

ENCYCLOPAEDIC DICTIONARY OF

Vedic Terms

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The Vedic sacrificers knew a cult of the nudes, which they hated. The hatred was more of an economic issue, rather than strictly religious one. This is clear from the glimpses of reconciliation of the Vedic sacrificers with people of other norms of life and rituals, such as *Yatis* and *Munis*, who, though of the same fold, followed different ways of life and did not accept the Vedic priestly rituals. The nudes, being hated out of jealousy, were taunted as *sisna-deva*. But, these people never left the field. Though the name *sisna-deva* lost currency in the later period, which only indicates that the nudes gained more acceptance in the then society, the practice of nudity continued as one of the distinguishing characteristics of the ascetic, who became and stayed on not only as a respected member of the ancient Indian (and even modern) society, but also came to be sought after.

Soma

The conception of Soma in the *Rgveda* is very peculiar. It appears in two forms—mortal and divine. The mortal Soma was a plant whose juice was extracted and offered to the god. In its divine form, Soma as praised by the seer with all the qualities and attributes common to other Rgvedic gods.

Vedic scholars, both Indian and European, have attempted to identify the soma plant, but up till now no definite conclusion has been arrived at with regard to its exact nature. The same is the problem in respect of the identification of the divine Soma. Indeed the paucity of exact references in the *Rgveda* is a hindrance to the clear identification of the plant or the god Soma. Consequently attempts have been made to understand Soma from the spiritual (*adhyatimika*) standpoint alone. This, however, could not put an end to the controversy regarding Soma.

Indeed, the apparently controversial opinions are nothing but the reflections of different developments of the Soma-idea through the ages. So, to understand Soma clearly, one has to

know primarily the exact implication of the term *soma* which has not been confined to a single meaning but has produced different meanings by way of semantic changes through the ages.

With this problem posited above, in mind, the present paper proposes to study in brief the gradual semantic development of the term *soma*. Thus, it may be said that the term *soma* first meant the inebriating juice of plants, secondly, the plants bearing soma, thirdly, the elixir of life and delight and lastly the god. We propose now to take them up, one by one.

The Inebriating Juice of Plants: It is true that none knows the name of the man who was the first drinker of Soma, nor is it possible to know it today because history preserves no record of him. But one thing is certain, the practice of taking intoxication even for spiritual elevation has been a necessity for man from very early times. This also was true in the discovery of soma. But it may be assumed, that, at the very outset, only the taste of the juice and not the mere sight of the plant produced in the mind of the discoverer a sense of elation and exhilaration for the time being. So, primarily, the juice was recognised and called *soma*. The term *soma* is derived from the root \sqrt{su} , 'to press', which means 'the juice, the pressed one'. The other name of soma like *andhas* and *indu* also mean the juice, though the former has been used as the plant name also. The word *pavamana*, used as an epithet to soma also fits the sense of the juice. Soma has been called also *sumnah*, which means 'pleasure'. The detailed description of soma in the ninth book of the *Rgveda* supports the view that the juice with the peculiar qualities captured the mind of the seer completely and became the chief source of attraction much more than the plants.

The Plant Bearing Soma: It is surprising that none of the seers of the *Rgveda* has devoted a hymn exclusively for the description of the soma plant which yielded the best oblation for the sacrifice. From the hymns addressed to soma in the *Rgveda* it is difficult to find out the exact nature of the physical

form of the plant. Plants in general have been a matter of praise to the seers (RV, 10.97). But why did not the seer described the soma plant? It should not be convincing that the seers who were so eloquent about the soma-juice had no knowledge about its yielder. It may be assumed that the soma plant was *not a single plant* and that there was group of plants from which the juice could be collected or extracted, or, in other words, plants bearing the particular juice were known as soma plants. Thus, any concrete description of the plant was rather impossible.

In the *Rgveda* has soma plant has been called as *osadhi* (RV, 10.85.2), *birudhah* (RV, 1.91.22), *udbhid* (RV, 8.79.3), *rasin* (RV, 9.97.14), *parnin* (RV, 9.82.21) etc. which are the names of plant in general. Once soma has been called 'the creator of all plants'. We also find the names of different regions as the birthplace of soma. The hill Munjavat was known as the place producing the best soma. The god Indra was known as very much fond of the soma of *Saryanavant* lake. All these appear to indicate different types of soma originating at different places. There is a clear and convincing proof of this in the ninth mandala of the *Rgveda* where different types of somas are mentioned:

ye samasah paravati ye arvavati sunvire

ye vada saryanavati

ye arjkesu krtvasu, ye madhye pastyanam

ye va janeshu pancasu (RV, 9.65.22-23)

"May these soma juices which are effused at a distance or nigh or on this Saryanavant (lake)—or amongst the Rajikas, or the Krtvas, or in the neighbourhood of the rivers' Sarsvati etc. or in five castes." (Tr., H.H.Wilson)

So far as the references in the Brahmanas are concerned, it appears that not only the original plants but even the substitutes also were not restricted to a single plant. In the medical

literature of Sanskrit more or less twentyfour types of soma plant have been mentioned. All these prove that the conception of the soma plant was not restricted to a single one.

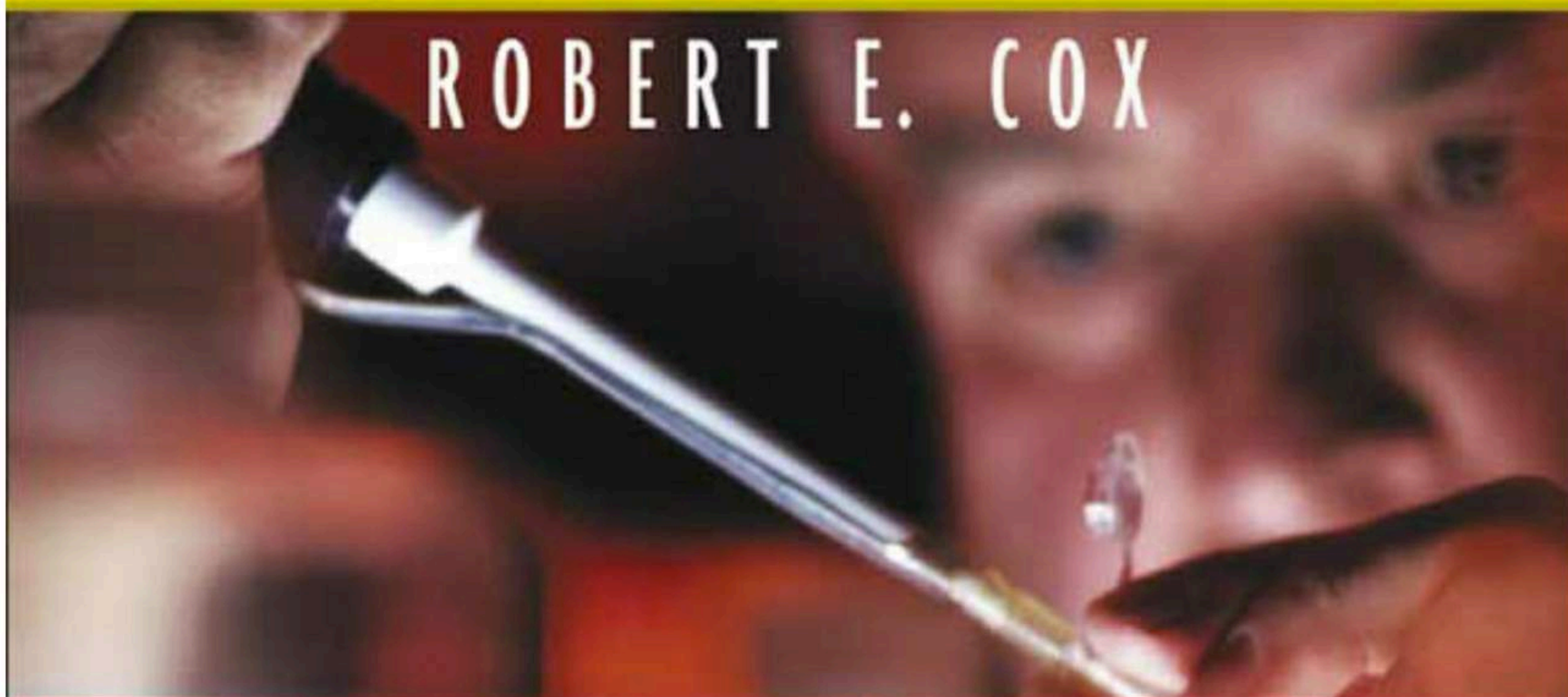
So far as the third meaning of the term is concerned, we can say that the meaning of *soma* was not restricted to the juice or the plant only, but was extended to mean also the elixir of life and delight. Thus soma became the giver of pleasure, strength and life. It was called the divine amborisa. A seer proclaimed once: "We have drunk soma, and become immortal. The Soma drink gave pleasure to the gods also and, so, is called *devamadanah* (RV, 9,44.1). Indra performed his heroic deeds by drinking soma. It is even said that all the gods are powerful through the power of soma: *somenaditya balinah*, RV, 10.85.2. In the sacrifice we find that Soma juice was mixed with other elements like milk, barley, curd, mead, ghee, water etc. Thus the oblation soma became a mixture of the elements giving life and delight. The abode of soma was also known as the above of delight. Thus it may be said that neither the plant nor the juice was adorable to the seers, but the effect of the drink, the taste of immortal bliss was longed for and so by soma they meant the elixir of life and delight.

The supernatural quality inherent in Soma made the seer to mediate upon the presiding deity behind it, and they finally recognised the existence of the god of the same name in it. They invoked the god to flow for ever, giving life and delight to all. Thus Soma became one of the principal deities in the Vedic pantheon. This god shares all the attributes of other Vedic gods and is mostly associated with Indra. The conception of the deity Soma as the moon is not distinct in the *Rgveda* but in the *Brahmanas* it has been identified with the moon clearly.

Thus all these meanings taken together give a clear picture of the idea of Soma of the *Rgveda*, which should be borne in mind while identifying Soma.



ROBERT E. COX



The ELIXIR *of* IMMORTALITY

A Modern-Day Alchemist's Discovery of the Philosopher's Stone



Eastern Alchemy

Alchemical Wizards of the East

It can be reasonably argued that the Western tradition of alchemy, which flourished in the Middle East and Europe during the medieval period, had its origins in the Hebrew and Egyptian traditions. But there was also an Eastern tradition of alchemy, with origins in India and China, thousands of miles to the east.

It turns out that both alchemical traditions, Eastern and Western, believed the same theory, used the same materials, and employed the same practices to pursue the same goals.

Moreover, the Eastern tradition is just as old as the Western, going back many thousands of years. How the theory and practice of alchemy became spread all over the ancient world at the very dawn of civilization remains a profound mystery, one that cannot be answered by current theories of cultural dissemination. My focus here, however, is on the substance of the practice and not on how it spread.

The East is renowned for its elaborate methods of spiritual development, involving various systems of physical, breath, and mental exercises. When one mentions meditative practices designed to yield spiritual enlightenment, one thinks of the East, where there are rich and diverse meditative traditions going back thousands of years. The histories and legends of the region are also filled with fabulous stories of enlightened masters endowed with miraculous powers who lived in hidden mountain caves or remote forest hermitages.

Moreover, the region is well known for two of the richest traditions of herbal medicine on our planet—the traditions of Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine, both of which utilize vast pharmacopeias of herbal substances. What is not so widely known is that there were also deep and ancient traditions of metallurgical alchemy in the region, which go back thousands of years.

In the Taoist tradition of China, the meditative process, which includes breath work and mental control over the subtle forces of chi in the body, was called the internal practice (neidan), while the consumption and use of alchemical elixirs was called the external practice (weidan). Both practices appear to have been present in the earliest periods of Chinese culture. However, around the fourth century AD, the emphasis began to shift toward the internal practice. Whether this was brought about by an increasing number of elixir poisonings or by the influence of Buddhism is unknown.

The Baopu-zi nei pian (Inner Chapters of the Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity), written by Ge Hong (ca. AD 283–343), provides insight into the typical viewpoints of Chinese alchemy. At the beginning of his treatise, Ge Hong rejects the view that only herbal drugs are beneficial for health and the prolongation of life. In the fourth chapter, he states that elixirs made from minerals and metallic substances are much more useful than the herbal ones. He claims that the herbal drugs are weak and strong heat destroys them, but that minerals and metals are strong and stable.¹ He then declares that the common or worldly people (shi ren) are ignorant of “such things as the nature of the cinnabar and so, it is not surprising that they do not believe in such subtle things as the way of immortality.”²

In an interesting passage, Ge Hong writes that the common people prefer to depend upon magical, superstitious, or religious methods of healing. They do not believe in the art of the famous physicians (alchemists) but rely instead on shamans and sorcerers. As a result, it is natural that they do not believe that by eating the golden and cinnabar elixirs, immortality

can be obtained. Thus, for Ge Hong, alchemy and the “arts of immortals” are not of a supernatural or religious nature; they are “positive” and “scientific” in the same way as are medicine and pharmacology.³ Given the fact that this treatise was written in the third century AD, it indicates a deep and ancient history of alchemy that stretches back into earliest periods of Chinese culture, largely shrouded in the mists of time.

An in-depth study of the alchemical tradition of India is presented by David Gordon White in his book *The Alchemical Body*. White focuses primarily on the siddha tradition of alchemy, which was practiced by the rasa siddhas of southern India and the nath siddhas of northwestern India during the first millennium AD.

In India, alchemy is called rasavidya, which literally means the “science of mercury,” or the “science of the elixir.” The word siddha means a “perfected one.” Unlike the Brahmanical priests of the orthodox Vedic culture, the alchemical siddhas did not view themselves as part of organized Vedic society. As Professor White put it, they transcended the boundaries of social caste and religious affiliation, and formed a “pool of wizards and demigods, supermen and wonder-workers that all south Asians (and Tibetans) could draw on to slake the thirst of their religious imagination” and “were the most syncretistic landmarks on the religious landscape of medieval India.”⁴

The siddhas represented embodiments of the tantric approach to spiritual realization: “Total autonomy, omniscience, superhuman powers, bodily immortality, and a virtual identification with godhead—although not at the expense of one’s autonomy—are the aims of the Hindu alchemist, just as they are of the great majority of nondualist tantrikas.”⁵

The rasavidya texts, which constitute the historical texts of the Indian alchemical tradition, were composed by the siddhas for the siddhas using the same type of symbolic code language that one finds in the Western traditions of alchemy—a language that is sure to lead one astray if one does not already possess knowledge of the process, having been granted that wisdom by the grace of God or by the blessings of a competent master.

The most important of the medieval texts is the *Rasanarva* (Flood of Mercury), dated to the eleventh century. Although the text is anonymous, it was purportedly written by a certain Bhairava, who comes as the twenty-ninth siddha in a list of exponents of the secret knowledge, indicating a long tradition of oral transmission of this wisdom prior to its ever being written.⁶

India is famous for its long-standing oral traditions of wisdom. Even today, there are Vedic pandits who pride themselves on the memorization of huge Vedic texts containing tens of thousands of verses. This was the dominant form of knowledge transmission for thousands of years. It is thus difficult for Western scholars to date the ancient Indian texts, because most were passed down from generation to generation in an oral form and were written down only at a relatively late stage in the tradition, often on banana leaves, which tend to decay rapidly in the tropical heat and humidity. Unlike ancient Western texts, which were often inscribed on clay tablets or walls of stone, and which therefore can be assigned a definitive date, the ancient texts of India were preserved in the hearts and minds of the people long before they were reduced to written form, and thus present a serious dating problem.

Although the rasavidya texts are the earliest written texts of the Indian alchemical tradition, many of the written Vedic texts are dated to the same period, even though it is generally recognized that the oral texts were composed long before.

The most authoritative of the ancient Indian texts is the *Rig Veda*, which served as the original religious canon for the ancient Vedic tradition and to a lesser extent for the Hindu

tradition, which evolved out of the Vedic tradition. The actual composition date of the Rig Veda is unknown, with estimates ranging from 4000 BCE to 1100 BCE.

In spite of the fact that the later Hindu tradition is dominated by the practice of yoga, meditation, and so on, one finds little if any mention of such practices in the Rig Veda. The primary practice outlined in the ancient text, to which an entire book (mandala) is devoted, is that of producing and consuming the soma or amrita rasa—the food and drink of the gods. It thus appears that alchemy was a dominant form of spiritual practice during the earliest periods of Indian culture.

Angiras and the Angirasas

According to Vedic lore, the first to teach the science of immortality (brahma vidya) to ordinary human beings on earth was the great sage and seer Angiras—one of the original seven seers (sapta rishis) from whom the seven historical families of Vedic seers descended. Angiras is credited as being the “father of all the riks”—or the father of all the mantras of the Rig Veda.⁷ His chief son was called Agni (fire), who was deified as the messenger of the gods and the first ministrant priest.

In the same way that Horus, the chief son of Osiris, became the fountainhead of a long line of mystery teachers, called the shemsu-hor (the descendants of Horus), who predated the historical Egyptian civilization, so also Agni, chief son of Angiras, became the fountainhead of a long line of mystery teachers called the Angirasas (the descendants of Agni), who predated the historical Vedic civilization.

In the same way that Osiris is credited as the first to ascend into the sky to obtain great immortality, so too is Angiras credited as being first to ascend into the sky to obtain great immortality. Just as Horus eventually followed the footsteps of his father Osiris and ascended into the sky, so too did Agni eventually follow the footsteps of his father Angiras and ascend into the sky. The shemsu-hor and angirasas strove to imitate their illustrious ancestors by following the same path. The Sama Veda thus tells us:

Hence these men have gone up on high and mounted to the heights of heaven: Go forward! Conquer on the path by which Angiras traveled to the skies! 8

In both cases, this was a path of immortality and the sojourners on the path were fueled and nourished by the elixir of immortality. Thus Angiras is not only credited as being the first to ascend into the heavens; he is also credited as being the first to teach how to produce and consume the mysterious substance called soma, the food of the gods, which is celebrated in the Rig Veda as the amrita rasa—the elixir of immortality.

The Alchemical Interpretation of Soma

Although Indian alchemy is generally believed to have originated during the first millennium AD with the rasavidya tradition, I would suggest that its roots go much deeper into the ancient prehistory of India. The Rig Veda and its ancillary texts provide the first references in human history to an elixir of immortality—namely the soma, the food of the gods.

Soma is king. Soma is the food of the gods. The gods eat soma.⁹

Although it is generally believed that soma was derived from a plant yet to be identified, I would offer the alternative suggestion that it was actually derived from mercury. This is consistent with the Western alchemical tradition, in which the philosophic mercury was symbolized by the word luna (moon). It turns out that soma also means “moon” and the juice of the soma was called rasa, a Sanskrit word that also means “mercury,” and was specifically used by the alchemical siddhas to indicate the elixir of immortality.

The idea that the Vedic description of soma is actually an alchemical or metallurgical allegory has also been suggested by various Vedic scholars. Dr. S. Kalyanaraman, a Vedic scholar and author of an authoritative dictionary on ancient languages, recently published a book titled *Indian Alchemy: Soma in the Veda*, in which he presents a detailed analysis of the Vedic mantras demonstrating their hidden metallurgical meanings.

Although Kalyanaraman suggests that the purpose of Vedic alchemy was simply to produce “gold” and other precious metals for ornamental and trade purposes, the numerous Vedic hymns that spell out the use of soma as a sacred elixir to be ingested for health, longevity, and spiritual immortality cannot be ignored. In one Rig Vedic hymn, the seers thus proclaim:

I have tasted, as one who knows its secret, the honeyed [soma] drink that inspires and grants freedom, the drink that all, both gods and mortals, seek to obtain, calling it nectar. We have drunk the Soma, we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods. . . . These glorious [soma] drops are my health and salvation: they strengthen my joints as thongs do a cart. May these droplets guard my foot lest it stumble and chase from my body all manner of ills. Far-famed Soma, stretch out our life-spans so that we may live . . . Make me shine brightly like fire produced by friction. Illumine us . . . enter within us for our well-being. With hearts inspired may we relish the [soma] juice like treasure inherited from our Fathers! Lengthen our days, King Soma, as the sun causes the shining days to grow longer. . . . It is you, O Soma, who guards our bodies; in each of our limbs you have made your abode. Our weariness and pains are now far removed; the forces of darkness have fled in fear. Soma has surged within us mightily. We have reached our goal! Life is prolonged! The drop that we have drunk has entered our hearts, an immortal inside mortals.¹⁰

When we cross-reference the Vedic descriptions of soma to the Western alchemical descriptions of the stone, we find a remarkable set of homologies. For example, in the Rig Veda those who were responsible for the production of soma were characterized as kavis. The word kavi is given the following definition:

gifted with insight, intelligent, knowing, enlightened, wise, sensible, prudent, skillful, cunning; a thinker, intelligent man, man of understanding, leader; a wise man, sage, seer, prophet; a singer, bard, or poet; of the Soma; of the Soma priest; of the Ribhus.¹¹

The kavis were especially associated with the soma and the fashioning of the hermetically sealed vessels by which the soma was produced. This is indicated by the fact that they were often associated with the Ribhus—mythical beings credited as being the first to fashion the sacred vessel by which Indra, the king of the gods, drank the soma. It is also indicated by the fact that the word kavi is closely related to the word kavacam, which among other things indicates the armor or clay luting with which the kavis used to seal their soma vessels. We recall that in the West the sealed alchemical vessel was also said to be “hermetically

sealed,” after the name of the Hermetic alchemists who sealed them. They also used various types of luting.

Kalyanaraman points out that the word kavi is also closely related to the word for “metalsmith” or “metallurgist” in languages closely related to Sanskrit. In ancient Persian, for example, the word for a metallurgist was kaveh; in Slovenian it was kovae; in Croatian, kavac; and in Hungarian, kovacsol.¹²

The medieval Indian alchemists who wrote the rasavidya texts, dated from the eighth century AD to the eleventh century AD, also often described themselves as kavis—alchemical wizards.¹³ Some Ayurvedic healers who inherited the rasayana tradition (the science of making elixirs) from their alchemical predecessors continue to be called kavirajas (royal kavis) to this day.¹⁴

The word kavi thus applies not only to those who originally processed the soma during the Rig Veda age, but also to the medieval Indian alchemists who were definitely engaged in metallurgical pursuits—as though they were part of the same age-old tradition spanning thousands of years. This supports our contention that Vedic soma has a metallurgical, rather than an herbalogical, basis.

There is other supporting evidence as well. The Rig Veda and the ancient Brahmanic texts state that the kavis purchased the raw materials for the soma from the Mujavats. According to Kalyanaraman, the Mujavats were ancient tribes that lived in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan. These are the regions closest to the Indian subcontinent, where there are naturally occurring sources of cinnabar ore (mercury sulfide).¹⁵ It is also known that these regions were once part of the ancient Indus-Sarasvati civilization, now believed to be the historical Vedic civilization.

Cinnabar occurs in the form of deep red or purple ore that appears to grow in the rock of mountains, like the leafless stalks of a plant. According to the Rig Veda, the soma stalks were plucked from mountain rock and then crushed with pounding stones, which made a loud noise. In one Vedic hymn the pounding stones are compared to voracious bulls that roar and bellow as they chew “the branch of the purple tree.”¹⁶ After being cooked in a vessel, perhaps to separate the sulfur from the mercury, the result was then filtered using a woolen fleece. The filtered streams of juice (rasa) that came out were described as “shining,” perhaps because they consisted of lustrous quicksilver.

There is no doubt that gold was also involved in the process of Vedic alchemy, as it was in Western alchemy. Indeed, in addition to mercury, gold was an important ingredient in the production of soma, as Kalyanaraman demonstrates with numerous references. The gold ore too would have been crushed with pounding stones, whose faces are often described as hari, a color that can mean either yellow, amber (golden), or red tinted. After crushing the gold ore, the result was rinsed with water and filtered through a woolen fleece.

The use of woolen filters was common in ancient metallurgical practices around the world, for the flecks of gold would stick to the fleece while the water and bits of stone would pass through. This may very well have been the origin of the Greek myth of the “golden fleece,” which was associated with the quest for immortality.

It is interesting to note that the Greek writers were often in disagreement about the actual color of the fleece. Some called it the “golden fleece,” whereas others called it the “purple fleece,”¹⁷ indicating perhaps its use for purifying both gold ore and purple cinnabar ore.

This duality of gold and purple was also applied to the Greek myth of the phoenix, an ancient symbol of rejuvenation and immortality.

Once the ingredients of the soma were purified, they were placed in a vessel to be cooked over a period that could extend for months. Those associated with the preparation of the soma were thus known as the celebrators of the nine-month or ten-month rite.¹⁸ Likewise, the Western alchemists claimed that the preparation of the elixir could take months of continuous cooking—typically nine or ten months.¹⁹

In the Rig Veda, the vessel of the soma was said to be fitted with armor and made strong as a “fortress of metal” so that it would not leak.²⁰ Likewise, the Hermetic tradition consistently emphasized that the alchemical vessel had to be made strong and sealed airtight so that the metallic vapors would not escape.

As the soma was being prepared, it displayed different colors. When cooked and purified, it was described as the destroyer of the black darkness.²¹ Similarly, in the Hermetic tradition, it was said that the “head of the crow,” or the phase of dissolution, was eventually overcome when the material became purified and fit for consumption. It then assumed a glorious white color, which was sometimes called the milk of life, or the “virgin’s milk.”²² The Western alchemists also compared the white phase of the elixir to milk curdled by rennet.²³ Similarly, in the Rig Veda the “white phase” of the process is described as that in which the purified soma becomes enveloped with curds and milk, or when the waters (molten metals) containing the metallic seeds yield bright milk.

*Then all the gods rejoice in the juice of this powerful (Soma), when it is enveloped with milk and curds.*²⁴

The purified Soma has implanted many a seed in those (waters) desirous of conception, which yield bright milk.²⁵

In the Western tradition, the additional colors associated with continued purification of the elixir were described as green, citrine (or amber), and finally purple or dark red. These are precisely the same colors (hari, harita, and aruna), associated with soma throughout the Rig Veda.

It is difficult to imagine that these are mere coincidences, especially given the fact that both processes were designed to produce a sacred elixir—the elixir of immortality—which was assigned similar properties in both traditions. It thus appears that we are dealing with an exceedingly ancient alchemical tradition that dates back to the earliest periods of Indian culture.

The rasavidya texts, which surfaced thousands of years later, provide more-detailed information about the alchemical process than the ancient Vedic texts, but both sets of texts appear to be part of the same age-old tradition. Like the alchemical siddhas, the angirasas—the earliest group of Vedic seers—were not part of any organized civilization. They too were “wizards and demigods, supermen and wonder-workers” who roamed the mountains, forests, and plains, like so many Merlins of old, prior to the crystallization of Vedic civilization.

In fact, there is textual evidence to support the notion that even as the historical Vedic civilization developed and orthodox orders of Brahmanical priests became established, the angirasas remained hidden in the forests, beyond the pale of emerging cities and villages, which they eschewed. A similar dichotomy developed in China, where the alchemical masters were viewed as immortals, who eschewed the cities and villages and preferred to live in solitary mountain haunts, where they could practice their art in secrecy and isolation, hidden from the prying eyes of the world. As in the West, the alchemical tradition in the

East was largely an underground and highly secretive tradition, which engendered wonder and mystery in the minds of the common people.

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