

APPENDIX I

ON THE ASSOCIATION OF THE BENT BOW WITH THE SKY IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

A Note by the

THE REV. CANON H. B. STARLING, D.D.
Member of the Committee of the Expedition

The Director has done me the honour of asking that I set down, for the use of subscribers to the Report, such observations as occurred to me upon being shown, in the autumn of last year, the squeeze taken from the lower register of the stela numbered 41 in the Expedition's list, together with the photographs of the middle register exhibiting the device there called the Bow. I do this the more readily because the matter falls, in a modest way, within a study I have pursued for some years under the guidance of better scholars than myself; and I do it the more cautiously for the same reason. I must ask the reader to bear in mind throughout that what follows is a note upon certain resemblances of language and of image across several literatures, and not upon the stela itself, concerning which I possess no competence whatever, and to which I return no verdict.

1. **The Hebrew Scripture.** The passage which will occur first to every reader is that of Genesis ix. 13–16, which I quote, as is the Committee's custom elsewhere in this Report, from the Authorised Version: 'I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth.... And I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant.' The word translated *bow* is the ordinary Hebrew *qesheth*, which is nowhere in Scripture a bow of any other kind than the warrior's weapon; and the sense of the passage, as the older commentators are agreed, is that of a bow laid aside — unstrung, its back to the earth, no longer bent in anger. It is, in short, the figure of a weapon at rest, offered in place of a weapon in use. I must, however, flag a difficulty which candour will not allow me to pass over: the bow of the Ras el-Qaus stela is not in this posture at all. It is bent and strung, its string drawn straight between the tips in the manner proper to a bow in use, or upon the point of use, and not to one retired. This is a real difference, and not a small one, and I do not think it can be resolved by any translation of the Hebrew; the two images stand, in this one particular, in direct opposition to each other, and I set the fact down as I find it, rather than smooth it away for the sake of a tidier note.

2. **A Mesopotamian Parallel.** I touch this next matter with the diffidence proper to a subject in which I read only at second hand and through translation. I understand, from the renderings of certain Babylonian tablets given by Mr. L. W. King and by other students of that difficult material, that a bow belonging to a war-goddess — named, according to the tablet and the period, now Ishtar and now otherwise — was in some traditions of that country set among the stars, and that a constellation was reckoned by its bow-shape and named accordingly; the same constellation is, I believe, that which our own astronomers of the Latin tongue have called *Sagitta*. I offer this with every reserve. I have not the cuneiform, I have not seen the tablets, and I am aware that Assyriology is at present a young and a contentious science in which today's reading is not infrequently corrected, or abandoned outright, by tomorrow's; and I should be sorry to have this note quoted as though I had made a precise identification which wiser men than I would not yet venture to make. I record the matter only as a

report of a report, and as a second instance — alongside the Hebrew — of a bow that is a weapon of a divine person, and is found in the heavens.

3. **The Vedic Parallel.** It is in the literature of India, however, that I find what seems to me, upon reflection, much the closest of these analogies. The ordinary Sanskrit name for the rainbow is *Indradhanush* — literally, and without any figure of speech to be unravelled, ‘the bow of Indra.’ Indra is, of course, pre-eminently a warrior among the gods of that system, a wielder of the thunderbolt and a captain in battle; and his bow, upon this reading, is not a retired weapon set aside as a sign of peace, but the very weapon of a martial god, seen bent in the sky as it might be seen bent in his hand. Here, if anywhere among the literatures known to me, is a bow in the heavens that is strung and not unstrung, active and not retired — and to that extent, *mutatis mutandis*, a nearer image to the device of the stela than the Hebrew figure with which I began. I put this forward as the closest of the analogies I have been able to assemble, without in the least supposing that closeness of image is evidence of any other connexion.

4. **The Classical Case, and its Weakness.** I should be wanting in candour did I not add, for completeness, the case commonly cited by writers upon this subject from the Greek: namely Iris, whose name the rainbow bears in that tongue to this day. But I must own plainly that this is, of the instances here collected, the weakest, and ought not to be pressed. Iris is a messenger and not a combatant; she carries no bow, strung or unstrung, and is not armed in any account of her known to me; the association is with her rapid, many-coloured passage between heaven and earth, and not with any weapon whatever. The Greek case belongs, if anywhere, to the history of the rainbow as a sign or a messenger, and not to its history as a bow; and I set it down chiefly lest a reader, finding it omitted, should suppose I had overlooked or suppressed it because it did not suit my argument.

5. **A Concluding Word, in which I Decline to Conclude.** I have now set before the reader four instances — Hebrew, Babylonian (at second hand and with every caution), Vedic, and Greek — in which the notion of a bow and the notion of the sky are found together in the minds of peoples who had, so far as history informs us, no contact sufficient to account for the coincidence by borrowing. Comparative religion can shew such recurring associations of idea again and again, across peoples remote from one another in place and in time, without being able to say why they recur. It is possible that we are here in the presence of some very old common root of thought, sunk too deep in the history of the mind to be traced further by any philology at our disposal. It is equally possible — and I own I can produce no argument that excludes it — that the coincidence is nothing more than the plain fact that a bow, and an arc of colour shaped as a bow is shaped, will suggest one another to any mind, in any age, without need of common ancestry or report at all. Between these two accounts I do not undertake to choose, nor do I think it the office of a note appended to an archaeological report to attempt the choice. What bearing, if any, these literatures may have upon the particular stela recovered at Ras el-Qaus, or upon the optical appearances recorded by Dr. Ambrose in §§ 45–55 above, I do not presume to say, and would counsel the reader against supposing I have said it by implication where I have not said it in terms. That question I commend, with respect, to those better qualified than a country clergyman to weigh philological resemblance against the evidence of the spade and the spectroscope alike.

*I remain, gentlemen, with much respect for the labours of my fellow-members of the Committee,
your faithful servant,*

H. B. STARLING

Canon of —; sometime Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

