



UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK
PADERBORN

Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

London, 1868

Part I. - Western World.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-62112](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-62112)

NOTES

ON

TREE AND SERPENT WORSHIP.

INTRODUCTION.

PART I.—WESTERN WORLD.

THERE are few things which at first sight appear to us at the present day so strange, or less easy to account for, than that worship which was once so generally offered to the Serpent God. If not the oldest, it ranks at least among the earliest forms through which the human intellect sought to propitiate the unknown powers. Traces of its existence are found not only in every country of the old world; but before the new was discovered by us, the same strange idolatry had long prevailed there, and even now the worship of the Serpent is found lurking in out-of-the-way corners of the globe, and startles us at times with the unhallowed rites which seem generally to have been associated with its prevalence.

Although the actual worship of Trees is nearly as far removed from our ordinary forms of faith as Serpent Worship, still it can hardly be considered as more than an exaggerated perversion of many of the ideas now current; and we can hardly wonder that in an early stage of human civilization, it may have assumed considerable importance. There is such wondrous beauty in the external form of trees, and so welcome a shelter beneath their over-arching boughs, that we should not feel surprise that in early ages groves were considered as the fittest temples for the gods. There are also, it must be remembered, few things in nature so pleasing to the eye as the form or the colour of the flowers which adorn at seasons the whole vegetable kingdom, and nothing so grateful to the palate of the rude man as the flavour of the fruits which trees afford. In addition to these were the multifarious uses to which their wood could always be applied. For buildings, for furniture, for implements of peace or war, or for ornament, it was indispensable. In ancient times it was from wood alone that man obtained that fire which enabled him to cook his food, to warm his dwelling, or to sacrifice to his gods. With all their poetry, and all their usefulness, we can hardly feel astonished that the primitive races of mankind should have considered trees as the choicest gift of the gods to men, and should have believed that their spirits

still delighted to dwell among their branches, or spoke oracles through the rustling of their leaves.

On the other hand, when it comes to be more closely examined, the worship of the Serpent is not so strange as it might at first sight appear. As was well remarked by an ancient author,* "The serpent alone of all animals without legs or arms, or any of the usual appliances for locomotion, still moves with singular celerity;" and he might have added—grace, for no one who has watched a serpent slowly progressing over the ground, with his head erect, and his body following apparently without exertion, can fail to be struck with the peculiar beauty of the motion. There is no jerk, no reflex motion, as in all other animals, even fishes, but a continuous progression in the most graceful curves. Their general form, too, is full of elegance, and their colours varied and sometimes very beautiful, and their eyes bright and piercing. Then, too, a serpent can exist for an indefinite time without food or apparent hunger. He periodically casts his skin, and, as the ancients fabled, by that process renewed his youth. Add to this his longevity, which, though not so great as was often supposed, is still sufficient to make the superstitious forget how long an individual may have been revered in order that they may ascribe to him immortality.

Though these qualities, and others that will be noted in the sequel, may have sufficed to excite curiosity and obtain respect, it is probable that the serpent never would have become a god but for his exceptional power. The destructive powers of tigers or crocodiles are merely looked upon as ordinary exaggerations of a general law, but the poison fang of the serpent is something so exceptional, and so deadly in its action, as to excite dread, and when we find to how few of the serpent tribe it is given, its presence is only more mysterious. Even more terrible, however, than the poison of the Cobra is the flash-like spring of the Boa—the instantaneous embrace and the crushed-out life—all accomplished faster almost than the eye can follow. It is hardly to be wondered at that such power should impress people in an early stage of civilization with feelings of awe; and with savages it is probably true that most religions sprung from a desire to propitiate by worship those powers from whom they fear that injury may be done to themselves or their property. Although, therefore, fear might seem to suffice to account for the prevalence of the worship, on looking closely at it we are struck with phenomena of a totally different character. When we first meet Serpent Worship, either in the Wilderness of Sinai, the Groves of Epidaurus, or in the Sarmatian huts, the Serpent is always the Agathodæmon, the bringer of health and good fortune. He is the teacher of wisdom, the oracle of future events. His worship may have originated in fear, but long before we become practically acquainted with it, it had passed to the opposite extreme among its votaries. Any evil that ever was spoken of the serpent, came from those who were outside the pale, and were trying to depreciate what they considered as an accursed superstition.

If fear were the only or even the principal characteristic of Serpent Worship, it might be sufficient, in order to account for its prevalence, to say, that like causes produce like effects all the world over; and that the serpent is so terrible and so unlike the rest of creation that these characteristics are sufficient to explain everything. When more narrowly examined, however, this seems hardly to be the case. Love and admiration,

* Sanchoniathon quoting Taatus ap Eusebium, Præp. Evangel. 40.

more than fear or dread, seem to be the main features of the faith, and there are so many unexpected features which are at the same time common to it all the world over, that it seems more reasonable to suspect a common origin. In the present state of our knowledge, however, we are not in a position to indicate the locality where it first may have appeared, or the time when it first became established among mankind.

In so far as such glimmerings as we possess enable us to guess the locality of its origin, I would feel inclined to say that it came from the mud of the Lower Euphrates, among a people of Turanian origin, and spread thence as from a centre to every country or land of the Old World in which a Turanian people settled. Apparently no Semetic, or no people of Aryan race, ever adopted it as a form of faith. It is true we find it in Judea, but almost certainly it was there an outcrop from the older underlying strata of the population. We find it also in Greece, and in Scandinavia, among people whom we know principally as Aryan, but there too it is like the tares of a previous crop springing up among the stems of a badly-cultivated field of wheat. The essence of Serpent Worship is as diametrically opposed to the spirit of the Veda or of the Bible as is possible to conceive two faiths to be; and with varying degrees of dilution the spirit of these two works pervades in a greater or less extent all the forms of the religions of the Aryan or Semetic races. On the other hand, any form of animal worship is perfectly consistent with the lower intellectual status of the Turanian races, and all history tells us that it is among them, and essentially among them only, that Serpent Worship is really found to prevail.

HUMAN SACRIFICES.

The almost universal association of human sacrifices with the practice of Serpent Worship would render it extremely desirable to ascertain, if it were possible, how far the connexion between the two is real, or to what extent the juxtaposition may be only accidental. The subject is, however, very seriously complicated by the circumstance of the very different form which the rite took in various ages, and the different points of view from which it must consequently be at times regarded.

In its earliest and simplest form, human sacrifice seems merely to have been regarded in the nature of a tithe. A cannibal savage shared with his cannibal god the spoils of victory as he did the products of the chase, or he sought to sanctify his revenge or his sensuality by making his deity a participator in his crimes. Another form arose from the idea that death was only a change, and that the future state was little more than a continuation of this world. It became consequently necessary for his enjoyment of it, that a man should be accompanied by his cattle, and his slaves, male and female, and in its most refined form the wife voluntarily sacrificed herself to rejoin her beloved husband. A third form sprung from a higher and more religious motive: it arose from a conviction of man's own unworthy and sinful nature as compared with the greatness and goodness of God, and the consequent desire to atone for the one by the sacrifice of whatever was most dear, and to propitiate the favour of the deity by offering up whatever was most precious and most beloved—even one's own, and it might be only, child. A fourth form, equally compatible with the highest civilisation, was the national sacrifice of one to atone for the sins of the many. Serpent Worship is associated in a greater or less degree with all these forms of the human rite, and so much

so that it is nearly correct to say that wherever human sacrifices prevailed, there Serpent Worship is found also, though the converse does not appear so capable of proof. Serpent Worship did continue to exist when, at least, human sacrifices had ceased to be performed, though even then it is not quite clear whether it was not only from the disuse of one part of what had once been associated.

In Egypt human sacrifices never assumed the position of a religious or domestic institution. The victorious king dedicated the prisoners taken in war to the gods, but beyond this it does not seem to have been carried; and Serpent Worship in Egypt seems likewise to have been sporadic and of little importance.

In Judea, so long as any traces of Serpent Worship prevailed, the idea of human sacrifices seems to have been familiar, but after Hezekiah's time we simultaneously lose all traces of either.

So long as Greece was Pelasgic, Serpent Worship and human sacrifices went hand in hand, but with the return of the Heraclidæ, the latter went out of fashion, though the former still lingered long, but in a modified form. In Rome, on the other hand, as we shall presently see, the worship of the Serpent was a later introduction, but as it strengthened, so did the prevalence of human sacrifices; and till Christianity put a stop to them they certainly were considered an important means of appeasing the wrath or propitiating the favour of the gods. It may, in Rome, have been to some extent derived from Etruria, or encouraged by the example of Carthage, where human sacrifices certainly prevailed till the destruction of the city, and wherever Moloch—"horrid king"—was worshipped; and in all these instances the practice seems to have risen and fallen with Serpent Worship.

In Mexico and Dahomey, where in modern times human sacrifices have been practised to an extent not known elsewhere, there too Serpent Worship was and is the typical and most important form of propitiation; while in India, there can be little doubt but that the two existed together from the earliest time. The sacrifice of men could not, however, stand before the intellectual acumen of the Aryan, and was utterly antagonistic to the mild doctrines of the Buddhist. It consequently was abolished wherever it was possible to do so; but the more innocent worship of the Serpent cropped up again and again wherever neglected, and remained in many places long after the sister form had practically lost its meaning. Both still exist in India at the present day, but not apparently practised together or by the same tribes. It is not, however, by any means clear whether the dissociation is real, or whether we merely assume it is so in consequence of our ignorance of the subject. Human sacrifices, especially among the Khonds, have attracted the attention both of governments and of individuals. No one has turned his attention to the modern forms of Serpent Worship.

Notwithstanding all these coincidences—and they might easily be extended—it must not be overlooked that nowhere can we trace any direct connexion between the two forms of faith. No human sacrifice was anywhere made to propitiate the serpent, nor was it ever pretended that any human victim was ever devoured by the snake god. In all instances the serpent is the Agathodæmon, the bringer of health or good fortune, the protector of men or of treasure, and nowhere was it sought to propitiate him by sacrifice of life beyond what was necessary for food, or to appease him by blood offerings.

When the subject has been more thoroughly investigated than has hitherto been the case, it may be possible to trace a more direct connexion between the two forms

of faith than we are now able to do. At all events we shall then be in a position to say whether it was a real partnership or only an accidental juxtaposition. In the meanwhile, all that is required in this place is to draw attention to the subject, and to point out a coincidence which is so remarkable that when investigated it may hereafter lead to the most important results.*

EGYPT.

In an attempt to investigate any form of ancient mythology from an historical point of view, we naturally turn first to Egypt; for not only was Egypt the earliest civilized of all the countries of the ancient world, in so far at least as we at present know, but she was pre-eminently the parent of all idolatries. With the Egyptians all knowledge was considered as divine, and whatever they saw, they worshipped. Their gods had been kings; their kings were gods; and all the animal kingdom was considered worthy of worship in a greater or less degree. From bulls to beetles, or from crocodiles to cats, it made little difference; all came alike to a people so essentially religious as the Egyptians seem to have been. It is little wonder, therefore, that Serpents, and it may be Trees, should be included in their multifarious Pantheon, and it is easy to detect numerous instances of the honours bestowed on both. Still it would be straining the argument beyond its legitimate issue to describe the Egyptians as in any sense an essentially Tree or Serpent worshipping people. The serpent was worshipped on the banks of the Nile among other animals, perhaps in some instances with a certain degree of pre-eminence;† but on the whole the accounts are hardly sufficient to enable us to say that the serpent was more honoured than his associated animal gods. At the same time it must be admitted that the serpent very frequently appears in the sculptures of the Temple walls, and frequently in a place of honour, as on the brow of the king, or as a prominent ornament of his dress, but hardly ever there with that pre-eminence he attained in other countries.

The relative position of Tree Worship among the Egyptians seems to be almost the same. It is true that the important part which the Tamarisk (*Ερλίκη*) plays in the legend of Isis and Osiris, as told by Plutarch,‡ might tend to a somewhat different conclusion, and the prominence given to the other tree (*Μηρίδην*), which marked and shaded the tomb of Osiris in the same legend, might lead to the conclusion that a form of Tree Worship prevailed in Egypt before the multifarious Theban pantheon was elaborated. The authority, however, for these facts is not such as can be relied upon, and the sculptures again do not favour the belief that Trees were considered as divine on the banks of the Nile, though they may justify the belief that the sycamore was sacred to the goddess Netpe, and the persea to Athor.§

* As human sacrifices hardly form part of the subject of the work, I have not thought it necessary to encumber the text of this section with notes or references. The subject has been exhaustively treated by Kalish, in his Commentary on Leviticus XXIII. p. 381 to 416. I am also much indebted to an unpublished essay by Sir John Acton, where the whole question is treated with his usual depth of learning.

† Herodotus, II. 74. Ælian, de Animal. XVII. 5. Clemens Alex. III. 2. p. 93.

‡ Plutarch, de Iside et Osiri, 11. Wilkinson's Ancient Egyptians, vol. V. p. 261, et seq.

§ Wilkinson, vol. IV. p. 391, plates 36 and 54, &c.

The great test of such a subject in Egypt are the sculptures which cover the walls of the Temples. These are the Bible of the Egyptians, in so far at least as we know it. Any one studying these with that object might easily pick out fifty or a hundred examples which would tend to show that the Egyptians were both Tree and Serpent worshippers; but, on a fair review of the whole subject, these would probably be found to be only a fractional part of the nature worship of the Egyptians, and neither the most prominent nor the most important.* In spite, therefore, of the passages in classical authors which may be quoted against this view, it would probably be incorrect to include the ancient Egyptians among the votaries either of the Serpent or of Trees.

JUDEA.

The earliest distinct allusion which we have to those mysterious properties which the ancients attributed to certain Trees, is to be found in the second and third chapters of Genesis. The planting of the Trees of Life and Knowledge in the Garden of Eden is there described in minute detail, and judging from subsequent forms of the story, their custody seems to have been intrusted to the serpent. Taken by itself, this narrative has always appeared one of the least intelligible parts of the Pentateuch, and numberless theories have been formed to account for what seemed so completely outside the range of ordinary human experience. With the knowledge we now possess, it does not seem so difficult to understand what was meant by the curse on the serpent, or the prohibition to eat the fruit of the trees. When the writers of the Pentateuch set themselves to introduce the purer and loftier worship of the Elohim, or of Jehovah, it was first necessary to get rid of that earlier form of faith which the primitive inhabitants of the earth had fashioned for themselves. The serpent, as the principal deity of that early religion, was cursed "above all cattle, and above every beast of the field;"† and in future there was to be for ever enmity between the serpent and "man of woman born." The confusion of ideas on this subject seems to have arisen from the assumption that the curse was directed at the reptile as such, and not rather at a form of worship which the writers of the Pentateuch must have regarded with horror, and which they thought it necessary to denounce in the strongest terms and in the form they believed would be most intelligible by those to whom it was addressed. The tree it was not necessary should be cursed; the fruit of the tree of knowledge had been eaten, and no further result could be obtained by access to it, while the tree of life was guarded by a cherub with a flaming sword, and all approach prevented. Its fruits could not then be obtained, nor have they to the present day.

The two chapters which refer to this, however,—as indeed the whole of the first eight of Genesis,—are now generally admitted by scholars to be made up of fragments of earlier books or earlier traditions belonging, properly speaking, to Mesopotamian rather than to Jewish history, the exact meaning of which the writers of the

* On such a monument, for instance, as the Sarcophagus of Menepthah, in Sir John Soane's Museum, where the Serpent occurs more frequently than on any monument of the same extent I am acquainted with, and in a more important character, there is not one instance in which it can be said he is being worshipped. He is the representative of heaven—is a good or evil genius—a protector or destroyer—a mere hieroglyphic—anything, in short, but never a god.—See Bonomi's published account of the Sarcophagus: Longman, 1864.

† Genesis, iii. 14.

Pentateuch seem hardly to have appreciated when they transcribed them in the form in which they are now found. The history of the Jews and of the Jewish religion commences with the call of Abraham, and from that time forward the worship of Serpents and Trees took an infinitely less important position, though still occasionally cropping up, often when least expected, but apparently not as a religion of the Jews, but as a backsliding towards the feelings of the pre-existing races among whom they were located.

There is apparently no mention of serpents, either in the Bible or in any of the traditions in connexion with Abraham or his immediate descendants; but that Patriarch "planted a grove at the well of the covenant (Beersheba), and called there "on the name of the Lord"*—a circumstance the more worthy of note, as it is the earliest mention of a form of worship to which continual allusions are afterwards made in Jewish history. The oak, or rather the terebinth tree, under which Abraham is said to have entertained the angels at Mamre, became an object of extreme veneration to his descendants, and, if we may trust Eusebius, was worshipped down to the time of Constantine.† The pious zeal of that emperor led him to desecrate its altars, and apparently to cut down the sacred tree to make way for a Christian church which he erected on the spot, and which was then or afterwards dedicated to St. George.‡

With the time of Moses the indications became more distinct and palpable. We gather from the context in the Bible,§ and still more from the narrative of Josephus,|| that the tree or bush on Horeb, from which the Lord appeared to Moses as a flame, had been considered sacred before that event. It was, indeed, apparently in consequence of its sanctity that it was chosen for the delivery of the oracle, while the conversion on that occasion of Moses' rod into a serpent brings these two names into the juxtaposition in which they are so frequently found. This miracle on Horeb would, however, be more impressive and more to the point were it not that it was repeated by Aaron before Pharaoh, and copied by the Egyptians;¶ but at the burning bush it stands alone, and without any apparent motive for its exhibition there, except the appropriateness of the combination.

With the Brazen Serpent in the Wilderness** we tread on surer ground; it is the first record we have of actual worship being performed to the Serpent, and it is also remarkable, as the cause of this adoration is said to have been its healing powers. From the readiness with which this explanation was adopted by the Jews, it would seem as if that characteristic had been ascribed to the Serpent before that time. We now, however, learn it for the first time, though we afterwards become so familiar with it in Greek mythology, where the Serpent himself represents Æsculapius, and is the indispensable concomitant of Hygieia.

From this time we lose sight of the worship of the Serpent from the narrative of the Bible, till it somewhat unexpectedly reappears in the time of Hezekiah. We then learn that the brazen image that Moses had set up, had for more than five centuries

* Genesis, xxi. 33.

† Eusebius, Vita Constantini, III. 53.

‡ The oak now pointed out at Hebron as Abraham's tree is in quite another locality.

§ Exodus, iii. 5.

|| Josephus, Antiq. Ju. II. 12. 1.

¶ Exodus, vii. 8.

** Numbers, xxi. 9.

been preserved in the Temple, and that "unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it."* It was only then, after six centuries of toleration, that it was resolved to put an end to this idolatry, together with the kindred worship of the Groves. In the intermediate period there is hardly any expression that countenances the belief that the worship of Serpents generally prevailed among the Jews, unless it be one in the Wisdom of Solomon, where it is said, "They worshipped serpents void of reason,"† in strange contrast with the New Testament expression, "Be ye wise as serpents."‡

Neither in the Bible, however, nor in the Talmud,§ is there anything that would justify the assertion that Serpent Worship, even in the most modified form, prevailed among the Jews after its abolition by Hezekiah. It cropped up again, as we shall presently see, in the Christian sect of Ophites, but probably in this instance the superstition was derived from Persia.

The case is different with the worship of Trees or Groves. The first form of this appears to have arisen from the veneration paid to natural groves, and the worship offered therein to Baal|| and other foreign gods, but the Grove or Asherah is also frequently an image, no doubt like that emblem so often represented on the Assyrian sculptures.¶ This is an artificial tree, such as might have been placed alongside of the Brazen Serpent within the Temple at Jerusalem.**

It hardly admits of doubt but that this worship of the Asherah or of Groves was a true and essential form of Tree Worship, but it seems to have been local, and entirely opposed to the spirit of the Jewish religion. As a rule it is reprobated by their chroniclers and prophets, and eventually disappears. Had it ever been really adopted by the Jewish legislators, we might perhaps be able to ascertain more correctly its origin and affiliations. Possibly we may do so when the Assyrian antiquities are more completely investigated than they now are. For the present we must rest content with the knowledge that both Trees and Serpents were worshipped in Judea, and hope that some new light may some day be thrown on the subject.

Even, however, if in abeyance, we can hardly suppose that Serpent Worship was extinguished in Judea, inasmuch as immediately after the Christian era we found it bursting forth again with wonderful exuberance in the sects of the Nicolaitans, the Gnostics, and more especially that called the Ophites (Οφίται). Of the latter, Tertullian tells us, "they even prefer the Serpent to Christ, because the former brought the knowledge of good and evil into the world. They point also to his majesty and power, inasmuch as when Moses raised the Brazen Serpent in the Wilderness, whoever looked on it was healed; and they even quote the Gospels to prove that Christ was an imitation of the serpent, because it is said, 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up'" (John, iii. 14).††

* 2 Kings, xviii. 4.

† Wisdom, xi. 15.

‡ Matthew, x. 16.

§ I make the assertion on the authority of Mr. Deutsch, of the British Museum, who has kindly looked through the Talmud for me with reference to the question.

|| 2 Kings, xvii. 16.

¶ Lord Aberdeen's black stone, History of Architecture, W.C. 75; see also British Museum Sculptures, and Layard's and Botta's plates, *passim*.

** 1 Kings, xvi. 33; 2 Kings, xxi. 3, xxiii. 4 & 6; Isaiah, xvii. 8, xxvii. 9, &c.

†† Tertullian, de Prescript. Hereticorum, c. xlvi.

Epiphanius describes these ceremonies in the following terms: "They keep a living serpent in a chest, and at the time of the mysteries entice him out by placing bread before him. The door being opened he issues forth, and having ascended the table folds himself above the bread.* This they call a perfect sacrifice. They not only break and distribute this among the votaries, but whosoever wishes it may kiss the serpent. This the wretched people call the Eucharist. They conclude the ceremonies by singing a hymn through him to the Supreme Father."†



CISTA, FROM A ROMAN COIN OF ADRAMYTUM.

There are other paragraphs to the same effect, and the representations of serpents and Serpent Worship in the so-called Gnostic form are too numerous and too familiar to require further notice here.‡

We have no means of knowing how long this worship of the Serpent continued to prevail in Syria—most probably down to the seventh century, when the Mahomedan invasion swept away a large mass of the parasitic superstitions which had fastened themselves on Christianity; but the literature of that age is so mixed up with fables and misrepresentations, that it is very difficult to write confidently about anything it describes.

Except the instance above alluded to, of the Terebinth at Mamre, I am not aware of any authentic instance of direct Tree Worship in Syria after the Christian era, but there may be, though, as they have not hitherto been looked for, they may still remain unknown.

* *Pigraque labetur circa do aria serpens.*—Ovid, *Amor. Eleg. lib. ii.*

† Epiphanius, *lib. i. Hæres: XXXVII. p. 267, et seq.*

‡ Though not bearing directly on the subject, the "Legend of the True Cross" is a curious example of a cognate superstition. Like most Mediæval legends, it is so childish that it would be hardly worth while to allude to it, but it contains an earlier oriental element, which may be considered as throwing some light on the old form of worship.

The legend relates that when Adam was on his death-bed, he sent Seth to try and regain admission to Paradise. This, of course, was impossible, but he was allowed by the angel who guarded it to look in at the gate. He saw, among other things, the tree which had borne the fatal fruit, its roots then extending to hell, but its upper branches reaching to heaven. The angel gave him three seeds, recommending him to place them in Adam's mouth, when he died. He did so, and they produced three trees, a cedar, a cypress, and a pine. These afterwards united into one, and their branches performed many miracles. Solomon cut down the tree, and tried in vain to use its trunk to support the roof of his palace. It disdained such a use, and was consequently thrown across the Brook Cedron to be trodden upon. It was rescued from this ignominy by the Queen of Sheba, and buried below the Pool of Bethesda, which owed its healing properties to its virtues. It came to the surface when wanted for the Cross, and afterwards was buried in Calvary, where it was recognized by the Empress Helena in consequence of its miraculous healing powers. It was taken to Persia by Chosroes, and recovered by Heraclius, and afterwards, as is well known, throughout the middle ages a piece of the wood of the True Cross was prized by emperors and kings beyond all other earthly possessions. So great, indeed, was the demand that it was endowed with the property of self-multiplication, but even this did not suffice to bring it into contempt, and as late as 1248 Philip Augustus erected the Sainte Chapelle to enshrine a morsel of the wood of the tree of Paradise. The Sainte Chapelle may thus be considered as the last, as it probably is among the most beautiful, temples ever erected to Tree Worship.

All this is so silly that the only excuse for alluding to it is, that throughout the earlier past there runs a thread of oriental myth different from the clumsy inventions of ordinary mediæval miracle mongers, and this, if properly investigated, might perhaps throw some light on the feelings with which sacred trees were regarded in ancient times, and tell us something of the causes which led to their being so universally worshipped.¹

¹ The following authorities for the legend are quoted by S. Baring Gould, in his "Myths of the Middle Ages," from which the above is abridged; *Vita Christi*, Troyes, 1517; *Legenda Aurea* de Jacques de Voragine; *Geschiedenis van het Heylighe Cruys*; *Speculum Historiale*, by Gottfried von Viterbo, &c.

PHENICIA.

In addition to the Tyrian coins and other monuments which in themselves would suffice to prove the prevalence of Serpent Worship on the seaboard of Syria, we have a direct testimony in a quotation from Sanchoniathon, an author who is supposed to have lived before the Trojan war.* This passage is in itself so curious as throwing light on the feelings of the ancients on this subject, that it may be worth while to quote it nearly entire. "Taautus attributed a certain divine nature to dragons and serpents, an opinion which was afterwards adopted both by the Phœnicians and Egyptians. He teaches that this genus of animals abounds in force and spirit more than any other reptiles; that there is something fiery in their nature; and though possessing neither feet nor any external members for motion common to other animals, they are yet more rapid in their motion than any others. Not only has it the power of renewing its youth, but in doing so receives an increase of size and strength, so that after having run through a certain term of years it is again absorbed within itself. For these reasons this class of animals were admitted into temples, and used in sacred mysteries. By the Phœnicians they were called the good *dæmon*, which was the term also applied by the Egyptians to Cneph, who added to him the head of a hawk to symbolize the vivacity of that bird."

After this, Eusebius or Philo go on to quote several other authors to the same effect, among others the Magian Zoroaster, who describes the hawk-headed deity as "the chief, the best, and most learned of the gods"; but from the context it appears that there is here some confusion between the Serpent god and the eagle-headed deity of the Assyrians, who is generally supposed to represent Nisroch,† and whose image so frequently occurs in the Sculptures. It scarcely admits of a doubt but that this eagle-headed deity of the Assyrians became the Garuda of the Hindu mythology, who, before the time when Eusebius wrote, had taken so important a position in the Serpent Worship of the Hindus, as we shall afterwards see, but it is still not clear how the confusion between the two objects crept into the passage as we now find it. Eusebius certainly understood the quotation as applying to the serpent, but the ascription to the serpent of these qualities cannot, I fear, be relied upon. It suffices to show, however, what importance the Christian writers of the fourth century were inclined to attribute to the Serpent Worship of the Gentiles.

The coins of Tyre represent in some instances a tree with a serpent coiled round its trunk, and on either hand two rude stone pillars (*Petræ Ambrosiæ*?) or an altar with two serpents rising from the angles of its base. Others represent the serpent coiled around a rude stone obelisk, with the Tyrian Hercules contending with a serpent.‡

Taken in conjunction with the above quotation, these, with others that might be quoted, suffice to show that the serpent was honoured, perhaps worshipped, in Tyre from an early period down to the time of Alexander. More, probably, might be found if looked for, but they are not necessary for our present purpose.

* Eusebius, *Præ. Evan.* I. 9. (p. 66, Gaisford). See also Müller's *Fragmenta*, III. 572.

† Layard, *Nineveh and its remains*, abridged edition, p. 46.

‡ Maurice, vol. VI. pl. 5. p. 273.

MESOPOTAMIA.

As hinted above, the Garden of Eden was supposed to have been situated somewhere on the Lower Euphrates, and the story of the earlier patriarchs down to Noah (Xisuthrus) being common to the narratives of Berosus and Moses, we naturally turn to Babylonia in the hope of being able to point out the mythical relations of that strange faith which is first mentioned as existing in that country. Unfortunately, long before the Greeks or any foreign travellers visited Babylonia, the great wave of the dominion of the Semitic Assyrian had passed over it, and nearly obliterated all traces of the earlier Chaldean forms, and as strangers ignorant of the language, it is hardly to be expected that they would have dug up the fossil remains of an extinct religion. The earliest native historian (Berosus) lived after the time of Alexander (B.C. 270 ?), so that he too was likely to pass over what had been so long forgotten. The one chance that now remains to us for recovering it is from the cuneiform inscriptions. Serpent Worship, so far as I know, has not yet been looked for among them, and till they are examined with special reference to the inquiry, it is impossible to say where it may or may not be found. In the meanwhile, Sir Henry Rawlinson informs us, that Hea, or Hoa, the third person in the Babylonian trinity of great gods, may be considered as the serpent deity, "since there are very strong grounds for connecting him with the serpent of Scripture, and the paradisaical traditions of the tree of knowledge and the tree of life."*

The only direct testimony we have of Serpent Worship in Babylon is in that part of the Book of Daniel which is now printed separately in the Apocrypha,† though it is difficult to understand why this should be so. The story told there of the fraud of the priests and the indignation of the people at the destruction of their god all bear so strong an impress of probability that it is difficult to doubt their truth.

The story as it stands, except in its catastrophe, is not unlike one related by Ælian,‡ as occurring in Egypt, in the days of Ptolemy Euergetes. The description of the serpents of Metele is nearly identical with this of Babylon, but there the only result was that the prying priest went mad, and for all we know the serpent continued to receive his daily dole for long afterwards.

Herodotus, strange to say, deserts us in this difficulty, and the only indication in Diodorus is in his description of the three statues that adorned the great Temple of Belus; that of Rhea being accompanied by two very large silver images of serpents, each weighing 30 talents; and that of Juno, standing with her right hand resting on a serpent's head.§

No mention of Tree Worship has, so far as known, been brought to light in Babylonia, but in Assyria it is among the most common forms of idolatrous veneration. The representations of this on Lord Aberdeen's black stone has already been alluded to, and it occurs at least twenty times as a principal object in Layard's plates, and very frequently also in Botta.||

* Herodotus translated, &c., by Geo. Rawlinson, vol. I., p. 600.

† Story of Bel and the Dragon, v. 23, et seq.

‡ Ælian, de Animal. XVI. 39.

§ Diodorus, II. 9. 5.

|| Monument de Ninive, 5 vols. folio. Paris, 1846-50.

It can hardly be doubted but that this is the Asherah or Grove so frequently mentioned in the Bible, and is a true form of Tree Worship; but no thorough investigation has yet been made by any one competent to the task, in order to ascertain how and where it arose, or what the exact ideas were which it represented. Judging *à priori*, I would feel inclined to suggest that the Serpent Worship was a peculiarity of the Turanian Babylonians of the old Chaldean Empire—Tree Worship that of the Semitic Assyrians; but a great deal has yet to be done before this can be either positively affirmed or rejected, and the reasons for even suggesting it will be more easily understood when our present task is further advanced.

GREECE.

In attempting to explain the phenomena presented by the architectural history of Greece, it seems necessary, as a basis for any reasoning on the subject, to assume the existence in that country of two distinct and antagonistic races at one period of the story. The one race is represented by the tombs, or so-called treasuries, of Mycenæ and Orchomenos, and the megalithic polygonal masonry of the walls of the most ancient cities. To the other belongs the chaste intellectual refinement of the Doric order, while between the two intervenes the elegant and ornate Ionic as a compromise combining the peculiarities of each.

The first class of buildings have been ascribed to the Pelasgi; and though considerable difference of opinion exists as to the exact ethnological position of those people, and whence they came, there seems no valid objection to assuming that they were a people of a race entirely different to the Hellenes, who afterwards superseded them. If not of purely Turanian race, they must have been so closely allied to that family that, till the contrary is shown, they may be considered as belonging to it.

The same distinction seems indispensable in treating of the mythology of ancient Greece. Assuming the Veda and the Zend Avesta to be exponents of the religious feelings of the Aryans, it is impossible to understand—if language is any test in such a matter—how a people speaking a tongue so purely Aryan as the Greek, could so completely have relapsed into a Turanian ancestral worship as we find that of Greece in its great age. Unless a great substratum of the inhabitants of Greece belonged to the Turanian family, their religion, like their language, ought to have presented a much closer affinity to the earlier scriptures of the Aryan race than we find to be the case. The curious anthropic mythology of the Grecian Pantheon seems only explicable on the assumption of a potential Turanian element in the population, though the study of the language fails to reveal to us its existence.

Such an hypothesis is still more indispensable when we refer to the Tree and Serpent Worship that certainly prevailed to a greater or less extent during the whole period of Grecian history, though of course more prominently during the earlier part. Here again it is necessary to make a further distinction. All the earlier myths refer to the destruction of serpents or of serpent races. This continues down to the return of the Heraclidæ; after that time, when Hellenic supremacy was assured, we meet with a kindlier feeling. The serpent then became the oracle—the guardian of the city, or the healing god,—the Agathodæmon in short. In Greece, as everywhere else, when a new faith once feels secure in its position, it no longer objects to the forms which it

superseded, and these by degrees crop up again, and eventually become part at least of the outward faith of people whose real sentiments may, nevertheless, be most diametrically opposed to such superstition.

One of the oldest and most celebrated myths of Greece relates the destruction of the dragon* Python by Apollo, and his taking possession of the oracle which the serpent guarded.† Cadmus fought and killed the dragon that devoured his men, and sowing its teeth raised soldiers for his own purposes. In Indian language, he killed the Naga Raja of Thebes, and made sepoys of his subjects. The tradition of the close of the career of Cadmus and his wife is even more suggestive of Serpent Worship than the events of their life. Their conversion into serpents as a cure for ills that had become unbearable, and the respect with which it is represented they were afterwards regarded, point to a form of faith that must have been at that time familiar to the inhabitants of Greece.‡

The Argonautic Expedition was undertaken to recover a fleece that hung on a sacred tree, guarded by a dragon that Jason and his companions would have been unable to cope with, unless they had been aided by the enchantments of Medea. But the great destroyer of serpents in those days was Hercules. Most appropriately was he represented as strangling two serpents sent by Juno to destroy him while he was yet in his cradle. His adventures in the Garden of the Hesperides is the pagan form of the myth that most resembles the precious serpent-guarded fruit of the Garden of Eden, though the moral of the fable is so widely different. His fight with the many-headed Lernean Hydra, on the other hand, suggests the origin in the West of many-headed serpents with which we are becoming so familiar in the East. In the earlier representations, apparently, he had only seven heads, but afterwards, as was also the case in India, they were indefinitely multiplied. A still earlier, perhaps the earliest, mention of this mythological animal is in Homer, who speaks of a three-headed snake as adorning the baldrick of the buckler of Agamemnon.§ As a Grecian peculiarity, this many-headedness might be passed over, but it is interesting as bearing on the subject we have specially in hand.

Though generally represented as the destroyer of Serpents, Hercules, on the other hand, is said to have been the progenitor of the whole race of Serpent-worshipping Scythians, through his intercourse with the Serpent Echidna.|| There is nothing, however, inconsistent in this. The age in which he is said to have lived was one of transition between two civilizations. An old Turanian Serpent-worshipping race were, in Greece, passing away, to make place for one of Aryan form. Hercules was the popular embodiment of all the favourite myths of the age; and to him consequently was ascribed the destruction of the old faith wherever it was destroyed, as well as its perpetuation wherever it was known to have been preserved.

* There seems to be no real or scientific difference in Greek between the word *Δράκων* and *ὄφις*. Generally, however, *Draco* is applied to the larger, and serpent to the smaller kinds of snakes. *Draco* would hardly be applied to an asp or cobra; nor *Ophis* to one of the great guardian serpents so frequently alluded to. I can hardly admit, however, the popular definition:—*Anguis aquarum, Serpens terrarum, Draco templorum*.

† *Python terræ filius draco ingens. Hic ante Apollinem ex oraculo in Monte Parnasso responsa dare solitus erat.*—Hyginus, fab. 140. If we may trust Lucian, de *Astrologia*, p. 544, at Delphi a virgin delivers the oracle, (hence, the symbol of the constellation *Virgo*), and a dragon speaks from under the tripod, because the constellation *Draco* appears among the stars.

‡ Ovid's *Metamorph.* III. 1. and IV. 9.

§ *Iliad*, XI. 38.

|| Herodotus, IV. 9.

After the return of the Heraclidæ, serpents—as hinted above—seem to have been kept at Delphi and in the caves of Trophonius;* in both instances, apparently, for oracular purposes. But the great centre of Serpent Worship was Epidaurus, where stood the famous temple of Æsculapius and the grove attached to it, in which serpents were kept and fed down to the time of Pausanias. Some of these, according to him, were of great size, measuring, he says, 30 cubits in length.† It is not, however, clear whence the myth of Æsculapius came, and when it was introduced into Greece. There was a temple dedicated to this god in Alexandria,‡ in which a huge serpent was kept; but this worship is as likely to have been taken there by the Greeks as brought thence, though the name and many features may be thought to betray an Egyptian origin.

Perhaps the most remarkable event connected with the Epidaurian serpent was the embassy sent from Rome in the year 462 A.U.C. under Quintus Ogulinus. The description of the advent of the divine serpent is one of the most animated passages in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,§ and which, so far as the main facts go, is confirmed by Livy,|| Valerius Maximus,¶ and Aurelius Victor.** That such an embassy was sent, and brought back a serpent, seems undoubted, as also that it was received with divine honours by the populace of Rome, and it may also be admitted that the plague was stayed after its arrival, but whether in consequence of it or not, is another question. The Romans thought it was, and Serpent Worship was established in Rome from that time forward. On the other hand, we learn from Pausanias'†† mention of it, that the Æsculapian serpent continued to be venerated in Greece till after the Christian era.

Another, and almost as interesting an example for our present purposes, occurred in Athens. When Minerva contended with Neptune for the city, she created the olive, which became sacred to her, and planted it on the Akropolis and handed over the care of it to the Serpent God Erechthonios. He is sometimes represented like the giants, as only half a serpent, the body of a man, the lower extremities as serpentine. Such, however, was not the usual or popular belief, inasmuch as we learn from Herodotus,‡‡ that when the Persians were approaching Athens the inhabitants, though warned by the oracle, refused to leave their homes till they learned that the great serpent, the guardian of the citadel, had refused its food, and left the place. When their Serpent God had deserted them, there was no longer any hope, and they fled.

There can be no doubt but that the ancient Tree and Serpent Temple stood where the Erechtheum now stands, and, being destroyed by the Persians, was rebuilt afterwards in its present form. The tree, I believe, occupied the Caryatid Portico, the serpent the lower cell adjoining, where also the well of Neptune seems to have been situated. The fane of the goddess occupied the higher level, and was approached by a different entrance.§§ Be all this as it may, the real point is that here we have in

* Pausanias, II. p. 137.

† Loc. cit. 175.

‡ Ælian, de Animal. XVI. 39.

§ Metamorph. XV. 5.

|| Liv. X. 47.

¶ Val. Max. I, 8, 2.

** Au. Victor, XXII. 1.

†† Loc. supra cit.

‡‡ Herod. VIII. 41.

§§ I am aware that in this distribution of the parts I differ from Beulé, who excavated this temple, and published the result of his researches. It would be out of place to attempt to give my reasons here, but my objections to his plan are not given without due consideration.

Athens a temple dedicated to Tree and Serpent Worship, and perhaps the only one specially so devoted which is now standing in Greece.

Besides, however, the prominent instances in which the snake figures in Greek mythology as the representative of the gods, or as delivering its oracles, or guarding sacred places or things, its influence occasionally crops up in places where we should least suspect it. Nothing, for example, can well be more curious than the story of Alexander's birth, as told by Plutarch.* That Olympias his mother should have kept tame snakes in the house is scarcely to be wondered at, as Illyria is a country where they abound, and where also their worship was prevalent. It is curious, however, that it should be thought worthy of record that one was found in her bed, and that Philip should have believed in the possibility of the serpent being the real father of Alexander the Great. The same view is taken by Lucian,† who seems to adopt without hesitation the idea that Alexander was born of a serpent. Even Cicero ‡ does not discountenance the story when he tells us that on the occasion of the illness of Ptolemy, one of Alexander's generals, from a poisoned wound, the serpent of Olympias appeared to him in a dream, having a root in his mouth. This Serpent, who, from the context we are led to infer, was the father of Alexander, then pointed out the place where the herb grew, and the wound cured by its application.

It is possible that the story may have arisen from some connexion with the Bacchic mysteries, into which Olympias was initiated, and in which serpents always played a prominent and important part, and we know that Alexander wished to connect his eastern conquest with that of the Indian Bacchus,§ but explain it as we will, the myth is curious as arising in so advanced a stage of Grecian enlightenment.

The traces of Tree Worship in Greece are even fuller and more defined than those of the Serpent *Cultus* just alluded to. In this instance we have fortunately an elaborate treatise on the subject by a thoroughly competent scholar,|| to which the reader is referred, and the slightest possible notice will consequently suffice for our present purpose.

As each succeeding Buddha in the Indian mythology had a separate and different Bo Tree assigned to him, so each god of the classical Pantheon seems to have had some tree appropriated as his emblem or representative. Among the most familiar are the oak or beech of Jupiter,¶ the laurel of Apollo, the vine of Bacchus. The olive is the well-known tree of Minerva. The myrtle was sacred to Aphrodite. The apple or orange of the Hesperides belonged to Juno. The populus was the tree of Hercules,** and the plane tree was the "numen" of the Atridæ.

Of all these the oldest and most celebrated was the oak, or rather grove at Dodona, originally founded by the Pelasgi,†† it may be some sixteen centuries before the Christian era: it remained an oracle till the time of Constantine.‡‡ It thus certainly survived, even if its foundation did not precede, that of its great rival, the

* Plutarch, Vita Alex. II.

† Lucian, dial. Mort. XIII. 1. Pseudo Kallisthenes, I. 10.

‡ Cicero de Divinat., II. 66.

§ Arrian, V. 2 and 3. Quintus Curtius, VIII. 10. 12.

|| Bötticher, Baumcultus der Hellenen, 8vo. 1856, p. 554, pl. 63.

¶ Pausanias, I. p. 40, VII. 643.

** Pliny, 12. 2.

†† Strabo, VII. p. 327.

‡‡ Aristides, I. p. 84, II. p. 12. Max. Tyr. 14. 1.

serpent oracle of the neighbouring Temple of Delphi. It was from the branches of this time-honoured tree that the sacred pigeons, combining the rustling of their wings with that of the leaves, made up those sounds which were interpreted as oracles throughout the whole period of Grecian history. It was not, however, only as a shelter for the sacred pigeons, or that the wind might rustle through their leaves and agitate the bells that hung among their branches, that the trees of the Dodonian grove were held to be sacred. Tradition ascribed to them the power of speaking for themselves, and even when cut down, as in the case of the ship *Argo*, a piece of the sacred oak inserted either in prow or keel, had the power of communicating to these adventurous navigators the will of Jove.*

It is not quite clear whether or not any structural temple, properly so called, ever was erected in the grove at Dodona. None certainly is described by Pausanias or any one else, and on the whole the context seems to bear out the conclusion that the grove was the *ιερόν*, and that except altars and minor adjuncts it was not profaned by any works of human hands.

The laurel at Delphi was as celebrated as Dodona's oak. It was under its shade that Python the son of Earth sought refuge when wounded by the arrows of Apollo, and where his oracle existed before the Sun god conquered it.† The earliest temple here was constructed of laurel wood, afterwards of bronze, and only in later days of stone, when apparently the oracle and with it the site of the tree was included in the sanctuary.

The story of Daphne need hardly be alluded to.‡ It is so well known, and so is the continual use of the laurel throughout classical antiquity as a sacred emblem of Apollo, as a sign of victory, the indispensable accompaniment of every triumph, and also as a healing power almost as important as the serpent of Æsculapius.§

In the opening cantos of the *Iliad* there is a scene which may serve as well as any other to illustrate the feelings of the Greeks on this subject.|| When the host was detained in Aulis, and Agamemnon was sacrificing under the shade of a sacred plane tree, a serpent creeps from under the altar, and, climbing the tree, devours deliberately, one after the other, the eight nestlings of a sparrow. The ninth one was the mother bird herself, thus prophesying the nine years they were to tarry before they conquered the wide-streets of Troy. To authenticate the wonder, the serpent was then metamorphosed by Jupiter into stone, and we learn afterwards, that the tree was considered as sacred, inasmuch as Pausanias saw the wood of it preserved in the Temple of Diana in the second century.¶ That nothing may be wanting to complete this as an illustration of their worship, it was while the Greeks were detained at Aulis that Agamemnon was—like Abraham—constrained to sacrifice his child, but as a goat was accepted for the one, so the Grecian hero was saved from a similar sorrow by the substitution of a deer by the goddess Diana. This looks like a period of transition, when at least the most objectionable features of the old faith were becoming obsolete, and might practically be set aside.

It would be easy to multiply these instances of Tree and Serpent Worship among the Greeks to almost any extent; but enough has probably been adduced to show how

* See Bötticher, *Baumcultus*, pp. 113, 164.

† Euripides, *Iph. in Taur.* 1245.

‡ At conjux quoniam mea non potes esse.

Arbor eris certe, dixit, mea.—Ovid, *Meta.* I. 558.

§ See Bötticher, pp. 338–393.

|| Pausanias, IX. 748.

¶ Homer, *Iliad* II. 304, et seq.

important a part it played in the mythology of Greece during the whole period of her independent history. When to this we add the knowledge of the purely anthropic and ancestral character of her popular Pantheon, we cannot but feel how little title Greece has to that purely Aryan rank which her language would seem to assign to her. There must always have been a very large admixture of Turanian blood in the veins of the inhabitants of that country, varying, of course, in extent in the different states, but except, perhaps, in Sparta, nowhere entirely evanescent.

ITALY.

It does not appear, from anything that has yet been brought to light, that the Etruscans were either worshippers of Serpents or of Trees. It is true the evidence is not conclusive, and is at best merely negative. We have none of the scriptures of the people. We cannot read their inscriptions, and such temples and religious edifices as remain are all of late date, contemporary with the advanced Roman civilization, and when consequently they may have been weaned from their earlier superstitions. It may also be observed that Serpent and Tree Worship are exactly those forms which are least likely to leave permanent traces of their existence except through the traditions of the people in some form of writing. When the Tree or Grove is cut down all traces of it are soon obliterated, and natural decay alone is quite sufficient to cause its complete disappearance, and when the Serpent dies there is no longer a god or an image of one in the sanctuary.

These considerations must make us pause before giving any very decided opinion on the subject; for, reasoning *à priori*, the Etruscans were just such a people as one would suspect of being likely to indulge in such a form of faith.

Their *quasi* Turanian origin, their ancestral worship, the importance they attached to sepulchral rites, the very absence of temples of a permanent character, and many other circumstances, would lead us to expect to find this worship among them, but till it is found it is needless to insist on what at best are mere probabilities.

One, however, of the first religious acts of the Romans brings us back to an old line of memories. When Romulus, so says the tradition, had slain Acron king of Cenina in single combat, he hung the "Spolia Opima" on an ancient oak on the Capitoline Hill, which the shepherds before that time had considered as sacred, and there marked out the boundaries of the Temple of Jupiter, which was the first and became afterwards the most sacred of Roman temples.*

On the other hand, almost the only tradition that seems to give a local and indigenous form to Serpent Worship is that connected with Lanuvium, a place sixteen miles south of Rome. Here we learn from Ælian there existed a large and dark grove, and near it a temple of the Argive Juno. In this place was a vast and deep cave, the abode of a great serpent. To this grove the virgins of Latium were taken annually to ascertain their chastity, which was indicated by the dragon.† If the serpent accepted the offering, not only was their purity considered as established, but a good and fertile season was sure to result from the success of the ordeal.‡ A similar oracle seems to have existed in Epirus, where a circular grove once stood surrounded by

* Livy, I. 10.
(4799.)

† Ælian, Var. Hist. IX. 16.
C

‡ Propertius, Eleg. VIII. 4.

a wall in which the sacred serpents were kept, descended it is said from the great Python of Delphi, and here dedicated to Apollo. On the great festival of the year a virgin priestess entered the grove naked, holding in her hand the sacred food. If they took it readily, a fruitful harvest and a plentiful year were sure to follow. If they refused, it was considered as the gloomiest of auguries.* The one difference between the two oracles being that in the Eastern oracle the serpents were not called upon to decide as to the chastity of the priestess, but merely to prophesy as to the prospects of the year.

Except in the instance of Lanuvium the traces of this primitive religion became infinitely more scarce in Italy than they were found to be in Greece, but whether this arises from their non-existence, or merely because they were not recorded, is by no means clear. As mentioned on a previous page,† the actual worship of the serpent was introduced from Epidaurus to Rome 462 A.U.C., but the fact of such an embassy being sent on this occasion indicates a degree of faith on the part of the people, which could only have arisen from previous familiarity.

In the Augustan age, enlightenment was too far advanced for such a primitive form of faith to have any real hold on the public mind. Indeed, when such a treatise as that of Cicero *De Natura Deorum* became popular many much more advanced beliefs than that in serpents were trembling in the balance, but the poets still delighted in referring to those forms which time and mystery had long rendered venerable. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are full of passages referring to the important part which the Serpent performed in all the traditions of Classic Mythology.

Every one is familiar with the circumstances of the two snakes sent by Minerva to destroy Laocoon‡ for his attempt to undeceive the fated Trojans. Their task accomplished, they sought refuge behind the shield of Pallas in her temple in the town. Still more characteristic was the appearance of a serpent from the tomb, when Æneas was sacrificing to the manes of his father Anchises,§ and his hesitation as to whether the unexpected apparition should be considered as the *genius loci*, or an attendant on his deceased parent.

In the other poets there are numerous allusions to Serpents and Serpent Worship, which in themselves, taken separately, would not be of much importance, and which consequently it would be tedious to quote, though taken altogether, with the other information we possess, they do indicate a prevalence of reverence for the serpent in Rome greater than might be expected from so enlightened and so freethinking a community. There is one passage, however, in *Perseus* || which it is impossible to pass over. It is that in which the satirist orders "two serpents to be painted " on the wall to indicate that the place is sacred." The form of this painting we learn from several examples at Pompeii and Herculaneum,¶ where two of somewhat conventional form, and in very conventional attitudes, approach an altar or some object which their presence seems intended to sanctify. There is every reason to suppose that such representations were much more common than the few remains we possess might at first sight lead us to suppose, and that the serpents were also

* Ælian, de Animal. XI. 2.

† *Vide ante*, p. 14.

‡ Virgil, Æneid, II. 200 and 227.

§ *Ibid.*, V. 84, et seq.

|| *Pinge duos angues :*

Pueri, sacer est locus.—Sat. I. 112.

¶ *Antichità d'Ercolano*, IV., p. 65. pl. xii.; *Mazois*, II. pl. 24, &c.

frequently represented as the *genii loci*,* and as mixed up with Mithraic or Tree Worship. The instances in which this occurs are so numerous that if collected together they would appear at first sight to make out a strong case, but notwithstanding all this the inhabitants of Imperial Rome cannot fairly be said to have been either a Tree or Serpent worshipping race. It is curious to observe, however, how some of the great men among the Romans still cherished the remnants of this superstition. Scipio Africanus† is reported to have believed that he had been nursed by a serpent, and Augustus allowed it to be understood that his mother Atia had received him from a serpent, remembering probably the story of Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great.‡ The people of Rome, it is said, on one occasion showed more sympathy with the young Domitius (afterwards Nero) than with his half-brother Britannicus, because "serpents had once watched over his childhood."§

The Emperor Tiberius|| kept a tame serpent for his amusement, but when he found it one morning eaten by ants he drew the augury that he must henceforward guard himself against an attack from the many-headed multitude. Hadrian, it is said, procured a large serpent from India, which he placed in the Temple of Jupiter Olympius at Athens,¶ which he had just rebuilt.

It is a difficult question to determine how far the representation of serpents on coins may be taken as indicating the existence of Serpent Worship in the cities to which they belong, or to what extent they should be considered as merely heraldic, like other animals or plants which were emblematic of other cities. If they might be enlisted, the coins of Tyre** would go far to confirm what we gather from other sources (*ante*, p. 10) of the prevalence of Serpent Worship there. The most remarkable series, however, of coins of this class are those known as Cistophoroi, belonging to certain cities of Asia

No. 2.



ROMAN PROCONSULAR
COIN OF TRALLIS.

Minor. On the obverse of these there is generally in the centre a bow case supported by two serpents standing erect, the one apparently male, the other female, and accompanied by emblems, the meaning of which is not easily determined. On the reverse they generally have a cista mistica, half open, and from it a serpent is issuing (Woodcut No. 1). Around this there is a wreath of vine leaves and grapes, indicating clearly a connexion with the Bacchic mysteries, in which such a cist was employed, and in which serpents always performed an important part.

All these serpent coins belong to the Roman period, the earliest apparently being struck during the pro-consulship of Q. Tullius Cicero (brother of the orator) B.C. 91, and after being the coinage of Asia Minor for more than a century they fade into the imperial coinage of the Empire.†† Those which have been found up to the present time belong to the following ten cities (Pinder says eleven, but Parium is doubtful),

* Antichità d'Ercolano, vol. I. pl. xxxix.

† Gellius, Noct. Att. VI. 1.

‡ Suetonius in Aug. c. 94.

§ Tacitus, XI. 11.

†† The best account, so far as I know, of these coins is in a paper by M. Pinder, in the Transactions of the Akad. der Wissenschaften. Berlin, 1855. As what is said in the text is mainly based on this, it will not be necessary to refer to it again.

|| Suetonius, Vit. Tib. 72.

¶ Xiphilin, Rom. Hist. Script. III. 358.

** Maurice, Indian Ant. VI. p. 273.

Pergamos, Thyatira, Smyrna, Ephesus, Sardes, Laodicea, Adramyttium, Tralles,* Apamea, and Nysa. As will be observed, this list comprises all the Seven Churches of Asia, with the exception of Philadelphia, and it is by no means clear that it, too, may not be eventually included. Is this coincidence accidental? If not absolutely, it certainly is nearly correct to assert, that no people adopted Buddhism except those among whom Serpent Worship can certainly be traced as pre-existing, and it appears probable that the worshippers of the serpent should in like manner be more open to the influence of Christianity than the refined and sceptical Greek or Roman.

This is not the place to attempt the investigation of such a subject, even if the materials existed for the purpose, but I may state, that my impression is, that these coins and other evidence† do prove the existence of a form of Serpent Worship in the cities of Asia Minor till after the Christian era. And, if I am not mistaken, the presence of such a form of faith may have influenced the early spread of Christianity in these cities to an extent not hitherto suspected.

GERMANY.

We look in vain through the classical authors for any trace of Serpent Worship among the Germans, nor indeed ought we to expect to find any among a people so essentially Aryan as they are, and always were; while, on the other hand, we have not in Germany, as we find in Greece, any traces of that underlying race of less intellectual Turanians who seem everywhere to have been the Serpent worshippers all the world over.

By whatever name they may have been known, these Ophite races seem, in Europe at least, never to have penetrated far inland from the shore of the sea. The deeply-indented coasts of Greece thus presented a singularly favourable locality for their settlement. They swarmed up the rivers of France, and the shores of such an inland sea as the Baltic was also well suited to their habits. They were adepts at draining lakes or embanking the estuaries of the rivers on which they settled. Fish seems to have been their principal food, and fishing consequently their chief occupation. What domestic animals they possessed they pastured on the alluvial plains which were kept clear of forests and fertilized by the floods. Such a people were, however, utterly incompetent to deal with the forests that covered the soil of Germany, and incapable of that steady organization of labour without which success in agriculture is impossible; especially under so rigorous a climate, and conditions so unfavourable as those which the surface of Germany must have presented to the earliest settlers there.

If, however, we find no traces of Serpent Worship among the purely Teutonic races, the evidences of Tree Worship are numerous and complete. Tacitus, in his *Germania*, alludes to it frequently. In one place he distinctly states that the Germans have no images, and decline to enclose their gods within walls, but consecrate groves and woods, within which they call on the name of God.‡ They called together the people of their own race in woods sanctified by the auguries of their forefathers or pristine awe,§

* Those of Tralles have also the Indian humped bull on the obverse (pl. 1, figs. 18 and 20), though what this may mean it is impossible at present to say.

† Herodotus, I. 78.

‡ Tacitus, *Germ.* 9.

§ *Prisca formidine*, *Loc. cit.* 39.

and sacred groves and trees are mentioned by name both by him and Cæsar.* The most frequent mention, however, of the sacred groves and trees of the Germans is to be found in the earlier Christian writers, who, when narrating the events that accompanied the conversion of the nation to Christianity, relate how these were cut down and destroyed, in order that the old superstitions might be eradicated. These have been collected and arranged by Grimm † with his usual industry and intelligence, so that it is hardly necessary here to go over the same ground again. The conclusion he arrives at (p. 60) is that "individual gods might have dwelt on hill-tops, or in "caves, or rivers, but the festal universal religion of the people had its abode in "woods, and nowhere has another temple yet been found."

The first care of the Christian missionaries, wherever they went, was to cut down the groves of the Pagans, and to desecrate their ancient places of worship, or to speak more correctly, to consecrate them by the erection of a chapel or church within their sacred precincts. They soon discovered that by the first course they only excited the wrath and enmity of the natives, by the latter they conciliated them, and drew them insensibly towards the purer faith; but they fail to tell us how long these quasi converts persisted in venerating in their hearts the god-like grove rather than the miserable stone and mortar house in which the priests told them their new god alone consented to dwell.

It would be well worth while, if anyone would take the trouble, to trace how long trees and groves continued to be objects of veneration after the Germans were converted to Christianity. One of the last and best known examples is that of the "Stock am Eisen" in Vienna, the sacred tree into which every apprentice, before setting out on his "Wanderjahre," drove a nail for luck. It now stands in the centre of that great capital, the last remaining vestige of the sacred grove round which the city has grown up, and in sight of the proud cathedral of the Christian, which has superseded and replaced its more venerable shade.‡

SARMATIA.

If a line were drawn from the shores of the Caspian Sea north of the Caucasus to the mouth of the Vistula or Dwina in the Baltic, it would be coincident with one of the oldest routes of communication between the east and the west, and one that probably was the road by which Serpent and Tree Worship were introduced into the north of Europe. It was the route by which Woden is said to have migrated westward in the first century before Christ, taking with him all that strange mythology which is connected with his name. It was on this route that Hercules met the serpent-maiden Echidna, and where she gave birth to the Eponymous hero of the Seythian nation.§ Here, too, resided the Amazons, the female warriors, whose institutions seem so mysteriously connected with Serpent Worship. At the far end of this route Procopius tells

* Loc. cit. 40. 43. Cæsar, Ann. 2. 12; 4. 73.

† The Khonds use neither temples nor images in their worship. They cannot comprehend, and regard as absurd the idea of building a house in honour of the deity, or the expectation that he will be peculiarly present in any place resembling a human habitation. Groves kept sacred from the axe, hoar rocks and hill tops, fountains and the banks of streams, are in their eyes the fittest places for worship."—Major Charteris MacPherson, Journal Royal Asiatic Society, vol. XIII. p. 235.

‡ Deutsche Mythologie, c. IV. pp. 57 to 77.

§ The festival of the Christmas tree at the present day, so common throughout the whole of Germany, is almost undoubtedly a remnant of the Tree Worship of their ancestors.

§ Herodotus, IV. 9.

us that "in his day the barbarians worshipped forests and groves, and in their barbarous simplicity placed trees among their gods."*

In Sarmatia, according to Erasmus Stella, "for some time they had no sacred rites; at length they arrived at such a pitch of wickedness that they worshipped serpents and trees." The Samogitæ, we are told, worshipped the serpent as a god, and if any adversity befell them, concluded that their domestic serpents had been negligently served. In Lithuania the people "believed vipers and serpents to be gods, and worshipped them with great veneration." Jerome of Prague, in the fifteenth century, according to Silvius, saw these wretched idolaters offer sacrifices to serpents. Every householder had a snake in the corner of his house, to which he gave food and offered sacrifice. Cromer † charges the Prussians with the same idolatry, and Masius ‡ mentions a royal town near Wilna where in his day (*adhuc*) serpents were worshipped by many of the inhabitants, and in Livonia it is characteristically added that the inhabitants were accustomed to sacrifice their most beautiful captives to their serpent gods.§

None of these indications are worth much in themselves, and the authorities on which they rest are not such as will bear the test of critical examination, but the general impression they leave is, that Serpent Worship must have prevailed in Eastern Europe to a great extent during the middle ages. It seems incredible that the authors named, and especially such a work as that of Olaus Magnus, should be so full of anecdotes of serpents and Serpent Worship in a country where nothing larger than a viper or adder naturally is found, if there were not some foundation for their belief.

Olaus Magnus,|| quoting from Crantzius and Mechavita, states that the Poles worshipped their gods, Fire, Serpents, and Trees, in woods. This state of things, he says, lasted in Poland down to the year 1386, when the prince and his brethren were converted to Christianity; but he adds, that though nearly extinguished, these superstitions still linger (1555) in remote parts of Norway and Wermelandia. In addition to this, however, we have evidence which it seems impossible to doubt, that both Trees and Serpents were worshipped by the peasantry in Esthonia and Finland within the limits of the present century (see Appendix A), and even then with all the characteristics possessed by the old faith when we first become acquainted with it.¶

SCANDINAVIA.

Among the problems that perplex the investigator of northern antiquities there are few that present so many difficulties as those which concern the advent of Woden, and the origin of the religion of which he was the chief. At the first glance he appears to have many affinities with the Buddha of the east. The name (Boden) is not dissimilar, the name of the fourth day of the week being Wodensday in the north, Budhbár in the east, and dies Mercurii in Latin, and the confusion that existed in the mind of the Romans between Mercury as the chief god of the Germans, and this Woden, shadow out a thread of tradition which might point to a solution. Woden,

* De Bello Gotico, II. 471, Bonn, 1833. † De Rebus Polon. III. 43. ‡ De Diis German. c. 29.

§ This paragraph is abridged from Deane's Serpent Worship, p. 245, et seq. I have not been able to verify the references.

|| Lib. III. ch. 1.

¶ Der Ehsten abergläubische gebraüche, &c., von J. W. Boecler, beleuchtet von F. R. Kreutzwald. St. Petersburg, 1854.

too, came from the east just at the time when we know that active missionaries were spreading the doctrines of Buddhism on all sides external to the central kingdom of India, within whose limits it had been previously confined. There certainly also was at that time an amount of Buddhism current among the western nations whose presence it is difficult to account for except on the assumption of some such migration. The more closely, however, the question is examined the less hope does there appear to be that a solution may be reached in this direction.

There are not, perhaps, in the whole world two religions so diametrically and so essentially opposed to one another as Buddhism and Wodenism, nor two persons so different as the gentle Śákya Muni, who left a kingdom, family, and friends to devote fifty years of his blameless life to the attempt to alleviate the sufferings of mankind, and Odin, "the terrible and severe God, the Father of slaughter: he who giveth victory and reviveth courage in the conflict: who nameth those that are to be slain."*

The leading doctrinal characteristic of Buddhism in its early form is its atheism; the Scandinavian, on the other hand, had Woden, Thor, Freya, and a host of minor gods, rulers of men during their lifetime, and continuing the active personal interference with the affairs of men after their elevation. Among the practical characteristics of Buddhism there was, first, the remarkable extension of the Jewish Commandment, "Thou shalt do no murder" into "Thou shalt not kill," including in the prohibition everything that had life; while the greatest glory of the northern hero was the number of his enemies he had slain, and nothing escaped from his joyous bloodthirstiness. Another peculiarity of Buddhism was the negation of all worldly pleasures and enjoyments. It is hardly possible to conceive anything more incongruous than would have been the presence among the roistering mead-drinking warriors of the north, of a yellow-robed ascetic, sworn to celibacy, living on alms, and devoting his life to pious contemplation; his one hope and highest aspiration being, that after infinite transmigrations he might be so purified by suffering that he might eventually obtain absolute rest by annihilation and absorption into the original essence of all things. How different this from the northern Walhalla. "The heroes," says the Edda,† "who are received into the palace of Odin have every day the pleasure of arming themselves, of passing in review, of ranging themselves in order of battle, and of cutting one another to pieces; but so soon as the time of repast approaches they return on horseback all safe and sound to the hall of Odin, and fall to eating and drinking. Though the number of them cannot be counted, the flesh of the boar, Sæhrimnir,‡ is sufficient for them all; every day it is served up at table, and every day renewed entire. Their beverage is ale and mead. One single goat, whose milk is mead, furnishes enough of that liquor to intoxicate all the heroes. Odin alone drinks wine; wine is for him both meat and drink. A crowd of virgins wait on the heroes at table, and fill their cups as fast as they empty them."

This, certainly, is not Buddhism, at least as that religion is known to us by anything that has hitherto been published on the subject. How far the revelations

* Mallet, Northern Antiq. (Bohn's edition), p. 21.

† Mallet, Northern Antiq., p. 104.

‡ Mallet, Prose Edda, 429.

of the sculptures of the Sanchi Tope may induce us to change our opinions of the earlier form of that faith remains to be seen. There is, certainly, a much greater similarity between the Buddhism of the Topes and the Scandinavian mythology than between it and the Buddhism of the books; but still the gulf between the two is immense, and if any traces of the doctrines of the gentle ascetic ever existed in the bosoms of Odin or his followers, while dwelling near the roots of the Caucasus, all that can be said is, that they suffered fearful shipwreck among the rocks of the savage superstitions of the north, and sank, never again to appear on the surface of Scandinavian mythology. If the two religions came anywhere in contact it is at their base, for underlying both there existed a strange substratum of Tree and Serpent Worship; on this the two structures seem to have been raised, though they afterwards diverged into forms so strangely dissimilar.

As will be seen in a subsequent part of this work, recent discoveries have narrowed, to a certain extent, the gulf which separated them at the time of their greatest development, and it is by no means impossible that if we are able to go further back they may be found to approximate still more closely. We do not yet, however, see much prospect of reaching a point where the two may come in contact, except at the point where they both start from their foundations; but the inquiry is too new, and the facts yet gathered are far from being sufficient to enable us to speak with anything like certainty, except regarding the later forms of either of these faiths.

The myth of the Yggdrasil ash is told in considerable detail in the Prose Edda, though its meaning will hardly be understood till we are more familiar with the corresponding features in Indian mythology.

“ It was under the ash, the chiefest and holiest seat of the gods, that they “ assembled every day in council. The branches spread over the whole world, and “ even reach to heaven above. It has three roots, one stood over Mimir’s well, in “ which wisdom and wit lie hidden; and one over Niflheim, a place where those “ wicked people are sent who die from natural causes, and this root it is, that is “ continually gnawed by the serpent Nidhogg, with whom in Hwergelmir there are so “ many snakes that no tongue can recount them.* The third root of the ash is in “ heaven, under it is the holy Urdar-fount; it is here the gods sit in judgment. Near “ this sit the three Norns or fates, who fix the lifetime of all men. In its branches “ sits an eagle who knows many things, and a squirrel, Ratatösk, runs up and down, “ and seeks to cause strife between the Eagle and Nidhogg. Four harts run across “ the branches of the tree and bite the buds.” In addition to this is the great Midgard serpent Jörmungand, “ who being of parentage of bad augury, was thrown “ by All-Father (Odin) into the ocean, but the monster grew to such an enormous “ size, that holding his tail in his mouth, he encircles the whole earth.”†

Without continuing these quotations further at present, enough has perhaps been brought forward to show that Yggdrasil is in the first place a reminiscence of the trees

* Pliny refers to the connexion of the serpent with the ash, but in a different sense (XVI. 13). He says snakes will not rest in its shadow, but shun it at a distance, and adds, from “personal experience,” that, “if a “ serpent is so surrounded by a fence of ash leaves that he cannot escape except by passing through fire, he will “ prefer the fire rather than pass through the leaves.”

† Translation of Prose Edda, 410 et seq.

of fate and knowledge of the Garden of Eden, though wisdom lay in a well of water at the root of the northern tree, of which Odin drank and gained knowledge,* instead of eating its fruit, which, with an ash, was not a probable form of the myth. It is also probably enough to enable us to recognize in the eagle, the Garuda, and in the Nidhögg, the Nagas of eastern fable, though the squirrel does not there appear to have been necessary to keep alive the enmity that always existed between them. And in Thor fishing for the Midgard serpent, and the part he is to play at the end of all things, we may without difficulty recognize a reflex of the churning of the ocean and the renewal of all things by Vishnu through the instrumentality of the great serpent. As might be expected from the nature of the country and style of its historians, we have fewer accounts of the actual form of the worship than of its doctrinal importance. Still we are told† that in front of the great Temple at Upsala "there grew a huge tree of unknown kind, that spread with large boughs, and was "green both summer and winter," and near the same temple a sacred grove, every tree and every leaf of which was considered the most sacred thing in the world.‡ It was called Odin's Grove, and in it the most solemn sacrifices were performed, especially every ninth year, when nine human victims were sacrificed from among the captives if in time of war, or nine slaves if in time of peace.

The serpent is not mentioned as an actual object of worship in any written history; though no doubt the superstition prevailed with the others down to the time when the whole was abolished in the ninth century on the introduction of Christianity. Yet we are told that in the sixteenth century, "There are house serpents "which are accounted in the northern parts of Sweden as household gods; they are "fed with sheep and cows' milk, and to hurt them is a deadly sin." The same author tells us that "serpents rest deep under the roots of birch trees, the multitude "of them cause heat with their breath, and so keep the leaves green in winter."§ All this is foolish enough, but the thousand and one stories about serpents which crowd the pages of the good Archbishop of Upsala suffice to show that even in his day the superstition had not died out among the common people, and though serpents were no longer worshipped, the time when they were so was not yet forgotten.|| At the same time it seems tolerably clear that such a serpent mythology as existed in Sweden could never have sprung up naturally in so northern a climate, where all the snake tribe are so insignificant. It must have been imported from the East, though we have yet to learn by whom this was done, and at what exact time it was effected.

* Page 411.

† Olaus Magnus, III. 5.

‡ Mallet, p. 113.

§ Olaus Magnus, XXI. 47 and 48.

|| Castren, in his *Travels in Lapland*, gives some very curious details about the feelings of the Lapps with regard to Serpent and Tree Worship at the present day. According to their traditions, Snakes, like men, live in societies, each with a captain and subordinate officers; once a year each community meets in general assembly, and not only has each serpent the right to bring his own grievances forward, but the jurisdiction of the chief extends to men who have slain or 'offended' any of his subjects.—*Reise Erinnerungen aus den Jahren 1838-44*, pp. 66-77. A good deal of information on this subject will be found in a Swedish work by Hylten-Cavallius, entitled *Wärend och Wirdarne*, p. 142, for the worship of Trees as at present existing, and pp. 329 to 332 for that of Serpents.

FRANCE.

We seem to know less of the primitive worship of the early inhabitants of Gaul than of that of almost any other country of Europe. This may arise partly because the Gauls were so far civilized before the classical authors became acquainted with them, that their old beliefs had lost much of their individuality and freshness, while they were not so far advanced or civilized at the time when Christianity blotted out the old religions, as to feel sufficient interest in them to care to record their forms. A good deal also is no doubt due to the fact that the subject has not been carefully investigated by any competent authority since the new school of criticism was introduced. The French antiquarians do not yet seem to have discovered the safe channel between the whirlpools of credulity and the dry sand banks of frigid scepticism.

Nearly all that we know of the religion of the ancient Gauls is gathered from the celebrated passage in Cæsar's Commentaries,* when he pauses from the narrative of his exploits to describe the civil and religious institutions of the people he had conquered. In this account there is absolutely no mention of either Tree or Serpent Worship; on the contrary, he tells us that their principal deity was Mercury, not probably the god known by that name in the Roman Pantheon, but it may be Woden or some such synonym. After him came Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva. Rather a strange selection, and stranger classification if we are to accept them as the Roman gods whose names they bear; but most probably they were local deities who, to his apprehension, more closely resembled these gods than any other his readers might be acquainted with.

Cæsar's assertion that the Druids were the priests, and by inference the only priests of the Gauls, is considerably modified by the subsequent testimony of both Strabo† and Diodorus,‡ who divide the priests into three classes, the Bards, the Druids, and the Soothsayers. All these authors agree in describing the principal rite to consist in sacrifices, performed apparently in the open air, and by inference in groves. They also agree in stating that human victims were frequently immolated in what appears to have been considered the most solemn and acceptable of their sacred rites.

Notwithstanding the silence of the principal authorities, we are not without evidence as to Tree Worship having prevailed. Maximus Tyrius,§ for instance, distinctly asserts that the "Celts worship Jupiter, but under the form of a tall oak tree;" and Pliny|| describes in detail the veneration of the Druids for the oak, especially the mistletoe, which grew on the oak, the ceremony accompanying its removal being apparently in Pliny's eyes the most important of those connected with the worship. It is, however, more from Christian writers that we acquire a conviction that Tree Worship prevailed extensively among the Celts.

There is, for instance, the famous pear tree, that grew at Auxerre in the fourth century, which was hung with trophies of the chase, and venerated as god by the people to such an extent that its destruction by the Holy Amator was considered

* De Bello Gall. VI. 13, 20.

† Geographica, IV. 275.

‡ Hist. V. 31.

§ Diss. 8. ed. Reiske, I. 142.: Κέλται σεβούσι μὲν Δία, ἄγαλμα δὲ Διὸς Κελτικὸν ἐφηρὴ δένδρον.

|| Hist. Nat. XVI. 95.

a triumph, not only worthy to be related at length in the life of Genarius,* but sung in indifferent Latin verse some centuries afterwards by Hericus.† From the Life of St. Amandus‡ we learn that groves and trees (*arbores et ligna pro diis colerent*) were worshipped in the north of France, near Beauvais (Belvacence), and the destruction of the tree, which was dedicated to the devil (*arborem quæ erat dæmoni dedicata*), is recorded as a most meritorious act.

The second Council of Arles§ denounced those who venerated trees, or fountains, or stones, and declared those guilty of sacrilege who neglected to destroy them. That of Tours|| issued a similar decree, almost in the same words; and even as late as 1262 the Council of Nantes condemned those who worshipped stones in desert and woody places (*locis sylvestribus*). These instances might no doubt be multiplied to almost any extent if anyone would take the trouble to look for them, but, as before mentioned, the French archæologists have hardly turned their attention to the subject.¶

The traces of Serpent Worship in Gaul are so few and so evanescent that, in ordinary circumstances, an author would be justified in asserting that it did not exist among the Celts any more than it did among the Germans, and in passing by the subject altogether. Such a superstructure, however, has been raised on a passage in Pliny** that it is impossible to treat it thus. Among the many marvels and puerilities of his Natural History, there is none more absurd than that of the egg (*anguinum*) produced by the breath of a number of serpents, who meet together for the purpose of producing it, apparently on midsummer eve. It is projected by them into the air, and must be caught in a blanket before it falls, and the fortunate possessor must be on horseback, and gallop off with it; for if the snakes catch him before he crosses running water, a worse fate than Tam o' Shanter's will befall him! This fable is reported on the authority of the Druids, and it is added that this *anguinum* is considered a charm by them. It is, I believe, the only passage in any classical author that connects the Druids with serpents, or by implication would lead us to suspect that some superstition regarding serpents may have existed in Gaul.

If the records of the early provincial Christian councils in France were examined, it is possible that some denunciation of Serpent Worship may be found. If General Penhouët†† is to be trusted, there are frequent traditions of the destruction of serpents by the early Christian missionaries, and these may fairly be construed as meaning Serpent Worshipers, if such passages exist; but till they are abstracted and published, no argument can be based on them.

There is still one argument which has occasionally been hinted at in the previous pages, which may be considered as tending to show that Serpent Worship may have prevailed among the Celts. They certainly indulged in human sacrifices, and where this custom prevails, we generally find Serpent Worship accompanying it. The converse also is generally true. The worshippers of the serpent were those who, so far as we know, were most addicted to the sacrifice of men. If this proposition could be

* Act. Sanctor. Bolland, 31 Julii, p. 203.

† Quoted by Grimm, Deutsche Myth. (2d ed.), p. 69.

‡ Acta Benedict. sec. 2, p. 714.

§ Arles Concil. II. can. 23.

|| Concil. Tur. II. can. 16.

¶ On Tree Worship in Gaul, see D. Monnier, Traditions Populaires comparées. Paris, 1854. p. 716 ff.

** Hist. Nat. XXIX. 3.

†† The Rev. Bathurst Deane, Worship of the Serpent, p. 283, et seq.

established absolutely, it would be a sufficient proof of the prevalence of Serpent Worship in Gaul, but the premises are as yet much too far from being established to enable us to draw any such definite conclusion from them. They may eventually be brought to do so. At present it must suffice to indicate the form of the argument without attempting to base any theory on so slender a foundation.

On the whole, therefore, we are probably justified in assuming that Tree Worship did exist among the Celts as among the Germans till their conversion to Christianity; but, on the other hand, there seems to be no sufficient evidence to show that they were worshippers of the serpent, and if the Druids were priests of the Celts, which there seems no reason for denying, there is nothing to connect them with that faith, though no doubt they may not only have tolerated but indulged in local superstitions, as many Christians do at the present day.

At the same time recent researches have brought to light circumstances which would lead us to believe, that there existed in France an earlier pre-Celtic race allied to the Esthonians and Finns. They may have been Serpent Worshippers, but they seem to have been obliterated by the Celts in very early pre-Christian times, and their fossil remains have not yet been examined to a sufficient extent to enable any positive opinion to be formed on the subject.

GREAT BRITAIN.

If we have reason to complain that the French archaeologists have not turned sufficient attention to their pre-historic antiquities, the same reproach cannot certainly be applied to those of this country. From the days of Aubrey and Stukeley to the present day volume after volume has issued from the press, and the transactions of learned societies are full of papers on the subject. Every barrow has been explored, every antiquity measured and described, and it must be added every etymology has been enlisted, and every scrap of evidence gathered together and amplified, till a fabric has been raised of such marvellous magnitude that it is startling to find on what slight foundation it rests, and how soon it would topple over if the breath of reason could only be brought to bear upon it. In the meanwhile, however, every upright stone has become a Druidical remain, and every circle or line of stones an Ophite temple. There was a time, according to our antiquaries, when the Druids ruled absolutely in this land, and when, under their auspices, Serpent Worship was as essentially the religion of the people as Christianity is now. The belief that this is so has become from reiteration so engrained, that modern science will probably have a harder task to extirpate it, than the Romans had to abolish the real Druids, or the early Christian missionaries had to induce the people to forsake the worship of the serpent in countries where it prevailed in reality.

Fortunately the controversy lies in a very narrow compass. There are, I believe, only two very short paragraphs in any classical authors which mention Druids in connexion with Britain, and not one that mentions Serpent Worship, and no English author prior, at all events, to the 13th century alludes to either the one or the other.*

* I make this absolute statement with considerable confidence, not only because no paragraph of the sort has been quoted by any of the advocates of this faith, but because there is a very full and careful index to the "Monumenta Historica Britannica," and the word Druid does not occur in it.

Of the two classical passages, that in Tacitus applies strictly to the Isle of Mona (Anglesea), and will be referred to hereafter. The other is that in Cæsar's Commentaries,* and is so important that it must be quoted at length, and in its own language. After describing the Institution of the Druids in Gaul, he goes on to say: "Disciplina (Druidum) in Britannia reperta, et inde in Galliam translata esse existimatur, et nunc qui diligentius eam rem cognoscere volunt, plerumque illo discendi causa proficiscuntur." Had this slight allusion not slipped from Cæsar's pen, there would have been absolutely no evidence of the existence of Druids in England; and after all it hangs on the value to be assigned to the word "existimatur," it is thought or believed! Neither Cæsar or any other Roman ever said he saw a Druid in this country; they never mention their temples or sacred places, and no one ever assisted at their rites. Still, with this paragraph before us, and with the knowledge that the majority of the inhabitants were Celts, it cannot be denied but that Druids may have existed in England, but even then their connexion with Serpent Worship rests wholly on that very apocryphal passage in Pliny (vide *ante*), in which he asserts that the Druids used the *anguinum* as a charm.

The other paragraph is more to the point.† In the year 61 A.D., Paulinus Suetonius was called away to suppress a revolt in the Island of Mona. He there met the army of the natives on the shore, and saw that the women and Druidesses were rushing about with dishevelled locks, and torches in their hands, urging the men to the contest.‡ When the rebellion was suppressed, the sacred groves in which their human sacrifices had been performed were cut down, and we are led to infer Druidism suppressed. Tacitus then goes on to narrate with infinitely more detail the far more important revolt of Boadicea, but, strange to say, in that great national uprising there is absolutely no mention of Druids, either in his narrative or in that of Dion Cassius.§ No groves were cut down, no rites abolished, when it was suppressed; and if any legitimate inference can be drawn from such silence, no Druids existed in the more civilized parts of England.

From whatever point of view the subject is looked at, it seems almost impossible to avoid the conclusion that there were two races in England,—an older and less civilized people, who,|| in the time of the Romans, had already been driven by the Celts into the fastnesses of the Welsh hills, and who may have been Serpent Worshipers and sacrificers of human victims, and that the uncritical Romans confounded the two. They seem rather to have dwelt on the picturesqueness of the naked blue-painted savage as a contrast with those races they were familiar with, as a Catlin revels in the manners and virtues of the Red Indian in contrast to the vices and effeminacy of his more civilized oppressor.

Be this as it may, it is principally from Welsh Triads, so-called, and the Welsh bards, that we depend for our knowledge of the Druids and their doings, and Serpent Worship in this country. If we knew when the works of the Welsh bards were

* De Bello Gall. VI. 13.

† Tacitus, Ann. XIV. 29.

‡ If I wanted an illustration of this scene, I do not know where I could find a better than on the walls of the Caves at Ajanta. The original copy of the picture was unfortunately burnt in the fire at the Crystal Palace in 1866; but it is engraved in Mrs. Spier's *Life in India*, p. 302.

§ Dion Cassius in Xiphilinus' Abridgment, LXII. 1 & 4.

|| Norris's Cornish Drama, II. 401.

reduced to the form in which we now find them, and if we could depend on the translations we have, some light might no doubt be thrown on our subject.* It is, however, an unfortunate peculiarity of the Celtic mind that when they attempt to elucidate the history of their country from their annals, they adopt a species of logic totally distinct from that followed by the Saxon, so that it becomes impossible to use the information they offer. Still it does not seem reasonable to doubt but that remnants of the Druidical religion, and perhaps also of Serpent Worship, may have lingered in the Welsh hills long after they had disappeared from the plains. Where we do find tradition attaching them to any of the monuments of the plain, it is through Welsh agency and almost within sight of the hills, as at Stanton Drew in Somersetshire,† that the serpent is introduced.

Beyond this, though we do occasionally find traditions of the serpent, they are few and far between, and of uncertain origin; one, for instance, is related by Mathew Paris, of St. Albans.‡ Writing in 1260 (?) he relates that the Saxon Abbot Aldred filled up a great hole which once was the abode of an immense dragon, in a place which was still called the Wurmenhert. This appears to have been surrounded by a circular vallum, which we infer still existed in the 13th century, though no trace of it now remains. The circular enclosure and the crypt may be considered as certain, they so exactly resemble the Irish Rath; but the dragon is, I fear, too far off to be depended upon, though it is one of the most authentic traditions we possess.

If this is so, it may be asked, what is the evidence on which the Druidical origin of such monuments as Stonehenge and Avebury have been assumed? The answer fortunately is simple—absolutely none. It never was pretended that any direct testimony existed, and the negative evidence is perfectly complete. No ancient author, no one, in fact, anterior to the invention of printing, ever refers to any stones or stone temples, circular or in any other form, as connected with the worship of the Druids or the Celts. On the other hand, every tradition that exists, whatever their value may be, points to the Arthurian age as that to which they owe their origin.

If it is further asked, what evidence there is to connect these temples with Serpent Worship, exactly the same answer must be given—not one tittle has yet been adduced. The one direction in which it seems probable some such connexion may be established, is from their similarity to the Indian examples, which it is the object of this volume to describe; but whether these will be sufficient for this purpose can only be decided when the argument is fully elaborated. Meanwhile are we correct in calling them temples at all? The one peculiarity of Celtic worship that seems best established, is the love of trees—their fondness of groves for their sacred rites. Is it probable that they would chose the downs of Wiltshire, especially such a spot as that where Stonehenge stands, for the site of their greatest temple—a spot where no tree ever grew or could grow? That they might erect a tomb or cenotaph among the graves of their forefathers seems probable enough; and if Avebury was a battle

* Skene's translation of the four most ancient Welsh poems, which has just been published, has gone far to set this question at rest. It cannot be said that the word Druid does not occur in them, but if we were not looking for it, it is hardly in such a manner as would attract attention, and the part they play is most insignificant, besides it is by no means clear to what age or authority such references really belong.

† *Archæologia*, XXV. p. 198.

‡ *Vitæ Abbatum*, p. 40.

field, that would account for the locality where it is found, but it seems difficult to suggest a reason for their being where they are on any other hypothesis.

This, however, is not the place to examine the evidence on which the age or purposes of these monuments is to be determined. It is, however, impossible to pass over the subject entirely in silence, as reference will occasionally have to be made to them in the following pages; while unfortunately nine people out of ten in this country at the present day believe that Stonehenge and Avebury were built by the Druids; that they were Dracontia or Serpent Temples; and every one can point out the altar stones on which the human victims were sacrificed, and in fact knows all about their religion and rites, and it may be added believes in their primæval antiquity. Till these erroneous impressions are dispelled, the subject we have in hand can hardly be rendered intelligible.

A far more promising field for the investigation of Serpent Worship in Britain occurs in Scotland, on the east coast, north of the Forth. In that country, now known as Pictland, there exists even at the present day a great number of Megalithic monuments, many of which are covered with sculptures of a class totally distinct from those found anywhere else, and which have hitherto baffled the ingenuity of antiquaries. Among them the serpent appears frequently and so prominently that it is impossible to doubt that he was considered as an object of veneration by those who erected those monuments, while on the other hand Serpent Worship could hardly have originated in the north of Scotland, where the snakes are so few and contemptible. Mr. Stuart* enumerates twenty-three representations of the serpent on these stones, thirteen times accompanied by emblems, ten times without them. In some instances, such as the Newton stone, the serpent is evidently the object for which the stone was set up, and he is accompanied by the broken sceptre, which may either be a hieroglyphic for God or King, or may only mean holy or great, or some such adjective, but it certainly implies distinction, if not consecration.

The age of these sculptured stones is known with tolerable certainty, inasmuch as the greater number of them have either the Cross itself or Christian emblems engraved upon them, and these must therefore be subsequent to the age of St. Columba, who arrived in Scotland apparently in 563, and died in 597. Many of those also which have only Pagan emblems are so nearly identical with the Christian stones that they must be about the same age. Some, however, are ruder and simpler, and the series fades back into the plain unsculptured Menhir, of which many exist in the same district. There seems, indeed, to be no essential break either, so far as design or purpose† is concerned, between the rude unchiselled blocks of Carnac and Avebury

* Sculptured Stones of Scotland, vol. II. p. lxxiv.

† From his position as Archbishop of Upsala—in one of the last countries in Europe converted to Christianity—and writing in 1555, no one was in a better position to know the truth about these stone monuments than Olaus Magnus, and his testimony is clear and distinct. "Habent hæc saxa in plerisque locis erecta, longitudine x., vel xv., xx., xxx., et amplius, et latitudine iv. vel vi. pedum mirabili situ. Sed mirabiliori ordine ac mirabilissimo charactere ob plurimas rationes collocata sunt. Literato rectoque et longo ordine videlicet pugilorum certamina—quadrato turmas bellantium et spherico familiarum designantia sepulturas. ch. xxix.—Or again, Quos humi recondere placuit honorabiles statuas lapidum excelsorum, prout hodie cernuntur mira compagine immensa saxa, in modum altissimæ latissimæ januæ sursum transversumque viribus gigantum erecta, &c. ch. xxx." There are other passages in the same author bearing directly on the subject, but too long to quote. They, however, all seem to describe so correctly, not only the form, but the uses of such monuments as

and such elaborate Christian obelisks or Swenos stone at Forres, or the group that once surmounted the mound at St. Vigean.*

We shall probably not err far if we regard these traces of Serpent Worship as indicating the presence in the north-east of Scotland of the head of that column of migration, or of propagandism, which, under the myth of Wodenism, we endeavoured in a previous chapter to trace from the Caucasus to Scandinavia. The Edda seems sufficient to prove that a form of Serpent Worship did certainly prevail in the latter country in the early centuries of the Christian era; and nothing seems more probable or more in accordance with Pictish traditions,† than that it should have passed thence into Scotland, and should have left its traces everywhere between the Orkneys and the Firths.‡ There is no evidence, however, of Serpent Worship, in this form at least, having passed south of the Forth. The traces of it that may exist in England or Ireland—if any—most probably belong to an earlier pre-historic people, and may have been introduced by another and more southern route.

AFRICA.

We tread on surer ground, when leaving Serpent Worship in its most attenuated form, and in the uncongenial climate of its furthest extension to the north and west, and turn to Africa, where it always was at home, and where it now flourishes in all its pristine vigour. Serpents are, and always must have been, so numerous and important in Africa, that it is there, if not in Mesopotamia, that we should, *à priori*, expect their worship to flourish, and it is by no means impossible that it was so. We know so little, however, of what happened in Africa in ancient times—except in Egypt—that it is difficult to speak with any confidence on the subject, and the institutions of Egypt were so abnormal and so exclusively their own, that we cannot reason from them to any general conclusions. Perhaps when the subject is carefully looked into, more may be ascertained than is now known, but our present purpose is with the worship as it exists at the present day, or did in recent times.

One of the best known examples of modern Serpent Worship exists in Upper Egypt, at a place called Sheikh Haredi, from a tomb of a Mahomedan saint of that name, which exists on the spot. The account given of the place by Norden,§ who visited it in 1738, with a mere change of names, is an exact counterpart of what might have been found in Pausanias or any ancient author describing the grove of Esculapius,

Avebury and Stonehenge, that in so far as the testimony of this author is concerned, it may be considered as conclusive. Perhaps I may be allowed to add that though I only became aware of the existence of these passages a few months ago, they are entirely in accordance with the conclusions I had long ago arrived at from an examination of the monuments themselves.

* All these will be found described in Stuart's "Sculptured Stones," above referred to, and also in Colonel Forbes Leslie's "Early Races of Scotland." Edin. 1866.

† Skene's *Chronicles of the Picts and Scots*, p. xc. et seq.

‡ There are some traditions in Northumberland, such as that of the Laidley Wurm of Spindleston Heugh; and there was a Wurm hill at Lambton, and at other places in the neighbourhood (Walter White, "Northumberland and the Border," p. 249, et seq.). All this would perfectly accord with the theory that it was the result of a Scandinavian course of immigration which reached these two points on the coast.

§ *Travels in the East*, ii. 40.

at Epidaurus. When any one was so unwell as to require his services, an ambassadress was sent in the person of a spotless virgin—as at Lanuvium—and if his godship pleased he came out of his cave, hung himself around her neck, and allowed himself to be carried in procession to the sick man's bedside. Here he stayed, as Norden irreverently suggests, a length of time proportionate to the gifts offered to his priests, and then returned alone to his dwelling. Dr. Pococke's episcopal dignity seems to have been so offended by the monstrosity of the superstition, that he abuses the serpent and his attendants, but he confirms in every particular Norden's account. He was told it had been there since the time of Mahomet; that they sacrificed to it sheep and lambs. They added that when a number of women visit him, which they do once a year, he comes out and twines himself about the neck of the most beautiful.*

From Wilkinson† we learn that the worship still continues, but has fallen somewhat into disrepute of late.

It does not seem to be a matter of much doubt but that the Serpent was extensively worshipped in Abyssinia before the introduction of Christianity in the fourth century. All the lists of their kings which have been brought home by Bruce, Rüppell, and others, commence with "the Serpent" and his progeny, though we are not told when he reigned nor where. We are further told that when Ábreha and Átzbeha founded Axum 340 A.D., "that one portion of the people of Ethiopia then worshipped the Serpent, the rest followed the Law of Moses. Abuna Abba Salâmâ then introduced Christianity, and the inhabitants were baptized," &c.‡

It is by no means clear whether the great dragon who is said to have lived at Axum § was a god or merely a serpent, more probably the former, as he was burst asunder by the prayers of nine Christian saints. Be all this as it may, we have the direct testimony of Bruce || that the Shangalla, in that neighbourhood, "worship " various trees, serpents, the moon, planets, and stars in certain positions;" and more instances might no doubt be found if looked for. It is, however, on the west coast that the worship flourishes in all its pristine vigour.

Although no one has resided long enough on the Guinea coast with learning and leisure sufficient to write anything like an exhaustive treatise on the religions of that country, we have what is nearly of equal value for our purposes in a series of narratives of Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English travellers, extending over more than two hundred years. Those anterior to 1746 have been digested by Astley ¶ into a continuous narrative and description; and in 1760 President de Brosses,** of the French Academy, wrote a lucid account of what was then known on the subject, and from that time various travellers have added to our knowledge; but the best and fullest are the narratives of M. Répin,†† a surgeon in the French navy; but

* Pococke in Pinkerton's Voyages, xv. p. 269, et seq.

† Handbook of Egypt, 301.

‡ Dillmann in Zeitschrift der Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, vol. VII. p. 338, et seq.

§ Ludolf. Comment. iii. 284?

(4799.)

|| Travels, ii. 554.

¶ Astley's Collection of Voyages, 4 vols. quarto, London, 1846.

** De Brosses, du Culte des Dieux Fetiches, &c. 12mo. Paris, 1760.

†† Le Tour du Monde, 1863, p. 9, et seq.

we have also that of Capt. Burton and Commodore Wilmot,* who went on an official mission to Dahomey in 1863. The one point on which we desire more information is as to the extent of this form of faith, and as to the ethnological relations of the people who practise it. We are told, for instance, that when the Dahomans invaded Whidah in 1726, they killed the sacred snakes, and otherwise outraged the religious feelings of the Whidans.† Both countries are now united under one rule, and apparently with one religion. Was it otherwise 140 years ago? and can the distinction now be traced? These and such like questions are well worthy of more attention than they have hitherto received, for if we are ever to understand the ancient peculiarities of this faith, it must be by a thorough study of the best living examples.

Hitherto we have been only gathering together, as it were, the fossil remains of an extinct religion, whereas in Africa not only does Serpent Worship flourish at the present day, but it exists in conjunction with all those peculiarities of which only traces can be found elsewhere. Ancestral worship, accompanied by human sacrifices on the most lavish scale, is the leading characteristic of the Dahoman religion, and with it we have the institution of a female warrior class, which we have hitherto only known through the beautiful Amazonian fictions of the Greeks or the legends of the Hindoos, as to the *Strī-rājya*, but in Dahomey the institution exists to this day in all its hideous savagery.

The three gods worshipped in Whidah, or to speak more correctly, the three classes of gods, are Serpents, Trees, and the Ocean;‡ the same trinity as was established in the Erechtheum, in the Akropolis of Athens, more than three thousand years ago. Of these, the serpent called *Danh gbwe*, or the earthly serpent, is the first. "It is esteemed the supreme bliss and general good. It has 1,000 *Danh-si*, or "snake wives, married and single votaries, and its influence cannot be meddled with " by the two others, which are subject to it."§

The ancestor of the present race of serpent gods is said to have deserted from the Ardrah people ages ago, in consequence of their wickedness, on the eve of a battle, and to have been received by the Whidah people with the highest honours.|| He is reported to be still alive, as all these gods are immortal, though it need hardly be added, no European has seen him, but his descendants seem to be among the most beautiful, and certainly are among the most harmless of their kind.

Des Marchais gives a full description of the worship addressed to this god, and a picture of a procession, in which the king, the king's wives, and all the nobles took part,¶ bearing presents and offerings to the serpent god. Prayers are addressed to him on every occasion, and answers are returned by the snakes in conversation with the high priest. The one thing we seem to miss is the Esculapian character. It may be that this is included in his characteristic of an omniscient and all-powerful god, but it does not seem to be especially mentioned.

* Mission to the King of Dahomey, 2 vols. 8vo. Murray, 1864.

† Capt. Snellgrove's Narrative in Astley, iii. 489.

‡ Bosman in Astley.

§ Burton, vol. II. p. 139.

|| Des Marchais' (1725) Voyages, ii. p. 135, et seq.

¶ A copy of this plate is given in Astley, vol. III. plate 7.

Women, when touched by the serpent, are said to become "possessed." They are seized with hysteria, and often bereft of reason. When so affected they are secluded in hospitals prepared for their reception, and generally afterwards are considered as priestesses,—Fetish women,—though returned to civil life. The bulk of the priestesses are girls devoted either before their birth or at a very early age to the service of the god. They are brought up in the temple, taught singing, dancing, and various accomplishments, exactly as the nautch girls are in the temples of Southern India, and when of age are married to the god. On this occasion they are marked with the image of the god by pricking the skin with needles and rubbing in indigo, or some blue dye, which is indelible. This seal is said to be set upon them by the god himself,* and, as in Greece, no one dare to divulge his mysteries.

Besides this earthly serpent, there is another, the heavenly one, commonly called *Danh*. It is the rainbow, and makes the *Popo* beads, and confers wealth on man. Its emblem is a coiled and horned snake of clay, in a pot or calabash.†

The second god in the Dahoman Pantheon is represented by lofty and beautiful trees. They are prayed to and presented with offerings in times of sickness, and especially of fever. The most revered of these is the cotton tree (*Bombax*), whose wives equal those of the snake, and the *Loco*, the well-known poison tree of the West African coast. The latter numbers few *Loco-si* or wives, but, on the other hand, has its own fetish pottery, which may be bought in every market.‡

The youngest brother of the triad is *Hu*, the ocean. The *Huno*, or ocean priest, is now considered the highest of all, a fetish king at *Whidah*, where he has 500 wives. The offerings to this god are rice, corn, oil, beans, and also cloth, cowries, and other valuables; but at times the king sends as an ocean sacrifice, from the capital, a man carried in a hammock, with the dress, the stool, and umbrella of a noble. A canoe takes him out to the sea, and he is thrown to the sharks.

The human sacrifices or "customs," as they are usually called, of Dahomey, are one of the most remarkable religious observances of the world. They have been frequently described, but by no one so fully or intelligently as by Captain Burton, in his volumes we have just been quoting from.§ They are divided into greater and lesser customs. At the former not less than 500 or 600 victims are sacrificed; at the latter, at which Captain Burton and his companions assisted, 30 or 40 seem to suffice. The idea seems to be that when the king leaves this world it is necessary his wife, his servants, and his domestic animals should accompany him, and they are all slaughtered accordingly. The lesser customs are an annual act of ancestral worship in honour of the departed king, and also to keep up his stock, though in the land of the immortal this seems unnecessary. Besides that, whenever a battle is fought or any great event happens, a messenger is despatched to propitiate the

* From Suetonius we learn that when *Atia*, the mother of *Augustus*, was touched by the serpent in the temple of *Apollo*, she was marked with a stain (*macula*) like a painted serpent, so that she did not afterwards dare to appear in the public baths.—Sueton. in *Aug.* c. 94.

† Burton, ii. 148.

‡ Burton, ii. p. 140, l. 141.

§ Burton. As almost the whole work is devoted to this subject, it is needless to specify pages.

late king by keeping him "*au fait*" in the news of his late kingdom. It is said the present king would not be unwilling to do away with, or at least to modify, some of the most revolting features of this great slaughter, but that his subjects would regard such an act as a neglect of his most sacred duties, and he might lose his throne as a punishment for such impiety.*

None of the works above referred to make it clear what the negro's ideas of immortality are, probably because none such exist. That they have an idea of a future state, and that they consider this world as merely one of transition, is evident. All pass on to the next and better world, but with the same wants, feelings, and desires that they possessed while sojourning here, and apparently with the same distinction of rank. The last king, however, is the one especially honoured, and the reigning monarch, when he dies, expects the chief worship to be paid to him, and no doubt he is the one who takes the greatest interest in sublunar affairs. They never rise apparently to the rank of gods, but if they do not die they are at least very soon forgotten.†

When contemplating this, to us, strange religious development, the question inevitably arises, How far are we to consider this Dahoman worship as a living fragment of the oldest religion of the world, or how far may it have grown up in more modern times?

The traditions of the country are, as might be expected, far too vague to be of any avail in such an enquiry, and we are left to draw our conclusions from such information as we can gather elsewhere. We know from the Egyptian monuments that neither the physical features nor the social status of the negro have altered in the slightest degree during the last 4,000 years. If the type was then fixed which has since remained unaltered, why not his religion also? There seems no *à priori* difficulty. No other people in the whole world seem so unchanged and unchangeable. Movements and mixtures of races have taken place everywhere else. Christianity has swept Serpent Worship out of what were the limits of the Roman world, and Mahomedanism has done the same over the greater part of Northern Africa. Neither influence has yet penetrated to the Gold Coast, and there apparently the negro holds "his old faith and his old feelings fast" in spite of the progress of the rest of the world. It may be very horrible, but so far as we at present know it is the oldest of human faiths, and is now practised with more completeness in Dahomey than anywhere else, at least at the present day.

AMERICA.

There are few things in connexion with the ancient mythology of America more certain than that there existed in that country before its discovery by Columbus extreme veneration for the serpent. Whether or not this should be designated "worship" is not so clear. The total absence of any native literature renders it extremely difficult to realise the exact interpretation to be put on any observed phenomena, and we

* Burton, ii. 176.

† Among the Zulus the snake is held in great respect, and is not willingly killed; as their dead ancestors are supposed to reappear in the form of snakes.—Colenso, on the Pentateuch, p. VI. p. 142.

gather very little trustworthy information from the early Christian missionaries or historians. They were either too ignorant or too prejudiced to take a dispassionate view of what they saw, and were too much inclined to see the serpent of Eve, or the deluge of Noah, in the vague traditions of the natives; though, to account for these, they were obliged to make St. Thomas missionary to Mexico—before it was founded—as well as first Bishop of Madras. The consequence is, that we are dependent either on a very imperfect examination of the Sculptures, or on very vague oral traditions, for our knowledge of the subject; and it need hardly be added, that with only such data it is extremely difficult to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion. At the same time, however, it must be admitted that if a systematic examination of such data as exist were undertaken, with special reference to Tree and Serpent Worship, a great deal might yet be effected; but as no one has yet attempted the investigation, the subject must for the present be left in its original obscurity.

The principal deity of the Aztec Pantheon seems Tezcatlipoca, or Tonacatlecoatl, literally the Sun Serpent. According to Sahagun, in his character of God of Hosts, he was addressed by the Mexican high priest: "We entreat that those who die in war may be received by thee, our father the sun, and our brother the earth, for thou alone reignest."*

The name of the primitive goddess, the wife of Tezcatlipoca, was Cihuacohuatl, or Tonacacihua, the female serpent or the female sun. She, according to the Mexicans, gave to the light at a single birth two children, one male the other female, to whom they refer the origin of mankind.†

A still more remarkable myth is that of Quetzal-coatl, literally the feathered serpent. He is by some represented as born of a pure virgin in the province of Tollan; by others as a stranger coming from a "far countrie," some time between the sixth and ninth century of our era. Be this as it may, he was the great lawgiver and civilizer of the inhabitants of Anahuac. He taught them religion, gave them laws, instructed them in agriculture and the use of metals, and the various arts of life. He is generally represented as an old man, with a white flowing beard and venerable aspect. He was, in fact, the Lycurgus and the Bacchus of Central America, and having finished his mission he withdrew, like the former, it is said, by sea, promising to return. So implicitly was this believed by his subjects, that when the Spaniards appeared on the coast they were joyfully hailed as the returning god and his companions. Alas! they came only to destroy them and their institutions.

If all the evidences bearing on this legend were thoroughly sifted by some one competent to the task, I feel confident they would result in an historical residuum; and if so, it would throw great light on one of the most perplexing problems connected with the civilization of the New World.

As we shall see presently, Serpent Worship was the faith of a great and prosperous kingdom in Cambodia at the time just indicated as the age of the Mexican prophet; and it is more than probable that the worship prevailed in China and the islands to the eastward at that time. Is it possible that it may have crossed the Pacific, and

* Squier's *Serpent Symbol in America*, p. 162.

† Gama, *Descripcion Historica y Cronologica de las pedras de Mexico*, 1832, p. 39.

landed on the western coast of America, and, finally, bloomed in Anahuac? If such a solution were possible, it would explain many similarities between the religion and arts of the Old World and the New, which are now extremely puzzling, for want of some such evidence of intercommunication.

On the other hand, if we may trust the antiquaries of the United States, there are great serpent mounds formed of earth, 1,000 feet long and more,* which would seem to prove that before the present race of Red Indians inhabited the states Ohio and Iowa, a race of Serpent Worshippers occupied their places, and they have been the ancestors of the Toltecs. When, however, we remember with what curious credulity Stukeley manufactured a Dracontium out of Avebury, and Bathurst Deane saw a serpent seven miles long in the groups of Menhirs at Carnac, we must pause before we feel sure that these American mounds do really represent serpents at all. This point cannot be settled without much more accurate surveys and more cautious observers than have yet turned their attention to the subject.

If it should turn out that these are really representations of the great serpent, and that this worship is indigenous in the New World, we are thrown back on the doctrine that human nature is alike everywhere, and that man in like circumstances and with a like degree of civilization does always the same things, and elaborates the same beliefs. It may be so, but I confess it appears to me that at present the evidence preponderates the other way. It should be mentioned, however, that in America the snake that is worshipped is always the indigenous rattlesnake. Whether as separate images or as adorning the walls of the temples of Yucatan, this characteristic seems invariable, and in so far would favour the local origin of the faith. The greatest difficulty of the investigation arises from almost absolute destruction of all the monuments of the capital by its barbarous conquerors, and the consequent paucity of real reliable data on which to found our conclusions.

It seems, however, impossible to read the numerous evidences which Müller† has collected together with so much industry not to feel convinced that Serpent Worship did prevail all over the continent. In Peru apparently with qualities similar to those of the Serpents in the Old World,‡ But in Mexico, and among the North American Indians, occasionally with attributes of terror which were never ascribed to him on this side of the Atlantic. Quetzalcoatl is always an exception to this inference; and on the whole it seems more reasonable to suppose that these characteristics are to be ascribed more to the horror of the Christian narrators than to the feelings of the worshippers. We have no native accounts, and depend consequently wholly on those who looked on the worship from an outside and antagonistic point of view.

If, however, we may trust Bernal Diaz, he tells us that living rattlesnakes were kept in the great temple at Mexico as sacred and petted objects. They were kept in a cabin of diversified form, in which a quantity of feathers had been strewed, and there they laid their eggs and nursed their snakelings. They were fed with the bodies of the sacrificed, and with dogs' meat.§ The same author tells us that on

* Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge, vol. 1.

See also Squier's Serpent Symbol, p. 137 to 141.

† Amerikanische Urreligionen. Basel, 1855.

‡ Müller, p. 366.

§ Bernal Diaz, translated by Lockhart, i, 233.

Cortes' march to Mexico they arrived at a place called Terraguca, which the Spaniards called the Town of Serpents, on account of the enormous figures of these reptiles which they found in the temples, and which the natives worshipped as gods.* But though it is impossible to read any of the narratives of the conquerors without being struck with the frequency with which sacred Serpents and Serpent Worship are spoken of, it is always as a thing accursed, and to be avoided; never as an object worthy of attention, or to be inquired into, and their narratives consequently throw very little light on the subject. The Sculptures would do more; but it will require a long and patient investigation by some one competent person on the spot before their evidence can be considered as available; at present we know very little of what they may contain.

It need hardly be remarked that human sacrifices were found accompanying Serpent Worship in America almost to as great an extent as in Dahomey. Even here, however, it is probable we must make a distinction which may be of some importance. In Africa the sacrificial rites seem to be purely ancestral. In America they were made to propitiate gods, not apparently the ancestors of the reigning family, nor nearer to them in time than Quetzalcoatl. The principal object seems always to have been augury to obtain from the gods an indication of their will, which does not seem to have been the case in Dahomey. It was also no doubt considered that the sacrifice itself was agreeable to the deity, and it was expected that the oracle, which was the declaration of his will, would be favourable in proportion to the number of the victims.

It is by no means improbable that when looked for, Tree Worship will also be found to have prevailed extensively in the New World. Mr. Tylor mentions two instances that came under his notice.† The first was a venerable deciduous cypress, with a stem sixty feet in circumference near its root, and with a fountain gushing up within the hollow of the trunk itself. It was hung all over with votive offerings, besides hundreds of locks of hair, teeth, and bits of ribbon. The other was treated in the same manner, and had the valuable property for whoever touched it, that all feeling of weariness left him. Müller also finds traces of Tree Worship all over the continent of America, and generally in juxtaposition, if not in actual connexion, with that of the Serpent.‡ But here again we must pause for further information before attempting to generalize.

* p. 125. See also pp. 3, 7.

† Anahuac, 215, 265.

‡ Amerikanische Urreligionen, 494. See also 107, 124, 264, *et seq.*