Dying of thirst, the Vedic seer Vasiṣṭha calls out to Varuṇa in Rg Veda 7.89, the first stanza of which contains a curious locution:

May I not now go to the house of clay, King Varuṇa! Be gracious, you whose sovereignty is good, be gracious! 1

The phrase in question is mṛṇmāyaṃ ghām (Sing. Acc.), 'house made of clay or earth'. 2 But what is the 'house of clay'? What is its place in the complex funerary geography of the Vedic Indians? These questions are thorny ones, for nowhere else in Vedic texts is the 'house of clay' mentioned. 3 As a result, Geldner was inclined to see it as a metaphoric expression for the funerary urn in which the bones of a deceased were buried after cremation, 4 while Zimmer compared mṛṇmāya- ghā- to bhūmīgṛha- of the Atharva Veda, a description of the dead as 'one whose house is the earth'. 5 Alternatively, one might simply consider the 'house of clay' as a rare name for the Otherworld, much as the mortally stricken Enkidu refers to his destination as 'the house of dust' in the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. 6 That the Vedic verse cited above is concerned with issues of death and dying cannot be doubted, given the context of the hymn (Vasiṣṭha's thirst) and its poetic assonance. With regard to the latter, we must note that terms with the form *mṛ- (where - represents a dental) appear three times within a total of eleven words — *mṛṇmāya, mṛṇā, and mṛṇāya — conjuring up the presence of a fourth such form: mṛṇā, 'dead'.

One problem in arriving at an understanding of what is signified by the 'house of clay' is our tendency toward the fallacy of misplaced concreteness as we conjure up a clearer vision than is actually conveyed by the words themselves. Thus, *mṛṇmāya- can mean either 'made of earth' or 'made of clay'. 7 The meaning of gṛhā-, normally rendered 'house', admits even more possibilities. Derived from a Proto-Indo-European form *gherdhos, gṛhā- denotes nothing more than an enclosure, a space surrounded by some sort of a wall, being built upon a P-I-E verbal root *gθerdh-, 'to surround, enclose, gird, hedge in'. It is thus comparable to such nouns as Avestan gరǝdǝ-, 'cave', Albanian gart, -dhi, 'hedge'; Phrygian -gǝrdum, 'city'; Old Saxon gǝrd, 'fenced piece of land'; Lithuanian gǝrdas, 'fold, pen'; and Russian ogǝrd, 'fence enclosure, kitchen garden', gǝrd, 'city', as well as to Gothic gǝrds, 'house'. 8 'House' is but one of many possible meanings, and while it was clearly the prevalent sense of the Sanskrit term, gṛhā- could be used to
denote other kinds of bounded space.9

Two other Sanskrit terms serve to describe the Otherworld as an enclosure having earthen walls. Thus, in Atharva Veda 18.1.54 and 18.4.63, the departed Fathers (pitāraḥ) are said to travel from this world to the next pathibhiḥ pūryānair, ‘by the paths leading to the fortress’. The Otherworld is thus seen as a pūr-, a fortified stronghold having ramparts most often made of hardened earth,11 such ramparts being designated dehī in two Vedic verses,12 a term to which we shall return below.

Again, in the Upaniṣads,13 the heavenly realms are said to have a sētu-, a ‘boundary wall’, the noun being derived from the verb √ṣī tyati, ‘to bind, tie, fetter’.14 Although sētu- can also mean ‘bridge, causeway’ in later texts (as, for instance, the great bridge from India to Śrī Lanka in the Rāmāyaṇa), this sense does not occur in the earliest texts,15 and is less appropriate for the Upaniṣadic usages than that of ‘boundary wall’, already attested in the Rg Veda.16 A sētu- is most properly ‘that which binds’, not ‘that which connects’, as is seen from its cognates in European languages: Old Norse seidr (masc.), ‘bond’, Old English sāda, Old High German seito, Lithuanian saitas, sietas, and Lettish saite, all of which mean ‘cord, bond’, as well as those terms which have taken on the specialized sense of ‘magic, binding force’: Welsh and Breton hud, and Old Norse seid (fem.).17 Perhaps the most instructive text is Chandogya Upaniṣad 8.4.1–2:

Now, the soul is the dividing boundary wall (setu-) for the separation of these worlds. Day and Night do not cross that boundary wall, nor old age, nor death, nor pain, nor good deeds, nor bad deeds. All evils turn back from it, for truly the Brahma-world is free of evil.

Therefore, a blind man, having crossed that boundary wall becomes non-blind; a wounded man, having crossed that boundary wall becomes non-wounded; a feverish man, having crossed that boundary wall becomes non-feverish. Therefore, having crossed that boundary wall, night appears as day, for truly the Brahma-world is for ever radiant.18

The picture is one of paradise, described in familiar Indo-European imagery as devoid of all ills.19 But what is of greatest interest to us is that paradise is radically separated from this mortal sphere, set apart by a boundary wall (sētu-). The new, Upaniṣadic teaching is that the soul (ātman) constitutes that boundary wall and that when one appreciates the true nature of the soul, one has crossed over the boundary which confines him to this earthly prison, but the imagery of the heavenly boundary wall which the text builds upon is an extremely ancient one.

At the very least, the image must ascend to the Proto-Indo-Iranian period, for an Avestan cognate, haētu-, also denotes the wall surrounding paradise in one of the most important funerary texts of the Avesta, and assures a parent term *saitu- for Proto-Indo-Iranian.20 The text reads as follows:

That beautiful maiden (the daēnā-maiden, personification of the deceased’s religious life), bold