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# What Was the *πάτριος νόμος* of the Sophists with Whom Onesicritus Conversed (Strab. 15.1.64): Some Fresh Data from Vedic Sources

## 1 Focus of the inquiry

Over the last century many remarkable contributions have been devoted to an interesting meeting between Alexander the Great and some Indian ‘sophists’ near Taxila, an episode narrated by several Greek sources with varying degrees of reliability. The present paper focuses on one of the testimonies handed down by Strabo in book XV of his *Geographia*, namely that attributed to Onesicritus, the renowned helmsman in Alexander’s fleet who was sent by Alexander himself to converse with this group. Following in the footsteps of some Indologists and Greek history and literature scholars, our investigation will concentrate mainly on the single episode of Calanus’ self-incineration, with the aim of trying to understand whether these aspects rely on a specific tradition, particularly Brahmanical or non-Brahmanical doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Finally, on the basis of some Vedic sources dealing with the leader’s self-immolation a slight change to one of the most authoritative current hypotheses on this question will be proposed.

## 2 A terminological premise

The title of my paper refers to the opening sentence of Strabo’s report which gives a brief summary of the life of the first sophist that Onesicritus meets, namely Calanus, who died *τῷ πατρίῳ νόμῳ*:

Ὀνησίκριτος δὲ πεμφθῆναι φησιν αὐτὸς διαλεξόμενος τοῖς σοφισταῖς τούτοις [...]. διαλεχθῆναι δ’ ἐνὶ τούτων Καλάνῳ, ὃν καὶ συνακολουθῆσαι τῷ βασιλεῖ μέχρι Περσίδος καὶ ἀποθανεῖν *τῷ πατρίῳ νόμῳ* τεθέντα ἐπὶ πυρκαϊάν – Strab. 15.1.63–64.

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1 As noticed by Karttunen (2002) 135 and n. 2: “the reasons for this suicide were never completely understood in the West” and it “somewhat puzzled modern scholars, too”.

**Nota:** All translations are by the author, unless explicitly stated.

Onesicritus says that he himself was sent to converse with these sophists [...]; [he says that] he conversed with one of these, namely Calanus, who accompanied the king all the way to Persia, and died *in accordance with the ancestral custom*,<sup>2</sup> being placed on a pyre.

Onesicritus was indeed sent to converse with these sophists since their excellent reputation and their nakedness had aroused Alexander's curiosity:

ἀκούειν γὰρ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον ὡς γυμνοὶ διατελοῖεν καὶ καρτερίας ἐπιμελοῖντο οἱ ἄνθρωποι ἐν τιμῇ τε ἀγοῖντο πλείστη, παρ' ἄλλους δὲ μὴ βαδίζοιεν κληθέντες [...] ἐπειδὴ οὔτε αὐτῷ πρέπειν ἐδόκει παρ' ἐκείνους φοιτᾶν οὔτε ἐκείνους βιάζεσθαι παρὰ τὰ πάτρια ποιεῖν τι ἄκοντας, αὐτὸς ἔφη πεμψῆναι – Strab. 15.1.63.

Alexander had heard that they always went about naked, and that they were people held in the highest honour who devoted themselves to endurance, and that, when invited, they did not go to visit other people [...]. Since it did not seem appropriate to him (i.e. to Alexander) to either visit them or to force them to do anything contrary to their will *against their ancestral customs*, he (i.e. Onesicritus) was sent [to them].

It is noteworthy that the adjective *πάτριος* (found in the questioned phrase *πάτριος νόμος*) also occurs here, but it is employed as a substantive inflected in the accusative neuter plural form, plausibly in the sense of 'inherited customs'.<sup>3</sup> According to Strabo, τὰ πάτρια determined their reserve which explained their reluctance to leave their seats of asceticism to participate in any kind of meeting anywhere else. Alexander respected their wishes and sent Onesicritus, one of his retinue, to talk to them.

In the analysed section of Strabo's work another occurrence of *νόμος* deserves attention: it is used by the second sophist Onesicritus meets, i.e. Mandanis,

2 Cfr. e.g. transl. Jones (1966) 109: "he died *in accordance with the ancestral custom*, being placed upon a pyre and burned up"; transl. Biffi (2005) 97: "e si lasciò morire, *fedele all'usanza Indiana*, adagiato su una pira"; transl. Radt (2009) 215: "und *nach herkömmlicher Sitte* auf den Scheiterhaufen gelegt aus dem Leben geschieden sei"; transl. Leroy (2016) 54: "et qui est mort *suivant les rites de ses ancêtres*, couché sur un bûcher".

3 Here the term refers to the Indian cultural context, but with reference to the Greek one at least, the adjective *πάτριος* is indeed an ambiguous expression especially as it was used by fourth-century BCE orators. Nonetheless, several authors adopted it "to refer to religious tradition or civic custom currently in use, as Thucydides did in describing the practice of the public funeral speech as being τῷ πατρίῳ νόμῳ" – Atack (2018) 176. See Thuc. 2.34.1: ἐν δὲ τῷ αὐτῷ χειμῶνι Ἀθηναῖοι τῷ πατρίῳ νόμῳ χρώμενοι δημοσίᾳ ταφὰς ἐποιήσαντο τῶν ἐν τῷδε τῷ πολέμῳ πρώτων ἀποθανόντων τρόπῳ τοιῷδε, "During the same winter, the Athenians, in accordance with ancestral custom, held a public funeral for the first who fell in this war". As for a partial overlapping use of the plural terms *πάτρια* and *νόμοι* especially in inscriptions and decrees, in which they can convey 'customs, traditions, laws, instructions' see also Carbon/Pirenne-Delforge (2017) 142–144. Many thanks to Elisabetta Poddighe for these important indications and references.

who asks whether the Greeks also taught similar doctrines. He is told that Pythagoras, Socrates and Diogenes taught something like this. Mandanis then replies as follows:

ὅτι τᾶλλα μὲν νομίζοι φρονίμως αὐτοῖς δοκεῖν, ἐν δ' ἁμαρτάνειν νόμον πρὸ τῆς φύσεως τιθεμένους· οὐ γὰρ <ἄν> αἰσχύνεσθαι γυμνοὺς ὥσπερ αὐτὸν διάγειν ἀπὸ λιτῶν ζῶντας – Strab. 15.1.65.

In other respects he regarded them (i.e. the Greeks) as wise, but they were wrong about one thing, namely, in preferring custom (νόμος) to nature (φύσις), for otherwise they would not be ashamed to go around naked, like he did, and subsist on frugal fare.

Many learned pages have already been written about the sophists walking around naked, starting from ancient authors who were even contemporary with Alexander, such as Theophrastus (*Hist. pl.* 4.5) who depicts the “Indian sages who wear no clothes” (τῶν Ἰνδῶν οἱ σοφοὶ μὴ ἀμπεχόμενοι), and Arrian who also mentions “the naked (γυμνοὶ) sophists” (*Indikà* 11.7). Instead, nobody can be sure about the identity of the *Gymnetae* described by Pliny (7.2.28) as a long-lived people (*macrobii*, surpassing a hundred years) and the Γυμνήτες occurring in Strab. 15.1.70 who are said to be a subgroup of the Pramnai,<sup>4</sup> opposed to the Brahmins. Nonetheless Calanus surprisingly invited Onesicritus to take off his clothes and listen naked to his words:

κελεύειν, εἰ βούλοιο ἀκροάσασθαι, καταθέμενον τὴν σκευὴν γυμνὸν ἐπὶ τῶν αὐτῶν λίθων κείμενον μετέχειν τῶν λόγων – Strab. 15.1.64.

He (i.e. Calanus) proposed that if he (i.e. Onesicritus) wished to learn, [he should] strip off his clothes, lie down naked on those very stones, and in that manner listen to his words.

Moreover, we have just noted how in Strab. 15.1.65, Mandanis again emphasises their practice of nakedness, in contrast with Greek usage, so that the later authors might have merely transformed this piece of information into a sort of proper name.<sup>5</sup> However, this detail together with the fact that they used to beg for alms (*bhikṣāgamana*) in the evening caused some scholars such as Karttunen and Stoneman<sup>6</sup> to rule out the hypothesis that these sophists were Buddhists, even though their nakedness does not depend on some specific νόμος. In fact, as we

<sup>4</sup> The identification of the Pramnai with the *śramaṇas* (opposed to the *brāhmaṇas*) has been discussed at length, but Falk (2022) recently proved its validity on an epigraphic and numismatic basis.

<sup>5</sup> See also Karttunen (1997) 56.

<sup>6</sup> Karttunen (1997) 62; Stoneman (2019) 326.

have seen, Mandanis praised nakedness as one of the effects of their giving priority to nature (φύσις) over customs (νόμος). He scolded Calanus for his arrogance, for having laughed when he saw Onesicritus dressed in his cloak, hat and boots and demanded that, if the latter wanted to attend his teachings, he would have to stand naked on the very stones on which he himself stood.

Bronkhorst spotted a passage in the *Āpastamba-Dharmasūtra* which informs us that in the third century BCE<sup>7</sup> – not long after Alexander the Great's incursion into India – some news about an optional rule prescribing nakedness for the ascetics did exist:

*tasya muktaṃ ācchādanam vihitam. sarvataḥ parimokṣam eke* – *ĀpDhS* 2.21.11–12.

Discarded clothes are prescribed for him. Some say that he should go completely naked – transl. Olivelle (2000) 105.

The whole question of nakedness should perhaps be at least partly downplayed, because here the action of wearing no clothes is not something imposed by some religious prescription.

Furthermore, it is quite plausible that, in the eyes of the Greeks, even wearing a simple piece of cloth around one's hips, sounded unconventional and perhaps unacceptable.<sup>8</sup> In other words, there is no need to associate this detail to the rigid religious choice of the renowned group of the *digambara* i.e. of the 'sky clothed' Jains. As noticed by Stoneman, "nudity or near-nudity, a fruit diet and non-violence are equally appropriate to other typologies of asceticism and, on the other hand, there is no reference to specific Jain practices such as the avoidance of pollution of the air by the breath [in Onesicritus' report]".<sup>9</sup> The latter detail would certainly have caught the attention of Alexander's envoy. However, what is more important for the present research is the fact that Mandanis' words seem to point to a natural relationship with nakedness and not to a prescription for them, a lexical opposition that is conveyed by the use of the terms φύσις and νόμος.

7 Bronkhorst (2015) 14 and (2016) 41. Olivelle (2018) 21 assigns this *Dharmasūtra*, which is the earliest one, to the period between the third and early second century BCE. I thank Alessandro Giudice who pointed out this more recent dating by Olivelle.

8 Bosworth (1998) 188 n. 70 maintained that Calanus cannot "have been enjoining complete nakedness, for even the ascetics themselves retained a loin-cloth to preserve their modesty", but, as easily also documented by Stoneman (2019) 293, even today there are plenty of ascetics who still go around completely naked.

9 Stoneman (1995) 108.

These are the three passages from Strabo that aroused my curiosity as to exactly which νόμος Strabo (or better his source Onesicritus) is hinting at, when Calanus' self-incineration is labelled as something happening τῷ πατρίῳ νόμῳ, "in accordance with the ancestral custom".

Scholars have often taken it for granted that this piece of information was completely unfounded.<sup>10</sup> This could be because ancient authors never really considered Onesicritus' account of the meeting with the Sophists as a particularly reliable source, even though, curiously enough, it probably served as the basis for all the later versions.<sup>11</sup> Note that a further difficulty in tracing historical data from Strabo's account of Calanus' death stems from the fact that he offers this episode of Alexander the Great's expedition as an example of the lack of agreement between his sources:

Τῆς δ' ἀνομολογίας τῶν συγγραφέων ἔστω παράδειγμα καὶ ὁ περὶ τοῦ Καλάνου λόγος, ὅτι μὲν γὰρ συνῆλθεν Ἀλεξάνδρῳ καὶ ἀπέθανεν ἐκὼν παρ' αὐτῷ διὰ πυρὸς ὁμολογοῦσι. τὸν δὲ τρόπον οὐ τὸν αὐτὸν φασιν οὐδὲ κατὰ τὰς αὐτὰς αἰτίας – Strab. 15.1.68.

Let the account of Calanus also be an example of the disagreement among historians. They all agree that he went with Alexander, and voluntarily died by fire in his presence, but they differ as to the manner and cause (of his death).

### 3 How Calanus died on the pyre

The chronicle of Calanus' death recounted by Strab. 15.1.68 starts with the following sentence:

Ἐν Πασαργάδαις δὲ νοσήσαντα, τότε πρῶτον αὐτῷ νόσου γενομένης, ἐξαγαγεῖν ἑαυτόν, ἄγοντα ἔτος ἑβδομηκοστὸν καὶ τρίτον, μὴ προσέχοντα ταῖς τοῦ βασιλέως.

When he fell ill at Pasargadae, the first illness of his life, he voluntarily left his life at the age of seventy-three years, paying no heed to the king's pleas.

Two different versions of the event are then presented. The first of these is minimalist and presents a favourable image of his death, emphasising how he stood heroically waiting motionless to be burnt by fire:

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. also recently Leroy (2016) 224: "Onésicrite (supra 1.65) fait de la mort volontaire une loi imposée aux Brahmanes, ce qui n'a bien sûr rien d'exact". See also Leroy (2015) 221.

<sup>11</sup> See Stoneman (1995) 103; Winiarczyk (2007) 238; Bruseker (2012) 11.

γενομένης δὲ πυρᾶς καὶ τεθείσης ἐπ' αὐτῆς χρυσῆς κλίνης, κατακλιθέντα εἰς αὐτήν, ἐγκαλυψάμενον ἐμπρησθῆναι.

A pyre was made and a golden couch placed on it: he laid himself upon this pyre, covered himself up, and he was burnt.

The second version starts by providing a little more information about the building of the pyre and portrays Calanus as an impulsive man rather than an ascetic endowed with extreme self-control:

οἱ δὲ ξύλινον οἶκον γενέσθαι, φυλλάδος δ' ἐμπλησθέντος καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς στέγης πυρᾶς γενομένης καὶ ἐμπρηθείσης, ὥσπερ ἐκέλευσε, μετὰ τὴν πομπὴν μεθ' ἧς ἦκεν, ῥίψαντα ἑαυτὸν ὡς ἂν δοκὸν συνεμπρησθῆναι τῷ οἴκῳ.

Others say, that a wooden house was built which was filled with leaves and that a pyre was built on its roof and a fire lit therein, as he had ordered, after the procession with which he had arrived, and, throwing himself upon the pyre, he was consumed like a log of wood, together with the house.

Indeed, καὶ ἐμπρηθείσης, “and lit a fire in it”<sup>12</sup> replaces the participle ἐγκλεισθέντα, “shut up”, on which Radt’s critical edition placed a *crux desperationis*<sup>13</sup> and suggested this replacement in the relevant commentary.<sup>14</sup> It was in fact difficult to conciliate the final action of Calanus throwing himself upon the fire with the fact that he had previously been shut up in the very house on whose roof the pyre was built.

In the latter version, the detail about the procession which accompanied Calanus to the pyre projects this funeral ceremony onto a leader’s triumphal parade, especially if we take into account Arrian’s version in *Anabasis* 7.2–3, on which Strabo’s first version is probably grounded and whose declared source is Nearchus, i.e. the navarch in Alexander’s army. Arrian places great emphasis on the procession on horseback that accompanies Calanus to the place of self-immolation, to the sound of trumpets, battle cries and elephant barks, and a sort of final distribution of the goods given to him by the retinue such as a royal robe (ἐσθῆς βασιλική), per-

12 In Leroy’s edition – see Leroy (2016) 59.

13 Radt (2009) 220. See also Bosworth (1998) 177 n. 14: “Calanus is said to be ‘enclosed’ [...]. Enclosed in what? Hardly the “house”, which is already filled with leaves; perhaps in a kind of structure near the pyre, from which he could leap into flames at an opportune moment”.

14 Radt (2009) 204: “Der überlieferte Text bietet mehrere Anstöße: wenn Kalanos in das Haus eingeschlossen wird (ἐγκλεισθέντα), kann er sich nicht mehr in das Feuer stürzen (ῥίψαντα ἑαυτὸν); ausserdem ist das Haus ja mit Laub gefüllt (ἐμπλησθέντος); ferner vermisst man eine Erwähnung des Anzündens von Haus + Scheiterhaufen. Alle diese Anstöße wären behoben wenn man καὶ ἐμπρηθείσης statt ἐγκλεισθέντα schriebe”. I thank Paola Pisano who drew my attention to the elegant solution advanced by Radt.

fumes (θυμιάματα), gold and silver cups (ἐκπώματα χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργυροῦ), the carpets (στρώματα) used to adorn the pyre and a royal Nesea breed of horse (ἵππος βασιλικός ὢν τῶν Νησαίων) which would have carried him to the pyre itself, had he been well enough to ride. The final effect in Arrian's version is that of a warrior's triumph and the division of spoils among warriors. Calanus' heroism is also particularly evident, because just like Strabo, Arrian also emphasises the fact that he remained immobile while the fire blazed.<sup>15</sup> Instead, the second version in Strabo's work underlines his impulsive leap into the fire. While both the afore-mentioned first descriptions of Calanus' death are based on the same source, i.e. Nearchus, Strabo's second version is traditionally attributed to Alexander's chamberlain, Chares of Mytilene.<sup>16</sup> In this case, his account does not paint Calanus in a favourable light which is in line with the criticism expressed by Megasthenes shortly after (see below).

Another major detail shared by Strabo and Arrian is the illness which caused Calanus to desire self-incineration. The verb used by both authors is νοσέω and Arrian explains that μαλακισθῆναι γάρ τι τῷ σώματι τὸν Κάλανον ἐν τῇ Περσίδι γῇ, οὕτω πρόσθεν νοσήσαντα, "when Calanus was in Persia, he became weak in the body, he who had never been sick before" (*Anab.* 7.3.1). This is indeed in line with a custom practised by 'sophists' which Mandanis had depicted in a previous passage, that is:

Αἰσχιστον δ' αὐτοῖς νομίζεσθαι νόσον σωματικὴν· τὸν δ' ὑπονόησαντα καθ' αὐτοῦ τοῦτο, ἐξάγειν ἑαυτὸν διὰ πυρὸς νήσαντα πυράν, ὑπαλειψάμενον δὲ καὶ καθίσαντα ἐπὶ τὴν πυράν ὑφάψαι κελεύειν, ἀκίνητον δὲ καίεσθαι – Strab. 15.1.65.

They regard disease of the body as the most disgraceful thing, and he who suspects this in himself, after preparing a pyre, voluntarily leaves his life through fire. And he first anoints himself, sits down upon it (i.e. the pyre), orders it to be lit, and burns remaining immobile.

And this seems to be the fruit of the coherent speculative framework that is described in a nutshell at the beginning of the same paragraph:

Τὰ γοῦν λεχθέντα εἰς τοῦτ' ἔφη συντείνειν ὡς εἴη λόγος ἄριστος, ὃς ἡδονὴν καὶ λύπην ψυχῆς ἀφαιρήσεται – Strab. 15.1.65.

He (i.e. Onesicritus) said that his (i.e. Mandanis') speeches tended to maintain that the best teaching is that which will be able to remove pleasure and grief from the mind.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. Arr. *Anab.* 7.3.5: ἀλλὰ τοῖς γὰρ ἄλλοις θαῦμα παρασχέσθαι οὐδέν τι παρακινήσαντα ἐν τῷ πυρὶ τοῦ σώματος, "But for everyone else it was a wonder to see Calanus' body in the flames without the slightest tremor".

<sup>16</sup> Bosworth (1998) 177; Leroy (2016) 224.

## 4 Did Calanus die by the rules?

As already mentioned, the second version of the account of Calanus' self-incineration seems to anticipate the criticism the gesture provoked in some people. The official author of such a criticism is Megasthenes:

Μεγασθένης δ' ἐν τοῖς μὲν φιλοσόφοις οὐκ εἶναι δόγμα φησὶν ἑαυτοὺς ἐξάγειν – Strab. 15.1.68.

But Megasthenes maintains that killing oneself is not a dogma among philosophers.

Nevertheless Bronkhorst clearly stated that “Megasthenes does not constitute a valid counter-argument, for he lived in and primarily described a part of India that was far from Taxila, where Brahmanism was not the dominant ideology”.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is perhaps left to the Indologists to verify whether this voluntary death on the pyre was really inspired by some Indian *πάτριος νόμος* or not. Hillebrandt already singled out the simple Vedic phrase *agnipraveśād brahmalokaḥ* that unequivocally supports the tradition of voluntary death by immolation in the latest *Dharmasūtra*, that is the *Vasiṣṭha-Dharmasūtra*, probably dating back to the first century CE.<sup>18</sup> This passage occurs in a section devoted to purificatory texts (*pavitrāṇi*), as explicitly stated in *VDhS* 28.10. The mentioned teaching occurs immediately after one praising abstention from the use of violence:

*ahimsy upapadyate svargam. agnipraveśād brahmalokaḥ* – *VDhS* 29.3–4.

A man who refrains from causing injury to living beings goes to heaven; entering a fire, one attains the world of Brahman. – transl. Olivelle (2000) 461.

And this explanation was endorsed by both Bronkhorst and Karttunen;<sup>19</sup> the latter also noticed that the same work, by contrast, is explicitly against suicide (*VDhS* 23.14). However, as is well-known, several scholars have questioned whether Calanus was indeed a Buddhist,<sup>20</sup> a Jain,<sup>21</sup> a Brahmin,<sup>22</sup> an Ajīvika<sup>23</sup> or even a wandering

<sup>17</sup> Bronkhorst (2016).

<sup>18</sup> Hillebrandt (1917) 5: “*agnipraveśād brahmalokaḥ* steht für den, der ‘ins Feuer eingeht, die Verheißung von Brahmas Welt’ [...] in offener Übereinstimmung mit einer alten und weitverbreiteten Sitte”.

<sup>19</sup> Bronkhorst (2016) 37; Karttunen (1997) 65.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Tarn (1951) 415; Halkias (2015) 164 and 166.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Thapar (1973) 60.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. Hillebrandt (1917); Bosworth (1998) 186.

<sup>23</sup> See Stoneman (2019) 317–319.



ascetic in general,<sup>24</sup> or whether his words simply reflected Greek cynical thought.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, Bronkhorst<sup>26</sup> has already taken a giant step in answering this question by suggesting that, rather than looking at other religions, we should have “a closer look at Brahmanism” to explain Calanus’ sensational gesture, since “after all, Brahmanism was deeply preoccupied with the Vedic sacrificial fire, whose victim was often looked upon as a substitute for the sacrifice”.

Thus, the purpose of the present research is limited to the reconsideration of Vedic passages which were surveyed by Bronkhorst,<sup>27</sup> i.e. to the Vedic sources about the Sarvasvāra Agniṣṭoma<sup>28</sup> – also known as Śunaṣkarnastoma, as demonstrated e.g. by the *Āpastamba-Śrautasūtra* (ĀpŚS 22.7.20–25) and *Hiraṇyakeśin-Śrautasūtra* (HŚS 17.3.18) which quote both names of the sacrifice (i.e. Sarvasvāra and Śunaṣkarnastoma) – next to each other.

This sacrifice is explained in two Sāmavedic sources, namely the *Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa* and the *Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa*, quoted here in their commonly accepted chronological order, at least in terms of redaction. The *PB*, which is shorter and has an earlier redaction, reads:

*trivṛd agniṣṭomaḥ sa sarvasvāro yaḥ kāmāyētānāmayatāmum lokam iyām iti sa etena yajeta. prāṇo vai trivṛt prāṇaḥ svarāḥ prāṇān evāsya bahir nīrādadhāti tājak pramīyate. trivṛd vai stomānām kṣepiṣṭho yat trivṛd bhavaty āśīyaḥ saṃgacchatā ity ananto vai svaro 'nanto 'sau loko 'nantam evainaṃ svargaṃ lokaṃ gamayati. abhivatyāḥ pravaty bhavanty asmād evainaṃ lokāt svargaṃ lokaṃ gamayanti ārbhāvapavamāne stūyamāna audumbaryā dakṣiṇā prāvṛto nīpadyate tad eva saṃgacchate. sa eṣa śunaṣkarnastoma etena vai śunaṣkarnā bāṣ-kiho 'yajata tasmāc chunaskarnastoma ity ākhyāyate – PB 17.12.1–6.*

A threefold [i.e. nine-versed] Agniṣṭoma; it has all the Sāmans circumflex [at the end]. He who wishes: “May I reach that world not through any disease”,<sup>29</sup> should worship by means of this. The threefold chant is breath; its [circumflex] pitch is breath; it (i.e. this pitch) leads the breaths outside him (i.e. the sacrificer), who suddenly dies. The threefold one is the swiftest of all the chants since [it is said that] the threefold [chant] is very quick with the one who is meeting [his ancestors] (i.e. is dying).<sup>30</sup> The pitch is endless, that world is endless;

24 E.g. Karttunen (1997) 58 and 62; Stoneman (1994) 506, (1995) 110 and (2019) 315; Bruseker (2012) 8.

25 See e.g. Brown (1949) chapter 2; Kubica (2021) 81.

26 Bronkhorst (2015) 7–23 and (2016) 34–42 and 417–422 (= Appendix II).

27 Bronkhorst (2016) 417–422 (= Appendix II).

28 Name of an important sacrifice devoted to Soma, i.e. to a divinized plant whose juice is praised due to its exhilarating effect.

29 The commentator Sāyaṇa supplies *dehena* to *anāyamatā*, so that the meaning might have been ‘with a body that is not sick’.

30 The present translation is inspired by the use of the verb *saṃgam-* in a famous early afterlife context, namely in *RV* 10.14.8: *sām gachasva pitṛbhiḥ sām yamēneṣṭāpūrtēna paramē vyōman | hitvā yāvadyām pūnar āstam ēhi sām gachasva tanvā suvārcāḥ*, “Unite with the ancestors, unite

it causes him to go to the endless heavenly world. [These verses] are endowed with [the prefixes] *abhi* ‘towards’ and *pra* ‘forth’,<sup>31</sup> thus it causes him to go from this world to the heavenly world. While the purifying laud sacred to the Ṛbhus<sup>32</sup> is being chanted, he (i.e. the sacrificer) lies down, his head covered by his upper garment, to the south of the pillar of Udumbara-wood. Then, he meets [his ancestors] (i.e. he dies). This is the Śunaskarṇastoma. Śunaskarṇa, Bāṣkiha’s son, worshipped by means of this. Therefore, it is called the Śunaskarṇastoma.

The *JB* was redacted later but its content is often quite conservative. In particular, Caland<sup>33</sup> considered it to be older than the other available Sāmaveda Brāhmaṇa, i.e. the *PB*, on the basis of a collection of generally ignored rites included in the *JB*. Moreover, the Jaiminīya school is generally considered older than the Kauṭhuma-Rāṇāyaṇīya Śākhā, due to its accordance with the surviving Nambudiri Ṛgveda and Yajurveda traditions.<sup>34</sup> The passage on this sacrifice reads:

*athaiṣa śunaskarṇastomaḥ. śunaskarṇo ha vai vārṣṇyakaḥ.*<sup>35</sup> *puṇyakṛd apāpakṛd āsa. sa ha cakame — puṇyam evāsmiṇ loke kṛtvāpāpaṃ kṛtya svargaṃ lokaṃ gaccheyam iti. sa etaṃ yajñam apaśyat. tam āharat. tenāyajata. tato vai sa puṇyam evāsmiṇ loke kṛtvāpāpaṃkṛtya*

with Yama, with what has been bestowed due to the sacrifice, in the highest distant heaven. Having left behind imperfection, come home again. Unite with your body in your full luster” – transl. Jamison/Brereton (2014) 1392 (modified). Caland (1931) 367 translates the verbal base *saṃgam* both in *PB* 17.12.3 and 5 as in a more general sense as ‘to meet with the own end’.

31 In order to explain this detail, Caland (1931) 468 refers to the ritual handbook called *Ārṣeyakalpa* or *Maśakakalpasūtra* 314 – see Caland (1908) 46–47 where there are 13 occurrences of the preposition *pra* as initial word of verse and the following crucial verse beginning with *abhi*: *abhi dyumnaṃ brhad yaśaḥ*, “towards splendour and mighty glory”. See also *LāṭŚS* 8.8.

32 They are itinerant priest-poets who became gods because of their deeds, praised in earliest Vedic sources, such as *RV* 1.110; 1.161; 3.54; 3.60; *ŚS* 6.108: see Pisano (2023) ad bibliography quoted there.

33 Caland (1931) XIX.

34 See Witzel (2016) 69. On the contrary, Keith decided in favour of the anteriority of the *PB*, especially because of linguistic evidence. See Keith (1932a) 700 and (1932b) 1049. Renou (1947) 101 endorsed Keith’s evaluation. The chronological problem is amplified by the assumed existence of a third Sāmaveda Brāhmaṇa, mentioned as *Śatyāyanakam brāhmaṇam* or *Śatyāyani-Brāhmaṇa* or *Śatyāyanakam* in several Kalpasūtras or by commentators. See Ghosh (1935) 98–101 (fragments 55–66); Parpola (1973) 9–10; Bodewitz (1973) 11–12; Gonda (1975) 349; Witzel (1989) § 5.2. However, several portions of the *JB* are often quite conservative in terms of contents. This may be due to its (ritual and narrative) eclectic prolixity, which has evidently led this text to voraciously incorporate ideas borrowed from different schools and thus at least partially retain them. See Keith (1932b) 1048; Renou (1947) 101–102; Gonda (1975) 348; Fujii (2012) 112. However, more generally speaking, it might overall have been one of the most recently fixed Brāhmaṇa texts, perhaps only earlier than the *Ṣaḍviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa* and the *Gopatha-Brāhmaṇa* – see Bodewitz (1973) 13.

35 *V.I. vāṣkyahaḥ*: this name matches that in *PB* 17.12.6.

*svargaṃ lokam agacchat. sa yaḥ punyakṛt kāmayeta punyam evāsmiṇ loke kṛtvāpāpaṃkṛtya svargaṃ lokam gaccheyam iti, sa etena yajeta. punyam evāsmiṇ loke kṛtvāpāpaṃkṛtya svargaṃ lokam gacchati. sa trivṛd bhavati. parāṇ iva ha vā eṣaḥ. svargam eva lokam abhinirmṛṣto yat trivṛt stomah. parāṇ evaitena svargaṃ lokam eti. tasya parāṇcy eva stotrāṇi bhavanti parāṇci śastrāṇi parāṇci prṣṭhāni parācī viṣṭutayaḥ. parāṇ eva sarvo bhavati. pravatiṣu stuvanti. parāṇcam evainaṃ tad amuṃ lokam gamayanti – JB 2.167.*

Now [the sacrifice called] Śunaskarṇa. Śunaskarṇa was indeed the descendant of Vṛṣṇi. He was one who has performed meritorious acts; he had not committed any sin. He, indeed, expressed his desire saying “May I go to the world of heaven by having carried out meritorious acts in this world without committing any sin!”. He saw this sacrifice. He took it for himself, he worshipped by means of this. Therefore, he went to the world of heaven by having carried out meritorious acts in this world without committing any sin. The one who has performed meritorious acts who expressed his desire saying “May I go to the world of heaven having carried out meritorious acts in this world without committing any sin!” should worship by means of this. Having carried out meritorious acts in this world he goes to the world of heaven without committing any sin. This is the threefold [chant]. This is indeed really as if it were going beyond. Whatever threefold chant there is, he is purified in the direction of the world of heaven. Just going beyond, it goes to the heavenly world by means of this. Its chants are going beyond, its upper side songs are going beyond, its Viṣṭuti schemes of recitations are going beyond. Just going beyond, it becomes all. They chant on the verses containing [the prefix] *pra-* ‘forth’. They cause him, really, to reach that world which is far.

The notion ‘without disease’ used in the cited *PB* passage is replaced by ‘without sin’ in the latter passage from the *JB*, so that death seems to be sought to avoid the suffering and impairment of disease in the first Sāmaveda source, but to avoid culpability in the second one. The role of merit or absence of demerit is definitely crucial in such a decision to perform self-incineration in the *JB* version.

Within the Black Yajurveda branch, namely in the *Baudhāyana-Śrautasūtra*, which is commonly considered the earliest *Śrautasūtra*<sup>36</sup> we can read an aetiological myth that explains the Śunaskarṇa performance. Here merit and demerit also clearly seem to play an important role, while no mention is made of illness and the lexicon overlaps that of the *JB*. The aim once again is ‘to leave one’s life free from fault’ and not simply in good health:

*śunaskarṇo ha vai śaivyo rājā punyakṛd bahuyāgy āsa. sa ha pāpiyāṇ janatām pratihitām pratikhyāyartvijah papracchāsti svit sa yajñakratur yenāiṣṭvaiva prayāyām iti. asti hīti hainam ṛtvijah pratyūcus. [...] sa hāvabhṛthād evodetya mamāra. yaṃ dviṣyāt tasyaivam yajñam kuryād upasṛtam vā yājayet. kṣipraṃ haivāsmāl lokāt prait – BaudhŚS 18.48.*

36 See Parpola (2011) 342.

King Śunaskarṇa, son of Śivi had been one who carried out meritorious acts and performed many sacrifices. Indeed, when he was deteriorating, after realising that the community was in a sorry state, he asked the officiant priests: “Is there any sacrificial rite, after whose performance I could go away?”. The officiant priest answered that there was one. [...] After having returned from the Avabhṛtha (i.e. from the ablution of the sacrificer and sacrificial vessels after the sacrifice), he (i.e. the sacrificer) died. One should perform this sacrifice for one who hates, or one who approaches him [for this purpose]. Soon he departs from this world.

Here it seems even clearer that the sacrificer performs the Śunaskarṇa rite because he feels a sense of responsibility towards the community which is in such a sorry state. He is thus not trying to avoid any kind of personal illness, but rather attempting to better the miserable condition of his community.

Instead, another Black Yajurveda *Śrautasūtra*, commonly classified as middle-recent<sup>37</sup> contains an explanation of the Śunaskarṇa where the idea of covering oneself, exactly as Calanus seems to have done, is repeated, together with the idea of reaching heaven *anāmayatā* commonly translated ‘without any disease’, but at the same time, the sacrificer is *maraṇakāma*- ‘one who wishes his own death’:

*caturthaḥ sarvasvāraḥ śunaskarṇastomaḥ. maraṇakāmo yajeta yaḥ kāmayetānāmayatā svargaṃ lokam iyām iti. yāmyaḥ paśuḥ śukaharita upālabhyaḥ. kṛtānnam dakṣiṇā. ārbhave stūyamāne dakṣiṇenaudumbariṇ pattaśenāhatena vāsasā dakṣiṇāśirāḥ prāvṛtaḥ saṃviśann āha brāhmaṇāḥ samāpayata me yajñam iti. tadaiva saṃtiṣṭhate* – ĀpŚS 22.7.20–25.

The fourth [threefold] (i.e. nine-versed Agniṣṭoma) is the Śunaskarṇastoma in which all the Sāmans are circumflex at the end. The one who wishes his own death, who desired by saying: “May I go to heaven without any disease” should sacrifice [with this]. In addition to the sacrificial animal for Yama [a he-goat], a yellowish parrot is to be seized as a victim. Cooked rice is the sacrificial gift. While the purifying laud sacred to the R̥bhus is being chanted, he (i.e. the sacrificer), lying down to the south of the pillar of Udumbara-wood, being covered with a never washed (i.e. new) garment with fringes, turned with his head towards the south, entering [the fire], he says: “O Brahmins, complete the sacrifice for me! At that moment the sacrifice is organised in all its parts”.

Another Black Yajurveda version, i.e. that in the *HirŚS*, is almost identical to the just cited *ĀpŚS* version, which is attributed to the same period, but it involves the plural genitive form *anāmayatām* instead of the singular instrumental *anāmayatā* found in both the *PB* and the *ĀpŚS*. The phrase *anāmayatām svargaṃ lokam* is indeed similar to the very common phrase *sukṛtām lokaḥ*, ‘the well-doers’ world’.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See Gonda (1977) 518; Brucker (1980) 58.

<sup>38</sup> *śunaskarṇastomaḥ. sarvasvāraḥ. maraṇakāmo yajeta yaḥ kāmayetānāmayatām svargaṃ lokam iyām iti vijñāyate. yāmyaḥ paśuḥ śukaharita upālabhyaḥ. kṛtānnam dakṣiṇā. ārbhave stūyamāne dakṣiṇenaudumbariṇ ahatena vāsasā pattaśena prāvṛtya dakṣiṇāśirāḥ saṃviśati*

Moreover, the crucial sentence starting with *maraṇakāmaḥ* ends with the expression *iti vijñāyate*, which commonly introduces a metarule (a *paribhāṣā*) in the Śrautasūtras. According to Chakrabarti's explanation,<sup>39</sup> this expression is used to introduce something that is 'known' on the basis of the *śākhā* to which the Vedāṅga text belongs. It should thus be possible to trace this sentence back to the earliest Vedic sources, but I have failed to find it in any work preceding the Śrautasūtras, while both the Black and White Yajurveda Saṃhitās (i.e. even earlier Vedic sources) contain a lengthy prayer formula ending with the imperative form *kalpantām* and *yajñena* ('May they prosper by means of this sacrifice!'). The formula recites a long list of boons desired by the sacrificer:

*ṛtām ca mé mṛtaṃ ca mé | ayakṣmām ca mé 'nāmayac ca me jīvātuś ca me dīrghāyutvām ca me | anamitrām ca mé 'bhayaṃ ca me sukhām ca me śāyanaṃ ca me suśās ca me sudīnaṃ ca me [...]* *yajñēna kalpantām* – MS 2.11.3–5 = KS 18.9 = TS 4.7.3.2 = VS 18.6.

May holy order, non-death, non-sickness, freedom from illness, life, longevity, freedom from foes, fearlessness, ease of going, lying down, fair dawning, and fair day prosper through the sacrifice!

This list is of little help, because anything *de facto* can be considered as a 'boon', i.e. can be part of the list. But perhaps another deverbal form, namely *anāmayitnu-* used in a stanza also occurring in the *Śaunaka Atharvaveda* and in the *Paippalāda Atharvaveda* with a very small variant at the end (*smṛś-* instead of

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*brāhmaṇāḥ samāpayatam etaṃ yajñam iti. yajñasaṃsthām anu saṃtiṣṭhate* – HŚS 17.3.18–23), "[Now the sacrifice called] Śunaskarṇa, that which has all the Sāmans circumflex [at the end]. It is known that the one who wishes his own death, who desired by saying 'May I go to the heaven of sinless people!' should sacrifice [with this]. In addition to the sacrificial animal for Yama (i.e. a he-goat), a yellowish parrot is to be seized as a victim. Cooked rice is the sacrificial gift. While the purifying laud sacred to the Ṛbhus is being chanted, he [the sacrificer], lying down to the south of the pillar of Udumbara-wood, being covered with a never washed (i.e. new) garment with fringes, turned with his head towards the south, entering [the fire], he says: 'O Brahmins, complete the sacrifice for me! At that moment the sacrifice is organised in all its parts'". The White Yajurveda version in the *Kātyāyana-Śrautasūtra* – which is considered very late e.g. by Gonda (1977) 528 – also includes a similar but shorter explanation of this sacrifice. KŚS 22.6.1–6: *maraṇakāmasya sarvasvārah. kṛtānnadakṣiṇah. dīkṣādy avajighraty eva bhakṣān. apsv avaharaṇam aso-mānam. ārbhave stūyamāne dakṣiṇenaudumbariṃ kṛṣṇājine saṃviśati dakṣiṇāśirah prāvṛtaḥ. tad eva mṛiyate*, "The Śunaskarṇa sacrifice is meant for the one who wishes his own death. Cooked rice is its sacrificial gift. From the *dīkṣā* onward he only smells food and beverage. These are thrown into the waters with the exception of the Soma juice. While the purifying laud sacred to the Ṛbhus is being chanted, lying down on the black antelope-skin to the south of the pillar of Udumbara-wood, turned with his head towards the south, he (i.e. the sacrificer) enters [the fire]. Just then he dies".

39 Chakrabarti (1980) 54–55.

*spṛṣ-* but with the same meaning) could give us some clue as to the semantic field of this term. In this stanza the two hands of the poet-officiant priest are envisioned as the agents of some act of healing: together with his voice, his hands bring about a cure in the context of what Jamison and Brereton define as the “usual pairing of action and speech characteristic of Atharvan practice”.<sup>40</sup>

*hástābhyāṃ dāśaśākhābhyāṃ jihvā vācāḥ pūrogavī | anāmayitnūbhyāṃ tvā tābhyāṃ tvōpa  
spṛśāmasi ||* – *RV* 10.137.7 ≈ *ŚS* 4.13.7 ≈ *PS* 5.18.8.

With the two hands endowed with ten branches – my tongue is the forerunner of speech – we touch you with those two that free you from pain, with these two.

If the lexicons are right and the meaning of *an-ā-mayat* is actually ‘not causing pain’ deriving from the verb *mī-*, ‘to lessen, to diminish, to destroy’ with the prefix *ā-*, ‘near to, towards’ preceded by the negative prefix, the conveyed notion might fit that of ‘freedom from illness’, but also the verbal idea of ‘causing no harm’. The idea of well-being that seems to be linked to these deverbal forms from *ā-mī-* probably makes no clear distinction between health and being at peace with oneself and others, i.e. between physical fitness and acquired merits.

On the other hand, the connection between ‘freedom from illness’ and the Śunaskarṇa/Sarvasvāra sacrifice – the possible inspiration for Calanus’ self-incineration – is exclusively appended to the interpretation of *anāmayat*. And this non-unequivocal term is intriguingly represented in conservative texts like the *JB* and the *BaudhŚS* by *punya*, ‘merit’ and *apāpa*, ‘no sin’.

## 5 The hypothesis of reading Calanus’ gesture as a case of extreme self-penitence

Bosworth assumes that “Given that disease was regarded as retribution for wrongdoing in this life or a previous existence Calanus’s suicide could be interpreted as an extreme penance”.<sup>41</sup> He quotes a couple of *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* passages, the first of which includes the compound *pāparoga* which has to be in-

<sup>40</sup> Jamison/Brereton (2014) 1622.

<sup>41</sup> Bosworth (1998) 182.

terpreted as a tatpuruṣa compound whose left-hand member conveys a causal sense, i.e. it means ‘disease due to a sin’:<sup>42</sup>

*śūnām ca patitānām ca śvapacām pāparogīnām | vayasānām kṛmīṇām ca śanakair nirvaped  
bhuvī – MDhŚ 3.92.*

He should also gently place on the ground offerings for dogs, oucastes, dog-cookers, persons with evil-diseases, crow, and worms – transl. Olivelle (2005) 113.

In fact, several bodily consequences of sins committed in the present life or in some previous ones are listed in *MDhŚ* 11.48–53 and the mechanism of this kind of consequent penance is clearly explained:

*iha duścāritaiḥ ke cit ke cit pūrvakṛtais tathā |  
prāṇnuvanti durātmāno narā rūpaviparyayam ||  
suvarṇacaurāḥ kaunakhyaṃ surāpaḥ śyāvadantatām |  
brahmahā kṣayarogitvaṃ dauścarmyaṃ gurutalpagaḥ ||  
[...]  
evaṃ karmaviśeṣeṇa jāyante sadvigarhitāḥ |  
[...]*

Some evil men become disfigured because of the bad deeds committed in this world, and some because of deeds done in a previous life. A man who steals gold gets rotten nails; a man who drinks liquor, black teeth; the murder of a Brahmin, consumption. A man who has sex with his elder’s wife, skin disease. [...] In this way, as a result of the remnants of their past deeds, are born individuals despised by good people [...]. – transl. Olivelle (2005) 217.

Nonetheless, the first of these two texts merely explains an analogous ritual treatment for the sick and out-of-caste and there is no suggestion that self-incineration was considered as self-penitence in either *MDhŚ* 3.92 or in *MDhŚ* 11.48–53. Analogously, Bosworth deduces from one of Pāṇini’s grammatical rules that self-cremation “was perhaps justified if one suffered a chronic disease, incurable in this life”,<sup>43</sup> but again, this interesting rule merely tells us that Pāṇini believed in the chance of a new embodiment for human beings. There is certainly no mention of a voluntary transition to another life:

<sup>42</sup> Olivelle also comments on this verse, by explaining: “the term *pāparoga* [...] does not refer simply to a serious sickness. The disease is regarded as the consequence of sins committed in previous lives”.

<sup>43</sup> Bosworth (1998) 182 n. 40.

*kṣetṛiyac parakṣetre cikitsyaḥ* – A 5.3.92).

A denominal oxytone affix occurs to derive *kṣetṛiya-* when the derived nominal stem denotes someone ‘who has to be treated in another body’.

However, Bosworth’s hypothesis that Calanus had aspired to a sort of self-penitence is thought-provoking. In particular, self-incineration is presented as a form of atonement (*prāyaścitta*) in the following passage from the *ĀpDhS* singled out by Bosworth himself:

*prathamam varṇam parihāpya prathamam varṇam hatvā saṃgrāmaṃ gatvāvatiṣṭheta | ta-trainam hanyuḥ || api vā lomāni tvacaṃ māmsam iti hāvayitvāgniṃ praviśet* – *ĀpDhS* 1.25.11–12.

When someone not belonging to the first social class kills a man belonging to the first class, he should go and stand in a battlefield, where they would kill him. Or else, he may have his body hair, skin, and flesh offered as a sacrifice in a fire and then throw himself into that fire – transl. Olivelle (2000) 63–65.

Another intriguing element is the parallel self-penance accomplished by going and standing on a battlefield, where enemies would kill the sinner. This recalls for instance the story in the *Mahābhārata* of how Bhiṣma, Droṇa and Bhūriśṛavas, the prince of the Bālīhikas, died on the battlefield: they stood still as the battle raged around them and staring into the sun and holding their breath in a supreme state of calm like *yogins*, they allowed themselves to be shot. Otherwise, they are depicted lying down on a bed made of arrows prepared in a typical *abhicāra* fashion.<sup>44</sup> These epic characters indeed represent the most successful and venerated kind of charismatic leader of a group of consecrated warriors, quite distant from the later orthodox figures of warriors or brahmīns (*kṣatriyas* or *brāhmaṇas*). But what is most important is that self-incineration is described here as a sacrifice whose victim is the sinner who enters the fire, whose hair, skin, and flesh are the offerings. And it is described in a manner that recalls the words used in one of the *Samhitās* of the same branch of the *ĀpDhS*, namely in the *TS*, to depict the *sattra* whose offering is the self (i.e. the *ātman*) of the *sattrins*:

*suvargām vā eté lokām yanti yé sattrām upayānti. abhīndhata evā dikṣābhīr ātmānam śrapayanta upasādbhir. dvābhyām lómāva dyanti dvābhyām tvācam. dvābhyām āsrt. dvābhyām māmsām. dvābhyām āsthi dvābhyām majjānam. ātmādakṣiṇam vāi sattrām. ātmānam evā dākṣiṇām nītvā suvargām lokām yanti* – *TS* 7.4.9.

44 See Pontillo (2016) 233–239 and bibliography quoted there.



Those who perform a *sattra* go to the heavenly world. With the *upasad* consecrations they kindle themselves, with two [days of the *sattra*] they cut their hair, with two, their skin, with two, their blood, with two, their flesh, with two, their bones, with two, their bone marrow. The *sattra* has the self as its *dākṣiṇā*. After bringing themselves as *dākṣiṇā*, they go to the heavenly world.

The *ātman* here is the offering itself rather than a sacrificial fee,<sup>45</sup> since, first of all, a *sattra* implies the officiant priests who, at the same time, are also the patrons of the sacrifice.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, more than being used as a priestly gift, the *sattrins'* bodies (*ātman*) are evidently cooked as victims and they are said to reach the *svarga loka* through the flames, as if they were common sacrificial animals.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed Bronkhorst already emphasised how “Self-immolation in the sacrificial fire may have been part of the Early Sattra sacrifice”.<sup>48</sup> Now, it is tempting to also consider the first two Sāmavedic texts we read as two other documents that show how heaven can be reached through self-sacrifice. Just as the *sattra* was performed in times of great stress for a community, we have seen that the aetiological myth in the ancient BŚS analogously explains that the sacrificer turns to self-immolation when he is worried about his community.

## 6 Is there any evidence in the *Mīmāṃsā* of the problem of self-immolation in the reformed Brahmanical context?

As Bronkhorst has been teaching us since 2007, not all ancient Indian institutions necessarily descended from the Brahmanical mainstream: *sattras* for instance must have been part of a non-Brahmanical section of the Indo-Aryan people.<sup>49</sup> The role of leader in the Vedic but non-Brahmanical tradition as someone who was responsible for providing the community with its essential needs and who absorbed military and economic power is sharply diminished in this Brahmani-

<sup>45</sup> As for the reconstruction of this ancient meaning of *dākṣiṇā*, as the best a sacrificer has to offer in a sacrifice as a fruit of his magnificence, see Candotti/Neri/Pontillo (2020) and (2021).

<sup>46</sup> See Pontillo (2023) and bibliography quoted there.

<sup>47</sup> See e.g. the observation of the material destiny of the body of the sacrificial horse and the insightful reflection on its future life among gods in *RV* 1.162.

<sup>48</sup> Bronkhorst (2015) 37 and (2016) 38. See also Falk (1983) and (1986) 30–44.

<sup>49</sup> Of course, with the adoption of all the necessary changes, this institution came to be incorporated within the inclusivist Brahmanical programme, so that there are orthodox *sattras* included in the later *Śrautasūtras*.

cally oriented world. At the same time, the direct relationship with heaven is transformed into a more complex system ruled by the intermediation of the priestly class. Even the action of sacrificing oneself must have sounded unacceptable from a ritualistic point of view within the strictly Brahmanical (*Śrautasūtra*) framework. An interesting piece of evidence is the problem arising from the case of our Sarvasvāra/Śunaskarṇa sacrifice in the Mīmāṃsā context. A couple of rules about this sacrifice appear in the book X of *Jaimini-Mīmāṃsā-Sūtras*:

*sarvasvārasya diṣṭagatau samāpanam na vidyate karmaṇo jīvasamyogāt* – JMS 10.2.57.

There is no completion of the Sarvasvāra at the appointed way (i.e. at the death) [of the sacrificer] due to the connection of the [sacrificial] action with a living person.

*syād vobhayoḥ pratyakṣaśiṣṭatvāt* – JMS 10.2.58.

There must be [the completion of the Sarvasvāra] because both [the sacrifice and its completion] have been directly enjoined.

Thus, the problem that emerges in the performance of this sacrifice concerns the sacrificer himself, namely the fact that each sacrifice is commonly carried out with the express intention of the sacrificer, i.e. the patron of the sacrifice. The issue here is that in his absence, i.e. when the patron dies during the ceremony, there is a risk that the ceremony could be interrupted and not carried out in full. Bronkhorst drew attention to Śabara's commentary on the second of these aphorisms and stated that "It can yet be argued that Śabara preserves an old tradition".<sup>50</sup> But let us read at least a small excerpt from this text:

*maraṇakāmo hy etena yajeteti. ārabhya parisamāpāyitavyam ity ākhyātārthaḥ. tena samāptir ākhyātenaivoktā bhavati. api cedam āmnāyate, ārbhave prastūyamāna audumbarīṃ sadaśena vāsasā pariveṣṭya brāhmaṇāḥ parisāpayata me yajñam iti saṃpreṣyāgniṃ viśatīti [...] puruṣaḥ kartā, na śarīram. sa ca pratīte'pi śarīre puruṣo'sti* – ŚBh ad JMS 10.2.58.

[It is said:] "The one who wishes his own death, should sacrifice with this (Sarvasvāra)". The meaning of the verb is that after beginning (the performance), it should be completed. Hence the completion is also denoted by the verb. This is also handed down in sacred texts: "When the laud sacred to the Ṛbhus is being chanted, after covering the *Audumbarī* post with a fringed cloth, after addressing them by saying 'O Brahmins, complete the sacrifice for me!', he enters the fire. [...] The individual principle is the agent, not its body. Even when the body is dead, the individual principle [still] exists".

The quoted passage is self-evidently the *ĀpŚS* passage we read at the beginning (but the sacrificial post is covered instead of the sacrificer's head). A strictly tech-

50 Bronkhorst (2016) 39.

nical solution is then advanced by Śabara, followed by a more philosophical one: since the sacrificer had already pronounced the injunction “O Brahmins, complete the sacrifice for me!” before he died, the sacrifice can be completed in all its parts. It goes without saying that this seems to be an addition dating back to later *Śrautasūtras* like the *ĀpŚS* and explained in the *Mīmāṃsā* literature, when plausibly the writers had realised that the problem of this religious practice had to be solved if they were to come to terms with Brahmanical orthodoxy.

By contrast, if we pay attention to another version in a very ancient *Śrautasūtra* in the *Sāmavedic* traditions (which moreover is generally more conservative than the others), i.e. the *Lātyāyana-Śrautasūtra*, we realise that this concern is totally lacking. This ancient *Śrautasūtra* text belongs to the same branch as the two *Brāhmaṇa*-texts from which we started reading the Vedic sources. Many of its sentences are strictly comparable to those we read in the *PB*, but there is no mention of illness. The text reads as follows:

*sarvasvāreṇa yakṣyamāṇo dīkṣāprabhṛti prayateta yathā sautye 'hani preyām iti [...] ārbhave pavamāne stūyamāna udumbaryā dakṣiṇā prāvṛto nīpadyeta kṛṣṇājinaṃ upastīrya dakṣiṇā-śīrās tad eva saṃgacchate tad eva mṛiyata iti. evaṃ mṛtaṃ yajamānaṃ havirbhiḥ saha rjī-ṣair yajñapātraiḥ cāhavanīye prahr̥tya pravrajeyur iti śāṇḍilyaḥ – LāṭŚS 8.8.1–5–6).*

One who is going to perform the Sarvasvāra (*trivṛt agniṣṭoma*) sacrifice, should make every effort from the consecration ceremony onward thinking “May I depart from this world on the day of [Soma] pressing”. [...] When the purifying laud sacred to the Ṛbhus is being chanted he should lie covered, to the south of the *Audumbarī* post on a black-antelope skin, after having spread the same [on the ground], with his head to the south. Thus, he is united [with the ancestors], thus he dies. Śāṇḍilya suggests that after having offered the sacrificer, who is thus dead, along with the oblations, the residual portions of the Soma and the sacrificial vessels in the *Āhavanīya* fire, they should leave (i.e. wander forth as ascetics).

Bronkhorst noticed: “One, and only one, text adds that, according to a named authority, the dead body of the sacrificer is subsequently put into the sacrificial fire”.<sup>51</sup> However, although this is the only text that explicitly mentions the sacrificer’s death, it is also important to underline that, as demonstrated by Parpola,<sup>52</sup> this is a very ancient source. It is consequently plausible that the *LāṭŚS* did not ‘add’ anything, but that it was instead the later *ĀpŚS* version of this sacrifice that might have added an apparently unjustified assignment of the task of concluding the ceremony to the Brahmins who were supposed to play the role of officiant priests. In the *LāṭŚS* version the sacrificer simply ‘dies’ and in Śāṇḍilya’s opinion, the ‘dead’ sacrificer is offered just like any other oblation in the *Āhavanīya* fire

51 Bronkhorst (2016) 39.

52 Parpola (1968) 201 and (1973) 15.

(the oblatinal fire of the three standard fires). One wonders thus about the identity of these people who pour this special offering into the sacrificial fire and then start their wanderings (*parivraj-*) again.<sup>53</sup> There is only a plural verbal form and no agent is expressed. Ranade's translation suggests that they are 'officiating priests', but they might actually have been the sacrificer's comrades if one connects this performance with a *sattra*-typology of sacrifice.

## Conclusion

If we now return to the story of Calanus, the warrior context of the procession and the choral nature of the participation of disciples etc. in the event are well-tuned to this category of self-immolation. Some other details, such as the way one covers oneself before immolation, also match. Moreover, in Strab. 15.1.68, even before describing Calanus' death and reporting Megasthenes' opinion, Strabo gives an account of several common rules that, according to some reports, Calanus had allegedly violated:

ἀλλ'οἱ μὲν οὕτως εἰρήκασιν· συνακολουθῆσαι γὰρ ὡς ἐγκωμιαστὴν τοῦ βασιλέως ἔξω τῶν τῆς Ἰνδικῆς ὁρων παρὰ τὸ κοινὸν ἔθος τῶν ἐκεῖ φιλοσόφων· ἐκείνους γὰρ τοῖς αὐτόθι συνεῖναι βασιλεῦσιν ὑφηγουμένους τὰ περὶ τοὺς θεοὺς, ὑφηγουμένους τὰ περὶ τοὺς θεοὺς, ὡς τοὺς μάγους τοῖς Πέρσαις – Strab. 15.1.68.

But some maintain that he accompanied the king, as a eulogiser of the king, going beyond the boundaries of India, violating the common usage of the local philosophers, for they attend the kings of that place itself, guiding them in their relationship with the gods, like the Magi in Persia.

It is clear that these rules are well-tuned to a Brahmanically-oriented culture. Nevertheless, the present analysis of these passages has shown that self-incineration did not emerge as a strictly orthodox Brahmanical practice, but neither was it typical of a heterodox ascetic, i.e. of a Jain or a Buddhist. Calanus was most probably just a heroic ascetic belonging to an age when orthodoxy and unorthodoxy did not

<sup>53</sup> The verb *parivraj-* is typical of the wandering ascetics (Skt. *parivrājaka*, Pali *paribbhajja*), who are formerly consecrated warriors at the same time. It is noteworthy that in an epic passage devoted to depict the Parivrajakas' behaviour (*parivrājakānām ācāra-* – *MBh* 12.185.3), the action of a man performing the Agnihotra "with the fire which rests on his body" (*agnihotra- svaśarīr-asamṣtha-* – *MBh* 12.185.5) is mentioned, which might be related to the Sarvasvāra sacrifice.

yet exist. In fact, at Alexander's time, the Śrauta Reform had probably yet to take root especially in this peripheral area.<sup>54</sup>

In other words, Onesicritus' report is not only an absolute figment of his imagination but he even sometimes supplies some pieces of history that are free from the main-stream (Brahmanical) influence. Calanus' self-immolation was really faithful to a very ancient ancestral custom, i.e. a πάτριος νόμος, belonging to the earliest Indo-Āryan culture, which could not yet be defined as Brahmanical.

The quarrel between the ancients reported by Strabo, i.e. between those who judged Calanus' gesture positively or negatively, precisely depended on the assumed or denied alignment with a πάτριος νόμος. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that Indian culture with its continuous updating had become more familiar to the Western world especially in Strabo's age, i.e. between the end of the first century BCE and the beginning of the first century of the Common Era. Over time a more Brahmanically-oriented reading of the Sarvasvāra/śunaskarṇa sacrifice had probably been looming in the minds of historians who were still reading Onesicritus' fragments on India.

The list of unconventional details of his behaviour might have been fruit of recent rumours or even correspond to the doubts Strabo had about the story which clashed with the updated picture of India that had been received in the meantime. Thus, exactly as suggested by the *PB* and by the later *Śrautasūtras*, this sacrifice was consequently presented, for instance, as being performed by an 'ill person' rather than by someone who had probably been a charismatic leader who, after accumulating great merits, decided to offer himself for the sake of his comrades. And this decision may have been taken at the time when Alexander's fortunes were beginning to wane, when Calanus became aware of the fact that he was no longer contributing to the welfare of his group and was thus ready to offer himself for them while preserving his previous merits.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See Bruseker (2012) 14.

<sup>55</sup> And indeed, Calanus's very name may even serve to dismiss the later claims that portrayed him as an impulsive philosopher in Strabo's work. The name Calanus has recently been interpreted as signifying 'one who performs good deeds', a *puṇyakṛt*, to use the *JB* words describing the *śunaskarṇa* sacrifice, whose pattern could really constitute the original πάτριος νόμος behind the pattern of his self-incineration. The etymon of his name, *kalyāṇam* has long been hypothesised as an expected North-Western form, and this has recently been confirmed – see e.g. Falk (2022) 156 – by the coins of the Indo-Greek king Telephus on which the Greek form εὐεργέτου is prakritised as *kalanokramasa-* corresponding to OIA (Old Indo-Aryan) *kalyāṇakarmasya*.

## Abbreviations

A	<i>Aṣṭādhyāyī</i> , ed. Sharma (1987–2003).
ĀpDhS	<i>Āpastamba-Dharmasūtra</i> , ed. Olivelle (2000).
ĀpŚS	<i>Āpastamba-Śrautasūtra</i> , ed. Thite (2004).
BaudhŚS	<i>Baudhāyana-Śrautasūtra</i> , ed. Kashikar (2003).
HŚS	<i>Hiranyakeśin-Śrautasūtra</i> or <i>Satyāśāḍha-Śrautasūtra</i> . <a href="https://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/ind/aind/ved/yvs/hirss/hirss.htm">https://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/ind/aind/ved/yvs/hirss/hirss.htm</a> (seen 1.3.2023).
JB	<i>Jaiminiya-Brāhmaṇa</i> , ed. Vira/Chandra (1954).
JMS	<i>Jaiminiya-Mīmāṃsāsūtra</i> , ed. Abhyankar/Jośī (1929–1934).
KS	<i>Kāṭha-Saṃhitā</i> , ed. von Schroeder (1900).
KŚS	<i>Kātyāyana-Śrautasūtra</i> , ed. Thite (2006).
LŚS	<i>Lātyāyana-Śrautasūtra</i> , ed. Ranade (1998).
MBh	<i>Mahābhārata</i> , ed. Sukthankar/Belvalkar/Vaidya (1933–1971).
MDhŚ	<i>Mānava-Dharmasāstra</i> , ed. Olivelle (2005).
MS	<i>Maitrayāṇī-Saṃhitā</i> , ed. von Schroeder (1881–1886).
PB	<i>Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa</i> , ed. Śastri/Śastri (1935–1936).
PS	<i>Paippalāda-Saṃhitā</i> , ed. Bhattacharya (1997).
RV	<i>Rgveda</i> , ed. Sontakke/Kashikar (1933–1951).
ŚBh ad JMS	<i>Śabara-Bhāṣya ad JMS</i> , ed. Abhyankar/Jośī (1929–1934).
ŚS	<i>Śaunaka Atharvaveda Saṃhitā</i> , ed. Bandhu (1960–1962).
Strab.	Strabo, <i>Geographia</i> , ed. Leroy (2016).
TS	<i>Taittirīya-Saṃhitā</i> , ed. Weber (1872).
VDhS	<i>Vāsiṣṭha-Dharmasūtra</i> , ed. Olivelle (2000).
VS	<i>Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā – Mādhyandina</i> recension, ed. Weber (1849).

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