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Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

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FRANCE.

We seem to know less of the primitive worship of the early inhabitants of Gaul than of that of almost any other country of Europe. This may arise partly because the Gauls were so far civilized before the classical authors became acquainted with them, that their old beliefs had lost much of their individuality and freshness, while they were not so far advanced or civilized at the time when Christianity blotted out the old religions, as to feel sufficient interest in them to care to record their forms. A good deal also is no doubt due to the fact that the subject has not been carefully investigated by any competent authority since the new school of criticism was introduced. The French antiquarians do not yet seem to have discovered the safe channel between the whirlpools of credulity and the dry sand banks of frigid scepticism.

Nearly all that we know of the religion of the ancient Gauls is gathered from the celebrated passage in Cæsar's Commentaries,* when he pauses from the narrative of his exploits to describe the civil and religious institutions of the people he had conquered. In this account there is absolutely no mention of either Tree or Serpent Worship; on the contrary, he tells us that their principal deity was Mercury, not probably the god known by that name in the Roman Pantheon, but it may be Woden or some such synonym. After him came Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva. Rather a strange selection, and stranger classification if we are to accept them as the Roman gods whose names they bear; but most probably they were local deities who, to his apprehension, more closely resembled these gods than any other his readers might be acquainted with.

Cæsar's assertion that the Druids were the priests, and by inference the only priests of the Gauls, is considerably modified by the subsequent testimony of both Strabo† and Diodorus,‡ who divide the priests into three classes, the Bards, the Druids, and the Soothsayers. All these authors agree in describing the principal rite to consist in sacrifices, performed apparently in the open air, and by inference in groves. They also agree in stating that human victims were frequently immolated in what appears to have been considered the most solemn and acceptable of their sacred rites.

Notwithstanding the silence of the principal authorities, we are not without evidence as to Tree Worship having prevailed. Maximus Tyrius,§ for instance, distinctly asserts that the "Celts worship Jupiter, but under the form of a tall oak tree;" and Pliny|| describes in detail the veneration of the Druids for the oak, especially the mistletoe, which grew on the oak, the ceremony accompanying its removal being apparently in Pliny's eyes the most important of those connected with the worship. It is, however, more from Christian writers that we acquire a conviction that Tree Worship prevailed extensively among the Celts.

There is, for instance, the famous pear tree, that grew at Auxerre in the fourth century, which was hung with trophies of the chase, and venerated as god by the people to such an extent that its destruction by the Holy Amator was considered

* De Bello Gall. VI. 13, 20.

† Geographica, IV. 275.

‡ Hist. V. 31.

§ Diss. 8. ed. Reiske, I. 142.: Κέλται σεβούσι μὲν Δία, ἄγαλμα δὲ Διὸς Κελτικὸν ἐφηλὴ ὄρεος.

|| Hist. Nat. XVI. 95.

a triumph, not only worthy to be related at length in the life of Genarius,* but sung in indifferent Latin verse some centuries afterwards by Hericus.† From the Life of St. Amandus‡ we learn that groves and trees (*arbores et ligna pro diis colerent*) were worshipped in the north of France, near Beauvais (Belvacence), and the destruction of the tree, which was dedicated to the devil (*arborem quæ erat dæmoni dedicata*), is recorded as a most meritorious act.

The second Council of Arles§ denounced those who venerated trees, or fountains, or stones, and declared those guilty of sacrilege who neglected to destroy them. That of Tours|| issued a similar decree, almost in the same words; and even as late as 1262 the Council of Nantes condemned those who worshipped stones in desert and woody places (*locis sylvestribus*). These instances might no doubt be multiplied to almost any extent if anyone would take the trouble to look for them, but, as before mentioned, the French archæologists have hardly turned their attention to the subject.¶

The traces of Serpent Worship in Gaul are so few and so evanescent that, in ordinary circumstances, an author would be justified in asserting that it did not exist among the Celts any more than it did among the Germans, and in passing by the subject altogether. Such a superstructure, however, has been raised on a passage in Pliny** that it is impossible to treat it thus. Among the many marvels and puerilities of his Natural History, there is none more absurd than that of the egg (*anguinum*) produced by the breath of a number of serpents, who meet together for the purpose of producing it, apparently on midsummer eve. It is projected by them into the air, and must be caught in a blanket before it falls, and the fortunate possessor must be on horseback, and gallop off with it; for if the snakes catch him before he crosses running water, a worse fate than Tam o' Shanter's will befall him! This fable is reported on the authority of the Druids, and it is added that this *anguinum* is considered a charm by them. It is, I believe, the only passage in any classical author that connects the Druids with serpents, or by implication would lead us to suspect that some superstition regarding serpents may have existed in Gaul.

If the records of the early provincial Christian councils in France were examined, it is possible that some denunciation of Serpent Worship may be found. If General Penhouët†† is to be trusted, there are frequent traditions of the destruction of serpents by the early Christian missionaries, and these may fairly be construed as meaning Serpent Worshipers, if such passages exist; but till they are abstracted and published, no argument can be based on them.

There is still one argument which has occasionally been hinted at in the previous pages, which may be considered as tending to show that Serpent Worship may have prevailed among the Celts. They certainly indulged in human sacrifices, and where this custom prevails, we generally find Serpent Worship accompanying it. The converse also is generally true. The worshippers of the serpent were those who, so far as we know, were most addicted to the sacrifice of men. If this proposition could be

* Act. Sanctor. Bolland, 31 Julii, p. 203.

† Quoted by Grimm, Deutsche Myth. (2d ed.), p. 69.

‡ Acta Benedict. sec. 2, p. 714.

§ Arles Concil. II. can. 23.

|| Concil. Tur. II. can. 16.

¶ On Tree Worship in Gaul, see D. Monnier, Traditions Populaires comparées. Paris, 1854. p. 716 ff.

** Hist. Nat. XXIX. 3.

†† The Rev. Bathurst Deane, Worship of the Serpent, p. 283, et seq.

established absolutely, it would be a sufficient proof of the prevalence of Serpent Worship in Gaul, but the premises are as yet much too far from being established to enable us to draw any such definite conclusion from them. They may eventually be brought to do so. At present it must suffice to indicate the form of the argument without attempting to base any theory on so slender a foundation.

On the whole, therefore, we are probably justified in assuming that Tree Worship did exist among the Celts as among the Germans till their conversion to Christianity; but, on the other hand, there seems to be no sufficient evidence to show that they were worshippers of the serpent, and if the Druids were priests of the Celts, which there seems no reason for denying, there is nothing to connect them with that faith, though no doubt they may not only have tolerated but indulged in local superstitions, as many Christians do at the present day.

At the same time recent researches have brought to light circumstances which would lead us to believe, that there existed in France an earlier pre-Celtic race allied to the Esthonians and Finns. They may have been Serpent Worshippers, but they seem to have been obliterated by the Celts in very early pre-Christian times, and their fossil remains have not yet been examined to a sufficient extent to enable any positive opinion to be formed on the subject.

GREAT BRITAIN.

If we have reason to complain that the French archaeologists have not turned sufficient attention to their pre-historic antiquities, the same reproach cannot certainly be applied to those of this country. From the days of Aubrey and Stukeley to the present day volume after volume has issued from the press, and the transactions of learned societies are full of papers on the subject. Every barrow has been explored, every antiquity measured and described, and it must be added every etymology has been enlisted, and every scrap of evidence gathered together and amplified, till a fabric has been raised of such marvellous magnitude that it is startling to find on what slight foundation it rests, and how soon it would topple over if the breath of reason could only be brought to bear upon it. In the meanwhile, however, every upright stone has become a Druidical remain, and every circle or line of stones an Ophite temple. There was a time, according to our antiquaries, when the Druids ruled absolutely in this land, and when, under their auspices, Serpent Worship was as essentially the religion of the people as Christianity is now. The belief that this is so has become from reiteration so engrained, that modern science will probably have a harder task to extirpate it, than the Romans had to abolish the real Druids, or the early Christian missionaries had to induce the people to forsake the worship of the serpent in countries where it prevailed in reality.

Fortunately the controversy lies in a very narrow compass. There are, I believe, only two very short paragraphs in any classical authors which mention Druids in connexion with Britain, and not one that mentions Serpent Worship, and no English author prior, at all events, to the 13th century alludes to either the one or the other.*

* I make this absolute statement with considerable confidence, not only because no paragraph of the sort has been quoted by any of the advocates of this faith, but because there is a very full and careful index to the "Monumenta Historica Britannica," and the word Druid does not occur in it.