

## THE CHINESE BATTLE OF THE FISHES.

BY BERTHOLD LAUFER.

IN his article "The Fish as a Mystic Symbol in China and Japan," Dr. Carus reproduced among other illustrations a stone bas-relief of the Han period representing a battle of the fishes,<sup>1</sup> and aptly described it as "an army of fishes going to war, thus presupposing the existence of a Chinese fish-epic which may have been a battle of the fishes corresponding to the Homeric Battle of the Frogs and Mice." Neither Dr. Carus nor I were able at that time to point to a source of ancient Chinese lore from which this representation of a fish-epic might have been derived. I believe I am now able to supply this want, and to trace the tradition which may have given the impetus to this curious artistic conception.

It is well known that under the reign of the first Emperor Ts'in Shi (B. C. 221-210) the belief prevailed in the existence of three Isles of the Blest, P'êng-lai, Fang-chang and Ying-chou, supposed to be far off in the eastern ocean, and to contain a drug capable of preventing death and securing immortality. The desire of the emperor to possess this drug prompted him to send an expedition out in search of these islands. The party consisted of several thousands of young boys and girls headed by the magician Sü Shi.

"Several years elapsed," Se-ma Ts'ien,<sup>2</sup> the father of history, tells us, "and they were not able to find the drug. Because they had incurred great expense and feared a reprimand, they made this false report: 'The drug of P'êng-lai can be found, but we were always prevented from so doing by the large *kiao*<sup>3</sup> fish and therefore could not reach the place. We wish to propose that an excellent

<sup>1</sup> *The Open Court*, July, 1911, p. 402.

<sup>2</sup> E. Chavannes, *Les mémoires historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien*, Vol. II, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> A species of shark.

archer be sent with us so that when the fish appears, he can shoot it with arrows from the repeating crossbow.<sup>4</sup>

"Emperor Ts'in Shi dreamed that he was fighting with the God of the Ocean who had the appearance of a man. He applied to a scholar of profound knowledge, an interpreter of dreams, who said to him: 'The God of the Ocean cannot be seen, because he is guarded by the large fishes and dragons. If your Majesty will offer prayers and sacrifices, and be ready and attentive, the good gods may be invoked.'

"The emperor, accordingly, ordered those going to sea to take along implements for catching the large fish, whereas he himself, armed with a repeating crossbow, and waiting for the large fish to come forth, kept in readiness to aim at it. He went from Lang-ya<sup>5</sup> to the mountain Yung-ch'eng,<sup>6</sup> without seeing anything; arriving at Chi-fu,<sup>7</sup> he perceived a large fish which he aimed at and killed." Shortly afterwards the emperor died.

In another chapter of his "Historical Memoirs" Se-ma Ts'ien gives a different version of the story:<sup>8</sup>

"Emperor Ts'in Shi dispatched Sü Fu to sea in search of the marvelous beings. On his return Sü Fu forged an excuse and said: 'I saw a great god in the ocean who thus addressed me: Are you the envoy of the Emperor of the West?—I replied in the affirmative.—What are you looking for?—I replied: I wish to ask you for the drug prolonging the years and increasing longevity.—The god said: The offering of your king of Ts'in is trifling; you may see this drug but must not take it.—Thereupon the god conducted me toward the south-east, and we arrived on the island of P'eng-lai. I saw the gate of the palace Chi-ch'êng, where stood an emissary of copper color and having the body of a dragon; his splendor illuminated the sky above. Then greeting him twice I said: What offering can I make to you?—The God of the Ocean said: Give me sons of good family with virgin daughters, as well as workmen of all trades. Then you will obtain the drug.'

"Emperor Ts'in Shi was very well satisfied and sent three thousand young boys and young girls; he gave Sü Fu seeds of the five kinds of grain and workmen of all trades. Sü Fu set out on

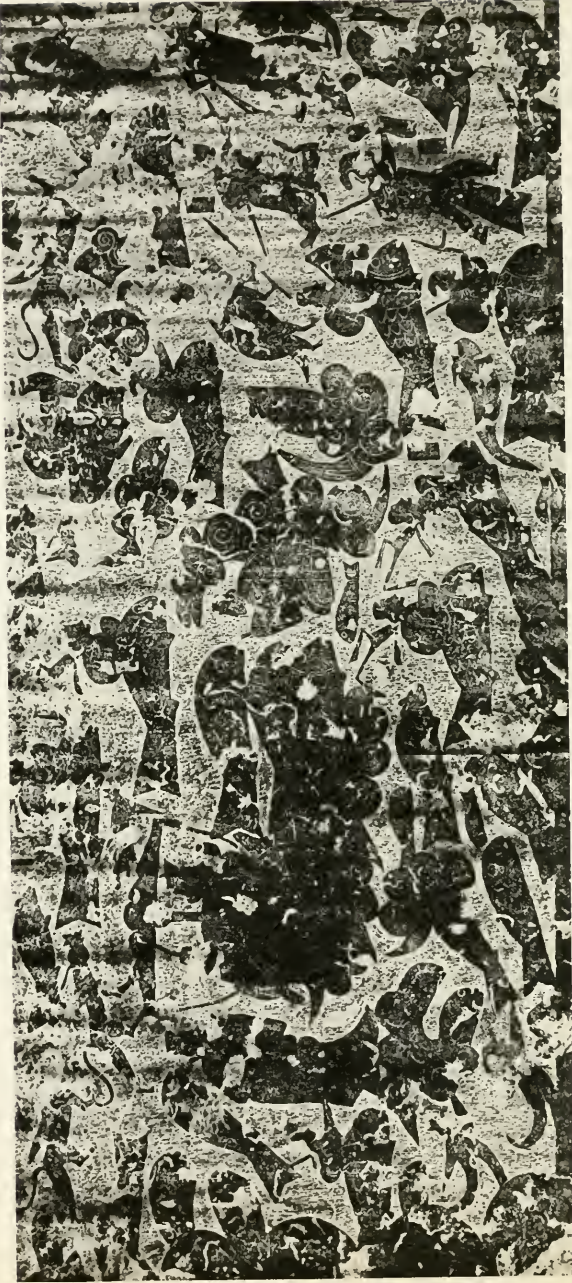
<sup>4</sup> Such crossbows with a magazine from which six to eight darts can be shot off in rapid succession are still manufactured and utilized in China.

<sup>5</sup> On the south coast of Shantung Province.

<sup>6</sup> In the prefecture of Lai-chou on the north coast of Shantung Province.

<sup>7</sup> On the north coast of Shantung.

<sup>8</sup> Chavannes, *loc. cit.*, p. 152.



THE ENVOY OF TS'IN SHI AND THE OCEAN-GOD.  
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his route; he found a calm and fertile place where he stopped and made himself king, and never returned."

From both these versions of the tradition, an understanding of the bas-relief in question may be derived. Indeed the submarine kingdom of the God of the Ocean is there displayed before our eyes. It is the sea, not a river, which is intended, as above all evidenced by the representation of sea-mammals. A seal is manifestly outlined on the upper left margin just above the canopy of the chariot, and there are reasons to believe that the Chinese first became acquainted with seals and other marine mammals through these very sea expeditions under Emperor Ts'in Shi. The oil obtained from seals was utilized for burning in the lamps placed in the emperor's tomb, and it was believed that they could not burn out for a long time.<sup>9</sup>

On the right-hand side of the slab is represented a four-footed mammal (slightly damaged) holding a spear in its forepaws. The center of the composition is occupied by the dignified personage driving the chariot drawn by three huge sea-fishes. The powerful God of the Ocean, "of the appearance of a man," guarding the Fortunate Isles and their treasure, the drug of immortality, may now be recognized in him; he is holding a jade emblem of rank in his hands. The man kneeling in front of his chariot, likewise provided with such an emblem, is apparently the magician, the envoy of the emperor; requesting the aquatic ruler for the drug. The armed warriors astride the fishes, and the fishes and frogs armed with bucklers and swords surrounding their lord on all sides, are his valiant body-guard ready to fight the unwelcome intruders, or perhaps on the warpath toward the shores of Shantung to punish the audacious emperor for his high-minded ambitions.

The subject of this bas-relief may therefore be defined as the struggle of Emperor Ts'in Shi with the God of the Ocean and his fish-creatures.

<sup>9</sup> Chavannes, *loc. cit.*, p. 195.