

AGARTTHA (I)

by Mircea A. Tamas

Ossendowski's travel journal presented a good opportunity for Guénon to publish, in 1927, his jewel-book **Le Roi du Monde**, trying to put order in this for too long distorted and mystified myth about the subterranean center Agarttha and its Lord of the World.¹ Guénon preferred to combine d'Alveydre's name "Agarttha" and Ossendowski's title "the Lord of the World." Curiously, after **Le Roi du Monde** appeared, the information about Agarttha stopped; no serious author heard, from reliable sources, about Agarttha anymore.² It was said that the representatives of the Hindu (and Tibetan) tradition were unhappy with Guénon publishing the book and unveiling the secrets of Agarttha; they broke any connections with Guénon. In fact, Guénon did not unveil any new information, but presented the already known data in a purely traditional and intellectual manner; very cautiously, he used names and elements already published by others. Sure, there have been attempts to discover the mysterious realm, and we may mention Nicholas Roerich's expedition. Roerich, a Russian, traveled at the beginning of the Twentieth Century to India, Mongolia and Tibet, in search of Agarttha, pushed by his theosophist wife. At the time Ossendowski's book appeared in France, Roerich started his adventure in the "heart of Asia."³ He mentions, in Ossendowski's orthography, the legend of the mysterious subterranean realm Agharti (**Altai**, p. 37), identifying it with Shambhala. Csoma already wrote about Shambhala in his **Analysis**, more than once,⁴ but Roerich was the one who promoted the mysterious center in three books, two of which are only a remake of the first one. His stories are of no great interest, and the theosophist influence is plainly visible; Roerich tried to connect Shambhala to the theosophists' Mahâtmas, in order to prove the validity of the theosophist theories.⁵ The fabulous Shambhala is not exactly a subterranean realm; it seems situated somewhere up north and, in 1933, James Hilton issued the best-seller **Lost Horizon**, describing an inaccessible and

¹ "The publishing of **Le Roi du Monde** has an exceptional importance that regards not only the Occident but the whole traditional world. It is a true *signe des temps* of providential and merciful nature, and it proves Guénon's function" (Gilis 13).

² Modern authors used though Agarttha, but usually in a very suspect and denigrator manner. R. P. Martin uses Guénon's name in a dubious novel, where he writes about Asgârd, the Black Order, Hitler and de Gaulle (R. P. Martin, **Le renversement ou La Boucane contre l'Ordre Noire**, Guy Trédaniel, 1984). Jean Parvulesco discusses Martin's novel, fantasizing that Asgârd of the Black Order is "the supreme transcendental center" (Jean Parvulesco, **La spirale prophétique**, Guy Trédaniel, 1986, pp. 133-137; **Que vous a apporté René Guénon?**, Dualpha, Paris, 2002, p. 130 ff.).

³ We should mention that Ossendowski was a geologist and mines' prospector, the same way Baron Ignaz von Born was; Roerich had archeology as his passion. The attraction to the subterranean levels is a sign of our Age, and sometimes it resembles to the violation of the graves. For Guénon, Roerich was an agent of the counter-initiation; on the other hand, Roerich was Julius Evola's favorite painter.

⁴ Csoma writes about the "fabulous Shambhala" (and its king, Dava Zang-Po), locating it in northern Asia (Csoma 184, 260, 280).

⁵ See about Shambhala, **Altai**, pp. 15, 35, 256; Nicholas Roerich, **Heart of Asia**, Inner Traditions, 1990, pp. 88, 132. See about Mahâtmas, **Altai**, pp. 381, 384 (Roerich even mentions William Crooks, the spiritualist, to prove the existence of the mysterious Mahâtmas), **Heart**, p. 90. Roerich writes about the Lord of the World (**Altai**, p. 62), about the "black stone" (**Altai**, p. 343), but it seems that everything is borrowed from his predecessors, being unclear how much information he gathered himself during his voyage. Curiously, he writes about the "Tower of Shambhala" (**Altai**, p. 391, Nicholas Roerich, **Shambhala**, Inner Traditions, 1990, p. 3). Roerich advances a very suspect idea, stating that the Mongolians, seeing a picture of New York City, considered it the perfection of Shambhala (**Altai**, p. 359)! On the other hand, a Lama declared that the great Shambhala is located far beyond the ocean, in the heavenly domain, and has nothing to do with the earth (**Shambhala**, p. 2), that is, Shambhala is, like the *zmei*'s realm, "beyond oceans and countries"; finally, Roerich mentions a "subterranean lake" under Potala (**Shambhala**, p. 20), similar to Lake Zirchnitz.

inviolable region in Tibet, called Shangri-La, an imitation of Shambhala. For the grand public, Shangri-La surpassed by far the fame of Agartha, entering the current language as a synonym for “hidden paradise,” thus banishing Agartha forever to the realm of the fairy tales (Hendrickson 606).¹ We may note that **Lost Horizon** is itself a fairy tale, being a copy of a Romanian tale, **Forever young and life without death** (collection Petre Ispirescu). Shangri-La has the capacity to keep individuals young forever, but if they leave this paradise, they regain their real age. In the Romanian fairy tale, the hero reaches the primordial center, “the land of eternal youth,” yet remembering the ephemeral world he returns and, losing his magic youth, becomes older and older until he dies.

After Guénon published **Le Roi du Monde**, the search for the subterranean realm went on, without any result, and then, as it usually happens in the modern scientific world, Agartha was declared a pure “invention.” Marco Pallis was the one who connected this “invention” to Guénon.² Pallis wandered through Tibet and India, investigating Tibetan Buddhism and, like Roerich, thinking that he became qualified in this domain³; of course, Guénon’s views about Buddhism did not please him, and neither did the fact that, where he wandered, nobody mentioned a word about Agartha. When René Guénon disappeared from this world, Marco Pallis openly expressed his grief, in an article **René Guénon and Buddhism**, published in a volume paying homage to Guénon at his death.⁴ We will come back to this question regarding Buddhism; right now we note that in the same article, Pallis wrote about the Lord of the World and the mysterious subterranean realm, concluding that the only known center is Shâmbala, Agartha being a name totally ignored in Asia. He based some of his affirmations on George Roerich, one of Nicholas Roerich’s sons, quoting him more than once, a fact that, on the contrary, is not in his favor. Nicholas Roerich’s expedition was one *en famille*, his wife and two sons participating equally in this adventure; the wife, Helena Roerich, was involved with the theosophists, and wrote some dubious books. The whole family was implicated in the suspect affair regarding “the stone of Shambhala,” an aerolite, which George Roerich suggested came from Sirius; a fragment of this stone was sent to aid in the foundation of the League of Nations! (Godwin 102). Nicholas Roerich also affirms that he witnessed in Mongolia (1927) the flight of a UFO, oval and shining (**Altai**, p. 361, **Shambhala**, p. 244); this explains, partially at least, the origins of those theories that consider the gods and heroes as extraterrestrials, trying to replace the sacred writings with “UFO science.” Most probably, George Roerich provided Pallis with similar suspect information regarding Shambhala.

Marco Pallis had no rest, and in 1984, when a file on “René Guénon” was published, he participated with an article, **Le Roi du Monde et le problème des sources d'Ossendowski**, avoiding to attack Guénon directly. The article is rather disappointing⁵; we would expect more essence from Pallis,⁶ and not just a repetition of what he wrote in 1951. Anyway, Pallis’

¹ The famous presidential residence, Camp David, built by Franklin Roosevelt, was first called Shangri-La (Bernbaum 3).

² More recently, Laurant touched on the problem, stating that Lucius Ampelius was the first to mention the name of Agartha; Ampelius wrote about a city in Egypt, called Agartus (Jean-Pierre Laurant, **Le sens caché dans l'oeuvre de René Guénon**, L’Age d’homme, 1975, p. 129). In a new translation, Agartus is mentioned not as a city but as architect of the Egyptian pyramids (L. Ampelius, **Liber Memorialis**, Les Belles Lettres, 1993, p. 16).

³ The second edition of his book, **Peaks and Lamas**, was improved under the influence of Guénon and Coomaraswamy. These two wrote favorable reviews, being very supportive (René Guénon, **Études sur l’Hindouisme**, Éd. Traditionnelles, 1979, pp. 202, 213).

⁴ **Études Traditionnelles**, 1951, no. 293-294-295, p. 308.

⁵ Les Dossiers H, **René Guénon**, L’Age d’Homme, 1984, p. 145 ff. Confessing to Godwin, Pallis calls **Le Roi du Monde** a “disaster” (Godwin 87).

⁶ It is, however, a general flaw. Today, many books or articles so called “traditional” or connected to Guénon, treat insignificant elements belonging to the “gossip” domain and not doctrinal problems belonging to the sacred sciences

conclusion was that Ossendowski, having a “tabloid” mentality, borrowed from Saint-Yves the idea of a subterranean realm, voluntarily distorted some names, and invented others. Nobody in India and Mongolia knew about Agarttha as this name is incompatible with Sanskrit, the title Lord of the World is a fantasy, the cult of Rama too, everything is just an imaginary tale of Western origin; only Shambhala had, as a myth, reality. It is true that, at the end of his article, Pallis, recalling that the “file” is dedicated to Guénon, introduced a sentence in which he accepted “the sacred geometry and geography” as Guénon stated them in **Le Roi du Monde**. We may note that in the same “file” Alain Daniélou considered **Le Roi du Monde** to be based on Ouspenski’s fantastic story, and contestable (p. 137); of course, Daniélou mistakes Ossendowski with Ouspenski, and has no idea that Guénon doesn’t treat the “fantastic story” but the doctrinal and symbolic meaning of the center. Regarding the Sanskrit name of Agarttha, we think that it represents one of Guénon’s “subtleties.” Sure, it is well-known that René Guénon took the Tradition and spiritual doctrines very seriously, and his approach was always very direct; yet his fundamental work **Le Roi du Monde** is, voluntarily or not, a “subtle tale” full of allusions, a “metaphysical tale” if we are permitted to use such an expression. Strongly involved in a “crusade” against the occultists, theosophists and pseudo-spirituality, Guénon reveals a subtle and elegant spiritual technique. He writes: “Agarttha signifie ‘insaisissable’ ou ‘inaccessible’ (et aussi ‘inviolable’, car c’est le ‘séjour de la Paix’, *Salem*)” (**Roi**, p. 67); which doesn’t mean at all a *mot-à-mot* translation of the name, but it reflects its inner and sacred significance. In this context, Hapel’s attempts to find valid etymologies for Agarttha appear as a misunderstanding of Guénon’s “subtlety” (Hapel 58).

Guénon stresses that Agarttha is the residence of *Salem*, of Peace. This is very important. Bernbaum and others translate the word *shambhala* as “the source of happiness” (Sanskrit *sham*, “happiness”) (Bernbaum 270). Yet the Sanskrit primary meaning of Shambhala is that of “the residence of tranquility, of peace” and only secondary “of joy.”¹ We should not be surprised that Agarttha and Shambhala are equivalents of Salem, the Center of the World in Judeo-Christian tradition, Salem being the city of the Lord of the World, Melchizedek (**Hebrews** 7:1-3, Guénon, **Roi**, p. 47 ff). When Guénon specifies that Agarttha signifies “inviolable,” because it is “the seat of the Peace, *Salem*” (**Roi**, p. 67), he implicitly indicates the equivalence between Agarttha, Shambhala and Salem.² The difference is that Shambhala is a name applied to the Center when that one was situated at the North Pole, on the top of Mount Meru, the Axis of the World; Agarttha refers to the hidden Center, when that one became subterranean. Shambhala doesn’t exist anymore in our decayed world, and that and is why many legends about it circulated freely in Asia and Pallis, Bernbaum and others could learn about them. Agarttha, on the contrary, is still present, though underground and invisible, and in consequence a thick mystery covers it. But we have to be careful: from an absolute point of view, there is no difference between Shambhala and Agarttha. In the Romanian fairy tales, the immediate meaning of the subterranean realm is that of “the other world” or “the land of the dragons (*zmei*)”; yet in other cases the same realm of the dragons (*asuras*, *zmei*) is at “the extremity of the world,” beyond oceans and countries, and not underground. In the same way, Shambhala is at the extremity of the world, that is, at the Extreme North, and Agarttha is underground. The guidebooks to Shambhala describe a journey very similar to those found in the Romanian fairy tales³; it is an initiatory journey symbolizing a spiritual realization within the intellect of the heart, where the real Shambhala hides. At the same

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¹ Sanskr. *shama* means “divine quiet, peace, rest”; also *sham* (*sam*) in the Vedic writings means at the same time peace and bliss.

² Guénon writes: “the word *Salem*, despite the common opinion, never designated a real city, but, if we consider it as a symbolical name of Melchizedek’s residence, could be regarded as an equivalent of the term Agarttha” (**Roi**, p. 49).

time, Shambhala is the spiritual center; from Shambhala, Kalki, the Savior, will come to put an end to the rotten and decayed world and start a new Golden Age. Some Tibetan legends consider Sucandra as the first king of Shambhala; he was an incarnation of Vajrapani, the Bodhisattva of Power and Master of Secret Teachings (Bernbaum 234). Sucandra was followed by six religious kings (that is, kings combining the spiritual authority with the temporal power), the son of the last one being Manjushrikirti, an incarnation of Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. Manjushrikirti's son, Pundarika, was an incarnation of Avalokitêshwara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion (Bernbaum 236). The last king of Shambhala will be Rudra Chakrin, an incarnation of Manjushri; he will fight and defeat the evil forces and will start a new Golden Age, being identical to Hindu Kalki-Avatâra. Rudra Chakrin, like the other kings of Shambhala, is an aspect of the Lord of the World.

Charles-André Gilis, in a chapter dedicated to the Lord of the World, points out that, despite Marco Pallis' statement, the three supreme functions connected to the Lord of the World are well-known in Asia; they are: Manjushri – the supreme function, Avalokitêshwara – the spiritual authority, and Vajrapânî – the temporal power (Gilis 15).¹ More recently, this thesis was developed in a new journal for traditional studies, **Science sacrée**.²

³ About the legends describing Shambhala and its location see Bernbaum's book. Unfortunately, the author, instead of limiting himself to a presentation of various data regarding Shambhala, tries to decipher the secret meaning of the journey to Shambhala and gives a psychoanalytical interpretation far from its real and truthful significance.

¹ Gilis states that René Guénon's mission was precisely to represent Agarttha, the supreme Center, in the Occidental world: "The function of the supreme authority, having the Center of the World as abode, is exactly the function that Guénon had as his mission to represent in a direct way in the Western world."

² **Science sacrée**, nos. 3-4, September 2001- April 2002. There are two articles about the three supreme functions in the Tibetan Buddhism. We may note that in the first one Cyrille Gayat translates the Sanskrit Shambhala as "the source of joy." In the second one, Pascal Coumes reiterates Gilis' statement about the triad Manjushri-Avalokitêshwara-Vajrapânî, and writes about Rudra Charkin and Shambhala.