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## **Tree and serpent worship**

**Fergusson, James**

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Cashmere

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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.



preserved than in most places on the plains. Another circumstance which has tended also in the same direction is that the Aryans on entering India do not seem to have turned aside to conquer or at least permanently to occupy the valley. If they entered India by crossing the Indus at or near Attock,—and there seems no good reason for doubting that this was so,—this seems so strange that we feel almost inclined to believe that Cashmere was really then in the state described in the earliest legends, a great lake, or at least a valley so filled with water and so swampy as to be unfit for human habitation. Though this may not be quite true we are no doubt justified in assuming that 4,000 or 5,000 years ago a much larger portion of the valley was under water than is the case now, and the real snakes may then have been relatively more important than their Naga successors afterwards became.

Be this as it may, Cashmere has always been considered, in historical times, as one of the principal centres of Serpent Worship in India, and hitherto it has been principally from her legends that what little was known of the Nagas has been gathered.

Cashmere is also fortunate in possessing in the Râja Taranginî something more like a connected history than almost any other country of India, and from its pages, with the incidental notices by classical, Chinese, and Mahomedan authors, we are enabled to form a tolerably distinct view of the subject.

Although from the context there is a strong presumption that Snake Worship prevailed in the valley from a very early period, still we have no direct testimony to the fact till the century before the Christian era, when the King Dâmodara having, it is said, offended some Brahman was converted into a snake,\* and still, it is said, haunts the spot. He was succeeded by three Tartar princes, known from history and from their coins to have been Buddhists, and to have reigned about the Christian era. In the reign of their successor Abhimanyu we are told that “in consequence of the disuse of the prescribed institutes, and the abolition of every form of sacrifice, and a departure from the lessons of the Nîla Purâna, the Nagas were particularly incensed, and visited the offences of the people with severe and unseasonable storms of rain and snow, and those especially perished who had adopted the Bauddha heresy.”† Gonerda III., who succeeded this king, prosecuted the reform which that prince had commenced.

The ancient ritual, according to the Nîla precepts,‡ was restored, and the worship of the Nagas and the offering of sacrifices re-established.§ During the following centuries we have several legends of Nagas, but the faith of the kings is seldom mentioned, and seems to have oscillated between Snake Worship, Buddhism, and Hinduism, but as our historian belonged to the latter faith his testimony is not always quite to be depended upon. When Hiouen Tshang entered the valley in 632,

\* Wilson's Abstract of the Râja Taranginî in Vol. XV. Asiatic Researches, p. 22. All the future references to this work are derived from the same source, which seems better and more trustworthy than the translation by Troyer. The volume and the page will, therefore, only be quoted.

† A. S. XV. p. 24.

‡ A. S. XV. p. 25.

§ The Nîla Purâna has not hitherto been seen by any European, but I trust to being able to add an abstract of its contents in an Appendix to this work. At my request Mr. J. Muir, the well-known Sanscrit scholar, wrote out to Sir D. Macleod, the Chief Commissioner in the Punjab, and he procured two copies from Cashmere, which are now in the hands of Professor Cowell, who has kindly undertaken to make the required analysis.



in the reign of Báláditya the last king of the Gonerdiya race, he found the Buddhist religion still very prevalent in the valley, though he admits that the king only interested himself in the heretics and in the temples of their gods, and despised the faith of Buddha.\* He repeats the usual story of the valley having been a lake, but adds, "50 years after the Nirvāna (B.C. 493?) a disciple of Ānanda converted the Naga "Raja, he quitted his tank, built 500 monasteries, and invited sages and saints to "come and dwell in them."†

It is not, however, only in the valley that our Chinese traveller repeats the Hindu legends about serpents and their power, but at every stage of his journey from Cabul to Cashmere, he everywhere finds some spot where a dragon king or Naga Raja resided, and played an important part in the legendary history of the land. These legends, as might be expected, were found in the seventh century very much altered from their more primitive forms, but they are interesting, in the first place, as showing how essentially the north-west corner of India was at one time the seat of Serpent Worship, and also, in what manner it was eventually—except perhaps in Cashmere—amalgamated with Buddhism.

Among these legends one of the most pertinent to our present purpose is that of a member of the family of Śākya—that of Buddha—who when travelling in Udayana—the Kamboja of the Hindus, lying northward from Peshawar—fell in love with a serpent king's daughter. He was eventually married to her, and by the advice and with the assistance of his father-in-law, killed the king of the country and obtained the sovereignty. Though his wife had obtained and was confirmed in the possession of a human body, a nine-headed snake occasionally appeared at the back of her neck, which on a certain occasion her husband cut off at a single blow while she was asleep. The result was blindness, of which she was afterwards cured by Śākya-muni himself, and her son Uttarasena was present at the distribution of his relics at Kuśinagara, where the great ascetic obtained Nirvāna.‡

An almost equally curious legend is told of a Buddhist priest (Bhikshu) who became a serpent, because he had killed the tree Elápatra, and resided in a beautiful lake or spring near Takshaśilā (Taxila). In our traveller's day when the people of the country wanted fine weather or rain, they went to the spring accompanied by a priest (Śramaṇa) "and snapping their fingers, invoke the dragon, and immediately "obtain their wishes."§ In these legends the chief characteristic of the Serpents throughout the East in all ages seems to have been their power over the wind and rain, which they exert for either good or evil as their disposition prompts.||

A curious confirmation of the prevalence of Nagas in the north-west of India is obtained from the Buddhist account of the proceedings consequent on the Third

\* Hiouen-Thsang, II. 180. † Voyage de Hiouen-Thsang, I. 168. ‡ Hiouen-Thsang, II. 141.

§ Hiouen-Thsang, II. 152. General Cunningham visited this spring at Hassan Abdul in 1863, and found it still revered. Other legends are told at pp. 49, 99, 133, &c.

|| This power over the weather, which is one of the leading characteristics of Nagas, has led to their being confounded with the Vedic Ahi. In their origin and purpose I believe the two to have been perfectly distinct, but in the process of time the one legend borrowed from the other till the two have become so mixed up together that it will now be extremely difficult to separate them again. My own impression is that the Vedic myth is an adaptation of a local superstition; borrowed in fact from the serpent-worshipping aborigines among whom the Aryans were settled.



Convocation held B.C. 253. Missionaries were then sent to all the neighbouring countries. Among others Majjhantiko was dispatched to Kashmîra and Gandhâra.\* A Naga king of that country, named Aravâlo, endowed with supernatural powers, by causing a furious deluge to descend was submerging all the ripened crops in Kashmîra and Gandhâra. The Nagas and their king tried every means to terrify the missionary, but were subdued by his calmness and address; "whereupon the Théro propounded his doctrines, and the Naga king attained the salvation and state of piety in that faith." In like manner "in the Himawanta (Himalaya) regions, 84,000 Nagas were converted, and the Naga king placing the Théro on a gem-set throne respectfully stood by fanning him. On that day the inhabitants of Kashmîra and Gandhâra, who had come with offerings to appease the wrath of the Naga king, bowing down to the Théro (instead of the Naga king) stood reverentially by his side," &c. These extracts from the Mahawanso,† depict faithfully the Buddhist belief on the subject two centuries before Hiouen-Tsang's time, though not from personal observation. The account is further interesting, because these in the north-west were the only Nagas to whom missionaries were sent by Aśoka. Either it was that the others had been converted before, or that Cashmere and the mountain countries east and west of it, were the most prominent seats of the faith.

These accounts by native authorities are fully confirmed by such scanty notices as we glean from classical authorities; Onesicritus tells us that two ambassadors sent to the king of Cashmere by Alexander, brought back news that the king of the country cherished two large serpents of fabulous dimensions.‡ Maximinius of Tyre tells us, that when Alexander entered India, Taxilus (King of Taxila) showed him a serpent of enormous size which he nourished with great care and revered as the image of the god whom the Greek writers, from the similitude of his attributes, called Dionysus or Bacchus.§

The latest authority we have, is that of Abulfazl, who tells us that in the reign of Akbar (1556—1605) there were in Cashmere 45 places dedicated to the worship of Siva, 64 to Vishnu, 3 to Brahmâ, and 22 to Durgâ, but there were 700 places in the valley where there were carved images of snakes which the inhabitants worshipped.||

All this is fully confirmed by the architecture of the valley; with very few exceptions, all the ancient temples of Cashmere seem to have been devoted to Serpent Worship. They stand in square courts which were capable of being flooded and were crossed by light bridges of stone, some of which still remain. Even at the present day some of these temples are unapproachable without wading, in consequence of the water which surrounds them, and all might be rendered so by a slight repair to their waterworks. There are, of course, no images in the sanctuaries which long prevented antiquaries from perceiving the form of faith to which they were dedicated. But where the deity is a living god and mortal, when he and his worshippers pay the debt of nature, they leave no material trace to recall the memory of their past existence.

\* In this wide sense Gandhâra seems to include all the countries westward of the Indus as far as Candabar. Relics of this missionary, as we shall presently see, were deposited in No. 3 Tope at Sanchi.

† Turnour, Translation, p. 72 and 73.

‡ Strabo, XV. 698.

§ Maxim. Tyr. Diss. XIII. ed. Lip. 140.

|| Ayeen Akbaree, Gladwin's Translation, p. 137.