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## THE SLAYING OF THE GOD SOMA

By

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Herman Lommel in a contribution to the book of Adolf E. Jensen, *Das religiöse Weltbild einer frühen Kultur*, Stuttgart 1948, pp. 89–92 drew the attention to some Vedic passages where the authors interpret the pressing of the Soma plant (*su-*) as the killing (*han-*) of the god Soma : TS 6, 4, 4, 4; 6, 4, 7, 1; 6, 4, 8, 1 sq.; KS 27, 3; MS 4, 5, 8; ŚBr 3, 4, 3, 15; 3, 9, 4, 2; 3, 9, 4, 17; 4, 1, 4, 8; 4, 2, 5, 15.

In the above mentioned book Jensen collected myths from many parts of the world, which have — despite of variants in detail — the central idea, that in primeval age a deity was slain and from its corpse then originated the edible plants. The ritual repetition of that primordial murder, the eating or swallowing of the body of that goddess (or a surrogate of it) guarantees plants and therefore life for the manhood. The deity was frequently identified with the moon.

Jensen attached importance to the fact, that according to him, these parallels are not the result of a similar psychological predisposition of men, but the consequence of the spreading of an only once made “finding”, a finding, that could explain the annual renewing of the fertility of the on and on exploited earth. Hence an explanation from history and not from psychology (archetypes : C. G. Jung and his followers).

It is not my intention to discuss here Jensen's theory with all its implications.

Lommel tried to show, that also Vedic India shared that myth. His contribution was not noticed by Indologists, because it was never mentioned in an Indological publication. Unfortunately it also was not included in his “Kleine Schriften”.

H. Lommel drew the attention to a special trait, mentioned in the texts of the Yajurveda : Mitra refused to assist in the slaying of Soma because he is *mitra-* “friend”. But finally Mitra nevertheless participated in the murder and so cattle departed from him (saying) : *mitráh sán krūrám akar* “(although) he is Mitra [friend] he has done a cruel (i. e. bloody) deed” (TS 6, 4, 8, 1). By mixing  
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the Soma with milk Mitra (and in consequence the Yajamāna, who repeats the slaying of Soma by the gods in sacrifice) is united again with cattle.

H. Lommel in an article "Mithra und das Stieropfer" (Paideuma 3, 1944, p. 207 sqq. = Kleine Schriften, p. 199 sqq.) tried to connect that trait with the West-Iranian cult of Mitras, where Mithra, the Iranian form of Mitra, kills a bull.

The possible objections against Lommel's treatment of the Yajurvedic texts are obvious: it is possible that the killing of the god Soma is not an inherited old myth, but the result of a theological speculation starting from the verb *han-* (in the RV never used for the pressing of the Soma plant), which could designate simply the pressing, was interpreted by the *brahmanādinah* according to its original meaning as "slay, kill".

That interpretation leads to the next step: "The god is killed in the pressing but every effort is made to repair the mischief ..." (Keith, TS I, CXXI). So the authors of the YV must explain and justify the participation of these gods who receive the cups: Indra / Vāyu, Mitra / Varuṇa, the Aśvins (TS 6, 4, 7-9).

Therefore it is predictable that the authors of the TS invent also an explanation on the base of the appellative meaning of *mitra-* = "friend" (which is not Rigvedic).

It is possible to dispel the doubts whether the idea of the killing of Soma was a real myth or only theological speculation of a later period, *only*, if we can show, that already in the RV exist passages which point to an appeasement. So we could conclude that the pressing of the Soma plant was indeed understood from the beginning as a *krūrām*.

In an article for the Festschrift Wilhelm Rau (forthcoming) I tried to show, that RV 9, 68, 4 *rākṣate śiraḥ* cannot be translated as H. Lüders, Varuṇa, p. 231 sq. maintained with "as a chief (*śiraḥ*) he (king Soma) protects (his subjects)." On various grounds it is clear that Geldner's translation "he (Soma) protects (his own) head" is correct. —Possibly the passage must be seen in connection with TS 6, 4, 9, 1: *yajñāsya śīro 'chidyata ... tāto vai tau yajñāsya śiraḥ prāty adhattam* "the head of the sacrifice was cut ... then indeed they both (the Aśvins) replaced the head of the sacrifice." In the system of the context the head of the sacrifice can only mean the head of Soma. Cp. RV 10, 94, 14 *suté adhvaré* what is of course *suté sóme* (1, 5, 2; 1, 177, 2; 3, 40, 1; 6, 23, 1, 5, 6 etc., etc.).

But there are still other passages in the RV, which show that the idea of the killing of god Soma existed, but was just like the lunar aspect of Soma — more or less suppressed. Allusions to the lunar aspect of Soma are found in hymns dealing with themes or rites which are not in the center of R̥gvedic thought, e. g. in the Sūryāsūktam 10, 85, 1-10.

Passages which point to a tabooing of the murder of Soma are the following : 10, 94, 10a *vṛṣā vo amśur ná kilā riṣāthana* “ your stalk is a bull, you should not be hurted.” Not so clear is 10, 85, 4 *grāvānām ic chr̥vān tiṣṭhasi* “ you ( Soma ) are standing upright listening to the stones ( for pressing out the Soma )”. Geldner comments : “ The stones do not hurt him.”

In RV 10, 94 ( praise of the stones for pressing ) the pressing of Soma is described by different metaphors. It seems that not all of these paraphrases are the product of poetical imagination, but mirror — at least partly — a common shy to designate the pressing as slaying. If the verb *han-* was intentionally avoided and given instead of it euphemistic circumscriptions, we can conclude, that the idea of killing the Soma even in R̥gvedic times existed.

The stones are dancing : 10, 94, 4c *saṃrābhya dhīrāḥ svāsr̥bhīr anartīṣur* “ the wise ( stones ) were dancing embraced by the sisters ( the ten fingers of the Adhvaryu )”. 10, 94, 5 *suparṇā vācam akratōpa dyāvī | ākharé kṛṣṇā iṣirā anartīṣuḥ | nyān nī yanty ūparasya niṣkṛtām | purū réto dadhire sūryaśvitaḥ* “ the eagles produced speech in heaven, over the ( sound ) — hollow the lively, the black stones were dancing. They come down to the place of rendezvous of the lower ( stone ). They let amply run sperm.” A similar erotic allusion we have possibly in 9, 82, 3 *sām grāvabhīr nasate vitē adhvaré* “ he ( Soma ) attains safely to the stones when the sacrifice is prepared.” *nas-* means “ to come through, to copulate, to reach the aim ”; *sam-nas-* is “ to attain safely, to meet for cohabitation ”, ( Cp. Schlerath in the Proceedings of the XXXII International Congress for Asian and North African Studies, 1986. Forthcoming ).

10, 94, 13d *pr̥cānti sōmam ná minanti bāpsataḥ* “ when they ( the stones ) chew the Soma they make him copious, they do not diminish his vital force ” ( according to P. Thieme, *Kleine Schriften*, p. 21 ).

6, 51, 14 *grāvānaḥ soma no hi kaṃ sakhitvanāya vāvaśūḥ* “ For our stones for pressing want you, Soma, for companionship ( feudal service )”.

10, 94, 14ab *suté adhvaré ādhi vācam akratā kriḍāyo nā mātarām tudāntaḥ* “ when the sacrifice was pressed, they produced speech; like playing children pushing ( their ) mother.” For *kriḍāyaḥ* Cp. 10, 78, 6ab *grāvānaḥ* ...

[*ádrayo ná viśváhā / śiśūlā nā kriḍāyaḥ* "the stones ... like rocks all-slaying (?), playing like children ..." — For *tudántaḥ* Cp. 9, 67, 19 *grāṇā tunnó abhī-ṣṭutaḥ / pavitraṃ soma gacchasi / dádat stotré sviryam* 20: *eṣá tunnó abhīṣṭutaḥ / pavitraṃ áti gāhate / rakṣohā vāram avyáyam* "pushed by the stone for pressing, praised, you go into the strainer, you bring possession of good men to the praising one." — "he (Soma), pushed, praised, dives into the strainer, made from sheep's wool, he who kills the demons." — *tud-* is apparently euphemism for *han-*. Additionally extenuated by the comparison with the playing children, who push but not hurt their mother (before birth in the womb?). And the killed Soma is at the same time *rakṣohán-*.

So my conclusion is that H. Lommel is right in taking the killing of the god Soma as a myth, inherited from Indo-Iranian times.