INDO-EUROPEAN COURSE · MODULE 6

06

Gods, Myths and Ritual

Reconstructing Indo-European religion: the Sky Father, the dragon-slayer, fire, and the Iranian turn



YSATIS

@airyanematlas · airyanematlas.github.io

What this module asks

The question

What did speakers of Proto-Indo-European worship, and what stories did they tell? We cannot read their beliefs, but we can compare what their descendants wrote down.

The evidence

Matching god names, repeated poetic phrases and parallel plots in Hittite, Vedic, Avestan, Greek, Latin, Norse, Baltic, Celtic and other sources. Every claim is graded A, B or C.

The limits

Reconstruction is not attestation. Many scholars treat the results as a map of probable themes, not as a Proto-Indo-European scripture.

Builds on Module 4 (the comparative method) and Module 5 (the Indo-Iranian branch).

Tier scheme used throughout: A secure, B probable, C speculative.

Module map: six parts

1

How religion is reconstructed

Method, evidence tiers, pitfalls

2

The sky and the divine

Sky Father, Dawn, Twins, storm, fire

3

Myths

Dragon-slayer, first man, cattle raid, afterlife

4

Ritual and cosmos

Fire, gift, drink of immortality, horse

5

Order and the Iranian turn

Rta and Asha, the great reversal, Zarathustra

6

Debates and review

Three functions, borrowing, what is secure

Course plan.

PART 1

01

How religion is reconstructed

Method, evidence and the main pitfalls



Religion without a text

What we have

Cognate god names and religious words; fixed phrases repeated in poems; myths that match in plot; rites described by later authors.

What we lack

No written Proto-Indo-European, no temples, and no images that can be tied to its speakers. Rites and beliefs have to be inferred.

What we do

Compare early texts in many branches and accept only what recurs independently of borrowing.

A feature found in one branch only is a local tradition until another branch confirms it.

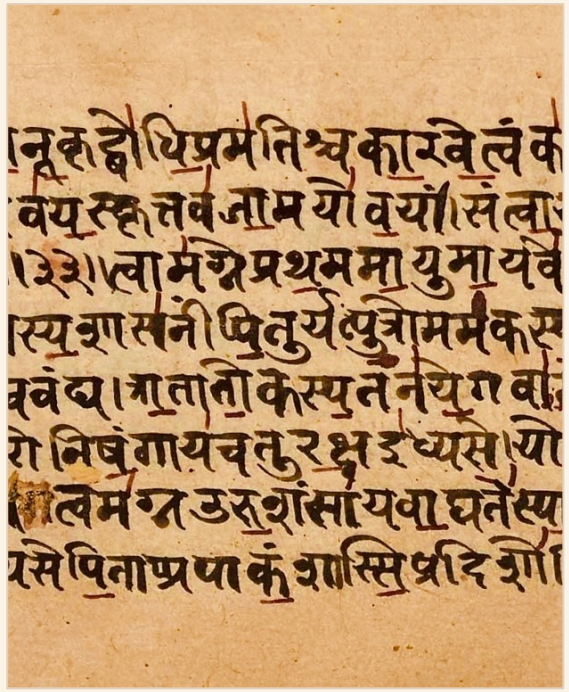
Tier A (method). Mallory and Adams 2006; West 2007.

When each branch first wrote about its gods

c. 1650 BCE	**Hittite**	Anatolian: Anitta text, then thousands of clay tablets of rituals and myths
c. 1450 BCE	**Mycenaean Greek**	Linear B tablets already name Zeus, Hera, Poseidon and Dionysos
1700–1100 BCE	**Vedic Sanskrit**	The Rigveda is composed; kept orally, written down far later
date debated	**Old Avestan**	The Gāthās: oral until the Sasanian era, then written down
c. 700 BCE	**Homeric Greek**	Iliad, Odyssey and Hesiod's Theogony
7th c. BCE	**Latin**	First inscriptions; Roman religion known mostly from later authors
c. 520 BCE	**Old Persian**	Royal inscriptions of Darius and Xerxes name Ahuramazda
8th c. CE	**Irish**	Law tracts and sagas, copied by Christian scribes
13th c. CE	**Old Norse**	Poetic Edda and Snorri: written in the Christian era
1547 CE	**Lithuanian**	First printed book; folk religion recorded later still

Tier A/B: dates as in the standard handbooks; Rigveda and Avesta dates are ranges and debated (see Part 5).

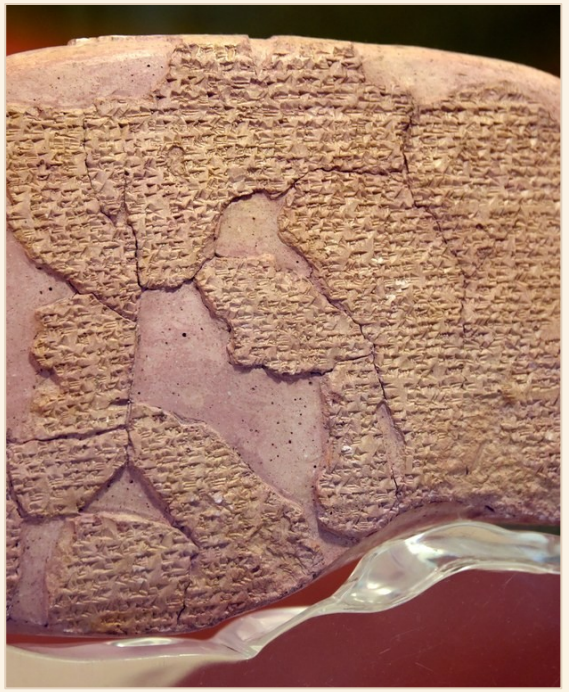
Texts we can actually read



Vedic

Rigveda manuscript page, Devanagari: a late copy of a text composed c. 1500–1000 BCE.

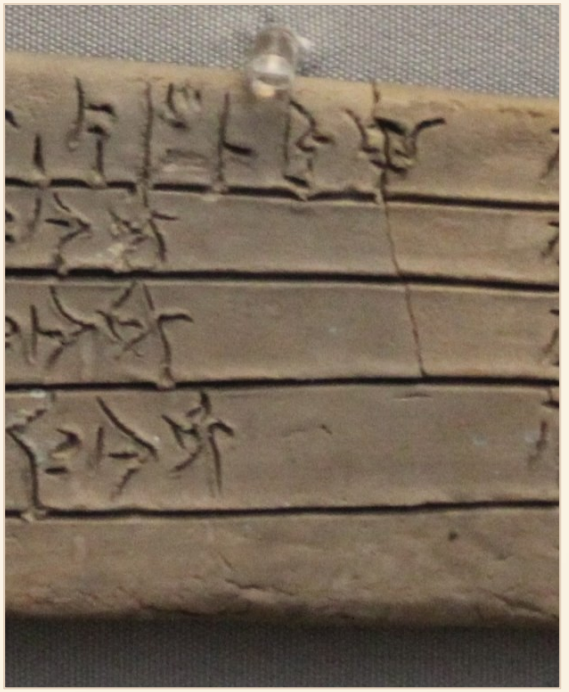
Ms Sarah Welch · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons



Hittite–Akkadian

The Kadesh treaty of 1269 BCE, Hatti and Egypt: treaties name gods as witnesses.

Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons



Mycenaean Greek

Linear B tablet from Pylos listing offerings to gods, including Poseidon (c. 1200 BCE).

Zunkir · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons



Old Norse

Flateyjarbók, a saga manuscript of c. 1390: our Norse sources are very late.

Árni Magnússon Institute · CC BY 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

Tier A (dates as in the standard handbooks). Photo credits on the last slides.

Three kinds of match

Kind of match	What matches	Example	How strong
Names	Cognate god names or religious terms	*Dyēus ph₂tēr: Greek Zeû páter, Latin Iū-piter, Vedic Dyáuṣ pitā́	Strongest, if form and role both match
Formulae	Fixed phrases with the same words	“imperishable fame”: Greek kléos áphthiton, Vedic śrávas ákṣitam	Strong: the words match, not just the idea
Plots	The same story under different names	A hero kills a three-headed serpent and frees cattle or waters	Medium: stories travel and can arise twice
Rites and institutions	The same ritual or social pattern	Horse sacrifice for kings in India, Rome and Ireland	Weakest: easy to over-read

A name plus a role in three or more branches is the gold standard. Everything else is graded down.

Tier A. Watkins 1995; West 2007; Mallory and Adams 2006.

Three layers of religion

Proto-Indo-European religion

c. 4500–2500 BCE · reconstructed only

Sky Father, Dawn, Twins, fire, the dragon-slaying formula

Proto-Indo-Iranian religion

c. 2500–1500 BCE · reconstructed only

Mitra, Indra, Nasatya, soma/haoma, rta/asha, the fire cult

Branch religions, as written

Hittite, Vedic, Avestan, Greek, Latin, Norse, Baltic, Irish

Texts and rites from about 1650 BCE to the Middle Ages

Each layer is reached by comparing the layer below it; the higher the layer, the more uncertain.

Tier A (logic of the method). Layer dates follow the chronology of Modules 1–3 and are approximate.

A century of method

Date	Scholar	Idea	Status today
1850s–60s	Max Müller	Gods as sun, dawn and storm: “nature mythology”	Largely abandoned as a whole theory
1930s–70s	Georges Dumézil	Three functions: priests, warriors, producers	Influential; contested in detail
1969	Émile Benveniste	Vocabulary of institutions: gift, oath, kingship	Standard reference
1981	Bruce Lincoln	First man, first king and the cattle myth	Debated
1995	Calvert Watkins	How to Kill a Dragon: matching poetic formulae	Widely used
2006–07	Mallory and Adams; West	Cautious handbook; wide survey of poetry and myth	Current baselines

The field moved from “what do myths symbolise?” to “which words and phrases match?”

Tier B. Dates of main works; Littleton 1982 on Dumézil; Watkins 1995; West 2007.

The evidence ladder

A — SECURE

Name or term and function match in three or more branches

- Sky Father *Dyḗws Ph₂tḗr
- Dawn goddess *H₂éusōs
- The word *deiwos “god”
- Fire as a sacred being
- Mitra, Indra, Nāsatyas as Indo-Iranian gods
- Rta and Asha “order”

B — PROBABLE

A formula or plot recurs, with some doubts

- Killing the serpent: *(h₁e) gʷʰent h₁ógʷʰim
- Manu and Yemo, the first man and twin
- River and watchdog on the road of the dead
- Soma and haoma as a drink of immortality

C — SPECULATIVE

Pattern depends on interpretation or one or two branches

- Three functions as a PIE ideology
- Perkʷunos as the PIE storm god
- The horse sacrifice as one common rite
- Flāmen = brahmán “priest”

Tier scheme of this course.

Three common misreadings

THE MISREADING

“All Indo-European myths are one myth”

THE BETTER READING

The family shares themes and a few formulae. Each tradition also borrowed, invented and reshaped. Similarity is a clue, not proof of a single origin.

THE MISREADING

“Gods with similar names did the same job”

THE BETTER READING

Roles shift: Vedic deva “god” is Avestan daēva “false god”. The same root can end up on opposite sides (see Part 2).

THE MISREADING

“Late texts are Indo-European”

THE BETTER READING

Snorri (13th century) and Gerald of Wales (12th century) wrote about much older ideas, but only a second branch can confirm what is old.

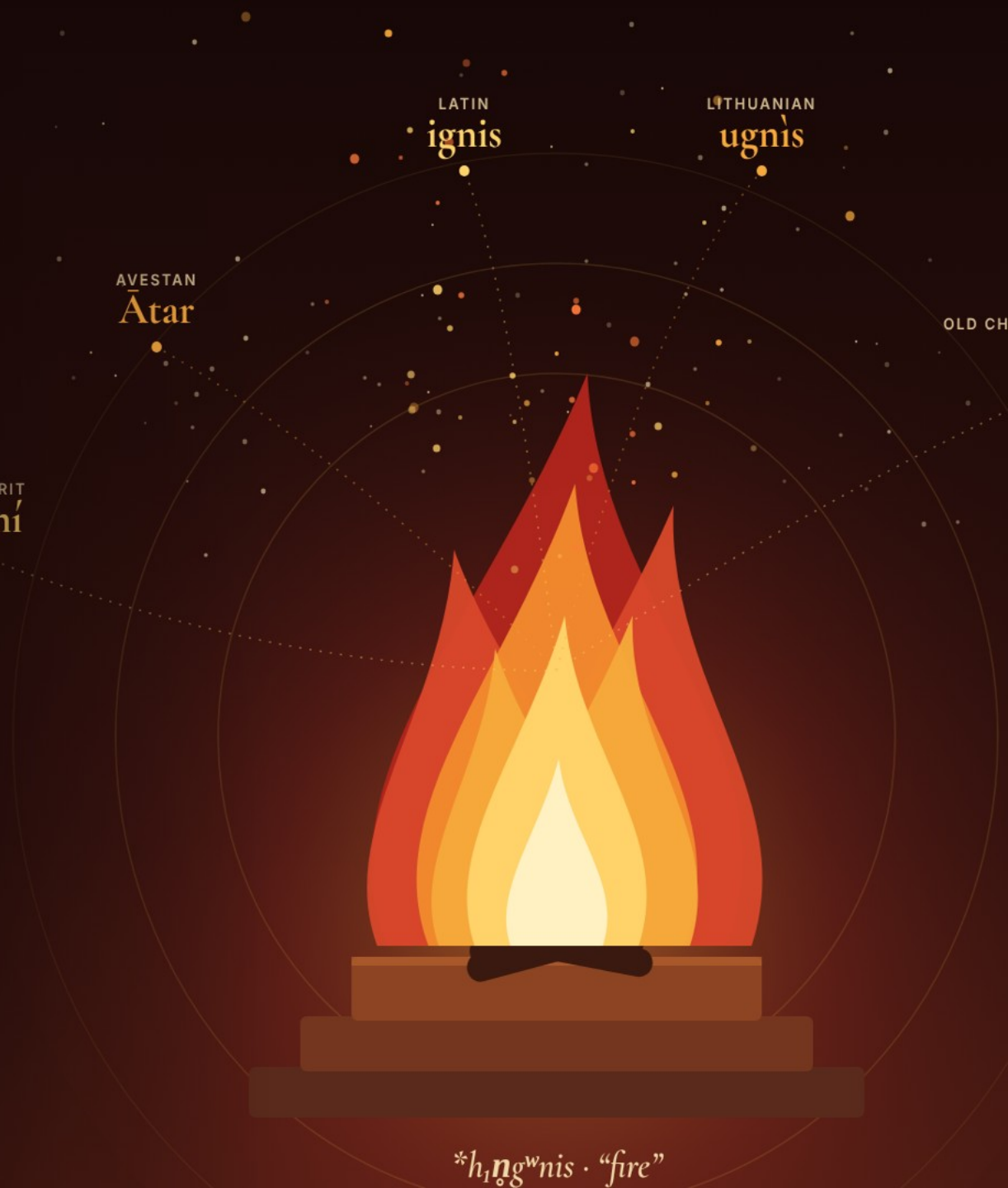
Tier A (method). Mallory and Adams 2006; West 2007.

PART 2

02

The sky and the divine

Sky Father, Earth, Dawn, the Twins and fire



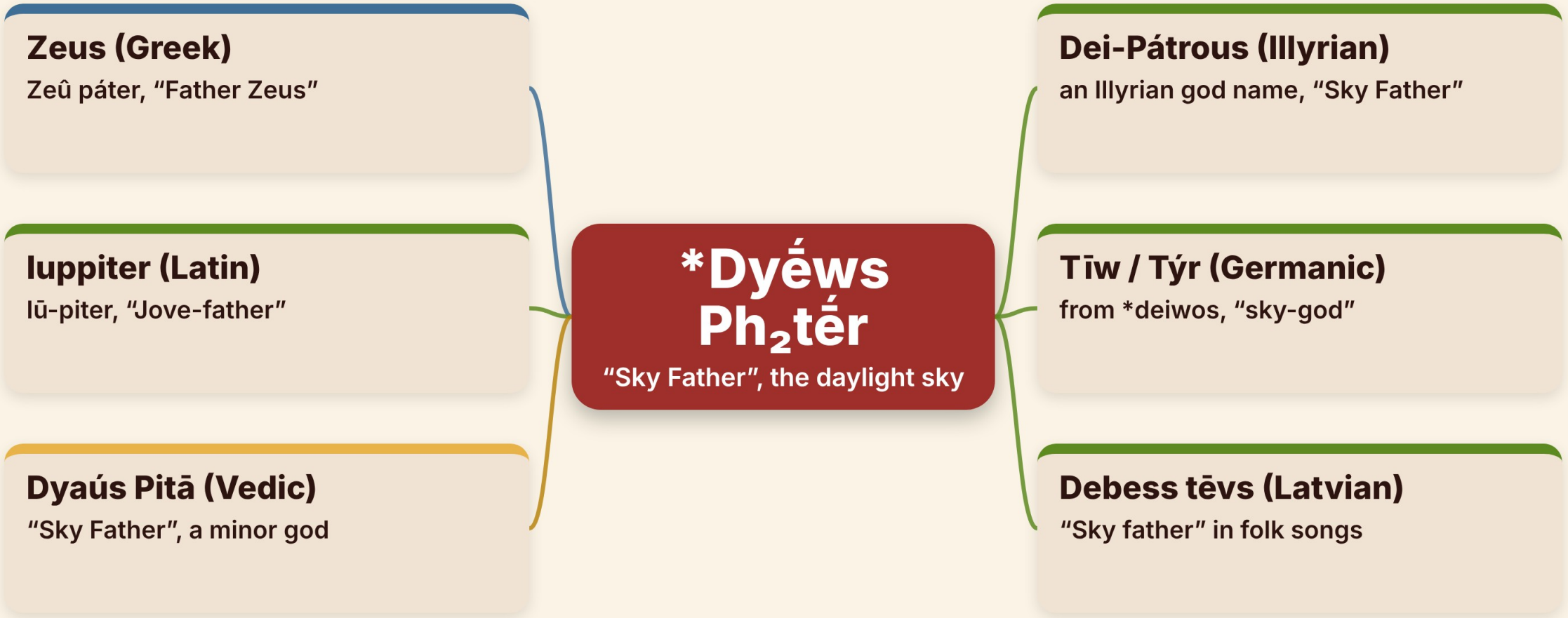
*Dyēus ph₂tēr, the Sky Father

Branch	Form	Meaning	Notes
Vedic	Dyáuṣ pitā́	Sky Father	A minor god in the Rigveda
Greek	Zeû páter	Father Zeus	Vocative formula in Homer
Latin	Iū-piter	Father Jove	Same formula, fused into one name
Hittite	Attaš Šiuš (“Father God”)	The chief god	Title, not a name; verify spelling
Old Norse	Týr; Old English Tīw	War god	Same root *dyēus, role changed
Baltic, Slavic	Dievas; Divъ	“god”	Root survives as the common word

The strongest reconstructed god: the name, the epithet “father” and the sky role all match.

Tier A. West 2007; Mallory and Adams 2006; Watkins 1995. Verify the Hittite form (Words to verify).

One root, many gods



Tier A. West 2007; Mallory and Adams 2006.

Who matches whom: gods by branch

	Vedic	Avestan	Greek	Latin	Germanic	Baltic
Sky Father	Dyaús		Zeus	Iuppiter	Týr (Tīw)	Dievs
Dawn	Uṣás	Ušå	Eos	Aurora	Ēostre?	Aušrà
Divine Twins	Aśvins		Dioscuri	Castor, Pollux	Alcis, Horsa	Ašvieniai
Sun	Sūrya	Hvar	Helios	Sol	Sól	Saulė
Earth	Pṛthivī	Zām	Chthṓn	Tellus	Jörð	Žemyna
Wind	Vāyu	Vayu		Ventus		Vėjas
Fire	Agni	Ātar		Ignis		Ugnis
Storm god	Parjanya				Fjörgynn	Perkūnas

Coloured = a matching deity or term; grey = no secure match. Latin twins are Greek imports. No tradition has them all.

Tier A/B: cells graded by the evidence ladder. West 2007; Mallory and Adams 2006.

Sky and Earth: a divine pair

Branch	Sky	Earth	Notes
Vedic	Dyaús	Pṛthivī (“the broad one”)	Dyāvāpṛthivī, the paired dual deity
Greek	Ouranós / Zeús	Gaîa, khthṓn	Khthṓn “earth” matches Vedic kṣáḥ
Hittite	Šiuš	Tekan (“earth”)	Cognate with Greek khthṓn
Latin	Iuppiter	Tellus; humus	humus is cognate with khthṓn
Norse	Himinn; Óðinn	Jörð (Thor’s mother)	Jörð is not from the same root

*“Earth” (*dʰégʰōm) is secure as a word; the Earth-Mother as a goddess is probable but thin.*

Tier A (word), B (goddess). West 2007; Mallory and Adams 2006.

The Divine Twins

Branch	Names	What they do	Notes
Vedic	Aśvins; Nāsatya	Horse-twins, healers, rescue at sea	Wed the Sun’s daughter Sūryā
Greek	Dioskouroi (Kastor, Polydeukes)	“Zeus’s boys”; horsemen; rescuers	Brothers of Helen
Baltic	Dieva dēli, Dievo sūneliai	“Sons of God”	Wooers of the Sun’s daughter
Roman	Castor and Pollux	Horsemen of the Republic	Borrowed from Greek
Norse, Germanic	Possibly Alcis (Tacitus)	Paired brothers	Uncertain: Tier C

*“Sons of the sky” (*diwós sūnū), horsemen who rescue and woo the Sun’s daughter: a probable inheritance.*

Tier B. West 2007; Mallory and Adams 2006.

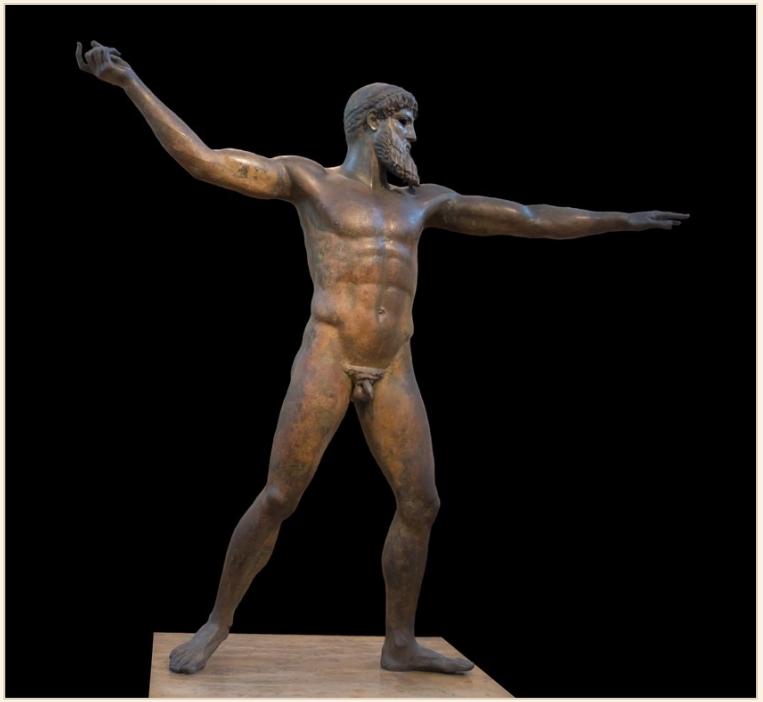
The Dawn goddess

Branch	Name	Notes
Vedic	Uṣás	Many hymns; “daughter of the sky”
Greek	Ēós (Aeolic Aûōs)	Rosy-fingered; daughter of Hyperion
Latin	Aurōra	Rome’s dawn goddess
Lithuanian	Aušrà, Aušrinė	Dawn, morning star
Old English	Ēostre (Bede)	Month-name goddess; attestation thin, verify

**$h_2$éwsōs is secure: a female dawn, the sky’s daughter, and the same word everywhere.*

Tier A. West 2007; Watkins 1995; Mallory and Adams 2006.

Sky Father, Dawn and the Twins



Zeus or Poseidon

Bronze god from Cape Artemision (c. 460 BCE), Athens: hurling a thunderbolt (or trident).

Jebulon · CC0 · Wikimedia Commons



Aurora

Guido Reni's Aurora (1614), Rome: the dawn leads the Sun's chariot. Photo reproduction; Latin Aurōra is cognate with Vedic Uṣás.

Rijksmuseum · CC0 · Wikimedia Commons



The Dioscuri

Castor and Pollux, "Zeus's boys": horse-tamer statues on the Quirinal, Rome.

Vlad Lesnov · CC BY 3.0 · Wikimedia Commons

Tier A/B. Images are classical-era; they illustrate the figures, not the reconstructed ancestors.

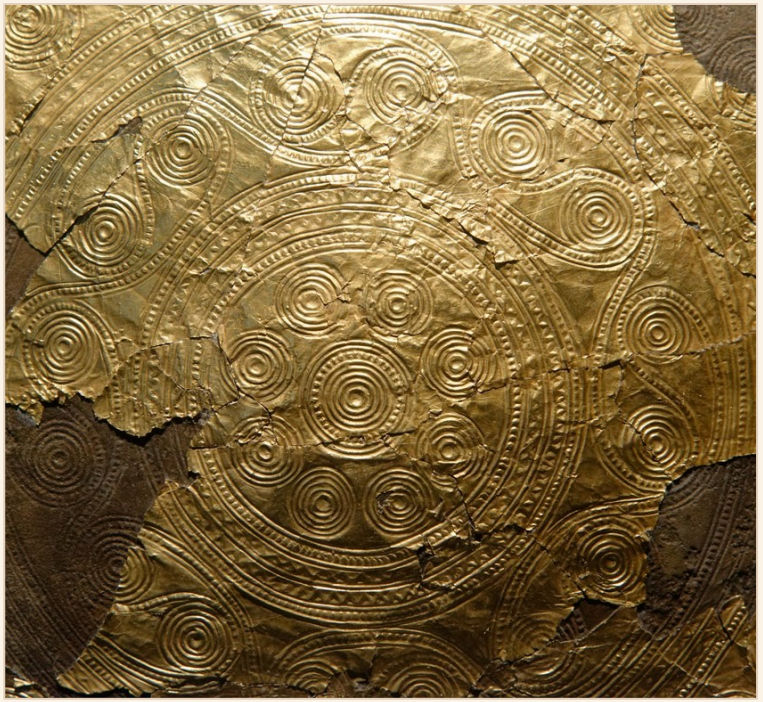
Sun, Moon and Storm

Figure	Words	Notes
Sun	Vedic Sū́rya; Greek Hḗlios; Latin sōl; Norse Sól; Lithuanian Saulė	A feminine sun in Baltic and Norse; masculine in Greek and Vedic
Moon	Greek mḗnē; Lithuanian mėnuo; Vedic mā́s; Latin mēnsis (“month”)	The moon measures time: “moon” and “month” are one word
Storm god	Lithuanian Perkūnas; Latvian Pērkons; Slavic Perunŭ; Vedic Parjányaḥ	Thunder-god name is probable (*Perkʷunos); the Germanic Thor is not cognate
Thunderbolt	Vedic vájra; Greek keraunós; Hittite Tarhunna	Weapon varies; the thunderbolt is shared

The names for Sun and Moon are secure; the Storm god’s name is secure only in Baltic and Slavic.

Tier A (Sun, Moon), B (Storm god). West 2007; Mallory and Adams 2006.

The Sun's chariot



Nordic Bronze Age

Trundholm sun chariot, Denmark (c. 1400 BCE): a gilded sun disc on a horse-drawn carriage.

Marie-Lan Nguyen · public domain · Wikimedia Commons



Vedic–Hindu

Konark Sun Temple, Odisha (13th century CE): the temple is Sūrya's chariot, with a stone wheel.

Ankur Panchbudhe · CC BY 2.0 · Wikimedia Commons



Vedic–Hindu

Sūrya, stone sculpture, British Museum.

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Tier B. West 2007; Kristiansen and Larsson 2005 (on the Trundholm chariot and the Sun).

Storm gods and idols



Tarhunza

Storm-god stele from Sam’al (Anatolia), about 9th–8th century BCE.

Ywpark2003 · CC0 · Wikimedia Commons



Teshub

Storm god with axe and thunderbolt: Neo-Hittite stele, Gaziantep.

Dosseman · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons



Zbruch Idol

Slavic four-sided pillar (early medieval) with three tiers: sky, earth, underworld.

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Perun (modern)

A modern reconstruction of a Perun idol in Ukraine; not an ancient object.

Ridnovirphoto · CC0 · Wikimedia Commons

Tier B (Anatolian storm god), C (Slavic idols). Photo credits on the last slides.

Fire: a god and a word

Branch	Form	Notes
Vedic	agní	Fire god; the first hymn of the Rigveda is to Agni
Latin	ignis	“fire”; the goddess is Vesta
Lithuanian	ugnìs	“fire”; the same word in Latvian uguns
Slavic	ogní	“fire”; Russian ogón’ is the same word
Avestan	ātar-	A different word, but fire is divine: the son of Ahura Mazdā

**h₁e̯gʷnis names fire in the west and in Vedic; Iranian replaced the word but kept the sacred fire.*

Tier A (word), B (sacred fire). West 2007; Mallory and Adams 2006.

Sacred fire across the family



Roman

House of the Vestals, Forum: home of the priestesses who kept Rome’s sacred fire.

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Vedic

A brick fire altar (agnicayana) built for a Soma sacrifice, Kurnool, India.

Puranastudy · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons



Zoroastrian

The sacred flame of the Atash Behram at Yazd, Iran, kept burning by tradition since 470 CE.

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Tier A/B. Boyce 1975; West 2007; Puhvel 1987.

Gods that flipped: Indo-Iranian reversal

VEDIC		AVESTAN
devá- god	flipped	**daēva-** false god, demon
ásura- lord (later a demon)	flipped	**ahura-** lord: Ahura Mazdā
Indra great god, slayer of Vṛtra	flipped	**Indra** a daēva named in the Vīdēvdād
Nāsatyas the divine twins	flipped	**Nāŋhaiθya** a daēva named in the Vīdēvdād
Vṛtrahán- epithet of Indra	kept	**Vərəθraγna-** a god of victory
Mitra god of contract	kept	**Miθra** god of contract

Tier A. Skjærvø 2011; Boyce 1975; Gnoli 2004. Detailed readings of Vendidad passages: verify.

PART 3

03

Myths: stories that match

The dragon-slayer, the first man and king, cattle and fire in water



The dragon-slayer formula

The phrase

Watkins reconstructs *(h₁e) gʷʰent h₁ógʷʰim, “he slew the serpent”: Vedic áhann áhim (Indra) and Hittite and Greek echoes.

The plot

A storm-god or hero fights a serpent that holds waters or cattle, kills it and frees them. Often a three-headed monster.

The caution

The plot is also found far outside the family. The words, not the plot, are the stronger evidence.

The matching verb–noun pair “slay + serpent” is a rare, strong case of a reconstructed poetic formula.

Tier B. Watkins 1995; West 2007. Hittite and Greek phrase details: verify before quoting.

Dragon-slayers across Eurasia



Seven slayers

- 1 Hittite: Tarhunt kills Illuyanka
- 2 Greek: Zeus and Typhon; Apollo and Python
- 3 Norse: Thor and Jörmungandr
- 4 Slavic: Perun and Veles
- 5 Armenian: Vahagn the dragon-reaper
- 6 Avestan/Persian: Θraētaona and Aži Dahāka
- 7 Vedic: Indra and Vṛtra

Tier B. Watkins 1995; West 2007; Puhvel 1987.

Slaying the serpent



Greek

Herakles and the Hydra on a Caeretan hydria (late 6th century BCE), Getty Museum.

J. Paul Getty Museum · CC0



Greek

Apollo slaying the Python: Renaissance drawing, Metropolitan Museum.

Metropolitan Museum of Art · CC0



Norse

Thor fishing for Jörmungandr on the Altuna runestone, Sweden (11th century CE).

Gunnar Creutz · CC BY-SA 3.0 · Wikimedia Commons



Vedic

Indra on his elephant attacked by demons: Indian painting, San Diego Museum of Art.

San Diego Museum of Art · public domain

Tier B. Watkins 1995; West 2007.

Myths side by side

	Indic	Iranian	Greek	Roman	Norse	Celtic	Hittite
Serpent slain	●	●	●	◐	●	○	●
Cattle raid	●	◐	●	●	◐	●	○
First man killed, world made	●	●	○	◐	●	○	○
River and watchdog	●	●	●	●	●	◐	○
Fire in the water	●	●	○	◐	○	●	○

filled = clear parallel (a named myth) half = partial or disputed dashed = none recorded

Table is built from the parallels cited in Lincoln (1986), Watkins (1995) and West (2007); an empty cell means “not attested”, not “absent”.

Tier B. West 2007; Lincoln 1981; Puhvel 1987.

The three-headed monster and the cattle

Tradition	Hero	Monster	What is won
Vedic	Trita Āptya (and Indra)	Triśiras, son of Tvaṣṭṛ	The cattle
Avestan	Θraētaona	Aži Dahāka, three-headed	Two women (his captured wives)
Greek	Heracles	Geryon, three-bodied	Cattle of Geryon
Latin	Hercules; Horatius	Cacus; the Curiatii	Stolen cattle; honour
Irish	Cú Chulainn	Three sons of Nechta Scéne	Honour; Tier C

A hero kills a three-headed foe and wins cattle or women: a probable shared plot with strong formula-level echoes.

Tier B (core), C (Roman, Irish). Lincoln 1981; Watkins 1995; Dumézil 1970.

First man, first king

Tradition	First man	His twin or partner	Notes
Vedic	Manu	Yama (first to die, king of the dead)	Manu is the human ancestor
Avestan	Gayō Maretan; Yima	Yima, king of a golden age	Yima’s kingdom is a reign without death
Germanic	Mannus (Tacitus)	Tuisto (“twin”)	Tacitus, Germania, c. 98 CE
Norse	Ymir, the primeval giant	Buri; Borr; Óðinn	Ymir’s name may mean “twin”
Roman	Romulus and Remus	Twin brothers, a founding killing	Compare Rome’s founding

*Lincoln’s proposal: *Manu (“man”) and *Yemo (“twin”) at the dawn of humanity; probable, debated.*

Tier B. Lincoln 1975, 1981; West 2007. Germania 2 (Tacitus).

A world made from a body

Vedic

Puruṣa (Rigveda 10.90) is sacrificed by the gods. Sky, earth, castes and the Sun come from his body.

Norse

Ymir is killed by Óðinn and his brothers. Earth from his flesh, sea from his blood, sky from his skull.

Avestan

Gayō Maretan is the first mortal; in later Pahlavi books metals and the first human pair come from his body.

A cosmic giant’s sacrifice is a probable pattern; the details differ enough to hide a shared origin or parallel invention.

Tier B. Lincoln 1981; West 2007; Puhvel 1987.

First kings, giants and the first beings



Iranian

Fereydun strikes Zahhak (Avestan Θraētaona and Aži Dahāka): Shahnameh miniature.

attributed to Sultan Muhammad · public domain · Wikimedia Commons



Iranian

Jamshid (Avestan Yima), the first king, writing on a rock: miniature by Abd al-Samad.

Abd al-Samad · public domain · Wikimedia Commons



Norse

Ymir slain, plate by Lorenz Frølich (1895).

Lorenz Frølich · public domain · Wikimedia Commons



Norse

The cow Auðumbla licks Búri from the ice: Icelandic manuscript, 18th century.

Jakob Sigurðsson (SÁM 66) · public domain · Wikimedia Commons

Tier B. Lincoln 1981; West 2007; Skjærvø 2011.

Fire in the water

Tradition	Figure	Who or what	Notes
Vedic	Apām Napāt	“Descendant of the Waters”	A fire-god hidden in water
Avestan	Apąm Napāt	Same name, a bright being in water	Yasna and Yashts
Irish	Nechtan	Keeper of a well of knowledge	Name may mean “washed”
Roman	Neptūnus	Later a sea god	Name may share the root of “moist”

Watkins reads Apām Napāt and Nechtan as the same inherited figure; Neptune is a possible third. Probable, not secure.

Tier B (Indo-Iranian), C (Irish, Roman). Watkins 1995; Dumézil 1970; West 2007.

PART 4

04

Ritual and society

Fire, sacrifice, priests, oaths and the three functions



A reconstructed rite in six steps

1 — Call
Invoke the gods by name; hymns and formulae

2 — Kindle
Light the fire, the divine messenger

3 — Pour
Libation of drink: milk, mead, or the plant drink

4 — Offer
Animal sacrifice; the gods' share is burned

5 — Feast
The people share the meat as guests

6 — Give back
Gifts for gifts: the gods answer with cattle and fame

What each step rests on

Invoke and pour share a root, *ǵʰew-, in Vedic juhóti, Avestan zaotar and Greek khéō. "Fire" is the sacred word *h_1n̥gʷnis. "Guest" (*ghos-ti-) and "give" (*deh₃-) mark the gift economy. This is a composite built from separate branches, not one attested ritual.

Tier C: a reconstructed outline, useful as a map of the vocabulary.

Tier B/C. Synthesis of Vedic, Avestan, Greek and Roman rites; West 2007. A model, not a record.

Words of the sacrifice

Idea	Vedic	Avestan	Other branches
Offer, pour	juhóti, hotṛ́ (priest)	zaotar (priest)	Greek khéō “pour”; Latin fundō
Sacrifice	yajña	yasna	Greek hágios “holy”, házomai “revere”
Praise	stómaḥ (hymn of praise)	staota- (praise)	Greek kléos “fame” (see next slides)
Holy	—	spəṇta- (“life-giving, holy”)	Lithuanian šventas “holy”, Slavic svętŭ
Libation drink	sóma	haoma	Root *sew- “press”

Many ritual words match in form between Vedic and Avestan, fewer outside Indo-Iranian.

Tier A (Indo-Iranian), B (wider). Mayrhofer; Skjærvø 2011; Benveniste 1969.

Sacred fire

Tradition	What was done	Date or source	Tier
Vedic	Household and public altars to Agni; a fire in every home	Rigveda, c. 1500–1000 BCE	A
Avestan / Persian	Ātaš fire as a symbol of Ahura Mazdā; fire temples	Avesta; Sasanian fire temples	A
Roman	Vesta’s perpetual fire tended by six Vestal virgins	Republic to late Empire	A
Baltic	Fire kept alive; sacred fires in the cults	Medieval chroniclers	C
Irish	Brigit’s perpetual fire at Kildare (late)	Medieval hagiography	C

Perpetual fire tended by a ritual caste is repeated in the west and east, so likely older than the branches.

Tier A/B. Boyce 1975; West 2007; Puhvel 1987.

Horse sacrifice and kingship

Tradition	Rite	What it does	Tier
Vedic	Aśvamedha: a king's horse is released for a year, then sacrificed	Proves the king's power	B
Roman	October Equus: a war-horse sacrificed to Mars each 15 October	Sacrifice for war and harvest	B
Irish	A king's union with a white mare (Gerald of Wales, late 12th c.)	A king's inauguration	C
Scythian	Horses buried with chiefs (Herodotus)	Burial and honour	B

A royal horse sacrifice in Vedic and Roman practice fits the steppe horse culture of Module 2. Irish evidence is weak.

Tier B/C. Dumézil 1970; West 2007; Anthony 2007. Gerald of Wales (Topographia Hibernica, c. 1188): verify details.

Sacrifice and sacred images



Roman

Suovetaurilia: the sacrifice of a pig, a sheep and a bull (Louvre relief).

Romainbehar · CC0 · Wikimedia Commons



Altai steppe

Felt saddlecloth with an elk, Pazyryk: horse gear buried with steppe elites.

Schreiber · public domain · Wikimedia Commons



English chalk

Uffington White Horse (Bronze Age, c. 1000 BCE): a horse image, not evidence of a rite.

Bill Boaden · CC BY-SA 2.0 · Wikimedia Commons



Celtic

Gundestrup cauldron, Denmark (Iron Age): horned figure on a ritual vessel; meaning debated.

Ktp72 · CC BY-SA 3.0 · Wikimedia Commons

Tier B/C. Dumézil 1970; West 2007; Anthony 2007.

Priests, poets and the sacred

Word	Branches	Meaning	Notes
brahmán / flāmen	Vedic brahmán; Latin flāmen	A priest	Link is contested: verify
atharvan	Vedic atharvan; Avestan āθravan	Fire-priest	Indo-Iranian: Tier A
druid	Gaulish druides, Old Irish druí	Priest, seer	From *dru-wid- “oak-knower”? C
***wátes (seer)**	Latin vātēs; Old Irish fáith; Germanic wōd-	Poet-seer	Seer and poet are one: Tier B
***kléwos**	Vedic śrávas; Greek kléos	“Fame, what is heard”	Poetic formula: Tier A

Priest, poet and seer shade into each other across the family.

Tier A/B/C as marked. Benveniste 1969; Watkins 1995; West 2007. Verify flāmen/brahman.

Three functions: priests, warriors, producers

1 · Sovereignty priests and kings: law and magic	2 · Force warriors: strength and war	3 · Fertility herders and farmers: wealth, health
VEDIC Mitra–Varuna; Brahmin priests	VEDIC Indra; Kṣatriya warriors	VEDIC the Nāsatyas; Vaiśya
AVESTAN Mithra and Ahura; āθravan priests	AVESTAN raθaēštā “charioteer” class	AVESTAN vāstryō.fšuyant herder-farmers
ROME Jupiter; flamines and the king	ROME Mars	ROME Quirinus
NORSE Odin and Týr	NORSE Thor	NORSE Freyr and Njörðr

Dumézil’s model: three ranks of society mirrored by three kinds of gods. The Mitanni treaty list (Mitra–Varuna, Indra, Nāsatyas) is his showcase; Greek and Hittite evidence fits poorly.

Tier B (Rome and India), C (elsewhere). Dumézil 1958, 1968; Littleton 1982.

Oath, gift and contract

Mitra and the oath

Vedic Mitra means “bond”; Avestan Miθra is the god of contracts. Benveniste links oath and treaty gods to the name.

The gift economy

A reciprocal-gift pattern runs through Indo-European vocabulary: *dō “give”, *ghosti- “guest–host”.

Guest-friendship

Latin hostis, hospes, English guest, Slavic gostĭ: one root, “stranger who is a guest”.

Religion and law were one system: a sworn contract was guarded by a god.

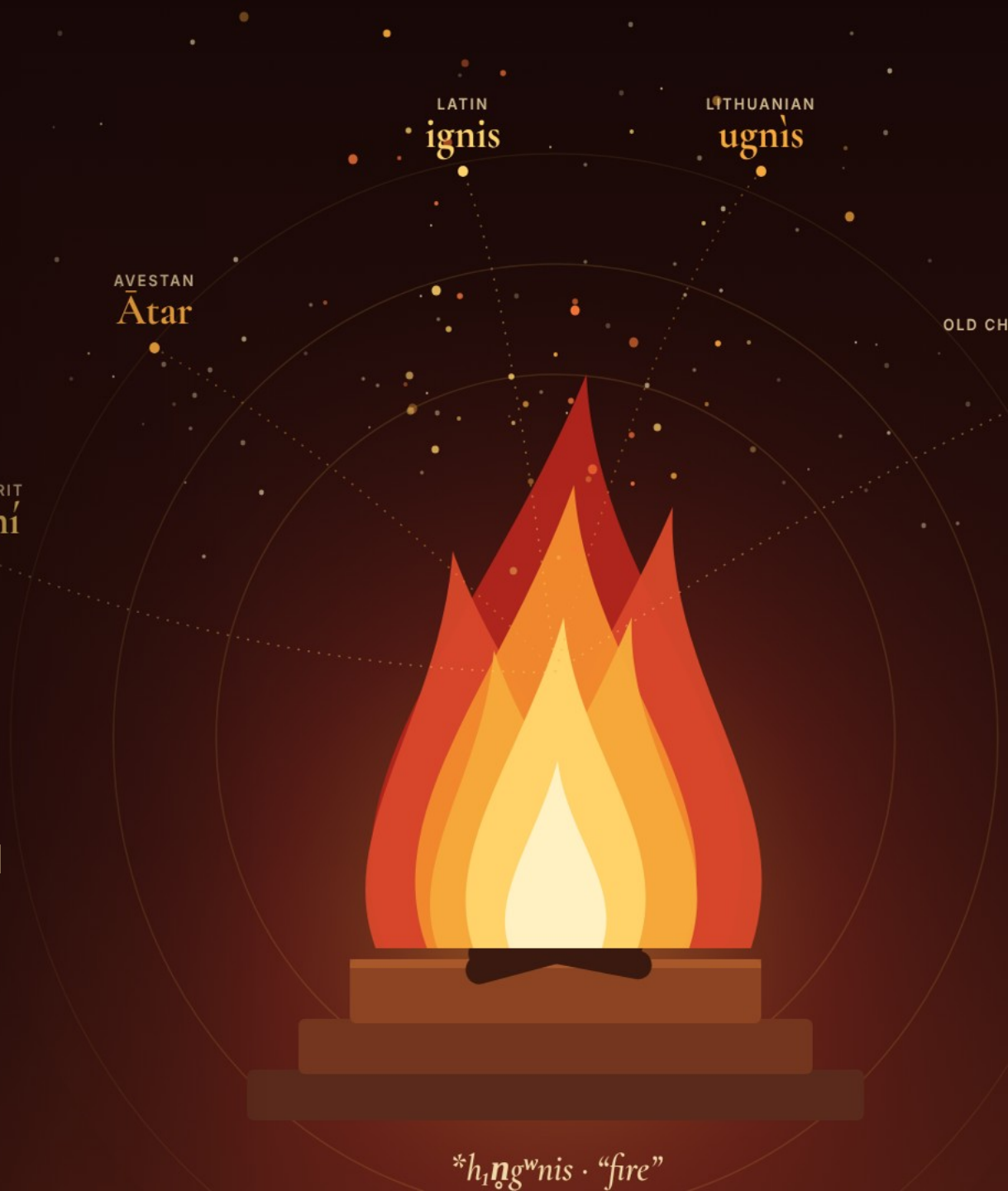
Tier A. Benveniste 1969; West 2007.

PART 5

05

Cosmic order and the Iranian turn

Truth and the Lie, the Mitanni gods, Zarathustra and the Avesta



Order and the Lie

Idea	Vedic	Avestan	Old Persian
Cosmic order, truth	ṛtá	aša-	arta- (in Artaxerxes)
Falsehood, deceit	drúh	druj-	drauga-
The root idea	“fitted together”	“right order”	Darius’s inscription: ahura, arta, drauga
Wider echoes	Latin ritus “rite”; ars “skill”	Armenian ard “order”	Greek arithmós “number” (Tier B)

“Order versus the Lie” is the central idea of Indo-Iranian religion and the base of Zoroastrian thought.

Tier A (Indo-Iranian), B (wider). Skjærvø 2011; Kent 1953; Schmitt.

The Lie-kings at Behistun



The relief (c. 520 BCE)

Darius I faces the rebel “Lie-kings” under the winged symbol of Ahura Mazdā. The text blames “the Lie” (drauga) for their revolt.

public domain · Wikimedia Commons



Darius I

Close view of the king, the work of Old Persian scribes and sculptors.

Leen van Dorp · CC0 · Wikimedia Commons

Tier A. Kent 1953; Schmitt; Skjærvø 2011.

Mitra and Varuṇa, Miθra and Ahura Mazdā

Vedic pair

Mitra and Varuṇa guard oaths, order and the sky. Mitra is the friendly contract; Varuṇa the binding sovereign.

Avestan pair

Miθra, god of contracts and light, and Ahura Mazdā, the wise lord, who defends order.

Possible link

Ahura Mazdā may continue an older sovereign “lord” such as Varuṇa; the equation is debated.

The two-god sovereignty (contract and lord) is a probable Indo-Iranian inheritance.

Tier B. Dumézil 1968; Skjærvø 2011; Boyce 1975.

The Mitanni treaty gods (c. 1380 BCE)

The Hittite king and Šattiwaza of Mitanni call these gods to witness, about 1380 BCE

AS WRITTEN IN CUNEIFORM

Mi-it-ra

= Vedic Mitra

god of contract, light

AS WRITTEN IN CUNEIFORM

U-ru-wa-na

= Vedic Varuna

guardian of cosmic order

AS WRITTEN IN CUNEIFORM

In-da-ra

= Vedic Indra

warrior, slayer of Vṛtra

AS WRITTEN IN CUNEIFORM

Na-ša-at-ti-ia-an-na

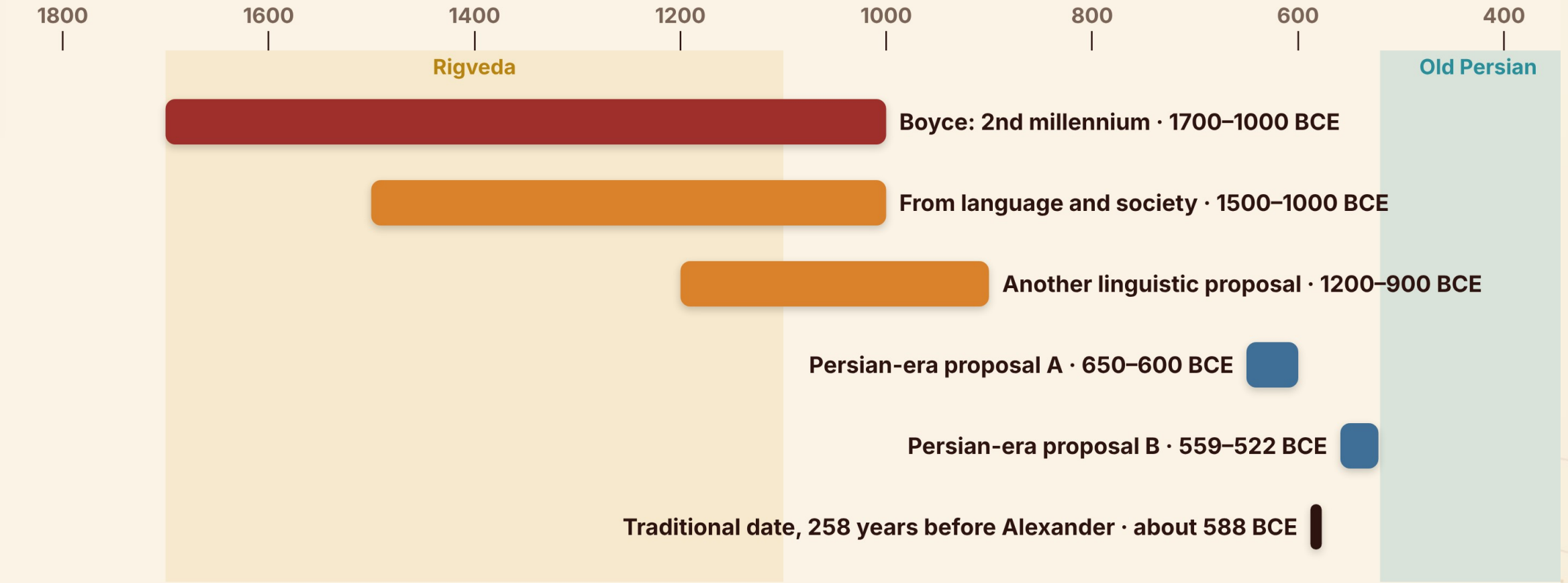
= Vedic Nāsatya

the divine twins (Aśvins)

These are Indo-Aryan forms found in a Hurrian-speaking kingdom. They show that these gods were already named, and sworn by, in the Late Bronze Age, about when the Rigveda hymns were being composed.

Tier A. Mayrhofer; Thieme 1960. Cuneiform spellings: verify before quoting (Words to verify).

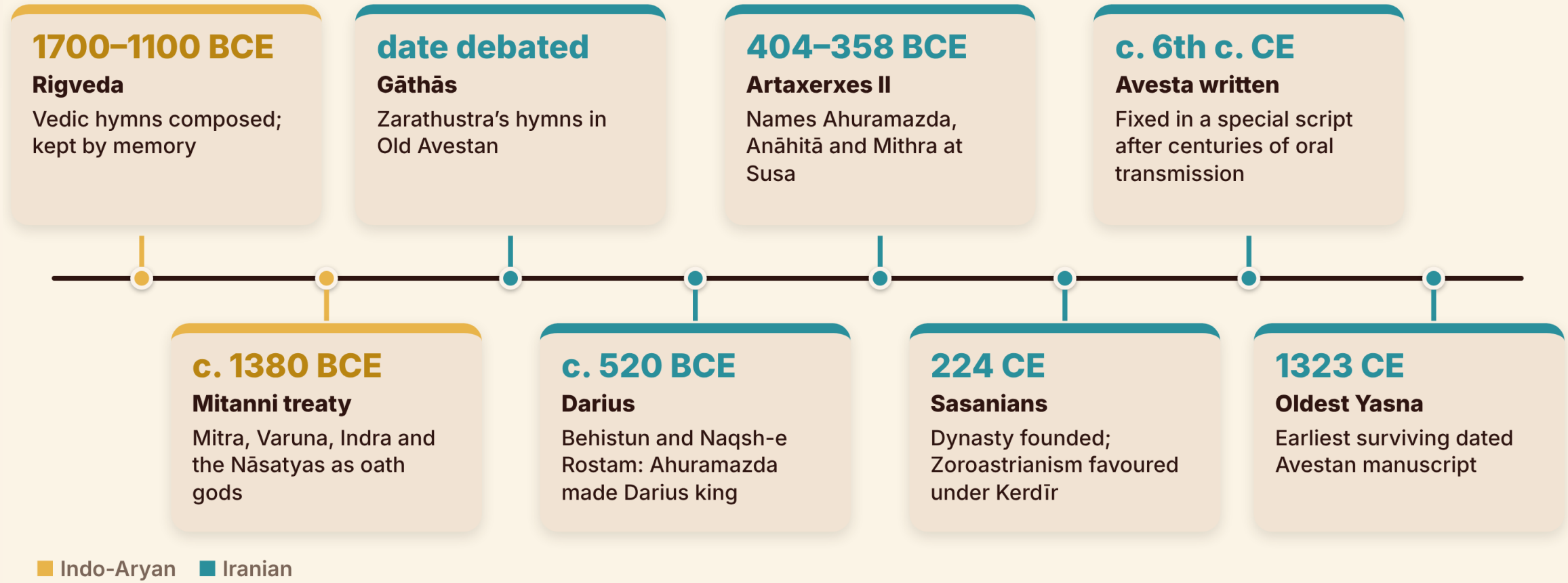
Gāthā dates: how old is Zarathustra?



No proposal is secure: the Avesta never dates its prophet. Bars are published proposals, not measurements.

Tier C (absolute date), B (relative age). Boyce 1975; Gnoli 2000; Skjærvø 2011.

From Gāthās to the Sasanian canon



Tier A/B. Skjærvø 2011; Boyce 1975. Dates of the Sasanian canon and Kerdīr: verify.

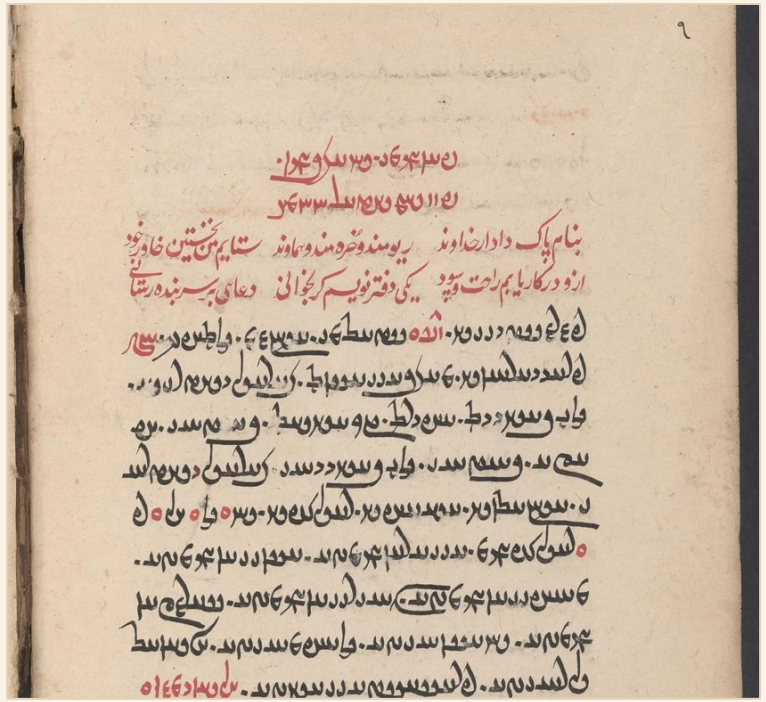
What Zarathustra changed

Inherited	Kept?	What Zarathustra did
Many gods (daēvas)	Rejected	The daēvas became false gods; Ahura Mazdā alone is supreme
Ahura (lord) class	Kept	Ahura Mazdā, “Wise Lord”, is the highest being
Order vs the Lie	Kept, sharpened	A moral war between aša and druj in every human choice
Fire and the rite	Kept	Fire is the symbol of order; the rite of yasna continues
Haoma ritual	Kept, reformed	Praised in the Young Avesta; the Gāthās are silent

Zarathustra kept Indo-Iranian form and changed the values: gods became demons, and the ethical war took centre stage.

Tier B. Skjærvø 2011; Boyce 1975; Gnoli 2000.

Avesta, winged symbol and fire temple



Avesta

Vendidad Sade manuscript, folio 1 (Columbia University MS Or 320).

H. D. F. Minochehr · CC0 · Wikimedia Commons



Persepolis

The winged symbol at Persepolis, often called the Faravahar; its Achaemenid meaning is debated.

Majid Taghipour · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons



Yazd

Zoroastrian fire temple at Yazd (1934), with the winged symbol above the entrance.

Diego Delso · public domain · Wikimedia Commons

Tier A (the Avesta), B (symbol). Boyce 1975; Skjærvø 2011.

Months of the Zoroastrian calendar

MONTH 1
Farvardin
Fravashis
guardian spirits of the righteous

MONTH 2
Ordibehesht
Aša Vahišta
“best order”, an Amesha Spenta

MONTH 3
Khordad
Haurvatāt
“wholeness”, an Amesha Spenta

MONTH 4
Tir
Tištrya
the star Sirius, bringer of rain

MONTH 5
Mordad
Amərətāt
“immortality”, an Amesha Spenta

MONTH 6
Shahrivar
Xšaθra Vairya
“desired rule”, an Amesha Spenta

MONTH 7
Mehr
Miθra
god of contract and light

MONTH 8
Aban
Apas
the waters

MONTH 9
Azar
Ātar
fire

MONTH 10
Dey
Dāθuš
“the Creator”, Ahura Mazdā

MONTH 11
Bahman
Vohu Manah
“good mind”, an Amesha Spenta

MONTH 12
Esfand
Spənta Ārmaiti
“holy devotion”, an Amesha Spenta

■ Amesha Spenta ■ other divinity or sacred element (Ahura Mazdā is the seventh, with Dey)

Tier A/B. Panaino; Boyce 1975. Meanings of some month names: verify.

Haoma and soma

Item	Vedic	Avestan	Notes
Word	sóma	haoma	Root *sew- / *hu- “press”: Tier A
Ritual	Pressed with stones, filtered and offered	Pounded in a mortar, offered with milk	Same procedure in outline
Divine	Soma is a god (Rigveda, Book 9)	Haoma is a god and a healer	Both are deified
The plant	Unidentified	Unidentified	Ephedra, Peganum, mushrooms: all debated: Tier C

The ritual drink is shared, down to its pressing; the plant is unknown.

Tier A (word, rite), C (plant). Skjærvø 2011; Mayrhofer; Mallory and Adams 2006.

Haoma and soma: plant and vessels



Ephedra

Ephedra przewalskii, Central Asia: one candidate for haoma or soma. The identification is unproven.

Urgamal Magsar · CC BY 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons



BMAC vessel

Silver vessel of the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (c. 2000 BCE).

Metropolitan Museum of Art · CC0



Living rite

Soma cart used in the Athirathram (Agnicayana) rite, Panjal, Kerala (2011).

Krishnanow · CC BY-SA 3.0 · Wikimedia Commons

Tier C (plant), A (the word and the rite). Skjærvø 2011; Mallory and Adams 2006.

Mithra to Mithras

Iranian Mithra

A god of contract and light in the Avesta; venerated by Persian kings (Artaxerxes II names Mithra).

Roman Mithras

A mystery cult in the Roman Empire, 1st to 4th century CE: initiates, caves, the bull-slaying scene.

The link

Franz Cumont saw a continuous Persian cult; Clauss, Beck and others stress Roman invention. The name continues; the cult is largely new.

Treat the Roman Mithras mysteries as a new cult with an Iranian name, not as the Persian cult exported unchanged.

Tier B/C. Cumont 1903; Beck 2006; Clauss 2000; Boyce 1975.

Mithra in stone



Sasanian Iran

Mithra with a radiate halo at Taq-e Bostan (4th century CE).

dynamosquito · CC BY-SA 2.0 · Wikimedia Commons



Roman Empire

Tauroctony: Mithras slays the bull (Louvre relief).

Jastrow · public domain · Wikimedia Commons



Roman Empire

A mithraeum at Santa Maria Capua Vetere, Italy.

Miguel Hermoso Cuesta · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

Tier B/C. Cumont 1903; Beck 2006; Clauss 2000.

The afterlife: bridge and judgment

Avestan

The Chinvat Bridge: souls cross after death; the just cross, the wicked fall. Yima's underground enclosure (Vara) in some texts.

Vedic

Yama is the first to die and king of the dead; the dead follow the paths of the fathers (pitṛ).

Wider echoes

Bridge or river to the dead: Norse Gjallarbrú; Greek Styx; a hound at the gate: Cerberus and Vedic Śabala dogs

A road or bridge to the dead guarded by a dog is a recurring but unconfirmed image.

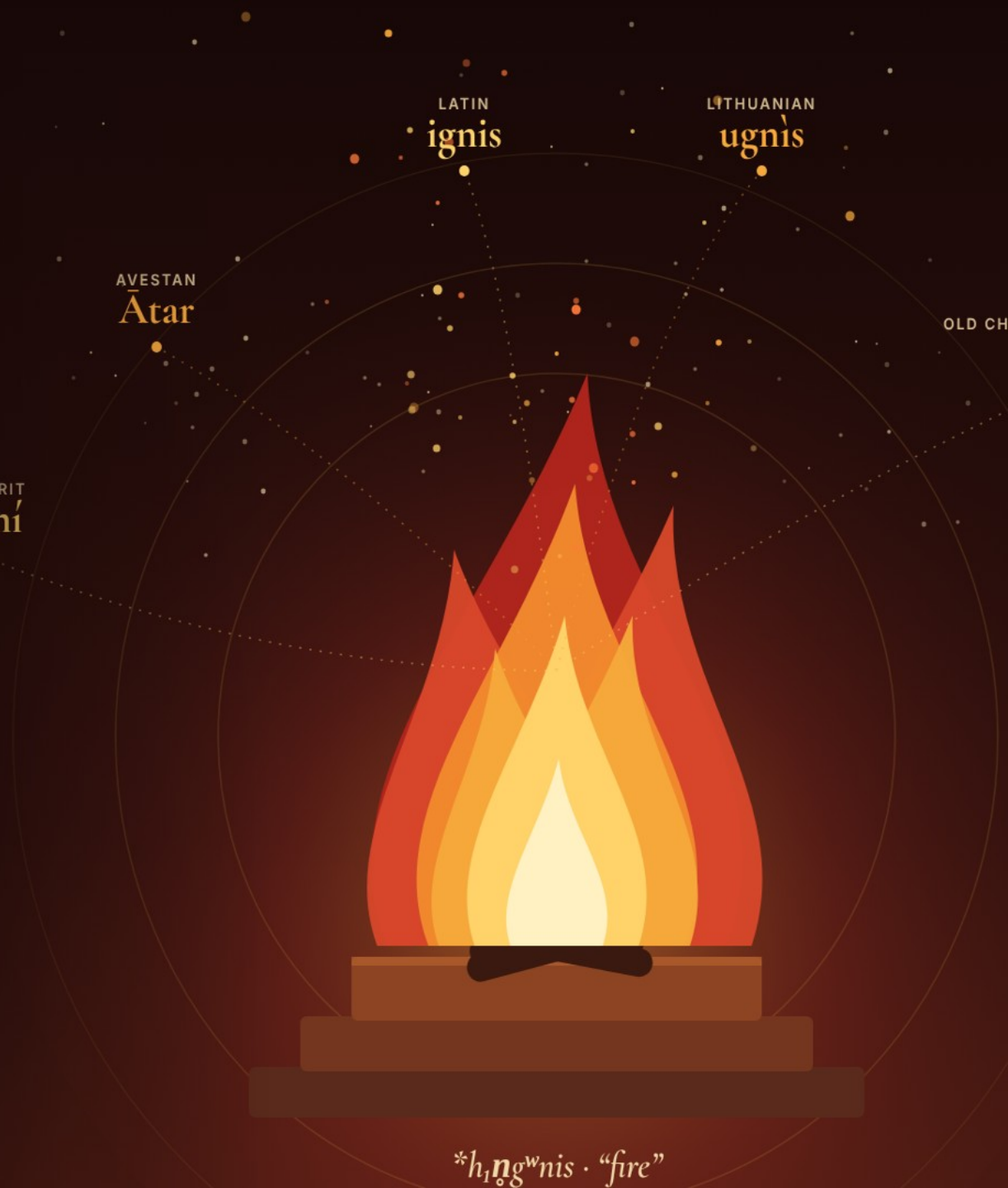
Tier B (Yama/Yima), C (bridge, dog). West 2007; Lincoln 1991; Boyce 1975.

PART 6

06

Debates, numbers and review

What is disputed, who to read, and a self-check



Four live debates

A single religion?

Some scholars say a Proto-Indo-European religion is a useful model; others say we can only talk of shared themes.

Dumézil's three functions

Strong for Rome and India; weaker elsewhere. Critics note selective evidence.

Gimbutas's goddess

Her Old Europe goddess is not supported by linguistic evidence and is contested by archaeologists.

Borrowing

Contact with Mesopotamia, Anatolia and the steppe may explain some of the "shared" myths.

The strongest claims need a name or a formula, not just a theme.

Tier B/C. Littleton 1982; Hutton 1997; Mallory and Adams 2006; West 2007.

One figurine, many readings



Neolithic Vinča-culture figurine, Kosovo · Albinfo · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

The “Goddess” debate

- Gimbutas read female figurines as evidence of a goddess-centred culture overrun by steppe pastoralists.
- Linguists note that the figures predate Proto-Indo-European and say nothing about its religion.
- Archaeologists dispute her reading of function: toys, ancestors, deities or votive items.
- What survives is the object, not the belief.

Tier C. Gimbutas 1991; Hutton 1997.

Three misuses to avoid

THE MISREADING

“Aryan religion” as a racial claim

THE BETTER READING

“Aryan” was a self-name of Indo-Iranian speakers (Module 5). Using it for a race, or for modern political myths, has no basis in the sources.

THE MISREADING

Neo-pagan reconstruction as history

THE BETTER READING

Modern revivals rework the evidence in good faith, but they are not the ancient religions themselves.

THE MISREADING

A single “Indo-European” myth

THE BETTER READING

Pop-science summaries merge Norse, Greek and Vedic stories into one. Each source has its own date, genre and politics.

Tier A (method). Mallory and Adams 2006; Schmitt on “Aryan”.

Module 6 in numbers

1,028
hymns in the Rigveda (Śākala recension)

10,552
verses counted in Aufrecht's 1877 edition

38%
of the Rigveda is in the family books, mandalas 2–7

17
Gāthās hymns by Zarathustra, in Old Avestan

6
Amesha Spentas, the divine powers around Ahura Mazdā

12
Persian months, all named for Zoroastrian divinities

4
oath gods in the Mitanni treaty of c. 1380 BCE

3
functions in Dumézil's model

2
words for fire: sacred *$h_1n̥g^{w}$nis, plain *$péh_2$ur

3
heads of the serpent *Ng^{w}hi in Lincoln's myth

1700–1100
BCE: usual range for the Rigveda

258
years before Alexander: the traditional date of Zoroaster

Tier A/B: values as on the slides in Parts 2–5.

Who's who in Indo-European religion

Max Müller

1823–1900: nature mythology, the "disease of language"; later discredited

Georges Dumézil

1898–1986: the three functions of Indo-European society

Émile Benveniste

Indo-European Language and Society (1969): institutions and vocabulary

Calvert Watkins

How to Kill a Dragon (1995): formulae and poetic language

Martin L. West

Indo-European Poetry and Myth (2007): the wide survey

Bruce Lincoln

Myth, Cosmos, and Society (1986): Manu and Yemo, Trito

Jaan Puhvel

Comparative Mythology (1987): textbook of the method

Mallory & Adams

The Oxford Introduction to PIE and the PIE World (2006)

Mary Boyce

A History of Zoroastrianism (1975–1991): the long view

Tier B: titles and years as in Sources; verify before citing.

Words to verify

Spellings

Hittite Attaš Šiuš; the cuneiform names in the Mitanni treaty; Hittite and Greek phrases quoted for the dragon-slayer formula.

Etymologies

flāmen/brahmán; Neptūnus; Ēostre (Bede); “druid” as “oak-knower”; Nechtan.

Facts and dates

Gerald of Wales (c. 1188); the Sasanian canon and Kerdīr; oldest Yasna manuscript (1323 CE); Persian month meanings.

These are flagged so a careful reader can check them before quoting.

Open verification list. Check in Mayrhofer, Schmitt, Skjærvø 2011, Watkins 1995 and West 2007.

Check your understanding

1. What does *dyēus ph₂tēr mean, and which branches show it?
2. Why is a matching formula stronger than a matching plot?
3. Name three divine pairs or twins shared by two or more branches.
4. What is the dragon-slayer formula, and who reconstructs it?
5. What did Lincoln propose about *Manu and *Yemo?
6. Name two branches with a perpetual sacred fire.
7. What are ṛtá and aša, and what is their opposite?
8. Which gods does the Mitanni treaty name?
9. What did Zarathustra keep, and what did he change?
10. Why is the Roman Mithras cult not simply Persian?

Questions drawn from the slides in Parts 1 to 5.

Check your understanding: answers

1 **"Father Sky"**
Greek Zeû páter, Latin Iū-piter, Vedic Dyáuṣ pitā́.

2 **Words match**
Formulae repeat the words; plots can travel or arise twice.

3 **Divine twins**
Aśvins, Dioskouroi, Baltic "Sons of God"; also Dawn and Sun.

4 **"He slew the serpent"**
Watkins: *(h₁e) gʷʰent h₁ógʷʰim; Vedic áhann áhim.

5 **First man and twin**
Manu and Yemo; Vedic Manu/Yama, Tacitus's Mannus/Tuisto.

6 **India and Rome**
Agni altars; Vesta's fire; also Iran.

7 **Order and Lie**
ṛtá/aša is order; drúh/druj is falsehood.

8 **Mitra, Varuṇa, Indra, Nāsatya**
Treaty of c. 1380 BCE.

9 **Kept form, changed values**
Fire and rite kept; daēvas rejected.

10 **A new cult**
The mysteries are Roman; the name continues.

As above.

Key terms

Cognate
A word that descends from a shared ancestor.

Formula
A fixed poetic phrase repeated across branches.

Dyēus
The reconstructed Sky Father and bright day.

Daēva / deva
A false god (Avestan) or a god (Vedic).

Ahura / asura
“Lord”: a god class; positive in Avestan, mixed in Vedic.

Ṛtá / aša
Cosmic order, truth.

Druj
The Lie, falsehood.

Haoma / soma
The ritual drink, pressed and offered.

Gāthās
The 17 oldest hymns of the Avesta.

Tripartite
Dumézil’s three functions.

Amesha Spentas
The Holy Immortals of Zoroastrianism.

Mithraeum
The cave-like temple of Roman Mithraism.

Definitions summarised from this module.

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- 19 · Soma cart — Krishnanow · CC BY-SA 3.0
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- 21 · Pazyryk saddlecloth — Schreiber · public domain
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- 22 · Gundestrup — Ktp72 · CC BY-SA 3.0
- 23 · Behistun relief — public domain
- 23 · Darius, Behistun — Leen van Dorp · CC0
- 24 · Yazd temple — Diego Delso · public domain
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- 25 · Vendidad MS — H. D. F. Minochehr · CC0
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- 28 · Capua mithraeum — Miguel Hermoso Cuesta · CC BY-SA 4.0
- 28 · Tauroctony — Jastrow · public domain
- 29 · Mithra, Taq-e Bostan — dynamosquito · CC BY-SA 2.0
- 30 · BMAC vessel — Metropolitan Museum of Art · CC0
- 30 · Ephedra — Urgamal Magsar · CC BY 4.0
- 31 · Vinča figurine — Albinfo · CC BY-SA 4.0

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Key literature

- Calvert Watkins, How to Kill a Dragon (1995)
- M. L. West, Indo-European Poetry and Myth (2007)
- J. P. Mallory and Douglas Q. Adams, The Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World (2006)
- Émile Benveniste, Indo-European Language and Society (1969; English 1973)
- Bruce Lincoln, Priests, Warriors, and Cattle (1981); Death, War, and Sacrifice (1991)
- Georges Dumézil, Mythe et épopée I–III (1968–73); C. Scott Littleton, The New Comparative Mythology (1982)
- Jaan Puhvel, Comparative Mythology (1987)
- Mary Boyce, A History of Zoroastrianism (1975–91); Prods Oktor Skjærvø, Introduction to Zoroastrianism (2011)
- Jean Kellens and Eric Pirart, Les textes vieil-avestiques (1988–91)

Check publisher and edition details before citing.

Sources for this module

- Watkins 1995; West 2007; Mallory and Adams 2006 (cited throughout)
- Benveniste 1969; Lincoln 1975, 1981, 1991; Dumézil 1958, 1968–73; Littleton 1982
- Skjærvø 2011; Boyce 1975–91; Gnoli 2000, 2004; Kent 1953; Schmitt (Old Persian and "Aryan")
- Mayrhofer (Indo-Aryan names in Mitanni); Thieme 1960 (the Mitanni gods)
- Puhvel 1987; Anthony 2007 (horse and ritual context); Hutton 1997 (on Gimbutas)
- Cumont 1903; Beck 2006; Clauss 2000 (Mithraism)
- Tacitus, Germania; Herodotus; Gerald of Wales, Topographia Hibernica (primary)

Works named as in the text; full bibliographic details to be completed.

Next in the course

Module 7

Coming next in the series.

Review

Return to Modules 4 and 5 for method and for Indo-Iranian detail.

Read

Start with Watkins 1995 and West 2007 for the full evidence.