

THE PHYSIOLOGUS AND THE CHRISTIAN FISH SYMBOL.¹

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UNDER the title *Φυσιολόγος* a small work on Christian zoology, or rather animal symbolism, was written in Alexandria in the first quarter of the second century. In it are enumerated the properties of a large number of real and fabulous animals and also of some trees and stones, and these are assigned either to Christ or to the devil and held up before the people as examples to be imitated or avoided. This curious little work which contains old nature lore and old nature fables in a Christian setting found a wide circulation in the Christian world. It was translated into Ethiopic, Armenian, Syriac and Arabic, and in Europe was worked over in the Middle Ages in a number of Latin versions which were carried over into the languages of most of the Germanic and Romance nations. The animal symbolism of medieval composition and graphic art which is so singularly delightful to us, had its origin in the *Physiologus*.

In the Greek original of this book the following Indian elements have been discovered, though to be sure the one to be treated first is not quite convincing.

In the second chapter it is specified as the third characteristic of the lion that his young are born dead and are awakened to life on the third day by a roar from their father: thus did God also on the third day awaken his son Jesus Christ from the

¹ Translated by Lydia G. Robinson from the author's *Indien und das Christentum* (Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1914). An English translation of the entire book is in preparation with the Open Court Publishing Company. In the bibliographical references the following abbreviations will be observed: ZDMG, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*; SBA, *Sitzungsberichte der Kgl. Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*.

dead. This lion story, as Grünwedel confidently asserts,² is supposed to go back to one of the earliest epithets of Buddha which later has been transferred also to several Bodhisattvas: namely, "the one who calls with the lion's voice," Skt. *simhanâda*, Pâli *sihanâda*. I think that this combination must be understood thus: The foolish statement in the Physiologus has arisen as the result of a misunderstanding from the statement of the Buddhists that "the lion of the house of the Shâkyas," as Buddha is often called, awakens men by his powerful call to the real life, to the knowledge of truth, and has shown them the way to eternal salvation. At least I can not imagine any other connection between the epithet of Buddha and the lion story of the Physiologus. The whole idea is not very plausible in itself but it gains in probability through the observation to which we now proceed.

Very evident is the misunderstanding of a well-known Indian story which has been pointed out independently by two scholars, F. W. K. Müller³ and Lüders,⁴ in Chapter 17 of the Physiologus in the account of the capture of the unicorn. According to that account the very strong and crafty unicorn can be conquered only in one way. A pure virgin must be sent to him. The unicorn approaches her and lays his head confidently in her lap, whereupon the virgin takes the animal, who follows her willingly, and leads it *into the palace to the king*. The concluding sentence furnishes proof that the origin of this fable has been derived from the Indian story of the hermit "Unicorn" (Ekashringa) which is widespread in both Buddhist and Brahman literature, and fragments of its oldest literary version, as Lüders has shown, are preserved in the verses of Jâtaka 526. In the Indian story a princess craftily entices to the capital city *into the palace of her father* the ascetic Unicorn, whose presence is necessary to remove the drought in the land. Hence it is obvious that the information about the capture of the unicorn animal in the Physiologus and its medieval offshoots has arisen through an obvious misunderstanding of the Indian legend.

Equally convincing is the evidence of an Indian derivation for the story of the elephant in Chapter 19 of the Physiologus which Berthold Laufer has given us on the basis of a Chinese source.⁵

² ZDMG, LII, p. 460, note 5; *Mythologie des Buddhismus in Tibet und der Mongolei*, Leipsic, 1900, p. 128.

³ Anniversary volume for Adolf Bastian, pp. 531-536, especially 532.

⁴ *Nachr. v. d. K. Ges. d. Wiss. zu Göttingen, Phil.-his. Kl.*, 1897, p. 115; 1901, p. 53, note 2.

⁵ *T'oung Pao*, XIV, July 1913, pp. 361f.

In the Physiologus we are told the following:⁶ "When the elephant has fallen he cannot rise because his knees have no joints. But how does he happen to fall? When he wants to sleep he leans against a tree and sleeps that way. Now since the Indians know of this peculiarity of the elephant they go about it and saw a little at the tree. The elephant comes to lean against it and as soon as he touches the tree it falls with him to the ground. Now after he has fallen he cannot get up again, therefore he begins to whine and cry. Another elephant hears him and comes to help him but cannot raise the fallen one. Then both cry out and twelve others come, but even these are not able to raise him. Then they all cry. Last of all comes the little elephant who places his trunk around the elephant and lifts him up."

The same thing is told of the rhinoceros in the Chinese account, originating in India, which Laufer has discovered. That this is more original than the account in the Physiologus, which of course also refers expressly to India, appears from the fact that the Indians who have always been well acquainted with the elephant could not possibly have represented it as possessing legs without knee joints. Hence in India the fable must have been told of the rhinoceros which is much rarer there than the elephant and is found only in the southern part of the country and on the islands of the Indian archipelago. The Physiologus has transferred this story of the rhinoceros, which he does not mention at all, upon the elephant.

Wo Shi-Kao, a Chinese physician from the period of the T'ang dynasty (618-907) who occupied an official position on the coast of Southern China, heard the genuine and original version from the mouth of a ship captain. In the words of Laufer it runs as follows: "The maritime people intent on capturing a rhinoceros proceed by erecting on a mountain path many structures of decayed timber, something like a stable for swine or sheep. The front legs of the rhinoceros being straight without joints, the animal is in the habit of sleeping by leaning against the trunk of a tree. The rotten timber will suddenly break down, and the animal will topple in front without being able for a long time to rise. Then they attack and kill it."

We must fully agree also with the succeeding observations which Laufer adds to this text in order to establish the originality of its subject in spite of its late attestation. The Chinese version relates consistently the capture of the rhinoceros by the craft of the

⁶ According to the German translation of Emil Peters, Berlin, 1898, p. 39.

huntsmen which is based on the animal's alleged anatomical character and manner of life; whereas the Physiologus merely tells of the cunning preparation for the capture, but then entirely forgets the huntsmen who are lying in wait. It treats only of the wonderful rescue of the fallen elephant which accords with the religious purpose of the book in giving occasion for its symbolical interpretation. The fallen elephant is Adam; the first who comes to his rescue is the law; the twelve who come afterwards but who are no more successful are the prophets; and the tiny elephant who finally brings deliverance is Christ who has humbled himself.

The Chinese text does not name India expressly but speaks of the "maritime people," by which must be meant in an indefinite way the inhabitants of the coast lands of farther India or of the islands of the archipelago, at any rate tribes that were under the influence of Indian civilization. Our story must have circulated in India proper (as the version of the Physiologus shows) long before the time when the ship captain mentioned by the Chinese physician had brought it to China. It reached the western part of the old world somewhat before the Greek Physiologus was written; for Pliny (*Hist. Nat.*, VIII, 39) and Cæsar (*De bello Gallico*, VI, 27) tell the same story of the elk who had no joints in his legs and therefore slept leaning against a tree, which the hunters sawed into in order to capture the animal. The derivation of this story from India and its connection with the fable of the elephant in the Physiologus and the fable of the rhinoceros in the Chinese account is as obvious as the necessity of the assumption that the last named version represents the original form of this strange bit of folklore.

Dependence on India is also perfectly clear in one other passage of the Physiologus. The bird *χαπαδριός* is mentioned in Chapter 38 as carrying away to the sun the illness of a man near whom it is brought, and there being consumed. This can be nothing else but the Indian bird *hâridravâ*,⁷ to which (Rigveda I, 50, 12 and Atharvaveda I, 22, 4) jaundice is transmitted and in the latter passage in verse 1 the disease is wished away to the sun.

These loans from India which we find in the Physiologus might seem in themselves to be of but little consequence for the purpose of this book, but still they are of great essential importance. The Gospel of John originated at the same time and in the same cycles of belief and thought as the Physiologus; therefore Indian material could find entrance into the former as well as the latter. I em-

⁷ Ernst Kuhn in an epilogue to Van den Bergh's *Indische Einflüsse*, 2d ed., p. 118, note 1, where the earlier literature on this coincidence is also given.

phasize this possibility with the greater positiveness because personally I have not been able to convince myself of the presence of Buddhist elements in the Gospel of John after careful investigation of the details under consideration.⁸ But even the infiltration of Buddhist elements in other New Testament writings seems more comprehensible in the light of the Indian stories in the Physiologus.

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The Christian fish-symbol is not mentioned in the Physiologus, and since it fits in so excellently into this thought-cycle we may in this case ascribe its full demonstrative force to the *argumentum e silentio*, and maintain that the fish-symbol had not yet found any application in Christianity at the time the Physiologus was written. The first evidence of it is in Tertullian at the end of the second century.

Pischel⁹ believes that he has established the loan of this symbol from northern Buddhism and that he has found its historical foundation in the mingling of religions recently brought to light in Turkestan. This thesis of Pischel's aroused a vigorous investigation of the problem but may now be finally characterized as untenable. The fish-symbol as denoting the Saviour arose in Christianity independently of Buddhism and must be referred to other sources.

From a scholarly essay of J. Scheftelowitz¹⁰ which is based on a large mass of material, it appears first that the conception of the fish as a symbol of the Christian originated in Judaism, which was familiar with the fish as the symbol of the Israelite; secondly and chiefly, that the idea of the fish as a symbol of protection against demonic influences and as a sign of good luck was astonishingly wide spread,¹¹ and with this is connected the equally wide-spread notion of the fish as the seat of departed human souls and also as the symbol of fertility. The fish-symbol denoting Christ as the Saviour has its root (like the same symbol for saviour gods and for Buddha in India, like the Babylonian legend of the pious Par-napishtim who was rescued from the deluge by the fish-god Ea, and many similar stories) in ancient popular ideas for whose origin we must go back to the beginnings of mankind, to the times when man regarded many animals which were superior to him in strength

⁸ See *Indien und das Christentum*, pp. 34, 35, 39-41.

⁹ "Der Ursprung des christlichen Fischsymbols," SBA, 1905, pp. 506ff.

¹⁰ "Das Fischsymbol im Judentum und Christentum," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, XIV, 1911, pp. 1ff, 321ff.

¹¹ Pp. 343ff.

and skill as higher beings which he therefore deified. The fish belongs to the oldest totem animals, and while man was still in the state of savagery it aroused his admiration on account of its ability to swim and live beneath the water.¹²

The *direct* derivation of the Christian fish-symbol as denoting the Saviour must be sought in the application which the fish has found in the symbolism of classical antiquity and with other Mediterranean nations.

This also sets aside the conception of Oldenberg¹³ that the origin of the Christian fish-symbol can be explained in a perfectly satisfactory manner from the familiar acrostic¹⁴ without the aid of foreign influences.

The objections which Van den Bergh¹⁵ has raised to this view go to show that the Christian use of the word *ἰχθύς* cannot have originated in that acrostic. When Van den Bergh proves that the close succession of these five words was not in the least customary in ordinary speech and in fact is not to be found at all in earlier times, and further that the combination of these letters in an acrostic was not suggested by any particular size of the initials in epigraphical use, it follows that the word *ἰχθύς* cannot originally have been referred to Christ. Van den Bergh¹⁶ says: "Through the interpretation of its letters the Ichthys became serviceable to the Christians and entirely lost its pagan aspect." I would like to change this explanation slightly; for I think that the religious and symbolic meaning of the fish then current in pagan lands in the sense of protection, salvation, good fortune, health and fertility caused the Christian interpretation of the letters in the word.

To the best known writings of the literature of northern Buddhism belong the "Lotus of the Good Law" and the biographies of Buddha called Lalitavistara and Mahāvastu, none of which can be placed before 200 A. D. Most of the parallels with the Gospel stories which have been met with in Buddhist literature are found in these three works.¹⁷ Unfortunately nothing more can now be said about these parallels except that it is not impossible that they were borrowed from Christianity. When in the later

¹² Compare the useful compilations of Paul Carus in "Animal Symbolism," *The Open Court*, February 1911, pp. 79ff.

¹³ ZDMG, LIX, pp. 625ff.

¹⁴ *ἰχθύς* = Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ υἱὸς σωτήρ.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, LX, pp. 210ff.

¹⁶ *Loc cit.*, p. 212.

¹⁷ *The Monist*, XXI, October 1911, p. 520.

Mahâyâna writings mention is made of Buddha as a fisherman who catches men like fishes, and this comparison has passed over into Chinese art in which Buddha is represented as a fisherman with rod and hook,¹⁸ we cannot fail to recognize here a transference of the Christian symbol into the Buddhist world, because the catching of fish is an entirely un-Buddhistic act.

¹⁸ Paul Carus, *The Open Court*, June 1911, p. 357. See the illustration on the cover of this issue.