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Tree and serpent worship

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Great Britain

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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.

Of the two classical passages, that in Tacitus applies strictly to the Isle of Mona (Anglesea), and will be referred to hereafter. The other is that in Cæsar's Commentaries,* and is so important that it must be quoted at length, and in its own language. After describing the Institution of the Druids in Gaul, he goes on to say: "Disciplina (Druidum) in Britannia reperta, et inde in Galliam translata esse existimatur, et nunc qui diligentius eam rem cognoscere volunt, plerumque illo discendi causa proficiscuntur." Had this slight allusion not slipped from Cæsar's pen, there would have been absolutely no evidence of the existence of Druids in England; and after all it hangs on the value to be assigned to the word "existimatur," it is thought or believed! Neither Cæsar or any other Roman ever said he saw a Druid in this country; they never mention their temples or sacred places, and no one ever assisted at their rites. Still, with this paragraph before us, and with the knowledge that the majority of the inhabitants were Celts, it cannot be denied but that Druids may have existed in England, but even then their connexion with Serpent Worship rests wholly on that very apocryphal passage in Pliny (vide *ante*), in which he asserts that the Druids used the *anguinum* as a charm.

The other paragraph is more to the point.† In the year 61 A.D., Paulinus Suetonius was called away to suppress a revolt in the Island of Mona. He there met the army of the natives on the shore, and saw that the women and Druidesses were rushing about with dishevelled locks, and torches in their hands, urging the men to the contest.‡ When the rebellion was suppressed, the sacred groves in which their human sacrifices had been performed were cut down, and we are led to infer Druidism suppressed. Tacitus then goes on to narrate with infinitely more detail the far more important revolt of Boadicea, but, strange to say, in that great national uprising there is absolutely no mention of Druids, either in his narrative or in that of Dion Cassius.§ No groves were cut down, no rites abolished, when it was suppressed; and if any legitimate inference can be drawn from such silence, no Druids existed in the more civilized parts of England.

From whatever point of view the subject is looked at, it seems almost impossible to avoid the conclusion that there were two races in England,—an older and less civilized people, who,|| in the time of the Romans, had already been driven by the Celts into the fastnesses of the Welsh hills, and who may have been Serpent Worshipers and sacrificers of human victims, and that the uncritical Romans confounded the two. They seem rather to have dwelt on the picturesqueness of the naked blue-painted savage as a contrast with those races they were familiar with, as a Catlin revels in the manners and virtues of the Red Indian in contrast to the vices and effeminacy of his more civilized oppressor.

Be this as it may, it is principally from Welsh Triads, so-called, and the Welsh bards, that we depend for our knowledge of the Druids and their doings, and Serpent Worship in this country. If we knew when the works of the Welsh bards were

* De Bello Gall. VI. 13.

† Tacitus, Ann. XIV. 29.

‡ If I wanted an illustration of this scene, I do not know where I could find a better than on the walls of the Caves at Ajanta. The original copy of the picture was unfortunately burnt in the fire at the Crystal Palace in 1866; but it is engraved in Mrs. Spier's *Life in India*, p. 302.

§ Dion Cassius in Xiphilinus' Abridgment, LXII. 1 & 4.

|| Norris's *Cornish Drama*, II. 401.

reduced to the form in which we now find them, and if we could depend on the translations we have, some light might no doubt be thrown on our subject.* It is, however, an unfortunate peculiarity of the Celtic mind that when they attempt to elucidate the history of their country from their annals, they adopt a species of logic totally distinct from that followed by the Saxon, so that it becomes impossible to use the information they offer. Still it does not seem reasonable to doubt but that remnants of the Druidical religion, and perhaps also of Serpent Worship, may have lingered in the Welsh hills long after they had disappeared from the plains. Where we do find tradition attaching them to any of the monuments of the plain, it is through Welsh agency and almost within sight of the hills, as at Stanton Drew in Somersetshire,† that the serpent is introduced.

Beyond this, though we do occasionally find traditions of the serpent, they are few and far between, and of uncertain origin; one, for instance, is related by Mathew Paris, of St. Albans.‡ Writing in 1260 (?) he relates that the Saxon Abbot Aldred filled up a great hole which once was the abode of an immense dragon, in a place which was still called the Wurmenhert. This appears to have been surrounded by a circular vallum, which we infer still existed in the 13th century, though no trace of it now remains. The circular enclosure and the crypt may be considered as certain, they so exactly resemble the Irish Rath; but the dragon is, I fear, too far off to be depended upon, though it is one of the most authentic traditions we possess.

If this is so, it may be asked, what is the evidence on which the Druidical origin of such monuments as Stonehenge and Avebury have been assumed? The answer fortunately is simple—absolutely none. It never was pretended that any direct testimony existed, and the negative evidence is perfectly complete. No ancient author, no one, in fact, anterior to the invention of printing, ever refers to any stones or stone temples, circular or in any other form, as connected with the worship of the Druids or the Celts. On the other hand, every tradition that exists, whatever their value may be, points to the Arthurian age as that to which they owe their origin.

If it is further asked, what evidence there is to connect these temples with Serpent Worship, exactly the same answer must be given—not one tittle has yet been adduced. The one direction in which it seems probable some such connexion may be established, is from their similarity to the Indian examples, which it is the object of this volume to describe; but whether these will be sufficient for this purpose can only be decided when the argument is fully elaborated. Meanwhile are we correct in calling them temples at all? The one peculiarity of Celtic worship that seems best established, is the love of trees—their fondness of groves for their sacred rites. Is it probable that they would chose the downs of Wiltshire, especially such a spot as that where Stonehenge stands, for the site of their greatest temple—a spot where no tree ever grew or could grow? That they might erect a tomb or cenotaph among the graves of their forefathers seems probable enough; and if Avebury was a battle

* Skene's translation of the four most ancient Welsh poems, which has just been published, has gone far to set this question at rest. It cannot be said that the word Druid does not occur in them, but if we were not looking for it, it is hardly in such a manner as would attract attention, and the part they play is most insignificant, besides it is by no means clear to what age or authority such references really belong.

† *Archæologia*, XXV. p. 198.

‡ *Vitæ Abbatum*, p. 40.

field, that would account for the locality where it is found, but it seems difficult to suggest a reason for their being where they are on any other hypothesis.

This, however, is not the place to examine the evidence on which the age or purposes of these monuments is to be determined. It is, however, impossible to pass over the subject entirely in silence, as reference will occasionally have to be made to them in the following pages; while unfortunately nine people out of ten in this country at the present day believe that Stonehenge and Avebury were built by the Druids; that they were Dracontia or Serpent Temples; and every one can point out the altar stones on which the human victims were sacrificed, and in fact knows all about their religion and rites, and it may be added believes in their primæval antiquity. Till these erroneous impressions are dispelled, the subject we have in hand can hardly be rendered intelligible.

A far more promising field for the investigation of Serpent Worship in Britain occurs in Scotland, on the east coast, north of the Forth. In that country, now known as Pictland, there exists even at the present day a great number of Megalithic monuments, many of which are covered with sculptures of a class totally distinct from those found anywhere else, and which have hitherto baffled the ingenuity of antiquaries. Among them the serpent appears frequently and so prominently that it is impossible to doubt that he was considered as an object of veneration by those who erected those monuments, while on the other hand Serpent Worship could hardly have originated in the north of Scotland, where the snakes are so few and contemptible. Mr. Stuart* enumerates twenty-three representations of the serpent on these stones, thirteen times accompanied by emblems, ten times without them. In some instances, such as the Newton stone, the serpent is evidently the object for which the stone was set up, and he is accompanied by the broken sceptre, which may either be a hieroglyphic for God or King, or may only mean holy or great, or some such adjective, but it certainly implies distinction, if not consecration.

The age of these sculptured stones is known with tolerable certainty, inasmuch as the greater number of them have either the Cross itself or Christian emblems engraved upon them, and these must therefore be subsequent to the age of St. Columba, who arrived in Scotland apparently in 563, and died in 597. Many of those also which have only Pagan emblems are so nearly identical with the Christian stones that they must be about the same age. Some, however, are ruder and simpler, and the series fades back into the plain unsculptured Menhir, of which many exist in the same district. There seems, indeed, to be no essential break either, so far as design or purpose† is concerned, between the rude unchiselled blocks of Carnac and Avebury

* *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, vol. II. p. lxxiv.

† From his position as Archbishop of Upsala—in one of the last countries in Europe converted to Christianity—and writing in 1555, no one was in a better position to know the truth about these stone monuments than Olaus Magnus, and his testimony is clear and distinct. "Habent hæc saxa in plerisque locis erecta, longitudine x., vel xv., xx., xxx., et amplius, et latitudine iv. vel vi. pedum mirabili situ. Sed mirabiliori ordine ac mirabilissimo charactere ob plurimas rationes collocata sunt. Literato rectoque et longo ordine videlicet pugilorum certamina—quadrato turmas bellantium et spherico familiarum designantia sepulturas. ch. xxix.—Or again, Quos humi recondere placuit honorabiles statuas lapidum excelsorum, prout hodie cernuntur mira compagine immensa saxa, in modum altissimæ latissimæ januæ sursum transversumque viribus gigantum erecta, &c. ch. xxx." There are other passages in the same author bearing directly on the subject, but too long to quote. They, however, all seem to describe so correctly, not only the form, but the uses of such monuments as

and such elaborate Christian obelisks or Swenos stone at Forres, or the group that once surmounted the mound at St. Vigean.*

We shall probably not err far if we regard these traces of Serpent Worship as indicating the presence in the north-east of Scotland of the head of that column of migration, or of propagandism, which, under the myth of Wodenism, we endeavoured in a previous chapter to trace from the Caucasus to Scandinavia. The Edda seems sufficient to prove that a form of Serpent Worship did certainly prevail in the latter country in the early centuries of the Christian era; and nothing seems more probable or more in accordance with Pictish traditions,† than that it should have passed thence into Scotland, and should have left its traces everywhere between the Orkneys and the Firths.‡ There is no evidence, however, of Serpent Worship, in this form at least, having passed south of the Forth. The traces of it that may exist in England or Ireland—if any—most probably belong to an earlier pre-historic people, and may have been introduced by another and more southern route.

AFRICA.

We tread on surer ground, when leaving Serpent Worship in its most attenuated form, and in the uncongenial climate of its furthest extension to the north and west, and turn to Africa, where it always was at home, and where it now flourishes in all its pristine vigour. Serpents are, and always must have been, so numerous and important in Africa, that it is there, if not in Mesopotamia, that we should, *à priori*, expect their worship to flourish, and it is by no means impossible that it was so. We know so little, however, of what happened in Africa in ancient times—except in Egypt—that it is difficult to speak with any confidence on the subject, and the institutions of Egypt were so abnormal and so exclusively their own, that we cannot reason from them to any general conclusions. Perhaps when the subject is carefully looked into, more may be ascertained than is now known, but our present purpose is with the worship as it exists at the present day, or did in recent times.

One of the best known examples of modern Serpent Worship exists in Upper Egypt, at a place called Sheikh Haredi, from a tomb of a Mahomedan saint of that name, which exists on the spot. The account given of the place by Norden,§ who visited it in 1738, with a mere change of names, is an exact counterpart of what might have been found in Pausanias or any ancient author describing the grove of Esculapius,

Avebury and Stonehenge, that in so far as the testimony of this author is concerned, it may be considered as conclusive. Perhaps I may be allowed to add that though I only became aware of the existence of these passages a few months ago, they are entirely in accordance with the conclusions I had long ago arrived at from an examination of the monuments themselves.

* All these will be found described in Stuart's "Sculptured Stones," above referred to, and also in Colonel Forbes Leslie's "Early Races of Scotland." Edin. 1866.

† Skene's *Chronicles of the Picts and Scots*, p. xc. et seq.

‡ There are some traditions in Northumberland, such as that of the Laidley Wurm of Spindleston Heugh; and there was a Wurm hill at Lambton, and at other places in the neighbourhood (Walter White, "Northumberland and the Border," p. 249, et seq.). All this would perfectly accord with the theory that it was the result of a Scandinavian course of immigration which reached these two points on the coast.

§ *Travels in the East*, ii. 40.