

EPHEDRA, THE OLDEST MEDICINAL PLANT WITH THE HISTORY OF AN UNINTERRUPTED USE

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ABSTRACT: *Ephedra was a source of anti-fatigue drink. In later period it became a drink of immortality and longevity. The use of Soma as the first drink of a newly born child is mentioned in Rigveda. The author identifies the Soma of Rigveda with the Ephedra and established its use in ancient Rome and also highlights here its continuity among Zorostrains.*

Soma is the name of a drink in Rigveda which confers immortality. It is the aqueous extract of a plant which is also named accordingly. On account of its historical importance attempts have been continued to identify it scientifically. Its latest position has been described by Prof. C.G. Kashikar (1980 ; 62), himself a renowned vedic scholar of Poona. He writes that “the problem of the identification of Soma plant has engaged the attention of the scholar for the last hundred and fifty years and in spite of persistent efforts in exploring literary, historical, geographical and botanical sources the problem cannot be said to have been settled unanimously. “A theory coined by Wasson (1968) assumes soma to be the mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*, which is a hallucinogen. This is usually eaten raw and its therapeutic effects are entirely different to Soma as described in Rigveda and Wasson has been criticized by Brough (1971). Another theory by Miss Mulholland (1976), strange enough, maintains (on p.53) “that the Soma plant cannot be identified from information obtained from Book Nine of the Rigveda”. On the contrary most scholars are unanimous in believing that the final compilers of Rigveda placed most of

the hymns dedicated to Soma in this very portion of Rigveda, Book Nine. Even more radical is the idea of Miss Mulholland that the active principle of the plant is an essential oil. She writes (on p. 53) that “the drug soma was a volatile oil. It was of a bright golden colour and had a sweet flavour”. With all the plants Soma could belong and what would be the nearest essential oil which like-wise makes its consumer energetic and euphoriant which Soma does according to Rigveda. I cannot take these two assertions seriously nor Wasson’s contention that Soma was a mushroom.

On account of his eminence as an authority on Iranian culture I cannot ignore Sir. H. W. Bailey (1972). The present theory is that soma is a Sanskrit word derived from the root Su=to press, when soma merely means, “the pressed out”. Common sense would suggest that the plant would be named first and its juice would be known later. Bailey realizing this states (on p. 105) that ‘the plant has no reasonable name if it is traced to Hau (Avesta word) or press out juice. “With emphasis on the phonetic principle he found Huma close to “Pashto Xomba which

means mushroom". As final conclusion he writes, "Would not spongy plant be a better name for a plant than pressed juice" p.105. I have shown earlier (1978) that the Chinese first called ephedra Hau-Ma, Fire coloured fibres of hemp and the Avesta form Hao – Ma is reminiscent of it. H, mutates into S, so that Hua-Ma later Sua-Ma finally became soma. At any rate Bailey's discussions would support Wasson's theory that Soma was a mushroom.

If there is to be one authority on Iranian – Zoroastrianism it would be Prof. Mary Boyce (1975 : 157) who writes briefly, but effectively, that "for hundreds of years the Iranians have known and used a species of Ephedra as Haoma". Before the Darmesteter (1895), a renowned Avesta scholar of his times, not only identified Homa = Ephedra but actually illustrated it as such. I (1982) had an occasion of reproducing Darmesteter's illustration on p. 27. Prof. Boyce has made a remark which is capable of elaboration and confirmation. She wrote, "*For hundreds of years the Iranians have known and used a species of ephedra.*" This we may also learn from Modi (1922) who informs that "Haoma juice (would be) the first drink (of a child) after birth. Formerly the juice was squeezed and consecrated in a fire-temple. New born child should be made to drink a few drops of this juice. Haoma was emblematical of immortality". Modi does not refer to the source according to which this custom was continued. West (1901: 222) translates a Zoroastrian scripture where verse 10.16 states that "the first food to be given to the child in Hom-juice". Now what confers immortality upon the living, also resurrects the dead. Accordingly Modi (1922) writes (on p.54) that "a few drops of Haoma juice were poured in the mouth of the dying person". In fact Haoma personified says "I, Haoma, who am holy and keep away death"

– Modi (p.305). Now the Parsis of Bombay, as Orthodox Zoroastrians, have kept up this custom of administering a few drops of Haoma juice to the new born. Since Haoma, which is ephedra, does not grow in the plains of India the Parsis of Bombay used to import ephedra all the way from Persia where it grows profusely. No mother would tolerate using a substitute of genuine Haoma for that would not assure the longevity of her child. The question now arises is that; if the custom, which exists today and has been ordained according to Holy Parsi scripture, has been inherited from ancient Aryan stock, it might be mentioned in Rigveda, the oldest source of such information. On account of its importance a separate article entitled "Soma juice as administered to a newly born child being mentioned in Rigveda" has appeared in the American J. Chinese Med. 11 (1-4): 14 – 15 (1983). RV. 3 – 48.2 states "that day when thou was born thou, fain to taste, darkest the plant's milk which the mountains nourish. That milk, thy mother first, the dame; who bear, thee, poured for thee in thy mighty father's dwelling" RV 3-32-9 says "India is thy true greatness, that soon as born thou darkest up Soma". The following verse, 3 – 32 – 10, adds "as soon as thou was born in the highest heaven thou darkest soma in delight thee Indra". Gods were immortals but they were mostly drug made immortals. Hence Soma was administered to them as the first to them as the first drink of a newly born child. Thus the present Parsi custom is really Aryan and can be confirmed by Rigveda. We have merely to follow it to trace the origin of soma. The Aryans who entered Europe and finally called themselves as Romans have an interesting history about ephedra.

Modi (p.232) explains that "it appears from Avesta that the Haoma ceremony was always accompanied by the Barsom

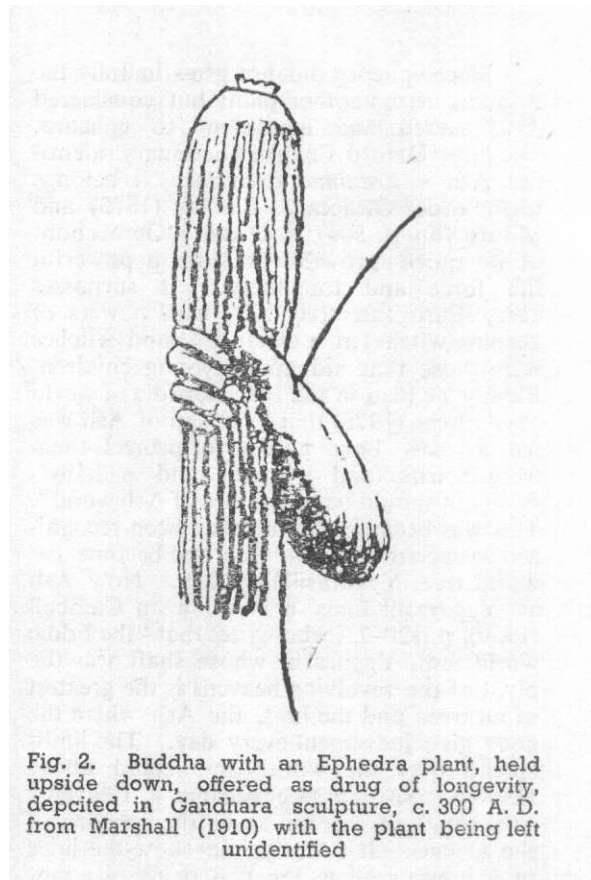
ceremony, as it is even now. The ancient Flamines, who like the Athravans of the Persians, where the Fire priests and whose practices resembled those of the Athravans or Iranian fire priests, whenever they went before the sacred, fire they used the twigs of a particular tree". Now the tree the Roman fire-priests used has remained unknown so far. In the first place it must be shown that the Zoroastrians, while worshipping fire, presented a bundle of plant Soma. Fig. 1, here shows a Zoroastrian King with rod-like twigs of ephedra. The picture is taken from Savil (1977). A corresponding scene,

Fig. 2, shows Buddha holding a bunch of ephedra twigs. This picture is taken from Marshall (1910).

Ephedra twigs can grow upto two feet if not even longer so that figs. 1 and 2 actually represent ephedra being held in the hands. But the Persian King and Buddha would dispose with ephedra as the Iranian rites required. We must not conclude that the Roman fire priests worshipped fire likewise, which Modi clearly mentions. But the Raman priest could not have used ephedra, as it does not grown in Italy.



Fig. 1. Zoroastrian King, holding a bundle of Ephedra stalks, C. 5th cent B. C. Rigveda verse 10.97.11 says "When bringing back the vanished strength I hold these herbs with my hand," from Savill(1977), explained as "detail of gold votive plaque from Iranian temple, fifth-third cent. E.C. showing a man carrying rods used in Zoroastrian rites. British Museum." That rods are Ephedra stalks is not identified.



The Roman tree then was a substitute, but so far it has remained unknown. But we can infer about its existence and identify it by the fact that the juice of that plant was given as the first drink of a newly born child. This custom is mentioned in Rigveda and still exists among the Parsis. This custom never died out and to follow it is the surest way of tracing the plant as the Soma of Rigveda.

Since ephedra did not grow in Italy the Romans used another plant but considered it as sacred and equivalent to ephedra. The large Oxford English Dictionary identifies, Ash = *Fraxinus excelsior*. It belongs to the order Oleaceae. Lindlay (1987) and Moore (on p. 506) writes that “On account of its quick growth revealing a powerful life force and toughness... it surpasses every European tree.... With powers of keeping witches at a distance”, and witches were those that kidnapped young children. Finally we read in the Encyclopedia of world Mythology (1975) that “the sap of Ash was fed to new born babies to protect them from spirits (and witches) and a baby’s first bath should be before fire of Ash wood”. This was because the tree had been recognized as sacred and “the Ash tree become the world tree, Yggdrasil” – p. 239. Now Ash as Yggdrasil finds a mention in Cambell (1959), p. 120 – 21, 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 judgment every day. The limbs spread over the world and stand above Heaven. Such a tree became a Heavenly tree equal in sacredness to the ephedra of the Aryans. It then explains how the juice of Ash was used as the first drink of a new born just as it is mentioned in Rigveda and just as it is actually practiced by the Zoroastrians in Persia and India. Thus the custom which is mentioned in Rigveda, was practiced in ancient Rome and is

existing even today among Zoroastrians. Briefly the juice was a sacred drink of immortality and if one should follow the history of this rite one can easily confirm Soma = Ephedra and as far as Rome is concerned Soma = Ash or *Fraxinus excelsior*.

CONCLUSION

Ephedra was at first a source of anti fatigue drink. Later it became panacea and drink of rejuvenation, finally of longevity, immortality and resurrection. Gods were not born mortals. A drink of immortality made them immortal. This was given as the first drink of a newly born child. This use is mentioned in Rigveda: 3.48.2 and 3.32.9-10. Indra was such a drug made immortal god. West translates a Zoroastrian Holy scripture which also maintains pouring a few drops of ephedra in the month of a new born. To expedite resurrection it was also given to the dead. This custom has survived up-to-date so that to follow it is to realize Soma = Ephedra. Romans, as a branch of Aryans, also believed in a drink of – immortality which they also gave to the newly born. Since ephedra was unknown they used juice of the Ash tree which was their sacred – tree. Altogether according to Prof. Mary Boyce “for hundreds of years the Iranians have known ephedra as Homa” and gave – it to the newly born to assure longevity.

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