Sacred Geography & the Legend of Agartha: A Spiritual Journey Between History & Mystery

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TIBET, HIMALAYAS BY NICHOLAS ROERICH, 1933

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The history of peoples is made by the unwritten history of great travels and world travellers – a history that began long before Herodotus or Marco Polo, in the Neolithic or even earlier, in some fantastical age of mankind. Perhaps even at the dusk of the primordial Golden Age, with glaciation or flood, and with the first in a series of catastrophes faced by the human species. Then followed eras of the migrations of peoples and races. If we believe Plato, then the Atlanteans were the first colonists in the world, and they came from the West. Others say that their ancestors were the Hyperboreans, who fled snow and ice in the Far North of the continent.

Over the course of subsequent history, peoples would move from North to South and from East to West – and not otherwise. This constitutes their course through history – a path of aging, degeneration and, at times faster, at times slower, of inexorable decline. This is how great conquests began, those that encompass immense regions, entire continents, and this is how great wars start, like the one that raged under the walls of Ilium – or was this only a shadow of some mythical war waged in the far deeper past, during the mythical age of the Earth? Perhaps at the beginning of time, “in illo tempore.”

They did not rush towards unknown and exotic lands, but towards their lost homelands, towards mythical lands of the beginning, towards the riches of the Golden Age. Towards primordial, Edenic abundance. Towards Paradise Lost, such as the biblical one, which we have not stopped searching for here on Earth even today.

One Islamic mystic, Suhrawardi, claimed that after death the soul returns to the homeland, for merciful Allah himself commanded this, and this would not be possible if he had not previously resided in it. This mythical homeland is to be found somewhere in the “spiritual East.” In order to find the strength for this, we must start from the spiritual West, the “Western wells of exile.”

The true journey, true adventures of the spirit, this Sheikh taught, start in the West. This is a place like a grave, a stockade of the burial-place. Arriving on the soil of an unknown continent, Christopher Columbus thought he had discovered the New Earth mentioned in the Apocalypse of St. John. The famous seafarer believed he was in the Gulf of Paria, and in its fresh currents had discovered the origin of the four rivers of the lost heavenly garden, Eden itself. “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth, of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John, and before that through the mouth of Isaiah,” Columbus proclaimed to King Juan, “and he showed me the place where to find it.”

There is no single land, island, or continent in the world that is a mere geographical certainty. The whole Earth is a sacred text, a holy book written in special signs – or at least this is what mystics and esotericists believe. The words of this text, it is thought, were written by God himself. Every journey is, in fact, a pilgrimage, for we are always walking on sacred ground. Every land and landscape, far and near, possesses hidden meaning and secret significance – spiritual, symbolic, eschatological, and even profoundly mystical. A landscape is at once both a physical and spiritual reality. This is the domain of a secret, mysterious science – mystical and sacred geography – whose knowledge, as happens, has been lost forever over the course of centuries or millennia.

The King of the World

Legend claims that somewhere, in the depths of the Earth, in dark caves and secret passages, there still lives one such sacred land inhabited by a secret, mysterious people, one hidden from the sight of others, that this is known to only a few chosen ones on the surface, and that this knowledge is a strictly guarded secret. Or maybe it was until recently. This secret kingdom is called Agartha. This legend is ancient and comes from remote prehistory. Agartha is spoken of in the legends of diverse peoples – white, red, and yellow – in both East and West. Agartha is a kingdom hidden underground, populated by a people gifted with miraculous powers, a people that lives in wisdom and immense wealth. But Agartha is even more than that: it is the spiritual centre of mankind ruled by a hidden ruler, the head of its initiatic hierarchy. His title is “King of the World.”

Legend holds that this supreme spiritual and metaphysical centre of mankind, Agartha, has not always been hidden underground, nor will it stay there forever. This condition corresponds to the fallen state of humanity, the age of darkness and confusion which, it is said, has lasted for the past 6,000 years. In 1890, the King of the World allegedly issued the following prophecy in the monastery of Narabanchi: “The time will come when the peoples of Agarthi will come up from their subterranean caverns to the surface of the earth.”

Travellers who have set their minds to find it have whispered about it. Caravan merchants have told exhilarating tales of it in inns and on mountain trails, in deserts and in remote corners. It is known to Tibetan sages whose teachings nourish monks and lamas. The common crowds, meanwhile, ridicule and laugh at such tales as the superstitions of the uneducated and gullible.

The tale of Agartha reached the West from two independent sources. In a book published posthumously in 1910, The Mission of India (or The Mission of India in Europe), the French esotericist Saint-Yves d’Alveydre introduced the West to Agartha as a Buddhist myth of a secret centre of the world hidden somewhere in the depths of the Himalayas, India, or Afghanistan.

French esotericist René Guénon focused on Agartha as a spiritual centre of the world in his 1927 book The Lord of the World (reissued in 1983)

D’Alveydre’s account was commented upon by another French esotericist, the founding thinker of Traditionalism, René Guénon. Traditionalist thought, through the works of René Guénon, provided an exegesis of this myth: at its deepest root is the idea of the supreme spiritual centre, the spiritual centre of humanity during the last time-cycle of humanity, i.e., the Iron Age in the traditions of the peoples of the West.

As Guénon observed, numerous parallels and analogies of this Buddhist myth of the King of the World can be found across the most diverse traditions, from the Hindu and Jewish through the Islamic and Christian to the Celtic myth of the Holy Grail which was subsequently, superficially Christianised. The very name “Aggartha” or “Agarttha,” Guénon writes, means “imperceptible” and “inaccessible” – “and also ‘inviolable’, since it is Salem, the ‘Abode of Peace’” – but the name of the spiritual centre before the present time-cycle was Paradesha (“supreme country” in Sanskrit), whence the Chaldean Pardes or the Paradisus (“paradise”) known to the Western traditions. Moreover, Guénon drew a connection between Agartha and the “Light of the East” of Islamic esotericism.

Legendary Agartha is spoken of in the same breath as forgotten lands such as Hyperborea. Two key figures helped bring the tale of Agartha to the West: French esotericist Saint-Yves d’Alveydre (left) and Polish traveller and author Ferdynand Ossendowski (right).

Absolute Pole

The “Light of the East” is none other than the “Light of the North,” the “Gold of the North” mentioned by classical writers. In other words, Agartha is only one of many projections of the Pole, the North Pole, Hyperborea or Paradise, which has shifted over the course of history from the North to the West and from the South to the East. There exists, to name it, the Absolute Pole. Agartha is an Eastern projection of the Absolute Pole. We cannot seek this mystical Pole above the surface of the Earth, at the top of Mount Meru as it was in the Golden Age or in the Hyperborean cycle, but only underground – not in the polar ice of the Arctic, but in the East of the Eurasian continent. Emanuel Swedenborg issued the mysterious pronouncement that in our age the “lost word” is to be found only among the wisemen of Tatary and Tibet, i.e., in the East.

Svyatogor (giant-warrior) by Nicholas Roerich, 1942

Some authors claim that contact has been maintained with this centre during almost all of the historical cycle of the West. This contact was at all times direct and realistic. But the final projection of the North Pole – the sanctuary of the sacred King of the World in the East – has become more and more inaccessible and mystified. It was interrupted only in late historical times. Guénon states that this happened soon after the Thirty Years War, more precisely in 1648, when the “real Rosicrucians,” 12 in total, left Europe and withdrew to Asia, to Agartha.

The second Western source on Agartha was the Polish traveller and author Ferdynand Ossendowski, who in his book Beasts, Men and Gods, published in 1924, reported on his tumultuous trip throughout Central Asia during the years 1921-1922. There is a moment, Ossendowski claims, when stillness overcomes the world, when wild animals stop in their run, horses stop to listen, birds stop flying, and travellers stop in their tracks. Hordes of sheep and cattle and yaks crouch down to the ground, and dogs cease their barking. The wind subsides into a slow trembling of air, and the Sun stops in its motion. For a moment, the whole world sinks into silence. An unfamiliar song penetrates the hearts of animals and people. This is the moment when the King of the World in Agartha speaks with God himself, when tongues of flame in the letters of the Vattan alphabet erupt from his altar.

Ossendowski’s account also received the commentary of Guénon. Guénon explains that Ossendowski wrote the name of this underground kingdom as “Agharti,” whereas Saint-Yves d’Alveydre used the form “Agartha,” “the latter being known to have been in contact with at least two Hindus.” The fact that this mysterious legend from the East reached the peoples of the West in two different versions is explained by the fact that d’Alveydre was inspired by Hindu sources, while Ossendowski was informed by Lamaist ones.

The accounts of d’Alveydre, Ossendowski, and Guénon do not, however, exhaust the traces and hints of “Agartha.” A book published in the 17th century in Leiden mentions a city by the name of “Agartus Oppidum” reportedly located in the Nile Delta of Egypt. This fact was unknown to Guénon. Lucius Ampelius, a Latin author from the third century, claimed that in this city stood a statue with hands of ivory and a bright emerald on its brow. This statue, it is written, incites panic and fear among animals and people, and especially among barbarians. The word oppidum in Latin means elevation, fort, or hill. The meaning of the word Agartus is unknown and has no meaning in Latin.

It is also recorded that long ago, in Medeia, near the southern coast of the Caspian Sea stood a city called Asagarta. Ptolemy added that the inhabitants of this land called themselves Sargartians, and Herodotus claims that 8,000 Sargartians (inhabitants of this lost land) were present in the army of the Persian King Darius. Asgard, the mythical city of the Aesir, was the capital of the Sarmatians and Roxalana. Some researchers equate Asgard with Agartha. Others think that Agartha was exactly that city mentioned by the Roman Lucius as lying on the banks of the Nile. This is a mistake – the very same mistake committed by some in regards to Atlantis or Thule. Agartha is in fact Thule, or rather one in a chain of Thules which appear at different times in different meridians. The same is true of its mysterious inhabitants, who at times come out onto the surface of the Earth. Thus, the name Agartha has been known since ancient times, since the very beginning of history, and it can be found everywhere, from ancient Egypt to Bactria, in its projections, in its representation on Earth, in its secondary variations, just as every Thule, including even Atlantis, is only a projection of the primordial and original Hyperborean Thule, the one erected by the hands of man-gods at the dawn of time.

Victory (Gorynych the Serpent) by Nicholas Roerich, 1942

Agartha and America

The fact that all the known names of sacred-geographical centres corresponding to cosmic cycles and events – Hyperborea, Thule, Atlantis, etc. – come up in investigations of Agartha, and that this is happening in the modern age, especially since the “discovery” of America, is no coincidence. If the discovery of America, or rather the return of America to history, triggered such unrest among peoples, then what will happen if the prophecy of the end of the world is fulfilled and the secret Agartha becomes known to all of humanity? It is prophesied that the people of Agartha will once more come out onto the surface of the Earth. And likewise, Paradise, the Garden of Eden, is hidden somewhere in the East. It is in the East of the “wise sages of Tatary,” Swedenborg claimed, that we should search for the “long forgotten word.”

What is the link between Agartha and America? Is it the same thread that interconnects all continents? Could their appearance, or rather re-appearance, on the horizon of world history represent a sign of the “final times,” the “End Times?” The “secret” of America was known to the Vikings, the Egyptians, and the Phoenicians even thousands of years before the Portuguese and Spanish seafarers.

Esotericists and the adepts of secret societies, mystics and conjurers, astrologers and neophytes, the followers of secret cults and obscure conspirators – all are still weaving their dark webs around Agartha and the deep mysteries that hide this underground kingdom.

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America is not only the land of the Apocalypse – a story that speaks about the end of the world and the last revelation. The first newcomers identified America with paradise, where even the trees and plants spoke the “hieroglyphic language of our Adamic or primitive state.” The New World was for them a projection of paradise on Earth, by which God baptised his chosen people – the New Israel. Others identified America, on no lesser grounds, with Atlantis, whose downfall was described by Plato. Failing to observe that the Greek philosopher was precise in the details he gave, and that, besides the island of Atlantis, he also mentioned a “land in the West surrounded by ocean on all sides.” This, there can be no doubt, is the North American continent. America is only its shadow, its projection in the Far West, the “false Atlantis.”

America is, of course, not the mythical island of Atlantis that vanished in the Atlantic Ocean at the very dawn of history. It is actually the Green Land, the Land of the Dead, the “Kingdom of Shadows” in the West that is mentioned in the legends and myths of many peoples. America is Trans-Atlantis. What is the meaning of the reappearance of a dead, sunken continent, on the horizon of world history? In the same way, Agartha is also a “land of the dead” which, as prophecy holds, is still to be discovered in the depths of the underground. In historical times, this reportedly was realised by some travellers and seekers. One of them was a Mongolian hunter who could not keep his secret, and thus had his tongue cut out by lamas. The Lama Djamsrap spoke of this in his book. Another was an illiterate Norwegian sailor who claimed to have lived in Agartha for several years. The reader will see that these fleeting mentions are not without grounds, and that America and Atlantis are closely connected without the topic of Agartha, the mysterious kingdom hidden in the everlasting dark, deep underground, and deep in the past. It is closely connected with the worlds of the dead and the past – with the past that refuses to die. And it verily conceals many secret histories of the human race.

And yet, the idea of an underground hiding place of the incarnation of the sacred, celestial principle is in itself contradictory. According to sacred logic, the seats of spiritual authority are to be found in mountains, not in the underworld, which is logically and naturally connected with the chthonic, the infernal, and the hellish. Moreover, archetypes and ideas themselves choose their bearers throughout history, and it is not always possible to accurately distinguish between “real” and symbolic continents, lands, and cities mentioned in sacred texts, from the Vedas to the Bible. In sacred texts, the sacred and earthly planes, physical and sacred geography, physics and metaphysics, constantly intersect. But, overall, these fabulous lands are not the product of mere fantasy: rather, the matter is one of a fragile memory for which it is still necessary to find the appropriate keys.

In this sense and according to this logic, the “Light of the North” or “Light of the East,” indeed the “Light of Agartha,” is not strictly localisable on the terrestrial plane. Likewise, journeys to and accounts of Agartha are not only or not mainly travels in geography and history, but travels of the spirit, travels whose “interior centre” is that within man. As the Chandogya Upanishad says, “Now, the light which shines higher than this heaven, on the backs of all, on the backs of everything, in the highest worlds, than which there are no higher – verily, that is the same as this light which is here within a person.” The chains of “Agarthas” lead along and are the chains of spiritual journey. In journeying to Agartha, we are travelling into the light of myth. The reawakening of myth is a reawakening of that hidden, mysterious, inner light within ourselves. In this dimension, “lost and found” lands, islands, continents, and kingdoms like Agartha have something to tell us that is quite different from the “positive geographical discoveries” and “research” of recent history.