

## ‘Hermes and Hestia’ Revisited

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In his brilliant article ‘Hestia-Hermès: Sur l’expression religieuse de l’espace et du mouvement chez les Grecs’ (*L’Homme* 3/3, 1963), Jean-Pierre Vernant explains the couple Hestia-Hermes as the religious expression of the polarity *unmovable* (Hestia) vs. *movable* (Hermes). In this paper, I argue that, by integrating the comparative data about Hermes, the Vedic fire-god Agni and the ‘fire-associated’ Ossetic hero Syrdon, Vernant’s hypothesis may ultimately apply to two complementary aspects of a ‘fire-deity,’ namely: the *static* hearth (Hestia: μέσῳ οἴκῳ κατ’ ἄρ’ ἔζετο πῖαρ ἐλοῦσα “she took fat and seated herself down in mid house,” HH 5.30) vs. the *dynamic* messenger/*psychopompos* (Hermes: εἰς Ἀΐδην τετελεσμένον ἄγγελον “the appointed messenger to Hades”, HH 4.572).

To begin with, I will focus on a bunch of features, which Hermes and Agni share, such as, among others, their common associations to (1) ‘fire’ and ‘sacrifice’/‘sacrificial share’; (2) the PIE root *\*[h<sub>1</sub>]aidʰ-* ‘to produce warmth’, which often occurs in connection with the role of ‘messenger’; (3) the semantic field ‘hunger’ and ‘eating (meat)’.

In this regard, I will also attempt to propose a new interpretation for the obscure epithet ἀκάκητα, namely: as a compound with a psilotic first member, ἄ<sup>o</sup> (*\*s<sub>1</sub>m<sup>o</sup>*) and a second member derived from IE *\*kenk-* ‘to dry/heat/burn’ (cf. Go. *hūhrus*, ON *hungr* ‘hunger’). Strikingly, ἀκάκητα applies to Hermes *psychopompos* in *Od.* 24.9–10:

[...] ἦρχε δ’ ἄρα σφιν

Ἑρμείας ἀκάκητα κατ’ εὐρώεντα κέλευθα

“Hermes *akákēta* led them (the suitors’ souls) down the dank ways”

This passage might be a clue to Hermes’s *fiery* nature. Indeed, we learn from Homer that human souls cannot reach the underworld without being given their fire-share (πυρὸς λελάχῳσι θανόντα “give [him] his due share of fire in death,” *Il.* 15.350).

The proposed distribution of roles between Hestia (HH 5.30+) and Hermes (HH 4.572), is comparable to Agni’s twofold aspect, as it is described in RV 10.16.9–10. Here, a ‘flesh-eating’ Agni conveys the dead body to the forefathers while “the other Agni”, i.e., the ‘ritual Agni’, carries oblations to the gods.

Finally, I will briefly discuss thematic overlaps between the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (HH 4) and the Ossetic tale ‘кыд фæзындис фæдыр’ (*kɪd fædzyndis fændyr*) “The origin of the *fændyr*” (*Narty Osetinskij Gerotinskij Epos* [Syrdon] 61). Like the cattle-thief Hermes, the Nart cattle-thief Syrdon is associated with ‘fire’; for example, he fathers a son named *Конага* (*Konaga*) ‘Fireplace’. Moreover, (a) Hermes’s and Syrdon’s thefts are preceded (HH 4.25) or followed (*NOGE* 61) by the invention of a musical instrument: the lyre (Hermes) and the *fændyr* (Syrdon). (b) It is through these musical inventions that Hermes and Syrdon will finally achieve the status of ‘peer’ in their communities: Hermes will move from Maia’s cave to the Olympus; Syrdon will become ‘one of the Narts’. (c) The musical *primus inventor* is put in connection with the funerary ritual. At the end of HH 4, Hermes becomes ‘the appointed messenger to Hades’; Syrdon performs a funeral offering for his dead sons with the *fændyr*.

To sum up: the analysis of Indic and Iranian comparanda supports to reconstruction of a ‘fire-based’ polarity *movable* vs. *unmovable* as underlying the couple Hermes-Hestia.