

Priesthood in Ancient India: A Study of the Maitrāvaruṇa Priest. By CHRISTOPHER Z. MINKOWSKI. Vienna: Sammlung De Nobili, 1992. 272 pp.

The Maitrāvaruṇa priest appears in a number of ancient Vedic texts as one of the ritual officiants at sacrifices involving the slaughter of animals. He stands at the western end of the sacrificial enclosure to the right of the Hotṛ, whose role is to recite Vedic hymns. In many contexts, the Maitrāvaruṇa priest functions as an assistant to the Hotṛ, chanting prayers along with him and other priests. He also works as the “commander” (*prasāstr*), carrying a long staff (*daṇḍa*), who receives signals from the Adhvaryu priest performing mechanical operations and then utters short commands (*praiṣa*) to the Hotṛ and others to initiate recitations.

At the beginning of this book, the author notes a recent upsurge in research and writing on Vedic sacrifice and its meanings, and stresses the originality of his contribution, which studies a particular person in all the contexts where he appears, rather than a rite or a sub-rite. He intends thereby to “isolate specific tendencies” in the sacrifice. Addressing Frits Staal’s idea that the rituals have no meaning outside their own terms, the author states that he will try to reconstruct the meaning of “elements of the Vedic ritual system” to “find the meaning as it is encoded in the actions of the rites,” and to portray “elements of the theory underlying the ritual practice.” The author explicitly states that he is avoiding any “underlying semantic and ideological network.”

The book opens with a rather clear statement of the background of the rites, including descriptions of the personnel, altars, and materials involved. The heart of the book consists of detailed descriptions of the Nirūḍhapaśubandha and Agniṣṭoma sacrifices, followed by short additional comments on larger soma rites including the Dvādaśāha, or twelve-day sacrifice. Although he is following the actions of a single priest, the author in fact discusses interactions with other officiants and with the sacrificer. Thus, these sections are in-depth presentations of the actions and words of the sacrifices, including sometimes lengthy transcriptions and translations of the hymns recited by the Maitrāvaruṇa priest and other performers. Separate chapters are on several related topics: a survey of the terms *upavaktr*, *prasāstr*, and *maitrāvaruṇa* through Vedic literature; a discussion of the concept of the two “divine hotṛs” (*daivyaḥ hotārau*) in the Ṛg Veda, *praiṣa* literature, and some later sources; and an extended analysis of the meaning of the staff held by the Maitrāvaruṇa priest and its resemblance to the Homeric *skēptron*. A substantial portion of this

book contains notes and sources, plus a critical edition and translation of the *Praśādhya*, a section of Ṛg Veda Khila literature, which is the source material for much of the presentation of the sacrifices.

After leading the reader in excruciating detail through arguments supporting the link between the Maitrāvaruṇa priest and the gods Mitra and Varuṇa, the author contemplates the significance of this identification in his concluding arguments. Using examples from the Brāhmaṇas, he returns to the roles of these two gods as heavenly priests, representatives of thought and action (*brahma* and *kṣatra*) who together form a twinned mediation of these forces. As such, they support moral authority or order (*ṛta*) in the universe. The author makes his boldest leap when he suggests that the death of the sacrificial animal may be the element within these rituals that threatens moral authority. As a representative of the gods Mitra and Varuṇa, the priest enables and sanctions correct enactment of the rites and prevents disruption from the death of the victim. By receiving his staff from the sacrificer and holding it until the end of the sacrifice, he stands as an embodiment of the authority of the gods. The Maitrāvaruṇa priest thus appears as the commander of the sacrifice who stands between all other participants and regulates the performance of duties by all parties. At this point, despite his earlier disclaimers, the author is bringing the reader into the worldview of the sacrifice and its part in an ideological system that eventually leads to the concept of *dharmā*.

This is a book designed for specialists interested in the structure and meaning of Vedic rituals, and would be heavy going for anyone unfamiliar with Sanskrit. The book also offers few overt initiatives in theoretical realms. Although the author claims that the interpretation of structure and sequence in the rituals he is presenting allows the beginning of a “philology” of ritual action, he does not expand on this idea later in the book. This remains a decidedly limited work, therefore, but by the end we emerge with a detailed vision of the world of the Maitrāvaruṇa priest and, after all, an understanding of the mentality of the Vedic sacrifice.

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