



---

The Sacred Anthill and the Cult of the Primordial Mound

Author(s): John C. Irwin

Source: *History of Religions*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (May, 1982), pp. 339-360

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062329>

Accessed: 02/01/2011 07:37

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *History of Religions*.

John C. Irwin

THE SACRED ANTHILL  
AND THE CULT OF THE  
PRIMORDIAL MOUND

Ethnographical reports of the last hundred years suggest that anthill worship is an ancient cult that survives in many parts of India up to the present day. The cult once occupied a central place in Vedic and Hindu religion, and from at least as early as the first millennium B.C., and probably earlier, it has figured prominently—if somewhat incomprehensibly—in rituals associated with all the critical events of human life, including birth, marriage, sickness, and death. Anthills have also played an important part in the consecration of temples, the warding-off of evil, ritual destruction of an enemy, calling divine witness, and securing material prosperity. The anthill in figure 1 is one among thousands still under regular worship, and although such shrines are nowadays mainly concentrated in the south, there is abundant evidence that they were once common throughout India.<sup>1</sup>

Strictly speaking, we should not call them “anthills,” because they are made not by ants but by termites (misleadingly called “white ants”). The termite, in fact, is unrelated to the ant. It is entomologically closer to the cockroach, but mainly confined to tropical and subtropical regions. However, since the term “ant” is used by all the ethnographers, philologists, and folklorists that I will be quoting, I

This paper is an amplification of a lecture originally given to the Folklore Society of University College, London, April 16, 1930.

<sup>1</sup> *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency* 9, pt. 1 (Bombay, 1879–1904): 380; further references in nn. 4, 14, 15, and 50 below.



FIG. 1.—Sacred “anthill” (termite mound), photographed beside the Madras-Kanchipuram road, Tamilnad. (Photo by author, January 1979.)

will use the correct term “termite” only when referring to the insect in real life.

The worship of anthills takes the form of ritual circumambulation (Sanskrit, *pradakṣiṇā*), involving clockwise or “sunwise” circulation, so that the mound is kept on the worshiper’s right. This is a solar rite in which the worshiper identifies with the course of the sun in its life-giving aspect.<sup>2</sup> Offerings are nowadays mostly vegetarian, in the form of food and drink (especially eggs, bananas, rice, and milk); but animal sacrifice is not uncommon, the blood of victims being poured down the ventilation shafts of the mound.

In most areas, the sacred anthill is identified with a village goddess (in pastoral areas, a god) who is believed to have been “born of the anthill,” without human father or mother, and who never has a consort. The deity does not represent the anthill, or vice versa; the anthill *is* the deity, and the deity is the anthill: mound and deity are regarded as one.

When we look for meaning in anthill rites, the first clue comes from the nature of the festivals associated with the cult, which are always celebrations of the New Year—although not ordinarily the calendric New Year. In many parts of India, up to the present day,

<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 2.6.2.15.

there is more than one New Year celebration within the twelvemonth, the calendric dates varying with local crop cycles. The date is related either to the harvesting of an important crop or preparations for a new sowing. The festivals are nonsectarian and commonly attract tribals, along with Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivites. In many cases the priests are non-Brahmins. When blood sacrifices are performed, Brahmin attendants simply turn their heads the other way.<sup>3</sup>

At some shrines, male and female worshipers take off all their clothes and ornaments and put on only leaf-dress for performance of the rituals. The leaves are those of the margosa or *nīm* tree (*Azadirachta indica*), one of the sacred trees and a species widely worshiped in India. The anthill site at Periyapālayam, in Chingleput District, Tamilnad, is a place once famous for a rite that Europeans refer to as "hook swinging." In this rite a human victim chooses to be rotated from a pole with no support other than an iron hook piercing his back.<sup>4</sup> A connection between "hook swinging" and anthill worship has been suggested but not explained.<sup>5</sup>

The observer of this cult may experience the feeling that the ghosts of an extremely archaic past are hovering around—so archaic, in fact, that meanings are today totally forgotten, even by the participants, who are riveted to ancient customs they are powerless to explain. However, when the data are carefully sifted and accumulated, the cult's association with all the critical events of human life becomes increasingly apparent. For instance, at wedding ceremonies, in order to ensure fertility of the marriage, clay from an anthill is brought to the marriage pavilion, remodeled into some potent shape, and used as

<sup>3</sup> Information obtained verbally at Periyapālayam in January 1979. Blood sacrifice at anthills was once common in the north of India, too. In the sixteenth century, the English merchant, Ralph Fitch, in his description of Cambay, in Gujarat, comments that although the people of this city (who were mainly Jains) avoided taking life and even maintained hospitals for birds and animals, they nevertheless "fed meat to anthills." Here, the author is apparently confusing the Jains who built the animal hospitals with the autochthonous tribal peoples of the area who sacrificed blood to anthills. This description was first published in Samuel Purchas, *Purchas, His Pilgrimes* (London, 1626), vol. 2, bk. 10. The more recent *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency* tells us that Gujaratis deem it "a great sin to kill ants" (in this case true ants, not termites, may be meant, the Gujarati word *raḍḍo* being used interchangeably for anthill, termite mound, and even rat hole).

<sup>4</sup> "Hook swinging" is a common misnomer for the solar rite properly called *cakra-pūjā*, literally, "the wheel form of (sun) worship." For descriptions of this rite, see esp. J. H. Powell, "Hook-Swinging in India," *Journal of the Folklore Society* 25 (1914): 147–97. The subject of so-called hook swinging or *cakra-pūjā* has been more fully discussed in my paper, "The Ancient Pillar-Cult at Prayāga (Allahabad): Its Pre-Aśokan Origins," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (in press).

<sup>5</sup> Bishop Henry Whitehead, *Village Gods of South India* (Calcutta, 1921), pp. 81–82.

a focal point of the entire ceremony.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, bride and bridegroom are required to sacrifice at an anthill; or the groom is expected to chase the bride around an actual mound until, against her resistance, she is "captured." Anthills are thought to be such potent agents of fecundity that in some parts of India, up to the present day, it is believed that dancing around an anthill is enough to induce pregnancy, without the intervention of any man.<sup>7</sup> (For the same reason, virgins wanting to preserve their maidenhood are warned to keep away.) Even more relevant to our thesis, as we will see later, are the many folktales of gods and goddesses seen coming out of, or returning into, an anthill.<sup>8</sup>

Since the ventilation shafts lead down into the netherworld—the realm of the Fathers (*pitrs*)—anthills are commonly used as altars for sacrifice to the ancestors.<sup>9</sup> Accounts also tell of a stick or pole bearing

<sup>6</sup> The place of anthill rites in marriage ceremonies is described in many sources, including Edgar Thurston, "More Marriage Customs in South India," *Madras Government Museum Bulletin* 5, no. 1, pp. 28–29; H. V. Nanjundayya, "Tigala Caste," in *Ethnographical Survey of Mysore* (Bangalore, 1906–8) pts. 9, 13, 22; L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes* (Madras, 1912), 2:376; and Verrier Elwin, *Folktales of Mahakoshal* (Bombay, 1944), p. 331. These rites often included verbal contests that have all the signs of very archaic custom (J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* [London, 1944], p. 83). A similar linking of verbal contests with anthill worship has been reported from Malaya, and a symbolic mound made of anthill clay, used in marriage ceremonies, is illustrated by Walter W. Skeat and Charles O. Blagden, *Pagan Races of the Malaya Peninsula* (London, 1906), vol. 2, opposite p. 71, with the interesting comment that this mound is regarded as "the most sacred emblem of the tribe" (1:189) and called "*kita-punya Imam*," a kind of "holy of holies." The peculiar shape, they say, "has come down from an entirely unknown origin" (1:57). The ordinary name of the mound is *besut*, which R. J. Wilkinson's *Malay-English Dictionary* defines as "anthill; mound; barrow; knoll . . ." Among the Batins of Selangor (according to Skeat and Blagden, 2:72–73), the mound of anthill clay is worshiped in combination with a sun symbol, and again there is ritualistic questioning of the bridegroom by the bride or her father, followed by a chase.

<sup>7</sup> Günther-Dietz Sontheimer, *Birobā, Mhaskobā and Khaṇḍobā*, Schriftenreihe des Südasien-Institut der Universität Heidelberg (Wiesbaden, 1976), pp. 131–32. For general comment on anthills and fertility, see Edgar Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions of Southern India* (London, 1912), pp. 132–33.

<sup>8</sup> Gustav Oppert, *On the Original Inhabitants of Bharatavarsa or India* (London, 1893), p. 464; and Sontheimer, *Birobā, Mhaskobā and Khaṇḍobā*, chap. 7.

<sup>9</sup> The best descriptions of these rites appear in Sarat Chandra Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs* (Ranchi, 1928), pp. 74–77, and *The Kharias*, (Ranchi, 1937), 2:374; William Crooke, *Popular Religion and Folklore in Northern India* (London, 1925), p. 388; and Günther-Dietz Sontheimer, "Some Incidents in the History of the God Khaṇḍobā," in *Asie du Sud: Traditions et changements* (Paris, 1978), Proceedings of the Sixth European Conference on Modern Asian Studies, Le Centre national de la Recherche scientifique, Paris, July 8–13, 1978. The anthill is an obvious entrance to the netherworld, where the ancestors are buried. This link is testified in the Mahābhārata (critical ed., 3.82).

a sun emblem painted with yellow turmeric and inserted into the center of the mound as an axis prior to the sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> In rites performed at the building of a temple, a piece of anthill clay called the "embryo" is inserted into the foundations<sup>11</sup>—a practice already included in the building of a Vedic fire altar.<sup>12</sup> Anthills also appear in the ancient Indian rite of royal consecration (*rājasūya*)<sup>13</sup> and in many rites of calling divine witness, in which anthills serve as oracles, or in the witnessing of oaths.<sup>14</sup> In social life, they also carry a guarantee of divine sanctuary, enabling the fugitive who escapes justice to secure immunity from arrest simply by embracing an anthill.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, there are recurrent folktales about a treasure guarded by a serpent hidden within the anthill. The serpent is often described as spitting fire and having in its head a wondrous jewel which emits rays causing the rainbow.<sup>16</sup> It is said that if you run to the spot "where the rainbow ends" and dig into the nearest anthill, there you will find treasure—that is, if you survive the anger of the guardian serpent.<sup>17</sup> Among the pastoral tribes of central India, the treasure is sheep: it is said that if you embrace an anthill and put your ear to it, you will hear the bleating of the first lambs of the creation.<sup>18</sup>

We see here a clue to the ultimate meaning of all the rites and usages we have been discussing: the anthill as sacred image of the primordial mound. The primordial mound is not the sacred mountain of cosmology. Its orientation appears to have been originally solar, in contrast with the world mountain of cosmology which was polar and

<sup>10</sup> Sontheimer, "Some Incidents," p. 2. Other references to the association of termite mounds with sun worship will be found in Edward Tuite Dalton, *Description of the Ethnology of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872), p. 159; Crooke, *Religion and Folklore in Northern India*, p. 32; and *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. "Dravidians (North India)." For Malayan parallels, see Skeat and Blagden, 2:72, 73. In ancient classical texts, the link between termite mounds and sun worship is shown in *Taittirīya Samhitā* 4.1.2; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.3.3.6; and *Mahābhārata* 3.82 (critical ed.).

<sup>11</sup> Teun Goudriaan, *Kāśyapa's Book of Wisdom (Kāśyapa-Jñānakāṇḍaḥ, a Ritual Handbook of the Vaikhāṇasas)* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.3.36 and 16.1.2.10. In another passage in the same text (2.1.1.7.), the earth of a molehill (*ākhu-karīṣa*) is built into the fire altar. I shall have more to say presently about the mythological interchangeability of anthill and molehill.

<sup>13</sup> Discussed by Jan C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration* ('s-Gravenhage, 1947), pp. 17, 19, 168, 170.

<sup>14</sup> Dalton, p. 159.

<sup>15</sup> Three references are given by Crooke, *Religion and Folklore in Northern India*, p. 380, n. 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46; and Jean Philippe Vogel, *Indian Serpentlore* (London, 1926), p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> This aspect is discussed in *ibid.*, p. 28. See also Elwin (n. 6 above), p. 331.

<sup>18</sup> Sontheimer, *Birobā, Mhaskobā and Khaṇḍobā*, chap. 6; also discussed in the same author's "Some Incidents," p. 2. Similar information is given by Robert V. Russell, *Tribes and Castes of Central Provinces* (London, 1916), 2:480.

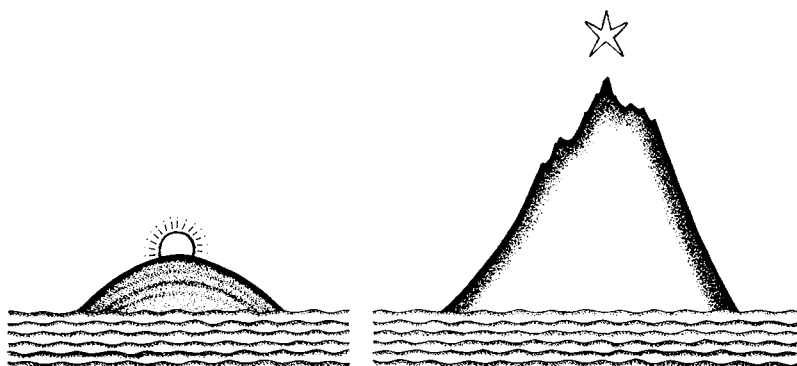


FIG. 2.—Left, The primordial mound of the archaic cosmogony. Right, The sacred mountain of later cosmogony.

incorporated a different set of astrological ideas (fig. 2). In its cosmogonic form, the image is that of a mound or “low eminence” that pushed its head above the waters. In regions with major river systems subject to flooding (where the early civilizations developed), the primordial mound was visualized as a mud bank, left high and dry by the receding flood: one day a “hump” of brown mud, seemingly lifeless; the next day bursting into greenery and myriad forms of life beneath the fertilizing rays of the sun. Where there were no large rivers, an alternative image was a rock with springs issuing from its base.

Whatever the form in which the primordial mound was visualized (and there are countless variations), it is here that we meet with a semantic trap. This cosmogonic mound commonly described as the “high place” was “high” only in relation to the waters out of which it emerged. The trap is made still more treacherous by the fact that the cosmogonic mound was conceived as “swelling” into a hill and eventually into a mountain. In other words, swelling, expansion were of its very essence, and it therefore becomes all too easy to read “mountain” where there was originally a “mound.” With these later stages, however, we are not concerned.

Since the primordial mound preceded the creation, it did not possess any of the dualities or polarities that characterize our own organized universe, such as heaven and earth, fire and water, gods and demons, male and female, and so on. Thus, without gods and demons there could be neither good nor evil; without life and water, no energy; without male and female, no procreation. The first and most important of the dualisms was heaven and earth, because it was from this that all other dualisms followed.

The archetypal image of the separation and unity of heaven and earth was the world tree, its branches extending to the heavens and its roots into the subterranean waters. This tree was the primary image of the world's axis. However, in versions of the cosmogony where a creator god was involved, the tree was commonly imaged as a pillar, ritually carved from its trunk. The tree/pillar that pushed up the sky also pegged down the mound to the bottom of the waters, giving it the stability it needed to expand into our universe.<sup>19</sup> With this combined action of propping and pegging, a number of other things happened simultaneously: the vacuum created between heaven and earth was filled by space; with the horizontal expansion of space, the four quarters were born, creating the area within which we live and breathe; and, most important of all in our present context, the sun was released from the waters to bring light and life into the world, to create time and the seasons, and to set in motion the whole cosmic life cycle.

Some features of this archaic cosmogony have been familiar for a long time.<sup>20</sup> However, detailed attention to the particular aspect with which we are now concerned—the primordial mound—is relatively recent. First accurate recognition came in 1916, with A. J. Wensinck's seminal work, *The Ideas of Western Semites concerning the Navel of the Earth*.<sup>21</sup> A few years later, from the same university, Leiden, came Adriaan de Buck's important doctoral thesis, "De Egyptische voorstellineen betreffende den Oerhevel" [The primordial mound in ancient Egyptian religion] (Leiden, 1922). This demonstrated that the theoretical conclusions Wensinck had drawn from Semitic sources were confirmed and extended by early Egyptian texts. After de Buck came W. B. Kristensen, professor of comparative religion at Leiden, whose *Het Leven uit den Dood* [Life out of death]<sup>22</sup> argued that the cult of the primordial mound was the key to the mystery of resurrection.

<sup>19</sup> Indra, for instance, at the creation "made steadfast the quaking earth . . . set at rest the agitated mountains . . ." and "the shaking mountains and the plains he fixed" (Rgveda 2.12.2 and 10.44.8). Similar examples can be cited from many archaic cultures.

<sup>20</sup> One of the first to point to the apparent universality of the cosmogony was Edward Clodd in his Presidential Address to the Folklore Society in 1895, published in *Folklore* 6 (1896): 62.

<sup>21</sup> A. J. Wensinck, *The Ideas of the Western Semites concerning the Navel of the Earth*, *Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam*, n.s., vol. 17, no. 1 (Amsterdam, 1916).

<sup>22</sup> William B. Kristensen, *Het Leven uit den Dood* (Haarlem, 1949). This work has not been translated, which may partly explain why it has had little impact in England and America, except through the works of Henri Frankfort, who was profoundly influenced by it.



The primordial mound was never mentioned in any Indian context until 1946, when there came into the picture yet another Leiden professor—this time, the professor of Sanskrit, F. B. J. Kuiper. It was in his review<sup>23</sup> of a book about the Ṛgvedic demon-serpent, Vṛtra, by the Danish scholar Burschardt, that Kuiper came out with the idea that the primordial mound was one with Vala in the Ṛgvedic myth of Indra slaying the demon—a central episode of Vedic religion. Kuiper had not then read W. Norman Brown's paper, "The Creation Myth of the Rig-Veda,"<sup>24</sup> which had rejected the idea of earlier generations of Sanskritists that the slaying of Vṛtra was a "nature myth" concerned with thunderclouds and rain. Kuiper's independent recognition of Vala as the primordial mound was both important in itself and as a corroboration of Brown's interpretation. Since then, Kuiper has extended his thinking. In his latest work he suggests that the so-called family books of the Ṛgveda (books 2–6) might have accompanied rites of renewal annually performed at the winter solstice, apparently under different climatic conditions, without a monsoon.<sup>25</sup> This accords with the fact that in their surviving codified (Vedic) form these concepts are already in the process of losing their original meaning. Owing to the exceptional conservatism of Indian religious practice, many ritualistic traces of the archaic cosmogony survive up to the present day and can be recognized once the investigator knows what he should be looking for. The cult of the anthill is here claimed as one of these survivals.

This brings me now to the second part of this thesis, in which evidence of surviving beliefs and practices will be used to throw light on the meaning of obscure passages in ancient texts. For instance, in the Yajur-veda, which reflects religious practices not later than the middle of the first millennium B.C., ants are addressed as "... the earliest of creation ..." (37.4). In the ritual text, Āpastamba Śrautasūtra (15.2.1), which is only slightly later, the mounds made by ants are identified with the first lump of mud raised to the surface of

<sup>23</sup> F. B. J. Kuiper, review of Leo Buschardt, *Vṛtra, Det rituelle daemondrab i den vediske Somakult* (Copenhagen, 1945), which was published in *Museum, Maandblad voor Philologie en Geschieden* 62 (1947): 198–200. An English translation of this important review is now in press in Kuiper's *Ancient Cosmogony*, ed. J. Irwin (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House).

<sup>24</sup> W. Norman Brown, "The Creation Myth of the Rig-Veda," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62 (1942): 85–98. Reprinted in W. Norman Brown, *India and Indology*, ed. Rosane Rocher for the American Institute of Indian Studies (Delhi, 1978), pp. 20–33.

<sup>25</sup> Kuiper's latest views are incorporated in *Varuṇa and Vidūṣaka: On the Origin of the Sanskrit Drama*, *Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen*, n.s., vol. 100 (Amsterdam, 1979).

the waters on the snout of the primordial boar (*ādi-varāha*).<sup>26</sup> In the same context, the insects themselves are addressed as “Ye divine ants, who originated at the Creation, ye who are combined with *ṛta*.”<sup>27</sup> At this stage, the primeval boar is not given a personal name, but the terms in which it is described in the same text are especially illuminating: “The earth, which was rooted up by the wild boar is addressed with the formula: ‘So large wast thou [i.e., the earth] in the beginning!’” In the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, ants are again described in terms now becoming familiar as “the first-born [*prathamajā*] of the world [*bhūtasya*].”<sup>28</sup> In the next verse, *bhūta* is equated with earth (*prthivī*) and described as “very small” when raised from the bottom of the waters—that is, before it began to “swell.” This is another allusion to the mound of the cosmogony.

This brings me now to the first of many remarkable correspondences between facts of nature, as revealed by modern scientists, and information which, unknown to them, was already embodied in texts of between 2,500 and 3,000 years ago. The truth is that the termite is an extremely archaic creature. Whereas man himself has inhabited

<sup>26</sup> Among the many different accounts of the way in which the earth itself came into being, the three main Indian ones are (1) the coagulation theory, best known from Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa 3.360, line 11; Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.2.2.; and Aitareya Upaniṣad 1.3; (2) the theory of the mundane egg and its variants, in Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa 3.360, line 7, and Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 40.1.6.1–2 (elements are also traceable in Ṛgveda 10.121.1 and 7, and 10.82.6); and (3) the theory that a cosmogonic boar brought up from the bottom of the cosmic ocean a lump of mud, originally no bigger than the animal’s snout, which subsequently “swelled.” The boar myth is especially associated with the schools of the Yajur-veda and has special relevance in our context, as we shall see. For fuller discussion, see F. B. J. Kuiper, “Cosmogony and Conception: A Query,” *History of Religions* 10, no. 2 (1970): 91–138. The connection between the anthill and the waterdiver, commonly in the form of a boar, which brings up the earth on its snout, is very persistent. But in the Shan states on the Burma-China border it is the ants themselves who bring up the earth from the bottom of the cosmic ocean (W. R. Hillier, “Notes on Manners, etc. of the Shan States,” *Indian Antiquity* 21 [1892]: 121). For fuller discussion of the myth of the boar as waterdiver, see my paper, “The Mystery of the (Future) Buddha’s First Words,” in *Annali* (Annals of Istituto Universitario Orientale, Seminario di Studi Asiatici, University of Naples, 1982) pp. 1–31.

<sup>27</sup> *Rta*, in the Vedas, is applied to cosmic order, conceived as hidden in the netherworld. It is to this world that the ventilation shafts of the termite mound give access.

<sup>28</sup> Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 14.1.2.10. According to one of the Greek versions of the cosmogony, ants were also regarded as the firstborn. In the one legend reported by William S. Fox (in *Greek and Roman Mythology*, vol. 1, *Mythology of All Races* [Boston, 1916], pp. 10–11), “Aiakos, the king of Aigina, had a country without a people until, at the command of Zeus, the ants on the island assumed human shape and became his subjects.” Here, we are already out of myth and into fable, yet the ant allusion may be older.

the earth for a mere 2 million years, the termite has been active for some 300 million years. In the cosmogony, as we have seen, the primordial mound was "founded upon the waters." The latter were originally conceived as constituting the cosmic ocean (Vedic *apah*), but in cosmology they were identified with the subterranean waters (*samudra*), which could be interpreted to include our modern concept of the "water table." How does this square with the facts? It might be thought that termites prefer dry places, since their mounds are commonly noticed in very arid terrain. Yet the Vedas tell us that termites penetrate to water wherever they dig, and that their special ability to do so was a gift from the gods.<sup>29</sup>

Modern entomologists, knowing nothing of ancient texts, have recently discovered to their surprise that termites do in fact possess this special ability. French and British scientists, experimenting independently, have found that some species of termite will penetrate more than forty meters (130 feet) of compacted subsoil to reach water and bring it to the surface.<sup>30</sup> This water they use to humidify the interior of their mounds, which (among five different species tested in Africa) never drops below 96.2 percent humidity, irrespective of outside temperature.<sup>31</sup>

The Vedas convey this information in connection with a medicinal charm made with water extracted from a termite mound. In one case, it is a remedy for flux: "Deep down do the Asuras bury this great healer of wounds . . . The ants bring up this remedy from the subterranean waters [*samudra*]." <sup>32</sup> In another, it is an antidote for poison: "That water, O Ants, which the gods poured out for you into the dry land, with this [water], sent forth by the gods, do ye destroy this poison! Sprung from heaven and earth, thou didst render the poison devoid of strength!" <sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> "Wherever the ants [*upadīkās*] dig, there do they open out water," Taittirīya Āraṇyaka 5.1.4 (cf. *ibid.*, 5.5.10). "That water, O ants [*upajīkās*], which the gods poured for you into the dry land . . ." (Atharva-veda 6.1000.2). *Upadīkās* and *upajīkās* are both used in Vedic Sanskrit for "termite."

<sup>30</sup> Maurice Caullery, "La 'Climatisation' de la termitière par ses habitants et le transport de l'eau," *Comptes rendus hebdomadaires des séances de l'Académie des Sciences* 127 (1948): 869–71; and J. P. Watson, "Water Movement in Two Termite Mounds in Rhodesia," *Journal of Ecology* 57 (1969): 441–51.

<sup>31</sup> Philip E. Howse, *Termites: A Study in Social Behavior* (London, 1970), pp. 103–4.

<sup>32</sup> Atharva-veda 2.3.3–4.

<sup>33</sup> Atharva-veda 6.100.2–3. There is an interesting parallel between the ancient Indian use of anthill clay mixed with water as a curative medicine and the ancient Chinese use of jade, ground down into powder and mixed with water for similar medicinal purposes and, more particularly, for ensuring against decomposition of the

The water comes from "deep down" where the Asuras bury it. (Asura, in the Vedas,<sup>34</sup> denotes the gods of the undifferentiated, primordial world who after the creation became "demons" of our dualistic universe.) The emphasis is on strife and on destroying the power of the poison by militant combat. In the very next verse, Indra is invoked as slayer of the Asura Vṛtra, and he is told "to smite the demons." In other words, the battle against poison is one with the fight against demons,<sup>35</sup> and thus one with the primordial battle of the cosmogony. Indra's destruction of Vṛtra, who guarded "the treasure in the rock," was synonymous with the release of the waters (*rasa*, essence of life) and the sun, the latter setting in motion the entire cosmic life cycle, as a paradigm of all victory.

Already we have seen that anthills are believed to contain treasure guarded by a serpent. This is a feature that the anthill shares with the primordial mound of the cosmogony and also with sacred tumuli in many parts of the world, the serpent/dragon/demon often being described as spitting fire and as having in its head a brilliant jewel that emits rays and is the source of the rainbow.<sup>36</sup> The true cause of the rainbow as sunlight refracted through raindrops was unknown to the ancient world,<sup>37</sup> but it seems often to have been regarded as the sign of a hierophany; more particularly, the rain "bow" was one with the "bow" used by the creator-god to slay or subdue the demon. In India, the rainbow is the "bow of Indra"—the bow with which Indra

---

corpse after death. For further discussion, see my paper "The Lāṭ Bhairo of Vārāṇasī: Another Pre-Asokan Monument?" *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (in press, scheduled for 1983).

<sup>34</sup> According to F. B. J. Kuiper, *Varuṇa and Vidūṣaka*, Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (1979), pp. 10–11.

<sup>35</sup> See Maurice Bloomfield, "Seven Hymns of the Atharva-Veda," *American Journal of Philology* 7 (1886): 466–85.

<sup>36</sup> In India, even Buddhist *stūpas* are sometimes associated with the belief in a fire-breathing serpent as guardian. On at least one occasion, this has proved an embarrassment to archaeologists excavating ancient *stūpa* mounds. For instance, during excavation of the Saidpur *stūpa*, when they discovered inside the main *stūpa* a smaller and still more ancient one, there was panic among the laboring force—both Muslim and Hindu—because they were convinced that the inner *stūpa* was the lair of a fire-breathing serpent that would destroy them if invaded (D. R. Bhandarkar, *Buddhist Stūpa at Saidpur in Sind*, Archaeological Survey of India annual report [1914–15], p. 89). For parallel evidence concerning the Western barrow, see Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, "The Hill of the Dragon," *Folklore* 61 (1950): 179.

<sup>37</sup> The Indian astronomer Varāhamihira (sixth century A.D.) gives two different explanations of the rainbow—one physical (that it is caused by varicolored solar rays pressed by the wind), the other mythological (that it arises from "the exhalations of serpents of Ananta's family") (*Bṛhat-samhitā* 35.1–2).

slays the serpent.<sup>38</sup> Thus we are left with the impression of an intrinsic link between anthill, treasure, rainbow, and demon-serpent—a link to which we shall have frequent occasion to return.<sup>39</sup> In the meantime, our concern is to bridge the gap between ancient texts and the beliefs and practices surrounding the sacred anthill as we see it worshiped today.

At the beginning, we noted that there existed more than 2,000 kinds of termite, which is not surprising for an insect that has been on earth for 300 million years. The mounds seen under worship in India today are not always large. An example, illustrated by W. T. Elmore in *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism*,<sup>40</sup> makes one wonder if the choice of mound has not something to do with the presence of the telegraph pole in the center. Could this have prompted worshipers to identify this with the axis mundi rising out of the primordial mound? The idea is not as absurd as it may at first seem, and we shall be returning to it. The commonest way in which a particular termite mound is selected for worship is when some passerby claims to have heard celestial music coming out of it, “trumpet blasts” being quite usual.<sup>41</sup> This is interpreted as a hierophany, and quickly word gets around. Bishop Whitehead says that within a short time thousands of people may be coming to the spot to worship.<sup>42</sup> They are worshiping not the mound, or the insects that made it, but the serpent living

<sup>38</sup> Among Indian Muslims the rainbow is called “the bow of Bab Adam [Father Adam]” (Crooke, *Religion and Folklore in Northern India*, p. 46). In the Deccan it is known as “Rāma’s bow” (R. E. Enthoven, *Folklore Notes*, vol. 2, *Konkan* [Bombay, 1915], p. 9).

<sup>39</sup> Among the Kols of northeastern India (described as being a tribe of autochthonous, pre-Āryan origin, hardly out of the neolithic stage of culture), the word for “rainbow” also means “water snake” (Dalton [n. 10 above], pp. 177 and 189). In the Kulu Valley of northwestern India, the rainbow is called *budhi nāgin*, which means literally “the old female serpent” (Vogel [n. 16 above], p. 30, n. 1). The same double meaning recurs in many other parts of the world, including Ayers Rock (called Uluru by the aboriginals), which is both the mythological and the literal “center” of the Australian continent, with many features characteristic of the cosmogonic mound. The serpent guarding the waters beneath the rock is called Wanambi and is said to “rise in the air in the form of a rainbow” (C. P. Mountford, *Ayers Rock*, amended ed. [Adelaide, 1977]). “The myth of a huge snake that lives in waterholes is known to the anthropological world as the rainbow serpent and appears to belong, in one form or another, to all Australian tribes.” For exactly the same convergence of serpent/rainbow, and its expression by the same word, see references given for many parts of world by James Hastings, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. “Rainbow.”

<sup>40</sup> Wilbur T. Elmore, *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism*, University Studies, vol. 15 (Lincoln, Nebr., 1915), plate 7.

<sup>41</sup> This recalls the stories of supernatural music which the medieval Chinese travelers frequently reported hearing coming out of Buddhist *stūpas* in India.

<sup>42</sup> Whitehead (n. 5 above), p. 20.

inside. That is why the ethnologist classifies the anthill cult as snake worship, for in fact that is what it has become. We are confirmed in this by numerous folktales about serpents in anthills, one of which, called the Bhūridatta Jātaka,<sup>43</sup> is depicted in a relief sculpture as early as the first century A.D. at Amarāvati. The association is also suggested by one of the common Telegu words for “anthill,” which is *pamba-purru*, “snake mound.” It is not more than one snake that was traditionally worshiped in the mound, but only one serpent—the primordial one—existing under different names. In India, he is the inhabitant of every tumulus, and his generic name is Nāgeśvara, literally “Lord of the Nāga-demons.” We find him also in the Greek *omphalos*, in the European barrow,<sup>44</sup> in sacred tumuli of the Americas,<sup>45</sup> and in many other parts of the world.

The Sanskrit word for “snake” is not *nāga*, but *sarpa*. *Nāga* originally meant “serpent” only in the context of the myth of the serpent-demon, who was no ordinary snake. Even in later times, *nāga* was not applied to any snake other than a cobra. In the R̥gveda, the primordial serpent is *ahi*, personalized as Vṛtra. In Hindu myths of a later period this serpent is alternatively named Śeṣa, Ananta, Vāsuki, or Kāliya, all personifications of the cosmic dichotomy, both beneficent in representing fecundity and malevolent in threatening destruction and return to chaos. It is significant that even today the special festival associated throughout India with anthill worship—called Nāgapañcamī—is especially associated with the birthday of Vāsuki.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> E. B. Cowell, ed., *The Jātaka* (Cambridge, 1895–1913), no. 543.

<sup>44</sup> Davidson (n. 36 above) points out that the treasure guarded is the mound in *Beowulf* is not presented in the poem as having belonged to Beowulf’s own day. It had been lying in the tumulus for thousands of winters (line 3050). In other words, its function as a burial mound was secondary, and the treasure was one with the wealth of the primordial world that had to be “won” in the demiurgic battle. By the time we reach the historical period, two important changes have occurred: on the one hand, the primordial mound as image of the sacred world (ultimately, a metaphysical concept) had become identified with an actual hill or mountain (typical examples being Greek Olympus, Indian Himavat, Hebrew Ṭabbur, and so on), and on the other, the originally secondary function of the tumulus as “burial mound” built in the image of the cosmogonic one was now becoming its primary function. As a result of the later development, the significance of the mythological “treasure” is contaminated by actual “treasures” added in the form of grave goods.

<sup>45</sup> For instance, the “Great Serpent Mound” in Adams County, Ohio, discussed by F. W. Putnam (*American Journal of Archaeology* 4 [1888]: 383), where the author points to the evidence that the serpent association antedates the burials the American Indians added to the mound.

<sup>46</sup> As reported independently from opposite ends of India by John Cain, “Legends and Notes on Customs in the Krishnā Districts,” *Indian Antiquary* 5 (1876): 187–88; and Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions of Southern India*, p. 134.

The mythological link between anthill and serpent draws attention to another correspondence between myth and nature. Termite mounds are often inhabited by cobras—and with good reason on the cobra's side, since this reptile is a water-loving creature and hates aridity. The humid, air-conditioned interior of the termite mound has a special attraction, and the cobra is grateful for the ventilation shafts which allow easy entrance and exit. Above ground level, termite mounds consist mainly of ducts and channels, the inhabited area being concentrated well below surface level. An entomologist, Dr. Mark Collins, reports that an African species of termite, *Macrotermes bellicosus*, equips its mound with a central pillar.<sup>47</sup> This is the species which was the subject of the pioneering classic study of termites by Henry Smeathman in the eighteenth century.<sup>48</sup> An extraordinary feature of the pillar in the mound is that it is free standing and supports the cells or combs which constitute the living quarters of the insects. We have already noted that the tree/pillar of the cosmogony is neither a tree in the arboreal sense nor a pillar in the structural. Yet, as a metaphor, the image is appropriate to either or both. The notion of such a parallelism existing between the cosmic axis on the one hand, and the spinal axis of the human body on the other, is well known to every student of Indian yoga texts.<sup>49</sup>

Turning now to associations between anthill and fertility, a modern scientist has aptly described the termite as living in a kind of "genital frenzy," since males attending the queen make it possible for her to produce up to 36,000 eggs a day, equivalent to 13 million a year.<sup>50</sup> It is therefore little wonder that these insects are sometimes recommended as diet to human males with declining sexual powers. In the practice of dancing before a termite mound to induce pregnancy we can recognize the parallelism of rites associated with megaliths in many parts of the world. In India, these rites survive up to the present day in the cult of *svayambhū*, literally, "self-existent," a term for unhewn cultic stones.

The clay of termite mounds consists of translocated soil brought up from the subsoil, which is therefore rich in minerals, sometimes including gold, the divine, incorruptible substance. Greek and Roman

<sup>47</sup> Mark Collins, "The Nests of *Macrotermes bellicosus* (Smeathman) from Mokwa, Nigeria," *Insectes Sociaux* 26, no. 3 (1979): 240–46. Since then, Collins has repeated his findings in "Two Hundred Years of Termitology," *Antenna, Bulletin of the Royal Entomological Society, London* 4, pt. 2 (1980): 42–48.

<sup>48</sup> Henry Smeathman, "Some Account of Termites, Which Are Found in Africa and Other Climates," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 71, pt. 1 (1771): 139–92.

<sup>49</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Yoga, Immortality, and Freedom*, Bollingen series, no. 56 (Princeton, N.J., 1958), chap. 6, esp. p. 235.

<sup>50</sup> Howse (n. 31 above), p. 20, quoting from E. Hegh, *Les Termites* (Brussels, 1922).

writers described termites as gold hoarders.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps this has contributed to the legend of the mounds containing buried treasure. Modern scientists, unprompted by knowledge of folklore, have recently shown that termites sometimes bring up gold from at least twenty-three meters below surface level. This has led them to enquire seriously if the termite might be a gold hoarder.<sup>52</sup> However, it is the metaphysical aspects of treasure in the anthill that concern our present enquiry. A. K. Coomaraswamy argued that, in the Vedas, the treasures of this world were thought of as shut up within the primordial rock or hillock before the creation and as proceeding from it afterward.<sup>53</sup> The primordial mound is in fact sometimes envisaged as hollow like a cave (or womb), enclosing the treasure. This is consistent with its role as the source of Soma and other plants born in the earth rather than upon it, contributing to the nature of the mound as a depository.<sup>54</sup> The mound is commonly conceived as floating, reminding us of the sea-girt *omphalos* of Homer (*Odyssey* 1.50). Coomaraswamy described the cosmic ocean as "metaphysically one with the undifferentiated sea of universal possibility." In Kuiper's definition, Indra's demiurgic act was to hurl his weapon at the floating mound, thereby "fixing" it to the bottom of the waters and at the same time splitting it open to release the goods of life.<sup>55</sup> The repetition of this rite at the beginning of each New Year constituted a fresh creation and release of the earth's divine—and material—riches.

Of particular importance is the mythological connection between anthill and sun. The Egyptian metaphor for the primordial mound was "island of flames." This is an allusion to the dawn, when the sun appears to rise out of the mound itself, as seen by an observer looking

<sup>51</sup> For instance, Pliny *Naturalis Historia* 11.36.111. The reference is mixed with fantasy: "The horns of the Indian ant fixed up in the temple of Hercules were one of the sights of Erythrae. These ants carry gold out of caves in the earth . . ." (J. P. Watson, "The Distribution of Gold in Termite Mounds and Soils at a Gold Anomaly in Kalahari Sand," *Soil Science* 113, pt. 5 [1972]: 317–21).

<sup>52</sup> E.g. Herodotus 3. 94–106 and Pliny (*Nat. Hist.*) 11.36.111. For discussion of these fantastic accounts of "gold-digging ants," see I. Puskas, "On an ethnographic topos in classical literature," *Annales*, Univ. Scientiarum Budapestinensis de Rolando Eötvös Nominatae, tomi 5–6 (Budapest, 1977–78); and Jean W. Sedlar, *India and the Greek World* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980). See also the earlier important study by Berthold Laufer, *Die Sage von der goldrabenden Ameisen*, which I have seen only as an off-print from *T'oung-pau*, ser. 2 (Leiden: S.O.A.S. Library, Pam Tibet A, 34577, 1908), 9:429–52.

<sup>53</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Kha and Other Words Denoting 'Zero,'" in *Coomaraswamy, Selected Papers*, ed. Roger Lipsey, Bollingen series, no. 89 (Princeton, N.J., 1977), 2:224.

<sup>54</sup> A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Ātmayajña: Self-Sacrifice," in *Coomaraswamy, Selected Papers*, ed. Roger Lipsey, Bollingen Series, no. 89 (Princeton, N.J., 1977), 2:119.

<sup>55</sup> Kuiper, *Varuna and Vidyāka*, p. 10.



eastward at certain sites and at critical moments of the year, when rites of renewal were celebrated.<sup>56</sup> A parallel idea seems to have given rise to one of the commonest sacred place-names of India, *Udayagiri*, "the mound of sunrise" (often misleadingly rendered "mountain of sunrise," even when there is nothing more than a rock or hillock in the physical landscape). The placing of a sun emblem on an anthill when it is used as altar for sacrifice to the ancestors makes sense of some passages in the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas that appear to be ritual evocations of the primeval dawn when (as the Egyptian pyramid texts say) the sun "took its first stand."<sup>57</sup>

This prepares us to see that the sacred anthill, like other consecrated spots serving as altar or throne, partakes of the source of creation. It is mystically conceived as located at the spot where heaven and earth were separated, synonymous with the center or navel of the earth, and the point from which the earth spread out or "swelled." We also begin to see why anthill clay plays such an important symbolic role in the foundation of sacred structures—for instance, in the building of the Vedic altar as well as the later Hindu

<sup>56</sup> Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 25 and 151–52. The anthill as "island of flames" and "the womb of Agni" (place of sunrise) is made very clear in Taittirīya Samhitā 4.1.2., h and k (trans. A. B. Keith in the Harvard Oriental series [Cambridge, Mass., 1914], 291). This text prescribes worship of Agni (the Sun) at an anthill with the words: "We shall carry Agni hidden in the mud [of the anthill], adding a *mantra* [prayer] honouring Agni 'discerning the world at daybreak.'" In this connection, see Jan C. Heesterman, "The Case of the Severed Head" (*Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens* 11 [1967]: 22–43), which deals with the very complicated myth of Makha. This myth is very relevant to the anthill, although its cosmogonic associations have not yet been fully worked out. For the development of this myth in later Hinduism, see esp. David Shulman, "The Serpent and the Sacrifice: An Anthill Myth from Tiruvarur" (*History of Religions* 18, no. 2 [1978]: 107–37), which is mainly concerned with the Śaivite applications of anthill worship.

<sup>57</sup> For instance, Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 6.3.3.5 and 6. Julius Eggeling's rendering (in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 41 [Oxford, 1894], pp. 206–7) reads as follows: ". . . Thereupon a hollow ant-hill is laid down mid-ways (between the lump of clay and the Āhavanīya fire). He looks along it; for the ant-hill is this earth, and this earth is these worlds. For the gods searched for him (Agni) in these worlds part by part; and in like manner does this one now search for him in these worlds part by part. . . 'Agni hath looked along the crest of the Dawns'—thereby they sought him in the Dawns;—'along the days, he, the first knower of beings,'—thereby they sought him in the days;—'and of ten-times along the rays of the sun,'—'along the sky and the earth hast thou spread;'—therewith they sought him in the sky and the earth, and found him; and in like manner does this one thereby find him (Agni). When he sees him from afar, he throws down that (anthill); and they go up to the lump of clay." Kuiper suggests that Eggeling's obscure rendering of the line in verse 6, given above, is better understood as follows: "Agni Jātavedas has been the first to catch sight of the beginning of the dawns, of the days . . . ." However, in his final comment he writes: "Verse 6 probably refers to the first day of creation, but the use here made of it is no doubt secondary. So, it can best be ignored when dealing with verse 5 and the ant-hill" (personal correspondence, June 5, 1979).

temple—and also why it features in coronation rituals<sup>58</sup> and why it offers sanctuary to the fugitive who embraces an anthill in order to secure immunity from arrest.<sup>59</sup> Since the place of cosmic birth, where life itself originated, was also the spot at which divine order is revealed, anthills also serve as oracles that speak for suprarational, divine destiny.<sup>60</sup>

At the moment of creation, the primordial mound is regarded as one with the tree growing out of it, the roots of the latter extending down into the subterranean waters and its branches upward into the heavens, which it separates from the earth. This meant that in India there was a powerful taboo against the felling of any tree growing on a sacred mound, which was extended to trees growing on termite mounds.<sup>61</sup> (It is a curious coincidence of nature, quite evident to forest travelers in India, that termites will never touch a tree growing out of their mound, even after every other tree in the area has been devoured.)

The witnessing of oaths before an anthill is another feature identifying it with the cult of the primordial mound, since in many cultures this rite seems to have been among those traditionally performed at the "sacred center" or "earth's navel." The use of anthill clay in rites of calling divine witness, noted among the autochthonous tribes in north India recently emerged from a neolithic stage of culture,<sup>62</sup> is another indication of the pre-Aryan origin of the cult.

A factor linking all these mound cults with the sacred anthill is their role in ancestor worship. This in turn provides an important clue to one central problem of archaeology: the religious meaning of the sacred tumulus. Archaeologists have been in the habit of equating "tumulus" with "burial mound," in spite of the fact that in many ancient tumuli there is no evidence of any burial. Although most sacred tumuli do contain burials, the Indian evidence suggests that we

<sup>58</sup> From Africa there are reports of tribal chiefs having to stand on a termite mound during their coronation ceremony (e.g., among the Umundri tribe, as reported by M. A. Canney, "The Magico-religious Significance of Sand," *Journal of Manchester Egyptian and Oriental Society* 19 [1935]: 39).

<sup>59</sup> For an African parallel of the termite mound serving as divine sanctuary, see K. Th. Pruess, *Glauben und Mystik im Schatten des höchsten Wesens* (1926), p. 25.

<sup>60</sup> Again, for African parallels of the termite oracle, see E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (London, 1939), pp. 352–57; and J. G. Myers, "The Epigamic Behaviour of the Termite *Microtermes sudanensis*," *Proceedings of the Royal Entomological Society* 13 (1938): 7–8.

<sup>61</sup> For instance, *Viṣṇudharmottara-purāṇa* 3.89.6. forbids the cutting down of a tree on an anthill even for the purpose of making an Indra-pole used in the cosmogonic rite of erecting a pillar to represent Indra. The anthill is here equated with *caitya* (see also V. S. Apte, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, who gives "anthill" as one of the meanings of *caitya* but does not state any source).

<sup>62</sup> Dalton (n. 10 above), pp. 159 and 294.

miss their ultimate religious meaning—and likewise the significance of the treasure they are everywhere believed to contain—unless we recognize that the tumulus as image of the primordial mound and therefore as mythical source of the earth's material riches was originally sacred in its own right, independent of "burial." In note 45 I explained the basis of this popular confusion and showed how the notion of primordial treasure in the cosmogonic mound is later overlaid by actual treasure in the form of grave goods. However, it is only at this stage that the secondary function of the primordial mound as archetypal tomb becomes the primary one.

Frequent references in folklore to saints buried in anthills apparently refer to the popular idea of ascetics meditating for so long in one spot that termites build their mounds around them. This is told, for instance, in the *Mahābhārata* (critical ed., 3.122), where the legendary ascetic Śyāmāyana is described as sitting in a termite mound entirely hidden except for his eyes, which are described as shining out like fiery coals as he practices asceticism (*tapas*). In modern folklore, the stories of saints in anthills seem to reveal the merging or contamination of a number of different sacred meanings, now difficult to sort out. Typical of these is the legend of Vālmīki, author of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, who is equated with Bāmik, a low-caste hunter who recited "Rām, Rām" in the same spot for 60,000 years, until entirely eaten by termites, which left only his bones.<sup>63</sup> Underlying such explanations may be the idea of the saint experiencing total metaphysical identity with the godhead or divine principle as expressed in the primordial mound and his return to the source of life. A shadow of this meaning may survive in the famous sculpture of the Jain saint (*tīrthaṅkara*) Gommateśvara, at Sravana Belgola, depicted with a termite mound in process of formation at his feet. One is also reminded of the countless stories of gods and goddesses disappearing into anthills, or born from anthills.<sup>64</sup>

The association of termite mounds with the home of the dead ancestors may throw light on African archaeology, where iron age

<sup>63</sup> The legend is told by R. V. Russell and Hiralal (*Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* [London, 1916], 4:225) in their description of the Mehtar case of sweepers. Monier-Williams, in his *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (s.v. "valmīka"), mentions *valmīka-bhauma* as the name of an anthill.

<sup>64</sup> Sontheimer, "Some Incidents in the History of the God Kṛṣṇā," pp. 2–6; G. Oppert, *The Original Inhabitants of Bharatavarsha or India* (London and Leipzig, 1893), pp. 464–65. It is interesting to recall in this connection that in Christian tradition, Adam was sometimes claimed to have had the earth mound as his virgin mother (J. Denk, "Zu Reinhold Kohlers Kleineren Schriften," *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Völkerkunde* 12 [1923]: 352).

burials have been reported in termite mounds.<sup>65</sup> African archaeologists unfamiliar with the termite cult as it exists in India have perhaps too readily assumed that the mound must postdate the cemetery (in one case attributed by its remains to the seventh century A.D.). Who is to say that the burial of chiefs in termite mounds was not the earlier custom?<sup>66</sup>

We have seen that the primordial mound of cosmogonic myth was conceived as a low elevation (high place) in relation to the waters, and that only after the creation did it expand into the sacred hill or mountain of the later cosmologies. This expansion or swelling is a feature of the termite mound in real life. A modern scientist, unfamiliar with the cosmogony, has described its form as "growing only slowly, week by week, pushed up, as it were, from the bowels of the earth . . ."<sup>67</sup>—words we recognize as entirely appropriate to the myth.

In India, termite mounds derive an important part of their sanctity from the fact that they are conceived as entrances to the netherworld and sources of fertility. This feature they share in common with the holes made by other species of "earth burrowers," including the *ākhu*, which Eggeling renders as "mole" but is more likely the Indian earth rat, which has similar habits of burrowing. Describing the *ākhu*, Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 2.1.1.7 says that these animals "certainly know the savour of the earth: hence, by entering deeper and deeper into this earth, they [grow] very fat, knowing, as they do, its savour; and wherever they know the savour of this earth to be, there they cast it up. . . ." As in the case of anthill clay, the officiating priest of the Brāhmaṇas incorporates earth from the cast of an earth rat (*ākhu-kariṣa*) in the making of a fire altar.<sup>68</sup> A further parallel may be seen in the Celtic term for the so-called burial mound or barrow, *cruach*. In surviving Welsh language this gives *crug*, or *morgrug*, meaning "anthill" or any other kind of object that is "piled," such as "corn

<sup>65</sup> J. I. Watson, "A Termite Mound in an Iron Age Burial in Rhodesia," *Journal of Ecology* (1967), pp. 663–69.

<sup>66</sup> For evidence of burial (of chiefs?) in termite mounds, see John Gunther, *Inside Africa* (London, 1955), p. 668, in his description of the Bakuts of the Congo.

<sup>67</sup> Herbert Noyes, *Man and the Termite* (London, 1957), p. 74. This description should call to mind the reports of archaeologists that the archaic tumulus of mud was very commonly, and in all traditions (the American and European barrow, no less than the pyramid, the ziggurat, and the Buddhist *stūpa*) enlarged in its early stages, layer by layer. Indian texts testify to the spiritual merit to be derived from such an enlargement.

<sup>68</sup> The primary meaning of *kariṣa*, says Eggeling in his translation, is "that which is scattered, or strewn about"; its secondary meaning is "manure" (*Sacred Books of the East* [Oxford, 1894], 12:279, n. 1). Farmers know that the fine earth of the molehill is especially fertile, like anthill clay.

stack.”<sup>69</sup> Returning again to the East, we find *upadika/uddēhikā*—“termite”—compared with Avestan *uzdaēza*, “piling up of earth.”<sup>70</sup>

The sacred anthill, as seen in India at the present day, is usually garlanded with flowers, and lying around are remains of food offerings in the form of eggshells, bananas, and milk. At the base there is likely to be a stone image of Nāgeśvarī, Lord of the Serpents. At other sites there are unmistakable signs of animal sacrifice, so much blood having been poured into the ventilation shafts that the mound is now defunct. Although an attendant priest may give the assurance that he still sees a cobra going in and out, it is not unusual to see walls going up around the shrine which tell a different story. It is a sure indication that the termites—their digestive systems conditioned to a meager diet of cellulose—have succumbed to the richer fare forced upon them, doubtless to their consternation (and to the consternation of the cobra, who prefers food alive and kicking). So the walls are being erected to prevent the lifeless termite mound being washed away in tropical rains, and in the final stage a roof will be raised—that is, if the priest has not in the meantime decided to move on, summoned by trumpets from another anthill.<sup>71</sup>

However, events do not always work out in exactly this way. Today’s visitor to Periyapālayam (where leaf-dress is still worn in the

<sup>69</sup> Sir John Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom* (London, 1898); confirmed by A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements* (1965), 1:115. A. H. Allcroft, in *Circle and Cross* (1927), 1:342, confirms independently that “the Welsh word for ‘anthill,’ *morgrug*, apparently derives its final element from *crug*, common term for ‘barrow’ . . . .”

<sup>70</sup> R. L. Turner, *Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-European Languages* (London, 1973), quoting Bartholomae, *Altiranisches Wörterbuch* (1905) (s.v. “*upadika*”).

<sup>71</sup> An interesting case of a new anthill shrine coming into being in the center of the most fashionable quarter of Madras city recently caught the newspaper headlines. Since this “happening” illustrates many of the traditional features we have been discussing, and at the same time reflects contemporary ignorance of the real meaning of the cult, I quote a description published in the journal, *India Today*, September 16–30, 1980: “A yellow mound about five feet tall seems to have materialized out of thin air. And not in any remote spot, either, but in the heart of the city of Madras, near the Woodlands drive-in restaurant. . . . A few weeks ago, Sundar, a waiter at Woodlands . . . was relaxing on a termite mound after a hard day’s work. They heard hissing sounds, and saw some wriggling forms. Convinced that the mound was the residence of some goddess, Sundar took his story to the head priest of a shrine near Madras. . . . He was told that if regular worship were performed for 48 weeks, the cobras would come out of their home. The ritual began. Every Thursday night, Sundar offered eggs and milk to the mound, and, according to him, the food disappears in a couple of hours. He sprinkles turmeric daily and strews flowers and fresh lemons. The turmeric has coloured the mound yellow, thus attracting the eye irresistably. But, because of its reputation and the mystery that surrounds it, many people prefer to view it from a distance. . . . About 500 people attend worship [*pūja*] every Friday morning . . . at the end of which ‘holy milk’ is offered [as *prasādam*] to everyone present, including some high-society ladies who drive up with pious regularity in their gleaming cars.”

ritual) will notice that piers for roof posts have already been built at the four corners of the anthill. But at that point the work had stopped, and it is now unlikely that posts and roof will be added. There are indications that there has been a change of policy. The rites of worship formerly concentrated at the anthill, which was originally the holy spot, are now already in process of being transferred to an anthropomorphic goddess installed in a structural temple nearby. We see her in figure 3. Once an anthill, this goddess is now a lady—yet



FIG. 3.—The goddess Bhavani, “born of an anthill.” Color print on sale to pilgrims at Periyapālayam, Tamilnad.

still mound shaped and retaining at her feet the offerings of flowers, eggs, bananas, and milk. The serpent—once the primordial one living in the mound—now emerges from the top of her head in the form of a hood or canopy. The name of this anthropomorphic goddess is Bhavānī, “the one who has become.” The color print of figure 3 on sale to pilgrims makes no disguise of her anthill origin. But this image is now already in process of being superseded by a new and more popular one in which the billowing skirt is the only reminder of the anthill from which she was born.

The leaf-dress worshipers of Periyalpālayam have in the meantime transferred their attention from the defunct anthill to the goddess in the temple. How much longer will they continue to wear leaf-dress? Perhaps the time is at hand when, shy of the tourist and ignorant of the meaning of their attire, the leaf-dresses will be folded up and put away forever. Or will their rite be revived for the profane attraction of future tourists, like so many archaic folk customs in other parts of the world today?

*Ashford Chace, Petersfield, Hants*