

**Henk Bodewitz, *Vedic Cosmology and Ethics: Selected Studies* (Gonda Indological Studies, Vol. 19).
Ed. Henk Bodewitz, Dory H. Heilijgers,
Jan E. M. Houben and Karel van Kooij. pp. 480.
Boston: Brill 2019.—Reviewed by Mattia Capotosto
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1. This work encapsulates over forty years of research carried out by Professor Henk Bodewitz. It is organised as a miscellany of 23 articles divided into two sections, with a total of 480 pages. After a brief preface by the editors, the first article gives a general introduction to the main topics. The first section is considerably longer than the second one, as it includes 16 articles and focuses on the Otherworld (*Yonder World*) in Vedic literature. The second section has 6 articles and explores *Vices and Virtues* in Vedic literature, drawing comparisons between older and more recent texts. The work includes an extensive and detailed list of bibliographic entries, an *index locorum* that allows readers to easily identify the relevant texts, an index of authors and a valuable general index. It is worth noting that readers can find the English translations for articles 2 (Bodewitz 1969) and 3

¹ This paper is the result of joint work discussed and shared by the authors: for the sake of academic requirements, §§ 1 and 4 are attributed to Mattia Capotosto, §§ 2 and 3 to Alessia Manca.

(Bodewitz 1974), which are written in German, in Appendices I and II. The various articles are all enriched with copious footnotes, providing elucidations, references to other texts, citations from the academic community, as well as terminological clarifications and definitions. All these contents provide even non-specialists in these subjects with a valuable tool for delving into the discussed topics, that is cosmology and ethics, in both ancient and later Vedic literature.

2. An especially valuable feature is the attention the author pays to linguistic detail: each paragraph focuses on one or more specific terms, and their occurrences are recorded in order to define their semantic field and reconstruct their historical, anthropological and philological background. Secondary literature is constantly taken into account and accurately investigated, and constructive criticism is provided—when necessary—on other works and their authors. Although Bodewitz' inquiries engage in a fruitful dialogue with crucial reference works by the contemporary and previous scholarship, such as Gonda 1966, Horsch 1971, Tull 1989, his research is largely independent and manages to encompass a greater number of ancient sources. All in all, the collection could be considered a monograph, as Bodewitz himself might indeed have conceived it, be it a merit of the editors or a consequence of the general consistency of the results of the author's research.

3. In *Yonder World*, Bodewitz mainly focuses on *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (already studied in his early works, 1973 and 1990), but does not neglect the *Upaniṣads* (*Kaṭha*, *Kauṣītaki*, *Chāndogya* or *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*), or even the *Samhitās*, privileging the *R̥gveda* and the *Atharvaveda* and frequently comparing the occurrences of the same terms found therein. This gives rise to many questions which the author either tries to answer or at least attempts to lay the foundations for further deep and thought-provoking studies that will allow knowledge about his research fields to be widened. First of all, what is the concept of the yonder world in the Vedas (RV e AV)? What is its nature, and where is it imagined to be? And how does it change in

texts, from a diatopical and diachronical point of view? According to Gonda (1965), the yonder world sometimes appears to be a fourth or fifth world which goes beyond the tripartite horizontal Vedic dimension; sometimes, it resembles an underworld, in which *naraka* (hell) is not always distinguishable from what Bodewitz calls heaven. Furthermore, the yonder world is connected to the existence of “pits” which in the Vedic imagination were seen as dangerous gates to this unknown dimension. Its inhabitants include the Fathers, the semi-divine *Pitṛs*; theirs is one of the after-death paths (*devayāna* and *pitṛyāna*) that bring the deceased to the gods’ or—with a minor level of bliss—to the ancestors’ world. Of course, as one may expect, the texts seldom agree, and the overall picture is thus often liable to changes. Nevertheless, the author deduces that hell, in its most negative meaning of darkness, is intended for demons and diseases, sinners and undesirable people. As regards human behaviour, the author inspects the role that merits and demerits play in obtaining a second life, be it on earth or not. Bodewitz also investigates the concept of *amṛtā* (immortality) and its consequences, such as dissolution (*mokṣa*) or re-death (*punarmṛtyu*), the basis of the later transmigration doctrine. Myths of chthonic and mortal deities are considered, first of all Yama (chapter 6, Bodewitz 1985), followed by Varuṇa in his most obscure and lunar aspects (Kuiper 1979, cited in more than one article). Chapter 5 (Bodewitz 1983) is devoted to the description of ritual practices and of each priest in his own Veda, with particular regard to the *Brahmān* in the Atharvaveda. Overall, this first part can be considered as a fundamental source for whosoever wishes to explore everything that is connected to the understanding of the yonder world starting from the most ancient Vedic sources and going back to the origins of the later idea of *saṃsāra*.

4. The articles in the second section (*Vices and Virtues*), as explicitly stated by the author (page 287), arise from the awareness that several preparatory works are necessary before one can tackle a broader study of the topic, such as a monograph. In fact, the articles in this part, following the same method as the other section, start with the assumption of analysing, or rather defining, various Vedic words that will then

have an ethical significance in the future doctrine. This is the case for *sukṛtá* (and *duṣkṛtá*), *aghám*, *āgas* and *énaś*, *kárman*. And it is only once these terms have been defined that one can proceed with any kind of analysis or reflection. All these terms are always accompanied by references to texts, which are often cited in the articles. The overall idea that one can grasp in Bodewitz is that these Vedic terms already had a non-ritual significance in their early history (e.g., chapter 23). This point of view criticises not only Gonda's (1966) assumptions since he affirmed that these terms are only associated with the ritual, but also Tull's (1989) who stated that ethicization took place in the early Upaniṣads, without however explaining how the completely amoral Vedic ritual doctrine of *karman* developed into the ethical, non-ritual classical doctrine in the later Upaniṣads (Chapter 19, Bodewitz 1993). However, far more noteworthy is the idea, widely defended by the author, that one must start from the semantics of the target culture to correctly translate the terms of that culture. Furthermore, articles 22 and 23 present a systematic analysis, first, of vices and then of virtues and a comparison is made with Western and Christian culture. Indeed, another constant in the author's *modus operandi* is the presence of several articles where he provides a list and individual analysis of various related topics, such as vices and virtues or vedic words, which is useful in providing a systematic understanding of their meanings. Such articles thus allow both experts and non-experts a comprehensive and orderly view of the topics, a true starting point for subsequent and more in-depth studies.

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