

Sapta r̥ṣayaḥ - The Big Dipper (*ursa maior*)

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In the oldest Indian text, the Ṛgveda, the seven stars of *ursa maior*, in English variously called ‘Great Dipper’, ‘Great Wagon’ (Wain) ‘Great Bear’ appear just once as ṛkṣāḥ “the bears” (RV 1.24.10, a designation quoted in a late Vedic text, Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 2.1.2.4 ‘formerly called...’, cf. Taittirīya Āraṇyaka 2.11.2). This name is similar to that of the Homeric Greeks, where the Bearss (hē arktos) is followed by her children (Iliad 18.487, Odyssey 5.273 “called the Wain which always wheels around in the same place”). Both indicate an Indo-European age of the concept, and probably a still older hunters’ idea of stone age antiquity.

But in a very late passage of the same Vedic text (RV 10.82.2) we already find this asterism under the name “the Seven Sages” (*sapta r̥ṣayaḥ*).¹ The seven primordial sages (ṛṣi) have been transported into Heaven, again not unlike the Greek heroes, as one of the few exceptions of persons admitted² after the gods reached heaven and “shut the door behind them.”³ There, their white bones (śarīrāṇi) shine each night. However, the concept of Seven Sages is purely Indian, a local development.⁴

The Seven Sages are seen close to the celestial North Pole, so that they can forever be seen (if one lives above circa 30 degrees North), as the seven stars of the ‘Great Dipper’ (*ursa maior*). Therefore, they appear to be forever ‘in the highest heaven’, never to leave this position, like other deceased persons, whether transposed as stars or just following the yearly movement of the Milky Way.

This is connected with the movement of the Big Dipper as well. Kuiper pointed out some 20 years ago⁵ that the gods such as Varuṇa turn over a heavenly casket and empty its contents over the earth beneath it, e.g. RV 5.85.3 “Varuṇa has poured out the cask, with its rim turned downwards, over heaven and earth, and the inter-space. Thereby the king of the whole world sprinkles the

soil, as the rain (sprinkles) the barley.” However, the identity of this heavenly casket has escaped us for many years.

The key for an understanding is Atharvaveda 10.9.8 which runs as follows: “A bowl (*camasa*) with the orifice downwards, bottom-side up, in it is deposited glory of all forms; there sit together the seven seers, who have become the keepers of it, the great one.” Even clearer is Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.2.4 (ŚB 14.5.2.4) “There is a cup with its mouth below and its bottom up. In it is placed every form of glory. On its rim [*tīre*] sit seven seers. Voice as an eighth is united with prayer (*brahman*)” [Hume]. The “commentary” by the author of this Upaniṣad passage even identifies the very Ṛṣis: “On its rim sit seven seers.... these are Gotama and Bharadvāja,... Viśvāmitra and Jamadagni,... Vasiṣṭha and Kaśyapa,... and Atri,” clearly, the *sapta r̥ṣayaḥ*, the seven Ṛṣis identified with *ursa maior*.

This asterism actually can be observed to turn upside down every night. *Ursa maior* has the form of a big spoon that is emptied out every night: it slowly turns around, scooping up the heavenly water and then releases it over the earth.

The image actually is not so rare as we might think... It has its similarities in ancient and modern Japan (*hokuto shichisei*, the ‘northern spoon’) and in North American English, where *ursa maior* is called “the Big Dipper”. One of the early generations of Japanese gods (coming after Izanagi/Izanami) in the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki also represents a name of this meaning.⁶ Even in South America where the Incas regarded the Milky Way as a river, the god of thunder, Inti, was seen in the asterism of the Great Bear, where he scooped water from the Milky Way, in order to wet the earth. This image is also close to the Black North American one of the Big Dipper as a “drinking gourd.” The Black slaves who in the 19th century tried to escape to Canada used these code words in their songs: “follow the drinking gourd!”⁷ These similarities which go beyond the idea of a Heavenly River and a Big Ladle or Spoon should alert us for more similarities in myth, spread all over the American and Eurasian area.⁸

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1 The Old Iranian texts (Avesta: Yašt 8.12, 12.28, 13.60) have a similar expression, “the seven signs” (*hapto-riṅga*), which would be *sapta liṅgā(ni)* in Sanskrit.

2 Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa 2.302 *lokānāṃ puṇyatamo yam ... sapta r̥ṣaya ārdhnuvan* “the best of places whom the seven Ṛṣis obtained.”

3 Śat.Br. 1.6.2.1, Taitt. Saṃh. 6.5.3.1, Ait.Br. 3.42; see also John E. Mitchiner, Traditions of the Seven Ṛṣis, Delhi 1982, p.249 sqq.

4 Cf. the closely related Avestan texts.

5 Reprinted in F. B. J. Kuiper, *Ancient Indian Cosmogony*, Delhi 1983, p. 138 sqq.

6 *Ame. no ku-hiza-mochi. no kami* ‘Heavenly water drawing gourd possessor’, and its mundane counterpart: *Kuni.no ku-hiza-mochi.no kami* ‘Earthly water drawing gourd possessor.’

7 This was meant as secretly giving the directions (pointing out the North) of the “underground railway”, bringing them from the southern states to the northern slave-free ones and into Canada, before the Civil War of 1861-65.

8 See my paper on Vala and Iwato (in the next EJVS), and my book *Origins* (in preparation).