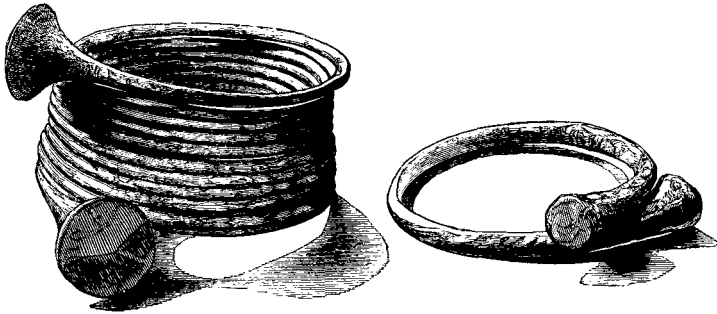


I.

ON THE NAGA TRIBES OF THE HIMALAYAS, WITH A NOTICE
OF THE OPENING OF A NAGA GRAVE. By R. GRAHAM THOMS,
Esq.

The Nagars or Nagas are hill tribes, and inhabit the lower ranges of the Himalayas bordering on Comillah, Cachar, Sylhet, and the greater length of Assam to Suddyah, the extreme boundary of the British possessions on the north-eastern frontier of India. What I know of them and their customs is principally from personal observation, and partly from a Munipooric man who could talk their language, and acted as my interpreter on several occasions. They are a wandering race, and subsist

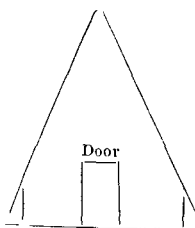
almost entirely upon roots and herbs found in the jungles, together with small fish caught in the (Bheels) swamps and rivers, and a little rice that they grow on the hills; but they are fond of pigs, buffaloes, and fowls, and more particularly fond of a dog or a dead elephant; they even go the length of breeding dogs entirely for consumption. I have seen the women carrying large baskets full of pups, and the men leading a lot of older ones for breeding purposes when removing to a new site; and I have known of a large band of Nagars, when visiting the plains, having come across a dead elephant, they at once encamped, erected huts, and did not move from the place until the whole of the elephant was con-



Bronze Armillæ from a Naga Grave. (3 inches diameter.)

sumed, and pieces of the flesh dried to take home to their wives on their return as a great delicacy. They are a middle-sized race of people, rather good-looking, not dark in complexion, and many not unlike a European in cast of features. They wear ornaments of brass or bronze round each arm above the elbow, and often on the wrists, necklaces of beads, buffalo horn, and cut shells round their neck, and rings in their ears. I have seen as many as twenty-five of these rings in one ear. They have little or no covering for their body—generally a small piece of strong coarse cloth, about nine inches wide and a foot long, hanging in front and tied round their loins with a piece of cord or strip of cloth; they seldom or never wear any covering on their heads; but tie a piece of split cane

round a little above the forehead, to prevent the hair falling over their face; their hair is generally very thick, strong, bushy, and jet black, and seldom or never worn long like the Munipoories, Cookies, and many other hill tribes. They almost always carry a spear and a daw when travelling or in the jungle. They live in small tribes or clans, and each has a head or chief; but I never learned if he holds any title or power, further than being the chief counsellor in cases of removing to a new station or settling a dispute. They generally select for their Poongies or villages the top of a small hill or commanding situation. The houses are invariably built in a line; but if a larger village, in two lines, with a street running in a straight line through the centre; the doors face the street or front, and are made in the end instead of the sides, this arises from the houses being built in a peculiar way. The walls or sides of the hut or house are made of bamboo, split, beaten flat, and plaited into a sort of coarse mat-work, and are not above three feet high. The roof is made very high, with a great slope, and thatched with sun-grass, or the leaves of the cane. The hut, when finished, has the appearance of a roof taken bodily off a house and set on the ground, (see fig.) They are generally



Naga Hut.
End elevation.

a quiet and harmless race, more especially about the hills of Cachar; but towards Assam they are warlike and often attack and burn each other's villages, carrying off the girls and young men as captives or slaves. I have never seen them follow any branch of trade; but I am told they make their own spears, daws, and other warlike weapons; and at night I have often seen large fires on the distant hills, which I am assured by the natives is smelting iron. They also manufacture most of their ornaments of bronze or other metal; but where the metal is procured, I am unable to say. The Munipoories say it comes from Burmah; and it is not unlikely, as the Cookies and

Munipoories, bordering tribes, get their metal from that country. But spears, weapons, and other ornaments must be made by themselves, as it is impossible to get them except from a Nagar himself.

These tribes of Nagars, as I have said before, are a wandering race, and move about from place to place in bands of from one hundred to

five or six hundred. They generally choose a hill well situated as to water, in the dense forest jungle, where they build their houses as already described. They then clear away the forest: here they grow rice and cotton chiefly, year after year, and remain in the same place until the ground gets so weakened by constant cultivation and cropping that it ceases to yield anything like a fair return. They then choose a new situation to which they remove and continue the same process. When a man dies, a grave is dug about five or six feet deep in front of his house. All that die in the Poongie during their stay at that place are buried invariably right in front of their own house, not certainly more than five or six yards from the door. The body is wrapped in the cloth used during lifetime. It is usually striped brick-red and white, made of cotton and spun by the women. The body is then laid at full length in the grave, face upwards; his spear is placed in his left hand, and the daw in the right. The necklaces of beads, shell, and pieces of buffalo horn, and other brass or bronze ornaments, are buried along with him. These ornaments are left on the body as when alive. The grave is then filled in with earth, and a large mound of stones, about four feet high, built loosely over the grave. Some of these mounds are made of the length of the grave, and others are made round and flat on the top, where some of the relations or family of the deceased usually sit throughout the day and evening splitting cane or bamboos for various purposes, such as split cane for string to assist in the putting together of their houses, or split bamboo for making various sorts of matting and small hand punkahs (fans).

The relics from the Nagar grave in Cachar that I have presented to the Society's Museum were dug up on a hill in Cachar, called Laback, in the Cheree Valley, a few miles from a large bazaar or market-village, called Luckypoor, on the Barak river. I had gone to that place (Laback) in the year 1862, for the purpose of opening out and clearing the ground for a tea-garden. Shortly after coming there, some of



Portions of a
Necklace of Chank
Shell from a Naga
Grave. (Halfsize.)

the natives told me that this place had been the site of an old Pongie of Nagars, and one of the largest tribes or clans in the district. I immediately had the jungle cut and cleared away round my bungalow to the extent of many acres, and found what was told me to be true, as I found numerous marks of houses and great quantities of the stumps of posts that the houses had been supported with, and several mounds of stone, as already described, which I concluded must be graves. I had one dug up, and the relics now presented to the Museum are those taken out of this grave. (See Donation List, p. 340.)

The same Nagas that had inhabited or dwelt on this place were then living on a very high mountain, called "Zhou Zhong," in Cachar, and not far from the province of Munipoore. I visited this Pongie in April last year, but found they had gone somewhere else: no one could inform me of their whereabouts. This tribe was a very powerful clan, and numbered several hundreds, and, I am informed, had a chief they called a king.

The above is a rough description of the Nagas from my own experience. I could have given more minute details as to dress and mode of living, &c.; but I think I have said enough to show the general habits and condition of these tribes.

Sir J. NOEL PATON remarked that this communication possessed a peculiar interest, from the fact that the bronze ornaments now exhibited from this Naga grave were almost identical in type with the armillæ so constantly found associated with the burials of the Bronze Age in Western Europe. The theory which assigned an Indian origin to the race that overspread Europe in that early age had been ably supported by philological evidence; but the fact that there existed so close a resemblance between the personal ornaments of these nomadic tribes of modern India and the early race whose remains are found all over Western Europe, seemed strongly corroborative of the truth of that theory.

Sir WALTER ELLIOT of Wolflee agreed with Sir Noel Paton as to the interest of the communication; but there could be no general conclusion drawn with safety from the customs of a single small tribe. The same or similar forms of ornament were found on the sculptures in many parts of India. He admitted the resemblance in type common to the personal ornaments not only of different periods, but of different

racés; although, instead of deducing from this the community of descent of the populations among which these ornaments were found to prevail, he was rather inclined to believe that it was merely an indication of similar conditions of society among different races at different periods. These Nagas, he thought, might probably be of Indo-Chinese extraction; but the paper was not of such an exhaustive nature as to warrant them in founding general conclusions upon it.