

The Saturnalia and the Mahavrata

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Source: *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (Jan., 1915), pp. 133-138

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25189288>

Accessed: 29-01-2017 07:14 UTC

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unknown to the *Rgveda*, and only appears in the Sūtras.¹ Therefore, to suppose that the period of 12 days was used as an intercalation is absolutely unjustified. Finally, the use of an intercalary month every five years is also unknown to the *Rgveda*² or to any early text. In all probability when intercalation was begun it took the form of rough attempts to secure coincidence of the lunar and solar years by the intercalation of a month here and there, and not by adding 12 days, which implies a certain accuracy of approximation to a knowledge of the lunar and solar years of 354 and 366 days respectively, of which neither is known to early India.

A. BERRIEDALE KEITH.

THE SATURNALIA AND THE MAHAVRATA

Sir J. Frazer, in an interesting discussion in *The Scapegoat*,³ has argued that the Roman Saturnalia was originally a festival held in February or March, at which in primitive times in ancient Italy it was the universal practice, wherever the worship of Saturn prevailed, to choose a man who played the part and enjoyed all the traditional privileges of Saturn for a season and then died, whether by his own or another's hand, in the character of the good god who gave his life for the world. The hypothesis is interesting; if accepted it establishes an historical connexion between the Saturnalia and the modern Carnival, and links the Saturnalia with the festivals of Kronos in Greece which show some faint traces of human sacrifice.

The evidence, however, when carefully sifted, indicates that the attempt to explain the Saturnalia on the theory of the dying god is not one which can be accepted. The date is a most serious difficulty which Sir J. Frazer's

¹ *Vedic Index*, ii, 413.

² *Vedic Index*, ii, 412.

³ pp. 306-12.

ingenuity cannot remove. As he himself points out,¹ Livy² treats the date as being December as far back as 217 B.C., Macrobius³ also does not hint that the date had ever been changed, and there is not the slightest justification for the conjecture of a change of time, an expedient to which the author has resorted on other matters with equal lack of justification.⁴ He argues that it is strange that the festival of the god who presides over sowing should have his feast in December instead of February or March, when agricultural operations begin in Italy, and he points out that the last day of the modern Carnival, Shrove Tuesday, was up to recent times the customary season in Central Europe for promoting the growth of the crops by means of leaps and dances. But against all these theoretic considerations must be set the simple facts of the Mahāvratā of the Vedic Calendar. That rite⁵ was held at the winter solstice, i.e. in December; it was not a festival of sowing, but one intended to quicken the fertility of the earth, and one of its chief features was the dance of the maidens bearing pitchers of water. No one would expect that a Vedic rite, duly ordered by the Brahmins, would present us with the licence of the Roman Saturnalia as recorded in the texts of the Augustan and later periods. But even in the completely formalized version of the Vedic texts there are traces of an unexpected prominence of Śūdras. The maidens are *dāsīs*, female slaves, and an Aryan strives with a Śūdra over a skin which is shaped to be a symbol of the sun. The Aryan is, of course, victor, but the mere fact of the struggle shows the popular character of the rite, and its open and avowed fertility magic deepens the impression. That magic includes a dialogue between a Brahmācārin and

¹ p. 345, n. 1.

² xxii, 1. 19 seqq.

³ *Saturnalia*, i, 10.

⁴ See Prof. C. F. Lehmann-Haupt's criticism (cited at p. 415, n. 1) of the theory of the change in the date of the Crucifixion.

⁵ See Hillebrandt, *Rom. Forsch.* v, 309 seqq.; Keith, *Śāṅkhāyana Aranyaka*, pp. 72 seqq.

a hetaira, a pale parallel of the licence of Augustan Rome. Nor can there be any doubt that the Saturnalia was, like the Mahāvratā, in its origin a fertility ritual, held at the winter solstice. The Carnival, on the other hand, while also intended to promote fertility, belongs to a different period, namely the rites of spring, and these rites have other characteristics than those of the winter solstice.

There is, however, one argument against this view of the equation of the Mahāvratā and the Saturnalia. The Mahāvratā contains no hint of the slaying of a god in the person of a human representative, a view which is very probably unknown to Vedic religion.¹ Nor does the Saturnalia in its classic form show any such rite, despite the full accounts preserved in various early authors. But in the accounts of the martyrdom of St. Dasius, on November 24, 303 A.D., made known by Professor Cumont, it is stated that it was the custom of the Roman soldiers at Durostorum in Lower Mœsia to celebrate the Saturnalia by choosing thirty days before the festival a young and handsome man who was clothed in royal attire, and who for the period of the feast was allowed to taste of every pleasure, but who was required to commit suicide on the altar of the god at the end of the period. From this it is deduced that the actual slaying of a representative of the god was normal in Italy and was only abolished by the advance of civilization, which left only the harmless practice alluded to in post-Augustan authors of choosing from the freemen a temporary king who could issue commands to the revellers.

Now this feature of the Saturnalia is precisely one which is not paralleled in the Mahāvratā and which is in all probability not ancient. The Saturnalia as we learn of it was a festival which had long undergone modification

¹ Keith, JRAS. 1907, pp. 929 seqq.; *Taittirīya Saṁhitā*, pp. cxxxviii seqq.

in the development of the Roman religion, and had been strongly affected by its assumed reproduction of the golden age of Saturn. In the mimic kingship and in the reversal of the roles of slave and master we have a case of myth reacting on religion and ritual; the Mahāvratā reveals, beneath its elaborate form, traces of a very old and primitive fertility ritual in which the slaves naturally participate; the Saturnalia shows a development of this primitive form into a reproduction of the mythical Saturnian days, and we need not seek to hold that the king of the Saturnalia was ever a representative of the god or died in that character. It is not, of course, necessary to deny this character of the rite as practised in the year 303 A.D. when St. Dasius earned martyrdom by declining to play the part of the chosen victim; that this case is one of the instances of the relics of the slaying of a human embodiment of the god is at least possible, though we cannot say it is certain, and though it is clear that the soldiers did not perform the rite as the killing of a god, and cannot have known its real significance. But it is idle to argue from Lower Mœsia and legionaries of 303 A.D. to the practices of Italy and Romans proper. In all probability the Saturnalia has in this case been contaminated with another ritual, and the facts shed no light on the original nature of the rite. It is contrary to all reasonable probability that no trace of human sacrifice should appear in any Augustan or post-Augustan author, had the Italians ever practised it in connexion with the Saturnalia, and it is clear that such a rite would have been wholly out of place with that merry festival with its representation of the golden age. Had such a sacrifice been known it would not have escaped the condemnation of the Christian Fathers,¹ who record other human sacrifices as practised at Rome. They

¹ Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 22, 30; Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* i, 21; Tertullian, *Apol.* 9; *Gnost.* 7, cited by Frazer, p. 312, n. 1.

record, indeed, an offering to the Latian Jupiter, and Sir J. Frazer suggests that at first this sacrifice took place on the top of the Alban Mount, and was offered to Saturn, to whom high places were sacred. But this is the wildest conjecture, and by means of such arguments anything could be equally well proved.

It must further be observed that unless the Carnival and the Saturnalia can be connected and the St. Dasius' version of the Saturnalia be accepted, it is impossible to find in the Carnival the slaying of a god in his human representative. The Carnival is marked by the burning of an effigy and by much fun and licence, and its time suggests irresistibly a popular festival in order to encourage the growth of the crops which are being sown. But the burning in effigy of the outworn corn spirit is no cogent proof of the burning of any human being in prior times in Italian lands, and the ritual of the Carnival does not therefore strengthen the argument as to the nature of the Saturnalia, even if the difference of dates was not fatal to the theory of the identity of the two rites. To burn an image is a perfectly simple magic rite, and to argue that the image is a substitute is to fall into the same fallacy as the Brahmins who argued that all sacrificial victims were substitutes for man.

Nor does the Greek evidence point to any real human sacrifice at the Kronia of a representative of the god. The Olympian Kronia held at the Equinox is unstained by any hint of such a sacrifice, and a bare mention in Porphyry¹ of a human sacrifice to Kronos at Rhodes in the month Metageitnion contains no hint of the divine character of the victim. And when we pass to the Sacæa of Babylon and the Jewish Purim, the wilderness of conjecture becomes yet more impenetrable, and still less light can be thrown on the origin of the Saturnalia. The Sacæa was held in

¹ *De Abſtinentia*, ii, 54. It must be remembered that Porphyry's statements in this chapter cannot be accepted without great caution.

July,¹ not even in March like the Babylonian Zakmuk, with which Sir J. Frazer identifies it, or like the Jewish Purim, apparently, though not certainly, a borrowing from Zakmuk. It follows, therefore, that the elaborate argument² which finds in Mordecai and Esther as opposed to Haman and Vashti a relic of a ritual of slaying the human personification of the god and his revival rests on the weakest and least plausible grounds. But in any case to argue from an Eastern rite of spring to the Italian rite of the winter solstice is wholly inconclusive. We have the sure evidence of diversity of date, and against that difference can be adduced only vague and unsubstantial conjectures of identity of substance.

A. BERRIEDALE KEITH.

MALAVA-GANA-STHITI

Dr. Thomas has said (JRAS, 1914, p. 1010) that I adhere to my original interpretation of the expression *Mālava-gaṇa-sthiti*. That is not at all the case. My original rendering (quoted *ibid.*, p. 746, in my note on which he has commented) was "the tribal constitution of the Mālavas," in the sense of the event of some formal establishment of the Mālavas as a tribe.³ My amended translation (p. 747) is "the usage of the Mālava tribe."

That the term *sthiti* in the dates of A.D. 473 and 532 has the sense of 'usage, custom, practice', is shown plainly by the use of *āmnāta*, 'handed down traditionally', instead of it, in the recently discovered date of A.D. 405.

¹ See Frazer, p. 359.

² Frazer, pp. 365 seqq., 405-7.

³ In JRAS, 1914, p. 414, Dr. Thomas gave "the continuance [*sthiti*] of the tribal constitution [*gaṇa*] of the Mālavas" as being the "substance" of my original rendering. That does not represent my rendering at all properly: it was to *gaṇa-sthiti*, not to *gaṇa*, that I gave the meaning of 'tribal constitution'; and I did not introduce the idea of 'continuance'.