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## **Tree and serpent worship**

**Fergusson, James**

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Scandinavia

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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.

too, came from the east just at the time when we know that active missionaries were spreading the doctrines of Buddhism on all sides external to the central kingdom of India, within whose limits it had been previously confined. There certainly also was at that time an amount of Buddhism current among the western nations whose presence it is difficult to account for except on the assumption of some such migration. The more closely, however, the question is examined the less hope does there appear to be that a solution may be reached in this direction.

There are not, perhaps, in the whole world two religions so diametrically and so essentially opposed to one another as Buddhism and Wodenism, nor two persons so different as the gentle Śákya Muni, who left a kingdom, family, and friends to devote fifty years of his blameless life to the attempt to alleviate the sufferings of mankind, and Odin, "the terrible and severe God, the Father of slaughter: he who giveth victory and reviveth courage in the conflict: who nameth those that are to be slain."\*

The leading doctrinal characteristic of Buddhism in its early form is its atheism; the Scandinavian, on the other hand, had Woden, Thor, Freya, and a host of minor gods, rulers of men during their lifetime, and continuing the active personal interference with the affairs of men after their elevation. Among the practical characteristics of Buddhism there was, first, the remarkable extension of the Jewish Commandment, "Thou shalt do no murder" into "Thou shalt not kill," including in the prohibition everything that had life; while the greatest glory of the northern hero was the number of his enemies he had slain, and nothing escaped from his joyous bloodthirstiness. Another peculiarity of Buddhism was the negation of all worldly pleasures and enjoyments. It is hardly possible to conceive anything more incongruous than would have been the presence among the roistering mead-drinking warriors of the north, of a yellow-robed ascetic, sworn to celibacy, living on alms, and devoting his life to pious contemplation; his one hope and highest aspiration being, that after infinite transmigrations he might be so purified by suffering that he might eventually obtain absolute rest by annihilation and absorption into the original essence of all things. How different this from the northern Walhalla. "The heroes," says the Edda,† "who are received into the palace of Odin have every day the pleasure of arming themselves, of passing in review, of ranging themselves in order of battle, and of cutting one another to pieces; but so soon as the time of repast approaches they return on horseback all safe and sound to the hall of Odin, and fall to eating and drinking. Though the number of them cannot be counted, the flesh of the boar, Sæhrimnir,‡ is sufficient for them all; every day it is served up at table, and every day renewed entire. Their beverage is ale and mead. One single goat, whose milk is mead, furnishes enough of that liquor to intoxicate all the heroes. Odin alone drinks wine; wine is for him both meat and drink. A crowd of virgins wait on the heroes at table, and fill their cups as fast as they empty them."

This, certainly, is not Buddhism, at least as that religion is known to us by anything that has hitherto been published on the subject. How far the revelations

\* Mallet, Northern Antiq. (Bohn's edition), p. 21.

† Mallet, Northern Antiq., p. 104.

‡ Mallet, Prose Edda, 429.

of the sculptures of the Sanchi Tope may induce us to change our opinions of the earlier form of that faith remains to be seen. There is, certainly, a much greater similarity between the Buddhism of the Topes and the Scandinavian mythology than between it and the Buddhism of the books; but still the gulf between the two is immense, and if any traces of the doctrines of the gentle ascetic ever existed in the bosoms of Odin or his followers, while dwelling near the roots of the Caucasus, all that can be said is, that they suffered fearful shipwreck among the rocks of the savage superstitions of the north, and sank, never again to appear on the surface of Scandinavian mythology. If the two religions came anywhere in contact it is at their base, for underlying both there existed a strange substratum of Tree and Serpent Worship; on this the two structures seem to have been raised, though they afterwards diverged into forms so strangely dissimilar.

As will be seen in a subsequent part of this work, recent discoveries have narrowed, to a certain extent, the gulf which separated them at the time of their greatest development, and it is by no means impossible that if we are able to go further back they may be found to approximate still more closely. We do not yet, however, see much prospect of reaching a point where the two may come in contact, except at the point where they both start from their foundations; but the inquiry is too new, and the facts yet gathered are far from being sufficient to enable us to speak with anything like certainty, except regarding the later forms of either of these faiths.

The myth of the Yggdrasil ash is told in considerable detail in the Prose Edda, though its meaning will hardly be understood till we are more familiar with the corresponding features in Indian mythology.

“ It was under the ash, the chiefest and holiest seat of the gods, that they “ assembled every day in council. The branches spread over the whole world, and “ even reach to heaven above. It has three roots, one stood over Mimir’s well, in “ which wisdom and wit lie hidden; and one over Niflheim, a place where those “ wicked people are sent who die from natural causes, and this root it is, that is “ continually gnawed by the serpent Nidhogg, with whom in Hwergelmir there are so “ many snakes that no tongue can recount them.\* The third root of the ash is in “ heaven, under it is the holy Urdar-fount; it is here the gods sit in judgment. Near “ this sit the three Norns or fates, who fix the lifetime of all men. In its branches “ sits an eagle who knows many things, and a squirrel, Ratatösk, runs up and down, “ and seeks to cause strife between the Eagle and Nidhogg. Four harts run across “ the branches of the tree and bite the buds.” In addition to this is the great Midgard serpent Jörmungand, “ who being of parentage of bad augury, was thrown “ by All-Father (Odin) into the ocean, but the monster grew to such an enormous “ size, that holding his tail in his mouth, he encircles the whole earth.”†

Without continuing these quotations further at present, enough has perhaps been brought forward to show that Yggdrasil is in the first place a reminiscence of the trees

\* Pliny refers to the connexion of the serpent with the ash, but in a different sense (XVI. 13). He says snakes will not rest in its shadow, but shun it at a distance, and adds, from “personal experience,” that, “if a “ serpent is so surrounded by a fence of ash leaves that he cannot escape except by passing through fire, he will “ prefer the fire rather than pass through the leaves.”

† Translation of Prose Edda, 410 et seq.

of fate and knowledge of the Garden of Eden, though wisdom lay in a well of water at the root of the northern tree, of which Odin drank and gained knowledge,\* instead of eating its fruit, which, with an ash, was not a probable form of the myth. It is also probably enough to enable us to recognize in the eagle, the Garuda, and in the Nidhögg, the Nagas of eastern fable, though the squirrel does not there appear to have been necessary to keep alive the enmity that always existed between them. And in Thor fishing for the Midgard serpent, and the part he is to play at the end of all things, we may without difficulty recognize a reflex of the churning of the ocean and the renewal of all things by Vishnu through the instrumentality of the great serpent. As might be expected from the nature of the country and style of its historians, we have fewer accounts of the actual form of the worship than of its doctrinal importance. Still we are told† that in front of the great Temple at Upsala "there grew a huge tree of unknown kind, that spread with large boughs, and was "green both summer and winter," and near the same temple a sacred grove, every tree and every leaf of which was considered the most sacred thing in the world.‡ It was called Odin's Grove, and in it the most solemn sacrifices were performed, especially every ninth year, when nine human victims were sacrificed from among the captives if in time of war, or nine slaves if in time of peace.

The serpent is not mentioned as an actual object of worship in any written history; though no doubt the superstition prevailed with the others down to the time when the whole was abolished in the ninth century on the introduction of Christianity. Yet we are told that in the sixteenth century, "There are house serpents "which are accounted in the northern parts of Sweden as household gods; they are "fed with sheep and cows' milk, and to hurt them is a deadly sin." The same author tells us that "serpents rest deep under the roots of birch trees, the multitude "of them cause heat with their breath, and so keep the leaves green in winter."§ All this is foolish enough, but the thousand and one stories about serpents which crowd the pages of the good Archbishop of Upsala suffice to show that even in his day the superstition had not died out among the common people, and though serpents were no longer worshipped, the time when they were so was not yet forgotten.|| At the same time it seems tolerably clear that such a serpent mythology as existed in Sweden could never have sprung up naturally in so northern a climate, where all the snake tribe are so insignificant. It must have been imported from the East, though we have yet to learn by whom this was done, and at what exact time it was effected.

\* Page 411.

† Olaus Magnus, III. 5.

‡ Mallet, p. 113.

§ Olaus Magnus, XXI. 47 and 48.

|| Castren, in his *Travels in Lapland*, gives some very curious details about the feelings of the Lapps with regard to Serpent and Tree Worship at the present day. According to their traditions, Snakes, like men, live in societies, each with a captain and subordinate officers; once a year each community meets in general assembly, and not only has each serpent the right to bring his own grievances forward, but the jurisdiction of the chief extends to men who have slain or 'offended' any of his subjects.—*Reise Erinnerungen aus den Jahren 1838-44*, pp. 66-77. A good deal of information on this subject will be found in a Swedish work by Hylten-Cavallius, entitled *Wärend och Wirdarne*, p. 142, for the worship of Trees as at present existing, and pp. 329 to 332 for that of Serpents.