of the whole epic (whether one takes the Greek whole to be 'Homer' or 'The Cycle'). In India the forest fire is a minor event occurring long before the Great War (which occupies Books 6-10 out of the 18), while our Greek episode is a major event *within* the corresponding Greek war.¹³ This bears on the motif of testing the hero (D7). Arjuna is tested by Indra *in advance* of the Great War; Achilles is already fighting that war.

2. Agni and Hephaestus contrast in many ways. Agni is a major figure in the cult, while Hephaestus is not; Agni is scarcely a craftsman, and differs from Hephaestus in his motives. He is active throughout, and he consumes living beings, while Hephaestus, as Fire, is active only in phase D and consumes only corpses and vegetation. One of the greatest differences between the two epic traditions is the timing of

¹² The two sub-episodes are not closely related, though a few points can be noted: the emphasis on pity (for the helpless Śārṅgakas, for the two fallen warriors); a female (Hera, Lapitā) reproaches a male (Apollo, the sage); a father (the sage, Priam), who yearns for his son(s), alive or dead.

¹³ One of the arguments for the correspondence is the five-phase structure of the wars. Four leaders of the Kauravas and four leaders of the Trojans succeed each other before a final nocturnal massacre in an enclosed area (Allen in press a).

the fire god's intervention. It contributes a good deal to the difficulty, at first reading, of appreciating the degree of similarity between the two stories.

However, fire is much more pervasive in the Greek than the Agni-Hephaestus comparison suggests. Achilles himself is 'fiery'. During the entire episode, he is assimilated to fire no less than twelve times (Richardson 1993: 138, commenting on the last such passage, 22.317-321). In general, the mortal Achilles resembles the mortal Arjuna (both are active throughout the episode). However, Achilles' fiery quality makes him resemble a fire god, while Arjuna is not particularly close to Agni. The quality shared by Achilles and Hephaestus reinforces the validity of 'side F' as an analytic concept, but it also hints at the great complexity of Achilles' persona.

3. The great Indra of side W, the atmospheric god of storms, clouds and rain, contrasts markedly with the minor figure of Skamander. Although he attends Zeus's assembly, Skamander is normally tied down to the plain of Troy and to the physical form of a river. Moreover, one reason for his fighting is obedience to Zeus's orders. However, Indra corresponds not only to Skamander (D4, E1, etc). As king of the gods, who enjoys himself and watches the end of the conflict from afar (D7, E4), he also corresponds to Zeus.

4. Apart from Agni, the mass of the Indian gods are on side W. The Greek gods distribute themselves in mutually hostile pairs between the two sides (recalling the chief human warriors in the *Mahābhārata* Great War, and the gods in Norse and Iranian eschatological wars).

5. The forest and its inhabitants contrast with Troy and the Trojans (despite e.g. E5). The contrast might be thought of as nature versus culture, except that the forest contains supernatural beings who are neither plants nor animals.

6. A different type of contrast concerns the emotions of the audience. Sympathy is scarcely elicited for the victims of Agni, as it is for the Trojans and their downfall. This must relate partly to difference 1. The Sanskrit episode is only a rehearsal: in the Great War itself Arjuna's victims do sometimes attract sympathy.

7. Cosmic overtones. The forest fire foreshadows the Great War, which itself is but one episode in the ever-renewed cosmic battle of gods and demons. Moreover, the Great War represents a break in cosmic time – it is debated 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 or five races), but within our episode demons are ignored, and the end of the heroic race seems far off.

8. A difference that would merit fuller treatment concerns theories of Indo-European ideology. Dumézil's trifunctionalism is by now well known, but it can be argued that the ideology in fact exhibited 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 the pentadic 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, traditionally understood by Dumézilians as representing F2 (though there is more to be said – Allen in press b). Publicly he joins side W and fights using water, but his true feeling is delight at the success of his son in championing side F. In other words, both Vāyu and Indra are in some sense allied with Agni – giving us the classic Dumézilian structure F1+2 versus F3.

However, the Sanskrit contains other important figures, even if we ignore Indra's troops. Above the fray, yet behind the action – uninvolved yet involved, there stands Brahmā the Creator, representing F4+. It is he who sets in motion the whole epic, by agreeing to lighten the load of beings who oppress the earth, and it is he who sets in motion this particular episode by advising Agni to consume the forest and to call on Arjuna's help (A2).¹⁴ At the other end of the hierarchy are the demonic inhabitants of the forest, representing F4-.

A similar analysis of the Greek would at best be partial. One can argue for Zeus F4+, winds F2, 'twinned' rivers (recalling Simoeis) F3, Trojans F4-, but without calling on the hypothetical element-function linkage (which would be circular), I see no reason to interpret Hephaestus or the 'fiery' Achilles as representing F1.¹⁵ Here, as often, it seems that Sanskrit epic has retained more of the old Indo-European functional ideology than the Greek.

As I say, it is easy to think of further differences, but these are not an obstacle to the common origin theory. They are exactly what one expects if oral traditions are passed on independently over long periods (the common linguistic ancestor of Greek and Sanskrit was perhaps spoken around 2500 BCE).

4. Broader issues

Let us assume that the similarities we have listed are genuine, *i.e.* that the texts say what I have alleged and that the 'shared features' have been accurately identified. Could such a degree of similarity be explained other than by common origin? Independent invention, even in societies of comparable socioeconomic type, is surely impossible, and direct influence of one epic on the other (as if the *Mahābhārata* derived from Alexander taking Homer to India) is at least as unlikely. The natural explanation is that the similarities derive from a common origin in a protoepic or protonarrative, and the most economic hypothesis is that this was told in an early unwritten Indo-European language.

¹⁴ If the disembodied Voice is his, or expresses his views, he also directly steers events.

¹⁵ 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).

In work of this sort, everything turns on whether the rapprochements are convincing. I shall comment first on their variety. One dimension of this can be called scope. The most global similarities are the *Two sides*, which form a framework dominating the whole episode, and the *Sequence of five phases*. Each phase in itself is a rapprochement applying to substantial parts of the narrative; one can also recall the twelve dispersed passages that link Achilles with fire and thus relate him to the fire gods. All these are broad-scope similarities. At the other end of the scale are tiny details such as C5, *Hither and thither*, which turns on the repetition of a single adverb and may perhaps be coincidental.

A common type of rapprochement links the Sanskrit main story with something in a Greek simile, for instance C3, *Fire burns forest*. My favourite example is E6, *Hot fat*, which reads oddly in Homer but makes perfect sense in the Sanskrit. The same phenomenon has been noted elsewhere (Allen 1996), and shows that narrow-scope comparisons can sometimes carry considerable weight.

Rapprochements can also be formal, in that they concern the organisation of the text rather than its content (E8).

The most important consideration is no doubt the number of rapprochements. Precise figures mean little, since the analyst can often bisect a single rapprochement or combine two or more separate ones. Nevertheless, we have assembled well over thirty. This number should be sufficient for it not to matter if a few (like C5) are rejected. Moreover, this particular paper does not stand alone. The larger the number of acceptable rapprochements between the Sanskrit and Greek epics (some are already published, others will be), the more likely it becomes that the epics are cognate and the less sceptical one needs to feel *a priori* towards each new proposal. Moreover if, as I believe, a great deal of IE common heritage still remains to be recognised in other parts of the IE-speaking world, it is not only Sanskrit-Greek comparisons that are relevant to judgements of what is plausible.

What is the future for this sort of work? The implication is that the great majority of the similarities we have identified represent features that were already present in a protonarrative. Theoretically, one can reasonably envisage the reconstruction of abstract schemes of protonarratives, together with hypothetical accounts of the steps leading from there to the texts we read now. However, this can wait. A vast amount of basic intricate work is needed first. It is not only a matter of extending to other parts of the epic narratives the style of comparison attempted here and integrating the results, while giving due attention to the other branches of IE tradition, but we also need to incorporate intra-tradition comparisons. A hint of the complexities to be expected is given by some of the more stable rapprochements we have met; while Indra corresponds to Skamander and Zeus (difference 3), Zeus corresponds to Indra and Brahmā (difference 8). Significant and stable one-to-one correspondences may prove rare.

It would facilitate reconstruction if, given a particular rapprochement, we could say which attested version was the more conservative – the closer to the protonarrative. My view, or hypothesis, is that the Sanskrit is usually the more conservative,

the Greek more innovatory (*cf.* difference 8). For instance, one can plausibly derive Homeric similes, which are – comparatively speaking – a rare phenomenon, from ordinary stories such as the Sanskrit preserves, but not vice versa; and the Indian separation of the fire god and the craftsman god is probably older than their fusion in Hephaestus. But one cannot assume that the Greek is never the more conservative.

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Part V. Work in progress

