

THE THREE STRIDES OF VIṢṢU

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1. The theories suggested in explanation of the character of God Viṣṣu are remarkably divergent. The prevailing view that he was a solar deity¹ has often been questioned and criticized in recent times.² Besides he has been

¹ Thus already Śākapūṇi, if his interpretation of the three strides as referring to *prthivyām, antarikṣe, divi* (Yāska, Nir. 12.19) implies the trias Agni-Vāyu-Sūrya (cf. Durga's commentary and Bṛhaddevatā I.90, but on the other hand ŚB. I.9.3.9) and Aurnāvābha (*ibid.*, see Macdonell, *JRAS* 1895, p. 170), probably Yāska, Nir. 5.17: *ṣipiviṣṣaḥ*] *pratipannaraśmiḥ*, Bṛhaddevatā (c. 400 B.C.?) II.69: *Viṣṣur nirucyate sūryaḥ sarvaṃ sarvāntarāś ca yaḥ*, Skandasvāmin (c. 500 A.D.) ad I.22.17: *Viṣṣur evā 'dityarūpeṇa lokān prakāśayati* (etc.), Comm. ad PB. XVIII.7.13 *bradhnasya*] *ādityasya Viṣṣurūpasya*, Mahidhara (c. 1590 A.D.) ad VS. 5.15 (= Agni-Vāyu-Sūrya), and further, e.g., Whitney, *JAOS* 3 (1853), p. 325, A. Weber, *Zwei vedische Texte über Omina und Portenta* (1858), p. 338, A. Kuhn, *Die Herabkunft des Feuers und des Göttertranks* (1859), p. 66 f., p. 251, Edw. Moor, *The Hindu Pantheon* (1810, 1864, 1897), p. 13 (sun, earth, water, space), Lassen, *Ind. Altertumsk.* I² (1867), p. 919, Max Müller, *Hymns to the Maruts or Stormgods* (1869), p. 116 f. (= *SBE.* 32, p. 133 f.), Eggeling, *SBE.* 12 (1882), p. 73 n.2 ("? the all pervading Sun"), 26 (1895), p. 62 n.2, E. Hardy, *Die Vedisch-brahmanische Periode der Religion des alten Indiens* (1893), p. 33 f. (Sun and Moon), L. von Schroeder, *Indiens Literatur und Cultur* (1887), p. 324 ff., *Mysterium und Mimus* (1908), p. 56 (Sonnengott und Fruchtbarkeitsgott), *Arische Religion* (1916-1923) II, pp. 64, 669 (earlier a moon-god), Barth, *Religions of India* (1891), p. 165 f., Macdonell, *JRAS*, 1895, p. 175 ("originally a sun-god"), *Vedic Mythology* (1897), p. 38, E. W. Hopkins, *The Religions of India* (1895), p. 41, *Epic Mythology* (1915), p. 85, P. Deussen, *Sechzig Upanishad's des Veda* (1897), p. 277 n., Th. Bloch, *Wörter und Sachen* I, p. 80 ff., Oppert, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 37 (1905), p. 331 f., D. R. Bhandarkar, *Lectures on the Ancient History of India* (1919), p. 128, Havell, *Handbook of Indian Art* (1920,² 1927), p. 164 ("the sun at noon supporting the heavens [Vishnu-Sūrya], or the sun at midnight under the earth reposing on the coils of the serpent of eternity [Ananta or Sēsha], the Milky way"), H. D. Griswold, *The Religion of the Rigveda* (1923), p. 284, A. B. Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda* (1925), p. 109, A. Hillebrandt, *Vedische Mythologie* II² (1929), p. 319 f., A. Hohenberger, *Die indische Flutsage und das Matsyapurāna* (1930), p. 96, J. J. Meyer, *Trilogie altindischer Mächte und Feste der Vegetation* (1937), II, p. 258, J. C. Ghose, *JBORS*, 24 (1938), p. 89 ff., R. N. Dandekar, *Kane-Volume* (1941), p. 100, V. M. Apte in: Majumdar and Pusalker, *The Vedic Age* (1951), p. 367 f., etc. Cf. also Gonda, *Aspects of early Viṣṣuism* (1954), p. 172: "the eternal phenomenon of the pervading and omnipresent, mighty and blessing stream of celestial light, warmth, and energy."

² Cf. e.g., Hopkins, *JAOS* 16 (1896), *Proceedings* p. cxlv ff., S. Konow, *Visvabharati Quarterly* III (1925), p. 216, S. Konow-P. Tuxen, *Religions of India* (1949), p. 61 f., Neisser, *JAOS* 45 (1925), p. 288, Hillebrandt, *Ved. Myth.* II², p. 319, H. Oldenberg, *Religion des Veda* (1923), p. 232, Haggerty Krappe, *Mythologie universelle* (1930), p. 141 f.

held to represent the Moon,³ or the Fire-god,⁴ Soma,⁵ or a mountain god associated with vegetation,⁶ a god of fertility,⁷ or a deity connected with *Vṛtrahan*.⁸ He has been stated to be an awakener to life,⁹ or the sacrifice,¹⁰ a popular personification of the *brahman*- or *ātman*-,¹¹ or a god of veneration and propitiation.¹² It has further been suggested that "the original character of Viṣṇu" was a non-Aryan¹³ or a proto-Indian¹⁴ religious concept. He has been considered a philosopher's,¹⁵ as well as a "late popular" god,¹⁶ a striding giant,¹⁷ no less than an *anima*, the essence of the *pīḍras* and, at the same time, the solar bird,¹⁸ the god of evolution,¹⁹ of movement,²⁰ or of immanence.²¹

³ H. Kunike, "Viṣṇu, ein Mondgott" (*Mythologische Bibliothek* VIII nr. 4, Leipzig, 1916), pp. 5-17, von Schroeder, *Arische Religion* II, p. 669. Cf. Hardy, *Die Vedisch-brahmanische Periode*, p. 33 f.

⁴ Bergaigne, *Religion védique* II, pp. 416, 418 ("l'identité primitive de Vishṇu avec Agni et Soma, prototypes de tous les sacrificateurs"), Sarkar, *The Folkelements of Hindu Culture*, p. 12.

⁵ Kasten Rönnow, *Trita Āptya* (I), p. 93 f.: "der vedische Soma-gott par préférence."

⁶ Havell, *The History of Aryan Rule in India* (1918), pp. 28, 111, 182 f. (but at the same time a solar god).

⁷ H. Güntert, *Der arische Weltkönig und Heiland* (1923), p. 292 (an ithyphallic god, similarly Haggerty Krappe, *Mythologie universelle*, 1930, p. 141 ff.). Cf. Neisser, *JAOS* 45 (1925), p. 288.

⁸ G. Dumézil, *Revue de l'histoire des religions* CXVII (1938), p. 167.

⁹ Paul Mus, *L'Inde vue de l'est*, p. 22: "doué . . . du pouvoir d'éveiller la vie dans le monde qu'ouvriraient ses trois pas mythiques."

¹⁰ L. D. Barnett, *Hindu Gods and Heroes* (1922), p. 37 ff., J. Charpentier, *Festgabe Jacobi* (1927), p. 277 n.2 (but according to H. Oldenberg, *Die Lehre der Upanishaden*, p. 17, a later interpretation).

¹¹ Deussen, *Der Gesang des Heiligen*, Introduction p. iv.

¹² B. Faddegon, in: Van der Leeuw (e.a.), *De godsdiensten der wereld* I¹ (1940), pp. 296 f., 303.

¹³ E.g., Przulski, *Archiv Orientální* 4 (1932), p. 261 ff., R. Otto, *Zeitschr. für Missionskunde und Religionswissenschaft* 1936, p. * 16 (reprint), von Eiokestedt, *Hirt-Festschrift* I, p. 362. Cf. Paul Mus, *L'Inde vue de l'est*, p. 22 (concerning Kṛṣṇa), W. Ruben, *Eisen-schmiede und Dämonen ind Indien*, p. 284.

¹⁴ *Census Report* 1931, I, 1, p. 394 ff. (p. 396: "the fruit of reaction of . . . proto-Hinduism to the Rigvedic invaders"), Hrozný, *Archiv Orientální* 13 (1942), p. 48.

¹⁵ L. von Schroeder, *Mysterium und Mimus* (1908), p. 56 (cf. Lassen, *Indische Altertumskunde* I² [1867], p. 919), contested by Oldenberg, *Religion des Veda*³⁻⁴, p. 228 n.2; Wüst, *Vergleichendes und etymologisches Wörterbuch des Alt-Indo-Arischen* I (1934), p. 92.

¹⁶ See Lassen, *l.c.*

¹⁷ Oldenberg, *Religion des Veda*³⁻⁴ (1923), p. 233; cf. *Nachrichten der Göttinger Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* 1915, p. 374 f.

¹⁸ K. F. Johansson, *Solfågeln i Indien* (1910), pp. 9, 14, 28, 70. Cf. also the same author, "Über die altindische Göttin Dhīṣaṇā und Verwandtes" (1917), pp. 47 n.2, 49, J. Charpentier, *Die Suparṇasage* (1921), p. 329 ff. (originally a bird, either the solar bird, or a bird with a bough of the tree of Life [Soma], or the primordial father of the living, conceived of as a bird. Bur in the Veda a solar god). See also *Festgabe Jacobi* p. 277 n.2.

¹⁹ G. J. Held, *The Mahābhārata, An ethnological study* (thesis, Leiden, 1935), p. 222: 'Śiva is the god of *samhāra*, Viṣṇu the god of the *śriṣṭi*'; cf. p. 221: "Viṣṇu is the

The very existence of such a diversity of views might provoke some questions with regard to the methods applied in the field of "Comparative Religion." For we are here concerned with one of the prominent gods in a religion that we know from the very beginnings of history up to the present day. The mass of evidence no doubt constitutes a special difficulty, but on the other hand it is unquestionable that the manifest inability of modern science to understand this god is not due to a lack of data. The main problem is rather, how to find an adequate interpretation for the evidence contained in the ancient texts. One is reminded of Andrew Lang's words: "Nothing in all mythology is more difficult than the attempt to get a clear view of the gods of Vedic India."²² Indeed, we are here confronted with the fundamental difficulty of Vedic mythology, viz., the impossibility of understanding a single mythological figure isolated from the context of the mythological system. Monographs on single deities are indispensable as a first step, because no interpretation can be attempted before all data have been gathered and arranged. The final interpretation, however, will have to account for a god's function within the total system.

2. In the oldest Vedic text Viṣṇu's function seems to be restricted to his taking three strides through the Universe. Nothing suggests that this text is particularly reticent about the real nature of the god's divine act. So a correct interpretation of the Rigvedic evidence is of vital importance. At the end of the nineteenth century Macdonell summarized the contemporary research in these words: "The opinion that Viṣṇu's three steps refer to the course of the sun is almost unanimous."²³ They are equally true today. There is only a difference of opinion as to the identity of each of the steps, which some interpret as referring to the rising, culmination, and setting of the sun, while others hold them to mean the three divisions of the Universe. From Macdonell's classification of the Rigvedic passages²⁴ we learn that Viṣṇu:

- 1) took three steps (I.22.18, VIII.12.27),
- 2) strode with three steps through this world (*idám* I.22.17), or traversed with three steps this wide extended sphere (*sadhástham* I.154.3),
- 3) traversed the earthly regions (*pārthiváni rájāmsi*), and fixed the upper sphere (*úttaram sadhástham*) while stepping thrice (I.154.1),

All-god, viewed from the side of life, Śiva the same, but viewed from the side of death," p. 224: "Śiva especially is the god of involution, Vishṇu of evolution" (but see also pp. 145, 194!). Cf. in this connection Hopkins, *Religions of India*, p. 388: "Vishṇu and Īva are different gods. But each in turn represents the All-god, and consequently each represents the other."

²⁰ Hopkins, *JAOS* 36 (1916), p. 264.

²¹ R. Otto *Gottheit und Gottheiten der Arier* (1932), p. 83 ff., *Zeitschrift für Missionskunde und Religionswissenschaft* 49 (1936), p. 296 ff. Cf. *Gefühl des Überweltlichen*, p. 111: "Einschlüpfen, a haunting something."

²² *Myth, Ritual and Religion* II, p. 148, quoted by Hillebrandt, *Ved. Myth.* I², p. 1.

²³ *Vedic Mythology*, p. 38. Cf. Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda*, p. 109: "the solar nature of the deity is reasonably plain."

²⁴ *JRAS* 1895, p. 171.

- 4) stepped widely over the earthly *scil.* regions (*pārthivāni*) with three strides (I.155.4); thrice traversed the earthly regions (*rājāmsi pārthivāni* VI.49.13),
 5) thrice traversed this earth (*etām pṛthivīm* VII.100.3,4),
 6) strode three (steps) (thither) where the gods rejoice (VIII.29.7).

Some other passages make it clear that the third step is the highest and that mortal men can only see the two lower ones (I.155.5, VII.99.1). This highest step, which is sometimes connected with the third and highest place of Agni (V.3.3, X.1.3),²⁵ is likened to an eye fixed in heaven which singers light up (I.22.20 f.) and is said to shine down greatly (I.154.6). The poet prays that he may attain to that dear abode (I.154.5).

This is the general picture that can be derived from the scattered allusions. For further details the reader may be referred to the manuals. The facts mentioned allow some general conclusions. In the first place it is apparent that to the Rigvedic poets the exact place where these strides were taken was of minor importance: the words *pārthivāni rājāmsi* (or even *pṛthivīm* alone) were apparently sufficient to indicate the place of Viṣṇu's act.²⁶ Cf. also AthS. XII.1.10: "(the earth) on which Viṣṇu strode out." In the second place the number three, though traditional, is not the only one mentioned, for sometimes Viṣṇu is said to have stridden over the seven places of the earth.²⁷ Now, three and seven are both numbers which denote totality, and the question arises, if there is sufficient reason for assuming some naturalistic explanation for the number three. Only later, especially in the Yajurveda, are the three steps equated to *pṛthivī*, *antārikṣam* and *dyāuḥ* (e.g., VS. 2.25; 12.5, TS. II.4.12.3 ff., V.2.1.1, TB. III.1.2.6; cf. *divó vā viṣṇa(v) utá vā pṛthivyá mahó vā viṣṇa(v) utá vā 'ntārikṣād* VS TS KS, etc., and see also AthS. VII.26.8, etc.). On the other hand, there occur also quite different interpretations (e.g., AB. VI.15.11), and it remains doubtful, if much weight should be laid on these ritualistic speculations. Still, the correctness of this interpretation, which has found general acceptance in later Hinduism (Mahābhārata, Kālidāsa, etc.), has seldom been questioned. Oldenberg, however, rightly objected that this seemingly simple explanation is at variance with the Rigvedic texts which stress the fact "dass der dritte Schritt ein eigenartiger, erhabenster ist, dass er in geheimnisvolle höchste Höhe führt."²⁸ Cf. *asyá rājasah parāké* (VII.100.5), *tád viṣṇoḥ paramám padmā sādā paśyanti sūráyah | divíva cakṣur ātatam* (I.22.20), *yātra devāso mādanti* (VIII.29.7), *náro yātra devayāvo mādanti* (I.154.5), *viṣṇoḥ padé paramé mádhva útsah* (I.154.5), *yātra gāvo*

²⁵ Bergaigne, *Religion védique* II, p. 46.

²⁶ See also Oldenberg, *Religion des Veda*, p. 229. Hillebrandt's theory of "verschiedene, bisweilen in dasselbe Lied aufgenommene Traditionen" (*Ved. Myth.* II², p. 317) does not carry conviction.

²⁷ I.22.16 *yáto viṣṇur vicakramé pṛthivyāḥ sapta dhāmabhiḥ* ("la terre avec ses installations autonomes" Renou, *Études védiques* IV, p. 95), cf. VIII.69.7 *sacevahi trīḥ sapta sakhyúḥ padé* "so wollen wir . . . dreimal in den sieben Schritten des Freundes zusammengehen," Geldner. Otherwise VIII.59.5 *trīḥ sapta*.

²⁸ *Religion des Veda*, p. 229 f.

bhūriśṛṅgā ayāsaḥ (6), *viṣṇo deva tvām paramāsyā vitse* (VII.99.1), and I.155.5. Other facts corroborate the inference that Viṣṇu's strides are not connected with any natural phenomenon. The words *yā u tridhātu pṛthivīm utā dyām ēko dādāhāra bhūvanāni viśvā* (I.154.4) do not suggest that the poet had the *trīml lokāḥ* of the later Veda in mind. Hillebrandt rendered it "der allein Himmel und Erde, je zu dreien, und alle Wesen gehalten hat."²⁹ We might prefer: "who alone supports in a threefold manner Heaven and Earth, all creatures."

For these reasons one can hardly evade the conclusion that in the Rigveda Viṣṇu has no particular connections with the sun. It is possible that the sun, when in the zenith, was associated with Viṣṇu just as the rising sun was a manifestation of Mitra and the setting sun one of Varuṇa (AthS. XIII.3.13). If so, this could account for AthS. XIII.2.31, but the text is not explicit. As for RS. I.155.6, this passage points to a connection with the solar year of 360 days³⁰ but does by no means imply that this year, set in motion like a revolving wheel (*cakrām nā vṛtām*), is directly connected with the sun: in the Brāhmaṇas the year always represents the totality (like Prajāpati), for when time is conceived as a cyclic process, all is contained within the compass of a year. The technical term for setting in motion this cyclic process is *cakrām prā vartayati* ever since RS. I.164.11-14 and the *cakrā-* which soon came to be associated with Viṣṇu (*cakrapāṇi-* ŚvB. V.8.2) is probably the symbol for this progression of the Universe.

On the other hand, it is hard to accept Oldenberg's suggestion that the number three is nothing but a "Wiederspiegelung einer allgemeinen Neigung der Phantasie."³¹

3. With regard to the aim of Viṣṇu's strides the Rigveda is as explicit as one may desire: it may be summarized in the one word "life." Viṣṇu is said to stride out *jīvāse* (VI.69.5), *urugāyāya jīvāse* (I.155.4), *mānave bādhitāya* (VI.49.13). Cf. VI.100.4. Some scholars assign the same act to Indra on the strength of VIII.63.9, but Geldner is apparently right in reading *asyā vṛṣṇo vy ōdanā urū kramiṣṭa jīvāse* (for *vyōdana*): "Er schritt weit aus nach dem Reisbrei, für diesen Bullen zum Leben," so that it becomes an additional testimony for the aboriginal *odana*-myth that has been grafted on the Vedic

²⁹ *Lieder des Rgveda*, p. 89. Not "das Dreifache, d.h., die dreitheilige Welt" (Roth, *PW.* III, col. 933, Ludwig, *Der Rigveda* I, p. 158, Geldner, *Der Rigveda* I, p. 212). It should be noted that *tridhātu* is never used to denote a tripartition of the world: in IV.42.4 *tridhātu prathayad vī bhūma* (as compared with, e.g., VII.36.1, V.87.7, X.62.3, VI.72.2, X.82.1; 149.2, II.10.7, V.58.7, I.62.5, VIII.89.5, I.103.2 = II.15.2) it must be an adverb, as it is in VI.44.21 *tridhātu divī*, VII.5.4 *tāva tridhātu pṛthivī utā dyāvur vaiśvānara vratām agne sacanta*, I.34.7 *pāri tridhātu pṛthivīm aśāyatam* (:8 *tisrāḥ pṛthivīr*). For *tridhātu* "thrice" see Renou, *Études védiques et pāṇinéennes* IV, pp. 54, 70. It may be equated to *tridhā* (cf. III.56.6) and *tredhā* (*tredhā nī dadhe padām* I.22.17).

³⁰ Macdonell, *JRAS* 1895, p. 174, f., cf. Oldenberg, *Rgveda, Textkritische und exegetische Noten* I, p. 151.

³¹ *Religion des Veda*, p. 231. These words reflect his "peculiar mental attitude towards myth and ritual" (Held, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 117.)

Vṛtra-myth.³² Cf. further *uruṣyá ṇa uruḥmann áprayuchan* (AthS. VI.4.3), *hástau pṛṇasva bahúbhir vasávyaiḥ* (AthS. VII.26.8). It is not clear, why Macdonell³³ holds this motive to be “a secondary trait.” The frequency with which it is mentioned suggests that it is an authentic feature.

A further characteristic of Viṣṇu is “his friendship for Indra, with whom he is frequently allied in the fight with Vṛtra. This is indicated by the fact that one whole hymn (VI.69) is dedicated to the two deities conjointly, and . . . by the fact that in hymns extolling Viṣṇu, Indra is the only other deity incidentally associated with him either explicitly (VII.99.5-6; I.155.2) or implicitly (VII.99.4; I.154.6, 155.1; cp. I.67.7).”³⁴ Viṣṇu’s assistance in the fight with Vṛtra has created some surprise. Oldenberg held this to occur “nur in einer ganz auf der Oberfläche liegenden Anähnlichung an Indra.”³⁵ Others tried to explain this alliance between the two gods from their supposed natural substratum. Thus Gonda, who accepts the traditional explanation of the three strides as referring to the diurnal ascent of the sun through the atmosphere to the zenith (and more particularly, to the sun’s energy as a “pervading, omnipresent, and fecundating stream of light and energy”) suggests that “Viṣṇu’s acting as Indra’s companion or assistant in fighting Vṛtra may be interpreted as reflecting ancient ideas with regard to help given by the power inhering in sunlight to the weather-god when the latter is about to destroy the demon who precludes the waters from fertilizing the soil.”³⁶ Similarly Griswold tried to connect the functions of lightning and sun, which he supposes to be personified by Indra and Viṣṇu.³⁷ A third theory explains the mythical association of Viṣṇu and Indra as the result of a historical union of the Viṣṇu-worshippers and the Indra-worshippers.³⁸ However, is there any reason to suppose that Viṣṇu’s rôle as Indra’s “assistant” was different from his general salutary activity in behalf of Mankind and the Universe? The answer will to a large extent depend on one’s views about Indra’s character. Without entering into this problem I should like to draw attention to a passage which seems never to have been discussed in earlier studies on Viṣṇu. RS. I.156.4*cd* reads as follows:

*dādhāra dākṣam uttamām aharvidam
vrajām ca viṣṇuḥ sákhivāṁ aporṇutē*

“Er besitzt höchsten Verstand, der den richtigen Tag ausfindig macht, wenn Viṣṇu in Begleitung des Freundes den Rinderperch aufschliesst.”³⁹ The

³² *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen*, afd. Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks, Deel 13, No. 7 (1950).

³³ *Vedic Mythology*, p. 39.

³⁴ Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, p. 39.

³⁵ *Religion des Veda* 231.

³⁶ *Aspects of early Viṣṇuism*, p. 60. For Indra as a weather-god see also p. 31, as representing power in nature, see p. 172.

³⁷ *The Religion of the R̥gveda*, p. 285 n.1.

³⁸ Hillebrandt, *Vedische Mythologie II*³, p. 313.

³⁹ Transl. Geldner. For the accent of *aporṇutē* see Oldenberg, *ZDMG* 60, p. 733.

mythological significance of the phrase *vrajdm apa-ūr-* becomes clear by a comparison with IV.51.2 *vy ù vrajdsya tmaso dvārochāntīr avrañ chūcayah pāvakāh* (cf. VI.62.11).⁴⁰ If Viṣṇu was credited with the act of opening the nether world along with his friend, he must accordingly have taken part in the process of creation. To this same conclusion points the word *aharvid-*. No matter, whether it is translated “knowing the (right) day”—which meaning nearly all authorities assign to it—, or rather “finding the day” (cf. *svarvid-* “finding the sun,” *gātvid-* “finding a way [out of a critical situation]”), the word in any case seems to point to a definite day. In VIII.5.21 it also occurs associated with the idea of the opening of doors: *utā no divyā īṣa utā sindhūmr aharvidā | āpa dvāreva varṣathah* “und schliesset uns die himmlischen Labungen und die Ströme auf wie die Tore, ihr Zeitenkenner!” (Geldner). It should be noted that Grassmann’s rendering by “der Tage kundig” has been accepted by Böhtlingk and Geldner.⁴¹ But his further explanation “für seine Handlungen die rechten Tage oder Zeiten wissend,” which calls to mind the classical expression *deśakārajña-*, hardly defines the meaning intended by the Vedic poets. If it means “knowing the right day” we may rather connect it with such phrases as I.123.9 *jānaty dhnaḥ prathamāsya nāma*. But since in VIII.8.7 the Aśvins are also addressed as *svarvidā* “finding the sun [of the new year],” it would seem more natural to render *aharvidā* in VIII.5.9, 21 by “finding the [first] day [of the new year].”⁴² If this conclusion is correct, the words *dkṣam aharvidam* indicate that Viṣṇu takes a part in the cosmogonical act of finding the sun in the darkness of the nether world and furnish an indication as to the time at which Viṣṇu was thought to take his three strides.⁴³

4. Before discussing the number three itself, it is necessary first to pay some attention to Viṣṇu’s place in the cosmic classificatory system. As Held rightly remarks: “The gods cannot be explained, it is true, from the classification-system, but we can understand them through it.”⁴⁴ In three Atharvavedic hymns (III.27, XII.3, XV.14) nearly the same classification is met with, viz.:

	N. Soma	
W. Varuṇa	S. Indra	E. Agni (XV.14.1: Maruts)

⁴⁰ See *IJJ* IV, p. 226.

⁴¹ Translation of VIII.5.9: “die Tage kennend”; Glossar: “die Opfertage (oder die Tageszeiten) kennend, opferkundig.”

⁴² Cf. Ludwig: “Tagfinder.”

⁴³ Unfortunately the passage VIII.66.10 is too obscure to allow an inference as to *ahardṣ-* (parallel to *svardṣ-*?).

⁴⁴ G. J. Held, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 222.

Indra's connection with the southern quarter, though found also elsewhere, is remarkable. In addition to these four quarters the *ūrdhvā dīk* is always imparted to Bṛhaspati, and the *dhruvā dīk* to Viṣṇu (see AthS. III.27.5, XII.3.59, XV.14.5). What exactly is meant by the *dhruvā dīk* becomes clear from such parallel phrases as *āvācī dīk* MS. II.13.21 (p. 167) and *iyām dīk* TS. V.5.10.2, TB. III.11.5.3 (= *adharā dīk*, Comm.). Cf. also *adhāstāt* AthS. IV.40.5, *ihā* TS. V.5.10.4 (corresponding to *dhruvāyām dīk* AthS. III.26.5)⁴⁵ and *asyām dhruvāyām madhyamāyām pratiṣṭhāyām dīśi* AB. VIII.14.3. It is accordingly the cosmic center and the nadir with which Viṣṇu is associated. The parallel texts of the Yajurveda show some variations. The northern quarter is here allotted to Varuṇa (resp. *Mitrāvdrūṇau*) and the western quarter to Soma.⁴⁶ The reason for this most abnormal division, which apparently is a later corruption of the normal system as represented in the Atharvaveda, is unknown. As for the *dhruvā dīk*, MS. agrees with AthS. in associating it with Viṣṇu, while TS. and TB. have respectively Yama⁴⁷ and Aditi instead.

Now, the mythological meaning of the center has long been known: it represents the totality of the parts distributed over the four quarters. So we are driven to the conclusion that at an early date Viṣṇu occupied a more central position than either Indra or Varuṇa, who are the protagonists of the opposed groups of Devas and Asuras and thus stand each for one of the moieties only. In contrast with them, Viṣṇu must consequently represent the unity of the two antagonistic parties, upper world and nether world. He stands for, and is, each of the two worlds (just as later he is, in a way, the heavenly bird Garuḍa and the serpent of the subterranean waters Śeṣa), but under the aspect of their unity, like Prajāpati. In AthS. X.10.30 the cosmic cow is said to be Heaven and Earth (i.e., the totality of the Universe), Viṣṇu and Prajāpati. In XIX.17.9; 18.9 the *dhruvā dīk* is associated with Prajāpati and *pratiṣṭhā*, in XVIII.3.25 with a god Dhartṛ.

Being related to both worlds, Viṣṇu also belongs to the gods of the nether world. In AthS. XI.6.2 he is invoked along with Varuṇa, Mitra, Bhaga, Amśa and Vivasvant for deliverance from distress (*amhas-*). It may have some importance, therefore, that Viṣṇu and Varuṇa are sometimes addressed conjointly⁴⁸ and that the mythical bird Suparṇa, the prototype of Garuḍa, is said to be *Vāruṇasya dūtām*, *Yamśasya yōṇau* (RS. X.123.6). This explains why Viṣṇu's position in the cosmogonical Vṛtra-fight was of the utmost importance and at the same time fundamentally ambiguous: his was to some extent the position and the rôle which in other mythologies is attributed to the divine trickster.⁴⁹ He could not fight the powers of the nether world,

⁴⁵ Hauer's doubts (*Festschrift Winternitz*, p. 144, n.1) do not seem justified.

⁴⁶ TS. V.5.10.2, MS. II.13.21 (p. 167, 3, 5 f.), TB. III.11.5.2.

⁴⁷ In the Mahābhārata Viṣṇu is Yama, see Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, p. 207.

⁴⁸ Cf. AthS. VII.25.1,2 (cf. IX.2.6), KS. XIII.4 (p. 184, 7, 10), MS. IV.14.6 (p. 223, 1, 5, 9, 12), TS. II.1.4.4, TB. II.8.4.4 ff. See Hillebrandt, *Ved. Myth.* II², pp. 69, 325.

⁴⁹ See J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong, *De Oorsprong van den goddelijken bedrieger* (Mede-

as Indra did, because these too were part of his essence. His natural place (like Prajāpati's)⁵⁰ was *between* the two parties, as indeed his position is during the Churning of the Ocean.⁵¹ Viṣṇu is the typical *madhyasthaḥ*, the connecting link between the two cosmic moieties, reflexes of which concept may be recognized in such ritualistic speculations as SB. III.4.4.15: Agni is the day, Soma the night, and Viṣṇu "what is between the two" (*ydd āntareṇa*), or KS. XXV.1 (p. 102, 13 ff.) *agnim śrīgam, somaṁ śalyam, viṣṇuṁ tejanam* (the shaft of the arrow). The factual importance of such identifications may be slight, but such passages show that the authors were quite aware of the *structural* function of Viṣṇu as the connecting link. In passing it may be called to mind that in later times Viṣṇu was (and still is) believed to stay for four months in the nether world, where he sleeps on Śeṣa in the subterranean waters and that, in contrast with other gods, he is endowed with two *vāhanas* which, while being at variance with each other, at the same time stress by their relationship the totalitarian character of the god. From a purely mythological point of view Viṣṇu, who by his position in the center must also in Vedic belief have been immediately associated with the cosmic pillar (*Skambhā*), must have ascended along this pillar at the beginning of the year and descended in the second half of it⁵² but, owing perhaps to the fact that the texts are primarily concerned with the beginning of the new year, they do not contain any reference to such a belief.

5. That the mythological concept of the nether world was associated with the earth appears from the fact that TB. III.1.5.3 substitutes Aditi for Viṣṇu as the divinity presiding over the nadir. The scholion to this passage has the following comment: *iyam dig] ity anenā 'dharā dik pradarsyate; aditir] bhūmis tasyā diśo devatā*.⁵³ This may account for Viṣṇu's connection with the plants. According to JB. I.181²⁻³ the gods won from the Asuras the cow and the horse through Indra-Varuṇa, the goat and the sheep through Indra-Bṛhas-

deelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde, Deel 68, Serie B, N° 1 (1929)).

⁵⁰ See *IJJ* V, p. 58 and cf. *JB*. I.19 *tān . . . antarā vikramyā 'tiṣṭhat*.

⁵¹ According to the Mahābhārata I.16.13 f. (*crit. ed.*) the Asuras held the head of the serpent, and the Devas its tail, but *ananto bhagavān devo yato, Nārāyaṇas tataḥ*, that is Viṣṇu, who is mythically identical with Śeṣa, his nether world aspect, is the connecting link between the two parties. He stands between them, e.g., on the reliefs of Angkor Vat, but also in modern representations (cf. e.g., the frontispiece in *Mumbai sabhā-caranaṁ paṁcāṅga*, samvat 1978). Since the Asuras are the elder brothers of the Devas (*Mhbh.* XII.34.13 *crit. ed.*: *asurā bhrātaro jyeṣṭhā devās cāpi yavīyasaḥ*), it is interesting to note that among the Papuas of Waropen (New Guinea) the cooperation and rivalry between two non-exogamous groups is seen as the head and the tail of a triton shell, the head being the clan of the "elder brother" and the tail the clan of the "younger brother." See G. J. Held, *Papoea's van Waropen*, Leiden 1947, p. 49 f. (as summarized by Milner, *BSOAS* XXII, p. 180).

⁵² Cf. in the Edda the squirrel on the trunk of Yggdrasil, who "shall bear the eagle's words from above and say them to Niðhögger [the dragon] below" (*Grímnismál* 32).

⁵³ For Aditi and the Earth, see Macdonell, *Ved. Myth.*, p. 121, Agrawala, *Indian Culture* 4 (1938), p. 407.

pati, but rice and barley (*vr̥hiṃ ca yavaṃ ca*) through Indra-Viṣṇu.⁵⁴ With the nadir are associated earth and fire, herbs (*ōśadhī-*), forest trees, and plants (*virūdh-*), AthS. XV.6.1; herbs, III.26.5, XII.3.59 (but Paippalāda: food and plants respectively), Viṣṇu and plants, III.27.5. It may be added that the earth is *mātṛam ōśadhīnām dhruvām bhūmiṃ pṛthivīmī*, XII.1.17. Viṣṇu and the nadir are connected with Virāj, XV.14.5, who again is associated with food,⁵⁵ and with Aditi (*āditiṃ virājam* VS. 13.43, cf. AthS. XII.-3.11). To the same relation points AthS. II.12.1 *kṣētrasya pātṇy urugāyō 'dbhutaḥ* (cf. RS. VII.35.10d *kṣētrasya pātīḥ* beside Viṣṇu in 9c?). It is not surprising, therefore, that in the Yajurveda, which particularly stresses the chthonic character of Aditi, she is called *Viṣṇupatnī*,⁵⁶ as are also Virāj⁵⁷ and *dhruvā dik*.⁵⁸ A discussion of Aditi lies outside the scope of this article,⁵⁹ but it may be pointed out that she is sometimes equated also with Heaven and Earth.⁶⁰ Heesterman holds her to be identical with Anumati,⁶¹ who is opposed to Nirṛti, the "personified representation of the cover of the embryo." This may be one of the sources of Viṣṇu's special connection with women.⁶²

6. As far as I see, Professor W. Norman Brown has been the first to state that Indra's fight with Vṛtra is a creation myth.⁶³ Since the Rigveda connects Viṣṇu's three strides with Indra's slaying of the serpent demon, we are driven to the conclusion that Viṣṇu's act must somehow belong to the same mythical context.⁶⁴ Several well-known authorities, however, have felt unable to accept this conclusion. Hillebrandt held the association of Viṣṇu with Indra to be quite irrelevant: "Die drei Schritte, die er z.B. IV.18.11; VIII.12.27; 52.3 für Indra tut, sind eine ganz überflüssige Sache und hier

⁵⁴ For these three groups of gods see below, p. 150 and cf. AB. III. 50, ĀsvŚ. VI. 1, Egeling, *SBE*. 26, p. 429, n. 1.

⁵⁵ *annam virāḥ*, e.g., *JB*. II.158¹⁰. See M. Mauss, *Mélanges S. Lévi* (1911), p. 333, Hauer, *Festschrift Winternitz*, p. 144, n.1, Hopkins, *Epic Mythology* 78, Gonda, *Aspects of early Viṣṇuism*, p. 67 (*virāḥ* = totality).

⁵⁶ VS. 29.60, TS. IV.4.12.5, VII.5.14.1, TB. III.1.2.6, ĀsvŚ. IV.12.2. For Viṣṇu and Aditi in the ritual see Caland, *Altindische Zauberei*, p. 112. In the epic the earth is *Vaiṣṇavī* (Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, p. 80).

⁵⁷ KS. XXII.14 (p. 70, 20).

⁵⁸ MS. III.16.4 (p. 189, 16), TS. IV.4.12.5 *dhruvā diśām viṣṇupatny āghorā 'syēsānā sāhaso yā manōtā*.

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Bergaigne, *Religion védique* III, p. 88 ff., Max Müller, *SBE*. 32, p. 241 ff., Vodskov, *Sjæledyrkelsen og Naturdyrkelsen*, pp. 321-73, Keith, *Indian Culture*, III, pp. 721-30, V. S. Agrawala, *Indian Culture* IV, pp. 401-409, Kuiper, *De goddelijke Moeder in de Voor-Indische religie* (1939).

⁶⁰ Cf. Macdonell, *Ved. Myth.*, p. 121, TS. I.5.11.5, IV.4.12.5, KS. XXIII.8 (p. 83, 19), and Heesterman (see next note), p. 202.

⁶¹ J. C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration* (1957), p. 18.

⁶² See Gonda, *Aspects of early Viṣṇuism*, p. 19 ff.

⁶³ *JAS* 61 (1941), p. 79; vol. 62 (1942), p. 98. For further references see *IJJ* IV (1960), p. 218, n.6.

⁶⁴ For the ancient Indian concept of creation as a process of arranging the primordial matter see, e.g., Held, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 118.

auf den Vṛtrakampf aus dem viṣṇuitischen Sagenkreise übernommen, um beide aus irgendeinem für die Verehrer wichtigen Grunde miteinander zu verknüpfen.”⁶⁵ Oldenberg expressed a similar opinion, “Aber wie die vedischen Dichter es lieben, die Taten, welche die Ordnung der Welt und das glückliche Dasein der Menschheit begründen, mit dem Vṛtrasieg in Verbindung zu setzen, so muss hier Viṣṇu zugleich mit der Vṛtratötung das vollbringen, was die ihm eigene Tat ist: er muss weit ausschreiten und dadurch Indra das grosse Schlachtfeld für seinen Sieg schaffen.”⁶⁶ It may be objected that Viṣṇu’s act cannot be said to be “superfluous” as long as its real character is not understood, and that the existence of *separate* Viṣṇuite sagas is an unproved theory.⁶⁷ Others have rightly explained the connection between both acts from the character of the two gods (see above, p. 142). We therefore start from the following assumptions which seem to us sufficiently warranted:

- 1) The myth of Indra’s fight with Vṛtra refers to the creation of the organized cosmos, consisting of upper and nether world.
- 2) Viṣṇu’s mythical act, accomplished like Indra’s for the welfare of the world, and sometimes directly connected with it, is also likely to form part of this creation act.
- 3) The poets do not lay much stress on the places where the steps were taken, the most important trait of the myth apparently being their number.
- 4) In the Rigveda the third step was conceived as quite mysterious and invisible to the human eye. Later theological speculations often try to find some correlate in the phenomenal world for such mythological concepts (as in the case of the inverted tree).⁶⁸
- 5) In spite of such assonances as *sákhe viṣṇo vitarám ví kramasva*⁶⁹ the prevailing idea with respect to Viṣṇu’s three strides seems to have been that of an ascension. There is no doubt as to the third step being the highest. Reference to this ascension is met with in VIII.69.7 *úd yád bradhásya viṣṭápaṃ indras ca gánvahi* “wenn ich und Indra, wir beide, nach Hause zur Höhe der Sonne hinaufsteigen.”⁷⁰ Geldner is probably right in taking st. 7 and 16 (*ádha dyukśám sacevahi!*) as spoken by Viṣṇu: in that case the idea of Indra’s ascension must be due to his association with Viṣṇu.⁷¹ The same idea of ascension associated with Viṣṇu also accounts for his being an *unnetr-*; cf. JB.II.68¹ *unnetar un mā naye ’ty áha, viṣṇur vā unnētā, yajño vai viṣṇuḥ,*

⁶⁵ *Vedische Mythologie* II², p. 313.

⁶⁶ *Religion des Veda*, p. 231.

⁶⁷ The fundamental weakness of such theories has rightly been censured by Norman O. Brown, *Am. J. Arch.* 53 (1949), p. 218, in the words: “The history of religion is conceived as a blind diffusion and collision of tribal traditions, with little or no regard for the functional interrelationship between religious institutions and the total culture of which they form a part.”

⁶⁸ See *Bijdragen Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde* 107, p. 80 ff.

⁶⁹ Oldenberg, *Nachrichten Gött. Akad. Wiss.* 1915, p. 374. In view of the “magical” use of repetition and assonance in prayers and exhortations to the gods (e.g., VS. 9.9 *vájino vājajito vājāṃ sariṣyántaḥ*, RS. I.124.13 *ástoḍhvaṃ stomyā(h)*, I.113.18 *usátir uśāsah*, 19 *jáne janaya*) no argument can be derived from the use of *ví* for the etymology of *Viṣṇu-*.

⁷⁰ Cf., e.g., comm. on PB. XVIII.7.13: *bradhásya | ádityasya viṣṇurūpasya*.

⁷¹ St. 14 refers to Indra and Viṣṇu. Cf. also Oldenberg’s note on st. 15 and see below p. 151.

*yajña evai 'naṃ tat sarvasmāt pāpmano vimucyo 'nnayati*⁷³ and MānGS. I.11.18 *Viṣṇus tvām unnayatu*,⁷⁴ and especially for the identification of Viṣṇu and the sacrifice.

7. The main problem with which one is confronted when trying to understand the real character of Viṣṇu's strides has never been clearly stated. On the one hand there has been a tendency, ever since the oldest Yajurvedic texts and the pre-Yāska interpreters of the Rigveda, to connect them with the triple division of the universe. On the other hand it cannot be doubted that, whatever may be the origin of this threefold division, the cosmological concept upon which the Vedic (and particularly the Rigvedic) mythology is mainly based is that of a cosmic dichotomy. The Vedic conception of the universe centers about the oppositions of Heaven-Earth, Day-Night, Devas-Asuras: "twofold indeed is this (universe), there is no third" (ŚB. III.3.2.2).⁷⁴ So, quite apart from other considerations, the dual division is likely to be earlier than the tripartite one,⁷⁵ and the ritualistic interpretation of the Yajurveda (e.g., VS.2.25 *divī viṣṇur vyākramiṣṭa . . . antārikṣe . . . pṛthivyām*) may not reflect the mythical meaning. The same is true of the Iranian interpretation in the Dēnkart.⁷⁶ From the survey of the Rigvedic passages (above p. 139) it emerges that the poets never refer to this triple division: they rather had the dual conception in mind, e.g., I.154.4 *yā u tridhātu pṛthivīm utā dyām ēko dādhāra bhūwanāni viśvā*, where Viṣṇu is said to hold in a threefold way Earth and Heaven, all that exists.

For a correct interpretation we must start from the mythical significance of the number three in Vedic thought.⁷⁷ It has long been observed that the predominant role of the number five in the Veda (cf. *pāñca jānāḥ*, *pāñca kṛṣṭiḥ*, *pāñca carṣanāḥ*, *pāñca kṣitīḥ*) is due to the fact that the five points of the compass (*pāñca pradīśaḥ* IX.86.29) "represent in the Vedic scriptures the entire world."⁷⁸ When five points are occasionally mentioned, that in the middle, where the speaker stands (*madhyatdḥ* RS. X.42.11), denotes the fifth.⁷⁹

⁷³ But in MS. I.3.39 (p. 46, 4) *ūnnetar vāsīyo nā ūnnayā 'bhi*, KS. IV.13 (p. 38, 9) *ūnnetar vāsīyo 'bhyūnnayā naḥ*, KKS. III.11 (p. 35, 9) *ūnnetar vāsīyo 'dhyūnnayā naḥ* there is no reference to Viṣṇu.

⁷⁴ But this formula is a "correction" of *Viṣṇus tvānu etu* TB. ĀpŚ. (cf. TS. III.2.6.1 *Viṣṇus tvānu vī cakrame*). Note the use of *un-nī-* as the technical term for the erection of the *yūpa* (RS. III.8.4, 9).

⁷⁵ Otherwise I.2.1.12; 2.4.21 (S. Lévi, *La Doctrine du sacrifice*, p. 92).

⁷⁶ Held, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 141.

⁷⁷ See above, p. 140. For the three strides of the priest in the Zoroastrian religion see Dumézil, *Orientalia Suecana* V (1956), p. 14, Haggerty Krappe, *Mythologie universelle*, p. 165 f. (cf. Darmesteter, *Le Zend-Avesta* I, p. 401, Hillebrandt, *Neu-und Vollmondsopfer*, p. 171 f.).

⁷⁸ No mention will be made of such general studies as, e.g., Usener, *Dreiheit*, *Rheinisches Museum* 58 (1903), p. 12 ff., W. B. Kristensen, *Kringloop en Totaliteit* (Verzamelde Bijdragen, p. 231, esp. p. 281 ff.).

⁷⁹ Held, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 120.

⁸⁰ Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, p. 9.

Indeed, as Held remarks, "the number of the whole is obtained by continually adding one to the whole already obtained."⁸⁰ The correctness of this observation is evident from such instances as pointed out by Heesterman:⁸¹ the "sixteenth round" (*ṣoḍaśin-graha-*) added as an extra element to a total made up of fifteen parts "not only exceeds but also encompasses the preceding fifteen-partite totality." Cf. AB. IV.1.4 "with the *ṣoḍaśin* as a *vajra* he encompasses (goes round, surrounds: *parigachati*) cattle." Prajāpati and the year (which is the all-encompassing totality) are often connected with the number seventeen; in ŚB. X.4.1.16 this is explained as being 16 plus one, Prajāpati himself being the seventeenth. (Similarly JB. II.104⁶: *trayastrīṃsam eva pitarāṃ Prajāpatim*). In KB. XIX.2 the thirteenth month is said to stand for the whole year: *etāvān vai saṃvatsaro yad eṣa trayodaśo māsas, tad atraiva sarvaḥ saṃvatsara āpto bhavati*.

Now it has long been clear that Viṣṇu's three strides are somehow connected with the totality of the universe, but it has never been expressly stated, what exactly is the mythical significance of the third step. Its explanation must be sought in the cosmogony, i.e., in the creation myth. In the beginning there was the undifferentiated primeval world consisting of the waters⁸² and the beginning of the primordial hill, which the cosmogonical boar had dug up out of the waters.⁸³ Heaven still lay on the earth.⁸⁴ By slaying Vṛtra, Indra rivets the hill, opens it, and "props up" (*stabh-*) the sky:⁸⁵ thereby the dual organization of the cosmos is created. But at the same moment Viṣṇu "strides out": his first step corresponds to the nether world (which includes the earth), his second step to the upper world, but his third step is a mystery, not perceptible to the human eye, for it corresponds to the totality of the opposed moieties, just as the thirteenth month stands for the totality of the preceding twelve months. All that exists, is in the three steps, or in the third that represents them. Hence it may be asked whether *tēṣu* (scil. *triṣū padēṣu*) *vīśvaṃ bhūvanam ā viveśā3* (VS.23.49). As compared with the *thesis* of the primordial world, and the *antithesis* of Indra's creation, Viṣṇu's third step is the *synthesis*. In later ritualistic speculations this idea can sometimes still be traced, e.g., Indra got two parts of Vṛtra's *indriyaṃ vīryam*, but Viṣṇu the third (JB. II.243). When the Asuras had stolen the *rasa* and *vīrya* of the sacrifice, Indra regained one-third with the help of Varuṇa, one third with Bṛhaspati, but the last third with Viṣṇu's assistance: "thus they excluded

⁸⁰ Held, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

⁸¹ *The ancient Indian royal Consecration*, p. 13 f.

⁸² *salilām apraketām*, e.g., RS. X.129.3, AthS. XII.1.8, TS. V.6.4.2, VII.1.5.1, TB. I.1.3.5, II.2.9.3, KS. VIII.2 (p. 84, 14), XXII.9 (p. 65, 13), JB. III.360^u, ŚB. XI. 1.6.1, etc.

⁸³ In Yajurveda, e.g., KS. VIII.2 (p. 84, 14), cf. MS. I.6.3 (p. 90, 4), TS. VII.1.5.1, TB. I.1.3.6, ŚB. XIV.1.2.11; otherwise JB. III.360^u, AitUp. I.3, ŚB. VI. 1.1.12, etc.

⁸⁴ AB. IV.27.5, JB. III.361⁴, PB. VII.10.1, TS. III.4.3.1, ŚB. I.4.1.21 f., III.2.1.2. See Geldner, *Der Rigveda in Auswahl II* (Kommentar), p. 113.

⁸⁵ Cf., e.g., Geldner's note on his translation of VII.86.1.

them from *all*” (*tān sarvasmād evā ’ntarāyan*, JB. I.180). Here, as in the passage from I.181 mentioned above, Varuṇa apparently stands for the Asuras and the nether world, Bṛhaspati for the Devas and the upper world, and Viṣṇu for the totality.⁸⁶

8. The difference between the current view of the Vedic god and the one here advocated is apparent. According to the former view Viṣṇu was in the Rigveda a mere assistant of the great Indra, who gradually gained in importance, finally to rise to the paramount position of mankind’s Savior.⁸⁷ In our opinion Viṣṇu, far from being a mere assistant, must have been conceived mythologically as standing between the two parties in the Vṛtra-fight, just as he stood in an ambiguous position between Asuras and Devas in the *amṛtamanthana*, and to some extent also as Kṛṣṇa stood in the battle of the Mahābhārata.⁸⁸ I may be permitted to quote here some words written many years ago: “Just as it is said in the epic that that party will be victorious with which Kṛṣṇa sides (*yataḥ Kṛṣṇas tato jayah*, Mhbh. VI.21.12, crit. ed.), so we shall have to attribute a far more fundamental importance to Viṣṇu’s seemingly insignificant rôle in Indra’s Vṛtra-fight than earlier Vedic scholars like Hillebrandt and Oldenberg were ready to admit: the two-sidedness of Viṣṇu’s nature is apparently the determinant factor which alone could incline the balance in the combat of the cosmic moieties.”⁸⁹ Viṣṇu, no less than Indra, was considered a victor (RS. VI.69.8, JB.II.242 f.). Unlike Indra, however, who apparently came “from nowhere,” he originally belonged to the nether world, though representing (like Aditi and Anumati) its auspicious aspect, which was opposed to *āmhas*-. He rose up from the center at the very moment when the dual world was being created, and so he is connected with the pillar which now supports the sky. Just as this pillar connects Heaven and Earth “like an axle two wheels,”⁹⁰ so Viṣṇu is the connecting link, which forms part of both worlds (see p. 145). As the sacrifice strode forth from (or through?) the *skambhā*-,⁹¹ so Viṣṇu as the sacrifice ascends to the sky and transmits the powers of the earth to the heavenly gods. Rönnow character-

⁸⁶ Of course no argument can be derived from these speculations, as in many others the meaning of the number three is no longer known: in VS. IX.31-32, TS. I.7.11.1 Viṣṇu is associated with three syllables, but the highest number is here seventeen syllables, connected with Prajāpati. In JB. I.156 the gods are said to have overcome the Asuras with two *savanas*, after which Indra alone accomplishes the third *savana* (which in I.180 is connected with Indra-Viṣṇu!).

⁸⁷ E.g., Gonda, *Aspects of early Viṣṇuism*, p. 163 (cf. p. 30 f.). But on p. 32 he is stated to be equal in rank to Indra (see also Keith, *Religion and Philosophy*, p. 109).

⁸⁸ On Kṛṣṇa as the divine trickster see Held, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 299, Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, p. 215. In the Veda only Viṣṇu, as representing the total Universe, could induce the sky to “make room” for Indra’s vajra: Bṛhaddevatā VI.123 *udyatasyaiva vajrasya dyaur dadātu mamā ’ntaram*.

⁸⁹ *Bijdragen Koninklijk Instituut 107* (1951), p. 77.

⁹⁰ RS. X.89.4 *yó ákṣeneva cakṛtyā śácibhīr víṣvak tastāmbha pṛthivīm utá dyām* (said of Indra).

⁹¹ AthS. X.7.16 *yajñó yátra párákrāntaḥ* (differently, Lindenau, *ZII. III*, p. 236).

ized him as the Soma-god *par excellence*:⁹² the words with which the poet addresses Viṣṇu and Indra in VI.69.6 “ye two are the [primeval] ocean, the bowl which contains the Soma”⁹³ must primarily refer to Viṣṇu (like those in the preceding stanza *somasya máda urú cakramāthe*, see Hillebrandt, *Ved. Myth.* II, p. 316, and those in VIII.69.7, see above, p. 147). Indeed, Viṣṇu presses the Soma for Indra (I.22.1), and later texts state that the Soma belongs to Viṣṇu (*sómo vaiṣṇavó* ŚB. XIII.4.3.8). His is apparently the mythical Soma bowl (*kalása-*), like the *mádхва útsaḥ* (I.154.5). Viṣṇu might also be called the god of *pravṛtti-* or cosmic progression⁹⁴ but while Held rightly remarks that *nivṛtti-* (regression) was also the movement of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa in later Hinduism, “the sleeping Viṣṇu, symbol of life that has ceased from activity and become merged in death,”⁹⁵ references to this belief are lacking in the Veda. On the other hand there is clear evidence of Viṣṇu’s connection with the mountains: he is “dwelling” or “standing” on the mountain(s) and “regent of the mountains.”⁹⁶ The specific mythological significance of the mountains (or mountain!) in the Vṛtra-myth is the primeval hill,⁹⁷ and if the concept of Uṣas dwelling on the surface of the mountain (*adrisānu-*) has rightly been associated with her cosmogonical appearance, Viṣṇu’s epithets will also have to be referred to the god’s epiphany: he stands on the summit of the mountain (I.155.1).⁹⁸ Particularly remarkable is I.154.2: “Because of this his mighty deed is Viṣṇu lauded, like some fierce beast that is much dreaded, That wanders as it lists, that haunts the mountains.”⁹⁹ Since he assumed different forms (VII.100.6) it may be asked if the *mrgó bhīmadh* may perhaps be his serpent form (cf. VIII.93.14, V.32.3; 34.2). Later art represents him standing on Mount Mandara, and arising from it as the cosmic pillar. In the middle of the seventh century, A.D., an artist at Māmalapuram portrayed the god, while taking his three strides, as being the supporting pillar of the Universe.¹⁰⁰

⁹² Trita Āptya (I), p. 93.

⁹³ *samudrá sthaḥ kalásaḥ somadhānaḥ*.

⁹⁴ See Held, *op. cit.*, p. 128 and see above, note 19.

⁹⁵ Held, p. 145. See especially Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, p. 207 on Viṣṇu as *saṃhartṛ-*.

⁹⁶ *girikṣīt-* I.154.3, *giriṣṭhā-* 2, *vīṣṇuḥ párvatānām* (scil. *ádhipatiḥ*), TS. III.4.5.1. Doubtful is VS. 16.29 *námo giriśayáya ca śipiviṣṭáya ca*, which Mahīdhara refers to Śiva.

⁹⁷ See *IJJ* IV, pp. 219, 222.

⁹⁸ (Indra-Viṣṇu) *yá sánuni párvatānām . . . tashátur*; cf. V.87.4 *ádhi ṣṛúbhīr* and see *IJJ* IV, p. 226 on *adrisānu-*, epithet of Uṣas.

⁹⁹ An explanation of Viṣṇu’s relation to the mountains has been suggested by Oldenberg, *Gött. Nachrichten* 1915, p. 375, and (for Kṛṣṇa) by R. Otto, *Zeitschrift für Missionskunde und Religionswissenschaft*, 49/10 (1934), p. 293. Neither seems plausible.

¹⁰⁰ E.g., Stella Kramrisch, *The Art of India*, v. 206. Cf. AthS. X.7.32; 35; 38; 41.