The Franco-German Early Tantra Project officially ended more than half a decade ago, and its results are being published with some slight delay. Notwithstanding, the reader’s patience is amply rewarded. Having appeared almost simultaneously with the publication of the Niśvāsatattvasaṃhitā, the earliest surviving Śaiva tantra, and three early works of the Pañcarātra (Early Tantra Series 1 and 2 respectively), the present volume is the second part of a tandem sub-project, the first part of which is still under preparation by Shaman Hatley.

The first word that comes to mind when thinking about the Brahmayāmālatantra (henceforth BYT) is “daunting”. And by that I mean the complete semantic range of the word: it is formidable, awesome, and challenging, but also at times taxing, discouraging, and unsettling. To begin with, it is a massive piece of work, weighing in at about 12,000 verses arranged in ca. 102 chapters. Although attested by several witnesses, including an early palm-leaf manuscript, the text is not very well transmitted. Moreover, technical terminology aside, it is couched in a peculiar register of Sanskrit called Aiśa, which, in spite of the heroic achievements of recent scholarship, is still something we have not come to terms with fully. The world of the BYT is equally difficult to reckon with: this is the universe of the cremation ground, inhabited actually or symbolically by initiates seeking magical powers and liberation undertaking outrageous rituals to propitiate ferocious deities. But the appeal and importance of the transgressive kind of tantric traditions is exactly this: what other antinomian religious movements in the history of humanity are attested in such rich detail by their very practitioners, as opposed to through the damning verdicts of antagonists and persecutors?

In order to engage seriously with this world and reconstruct the mediaeval religious landscape of the Indian subcontinent, we need ventures like the aforementioned Early Tantra Project and volumes such as this one. The trailblazer in the study of the BYT was Alexis Sanderson, who first realised its fundamental importance, and whose essential studies contextualised the work, lifting it
into scholarly discourse from undeserved obscurity. Shaman Hatley’s thesis, a reworked and expanded version of which will be the much-awaited first volume of the present sub-project, engaged with the BYT in greater detail and was for almost a decade a trustworthy guide for anyone wishing to tackle the text. However—and I am sure all in tantric studies will agree—there are no dead dragons here to flog.

The BYT stands at the very heart of the transgressive trend. Most probably a product of the seventh century and the earliest of the so-called Bhairava tantras, it was influential for centuries to come, most notably for the kindred Vajrayāna tradition of the deity Saṃvara/Śaṃvara, as already shown by Sanderson and, subsequently, Hatley. The geographical provenance is a thorny question, but as Kiss proposes (p. 16), the region centred on Prayāga (modern Allahabad) is a likely contender.

At the centre of attention in this volume is the practitioner (sādhaka). From the very outset, Kiss points out that the taxonomy of this seminal figure—one might say the hero of the tantric saga—is different from the one we know from the later tradition and which became the standard (tālaka/suddha, miśraka/suddhāśuddha, and carubhojin/asuddha vs. samayin, sādhaka, putraka, and ācārya). The focus explains the choice of chapters: while chapter 45 expounds on the sādhaka, the other two, chapters 3 and 21, teach the pantheon worshipped and the observances undertaken. The three chapters thus form a conceptual unit. Kiss shows that the text’s triadic model is hierarchical and that much depends on the sādhaka’s spiritual activity in past lives. He also points out that although the BYT is on the whole transgressive, many of the activities, even those considered of a higher kind, are within the realm of purity (celibacy, vegetarianism). It should be mentioned in passing that, although unvoiced, the author seeks to engage with the text on its own terms throughout, steering clear of extrapolations from other conceptual frameworks, an otherwise unavoidable trap for the less critically inclined. For example, see his elucidation of the technical term devāgāra on pp. 27–30 (not a temple or sanctuary, but the three-dimensional maṇḍala of the cult) or (a/)suddha on pp. 35–36 (not ritually pure, but cleansed of past karman). Moreover, new technical terms are discerned, e.g. avagraha meaning ‘seminal retention’ on p. 49, or the semantic range of already known terms is extended, e.g. yantra on pp. 49–50 (not magical diagram, but any prop for magic or magic itself).
