

## Greek, Tamil and Sanskrit: Comparison between the Myths of Prometheus, Sembian and Sibi

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*The Prometheus myth in Greek literature deals primarily with the theft of fire. The mythological story unwinds such events as the sacrificial thigh bone, God's corporal punishment, and the eating of flesh by an eagle. A link with the Oceanus race and with the continent of Asia is also seen. Interestingly resemblances with this myth can be seen in some ancient literary sources from Tamil and Sanskrit languages. The Tamil myth of 'Sembian' and the Sanskrit myth of 'Sibi' also have resemblances with the Greek myth of Prometheus. The parallels seen between these myths are examined here.*

**Keywords:** comparative study, Indian, myth, Prometheus, Sanskrit, Sembian, Sibi, Tamil

### Introduction

Myths can be considered to be the ancient sources of information on ancient history and culture. Some myths, even though arising in different corners of the world (and in different languages), strangely reflect one another. The similarities in mythologies may indicate parallels and influences of one another. If the similarities are occasional they may be seen as parallels. If the similarities are made by personal contact, they may be seen as influences. The Greek myth of Prometheus has similarities with the Tamil myth of Sembian and the Sanskrit myth of Sibi. The reason for these similarities shall be searched in the mythological theories of parallels and influences.

### Prometheus

There are many myths related to Prometheus; among those myths, noteworthy mentions are as follows:

1. Maker of Mankind and Philanthropism
2. Sacrificial thigh bone
3. Related with fire (Theft of fire)
4. God's corporal punishment
5. Flesh-eating by an eagle
6. Oceanus Race and
7. Prometheus' connection with Asia

The myths related with these topics are discussed in detail below.

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*Maker of Mankind and Philanthropist*

Man being a social animal depends upon the help of another. The society, or a person in the society, needs the help of the other. In this scenario a hand that is ready to help is considered to be a special character of a super human or as God himself, which is made very obvious in the myth of Prometheus (Jones 1918).

λίθοι κεῖνται σφισιν ἐπὶ τῇ χαράδρᾳ, At the ravine there lie two stones, each of  
μέγεθος μὲν ἑκάτερος ὥς φόρτον which is big enough to fill a cart. They have  
ἀποχρῶντα ἀμάξης εἶναι, χρῶμα δέ ἐστι the color of clay, not earthy clay, but such  
πηλοῦ σφισιν, οὐ γεώδους ἀλλ' οἷος ἂν as would be found in a ravine or sandy  
χαράδρας γένοιτο ἢ χειμάρρου ψαμμώδους, torrent, and they smell very like the skin of  
παρέχοντα δὲ καὶ ὁσμὴν ἐγγύτατα χρωτὶ a man. They say that these are remains of  
ἀνθρώπου: ταῦτα ἔτι λείπεσθαι τοῦ πηλοῦ the clay out of which the whole race of  
λέγουσιν ἐξ οὗ καὶ ἅπαν ὑπὸ τοῦ mankind was fashioned by Prometheus.  
Προμηθέως τὸ γένος πλασθῆναι τῶν Paus. 10.4.4.  
ἀνθρώπων. Pausanias, Description of Greece,  
Greek travelogue, C 2nd A.D

Thus it is described that Prometheus created humans, and after that he also gave mankind the much needed fire. This reveals that he was not only the creator, he was also a benefactor, and for this noble act he even goes to the extent of deceiving God.

*Sacrificial Thigh Bone*

Sacrificing animals as an offering to the Gods has been one of the important rituals in ancient times. At the end of the event the flesh of the sacrificial animal is offered to God—it is also a mark of respect given to God. Deception is not permitted in this ritual. Here there is a need to look at the situation in the myth of Prometheus (Smyth 1926, Evelyn White 1914).

495 χολή, λοβοῦ τε ποικίλην εὐμορφίαν.  
κνίσῃ τε κῶλα συγκαλυπτὰ καὶ μακρὰν  
ὀσφὺν πυρώσας δυστέκμαρτον ἐς τέχνην  
ᾧδωσα θνητούς, καὶ φλογοπὰ σήματα  
ἐξωμμάτωσα, πρόσθεν ὄντ' ἐπάργεμα.

[495] the gods, also the speckled symmetry  
of the liver-lobe; and the thigh-bones,  
wrapped in fat, and the long chine I burned  
and initiated mankind into an occult art.  
Also I cleared their vision to discern signs  
from flames, which were obscure before  
this. [500]

Aesch. PB

Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound,  
Greek tragedy C.5th BC

535καὶ γὰρ ὅτ' ἐκρίνοντο θεοὶ θνητοὶ τ' ἄνθρωποι Μηκῶνι, τότε ἔπειτα μέγαν βοῦν πρόφρονι θυμῷ δασσάμενος προέθηκε, Διὸς νόον ἐξαπαφίσκων. τοῖς μὲν γὰρ σάρκας τε καὶ ἔγκατα πίονα δημῷ ἐν ῥινῷ κατέθηκε καλύψας γαστρί βοεῖη, 540τῷ δ' αὖτ' ὅστέα λευκὰ βοῶς δολίῃ ἐπὶ τέχνῃ εὐθετίσας κατέθηκε καλύψας ἀργεῖι δημῷ. δὴ τότε μιν προσέειπε πατήρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε: Ἰαπετιονίδι, πάντων ἀριδείκετ' ἀνάκτων, ὦ πέπον, ὥς ἑτεροζήλως διεδάσσαο μοίρας.	[535] For when the gods and mortal men had a dispute at Mecone, even then Prometheus was forward to cut up a great ox and set portions before them, trying to deceive the mind of Zeus. Before the rest he set flesh and inner parts thick with fat upon the hide, covering them with an ox paunch; [540] but for Zeus he put the white bones dressed up with cunning art and covered with shining fat. Then the father of men and of gods said to him: "Son of Iapetus, most glorious of all lords, good sir, how unfairly you have divided the portions!" Hes. Th. Hesiod's Theogony, Greek epic, C.8th BC
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To help mankind, Prometheus tricks the God Zeus as found in the Greek tragedy C 5<sup>th</sup> B.C. Food and meat were obviously a scarcity at the time of the myth, and people were suffering from want and were thus unable to fulfill the sacrificial needs of God Zeus. Seeing this Prometheus had no other way to solve this problem other than taking the dry bones of animals and covering them with the fat of sacrifice instead of the real meat and offering them to the God Zeus. He staged this deceptive act for the benefit of mankind knowing full well that he might incur the wrath of Zeus.

#### *Related with Fire (Theft of Fire)*

Fire is one of the main sources of energy. The use of fire is one of the remarkable milestones in the development of mankind. It has helped man to not only cook his food and make agricultural implements, but also to create weapons of war with hard metals like bronze, copper and iron. Fire is an important source of energy and has an important place in modern industry and war. Hence, the value of fire is revealed in the myth of Prometheus (Lamb 1967) who was the bringer of fire and civilization to the mortals. He was the giver of all arts and sciences, as well as the means of sustenance.

ἀπορία οὖν σχόμενος ὁ Προμηθεὺς ἦντινα σωτηρίαν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ εὖροι, κλέπτει Ἥφαιστου καὶ Ἀθηνᾶς τὴν ἑντεχνον	Then Prometheus, in his perplexity as to what preservation he could devise for man, stole from Hephaestus and Athena wisdom in the arts Plat. Prot. 321c
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[321δ] σοφίαν σὺν πυρί—ἀμήχανον γὰρ ἦν  
 ἄνευ πυρὸς αὐτὴν κτητὴν τῷ ἢ χρησίμην  
 γενέσθαι—καὶ οὕτω δὴ δωρεῖται ἀνθρώπῳ.  
 τὴν μὲν οὖν περὶ τὸν βίον σοφίαν ἄνθρωπος  
 ταύτῃ ἔσχεν, τὴν δὲ πολιτικὴν οὐκ εἶχεν: ἦν  
 γὰρ παρὰ τῷ Διί. τῷ δὲ Προμηθεΐ εἰς μὲν  
 τὴν ἀκρόπολιν τὴν τοῦ Διὸς οἴκησιν οὐκέτι  
 ἐνεχώρει εἰσελθεῖν—πρὸς δὲ καὶ αἱ Διὸς  
 φυλακαὶ φοβεραὶ ἦσαν—εἰς δὲ τὸ τῆς  
 Ἀθηνᾶς καὶ Ἡφαίστου οἶκημα τὸ κοινόν, ἐν  
 ᾧ

[321d] together with fire—since by no  
 means without fire could it be acquired or  
 helpfully used by any—and he handed it  
 there and then as a gift to man. Now  
 although man acquired in this way the  
 wisdom of daily life, civic wisdom he had  
 not, since this was in the possession of  
 Zeus; Prometheus could not make so free as  
 to enter the citadel which is the dwelling-  
 place of Zeus, and moreover the guards of  
 Zeus were terrible: but he entered  
 unobserved the building shared by Athena  
 and Hephaestus  
 Plat. Prot. 321d  
 Plato's Protagoras, C.4th BC

In this episode the mortals created by Prometheus seem to be at a low state when compared to that of other living creatures. To uplift the mortals he stole the fire from God Zeus without being concerned about the consequences of doing such a defying act. His only motive was to somehow help mankind. Because of this selfless characteristic, Prometheus has a very special place in this myth, however, this action incurs the wrath of Zeus.

#### *God's Corporal Punishment*

Punishment is the infliction of pain for wrong doing. The aim of punishment may vary. Punishments differ in their degree of severity and may include sanctions such as reprimands, deprivations of privileges or liberty, fines, incarcerations, ostracism, the infliction of pain, amputation and even the penalty of death—these punishments are accorded mainly to rectify wrong doings. Sometimes punishments are very hard; bodily punishments belong to this category. This is also seen in the myth of Prometheus (Evelyn White 1914).

520ταύτην γάρ οἱ μοῖραν ἐδάσσατο μητίετα  
 Ζεύς.  
 δῆσε δ' ἄλυκτοπέδησι Προμηθέα  
 ποικιλόβουλον  
 δεσμοῖς ἀργαλέοισι μέσον διὰ κίον'  
 ἐλάσσας:

[520] for this lot wise Zeus assigned to him.  
 And ready-witted Prometheus he bound  
 with inextricable bonds, cruel chains, and  
 drove a shaft through his middle,  
 Hes. Th.  
 Hesiod's Theogony,  
 Greek epic, C.8th BC

God Zeus was very angry when Prometheus stole the fire from him, so he punished him physically by cruelly nailing him to a mountain in the Caucasus and driving a shaft through his middle. He also sent an eagle to eat his immortal liver which constantly replenished itself. Prometheus underwent the punishment of God Zeus and bore all the physical sufferings solely for the benefit of mankind.

*Body Flesh Eaten by Bird*

Bodily punishments are intended to inflict pain. Flogging, branding and even mutilation was practiced in most civilizations in ancient times. The punishment received by Prometheus for the theft of fire from the god is indeed very sympathetic (Evelyn White 1914).

καί οἱ ἐπ' αἰετὸν ὥρσε τανύπτερον· αὐτὰρ ὃ  
 γ' ἦπαρ  
 ἦσθιεν ἀθάνατον, τὸ δ' ἀέξετο ἴσον ἀπάντη  
 525 νυκτός ὅσον πρόπαν ἦμαρ ἔδοι  
 τανυσίπτερος ὄρνις.

and set on him a long-winged eagle, which  
 used to eat his immortal liver; but by night  
 the liver grew [525] as much again  
 everyway as the long-winged bird devoured  
 in the whole day.

Hes. Th.

Hesiod's Theogony,  
 Greek epic, C.8th BC

Unable to bear the suffering of the mortals, Prometheus had no other alternative than to steal the fire from Zeus, for which he had to undergo the punishment given by Zeus who set on him a giant eagle to eat the liver of Prometheus.

*Oceanus Race*

There are some myths especially related to the sea. The peoples belonging to fishing communities and sea traders are related with these types of myths. Prometheus is also related to this type of myth (Evelyn White 1914).

κούρην δ' Ἰαπετὸς καλλίσφυρον  
 Ὠκεανίην  
 ἠγάγετο Κλυμένην καὶ ὁμὸν λέχος  
 εἰσανέβαινεν.  
 ἦ δέ οἱ Ἄτλαντα κρατερόφρονα γείνατο  
 παῖδα:  
 510 τίκτε δ' ὑπερκύδαντα Μενόϊτιον ἠδὲ  
 Προμηθεά

Now Iapetus took to wife the neat-ankled  
 maid Clymene, daughter of Ocean, and  
 went up with her into one bed. And she bore  
 him a stout-hearted son, Atlas: [510] also  
 she bore very glorious Menoetius and clever  
 Prometheus,...

Hes. Th.

Hesiod's Theogony,  
 Greek epic, C.8th BC

The mother of the Prometheus was associated with the sea. All other relatives of Prometheus were also related with the sea. According to Aeschylus, the wife of Prometheus was also connected with the sea (Smyth 1926).

## Χορός

ἔμαθον τάδε σὰς προσιδούσ' ὀλο-  
 ᾶς τύχας, Προμηθεῦ.  
 τὸ διαμφίδιον δέ μοι μέλος προσέπτα  
 555 τὸδ' ἐκεῖνό θ', ὅ τ' ἀμφὶ λουτρὰ  
 καὶ λέχος σὸν ὕμεναίου  
 ἰότατι γάμων, ὅτε τὰν ὁμοπάτριον ἔδνοις  
 560 ἄγαγες Ἡσιόναν πείθων δάμαρτα  
 κοινόλεκτρον.

## Chorus

I have learned this lesson from observing  
 the luck, Prometheus, that has brought  
 about your ruin. And the difference in the  
 song stole into my thought [555] —this  
 song and that, which, about your bridal bed  
 and bath, I (the chorus of Oceanids) raised  
 to grace your marriage, when you wooed  
 with gifts [560] and won my (the Oceanid)  
 sister Hesione to be your wedded wife.

Aesch. PB

Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound,

Greek tragedy C.5th BC

In these myths it is shown clearly that Prometheus belonged to a race closely linked with the sea.

*Prometheus connection with Asia*

Prometheus was also connected with Asia (Godley 1920).

[3] ἤδη γὰρ Λιβύη μὲν ἐπὶ Λιβύης λέγεται  
 ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν Ἑλλήνων ἔχειν τὸ οὖνομα  
 γυναικὸς αὐτόχθονος, ἡ δὲ Ἀσίη ἐπὶ τῆς  
 Προμηθέος γυναικὸς τὴν ἐπωνυμίην.

[3] For Libya is said by most Greeks to be  
 named after a native woman of that name,  
 and Asia after the wife of Prometheus;  
 Hdt. 4.45.3

Herodotus's Histories, C.5th BC

In this myth Herodotus says that the continent of Asia was named after the wife of Prometheus. In this aspect we see the connection of Prometheus with the Asian continent. Thus Prometheus was related with the myths of 1) Philanthropic or giving mind, 2) Sacrificial thigh bone, 3) Related with fire (Theft of fire), 4) God's physical punishment, 5) flesh-eating bird, 6) Oceanus race and 7) Connection with Asia. In connecting these myths, it can be said that Prometheus who belongs to the sea and Asia, faced bodily wounds by the bird related with fire. This is visualized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Prometheus Bound**



Prometheus belongs to the Oceanus Race. Some sea myths may also be related with him. Here it is to be known about an instance which is not directly related to Prometheus, but related with the sea in Greek literature (Mooney 1912).

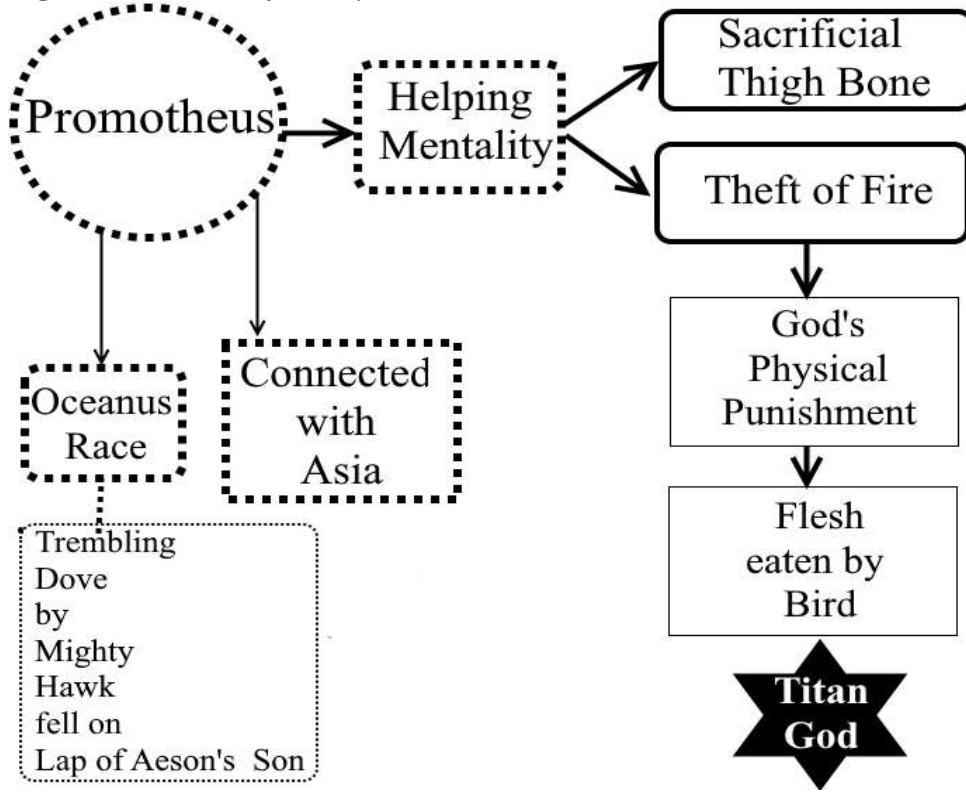
540 Ὡς φάτο: τοῖσι δὲ σῆμα θεοὶ δόσαν  
 εὐμενέοντες.  
 τρηρὼν μὲν φεύγουσα βίην κίρκιοιο  
 πελειᾶς  
 ὑψόθεν Αἰσονίδεω πεφοβημένη ἔμπεσε  
 κόλποις:  
 κίρκος δ' ἀφλάστῳ περικάππεσεν. ὦκα  
 δὲ Μόψος  
 τοῖον ἔπος μετὰ πᾶσι θεοπροπέων  
 ἀγόρευσεν:  
 "Ὑμμι, φίλοι, τόδε σῆμα θεῶν ἰότητι  
 τέτυκται:  
 οὐδέ τη ἄλλως ἐστὶν ὑποκρίνασθαι  
 ἄρειον,  
 παρθενικὴν δ' ἐπέεσσι μετελθέμεν  
 ἀμφιέποντας  
 μήτι παντοίῃ. δοκέω δέ μιν οὐκ  
 ἀθερίζειν,  
 εἰ ἐτεδὸν Φινεύς γε θεᾶ ἐνὶ Κύπριδι  
 νόστον  
 πέφραδεν ἔσσεσθαι. κείνης δ' ὄγε  
 μέλιχος ὄρνις  
 πότμον ὑπεξήλυξε: κέαρ δέ μοι ὥς ἐνὶ  
 θυμῷ  
 τόνδε κατ' οἰωνὸν προτιόσσεται, ὥς δὲ  
 πέλοιτο.  
 ἀλλά, φίλοι, Κυθήρειαν ἐπικλείοντες  
 ἀμύνειν,  
 554 ἤδη νῦν Ἄργοιο παραιφασίησι  
 πίθεσθε."

(3.540-544) Thus he spake, and the gods in their goodwill gave them a sign. A trembling dove in her flight from a mighty hawk fell from on high, terrified, into the lap of Aeson's son, and the hawk fell impaled on the stern-ornament. And quickly Mopsus with prophetic words spake among them all:

(3.545-554) "For you, friends, this sign has been wrought by the will of heaven; in no other way is it possible to interpret its meaning better, than to seek out the maiden and entreat her with manifold skill. And I think she will not reject our prayer, if in truth Phineus said that our return should be with the help of the Cyprian Goddess. It was her gentle bird that escaped death; and as my heart within me foresees according to this omen, so may it prove! But, my friends, let us call on Cytherea to aid us, and now at once obey the counsels of Argus.

*Argonautica*

The above scene is present in the Greek epic called *Argonautica* which was written by Apollonius Rhodius in the third century B.C.; it is an epic related with sea journey. In this incident a soft bird (dove), frightened by a stronger bird (hawk), fell onto the lap of a human. It is an incident in the myth related to life in the sea. Thus, the above said myths related with Prometheus and the sea can be pictured according to their similar relationships in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Structure of the Myth - Prometheus

### The Myth of Sembian-Sibi

Tamil is one of the ancient classical languages of the world, having ancient literatures like that of the Greek language. The oldest available literature in Tamil is called the Sangam literature. Many historical events and myths are found in this literature. One among them is the myth of Sembian - Sibi. Sembian belonged to the Chozha dynasty. The Chozha kings had contact with Greeks and Romans in the west (Schoff 1917)<sup>1</sup> and China in the east (Schoff 1917,<sup>2</sup> Warmington 1928).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Tamil poem Paddinappalai gives us a vivid description of a busy port of the Chola Kingdom, Kaviripaddinam, which was built on the northern bank of the Kaviri River, then a broad and deep stream into which heavily laden ships entered from the sea without slackening sail. At the beach were raised platforms and warehouses where cargoes were stored. The goods were stamped with the royal tiger stamp after payment of customs duty and then released to the merchants. Close by were settlements of the Yavana merchants, which name included not only Ionians or Greeks, but Graeco-Bactrians and Parthians. Here were quartered foreign traders from other lands beyond the seas, and precious cargoes of many kinds were brought from all direction.

<sup>2</sup>The author of the Periplus mentions the three kingdoms of southern India: Chera, with its port of Muziris, the Muchiri of the Tamil ports; Pandya, the capital of which, Madura, Pliny reports as Modiera; and the coast country, that is, Chola, with its capital called Argaru, that is Urugapura, Uraiyitr, the modern Trichinopoly on the Kaviri, while the port of Kaviripaddinam he mentions as Camara, and says that there were in that port not only the large single-masted vessels peculiar to the Malabar coast, but others very much larger which made the voyage to Chryse and the Ganges.



In the poem number 37, Mārōkkathu Nappasalaiyār, Puranānūru, Sanga Ilakkiam (Tamil Virtual University 1995), Sembian is praised for his kindness shown towards a dove in safeguarding it from a hawk.

“O heir of *Sembean* who removed the anguish of a  
dove and owned a rage-filled army with bright spears!  
You attacked like roaring thunder which entered with  
flashing fire that rose in the sky, into a cave with  
green vines, and chopped a five-headed poisonous  
snake with white fangs.”

37, Mārōkkathu Nappasalaiyār,  
Puranānūru, Sanga Ilakkiam.

Here Sembian is also related with flashing fire. In Tamil, ‘Si’ and ‘Sem’ are interchangeable. For example, the word ‘Sivappu’ denotes red colour. When it denotes the red colour of the eye, it becomes ‘Semkan’. In the same way, ‘Sembian’ becomes ‘Sibi’. In Japanese language ‘bi’ becomes ‘vi’. So ‘Sibi’ becomes ‘Sivi’ in Japanese. This myth is mentioned in the epic *Mahabharat* in the form of a story.

#### *Mahabharat*

This is one of the oldest epics in India written by Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa in Sanskrit. It includes many myths and events. One among them is the myth of Sembian-Sibi-Sivi (Ganguli 1896).

“Markandeya said, 'One day it was resolved by the gods that they should descend on the earth and try the goodness and virtue of king Sivi the son of Usinara. And addressing each other well -Agni and Indra came to the earth. And Agni took the form of a pigeon flying away from Indra who pursued him in the form of a hawk, and that pigeon fell upon the lap of king Sivi who was seated on an excellent seat. And the priest thereupon addressing the king said, 'Afraid of the hawk and desirous of saving its life, this pigeon hath come to thee for safety. The learned have said that the falling of a pigeon upon one's body forebode a great danger. Let the king that

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He mentions Chryse as an island opposite the Ganges and under the rising sun and tells us that beyond Chryse the sea comes to an end, and that to the north was a land called ‘This’ with an inland city called Thinae (China) from which silk was brought overland through Bactria to the Gulf of Cambay and by way of the Ganges to the ports of Damirica, that is, Tamil Land, the Tamilakam of their ports (Peripl. Mar. Erythr. 63, 64).

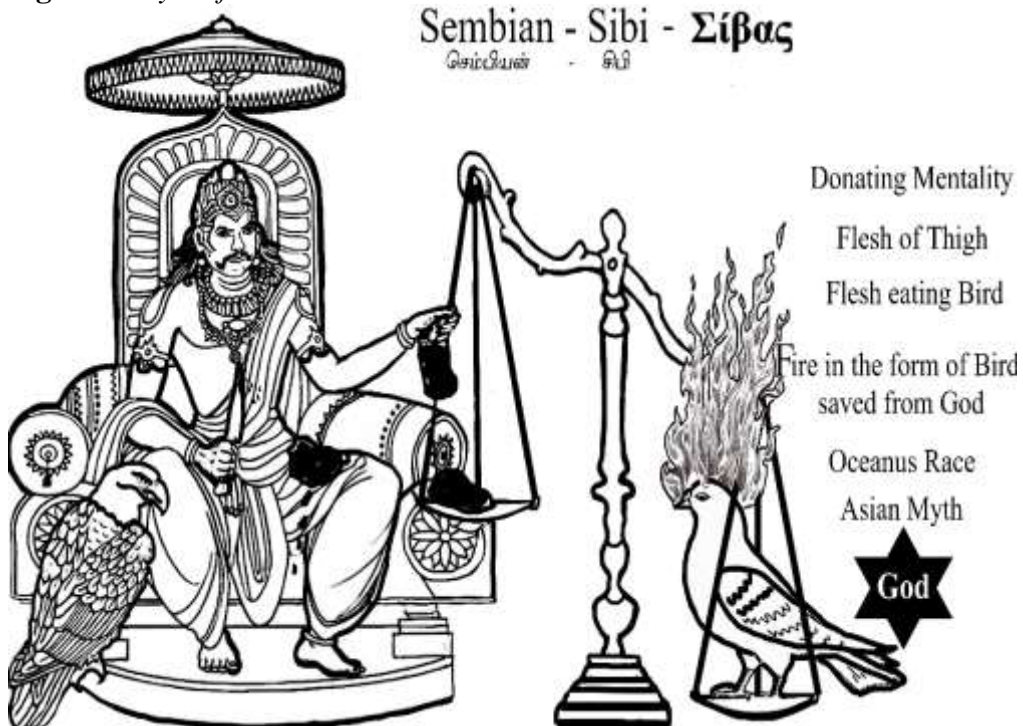
<sup>3</sup>Woven silk destined to be dyed for wear, and unwoven silk destined to be worked up in Egypt, Syria, and Galilee could be sent conveniently byway of the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea, and this cheaper route avoiding Parthia would be encouraged by the Romans..... silk sellers frequented Kaviripaddinam in the Chola Kingdom..... Rome, who encouraged such developments for the purpose of eliminating the Parthians and the expensive land-route, and we ultimately hear of Indian silks besides Chinese, Parthian, and Median robes. But the Indians became intermediaries in two ways-for though part of the silk sent by them to the Romans was diverted from the land-route for that purpose, part of it was the result of India's own trade in Chinese silk. A fort in Pakistan named Sembian - Sibi is a proof to the spread of his fame.

understands omens give away wealth for saving himself from the danger indicated.' And the pigeon also addressed the king and said, 'Afraid of the hawk and desirous of saving my life I have come to thee for protection. I am a Muni. Having assumed the form of a pigeon, I come to thee as a seeker of thy protection. Indeed, I seek thee as my life..... I am not a pigeon. Oh, do not yield me up to the hawk..... And after the pigeon said so, the hawk addressed the king, and said, ... It is not proper for thee, O king, to interfere with my food by protecting this pigeon ..... And at this appeal of the king, the hawk said, 'O king, if thou givest me as much flesh as would be equal to the weight of the pigeon, cutting it off thy right thigh; then can the pigeon be properly saved by thee; ... But the pigeon still weighed heavier, and then the king himself ascended the scale!'"

Section 196, Book 3  
The Mahabharata

In this myth a soft bird (pigeon), frightened by the strong bird (hawk), falls onto the lap of the human, Sibi. In this mythology the Agni denotes a fire God which comes in the form of a pigeon, and the God Indra is in the form of a hawk. It is mentioned here that the hawk which belong to the eagle's family hunts the pigeon which belong to dove's family. Indra is the King of all Gods and head of heaven like the God Zeus in the Greek myth. Sembian-Sivi hides or saves the fire (which is in the form of pigeon) from the King of all Gods (which is in the form of hawk). For that Sembian-Sivi gives his flesh from his thigh. The above thoughts are visualized in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Myth of Sembian**



In view of this enormous sacrificial mind of Sembian for the sake of a bird, he is portrayed as a noble soul and is accorded a special place in the Hindu religious beliefs.

## **Buddhism**

Buddhism (Beckwith 2015)<sup>4</sup> is the world's fourth-largest religion with over 520 million followers, about 7% of the global population are Buddhists. It originated in ancient India, sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE, spreading in throughout most of Asia. Later, China and Japan followed Buddhism. Many Buddhist monks from China travelled to India and collected books and ideas that are related to Buddhism. The Buddhist monk and traveler Fa-Hien was among them.

### *The Journey of Fa-Hien to India*

Between 399 and 414 CE, the Chinese Buddhist monk Fahien (Fa-Hsien, Fa Hien) undertook a trip to India via Central Asia. His mission was to collect books and teachings of Buddhism. After a long journey done mostly on foot and a stay of about 15 years, he returned to China to compile a book on his findings that he had gathered during his journey. We find that he was mentioned in the myth of Sembian or Sibi (Legge 1886).

“In that country also Buddhism is flourishing. There is in it the place where Sakra, Ruler of Devas, in a former age, tried the Bodhisattva, by producing a hawk (in pursuit of a) dove, when (the Bodhisattva) cut off a piece of his own flesh, and (with it) ransomed the dove. After Buddha had attained to perfect wisdom, and in travelling about with his disciples (arrived at this spot), he informed them that this was the place where he ransomed the dove with a piece of his own flesh. In this way the people of the country became aware of the fact, and on the spot reared a tope, adorned with layers of gold and silver plates.”

Chapter IX - Soo-ho-to  
The travels of FA-HIEN,  
A.D. 399-414

These statements reflect a connection between the myths of Sembian-Sibi and Buddhism. It is to be noted that based on this myth many stone carvings were made in the ancient Buddhist temples called Borobudur.

### *Borobudur Buddhist Temples*

Borobudur or Barabudur is a 9<sup>th</sup> century Mahayana Buddhist temple in Central Java, Indonesia. It is the world's largest Buddhist temple. The temple consists of

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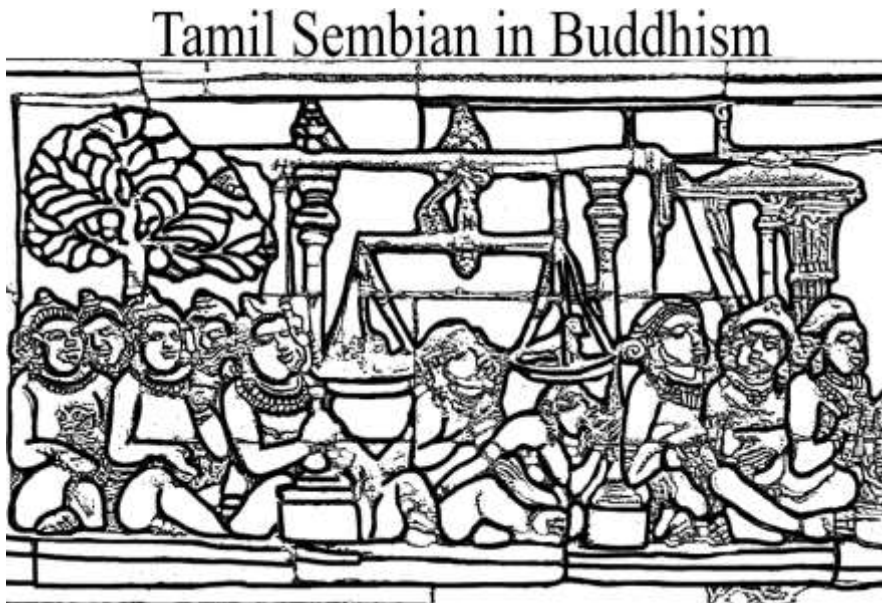
<sup>4</sup>Greek Buddha

nine stacked platforms, six square and three circular, topped by a central dome. It is decorated with 2,672 relief panels and 504 Buddha statues. The central dome is surrounded by 72 Buddha statues, each seated inside a perforated stupa (Raffles 1817). The location of the place and the stone carvings of Sembian-Sibi are visualized in Figures 4-5.

**Figure 4.** *Borobudur*



**Figure 5.** *Stone Carvings of Sembian*



On the right side, one can see Buddha sitting with his followers. On the left side we see some people sitting with a balance (Raffles 1817). The next picture illustrates the scene very clearly—here, in one of the pans of the balance, a pigeon is placed. On the other pan a piece of flesh is taken from the thigh of the king is placed, this scene is visualized in Figure 6.

**Figure 6.** *Myth of Sembian*



In this picture, it can be seen that a man is cutting out a portion of the flesh of the king from his thigh. The pigeon is postured near the King. A person is seen holding a balance, pieces of flesh are seen to be placed on one of the pans of the balance. The myths of Sembian-Sibi are seen carved into the Buddhist temples. On the myth of Sembian-Sibi are found represented not only in the form of stone carvings, but also found to be represented in the form of paintings, which can be seen in the ancient Buddhist temples called Caves of the Thousand Buddhas.

#### *Caves of Thousand Buddhas*

The Mogao Caves, also known as the Thousand Buddha Grottoes or Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, form a system of 492 temples 25 km (16 mi) south-east of the center of Dunhuang, an oasis located at a religious and cultural crossroads on the Silk Road in Gansu province, China. The caves are also known as the Dunhuang Caves. The first caves were dug out in 366 CE as places of Buddhist meditation and worship. In these caves there are many paintings related with the Buddhas. Those of whom who followed the teachings of Buddhism found a place in the paintings. In this light Sembian-Sibi is a person with the great quality of nobleness and has also secured a place among the Thousand Buddhas. It is visualized in Figure 7.

**Figure 7.** Cave Drawings - Sembian

In this Buddhist temple many carvings and paintings were made. On the side of the big statue a painting related with Sembian-Sibi myths can be seen. The following Figure 8 shows it very clearly.

**Figure 8.** Sembian

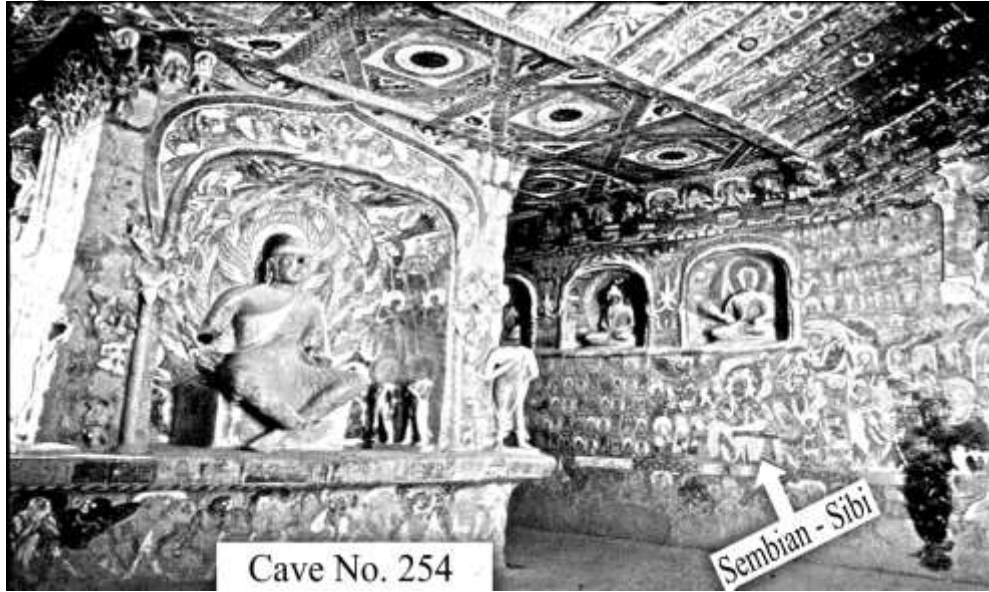


Several paintings related with the myths were shown. In this Sembian-Sibi myth was highlighted here in Figure 9.

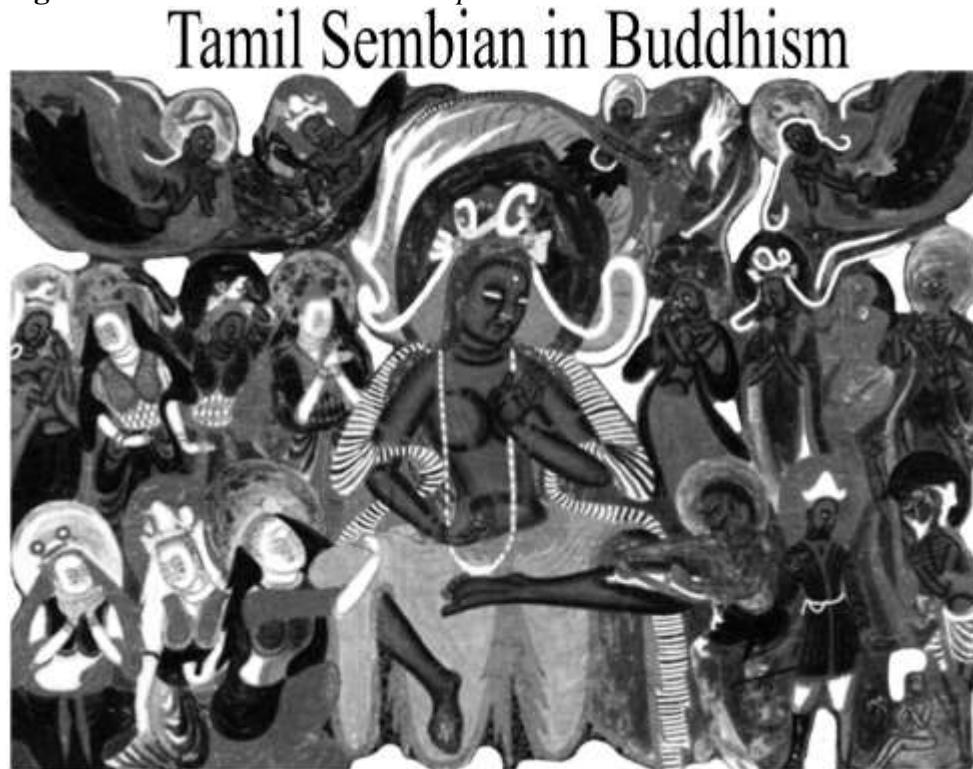
**Figure 9.** *Sembian*



Here the person is cutting the thigh part of the Sembian-Sibi. In the other caves there are also many paintings related with this myth. One among the caves is cave no. 254 (Abe 1989). The above thoughts are visualized in Figure 10.

**Figure 10.** *Sembian*

In this picture near the Buddhist statue many paintings are seen; one among them is related with the myth of Sembian-Sibi as visualized in Figure 11.

**Figure 11.** *Sembian with Black Complexion*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Black is the complexion of the Tamilians.



Here a man is seen cutting the thigh of the Sembian-Sibi to extract the flesh. These caves of the Thousand Buddhas are located along the Silk Road in Dunhuang, China. The Silk Road was a network of trade routes which connected the East and West, and was central to the economic, cultural, political, and religious interactions between these regions from the 2nd century BCE. This silk route starts from Greece and ends in China (Hohensee 1989) as portrayed in Figure 12.

**Figure 12.** *Silk Route and Sea Route*



Thus the myth of Sembian-Sibi related with fire and flesh eating bird are seen in the literatures of Tamil and Sanskrit and has also found a way in the religious thoughts of these two religions. At the same time, this myth has many similarities with the myth of Prometheus.

## Comparison

### *Readiness in Giving*

Sembian-Sibi in Tamil literature is noted for his noble qualities. He has a readiness to give away everything and anything to persons who are in need. In the myth of Sembian-Sibi, the God himself wants to test Sibi's noble qualities and his readiness to give. We find a parallel of the same feature in the myth of Prometheus as well.

*Sacrificial Thigh Bone*

In the myth of Sembian-Sibi the thigh bone plays a very important role. Sibi cuts his thigh to extract flesh in order to save the pigeon. In the myth of Prometheus, he deceives God Zeus with a thigh bone for protecting mankind. The thigh bone in Prometheus is turned into the thigh-flesh in the Sibi myth.

*Related with Fire*

In the myth of Sembian-Sibi the god of fire called Agni takes the form of a pigeon and seeks refuge in the hands of the King Sibi and begs him to be saved from the pursuit of the wild hawk. Here Sembian saves the pigeon which is indeed the fire God. In the Prometheus myth Prometheus steals the fire. In this way fire is linked in both the myths.

*God's Bodily Treatment*

In the myth of Sembian-Sibi, Indra, the chief of the Devas asks for a portion of the flesh to be extracted from the thigh of King Sibi as a ransom for the life of the pigeon. It is mentioned as a means to test the nobleness of the king Sibi by Indra. In the myth of Prometheus, the chief of the Gods, Zeus, ties the body of Prometheus and gives bodily punishments. In both the myths the king of the Gods tests them in the same manner that is through physical punishments.

*Body Flesh Eaten by Eagle*

In the myth of Sembian-Sibi, the eagle which is actually Indra, the king of the Gods, demands the thigh flesh of Sibi. Here, the eagle represents the king of Gods. In the myth of Prometheus, the flesh of Prometheus is eaten by the eagle which is the symbolic bird to represent the king of the Gods, Zeus. Both the myths have the presence of the king of Gods—their representative bird (the eagle), and the incident of eagle eating the human body flesh. The variation is in the myth of Prometheus the liver was eaten by the bird, whereas in the Sembian myth thigh flesh was demanded by the bird. In both the myths the bird demands flesh of the human body for the fire. Thus, both the myths have resemblance.

*Oceanus Race*

In Sanskrit Rig Veda (Griffith 1896) and Mahabharata epic, Sembian-Sibi is represented as belonging to Nara race. Their family members are called by names, Usi Nara and Sibi Nara.

Drive forward thou the wagon-ox, O Indra, which brought Usinarani's wagon hither.  
May Heaven and Earth uproot and sweep iniquity and shame away: nor sin nor sorrow trouble thee.

Rig 10.59.10

The Mahabharata epic explains the meaning of Nara (Ganguli 1896).

“In ancient times I called the waters by the name of Nara; and because the waters have ever been my ayana or home, therefore have I been called Narayana (the water-homed).”

3 & 4, Chapter 187, Book 3,  
The Mahabharata

In Tamil literature Sembian is related with Neer, that means any water body or sea. This ‘Nara, Neer were also related with sea in Greek myths (Mooney 1912).

“But to them appeared Glaucus from the depths of the sea, the wise interpreter of divine Nereus [Νηρηϊός],”

Line. 1311. Book 1,  
Argonautica

Thus the race Nara is related with sea and the Greek Prometheus is also related with sea. In this way, both the myths are related with sea. The base of the Sembian myth is to safe guard a soft bird (pigeon or dove) frightened by the strong bird (hawk) which fell on the lap of the King Sibi. Even though it is not present in the Prometheus myth, but in the sea myth of the Greeks. In Greek it is related with the augury of the bird. The bird related with augury is called as ‘ὄρνις’ in Greek. In Tamil the augury of the bird itself is called ‘Orthal’ which is the same as in the Greek language (Pugazhendhi 2018).

aNagkuTai mun'n'Ir paran'ta ceRuv  
uNagku tiRam peyarn'ta veN kal amiztam  
kuTa pula marugkin uyimmAr, puL **Orttup**  
paTai amaittu ezun'ta peruj cey ATavar

Men of great action listen to **bird omens**,  
and go  
with protective groups, .....

Akanānūru 207, Mathurai Eluthālan  
Chēnthampoothanār, Sanga Ilakkiam  
(Tamil Virtual University 1995)

It ensures the transfer of this myth between Greek and Tamil. Thus the Greek myth of Prometheus and the Tamil myth of Sembian are very closely related. All the above said aspects are compared in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Comparison of Myths*

S/No	Myths	Prometheus	Sembean or Sibi or Sivi or Sibae
1.	Donating mentality	Punished by God	Tested by God
2.	Fire	Steal the Fire	Hide the Fire God as in the form of pigeon
3.	Flesh eating bird	Eagle eat the liver for the theft of fire	Hawk demanded the flesh for the fire God
4.	Thigh	Cheating thigh-bones for the part of Zeus	Thigh flesh was demanded
5.	Race	Belongs to the oceanus race	Belongs to the oceanus race In some myth he belongs to nara (Sibinara, Usinara) family. Nara means water or sea as in Nereus in Greek.
6.	God	Titan God	God Buddha

*Difference*

In the Greek myth, Prometheus steals the fire from Zeus; in the Indian myth, the fire God Agni is saved by Sembian from the eagle. This is the main difference between these two myths. Hence, there is a need to find the uniqueness in this difference.

*Uniqueness in the Difference*

In the **Greek myth**, Zeus God is related with eagle.

So the sentence ....

1. Prometheus stole the fire from the **Zeus God** = Prometheus stole the fire from the **eagle God**.
2. Prometheus **stole** the fire from the eagle God = Prometheus **taken** the fire from the eagle God.
3. Finally it means **Prometheus taken the fire from the eagle God**.

In the **Indian myth** Sembian saved the pigeon from the hawk (eagle family) means ...

1. Sembian save the pigeon from the **eagle** = Sembian save the pigeon from the **eagle God**. [Since the God is only in the form of eagle] [And the same God is also the king of Gods, like Zeus]
2. Sembian saves the **pigeon** from the eagle God = Sembian save the **fire God** [Because the fire god is only in the form of pigeon in Indian myth.] from the eagle God.
3. Sembian **save** the fire from the eagle God = Sembian **take** the fire from the eagle God.
3. Finally it means **Sembian take the fire from the eagle God**.

In this way, the Greek Prometheus stole the fire from the Zeus God, and in the Tamil myth, Sembian saved the pigeon from the eagle are both one and the same.

Here it is required to finalize whether the similarities seen between these two myths are occasionally parallels or influenced by one another.

### *Influence between Tamil and Greek Myths*

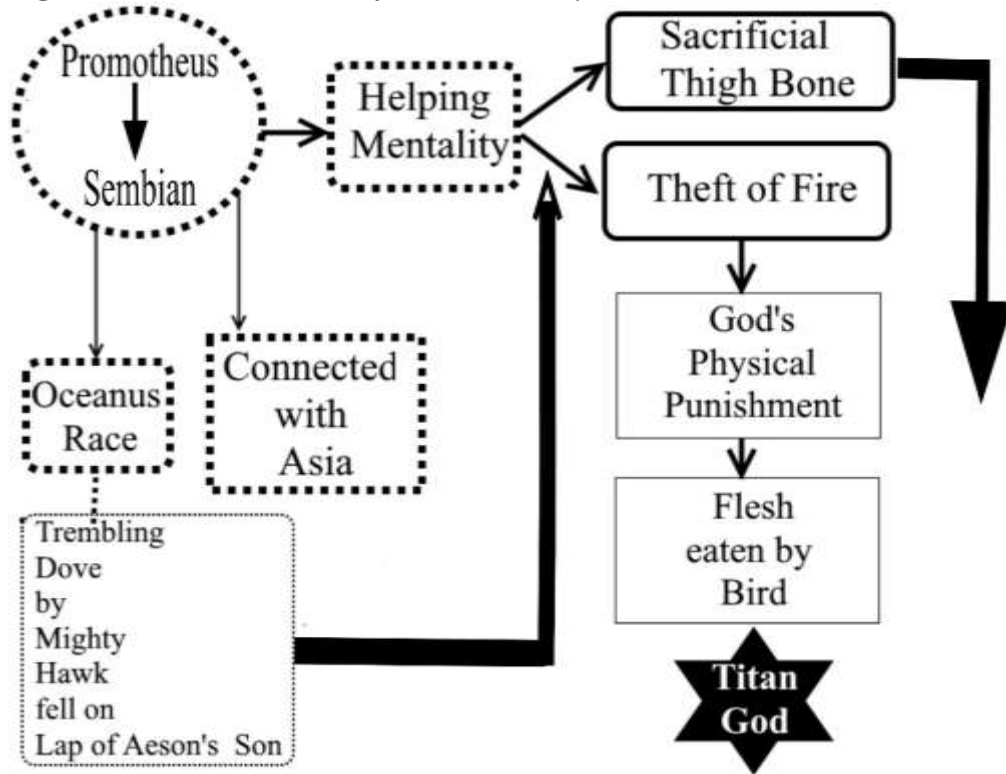
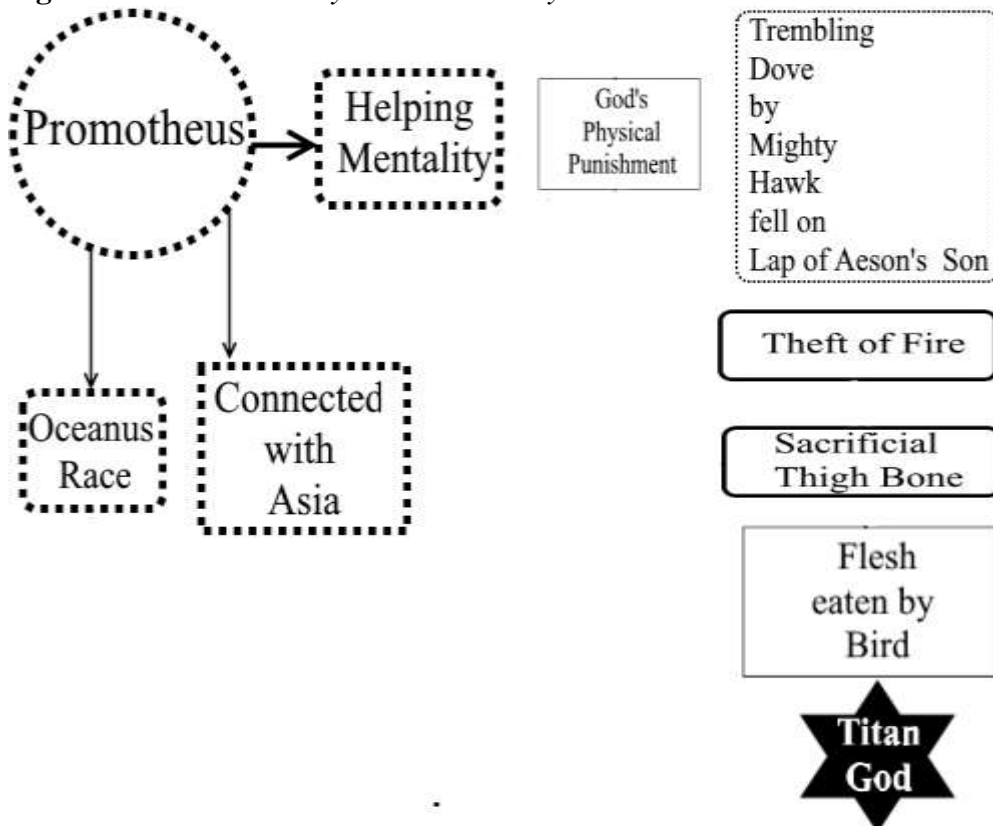
Greeks and Tamilians had trade relations from the pre-historic era (Pugazhendhi 2020). Owing to these trade relations, some myths were transformed within these societies (Pugazhendhi 2021). So the similarities seen between Sembian and Prometheus are not only occasionally parallels, but might be influenced by one another. In Greek Sembian-Sibi-Sivi is mentioned as Sibae. The Greek Geographer, Strabo, gives his views saying that some ancient people who lived during 1 BCE were related to both Greek Prometheus and Tamil Sibae (Jones 1924).

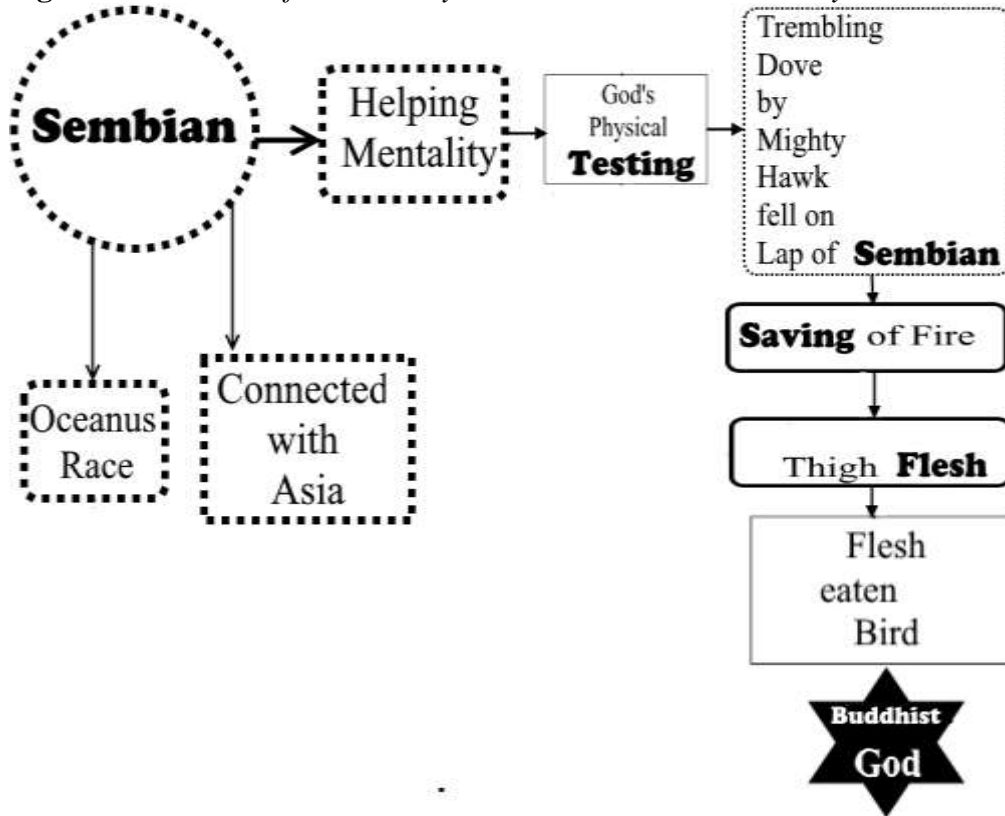
Ἄορνον δέ τινα πέτραν, ἧς τὰς ῥίζας ὁ Ἰνδὸς ὑπορρεῖ πλησίον τῶν πηγῶν, Ἀλεξάνδρου κατὰ μίαν προσβολὴν ἐλόντος, σεμνύνοντες ἔφασαν τὸν Ἡρακλέα τρίς μὲν προσβαλεῖν τῇ πέτρᾳ ταύτῃ τρίς δ' ἀποκρουσθῆναι. τῶν δὲ κοινωνησάντων αὐτῷ τῆς στρατείας ἀπογόνους εἶναι τοὺς Σίβας, σύμβολα τοῦ γένους σώζοντας τό τε δορὰς ἀμπεχεσθαι, καθάπερ τὸν Ἡρακλέα, καὶ τὸ σκυταληφορεῖν καὶ ἐπικεκαῦσθαι βουσί καὶ ἡμιόνοις ῥόπαλον. βεβαιοῦνται δὲ τὸν μῦθον τοῦτον καὶ ἐκ τῶν περὶ τὸν Καύκασον καὶ τὸν Προμηθεά:

When Alexander, at one assault, took Aornus, a rock at the foot of which, near its sources, the Indus River flows, his exalters said that Heracles thrice attacked this rock and thrice was repulsed; and that the Sibae were descendants of those who shared with Heracles in the expedition, and that they retained badges of their descent, in that they wore skins like Heracles, carried clubs, and branded their cattle and mules with the mark of a club. And they further confirm this myth by the stories of the Caucasus and Prometheus,

15.8, Greek Geography,  
Strabo, 1 B.C.

This reference related with the three characters such as the Heracles, Prometheus and Sibae lived in India. It is mentioned that the Sibae embraced the costume of the Heracles. The connection between Prometheus and Sibae is not mentioned in this Greek reference. The Tamil myth highlights the link between Prometheus and Sibae and relates with fire and a flesh-eating bird. The myth related with the terrifying pigeon by the hawk which fell upon the lap of king Sembian has a main place in this myth which is not directly related with the myth of Prometheus, but is present in the sea related myth. Thus the myth related with Sembian seems to be a trans-placement myth of Prometheus as in Figure 13 and Figure 14 and are formed as Sembian myths as in Figure 15.

**Figure 13.** *Trans Placement of Prometheus Myths***Figure 14.** *Prometheus Myth to Sembian Myth*

**Figure 15.** Structure of Sembian Myth Related with Prometheus Myth

### Conclusion

According to the mythological theory, the resemblance of myths seen in two different societies can be looked upon as parallels and influences. The resemblance is owed to the contact of these societies which had influence on one another. There are some resemblances seen between the myths of Prometheus and Sembian-Sibi. Among these resemblances are some seen to have direct relation with them, while others are related through the sea myths which are common to both. In Greek, Prometheus claims to belong to the oceanic race. In Sanskrit Sembian-Sibi-Sivi is mentioned as belonging to 'nara' tradition meaning water. In Tamil, Sembia-Sibi is a historical king belonging to Chozha or Chola dynasty. This dynasty had sea trade contact with Greeks and Romans in the west, China in the east and Ganges in the north of India from the pre-historic era. Some paintings in China clearly depict the black complexion of Sembian-Sibi which is the skin tone of the Chozha or Chola kings of Tamil Nadu. The sea trade among these countries transforms these myths amidst the Greek land, Tamil Nadu and China more than it could have been through land trade route called the Silk Road. So the resemblances seen between these two myths are not only parallels, but are influences.

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