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Abstract

This article examines the early Islamic notion that Adam, the promulgator of the human species, descended to India from heaven. Readers are introduced to Adam's Peak, a mysterious mountain in Sri Lanka that is revered by some Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians alike.

Keywords

Adam, Sri Pada, Adam's Peak, Buddha, India, Sarandīb, Sri Lanka, Eve, Saman, St. Thomas

The Indian subcontinent's relationship with Islam is ancient, but it is not often considered the birthplace of the religion. However, according to some of the earliest Islamic texts, Adam, who is universally regarded by Muslims as the primal man and the vicegerent of God, was cast down to Sri Lanka from Paradise. A mysterious rock formation marks the summit of Adam's Peak, a mountain known as Sri Pada ("Sacred Footprint") to the Sinhalese. A large imprint that resembles an oversized footprint mesmerized contending Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians alike. The Hindus claimed it for Shiva and Vishnu,¹ the Buddhists for Gautama Buddha,² and some Christians for St. Thomas.³ A monastery dedicated to the veneration of this impression was built at the summit, and pilgrims have flocked to it for centuries.

¹ William Skeen, *Adam's Peak* (W.L.H. Skeen & Company: 1870), pp. 27

² *Ibid*, pp. 13

³ *Ibid*, pp. 11



In his chronicle, Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) includes a section called “The Place on Earth to Which Adam and Eve Came When They Were Cast Down”, where he records several chains of narrators that go back to the companions and the *tābi‘īn*. Among these authorities are Ibn ‘Abbās, Ibn Iṣḥāq, Mujahid b. Jabr, and ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.⁴ All of the reports claim that Adam was sent to the Indian subcontinent. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is quoted as saying, “The land with the sweetest smell on Earth is the land of India. When Adam was cast down there, some of the smell of Paradise clung to India’s trees.”⁵ In another passage, Ibn ‘Abbās says, “Adam was cast down upon a mountain in India called Nūdh.”⁶ This may be a reference to Nod, an eastern land that Cain was banished to after killing his brother in Genesis. However, some editions of Ṭabarī call the mountain Būdh, which has a resemblance to the word Buddha (Būdhā in Arabic).⁷ Ṭabarī notes that this mountain was in Sarandīb, the ancient Arabic word for Sri Lanka.⁸ The word Sarandīb was probably derived from the Sanskrit *Svarna-Dīpa*, which means “Golden Island”; as nuggets of various sizes were found in antiquity.⁹ The summit of the mountain was said to be the axis mundi, as Adam’s feet were upon the mountain whilst his head was in heaven.¹⁰

⁴ Franz Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 1 (SUNY Press: 1989), pp. 290-297

⁵ Ibid, pp. 291

⁶ Ibid, pp. 291

⁷ Ibid, pp. 291

⁸ Ibid, pp. 292

⁹ Asiff Hussein, *The Jewels of Sarandib – Sri Lanka As Seen Through Arabian Eyes*, <https://roar.media/english/life/history/the-jewels-of-sarandib-sri-lanka-as-seen-through-arabian-eyes/>

¹⁰ Franz Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari*, pp. 292

The Shī‘ī theologian Ṣadūq (d. 991 CE) furthermore records traditions relating to Adam and India. In his *‘Uyūn al-Akḥbār al-Riḍā*, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is asked to identify the noblest valley on the face of the Earth, to which he responds, “Sarandīb, for Adam was cast down therein from heaven.”¹¹ In Ṣadūq’s *‘Ilal al-Sharā‘i*, he also mentions the aroma of India by quoting Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq as saying, “Adam fell from Paradise to Ṣafā, and Ḥawwā to Marwa. She would comb [her hair] in Paradise, but when she was sent to the Earth, she said, ‘I do not want a comb whilst I have incurred [God’s] wrath’. So, she removed her pleats, and the musk from her pleats, with which she would comb in Paradise, dispersed. The wind carried it, and its excess landed in India. For that reason, musk came to be in India.”¹² While the tradition does not mention Adam’s Peak, it can be compared to the report noted earlier on the smell of Paradise residing in India.

Perhaps the earliest Muslim account on the subject is from the beginning of the ninth century CE. In the narrative of Sulaymān, an Arab merchant, he mentions a mountain called al-Rūhūn, “to the top of which it is thought Adam ascended (*si‘c*), and there left the print of his foot ... Adam at the same time stood with his other foot in the sea.”¹³ Till today, Rohana is one of the names of Adam’s Peak. Sulaymān then mentions that the mountain is rich with rubies and other precious stones. Sulaymān’s account was preserved in an eighteenth century French work on Muslim travelers.¹⁴ In the fourteenth century, Ibn Baṭūṭah, the renowned Muslim traveler, was taken to “the blessed foot of our forefather Adam”, and he recounted the annual pilgrimage that took place there.¹⁵ Ibn Baṭūṭah also recounts the tenth century visit of Ibn Khafīf to Sarandīb, who was honored by locals after trying to spare an elephant and, in turn, having an elephant spare his life in an attack on his band.¹⁶

It is unclear how or why Sri Lanka became associated with Adam. A hint may be found in the writings of Valentinus, a second century Gnostic Christian theologian and heresiarch. A fourth century Coptic manuscript of Valentinus’ discourse mentions a sacred footprint of the primal man, but it does not mention a location, nor does it mention any pilgrimages to the landmark.¹⁷ It is possible that the belief in this footprint was communicated to the Arabs, who absorbed some of the Gnostic legends that were rejected by mainstream Christianity, but no one can know for certain.

Other civilizations upheld similar legends. In the third century, Chinese voyagers wrote reverentially of the sacred footprint of “the first created man, who in their mythology, bears the name of Pawn-koo.”¹⁸ The gems of the mountain were attributed to the crystallized tears of this man, and its water was similarly considered miraculous.¹⁹ Soon thereafter, in the fourth century, Fa Hian, the Chinese pilgrim and traveler attributed the footprint to the strength of Buddha’s divine foot.²⁰ One of the names of Adam’s Peak is Samanala, which refers to the deity Saman, whom the Sinhalese believe to be

¹¹ Ṣadūq, *‘Uyūn al-Akḥbār al-Riḍā*, <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m012/09/no0998.html> pp. 221

¹² Ṣadūq, *‘Ilal al-Sharā‘i*, vol. 2, <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m012/09/no0998.html> pp. 491-492

¹³ William Skeen, *Adam’s Peak*, pp. 46

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 46

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 37

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 48

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 40, 53

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 24

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 24

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 24-25

the guardian of the mountain.²¹ In the sixth century, a Buddhist monk by the name of Mahanama wrote about the legendary visit of Buddha to Adam's Peak,²² where he entrusts Saman to the care of the mountain and Sri Lanka and leaves the impression of his foot on its summit.²³

Some Hindus hold that the footprint belongs to Vishnu or Shiva; the attribution to the latter arose due to a legend where Shiva retired to the mountain and, to commemorate his abode there, left the impression.²⁴ When Hindu conquerors came to the mountain, they found medicinal trees and plants that were like those on the peaks of the Himalayas – Shiva's favored abode.²⁵ Another name of the mountain is Swargarrhanam ("Ascent to Heaven"), as pilgrims who climb the summit would receive Shiva's sacred footprint.²⁶

Marco Polo, the celebrated Venetian traveler, also refers to traditions that connect the mountain to Adam and Buddha.²⁷ He however states that it is the tomb of Adam or the tomb of Buddha that sits at the summit of the high, rocky mountain.²⁸ The former, he says, is the account of the Saracens. In the seventeenth century, the Portuguese took control of Sri Lanka, and they attributed the footprint to St. Thomas,²⁹ who, according to Christian tradition, sailed to India sometime after the crucifixion. This may have been a way for Catholic conquerors to appropriate the local reverence of the mountain for themselves.

Adam's Peak is a resource-rich mountain that was exalted by the ancients and visited by pilgrims from all over the world. Whether or not the forefather of the human species was ever upon this mountain, it is still a symbol of consensus for mankind. One cannot help but be reminded of the Garden of Eden when gazing at the green paradisaic island and its peak.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 13

²² Oskar Von Hinuber, *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, ed. 1 (Munishiram Manoharlal Publishers: 1997), pp. 87-93

²³ William Skeen, *Adam's Peak*, pp. 13-17

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 27

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 35

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 35

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 55

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 55

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 54