

# Soma and Ecstasy in the *Ṛgveda*\*

George Thompson

For Frits Staal, *gurudakṣiṇā*

I took up the perennial and seemingly intractable problem of Soma more than a year ago, after a desultory, richly stimulating conversation with Frits Staal and Michael Witzel that ranged over many, many topics having to do with the recent revelations about the Bactrian-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC) [cf. Sarianidi 1998 and 1999]. We all agreed at that time that Victor Sarianidi's claim that the BMAC was a proto-Zoroastrian culture was certainly provocative and important, but perhaps quite a bit premature. But there was less agreement among us, and much less certainty, concerning the significance of Sarianidi's apparent discovery of traces of ephedra at various BMAC sites. On the one hand, such traces seemed to confirm the well-known and influential thesis of Harry Falk, which asserted that the Vedic sacred drink Soma, and thus also Avestan Haoma, was an extract from an ephedra. On the other hand, Sarianidi claims to have found at BMAC sites traces of other pollens as well – hemp, poppy, and cannabis among them – and he repeatedly characterizes Soma/Haoma as a hallucinogenic beverage. Such claims would seem to directly contradict Falk's view that "there is nothing shamanistic or visionary either in early Vedic or in Old Iranian texts" [Falk, 1989, p.79]. Furthermore, Sarianidi implicitly characterizes this Soma/Haoma beverage as a "concoction" consisting of a probably variable number of extractions. This characterization of course runs directly against the grain of the current opinion among Vedicists that there must have been one, and only one, soma-plant. It is puzzling therefore that in spite of these rather glaring disagreements, the consensus that was established by Falk's article seems not to have been troubled at all, and it is even more puzzling that Sarianidi's work continues to be cited in support of it.<sup>1</sup>

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\* Note: the author has represented Sanskrit according to the Harvard-Kyoto table, well known to readers of EJVS, here transposed to Unicode.

<sup>1</sup> I have unfortunately not had the opportunity to see the papers that have developed out of the 1999 conference in Leiden on the Soma/Haoma cult, with which, I am pleased to

I will admit at the outset that I have no adequate alternative to the ephedra-theory, at least when it comes to an identification of the ur-plant from which the sacred drink Soma was extracted. I will admit also that in my intrepid youth I was charmed, as I think many of us were at the time, by the mushroom-theory of R. Gordon Wasson [Wasson 1968]. But I quickly became an agnostic after reading Brough's very persuasive critique of that theory [cf. also Kuiper 1970], and ever since then I have been more or less agnostic about the identity of the sacred drink Soma [adopting a position rather like those of Elizarenkova 1996 and Oberlies 1998] I also acknowledge the influence of David Flattery and Martin Schwartz [Flattery & Schwartz 1989], whose book identifying Soma/Haoma as *Peganum harmala*, a mountain rue, I have found illuminating, particularly in their insistence on the importance of the Iranian evidence. In fact, it has taken me fifteen years to come to terms with their rather counter-intuitive insistence [so it seemed to me at the time] that the Vedic evidence was not as important in this matter as the Avestan evidence. I have come to think that they may have been right after all about the secondary value of the Vedic evidence. But I have also come to the conclusion that the Avestan evidence may be "secondary" as well. But that is the matter for another paper, so I won't pursue it here.

My interest in examining the Soma-problem was re-kindled by Frits Staal's insistence that the ephedra-theory was not at all persuasive. In a recently published article he has presented a criticism of the ephedra-theory with which I generally agree, and to which I will attempt to contribute a few more arguments in this paper. I must acknowledge publically that when Staal insisted that the matter must be reconsidered, and when Michael Witzel suggested that it would be a good project for me to look into the matter, I quickly backed away from it. I knew that it would be an enormous task, and I knew that it would be a difficult one to complete. Nevertheless, the importance of the matter eventually lured me into the task. As I have observed elsewhere [in *Festschrift Staal*], one of Staal's great contributions to Vedic studies has been his resolute determination to question received

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say, the present paper is now included. I look forward with great anticipation to the publication of the proceedings of this conference, which will surely move us forward on the Soma-question, interest in which among Vedicists is, as far as I can tell, gaining a great deal of momentum at the moment.

opinion. It is in recognition of his remarkable independence of thought that this paper is offered to him, as a *gurudakṣiṇā*.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than summarizing the ephedra-theory [which I trust will be unnecessary for most of this journal's readers], I would like to respond in detail to a few points in Falk's paper, which is in my opinion the best articulation of the ephedra-theory, and one of the best summaries of the Ṛgvedic material that we have. The first point is his insistence, rather surprising to me, that there is no evidence of shamanic or visionary experience in Vedic, and no evidence whatsoever also that the Soma-drink was hallucinogenic, itself also surprising [not that I claim that Soma \*was\* hallucinogenic; rather, I reject the suggestion that it could not have been so]. Much of what Falk says in this article rings absolutely true to me, but these two claims don't ring true at all, and it is the primary goal of this paper to argue against them. Of course, the ephedra-theory has been around for a long time,<sup>3</sup> primarily because of the well-known fact that Parsis have been using ephedra in their rituals for many centuries, and they have been calling it something like 'um', 'oman', 'hum', 'huma', or 'hom', etc., in Iranian languages [all obviously from 'haoma'], or in Indic 'som' or 'soma' or 'somalatā', etc. [all obviously from 'soma'].<sup>4</sup> Flattery & Schwartz were the first to point out the rather significant implication of this fact: "that ephedra was called \*sauma already in the common ancestral Indo-Iranian language" [p. 68]. Now, for Falk, the obvious conclusion to draw from this is that the inherited term \*sauma referred, as it still does among Parsis, to the juice or extract of an ephedra plant, which in fact is readily found throughout the relevant regions.<sup>5</sup> For Falk, then, there is no need to look elsewhere for the ur-plant: it is straight-forwardly an ephedra [as was assumed much earlier by Geldner in his still standard translation of the *Ṛgveda*]. But Flattery & Schwartz resisted this conclusion, for one simple reason: in their view, "ephedra is without suitable psychoactive potential" [p.73]. According to

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Staal's paper and this one were written entirely independently of each other. I did not learn of Staal's until I had sent him an early version of this one based on a paper presented at the 2001 AOS conference in Toronto. At that time his paper was already in press.

<sup>3</sup> On the history of the ephedra theory, see O'Flaherty in Wasson, 1968, pp. 95-147. Cf also Falk's brief but illuminating summary.

<sup>4</sup> For details, see Flattery and Schwartz, pp.68-72. They cite also certain Dardic forms that indicate that \*sauma was not exclusively a Sanskritic or Sanskritizing form.

<sup>5</sup> Recent reports indicate that ephedra has been found also among the mummified bodies discovered in the Tarim Basin; cf. Mallory & Mair, pp. 138, 186, 200, etc.

them, the juice that one extracts from ephedra is a rather mild stimulant, ephedrine [similar in effect to adrenaline] which, besides providing some relief for those with asthma, is, as Falk rather dramatically says, “a reliable stimulant for warriors and a great aphrodisiac” [p.87].<sup>6</sup> Flattery & Schwartz, on the other hand, emphasizing the frequent association in both Vedic and Avestan between *\*sauma* and *\*mada* [“intoxication”], have insisted that the ur-plant must have contained psychoactive or hallucinogenic properties. And so Flattery & Schwartz, seeking a better-fitting candidate, turned to *Peganum harmala*, a mountain rue also well known in the relevant regions, and which, by the way, also has names in Iranian languages that derive from *\*svanta* [Avestan *spenta*], ‘numinous, sacred,’ and which therefore has a suggestive linguistic pedigree of its own.<sup>7</sup> Falk [p.78-9] has usefully classified the various proposals for identifying the original *\*sauma*-plant into three general categories, according to the pharmacological properties of the plant: the 1st group, that it was hallucinogenic [e.g., hemp, cannabis sativa, the mushroom *Amanita muscaria*, or the wild mountain rue, *Peganum harmala*; also opium & mandrake]; the 2nd, that it was alcoholic, fermented from the likes of rhubarb, common millets, rice, or barley, and even grape;<sup>8</sup> the 3rd, that it was a stimulant of some sort [besides ephedra, ginseng has been proposed by Windfuhr, 1986]. Falk has offered strong, largely persuasive, evidence that the Ṛgvedic Soma must have been a stimulant [see his extensive discussion of the RV word *jāgrvi*, “alerting,” etc, applied to Soma]. Soma was used, for example, at the night-long *atirātra* rites, to chase away sleep, to inspire poetic thoughts [cf. Kavi Soma as *janitā matīnām*, as *ṛṣikṛt*, etc], as well as inspiring battle-courage [particularly in the case of Indra] and even as an aphrodisiac [perhaps especially among women: see RV 8.91.1 & 1.28, cited

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<sup>6</sup> For a more technical discussion of the psychopharmacology of ephedras, see Spinella 2001, pp.114-117.

<sup>7</sup> See the discussion of Flattery and Schwartz, pp.45ff. Without going into detail, the main objections to the identification of *\*sauma* as *Peganum harmala* have been proposed already by Falk and Staal: first, that *harmala* is burned for fumigation, not pounded and pressed, as in our early-Indo-Iranian texts; second, that it is a rather commonplace weed, not a rare and difficult-to-find mountain plant, as the early evidence clearly shows *\*sauma* to have been. Furthermore, in contrast with the much later Arabic evidence offered by Flattery & Schwartz [pp.32f.], there is no mention of seeds in the early Indo-Iranian evidence. Also, there is no evidence in these later texts of the pressing of *harmala* and the mixing of its juice with milk and honey, as in the early texts. Of course, it should be added that if the second objection [its easy availability] is valid in the case of *Peganum harmala*, it may also be a valid objection to the ephedra-theory.

<sup>8</sup> Besides Falk, pp.78ff., see also the broad survey of O’Flaherty, in Wasson, pp. 95-147.

by Falk]. Each of these uses can be identified in Avestan texts as well.<sup>9</sup> It is or should be obvious that Falk has made a renewed, much-strengthened, case for the old ephedra-theory. However, it seems to me that the evidence for the claim that the Soma-plant was a stimulant needs to be examined more closely. This claim rests largely on the use of the term *jāgrvi* as an epithet of the god Soma. [cf Falk, pp. 79f]. The term is attested 23x in the RV: 3x it is used to refer to the hymns that awaken, inspire, or stimulate Indra [3.39.1 + 2; 8.89.1]; 9x it refers to the awakening, stimulating virtue of Agni [1.31.9, 3.2.12, 3.3.7; 3.24.3; 3.26.3; 3.28.5; 5.11.1; 6.15.8; 8.44.29]; 11x it refers to the awakening, stimulating effects of Soma [3.37.8; 8.92.23<sup>10</sup>; 9.36.2; 9.44.3; 9.71.1; 9.97.2; 9.97.37; 9.106.4; 9.107.6; 9.107.12; 10.34.1]. Admittedly, such a distribution would seem to confirm Falk's claim that this epithet suggests that the Soma-plant is a stimulant. But in fact this distribution raises interesting questions. First of all, notice that there are no attestations of the word at all in three of the family books [Books 2, 4, and 7], and it is attested only once in two of them [Books 5 and 6]. Also noteworthy is the fact that *jāgrvi* occurs only once each in the two large later addenda to the RV, Books 1 and 10. This suggests that there is no chronological significance to the distribution. In light of the rareness of this word in the vast majority of the RV, it is very striking indeed that it occurs as many times in Book 3 as it does in Book 9 [8x each], especially when one considers that Book 9 is almost twice as long as Book 3. In Book 3 the word occurs as an epithet of Agni 5x, of the hymn 2x, and of Soma 1x. In Book 8 meanwhile its three attestations are distributed equally to Agni, to the hymn, and to Soma (though transferred to Indra) [1x each]. Now, it is conceivable that the Soma hymns that have been extracted from the family books and collected into Book 9 could have been drawn from any of those books, and this might explain why the word *jāgrvi* is so poorly attested in them. If this is the case, then this remarkable distribution would be more or less insignificant, and the high frequency in Book 9 would simply confirm Falk's view that the term is as appropriate to Soma as it is to Agni, the two gods who accompany and keep awake the priests as they perform their *atirātra* rites. But this fails to take into consideration the relatively much, much higher frequency of the word in

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Y. 9-11 [Hom Yasht] passim.

<sup>10</sup> Strictly speaking, it is Indra who is addressed here as *jāgrve*, but clearly, as Falk, p. 80, has pointed out, he is addressed so because he has consumed Soma. It is a transferred epithet here.

Book 3. A better alternative, it seems to me, would be to grant more weight to the evidence of the older family book, Book 3. There it would appear indisputable that Agni is the primary recipient of the epithet *jāgrvi*, whereas it is a transferred epithet when applied to Soma and the hymn [*matī*]. This is not to say that the term is applied inappropriately to Soma. No, Falk has convincingly demonstrated its appropriateness. Rather, it is to suggest that the word might be better understood as an element within traditional Vedic formulaics. Interpreting *jāgrvi* in this way is consistent with the fact that the other terms cited by Falk in this context [*vīpra*, *kavī*, *ṛṣikṛt*, etc.] are more frequently attributed to Agni than to Soma. Furthermore, since it is clear that there was a marked preference for this divine epithet *jāgrvi*<sup>11</sup> among the *viśvāmitra* clan, it might be reasonable to suppose that this is the clan to whom we should attribute the best authority.<sup>12</sup> The attestations of *jāgrvi* in Book 9 seem to me to be a secondary extension of a formula that is more appropriate to formulaics of the Agni-cycle. For this reason, I am not entirely persuaded that the word refers to the soma-extract as having a specific psycho-pharmacological effect. As for RV 5.44.14-15, which Falk [p. 80] cites as perhaps “the most convincing example” of a passage showing that Soma is a stimulant, the theme of staying awake and alert through the night is certainly central there [cf. the extensive repetition of the verb *jāgāra* in both stanzas]. But the reference there is not to the Soma-plant, but rather to the god Soma, who asserts that “It is I who am at home in your friendship” [*tāvāhām asmi sakhyé níokāḥ*], and in fact the one to whom the god Soma asserts this is the god Agni, as is evident in stanza 15. I have argued extensively in Thompson 1997a [pp.32ff.] that this pair of stanzas is a variation on the Vedic *brahmodya* pattern, and that, in a highly indirect and riddling way, the poet here [the author of what Geldner considered to be the most difficult hymn in the RV!] has identified himself with the god Soma, and his “alert, awake” audience with the god Agni [see the discussion of stanza 13, which in fact initiates the theme of wakeful alertness, but in that stanza it refers to a human patron, not a god, and his name appears to be

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<sup>11</sup> The use of *jāgrvi* as a divine epithet must go back to an old, common Indo-Iranian tradition, since it is attested in exactly the same usage in the Avestan cognate *jīyāuruuah*, applied to Mithra, as well as to a divinized *hām̐vareiti*, “Manly Valor.”

<sup>12</sup> Note also that 29 of the 62 hymns of Book 3 are devoted to Agni [vs. 24 to Indra].

Sutambhara, “the one who bears the Soma-juice”<sup>13</sup>]. In short, the many obscurities of this hymn make very problematic the interpretation of this passage. To use it as secure evidence that the Soma-plant had to have been a psycho-pharmacological stimulant seems to me to be premature. I think that Falk has also studiously avoided the enormous evidence, in both Vedic and Avestan, that links *\*sauma* with *\*mada*, “intoxication.” Instead of delving into the interesting question of the very broad semantic range of the term *\*mada* [and related forms] – e.g., whether it would cover all three of the types of soma-theories that have been proposed: (1) hallucinogenic? (2) alcoholic? (3) stimulant? – as, in fact, it certainly does<sup>14</sup> – instead I will simply point out that in the RV the vast majority of attestations of *máda* [and related terms] occurs clearly in Soma-contexts, so it is Soma-*mada* in particular that we should be concerned with. As far as I can see, these attestations strongly suggest something like the sense ‘ecstasy’, rather than an alcoholic inebriation, or a general stimulant effect like that of an ephedra-extract. As Brough has also suggested of *máda* and related terms: “It is difficult to give an adequate equivalent, but the tenor of the hymns indicates something like ‘possession by the divinity’, in some way comparable to Greek  $\mu$ ” [Brough, p. 374; cf. similarly Staal, pp.752, 759, where he glosses the verbal root *mad-* as suggesting “rapture or bliss”]. In other words, the physiological effects of *\*sauma*-intoxication in early Indo-Iranian, as far as I can tell, cannot easily be reduced to the effects resulting from a rather mild stimulant, or of an aphrodisiac even of the strongest sort, as ephedrine seems to be.<sup>15</sup> Instead of defending in any detail the truth of these claims for the connotations of *sómasya máda* and related terms in the RV [which I will attempt in a forthcoming article<sup>16</sup>], I’d like to take a close look at one hymn from the RV,

<sup>13</sup> A small cycle of Agni-hymns is attributed to Sutambhara at RV 5.11-14. In this cycle there are two references to the theme of awakening: at 5.11.1 [*jágrvi*, of Agni] and 5.14.1 [the impv. *bodhaya*, taking the direct object *agním*].

<sup>14</sup> See KEWA 2.568 for the relevant literature. It is puzzling to see that in his magnum opus on Soma T. Oberlies has completely ignored this question, even in the 57 page chapter on “Der Soma-Rausch und Seine Interpretation” [Vol. I, pp.449-506].

<sup>15</sup> Again, see Spinella 2001, already cited. Of course, it may well be that ephedrine may be potent enough in some cases to induce visionary or ecstatic experience. – such as that extracted from the mountain varieties of ephedra mentioned by Falk, p. 83 [also Nyberg, 1995]. If so, then I will give up my objections to the identification of ephedra as the ur-Soma-plant. But so too, it seems to me, Falk will have to give up the claim that Soma could not have induced visionary, ecstatic, or even shamanic experiences.

<sup>16</sup> *máda* is attested 279x in the RV. If we include compounds and variant forms like *madirá*, etc., the total amounts to roughly 400x. There are also roughly 200 attestations

10.119, a very well-known and much discussed hymn, the so-called *laba-sūkta*, ‘song of the lapwing.’ And, in doing so, I’d like to return to Falk’s claim that there is no evidence of visionary or shamanic experience in Vedic, and his view that the Soma-extract was therefore not likely to have been a drug that induced ecstasy.<sup>17</sup> Here is Falk in his own rather remarkable words: “The only half-serious reason to expect hallucination as an effect of Soma-drinking in an Indian context is the well-known *laba-sūkta*, RV 10.119” [Falk p.78]. I must say this is an astonishing remark. First of all, this hymn is not at all “the only reason” for such a view – whether half-serious or full-serious or not serious at all. There are many other hymns in the RV which also seem clearly to indicate visionary experience, or ecstatic experience, whether induced by Soma or by other means. One obvious example is RV 8.48, which Falk [p.80] cites only to refer to *nidrā́*, ‘sleep,’ in stanza 14, while ignoring all of the evidence in this remarkable hymn for ecstatic and visionary experience. Another is 10.136, which portrays the *keśín* in ecstatic experience [of shamanic flight, as I would suggest] induced by the consumption of some unidentified poison, *viṣá*. Furthermore, it is likely that visionary experience may have been induced by entirely non-intoxicant, non-pharmacological, ritual means, such as the *Ātmastutis*, to be discussed in what follows. In any case, I do not insist that Soma must have been an hallucinogen. But I do insist that visionary and ecstatic experience is well-attested in the *Ṛgveda*, and that it is frequently attributed by the poets themselves to the consumption of Soma. Shouldn’t we take the poets at their word in this matter, since it involves, as I will try to show, their own personal, very real, experience? As for 10.119 itself, Falk’s argument against its depicting visionary or ecstatic experience is based on the claim that the hymn describes the experience of Indra, or at least of Indra in the guise of a bird [*labá*], probably a lapwing – rather than the experience of a human being who is “in the intoxication of Soma” [cf. *sómasya* of the hymn’s refrain in

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of verbal forms of mad-. Clearly, this material points to a major preoccupation of the Vedic poets. Much work remains to be done.

<sup>17</sup> In response to the oral version of this paper presented at the AOS annual meeting in Toronto, March 2001, objections were raised against the admittedly indiscriminate use of such terms as ‘visionary,’ ‘ecstatic,’ and ‘shamanic.’ But I should point out that all of these terms were introduced by Falk. Of course, these terms are not synonymous, but they do cover a semantic territory that should be recognized as continuous and related. In any case, I feel no obligation to defend in this brief paper my use of these terms. More will be forthcoming on the notion of a Vedic shamanism, and on the precise semantics of *sómasya máda* in the RV.



light of the formula *sómasya máde*, as well as its variants]. In particular, Falk calls attention to stanza 11, where, after consuming Soma, “some winged creature”, he says, touches both the earth and the sky with its wing, and stanza 8, where the bird’s body expands beyond the extent of earth and sky. Falk concludes: “nowhere is it said that human Soma-drinkers feel that they are growing. To fill the whole cosmos is a feature of several gods [e.g., Agni, Ūṣas, Sūrya, as well as Soma]...” [Falk, p. 78 – parenthesis added]. Therefore, in Falk’s view, the hymn does not offer even half-serious evidence that Soma was hallucinogenic, or that the experience described in the hymn was ecstatic or visionary. Here, again, I must disagree: there are good reasons to reject Falk’s too-rigid interpretation of the hymn as a strictly mythological narrative. Let us look at the hymn in detail.

10.119.1

<i>íti vā íti me máno</i>	Yes, yes, this is my intention.
<i>gám ázvam sanuyām íti</i>	I will win the cow, the horse. Yes!
<i>kuvít so’ masyāpām íti</i>	Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.2

<i>prá vātā iva do’ dhatā</i>	Forth like raging winds
<i>u’n mā pītā ayaṃsata</i>	The drinks have lifted me up.
<i>kuvít so’ masyāpām íti</i>	Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.3

<i>u’n mā pītā ayaṃsata</i>	The drinks have lifted me up,
<i>rátham ázvā ivāzávaḥ</i>	as swift horses lift up the chariot.
<i>kuvít sómasyāpām íti</i>	Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.4

<i>úpa mā matír asthita</i>	Inspiration has come to me,
<i>vāzrā putrám iva priyám</i>	like a bellowing cow to her precious son.
<i>kuvít so’ masyāpām íti</i>	Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.5

*ahám táṣṭeva vandhúram  
páry acāmi hṛdā matīm  
kuvít so'masyāpām íti*

I, as a craftsman the chariot seat,  
I bend around in my heart this inspiration.  
Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.6

*nahí me akSipác caná-  
achāntsuh páñca kṛṣṭáyaḥ  
kuvít so'masyāpām íti*

Not even a blink of the eye  
have the five tribes seemed to me.  
Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.7

*nahí me ro'dasī ubhé  
anyám pakṣám caná práti  
kuvít sómasyāpām íti*

Neither of these two worlds to me  
seems equal to one of my two wings.  
Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.8

*abhí dyām mahinā bhuvam  
abhímām pṛthivīm mahīm  
kuvít so'masyāpām íti*

I have overwhelmed heaven with my  
greatness,  
I have overwhelmed this great earth.  
Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.9

*hántāhám pṛthivīm imām  
ní dadhānīhá vehá vā  
kuvít sómasyāpām íti*

I myself, I myself will set down this  
earth, perhaps here, perhaps there.  
Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.10

*oṣám ít pṛthivīm ahám  
jaṅghānānīhá vehá vā  
kuvít so'masyāpām íti*

Heatedly will I smash the earth,  
I will smash it, perhaps here, perhaps there.  
Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.11

*diví me anyāḥ pakṣó-*

In heaven is the one of my two wings.

*adhó anyám acīkṛṣam*                      The other I have dragged down here below.  
*kuvít so'masyāpām íti*                      Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.12

*ahám asmi mahāmaho'*-                      I myself, I am become great, great,  
*abhinabhyám u'dīṣitaḥ*                      impelled upward to the clouds.  
*kuvít so'masyāpām íti*                      Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

10.119.13

*gṛho' yāmy áraṃkṛto*                      I go forth a home<sup>18</sup> that is well made,  
*devébhyo havyavāhanaḥ*                      a vehicle of oblations to the gods.  
*kuvít so'masyāpām íti*                      Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

First, some general comments and observations: This remarkable hymn has received a great deal of attention,<sup>19</sup> not only because of what it may or may not teach us about Soma, but also because of the many difficulties which it has presented to interpretation. There is considerable disagreement, for example, about the identity of the assumed speaker, whether it is Indra, or Agni, or the lapwing itself, the *laba* to whom the hymn is attributed by the native tradition, or whether it is Indra in the guise of a lapwing, or perhaps finally a human poet expressing the exhilaration induced by the soma that he has consumed. Here is Falk's summary of his own interpretation of the hymn: "The traditional explanation of the *Laba-sūkta* is the only credible one: a bird, assumed to be Indra in disguise, has drunk from the Soma offered and is thought to feel the same as the god in his usual, non-material form. Because all the proponents of Soma as a hallucinogenic drug make their claim on the basis of a wrong interpretation of the *Laba-sūkta*, their

<sup>18</sup> As Hauschild has argued at length [1954, pp. 276f.; cf. also Rau 19xx], a *gṛhá* in early Vedic was likely to have been a domestic wagon. This sense seems to be confirmed in this passage by the collocation with *havyavāhanaḥ*, "vehicle of oblation," in the following line.

<sup>19</sup> Besides the standard translations and commentaries of Geldner, Renou [besides EVP 14.39 & 110, cf. also Renou 1956] and Elizarenkova [1999], see also the very detailed study of Hauschild; also Schmeja; Mylius; Stuhmann, et al. The remarks of Gonda, "The So-Called Secular, Humorous and Satirical Hymns of the R̥gveda," Selected Studies 3.379f., remain pertinent. On the other hand, it is also important to note that this hymn has been surprisingly ignored by Wasson, as well as by Flattery & Schwartz. It is also neglected by Oberlies, already cited, in note 11.

candidates must be regarded as unsuitable” [Falk, p.79]. Perhaps an adequate response can be summoned here to this rather peremptory dismissal of some of the best Vedicists of the past 100 or more years. One crucial fact about this hymn, it seems to me, has been under-valued by everyone who has dealt with it, and that fact is that it is an *Ātmastuti*, that is, a ‘hymn of self-praise.’ The fact has been noticed, of course [in particular by Hauschild in his admirable article, and also by Geldner in his introductory comments on the hymn], but until fairly recently the *Ātmastuti*, as a significant genre of RV poetry, has been more or less ignored. The fact that this hymn is an *Ātmastuti*, in my view, makes superfluous all of the discussion, including Falk’s, concerning the hypothetical identity of the speaker of this hymn. As Toporov [1981] and Elizarenkova [1995] have pointed out, the RV *Ātmastutis* are marked by the emphatic use of forms of the first person pronoun, as well as first person verbal forms. But such formal features also mark clear pragmatic features of the genre, two in fact, as I’ve tried to show in Thompson 1997b. One of these, rather self-evident in fact but to my knowledge never fully appreciated, is the act of self-assertion which such hymns express, and in fact which they enact. As is well-known, Vedic poets often find themselves in a position where boastful self-assertion is more or less obligatory [as in the case of the respondent in a *brahmodya* dialogue: cf. Thompson 1997a]. An interesting instance in the RV of direct self-assertion [independent of verbal contests] is RV 10.159, in Geldner’s words a “Triumphlied einer Frau.” This hymn dramatically conveys the “Selbstverherrlichung” of a wife over her rivals – i.e., her rival-wives.<sup>20</sup> But in fact the *Ātmastuti* is not a simple matter of self-assertion, and therefore it should be distinguished from a direct, straightforward act of self-assertion such as in 10.159 [to mark this important distinction, I have adopted the traditional term *ahaṃkāra* to refer to the strictly human act of self assertion, in contrast with the *Ātmastuti*]. The *Ātmastuti* is, in my view, a psychologically much more complicated matter of impersonation, of self-conscious role-playing, as in the well-known case of RV 10,125, where the poet, known traditionally by the name of *vāc āmbhṛṇī*, actually impersonates, i.e., adopts the persona of, the goddess *Vāc*, who is herself the mythological embodiment of the Vedic poetic tradition.<sup>21</sup> In brief, all *Ṛgvedic* *Ātmastutis* are performances wherein a human performer

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<sup>20</sup> For a full translation and commentary on this hymn, see Thompson 1997b.

<sup>21</sup> For a full translation and commentary, see again Thompson 1997b.

impersonates, and speaks both for and as, a divine agent.<sup>22</sup> Here, at RV 10.119, the poet, who is known by the traditional but uninformative name of Laba Aindra,<sup>23</sup> has clearly adopted a role, apparently a traditional role. Admittedly, it is hard to determine precisely which role he has adopted in this hymn [is he impersonating Indra? Agni? some mythological bird?]. But a proper view of the pragmatics of Vedic speech-acts, and in particular the pragmatics of *Ātmastuti*,<sup>24</sup> suggests that the particular role that is being played in this hymn is far less important than the fact itself that a poet, a human being and not a god, is indeed playing a role, like an actor in a Greek tragedy, perhaps, or perhaps rather like a Central Asian shaman, which in my view is a much more appropriate comparison.<sup>25</sup> In other words, from the

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<sup>22</sup> To my knowledge it has not been noticed before, but as a matter of fact there are traces of both the *ahamkāra* and the *Ātmastuti* motives in Avestan as well: see in particular the *azEm* sequence in the *Hom Yasht*: Y 10.15-18 [the poet's *ahamkāra*, in fact, a kind of pledge of allegiance to the god Haoma]. Y 9.2 is a brief *Ātmastuti* attributed to Haoma; Yt 8.25 is a brief Ahura *mazdā* *Ātmastuti*; Yt 14.3f., etc. Perhaps the best examples are Yt 1.7-8 attributed to Ahura *Maśdā*, and the very interesting "I am" sequence immediately following at stanzas 12-15. A brief *Ātmastuti* is also attested at Yt.10.54-56 [*Mithra Yasht*].

<sup>23</sup> This name is uninformative because it is merely inferred from the text of the hymn. In fact, neither element of the name is attested in the hymn, nor is the name of any other deity [the term *sóma* clearly refers to the juice that has been drunk, and not to the god Soma]. In my view, neither the traditional name of the poet nor the traditional interpretation of the hymn can be accepted [pace Falk].

<sup>24</sup> Thompson 1997b has already been cited, but it seems necessary to stress the point here. Stuhmann [1985, p.91] has made the following remark, which has been affirmed by Oberlies [Vol. 1, p. 496]: "Die Somalieder sind... wesentlich Wir-Dichtung und Preisliedern auf Soma; individuelle Rauschprotokolle können wir nicht erwarten." In general, this is probably a valid remark, but RV 10.119 shows that in fact there are exceptions, as *Ātmastuti* in general also show. In fact there is a clear record of individual experience of ecstasy in the RV, as a direct result of Soma consumption. Furthermore, a brief look at the concordances of Bloomfield or Lubotsky will show that there is a good amount of evidence for an Ich-Dichtung genre, both in the RV in general, and among Soma hymns in particular. Oberlies in fact appears to contradict himself at Vol. 2, p.39, when he notes the "I am" sequence at the beginning of RV 4.26 as the utterance of an "ekstatisch erregten Seher" [the hymn is cited several times in Thompson 1997b, where more evidence and a more detailed analysis can be found].

<sup>25</sup> In his notes to stanza 1, Geldner compares RV 10.97.4, the words of a "Medizinmann." This passage will be treated in a forthcoming paper on the particle *iti*. Cf. more recently Meissig 1995 [on RV 10.108, which, by the way, displays *Ātmastuti* features] and Deeg 1993 on Vedic shamanism [I have not had access to these articles, which are cited by Oberlies, vol.1, p.311]. Frederick Smith is presently working on the notion of a Vedic shamanism; I eagerly look forward to his discussion. As for older literature, see Gonda, Oldenberg, Hauer, et al. Note that Flattery & Schwartz, pp.24f., briefly allude to Amazonian shamanism.

point of view of pragmatics it does not matter who is \*supposed\* [or \*imagined\*] to be speaking in this hymn. The fact remains that it is \*actually\* the poet himself who utters these words, and through whom these words pass, just like the streams of Soma [as the poets of the RV themselves are prone to say]. The refrain of this poem, then, is to be attributed not to this or that god or to some other mythological creature. No, it belongs, strictly speaking, to the poet who formulated it, whose emphatic repetition of the personal pronoun places him pragmatically at the very center of the hymn, as the person through whom the performance passes, and through whom the impersonated being – in my view, most likely, Agni<sup>26</sup> – becomes manifest, palpable, or *satyá*, ‘true,’ for his audience. It is therefore legitimate, in my view [pace Falk], to interpret the experiences evoked in RV 10.119 as genuinely human experiences, whether directly felt as the result of drinking Soma, or theatrically enacted [or perhaps re-enacted], that have been experienced by the poet himself. In other words, behind the mask of the performance of RV 10.119, genuine human experience is undeniably evoked and enacted in it. Consider the great prominence of first person forms. First of all, the refrain, conveying the hymn’s central motif, is conspicuously marked by the first person root aorist *ápām*, “I have drunk [of the Soma].” But in every stanza of the hymn the refrain is accompanied by at least one other first person form, whether an enclitic variant of the first person pronoun [e.g., *mā* in stanzas 2 and 4, *me* in stanzas 6 and 7, etc.], or by a first person verbal form [e.g., *bhuvam* in stanza 8 and *yāmi* in stanza 13]. But far more frequently one finds a combination of both pronominal and verbal forms [e.g., *me* and *sanuyām* in stanza 1, etc.]. This slowly accelerating but highly dramatic accumulation of first person forms culminates in stanzas where the first person pronoun *ahám* emphatically [and in fact redundantly] accompanies a first person verbal form [stanzas 5, 9, 10, 12]. This emphasis is reinforced in stanzas 5 and 12, where *ahám* takes the highly marked stanza-initial position; in stanza 9 where it takes second position following

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<sup>26</sup> If stanza 13, the hymn’s finale, is not a later addition to the hymn [as has been suggested by S. Jamison, personal communication], then the phrase *devébhyo havyavāhanaḥ* would strongly suggest that Agni is the god impersonated in this hymn. Of course, Agni is often represented as a bird in the RV [a motif culminating in the bird-shaped altar of the *agnicayana*]. I see this hymn as an expression of a kind of Soma-and-Agni fire mysticism, although this is not the place to go into the matter. Cf. also the largely unpersuasive interpretation of *gṛhá* as *grāha*, and of *yāmi* as a passive “was filled,” proposed by Hillebrandt [I.277].

the exhortative particle *hánta*; and in stanza 10, where it stands in line-final position, followed immediately by the first person subjunctive of the intensive form of the verb *han-*, *janḡhánāni* [which itself (along with *ihá vehá vā*) echoes the first person subjunctive *ní dadhāni* (*ihá vehá vā*), etc., of the preceding stanza]. This highly elaborate, skillfully managed, network of first person forms is further strengthened by an extraordinary sequence of word and phrase repetitions, rhymes, rhythmic syncopations, puns, etc, which itself could sustain an extensive analysis. Even without going into such an analysis here, it is readily evident that this hymn is a poetic tour-de-force, even when judged against the very high standards of Ṛgvedic poetic tradition at its best. There should be no ambiguity about the function of all of these first person forms [called ‘shifters’ by certain linguists and semiologists of discourse]: they are designed to call attention to the speaker as speaker – not only within the pretended mythological context which has preoccupied the interpreters of this hymn, but also outside of that context, i.e., the context of the performance itself. Recall that in his interpretation of RV 10.119 [quoted above], Falk refers to the supposed “usual, non-material form” of the god Indra. Well, let us assume for the sake of the argument that this hymn is about Indra. In my view, the assumption that the “usual form” of the god Indra was “non-material” for a Vedic audience needs to be seriously re-examined. I’m not so sure that a Vedic audience would have recognized a “non-material” form of Indra, or of any other Vedic god for that matter. In any case, there is good evidence that Indra did in fact manifest himself on occasion in very material form. Of course, there is better, more obvious, evidence that a god like Agni was constantly present to his Vedic devotees in clearly material, visible, if not quite tangible, form, in the ritual fires, for instance. And Soma is clearly manifest in material, quite tangible, form both in the Soma-plant itself [in my view called *aṃśú*] and in the Soma-juice. As for Indra, one place where one finds him manifest in material form is the RV *Ātmastutis* [most of which in fact are dedicated to him]. In RV 10.119, if indeed it is Indra who is represented in it, he is given the form of a bird, a lapwing [this is the mythological, non-material, form that Falk rightly emphasizes]. But the god is manifest also in quite material form, that is, in linguistic [i.e., audible] form, in the sequence of first person forms that dominates and in fact gives structure to the entire hymn. Furthermore, I think that it is legitimate to say that the impersonation that is clearly performed in this hymn shows the god in a palpably material form, embodied literally in

the performer of the hymn. For the audience of RV 10.119, Indra can be seen there standing before them. For the duration of this performance, the R'Si's body is Indra's body. The ṛṣi's words are Indra's words. The ecstatic flight of the ṛṣi, induced by the drinking of Soma, is also the ecstatic flight of Indra. The members of this Vedic audience, I trust, would have been capable of asserting, without delusion or deceit, that they had indeed seen Indra. Such certainty, it seems to me, would have been the product of shamanic performance, that is, a highly theatrical and physical performance, and not of mythological fancy alone. The flight that is clearly alluded to in the hymn is not mere mythological flight. It is the shamanic flight of a ṛṣi, who seems to me to be experiencing genuine ecstasy which, as the refrain emphatically tells us, has been induced by the drinking of the Soma-juice. A god has entered into this ṛṣi and speaks through him. As far as I can see, what is described and enacted in this hymn is entirely consistent with the performances of shamanic flight that one encounters in the literature [besides the classical account of Eliade 1951, see the essays collected in Diogenes 158, 1992].<sup>27</sup> Besides the basic theme of magical flight made notorious by Eliade's treatment of it, there are many features in the hymn that strike me as shamanic. The boasting which has struck some scholars as bordering on megalomania or simply a crude joke ["Scherzspiel", thus von Schroeder] is frequently encountered in shamanic performance. Shamanic dance is probably attested here at RV 10.119.8-10 [shamanic dance certainly is attested at RV 10.97]. The suggestion that the hymn is a parody, which goes back to von Schroeder and which re-surfaces on a regular basis, needs to be mentioned here too. I am willing to entertain the notion that RV 10.119 might well be a parody in some sense. The heavy repetition of the quotative particle *īti* may in fact mark some sort of parodic intent.<sup>28</sup> But again, parody is a phenomenon well-known to students of shamanism. As for "visionary" experience of a shamanic kind, admittedly there is no straight-forward, explicit evidence of it in this particular hymn, but it is certainly evident at RV 8.48.3 [et passim], with which I will rest my case:

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<sup>27</sup> On early interpretations of the hymn that suggest its shamanic features, see Gonda, pp. 379f, cited above.

<sup>28</sup> A very lengthy discussion of the quotative particle *īti*, and a defense of my translation of it here, has been deleted from this paper, which even without it is overly long. This discussion, and some observations on the evolution of its syntax, will be presented in a forthcoming paper.



<i>ápāma so'mam amṛtā abhūma-</i>	We have drunk the Soma. We have become immortal
<i>-aganma jyótir ávidāma devān</i>	We have gone to the light. We have found [i.e., seen] the gods.
<i>kíṃ nūnám asmān kṛṇavad árātiḥ</i>	O immortal one, what can the indifference
<i>kím u dhūrtír amṛta mártiyasya</i>	the malice, of a mortal man, do to us now?

In spite of the many difficulties which this remarkably energetic and finely-crafted hymn,<sup>29</sup> RV 10.119, presents to interpretation, in my view it nevertheless offers us good evidence for both ecstatic and indeed shamanic experience in the RV, experience which is directly and explicitly linked by the poet himself with the drinking of Soma. Falk's claims to the contrary seem to me to stand, in the end, on surprisingly weak foundations. Considering the fact that several of the major claims in his article are subject to serious objections [ranging from the claim that Soma must have been a stimulant, tout court; the claim that it could not have been psychotropic; the claim that there is no evidence of shamanic experience in the RV; and finally to Falk's abrupt interpretation of RV 10.119 as a strictly mythological narrative which reveals nothing whatsoever about the effects of Soma consumption on real human participants in the Vedic Soma cult], it seems to me now, as it seemed to Frits Staal well over a year ago, that it is time to re-open the question of the specific psycho-pharmacological properties of

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<sup>29</sup> It is frequently suggested [e.g., Brough, p.376; several members of the audience in Toronto who responded to an oral version of this paper] that such craftsmanship could not have been achieved by a poet "in the intoxication of Soma." This has been rebutted already by Staal, p.761 [note his remarks re the fallacy of the excluded third possibility: that the poet could nevertheless have been familiar with Soma-ecstasy, even if not intoxicated while composing the hymn]. I would add this point, taken unchanged from an earlier version of this paper: "Second, the famous example of the German Romantic poet Hölderlin demonstrates that the poetic function is [or can be] autonomous from the proper functioning of the other intellectual and social functions of the mind. If Hölderlin was capable of composing exquisitely crafted, metrically perfect poems, while suffering the debilitating symptoms of severe schizophrenia, it seems to me that this anonymous but very fine RV poet likewise might well have been capable of composing an extraordinary hymn like RV 10.119, consciously impersonating this or that god for his willing and susceptible audience, while undergoing whatever strange symptoms, any whatsoever, that that potent Vedic god Soma, whatever He was, was able to induce in him."

Soma, and to explore with renewed seriousness the possibility of a Vedic shamanism that is intimately related to Soma.

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