

Brief report of the Workshop
The Soma/Haoma-cult in early Vedism and
Zoroastrism: Archeology, Text, and Ritual
Leiden, 3-4 July 1999

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This workshop was organized and hosted by the Research school CNWS, University of Leiden, to deal with a 'perennial' problem in Indology and Iranology: the nature of the Soma/Haoma plant and the juice pressed from it. Soma/Haoma plays an important role in Vedic and Zoroastrian ritual and mythology. Recent discoveries at Margiana, modern Turkmenistan, showed the remains of a temple-cult in which several plants were employed. According to the archeologist Prof. V.I. Sarianidi, working on sites in Margiana since more than a decade, these plants include papaver and Ephedra. As early as in 1922, the Ephedra has been mentioned as the best candidate for the plant from which juice is extracted and consumed in the Vedic Soma-ritual, as well as in the Avestan Haoma-ritual (Modi 1922:301-5). After a period of investigations of all kinds of other candidates – e.g. alcoholic drinks based on rhubarb (Stein 1931) or honey or millet; a mushroom, *Amanita muscaria* or fly-agaric (Wasson 1968); the Syrian rue (Flattery & Schwartz 1989) – several recent studies have again arrived at Ephedra as a plant which could very well have been used in the Soma/Haoma-rituals. The recent discoveries in Margiana would lend additional support to the identification of Soma/Haoma as Ephedra. The complex problem of the Soma/Haoma-cult involves the archeological interpretation of material remains (making use also of botanic and medical knowledge), the philological understanding of ancient Vedic and Avestan texts, and an anthropologically sound reconstruction of an evolving ritual system connected with the material remains and the texts. Scholars with diverse academic backgrounds and specializations had been invited to present a paper at the workshop.

After the opening address of Prof. J.C. Heesterman, the first lecture was given by the archeologist of the Iranian world Dr. W. Vogelsang (research school CNWS, Leiden University). In his lecture, “The advent of the Indo-Iranians: the Minefield of Archeological Interpretation,” Dr. Vogelsang dealt with the implications of the findings in Margiana for the large problem of the presence of the ‘Indo-Iranians’ in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent and the Iranian world, at least from ca. 1 millennium B.C. onwards. The common view is that the Indo-Iranians are a ‘branch’ of nomadic or semi-nomadic Indo-Europeans, who entered the Iranian world from the north. In his recent book, *Margiana and Proto-Zoroastrism*, V.I. Sarianidi argues that the temple-cult for which he found indications in Margiana is a predecessor of the Zoroastrian rituals centering around Haoma and fire. The inhabitants of the building complexes in Margiana and Bactria (BMAC) would have been Indo-Europeans, ancestors of the Iranians and Vedic Indians. Vogelsang, however, argues that it is not likely that the nomadic or semi-nomadic Indo-Europeans got settled in the BMAC buildings, though they may have been in close contact with this urbanized culture, and may have been influenced by their rituals, perhaps including rituals in which Ephedra and other plants were employed.

Dr. A.F. de Jong (Leiden University, Faculty of Theology), specialist in Zoroastrism and religions of antiquity, gave the next lecture entitled “Triple Haoma in the Development of Zoroastrian Traditions.” Dr. de Jong emphasized the importance of mediaeval developments in Zoroastrism, which determine to a great extent our perception of the earlier phases. In this later Zoroastrism, the physical Haoma plays a minor role, while the mythological and eschatological Haoma is of great importance. Finally, the problem of the interpretation of the ‘triple Haoma’ which is mentioned in later texts was addressed.

The last morning lecture was a presentation by Prof. V.I. Sarianidi, in which he gave information about the archeological findings in Margiana, including the most recent ones of this spring. Prof. Sarianidi illustrated his lecture with numerous slides. He could demonstrate quite convincingly that some special buildings were used for purposes which involved the use of various plants. Stylized drawings suggested that plants including papaver, hemp and Ephedra were of importance to the former inhabitants of the archeological complexes.

In the afternoon, Indologist Prof. Harry Falk (Berlin) gave a lecture entitled “Decent drugs for decent societies,” in which an overview was provided of the major current arguments for the identity of the Soma. Some new considerations were added to the arguments which Prof. Falk presented 12 years ago (also in Leiden, at the 8th World Sanskrit Conference) in favour of the Ephedra-thesis. Especially the type of behaviour to be expected after employment of different types of drugs, and its suitability or otherwise in a certain type of society and ritual, received Prof. Falk’s attention in this lecture. It was argued that the effects of the fly agaric (initially soporific, later increased aggressivity, deteriorated ability to formulate sentences), are very contrary to what is to be expected from Soma (stimulating wakefulness, poetic inspiration; no aggressivity). The effects of Ephedra would suit much better the references in the hymns and the employment in the ritual.

The second afternoon lecture, by Dr. Jan E.M. Houben (Kern Institute, Leiden), was devoted to a hymn in the *R̥g-Veda* which refers to a rare way of Soma-preparation quite different from the elaborate and solemn form known from the ritualistic texts and also presupposed in numerous other *Ùg-Vedic* hymns. This exceptional Soma-preparation, obsolete for about two millennia, is undertaken privately with household mortar and pestle as its simple instruments. Typologically it may be regarded as an intermediary between two well-known types: the Zoroastrian (simple, with mortar and pestle) and the Vedic (elaborate, with special stones and boards). Current treatments of the hymn such as the one by K.F. Geldner do not bring out satisfactorily its relevance for the ritual practice reflected in it.

The last afternoon lecture was by Drs. Friso Smit, who is specialising in ethno-pharmacognosis at the department of medicinal chemistry, Utrecht University. In his presentation, “The Soma-Haoma problem from ethno-farmacognostical perspective” Smit enlightened the participants about chemical and pharmacological aspects of the Ephedra-plant and related drugs, and about their use in various ethnic communities. The pharmacological effects of ephedrine generally suit the effects ascribed to Soma and Haoma (including negative effects with too high doses).

The next day a video-film on the Zoroastrian Yasna ceremony (produced by Prof. Dr. J. Boyd, Colorado State University) and parts of The Pravargya Ritual: performances in Delhi (produced by J.E.M. Houben and Nandini Bedi) were shown and discussed. Next, the results of the lectures of the previous day were further discussed. As for the main topic of the workshop,

the identity of the Soma/Haoma, most participants could accept Ephedra as a serious candidate. Diverging views were held, and continued to be held, regarding implications for problems of the social, cultural and linguistic situation of ancient South and Central Asia-problems which are both theoretically and ideologically very sensitive. Professor Sarianidi graciously offered to send some specimens of the material containing plant remains to Leiden for further investigation.