

The Feast of Akma

And there were amongst them, those skilled in the art of roadmaking: the Asphaltites, and the men of Bitmak and Tarmak.

2. And it came to pass that these spake one with the other, saying, Behold, unto each of us hath been given the knowledge of roadmaking.

3. This gift, which our forebears did bequeath unto us, and which we in our time have endowed with much patient and arduous toil, often without great reward, doth place on us the task of lightening the task of travel by our fellow men.

4. Yea, even as the strong horse giveth speed unto the chariot, so do we make even the path of the chariot and give unto the horse a sure and safe foothold that he stumble not upon his journey.

5. Now is the time come when we should make a covenant with each other that the work we do should benefit from our threefold wisdom and from the many implements that we can bring together.

6. But it was known that amongst them were some who held the preference for this way or that way of roadmaking; some were imbued with the spirit of the Asphaltites, and others of the manner of Bitmak or of Tarmak.

7. And in the past they had oft vied one with the other according to their inclinations.

8. Then the wise men among them spake thus: Brethren, ye are all good roadmakers whether ye be Asphaltites or of Bitmak or Tarmak, moreover many of you have dwelt in all these places.

9. So that the great task of roadmaking shall be unhindered by different counsel amongst you, let us appoint one whose wisdom shall encompass us all.

10. That he may be our guide in aiding our fellow men to go with greater comfort upon their journeys, whether their travel be upon this or that or the other of our several enterprises.

11. And it came to pass that they did appoint the great and wise Akma to be their leader. And he gathered about him the noblest and wisest from the three tribes that they might give him counsel.

12. And under the rule of Akma there was much joy in the hearts of they who journeyed upon the highways and much more comfort in their seats

because the way was made even for their chariot wheels and safe for their horses.

13. But the time came when they that had to journey upon the roads which had not been made by Akma were sad at heart and sore in body; they did lament loudly in the public places and did write some foul words upon walls and they did complain unto Akma.

14. But he rebuked them saying: Know ye not that even the sons of Akma cannot make roads without money.

15. Even though we work without much profit, it needs many pieces of silver for the materials thereof and the gods have so little money to provide for us.

16. Then did the travellers cry out and rent their clothes saying: How sayest thou that there is lack of money? Are we not all taxed upon our chariots and upon the food for our horses, yea, even upon the hire of chariot drivers?

17. Surely this tribute should furnish enough for all the roads, even were they paved with gold, and this we do not ask.

18. But we are sick unto death of the badness of many roads and the scourge of travelling upon them.

19. Of the chaos in busy places and the hindrance in the narrow places.

20. What doth it profit a man that he hath a chariot but is so delayed that it were better for him to go upon his own two feet?

21. Is there no shame amongst our rulers when they see the stranglehold upon our commerce?

22. And are we to be made a mockery of before our enemies?

23. Then did Akma hold council with the wisest of his followers and did ask of them: What may we do that the just desires of these travellers be fulfilled and their sufferings lessened?

24. And one of the followers answered: O great and mighty Akma, why do we not make supplication unto the gods that they shall bestow upon us a little more of the money that they have taken from the chariot owners that we may thereby be enabled to make roads more worthy of our great country?

25. And Akma said: Verily we should take pity upon these people and seek some lightening of

their distress, but the gods are unlikely to incline their ears to our supplication. For we know that they use this money for purposes that they think will more readily bring unto them the favour of the multitude.

26. Then spake Itma, the son of Akma, he who was also known as Art, for he had learnt wisdom at the oracle of Brix.

27. My father, why dost thou not make thy supplication unto Barbaracas, the goddess of transport, for surely she will have pity upon those having need of better roads.

28. And Akma answered him saying, Thou speakest wisely, O my son, but forget not the difficulty of entry into the presence of Barbaracas, who dwelleth in the sanctuary beneath the great tower of Bigben.

29. There she is guarded by a whole host of office-bearers whose voices are as brass cymbals and whose faces strike terror in the hearts of all men. For their throats are encircled with fire, even with necklets of scarlet.

30. Shall we risk our livelihood, even those few possessions that are ours, by an assault upon these barbarians?

31. Or shall we waste the years of our manhood by endless epistles that will not penetrate beyond the outer rings of scribes and quidless churls?

32. Then did Itma say: Let us not be daunted by the labyrinth of Bumph, nor by the braying of the brass.

33. Let us act with circumspection and with some guile. Thou knowest that the beauteous Barbaracas is well disposed to appearing in public places and to discourse before the assembly.

34. Let us, therefore, proclaim a great feast and invite Barbaracas to attend that she may eat and drink with us.

35. Then, when we have feasted, shalt thou pour thy supplication into her ear, and she will heed thy words and give answer unto our prayers.

36. And it came to pass that Akma proclaimed a great feast at the temple of Dorchest.

37. And there were gathered together many of the roadmakers and those that had authority upon the roads along with the scribes and soothsayers and those who were prone to attend at feasts.

38. And Barbaracas did favour them with her presence and did sit on the right hand of Akma and made merry. And they did eat mightily of the bounteous meats which Akma had provided and drank deeply of his wine, even unto the vast number of goatskins thereof.

39. And when they had feasted, Akma stood upon his feet, albeit with some trembling and some unsteadiness, and did speak the words that he had inscribed upon the tablet concealed beneath his garment.

40. O, most wise, beautiful and virtuous Barbaracas, we who are unworthy to touch the hem of thy garment, do offer thee our humble thanks for thy great kindness in coming amongst us and breaking bread with us. This is for us an omen that thou dost not distain our modest services. We hope that in the days to come thou wilt distain them even less.

41. Thus Akma spake, and with his words of praise did also include a plea that Barbaracas should give more freely of the gold of the treasury for the comfort of weary road travellers.

42. Then did the gracious Barbaracas give answer to Akma and thanked him for his greetings and sustenance. With honeyed words did she thank him for these things and spake of the great joy that her beloved roadmakers were now unified under his wise tutelage.

43. And she told them of all the care she had bestowed upon the welfare of all wayfarers, how she had curbed their speed that their chariots should come to no harm and had restrained them from leaving chariots unattended by the way lest they were an obstruction to others. With these and many other laws had she strived to bring them comfort.

44. And she did remind them that the gods had many burdens upon their purse: to minister to the infirm, the sick and the aged; the destitute and those whose children were many; to build temples of learning for the young and houses for those in the wilderness.

45. And although she would fain build many more roads, she was mindful that there was not money for all these things.

46. But the gods had given two handfuls of shekels to the roadmakers whereas heretofore there had

only been one and that maybe before another year had passed, there might be two handfuls and half a handful more.

47. And they that listened clapped their hands with glee for they thought their deliverance was nigh. But the elders amongst them clapped only feebly because they were full of doubt.

48. For they had heard such words before and found them oftentimes unfulfilled.

49. Then did Barbarcas end her discourse with words upon a manner new in which she would lessen the hazard of wayfarers.

50. There were amongst those who drove their chariots some who were tempted to look upon the wine when it was red and thereafter to proceed upon their way without due care and attention.

51. And upon these, the gods looked with disfavour and had decreed that they should be corrected. And the manner in which they should be taken in their sin was by means of a magic crystal.

52. And Barbarcas displayed such a magic crystal before the assembly and bade Akma to breathe upon it.

53. And Akma die breathe heavily upon the crystal and thereupon it was of a green colour, yes, even as the grass of the field.

54. Then did Barbarcas say unto Akma that this was a sign that he had drunk too deeply of the wine and that he should not drive his chariot while he was thus afflicted.

55. For if he did, the wrath of the gods would be visited upon his head and his chariot would be taken from him.

56. And Barbarcas departed from the feast to her sanctuary under Bigben.

57. But the assembly tarried in their seats, being sore afraid lest the minions of Barbarcas should ask them also to breathe upon a crystal.

58. And whilst they tarried, they drank no more wine, but debated among themselves what answer they would give to those on whose behalf Akma had pleaded unto Barbarcas.

59. And there was much doubt in their minds as to whether they could give comfort unto them because crystals were of little value for the making of roads.

60. And although they sorrowed over this, they were all glad that Akma had persuaded Barbarcas to feast with them for it might have softened her heart a little to have been of their company and it was unlikely to have done them any harm.

61. And they were of one mind that it had been a feast of great excellence. So they thanked Akma for his wisdom and kindness of heart and hoped that he would continue with his good work.

This text was originally published in the UK's Institute of Asphalt Technology's monthly Bulletin, in 1966 when Barbara Castle was Minister of Transport.

The Brixton College for Further Education was a center for art and technical education. In 1992 it was amalgamated with two other similar colleges to form South Bank Colleges in the Borough of Lambeth, London, UK.

The Dorchester is a famous London hotel at which banquets are often held.

This bit of amusing nonsense was sent to me in Dubai in 1966 by a fellow civil engineer as a fax that was printed out on thermofax paper which, over time, fades to become barely-discernable. I found it recently and typed it out before it disappeared completely.

Michael Hamilton-Clark
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