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Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

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Greece

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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no valid objection to assuming that they were a people of a race entirely different to the Hellenes, who afterwards superseded them.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.

‡ Propertius, Eleg. VIII. 4.