CHAPTER 15

The European Construction of Kailas-Manasarovar

Introduction

The modern Kailas-Manasarovar attracts pilgrims from all over the world. But the process by which it came to be known and understood as a significant spiritual site by cultures outside of Asia was, until the early 20th century, a slow and lengthy one. In the wider sense the process of knowing can be traced to the ancient Greeks, particularly Ptolemy, whose accounts continued to underpin European geographical knowledge of the lands beyond the Indus down to the 19th century. But the first specific mention of Tibet came in Arab sources and as Mughal rule drew India into the Islamic world there was a growing awareness of the Himalayan land of ‘Thibbet’, particularly as the source of the medicinal spice, musk.

The first certain reference to Manasarovar in European writings was by the Jesuit, Antonio de Monserrate, who attended the Mughal court in 1580. He referred to “yogis—who visit many territories but tell many lies and mix legends with facts”, and Himalayan priests describing a plateau over the mountains where, “[o]n the banks of a certain lake there—which the local people call lake Mansaruor—a certain tribe inhabits a very old city.” But de Monserrate’s report circulated only in Jesuit circles. It remained unpublished and was forgotten until the early 20th century, as were most of the Jesuit and Capuchin reports on their Tibetan travels in the 17th and 18th centuries.

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1 On which see Dunlop (1973).
2 On which see Akasoy, Burnett and Yoeli-Tlalim (2011).
3 Sven Hedin credited the first historical mention of Manasarovar as being a 1553 report by Mirza Haider, a general of the Khan of Yarkand. He referred to a fortress called Luk-u-Labuk beside an unnamed lake, which according to Hedin, “must have been Manasarvar [sic].” No fort is otherwise recorded there, however (although a Buddhist monastery might have been intended). Unless there is more to Haider’s report (which I have not sighted) than Hedin references, the identification seems questionable for this is a region of many lakes. Unable to confirm Monserrate’s reference, Hedin credited the first European account of the lake to an account by the trader Johan van Twist dated to 1638; Hedin (1917: volume i: 156). See however, Lahiri (2005:82) concerning maps from this period showing a central Asian lake as the source of 4 rivers.
4 Quoted in Allen (1982: 36); also see Wessels (1924: n. 3 46).
European knowledge of the Himalayas rapidly increased after the establishment of their trading centres in India in the early 17th century, with occasional mentions of Manasarovar in the context of the origins of trade goods such as borax and musk. But there were no first-hand accounts of the site or any mention of the lake or the as-yet-unmentioned mountain having any spiritual connotations. Even the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio de Andrade (1580–1634), who travelled from Badrinath to Tsaprang over the Mana-la in 1624–1625 and was the first European observer in the region, did not mention Kailas or the lakes.5

Not until 1715 did the first European, Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri, report sighting Kailas. He stated that the region was held sacred by the Tibetans, “on account of a certain Urghien [i.e.: Padmasambhava] who is the founder of the religion professed in Tibet.”6 He then described seeing:

an enormously high mountain, very wide in circumference, its summit hidden among the clouds, covered with perpetual snow and ice, and most terrible on account of the icy cold. In a cave of that mountain, according to legend, there lived the above-mentioned Urghien in absolute retirement and uninterrupted meditation. Not only do the Tibetans visit the cave, where they invariably leave some presents, but with very great inconvenience to themselves they make the round of the whole mountain, an occupation of some days, by which they gain what I might call great indulgences.

Desideri called the mountain “Ngari Niongar” and Manasarovar “Retoa”.7 Curiously he did not mention Rakas Tal but reported that Retoa was said to be the source of the Ganges and that, “this lake is greatly venerated by these superstitious people, and so from time to time they gather there on pilgrimage and circumambulate it with great devotion...”8 While incorrect regarding the Ganges, Desideri did correctly identify the Indus and Brahmaputra rivers but as with de Monserrate’s reference his writings, though known to Sven Hedin, remained unpublished until the 20th century.9 By that time they were little more than a historical curiosity and had no real impact on the formulation of a European understanding of the region.

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5 On Andrade and the Jesuits; see Wessels (1924).
7 This toponym is not otherwise known.