

# EAST AND WEST

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# On the Iranian Soma and Pers. *sepand* 'Wild Rue'

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While W.B. Henning's account <sup>(1)</sup> remains theoretically possible, Professor Gershevitch <sup>(2)</sup> has advanced a new etymology for the Persian *sepand*, *Peganum harmala*, i.e. 'wild rue'. The prompt for Gershevitch came from recent research by D.S. Flattery and M. Schwartz <sup>(3)</sup> on the botanical identity of Soma in Iran although — rightly, in my opinion — he does not agree with their conclusions. Moreover, he also departs from Henning on the etymology of *sepand*, and here it is worth noting that Flattery and Schwartz did not contest Henning's etymological reconstruction, which enjoys general consensus, but rather his historical/semantic interpretation.

Henning takes the Persian *sepand* in relation to Avestan *spānta-*, 'sacred', while distinguishing it from the Persian *sepandān* which, as we know, he accounts for with *sepan*, 'mustard', and *dān*, 'grain'. Henning assumed that people given to apotropaic practices could only attribute 'sacred' qualities to what already belonged to the tradition of witchcraft and superstition, adding that the term *sepand* ('sacred') must have been used by devil-worshippers: '[...] for to a *daēvayasna* or devilworshipper the plant was indeed "sacred"' (*loc. cit.*).

In my opinion this account, which I also considered in a review of the volume by Flattery and Schwartz <sup>(4)</sup>, remains valid despite the various arguments these two scholars bring against it. However, there can be no doubt that Professor Gershevitch's contribution casts new light on the problem of the Persian *sepand*. We have in fact seen that it would be possible to reconstruct a new etymology on the basis of the Baškardi *sipaxt*, 'wild rue' <sup>(5)</sup>: *sepand*, 'wild rue' < \**spand* < \**sprand* < Early Iranian \**spranti-* < IE \**sprenti-* < \**spreng-ti*.

However, two pieces of evidence remain to suggest that we should not totally abandon the etymology *sepand* < Av. *spānta-*, and it is worth considering them here. In the first place, there are many forms of the Neo-Iranian name of wild rue which can easily be associated with

<sup>(1)</sup> 'A Grain of Mustard', *AION*, Sezione linguistica, VI, 1965 (pp. 29-47), p. 39.

<sup>(2)</sup> I. Gershevitch, 'Linguistic Geography and Historical Linguistics', in *La posizione attuale della linguistica storica nell'ambito delle discipline umanistiche* (Roma, 26-28 marzo 1991), Atti dei Convegni Lincei, 94, Roma 1992 (pp. 165-81), pp. 176 ff.

<sup>(3)</sup> *Haoma and Harmaline, The Botanical Identity of the Indo-Iranian Sacred Hallucinogen 'Soma' and Its Legacy in Religion, Language, and Middle Eastern Folklore*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1989.

<sup>(4)</sup> *EW*, 39, 1989, pp. 320-24.

<sup>(5)</sup> Cf. Middle Persian *sipxt* 'sprouting, blossoming'; and see M. Schwartz, *op. cit.* (fn. 3), p. 144, on I. Gershevitch's suggestion.

the Avestan *spānta-* <sup>(6)</sup>. In the second place, the fifth day — called *esfand* — of the month called *Esfand* (cf. Avestan *Spānta Armaiti*, Middle-Persian *Spandarmad*) saw celebration of the feast known as *Esfandagân*, during which wild rue was used in the way Professor Gershevitch described when proposing ‘sprouting, blossoming’ as the etymological meaning of *sepand*. In fact, there seems to be very close analogy with the case of the *bahman* plant used on the second day — called *bahman* — in the month *Bahman*, of the feast known as *Bahmanjane* <sup>(7)</sup>. In conclusion, the choice remains between Henning’s etymology and Professor Gershevitch’s. In the latter case, however, we might also suspect that contamination occurred between a *sepand* deriving, ultimately, from an IE *\*sprengti-* and a *sepand* that could have included among its antecedents the Avestan *spānta-*, or that might at any rate have been interpreted or perceived as related to it. Of one point there can be no doubt, and that is that the Middle-Persian *spand* postulated by M. Schwartz <sup>(8)</sup> never existed as such.

As for the Middle-Persian *\*spand* (from an Avestan *spānta*), recurrence is only found as a fossil in compounds such as *Spandarmad* (see above) and *gōspand* ‘(small) livestock, sheep’. In the place of the Avestan *spānta-* we generally find *abzōnīg*, ‘increasing, expansive, beneficial’, in Pahlavi. This may represent further evidence in support of Professor Gershevitch’s thesis since we are, in fact, unable to document continuity between the Early Iranian and Neo-Iranian phases.

<sup>(6)</sup> See table 1 on p. 40 of the above cited volume by Flattery and Schwartz.

<sup>(7)</sup> The analogy was also noted by D.S. Flattery himself, *op. cit.* (fn. 3), pp. 78-79, fn. 11, although he came to different conclusions.

<sup>(8)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.