

**An ‘Ordeal-Related Phenomenon’ in the Śaunakīya recension of the
Atharvavedasamhitā (AVŚ 2.12)?
A Closer Look Informed by Related Vedic and Dharmaśāstra Sources**

Abstract

This article re-examines the long-standing debate over whether a hymn from the Śaunakīya recension of the *Atharvavedasamhitā*, i.e., AVŚ 2.12, contains a reference to a fire ordeal. While some early scholars interpreted the hymn through the lens of later Dharmaśāstra literature, others have argued that such readings are anachronistic. Building on the distinction between the classical Hindu ordeal (*divya*) and earlier “ordeal-related phenomena,” this study reassesses AVŚ 2.12 through close philological analysis and Vedic parallels and comparanda. By integrating the Paippalāda parallel, Atharvavedic internal evidence, the Kauśikasūtra ritual framing, and other later Vedic and Dharmaśāstra sources, the article argues that neither a fire ordeal nor an “ordeal-related phenomenon” can be identified in the hymn. Instead, AVŚ 2.12 is best understood within the Atharvavedic domain of counter-sorcery, where fire functions as a revelatory and destructive agent against magical opponents.

1. Introduction: Revisiting the Discussion on AVŚ 2.12

Throughout the history of religions, from antiquity to the modern era and across both Western and Eastern cultures, trial by ordeal—understood as a divinatory practice with judicial implications—has emerged as one of the most fascinating religious, social, and legal phenomena, consistently attracting scholarly interest.⁸⁰ The Hindu ordeal is no exception: a substantial body of research has examined it from multiple perspectives, including religious and cultural studies and philological and textual analysis. These studies focus primarily on Sanskrit sources that describe its procedures,⁸¹ above all

⁸⁰Author’s note: All translations are by the author unless explicitly stated. Pitch accents will only be noted if they are present in the relevant sources.

For a general overview of the ordeal from the standpoint of religious studies, see Sabbatucci (1987) with bibliography.

⁸¹ Among the Indological studies, notable contributions on Hindu ordeals include Kane (1962-1975, III, pp. 361-378), Hazra (1968), Derrett (1978), Lariviere (1976; 1981, pp. 1-51; 1984; 1991), Pendse (1985, pp. 1-185, 197-240),

the Dharmasāstra tradition,⁸² as well as materials from other genres, particularly the Purāṇa literature.⁸³ Many institutions that were fully developed during the classical period and systematised in the Dharmasāstra literature were preceded by related phenomena that anticipated certain aspects of them in the Vedic era; trial by ordeal is one such example. In my doctoral thesis,⁸⁴ I proposed the category of “ordeal-related phenomena” to describe this earlier phase of the Hindu ordeal.

It was precisely while investigating such phenomena that I encountered several divergent scholarly views concerning the possibility that AVŚ 2.12 might contain a reference to an ordeal, specifically a fire ordeal. Within the activities carried out for the PRIN 2022 ATHARVAVEDA project,⁸⁵ in which I am a member of the Cagliari team, I decided to examine this hymn using the project’s methodology: a re-examination of the Atharvavedic hymns of the Śaunakīya recension through careful consideration of Vedic textual parallels and comparanda. Specifically, by applying this approach, the present paper argues that some scholars have misread AVŚ 2.12 through an anachronistic juridical lens and that neither an actual fire ordeal nor an “ordeal-related phenomenon” can be identified in the hymn.

Before outlining the structure of the paper, I quote the hymn according to the Śaunakīya recension, together with a fresh translation, which will be the basis for the subsequent discussion (AVŚ 2.12):

dyāvāpṛthivī urv àntárikṣam kṣétrasya pátny urugāyó ’dbhutaḥ |
utántárikṣam urú vātagopam tá ihá tapyantāṃ máyi tapyámāne || 1 ||
idám devāḥ śṛṇuta yé yajñīyā sthá bharádvājo máhyam uktháni śamsati |
pāse sá baddhó durité ní yujyatām yó asmākaṃ mána idám hinásti || 2 ||
idám indra śṛṇuhi somapa yát tvā hṛdā sócatā jóhavīmi |
vṛścāmi tám kúliseneva vṛkṣám yó asmākaṃ mána idám hinásti || 3 ||
aśtībhis tisṛbhiḥ sāmagébhir ādityébhir vásubhir ángirobhiḥ |
iṣṭāpūrtám avatu naḥ piṭṛñám ámúṃ dade hárasā dáivyena || 4 ||

Yelle (2002), Brick (2010), Rocher (2012: 389-393), Wiese (2016), and Olivelle (2018b, pp. 290, 295-296). I have also addressed specific philological issues in Sanskrit texts on ordeals in two papers of my own: Giudice (2022; 2025).

⁸² See MDh 8.114-116, YSm 2.98-117, NSm 20, ViSm 9-14, BSm 8, KSm 411-461, and PiSm 1.

⁸³ See VDhP 3.328 and KuKh 44.

⁸⁴ My doctoral thesis (Giudice 2026) focuses on what the Dharmasāstra tradition considers as the most authoritative root text on ordeals, namely the *Pitāmahasmṛti*. I produced a new critical reconstruction of the text, which survives solely through indirect transmission and must therefore be reconstructed from quotations preserved in later sources. Owing to the central theme of the *Pitāmahasmṛti*, I have had the opportunity to reflect more broadly on the history of the Hindu ordeal as a legal institution, and even on its “prehistory,” i.e., the phase preceding its establishment in the Dharmasāstra.

⁸⁵ For further details on the PRIN 2022 project “Entangled chronotopes: language, power, bodyscapes and religion in the first ten books of the Śaunaka Atharvaveda-Saṃhitā [SS]” (2023-2026), whose Principal Investigator is Tiziana Pontillo (University of Cagliari), I refer to the official website: <<https://prin.unica.it/atharvaveda/>> (accessed 25/11/2025).

dyāvāprthivī ānu mā dīdhīhām vīsve devāso ānu mā rabhadhvam |
āṅgirasah pītarah sómyāсах pāpām ā rchatv apakā́māsya kartā || 5 ||
ātīva yó maruto mányate no bráhma vā yó nīndīṣat kriyāmāṅgam |
tápūṃṣi tásmāi vṛjinā́ni santu brahmadviṣam dyáur abhisám̐tapāti || 6 ||
saptá prāṅṅn̄aṣṭáu majjñás⁸⁶ tām̄s te vṛścāmi bráhmanā |
áyā yamāsya sádanam agnídūto áram̐kṛtah || 7 ||
ā dadhāmi te padām sámiddhe jātávedasi |
agnīh̄ sárīram̄ veveṣṭv̄ ásum̄ vāḡ ápi gachatu || 8 ||

(1) Heaven and Earth, the vast Intermediate Space (i.e. Atmosphere), the Mistress of the Soil, the marvellous Wide-Striding One (i.e. Viṣṇu), and the vast Intermediate Space, which has the Wind as its guardian: may these here be inflamed while I am inflamed [with anger]. (2) Listen to this, o [you] Gods worthy of worship. Bharadvāja recites *ukthas* for me: may he who harms our mind be fastened to misfortune, being bound by a fetter. (3) Listen to this, O Indra, Soma-drinker, when I sacrifice to you with an ardent heart. I cleave the one who harms this mind of ours, just like a tree with an axe. (4) With thrice eighty Sāmaveda cantors, the Ādityas, the Vasus, the Āṅgiras – may the merit of the sacrificial rites⁸⁷ of the fathers protect us – I take that one with divine grasp. (5) O Heaven and Earth, may you appear by my side. O all gods, may you stand by my side. O Āṅgiras, Fathers, Soma-drinkers, may the doer of abhorrence fall into misfortune. (6) O Maruts, whoever despises us or has opposed our spell while being cast, may the deceits be heat for him; may Heaven thoroughly heat the one who hates the *bráhman*. (7) Seven breaths, eight marrows: I cleave them with a spell for you. May [you], whose messenger is Agni [and] who is adorned, advance to Yama’s seat. (8) I place your foot on the All-knower (i.e. Agni) while he is lighted. May the fire consume [your] body, may [your] word also merge into the vital air.

Building on the premises outlined above, I intend to revisit the scholarly discussion of AVŚ 2.12—one that has largely remained grounded in mid-twentieth-century interpretations—by engaging with more recent research and interpretative perspectives on Hindu ordeals and their historical development in ancient India.

To the longstanding debate on AVŚ 2.12, which will be carefully examined (see § 2), the present paper makes specific contributions. First, it redefines the question by clearly distinguishing between

⁸⁶ This variant is attested in Whitney and Roth’s edition of the AVŚ, whereas the edition of Śaṅkara Paṇḍuraṅga Paṇḍit prints *mānyas* following Sāyaṇa’s commentary, which glosses it as *dhamanyas*, ‘a kind of vessels situated in the throat.’ See Whitney and Lanman (1902, I, p. 55). A fuller discussion is provided by Kim (2021, p. 45 n. 215).

⁸⁷ The interpretation of the compound *iṣṭāpūrta-* as a *tatpuruṣa* rather than as a *dvandva* (as traditionally understood) follows Pontillo (2019), who demonstrate that the reading as a *tatpuruṣa* is unambiguously attested in some Vedic sources and may reflect the compound’s original meaning. For the interpretation as a *dvandva*, cf. Windisch (1888), Wackernagel (1957, p. 160), and Sakamoto-Goto (2000).

(a) the later Hindu institution of ordeal (*divya*) as outlined in Dharmaśāstra jurisprudence and (b) earlier “ordeal-related phenomena” documented in later Vedic sources. This clarifies what would—and would not—serve as evidence for an ordeal-related phenomenon in the Śaunakīya hymn under analysis (see §§ 3-4). Second, in addition to incorporating the Paippalāda parallel (AVP 2.5.7-8) into the debate as a comparative text for interpreting AVŚ 2.12.7-8, it strengthens the contextual argument by situating AVŚ 2.12 within its Atharvavedic ritual context. Alongside internal comparanda such as AVŚ 1.7-8 (where Agni is invoked as revealer and destroyer of concealed sorcerers), the *Kauśikasūtra* framing (KauśS 47.12-57) provides converging evidence that the hymn primarily functions within the domain of counter-sorcery, rather than any dispute-resolving or proto-judicial context (see § 5).

2. A Survey of Scholarship on AVŚ 2.12

This section offers a survey of divergent scholarly interpretations of a possible connection between AVŚ 2.12—especially 2.12.7-8—and the fire ordeal. Some scholars have argued that the hymn was used during the performance of a fire ordeal, whereas others have rejected this interpretation; moreover, the two positions appear to fall into a broadly chronological sequence.

The first to propose such a connection was Schlagintweit (1866, pp. 7-8, 13-19), who claimed that the *Atharvavedasamhitā* contains the earliest textual reference to the fire ordeal. His hypothesis was subsequently accepted by Weber (1873, pp. 164-171), Ludwig (1878, p. 445), Zimmer (1879, pp. 183-184), and Kaegi (1887, p. 51). According to this line of interpretation, the hymn accompanies the performance of the fire ordeal: the first part (AVŚ 2.12.1-6) describes a man undergoing the test—possibly holding an axe (AVŚ 2.12.3: *kūliseneva*)—whereas the final two verses (AVŚ 2.12.7-8) are taken as an invocation to Agni, the deity presiding over the ordeal by fire. AVŚ 2.12.8, in particular, has been interpreted as containing the formula by which the deity is called upon to reveal the truth or falsehood of the person undergoing the ordeal. According to this reading, if the utterer’s speech is true, he remains unharmed; if not, the fire will consume him.

However, other scholars found this interpretation problematic from the outset, arguing that it rests on a series of overinterpretations. Grill (1888, pp. 85-88) was the first to contend that the hymn is directed against enemies. Bloomfield (1889, pp. ccxxii–ccxxvi) refined this view by proposing that the target is a man who obstructs ritual action. He rejected Schlagintweit’s interpretation for several reasons. In his view, the supposed ordeal formula in the final two verses was more plausibly adapted from the funeral ritual. Schlagintweit’s translation of the final part of AVŚ 2.12.1—“diese sollen hier gebrannt werden, wenn ich gebrannt werde” (Schlagintweit 1866: 13)—suggests literal burning, whereas it is better understood metaphorically as an inner ‘fire of anger.’ Furthermore, invocations to Heaven and Earth (AVŚ 2.12.1 and 2.12.5) do not serve as assertions of innocence in Vedic discourse, as they might in some Western traditions. Finally, the *Kauśikasūtra* section concerning this hymn (see § 5) does not associate it with a fire ordeal. This line of interpretation was subsequently

adopted by Whitney and Lanman (1905, pp. 53-56) in the translation of the Śaunakīya recension of the *Atharvaveda*, where this hymn is regarded as directed against spell-blockers.

Since the scholars opposing the ordeal interpretation are chronologically later than those supporting it, one might assume that the issue had been settled. Nevertheless, a few decades after Whitney and Lanman's translation of the AVŚ, Kane (1962-1975, III, p. 361) revisited the matter in the chapter on ordeals in the third volume of his monumental *History of Dharmaśāstra*. He wrote: "Atharvaveda [Śaunakīya] II.12 is held by several Western scholars to contain a reference to the fire ordeal. This also is far from certain, though verse 8 may lend some support to that view." Kane, who, to my knowledge, is the last scholar to have addressed the possible reference to a fire ordeal in AVŚ 2.12, seems to leave the matter somewhat unresolved.

Ultimately, the first interpretation does not depend on independent evidence from the *Atharvavedasamhitā* itself but on the retrospective application of later legal categories to such an early Vedic text. In contrast, the second interpretation resituates—correctly, in my view—AVŚ 2.12 within the Atharvavedic corpus and its ritual pragmatics. To clarify the issue definitively, this study reinforces this position by systematically re-evaluating the hymn through Vedic parallels and later comparanda, starting with a contextualised analysis of the fire ordeal as outlined in Dharmaśāstra sources (§ 3).

3. Voices from Afar: The Fire Ordeal in the Dharmaśāstra literature

The procedure that the scholars supporting this line of interpretation understand as already attested in the hymn under examination—what Schlagintweit (1866: 13) called "[d]as älteste Zeugnis"—is the very one that would later be codified in Sanskrit legal literature (i.e., the Dharmaśāstra) as the Hindu ordeal. But how did this ordeal actually function?

In brief, in the classical period—specifically as regulated in Gupta and post-Gupta Dharmaśāstra texts such as the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* (the first text to introduce a standardised label for the institution: *divya*) and *Nāradaśmṛti*⁸⁸—the Hindu ordeal constituted one of the two divine means of proof (*daivikapramāṇa*) within the judicial procedure (*vyavahāra*). Like the judicial procedure as a whole, the ordeal underwent a significant development (which, of course, cannot be discussed here),⁸⁹ becoming increasingly technicalised, with additional procedural elements and even new types of ordeals being introduced over the centuries.⁹⁰ Its basic logic, however, remained stable: it operated

⁸⁸ A clarification regarding the relative dating of the two Dharmaśāstra texts mentioned: the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* is dated to the late fourth or early fifth century CE, whereas the *Nāradaśmṛti* is likely later, assigned to the fifth or sixth century CE. See Olivelle (2018a, pp. 26-28) for the current dating proposals.

⁸⁹ In this regard, see e.g. Olivelle (2018b).

⁹⁰ Suffice it to note that the number of ordeal types increased from five—scale, fire, water, poison, and sacred water—as described in the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*, *Nāradaśmṛti*, and *Viṣṇusmṛti*, to nine in the *Bṛhaspatismṛti* and

as a test—either physical or aleatory—that the individual subjected to it (generally the defendant) had to undergo to prove his innocence: a successful outcome established innocence; failure entailed guilt.⁹¹

More specifically, the procedure of the fire ordeal—referred to in the Dharmaśāstra texts as *agnidivya* (‘fire ordeal’) or *agnividhi* (‘fire procedure’)—is outlined as follows: while holding a red-hot iron ball, the individual must cross several circles (the number varies from seven to nine, according to the text) drawn on the ground; after crossing them and placing the ball on the ground, he is deemed innocent if his hands remain unburnt. As with the institution of the Hindu ordeal in general, the procedure of the *agnidivya* has evolved through numerous innovations over time.⁹²

Although one cannot reasonably expect a Vedic hymn to specify procedural details, it remains, in my view, that the only comparable element between AVŚ 2.12 and the Dharmaśāstra treatment of the fire ordeal is the ritual use of fire as a truth-revealing agent. Following the second line of interpretation (§ 2), in my understanding, in the Atharvavedic hymn, fire is likely depicted as a revealer of sorcerers, or rather, individuals performing counter-sorcery against the person reciting the hymn; in the fire ordeal, by contrast, it discloses the guilt or innocence of the undergoer. However, in the context of ancient India, the revelatory power of fire is by no means limited to the trial by ordeal, and the subsequent discussion will clarify this point (§ 5).

4. Identifying ‘Ordeal-Related Phenomena’ in the Vedic Corpus

Investigating the “prehistory” of Hindu social and legal institutions in the Vedic era is undoubtedly a complex undertaking, and it easily risks overinterpretation. In the case of AVŚ 2.12, since the only comparable feature is the idea of fire as a revealing agent, no further comparison can be sustained. Quite different in nature, however, are the genuine “ordeal-related phenomena” found in the Vedic corpus—specifically two episodes relevant here: the trial by fire of Kaṇva’s sons (PB 14.6.6; JB 3.235) and the test involving a heated axe (ChUp 6.16).⁹³ As these episodes share more features with

Pitāmahasṃṛti (at least in the versions reflecting their medieval expansions; see Giudice 2026, pp. 55-76, 854-860, 869-885).

⁹¹ Among the works listed in footnote 2, I refer in particular to those by Kane (1962-1975), Lariviere (1981), and Pendse (1985) for the most detailed accounts of the history of the Hindu ordeal.

⁹² The sections of the Dharmaśāstra texts that describe the fire ordeal are YSm 2.107-111, NSm 20.15-24, VSm 11, KSm 441, BSm 8.53-57, and PiSm 1.117-149. An allusion to it is also found in MDh 8.114-115; however, at the chronological stage represented by the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, the ordeal as a formal legal institution had not yet emerged—its full articulation appears only with the *Yājñavalkyaśṃṛti*, several centuries later—although some preliminary procedures (i.e. fire and water) were already present. In this regard, see Lariviere (1981: 1-4) and Giudice (2026: 809-820).

⁹³ See, in this regard, the discussion of these episodes in Lariviere (1981, p. 2-3). In my PhD thesis, besides introducing the label “ordeal-related phenomena”, I developed this discussion in greater detail (Giudice 2026, pp. 777-790).

the later fire ordeal, the authors of the Dharmasāstra texts explicitly cite them as Vedic precedents for the institution of ordeal and thus regard them as such within the legal tradition.⁹⁴

The first episode comes from the *Brāhmaṇas* and is preserved in two versions: one in the *Pañcaviṃśabrāhmaṇa* (PB 14.6.6) and one in the *Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa* (JB 3.235), both belonging to the Sāmaveda branch. In both accounts, two descendants of Kaṇva undergo a trial to determine who is right in a dispute between them, although the grounds of the dispute differ. The former text presents a trial by fire, while the latter adds a trial by water as well.

Starting with the *Pañcaviṃśabrāhmaṇa*, the episode explains the origin of the Vātsa chant. In this narrative, the two descendants of Kaṇva are named Vatsa and Medhātithi. Medhātithi accuses his brother Vatsa of not being a Brāhmaṇa but the son of a Śūdra woman. Being falsely accused, Vatsa chooses to face a trial by fire to reveal the truth—namely, that he is indeed the son of a Brāhmaṇa. The episode concludes with Vatsa’s vindication: while chanting the Vātsa chant during the ordeal, he alone emerges with his hair unburnt, whereas Medhātithi’s hair is singed, revealing him as the false accuser. The passage reads as follows (PB 14.6.6):

*vatsaś ca vai medhātithiś ca kāṇvāv āstāṃ taṃ vatsaṃ medhātithir ākrośad abrahmaṇo 'si sūdrāputra
iti so 'bravīd ṛtenāgniṃ vyayāva yataro nau brahmīyān iti vātsena vatso vyain maidhātithena
medhātithis tasya na loma ca nauṣat tad vāva sa tarhy akāmayata kāmasani sāma vātsaṃ kāmam
evaitenāvarundhe || 6 ||*

Vatsa and, indeed, Medhātithi were both Kaṇva’s sons. Medhātithi scolded this Vatsa: “You are not a Brāhmaṇa; you [are] the son of a Śūdra woman.” He said: “Let us two go through the fire according to the rule [to ascertain] which of the two of us is the more learned Brāhmaṇa. With the Vātsa chant, Vatsa went [through the fire]. With the Medhātithi’s chant, Medhātithi [went through the fire]. Not [even] a hair of him (i.e. Vatsa) burnt. At that time, he longed for this indeed. The Vātsa chant is a *sāman* that fulfils wishes. With it, he reached [his] very desire.

The version of the *Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa* includes this episode to explain the origin of the Maidhātitha chant. The two descendants of Kaṇva, known here as Medhātithi and Triśoka, argue over the Brahman, so no accusation—whether true or false—is involved in this case, but just a dispute about who was the best to discuss the Brahman. The two underwent two trials, one by fire and one by water, and in both cases Triśoka appears to defeat Medhātithi, thereby proving to be the better of the two. Here is the portion of this passage where the trial by fire is described (JB 3.235):

⁹⁴ As textual evidence, it may be noted that the *Brāhmaṇa* episode is referred to in a verse from the *Mānavadharmasāstra* (MDh 8.116), which I also quoted below in the text, and in Medhātithi’s commentary thereon (see Medh *ad* MDh 8.116), while the episode from the *Chāndogyopaniṣad* is quoted and discussed by Viśvarūpa in his *Bālakrīḍā* on the *Yājñavalkyaśmṛti* (see Viś *ad* YSm 2.117). See, in this regard, Giudice (2026, pp. 809-810, 819-820, 886-889).

[...] *kāṇvāyanau brahmaṇy aspardhetām medhātithiś ca trisokaś ca | tāv abrūtām ehy agniṃ samiddham atyayāveti | tāv agniṃ samiddham atyaitām | upary upary eva trisoko 'tyaid athetarasya pakṣmāṇy udaṣat | tam abravīd ajaiṣaṃ tveti | nety abravīd asurīputra eva tvam asi | devatā eva tvayā saṃsprṣtam nācīkamanteti | [...]*

Medhātithi and Trisoka, descendants of Kaṇva, contended about the Brahman. The two said: “Come on; let us two pass through the lighted fire!” The two passed through the lighted fire. Trisoka passed through [it] just before [Medhātithi]. Then, [the fire] burnt the eyelashes of the other one (i.e. Medhātithi). [Trisoka] said to him: “I have vanquished you.” He (i.e. Medhātithi) answered: “No! You are the son of an Asura mother indeed. The divinities did not long for what has been touched by you.”

Although few details are given, the procedure of this *Brāhmaṇa* episode seems to differ from the fire ordeal described in the Dharmaśāstra. This trial appears to be merely a crossing of the fire, without circles on the ground or an iron ball, and the overall context remains non-judicial. Nonetheless, a key similarity—besides the revealing aspect of the fire (which is not unique to the trial by fire)—is that this story involves a trial where the god Agni, manifested in the fire, is used to settle a dispute between two contenders, after—in the case of PB 14.6.6—a (false) accusation of one by the other. This might be why the Dharmaśāstra authors regarded this episode as a Vedic precedent for the use of divine proof in lawsuits, exemplified by the following verse from the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, which, by mentioning Vatsa, still refers to the *Pañcaviṃśabrāhmaṇa* version (MDh 8.116):

*vatsasya hy abhiśastasya purā bhrātrā yavīyasā |
nāgnir dadāha romāpi satyena jagataḥ spaśaḥ || 116 ||*

(116) When, in ancient times, Vatsa was accused by [his] younger brother (i.e. Medhātithi), Agni, the messenger of the world, did not burn a single hair [of his] because of the truthfulness [of his words].

The *Chāndogyopaniṣad*, also part of the Sāmavedic tradition, contains the ordeal-related episode that most closely resembles the later Dharmaśāstra institution of trial by ordeal, insofar as it is set within a proto-judicial framework. Here, a man accused of theft is seized by those who charge him and brought before what appears to be a sort of popular tribunal. He is required to undergo a test involving a heated axe, the result of which determines his guilt or innocence: if he is burnt, he is to be judged guilty; if unburnt, he is acquitted and released. In the end, the text states that it is the Ātman—the universal Self—that preserves him. Here follows the text (ChUp 6.16):

puruṣaṃ somyota hastagrhitam ānayanti | apahārṣīt steyam akārṣīt paraśum asmai tapateti | sa yadi tasya kartā bhavati tata evānṛtam ātmānaṃ kurute | so 'nṛtābhisamdhō 'nṛtenātmānam antardhāya

paraśum taptam pratigrhñāti | sa dahyate | atha hanyate || 1 || atha yadi tasyākartā bhavati | tata eva satyam ātmānam kurute | sa satyābhisandhaḥ satyenātmānam antardhāya paraśum taptam pratigrhñāti | sa na dahyate | atha mucyate || 2 || sa yathā tatra nādāhyeta | etad ātmyam idaṃ sarvam | tat satyam | sa ātmā | tat tvam asi śvetaketo iti | tad dhāsya vijajñāv iti vijajñāv iti || 3 ||

(1) O Somya, [people] lead a handcuffed man [saying]: “He has stolen, he has committed a theft! Heat an axe for him!” If he is guilty of this, he thereby becomes himself untruth indeed. If he tells untruth and conceals himself under untruth, he holds the heated axe, gets burnt, and then is killed. (2) But if he is not the maker of this (i.e. he is not guilty), he thence becomes himself truth indeed. If he tells the truth and conceals himself under the truth, he holds the heated axe, does not get burnt, and then is released. (3) “That by which he was not burned on that occasion—this whole world has that as its own. This is the truth; he is the Self; that is you, Śvetaketu.” From him, he did learn; he did learn it indeed.

Although this passage has been overinterpreted by Kane (1962–1975, III, p. 375)—who identified it as an example of the ploughshare ordeal, a much later type that appeared in the second half of the first millennium CE with a different procedure⁹⁵—Olivelle (1998, p. 563) rightly pointed out that the closest parallel is the fire ordeal. In addition to being referenced by Dharmasāstra scholars as a Vedic precedent for the tradition,⁹⁶ this episode may be regarded as a clear example of an ordeal-related phenomenon that seems to foreshadow a canonical form of fire ordeal later formalised in the Dharmasāstra during the Common Era. In all these cases of actual “ordeal-related phenomena”, fire functions as an adjudicatory agent within a structured confrontation, providing a publicly understandable outcome that resolves a dispute; none of these features are present without overinterpretation in AVŚ 2.12.

5. Returning to AVŚ 2.12: An Analysis of Vedic Parallels and Comparanda

Based on comparative analysis with later Vedic and Dharmasāstra sources detailed above (§§ 3-4), it is now possible to revisit the interpretation of AVŚ 2.12 from a more solid textual and historical-cultural perspective. First, a reference to an actual “ordeal” is not supported by the available evidence: the institution of the Hindu ordeal (*divya*, in the technical legal sense) is attested only from the early fifth century CE onwards, with the codification found in YSm 2.98-117. Second, the hypothesis that the hymn might instead reflect an “ordeal-related phenomenon”—of the type instanced in the *Brāhmaṇa* episode and in the *Chāndogyaupaniṣad*—also seems unlikely. This is based on the fact

⁹⁵ The procedure of the ploughshare ordeal involves licking a heated ploughshare (*phāla*) and not an axe (*paraśu*) as in the case of the *Chāndogyaupaniṣad*. I have discussed the development of the ploughshare ordeal in Giudice (2022), then further expanded in my PhD thesis (Giudice 2026, pp. 854-860, 869-885, 900-910).

⁹⁶ See n. 16.

that such Vedic episodes share key features (of varying incisiveness) not found in AVŚ 2.12, namely: (i) a dispute between two contenders (non-judicial, in the case of the Brāhmaṇas) or two parties (i.e., the accused man and the people, set in a proto-judicial scenario, in the case of ChUp 6.16); (ii) the depiction of a fire test; (iii) the fire acting as an agent responsible for revealing the truth and consequently solving the dispute; and (iv) the explicit citation of these passages within the Dharmasāstra tradition as authoritative Vedic precedents for the later Hindu institution of ordeal.

A more convincing interpretation of AVŚ 2.12, consistent with the second line of scholars (§ 2), particularly Whitney and Lanman (1905, pp. 53-56), must be sought in the hymn *ex ipso*. The first portion (AVŚ 2.12.1-6) consists of a series of imprecations directed against a rival characterised as a sorcerer, spell-blocker, or practitioner of counter-magic—a rival whose harmful activities are to be exposed and neutralised through the agency of fire. Several passages make this function explicit:

AVŚ 2.12.2cd: *pāṣe sā baddhó durité ní yujyatām yó asmākaṃ mána idám hinásti*

May he who harms our mind be fastened to misfortune, being bound by a fetter.

AVŚ 2.12.3cd: *vṛścāmi tām kúliśeneva vṛkṣām yó asmākaṃ mána idám hinásti*

I cleave the one who harms this mind of ours, just like a tree with an axe.”

AVŚ 2.12.4d: *ámúṃ dade hárasā dáivyena*

I take that one with divine grasp.

AVŚ 2.12.5d: *pāpám á ṛchatv apakāmasya kartá*

May the doer of abhorrence fall into misfortune.

AVŚ 2.12.6cd: *tápūṃṣi tásmāi vṛjināni santu brahmadviṣaṃ dyáur abhisám̐tapāti*

May the intrigues be burning for him: may Heaven thoroughly heat the one who heats spells.

The last two verses (AVŚ 2.12.7-8) constitute a final declaration directed at an opponent using counter-magic against the hymn reciter. The opponent is revealed to be a sorcerer by the fire, with a desire to be consumed by it, and the breath—understood as vital energy—leaves his body and reaches Yama, the god of death. More precisely, the ritual action in AVŚ 2.12.8ab (*á dadhāmi te padám sám̐ddhe jātávedasi*, “I place your foot on the All-knower while he is lighted”) and the following wish in AVŚ 2.12.8cd (*agnih śárīraṃ veveṣtv ásum vāg ápi gachatu*, “May the fire consume [your] body, may [your] word also merge into the vital air”) are to be considered as a coercive act performed by the speaker against an opponent and the subsequent imprecation directed at him.

This interpretation of the entire hymn is also supported by an analysis of the Paippalāda version, which Zehnder (1999, pp. 31–34) similarly interprets as a hymn aimed at taking out an enemy wizard. Although the verses are arranged in a different order and exhibit minor variations, the Paippalāda version closely corresponds to the Śaunakīya version. As textual evidence, I here provide the text of the last two verses in both versions:

AVP 2.5.7-8:

*ā dadhāmi te padam samiddhe jātavedasi |
agnih śarīram veveṣtu yamaṃ gachatu te asuḥ
|| 7 ||
sapta prāṇān aṣṭau majjñās tāms te vṛścāmi
brahmaṇā |
yamasya gaccha sādānam agnidūto araṃkṛtaḥ
|| 8 ||*

(7) I place your foot on the All-knower (i.e. Agni) while he is lighted. May the fire consume [your] body [and] may your breath reach Yama.
(8) Seven breaths, eight marrows: I cleave them with a spell for you. May [you], whose messenger is Agni [and] who are adorned, advance to Yama's seat.

AVŚ 2.12.7-8:

*saptā prāṇān aṣṭau majjñās tāms te vṛścāmi
brāhmaṇā |
āyā yamāsya sādānam agnidūto araṃkṛtaḥ || 7 ||
ā dadhāmi te padam sāmiddhe jātavedasi |
agnih śarīram veveṣtv āsum vāg āpi gachatu ||
8 ||*

(7) Seven breaths, eight marrows: I cleave them with a spell for you. May [you], whose messenger is Agni [and] who are adorned, advance to Yama's seat. (8) I place your foot on the All-knower (i.e. Agni) while he is lighted. May the fire consume [your] body, may [your] word also merge into the vital air.

A further parallel in the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*—already noted by Whitney and Lanman (1905, p. 55)—reinforces this interpretation. A *Ṛgvedic* hymn (RV 6.52) contains, in its opening *trca*, a verse closely matching a verse from the *Atharvavedic* hymn under examination (RV 6.52.2 ≈ AVŚ 2.12.6). In the context of this *Ṛgvedic* hymn, this verse functions as an attack against the rival sacrificer and calls upon the Maruts to thwart him by frustrating his designs, as Jamison and Brereton (2014, II, p. 847) explain. Here follows the text of the two compared verses:

RV 6.52.2:

*āti vā yó maruto mányate no bráhma vā yáḥ
kriyámāṇam nínitsāt |
tápūṃṣi tásmāi vṛjināni santu brahmadviṣam
abhí tám śocatu dyaúḥ || 2 ||*

O Maruts, whoever despises us or will oppose our spell while being cast, may the deceits be heat for him; may Heaven flame towards the one who hates the *bráhman*.

AVŚ 2.12.6:

*átīva yó maruto mányate no bráhma vā yó
nínḍiṣat kriyámāṇam |
tápūṃṣi tásmāi vṛjināni santu brahmadviṣam
dyáur abhisámtapāti || 6 ||*

O Maruts, whoever despises us or has opposed our spell while being cast, may the deceits be heat for him; may Heaven thoroughly heat the one who hates the *bráhman*.

Within the *Atharvavedasamhitā* itself, AVŚ 2.12 can also be compared to several hymns in which the god Agni is invoked to unveil concealed sorcerers. Notably, an instructive comparative analysis can be made with the pair of hymns AVŚ 1.7-8, both of which explicitly summon Agni to detect,

expose, and ultimately destroy hidden sorcerers (*yātudhāna*) and related evil beings (*kimīdin*).⁹⁷ These hymns constitute clear Atharvavedic evidence for a ritual logic in which fire functions—outside any context of dispute—as a supernatural revealer of harmful magical opponents. In the first hymn (AVŚ 1.7), the god Agni—often conjunct with Indra—is repeatedly addressed as the one who brings forth or exposes sorcerers, forcing them to manifest themselves:

AVŚ 1.7.1ab: *stuvānām agna ā vaha yātudhānaṃ kimīdīnam*

O Agni, draw near the sorcerer, the evil being, uttering words...

AVŚ 1.7.2d; 1.7.6d: *yātudhānān vī lāpaya*

...make the sorcerers utter lamentation.

AVŚ 1.7.3ab: *vī lapantu yātudhānā attriṇo yé kimīdīnaḥ*

Let the sorcerers, the evil devourers, utter lamentation...

AVŚ 1.7.4cd: *brāvītu sārvo yātumān ayám asmīty étya*

...let each practitioner of sorcery, having arrived, proclaim: ‘I am a sorcerer.’

The fire of Agni is not merely revelatory but also destructive:

AVŚ 1.7.5: *páśyāma te vīryam jātavedaḥ prá ṇo brūhi yātudhānān nṛcakṣaḥ |*

tváyā sārve páritaptāḥ purástāt tá ā yantu prabruvāṇā úpedám ||

Let us see your power, O All-Knower (= Agni); declare to us [who] the sorcerers [are], O guide of men; let them all, heated by you at the forefront, come here, announcing themselves.

The hymn reaches its peak at the end: after Agni has brought the exposed sorcerers bound, Indra finishes them by smashing their heads with his thunderbolt (AVŚ 1.7.7).

The precise characterisation of Agni remains consistent in the second hymn (AVŚ 1.8). In addition to requesting Agni and Soma to pierce the sorcerer (AVŚ 1.8.2), the final verse reveals, on one hand, Agni’s power of knowing, and on the other, his destructive capacity:

AVŚ 1.8.4: *yátraisām agne jānimāni véttha gúhā satām attriṇām jātavedaḥ |*

tāms tvám bráhmanā vāvrđhānó jahy èṣām śatatárham agne ||

Wherever, O Agni, you have come to know the origins of the devourers who are in secret, O All-Knower, you—exalted by prayer—kill them, O Agni, piercing them a hundred times.

⁹⁷ The *Kauśikasūtra* includes AVŚ 1.7-8, along with several others, in a collection of hymns called *cātana*, i.e. ‘causing to hide’, ‘driving away’, employed to expel sorcerers and demonic beings (see KauśS 8.25).

Overall, AVŚ 1.7-8 depict a clear Atharvavedic model of fire as an agent of forced revelation and destruction, specifically for sorcerers—precisely the same model assumed by AVŚ 2.12.

Finally, the *Kausikasūtra* section relevant to this hymn (KauśS 47.12-57)⁹⁸ well aligns with this reading, as it frames AVŚ 2.12 in a ritual against rivals rather than in the context of a dispute between contenders. This section is divided into two parts: a description of preliminary actions for witchcraft practices (KauśS 47.12-24), followed by a lengthy incantation to counter opponents (KauśS 47.25-57). In the first part, the preliminary actions for witchcraft include placing a special girdle in sour milk and honey, girding oneself with it, smearing the staff with the residue of oblations, muttering *mantras* over it, and so forth. In the second part, a more intriguing aspect of this discussion is the extended incantation against the opponents, performed by using parts of this hymn as weaponised *mantras*, particularly AVŚ 2.12.1, AVŚ 2.12.2c, AVŚ 2.12.4d, and AVŚ 2.12.6 (respectively in KauśS 47.25, 47.49, 47.50 and 47.52), all taken from the first part of the hymn. Notably, this *Kausikasūtra* section never cites AVŚ 2.12.7-8, the very verses that the scholars following Schlagintweit’s interpretation claimed supported the depiction of the fire ordeal in the Atharvavedic hymn under scrutiny.

To conclude, contrary to one branch of scholarship and in agreement with another (§ 2), the combined evidence shows that AVŚ 2.12 cannot be interpreted as referring either to a fire ordeal (properly documented in Dharmaśāstra texts only from the Common Era onwards: § 3) or to an ordeal-related phenomenon that would foreshadow the later fire ordeal (of the type found in other Vedic sources: § 4). Instead, based on an *ex ipso* interpretation of the hymn, supported by Vedic parallels and comparanda, AVŚ 2.12 is best understood as belonging to the Atharvavedic domain of sorcery and counter-sorcery: it was probably used as a countermeasure against a rival who had previously engaged in harmful magical practices against the reciter.

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⁹⁸ It is not my intention here to address the complex textual problems of the *Kausikasūtra*, which are undoubtedly compounded by the age of the available complete edition (Bloomfield 1989). For a discussion of these issues and the ongoing project of a new critical edition (with a case study), see Rotaru and Sumant (2014).

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