



UNIVERSITÄTS-  
BIBLIOTHEK  
PADERBORN

## **Tree and serpent worship**

**Fergusson, James**

**London, 1868**

Germany

---

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

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.