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978-1-107-67006-8 - The Thunderweapon in Religion and Folklore: A Study in Comparative Archaeology

CHR. Blinkenberg

Excerpt

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### I. Danish, Scandinavian, and German popular tradition ; extent of the Thunderstone belief in Europe and other Continents.

THE belief in thunderstones, which has been common at all times in Denmark, has not yet entirely disappeared. Thirty or thirty-five years ago the author found it fully alive in south-western Jutland. Amongst the recent records of Danish folk-lore we find now and again information about thunderstones, and in the earlier Danish literature, too, the prevailing ideas of the peasantry on this subject are touched on in a few places, for instance, in Holberg [72] and Pontoppidan [1]. With no very close connection with Danish popular belief, and of little importance in the study of the Danish tradition, there are, on the other hand, the "learned" expositions of J. L. Wolff and O. Worm: these are derived from foreign literary sources and originate in the ancient classical literature [115 a].

The substance of the Danish thunderstone belief is as follows:

The thunderstone falls down from the sky in thunderstorms or, more accurately, whenever the lightning strikes. The stroke of the lightning, according to this view, consists in the descent of the stone; the flash and the thunder-clap are mere after-effects or secondary phenomena.

The stone protects the house in which it is kept against strokes of lightning; "where it has once struck it is not worth coming again" [62]. In many parts the stone was simply kept lying on a shelf, on a chest of drawers, or in a box. Usually, however, it was kept in a particular place where it might be free from daily disturbance: it was immured in the wall, laid under the floor, on the top of the four-post bedstead, or under

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the roof [138]. The object was evidently to avoid touching the thunderstone, and this is sometimes very distinctly emphasized in the records [51, 53]; thus, in Jutland it was often kept under the far side of the fixed bedstead.

The thunderstone keeps trolls and other pernicious creatures away from the house, and as most of the evils which befall man and his property are due, according to the old popular belief, to witchcraft and evil beings, the thunderstone in general becomes a protection for house and cattle; it draws luck to the house, can be used as a healing power, and so on. This idea particularly asserted itself in certain cases where an injurious influence, the origin of which was unknown, was frequently felt. Thus the thunderstone especially protects the little unchristened child against being "changed" and the horse in the stable against "nightmare." But it was especially common to use the thunderstone as a protection against mishaps with the milk and its treatment: it was laid on the milk-shelves that the milk might keep fresh or give better cream, and put on the churn that the churning might give good butter. In many parts a new, special name for the thunderstone has thus resulted: butter-luck, etc. [71].

While these ideas were spread in essentially the same form and preserved more or less perfectly all over the country, it was with particular sorts of stones that the belief was associated in particular parts of the country. Denmark has three portions of territory in touch with the neighbouring countries in the east and south, each with its special kind of thunderstone. In the greater part of the country, viz. in Sealand with the neighbouring isles, in Langeland, Funen, Bornholm (?), and in Vendsyssel, Mors and the eastern parts of Jutland, the common flint-axes of the stone age or occasionally other flint antiquities (dagger blades, even the crescent-shaped flint saws [33]) were the objects supposed to fall down from the sky in thunderstorms [1-38]. Partially in Sealand and on the islands to the south of it, Falster, Lolland and Bornholm [39-47], belemnites ("fingerstones") were regarded as thunderstones; whereas in western and southern Jutland [49-70] fossilized sea-urchins (sea-eggs, echinites) passed as such. This may also

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have been the case in other districts, and if in this connection we may rely entirely on the existing records, it seems that the thunderstone belief in some places divided into two branches, so that the ideas which mainly concerned milk, churning, etc., were associated in some parts with echinites, whilst flint antiquities were looked upon as thunderstones.

The Danish thunderstones, then, have externally only one common feature, a special shape which differs from that of the common rude flint and is of fairly but not very frequent occurrence. It is not recorded that other natural stones or stone antiquities have been looked upon as thunderstones in Denmark.

The side-issues of the belief in the power of the thunderstone are, as has been said above, in the main easily intelligible from a consideration of the fundamental idea. On the other hand, this nucleus, round which the other ideas seem to have grown, demands an explanation which the Danish tradition does not of itself provide. To obtain even a probable solution, the forms which kindred popular beliefs have assumed in other countries must be taken into consideration: in this way the main facts and details, which will afford a support for the explanation, may come to light. In the first place, we must turn to the kindred peoples in the east and north, and to the neighbouring country in the south.

In Norway the thunderstone belief does not seem to have such importance as in Denmark. In the greater part of the country "certain round and smooth stones" have been looked upon as thunderstones; whereas the axes of the stone age are so regarded only in the southern part of Norway, nearest Vendsyssel. Of these only a few and for the most part brief records exist [86-89], and the derived ideas referred to above seem practically unknown.

In Iceland thunderstones are scarcely known in popular tradition, for the simple reason that thunderstorms are a rare phenomenon; consequently they have been of no importance in the realm of popular ideas and have left no trace in it. From modern times we have only scattered information about thunderstones; everything suggests that these ideas are of late origin, introduced no doubt through foreign literary channels.

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If, therefore, the earliest inhabitants of the country brought the thunderstone belief with them, it must have become extinct because the natural conditions did not favour its preservation and further development [90–91].

It is quite otherwise in Sweden [81–85], where the thunderstone belief has been widely spread until the latest times. It is usually the implements of the stone age (not only the flint axe, as in Denmark, but quite as often the pierced axe) that are supposed to have come down with the thunder, though in certain parts (as in southern Skaane, close to the Danish Isles) it is the belemnite that is so regarded; in other parts the same is said about rock crystals, stones worn by water, etc. In some places the tale goes that the thunderstone, on striking, dives seven fathoms deep into the ground, afterwards rising one fathom every year until, after the lapse of seven years, it again reaches the surface—an idea that occurs in many different countries, though hardly in the Danish tradition. The power attributed to it in the affairs of daily life is partly the same as, or, at any rate, akin to, that known in Denmark: thus it is laid in the granary as a preventive against rats, and in the brewing vat to prevent the trolls from spoiling the brew; it is used against disease amongst cattle and also amongst men and women; it is hung as a charm round the neck of a child to protect it against the ague, and is placed over the horses in the stable to keep away the nightmare; it is a protection not only against lightning but also against other forms of fire; thus it is carried about “Svedjeland” (*i.e.* land cleared from forest by fire) to prevent the fire spreading; finally, it becomes a means of attracting good fortune generally, and may therefore be fastened to a fishing-net.

In Germany [93–95] we have many records of the popular belief in thunderstones in various parts of the country. Here, in the main, the same ideas occur which are known in Scandinavia, but besides these we find individual features foreign to the Danish and Swedish traditions. Some of these occur in other countries as well, but others seem peculiar to German districts. Not only flint axes, belemnites, and echinites pass for thunderstones, but also, in certain parts at any rate, pierced stone axes.

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The thunderstone comes down with the lightning ; it penetrates a certain depth into the earth but comes to the surface again after the lapse of a definite time ; when a thunderstorm is brewing, the stone perspires and moves. It is a protection against lightning, for which purpose it is carefully kept, put up under the roof, or hung up near the fire-place. In some parts of East Prussia, where the belief is associated with the pierced axe, when a thunderstorm is coming on, the peasant puts his finger through the hole, swings the axe round three times, and then hurls it vigorously against the door—thus the house is freed from strokes of lightning. The genuine thunderstone is proof against fire. To test its genuineness a piece of thread is wound round the stone, which is then thrown into the fire ; if the thread does not burn, the stone is genuine. Further, it will serve as a safeguard against witches, is put in the cradle with little children to protect them, is kept in the dairy and will cure the cattle of disease, especially the cows of inflamed udders (due to being milked by witches). It is also used as a cure for various diseases amongst human beings, partly by stroking the sore place with it, partly by scraping a powder from the stone and giving it to the sick person. These last ideas may, like the corresponding features known from Denmark, be derived from the belief that the thunderstone drives away evil creatures ; in other cases the fact seems rather to be that the thunderstone, being already beneficial in so many cases, has come to be included in the motley collection of remedies employed by popular medicine ; other remedies are used in conjunction with it for the same case. In an attempt, however, to find the nucleus of the thunderstone belief we must not dwell on these points, but fix our attention on the main ideas which characterise it.

Kindred beliefs, partly in exactly similar form, are found much farther abroad, not only in the Teutonic and Anglo-Saxon countries but also amongst other European peoples. We have records of this in all parts of Europe, and it appears that not only among the peoples of Indo-European origin, but also among others, *e.g.* the Ugro-Finnish peoples, the thunderstones play their part. If we turn to the other continents it becomes still clearer that this popular belief is not

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limited to any one race: for the same chain of ideas is found in almost the whole of Asia and Africa, in China and Japan, as well as amongst the negroes of the Guinea Coast. The main idea, that the thunderstone comes down with the lightning, is everywhere the same; many secondary ideas attaching to it are also found in remarkably similar forms.

Thus it is over a great part of the globe that the belief in thunderstones is spread. There are, however, large districts where it is not known. This is especially the case in the South Sea Islands and in Australia, which hold also in other respects a peculiar position in the development of the human race. From America we have only a few scattered reports of a kindred belief, and there is but small probability of its being really indigenous there. The accounts most frequently appear in such a form as to suggest that the thunderstone belief, in the cases in question, was introduced by European immigrants (especially the Spanish and Portuguese in South and Central America), who brought the idea with them from their native country fully formed, and may well have applied it to the stone axes that were to be found on American soil as well as to those of their own countries. From the Spaniards and Portuguese it may have spread to the Indians. The American aborigines had usually quite different conceptions of the nature of thunder; according to a wide-spread belief, both in North and South America, it was produced by a large thunder-bird [132, 133]. Thus in the attempt to disentangle the original thunderstone belief it will be best not to consider America.

In Europe, Asia, and Africa it is most frequently prehistoric stone antiquities that pass for thunderstones; but, besides these, other stones (belemnites, echinites, globular stones and rock crystals) are similarly regarded.

This, however, does not seem to have had any particular effect upon the development of the popular belief.

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## II. The Thunderstone in pagan religions of the present day.

IT would help very little fully to recount at this point the traditions prevailing in various countries; for these the reader is referred to a later chapter [X] where the main portions of the existing records are given in abstract. While in the main we find the same ideas everywhere, different features are predominant in different localities. There is a special reason why our attention should be concentrated on the traditions in those parts of the world which have not been influenced by Christianity or other advanced religions. For there can be no doubt that the central features of the belief in thunderstones are not of Christian, Buddhist, Brahman or Mahometan origin, and that the old idea to some extent held its own in spite of religion, or at any rate because it was not felt to be in conflict with it. In those countries, on the other hand, which were dominated by the above religions, the power exercised by religion over the mind may have effaced certain aspects of the idea about the thunderstone which were incompatible with the faith. Among the accounts derived from distant countries two will be mentioned here which exactly illustrate this. One of them, the material for which is derived from the National Museum, is especially noteworthy, inasmuch as it has never, to the author's knowledge, been published before.

On the Guinea Coast and in its hinterland the belief in thunderstones is very common. The ancient stone axes, which are regarded as such, are called "thunderbolts," "lightning stones," "stonegods," or "thundergods," and are supposed to fall from the sky in thunderstorms. When the lightning splits a tree, kills a man, or sets fire to a house, the thunderstone is held to be the agent. As a protection against lightning it is placed

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under the rafters, and sacrifice is made to it of cowries, poultry, or kids, when it is smeared with the blood of the sacrificed animals, or with milk. The Danish missionary Monrad mentions this belief in his description of the Guinea Coast [129], and makes the interesting statement that no negro dares to take a false oath when near such a thunderbolt. The belief, prevalent amongst certain African tribes, which places the thunderbolt in the hand of a personal god as an instrument of power and vengeance, seems to be of later origin.

From the opposite boundary of the great territory in which the thunderstones are known we get descriptions of a very similar character. In the mountain districts in the centre of southern India there are tribes only superficially touched by Brahmanism, amongst whom earlier religious ideas and customs still linger. From these regions we have gained much information and numerous collections in the National Museum, for which we are principally indebted to the Danish missionary, Mr Löventhal, who has worked in Vellore for many years [119 *e*].

The museum thus possesses some stone implements, mostly axes, from the Shevaroy Hills, which lie to the south-west of Madras. Some of them Mr Löventhal acquired, in exchange for other articles, from a planter in the district who is a collector of antiquities. About these axes Mr Löventhal writes as follows: "The inhabitants of the Shevaroy Hills (the Malayals, of Dravidian race, who, according to their own traditions, have migrated to the mountains from the district about Conjeveram, close to the south-west of Madras) call these axes thunderstones and believe that they have fallen from the sky. They have small stone altars in the forests where they lay these stones, and they regard them as a kind of deity." According to what the Malayals told Mr Löventhal, the planter had taken the whole of his large collection of stone axes ("whole baskets full") from their altars. From the same mountains there are seven stone axes sent to the museum by Mr Berg, a missionary, who describes them as follows: "The thunderbolts were worshipped as village gods in these mountains; they were presented to me, while on a preaching tour, by the inhabitants, who are called Malayals,



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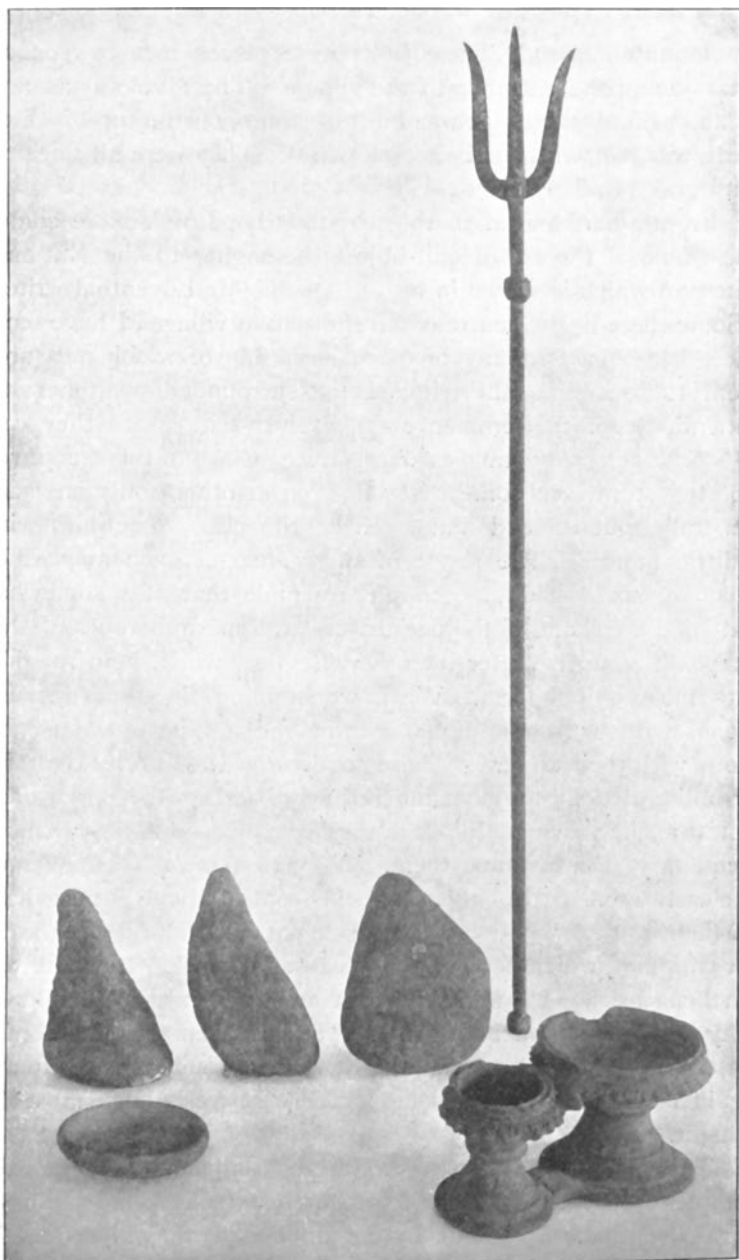


Fig. 1.

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*i.e.* 'mountain men.' These bolts were placed in a row on an altar just at the entrance to the village. The altar was as high as an ordinary table. It was built of stones, on the top of which earth was laid, with the bolts stuck in it. They were all smeared with ghee (Indian butter)."

From a pariah altar in the neighbourhood of Vellore comes the whole of the set of cult-objects belonging to the National Museum which is shown in fig. 1. Of this Mr Löventhal writes: "Somewhere in the centre of all the pariah villages I have seen, there is a square mound of earth, each side of which measures from 12 to 16 feet, the whole being surrounded by stones; in the middle of this eminence—the 'earth-temple' as they call it—there generally stands a large tree. Close to this tree three pointed stones (in some cases five, or in others only one) are generally put on end and fixed in the clay, sometimes with a little mortar. The shape of these stones, which may differ much in size, should, if possible, resemble that of a somewhat flattened cone, and if the pariahs can find natural stones of this shape, they much prefer it; otherwise they work them roughly into the required form. When worshipping they smear these stones with saffron and make three red aniline dots on each stone with their fingers. These are soon washed off by the rain, or obliterated by the sun and hot wind, and as the pariahs are not as a rule very punctilious in their worship, the stones are most frequently seen without them. A small *trisula*<sup>1</sup> is stuck into the earth next to the stones, and in front of them is placed an earthenware bowl with a wick inside for oil, and a double bowl for camphor, which is commonly used as incense. But both the earthenware bowls and the *trisula* are often missing; children play with them and break the bowls, but when the time comes for the stones to be smeared, the bowls and *trisula* must be found again and put in their places; otherwise fresh ones must be bought."

The photograph here reproduced of one of these "earth-temples" (fig. 2) has been procured by the kind help of Mr Löventhal. It stands in the middle of the only street in

<sup>1</sup> A small three-pronged fork of iron. For its significance and origin see Chap. VII.