

THE NATIVITY.

SIMILARITIES IN RELIGIOUS ART.

BY THE EDITOR.

BUDDHISM and Mazdaism¹ are older by five centuries than Christianity. That Mazdaism exercised a powerful influence on Judaism and especially on the Apocrypha of the Jews has never been doubted; and considering the fact that Buddhist missionaries were sent by Emperor Ashoka, the Buddhist Constantine, to the Yavanas, i. e., the Ionians or Greeks in Syria as well as in Egypt, there is no doubt that Buddhist doctrines, too, may have contributed an important share to the development of Christianity. But, on the other hand, an early influence of Christianity on later Buddhist ritual is by no means excluded, and we propose here to pass in review a few art-representations from various sources which may serve as tests and will illustrate the complications involved.

The following passage quoted from the well-known work, *The Cave Temples of India*, by James Ferguson and James Burgess (p. 138), proves how fruitful a thorough investigation and comparison of Christian and Buddhist antiquities would be, and it is a pity that a few only of the Buddhist sculptures and paintings have become accessible :

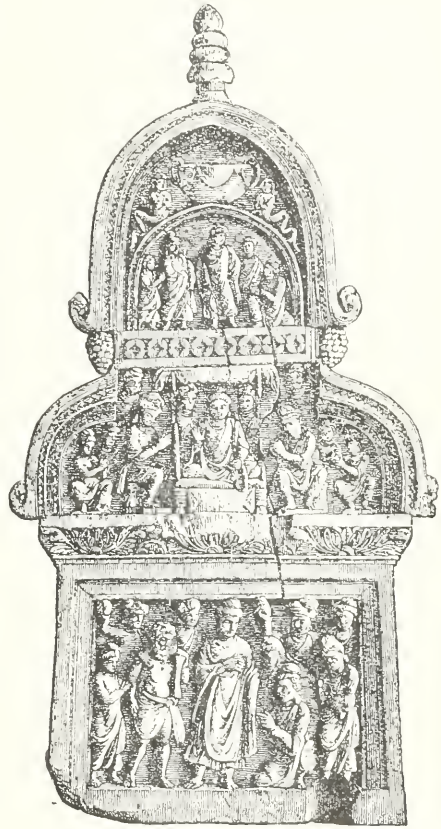
“ One of the most interesting peculiarities of the Peshawar, or rather Gandhâra sculptures, is that it would not be difficult to select from among them several that would form admirable illustrations for a pictorial Bible at the present day. One, for instance, is certainly intended to represent the Nativity. The principal figure, a woman, is laying her child in a manger, and that it is intended to be such is proved by a mare with its foal, attended by a man, feeding out of a similar vessel. Above are represented two horses' heads in the position that the ox and the ass are represented in mediæval paintings.

¹ The worship of Ahura Mazda, i. e., Lord Omniscient, the religion of the Persians.

"A second represents the boy Christ disputing with the doctors in the Temple. A third, Christ healing a man with a withered limb, either of which if exhibited in the Lateran, and re-labelled, might pass unchallenged as sculptures of the fourth or fifth centuries.

"The scene in the annexed wood-cut may, in like manner, be taken to represent the woman taken in adultery. Two men in the background, it will be observed, have stones in their hands ready to throw at her. The similarity in this instance is a little more far-fetched than in the others, but still sufficiently near to render a comparison interesting. The study of these most interesting sculptures is now rendered impossible from the closing and dispersion of the India Museum."

Following the conception of Gruenwedel, who in similar Gandhâra reliefs interprets the club-bearing figure as Papiyân (or Mara) the evil one, I should not think that the threatening figures are men lifting up stones against the woman, but spirits of ill-will and evil who make it a business to deter the Buddha from his career of teaching the people and healing their soul's infirmities. I do not deny the similarity of this Gandhâra sculpture to the story of the adulteress in the Gospel, but I am perfectly convinced that it is purely accidental. It is nevertheless of great interest, as it proves that



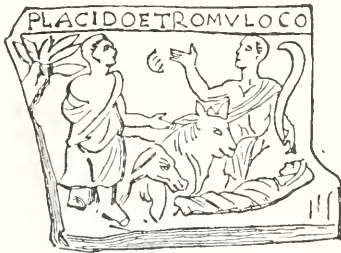
CONVENTIONAL ELEVATION OF THE FRONT OF A CELL. From a sculpture at Jamal-giri, now in the India Museum, South Kensington.

history repeats itself. As the multiplication table may be invented independently in different countries, so similar ideas may be thought, similar ethics may be preached, similar poems may be sung, similar discoveries may be made, similar truths may be uttered, and similar inventions may be made in perfect independence of another by people of different race and different climates.

Mr. Ferguson declares in another passage of the same work, that "photographs of nearly all the known specimens are in his possession" and we can only urge him to publish them for the benefit of archæological investigations.²

Gandhâra or Kandahâr is situated in the northwestern part of India. It is mentioned in the Ashoka edicts as one of the countries to which missionaries were sent and we learn that here the Greek invaders became favorably impressed with the doctrines of Buddhism. Menander, called in the Buddhist canon Milinda, a Yavana, a Baktrian king of Sâgala, who lived about 100 before Christ, showed so much interest in the religion of the Enlightened One that he held a dispute with Nagasena, a representative Buddhist saint and philosopher, the record of which is an important book of the scriptures of the Mahâyâna school. The Greek invaders became converted to Buddhism, which flourished for a long time, reaching its height in the fourth century of our era, until the Brahman reaction set in and the country was invaded by Mohammedans.³

The story of Christ's Nativity, although not frequently represented on early Christian monuments, is quite ancient but probably not as ancient as the Gandhâra sculptures. Illustrations of the Christ child have been discovered as early as in the fourth century. The oldest one on record is dated from the year A.D. 343. The best Christian archæologist, Prof. Franz Xaver Kraus, says:



NATIVITY OF CHRIST.

From a sarcophagus of 343 A.D.

Sebastiano, which, however, belongs to the post-Constantinian, time and was

¹ Footnote, p. 28.

² The wall-decorations of the Ajanta caves have been published of late in a very fine work.

³ The transition from Buddhism to the present Brahmanism is an unsolved problem still. There are evidences in some places that Buddhism was persecuted and many of the Buddhist sanctuaries were destroyed; in other places again the reaction appears to have been accomplished peacefully. At any rate, Buddhism ceased to be a legalised religion, and the Buddhists were obliged on penalty of expulsion to renounce their faith. Mr. Dharmapâla has made the interesting suggestion that the mass of the Buddhist population turned Mohammedans as the sole refuge that was left them, for they could not return to Brahmanism after having lost caste. This would explain why the Mohammedans of India, so similar in type to other Indians of Aryan descent, are so numerous all over India, for it is all but impossible that the Mohammedan population over fifty millions strong should consist exclusively of the descendants of the invaders. On the other hand, it is difficult to say what became of the many millions of Buddhists all over India.

painted, according to the testimony of Chloricius, at Gaza in the sixth century. Some Nativities are found on sarcophagi; for instance, on that of Milan, in S. Ambrogio;¹ sometimes on cut stones, but more frequently on ivory.

"The presence of ox and donkey is a legend which apparently has been formed from Habakkuk, Chapter III, verse 17, mentioned since the third and fourth centuries in the Apocrypha (see the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew), and known to Prudentius² and Hieronymus.³

"In the cemetery pictures, the shepherds are nowhere to be seen; but sometimes on sarcophagi and on an oil vase of Monza, also on an ivory cut of the sixth or seventh century."

The story of Christ's Nativity contains several features that are analogous to ancient Buddhist traditions, especially the incident that the child was born while the parents were on a journey and that the king of the country sought the life of the new-born baby on account of the prophecy that it should become the greatest monarch of the world. The massacre of children which Bimbisara, the Buddhist Herod, is reported to be guilty of is not even original with Buddhism, but dates back to the pre-Buddhist myths of Krishna, of whose happy escape from the persecution of his cruel uncle, the king, similar stories are told.

According to the Apocryphal gospels where the story of the manger is told more fully, Christ was born in a cave and thence transferred to a stable where the ox and ass worshipped him. The report of Pseudo-Matthew reads as follows:

"Now on the third day after the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the most blessed Mary went out of the cave, and, entering a stable, put her child in a manger, and the ox and ass adored him. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, who said, The ox doth know his owner, and the ass his master's crib. The very animals, therefore, ox and ass, having him between them, incessantly adored him. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Habakkuk the prophet, who said, Between two animals, thou art made known. In the same place Joseph carried with Mary three days."

The Nativity of Christ, according to the canonical Gospels, takes place in a stable; but according to the Apocrypha in a cave and the agreement is absolute.⁵ These legends proved so strong that, in spite of the canonical version of the story, a cave near Bethlehem came to be finally regarded as the place of the Nativity, and a church was erected on the spot to commemorate the event and still stands as a lasting monument of this belief. It appears that the idea of a cave being the place of Christ's Nativity may be

¹ See Allegranza Monuments, page 63, table 5.

² Prudent. Cathem. XI. 77.

³ Peregrin. S. Paulae (Tobler Itin. terræ sanctæ I 33). See also De Rossi Mus. 18.

⁴ See Rudolph Hofmann *Das Leben Jesu nach den Apokryphen*, p. 102 107.

⁵ *Prote v.* c. 17-20; *Hist. de nat. Mariæ*, c. 13; *Hist. Joseph*, c. 17; *Ev. inf. Arab.*, c. 2-3.

attributed to the influence of the Dionysus myth, whose birth is said to have taken place in a cave, and this again may be the echo of older Oriental legends which were imported into Greece in the fourth or fifth century of Christ.

While there can scarcely be any doubt as to the Indian origin of the story of the massacre of the children at Bethlehem, we cannot rashly infer that the legend of the ox and donkey was taken from the same source, even though the Gandhâra sculptures seem to verify this view. We must bear in mind that a manger which appears in the monuments is not mentioned at all in any one of the



THE THREE MAGI WORSHIPPING THE CAVE-BORN SAVIOUR.
In the *Codex Vaticanus Græcus* (1613). Mary and the child
are seated inside a rock.

Buddhist legends known to us, and we have little reason to believe that the idea originated in Gandhâra.

While a mutual influence of Buddhist and Christian art is not excluded, the probability of their independent development seems to be more probable. Both may have developed from ideas common to the two religions, their similarity being either purely accidental or founded on notions derived from a common source of older traditions. This would explain the differences of detail which are strong enough to indicate their mutual independence. Thus the ass and the ox adore the Christ child, while the Gandhâra sculptures show two horses' heads in their place. The common

idea from which both representations may have sprung independently may be the tradition that both saviours were born on a journey.



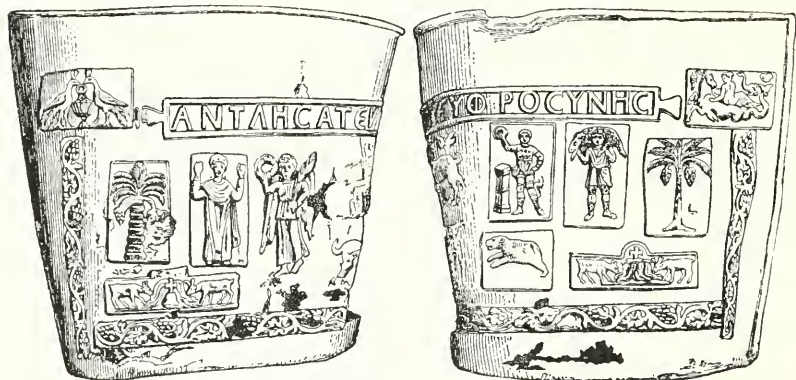
BUDDHA HEALING. From the Gandhâra Sculptures. (Takht-i bahâi.)

This bas-relief, as well as many others, is an instance of the similarity between Buddhist and Christian illustrations.

That Nestorian rituals have influenced the Buddhism of Thibet in the sixth or seventh century of our era seems to be certain, but it is not probable that Christian art should have blossomed out in

the East before it was actually developed in the West. The Gandhâra sculptures are about contemporaneous with analogous productions in Christian countries, and it is not likely that the latter should have served as models for the former.

The common sources of Buddhism and Christianity are apparently not limited to Brahmanism, but may go back to Persian and Babylonian traditions. Some must have come down to the authors of Gospels from the hoary antiquity of Accadian wisdom and may successively have passed through the various media of Assyrian, Persian, Syrian and Greek versions. Considering the tenacity of the human race in preserving old traditions, it is natural that if a new era of thought dawns in history, the old stories are not forgotten but adapted to the new faith; and thus when we meet with striking similarities between analogous movements, representing



A LEADEN VESSEL WITH VARIOUS RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS, PAGAN AS WELL AS CHRISTIAN. (Found at Tunis in 1866.)¹

the same crisis of the religious evolution of different countries, such as Western Asia and India, it is not surprising, but exactly what we must expect, when we find some most striking similarities not only in their fundamental principles, but also sometimes in their most accidental and apocryphal accretions.

As to art, we know positively that Buddhist as well as Christian sculpture originated under the influence of Greek masters, and it is therefore natural that much that is Greek, though modi-

¹ Conspicuous among the symbols on this vessel which is assumed to be of the fourth or fifth century, is a good shepherd. The others are the vine with grapes, the cross on the waters of life, a man with a crown near an altar (probably Mithraistic), a bear, a praying priest, palm trees with fruits, a Victory with wreath and palm branch, a Nereid and two peacocks. The vessel need not be Christian, and may be syncretic. Prof. Franz Xaver Kraus, from whom we reproduce the illustration, believes he finds on it a drunken Silenus in one of the figures, whom we are unable to discover. See his *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, I., p. 242.

fied by a change of conditions, should have continued in the art-productions of both religions.

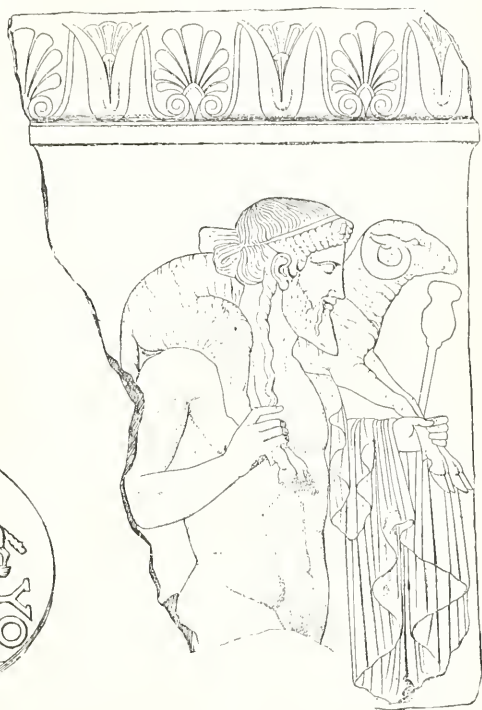
The Gandhâra bas-relief reproduced in this article, which suggests the story of the woman taken in adultery, may have no direct connexion with the Christian story, but representations of the scene may go back to common sources, artistic productions of a past age, which need not even have had the same significance. Thus the



THE GOOD SHEPHERD ON A LAMP FOUND IN THE CATACOMBS.¹



CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS ON A CORNELIAN SEAL, OF THE MUSEUM KIRCHERIANUM.²



HERMES KRIOPHOROS, THE RAM-BEARING HERMES. (Fragment of an altar at Athens.)³

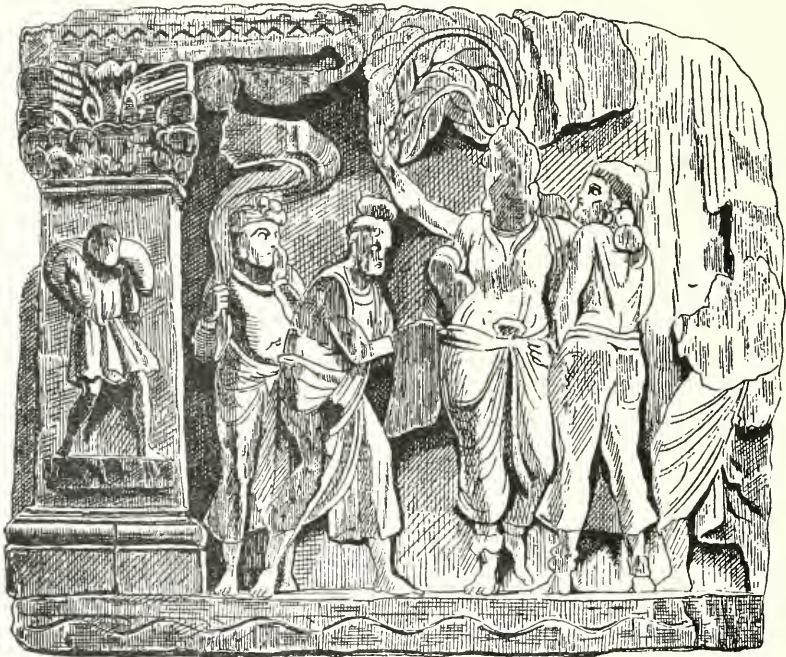
statues and bas-reliefs of Hermes, represented in the act of carrying a calf or a ram to the altar at Eleusis, changes into the lamb-bearing Christ, a transition which seems to have taken place in the

¹ Reproduced from Louisa Twining, *Symbols and Emblems*, Plate XIV.

² The seal exhibits an anchor, the lamb, fishes, the T cross, the dove with the olive branch, a ship with a T cross mast, and the letters IXΘYC, i. e., Ichthys (fish), meaning Jesus, Christus, God's Son, the Saviour.

³ Probably the work of Kalamis, presumably an Athenian sculptor who flourished about the eightieth Olympiad. See Baumeister's *Denkmäler*, II., p. 774, s. v. Kalamis.

third century. But even before this transformation of a Pagan piece of art into a Christian conception with an entirely changed interpretation of its significance could have been completed, we find the same motive as a purely ornamental design in the Gandhâra sculptures. We do not doubt that the Greek artists who executed the Buddhist sculptures of Gandhâra were so much pleased with the beauty of the ram-bearing Hermes that they introduced the figure in an appropriate place. The picture of a lamb-bearing Christ was a welcome suggestion to Christians and fell on good



THE NATIVITY OF BUDDHA.

With a lamb-bearing shepherd on the pilaster. The face as well as the figure of the sheep is badly battered.¹ (Gandhâra Sculpture in the Museum of Lahore.)

soil in Christian art on account of the parable of the good shepherd which caused the original Pagan significance quickly to be forgotten; but the sacrificial idea was so foreign to Buddhism that we need not be astonished if the figure of a lamb-bearer remained an isolated instance in Buddhist art and found no further development because there did not happen to be in Buddhist literature

¹ The bas-relief shows Mâyâ in the grove of Lumbini. Her sister Prajapati on her left side, Brahma and Chakra on the right.

any thought or parable or Jataka tale that could endow the type of a good shepherd with new life. Thus it remained undeveloped.

Hermes was the leader of souls to the Nether World, and thus the ram-bearer becomes a symbol of divine guidance through the



THE GOOD SHEPHERD TOGETHER WITH
CUPID AND PSYCHE.¹
(Pagan Sarcophagus.)



MOTHER BRINGING HER CHILD
TO BUDDHA.
(Fresco in the Ajanta Caves.²)

portals of death. A Greek sarcophagus (obviously of Pagan workmanship) represents Cupid and Psyche together with the Kriophoros, i. e., a ram-bearing deity; and the catacombs of Rome (Pagan



THE GOOD SHEPHERD AND THE FOUR SEASONS.
Fresco in the Catacombs of St. Calixtus.³

as well as Christian) are full of shepherds carrying lambs on their shoulders. The religious syncretism of the age appears here as well as in other fields, and Christian symbols are frequently mixed

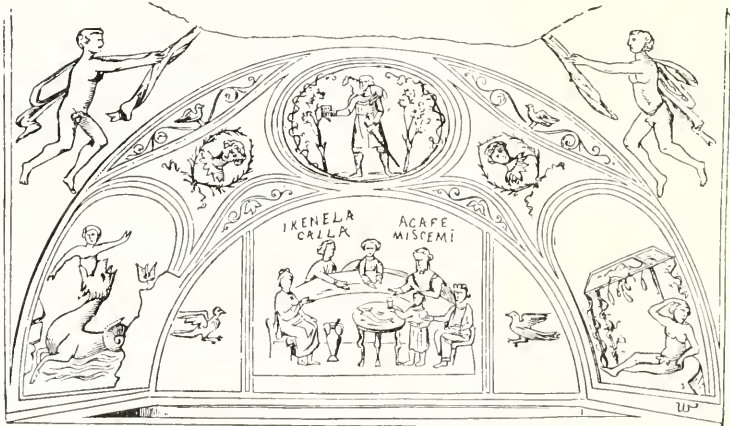
¹ Reproduced from Kraus, *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, I., p. 102.

² Reproduced from a photograph kindly lent me by Prof. Charles S. Lanman.

³ Reproduced from Louisa Twining, *Symbols and Emblems*, Plate XIV.



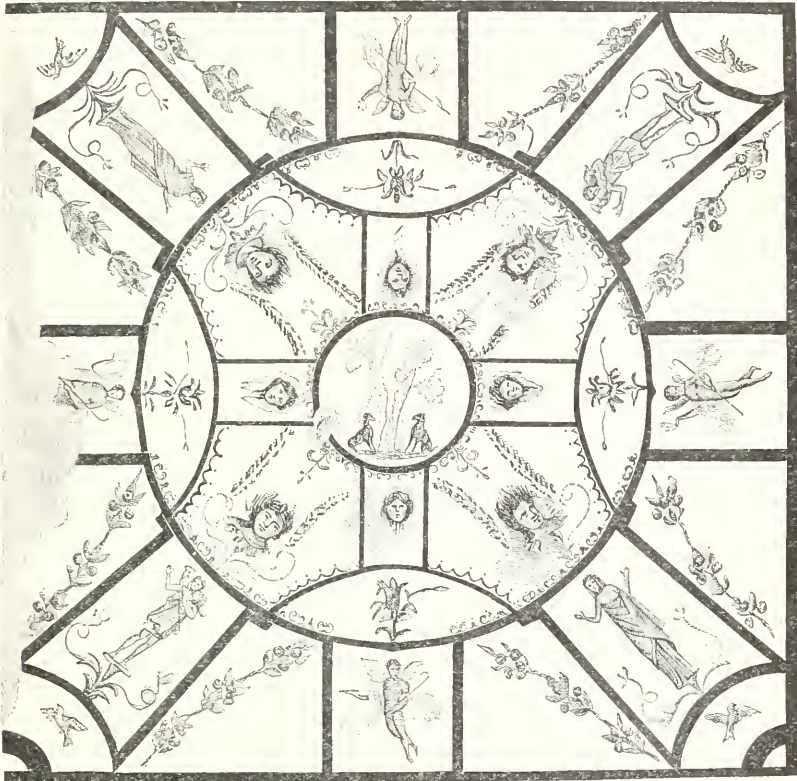
CEILING OF THE CATACOMBS OF ST. CALIXTUS.
The good shepherd surrounded by purely Christian pictures.



THE GOOD SHEPHERD WITH THE FLUTE OF PAN IN HIS HAND.¹
Underneath the representation of an Agape or love-feast. (Fresco in the cemetery of St. Peter and Marcellinus.)

¹ Franz X. Kraus, *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, I., p. 129.

up with figures of unequivocally Pagan thought. The picture on the ceiling of St. Lucia shows in the center a tree with two animals of doubtful nature, commonly supposed to be sheep. It is surrounded by ornamental heads, flowers, and birds, by Cupids and figures in the attitude of prayer. Considering the fact that this was the mode in which the ancients approached the gods and in which the souls of the dead were portrayed on their arrival at the throne



CEILING OF SANTA LUCINA. (After Rossi. Reproduced from F. X. Kraus.)

of Proserpine, there is not one emblem on this monument of the catacombs that can be regarded as typically Christian.

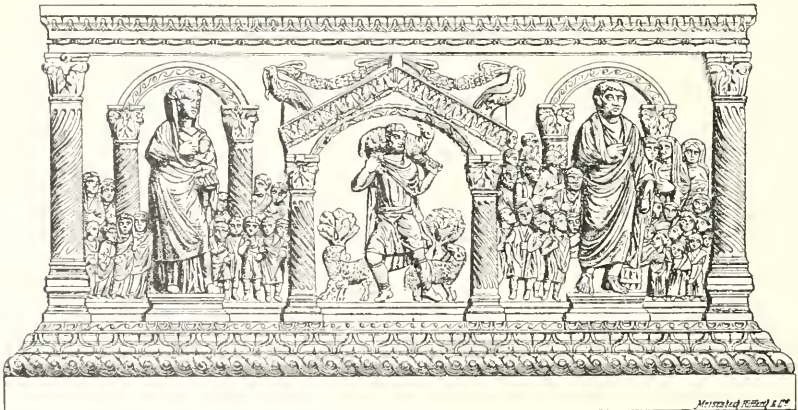
The idea of the Good Shepherd as a religious symbol appears also in Egypt and becomes very prominent in the Græco-Egyptian religion where the god Thoth is identified with Hermes and invoked under the name Poimander, which is a corruption of *ποιμὴν ἀνθρώπων*, i. e., shepherd of men.



THE GOOD SHEPHERD OF THE
LATERAN.¹



THE CALF-BEARING HERMES.
(From *Denkmäler des klassischen
Alterthums.*)

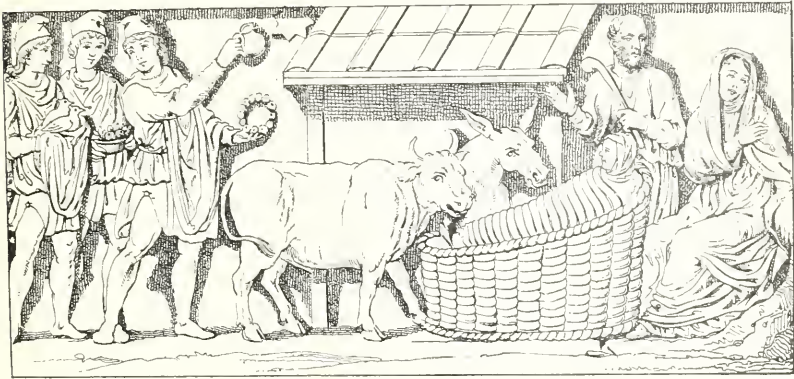


SARCOPHAGUS OF SOLONA.² (After Garrucci.)

¹ From Kraus, *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, I., p. 227.

² This sarcophagus was described first by Conze in 1872, then by Durand in 1874, and we reproduce it from Franz X. Kraus (*Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*) who says: "The front of the sarcophagus is marked by strong pillars and divided into three parts. The central part is covered by a roof ornamented with a garland carried by birds. Underneath it stands the good shepherd as a bearded man, the second stage of the development of the type. In the arcade on the right stands a man, on the left a woman, both surrounded by a multitude of children. These same persons with fewer followers reappear on one of the smaller sides of the sarcophagus, while the other shows a genius of death with the down-turned torch. We are here apparently confronted with a representation of teachers whose calling too is mentioned in the inscriptions."

The details of the posture of the lamb bearer agree so closely in all three cases, the Greek Pagan, the early Christian and the Gandhâra Buddhist figures, that there can be little doubt about the historical connexion in the development of this type; but there are other instances of a spontaneous similarity in which connexions can neither be traced nor be deemed probable. As an example we reproduce a picture of the Ajanta caves in which a mother brings her child to the Buddha and which if it were Christian might be an appropriate illustration of the Gospel verse "Suffer little children to come unto me." The hypothesis of Christian influence is fairly excluded in the Ajanta caves, and we must recognise here again that the same sentiment (*viz* , the desire of bringing children



THE NATIVITY.

Reproduced by Nork (in Scheible's *Kloster*, Vol. VII., Part I, p. 50).

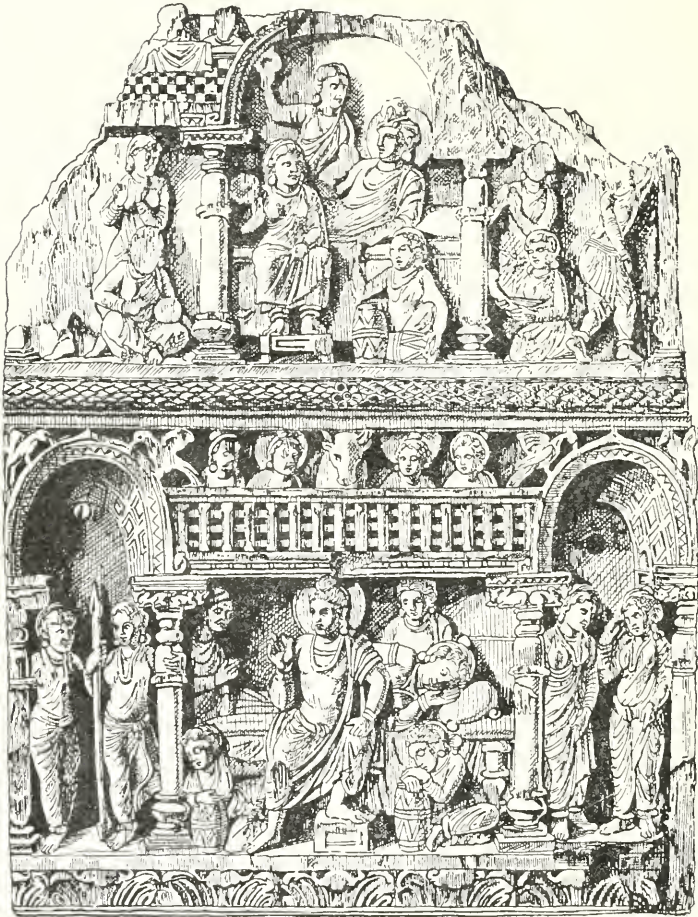
The Magi bear other gifts than those mentioned in the Gospels.

at their tender age under the wholesome influence of religion) would produce similar art representations in Buddhism and in Christianity.

F. Nork, in his *Festkalender*, publishes an interesting illustration of what he calls the nativity of Mithras. He states that it is taken from a Mithras monument by Kircher, from whose *Roma Subterranea* it is said to be reproduced.¹ The illustration might, however, be taken for a representation of the Christian Nativity, except for the gifts which the three Magi bring to the new-born Saviour. According to the Gospels, they are gold, frankincense and

¹ Published in *Das Kloster*, edited by I. Scheible, Vol. VII., Part I., page 50. The illustration is here reproduced, but I have so far been unable to verify the authority. There is a mistake somewhere, for Kircher never wrote a book entitled *Roma Subterranea*. The illustration may be found in a book of that title by some other author, or in Kircher's *Mundus Subterraneus*. The stable indicates the influence of the Christian canonical Gospels and makes, in our opinion, Nork's view unacceptable. But the relief remains interesting on account of the gifts of the magi, which indicate another and unknown tradition.

myrrh, while on the present bas-relief one of the Magi offers doves, another flowers, and the third holds in his right hand a vessel and in his left hand a wreath of roses, perhaps a rosary. The place of



BUDDHA'S RENUNCIATION.

Gandhâra Sculptures of Jamâlgârhi. The upper part shows the prince surrounded by servants, musicians, and dancers. The lower part represents the moment when he leaves his wife. The ox in the gallery indicates the date, which was the full moon of the month Ashâdâ, when the moon stood in the zodiacal sign of the Bull (Uttarâshâdhâ). (See Grünwedel, *Buddh. Kunst.*, page 109.)

birth is not a cave, but a stable, and yet the child does not appear in a manger, but in a basket, and the ox and the donkey seem to worship the child.

The planets and constellations were pictorially represented in the Orient under the allegory of animals; hence the twelve signs of the ecliptic are even to-day still called the zodiac, i. e., circle of animals. In some ancient sculptures (as for instance in the Buddhist bas-relief of Jamâlgârhî here reproduced) the date of the event is indicated by the animal that serves as an emblem of the month, in the present case a bull. Might not the story of the ox and the donkey that witness the birth of Christ have originated in the same way? It would be difficult to prove, but some old-fashioned illustrations showing a similarity of treatment to the bull in the Jamâlgârhî bas-relief seem to speak in favor of this hypothesis. Mr. Nork, from whose essay we here reproduce an illustration taken from an ancient glass, interprets the two animals astronomically as the signs of the ass of Typhon and the bull of Osiris, and he is apparently not familiar with the Buddhist sculpture.

That the idea of the Star of Bethlehem is due to Persian influence cannot be doubted, because the Apocryphal Gospels state that the Magi had watched for the constellation of the Saviour, according to a prophecy of Zoroaster (Zerdusht). We read in the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy (chapter 7) the following account :



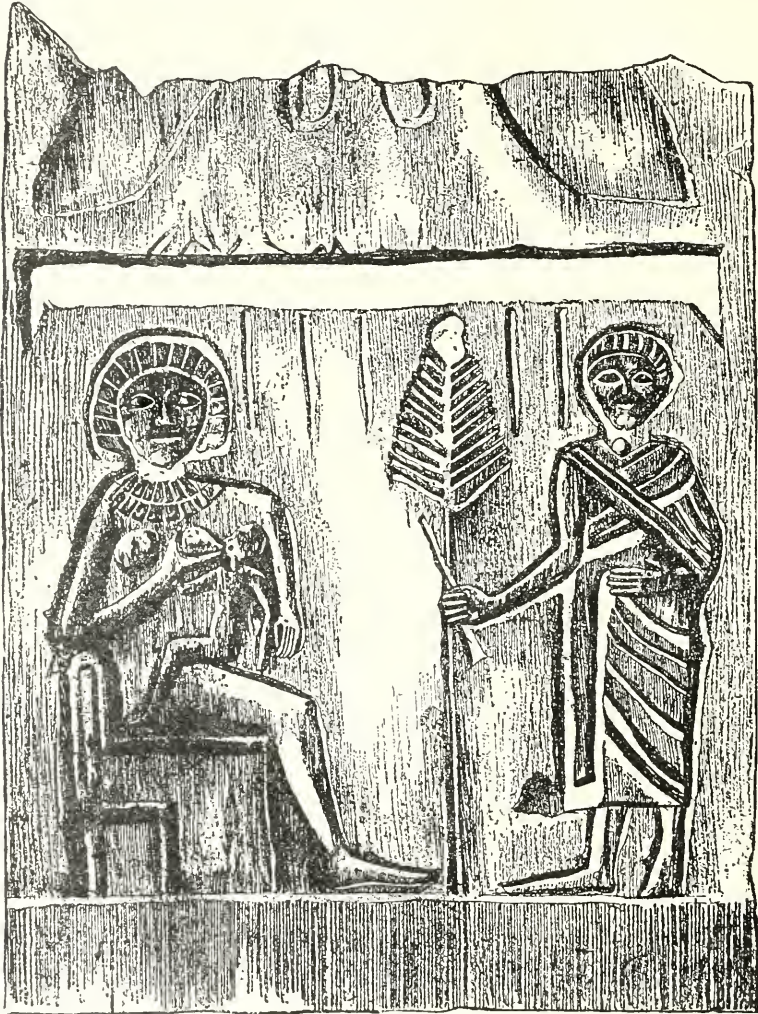
THE NATIVITY FROM AN ANCIENT GLASS.¹

" And it came to pass when the Lord Jesus was born at Bethlehem of Judah in the time of Herod the King, behold Magi came from the east to Jerusalem, as Zerdusht had predicted: and they had with them gifts, gold, incense, and myrrh; and they worshipped him and offered unto him their gifts. Then lady Mary took one of his swaddling bands and gave it them for a little reward, and they received it from her with great honor. And the same hour there appeared unto them an angel in the form of the star which had been the guide of their way before; and following the leading of its light they departed, until they reached their own country."²

¹ From *Sacrum monumentum in antiquo vitro Romae.*

² Matt. ii. 1-12 The mention of Zerdusht or Zoroaster in this chapter accords with an old Christian notion in the East, that he was the same as Balaam, and predicted the rising of the star. Some made him a disciple of Elijah, but an old priest from Oroomiah mentioned the other opinion to me as the true one. See the article "Zerdascht" in D'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale*.

That stars, especially the planets, are divine beings, gods, or archangels, is an ancient Iranian idea which otherwise does not re-appear in Christianity.



COPTIC BAS-RELIEF. (From Ebers.)¹

The Zoroastrian prophecy expressly connects the Star of Bethlehem with the constellation of the Virgin; and it appears that the

tale. Brunet refers to the *Biographie Universelle*, Vol. lii., and Norberg's *De Zoroastre Bactriano*. See, too, Hottinger's *Historia Orientalis*, ii. 6, 16; and also the note of Thilo, *Codex Apoc.*, p. 139

¹ Ebers believes that this interesting bas-relief represents Mary with the child and Joseph, but Kraus thinks that it is Isis nursing the God-infant Horus.

constellation received its name from the very fact that its rise indicated the birth of the new sun at the winter solstice. Mr. Nork quotes a temple inscription at Sais which directly calls the Virgin the "Mother of the Sun" (Procl. in Tim. I. I.) and Eratosthenes of Alexandria identifies her with Isis, the mother of Horus. Scaliger describes her as a beautiful virgin with full hair, ears of corn in her hand, and nursing a boy-baby. The same author, Mr. Nork, quotes Albertus Magnus as having known that with the rise of the constellation of the Virgin our Lord Jesus Christ was born, and adds that he may have had a source which is now lost; but the item is interesting, and seems to verify the other statements connected with the legends of the Nativity. Roger Bacon, the learned monk of the thirteenth century, is another important witness. He places the birth of the Blessed Virgin herself at the time when the sun stood in the constellation of the Virgin, being the emblem of her, while nursing the infant Jesus Christ.

St. Paul says nothing about the birth of Christ and we know that the early Christians were little concerned with the details of the life of the Saviour. They clung to his doctrines and to the belief in his resurrection. The legends of the Nativity were formed under the influence of other religions which possessed aspirations similar to Christianity.

The similarity between the doctrines of the ancient Mazdaism and Christianity is well established. The followers of Zoroaster believed in a virgin-born saviour, later on identified with Mithras, whose arrival on earth would usher in a millennium of peace and happiness. The dead would rise and the world would be renewed; and the daily prayer was for the speedy coming of the kingdom.

Mithras is called the God that comes from the rocks (*ὁ θεὸς ἐκπέτρας*) and is represented as a child emerging from a rough stone. This name may have given rise to the idea that he was born in a



MITHRAS BORN FROM THE ROCKS.

Holding in his hand the grape which replaces in the West the Haoma of the Persians.¹

¹ Reproduced from F. Cumont, p. 231, after Lajard, Plate CIII.

cave, which would be the more probable, as the cave plays an important part in Mithras worship.

Mithras worship was almost in possession of the world when Christianity came to the front and overthrew it. Judging from monuments discovered in France, on the Rhine, and on the Danube, the entire north of the Roman Empire was strongly addicted to the cult of Mithras.

The influence of Mithras worship on Christianity is well established.¹ We mention especially the rites of baptism, the Eucharist, facing the Orient in prayer, the sanctification of the day of the sun, and the celebration of the winter solstice as the birthday of the Saviour. Concerning this latter institution, the Rev. Robert Sinker says in Smith's *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities* (pp. 357-8) :

“As Mithraicism gradually blended with Christianity, changing its name but not altogether its substance, many of its ancient notions and rites passed over too, and the Birthday of the Sun, the visible manifestation of Mithras himself, was transferred to the commemoration of the Birth of Christ.

“Numerous illustrations of the above remarks may be found in ancient inscriptions, *e. g.*, SOLI INVICTO ET LUNAE AETERNAE C. VETTI GERMANI LIB. DUO PARATUS ET HERMES DEDERUNT,² or ΗΑΙΩ ΜΙΘΡΑ ΑΝΙΚΗΤΩ³ (Gruter, *Inscriptiones Antiquae*, p. xxxiii). In the legend on the reverse of the copper coins of Constantine, SOLI INVICTO COMITI,⁴ retained long after his conversion, there is at once an idea of the ancient Sun-God, and of the new Sun of Righteousness.

“The supporters of this theory cite various passages from early Christian writers indicating a recognition of this view. The sermon of Ambrose, quoted by Jablonsky, is certainly spurious, and is so marked in the best editions of his works; it furnishes, however, an interesting illustration of an early date. The passage reads :

“Well do the common people call this somehow sacred day of the birth of the Lord “a new sun,” and confirm it with so great an authority of theirs that Jews and Gentiles concur in this mode of speech. And this should willingly be accepted by us, because with the birth of the Saviour there comes not only the salvation of man-

¹The mysteries of Mithras were introduced into the Roman Empire at the end of the first century. They gained more and more influence until they reached a climax in the second and third centuries of the Christian era. Most of the many monuments which Mithras worship left all over the Roman Empire, especially in Gaul and Germany, date from this period when it had almost become a rival of Christianity.

²To the unconquerable sun and the eternal moon this is given by P. and II., the two children of C. V. G.

³I. e., Helios (or the sun) Mithras the invincible.

⁴To the invincible Sun, the protector.

kind, but the brightness of the sun itself is renewed.' (*Serm.* 6, in *Appendice*, p. 397, ed. Bened.)

"In the Latin editions of Chrysostom is a homily, wrongly ascribed to him, but probably written not long after his time, in which we read :

"'But they call it the birthday of the Invincible (i. e. Mithras). Who, however, is invincible if not our Lord, who has conquered death? Further, if they say, "it is the birthday of the sun," He is the sun of righteousness, about whom the prophet Malachi says, Unto you that fear my name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.'"¹

The preceding lines of this quotation from Chrysostom (*Hom.* 31) plainly state that Christ's birthday has been fixed upon the day of the birth of Mithras. Chrysostom says: "On this day (the birthday of Mithras) also the birthday of Christ was lately fixed at Rome in order that whilst the heathen were busied with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their holy rites undisturbed." (*Sermo de Nativitate S. Joannis Baptistae*: Vol. II., 1113, ed. Paris, 1570.)

The Rev. Mr. Sinker continues :

"Leo the Great finds fault with the baneful persuasion of some to whom this day of our celebration is worthy of honor not so much on account of the birth of Christ as for the sake of the renewal of the sun."

"Again, the same father observes :

"'But no other day appears to us more appropriate than to-day for worshipping in heaven and earth the Feast of the Nativity, and while even in the material world (in the elements) a new light shines, He confers on us before our very senses, the brightness of His wonderful sacrament.' (*Serm.* 26, § 1, p. 87.)

"We may further cite one or two instances from ancient Christian poets: Prudentius, in his hymn *Ad Natalem Domini*, thus speaks (*Cathemerinon*, xi. init., p. 364, ed. Arevalus):

"'Why does the sun already leave the circle of the arctic north?

Is not Christ born upon the earth who will the path of light increase?'

"Paulinus of Nola also (*Poema* xiv. 15-19, ed. Muratori):

"'Truly, after the solstice, when Christ is born in the body,

With a new sun he will change the frigid days of the north wind.

While he is offering to mortals the birth that will bring them salvation,

Christ with the progress of days gives command that the nights be declining.

¹ Observe in this passage that the prophet thinks of the sun as God after the Babylonian and Egyptian fashion, as having wings which are of a wholesome or healing influence.

“Reference may also be made to an extract in Assemani (*Bib. Or.*, ii. 163) from Dionysius Bar-Salibi, bishop of Amida, which shows traces of a similar feeling in the East; also to a passage from an anonymous Syrian writer, who distinctly refers the fixing of the day to the above cause; we are not disposed, however, to attach much weight to this last passage. More important for our purpose is the injunction of a council of Rome (743 A. D.): ‘None shall celebrate the Brumalia on the first of January’ (can. 9, Labbé vi. 1548), which shows at any rate that for a long time after the fall of heathenism, many traces of heathen rites still remained.”

So far the Rev. Robert Sinkler. In the *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities* (I., p. 357) he quotes the various passages in their original language, which we have taken the liberty to replace by English translations.

Now, in fine, what shall we say of all these similarities of Christian legends with Buddhistic, Mithraistic, Greek, and other myths? The common belief is that if these similarities could be proved to constitute actual connexions, and if they could be traced to a common source, it would be a death-blow to Christianity, because it destroys its claim to originality. That in our opinion is a mistake. Our knowledge of the origin of Christian legends neither establishes nor destroys Christianity; it only helps us to understand its mission better and learn to appreciate its place in the evolution of religious thought.

Christianity is a new phase in the history of mankind, but it could be acceptable to the people of the age in which it originated only by literally coming as a fulfilment of the ancient religions which it replaced. Thus the fabric of its legends will appear to the historians as a new combination of older traditions; and the light of its main ideas is a collection of the scattered rays of many more ancient notions which were then focussed into systematic form.

The legends of Christianity were undoubtedly believed by many early Christians, and their religious faith was not at once freed from the Pagan conceptions of pre-Christian traditions. In fact, many of these Pagan conceptions continue till to-day, and it is the duty of the present generation to sift truth from error and to understand religion better than did our ancestors. The history of mankind is not yet concluded and least of all the chapter of the development of man’s spiritual aspirations, his religious ideals and the hopes of the faith that is in him.