THE TREE OF JESSE AND INDIAN PARALLELS OR SOURCES

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The Tree of Jesse appears in Christian iconography possibly towards the close of the eleventh century; in any case it is found frequently in the twelfth century and in later Gothic art. Certain prototypes can be recognized even as early as the ninth century. At first the stem appears in Jesse's hand, then it rises from a point immediately behind the center of his reclining body, finally it rises from his navel. The ultimate flower of the tree is always Jesus, but the formula so develops that the Virgin becomes the most conspicuous figure (as in Fig. 1); moreover, as the branches multiply the whole becomes a veritable genealogical tree of the kings of Judea. The essential elements of the developed type are the representation of a kind of tree of life rooted in the navel of the recumbent Jesse and having for its ultimate flower a manifestation of the deity.

Portera has suggested that the conception is a fundamentally Oriental one, though the Bazaklik example cited by him is hardly pertinent. In the present preliminary note I do not propose to assert an Indian origin of the motif; I merely wish to point out that the whole group of ideas involved appears much earlier in India than anywhere else, that it leads there to the evolution of iconographic types which present startling parallels to those of the Jesse series, and that a derivation of the Western from the Indian forms is by no means impossible.

A type in some ways related to that of the Tree of Jesse occurs in illustrations of the Speculum Humanae Salvationis in connection with the story of Astyages. The Persian king is said to have had a dream in which he saw a vine growing out of the body of his only daughter. This vine was interpreted as a prophecy of the birth of King Cyrus, but in the Speculum the daughter becomes a type of the Virgin Mary. In the illustrations the vine sometimes rises from her navel, sometimes from between her breasts; in some cases it consists of leafy branches, not like a grapevine. Sir Thomas Arnoldb has inferred a lost early Persian type underlying not only the Speculum illustrations but also certain Persian illuminations that represent female figures surrounded by foliage.

A very obvious Indian parallel to the Tree of Jesse is the well-known Indian composition representing the birth of Brāhma, who is designated as "lotus-born," "navel-born," etc. and is shown seated on a lotus flower the stem of which rises from the navel of the recumbent Nārāyaṇa. Nārāyaṇa is here the supreme deity, represented as reclining (sayana-mūrti) on the cosmic waters during the interval between two cycles of manifestation; Brāhma is the demiurgic, the immediate creator of the new universe about to be brought

1. Sāṅkt: Lotus Rhizome Springing from a Yakṣa's Navel, C. 100 B. C.
3. Loc. cit.

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FIG. 1—Arcetri, S. Leonardo: Tree of Jesse Detail of Pulpit. XII Century

FIG. 2—Thaton, Burma: Lotus Birth of Brahma, Siva, and Vishnu, from Navel of Narayana (After Temple)\textsuperscript{10}

FIG. 3—Amaravati: Lotus Rhizome Rising from “Full Vessel” Supported by Yaksha. C. 200 A. D. (Photo. Goloubew)
into being. The oldest representations of this theme that I am able to cite are those of the reliefs in Caves II and IV at Bādāmī, dating from the end of the sixth century;⁶ at Deogaṛh, at least a century earlier, practically the same composition is found except that the stem of the lotus is not connected with Nārāyaṇa’s navel.⁷ Examples dating from the eighth century are known at Ellīrā⁸ (Fig. 6) and Sirpur,⁹ and the subject is not rare in still later mediaeval art, and it even recurs not infrequently in Rajput paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The formula passed also to Farther India, occurring both in Burma and Cambodia. Some of the Burmese examples from Thaton (Fig. 2) are remarkable in representing not merely a single deity as born from lotus and navel but the trinity of deities, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, seated on separate lotuses, all branches of one stem rooted in Nārāyaṇa’s navel.¹⁰

Although there does not seem to exist any representation of the birth of Brahmā in sculpture dating before the sixth century A. D., the event is explicitly described in the Mahābhārata (iii, 272, 44, and xii, 207, 13). The former of the passages cited reads as follows: “As soon as that Eternal Being [Nārāyaṇa] concentrated thought upon a New Creation of the Universe a lotus flower immediately came into existence from His navel and the four-faced Brahmā came forth from that navel-lotus.” As the extreme limits for the Mahābhārata are from 400 B. C. to 400 A. D. the text certainly takes us back beyond the earliest reliefs.

Nārāyaṇa is the supreme deity of the later Vedic period and effectively identical with Brahmā.¹¹ Bearing this in mind we can recognize the tradition already in the Rg Veda (x, 82, 5): “Prior to the sky, prior to this earth, prior to the living gods, what is that germ which the waters held first and in which all the gods existed? The waters held that same germ in which all the gods exist or find themselves; on the navel of the Unborn stood that in which all beings stood.”¹² Further, in the Atharva Veda (x, 7, 38) we have a description of Brahmā as “a great Yakṣa” in the midst of the creation, lying on the sea in penance;¹³ therein are set whatever gods there are, like the branches of a tree round about a trunk.”

The conception of a tree of life rooted in Brahmā recurs also in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad (vi, 1): “This eternal fig tree! That [root] indeed is the Pure. That is Brahmā.” It recurs again in a somewhat different way in the Bhagavad Gītā (xv, 1–3). We have thus been able to trace from let us say about a millennium B. C. onwards the essential elements common to the formulation of the Indian Birth of Brahmā and the Christian Tree of Jesse.

That our tree of life, in which all beings are set, should be rooted in a navel, whether of Brahmā, Nārāyaṇa, or Jesse, is significant, because it is precisely in India that importance has been attached to the navel as a center of vegetative energy. “The navel of immortality,” “the navel of Varuṇa,” and similar phrases constantly recur in Vedic literature.

7. J. Burgess, Ancient Monuments of India, pl. 250.
8. In the Daśāvatāra Cave.
10. Sir R. Temple, Notes on Antiquities from Ramana- desa, in Indian Antiquary, 1894.
11. Sir R. G. Bhandarkar, Vaishnavism, Śaivism, etc., 1913, p. 37. Later, when Brahma has lost his importance as supreme deity, Viṣṇu, taking his place, is identified with Nārāyaṇa and inherits the traditions connected with both the others.
12. Repeated in the Yajur Veda (Taittirīya Sanhīṭa, iv, 6, 3).
13. Every Indian deity may upon occasion be designated as a Yakṣa; see my Yakṣas, Washington, 1928, where, however, the Vedic passages, in which the earliest references are found, are omitted (see A. Hillebrandt, Vedicis Yakṣa, in Aus Indiens Kultur, Festgabe Garbe, 1927).
14. It is by the energy achieved in austerity (apās) that Brahma is said to have created the world.
and in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (v, 7, 1, 9), where the sacrificer hangs a golden sun disk around his neck so that it rests upon his navel, we find the following: "Why over the navel? [Because] beneath the navel is the seed, the power of procreation, and the gold plate represents vital energy and vigor."

Now the two Vedic passages cited above are especially suggestive inasmuch as they bring together two ideas, the tree rooted in a navel, and that the navel of a Yakṣa, which are later very conspicuous in the iconography of the water cosmology. In this iconography vegetation, the type of life, is represented by a lotus rhizome bearing leaves and flowers, sometimes with enframed animals or even human figures, and rising from the waters (see, for example, Fig. 3, where the uppermost enclosure contains an aniconic representation of the Buddha), the watery source being represented either by a "full vessel" (Grail motif), or by the open jaws of a makara (crocodile, water symbol), or by a dwarf Yakṣa, from whose mouth or navel (Fig. 4) the stem of the lotus rises. Yakṣa, of course, are vegetation spirits, guardians of procreative energies; the sap in trees is identical with the essence in the waters, with the water of life (amṛta); and these facts, taken in connection with the texts already cited, reveal very clearly the nature of the group of cosmic theories which ultimately finds expression in the formula for the Birth of Brahmn. Another motif closely connected with this formula is that of the tree or creeper the fruits of which are divine girls; trees of this kind grow in the Yakṣa Kubera's grove called Caitraratha (Rāmāyana, ii, 91, 43 f.), and later a creeper of this kind (nāra-lalā, "woman-vine") becomes a familiar form in decorative art. The Arabic Waqwaq tree may represent another phase of the same tradition.

Enough has now been said to show that the conception of a cosmic or world tree, bearing deities or other beings in or as its branches, and rising from the navel of some being who represents the ultimate source of life, is characteristicly Indian and of far greater antiquity than can be attributed to any kind of Jesse Tree. It is not necessary to assume that the idea of a Tree of Jesse represents in its entirety a borrowing from Indian or other Oriental sources; but when the fully developed formula, as in the Arcetri example (Fig. 1), approaches so closely the mediaeval Indian form as found in the Birth of Brahmn, when the tree actually resembles a lotus and rises from the navel of a recumbent figure, one is at least inclined to suppose that Indian types may have influenced the development.

It may well be that Male's pronouncement, "Née en Orient, l'iconographie chrétienne nous est arrivée toute faite," has a significance of farther reach than he intended. However this may be, it is clear already from the researches of Strzygowski and others that the study of Christian iconography and of the history of Western design can never be complete until the Indian parallels have been duly considered. These seem to be of importance at two periods, first, in the development of Coptic art, and, secondly, in that of Romanesque and Gothic. By way of example I will allude to the "sirene poisson" which appears in Romanesque, for instance, at Modena. Both male and female forms are recognizable, the motif being thus that of a kind of merman or mermaid with bifurcate fish tails, one of which is held in each hand. Porter supposes that the type has been developed by a misunderstanding of the Ahnās earth goddess holding a garland of fruits. Unfortunately for this theory, which is based only on the circumstantial evidence of visual similarities not amounting to identity, the two-tailed merman or mermaid occurs already in Etruscan art.

of the third century B. C., and in Indian art both about 100 B. C. at Sārnāth (Fig. 5) and about 100 A. D. at Mathurā (Fig. 6). In the Mathurā example the fish tails end in dragon heads, and this too is a feature that reappears in later Western art.

It is evident that the assumption of a misunderstanding of another type is here unnecessary; it is even more likely that the Ahnās earth goddess has been affected by the "sirène poisson" than vice versa. Nor is it necessary to suppose that the motif has been borrowed in India from Etruscan sources; early Indian art preserves forms that must have been long current there before the earliest examples in stone are found. In all probability the Indian form represents merely the Indian phase of a common "Early Asiatic" type, antedating all extant examples wherever met with. A parallel case is that of the familiar two-headed eagle, common in Indian art in the mediaeval period, common also in Western Asiatic (especially Hittite) art, and certainly of Oriental origin in European art. Another parallel is afforded by a widely distributed type of design in the "animal style" in which a single head is made to serve appropriately as part of the anatomy of two or more animals. Still another instance is the motif of a figure holding in both hands a piece of drapery which blows out behind or over the figure: C. H. Morgan, illustrating numerous European and one Chinese example, does not give one from India, though the type is there extremely common, and the Chinese example is certainly of Indian derivation. In all these cases students have been too freely inclined to assume on insufficient evidence a borrowing in one direction or another. It is, however, particularly important to bear in mind that the first occurrence of a given motif, that is, first to our knowledge, does not necessarily correspond to first invention, nor does it even of necessity indicate the country of first invention. The probable environment of first invention must be considered always in the light of cultural conditions as a whole, and, wherever in any way possible, literary evidence should be adduced in support of a real significance and not merely an accidental use of a motif. In any case, for students of Christian mediaeval art the Indian forms provide analogies and parallels which cannot be neglected if all the problems are to be seen in proper perspective.

![Fig. 5](image1)

![Fig. 6](image2)

![Fig. 7](image3)

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20. An admirable example of rigorous method has recently been furnished by W. Norman Brown in his *Indian and Christian Miracles of Walking on the Water*, Chicago, 1928.
21. Sārnāth: Fish-tailed Merman, C. 100 B. C.
23. Mathurā: Dragon-tailed Merman, C. 100 A. D.