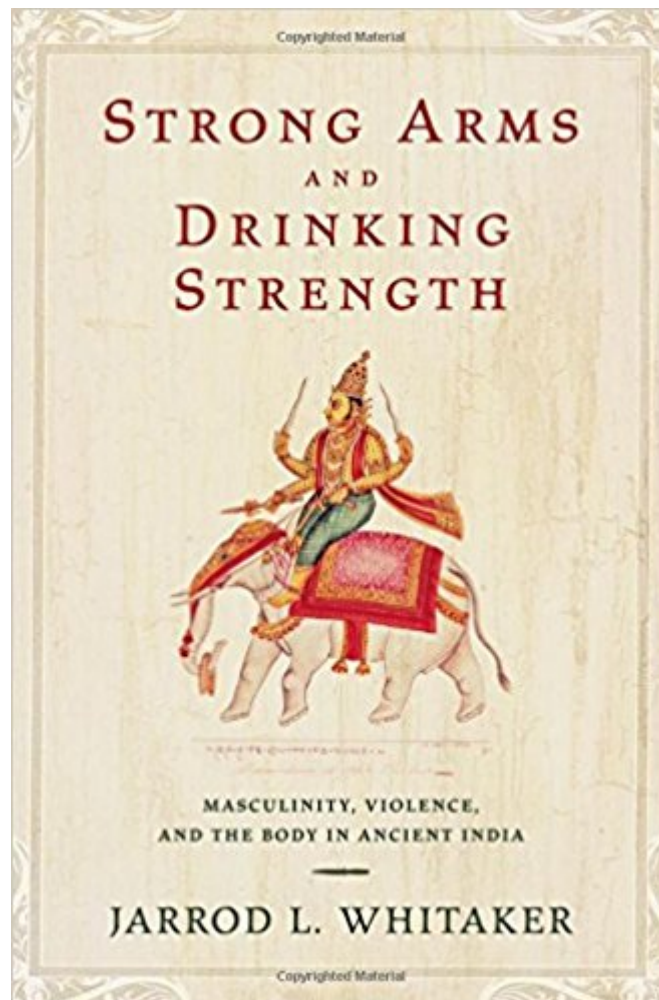




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Strong Arms And Drinking Strength: Masculinity, Violence, And The Body In Ancient India



Synopsis

Jarrold L. Whitaker examines the ritualized poetic construction of male identity in the Rgveda, India's oldest Sanskrit text, arguing that an important aspect of early Vedic life was the sustained promotion and embodiment of what it means to be a true man. The Rgveda contains over a thousand hymns, addressed primarily to three gods: the deified ritual Fire, Agni; the war god, Indra; and Soma, who is none other than the personification of the sacred beverage *soma*. The hymns were sung in day-long fire rituals in which poet-priests prepared the sacred drink to empower Indra. The dominant image of Indra is that of a highly glamorized, violent, and powerful Aryan male; the three gods represent the ideals of manhood. Whitaker finds that the Rgvedic poet-priests employed a fascinating range of poetic and performative strategies--some explicit, others very subtle--to construct their masculine ideology, while justifying it as the most valid way for men to live. Poet-priests naturalized this ideology by encoding it within a man's sense of his body and physical self. Rgvedic ritual rhetoric and practices thus encode specific male roles, especially the role of man as warrior, while embedding these roles in a complex network of social, economic, and political relationships. *Strong Arms and Drinking Strength* is the first book in English to examine the relationship between Rgvedic gods, ritual practices, and the identities and expectations placed on men in ancient India.

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Customer Reviews

"This important book cuts sensitively to the core of the construction of masculinity in Vedic family,

clan, and tribal society. From early hymns that reflect expansion through seasonal migrations to the hegemonic patriarchy embodied in state formation that closes the Rgvedic canon, Whitaker details a consistent androcentric ideology that lauds strength, intimidation, and violence through images of the hyper-masculine body and soma drinking of the god Indra. A needed but rare convergence of philology with gender, body, and ritual studies." --Alf Hiltebeitel, Columbian Professor of Religion, History, and Human Sciences, The George Washington University "I am much impressed. Whitaker sheds glaring light on a greatly neglected aspect of Rgvedic ritual."--Professor Thomas Oberlies, Institute of Indology, University of Goettingen "Dr Whitaker's monograph brilliantly demonstrates how the Vedic ritual experts used their arts of poetic composition and performance to create and reinforce a social construction of masculinity. Clearly written and well-argued, this book brings together current scholarship in Vedic studies and in gender theory in order to contribute to debates in both of these fields."--Theodore N. Proferes, Senior Lecture in Ancient Indian Religions, Department of the Study of Religions, School of Oriental and African Studies

Jarrold L. Whitaker is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion at Wake Forest University, where he teaches courses relating to Asian Religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, and also theory and method courses on religion, ritual, and gender. He holds a M.A. with First Class Honors in Religious Studies from The University of Canterbury, New Zealand (1998), and a Ph.D. in Asian Cultures and Languages from The University of Texas at Austin (2005).

To be honest I was at first a little apprehensive about this book. Not only because I have read some of the history of early Vedic ritual culture but also because I have had the opportunity to meet and be a student of the author. This book, surprised me however in more ways than one. I was able to easily grasp and understand the ideas that Whitaker explored between various ritual studies as well as the idea of the body. There was never a point where I felt as though I had no idea what was going on, though to be sure there were many times I paused to absorb what was being said. Dr. Whitaker eloquently takes the reader through each of the various concepts from the emphasis on masculinity to the perception of the body and how one would understand the self. I would highly recommend this book for those who are seeking to learn more about not only this culture but also about the ideals that this culture had and the way its people adapted and adjusted to their various roles.

Whitaker's *Strong Arms and Drinking Strength* is a thorough introduction to the world of masculinity

in India 2,000 years ago. For those who are not well versed in Sanskrit or are beginning the study of Aryan culture, this book does an excellent job of unpacking the social, economic, and political ramifications of ritualized violence. From raids to rituals, each chapter breaks down the roles and expected actions of males to obtain and maintain standing in a semi-nomadic, volatile society. Although probably not a book you would consider bringing to the beach, *Strong Arms & Drinking Strength* is an interesting read for those eager to learn more about a culture that in many ways is visible in our own. The book reflects a fascinating society's construction of gender, power, and violence.

Just as the war god Indra overthrew the cosmic adversary Vrtra to free the cattle and the rivers from Vrtra's serpentine coils, so also Jarrod Whitaker's book represents a watershed in Rgvedic masculinity studies. In *Strong Arms and Drinking Strength*, Whitaker points out that the Rgvedic hymns are rife with androcentric language, praise of masculinity and martial acumen, references to Indra as the hypermasculine prototype which human (Aryan) men should imitate, and contentions that ritual participation--especially in the soma ritual--is essential for strengthening the gods Indra, Agni, and Soma, as well as Aryan men. He simultaneously laments the fact that despite this abundance of material in the Rgveda, no focused study has formerly been conducted on the relationship between the ritual performances and the ways that these practices and discourse interact to construct, reconstruct, legitimize, and perpetuate the ideal of masculinity for Aryan men. The soma ritual involves the ritual pressing of an ephedra-based plant, mixing the resulting juice with milk and ghee, and making an offering of it to the gods Indra, Agni, and Soma. The gods are depicted as drinking large quantities of soma, which strengthens them to perform their manly and martial deeds. The ritual also involves the human participants drinking the soma, which is likewise said to make them strong and manly in participation with the gods.....read my full review on my blog ryanwesleyweber.wordpress.com.....Whitaker's book brings to light an aspect of Rgvedic studies that had previously been neglected. It also makes a valuable contribution to the field of gender studies. It will be appreciated by Vedic scholars, general religion students, as well as those casually interested in religious and masculinity studies.

Indra, Agni, and Soma: Maybe you're asking yourself, who are they and why do I care? One initially may be prone to claim that they are merely "some gods of an ancient civilization," however, in "*Strong Arms and Drinking Strength*," Dr. Whitaker brilliantly demonstrates that such an analysis would be a major oversimplification. Indra, Agni, and Soma are not only the three central figures of

the oldest surviving Indian text, the Rgveda, but they are symbolic representations of the social, economic and political ideologies of an androcentric ancient Indian society. Via a deep analysis of the ritual discourse used to describe these three figures, Dr. Whitaker explores the reciprocal relationships that much have existed "on the ground" during the early Vedic period of ancient India between the ritual and an Aryan man. He proposes that the ritual empowered the Aryan man to reach the highest level of social, economic and political prestige and in return, he sustained the ritual through continued practice (so that he could gain these things) that he adjusted appropriately to meet the needs of his community. All of this to say, Dr. Whitaker's book is not another dry history book with stories to which we, 21st century readers, cannot relate. It is instead, a detailed portrait of a society that esteemed war, power, bravery, and leadership. Therefore, through Dr. Whitaker's work, we, as readers, are able to see and experience the worldview of an Aryan men living in the early Vedic period. Whether or not you're interested in ancient Indian religions in specific, you will enjoy the action-packed and drama-filled book of a society that at first glance seems extremely distant, but with closer examination, seems a lot like our own.

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