

The Cult of the Snake

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THOSE interested in Roman coins must have noticed the prominence given to the serpent in certain issues which portray the goddesses Hygæia, Salus, etc. The fossil ammonites frequently found in the excavations of Roman towns, of which there were specimens outside the Herts County Museum and at an ancient roadside fountain near Wimereux (France), are associated with an ancient cult found all over the world which was adopted by the Romans. In some places this cult or worship, or what might be more properly termed "the propitiation" of the "serpent demoness" or "goddess of fertility," is indicated by interlaced snakes of which specimens are carved on the hog-backed stones at Dinsdale, Gosforth, and at Susa (Tripoli), etc. The Moslems adopted the Biblical story of the "fall of man" but used the words Satan and Eblis (calumniator). The application of the serpent to the story by Moslems is regarded as of Christian origin. In certain parts of Africa the belief in a demon snake remains with peoples who can have had no knowledge of the Bible, Talmud or Qoran. It is the practice to propitiate the snake demoness by means of offerings of milk, eggs or small animals which in some cases are actually taken away by living reptiles. The development of the interlaced snakes into the Christian interlaced cruciform is a matter of controversy.

Residence abroad in contact with illiterate and primitive people causes one to be sceptical of many of the theories advanced by the earlier school of anthropologists who have applied the "Golden Bough" to everything which they have seen on their travels irrespective of the history of the people to whom it is applied. It is not my intention to discuss the effect of the development of the nervous system in man with respect to the growth and influence of religion. To defend the scepticism which I share with many others one illustration will suffice. The geological evidence shows that about 5000 B.C. in consequence of the forest

increase, primitive man was hard pressed for food in certain regions. The domestication of animals (including the now wild South African eland and an extinct species of Egyptian sheep) was not, however, attributed by anthropologists to a precautionary measure to ensure his food supply, but to the reservation of animals from his food supply for sacrificial purposes to some unknown deity. The development of agriculture was subsequent to the domestication of animals and is considered to be the result of man observing that the animals ate grass and seeds and that he was obliged to do the same to maintain life. In view of the evidences of cannibalism in pre-historic settlements I do not accept the sacrificial theory, as I have not yet heard of any primitive man who would make any sacrifice of food or water to the detriment of himself. I therefore beg to submit my personal experience of snakes in the Sudan as a rational explanation of the origin of the "Serpent Cult" which is so frequently alluded to and illustrated in the published accounts of archæological excavations in various parts of the world.

When I first went to Port Sudan in 1905 after five years' residence in Egypt the site of the future port was a barren coral desert and there were neither scorpions, snakes nor mosquitoes. We lived in tents which were replaced by wooden bungalows built on cement blocks about four feet from the ground and open underneath. There was a limited supply of fresh water and the sanitary arrangements were of a primitive character. The water supply at Suakim was, however, maintained by means of an earthen dam which held up the flood water from rainstorms and filled wells sunk inside the barrier. This is the ancient method by which water was conserved in Arabia since about 800 B.C.

After the stone houses had been built we had water laid on to a tap outside the house on the ground level and the heat of the sun was so great on the exposed pipes that we never required to heat the water for our morning and evening baths. We commenced to grow hedges which were irrigated by waste kitchen and bath water, which was led to the shrubs by means of condemned boiler tubes, gutters or old pipes. Snakes then appeared although they had been previously unknown

to us on the saline coral littoral. Some came into the servants' quarter after scraps of food. One was tracked with considerable patience by my Somali servant and killed. It was of a particularly venomous character and my servant spent hour after hour watching for the female mate for two or three days whilst my daughter was not allowed to go below the upper verandah. The female was found and killed. She had secreted herself in a hole near a leaky pipe and when she missed her mate she came out to search for him.

From the information given to me by my native servants (Moslem and Christian) it would appear that snakes require water when forming their eggs and usually haunt some constant water supply at that period. The water in the native wells was much too low for a snake to reach and then get out of the well. Those who have kept fowls during this recent drought know how important a water supply has been in order to maintain the production of eggs. It seems to me that in this necessity by the snake for water we have a perfectly natural explanation of many aspects of the serpent cult such as malignity, calumny (the hissing), fertility, etc. I cannot explain the significance of the serpent in regard to health except by the brazen serpent episode of the Bible.

Once a python or venomous snake has established itself near a constant water supply used by man it constitutes a danger to life and it is obvious that something must be done. It must not be overlooked that with the exception of rivers, the only water supply primitive man had were lakes or natural springs. Desert watering places are frequently miles apart and the hills in which venomous snakes were found were ten miles from my house.

It was dangerous for naked men to attack or try to dislodge these large reptiles, so cunning was resorted to. Eggs, chickens or animals were placed in the reptile's trails so that it might obtain satiety by devouring them. During the process of digestion after swallowing its prey the serpent is somnolent and gorged. It does not attack unless touched or disturbed and with care it is possible to approach a water supply. So the process of making offerings to the snake (and crocodile) com-

menced and went on until in the course of time man's imagination developed and the reptiles began to assume the various stages of totemism, and deification until they were represented by symbols such as the spirals on stones seen in Ireland (whence tradition says St. Patrick evicted the snakes) and other parts of the world. The idol stage was later and the ammonite was probably a rude form of idol.

These views receive some support if we carefully examine the bushmen's paintings and compare them with the reputed pre-historic paintings of Spain or the rock drawings of men disguised in animals' skins. At the present time the bushmen of South Africa and the aborigines of Australia use animal disguises, or carry trees (when procurable) as the Japanese did in the Russian war, to conceal their movements and purpose when stalking game.

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