

A CHINESE ST. PATRICK.

HISTORY OR MYTH?

BY JOHN STEELE.

IN the reconstruction of ancient history the myth hypothesis has been freely adopted as the universal solvent. No difficulty, however intractable to other treatment, has been known to resist this agent, corrosive often to a degree. This method in criticism is not the exclusive property of the last two centuries. The Greeks used it and disposed of many awkward theological difficulties by its means.

In the absence of direct proof myth, other things being equal, may be as good a working hypothesis as any; but the crux of the problem is in the establishment of the equivalency of the assumptions that justify the different hypotheses. In the treatment of the ancient histories of the middle East this equivalency is most difficult to secure. Whole hosts of contemporary facts have disappeared. Customs are known to us only by chance allusion. Modes of thought are lost. Most difficult of all, the atmosphere of past time has become so attenuated that we find it difficult, if not impossible, to breathe it in quantity sufficient to saturate our reasoning faculty. As a result we have a free use of the myth solvent.

Now this method of solution is open to some objections that lie on the surface. It is easy, it has a suspicious history, and it is opposed to the common-sense humanistic thinking of the simpler East. It is easier to cut the knot than to undo it, but in other departments of criticism the obvious solution is suspect. It requires courage to accept an antinomy and wait for the further light that will bring the higher resolution. It requires courage also to sit down in front of an historical difficulty, and wait and work for

its solution without resorting, *currente calamo* to myth as the obvious and therefore the only reasonable explanation.

Again, the myth as a solvent has ever been the child and not the parent of scepticism. This holds good whether the scepticism be philosophic or religious and whether the interest behind it be destructive or conservative. The fact is sufficient to suggest extreme caution both in the application of the method and in the acceptance of its results.

And finally the ancient histories, when approached from the eastern side, so to speak, are so replete with human interest that to sublimate them is to do violence to the basal instincts of humanity. No amount of study lore can in such a case outweigh the humanism that underlies the thinking of the centuries.

An incident recorded in a Chinese local history seems to bring us to the very cradle of a myth, and at the same time to show that the easy and obvious mythical explanation is not the most credible one.

At the beginning of the ninth Christian century the T'ang dynasty was served by the ardent Confucianist and able administrator, Han Yü. Too well served indeed for his own interest, for when the emperor, a devotee of Buddhism, welcomed with extravagant honors the arrival at the capital of a bone of the Indian saint, Han Yü protested in a memorial which remains to the present day a monument to his patriotism. The reward of this temerity was banishment to Ch'ao-chou, a prefecture on the southeastern border of the empire, scarcely reclaimed and but for a few scholars sunk in barbaric ignorance. The district retains the name to-day, with Ch'ao-chou fu as its administrative center and Swatow as its trading port.

The administration of Han Yü lasted a bare nine months, but in that time he contrived to establish civilization on a sure basis, and he is worshiped to this day as the patron saint of the region under the posthumous title of Wên-kung, "Literary Duke." The means he employed was the development of the village school system. Enlisting the services of a noted scholar of the region, who now occupies the place of honor next him in the temples, he popularized education to such a degree that at the close of the Ming dynasty Ch'ao-chou natives boasted that their "white words" (*patois*) were spoken in the streets of Peking. This referred to the large band of Ch'ao-chou scholars who held office under the Ming emperors.

But the most dramatic incident in the administration of Han

Yü in A. D. 819 is his expulsion of a monster crocodile from the river which flows past the prefectural city and has since been called by his name. The story goes that dwellers on the river bank appealed to him for protection against this monster, who devoured their sheep, pigs, fowls, and cattle, and even dragged into the water the wild boars, deer, and bears which came down from the hills to drink. The prefect in response to this appeal prepared an ultimatum to the monster, and cast it into the stream along with a sheep and a pig. Thereupon the crocodile disappeared, cast out by this eastern St. Patrick.

The story seems to present as perfect an example of the myth as we could ask for. It satisfies all the conditions. The administrator found his province dominated by barbaric ignorance. He engaged this demon, and expelled it. Such legends are common in other lands. The only touch wanting to complete the myth is the metamorphosis of the crocodile into a dragon, as has been done in the dragon stories of Rhodes and elsewhere. And scholars of repute are not wanting who accept this interpretation, e. g., Professor Giles in an article on Han Yü in his *Dictionary of Chinese Biography*.

But there are strong reasons for accepting even the details of the crocodile story as genuine history, without accepting the causal nexus assumed by the recorders.

This crocodile story does not stand alone in the annals of Ch'ao-chou. Two other instances, at intervals of about 150 years, are recorded. That given in fullest detail refers to the year A. D. 999, under the Sung dynasty. Chên Yao-tso was at that time prefect of Ch'ao-chou. Devoted to the teachings of Confucius, as was his illustrious predecessor, he erected a shrine to the latter, and depicted on its walls the story of the crocodile. In the summer of the following year word was brought to him from Liu-wong, a town forty miles further up the Han river, that a crocodile had appeared in a deep pool there and with a blow of his tail had swept into the water a boy of the surname Chang who was playing by his mother as she washed clothes on the river bank. On receipt of this news the prefect sent two of his officers to drag the pool with a stout net. They secured the beast, and brought him to Ch'ao-chou fu, where he was treated as a contumacious descendant of Han Yü's enemy, was cut in pieces and boiled as a warning to others. This story, corresponding on the one hand with the known habits of the alligator and on the other with the practices of Chinese magistrates, is well authenticated. The third story lacks detail, and is on that

account the less likely to be a fabrication. It is the latest record of the appearance of a crocodile in the Han river.

The documents recording these events have always been accepted as contemporaneous with the events themselves by scholars who are among the keenest and most fearless literary critics in the world. The evidence for their genuineness is derived from criticism of the lower and the higher order, for the Chinese are experts in both. The "Ultimatum" of Han Yü corresponds in style with other literary remains of the great writer, and has a place along with unquestioned products of his pen in the collection of "Masterpieces of Literature," upon which the style of students throughout the empire has been modeled for centuries.

Although no alligators are now found in the Han and none of their remains have yet been discovered in Ch'ao-chou (no serious geological work has yet been attempted there), the occurrence of such reptiles in that region, either as visitors or habitants, is in the order of nature. M. Fauvel has shown how widely the crocodile was distributed through China. If other evidence were lacking the existence of allied species to-day in the rivers of Indo-China on the south and in the Yangtze in China proper, makes their occurrence at intermediate points, when riverine conditions were favorable, a matter of certainty. The distribution of the Nile crocodile from Egypt, through Madagascar, to the Cape is a parallel instance.

Strong evidence for the actuality of the occurrence is derived from its relation to the administrative problems of Ch'ao-chou under the T'ang dynasty. The prefect was appealed to by the people entrusted to his care. As official in charge of the district he was the "father and mother" of the inhabitants. It is not only the instinct of sport that sends an Indian collector into the jungle after the tiger which has been playing havoc with the bullocks and men of the district for which he is responsible. Han Yü could not turn a deaf ear to the cry of his "children." In virtue of his office he was compelled to do all in his power to give them relief; and as a consistent Confucianist he believed himself to be in such harmony with the established order of things as to have the assistance of nature when he set himself to remove any cause of disturbance in her realm.

The "Ultimatum" also opens up a vein of political philosophy which is conclusive as to its genuineness, as well as illustrative of the Oriental theory of government. The rule of the emperor spelled to Han Yü a civilization pushed out from the capital until it covered the most remote provinces of the empire. On its borders

this civilization marched with Chaos, unsubdued and but sullenly yielding to superior force the fastnesses she once claimed as her own. So to-day in India the jungle marches with the village fields, and man disputes the possession of his holding with the wild beasts. The prefect had learned from history of the disappearance of noxious animals from his district before the all-pervasive civilization of the great Yü. He knew of the decadence that followed that ruler's death, and of the return to their old haunts of the savage and the wild beast. Now, when he holds commission from an emperor under whom the old limits of empire had been restored, he finds his authority disputed by this monster. The crocodile is the protagonist of a hardly subdued and still rebellious savagery which must be pushed beyond the borders of the imperial sway. The "Ultimatum" allows to the crocodile a right to live, and a place in nature. All it asks is that this place shall be beyond the emperor's dominion. The strain of exalted imperialism in which the document is conceived is very noble.

And the monster disappeared! Han Yü was fortunate as he deserved to be. A chronicler tells that during the night that followed the committal of his "Ultimatum" to the waters a great storm raged and the waters below the city were dried up. When normal conditions returned the crocodile had disappeared. There is nothing incredible in this. In the ninth century A. D. the river Han below Ch'ao-chou fu was more like an estuary than it is to-day. A heavy rainfall among the mountains would send down a volume of water which would first scour the channel clear of such unwieldy things as crocodiles, and then deposit over the estuary great quantities of disintegrating granite sand. This would for the time choke up all the channels, and spread the waters of the river over a wide area. Even if the crocodile were not swept away by the first rush of water, the shoaling up of the river below him threatening his retreat to deeper waters would be sufficient to cause him to withdraw down river. This one finds in the Malay Peninsula to-day as the dry season comes on, the unfortunate crocodiles remaining in isolated pools being subject to death from starvation. Either of the above explanations would sufficiently account, in a natural manner, for the disappearance of the beast. *Felix opportunitate* the great prefect enjoys the added honor of being the exterminator of the crocodile, and the bringer of peace to the people. It is worth while noting that the early references to this occurrence treat it as a matter of importance secondary to Han Yü's great administrative and educational reforms. By these

they say he made of the barbarous southeast "a dwelling place of Confucius and Mencius by the sea-shore."

On the evidence submitted here one may fairly claim that in this case the mythical solution, though temptingly obvious, is not the correct one. Other difficult cases in Eastern historical literature may, on examination, yield a similar result.