

Soma

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The drink called in Avestan *houma* and in Sanskrit *soma* played a major part in the rituals of the Old Iranian culture and in the Indian culture derived from it. The identity of the plant from which this drink was made has long been sought by Indologists and pharmacologists. I here briefly review the major suggestions, and end by agreeing that the suggestion most often previously offered (ephedra) is probably correct.

From the Rg Veda hymns, it is evident that soma is derived by pressing the leaves and stems of a plant. There is no suggestion that fermentation is involved, thus the alcoholic suggestions (Oldenberg 1894 and others) must be excluded. The mushroom (fly-agaric, Wasson 1969), is ruled out, since mushrooms have no leaves and stems to be pressed. Syrian rue (pergamum harmala, Flattery and Schwartz 1989) is unlikely, since only the seeds of that plant contain a psychoactive substance. Clark (2017), based on the ayahuascas of the Amazon region, proposed a mixture of plants, but “there is no direct evidence in the Rgveda that multiple plants were used in the preparation of soma” (Brereton/Jamison 2020, 79).

The major candidate has always been the ephedra plant, one point in its favor being the fact that ephedra is still used in modern Zoroastrian (that is, modern Iranian) ritual. One difficulty with ephedra, or with any single plant, is that Avestan haoma and Sanskrit soma are sometimes said to produce different effects: the one giving rise to “hallucination,” the other to “intoxication.” The terms are perhaps not very happily chosen; we might better think of a transcendental mental experience on the one hand (such as is produced by breath control in Buddhist meditation) and strengthening on the other. Consider ephedra’s modern substitute, pseudoephedrine. It is not available on the open shelves of the pharmacy, but must be asked for, and adult status proved. My local pharmacist tells me that kids like to get high on it, whence the prohibition, whereas truck drivers use it to keep awake during the many hours of a long haul.

The concept of “stimulation” would seem to cover both uses.

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