



THE DRAGON GOD (DAI-JA) IN IDZUMO, JAPAN

FOR DESCRIPTION OF PLATE SEE PAGE I

# THE DRAGON GOD (DAI-JA) IN IDZUMO, JAPAN. A JAPANESE TALE

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The Rev. J. C. Calhoun Newton, President Emeritus of Kwansei Gakuin, Union Methodist College at Kobe, Japan, in forwarding a photograph of the dragon to the National Museum, wrote to F. W. Hodge under date of April 27, 1921:

\* \* \* I am sending under another cover a description of the Dai Ja of Idzumo Shrine, an ancient serpent god of that place.

Some time ago an enlarged photograph of this serpent god was entrusted to Bishop Walker R. Lambath, D. D., with the request that he deliver it to Doctor Hough, and will you kindly pass over to him the enclosed description of it. \* \* \* [See plate.]

An abstract of President Newton's description as far as it bears on this serpent cult in Japan is as follows:

Every year from ancient times all the gods in Japan assemble at "Amenohizuminomiya," in Idzumo Province, for the marriage conference. This is the reason why October is called in Japan, especially in Idzumo, the "Assembling Month of the Gods."

In this month a sea-god named "Wadatsuminokami" sends a white serpent to the "Inasa Shrine" with his message. On his way the serpent is found by a certain devotee and taken into the shrine, where he is made for that year the pacifier of storms, fires, and floods.

This legend is derived from the "Susano" mythology. Susanonomikoto, the son of Isanakinomikoto, after his father's death goes to Idzumo. This territory was possessed by an old man and his wife named "Ashinadzuchi" and "Tenadzuchi," at this time. A terrible eight-headed dragon lived there, and many young women were captured by him. So Susanonomikoto killed him by giving him a strong drink, in order to save the old couple, and then he married the daughter, named "Kushinada hime," of this old man and woman. \* \* \*

At the present day there are two "Shinto" shrines in Idzumo, the one, "Yaegaki Shrine," dedicated to Kushinada hime, the goddess of marriage, and the other, "Kitsuki," dedicated to "Okuninushi," son of Susano Mikoto, the god of fortune.

Every year, from the 11th of October until the 17th, there is a great festival in these two shrines, and during those days there was once a dreadful storm in

this Province. The people ceased their house building, roof covering, entertaining, social gatherings, singing, playing on instruments, and all other kinds of business.

This probably came from the tradition of Susano mythology. While Susano was killing the Dragon for the old man and woman, they were watching it, staying near by until the awful monster was dead. In China and Japan there is a widespread tradition that such a dragon has something to do with a dreadful storm.

A fuller account of this story is given by Aston.<sup>1</sup>

Susa no wo, the deity of rainstorm and brother of Amaterasu, the sun goddess, in coming on his wanderings to the province of Idzumo, he observed a chopstick floating down the river Hi, so thinking that there must be people living further up the stream, he went in quest of them, and found an old man and an old woman weeping, with a young maiden set between them. He asked of them, "Who are ye?" The old man replied, "Thy servant is a deity of earth, and his name is Ashinadzuchi, son of the great God of the Mountain. My wife's name is Tenadzuchi, and my daughter is called Kushinada hime." He further inquired, "Why weep ye?" He answered, saying, "I have had eight children, girls; but the eight-forked serpent of Koshi came year after year and devoured them. It is now the time of its coming, and therefore do we weep." "Describe to me this serpent," said Susa no wo. "Its eyes are as red as the winter cherry. It has one body with eight heads and eight tails. Moreover, its body is overgrown with moss, pines, and cedars. Its length extends over eight valleys and eight hills. Its belly is always all bloody and inflamed to look upon." Then Susa no wo said to the old man, "If this be thy daughter, wilt thou give her unto me?" "With reverence be it said," replied the old man, "I know not thy honourable name." "I am the elder brother of the Sun-Goddess, and have now come down from heaven," replied Susa no wo. Then the deities Ashinadzuchi and Tenadzuchi said, "In that case, with reverence we offer her to thee." Susa no wo straightway took that young maiden and changed her into a many-toothed comb, which he stuck into his hair, and said to the deities Ashinadzuchi and Tenadzuchi, "Do you brew some saké of eight-fold strength. Also make a fence round about, and in that fence let there be eight doors, at each door let there be eight stands, on each stand let there be a saké-tub, and let each saké-tub be filled with the saké of eight-fold strength. Then wait." So having prepared everything in accordance with his august bidding, they waited. Then the eight-forked serpent came, indeed, as had been said, and bending down one head into each of the tubs, lapped up the saké. Hereupon it became drunken, and all the heads lay down to sleep, when straightway Susa no wo drew his ten-span sword from his girdle and slew the serpent, so that the river had its current changed to blood. Now, when he cut the middle part of the tail the edge of his august sword was broken. Wondering at this, he pierced it and split it open, when he found that within there was a great sharp sword. He took this sword, and thinking it a wonderful thing, reported his discovery to the Sun Goddess. This is the great sword Kusanagi (Herb-queller).

Doctor Aston points out the striking resemblance of this story to that of Perseus and Andromeda, and quotes from Sydney Harland's "Legend of Perseus" (chapter viii),

<sup>1</sup> W. G. Aston. *Shinto: The Way of the Gods*, 1905, p. 103f.

that we have in this incident a reminiscence of the abolition of human sacrifices to deities in the shape of lower animals. \* \* \* In certain stages of civilization, sacrifices of the kind are practiced, and are frequently offered to water-spirits conceived in animal form. \* \* \* It may, of course, be that the monster sent to devour Andromeda is to be regarded simply as the personification of water or of specific rivers in their sinister aspect.

Doctor Aston adds then, concerning the dragon of the Japanese story:

The circumstance that the scene of this episode in Susa no wo's career is the bank of a river is, therefore, by no means immaterial. Indeed, we may plausibly conjecture that the description of the serpent with its eight (or many) heads and eight tails, its length extending over eight valleys and eight hills, its body overgrown with moss, pines, and cedars, and its propensity for devouring human beings, is nothing more than a fanciful representation of the river, with its serpentine course, its tributaries and branches, its wooded banks, and the danger by drowning in its pools or at its fords.

The conception of a stream as a serpent or dragon, or one of these animals as the embodiment of a water-deity, is widespread. There is for the imagination a close nexus between a river and serpent. The sinuous, often winding and twisting course of the former and its mysterious movement without legs represents it to the fancy as a great, long-stretched serpent, while the beautiful wave-like motion of the latter and the water habitat of many of the species connects it with rivers and streams as the *genius loci*.

Even in the Rig Veda there is deification of the cloud-snake. In later times they (the serpents) answered to the Nymphs, being tutelary guardians of streams and rivers.<sup>2</sup> The Arabs still regard medicinal waters as inhabited by *jinn*, usually of serpent form, [and] on the borders of the Arabian field we have the sacred fountain of Ephea at Palmyra, with which a legend of a demon in serpent form is connected.<sup>3</sup> A dragon's well is mentioned in Nehemiah II, 13, and a snake river in Josephus, Jewish War, V, 3, 2.

In the Babylonian creation myth the primeval watery chaos is symbolized by the monster Tiamat, and the conflict between Bel Marduk and Tiamat is a favorite theme of Assyro-Babylonian glyptic art. Tiamat is there pictured either as a composite dragon or—more rarely—as a long-stretched serpent. Thus on a cylinder seal in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, a cast of which is on exhibition in the United States National Museum, Tiamat is represented as a large serpent with a peculiar horned head fleeing before Marduk, who pursues her with a sickle-shaped scimitar. The personification of the watery chaos by the dragon or serpent Tiamat may have been suggested to the Babylonian fancy by the waving billows of the agitated sea.

Reminiscences of the overthrow of Tiamat by the sun-god Marduk may be traced in the Old Testament where, of course, not Marduk.

<sup>2</sup> E. W. Hopkins, *The religions of India*, 1895, p. 376, n. 3.

<sup>3</sup> W. Robertson-Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 1889, p. 153f.

but the true God of Israel quelled and put to silence the evil dragon. Thus Isaiah LI, 9: "Art thou not it that cut Rahab and wounded the dragon." *Rahab*, which means raging, insolence, tumultuousness, is not unsuitable as a title of the chaos dragon, compare Isaiah XXX, 7. Psalm LXXXIX, 10: "Thou hast broken Rahab in pieces, as one that is slain." Job XXVI, 12: "He stilleth the sea with his power, and by his understanding he smiteth through Rahab." compare Job IX, 13. In all these passages Rahab is evidently an alternative for the Babylonian Tiamat and at the same time an emblematic synonym for Egypt. Isaiah XXVII, 2: "In that day the Lord with his sore (properly, hard) and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing (Revised Version, the swift, and margin, gliding or fleeing) serpent, and leviathan the crooked (Revised Version, margin, winding) serpent, and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea." The three monsters in this passage are not unplausibly interpreted by some commentators (so, for instance, by Franz Delitzsch) as designating the three rivers, the Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile, and symbolic of Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt, respectively, the three hostile powers of the world which were situated on these rivers. The "swift" or "fleeing leviathan" (compare the description of the Tiamat cylinder seal above) is a fit designation of the Tigris with its swiftly running course and rapids, whence its name, which is derived from old-Persian *tigra*, pointed, and *tigri*, arrow, characterizing it as darting or shooting forth like an arrow, compare Horace Odes IV, 14, 46: *rapidus Tigris*. Its Hebrew name, *hiddekel*, means sharp. The "crooked" or "winding leviathan" may well describe the Euphrates with its many windings and bendings; while the dragon, Hebrew, *tannin*, originally a personification of the sea or the floods, was subsequently applied to Egypt, compare Isaiah LI, 9; Ezekiel XXIX, 3.

An instance in which a deity personifies the fructifying river Euphrates and is on this account denominated a serpent is found in an early Babylonian liturgy. Ninlil (also called Nintu and Nin Kharsag), spouse of Enlil, the supreme god of Nippur, who represents or symbolizes the female element of reproducing nature, is called serpent (Assyrian, *Sir*),<sup>4</sup> and the Euphrates itself was called the "river of the snake."

Finally, the symbol of representing the world under the form of a serpent biting its tail is explained from the fact that in the cosmogony of Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, and India, the earth was believed to be circumscribed by an ocean or "celestial river," whose circular course is compared to a serpent.

<sup>4</sup> George A. Barton, *Miscellaneous Babylonian Inscriptions*, 1918, pp. 16, 41, 43, and 46, compare. J. P. Peters, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 41, pp. 131 and following, especially pp. 142 and following.