

Scandinavia and the Balkans

Scandinavia and the Balkans:

*Cultural Interactions with
Byzantium and Eastern Europe
in the First Millennium AD*

Edited by

Oksana Minaeva and Lena Holmquist

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Scandinavia and the Balkans: Cultural Interactions with Byzantium
and Eastern Europe in the First Millennium AD

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PREFACE

The articles in this book are based on papers given at the conference *Scandinavia and the Balkans: Cultural Interactions with Byzantium and Eastern Europe in the First Millennium*, which was held on 25 and 26 September 2012 at the New Bulgarian University, Sofia. The conference was accompanied by a traveling seminar to the old Bulgarian capitals Pliska and Preslav and the cult complex “Madara”, which involved conference participants and students from the MA Comparative Art Studies program and the PhD program Art Theory and Visual Studies at the New Bulgarian University, Sofia. The project was funded by the Central Fund for Strategic Development of the Trustees of the New Bulgarian University and by the Educational Fund of the Graduate School of NBU.

The conference was designed to pave the way for studies on the connections between the Balkans and Scandinavia to develop within a broader context, to promote the successes of the researchers who have dedicated their efforts to this scholarly field, and to articulate the importance of this topic to scholarly investigations, education and society.

The topic of the conference is one that has rarely been discussed in academic studies, while in the social and cultural space it is almost unknown. At first glance it deals with a rather narrow historical frame, remote from today’s reality—the relationship between two distant geographical and cultural areas in the past. In fact, the focus, or rather, multiple foci on this topic offered by participants in the conference suggest a variety of aspects of the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages in the Balkans and Scandinavia. These aspects are tinted in their interrelations with influences and meetings of other cultures; despite the diversity of contexts, one can mark some obvious parallels and typological similarities in the emergent cultural phenomena and artifacts.

INTRODUCTION

SCANDINAVIA AND THE BALKANS IN THE EYES OF EACH OTHER

What does the notion of Scandinavia and the North mean to the people populating the Balkan peninsular? Does it linger upon images of the mythological heroes and gods of the Ases and the Vanes (known to us, the Bulgarians, through Wagner's variant of interpretation rather than the original sagas)? Is it based on the invincible ulfhednar and vikingar, the trolls, orcs, hobbits and other trans-real and composite creatures (in their literary expression from Tolkien's imagination or, even more so, from their cinematic visualization)? Or is it perceptible in the symphonism, the pastoral elegies of Grieg and Sibelius, based on the imminent accord and trinity of *sol, vind och vatten* (the sun—meaning also the polar light—overcoming the darkness, the winds of the North and the white gleaming waters of the sea) in the soul of the Northern personality?

What does the notion of the South and the Balkans mean to the Northern people? Is it an equal, or just a part of the road to the East, opening the door to the uncountable natural resources and ever-fruitful and abundant flora—a counter-balance to the cold and meager soil of the North and the wet, stabbing chill of its gray skies? Does it embody grief for the lost primeval homeland of the mythical forefathers, the faraway place to which the soul, freed from its mortal corporeal covering, will be transported? Or does it encapsulate the boundless human yearning for voyages to the unknown, the ceaseless play of transformations and counter-transformations of the gods into humans and vice versa, as it is felt in the orphic idyll of the stanzas “vem spelar på en pipa...” in Lars Erik Larson's suite *Förklädd Gud* (The God in Disguise)?

Their remote geographic location bestows on these two notions of the North and the South an aura of enigma, such as the one, allotted to every distance or far-fetchedness, of the infiniteness of time and mind. And, as always, every quest to the unknown is a search for and a challenge to the understanding of one's own integrity.

These two notions—or rather, vague ideas—of Scandinavia and the Balkans can be explored not only in terms of their contacts and

interactions, but through the tropes, metaphors, metonyms, hyperbolae and whatever literary or linguistic devices are used to refer to them, which supposedly define the relation between their nomination and content.

What is, in fact, sought and discovered in these ideas through the focus of historical perspective?

Ideas of the North and the South from Antiquity onwards

The conceptualizations of Scandinavia and the North from the viewpoints of the Mediterranean peoples and, more generally, the people of the South, as preserved in ancient written sources, reveal ideas of distant and desolate lands inhabited by strange peoples. The unknown and the weird, embodied by these distant regions, are expressed in images of giants, one-eyed, crippled or multi-limbed monsters, and metamorphosing or composite creatures.

The North is known as “the most faraway land of Thule” (Ultima Thule, Θούλη, *Thoulē*) in ancient sources. Various texts locate the North in Iceland, Shetland and the Orkney Islands, Scandinavia or Greenland. According to other ancient authors, the North is a place located beyond the borders of the known world. Even the shortest overview of Greek authors can reveal that all discoveries were subject to the thirst for new lands, goods and things unseen.¹

Looking back to the beginning of ancient literature, the Greek traveler Pytheas (writing circa 330–320 BC) describes, according to the cosmological model then accepted within his cultural sphere, the farthest land of the Arctic Circle as a place “where day and night change over six months”. He was followed by other authors, such as Polybius (*Histories*, Book XXXIV, circa 140 BC) and Strabo (*Geography* Book I, Chapter 4, 77, circa 30 BC). Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (Book VI, Chapter 34) defines the farthest limit of the North and the world as the last Scythian parallel. This tradition was continued in late Hellenistic Greece and the early Middle Ages by writers, poets and historians.

Especially important for us are the stories of the Byzantine historian Procopius, dating from the first half of the sixth century, which describe the various tribes and nations. Among them, Procopius tells of the Heruli, a Germanic tribe, which for a time was encompassed within the orbit of Byzantium’s Balkan interests and later settled farther north. His reports are confirmed by archeological data, based on which it is believed that he is in fact describing Scandinavia and the tribes there, among which are included

¹ Davidson, 2005.

the Geats (Gautoi) and the Saami (Scrithiphini). This same author supplies us with information on the ancient Magna Bulgaria and the creation of the Bulgarian Kingdom in the Balkans following the arrival of khan Asparukh.² Therefore, no matter how mythological tradition uses already familiar topoi, the facts regarding actual events and happenings lend these historicized narratives the outward appearance of authenticity and detail.

The geographical views of the Scandinavians and, more generally, the people of the North regarding the South begin at the modern boundaries of Eastern Europe, as revealed by mythological, literary and historical sources, including runic inscriptions and skaldic poetry. Three main areas can be outlined, each of which is represented differently in topographic and ethnonimic traditions. All three areas or zones are embraced in the collective concept of “Austr” (East), “Auðrlönd” (East of the Earth), and “Austrvegr” (Eastern Way). The spatial and temporal margins of this concept depend on the various circumstances and understandings which characterized the historical periods in question.³

The first zone is the so-called “Baltic zone”, which is the nearest to the Nordic countries and includes the southeastern and eastern parts of the Baltic States and Finland, the northern part of the Scandinavian peninsula, Finmarken (populated with Saami, Finns, Karelians and others), and further on to the mysterious forest of the Bjarmaland in the Russian Northern belt. The southern border of the “Baltic zone” was populated by the Baltic Slavs, who were well known to Scandinavians in the Viking era of commercial and military relations.

The second zone, which is adjacent to the Baltic one, covers the area of Ancient Rus’ and is crowded with names of cities and rivers, known primarily from sagas and medieval literary works. The most important toponyms from the second “Ancient Rus’ zone” are characterized by the special pattern “X-garðr” for the names of large settlements, appearing as a result of the Scandinavian-Rus’ contact. The pattern was produced only in Eastern Europe; such names of settlements were not shaped according to this model in either Scandinavia or Western Europe. It is found in the names of settlements such as Hólmgarðr = Novgorod and Kaenugarðr = Kiev, hence the name of the country “Garda”, Gardariki (Rus’). Miklagarðr, being the nomination of Constantinople (literally “Great City”), is in close proximity, located in the third “Pontic-Byzantine zone”, but directly connected with Novgorod and Kiev through the “road from the Varangians to the Greeks”.

² Procopii Caesariensis, *Opera omnia*.

³ On the problems of the geo-political and socio-cultural aspects of contact areas as described in historical sources, see Мельникова, 1988.

The texts of ancient and medieval authors provide us with huge range of historical parameters, seen through the early Christian prism, then through medieval mysticism, all of which hold important information for interpreting modern times of the geographical and cultural limitations of the possibilities of human inhabitation. At the same time, they offer various contradictory and conflicting interpretations of concepts such as ethnicity and cultural identity, illustrate anthropological oppositions such as alien–same or foreign–own, and demonstrate ideas of otherness in describing the physical, social, cultural and even psychosomatic hues of the peoples populating these lands, as seen through the eyes of foreigners from the South—travelers, invaders, ambassadors or simple authors—with their declarations of plausible truths or imaginary dreams.

These ancient writers intuitively perceived and recorded not only the boundaries and locations of various tribes and peoples, but also the contact areas and cultural interactions between them. Compared to the lands of India or to the lands beyond the farthest Scythian parallel inhabited by the legendary Hyperboreians—the giant keepers of gold, bearers of the secrets of life and immortality—Scandinavia and the North are ultimately turned into a magical point, both of attraction and disregard, for the residents of the South, including those of the Balkans. On the other hand, for the Northern peoples, the South gradually achieved somewhat more real outlines as the mythical core was substantiated with observations. The combination of the mythological mind and the physical perception and absorption of space led to the presence of Northerners in the East and South persisting over quite a long period—a phenomenon described by researchers as “Viking colonization”.⁴

Thus, it can be concluded that while the historic interest of the South (the Mediterranean and the Balkans) as directed towards the North dates from an earlier era and actively occurred in late Antiquity through the influence of Roman heritage in the North, especially in the Vendel and Merovingian periods, the reverse wave of Northern interest in the South came more or less after these times, but with much greater intensity, as manifested in the Viking raids against Constantinople and the Mediterranean. These uneven flows of influence, connections and contacts, occurring from the end of the first millennium BC throughout the whole of the first millennium AD, represent a truly complex mosaic of historical phenomena, upon which the papers in this book aim to shed light.

⁴ Jansson, Ingmar and Ulf Fransson, 2007.

The idea of the North and Scandinavia in Bulgarian culture and historiography

Unsurprisingly, the idea of the North in Bulgarian historiography was initially related to the patriotic self-assertion of the Bulgarians in the so-called Revival period in the nineteenth century, following a long era characterized by a lack of statehood and nearly 500 years of subordination to the domination of the Ottoman Empire. As well as seeking to place itself within the coordinates of ancient cultural history, the Bulgarian nation sought to confirm its identity by uncovering its past down to the very roots. Indeed, one of the most efficient tools for building a legitimate claim to statehood and constructing a firm ethnic self-assertion is to find supporting evidence from past events and discover a genuine connection with the most ancient rulers and sacral places, veiled with the prestige of the mythical golden age. Thus, in its first phase of development, Bulgarian historians searched for the earliest areas inhabited by the ancient Bulgarians and attempted to trace their contacts with other nations and cultures, including the people of the North. This phenomenon coincided with the process of separating science and knowledge from religious mysticism and dogmas—in other words, with the beginning of the age of empirical science. Knowledge was acquired from journeys, expeditions and missions not only in Bulgaria but across the whole of Europe—a tendency concurrent to great developments in typography, education, early collections and museums.

In the Bulgarian lands under Ottoman rule, this process was involved in the explosion of romantic ideas of freedom and struggle in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, spurred on by the appearance of the first book on Bulgarian history, written by the monk Paisius of Hillandar Monastery on Mount Athos in 1662. The early historical works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries raise the question of the ethnic genesis of the Bulgarians, and hence their place in world civilization. They reflect Western European historians from the eighteenth century and earlier, in which a number of common theories were posited. According to one of these theories, the Bulgarian people may have originated from Scythia or from areas around the Volga, from whence their name derived. One adherent to this “Scythian-Sarmatian” hypothesis was Caesar Baronius (*Annales Ecclesiastici*, Vol. I-X, Roma, 1602), who offered arguments given by the Byzantine chroniclers Theophanes and Skylitzes.⁵ Another theory linked the early Bulgarians with Scandinavia, suggesting they came

⁵ Runciman, 1930.

from there and settled in Thrace. This idea, also known as the “Vandal” theory, was accepted by Mavro Orbini in his book *The realm of the Slavs (Il regno degli Slavi, Pesaro, 1601)*. Orbini cites the evidence of Anasthasius the Librarian in *Chronographia tripartita* regarding the formation of the Bulgarian state following the disintegration of Magna Bulgaria and the separation of the sons of khan Kubrat—information which is still accepted and partially debated in modern Bulgarian academic research.⁶

Another strand in Bulgarian historiography, interwoven with this interest in the North, is associated with one of the central topics regarding the people of the North and Scandinavia, namely their origin, including the origin of the Germanic tribes. The so called “Gothicism” in the academic and cultural works of Europe has widely influenced not only the social but also the political life of the region since the eighteenth century. In Bulgarian scholarly literature this tendency is expressed in an increasing number of historical, epigraphic and archeological studies on the Goths in the Balkans, a trend which continues to gain strength in present-day times.

Before the liberation of the Bulgarian people from Ottoman domination in 1878, interest in the North was articulated mainly through historical studies of ancient Bulgarian history, i.e., the direction of interest was focused on the past. However, after the establishment of the Bulgarian state, curiosity about the North (particularly Scandinavia) burst forth with great force, along with a new direction of focus on the contemporary cultural phenomena which were, to a large extent, influencing all European culture in the twentieth century. This shift was manifested in the wave of plays by Ibsen and Strindberg which swept through Bulgaria, alongside the musical impact of Grieg, Sibelius and other Northern composers. Many Bulgarian writers, critics and poets in the first half of the twentieth century (such as Yordan Yovkov, Teodor Trayanov, Pencho Slaveikov and Geo Milev) were impressed by the drama of the Northern soul, by its harmony and contrast, by its unity of moral and social elevation and degradation, to such an extent that two contemporaries of this process, Petko Todorov and Emmanuel Popdimitrov, argued that Bulgarian society had been “Ibsenized”.⁷

At the beginning of the twentieth century, knowledge about Scandinavia and the North in Bulgaria came primarily through the influence of the contemporary northern theater and music; it is only recently that the North reached Bulgarian audiences in its deeper and

⁶ Anasthasius Bibliothecarius, *Chronographia tripartita*.

⁷ Ганчева, 2012.

authentic poetic form through the Nordic sagas and mythology, by means of the latest translations of Snure Sturlusson's (1179–1241) writings and of the Icelandic sagas.⁸ Alongside the increasing number of translations of modern Nordic authors and the growth in Nordic language education at university level, Scandinavian and Nordic studies in Bulgaria today are marked by their ascending development. Steps in this direction include the Thracian exhibition at the State Historical Museum in Stockholm in 1980 and its Swedish counterpart in Sofia.⁹ The documents and materials collected by the Swedish archives and libraries and represented at this exhibition illustrate the contacts between Sweden and the Bulgarian lands from around the mid-seventeenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century, when the official diplomatic, economic and cultural ties between the two countries were established.

In this context, the thematic focus of the conference *Scandinavia and the Balkans: Cultural Interactions with Byzantium and Eastern Europe in the First Millennium* and the contributing papers expanded in this volume aim to enlarge the boundaries of this little-known and under-researched historical and cultural domain.

The idea of the South, including the Balkans and Eastern Europe, in Norse culture and historiography

Research on the South as a humanitarian and geo-political concept in the academic output of Scandinavian nations developed in parallel to the search for their own roots in their mythological past. This was part of a greater trend characterized by Romanticism and other cultural movements in the rapidly growing industrial society of Europe, which was reverting back to its own roots whilst, at the same time, venturing upon distant expeditions to other worlds in order to preserve, conserve and offer in a systematized and clear way the fruits of its discoveries and investigations through research papers, museum collections and treasuries. Thus, the genesis of museum collections and modern academic institutions clearly went hand in hand with a striving for periodization, classification, arrangement, sorting and categorization, not only in the natural sciences but in history and archeology.

⁸ *Староисландски саги и митове*, 1979; Стуре Стюрлусон, 2003.

⁹ Дамянова, 1980.

These endeavors have been maintained and sponsored by a number of enlightened monarchs such as King Gustaf VI Adolf,¹⁰ as well as other great minds in science and culture. Here we cannot refrain from mentioning the name of Christian Jürgensen Thomsen,¹¹ the renowned Danish antiquarian who established the basis of the antiquarian collections of the National Museum in Copenhagen, and also developed a number of research methods and techniques for archeological studies. To him we are obliged for the tripartite periodization of the epochs of the Northern finds and relics—the Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages. Another prominent archeologist responsible for some of the cornerstones of Northern archeology and history is the Swedish academic Oscar Montelius,¹² whose concept of seriation complemented and built upon Thomsen's periodization.

The strongest motivation driving the Northern interest in the studies of the South is the quest for the deep mythological past of the sagas. Other sources, such as the runic inscriptions, found in various sacral and social places on a variety of media—stone stelae, tombstones, votive and commemorative columns, etc. are added to them to them. Here it is worth recalling the major debates on the burial places of the Swedish Kings first mentioned in mythological texts, or those regarding the locations of the earliest recorded settlements of the various tribes of the North in Danish, Swedish, Norwegian or Finnish historical accounts.¹³ Besides noting the first scholars who translated and interpreted the ancient Old Norse texts and the first archeologists who attempted to establish a link between the mythological and archeological data, such as Swedish scholars Birger Nerman¹⁴ and Sune Lindqvist¹⁵ and Danish academic Johannes Brøndsted¹⁶, it should be pointed out that even today this field of research into ancient Old Norse texts represents a significant proportion of academic endeavors.

The research on our distant past can be divided into two geographical directions which, of course, have a number of interfaces and interactions. The first explores the East and concentrates on studies of the Eastern European steppes and the cultural phenomena found along the Silk Road,

¹⁰ King Gustaf VI Adolf participated in archeological expeditions in China, Greece, Korea and Italy. He also founded the Swedish Institute in Rome.

¹¹ Thomsen, 1836.

¹² Montelius, 1903.

¹³ Lindqvist, 1929; Stenberger, 1964; Hedeager, 1997.

¹⁴ Nerman, 1925.

¹⁵ Lindqvist, 1936.

¹⁶ Brøndsted, 1957–1959.

which runs through Central Asia and China, as epitomized by the writings of one of the travelers, Sven Hedin.¹⁷ The second direction, which measures and compares the North with overseas and continental borders of “Nordicism”, is the study of the Mediterranean in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, involving both close and distant disciplines such as ancient and medieval history and archeology, Byzantinology and other less-obviously related academic fields, such as Egyptology.¹⁸

Evidence referring to the contacts between Scandinavia and the Balkans is provided by material artifacts and written sources from the past, but these sources are rather scanty.¹⁹ When the Swedish King Karl XII happened to pass through Bulgaria following the defeat at Poltava and the battle of Bender (Turkey) in 1709, Mikael Eneman, who was among his accompanying circle and had a custom of collecting books from the places they crossed,²⁰ gave a curious description of the Bulgarians at that time. However, this is a rare example of close observance of the Balkans by a Northerner.

Of particular relevance to the topic of this book, specifically concerning the relations between Scandinavia and the Balkans, is the development of studies on Slavic culture and languages, Byzantine studies and Bulgarian studies in Nordic countries. Due to the region’s close historical ties with Russia, Russian studies—especially those dealing with the nature of contacts between Scandinavia and the population inhabiting Eastern European lands—are quite advanced in Scandinavia. However, to a certain extent, this also concerns the field of Byzantine studies, since Byzantium included in its orbit many of the peoples surrounding the Byzantine commonwealth, including the cultures of the North, which entered into contact with it in one or another period of their existence. The numerous conferences and symposia on Byzantine studies taking place in Northern countries in the late twentieth century and in more recent years have tended to discuss not only specific problems relating to the culture and history of Byzantium, but also the interaction, influences and various types of communication between these rather distant cultural and geographic spheres of North and South.²¹ Thus, one of the latest Byzantine congresses took place in Copenhagen, a mark of the widening frames both of Byzantine and Nordic studies.²²

¹⁷ Hedin, 1900.

¹⁸ Boëthius, 1927.

¹⁹ Op. cit. in ref. 7.

²⁰ Eneman, 1889; New ed., 2012.

²¹ *Les pays du Nord et Byzance*, 1981; *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia*, 1998.

²² Fuglesang, 1996, 137–168.

Bulgarian studies, which are now developing in Scandinavia, also play an important part in the acquaintance and contacts between Scandinavia and the Balkans. This refers not only to the development of linguistic studies in Swedish universities and research institutions, but to subjects such as the history, anthropology and archeology of the Balkans. As early as the 1930s, slavacist Knut Knutsson was highlighting the great influence of the Bulgarian tradition upon Slavic manuscripts, which were brought to Scandinavia mostly through Russia and the Novgorod region. And since then to the present, when in 2012 Uppsala University commemorated 120th anniversary of Bulgarian studies.

The possibilities for study of the relations between Scandinavia and the Balkans provided at an institutional level by universities, museums and research centers (such as Stockholm, Uppsala and Gothenburg Universities, the Swedish Institute in Athens and the Swedish Research Institutes in Rome and Istanbul) enhance and support in practice the effectiveness of research contributions and the accumulation of results in this sphere.

How the North (Scandinavia) and the South (the Balkans) met in the past is a complex question. This short treatise highlights the need and motivation for a conference focused especially on the question of the relationship between Scandinavia and the Balkans, aiming to reveal (admittedly, only a very small part of) the complex web of interrelations that are fundamental to the nature of cultural contact.

All roads in the Middle Ages lead to Constantinople

The texts in this book are based on reports read at the conference *Scandinavia and the Balkans: Cultural Interactions with Byzantium and Eastern Europe in the First Millennium*, which was held in September 2012 at the New Bulgarian University, Sofia. The conference was accompanied by a traveling seminar to the old Bulgarian capitals Pliska and Preslav and to the Madara cult complex. The project was funded by the Central Fund for Strategic Development of the Trustees of the New Bulgarian University. The conference and its organization engaged the Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies in Stockholm University and the Department of Art Studies and History of Culture in the New Bulgarian University through the efforts of Associate Prof. Lena Holmquist and Associate Prof. Oksana Minaeva. Without their commitment, this volume would not have been possible.

The papers presented at the conference continue the trend of expanding study into the links between Scandinavia and the Balkans, following the

path of the small number of previous forums on this theme, such as the Bulgarian-Scandinavian symposia²³ and the 2012 international conference *Bulgaria and the Scandinavian North: directions of acquaintances*, which commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of Scandinavian studies in Sofia University “St. Clement Ochridski”.²⁴ Another scholarly event devoted to Scandinavia and the Balkans was the international research symposium *Eastward and Westward: interethnic contacts at the time of the formation of the Rus' of Novgorod; culture, memory and identity*, which was held in St. Petersburg and Novgorod in July 2009. There are also, of course, the annual Byzantine studies meetings in Sweden, arranged by the Swedish Byzantine Society, as well as various other important research projects reflected in the Nordic Byzantine Network.²⁵

What distinguishes the texts presented to the conference *Scandinavia and the Balkans: Cultural Interactions with Byzantium and Eastern Europe in the First Millennium* is the attempt to draw a more wide-ranging picture of the manifold links between Scandinavia and the Balkans. This broad view marked the event out from most conferences and symposia, which have tended to focus on narrower issues, directed primarily to one particular topic within the arts, linguistics, history or archeology.

The articles submitted here are interdisciplinary and draw upon the fields of history, literary history, cultural anthropology, linguistics, history of culture, archeology and the arts. Chronologically, they cover a long period: from the end of the first millennium BC through the whole of the first millennium AD. This wide historical scope makes it possible to trace the diverse manifestations of typological and/or contact links between the two socio-cultural-historical areas of Scandinavia and the Balkans in antiquity and the medieval past. The texts explore a wide range of the latest discoveries and interpretations, revealing new opportunities for deepening the mutual understanding between these two cultural regions. If, however, we were to define the specific academic disciplines more accurately, we would say that the texts concern Thracology, Germanistics, Scandinavistics, Byzantinology and Bulgarian studies. The authors present not only their personal research, but also the latest achievements of their own national sciences, being the most prominent scholars in their field of knowledge in their own countries. The articles provide newly-discovered, unpublished data and give methodologically new interpretations of written

²³ Пашов, 1981; Тишева, 1996.

²⁴ Ганчева, 2012, кн. 1–2, 14–21.

²⁵ Bysantinska sällskapet Bulletin; <http://www.nordbyz.net/content/aarsmote-bysantinska-sallskapet>

sources, going beyond nationalistic prejudices to expose a far deeper objectivity and understanding of the complex issue of Europe in its making. The Scandinavian-Balkan axis of contact and its contribution to the past is still an under-explored part of the puzzle of the European cultural mosaic. It is hoped that the ideas discussed in this book will offer keys to deciphering it.

In the end, this text does not claim to be an exhaustive overview of the status quo of research on the topic under question. Rather, it calls attention to some of the most intriguing and fascinating issues in the studies of the past of these two distant yet, at the same time, close worlds.

And who could deny that this shared history is just as relevant today, and will continue to be so in the future?

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PART I

GLIMPSES ON EARLY CONTACTS BETWEEN SCANDINAVIA AND THE BALKANS

THE GUNDESTRUP CAULDRON: ICONOGRAPHY AND SEMANTICS OF THE “WARRIORS’ FRIEZE”

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The Gundestrup cauldron is one of the most discussed pieces of Late Iron Age European art. Found in the marshes of Jutland more than a century ago, it was produced by ancient Thracian craftsmen in late second century BC. To this day, it remains one of the richest springs of mythological and epic information for the reconstruction of ideology of the ancient Europeans.¹

The semantic analysis of works of ancient art is always a kind of ideological reconstruction.² I shall use the principles developed by modern cultural anthropology and, above all, the methods of structuralism and semiotics. But first of all, I would like to explain why I consider these particularly suitable for the reconstruction of the pictorial language of myth.

In interpreting the imagery of Egypt, the Middle East and Greece, we usually treat it as an illustration of recorded (i.e., written) verbal stories. In the case of barbarian works of art, however, this kind of approach is impossible, since they were created by non-literary societies where the mythological narrative was part of an oral tradition, and therefore no fixed version can serve as a model.³ Here the myth lives a full-blooded life in the three languages of action, word and image. This is why mythological imagery is not a translation illustrating some verbal or ritual text but an independent variant of the myth. This explains why, for example, one cannot discover among the images of ancient Thrace any faithful illustration of myths known from written sources.

Of course, by means of this approach we can only reconstruct things at the level of structure, i.e., of the general invariant rather than of the specific mythical story. The barbarian artist rarely tells a story. He prefers

¹ Kaul, 1991; Kaul et al. 1991.

² Kaul, 1991; Kaul et al. 1991.

³ Marazov, 2011.

a cumulative principle in organizing the pictorial text. He simply juxtaposes the textual elements and leaves us guessing about the exact connection between them. Herein—not in the ingredients but in the recipe for combining them—lies the key to the meaning that the ancient artist has invested his images with. The intertextual connections are to be sought outside the concrete text: in its structure. This is why it is particularly important to identify the structure beneath the great variety of scenes and personages. The invariant structure of myth rests on binary oppositions, which may be coded in different ways and yet may be reliably identified as male-female, right-left, human-animal and the like. This makes it possible to start with some objective pointers and then proceed to develop interpretations by drawing parallels to written sources or better-known mythological systems.

In one of the most intriguing friezes on the Gundestrup cauldron we see warriors on foot and on horseback, marching in two lines in a clockwise procession.

Let us now turn to an element which has not been discussed thus far: the horizontal tree dividing the pictorial space into two halves. Some researchers identify it as the “May Tree”, which still figures in European folklore. Evidently, though various interpretations are possible, none of them would change its basic meaning as “The Tree of Life”. Judging by this motif, one may regard the scene as some kind of annual feast. In fact, the tree is a stem with flowers, therefore it is shown at a time of blossoming, i.e., in spring. This is the time of year when the war season opened in the ancient world.⁴

The image of tree in a vertical, not a horizontal position, is an artistic convention. In my opinion, the pictorial text should be deciphered from the top of the tree downwards and from right to left, following the circular movement of the warriors’ procession.

The figures in the two friezes belong to different levels in the military hierarchy: below are the infantrymen (an inferior branch of the army), and above the horsemen (occupying a higher position both in the army and in society).⁵ To the sound of horns shaped like dragons’ bodies and heads, six warriors armed with shields and spears are marching in the direction of a dog, which is jumping towards them. They are followed by a seventh warrior whose equipment indicates that he is of a different status: he wears a helmet and a broad belt. In my opinion, this frieze represents a group of young warriors (ephebi) who are going through a rite of initiation under

⁴ Dumézil, 1974.

⁵ Lissarrague, 1990.

the guidance of their mentor (the figure with the helmet). They are marching to the left, i.e., downwards towards their death, which awaits them at the end of the rite of passage. In my opinion, the realm of the netherworld is personified by the figure of the dog—the Hound of the Hell, which occurs in all Indo-European mythologies.⁶ Thus we have an accumulation of various signs sharing the common meaning of “death”: down, the roots of the tree, left, the threatening dog. I should like to note that in the Iranian mythoritual tradition, young warriors during the period of initiation were called *mario*, meaning “wild” or “left”.⁷ During this transitional period they lived outside society (like wild animals) and outside its norms (compare the meanings of “right” = straight, correct, situated on the right, normal, and “left” = not right, crooked in Indo-European languages). Similarly, in Indo-European mythology we find a recurring trope of warriors turning into wolves. Certain Thracian heroes with markedly military functions were given names such as Harpalykos (Rapacious Wolf) and Lykurgos (One Who Pretends to Be a Wolf). The war god of the Thracians himself was called Kandaon (Dog/Wolf-strangler) and is represented in this role on two almost identical bronze dice.⁸

The analogies can be easily multiplied, but more important for us is to see whether the warrior-dog relationship is part of the message conveyed by the pictorial text of the cauldron. One of the gods depicted in the metopes holds in his hands two youths, whose costumes resemble those of the ephebi in the relief discussed above. An animal is depicted immediately above the raised free hand of each of the youths: a dog/wolf over the right and a boar over the left one; another pair of animals are shown under their feet: a dog/wolf and a winged horse. Probably these animals are zoomorphic signs of the initiation stage that the young warriors have reached, since, along with the wolf, the boar is the other emblem of this social category. After all, the fate of the epic heroes was bemoaned because they were destined to become food for the dogs if they escaped the “beautiful death”. The same fate awaits the young initiates in the relief with the tree. They must fight the infernal beast and be torn to pieces by him. It may be precisely this episode represented on the breast of the god in the metope, where a twin-headed dog has cut two identically-dressed youths in halves.

This death is temporary. It marks a necessary end to the period of adolescence. Having passed the trial of their worth successfully, the youths will be reborn in a new capacity: as men and horsemen. This reincarnation

⁶ Lincoln, 1974: 273–285.

⁷ Wikander, 1938.

⁸ Иванов, 1977: 183–213.

procedure will be performed by the patron goddess of the initiation. Her figure occupies the entire height of the relief, across the two friezes, which is indicative of her function as a mediator between the two zones of the vertical structure of the Cosmos. She will dip the dead bodies into the cauldron (which is placed at the roots of the tree, i.e., in the underworld, but with its upper half emerging, thus establishing a connection to the upper world). The cauldron is full of life-giving water, the drink of immortality, or bull's blood, and the initiated will be restored to life in their new status. The lower file consists of six ephebi, while the cavalcade above comprises only four horsemen. The initiation-death identity is a common feature of rites of passage. In Balkan folk songs, the souls of deceased people beseech the Tree of Life to “stretch its branches, to bend its top that they [can] step on them and cross the sea which divides the world”.⁹ The tree on this relief is in the exact position to realize the wish of the warriors' souls—the horsemen literally step on its branches.

A number of signs give evidence of an opposition between the participants in the cavalcade and the figures in the lower file. The horsemen occupy the “upper” position, move in the auspicious “rightward” direction towards the top of the tree, they are mounted (which re-emphasizes their “upper” spatial position), and wear richly decorated helmets.

The horned serpent is at the head of the whole group. The snake is a well-known signifier of the world beyond, a mediator between the lower and the middle zones of the Cosmos. This role is further emphasized by the ram's horns, because in myth (as in ritual) the ram is an unquestioned mediator.¹⁰ Probably in this case the snake has been assigned the task of leading the warriors, reborn for a new role in life, out of the underworld. The fact that the three horns, crowned by dragons' heads, are placed immediately beneath the serpent can hardly be coincidental. In Indo-European mythology, the dragon is often represented as a serpent with three heads of beasts of prey.¹¹ Thracian art has given us some remarkable examples of this mythical antagonist.¹² The youths were usually led by mentors, who announced the beginning of the ritual dances with the sound of some musical instrument. By the sound of the horns the mentors summon the young warriors to an encounter with the three-headed dragon who is at once their enemy and mythical ancestor, while after their rebirth

⁹ Рогусиус, 2010.

¹⁰ Магазов, 1981; 1989.

¹¹ Иванов, Топоров 1974; Dumézil, 1985.

¹² Магазов, 2010.

the horned serpent leads them into the upper world. Thus the cycle is closed.

The message of the pictorial text of the Gundestrup cauldron is based on the socio-ideological differentiation that is characteristic of Indo-European mythology. It reflects the separation of three ideological functions: priestly, military and economic.¹³ The first of these is embodied by the shaman and fashioned after the model of priestly initiation. The second is shown in action: the initiation of the young warriors takes place in front of our eyes. The third is personified by the woman and her ritual preparation for marriage, which will ensure the reproduction of society. Thus the cauldron's pictorial text embraces the structure of the social cosmos and, at the same time, the active mechanisms of its perpetual regeneration.

It is inevitable that some links will be missing from any interpretation of the cauldron's integral text, because today we can only examine it as a separate artifact, divorced from the broader context of the ritual situation in which this richly-decorated vessel was intended to serve. Though it is generally agreed that it served a ritual purpose, opinions regarding the type of ritual in which it was used still differ. However, the present analysis suggests a possible answer. Judging by the images, it seems extremely likely that there is no doubt that the cauldron was the central ritual object in a festival which involved the whole community. It was at such times that, having passed their initiation, youths and maidens were reintegrated into society as its equal members.

The ritual actions may well have been accompanied by the recitation of mythological poems, which the priests perhaps illustrated by means of the images on the cauldron. Word, action and image were fused into one indivisible language. But the semantic connections between the scenes on the cauldron have vanished, along with along with the details and contextual meanings of the festival. The new initiates were the main participants in the ritual. Maybe they were symbolically dipped in the cauldron, which was full of sacrificial blood, as is shown in the frieze. Perhaps the cavalcade of young horsemen showed their skills in horse taming and the girls demonstrated their abilities in wifely jobs such as knitting, spinning or weaving. In Athens, the Panathenaea festival was similar in form to this.

In both cases, the festival actualized the birth of society and its institutions. In archaic society, the new year was just such a festival with a pronouncedly transient nature. It was usually celebrated at the beginning

¹³ Dumézil, 1992; Puhvel, 1987.

of spring, which is why signs of this season are assigned an important place among the codes of the mythological narrative depicted on the Gundestrup cauldron. This accounts for the insistent female-male opposition in the cauldron's pictorial program. During critical periods, when nature and society were threatened by chaos, archaic society used to split ritually along sexual lines. Its two halves imitated hostility, which was often accompanied by a reversal of their usual roles: men took the place of women, engaging in feminine activities, and vice versa. This is one of the things we can see in the cauldron's imagery: the men fail to vanquish the bull but a woman performs this ritual task successfully. The sacrifice will restore the normal structure of society and its members will resume their habitual roles: order will prevail over chaos and the activities of the two halves of society will return to normal. We do not know how exactly this festival was celebrated, but we have enough information about its nature. We have enough information about its nature to suggest that this is the day of the vernal equinox, of complete renovation, of the rebirth of nature and society.

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