

## Carrying Fires: Indo-European Fire Rituals and Glowing Embers on the Move

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### Abstract

*The solemn sadhu carrying his holy fire in a ceramic pot on his head are the last bearers of a specific part of millennia long traditions and Indo-European heritages. While the Vedic fires still shine and burn in many rituals throughout the sub-Indian continent, the particular fires ever burning and carried in ceramic pots represent perhaps one of the oldest and most original types of Vedic and Indo-European fires and fire rituals. The reasons why these types of fires were seen as the utmost holy and preserved as the most venerated and honourable gift from the gods cannot be sought under the scorching sun along the holy rivers in India, but among pastoral groups living in harsh and cold conditions and climates. Among early Indo-European pastoralists, the ever-burning fire represented the ultimate source and force of life, and these beliefs have been so strong and pervasive that the tradition and religious importance still shines and will continue to do so, because in their seemingly simplicity, these fire rituals reveal a profound complexity and they enable particular ritual possibilities and unique conceptualisations of divinities and their qualities.*

**Keywords:** *Fire rituals, Indo-European heritage, Pastoral traditions, Religious significance, Vedic fires*

### Introduction

The Vedic fire rituals has a long prehistory originating in common Indo-European fire rituals. While we usually think of flames and the burning and consuming fire when we talk about fire rituals, the ascetic and wandering Hindu sadhu carrying a ceramic pot with glowing embers and charcoals is better representing the original cosmic fire (Fig. 1). From a practical point of view today, although a good fire is always welcome, it may seem unnecessary to carry and protect glowing embers in the hot

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Indian environment, but this millennia-long fire tradition originated in colder climates among Indo-European pastoralists. Among pastoralists on the move and especially during the long and cold winters, carrying the life-giving fires alive in a pot was a matter of life and death. If the fire became extinct or dies out, in harsh environments this could be fatal. Always carrying the most precious and life-giving force in an active form may explain why the fire and its associated rituals became so prominent in the Vedic tradition.

While the practical needs may explain parts of why life-giving aspects are ascribed to the fires, it cannot explain why the Vedic fire has been utmost holy throughout history. Compared to other ritual and religious processes, a holy fire has unique qualities, since it can be built and maintained through rituals by other and multiple fires. A holy fire may constitute the fire from a cremation, the goldsmith, the potter and other rituals, like the household fire, for instance, and by making specific fires they become like ritual documents or history books with unique stories and qualities. Carrying, caring and maintaining these particular fires add to the holiness and the importance of using them throughout life, and therefore has the Vedic fire a particular role in culture and cosmology. And it all started with the glowing embers in the pot, which is the point of departure for this analysis of carrying fires and the living heritage of Indo-European fire rituals on the move.

Thus, in this article, I will; 1) give a brief overview of Indo-European history and central cultural and cosmological developments in cold ecologies, 2) present a comparative Indo-Iranian framework for understanding the role and holiness of fire in rituals and worship, 3) highlight Hindu examples of ritual fires on the move and unique ritual traditions and complex religious practices, and 4) analyse the Indo-European heritage of fires and embers on the move



**Fig. 1. Sadhu with his ritual fire in a ceramic vessel. Pashupatinath, Nepal. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.**

and why this may represent a particular and unique way of conceptualising divinities and hence explain why these seemingly small fire rituals represent some of the world's deep history and most successful religious traditions.

## Indo-European Culture and Cosmology

Today, the shared Indo-European heritage is reflected in the fact that about half of the world's population speak one of the many Indo-European languages that have developed throughout the millennia. The shared and common root and partial common, partial parallel, development have also left significant shared cultural and cosmological patterns, which are not least evident in ritual traditions stretching from Ireland and Norway in the West to India and Nepal in the east.

By the end of the 18th century, the British colonial official and researcher William Jones (1746-1794) showed that the old Indian ritual language Sanskrit was closely related to not only Latin and Greek, but also other languages such as German and the Baltic languages. While Indo-European studies started as comparative linguistics, in the 19th century the field expanded to comparative religious studies with Max Müller as the most prominent scholar (Müller 1856, 1859, 1879). Müller himself pointed out the more than human qualities and characters of fire:

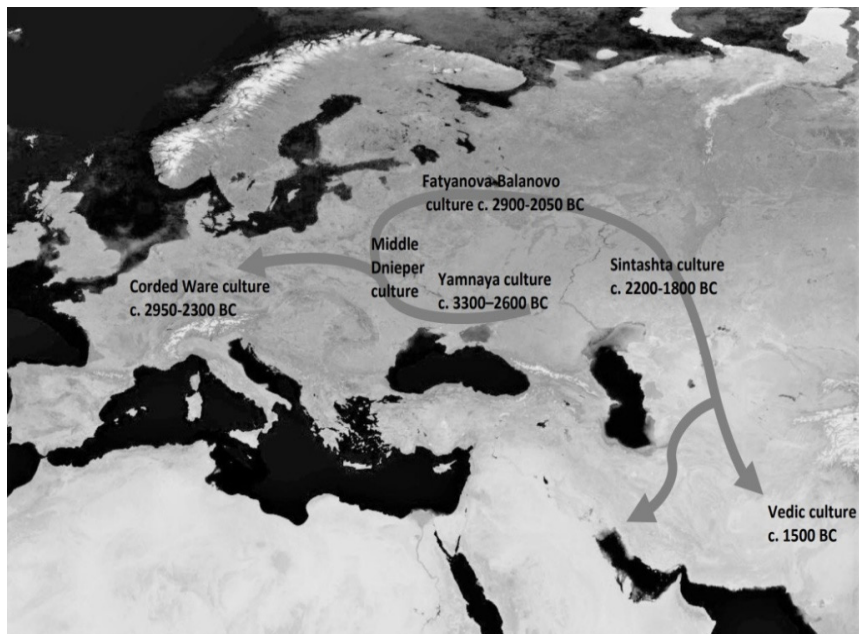
‘At one moment the fire was here, at another it had gone out. Whence did it come? Wither did it go? If there ever was a ghost, in our sense of the word, it was fire. Did it not come from the clouds? Did it not vanish in the sea? Did it not live in the sun? Did it not travel through the stars? ... So many things could be told of him, how that he was the son of two pieces of wood; how, as soon as he was born, he devoured his father and mother, that is, the two pieces of wood from which he sprang; how he disappeared or became extinguished, when touched by water ... how at a later time he carried the sacrificial offerings from earth to heaven, and became a messenger and mediator between the gods and men: that we need not wonder at his many names and epithets, and at the large number of ancient stories or myths told of Agni; nor need we wonder at the oldest of all myths, that there was in the fire something invisible and unknown, yet undeniable, – it may be, the Lord’ (Müller 1879: 199–200).

While there were numerous archaeological studies of Indo-Europeans in the first half of the 20th century (e.g. Childe 1926), Indo-European research was mainly restricted to linguistic studies after the Second World War and questions about culture and migration were largely off the map. Nevertheless, some researchers still pointed out the visible

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connections and proposed interpretative scenarios connecting the east and the west (e.g. Håland & Håland 1982; Lincoln 1981, 1986; Mallory 1989; Anthony 2007; Kaliff 2007; Kristiansen 2009, 2012), but it was not until the ground-breaking aDNA results from 2015 onwards that comparative and inter disciplinary Indo-European studies gained new momentum (Allentoft et al. 2015; Haak et al. 2015, Narasimhan et al. 2019). It is now clear that the main spread of Indo-European languages together with culture and cosmology was primarily a result of migration of pastoral groups, although the picture is highly complicated and there have been intricate cultural historic processes of migration, cultural diffusion and development, and also refluxes of people and ideas going back and forth throughout the millennia. In short, around 4,000-4500 BC pastoral groups on the steppes living north of the Black Sea started to move westwards to Europe

before moving eastwards. The Sintashta culture (ca. 2,200-1,800 BC) in today's Russia was instrumental in the further spread of Indo-European languages, cultures and religions (Fig. 2), including the Vedic fire rituals.



**Fig. 2. Schematic map of the Indo-European migration from the Steppes to Europe and Asia. Illustration by Terje Oestigaard and Anders Kaliff.**

From Sintashta, there were not only migration to

Iran and India, but also back to Europe (for further references, see Kaliff & Oestigaard 2020, 2022, 2023).

Importantly, the Indo-European migration routes connecting east and the west was primarily not in a temperate and a climatic warm zone, but this was a region with long, cold and snowy winters (Anthony et al. 2016). Apart from the river Volga, which

for a large part flows eastwards before turning southwards, most of the rivers on the steppes flow north-south and as such represent barriers cutting and separating making migrations crossing the steppes difficult. These rivers were wide and as cattle cannot swim, one possible way to cross the rivers were during the winters when they were frozen, or to walk on the frozen Volga as a highway connecting the east and the west. Importantly, pastoralists living in these cold environments were fundamentally dependent upon fire for survival. Carrying pots with glowing ember – an ever-burning fire that protected the whole community – was the source of wealth and health of all wherever and whenever the pastoralists moved with their cattle: this may be the origin of the holiness and veneration of this particular type of fire. Lighting a new fire in cold and wet places is possible, but it may be a jeopardy: having glowing ember in a pot ready to liven up and give warmth and prosperity to people and animal is the ultimate – and the last – security for people living on the margins in hostile environments.



**Fig. 3. Maneckji Seti Ajiary – A Zoroastrian temple in Mumbai, 2003. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.**

This northerly migration route of the early Indo-European pastoralists have also left other traces. In the history of comparative linguistics, it has puzzled researchers that there are linguistic links between Baltic languages and Indo-Iranian, in particular divinities associated with horses, riding or chariots carried in the sky (Biezais 2021). Importantly,

‘One of the cultural elements that is of special significance in both the Balto-Slavic and the Indo-Iranian area is the sacred fire. Fire as a sacred tool is central to several older Indo-European cultural traditions, to such an extent that it can be highlighted as a particularly significant ritual element... A distinctive feature is not least the ritual

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seasonal fires, linked to beliefs in the protective aspect of fire in combination with its sympathetic magic role to infuse the sun's power into the growing crop, and thus to increase the fertility of the agricultural year. Not least among the Baltic peoples are there such long-standing traditions where fire as a sacred tool also seems to have had a very central significance (Kaliff & Oestigaard 2023:116).

It is in the Indo-Iranian and Zoroastrian traditions one may trace further ritual uses that may enhance our understanding of this ancient tradition of ritual fires in general, and moving and carrying holy fires in particular.

### Indo-Iranian Fires and Worship

Among the world religions today, Zoroastrianism is most famous for its fire rituals and temples. Ahura Mazda, 'the Wise Lord', is the supreme god, but the popular perception of him as a 'fire god' and Zoroastrianism as a religion worshipping fire is a simplification. Zoroastrianism has an extreme focus on purity of the elements, the life-giving forces and the good creations on earth. From a comparative perspective, while there are many similarities between Zoroastrian and Vedic fire rituals, there is also a notable difference: the use of fire in funerals. In Zoroastrianism, it is prohibited to pollute the fire by letting it consume the corpse and hence the practice of air-burials has been the prescribed and preferred mortuary practice whereas in today's Hinduism the cremation fire has a particular cosmic importance in cosmology (Boyce 1979, 1984, 1992; Choksy 1989; Clark 2001).



**Fig. 4. The 16 different fires constituting a holy fire. Model by Terje Oestigaard.**

In Zoroastrianism, there are different types of fires and temples, and the most holy fire is the cathedral fire consisting of 16 different fires and it takes 14,000 hours to consecrate it (Fig. 3). Holy fires such as these have to burn continuously and one cannot divide the fire and use it in another temple. In practice, there is no shortcuts in religious devotions and if another temple wants an equally holy fire on their premises, the only way to achieve this is by meticulously building up a new holy fire by 16 others fires and thousands of hours with prayer. The ways Indo-Iranian fires are built and consecrated are instructive for understanding why Zoroastrianism is not simply a religion worshipping fire, but rather a religious practice revealing the depths of tradition and the complexity of beliefs enabled by the very qualities of fire itself.

David Knipe (1975:25) shows how a consecrated fire may contain the world and cosmos. By understanding how a holy fire is built and consecrated, it transcends any simple notion of worshipping fire as a kind of idolatry. Following the *Zend-Avesta*, the consecrated fire consist of 16 particular fires, one natural, other ritual and productive fires (Fig. 4): 1) a fire from lightning, 2) a fire from royals or officials, 3) a fire from cremation, 4), a fire from an ascetic, 5) a fire from the dyer, 6) a fire from the potter, 7) a fire from the brick maker, 8) a fire from the goldsmith, 9) a fire from the mint master, 10) a fire from the iron smith, 11) a fire from the armorer, 12) a fire from the baker, 13) a fire from the brewer, 14) a fire from the soldier or traveller, 15) a fire from the shepherd and 16) a fire from a household.

Historically, there are textual evidences of even much more complicated and holy fires: ‘The Bahrâm fire is composed of a thousand and one fires belonging to sixteen different classes (ninety-one corpse-burning fires, eighty dyers’ fires, &c). As the earthly representative of the heavenly fire, it is the sacred centre to which every earthly fire longs to return, in order to be united again, as much as possible, with its native abode. *The more it has been defiled by worldly uses, the greater is the merit acquired by freeing it from defilement*’ (Darmesteter 1895:115-116. fn. 2, my emphasis).

If the worship and veneration of fire was first and foremost a ritual and religious purification process, one may better understand why it is a sacrilege and heinous sin in Zoroastrianism to pollute the fire. It is a desecration of the holy. Also, the fires are condensed holiness and purity on earth and hence a source for spiritual enlightenment and benevolent powers. Polluting the holy fires would be a desecration of not only the divinity, but also all the devotees having worshipped and purified the fires for thousands of hours.

The uniqueness and individuality of these fires also point in another direction. If some of the original Zoroastrian fires before purification were more defiled than others, in practice that the totality of the consecrated fire was composed of carefully selected individual fires with distinct qualities and (defiled and impure) life-histories, this may also work the other way: The holiest fires are the ones comprising of the purest fires or those fires that have the most glorious life-histories. In other words, the cremation fire of a king is more valuable and holy than the one of a commoner and in a similar vein, the household fire of a panditis more precious and religiously powerful than the one of a bandit. In Hinduism, there are examples of Vedic fires working and functioning on these religious principles.

### **Hindu and Vedic Fires on the Move**

In Varanasi in India – the ‘City of Light’ – cremations burn day and night as it has done since time immemorial (Eck 1993, Parry 1994).

Manikarnika Ghat is the holiest cremation ground in Varanasi and hence in the whole Hindu cosmology (Fig. 5). In Varanasi, there is a special group of undertakers known as Dom and they have a particular temple at the ghat where they keep a perennial fire. ‘In brief, their main role in the death ritual



**Fig. 5. Cremations at Manikarnika Ghat, Varanasi. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.**

of all castes is to arrange the funeral pyre, provide the wood and sacred fire, which is kept alive perennially,’ Meena Kaushik says: ‘The sacred fire is seen to symbolise the fire of the ascetic Śiva. It is auspicious and kept alight perennially. It is believed that if it were not kept alight, misfortunes would strike the Doms’ (Kaushik 1976:269).



This sacred fire has an intriguing life-history. The fire in the temple is perpetual and is always burning as it has done for ages, some say it is 3,500 years old, others that it has always been burning. The fire is continuously being refuelled by logs from cremation pyres and each new cremation is lit by the ever-burning fire in this temple. Some say that the original fire was lit by Shiva himself thus making the fire cosmogonic – it burns from the beginning to the end of cosmos, and it is one of the reasons why it is so beneficial to be cremated in Varanasi whereupon the ashes are immersed into Mother Ganga. ‘Since cremation is sacrifice, since sacrifice regenerates the cosmos, and since the funeral pyres burn without interruption throughout day and night at Manikarnikā ghāt, creation is here continually replayed. As a result, it is always satya yuga – the first and best of the four world ages – in Kashi, for in this way it is always the beginning of time when the world was new’ (Parry 1982: 340). Thus, it is also believed that if the cremations cease to burn at Manikarnika, Kashi will no longer remain in the Golden Age of the original time.

In her book *Structure and Cognition*, Veena Das sums up the essence of sacrifice and cremation (Das 1990: 122–123):

‘Thus the site of cremation is prepared in exactly the same manner as in fire-sacrifice, i.e. the prescriptive use of ritually pure wood, the purification of the site, its consecration with holy water, and the establishment of Agni with the use of proper mantras. The time chosen for cremation has to be an auspicious one. The dead body is prepared in the same manner as the victim of a sacrifice and attributed with divinity ... As in other sacrifices, the sacrificer, who is the son in this case, achieves religious merit through having performed the sacrificial rituals in accordance with prescribed procedures.’

The Vedic fires in funerals are not restricted to Varanasi, rather the opposite, and the household fire and the cremation fire are traditionally the same and an intrinsic part of weddings. If the Brahman was an Agnihotra, the ritual fire was brought from his father-in-law’s house during the wedding ceremony. ‘Whilst they are looking at each other, the priest puts a fire of burning charcoal into the square fenced in with the string and earthen pots...During all the remaining wedding ceremonies this fire must never be allowed to go out’ (Stevenson 1920:79). This fire was not only venerated throughout life and the marriage, but it was never allowed to extinguish (Stevenson 1920:107). During the cremation of a priest, embers from three fires or hearths have been used to lit the cremation pyre:

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‘Embers from each hearth were then dropped into the kunda, terra-cotta pots... These were carried in front of the body out the door and down the path by [the] son...Embers from [the] three hearths were now transferred a final time onto [the priest’s] body, the ahavaniya offering fire beside his head, the daksinagni beside his chest, the garha-patya cooking fire by his right thigh, each igniting straw that then set wood alight. Within three hours [the priest’s] body was no more, his agni-hotra fires being burned together and conjoined as Agni’ (Knipe 2015:34-35).

The household fire not only lit the pyre and cremated the householder or priest, but the very fires itself died with the deceased in the flames. Cremation is a fundamental part of culture and cosmology and the lightning of the cremation pyre has a fundamental ritual role linking the different realms (Oestigaard 2005).

### **The Indo-European Heritage of Fires and Embers on the Move**

The very character of Agni in particular or a fire-god in general is that he is alive by its nature and very much so. Frits Staal has painted a vivid and flamboyant picture of this living god:

‘Agni is brilliant, golden, has flaming hair and beard, three or seven tongues, his face is light, his eyes shine, he has sharp teeth, he makes a cracking noise, and leaves a black trail behind. He is fond of clarified butter, but he also eats wood and devours the forest. In fact, he eats everything. He is in particular a destroyer of demons and a slayer of enemies’ (Staal 1983: 73).

From this perspective, the flames and fires are not only personified and deified, but they are individuals with specific qualities and characteristics. Although this approach and perception gives a much more lively and vital god than most other visualisation and manifestations, like a statue of mud or wood, a focus on moving embers and carrying fires extends this understanding by opening up new doors to this and the other world.

By combining and uniting different fires with distinct qualities and life histories – for the better or worse, the pure or the polluted fires – each specific made fire becomes unique and lives its own life. Moreover, the fire takes on a corporeal body, and like the changing flames, this body and composition may also change throughout its lifetime by incorporating new fires and qualities. A living fire becomes thus not only an organism, but it also contains unique cosmic qualities in ways no other gods can express or visualise apart from the fact that the consuming powers of the flames are very mighty forces in themselves. By definition, even fluid water gods become more permanent in structure and content than a fire god that is built up by specific fires, like a royal fire and

the fire from a goldsmith. Also, there are differences between royals and smiths, and these differences and qualities will be transferred to and reflected in the specific fire god. An intrinsic and fundamental quality of all fires are the consuming or annihilating powers, from the gentle household fires cooking food to the destructive fires destroying and burning households and villages. Or in cultural terms, different fires may also have different personalities – good



**Fig. 6. A holy fire in a ceramic pot. Pashupatinath, Nepal. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.**

or bad – but no human can fully control a fire, and even the smallest glowing ember may cause havoc and catastrophe if it is unsupervised and at the wrong place, like close to hey, just for a second. Even if humans may build up and consecrate holy fires, they may never fully control it. Humans may control the fire by extinguish it, but then they also lose all the beneficial and life-giving qualities in the very process.

Thus, in practice the only and best way of controlling the fire is by carrying, caring and moving the glowing embers in a ceramic pot, as evident by the ritual practices of the sadhus. This puts emphasis on the pot as a portable container (Fig. 6). From another perspective, Mary Levin equalled the fire-altar and the cremation pyre. Building on Satapatha Brahmana, she writes:

‘Thus, both the initiation through the sacrificial offerings or the building of the Fire Altar, and the cremation of the dead are considered as rebirth, or obtaining a new body... The object of the Fire Altar ritual and the funeral ceremonies was to obtain as much “life” as possible for the sacrifice, or, in the case of the dead, to restore “life” that had been lost... These funeral customs were closely associated with the ceremony of building the Fire Altar, for they formed part of this great ritual... This explains the purpose of cremation. The pyre represented the Fire Altar’ (Levin 1930: 64-65).

Carrying a pot with the glowing ember, the source of the holy fire, is in practice a way bringing along a mobile altar. The god and the place of worship is not restricted to one place, one temple and one person at the time, but it is flexible, unique and always on the move as people has been throughout the ages. Thus, the analysis has moved a long way from early Indo-European pastoralists living on the steppes in cold and harsh winter condition through large parts of the year. In such areas under such circumstances, it makes sense from a functional point of view that the pastoralists brought with them their fires as glowing embers in pots, and if such a vital life-giving was deified and seen as the most important in culture and cosmology, nothing would be holy and worshipped. Among the Vedic ritualists, however, this ecological factor cannot explain the fundamental role this particular fire rituals continue to have for millennia. On the other hand, the continued tradition in the Vedic religion may perhaps give us a glimpse of the origin of fire worship and rituals in the Vedic fire rituals.

‘Vedic ritual is not only likely to be the oldest surviving ritual of mankind, it also provides the best source material for a theory of ritual. This is not because it is close to any alleged “original” ritual. Vedic ritual is not primitive and is not an Ur-ritual. It is sophisticated and already the product of a long development. But it is the largest, most elaborate, and (on account of the Sanskrit manuals) best documented among rituals of man’ (Staal 1983:9).

Thus, in a broad Indo-European perspective I think one may dare to put forward another interpretation explaining the success of this ritual tradition throughout the millennia in very different ecologies and cultural traditions: Moving embers and carrying fire were not only practical and functional, but it also created a completely new way of perceiving and interacting with gods. By combining different fires with distinctive qualities, the new combined and united fire took on a corporeal identity and being unlike anything else. Each fire in every pot was unique and had its own life history that changed throughout the ages as it lived in cultures and communities. The gods become more personal and powerful, more omnipresent, but also very practical and fundamental: The fires gave life to all through cooking and the protection it gave each day and night around the hearth. Carrying and caring for the fire in a pot was seemingly an insignificant daily and ritual practice, but it may in fact have been one of the greatest religious developments in history, because it has proven very resilient during the last four millennia.

## Conclusion

The solemn Hindu ascetic walking with his ceramic pot containing the glowing ember he will use to light his sacred fire is one of the last bearer of a great Indo-European tradition and heritage that have been vital for millennia in societies from Western Europe to the sub-Indian continent. Although seemingly small and mundane, this was also one of the strength of having a portable altar with immense divine forces glowing in a ceramic pot. Apart from the very practical uses of fire for heating and cooking, social processes also embedded in ritual and religious structures, it is almost unbelievable and unimaginable to have so powerful forces in a mobile pot, day and night throughout the year. Even the smallest glowing ember almost dying and disappearing may turn out to become the most powerful power burning and destroying village and even cities. The malevolent sides are the other side of fire's benevolent qualities. In the words of Frits Staal (1983:73-74):

‘Though old, Agni is also ageless and permanently young. Himself fertile, he is the son and manifestation of victorious strength...He gives long life. He is born from the kindling blocks (*aran*), from heaven (where he is lightning and the sun), and from earth, where he resides in plants and woods. He is also born from water, celestial as well as terrestrial. This at first surprising origin is connected with clouds and with the firewood that comes from plants and trees, themselves born from water. It reflects the image of the sun rising out of the eastern oceans and setting in the western ocean; and it also indicates that Agni, as generative power, is the female principle, which enters the female waters as it enters the earth. Agni is intimately connected with the home, the clan, the tribe, and with rituals. He is installed in the home as the domestic fire; he guards and lights the home; he is a guest, a friend, chief of the clan or tribe...But he is also the domestic priest...and the sacrificer of the gods...He takes the offerings to the gods, but he also brings the gods down to earth to partake of them’.

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