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Tree and serpent worship

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Persia

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PART II.—EASTERN ASIA.

PERSIA.

THE Eastern branch of our subject has been even less investigated by European scholars than those divisions noticed in the previous pages. This has arisen partly from a less degree of familiarity with Eastern tradition, but more probably because until the very recent discoveries in Cambodia and at Amravati no very tangible data existed on which any satisfactory conclusions could be based. The subject is now, however, assuming a very different aspect, and before long it may be hoped that great light will be thrown on the Tree and Serpent Worship of the ancient world, from a study of those forms of that faith which we now know existed at one time in India.

With Persia the case is slightly different. We have no material remains of Snake Worship in that country, and very little native history. The Zend-Avesta is the work from which we might hope most, not only from its antiquity, but because of its doctrinal character. It is, however, of very little use for our present purposes, inasmuch as it, like the Vedas, embodies the religious belief only of the Aryan, or as they are called here, the Iranian branch of the Persian people, and it need hardly be repeated here that they are not, and never were, serpent worshippers anywhere. If, indeed, there is one point which comes out more clearly than another in the course of this investigation, it is that Serpent Worship is essentially that of a Turanian, or at least of a non-Aryan people. In the present state of the enquiry it would be too bold a generalization to assert that all Turanian races were Serpent Worshippers; and still less can it be affirmed that all who looked on the Serpent as a God belonged to that family of mankind. It is safe, however, to assume that the whole tendency of the facts hitherto brought to light, lies in that direction; and it seems probable that eventually the worship of the Serpent may become a valuable ethnographic test of the presence of Turanian blood in the veins of any people among whom it is found to prevail.

At the time when the Greeks became acquainted with Persia, the whole country, under the influence of the Achæmenian kings, had been brought to acknowledge Zoroasterism with its elemental Fire Worship as their principal form of faith. This religion in its purity,—if we know it in that state,—was the faith which the Iranians brought with them from their original seats when they separated from the Indian Aryans, and was practically their common faith both in India and in Persia. In the latter country, however, in the time of the Achæmenidæ, it was strangely mixed up with Magism, a religion of much more Semitic, or even, it may be suspected, Turanian form, and the two were at that time so blended, that in the accounts of the Greeks at least it is impossible to separate the one from the other.

At the time when the Greeks first make us practically acquainted with Persia, Tree and Serpent Worship had ceased to be regarded as the religion of any important body in the state, though the probability is that it may have been followed to a considerable extent by large classes of people in that vast empire. As, however,

the Persians despised, and the Greeks did not observe the Ophites, we are left almost entirely at the mercy of the Mahomedan historians and poets of the eleventh and following centuries for such faint glimmerings of truth as can be picked up, and anyone who has ever opened one of their books will know what blind guides they are in such an investigation. It is doubtful whether even the critical skill of European scholars will ever sift a substratum of tangible history out of the fables of Firdausi or Mirkhond. At present the task has hardly been attempted, and when it has, with only a small modicum of success.

By far the most important and most interesting person in ancient Persian history, for our present purposes at least, is Zohák. According to all accounts he came from Arabia, and took his title, Bívar-asp, from his body guard of 10,000 horsemen by whom he was always accompanied.* His genealogy from Tází or Táj, the eponymous of the Arabs, is given both in the Bundehesch and the Mojmil.† His father is represented as a simple possessor of flocks and herds, but he is said to have conquered Central Asia, and to have fixed his residence at Babel.‡ His reign, or rather that of his dynasty, is said to have lasted 1,000 years, when he was overthrown by Feridún, with the assistance of Gavah the blacksmith, by whom the original line of Jemshid was then restored.

Feridún has been identified almost without doubt with Thraëtaona of the Zend-Avesta, celebrated as the slayer of the three-headed Serpent Daháka, who was the creation of the evil power Angra Mainyus,§ or more popularly Ahriman.

Zohák is represented by all the Mahomedan historians as having two snakes growing at his back, one from each shoulder, and they add that it was necessary to appease these monsters by sacrificing daily two young men in order that their cravings might be satisfied with their brains.|| All this has hitherto been mysterious enough, but as we shall presently see, all women of the Nága race had one serpent between their shoulders, and all men—in India—one with three, five, or seven heads; the two of Zohák seem an earlier form, being the exact duplication of those of the females, and it is also probable that the *three* heads of the Zend-Avesta¶ include the human head between the two snakes. We shall be in a better position to judge of this presently, but whatever explanation we adopt, it seems only to be an earlier form of a myth with which we are now becoming familiar in India. The human sacrifices are only what we find so universally accompanying Serpent Worship all the world over.

The most startling novelty with regard to Zohák is the assertion that he came from Arabia, where we have no reason to suppose that Serpent Worship then pre-

* Justi Bundehesch, 1868, Glossary s. v. béwarásp. Handbuch der Zendsprache, 1866, Glossary s. v. Daháka.

† Windischmann, Zoroastrische Studien, pp. 30, 37, c. 39.

‡ Is it possible that this is the Arab dynasty which, according to Berossus, ruled in Babylon in the 13th century B.C.? Rawlinson's Ancient Monarchies, vol. I. p. 193.

§ Windischmann, quoting from the Yaçna, IX. 8, p. 29. See also Westergaard in Weber's Indische Studien, vol. III. p. 416.

|| Mojmil (156); Windischmann, 37; Sháh Náme, Atkinson's translation, p. 14.

¶ Tribus oribus præditum, tribus capitibus. Masaudi, III. p. 252, and the Mahomedans, on the contrary, always speak of "Two Serpents borne on the shoulders of Dahák."

(4799.)

ailed. Perhaps it only means right bank of the lower Euphrates, which to a man writing in Afghanistan, or the north-east of Persia, might be so described; the original seat of the empire being Babylon would bear that interpretation. Moses of Chorene* would try to persuade us that Zohák was identical with Astyages the Mede, but as his assertion seems to rest more on a verbal coincidence than on historical evidence, too much reliance must not be placed upon it. The Serpent dynasty most probably reigned in Media rather than in Persia proper, but they must have been extinct before the time of Cyrus, though all this requires more careful examination than it has yet met with.

One remnant of the race of Zohák seems to have survived in Cabul, and it would be especially interesting to us, if we knew more about it, as it seems the connecting link between the Persian and Indian Serpent Worship. According to the Mojmil, "When Táj, the primogenitor of the Arabs, was settled in Babel, one of his sons married a daughter of Feridún and settled in Cabul, and his son was Rustem's maternal grandfather."† We find further particulars of the family in the Sháh Náme. When Zál the son of Sám went to Cabul he found Mihráb, a descendant of Zohák, on the throne, and having fallen in love with his daughter, Rudabeh, he was forbidden by the Mubids to marry her, because the chief of Cabul was of the family of Zohák, the Serpent King. The father too from this circumstance dreaded the resentment of Manuchehr if he allowed the union, and not without reason, for the king ordered Sám to destroy Kábul by fire and sword, and especially the house of Mihráb, then ruler of the serpent race, and all his adherents were to be put to death.‡ Fortunately for the lovers the difficulty was got over, and the result was the birth of Rustem, the most wonderful hero of Eastern romance. The point of interest to us, however, is, that it is probably to the preservation of this race of Serpent worshippers that we owe that remarkable development of Buddhism, which distinguished the valley of the Cabul river between the decline of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom and the rise of the Mahomedan power in that quarter.

The last material trace of Serpent Worship that is found in Persia occurs in a bas-relief at Nakshi-Rustem, near Persepolis. It represents Ormuzd bestowing the circlet of royalty on Ardishir Babegán the first king of the Sassanian line (A.D. 226). Beneath the feet of the horse on which the god (?) is seated, lies Ardevan, the last of the Parthians, and round his head are twisted two writhing snakes,§ not such as probably adorned the shoulders of Zohák, but still sufficiently important to mark that the sculptor intended to represent the Parthian as of the hated race of Zohák, the follower of the accursed Ahriman, whom Ormuzd tramples under foot while bestowing the emblem of royalty on the Zoroastrian, Fire-Worshipping Sassanian.

The more closely it is looked at the more probable does it appear that not only in this instance, but throughout the whole ancient history of Persia, the so-called dualism is much more an ethnographical expression than the result of any theological

* History of Armenia, Postscript to Book I. "Les descendants d'Astyages établis en Arménie portoient encore le nom de Vischabazouni, ce qui signifie Race de dragon. Cette dénomination leur venait du nom du roi des Mèdes."—St. Martin, I. 285.

† Windischmann, 37.

‡ Atkinson's translation of Shah Nameh, p. 77 et seq.

§ Ker Porter, vol. I. plate xxiii. ; Flandin et Coste, Voyage en Perse, plate clxxxiii.

elaboration. It was the opposition of Turan to Iran, of Zohak to Zoroaster, of Ormuzd to Ahriman—an Aryan race, with their pure elemental worship, intruding into a country occupied by a serpent-worshipping people of Turanian origin, but instead of totally abolishing and ignoring the religion of the conquered, forcing it into an unnatural combination with their own. All this, however, was carried out in such a manner as to represent their own, as the source of all that is good and elevated, and that of the subject race as the origin of all that is evil and accursed.

The answer to the question whether Tree Worship did or did not prevail in Ancient Persia will mainly depend on the signification scholars may eventually agree to assign to the Homa or Soma worship, which forms so important a ceremonial observance both in the Vedas and the Zend-Avesta. If the Soma plant always was the *Asclepias acida* or *Sarcostema viminalis*, which is now used by the Brahmans for that purpose, it cannot be called Tree Worship in the sense in which the term is used throughout this essay. The *Asclepias* is a creeping shrub, almost without leaves, and only remarkable for a milky juice, to which the most important virtues are ascribed. It is now used as freshly expressed,* but in former times was fermented so as to produce intoxication.

On the other hand, Windischmann, who had probably rendered himself more familiar with the spirit of the Zend-Avesta than any other scholar, thus expresses himself on the subject. "Homa is the first of the trees planted by Ahura-Mazda in the fountain of life. He who drinks of its juice never dies. According to the Bundehesh, the Gogard or Gaokerena tree bears the Homa, which gives health and generative power, and imparts life at the resurrection. The Homa plant does not decay, bears no fruit, resembles the vine, is knotty, and has leaves like jessamin, yellow and white."†

In another place he says, "From this it appears that the White Homa or the Tree Gokard is the Tree of Life which grew in Paradise."

In Persian mythology the Homa was also personified as a god, and converses with Ahura-Mazda with regard to the origin of all things, as if he were co-equal in knowledge with the great god of the Persians himself. Whatever form, however, it may have taken, our author adds, the Soma was unquestionably the greatest and holiest offering of ancient Indian or Iranian worship.‡

It would require a much more intimate knowledge of the subject than can be obtained from such translations as have been made, or such books as have been published, to speak at all definitely regarding the Homa. From such data as are available it would appear that the Homa had its origin in the same myth as the Trees of Life and Knowledge which grew in Paradise, and that it passed through a stage of Bacchic mystery, though whether the vine or some other plant was then the Homa is by no means clear; and at last it sank into the present innocent Soma form, which, however, can hardly be regarded as anything but a reminiscence of its former greatness and importance.

* Haug Essays, p. 247 ff. Wilson, Introduction to the Rig-Veda-Samhitā, vol. I. p. xxxvi. et seq.
† Ueber den Somacultus der Arier. p. 131.

‡ Windischmann, Zoroastrische Studien, pp. 89, 167, 251.

We shall have frequent occasion to speak of the Bodhidruma or Tree of Knowledge of the Buddhists, in the sequel. It is the principal object of worship at Sanchi, and among the most important at Amravati. It will only be possible to ascertain what connexion may have existed between it and the Gaokerena of the Persians, or the Homa, when some competent scholar, familiar with both Zend and Sanskrit, looks through the original authorities with special reference to this inquiry.

Though sufficiently absurd, the following legend from the Sháh Náme is curious. Sikander, after the conquest of India, went to Mekka, and thence to a country where there were two trees, one male, one female. The first spoke during the day, the latter at night. Whoever had a wish went there to have his desires accomplished. Sikander longed for length of days. When he came under the tree a horrible sound arose and rung in his ears; and on his asking what it meant, the attendant priest replied that fourteen years of his life still remained. Again he asked, "Shall I see Rúm and my mother and children before I die?" The answer was, "Thou wilt die at Karshán."*

The oldest known authority for this legend is the Pseudo-Kallisthenes, who wrote apparently about the year 200 A.D.† As he relates it, there were two trees, one of the Sun, which spoke in the Indian language, and one of the Moon which spoke Greek.‡ In the Mediæval fables, the "leafless tree" was introduced between these two. This tree is mentioned by Marco Polo,§ and under the name of the "Arbre Sec" was one of the favourite myths of the Byzantine and of early Christian travellers, though it is even now by no means clear where it grew (my impression is that it was in Scistan, though others place it in Khorassan), nor what exact meaning the Mediævalists attached to the fable.

Unfortunately the classical authors afford us little or no assistance in regard to Tree Worship in the countries westward of India, except the incidental remark of Quintus Curtius, in speaking of the inhabitants on the banks of the Indus, "Arbores maxime colunt,"|| there is no passage bearing, so far as I know, directly on the subject.

The Chinese travellers are hardly more communicative; but Hiouen-Tsang does mention a great Pipal tree of Peshawar,¶ under whose shade the four preceding Buddhas had reposed, and under it the last had predicted the appearance of the great Kaniskha, who in consequence had erected alongside of it, about the Christian era, the largest and tallest of all the Stupas of which we have any record. This tree seems to have existed and been revered down to the time of Baber (in 1504), who mentions it as the great tree of Bekram.** The Gûrh Katri he describes as close to it was probably the remains of the Monastery of Kaniskha. Even its site cannot now be ascertained.

CASHMERE.

Although from its position on the map, Cashmere might fairly be considered as an integral part of India, still its circlet of mountains has been sufficient to keep it distinct and separate, and we consequently find there vestiges of the old faith better

* Atkinson, Translation, p. 507.

† Zacher, Pseudo-Kallisthenes. Halle, 1867, p. 102.

‡ Loc. p. 161.

§ Marsden, p. 109.

|| Hist. Alex. VIII. 9.

¶ Histoire de la Vie de Hiouen Tsang, I. p. 83.

** Leyden's translation of Memoirs of Baber, 157, 264.