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The pre-Christian religions of the northern Indo-Europeans : the traditions of the Celts, Germanics and Balts in a critical perspective of the humanities : summary

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SUMMARY

The Pre-Christian Religions of the Northern Indo-Europeans

The Traditions of the Celts, Germanics and Balts
in a Critical Perspective of the Humanities

1 Prologue

The presented study aims to offer critical insights into problems of research in pre-Christian religions of the northern Indo-Europeans – namely the traditions of Celtic, Germanic, and Baltic peoples. The adjective “northern” in association with these ethnic groups has no linguistic connotations, as their languages do not belong to a common genealogical subgroup within Indo-European languages. The reasons for their common classification here are connected mainly with geography, since Celtic, Germanic and Baltic peoples represent the northernmost Indo-European groups, and also with cultural history, which is closely related to the former factor.

The ethnogenesis of these groups took place in the area north of the Alps and Carpathians – within an area that has been in the antique literatures of Greek and Italian provenience traditionally called *barbarikon/barbaricum*. In a certain sense, this pejorative term mirrors the cultural conservatism of the northern Indo-Europeans, since during the 1st millennium BCE, their cultures apparently did not transform so turbulently or substantially as did the cultures of their southern relatives in the Mediterranean area due to the influences of urban civilizations, whose representatives belonged mainly to Afro-Asiatic groups (especially Semitic), or to the ethnic substrates of the northern Mediterranean

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(e.g. Hurrians, Hattians, Minoans, Etruscans and Iberians), which were later indoeuropeanized.

As becomes apparent from historical documents, as well as linguistic and archeological analyses, similarly complex processes took place even beyond the Alps and Carpathians. The autochthonous non-Indo-European substrates or adstrates – of which only Basques, Sami, and Balto-Finns have, linguistically speaking, survived – played undoubtedly an important role in the cultural genesis of the northern Indo-Europeans. However, the documentation and reconstruction of these processes, as well as of the “living” religious cultures of all these ethnic groups before Christianization, face notably larger difficulties, mainly for the reason that there is a relative lack of reliable sources of information about the cultural reality in the northern half of Europe, as well as that these sources usually concern only particular locality or region.

From the end of the Ancient period, old-European polytheisms started to be rejected due to the successful spread of Christianity, coming from Semitic cultural epicenters. The conversion began first within the Roman Empire, and later, during the Medieval period, also gradually in the area beyond its former northern border. Due to centuries-long literary traditions, as well as substantially richer iconographies, the religions of the Mediterranean Indo-Europeans (or, more precisely, Greeks and Romans) are nowadays more-readily reconstructable than the traditions of their relatives in the northern half of Europe, which were disrupted by the process of Christianization without being comprehensively documented by written sources, and also without leaving material remains of unambiguous informational value. Fragmentarily preserved archaeological material, the superficiality of Ancient and Medieval ethnographic descriptions, ideologically improved mythologies, and reduced ritual customs under the censorship of Christian ideology – these circumstances in particular have always made research into the old religions of the northern Indo-Europeans extraordinarily problematic.

The most intensive periods of the academic study of these religions are tightly connected – not accidentally – with the growth of European nationalisms between the 18th and 20th centuries. On the one hand, there evolved an intensive heuristics of literary, archaeological and ethnographic sources, but on the other hand there also appeared notably tendentious interpretations of the gathered material. The reconstructed images of these cultures changed in time not only due to the influence of various academic disciplines (e.g. philology, anthropology, sociology, psychology), but also thanks to the contemporary socio-cultural trends, ideologies and paradigms (e.g. evolutionism, romanticism, Marxism, xenophobic nationalism, pacifistic internationalism, feminism, and ecological and countercultural movements). The academic sphere has never been very resistant to such mentioned trends.

From the late 1980s, under the influence of deconstructivistic criticism, there took place notably stronger reflection on the methodological problems associated even with the study of Indo-European polytheisms. In practice, this led mainly to more intensive research into the character of the information sources, especially in the context of their ideological or cultural-historical background. It also forced scholars to concentrate not only on those aspects of these ancient religions that we *know* due to the preserved factography, but also on the aspects which we *do not know* – and openly to admit the lack of knowledge without attempting to fill information gaps with the help of intuitive or fantastic “reconstructions”. However, the described turn from “phenomenological” to “critical” hermeneutics has not been acquired by specialists in this field generally. Due to the persistence of ideological (or other) misinterpretational tendencies, this study aims systematically to review scientific knowledge in this field of study. It seeks to follow actual critical discourse, which is based on three crucial dimensions of scientific “objectivity”: empirical evidence, logical coherence, and verifiability.

The particular thematic chapters reflect the results of the main branches of the humanities participating in the research of pre-Christian religions of the northern Indo-Europeans: archaeology, philology, and ethnology. Each chapter introduces into a brief history of research in the selected north-Indo-European tradition, summarizes existing results with respect to its reconstruction, and presents the interpretational possibilities and limits in dealing with fundamental problems in the particular field. The selection of the concrete “ethnic tradition”, which serves as an object of analysis from the perspective of the particular scientific discipline, is based on the “exclusivity” of preserved material: either its quantity, or quality, or both of them. Attention in the particular chapters is thus dedicated to 1) the problems of studying Pagan Celtic religions on the basis of preserved archaeological material, 2) the analysis of old Germanic mythologies on the basis of literary documents of various proveniences, genres, datation, or circumstances of creation, 3) the possibilities and limitations connected with the use of the modern folklore of Baltic countries as a source for the reconstruction of the pre-Christian traditions of the Balts.

2 How to “read” the material remains of vanished cultures: Pagan Celtic religions from an archaeological perspective

Various aspects of cultures of particular Celtic groups have been subjects of intensive study both inside and outside Europe for almost a quarter of a millennium. During the last century it was notable how the image of ancient Celts changed slightly in academic publications: from members of an “heroic society”, spreading its culture through military expansion, into “mobile tradesmen” integrating

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Europe by means of their language and culture through both their organizational and technological skills, as well as their prestigious artistic styles. There is more or less a consensus among linguists that Celtic languages were spoken in Bronze Age Europe – although questions as to whether the focus of their geographical genesis was in the Atlantic or Alpine region, or whether these languages were already connected with Neolithic peoples or with groups from substantially later periods are still unresolved.

We have some knowledge of pre-Christian Celtic cultures from the literatures of the ancient and medieval periods. They represent the primary sources for academic research, yet both types contain various qualitative problems. Without them, however, we would, only with considerable difficulty, be able to detect anything particular about the Celtic religions (especially rituals and mythologies), as such things refer to a “living” culture and cannot be divined from pure archaeological material. On the other hand, archeological findings surely provide an important tool for the completion, confirmation, and sometimes also falsification of information about the Celts from the abovementioned (generally rather insufficient) literary sources. Archeological artefacts also show well both the changes in cultures over time and the once existing cultural particularism within a single language area.

Religious ideas, however, are usually expressed within a material culture just in the form of a “symbolic index”, and (unfortunately for us) not as a “text” that would be possible to “read”, especially when there is the absence of autochthonous literary or narrative explanations. Thus, within the archeological horizons in the areas inhabited by ancient Celts we find, for example, figural statues, but there is virtually no way of simply confirming who they depict. Even though we know some names and the visual appearance of deities from Celtic-Roman temples and altars, we know virtually nothing about the relations between them, or about their individual mythological associations. Among archeological findings there are many great exemplars of La Tène style artefacts, depicting some “surrealistic” metamorphoses which might probably have once had an association with the contemporary religious philosophy. However, because of the absence of an appropriate interpretative key for Celtic art, there is also an absence of the possibility to associate the art more directly with the Celtic pantheon or mythology. Furthermore, there is exactly no (direct) proof that there has ever been any connection between art-style and religion. We also often find various “hoards” in pits in the ground or in lakes and rivers – however, without any knowledge about their ideological context (if there ever was one). In other words, it is usually a matter of debate whether such a hoard was a religious sacrifice or not, and if so, to which deity it was dedicated and what the motivation for the gift was. Furthermore, every specialist (as well as every enthusiastic amateur) in the field seeks to localize the Pagan Celtic sacred “groves” and “fields” described by

ancient sources. However, with a nearly complete absence of stone architecture and a probably lower level of terrain improvements in the sacred sites of Celtic areas, archeology can exactly detect – at best – only some traces of architectural objects or enclosed areas without higher certainty that such places were really used for sacral activities. Among the most interesting issues arising from ancient literary sources are those associated with the Celtic druids. Archeologically, however, it is extraordinarily difficult to identify without doubt any grave, statue, or artefact as being “druidic”.

The above-mentioned problems can potentially be solved with the help of cultural analogies between the Celts and their close ethnic relatives (i.e. ancient Germans, Scythians, and others). However, also in other North-Alpine areas outside the Celtica, we face a similar situation (and it is worth adding that in the South-Alpine areas the situation is only a little better). For these reasons, our knowledge about the religious cultures of the ancient Celts remains rather vague – and, therefore, any reconstructions of such cultures will be rather general in nature.

3 How to perceive myth and myth-making: old Germanic mythological narratives, their ideologies and variations

Since the beginning of the systematic study of Indo-European religious traditions, the literary sources of Germanic mythology have been some of the most important – as well as the most intensively studied – reservoirs of information. Their exclusivity has always been based on the relative richness of their historical documents, and especially the relative completeness of their preserved mythological themes, whose archaicity has been demonstrated by comparative religious studies. In particular, myths that describe pre-Christian Germanic cosmology, cosmogony, theogony, anthropogony, and eschatology – virtually unknown from other Indo-European regions northwards from the Alps due to the absence of documents of this kind – have an extraordinary value for academic research.

However, virtually all important sources of Pagan Germanic mythologies are concentrated in Iceland, i.e. an isolated margin of the Germanic-speaking area, not only in regard to geography, but also to the progress of civilization. Only in the mythological collections from Iceland, namely *Poetic Edda* and Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, are there preserved, for example, tales about Pagan deities which appear only rarely in literatures from other Germanic areas and usually in genres of a primarily non-mythological character.

Besides Iceland, other important mythological materials come from Scandinavia and England. However, the only body of work comparable to the Eddic literature is the initial books of Saxo Grammaticus’s chronicle *Gesta Danorum*, in which the author complements the prehistory of Denmark with mythological mo-

tives, though in notably reinterpreted versions. The Old English poem *Beowulf* represents primarily the genre of the heroic tale, which preserves ethnographically valuable attestations of Pagan rituals or customs, despite an explicit Christian perspective on the part of the storyteller. Considering the relatively peaceful historical process of Christianization in Anglo-Saxon Britain, respectively the rather benevolent attitudes of Christian missionaries towards local Pagan cultures, it is possible that the lifestyle and institutions described in the story mirror the real cultural situation in early Christian England (despite the story being situated in Denmark and Sweden).

Prevalent parts of the continental Germanic area – mainly the progressive regions of the Rhineland – are notably poor in regard to “relic” mythological attestations. *The Merseburg Incantations*, apparently rather accidentally recorded, represents virtually the only continental record of mythological narratives about Pagan deities. The Middle High German poem *Song of the Nibelungs* represents, as a genre, primarily the medieval Christian romantic ballad. It documents, however, also the apparent continuity of pre-Christian “heroic” social codes, as well as a form of esotericism connected with divination and magic – both attested among Germanic peoples in older ethnographic sources. This poem represents also important comparative material with respect to the Eddic heroic cycle about Sigurd and Gudrún. The Icelandic variant of the story is, however, apparently more conservative, and closer to the Pagan original – mainly for the frequented allusions to Pagan rituals, as well as for the appearance of Pagan deities as actors in the story. Within the Icelandic version, the tragical story about legendary human heroes is also connected to previous chronological events, where Pagan gods appear as the main protagonists. Comparison of both the Icelandic and German versions – each coming from mutually distant corners of the Germanic-speaking area – also clearly demonstrates the general character of the myth-making process, influenced by religious or other ideological motivations, and directly connected with the cultural environment of the audience for whom the original story was modified. The story can serve also as a good example of the virtual inseparability of both mythological narratives about gods and demons on the one hand, and historical legends or historiography in general (which are not usually categorized as “mythological literature”) on the other.

The most important “mythological” literatures from the Germanic-speaking area – the Icelandic *Eddas*, Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*, the English *Beowulf*, and the German *Song of the Nibelungs* – were created roughly in the same period. However, the Pagan Germanic cultural heritage in these works apparently increases from more progressive southern areas towards more isolated and conservative northern areas. This contrast between the Germanic north and south (respectively, between islands and the continent) in regard to the preserved pre-Christian contents and forms of autochthonous literatures is closely related to the historical

character of the Christianization process. Within Iceland and Britain, this process took place in a substantially more benevolent way than in the civilizational centres of the continent (from where Christianity historically spread northwards). Apparently, this factor notably influenced not only the quantity of preserved pre-Christian narratives, but also their “quality” (in regard to their archaic contents, as well as the poetic forms in which the tales were traditionally maintained).

All the abovementioned Germanic mythological literatures were – it is necessary to add – written by Christian scholars (usually monks or poets) two or more centuries after the official Christianization of the areas where the authors lived (and where they were usually born). Such a long period between the abandonment of Pagan cults and the creation of these literatures clearly documents the persistence of the popularity of Pagan narratives, especially in marginal parts of Europe. However, for the fact that we do not know the original Pagan versions of the myths (that were probably never recorded in a script during the pre-Christian periods), it is virtually impossible to describe more precisely both in which ways and how quickly the myths eroded after the conversion to Christianity. For this reason, we can only speculate about the degree of influence of Christian authors on these originally Pagan tales – no matter whether we know their identities and biographies (as in the case of Snorri Sturluson or Saxo Grammaticus), or not (as in the case of *Beowulf* or *Song of the Nibelungs*). We are also unclear about what exactly motivated these Christian authors to record these narratives. It is only possible to hypothesise about their reasons on the basis of analyses of both the contents and cultural-historical backgrounds of the stories.

4 How to deal with “Pagan relics”: Baltic folklore as a source for the study of the pre-Christian traditions of the Balts

Due to the peripheral geographic location of the Baltic region within the European continent, as well as to its late Christianization, the folklore of the Baltic countries preserved many pre-Christian archaisms. For this reason, folkloric sources have frequently been used in the study of Baltic paganism (and even in the reconstruction of Indo-European beliefs) since the beginning of scientific research in this field. In virtually all constitutive elements of folklore involving a religious dimension (narrative genres, traditional calendars and feasts, folk art) continuities with pre-Christian cultures can be observed. These “archaic elements”, preserved especially in rural traditions, represent, however, rather “marginal” or “secondary” heritage of the old faith, since the main constitutive features of the pagan religion (i.e. the structure of the pantheon, the main corpus of the mythology, idols and images of gods, related cults and rituals, and institutions of the priesthood) were nearly completely removed during the long

process of the Christianization of the indigenous people between the 13th and 17th centuries. The main problem for the study of pagan relics in Baltic folklore lies in the absence of knowledge on their micro-histories. Another important problem is connected with the quality and quantity of folkloric sources from national archives, especially those collected before World War I. Although qualitative research methods in ethnology developed substantially during the 20th century, ironically the same century also witnessed the rapid demise of folklore traditions, nowadays maintained and protected rather as a foundation for the national identities of Lithuanians and Latvians.

5 Epilogue

The orientation of each thematic chapter to the religions of one selected northern Indo-European ethnic area was practical mainly for three reasons: 1) from the perspective of basic constitutive features these religions were relatively similar to each other (especially due to factors of geography, cultural history, and ecology) – hence the problems which scholars face in attempting their reconstructions are usually similar as well; 2) the “religious traditions” of Celtic, Germanic and Baltic peoples (as imagined complexes defined by ethno-linguistic borders) usually show, from a closer perspective, some measure of regional heterogeneity. The thorough reflection of this aspect in independent chapters has been quite useful, already for the simple fact that generations of scholars in the past usually preferred to emphasize and search for features of cultural homogeneity among individual ethnic groups; 3) archaeological, historical-literary, and ethnographic data for studying the religions of each of the north-Indo-European groups are available on a mutually exclusive scale. In other words, the evidence of pre-Christian religiosity among Celtic, Germanic, and Baltic peoples is usually preserved by different kinds of information sources. This situation is usually closely connected with the different histories of individual European regions, or eventually with the different cultural specificities of their inhabitants. In any case, a larger quantity of data usually provides wider scope for argumentation, as well as for the desired reconstruction of the ancient religious reality, optimally to the exclusion of both unsatisfying speculative hypotheses and dry resignation statements. Thus, it has been more practical to pay more attention to those ethno-cultural areas where information sources are available in a larger quantity.

The history of scholarly interest in the ancient cultures of the northern Indo-Europeans is tightly connected with the earliest beginnings of the humanities. From the history of research in the fields of Celtic, Germanic and Baltic religions, it is apparent how nationalistic romanticism (or other kinds of idealism) was a crucially motivating impulse for studies and heuristics in this area. It influenced

not only the academic discourse and paradigm, but also the choice of study themes. As a result, notable proportion of academic works that are dedicated to the religions of northern Indo-Europeans show features of “politics projected into the past” (such projection defined as the main task of historiography by the Russian Bolshevik historian Mikhail Pokrovsky in the beginning of the 20th century) or even “ideology in narrative form” (the definition of a *myth* proposed several years ago by the American scholar of religious studies Bruce Lincoln).

From the perspective of methodology, this work sought to follow the traditions of both critical hermeneutics (in regard of interpretation procedures) and deconstruction (in regard of the reflection of ideological presuppositions within research). The synchronic attention paid to evidence of the religiosity of Celtic, Germanic and Baltic peoples, but also to the history of their research, arose for a simple reason: a knowledge of the approaches of former generations to the same problems that are faced by contemporary specialists may serve as a “springboard” – one that enables a compulsory overview and facilitates inspiration, as well as raises important warnings. The optimal effect then should be an ideologically more critical and interpretatively more careful evaluation of the fragmentary data available for the study of these ancient religions, since they have the apparent potential to awaken our myth-making instincts.

