Abstract

The ecstatic journeys that are part of Zoroastrian religious culture are strongly linked to the expressive forms of Gnostic dualism. These are explorations of entheogenic worlds created by the eating of the hallucinogenic substances and/or narcotics, the «food» or «illuminating drink» (rōnšngar xwarišn) of the Pahlavi texts. A Gnostic text, the Apokryphon Johannis speaks of the Tree of Life and its poisonous fruits. In the beginning, the Edenic trees are one, called in two different ways. The Rabbinical commentaries confirm this conjecture: the two original trees stood both at the centre of the garden, united by the roots. Even in Iran the events of the first parents of mankind are tied to a tree and to the knowledge dispensed from it, and imply the attainment of that knowledge and visionary power. These hallucinogenic rituals play a role also in the teachings of the late Magusaean, the Hellenised Magoi or the Mages of the Greek settlements, a kind of Zoroastrian defrocked priests that live in Syria or Anatolia. The Hellenistic and Late-Antique literature gives rise to many comparisons between Iranian lore and Western traditions, with a special regard to the psychotogenic experiences. Also, there are many traces of these contacts among Iranism and Judaism. These ritual attitudes are at the beginning of the Modern magical world.

Among the Coptic Gnostic texts found at Nag-Hammadi between 1946 and 1950, the Apokryphon Johannis is remarkable. Four versions of it are known, the oldest is contained in papyrus 8502 of Berlin’s Staatsbibliothek = Berolinensis Gnosticus (BG).1 The four texts do not give us the same review, but two: a short one, represented by BG and Nag-Hammadi Codex III, and a more extensive version gave by Nag-Hammadi Codex II and IV. 

Irenaeus (Adv. haer. I, 29, 1-4) has probably used a short Greek version of the Apokryphon Johannis to refute – before 180 A.D. – the teachings of Barbelonotics.2 A Gnostic group whose name derives from Barbelo, she is a female Aeon at the beginning of the whole universe.3 She, the Mother of all living,

3 See also Epiph. Pan. haer. 25, 2, 2-4.


Ialdabaōth, aided by dark powers -- the Archons -- creates the soul of Adam, a faulty duplicate of an image of light. But the psychic man lies motionless on the ground, devoid of the living breath that the Demiurge and the powers cannot infuse. Only by a stratagem, the light world will be able to animate Adam.

After the creation of the soul, Ialdabaōth and the Archons create the real man, the Adam of flesh; they bring to him the gates of paradise, offering the plants that grow there. From the Archons rises a «spirit of imitation», the ἀντίμιμον πνεῡμα that incited Adam towards evil and sin, inviting him to eat from the Tree of Life, the paradise plant with its deadly fruit. Its root is bitter, its branches are a shadow of death, its leaves contempt and deceit, its seed drinking itself forever to the darkness.

Now, the drinking in Gnostic dualism is an action ascribed to the world of darkness; food and drink nourish the body, antithetical to true life, bright and ineffable. Marcion denies the materiality and corporality of Jesus: the Savior feeds and drinks only in appearance (Tert. Adv. Marc. 3, 8, 4).

This suggestion starts from the Synoptics, in a passage that we find, almost identical, in the first and third Gospel. The subject is John the Baptist of whom Jesus says: «John has come, neither eating nor drinking, and they say “He has a demon. The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and people say: “Here is a glutton and wine drinker (ἰδοὺ ἄνθρωπος φάγος καί οἰνοπότης), a friend of publicans and sinners”» (Mt. 11, 18-19). The parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke (7, 33-34) is the longest, this suggest that it is the oldest.

It is the Gnostic Docetism which also echoes Saturninus (or Satornilo), according to which the Saviour has no body, is a mask that shows itself in human form (Ir. Adv. Haer. 1, 24, 2).

The Apokryphon Johannis speaks of the Tree of Life and its poisonous fruits. Those who read the Bible (Gen. 2, 9) learn that among all the lush trees in

18 See also the Gnostic doctrines of the Mandaeans reflected in Ginz… lamina II, 1 (Petermann, 58, 8-18; Lidzbarski, 156).
21 Ibid. p. 525.
Eden there were two peculiar ones: «the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil» (w’s ḥṭyym btwk ḫgn w’s ḥ’d’t ṭwb wry). God forbids man to eat the fruits of the second tree, the Tree of Knowledge, the Tree of gnōsis.

The text, however, falls into contradiction. In fact, Eve, in response to the tempting serpent, says: «Of the fruit of the garden’s trees we may eat, but the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God said: “You shall not eat, and you shall not touch it, otherwise you die”» (Gen. 3, 2-3). Now, in the previous chapter, we read that the tree in the middle of the garden of Eden was not that of Knowledge, which is forbidden to eat, but the Tree of Life.

In the beginning, the Edenic tree is one, called in two different ways. The Rabbinical commentaries confirm this conjecture: the two trees originally stood at the centre of garden, joined at the roots. Other versions describe the Tree of Knowledge as a hedge enclosing the Tree of Life. So, the Apokryphon Johannis seems to derive from an ancient Midrashic tradition older than the drawing up of Genesis.

Some Rabbinical sources claim that Adam, by eating the fruit of the Tree, had the gift of prophecy; he preferred the gift of knowledge rather than immortality. This means that it was an entheogenic fruit, capable of expanding the mind over the limits of perception.

Not surprisingly, other sources identify the Tree of Knowledge with a huge ear of corn. The cereal, as well as do the origins of agriculture and food, in fact, refers to the hallucinatory ecstasy of ergotism, the Claviceps purpurea poisoning, the sclerotium of rye, the purple mushroom that infects rye and other graminaceous plants such as wheat, liable in the past and in antiquity of serious epidemics.

From Claviceps purpurea derives a highly psychoactive compound, LSD. In 1918, the Sandoz laboratories of Basel, isolated and purified the first ergot alkaloid. In 1934 it was possible to recognize the lysergic acid as a common basis of all derivatives of ergot. But the breakthrough came in 1943 when Albert Hofmann, in charge of studying the lysergic acid amides at the Sandoz

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28 Gen. Rab. pp. 139-142.
laboratories, accidentally came in contact with one of them (the twenty-fifth diethylamide of d-lysergic acid). After a few hours he was hit by phenomena of alternate perception. Albert Hofmann began the studies on the modified states of consciousness induced by this substance. One quarter of a milligram of LSD was enough to provoke a radical revulsion of ordinary perception. This surprising discovery was confirmed in 1962 by W.A. Taber and in 1964 by K. Genest.

The ecstatic journeys are part of Zoroastrian religious culture, strongly linked with the expressive forms of Gnostic dualism. Explorations of worlds produced by entheogenic drugs and/or narcotics, the «food» or «illuminating drink» (rōnšgar xwarišn) of the Pahlavi texts. The Avestan word bayha- (Pahlavi bang/mang) linked with the Sanskrit bhangā, «hemp», the κάνναβς of Herodotus (4, 74, 1), is of great interest under this point of view.

The Fravardin Yasht speaks of a liturgy celebrated with much bayha (pouru.banghahe zaōšahe ašaonō fravašim yazamaide: Yasht 13, 124 a), while, in contrast, the Widēwdād seems to restrict or stigmatize its ecstatic use. The bang or mang is sometimes called «medicine» (Avestan bēšazya- > Pahlavi bēšaz) and has – according to the doses, use, and where the plants are identified – sedative, analgesic, hallucinogenic and/or anesthetic properties. The action of this compound should be considered together with the Avestan haoma- (pahlavi hōm) the psychoactive plant related with the Vedic soma-. The haoma is the main subject of the Avestan sacrifice, the entheogenic fluid receptacle of light force, the libation at the heart of Zoroastrian religion cult.
It is the bang that alleviates the sufferings of Gayōmart, the Prophet, the father of mankind in the Zoroastrian tradition.

According to the Iranian Bundahišn, at the death of Gayōmart his seed split into several parts, one was purified by the rays of the Sun, two parts were collected by the archangel Nēryōsang, and a part fell to the ground. The latest gave birth to Mihrē and Mihryānē, the Iranian Adam and Eve, who sprouted from the earth in the form of a rhubarb plant, which has one body and fifteen leaves.

Even in Iran, therefore, the events of the primordial couple are tied to a tree and to the gnōsis, the knowledge that came from it: the attainment of this knowledge and visionary power implies the possession of xwarrah (< Avestan x'arañah-) — the aura gloriae surrounding the Iranian kings and is also their «fortune».

According to Zoroastrian ideology the x'arañah- is imagined as strength and visionary powers, something intangible and endless, a «brightness», a «light power». The x'arañah- leading a whole Avestan work, the Zamyād Yašt, is a creative and life-giving power to the place it occupies in Mazdean cosmogony.
The «mind’s sight» or «wisdom’s sight» is the metaphysical tools that in Zamyād Yašt enable Sāosyaŋ- Astvår,āratha to transform and immortalize the visible world. There exists a constant relationship between the xwarrah- and beverages consumed by the sacrificer or other Zoroastrian religious figures: the xwarrah- is in haoma, and then in the «ambrosia» (anōş) which resurrects the dead and makes the living immortal, and it is in the milk mingled with hōm drunk by Zoroaster’s parents before his birth.

It is the rōšngar xvarišn, the «illuminating drink» full of xwarrah, that makes it possible that king Wištāsp, friend and protector of Zoroaster, is able to contemplate the ultimate mystery, the «mystery of the great xwarrah».

In the same sense, the idea of xwarrah- is renewed in Manichaeism, applied to Light-Noûs, the wahman wuzurg of Middle-Persian texts, the «glorious» lord (Parthian farrahāwānd); the name that in Bundahišn designates Ohrmazd as xwarrahāmand. The great splendour is the farrah wuzurg, which in Manichaeism accompanies the beings of Light.

The possession of xwarrah is thus intimately linked with power of vision and with extrasensory multiverse, a separate reality. This altered perception is inextricably connected with the story of Gayōmart and his death by Ahrimanian


53 Dēnkard VII, 2, 39-42.


hands. The light seed of Gayōmart makes the earth fruitful and generates an anthropomorphic plant, or rather a couple of phytomorphic androids. All Islamo-Persian sources agree that Adam was Gayōmart, thus laying the foundations for a syncretism that has produced significant results and mythographic combinations. This is the case of Tāhir al-Maqdisī. According to this Muslim author Gayōmart (= Kayūmarraṯ) is killed, decapitated by Iblīs. The blood that drips from the severed head is then divided into three parts. One is prey to the darkness and falls into the hands of «Satan», another is saved by the angel Nēryōsang (= Nīryūsank), while the last one fall to the ground, and after a gestation of forty years, gives rise to a pair of phytomorphic androids in the shape of a plant of rhubarb (rībās). The «ejaculated seed into Spandarmad», that is in soil, is changed into a more cruel but harmless «blood». The symbolic value is identical, the sexual imagination attenuated if not completely removed. The Islamic mythographer witnesses the confluence of both traditions, Zoroastrian and Manichaean, in what he is telling. In a remarkable work of a few years ago, Mircea Eliade draws a parallel between the rhubarb plant of Mazdaean tradition and the mandrake of folklore. This is a parallel that goes beyond the mythological and religious phenomenology, involving the topics of sociology and ethnobotany. The Middle Persian ṭēbās, indicating a medicinal «plant» (Pahlavi urwar), a «bitter herb» which is usually recognized in the plant of rhubarb (Rheum officinale). The name is probably linked with the Avestan raēva-raēvant- «wealth, splendor» (noun rayay-), semantically related to light and its shining power, the xᵛarənah-. In Yašit 6, 1 the sunlight is explicitly identified with the «undying wealth» (amōšom raēm): during the hot afternoon, the «venerable» and divine

60 Hartman, Gayōmart, p. 133.
61 Cfr. Rivāyat to Dādastān i dēnīg in Hartman, Gayōmart, p. 115.
63 Eliade, «Gayomart, Adamo e la mandragola», pp. 159-169.
65 AirWb, coll. 1484-1485.
66 AirWb, coll. 1511-1512.
yazata collect the $x\'ar\textperthousand n\textperthousand h$- and spread it on earth to produce wealth and prosperity.\textsuperscript{68}

The union of anthropomorphic plant and shining power is the logical consequence of Gayōmart story: the seed, in the Mazdaean myth, is the receptacle of «splendor»,\textsuperscript{69} the $x\'ar\textperthousand n\textperthousand h$-. Fertilising the earth, GayŶmart’s seed generates a hybrid creature, partway between a human being, an animal and a plant. A circumstance that has a lot to share with Manichaeism and his main myth, the «Seduction of the Archons», is a dismal cosmogony combined with a more pessimistic anthropogony.\textsuperscript{70}

The Archons, excited after eating the Primordial Man and his light sons, are induced to ejaculate their seed on the floor, and by a portion of it sprout the trees and plants. So, the Manichaean Faustus will reply to St Augustine, about the Jesus patibilis «crucified on all plants» (ab omni ligno suspensus).\textsuperscript{71} A correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm (CMC 10, 1-16),\textsuperscript{72} is marked by a significant physiological contest.\textsuperscript{73} In the Manichaean doctrine, the fate of the Living Soul scattered in the world (= Jesus patibilis) is linked with the digestive metabolism: through food, day after day, the Manichaean Chosen One adopts and sanctifies the particles of light contained in it; it disjoins the light from poisonous mixture with dark elements.\textsuperscript{74} These bright fragments, cleansed and purified, are returned to their living image, the New Man, ready to welcome the shining Νους (mpnous nouaine).\textsuperscript{75}

The most striking parallel with the myth of Gayōmart, as pointed out by Eliade, are the traditions about mandrake (Mandragora officinarum),\textsuperscript{76} a plant whose psychoactive powers have profoundly marked the visionary world of Mediterranean and Central-Asiatic religions.\textsuperscript{77} This approach is not only phenomenological: the plants of rhubarb and of mandrake are sometimes confused; in some magical recipes rhubarb root is used in synergy with the mandrake root.\textsuperscript{78} The root, that contains a large part of the active ingredients of

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\textsuperscript{68} Mawet, «“Light” in Ancient Iranian», p. 287.
\textsuperscript{69} Gnoli, «Un particolare aspetto del simbolismo della luce», pp. 98 ss.
\textsuperscript{70} Eliade, «Gayomart, Adamo e la mandragola», pp. 162-163.
\textsuperscript{71} August, Contra Faust, 20, 2.
\textsuperscript{74} Keph. 79 (Schmidt-Polotsky-Böhlig [Stuttgart 1935-1940], p. 191, 16-20).
\textsuperscript{75} Keph. 94 (Schmidt-Polotsky-Böhlig, pp. 239, 29-240, 6).
\textsuperscript{76} Eliade, «Gayomart, Adamo e la mandragola», pp. 163 ss.
\textsuperscript{77} Rätsch, Enzyklopädie, pp. 344 a-357 b.
\textsuperscript{78} Rätsch, Enzyklopädie, p. 348 a.
both plants, is one of the most characteristic aspects of the mandrake. Dioscorides called the mandrake ἀνθρωπόμορφος, stating that it is a word already used by Pythagoras. In fact, the mandrake root resembles a human being on a small scale, from which originates the definition of semihomines given by Columella.

Taken for granted all these wonderful qualities about the plant, including its entheogenics effects, we understand its magical and religious use. In Iranian myth, the rhubarb plant, in its anthropomorphic appearance, has borrowed heavily from the mandrake, mainly from its root. Joined to its psychoactive powers, there is light force and visionary power peculiar of haoma. It is likely that even the ancient Gnōstikoi knew and used the psychoactive power of mandrake in their rituals. In this sense, it may perhaps explain the evidence of St Epiphanius about Ophites, which details the ceremony that is involved in the mandrake and his visionary powers: a snake kept in a basket is delivered and used by the members of the sect to consecrate the Eucharistic breads, made of flour mixed with mandrake roots. Authentic or not, the reconstruction of the Gnostic ritual leads toward entheogenic aspects of ancient cultures, in particular those connected with the initiatory and cultic use of mandrake, a use which will be widely developed in Arabian Hermetism.

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79 Diosc. 4, 75 a (Wellmann); cfr. also Strabo 17, 1, 28.
80 Colum. 10, 19.
81 Gen. 30, 14-16; Cant. 7, 14; Diosc. 4, 76 a (Wellmann); Ios. Flav. Bell. Iud. 7, 6, 3; see also Rätsch, Enzyklopädie, p. 348 b.
83 Rätsch, Enzyklopädie, p. 359 b.
85 Pan. haer. 37, 5, 3-7; cfr. anche Ir. Adv. haer. I, 30, 7; Hipp. Ref. V, 16, 14; Ps.-Tert. 2, 1.