



Beyond Black and White: The Italian Reception of the Debate on Native Indian Commentaries in Nineteenth-century Vedic Studies

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Abstract This article discusses the nineteenth-century debate between German and British Indologists on ancient Indian commentators, shedding light on how Italian Indologists received and responded to this discussion. It reveals why Italian scholars, although trained under the most eminent German philologists, often disagreed on the status of native commentaries, sometimes viewing them as an unreliable guide to interpreting the Vedas and other texts. Moreover, Italian criticisms of the German approach to ancient Indian texts reflected differences in the ideological concerns underpinning the hegemonic discourses between Europe and India. Because of both transnational reception and nation-building concerns, the history of Italian Indological studies represents a unique perspective in the context of European approaches to the subcontinent.

Keywords History of Italian Indology · Vedic studies · Sāyaṇa · Mallinātha

Il Veda è come la montagna di Golconda, irta di scogli e piena di diamanti—
The Veda is like the mountain of Golconda, fraught with rocks and full of diamonds (Kerbaker 1879a: 56).

Introduction

The status of indigenous commentaries on the restoration, translation, and interpretation of the Vedic texts—particularly the *Ṛgveda*—holds a key position in nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse. Recent scholarship on the history of

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Indological studies in Germany and Great Britain has attempted to summarize the debate by drawing attention to the personalities involved. Current studies on intellectual and social history show the importance of combining macro- and microanalysis by situating the individual academics and the outcomes of their research within their sociological contexts. Following these trends, in this article, I survey leading nineteenth-century Indology scholars, attending to their academic and personal trajectories, including their unique backgrounds, formative experiences, institutional affiliations, and the relationships they established with other academics in their respective countries as well as transnationally in Europe and colonial India.

Beginning with Raymond Schwab (1984) there have been several scholarly works devoted to these interactions, forming its own social history within the larger frames of nineteenth-century Indological and Euro-American humanistic scholarship.¹ These studies invariably focus on France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, hardly giving any mention to the history of Italian Indology. Indeed, Schwab's groundbreaking study of this history devotes but a single footnote to the establishment of the early chairs of Indology in Italy (1984: 489n14). To enter this world, I revisit one of the key debates defining Euro-American Indology in the latter half of the nineteenth century, that centering on the reception of the Indian commentarial tradition as these scholars sought to engage with "original" Sanskrit texts. To contextualize the debate, I first turn to recent developments across Vedic and Indian studies focusing on a trend that considers the subjects' authority in guaranteeing the authenticity in the transmission of the Vedas. I then consider how Euro-American scholarship (re)shaped and (re)stored these texts. This last phase, which reached its heights in the second half of the nineteenth century under specific ideological and political circumstances, will allow me to delve into the largely undiscussed ways in which Italian scholars contributed to this debate.

Āryan Texts and European Ideology: The Unresolved Debate on the Vedic Commentaries

Recent approaches and ongoing debates in Vedic studies have been elevated by considering the "canonicity" of the Vedas. Among the noteworthy discussions are those engaging the Vedic canon's formation;² the epistemological issues related to such a "canon";³ and the status of these texts as *śruti*.⁴ Similarly, Marianna Ferrara (2013, 2018) highlights the "struggle for sacrifice" that arose within different groups of specialists and its effect on the preservation of the Brāhmanical tradition—in essence, approaching the Vedic sacrifice (*yajña*) as a matter of social dynamics. A significant outcome of such studies has been the "restoration" of the role played by

¹ For example, Halbfass 1988; Goldman 2004; McGetchin 2004, 2008; Rabault-Feuerhahn 2008, 2019; Rocher and Rocher 2013; Adluri and Bagchee 2014; and Tull 2015.

² See Witzel 1997.

³ See, for example, Ferrara 2012.

⁴ See Pollock 2005.

redactors and ancient commentators, focusing on their status as social agents and transmitters (*tradentes*) who handed over a given content.⁵ This restoration—which sets the act of transmission (*tradere*)⁶ along with the transmitter (the commentator) and the final content (*traditum*, that is, what we indicate as traditional commentary) within the social, political, and religious context of its time—stands in sharp contrast to the ways in which nineteenth-century Indologists considered the Indian exegetical tradition, especially the work of the famed fourteenth-century Indian commentator Sāyaṇa.⁷

Sheldon Pollock (2015a,b) draws attention to the status of theorization concerning the practices among India’s textual specialists by questioning what it means to edit and read a text in pre-modern India. Pollock highlights how Indian philological practice manifested itself in the sudden appearance of certain commentarial writing, thereby raising the possibility of taking the “philology of India in the past” as the basis “for Indian philology in the future” (2015a: 19). Whitney Cox (2017) has noted that Pollock’s work, which has impelled considerable scholarly discussion, throws a positive light on the commentarial tradition, highlighting how it reflects the specific intent of its authors. This understanding refutes the trend in European Indology, regnant in the nineteenth century, that saw the Indian exegetical tradition as little more than an amalgam of eclectic interpretations.⁸ Pollock’s and Cox’s studies, which seek to elicit what the commentators attempted to achieve philologically, the textual criteria they established, and their socio-cultural motivations, represent a clear turning point for contemporary philological approaches to the Indian tradition. However, others have questioned whether this approach itself fully comprehends the science of philology. Thus, Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee have noted that when “Indologists have been called upon to legitimate their discipline, they have invoked the comparison with classical philology, even though...they had only the haziest notions of [Indology]” (2018: 320).⁹ Their case against contemporary Indology challenges the allegedly scientific understanding of textual criticism claimed especially by German Indologists, which they considered to be grounded in out-moded ideological assumptions, audaciously asserting that “German Indology fails to meet even basic canons of objectivity, truth and method” (Adluri and Bagchee 2018: 319).

It is unnecessary to dwell on the broader methodological issues concerning the epistemology and sociology of the Indian tradition’s legitimation process in South Asia. As noted above, much has been written on the dynamics of cultural transmission. The studies of the Vedic texts and their related religious practices are in a reasonably good position. Approaches that consider the canon’s formation and transmission will continue to inform the study of the overall Vedic tradition. Nevertheless, there are still

⁵ See Squarcini 2005.

⁶ On the act of transmission in ancient India, see, for instance, Houben 2009; and for emphasis on the practical aspect of transmission, see Colas 1999.

⁷ See D’Intino 2018; and Galewicz 2000, 2009.

⁸ See Cox 2017: 14.

⁹ Adluri and Bagchee’s work (in particular, Adluri and Bagchee 2014) has been frequently criticized; see, for example, Franco 2016; Nicholson 2017; and Tull 2017. Franco and Adluri and Bagchee have conducted a spirited “back and forth” on academia.edu, much of it vituperative.

difficulties in interpreting concepts expressed in these texts, most notably in the *Rgveda*, which has long challenged scholars. Here again, we are reminded of the long-held uncertainty among Euro-American scholars regarding the use of later Indian commentaries in interpreting the *Rgveda*. Thus, before approaching the main subject of this article, it is worth first considering the debates held among nineteenth-century Western scholars regarding the Indian commentarial tradition.

The idea that indigenous Indian traditions of textual knowledge could not reach the level of European knowledge reflects the West's self-understanding of its accomplishments in its own knowledge systems, particularly in comparative Indo-European philology and linguistics. These assumptions pervaded nineteenth-century Indology and reflected the general direction of German scholarship.¹⁰ Furthermore, nineteenth-century philology represented a privileged scholarly approach to past or otherwise foreign cultures. It is true that the most diligent Indo-European philologists were found in German universities, which around the mid-nineteenth century "became the training ground for scholars who became established throughout Europe and America" (McGetchin 2004: 211). With no lack of hubris, German philologists working on Indian texts claimed that their philological skills—achieved through the comparative method—mattered more than the views of the Indian commentators, whether found among contemporary indigenous exegetes or preserved in texts.

The modern study of India chiefly owes its origins to the late eighteenth century presence of Europeans in India and initially grew as an adjunct to the imposition of British governance in South Asia.¹¹ Britain's extensive colonial presence in South Asia and the relationship the British had with their native counterparts—both ruling them and seeking their cooperation with the colonial enterprise—colored British Indology, distinguishing it from its counterparts throughout the rest of Europe. Thus, the German scholarly engagement with India was marked by its "strictly textual and erudite approach," which stood as "a proof that they were solely driven by scholarly interest and that their scholarship was more thoroughgoing than that of the British" (Rabault-Feuerhahn 2019: 100). Following Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn, "armchair philologists" represented the champions of this meticulous philological approach: Theodor Benfey, Richard Garbe, Rudolf Roth and his collaborator Otto Böhtlingk, Albrecht Weber, and the American linguist and Sanskritist William Dwight Whitney.¹²

The varied approaches nineteenth-century Euro-American scholars took to the question of Indian exegetes cannot be oversimplified. As highlighted by Adluri and Bagchee, "although disdain for traditional scholarship was commonplace..., there was variation between individual schools with some Indologists being more open to Indian knowledge" (2014: 22n92). For instance, Weber's edition of the *Yajurveda* (1852) included only extracts from Sāyaṇa's *Rgvedabhāṣa*. Others, including Maurice Bloomfield, Karl F. Geldner, Theodor Goldstücker, Ralph T. H. Griffith,

¹⁰ For a recent survey of the post-Enlightenment development of philology in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (particularly in the German-speaking world), with special attention given to Indian and Sanskrit studies, see Witzel 2014.

¹¹ See Tull 2015: 216–18.

¹² These scholars were all German with the exception of Whitney; however, Whitney studied under Franz Bopp and Rudolf Roth in Germany, at a time when there was no academic tradition of Sanskrit in the United States.

Martin Haug, Hermann Oldenberg, and Richard Pischel, drew extensively on the Indian commentarial tradition. Friedrich Max Müller notably featured Sāyaṇa's commentary in his critical edition of the *Ṛgveda-saṃhitā* (1849–74), a decision that proved to be highly controversial. Richard Pischel and Karl F. Geldner (1889: iii–xxxiii), in their work on the Vedic text, implied that comparative philology and linguistics did not allow for the comprehension of Vedic texts without an appreciation of the indigenous tradition through which the Vedas had been transmitted for a thousand years.¹³

Contrasting opinions also arose among the increasing number of German scholars who, around the end of the nineteenth century, went to India and finally encountered Indian specialists firsthand. Among them were Martin Haug, who was regularly employed by the cultural institutions of the British Raj, and Richard Garbe, a former student of Rudolf Roth. After his journey to India, Haug took the opportunity to balance the belief in the superiority of Western philology with field observation, developing close relationships with Hindu and Parsee priests.¹⁴ Yet, Garbe did not consider the *paṇḍitas* as equals and “viewed this superiority and the ‘duties’ it implied...as a natural corollary of Western rule over India” (Bagchi 2003: 321).

Among the academic Germans who broadly dismissed India's native exegetes—all of whom belonged to the Indian priestly caste—there can be detected the Protestant distrust of “priestcraft” and its corollary, a deep discomfort with the control of scripture by a hieratic class. This attitude had heavily influenced German Indology almost since its inception: whether Hindu, Parsee, Jewish, or Catholic, according to the narrative of early nineteenth-century Neo-Protestantism, the clerical authority was considered the agent of textual corruption and spiritual decline.¹⁵ Adluri and Bagchee identify this trend in German Indology, along with its idea of the priestly manipulation in corrupting Indian texts, as “the key to

¹³ However, it is noteworthy that despite his openness towards the Indian commentaries, Geldner's attitude to the Avestan *zand*—the Middle-Persian Pahlavi commentaries of the *Gāthās* and other Avestan texts—was completely different, showing a skepticism now outdated (Cantera 2004: 57).

¹⁴ See Rabault-F Feuerhahn 2019.

¹⁵ See Gelders and Derde 2003. As a matter of fact, since Luther's reform, the European obsession with the uncorrupted religious texts reflected the Protestant idea that Catholic clergy had later corrupted the purity of the original revelation. As Catholic clergy were the sole responsibility for the degeneration of revelation, so too the “brahmin church” (Gelders and Derde 2003: 4615) was considered responsible for the corruption and decline of the pure religious sentiment. Rudolf Roth especially “of all its partisans, however...was its most vehement advocate” (Adluri and Bagchee 2020: 99). Roth's ethical and temporal concerns thus were deeply grounded in this Neo-Protestant narrative. The Indian native commentators, then, could be easily compared by Roth to the tradition of rabbinical commentaries on the Old Testament, which “represented the paradigmatic instance of how texts could be corrupted by the tradition” (Adluri and Bagchee 2014: 334). The German quest for the *ur-text*—having emerged from the Protestant theological framework (314–55)—became a quest for pure revelation, free from the later bulk of commentaries and later expositions through which “pure” Indian religion became inaccessible without the help of the Brahmins. Written in a “secret” language, that is, Sanskrit, the Brahmins became “the sole guardians of the so-called sacred books” (Gelders and Derde 2003: 4614), perpetuating the same fraud of their Catholic counterparts, who “kept the Bible secret behind the dark curtain of the Latin language” (4615). Then, the “differences between the ‘pure original’ as embodied in those texts and that which the priests imposed upon the laity confirmed that priesthood was a similar phenomenon all over the world” (4615). On the massive infiltration of Protestant literalism, asserted by Luther, into the academic reconstruction of the Indian past, see Yelle 2013.

understanding German Indology” (2014: 10). In a letter dated December 10, 1855, addressed to the Prussian statesman Karl Otto von Raumer, Albrecht Weber reflects the degree to which German scholars saw their work on the Vedic texts as following that of the great Protestant divines who “democratized” the Bible for the masses: “The critical analysis and publication of Vedic texts shall assume a role among the Indians, similar to Luther’s translation of the Bible” (translated and cited in Sengupta 2004: 279).

What specific arguments and strategies were used to justify German (and more broadly, European) Indologists as “official purveyors of Indian culture” (Adluri and Bagchee 2014: 3)? To begin with, the critiques of the Indian commentary tradition were linked to the perceived current decay of Indian society, but also to the belief that the Vedas were the quintessence of the Indo-European past and the cultural repository of the ancient forebears of the Germanic race.¹⁶ The Vedas, then, were to be separated from the whole of the later Indian tradition which Europeans saw as crude and “monstrous” (Tull 1991: 30). No examples of the Āryan past in contemporary India had been found, nor any surviving traces of a common Indo-European kinship among its inhabitants. The notion of a direct intellectual line connecting the ancient “Āryan brothers in India” and the common heritage between European and Vedic people was no more than an irredeemably false myth. In both religion and racial composition, “Āryan origins had been diluted to the point where only a minuscule fraction of Hindus could truly be called ‘Āryan’” (Bagchi 2003: 310). This was, without exception, the position claimed and shared by many German Indologists.¹⁷ Relics of the original Indo-Europeans contained in the ancient texts clashed with the repulsive customs of contemporary Indians, a “mixed

¹⁶ The figure of Friedrich Schlegel looms large in the creation of a German national identity that looked to India in its construction, and more broadly in reassessing Germany’s cultural hierarchy among European nations (see Tzoref-Ashkenazi 2004, 2006). Furthermore, according to Pollock, Indology played a key role in the German colonial agenda but was “potentially directed inward—toward the colonization and domination of Europe itself” (1993: 77). According to Adluri, German Indology, in fact, “was always far more preoccupied with the rivalry with its European peers than with legitimizing colonization” (2011: 266). Then, drawing from Pollock’s suggestion, it has been argued that “it is this mixture of Eurocentric consciousness and a need to draw on Āryan heritage that was responsible for the unique status of German ‘Orientalism’....The ‘Orientalist’ aspects of German Orientalism may even have been a side-effect of its concern with European prestige” (266). For further sources, see Adluri and Bagchee 2020: 90n2.

¹⁷ One of the general assumptions originated from the so-called “biracial theory.” The theory propounded by German comparative philologists marked a difference between the Āryan tribes, who entered the Indian subcontinent from the north-western frontiers, and its aboriginal inhabitants, who were subdued and moved southwards. Scholars who built on the division between the “Āryan” invaders and the “Dravidian” inhabitants were supported by linguistic and philological evidence. Among the various antagonists of the Āryans recorded in the *R̥gveda*, scholars identified the *dāsya/dāsā* with Dravidian-speaking people of the South. Sanskrit literary sources also substantiated the theoretical tenets, namely, the normative religious texts (that is, Dharmaśāstra literature), which defended the conservative attitude of the Āryan highest castes (Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, and Vaiśya) against racial mixing. On this question and the growing conflict between the philologists and the racial anthropologists, see Arvidsson 2006: 44–49. Following Arvidsson, who highlighted Christian Lassen’s main contribution to the growth of the “biracial theory,” Adluri and Bagchee (2014: 40–48) stress Lassen’s pseudo-historical reading of the *Mahābhārata* “as an allegorized version of the historical conflict between Āryans and Dravidians” (44). On the racial interpretation of the Vedic passages from Max Müller onward, see Bryant 2001: 59–63.

people,” argued Richard Garbe (1925) after his journey to India, who “came not from the Aryans but from ‘the darker side’” (Bagchi 2003: 310).

The notion that ancient Indian texts such as the *Rgveda* carried Europeans back to the primitive Indo-German time¹⁸ had a deep effect on the European Indologist’s view of the Indian commentarial tradition, emerging in controversies over the utility of the famed fourteenth-century Indian commentator, Sāyaṇa, in interpreting the Veda. Along with the general dismissal of later Indian thought, European scholars tended to view the fact that Sāyaṇa was temporally closer to the contemporary age than to the supposed common Āryan past depicted in the *Rgveda* as evidence that he lacked relevance. Viewing themselves as the legitimate Āryan heirs and with an elevated understanding of the scientific rigor of European comparative philology, German academia concluded that they “understood” the Vedas better and more correctly than Sāyaṇa. As Herman W. Tull notes, a general notion arose among the “European interpreter” that he “had open to him, through the science of language, a channel to this ancient cultural heritage that had long been...shut off to the Hindus” (1991: 40).

The Vedic and Āryan Past During the National Rebirth of Unified Italy

Besides the efforts made by many European scholars to explain the Vedas using only comparative philology, the remaining debate for the credit to be given to indigenous commentaries entails certain discourses that shaped the relationship between Europe and India. In the Italian context, it should be highlighted how recent studies have allowed us to reconsider the impact of these discourses—particularly those related to the Āryan origins of European peoples—in nineteenth-century Italy. During the second half of the nineteenth century, after political unification in 1861, Italy faced a national struggle of cultural unification and was engaged in a nation-building process. This process involved scholars and Orientalists, including Michele Amari (1806–1889), Angelo De Gubernatis (1840–1913), Giacomo Lignana (1827–1891), and Giuseppe Turrini (1826–1899), who, in various ways and with contrasting political positions, were engaged in the main political and cultural matters of the nation.

Italian Indologists partly replicated the quarrels which were vehemently animating the Indological debates in Europe,¹⁹ whose compelling aim was to find unity and identity—both on the political and, above all, academic levels—to (re) affirm the Italian position in Europe. Thus, in assessing their relationship to the Indian tradition, Italian scholars were primarily concerned with reassessing and restoring Italian origins. To reconcile Italy with the great Āryan stream, scholars from different disciplines tried to sever any ties of the national past with the Mediterranean/Semitic lineage. The task was to consolidate the place of Italian culture within the contemporary Āryan-European family and to detach the Latin civilization from its southern/Semitic linkages. Supported by comparative

¹⁸ See Cowan 2010.

¹⁹ See Aramini 2018.

philology, ethnography, and other positivistic tools, scholars were able to relate the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula to northern Europe, the cradle of the Germanic people.

Āryanism in Italy set in motion an “internal” discourse far more than an “external” or “colonial” one. Āryanism represented a way to legitimize a historical claim to Italian nationhood, and Italian national patriotic scholars undertook the quest to reconnect the Italian people to the genealogy of *Homo Europaeus* even before the unification.²⁰ Thus, Fabrizio De Donno cogently argues, in his pioneering work, *Italian Orientalism*, that “in the field of Indology, Italian Orientalism was more concerned with the construction of the Aryan identity of the Italian people than with Italian colonialism” (2019: 12).²¹ Italian ideological concerns were placed above any dominant colonial discourse or direct colonial ambition during the first half of the century. If Āryanism did work as a function of Italian imperialism, this did not happen before the last two decades of the nineteenth century, functioning primarily as an archetype for all Italians in an “internal” national perspective. Later, India itself was definitively cut off from colonial projects and ambitions. However, we cannot underestimate the rise of colonial rhetoric in works of later Italian Indologists, such as Angelo De Gubernatis and Francesco Lorenzo Pullé (1850–1934),²² which corresponded with a shifting of national concerns. Italians shared a common background with the Germans, who were cut off from India politically, and thus, isolated from the living Indian tradition. Additionally, German and Italian discourses on India shared the same notions of authority and dominance, a Eurocentrism that went beyond the borders of the countries involved in colonial political domination.

There were further ties between Italian Indological studies and Germany. By the second half of the nineteenth century, scholarships provided by the Italian government allowed scholars to go abroad to complete training in Oriental languages. First generation Italians with an interest in Indology therefore took this opportunity to study under leading German academics, specifically Albrecht Weber and Rudolf Roth. Accordingly, these encounters and the scholarly networks established between Italian Indologists and their European counterparts placed the Italian Indologists within a particular ideological position. However, despite the direct and close ties with German Indological schools, Italian Indologists did not root themselves in a strictly philological tradition of the historical-critical method.²³ These points of convergence and divergence between the Italian and German Indologists can be seen in the effects of the debate on native commentaries in Indian

²⁰ See Quine 2013; and Barsotti 2021.

²¹ For a critical review of De Donno’s work, see Patriarca 2021.

²² Professor of Sanskrit and Indo-European Philology, Pullé, after his training in Italy under De Gubernatis, moved to Germany, where he completed his training at Berlin University under Albrecht Weber, Theodor Mommsen, and Heinrich Kiepert.

²³ Still, following their French neighbors over time, Italian scholars could not avoid being under the German hegemony. In the 1820s and 1830s, the “Florist” controversy—which opposed scholars who cared about aesthetic taste in translation instead of scientific accuracy—represented the very turning point for Oriental studies, from which the German call for a strictly scientific method came to dominate European scholarship. On the parallel in French scholarship, see McGetchin 2003.

studies in the biographies and scholarly (and political) trajectories of the Italian Indologists discussed further below.

Following the Path of Philology: Michele Kerbaker

Despite the typical path that led European and Italian scholars to study at German universities, one of the most German-inspired Indologists in Italy, Michele Kerbaker (1835–1914), completed his training in Italy under Giacomo Lignana, a comparative philologist.²⁴ Still, Kerbaker was most influenced in Vedic studies by the German Indologist Rudolf Roth, a “master of Vedic science...and school-founder of those good interpreters” (Kerbaker 1880: 120).²⁵ He drew German and non-German students alike. More than any other scholar, Roth “had decisively contributed to establishing an attitude of mistrust towards indigenous commentaries” due to “a temporal...ethnic gap between Sāyana and the Vedic Indians” (Rabault-Feuerhahn 2019: 112). Accordingly, Kerbaker joined the fray on the side of Roth, viewing Sāyana as an untrustworthy interpreter of the Vedas. Echoing the views of the German Indologists Albrecht Weber, Rudolf Roth, and Otto Böhtlingk, Kerbaker criticized his German colleague Martin Haug, one of a handful of German Indologists who had worked in India and who acknowledged the value of native exegesis, as “the most Brāhmanic European Sanskritist that has ever existed” and decried what he saw as his misguided attempt “to be recognized as the head of that school which considers as a cornerstone of the Vedic hermeneutics, the religious symbolism, and the traditional commentary of the Indian theologians” (Kerbaker 1879b: 325).

Although stemming from a rooted philological tradition, Kerbaker’s readings were marked by his inclination to translate texts in metrical forms recognizable to Italians, even if it implied the distortion of the original text. He thus chose to publish a rhyming translation of an anthology of Vedic hymns from the *Ṛgveda* into Italian *ottava rima* (literally “eighth rhyme”). This was followed by a voluminous versified rendering of more than 14,000 stanzas of the *Mahābhārata*.²⁶ He maintained that a poetic translation of the *Ṛgveda* represented a risk but was necessary to transmit the vividness of the poetry. The hegemonic position of the Italian scholar manifests itself in the appropriation of the original text according to his own categories. Thus, Kerbaker’s attitude toward the Indian commentaries followed the position of his German colleagues, in that it was dominated by an unambiguous acknowledgment of the scientific hegemony of the European philological method. In the wake of the German philological tradition, he claimed that

²⁴ Lignana was trained in Indian languages under Christian Lassen and in Iranian languages under Friedrich Spiegel at Bonn University.

²⁵ All translations from the Italian are my own.

²⁶ For an analysis of Kerbaker’s translation strategies and their cultural implications, see De Simini and Sfera 2016. For an exhaustive bibliography of Kerbaker’s works in the field of Vedic studies, see Sani 2016.

to give life and, it could be said, to resurrect the Vedic word, almost dead and buried under the Brāhmaṇical comment, was the science of the European Orientalists destined, who then suddenly gained an immense advantage over the Indian commentators, directing the unscrupulous eyes of the philological criticism over the Vedic hymns literature, pointing to the primitive and literal sense of the text, considering this as a historical monument instead of a sacred codex....For that reason, nowadays, through the work of Western scholars, India rediscovers the sense of the Vedic word....For this very reason, it is prepared with the most appropriate and efficient way to enter the path of the modern civilizing process (Kerbaker 1879a: 59–60).

However, having claimed the superiority of the European (or, more appropriately, German) method over the Indian and having depicted its mission—that is, “to [make India] enter the path of the modern civilizing process”—Kerbaker bluntly disparaged Sāyaṇa’s commentary:

He who reads the comment of Sāyaṇa feels a sense of unpleasant disappointment in finding out how many different voices reflect a single concept and how, as a consequence, the commentator can satisfy himself in many places of a very easy and comfortable interpretation, yet just monotonous, colorless, and insignificant. Too frequently, he remains hesitant towards the different likely explanations that he leaves to the readers’ judgment (Kerbaker 1879b: 330).²⁷

Yet, despite his unequivocally hegemonic perspective, Michele Kerbaker was able to reassess his understanding on Sāyaṇa’s commentary: the medieval glosses could be regarded as the last resort that a scholar could rely upon. As German scholars did before him, Kerbaker began to compare his rendering with those of his European colleagues, approving some and disapproving others on the grounds of accuracy.²⁸ The Indian commentator was then “like the cane of a blind person, in the obscurest and thorny places of the Vedic exegesis” (Kerbaker 1880: 120). However, Kerbaker was far from admitting the legitimacy and relevance of the Indian tradition of commentary but, following the model of Albrecht Weber who did not fully exclude Sāyaṇa’s commentary in his edition of the *Yajurveda*, included a few extracts.

Before examining the position of other Italian Indologists, let us consider a few examples of Kerbaker’s translation strategies to demonstrate how Sāyaṇa’s commentary was put into practice. The following passages are from Kerbaker’s (1880: 122) translation of the hymn to Agni, corresponding to *Ṛgveda* 1.65.3, a hymn addressed to one of the oldest Vedic deities, the translation of which varied wildly among Western translators. Thus, Kerbaker translated *pāriṣṭis bubhuva* as

²⁷ Kerbaker’s views echoed Rudolf Roth’s in his “Vorwort” (Foreword) to the Petersburg Sanskrit dictionary (Böhtlingk and Roth 1855), where the German scholar claimed that “the very same qualities that make commentators preeminent guides to an understanding of the theological books [that is, according to Roth’s opinion, the *Brāhmaṇa* texts] make them unusable guides in that far more ancient and completely different field [that is, the *Ṛgveda*]” (cited in Adluri and Bagchee 2014: 329).

²⁸ Kerbaker’s translations relied on those published by Friedrich Rosen (1838), Alexandre Langlois (1848–51), Theodor Benfey (1862–64), and Hermann Grassmann (1873, 1876–77).

“strinsero in giro” (1880: 142), where Rosen reads “erat quaesitio,” following the misreading of Sāyaṇa, who derives *pāriṣṭis* from *pāri-√iṣ* (“to seek,” “to search about for”), instead of the correct reading *pāri-ṣṭi* (< *pāri-√as*) provided by Grassmann’s (1873: 788) dictionary of the *Rgveda*.²⁹ In *Rgveda* 1.65.5, Kerbaker rejected Langlois’s and Rosen’s interpretation of Agni’s epithet *bhujma* (= *bhujman*, “abounding in windings,” “ab. with enjoyment,” “fertile”). They derive the word from the seventh-class root \sqrt{bhuj} , “to enjoy,” following the gloss given by Sāyaṇa, instead of Grassmann’s reading, which derives *bhujma* from the sixth-class root \sqrt{bhuj} , “to bend” (Kerbaker 1880: 142). In contrast, in certain other passages, Kerbaker (1880: 142) credits Sāyaṇa’s gloss over the modern Western interpretation.

As mentioned above, although he provided his translation with a philological commentary and a literal rendering, for Kerbaker “poetic taste had to be preferred over interpretive tradition” (De Simini and Sferra 2016: 179). Moreover, there is also the sense that Kerbaker saw his reading of the Vedas as a mission: to restore and give back to Indians a text they could not have access to anymore.

Following the Path of Friedrich Max Müller: Giuseppe Turrini and Angelo De Gubernatis

In Italy, Giuseppe Turrini and Angelo De Gubernatis were deeply influenced by the German-born Friedrich Max Müller—although for different reasons. Max Müller was one of the few European scholars who initially attributed real importance to Sāyaṇa’s commentary, including it in his Sanskrit edition of the *Rgveda*. However, over the years, Max Müller reconstructed his view, as confirmed by his assertions about the gradual corruption of the Vedic hymns and the fallibility of the native commentators, eventually declaring that Sāyaṇa “teaches us how the Veda ought not to be, rather than how it ought to be understood” (cited in Tull 1991: 39).³⁰

Turrini did not move to Germany or anywhere else abroad, having completed his training in Oriental studies in Italy. He studied Sanskrit and comparative philology in Turin under the pioneer of Italian Indology, Gaspare Gorresio. His academic career began in 1860 when he was appointed as professor of Sanskrit and Indo-European Philology at the University of Bologna, a position that he held until his death in 1899.³¹ Turrini was a man of letters. His interests involved a wide range of research areas, including Italian medieval religious literature, translation of holy scriptures from Latin and Greek, and comparative literature and philology. As an Indologist, he focused on Vedic religion and *kāvya* literature.³² Turrini’s view

²⁹ Kerbaker’s interpretation agrees with the modern reading of Jamison and Brereton (2014: 187), whose translation reads: “The gods followed the commandments of truth. Like heaven (enclosing) the earth was his enclosing” (*ṛtāsya devā ānu vratā gur | bhūvat pāriṣṭir dyaūr nā bhūma*).

³⁰ See also pages 35–39 in Tull 1991 and 232–33 in Tull 2015.

³¹ For a biographical account of Turrini against the backdrop of the socio-cultural and political context of the Italian Risorgimento, see Crafa 2020: 27–51.

³² Turrini’s unpublished translations of excerpts from the *Meghadūta* and *Rtusamhāra* are provided in Crafa 2020: 81–91.

remains at odds with Kerbaker's approach. Like many of his colleagues, including the Italian Iranicist Italo Pizzi (1849–1920), Turrini was among the critics of the German philological method. His criticisms against the meticulous, pedantic, and sterile approach of the German philologists and their disciples were not publicly stated, as with Pizzi, but reported by his colleagues.³³ Besides the opposition to its overcritical nature, Turrini's criticisms were concerned with the total lack of aesthetic and literary taste in the German scholarly tradition. Therefore, it should not be surprising that Turrini's personal and academic correspondence, deposited in the Historical Archive of the Municipal Library of Trento, Italy, does not contain any letter sent by or received from German scholars.³⁴

Nevertheless, in publishing his translation of the forty-one stanzas of the Ajavilāpa, "King Aja's Lament" (Turrini 1899a), the eighth *sarga* of the *Raghuvamśa* of Kālidāsa, Turrini became a part of the transnational networks of nineteenth-century Indology, developing a collegial relationship with Max Müller.³⁵ Thirty years before publishing his work, in about 1869, he sent a first draft of his translation to the Oxford professor. His review came more than a year later:

I collated your translation with the original more than a year ago, and I found it as the whole correct. It is a beautiful fragment, and it seemed to me to lose nothing in your translation. But if you think of publishing it, I think you ought to take Mallinātha's commentary and go over the text once more. You will find some slight *nuances* in almost every verse when the native commentator tells us what the *correct* intention of Kalidāsa was and when we, without the help of a native interpreter, do not always see all the beauty of his poetry. Then and then you will find that you have misapproached some words....I shall not attempt to publish a translation, still less a test commentary, without availing myself fully of the *native commentators*. I write this to you quite openly, as you wished to have my candid opinion, and as I feel sure that it would not be difficult to you to make your work quite perfect.³⁶

The plan to publish the translation was delayed by Turrini's decision following Max Müller's "candid opinion" to include Mallinātha's commentary of the *Raghuvamśa*.³⁷ The decision implied that the Italian Indologist had to compare his overall reading with Mallinātha's glosses. Finally, although incomplete, the episode of the Ajavilāpa, along with its medieval commentary, appeared just a few months before his death in 1899. Just as Rudolf Roth had sown the seeds of his scholarship in

³³ See Crafa 2020: 39.

³⁴ See Crafa 2020: 53–70.

³⁵ Though Max Müller was considered a respected friend by the Italian Indologist, it is not clear how Turrini had become acquainted with him.

³⁶ Historical Archive of the Municipal Library of Trento, Italy, ms. 2864, Letter of Friedrich Max Müller to Giuseppe Turrini (Park End, Oxford, February 9, 1871). The original, underlined words are reproduced in italics.

³⁷ A well-known commentator of Kālidāsa and other Sanskrit authors, Mallinātha (ca. 1350–1450) was also a poet and author of *mahākāvya* poems. See Lalye 2002.

America through his close relationship with his student, Yale professor of Sanskrit William Whitney,³⁸ Max Müller did on Italian soil through Turrini. However, Turrini makes no direct mention of Mallinātha's reading, so it is difficult for the reader to understand how the Indian commentary affected the final translation. The same issue occurs in the sample of Vedic hymns he had translated and dedicated to his friend Max Müller, where he celebrated Śāyaṇa as "the best and most famous of the Indian scholiasts" (Turrini 1899b: 24).

An apparatus of notes accompanies Turrini's translation, etymologically arranged, which provides the reader with more than a mere philological commentary, but also a religio-historical analysis of concepts through a comparative perspective, looking broadly across ancient cultures from Romans to Burmese Buddhists.³⁹ Besides its scholarly value, Turrini's work—and this could be said for the entirety of his scholarly production—was conceived as a call to the younger generations and as a defense of the ethical and aesthetic principles of literary works. Thus, he stressed ancient and modern literature's social and moral values, whether in Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, or any other language. As a Catholic in increasingly secular society, Turrini aimed to point out the criticisms he addressed against the treatment of the Christian faith by comparative mythologists.⁴⁰ Though his work appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, any hegemonic discourse and rhetoric of the common Indo-European kinship were set aside, as was the pre-eminence of Europeans (and Italians) that had been upheld by Italian and foreign scholars. Moreover, it seems that Turrini did not care about the scholarly disagreements that marked the debate among his European colleagues on native commentaries. Even the academic field of Indology played a key role in the nation-building process, providing a wealth of material for the nation's younger generations.

Once more, by pointing out how biographical trajectories and socio-cultural dynamics interact in the construction of scholarly identity,⁴¹ I suggest a further reason that may have influenced and inspired Turrini's turn to traditional and

³⁸ See McGetchin 2008: 45–50.

³⁹ See Turrini 1899a: 148–59.

⁴⁰ The relation between the concerns of the Italian Orientalists and their Catholic background has not been adequately researched. Italian Indology appears not to have been entirely ideologically driven as compared to its German counterpart—which explicitly defended and legitimized a Protestant vision of the world and which deeply influenced their educational policies (see Sengupta 2004; Howard 2006). Nevertheless, many Italian Orientalists came to consider the new historical approach to religion and Indo-European philology as a tool "to lift Italy out of stagnation" (De Donno 2019: 182), a path to emancipate Italian society and culture from Catholic yoke. Indeed, the question should be considered against its political background and the underlying debate about the role of the Papal State and the new Italian nation. Positions differed considerably, depending on each scholar's political and religious faith (for a general overview, see Borutta 2012, 2013; see also Raponi 2014). German scientific positivism and historicism thus gained ground among liberals, anti-clerical and radical-oriented Orientalists, whose activity came to be viewed as a secularizing mission, with the aim to replace faith and Catholic dogmatic narrative with scientific knowledge (De Donno 2019: 179–91). On the contrary, religious scholars such as the Jesuit Orientalist Cesare Antonio de Cara (1835–1905) attempted to dismiss the "rationalist" approach that emerged from the viewpoint of Neo-Protestantism, undertaking a tenacious defense of Catholic authority against all those statements concerning the origins of man and culture that inevitably raised theological issues (De Cara 1884, 1887; Crafa 2022).

⁴¹ See Rabault-Fuerhahn 2019.

indigenous commentaries. Turrini was born in the Italian territories under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He took part in the revolutionary events in 1848 and was forced into exile from his homeland with the revolution's collapse. During that time, and until his death, he strove for the linguistic autonomy of the German-speaking Italian territories.⁴² Italy was not yet completely unified, and the struggle for the political independence of the north-eastern territories continued to be pursued by scholars like Turrini. Besides his affinity for Max Müller, the trust and approval of a native Indian tradition he evinced may have reflected a deeper ideological concern, one which favored the autonomous exegesis of a people's sacred literature in their language.

Considering that both the archives and the cultural activities promoted by local libraries were under the control of the occupiers during the Austrian occupation, it is worth speculating how the foreign control may have been perceived by Turrini. A close reading of Turrini's publications reveals how scholarly and patriotic concerns at times overlapped. Relations between Turrini and his Italian colleagues were marked by scholarly disagreements on different issues, not foremost concerning the credit assigned to Indian interpreters and commentators as (il)legitimate heirs of Āryan ancestors. Near the end of the nineteenth century, Turrini was involved in defending the Christian identity of his nation, much as De Gubernatis was in claiming the superiority of Christian civilization to justify the Italian colonial ambitions over India.⁴³

Due to his manifold interests, Angelo De Gubernatis was, without a doubt, the leading Italian Indologist of his time. His greatest merit was promoting Indian studies in Italy to de-provincialize Italian academic and cultural life. In doing so, "he took his activity of mentor and populariser of civilizations very seriously" (Baldissera 2020: 95). An eclectic character, he remains a controversial figure of Italian and European Oriental studies, just as he was in Italy's political and cultural life.⁴⁴ He had been a high-achieving pioneer but sometimes accused of superficiality, an anti-Catholic and advocate of Christian supremacy over Indians, and an ardent anarchist and a loyal servant of the Italian monarchy. De Gubernatis's ambiguity and contradictions have been cogently pointed out by recent studies on his intellectual trajectories between Italy, Europe, and India.⁴⁵ Combining these aspects and contradictions marked different periods of his life, but they sometimes overlapped in his academic and cultural life.

After his studies in Italy, De Gubernatis went abroad to Germany to complete his training in Sanskrit, Avestan, and comparative philology. He attended Albrecht Weber's courses at the University of Berlin, and Weber would become a leading figure for the Italian scholar. But then, in 1875, De Gubernatis became acquainted

⁴² See Crafa 2020: 51.

⁴³ On De Gubernatis's theories on comparative mythology and religion attracting criticism from Catholic scholars for betraying Christianity, see Crafa 2020: 115–32.

⁴⁴ See Vicente 2012.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Bocchi 2013; and Baldissera 2020.

with Max Müller and became the most active exponent of his theories on comparative mythology in Italy.⁴⁶ Still, this did not result in an uncritical emulation of Max Müller's thought. While aligning with his teachings, De Gubernatis did not fail to highlight some of Müller's limits, as recently noted by Lorenzo Fabbri (2017).

Although he was trained in Germany under Weber, De Gubernatis did not ground his academic career in the German philological tradition.⁴⁷ Even before his encounter with Max Müller, in his annotated translation of the first twenty hymns of the *Rgveda*, De Gubernatis (1864) neither rejected nor mistrusted later Indian commentaries. In the afterword to his translation, he informed his readers about his decision "to accompany the Vedic text with the Sanskrit commentary of Sāyana, so that the young may learn to explain India with India" (De Gubernatis 1864: 88). De Gubernatis's statement here has been praised as being "definitely modern and [a] rather original outlook on Indology, very advanced for the times" (Baldissera 2020: 101). However, De Gubernatis changed his attitude over time, and his later approach reflected the turn of Italian foreign policy during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. His translation could then be placed at the early stages of the Oriental studies in Florence, between 1867 and 1878.⁴⁸ The center of this renewed interest in Oriental disciplines was the Institute for Higher Practical Studies and Specialization.⁴⁹ To collect manuscripts, manufactured art, and sacred objects, De Gubernatis undertook a journey to India, from 1885 to 1886, with the financial support of the Italian government. Besides having a scholarly purpose, the Italian mission aimed to establish commercial relations on Indian soil. The journey represented a turning point in De Gubernatis's opinion of India with colonial ambitions in mind. It should be considered that his anthology of Vedic hymns was published more than twenty years before, at the beginning of De Gubernatis's devotion to an ancestral and learned India, when a young De Gubernatis wished to enroll in the fight to liberate Italy. Judging from De Gubernatis's afterword to his translation of the *Rgveda*, it seems that he had not yet interiorized the very common colonial perspective on the ways of producing knowledge and on the subordinate role that the native population could play in this process.

Italy in the mid-1860s was a young nation looking for a consolidation of its political unity by a cultural politics of nation-building. De Gubernatis and his

⁴⁶ See Rabault-F Feuerhahn 2016.

⁴⁷ As supporting evidence for a distinctly Italian approach, I would also mention De Gubernatis's successor in the Sanskrit chair in 1892, Paolo Emilio Pavolini (1864–1942). Before joining the Florentine Institute as professor of Sanskrit, he joined the great Jainist scholar Ernst Leumann from 1889 to 1891. He took the opportunity to refine his skills in Indological and Avestan fields under Albrecht Weber and Karl Geldner. Pavolini's works span various fields, from classical philology and Finnish literature to Jain and Buddhist studies. Nevertheless, his German-rooted training did not prevent him from valuing the pivotal role of the Indian commentaries, as exemplified by his statements on Mallinātha, "whose support—like the other 'indigenous' commentaries—always remain valid and indispensable" (Pavolini 1897: 16). He went even further, by expressing his satisfaction that, among his European colleagues, the value of the tradition of commentary, "day by day raise the credits, unjustly denied to them, by more than one Indologist, in past times" (16).

⁴⁸ See Vicente 2012: 133–41.

⁴⁹ See Lelli 2016.

colleagues in Florence sought to consolidate an Italian position in Oriental studies by improving and creating chairs, learned societies, and academic journals. By the mid-1880s, in contrast, following Italy's growing interest in sharing in the European colonial project, De Gubernatis's interest turned towards a colonial vocation. When he traveled to India, Italy had taken control of the Horn of Africa (Assab in 1882 and Massaua in 1885), and then, as De Gubernatis noted, India's eastern coast became much closer. On his return from India, he published an account of his journey in three volumes entitled *Peregrinazioni Indiane* ("Indian Wanderings," 1886–87), all the ambiguities of his attitudes toward Indian culture and people emerged. Filipa Lowndes Vicente (2012: 125–212) highlights that De Gubernatis's contradictions allow us to draw a more complex picture of his scholarly trajectory. He was a European Orientalist, but he came from a country with no direct connection to colonial India. Yet this position did not prevent him from sharing the same position as his European colleagues. By qualifying himself as a "pilgrim of the science," he became interested in a "sacred India," which he identified with the Āryan and believed was preserved by the learned priests. Unfortunately, his encounter with the Brahmins was disappointing. India was considered the Indo-European *urheimat* of the Āryans, but it was difficult for Italian Indologist to find its traces among the decay of contemporary Hindu India.⁵⁰ Cruel and monstrous customs were attributed to non-Āryan groups settled in Āryan lands. De Gubernatis's narration contains a few elements that reveal, in unambiguous terms, a hegemonic and hierarchical perspective on the relation between the European scientific approach and indigenous knowledge. His political stance regarding India was ambiguous. He believed that enlightened Brahmins could bring an independent India back to its ancient ideals—the Āryan ideals—instead of those currently witnessed. At the same time, despite his disapproval of various colonial abuses, he justified the British presence in India. In the end, his colonial vocation manifested itself: Italy should have tried to conquer India, at least commercially, by claiming the superiority of Christian civilization to justify European and Italian hegemonic discourses on Indian soil.

Concluding Remarks

Though it may now seem a historic relic, uncertainty about the utility of the Vedic commentators continues to plague modern scholarship. Thus, in claiming the "undeciphered" status of the *R̥gveda*, Karen Thomson (2009a) has strongly criticized the failures of the current hermeneutical approach towards the Vedic texts, suggesting that a later commentary does not serve to make the translation any more

⁵⁰ The quest for Germany's prehistoric origins was one of the main concerns of German Orientalists. From a secularized perspective, the direct link between Sanskrit and the German language enabled scholars to reassess the biblical ethnic framework. A close ethnic affiliation between Āryan people, language, and culture thus played a key role for the German national self-understanding from the nineteenth century onwards. See Benes 2008: 65–112. The role of the Āryan *urheimat* concerning the German national ideology has also been discussed in Pollock 1993. For a historical understanding of the notion of *heimat*, see Blicke 2002.

convincing, standing entirely at odds with the general view of contemporary scholarship. Thomson's main concern is principally due to the influence of the Indian commentaries on modern scholarship, which "can have faith in the careful oral transmission of the poems, but not necessarily in the way in which they were first interpreted, and then, much later, written down" (2009a: 4). This was a position vehemently defended by Thomson (2009a,b, 2010) against the reactions following the claim of her quest, in retranslation, for "discovering sense where before there was nonsense" (2010: 424).⁵¹ It is surprising to see the degree to which Thomson's views on Indian commentaries by Vedic scholars echo the sentiments of Michele Kerbaker, pronounced more than a century ago: "Time devoted to the mass of later ritual texts and commentaries, in other words, is not just time that is *not* spent in the attempt to decipher the *Rigveda*. It buries the text" (Thomson 2009a: 24; italics emphasis in the original; underline emphasis added). Furthermore, Michael Witzel (1996, 1999: 17–18) portrays issues contemporary scholars face when translating Vedic texts in a similar fashion. Even though Witzel's position appears more balanced—noting that "the medieval commentaries can help us in understanding the ritual and some of the grammar, syntax, and the general background of the texts" (1996: 167)—he yet reminds us that "the medieval commentators were almost as distant from the ancient Vedic texts as we are nowadays: in time, location, society, religion, climate and natural surroundings" (166–67), thereby demonstrating the continuing relevance of the nineteenth-century debate on the status of indigenous commentators.

As already observed, the questions raised by the various European perspectives regarding native Indian exegesis involved several issues relating to text and context. For different reasons, many of the scholars detailed above played significant roles in the cultural lives of their countries, particularly as nationalist intellectuals were involved academically in the process of nation formation. The debate on later Indian commentaries brought scholars from different schools into opposition, reflecting different ideological concerns. German and German-inspired Indologists claimed that Western scientific tools provided by their achievements in comparative philology and linguistics mattered more than indigenous commentarial tradition. Despite the close ties with the German philological tradition and its leading figures Albrecht Weber and Rudolf Roth, Italian Indology does not have its roots strictly in meticulous and minute philological matters, as for "the recovery of what...[Germans Indologists] understand to be the earliest strata on Indian thought and culture" (Goldman 2004: 31). Such a perspective, championed by German Indologists, required "the purging of later accretions, so as to reveal them, to the extent that such a thing is possible, in their pure, 'original' and uncorrupted forms" (Goldman 2004: 31). Moreover, Orientalists such as Giuseppe Turrini and Italo Pizzi were noticeably disdainful towards German philology. They shared the same

⁵¹ For responses to Thomson's essay, "A Still Undeciphered Text: How the Scientific Approach to the Rigveda Would Open up Indo-European Studies" (2009a), see Mumm (2009); Parpola (2009); and Zimmer (2009). For a critical review of Thomson's work (2009a, b, 2010), see Ronzitti (2011: 58), who demonstrates how Thomson's claim—far from being a reconstruction of a nineteenth-century scholarly approach to Vedic texts—could be regarded as a reconstruction of a nineteenth-century scholarly approach to a one-sided review.

opinion against the hypercritical German approach, which has been described as “an intellectual totality, a world unto itself that at the same time gave access to the essence of nations” (DeJean 1989: 148).

As we have seen, there was a general Western distrust of Indian knowledge and its ideological discourses. Later Indian commentaries would be understood to reflect the corruption and the decay of modern Indian customs and society. With this perspective, German philological efforts aimed to restore the “original” text and give it back to history. As such, Michele Kerbaker’s studies on various Vedic subjects might be seen as the most representative of the German scholarly tradition in Italy. Indeed, the German quest implied “a distaste for the culture and society of modern India, its cultures and its values, and a corresponding disinclination to study its modern literature and peoples” (Goldman 2004: 32). Then, although Angelo De Gubernatis reflected the hegemonic European attitude of his time and looked at India as did many of the colonialists of his day, his scholarly career testifies to a different attitude, as demonstrated by his manifold interests. He translated modern texts from Italian into Gujarati, developed an interest in Indian theater and women’s social and cultural issues, composed dramas, collected and investigated folk materials, always approaching them with a comparative Indo-European perspective. As evidenced by his travel account, he was a fine observer, even if full of contradictions. Despite the strictly philological and historical training he received in Germany and his friendship with Albrecht Weber, he never perceived himself as an “armchair philologist” but portrayed himself as a “pilgrim of science.”

Because of different ideological concerns, Italian Indology was more a reflection of European power than a contributing factor to its emergence and growth. In this context, then, the Italian reception of Āryanism was controversial. The claims of German scholars were replaced by Italian scholars “driven by the impulse to restore Classicism through the Aryan narrative to counter the rhetoric of Latin decadence” (De Donno 2019: 165). The Italian approach towards their studies thus differed from that of their German colleagues: Italian Indologists did not dismiss a Western reliance on indigenous commentaries at all.

Even the harshest critics were aware of the pivotal role played by comparative philology, and their works on Vedic subjects included etymological notes with analysis of Vedic terms that enabled readers to understand the hymns better. That these scholars inhabited roles as men of letters must also be appreciated here. Giuseppe Turrini had been asked to hold the chair of Comparative Literature at the University of Bologna, besides teaching Sanskrit language and literature and comparative Indo-European philology.⁵² Angelo De Gubernatis, once appointed at Rome University in 1891, taught Italian literature until his death. Paolo Emilio Pavolini, aside from his philological approach to the Buddhist canon and scriptures, spent his academic research studying and translating literary works from different European languages, such as Finnish, Modern Greek, Hungarian, Polish, and Ukrainian. Here we can find the roots of Italian Indology amidst the broad literary and aesthetic preferences of these scholars, as also remarked by Francesca Dovetto (1994). Making use of personal and academic correspondences, Dovetto also points

⁵² See Nassi 1993: 296.

out the contrast between German-inspired philologists such as Michele Kerbaker and those who, keeping faith in the Italian tradition, tried to accommodate the new teachings of comparative linguistics at Italian universities with the “literary taste and habits of our country” (1994: 133).

Moreover, it is interesting to note that Giuseppe Turrini was far more qualified than others at the University of Bologna simply because he was a German-speaking scholar. Based on the personal correspondences of scholars, we can surmise that being a subject of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as Turrini was, along with, for instance, the well-known linguist Graziadio Isaia Ascoli (1829–1907) and the philologist and professor of Sanskrit Emilio Teza (1831–1913), was to be considered an advantage.⁵³ Even if he repeatedly tried to break all ties with the German-speaking world, his firsthand knowledge of German philology allowed him to secure his academic position. After he was appointed professor of Comparative Indo-European Philology, Turrini inevitably became an implicit intermediary of the German philological tradition in Italy. Italian scholars could not avoid falling under the shadow of German Indology.

In elucidating a history of Italian Indology within the larger frame of European (and in particular German) studies of India, we can draw conclusion that the biographical trajectories of these scholars were intertwined with different stages of Italian history and followed the evolution of Italian nationalism from emancipation to oppression. Angelo De Gubernatis followed the evolution of the Italian foreign policy that occurred in the 1880s and changed his attitude and views; Giuseppe Turrini, as a citizen of occupied territories (if not politically, at least linguistically and culturally), did not dismiss his belief in the freedom from foreign domination of native peoples. In sum, by approaching the biographies of scholars and their personal and academic trajectories with the combination of macro- and microanalysis in Indology’s intellectual and social history, we may consider that a particular set of historical and ideological circumstances have given Italian Indology distinctive traits that still require further investigation.

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⁵³ See Brambilla 1981: 599–600.

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