THE ĀPRĪ HYMNS OF THE RGVEDA AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

1. INTRODUCTION

It has long been acknowledged that a fixed scheme lies at the basis of the Āprī hymns. This has led to a detailed discussion about the origin and the function of these hymns. In the preface to his edition of the Nirukta of Yāska Roth has qualified them as prayers or invocation hymns. Müller pointed to their artificial character and found a resemblance with the character of the hymns of the Sāma- and Yajur-veda. From this he inferred that these hymns were composed for sacrificial purposes and he agreed with Burnouf that they should be recited by the hotar prior to the slaughtering of certain sacrificial animals. He was completely in the dark as to their original meaning, but on the basis of the old Indian tradition he thought it quite possible:

"that the Āprī hymns may have been songs of reconciliation, and that they were called āprī, i.e. appeasing hymns not from their appeasing of the anger of the gods, but the enmities of members of the same or different families." 

Together with Schwab, Hillebrandt saw the Āprī hymns as the invocations for the various deities and sacrificial objects accompanying the preliminary offerings (prayāja) of the animal sacrifice, which were handed down by the various priestly families of the RV. This opinion was shared by Oldenberg who maintained:

"The Āprī-hymns, consisting of eleven or twelve verses, were destined for the Prayāja-offerings of the animal sacrifice, such as the sacrificial grass, the divine gates through which the gods had to pass on their way to the sacrifice, etc."

Keith also considered these hymns as the litanies accompanying the preliminary offerings of the animal sacrifice.

Bergaigne was one of the first who drew attention to the fact that the āprisuktas belonged to an early stage of Vedic ritual. According to him they were formed before the compilation of the RV. samhitā and inserted in the group of Agni hymns on account of assimilation and according to the metrical and numerical principles which were usually applied.

From a different point of view the āprī stanzas were studied by Hertel. He was kindled with enthusiasm by a monograph on the god Janus, in which the
author, Otto Huth, tried to reconstruct the Indo-European New Year cult with the help of Italic and German sources. Janus had a central place in this cult and his name was connected by Huth with the I.E. stem of the word *iáno-, i.e. “course” (in German: Gang). He was therefore regarded as the god of the year who presided over the two courses of the sun towards the northern and southern solstice, or, to say it in German, as “der Jahrgott der Gänge”. Huth has given an enumeration of the characteristics of this Janus cult, and Hertel claimed to have found them in the āprisūktas as well. Hertel argued against the opinion of Oldenberg and accused him of having obscured the real knowledge of the ‘Ariertum’, not only by using Vedic concepts for the interpretation of these hymns, but also by applying concepts of his own inherited religion. Hertel, for instance, preferred to render the term deva by “Himmelslichterstrahler”, instead of by “god”, as Oldenberg usually did. He claimed that these sacrificial hymns were connected with the ancient I.E. New Year cult at the time of the winter-solstice and that they were addressed to Agni, respectively Indra, the sacred fire, which would correspond to Janus. This New Year cult formed a good illustration of the author’s doctrine of light, in which the celestial fire (“Himmelsfeuer”) had a central place. He regarded the fixed deities of each āpri stanza, which were referred to by ‘keywords’, as partial aspects of the collective person Agni. According to him the supposed connection between these hymns and the animal sacrifice was an error. They were inserted in this sacrifice due to the activities of the theologians who were also responsible for the brāhmaṇas. These people incorporated stanzas of the āpri hymns in the liturgy of the animal sacrifice as prayājas. This vision, which he expounded with a lot of fantasy, to say the least, has been rightly criticized by — among others — Gonda, whose critical remarks I share in broad outline.

More recently the āpri hymns were discussed by Potdar in connection with several interpretations in two detailed articles. The set pattern of these hymns together with their distribution in most of the family books of the RV. brought him to the following conclusion:

“This rather unusual popularity of the āpri hymns, apparently must have been due to a sort of family ritual that must have become associated with them in early stages. It is this ritual that we have to try to ascertain on the basis of internal evidence.”

From a closer examination of each of these stanzas Potdar learnt that they were not dedicated to eleven deities which should be glorified. The hymns could be relieved, therefore, of their artificial connection with the prayāja offerings of the animal sacrifice (nirūdhapaśubandha). Originally they had reference to a simple family ritual, in which Agni as god of the sacred fire had a central place.

The view of Potdar is shared in the main by Gonda, who states that there