Theodore N. Proferes has written an immensely rewarding and cogent monograph. It examines a number of central poetic motifs in the ancient Indian liturgical corpus that express and reflect ideals of sovereignty, political unity, and cosmic power. The general argument is that the authors of the early Vedic liturgical texts (primarily the Rgveda) communicate and ritualize the ideals of sovereignty by way of poetic tropes involving fire, water, and solar imagery. Since ritualists portray rulers as relatively independent, the poetic language of sovereignty began to incorporate ideals of freedom and self-determination. In the classical ritual traditions of the Brāhmaṇaṣa and early Upaniṣaṣada, all men eligible to perform rituals, whether of royal standing or not, used such lofty language to express their desires for spiritual autonomy and power.

In his opening chapter (“Introduction: Politics and Liturgical Poetry”), Proferes lays out the role of liturgical poetry in constructing a ritualized form of political discourse. In addition, he provides a clear and useful overview of the nature of Vedic sovereignty and social formations, especially as designated by the term vīś (“clan/clan-settlement”) and the terms jāna, kṛṣṭi, and carsaṇī, all of which the author suggests are better translated as “people(s)” instead of the usual, yet poorly defined “tribe”.

In chapter two (“Ritual Fires and the Construction of Sovereignty”), Proferes focuses primarily on the representation and ideology of the deified ritual fire (agni) in the Rgveda, though he traces some of its symbolism in the later Samhitās and Brāhmaṇaṣa. He lucidly argues that the ritual fire acts as a potent symbol of kinship, clan unity, tribal might, and political sovereignty. The symbolism of fire as a unifying entity is based on the fact that it exists in multiple places at once, yet its tangible and transferrable nature allows it to be brought together into a singular form. From their
own individual fires, various clans jointly kindle a single tribal fire, which represents the unified power of the king and the support of his people. Moreover, communal clan fires signify kinship relationships and their amalgamation into a king’s fire symbolizes the idealized power of his extensive polity and the clan’s submission therein. The ritual fire thus acts as a concrete symbol of political relationships, especially alliances and sovereignty. As Proferes aptly states: “Control of fire is the equivalent of control over all levels of society” (p. 31). The author further demonstrates that poets identify the ritual fire with the sun because solar symbolism represents the power of rulership and alliance, and this is particularly expressed by way of spatial imagery and the idealized social formation of the “Five Peoples” (pâñca jánâh). In contrast to past scholarship, Proferes argues that this phrase does not refer to five actual tribes, but rather acts as the idealized symbol of Āryan power; that is, the outer four peoples signify the inhabitants of the cardinal directions who are ruled by the fifth central group constituted by the tribal leader and his clans. Hence, the distribution of fire throughout various clans and its reintegration into the king’s single fire, called the “Five Peoples’ fire” (pâñcajanya agni), expresses the solidarity of the disparate peoples and the way in which they collectively invest sovereignty in their ruler. Poets further articulate their political ideologies in cosmic terms when they identify fire with the sun. As the definitive symbol of cosmic rulership, the sun shines over individual communities. In the same way, the king’s tribal rules over individual clan and household fires. Proferes also puts forward a complex and well-argued thesis about the hypothetical Rgvedic prehistory of the Tānūnaptra rite as represented in the Brāhmaṇas. Priests employ this rite to construct a body politic wherein they ritually unify their identities with the king in order to display their combined strength and alliance. As the author so persuasively concludes, “The fact that sovereignty moved between two poles of centralization in a tribal leader and diffusion among the various clan leaders explains why fire could be such a potent political symbol for the Vedic ritualists; the fission and fusion of fire mimicked the political economy of clan-based society.” (p. 76)

In the third chapter (“Fire in the Waters and the Alchemical King”), Proferes argues that ritualists identify the function and qualities of a king with the sun. As such, the human king embodied the powers of the sun and possessed a solar body, often represented ritually in the form of a bird. This is most clearly seen in the royal unction rite (rājābhiseka)—a component of the larger royal consecration ritual (rājasya)—where the king is reborn as the sun when he is anointed with water brought from widely dispersed sources. The consolidated waters contain their own fiery element vârcas (also dyumnâ and téjas), which is the “splendor” of various fires spread throughout the universe. The imagery of the royal abhiṣeka rite thus parallels the symbolism of fire (as seen in chapter two) where the king’s fire is identified with the sun and constituted by many individual clan fires. That is to say, the waters of the unction rite are identified with the disparate clans. Just as the clans come together with their individual fires to unite under a single ruler, the symbolism of the unction rite indicates that the sprinkling of water over the king symbolizes his rule and rebirth as the sun. The rite also invests in him the fiery powers of the universe and his peoples. Given this, the author aptly concludes that the common Vedic idiom “fire in the waters” is an expression of “latent sovereign power” (p. 79). Therefore, the identification of waters and clans, and the overlapping symbolism of fire, water, sun, and kingship, work to legitimize the king, while expressing political unity.