

Some Notes on Machen's 'Sixtystone'

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In Arthur Machen's 'story within a story within a story', *The Novel of the Black Seal* (contained, as it is, in the *Adventure of the Missing Brother*, itself a chapter in *The Three Imposters*), there is a mysterious reference to Ixaxar, the Sixtystone. The narrator, Miss Lally, who has been employed by the unfortunate Professor Gregg, to be governess to his two children, is browsing through Professor Gregg's library. A "fine old quarto...printed by the Stephani, containing the three books of Pomponius Mela, *De Situ Orbis*, and other of the ancient geographers"ⁱ, catches her eye, and in examining the volume she recalls:

"my attention was caught by the heading of a chapter in Solinus"ⁱⁱ, and I read the words: MIRA DE INTIMIS GENTIBUS LIBYAE. DE LAPIDE HEXECONTALITHO, --'The wonders of the people that inhabit the inner parts of Libya, and of the stone called Sixtystone.' The odd title attracted me, and I read on:

Gens ista avia er secreta habitat, in montibus horrendis foeda mysteria celebrat. De hominibus nihil aliud illi praeferunt quam figuram, ab humano ritu prorsus exulant, oderunt deum lucis. Stridunt potius quam loquuntur; vox absona nec sine horrore auditur. Lapide quodam gloriantur, quem Hexecontalithon vocant; dicunt enim hunc lapidem sexaginta notas ostendere. Cujus lapidis nomen secretum ineffabile colunt: quod Ixaxar.

'This folk,' I translated to myself, 'dwells in remote and secret places, and celebrates foul mysteries on savage hills. Nothing have they in common with men save the face, and the customs of humanity are wholly strange to them; and they hate the sun. They hiss rather than speak; their voices are harsh, and not to be heard without fear. They boast of a certain stone, which they call Sixtystone; for they say that it displays sixty characters. And this stone has a secret unspeakable name; which is Ixaxar.'ⁱⁱⁱ

The tale unfolds to reveal the survival in South Wales of an ancient and malevolent race, elsewhere termed the 'Little People'. The connection between this race, who still dwell in the Grey Hills near 'Caermaen', and those of many thousands of years earlier, is made apparent by the strange, semi-wild (and semi-human?) boy, Jervase Cradock, who, in his fits, utters "an inconceivable babble of sounds bursting and rattling and hissing from his lips...an infamous jargon, with words, or what seemed words, that might have belonged to a tongue dead since untold ages..."^{iv}

Machen has in fact composed a clever imitation of Solinus, who genuinely does refer to a Sixtystone, but in the following way (Latin version given here for the interest of those readers whose Latin is not as rusty as my own):

Quod ab Atlante usque Canopitanum ostium panditur, ubi Libyae finis est et Aegyptium limen, dictum a Canopo Menelai gubernatore sepulto in ea insula quae ostium Nili facit,

gentes tenent dissonae, quae in aviae solitudinis secretum recesserunt. ex his Atlantes ab humano ritu prorsus exulant. nulli proprium vocabulum, nulli speciale nomen. diris solis ortus excipiunt, diris occasus prosequuntur ustique undique torrentis plagae sidere oderunt deum lucis. adfirmant eos somnia non videre et abstinere penitus ab animalibus universis. Trogodytae specus excavant, illis teguntur. nullus ibi habendi amor: a divitiis paupertate se abdicaverunt voluntaria. tantum lapide uno gloriantur, quem hexacontalithon nominamus, tam diversis notis sparsum, ut sexaginta gemmarum colores in parvo orbiculo eius deprehendantur. homines isti carnibus vivunt serpentium ignarique sermonis stridunt potius quam loquuntur. ^v

I have found English translations of Solinus rather hard to track down; I did manage to locate a 16th century version^{vi} by Arthur Golding^{vii} [given below with original spelling, which, I think, has its own charm]:

CAP. XLIII^{viii},

Wonderfull things of the nations of Lybia, and of the ftone called Hexacontalythos.

Whatfoeuer lieth between Mount Atlas and the mouth of Nile called Canopitane, which beareth the name of *Canopus* the Mafter of *Menelaus* fhip who was buried in that Lande, which lyeth againft the faid mouth of Nyle, where Libie endeth, and Egypte beginneth, is inhabited by nations of sundry languages, which are withdrawne into wayleffe wilderneffes.

The Athlantians

Of thefe the Athlantians are altogether void of manners meete for men. None hath anie proper calling, none hath any speciall name. They curfe the Sun at his rising, and curfe him likwife at his going downe: and becaufe they are fcorched with the heate of his burning beames, they hate the God of light. It is affirmed that they dreame not, and that they utterlie abtaine from all thinges bearing lyfe.

The Troglodites or Cauecreepers.

The Troglodits dig them cause under the grounde, and houfe themfelves in them. There is no couetoufneffe of getting, for they have bound themfelues from riches, by wilful pouertie.

The ftone called the threefcore stone, or the Sixtistone.

Onely they glory in one ftone which is called *Hexacontalythos* fo powdred with diuers fparks, that the colours of threescor fundrie ftones are perceived in his little compaffe. All thefe liue by the flefh of Serpents, and beeing ignoraunt of fpeech, do rather iabber and gnarre then fpeake. ^{ix}

So Machen's pastiche draws upon ideas taken from two of Solinus' paragraphs: the hatred of the Sun espoused by the Atlanteans; and the Troglodytes' veneration of the Sixtystone, together with the primitive sounds they utter in place of speech.

That Machen both enjoyed writing such compositions, and had a talent for doing so, is attested by another piece, 'Of the Isle of Shadows: and of the strange customs of the men that dwell there'^x, purportedly authored 'by the shade of Sir John Maunderville', which again draws on accounts of early exploration and geography; in this case, the fabulist and traveller John Mandeville.

I first came across Machen's Solinus composition, not in his own *The Novel of the Black Seal*, but quoted in Kenneth Grant's *Hecate's Fountain*.^{xi} Kenneth Grant, secretary to Aleister Crowley in his latter years, and perhaps the most important post-Crowley occultist, often refers to Machen and HP Lovecraft in his 'Typhonian Trilogies'^{xii} (of which *Hecate's Fountain* is the sixth volume; he also cites *The Novel of the Black Seal* in *Outside the Circles of Time* and *Outer Gateways*). Grant's writings portray the fantastic *fiction* of both writers as having an underlying, occult *reality*, whether consciously or unconsciously. Thus, Lovecraft's Great Old Ones may be contacted and even summoned (should such an aim be desired!) by practising occultists, despite Lovecraft, in personal correspondences with friends, deriding magic as superstitious nonsense.

Grant notes that a Crowleyean magickal ritual, the Rite of the Ruby Star, refers to a stone in which is fixed 'the Star of the Six'. "This", he states, "may be an indirect reference to the *Hexecontelithos*, or Sixtystone, known to certain cthonian entities described by the historiographer Solinus"^{xiii}. He then goes on to quote Machen's Solinus pastiche ("They dwell in remote and secret places..." see above and footnote 3). Grant attributes the quote to Solinus, noting that it was "translated by Arthur Machen and quoted in his *The Novel of the Black Seal*"^{xiv}. So he has either been gulled by Machen (by virtue of the convincing qualities of the pastiche) and believed Machen's Latin to be a quotation from an ancient source; or he is aware that it is Machen's own, but is (mis)representing it thus for his own reasons. It should also, perhaps, be pointed out that Grant chooses to spell Machen's 'Ixaxar' with a third 'a', thus: 'Ixaxaar'. This is presumably because of the kabbalistic practice known as *gematria*, the substitution of letters by numbers (heavily employed in Grant's work as a means of establishing correspondences). The latter spelling yields the number 333^{xv}, a number of much significance in Grant's Typhonian OTO system.

Should it appear that I may be appearing to malign 'Uncle Kenny' (as Grant is affectionately known), I should like to state that I have been a devotee of his writings for thirty years; his seemingly-autobiographical descriptions of magickal rituals make for very compelling reading. But some of his statements, as the foregoing may indicate, should be taken with a 'pinch of salt' if considered as literal fact^{xvi}.

Perhaps one could draw a comparison between Grant's writing and that of Arthur Machen, in that they both mix fact and fiction, and cite source material of dubious veracity. Finally, let us not be too harsh on Kenneth Grant; if – as I suspect – he genuinely believed Machen was quoting a 3rd century writer, then this is merely a testament to the skill with which Machen composed his 'Solinus' passage in *The Three Imposters*; the passage is itself an Imposter...

Footnotes

- ⁱ *The Three Imposters*. Arthur MACHEN. 1995. London: Dent. p.58
- ⁱⁱ Gaius Julius Solinus ; 3rd century AD Roman grammarian
- ⁱⁱⁱ *The Three Imposters* ibid
- ^{iv} *The Three Imposters* p.64
- ^v Cap.XXXII. *Caii Julii Solini de Mirabilibus Mundi*. [online] <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/solinus.html>
- ^{vi} *The excellent and pleafant worke of Iulius Solinus Polyhifto*r. Translated out of Latin into English by Arthur Golding. Gent. Printed by I.Charlewoode for Thomas Hacket. London, 1587
- ^{vii} 1536-1605 (?). Thought to be a native of London. As well as Solinus' *Collectanea*, Golding translated Caesar's *Commentaries*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the works of the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela, who was a source for Solinus.
- ^{viii} NB. These chapter numbers vary according to which Latin version is consulted; XLIII here is from the Golding edition; whilst Mommsen (1864) and Pancoucke (1847) have XXXI and XXXII respectively
- ^{ix} *The Excellent and Pleasant Worke: Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium of Caius Julius Solinus*. Translated from the Latin (1587) by Arthur Golding. A facsimile reproduction with an introduction by George Kish, University of Michigan. 1955. Gainsville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints. Cap.XLIII
- ^x From: *Ritual and Other Stories*. Arthur MACHEN. 1992. Lewes, Sussex: Tartarus.
- ^{xi} *Hecate's Fountain*. Kenneth GRANT. 1992. London: Skoob.
- ^{xii} *The Magical Revival, Aleister Crowley and the Hidden God, Cults of the Shadow, Nightside of Eden, Outside the Circles of Time, Hecate's Fountain, Outer Gateways, Beyond the Mauve Zone, The Ninth Arch*
- ^{xiii} *Hecate's Fountain* p.34
- ^{xiv} *Hecate's Fountain* footnotes p.34 and p.230
- ^{xv} IXAXAAR = 10 + 60 + 1 + 60 + 1 + 1 + 200 = 333
- ^{xvi} As Dave Evans said in a 2008 conference paper: "reading Grant is like taking a powerful hallucinogenic drug, there seems to be an urgent and elaborate message from 'beyond' to be found, but that it doesn't always come across in a linear or sometimes even in a *linguistic* fashion."] *Crowleyan Echoes: Baraka and Fantasy*. Dave EVANS. [online] http://www.cesnur.org/2008/london_evans.doc