

TURTLE ISLAND

BY

BERTHOLD LAUFER



Reprinted from THE OPEN COURT, December, 1933

TURTLE ISLAND

BY BERTHOLD LAUFER

Dedicated to Dr. Moritz Winternitz, Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Prague, in honor of his seventieth birthday, December 23, 1933.

IN his monumental work *Geschichte der indischen Litteratur* Professor Moritz Winternitz has devoted an admirable chapter to a discussion of Indic stories and their migration eastward and westward, and observes wisely (II, p. 105), "Although many tales may have found their way from India into the West, yet it can hardly be doubted that also many a foreign tale has migrated into India. This, for instance, might be the case with reference to the mariners' tales which relate shipwrecks and various strange adventures at sea." On the other hand, Erwin Rohde (*Der griechische Roman*, 3d ed., 1914, p. 193) is inclined to trace to India the more important motives of the Arabic marine novels and sees Indic influence likewise in the Greek literature of marine romances.

About a decade ago I read a paper before the American Oriental Society under the title "Tales of the Indian Ocean" of which I gave the following definition:

There is a type of mariner's story or sailor's yarn which we meet in all countries bordering on the Indian Ocean—in Greek, in Syriac and Arabic, in Sanskrit or Pāli, as well as in Chinese. Where and how these stories originated is often difficult to decide, and it seems best to characterize them simply as tales of the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean, so to speak, functioned as the broadcasting station which sent these stories out to all ports. The Indian Ocean had a peculiar fascination upon the minds of Greeks, Arabs, Persians, Indians, Malayans, and Chinese; its many wonders stirred their power of imagination, and its marine animals even gave rise to new mythical conceptions.

Most of these tales appear to have originated in the circle of navigators and to have been spread by sailors from one port to another. This fact is clearly disclosed in the story of "The Capture of the Rhinoceros" which a Chinese physician of the T'ang period, as he states advisedly, recorded from the lips of a foreign sea-captain whom he had met in Kwang-tung (Laufer, *T'oung Pao*, 1913, pp. 361-364 and *Chinese Clay Figures*, pp. 145-147).

The story of Turtle Island or Whale Island belongs to this cycle. Zacher (*Pseudocallisthenes*, p. 147) characterizes it well as "one of

those very ancient migratory tales coming down from an unknown period, which float between Orient and Occident from early times." Its distribution has often been discussed, but the Chinese versions have not yet been utilized.

The *Kin-lou-tse* ("The Golden Tower", chap. 5, p. 19) written by Yi, prince of Siang-tung, afterwards the emperor Hiao Yüan of the Liang Dynasty (A.D. 552-554), which contains several curious traditions pointing to a foreign origin, offers the following tale:

Once upon a time there lived a huge turtle amidst sandy islets. The animal's back was covered with trees which made it appear like a regular island in the ocean. It happened that merchants came there, and believing that it was an island, gathered fuel with a view to prepare their food. The turtle was burned hot and dived back into the sea, whereupon several tens of men suffered death.

However terse and sober this account may be, it embodies all essential elements and represents the primeval version of the story which seven hundred years later appeared in the romance-like adventures of Sindbad the Sailor in the Arabian Nights.

About a century later the Chinese were treated to an Indic version of the story. Hsüan Tsang, the illustrious Chinese pilgrim to India (Julien, *Mémoires*, I, p. 474; Beal, *Buddhist Records*, II, p. 125) tells in his Memoirs about a merchant prince from Jäguda, who worshiped the heavenly spirits and despised the religion of Buddha. With some other merchants he embarked in a ship on the southern sea and lost his way in a tempest. After three years their provisions became exhausted, and they invoked the gods to whom they sacrificed. All their efforts were futile when unexpectedly a great mountain with steep crags and precipices and a double sun radiating from afar was sighted. The merchants were overjoyed at the prospect of finding rest and refreshment on this mountain. But the merchant-master exclaimed, "This is no mountain, it is the fish makara (whale); the high crags and precipices are but its fins and mane; the double sun is its eyes as they shine." The master then remembered Avalokiteçvara as the savior from the perils of the sea, and they all invoked his name. The high mountains disappeared, the two suns were swallowed up, and the mariners were rescued from shipwreck through the intervention of a Çramana walking over the sky.

It is obvious that the Buddhists made use of an old story and adapted it to their own purpose. Rescue at sea through the intervention of the Buddha or his saints is a frequent motive in Buddhist hagiography and iconography. Foucher (*Etude sur l'Iconographie bouddhique*, p. 82) points out a bas-relief of Bharhut where a makara devours a ship with its crew (Cunningham, *Stūpa of Bharhut*, plate 34,2). Further, an allusion to this motive is made in the Tibetan cycle of legends associated with the name of Padmasambhava of the eighth century (Grünwedel, *Buddhistische Studien*, p. 106).

An echo of Hsüan Tsang's story, as pointed out by me in *Journal of American Folk-lore*, 1926, p. 89, occurs in *Liao chai chi i*, No. 82 (translated by H. A. Giles under the title *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*). I have no intention of covering the whole ground occupied by this legend or giving a complete bibliography of previous studies; suffice it to refer to Zacher, *Pseudocallisthenes*, p. 147; Runeberg, "Le conte de l'Isle-poisson," (*Mémoires Soc. néo-philol. à Helsingfors*, II, pp. 343-395), and Cornelia C. Coulter, "The 'Great Fish' in Ancient and Medieval Story" (*Transactions Am. Philol. Assoc.*, LVII, 1926, pp. 32-50). I do not agree with previous investigators in regarding the heroic exploit of Keresāspa in the Avesta as the earliest version of this tale. This, in my estimation, is entirely distinct: Keresāspa slays a horned monster on land, which is the principal motive of the story, while the feature that he cooked meat on the monster's back is merely an incidental accessory. There is no sea, no monster island, no casualty or rescue from this alleged island in the Avestan episode. If anything is clear, it is the fact that the monster island motive must have originated in a maritime setting and have grown out of marvelous incidents of a sea voyage. Thus remain as the oldest versions the cycle of the Greek romances of Alexander and the Physiologus. In one of Alexander's alleged letters to Aristotle, the monster is specified as a "giant turtle" (otherwise "sea-monster"; see Ausfeld, *Der griechische Alexanderroman*, p. 178).

A turtle appears in the *Wonders of India* (*Livre des Merveilles d'Inde*, ed. Van der Lith and Devic, p. 37), Qazwīnī, in his *Wonders of Creatures*, likewise connects the story with a marine turtle, and such we find in the Chinese version of the *Kin-lou-tse*. The transformation of the turtle into a whale seems to be due to the

Physiologus. The Chinese version, I am inclined to think, was transmitted to China by oral tradition. I can cite a specific instance of the occurrence of our tale, where literary diffusion is out of the question. It was recorded about eighty years ago among the Karen, an illiterate tribe of Upper Burma, by Francis Mason ("Religion and Mythology of the Karen," *Journal As. Soc. of Bengal*, XXXIV, 1858). As it has escaped the previous writers on the subject, it may be cited here in extenso.

The Elders among the Karen say there are fish in the sea as large as mountains, with trees and bamboos growing on them as on land. Voyagers have to be careful where they land to cook. They carry axes, and cut into the ground to try it. If juice springs up where it is cut, they know that they are on a fish; but if the ground seems dry, they are on land, and go to cooking. It is related that a man landing on an island went to cooking without trying his ground, and it turned out to be a fish which sunk with him into the sea and then swallowed him. When the man was in the fish's belly, he said to the fish: "When males acquire large game, they shout and cry out in exultation, but you are silent. Are you not a male?" On hearing this, the fish opened his mouth to scream, when the man leaped out and escaped. The elders say that when people kill one of these fish, it is impossible for them to eat it all up, and they burn its fat. With its bones they can make beams and rafters for houses.

In this version the "island" motive is connected with the "swallow" motive, both of which, according to Miss Coulter in the article quoted above, were developed in India and spread westward, leaving their mark in turn on Greek, Arabic, medieval Latin, and the vernacular literatures. While I concede the possibility of an Indic origin of the "island" motive, I am not so sure of the "swallow" motive being specifically Indic (compare my article "The Jonah Legend in India," *The Monist*, 1908, p. 576). Allusions to the "swallow" motive occur in Chinese authors of the pre-Christian era when Indic influence is out of the question. Several ancient philosophers (Chuang-tse among them) use the phrase "the boat-swallowing fish" (*t'un chou chi yü*) as a well-known affair or a firmly established expression: thus, Shi-tse (*Chu tse wen sui sü pien*, ed. by Li Pao-ts'üan, chap. 9, p. 7) says, "Where water gathers, the boat-swallowing fish will arise" (cf. also Pétillon, *Allusions littéraires*, pp. 313, 497, and Pelliot, *T'oung Pao*, 1920, pp. 294, 351).

The *Kin-Lou-tse* contains the expression in three passages (chap. 4, pp. 18, 19b, 25b). The only explanation of this phrase I have found thus far occurs in the *Chi lin sin shu* (*op. cit.*, chap. 5, p. 15): "In the southern region there is the alligator fish [thus literally: *ngo yü*] whose snout is eight feet long and which reaches its largest size in the autumn. The fish stretches its head out of the water and swallows the men near the border of the ship. Other men in the boat seize spears and try to keep the fish off." Granting that it might have happened in ancient times that a frail boat struck an alligator, a huge fish, or some species of whale and capsized, drowning some of the sailors, the report could easily gain ground that these men were swallowed by a marine monster. As long as we do not know more about the boat-swallowing fish of the ancient Chinese, I am rather disposed to credit it to an actual experience or several experiences than to an outside influence.

Ulrich Schmidt, in his *Voyage to the Rivers La Plata and Paraguai* (1567, Hakluyt Soc. ed., 1891, p. 86), relates, "Between S. Vicenda and Spiritu Sancto there are plenty of whales which do great harm; for instance, when small ships sail from one port to another, these whales come forward in troupes and fight one another, then they drown the ship, taking it down along with the men." This is not a reminiscence of the tale of Whale Island, but the simple record of incidents or experiences within a well-defined locality of South America. Qazwīnī (*Kosmographie*, translated by K. Ethé, p. 268) remarks in his description of the whale that sea-going vessels have much to suffer from it and that it devours whatever it finds. Another kind of whale (p. 289) is defined by him as a very large fish which can smash a ship. See also *Livre des merveilles de l'Inde*, pp. 14-15.