

**ON PREHISTORIC
TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS
IN CONNECTION WITH SUN
AND SERPENT WORSHIP**

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On Prehistoric Traditions and Customs in Connection with Sun and Serpent Worship by John Samuel Phené

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JOHN SAMUEL PHENÉ

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PREHISTORIC TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS
IN CONNECTION WITH
SUN AND SERPENT WORSHIP.

BY

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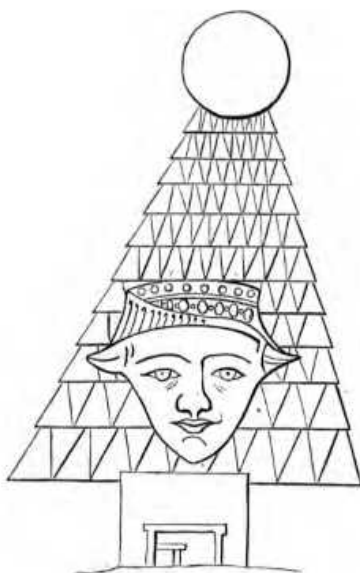
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The head of Osiris above the chest of Typhon, and beneath the sun, which is supported on a pyramid of emblems of fire and water. From the temple at Tentyris, Egypt.



The god Nilus, with the sources of the Nile flowing into the Ocean. Tentyris.



An early Occidental habitation similar to the chest which enclosed Osiris, *supra*.

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Habelsara
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ON

PREHISTORIC TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS

IN CONNECTION WITH

SUN AND SERPENT WORSHIP.

IN approaching the subject indicated in the title of this paper, I propose to do so in the first instance by a slight sketch of natural and first impressions, for the purpose of weighing the influence they may have exercised on the peculiar worship under consideration.

2. Over the wide world are evidences of what, *primâ facie*, seems so strange and repulsive a custom, that those who hear of it for the first time may be excused expressions of incredulity and disgust; yet, although there is a popular adage that "vice has only to be seen to be abhorred," experience proves to us that it depends very much upon the garb in which we see it, what amount of abhorrence, if any, will be accorded. So we have examples of those in whom disgust would most probably show itself prominently towards the features of that to which I allude, being drawn, either from ignorance of danger or by a species of fascination, to display towards its symbol at least, admiration rather than disgust, and fondness rather than repulsion. I refer to the almost universal prevalence of serpent-worship in ancient times, the extant remains of which are still to be found on probably all the continents of the earth.

3. The effect upon a person hearing for the first time of the worship of an idol—an actually fabricated god—is, as a rule, one of surprise and pity; but on hearing of the worship of a serpent, it is one of disgust and abhorrence. These feelings are very much the result of education, *i. e.* a knowledge of the dangerous properties of serpents, as it is shown from several recorded instances of children petting snakes they had disco-

vered,* and of the fondness and reverence exhibited by the priestesses of Pythons, to the good offices of which deities they assumed they were entitled, that, in the absence of a knowledge of danger, fear and repulsion are not necessarily felt. It becomes a question, then, at the outset, whether or not a great part of the worship devoted to serpents has arisen directly from fear of their destructive powers; and this is a feature we cannot altogether discard.

4. But this which might appear, *primâ facie*, as a sufficient cause, must be very much modified when we look a little more closely into the matter. Thus we find in Egypt a good and a bad serpent,—the goddess Ranno (fig. 35), the god Apophis (fig. 36),—the one considered worthy of adoration, the other styled “the great enemy of the human race,”† which was to be opposed or else propitiated. The latter is gravely reported to have been once captured and brought to Alexandria in triumph;‡ and the question naturally arises, How did the other serpent become invested with good attributes?

5. I can not only easily imagine, but it seems impossible to conclude otherwise, that man, simply as man, by which I do not mean a creature in a condition of development from the lower animals, but a wanderer from the home or original hive; a voluntary apostate, seeking forgetfulness of the past in new scenes and distant localities, and dreading his god, from whom, as well as his own race, he was fleeing in dismay; having, moreover, a passion implanted in his breast—that of worship—which neither time nor distance could obliterate; that man, as such, and in such condition, and having still before him the recollection of attributes recognized by others as those belonging to his late god, but which he refused to acknowledge, and which combined grandeur, beneficence, and creative power, must perforce have elected to worship the only representative he could find possessed of any such qualities; namely, Nature, through which, in short, these very powers of his offended god had so far been visibly manifested, and that the first direction of his new worship would be terrestrial;§ the second, which he would willingly have shunned, but neither dared nor could dispense with, celestial. At such a period of his experience,—and I am assuming the earliest, the Ocean would have presented a dreary and unknown

* A curious illustration of fondness for serpents exists at Chelsea at the present time, which has led to alarm in the neighbourhood.

† Samuel Sharpe's *Hist. of Egypt*, vol. i. p. 58.

‡ Diodorus Siculus.

§ So strong was this feeling, that Berosus described Xisuthrus, i.e. Noah, on coming out of the ark after the Flood, as first paying his *adoration* to the *Earth*, and then sacrificing to the gods. (Dr. George Smith.)

waste, an eternity of waters, subject to as violent commotions from storm and tempest as his own troubled mind, and again relapsing into a state of calm and purity even more harrowing, by recollection, to the distracted and restless wanderer.

6. Into that Ocean however went, continuously, as it appeared, the only objects that would now seem to him of interest,—his new gods; the sun, followed by his constant satellites; and the refresher and revivifier of his other god,—the earth—indeed a feature of it—the river. This is strongly borne out by Egyptian representation. The frontispiece depicts a very remarkable hieroglyph in the portico at Tentyris; the sun supported on a pyramid composed of the symbols of fire and water, with the head of Osiris in front, placed over the cist or chest in which Typhon imprisoned him. The characteristics of Osiris are shown in his negro lips and in the horns of the bull Apis. From the details the meaning of the figure is apparent; all the symbols of fire are incomplete, the apices being absent Δ ; all those of water, on the contrary, are perfect ∇ ; the pyramid is not a true one, but elongates to the left; or west; the head of Osiris is placed studiously in the western elongation, i.e. towards the left or west; the rays slant; and on the left of the cist is an extra enclosure.* It is clear that this refers to the sun setting in the ocean, water being shown by the perfect symbol, and fire by the deficient one. Moreover, the whole is canopied by a vast female figure, whose garments covered with water-lines clearly represent the Ocean, not the Mediterranean towards the north, but the vast ocean supposed by the ancients to surround the world, as we are told by Herodotus; and which ideal surrounding is completed in the hieroglyph in question, by an equally vast oceanic figure opposite to the above, the hands and feet of both meeting each other. Osiris wearing the horns of Apis in this case strengthens the simile, as Apis, Hapi, or Hapi signifies in Egyptian to conceal.† Beneath the above I have placed a hieroglyph from the same temple, representing the god NILUS holding the sources of the NILE, which, issuing in *serpentine* forms from his hands, and being lost in the ocean, fulfil the remainder of the metaphor I have chosen.

7. The people we call Egyptians probably reached Egypt

* The interior of this chest, with its western chamber, corresponds so exactly with one of the old Irish dwellings that it almost seems to indicate the sun going towards the land of a people having like habitations and living westward. A drawing of one is placed at the foot of the chest under description.

† Bansen, vol. i., Vocabulary, page 462.

from Asia Minor, and their first associations would in that case familiarize them with the idea of the sun setting in the Western Ocean. From their geographical position, the persons we call Orientals (by which I mean those dwelling at the eastern end of the Mediterranean), would observe the sun going into the waters at night, but not rising from them in the morning, as we islanders do. The sun-worshippers it would seem, as I have pointed out in a paper in the *British Archaeological Journal* for March, 1873, were in the habit of worshipping the sun when he appeared on the tops of the mountains. I do not think the people, as a rule, ascended, but only the priest, who was seen enveloped in his glory. Indeed, it is found that the inscription on the Moabite stone contains an expression פִּרְי (daybreak)* not known in the Hebrew writings, the nearest approach to which is, "like morning spread upon the mountains," described by the same writer as a time of darkness; *i. e.* idolatry—their idolatry being sun-worship.† Hence such a person as I have assumed would see a similarity in this common act of the sun and the river, the two agents through whose means the earth was fertilized.

8. The river, then, would become in particular an object of veneration. Now, with regard to Egypt, where the sun and serpent were both worshipped, let us take an idea from the description of a late popular writer as to the appearance of the Nile (I prefer such an opinion to that of an antiquary or man of science, or any person having an idea to clothe). He describes the view from a lofty summit thus: "A vast level panorama, bounded by the chains of the Arabian and Libyan hills, lay spread before us, diversified with every shade of green, and watered by the Nile; *creeping, like a silvery serpent, through the green savannahs.*"‡ That which meets the eye of the traveller now, so far as nature is concerned, met it then, and, in the eyes of the devotee, the river was a giant god, of which the serpent was but a symbol. Moreover, while it has been frequently suggested that the annual renewal of the serpent's skin would be construed by the observers of nature into a renewal of life, and by inference into the property of immortality, it has never, I think, been pointed out that this

* W. P. Walsh, quoting Professor Davidson.

† Joel ii. 2.

‡ Warburton, *The Crescent and the Cross*. It is remarkable that the Hebrew word for green vegetation, פִּרְי (Cant. i. 15) is almost identical with the name of the goddess Ranno, goddess of harvest, &c.—See p. 2. (W. R. Cooper.)



Fig. 1. Ornament in Dowth. (From a Rubbing. By J. S. Phené.)

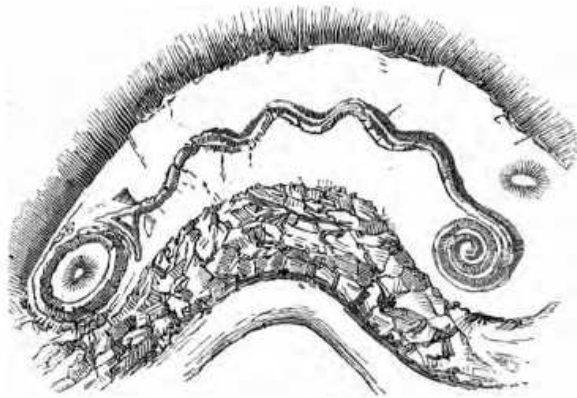


Fig. 2. Serpent and Mound, Ohio.



Fig. 3. Egyptian.



Fig. 3a. From New Grange.