

Haoma-Soma in the World of Ancient Greece†

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Abstract — Evidence of the worship of (nonalcoholic) Haoma-Soma in Iran and India (identified by Wasson as *Amanita muscaria*) can be found in Greece and its neighboring lands. While Iranian and Indic peoples preserved their original worship in their final settlements, Indo-European tribes, including the Thracians, the Phrygians, and the Greeks, after settling in Europe and Asia Minor, abandoned their ancestral worship of Soma (Sabazios) and substituted the Semitic (alcoholic) Dionysos. However, they retained traces of the original Soma worship in Dionysiac rituals. This modified Dionysiac worship spread throughout the Western world. Six formal criteria are used to establish the identity of Soma with Dionysos (Sabazios): (1) both cults had the same aim (to cause ecstatic behavior); (2) both cults required the attainment of the same spiritual state (purity); (3) both cults had an idiosyncratic myth in common; (4) both cults showed the identical word root in the name of the worshiped god; (5) both cults had identical zoological and botanical associations with their god; and (6) the alcoholic god (Dionysos) was depicted as having the same physical effects on human beings as that of the ancient nonalcoholic god (Soma).

Keywords — *Amanita muscaria*, ancient Greece, Dionysos, Sabazios, Soma

The aim of the present article is to find in ancient Greece and its peripheral neighbors traces of the worship of Haoma-Soma that was practiced in Iran and India. It is postulated that the worship of Sabazios (Dionysos) in Thrace, Phrygia, and Greece shows remnants of the original Indo-European cult of Haoma-Soma.

One of the most vivid divinities in the Rigveda is the god Soma. While some of the gods of the Indic pantheon, such as Indra, Sūrya, Agni, and Dyāuspitar, are spoken of with awe and reverence, the believers' deep and intense love is concentrated on Soma. The god is close to humans — so close, in fact, that if a human being partakes of him or incorporates him, the human being acquires some of the god's divine essence.

†For references to ancient Greek texts, the reader is referred to the Loeb Classical Library. Published from 1910 to the present by William Heinemann (London) and Harvard University Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts), this series of volumes listed by author, with Greek and English texts on alternate sides of the page, is available at most university and major public libraries. Citations from the Rigveda and the Avesta are copied from Wasson (1968).

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On the plateau of pre-Zoroastrian Iran the same gods prevailed as on the Indian subcontinent. Zoroaster's religion consigned all the Indic divinities to the rank of *devas*, or demons. But in the case of Soma (or Haoma in ancient Persian), Zoroaster's teachings were ambiguous. He had extravagant words of praise for the god in Hōm Yašt ceremony, but elsewhere in the Avesta (48:10) he impatiently decried the use of Haoma: "When wilt thou do away with the urine of drunkenness with which the priests evilly delude [the people] as do the wicked rulers of the provinces in full consciousness of what they do?" It is possible that Zoroaster was not against the worship of Soma per se, but that he excoriated the *manner* in which the god was worshiped. It may also be that the worship of Soma was too deeply ingrained in the population of Iran and that Zoroaster prudently made this one exception in his condemnation of the ancestral polytheism of the people.

The very word "Soma" (Haoma) has an interesting derivation. The name goes back to the Sanskrit root *su* (to crush). In its strengthened forms (*guṇa* and *vrddhi*), the root becomes *so* or even *sāu*. Thus the basic meaning of the word is "the crushed one."

The identity of Soma has been one of the biggest question marks in the field of religious history. It is known that

some aspect of a plant was crushed and after a series of treatments of its juice it became an intoxicant, an elixir that conferred on the partaker an ultimate oneness with divinity. Thus, for a short time the human being became a god. The term "Soma" refers to the plant, its juice, and finally to the god who is the personification of its beneficent effects.

The identification of Soma received a significant boost from the work of the prominent ethnomycologist R. Gordon Wasson (1968). He identified Soma with the poisonous but beautiful toadstool *Amanita muscaria*. Today Wasson's thesis has found general acceptance by most experts in the field of the botany of psychoactive drug plants. For the purposes of the present article, a brief review of his arguments for the identification of Soma may be of value.

Somewhere on the Eurasian continent, perhaps in European or Asiatic Russia, Indo-European tribes lived side by side with Finno-Ugrian peoples. It does appear that the more closely related language group of Sanskrit, Avestan, and ancient Greek share a small part of the vocabulary with some Finno-Ugrian tribes still living in Siberia (Burrow 1955). It is by no means improbable that along with vocabulary these peoples exchanged religious practices, although there is no existing knowledge of who borrowed from whom.

In connection with the descriptive words used in the Rigveda that recount the qualities of Soma, Burrow listed 30 words common to Finno-Ugrian and Indo-Iranian languages. Several of the words from this list were used in the Rigveda as epithets of Soma. Furthermore, one other interesting item may be noted. Among Finno-Ugrian peoples the original word for *Amanita muscaria* was *pong, a word apparently cognate with the Latin *fungus*, meaning a mushroom.

Wasson cited the descriptions by several travelers of the mores of tribes living in the valleys of the Ob and the Yenisei as well as on the Kamchatka peninsula, and he added to these observations many of his own descriptions. Until recently, *Amanita muscaria* was being used by such tribes as the Ostyaks, Voguls, Koryaks, and the Samoyeds for the psychoactive qualities that this toadstool offered. The shamans of these tribes crushed the mushroom to obtain a juice that produced ecstatic, hallucinogenic (or, as Wasson would have it, entheogenic) experiences, which enabled the partaker to perform physical feats of astonishing dimensions. It is this plant, *Amanita muscaria*, that Wasson identified to be Soma.

Except for the Himalayan highlands of India, *Amanita muscaria* is not found on the rest of the Indian subcontinent or in Iran. According to Wasson, the Indo-Iranian tribes brought the tradition of the Soma plant with them into lands where *Amanita muscaria* does not readily grow. For a while, connections were perhaps maintained

with the homeland where the mushroom was gathered and brought in dried form to their new habitats. (When the original Soma was gathered, it was not a plant that was cultivated and reaped, but was found and gathered in a wild form.) With the passage of time, connections with the homeland weakened and finally disappeared, and some alternate substance had to be found to enable priests to engage in their ancient rituals. As will be shown, in some lands the cultivation of the grape and the production of wine as an intoxicant supplied an adequate substitute, and finally supplanted Soma altogether. However, neither in India nor in Iran has the substitute for Soma ever taken the form of an alcoholic intoxicant.

In India, the Rigveda is the principal source of information concerning Soma. The plant, when mature, was gleaming with a red-golden glow like the sun during the day (Rigveda IX 46^{10ab}), and was silvery white at night (IX 97^{9d}). It shed its original white coating (IX 86^{49c}), and shining like a bull it still wore the dress of sheep (IX 70⁷). Sometimes it was likened to a cow's udder to be milked (VIII 91^{9a}), and sometimes to Heaven's head (IX 69^{8cd}). It grew in the mountains (V 43^c) and absorbed the sun's rays — filter of the sky (IX 66^{5abc}) — in order to acquire the basic miraculous potency.

The priests (or officiants) pounded the plant with stones (IX 11⁵⁻⁶), passed its pulp through a filter of lamb's wool (thus, a second filter), mixed its juice with milk, curd or honey, and drank the yellow liquid thus produced. The priests, impersonating Indra or Indra's charioteer Vāyu, received the poison into themselves, where a further purification was achieved (IX 80^{3a}). These officiants, with their bladders full, urinated the Soma; in this way, they themselves served as the final living filter of the inebriating juice (IX 74⁴), a juice now purified, ready to be ingested, ready to be drunk as the wondrous drink of immortality. Past travelers among the Finno-Ugrian peoples attested to the same practice in Siberia. The juice of *Amanita muscaria* was not very effective just after it had been extracted from the mushroom, but now — after it had been urinated by the shamans — its potency became prodigious.

The custom of drinking urine can be explained by modern chemistry (Schultes & Hofmann 1980). While fresh, *Amanita muscaria* contains ibotenic acid, which produces several compounds, including muscimole (the active hallucinogenic principle), when the mushroom is dried. When *Amanita muscaria* is wetted again and its juice is squeezed out and ingested, the muscimole is not metabolized, but it passes through the body and it is excreted in the urine, with its hallucinogenic power unchanged. Therefore, the urine itself, when ingested, can cause hallucinations and intoxication again. In fact, it is possible that the raw juice of *Amanita muscaria* can cause unpleasant side effects, including nausea, dizziness, and cold sweat, but the agents causing these side effects will have

been metabolized and are inactive in the urine. Thus, the person who drinks the raw juice is, in a sense, a filter and the urine is thus regarded as the purified liquid of immortality.

Wasson noted that *Amanita muscaria* physically answers every description that is lavished on the Soma in the Rigveda. As a mushroom, it grows rapidly, without roots, leaves or branches. Remarkably like a phallus in appearance, its cap is covered with fleecy-white tegumen (the silvery white of night, the dress of sheep, the cow's udder). This tegumen breaks into tufts, revealing a cap or head beneath that gleams golden-red (like the sun, a bull or a single eye). The tribal shamans revered the ecstasy-producing qualities of this liquid filtered through a human being, which ultimately became a wondrous liquid of immortality.

Two particular points made by Wasson are saved for last because, as will be shown later, these points are of special importance for the purpose of this article. Wasson noted two associations with *Amanita muscaria* in Siberia and Russia. First, *Amanita muscaria* grows in northern Eurasia in a symbiotic relationship with birches and firs. When the mushroom thrusts itself forth from the ground, it is always under the shadow of and near the roots of these trees. Further south, the birches and firs disappear and *Amanita muscaria* is nowhere to be found.

Second, there is an interesting association between *Amanita muscaria* and creeping animals like lizards, toads, and frogs. The English word "toadstool" for *Amanita muscaria* is a perfect example. Other European languages follow the same trend: Norwegians and Danes speak of a toad's hat; the Low Germans speak of a frog's stool; the Irish speak of a frog's pouch; and the Pennsylvania Dutch speak of a toad's stool (*grottestuhl*) and a toad's foot (*grottefuss*). In some local dialects, the French use the identical concept. They refer to *Amanita muscaria* as *crapaudin* (from *crapaud*, meaning toad). Yet, nowhere is there an actual cause and effect established to account for this relationship. The present author's view is that both *Amanita muscaria* and the presence of toads and frogs require a shady terrain with considerable moisture. Besides, the mushroom — growing low on the ground — is a perfect natural companion for amphibians and snakes. Also, the toxic nature of the skin of some amphibians can be associated with the toxicity of *Amanita muscaria*.

ANCIENT GREECE

It is not easy to isolate elements of worship of Haoma-Soma in ancient Greece for the simple reason that these elements were mixed up with a similar god, though a god of totally different origin. It is the thesis of this article that the divinity ultimately worshiped in Greece and cognate with Haoma-Soma was, in its basic elements, the Thracian

god Sabazios. Because this god was syncretized at the end of the fifth century B.C. with the Greek Dionysos or Bakchos, the cult of this complex god that came to Greece from foreign lands will now be analyzed.

It is known that Dionysos-Bakchos was originally a non-Greek god, probably of Semitic origin. According to James (1959), his remote ancestry seems to be the Asiatic dying god of fertility (Tammuz, Adonis, Baal, Attis), associated with the Great Mother Goddess (Inanna-Ishtar, Astarte, Ananth, Kybele). Essentially this dying god, an embodiment of grain (his body) and wine (his blood), came to life in the spring. When he grew to maturity (ripened), he allowed himself to be ground and crushed for the benefit of humanity, but before his self-sacrifice, he gave up part of his seed to impregnate the Great Mother to assure a crop for next year. Since he rose again the following year, he was not only a god representing humankind's nourishment and fertility, but also a god of death and ultimate resurrection.

Because his death each year was a cause for mourning and lamentation, the Semitic population (always loath to call a god by his true name) occasionally referred to him in their Semitic language as *Bākūy*, the lamented god (Astour 1961). The worship of this lamented god was widely practiced from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean and from southernmost Arabia to the Black Sea. This Semitic god came by several paths to Greece and to lands neighboring Greece, where the ancient Soma may have been originally worshiped. It was in the neighboring land of Thrace and Macedonia that the Semitic god was first syncretized with Sabazios.

One important avenue whereby the Semitic lamented god reached Greece was by way of Thrace, a land that lies west of the Hellespont, in what is modern Bulgaria and European Turkey. Precisely when the Thracians settled in their territory is difficult to determine, in part because the Thracians left no written records, with the exception of an unintelligible seal ring. They never seemed to have mastered the art of writing. It is possible that they may have come from their home in Russia to their new land even before the Greeks occupied the land that historically became their own. By the time of the Trojan War, the Thracians seem to have been acclimatized to their Semitic neighbors in that they worshiped the Great Mother Goddess (Herodotus said that her name was Bendis) and they practiced Semitic polygamy and circumcision.

One Thracian tribe crossed the Hellespont into Asia and settled in Anatolia. They were called the Briges or Phrygians (Nilsson 1967; Strabo's Geography). In fact, in the *Iliad* (2.II: 844-846, 861-862), Homer listed the Phrygians, as well as the Thracians, as allies of Troy against the invading Greeks. It is the present author's belief that the Thracians in general, and the Phrygians in particular, had brought the worship of the god Haoma-Soma

from their ancestral home to a place where *Amanita muscaria* was not used, or simply did not grow.

Unlike the situation in India and Iran where the incoming Indo-Europeans found no competition, the Phrygians became neighbors of the Semites who already had an ecstasy-inducing god, namely Bākūy. Of course this god produced an ecstatic experience through alcohol, and before long the prevailing Semitic god and the ancestral Sabazios or Soma were syncretized. They translated the borrowed Semitic lamented god Bākūy into their own Indo-European language as *Diounsis* (the perfect passive participle of the Sanskrit root *div*=lament: *dyuná*=lamented). The word "Diounsis" (of course borrowed by the Greeks as Dionysos and regarded as a proper name: cf., Adonis) is found by good fortune on gravestones of the third century A.D., written partly in Greek and partly in Phrygian (Calder 1927: 161ff.). Here the god is described as a guardian of tombs. Thus, there are two names for the same god: the Thrako-Phrygian and Indo-European Sabazios as well as his syncretized version Diounsis, who originally was invoked as Bākūy by the Semites.

The worship of this naturalized god (Diounsis-Sabazios), now honored for his alcoholic drink, quickly spread not only among the Phrygians but also among their Thracian confreres west of the Hellespont, although not without resistance. In the *Iliad* (6.II: 130-140), Homer spoke darkly about Dionysos' vengeance on Lykourgos, a king of the Thracians; Diodorus Siculus (III.65: 4-6) also elaborated on this struggle. While the course of this religious conflict is not known, at a later date the Thracians were known as notorious drunkards and, according to Herodotus, one of the chief Thracian gods was Dionysos. Of course, in discussing Thracian religion, Herodotus contradicts himself elsewhere by calling the chief god of the Thracians *Zalmoxis*.

The only available significant religious evidence from Thrace is the omnipresent depiction of the "Hero," the god on horseback. Like the Semitic dying god, he is never named (the dedicatory inscriptions are in Greek, not Thracian). In several representations he is shown performing the Semitic ritual, the *ἑρὸς γάμος* (sacred marriage) with the Mother Goddess. However, unlike in the Semitic East, he is nowhere shown as a minor divinity dying each year. Occasionally, his robe or saddle is decorated with ivy, the symbol of eternity. In fact, he seems to occupy a position of supreme eminence. Although he is nameless, many authorities (e.g., Nilsson 1967; Kazarow 1938) identify this hero as the god Sabazios-Diounsis, and he may be identical to the Thracian god whom Herodotus called Dionysos. On Thracian reliefs, he is shown riding toward a tree (perhaps the Tree of Life), and often a snake is coiled about the tree, perhaps a theriomorphic representation of the god. Usually, the hero is shown hunting down a wild boar (often symbolizing death in the Semitic world (cf., the presence of a wild boar in the myth of Adonis). As if

to show his eastern origin, the hero is represented as wearing a Phrygian cap (Pol & Marazov 1975). One means of identifying the "Hero" is his occasional gesture of blessing, the *Benedictio Latina* (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1977), which is a prominent characteristic of Sabazios, as will be seen below.

It is interesting that in Asia Minor the hero is known as Σῴζων, the "Saving God" (Nilsson 1967: 658). The present author believes that in this instance there is a bit of religious chauvinism on the part of the Greeks who always insisted on identifying every foreign deity with their own, often resorting to false etymology to enhance the argument. Undoubtedly, the Thrako-Phrygian "Hero" god, generally nameless in the Semitic manner, was perhaps called hieratically Sabazios or its Thracian equivalent, and the Greeks simply used a word of their own Σῴζων, which sounded roughly like the Thracian term, to designate this foreign god. As a whole, the term "Saving God" was apt because the hero helped worshipers, saving them from illness, death, and sin.

Some aspects of the Thracian Diounsis (Dionysos) slowly filtered down to Greece, and the Greeks did maintain a tradition that their Dionysos came to Greece from Anatolia-Lydia (see Euripides' *The Bakchai*) or from Thrace, thus indirectly from Asia Minor. However, Bākūy, the same Semitic "Lamented God" who was introduced to the Phrygians and Thracians, was also brought directly to Greece by the Phoenicians. Thebes, the traditional birthplace of Dionysos, was an early Phoenician colony, and Kadmos, a Phoenician himself, is credited with having introduced the Phoenician alphabet to Greece. It was Kadmos' daughter Semele, who after union with Zeus, bore Bakchos-Bākūy as an illegitimate child. After Bakchos had grown up, he encountered the same opposition on the part of the Greek chieftains as his Thrako-Semitic counterpart Diounsis-Sabazios met in Thrace. Thus, in Greece there is actually one god with two names, Bakchos and Dionysos. The Greeks identified the two gods and used the names interchangeably. Bakchos was the direct Hellenization of the Semitic Bākūy, while Dionysos may have been a Thrako-Phrygian translation of the same Bākūy, but indirectly acquired.

Unlike the Thracian tribes, the Greek states (to some extent) managed to domesticate this alien god. Up to almost the end of the fifth century B.C., Dionysos was a gentle god who was kind to those who accepted him. However, as a reminder of his wild origins (that he maintained in Thrace), he was cruel and unforgiving to his opponents. Generally, he offered his body and his blood as well as his sexuality to all who would take him and accept him, but if anyone denied him, he drove that person mad. He could enter any human being if that person ingested the god by eating the god's flesh and drinking the god's blood. He gave to anyone under his influence a feeling of immortality, an experience of divine essence. Yet, in anger,

he could cause humans to lose their minds and in their madness to tear an unbeliever from limb to limb, thus causing his victim to suffer dismemberment (σπαράγμός), a fate that he himself had suffered all the time in mortal guise, although of course as an immortal he always returned to life. While Greek tradition usually assigned the act of dismemberment to women (Mainades), his companions Satyroi and Seilenoi probably performed this destructive task in the god's Semitic beginnings. (The word "satyros" comes from the Semitic root *s.t.r.*, meaning to tear, to butcher, to dismember [Astour 1961]).

As a god of wine, Dionysos' emblem was the grapevine (as well as the ivy), and he carried with him his scepter entwined with grape leaves or ivy — namely the thyrsus. Whomsoever he touched with his thyrsus, that human being came under his influence. Associated with Dionysos (or perhaps an emanation of the god) was Eros or Desire, who imbued any mortal with the presence of the god, and thus made that mortal temporarily a god. In the Greek world, Dionysos was usually associated with the eastern symbol of strength, the bull, or with the Greek animal symbols of sexuality, the goat or the ass.

This complex Hellenized Semitic god of fertility was syncretized with Diounsos-Sabazios in Greece at the end of the fifth century and through the fourth century B.C. This time, the syncretizing process seems to have originated from the rising power of Macedonia. Situated north of Thessaly and west of Thrace, Macedonia was a semibarbaric land where — from the Greek point of view — primitive religious practices still prevailed. The proximity of the country to Thrace undoubtedly opened Macedonia up to strong Thracian religious influence. The Macedonian language (while Greek of sorts) was barely understood by the Greeks, and the Macedonians themselves were probably a mixture of Hellenic and Thracian elements. At any rate, Macedonia (like Thrace) gave special prominence in its pantheon to the god Dionysos. Actually, in the eyes of the Greeks, the Dionysos of the Macedonians was not only more primitive and wilder than their own god, but was undoubtedly (like the Thracian god) an essentially different god, namely Sabazios.

It is fortunate that first-hand information about this Dionysos is available from no less an observer than Euripides. The playwright, who had been a spokesman for Athenian humanism, departed in his old age from Athens and spent the last two years of his life in barbaric Macedonia because of his disenchantment with Athens being ground down by the Peloponnesian War. The existing product of his self-imposed exile is his masterpiece *The Bakchai*. This play is the first concrete evidence of the "other Dionysos," a god wilder and more primitive than his tamed Greek counterpart but at the same time more spiritual and more psychologically moving, namely Sabazios.

PROOF OF THE IDENTIFICATION OF HAOMA-SOMA

The main thesis of the present article is that the non-Greek Macedonian-Thracian god was Sabazios, the third embodiment of the Indo-Iranian Haoma-Soma. Ideally, to prove this identification, six different types of identity would have to be demonstrated: (1) that Sabazios was essentially the same ecstasy-causing god, ingested in a similar way, as Haoma-Soma; (2) in order to partake of the god's divinity, the celebrant had to be pure or had to acquire spiritual purity as a prerequisite before being considered fit to receive the god; (3) the two different deities would have to be shown as sharing some very individual — even idiosyncratic — episode in their myths; (4) it would help the proof if it could be shown that (allowing for linguistic changes) Haoma-Soma and Sabazios had the same name; (5) keeping in mind Wasson's hypothesis of the identity of Haoma-Soma with the *Amanita muscaria* of the Finno-Ugrians, it would have to be seen if Sabazios shared or suggested the same associations as *Amanita muscaria*; and (6) that the psychoactive effects produced by *Amanita muscaria* compare favorably with the effects Dionysos-Sabazios provided, as described in the literature of ancient Greece.

Sabazios Is the Same as Haoma-Soma

Historically, Sabazios was a god associated with ecstatic experience. However, this experience was caused not by hallucinogenic mushroom juice, but by the eating of the god's body in the form of bread and by the drinking of the god's blood in the form of fermented grape juice (i.e., wine), particularly the latter. Sometimes the feeling of ecstasy came from dancing and the music accompanying the dance. It should always be remembered that in Greece or in the peripheral territories of Macedonia and Thrace *Amanita muscaria* may have not been available, very much as on the plateau of Iran and on the subcontinent of India.

While the literate societies of Iran and India, through the Avesta and Rigveda, kept the memory of the ancient Haoma-Soma alive (even though various substitutes had to be used for the traditional but no longer available plant), the neighboring lands of Greece had not preserved such a tradition, and the substitution of alcoholic wine for the nonalcoholic mushroom juice had been made long ago in the deep recesses of their prehistory. It should also be remembered that centuries separated the mention of Haoma-Soma and Sabazios. The Rigveda may date from the eleventh century B.C. or even earlier and the older parts of the Avesta were perhaps from the tenth century B.C., whereas the first mention of Sabazios came (at the earliest) from the end of the fifth century B.C. and with increasing

frequency from then on. If it were not for the existence of the Rigveda in India and the Avesta in Iran, neither India nor Iran of the fifth century B.C. would have had the vivid tradition of the Soma or the Haoma.

Of course, the electrifying appearance of the Semitic Bākūy-Bakchos-Diounsīs-Dionysos tended to cause the Indo-Iranian Haoma-Soma to fade somewhat in the consciousness of the Thrako-Phrygians and Macedonians. The rival divinity absorbed many of the ecstatic properties of the Aryan god. In Iran and India, the incoming tribes found among the native peoples no equivalent divinity who could be as intimate with a human being as to offer himself to be eaten and imbibed. The Haoma-Soma had no rival and consequently prevailed in human consciousness.

Purity and Purification

While the traditional Greek account of the celebration of Dionysos endowed his rites with suggestions of rowdiness, noise and sexual abandon, the Thrako-Phrygian and Macedonian god required of the worshiper purity of the soul. The dualistic concept is perfectly illustrated in Euripides' *The Bakchai*. While Pentheus, in true Greek fashion, shows contempt for the rites of the god, and like a Puritan seems to sniff lewdness in the god's worship, the messenger in the play goes to great lengths to describe the simple purity of the women as they celebrate the god in naked innocence. As will be seen below, before neophytes could be admitted into the presence of the god, they had to be purified and every particle of impurity or dirt had to be washed or rubbed out of the very pores. The choral odes of the play echo a basic search for psychic purity, which can be obtained by allowing oneself to exist in union with nature.

This basic search for purity is prevalent in the Hōm Yašt ceremony of the Avesta, and throughout the ninth book of the Rigveda wherever Soma is mentioned. The blessing of the god must be merited by the celebrant, for only the pure are fit to receive the god.

Deities Share Individual Characteristics

The most insistent and striking myth about Dionysos-Sabazios in the Greek world was the strange manner of the god's birth. Although he was conceived of Zeus and his mother Semele, as Semele was perishing in flames in Zeus' presence, Zeus took the unborn god from Semele's womb and placed the fetus in his own thigh, so that the unborn child might complete his normal period of incubation. Thus, the god was born from Zeus' thigh, and was often referred to as thigh-bred Dionysos (μηροτραφής Διονυσος) or thigh-sown Dionysos (μηροσπαπής Διονυσος). In this way, the god was actually born twice: prematurely of a mother and, in the fullness of time, from the thigh of his father, Zeus. By false etymology, ancient Greeks explained the god's frequent epithet "dithyram-

bos," as "he who came twice to the gates of birth" (ὁ δις θύραζε βεβηκώς).

It is therefore surprising to find in an article by Kuhn (1852) on Soma, a quotation from the *Vājasaneyi Samhitā* (4.27) where Soma is called on to enter the right thigh of Indra. Kuhn further quoted (p. 192) the scholiast to this passage in the *Tāittirīya Samhitā* noting that the gods "brought Soma and placed him in the right thigh of Indra. So, he is now Indra, and he who offers sacrifices to Indra, for that reason speaks to Soma as well."

Indra, as a storm god, with accompanying thunder, lightning and rain, can easily be equated to Zeus. Certainly, the concept of a god hidden in a mighty god's thigh is most unusual even in the realm of mythology, so that one is forced to consider the two myths to be closely related. Of course it would be easy to explain the connection as being due to borrowing, on account of the appearance of Alexander the Great in India and the subsequent importation of the Greek myth to India in the fourth century B.C., somewhat in the manner of transplanting Greek drama into later Sanskrit literature. However, the fact remains that both the *Vājasaneyi Samhitā* and the *Tāittirīya Samhitā* were probably composed five hundred years before the time of Alexander.

Did Haoma-Soma and Sabazios Have the Same Name?

The very name of the deity (Sabazios) can be compared with the word "Soma," if the word "Sabazios" is reduced to its simplest form. A passage in Demosthenes' oration "On the Crown" (330 B.C.) provides the needed information. Here Demosthenes is trying to denigrate his rival Aischines by showing that in his youth the latter was an acolyte of his mother, a priestess of Dionysos-Sabazios. When Aischines led the initiates in a public procession, he would bellow: "O Saboi!"

Because it is known that the initiates of Bakchos, after partaking of the body and the blood of Bakchos, became the god and were themselves called *Bakchoi*, it follows that in order to be called *Saboi*, the adherents of the Bakchic Sabazios had to ingest a god named *Sabos* or *Savos*. This is the basic, elementary form of the name of the god Sabazios. It requires no training in philology to recognize the *vṛddhi* strengthened form *sāu* of the Vedic root *su* (meaning to crush), the very root of the word "Soma" (the crushed god). The lexicographer Hesychios (see Nilsson 1967) indicated that the Macedonian word for Seilenos, the attendant of Dionysos, was *Saudos*, thus repeating the same Indo-Iranian root. Thus the word "Sabazios" is made up of *Sabos* and *Dios* (meaning god), where the initial D became a Z (i.e., Dios=Zeus). In fact, in inscriptions the name of the god is occasionally spelled *Sabadios* instead of *Sabazios*.

Does Sabazios Share or Suggest the Same Associations as *Amanita muscaria*?

In the Hellenic and quasi-Hellenic world, the worship of Dionysos-Sabazios was associated with various concrete rituals and symbols. Aside from the topic of purity and cleansing previously referred to, it is with the nebris — the spotted fawnskin — that one can establish the most specific connection between Haoma-Soma of the Indo-Iranians and Sabazios-Dionysos of the Greeks and Macedonians. It is the accepted concept that the nebris or fawnskin worn by every Dionysiac initiate represented an animal incarnation of the god, a stag or deer. The initiate who had become one with Bakchos or Savos wore the nebris united with the god, and was now under the god's skin. By wearing the skin of one of the god's theriomorphic aspects, the neophytes thus showed unmistakably to the world that they had become the god at the moment of donning the nebris. In other words, god and mortal humans fused for the moment into a single entity. This explanation may be correct in some instances, although it must be admitted that nowhere is a statement found that the god had ever assumed the shape of a stag or deer.

However, a puzzling passage in the beginning of Euripides' *The Bakchai* (not forgetting that the play deals with the Macedonian Sabazios-Dionysos) makes one pause to seek some other explanation of the nebris symbol. Here, the Bakchic women (followers of Dionysos from Asia) sing of the god and urge his adherents to don his ritual symbols: "Wreath the garments of the spotted fawnskin with tufts of white wool."

The passage is mystifying. Dodds (1960), the great expert on the play, suspected that an allusion is made here to some obscure ritual. The *mystes*, by wearing the nebris, does show that the person and the god are one. Yet, in this unity, in what physical form is the god manifest? Surely, white woolen tufts are unnecessary if the nebris is to reveal the god as a stag or a deer. How much more likely would it be if the initiates showed that they were the god in the shape of *Amanita muscaria*! As Wasson pointed out, *Amanita muscaria* (when it first thrusts itself from the ground) is covered with a veil of woollike silvery white cover, "the Asurian color." As the mushroom matures, the white woollike cover breaks up into tufts, revealing the golden-red glow of the mushroom cap beneath. Wasson cited some interesting passages from the Rigveda to illustrate his point.

He [Soma] bellows, terrifying bull, with might, sharpening his [red-glow] shining horns, gazing afar. The Soma rests in his well-appointed birthplace. The hide is of bull, the dress of sheep.

— Rigveda (IX 707)

[Soma] sloughs off the Asurian color [i.e., godlike] that is his. He abandons the envelope, goes to the rendezvous with the Father [sky]. With what floats he makes his vesture of grand-occasion.

— Rigveda (IX 722)

Like a serpent, he [Soma] creeps out of his skin.

— Rigveda (IX 964a)

By day he appears *hári* [color of fire], by night silvery white.

— Rigveda (IX 973a)

If one compares these passages of the Rigveda with obscure lines of *The Bakchai* quoted above, the meaning of these lines of the choral ode and the significance of the nebris become clear. The spotted fawnskin of Dionysos is not worn by *mystai* because the god manifests himself as a spotted fawn, but because the nebris — embellished with tufts of white wool — reveals in a naturalistic manner a subconscious idea that the god, and through him the *mystes*, is the *mushroom*. The golden-red glow of the mushroom cap in a color similar to deerskin is thus covered with the tufts of the white woollike remains of its original cover. In this way the fawnskin is the tangible representation of the mushroom.

But have human beings ever tried to represent themselves as the quintessential personification of the mushroom? To answer this question one must turn to the folklore of those tribes that used *Amanita muscaria* as a divine intoxicant. Wasson supplied the answer by quoting a description of the Siberian Koryaks and their religious concepts by the anthropologist Jochelson (1905: 115): "In the beginning of things, at the mythological time of the Big Raven, the transformation of animals and inanimate objects into men was a natural occurrence. At that time man also possessed the power of transforming himself. By putting on the skin of an animal, or by taking on the outward physical character of an object, man could assume its form. . . . Eme'mgut [the semi-divine son of the Creator] and his wives put on wide-brimmed hats resembling the fly-agaric [*Amanita muscaria*] and they became the poisonous fungi."

In the above passage one finds a definite trace of primitive sympathetic magic. By appearing with some attribute of a plant or animal, the human being actually becomes and is the substance he or she desires to possess. By showing the supreme power some attribute of the desired object, the individual communicates with heaven to indicate what he or she wants. However, at this point it should be noted that in this instance there is a clear concept of human beings uniting with a god (a mushroom god or for that matter any other god).

Elsewhere, Wasson cited another instance where people tried to intimate to heaven what they wanted by trying to behave as the desired object behaves. Here, Wasson cited another anthropologist, Bogoraz (1904-1909: 206), who described the action of a man who wanted to get hold of *Amanita muscaria*: "I saw one man suddenly snatch a small narrow bag and pull it with all his might over his head, trying to break through the bottom. He was evidently imitating the mushroom bursting forth from the ground."

Both of the instances are cited here to prove that the nebris, as a symbol of Sabazios-Dionysos, does not necessarily indicate the god manifested as a deer or stag, but that this emblem of the god goes back to the time when Sabazios was the sacred mushroom — an identity no longer remembered but subconsciously followed.

Before the end of the fifth century B.C., when the Macedonian-Thracian version of Dionysos began to trickle down to Athens, two plants were chiefly associated with the god in popular worship. These were the grape, along with its foliage the grape leaf, and the ivy. It is easy to understand the meaning of the grape leaf as a symbol of the god. His Semitic origin as the incarnation of food, namely bread and wine, goes back to Adonis, Baal, and Tammuz. The god's association with ivy may be later and not Semitic. Ivy is an evergreen associated with a climate colder than that of Asia Minor. The evergreen ivy undoubtedly symbolized Dionysos after he had reached Europe, not as a minor divinity who died each year, but as a god as lasting as the ivy, which even in the midst of snow and ice gives promise of the greening season to come. Both the ivy and the grape leaf were used before the end of the fifth century B.C. as a wreath about the head of Dionysos and as the green frond crowning the end of a bare branch or a fennel (νάρθηξ), forming the magic wand of the god, namely the thyrsus.

With the introduction of the Thrako-Macedonian Sabazios-Dionysos, the character of the god's plant association suddenly changed: the thyrsus was frequently topped by a fir cone rather than a bunch of grape leaves or ivy. In representations from the era of the Roman Empire, Sabazios (all by himself) is represented as a bearded figure, holding a fir cone in the palm of his hand (Nilsson 1967). Since the fir cone represents an evergreen plant, it is not surprising that the branches, with their green needles, occasionally replace or appear side by side with the more traditional ivy; both evergreens were used to symbolize the god's eternity. It may also be added that in Euripides' *The Bakchai*, the Maenads were described as reposing in innocent simplicity on the fir needles of the forest on Mt. Kithairon. Later, in the same play, Pentheus is shown perched on a fir tree, supposedly in order to spy on the Maenads, but in reality offering himself up unwittingly as a human sacrifice to the god.

One other plant makes its solitary appearance in connection with Sabazios, the so-called white poplar (λεύκη). In "On the Crown," Demosthenes described Aischines leading a public procession of devotees, with their heads entwined with λεύκη. The word itself does not really denote a specific tree: with a change of accent it simply means white, although the Greeks usually applied the word to the white poplar. If a white birch ever existed in Greece (which it did not in ancient times), it too would have been called λεύκη.

It is interesting that with the arrival of Sabazios on the Athenian scene, two trees suddenly came into prominence — the fir and the "white tree," a term used by the Greeks to denote the only white tree they knew (i.e., the white poplar). If one recalls Wasson's contention that the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom, the original Haoma-Soma, exists in a symbiotic relationship with the fir and the birch in Russia, the association of the fir and the white tree with Savos-Sabazios is remarkable! This is not to suggest that the Macedonians or Thracians had remembered anything about the true nature of Sabazios as a divine personification of the mushroom. Rather, even after the true meaning of Sabazios had disappeared, the association of the mushroom with the fir and birch remained in popular consciousness.

Up to the end of the fifth century B.C., aside from his mythic association with the ass and the panther, Dionysos had two theriomorphic manifestations in the Greek world, namely the goat and the bull. However, with the end of the fifth century B.C., Dionysos — now syncretized with Sabazios — was suddenly associated with creeping animals: snakes, toads, frogs, and lizards. This association with snakes (although the early Greek form of Dionysos had no such association) can be understood if one recalls that in Asia Minor the earliest example of the dying god-lover of the Great Mother — the Sumerian Dumuzi or Tammuz — was sired by Ningišzida (Lord of the Tree of Life), who always appeared in the shape of a snake. The legend immediately brings to mind the Genesis story of the serpent in the Tree of Knowledge. The idea of a god entwined as a snake in the Tree of Knowledge or the Tree of Life was undoubtedly transmitted by Semitic tradition to the Phrygian branch of Thracians, who in turn endowed the hero god of their European homeland with the same concept. Several of the votive tablets show the Thracian Hero riding toward the Tree of Life about which a snake is coiled (Pol & Marazov 1975). In this instance, it is interesting that it is not the Greek tradition that preserves the Semitic snake association, but rather the Thrako-Macedonian version of the god.

While it is true that the snake aspect of the god was for the most part Semitic in origin, the Rigveda occasionally speaks of Soma in terms of a snake creeping out of his old skin. Wasson interprets this image as further proof that the Vedic Soma was *Amanita muscaria*.

Yet, snakes were not the only crawling creatures associated with Sabazios. Frogs, toads, and lizards figured prominently as the god's associates. In several ancient sculptured representations the hand of Sabazios may be seen in a gesture of blessing (*Benedictio Latina*), but the hand of blessing is literally crawling with reptiles and amphibians.

What was the origin of this strange partnership of god and animal? The great historian of Greek religion, Nilsson

(1967: 660) threw up his hands and declared that "[Sabazios] has an inexplicable preference for crawling animals. These manifestations are characteristic of the spirit of the era and the Oriental religions; it cannot be denied that these [associations] actually border on superstition." Nonetheless, the association is very real. Almost a hundred of these "Hands of Blessing" have already been found. They were made of bronze and came from a wide area extending from Asia Minor to Spain and from Rumania to North Africa. There must have been a cause for the close connection between Savos-Sabazios and crawling animals.

Again, returning to the discussion of Wasson's concept of the origin of Haoma-Soma as the hallucinogenic mushroom *Amanita muscaria*, he spent considerable time discussing the actual association throughout Europe between this mushroom and toads, frogs, and lizards, as evidenced even by the English term "toadstool" for a poisonous mushroom. Although Wasson wrote of the fact, he did not account for the cause of the association. The relationship is probably caused by the need for moisture of mushrooms, reptiles, and amphibians, and by the fact that mushrooms and crawling things go together because of their closeness to the ground. One other relationship may be that the toxic nature of *Amanita muscaria* can be related to the toxicity of the skin of some amphibians.

Do the Effects of *Amanita muscaria* Compare Favorably with Those of Dionysos-Sabazios?

Wasson reported how the ingestion of *Amanita muscaria* affects the user. After a short time, the partaker feels euphoria (but unlike the symptoms after the consumption of alcohol), experiences a lightness of foot and an ability to perform tasks beyond a normal capacity. Wasson described a man who, during inebriation with the mushroom, was able to carry a 120-pound sack of flour for 10 miles. Although occasionally nausea and vomiting ensue, several witnesses reported that they themselves saw no serious physical harm among the participants. Another reported concrete symptom is abnormal visual experience: a drop of water on the ground appears to be as large as a pond or a single stalk of straw looks like a big tree trunk (i.e., macropsia). At a later stage of inebriation, the witnesses reported that the participant sees the mushroom as if in human shape (a mushroom man) who exerts total power and orders the partaker to do anything the mushroom man wishes.

An interesting counterpart to these effects is found in Greek literature. In *The Bakchai* of Euripides, Dionysos and King Pentheus encounter each other, and even though Pentheus wishes to lead an armed expedition against the god and his followers, on a single word from the god, Pentheus experiences strange feelings. He sees two suns and two Thebes, each with seven gates. This may be taken as the banal symptom of overindulgence in alcohol, but

in the next vision of Pentheus, while he sees the god in human form as before, he also sees him in his theriomorphic shape as a bull. In other words, Pentheus' vision is not really double in the conventional sense, but rather he is viewing both ordinary and Dionysiac reality simultaneously. Furthermore, Pentheus exhibits an unusual type of euphoria. He is full of exaggerated self-confidence and labors under the delusion that his is all-powerful. He thinks he can lift an entire mountain (Mt. Kithairon) with one arm and overturn everything on it (i.e., micropsia). He talks with the incarnation of his hallucination (i.e., Dionysos), and contrary to his personal wishes, he carries out the suggestions of Dionysos to spy on the Bakchic women, and in order not be found out he is persuaded to wear women's clothes. Of course in the hands of Euripides the scene where Pentheus is thus overpowered by the god becomes not only a divine possession, but (2,500 years before Freud) becomes a situation in which the human subconscious residing within Pentheus (Dionysos) overturns Pentheus' conscious desires.

CONCLUSION

Thus, one is presented with the fact that if Wasson's identification of Haoma-Soma with *Amanita muscaria* is valid, then a third group of Indo-European peoples on the outskirts of the Greek world showed circumstantial evidence for an extinct worship of the same liquid of immortality as the Hindus and the ancient Iranians. It is true that among the Thrako-Phrygians and the Macedonians the use of the sacred hallucinogenic juice had disappeared, and perhaps a new means of sacred inebriation had been discovered in the form of the fermented juice of the grape. Yet the tradition and the concept of the deity lived beyond the product, with all its basic associations untouched.

In fact, one of the most individual mythological traits (i.e., being thigh born) is shared by both Soma and Sabazios. The name of the god survived, as well as the aura of purity and goodness that one encounters in the Avesta. The use of the fawnskin as a symbol of the god can easily be interpreted as being reminiscent of the original Haoma-Soma, *Amanita muscaria*. The fir and birch, the botanical associations of the mushroom, the apotheosis of which became the god Haoma-Soma, remained as the half-remembered associates of Sabazios. The unusual attendants of *Amanita muscaria*, crawling creatures like toads, frogs, and lizards remained with Sabazios until the time when Christianity drove the god's worship underground. Lastly, the effect of Dionysos-Sabazios on individual humans shows more hallucinatory abnormalities in vision than the traditional alcoholic intoxication.

Finally, in establishing the relationship between Haoma-Soma and Sabazios, the ritual use of Haoma-Soma finds a place in the history of the religions of the Western

world. The fact is that the worship of Sabazios seems to have played a teasingly important role in the evolution and practice of Judaism and Christianity. However, tracing this

development belongs elsewhere and is not the theme of the present article.

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