

Ashvamedha

The **Ashvamedha** (Sanskrit: अश्वमेध *aśvamedhā*) is a horse sacrifice ritual followed by the Śrauta tradition of Vedic religion. It was used by ancient Indian kings to prove their imperial sovereignty: a horse accompanied by the king's warriors would be released to wander for a period of one year. In the territory traversed by the horse, any rival could dispute the king's authority by challenging the warriors accompanying it. After one year, if no enemy had managed to kill or capture the horse, the animal would be guided back to the king's capital. It would be then sacrificed, and the king would be declared as an undisputed sovereign.

Ashvamedha is a forbidden rite for Kaliyuga, the current age.^{[1][2]}



Ashvamedha yagna of Yudhishthira

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The sacrifice

The Ashvamedha could only be conducted by a powerful victorious king (*rājā*).^{[3][4]} Its object was the acquisition of power and glory, the sovereignty over neighbouring provinces, seeking progeny and general prosperity of the kingdom.^[5]

The horse to be sacrificed must be a stallion. The horse is sprinkled with water and the Adhvaryu, the priest and the sacrificer whisper mantras into its ear. The horse is then set loose towards the North-East, to roam around wherever it chooses, for the period of one year (or half a year, according to some commentators). The horse is associated with the Sun, and its yearly course. If the horse wanders into neighbouring provinces hostile to the sacrificer, they must be subjugated. The wandering horse is attended by a hundred young men, sons of princes or high court officials, charged with guarding the horse from all dangers and inconvenience. During the absence of the horse, an uninterrupted series of ceremonies is performed in the sacrificer's home.

After the return of the horse, more ceremonies are performed. The horse is yoked to a gilded chariot, together with three other horses, and Rigveda (RV) 1.6.1,2 (YajurVeda (YV) VSM 23.5,6) is recited. The horse is then driven into water and bathed. After this, it is anointed with ghee by the chief queen and two other royal consorts. The chief queen anoints the fore-quarters, and the others the



A 19th-century painting, depicting the preparation of army to follow the sacrificial horse. Probably from a picture story depicting Lakshmisa's *Jaimini Bharata*

barrel and the hind-quarters. They also embellish the horse's head, neck, and tail with golden ornaments. The sacrificer offers the horse the remains of the night's oblation of grain.

After this, the horse, a hornless he-goat, a wild ox (*go-mrga*, *Bos gaurus*) are bound to sacrificial stakes near the fire, and seventeen other animals are attached to the horse. A great number of animals, both tame and wild, are tied to other stakes, according to a commentator, 609 in total.^[6]

The chief queen ritually calls on the king's fellow wives for pity. The queens walk around the dead horse reciting mantras. The chief queen then has to spend a night with the dead horse.^[7]

On the next morning, the priests raise the queen from the place. One priest cuts the horse along the "knife-paths" while other priests start reciting the verses of Vedas, seeking healing and regeneration for the horse.^[8]

The Laws of Manu refer to the Ashvamedha (V.53): "The man who offers a horse-sacrifice every day for a hundred years, and the man who does not eat meat, the two of them reap the same fruit of good deeds."^[9]

Similar sacrifices elsewhere

Many Indo-European branches show evidence for horse sacrifice, and comparative mythology suggests that they derive from a Proto-Indo-European ritual. The Ashvamedha is the clearest evidence preserved, but vestiges from Latin and Celtic traditions allow the reconstruction of a few common attributes.

A similar ritual is found in Celtic tradition in which the King in Ireland conducted a rite of symbolic marriage with a sacrificed horse.^[7] Roman horse sacrifice tradition also coincide with Ashvamedha.^[10]

Horse sacrifice were performed among the ancient Germans, Armenians, Iranians,^[11] Chinese, Greeks,^[12] among others.

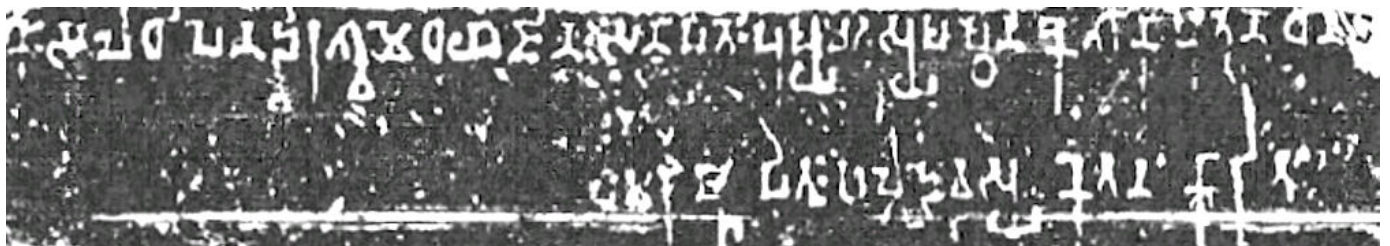
List of performers

Sanskrit epics and Puranas mention numerous legendary performances of the horse sacrifice.^[13] For example, according to the *Mahabharata*, Emperor Bharata performed a hundred Ashvamedha ceremonies on the banks of Yamuna, three hundred on the banks of Saraswati and four hundred on the banks of the Ganga. He again performed a thousand Ashvamedha on different locations and a hundred Rajasuya.^[14] Following the vast empires ruled by the Gupta and Chalukya dynasties, the practice of the sacrifice diminished remarkably.^[15]

The historical performers of Ashvamedha include:

Monarch	Reign	Dynasty	Source
<u>Pushyamitra Shunga</u>	185-149 BCE	<u>Shunga</u>	Ayodhya inscription of <u>Dhanadeva</u> and <u>Malavikagnimitra</u> of Kalidasa ^[16]
Sarvatata	1st century BCE	Gajayana	Ghosundi and Hathibada inscriptions ^[16] Some scholars believe Sarvatata to be a <u>Kanva</u> king, but there is no definitive evidence for this. ^[17]
Devimitra	1st century BCE	Unknown	Musanagar inscription ^[16]
<u>Satakarni I</u>	1st or 2nd century CE	<u>Satavahana</u>	<u>Nanaghat inscription</u> mentions his second Ashvamedha ^{[18][16]}
Vasishthiputra Sri Santamula or Chantamula	3rd century CE	<u>Andhra Ikshvaku</u>	Records of his son and grandson ^[19]
Shilavarman	3rd century CE	Varshaganya	Jagatpur inscriptions mention his fourth Ashvamedha ^[16]
<u>Bhavanaga</u>	305-320 CE	<u>Nagas of Padmavati</u>	The inscriptions of <u>Vakataka</u> relatives of the Nagas credit them with 10 horse-sacrifices, although they do not name these kings. ^{[16][19]}
Vijaya-devavarman	300-350 CE	<u>Shalankayana</u>	Ellore inscription ^{[20][21]}
Shivaskanda Varman	4th century CE	<u>Pallava</u>	Hirahadagalli inscription ^[20]
Kumaravishnu	4th century CE	<u>Pallava</u>	Omgodu inscription of his great-grandson ^[20]
<u>Samudragupta</u>	355-375 CE	<u>Gupta</u>	Coins of the king and records of his descendants ^{[20][22]}
<u>Kumaragupta I</u>	414 – 455 CE	<u>Gupta</u>	[23]
<u>Madhava Varmana</u>	440-460 CE	<u>Vishnukundina</u>	[19]
<u>Pravarasena II</u>	5th century CE	<u>Vakataka</u>	Inscriptions of his descendants state that he performed four Ashvamedha sacrifices ^[20]
Dharasena	5th century CE	<u>Traikutaka</u>	[21]
Krishnavarman	5th century CE	<u>Kadamba</u>	[21]
<u>Narayanavarman</u>	494–518 CE	<u>Varman</u>	Legend of Bhaskaravarman's seals ^[24]
<u>Bhutivarman</u>	518–542 CE	<u>Varman</u>	Barganga inscription ^[24]
<u>Pulakeshin I</u>	543–566	<u>Chalukyas of Vatapi</u>	[25]
<u>Sthitavarman</u>	565–585 CE	<u>Varman</u>	[26]

<u>Pulakeshin II</u>	610–642 CE	<u>Chalukyas of Vatapi</u>	[19]
Madhavaraja II (alias Madhavavarman or Sainyabhita)	c. 620-670 CE	<u>Shailodbhava</u>	Inscriptions ^[27] [24]
Simhavarman (possibly <u>Narasimhavarman I</u>)	630-668 CE	<u>Pallava</u>	The Sivanvayal pillar inscription states that he performed ten Ashvamedhas ^[20]
Adityasena	655-680 CE	<u>Later Gupta</u>	<u>Vaidyanatha temple</u> (Deoghar) inscription ^[24]
Madhyamaraja I (alias Ayashobhita II)	c. 670-700 CE	<u>Shailodbhava</u>	Inscriptions; ^[28] one interpretation of the inscriptions suggests that he merely participated in the Ashvamedha performed by his father Madhavaraja I ^[24]
Dharmaraja (alias Manabhita)	c. 726-727 CE	<u>Shailodbhava</u>	Inscriptions; one interpretation of the inscriptions suggests that he merely participated in the Ashvamedha performed by his grandfather Madhavaraja I ^[24]
<u>Rajadhiraja Chola</u>	1044–1052 CE	<u>Chola</u>	[29]
<u>Jai Singh II</u>	1699–1743 CE	<u>Kachwahas of Jaipur</u>	[30]



The Dhanadeva-Ayodhya inscription, 1st century BCE, mentions two Ashvamedha rituals by Pushyamitra in the city of Ayodhya.^[31]



An Ashvamedha coin of Kumaragupta, who performed the sacrifice in 5th century CE. Coin of Samudragupta circa 335-380 CE. Ashvamedha type.

The Udayendiram inscription of the 8th century Pallava king Nandivarman II (alias Pallavamalla) states that his general Udayachandra defeated the Nishada ruler Prithviviyaghra, who, "desiring to become very powerful, was running after the horse of the Ashvamedha". The inscription does not clarify which king initiated this Ashvamedha campaign. Historian N. Venkataramanayya theorized that Prithviviyaghra was a feudatory ruler, who unsuccessfully tried to challenge Nandivarman's Ashvamedha campaign. However, historian Dineshchandra Sircar notes that no other inscriptions of Nandivarman or his descendants mention his performance of Ashvamedha; therefore, it is more likely that the Ashvamedha campaign was initiated by Prithviviyaghra (or his overlord), and Nandivarman's general foiled it.^[32]

In Hindu revivalism

In the Arya Samaj reform movement of Dayananda Sarasvati the Ashvamedha is considered an allegory or a ritual to get connected to the "inner Sun" (Prana)^[33] According to Dayananda, no horse was actually to be slaughtered in the ritual as per the Yajurveda. Following Dayananda, the Arya Samaj disputes the very existence of the pre-Vedantic ritual; thus Swami Satya Prakash Saraswati claims that

the word in the sense of the Horse Sacrifice does not occur in the Samhitas [...] In the terms of cosmic analogy, *ashva* is the Sun. In respect to the *adhyatma paksha*, the *Prajapati-Agni*, or the *Purusha*, the Creator, is the *Ashva*; He is the same as the *Varuna*, the Most Supreme. The word *medha* stands for homage; it later on became synonymous with oblations in rituology, since oblations are offered, dedicated to the one whom we pay homage. The word deteriorated further when it came to mean 'slaughter' or 'sacrifice'.^[34]

He argues that the animals listed as sacrificial victims are just as symbolic as the list of human victims listed in the Purushamedha^[34] (which is generally accepted as a purely symbolic sacrifice already in Rigvedic times).

All World Gayatri Pariwar since 1991 has organized performances of a "modern version" of the Ashvamedha where a statue is used in place of a real horse, according to Hinduism Today with a million participants in Chitrakoot, Madhya Pradesh on April 16 to 20, 1994.^[35] Such modern performances are sattvika Yajnas where the animal is worshipped without killing it,^[36] the religious motivation being prayer for overcoming enemies, the facilitation of child welfare and development, and clearance of debt,^[37] entirely within the allegorical interpretation of the ritual, and with no actual sacrifice of any animal.

Reception

The earliest recorded criticism of the ritual comes from the Cārvāka, an atheistic school of Indian philosophy that assumed various forms of philosophical skepticism and religious indifference. A quotation of the Cārvāka from Madhavacharya's Sarva-Darsana-Sangraha states: "The three authors of the Vedas were buffoons, knaves, and demons. All the well-known formulae of the pandits, jarphari, turphari, etc. and all the obscene rites for the queen commanded in Aswamedha, these were invented by buffoons, and so all the various kinds of presents to the priests, while the eating of flesh was similarly commanded by night-prowling demons."^[38]

This part of the ritual offended the Dalit reformer and framer of the Indian constitution B. R. Ambedkar and is frequently mentioned in his writings as an example of the perceived degradation of Brahmanical culture.^[39]

While others such as Manohar L. Varadpande, praised the ritual as "social occasions of great magnitude".^[40] Rick F. Talbott writes that "Mircea Eliade treated the Ashvamedha as a rite having a cosmogonic structure which both regenerated the entire cosmos and reestablished every social order during its performance."^[41]

See also

- Horse sacrifice
- Ashva, horse in Vedic culture
- October Horse in Roman religion

Footnotes

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13. David M. Knipe 2015 p. 234.
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19. Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya 2007 p. 203.
20. Dineshchandra Sircar 1971 p. 176.
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39. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*
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