

NOTES ON THE WORSHIP OF CHONSU.¹

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In the well-known *Legend of the Possessed Princess* we read that Rameses xii. was devoted to the worship of Chonsu. The story may be found in a translation by Dr. Birch in the fourth volume of the *Records of the Past*, from a sandstone tablet in the French National Library. It begins by telling us that King Rameses was in Naharana (Mesopotamia) receiving tribute when the Prince of Bakhten presents to him his beautiful daughter. Pharaoh falls in love with her, conducts her to Thebes, where the nuptial ceremonies are performed, confers on her the title of Chief Royal Wife, and gives her the Egyptian name of Raneferoo. Some time after, the Prince of Bakhten sends to tell his august son-in-law that the sister of Raneferoo is ill. Her name has a very Asiatic sound, Bent Rash, "chief's daughter," and probably is only her designation by the messengers, and not really a name like Raneferoo, which signifies in Egyptian "the blessings of Ra," or more literally "Ra of the beautiful ones." Rameses sends his secretary—whose name, by the way, is the only thing in the story which has a fictitious sound, Tahutiemheb, "Thoth in his heart"—to Bakhten, to report on the condition of the princess. He finds her possessed by demons "hostile to contend with," and returns with another embassy to Egypt. Rameses lays the matter before his favourite divinity, Chonsu, called Neferhotep in Uas or Thebes; and the god apparently speaks to another Chonsu, the Giver of Oracles, and permits or desires him to go to Bakhten to save the daughter of the chief. The passage is a very difficult one. I do not undertake to make any remarks on the original; but the translation seems clearly to indicate the existence of two Chonsu's. Slightly varied, it runs as follows:—"Then said His Majesty (Rameses) before Chonsu, in Uas, called Neferhotep, 'My good lord, wouldst thou turn thy face to Chonsu, the maker of oracles, the great god, chaser of possessors, let him go to the land of Bakhten by a very great favour.' Then said His Majesty (Chonsu) 'Give thy protection with him. I let His Majesty go to the land of Bakhten to save the daughter of the prince.'"

Dr. Birch has put marks of quotation before and after the words "Give thy protection with him;" but to make sense they should include all down to the word prince, at least.

The next sentence is, "Chonsu in Uas, called Neferhotep, assented: he gave his divine virtue fourfold to Chonsu the Giver of oracles in Uas: His Majesty (Rameses?) ordered that Chonsu the Giver of oracles should be made to proceed to the great ark," and so on.

It is evident that here we have three majesties. There is the king; there is Chonsu, called Neferhotep; and there is Chonsu, the Giver of

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oracles, who is ordered by his counterpart divinity to go to Bakhtan in an ark.

The rest of the story may be briefly told. The god in his ark is received by the chief with great reverence, and speedily cures the princess. Great sacrifices to the Giver of Oracles ensue, and the god is delivered in Bakhtan, the prince saying in his heart, "I will not let him go to Egypt." After more than three years the prince has a dream, which frightens him. He sees the god, *like a golden hawk*, come out of his ark and fly on high to the land of Egypt. He tells the prophet of Chonsu, who had come with the god that he may return, and "the god Chonsu, the Giver of Oracles in Uas," goes back to the house of Chonsu, called Neferhotep, gives him the presents he has received, and retires in peace.

It is evident, I think, that we have here the god Chonsu himself in his Temple at Thebes, in what visible form I know not, and he gives of his divinity to a hawk, which hawk, the Giver of Oracles, apparently that incarnation or visible form of the god to which people resorted for advice, goes to Bakhtan, while Neferhotep remains at Thebes.

It will have been remarked that there is not a word here about an image of Chonsu. The ancient Egyptians did not worship images, however highly some may have been esteemed and however common they are; but their gods always appeared to them in a living form. Each little city had its sacred animal. The conquest of other cities by one made the sacred animal of the conqueror a universal god, and in process of time the number of the gods thus universally venerated became enormous. It was in proportion directly to the number of cities; and those who have been in Egypt will remember that there are no outlying hamlets, no straggling suburbs in that country, because each city is circumscribed and isolated annually by the inundation.

The relation of the worship of the dynastic gods, the divine ancestors of the kings, Osiris, Isis, Horus and the rest, to that of these local gods is a subject too extensive and difficult for me to do more than mention it now. In a great many towns, scattered over the face of the whole country, there were sacred hawks. I exhibit a wooden figure of a hawk, with a brail or confining band of gold fringe round his wings. He appears to be what we know as a kestrel or windhover, and no bird is more abundant at the present day in Egypt. He hovers, as if hanging from the heavens by a thread. When he became a god, no doubt he was confined in an ark or shrine. Numberless examples of these shrines, some of them carved in granite and of immense size, are still in existence. On great days the god's wings would be tied with a brail to prevent undignified flutterings, and he would be carried in procession that the people might see divinity beaming from his great brown eyes.

Another brown eyed hawk, the peregrine, is also common in Egypt. I knew a collector of bird skins on the Nile who shot twenty, believing them to be different kinds of falcons; but when he brought them home he found they were only peregrines in different stages of plumage. I exhibit a mummied peregrine: the figure being made up into the likeness which is always given of Chonsu in sculptures and on scarabs. It is possible or probable that Horus was represented by a kestrel and Chonsu by a peregrine. The French, with characteristic ignorance of such small details, sum up all these sacred birds as sparrow hawks. I do not

believe there is any evidence that the sparrow hawk was ever worshipped. His cultus, if it existed, must have been rare, since he is not represented on monuments or otherwise. His general form and his yellow eyes would distinguish him from the kestrel or the peregrine at once. The merlin, which greatly resembles the kestrel, but does not hover, may have been among the sacred animals. I have seen statues and small figures which, from the large size of the feet, were more like merlins than kestrels. If the French err in one direction, our English authorities err in another, and a well-known writer,¹ now dead, is at the trouble of inventing a hawk which no one but himself has ever seen, and giving it the name of *Falco Aroeris*. The same writer says "the hawk of Philæ is the same kind (*sic*) as that sacred to Ra, and not, as some have imagined, a different species." The grounds for this very positive, though ungrammatical, assertion are not given: and its fallacy is evident before the distinct statement of Strabo, who probably saw both, and who says the hawk at Philæ was much larger than that he had seen in Lower Egypt, and appeared to be of a different species. In other words a falcon, perhaps a peregrine, perhaps a jer-falcon was worshipped on the holy island and a kestrel in the other places.

Chonsu was specially the god of the moon, and is represented frequently with a crescent on his head. Sometimes he is hawk all over, sometimes he has the body of a man and the head only of the bird. He was very popular in Egypt, no doubt from having been the sacred animal of one of the towns which eventually became incorporated in the gigantic metropolis of Thebes, that namely of Uas, which seems to have been on the eastern bank, and not far from Karnac. He is sometimes said to have been the "third member of the great Theban triad" with Amen Ra, and Maut. To tell the truth, I do not know what is meant by "the great Theban triad." There may have been recognised triads in some parts of Egypt in late times: but I do not know of any. Four gods is the usual number held specially sacred in one temple: and the so called triad of Thebes is constantly varied—in other words, it does not exist. Dr. Birch's list of "triads" in the British Museum "Guide," contains four or five names under each.

The scarab I exhibit is carved in jade and is one of a very limited number of objects in that stone which have been found in Egypt. The name on it is cut as if the lapidary encountered the greatest difficulty. The ancient Egyptians were not skilful in gem cutting. The inscription which is much abbreviated, seems to contain the usual throne name common to Rameses the Second, and Rameses the Twelfth, and the additional sentence "beloved of Chonsu, giver of oracles." Jade may have been among the objects sent by the Asiatic prince to his son-in-law. A different and softer stone of the same "moonlight" colour is often used for representations of Chonsu, the god of the moon.

The Uza, or sacred eye, which accompanies the scarab, is made of steatite covered with a rich green glaze, and inscribed with the name of "Ra-neferoo, the divine wife." It should be observed that a left eye is represented. The right eye was sacred to the sun, the left eye to the moon. Raneferoo, therefore, appears as a votary of Chonsu, equally with her royal husband.

¹ Wilkinson, "Ancient Egyptians" iii., 318.