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Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

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Cambodia

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CAMBODIA.

There is another country on the other side of the Bay of Bengal the study of whose antiquities is nearly as important to the elucidation of Serpent Worship in India, as those of Cashmere, though in a totally different sense. In the last-named country we look for the "incunabula" of the faith, in Cambodia for its fullest known development. The ruined cities of Cambodia have, however, been only so recently discovered, and are yet so little known, that it is extremely difficult to feel sure on many points connected with their history or purposes.* Whatever doubt may, however, exist on other points, it seems certain that the great Temple of Nakhon Vat was wholly dedicated to Serpent Worship. Every angle of every roof is adorned with a grim seven-headed serpent, with a magnificent crest of what is apparently intended for feathers, and every cornice of every entablature is adorned with a continuous row of these seven-headed deities, but without crests. The former may be counted by hundreds, the latter by thousands. But it is not only these; every balustrade, every ridge, almost every feature of the building bears the same impress. The arrangements too of the temple are such as are suitable for Serpent Worship, and that only. There is no image in the sanctuary, and no worship represented in the bas-reliefs. All the courts are tanks to contain water, and everything recalls the temples of Cashmere, but with ten-fold magnificence. Neither in India, nor so far as is known is there any other temple, displaying the same amount of patient labour devoted to the elaboration of appropriate ornament over so extended a surface as in this newly-discovered temple. It is 600 feet square at base, and rises to a height of 180 feet in the centre, while every part is covered with carvings in stone, generally beautiful in design, and always admirably adapted to their situation, and to tell the story they were meant to convey. The startling thing to us is, that simultaneously with the erection of the great cathedrals of York, Amiens, or Cologne, a larger and more magnificent temple than either of them was being erected in another part of the globe, in a style and dedicated to a religion of which the western builders knew nothing. What seems equally strange is that all memory of the people, and all knowledge of their buildings, should have so completely passed away that till within the last ten years no one in Europe suspected their existence.

We shall not know whether the other temples in the city of Nakhon Thom are equally dedicated to Serpent Worship till some one visits them who has some previous knowledge of the subject. They are so completely overgrown with jungle that photography will hardly help us in this instance. They were more extensive, and seem to have been as elaborately ornamented as the one temple of which we

* The temples were first discovered by M. Mouhot, a French naturalist, in 1858-60, but he did not pretend to any knowledge of their history. They were afterwards visited by Dr. Bastian, who has written voluminously regarding them, but either it is that he knows nothing about them, or for some reason he is afraid to commit himself to any statements regarding them. The greatest amount of information has been obtained from the photographs of Mr. J. Thomson, and his personal communications. From these sources a tolerably connected account is condensed in my *History of Architecture* (II. p. 713, et seq.), to which the reader is referred. Since it was published, Messrs. Edmiston and Douglas, of Edinburgh, have published a selection of Mr. Thomson's photographs, with explanatory text taken principally, with my consent and collaboration, from my work above referred to.

have some knowledge, but they seem rather to have been dedicated to some bastard form of Buddhism than to the worship of the Serpent in the form in which it is found at Nakhon Vat.

The question that principally interests us at this stage, is to ascertain how this marvellous development of Serpent Worship arose in Cambodia, and at what time.

The first impulse would be to assume that it was indigenous, but this certainly does not seem to be the case. The architecture of the temple is, if anything, classical—Roman Doric. The ornaments—bassi-relievi—are all subjects borrowed from the Rāmāyana or Mahābhārata, and fade gradually into the myths of the Hindu religion. The people are Indian. The natives, wherever they appear, are represented as an abject race, and are very cruelly treated by the superior race who were the builders of the temple, and the carvers of the bas-reliefs.

Another theory, which at first sight seemed plausible, was that the worship had reached Cambodia from the north. We know from Hiouen-Thsang that Serpent Worship was to be found in Koutche in the north of Thibet,* we know that the Strī Rājya, or Amazon kingdom, was in Thibet,† and we have so many traces of Serpent Worship all along the north of the Himalaya, Hindu Kush, and Caucasus, that it looks like a Scythian or northern form of faith, and may have leaked through the mountain ranges into both Cashmere and Cambodia, radiating from a common northern centre.

When more closely looked into, this theory seems as untenable as the last. The communication between Thibet and Cambodia is barred by ranges of mountains, which have hitherto proved practically impassable either as trade routes or for military operations. The southern country could only be reached through China, and Serpent Worship could hardly have passed through that country without leaving more traces of its passage, or bringing with it more evidences of Chinese civilization, than appears to be the case. We know so little, however, of the local superstitions of China that we must pause before expressing any decided opinion on this subject.

The only remaining hypothesis that suggests itself is that they came from India direct by sea. When we turn to their own traditions for any confirmation of this, the answer is distinct, "Our ancestors came from Myang Rom, or Romavisei, not far from Takçasila" (Taxila).‡ Startling as this may at first sight appear, there are many circumstances which not only take away from its strangeness, but seem to render it probable. In the first place Taxila, as just pointed out, was one of the great centres of Serpent Worship. The country they claim to have migrated from is, by the ancient Sanskrit authorities, called Kamboja.§ Their capital they call Inthapattapuri (Indraprastha), and that of Siam was Ayuthia (Ayodhyā), the two capitals of the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana, and almost all the other principal towns throughout the country bear Sanskrit names. If Halifax, Boston, and New York, are evidence of an English people having settled in America, the names of the Cambodian cities are equally conclusive in this respect.

* Mémoires, I. 4.

† Asiatic Researches, XV. 48.

‡ Bastian, Völker des Östlichen Asien, I. p. 393.

(4799.)

§ Wilford, A.R., VI. 516., VIII. 336; Muir, orig. Sanscrit Texts, II. 368. ff. &c.

Another argument which seems as important as any other, is the similarity of the style of architecture in the two countries. This is not only traceable in the arrangement of their temples, but in the details. The Cashmere pillars are curiously like those of the Grecian Doric order,* those of Cambodia are even more classical, but resemble Roman Doric. Nothing similar to either has yet been discovered between the two points, but there is an amount of classical influence apparent in the sculpture at Amravati which seems to supply a connecting link.

The improbability of such a migration is considerably lessened by the knowledge that an Indian colony did reach Java, by sea of course; did introduce there their own faith, and built those wonderful temples of Brambanan and Borobuddor, which in many respects resemble, though they do not rival, those of Cambodia. All this has been rendered more probable within the last year by the discovery of Serpent Worship existing to the extent it does at Amravati, near the mouth of the Kistnah, the very country whence navigators set sail who were about to cross the bay of Bengal going to the Gold Coast,† which we may almost certainly fix at Ligor, and this seems to point out the route which the Cambodians took on their migration.‡

Every day since my attention was turned to the sculptures at Amravati, fresh evidence of the prevalence of Serpent Worship in Central India has come to light, and it seems now tolerably clear, either that serpent races passed down the valley of the Indus, across Central India by the valley of the Godavery, and thence by sea to Cambodia; or that they passed from Tashsaílâ direct by land to Amravati, and thence to the Golden Chersonese. If a straight line is drawn on the map between these two first-named places it passes over Sanchi and other spots where Snake Worship once prevailed, and on the whole this route seems to be the one the emigrants would most probably have taken; but we are only yet on the threshold of the inquiry, and must wait for further information before deciding.

The time when this migration took place is not so easily fixed, but it appears to have first commenced in the fourth century, (after 318,) to have been continued in the fifth and sixth, and probably reached its height in the era of the religious disturbances and persecutions in India in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Cambodia was conquered by the Siamese between the years 1351-74, the capital destroyed, and depopulation set in. From that time Serpent Worship seems to have declined rapidly from its position of splendour and supremacy, and to have been succeeded by Buddhism, which is now the faith of all the civilized Indo-Chinese provinces.

The Cambodian legends which refer to the colonization of the country and the building of the city of Inthapattapuri, are all extremely similar to those related by Hiouen-Thsang, when speaking of the country whence they came, as noticed above. In all the dragon king's daughter is the principal personage, and from her the royal race claim to be descended. In the Cambodian legend it is related that the banished prince, Phra Thong, was driven, after a long sea voyage, on an island where grew a wonderful Talok tree, "Grewia inæqualis." He ascends its branches to look about him, but the tree grows faster than the celebrated beanstalk of Jack, and he

* Essay on the Arian order of Architecture as exhibited in the Temples of Kashmir, by Captain A. Cunningham, J.A.S.B., September 1848.

† Ptolemy, VII. 1.

‡ Jour. Asiat. Soc. Beng. XVII. 86.

fears he shall never see his mother earth again. In descending, however, he finds himself in a wonderful grotto in the hollow of the tree, where he meets with the dragon king's daughter, and marries her. The father consents to their union, and builds the city of Nakhon Thom for their residence, where he comes frequently to visit his beloved daughter; but the people complain of his presence, and his ungrateful children frighten him away by placing an image of the four-faced Brahma over the gate of the city.*

Another form of the legend is, that king Pathumma Surivong, while reposing under the wonderful tree, saw the dragon king's daughter bathing with her companions in a neighbouring lake, fell in love and married her, and went to the underground abode of his father-in-law, where he spent a fortnight. According to this legend he behaved much better to the old Serpent than Prince Phra Thong.

According to a third form, Indra had come down from heaven, but had neglected to bring any female attendants with him; feeling the loneliness of his situation, took up with the dragon king's daughter, who bore to him Ketumalea, the father of Pathumma Surivong, who seems really to have been the founder of the city.†

We have a date twice repeated, 957-8 A.D., for the accession of the last-named king, and if the names above quoted were really or closely connected with one another, as the legends would lead us to suppose, the migration and all the subsequent events down to the founding of the city really took place in the tenth century. If we were to draw our conclusions from the legends alone, this view must probably be adopted; but the context, and the indications from Indian experience, incline me to extend the time between the first migration and the building of the city to four or five centuries; but it is at present little more than guess work, in so far as the earlier dates are concerned. The circumstance that interests us most is the important part played in these legends by Nang Nakh, the Serpent King's daughter, and the description of her father and his kingdom. Foolish and legendary as all this may appear at first sight, it assumes considerable importance when we find it resulting in some of the most wonderful temples which the world ever saw, and in the most remarkable development of pure Serpent Worship anywhere to be found.

CHINA.

It is extremely difficult to ascertain anything that is at all satisfactory regarding the worship of the Serpent in China. No scholar, so far as I know, has investigated the subject, nor has any traveller devoted special attention to such indications of it as may exist in the country. We are consequently left to such stray passages as are scattered here and there in the various authors who treat of Chinese subjects, and

* The Serpent King was, it appears, a Sabbatharian, at least he devoted every seventh day to prayer. Bastian, I. 397. See also Trans. R.A.S., vol. II. p. 94, where Col. Low reports, "Every seventh day the mighty "Raja Naga issues forth from his palace, and having ascended a high mountain, pours forth his soul in ardent "devotion."

† All these legends are taken from Bastian's *Völker des Östlichen Asien*, pages 393 to 439. They are so mixed up together and with extraneous matter that it is impossible to quote separate pages, even if it were worth while.