



UNIVERSITÄTS-  
BIBLIOTHEK  
PADERBORN

## **Tree and serpent worship**

**Fergusson, James**

**London, 1868**

Italy

---

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

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.

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 TRALLES.

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 *cista* 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.