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## **Tree and serpent worship**

**Fergusson, James**

**London, 1868**

Sarmatia

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

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of the sacred grove round which the city has grown up, and in sight of the proud cathedral of the Christian, which has superseded and replaced its more venerable shade.‡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.