

Zeitschrift:	Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber:	Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band:	59 (2005)
Heft:	3
Artikel:	Theory and method in Vedic studies
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DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147695

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THEORY AND METHOD IN VEDIC STUDIES¹

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OBERLIES, Thomas, *Die Religion des R̄gveda*, erster Teil: *Das religiöse System des R̄gveda*. Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, vol. 26. Wien: Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, 1998 (hereafter referred to as Rel. I).

OBERLIES, Thomas, *Die Religion des R̄gveda*, zweiter Teil: *Kompositionsanalyse der Soma-Hymnen des R̄gveda*. Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, vol. 27. Wien: Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, 1999 (hereafter referred to as Rel. II).

1.1 Since its beginning ca. two centuries ago, the systematic study of ancient Indian literature in general and Vedic texts and the R̄gveda in particular has been undertaken on the basis of quite divergent theoretical starting points. The French Vedist Abel Bergaigne (1838–1888), for instance, emphasized the structure of myths and de-emphasized concrete historical events, long before Lévi-Strauss developed his structuralist approach to myths, rites and human culture.

1.2 In his three-volumed *La Religion Védique d'après les hymnes du Rig-Veda* (1878–1883), Bergaigne observed with regard to the protégés of the twin gods of dawn, the Aśvins, that² “they are usually characterised as ṛṣis, singers, priests; but this is no reason for us to recognize them as real personalities.” If somehow a case of curing or rescuing happened to be real, he thought it must have been attributed to the Aśvins only because myths on

1 The investigations on which this article is based were supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), and by the National Science Foundation (U.S.A.) under Grant No. 0135069.

2 BERGAIGNE, 1883a:437: “Les protégés des Aṣvins reçoivent pour la plupart la qualification de *rishis*, de chantres, de prêtres. Mais ce n'est pas pour nous une raison de reconnaître en eux des personnages réels.”

curing and rescuing were pre-existing.³ On the other hand, Hermann Oldenberg (1854–1920), author of *Die Religion des Veda* (1894, 2nd ed. 1917) read the same stories as reminiscences of events occurring to real persons⁴ “The skipper in distress, the aging virgin, the wife of the eunuch are people, nothing but people, in whose fates the inventive pleasure of storytelling could demonstrate the favour of the divinities who are the helpers par excellence from trouble and misery [i.e., the Aśvins, J.H.].” The Aśvins themselves Oldenberg preferred to see as originally representing a natural phenomenon, just as Agni (fire), Uṣas (dawn) and Sūrya (sun), which the R̥gvedic hymns often associate with the Aśvins. Assuming that some shifts had taken place and that the poets did not realize the Aśvins’ original representation he thought they were the morning and evening star.⁵

1.3 In Thomas Oberlies’ *Die Religion des R̥gveda* (1998 and 1999 or Rel. I and Rel. II), we find throughout an approach which is in fact closer to Bergaigne than to Oldenberg, even though it is Oberlies’ stated aim (Rel. I, *Vorwort*, XI) to write a work that will at last replace Oldenberg’s *Die Religion des Veda* which after more than a century (counting from its first edition in 1894) is still an important Indological work of reference (Handbuch).⁶ Anyone reading or working with Oberlies’ monumental work should realise that it is an elaboration and reworking of his *Habilitationsschrift* on the composi-

3 BERGAIGNE, 1883a:437: “Si quelques-uns [parmi les protégés des Aṣvins, J.H.] ont vraiment existé, leurs aventures n’en sont pas moins du domaine de la mythologie. ... Le fait réel d’une guérison ou d’une délivrance inespérée n’aurait, en tout cas, été attribué à l’intervention des Aṣvins qu’en vertu de la préexistence de mythes relatifs à des guérisons ou à des délivrances.”

4 OLDENBERG, 1917:215: “Der Schiffer im Seenot, die alternde Jungfrau, die Gattin des Hämlings sind Menschen, nichts als Menschen, in deren Schicksalen erforderliche Erzählerslust die Gnade der Gottheiten, die vor allen anderen Helfer aus Not und Elend sind, sich beweisen liess.”

5 Also for Bergaigne natural phenomena are often underlying the divinities in the R̥gveda, but in the case of the two Aśvins he thinks they are a special form of Agni (fire) and Indra (solar god). Cf. BERGAIGNE, 1883a:494ff.; 4ff. on Agni; 159ff. on Indra as originally solar god who became a warrior god who is liberal and helpful to his worshiper.

6 “... erklärtes Ziel war es, Hermann Oldenbergs vorzügliche Religion des Veda (letztlich) aus dem Jahre 1894 zu ersetzen.”

tion of the Soma hymns.⁷ Hence, the divine Soma strongly dominates the two volumes, and topics that could have been treated in their own right are discussed in their relation with Soma.

1.4 On the basis of the extensive material included in the *Rgveda* – not to be regarded as a single, homogeneous text but rather, according to the characterization of E.V. ARNOLD, 1915, as a “library” – and making use of a few other sources, esp. the Avesta and later Vedic texts, Oberlies tries to recover the *Rgvedic* religion *as a system* (with a strong emphasis on Soma). That this is Oberlies’ aim can be inferred from the subtitle of the first of the two volumes of the work, *Das religiöse System des Rgveda* – but it is not clearly explained or discussed in the brief *Vorworte* in Rel. I and Rel. II (neither of the two volumes contains an Introduction). The author has written the work according to specific theoretical starting points, to which he hints when he mentions as his second aim (Rel. I, *Vorwort*, XII), next to replacing Oldenberg’s *Die Religion des Veda*, the closing of the gap between Indology and Religious Studies. In this context he mentions the *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* edited by H. Cancik, B. Gladigow and others (consisting of five volumes, published from 1988–2001, of which three were available for Rel. I and four for Rel. II).

1.5 It is well known that the *Rgveda* developed over a period of at least a few centuries.⁸ According to an estimation by WITZEL, 1997:263, the bulk of its material was composed in a period of five to six generations, somewhere between ca. 1900 and 1200 B.C. If we want to study “das religiöse System” of the *Rgveda*, we should therefore ask a crucial question, before easily assuming that there really *is* a system. This question is not asked by Oberlies – nor for that matter by Michael Witzel in a recent article where he, somewhat like Oberlies, tries to give an overview of *the* system of the *Rgvedic* religion (WITZEL, 2004). The question is: Was there any “system” underlying and remaining constant during the long period and over the large area in which the *RV* was composed? We know that significant transformations took place

7 The second part, according to the *Vorwort* in Rel. I, corresponds to the reworked *Habilitationsschrift*, the first part should give an overview of the *Rgvedic* religion; but here too there is a great (over-)emphasis on Soma.

8 Cf. GONDA, 1975:15: “It is mostly assumed that some hundreds of years must have been needed for the hymns found in the oldest corpus, the *Rgveda* – and for those which have been lost – to come into being.”

in the *Rgvedic* period. Why should we assume that those transformations left “the system” intact, did not distort or break it? Although it is not always easy to identify what is old and what is recent in the *Rgveda*, it is generally accepted that some parts are indeed significantly older and others significantly more recent (cf. OLDENBERG, 1888). Is it really advisable to try to reconstruct *the* religious system on the basis of all this chronologically (and geographically) distinct material, or should one try to reconstruct, for instance, two different systems to take account of early and late *Rgvedic* religion? We also know that the final arrangement and canonization of the *Rgveda* as we know it took place considerably later than the creation of the hymns.⁹ And we know that at an early stage the transmitters of the texts had problems with the meaning of ancient and/or dialectal expressions and added commentaries and other tools for the interpretation of the *Rgveda*. Under such circumstances, can we assume any “system” to be present?¹⁰ And if we do perceive one after much study, does this perceived system have any status beyond our own perception and reconstruction?¹¹

9 Cf. OLDENBERG, 1888:370, HILLEBRANDT, 1889:405f, GONDA, 1975:14, BRONKHORST, 1989, and WITZEL, 1997. The *Rgveda* consists of collections which have a character and status, and presumably a history, of their own. Cf. Atharvaveda Paippalāda 8.15.6 and the enumeration in Śāṅkhāyana-Grhyasūtra 4.10.3 (to which A. LUBOTSKY drew attention in a study of AVP 8.15, paper presented at the 29th Deutsche Orientalistentag, Halle, 20 Sept. 2004).

10 Cf. PINAULT, 2000:614: “Il faudrait peut-être tracer une discrimination entre des notions fondamentales sur le monde, partagées par toutes les familles de poètes, et les marges à partir desquelles pouvaient se développer des cosmogonies concurrentes, et parfois incompatibles. ... Il faut éviter aussi l’excès de système.” JAMISON, 2000:389: “I am not at all convinced that the RV presents us with anything so tidy and systematic or that we should expect such a geographically and temporally diverse text ... to do so.” That the *Rgvedic* poets themselves were aware of different cosmologies is clear from a verse such as 1.164.12 where the view that the sun is in the upper half of heaven is juxtaposed to the view that it is in the lower half.

11 Oberlies’ discussions and presentations suggest and presuppose the religious *system* as a homogeneous structure, and, starting with his title for both volumes, Oberlies also suggests a unitary *religion* of the *Rgveda*. Nevertheless he points out, quite late and in the form of a footnote (Rel. I:162, footnote 84), that one should in fact speak of a plurality of *Rgvedic* family religions and family rituals. A synchronic plurality of *religions* within the *Rgvedic* religious system figures also in the chapter “Gesellschaft(sordnung) und religiöses System” (Rel. I:333–362). Here Oberlies distinguishes three “religions” which correspond to ways of living and of social order: (1) the Indra-Maruts religion corresponding to the phase of moving and conquering new

2.1 In his observations on the R̄gvedic divinities, Oberlies presents the divine figures of the two Aśvins as “Zwischen/Mittelwesen,” as beings of the intermediate sphere or phase (section 1.6.2.2 in Rel. I:178–183). Oberlies¹²: “Whenever matters of an ‘In-Between’ are concerned – birth, marriage, initiation, calamity – the Vedic believer calls the Aśvins to his aid.” They operate in between different domains: between being and non-being (help in fertility), between the state before birth and coming to life (function: help in birth, initiation), between old age and (renewed) youth, life and death, non-marriage and marriage, and between darkness and light. In the R̄gvedic references to the Aśvins, Oberlies sees the reflection of two Indo-European (*indo-germanische*) myths: (a) the myth of the twin gods trying to get back their sister, dawn, after she had been taken away; and (b) the myth of the twin gods getting the daughter of the sun as their bride. The Aśvins are in between the gods and the Asuras: they are the potentially new third generation that tries to acquire power from the second generation, Indra and the gods, who ousted the Asuras.¹³

2.2 With regard to the Soma-sacrifice which is central in the Indra-cult, the Aśvins are at first excluded from a share of the inebriating Soma juice, next they get a place in the Soma ritual and a share of the juice, after having helped an old seer, Cyavana, by making him young.¹⁴ Oberlies remarks that

land; (2) the Varuṇa-Ādityas religion corresponding to the phase of being settled; (3) the Agni-religion which is the “continuum of vedic religiosity.” The view developed here by Oberlies is important, but it does not go well with the overarching dominance of Soma in the two volumes. If the view of the three religions (two alternating subsystems and a third one that is the continuum) is taken seriously, the discussion of “the religion of the R̄gveda” would require a quite different set-up of the work. Oberlies accepts there was a momentous transformation after the R̄gvedic period (cf. the “Umbruch” mentioned on p. 361), but he does not take into account that transformations may have taken place within the R̄gvedic period; nor does he take into account the possibility of contradictions and inner conflicts within the system (cf. HEESTERMAN, 1985, who, however, does not focus on the R̄gveda).

12 Rel. I:179: “Immer wenn Belange eines »Dazwischen« betroffen sind – Geburt, Heirat, Initiation, Notlagen –, ruft der vedische Gläubige die Aśvin zu Hilfe.” On the Aśvins cf. ZELLER, 1990, OBERLIES, 1992 and 1993.

13 Rel. I:181: “Zwischen den Asuras, den vormals herrschenden Göttern, stehen sie als potentiell neue Machthaber, als die 3. Generation, die zur Macht strebt ...”

14 The myth that explains the relation between Pravargya and Agniṣṭoma also provides an alternative explanation why the Aśvins get a late drink in the Soma sacrifice (cf.

some have taken this story as a reason to take the Aśvins as originally human beings who accomplished remarkable acts of curing and rejuvenation, and who got subsequently deified. Oberlies rejects such a (euhemeristic) explanation and proposes various causes: (1) Since the Aśvins are the coming ruling generation of divine beings, they should not yet participate in the Soma. They only get a share of the third pressing (of remaining plant material) or of the preliminary pressing on the morning before the *Atirātra*. According to Oberlies,¹⁵ “*that is why* the Aśvins are those who come late to the Soma, not, as now and then stated, because they were previously humans.” (2) Just as other twins in Indo-European mythology, the Aśvins have a close relation to bees and honey. Also in the *Rgveda* it is clear that honey is their proper drink. If they have a share of the Soma instead of honey this requires an explanation which is provided by the construct of “coming too late.” (3) The Aśvins are closely connected with the *initiand*, who comes to drink the Soma for the first time. As such they should definitely come later to receive the Soma, after the “established” Soma-drinkers.

In the first and third explanations, characteristics of the Aśvins are explained by their place in the (postulated) synchronic *Rgvedic* religious system. The second explanation justifies “coming too late” as a means to link a more original offering of honey to the Aśvins in the distant past to the offering of Soma in the Soma-sacrifice of the (postulated) synchronic *Rgvedic* religious system.

2.3 It may seem elegant and seductively attractive to assume a synchronic system of *Rgvedic* religion. But if we know that significant transformations took place, even if details of these transformations and the attribution of sections within the *Rgveda* to different stages of the transformations remain subject of discussion, this approach becomes problematic. Witzel is somehow aware of the serious problems of conveniently assuming that there was a system of *Rgvedic* religion. The system contains contradictions, caused by influences external to the system:

Internal pressures include those of changes in habitat, economy and society, such as the constant upward influence or upscale movement of sections of the lower classes;

Houben, 1991). There is no need to take the mentioning of the Aśvins’ cup (*gráha*) with WITZEL 1972:XIX n. 28, as a sign of the displacement of the story.

15 Rel. I:182: “Und *deshalb* sind die Aśvin die zum Soma ‘Zu-Spät-Gekommenen’, nicht etwa, wie öfters behauptet, weil sie ehemals Menschen waren.”

they also include *some* system-immanent, built in internal contradictions of a given *weltanschauung* (HEESTERMAN, 1985), and the gradual realization, by whatever processes or (vested) interests, of such contradictions. (WITZEL, 2004:582)

He also observes that:

It is important to realize that local intellectuals, thinkers, priests and philosophers constantly discover certain contradictions (which may not bother most people most of the time) and seek for a solution, in other words, try to establish a new system. This often involves thinking 'outside the box' ...

Frequently, contradictions are resolved by syncretistic amalgamation of various competing deities, or by positing 'higher' levels of truth or insight ...

External influences can obviously be due to trade, immigration or invasion of outside peoples, or by the movement of the bearers of the religion in question into a new area of settlement and subsequent developments of amalgamation, syncretism and priestly justification conditioned by the new surroundings. (WITZEL, 2004:582–583)

Nevertheless, he asserts his belief that there really is such a system out there waiting to be discovered:

Because of the fragmented and sketchy nature of our information, what is generally missing in modern interpretation is a view of the Vedic religion as a *system* that includes mythology, ritual, customs and beliefs which permeate the life of a Vedic Indian ... Other religions, whether those of the great early civilizations or of modern tribal communities, are built on such *inherent* conceptual systems (and rituals). It would be very surprising if only the *Rgveda* would prove to be an exception from this general trend ... Still, both due to increasing specialization and the fragmentary nature of our materials, it is not unusual to find statements indicating that there was no major overarching *Rgvedic* world view yet. (WITZEL, 2004:581)

With all of Witzel's allowances for unsystematicity within the system, one wonders where the system would then be located, where it would have its stability. Witzel, and implicitly also Oberlies, imply the validity of an "orthodox" system but in the Vedic time who was there to be interested in orthodoxy? Could any sort of orthodoxy be anywhere located in a society where orality is largely dominant? And how can we claim to describe it? Could it be that almost any description will do, and that whatever does not fit our perceived system can be attributed to outside-influences, to immanent contradictions, etc. It is true that scholars have been trying to reconstruct

inherent conceptual systems also for modern tribal communities.¹⁶ But the status and validity of such systems have been questioned, and it has been observed that such tribal communities are often more interested in orthopraxy rather than any sort of orthodoxy reconstructed by scholars.¹⁷ Similarly, it has been observed that in Vedic religion and in many forms of later Indian Hinduism, orthopraxy is much more important than orthodoxy.¹⁸ Oberlies seems less aware than Witzel of the limitations of his acceptance of a “system” of Vedic religion, but the same considerations would apply to his approach.

2.4 Oberlies does point to a program for his discussion of the system of Rgvedic religion. He posits that the Rgvedic religion is a classical case of *polytheism*, that is, according to the definition of Gladigow which he cites,¹⁹ “a form of religion in which one conceives an activity of a plurality of gods that are represented as personal.” From the examples cited it is clear that Gladigow’s discussion of polytheism (1983) is primarily informed by ancient Greek polytheism, for which elaborate *written* sources were available from antiquity onwards to the Hellenistic period.²⁰ The term polytheism he attributes to the Hellenized Jew Philo of Alexandria, first half of the first century

16 We may mention the influential studies by C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1964–1971.

17 Cf. D. TOOKER’s observation (1992:815) on the basis of her research among the Akha of north Thailand and neighboring areas: “From the Akha evidence, it is clear that we need to get away from the idea that people in so-called ‘primitive’ or ‘traditional’ societies follow a single orthodoxy or do not have different points of view. From previous examples, we can see that the Akha were not following unquestioned orthodox doctrines, precisely because, for them, orthodox doctrines did not matter. What mattered was correct practice. For example, so far as I know, no family has been excluded or exiled from an Akha village because of heretical statements, that is, because of their ‘beliefs’. However, there were exclusions because people did not do záÑ, as we have seen above ...”

18 Cf. STAAL, 1961:11–17 and 1989:389; FLOOD, 1976:12: “Behaviour, expressing Hindu values and power structures, takes precedence over belief, orthopraxy over orthodoxy.”

19 GLADIGOW, 1983: “Als Polytheismus sei eine Religionsform bezeichnet, in der ein Handeln einer Mehrzahl persönlich vorgestellter Götter konzipiert ist.” GLADIGOW, 1998, which Oberlies could not use for his Rel. I, is a revised and elaborated version of Gladigow 1983. Other publications of Gladigow on polytheism include Gladigow 1995.

20 GLADIGOW, 1998:327f. draws attention to a very late European formulation of a polytheistic world view inspired by Plato and Zarathustra, namely the *Nomon Syngraphe* or *Book of Laws* by Gemistos Plethon who died in the middle of the 15th century, just before the collapse of the Byzantine Empire.

C.E., who employs it to refer polemically to the non-Jewish religions of antiquity. The constitutive elements posited by GLADIGOW, 1983 are: (1) gods as subjects, (2) gods as active subjects, (3) formation of the pantheon. What is of central interest to him is the internal structure of the pantheon and the way this structure is constituted, for instance by a “war of gods”. He rejects as outdated a simple listing of gods as description of a polytheism because the structure of relationships between the gods is of crucial importance.

Whatever the great value of Gladigow's approach to polytheism, we see that something very important is entirely missing: ritual or cult. If we take other articles of Gladigow into account, we see that ritual or cult is not entirely missing, but still it is basically subordinate to the doctrinal aspects of the polytheistic religion. This bias can be understood as deriving from the origin and history of the concept of polytheism as a polemic category of monotheistic religions, Jewish religion and Christianity, of which especially the latter has greatly emphasized doctrine over ritual. Perhaps also the dominance of structuralistic approaches in religious studies and the humanities at the time Gladigow developed his concept were favourable for a neglect of ritual and cult. With regard to Vedic religion, however, neglecting these would be a great injustice to the material; and also Gladigow in practice has to take ritual into account, as in his discussion of ancient Roman religion (GLADIGOW, 1992). Oberlies, in any case, after citing Gladigow's definition of polytheism, enumerates as its constitutive elements (Rel I:168) (a) representations of gods, (b) gods, (c) cult, rituals and rites, (d) myth. In accordance with this, the subsequent sections in Rel. I²¹ deal with representations of gods (section 1.6.1), the gods of the Rgvedic pantheon (1.6.2, with subsections 1.6.2.1–22), cults, complexes of rites and festivals (1.6.3, with subsections 1.6.3.1–10), myth (1.6.4), and finally, though not announced in the enumeration of constitutive elements, the Vedic ritual calendar (1.6.5). This completes the part “Soma and the Rgvedic religion” (1.1–6). Next, the structure of the Vedic religious system is discussed as parallel with the order of society in 2.1–9. As in Gladigow's approach, cosmogony is of importance for the revelation of the structure of the Rgvedic religion. In paragraphs that continue the numbering of the previous section this is discussed in 2.10–14 which receives the heading Cosmogony. After this elaboration of the program implied in Gladigow's discussion of polytheism, the book contains a

21 A few sections precede in which the volume is introduced, and some problems regarding the Soma as hallucinogen drink and as god are discussed.

part on “Soma, power and legitimization of rule” (3.1–3.14), “the Soma inebriation and its interpretation” (4.1–4.8), and the “form and function of the Soma-hymns” (5.1–5.7). The last part contains about one and a half page on the procedure of the Soma ritual, after the earlier brief discussion in the section on the Soma-ritual (Rel. I:279–285). It is clear from this overview of the contents that Oberlies, following Gladigow, does not entirely neglect but still gives a very subordinate place to ritual, while strongly focusing on the conceptual side of a (reconstructed) Vedic religion. The system which he mentions in the subtitle of Rel. I concerns this conceptual side, ritual plays an entirely subsidiary role.

2.5 If we apply our scepticism towards Oberlies’ “religious system” to his dealing with the Aśvins, we have to ask whether there is a sufficiently systematically stable Rgvedic system of divine figures that would allow us to give them the systematic place given to them by Oberlies, and next to use this as explanation for certain characteristics of the Aśvins. On paper, Oberlies’ scheme looks attractive. But it is unlikely that the Vedic Indians put systems of the divinities figuring in their rituals on paper. Exceptions to Oberlies’ nice scheme are abundant if one confronts it with statements in the Rgvedic hymns. Already BERGAINNE, 1883a:435, 494f., pointed out the overlap of the Aśvins with other gods: Indra and Agni share characteristics and functions (e.g., in healing) held to be crucial to the Aśvins. Elsewhere (Houben, 2000a, 2000b) I demonstrated that during the Rgvedic period itself a significant transformation took place in a ritual closely connected with the Aśvins. In one of the family maṇḍalas, namely in maṇḍala five, the book of the Atris, we see references to an old form of the Gharma ritual. References to an elaborate ritual that corresponds to the Pravargya as we know it from Yajurvedic and other post-Rgvedic sources are found in parts of the Rgveda about which we have independent indications that they were later. Oberlies regards the preparation of the clay vessel as a post-Rgvedic innovation: the RV would have known (only) the metal vessel (Rel. I:295). However, as I pointed out in 1991:30, “there seems to be a rather clear reference to the preparation of the clay vessel by the Adhvaryu in one Rgvedic verse: verse 43 of RV 1.164.” The proposed solution to the enigma of 1.164.43²² suits a

22 The crucial point is that *śakamáyam* does not refer to an out-of-the-blue “cow-dung” as suggested by Sāyaṇa and accepted by modern interpreters as starting point for their speculations. In the ritual (*adhiyajñam*) interpretation of the verse it is rather the *horse*

much larger pattern of solutions of riddles in RV 1.164 which I discussed in 2000b. In this pattern of solutions, also 1.164.4 implies a reference to a clay pot.²³ Another problem consists in Oberlies' dealing with the Gharma-ritual that would be the initiation-festival of Rgvedic tribes, a precursor of the Upanayana ceremony of the classical Vedic period, and genetically connected with the sacred thread employed in Zoroastrism (Rel. I:297). As I pointed out in my 2000b article on RV 1.164 and the Pravargya, and as I discuss more elaborately in a forthcoming article, the Pravargya and the observance associated with the study of its mantras (called *Avāntaradīksā* in classical sources) do not presuppose someone's first introduction to the Veda study. Rather, they pertain to advanced initiations of Veda students who have already gone through the study of their main texts. The findings regarding the evolution of the Rgvedic Gharma/Pravargya can be supplemented with the observation that the ritual worship of the Aśvins as we find it reflected in the older parts, especially maṇḍala five, is not known from any post-Rgvedic source.²⁴ With these changes in rituals associated with the Aśvins and the

dung that is used for fumigating the Pravargya vessel before it is used in the heating ritual.

23 RV 1.164.4: *kó dadarśa prathamān jāyamānam asthanvántam yád anasthā bibharti / bhúmyā ásur ásrg átmā kvà svit kó vidváṁsam úpa gāt práṣṭum etát //*
 Oberlies (Rel. I:547) identifies *asthanvánt* 'the one having bones' directly as Agni (fire), but in the ritualistic (*adhiyajñam*) interpretation it is rather the clay pot to be heated in the Pravargya, which will become, when filled and anointed with ghee it is burning, a real Agni possessing bones.

24 As I explain in detail in a forthcoming article on Atri and the Aśvins, the hymn RV 5.78 consists of a few layers, each corresponding to the use of the verses in a new oppressing situation (cf. now, somewhat differently, also PIRART, 2001:321). The hymn seems to be peculiarly mixed, but a pattern emerges that is typical of various Aśvin-hymns: a number of other cases of rescue or helping are referred to, with a view to inspire the Aśvins to help again in a new, problematic situation. The Atri-story is apparently referred to in 5.78.4 in order to inspire the Aśvins to give help to Saptavadhri who is in a similar, but not entirely identical troublesome situation. These two rescues, again, are referred to in a new situation (at which Soma is pressed) in order to inspire the Aśvins to give help to the boy about to be born, who is in a similar, but by no means identical troublesome situation.

This hymn and several other hymns suggest an ancient practice in which the Aśvins receive an offer and are invoked for help, with verses that commemorate earlier good deeds of the Aśvins. This ancient practice is still reflected in the epic story of Upamanyu (Mahābhārata 1.3.50f. and 60–70) but, as far as I know, it is not known in classical Vedic ritual (Śrauta, Gṛhya, Dharma) or in current practice.

evolution of hymns intended for these rituals there is no basis to believe that their conceptual side would not have significantly transformed or changed over time. Since writing was absent or of minor importance, neither any theology nor any mythology of the Aśvins was anywhere stabilized in any structure²⁵ except in the structure of the rituals of the Aśvin cult – and these rituals changed and evolved. Although we demonstrated it only with regard to a single element, this undermines the postulation of a well-ordered religious system covering the entire R̄gvedic culture in all its chronological and geographic depth and breadth.

3.1 A second, and more central example for Oberlies' approach is his dealing with the Soma – plant, juice and god – that is the subject of an extensive ritual to which a major part of the R̄V is devoted. As one could expect in the light of Oberlies' interest in “the system” of R̄gvedic religion, he is not very much interested in one aspect of the Soma-problem: the botanical identity of the plant or plants used in the most important ritual of the R̄gveda²⁶ “Not the substance ‘Soma’ should interest us, but the interpretation of the Soma-inebriation on the part of the (R̄g-)vedic poets.” In order to understand Oberlies' position, we have to take into account some reviews and articles by him on the Soma.

3.2 In his 1995 review of Kashikar 1990, Thomas Oberlies makes some important remarks, apart from giving additional bibliographic references. Oberlies accepts with Kashikar that the Brāhmaṇas and Śrautasūtras are aware of *some* plant being the real Soma. However, there is insufficient evidence for a positive identification. Referring to Brough 1971, Kashikar had rejected Wasson's identification of Soma as the fly-agaric, a mushroom. Kashikar then simply took the three main remaining plants that have been

25 GOODY, 1987 contains much important and relevant material, for instance pp. 297ff. on the absence of a “univocal version” of the Kunmanggur myth among Australian aborigines not used to writing. However, his argument about the Veda as an originally written text is to be rejected. On orality in the early Indian tradition see now also SCHARFE 2002:8ff. and for the transition from orality to literacy in Sāṃkhya cf. Houben, 2001.

26 Rel. I:166: “Nicht die Substanz »Soma« hat uns zu interessieren, sondern die *Interpretation des Somarausches seitens der (rg)vedischen Dichter.*” The relative insignificance of the botanical identity of the Soma is also emphasized on p. 444 at the beginning of section 3.14, “Soma – nur eine Pflanze?”

suggested by scholars as being the Soma, and by exclusion of the first two, *Sarcostemma brevistigma* and *Periploca aphylla*, he arrives at the conclusion that it must have been Ephedra. Even when the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Śrautasūtras* seem to suggest awareness of *some* plant as the unequivocally real Soma, Oberlies doubts whether it can be assumed that this was also the plant used in the *R̥gveda*. This would only apply if there were an uninterrupted continuity between *R̥gveda* and *Yajurvedic* texts. Oberlies mentions three problems with the identification of Soma with Ephedra:

- (1) The reddish-yellow (rot-gelb) colour is lacking (only the berries of Ephedra are red but the berries are not mentioned in the texts).
- (2) Juice pressed from Soma does not have a milky character, whereas the *R̥gveda* speaks of “milking the (Soma-)stalks” and of Soma as the cow’s first milk after calving (*pīyūṣa* ‘beestings’).
- (3) Oberlies’ most fundamental problem with the Ephedra-identification is that Ephedra does not have the required hallucinogenic effect that is attested in the *R̥gvedic* hymns.

As in Rel. I:166, Oberlies concludes his discussion in the 1995 review of Kashikar with the observation that it is the interpretation of the Soma-intoxication on the part of the Vedic poets in the context of their referential frame which should receive our interest and attention, rather than to lay excessive emphasis on the nature of the substance. Similarly, Tatjana ELIZARENKOVA, 1996, has emphasized the importance of the style and structure of *R̥gvedic* texts behind which there are insufficient traces of the direct impact of a psychoactive substance to make identification possible. No doubt, the importance of the cultural “construction” of textual representations of personal, including mystical, experience should not be underestimated. And what applies to the study of mystical experience will apply equally to a large domain of experiences resulting from psychoactive substances. After earlier generations of authors with what may be called various “essentialist” and “perennialist” approaches to mystic experience (William James, Rudolph Otto, Mircea Eliade, Aldous Huxley), a constructivist paradigm found wide acceptance in academic scholarship in the latter half of the twentieth century (cf. the committed and persistent propagation of this paradigm in a series of collective volumes on mysticism directed by Steven T. Katz, KATZ 1978–2000).

3.3 In spite of his affinity with a constructivist approach when he argues for studying the Vedic poet first of all in his religious context, from the

above mentioned third, most fundamental (“*wesentlichste*”) problem, it is clear that he presupposes that indications for hallucinations in the *Rgveda* point directly to the use of a substance having hallucinogenic effects. However, convincing indications for hallucinations, apart from the quite explicit *Rgveda* 10.119, are rare, and even if these should not be explained away, they are to be weighed against other considerations which point to an absence of hallucination, but rather to a powerful stimulant suitable to divine and human warriors who cannot afford to perceive things that have no basis in objective reality.

3.4 The second point – regarding Soma as the cow’s first milk after calving (*pīyūṣa* ‘beestings’) – is to be studied against the background of *Rgvedic* poetic usage, where among other things thoughts can be obtained from an udder (5.44.13), or where an inspired poem can be compared with a dairy cow (3.57.1), or where there is no problem in speaking of the “udder of the father” (3.1.9). To satisfy the literalists who insist that, even with the extensive evidence that “milking” is a central and flexible metaphor for “deriving something precious from”, *pīyūṣa* ‘beestings’ (in medical terminology: ‘colostrum’) must absolutely be taken as having not only relational but also physical characteristics of milk, it can be pointed out that the long sessions of beating the Soma-plant with the stampers or press-stones can be expected to give a pulpy-watery mixture in a first pressing which may have looked like the creamy fluid with special nutritious and protective ingredients that a cow produces for a new born calf. Such pulpy-watery mixture is what I saw come forth from the pounding of the Soma-substitute called *Pūtīka* (probably *Sarcostemma brevistigma*) in Soma sacrifices in Maharashtra and New Delhi. Several ideas may hence underlie the use of the term *pīyūṣa* ‘beestings’: the first juice appearing from the pressing is “beestings” by virtue of its being the first fluid produced from the stalks; it is “beestings” by virtue of its pulpy-watery, hence somewhat cream-like, character; it is “beestings” on account of its nutritious and protective potency. Finally, those invoking the *Rgvedic* references to beestings as an argument against Ephedra seem to have overlooked that the cow’s first milk after calving is usually not white but may have all kinds of colours, from yellowish to greenish and purple, which does not constitute a contra-indication for its quality. This applies at least to the

cows common in Europe, as I understood from a well-informed relative.²⁷ The metaphoric flexibility of terms in the sphere of “milking” in any case prevents *pīyūṣa* from being an argument against the Ephedra candidate. As for the problem of the reddish-yellow colour attributed to Soma: in Oberlies’ brief statement, where he mixes up “reddish-yellow (rot-gelb)” and “red (rot)” or at least opaquely shifts from the one to the other, there is nothing that would invalidate Brough’s 1971 extensive discussion of the colour-term in his criticism of Wasson.

3.5 A problematic part in Oberlies’ argument lies in his attempt to disconnect the evidence of Brāhmaṇas and Śrautasūtras from that of the R̥gveda. Oberlies observes (1995:236) that Kashikar presupposes that the plant used as Soma according to the Brāhmaṇas and Śrautasūtras is identical with that of the R̥gveda. However, according to Oberlies this would apply only if there were an uninterrupted continuity from the R̥gveda to the Yajurveda with regard to beliefs, rituals and cults. Since this cannot be accepted (Oberlies asks rhetorically: who could seriously believe this, with exclamation mark), statements in the Brāhmaṇas and Śrautasūtras would prove little for the R̥gveda (with exclamation mark). A few paragraphs further (1995:237), he acknowledges that Kashikar’s conclusions provide new insights for the Brāhmaṇas. Here, the Soma may have been Ephedra. But, Oberlies adds, this was in all probability not the “original” (with exclamation mark).

3.6 In spite of all the exclamation marks, Oberlies’ line of reasoning is neither self-evident nor convincing. At first, he makes the *general statement* that we cannot assume there was an uninterrupted continuity from the R̥gveda to the Yajurveda with regard to beliefs, rituals and cults. On the next page, it is suddenly *most probable* that there is no continuity *in the specific case* of the knowledge of the Soma-plant. This is like observing first that one cannot be sure that traffic rules in Italy are the same as in France, and next that it is most probable that when the French drive on the right side of the road the Italians must drive left. It is well known that there are indeed important distinctions between the R̥gveda and the Yajurveda and subsequent

27 A Maharashtrian sweet dish made out of beestings is reported to have a light yellowish colour (Madhav Deshpande, Indology List, open discussion archive 11-02-2003, and, off-list, Vishal Agrawal 12-02-2003, in response to a question I asked on the Indology list – 11-02-2003 <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucgadkw/indology.html>).

sources, including distinctions with regard to the ritual. However, these distinctions appear only against the background of a massive flood of elementary and structural continuities, which in many cases extend even to proto-Indo-Iranian times. It is also well-known that ritual in particular has a tendency to be conservative, even when interpretations and belief systems change. In the beginning days of Indology, scholars like Roth have emphasized the independence of the *Rgveda* from the later ritual texts. Vedic hymns would be expressions of “natural” lyrics which had little to do with the detailed liturgical practice as found in later texts. Close studies of scholars have in the meantime shown that there are numerous continuities and that the large majority of *Rgvedic* hymns suit ritual contexts which are still part of the “classical” ritual system as found in the *Yajurvedic* texts (cf. GONDA 1975:83ff. and 1978). In addition, in several specific cases such as the animal sacrifice (BOSCH, 1985) and the *Pravargya* (Houben, 2000), the basic continuities and structural changes have been demonstrated in detail. In the case of the *Pravargya*, it has become clear that the largest transitions took place within the *Rgvedic* period, while post-*Rgvedic* sources continue with the ritual end-results of the *Rgvedic* developments. In the case of the *Soma*-ritual, pervading not only the ninth book but the entire *Rgveda*, a comprehensive study and reconstruction of its *Rgvedic* form is still a desideratum even if we have an important preliminary study in the form of Bergaigne’s “*Recherches sur l’histoire de la liturgie védique*” (1889; cf. also RENOU, 1962 and WITZEL, 1997:288ff.).

Theodore PROFERES, 2003, recently published a significant study of the development of the liturgy of the *Rgvedic* *Soma* sacrifice and its relation with the post-*Rgvedic* form of that liturgy in the *Śrautasūtras*.

3.7 Against the background of ritual continuities, Oberlies’ easy assumption that there must be discontinuity in the case of the plant that is central in the most dominant *Rgvedic* *Soma* ritual is unsound. In the light of what we know of ritual in general and Vedic ritual and culture in particular a much more reasonable starting point will be to assume that there is continuity unless there is an indication to the contrary. Such indications pointing to a rupture in the knowledge of a specific *Soma*-plant, as briefly indicated in Kashikar 1990, are not found in classical *Yajurvedic* texts which continue to refer the practicing Brahman to an identifiable real *Soma*-plant even if he is occasionally allowed to sacrifice with a substitute.

3.8 Does Oberlies' way of dealing with *R̄gvedic* ritual in the context of an "orthodox" religious system underlying the whole of the *R̄gveda* make sense in the light of his emphasis on the system of *R̄gvedic* religion? It does, since, as we have seen above, the Gladigowian approach followed by him strongly emphasizes the conceptual side of a religion over its cults and rituals. However, especially in the case of Vedic religion, in the absence of a significant use of written sources, the rituals were the most tangible structures available to the Vedic people. As such these rituals, and not a (reconstructed or postulated) conceptual scheme, should be our starting point in the reconstruction of Vedic culture and religion.

4.1 A third major example can be mentioned to illustrate the specific approach adopted by Oberlies. It concerns the "analysis of the composition of the Soma hymns of the *R̄gveda*" ("Kompositionsanalyse der Soma-Hymnen des *R̄gveda*"), which forms the subject of the entire second volume of *Die Religion des R̄gveda*, Rel. II. On the basis of its title one could expect a discussion of whatever we know of the structure of the individual hymns and of the Veda and their composition. Research of predecessors, colleagues (e.g., Oldenberg, Renou, Schlerath) and himself was summarized in the chapter "The Structure of the *R̄gvedic* Poems" in Gonda's *Vedic Literature* (1975:173–210). Gonda dealt with "stanzas and metres," "structures of the sūktas," "introductory and final stanzas," "groupings of stanzas," "composite' hymns," "similarities and repetitions," "monologues, dialogues, the ākhyāna theory." In stead of a critical discussion of the work already done on this topic and perhaps some new contributions by Oberlies, we find quite something else in Rel. II. The first part of Rel. II is called the "composition elements of the Soma hymns." It contains, in sections 6.1–14, only an enumeration of the themes of the Soma hymns. These include technical details of the pressing, purification and mixing of the Soma; requests to the Soma that concern the purification; other requests; the place where the Soma grows, place of origin (the mountain, heaven, the heavenly sea, the heavenly Soma-well); Soma as fluid – water, rain, seed, milk, ghee; Soma and fertility, Soma and barley; comparisons in the Soma-maṇḍala; identifications in the Soma-maṇḍala – the bull Soma, young women = fingers, cow = milk for mixing; epithets and names; Soma as drink for the gods; myths of the Soma-maṇḍala; Soma and the song/poem; social and economic data. A section on Indo-Iranian phraseology is added (6.14). After this enumeration, Oberlies tries to find how these compositional elements are conceptually ordered. But

he is hardly interested in how the elements occur within the individual Soma hymn.²⁸ The next part is devoted to “‘Space’ and ‘Time’ as ordering principles of the compositional elements.” It consists of sections 7.1–13, devoted especially to the sacrificial area where the Soma is pressed, including the Soma press, and the projection of the world on the Soma press. The next part is devoted to one theme which Oberlies has observed throughout the ninth book, though spread over numerous dispersed references: the theme of “king Soma’s war expedition” (which he also calls *Vājasāti I*). Oberlies elaborates, in sections 8.1–12, the parallelism of the victorious and liberal king and Soma in great detail. The last part is devoted to a related theme and is called “*Vājasāti II*: the victorious run of the race horse and of the chariot Soma.” In sections 9.1–6 Oberlies deals here with the comparisons and identifications of Soma not with the victorious king but with the victorious horse or the chariot. This ends the second volume (except for the Indices and *Nachträge*). While it is rich in important observations, those familiar with the studies of Gonda, Renou and Schlerath are still left wondering when the analysis of the composition of the Soma hymns will start.

4.2 Again we see here Oberlies’ theoretical and methodological starting points at work, with which not all Indologists are necessarily familiar, and which they need not all accept for themselves. Oberlies’ analysis is entirely in line with the global analysis of myth within the structuralistic approach of which Lévi-Strauss was a major exponent, although Oberlies does not seem to have been directly influenced by Lévi-Strauss’ analyses of myths (in any case, no work of his is referred to in the bibliography).²⁹

28 In 7.1 Oberlies emphasizes and illustrates with an example (translation of RV 9.78) that it may seem that the Soma-hymns of the ninth book are just arbitrary sequences of the enumerated compositional elements, but that they are nevertheless ordered according to the spatial and temporal dimension. The rest of sections 7.1–9.6 is next devoted to principles that order the compositional elements in the hymns – but we do not find a discussion of how individual hymns are constructed in the sense of the studies of hymn composition by the Vedists mentioned above.

29 In view of the great importance of structuralism in the human sciences including religious studies (at least in the formative years of the 70’s) it may be assumed that Oberlies was inspired to adopt a structuralist path under the direct influence of some other scholar. The work of Gladigow, and that of W. Burkert, another author often respectfully referred to by Oberlies, have “structuralistic” features. The works on Indo-european and Vedic myth of Dumézil and of Kuiper can equally be regarded as representatives of “structuralist” approaches.

4.3 An important topic within Oberlies' "(structuralist) analysis of the composition" of Soma hymns concerns the pressing equipment to press the Soma. Oberlies devotes three sections directly to the pressing equipment. These three sections, called *Preßapparatur* (I), (II) and (III), are interrupted with sections devoted to related issues. In 7.5 (p. 134ff.), "Preßapparatur (I)," Oberlies starts with the observation that the Zoroastrian ritual apparently preserves a *Sáuma-ritual of the Indo-Iranian time more faithfully than the elaborate Soma-ritual of the *Rgveda*. The plant Soma is collected in the mountain by women and next pressed by priests. The juice is transferred to a special container, from which it flows to another through a sieve. In the last vessel it is mixed with milk. Since the pressing equipment is the main subject of these sections it is to be specially noted that in the context of the pressing by the priests Oberlies speaks of a "(silver) winepress" ("(silbernen) Kelter") referring to Y 10.2 and 10.17. Y 10.2, however, refers to the *fratarem* and the *uparem havanem*, which are generally regarded as the lower and upper part of the haoma press, that is, the mortar and pestle (cf. OLIPHANT, 1920:226). Oberlies confusingly adds in note 43 that "the younger Avesta deviatingly (abweichend) speaks of a stone and a metal mortar (or something similar)." Does the deviation refer to the mortar-and-pestle character of the press which Oberlies does not want? Comparing the passages to which he refers one sees that "deviatingly" can only refer to the specification "stone" or "metal" (instead of silver) which the passage involved, Y 24.20, allows to be used for the pressing of Soma. There is no indication that the use of mortar and pestle referred to in Y 24.20 would be an innovation in the younger Avesta. In the light of the younger texts, archeological findings and later practice, and in view of the tendency of ritual to continuity, there is no reason to assume for the older Avesta another pressing installation than the mortar and pestle.³⁰

Then Oberlies turns to the *Rgveda*. He starts with the basic Soma-ritual known in classical times, the *Agniṣṭoma*, and then sees how far it suits the *Rgveda*. The plant stalks are made to swell, after which they are pressed in the pressing equipment. Referring to S.G. Oliphant's 1920 study of the Soma and Haoma press, he observes that two types of pressing equipment are distinguished, one in which the Soma is pressed by a lower and an upper stone, and another in which there are several stones. He cites Oliphant's conclusion

30 The archeological findings of mortars and pestles are mentioned by BOYCE, 1975:168, n 142. For a documentation of the current Haoma offering see BOYD & KOTWAL, 1991.

that in the Vedas we have two types of press, and only two, one the mortar and the pestle, and possibly derivative forms of the same, and the other a press of the type described by Āpastamba [i.e., ĀpŚS 12.2.15–16, J.H.], with possible variations also; and that in the Vedas *grāvan* regularly refers to the former and *ádri* to the latter. (1920:248)

Without further explanation Oberlies attributes in the immediately following sentences the opposite view to Oliphant. Oliphant, according to Oberlies, drew the attention – although, he adds, not *expressis verbis* – to an important point, namely, that there is *no* distinction in the Ṛgveda between a “mortar pressing” and a “simple pressing with the stone press.” Is this inverted reading of Oliphant serious or ironical? The general reader is left in the dark, and has no choice but to study Oliphant’s valuable study himself. The non-distinction of “mortar pressing” and “stone pressing” is in any case Oberlies’ unargued view, which neglects Oliphant’s detailed philological argument. A honest summary of Oliphant’s conclusions regarding the Haoma and Soma press, whether one agrees with them or not, would be as follows:

- (a) In the Avesta *havana* and *hāvana* refer to the mortar and pestle used for pressing Haoma. No alternative pressing equipment is mentioned.
- (b) The ṚV is familiar with two types of Soma press: one can be called the Āpastamba type (with five pressing stones), and the other is the *ulūkhala* or mortar-and-pestle type.
- (c) Normally, *ádri* is used for the first (Āpastamba type), *grāvan* in connection with the second (mortar type); however, in a small number of cases, probably on account of poetic reasons, *ádri* is apparently used for a mortar type press, and *grāvan* in connection with an Āpastamba type of press; this applies to the relatively late poem ṚV 10.94.
- (d) In later Vedic literature (after the Ṛg- and the Atharvaveda), *grāvan* is the term for the pressing stones of the Āpastamba type of press.

4.4 After dispensing with Oliphant’s argument by inverting its purport, Oberlies feels there is still one Ṛgvedic hymn in the way of a homogeneous account of the pressing equipments. This is ṚV 1.28 to which section 7.5.1 is devoted.

The first verse of ṚV 1.28 is as follows:

1. *yátra grāvā pṛthubudhna ūrdhvó bhávati sótave /*
ulúkhalaśutānām ávéd v indra jalgulah //

This may be translated as: “When the *grāvan* with broad base is elevated for the pressing (of soma), you will certainly, o Indra, completely swallow down the (soma-juices) pressed in the mortar.”

There are some difficulties with the interpretation of *grāvan*. According to Oliphant, the elevated *grāvan* with broad base is a collective singular like the Avestan *havana* and refers to the mortar and pestle. Geldner (ad RV 1.28.1) thinks that the wooden mortar and pestle are here addressed as pressing stone. According to HILLEBRANDT (1927:414) it is the mortar that is referred to as *grāvan* with broad base. But there is little doubt about *ulūkhala* in *ulūkhalaśuta* in the last pāda, which recurs in the subsequent verses 1.28.2–4: in later Sanskrit *ulūkhala* unequivocally means “mortar” which seems also to be its meaning here, as accepted, for instance, by Geldner but also Oliphant. Oberlies takes exception and interprets it as “stone surface” (“Steinplatte”). Oberlies reproaches previous translators and students of the hymn to have all taken the hymn as referring to a Soma pressing with mortar and pestle, but he excludes, in note 71, Oliphant.³¹ On the next page (Rel. II:140 note 75), however, he notes that also Oliphant takes *ulūkhala* as the mortar (and the elliptic dual *ulūkhala* as mortar and pestle), so that it remains finally unclear to what the previous exclusion relates.

Oberlies discusses one more word in this hymn, *adhiśavanyā*. It occurs in verse two:

2. *yátra dvāv iva jaghánādhiśavanyā kṛtā /*
ulūkhalaśutānām ávéd v indra jalgulah //

There are several problems with the direct and metaphorical interpretation of terms, but one might translate as follows: “Where the two press-supporting (boards) are arranged like the female private parts (*jaghánā* as labia), you will certainly, o Indra, completely swallow down the [soma-juices] pressed in the mortar.”

On p. 138 Oberlies first argues that etymologically the *adhiśavane phalake* of the classical Soma ritual should refer not to “pressing boards” for extracting the Soma juice, but to boards placed under the Soma press, on top of which the pressing takes place (*adhiśavana-*, “etwas, auf dem gepreßt wird”). Having thus been close to a correct understanding of the place and

31 Rel II:139 note 71: “Natürlich mit der Ausnahme von OLIPHANT, (1920), der das Lied auf den Seiten 228–231 seiner Studie behandelt.”

arrangement of the *adhiṣavane phalake* in the classical Soma ritual,³² he gets led astray on the following page by thinking that the boards should be placed next to the pressing board (“Preßbrett”) because the Śrautasūtras call them *pradhimukha* or *pradhiprakāra*, “with *pradhi* as mouth, in the manner of *pradhi*” and the *pradhi* refers to the side parts of a wheel that is placed next to a middle piece. For the classical Soma ritual this is entirely erroneous. The spatial misrepresentation aside, what is important for his own argument in this section is that he takes the *adhiṣavanyā* of RV 1.28.2 as referring to these very *adhiṣavane phalake* of the later classical Soma ritual.³³ The entire discussion of Oberlies in the excursus devoted, according to the title of this section, to RV 1.28, is thus used to emphasize a single message: the suitability of the classical Śrautasūtra descriptions of the Soma press for the procedure in the R̥gveda, including RV 1.28 that is generally accepted as referring to a deviant form of Soma pressing. By avoiding a systematic discussion and translation of all verses of this short hymn, he is able to entirely neglects some crucial differences with the classical procedure of Soma pressing: in RV 1.28 not the priests of the classical ritual but the wife is engaged in the act of pressing (verse 3); a cord is tied to the pestle in order to move it around (verse 4); the pressing occurs at home in the houses of the people (verse 5). These crucial structural differences point to a type of Soma pressing that is indeed significantly different from the classical ritual.

4.5 Having arrived at the (in details problematic, see above) view that “already the R̥gvedic Soma ritual” was familiar with the use of two boards that fixed the Soma pressing board, Oberlies devotes the very brief next section, 7.6, with the title Die Preßapparatur (II), to a picture taken from a book of V.M. Masson, 1959, on archeological finds in Margiana. Details of

32 That is, an understanding that suits the ritual descriptions as well as current practice as I could see at a few occasions in India. Cf. CALAND & HENRY, 1906:103 for a description. CALAND, 1924:219) imagined the press supporting boards to have a cut at the back side, but for this there is no supporting evidence. DHARMADHIKARI, 1989:43 gives a picture of two *adhiṣavanaphalake*, to which O. refers in his Letzte Nachträge of Band II (Rel. II:312). O. does not mention that the description given there does not suit his own, incorrect one on p. 138f. (Dharmadhikari is to be corrected too: not a black antelope’s skin but the hide of a red bull is to be spread on top of the press supporting boards.)

33 Referring to OLDBERG, 1908:460–461, Anm. 5, who suggests to follow Sāyaṇa’s explanation of *adhiṣavanyā* as *ubhe adhiṣavanaphalake*, Oberlies adds the consideration that the author used the word as an “excentric” equivalent of the *adhiṣavanaphalake*.

the find or of the discussion in the book from which the picture is taken are not given. It is then suggested that this picture would be similar to the Vedic “pressing board”: it would be a square stone, in the middle with a square depression, and on one of its broad sides provided with a nozzle-shaped discharge. The subsection 7.6.1 starts with the observation that book nine of the *R̄gveda* concentrates very much on the moment that the Soma passes through the sieve, and that the moments of the actual pressing and the preparation for it are largely neglected. It is observed that the “pressing surface” (*úpara*) is mentioned only twice, and only in book 10, while *upala-praksin* “moving the upper mill stone” (following an interpretation given by Thieme) is mentioned in 9.112 which is held to be an addition. The author thinks that the non-mention of the exact place and way of pressing requires an explanation, and, referring to studies by Schlerath, he finds it in the aversion to talk of the “killing” of the Soma.

4.6 Section 7.7 is the third one devoted to Die Preßapparatur. It is observed that the poets of book nine not only avoid to give information on the act of pressing and the preparation for it, but they are also unwilling to talk of the collection of the juice after the pressing. Incidentally, this undermines the validity of the thesis advanced by Oberlies in 7.6.1, namely that the poets do not speak of the act of pressing because it amounts to a killing. Collecting the pressed juice does not correspond to killing but is nevertheless equally avoided, as much as the topic of collecting the juice after the sieve and distributing it. If at all we can work with the type of moral considerations brought into play by Oberlies (and earlier by Schlerath), we have to formulate the thesis positively, namely that it is not the fear for an association with killing that turns away the attention, but the high valuation of the moment of purification and transformation of the juice that focuses the attention on a single, crucial moment in the ritual. Oberlies considers next the possible procedures for getting the pressed juice in the sieve. It is concluded that the cow hide must have had the function of collecting the juice, and that the cow hide is next lifted up to pour the juice into the sieve. There are then three stages in the purification of the Soma: (1) it is pressed out on a stone board; (2) the juice is poured into the sieve; (3) from there it flows into various kinds of vessels. This sequence of acts and the position of the press on the earth make it necessary that the Soma was put down and lifted up a few times in the procedure. This is the subject of section 7.7.1, which concludes with a scheme that makes the moments of putting down and raising of Soma paral-

lel with the coming down to the earth and the rising up to heaven of Soma (exact textplaces for the mythological events are not given). The following sections elaborate the parallelism which implies the projection of the world on the pressing equipment. The parallelisms are illustrated with a few more schemes in subsequent sections, of which the last one, on p. 159 (section 7.11), contains probably a rather confusing mistake (for which the *Nachträge* of Rel. II provides no help). The scheme is as follows:

	Himmel	Mischgefäß	
Abstieg	Zwischenraum	Seihe	Aufstieg
↓	Erde	Preßbrett	↓

That going from heaven to the intermediate space to the earth is a descent is clear. One would then expect an upward arrow instead of a downward arrow under Aufstieg or ascent. Taking the juice from the “pressing board” to the sieve would indeed imply an ascent according to Oberlies. However, going down from the sieve to the mixing vessel consists of a physical *descent*, and the mixing vessels were also associated with the earth. But the mixing vessels on the place of sacrifice are also said to correspond to heaven, to the place where the gods come to partake of the offerings (p. 159). So perhaps the arrow under Aufstieg should point in both directions? One is tempted to conclude that Oberlies’ parallelism does not really work, or that he was negligent precisely at the moment the reader expects decisive clarity. I for one think that Oberlies did lay his finger on a crucial point, but that it has been too hastily presented with a confusing error.

5.1 We thus see again that the – insufficiently reflected and discussed – theoretical and methodological starting points are of decisive influence on Oberlies’ work. Positing from the beginning that there is a religious system in the *Rgveda* taken as a whole, and a system that follows the plan for structured polytheisms proposed by Gladigow mainly on the basis of material from western Antiquity, gives Oberlies a strong bias towards conceptual schemes, away from ritual, and even away from the text and the language. A structuralist approach applied to the *Rgveda* as a whole directs the aim of one’s research to discovering patterns and establishing schemes. A singular fact that does not suit one’s scheme is disturbing – evidence in a single hymn pointing to a completely different type of Soma pressing, even if the *Rgvedic* exception suits perfectly in the wider field of Indo-Iranian ritual, is

disturbing and is best neglected. Oberlies' collects and discusses (often too hastily) important text places and cites a large number of secondary sources, but in several cases the reader will be much better off if he quickly puts Oberlies' stimulating but often too loose argumentations aside and turns directly to the texts and the secondary publications. Evidence that is crucial but problematic, like the majority of verses of *RV* 1.28, has been neglected, secondary literature has been misquoted or misrepresented (like Oliphant's study of the pressing stones). While the dangers and pitfalls of the specific structuralist approach adopted by Oberlies have led to several problematic passages in the two volumes, there are also strong points and directions where important contributions can be made to a difficult field of study. Oberlies' analysis of compositional elements and his reconstruction of a poetic space for the Soma hymns, according to the dimensions of physical position and time are likely to become enlightening and determinative for future scholarly interpretations of one of the darkest collection of texts. An even greater achievement is the crystallisation of the space-time movements in the ninth book in two reconstructed mythical proceedings, the one of King Soma and the one of Soma as horse or as chariot. The homogeneity of "the *Rgvedic religion*" posited by Oberlies is problematic from the outset for a religious and/or conceptual system of a people without script but attaching much value to ritual. Less worked out but perhaps more promising is Witzel's approach (forthc. [2004]) which is very similar to the one adopted by Oberlies but starts by accepting a synchronic and a diachronic axe within the *Rgvedic* period. But Witzel, like Oberlies, seems to be overly focused on the reconstruction of conceptual schemes, relegating ritual to a distant secondary place of low importance. Taking into account the forgetfulness of subsequent generations when they try to make sense and make pragmatic use of an inherited ritual and religious system in ever changing circumstances, one arrives at the image of a stratigraphy of layers which have continuity but also important discontinuities. In a recent article, Parpola presented a program for the study of *Rgvedic* religion and culture in which concepts, rituals and popular practice have a balanced place and in which subsequent "layers" are moreover connected with subsequent immigrants on the Indian subcontinent (PARPOLA, 2004).

5.2 Oberlies' work has already led to a number of critical reviews which gave important corrections and additions, and a reaction by Oberlies him-

self.³⁴ Both the criticisms and the reaction have paid relatively little attention to, and have still less critically considered, the peculiar theoretical and methodological starting points of Oberlies who wants to align the study of the *Rgveda* with the work of a specific school in religious studies. Nor was there much attention for the theoretical and methodological starting points that have become standard in Vedic studies and that were underlying the criticisms.³⁵ Oberlies' approach can be valuable if the Gladigowian "research program" is executed with more careful attention for texts and the arguments in secondary sources but also for its own inherent limits and possible strong points. Quite different approaches are possible, for instance one that does not focus on reconstructing schemes which were definitely never in the awareness of the Vedic people, but on ritual structures that have, next to the established texts, a "solidity" of their own, that were definitely of direct importance to the Vedic people; and that are thus the first media from which we can expect any "solid" help in the interpretation of the ancient *Rgvedic* texts.³⁶

5.3 In his response to critics, Oberlies has given up the claim that his *Religion des Rgveda* I and II have the character of a reference work ("Handbuch").³⁷ But the general title *Religion des Rgveda* still suggests a Handbuch-status. Also the subtitles of the two volumes would require reconsideration.

34 OBERLIES, 2001 is a response to BODEWITZ, 2000 and SCHLERATH, 2000. Cf. also PINAULT, 2000, JAMISON, 2000 and 2001, VERPOORTEN, 2002.

35 For a discussion of approaches in the study of the Vedas cf. GONDA, 1975:56–63, who characterized (p. 56) the Vedic researches of the 19th century and the early 20th century as "a struggle for the most adequate methods." Gonda's own theoretical presuppositions (cf. BODEWITZ, 1991) become visible in an article by Karel WERNER, 1982. In Gonda's work, Werner finds "echoes of [Rudolph] Otto, Jungian depth psychology and modern structuralism" (WERNER, 1982: 16). Apparently of importance to Gonda in view of his positive references are G. van der LEEUW, 1890–1950, and his phenomenology of religion.

36 Rel. I:327 Oberlies refers to what he calls the *myth-and-ritual*-Debatte, the discussion on the priority of myth over ritual or vice versa. On p. 328 he declares himself to be in favour of a structural analysis of myths, and highlights the importance of a *toolbox approach* which makes use of any interpretive tool that may serve to arrive at a hidden message in a myth.

37 OBERLIES, 2001: 20: "Natürlich – das will ich gerne zugeben – war es (rückblickend) ungeschickt von mir, meinem Werk *Handbuch-Charakter* zusprechen meinen zu müssen, auch wenn dies weder im Titel noch im Untertitel geschehen ist: Dieser Anspruch sei hiermit ausdrücklich aufgegeben."

The subtitle of the second volume is perhaps acceptable, if the specific theoretical background of the intended (structuralist, Gladigowian) analysis of the composition will be sufficiently emphasized and explained. But the subtitle of the first volume promises much more than the volume can offer, even if we combine the two available volumes. Can one claim of a book that it presents “the religious system of the *Rgveda*” if a crucial god such as Agni, pervasively present in text and ritual, does not receive a discussion of his own in the volume? Even as a treatment of “only” *Rgvedic* religion, which brings Oberlies’ work closer to that of Bergaigne than to that of Oldenberg, the work is seriously incomplete.³⁸ A treatment of Agni is promised in a third volume that should also discuss in detail “sacrifice(s), rites and rituals” (Rel. I, *Vorwort*: XIV). However, the adopted approach which tries to analyse the mythical and personal elements of a pantheon before showing their relationships in a (reconstructed) overarching structure is severely undermined by the exclusion of Agni. Equally serious is the absence of a peculiar element in the *Rgvedic* pantheon, the *Viśve Devāḥ*, or “All-Gods”, to whom as a separate group a considerable number of the most interesting hymns of the *Rgveda* are devoted (cf. RENOU, 1958) – hymns where, as Renou observed in 1961:4, the references to Soma are remarkably rare. The absence of the *Viśve Devāḥ* in Oberlies’ version of the *Rgvedic* pantheon can thus be seen as another distortion arising from his (over)emphasis on Soma. Only in an incidental footnote on p. 174 of Rel. I, Oberlies announces that the *Viśve Devāḥ* will be dealt with later on. Whether these structural shortcomings can be undone with the promised additional sections in the planned third volume remains to be seen.³⁹ However, forgetting about the problematics of the religion of the

38 Both in the searching character and in the strong emphasis on the structure of a *Rgvedic* religious system that is to be recovered by intelligent reconstruction, Oberlies’ work is closer to Bergaigne, as Oldenberg remains more focused on his well-considered positions in various topics while he is less eager to fit everything into a synchronic system. Moreover, for Bergaigne the *RV* is throughout the starting point, whereas Oldenberg takes a much broader collection of textual sources as primary starting points: *RV*, *AV*, Yajurvedic mantras, the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Sūtras*, making additional use of the Avesta, occasionally also of sources in Indo-european languages other than Vedic and Avestan. For Oberlies the *RV* is the starting point, but he frequently refers to the Avesta.

39 In the *Vorwort* to Rel. II, p. XII–XIV, we find again a reference to the planned third volume. No word here about the topics of Agni and the *Viśve Devāḥ* which remained from the first volume. Instead, Oberlies gives here a brief explanation of the way he wants to deal with Vedic rituals. The determination of the elements of the rituals and the rules of

R̄gveda, we can appreciate the two volumes for what they are: excellent, challenging, but in details often still sketchy studies of Soma and the enigmatic Soma book of the R̄gveda, indispensable for serious students of the R̄gveda (though of limited value to non-specialistic readers attracted by the broad title).⁴⁰

5.4 Critics have drawn attention to various shortcomings and problems in several parts of Oberlies' work, but issues of theory and method underlying the perceived shortcomings and problems have not received the attention they deserve. A few new examples have been discussed here, but now for the first time with a serious attempt to show how they derive from Oberlies' distinct presuppositions and starting points. I conclude with a few additional corrections and remarks on the two volumes.

In view of Oberlies' long term involvement with Soma and Haoma one is surprised not to see a reference to Victor Henry's *Esquisse d'une liturgie Indo-Éranienne* which forms Appendice III to Caland's and Henry's description of the Agniṣṭoma (CALAND & HENRY, 1907). This study of 22 pages deals with the Vedic Soma and the Avestan Haoma ritual and liturgy, a topic of pervasive interest to Oberlies, and particularly relevant for instance for Rel. I:241–247, Rel. II:3–120. This appendix is perhaps the same as “Henry's Studie ‘Soma et Haoma’ (Paris 1907)” of which Oberlies says that he regrets that it was not accessible to him (Rel. I:244 note 467).

In the rich bibliography of secondary literature of 136 (Rel. I) + 4 (Rel. II) pages, one misses a reference to Louis Renou's 16 volumes of *Études védiques et pāṇinéennes*. It is especially regrettable that Renou's two volumes on the Soma hymns, *Études védiques et pāṇinéennes* volumes 8 and 9 (both appearing in 1961), have apparently not been consulted. Just as Olden-

their composition he regards as one of the most urgent tasks. The focus will be on house rituals. Since Oberlies announces “eine Untersuchung des vedischen Rituals” it seems that the author is not planning to restrict himself to the R̄gveda, but then, where will the other Vedic *samhitās* (those of the Sāmaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda) be dealt with?

40 As we have seen, this is what the two volumes are also historically, as they derive from Oberlies' *Habilitationsschrift* (*Vorwort* of Rel. I) on the Soma-hymns. A more accurate title for the first volume or for both volumes which prepares the reader for the centrality of Soma would be: “Soma and its R̄gvedic context of myth and ritual.” If the work is to be placed into a category it would go not with the handbook of Oldenberg nor with the encyclopedic study of Bergaigne but rather with the two volumes on Varuṇa by H. Lüders.

berg, Geldner and Lüders were “dialogue partners” for Renou, Renou himself should have been a “dialogue partner” for Oberlies in his reflections on interpretational problems. Renou’s introduction to the Soma hymns in volume 9 attests to a comprehensive familiarity with all Ṛgvedic hymns to Soma, not only those of book nine.

Renou’s article “Les hymnes aux Viśve Devāḥ” is mentioned twice in Oberlies’ bibliography, once as appearing in 1959, once as appearing in 1963. The earlier date is correct.

On p. 148 line 10 read “die Kāthaka- und Maitrāyanīya-Passage” instead of “diesen beiden Kāthaka-Passagen.”

On p. 154, note 41, the author makes a valuable observation on the importance of Indo-Aryan derivations of Vedic words (through a *Volkssprache* which can be assumed next to the language of the carefully poetic expressions of the powerful hymns). However, to call the non-Indo-Aryan derivations “Fremdwörter” as Oberlies does is conceptually problematic and does not do justice to the “linguistic area” which the Indo-Iranian region already must have been in the time of the composition of the Vedic hymns. A convincing methodology for choosing between these two alternative ways of reconstruction has not yet been formulated and the underlying methodological problems are too often happily neglected.

On p. 549 we find the statement, followed by an exclamation mark, that the Gāyatrī-part of the ninth book contains only three references to the name of a poet, once Medhyātithi, twice Jamadagni. The poets of the Ṛgveda are not at all fond of referring to their own or their colleague’s names, so that the presence of three references in sixty seven Gāyatrī hymns of book nine is nothing remarkable (for the Soma hymns in other metres the poet name Kakṣīvant, 9.74.8, can be added).

An important lacuna in the secondary literature especially for Rel. II is B.H. Kapadia 1959 who studies a greater number of epithets of Soma in a more profound way than in Oberlies’ section 6.9, Rel. II:81–93. Kapadia lists ca. 650 epithets and characterizing expressions of Soma from all books of the Ṛgveda (with a large majority from the ninth), and thus makes the ninth book’s richness in Soma epithets better visible than Oberlies who lists 370 epithets only from the ninth book.

Rel. II:251 we find a scheme that distributes six items over two rows and three lines. First row: “Start des Rennens,” “Passieren der Seihe,” “Erreichen des Ziels”; second row: “Losfließen der Soma-Tropfen,” “Umrundung der

Wendemarke,” “Eintritt in die Mischkübel.” The two items on the middle line have been inadvertently inverted.

Rel. II:306: to the additional references regarding the problem of killing in Vedic ritual should be added: Houben, 1999.

The passages that are of greatest interest in these two volumes, and that seem to have been written with the most enthusiasm, are those dealing with myths and cosmologies against the background of structural and comparative analysis. One may or may not agree with the conclusions or one may have doubts on aspects of the method, but the studies on the smith Tvaṣṭar (Rel. I:255–258), on the father and mother of Indra (Rel. I:258–268), on the heavenly lake and the competing theses of Lüders and Kuipers (Rel. II:18–29), are important and innovative contributions to the study of Ṛgvedic and Indo-Aryan religious concepts, beliefs and rituals.

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