

TO TASHKURGAN AND PANDUWASNUWARA: A GREEK MYTH ON THE SILK ROUTES.

Along the ancient Silk Routes, which wended their slow and tedious ways through the arid wastes of Central Asia, carrying the trade and treasures of the Orient in exchange for goods from the West, there undoubtedly went on a commerce of subtler and richer fare than the silk itself after which these routes have been named and famed. For, the caravans of shaggy pack-horses and two-humped Bactrian camels, plodding along these routes that led from distant Luoyang to Imperial Rome, took with them from one place to another elements of the culture and civilization of the lands through which they passed. Not the least significant of these were the doctrines of the gentle religion of Buddhism, which kept advancing ever eastwards from India in the early centuries A.D., carried thither in the course of their business by traders and travellers, or more deliberately by Buddhist missionaries. The remains of the numerous Buddhist settlements and temples that are encountered on the way today are testimony to the impact that Buddhism had on the peoples along these routes. Shrines and monasteries, dotting the plains and slopes or sculpted into the sheer faces of towering mountains, have survived the ravages of war and plunder, not to mention the subsequent conversion of the people themselves to Islam.

Along with Buddhism, however, there penetrated into these regions the art which Greek contact with India, following Alexander's conquests in the East, had begun to generate in the area, then as now identified as Gandhara. This art, accompanying Buddhist missionary activity, which reached its height in the first century A.D., made its way into Chinese Turkestan by one or the other of the ancient routes - i. e., that from Bactria (North West Afganistan), which went across the Pamir plateau and on to Khotan via Kashgar and Yarkand, and that through Kashmir and over the Karakoram Pass, the shorter but more difficult route. From Kashgar these overland Silk Routes carried Buddhism and Graeco-Buddhist art further eastwards, either over the north of the Taklamakam Desert, following the course of the Tien-shan mountains, or south of the Taklamakan, to Khotan and onward, following the Kuen Lun range (See map: Plate 1.)

But with the Greek incursion into Northwest India and the historic meeting of the two great cultures that took place there in the centuries that followed, a great deal more permeated of Hellenic and Hellenistic achievement than its art and sculpture. The literary contribution must surely have been considerable too, even if not as easily discernible as the visual on account of the transmutation and localization which it had undergone in the process of absorption. Vestiges of Greek philosophical systems cross Indian thought like a mist, leading scholars to propose varied explanations for such semblances of similarity. In Indian religion too are traces, blurred though they be, of ideas and ideologies that may owe themselves to the Greek presence in India during these early centuries.

On the other hand, more positive evidence exists in the extant literature of India of the acceptance and assimilation from Greek literature and drama of a great outpouring of myth, fable and story motifs. While a good part of them found their way into the mythology of Buddhism, which had begun to flourish in these same centuries that saw the Greeks in India, others found their way into other religious and secular literatures of India. For one who seeks them, the Buddhist Birth Stories, the *Jataka*, are a field rich in Greek motifs, as is to a lesser degree the *Pancatantra*, while I am sure more than one of the streams that emptied themselves into that 'ocean of the streams of story', the *Kathasaritasagara*, must have had their sources in the literatures of ancient Greece. Archaeological finds and the likelihood of some indebtedness of Sanskrit drama to the Greek stage come as no surprise in a context in which it would have been the absence of such that would have been the greater cause for wonder.

From Bactria and Gandhara Greek myth, fable and story motifs, in their purity or carried in Indian literature and passing into the channels of commerce that conducted the trade and treasure of the Orient - precious stones, silk and spices - in exchange for Western goods, would have made their passage east, being narrated in the caravans, sermonized upon in the monasteries or passed from mouth to mouth in the entrepots where the silk and other wares rested, passed through or changed hands. And as they went, their form, like the art of the Indo-Greeks or the iconography of the Buddha image itself which it created, underwent localization and transmutation, even if some of them continued to be recognizable even so without difficulty.

One such is a motif from Greek mythology which I wish to observe here, if only for the reason that evidence of its eastward passage has been encountered on a Silk Route overland as well as on the sea lane (the now so-called 'Silk Route of the Sea') that was in time to make the gruelling journey by land, even if very much shorter and more direct, a forbidding alternative.

The motif I advert to is that of the Greek myth of Danae, the beautiful daughter of Acrisius, king of Argos. As the myth goes, her father set soldiers to guard the princess in a tower for fear of an oracle that if a son were born to her, he would kill him. But, as some say, Zeus came to her as a shower of gold (Plate 3a) or, as others say, her uncle, Proteus, perhaps bribing the guards with gold. In consequence of this Danae conceived, and in time gave birth to a son, Perseus, who lived to be a famous hero - and also fulfil the dreaded prediction, when a discus he threw hit Acrisius and killed him.¹

There can be little doubt that it is the motif of this myth that inspired the story which the recent Chinese archaeological expedition on the Silk Route heard at Tashkurgan, the old fort in the mountain trough of Sarikkol, which leads from the upper Oxus (Amu Darya) to Yarkand. Here it was narrated that a soldier, detailed to conduct a Chinese princess to Persia as a bride for the king, but encountering a war, guarded her in a stone tower. Afterwards, when he went to fetch her down, he found she was pregnant. The explanation, quite like that of Danae, was that a god had come down to her from above. The son born to her later became a renowned hero.

1. Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* ii. 4, 1-2 and 4.

Prominent among the architectural edifices one met along the ancient Silk Routes were towers of stone or adobe brick, placed strategically to guard these routes, while the settlements and monasteries were also fortified with walls and battlements. Without the protection of armed contingents of soldiers stationed at strategic points along the way, the caravans, not to mention the settlements themselves, would have been subjected to the depredations of marauding bands of banditi. When it did happen that a caravan was plundered or a settlement or oasis raided, it became necessary for the powers that were to send out punitive expeditions after them to prevent repetitions and secure the safety of life and trade along these routes.

For their part, the caravans which made their journey along these routes would have had to solicit passage, and with it, protection from the authorities through whose territories they passed, though the frequency of the traders and travellers and the on-going commerce of the settlements between themselves would have evolved a regular system of authorization through the length of the routes from China to all their several destinations.

We learn from Ptolemy,² who derives from the geographer, Marinus of Tyre, that it was to a place called 'Stone Tower' that the agents of one Maes, also called Titianus, a Macedonian entrepreneur (*aner Makedōn*), had travelled from Balkh (in Bactria).³ This is the furthest east that any travellers from lands bordering the Mediterranean had reached on the transcontinental road to China. 'Stone Tower' is said to be close to another place called only "the starting point of the traders for Sera", while Sera itself is given by these people as still seven months journey away.⁴

Now, it would have been a happy coincidence if this 'Stone Tower' reached by Maes Titianus' party was the same as Tashkurgan, since Tashkurgan itself means no less than 'Stone Tower'. Indeed there are some who have identified the one place with the other on this basis.⁵ But, interesting as the identification may be for our purpose here, we have to do without it. For Tashkurgan cannot have been the place referred to by Ptolemy, since the approach to his 'Stone Tower' is described to follow a zig-zag passage, including an ascent through the gorge of the Comedae. In fact, as J. Oliver Thomson suspects, 'Stone Tower' looks more like some place on

2. I. 11. 7

3. On Maes Titianus, see M. Cary 'Maes, qui est Titianus', *Classical Quarterly* n. s. vol. VI (1956) p. 130-134.

4. Marinus accepts and calculates the distance at 36,200 stades, and fixes the terminus at 228°. Ptolemy, allowing for gross exaggeration and for several delays and deviations, reduces this by half and places the terminus at 177½°. It is unlikely that Maes' men themselves proceeded beyond 'Stone Tower'; the rest of what they reported may be what they heard from the traders from Sera, whom they met there, or at the 'starting-point'.

5. For those who hold this view, see J.O. Thomson *History of Ancient Geography* Cambridge (1948) p. 309, footnote 1.

the northern route close to Darautkurgan, "where the Alai trough opens a way to the river of Kashgar", with Irkeshtam probably the so-called "starting-point of the traders for Sera."⁶ [Ptolemy himself is hopelessly confused; in his introductory discussion in Book 1 he locates 'Stone Tower' at 132°, while his map puts it at 135°, on his gradation.]

In its passage to India, our Greek motif of the princess in the tower is reflected in the *Ghata Jataka* (No. 454). Whence a disintegrating version supplies the plot for the story of the birth of Krishna. In the *jataka* it is predicted of princess Devagabba that a son born to her would put an end to the royal line, i.e. by killing her two brothers, his uncles. So the brothers "resolved to give her in marriage to none, but to keep her husbandless, and watch: and they built her a single-pillared room (*ēkathunaka*, or variantly *ēkatthambha pāsada*) for her to live in, and provided her a serving-woman to serve her, and her husband acted as watch". But by and bye a young man, Upasagara by name, gained access to her, and by their intercourse Devagabba conceived, not once but many times - though it remains that it was the eldest son born to her who fulfils the prediction, when he throws a wheel (*cakka* = *cakrāyudha*) which beheads both his uncles.

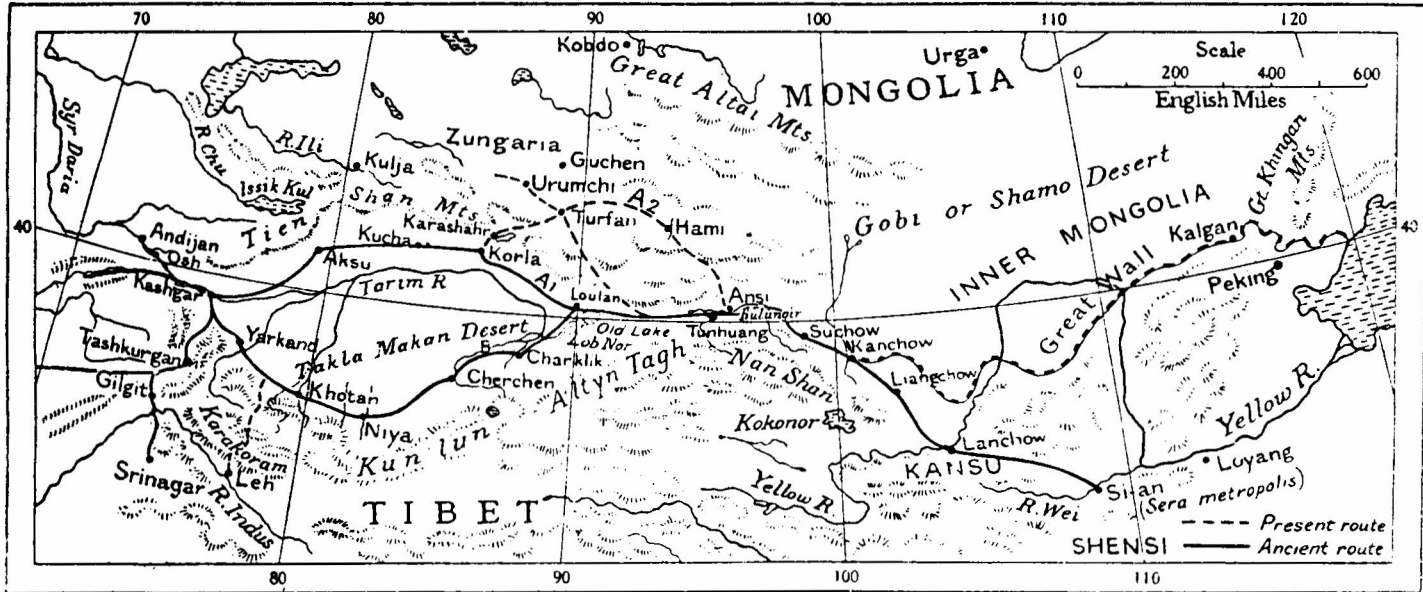
Quite apart from the tower, or towerlike edifice, in which the *Ghata Jataka* princess is confined, two other details of the story irrefutably link its motif with that of the Greek myth of Danae. These are, firstly, the flying wheel with which the son decapitates his mother's brothers; for I see it as a close parallel to the discus thrown by Perseus which kills Acrisius; and secondly, the very name of the princess, "Devagabba", which translates "god-pregnant", reflecting (even when she herself is not impregnated by a god, as is the princess in the stone tower of Tashkurgan) the experience of their common prototype, the Greek girl, Danae, to whom Zeus came down in a shower of gold.

There is no reason for thinking otherwise than that the myth of Danae had made its way to India in the wake of Alexander's historic expedition to India or the more peaceful communications that it opened up between the Hellenistic world and India immediately afterwards. Nor is this anything but a single instance of the many fable, myth and story motifs from Greek literature that reached India in the centuries following, and worked themselves ingeniously into the fabric of Indian literature.

The presence of the same motif in Sri Lanka, however, raises a more interesting possibility than that it owed itself to the *jataka* story. The motif itself one finds in the historical anecdote of the *Mahavamsa* of the seclusion of Ummadacitta, the one

6. *op.cit.* p. 308. A Tashkurgan is shown in some maps in the locality of Darautkurgan. Another, which is too close to be the place, is shown about 45 miles due east of Balkh. The recurrence of the name surely owes itself to the common feature of stone towers in these regions.

PLATE I



Silk routes.

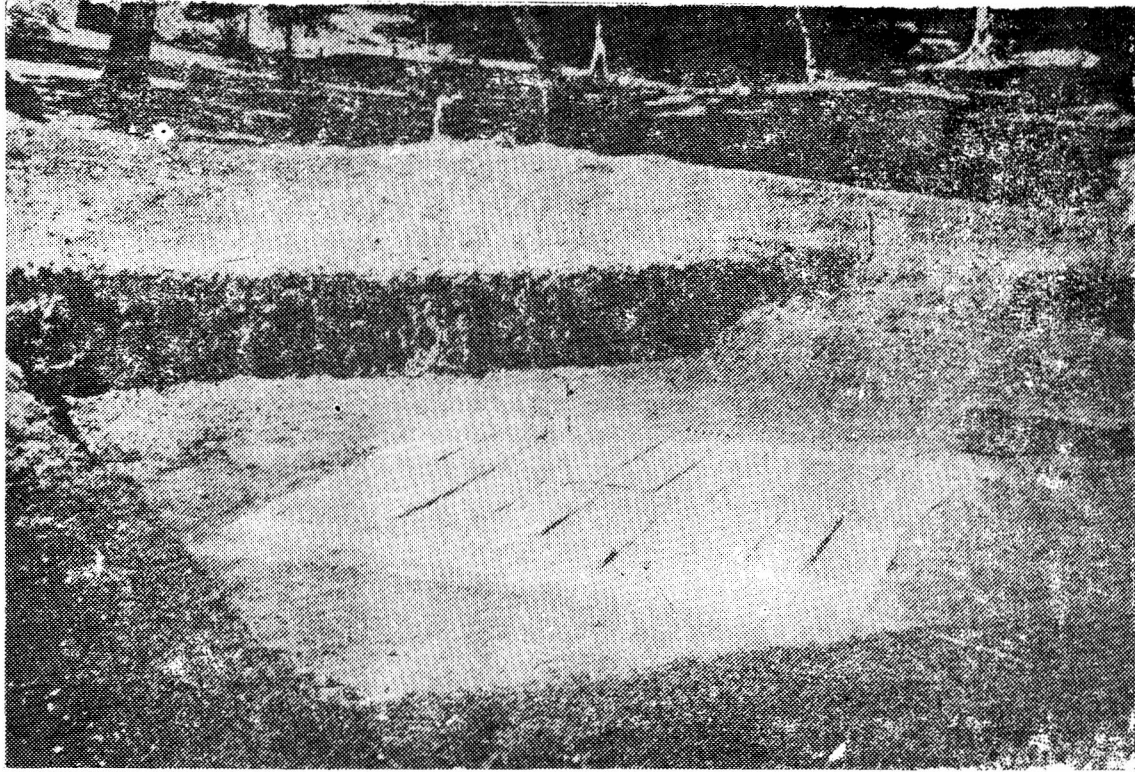


PLATE 2. Panduwasnuwara. Circular site and stone platform. The hole under the centre slab, in the context of the name of the city, fired popular imagination with the notion of the single-pilared tower in which Panduvasudeva's daughter, Ummadacitta, was lodged.



(a)



(b)

PLATE 3. From a red-figure krater from Caere, 490 - 470 B.C. (a) Zeus comes down to Danae in her tower as a shower of gold (b) King Acrisius prepares a larnax to set Danae adrift on the sea: the babe in her arms is the would-be hero, Perseus.

and only daughter of King Panduvasudeva, of whom (as in the case of Danae of the prototype as well as Devagabba of the *jataka*), it was foretold that a son born to her would kill his kin. In fear of this, our *Mahavamsa* author says, her brothers lodged her in a chamber having but one pillar, and guarded by one hundred soldiers. But even so a man got to her, her cousin, Dighagamani, and in consequence of their cohabitation on that occasion Citta gave birth to a son, the redoubtable Pandu-kabhaya, who performed deeds of great valour and became king after fulfilling the prophesy made over Citta⁷.

Both Indian *jataka* and Sri Lankan historical anecdote will be found to considerably slacken the details of the Greek motif, the former, out of the besetting weakness of Indian literature for exaggeration and hyperbole, the *Mahavamsa* perhaps also from the need to comply with historical fact. But, for all that, the motif remains clear enough. Prediction, princess, tower (or tower-like edifice), clandestine visit, pregnancy, and ultimate fulfilment of the fateful prophesy are all there – and if the pregnancy is not actually effected by a god in either case, in the *jataka* at least the princess's name, "Devagabba" (as pointed out before), looks back to that detail in the prototype myth.⁸

A study of the Greek myth motifs which have been drawn into the illustration of the early history of Sri Lanka, however, raise the possibility that some of this material made its way to the island directly and without the intermediation of Indian literature, Buddhist or otherwise. For instance, the motif which continues the Danae myth and provides the *Mahavamsa* the basis of its historical account of the floating of Viharamahadevi in her strange vessel (a huge pot, be it noted) upon the seas, and her drifting to a different realm, where fishermen draw her ashore and she weds the king of that realm⁹ is not found anywhere in Indian literature. Similarly, the reason for the action of King Kelanitissa in floating Viharamahadevi thus, the inundation of his kingdom by the sea, for which he is called upon to sacrifice his own daughter to assuage the anger of the sea-gods, looks to a Greek myth motif again not found anywhere in Indian literature for emulation, i.e. the story of Andromeda (also belonging to the Perseus saga), whom her father, Cepheus, sacrificed to the sea to halt its flooding of his kingdom.¹⁰

7. *Mahavamsa* ix. 1 f.

8. An obvious innovation is found in the Krishna legend, with "Devagabba" being read to mean pregnant *with* a god, rather than *by*. This account of Krishna's nativity is late and not uninfluenced by Buddhist as well as Christian story.

9. *Mahavamsa* xxii. 11-12.

10. Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* ii. 4.3. See Plate 3b; the motif of the Sri Lankan story of Viharamahadevi interweaves details of the two separate Greek myths of Danae and Andromeda. See my article 'The Princess in the Boat', *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* vol. x (1984) p. 57-86.

To this evidence may be added the presence of several details in the very foundation myth of Sri Lanka itself, the story of Vijaya. For, while these closely reflect details in the Circe adventure of Odysseus in Homer's epic, they are yet in excess of anything that one could point to as present in Indian story, and must thus argue for Sri Lanka as to some degree an independent beneficiary of stories originated in Greece.¹¹ Indeed, arising from such a supposition, one may have cause to suspect that a not inconsiderable amount of the Greek motifs and motif-details even common with Indian literature, and so far used to argue a second-hand derivation of these for Sri Lanka, may themselves well have been part of a shared heritage which made its way to Sri Lanka along that corridor of the sea that was to form a vital part of the Silk Route of the Sea—none other, surely, than that which Vijaya himself took, with a stop-over at Shurparaka, on his way to the island.

About the time of the compilation of the *Mahavamsa*, which took in these several motifs of distinct Greek origin, Sri Lanka had begun to assert a positive commercial significance, lying as it did, midway along the sea route from the Far East to the westerly lands. The growth in importance of this Silk Route of the Sea is attributed by scholars (among them, notably my colleague, Dr. D.P.M. Weerakkody)¹² on the one hand to the growing prosperity of southern China, which began demanding western goods, and on the other, to the disturbed conditions that made the shorter and more direct land routes fraught with risk.

Thus, writing in the first half of the sixth century, Cosmas Indicopleustes refers to Sri Lanka as the "mediatrix" in the commerce between east and west, and observes it as the central point on the route to the Silk Country, which he calls 'Tzinista', and (surely by way of its inevitability also, whether going to or from) as a definite break in the voyage. He observes that the Silk Country lay to the left of those sailing into the Indian Ocean beyond the Persian Gulf and that the Indians called the island Silediba, while the Greeks called it Taprobane.¹³

Persian interest in Sri Lanka had anticipated this new and growing importance of the island well ahead, leaving a record of the fact with evidence that is, for our present concern, of a most curious nature. For it partially matches the Tashkurgan story of the Chinese princess on her way to marry the Persian king, with a historical detail of its own. Only here what is Chinese is the source— which incidentally takes the story back as far as 380 A.D.¹⁴ Like a prelude to the former story, it tells of a princess being sought as a bride for a king. The king remains Persian, but the princess, whose hand is sought by the Persian king (even sending a golden bracelet as a gift to woo her) is none other than the daughter of the Sinhala king!

11. See my 'Greek Elements in the Vijaya Legend' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Sri Lanka)* vol. xxvi (1982) p. 43-66.

12. See his article 'Sri Lanka through Greek and Roman Eyes' Colombo (1990) in *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea* ed. Senaka Bandaranayake. Colombo (1990) p. 163-173

13. ii. 45-46.

Popular imagination, fired by the romance of the sory of Ummadaciita but with little more to go on than the name of the place, has associated a circular site in Panduwasnuwara in the Kurunegala District of Sri Lanka with the single-pillared chamber (*ēkathunika gēhe*), in which she was protected from men. The structure itself has been conjectured upon its name to be a cylindrical apartment raised aloft like a dove-cot upon its single pillar, and thus not much unlike a round tower. Accordingly, when a shallow hole was discovered in the middle of the paved platform at the centre of this site, it was enough (even if physically hardly so!) to add strength to the prevailing belief.¹⁵ However, it was the same archaeological undertaking which put an end to any possibility of entertaining such a hope for our romantic story, at least as far as serious scholarship is concerned. For, according to all accounts the site can be dated no earlier than the 12th century A.D..

On the other hand, of Tashkurgan on the land route that saw the silk go by, the fort's association with its myth remains of the opposite nature. For, one cannot but think that it was the actual stone tower, after which Tashkurgan took its name, which entrapped the Greek myth of Danae as it made its way east, rather than that the story based on its motif figmented the tower for its purpose.

Of how many other stone towers along these caravan routes the story was told which had its origin in the sad myth of Danae, we shall never know. If the agents of Maes Titianus themselves heard it of the "Stone Tower", which surely gave the name to the place which they reached, they certainly made no mention of it that we know of. On the other hand, what we do know is that it could be men like these traders of the entrepreneur, Maes, who carried such stories from west to east and east to west, depositing them here and there unawares like the scraps of silk discovered in recent times along these ancient routes, when they transported their exotic fare across the dismal wastes of Central Asia.

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14. Liu Sing Chi, *Chow Chu Che*, quoted by O.W. Wolters in *Early Indonesian Commerce*, Ithaca, N.Y. (1967) p. 81. I am indebted to Dr. Weerakkody for refering me to this information. The practice itself is not uncommon in the politics of these as well as other ruling houses.

15. The site was excavated by Prof. Senerat Paranavitana, who describes and discusses it, with 3 useful photographs, in *Ceylon Today* vol. II, no. 2 (Feb, 1953) p. 7-10. See Plate 2.