

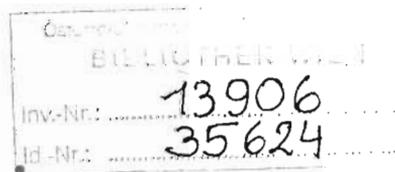
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## A PERSIAN PAINTING ILLUSTRATING EPHEDRA, LEADING TO ITS IDENTITY AS SOMA

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The early Aryans, as hunters and later as pastoral nomads, used the fresh extract of a plant called Soma. It was an energizer and euphoriant which made them fatigue-proof and reasonably happy. They drank it thrice a day which shows its indispensability to the life they led. Later it became a drink of immortality and finally god Soma in charge of all vegetation and even the Moon-god. What the plant was has however remained an unsolved problem. As late as 1980 Prof. Kashikar (1) could write that, "the problem of the identification of Soma plant has engaged the attention of scholars of the last hundred fifty years and inspite of persistent efforts in exploiting literary, historical and geographical and botanical sources the problem cannot be said to have been settled unanimously." Yet there was a source of information that was never considered before and it was archeological.

In fact such evidence did present itself but was misinterpreted. There are two pieces of Gandhara sculpture illustrated by Sir. J Marshall (2). One shows Buddha being offered a bundle of seven ephedra plants, by a herbalist, who has placed the bundle vertically on the ground. Then Buddha is holding one such plant as though it was an acceptable gift. The other piece of sculpture depicts Buddha being offered two bundles of grass, this being cut at both ends. One such bundle is lying horizontally on the ground and the other is held in the hand of the grass-cutter. Buddha, by a gesture of his hand, is suggesting that even this bundle may be placed on the ground. We have in these two scenes the following differences. A bundle of seven plants, is placed vertically; the herbalist has his head decorated with a tuft of leaves; Buddha is holding a plant in his hand. In the other piece of sculpture the grass-cutter has brought two bundles of grass. Grass is cut at each end. Now Rigveda: 1.38.1 speaks of "Gods for whom sacred grass is clipped". Also<sup>1</sup> R.V: 5.9.2 states "in the man's home who offers gifts where grass is trimmed agni is priest". Such grass, as two bundles, were brought by the

grass-cutter. One is placed horizontally on the ground and the other is held in the hand of the grass-cutter. The grass cutter is not decorated in any way, unlike the herbalist. Then Buddha is not holding any branch of grass. These differences are obvious but have been ignored, and what is more, having pointed them out in three communications published in 1962 (3); in 1963 (4); and in 1974 (5), I find it difficult to realize how others hesitate to recognize Soma-Ephedra. Now the sceptics are all those who have ignored archeology as the source of information. That an authority like Marshall can even misidentify ephedra as grass shows his ignorance of the plant, not to talk of others who were not eminent archeologists.

Then continuing to seek evidence which directly appeals to the eye I have found ephedra painted in a Persian Painting. It comes from Pope's (6) encyclopedic work on Persian art. His plate 913 belongs to a miniature painting from (an album). The painting bears the caption, "hunting scene in a rocky landscape", being the work of Mir Syed Ali painter dated c.1555 AD. It depicts the most characteristic features of Soma as mentioned in Rigveda. The topmost portion of the painting has been enlarged and is offered here as fig.1. The landscape is hilly, full of rocks and geographically may belong to a locality between Afghanistan and Pakistan or North-West of Peshawar. There is only one kind of plant which strikes the eye and it decorates the hill tops. Now this is the typical habitat of Soma according to Rigveda. Some grew on Mujavat mountain so much so that it was called Maujavatha, RV.10.34.1. It was further named in terms of its habitat as Parvata-vidha and Gristha. Then the plant as Giriprishtha suggested the corresponding name for its habitat as Soma prishtha RV.8.43.1 Thus Soma became the lord of mountains and mountains became the Dominions of Soma. More importance than this could not have been assigned to the habitat of Soma and becomes the first indication in identifying the plant. Here Kapadia (7;35) mentions further verses in Rigveda. Now fig.1. shows only one kind of plants on hill tops. Such soil is well drained so that plants growing there must be resistant to drought. It then stands competition with others and usually ephedra grows mostly by itself. It belongs to the pine family and even pine-forests are pure-forests, also occupying the highest mountains. Now ephedra has no leaves and is an assembly of thin long stalks which, even at a short distance, appears as one mass. Mughal paintings as also Persian miniature paintings depict landscapes with plants and flowers and with details. On the contrary fig.1 shows plants painted without any distinction of parts. To show what was the reality I have, as inset, marked

with an arrow in fig.1, being a reduced photographic reproduction of *Ephedra granadaria* as published in Wealth of India (8). Plants such as they appear in the "inset", fig.1, when painted would best appear as actually shown in fig.1, with plants on hill tops and a few a little lower.

We now turn to Rigveda for the description of the plant, verse 9.5.10 speaks of Soma plant as "Vanaspati, the ever-green, the golden-hued, with a thousand boughs", thus as a mass where details can not be depicted. The plant is a vanaspati, a medicinal plant. We can confirm this as the source of ephedrine. In folk medicine it is also used as the herb against asthma and even as an aphrodisiac, since it is an energizer. Then it speaks of Soma as an ever green plant and ephedra, like the pine, is ever green. Thirdly its colour is yellow at least in parts. Fig.2 is the Chinese plant *E.sinica*, formerly called *Ephedra flava*, where flava means yellow. Fig.2 shows the upper stalks are green and lower down as yellow. The coloured photograph first appeared in a Chinese work (9) published at Peking, in 1970. Its copy, fig.2, was received as the gift of Sir Joseph Needham, the world authority on the History of Chinese Science. Then the plant is a mass of "thousand boughs" which, when painted, would appear as it goes in fig.1. The plant ephedra, as photographed, is also shown in the inset, marked with an arrow, in fig.1. If we take the plant seen in the "inset" and paint it, the result would be the plants seen above on the hill top, in fig.1. Thus the specific habitat, the hill top, and the characteristic feature as constituted of a "thousand boughs", identify ephedra as Soma.

We have yet to explain the nature of the boughs or stalks apart from their being innumerable in a plant. RV.10.8.9.5 speaks of the plant being "very strong", or difficult to uproot and it is "armed as with arrows", being a synonymous expression to "thousand boughs". When thousand arrows can be conceived as a mass there would be "thousand boughs" of ephedra. There is no mention of any leaf in Rigveda, nor is there a typical one in ephedra. There is yet a feature of the stalks of Soma indicated in Rigveda. Kapadia (7;7) writes that "the word Kship, in RV.9.79.4, characteristically used with the stalk, suggests that it had several joints as on the finger. The word Prishtha in RV.4.20.5 also suggests the same idea. Vana is another word that is connected with the Soma plant R.V. 9.50.1". Then just as the habitat of Soma has been emphasized giving Soma the names Maujavatha, Giriprishtha and Parvatavidha, the jointed nature of the stalks has likewise been emphasized by the use of the terms Kship, Prishtha and Vana. Now no commentator of Rigveda has referred to Charaka (10;496)

who spoke of "the sovereign herb which is known by the name Soma (and) has fifteen joints or knots (per stalk)". Dr. Aitchinson, served as the Naturalist of the English Afghan Boundary commission of 1885. With regard to ephedra, as reported by Modi (11;303), he wrote that it consists of "branches and sprigs as one mass of upright twigs each twig, made up of joints, like the joints of fingers". If he had known Sans-Krit he would have used here the word Kship, mentioned above, as occurring in Rigveda 9.79.4. Aitchinson further found "the plant to be a bush with golden coloured flowers and the twigs more or less so. The plant has no leaves. It is all twigs and jointed". Here fig. 2 illustrates the stalk as yellow at the base and the jointed nature of the stalks quite clearly.

### SUMMARY

Soma has been extolled in Rigveda as the plant growing on hill tops. It is composed mainly of long thin stalks like arrows. Then the stalks are jointed. The plant like any other would be green but Soma was also partly yellow. Fig.1 shows ephedra growing on hill tops and as a mass of arrow-like stalks which appears as a bush. Fig. 2 shows the Chinese species the first the Aryans used. The stalks at the base are yellow., and each stalk is jointed. These are the specifying features as observed in nature of ephedra and mentioned in Rigveda as qualifying Soma.

### FOOTNOTES

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6. Pope, Arthur. (1938).  
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7. Kapadia, B.H. (1959).  
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