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# Maruts and the Ritual Paths to Immortality: Hints of Indo-Iranian Doctrines

## 1 Premise

The purpose of the present essay is to reconsider the question of the alleged relationship between the Maruts, the Vedic deities always mentioned as a group, and the Avestic guardian spirits, the Frauuašis. In particular, it explores for the first time in this framework the relevance of certain late Vedic passages illustrating the role played by the hymn named after the Maruts (i.e. the Marutstoma) in securing access to heaven for a specific group of warriors (i.e. the so-called Vrātya group of Daivas).

By proposing to re-examine the relationship between the Indian Maruts and the Iranian Frauuašis, we are taking a considerable chronological leap backwards, compared to the centuries commonly associated with the history of the Silk Roads. Nonetheless, future secondary branches of the Silk Roads would definitely pass through the geographical area that relates to our sources and which has always been an important crossroad of Asian intercultural exchange. Moreover, when we need to account for some points in common between the two cultures, the hypothesis of historical contacts must always be checked against the concurrent possibility of a genealogical relationship grounded on the well-known hypothesis of an Indo-Iranian family; a point that deserves close attention.

## 2 Maruts and Frauuašis: A Discussion on the Earliest Assumptions

To the best of our knowledge, the origin of the issue dates back to 1929, when Lionel David Barnett compared the Vedic Maruts with the Avestic Frauuašis. He maintained that, on account of India's particular climatic conditions, the earlier

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group of celestial genii might have later been reinterpreted as a group of storm-gods, namely the Maruts:

Precisely like the Fravašis, the Marúts in the RV . . . are a host dwelling in heaven and constantly waging battles in the sky against the power of darkness and evil, especially revealing themselves in the lightning and thunders of the storms that bring rains to parched plains of Northern India and revive the forces of nature. The Vedic poets exhaust their vocabulary in describing the awful battle-array of the Marúts, the splendour of their gleaming spears, their cars and horses, the terrors of their valour, and the like, in the same strain as the Avestic pictures of the Fravašis, but with vastly more literary elaboration. Owing to the peculiar climatic conditions of India, this function of ruling the storm and thereby giving rain has overshadowed the other aspects of the Marúts in Vedic India, and misled modern scholars into regarding them as primarily and originally storm-gods. They have other and equally important aspects.

## 2.1 Bands of Warriors and the Source of Abundance

Georges Dumézil (1953) also emphasised the fact that the Maruts and Frauuašis were both warrior groups in the service of two pre-eminent gods (Indra and Ahura Mazdā respectively). He associated them with the second Indo-European social function, including them on the list of heirs of the Indo-Iranian *Männerbund*.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, he highlighted their connection with water and with the fact that they were responsible for its distribution to humankind, a task which, in his opinion, better matched the third social function. Nonetheless, he considered the Frauuašis a possible Zoroastrian innovation more than an ancient institution,<sup>2</sup> while other scholars, for instance Geo Widengren (1965), insisted on their pre-Zoroastrian character. Even more recently Mary Boyce (1975, 119) has maintained that a part of the Frawardīn Hymn (*Yašt* 13), i.e. the Hymn to Frauuašis and one of the most important sources on these divine beings, appears to be extremely ancient, while the rest is strongly Zoroastrian. Indeed, it will not escape anyone's notice that there are passages in Y 13 in which the Frauuašis are invoked as protectors against dangers coming from the *daēuuas*, e.g. the Frauuaši of Yima in Y 13.130 (cf. Panaino [2013] 115, 150), nomenclature which self-evidently cannot date back to the shared Indo-Iranian culture. In any case, this couple of functions (warlike endeavours and water distribution) is considered by Kellens (2016, 145)

<sup>1</sup> In 1981, Lincoln again assumed the existence of a proto-Indo-Iranian group of martial spirits of the air reconstructed on the basis of Frauuašis and Maruts.

<sup>2</sup> Another contribution against the identification of Frauuašis with Maruts is Malandra (1971).

to be such a specific association that “[elle] ne peut relever du hasard et, si elle correspond à la réalité, la cause est entendue”.

As far as their warlike nature is concerned, the situation in the Indian context is quite clear. As is well known, the Maruts are mainly portrayed in the *Ṛgveda* as comrades of Rudra and Indra, as a band of warriors often associated with the weather phenomena of rain and storms. They are considered to be the divine equivalent of the *mārya*,<sup>3</sup> i.e. of young warriors no older than twenty years.<sup>4</sup> It is neither possible nor necessary here to quote all the relevant passages; we will limit ourselves to presenting just a few that allow us to highlight some interesting items, in particular the link of Maruts with light — due to the brilliance of their armour and because light is intrinsic to their very nature — and with water, in particular rain. Their relationship with rain, by the way, goes beyond the well-known and immediately recognisable similarity between the sounds and colours of battle and those of a thunderstorm since another element, as *ṚV* 2.34.8 below clearly shows, is the connection between water and the earth’s fertility, which parallels the theme of abundance guaranteed by the return from a victorious expedition:

*ṚV* 1.85.8:

*śūrā ived yuyudhayo na jagmayah śravasyavo na pṛtanāsu yetire |  
bhayante viśvā bhuvanā marudbhyo rājāna iva tveṣasamdr̥śo<sup>5</sup> narah ||*

Like heroes indeed, like fighters moving forwards, like those who seek fame / flow in battles they have arrayed themselves: all the living beings are scared by the Maruts, lords rushing into / shining in sight like chieftains.

*ṚV* 2.34.8:

*yad yuñjate maruto rukmavakṣaso ‘śvān ratheṣu bhaga ā sudānavah |  
dhenur na śiśve svasareṣu pinvate janāya rātahaviṣe mahīm iṣam ||*

When the Maruts, with golden ornaments on their chest, yoke their horses to the chariots, they who abundantly pour out / give in prosperity,

<sup>3</sup> See Wikander (1938) 75.

<sup>4</sup> Analogous age-graded groups are also singled out e.g. in ancient Greek and middle Persian sources: see Falk (1986) 94 and McCone (2020) 115–116.

<sup>5</sup> Here and in the second hemistich the poet is playing on the two aspects of *tveṣa*-, namely ‘vibration’ (especially impetus, movement proper to the flow of water) and ‘shimmering’ (of gold but also of the stars, see below). We will manage the involved occurrences of double-entendre by separating the two meanings with a backslash.

just as a milk-cow in her folds swells for her young [they pour out] great refreshment for the man who has offered oblations.<sup>6</sup>

Some other interesting verses underline the greater intrinsic radiance of the Maruts compared to other deities, a fact that seems to emerge clearly in the following stanza, notwithstanding its still controversial interpretation. This feature, together with their function of colouring, beautifying sky and earth, would indeed lead one to hypothesise a connection with the (night) sky rather than with a storm:

*RV 7.57.3:*  
*naitāvad anye maruto yatheme bhrājante rukmair āyudhais tanūbhiḥ |*  
*ā rodasī viśvapiśaḥ piśānāḥ samānam añjy añjate śubhe kam | |*

The others do not shine so much as these Maruts here with their ornaments, their weapons, their bodies: they, who adorn everything up to heaven and earth, while adorning themselves apply the same pigment for the sake of splendour indeed.<sup>7</sup>

Undoubtedly we have fewer vivid images of the Frauuaṣis' ranks, particularly if we focus on the earliest literary testimonies,<sup>8</sup> nevertheless, it is at least com-

<sup>6</sup> In this verse the continuous shift between water and abundance is tangible, further underlined by the identification between the Maruts and the cow that swells with milk for her calf.

<sup>7</sup> This verse contains many difficult points that are yet to be satisfactorily solved; see Jamison/Brereton's online notes to their translation, Book 7, pp. 82–83: [http://rigvedacommentary.alc.ucla.edu/?page\\_id=25](http://rigvedacommentary.alc.ucla.edu/?page_id=25) (accessed January 2026). As Jamison already recalls in her notes, the first hemistich may have another interpretation (already proposed by Geldner) with *anyé* determining *marútaḥ* “No other Maruts shine like these ones”; Jamison rejects it both on syntactic grounds (the position of *yathā*) and “common sense”: “who would the other Maruts be?” We have also accepted the first version, which seems to offer a better word-order, but we are still intrigued by the possible existence of “other Maruts” competing with those of their own clan. Jamison/Brereton (2014) 952 translate the second hemistich as “All adorned, themselves adorning the two world-halves, they smear a common unguent on themselves for beauty”. Here the issue concerns the two derivatives from the verbal base *piś-*: *viśvapiś* and *piśāná*. We are not convinced by Jamison's arguments in favour of a passive value of the first radical compound since we believe that its usage in qualifying the chariot of Dawn in the quoted parallel verse (*RV 7.75.6*) does not justify foregoing the most common active value. Nor we accept Scarlata's (1999: 319–20) suggestion according which *viśvapiś* as constructed by analogy on *viśvápeśas* “containing all adornments”. Other open questions are the transitive or intransitive value of the two verbal bases *piś-* and *añj-* and the role of the particle *ā*, usually considered a preverb of either base. We propose instead to read it as associated with the dual accusative *rodasī*, thus eliminating the problem of a possible double accusative ruled by *ā* . . . *añjate*. The meaning would be that the Maruts decorate heaven and earth with the same bright colour with which they adorn themselves.

<sup>8</sup> The oldest attestation is *Y 37.3*, discussed recently in Kellens (2016) 139.

monly accepted that they do have “une insistante coloration guerrière” (Kellens [2016] 138) and their cult seems to display features of both hero and ancestor worship.<sup>9</sup> Yet some passages, such as *Y* 13. 27 and 45, allow us to recognise certain parallels in the description of these celestial beings, whose help in battle is invoked by pious men and who come covered with shining brass armour and weapons to destroy thousands of foes.

## 2.2 Providing and Distributing Water

Let us now return to the topic of water as a blessing bestowed by benevolent deities and note how scholars like Söderblom (1899, 377) and Panaino (2020, 269) emphasised the relationship of the Frauuaṣis with water on the basis of *Y* 13.53–54. The passage tells us that waters had stood for a long time in the same place without flowing, but then they started to flow thanks to them.<sup>10</sup> Analogously, the Maruts play a sort of demiurgic role in relation to water coming from clouds and springs in the mountains. The following three passages selected from the *Ṛgveda* are good examples:

*ṚV* 5.53.10:

*tám vaḥ sárdham ráthānām tveṣám gaṇám márutam návyasinām |  
ānu prá yanti vṛṣṭáyah ||*

The rains go after your host of chariots, the rushing marutian group of the ones coming after (i.e. of thunders).

*ṚV* 5.58.3ab:

*á vo yantūdavāhāso adyá vṛṣṭīm ye víśve marúto junánti |*

Let those who bear the water come today here to you, all the Maruts who impel the rain!

*ṚV* 5.59.7:

*váyo ná yé śréṇīḥ paptúr ojasántān divó bṛhatāḥ sánunas pári |  
ásvāsa eṣām ubháye yáthā vidúḥ prá párvatasya nabhanūṃr acucyavuh ||*

<sup>9</sup> Kellens’ reference (2016) 147 to the well-known rite devoted to the Frauuaṣis mentioned in *Y* 13.49 is interesting in this perspective. He suggests that the rite might have been performed on the occasion of military conscription.

<sup>10</sup> In this section of *Y* 13 the Frauuaṣis are also at the origin of the setting in motion of plant life (13.55–56) and of the movement of the stars (13.57–58). See below.

They who like birds in rows flew by means of their vigour about the limits of heaven from the lofty summit (of mountains). Their horses like both (i.e. gods and human beings)<sup>11</sup> know that they set the mountain springs in motion.

This crucial role of the Maruts is so exemplary that we even find them as a standard of comparison for water conveyors in the following stanza:

*ṚV 8.98.7:*

*ādāhā hīndra girvaṇa úpa tvā kāmān mahāḥ sasrjmāhe |  
udéva yānta udābhīh | |*

Therefore, O Indra, who longs for hymns, we have propelled our great desires to you, as those who come with waters (i.e. the Maruts) do with their waters.

In fact, if one considers India's particular monsoon rainfall, and once one has ascertained a connection with rainwater for both the Maruts' and Frauuaṣis', the shift towards the status of storm gods for the Maruts does not seem such a great leap.

### 3 The Wings of Maruts and Frauuaṣis

Moreover, the Frauuaṣis are envisioned as supernatural beings who inhabit the air; they are described as “well-winged birds” flying towards their devotees in *Y 13.70*. The image seems to be quite in line with the common iconography. Indeed, Maruts are either directly identified or compared with birds, as shown in the aforementioned *ṚV 5.59.7*, particularly with falcons (e.g. *ṚV 7.56.3*) and wild geese (*haṃsa*):

*ṚV 7.59.7:*

*sasvās cid dhī tanvāḥ śumbhamānā á haṃsāso nīlaprṣṭhā apaptan |  
viśvaṃ sārḍho abhīto mā ní ṣeda náro ná raṇvāḥ sāvane mādantaḥ | |*

Indeed, the blue-backed wild geese,<sup>12</sup> who even secretly adorn themselves, have flown here. You, the whole troupe, have sat down next to me, like joyous heroes taking pleasure in the Soma pressing.

*ṚV 2.34.5:*

*indhanvabhīr dhenúbhī rapśádūdhabhīr adhvasmābhīh pathībhīr bhrājadrṣṭayāḥ |*

<sup>11</sup> This interpretation is in line with Sāyana's commentary: *ubhaye devā manuṣyās ca yathā viduḥ jānanti tathā* “They know [it] as both gods and human beings are aware [of it]”.

<sup>12</sup> I.e. the Maruts, to whom the Hymn is dedicated. Of course, the *haṃsas* are not normally blue-backed, which might suggest that peacocks are hinted at here.

*á haṃśásó ná svásarāṇi gantana mádhora mádāya marutaḥ samanyavaḥ ||*

With your flaming milk-cows whose udders are plentiful, o Maruts endowed with glittering spears, who are of one mind, come here to enjoy the honey along paths free from darkness, like wild geese (coming) to their nests!

In some other passages, the bird-like feature is instead attributed to the Maruts' horses or chariots: the flying image does not depend on the Maruts themselves, but on what they use as their vehicle.

*RV* 1.88.1:

*á vidyúnmadbhīr marutaḥ svarkaí ráthebhīr yāta ṛṣṭimádbhīr ásvaparnāiḥ |  
á várṣiṣṭhaya ná iṣā váyo ná paptatā sumāyāḥ ||*

O Maruts, by means of your well-thundering (lit. well-singing) chariots endowed with lightning, full of spears, whose wings are horses, come here with the highest nourishment, fly here like birds, magic beings!

Dandekar (1979, 237) considered that this appearance as birds was enough to make them souls of the dead:

It may be recalled that according to the primitive mythological thought, the spirits or the dead often wander about in the form of birds. The popular divinities, the Maruts, must therefore, have originally been connected in a special manner, with the ideology relating to death and the spirits of the dead.

And indeed, to support his reading of the earliest history of the Maruts, Dandekar (1979, 237 fn. 124) quotes five passages (those analysed above included) as examples of the connection of Maruts with water and above all with birds, namely *RV* 1.87.2; 1.88.1; 5.59.7; 7.56.3; 7.59.7. He (1979, 238 fn. 127) also assigns to the winds the role of vehicle for the “wandering spirits of the dead” in their most ancient conception:

[. . .] In the primitive thought the spirits of the dead are usually believed to be wandering about through winds. The connection between the Maruts and the winds may thus be reflecting also this ancient belief.<sup>13</sup>

It is not necessary to take a position on the issue concerning the earliest expression of the motif of the peacock carrying dead people to the stars, as can be seen on the funeral urns of the Late Harappan Cemetery H at Harappa — see e.g. Wit-

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<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, such a fascinating hypothesis has yet to be demonstrated, even though it has been long cultivated by other scholars, for instance by Meyer (1883) 218: “[. . .] Maruts, wie Ribhus einst sterbliche Menschen gewesen sind, die erst später die Gemeinschaft der Götter erlangten. Sie sind also noch deutlich in unsterbliche Winde verwandelte Menschenseelen”.

zel (2001, 21) and Parpola (2015, 185, 186 fig. 15.9); it is in any case undeniable that the successful sacrificers become birds and reach heaven, at least according to some Yajurveda (e.g. *KS* 34.8) and Brāhmaṇa texts (*PB* 5.1.10, 5.3.5; 19.10.4; 19.11.8).<sup>14</sup> One of the most common identifications portrays the soul as a wild goose (*hamsa-*), an image already associated with the Maruts in the aforesaid *ṚV* 2.34.5 and 7.59.7. Moreover, it recurs as the sacrificer's postmortal body (see especially *BĀU* 2.5.18; 4.3.11–12; *ŚVU* 1.6; 3.18),<sup>15</sup> in the Upaniṣads and even earlier in *KB* 7.4 and *JB* 2.53 in the account of the episode of the esoteric conversation between king Keśin Dārbhya and the previous king of the Pañcālas who had taken on the semblance of a golden wild goose.<sup>16</sup> However, the evidence in favour of the role played by the *Ṛgveda* sources in such a reconstruction of the imagery of the soul of the dead as birds has till now been considered inconclusive – see e.g. Norelius (2023, 562–563). Consequently, the role played by the *Ṛgvedic* Maruts in the history of this notion remains unproven.

## 4 Etymological Remarks

Linguistically speaking, if one accepts the etymological derivation of *marút-* from *mṛ-*, “to shine”, as maintained e.g. by Chakravarty (1991–1992), then it is clear that they should have originally been recognised as storm gods especially connected with lightning and perhaps also identified with stars since they are defined as intrinsically radiant (see above, *ṚV* 7.57.3). On the other hand, if the correct etymon were from *mṛ-*, “to die”, as maintained e.g. by Dandekar (1979), the Maruts might formerly have been the souls of the dead, probably associated with wind and birds early on. Nonetheless, the latter notion of the Maruts seems marginal in the *Ṛgveda*,<sup>17</sup> and the earliest occurrence mentioning the Frauuaṣis in the *Gathas* clearly bears a moral connotation not shared by the Maruts. Only the Frauuaṣis of the righteous are worthy of worship like the gods and capable of securing benefits for those who pray to them. According to Jean Kellens (2016, 141) they are the “preferences of men and women who support the Aśa”, i.e., according to the etymology dating back to Narten (1985), they might have represented the state of mind with which the sacrificer paid homage to the divinity, i.e. the preference the sacrificer has for a given Frauuaṣi. Within both phonic and seman-

<sup>14</sup> An interesting survey of the relevant late Vedic quotations is offered by Norelius (2023) 562–565.

<sup>15</sup> Norelius (2023) 564.

<sup>16</sup> See Kulkarni (2016) 76–77; Pontillo (2022) 1082–1084.

<sup>17</sup> This is emphasised e.g. by Chakravarty (1991–1992).

tic perspective a plausibly comparable Vedic institution is in fact the *pravara-*, already recalled by Narten to explain the etymology she proposed, which is the “selection” of the *hotr* by the Adhvaryu in the ceremonies.<sup>18</sup> In our opinion, the *pravara-* might be better connected to the Frauuašis, when the term is used e.g. in *ĀpŚS* 24.5.1–10.18, as the name of the lists of the seers-ancestors employed during the sacrifices – see Renou (1953, 110–111).

It is also noteworthy that this preference is expressed not individually, but rather by the whole clan. Nobody prays to a Frauuaši for himself, but exclusively for his community. But above all, “preference” must be meant as the preferential link that the Frauuašis maintain with the social groups to which they had belonged in their earthly life. Indeed, the first section in *Y* 13 (1–84) is a glorification of the powers and attributes of the Frauuašis in general, who grant victory in battle; the second part (85–158) is an enumeration of the Frauuašis of the most celebrated heroes of Mazdeism, from the first man, Gaiia Marətan, down to the last, Saošiant. Their cult then takes deeper root in the Younger *Avesta*, where it seems to present some clear traits of hero worship.<sup>19</sup>

## 5 Intermediate Summary

All in all, we have noticed a real convergence of features between Maruts and Frauuašis, as regards:

- a. their warlike nature,
- b. their close relationship with water,
- c. their radiance,
- d. bird imagery.

On the other hand, an important divergence between the two groups seems to lie in:

- x. the relationship with the afterlife. In the case of the Maruts this is hard to prove on the basis of the *Rgveda*, but we will try to show how the late Vedic tradition seems to contradict this impression (§ 6);

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<sup>18</sup> See Narten (1985) 37–39.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, at first glance a trait of individuality appears in the relationship of the single priests with the “preferred” Frauuašis, e.g. in *Y* 59.29, when, through the recitation of the Frauuarāne prayer, “the priestly personality” is constituted and the priestly Frauuaši takes her place in the lineage of the historical officiating priests over time — see Cantera (2020) 274–275. Nonetheless, this important ritual performance starts indeed from the individual dimension and moves towards the collective, namely towards “the identification of the Frauuašis of the other members of the community with the one of the priests” — see Cantera (2020) 197 and Panaino (2020) 271.

y. the demiurgic role played by the Frauuašis for the motion of the sun, the moon and the stars and the underpinning of the sky, as it is depicted e.g. in Y 13.16, 13.29, 13.57–58 and even more clearly in the Young Avestan tradition – see Hintze (2009, 111–113), Panaino (2019, 155 and 155 fn. 548; 2020, 269).

We will mainly concentrate on point x (which — as we will see — partly involves point y), but let us start by pointing out some important elements with reference to the second point. It is true that there is no direct counterpart of this alleged function of Frauuašis in the context of the Vedic passages devoted to the Maruts. Nonetheless, in ŚS 15.6.5, a role close to the one attributed to the Frauuašis is assigned to the Ekavrātya,<sup>20</sup> i.e. to the prototypical figure of the members of the *Männerbund* with whom both the Maruts and the Frauuašis have always been associated from the beginning of the study of such a possible comparison:

ŚS 15.6.5:

*tam ṛtaṃ ca satyaṃ ca sūryaś ca candraś ca nakṣatrāṇi cānuvyacalan |*

Behind him (i.e. the Ekavrātya) moved *ṛta* and *satya* and sun and moon and stars’.

Moreover, as noticed by Panaino (2020, 270 fn. 49), the text of Y 13 “never explicitly declares that the Frauuašis gave a physical impulse to the astral bodies, but simply that they showed the right celestial way to them”. We will see below how this action of pointing out a specific path in heaven is also attributed to the Maruts in the Brāhmaṇas, albeit with different details and with a more substantiated purpose.

Let us now come to point x. Our starting point was a position inaugurated by Gnoli (1982), who identified a pre-Zoroastrian substratum in the conception of the Frauuašis that might have belonged to a popular form of the cult of the dead, a probable mixture between ancestor and hero worship. It is noteworthy that this reading has been recently endorsed by several scholars, e.g. Kellens (2016, 145). Gnoli (1982, 258) asserted that there was no special relationship of the Maruts with the dead and their cult, while such a cult was crucial to understanding the ancient Frauuašis.<sup>21</sup> He singled out this feature as a major weak point in the identification of Maruts with the Frauuašis.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See below § 6.

<sup>21</sup> See Boyce (1975) 124–127 and Hintze (2009).

<sup>22</sup> This hypothesis was opposed e.g. by Mary Boyce in 1995, who clearly interpreted the development of the Frauuašis’ heroic horizon as a later development of the famous Iranian heroic age.

In particolare, il punto debole della comparazione delle *fravaši* coi Marut – e quindi a maggior ragione della loro presunta natura di sostituti zoroastriani di precedenti entità pre-zoroastriane – sta, come d'altra parte osservò lo stesso Dumézil, nell'assenza in questi ultimi anni dello elemento «anime dei morti» o «angeli guardiani associati alle anime». In realtà il carattere fondamentale delle *fravaši*, da ricollegarsi a un antico strato della religiosità iranica tipica di una società fortemente impregnata di valori guerrieri – il riferimento ai *Mān-nerbūnde arī* è qui, a parer mio, più che mai pertinente – deve essere ricercato nelle concezioni della morte e della sopravvivenza.

At this point, it would be legitimate to wonder exactly what led us to consider again the *vexata quaestio* of the Maruts in relation to doctrines on *post-mortem* destiny. The answer is grounded in a couple of important recent scientific achievements. First of all, in the last thirty years scholars have begun to work on the Vedic texts by postulating more than one cultural matrix for all the sources (see e.g. Parpola [1983], [2015]; Witzel [1987], [1989], [1997]; Samuel [2008]; Bronkhorst [2007]), [2016]; etc.). Secondly, the research community now admits that some ancient Indo-Aryan doctrines that were marginalised by the Brahmanical mainstream have been preserved in texts more recent than the *R̥gveda*. Therefore, here we are proposing to resort to two versions of the same episode, in two sources from the *Sāmaveda* branch, which, like the *Atharvaveda*, is often more conservative than the *Yajurveda*.

## 6 On a Maruts' Rite to Gain Access to Heaven: Sāmavedic Brāhmaṇas

As is well known, the Brāhmaṇas are basically exegetical texts of the *Samhitās* that date back to between the 9th and 6th century BC, ultimately marked by what we consider the cultural mainstream of the so-called Brāhmaṇical reform, i.e. that set of changes that led to the establishment of the so-called *varṇāśrama*-system with functionally distinct social classes (*varṇa*-) and clearly distinct life stages (*āśrama*-). Despite the fact that the novelties of the reform pass through these texts, they retain important traces of a different culture, which are significant for our comparative purpose. The *PB* is older than the *JB*, but the *JB* is richer and even more conservative.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> More precisely, Caland (1931) xix hesitatingly estimated that the *JB* was older than the other *Sāmaveda* Brāhmaṇa, i.e. the *PB*, on the basis of the “ritualistic facts”, while Keith (1932a) and (1932b) 699 considered the *PB* older than the *JB* by relying on the linguistic data. On the latter linguistic evaluation, see also Renou (1947) 101–102; Parpola (1973) 7, 9–10; Gonda (1975) 348–349.

At the core of the episode there are the so-called *daivā vrātyāḥ*,<sup>24</sup> who aspire to reach the *svarga loka* and who are actually given a chance to gain access to it by the Maruts, who in turn have been authorised by the Gods.

PB 17.1.1:

*devā vai svargaṃ lokam āyaṃs teṣāṃ daivā ahīyanta vrātyāṃ pravasantas ta āgacchan yato devāḥ svargaṃ lokam āyaṃs tena taṃ stomaṃ na chando 'vīdan yena tān āpsyāṃs. te devā maruto 'bruvann etebhyas taṃ stoman tac chandaḥ prayacchata yenāsmān āpnavān iti tebhya etaṃ śodaśaṃ stomaṃ prayacchan paroḥṣam anuṣṭubhaṃ tato vai te tān āpnuvan.*

The Gods indeed went to the world of Heaven; of them the Daivas were left behind. Setting out on a Vrātya expedition, they arrived [in the place] where the gods had left for the world of heaven. Thus they found neither the Stoma nor the Chandas by means of which they could reach them. The Gods said to the Maruts: “Offer them that Stoma and that Chandas, by means of which they may reach us”. The Maruts offered them that Stoma made of sixteen [verses], which is cryptically the Anuṣṭubh. Thereupon, they reached them (i.e. the Gods).

In this passage the Maruts seem to have a sort of demiurgic role, already mentioned in § 4, since they have proven mastery in the paths to heaven, showing these paths to human beings who aspire to reach the place inhabited by the gods. We consider that such a feature of the Maruts may be compared with the role

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<sup>24</sup> According to Sāyaṇa’s commentary they are the ranks, i.e. the *viś-* or *vrāta-*, of a leading god: *teṣāṃ devānām anucarāḥ ata eva devasambandhāt daivā janāḥ*, “Therefore the servants of these gods because of their relationship with the gods are [called] *daiva*-people”. The term *daiva-* also occurs in PB 24.18 and has often been interpreted as deriving from *deva-* in the sense of “adherent of ‘the God’”, referred to Rudra because there are some Brāhmaṇa and Kalpasūtra occurrences of *deva-* as Rudra’s name — see e.g. Caland (1931) 455, but it perhaps might be better intended as “who aims to the heaven”, according to a suggestion by Heesterman (1962) 18. The term is often compared with both *divya-*, used in JB 1.277 and 2.221 (as for the latter see below) and JUB I.10.9, I.34.6, I.45.1 (as for the other occurrences, see Candotti/Pontillo [forthcoming]), and with *daivya-* in BŚS 18.26, always used as qualifiers for the plural noun *vrātyas* and in the latter passage explicitly designating a group of Maruts headed by Viṣṇu. On the basis of the fact that the Gods themselves seem to have gained their access to heaven through a ritual — as Witzel (1984) 219 already underlined — Dore/Pontillo (2016) 23–25 assumed that the *daivas* might have been beings who had not yet gained such access by means of the competitive pattern of the so-called *vrātyas*, but that this mechanism of the access-way to heaven was secondarily reinterpreted in the only available sources, which are brāhmaṇical: “More precisely, the discrimination between beings admitted to or excluded from heaven in PB 17.1 and, as a consequence, the distinction between gods and non-gods brought about at birth might have been the fruit of a secondary brāhmaṇic re-interpretation of some ancient passages that fuzzily mirrored a socio-religious context where the status of *deva* was that of the divinized hero, or rather, the divinized leader of the solidary and competitive group of consecrated warriors”.

attributed to the Frauuaṣis in *Y* 13.16; 57–58 when they show the right path to follow to reach the sun, the moon and the stars.

The text continues with the specification that the Marutstoma is a Vrātyastoma. This specification and the interesting technical detail on metres we have just read suggest that the passage belongs to a culture other than the Brahmanical one. The text had thus to reinterpret it in order to assimilate it. We assume that the “small Chandas” — associated with the Maruts in the following passage — is the octonary Anuṣṭubh verse, contrasted with the hieratic and refined hendecasyllabic Triṣṭubh or the dodecasyllabic Jagatī.<sup>25</sup> In particular, the Kakubh metre, made up of unequal strings, i.e. two octonaries separated by a dodecasyllabic string, is replaced by the Anuṣṭubh, which is made up of two equal octonary strings, to create the Dyautāna Sāman.

*PB* 17.1.2–6:

*hīnā vā ete hīyante ye vrātyāṃ pravāsanti na hi brahmacaryyaṃ caranti na kṛṣṇin na vaṇijyām soḍaṣo vā etat stomah samāptum arhati. marutstomo vā eṣa yāni kṣudrāṇi chandāṃsi tāni marutām. kakubhaṃ prācīm udūhaty atha yadaiṣā dvipadā kakubho loke kriyate rūpeṇaivaināṃs tat samarddhyati. adhāhīndra girvaṇa iti<sup>26</sup> viṣama chando viṣama iva vai vrātaḥ sarvān evaitān samān karoti. tāsu dyautānam.*

Those who set out on a Vrātya expedition are indeed the excluded, i.e. they are excluded: they practise neither the study of the Vedas, nor agriculture, nor trade. It is the Stoma made of sixteen [verses] that is actually capable of reaching this. This is indeed the Stoma of the Maruts. The small Chandas are those of the Maruts. “He moves the Kakubh in front; then, instead of the Kakubh, this stanza consisting of two Pādas is recited: in this way he makes them thrive with respect to their form”. The Chandas beginning with “O Indra who longs for hymns” is unequal, just as the group is unequal. This (Stoma) makes them equal. On these (metres made up of two Pādas) the Dyautāna(-sāman) is performed.

This Sāman is also mentioned in another section of the *Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa*, where it is recited as a Prāyaścitti, i.e. as an atonement formula.

*PB* 9.9.13:

*yadī grāvāpiśtryate paśubhir yajamāno vyrdhyate [ . . . ] dyutānasya mārutasya sāmṇā stuyuh.*

If one of the stones used for pressing breaks off, the Sacrificer is deprived of his cattle. [ . . . ] They should laud it with the Sāman of the Dyutāna Māruta.

<sup>25</sup> This identification is openly endorsed by *TĀ* 5.5.2.3 (= 5.5.2.4), which states: *dyutānas tvā māruto marudbhīr uttarato rocayatv ānuṣṭubhena chandasety āha*, “May Dyutāna of the Maruts together with the Maruts shine forth from above through the anuṣṭubh-metre’ thus he says”.

<sup>26</sup> The *pratīka* hinted at here is *ṚV* 8.98.7, metrically a *kakubh*, cited and commented on above in § 2.2.

Furthermore, the character of the Marutian *dyutāna*- is mentioned in an episode recorded in *PB* 17.1.

*PB* 17.1.7–10, 17:

*dyutāno mārutas teṣaṃ gṛhapatir āsīt ta etena stomenāyajanta te sarva ārdhnuvan yad etat sāma bhavaty ṛdhya eva. yan niruktaṃ nidhanam upeyur gṛhapatir evardhnuyād apetarān ghnitātha yad aniruktaṃ upayanti sarvān evaitān ṛddhau bhūtau pratiṣṭhāpayati. [ . . ] devo vo draviṇodā ity agniṣṭomasāma kāryyaṃ devatāsv evainān pratiṣṭhāpayati [ . . ] trayastriṃśatā trayastriṃśatā gṛhapatim abhisamāyanti trayastriṃśad dhi devā ārdhnuvan ṛdhya eva.*

Dyutāna Māruta was their (i.e. the Daivas') Gṛhapati. They performed this (Marut-)stoma and they all thrived, for this hymn was born for prosperity. If they started performing it (i.e. the Stoma) "explicitly" [addressed to a single god], only the Gṛhapati would thrive and he would deny the others' [prosperity]. If they start performing it "non-explicitly", he firmly establishes all of them (i.e. also the other Daivas) in prosperity and well-being. [ . . ] [The verse, which begins with] "The god who bestows riches",<sup>27</sup> must be recited for the Agniṣṭoma-sāman; he (i.e., the god) establishes them (i.e., the Daivas) among the deities. [ . . ] Each of them approaches his own Gṛhapati with thirty-three [cows], because thirty-three were the gods who thrived [through the Marutstoma]. [This was] precisely for prosperity.

A second, longer version of the same episode devoted to an important involvement of Maruts in the afterlife destiny of human beings occurs in the *Jaiminīya-Bṛāhmaṇa*. The poetic sacrificial tool for obtaining heaven will again be called *dyautāna*- and it will again be a Vrātyastoma. As anticipated, here the protagonists are called *divya vrātyas*. They seem to compete directly with the Devas for pre-eminence, which in this case is the status of the so-called Ekavrātya, the protagonist of the Vrātyakāṇḍa (*ŚS* 15).

*JB* 2.221:

*athaite vrātyastomāḥ divyā vai vrātyā vrātyām adhāvayan budhena sthapatinā. ta ete ekavrātyām ārchann imaṃ vaiva yo 'yaṃ pavata iśānaṃ vā devam. tān yajñasyartyāvidhyat. te svargaṃ lokaṃ na prajānan. te 'kāmayanta – pra svargaṃ lokaṃ jāniyāmeti. te prajāpatim evopādhāvan. tebhya etaṃ vrātyastomaṃ yajñaṃ vyadadhāt. tam āharan. Tenāyajanta. tato vai te svargaṃ lokaṃ prajānan. muhyantīva vā ete ye vrātyām dhāvayanti. tad yad vrātyastomena yajante svargasyaiva lokasyānukhyātyai.*

And these are the Vrātyastomas. The *divya vrātyas* ran a Vrātya expedition with Budha as their Sthapati. They aimed at the status of Ekavrātya, that is, at the one who blows/purifies and the god who commands. [The god] pierced them with the wound of their sacrifice: they did not learn [the way to] the world of heaven. They wished it [by saying] "May we learn [the way to] the world of heaven". They resorted to Prajāpati. He provided this Vrātyastoma

<sup>27</sup> The *pratika* hinted at here is *ṚV* 7.16.11 = *SV* 1.55: *devo vo draviṇodāḥ pūrṇaṃ vivaṣṭy āsicam | úd vā siñcādhvam úpa vā pṛṇadhvam ād id vo deva ohate*, "The God who bestows riches desires your full oblation. Pour or fill! only then does the God honour you".

sacrifice for them. They took it. They sacrificed through it. Therefore, they really learned [the way to] the world of heaven. Those who run the vrātya expedition are as if they were bewildered. That is why they sacrifice by means of the Vrātyastoma, to reveal [the way to] the world of heaven. [ . . ]

This passage, which — as we have noticed elsewhere — shows a sort of commentarial attitude with respect to ŚS 15.1,<sup>28</sup> ends by mentioning again a mighty Māruta as in the *Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa*, but in this case the sāmans are two:

*JB 2.224–225:*

*athaite uṣṇikkakubhau mādhyamdinam savanam abhi pratyāharanti. prajā vai chandasām uṣṇikkakubhau. tayor bṛhato mārutasya sāmāni bhavataḥ. dyautāne vā devasāme. chandāmsi vai svargo lokaḥ.*

[ . . ]

*tat trayamstrīṃśad vai sarvā devatāḥ. sarvāsv evaitad devatāsu yajñasyāntataḥ pratitiṣṭhanti.*

Then these (Vrātyastoma) bring the [ metres] Uṣṇih and Kakubh back to the Midday pressing. These two Uṣṇih and Kakubh are the creatures of the Chandas. Of these two, the two sāmans belong to the mighty Māruta. The two divine hymns are the two Dyautānas. Indeed, the Chandases are the world of heaven.

[ . . ]

This set of thirty-three are in fact all the gods. At the end of the sacrifice, they are well established among all the deities.

In conclusion, as far as points x. and y. of our § 5 are concerned, it is indisputable, as shown by these two late Vedic texts, that the Maruts had a special relationship with afterlife and that their mastery of the celestial paths to heaven is comparable to that of the Frauuaṣis. Thus, it might be counterintuitive to assume that these two groups of divine beings, showing so many elements in common, have independently innovated in the same direction;<sup>29</sup> on the contrary, the hypothesis that they have both inherited comparable traits from the Indo-Iranian community looks more plausible.

<sup>28</sup> Candotti/Pontillo (2015) 28–30.

<sup>29</sup> As it should be supposed if we accept that this element in the Frauuaṣis is an innovation in the so-called Iranian heroic period: see e.g. Boyce (1975) 124–127; Hintze (2009).

## 7 Looking Backwards: Traces of an Ancient Culture

We believe that, in the preceding sections, we have managed to prove that the culture attested by the Brahmanas does indeed connect the Maruts, depicted as the deified ancestors of the Vrātyas, with the world of beyond and with the path to heaven. With the Vrātyas they also share the presence of a heroic leading figure sometimes called Dyutāna Māruta. Moreover, the Maruts are repositories of an esoteric knowledge (that bears their name) on how to reach heaven, and they may pass this on to their devotees.

The crucial question that now needs to be answered is how far at least some of these features can be backdated. We started our discussion by pointing out how it has become clear in recent decades that a straightforward equivalence between the antiquity of a given text and that of the content it conveys is not always tenable. When one is confronted with a datum not recorded in the oldest texts, it is always necessary to wonder whether one is dealing with an innovation or the re-emergence of an ancient element codified only at a later date. One first step when determining the antiquity of a given testimony is to use later attestations as an inspiration to look at older texts from a different perspective. More specifically, we will focus on the character of Dyutāna Māruta, whose very name bears a link with the Maruts, and try to find some earlier hints of it.

### 7.1 Dyutāna of the Maruts, Not a Trivial *sthāpati*

This character is a complex one, since it is endowed with a wide array of features in ancient Vedic literary texts, such as that of being a *ṛṣi* and even a god.<sup>30</sup> The name itself is far from commonplace: *dyutānā-* is an aorist radical middle participle of the verbal base *dyut* “shine” and should thus be interpreted as meaning the “shining one/the lightning”. With barytonesis, the term *dyūtāna* is as old as the *ṚV*, since it is mentioned as an epithet attributed to various gods (an unnamed god<sup>31</sup> then Agni and then Sūrya) in *ṚV* 10.181.<sup>32</sup> As for *māruta-*, the secondary de-

<sup>30</sup> The *Anukramaṇī* attributes one hymn of the *Ṛgveda*, precisely *ṚV* 8.96, to this god.

<sup>31</sup> In all probability, the god of lightning given the well-known tripartition of the fires.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the subtleties of this hymn, see Pontillo (2019). Such an ancient attestation, in a context that vouches for the interpretation from the verbal base *dyut-*, “to shine”, makes Crevatin’s (1978) 53 proposed etymology of *dyu-tānā*, “the heavenly sucker”, in parallel with *ni-tānā*, “the sucker downwards” (for which see below § 7.2), unlikely.

rivative nominal stem from Marut, we object to translations such as those found in MacDonell and Bodewitz as “descendant of the Maruts” since the usage of this derivative as a patronymic is not attested, at least in the *ṚV*. Grassman s.v. gives two possible meanings: “1) aus Marut’s bestehend, ihnen gehörig; 2) mit den Marut’s in Verbindung stehend” (as an epithet of Viṣṇu). We have thus chosen to translate the term as “[proper] to the Maruts”, and sometimes straightforwardly as “marutian”, avoiding any unjustified hint of a genealogical relationship between this character and the flock of gods.

The name, with some variants, is already mentioned in a *mantra* of some Saṃhitās of the Yajurveda. The *mantra* is addressed to the ritual pole, the *audumbarī* (*sthūṇā*), the post made of *udumbara* wood, erected in the centre of the *sadas* or hall of recitations and which receives some oblations. As Bodewitz points out,<sup>33</sup> although the post does not actually play a ritually relevant role, the moment of its fixation is ritually crucial since the post is an image of the sacrificer and at the same time represents the *axis mundi*, which creates an interconnected, viable tripartite space of earth, atmosphere and sky.<sup>34</sup> The text itself is plain, in that it reads:

TS 1.3.1.2.4:

*dyutānās tvā mārutó mīnotu mitrāvaruṇayor dhruveṇa dharmaṇā.*

May Dyutāna of the Maruts fix you with the stable support of Mitra and Varuṇa.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, one can glean some interesting insights once the *mantra* is ritually contextualised and inserted into the flow of *mantras* that accompany the liturgy. Such a context is described in three different Brāhmaṇas. The first two are the already discussed Samavedic Brāhmaṇas — that is, *Pañcaviṃśa-* and *Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa*, which thus confirm themselves as the main tradition preserving the memory of this special dimension of the Maruts.

<sup>33</sup> See Bodewitz (1990) 216, n. 35: “The Udumbara pillar is described as the axis mundi, which in the cosmogony supports heaven and fastens the earth drifting about in the primordial waters”. A recent study dedicated to the *audumbarī* (*sthūṇā*) with a rich apparatus of textual references is Sahoo (2004–2005).

<sup>34</sup> Moreover, in this role of connecting heaven and earth the *audumbarī* is a kind of mirror reflection of the *yūpa* (the sacrificial post) itself, which again grants access to heaven to both victim and sacrificer.

<sup>35</sup> *VSM* 5.27 has a variant in the second part of the *mantra* with a vocative dual instead of the corresponding genitive: *mitrāvāruṇau dhruveṇa dhārmaṇā*, “o Mitra and Varuṇa with [your] firm support”.

PB 6.4.20:

*tām ucchrayati dyutānas tvā māruta ucchrayatūd divaṃ stabhānāntarikaṣaṃ pṛṇa dṛṃha pṛthivīm.*

He raises it (f.) (with the formula): “Let Dyutāna Māruta raise you (f.); upwards establish the sky; fill the air; make the earth firm!”

JB 1.72

*ud divaṃ stabhānāntarikaṣaṃ pṛṇa pṛthivīm upareṇa dṛṃha dyutānas tvā māruto minotu mitrāvāruṇayor dhruveṇa dhārmaṇā gṛtēna dyāvāpṛthivī āpṛiṇāthāṃ supippalā oṣadhīḥ kṛdhi svāhety audumbarīm abhijuhoti.*

“Upwards establish the sky; fill the air; make the earth firm with your lower part”. “Let Dyutāna of the Maruts fix you, with the stable support of Mitra and Varuṇa”, “Heaven and earth, he pleased with ghee”, “Make the crops bear good grains, hail!”. Thus he pours [the oblation] over the sacrificial post.

The trait that stands out most in both these passages is that of support and connection between the three worlds proper to the *sadas* pole (as well as to the sacrificial pole). Dyutāna Māruta is invoked as a deity in the midst of other better-known ones entrusted precisely with the erection of the pole. He is thus the one who has the power to establish the partition of the worlds and at the same time to connect them.

Moreover, a particularly significant homology is proposed as an interpretation of the *mantra* itself by the third text, the *Śatapatha – Brāhmaṇa*, a late yet interestingly syncretistic text of the White Yajurveda. This text chooses the second variant of the *mantra* split in two halves:

ŚBM 3.6.1.16:

*ātha minoti. dyutānās tvā mārutó minotv íti. yo vá ayam pávata eṣá dyutānó mārutas. tád enām eténa minoti. mitrāvāruṇau dhruvéṇa dhārmaṇéti. pṛāṇodānau vái mitrāvāruṇau tád enām pṛāṇodānābhyām minoti.*

Then he erects [the f. pole] [saying] “Let Dyutāná Mārutá raise you [the f. pole]!” This Dyutāná Mārutá is in truth that famous one who blows/purifies. With this (wind) he then fixes it (i.e. the earth). “Mitra and Varuṇa [may fix you] with the stable foundation!” Truly Mitra and Varuṇa are the inhalation and exhalation. He then fixes it (i.e. the earth) with the inhalation and exhalation.

The most interesting information here is the identification of Dyutāna Māruta with “that famous one who blows/purifies”. This description is used in almost identical terms (*yo yaṃ pavata iśānaṃ vā devaṃ*, “the purifying god” or “the god who commands”) in JB 2.221<sup>36</sup> in order to identify the Ekavrātya, i.e. that vrātya

36 See § 6.

who is credited with a number of glorious feats including finding the path to becoming a (solar) god and setting the sun, the moon and the stars in motion.

## 7.2 Nitāna of the Maruts: Only a Name Variation?

An interesting variant is found in *Maitrayāṇi*-, *Kaṭha*- and *Kapisthalakaṭha-Saṃhitās* in exactly the same ritual context. Here we find *nitāna tvā māruto nihantu* instead of *dyutānās tvā māruto minotu*. Moreover, the tradition for the second part of the mantra intersects with the variants we have already seen in the case of *dyutāna*, so that we have the following possible alternatives:

**Table 1:** Synopsis of the Mantra Variants.

VSM 5.27	<i>dyutānās tvā māruto minotu</i>		<i>mitrāvāruṇau dhruvéṇa dhārmaṇā</i>
TS 1.3.1.2.4	<i>dyutānās tvā māruto minotu</i>		<i>mitrāvaruṇayor dhruveṇa dharmāṇā</i>
MS 1.2.11 = MS 3.8.9		<i>nitānas tvā māruto nihantu</i>	<i>mitrāvaruṇau dhruveṇa dharmāṇā</i>
KS 2.12 = KS 25.10		<i>nitānas tvā māruto nihantu</i>	<i>mitrāvaruṇayor dhruveṇa dharmāṇā</i>
Kap. 2.6		<i>nitānas tvā māruto nihantu</i>	<i>mitrāvaruṇayor dhruveṇa dharmāṇā</i>

It is not easy to choose between the two *mantra*-variants or to postulate a derivation path. Crevatin (1978) argues for a greater antiquity of the *nitāna*-formula, which would make *dyutāna* a reinterpretation arising from difficulties in the transmission of text. Although we do not fully agree with Crevatin's interpretation, it does contain some very interesting elements and will be briefly discussed here.

The figure of Nitāna Māruta is definitely more elusive than that of Dyutāna insofar as it has no further attestations as a mythical name. In fact, it is precisely on the basis of this observation that Crevatin actually proposed a reading of the syntagm not as a proper name but as an apposition to the post in the

*sadas*. Crevatin<sup>37</sup> points out that the only other occurrence of the term *nitāna* is found in a passage from ŚS 6.139.1 with the meaning of “branch or sucker going downwards”, where it is opposed to *pratāna*, “branch with horizontal extension” in a hymn that evidently invokes the cosmic tree. Nevertheless, in order to postulate a nominal sentence, this interpretation requires that the text be amended, reading a nominative *tvam* instead of the accusative *tvā* and shifting the finite verb to the second sentence, with a new, implicit, agent:

*nitāna tvam māruto nihantu mitrāvaruṇau dhruveṇa dharmanā.*

You are the Mārutian downward sucker may he (the priest)<sup>38</sup> set you up, o Mitra and Varuṇa, with a stable foundation!

Despite the ingeniousness of the proposed emendation, we are left somewhat perplexed since this variant is never attested (in the Saṃhitās or in the commentaries). On the other hand, the immediately following *mantras* of some texts, e.g. in *MS* 3.8.9,<sup>39</sup> where *tvā* is evidently an accusative form and always refers to the column that is being erected, lead one to surmise that the accusative was the original reading. Moreover, the character of Dyutāna Māruta is also attested outside the context of the *mantra*; it is therefore difficult to believe that it is simply a textual ploy used to solve a problem.

On the contrary, we consider that we are clearly dealing with a proper name in both variants: the name *nitāna māruta*, i.e. “the marutian one leaning downwards”, highlights the figure’s relationship with the cosmic tree as an image of the post, while Dyutāna Māruta fosters the identification of this same post with the lightning or the pillar of light.<sup>40</sup> This interpretation is reinforced when we

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Thus following Crevatin (1978) 53: “il punto centrale è l’accusativo *tvā*, che a mio avviso è errore (agevolmente giustificabile) della tradizione orale e della recitazione per il nominativo *tvam*, ossia *nitānās tvam māruto*; abbiamo cioè una frase nominale di ottima credibilità, ‘Tu sei il pollone all’inghiù marutiano’: dopo di essa il senso esige una pausa e quanto segue (‘che egli ti innalzi . . .’) dev’essere inteso come un invito augurale rivolto all’officiante che solleva il palo”.

<sup>39</sup> *MS* 3.8.9 *brahmavaniṃ tvā kṣatravaniṃ paryūhāmīti*, “I heap you up, you who provides the power of speech, provides the power of kingship”.

<sup>40</sup> It is not possible here to address the complex issue of the imagery of the two paths of fire/light, from heaven to earth and vice-versa, and their links to the idea of a connection between heaven and earth. Suffice it to recall the image of the column of fire emerging from the *gharmapot* compared to the image of a cow “transforming herself into lightning” (*vidyūd bhāvanti*) in *RV* 1.164.29, as discussed by Houben (2000) 507. As pointed out by Pontillo (2019) 256, “In fact the Gharma-milk becomes a sort of inverted lightning, unexpectedly directed at heaven”. Such an inversed path, as shown in Pontillo’s article, was not uncommon in the *RV*.

consider the testimony of the commentarial part of the Saṃhitās where Nitāna Māruta is matched with a sort of primeval sacrificer:

MS 3.8.9:

*nitānas tvā māruto nihantv iti mano vai nitānaḥ prāṇā mārutās, mitrāvaruṇau dhruveṇa dharmaneti mitram evaināṃ dādāra varuṇaḥ kalpayati vidhṛtyai ca khalu vā eṣāṃ prajānāṃ kṛtyai ca mīyate mitrāvaruṇau vai devānāṃ dharmadhārayau daivaṃ vā etad dharmanam adīdharatām, yad audumbarī.*

“May Nitāna Māruta set you up”: indeed the *manas* (the intellect) pervades downwards and the *prānas* (the breaths) are marutian (windy?); “Mitra and Varuṇa [may set you up] with a stable foundation!” Mitra indeed established it (f.) while Varuṇa shapes it; and for the protection of these living beings and for their shaping it is fixed. Mitra and Varuṇa indeed are the ones who establish the foundation (*dharman*) of the gods; indeed they have established this divine foundation which is the Udumbara post.

KS 25.10:

*nitānas tvā māruto nihantv iti mano vai nitānaḥ prāṇā mārutās | svayaivaināṃ devatayāvaharati || nitāno ha sma vai māruto devānām audumbarīm minoti | tenaivaināṃ minoti | mitrāvaruṇayor dhruveṇa dharmaneti | mitreṇa vā imāḥ prajāś śāntā varuṇena vidhṛtāḥ kṛtyā eva vidhṛtyai.*

“May Nitāna Māruta plant you”: indeed the *manas* (the intellect) leans downwards and the breaths are marutian (windy?), he (the priest) puts it (f.) down through its own deity. Nitāna Māruta indeed fixed the *audumbarī* of the gods. With him (N. M.) he (the priest) fixes it (f.). “With the stable foundation of Mitra and Varuṇa” etc.

Compared to other homologies that characterise the exegetical activity of the brāhmaṇas, this example undoubtedly presents some peculiar traits. In fact, we are asked to interpret the two parts of the name separately as indicating two different entities, namely the intellect and the vital breaths or sense organs.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, these two entities constitute the frame of the human being as such and, considering the fact that the *audumbarī* post is an image of the sacrificer and that it is built on the basis of his height, it follows that Nitāna is the image of the primeval sacrificer.<sup>42</sup> The paronymological analysis of the name thus does not prevent us from resorting to a single archetypal figure, and this idea is even reinforced by the fact that KS explicitly identify him as the heroic agent at the origin

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. BĀU 2.1.17: *yātraishā etāt suptó 'bhūd yā eṣā vijñānamāyāḥ púruṣas tād eṣāṃ prāñānām vijñānena vijñānam ādāya yā eṣò 'ntār hīdaya ākāśās tasmīñ chete*, “When this man was asleep, the Puruṣa which consists of perception, taking possession of perception by means of the perception of these *prāñās* (pl., i.e., the senses), lies in that space which is within the heart”.

<sup>42</sup> Renou (1953) 53.

of the connection between heaven and earth established by the celestial post in the *sadas*.

Dyutāna and Nitāna Māruta thus seem to be two different marutian divine beings who share a series of founding traits that are, however, depicted in different ways: in both cases they are deities entrusted with the ritually crucial moment of raising the *sadas* post, which represents both the sacrificer and the *axis* that connects heaven with earth. Likewise, common to both figures (albeit more directly in the case of Nitāna) is the association with breath and wind, considered typically marutian.<sup>43</sup> Dyutāna, however, presents more obvious heroic traits (he was *sthāpati* of those who were left behind at the first sacrifice) and is associated with a system of images that revolve around the theme of light/lightning, also in its well-known role of connecting the sky with the earth. Nitāna, on the other hand, is a personification of the sacrificer who is granted access to heaven through the ritual realisation of his alter ego, the *sadas* post, which itself is an image of the cosmological tree or *axis mundi*.

## 7 Conclusions

A comparative analysis of some later sources has enabled us to recover a number of interesting elements that allow us to attribute a specific relationship with post-mortem destiny to the Maruts. In particular, the Brāhmaṇas testify to the existence of a Marut-Stoma to obtain heaven or to be placed among the gods,<sup>44</sup> and the Maruts are endowed with a specific expertise in this domain. The leader of the rite, Dyutāna Māruta, is already attested in the Saṃhitās, where he shows some unmistakably divine traits. Again, even if in a different ritual context, his role is to create a path connecting heaven and earth, along which the sacrificer can ascend. The variant reading Nitāna Māruta might represent an alternative liturgical identification, or it might be a later rationalisation constructed upon the image of the cosmic tree. In both cases an individual character is picked out from the usually uniform marutian flock.

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<sup>43</sup> In fact, Dyutāna Māruta is associated with breath through his identification with the Ekavrātya. For a recent focus on the relationship between the Ekavrātya and breaths see Neri/Pontillo (2023) 107–111.

<sup>44</sup> The parallel with the Vrātyastoma is also of great interest, and likewise the correspondence between the leader of the *Männerbund*, with the divinised figure of the Ekavrātya and his well-known cosmological/demiurgic dimension.

We hope we have succeeded in showing that many of the common traits between Maruts and Frauuaṣis already identified by previous research are sound in the face of in-depth analysis. In so doing, we have also emphasised further elements of comparison (identification with birds, the role of setting the stars in motion, the relationship with water and abundance). Moreover, the specific trait of relationship with the afterlife can now be added to the list, a trait hitherto not associated with the Maruts.

As a matter of fact, it seems to us that the only element opposing an identification between the two divine groups as being born from a common Indo-Iranian substratum lies in the fact that they are identified by two completely different names.<sup>45</sup> The term *frauuaṣi* (and in particular the term *frauuarāne* in the anonymous prayer) are, as we have seen, not without parallels in the Vedic world (cf. *pravara*), but what is lacking in this case, at least in the current state of our research, is the relationship with the Maruts. A tentative explanation could be that the Frauuaṣis, in their liturgical aspect, are indeed an Iranian innovation built, however, on a common Indo-Iranian basis.

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<sup>45</sup> Although a mutual intentional distancing at the linguistic level would certainly not be surprising in this Indo-Iranian context.

