

Nataliya Yanchevskaya

VARUṆA, THE TIME LORD?

The article analyses Varuṇa, a complex Vedic deity whose functions include being in charge of the Cosmic Order/Truth (*ṛtá*) and the celestial ocean. It clarifies Varuṇa's mythological functions, powers, and attributes in the *Ṛgveda*; proposes a probable etymology of *vratá*, his major power, and of his very name, and establishes Varuṇa's possible role as a Vedic time-deity.

Keywords: Vedic mythology, Varuṇa, *Ṛgveda*, time, *ṛtá*, Vedic etymology, Indo-European etymology.

For my teacher, prof. Yaroslav V. Vassilkov, whose inspiring work opened my eyes to Varuṇa's heavenly ocean.

1. Varuṇa and ṛtá

A Vedic deity most closely associated with ṛtá is, undoubtedly, Varuṇa. This association is clear from many passages in the RV¹ and defines his major function: he is the one who arranges and regulates the universe by means of ṛtá; he also protects and enforces ṛtá and punishes those who disturb it. RV 2.28.4 speaks of “Varuṇa's ṛtá” (*ṛtám ...váruṇasya*) that causes rivers to flow:

*prá sim ādityó asṛjad vidhartām ṛtám síndhavo váruṇasya yanti |
ná śrāmyanti na ví mucanty eté váyo ná paptū raghuyā párijman ||*

Āditya [Varuṇa], the arranger (distributor), sent them flowing forward. Rivers move [according to] Varuṇa's ṛtá.

Neither do they tire, nor do they unharness. Swiftly, like birds, [they] have flown around.

Through ṛtá Varuṇa upholds the universe and organizes it, which can be seen, for example, in RV 4.42.3-4:

*ahám índro váruṇas té mahitvórvī gabhīré rájasī suméke |
tváṣteva víśvā bhúvanāni vidván sám airayaṃ ródasi dhārāyaṃ ca || 3 ||
ahám apó apinvam ukṣámāṇā dhārāyaṃ dívam sádana ṛtásya |
ṛténa putró áditer ṛtāvotá tridhātu prathayad vi bhúma || 4 ||*

I, Varuṇa, am Indra. These two wide and deep realms are established [firmly] by [my] greatness. Knowing, like Tvaṣtar, all beings², I joined together³ and supported heaven and earth.

¹ “RV” here and further — the *Ṛgveda*. All quotes from the RV are based on the Aufrecht's edition (Aufrecht 1877); all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

² “all beings” — *víśvā bhúvanāni*. Another possible translation is “all worlds”.

³ “joined together” — *sám airayaṃ*; 1Sg. Imperfect from causative of the verbal root *īr-* with a prefix *sam-*. Can also be translated as “set in motion” or “created”. This hymn is a verbal contest between Varuṇa and Indra where Varuṇa claims to be Indra and “tries to disguise the difference between himself and Indra” (Kuiper 1979: 22). Therefore, a translation “joined together” seems more plausible, referring to one of Indra's deeds when he pushed the sky up and separated heaven and earth. By separating the two realms, he simultaneously joined them by his body, acting as the cosmic axis, world tree or sacrificial pole.

I made the streaming waters swell; I supported heaven in the abode⁴ of *ṛtá*. The son of Aditi, the one who possesses *ṛtá*⁵, spread out the threefold earth by means of *ṛtá*.

Varuṇa and Mitra “govern the universe by means of *ṛtá* and place the shining chariot [of] the sun in heaven” (RV 5.63.7cd — *ṛténa víśvam bhúvanam ví rājathaḥ sūryam á dhattho diví cítryam rátham* ||). In RV 10.124.5 it is clear that Varuṇa has the power to separate (or “sift”) *ṛtá* from *anṛtá*, its opposite — disorder, untruth. In this verse Indra asks Varuṇa to separate the two and help him govern his kingdom:

nírmāyā u tyé ásurā abhūvan tvám ca mā varuṇa kāmáyāse |
ṛténa rājann ánṛtam viviñcán máma rāṣṭrásyádhípatyam éhi ||

These Asuras have now become devoid of their magic. If you, o Varuṇa, will love me, o king, separating *ṛtá* from *anṛtá*, come to the sovereignty of my kingdom⁶.

It is worth noting that in a hymn where Agni and Soma are also mentioned and have their own dialogs with Indra, a request to separate *ṛtá* from *anṛtá* goes to Varuṇa. This highlights his principal function and shows that he indeed is a true and foremost master, knower, and upholder of *ṛtá*.

Varuṇa is the one who ensures that *ṛtá* is not violated. He (alone or with Mitra) punishes the offenders by binding them with his noose (*pāśa* — noose, fetter, snare), therefore there are multiple requests to Varuṇa to “release” from his fetter or to different other gods to release from Varuṇa’s noose. Varuṇa’s noose represents diseases (first of all, dropsy, a water-retaining disease, which emphasizes Varuṇa’s connection with the waters) and retribution. RV 7.65.3 mentions these fetters by which Mitra and Varuṇa who cannot be deceived by a cheating mortal bind *ánṛta* (disorder, untruth):

tá bhūripāśāv ánṛtasya sétū duratyétū ripáve mártýāya |
ṛtasya mitrāvaruṇā pathá vām apó ná nāvá duritā tarema ||

⁴ “abode” — *sádana*, lit. “a seat” or “a place”. The seat or abode of *ṛtá* refers to the sky where the sun is.

⁵ “the one who possesses *ṛtá*” — *ṛtávan*; can also be translated as “righteous” or “truthful”.

⁶ “come to the sovereignty of my kingdom” is a literal translation. The meaning here is “come to rule my kingdom [with me]”.

These [two] who have many fetters, the binders of disorder (*ánṛta*), who cannot be overcome by a deceiving mortal — o Mitra and Varuṇa, may we cross the danger by your path of *ṛtá* [as] waters by boat.

In RV 7.88.6-7, where poets ask Varuṇa not to punish them for their transgressions and indirectly request him to release them from his fetter, it is clear that Varuṇa is seen as a severe deity watching over peoples' wrongdoings and punishing even those who are his friends by binding them with his fetter/noose. Here punishing as binding is contrasted with forgiveness as release from the fetter:

*yá āpír nityo varuṇa priyáḥ sán tvám ágāmsi kṛṇávat sákhā te |
mā ta énasvanto yakṣin bhujema yandhí śmā vípra stuvaté várūtham || 6 ||
dhruvāsu tvāsú kṣitítu kṣiyánto vy ásmát pāśam varuṇo mumocat |
ávo vanvānā áditer upásthād yūyám pāta svastibhiḥ sádā nah || 7 ||*

6. O Varuṇa, even if a friend of yours, dear to you, your companion, were to commit offences [against] you, may we, the fallible, not taste [your punishment], o Avenger! The wise [poet]⁷ — ever bestow protection upon the one who praises [you]!

7. Dwelling in these lasting dwellings [we address] you — may Varuṇa loosen his noose from us! — receiving help from Aditi's lap⁸. May you [all gods] always protect us with [your] boons!

As the highest of the Ādityas, Varuṇa is *ṛtásya gopá*, a protector, or, literally, a herdsman of *ṛtá*. This epithet is not unique to Varuṇa and can be addressed to other deities as well; still it shows that Varuṇa is associated with *ṛtá*. We find it describing Varuṇa alone when he is identified with Soma in RV 9.73.8⁹, likely in 10.49.13 that mentions a singular, although unnamed, herdsman of *ṛtá*, and in RV 10.8.5ab when Agni becomes Varuṇa:

bhúvaś cákṣur mahá ṛtásya gopá bhúvo varuṇo yád ṛtáya véṣi |

You [, o Agni,] become the eye and the herdsman of great *ṛtá*. You become Varuṇa. So you close in on *ṛtá*.

⁷ “The wise [poet]” — *vípra*.

⁸ “lap” — *upásthā*; can be translated as “womb.”

⁹ Nominally, it describes Soma, however, Varuṇa is mentioned in the hymn multiple times and it is clear that Soma acts *as Varuṇa*.

In multiple cases the epithet refers to both Varuṇa with Mitra, i.e., in RV 5.63.1, RV 7.64.2, or to a group where Varuṇa is accompanied by other Ādityas — first of all, by Mitra and Aryaman, as in RV 8.31.13, and also to all the Ādityas, like in RV 6.51.3, likely in RV 1.163.05, etc. Generally, all the Ādityas and the Ādityas as a group function as guardians of *ṛtá*. Apart from the Ādityas, this epithet can also describe such deities as Agni (RV 1.1.8; RV 3.10.2; RV 10.118.7) and Soma (RV 9.48.4), i.e., those that:

1) are primary physical agents in the ritual (Agni as sacrificial fire; Soma as sacrificial drink and a plant);

2) can be identified with Varuṇa, such as Agni that is “Varuṇa when he is born and Mitra when he is kindled”¹⁰, as stated in RV 5.3.1, or Soma who acts as Varuṇa in RV 9.73.8 discussed above;

3) possibly — are associated with the sun (Agni as celestial fire) and the moon (celestial Soma).

I add “possibly” to this point, because Soma’s connection with the moon in the RV is rather vague and implicit. According to A. MacDonell¹¹, it can be observed in RV 10.85.5 and RV 1.91.16-18. Both hymns speak about the celestial Soma (found in multiple hymns of the RV¹²) that “swells up” like the waxing moon. RV 10.85 describes a marriage between Soma and Sūryā, the sun-maiden¹³. In RV 10.85.5¹⁴ the word *māsa* that can mean “the moon” but also “a month” is mentioned: *sāmānām māsa ākṛtiḥ* (RV 10.85.5d), translated by S. Jamison & J. Brereton as “the moon is a model of the years”¹⁵. However, this phrase can be understood as “a month is a constituent part of the years”. S. Jamison and J. Brereton comment:

“Soma here [is] identified for the first time as the moon, an identification that becomes standard later. The waning and waxing of the moon are referred

¹⁰ MacDonell 1897: 95.

¹¹ MacDonell 1897: 107.

¹² Discussed in MacDonell 1897: 111.

¹³ Which can be seen as a parallel to a widespread Indo-European mythological motif of the marriage between the sun and the moon.

¹⁴ *yāt tvā deva prapībanti tāta ā pyāyase pūnaḥ |
vāyúḥ sómasya rakṣitā sāmānām māsa ākṛtiḥ ||*

¹⁵ Jamison, Brereton 2014: 1522.

to in verse 5, and probably cryptically in the first part of verse 4, in the puzzling adjective “those whose regulation is sheltering” (*āchādvidhāna*), using an idiom otherwise used for the regulation of the months and seasons”¹⁶.

The connection of Soma with the moon becomes quite explicit in the later Vedic tradition and culminates in Classical Hinduism where Soma *is* the moon. Soma means the moon in the Atharvaveda, e.g., AV 7.81.3.4, 11.6.7, etc., and then in ChU 5.10.1 Soma is identified with the moon and said to be food of the gods; the same idea is expressed in various Brāhmaṇas, i.e., AB 7.11, ŚB 1.6.4.5, KauB 7.10; 4.4.

There are a number of other epithets designating Varuṇa that demonstrate his relationship with *ṛtá*. Although these epithets are typical of Varuṇa, they are not exclusive for him and describe other gods as well. One of them is *ṛtávan* — “the one who possesses *ṛtá*”, “true to *ṛtá*”¹⁷; also: “righteous” or “truthful”. It can refer specifically to Varuṇa, like in RV 4.42.4, or jointly to Mitra and Varuṇa (in RV 1.136.4; 1.151.8; 5.65.2; 5.76.4; 8.23.3; 8.25.1,4,7,8), as well as to the Ādityas as a group (RV 2.27.4, etc.). Among the other gods who are frequently described as *ṛtávan* is Agni (a non-exhaustive list includes RV 2.35.8; 3.13.2; 3.20.4; 4.2.1; 4.5.6; 4.7.7; 7.3.1; 10.2.2, etc.). Additionally, Varuṇa, along with Mitra, is *ṛtájāta* — “born from *ṛtá*” (e.g., RV 7.66.13), *ṛtásprś* (e.g., RV 1.2.8) — “connected with/touching *ṛtá*” and *ṛtávṛdh* — “the one who grows/strengthens by means of *ṛtá*” (e.g., RV 1.2.8, 1.25.5, 7.66.13). In RV 5.66.1c Varuṇa is called by a unique epithet *ṛtápeśas* — “the one whose form is *ṛtá*” (a variant translation — “the one whose ornament is *ṛtá*”).

All the examples and epithets provided above illustrate Varuṇa’s multidimensional association with *ṛtá*. This association is very strong and well-attested in the RV by indological scholarship¹⁸. I intend to show how other attributes as well as mythological and etymological links that characterize Varuṇa further solidify his status as the lord of *ṛtá* and reveal his status as the lord of time.

¹⁶ Jamison, Brereton 2014: 1519.

¹⁷ “Fidèle à la loi,” as translated in Bergaigne 1878-97: vol. 3, 229.

¹⁸ See, for example, Hillebrandt 1877 and 1891-1902, Lüders 1951-59, Kuiper 1979, Brereton 1973.

2. Varuṇa and *vratá*

In addition to *ṛtá*, there is another significant term found in the RV that Varuṇa is closely related to, that is *vratá*. This notion received a lot of scholarly attention in the field of the Vedic studies; its etymology, meaning, and relationship to different deities has been examined by A. Bergaigne 1878-97 (vol. 3), W.D. Whitney 1885, V.M. Apte 1942, H. Lüders 1951-59, P. Thieme 1957 and 1959, H.-P. Schmidt 1958, Hacker 1973, J. Brereton 1975 and 1981, T. Lubin 2001, and many other scholars.

Let us first consider the application of this word in the RV and its relationship to Varuṇa. Timothy Lubin, slightly adjusting the data given in H.P. Schmidt's tabulations¹⁹, presents the following numbers that show how the usage of the word *vratá* in the RV corresponds to different "divine agents":

"... some gods are more noted for their *vratás* than others. *Vratás* are attributed to most of the gods at some point in the *Ṛg Veda* corpus, but when we can ascertain the divine agent of the *vratá* — about half of the time — it is most frequently Varuṇa (twenty-four instances, including eight instances jointly with Mitra, and once jointly with Mitra and Savitr̥), Agni (fifteen, plus two jointly), Soma (twelve), Indra (twelve, plus two jointly), Savitr̥ (ten), and the "All Gods" (*Viśve Devāḥ*) (seventeen)".²⁰

As can be seen from these figures, Varuṇa is a primary, albeit not the only, agent of the *vratás*. His major functions include exerting the *vratás* (the meaning of the term will be discussed below) and watching over their observance, i.e., Varuṇa and the *vratás* are definitely functionally correlated. According to H.-P. Schmidt²¹, words "*Varuṇa*" and "*vratá*" are also related etymologically, both stemming from the Indo-European root **uer-/uere-/urē-* "to speak, talk"²², an etymology for *vratá* first proposed by A. Bezenberger²³ and then for *vratá* and *Varuṇa* by A. Meillet²⁴. P. Thieme also supports this etymology for both *vratá* and *Varuṇa*²⁵ as well as the meaning of the word *vratá* that, as states H.-P. Schmidt, in all cases in the RV is "Gelübde"²⁶, i.e., "vow".

¹⁹ Lubin 2001: 568, fn. 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 568.

²¹ Schmidt 1958.

²² For meaning and cognates, see Pokorny 2007: 3367.

²³ Bezenberger 1877, 1: 253f.

²⁴ Meillet 1907: 157f.

²⁵ Thieme 1959: 150.

²⁶ Schmidt 1958: 17.

Schmidt explains that a vow should be understood as “eine Art von promissorischem Eid”²⁷, i.e., a promissory oath. This view was contested by P. Hacker²⁸ and J. Brereton²⁹. Both accept the etymology of the word but dispute its meaning. J. Brereton at length analyzes semantics and employment of the word *vratá* in the RV and concludes that the meaning “oath/vow” in many cases doesn’t fit the context of particular hymns of the RV and AV. He argues that *vratá* is a commandment³⁰; “an action which is governed by a commandment and so is considered an expression of the commandment”; and “‘authority’, the power to command”.³¹ He also concludes that Varuṇa is a personification of *vratá*.³²

Both meanings of *vratá* — “vow/oath/promise” proposed by H.-P. Schmidt and “commandment” suggested by J. Brereton — were disputed by Timothy Lubin. He seems to accept (without scrutinizing it) the etymology (IE **ur-*/*ure-*/*urē-*), which he credits to the “current consensus”³³, but rejects the proposed understanding of *vratá*. He also avoids discussing the idea of the etymological relationship between *vratá* and Varuṇa, stating “whether or not we fully accept this etymological argument, or this understanding of Varuṇa’s name, it is likely that the Vedic poets made this connection”³⁴. Lubin thoroughly analyzes the usage of the word *vratá* in the RV and later Vedic texts, and shows that its application in the corpus of the Ṛgveda is, generally, threefold:

1) *vratás* as divine laws, i.e., *vratás* of the gods that “constitute a manifestation of divine will in the “natural” patterns and processes of phenomena (such as the flow of water) in the observable world. The “way the world is” then is seen as a confirmation of divine agency.”³⁵

2) *vratás* as ritual observance/activity, i.e., *vratás* of the humans who observe ritual activities following a prescribed set of rules.

3) *vratá* as a rule or “standard mode of action” in a general sense.³⁶

²⁷ Schmidt 1958: 32.

²⁸ Hacker 1973.

²⁹ Brereton 1975 and 1981.

³⁰ Brereton 1975: 81f.

³¹ Brereton 1981: 70.

³² Brereton 1975: 101.

³³ Lubin 2001: 565.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 569.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 574.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 567.

Consequently, having shown the application of the term, Lubin rejects Brereton's translation "commandment" and proposes to translate *vratá* as "rule" or "law" in most cases. He also notes that he prefers "to avoid Brereton's gloss 'commandment', which seems to emphasize unduly the speech component, since the Ṛg Veda never alludes to the pronouncing or declaring of a *vrata*"³⁷. *Vratá*, therefore, is something that can be set, followed, or observed (like a rule, law, or ritual/action) rather than said, pronounced or declared (like an oath, vow, or commandment).

While I consider T. Lubin's arguments convincing and the meanings and translations of *vratá* offered by him very plausible, I think that semantics and functions of this term in the Vedic context can be better explained by a different etymology. This etymology was proposed by W.D. Whitney³⁸ and independently by A. Ludwig³⁹; then supported by V.M. Apte⁴⁰: it is a derivation of the word *vratá* from a Sanskrit root *vṛt-*, "to turn, revolve, roll, move, take place" with a secondary meaning "to pass away (as time)"⁴¹. This etymology allows to interpret *vratá* as an action; repetitive/ritual activity; any fixed "rule" or "law", i.e., an activity that must take place; things how they are supposed to be. Even the meaning "commandment" as prescribed activity won't be far-fetched, whereas a derivation from an IE **u̯er-/u̯ere-/u̯rē-* 'speak' may only account for such meanings as "oath/vow" or "commandment" but would hardly include any activity-related connotations.

Additionally, W.D. Whitney supports his etymology of *vratá* by making the following syntactic argument:

"...verbs which take *vratá* as object decidedly favor its interpretation as a word of motion. We do not find them to mean 'obey, submit to, accept,' and the like, but rather 'follow after, pursue, attach one's self to,' and so on (*i, anv-i, anu-car, anu-gā, anu-vṛt, sac, etc.*)"⁴²

Whitney illustrates his point with multiple examples of the usage of the word *vratá* with different verbs of movement, such as "*ánu*

³⁷ Lubin 2001: 567, fn. 9.

³⁸ In Whitney 1885.

³⁹ Ludwig 1876-88. Vol. 1: 6-88, Vol. 3: 266.

⁴⁰ In Apte 1942: 4 ff.

⁴¹ As in Monier Willams 1899: 1009.

⁴² Whitney 1885: CCXXX.

vratám carasi” (RV 3.61.1), “*vratám agne sacanta*” (RV 7.61.1), etc.⁴³ He also states that there might be indications of the traditional recognition of the etymological relationship between *vratá* and the root *vṛt-*: several stanzas contain a word play that involves the word *vratá* occurring closely to different derivatives of the root *vṛt-*. As an example, Whitney (although warning that this might not be important and can simply be “accidental collocations, or artificial plays upon words”⁴⁴) partially quotes the following stanza (RV 1.183.3) that indeed has the *vratá/vṛt-* word play:

ā tiṣṭhataṃ **suvṛtam** yó rátho vām ánu **vratāni vārtate** havíṣmān |
yéna narā nāsatyēṣayādhyai **vartír** yāthás tánayāya tmāne ca ||

Mount your well-rolling (*suvṛtam*) chariot — filled with oblations — that rolls (*vārtate*) following the laws (*vratāni*). By which [chariot], o Nāsatyas, you, [two] men, make [your] round[s] (*vartíḥ*) to invigorate [us] and for the sake of [our] offspring.

An extra point that can be added to Whitney’s “appeal to tradition” is that Sāyaṇa consistently glosses *vratāni* as *karmāṇi*⁴⁵, i.e., rituals or actions. This explanation definitely does not cover all the possible connotations of the word but accounts for at least some cases. We cannot, of course, completely rely on the traditional interpretation for the understanding and especially etymology of the term. However, in addition to other arguments, these two pieces of evidence are still worthy of consideration since they represent an established point of view as well as a poetic intuition. Overall, based on the semantics and morphological analysis of *vratá*, its deviation from Skt. *vṛt-* does seem possible.

If Varuṇa’s name is etymologically related to *vratá*, as suggested by H.-P. Schmidt⁴⁶, then we can assume that the word *varuṇa* also stems from the Sanskrit verbal root *vṛt-* or rather from its “predecessor”, an Indo-European root **u̯er-/u̯er-t-* — ‘to turn, wind’⁴⁷. In general, it denotes any circular, revolving movement or activity. Apart from

⁴³ Whitney 1885: CCXXX.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ E.g., in his comment to RV 1.183.3 in Sāyaṇa 1933-1951, Vol.1: 1081.

⁴⁶ See also Mayrhofer 1996: 515-16, 594-5.

⁴⁷ Pokorny 2007: 3352; Watkins 2011: 102 (*wer-³*).

a variety of derivatives signifying movement, turning, path/way, as well as (significantly for the mythology of time and time-wheel) a plethora of meanings associated with the wheel and a path of the wheel (e.g., Sanskrit *vartman* — ‘a track or rut of the wheel, path, course’), it produced a number of words that have temporal connotations, such as Sanskrit *vartamāna* — ‘present time’ or ‘present tense’ (also: ‘moving, turning, existing’); Old Slavic *vremę* — ‘time’ (from the Proto-Slavic **uertmen* — ‘time’ through the form *vertmę*)⁴⁸, Khotanese-Sakan (Middle Iranian) *bada-* < **varta-* ‘time’⁴⁹; Old Norse *urðr* — ‘that which has come to pass’, i.e., the past, also: fate, name of one of the Norns (fate-goddesses); Old Norse *verðandi* — ‘present’, ‘happening’, name of another Norn; Old English *wyrd* — ‘fate, destiny’ and Old High German *wurt* — ‘fate’⁵⁰; Latin *anniversarius* — ‘returning yearly’ as well as Latin set expressions *anno vertente* — ‘return/course of the year’ and *mensis vertens* — ‘current/unfolding month’; Old Slavic *връстѣ* — ‘series; generation’, hence Russian *сверстник* [*sverstnik*] — ‘of the same generation, contemporary’; Old Slavic *връста* ‘interval in space or time’; possibly Latin *Vertumnus*, the Roman god of changing seasons and the year. Notably, many words denoting spindle in different Indo-European languages are also derived from this root, e.g., Sanskrit *vartana*, Middle Iranian *fertas*, Welsh *gwerthyd*, Old Slavic *vrěteno* (**uerteno*), etc., which is important for the mythological context because spindle in the Indo-European mythology in many cases represents time, year, and fate⁵¹.

An interesting Sanskrit compound that is worthy of a special mention is *ṛtu-vṛtti* — ‘revolution of the seasons, a year’. This compound — clearly denoting time — contains derivatives from two time-related Indo-European roots: **ar-* and **uer-/uer-t-*. The presence of such a compound in the language may indicate that there is some kind of “language memory” (something like “cultural memory”) of the semantic (albeit not etymological!) connection between the two roots and also of temporal connotations of their derivatives.

Returning to the formation of the word *varuṇa*, the following can be said: the word is present in the Mitanni treaty (c. 1380 BC)⁵² and is

⁴⁸ Oguibénine 2016: 70.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Watkins 2011: 102.

⁵¹ For discussion see: Yanchevskaya 2018: chapter III.

⁵² Witzel 2004: 588-589; for the date also Witzel 1992: 613.

likely to originate on the Indo-Aryan level. It can stem from the root * $\underline{u}er$ - in its form without an extension $-t$, whereas *vratá* is derived from the form * $\underline{u}er-t$ - that has the extension. The suffix $-una$ ⁵³ is rather rare in Sanskrit, there are no more than 10-15 formations with it (*árjuna*, *karúna*, *-cetúna*, *táruna*, *dāruná*, etc.⁵⁴). The suffix is found in both Sanskrit and Avestan language, therefore it is at least Indo-Iranian but, being present in the Mitanni treaty as a part of the word *varuṇa*, is likely to be Indo-Aryan as well. Generally, the suffix is used to form adjectives on the basis of the verbal roots. *Varuṇa* therefore can be an Indo-Aryan adjectival formation from the root * $\underline{u}er$ -(t -) (probably with the causative meaning) and can tentatively signify “the one who turns/revolves [things]” or “the one who sets [thing] in [circular] motion”.

Further considering Varuṇa and his possible links with time, we can now hypothesize that he is associated with time through his connection with notions derived from the both aforementioned time-related Indo-European roots — * ar - and * $\underline{u}er$ -/ $\underline{u}er-t$ -. First of all, Varuṇa is connected with time through his functional association with *ṛtá* (derived from * ar -). Second, if his very name or at least the designation of his major power (*vratá*) indeed stem from the root *vṛt*- (IE * $\underline{u}er$ -/ $\underline{u}ert$ -), it means that his association with time can also be seen on the etymological level.

Let us now analyze Varuṇa’s mythological functions in the RV and see if we can find any mythological narratives and motifs that would allow us, so to speak, to place Varuṇa into the temporal domain.

3. Varuṇa and Time in Vedic Mythology

It is not an easy task to analyze Varuṇa’s mythology and determine what his mythological functions are. Unlike Indra, who clearly is a major (or even the main) character in the Vedic mythological narratives, Varuṇa is hardly associated with any coherent stories. Therefore, his mythology needs to be reconstructed through examining separate mythological motifs related to him. Here I present a web of mythological motifs that indicate Varuṇa’s association with time and reveal his role as a time-lord.

As discussed above, Varuṇa’s primary function is to uphold *ṛtá* as 1) a Cosmic Order that structures spatial and temporal events and puts

⁵³ ‘ n ’ of the suffix is cerebralized in Varuṇa due to the normal phonetic changes.

⁵⁴ Whitney 1950: 443.

them in sequence, and as 2) Truth (the moral law). In RV 1.164 (a famous “*asyá vāmasya*” riddle hymn), *ṛtá* is pictured as a wheel and also as a shining chariot that crosses the sky following a fixed path. This wheel as well as the chariot is identified with the sun and with the year.⁵⁵ In the Vedic worldview, the year (and time in general) and the sun are thought of as closely connected. In the RV, the sun is a measure of the universe/the earth and an instrument by which the act of measuring is performed (cf. RV 1.50.7: *ví dyám eṣi rájas pṛthv áhā mímāno aktúbhiḥ | páśyañ jánmāni sūrya ||* — ‘You travel across the sky [and] the wide realm, measuring the days by the nights⁵⁶, looking upon the living, o Sūrya [the sun]!’). In RV 5.85.5, Varuṇa measures the earth using the sun as his “yardstick”:

*imām ū ṣv āsurasya śrutasya mahīm māyāṃ varuṇasya prá vocam |
mānēneva tasthivāṃ antárikṣe ví yó mamé pṛthivīm sūryeṇa ||*

I sing this great magic of Varuṇa, the superb illustrious Asura, who, standing in the intermediate space, measured out the earth with the sun like a measure.

Varuṇa therefore is specifically linked in this stanza to the sun’s measuring function: the sun is used as a metric of the time-space continuum, and Varuṇa in this case personifies this function.

Although Varuṇa cannot be considered a “sun deity”, he exhibits multiple motifs that strongly associate him with the sun. There are several hymns where the sun is called an eye of Varuṇa or that of Mitra and Varuṇa. For example, in RV 1.50.6, a hymn dedicated to Sūrya, the sun, we find the following verse:

yēnā pāvaka cákṣasā bhuranyántaṃ jánāṃ ánu | tvám varuṇa páśyasi ||

O purifying one, [the sun is] the eye by which, o Varuṇa, you look over the restless among the living.

The sun as the eye of Mitra and Varuṇa is mentioned in different hymns, including RV 1.115.1, 7.61.1, 7.63.1 etc. A typical example would be RV 10.37.1a,d:

⁵⁵ See: Yanchevskaya 2018: I.1.2.1.

⁵⁶ “by the nights” — *aktúbhiḥ*; another possible translation is “by [your] rays”. This double meaning is probably intended as a poetic device.

námo mitrásya váruṇasya cákṣase ... |... divás putráya sūryāya śamsata ||

Bow to the eye of Mitra and Varuṇa... praise to Sūrya [the sun], the son of heaven.

In RV 6.51.1, not only Mitra and Varuṇa's eye is equaled with the sun, but also it is called "the face of *ṛtá*", therefore this verse demonstrates a link of associations: Mitra and Varuṇa's eye with the sun, the sun with *ṛtá*, Mitra and Varuṇa with *ṛtá*:

*úd u tyác cákṣur máhi mitráyor áṁ éti priyám váruṇayor ádabdham |
ṛtásya súci darśatám ánīkaṁ rukmó ná divá úditā vy ádyaut ||*

The great eye goes up — [that] of Mitra, [that] beloved undeceived [eye] of Varuṇa. The shining face of *ṛtá* has glowed brightly in the [sun]rise like a [golden] ornament of heaven.

There are multiple other motifs dispersed through the text of the RV that show Varuṇa's connection with the sun. He (alone or accompanied by Mitra and Aryaman) is the one who makes the path for the sun (RV 1.24.8ab: *urúm hí rájā váruṇas cakāra sūryāya pánthām ánvetaṁ u* | — 'King Varuṇa made a wide path for the sun to follow'; also in RV 7.87.1 and elsewhere) and causes the golden swing of the sun to shine in heaven (RV 7.87.5cd: *gṛtso rájā váruṇas cakra etám divi preñkhám hiranyáyam śubhé kám* || — 'Crafty king Varuṇa made this golden swing in heaven for splendor'). Just like the sun, Varuṇa (with or without Mitra) has a chariot that he mounts in heaven (RV 5.61.3) that shines like the sun (RV 1.122.15c,d: *rátho vām mitrávaruṇā dīrghāpsāḥ syūmagabhastīḥ súro nádyaut* || — 'Your chariot with a long front drawn [and] [ray-like] thongs, o Mitra and Varuṇa, shone like the sun'). Abode or a place where Mitra and Varuṇa sit (*sādana*) is in heaven (RV 1.136.2 *dyukṣám sādanam* — 'celestial sit/abode'). Their dwelling place (*yoni*⁵⁷) is described as golden (RV 5.67.2a,b: *á yád yónim hiranyáyam váruṇa mítra sádathah* | — 'When you, o Varuṇa, o Mitra, sit at the golden abode...'), and golden-winged is Varuṇa's messenger (RV 10.123.6c — *híranypakṣam váruṇasya dūtám*). The sun enters

⁵⁷ *Yoni* in the later language is understood as a womb, however, this meaning is rather rare in the RV (there are singular instances when this meaning can possibly be applied). Besides, in the context of the discussed hymn this connotation is unlikely.

Varuṇa and Mitra's dwelling (RV 1.152.4) and in a different hymn the sun tells Varuṇa and Mitra if human beings committed any offences (RV 7.60.1-3).

Whereas Varuṇa's relationship to the sun reflected in the motifs discussed above connects him with time indirectly, there is another set of mythological motifs in the RV that shows his direct association with time. In RV 8.42.2, Varuṇa is the herdsman or protector of immortality (*amṛta*) that represents time-eternity⁵⁸:

*evā vandasva váruṇam bṛhántam namasyā dhīram amṛtasya gopām |
sá naḥ śárma trivárūtham ví yaṃsat pātām no dyāvāpṛthivī upásthē ||*

Thus praise mighty Varuṇa, make reverence to the wise herdsman of immortality! May he grant us refuge with threefold protection! Protect us in your womb, o Heaven and Earth!

The epithet *amṛtasya gopā* — herdsman of immortality — is rare in the RV. In RV 6.9.3c it describes Agni *Vaiśvānara* (fire-belonging-to-all-men), as well as a similar epithet — *gopā amṛtasya rakṣitā* — 'herdsman, protector of immortality' in RV 6.7.7d. Agni is also said to be *amṛtasya nābhiḥ* — 'the navel of immortality' (RV 3.17.4), so his associations with *amṛta*, immortality, are clearly very strong: being the navel (center) of immortality, he embodies it. However, these associations are likely to have their root in the ritual and Agni's role as physical fire: a navel (*nābhi*) is a term that refers to the fire altar (*védi*)⁵⁹ or, more specifically, a hollow in the center of the altar where the fire is situated during a sacrifice. Fire, Agni, being a *vediśád* — 'sitting on the altar' (RV 1.140.1, 4.40.5), is the center of the sacrifice — 'navel of sacrifices' (*nābhiṃ yajñānām*; RV 6.7.2), so is the sacrificial butter that is put into the fire during the ritual and also referred to as 'navel of immortality' in RV 4.58.1. The same can be applied to *soma* that embodies immortality as a sacrificial substance "in the center of the ritual" and also as a giving and sustaining immortality drink of the gods (in the mythology of the later Hinduism *soma* as drink of immortality is substituted by *amṛta*). Unlike Soma and Agni, Varuṇa whose role in the ritual is far less prominent and who does not

⁵⁸ For immortality as time-eternity see: Yanchevskaya 2018: I.1.2.

⁵⁹ Elizarenkova 1995: 34.

represent any physical substance or element, never *embodies* immortality (unless he is identified with Agni or Soma, as shown above). He truly is a guardian, a herdsman of immortality (*amṛ́tasya gopá*), an external force that puts things and events in order (ensuring that *ṛtá* functions properly by imposing his rules, *vratás*), distinguishes between the mortals and immortals by properly arranging them (e.g., in RV 5.72.2b Varuṇa and Mitra ‘arrange the [mortal] people properly’ — *dhármaṇā yātayájjanā*), differentiates eternity and temporality, and does not allow any confusion in the universe.

Varuṇa’s functions as an arranger of time periods can also be expressed quite directly. He “knows twelve months” and their subdivisions (RV 1.25.8), as well as the additional, thirteenth month, that is “born afterwards”:

véda māsó dhṛtávrato dvādaśa prajāvataḥ |
védā yá upajāyate ||

[Varuṇa] whose rules are firm, knows the twelve [months] and their offspring. He knows the one born afterwards.

He also (with Mitra and Aryaman) regulates and arranges the year, seasons, months, days, and nights, e.g., RV 7.66.11:

ví yé dadhúḥ śaradam māsam ād áhar yajñám aktúm cād ṛcam |
anāpyám váruṇo mitró aryamá kṣatráṃ rájāna āśata ||

These who apportioned the year⁶⁰, the month, and the day, and then the sacrifice, the night, and the hymn[s] — the kings Varuṇa, Mitra, Aryaman have attained unattainable power.

In RV 8.41.10, Varuṇa divides days and nights, thus creating a day-cycle by his laws/rules:

yáh svētám ádhiniṛijaś cakré kṣṇám anu vratā |
sá dhāma pūrvyám mame yá skambhéna víródasī ajó ná dyám ádhārayan
nábhantām anyaké same ||

⁶⁰ “the year” — *śaradam*; can also be understood as “autumn”; in this context translation ‘year’ (i.e., repetition of autumns/harvest seasons) is more appropriate.

The one who has made the white [days] wearing [shining] garments black [nights] by [his] laws⁶¹ — he measured the ancient abode. The one who held apart heaven and earth by the fulcrum, like Aja [Ekapad] the sky.
May all the others be torn apart!

Despite a certain degree of syntactic obscurity in this verse, it can be derived that Varuṇa (described here as a creator who separates heaven and earth and acts as the world axis and supporter of heaven) has power over “the black and white”. “Black and white” clearly refer to days and nights, cf. RV 6.9.1: *áhaś ca kṛṣṇám áhar árjunam ca ví vartete rájasī vedyābhiḥ* | — ‘black day and white day roll manifestly through heaven and earth’. Therefore, Varuṇa regulates the alternation of days and nights by means of and in accordance with his rules or laws, *vratás*. A similar idea is expressed in stanza 3 of the same hymn (RV 8.41.3): Varuṇa controls the nights, holds them in his embrace, and establishes the dawns by *māyā*, his magical power:

sá kṣápaḥ pári śasvaje ny úsró māyáyā dadhe sá víśvam pári darśatāḥ |
tásya vénīr ánu vratám uśás tisró avardhayan nábhantām anyaké same ||

He has embraced the nights [and] established the dawns by his magical power. The splendid one, he [encompasses] all. Following [his] rule[s], his lovers strengthened the three dawns.
May all the others be torn apart!

The regular arrival of the dawns and the change of the days and nights follow Varuṇa’s rules or laws, as exemplified by RV 1.123.7-8; “thirty *yojanas*” here represent the thirty days of a month:

ápānyád éty abhy anyád eti víśurūpe áhanī sám carete |
parikṣitos tamo anyā guhākar adyauḍ uśāḥ śośucatā rathena || 7 ||
sadrśīr adya sadrśīr id u śvo dīrgham sacante varuṇasya dhāma |
anavadyās trimśataṃ yojanāny ekaikā kratum pari yanti sadyaḥ || 8 ||

8. The one goes away, the other comes. The day and the night [=two day-halves], the two dissimilar in form, proceed together. Another one concealed

⁶¹ Lit. — “... made white garment-wearers [days] black [nights]”. Another possible variant would be “the one who has made the white [days] and black [nights] wear garments”. Kuiper 1979: 72 translates this line: “He who made the white wearers of garments black ones, in accordance with his vows”.

the darkness of the two surrounding [spheres]: Uṣas, [the dawn], blazed [in the sky] with her shining chariot.

9. Appearing the same today, appearing also the same tomorrow, they follow the long[-standing] law of Varuṇa. Irreproachable, one by one [they fulfill their] purpose [and] circle thirty *yojanas*⁶² in one day.

The sun and the moon are in Varuṇa's control; they are "his" (RV 8.41.9ab *yásya śvetā vicakṣaṇā tisró bhūmīr adhikṣitāḥ | trīr úttarāṇi paprátur...* — '[Varuṇa,] he who has [two] brightly shining wide-observing ones [that] rule the three earths [and] thrice filled the highest [domains]'). Varuṇa's laws (*vratāni*) also regulate when the moon and the stars appear and disappear, i.e., again, they ensure the rotation of the day and the night, e.g., RV 1.24.10:

*amī yá ṛkṣā níhitāsa uccā náktam dádrṣre kúha cid díveyuh |
ádabdhāni váruṇasya vratāni vicākaśac candrāmā náktam eti ||*

These [stars,] the [celestial] bears placed high [in the sky] are seen at night [but gone] somewhere by day. Unbreakable are Varuṇa's laws: the moon wanders at night beholding [the earth].

It can be said that Varuṇa creates temporality and establishes the time of the phenomenal world. By digging the path for the sun (the path of the chariot of *ṛtá*) he also creates a way for the days to follow, RV 7.87.1:

*rádat pathó váruṇaḥ sūryāya prārṇāmsi samudriyā nadínām |
sārgo na srṣṣtō árvatīr ṛtāyāñ cakāra mahīr avānīr áhabhyaḥ ||*

Varuṇa cut open the paths for the sun, [he made] the streams of the rivers [rush] forth to the sea, like a herd of [streams-race-horses] released running following [the path of] *ṛtá*. He made mighty riverbeds for the days.

In RV 3.61.7 the dawns that signify the passage of time appear in the sky because of the magic power of Mitra and Varuṇa:

*ṛtāsya budhnā uśāsām iṣanyán vṛṣā mahī ródasī á viveśa |
mahī mitrásya váruṇasya māyā candréva bhānūm ví dadhe purutrā́ ||*

⁶² *Yojana* — a measure of distance equal to "one yoke" of horses, i.e., the distance that can be covered by one (unchanged) yoke of horses. In this verse each *yojana* represents a day of a month.

Driving the dawns in the depths of *ṛtá*⁶³, the bull [of the Sun] entered two great realms [heaven and earth]. Great is the magic of Mitra and Varuṇa: it has spread in many directions like the shining [Dawn spreads] her luster.

Not only Varuṇa exercises the work of time in the natural world, but also he is in charge of human fate (he can, for example, ease or hinder “daily paths” of humans) and their life duration. It is in his power to prolong or shorten the lifespan of humans, therefore one of the usual requests addressed to him is to extend the lifetime, e.g., RV 1.25.12:

*sá no viśvāhā sukrátur ādityáh supáthā karat |
prá na āyūṃṣi tārīṣat ||*

May the wise Āditya [Varuṇa] always make our paths good.
May he extend our lifespans!

Another request would be not to reduce the lifetime, as in 1.24.11cd:

áheḷamāno varuṇehá bodhy úruśaṃsa mā na āyuh prá moṣīḥ ||

Be not angry now, o Varuṇa, praised by many! Do not take away our lifespan!

Being in charge of human lifespan, Varuṇa who, as can be seen from the quote above, is able to take life is very much associated with death and the netherworld, which functionally unites him with different Indo-European deities of fate and time. The association between death and time typical for the Indo-European cultures is preserved in India as well. It can be observed in various texts, most typically in the epics where Yama, a personification of death, is often identified with Kāla, time⁶⁴. Significantly, Varuṇa shares certain functions with Yama, which can be seen in RV 10.14.7:

*péhi préhi pathíbhiḥ pūrvyébhīr yátrā naḥ pūrve pitáraḥ pareyúḥ |
ubhá rájānā svadháya mádantā yamám paśyāsi váruṇaṃ ca devám ||*

Depart, depart by ancient paths where our forefathers went before us. You will see both kings delighted (intoxicated?) by the *svadhā* (-offering and exclamation) — Yama and the god Varuṇa.

⁶³ ‘in the depths of *ṛtá* — *ṛtāsya budhná* [=*budhne*] — most likely, in the sky.

⁶⁴ See Vassilkov 1999: 23-24.

The quoted stanza belongs to a funeral hymn and presents an instruction to a newly dead person who is about to depart to the world of the forefathers following the *pityāna*, the way of the ancestors. The stanza suggests that the dead who arrives to the “highest heaven” (*paramé vyòman* — RV 10.14.8) meets there both Yama, the lord of the dead, and Varuṇa who is never explicitly described as a death deity in the RV. Moreover, both kings are said to be “delighted by the *svadhā*” that is a ritual exclamation that accompanies an offering to the ancestors, which means that both Yama and Varuṇa take part and have their share in the sacrifice to the ancestors. Therefore Varuṇa is depicted in this hymn as another king of realm of the dead, parallel to Yama. It is not the only parallel between the two deities in the Vedic tradition: on multiple occasions in the RV Varuṇa is identified with Yama (e.g., RV 1.163.3); Varuṇa’s noose (*pāśa*, sometimes translated as fetter) by which he binds offenders is a counterpart of Yama’s foot-fetter (*pādbiśa*). That can be seen in RV 10.97.16 where Yama’s *pādbiśa* is mentioned directly and Varuṇa’s noose is implied by the word *varuṇya* — “that of Varuṇa’s”:

muñcāntu mā śapathyāḍ átho varuṇyāḍ utá |
átho yamásya pād̥biśāt sárvasmād devakilbiśāt ||

May they release me from the curse, and also from Varuṇa’s [noose],
and from Yama’s foot-fetter; from every fault before the gods.

In the later tradition (in Hinduism) where Varuṇa’s role is diminished to being simply a deity of the water/ocean, Varuṇa’s noose (*pāśa*) becomes Yama’s attribute. Also, in the post-Ṛgvedic literature, mostly in the AV (both AVŚ and AVP), the noose can be attributed directly to death: there are multiple mentions of “the noose of death” — *mṛtyupāśa* (i.e., AVŚ 8.2.2c, AVŚ 17.1.30b), *mṛtyoḥ pāśa* (i.e., AVP 2.80.5c, AVP 2.37.5, AVŚ 12.4.37d), etc. Notably, one of the most typical epithets for Yama in the epics is *Dharmarāja*, the king of Dharma; in many cases Yama is identified with god Dharma. Because Vedic *ṛtá* as moral law (that acquires a sense of religious duty and loses most of the meanings associated with Cosmic Order) is substituted by Dharma⁶⁵

⁶⁵ A Hindu notion Dharma has its roots in the Vedic *dharman*, a term very close to certain connotations of both *ṛtá* and *vratá*. *Dharman* can be translated as ‘ordinance, law, decree, established way’. *Vratá* and *dharmán* are Varuṇa’s means to uphold and guard *ṛtá*,

in Hinduism, it can be said that Yama to some extent assumes Varuṇa's function as the lord of *ṛtá*.

There are additional indirect indications of a link between Yama and Varuṇa in the RV. For example, in RV 10.123.6 Varuṇa's messenger is found in Yama's abode (*yoni*):

*nāke suparāṃ úpa yát pátantam hṛdā vénanto abhy ácakṣata tvā |
híranypakṣam váruṇasya dūtám yamáśya yónau śakunám bhuraṇyúm ||*

When they, longing with their heart, saw you, [an eagle] with beautiful wings flying in the sky, the golden-winged messenger of Varuṇa, the bird quivering in Yama's abode.

A famous hymn where a poet, apparently Vasiṣṭha, when stricken by a horrible disease (presumably, dropsy⁶⁶) asks Varuṇa to not let him go “to the house of clay” (RV 7.89), is another example of Varuṇa's ability to cause death. The house of clay mentioned in the hymn is most likely a grave or the earth where the dead are buried. This interpretation is supported by a sound play in the hymn, especially in the first stanza, RV 7.89.1:

*mó śú varuṇa mṛṇmáyaṃ gṛhám rājann ahám gamam |
mṛlā sukṣatra mṛlāya ||*

O Varuṇa, may I not go to the house of clay, o king! Mercy, o well-ruling one, have mercy!

A series *mṛṇmáyaṃ ... mṛlā ... mṛlāya* plays on the sounds of the root *mṛ-*, to die, as well as on *mṛn/mṛd* — clay.

Varuṇa's connection with death that is not immediately apparent in the RV resurfaces in the later tradition. Different texts straightforwardly identify Varuṇa with death. Examples of such identification are provided by Kuiper (1979) and include passages from the Gopatha Brāhmaṇa that directly calls Varuṇa death⁶⁷ (GB 1.1.7: *taṃ varuṇam*

thus, Yama's association with Dharma can definitely be considered as something that was inherited from Varuṇa's mythology.

⁶⁶ See Zysk 1985: 59-61.

⁶⁷ Kuiper 1979: 71.

mṛtyum — ‘that Varuṇa [who is] death’), also Kāṭhaka-Saṃhitā that states that Varuṇa is death and therefore causes death⁶⁸ (KS 13.2.181.7: *mṛtyur vai varuṇo | mṛtyunai ‘vai ‘nam grāhayaty |* — ‘[For] Varuṇa indeed is Death, [so] he causes that [sacrificial ram] be taken by Death’), and others. In the epics, where Varuṇa’s role is mainly reduced to that of the deity of the ocean/water, his association with death, ancestors, and the netherworld unexpectedly reemerges in various sources. In the MBh Varuṇa’s realm is said to be “where the sun sets”⁶⁹, e.g., MBh 3.160.10-11:

*yaṃ prāpya savitā rājan satyena pratitiṣṭhati |
astam parvatarājānam etam āhur maṇiṣiṇaḥ ||
etaṃ parvatarājānaṃ samudraṃ ca mahodadhim |
āvasan varuṇo rājā bhūtāni parirakṣati ||*

The [place,] having reached which Savitṛ [, the sun,] stops [in accordance with] the truth, o king, the wise ones call Asta, the king of the mountains. Inhabiting that king of the mountains and the ocean, great lord of the waters, King Varuṇa protects [all] beings.

This idea corresponds to the Vedic one expressed in a hymn addressed to Mitra and Varuṇa, in RV 5.62.1ab, that shows that Varuṇa’s *ṛtá* is concealed in a place where the sun sets:

ṛténa ṛtám ápihitam dhruvám vāṃ sūryasya yátra vimucánty áśvān |

By means of Order (*ṛtá*), your firm Order (*ṛtá*) [, o Mitra and Varuṇa,] is hidden where the stallions of the sun are unyoked.

Kuiper (1979), offering other examples of Varuṇa’s realm being in the land of the setting sun, establishes that in the epics this place shares many characteristics with the *nāgaloka*, the kingdom of the serpents, as well as with Pātāla, the subterranean abode of the serpents and demons, a mythological capital of the *nāgaloka*.⁷⁰ It should be added, that ‘the land of the setting sun’ (west) is generally associated with the netherworld in many Indo-European cultures; the same can be said

⁶⁸ Kuiper 1979: 72.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷⁰ See Kuiper 1979: 82-83.

about a great mountain (especially “the king of the mountains”) that in different Indo-European traditions marks the entrance to the world of the dead.

It is crucial to note that in a famous story of Uttāṅka⁷¹ found in the Mahābhārata that Kuiper quotes to illustrate similarities between Varuṇa’s world and the world of the serpents⁷², the protagonist (Uttāṅka) goes to the *nāgaloka* through a ‘wide great hole’ (*vivṛtam mahābīlam*) and sees a loom with a spinning wheel there. The loom and the wheel, as directly explained in the episode, represent time: Uttāṅka sees the wheel of the year, the wheel of time; different parts of the loom, cloth, threads, etc., symbolize various time-units. Significantly, the actions of the wheel-turning and thread-spinning are denoted by the verbal forms of the root *vṛt-*. Near the loom there stand two women that are said to be Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ, ‘Arranger’ and ‘Distributor’, two deities of fate. This episode is analyzed in detail by Ya. Vassilkov⁷³, therefore, without dwelling on it here, it is necessary only to highlight the part that is relevant for the study of Varuṇa’s functions: the wheel of time in this episode is situated in the kingdom of the nagas that, according to Kuiper, is described as indistinguishable from the realm of Varuṇa. The role of the two characters standing near the loom — Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ — and their relationship to Varuṇa will be discussed below.

Returning to the mythological motifs that show Varuṇa’s connection to the netherworld and death, it should be mentioned that in RV 1.24.7 Varuṇa appears to be upholding the inverted world tree:

abudhné rājā váruṇo vānasyordhvám stūpaṃ dadate pūtádaśah |
nīcīnā sthur upári budhná eṣām asmé antár níhitāḥ ketávaḥ syuḥ ||

In the bottomless [space] King Varuṇa whose power is pure holds high the top of the tree. Downward [hang its branches], upward is their base. May these rays [of light] be fixed within us!

The position near the bottom of the world tree in the Indo-European mythological system usually is a place of a chthonic serpent-like deity associated with death; the one whom Ivanov and Toporov call the

⁷¹ MBh 1.3.137 ff.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷³ Vassilkov 2010: 12-13.

“adversary of the thundergod”⁷⁴ — the adversary who, like Slavic Veles, is also a master of magic and poetry (cf. Varuṇa who possesses *māyā́*, magical power; who is called a poet, *vípra* and *kaví* in the RV, *kavi* in the later tradition; and whose opposition with Indra shows in different hymns of the RV⁷⁵). The inverted world tree symbolizes “the other”, the inverted world, thus Varuṇa’s position holding the bottom of this tree — the tree whose branches grow “downward” — can be an extra indication of him belonging to the netherworld.

As a punisher of wrongdoers, Varuṇa is a judge who determines people’ destiny. His undeceivable spies (*spāśah*) search for those who disturb the order and report to Varuṇa; his nooses bind the offenders and strike them with deadly diseases; protecting the order, he causes pain and death. Ultimately, he represents fate and final judgment.

Finally, the following should be added to the list of the time-related motifs in the mythology of Varuṇa: the Year that represents eternal time that arranges the universe and creates temporality⁷⁶, in RV 10.190 arises from the “foaming ocean” (*samudrād aṛṇavād* — RV 10.190.2a), i.e., it originates in the cosmic waters. The ocean/sea is Varuṇa’s realm in the later tradition (especially in the epics and purāṇas), however, even in the RV he is closely connected with water⁷⁷: he causes rivers to flow, makes rainy clouds to pour rain, and, significantly, he is linked with the celestial ocean. In RV 8.41.8 Varuṇa is identified with heavenly ocean, he *is* the ocean:

sá samudró apīcyās turó dyām iva rohati ní yád āsu yájur dadhé |
sá māyā́ arcinā padāstṛṇān nākam āruhan nābhantām anyaké same ||

He [is the] powerful/abundant hidden ocean — [it is] as if [he] ascends to heaven when he has put the *yájus* (sacrificial formula) into them. He scattered magic by [his] ray-foot, he ascended to the sky.
May all the others be torn apart!

Thus, it can be said that the Year appearing from the cosmic ocean arises from the realm of Varuṇa. The Year is said to be “putting the

⁷⁴ See Ivanov and Toporov 1974: 6 ff.

⁷⁵ See Kuiper 1979: 56, fn. 183; Bergaigne 1878-97: vol. 3, 139-149.

⁷⁶ Detailed discussion in Yanchevskaya 2018: I.1.2.1,3.

⁷⁷ For Varuṇa’s association with waters in the RV see Lüders 1951-59: vol. 1; for the epics see Kuiper 1979: 77-81.

days and the nights in order” (*ahorātrāṇi vidádhat* — RV 10.190.2c), *vidádhat* being a present active participle form the verbal root *dhā-* prefixed by *vi-* — ‘to distribute, arrange, put in order’, etc. The same root is the source of the two agent nouns — *dhātṛ* and *vidhātṛ* — denoting the two deities of fate standing near the wheel of the year in the story of Uttānka in the Mahābhārata. Derivative forms of this root designate arranging and distributing activities of the undivided time that becomes divided in the process of creation (division of an undivided entity signifies creation). Notably, the same form — *vidádhat* — that describes the acts of the Year in RV 10.190.2c is used in relation to Varuṇa⁷⁸. Although we find this participle in the passages dedicated to both Mitra and Varuṇa, it refers only to *one* of the gods, e.g., in RV 6.62.9ab:

yá īm rájānāv ṛtuthá vidádhad rájaso mitró varuṇás cíketat |

The one of the two kings — Mitra, Varuṇa — [who] regulates [events] in the proper sequence would observe the sky.

Another place where this participle is used is a wedding hymn RV 10.85.18:

*pūrvāparāṃ carato māyáyaitaú śísū krīḷantau pári yāto adhvarám |
viśvāny anyó bhúvanābhicāṣṭa ṛtūṃr anyó vidádhaj jāyate púnaḥ ||*

Following one another these two wander by means of [their] magic power. Like two playing children they move [run?] around [the place of] sacrifice. One observes all beings, the other, distributing times, is born again [and again].

The stanza preceding the one quoted above (10.85.17) includes a reverence to Sūryā, the daughter of the sun, whose marriage to Soma is the subject of this hymn, and to Mitra and Varuṇa; all three are called “mindful of what exists” (*bhūtāsya prácetasah*). The verse is clearly a riddle. Having multiple forms in the dual, it can be taken as

⁷⁸ Overall, this form is infrequent in the RV and occurs 3 times. Once (RV 10.190.2c), the agent is the Year; in the second case (RV 6.62.9a) it is either Mitra or Varuṇa (although the participle is in singular and therefore refers to only one of them); and in the third case (RV 10.85.18d), in a riddle, there are allusions involving the sun and the moon as well as Mitra and Varuṇa.

a continuation of Mitra and Varuṇa's theme, especially because it mentions *māyá*, the magical power that belongs to the gods and the asuras but is primarily associated with Varuṇa. It is also thematically connected with RV 6.62.9ab: in both stanzas an agent (Mitra or Varuṇa; the sun or the moon) is distributing times/events according to the proper sequence (*ṛtuthā vidádhad* vs. *ṛtúmr ... vidádhaj*) as well as observing the sky or beings (*rájaso ... cíketat* vs. *viśvāny ... bhúvanābhicāṣṭa*). As a riddle, this stanza can refer simultaneously to the sun and the moon and to Mitra and Varuṇa, perhaps using and also establishing poetic and mythological connections between the two celestial bodies and the two gods. From the passages analyzed above it can be seen that the activity of distributing/regulating the time-units and establishing sequence of events is performed by the Year, Varuṇa (with Mitra), and by the sun or the moon, both of which, of course, symbolize a solar or a lunar year correspondingly. Additionally, that activity is ascribed to Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ, the two deities standing near the wheel of time in the MBh: they represent the organizing power of time and the temporal nature of fate. Varuṇa therefore appears to have functions similar to those of the Year and deities of fate: he is a time distributor and sequence-arranger.

4. Conclusion

Summarizing the materials considered in this article, it could be said that Varuṇa is associated with time in many ways: he is a guardian and observer of *ṛtá* that, as shown and discussed at length in Yanchevskaya 2018⁷⁹, represents time-eternity in the early Vedic thought. His major regulatory power, *vratá*, as well as his very name may be derived from an Indo-European root **uer-/uer-t-* that produced a plethora of lexical units with temporal meanings in different languages. Mythology of Varuṇa is filled with time-related motifs: he is explicitly connected with the sun that represents the solar year and is identified with the wheel of *ṛtá* which is also the wheel of the year; he makes the path for the sun and watches over its movement; his chariot is compared with that of the sun and hence with the chariot of *ṛtá*. Varuṇa subtly and implicitly but nevertheless connected with the moon and the lunar year. He “knows” the year and different time units,

⁷⁹ Yanchevskaya 2018: I.1.2.1.

divides the seasons, days, and nights; he sends the dawns that epitomize the daily passage of time on their path across the sky, establishes the change of day and night, and controls celestial bodies. He prolongs or shortens human lifespan and therefore regulates the personal time; he is the final judge and punisher; he is fate. Being the “herdsman of immortality” (*amṛta*), Varuṇa guards time-eternity. Just like *kāla*, time, in the epics, he personifies death and is linked with Yama, the god of death. His realm corresponds to the land of the dead and to the kingdom of the serpents, *nāgas*, — a place where, according to the MBh, a wheel of time stands. Just like the Year that arises from Varuṇa’s cosmic ocean, Varuṇa arranges and distributes events and time-units.

It can be concluded that one of Varuṇa’s major mythological functions that could be reconstructed from the traces preserved in the RV is that of a time deity. He controls different aspects of time: undivided time-eternity that permeates and orders the universe, time-temporality containing discrete units, and ‘personal time’, i.e., lifespan and fate of human beings. Varuṇa’s chthonic and death-related features are in full agreement with his functions as a “time lord”: in general, time deities and “temporal” folklore characters of the Indo-European mythological system possess such features and usually are closely connected to death and magic.

As a very complex mythological character, Varuṇa, of course, cannot be reduced to one function, even to as multidimensional as the function of a time lord: not all his characteristics and attributes can be explained within this framework. Besides, some of his features not clearly present in the RV might still be unknown to us and are yet to be revealed by comparative analysis of the Indo-Iranian and Indo-European materials. Nevertheless, I hope this short study helped to shed light upon at least a certain major trait in the mythology of this mysterious and majestic character.

References

- Apte, V.M. 1942. All about ‘vrata’ in the Rigveda. *Deccan College Research Institute Bulletin*, Poona, vol. 3, no. 4: 407-88.
- Aufrecht, Th. 1877. *Die Hymnen des Rigveda*. Bonn.
- Bergaigne, A. 1878-97. *La religion védique*. 4 vols. Paris.
- Bezenberger, A. 1877. *Beiträge zur Kunde der Indogermanischen Sprachen*, 1. Göttingen.

- Brereton, J.P. 1973. *Aditi and the Ādityas in the Rig- and Atharva-Vedas*. Yale University, Ph.D.
- . 1981. *The R̥gvedic Ādityas*. New Haven.
- Elizarenkova, T.J. 1995. *Language and style of the Vedic ṛ̥ṣis*. State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Hacker, P. 1973. *Vrata*. Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaft in Göttingen, Phil.-hist. Kl., no. 5. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Hillebrandt, A. 1877. *Varuna und Mitra, ein Beitrag Zur Exegese des Veda*. Breslau.
- . 1891-1902. *Vedische Mythologie*. Breslau.
- Ivanov, V.V. and V.N. Toporov. 1974. *Issledovanija v oblasti slavjanskix drevnostej*. Moscow: Nauka.
- Jamison, S.W. and J.P. Brereton (trans. and eds.) 2014. *The Rigveda: the earliest religious poetry of India*. 3 vols. New York: Oxford University Press
- Kuiper, F.B.J. 1979. *Varuṇa and Viduṣaka*. Amsterdam.
- Lubin, T. 2001. Vratá Divine and Human in the Early Veda. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. Vol. 121, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 2001): 565-579.
- Lüders, H. 1951, 1959. *Varuṇa*. (2 vols.). Ed. by L. Alsdorf. Goettingen.
- Ludwig, A. 1876-88. *Der Rigveda*. 6 vols. Prague.
- Macdonell, A. A. 1897. *The Vedic mythology*. Strassburg.
- Mayrhofer, M. 1996. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen*. Volume II. Heidelberg.
- Meillet, A. 1907. Le dieu indo-iranien Mitra. *Journal Asiatique*, 10: 143-59.
- Monier Williams, M. 1899. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary Etymologically and Philologically Arranged*. Oxford.
- Oguibénine, B. 2016. *L'héritage du lexique indo-européen dans le vocabulaire russe. Compléments au Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue russe de Max Vasmer. Première série*. Paris: Institut d'études slaves.
- Pokorny, J. 2007. *Proto-Indo-European Etymological Dictionary. A Revised Edition of Julius Pokorny's Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Indo-European Language Association [<http://dnghu.org/>].
- Sāyaṇa. 1933-1951. *R̥gveda-samhitā with the commentary of Sāyaṇācārya*. Vol. 1-4. Poona: Tilak Mahārāshtra Vidyapith, Vaidika Saṁśodhana Maṇḍala.
- Schmidt, H-P. 1958. *Vedisch 'vratá' und awestisch 'urvāta'*. Hamburg: DeGruyter.
- Thieme, P. 1957. *Mitra and Aryaman*. Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of arts and sciences, Volume 41. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 1959. Review on 'Vedisch vratá und awestisch urvāta (= Alt- und Neu-Indische Studien, 9) by Hanns-Peter Schmidt'. *Indo-Iranian Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1959): 144-151.
- Vassilkov, Ya. V. 1999. Kālavāda (the doctrine of Cyclical Time) in the Mahābhārata and the concept of Heroic Didactics. In *Composing a tradition*.

- Concepts, Technics, and Relationships. Proceedings of the First Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purānas.* Zagreb: 17-33.
- . 2010. 'Koleso vremena' v indijskom epose i 'peschera sudeb' u o. Pavla Florenskogo. *Radlovskij Sbornik: nauchnye issledovanija i muzejnye proekty MAE RAN v 2009 g.*, Saint Petersburg: 11-14.
- Watkins, C. 2011. *The American heritage dictionary of Indo-European roots.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 3rd ed.
- Whitney, W.D. 1885. On the Etymology of the Sanskrit Noun *vratá*. *JAOS* 11, pp. ccxxix-ccxxxi.
- Witzel, M. 1992. Alfred Hillebrandt Reconsidered. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 112, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1992): 611-618.
- . 2004. The R̥gvedic Religious System and its Central Asian and Hindukush Antecedents. In: A. Griffiths & J.E.M. Houben (eds.). *The Vedas: Texts, Language and Ritual.* Groningen: Forsten: 581-636.
- Yanchevskaya, N. 2018. *Contemplating Eternity: On Time, Death, and Timelessness in Ancient India.* PhD Dissertation, Harvard University.
- Zysk, K. 1985. *Religious healing in the Veda.* Philadelphia.