

The Wild Boar and the Bear¹

by:
René Guénon

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 1, No.1. © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

AMONGST the Celts, the wild boar and the bear symbolise respectively spiritual authority and temporal power, that is to say, the two castes of the Druids and Knights, the equivalents, at least originally and in their essential attributes, of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. This symbolism in origin clearly Hyperborean, is one of the marks of the direct connection between the Celtic tradition and the primordial tradition of the present *Mahayuga* (cycle of four "yugas" or ages) whatever other elements from previous but already secondary and derivative traditions may have come to be added to this main current and be, as it were, reabsorbed into it. The point to be made here is that the Celtic tradition could well be regarded as constituting one of the "links" between the Atlantean and Hyperborean traditions, after the end of the secondary period when this Atlantean tradition represented the predominant form and became the "substitute" for the original centre which was already inaccessible to the bulk of humanity.² As regards this point also, the very symbolism we have just mentioned can provide some not uninteresting evidence.

Note, in the first place, the importance given to the symbol of the boar by Hindu tradition, which was itself the direct issue of the primordial tradition, and which affirms expressly in the *Vêda* its own Hyperborean origin. The boar (*varāha*), as is well known, not only represents the third of the ten *avatāras* of *Vishnu* in the present *Mahayuga*, but our entire *Kalpa*, that is, the whole cycle of manifestation of our world, is designated as *Shwêtavarāha-Kalpa*, the "cycle of the white boar." This being so, and if the analogy which necessarily exists between the great cycle and subordinate cycles is taken into consideration, it is natural that the emblem of the *Kalpa*, if it may be expressed thus, is to be found once more at the starting point of the *Mahayuga*. This is why the polar "sacred land," seat of the primordial spiritual centre of this *Mahayuga*, is also called *Vārāhi*, or the "land of the boar."³ Moreover, since it is here that the first spiritual authority dwelt, of which all other legitimate authority of the same order is but an emanation, it is no less natural that representatives of such an authority should have received from it the symbol of the boar also, as their distinctive emblem, and should have kept it throughout. This is why the Druids designated themselves "boars," although since symbolism has always many aspects, we may well have here also an allusion to the isolation in which they kept themselves with regard to the outside world, the wild boar always being regarded as the "solitary" one. Moreover, it must be added that this isolation itself, which took the form, with the Celts as with the Hindus, of a forest retreat, is not unconnected with the characteristics of "primordially," of which at least some reflection should be maintained in all spiritual authority worthy of the function it fulfils.

But to return to the name *Vārāhi*, which leads to some particularly important observations: it is regarded as an aspect of the *Shakti* of *Vishnu*, and more especially with

relation to his third descent, the boar *avatāra* whose "solar" nature immediately identifies him with the "solar land" or primeval "Syria," to which reference has been made elsewhere,⁴ and which is, moreover, one of the designations of the Hyperborean *Tula*, that is, of the primordial spiritual centre. Then again, the root *var*, for the name of the boar, is to be found in the Nordic languages in the form of *bor*; the exact equivalent of *Vārāhi* is thus "Boreas," and, in fact, the customary name "Hyperboreas" was used by the Greeks only at a period when they had already lost the meaning of this ancient designation. It would be better, in spite of the usage which has been prevalent since then, to term the primordial tradition not "Hyperborean," but simply "Borean," thus affirming unequivocally its connection with "Boreas" or "land of the boar."

There is yet another angle: the root *var* or *vri* in Sanscrit contains the meanings of "cover," of "protect" and of "hide," and, as the name *Varuna* and its Greek equivalent *Ouranos* show, it serves to indicate the sky, both inasmuch as the sky both covers the earth and represents the higher worlds that are hidden from the senses.⁵ Now all this is perfectly applicable to the spiritual centres, either because they are hidden from the eyes of the profane, or because they protect the world by their invisible influence, or, finally, because they are, on earth, as the images of the celestial world itself. It may be added that the same root has yet another meaning, that of "choice" or "election" (*vara*), which is obviously no less appropriate to the region which is invariably referred to as the "land of the chosen," the "land of saints," or the "land of the blessed."⁶

In what has just been said, it is possible to discern the union of the "polar" and "solar" symbolisms, but, strictly speaking, in that which concerns the boar, it is the "polar" aspect which is especially significant; and, moreover, this arises from the fact that in ancient times the boar represented the constellation which later became the Great Bear.⁷ In this substitution of names lies one of the marks of what the Celts symbolised by the strife between the boar and the bear, that is, the revolt of the representatives of temporal power against the supremacy of spiritual authority, with the diverse vicissitudes which followed one another in the course of successive historical epochs. The earliest manifestations of this revolt actually go back far beyond so called "historical" times and even further than the beginning of the *Kali-Yuga*, in which it was to become more wide-spread than ever before. This explains how the name *bor* came to be transferred from the boar to the bear, and how "Boreas" itself, the "land of the boar," became the "land of the bear," during a period of Kshatriya predominance, to which, according to Hindu tradition, *Parashu-Rama* put an end.⁸

In this same Hindu tradition the most usual name for the Great Bear is *sapta-riksha*, and the Sanskrit word *riksha* is the name for the bear, etymologically identical with those by which it is known in various other languages: the Celtic *arth*, the Greek *arktos*, and also the Latin *ursus*. It may be wondered however whether this is really the primary meaning of the term *sapta-riksha*, or if there has not been rather, in the manner of the substitution we have just mentioned, a sort of super-imposition of words which are etymologically distinct, though they may be considered closely connected and even identical by the application of a certain phonetic symbolism. Indeed, *riksha* is also, in a general sense, a star, that is to say in fact a "light" (*archis*, from the root *arch* or *ruch*, to "shine" or "illuminate"); and, on the other hand, the *sapta-riksha* is the symbolic dwelling of the seven Rishis, who, apart from the fact that their name is related to "vision," thus

light, are also themselves the seven "Luminaries" by whom the Wisdom of earlier cycles was transmitted to the present cycle.⁹ Nor is this connection between the bear and light the only case of its kind in animal symbolism, for the wolf was held to be connected with light by both Celts and Greeks,¹⁰ whence its attribution to the solar God, Apollo or Belen.

At one period the name *sapta-riksha* was applied, not only to the Great Bear, but to the Pleiads, which also contains seven stars. This transfer from a polar constellation to a zodiacal constellation corresponds to passage from solstitial to equinoxial symbolism, implying a change in the starting point of the annual cycle, as well as in the order of predominance of the cardinal points related to the different phases of this cycle.¹¹ This is the change from North to West, which refers to the Atlantean period; and this is clearly confirmed by the fact that, for the Greeks, the Pleiads were daughters of Atlas and, as such, they were called also Atlantids. Transferences of this type are, moreover, often the cause of manifold confusions, the same names having different applications in different periods, and this applies equally well to terrestrial regions as to celestial constellations, so that it is not always easy to determine exactly the connection in each case. In fact this can only be done by linking up their diverse local variations with the characteristics pertaining to the corresponding traditional forms, as we have just done with those of the *sapta riksha*.

In Greece the revolt of the Kshatriyas was represented by the hunting of the Boar of Calydon, a transparently Kshatriya version of the struggle according to which they claim for themselves a decisive victory, since the boar is killed by them. Athenaeus, following earlier authors, declares that the Boar of Calydon was white,¹² which clearly identifies it with *Shwêta-varāha* of Hindu tradition.¹³ Equally significant, in the present context, is the fact that the first blow was struck by Atalanta, who, it is said, had been suckled by a she-bear, and the use of the name Atalanta might indicate that the revolt began either in Atlantis itself, or at least amongst the inheritors of its tradition.¹⁴ Then again, the name Calydon is reproduced exactly in the name Caledonia, the old name for Scotland. Apart from any question of "localisation," it is, properly speaking, the country of the "Kalds" or Celts;¹⁵ and the forest of Calydon is no different, in fact, from that of Bracelonde, the name of which, although in a somewhat modified form, is the same, and is preceded by the word *bra* or *bor*, that is, by the name of the boar itself.

The fact that the bear is often taken symbolically in its feminine aspect, as we have just seen with regard to Atalanta, and as is seen in the naming of the constellations of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, is not without significance in so far as it is attributed to the warrior caste, wielder of temporal power, and there are several reasons for this. Firstly, this caste normally plays a passive or feminine role with respect to the sacerdotal caste, from which it in fact receives not only the teaching of the traditional doctrine, but also the legitimation of its own power, whence its "divine right." Further, when this same warrior caste, overthrowing the normal relationship of subordination, claims supremacy, its predominance is generally accompanied by the predominance of feminine elements in the symbolism of the traditional form as modified by it, and sometimes even, as a consequence of this modification, by the institution of a feminine form of the priesthood, as for example that of the Celtic Druidesses. This last point is merely touched upon here since to dwell on it would take us too far from our subject, especially if we were to go in search of corresponding examples in other traditions, but at least this indication serves to

show why it is the female bear, rather than the male, which is symbolically placed in opposition to the boar.

It should be added that the two symbols of the boar and bear do not always appear as being inevitably in opposition or combat, but that, in certain cases, they can also represent spiritual authority and temporal power, or the two castes of Druids and Knights in their normal and harmonious relationship, as may be seen especially in the legend of Merlin and Arthur. In fact, Merlin, the Druid, is also the boar of the forest of Bracelonde (where he ends, moreover, not by being killed, like the Boar of Calydon, but only by being put to sleep by a feminine power); and King Arthur's name was derived from that of the bear, *arth*; more exactly, the name is identical with the star *Arcturus*, taking into account the slight difference due to their respectively Celtic and Greek derivations. This star is to be found in the constellation of the Great Wain, and, in these names can be seen the union of the emblems of two different periods: the "Guardian of the Bear" has become the Waggoner, whilst the She-Bear herself, or the *sapta-riksha*, has become the *septem triones*, that is to say the "seven kine" (whence the appellation "Septentrion" to indicate the North). However, we are not concerned here with these transformations which are comparatively recent compared with those which we are considering.¹⁶ All that has been said so far seems to point to the following conclusion as regards the respective role of the two currents which contributed to the formation of the Celtic tradition: originally, spiritual authority and temporal power were not separated into two different functions, but were united in their common principle and a vestige of this union is still to be found in the very name of the Druids (*dru-vid*, "strength-wisdom," these two terms being symbolised by the oak and the mistletoe).¹⁷ On these grounds, and also as more particularly representing the spiritual authority to which is reserved the higher part of the doctrine, they were the true heirs to the primordial tradition, and the essentially "borean" symbol, that of the wild boar, truly pertained to them. As for the Knights, having the bear as their symbol (or the She-Bear of Atalanta) it may be considered that the part of the tradition more especially destined for them contained, principally, elements originating from the Atlantean tradition; and this distinction may even help to explain certain more or less enigmatic parts of the subsequent history of the traditions of the West.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

Examine the mutations of things and thou wilt find everywhere 'has been' and 'will be.' Think on God and thou wilt find 'is' where 'has been' and 'will be' cannot be...Being is a term for immutability... There is primal and absolute life, in which it is not one thing to exist and another to be, but the same thing to be and to exist; and primal and absolute intelligence, in which it is not one thing to be living, another to understand, but to understand is to live, and is to be, and all things are one.

St. Augustine

¹ *Symboles fondamentaux de la Science sacrée*, ch. (Gallimard, Paris, 1962).

² Cf. *Le Roi du Monde*. Ch. X, notably passages concerning the relations between the Hyperborean *Tula* and the Atlantean *Tula* (*Tula* or *Thule* being one of the earliest designations of spiritual centres); see also *Symboles fondamentaux*, etc.,

³ Contrary to what Saint-Yves d'Alveydre seemed to have thought, this name *Varahi* is certainly not applicable to Europe, which is the "Land of the Bull," though no doubt it came to be so called in a period far removed from the origins.

⁴ See *Symboles fondamentaux* etc., ch. VI, and XII. The *Vayu Purana* describes the Varāhar (the Boar Avatāra) as follows: "His bulk was vast as a mountain; his tusks were white and sharp and fearful; fire flashed from his eyes like lightning, and he was radiant as the sun."

⁵ The Latin word *coelum* itself has the same significance originally. See in this connection *Le Roi du Monde*, Ch. VII.

⁶ The Germanic root *ur*, which has the sense of primordiality, would also seem to be related to the Sanscrit *var*.

⁷ It should be recalled that this constellation has also had many other names, amongst them that of the scales, but it would be beyond the range of this article to concern ourselves with it at present.

⁸ It has already been pointed out in this connection that Fabre d'Olivet and those who followed him, like Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, seem to have made a somewhat strange confusion between *Parashu-Rama* and *Rama-Chandra*, that is to say between the sixth and seventh *avatars* of *Vishnu*.

⁹ The persistence of these "seven Luminaries" will be observed in Masonic symbolism: the presence of a similar number of persons representing them is necessary for the constitution of a "just and perfect" lodge, as well as for the validity of the initiatory transmission.—Let us point out also that the seven stars which are mentioned at the beginning of the Apocalypse (I. 16 and 20) would be, according to some interpretations, those of the Great Bear.

¹⁰ In Greek the wolf is *lukos* and light is *luke*; hence the double meaning of the epithet of *Apollo Lycius*.

¹¹ The transfer of *Libra* into the Zodiac naturally has a similar significance.

¹² *Deipnosophistarum*, IX, 13.

¹³ It need scarcely be recalled that white is also the colour attributed symbolically to spiritual authority; and it is known that the Druids wore white robes.

¹⁴ There are also other curious connections in this respect, in particular between the golden apples referred to in the legend of *Atalanta* and those in the garden of the *Hesperides* or "daughters of the West," who were also like the *Pleiads* daughters of *Atlas*.

¹⁵ It is likewise probable that the name *Celts*, like *Caldeans*, which is identical with it, was not originally applied to a particular people, but to a sacerdotal caste exercising spiritual authority among different peoples.

¹⁶ *Arthur* is the son *Uther Pandragon* the "chief of the five," that is to say the supreme king who lives in the fifth kingdom, that of the *Mide* or "middle," situated at the centre of the four subordinate kingdoms which correspond to the four cardinal points (see *Le Roi du Monde*, Ch. IX); and this situation is comparable with that of the celestial *Dragon* when, containing the *Pole Star*, he was "in the midst of the sky like a king on his throne," according to the expression of *Sepher Ietsirah*.

¹⁷ For the ancient Egyptians the symbol of the *Sphinx*, in one of its meanings, combined these two attributes according to their normal relationship. The human head may be considered as representing wisdom and the leonine body as representing strength; the head is the spiritual authority which directs, and the body is the strength which acts.