

Indo-Slavic mythological parallels

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1. THUNDER GOD AND HIS ADVERSARY

The most striking and probably the most important parallel between Indian and Slavic mythology is related to the so-called Fundamental myth, i.e., to the myth of the Thunder god and his adversary.

In India, particularly, in the *R̥gveda*, this myth is, first of all, associated with Indra (there are some other variants of this myths related to other characters).

Indra is the Vedic Thunder god. Except for being related to storm and thunder, he is also connected with fertility and considered to be an ideal warrior and king.

There are two main myths of the aforementioned nature associated with Indra: the first is the one where Indra kills the serpent demon *Vṛtra*, who was lying at the mountain and obstructing the waters, by striking him with his *vajra*, the lightning bolt. After he slays *Vṛtra*, the waters (also represented as cows) are released as well as the dawn and the sun.

The second one is the myth of the Vala cave. In this myth Indra together with the Angiras releases the cattle and the Dawn (*Uṣas*) locked in a cave - he smashes the gates of a cave with, again, his *vajra*.

In Slavic mythology, which is, unfortunately, not as well preserved as the Vedic one and requires much more reconstructing, we also find the myth of the Thunder god and his opponent. This myth has many variants in Russian mythology. Those variants, just as in case of the Vedic mythology, involve different characters, but the most ancient version of this myth is related to the Thunder god Perun and his adversary - the cattle god Veles (Volos).

Perun was the god of thunderstorm and lightning in the Kiev Rus' pantheon. It is worthy of a mention that Perun is not just a Russian god, but a pan-Slavic one: all Slavic peoples worshipped him or his hypostases

at some time. The cult of Perun has also much in common with the worship of Perkunas in the Baltic mythology. His main features and functions can be shortly summarized as follows: first of all, he is associated with thunderstorm, rain and thunder. He, like the Vedic Indra, is connected with arms and military might and regarded as a patron and a leader of the military force, and his main weapon is the thunderbolt. He is a deity of fertility as well. It is also important to mention that Perun, especially according to the folk tales and Byelorussian oral sources, is connected with a mountain and an oak tree. In various Slavic traditions Perun is tied to "everything above" (the sky, etc.) and his image was always carved at the top of sacrificial pole.

In opposition to Perun, images of god Veles (Volos) were always carved at the bottom of sacrificial poles and indeed Veles is connected with "everything below".

Veles is usually (if not always) characterized as "the cattle god", thus his principal function as a patron of cattle is emphasized. He was also regarded as a god of wealth and prosperity, because, like in many cultures, for the Slavic people the cattle was one of the main components of wealth (the usual example of such a connection is Latin "pecunia" - "cattle" and also "money"). As a god of wealth, Veles is also related to gold and, interestingly, to the underworld and death (as it was established by V. Propp, gold and the golden color in Russian folklore is usually related to the "other world" - the "thirtieth kingdom"). Also, there is a possibility of a connection between Veles and poets (or, in some cases, magi). As it can be reconstructed from the studying of mythological and folklore "allo-characters" that substituted Veles in the Christian age, this god is also very much connected with the snake (serpent, dragon) and he himself has rather distinct snake features.

The Slavic version of the Fundamental myth definitely involves a struggle between Perun and Veles. As it is mentioned before, there are many versions of this myth. The general plot usually goes like this: the Thunder god (thunder thrower; sometimes just "the thunder") pursues his opponent - the serpent. The serpent hides either underneath an oak tree or in its hollow (sometimes - in a cave or under a stone). The Thunder god destroys the oak and kills his adversary. The cause of their struggle varies and sometimes unclear, and it is yet to be reconstructed fully, however if we consider that Veles is the protector of cattle, it is possible that it is a

struggle for cattle. In fact, some versions of the myth indicate that the adversary of the Thunder god left his herds unattended.

From this we can see that between the Slavic and the Vedic versions indeed there are many similarities: the struggle between the Thunder god and a serpent-like character; the killing of the serpent by means of thunderbolt (vajra, Perun's *perun* - the thunder arrow); the motif of destruction of a cave or cavity (an oak hollow clearly is a substitution), as it happens in the myth of the Vala cave; presence of a mountain or of a tree; presence of cattle or, as in Slavic version, connection with cattle, etc.

The fundamental myth is also regarded as a universal cosmogonic myth found in various Indo-European mythological systems. For instance, in the Balkan area, where Slavic tradition has survived to a large extent, an ancient ritual of "nestinarstvo" (Bulgarian "nestinar" - "dancer on the fire/on the charcoals") still exists and supplies us with a good example of how the Thunder God myth has changed and been kept alive. In Greek and Bulgarian territories, the ritual includes stepping on a lit fire in a public place at night as central performance; special ritualistic songs are sung, "nestinars" (dancers) step on the fire and dance for a long time while carrying icons of St. Constantine and St. Helen (the nestinar ritual takes place on 21-22 of May or 31-4th June, the days of these two saints).

The most characteristic motifs and participants of this ritual that are connected with the IE Fundamental myth are: burning by fire; water sources (covered by lids during the whole year; cannot be opened unless allowed by St. Constantine); the oak tree (water sources are found under oaks); an invariable feature of the ritual is the thunder produced by the sacred drum, arrows are shot at those who anger St. Constantine; arrows are also shot by the *ustreli* (Bulg. устрели, a kind of vampire) or by the *topaci* (spirits of bulls drowned in a river). The *topaci* correspond to two elements of the IE myth: water and cattle, cf. the myth of Vala/VRtra in Vedic mythology. Finally, a note about the fire associated with the Sun: the icons carried during the ritual are draped in red clothes, sometimes with drawings of the Sun.

The nestinars are closely associated with the divine: stepping on and through the fire means renewal and purification as well as achievement of a high spiritual status (the gift of prophecy is then acquired). The cult of

the bull connected to St. Constantine reminds of the elements of the Iranian Mithra cult.

More generally, the Balkan data and materials exhibit an overall pattern of the following three steps in its development that belong to one time axis: 1) cosmogonic drama resulting in the creation of the world; 2) the fight of the Thunder god with his adversary (the Serpent); the chasing away of Thunder god's children; 3) resurrection of the youngest son who is the only one able to survive the ordeal by fire and is the only authentic progeny capable of beginning a new calendar cycle (i.e. renewal of Creation).

2. PURUṢA/GOLUBINAYA KNIGA

Another Slavic mythological motif very much neglected in recent research (even in Russia) is that of the origin of the world from the members and organs of the Cosmic Man. It has both Indian and non-Indian parallels: in Iranian tradition (the Bundahishn text), in Greek (the Orphic hymn to Zeus), in Hebrew tradition (the Book of Enoch, where Adam is the Cosmic Man), in the Germanic lore (the Ymir legend of the Edda) and finally in the Rgveda (Puruṣasūkta - RV, 10.90).

The Slavic (particularly, the Old Russian) version of this myth is found in the "Book of the Dove" ("Golubinaya kniga"). Popular etymology has replaced the original title "Glubinnaya kniga", i.e. "The Book of Profound Mysteries", with "Golubinaya kniga" suggested by the Christian symbol of the Holy Ghost (Dove).

The story of the "Book of the Dove" can be summarized as follows. A book of immense size has fallen from heaven. Monarchs from all countries come to see this book. Among them is the wise Tsar (king) David. The monarchs ask David: "who wrote the book?" He says: "Jesus Christ, the Lord of Heaven. Isaiah tried to read it, but could read only three pages in three years". Consequently, the monarchs ask David to relate by heart what is written in the book and to answer these questions: "how did the world begin? how did the sun, the moon and stars start shining? where did the winds, thunder, tsars, boyars, and peasants come from?" David replies: "The whole world was begotten by the Holy Spirit of Sabaoth; the red sun is from God's face; the moon from God's breasts; the stars from God's vestments; the dawn and dusk are from God's eyes; the winds from the breath of Sabaoth; thunder from God's speech; the Tsars from the holy

head of Adam, the boyar-princes from the holy relics of Adam, the orthodox peasants from the holy knee of Adam."

Thus, the Book of the Dove explains how the world and social classes came into existence. Origination of the social groups from Adam's body strikingly resembles the genealogy of Indian social classes (varnas) originated from the body of Puruṣa. RV X.90: Puruṣa's mouth became the *brāhmaṇa* (priests), his hands the *rājanya* ("the prince"), his thighs the *vaiśya*, his feet the *śūdra*; the moon was born from his mind, the sun from his eye, Indra and Agni from his mouth, the wind from his breath, the inner space from his navel, the heaven from his head, the earth from his feet, the four quarters from his ear."

It is clear that the Vedic myth, in which the social classes are created from the dismembered body of the primordial Man, is paralleled (and possibly substituted in the Russian version) by the Christian belief that mankind descends from Adam. Another difference is that in the Vedic version everything stems from the body of Puruṣa, but in the Russian version nature is created from the body of God, whereas social classes from Adam's body.

This parallelism may, according to Stanislaw Schayer, indicate a common origin, which is neither Aryan nor Semitic, but belongs to a pre-Aryan and pre-Semitic civilization. Schayer thinks that Indo-Iranian influence played an important role in Southern Russia for several centuries before the introduction of Christianity. It is important to note that the idea of the origin of social classes does not appear in any of the Christian apocrypha, not even in the presumed source of the Dove Book (the "Discourse of the Three Saints"). That consideration leads Schayer to conclude that the most likely source of the story of the creation of the world in the Book of the Dove is the Vedic Puruṣasūkta.

3. EASTERN SLAVIC PARALLELS TO A VEDIC MYTH OF TRITA

One of the most enigmatic figures in Vedic mythology is a character sometimes named *Trita* (meaning "the 3rd") and sometimes - *Trita Āptya* ("the 3rd of the waters/related to the waters"). The paper explores this character from a comparative perspective.

In hymn 1.187 of the RV a passage states that Trita killed (or rather tore apart) Vṛtra. Also - that Indra "cleft Vṛtra as Trita cleaves the fences of Vala" (1.52) or "smashed the gates of Vala cave the way Trita [had]". There are other hymns where different deeds of Indra are ascribed to Trita: Trita is said to be the killer of a three-headed dragon *Višvarūpa*, and also to be the one who released the cows, etc.

Trita is related to the sacred drink of Soma: he is one of the first who pressed Soma (Soma was pressed by - 1. *Manu Vivasvant*; 2. *Trita Āptya*; 3. *Indra*), he gives a drink of Soma to Indra before Indra's battle with *Vṛtra*, etc.

Famous hymn RV 1.105 says that some Trita (a man, *ṛṣi*, who said to be somehow related to Trita Āptya) is put into a well (another hymn mentions a pit), as stated elsewhere in the RV and later in Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa and in the MBh, by his brothers Dvita (the 2nd - mentioned in the RV) and Ekata (the 1st - Brhmanas, MBh). He spends a night inside the well/pit, prays to the gods, performs a mental sacrifice, and then the gods (Brihaspati being their messenger) release him. From another hymn it can be concluded that Trita and Trita Āptya seem to be the same character, because it is said that Trita prays to his father inside a pit, claims his father's weapons and, after leaving the pit, kills the dragon *Višvarūpa* (RV 10.8.7-8).

There are Iranian mythological parallels to this myth: again, we have two characters with etymologically related names - Thraetaona and Thrīta - who perform the same functions and share the same characteristics as the Vedic characters: Thraetaona kills the three-headed dragon Azi Dahaka and releases maidens (not cows, but these are interchangeable); he has 2 brothers who try to kill him when he goes to fight the dragon. The other character, Thrīta, is the third man who prepared the drink of *haoma*, the Iranian counterpart to Vedic *soma* (in the Avesta the first man who pressed *haoma* was Vivahvant, the second one was Athwya [this name is related to Vedic Āptya], and the third one was Thrīta). According to Avesta, Thrīta has two sons (one of them is a judge and the second one kills a dragon). Thrīta is said to be the first healer who receives from Ahura Mazda 10 thousand medical herbs, white *haoma* and the tree of immortality.

Slavic and Baltic mythologies present interesting similarities to this myth. For example, in Old Slavic tradition, there are a number of myths and

folktales that have a character whose name usually means "the *Third*" (such as Slavic *Tret'yak*, *Trayan* or *Ivan Tretej*, i.e., Ivan the Third [son]). Details, of course, differ, but the story line remains the same. It can be summarized as follows: the protagonist is betrayed by his two brothers and thrown into a pit (or a well and the like), from where he goes to or finds himself in the netherworld (the *third* kingdom), overcomes a variety of obstacles (sometimes escaping *three* inevitable deaths), in many cases - finds the waters of life and death [NB! In eastern Slavic folklore a certain combination of the water of life and the water of death provides a drink/infusion of immortality - somewhat analogical to *soma/haoma*], kills a three-headed dragon and then a bird carries him from the underworld. Afterwards he sometimes marries a princess and becomes a king.

Another interesting and relevant story is the Russian folktale "*Ivan Vodovich and Fedor Vodovich*". Here is a summary of the main storyline: A king (or, rather, a tsar) says to his pregnant wife that if she gives birth to a son, he will "allow him to see the light", but if she gives birth to a daughter she [the daughter] won't be allowed to see the light. The queen gives birth to a daughter. This daughter grows up in some kind of a dark prison (*temnica* means both a dark place and a prison) and doesn't see the light until she is 18 years old. Then her nurse lets her into the yard. In the yard the girl sees a *well* and a golden chalice floating inside the well. She takes a cup and drinks water from it. Afterwards, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to twins who are named *Ivan Vodovich* and *Fedor Vodovich*. *Vodovich* is a patronymic that means "son of water (or - of the waters)" (cf. with Vedic *Āptya*).

The twins grow up quickly, and when they are "7-8 years old" they go to see the world and find a stone (*syr-goryuch kamen'*) with an inscription that says: "if you go this way, you will meet beautiful girls; if you go that way, you won't be alive". Ivan Vodovich chooses the first path and Fedor Vodovich chooses the second one - the way to death. This way brings him to a kingdom where a great three-headed snake (dragon) comes from the waters every day to eat "one person per day". Fedor Vodovich kills the snake and saves the eldest daughter of a king. Then the same repeats with a six-headed snake and the second daughter and a nine-headed snake and the youngest daughter whom Fedor Vodovich marries after saving her. Some time after his wedding Fedor Vodovich, while bathing, sees a golden bird, runs after it trying to catch it. The bird crosses a lake and hides inside the hut of *Baba Yaga* ("the Old Woman" who represents death and can

cause it - a prominent character in the Eastern Slavic folklore). Baba Yaga turns Fedor Vodovich into stone.

His brother, Ivan Vodovich, searches for his brother, reaches the kingdom, where he, being Fedor's twin, is received as Fedor and takes residence in the royal palace. Then the story repeats: Ivan sees a golden bird, tries to catch it, runs into Baba Yaga, defeats her and turns her into stone with her stuff, then finds the stone which is his brother, he coerces a raven into bringing him some live water (water of life) and revives the brother who returns to his kingdom and Ivan Vodovich home, to his mother.

Even from this brief juxtaposition of Vedic and Slavic material it is evident that both mythological systems exhibit the same pattern: the character under consideration goes to the underworld through some kind of a pit or well (a usual substitute of a grave) or dies, overcomes obstacles and death itself, finds a drink (or a tree) of immortality, kills a dragon (who is possibly the king of the underworld), by this deed recreating the universe, and then may become a king or even a god, etc.

A more complicated but nevertheless apt parallel to the Vedic myth of Trita Āptya can be found in the Russian folk tale "Bear the Tsar". Bear the Tsar (who, as I have shown in my presentation during the Comparative Mythology Conference in Edinburgh, is clearly a representation of Veles) grasps the beard of a king, who is leaning over a *well*, and refuses to let him go without a ransom. The king wants to pay out with *cattle* (cows and horses), but Bear asks for "the thing at home that you don't know about". The king agrees gladly because he thinks that every thing at home is known to him. He goes back home and finds out that, while he was away, his wife gave birth to two children (a boy and a girl). Not willing to give his children to Bear, the king decides to hide them, so he orders to "dig a very deep *pit*... decorate it like a palace... bring lots of food and drink... then the *children are lowered into the pit*; a ceiling is built and covered with earth". After a while the king and his wife die and children continue to grow up in the pit. Bear the Tsar comes to take the children away, finds them, and carries them to *his kingdom* in the *mountains* (it is exceptionally rare in the Russian folklore for a bear to live in the mountains!). "Bear the Tsar brings them to mountains so high that they touch the sky; it's a void, *nobody lives there*". And it's impossible to tell from the description of Bear's journey whether he flies or travels on foot. Then brother and sister try to escape on a falcon. Bear the Tsar "notices the falcon flying in the sky, bangs his head on ... earth [banging on earth usually means in Russian folklore that the

character magically transforms itself - N.Y.] and *burns* the falcon's feathers *with a flame*". Finally, after **three** attempts, they escape on a little *bull*. Bear pursues them until the prince "waves a towel behind him and suddenly a *fiery lake* emerges". Bear returns home. Prince and princess find a house near the lake and live there. After a while princess goes to the lake and "on the other side of the *fiery lake* a **six-headed** [or, in another version - *three-headed*] *snake* lands on the shore". The snake tricks princess and steals her. Prince finds the snake, kills it, and saves princess. The story ends.

As it was shown in my presentation in Edinburgh, in this folktale Bear and the Snake are basically two hypostases of the same character - particularly, of Veles, the god of wealth, cattle and the lord of the Underworld. This story exhibits a similar pattern and a set of motifs to the stories and myths of the character named the Third - the protagonist(s) are lowered to a pit from where they are taken to the Underworld (mountains/a mountain, fiery lake, a kingdom where nobody lives - allusions to the underworld; the pit where the children were hiding is essentially a grave, i.e. another entrance to the underworld, etc.), they escape after three attempts using a magical towel (there are tales connecting this magical object with immortality and waters of life and death) and, finally, the prince kills a dragon.

Another Russian folktale exhibiting a similar pattern: a girl is maltreated by Satan, doomed to death and carried from her house through a hole made under the threshold, not through a door (Anuchin 1890: 11-12, fn. 25). After the girl dies, a flower grows on her tomb and becomes the very same girl that comes back to the living: like the Third, the girl overcomes her own death and actualizes the link between the two realms.

It is too early to draw any elaborate conclusions, however, even now it can be said that different myths and folktales of Vedic/ancient Indian and Old Slavic traditions are structurally similar and demonstrate common patterns and genetically related characters. Considering history of contacts between the two cultures, it is plausible to state that these common features are due to the common Indo-European origin of these myths.