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Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

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Phœnicia

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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.