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SOMA OF THE ARYANS AND ASH OF THE ROMANS

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It is proposed to show that ephedra by stages finally became a sacred plant as Soma with the Aryans and its juice, also called Soma, a drink of immortality. The Romans, belonging to the same stock, looked upon Ash as equally sacred so that Ephedra and Ash both shared two special uses to be discussed presently.

The progressive development of ephedra, from a common weed to the plant-god, Soma, has not been depicted before, hence this may briefly be indicated here. Nothing appeals better than what has been useful. The ancient Aryans were hunters and needed an anti-fatigue drink. This came as the extract of ephedra. Ephedrine, its active principle, like caffeine, promotes muscular activity. Rigveda accordingly speaks of Soma as bestowing physical strength, Ephedrine, improving circulation of blood in the brain, also produces euphoria and Rigveda extols Soma as bestowing happiness. It is easily seen that the same agency which energizes the body has a corresponding beneficial effect on the mind. As primitive folks the Aryans had no knowledge of drugs so that for every ailment they used Soma-juice which then became a panacea. As hunters they lived always facing starvation hence they could hardly tolerate a social parasite. Accordingly a chronic patient was left to die while the aged was exiled as ascetic in a forest. Then an individual of middle age would realize that his output of energy has declined. Fearing that he would be exiled as ascetic for not proving to be a proper bread earner, he would over-dose himself with the juice and thereby remain as active as his younger comrades. Subjectively he would feel he has become young whence to him Soma would be a drink of rejuvenation. Thus by its use he can remain longer in the tribe. This in effect meant his life was prolonged so that to him Soma juice was a drink of longevity. Such an individual, whose life demanded the constant use of Soma, out of gratitude can go to the extent of saying, as in Rigveda, 8. 48. 3, that "we have drunk soma and become immortal". Not only that, RV. 10. 57. 3 affirms "we call the spirit hitherto, with Soma, of our parted sires". This means that ephedra or soma had become an agency of resurrection. Now Stein¹ actually discovered ephedra interred

1. Stein, Sir A. (1932), On the Ephedra, the Hum Plant and Soma BLSOAS, 6 : 501.

with the dead when he excavated the grave of an Aryan in Central Asia. We can thereby realize that if ephedra was used as an agency of resurrection it must have already been recognized as a herb of longevity-cum-immortality for it is the gift of the agency of longevity by the living to the dead that can expedite resurrection. Summarizing what has been narrated we find ephedra started by offering an anti-fatigue drink. Next it became a panacea. Thirdly a drink of rejuvenation. Fourthly a drink of longevity-cum-immortality. Fifthly a herb of resurrection. Finally the plant was deified as god Soma so that the plant, as god-sent medicine instilled faith-cure and proved to be a useful medicine. Such a consideration was necessary to explain the two uses of ephedra which have survived upto recent times. The more important may be considered first.

Soma of Rigveda is called Haoma in Avesta of the Iranians. Modi² mentions the term "Haoma-Duraosha i. e. Haoma that keeps away death" p. 228. The other use was to consecrate fire. In another publication Modi³ writes (on p. 277) that "Haoma juice (was the) first-drink after birth". On p. 8 he explains that "formerly a mother in child-birth first drank a few drops of the sacred-Haoma juice consecrated in a fire temple (and even) the new-born child should be made to drink a few drops of this juice being emblematical of immortality". Now what goes to initiate longevity also confers resurrection. Accordingly Modi (on p. 54) writes that "a few drops of Haoma juice were poured into the mouth of the dying person". It can be granted that it matters little what was being given to an individual who was about to expire but no mother would tolerate a substitute of a genuine drink of longevity being administered to her child. The child was to receive only the real drink of longevity and no substitute. This custom, still existing among the Parsis of India, as descendants of ancient Aryans, is also mentioned in Rigveda as has been pointed out by me⁴ recently. RV. 3. 48. 2 states "That day when thou wast born, fain to taste it, drankest the plant's milk, which the mountains nourish. That milk, thy mother first; the dame who bare thee, poured for thee in thy mighty father's dwelling". RV. 3. 32. 9 and 10 read as follows, "(Indra) soon as born thou drankest up the Soma" verse 9. "As soon as thou wast born in highest heaven thou drankest Soma" verse 10. Since this custom exists even today it allows us to interpret the above verse in Rigveda literally.

2. Modi, Sir J. J. (1912), *Anthropological Papers*. Bombay.

3. Modi, Sir Jivanji Jamshedji (1922), *Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsis*. Bombay.

4. Mahdihassan, S. (1983), Soma Juice as administered to a newly born child being mentioned in Rigveda, *Am. J. Chinese Med.*, 11 (1-4): 14-15,

The other use of ephedra was the consecration of fire. Consecration means ritual enlivenment, something dead now becomes a life-form. Ephedra, as a perennial or ever-green plant, was obviously rich in life-force. Then its juice poured into fire would be, as it were, seeding it with life-force. Consecrated fire now

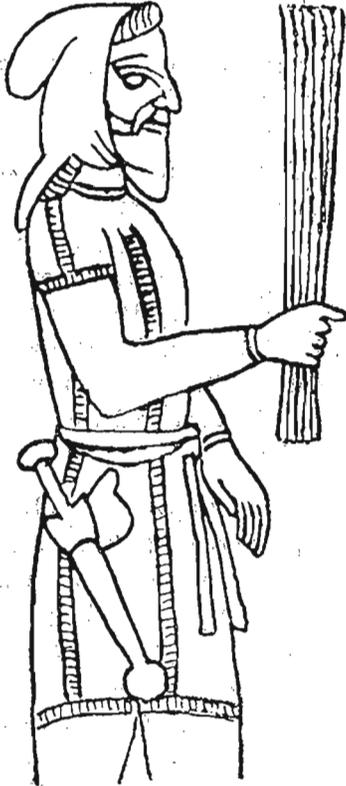


fig. 1 : A Zoroastrian King, holding a bundle of ephedra stalks for consecrating fire. Dated 5-3 cent. B. C. From Savill (5).

became "ever-lasting fire" and the heat, emanating from it, bestowed longevity upon its worshippers. That was the real object to be gained by fire-worship. The Iranians however felt it proper to present ephedra stalks before a fire rather than pour its juice. Such a scene has been graphically depicted. Sheila Savill⁵ reproduces a picture of a "Zoroastrian king holding a bundle of stalks". This picture is offered as fig. 1 here. It constitutes the main "detail of a gold votive plaque from Iranian temple of fifth to third cent. B. C. now preserved in the British Museum". The stalks are not identified but obviously belong to ephedra plant. I am tempted to quote RV. 10. 97. 11 as illustrating the above picture. It says that "when bringing back the vanished strength *I hold these herbs with my hands*". Now the ephedra plant can grow up to 2 feet which can explain the long rods in fig. 1. Prof. Mary Boyce⁶ would further explain that the sacred plant presented before fire, to consecrate it, now called "Baresman shown

in Achaemenian and subsequently in Sasanian art was of impressive size, about 1½ ft. long, made up apparently of stiff straight rods". Fig. 1 bears this out. In Iran the Aryan used ephedra to consecrate fire and also to supply a drink of longevity. The latter use was also to be found among the Indians.

Ephedra has been depicted also in the Gandhara art of India. There is a scene where the grass-cutter, named Swastika, has brought two bundles of grass

5. Savill, Sheila (1977), *Pears Encyclopedia of Myths and Legends : The Orient.*, p. 27 : Pelham Books, London.

6. Boyce, Mary (1982), *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 2, p. 38, R.G.B...81

for Buddha to sit upon. This scene has been reproduced by Marshall⁷ and is offered here as fig. 2. It has been dated 300 A. D. In another piece of Gandhara sculpture a herbalist has brought a bundle of some ephedra plants as the herb of longevity. Buddha was born a prince and as such a mortal. Later, when he was enlightened, he became an immortal.

But even the deities remained immortal by consuming Amrith or Ambrosia. In Rigveda Soma was Amrith and ephedra being Soma, the herbalist brought a bundle of ephedra plants to provide Buddha with a drink of immortality. This scene, also taken from Marshall, is offered here as fig. 3. Unfortunately Marshall identifies even the bundle of ephedra plants, seen in fig. 3. as grass. It will be further seen that in fig. 3, Buddha has accepted ephedra as a worthy gift and is holding some in his right hand. On account of its importance the plant Buddha is holding has been enlarged as pen and ink drawing and is shown as fig. 4. Then figs. 1 and 4 easily compare between themselves each as a bunch of stiff, rod-like stalks. They both illustrate ephedra.



fig. 4 : Ephedra stalks held in the hand of Buddha, an enlargement from fig. 1.

RV 10.77.11 : "I hold these herbs with my hand".

Fig. 1 has been explained as a Zoroastrian King presenting ephedra for consecrating fire. Modi (2 : 232) further explains that "it appears from Avesta that the Haoma ceremony was always accompanied by the Barsom ceremony, as it is even now. The ancient Flamines, who like the Athravans of the Persians were the Roman fire priests, and whose many practices resembled those of the Athravans or Iranian fire-priests, used, whenever they went before the sacred fire, twigs of a particular tree."

Figs. 1 and 2 do not differ in principle and it would appear Buddha, in fig. 2, is imitating an Iranian custom which would be presenting Soma before an altar of sacred fire. Here I am grateful to Prof. C. G. Kashikar for pointing out that Buddha, in fig. 2, like the Zoroastrian King, in fig. 1, is following an Iranian and not a Vedic custom. After all Gandhara art was executed by artists under Iranian-Greek influence.

7. Marshall, Sir J. (1910), *The Buddhist art of Gandhara*.



fig. 2 : Buddha being offered two bundles of grass. From Marshall (7).
[See page 642]





fig. 3 : Buddha accepting ephedra as the herb of longevity, a scene depicted in Gandhara art c. 300 A. D. From Marshall (7). [See page 642]

The tree of the Romans has remained unidentified. But its identity can be ascertained if it be inferred that the sap of this tree was used as the first drink of a newly born child and this was more important. Whereas the branch of any tree may be used to consecrate fire no one dare to give a child a drink not believed to be a genuine drink of longevity. Now the Romans used the sap of Ash just as the Zoroastrians today use the extract of ephedra. The Oxford English Dictionary identifies Ash = *Fraxinus excelsior*. It belongs to the order Oleaceae. Lindley⁸ and Moore write (on p. 506) that "On account its quick growth (revealing life-force) and toughness ... it surpasses every European tree". Both these qualities are also shared by ephedra. Then Ash became a sacred tree so much so that it was assumed as having "Powers of keeping witches at a distance", when witches were those who kidnapped children. Finally we read in the Encyclopedia of World Mythology⁹ that the "Sap of Ash was fed to new born babies to protect them from spirits, and a baby's first bath should be before fire of Ash wood."

This was because the tree had been sacred and "the Ash tree became the world-tree, Yggdrasil" — p. 239. Now Ash as Yggdrasil finds a mention in Campbell¹⁰ who writes that "the Eddic world Ash, Yggdrasil whose shaft was the pivot of the revolving heavens is the greatest of all trees and the best, the Ash where the gods give judgement every day. Its limbs spread over the world and stand above heaven." Such a tree became a celestial tree like ephedra which was deified as god Soma by Aryans. It then explains how the juice of Ash was used like the Haoma or ephedra extract today as the first drink of child who thereby would be destined to have a long life. Then ritually speaking Ash = Haoma = Ephedra = plant of longevity. We can now recognize Ash as the hitherto unknown plant the Romans used for consecrating fire and its sap to assure the longevity of the newly born child.

Summary

In Rigveda ephedra has been called Soma. Its stagewise development has been indicated. Its juice as anti-fatigue drink was used by Aryan hunters, later as panacea, as rejuvenating the middle aged, as drink of longevity and immortality. The plant as emblem of resurrection finally became the plant-god Soma. The Iranian-Aryans even use today the plant to consecrate fire and its extract

8. Lindley, J. and T. Moore (1873), Encyclopedia or Treasury of Botany 2nd edition. Rept. Neeraj Publishing House, Delhi.

9. Encyclopedia of world Mythology (1975), Foreword by Rex Narner. Galhad Books N. Y.

10. Campbell, Joseph (1959), The Masks of God — London, pp. 120-121.

as the first drink of longevity for a newly born child. Ephedra is depicted in Persian art of 4th cent. B. C. and in Gandhara Indian art of 4th cent. A. D. In each case the plant has stiff rod-like stalks characteristic of ephedra. The Romans used Ash as the equivalent of Soma. The sap of this tree was given to the newly born. Moreover before the fire of Ash wood the newly born was bathed so that the heat of sacred fire could also prolong its life. A branch of Ash tree was presented by the Roman fire priests before fire to consecrate it. Briefly Ephedra = Ash = Plant of longevity.