

PRIESTHOOD IN ANCIENT INDIA: A STUDY OF THE MAITRĀVARUṆA PRIEST. By CHRISTOPHER Z. MINKOWSKI. (Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, Vol. XVIII.) pp. 272. Vienna, Sammlung De Nobili, 1992.

Concentration on the role of the Maitrāvaruṇa priest in the rituals has enabled the author to penetrate significantly further into the role of priesthood in the Vedic period than a more general study would have permitted; the subtitle is therefore the more accurate description of the contents but the title is justified. Minkowski presents an essentially synchronic approach to the material (which is however informed by an awareness of diachronic perspectives), based on philological study of the texts and an analysis of the structural elements of the ritual. The second of these might suggest a similarity of approach to Frits Staal but Minkowski tactfully makes his own position clear as follows (p. 36): “The approach taken here, of presuming meaning, is not entirely in conflict with STAAL’s view of the ritual’s meaninglessness, for I read STAAL’s theory as a radicalized statement of the reasonable view that the structures of the rite are crucial to its understanding. This study attempts to find the meaning as it is encoded in the actions of the rites.”

Perhaps the most generally relevant of his findings is a reinterpretation of the term *ṛtvij* as “the one who worships according to the distributions” and the understanding that the distribution of priestly functions is an essential feature of the *yajña*, revealed of course in the names of the officiants. This in particular arises from his demonstration that the Maitrāvaruṇa is the priest who divides up speech among the other priests by delivering the *praiṣas* (it is notable that in, for example, the Nirūdhapaśubandha the Maitrāvaruṇa’s role is purely a speaking one and he makes no offerings) and that the action of distributing duties to the priests is most clearly expressed in the *ṛtuyājas* (rituals *ṛtúnā*, according to the allotment of duties), which earns the Maitrāvaruṇa his title of Praśāstr̥, the commander. Minkowski links this with the role of Mitra and Varuṇa in the primordial sacrifice as the basis for the Maitrāvaruṇa’s name. He also argues that, as the single representative of a dual deity, the Maitrāvaruṇa has the power to mediate between other priests, as when he transmits commands from the Adhvaryu to the Hotṛ, and that the pairing of the deities underlies the tendency for the Maitrāvaruṇa to be paired with the Hotṛ.

Some other points that emerge from his study are the way that the Maitrāvaruṇa enables the Hotṛ to communicate with his divine counterpart, Agni, the Maitrāvaruṇa’s closer connection with the Yajamāna (represented by his positioning to the south of the *pr̥sthīyā*, the side of the Yajamāna and of *kṣatra*), the greater significance of his role in delivering *praiṣas* compared with that as one of the *hotrakas*, the resemblance of the *divyau hotārau* to Mitra and Varuṇa, the extent to which the Maitrāvaruṇa’s *danḍa* is a symbol of his delegated regal authority, and the significance of his representing the divine authority of Mitra and Varuṇa in avoiding the potential dangers of the animal sacrifice (in which his participation is essential). The last point leads also to the conclusion that the link between the Maitrāvaruṇa and Mitra and Varuṇa is not incidental but basic, in that the Vedic deities are not just the recipients of the rites but also, through their human representatives among the priests, the performers of them. Minkowski’s overall synchronic approach does not prevent him

from demonstrating that the term *maitrāvaruṇá* is not used in the Ṛgveda as the name of a priest, whereas *prasāstr̥* is, but in the Yajurveda and the Brāhmaṇas the term *maitrāvaruṇá* takes over completely from the other, while he argues that a third term, *upavaktṛ̥*, originally had a sense somewhat different from *prasāstr̥*.

The last part of the work (pp. 171–232, a valuable addition to the thesis on which the rest is based) consists of a critical edition and translation of the *Praśādhyāya*, based on no less than 55 manuscripts but presenting the version of the six manuscripts belonging to the Śāṅkhāyana school because of its noticeable difference from the versions published in previous editions.

This carefully researched and well presented volume marks another significant advance in our understanding of Vedic ritual. It will certainly repay study by everyone interested in any way in Vedic religion.

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