
SOMA - HAOMA

Note: The Soma-Haoma issue of the EJVS, of which this is the first part, presents the direct and indirect outcome of a workshop on the Soma-Haoma problem organized by the Research school CNWS, Leiden University, 3-4 July 1999.

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Soma and Ecstasy in the Rgveda
George Thompson

-- For Frits Staal, gurudakSINA

(Note: the author has represented Sanskrit according to the Harvard-Kyoto table, well known to readers of EJVS.)

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.(1)

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 opinion. It is in recognition of his remarkable independence of thought that this paper is offered to him, as a *gurudaksina*.(2)

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 Rgvedic 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(3), 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 'somalata', etc. [all obviously from 'soma'].(4) 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.(5) 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 Rgveda]. But Flattery & Schwartz resisted this conclusion, for one simple reason: in their view, "ephedra is without suitable psychoactive potential" [p.73]. According to 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].(6) 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.(7)

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;(8)

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 Rgvedic Soma must have been a stimulant [see his extensive discussion of the RV word ja'grvi, "alerting," etc., applied to Soma]. Soma was used, for example, at the night-long atiratra rites, to chase away sleep, to inspire poetic thoughts [cf. Kavi Soma as janita' matina'm, as RsikR't, 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 by Falk]. Each of these uses can be identified in Avestan texts as well.(9) 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 ja'grvi 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(10); 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 ja'grvi 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 1x, 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 ja'grvi 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 the ritual in Atpra rites. But this fails to take into consideration the relatively much, much higher frequency of the word in Book 3. A better alternative seems to me to 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 ja'grvi, whereas it is a transferred epithet when applied to Soma and the hymn [mati']. 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 formulae. Interpreting ja'grvi in this way is consistent with the fact that the other terms cited by Falk in this context [vi'pra, kavita, sakti, 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 ja'grvi(11) among the vizvAmitra clan, it might be reasonable to suppose that this is the clan to whom we should attribute the best authority. (12) The attestations of ja'grvi in Book 9 seem to me to be a secondary extension of a formula that is more appropriate to formulae 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 9.44.44-45, 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 jagara in both stanzas]. But the reference there is not to the Soma-plant, but rather to the god Soma, who asserts that he is a man at home in your friendship" [ta'vāna m asmi sakhye m ukān], and the fact that the one to whom the god Soma asserts this is the god Agni, as is evident in stanza 18-19. I have argued extensively in Thompson 1997a (pp. 52-54) that this pair of stanzas is a variation on the vedic brahmya pattern, and that, as a highly indirect and riddling way of expressing the theme of what Geldner considered to be the most difficult hymn in the RV, it 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 god, and his name appears to be Sutambara, the one who bears the Soma-juice (13)]. 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, and that it must be premature. I think that Falk has also studiously avoided the enormous evidence, in both Vedic and Avestan, that links pēuma with "madness, intoxication." Instead of plying into the interesting question of the very broad semantic range of the term mada (and related forms) and 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 (14)-- instead I will simply point out that in the RV the vast majority

this book: worship
of the Lord God of
things which must
be heard and seen,
and of thy
warrant and of thy
things.

with the sayings of
things which must
be heard and seen,
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of attestations of ma'da [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 ma'da 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 $\mu\alpha\delta\alpha$ " [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. (15)

Instead of defending in any detail the truth of these claims for the connotations of so'masya ma'da and related terms in the RV [which I will attempt in a forthcoming article (16)], I'd like to take a close look at one hymn from the RV, 10.119, a very well-known and much discussed hymn, the so-called laba-sukta, '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. (17) 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-sukta, 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. 90] cites only to refer to nidra, '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 kezi'n in ecstatic experience [of shamanic flight, as I would suggest] induced by the consumption of some unidentified poison, visa'. Furthermore, it is likely that visionary experience may have been induced by entirely non-intoxicant non-pharmacological, ritual means, such as the Atmasthanis, 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 Rgveda, 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 [laba], probably a lapwing - rather than the experience of a human being who is in the intoxication of Soma" [cf. so'masya of the hymn's refrain in light of the formula so'masya ma'de, 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, USas, surya, 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'ti VA' i'ti me ma'no
ga'm a'zvaM sanuyAm i'ti

Yes, yes, this is my intention.

I will win the cow, the horse. Yes!

kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.2
 pra' va' ta' va' da' dha' ta Forth like raging winds
 u'n ma' pita' ayamsata The drinks have lifted me up,
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.3
 u'n ma' pita' ayamsata The drinks have lifted me up,
 ra'tham a'zva i'vaza'vah as swift horses lift up the chariot.
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.4
 u'pa ma' mati'r asthita Inspiration has come to me,
 VAZRA' putra'm iva priya'm like a bellowing cow to her precious son.
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.5
 aha'm ta' stieva vandhu ram I, as a craftsman the chariot seat,
 pa' ry aca'mi hrda' mati'm I bend around in my heart this inspiration.
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.6
 nahi' me aksipa'c' cana' Not even a blink of the eye
 achantsu' pa' i'ca ksta' vah have the five tribes seemed to me.
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.7
 nahi' me ro'dasi ubhe' Neither of these two worlds to me
 anya'm paksa'm cana' pra'ti seems equal to one of my two wings.
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.8
 abhi' dya'm mahina' bhuvam I have overwhelmed heaven with my greatness,
 abhi' ma'm prthivi'm mahi'm I have overwhelmed this great earth.
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.9
 ha' nra'm prthivi'm ima'm I myself, I myself will set down this
 ni' dadhAni'ha' vena' va earth perhaps here, perhaps there.
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.10
 oSa'm prthivi'm maha'm Heatedly will I smash the earth,
 jagha' na'ni'ha' vena' va I will smash it, perhaps here, perhaps there.
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.11
 divi' me anya'm pakso' In heaven is the one of my two wings.
 adho' anya'm acikasa'm The other I have dragged down here below.
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.12
 aha' m asmi mahamaho I myself, I am become great, great,
 abhinabhya'm u' disita' impelled upward to the clouds.
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!
 10.119.13
 gRho' yamy a' hramkRto I go forth a home (18) that is well made,
 deve' bhyo havyava' hanah a vehicle of oblations to the gods.
 kuvi't so'masya'pam i'ti Have I drunk of the soma? Yes!

First, some general comments and observations. This remarkable hymn has received a great deal of attention (19), 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-sukta 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.

of the Triple Goddess
 frightening death-crone,
 in most cultures she
 of a made deity. Yet the
 in the form of sensuous
 venge-spirits: in reverent
 the Muslim Fatma; in
 as Eve, Helen of Troy,
 and Petarch's Laura. It is
 text to be a story that
 it, from fragments of
 at various sites in Iraq,
 are administrative and
 tablets and fragments,
 second millennium B.C.E.
 the Old Testament—
 legends, and wisdom
 than literature, was ably
 tag, awaiting the spade
 added and its environ-
 all stories that predate
 connecting Sumerian
 and relate a
 been modeled. From
 tablets and fragments,
 of stories about the
 Anna is an adolescent
 with of a special tree,
 ed for her out of it,
 knowledge of good
 After Enki has been
 drunken generosity
 sily described; there
 are many more; the
 might be to say they
 for good or for ill
 and the priesthood;
 y, and oratory; and
 discovering her own
 and is wooed by
 ings, joyously sleeps
 not necessarily last
 recorded on fourteen
 ups in the text) and
 as about. The story
 of death made by
 s, Orpheus, Osiris,

Because all the proponents of soma as a hallucinogenic drug make their claim on the basis of a wrong interpretation of the Laba-sukta, their 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 Atmastuti, 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 Atmastuti, as a significant genre of RV poetry, has been more or less ignored. The fact that this hymn is an Atmastuti, 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 Atmastutis 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. (20) But in fact the Atmastuti is not a simple matter of self-assertion, and therefore it should be distinguished from a direct, straight-forward act of self-assertion such as in 10.159 [to mark this important distinction, I have adopted the traditional term ahamkara to refer to the strictly human act of self-assertion, in contrast with the Atmastuti]. The Atmastuti 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 VAC Ambhrini, actually impersonates, i.e., adopts the persona of, the goddess VAC, who is herself the mythological embodiment of the Vedic poetic tradition. (21) In brief, all Rgvedic Atmastutis are performances wherein a human performer impersonates, and speaks both for and as, a divine agent. (22) Here, at RV 10.119, the poet, who is known by the traditional but uninformative name of Laba Aindra (23), 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 Atmastutis (24), 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. (25) In other words, from the 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 (26) -- becomes manifest, palpable, or satya, '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 a'pam, "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., ma 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 yam in stanza 13]. But far more frequently one finds a combination of both pronominal and verbal forms [e.g., me and sanuyam in stanza 1, etc.]. This slowly accelerating but highly dramatic accumulation of first person forms culminates in stanzas where the first person pronoun aha'm 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 aha'm takes the highly marked stanza-initial position; in stanza 9 where it takes second position following the exhortative participle ha'nta, 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-, jagha'nani [which itself (along with iha' vaha' va) echoes the first person subjunctive ni' dadhani (iha' vaha' va), 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 Rgvedic 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 amzu'] and in the Soma-juice. As for Indra, one place where one finds him manifest in material form is the RV Atmastuti [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 R'si's words are Indra's words. The ecstatic flight of the R'si, 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 R'Si, 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 R'Si 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]. (27) 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 'ti may in fact mark some sort of parodic intent. (28) 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:

a'pama so'mam amR'ta abhūma- we have drunk the Soma. We have become immortal
-aganma jyo'tir a'vidama deva'n we have gone to the light, we have
found [i.e.,

the gods.

ki'M nUna'm asMA'n kRNavad a'rAtIH

o immortal one, what can the

indifference

ki'm u dhurti'r amRta ma'rtyasya the malice, of a mortal man, do to us
now?

In spite of the many difficulties which this remarkably energetic and finely-crafted hymn (29), 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 Soma, and to explore with renewed seriousness the possibility of a Vedic shamanism that is intimately related to Soma.

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Notes

1. 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 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.
2. 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.
3. On the history of the ephedra theory, see O'Flaherty in Wasson, 1968, pp. 95-147. Cf also Falk's brief but illuminating summary.
4. For details, see Flattery and Schwartz, pp. 68-72. They cite also certain Dardic forms that indicate that *sauma was not exclusively a Sanskrit or Sanskritizing form.
5. 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.
6. For a more technical discussion of the psychopharmacology of ephedras, see Spinella 2001, pp. 114-117.
7. 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.
8. Besides Falk, pp. 78ff., see also the broad survey of O'Flaherty, in Wasson, pp. 95-147.
9. Cf. Y. 9-11 [Hom Yasht] passim.
10. Strictly speaking, it is Indra who is addressed here as jA'grve, but clearly, as Falk, p. 80, has pointed out, he is addressed so because he has consumed Soma. It is a transferred epithet here.
11. The use of jA'grvi 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 jiGAuruuuh, applied to Mithra, as well as to a divinized ha-m.varEiti, "Manly Valor."
12. Note also that 29 of the 62 hymns of Book 3 are devoted to Agni [vs. 24 to Indra].
13. 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 [jA'grvi, of Agni] and 5.14.1 [the impv. bodhaya, taking the direct object agni'm].
14. 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].
15. 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.

16. ma'da is attested 279x in the RV. If we include compounds and variant forms like madira', etc., the total amounts to roughly 400x. There are also roughly 200 attestations of verbal forms of mad-. Clearly, this material points to a major preoccupation of the Vedic poets. Much work remains to be done.

17. 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 so'masya ma'da in the RV.

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

19. 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 Rgveda," 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 111.

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

21. For a full translation and commentary, see again Thompson 1997b.

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

23. 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 so'ma 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].

24. 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 Soma-Lieder 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 Atmastutis 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].

25. 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 i'ti. Cf. more recently Meissig 1995 [on RV 10.108, which, by the way, displays Atmastuti 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. 26. 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 deve'bhyo havyaVA'hanah 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 grha' as gra'ha, and of yami as a passive "was filled," proposed by Hillebrandt [I.277].

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

28. A very lengthy discussion of the quotative particle i'ti, 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.

29. 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."

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FATE OR FREE WILL

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THE YOGA OF KRISHNAMACHARYA

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THE NAMARUPA OF SOMA

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ON THE NĀMARŪPA OF SOMA

GEORGE THOMPSON

NOT COUNTING THE INSCRUTABLE sign system of the ancient Indus Valley Civilization, which, in spite of countless attempts at decipherment, we cannot interpret at all, and which actually may not be a script in the strict sense, the Ṛgveda is the oldest known text of the Indian traditions. The Vedic tradition that the Ṛgveda initiates is generally dated to a period between 1500 years BCE to around 500 years BCE. But these dates are far from reliable and could easily be modified at both ends, because Vedic was a strictly oral tradition. There is no reference to writing anywhere in all of Vedic literature, and it is clear that the transmission of Vedic texts was accomplished by means of extraordinary, highly elaborate techniques of memorization and recitation, rather than by means of the now familiar technology of writing. Of course, writing tends to be viewed these days as a prerequisite vehicle of rationality. Clearly the Vedic tradition belies that view.

The close of the Vedic period at roughly 500 years BCE seems relatively secure, since the earliest extant Buddhist texts in the Pali Canon (certainly at least a few centuries after the life of the Buddha himself, which is speculatively dated to around 400 BCE) seem likely, for the most part, to have followed the entire Vedic literary corpus. Also, it is only by the middle of the third century BCE that we have the first clear evidence of writing in the Indian subcontinent, in the famous rock edicts of the Buddhist emperor Aśoka. On the other hand, the beginning of the Vedic period is very much shrouded in the obscurity of prehistory. Vedic texts show no awareness at all of the Indus Valley civilization, which for unknown reasons began to decline by 1900 BCE. And all efforts so far to link the archaeology of the relevant areas with Vedic culture, and especially the culture of the Ṛgveda,

have completely failed. However, we do have the comparative linguistic evidence of the famous Mitanni texts, which have loan words that clearly refer to Vedic gods, and which use horse-training terms that are also clearly Vedic in origin. These texts are securely dated to the fourteenth century BCE and suggest a reasonably good starting point for the Vedic period.

SINCE OUR ONLY DIRECT ACCESS TO the Vedic tradition is through its texts, Vedic scholars have had to rely on philology as their chief and, in fact, only viable, tool. Now, in my experience there are very few things that Vedic scholars argue about that a nonacademic audience would take much interest in. For the most part we Vedicists are accustomed to arguing about dry technical matters of grammar and philology, like the function of injunctive verb forms, for example, instead of far more interesting matters, like the origins of the yoga traditions. As a matter of fact, there may well be evidence of something like yogic practices even in the Ṛgveda, but the term *yoga* itself was never explicitly used to refer to such practices. For the most part the term *yoga* is used literally to refer to the yoking/harnessing of wagons and horses. Occasionally it is used metaphorically to refer to the yoking/harnessing of the mind in preparation, say, for war, or for those well-known Vedic verbal contests, the *brahmodyas*. Nowhere is there anything like the technical discussions of yoga that one finds in the *Yoga Śāstras*. Most Vedicists have therefore been cautious about making overconfident claims for a Vedic tradition of yoga in the classical sense.

Of course, it is understandable that those coming from a more traditionalist perspective—rather than a scholarly one like mine—would readily consider yoga as a distinctive feature of all Indian

spiritual traditions—both Hindu and non-Hindu alike. Actually, I know of no one who would seriously deny the claim that yoga is an indispensable element of classical Indian spiritual traditions of all sorts. But the fact remains that, whatever yogic practices may be evident in the Ṛgveda, they are relatively rare, and, far from being central to the religion of the Ṛgveda, they seem rather marginal. Furthermore, the Ṛgveda, even while it is the fountainhead of the Vedic tradition, is itself in many ways clearly marginal within that tradition, because many important features of the classical Vedic religious and ritual tradition are not yet found in the Ṛgveda. In terms of lexical, formulaic, and general cultural parallels (including religious parallels), the Ṛgveda in fact has more in common with the Avestan texts of ancient Iran than with the later Vedic *Brāhmaṇa* texts. In general, the Ṛgveda is a text that looks backward toward its past, which took place in Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia, rather than forward toward its future, which took place first in the northwest corner of the Indian subcontinent, and then gradually spread to the rest of the subcontinent, that is, the India of today.

AS FOR THE TERM *YOGA* ITSELF, NOTE that there is no corresponding Iranian form **yaoga*¹. We do have the same verbal root *yaog-*, 'to yoke,' in Avestan as we have in Sanskrit *yūj-*, 'to yoke.' In Avestan, there are a few metaphorical passages—e.g., 'yoking oneself to *Aša* (Truth),' which is exactly parallel to the Ṛgvedic 'yoking oneself to *Ṛta* (Truth)'—but for the most part the Avestan verb is used quite literally; there is no passage that suggests the 'yoking/

¹**yaoga* is the way that linguists and philologists identify a term as reconstructed, not actually attested. Also see footnote ² on page 67 for **sauma*.

harnessing of the mind' that we see in the Ṛgveda. And finally, there is no good evidence at all in Avestan of yogic practices in the classical sense.

All of this clearly suggests that the yoga tradition of classical India was not an inheritance from a shared Indo-Iranian tradition. It seems much more likely that yoga as a rigorous discipline of the self was new to the Vedic Aryans, an indigenous tradition that they probably encountered for the first time as they migrated from the Iranian highlands and the Hindu Kush down into the Punjab. Given the metaphorical uses of the term *yoga* starting already in the Ṛgveda, it is tempting to speculate about what might have happened in ancient India. Encountering native traditions of self-discipline that were foreign to the old Ṛgveda, later generations of Vedic Aryans (starting with the Taittiriya Āraṇyaka) began to use the term *yoga* to refer to these new practices, giving the term *yoga* a new, technical sense, 'concentration of the mind,' which ultimately came to have the classical sense, 'the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind,' as it is defined, many centuries later, in the Yoga Sūtras.

In general, there are many ideas and customs that are distinctive of classical Hinduism which we cannot find, or can find only sporadically or marginally, in the Ṛgveda. Besides yoga, consider the doctrine of reincarnation, or of an eternal *Ātman* distinct from the body, or of karma and rebirth, *advaita* non-dualism, vegetarianism, etc. None of these is clearly present in the Ṛgveda. Furthermore, there is no need to mention the rather large number of gods of Classical Hinduism who are utterly absent in the Ṛgveda, some among them being the most important of all of the gods of Hinduism!

PERHAPS I MAY BE PERMITTED TO MAKE two more general points before moving on to my main topic, *Soma* in the Ṛgveda. The first is that it is important to remember that Hinduism and Vedism are not exactly the same thing. Obviously there are significant continuities of language and culture between them, but there are just as

many, if not more, discontinuities. We can see simultaneously in the transition from Vedic to Classical Hinduism both the appearance of new ideas and practices, and the abandonment or loss of old ones. In many cases, we can see the cult of this or that old Vedic god fade slowly away, while the cult of this or that new Hindu god arises and flourishes, sometimes as if out of nowhere (well, at least that is how it looks from a Vedicist's perspective!). Urban civilization also re-emerges in India after about a 1,500-year-long hiatus. And a new austere spirituality, a new soteriology reflected in Buddhism and Jainism, as well as in late Vedism itself, emerges powerfully onto the scene. Finally, the astonishingly new epic traditions of the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa step out onto the historical stage, changing India forever.

The inevitability of historical change is not something that most of us care to be reminded of, I suppose, preoccupied as we are with the worries that the awful present confronts us with. But certain nativist historians of India have preferred to ignore historical change at all costs, in order to celebrate the *Sanātana Dharma*, the perennial truth of the Hindu tradition. But surely it is possible to embrace this *Sanātana Dharma* without distorting history for the sake of it.

THIS BRINGS ME TO MY SECOND POINT. These same historians also argue, against all credible evidence, that India is the cradle of civilization, and they do mean ALL civilization! Well, of course, it is no such thing!

It is certainly possible, and eminently reasonable even, to celebrate India as one of the truly great civilizations of the world without resorting to the tactics that these pseudo-historians have used on a more or less regular basis. Note, for example, their recent vicious attacks on the distinguished historian of ancient India, Romila Thapar, or their brazen fabrication of evidence on Indus Valley seals (through the crude manipulation of computer images) in order to argue, in the absence of any real evidence, that the language of this remarkable prehistoric urban

civilization was Sanskrit. I would urge the reader to reject the politicization of ancient Indian history that we see today in so much of the popular discussion of India's glorious past. This past is great and strong enough that it can stand on its own without the distortions and exaggerations of these very aggressive, politically motivated, revisionists.

Of course, scholars are not immune to religious and political sentiment and bias. But, as scholars, we have all committed ourselves to the rigorous pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and to the principle that we will subordinate personal bias to that pursuit of knowledge. That is not an easy thing to do for anybody, I readily admit, but frankly if you cannot do it, you cannot legitimately be called a scholar. On the other hand, I readily admit that scholars are just scholars. We are not, and we do not pretend to be, sages or spiritually enlightened *mahātmas* whose advice you should take seriously for anything outside of our small area of expertise. Vedicists do the small but necessary work of studying, interpreting and translating the texts of the Vedic tradition. Without the editions, translations, commentaries and interpretations of these bookish scholars, very few others would be able to understand the Vedas at all. This is especially true of the very remote and highly obscure Ṛgveda. It is even more true of the closely related texts of Old Avestan, which we have come to recognize as so close to the Ṛgveda in language and content that they form, as a distinguished Iranist has recently suggested, an eleventh book of the Ṛgveda.

SO LET US NOW TURN TO THE QUESTION of *Soma*. It is one of those rare Vedic topics that people in general seem to take a very keen interest in, not only in India but also in all those places where there is a serious interest in the spiritual traditions of classical India.

First of all, the god *Soma* is clearly one of the most important and most frequently invoked gods of the Vedic pantheon. He is as important as the great warrior god *Indra*, the chief god of the old Vedic clans, and as *Agni*, the

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nearly omnipresent god of the old Vedic ritual fires. These three are, by far, the central gods of the R̥gveda. Soma has long been known and worshipped in India as a god who offers immortality (*amṛtatvam*) to his devotees and, as the lord of plants and waters, he has been traditionally linked, both in Vedic and later Hindu traditions, with the cycles of the moon, and therefore with the god of the moon. Another important feature of his divine personality is his ability to give battle strength to his worshippers, as well as both poetic and visionary experience. The R̥gvedic myth of the theft of Soma from some celestial fortress by a remarkable bird, for the sake of Indra (on the one hand to give him battle strength; on the other to give him ecstasy), is also well known and is a central element in the mythological career of the god Soma. Though in the early days of modern Vedic studies there was a more or less silly controversy about the 'original nature' of the god Soma (whether his mythology was ultimately solar or lunar in origins), Vedicists have come to general agreement about Soma's celestial or divine manifestations, which were actually in their origins neither solar nor lunar.

In fact, in his origins the god Soma was first and always perceived to be a plant. In the R̥gveda, Soma's plant nature is never far from view. However, and this has spawned much controversy as a result, the R̥gvedic *R̥ṣis* seldom distinguished carefully between Soma as a plant and Soma as a juice, nor even Soma as a god. This has made the botanical identity of the Soma plant a very difficult matter to determine. But in spite of that difficulty, it is exactly that question that has attracted the most attention over the years. It should be noted, however, that this focus on the plant is more than a little misguided, since the term *soma* (Avestan '*haoma*') strictly speaking does not refer to a plant at all. It is a noun derived from a verbal root *su-* (Avestan *hu-*) meaning 'to press, to extract,' which indicates that this noun initially referred not to a plant but rather to a juice extracted from an otherwise unspecified plant.

In my view, it is likely that we do know

the name of the original plant from which this juice was extracted, although this view is not generally accepted. There are good arguments to defend this claim, but they require one of those extended philological discussions that tend to put nonspecialists to sleep. Suffice it to say here that the original name of the 'soma' plant was '*amśu*' (Avestan *asu*). This term is generally interpreted to mean 'stem, stalk' (in classical Sanskrit it comes to have an extraordinary range of metaphorical meanings, like moon-beam and sunray). It appears likely that this word was the original name of the original soma plant. This name is not of Indo-European descent but rather is a foreign borrowing from some unknown, probably Central Asian language. Those who are interested in the details of the argument can consult the website of the 'Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies,' which has recently published a longer version of this essay.

UNLIKE THE YOGA TRADITION, WHICH I believe was indigenous to India and therefore an innovation that was only slowly absorbed into Vedic culture, the Soma cult was clearly inherited from the common Indo-Iranian past. This is borne out by the fact that this cult is also well attested in the early Avestan texts. Just as we can easily reconstruct a common **sauma*² cult (with the god Soma in Vedic, the god Haoma in Avestan), so we can legitimately reconstruct a common **sauma* plant (*amśu/asu*), as well as a **sauma* juice. In both traditions, the plant is gathered, often with great difficulty and preferably from mountain sites, where the best specimens are found. Sometimes it is purchased at great expense, and, as the Vedic ritual tells us, the seller was sometimes beaten. In both Avestan and Vedic, this plant is pressed, then filtered, mixed with milk, water, ghee, or grains. It is offered ritually to various gods and then drunk by the priests.

It is sometimes suggested that this ambrosial drink of the Indo-Iranians has origins going all the way back to prehistoric Indo-European times. There is in fact an Indo-European drink of immortality, a nectar or an ambrosia

(both of these Greek terms refer to a drink that, in the first case 'overcomes death,' and in the second is 'the drink of the immortals'). This drink was frequently called a 'mead,' i.e., 'honey,' just as Soma was called '*madhu*,' 'honey' (English 'mead' and Sanskrit '*madhu*' are cognates). But whatever the original Indo-European drink may have been (most of the European words that refer to it have the sense 'honey, beer, wine'), the Indo-Iranian drink, soma/haoma, and the cult based on it, must have been a later innovation. Even though the verbal root from which the word pair soma/haoma is derived is certainly Indo-European, the two terms themselves are not attested outside of the Indo-Iranian language family. As I have already noted, the original name of the plant, *amśu/asu*, is likely to have been a loan word from a Central Asian substrate language.

Also, although seldom noticed, in Avestan the haoma plant is never referred to as *madhu*—'honey.' We thus cannot reconstruct this connection between Soma and honey to the common Indo-Iranian period. On the other hand, it is only in the Indo-Iranian culture-sphere that this 'drink of immortality' was deified: nowhere in Europe do we ever encounter a god 'Nectar' or a goddess 'Ambrosia.' In fact, all of the major features of the Indo-Iranian cult of **sauma* are peculiar to that culture and are otherwise absent in Indo-European. In short, the Indo-Iranians did not inherit their **sauma*-cult from their linguistic ancestors, the Indo-Europeans. If they did not invent the tradition themselves, then they must have gotten it from somewhere else. That place was most likely Central Asia.

It seems clear that when the Proto-Indo-Iranians migrated into the areas with which they became associated historically they already possessed a newly acquired tradition involving a sacred drink extracted from a certain hard-to-obtain plant, the best specimens of which came from the mountains, as well as an elaborate, new and innovative ritual and mythology to go along with it. The deification of this new sacred drink is also already well entrenched at this time within both branches of the

² Vedic 'soma' and Avestan 'haoma' lead us to suppose that the earlier form of this word in the prehistoric period would have been '**sauma*'.

tradition. But none of the major features shared in common by the Iranian and Indic branches can be attributed to Indo-European inheritance. Somewhere between their departure from their Indo-European homeland and their arrival at their historical destinations, the Indo-Iranians acquired a sacred drink that was uniquely theirs (i.e., that was significantly different from the old Indo-European traditions revolving around an ancient drink of immortality), and migrating southward, they brought their *sauma tradition with them.

OVER THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, A consensus has formed among Vedicists that the original Soma plant must have been an ephedra plant. In a short paper like this one, it isn't possible to examine in detail the reasons for this consensus. Briefly, there have been three main theories over the past generation or so. The best known and most popular among these has been Wasson's theory that Soma must have been a mushroom, the fly agaric, which is known to have psychotropic properties. But in the late 1980s Flattery and Schwartz argued persuasively that the Iranian evidence had been neglected, and that the original haoma/soma plant was probably the mountain rue, *Peganum harmala*, a plant whose extract also has psychotropic properties. Their theory was soon superseded, among Vedicists at least, by Falk's theory that the Soma plant must have been a stimulant, and therefore an ephedra plant. Falk's theory has been strengthened by the discovery of ephedra at several archaeological sites of Central Asia that may have been associated in some way with the Proto-Indo-Iranians. Traces of ephedra have been found in vases excavated from the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC), an important set of sites in Turkmenistan recently excavated by Sarianidi. Also, the mummies that have been recently discovered in the Tarim Basin of the Xinjiang Province of western China have in some cases been found with bundles of ephedra nearby.

The important contribution that Falk made to the discussion was to call attention to the evidence in the R̥gveda

that the Soma drink must have been a stimulant. Some of his arguments were not very persuasive, and I have challenged them in the longer paper. But I think that we do have to concede the point that there is good evidence that the Soma drink was used as a stimulant, as well as an aphrodisiac. There is also evidence that the Soma drink was used medicinally.

However, I also think that Falk failed to address what I have come to call 'the other evidence.' Besides being used to stimulate battle strength and sleep-defying attentiveness through the course of night-long (*atirātra*) Soma rituals, the Soma drink was also used to induce ecstasy and visionary experience. It is this 'other evidence' that strongly impressed both Wasson and Flattery-Schwartz, as well as many other Vedicists over the years. This evidence, which largely revolves around the extensive use of the verbal root *mad-*, 'to be intoxicated, to experience exhilaration, to experience ecstasy,' is textually much more massive than the evidence that Falk cites to defend the claim that the Soma drink was a stimulant.

Frits Staal has recently suggested that the very frequent R̥gvedic phrase '*somasya mada*,' 'intoxication of Soma,' reflected an experience of rapture or bliss, and John Brough earlier compared the experience of Soma intoxication to what the Greeks called 'enthousiasmos,'—'possession by the divinity.' In my view, these remarks are correct and can be supported by many passages from the R̥gveda. It therefore has astonished me that someone with the great familiarity with the R̥gveda that Harry Falk undoubtedly has could summarily dismiss the idea that the Soma drink might have been capable of inducing visionary experience.

Fred Smith is presently working on a book that examines the experience of trance or possession in Indian traditions. Not surprisingly there is a chapter on the Vedic tradition that presents good evidence that the experience of possession was well known within the Vedic tradition. Well, it is certainly premature to rely on Smith's as yet unpublished work to discredit Falk's suggestion, but at the same time we

might pause once again at Falk's clearly overconfident suggestion that this sort of thing was utterly absent in the R̥gveda. Smith's work will show that in fact possession was very much a part of Vedic experience.

I MYSELF AM NOT COMMITTED TO ANY theory of what the original Soma plant might have been. Given the fact that from very early on, in both Vedic and Avestan, various substitutes were used in place of the original plant, which had become increasingly difficult to find, it is very likely that we will never know what that original plant might have been. The obscure poetic language of the Vedic R̥sis is another factor preventing us from attaining a good, clear description of the plant. In one strange hymn that I have studied at length and written about, RV 10.94, the Soma stones, that is, the stones used to press the juice from the plant, are characterized as chanting priests, or as bulls chewing on the Soma plant, as eagles racing up into the sky, as swift horses, and finally as 'Soma eaters.' All of this is utterly confusing. It is impossible to interpret this hymn as a literal description of the Soma ritual (although, to my amazement, I have seen attempts to do so). One might be tempted by it to suppose that the Soma plant may have been eaten, since there are several obscure references to the loud noisy eating of it.

But the hymn appears to be a mocking, satirical performance of the Soma ritual—possibly performed under the influence of Soma intoxication! The Soma stones appear to have been fetishized, anthropomorphized, and even divinized. There is even reference in the hymn to shamanic dance. But in no way can the hymn be used as an aid to identifying the Soma plant. The point is that we are dealing with a very complicated issue, with evidence that can be interpreted in many different ways, and even with the possibility that there was more than one Soma plant.

However, some things are clear about Soma, and in my view one thing that is clear is that the Soma drink was potent enough to induce not only exhilaration but also ecstasy and visionary expe-

rience. By way of concluding this brief introduction to the *nāma* and *rūpa* of Soma, I offer a new translation of the famous *Labā-sūkta* of the Ṛgveda (10.119.1-13), “the Song of the Lapwing.” This hymn has played an important role in the debate concerning the psychopharmacology of the Soma drink. Many scholars have interpreted this hymn as the record of visionary experience, and possibly of hallucination. Falk dismissed this, offering instead an interpretation of the hymn as a mythological narrative (concerning Indra disguised as a bird). Here is the Sanskrit text accompanied by my translation:

iti vā iti me mano
gām āsvaṁ samuyām iti
kuvit somasyāpām iti
pra vātā iva dodhata
un mā pītā ayāṁsata
kuvit somasyāpām iti
un mā pītā ayāṁsata
ratham āsvā ivāśavaḥ
kuvit somasyāpām iti
upa mā matir asthita
vāsrā putram iva priyam
kuvit somasyāpām iti
aham taṣṭeva vandhuram
pary acāmi hṛdā matim
kuvit somasyāpām iti
nahi me akṣipac canā-
cchāntsuḥ pañca kṛṣṭayaḥ
kuvit somasyāpām iti
nahi me rodasi ubhe
anyam pakṣaṁ cana prati
kuvit somasyāpām iti
abhi dyāṁ mahinā bhuvam
abhīmāṁ pṛthivīm mahīm
kuvit somasyāpām iti
bantāham pṛthivīm imām
ni dadhāniha vaha vā
kuvit somasyāpām iti
oṣām it pṛthivīm aham
jaṅghanāniha vaha vā
kuvit somasyāpām iti
divi me anyah pakṣo
‘dho anyam acikṣam
kuvit somasyāpām iti
aham asmi mahāmaho
‘bhinabhyam udiṣitah
kuvit somasyāpām iti
grho jāmy aruṅkṛto
devebhya harjavāhanah
kuvit somasyāpām iti

Yes, yes, this is my intention.
I will win the cow, the horse. Yes!
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
Forth like raging winds
The drinks have lifted me up.
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
The drinks have lifted me up,
As swift horses lift up the chariot.
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
Inspiration has come to me,
Like a bellowing cow to her precious son.
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
I, as a craftsman the chariot seat,
I bend around in my heart
this inspiration.
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
Not even a blink of the eye
Have the five tribes seemed to me!
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
Neither of these two worlds to me
Seems equal to one of my two wings!
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
I have overwhelmed heaven
with my greatness,
I have overwhelmed this great earth!
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
I myself, I myself will set down this
Earth, perhaps here, perhaps there.
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
Heatedly will I smash the earth.
I will smash it, perhaps here,
perhaps there.
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
In heaven is the one of my two wings.
The other I have dragged
down here below.
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
I myself, I am become great, great,
Impelled upward to the cloud!
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!
I go forth a home that is well made,
A vehicle of oblations to the gods!
Have I drunk of the Soma? Yes!

LEAVING ASIDE THE ELABORATE COMMENTARY that hymns of the Ṛgveda often require, I will close by simply pointing out that this hymn belongs to a genre of Ṛgvedic poetry called ‘ātmaśturis’—‘hymns of self-praise’—in which the Ṛṣi adopts the voice, and in fact the persona, of a god. This hymn is not a miniature mythological tale of Indra disguising himself as a bird. It is a shamanic performance in which a god (in my view, Agni) speaks through

the Ṛṣi. For the duration of this very theatrical performance the Ṛṣi and the god are one, the skillfully composed words of the Ṛṣi are the god’s words. The god has become manifest on earth, palpable and real, or in Sanskrit, ‘satya.’

The hymn tells us repeatedly in its refrain that the genuinely human experience emphatically evoked in it is the result of the author’s having drunk of the Soma. Surely, we should take this author at his word. The intense feelings of exhilaration, of flight, of expansiveness, of strength and greatness, and finally the astonishing sense of self expressed in the hymn—these are the most prized things that Soma, the god and the plant and the drink, grants to his devotees.

The evidence is clear: Soma was originally a plant that induced such intense experiences in Soma drinkers that the agent of these experiences, an unknown plant, became divinized, not only in India but also in ancient Iran. Ṛgveda 10.119 is probably our very best evidence for the claim that drinking Soma did indeed induce visionary and ecstatic experience, and not just exhilaration or adrenaline-like stimulation, as claimed by Falk. But far more evidence for this is available to us if we are willing to look patiently and closely for it. In my opinion, this hymn is remarkable, however, because it shows us that this Vedic Ṛṣi, whom tradition identifies as Laba, knew what it was like to be godlike. For, to paraphrase the famous words of another Vedic Ṛṣi (RV 8.48.3), he had drunk of the Soma, and as a result he became immortal, he went to the light, and indeed he found the gods. ♀



NOTE: For the sake of brevity and clarity (so it is hoped), I have avoided all footnotes and text references. For all of the references cited in this article, please consult my longer article in the *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, Volume 9, Issue 1, Article 5, May 2003, which contains several other articles on Soma/Haoma as well.



On Meaning and Mantras Essays in Honor of Frits Staal

Edited by

George Thompson
and
Richard K. Payne

Frits Staal at the 2011 *agnicayana* in Kerala, India.
Photos courtesy of Michael Witzel.

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I now understand why such attempts to convey the rich complexity of the poetry of the RV have not appeared in print to date. Over the years I have learned that it is very, very difficult to convey the brilliance of the language of the RV into English, or perhaps into any language. Nevertheless, I attempt to do so here, in the very small sample of hymns translated below. My hope and ambition is to eventually produce an anthology of roughly 100 hymns that I have already worked on extensively. What I have not yet been able to do is to make a translation for each hymn that also succeeds as genuine poetry in English.

As for the difficulties in the interpretation of the RV, I refer to the complaints about this in a recent, monumental translation of the RV by Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton.² Examining their commentary on the few hymns that I translate here makes clear how difficult it is to produce good RV exegesis. In their acknowledgements, Jamison and Brereton recall that, having been encouraged to do a "quick" translation of the RV for a general audience by Patrick Olivelle at the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society 1998, it took them 16 years to publish it. Jamison and Brereton have also created a website where further commentary on the RV can be continued collectively by members of the Vedic studies community. When it comes to the RV, there is no such thing as a "quick" translation that will also be good.

I focus on a handful of hymns in order to make a minor point about *soma*—the god, the plant, and the juice that is extracted from it—as well as evidence of shamanism in the RV. For the most part Vedicists have expressed little interest in (or perhaps rather a certain uneasiness about) the question of identifying the plant or characterizing the effect of the extracted juice on those who drink it. For example, Jamison and Brereton feel obliged to mention the long debate among Vedicists concerning whether *soma* juice was a hallucinogen or a stimulant, because the interpretation of at least some of the *soma* hymns in the RV require consideration of what the texts of these hymns say about the effects of drinking *soma*. A key question, acknowledged by Jamison and Brereton, is the meaning of the verbal root *mad-* and variants derived from it—no small task, since there are more than 700 attestations of all of these variants in the RV and the semantic range of the root *mad-* is rather wide. Nevertheless, they claim to find more textual evidence to interpret the RV *soma* extract as a stimulant rather than a hallucinogen:

Neither the imagery of the poems nor the vision of the poets requires a hallucinogen to explain them. Our view of the hymns is that they are careful, often intricate compositions that attest to the skill and imagination of the poets. There is no need to assume that the poets experienced the effects of a hallucinogen. . . .³

I disagree with these two excellent scholars, whom I also consider to be my friends. It may well be that there is no requirement to embrace the view that *soma* juice was hallucinogenic, but I think there is indeed a requirement to at least consider the possibility. I have looked for good evidence that the juice, the *soma* extract, must have been an extract from an ephedra, a stimulant, but I have found only a few dozen passages that

may be read as suggestive of this. In order to defend their bold claim Jamison and Brereton would need to present good exegesis of more than half of the 700 or so attestations of *mad-* in the RV, but they have not done so. Of course, it is also true that I too have not produced convincing exegesis of the majority of attestations of all of the RV attestations of *mad-* here.⁴ Until a thorough discussion of all of these attestations can be had, claims on both sides of the question seem to be insubstantial surmises, driven perhaps by little more than preconceptions.

About 15 years ago, during a tour of the United States giving talks on Vedic topics, Frits Staal visited Harvard University to give a lecture, of course mostly concerning ritual. He invited me to attend his Harvard lecture and as I hadn't seen Frits in a few years I was eager to attend. The lecture was a great success and afterward Michael Witzel invited Frits and me to his office to talk about all things Vedic. Eventually the subject of *soma* came up: was it a stimulant or a hallucinogen? Michael was inclined to accept the most popular view at the time, that the *soma* plant was an ephedra.⁵ Frits and I both demurred. We spent some time talking about R. Gordon Wasson's book *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*,⁶ published in the psychedelic Sixties. Neither Frits nor I were confident that the original *soma* plant was a mushroom, but we both felt that whatever kind of plant *soma* was, the substance drawn from it was hallucinogenic in nature. Michael turned to me and said something along the lines of "You should explore this. Someone has to," and Frits agreed. At the time I declined to take up the challenge, knowing that the task would require a lot of time that I did not then have.

The question nagged at me, however, and it seems that it nagged at Frits too. Separately, without either of us knowing what the other was doing, Frits wrote a little-known paper published in 2001, "How a Psychoactive Substance Becomes a Ritual: The Case of Soma,"⁷ in which he argues that indeed the original *soma* plant (also known in Old Avestan as *haoma*) must have produced a psychoactive substance. He also suggests that as the Vedic clans migrated deeper into the Indian subcontinent they could no longer find good specimens of the *soma* plant, which was known to grow best in the high mountains, and he claims that as a result they resorted to substitutes that lacked psychoactive properties. Thus, in the absence of psychoactive drugs, the Vedic clans resorted to ritual. Just a couple of years later, I published a paper on "Soma and Ecstasy in the *R̥gveda*,"⁸ in which I support the view that the *soma* drink was hallucinogenic.

The only other recent major Vedicists who may agree with the view shared by Frits and myself (at least in print) are, as far as I know, Rainer Stuhmann, in "Rgvedische Lichtaufnahmen: Soma botanisch, pharmakologisch, in den Augen der Kavis,"⁹ a work that is not much cited in recent literature, though it should be; and Frederick M. Smith, in *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization*, which talks usefully about *soma* as well as shamanism (though he does not explicitly link these two topics).¹⁰ Jamison and Brereton acknowledge Stuhmann's 2006 paper in their translation; they also cite my 2003 paper, "Soma and Ecstasy in the Rgveda." This debate may go on forever without final resolution, or perhaps it will simply be ignored. After all, when confronted with something that we don't know much about, such as the subject of hallucinogens vs. stimulants, it is probably better (and certainly easier) to simply ignore it. In my view, this is what Vedicists generally have done. Nonetheless I here propose a short argument that the *soma* drink was indeed a hallucinogen.

Jamison and Brereton seem to suggest that because the RV hymns "are careful, often intricate compositions that attest to the skill and imagination of the poets," they could not have been composed by people under the influence of hallucinogenic substances. Similar suggestions have already been dismissed long ago, and correctly, by Staal.¹¹ John Brough had already suggested the same thing in his 1971 review of Wasson's book on *soma*.¹² The intricate poetry of the RV, in Brough's view, could not have been composed by someone under the influence of a hallucinogen. Let me point out, however, that neither Frits or I have ever said that the RV poets were actually under the influence of a hallucinogen while composing the hymns! We simply suggest that they were familiar with hallucinogens. Even so, examples can be found of great intellectual work being done while under various altered states.¹³

The first piece of evidence I offer here is RV 10.119.¹⁴ Frits considered this hymn to be our best evidence that the *soma* drink was hallucinogenic. Note that Jamison and Brereton also embrace my interpretation of this hymn, although they are not convinced that the ecstasy or intoxication reflected in it is evidence of a hallucinogenic state.¹⁵ While it is gratifying that they accept my interpretation, I don't think that they actually entirely understood it. In the essay I assert clearly my belief that the *soma* drink was hallucinogenic. Jamison and Brereton do not confront my claim; they simply ignore it.

Another reason to quote this translation is that Philo Bregstein, one of Frits' oldest friends, also cites it in his contribution to this memorial to

Frits.¹⁶ Frits and Philo became good friends as schoolboys and stayed in touch over their long, successful careers in very different fields. In his essay Philo compares my translation of RV 10.119 to Molly Bloom's lovely final soliloquy in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Without the inclusion of my translation of the hymn here, many readers would likely find his reference to Molly Bloom's ecstatic "yes, yes" rather inscrutable. This emphatic "yes, yes" is also found in RV 10.119. Both texts clearly refer to some sort of ecstatic experience (in the case of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Molly's ecstasy is clearly erotic in nature; in the case of the RV poets, it is visionary).

The chief importance of this hymn is that it shows clearly that drinking the *soma* extract produced ecstasy in the RV poets. This was an experience of flight, of inspiration; an "experience of multitudes" not unlike that described by Walt Whitman in his epic poem *Song of Myself*. It is also an experience of greatness, unimaginable greatness. In their discussion of RV 10.119, Jamison and Brereton also refer to my paper "Aṅhākāra and ātmastuti: Self-assertion and Impersonation in the Rgveda,"¹⁷ in which I characterize the Vedic *ātmastuti* as a poet's impersonation of a god. They do not point out my conclusion, however:

The implication of this study is that the RV poet in performing an *ātmastuti* is adopting the persona of a god, and thereby he can legitimately be said to be a human god, as the Brahmin is said to be at SB 2.2.2.6.18

This is just a brief step away from saying that the RV poet was channeling a god; therefore, he was acting as a shaman.

Around the same time this article appeared I presented a paper, "Shamanism in the Rgveda and Its Central Asian Antecedents," at one of Michael Witzel's Vedic "round tables" at Harvard University,¹⁸ in which I argue that the Indra of the RV is often a god that the Vedic poets channel in their *ātmastutis*, and that Indra's roots are not Indo-European but more specifically Indo-Iranian. The translations of RV 10.48 and 10.49 presented in this paper suggest, in my view, that Indra was originally a shamanic shape-shifting figure. I recall that the essay was well received by Witzel and others in attendance. I have since had many conversations with Michael about traces of shamanism not only in Vedic materials but also in the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC).¹⁹ This is a culture with which the Vedic clans are likely to have been in contact before arriving in the Punjab roughly around 1400 B.C.E. Witzel has in fact expressed a great deal of interest in shamanism in his landmark book, *The Origins of the World's Mythologies*.²⁰

20 A growing literature in Vedic studies argues that the evidence for shamanism in the RV is significant.²² Traces of shamanism are evident in other places in Vedic, for example, tree climbing.²³ See also Indra's shamanic role in the later *śundhāśepha* story in the *Āitareya Brāhmaṇa* (7.13–18). Given the existing evidence of contact between the reindeer peoples of northern Central Asia and the horse peoples of southern Central Asia, including Indo-Europeans, there is good reason to seek additional evidence, both linguistic and archaeological, of contact between these cultures. Wasson's book should not be dismissed out of hand: the northern reindeer peoples certainly used mushrooms to induce visions and ecstasy (and his ethnographic sources are also valuable). As I argue, the RV preserves memory in their Vedic horse cult of the reindeer cult of their northern neighbors, and the evidence is both archaeological and textual. If the RV poets did remember reindeer antlers (suggested by the fact that they placed reindeer masks on their horses), perhaps they also remembered the psychotropic mushrooms of the reindeer people!

Consider RV 1.163, one of only two hymns in the *Ṛgveda* that are dedicated to the sacrificial horse (*aśvasūitis*). Where RV 1.162 is focused on the ritual dismemberment of the horse and on the ritual handling of its body, RV 1.163 is much more metaphysical and metaphorical. This horse sings and flies. He has the wings of an eagle and the leaping forelegs of an antelope. He has a soul or spirit (*atimān*) that flies. He has a mind (*cittā*) that races like the wind and he himself is described as being as swift as the mind (*minojīvanas*). Most importantly, in stanzas 9 and 11 he has antlers. As Victor Mair has pointed out to me, this Vedic horse with his "horns" is a clear sign of an earlier reindeer cult that is found all over Eurasia.²⁴ In excavations at sites that are about 2,500 years old, such as Pazyryk in the western regions of Western Siberia among the Altai Mountains, horse skulls wearing reindeer masks with antlers have been found.²⁵ While all previous translations of this hymn of which I am aware assume that the phrase "horns of the sacrificial horse" is a metaphorical reference to a horse's flaring mane that resembles the rays of the sun, the simple truth seems to be that the horns referred to were actually antlers. In stanza 11 the "horns" are said to "branch in many directions" (*viśṭhītā purutā*). Clearly, they are antlers there.

Asko Parpola also points to loan words in Finnish that derive from Indo-European and Indo-Itarian languages.²⁶ The cumulative evidence for contact between these peoples is strong.

For years I have been studying these reindeer peoples, searching for evidence of possible influences of their culture on the later culture of

the horse peoples, such as the early Indo-Europeans. In RV 1.163 the behavior of the sacrificial horse is strikingly reminiscent of the behavior of the Siberian reindeer. This suggests earlier contact between these peoples and there is further linguistic evidence of this contact, as Alexander Lubotsky,²⁷ Witzel, and Parpola have offered.

My son Akira, whose fiancée is a genealogist, recently took a DNA test to discover his genetic heritage. The results suggest that he is 25 percent Siberian, and that I, his father, am 50 percent Siberian. My wife and I have two sons: Akira has a Japanese name, my other son has a Russian name, Nikolai. What were we thinking when we gave them these names more than 30 years ago? Most friends and neighbors (and, no doubt, strangers) who look at me do not see a Scot or a German (my mother's roots); they see an Asian,²⁸ and in fact everyone concedes that I look quite Asian. I lived for almost 20 years in the San Francisco Bay Area, a place I loved and where I was easily recognized as one of its own, an Asian. In Chinatown people assumed I was Chinese. At San Francisco's Japantown it was assumed I was Japanese. In Korean markets I was assumed to be Korean. The point is that while I was quite sure that I was at least partly Asian, I didn't know the details. Now I know some of the details. While I know nothing else about him, it appears that my father was a Siberian, perhaps a Yakut or an Eveni.

Another significant feature of RV discourse is animal vocalization. I have done extensive (as yet unpublished) research into the verbal roots that express animal vocalization in the RV.²⁹ Reference to animal vocalization in the RV is surprisingly extensive yet it has rarely been discussed seriously, as far as I know. This calls for an explanation. In my view, it is a reflection of a distinct shamanizing substrate in the cosmology of the RV.

I am convinced that we cannot approach the RV only as philologists. We must also be anthropologists and archaeologists and students of comparative mythology and religion. Does anyone believe that, as Vedicists, we could easily step into the world of the RV poet and arch-riddler Dṛghatamas and have a readily intelligible conversation with him? We do not share a common conceptual universe with the poets of the RV, just as we do not share a common conceptual universe with anyone who lived three, four, or more millennia ago. Of course, we share a common core of humanity with them, but in my view it is simply not possible that we would all think alike even now. This is not to say that we Vedicists are modern and rational while the Vedic clans we study are archaic and irrational. This is certainly not the case: Vedicists may be modern but we are not always rational. And while the Vedic clans were

archaic, in the sense that they were pre-literate and pre-urban for the most part, certainly they were not always irrational. In fact, when it comes to the science of language, Vedic culture was ahead of the Greeks by a thousand years. For me, the RV poets were prehistoric Dadaists.³⁰ In other words (admittedly jocular ones), they were prehistoric post-modernists, and they certainly considered themselves to be the smartest members of their Vedic clans, just as I imagine that Marcel Duchamp was among his clan.

Returning to RV 10.119, Frits also embraced my translation of it because he found it to be very poetic. At a Vedic conference in Leiden in 2002, he and the French Vedicist Charles Malamoud urged me over dinner to translate the RV into some kind of poetic equivalence in English. I have been working on this for years, and for both of them.

I include my translation of another often-quoted hymn, RV 8.48, here as well, of course and for obvious reasons. It confirms the view—both Frits' and my own, but also that of Stuhmann and Smith, as well as of Jamison and Brereton (in spite of themselves)—that the extract of *soma* produced visions, hallucinations, enthusiasm (in the etymological sense of this word in Greek, mentioned in the first paragraph), the experience of flight, of becoming godlike, etc. Ephedra extractions do not evoke these qualities and feelings; instead, they generate hyperstimulation and sleeplessness and serve to fuel battle rage, and indeed there is some of this in the RV. By my count, however, there are a mere few dozen passages that suggest that *soma* might have been a stimulant (the extent of Harry Falk's evidence, in my view, see note 5). What about the other hundreds of attestations of the root *mad-*? Falk does not cite them. Jamison and Brereton do not cite them. And, unfortunately, I cannot cite them here either—but I have at least looked at them all. I don't assume that my view is to be trusted on this: look for yourselves!

I have also included a translation of another well-known hymn, RV 10.136, Jamison and Brereton note (as have others before them) that this hymn describes the experience of drinking some unnamed poison (*viśā*), in which emphasis is placed on the experience of flight, of the smallness of heaven and earth, compared to the greatness of the *mūni*, the overwhelming power of the poet. This language is very similar to that of RV 10.119. Significantly, the hymn tells us "you mere mortals, you are able to look only upon our [human] bodies." What the "Long-haired one" drinks in this hymn is called "poison" only in this hymn, and nowhere else (unspecified drugs are mentioned in the RV occasionally, but not in reference to *soma*). The question raised by this hymn is whether or not it

refers to some other drug, or to the soma drink as a drug. My view, which does not differ significantly from that of Jamison and Brereton, is that, given the fact that this hymn uses the highly formulaic language of the *soma* hymns, this suggests that it may refer to *soma* as a potent drug, quite possibly a hallucinogen. There is a lot that we do not know, however, about this hymn. Who is Kumannā, for example? We have no idea.

Did the RV poets consider ephedra a drug? We also can't answer this, because we don't know what their word for ephedra was. An interesting, much-discussed Indo-Iranian term in the RV, *amśi* (*asu* in Avestan), may well be the original name of the Indo-Iranian *soma* plant.³¹ This word is not attested in other Indo-European languages; it can be reconstructed only as Indo-Iranian. It may well be the name of the original *soma* plant, the original name of the pre-Vedic, non-Indo-European *soma* plant. Lubotsky suggests that it is a loan word from an Indo-Iranian substrate language, possibly the language of the BMAC.

There is no doubt in my view that these very few passages establish, by themselves, a strong link between prehistoric Siberian and prehistoric Indo-Iranian cultures. We can now assert with confidence that the RV poets preserved a strong memory of their ancestors' contact with the reindeer peoples of Siberia. It is time for Vedicists to resume the debate about the identity of the *soma* plant and the qualities of the intoxicant that was extracted from it.

Let us return to the topic of animal vocalization. There are dozens of roots that express one sort of animal vocalization or another in the RV. Here I will focus on only one root: *mā-2*, *mīnāti*, bellows, roars, bleats.³² This root is clearly onomatopoeic: thus more accurately it means to make the "m-sound," i.e., nasalization. This root is rare in the RV, occurring only 16 times there, of which seven instances belong to the Dīrghatamas cycle. However, most of the non-Dīrghatamas cycle RV citations seem to have clear formulaic links with the Dīrghatamas cycle, so that it is possible to argue that there is a coherent use of this verbal root in the RV, which revolves around the crucial late Rgvedic cycle of hymns attributed to the riddling poet Dīrghatamas. After the RV this verbal root seems to have disappeared from common use. See also the related noun *māyā* at 1.164.28, 29; also 7.103, the frog hymn (notice *gōmāyā* and *ajāmāyā* at 7.103.6, 10, discussed below). At 10.95.3 the sound of thunder is compared to the bleating, or rather the nasalization, of sheep.

The root is most frequently applied to cows. But it is also applied to goats, horses, and sheep, as well as frogs and thunder (*Parjanya*). If we acknowledge that the clearly metaphorical uses of the term refer to the

flow of speech, then we can say that it refers also to humans (see AV 6.38.4). This results in the curious fact that, besides other creatures, all five of the canonical Vedic sacrificial victims are attested as "nasalizing."

Given the preponderance of reference to cows, it is often glossed as "to moo." On the other hand, since it frequently refers to the vocalization of other animals, it is often glossed in such a way as to reflect the conventional transcription of animal vocalization in Western languages: when a cow does a *māyīm* it is glossed as a "moo." When a horse does it, it is a "neigh." When a goat or a sheep does it, it is transcribed as a "bleat." When the thunder does it, it is a "roar." These glosses are facile and wrong. The feature that is expressed by this root is nasalization, or extended nasalization, as in *mmmm*, otherwise *ommmmm* if preceded by that vowel. The common feature is *mmmm* preceded by a vowel.

Other verbs that characterize animal vocalization capture other features of animal vocalization: resonance is expressed by the roots *ṛu-*, *nu-*, other roots, such as *nad-*, *krand-*, and *ṛap-ḥlap-*, capture other features as well, for example, stop features. Others, like *śans-*, *swan-*, and *śunt-*, mark the hissing sound of sibilants. Generally these roots do not accurately capture animal vocalizations in general, however. They are just as inaccurate as our English versions: moo, meow, bow-wow, ribbit, neigh, oink, etc.

In any case, we learned long ago from Mircea Eliade that shamans have long cultivated "a language of the animals"³¹ known by them alone, a language that not only mimics the sounds of their familiar animals, as in the case of the Vedic clans, but which these Vedic poets have also turned into sacred mantras.

To illustrate my remarks on the root *mā-*, I also offer my translation of RV 7.103, the famous "frog hymn." Briefly, this hymn cannot possibly be only about literal frogs.³² The hymn explicitly refers to frogs who "*mā-*" like a cow (*gōmāyū*) or like a goat (*ajāmāyū*) in stanzas 6 and 10. Frogs don't do this sort of thing—that is, they don't mimic the sounds other creatures make—but Vedic priests do. In my view, animals in general are not very much interested in the topic of "animal vocalization," whereas Vedic priests emphatically are.

This material clearly shows that human vocalizations are not significantly different in the RV than the vocalizations of a large number of other animals. What is going on here? Well, what is going on here is a conversation between Vedic clans and the animals that they knew intimately: humans, horses, cows, sheep, goats, frogs, etc. The Vedic clans had a rich vocabulary that mimicked the sounds of their animal neighbors. Is this evidence of their shamanism? I believe that it is.

In Vedic these animal vocalizations also led to the sacred syllable OM. Very briefly, here's how. The late-RV poet Dīrghatamas, author of RV 1.163 as well as the *brahmodya* hymn RV 1.164, was not only familiar with horses that wore antlered reindeer masks; he was also familiar with the sacred syllable OM,³³ which he alludes to famously in RV 1.164.39.

That syllable of the *Ṛg[veda]*, that highest space
Where all the gods have taken their places,
What will he do with the *Ṛg[veda]*, who does not know this [syllable]?
Only those who know that sit together here with me!

This long, enigmatic, and riddling hymn is deliberately obscure, as is indicated by the poet's very name, Dīrghatamas, "he who dwells long in darkness." He also is clearly interested in Sānavedic song traditions,³⁴ as well as poetic meters, numerical symbolism, poems as weavings (or texts), etc. In the final line of stanza 5, he chants *vī tathīve kaśāya śināṇ u*. In the second line of stanza 28, he chants *mānānā nam hīn kṛom mānān u*. In my view these two line-final infinitives, *śināṇ* (from *vā-*, to weave) and *mānānā* (from *mā-*, to nasalize), both followed by the emphatic particle *u*, are esoteric allusions to OM, as well as to esoteric Sānavedic traditions. Let us ponder, then, and debate, these issues.

The Translations

1.163

1. When you were first born, you sang,
Then you arose from the sea and/or the earth.
You had the wings of an eagle, the arms of an antelope.³⁵
O quick one, your birth was magnificent and worthy of song!
2. He was given to us by Yama, and then Trita yoked him.
Indra was the first one ever to mount and ride him.
The Gandharva seized the reins that guide him.
And you Vasus, you fashioned this horse from the sun!
3. O quick one, you are Yama and you are Āditya,
And through esoteric rule you are also Trita.
When mixed with Soma you are almost like him.
They say that you have three magical ties with heaven.
4. Yes, they say you have three magical ties with heaven,
And three ties within the waters, and three within the deep sea.

And, O quick one, you also seem like Varuṇa to me,
And that is where they say your greatest birth is!

5. O prize-winner, these are the waters that wash you down.
These are the hoof-prints left behind by a victorious horse,
And in them I have seen your auspicious reins
Which the defenders of truth (*R̥ta*) defend!

6. In my mind I saw your spirit (*ātman*) there in the distance.
It was a bird flying down here beneath the sky.
I saw your head, with its wings. You were breathing
Heavily, crossing over easy dust-free paths.

7. It was there that I saw your highest form
As it sought its food in the footprint of the cow.
When a mortal man gets to enjoy this food like you,
That great hunger for grain awakens in him.

8. O quick one, the chariot pursues you, the young man too.
The cows also pursue you, as does the pleasure
Of young girls! Young warriors also seek your company.
Even the gods themselves have mimicked your manliness!

9. The antlers of this horse were golden! His feet were made of bronze.
He is as fast as a thought is. Even Indra was not as fast as he was!
The gods have come to taste the sacrifice of Indra's horse,
He who was the first one to mount that swift horse.

10. These heavenly horses with their flaring nostrils,
Their hind-legs stand still while their midsection flies open.
When the horses reached the race course in the sky
They hold together in formation like wild geese!

11. Your body is in full flight now, quick one,
And your mind is racing like the wind!
Your antlers branch out in many directions.
They go careening through the forests!

12. The quick prize-winning horse has come to the slaughter,
Meditating, with his mind stretched out to the gods.
The goat his kinsman is led forward.
Behind them come the poets and the singers.

13. The swift one has now approached the highest seat,
There, to his father and to his mother.
May he go there now, a most pleasing gift to the gods, who
Promises the sacrificer that his wishes will now be granted!

RV 7.103

1. After lying silent for a year,
The Brahmins are now performing their vows.
The [clan of the] Frogs has sung
The song that Parjanya has released like rain.

2. When the divine waters have approached this one,
Lying in a pond like a dried out sack,
Then the call and response of the Frogs arises,
Like the calling of the cows to their calves.

3. And at the coming of the monsoon, when the rains have
Poured down upon these eager, thirsty Brahmins,
Then, as a son, singing the *atthikīṇa*, repeats after his father,
So one Brahmin of the Frog clan repeats after the other:

4. One of the two greets the other from behind,
When they rejoice at the downpour of the monsoon.
And when this Brahmin of the Frog clan leaps excitedly in the rain,
The spotted one mixes his song with the song of the green one.³⁸

5. And when, among them all, one recites the song of the other,
As a student recites his teacher's song,
It's as if every part of their song is in harmony,
When you good singers sing them over the waters.

6. One does the cow chant; another does the goat chant.
The spotted one chants; the green one chants.
Their songs all have the same name, but each has a different form.
When they utter a song they embellish it in many ways (i.e., with
different melodies).

7. Like Brahmins at the overnight soma sacrifice,
Like ones singing around a full lake of soma
You celebrate in a circle that first day of the year,
Frogs, now that the monsoon has finally come!

8. Brahmins who possess soma have performed their song.
They are performing their annual hymn (*brithman*).
The ritual priests sweating with their pots of boiling milk
Show themselves. They are not hidden.

9. These men (i.e., the Brahmins, not the frogs) have observed the order of
The twelve-month year set by the gods. They don't ignore the season.
When after a year the monsoon comes again,
The heated soma pots also achieve their release.

10. He who recites the cow chant has given. He who recites the goat chant has given.

The spotted one has given. The green one also has given us wealth.

The members of the frog clan have given hundreds of cows.

They have thereby extended our lives by a thousand *soma* pressings!

8.48

1. I have shared in the potency of this sweet drink

That arouses good insight and best finds the open spaces—

And so I have become wise. All the gods and mortals too

Gather together to seek this drink. And they call it honey.

2. Now that you have entered me, you will become Aditi—

She without boundaries—who turns away the wrath of the gods.

O juice of Soma, O Indu, you who enjoy Indra's friendship,

Be like a mare attentive to the yoke, and yield your wealth to us.

3. We have drunk the *soma*! We have become immortals!

We have gone to the light! We have found the gods!

O immortal one, what can the malice and deceit

Of a mere mortal man do to us now?

4. O juice of Soma, O Indu, now that we have drunk you,

Be very gentle to our heart, as a father is gentle to a son.

O far-famed one, be mindful of us, as a friend is of a friend.

Prolong these days of our lives, O Soma, so that we may thrive!

5. These are the famous liberating juices that I have just now drunk!

You have sewn me together in my joints, as leather straps hold together

My chariot! May these juices protect me from the breaking of a leg;

May they keep lameness as well far away from me.

6. Like fire ignited by kindling sticks, may you burn me.

Make us able to see far (i.e., into darkness?). Make us more blessed.

For now I am in an ecstasy of you, Soma, and I think that I

Am like a rich man now! Come now and bring me prosperity!

7. May we now, with reverent minds, have a share in you, as we

Would a share in the wealth of our fathers, now that we have pressed you.

O king Soma, prolong these days of our lives,

Just as Sūrya, the sun, prolongs these days of spring!

8. O king Soma, show us mercy and give us good health.

For we are your devotees, and you should know this.

O Soma drink, a burning rises up, a wrath rises up in me!
Please do not give us over to the pleasure of our rivals.

9. For you are the guardian of our bodies, O Soma.

You are our eyewitness. As such you have settled into all our limbs.

Whenever we offend your laws, O god, you should be merciful to us.

You should be a dear friend to us, for the sake of our well-being!

10. I would be a friend to a kindhearted friend, to Soma,

Who, now that I have drunk him, surely will not harm me. Indra,

Lord of the bay stallions, this is the Soma that is placed in us.

For Soma I now go to Indra, to prolong the days of our lives.

11. These hungers, these diseases, have departed from us.

These demons of darkness have trembled. They are frightened.

Soma has risen up in us, becoming enormous now.

We have gone to where they go who prolong the days of their lives.

12. O fathers, this soma potion which we have just now drunk

Has seized our hearts. An immortal has possessed us mortals.

So we will give our oblations to this god Soma.

Because of him we will always be rich men now!

13. O Soma, you who keeps company with the fathers,

You have stretched out the expanse of heaven and earth.

O Indu, with this oblation let us pay homage to you!

May we ourselves remain lords of great riches!

14. O gods, advocate for us as our protectors.

Let neither sleep nor thoughtless speech overcome us!

May we always be the precious friends of Soma.

May we, with our fine sons, address him well at the sacrifice!

15. It is you, O Soma, everywhere our source of strength!

It is you, the finder of the sunlight, man's witness. Enter us!

It is you, O Indu, sharing your pleasure with us, your helpers!

Please protect us from the past, as well as the future!³⁹

10.119

1. Yes, yes, this is my intention.

I will win the cow, the horse. Yes!

Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!

2. Forth like raging winds

The drinks have lifted me up.

Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!

3. The drinks have lifted me up,
As swift horses lift up the chariot.
Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!
4. Inspiration has come to me
Like a bellowing cow to her precious son.
Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!
5. I, as a craftsman the chariot seat,
I bend around in my heart this inspiration.
Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!
6. Not even a blink of the eye to me
Have seemed the five tribes.
Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!
7. Neither of these two worlds to me
Seems equal to one of my two wings.
Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!
8. I have overwhelmed heaven with my greatness,
I have overwhelmed this great earth.
Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!
9. I myself, I myself will set down this
Earth, perhaps here, perhaps there.
Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!
10. Heatedly will I smash the earth,
I will smash it, perhaps here, perhaps there.
Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!
11. In heaven is the one of my two wings.
The other I have dragged down here below.
Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!
12. I myself, I am become great, great,
Impelled upward to the clouds.
Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!
13. I go forth a home that is well made,
A vehicle of oblations to the gods!
Have I drunk of the *soma*? Yes!

10.136

1. Long-hair takes the fire, Long-hair takes the poison.
Long-hair takes the two wide worlds.

- Long-hair is said to be this light, yes—
Long-hair—so that all may see the sun!
2. Silent sages shrouded by the winds,
They are dressed in soiled yellow robes.
And when the gods possess them, they
Follow the wide path of the winds!
3. Exhilarated by our silent vows,
We have ridden upon the winds!
You mere mortals, you are able
To look only upon our bodies!
4. The silent sage flies high upon
The middle region of the sky,
Looking down upon all things, a friend
Of the gods, in search of great power!
5. He is the horse of the Wind, Vāyu's friend,
And thus a silent sage driven by the gods.
He is the one who dwells in both seas,
Both the eastern one and the western!
6. Long-hair, an interpreter of signs,
A sweet, most exhilarating friend,
He pursues the path of the water-spirits,
Of celestial boys, and wild untamed beasts!
7. Vāyu has stirred it up, and Kunamānā
It is who grinds it down for him,
When Long-hair drank with Rudra
From this cup of Rudra's poison!

Notes

- 1 Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda: An Anthology: One Hundred and Eight Hymns, Selected, Translated, and Annotated* (London: Penguin Books, 1981).
- 2 Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton, *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 3 Jamison and Brereton, *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, vol. 1, p. 32.
- 4 I have compiled a folder of handwritten notes on all of these passages, and perhaps at some point I will find the time to contribute them to Jamison and Brereton's website, <http://rigvedacommentary.ualc.ucla.edu/>.
- 5 The view that the *soma* plant was an ephedra was held by Harry Falk, "Soma

- I and II," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 52 (1989): 77–90, and this remains the view of Jamison and Brereton even now.
- 6 R. Gordon Wasson, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).
- 7 Frits Staal, "How a Psychoactive Substance Becomes a Ritual: The Case of Soma," *Social Research* 68/3 (Fall 2001): 745–778.
- 8 George Thompson, "Soma and Ecstasy in the *R̥gveda*" *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 9/1 (May 2003).
- 9 Rainer Stuhmann, "R̥gvedische Lichtaufnahmen: Soma botanisch, pharmakologisch, in den Augen der Kavis," *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 13 (2006): 1–93.
- 10 Frederick M. Smith, *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
- 11 See Staal's discussion, for example, in *Discovering the Vedas: Origins, Mantras, Rituals, Insights* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 99f.
- 12 John Brough, "Soma and Amanita Muscaria," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 34/5 (1971): 331–362.
- 13 Frits once mentioned to me that he knew of a physicist at UC Berkeley who composed careful papers, filled with intricate mathematical formulae, while completely drunk. We both also talked a lot about the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, who, as is well known, would sit silently inarticulate in a room when receiving visitors. After the visitors left, he would return to his desk and compose careful, extraordinarily intricate compositions, still in silence. The great Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, to whom Wasson dedicates his book on *soma*, has written about the linguistics of Hölderlin's situation: he was utterly incapable of oral discourse, yet utterly brilliant in silent, written poetic discourse. His was a kind of unusual autism.
- 14 I translated RV 10.119.14 in my 2003 article "Soma and Ecstasy in the *R̥gveda*" This has been a very popular translation that has been reprinted many times, including in Staal's *Discovering the Vedas*, p. 96ff.
- 15 Jamison and Brereton, *The *R̥gveda*: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, vol. 3, p. 1589.
- 16 Philo Bregstein, "Discovering Frits Staal," pp. 59–78.
- 17 George Thompson, "Aṅamkāra and Ātmastuti: Self-assertion and Impersonation in the *R̥gveda*," *History of Religions* 37 (1997): 141–171.
- 18 Thompson, "Aṅamkāra and Ātmastuti," p. 171.
- 19 My essay "Shamanism in the *R̥gveda* and Its Central Asian Antecedents" is not well known. After I presented it at Harvard in 2003 it was posted to Witzel's website, https://www.academia.edu/5584897/Shamanism_in_the_RV_2_.
- 20 In particular, the cover of Fredrik Hiebert's *Origins of the Bronze Age Oasis Civilization in Central Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography, Harvard University, 1994) reproduces an image of a cylindrical seal clearly depicting a shamanic scene with drummers, pole-vauling, and dancers wearing animal masks, as well as flying animals.
- 21 E. J. Michael Witzel, *The Origins of the World's Mythologies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 22 See, e.g., Romano Mastromattei and Antonio Rigopoulos, eds., *Shamanic Cosmos: From India to the North Pole Star* (Venice: Venetian Academy of Indian Studies, 1999).
- 23 See Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 269 et passim.
- 24 Victor Mair, "Horse Sacrifices and Sacred Groves among the North[western] Peoples of East Asia," *Eurasian Studies* 6 (2007): 22–52.
- 25 Sergei Rudenko, *Frozen Tombs of Siberia: The Pazyryk Burials of Iron-Age Horsemen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970). Piers Vitebsky, *The Reindeer People: Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), p. 8, reproduces a photograph of the horse's reindeer mask found at Pazyryk.
- 26 Asko Parpola, *The Roots of Hinduism: The Early Aryans and the Indus Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 27 Alexander Lubotsky, "The Indo-Iranian Substratum," in Christian Carpelian, Asko Parpola, and Petteri Koskikallio, eds., *Early Contacts between Uralic and Indo-European: Linguistic and Archaeological Considerations, Papers Presented at an International Symposium Held at the Ylälinna Research Station of the University of Helsinki 8–10 January 1999* (Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seuran, 2001), pp. 301–317.
- 28 For the curious, see the author photograph in my translation, *The Bilingual Gita: A New Translation* (New York: North Point Press, 2008).
- 29 However, there is public record of my work on animal vocalization on the Indology email list; a search for "animal vocalization" will yield some discussions there.
- 30 See Barend Faddegon, "Ritualistic Dadaism," *Acta Orientalia* 5 (1926–1927): 177–195.
- 31 Lubotsky, "The Indo-Iranian Substratum," p. 310.
- 32 Manfred Mayrhofer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindarischen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1986–1996), vol. X, p. X. [GIVE VOL/PAGE CITE]
- 33 Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, p. 98.
- 34 Pace Stephanie Jamison, "Natural History Notes in the *R̥gvedic* 'Frog' Hymn," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 72/73 (Amrta-mahotsava Volume) (1991–1992): 137–144, and Jamison and Brereton, *The *R̥gveda*: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*.
- 35 Pace F. M. M. Gerety, *This Whole World is OM: Song, Soleriology, and the Emergence of the Sacred Syllable*, doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2015.
- 36 On which see Gerety's valuable dissertation, *This Whole World is OM*.

³⁷ Two arms = two forelegs.

³⁸ Perhaps this last line has a double sense, referring not just to the coloring of the frogs; it may refer as well to priestly clan colors. The point I wish to emphasize is that this hymn is more about priests, Brahmins, than it is about frogs; *pace* Jamison, "Natural History Notes in the Rigvedic 'Frog' Hymn."

³⁹ Literally, from behind (the past), as well as in front (the future).

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