

New York Medical Journal

and

Medical Record

Philadelphia Medical Journal ^{and the} Medical News

A Semimonthly Review of Medicine and Surgery, Established 1843.

VOL. CXVI, No. 4

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 16, 1922

WHOLE No. 2239

Serpent Worship and the Dawn of Medicine

By JONATHAN WRIGHT, M.D.,

Pleasantville, N. Y.

As we look upon our medical book plates we see in many of them, stamped on the title page, the device of Æsculapius, whose connection with the serpent was so close he was received into the Roman religion in the form of a living snake (1). Our

minds, if historically informed, travel back through the snakes in the temple of Epidaurus and those climbing Aaron's rod to the plumed serpent of the Mesopotamian civilization and of the Central American civilization. There before our eyes, in numerous illustrations, as well as in others where the snake peers out from behind the statue of Æsculapius, there we see the vestige of primitive medicine which was so intimately connected with primitive religion, a time when the priest and the doctor were one. It is a remarkable record which we find in the study of primitive man in his relation to the serpent. It has crept into the book of Genesis, and it is so voluminous that we can here only touch on the high points in the relief as we pass across the record to the dawn of historical medicine. Even so, we soon realize

that the serpent is one of the features in the wild man's environment which sharply reminds us how different it was from our own. So important

an element was it and still is in tropical countries that there we find the snake raised to the most important place in the cult of primitive religions. As in those latitudes especially the venomous snake most abounds we cannot avoid the conviction that

out of the hated and horrid power of poison in its bite grew the instinctive repulsion man feels for it, but out of it also, the fear rising into reverence in the children of nature, sprang to a large extent snake worship as a cult in so many and so widely separated regions of the globe. According to Lubbock (2) serpent worship prevails or has prevailed in Egypt, India, Phœnicia, Babylonia, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Persia, Cashmere, Cambodia, Thibet, China, Ceylon and among most of the tribes of Africa and very extensively among those of America, and in the Islands of the Pacific. It has penetrated as far north as the Kalmucks of Siberia.

Prevailing so universally there are some who have regarded it as the primitive religion of man, but that is a narrow conception of the origin of it, and comprehensive

as are the manifestations of the phenomena, entirely inadequate. However, it is saving the cobra from extinction or from attempts to ex-



FIG. 1.—Faience figure of snake goddess.

terminate it today in India, where the deaths from the bite are appalling in some districts. In Ceylon they say (7) the cobra is the good snake. That vast numbers of people die each year from its bite makes no difference. "The great god Brahm put his mark upon all our people, when the first cobra spread his hood to keep the sun off Brahm as he slept. Look and be afraid," spake the snake in Kipling's tale of "Rikki-tikki-tavi." It takes refuge thus beneath the shield of superstition as did, according to Virgil (3) the serpents which killed Laocoon and his sons "*sub pedibusque deæ clipeique sub orbe teguntur*" (12). The maleficent power it carried in its fangs often sinks entirely from view and in the Cretan Snake Goddess we shall find it the symbol of life and power just as it was rising to that position in the civilization of the central Americans and the Mexicans (4) when Columbus discovered America. Its venom could hardly have impressed the Kalmucks or the Druids. The idea of resurrection after death has played an important part in almost all religions and among the Druids the snake was regarded "as a symbol of the renovation of mankind, one of the doctrines set forth in their mysteries. It is known that the snake casts its skin annually and returns to a kind of second youth. Fine specimens of this reptile were kept by the Druids close under the altar of augury and from their motions important divinations and legal decisions were made. Below the breastplate of judgment the Druids wore, suspended by a chain, the Glain Neidr, or snake stone" (5). In Wales, Miss Trevelyan found a story that could have been taken from the legends of the snakes of Æsculapius. A snake was seen gliding through the grass of an orchard, with leaves in its mouth, which it was chewing and it was seen to apply them to a child lying there sick of the scurvy. Baden Powell (6) tries to trace the origin of Hindu snake worshippers: "We know there was an ancient serpent (and sun) worshipping race in Kashmir; that the people of Taxilla in Alexander's time, were snake worshippers and certainly not Aryans," but the same may be said of the Central Americans. A character so world wide, so lost to us in the earliest traces we have of man on this earth, it is useless to attempt to trace to any one centre of primitive life.

According to Andrew Lang, among the tribes of Central Australia, Daramulum, one of their deities, was the author of disease as he was the possessor of medical skill. "He appears in the form of a serpent at their assemblies, like Æsculapius and the

American Hobamok" (8). Among the African Zulus a certain species of serpent contains the spirits of their ancestors (1) and Æneas suspected the ghost of his father, when he did sacrifice to his manes, in the serpent when it glided among the bowls and the cups at the feast and drank from them and when it took refuge in the tomb he was "*incertus, geniumne loci famulumne esse putet*" (9), doubtful whether it was a local deity or the parental spirit. But ancestor worship, no more than the snake's venom or the resurrection of its skin entirely suffices as an explanation of serpent worship, though it is possible, if we believe such primitive beliefs are transmissions by human immigration or by word of mouth, to suppose the power of its bite was the starting point of primitive man's reverence for it, and other ideas, ancestor worship and the resurrection of the dead among them, were subsequently engrafted on it, but the question in this form assumes proportions which forbid its introduction here, interesting as the details are.

There is nothing of any of these in the story from the lower Niger in Africa, but it illustrates the depths to which human abjection reaches in the face of such superstitions and it has its element of the ridiculous as well. Among the huts in the villages there, the pythons, some grown to enormous size, are allowed freedom of quarters and choice of food in a way that would seem very disconcerting to us to say the least. "What appears to have astonished my native informants is the occasional unruliness of these pampered creatures in attempting to swallow infants and young children, in other words, the youngest members of the ancestral circle. What, however, is even more enigmatical to the European mind than this ingratitude is the fact that even in an emergency of this personal nature, when the

life of a human being in whom is centered all the love of a mother, and who may perhaps be to the father the last and only hope of perpetuating his own personality—is at stake, a priest, the High Priest if available, must be appealed to to rescue the child" (10).

How far the Cretan civilization, of which archeology alone has furnished about all the historical information we possess, may be held to represent a connecting link between the culture of the mainlands of Asia and Africa and the Mycenaean and the Greek civilizations has not been elucidated either by archeological research nor by allusions in the oldest historical records we have. That it was a very high one, as compared to the conditions of



FIG. 2.—A Greek statue to Æsculapius.

primitive life, in which thus far for the most part we have sought our examples of the origin of serpent worship, we are forced to believe by the astounding revelations of Sir Arthur Evans and his workers in the last twenty years. The picture of the snake goddess of Knossos has circulated widely in various publications in recent years.

We have another hint on our way to Æsculapius from this mysterious centre of prehistoric civilization in the Ægean. "We are brought face to face," Miss Harrison declares (11), "with the astounding fact that Zeus, father of gods and men, is figured by his worshippers as a snake." It was in Crete, especially around Knossos, according to one account, the most widely accepted one, that Zeus was brought up. According to Rogers, the translator of Aristophanes, in a footnote to the Plutus, quoting a passage from Dr. Caton I fail to find, it was in Cos, the birthplace of Hippocrates, an island not far from Crete and close to the mainland of Asia, where on investigation there was discovered in the temple floor a receptacle in which it was surmised the sacred serpents had their den. At least Dr. Caton (12) refers to such a home for the snakes in his description of the temple at Epidaurus, on the eastern coast of Argolis in Greece. He says in an especial degree they were an incarnation of the god and through a hole in the cover perhaps they crept to impress the patients lying in the corridors above, who regarded them with the utmost awe, a great adjuvant to any medication. Such a scene full of humor and mirth, depicted by Aristophanes, possibly we shall have occasion to refer to on another occasion.

Pausanias (13) gives many legends, few alike, of the birth and training of Æsculapius, but he says, "his most famous sanctuaries are offshoots from the one at Epidaurus." At Athens they called the day Epidauria, on which, in celebrating the mysteries they assigned a share to Æsculapius and dated the time since he was considered a god from the period when this practice began. His ancestry on his mother's side as well as on his father's, like that of most heroes, is shrouded in mystery for us. A common version was that he was the son of Apollo and Coronis, a light minded lady, of the kind apparently, who in every age of the world makes trouble, not so much for the genealogists as for those who seem really to regard the genetics of man as a serious scientific occupation, fondly believing any animal is as content in freedom as horses and sheep are forced to be in bondage. We are privileged, however, to believe Æsculapius was a successful practitioner and a famous physician, if we choose, but the pious Pausanias, basing his faith on much evidence which does not impress us, believed he was always a god. Whether his mother was Coronis or Arsinoe, whom the Messenians claimed as a fellow citizen, the Pythian Priestess at Delphi gave an answer from Apollo, acknowledging but excusing the share he has in the frailties of mortal flesh, to which we may subscribe for the sake of the first line:

O, born to the world's great joy, Æsculapius,
Offspring of love, whom Phlegas's daughter, fair
Coronis, bore to me.

In the Hieron Valley, in the Argolic Peninsula, there is a hamlet by the name of Koroni which commemorates (12) still the name of the fair Coronis, six miles from Epidaurus. Here, we are told in one of the legends, Æsculapius was born. In Pausanias's day the statue of the god stood in the temple at Epidaurus, seated on a throne, grasping a staff in one hand and holding the other over the head of the serpent, a dog crouching at his side. Lickings from the tongue of either cured the sick people in his temples, wherever they stood. Athens, Delphi, Pergamus, Troizen, Cos, Trikke, are the ones Caton specifically mentions, but at Sicyon, where there was a temple, they told Pausanias the god was brought to them from Epidaurus in the likeness of a serpent sitting in a carriage, drawn by mules and the person who brought him was a Sicyonian woman. At Cos Æsculapius also practised, it appears, since some Epidaurians of Argolis, being sent by their government to consult him there, carried with them in the ship a serpent, which plunged into the earth near the sea at a port they called at in Laconia. There they stayed and erected altars to Æsculapius where the serpent escaped into the hole.

This was in Lacedemonia, but by the story we have traced the legendary Æsculapius, whether god or woman. At Cos Æsculapius also practised. The temples of Cos, subsequently the birthplace of the historical father of medicine and the dwelling place of his kin for many generations as priests of the god before him. Æsculapius appears to have arrived late at Athens, in the time of Sophocles, but here we must halt, since already it is apparent that of all the devout men who now sleep in the bosom of the earth they once trod the snake worshippers are the most numerous and our emblem is one that was once most efficacious in impressing mankind with awe and, for us most important of all things, with faith.

REFERENCES.

1. LANG, ANDREW: *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, London, 1906.
2. LUBBOCK, SIR JOHN (Lord Avebury): *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*, sixth edition, London, 1911.
3. VIRGIL: *The Æneid*, II, 227.
4. SHORT, JOHN T.: *The North Americans of Antiquity*, New York, 1880.
5. TREVELYAN, MARIE: *Folk Lore and Folk Stories of Wales*, London, 1909.
6. BADEN-POWELL, B. H.: *The Indian Village Community*, London, 1896.
7. BUNSEN, MARIE VON: Die phantastischste Ruine der Welt, *Deutsche Rundschau*, vol. clx, September, 1914.
8. LANG, ANDREW: *Magic and Religion*, London, 1901.
9. VIRGIL: *The Æneid*, V, 95.
10. LEONARD, ARTHUR GLYN: *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes*, London, 1906.
11. HARRISON, JANE ELLEN: *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 1903, p. 18.
12. CATON, RICHARD: *The Temples and Rituals of Asklepios at Epidaurus and Athens*, London, 1900.
13. Pausanias's *Description of Greece*, Book II, cap. xxvi seq., tr. by J. G. Frazer, London, 1898.