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*Die Religion des ṚgVeda. Zweiter Teil: Kompositionsanalyse der Soma-Hymnen des ṚgVeda.* By THOMAS OBERLIES. Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, vol. 27. Vienna: Sammlung De Nobili, 1999. Pp. xx+313.

This book constitutes the second volume of the ambitious treatment of Rigvedic religion (projected for three volumes) by the distinguished Indologist Thomas Oberlies. (For my review of vol. 1, *Das religiöse System des ṚgVeda*, see *History of Religions* 40, no. 4 [2001]: 387–90). But as the volume under review is also a revision of Oberlies's *Habilitationsschrift* of 1991 (University of Tübingen), it is in many ways the kernel of the whole multivolume work and provided the impetus for it. It is therefore easier to discern here what shaped the somewhat idiosyncratic nature of the first volume and to anticipate how the third volume will be conceived. (Volume 3 proposes to treat the elements of Vedic ritual and their interrelations; see p. ix of vol. 2).

The focus of this volume is clearly stated by its title: an analysis of the motifs and structures of the hymns dedicated to Soma Pavamāna, that is, the hymns of the Ninth Maṇḍala. Unlike the other nine books of the *Rig-Veda*, with their miscellany of divine dedicands, book 9 is devoted only to the deified ritual offering Soma Pavamāna “self-purifying Soma.” These 114 hymns are extremely limited in subject matter: they treat only a few linked episodes in the ritual preparation of soma—its pressing, filtering, and mixing with cows' milk—but do so with an extravagance of stereotyped imagery and high-flown rhetoric.

In his first volume, Oberlies considered the central place of the soma cult in Rigvedic religion and the reasons for the concentration on the particular ritual moments obsessively described in the Soma Pavamāna hymns. In his view these

ritual moments constitute the “transubstantiation” of the ritual substance into god, and this transubstantiation is the central event of one of the “religions” he has identified in the *Rig-Veda*, the warrior religion with god Indra as its chief deity. In other words, the particular subject matter of the Soma Pavamāna hymns is no accident, and understanding the hymns will give us access to the conceptual preoccupations of the “Indra religion” as a whole. For this reason, in this volume he turns his attention to the internal content and structure of the hymns themselves.

The book is divided roughly into halves. The first (chap. 6, through-numbered from vol. 1) treats the “compositional elements” of the hymns (pp. 1–123); the second (chaps. 7–9, pp. 124–256) sets out three “models” into which these elements can be fitted. In other words, the book is conceived as a sort of simple grammar, presenting first, in elaborated list form, the equivalent of words or grammatical features, followed by the rules for combining them (a model which used to be called in linguistics “item and arrangement”). It is an effective, if somewhat limiting, device.

In the first half Oberlies identifies fourteen “compositional elements” of curiously heterogeneous type. Some are strictly verbal or phraseological, for example, epithets and names (sec. 6.9, pp. 77–92), formulaic invitations (sec. 6.2, pp. 3–4); others treat the conceptual relations of soma, for example, soma as liquid (sec. 6.5, pp. 31–50, with subsections devoted to soma’s relation with various liquids such as water, rain, and semen). Yet another “element” presents a speculative disquisition on the structure of Rigvedic society: “Gesellschaftliche und volkswirtschaftliche Daten” (sec. 6.13, pp. 106–20), whose relevance to soma and the soma hymns only becomes clear much later in the book. There is much of interest and value in this series of discussions, and certainly many of the preoccupations of the soma hymns are identified in this chapter, but, perhaps because of the motley nature of the subjects treated, the whole does not strike the reader as a comprehensive and structured treatment of the thematics of the hymns.

The three models treated in the second half are also of varying types. The first (chap. 7, pp. 125–65) presents “Space and Time” as ordering principles of the hymnal composition. In actual fact, time is barely treated; most of the discussion concerns space, especially ritual space as defined by the ritual apparatus and its arrangement and the orderly progress of soma from one piece of equipment and ritual procedure to the next. Other spatial realms are here equated to ritual space, in particular the divisions of the cosmos, and Oberlies clearly shows the interweaving of cosmic images with the well-known steps of ritual soma preparation—for example, the filtering of the soma through a sheep’s fleece can be poetically represented as a journey through the atmosphere or midspace (*antarikṣa*) between heaven (ritually, the pressing apparatus) and earth (ritually, the vessel containing milk with which soma is mixed after filtering). Section 7.8 (pp. 147–57) sketches these relations deftly, though it is useful to remember that such analyses are not as novel as Oberlies sometimes implies: the interrelations between microcosm (ritual) and macrocosm (the cosmos and the divine, human, and impersonal forces that populate it) in the Vedic mental universe have long been analytic staples of scholarship in this field.

The other two models are closely related, and each involves the identification of personified-deified soma with a figure or element in Vedic warrior culture: in

chap. 8 (pp. 167–219) with a victorious warrior king and in chap. 9 (pp. 221–56) with a chariot and/or chariot horse, both in turn closely associated with regnal victory. There is no question that the images discussed in these two chapters are ubiquitous in the soma hymns, and Oberlies's systematization of the imagery offers intriguing suggestions for the reasons for this ubiquity.

In short, there is very much to admire in this immensely learned and always stimulating book, which offers rich discussions on far more topics than I can mention in a review of this brevity. And yet, as with volume 1, I must confess also to some disappointment with it. I will here sketch out some reasons for my reaction, while emphasizing the work's importance and value for all Vedic scholars.

In part, there is a problem of presentation. As just noted, it is immensely learned—to the point of distraction. Footnotes take up at least half of many pages (and, because of their smaller type, therefore take up more than half the actual text on those pages); they range widely over many fields and languages and display a dazzling mastery of the secondary literature, but their sheer volume can clog the progress of the argument.

But more crucial than what we have too much of is what we have none of. In a book devoted to an internal analysis of the composition of a body of very sophisticated poetry, there is not a single analysis of a poem. Oberlie's procedure outlined above, identifying individual "elements" first and then the conceptual models into which they fit, is fine as far as it goes, though rather too schematic, but each aspect of this plan relies on the same technique: extracting passages from their contexts and arranging them into internally consistent groups of Oberlies's devising. I raised objections to this procedure (a common one, by no means limited to Oberlies) already in my review of volume 1. Relying on it exclusively seems even more of a defect here, since this volume is entirely concerned with poems as poems. We should have a demonstration of how the elements and models identified by Oberlies are deployed by poets, how the motifs and images unfold in the course of a poem, and what juxtapositions and interrelations are thus revealed. We should also be given at least a glimpse of the phonological and morphological plays that are so important in Rigvedic poetry that they often "drive" the semantics. Yet the only complete hymn I found presented as a unity in the text is 9.78 (given p. 125 in the translation of Lommel), with no discussion of its structure or poetic qualities.

This willful ignoring of the poetry qua poetry is also evident from the almost complete absence of the Sanskrit text for the myriad passages cited, which are given only in German translation. (Curiously, however, philological details concerned with lexical and grammatical interpretations of the Sanskrit are debated in the notes, though without the text to refer to.) Although the absence of Sanskrit might seem to make the book easier for a nonspecialist to use, in fact this is not a book a nonspecialist can easily approach, as too much detailed background knowledge is assumed. Although including the text would have swelled an already large book, it is a serious flaw in my opinion, for two reasons. First, almost every verse in the *Rig-Veda* presents problems of interpretation on the lexical and grammatical level, difficulties that translations, however skillful, conceal. And second, as I said in my first review, the way the *Rig-Veda* means is through verbal

manipulation and self-conscious artistry; the meaning cannot be reduced to “concepts” and “models” divorced from the words that convey them, without impoverishing not only its form but also its very message.

Nonetheless, no one can capture everything about this infinitely puzzling and infinitely compelling text, and Oberlies has greatly advanced our understanding of one of the central aspects of the *Rig-Veda* and the religious system embodied, however obscurely, in it.

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