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► **To cite this version:**

Carmen Sylvia Spiers. The Marginality of the Atharvaveda in Its Historical Context. Studies in the Atharvaveda: Proceedings of the 3rd Zurich International Conference on Indian Literature and Philosophy, 15, De Gruyter, pp.253-276, 2024, Welten Süd- und Zentralasiens / Worlds of South and Inner Asia / Mondes de l'Asie du Sud et de l'Asie Centrale, 9783111244419. 10.1515/9783111244433-011 . hal-04843368

**HAL Id: hal-04843368**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04843368v1>**

Submitted on 17 Dec 2024

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Carmen Spiers

# The Marginality of the Atharvaveda in Its Historical Context

**Abstract:** This article attempts to sketch out an essential aspect of the Vedic ritual tradition commonly called “Atharvaveda”: its marginality with respect to the Śrauta-tradition among the various ritual modes practiced by the community of Vedic, and later Brahmin, priests. This marginality has never truly wavered, from Vedic times until today, despite the late “canonization” of the Atharvaveda and various attempts at its promotion. The idea that the Atharvaveda is not on the same level as the Ṛg-, Sāma-, and Yajur- Vedas is familiar to most, but we would add that the Atharvaveda has carried distinctively negative connotations within Vedic priestly culture from the beginning of its history. The evidence for this argument is organized in five sections: 1, the Atharvaveda’s late inclusion in a closed group with the Ṛg-, Sāma-, and Yajur- Vedas; 2, the derogatory designations, or the negative connotations which the various designations of the Atharvaveda have carried, and this tradition’s history of attempts to rename itself; 3, the marginal and impure status of the medical profession, a specialty of the Atharvaveda, in the period of the Yajurvedic Saṁhitās and Brāhmaṇas; 4, the ritual inferiority of other groups associated with the Atharvaveda; 5, the persistent marginality and inferiority of the Atharvaveda in the post-Vedic period.

Although the hymns of the Ṛgveda and those of the extant Śaunaka and Paippalāda collections (*saṁhitā*) of the Atharvaveda can both be called “Vedic hymns”, they are distinct in many ways. It is well known that they reflect different temporal, environmental, and social contexts: mid to late second millennium BCE vs. the beginning of the first millennium BCE, the Bronze Age vs. the Iron Age, North-West India vs. farther east, semi-nomadic cattle-herding vs. sedentary agriculture and animal

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**Note:** I would like to thank the organizers of the conference for having given me the opportunity to participate in yet another highly rewarding event under the Swiss Paippalāda Project. The presentation I gave at the conference was entitled “The Draft-Ox as King: ŚS 4.11/PS 3.25 and the Gosava of the Brāhmaṇa texts,” but Umberto Selva’s 2019 thesis, defended a couple months before the date of the conference, masterfully covers the topic in question so there is no need for any further repetition here. I also thank my reviewers for their insightful discussion leading to a clearer focus in this paper.

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husbandry, loose-knit mobile clans vs. villages with increasing social hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> The newer hymns of the Atharvaveda never replace those of the Ṛgveda, central elements of the Śrauta ritual system till this day. So what, then, is the position of the hymns of the Atharvaveda and of the whole Atharvavedic tradition, within the Brahmanical milieu?

The old “religion vs. magic” binary distinction of the early social sciences, mapped onto Vedic culture as “Ṛgveda vs. Atharvaveda” and occasionally uncritically repeated, is sometimes opposed by taking the equally simplistic step of conflating totally the Ṛgveda and the Atharvaveda, whereby their texts would equally represent one single, unitary “religion.” Thus, as one scholar writes: “Whereas many Western scholars have regarded the Atharvaveda with suspicion and dismissed its contents as ‘sorcery’ or ‘magic’ as opposed to the pure ‘religion’ of the Ṛgveda, the Indian tradition itself does not express a similar anxiety over the contents of the fourth Veda, nor does the tradition distinguish between the religion of the Atharvaveda and that of the other Vedas” (Cohen 2020: 8). The truth of this statement cannot be maintained, as it involves ignoring the fact that Ṛgvedic and Atharvavedic hymns have, from the ancient period until today, always been kept in different categories, used, and viewed differently within Indian culture. We can indeed affirm, as we shall see, that the Brahmanical tradition does “express anxiety” over the contents of the Atharvaveda.

Here I will try to sketch out an essential aspect of the Vedic ritual tradition commonly called “Atharvaveda”: its marginality with respect to the Śrauta-tradition among the various ritual modes practiced by the community of Vedic, and later Brahmin, priests. This marginality has never truly wavered, from Vedic times until today, despite the late “canonization”<sup>2</sup> of the Atharvaveda and various attempts at its promotion. The success that the priests of the Atharvaveda attained among some political elites in India at certain points<sup>3</sup> should also not be overestimated: it did not change the fact of the Atharvavedic priests’ continuously marginal position from the point of view of the community of Brahmin priests to which they belong. The idea that the Atharvaveda is somehow not quite on the same level as the Ṛg-, Sāma-, and Yajur- Vedas is familiar enough to most, but I would add that the Atharvaveda has carried distinctively negative connotations within Vedic priestly culture from the beginning of its history. I will organize the evidence for this argument in five

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<sup>1</sup> These facts have resulted from the cross-referencing of archeological data and indications within the texts; see Witzel (2009) and, for a very basic overview supported with a bibliography, Kulke & Rothermund (2016: 11–26).

<sup>2</sup> By this I mean its inclusion in a closed group of four with the Ṛg-, Sāma-, and Yajur-Vedas: see section 1 below.

<sup>3</sup> See Sanderson (2004) and (2007).

sections: 1, the Atharvaveda's late inclusion in a closed group with the Ṛg-, Sāma-, and Yajur- Vedas; 2, the derogatory designations, or the negative connotations which the various designations of the Atharvaveda have carried, and this tradition's history of attempts to rename itself; 3, the marginal and impure status of the medical profession, a specialty of the Atharvaveda, in the period of the Yajurvedic Saṁhitās and Brāhmaṇas; 4, the ritual inferiority of other groups associated with the Atharvaveda; 5, the persistent marginality and inferiority of the Atharvaveda in the post-Vedic period. I hope to put to rest any doubts concerning the Atharvaveda's marginal status, and perhaps convince readers of its negative reception in the Brahmanic priestly community over time.<sup>4</sup>

## 1 The Atharvaveda's Late Inclusion as a "Veda"

It is well known that the Ṛg-, Sāma-, and Yajur- Vedas originally formed a closed group of three that did not include the Atharvaveda, which was to be added only at the end of the Vedic period (see Bloomfield 1899: 21–34; Renou 1947: 12–13; Gonda 1975: 8, 268; Holdrege 1994: 54, n. 5; Witzel 1997: 278; Bronkhorst 2016: 226). In Patton (1994), a volume dedicated to questions of the Vedic canon, the Atharvaveda is mentioned almost exclusively in footnotes.<sup>5</sup> We find references to the group of three together, *ṛcaḥ* (strophes), *yājum̐ṣi* (ritual formulas), and *sāmāni* (melodies), without any reference to something representative of the Atharvaveda, starting in the last book of the Ṛgveda-saṁhitā<sup>6</sup> and continuing throughout Vedic literature,

<sup>4</sup> The following makes use of some of the material in the first chapter of my PhD thesis, written in French (see Spiers 2020). However, the scope of this paper is narrower, although in some places the relevant passages are actually presented in greater detail than in the thesis, for instance in section 4 of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> In one of the volume's articles, Holdrege writes (1994: 36): "The core *śruti* texts are the four types of mantras, *ṛcs*, *yajuses*, *sāmans*, and *atharvāṅgirases* or *atharvans*, which are collected in the Saṁhitās." However, the "fourth Veda" is not further discussed in her article, precisely because (p. 39), "In their discussions of the bounded textual manifestation of the Veda, the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads tend to focus almost exclusively on the three mantra collections, *ṛcs*, *yajuses*, and *sāmans*, which are generally designated as *trayī vidyā* ('threefold knowledge') or *traya veda* ('threefold Veda')." As she says in footnote 24 (p. 57) to this statement, "This prevalent emphasis in the Vedic texts on the threefold Veda, Ṛg-Veda, Yajur-Veda, and Sāma-Veda, suggests that it took some time before the Atharva-Veda was accorded an equivalent status as the fourth Veda."

<sup>6</sup> Ṛgveda 10.90.9 (ed. Aufrecht 1877: 388): *tāsmād yajñāt sarvahūta ṛcaḥ sāmāni jajñire | chāndāṁsi jajñire tāsmād yajus tāsmād ajāyata ||*.

including within Atharvavedic texts.<sup>7</sup> The first reference to the Atharvaveda as a fourth element next to the other three occurs in one of its hymns, under the compound name *atharvāṅgirāsaḥ*<sup>8</sup> “the Atharvans and the Aṅgirasas”:

ŚS<sup>9</sup> 10.7.20 (ed. Roth & Whitney 1924: 231):  
*yāsmād ṛco apātakṣan yajur yāsmād apākaṣan |*  
*sāmāni yāsya lómāny atharvāṅgirāso mūkham skambhām tām brūhi katamāḥ svid evā sāḥ ||*

They cobbled the Ṛc-stanzas from him, they scraped off the Yajus-formula from him; his hairs are the Sāman-melodies, his mouth is the Atharvans-and-Aṅgirasas. Tell [me], this Skambha-support, whoever is he really?<sup>10</sup>

The context indicates that *atharvāṅgirāsaḥ* must designate oral ritual elements in line with *ṛc*-, *yajus*-, and *sāman*-, and yet the compound is formed from the name of legendary poet-priests, *āṅgiras*-, and an antiquated priestly title, *átharvan*- (see section 2 below). Since these two are not originally words for liturgical elements, this in itself sets them apart from the first three.<sup>11</sup>

7 A perusal of Bloomfield's concordance (1906: 285–286) should suffice: “*ṛk sāma yajur ucchiṣṭe* AV.11.7.5<sup>a</sup>; *ṛk sāma yajur vaṣaṭ svāhā namaḥ* TS.7.3.12.1; KSA.3.2 [ . . . ] *ṛksāmābhyām yajuṣā saṁtarantaḥ* (VS.KS.ŚB.MŚ. °*bhyām saṁtaranto yajurbhiḥ*) VS.4.1<sup>c</sup>; TS.1.2.3.3c; 3.1.1.4; KS.2.4<sup>c</sup>; 23.6; ŚB.3.1.1.12; MŚ.2.1.1.6<sup>c</sup> [ . . . ] *ṛgbhiḥ sāmna yajurvedaḥ* AV.12.1.38<sup>d</sup> [ . . . ] *ṛcaḥ sāma yajur mahi* AV.10.7.14<sup>b</sup>; *ṛcaḥ sāmātho yajuh* AV.11.8.23<sup>d</sup> [ . . . ] *ṛcā sāmna yajuṣā devatābhiḥ* TB.3.7.6.13<sup>b</sup>; ApŚ.4.8.4<sup>b</sup> [ . . . ] *ṛco nāmāsmi yajūṁṣi nāmāsmi sāmāni nāmāsmi* VS.18.67 [ . . . ] *ṛco yajūṁṣi sāmāni* TB.3.12.8.1<sup>a</sup>.” To this list I add *ṛcaḥ sāmāni yajūṁṣi* from a prose section of the Maitrāyaṇīsaṁhitā: 2.4.3 (Schroeder 1883: 41, line 16); = Taittirīyasaṁhitā 2.4.12.7.

8 On this dvandva compound, of which the stem is *atharvāṅgirāsa*-, see Wackernagel (1905: 157, §66c). The thematic derivative stem *atharvāṅgirāsa*- seems not to be attested in the Vedic corpus (Bloomfield 1899: 7–8). The only other occurrence of *atharvāṅgirāsa*- within the Atharvavedic Saṁhitās is found in PS 16.84.7, in a longer list of genres reminiscent of those from the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa that I cite further on. There is also an isolated case where only the Atharvans are mentioned in a reference to the Atharvaveda as a hymn collection, in the obviously late litany of praise for the different books of the Śaunakasaṁhitā, ŚS 19.23. The first line reads: *ātharvaṅānām caturṛcēbhyah svāhā* “Praise be to the [hymns] of four-stanzas (= book 1) of the Atharvans”, and goes on similarly for the other books.

9 The names of the Śaunaka- and the Paippalāda-Saṁhitās of the Atharvaveda are abbreviated ŚS and PS respectively. All other text names are written in full. ŚS: edited by Whitney & Roth (1924), except for book 20, and by Pandit (1895–1898); PS: edited by Bhattacharya (1997–2016); concerning the passages listed in footnote 14, PS book 5 is also available in the edition with translation by Lubotsky (2002).

10 All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise specified. – In place of *sāmāni yāsya lómāny atharvāṅgirāso mūkham*, the Paippalāda parallel (PS 17.9.1c) has *chandāṁsi yāsya lomāni* (ed. Bhattacharya 2011: 1160).

11 Atharvan and Aṅgiras and/or their patronymics are found together but uncompounded in ŚS 10.6.20/PS 16.44.3; ŚS 11.6.13/PS 15.14.6; ŚS 16.8.11–14/PS 18.52.9–12; ŚS 19.54.5/PS 11.9.4cd–5; PS

However, the first reference to the Atharvaveda as a fourth element *outside* of its own texts occurs in the Taittirīyasamhitā, a relatively late Yajurvedic Samhitā (Witzel 1997: 303, 305); this is also the only such reference in a non-Atharvavedic Samhitā:

Taittirīyasamhitā 7.5.11.2 (ed. Weber 1872: 332)

*ṛgbhyāḥ svāhā yajurbhyaḥ svāhā sāmabhyaḥ svāhāṅgirobhyaḥ svāhā védebhyaḥ svāhā gāthābhyaḥ svāhā nārāsaṁśbhyaḥ svāhā rāubhībhyaḥ svāhā sārvasmai svāhā || 2 ||*

Praise be to the Ṛc-stanzas, praise be to the Yajus-formulas, praise be to the Sāman-melodies, praise be to the Aṅgiras-formulas praise be to the Vedas, praise be to the Gāthā-songs, praise be to the Nārāsaṁśi-songs, praise be to the Raibhī-songs, praise be to the whole!

The “Aṅgirasas” refer here to liturgical material particular to the Atharvaveda in that it makes up half of the aforementioned compound *atharvāṅgirāsaḥ*. However, we do not have here a closed group of four elements including one referring to the Atharvaveda, but rather a list of eight elements. It is hard to know if the mention of “Vedas” which follows the group of the first four is meant to sum them up collectively and put them on a higher level than the other four types of “songs” which follow. This occurrence sets the stage for the usage met with in the Brāhmaṇas and afterward, where “the *atharvāṅgirasas* or *atharvans* are rarely mentioned along with the other three mantra collections” (Holdrege 1994: 57, n. 24); when they do appear after a reference to the first three collections, it is only as part of a longer list of all sorts of Vedic lore, “sacred” or not (see also Bloomfield 1899: 23). In Śatapathabrāhmaṇa (Mādhyamīna) 13.4.3.1–14,<sup>12</sup> the crowd during the Aśvamedha-festivities is regaled on subsequent days with music and performances from different “Vedas” (here the term *véda-* is in apposition to the following items): Ṛc the first day, Yajus the second, Atharvan the third, Aṅgiras the fourth, Sarpavidyā the fifth, Devajanavidyā the sixth, Māyā the seventh, Purāṇa the eighth, Itihāsa the ninth, and Sāman on the tenth. A parallel passage in the later ritual manual Śāṅkhāyanaśrautasūtra 16.2.9 (ed. Hillebrandt 1888: 198) describes the Aśvamedha-festivities in the same way, but uses compounds in *°veda-*,<sup>13</sup> including *atharva-veda-*, perhaps one of this word’s first occurrences outside of the Atharvaveda’s own literature. However, in both Śatapathabrāhmaṇa and Śāṅkhāyanaśrautasūtra, the universal application of the term “Veda” to all the diverse elements in the enumeration, ranging from the Ṛc to

5.11.4; PS 16.94.5–8; PS 17.22.3; PS 17.28.22–25. In these passages they are not used as designations of types of ritual utterances, but act rather as semi-divine personalities, just as they do when found singly (just Aṅgiras or just Atharvan) in the Ṛgveda as well as in the Atharvaveda.

<sup>12</sup> Text ed. Weber (1855: 984–986). Full translation in Eggeling (1900: 361–370).

<sup>13</sup> For a study of early occurrences of such compounds and of lists of “Vedas,” see Bronkhorst (1989).

Purāṇa, shows that this term here simply means “lore” and that we cannot conclude from such passages that the Atharvaveda belongs to an exclusive group with the Ṛg-, Sāma-, and Yajur- Vedas, just because it might also be called “Veda”.

However, a similar list in Śatapathabrāhmaṇa (Mādhyam̐dina) 14.5.4.10 uses the compound form ending in °vedá- for the first three, but not for the Atharvans-and-Aṅgirasas and the rest: *ṛgvedó yajurvedáh sāmavedò 'tharvāṅgirása iti hāsáḥ purāṇān̐ vidyá upaniśádaḥ ślókāḥ sūtrāny̐ anuvyākhyánāni vyākhyánāni* (ed. Weber 1855: 1064; the same list is also in Śatapathabrāhmaṇa [Mādhyam̐dina] 14.6.10.6). Similarly, the Brāhmaṇas of the Ṛg- and Sāma- Vedas have a story about the creation of the three Vedas, grouped together without mention of the Atharvaveda, but this story is taken up by the late Atharvavedic Gopathabrāhmaṇa and modified to fit the idea of four Vedas. Let us first cite the story of three Vedas from the Aitareyabrāhmaṇa (belonging to the Ṛgveda; a parallel is found in the Sāmaveda's Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa, 1.357):

Aitareyabrāhmaṇa 5.32 (ed. Aufrecht 1879: 154–155):

*prajāpatir akāmayata: prajāyeya bhūyān̐ syām̐ iti. sa tapo 'tapyata, sa tapas taptvemān̐ lokān̐ asṛjata: pṛthivīm̐ antarikṣam̐ divam̐. tān̐ lokān̐ abhyatapat, tebhyo 'bhitaptebhyas trīṇi jyotiṃsy̐ ajāyantāgnir̐ eva pṛthivyā ajāyata, vāyur̐ antarikṣād, ādityo divas. tāni jyotiṃsy̐ abhyatapat, tebhyo 'bhitaptebhyas trayo vedā ajāyanta: ṛgveda evāgner̐ ajāyata, yajurvedo vāyoḥ, sāmaveda ādityāt. . . .<sup>14</sup> sa prajāpatir yajñam̐ atanuta, tam̐ āharat, tenāyajata. sa ṛcaiva hautram̐ akarod, yajuśadhvaryavam̐, sāmnodgītham̐. yad etat trayayai vidyāyai śukram̐, tena brahmatvam̐ akarot.*

Prajāpati desired, “May I propagate myself, may I be more.” He performed ascetic heat; having performed ascetic heat he emitted these worlds: earth, midspace, sky. He heated the worlds; from them when heated three luminaries were born. Agni was born from the earth, Vāyu was born from the midspace, Āditya was born from the sky. He heated the luminaries: from them when heated the three Vedas were born. The Ṛgveda was born from Agni, the Yajurveda from Vāyu, the Sāmaveda from Āditya. . . . Prajāpati extended the rite: he took it, he performed the rite with it. He performed the Hotar's office with the Ṛc, the Adhvaryu's with the Yajus, the Udgītha with the Sāman. He performed the Brahman's office with that which the triple science has that is pure.

Here follows the modification of this story to fit four Vedas in the Gopathabrāhmaṇa:

Gopathabrāhmaṇa 1.2.16 (ed. Gaastra 1919: 49):

*prajāpatir atharvā devaḥ sa tapas taptvaitam̐ cātuḥprāśyam̐ brahmaudanam̐ niramimīta catur-lokam̐ caturdevam̐ caturvedam̐ caturhautram̐ iti. catvāro vā ime lokāḥ pṛthivy̐ antarikṣam̐ dyaur̐ āpa iti. catvāro vā ime devā agnir̐ vāyur̐ ādityas̐ candramās̐ catvāro vā ime vedā ṛgvedo*

<sup>14</sup> An intervening passage on the birth of the three ritual exclamations is omitted for the sake of space.

*yajurvedaḥ sāmavedo brahmaveda iti. catasro vā imā hotrā hautram ādhvaryavam audgātram brahmatvam iti.*

The divine Atharvan is Prajāpati. Having performed ascetic heat, he fashioned out that four-portioned rice-gruel for the Brahmins, with four worlds, four gods, four Vedas, four priestly offices. Four are these worlds: earth, midspace, sky, waters. Four are these gods: Agni, Vāyu, Āditya, Candramas. Four are these Vedas: Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, Brahmaveda. Four are these priestly offices: that of the Hotar; that of the Adhvaryu, that of the Udgātar, that of the Brahman.

This passage is also a classic example of the Gopathabrāhmaṇa's pro-Atharvaveda propagandist style, which aims to secure the position of the Brahman-priest in Śrauta ritual for Atharvavedins (or "Brahmavedins"). Besides this passage and ŚS 10.7.20 cited above, I have not been able to find any closed enumerations of four elements wherein one refers to Atharvavedic formulas outside of the Gṛhyasūtras and the Upaniṣads; in the latter, the fourth element is still often called *atharvāṅ-girasah*, or *ātharvaṇam* (the Ātharvanic [collection]), even when the compounds in °veda- are used for the first three (Holdrege 1994: 57, n. 24, with text citations).

## 2 Derogatory Designations

We have mentioned above one of the oldest ways of referring to the hymns of the Atharvaveda, *atharvāṅgirāsaḥ*. The variant *bhṛgvaṅgirāsaḥ* "the Bhṛḡus and the Aṅgirasas" is found from the Brāhmaṇas on, and is preferred in Atharvavedic ritual texts (Gonda 1975: 267).<sup>15</sup> Three entities, then, are contained in these names: Aṅgiras is present in both, combined with either Atharvan or Bhṛḡu.<sup>16</sup> While Atharvan is a priest's title, Aṅgiras and Bhṛḡu are the eponymous ancestors of families of Vedic priest-poets designated by the patronymics Aṅgirasa and Bhārgava (these *gotras* are still met with today); with the founders of the different schools (Pipalāda, Śaunaka, etc.), they represent the traditional Atharvavedic sages in medieval Indian ritual literature (Griffiths & Sumant 2018: LVII). Here I will describe what each of these names represent by themselves, and then mention another, less common designation of the Atharvaveda: Yātu.

Despite their apparently respectable place as a family of Vedic poets and as legendary priests frequently invoked as ancient ritual role-models in the Yajurveda,<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> An uncompounded version is found in the genitive sequence *bhṛḡgūṇām aṅgirasām* "of the Bhṛḡus [and] the Aṅgirasas" in Khila 3.15.30 to Ṛgveda 10.84 (ed. Scheftelowitz 1906: 102).

<sup>16</sup> The three are found together in Ṛgveda 10.14.6 (repeated in the Atharvaveda as PS 18.63.1/ŚS 18.1.58).

<sup>17</sup> See the study by Shende 1950.



the Aṅgirasas are called “terrible” (*ghorá-*) from the latest, so-called “Atharvavedic” book of the Ṛgveda onwards,<sup>18</sup> and continue to be so characterized and connected with inimical violence in all periods of Vedic literature, within and without the Atharvaveda.<sup>19</sup> The Aṅgirasas are even mixed up with Asuras in some late Vedic texts, when the latter had become the gods’ enemies (see section 4 below). By medieval times, Aṅgiras is synonymous with *abhicāra* or hostile ritual: the Aṅgirasakalpa (*āṅgirasah kalpaḥ*, *aṅgirasām kalpaḥ*) of the Atharvavedic medieval tradition is also known as the Abhicārakalpa (Sanderson 2007: 202). We also find the concept of *praty-āṅgirasa* or “anti-Aṅgiras” ritual, that is, rites to defend against ritual attacks, developed in both the Atharvavedic and the Ṛgvedic ritual traditions.<sup>20</sup> The Aṅgirasas’ *purohita*-like role as Indra’s aides in his battle against Vala<sup>21</sup> might suggest an ancient association with hostile ritual specifically in the service of a chieftain. At any rate, one cannot disregard the terrible side of the Aṅgirasas, nor the antiquity of this aspect and of their intimate association with the tradition later called Atharvaveda.

“Atharvan” is an obsolete priest’s title. The word *átharvan-*, like that for the physician *bhiṣáj-* (see section 3 below), is common to both Vedic and Avestan and might be a foreign loanword from the Oxus civilization languages of the Indo-Iranian substrate.<sup>22</sup> As can be seen by the use of the word in the hymns of the Ṛgveda (as well as in the Avesta), “Atharvan” originally designated a type of priest,<sup>23</sup> but no priest bearing this title appears in codified Vedic ritual. Like the title “Asura”, “Atharvan” can be said of gods in the Ṛgveda but afterward goes out of style, to say the least. Heesterman (1993: 143–144) notes the Atharvan-priest’s “somewhat peripheral position” in Vedic and Avestan texts; in ancient Iran the title was superseded by *magu* (which, I might add, is at the origin of the word “magician” in European languages, transmitted through Herodotus; see Boyce 1982: 15–19). Heesterman further remarks: “The Iranian *āthravan*, then, does attest to the early existence of priestly figures serving kings and magnates. But his status of a priestly servant in a

18 Ṛgveda 10.108.10, probably 10.92.3 as well; see Jamison & Brereton (2014: 1542).

19 For an overview of passages, see Bloomfield (1897: XIX–XXI).

20 See Bahulkar (2004). In medieval Tantric currents, the goddess Pratyāṅgirā is known as an Atharvavedic version of Durgā.

21 See, for example, the discussion of this well-known myth in Jamison & Brereton (2014: 22).

22 \**atharwan*; in Avestan *āthrauuan-/aθaurun-*; see Lubotsky (2001: 303, 310).

23 See Mayrhofer (1992: 60): “Priester; Name des ersten Priesters des Vorzeit (ṚV+).” The word is translated “fire-priest” by Jamison & Brereton (2014) in several of its occurrences in the Ṛgveda (8.9.7, 10.87.12, 10.92.10), but as Heesterman (1993: 143) notes, all Vedic priests are fire-priests. The idea that Atharvan is a priestly title and not a family name was proposed already by Macdonell (1897: 141) after a discussion of all Ṛgvedic occurrences; see also Macdonell & Keith (1912: 17).

magnate's household does not speak for an autonomous state and certainly not for high status or spiritual authority." See section 5 for the royal connection in India.

According to the well-known opposition in Atharvavedic ritual tradition between a positive category referred to as *sānta*- "auspicious", *ātharvaṇa*- "Ātharvanic", or *bheṣaja*- "medicine", and a negative one referred to as *ghora*- "terrible", *āṅgīrasa*- "Āṅgīrasic", or *yātu*- "maleficent power/device" (Bahulkar 1994: 40), the name "Atharvan" should represent something positive in contrast to Āṅgīras. However, this is part of a later development:<sup>24</sup> In the Atharvavedic hymn collections, there is no correlation between Āṅgīras and hymns for causing harm nor between Atharvan and auspicious or healing hymns, as has long been noted.<sup>25</sup> There are in fact more passages that associate Āṅgīras with medicine than Atharvan.<sup>26</sup> In general, the so-called "medical" hymns blend in with hymns against enemies because of their violent exorcistic content and their portrayal of the physician as a ruthless warrior and the illness as a demon (Pinault 2004). Furthermore, medicinal practices were in no way viewed as "positive" or "pure" in the ancient period, as we shall see in section 3.

Bhṛḡu, as I mentioned at the beginning of this section, was preferred to Atharvan by the post-Saṁhitā Atharvavedic ritual tradition, with the designation *bhṛḡvaṅgīrasaḥ* being more prevalent in this sphere. Bhṛḡu at one point must have sounded better than Atharvan, as the names being pushed by the post-Saṁhitā

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps occasioned by the emergence of the medieval ritual category of *sānti*, according to Geslani (2018: 30, note 41, and p. 40). The Kauśikasūtra and the Vaitānasūtra, both Atharvavedic ritual texts belonging to the end of the Vedic period, show only partial signs of the polarized ritual categories called *sānta/ātharvaṇa* and *ghora/āṅgīrasa*. The Gopathabrāhmaṇa, which presupposes these two Sūtras, is the most explicit in its presentation of this distinction. See Bloomfield (1897: XVIII–XIX), Caland (1910: 14; comments to Vaitānasūtra 5.7.10), and most recently the discussion in Griffiths & Sumant (2018: LXI–LXIV), which also shows how the distinction has become standard in medieval Atharvavedic ritual texts like the Karmapañjikā.

<sup>25</sup> Bloomfield (1899: 22); Henry (1909: 221); Macdonell & Keith (1912: 18); Shende (1950: 119) and (1952: 6).

<sup>26</sup> Āṅgīras is explicitly connected with a medical practice, without mention of Atharvan, in six passages: ŚS 8.7.17/PS 16.13.8, ŚS 8.7.24/PS 16.14.3, ŚS 19.34.6/PS 11.3.6, PS 3.22.1, PS 5.30.9 and PS 7.19.6. The same goes for Atharvan only in four passages: ŚS 4.37.1/PS 12.7.1, ŚS 10.2.26/PS 16.59.9, PS 1.8.4 (ab: ŚS 2.3.4ab), and PS 1.38.4. Outside of the Atharvaveda, we do find some stray mentions connecting Atharvan to medicine, such as *bhesajam vā ātharvaṇāni* "Ātharvanic [formulas] are medicine" in Pañcaviṁśabrāhmaṇa 12.9.10 (ed. Chinnaswami Sastri 1935: 463; similarly 16.10.10, 1936: 246). Moreover, according to the Anukramaṇī, the author of the hymn Ṛgveda 10.97 addressing medicinal herbs is called Bhiṣaj Ātharvaṇa, and this name is also given by the Mantrārṣadhyaia as the author of Kāthasaṁhitā 16.13, i.e. a full quotation of Ṛgveda 10.97 (see Weber 1855b: 459). Bloomfield (1897: XXI) followed by Macdonell & Keith (1912b: 106) misunderstands Weber's indication to mean that the name Bhiṣaj Ātharvaṇa appears in the text of the Kāthasaṁhitā itself, which is not the case.

Atharvavedic tradition reveal a desire to replace old associations.<sup>27</sup> Bhṛgu as a family name appears to have closer ties to a historic human reality than Aṅgiras. Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa 2.2.3 designates specifically a Bhṛgu learned in the Atharvaveda as the best choice for the kings' *purohita* (Sanderson 2007: 205, n. 30). Bhārgava, and not Aṅgirasa, is found among the *gotra* names of Atharvavedic recipients of royal grants in the epigraphical sources presented by Schmiedchen (2007, appendices pp. 374–376). In the Vedic period, Bhṛgu seems to be rather neutrally charged compared to Aṅgiras; however, by the time of the Mahābhārata epic, the Bhārgavas along with the Aṅgirasas represent violent, wrathful Brahmins who are not to be crossed (Bronkhorst 2016: 237–240; see also Malinar's contribution in this volume on hostile ritual practices associated with the Atharvaveda in the Mahābhārata). As we know, Atharvan finally won out over both Bhṛgu and Aṅgiras in the name Atharvaveda, common today. This is mostly, it seems, because the other Vedic traditions never adopted the more modern or positive names involving "Bhṛgu" and "Brahman" with which the Atharvavedic tradition attempted to make a better name for itself.

Finally, it is worth noting that in one of its many passages that list Vedic genres, the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa appears to define the Atharvaveda as *yātú-*, for so it describes the fourth element coming after Ṛc, Sāman, and Yajuṣ:

Śatapathabrāhmaṇa (Mādhyam̐dina) 10.5.2.20 (ed. Weber 1855: 795):  
*tām etām agnir ity adhvaryāva ūpāsate | yājur ity eṣā hīdām sārvaṃ yunakti sāmēti chandogā etāsmiṃ hīdām sārvaṃ samānām ukthām iti bahvṛcā eṣā hīdām sārvaṃ utthāpāyati yātūr iti yātuvīda etēna hīdām sārvaṃ yatām viṣām iti sarpāḥ sarpā iti sarpavidā ūrg iti devā rayir iti manuṣyā māyēty āsurāḥ svadhēti pitāro devajānā iti devajānavīdo rūpām iti gandharvā gandhā ity apsarāsaṃ tām yāthāyathopāsate tād evā bhavati.*

The Adhvaryu-priests worship that very one<sup>28</sup> as Agni [and] as the Yajuṣ-formula, for he yokes this whole [world]. The singers of verse [worship him] as the Sāman-melody, for in him this whole [world] is one and the same. The knowers of the many Ṛc-stanzas [worship him] as the hymn, for he sustains this whole [world]. The Yātu-experts [worship him] as Yātu-maleficent power, for by him is this whole [world] controlled. The snakes [worship him] as poison, the snake-experts as a snake, the gods as ambrosia, the humans as wealth, the Asuras as Māyā-power, the Fathers as the Svadhā-offering, the knowers of the Devajana as Devajana, the Gandharvas as beauty, the Apsarasas as scent: however they worship him, just so does he become.

Of course, it is also possible that no particular reference to the Atharvaveda is meant at all in this multi-item list. However, the fact that the first four, concerning

<sup>27</sup> The promotional name Brahmaveda, which we saw in the Gopathabrāhmaṇa passage cited in the last section, never catches on: it is used solely in Atharvavedic ritual literature. See citations of texts in Sanderson (2007: 208, n. 39).

<sup>28</sup> The supreme Puruṣa; see ŚBM 10.5.2.19, and Eggeling (1897: 373).

Yajuṣ, Sāman, Ṛc, and Yātu, are set apart from the rest by their explicative word-play (*yātu-* is here suggested as deriving from *yam-* “to hold, control”), suggests that a fourth item is here starting to be recognized as a ritual tradition akin to the others but that its name is not yet fixed. The practitioners of *yātú-* are “praised” in association with the “Brahmins of death” in the Atharvaveda:

ŚS 6.13.3/PS 19.5.3 (ed. ŚS: Roth & Whitney 1856: 108; PS: Bhattacharya 2016: 1414):  
*námas te yātudhánebhyo námas te bheṣajébhyaḥ | námas te mṛtyo múlebhyo brāhmaṇébhya  
 idám námaḥ ||*

Homage to your wielders of maleficent power, homage to your medicines, O Death, homage to your roots (plant concoctions): this homage [is] for your Brahmins.

These Brahmins who know the techniques and formulas of death (both to bring and to repulse it) must be those of the Atharvaveda itself, because it is in this Veda that such techniques and formulas are recorded and transmitted. But aside from this passage, both in the hymns of the Ṛgveda and the Atharvaveda, *yātú-* is hated and feared as harmful, and its practitioner (*yātudhána-*) must be killed. Though the line between human and demonic is blurry in Vedic, *yātú-* is often associated with curses and aggressive rituals performed by humans, as shown already in the famous episode from ṚV 7.104 (ŚS 8.4/PS 16.9–11) in which the speaker (traditionally, the poet Vasiṣṭha), after cursing his enemies to die, vehemently swears his innocence before the god Agni perhaps in anticipation of accusations of engaging in *yātú-*. It is telling that the Atharvaveda could be associated with such an unambiguously negative notion.

### 3 The Marginal Status of the Medical Profession, a Specialty of the Atharvaveda

Among the canonical Vedas, the Atharvaveda is uniquely associated with physicians and with rites to banish disease, which are well represented in its hymns. But physicians are impure and excluded from mainstream Vedic ritual activity (Soma-rites) in the earliest Yajurveda accounts and elsewhere:

Maitrāyaṇīsaṁhitā 4.6.2 (ed. Schroeder 1886: 79, line 19, to p. 80, line 7):  
*yajñásya vái ṣṣṭásya śiro 'chidyata. tásmāi devāḥ prāyaścittim aichann. átha vá etáu tárhi devānām bhiṣájā ástām aśvínā ásomapau. tá úpādhāvan. yáthā bhiṣájam upadhāvanty evám idám yajñásya śíraḥ práti dhattam íti. tá abrūtām. bhāgō nā astv íti. vṛṇáthām. íty ábruvaṁs. tá abrūtān. grāham nau gṛhṇantu. somapīthām áśnavāvahā íti. tád vá aśvínau práty adhat-tān. tásmād áśvínībhir abhí ṣṭvanty. aśvínau hí pratyádhattām. táu vái bahiṣpavamānénaivá*

*pāvayitvá tábhyāñ pūtābhyāñ yajñīyābhyāñ bhūtābhyāñ grāham agrhṇāñs. tasmād bahiṣpavamāne stutā āśvināu grhyete.*

The head of the rite in progress was cut off. The gods sought a remedy for that. At that time those two physicians of the gods, the Aśvins, were not Soma-drinkers. They (the gods) resorted (to the Aśvins), just as one resorts to a physician, saying, ‘Put back the head of the rite here!’ The two (Aśvins) said, ‘Let us have a share [of the rite].’ – ‘Choose!’ replied the gods. The two (Aśvins) said, ‘Let them draw a cup for us two. We would like to obtain Soma-drinking.’ The Aśvins put back the [head]. That’s why one sings with the Āśvinī-meters. For the Aśvins put back [the head]. Only after having purified them with the Bahiṣpavamāna does one draw the cup for the two (Aśvins) who have been [thus] purified, having become worthy of the rite. That’s why the two [cups] for the Aśvins should be drawn once the Bahiṣpavamāna has been sung.

Taittirīyasamhitā 6.4.9.1–3 (ed. Weber 1872: 205–206):

*yajñāsya śiro ’chidyata; té devā āśvināv abruvan: bhiṣājau vai stha idāñ yajñāsya śiraḥ prāti dhattam iti, tāv abrūtāñ: vārañ vṛṇāvahai grāha evā nāv atrā ’pi grhyatām iti; tábhyām etām āśvinām agrhṇan, tāto vai tāu yajñāsya śiraḥ prāty adhattām; yād āśvinó grhyāte yajñāsya niṣkṛtyai. tāu devā abruvann: āpūtau vā imāu manusyacarāu || 1 || bhiṣājāv iti, tasmād brāhmaṇéna bheṣajām ná kāryām, āpūto hy eṣó ’medhyó yó bhiṣák; tāu bahiṣpavamānéna pāvayitvá tábhyām etām āśvinām agrhṇan, tasmād bahiṣpavamāne stutā āśvinó grhyate. tasmād evāñ vidúṣā bahiṣpavamānā upasādyaḥ, pavitrañ vai bahiṣpavamānā atmānam evā pāvayate. tāyos tredhā bhāiṣajyam ví ny ādadhu; agnāu tṛtīyam apsú tṛtīyam brāhmaṇé tṛtīyam; tasmād udapātrām || 2 || upanidhāya brāhmaṇām dakṣiṇató niṣādya bheṣajām kuryād; yāvād evā bheṣajām téna karoti, samārdhukam asya kṛtām bhavati.*

The head of the sacrifice was cut; the gods said to the Aśvins, ‘Ye are physicians; do ye replace the head of the sacrifice’; they replied, ‘Let us choose a boon; let there be drawn a cup for us also herein.’ For them they drew this cup for the Aśvins; then indeed did they replace the head of the sacrifice; in that (the cup) for the Aśvins is drawn, (it is) to restore the sacrifice. The gods said of these two, ‘Impure are they, wandering among men [1] and physicians.’ Therefore a Brahman should not practice medicine, for the physician is impure, unfit for the sacrifice. Having purified them by the Bahiṣpavamāna (Stotra) they drew for them this cup for the Aśvins; therefore (the cup) for the Aśvins is drawn when the Bahiṣpavamāna has been sung. Therefore by one who knows thus the Bahiṣpavamāna should be performed; verily he purifies himself. Their skill as physicians they deposited in three places, in Agni a third, in the waters a third, in the Brahman a third. Therefore one should put beside him a pot of water [2] and sit on the right hand of a Brahman when practicing medicine: all medicine he performs thereby, his remedy becomes effective. (translation by Keith 1914: 535).

Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa 3.124 (ed. Raghu Vira & Lokesh Chandra 1954: 406):

*sa \*hovācāśvinau<sup>29</sup> vai tau darvihomiṇau bhiṣajyantāv idāñ carato ’napisomau |*

He said, ‘The two Aśvins go about here making herbal offerings and practicing medicine: they have no place by the Soma’.

29 Ed. *sa sahocāśvinau*; emendation by Gerhard Ehlers.

Śatapathabrāhmaṇa (Mādhyam̐dina) 4.1.5.13–15 (ed. Weber 1855: 351–352):

*tāu hocatuḥ | sūkanye kēnāvām āsarvau svaḥ kēnāsamyddhāv iti tāu hārṣir evā prāty uvāca kurukṣetre 'mī devā yajñām tanvate té vām yajñād antár yanti tēnāsarvau sthas tēnāsamṛddhāv iti tāu ha tāta evāśvīnau prēyatus tāv ā jagmatur devān yajñām tanvānānt stutē bahiṣpavamānē || 13 || tāu hocatuḥ | ūpa nau hvayadhvam iti té ha devā ūcur nā vām ūpa hvayīyāmahe bahū manuṣyēṣu sāmṣṣtam acāriṣtam bhiṣajyāntāv iti || 14 || tāu hocatuḥ | viśīrṣṇā vāi yajñēna yajadhva iti kathām viśīrṣṇēty ūpa nū nau hvayadhvam ātha vo vakṣyāva iti tāthēti tā ūpāhvayanta tābhyām etām āśvinām grāham agrhṇāms tāv adhvaryū yajñāsyābhavatām tāv etād yajñāsyā śīraḥ prāty adhattām tād adās tād divākīrtyānām brāhmaṇe vy ā khyāyate yāthā tād yajñāsyā śīraḥ pratidadhātus tāsmād eṣā stutē bahiṣpavamānē grāho grhyate stutē hī bahiṣpavamānā āgachatām || 15 ||*

They [the Āsvins, C.S.] said, 'Sukanyā, in what respect are we incomplete, in what respect imperfect?' The Ṛṣi himself answered them, – 'In Kurukshetra yonder the gods perform a sacrifice and exclude you two from it: in that respect ye are incomplete, in that respect imperfect!' And the Āsvins departed forthwith, and came to the gods, as they were performing a sacrifice, after the chanting of the Bahiṣpavamāna. 14. They said, 'Invite us thereto!' The gods said, 'We will not invite you: ye have wandered and mixed much among men, performing cures.' 15. They said, 'But surely ye worship with a headless sacrifice!' – 'How with a headless (sacrifice)?' – 'Nay, invite us, and we will tell you!' – 'So be it!' so they invited them. They drew this Āśvina cup for them; and those two became the Adhvaryu priests of the sacrifice, and restored the head of the sacrifice. Then, in the chapter of the divākīrtyās, it is explained how they did restore the head of the sacrifice. Hence this libation is drawn after the chanting of the Bahiṣpavamāna, for it was after the chanting of the Bahiṣpavamāna that they arrived. (translation by Eggeling 1885: 275–276).

Further on, in the Dharma texts, medicine is still a “despised” profession (see Bloomfield 1899: 26 and Macdonell & Keith 1912b: 104–105). As for the oldest period, Ṛgveda 9.112.3a *kārūr ahām tatō bhiṣāk* “I am a bard, Dad is a doctor” might imply that the same family could produce Vedic ritual professionals as well as physicians, but this depends on the exact sense of *kārūr*<sup>30</sup> and in any case does not necessarily mean that the practitioners of these professions had equal social status in the earliest Ṛgvedic times.

## 4 The Ritual Inferiority of Other Groups Associated with the Atharvaveda

Vedic physicians and their divine counterparts, the Āsvins, are not the only ones to be excluded from Śrauta ritual and then allowed only after purification/instruc-

<sup>30</sup> See Köhler (2018: 114) on the sense of this word.

tion. A similar mythical storyline of inferiority and gained acceptance is common to the Aṅgirasas and the Vrātyas, both groups being strongly associated with the Atharvaveda in particular. Here, first of all, is the story of the Aṅgirasas:

Kāthasamhitā 9.16 (ed. Schroeder 1900: 119, lines 10–18):<sup>31</sup>

*āṅgirasas ca vā ādityās ca svargé lokè 'spardhanta tá ādityá etān páñcahotāram apaśyañs táñ mánasānūddrútyājuhavus táta ādityās svargám lokám áyann ápáñgirasó 'bhrañśanta té 'ñgirasa ādityān abruvan kvà stha kathām vo havyañ vaksyāma íti cchāndassv íty abruvan gāyatrīyāñ vásavas triṣṭúbhi rudrá jāgatyām ādityá íty átra vái devébhyas sadbhyó havyañ uhyate yá evāñ devāñ upadésānād védopadésānavān bhavati yās svargākāmas syāt sá etāñ páñcahotāram mánasānūddrútya juhuyāt páñca vā ṛtáva ṛtāvās sañvatsarás sañvatsarás svargó loká ṛtúsv evá sañvatsaré pratiṣṭhāya svargám lokám eti ||*

The Aṅgirasas and the Ādityas vied for the heavenly world. The Ādityas saw that ‘Five-Priest’ formula. Having mentally recited it, they made an oblation. Because of that the Ādityas arrived at the heavenly world. The Aṅgirasas fell off. The Aṅgirasas said to the Ādityas, ‘Where are you? How will we carry the oblation to you?’ ‘In the meters,’ they replied, ‘the Vasus in Gāyatrī, the Rudras in Triṣṭubh, the Ādityas in Jagatī.’ For in this world, the oblation is carried to the divine beings. Who thus knows the gods by instruction becomes an instructed person. He who would desire heaven should make an oblation after having mentally recited that ‘Five-Priest’ formula. For five are the seasons, the seasons are the year, the year is the heavenly world. Only having taken foundation in the seasons, in the year, does one go to the heavenly world.

Notice the emphasis on proper instruction in ritual matters, and the implication that the Aṅgirasas were deficient in this.<sup>32</sup> A similar competition wherein the Ādityas beat their rivals on account of their superior ritual knowledge is alluded to in Taittirīyasamhitā 3.5.1.2–3 (ed. Weber 1871: 304–305):

*ādityās cāṅgirasas cāgnīñ ādadhata té darśapūrnamāsau prāipsan tēṣām āṅgirasāñ nīruptañ havir āsīd áthādityá etáu hómāv apaśyan táv ajuhavus táto vái té darśapūrnamāsáu ||2|| pūrva ālabhanta*

The Ādityas and the Aṅgirasas piled up the fires, they desired to obtain the new and the full moon (offerings); the Aṅgirasas offered the oblation, then the Ādityas saw these two offerings, and offered them; then they first grasped the new and the full moon (offerings). (translation by Keith 1914: 278)

Here the Aṅgirasas have some ritual technique, but it appears not to be sufficiently sophisticated. The Vrātyas’ ritual insufficiency is similar: they have the desire but

<sup>31</sup> This and similar passages are summarized by Shende (1950: 118) in his overview of the Aṅgirasas.

<sup>32</sup> This has already been noticed by Lévi (1898: 67–68): “Les Ādityas pour leur sacrifice n’ont pas demandé de conseils et n’en ont pas reçu. Les Angiras, moins habiles, sont fréquemment arrêtés par leur ignorance.”



not the means. Umberto Selva has recently discussed the foundational myth of the Vrātyas; I cite his summary:

The gods went to heaven, but left behind (*hi-*) the *daiva/divya* Vrātyas. This mythical Vrātya group with Budha or Dyutāna Māruta as leader (*sthapati* or *grhapati*) aimed at following the gods on their path. Eventually the Maruts (PB) or Prajāpati (JB), depending on the version of the myth, provide them with the necessary knowledge or the proper rituals that allow them to reach the gods in the *svarga loka* via the *devayāna path*. These are the Vrātyastomas, special rituals that need to be performed when forming a Vrātya alliance before undertaking a Vrātya expedition, as well as at the end of the expedition, in order to be re-integrated into society. (Selva 2019: 392–393).<sup>33</sup>

As Selva points out, the ambiguous societal and religious position of the Vrātyas is such that their identity is still debated:<sup>34</sup> some consider them to represent a heretical tradition in the eyes of the Vedic mainstream, while Selva follows others in seeing a pan-Vedic inherited tradition of warrior brotherhoods made up of youths and marginalized persons for which special rituals were necessary if they wished to be reintegrated as part of regular Vedic society and ritual practice. Whatever the case may be, they are fringe characters. Selva (2019: 393–394) further remarks that the Vrātya story is paralleled by that of Rudra/Paśupati's exclusion from the gods' sacrifice (see also Candotti & Pontillo 2015); again, the cult of Rudra is particularly well represented in the Atharvaveda as compared to the other Vedas.

So we see that one frame story is common to the twin Aśvin physicians, the Aṅgirasas, and the Vrātyas: all are left out of the gods' ritual endeavors, but finally gain access through instruction. It might be possible, in the case of the Aṅgirasas, to object that they simply represent the human priest, and not the Atharvavedic priest in particular, and that the story only reflects man's original attempts at ritual by emulation of the gods. However, other versions of the story equate the Aṅgirasas with the Asuras,<sup>35</sup> thereby making them downright enemies of the gods, and not human but demonic. A short hymn alluding to this story is found as Ṛgvedakhila 5.20/ŚS 20.135.6–10.<sup>36</sup> Successively more detailed prose stories surrounding the use

<sup>33</sup> Selva presents the various versions from Pañcaviṃśabrāhmaṇa 17.1.1–7 and 24.18.2, as well as Jaiminiyabrāhmaṇa 2.221, with text and translation. See also Caland's translations: Caland (1931: 454–456 and 620–622) for the PB passages and Caland (1919: 183–184) for the JB.

<sup>34</sup> Selva (2019: 392, and 334, n. 33, etc.); see also af Edholm (2017: 2).

<sup>35</sup> The storyline is discussed by Heesterman (1993: 37–41), who mentions the character identity shift briefly (footnote 142), but does not present the passages.

<sup>36</sup> The hymn begins everywhere *ādityā ha jaritar āṅgirobhyo dākṣiṇām anāyan* “The Ādityas, O singer, brought the *dakṣiṇā*-fee for the Aṅgirasas”, the rest differs slightly from place to place but concerns their accepting or refusing various *dakṣiṇās* (ŚS ed. Pandit 1898b: 831–832; Ṛgvedakhila ed. Scheftelowitz 1906: 164). One difference interesting for our purposes is that the ŚS reads (10ab) *dēva dadatv āsuram tād vo astu śūcetanam* “Let the gods give an Asuric thing, let it be agreeable to



of this hymn, called Devanītha, are found from one Brāhmaṇa to the next:<sup>37</sup> the core idea is that the Ādityas outwit the Aṅgīrases in order to get to heaven before them, by making them officiate for the Ādityas' heaven-winning Soma sacrifice and by making them accept the *dakṣiṇā* remuneration for it. At one part of the story in the latest versions, the Ādityas offer Speech as a *dakṣiṇā* and the Aṅgīrases refuse her. She becomes an angry lioness intent on harming both parties, and here the Ādityas and the Aṅgīrases are renamed as the Devas and the Asuras:

Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa 2.115 (text as in Caland 1919: 158)

*athaiṣa sadyahkṛiṭh te vṛtā nāpākṛāmaṁs ta etyāyājayaṁs tebhya etām vācam vaḍavām śvetām bhūtām aśvābhīdhānyabhīhitām ānayann imām pratigṛhītetī te 'bruvañ chreyasyam asman no imām uḍyaṁsyāma iti sā krudhā na mā pratyagṛhṇann iti simḥy ubhayatomukhī bhūtvordhvodakṛāmat sobhayān devāsurān antarātiṣṭhad yañ devānām upāpnod yam asurāṇām tam ādaḍānā*

As to that Same-Day Soma ritual: the (Aṅgīrases) chosen (as officiants by the Ādityas) did not step down. Having come, they officiated. (The Ādityas) brought them Speech in the form of a white mare bound with a halter. “Accept her”, they said. (They replied,) “This one is too great for us. We won’t be able to raise her.” She became angry, (thinking,) “They didn’t accept me.” Having become a two-mouthed lioness she rose straight up. She stood between the two groups, the Devas and the Asuras, seizing whichever of the Devas and the Asuras she could reach.

This translation follows Caland’s (1919: 160; German), who identifies the unnamed subjects in the beginning as Aṅgīrases by citing also Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa 3.187–188. This last passage explains at length how the Aṅgīrases planned a Next-Day Soma sacrifice and asked the Ādityas to officiate. The Ādityas, not wishing to put themselves in the subordinate position of officiants to the Aṅgīrases, thought up the Same-Day version and asked the Aṅgīrases to officiate, thus making them subordinate. It starts: *ādityās ca vā aṅgīrasas ca svarge loke ’spardhanta ta aikṣanta yatare no yatarān yājayiṣyanti te hāsyanta iti . . .* “The Ādityas and the Aṅgīrases vied for

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you (O Aṅgīrases)”; the Khila version (4b) is probably original with (*a*) *vāram* “boon” in the place of *āsuram*, but the confusion is telling. Gopathabrāhmaṇa 2.6.14 repeats the ŚS version (ed. Gastra 1919: 268; one manuscript has the variant *asuram*). In Śāṅkhāyanaśrautasūtra 12.19 (see Caland 1953: 337–338), the hymn is recited after the so-called “Prattle of Etaśa” during the twelve-day Soma sacrifice; the preceding Khila likewise relates the “Prattle of Etaśa”.

<sup>37</sup> This story was presented with citations from several passages from the Brāhmaṇas by Lévi (1898: 65–66). The story is found in a short form in Kauṣītakibrāhmaṇa 30.6 (Keith 1920: 526–527) and Pañcaviṁśabrāhmaṇa 16.12 (Caland 1931: 446–447); Aitareyabrāhmaṇa 6.34 (translated by Keith 1920: 285–287) is much longer with the Khila verses embedded; finally, Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa 2.115–7 + 3.187–8 (see Caland 1919: 158–161) and Śatapathabrāhmaṇa (Mādhyandina) 3.5.1.13–25 (translated by Eggeling 1885: 113–116) momentarily identify the actors at one point as the Devas and Asuras, as shown here.

the heavenly world. They reflected: “Whichever of us will officiate for the others will be left behind” (text as in Caland 1919: 158; shorter versions of the story are also found in Jaiminiyabrāhmaṇa 2.120, 2.362, 2.365). In the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa, the Ādityas and the Aṅgirasas are explicitly named only to be re-identified as Devas and Asuras in the course of one continuous story:

Śatapathabrāhmaṇa (Mādhyamdina) 3.5.1.13 (ed. Weber 1855: 268)  
*dvayyò ha vá idám ágre prajā āsuḥ | ādityás caivāṅgirasas ca . . .*  
 . . . 3.5.1.21 (p. 269) *sòbháyān ántareṇa devāsuránt sámýattānt simhí bhūtvádádānā cacāra*

In the beginning, the creatures here were of two types: the Ādityas and the Aṅgirasas . . . She (Speech), having become a lioness, roamed between the two warring parties, the Devas and the Asuras, seizing [whichever of them she could].

Though this is not original and reflects confusion with the much more common story of the war between Devas and Asuras, it speaks to the ambiguous status the Aṅgirasas hold in the story. Incidentally, the Vaidika Brahmins of Andhra Pradesh invoke the rivalry between Devas and Asuras as a parallel for their own inter-priest enmities, requiring secret recourse to the Atharvaveda’s rival-smiting powers (Knipe 2004: 433). These enmities often involve bitterness surrounding invitations and a refusal to officiate in others’ rites; for the officiant is seen as subordinate to the Yajamāna, and the officiant’s obligatory receipt of a *dakṣiṇā*-fee is particularly problematic in this light (see section 5 on the stigma surrounding a paid priest). An invitation to officiate can thus sometimes be perceived as an insult. This is clearly an old problem, as the story about the Aṅgirasas officiating for the Ādityas shows.

## 5 The Persistent Marginality of the Atharvaveda in the Post-Vedic Period

From medieval times, though these represent the heyday for Atharvavedic *purohitas* in the service of kings (see Sanderson 2007: 204–205), we still have strong indications of the marginal position of the tradition with respect to the other three Vedas. First of all, working for a king would not have led to particular esteem within the larger orthodox community of Smārta Brahmins in the medieval period: the king’s priest increasingly had to officiate in temples, and Brahmins who worked as temple priests for more than three years lost their Brahmin status and were vilified as *devalakas*, as *upabrāhmaṇas* “sub-Brahmins”, and as *brāhmaṇacaṇḍālas* “Brahmin untouchables” (Sanderson 2009: 276–278). Furthermore, the Atharvaveda was considered irrelevant for Śrauta ritual in the Brahmin community: this is underscored by the fact that in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when the Atharvaveda should have been well-es-

tablished as the “fourth Veda”, Bhaṭṭa Jayanta feels the need to devote a chapter of his Nyāyamañjarī to the defense of the Atharvaveda’s authority next to that of the other three Vedas (see Kataoka 2007: 317). Jayanta admits that it is not an authority for Śrauta matters, but that it is authoritative for the sort of rites peculiar to it, namely *śānti*, *puṣṭi*, and *abhicāra*, which represent ritual categories important to royal ritual. Finally, the law codes condemn as a “minor sin” many practices particularly associated with the Atharvaveda,<sup>38</sup> but make an exception for kings. Despite the special status of the *purohita* versed in Atharvan ritual, Atharvavedins as a group are still a minority recipient of state donations in the Indian epigraphical record.<sup>39</sup> As Alexis Sanderson has noted, Śaiva priests, who competed with and eventually superseded the Atharvavedins in the role of royal officiants, recognized that the Atharvaveda was not on the same level as the other three Vedas, and even considered it to constitute, like their own, a restricted teaching beyond mainstream Smārta tradition:

Indeed the Śaivas themselves have presented the Atharvaveda in just these terms. After defining the Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, and Sāmaveda together with the Smṛtis as the common revelation the Jayadrathayāmala’s first Ṣaṭka goes on to list those scriptures that are the basis of those religious systems that transcend this level, and includes the Atharvaveda among them. (Sanderson 2007: 206, followed by citation and translation of texts)

Finally, the modern situation mirrors the ancient one: Knipe’s fieldwork on rivalry among the Vaidika Brahmins of Andhra Pradesh gives a telling picture of the place of the Atharvaveda (Knipe 2004). These *āhitāgni* Brahmins, though belonging to the Taittirīya school of the Yajurveda, secretly memorize hymns and even whole books of the Atharvaveda in order to get the better of their enemies. They invariably insist that they are simply defending themselves from the attacks by rival co-priests; the performer of hostile ritual acts (*abhicāra*), presents himself as a victim forced into responding in this way. Calumny and insults go hand in hand with this secret ritual aggression, and one of the most common accusations is precisely that of practicing “mean” (*kṣudra*) arts, that is, *abhicāra*.<sup>40</sup> Thus we see how the Atharvaveda is seen as low and dangerous but also, with a certain degree of hypocrisy, useful. Bodewitz’ discussion of the contradiction between the highest sin of Brahmin-murder and the

<sup>38</sup> *Abhicāra*- and *mūla-karmaṇ*- are *upapātakas* in Manusmṛti 11.63; see Kane (1962: 1079–1080), Goudriaan (1978: 365), and Sanderson (2004: 233).

<sup>39</sup> Schmiedchen (2007: 356–357); inscriptions are found from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.

<sup>40</sup> Knipe (2004: 442). Acts qualified as *kṣudra*- have long referred to *abhicāra*-; see Goudriaan (1978: 365). Another accusation, unsurprisingly, is that of having served as a despised temple priest, referred to scornfully with the English word “businessman” by some of Knipe’s interviewees, because such priests are usually paid.

existence of rites whose goal is the death of the enemy, who is often in practice a rival Brahmin, is illuminating in this context (Bodewitz 2007=2019: 356–361).

In the 1960s, the Atharvavedin Brahmins of the Paippalāda school in Odisha were excluded from intermarriage and eating together with other Brahmin communities (Bhattacharyya 1968: 39). We can sum up with the remarks made by Witzel (2016: 73) in his recent overview of the current state of the Vedic schools in India:

As has been mentioned earlier, the tradition of the Atharvaveda has always been the weakest among the four Vedas, no doubt due to its minor role in Śrauta rituals. On the other hand, kings needed Atharvavedins for their specific rituals (see AV *Pariśiṣṭa* 2), so that their survival was to some extent ensured. For example, the forty-odd small kingdoms of Orissa had a system of four Rājagurus, one of them being an Atharvavedin – who was in charge of police and spying.

## 6 Conclusion

It is the undeniable concentration of marginal elements in the Atharvavedic tradition that allows Parpola (2015) to go so far as to make a case for its belonging to a religion originally separate from that represented by the core of the Ṛgveda and Soma-centric Śrauta ritual.<sup>41</sup> I would rather say that the Atharvaveda tradition consolidated a host of marginal practices, but that these still belong, albeit as minor ritual modes of varying acceptability, to Vedic priestly tradition as a whole, for which Śrauta ritual was the major mode. We can compare the characterization chanced upon in a recent book review by Lubin (2020: 794): “The rites and mantras ‘of Atharvan and Aṅgiras’ constituted the ‘other’ ancient priestly tradition running parallel to the ‘high cult’ orthodoxy of the ‘three Vedas’ (Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda).” This paper has, I hope, sufficiently shown that representatives of the original three Vedas did express anxiety about this “other” ritual tradition, the Atharvaveda: at first they ignored it, but then they allowed it as a genre at the border between the three Vedas and various types of popular lore, and tentatively accepted it as a fourth Veda only at the end of the Vedic period. The Atharvaveda’s associations with groups such as roaming physicians and Vrātya warrior bands, considered impure in the texts of the original three Vedas, play a role in its lack of respectability for these three. The way non-Atharvavedic Brāhmaṇa texts confuse the Aṅgirasas with the Asuras as unfit ritualists and enemies of the gods is also

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<sup>41</sup> See also the review of Parpola (2015) by Jamison (2020), for whom “the differences are not different enough” to posit a historically separate religion and culture.

important given the Aṅgirasas' early role as co-representatives of this tradition with the Atharvans. The Atharvaveda, as is clear from this its most common name today, tried to purge itself of its associations with Aṅgiras who had come to represent "terrible" hostile ritual; there was even an attempt at the end of the Vedic period to claim the irreproachable name "Brahmaveda", which needless to say never caught on. Even after the Vedic period, Atharvavedic Brahmins struggled for full acceptance within wider Smārta culture, their Veda being considered useless for Śrauta ritual, and they were sometimes subject to eating- and marriage- restrictions with Brahmins of the other Vedas. Here it is important to note that when I invoke the marginality of the Atharvaveda, I speak of the margins of Brahminical orthodoxy: we have seen that Atharvavedins had some degree of success in obtaining positions as royal *purohitas* in the first millennium CE, and as such they would not have been marginal figures from the point of view of the king and his retinue or from the point of view of the non-Brahmin subjects of this king. However, even then, the *purohita* continued to be scorned by the mainstream Smārta Brahmin orthodoxy, who considered the former a seller of his knowledge just like a paid temple priest. In the Vedic period, the Atharvaveda is a marginal tradition from the point of view of the representatives of the original three Vedas, and in medieval and modern times, marginal from the point of view of Smārta priestly society. It is important to recognize the marginality of the Atharvaveda, defined in this way with respect to the other Vedas, as an important component of its historical context; this in turn is important for accurate interpretation of Atharvavedic hymns, as they are distinct in many ways from Ṛgvedic hymns.

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