

Internationales Asienforum

International Quarterly for Asian Studies

Herausgegeben von

Detlef Kantowsky und Alois Graf von Waldburg-Zeil

Wissenschaftlicher Beirat:

Hans-Georg Bohle, Hans-Dieter Evers, Michael von Hauff,
Hermann Kulke, Gudula Linck, Jürgen Rüland

Schriftleitung: Clemens Jürgenmeyer

ABI ARNOLD
BERGSTRAESSER
INSTITUT

IND z: 204 / 39,3-



27.01.2009

THOMAS OBERLIES, *Die Religion des Ṛgveda. Erster Teil: Das religiöse System des Ṛgveda*. (Publications of the Nobili Research Library 26). Wien: Institut für Indologie, 1998. XIV, 632 pages, € 67.59. ISBN 3-900271-31-3

THOMAS OBERLIES, *Die Religion des Ṛgveda. Zweiter Teil: Kompositionsanalyse der Soma-Hymnen des Ṛgveda*. (Publications of the Nobili Research Library 27). Wien: Institut für Indologie, 1999. XX, 313 pages, € 26.07. ISBN 3-900271-32-1

Ten years ago, Thomas Oberlies, Indologist at the University of Göttingen, began to publish his multi-volume study of the Ṛgveda. In his preface to the first volume he announced a third volume on sacrifice and rituals, for which I was waiting in order to jointly review all three volumes. But it seems unlikely that the third volume will be brought out in the near future. This explains, but does not justify the delay of this review.

The first volume – interestingly dedicated to Burkhard Gladigow, Oberlies' teacher of Science of Religion, and not to the late Paul Thieme, one of his indological teachers – introduces the reader to the Ṛgveda and thereafter deals mainly with Soma, whom Oberlies considers – together with Indra – as the most important deity of the Ṛgveda (vol. 1, p. 152). Chapter 1 (“Soma und die ṛgvedische Religion”) deals with the Ṛgvedic religion and ritual in general. In chapter 2 (“Gesellschafts(ordnung) und religiöses System”), Oberlies discusses the social system and the cosmogony. Chapters 3 (“Soma, Macht und Herrschafts(legitimation)”) and 4 (“Der Soma-Rausch und seine Interpretation”) focus on Soma, power and legitimation, the contests between Soma and Indra, and the intoxication from the hallucinogenic *soma* drink. In the fifth and final chapter (“Form und Funktion der Soma-Hymnen”), Oberlies analyzes structure and function of the Soma hymns.

The second volume (a revised version of Oberlies' habilitation thesis from Tübingen) continues the discussion of the composition and structure of the Soma hymns, especially of the comparatively stereotyped 114 hymns of the 9th book of the Ṛgveda (ch. 6: "Die Kompositionslehre der Soma-Hymnen"), dwelling in particular on aspects of space and time (ch. 7: "'Raum' und 'Zeit' als Ordnungsprinzipien der Kompositionselemente"). Interspersed are sections on various topics such as the duties of the king or the Vedic chariot. In chapter 8 ("Vājasāti I: König Somas Kriegszug") and 9 ("Vājasāti (II): Der Siegeslauf des Rennpferdes und des Streitwagens Soma"), Oberlies deals with the Vedic warrior culture.

Oberlies seeks explanations for seemingly unconnected and at times even contradictory passages in the Ṛgveda by elaborating common structures underlying them. Some of these structures are related to Vedic ritual.

In the decade since publication considerable progress in Vedic research has been made. Thus, a new translation of the first books of the Ṛgveda by the renowned Vedic scholars Michael Witzel and Toshifumi Goto (with an excellent introduction to the Ṛgveda) has since been published (*Rig-Veda. Das Heilige Wissen. Erster und zweiter Liederkreis*. Übers. von Michael Witzel und Toshifumi Goto. Frankfurt am Main/ Leipzig: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2007), while Oberlies' work relies to a certain extent on Karl-Friedrich Geldner's famous translation (a low-priced reprint, edited by Peter Michel, has just appeared 2008 in the German Marix Verlag). Currently Oberlies himself is preparing a new introduction to the religion of the Ṛgveda announced for 2009 by the Verlag der Weltreligionen, in which he might respond to the critical objections that have been articulated by several reviewers, e.g. *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 95 (2000): 313–321 (H.W. Bodewitz), *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 95 (2000): 526–539 (B. Schlerath) or *History of Religions* 41.2 (2001): 180–183 and 40.4 (2001): 387–390 (both St. W. Jamison).

Most of these reviewers praised Oberlies for his meticulous work, ambitious scope, learnedness (137 pages of bibliography in the first volume!) and rich discussion of many topics and particular issues. However, some also criticized the author for his concentration on the Ṛgveda (neglecting post-Vedic sources) and the Soma hymns in the ninth *maṇḍala*, the lack of quotations from the original text, the incoherent structure of the two books, or certain lacunae: thus, among the deities of the Vedic pantheon that Oberlies describes in the first volume, Agni, to whom most hymns are addressed, is missing (however, he intended to discuss Agni in the third volume). Several reviewers criticized the misleading title chosen by Oberlies, because it is not so much a book on the religion of the Veda but a study of several aspects therein.

I cannot but agree with these overall assessments. The two volumes cannot substitute the classic and still highly inspiring book on the Veda by Hermann Oldenberg (*Die Religion des Veda*. Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1894; 2. Aufl. Stuttgart/Berlin: Cotta'sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger, 1917), which Oberlies

wants to replace (vol. 1, p. IX). Neither in substance nor in style is this immodest claim acceptable. To be sure, no serious scholars of the Ṛgveda can in future ignore Oberlies' book, even though it cannot be recommended for beginners or students of religion without a substantial indological background. Since a considerable part of his arguments is based on a particular understanding of Vedic ritual, it is to be hoped that Oberlies will present the announced third volume in due time.

Axel Michaels
