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ABSTRACT. This article argues that theories are the best way to study myth – individual myths as well as myths as a whole. Theories are claims to know the origin and function of not one myth or some myths but all myths. Theories, to their credit, make universal claims. Theories do not claim that myths exist everywhere but do claim that wherever myths exist, they arise and serve to fulfill the same need. What the need is, varies from theory to theory. The universalistic scope of theories is tied to independent invention. Theories assume that myths arise independently in each culture. Myths do not arise in one culture and spread to another by transmission, or diffusion. Transmission can seek to account for myths worldwide, but ordinarily it seeks to account for myths regionally. Independent invention and transmission offer contrary explanations of the similarities among myths, whether universally or regionally, but in their focus on similarities they stand opposed to postmodernism, which emphasizes the differences among myths. This paper argues that theories are indispensable for finding the differences as well as the similarities among myths. Differences begin only where similarities end. Six basic objections to theorizing are considered and rejected. Three theories of, specifically, hero myths are presented to illustrate the advantages of a theoretical approach to the study of myth.

KEYWORDS: myth, theory, independent invention, transmission, hero myth.

THEORIES AND INDEPENDENT INVENTION

There are two ways of seeking similarities among myths: through transmission and through independent invention. Transmission can be universal but typically is regional. “Theories” of myth assume independent invention. The two approaches to similarities are not incompatible, and “independent inventionists” are most willing to attribute similarities in detail to transmission. Still, I contend that independent invention, expressed through theories, offers a superior explanation of similarities than transmission.
Robert A Segal

First, the scope of theories is worldwide, whereas that of transmission tends to be narrower. As I use the term, theories by definition are universal. A theory of myth claims to be able to account for any myth. An account of merely Greek or Hebrew myth would not, for me, qualify as a theory. To account for myth worldwide is not to assume that myth exists everywhere. Rather, a theory claims to be able to account for myth wherever it is found. There have been attempts to trace myth from a single starting point – for example, ancient Egypt – but those attempts have proved at best speculative.

Second, the explanations of similarities given by theories are based on regularities, whereas the explanations given by transmission tend to be happenstance. Similarities via transmission are the product of circumstances: one culture happens to come in contact with another, however permanent that contact then becomes. Similarities via theories are the product of something inherently permanent: human nature, the nature of society, or the nature of the world. Again, theories do not maintain that the source of myth always produces myth but rather that myth always comes from the same source.

Third, theories explain not only the origin but also the function of myth, whereas transmission explains only the origin. The question commonly left unanswered by transmission is not where culture Y gets its myths from – the answer is culture X – but why myths take hold in culture Y. Theories, by contrast, attribute the duration as well as the creation of myths to a need. What the need is, varies from theory to theory and from discipline to discipline. Whatever the need, it accounts for both the emergence of myth and the perpetuation of myth. If, for example, a theory attributes myth to a need to explain the physical world, then myth arises to satisfy that need and lasts as long as it continues to satisfy that need. Of course, things other than myth may arise to fulfill that same need as well or even better, so that myth lasts only as long as it not merely fulfills the need that gave rise to it but does so at least as well as competitors.

OBSESSIONS TO THEORIES

Independent invention and transmission are at heart akin; both seek the similarities, not the differences, among myths. Both then face the challenge from “particularists”, or those who seek the differences among phenomena. Preference for the differences long antedates

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postmodernism and is almost endemic to many disciplines in the humanities. The tradition that goes back to Wilhelm Dilthey and is as recent as Clifford Geertz virtually defines the humanities vis-à-vis the sciences by its concern for the particular vis-à-vis the general. Geertz divided the social sciences into two varieties: the interpretive, which was equivalent to the humanistic, and the explanatory, which was equivalent to the natural scientific. He sought to ally the social sciences with the humanities. And while he characterized interpretation vis-à-vis explanation in several ways, his chief distinction was exactly that between the interpretive focus on the particular and the explanatory focus on the general. To quote him:

"[The notion that the essence of what it means to be human is] most clearly revealed in those features of human culture that are universal rather than in those that are distinctive to this people or that is a prejudice we are not necessarily obliged to share. Is it in grasping such general facts – that man has everywhere some sort of "religion" – or in grasping the richness of this religious phenomenon – Balinese trance or Indian ritualism, Aztec human sacrifice or Zuñi rain-dancing – that we grasp him? Is the fact that "marriage" is universal (if it is) as penetrating a comment on what we are as the facts concerning Himalayan polyandry, or those fantastic Australian marriage rules, or the elaborate bride-price systems of Bantu Africa? (Geertz 1973: 9)"

For Geertz, the question is rhetorical.

Geertz’s argument epitomises the circularity of the quest for the particular. We are supposed to recognize almost intuitively that where the general is sketchy and haphazard, the particular is rich and fascinating. But not everyone experiences the particular the same way. Generalists see the particular as narrow and trivial and see the general as adventurous and comprehensive.

While generalists can attribute similarities either to transmission or to independent invention, the attribution of myth to independent invention is more of a nemesis to particularists than is the attribution of myth to transmission. For again, transmission is usually regional rather than worldwide, and the focus on a region allows for the delineation of the distinctiveness of that region. Particularists may prefer to find differences even within the region, but at least the

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region is differentiated from other regions, and the particularities of that region can be part of the explanation by transmission. By contrast, once again, independent invention is worldwide. I do, then, want to defend independent invention more than transmission against particularists. In defending independent invention, I am defending theories, and in defending theories, I am defending the comparative method.

The comparative method has been damned on many grounds:

(1) for finding only similarities among phenomena and ignoring differences
(2) for confusing similarity with identity
(3) for generalizing too broadly
(4) for generalizing prematurely
(5) for taking phenomena out of context
(6) for generalizing at all.

These criticisms are in fact misconceptions, either about the method or about knowledge itself.

First, to compare phenomena is merely to match them up. It is scarcely to dictate what will be found. It is therefore scarcely to dictate finding only similarities. Indeed, to compare phenomena is necessarily to find differences as well as similarities. Even if one were seeking only similarities, one would know that one had found them all only at the point at which no further differences could be converted into similarities. Consequently, one can as readily use the comparative method to find differences as use it to find similarities. Geertz himself compares Indonesia with Morocco to illuminate the differences between them:

The dissimilitudes of Morocco and Indonesia do not separate them into absolute types, the sociological equivalent of natural kinds; they reflect back and forth upon one another, mutually framing, reciprocally clarifying. Or so they seem to do for me. I learned more about Indonesia when, shaken by the disturbances of the mid-sixties, I decided it the better part of valor to work in Morocco, than I would have had I gone back then directly to Indonesia. And I learned more about Morocco when, after things had settled down again in the seventies, I returned, not without trepidation, to Indonesia, than I would

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The comparative method can thus be used by particularists as well as by generalizers, but only by seeking similarities.

Second, it is a logical truism that any two entities, however much alike, are still distinct. Therefore the comparison of phenomena can never yield identity, only similarity. Even to seek only similarities is not to eliminate differences. Conversely, to seek only differences is a typically defensive reaction by those fearful of comparison – is not to eradicate similarities. The options are neither wholesale identity nor total uniqueness but only further similarities or further differences.

Those who seek similarities not only cannot but do not deny differences. They deny the importance of differences. To counter vaunted similarities with sheer differences is, then, to miss the point. To argue from the fact of differences, which are never denied, to the importance of them is to beg the question: why are differences more significant than similarities? The argument in favour of similarities – that similarities are weightier than differences – may be questioning-begging, but so is the argument in favour of differences – that differences are deeper than similarities. Moreover, one will never be able to identify all the cases of flood myths or all the information about all of those cases. How would one even know if one had? It is a

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rudimentary fallacy of explanation – the so-called Baconian, or inductivist, fallacy – to oppose drawing conclusions until all the knowable facts are “in”. Because generalizations are recognized as tentative, the comparative method does not generalize prematurely. If it does, then even non-comparativist conclusions about the flood myth of people X alone are also premature, for here, too, all the knowable facts are never “in”. And the facts do not even include causes, which are inferred.

Fifth, proper comparisons not only do not but cannot take phenomena out of their contexts. To be able to compare the flood myth by people X with that of people Y, one had better be sure that both peoples really do have flood myths and really do take them seriously as accounts of past flooding. From where but the context can this information be secured? To quote J. G. Frazer, himself routinely castigated by particularists for supposedly tearing cases out of context:

The [anthropological] method is neither more nor less than induction … And the first condition of a sound induction is exact observation. What we want, therefore, in this branch of science is, first and foremost, full, true, and precise accounts of savage and barbarous peoples based on personal observation. Such accounts are best given by men who have lived for many years among the peoples, have won their confidence, and can converse with them familiarly in their native language …

(Frazer 1931: 244)

So worried is Frazer that comparison prior to observation will contaminate the observation that he insists that “every observer of a savage or barbarous people should describe it as if no other people existed on the face of the earth” – that is, in its particularity. Frazer permits the observer to be a comparativist as well, but only if the activities are kept separate: “the mixture of the two is, if not absolutely fatal, at least a great impediment to the utility of both” (Frazer 1931: 246). Far, then, from comparing phenomena severed from their contexts, the comparative method compares phenomena in their contexts.

What might seem to be taking phenomena out of context is really mere selectiveness. Insofar as the object of comparison is flood myths, much else about the peoples compared will properly be

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ignored as irrelevant. Other kinds of myths in each society may well be ignored. Yet an analysis of the flood myths of people X alone will also ignore as irrelevant most other aspects of their culture. The difference between the selectiveness of a generalist and that of a particularist is only one of degree. The broader the scale of a comparison, the more selective the elements compared will be – this in order to encompass all cases. If one is comparing flood myths worldwide, one will disregard the differences between one flood myth and another. But to select only common elements from all the cases is not to ignore the context, which is still indispensable for determining the existence of a flood myth in each case.

Sixth and most important, comparison is not merely permissible but indispensable. To understand any phenomenon, however specific, is to identify it and to account for it. To identify something is to place it in a category, and to account for it is to account for the category of which it is a member. Both procedures are thus inescapably comparativist.

Suppose one wants to know why people X – just people X – have flood myths, and suppose one ascertains from people X that they, too, create and recount flood myths in order to remember the danger that flooding can cause. Presupposed in the claim that people X create and tell flood myths because they believe that it pays to do so. Only this generalization about the practical, vested motivation of other peoples accounts for the behaviour of people X in particular.

Take the case of the French Revolution. Suppose one claims, on the basis of an intensive study of the French urban poor, that the urban poor revolted because the price of bread kept rising. Built into this claim, even if offered only about the French case, is the generalized claim that whenever the price of bread rises, people will revolt. Otherwise what explains why the French revolted? Because they were French? That answer is circular. Because they were French? But then one is explaining the French Revolution in particular by appeal to the generalization, whatever self-evident, that when people are hungry...
enough, they will revolt. If one replies that by no means all peoples revolt when the price of bread or of food generally rises, then the purported explanation of the French case is inadequate, for something more than the rising price of bread must have been the cause in that case if the rising price is not sufficient to spur revolt every time. Whatever else is added – hatred of the monarchy, despair over the prospect of reform, agitation by the press – constitutes a sufficient explanation of the French Revolution only if it also constitutes a sufficient explanation of every other revolution. If these same circumstances do not produce revolution every time, then they inadequately account for revolution any time.

Apply this argument to flood myths. Suppose, again, one claims, on the basis of a meticulous study of people X, that they invent flood myths because they believe that they will thereby respond more effectively to future floods. Built into this claim about people X is the generalization that whenever people believe they can better cope with future floods by recounting past ones, they will create flood myths. If one replies that not all peoples who face recurrent flooding create flood myths, then the explanation is inadequate even for people X. For something else must be at work to account for why people X bother with flood myths when other peoples facing the same danger do not. Whatever else suffices to account for the case of people X does so only if it also suffices to account for the creation of flood myths by other peoples in the same circumstances.

Some anticipated objections can readily be met. It might be argued that other peoples create flood myths for different reasons. Suppose a study of people Y reveals that they create flood myths even though they face no danger of flooding. But that discovery is no argument against the proposed explanation for people X, for the claim made about them is intended to provide only a sufficient, not a necessary, explanation. The claim is not that the only reason for flood myths is the fear of future flooding but that whenever that fear exists, there will arise flood myths. Most explanations of human behaviour and even of physical events are offered as at best merely sufficient, not necessary, ones. Ordinarily, there are too many possible and different reasons for any specific behaviour to be able to stipulate necessary ones. People may revolt for many reasons. They need not be famished to do so.

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Conversely, it might be argued that even would-be sufficient generalizations invariably fail to suffice. Suppose a study of people Z discloses that they, like people X, face danger of flooding no less severe, have no greater access to materials for permanent fortifications, and have no fewer myths generally. Yet suppose that even so, they, in contrast to people X, do not have flood myths. Obviously, the explanation of people X thereby proves insufficient and must be supplemented to account for their having flood myths. But suppose, further, that no matter how many additions are made, the explanation still fails to account for the difference between people X’s behaviour and people Z’s. The conclusion to be drawn is not that the reasons for people X’s behaviour are unknowable but that the reasons are so numerous or so complex that no other people will likely share them. Most explanations of human behaviour and even of physical events are intended as less than even sufficient ones. Most often, they are offered as merely probabilistic. The claim is that when the conditions named occur, the behaviour will likely, not inevitably, occur, and the degree of likelihood may even be less than 50%. No matter how famished people are, most do not revolt.

Most strongly, it might be argued that even necessary and sufficient generalizations are irrelevant because the behaviour itself is unique. Suppose that only people X have flood myths. The uniqueness of their case would be merely a historical contingency. The explanation offered of their unique case would still have to hold, even if as less than a sufficient explanation, for any future case of a people in the same circumstances. That people would also be expected to have flood myths. Otherwise the explanation would fail to explain even the sole case to date. The comparative method is often confused with the assumption of universals – as if it stands committed to similarity across many, even all, cultures. In actuality, the method requires the search for multiple instances of a phenomenon but allows for the discovery of even just one.

Finally, it might be observed that even if more than one people has flood myths, the flood myths of people X will surely differ from those of people Y. Even multiple flood myths of each people differ from one another. Otherwise they would be the same myths. How does the comparative account for the differences? The answer is that it does not. The comparative method, once again, purports to be able to account for similarities only. It acknowledges differences but ascribes them to the particular characteristics of each people or each myth.

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That, let us say, one flood myth attributes flooding to rainfall and another to a tidal wave does not undermine their kinship as flood myths. The comparative method does not bar particularists from concentrating on the distinctive cause of flooding in each myth but is not thereby to be faulted for its indifference to particularities.

In short, the way to understand people X is not merely by myopically studying them more and more. It is also by studying other peoples as well. One cannot, in particularistic fashion, ignore other peoples and focus only on people X. One cannot say blithely that one cares only about people X or, like Geertz, that the differences between people X and other peoples are more profound than the similarities. Even if one is interested only in the particular, similarities are indispensable, both in categorizing, for example, the French Revolution as a revolution and in accounting for it. Geertz himself employs similarities in the very effort to articulate the distinctiveness of the cultures he has studied.

The comparative method amounts to more than the juxtaposition of phenomena. It means the identification of a common category for those phenomena. That identification spurs the application or the discovery of a common explanation of that category. Comparativism does not merely uncover generalizations. It uncovers generalizations that demand explanations. In other words, comparativism leads to theories, which are the explanations of the generalizations found. Once the comparative method finds similarities, the similarities must be accounted for. If the similarities are widespread, even universal, the explanation must be equally broad. The kinds of explanations sought will invariably differ from the kinds offered of particular cases, for they must now hold for all humanity or for a large portion of it. Comparison thus serves to spur not merely broader explanations but also new ones.

THEORIES OF HERO MYTHS

It is one thing to defend the propriety of theorizing. It is another to defend the actual practice of theorizing. As an example, let us take theories of hero myths. Theories of myth per se raise the same problems.

The study of hero myths goes back at least to 1871, when the Victorian anthropologist E. B. Tylor argued that many of them follow

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The study of hero myths goes back at least to 1871, when the Victorian anthropologist E. B. Tylor argued that many of them follow

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a uniform plot, or pattern: the hero is exposed at birth, is saved by other humans or animals, and grows up to become a national hero (see Tylor 1871: I, 254-5). All of his examples are of male heroes. He sought only to establish a pattern for male hero myths, not to account for that pattern.

In 1876 the Austrian scholar Johann Georg von Hahn used fourteen cases to argue that all “Aryan” hero tales follow an “exposure and return” formula more comprehensive than Tylor’s (see von Hahn 1876: 340). In each case the hero is born illegitimately, out of the fear of the prophecy of his future greatness is abandoned by his father, is saved by animals and raised by a lowly couple, fights wars, returns home triumphant, defeats his persecutors, frees his mother, becomes king, founds a city, and dies young. As the attainment of kingship dictates, von Hahn’s heroes are exclusively male. Though himself a solar mythologist, von Hahn, like Tylor, tried only to establish a pattern for hero myths, not to account for the pattern he found.

Similarly, in 1928 the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp sought to demonstrate that Russian fairy tales follow a common biographical plot, in which the hero goes off on a successful adventure and upon his return marries and gains the throne (see Propp 1968 [1958]). Again, the attainment of kingship assumes a male hero. Propp’s pattern skirts both the birth and the death of the hero. While himself a Marxist, Propp here, in his earlier, formalist phase, attempted no more than von Hahn and Tylor: to establish a pattern for hero stories, not to account for the pattern he found.

Of the scholars who have not only delineated patterns in hero myths but also offered explanations, or theories, of them, by far the most important have been the Viennese psychoanalyst Otto Rank (1884-1939), the American mythographer Joseph Campbell (1904-87), and the English folklorist Lord Raglan (1885-1964). Rank later broke irreparably with Sigmund Freud, but when he wrote The Myth of the Birth of the Hero (1909), he was a Freudian apostle. Freud even wrote the section of the work on the “family romance”. While Campbell was never a full-fledged Jungian, he wrote The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949) as a kindred soul of C. G. Jung. Raglan wrote The Hero (1936) as a theoretical ally of J. G. Frazer.
The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles. During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy, in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative). As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or by an humble woman. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents, in a highly versatile fashion. He takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged, on the other. Finally he achieves rank and honors. (Rank 1990 [1914]: 57)

Literally, or consciously, the hero is a historical or legendary figure like Oedipus. He is heroic because he rises from obscurity to, typically, the throne. Literally, he is an innocent victim of either his

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Symbolically, or unconsciously, the hero is heroic not because he dares to win a throne but because he dares to kill his father. The killing is definitively intentional, and the cause is not revenge but sexual frustration. The father has refused to surrender his wife, who is the real object of the son’s efforts: “as a rule the deepest, generally the unconscious root of the dislike of the son for the father, or of two brothers for each other, is referable to the competition for the tender devotion and love of the mother” (Rank 1990 [1914]: 74). Too horrendous to face, the true meaning of the hero myth gets covered up by the concocted story, which makes the father, not the son, the culprit. The pattern is simply “the excuse, as it were, for the hostile feelings which the child harbors against his father, and which in this fiction are projected against the father” (Rank 1990 [1914]: 80). The fantasy is the fulfilment of the Oedipal wish to kill one’s father in order to gain access to one’s mother. The myth fulfills a wish never outgrown by the adult who parents or, ultimately, fate. While his parents have yearned for a child and sacrifice him only to save the father, they nevertheless do sacrifice him. The hero’s revenge, if the parricide is even committed knowingly, is, then, understandable: who would not consider killing one’s would-be killer?

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either invents or uses it. That adult is psychologically an eternal child. Having never developed an ego strong enough to master his instincts, he is neurotic: “There is a certain class of persons, the so-called psychoneurotics, shown by the teachings of Freud to have remained children, in a sense, although otherwise appearing grown up” (Rank 1990 [1914]: 63). Since no mere child can overpower his father, the myth maker imagines being old enough to do so. In short, the myth expresses not the Freudian goal of the first half of life but the fixedated childhood goal that keeps one from accomplishing it.

Rank’s theory can be criticized on multiple grounds. One can grant the pattern while denying the Freudian meaning, which, after all, reverses the manifest one. Or one can deny the pattern itself. Certainly the pattern fits only those hero myths, or the portions of them, that cover heroes in the first half of life. Excluded, for example, would be the bulk of the myths of Odysseus and Aeneas, who are largely adult heroes. Rank’s own examples come from Europe, the Near East, and India and may not fit heroes from elsewhere.

Rank’s pattern does not even fit all of his own examples. Moses, for example, is hardly the son of Pharaoh, does not kill or seek to kill Pharaoh, and does not succeed Pharaoh. Moses is the son of lowly rather than noble parents, is exposed by his parents to save rather than to kill him, and is saved by the daughter of Pharaoh.

Yet far from oblivious to these departures from his scheme, Rank, in defence, appeals both to non biblical versions of the Moses saga that come closer to his pattern and, still more, to aspects of the biblical account that hint at the pattern. He appeals above all to non biblical versions of the Moses saga that come closer to his pattern and, still more, to aspects of the biblical account that hint at the pattern. He appeals above all to non biblical versions of the Moses saga. Neither Odysseus nor Aeneas, for example, is hardly the son of Pharaoh, does not kill or seek to kill Pharaoh, and does not succeed Pharaoh. Moses is the son of lowly rather than noble parents, is exposed by his parents to save rather than to kill him, and is saved by the daughter of Pharaoh.

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Still, why is there any disparity between the Moses story itself and the pattern it purportedly typifies? Rank would say that the reason is the same as that for the disparity between the pattern and the Freudian meaning it purportedly typifies: even the meaning of it, bears too wrenching a truth for both the creator and the user of the myth to confront consciously. At the same time Rank assumes that the Moses story is close enough for the pattern to be said to hold.

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Joseph Campbell

Just as classic Freudian problems involve the failure to establish oneself in the outer world, in the form of working and loving, so distinctively Jungian problems involve the failure to re-establish oneself in the inner world, in relation to the unconscious. Freudian problems stem from excessive attachment to the world of childhood; Jungian problems, from excessive attachment to the world one enters upon breaking free of the childhood world: the external world. To be severed from the internal world is to feel empty and lost.

Just as Rank confines heroism to the second half of life, so Campbell restricts it to the second half. Rank’s scheme begins with the hero’s birth; Campbell’s, with his adventure. Where Rank’s scheme ends, Campbell’s begins: with the adult hero ensconced at home. Rank’s hero must be young enough for his father and in some cases even his grandfather still to be reigning. Campbell does not specify the age of his hero, but the hero must be no younger than the age at which Rank’s hero myth therefore ends: young adulthood. While some of Campbell’s own examples are of child heroes, they violate his Jungian meaning, according to which heroes must be fully developed egos ready to encounter the unconscious from which they have long been severed. Campbell’s heroes should, then, be in the second half of life.

Rank’s hero must be the son of royal or at least distinguished parents. Campbell’s need not be, though often he is. Where Rank’s heroes must be male, Campbell’s can be female as well, though Campbell inconsistently describes the hero’s initiation from an exclusively male point of view. Finally, Campbell’s scheme dictates human heroes, even though many of his examples of heroes are divine. Rank’s pattern, by contrast, allows for divine as well as human heroes.

Where Rank’s hero returns to his birthplace, Campbell’s marches forth to a strange, new world, which the hero has never visited or even known exists. This extraordinary world is the world of the gods, and the hero must hail from the human world precisely to be able to experience the distinctiveness of the divine one.

In this exotic, supernatural world the hero encounters above all a supreme female god and a supreme male god. The hero has sex with the goddess and marries her – the reason the hero must here be male.

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He competes with the male god and bests him – the reason the hero must here be male. Yet with both gods not just the goddess, he becomes mystically one and thereby becomes divine himself.

Where Rank’s hero returns home to encounter his father and mother, Campbell’s hero leaves home to encounter a male and a female god, who are neither his parents nor a couple. Yet the two heroes’ encounters are remarkably akin: just as Rank’s hero kills his father and, if usually only latentely, marries his mother, so Campbell’s hero, in reverse order, first marries the goddess and then bests the god.

The differences, however, are even more significant. Because the goddess is not the hero’s mother, sex with her does not constitute incest. Moreover, the two not only marry but also become mystically one. Despite appearances, the hero’s relationship to the male god is for Campbell no less positive and so no less non-Freudian. Seemingly, the relationship is blantly Oedipal, but it is not. The hero is not really fighting with his father over his mother. For again, the two gods are neither his parents nor a couple. The hero is seeking from the god the same love that he has just won from the goddess.

When Campbell says that initiation myths “reveal the benign self-giving aspect of the archetypal father”, he is using the term in its Jungian sense (Campbell 1972 [1949]: 139-40). For Freudians, gods symbolize parents. For Jungians, parents symbolize gods, who in turn symbolize father and mother archetypes, which are components of the hero’s personality. The hero’s relationship to these gods symbolizes not, as for Rank, a son’s relationship to other persons – his parents – but the relationship of one side of a male’s personality – his ego – to another side – his unconscious. The father and the mother are but two of the archetypes of which the Jungian, or collective, unconscious is composed. Archetypes are unconscious not because they have been repressed but because they have never been conscious. For Jung and Campbell, myth serves not, as for Freud and Rank, to satisfy neurotic urges that cannot be manifested openly but to express normal sides of the personality that have just not had a chance at realizition.

By identifying himself with the hero of a myth, Rank’s myth maker or reader vicariously lives out in his mind an adventure that, if ever directly fulfilled, would be acted out on his parents themselves. While also identifying himself – or herself – with the hero of a myth, Campbell’s myth maker or reader vicariously lives out in the mind an adventure that even when directly fulfilled would still be taking place
in the mind. For parts of the mind are what the myth maker or reader is really encountering.

Having managed to break free of the secure, everyday world and go off to a dangerous new one, Campbell’s hero, to complete the journey, must in turn break free of the new world, in which the hero has by now become ensnared, and return to the everyday one. So enticing is the new world that leaving it proves harder than even leaving home was. Circe, Calypso, the Sirens, and the Lotus Eaters thus tempt Odysseus with not just a comfortable, long life but a carefree, immortal one. Jung no less than Freud opposes a state of sheer unconsciousness. Both strive to make the unconscious conscious. The hero’s failure to return to the everyday world would spell failure – the failure to assure the reality of the unconscious.

Like Rank’s theory, Campbell’s can be faulted on various grounds. As with Rank’s theory, one might grant the pattern but deny the meaning. Or one might question the pattern itself. Since the pattern obviously applies only to myths about heroes in the second half of life, it excludes all of Rank’s hero myths, or at least all of Rank’s portions of them. Whether it even fits Campbell’s own examples is not easy to tell, for Campbell, unlike either Rank or Raglan, provides no set of hero myths to accompany the whole of his pattern. While he continually cites scores of hero myths to illustrate individual parts of his pattern, he does not apply his full pattern to even one myth.

One might question even so seemingly transparent a confirmation of Campbell’s pattern as the myth of Aeneas, which Campbell names as an example of his pattern (see Campbell 1972 [1949]: 30). Aeneas’ descent to Hades and return do fit Campbell’s scheme snugly, but Aeneas’ larger itinerary does not. Rather than returning home to Troy upon completion of his journey, he proceeds to Italy to found a new civilization. Similarly, Odysseus’ descent to the underworld fits Campbell’s pattern, but his larger journey, which Campbell cites (see Campbell 1972 [1949]: 58), does not.

Lord Raglan

Lord Raglan’s theory of hero myths, following Frazer’s, ties myth to ritual. The specific ritual involves the king, but Frazer actually conflates two forms of the ritual. In one form the king is a mere spell failure – the failure to resist the allure of the unconscious.

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in turn of the presently dead vegetation. The ritual is performed annually at the end – the would-be end – of winter. In the other form of the ritual the king is himself divine, with the god of vegetation residing in him, and is actually killed and replaced. The soul of the god is thereby transferred to the new king. The killing of the king does not magically induce the killing of the god but instead simply preserves the health of the god, for the king is killed at the first sign of weakness or at the end of a fixed term so short as to minimize the chance of illness or death in office. The state of the king determines the state of the god of vegetation and in turn the state of vegetation.

Raglan adopts this second version of the ritual, but he goes beyond Frazer to equate the king with the hero. For Frazer, the king may in effect be a hero to his community, but Raglan actually labels him one. It is Raglan who turns a theory of myth in general into a theory of hero myths in particular. Moreover, Raglan introduces his own detailed hero pattern, which he applies to twenty-one hero myths. That pattern extends all the way from the hero’s conception to his death. In contrast to Rank’s and Campbell’s patterns, it therefore covers both halves of life:

(1) The hero’s mother is a royal virgin;
(2) His father is a king, and
(3) Often a near relative of his mother, but
(4) The circumstances of his conception are unusual, and
(5) He is also reputed to be the son of a god.
(6) At birth an attempt is made, usually by his father or his maternal grandfather, to kill him, but
(7) He is spirited away, and
(8) Reared by foster-parents in a far country.
(9) We are told nothing of his childhood, but
(10) On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.
(11) After a victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast,
(12) He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and
(13) Becomes king.
(14) For a time he reigns uneventfully, and
(15) Prescribes laws, but
(16) Later he loses favour with the gods and/or his subjects, and

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Clearly, parts one to thirteen correspond roughly to Rank’s entire scheme, though Raglan himself never read Rank. Six of Raglan’s cases duplicate Rank’s, and the anti-Freudian Raglan nevertheless also takes the case of Oedipus as his standard. The victory that gives the hero the throne is not, however, Oedipal, for the vanquished is not necessarily his father, even if, as for Rank, the father is usually the one who had sought his son’s death at birth. Parts fourteen to twenty-two do not correspond at all to Campbell’s scheme. The hero’s exit is loosely akin to the hero’s journey, but for Raglan there is no return. For Rank, the heart of the hero pattern is gaining kingship or other title. For Raglan, the heart is losing kingship. Wherever Campbell’s heroes are kings, the heart is their journey while king.

Raglan’s hero can be any adult. Raglan’s must be not only a male but also a king. Campbell’s hero must – or should – be human. Raglan can be either divine or human.

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For all Raglan’s touting of the symbiosis of myth and ritual, his myth and ritual seem incongruously out of sync. In the myth the protagonist is usually human. In the ritual the protagonist is always divine. The myth runs from the birth of the protagonist to his mysterious death. The ritual enacts only the portion of the myth that corresponds to the replacement of the king: the exile of the incumbent. Raglan nevertheless equates the myth with the ritual. In both, the central figure is the king. What Raglan considers the core of the myth – the toppling of the king – corresponds to the undeniable core of the ritual – the killing of the king when he either weakens or finishes his term. Strictly, the myth, which describes the life of a past hero, is less the script than the inspiration for the ritual, which involves the killing of the present king. The myth is intended to spur the king to submit to the ritual and thereby be a hero to his subjects.

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takes Raglan’s form. Or one might deny the pattern itself – denying either that it applies worldwide or that it even applies substantially to Raglan’s own cases. By Raglan’s own tally, none of his examples scores all twenty-two points, and one scores only nine. What of hero myths in which the hero, rather than seeking or becoming king, remains the outsider in conflict with the established king – for example, the conflict in the Iliad between Achilles and Agamemnon? Rank can at least assert that hero myths which stray from his scheme are distortions created to keep the true pattern hidden. Raglan can use no comparable ploy: there is nothing in his pattern to be kept a secret. Why, then, one might ask, do not any of his hero myths, if not all hero myths, attain perfect scores?

PROBLEMS POSED BY THE THEORIES

The point of this article is not to defend these three specific theories of hero myths or any specific theories of myth per se. The point is to use these three theories to defend theorizing itself. As severe as the problems facing these theories are, they are surmountable, and theorizing should not be abandoned.

The problems posed are various. First, the theories are incompatible with one another, both in their patterns and in their explanations of those patterns. One response would be to note that there can be multiple and incompatible interpretations of individual myths. The problem is therefore not distinctively comparative. The solution: simply choose one theory over the others.

Second, the theories cover only certain kinds of hero myths. They apply to heroes of only one class, occupation, gender, or age. The solution: narrow the category covered by theories from that of hero myths per se to that of myths of royal or aristocratic heroes, myths of male heroes, myths of young heroes, and so on.

Third, the theories do not even work fully for the kinds of hero myths they do cover. No myth, including the myths selected by the theorists themselves, fits the pattern that is applied to it. But does any interpretation of an individual myth cover all aspects of it? The solution: allow, as Raglan allows himself, for a partial fit. But also recognize the fallback argument of Rank: that misfitting may be part of a cover-up. And recognize, too, the arguments of both Campbell

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and Rank: that myth is to be read symbolically rather than literally, so that a misfit at the literal level can still allow for a fit at the symbolic one. Because Raglan reads myth literally, he cannot enlist this argument.

The benefits of the theories

The benefits of the theories of myths outweigh the liabilities, especially when compared with the benefits offered by appeal to transmission. The theories of Rank, Campbell, and Raglan show similarities among hero myths beyond the mythology of a single culture or region. They venture beyond Indo-European or Semitic or Chinese myths to myths worldwide. They broaden the scale of comparative mythology.

The similarities to which these theories and all other theories point do not depend on the vagaries invoked by transmission. The similarities reflect human nature or the nature of society, and do so even if hero myths or myths per se are not to be found universally. Theories account not for the historical origin of similarities, the way transmission does, but for the recurrent origin, for the recurrence of hero myths or of myths generally. Even if myths are not universal, theories explain why they last for as long as they do. Transmission may explain where myths come from, but theories also explain why myths, whatever their origin, take hold. For all of these reasons, theories, while not incompatible with transmission as a source of similarities, are superior to transmission in the comparative study of mythology.

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In Defence of Theories of Myth

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The Divine Descent of Kings and the Germanic Pantheon

EMILY LYLE

ABSTRACT. Kings claiming descent from a god are familiar in the Germanic context and this study aims to increase understanding of the Germanic pantheon by showing that it is possible to theorise that two royal lineages, stemming from Tyr and Odin, are present within it. The methodology employed is that of creating a model. The study proposes that it is possible to explain the set of five male gods who are strongly represented in both narrative and place-name evidence – Tyr, Odin, Thor, Njord and Freyr – as forming alternating royal lineages. The system is seen as including two goddesses – an ancestress and a queen – who are represented in the Germanic context by Frigg and Freyja.

KEYWORDS: alternate succession, cosmology, Germanic, goddesses, gods, Indo-European religion, kingship, Old Norse, pantheon, prehistory

INTRODUCTION

The pre-Christian religious complexes in Europe can be understood as belonging to the broad sweep of indigenous religions throughout the world. These are the primary religions of humankind and one of their markers is that they lack the literacy that enabled the secondary religions of the book to come into existence. When there is no writing, peoples conceptualise and organise themselves differently from when there is writing and many intricate ways in which this can be done have been explored by anthropologists who have done fieldwork in small-scale societies.

However, the implications of this difference have not yet been fully brought to bear on the peoples whose languages fall into the Indo-European group. In these cases, the linguistic connections point us to a distant past and it is in that distant past that we have to seek the sort of relationship between a society and its gods to be expected of a

Cosmos 26 (2010), 23-35
One part of the model concerns what can be called genealogical time and represents people living within a four-generation capsule consisting of the current generation and the three preceding generations. Although valuable outcomes have resulted from minute and context-sensitive studies of this sort, they still leave the basic question about the nature of the core religion unanswered, and the time seems ripe for tackling it again. To do that we need a theory, and the point about a theory is that it is not initially accepted by everyone and so can form a focus for debate. I have been trying, through a variety of approaches, to determine the nature of this society (Lyle 1990; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009), and have arrived at a theoretical model of it (Lyle 2010).

Another part of the model is that the creation of the world through the emergence of the gods is not only a theogony but, as Jan Assmann has dubbed it in the Egyptian context, a “cratogy”, i.e. that it is a power structure legitimising kingship (Assmann 2008: 61). The new claim being made by my theory, in this case, is that the structure of a society of which we have knowledge through writing keeping exactly to a system laid down long before writing came into existence. We have to allow for millennia of diachronic developments from the core form. In these circumstances, scholarship has often preferred to produce studies within the narrower framework of one linguistic group. Although valuable outcomes have resulted from minute and context-sensitive studies of this sort, they still leave the basic question about the nature of the core religion unanswered, and the time seems ripe for tackling it again. To do that we need a theory, and the point about a theory is that it is not initially accepted by everyone and so can form a focus for debate. I have been trying, through a variety of approaches, to determine the nature of this society (Lyle 1990; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009), and have arrived at a theoretical model of it (Lyle 2010).

One part of the model concerns what can be called genealogical time and represents people living within a four-generation capsule consisting of the current generation and the three preceding generations. Although the point has not been stressed, it is clear from Indian, Greek, Roman and Celtic evidence that there was a strong awareness of this pattern, and Lin Foxhall, in the Ancient Greek context, has brought out its importance for the overall concept of time. She calls this four-generation period “human time” (Foxhall 1995: 132-5), and it has often been appreciated that this stretch of time (which falls within human memory) can be contrasted with a mythical time of the gods, as is done, for example, by Jan Assmann (1992: 55-6). The new claim being made by my theory is that the imagined time of the gods was conceived of as following the same pattern as human time, i.e. that there were gods of four generations falling into two groups that were equivalent to the current generation on the one hand (the young gods) and three previous generations on the other (the old gods).

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the proposed four-generation pantheon is the charter for a system by which the king was selected from alternate halves of the society in each generation. The strongest actual trace of this alternate kingship comes from early Hititite and Greek evidence (Finkelberg 2005: 65-89), but the Germanic concept of royal descent from the gods seems to throw more light on the pantheon. I aim here to draw out connections between Germanic kingship and the theoretical model.

**DESCENT FROM THE GODS**

Claims to divine descent mattered to Germanic kings and to the peoples they ruled. Long lines of descent, the longer the better, were articulated and were held to give legitimacy to a ruler. Early evidence comes from England where most of the royal lines were traced back to Woden (Dumville 1977). An exception is the East Saxons who traced their royal line back to Seaxnet, and it has been theorised that all the Saxons in England might have traced their lines back to the same god (Dumville 1977: 78). A lineage that contained a divine name or names might take its origin from a pagan god but we also find pagan god-names featuring at a much later point in an overall lineage that went back to Noah or to Adam, “the son of God”, enabling kings to draw power from both their euhemerised pagan heritage and also their Christian one (Faulkes 1978-9: 92-106; Davis 1996: 51-63).

**RE-DEFINING THE PANTHEON AS ROYAL FAMILY**

Study of descent from the gods takes us right to the heart of the nature of the human-divine relationship, and I propose that we can make it a starting-point to open up a fresh interpretation of the pantheon. This would have been quite impossible before critical approaches to such things as Snorri Sturluson’s overall view of the pagan universe came to the fore (see e.g. Clunies Ross 1994; Abram 2009). Scholars now have the capacity to pick apart the various strands that have come down in the patchy record available to us in literary sources, place names and archaeological finds, so that careful detailed statements can be made about many small aspects of the pagan heritage, and this will hopefully allow space for the insertion of new interpretative

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sults based on a more abstract modelling which will permit useful connections to be made to other Indo-European branches.

The gods have perhaps been thought of primarily as being responsible for particular areas of human concern (e.g. war, fertility), with their family linkage being secondary. However, when we put the idea of descent in the centre, the family linkage becomes paramount and, when the family linkage is that of a royal family, we have to concern ourselves with succession as well as with kinship. The stories that feature the figure of Odin in a senior generation being treated as “All-father” (Snorri, Gylfaginning 6-9, Faulkes 1987: 11-13; Poetic Edda, ed. Larrington, 1996: 6). Crucially, they also engage in mating with a goddess, as discussed in the next paragraph.

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**SUCCESION WITHIN THE PANTHEON**

As I realised some time ago when seeking a solution to the puzzle of the descent of the Irish Lugaid of the Red Stripes from three “fathers”, the triad of old gods with different characteristics implies the existence of two lineages, one of which contains the grandfather and father of the king and the other of which contains another male of the father’s generation who could potentially (in a close-knit system) be the king’s uncle (Lyle 2007; 2010).

According to this interpretation, the old-god triad can be presented in terms of descent and succession, with Tyr as first king and Odin as second king and Njord as not a king. When there are two lineages, that non-king blank is needed to carry the line forward. One line of descent is Tyr, Njord, Thor (in the role of young king and Tyr’s grandson). The other line of descent is simply Odin among the old gods but the line of succession is from Odin to Thor as young king. Patrilineal descent and royal succession are distinguished from each other in a two-lineage system.

In terms of generations, the pattern runs as shown in Table 1.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lineage 1</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tyr (king)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Njord</td>
<td></td>
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Table 1. The posited kings in the pantheon

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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Freyr</td>
<td>Freyja</td>
</tr>
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Table 2. Royal succession among the gods

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Saxnot remains a riddle. Since he is named together with Thunaer and Woden, he must have been an important god. He must also have been known in England for the genealogies of the East Saxon kings are traced to a Saxon. Saxnot does not appear in the other royal genealogies, which shows that the kings of Essex were believed to descend from a divine ancestor who was not the parent of other dynasties. Saxnot has often been identified with Tyr, but chiefly because he is named together with two other great Germanic gods. Probably he was conceived originally as the eponymous god of the Saxons, whether his name meant “companion of the sword” or “friend of the Saxons”. (1964: 100)

It is not possible at present to be certain of the Saxnot-Tyr identification that has been proposed, but in any case the information available shows that the Germanic peoples who migrated into England had two different gods who could be placed at the head of dynasties, and it is certainly possible to entertain the idea that the lineages stemming from them relate to the two lineages distinguished here as those of Tyr / Nord and Odin / Freyr. It can be assumed that the balanced alternation between two lineages was lost, or largely lost, before the historical period and that each of the lineages developed a separate existence.

An interesting point that comes out of Brink’s recent study of theophoric place names in Scandinavia is that Tyr names are almost entirely confined to Denmark. As Brink notes: “In Denmark the cult of the gods was entirely confined to Denmark. As Brink notes: “In Denmark the cult of the gods was entirely confined to Denmark. As Brink notes: “In Denmark the cult of the gods was entirely confined to Denmark. As Brink notes: “In Denmark the cult of the gods was entirely confined to Denmark. As Brink notes: “In Denmark the cult of the gods was entirely confined to Denmark. As Brink notes: “In Denmark the cult of the gods was entirely confined to Denmark. As Brink notes: “In Denmark the cult of the gods was entirely confined to Denmark. As Brink notes: “In Denmark the cult of the gods was entirely confined to Denmark. As Brink notes: “In Denmark the cult of the gods was entirely confined to Denmark. As Brink notes: “In Denmark the cult of the gods was entirely confined to Denmark. 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Odin is widely represented as royal ancestor (Faulkes 1978-9: 93-100) and there is also evidence for kings claiming descent from Ægis and this is especially abundant in Uppsala and its vicinity. (Sundqvist 2000: 129-59) Freyr himself being treated as a king is unexpected in terms of a two-lineage system (and would have to be accounted for by positing a shift to a single lineage pattern), but a human king being considered a descendant of Freyr is in keeping with the model, which places Freyr firmly in the group of gods concerned with succession.

CONCLUSION
Although changes in the structures of kinship and succession have necessarily led to the disintegration of the primary pattern in the mythic narratives, the outlines of a two-lineage system can still be made out. It is not possible at present to resolve all the questions raised in relation to the sovereignty. The long lines of human royal ancestors found in history could have been a secondary development, distancing the king from the gods at the same time as it tied them to them. The original concept could have been that the king mirrored the god and in a sense belonged to the pantheon. It is especially interesting to see the fertility gods, Njord and Freyr, forming a distinct category that is defined as being excluded from kingship. If this idea is found to be valid, it would add significantly to our understanding of these gods.

The proposed system is a coherent one and this discussion should enable us to look with fresh eyes at the Germanic pantheon and to see points of correspondence with Indo-European patterns. The concepts explored here outline a pantheon with shape and purpose and imply a close correspondence between the religious structures of the prehistoric people in whose time the pattern was laid down. The element of social structuring within a cosmological society gives an

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extra layer to draw on that supplements the evidence of verbal forms such as toponyms and myths and I argue that taking account of this layer may sometimes enable us to reach new conclusions.

References


The Divine Descent of Kings and the German Pantheon


Helping the Cosmos: The Indian *Avatāras*

MARY BROCKINGTON

ABSTRACT. *The Sanskrit term* avatāra *means the coming down from heaven of a god, usually Viṣṇu, in a form not his own, to perform on earth a specific task that will benefit the universe, usually rescuing the earth from some kind of catastrophe. Several of the ten avatāras figuring in the developed codification perform a cosmogonic function, and some of the tales attached to avatāras also provide interesting early examples of international narrative motifs; but in the case of the fully anthropomorphic examples, their role as avatāras does not entirely correspond to their modern popular religious function.

KEYWORDS: avatāra, Viṣṇu, cosmogony, narrative motifs, bhakti

A necessary starting-point for this essay is to define the term avatāra, because it is frequently misunderstood in the West. The avatāra-concept is fundamental to Vaiṣṇava doctrine, but it is not limited to Vaiṣṇavas (those who revere Viṣṇu), nor is it Hinduism’s equivalent of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, although there are some analogies. What the Sanskrit word actually means is, literally and physically, “descent”: in this case, the coming down of a god, usually but not exclusively Viṣṇu, in a form not his own, from heaven (thought of as up above) on to the earth beneath, to perform a specific task which will benefit the universe, usually seen as rescuing the earth from some kind of catastrophe. The development of the term, and the related concept of “unburdening” the earth, were charted by Paul Hacker (1978 [1960]).

The concept is not found in the earliest phases of Indic religion, where the systems now named “Hinduism” had not yet emerged. Absent from Vedic thought, it begins to develop in the epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, only in their very latest stages (from perhaps the third century AD onwards), and the word itself is not applied to the concept until considerably later (Brockington 1998: 277-89, 460-3; Brinkhaus 1993). It was then gradually codified with
varying numbers of *avatāras*, from four to twenty-nine, but the number settled down relatively early as ten, although not always the same ten individuals; it was not until the eighth century AD that general acceptance was accorded to the standard list:

1. Matsya: “fish”
2. Kūrma: “tortoise”
3. Varāha: “boar”
5. Vāmana: “dwarf”
6. Rāma Jāmadagnya: “Rāma son of Jamadagni”
7. Rāma Dāśarathi: “Rāma son of Daśaratha”
8. Krṣṇa (sometimes replaced by his brother Balarāma: “Strong Rāma”)
9. Gautama Buddha: “Gautama the enlightened one” (alternatively the Jina)
10. Kalki

The first five and sometimes the last one are all non-human figures (or are at least not fully human) and tell cosmological stories, sometimes using early examples of narrative motifs analogous to those found in later international tale-types. The first three, and arguably the tenth, are examples of the familiar motif of the Animal Helper (the animal who has greater powers than his human or demonic apparent superior); indeed, in the fullest versions the fish-*avatāra* plays the role of a Grateful Animal. Numbers 6, 7 and 8 are all human heroes whose stories were made popular by the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*.

Our sources of knowledge of the *avatāras* are early texts (the epics and the Purāṇas for the developed form of the stories), but more valuable sources are sculptural, usually in the form of carvings on temple façades. To take only one example, the narrative frieze from the sixth-century AD Daśāvatāra (“Ten *avatāras*”) temple at Deogaṛh in Madhya Pradesh, south of Jhansi (now in the National Museum, New Delhi), antedates any extant manuscripts by several centuries, so it is all the more regrettable that such valuable evidence is so often overlooked, or admired for its artistic qualities rather than studied for its narrative content. Sculptures or paintings of the *avatāra*-figures of various dates can be found in most collections of South Asian art, and are reproduced in all the standard textbooks, catalogues and guides,
so I will mention only three that deserve to be better known: the
detailed investigation and reproduction of fourteenth- to sixteenth-
century sculptures at Vijayanagara in Karnataka, southern India; the
catalogue of an album of gouaches painted before the middle of the
eighteenth century in the south-east of the neighbouring state of
Andhra and now in Warsaw University Library; and the catalogue of
an exhibition of eighteenth-century paintings at the Museum
Rietberg, Zürich (Dallapiccola and Verghese 1998: 45-54, figures 25-
35 and plates 43, 44 and 46; Jakimowicz-Shah 1983: particularly
pages 70-103, 112-22 and 160; and Holm, Fischer and Fischer 2006
respectively).

The *avatāra*-figures were not invented or developed *ex nihilo*
along with the concept: they all had some previous existence in a
form which was not always entirely compatible with the use to which
it was now being put. This process of adaptation and codification also
enables us to chart the rise in significance of Viṣṇu, the Preserver,
and the corresponding decline of the earlier “helper” figure, the
Creator-god Brahmā or Prajāpati, who had been the original
protagonist in the first three stories. In this essay I limit myself to the
formative stages, but the concept is still very much alive (Schreiner
1999: 275), although the word is also often used loosely as if it were
the equivalent of “reincarnation” (e.g. Smith 1991 *passim*). In some
cases the *avatāra* figure has developed a prominent local cult, which
may even overshadow his status as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu; a particular
example is the popularity of Naraśiṃha in Karnataka, which perhaps
reflects and preserves some archaic significance antedating his
acceptance into the *avatāra*-scheme.

An introductory element to a relatively early form of *avatāra*-story
is that the gods, worried by the depredations of some anti-god,
approach Brahmā for help, and he issues appropriate instructions to
Viṣṇu (e.g. *Rāmāyana* 1,14.4-15.7 and *Mahābhārata* 3,260.1-5; 3
both are versions of the birth of Rāma Dāśarathi). In the more developed
forms the gods approach Viṣṇu himself and implore him to intervene;
see for example *Brahmapurāṇa* 213.72-5 and 73.9-22 (Narasimha
this scene is represented in painting, rather than verbally, the artist
may seize the opportunity, no doubt for sound commercial reasons, to
enhance his patrons’ prestige by including them in the deputation; 5 by
doing so, he incidentally emphasises the dual nature of the *avatāra*’s
role, to protect gods and to protect mankind. That it was usually
Viṣṇu who should be chosen as saviour is probably due to the generally benevolent role as Preserver that he was to assume in the trimūrti concept – the other two members of this divine triad being Brahmā, the creator, and Śiva, the destroyer. Śiva too can generate avatāras, but these are of far less prominence, for he is viewed as an outsider, living in the Himālaya, associated with asceticism and destruction and haunting cremation grounds. Whether he and his wife are portrayed as beautiful or ugly, their activity is always fearsome.

(1) MATSYA: “FISH”

The first avatāra is usually Matsya, the Sanskrit common noun for “fish”. This story goes back to the sixth century BC or earlier (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 1.8.1; Brockington 1998: 279), but according to the Mahābhārata version composed a few centuries later the seer Manu cares for a little fish until it grows huge and warns him of an impending flood which will cleanse and destroy the world; instructed by the fish, Manu builds an ark and takes into it Seven Seers and the seeds of all creatures. The fish is conveniently provided with a horn on its head which Manu lassoes using a snake as rope, and tows the ark across the flood to the highest peak of the Himālaya, where it reveals itself to be a god: Prajāpati or Brahmā in the earlier sources, Viṣṇu in later ones. Manu then re-creates the world and all its creatures (Mahābhārata 3,185, cf. MBh 12,300; tr. van Buitenen 1975: 583-85 and Fitzgerald [forthcoming] respectively). The story is developed in various Purāṇas, chiefly the Matsyapurāṇa (Brockington 1998: 279). One later extension of the myth involves no fewer than two Viṣṇu-avatāras in the same story: Hayagrīva, a demon with a horse’s head, steals the Vedas, and Viṣṇu takes on a similar form to recover them. The outline of this cosmogonic story is familiar from the early literature of many cultures, and its precise relationship to the Hebrew, Mesopotamian and Classical Flood Myths is a matter of debate among Indologists. The Biblical story is complicated by the fact that Yahweh must be portrayed as all-powerful, but this leads to him contradicting himself twice: he sends the Flood to destroy the earth, but saves the righteous Noah, then repents and promises not to do it again (Genesis 6-8). The position of Indian gods is more ambivalent, and here at least they are subject to
natural forces: it is important to note that the Indian flood has not been sent by the gods.

(2) KŪRMA: “TORTOISE”

In the second cosmogonic story the gods and their opponents churn the ocean, hoping to produce the amṛta, the nectar of immortality; in doing so they produce all sorts of objects, many with a cosmological significance, including Lakṣmī the goddess of wealth and fortune who in later developments became the consort of Viṣṇu. They use a mountain as churning stick, and turn it in Indian fashion, but with a snake, not a rope. To stop the mountain sinking into the ocean bed, they pivot it on a tortoise (kūrma), an animal with a significant role in Vedic ritual. Early versions of the story found in the Brāhmaṇas again identify the tortoise with Prajāpati; at Mahābhārata 1,16.10-11 it is Akūpāra, king of tortoises, but Viṣṇu is introduced to direct operations; not until Viṣṇupurāṇa 1,9.86 does Viṣṇu become the tortoise himself (Brockington 1998: 279-80; van Buitenen 1973: 73-4).

(3) VARĀHA: “BOAR”

Viṣṇu’s form as Varāha, a boar, can be shown with a gigantic anthropomorphic body and a boar’s head, but sometimes wholly as a boar. A huge rock-cut example of the first type can be seen at Udayagiri near Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh, and impressive figures of the wholly animal type are preserved in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford (acc. no. 1969.43), in a shrine facing the Lakṣmaṇa temple in the western group at Khajurāho, and in the museum at the bottom of the ridge at Gwalior. This myth blends together several different stories of a boar raising the goddess Pṛthivī (the earth) from the depths of the ocean; again, at an early stage of development the protagonist is Prajāpati, though the Mahābhārata text already identifies him as Nārāyaṇa, a figure later himself to become identified with Viṣṇu (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 14,1.2.11; Mahābhārata 3,100.19-22; van Buitenen 1975: 420; Brockington 1998: 280-1, citing Brinkhaus 1991 and Gail 1977b). In a third- to first-century BC passage the Rāmāyaṇa preserves an early form of the myth in which the earth is raised from the primeval waters by Brahmā as boar as part of creation (Rāmāyaṇa 2,102.2-3, trans. Pollock 1986: 303;
Brockington 1998: 461-2), while other sources have the earth sunk post-creation by various demons; later still (post fourth century AD), the earth has been sunk by the weight of over-population, and death has to be introduced to regulate the numbers (Mahābhārata 3 App. 16). Some iconographic texts require the Varāha figure to be shown with one leg placed upon a tortoise (kūrma) (Rangarajan 1995), but this prescription probably reflects the animal’s importance in Vedic ritual rather than a direct reference to Viṣṇu’s Kūrmāvatāra role. In the case of these non-human avatāras it is hardly appropriate to talk about a “descent”, for the setting is mostly some kind of mythical area, not corresponding to a geographical reality. In the case of the boar-avatāra it depends to a certain extent on whether the narrative is expressed in verbal or visual terms, that is to say, whether the earth is thought of as a material place or as a goddess; and whether men or gods are being helped depends largely on how great a measure of reality is given to the metaphor. In practice these niceties are largely irrelevant.

(4) NARASIṆHA: “MAN-LION”

Unlike the other avatāra myths, we do not know the first form of the Narasimha story, but it must antedate the earliest extant reference at Mahābhārata 3,100.20c, since that is a summary (trans. Van Buitenen 1975: 420; Soifer 1991: 73; Brockington 1998: 281-2; for translations of Purāṇic versions see Soifer 1991: 161-91). Hiraṇyakaśipu, secure in the possession of a boon of invincibility, is wreaking havoc, usurping the gods, dominating the cosmos, and eventually ignoring the advice of his pious son. He cannot be killed by god or man or animal, with any weapon, by day or night, by dry or wet, so Viṣṇu appears at twilight, in a form half man, half lion, and tears out his entrails with his claws. This man-lion story is not found in the Vedas, but what is interesting about these later accounts is that they incorporate and develop the motifs associated with the Paradoxical Task, motifs adapted to different contexts in widely collected oral narratives, but first recorded in India in a different Vedic story in the first half of the first millennium BC (Thompson 1955-58: motifs H 1050-77 and M 367.1; Ṛgveda 8, 14.13, trans. O’Flaherty 1981: 160; Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 12,7.3.1-3, trans. Soifer 1991: 38-9).
In that story Indra has promised not to kill the anti-god Namuci in any one of a number of possible ways, including “neither dry nor wet”, and “neither with the palm of my hand nor with my fist”; when it becomes necessary for him to take action, Indra wraps his thunderbolt in foam and kills Namuci at twilight. The “neither dry nor wet” proviso appears incongruously in the Narasiṃha story, where it is no longer apposite, and the passage from *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* 2.5.3-29 (tr. Soifer 1991: 162) makes a self-conscious effort to relate Viṣṇu’s use of his claws as a weapon to this proviso rather than to the appropriate but here unexpressed “neither with the palm of my hand nor with my fist”. This particularly ferocious form of justice is reproduced with gusto on the pillars of many temples in Karnataka, where the medium of sculpture has enabled its practitioners to represent with dramatic force and accuracy a scene found only at a late stage in the verbally-expressed texts: Narasiṃha appears to be bursting out of the pillar of a temple verandah, as if circumventing a new guarantee that the monster would be killed “neither within a building nor outside” (Soifer 1991: 97, 103). Narasiṃha is widely revered in Karnataka, and is also found depicted as a sage deep in meditation (Dallapiccola and Verghese 1998: plates 45-6), implying the existence of some variant tradition, possibly an archaic local cult; Soifer points out that Narasiṃha is an ambivalent character who also has links with the cult of Śiva, the Destroyer, and in some texts remains a threat (Soifer 1991: 89-93) – an Indic equivalent of letting the genie out of the box.

(5) VĀMANA: “DWARF”

The demonic King Bali had also contrived to dominate the whole of the three worlds, so when an innocent-looking dwarf (Vāmana simply means “dwarf”) came and asked for as much land as he could cover in three strides, the unsuspecting Bali granted the request without hesitation. Vāmana asked to be sprinkled with holy water, and then suddenly turned back into the gigantic figure of Viṣṇu. With one stride he covered the whole earth, with a second he covered the heavens. In some versions he won the underworld too for the gods with his third stride, in others he forbore to take the third stride and left lordship of the underworld to Bali (Soifer 1991); versions which later rehabilitate Bali have been studied by Clifford Hospital (1984). A striding exploit, this time ascribed to Viṣṇu from the beginning,
had been known from as early as the *Ṛgveda* (perhaps 1000 BC), but there it is a simple creation myth; he strode through the universe to subdue it and bring it into the power of the gods. Subsequently the striding was adapted to the defeat of a demon, but the element of deception by a dwarf to achieve this end was not incorporated till later still (*Rāmāyana* 1.28.2-11; Goldman 1984:179; *Mahābhārata* 3.100.19-22; van Buitenen 1975: 420 [and 3 App. 27.64-82, but no deceptive dwarf is found at 12,326.74-6]; Brockington 1998: 282-3 and 462, citing Tripathi 1968). This is a very early record of the Deceptive Land Purchase motif (Thompson 1955-58: K 185), which takes many forms throughout the world, the most famous in Europe being the ox-hide cut into strips by Dido to enable her to acquire enough land to found Carthage.

(6) **RĀMA JĀMADAGNYA: “RĀMA SON OF JAMADAGNI”**

Rāma Jāmadagnya (also known as Rāma Bhārgava: “Rāma descendant of Bhṛgu” and Paraśurāma: “Rāma with the axe”) is a complex character with many different narratives attached to him, including a cosmogonic episode in which he created a tract of land around Śūrpāraka (near Mumbai) by frightening the sea into retreating. It is not clear why he became associated with Viṣṇu (or sometimes with Śiva) and included in purāṇic lists of *avatāras*, but the episode that has become accepted as the reason, and has been rationalised as a beneficial action in relieving the overpopulated Earth of a large part of its burden, is that in order to avenge the murder of his father he killed many thousands of men of the warrior class (*kṣatriyas*), repeating the slaughter twenty-one times in a genocidal frenzy. He is particularly noted for his extreme reactions; in another, and later, demonstration of his filial piety, he unhesitatingly beheads his mother in obedience to his father’s over-hasty command. 8

(7) **RĀMA DĀŚARATHI: “RĀMA SON OF DAŚARATHA”**

Rāma Dāśarathi is a very different kind of warrior, and a contrasting exemplar of filial piety; he is the hero of the *Rāmāyana*, the person usually meant when the name “Rāma” is used on its own. In order to fulfill a rash vow made by his father, the virtuous prince Rāma insisted on leaving his comfortable life at court in favour of a life of hardship in the forest, eventually defeating a demon, Rāvaṇa, who has
abducted Rāma’s wife Sītā. This heroic romance, probably composed around the fifth century BC, was developed by later generations into a religious epic in which, by about the third century AD, Rāvaṇa was seen, in addition to being Rāma’s private enemy, as the enemy of the gods, threatening the stability of the whole cosmos, and invulnerable to all supernatural beings; only a man would be able to defeat him, so Viṣṇu became incarnate, technically taking on the fourfold manifestation of Rāma and his three brothers, although only Rāma is seriously considered to be the avatāra-figure. Rāma, today popularly known as Rāmacandra, “Rāma the moon”, or simply as Rām, has as it were outgrown his earlier position as a manifestation of Viṣṇu and now achieved the role of god in his own right. The contrast between this Rāma and the preceding Rāma Jāmadagnya is brought out at Rm 1,73-5, a passage probably incorporated into the Rāmāyaṇa in about the third century AD, in which the two avatāras illogically but dramatically confront each other, and the young Rāma Dāśarathi triumphs defiantly over his fearsome previous incarnation.

(8) KRṢṆA (SOMETIMES REPLACED BY HIS BROTHER BALARĀMA: “STRONG RĀMA”)

Krṣṇa is another character whose origin is difficult to unravel. He is not even the hero of the epic in which he is first recorded, the Mahābhārata, where he plays a non-combatant role as adviser and comforter to the heroes, as charioteer to Arjuna, and most famously, but only in the later stages of redaction, as expounder of the Bhagavadgītā; what gave rise to his avatāra-status, and possibly to the avatāra-concept as a whole, was the inclusion, at a late stage, of his theophany in the Bhagavadgītā (which is itself a late part of the Mahabhārata). His story was subsequently expanded in other directions, notably in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, and so elevated is his status now that it is sometimes thought inappropriate for him to appear merely as one among the avatāras, and his place in the scheme is then given to his elder half-brother, Balarāma. Krṣṇa can even generate avatāras of himself, as Peter Schreiner has noted for recent times, although understanding of the concept and its major figures can sometimes be hazy (Schreiner 1999: 275; Smith 1990: 6).
(9) GAUTAMA BUDDHA: “GAUTAMA THE ENLIGHTENED ONE” (ALTERNATIVELY THE JINA)

By contrast, *avatāra* number 9 is a semi-historical figure. To find the Buddha, or sometimes the Jina (the founder of the Jain faith), reckoned among these incarnations of a Hindu god seems rather strange, but their role is to preserve the purity of Hinduism by leading the unwary to perdition (Brockington 1998: 286-7; Gail 1969); these leaders of heterodoxy have been turned into “helpers” of orthodoxy.

(10) KALKI / KALKIN

Kalki, the last *avatāra*, has not yet appeared. Viṣṇu will again descend to earth, this time as a swordsman riding a white horse, alternatively just as the white horse, to purge and destroy the world at the end of this present degenerate age in a process which might be thought to stretch the usual definition of “help”, but nonetheless contributes to the overall cosmological plan. This millennial figure may have been inspired by the idea of Maitreya, the future Buddha, an idea itself influenced by Zoroastrian sources brought into northwest India during a period of invasions between the second century BC and the second century AD (Brockington 1998: 287). Unlike the eschatological events in other cosmological schemes such as Christianity or Scandinavian religion, this destruction is not final, for the Indian view of time is not linear but cyclical. Viṣṇu spends some time sleeping on the cosmic snake before a lotus stem springs from his navel and from its bud there emerges again the creator-god Brahmā, ready to restart the whole process of creation, degeneration, intervention, dissolution and re-creation.

The term “helper” pre-supposes a second party, the person or group to be “helped”. In the context of Brahmanical observance under which the *avatāra*-concept was developed, the implicit understanding is normally that the status, needs or interests of the “helped” are superior to those of the “helper”; the “helper” is an “assistant” rather than “one who confers a benefit”: bottom-up, rather than top-down. The human *avatāras*, though gifted with superhuman strength, have voluntarily given up their divine attributes when they take birth on earth, and the process by which they are made aware of their divinity is a complex one, given that the outline plot and characterisation of
their stories had been fixed several centuries before the whole concept of the *avatāra* emerged. Given too the stature of the *avatāras*, the situations remedied are of correspondingly cosmic importance, a threat to the universe as a whole (not even just to humanity), for instability and lack of order on earth are bound up with instability and lack of order in the natural world. The gods’ fears of domination by the anti-gods do not spring from class-selfishness alone, and even the Buddha or the Jina have a valid role to play in this process. In the *avatāra*-system, Viṣṇu himself appears to be above the problems of the cosmos, acting not on his own behalf, but in response to the supplication of the other gods, as if he is not quite one of them.

The *avatāras* do not intervene in private struggles, however great their impact on individual human beings. This causes something of a problem in the case of both Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, the most prominent of the human *avatāras*. Accordingly, Rāma’s quarrel, originally personal and lacking even national implications, was transformed into a cosmic struggle when it was adapted to accommodate Viṣṇu’s descent on to the scene, and Kṛṣṇa’s actual deeds, whether his participation in the action of the *Mahābhārata* or his vengeance on his wicked uncle, make little contribution to his status as *avatāra*.

It is the contrasting mediaeval bhakti devotional tradition that reverses the process and introduces the top-down element, the gracious, approachable god, Rāma or Kṛṣṇa, who intervenes to help individual worshippers overcome their personal difficulties. From almost the earliest stages of the *Ramāyaṇa*’s development some of Rāma’s military exploits had raised uneasy moral questions: eventually in 1932 the Hindi poet Maithilīśaraṇ Gupta published *Sāket*, presenting a bhakti-influenced view of Rām as born to show people the right way to a fulfilled existence, while accommodating this view to Rām’s epic role with the underlying implication that this will involve freeing India from British rule (Stasik 2002).

In the developed form of the Kṛṣṇa story as presented by the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, Kṛṣṇa is first a rascally, adorable baby growing up incognito among a group of cow-herders, then a wild, defiant and charming teenager with whom all the young wives of the area fall helplessly in love. He is physically precocious and accomplished too, and defeats a number of deadly demons before killing his uncle, a tyrant who has usurped Kṛṣṇa’s father’s throne. His popular charm and graciousness as a herdsman flute-player have led to him, like
Rāma, becoming one of the major gods of modern Hindus; whether his romantic and erotic escapades are to be taken at face value or interpreted as an allegory of the soul’s union with the divine is largely a matter for the devotee.

As with Rāma, the dichotomy between the concepts of *avatāra* and *bhakti* is not complete. Kṛṣṇa’s personal victories are supplemented by an episode reflecting the triumph of a new form of religion over the old Vedic gods. The youthful cowherd persuades his tribe to stop worshipping Indra, the rain god, in favour of the mountain Govardhana; Indra, outraged, retaliates with storms and floods, so Kṛṣṇa picks up the mountain, balances it on the tip of the little finger of his inauspicious left hand – a studied insult – and shelters people and cattle beneath it like an umbrella until Indra acknowledges the boy’s superiority; this protective gesture is minor compared to the exploits of the true *avatāras*, but it reflects a considerable development from his original *Mahābhārata* role as non-combatant charioteer and adviser of his friend Arjuna in a devastating but essentially personal battle; it was the incorporation into that epic, at a late stage, of his *Bhagavadgītā* theophany that gave rise to his *avatāra*-status, a starting-point which can act equally as the summation of the whole concept: “Whenever there occurs a decline in righteousness and a surge in unrighteousness, then I send forth myself. To protect the good and to destroy evil-doers, in order to establish righteousness, I come into being from age to age.” (*Bhagavadgītā* 4.7-8, trans. Brockington 1998: 273; cf. van Buitenen 1981: 87)

Mary Brockington is an independent scholar and a Research Fellow of the International Association of Sanskrit Studies. She has worked on narrative techniques in traditional literature, particularly the Rāmāyaṇa.

Notes

1 This essay is an amplified version of a talk first presented at a joint conference of the Traditional Cosmology Society and the Katharine Briggs Club at the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, October 2000, on the theme of “Supernatural Helpers”.
Using the term “Hinduism” to denote Indic religion before the 4th century AD at the earliest is no more appropriate than using the terms “Protestant”, “Catholic”, or “Orthodox” for Christianity at a similar date.

Tr. Goldman 1984: 153-5 and van Buitenen 1975: 730-1 respectively.

The Purāṇas are a class of sprawling, religiously-oriented texts compiled over a long period after the epics were largely complete.

A good example is provided by a miniature by an eighteenth-century painter at the court of the Mewari princes in Rajasthan; it is preserved in the City Palace Museum, Udaipur. The same technique was frequently used in European mediaeval religious painting.

See also Brinkhaus (2000) for the relationship of the seer Mārkaṇḍeya to a developed form of the episode.

For detailed iconographic prescriptions see Rangarajan (1995).

The complexities of the traditions surrounding him are explored in Gail (1977a) and Fitzgerald (2002).

The Bhagavadgītā was probably not incorporated into the Mahābhārata until the first and second centuries AD, with the theophany being added at the end of this period.

I explored this situation a little more fully in my contribution to a related conference on Supernatural Enemies (Brockington 2001: 56-7).

References

Texts and translations

Mary Brockington


Secondary literature


Cosmos in a Painting – Reflections on Judeo-Christian Creation Symbolism

FRANCISCO VAZ DA SILVA

ABSTRACT. This paper addresses the cosmological assumptions underpinning an enigmatic variation on the Madonna-and-Child image, in which the Child Jesus appears as a dragon slayer. In order to evoke the mental landscapes that could make sense of this composition, the discussion visits folklore, Christian art, and the Scriptures. By and by, it finds that the enigmatic image analogizes the story of Genesis and an ancient dragon-fight myth, so that Mary’s victory over the ancient serpent both redeems the fault of Eve and reflects God’s primordial victory over the dragon. The image also draws on the traditional analogy between the Father’s victory over marine chaos and the Son’s overcoming of the Ancient Law, which allows treating the birth, baptism, and resurrection of Jesus as so many variations on a single theme. The discussion suggests that the enigmatic composition draws on a leitmotiv of scriptural writings – the defeat of the chthonic dragon, and the correlative victory of the celestial bird – and thus provides a striking example of symbolic condensation in a painting.

KEYWORDS: Christian Symbolism, Art, Dragon-slayer, Bible, Creation

This paper proposes a quest for the cosmological assumptions underpinning a remarkable fresco, dated 1738, which I found painted on a house facade in Radovljica, Slovenia. This fresco, bearing the caption Bitte für uns, o (Heilige) Gottes Gebererin (“Pray for us, oh Holy God’s Scion”), depicts the Virgin Mary holding her child, who, in turn, is engaged in the act of overpowering a dragon (see Figure 1). This detail is puzzling, for nothing in the New Testament appears to justify the notion of the Child Jesus enacting the venerable dragon-slayer’s role – and yet, there must be an underlying rationale for this image. Obviously the anonymous author of this fresco has sought to communicate something, but what might this be?

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To solve this problem, it is best to start by getting a sense of the
fresco’s organizing ideas by looking at the composition as a whole. At first sight it is clear that the setting is tripartite, and the Madonna and Child stand between heaven and earth. On the celestial end of the painting, Mary’s blond head is covered with blue and is surrounded by a fluttering blue dove, by a solar orange blot, and by angelic heads. The fact that this heavenly region takes up most of the space in the painting suggests that the fresco emphasizes the notion that the Madonna stands above the sublunary realm where humanity dwells. Note that the whole sublunary region appears compressed, for the moon sits right on top of the earth. One level below, the deep blue earth hints to that chthonic/marine realm one may call the netherworld. At this lowest level, a red-and-greenish serpentine dragon raises its head close to the horned (crescent) moon. Interestingly, the dragon’s body is bent so as to replicate the lunar shape – and Mary’s right foot stands almost on the moonlike curve of the serpentine body. From above, the Child Jesus plunges a long-shafted cross vertically into the dragon’s throat. Overall, two things seem noteworthy. First, the vertical axis unifying this cosmic scenario is populated by both Mary’s body and the long-shafted cross. Second, two animals mark the ends of the vertical axis connecting heaven and hell – there is the celestial dove up above, and the chthonic snake down below.

At first glance, this is about as much as can be said about the Radovljica fresco. While it is clear that definite cosmological notions undergird the fresco, we are still clueless as to how to understand them. Therefore, we need to deploy a comparative procedure in order to reconstitute the conceptual universe that the fresco displays. This is possible because religious paintings tend to convey stable themes by means of multiple variants. Since each variant displays one particular point of view, by taking into account a number of variants we should get a fuller image of the underlying theme. In other words, variants tend to illuminate one another while bringing out the essence of the common theme. So, then, to understand this fresco we need to lay out its themes in a comparative framework. Sometimes the comparative materials will be other paintings, and sometimes they will be scriptural texts. Either way, the unchanging procedure will consist in reconstituting the mental context for each aspect of the fresco, while fresco’s organizing ideas by looking at the composition as a whole. At first sight it is clear that the setting is tripartite, and the Madonna and Child stand between heaven and earth. On the celestial end of the painting, Mary’s blond head is covered with blue and is surrounded by a fluttering blue dove, by a solar orange blot, and by angelic heads. The fact that this heavenly region takes up most of the space in the painting suggests that the fresco emphasizes the notion that the Madonna stands above the sublunary realm where humanity dwells. Note that the whole sublunary region appears compressed, for the moon sits right on top of the earth. One level below, the deep blue earth hints to that chthonic/marine realm one may call the netherworld. At this lowest level, a red-and-greenish serpentine dragon raises its head close to the horned (crescent) moon. Interestingly, the dragon’s body is bent so as to replicate the lunar shape – and Mary’s right foot stands almost on the moonlike curve of the serpentine body. From above, the Child Jesus plunges a long-shafted cross vertically into the dragon’s throat. Overall, two things seem noteworthy. First, the vertical axis unifying this cosmic scenario is populated by both Mary’s body and the long-shafted cross. Second, two animals mark the ends of the vertical axis connecting heaven and hell – there is the celestial dove up above, and the chthonic snake down below.

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Figure 1. The Madonna and Child Between Dove and Snake (Radovljica, mural fresco).
keeping in mind the big question – how do those themes make sense together? Hopefully, by the time we come to acknowledge that the Scriptures made constant use of dragon-slaying imagery ever since Elohim parted the abyss to create heaven and earth, the obscure dragon fight in the Radovljica fresco will have turned into a clue to a fundamental aspect of Judeo-Christian symbolic thought.

MARY’S IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Our path is pre-determined, so to speak, for the main scene portrayed in the Radovljica fresco is quite standard in Christian painting. As I have shown elsewhere (Vaz da Silva 2004; 2008: 115-19), depictions of the Madonna standing between heaven and earth regularly portray Mary’s heavenly conception in terms of being above the moon and of defeating a snake. Such images suppose symbolic equivalence between the cyclic moon, the sloughing snake (both of which purportedly grow old and rejuvenate), and women’s cyclic power to bear new life. The underlying logic is relatively straightforward.

Whereas Eve became the mother of all humans, subjected to the cyclic moon under the spell of the primordial snake, Mary (deemed the New Eve) overcomes the procreative fate of women in the sublunary world. Thus, she is impregnated in the upper part of things – by a heavenly bird, through the ear – and thus stands above the moon while squashing the serpent of Eden under one foot.

One likely source for the Madonna’s cosmic standing is chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation, which depicts “a woman clothed in the sun, and the moon beneath her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars”, giving birth to the male child who “will shepherd all the nations with a staff of iron”. In this most famous vision by St. John at the island of Patmos, a great dragon threatens the woman and the child, but at length the beast is defeated and goes away “to do battle with the rest of her seed”. The reader may feel that this sounds familiar, and rightly so, for in Genesis 3:15 God had put eternal enmity between he snake’s seed and the woman’s seed. Indeed, the great dragon of the Book of Revelation is explicitly “the ancient snake.”

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Fig. 2. “The Debt is Paid” by Leopold Layer (Stična Religious Art Museum).
So the main idea is clear. Whereas Eve was defeated by the serpent, and thus ushered humankind to its fate under the cyclic moon, Mary overcomes the beast and dwells above the moon, crowned by twelve stars — same number as the zodiacal constellations girding the rolling heavens. This theme is most suggestively depicted in an eighteenth-century painting by Leopold Layer, “The Debt is Paid”, kept at the Slovenian monastery of Stična (see Figure 2). This painting displays the standard image of Mary: her cosmic standing with sunshine around her body, twelve stars and the dove above her head; and the moon, the serpent, and the earth below her feet. But Layer adds God to the upper part of to the picture so as to make clear that the dove symbolizes the spiritual conception of Jesus. Moreover, an angel erases the primordial fault in Eden as though to clarify that the dragon below Mary’s feet is the crafty snake of Eden. And, of course, the very name of this painting intimates that Mary in her spiritual conception is the New Eve. (By the same token, Jesus — whose sacrificial incarnation redeems the Original Sin — is the New Adam.)

One remarkable thing about the Radovljica fresco is that it weakens the Madonna’s serpent-taming function. Although the impregnating dove flutters by the Madonna’s head in a heavenly setting, as expected, Mary does not quite step on either the serpent or the moon. Rather, it is her son who conspicuously counters the serpentine dragon with his cross. The image of the Child Jesus carrying his cross is anachronistic, of course, and this very fact suggests that theology (not biography) is at stake. Therefore, we must grasp why the Child Jesus should be yielding the cross of his future sacrifice.

In short, the Radovljica fresco makes use of a traditional theme. According to this theme, the Virgin Mary stands between heaven and earth. While standing above the moon, a heavenly bird impregnates her through the ear and she defeats the serpent that ushered women into sublunary procreation (for further details, see Vaz da Silva 2008: 115-19).

CHILD JESUS WITH CROSS

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In two early-sixteenth-century paintings by Raffaello, *Alba Madonna* (held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington) and *Madonna of Belvedere* (held at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), the Virgin sits with two babies – John the Baptist and Jesus. In both paintings, John looks up at his divine cousin while holding the lower end of a miniature cross with his two hands – as though offering it – and Jesus grips the upper end of the cross with his right hand, as though accepting the offering. The intensity and solemnity of the scene belies the tender age of its actors. Indeed, this passing of the token of sacrifice depicts John the Baptist’s famous assertion: “I am not Christ…I am sent before him…He must increase, and I must decrease” (Jn 3:28, 30; cf. Jn 1:29, Mt 3:1-4, 11:10, Mk 1:2). Significantly, Augustine saw in this progression from the precursor to the messiah a fit template for the progress of the faithful “unto Him who died for all, and rose again” (Sermon 194, in St. Augustine 1952: 121-2). This analogy clearly brings out the sacrificial implication of the cross the Baptist is passing on: whereas the Precursor announces redemption of human sins, it is up to the Saviour to suffer it through. Thus, in Mantega’s late fifteenth-century depiction of the two infants in *Holy Family* (kept at the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden), the forerunner holds a miniature cross and, while pointing to his divine cousin, wears a ribbon that reads (after Jn 1:36), *ecce agnus dei*. In the same vein, Grünewald’s early fifteenth-century *Isenheim Altarpiece* (held at the Unterlindemuseum in Colmar, France) depicts the Baptist – flanked by the lamb of God, which carries the cross and bleeds into the chalice of Holy Communion – pronouncing “He must increase, and I must decrease” even as he shows Jesus writhing in agony on the cross. In short, the image of the Child Jesus yielding the cross emphasizes his sacrificial destiny. Such destiny implies, of course, that Jesus was destined to die even before being born. To make this point, some painters have resorted to the strange expedient of depicting the incarnating Jesus already carrying his cross while in transit towards Mary’s womb. Note that to depict the body of Jesus before he actually incarnated was a brave stance, for the dogmatic view that the Word took flesh in Mary’s womb entailed that – as Thomas Aquinas (2002: 240) put it.

In two early-sixteenth-century paintings by Raffaello, *Alba Madonna* (held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington) and *Madonna of Belvedere* (held at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), the Virgin sits with two babies – John the Baptist and Jesus. In both paintings, John looks up at his divine cousin while holding the lower end of a miniature cross with his two hands – as though offering it – and Jesus grips the upper end of the cross with his right hand, as though accepting the offering. The intensity and solemnity of the scene belies the tender age of its actors. Indeed, this passing of the token of sacrifice depicts John the Baptist’s famous assertion: “I am not Christ…I am sent before him…He must increase, and I must decrease” (Jn 3:28, 30; cf. Jn 1:29, Mt 3:1-4, 11:10, Mk 1:2). Significantly, Augustine saw in this progression from the precursor to the messiah a fit template for the progress of the faithful “unto Him who died for all, and rose again” (Sermon 194, in St. Augustine 1952: 121-2). This analogy clearly brings out the sacrificial implication of the cross the Baptist is passing on: whereas the Precursor announces redemption of human sins, it is up to the Saviour to suffer it through. Thus, in Mantega’s late fifteenth-century depiction of the two infants in *Holy Family* (kept at the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden), the forerunner holds a miniature cross and, while pointing to his divine cousin, wears a ribbon that reads (after Jn 1:36), *ecce agnus dei*. In the same vein, Grünewald’s early fifteenth-century *Isenheim Altarpiece* (held at the Unterlindemuseum in Colmar, France) depicts the Baptist – flanked by the lamb of God, which carries the cross and bleeds into the chalice of Holy Communion – pronouncing “He must increase, and I must decrease” even as he shows Jesus writhing in agony on the cross. In short, the image of the Child Jesus yielding the cross emphasizes his sacrificial destiny.

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trenchantly – anyone who affirms that Christ “brought down with Him a body formed of celestial matter…contradicts the truth of Scripture”. So, what points were these daring painters making? Consider the “Annunciation” scene depicted in the mid-fifteenth-century altarpiece at the Sainte-Marie-Madeleine church (Aix-en-Provence), in which the Madonna kneels before a Gothic lectern, her red velvet robe covered by a mantle of gold brocade displaying a floral pattern. While the angel announces the impending incarnation of Jesus, God the Father sends his word downwards to Mary’s exposed ear. The Word takes visible form as light rays, amongst which a tiny blond Jesus plunges into incarnation, head first, while carrying the cross. Likewise, in the early-fifteenth-century Madeleine Altarpiece by Robert Campin (held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) a tiny Jesus carrying the cross plunges head first amidst the light rays which descend from a window towards Mary’s receptive ear. In order to understand this image, note the constant association in European thought of head-first presentation with normal birth, and of feet-first presentation with passing away (see Belmont 1971: 129-47; Vaz da Silva 2008: 63, 73; cf. Feilberg 1907: 369). In this notional context, a head-first plunge into the womb while carrying the sacrificial cross connotes both the birth and the death of Jesus. Of course, this is in strict accordance with the theological point that Christ incarnates to die, and dies to resurrect. Jacopo da Varazze, in his thirteenth-century Golden Legend, stresses the correspondence between the Saviour’s incarnation and his resurrection by fusing both events on the same calendar slot (March 25), and he merges the significance of Christ’s birth and death by expressing the symbolic identity of the womb and the tomb – as Jacopo puts it, just as Jesus could leave his mother’s sealed womb, so He could exit the closed tomb (Voragine 2004: 264, 284). Incidentally, the intermingling of the notions of birth and death underling the assimilation of womb and tomb explains the tradition that Jesus was both born and buried in a cave.7 And note that the analogy between descent into a womb and into a tomb is not specifically Christian. As Macrobius explains the concept of Neo-Platonism, the body “being a ‘tomb’ of the soul”, incarnation entails being thrust “into the shades of death, as it were”.

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But, as we saw, the death connotation of incarnation is only half the story. The other half is the resurrection value of the Saviour’s death – and this is precisely what Christian art has represented by means of dragon fighting. Indeed, extant depictions of Jesus overpowering the dragon show that the monster represents the marine/chthonic abode of the dead. For example, an illumination in a late-thirteenth-century Latin manuscript of the Gospel of Nicodemos depicts Jesus overpowering with his cross a dragon’s head arising from the sea. This image refers to the tradition that the dead Christ, during the time he was buried, went down to hell and therein raised souls from the dead. Thus, the scene portrays Jesus keeping open the monster’s jaws with the cross while he pulls out Adam and Eve, David, Solomon, and John the Baptist. Another depiction of the same theme is shown on an altarpiece from the Narbonne Cathedral, dated c. 1375, displayed at the Louvre Museum in Paris. This altar cloth, destined for use during Easter celebrations, presents a sequence of scenes bearing on the Passion and Resurrection. The last three scenes depict sequentially the Entombment, then Jesus (conspicuously covered with the stigmata of his recent crucifixion) keeping the sea dragon in check with his cross while he pulls Adam and Eve out of its mouth, and these jaws overpowered with his cross. Overall, homologies between descent into the womb and into the tomb on one hand, and between birth and resurrection on the other, suggest that the beginning and the end of Christ’s sacrificial path blend into each other – for the divinity was born to die, and died to resurrect. Therefore, to acknowledge that the divine Word put on flesh to suffer redeeming passion amounts to granting that the long-drawn sacrifice of the Lamb of God started on the very moment of incarnation. In short, the plunging embryo with a cross bespeaks the death connotation of incarnation.

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The foregoing discussion implies equivalence between Christ’s entombment, descent into the netherworld, and incorporation by a dragon. In fact, this equivalence has been around by means of a well-known story. Jonah, famously swallowed and then regurgitated by a sea monster, has long been considered a forerunner of the buried and resurrected Christ. As Matthew (12:40) put it, “as Jonah was in the belly of the sea monster for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights” (Jones 1968). Augustine (City of God 18.30) emphasizes the resurrectional implication of this image when he specifies that Jonah was “taken into the belly of the monster, and given back on the third day, … to signify that Christ would come back from the depths of Hell on the third day” (St. Augustine 1984: 798). And this idea takes visible form in Maerten van Heemskerck’s mid-sixteenth-century Triptych of the Entombment (held at the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels), which depicts the entombment of Jesus in a sarcophagus bearing in bas-relief the image of Jonah exiting the sea-monster’s mouth, head first, in allusion to the forthcoming resurrection. All this supposes equivalence between exiting the dragon’s belly, exiting the netherworld, and resurrection. In other words, St. Augustine’s point that Jesus “had to die and rise again” (City of God 18.46) has been metaphorically conveyed after the pattern of being swallowed and again expelled by a dragon, and has been visually represented in the guise of dragon fighting.

Let us pause a moment, for this symbolic nexus requires some reflection before we proceed. The equivalence between being passively swallowed and then regurgitated, by a dragon and the act of actively fighting a dragon is as old as it is obscure. Think of it: why should a man’s death and return to life within the dragon amount to the slaying of the dragon by a man? Classicist Jane Ellen Harrison, at finding one particular instance of this general problem in her field of expertise, provided a precious insight. She was considering a Greek vase-painting allusive to Jason’s killing of the dragon and the finally the resurrected Christ’s apparition to Mary Magdalene. Taken together, these images tell us that the dragon fight takes place while the Saviour is buried, and that, consequently, victory over the dragon symbolizes Christ’s resurrection.

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Such insights suggest that dragon slaying entails rejuvenation in much the same sense as the sloughing of snakes supposedly involves discarding the old self. Hence, St. Paul’s famous casting of spiritual conversion in terms of stripping off the old man (Eph 4:22-23, Col. 3:9-10); hence, too, the longstanding idea that the young adder kills its father.” Indeed, depending on the perspective, the demise of the dragon may be seen as an act of self-renovation or as an aggression by the younger incumbent (see Coomaraswamy 1935: 2). Now, we know that the Radovljica fresco casts Jesus Christ as the New Adam, which implies positing transformation between acts in the New Testament and in the Old Testament. From this vantage, Jesus’s fight against the dragon takes a wider significance – for this monster, as we shall see, is both the old serpent of Eden and the primeval sea dragon. In other words, the bold act of Jesus Christ repeats Elohim’s primordial act, which suggests a longstanding connection between the dragon and the deity.

**Cyclic creation**

*At the beginning of things, the methodic ordering of the marine abyss in Genesis (1:13) – by separating light from darkness, upper waters from lower, and dry land from sea – was an attack on the sowing of its teeth, which, however, shows Jason half inside the open mouth of the dragon – his head towards the outside – for, as Harrison (1963: 435) puts it, “the dragon-slayer is of the dragon’s seed. He is being born anew from his jaws”. Remarkably, this insight matches Vladimir Propp’s independent conclusion that the dragon slayer is engendered by the dragon – in the twofold sense that one swallowed by the dragon acquires supernatural power even as he harms the beast from the inside, and that the dragon–slayer hero inherits the defeated dragon’s traits – so that, as Propp (1985: 263-4) puts it, “the dragon overcomes the dragon”. In the same vein (but, again, quite independently), Amanda Coomaraswamy (1943: 6) noted the tacit principle that the dragon slayer is related to the slain dragon or serpent “by filiation and younger brotherhood”, and is “alter ego rather than another principle”.

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undifferentiated wholeness of chaos, tantamount to assaulting the primordial sea dragon. Indeed, Psalm 74 (13-14) states that the same breath that God split the sea in two, smashed the head of monsters on the waters, and crushed Leviathan’s heads. Likewise, Job 26 (12-13) expresses the containment of primordial chaos by saying that God has calmed the sea and struck Rahab down, swept the heavens and pierced Leviathan. The constant idea is that the act of bringing primordial chaos under control consists in bounding unruly waters personified by the multi-headed dragon. Hence, the Lord himself describes in two parallel harangues his containment of the abyss waters and the taming of Leviathan (Job 38:8-11, 40:25-31). Moreover, Yahveh mentions to Job that where the abyss is deepest lie the gates of death and the realm of shadows (Job 38:16-17). Indeed, the “great fish” that swallows Jonah keeps him in tehom, the “abyss” (Jon 2:1, 6) — a word that also designates the primordial abyss of Genesis 1 — and the monster’s entrails are said to be the very belly of Sheol (In 2:1-3), which reportedly lay naked before God when he fought Rahab/Leviathan (Jb 26:5-14). In other words, the realm of the shadows lies in the sea dragon’s entrails, which is precisely the implication of the portrayals of Christ’s Harrowing of Hell as sea-dragon harassment.

Note that God did not actually eliminate the abyss, nor did he necessarily obliterate the dragon forever. Rather, he pent up the primordial waters so as to leave room for creation, and — according to certain sources (Jb 38:10, 40:25-30; see also Ginzberg 2003: 1:28, 1:30 n.124) — he made Leviathan a slave for life. Interestingly, this psalm conveys the notion that God made the abyss he then neutralizes, and created the dragon he then defeats (the view that God created the sea monsters is actually present in Gn 1:21, on which see Levenson 1994: 53-65). Now, to state that

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God made the abyss he then neutralizes, and created the dragon he then defeats, implies a cyclical view of creation. Certainly, from a cyclical point of view it is not contradictory to posit that the abyss is primordial (insofar as it contains the next creation) and yet has been created (for it is a remnant of previous creations).

There is growing scholarly acknowledgment that *creatio ex nihilo* is not, as Jon Levenson (1994: xxix, cf. 3-13) puts it, “an adequate characterization of creation in the Hebrew Bible”. In this trend, modern translators tend to render Genesis 1:1 as, “When God began to create heaven and earth” (Tanakh 1988: 3) or, “In a beginning when God created heaven and earth” (TOB 1989: 51 n.b). Of course, the indefiniteness of such beginning is in line with the statement, in Psalm 104 (5-7), that God himself had unleashed (how many times before?) the flood he then quells. Moreover, Jewish traditions are familiar with the idea that God “made several worlds before ours, but destroyed them all”. Indeed, extent stories in Rabbinical tradition recount that when the waters rebelled “God determined to let the whole of creation resolve itself into chaos again”, but then withdrew this command even as he confined the waters (Ginzberg 2003: 1:1, 12). In light of the foregoing discussion, God’s use of the rebellious waters for the purpose of destruction – and the subsequent quelling of the flood for creation – amounts to cyclically unleashing and then curbing the sea dragon, which is one possible way to understand the notion that Leviathan is God’s playing.

Although this time around God refrained from flooding the dry expanse, still the Flood story (Gen 6-9) confirms that God used to renew the world by allowing the deep to cover the mountains and then forcing the waters to subside (see Levenson 1994: 10-11). In Genesis 6 we learn that, since the earth had become corrupt before God, the Almighty instructs Noah to preserve the seed of every living thing inside a wooden ark. Then Genesis 7 describes how God causes the fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky to break open in order to blot out from the earth all existence he created, so that after forty days the waters cover even the highest mountains. Then Genesis 8 tells how, after the waters had swelled on the earth one hundred and fifty days, God decides to take action. As might be expected, such action echoes creation. First a divine wind stills the flood for creation – amounts to cyclically unleashing and then curbing the sea dragon, which is one possible way to understand the notion that Leviathan is God’s playing.

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waters (Gn 8:1 = Gn 1:2), and God quells the fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky, so that the rain stops and the separation between higher and lower waters is reinstated (Gn 8:2 = Gn 1:7). Thereafter the waters recede steadily from the earth (Gn 8:3, 13-14 = Gn 1:9-10), which allows living creatures to again swim over its surface (Gn 8:17 = Gn 1:22). Finally, chapter 9 makes it clear that, on the threshold of a renewed earth, Noah amounts to Adam. Just as God had exhorted Adam to be fertile and rule over the other living things (Gn 1:28), so now he blesses Noah and his sons to be fertile and dominate the other living things (Gn 9:1). But whereas Adam had caused the ground to be cursed (Gn 3:17), Noah actually redeems the soil from that curse (Gn 5:29, 8:21), which means that Noah is like Adam, only one level up in the time spiral – Adam with a clean slate, so to speak. And now the Creator pledges by solemn covenant never again to doom the earth because of man (Gn 8:21) – that is, never again to send a flood to destroy the earth (Gn 9:11).

Of course, there is no reason to doubt the Creator’s sincerity regarding this pledge. Just like depictions of dragon fighting on creation became distant memories, so did stories of punishing floods become passé. And yet, the pattern of renewal by immersion in the abyss – and the inherent dragon imagery – have persisted in the Hebrew scriptures in symbolic forms. First, consider that a number of biblical texts assimilate the Pharaoh of Egypt to the great sea dragon (see Ez 32:2). The leading metaphor is that, like God drew out Leviathan with a fishhook (Jb 40:25), so he shall put hooks in the jaws of Pharaoh, the Nile monster (Ez 29:3-4), and, like God has left Leviathan as food for the denizens of the desert (Ps 74:14), so he will fling Pharaoh into the desert to feed the wild beasts (Ez 29:5, 32:4).

Interestingly, this symbolical association entails that the exile of the chosen people in Egypt amounts to dwelling in the abyss under the dominion of the sea dragon – and that, by the same token, their flight is equivalent to the liberation of dry land from the sea. Indeed, Jewish traditions maintain that when the Creator tore the primordial mass of water into two halves he informed the waters that they would be divided again for Israel’s sake – which casts the partition of the Red Sea as a repetition of creation (Ginzberg 2003: 1:14 n. 52). Recall that the Israelites cross the Sea of Reeds when God splits the waters (Gn 8:1 = Gn 1:2), and God quells the fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky, so that the rain stops and the separation between higher and lower waters is reinstated (Gn 8:2 = Gn 1:7). Thereafter the waters recede steadily from the earth (Gn 8:3, 13-14 = Gn 1:9-10), which allows living creatures to again swim over its surface (Gn 8:17 = Gn 1:22). Finally, chapter 9 makes it clear that, on the threshold of a renewed earth, Noah amounts to Adam. Just as God had exhorted Adam to be fertile and rule over the other living things (Gn 1:28), so now he blesses Noah and his sons to be fertile and dominate the other living things (Gn 9:1). But whereas Adam had caused the ground to be cursed (Gn 3:17), Noah actually redeems the soil from that curse (Gn 5:29, 8:21), which means that Noah is like Adam, only one level up in the time spiral – Adam with a clean slate, so to speak. And now the Creator pledges by solemn covenant never again to doom the earth because of man (Gn 8:21) – that is, never again to send a flood to destroy the earth (Gn 9:11).

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waters with his wind in order to create a stretch of dry land (Ex 14:15-22, 29), after which the hosts of Pharaoh are flung into the deep (Ex 14:23-28, 15:4-10). Compare Isaac’s glorification of God’s creation as a victory on three counts: defeating the dragon, quelling the deep waters, and making the abysses of the sea a road “the redeemed might walk” (Is 51:9-10). And so, to repeat, the exile in Egypt amounts to being under the dominion of the sea dragon in the marine abyss, and the dry crossing of the Sea of Reeds amounts to the extraction of earth out of chaos. Which implies that the woeful exile of Moses and the Israelites in Egypt echoes the trials and tribulations of Noah and his chosen few in the marine abyss. The bottom line being that, even after Noah’s covenant with Noah ended the cyclical quashing of purificatory floods, there remains a pattern of sending the elected few for a cleansing period – metaphorically, under the clutch of the dragon – before a fresh era can start and a new covenant be established. In this sense, to borrow Levenson’s apt expression, “if Noah reiterates Adam, he also anticipates Moses” (Levenson 1994: 76).

This suggests that Adam, too, must somehow relate to the chaotic realm of the dragon. Interestingly, Genesis 13:10 states that the Jordan plain, being well watered, is like the garden of the Lord and like the land of Egypt. This association between the land irrigated by the Nile, where a metaphorical dragon dwells, and the Garden of Eden is interesting because this garden was reportedly watered by a flow welling up from the ground (Gn 2:5-6), and, of course, trouble there arose because of a serpent (Gn 3:1-13). Plainly, a conjunction between welling ground waters and the presence of a serpent/dragon is significant. It is tacit in the Flood episode – a regression to primordial chaos, in which all birds and land creatures (but not the marine monsters) perish – and it is explicit regarding the Nile “dragon.” In all three cases, the predominance of ground waters and the inherent serpent/dragon ushers in a crisis followed by renovation. Adam’s faltering before the serpent causes the fall of humankind, but then Noah’s survival in the flood leads to a covenant, and Moses’ victorious escape from the clutches of the Nile “dragon” prefigures a new covenant. In short, the mutually transforming roles played by Adam, Noah, and Moses unfold in a series of cyclic renewals that

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involve facing welling waters, agonistic dragons/serpents, or both.

Joseph Fontenrose (1980: 162), while examining Mesopotamian materials, rightly stated that the image of a dragon swallowing the hero amounts to dispatching the latter to the realm of the dead, “for the monster’s belly was itself identified with the underworld.” Indeed, we know that the imams of the great fish that swallowed Jonah were likened to “the belly of Sheol” (Jon 2:1–3). In a variant image Noah and his companions have been kept in the entrails of an ark, tossed about in the waters that enshrouded all dead creatures. And, of course, Moses’ people were kept in the land of Egypt, dubbed Rahab (Ps 87:4; Is 30:7), which one reaches by going “down” (Gn 43:5, 15, 20) – like going “down” into Sheol (Gn 42:38, 44:29,31) – and again leaves by coming back “up” (Gn 50:5,24; Ex 13:19). In the same trend, insofar as Christ’s descent into hell has been compared to Jonah’s descent into Sheol at the heart of the sea, it must be reckoned as a regression into the primordial abyss out of which God elicted creation. It follows that Christ, on resurrecting out of hell, fights the same primordial dragon that God the Father tamed on transforming chaos into creation. And, intriguingly, the ritual of baptism – whereby individual souls are accepted into the New Law – repeats the ancient pattern of immersion in water, and rebirth, for a covenant with God. Which, by necessity, entails that dragon-slaying symbolism is inherent to the individual experience of spiritual admission into the Church.

**BIRD AND SERPENT**

To argue this point involves turning, at last, to the dove that flutters over the dragon-fight scene in the Radovljica fresco. We saw that this bird usually hovers over Mary in images that depict her standing above the serpent and the moon, and we know that such images imply that Mary overcomes the serpent. What is more, the gospels famously describe the dove fluttering over the scene of the baptism of Jesus Christ (Mt 3:16, Mk 1:10; cf. Lk 3:22, Jo 1:32). I am about to argue that all such dove apparitions mark a victory over the snake/dragon and the chaotic waters. In fact, this symbolic role of the dove is clear involve facing welling waters, agonistic dragons/serpents, or both.

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on the very act of creation. Jewish traditions have long understood the statement that the spirit/wind/breath (ruah) of God “hovered” (m’trehap) over the primordial waters (Gn 1:2) in terms of the image of a dove fluttering over its nest (see Peters 1911: 44-77; Moberly 2000: 352-4; cf. Morgenstern 1920: 196).15 The implied association between the dove and the wind of God,17 engaged in separating the waters and in forcing the sea to give way to dry land, again shows in the Flood narrative. Here the wind of God quells the flood, and then the dove lets Noah know when the ground is dry again (Gen 8:1-12). Predictably, the exodus from Egypt is also a case in point. God describes his rescuing of the Israelites from the clutches of Pharaoh in terms of his carrying the chosen people “on eagle’s wings” (Ex 19:4). And, even though that eagle is not a dove, another description of God taking care of his people in the desert uses the specific metaphor of the eagle hovering over its brood (Dt 32:11), which repeats the primordial image of God’s ruah hovering over the chaotic abyss like a dove over its nest.18

Moreover, as might be expected, the dove is implied in Jonah’s emergence from the abyss. From as early as the 4th century CE, Jerome takes it as self-evident that Jonah is the “fairest of doves, whose shipwreck shows in a figure the passion of the Lord” (Jerome 2008). In the same vein, he boldly describes Jesus as “Jonah, that is to say ‘dove’ or ‘suffering’ (he is given both meanings, either because the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and stays with him, or because he has suffered for our wounds…”). And Jerome reckons that Jordan means “descent”, so that Jonah (dubbed “the dove, or the suffering”), on metaphorically crossing the river eastwards, passes from the abode of the dead into the realm of the living (Jerome 2000).

Which, again, takes us to the baptism of Jesus. The gospels make it clear that the Holy Spirit in dove shape descends upon Jesus as he emerges from the Jordan waters, and Byzantine icons show Christ standing over serpents in the Jordan (Stone 2002: 47-62). For instance, a remarkable illumination from an Armenian 16th-century manuscript shows the dove descending on Christ, who stands in the Jordan waters while trampling a višap, the Armenian dragon that amounts to Leviathan (Stone 2002: fig. 6, discussed in pp. 54:7).19

This said, it is time to note that the hovering dove marks the defeat on the very act of creation. Jewish traditions have long understood the statement that the spirit/wind/breath (ruah) of God “hovered” (m’trehap) over the primordial waters (Gn 1:2) in terms of the image of a dove fluttering over its nest (see Peters 1911: 44-77; Moberly 2000: 352-4; cf. Morgenstern 1920: 196).15 The implied association between the dove and the wind of God,17 engaged in separating the waters and in forcing the sea to give way to dry land, again shows in the Flood narrative. Here the wind of God quells the flood, and then the dove lets Noah know when the ground is dry again (Gen 8:1-12). Predictably, the exodus from Egypt is also a case in point. God describes his rescuing of the Israelites from the clutches of Pharaoh in terms of his carrying the chosen people “on eagle’s wings” (Ex 19:4). And, even though that eagle is not a dove, another description of God taking care of his people in the desert uses the specific metaphor of the eagle hovering over its brood (Dt 32:11), which repeats the primordial image of God’s ruah hovering over the chaotic abyss like a dove over its nest.18

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This said, it is time to note that the hovering dove marks the defeat
of the serpent because the two animals are deemed intimate enemies. Karen Jones (1968: 249-55) has called attention to “many cultic objects ... decorated with applied serpents facing doves” in ancient Palestinian and Near-Eastern cults. Actually, the standoff between a celestial bird and the chthonic snake is a widespread motif (see Wittkower 1939). In examining this “bird and serpent myth”, Kalipada Mitra (1925: 86) feels compelled to explain the notion that serpents know (and can convey) the oracular language of birds because snakes are the victims of birds and “in nature the victims well understand the habits of their enemies that enable them to guard themselves against their attack”. On a different tack, James Frazer (1888: 181) chooses to stress that serpents eat birds’ eggs, from which follows that “they are blood relations of birds, having the blood of birds in their veins”. Of course, each author is partly right. Together, they bring forth the notion that the two proverbial enemies, continuously ingesting each other in an endless circle, are ultimately consubstantial. Thus, Pliny (10.137) recalls a tradition that mentions “birds from a mixture of whose blood a snake is born, whoever eats which will understand the conversations of birds” (Pliny 1983: 381). This consubstantiality between cyclically interchanging predator and prey suggests an image of endless death and regeneration involving the unity of fighting halves. As Géza Róheim (1992: 17) points out, fairy tales present the two intimate foes as, indifferently (among others), a serpent and a bird, two serpents, or two dragons.

Having understood this, let us take note of the fact that the strife frequently happens on the World Tree. For example, Hilda Davidson (1990: 191-2) remarks that in South Borneo the strife of the bird and the serpent “is said ultimately to destroy the tree, but it always springs up anew” – and she compares this to the image of the Scandinavian world tree, Yggdrasil, which was a symbol of the constant regeneration of the universe. Quite independently, David Knipe (1967: 353) notes that “the eagle-and-serpent polarity in conjunction with the tree”, found in various traditions, supposes homology between the shedding of foliage, the molting of plumage, and the sloughing as symbols of renovation. In short, the fight between the celestial bird and the chthonic serpent on the axis mundi expresses on a broad transcultural basis the dynamism of cyclic cosmos.
CONCLUSION

This is why, I submit, this specific image appears in the Judeo-Christian scriptures whenever a new cycle unfolds from chaos. We have seen that depictions of various biblical events – such as Creation, Exodus, and Resurrection – draw on the constant image of victory over the chthonic dragon and the correlative victory of the celestial bird. This suggests a concept of time not as a linear axis of happenings, but rather as a harmony of meaningful events continuously transforming one another.

Regarding the Radovljica fresco, we saw that Mary’s body and her son’s cross stand vertically between the dove and the dragon, just as in other traditions the Tree of Life stands between the celestial bird and the chthonic serpent. In other words, the Radovljica fresco depicts the ancient axis mundi image in Christian terms. In so doing it analogizes the story of Genesis and the ancient dragon-fight myth, so that Mary’s victory over the serpent reflects God’s victory over the dragon. Moreover, the fresco superposes the Father’s victory over marine chaos and the Son’s overcoming of the Ancient Law. And it treats the birth, baptism, and resurrection of Jesus as so many variations on a single theme. Quite beside its aesthetic appeal, this enigmatic fresco is a lesson in symbolic condensation, tripartite space, and repetitive time.

Francisco Vaz da Silva is an assistant professor of anthropology and folklore at the Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Lisboa, Portugal; fgvs@iscte.pt

Notes
1 I owe the reading of the fresco’s caption to Andrej Pleterski and Blaž Resman (respectively Institute of Archaeology, and France Stele Institute of Art History, at the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts), whom I warmly thank here.
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CONCLUSION

This is why, I submit, this specific image appears in the Judeo-Christian scriptures whenever a new cycle unfolds from chaos. We have seen that depictions of various biblical events – such as Creation, Exodus, and Resurrection – draw on the constant image of victory over the chthonic dragon and the correlative victory of the celestial bird. This suggests a concept of time not as a linear axis of happenings, but rather as a harmony of meaningful events continuously transforming one another.

Regarding the Radovljica fresco, we saw that Mary’s body and her son’s cross stand vertically between the dove and the dragon, just as in other traditions the Tree of Life stands between the celestial bird and the chthonic serpent. In other words, the Radovljica fresco depicts the ancient axis mundi image in Christian terms. In so doing it analogizes the story of Genesis and the ancient dragon-fight myth, so that Mary’s victory over the serpent reflects God’s victory over the dragon. Moreover, the fresco superposes the Father’s victory over marine chaos and the Son’s overcoming of the Ancient Law. And it treats the birth, baptism, and resurrection of Jesus as so many variations on a single theme. Quite beside its aesthetic appeal, this enigmatic fresco is a lesson in symbolic condensation, tripartite space, and repetitive time.

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8 The mid-second-century Protevangelion of James (18.1) states that Joseph, on realizing that the child was pressing to be born, took Mary into a cave; and, of course, the apostles concur in saying that Jesus’s tomb was hewn out of the rock (Mat 27:60; Mk 15:46; Lk 23:50).

9 The illumination may be viewed in a fine recent French translation of the Gospel of Nicodemus (Gounelle and Izydorczyk 1997: 200). Regarding the Harrowing of Hell theme, see Peter Dinzelbacher (2002).

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13 Likewise, in the Babylonian creation epic the preexisting water abyss is impersonated by the primordial dragon Tiamat, whom Marduk slays
with the help of the winds and other storm weapons (Pritchard 1955: 61-8). On traces of the historical connection between Hebrew cosmogony and Babylonian and Sumerian myths, see Elena Cassin (1981: 228-9), Noah S. Kramer (1972: 37-41), and Mireya Eliaide (1980: 76-7).

14 Compare to the Hebrew marine dragon of chaos the Vedic snake Sesha, or “remained”, which dwells in the chaotic waters in promise of the next cosmic renaissance (see Biardeau 1981: 241).

15 Unless otherwise stated, all Old-Testament citations are taken from the Tanakh (1988), translated by the Jewish Publication Society of America.

16 John P. Peters (1911: 44-7) argues that the bird image supposes the paradigm of the cosmic egg, which is quite alien to Jewish thought; and that, therefore, the ruah of God is best interpreted in the Mesopotamian tradition of wind, the divine weapon against the primal dragon. On a different tack, Julian Morgenstern (1920: 196) argues that the Hebrew scripture might echo here the Phoenician theme of a cosmic egg. Whatever one may think about the embodiment of the cosmic-egg idea in Genesis 1:2, my point is that the tradition of the hovering dove cannot be explained away, and, therefore, we need to understand how the presence of a bird fits in the fight against the dragon.

17 Incidentally, note that the association between the dove and the wind of God in Jewish tradition prefigures the association between the dove and the gushing divine Word in Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation (see Vaz da Silva 2008: 117-19). And, of course, the Holy Spirit takes dove shape in the gospels (see below).

18 R. Moberly (2000: 352) specifies, a propos the hovering ruah of Genesis 1:2, “The one other usage of rpl Pi. in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy xxxii 11”. So the eagle is permutable with the dove. Moreover, Hebrew legends show that the dove is also permutable with the raven (see Ginzb erg 2003: 1:37, 151-2 n.51), which is anything but strange in light of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown’s remark that throughout the world contrasting birds (such as the white cockato and the black cockato, or the white cockato and the crow) are often selected as representing a relationship of opposition, which Radcliffe-Brown (1977: 64-5) defines as “the union of opposites … which combine to make a unity when they are joined together”. The višap. Stone says, “is the mythical Armenian dragon, but the world is also used in the Armenian translation of the serpents in Psalm 73(74)” (p. 54).

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Circle and Square: Explorations in Symbology

MARK A. RIDDLE

ABSTRACT. The paired symbols, circle and square, appear prominently at the religious foundations of major world cultures, the circle representing heaven, the square representing earth. Chinese examples include temple design, ancient art motifs, the “bi” and the “cong”, TIJ or compass and square mirrors, and cosmological game and diviners’ boards. Other circle and square examples are found in West Asian urban design, such as in the Sassanian city Firuzabad, and the ancient cities Darabjird, Ecbatana, Dilberdjin and Dzharkutan (some of which were founded as early as 13th Century BC). The Indo-European vara found in West Asian cities such as Merv and Phreaspa are expressions of the symbology, as are the Buddhist stupas and Mongol yurt dwellings. Examples are found all across Asia, in the classical world of the Mediterranean and in very early American cultures. The geometrical “sacred cut”, combined with numerology, lies at the heart of circle-and-square cosmology and can be found throughout diverse ancient cultures. This evidence suggests a religious unity of the ancient world and diffusion from a single, primordial source deep in antiquity.

KEYWORDS: circle, square, symbolism, cosmology, architecture, numerology

INTRODUCTION

Quick Quiz Question: If the black robe and square black cap of the graduation ceremony indicate the possession of an earthly credential conferred by human authority, what garb would symbolize a corresponding heavenly status provided by divine authority?

Before we answer, let us look at some definitions. Symbolology is the formal study of symbolism – the uses and meanings of symbols. A symbol is commonly defined as an arbitrary sign that has acquired a conventional significance, something visible that by association and convention represents something else that is invisible.

Answer to Quick Quiz Question: a white robe with a round white

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cap. (White is commonly an opposite of black; round is opposite to square as heaven is to earth and divine to human.)

If you answered correctly without hesitation, you obviously have already been introduced to the world of symbolism; perhaps you are already adept at interpreting symbols. If you had no idea how to answer the question, this essay may be too narrowly focused to serve as an introduction to “the lost language of symbolism.” We will focus specifically in this essay on one particular pair of symbols, circle and square. We will find that these two symbols appear prominently at the foundations of major world cultures, and point to evidence which suggests that the ubiquity of, and commonalities in the uses of, these symbols constitute evidence of diffusion from a single, primordial source deep in antiquity.

HEAVEN AND EARTH IN CHINESE COSMOLOGY

According to ancient Chinese belief, the human body and the world are constructed alike, microcosm and macrocosm. The round head is the vault of heaven and the rectangular feet are the square earth (Maqero 1981: 435; the two feet side by side form a square; see also Eliade 1987, XIV, 290, 299). By an ancient Chinese tradition, every capital city must include a Ming-tang ( 明堂 ) Temple, the “Hall of Light”, a ritual palace that is at once an imago mundi ( the universe in microcosmic form ) and an elaborate embodiment of the ritual calendar. The Ming-tang was built on a square base (=Earth) and was covered by a round roof (=Heaven) (Eliade 1982: 11-17). Tai-shan, the central and most important of the five sacred mountains of ancient China, was a symbol of the cosmos and the state and believed to be a producer of life forces; its sacred force figured in spring rites of planting and the autumn harvest. A close relationship developed between the mountain and the emperor, who exercised his pivotal role in, and derived his authority from, rituals performed in an elaborate system of monuments erected on the mountain. At the summit, an open circular platform was constructed for the Feng sacrifices – burnt offerings to Heaven. At the base of the mountain, a
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In Beijing’s Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, a complex of temples still prominent today, includes the circular Temple of Annual Prayers and Altar of Heaven (three concentric tiers within a square enclosure); the Altar of the Earth is square (Watson 1981: 510-11)4. The Temple of Heaven complex consists of three sections on a north-south axis. Here, at the Winter Solstice, in a ceremony last performed in 1915, the emperor paid homage to Heaven and reported on the state of the realm (Paludan 1998: 168)3.

SYMBOLS IN JADE

The symbolism of the circle and square go back far into Chinese pre-history – art motifs of the Neolithic Yangshao culture were “derived from squares and circles without reference to organic form” (Watson 1981: 32). The Xiao-jing (Classic of Filial Piety) of ca. 400 BC mentions (Ch. 18) the round and square sacrificial vessels placed beside the coffin during a funeral.4

Among the ancient artifacts found by archaeologists in China are the round “bi” (磬), commonly translated “jade disc”, representing Heaven and the square “cong” (鼎), representing Earth (Loewe 1979: 40). In late Neolithic times, jade bi were often laid on top of the body in burials (Hearn 1996: 9, 12). The bi is a flat, doughnut-shaped disk while the cong is a hollow jade tube, squared or octagonal on the outside. Jade was often a substance sacrificed – round blue pieces were offered to Heaven and square yellow pieces to Earth (Eliade 1987, VII: 504). The Lianzhu culture of the Yang-zı River Delta (3300-2250 BC) is renowned for its cong and bi ritual jades, likely mass-produced by artisan specialists (Barnes 1993:114-15).5 Under the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BC), a blue bi was offered to Heaven at the winter solstice, and at the summer solstice a yellow cong was offered to Earth (Soothill 1951: 201-2).7

Chinese scholars hold that the jade cong reflects the cosmology of ancient China. It is square outside and round inside, based on the notion that Earth is square and Heaven round, while the centre hole

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Chinese scholars hold that the jade cong reflects the cosmology of ancient China. It is square outside and round inside, based on the notion that Earth is square and Heaven round, while the centre hole
represents the passageway between Heaven and Earth. A rod passing through the centre hole would represent the Heavenly ladder by which a sorcerer or shaman travelled between Heaven and Earth. On most cong are carved images of animals which were supposed to help the shaman in his travels (Yu 1997, I: 80, 87, 94, 100).

The symbolic significance of the bi is generally acknowledged, but some scholars believe that the bi had an important role in ritual, as well. According to ancient texts, the bi served to "render homage to the heavens", but the esoteric meaning of these words has been lost. Lost was the function of the bi as an ancient astronomical instrument. The bi was used to locate the celestial pole thousands of years ago, in an age in which it was not located near a convenient marker such as the Pole Star. Chinese uranography (star cartography) is wholly based on the rotation of the stars around the pole; held against the background of the sky so that the stars of Ursa Major, or the Big Dipper, correspond to markings incised upon it, the bi shows at its centre the position of the pole (Myers 1959-1968, II: 80 and Plate 31).8 The religious significance of this is, of course, that the celestial pole (now the Pole Star) is the residence of Tai-yi (天一), the Emperor of Heaven, the supreme deity of the Taoist pantheon (Kubo 1977: 92).3 For the Taoist, to return to the original unity of the One is to return to the Pole Star. It is the universal Alpha and Omega, the place where all things begin and to which all return. This is how a jade disc can be used in rituals to "render homage to the heavens".

THE MUSIC OF THE JADES

According to musicologist Fritz A. Kuttner, “the Chinese had a longing and an amazing gift for mystical cosmology involving sacred numerical relations, especially in the field of music” (Kuttner 1990: 104). “Many bi discs had a musical determination and symbolism of their own apart from the other ceremonial significances.” Bi were not only a symbol of Heaven and of the male principle (yang), but also of sound and life (death is silence; sound is life). That is why they were placed on the chest, in the mouth, or on the lips of the deceased at burial (Kuttner 1990: 82).

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Also serving a double role as both religious symbol and musical instrument were the jade *qing* (磬), lambda-shaped stone gongs (Japanese “uchi-ishi”), a set of sixteen of which were suspended from a wooden frame to create a chimes-like musical instrument. As C.A.S. Williams pointed out almost a century ago, the *qing* was shaped like the gnomon, or carpenter’s square, which in China was “the emblem of a just and upright life” (1941: 284, 288, 376). “The application of the square and compasses as symbols of morality was known to the Chinese from early ages” (Williams 1941: 82). The set square and the compasses are, of course, the instruments by which the circle and the square are constructed.

**CHINESE MIRRORS IN BRONZE**

Markings representing the T-square, set-square and compasses appear on Han-era Chinese bronze mirrors called “TLV” mirrors in English, after the shapes of these markings. In Japanese, they are referred to as “Compasses-and-Square Mirrors” (方格規矩鏡), the name reflecting what the markings symbolize. The mirrors were produced in government factories from the mid-1st Century BC to the mid-1st Century AD, featuring a central square and circle denoting Heaven and Earth, surrounded by multiple thermorhombi set off by the rectilinear elements of the TLV design. In the final version of this design, the animal forms were standardized as a white tiger (west), red bird (south), green dragon (east) and black snake and tortoise (north). TLV mirrors ceased to be made about the middle of the 1st Century AD but these design elements continued in artistic use for another century, or until about the end of the Han dynasty (Watson 1981: 87, and Colour Plate 31).

In 1948, American scholar Schuyler Cammann provided a key to understanding the symbolism of these mirrors, which were apparently used both in rituals and for divination. According to Cammann, the “V” shapes frame the central square, which is thought to represent China as the “Middle Kingdom.” It also mirrors the ancient Chinese idea that Heaven was round and Earth was square. This illustrated the Chinese idea of the five directions – North, South, West, East and Centre. The area in between the central square and the circle was shaped like the gnomon, or carpenter’s square, which in China was “the emblem of a just and upright life” (1941: 284, 288, 376). “The application of the square and compasses as symbols of morality was known to the Chinese from early ages” (Williams 1941: 82). The set square and the compasses are, of course, the instruments by which the circle and the square are constructed.

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represented the “Four Seas”. During the Han Dynasty the “Four Seas” represented territories outside China. The nine nipples in the central square likely represented the “nine regions of the earth”, discussed by Cammann as having come from the Shiji, the first of the official dynastic histories of China (1948).

The “T”s reflected the “Four Gates of the Middle Kingdom” idea present in Chinese literature, analogous to the four inner gates of the Han place of sacrifice, or the four gates of the imperial tombs built during the Han period. The “L”s are thought to have symbolized the marshes and swamps beyond the “Four Seas”, at the ends of the earth. The “L”s seem to bend, possibly to achieve a rotating effect which symbolized the four seasons, or the cardinal directions. The eight nipples outside of the central square were most likely representations of the Eight Pillars, mountains that held up the canopy of Heaven. The area between the inner round border and the outer rim of the mirror was often filled with swirls that represented the clouds in the heavens. 12

On the other hand, Japanese scholars hold that the “L”s and “V”s divide time, the calendar (the “L”s representing the two solstices and the two equinoxes, and the “V”s the beginning points of the four seasons, thus dividing the calendar into eight parts), while the “T”s divide space in the same way. 13 Other Japanese scholars theorize that a TLV mirror is an expression of Chinese yin-yang, wu xing cosmology – a kind of mandala, corresponding to the horizontal plane of a calendrical sundial, a gui-biao (圭表), with the central nipple indicating the position of a sundial’s vertical gnomon (表), which when in place would cast a shadow on the horizontal mandala (表) indicating points of the annual calendar essential to agriculture and important to statecraft. 14

COSMOLOGICAL GAMEBOARDS, DIVINER’S BOARDS, AND TLV MIRRORS

The “TLV” mirrors are no doubt related to a Han-era board game, liubo (六博, “six rods”), played on a board which also had cosmological referents (Barnes 1993: 199, 202). 15 Played in elite Chinese society from the 6th Century BC, the board has a central square divided into represented the “Four Seas”. During the Han Dynasty the “Four Seas” represented territories outside China. The nine nipples in the central square likely represented the “nine regions of the earth”, discussed by Cammann as having come from the Shiji, the first of the official dynastic histories of China (1948).

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four triangles. Scholars believe that players’ pieces were moved along “L-shaped and single-bar “roads” according to rules derived from ancient divination practices. The four directions and the numerology of the number 12 seem to be important elements of the game, with the result that liu-bo could be played as an allegory of the annual cycle and the orderly regulation of the state, subject to the intervention of fate in the form of rod or dice throws. The ancient Chinese seem also to have believed that liu-bo was played by the immortals (Rawson 1996: 159-61).16

The diviner’s board of Han-era China, called shi (司), also bore marks similar to those on TLV mirrors. The instrument was comprised of two discs, one circular (on top) and one square (below), symbolizing the cosmos, with the circular and square discs representing Heaven and Earth, respectively. The circle could be rotated in relation to the square. The seven stars of the Big Dipper, joined together by a line, were inscribed in the central area of the upper, circular disc; the pivot which held the two discs together passed through or near the central and brightest star of the constellation (epsilon Ursa Major). The operator (diviner) used a pair of compasses and a set-square as auxiliary aids. First, the operator set the square board to correspond with the cardinal directions. Then the operator revolved the circular disc to correspond with the position of the sun, and the handle of the Dipper engraved in the centre of the circular disc then indicated the result of the divination by pointing to one of many figures incised on the outer edges of the discs (Loewe 1979: 75ff).17

Michael Loewe suggests that the purpose of the TLV mirrors was to represent and perpetuate the most favorable position that could be obtained by manipulating the two discs of the diviner’s board, to provide the owner of the mirror an assurance that he or she was correctly oriented to the cosmos (1979: 80ff).18

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WEST ASIAN URBAN DESIGN

It may seem like a stretch to go from ancient Chinese game-board design to West Asian city planning, but we intend to show that they are related – and that what links them is the cosmology of the circle four triangles. Scholars believe that players’ pieces were moved along “L-shaped and single-bar “roads” according to rules derived from ancient divination practices. The four directions and the numerology of the number 12 seem to be important elements of the game, with the result that liu-bo could be played as an allegory of the annual cycle and the orderly regulation of the state, subject to the intervention of fate in the form of rod or dice throws. The ancient Chinese seem also to have believed that liu-bo was played by the immortals (Rawson 1996: 159-61).16

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and square. The Sassanian city Firuzabad founded ca. 226 AD was built on a perfectly circular plan modelled after the Parthian city of Darabjird; Ecbatana, royal city of the Medes; and the Achaemenid citadel at Dilberdjin (Myers 1959-1968, XII: 705). The square base and round dome was an architectural feature of Sassanian origin (Myers 1959-1968, I: 39). The round cities and palaces of the Medes, Parthians and Sassanians reveal cosmological concepts – the circular cities were divided into four equal sectors by radial access streets oriented to the cardinal directions. The most famous of the “cosmic round cities” of the East was Baghdad, the “Round City of Mansur”, founded in 762 (Myers 1959-1968, VIII: 334). The Oriental military camp was also circular (“Orange 1959: 481-3”). The circular cities and palaces of the Medes, Darabjird; Ecbatana, royal city of the Medes; and the Achaemenid citadel at Dilberdjin (Myers 1959-1968, XII: 705). The square base and round dome was an architectural feature of Sassanian origin (Myers 1959-1968, I: 39). The round cities and palaces of the Medes, Parthians and Sassanians reveal cosmological concepts – the circular cities were divided into four equal sectors by radial access streets oriented to the cardinal directions. The most famous of the “cosmic round cities” of the East was Baghdad, the “Round City of Mansur”, founded in 762 (Myers 1959-1968, VIII: 334). The Oriental military camp was also circular (“Orange 1959: 481-3”). The square base and round dome was an architectural feature of Sassanian origin (Myers 1959-1968, I: 39). The round cities and palaces of the Medes, Parthians and Sassanians reveal cosmological concepts – the circular cities were divided into four equal sectors by radial access streets oriented to the cardinal directions. The most famous of the “cosmic round cities” of the East was Baghdad, the “Round City of Mansur”, founded in 762 (Myers 1959-1968, VIII: 334). The Oriental military camp was also circular (“Orange 1959: 481-3”). The square base and round dome was an architectural feature of Sassanian origin (Myers 1959-1968, I: 39). The round cities and palaces of the Medes, Parthians and Sassanians reveal cosmological concepts – the circular cities were divided into four equal sectors by radial access streets oriented to the cardinal directions. The most famous of the “cosmic round cities” of the East was Baghdad, the “Round City of Mansur”, founded in 762 (Myers 1959-1968, VIII: 334). The Oriental military camp was also circular (“Orange 1959: 481-3”).
Kyzylkum Desert consists of concentric circular structures, with dwellings in the outer section and a burial ground for a ruling elite and a temple for a dynastic cult in the inner area – dating from the 4th Century BC (Frumkin 1970: 10, 94-5, and plates XXIX, XXX). The *vara* concept, the old Indo-Iranian architectural plan, is known from the scripture of the Parsees, the *Avesta*, said to date from the time of Zoroaster, ca. 600 BC, and features a square and a circle inscribed one within the other (Yablonsky 1995: 249). *Vara* means “enclosure”, and in the *Avesta* account, a terrible winter depopulates the earth; the only survivors are protected by a *vara* built by Yima, the first shepherd-king/first ancestor of Iranian myth, in the legendary homeland of the Iranians, at the direction of Usa (Goswamy 1977: 171-2). The Bactrian cult centre at Dzharkutan, discovered by A. Askarov in 1977, is an example of a *vara*. Dated to the 14th–13th century BC, it “has neither sources nor parallels in the Near East”. Instead, it shows the influence in Bactria of the northern steppe culture; on the steppe, Scythian royal kurgans show the same planning principle. The *vara* is a microcosm of the universe, incorporating circle and square components of a temple and royal burials. “This mythologeme could only have originated in a society where there already existed the prototype of a ‘celestial town’, the European steppe culture ca. 2000 BC (Kuz’mina 2007: 3: 34-5).

**LINKS ACROSS ASIA**

In the Old Turkic religion, the Earth is seen as square, covered by a circumscribed sky dome, the four corners of the earth lying outside the shelter of the sky. The Mongol yurt dwelling (a circular tent) with its pillar an *axsus mundi*, or world axis, is seen as a microcosm of the universe (Eliaide 1987, XV: 89). Some questions concerning the origin of the circle-and-square cosmology – whether, for example, the Turks and Mongols got their cosmological notions from the Indo-Iranians or from the Chinese – may be difficult to answer. One link which seems easy to identify is the influence of Indo-Iranian or Indo-European concepts on Buddhist cosmology and architecture. The plan of the Buddhist *stupa* was based on the square (Earth) and the circle (Heaven) (Eliaide 1987, VII: 49). The use of the circle and the square is a microcosm of the universe, incorporating circle and square components of a temple and royal burials. “This mythologeme could only have originated in a society where there already existed the prototype of a ‘celestial town’, the European steppe culture ca. 2000 BC (Kuz’mina 2007: 3: 34-5).

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in complex ways is obvious in the ground plans of the Rawak Vihara at Khotan, in Xinjiang, of the Kanishka stupa at Peshawar, in Pakistan, and of the vast Tope-e-Rustam stupa at Balkh, in Afghanistan. The stupa at the centre of the vihara (monastery) at Rawak is based on a large square platform with staircases projecting at the quarters, creating a cruciform shape (Rowland 1970: 122-4). The ruins of Miran, south of Lop Nor in Xinjiang, excavated by Aurel Stein, show the principal building was a massive square. On a circular base inside a round room stood a stupa not visible from the outside. Wall paintings there date from 300 AD.\(^2\) The old royal city of Yar-khotho, near Turfan, in Xinjiang, was a square oriented to the cardinal directions, with a stupa raised on a square platform at its centre (Myers 1959-1968, XIV: 350). And finally, the word "mandalo" means "circle". The mandalas central to so many forms of Buddhism are either a circle within a square or a square within a circle within a square (Eliade 1987, IX: 139).\(^2\) Tantric Buddhist devotees believe their gods reside in a square palace with four gates in the four directions, surrounded by a mandala (circle) (Eliade 1987, XII: 133).

We will return later to the questions of historical links between similar cosmological concepts in cultures distant from each other, and will suggest that this evidence shows the religious unity of the ancient world.

**CLIPPEUS, THOLS, POMERIUM AND MORE – CLASSICAL PARALLELS**

We turn now to the Classical world of the Mediterranean lands for more circle-and-square cosmology and symbols. H.P. L'Orange, Norwegian archaeologist and art historian, wrote that the ancient world conceived the *clipeus*, the round shield, as an image of the cosmos, citing Roman poet Ovid on Achilles' shield as an *imago mundi*. The ancient East saw the world as a circle or *clipeus* and placed the cosmocrator, god and king, at its centre (L'Orange 1953: 90, 93).\(^2\) Seals of Achaemenian Persia show Ahura Mazda in the middle of the "world ring", and the same forms appear in reliefs at Persepolis. This is the *imago clipeata* of the Byzantine and other Classical peoples (L'Orange 1959: 488-90).

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The Greek tholoi, which had conical roofs, may have been heroa (a centre of a hero cult). The Doric tholoi at Marmaria (ca. 390 BC), the most ornate sacred building since the Parthenon, stimulated the creation of great circular buildings at Epidaurus, Olympia and Samothrace (Turner 1996, 13: 380, 390 and 8: 694). The tholos of Epidaurus consisted of three concentric circular foundations supporting a “triple crown” of columns, a cela wall, and an innermost circle of 14 columns (Myers, 1959-1968, XI: 435, 437). Tholos is also the word for the beehive-shaped tombs of the Mycenaean Greeks; the mounds were a re-creation of the archetypal cosmic mountain, the source of life, centre of the world and the link between the worlds of the gods, the living, and the living (Eliade 1987, XIV: 553). The round hat with a high crown worn in ancient Greece was called a thola, after this tholos (Myers 1959-1968, IV: 24).

In Plutarch’s account, Romulus slew Remus after the marking (with a plow drawn by a bull and a cow) of the pomerium, the sacred circle which delineated Roma Quadrata, the square Rome, because Remus violated the pomerium. For Plutarch, Rome was both a circle and a square (urbs quadrata), a mandate. According to Plutarch, Romulus learned from Etruscan builders “as in the mysteries”, or by a secret rite, how to create the city (Eliade 1987, XV: 105; Jaffe 1964: 242; Plutarch 2001: 30-1). According to Varro, the pomerium was a circle marked by a wall of stones which marked a Roman sacred space, the realm of the imperium domi, the jurisdiction of civil power (Eliade 1987, XII: 449-50).

The infraction for which Remus was caused to forfeit his life may have involved a violation of an oath. In the Indo-European cultural sphere, oath-taking was highly ritualized. We know that among Germanic peoples, trials were conducted by the thing, or legislative assembly. “An oath circle would be inscribed on the ground and the person swearing required to stand inside it. Under no conditions could he leave the circle or even place a foot outside its perimeter until the ritual was ended” (Eliade 1987, XV: 304).

There are more examples from the Classical world. In the Timaeus and the Critias, Plato describes Atlantis as having a palace enclosed by circular walls, on a rectangular plain divided into square plots (Rosenau 1972: 20-1). One Roman signa (flag) showed a wolf mounted on a cube (Earth) and on a sphere (Heaven) (Eliade 1987, XIV: 553). The round hat with a high crown worn in ancient Greece was called a thola, after this tholos (Myers 1959-1968, IV: 24).

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Danish engineer Tons Brunes, in *The Secrets of Ancient Geometry and Its Use* (1967) describes how a square can be divided into nine equal square parts using a set square and pair of compasses. He calls the middle square of this nine-part grid a *sacred cut* and claimed that the geometry of the sacred cut is part of the design of many ancient buildings, including the Parthenon and the Roman Pantheon. Brunes traced the application of the "sacred cut" from the ancient Egyptians through the Greeks and Romans to medieval Europe and believed that the idea was transmitted from Egypt to Greece by Pythagoras (Watts 1986: 132-9). For Brunes, the "cut" is "sacred" because it employs both circle and square, uniting the earthly with the divine; it squares the circle; and it yields an octagon (the traditional shape of Christian baptistries) (Calter 1998).

The nine-part square was also foundational in China, where the centre sector is also sacred (Wheatley 1971) and in India, where it became the swastika (Greider 1982: 108-9). We shall see below that the combining of the nine-part square with numerology to create the "magic square" lies at the heart of circle-and-square cosmology.

**PAN-PSYCHISM OR PAN-DIFFUSIONISM?**

From China across Eurasia to Rome, the ancient world was unified by the cosmology of circle and square, heaven and earth. What can account for this phenomenon? Carl Jung believed that the circle-square pattern and antithesis is archetypal in a universal human subconscious. And some phenomena seem to support Jung’s theory.
of archetypes. We find, for example, the circle and square cosmology in the Americas, examples of which would include: the tukipu temple of the Huichol of the Sierra Madre Occidental of Mexico, which is circular (Eliade 1987, VI: 493), the circular White Path of the xingwiwaon ("Big House") of the Delaware, upon which singers and dancers walk (Eliade 1987, VII: 17-18), the sacred camp circle, which for the Plains Indians is an image of the cosmos (Eliade 1987, VII:17), the sacred circle within the central, circular teepee which is the centre of Sioux ritual performances (Niehardt 1932: 165, 186, 189, 206) and the circle of dancers of the Ghost Dance at Wounded Knee Creek in 1890 (Niehardt 1932: 257) – all these parallels seem remote enough from Eurasia to recommend a Jungian explanation.

Support for Jungian archetypes can certainly be found in Black Elk’s dictum: “the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round”. Black Elk disliked the white man’s houses, saying: “It is a bad way to live, for there can be no power in a square”. And his statement that “Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle” can be taken either as the empirical observation of a spiritual adept, or as evidence of world-wide diffusion of cosmological concepts, or as evidence for the existence of Jungian archetypes, depending on one’s point of view (Niehardt 1932: 194).

Psychological insight as well as historical fact is implied in Marshall McLuhan’s generalization that “Men lived in round houses until they became sedentary and specialized in their organization ... The square room or house speaks the language of the sedentary specialist, while the round hut ... tells of the integral nomadic ways of food-gathering peoples” (McLuhan 1964: 118-19). Maekawa Kaname analyzed residential settlements of medieval Japan and found “a symbolic aspect” – “Squares [such as castles] meant domination and circles [farming villages] community.” This anthropological evidence supports Jung’s claim for the archetypal status of these symbols.

On the other hand, pan-diffusionists, such as American anthropologist Terence Greider, find evidence that even the Americas were included in three waves of world-wide diffusion of culture. The Third Wave culture focused on astronomy, astrology, and calendrics of archetypes. We find, for example, the circle and square cosmology in the Americas, examples of which would include: the tukipu temple of the Huichol of the Sierra Madre Occidental of Mexico, which is circular (Eliade 1987, VI: 493), the circular White Path of the xingwiwaon (“Big House”) of the Delaware, upon which singers and dancers walk (Eliade 1987, VII: 17-18), the sacred camp circle, which for the Plains Indians is an image of the cosmos (Eliade 1987, VII:17), the sacred circle within the central, circular teepee which is the centre of Sioux ritual performances (Niehardt 1932: 165, 186, 189, 206) and the circle of dancers of the Ghost Dance at Wounded Knee Creek in 1890 (Niehardt 1932: 257) – all these parallels seem remote enough from Eurasia to recommend a Jungian explanation.

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Psychological insight as well as historical fact is implied in Marshall McLuhan’s generalization that “Men lived in round houses until they became sedentary and specialized in their organization ... The square room or house speaks the language of the sedentary specialist, while the round hut ... tells of the integral nomadic ways of food-gathering peoples” (McLuhan 1964: 118-19). Maekawa Kaname analyzed residential settlements of medieval Japan and found “a symbolic aspect” – “Squares [such as castles] meant domination and circles [farming villages] community.” This anthropological evidence supports Jung’s claim for the archetypal status of these symbols.

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– the systematic observation and recording of the phenomena of the celestial realm. Its characteristic signs were the symbols circle and square. Greider points out that for millennia the circle had represented the earth in prehistoric art, but in Third Wave art the circle changed its reference from the earth to the heavens, and the square replaced it as the earth symbol, and the quincunx pattern (centre and four corners) became the ideal pattern for human occupation of the earth. Greider notes this pattern in Shang China, Inca Peru, and in the Navajo and Mayan concepts of the land. Circle and square evidently represent Heaven and Earth even in the Big Horn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming (Greider 1982).

Newton Was Right

To the medieval alchemists, quadratura circuli (“squaring the circle”) was the ultimate goal – the key to overcoming the opposition of matter and spirit, to the transmutation of base metals to gold. “From a man and a woman make a circle, then a square, then a triangle, finally a circle, and you will obtain the Philosopher’s Stone” (Eliade 1979-123). American historian B.J.T. Dobbs wrote that Sir Isaac Newton probed alchemy “as it has never been probed before or since”. Newton believed that in the beginning of the world, God had imparted the secrets of “natural philosophy” (science and mathematics) and of the true religion to a select few mortals. The knowledge was subsequently lost, but then later partially recovered and incorporated into myths and mysteries, where it would remain hidden but recoverable to one who possessed the key of knowledge (Dobbs 1975, cited in Eliade 1988: 260).

For the ancient Egyptians, one key to knowledge was expressed in the architecture of the pyramids. Apparently, the first true pyramid with straight rather than stepped sides was attempted at Medyum by the pharaoh Sneferu (r. 2613 to 2589 BC). The builders tried to construct the sides at an angle of almost 52 degrees – a pyramid with this angle will have a height equal to the radius of a circle of circumference equal to the perimeter of its base. In other words, the Egyptian pyramid is an architectural squaring of the circle. The sides of the Meidum pyramid collapsed during the latter stages of

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Isaac Newton’s interest in the Ancient Mysteries followed that of the Renaissance Christian Hermetists Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno, Campanella, Paracelsus and others who rejected Scholasticism in favour of looking back to the Pythagoreans, the Kabbalah, “Hermes Trismegistus”, and the Mystery Religions of the Greco-Roman world to “rediscover the primordial revelations of Egypt and Asia and demonstrate their common ground and single source” (Eliade 1988: 250-1). They believed in a “Prisca Theologia”, that a single, true, theology exists, vestiges of which can be found in all religious traditions, and which was given by God to humankind in antiquity.

The MAGIC SQUARE

Independent scholar Robert Dickter, of California, has identified the “Magic Square”, known to the ancient Chinese as the Luo-shu (洛書), as the basis of both Chinese and Pythagorean numerology and cosmology. An explication of Dickter’s argument is beyond the scope of this essay, but if Dickter and his sources are correct, the mathematics implicit in this pattern,

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and more. If so, then the mathematics of the Magic Square, as the ancestor of modern mathematics and science, is the Primal Revelation sought by Sir Isaac Newton.

Conclusion

In Chinese legend, at the time of the Emperor Yu the Great, founder (ca. 2070 BC) of the Xia dynasty, a magical turtle with the Luo-shu pattern inscribed on its shell emerged from the flooding Luo River. Dickter attributes to the Luo-shu the eventual emergence of Pythagorean mathematics, over a millennium later. But since Pharaoh Sneferu, whose pyramid was an attempt to square the circle, evidently preceded Emperor Yu by some centuries, a more likely scenario would push the origin of Magic Square mathematics, and circle-and-square cosmology, deeper into pre-history and attribute its appearance in Egypt, and then in China, to diffusion from a single source, since it is highly unlikely that anything as complex as Magic Square mathematics could be archetypal in the Jungian sense. On the basis of this evidence we can be confident in asserting that those who participate in rituals wearing either the black robe and square black cap, or their symbolic opposites, or both, are participating in rituals whose symbols lie at the foundation of all the world’s major cultures and originate deep in pre-history.

Notes

1 See Gaskill (2003) for a more comprehensive introduction to symbology. An earlier version of this essay was read by the author at the August 1990 Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City.

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The tri-level Temple of Annual Prayers (Tian-tan) is commonly said to have been constructed without the use of even a single nail. For more description of the three (odd number) terraces of the Altar of Heaven and the two (even number) terrangular terraces of the Altar for the Adoration of the Earth, see Myers (1959-1968: s.v. “China”, III: 426-7).

The blue roof tiles of the Temple of Annual Prayers also symbolize Heaven.

The two essential vessels of all early Chinese ritual – funerals, sacrifices and feasts – were the square “ji” vessels and round “guo” vessels. See photos at: http://history.cultural-china.com/en/54History/3790.html.


The information comes from the Zhou-li. For a recent account and interpretation of the cong and bi, see Rawson (1996: 52-4).

The proof of this is said to be found in the large bi at the Brussels Royal Museum of Art and History. For more on cong and bi jades, see EWA (XII: 894, and II: 131, VI: plate 49, XII: 832).

The symbol of Tai-yi is said to be the flaming pearl, a symbol found also in Japan, where it is the symbol of the Inari shrines (Herbert 1967: 506) and in the Holy Land, as a Samaritan symbol (Tenney 1967: 762). For an introduction to Tai-yi, see Rawson (1996: 149-50): also: http://www.patheos.com/Library/Taoism/Ritual-Worship-Devotion-Symbolism/Symbolism.html.

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13 See http://we magna.jp/~ark/sinkyou_utsuyoudouyou.html, in Japanese. In the 19th Century, Mormon buildings in Utah had “L” and “V” markings on the outside. In 1969 the Historic American Buildings Survey classified the old endowment house in Spring City, Utah, as a Masonic hall because it still had these “Masonic emblems” in the gable end (Francaviglia 1978).


15 The illustration at Loewe (1979: 85) is especially useful.

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18 Game boards and divinatory boards in India and Peru were also based on the cosmic square (Greider 1982: 110-11).

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The Indian city in historical times is a constructed mandala — "concentric circles and squares in which symbols, colors and position with respect to the principal axes speak a profound language" (Myers 1959-1968, XIV: 191). The shield of Achilles is described by Homer (Iliad, 18). Roman poet Lucan expressed the imperial ideology in advising the emperor to choose his seat in the middle of the universe, lest the cosmic system should lose its equilibrium — "Maintain the equilibrium of the firmament in the middle circle of the universe" (De Bello Civili 1: 45ff., cited in L’Orange 1982: 30-1).

For the Thymele at Epidauros and the round temples of Samothrace and Athens, see Hastings (1908: I: 730b, 730a, 739a-40b).

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Exchange, Reciprocity and Social Dualism according to the Kaingang of Southern Brazil

ROBERT R. CREPEAU

ABSTRACT. The nature of dual social organization and the role of reciprocity have been at the heart of anthropological research on the Gê and Bororo Indians of Brazil since the 1920s. This paper revisits the different approaches that have been proposed to explain the complex interrelationship existing between dualist ideology as expressed by the Gê themselves, the great variety of reciprocal practices associated with this ideology and the role of reciprocity as a unifying and explanatory principle. Using data collected among the Kaingang of Southern Brazil, it re-examines the role of social exchange and reciprocity in the ritual context of Kikikoia, a second funeral ritual. Kaingang’s conceptions of reciprocal services and partnership are not adequately rendered by our anthropological concepts of gift, exchange, dialectical society, or process of social (re)production. The author argues that while it is true that these concepts are used as general implicit principles realized in practices by the social actors and the social system, and made explicit by the observer, partnership is explicit in Kaingang practices where the emphasis is put on the asymmetrical and complementary relationship of partners of opposite moieties defined as parts of a social whole. More precisely, according to the Kaingang, social life is not based on exchange as such (as an implicit principle) but on the explicit sociological institution of partnership between asymmetric and complementary classes emerging of a pre-existing totality. Accordingly, exchange and reciprocity are not an unconscious given nor a function of dual organization but something instituted in the mythic past by the action of some ancestral culture-heroes.

KEYWORDS: Brazil, Kaingang, Gê, ritual, myths, reciprocity, exchange, social dualism

Exchange, Reciprocity and Social Dualism according to the Kaingang of Southern Brazil

ROBERT R. CREPEAU

ABSTRACT. The nature of dual social organization and the role of reciprocity have been at the heart of anthropological research on the Gê and Bororo Indians of Brazil since the 1920s. This paper revisits the different approaches that have been proposed to explain the complex interrelationship existing between dualist ideology as expressed by the Gê themselves, the great variety of reciprocal practices associated with this ideology and the role of reciprocity as a unifying and explanatory principle. Using data collected among the Kaingang of Southern Brazil, it re-examines the role of social exchange and reciprocity in the ritual context of Kikikoia, a second funeral ritual. Kaingang’s conceptions of reciprocal services and partnership are not adequately rendered by our anthropological concepts of gift, exchange, dialectical society, or process of social (re)production. The author argues that while it is true that these concepts are used as general implicit principles realized in practices by the social actors and the social system, and made explicit by the observer, partnership is explicit in Kaingang practices where the emphasis is put on the asymmetrical and complementary relationship of partners of opposite moieties defined as parts of a social whole. More precisely, according to the Kaingang, social life is not based on exchange as such (as an implicit principle) but on the explicit sociological institution of partnership between asymmetric and complementary classes emerging of a pre-existing totality. Accordingly, exchange and reciprocity are not an unconscious given nor a function of dual organization but something instituted in the mythic past by the action of some ancestral culture-heroes.

KEYWORDS: Brazil, Kaingang, Gê, ritual, myths, reciprocity, exchange, social dualism
The nature of dual social organization and the role of reciprocity have been at the heart of anthropological research on the Gê and Bororo Indians of Brazil since the 1920s. A few competing approaches have been proposed to explain the complex interrelationship existing between dualist ideology as expressed by the Gê themselves, the great variety of reciprocal practices associated with this ideology and the role of reciprocity as a unifying and explanatory principle.

At the most general level, Gê dual social organization corresponds to Marcel Mauss’s paradigmatic type of system of total services:

The purest type of such institutions seems to us to be characterized by the alliance of two phratries in Pacific or North American tribes in general, where rituals, marriages, inheritance of goods, legal ties and those of self-interest, the ranks of the military and priests – in short everything is complementary and presumes co-operation between the two halves of the tribes (Mauss 1990: 6).

Using data collected in collaboration with members of the Kaingang society of Southern Brazil, I revisit in this paper the role of social exchange and reciprocity. I argue for a contextual approach that takes into account dualist ideology as well as the fact that the Kaingang define also themselves in monadic and polyadic terms in various discursive and ritual contexts (Crépeau 1997; 2008).

I will also briefly address the relationships existing between holism and reciprocity and argue that Kaingang conceptions of reciprocal services and partnership are not adequately rendered by our anthropological concepts of gift (Mauss 1990), exchange (Lévi-Strauss 1950, 1958), dialectical society (Maybury-Lewis 1979, 1989; Da Matta 1982), or process of social (re)production (Turner 1996; Weiner 1992). While it is true that these concepts are used as general implicit principles realized in practices by the social actors and the social system and made explicit by the observer, partnership is explicit in Kaingang practices and in specific discursive and ritual contexts where the emphasis is put on the asymmetrical and complementary relationship of partners of opposite moieties and ranks of the military and priests – in short everything is complementary and presumes co-operation between the two halves of the tribes (Mauss 1990: 6).

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sections. I will argue that from a Kaingang’s point of view, partnership implies a holistic ideology which defines partners as essential parts of a social whole.

HAUNTED BY HAU

Godbout (2002: 151) writes that the gift should not be conceived and analyzed strictly in relation to the circulation of the object itself but by taking into account the point of view of the social actors. Godbout is reacting against what he calls “extreme conceptions” of the gift “defined only by what is circulating or... by the fact that there is or not a counter-gift...”. According to Godbout (2002: 152), this is precisely what Marcel Mauss intended to do in The Gift: “... instead of being satisfied to observe only what is circulating in one direction or the other, he asked himself the question of the specification of the relation”.

Indeed, Mauss’s use of the Maori concept hau has been widely discussed and often criticized since the publication of The Gift (Kilani 1990). For instance, according to various commentators (cf. Godelier 1996: 70, 144), Mauss’s explanation of the obligation to reciprocate is wrongly founded on a specific system of beliefs or moral and magico-religious representations. I would like to argue briefly here that it is an exaggerated claim that “the Maori hau is raised [by Mauss] to the status of a general explanation ...” (Sahlins 1972: 150).

Of course, it is true that Mauss used suggestive phrasing when describing the obligation to return gifts: “spiritual mechanisms”, “moral and religious reason” (Mauss 1990). However, I would like to suggest that most commentators did not fully realize that Mauss gives logical and consequently analytical priority not to spiritual mechanisms – of which Maori hau is a prototype in The Gift – but to what he calls “a type of law and economy” (Mauss 1983: 153). Spiritual mechanisms such as hau constitute a type of explicit rule and idea related to a general implicit normative context; in his words a “type of law and economy” (ibid.). In fact, these mechanisms are at work in specific contexts – Maus is referring for instance to: “real contracts” (ibid.) – which constitute for him the general context

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within which he wants to describe “the nature of the juridical bond created by the transmission of things” (ibid.).

It is well known that Lévi-Strauss suggested that Mauss used hau to reconstruct a totality from its parts. More importantly for my argument here, Lévi-Strauss criticized Mauss for introducing in his explanation of reciprocity an indigenous concept and point of view:

… Mauss strives to reconstruct a whole out of parts; and as that is manifestly not possible, he has to add to the mixture an additional quantity which gives him the illusion of squaring his account. This quantity is hau. Are we not dealing with a mystification, an effect quite often produced in the minds of ethnographers by indigenous people? Not, of course, by “indigenous people” in general, since no such beings exist, but by a given indigenous group, about whom specialists have already pondered problems, asked questions and attempted answers … We do not need hau to make the synthesis, because the antithesis does not exist. The antithesis is a subjective illusion of ethnographers, and sometimes also of indigenous people who, when reasoning about themselves—as they quite often do—behave like ethnographers, or more precisely, like sociologists; that is, as colleagues with whom one may freely confer (Lévi-Strauss 1987 [1950]: 47 and 49).

But in contrast to Lévi-Strauss’s interpretation, it seems quite clear that Mauss was not trying to reconstruct exchange per se from its parts but was referring at the very beginning of The Gift to a totality which is not at all the sum of the three obligations to reciprocate to which he would later add hau. As Vincent Descombes wrote:

If the thing is animated instead of inert, it is not because people have an animist conception of inert things, but because things are integrated within the exchange system. What is “animated” is not the particular item in question … , it is the thing as given by a person or a family. You might as well say that gift relations are triadic and that we must never separate the relation to the object of the relation to the person. And it is simply not the particular item in question … , it is the thing as given by a person or a family. You might as well say that gift relations are triadic and that we must never separate the relation to the object of the relation to the person. And it is not the particular item in question … , it is the thing as given by a person or a family. You might as well say that gift relations are triadic and that we must never separate the relation to the object of the relation to the person But in contrast to Lévi-Strauss’s interpretation, it seems quite clear that Mauss was not trying to reconstruct exchange per se from its parts but was referring at the very beginning of The Gift to a totality which is not at all the sum of the three obligations to reciprocate to which he would later add hau. As Vincent Descombes wrote:

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precisely what Mauss never ceases to say: hau is the notion of a juridical bond between persons created by the transmission of things. (Descombes 1996a: 254, my translation)

The general hypothesis of Mauss in *The Gift* is correctly holistic and based on the pre-eminence of a social whole vis-à-vis its parts. Mauss initially locates this totality in a pattern of symmetrical and reciprocal rights and duties between groups and sub-groups, moieties or phratries, etc., which, he wrote, “ceases to appear contradictory if, above all, one grasps that “all these institutions express one fact alone, one social system one precise mentality” (Mauss 1990 : 14). This specific mentality is realized as a constant exchange of a spiritual matter, including things and men, between clans and individuals, distributed between social ranks, the sexes and the generations” (ibid.).

Mauss is adopting here a legitimate holistic approach by postulating an encompassing totality: a social regime, a specific mentality, a whole whose juridical (or, better, logical) pre-eminence is expressed by its parts or institutions in the form of rules, ideas and statuses binding men and objects in contextualized practices. It is a holistic approach which corresponds to the definition of social totality as a “logical system of rules” proposed by Descombes (1996b: 83). In other words, while it is true that “hau is not the ultimate explanation of exchange” (Lévi-Strauss 1950: 48), the reduction of the normative concept hau, to a non normative one, exchange as an unconscious necessity, does not constitute a sociological resolution of the problem.

As we know, Mauss (1990: 11) was puzzled by Ranaipiri’s allusion to the intervention of a third person, but as Godelier (1996: 61) wrote: “… even when exchanges (of gifts or commodities) imply only two individuals or groups, they always imply the presence of a third party – or rather of the others as third. In exchange, the third term is always included”. It is noteworthy that Charles S. Peirce defined exchange as a triadic relation which implies the law as the third term (or party):

If you take any ordinary triadic relation, you will always find a mental element in it. … Analyze for instance the relation precisely what Mauss never ceases to say: hau is the notion of a juridical bond between persons created by the transmission of things. (Descombes 1996a: 254, my translation)

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involved in “A gives B to C”. Now what is giving? It does not consist [in] A’s putting B away from him and C’s subsequently taking B up. It is not necessary that any material transfer should take place. It consists in A’s making C the possessor of B according to Law. There must be some kind of law before there can be any kind of giving, – be it the law of the strongest (Peirce 1958: #331).

Concepts such as hau reveal that a logical system of rules, a social totality (a type of law, a social regime, as Mauss puts it) is a necessary precondition to exchange and defines and orders the mutual status of the partners, for if one gives something one cannot at the same time be the recipient of that same item: “to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself” (Mauss 1990: 12). In other words, the donor is giving away something of himself, not ontologically or mystically, but in juridical terms of status, rights and obligations in relationship to a specific partner and a specific object (term or services) of exchange.

ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND ON THE KAINGANG

The Kaingang are actually the most numerous members of Gê linguistic and cultural family of Brazil with approximately 30,000 persons living mainly on reservations located in the southern Brazilian states of São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul. In contrast to other Gê and Bororo societies (Crocker 1969, 1985; Maybury-Lewis 1967; Nimuendajú 1939, 1946; Turner 1979), the Kaingang are not, historically at least, known to have built circular or semi-circular villages that directly express and represent their social organization and cosmology, though it is noteworthy that the house of the political leader, called pãh (cacique in Portuguese), is conceived to be located at the centre of the reservation. The space surrounding the houses is called plur, which means literally “clean space”, in contrast with the virgin forest, nietkuxã, literally “cold forest” or very dense forest where the sun never reaches the ground. These contrasts constitute the spatial triad “in, plur, nietkuxã” (house, involved in “A gives B to C”. Now what is giving? It does not consist [in] A’s putting B away from him and C’s subsequently taking B up. It is not necessary that any material transfer should take place. It consists in A’s making C the possessor of B according to Law. There must be some kind of law before there can be any kind of giving, – be it the law of the strongest (Peirce 1958: #331).

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Kaiang dual organization consists of moieties called kamé and kairu, which are conceived as asymmetric and complementary. Kamé moiety is conceived as first, masculine, associated with the sun, the east, political power and shamanism, while in contrast kairu is conceived as second, feminine, associated with the moon, the west, and the organization of second funeral rites. Each moiety has a section and a sub-moiety: votôro is associated with kairu while veineky is associated with kamé. Moiety and section membership is patrilineal but can also be exceptionally acquired by nomination. The Kaiang dual organization describe the rule of exogamy by saying that one should ideally marry the person of a different facial painting, meaning a person of a different moiety or section. In formalized contexts such as myth and ritual, social relations are described or actualized as being mainly dyadic, using the kamé-veineky/kairu-votôro moiety contrast, while spatial relations are described according to two tridic schemes: horizontally, by using the “house, clean space, forest” domains discussed earlier, or vertically, by using, “high, middle, low” contrasts. For example, Xapécó reservation cemeteries are best described using these contrasts. Located east of a settlement, the cemetery is divided into a kamé and a kairu section by an east-west path going from the entrance of a rectangular fenced-space to the main cross at the rear of the cemetery. In the administrative centre of the reservation, called Xapécózinho, kamé and veineky are buried in the southern section and kairu and votôro in the northern section, even if this ideal is not entirely realized in practice today for several reasons (Crépeau 2000). In a nearby settlement named Pinhalzinho, I noted an inversion of this pattern: kamé are buried in the northern section and kairu in the southern section delimited by an identical east-west axis. Since kamé moiety is clearly associated with the sun and the east while kairu is associated with the moon and west, at first I did not understand this inversion involving these two cemeteries until informants interpreted it for me by using a high/low contrast: the kamé belong to the higher part and the kairu to the lower part of the cemetery. This interpretation is also related to the fact that the cemetery is conceived as a temporary middle or intermediary domain for the deceased souls (vein kupri) who will be later liberated by the clean space, virgin forest) associated with the dyadic structure of moieties (Crépeau 1997; Rosa 2005).

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enactment of the Kikikikoia ritual (see below) after which they will be able to reach their final resting place(s). According to some informants, kamé and veineky souls rest in a place called Fogkawe, located toward the east in a high place, while kairu and votôro souls go to an underground location called Nûmbé, perhaps a cavern, to the west.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL INSTITUTION OF RECIPROCITY AND EXCHANGE ACCORDING TO THE KAINGANG

In the early 1960s, David Maybury-Lewis (1960) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958, 1960) argued about the nature of dual social organization of the Gê and Bororo of Central Brazil. According to Lévi-Strauss, dual social organization is adventitious and illusory for the natives as well as for the naïve ethnographer because there is always a third party involved in the apparent relationship of moieties, for example a third section or a third partner: “Behind the dualism and the apparent symmetry of the social structure, we perceive a more fundamental organization which is asymmetrical and triadic (…)” (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 145).

David Maybury-Lewis called Gê societies “dialectical” because the theme of balance and complementarity is, according to him, a fundamental preoccupation for them. The Gê seek harmony and “it is the system which creates the reciprocity”, not the other way around: “This is demonstrated by the central Brazilian data that show how the terms of the reciprocity can change drastically without destroying the system. Reciprocity, in short, is a function of dual organization, not a cause of it” (Maybury-Lewis 1989: 112).

According to data gathered at Xapecó reservation in Santa Catarina State in Southern Brazil, Maybury-Lewis is right when he relates dual organization to a quest for harmony, though for my informants, dual organization is also related to power, which implies conflict, competition and hierarchy, a point well made by Terence Turner (1979, 1984, 1996) for the Kayapô and other Gê societies of Central Brazil. Indeed, informants of both moieties conceived contextually kamé moiety as first and stronger and as encompassing the kairu moiety which is consequently second and weaker, for enactment of the Kikikikoia ritual (see below) after which they will be able to reach their final resting place(s). According to some informants, kamé and veineky souls rest in a place called Fogkawe, located toward the east in a high place, while kairu and votôro souls go to an underground location called Nûmbé, perhaps a cavern, to the west.

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In the early 1960s, David Maybury-Lewis (1960) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958, 1960) argued about the nature of dual social organization of the Gê and Bororo of Central Brazil. According to Lévi-Strauss, dual social organization is adventitious and illusory for the natives as well as for the naïve ethnographer because there is always a third party involved in the apparent relationship of moieties, for example a third section or a third partner: “Behind the dualism and the apparent symmetry of the social structure, we perceive a more fundamental organization which is asymmetrical and triadic (…)” (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 145).

David Maybury-Lewis called Gê societies “dialectical” because the theme of balance and complementarity is, according to him, a fundamental preoccupation for them. The Gê seek harmony and “it is the system which creates the reciprocity”, not the other way around: “This is demonstrated by the central Brazilian data that show how the terms of the reciprocity can change drastically without destroying the system. Reciprocity, in short, is a function of dual organization, not a cause of it” (Maybury-Lewis 1989: 112).

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According to the same informants of both moieties, dual organization is not illusory, as wrote Lévi-Strauss (1958: 145), but elusive. They know too well that their day-to-day interaction is lived in a plural society with factions, social, economic and political divisions, and a sad absence of unity, unía o as they say in Portuguese. But according to their narratives about the great flood or the origin of the moon, they once in the past constituted a unified society issued of kamé ancestors who at the beginning of time instituted social order based on moieties and sections (Crépeau 1994, 1997; 2000; Pereira-Gonçalves 2000).

If we follow my Kaingang informants, exchange and reciprocity appear not as an unconscious given (Lévi-Strauss) nor a function of dual organization (Maybury-Lewis) but as something instituted in the past by the action of powerful ancestral culture-heroes: a) who stole the basic elements of Kaingang life such as fire, water or honey from their egoistic primordial owners; b) who generously gave them to humanity, for instance maize and other cultigens gave by Nhar (or Maize) after his death; c) who created moiety and section partnership after the destruction of the first humans by the great flood (Crépeau 1994, 2008).

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KIKIKOIA SECOND FUNERAL

I will now briefly examine the context of “total services” between moieties enacted in funerary ritual contexts in Xapêcô and Palmas reservations of Southern Brazil. In the recent past, funerary treatment of a dead person involved two steps: 1) the burial and first funeral rite followed approximately a year later by, 2) the second funeral rite, called Kikikoia. Today, the latter was performed only for adult Catholic traditionalists.

The First Funeral
After death, the person is laid out on a table with his feet oriented to the east: “He is looking in direction of the cemetery, located to the east or in direction of sunrise”, according to the Kaingang. The body example in ritual contexts such as second funeral ritual as will be discussed in next section (Crépeau 1994, 1997; Rosa 2005).

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is carefully washed, combed and dressed with clean clothes before being placed flat on its back in a wooden coffin. The person will then be exposed in the church or in the school in settlements where there is no church. There, the east-west orientation of the body is maintained. Family members and friends spend the night lighting candles, singing, praying and socializing. Since most of the time no Catholic priest is available, the reservation’s ritual singers, two partners belonging respectively to kamé and kairu moieties, are invited to sing and pray for the deceased.

In the past, members of the opposite moiety of the deceased performed funerary services. I witnessed such a ritual only once in June 1995 when an influential man died at a very old age while the Kikikoia was being performed. Belonging to kairu moiety, this man was considered the oldest person of the reservation and was very respected as the penultimate organizer of the Kikikoia. When the news of his death broke, people commented that the old man had waited until the beginning of the Kikikoia to pass away, so he was able to participate in the ritual he loved and cared so much about.

The body is buried at daybreak the following morning (a practice which follows usual Brazilian funeral treatment). In the cemetery, the body is buried with his head oriented to the east and his feet to the west because he is now considered “looking” in the direction of sunset. A simple, plain wooden cross is driven into the ground at the head of the grave and a tipanãri, a small branch of Araucaria pine tree (Araucaria angustifolia) for a kamé or of sete sangria tree (Simulocarpus parviflora) for a kairu, is placed on the grave to indicate that the second funeral has not yet taken place. After seven days, family members will light candles on the grave to guide the soul toward the cemetery where it is believed to remain until second funeral.

Second Funeral Rite

The second funeral name, Kikikoia, literally means “to eat the honey beer”. It is celebrated approximately a year after the first funeral. The ritual must be formally solicited by family members of the deceased to a ritual singer of the opposite moiety or the pã-i, the chief organizer of the ritual. Second funeral is organized and performed only if demands originate from at least two families of opposite

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The second funeral usually takes place after harvest somewhere between April and May. It is consequently a period during which maize, black beans and other agricultural products are more abundant than average. It is also the period during which Araucaria pine trees (*Araucaria angustifolia*) produce their fruit, called *pinhão*, which before massive deforestation were a very important source of food for the Kaingang as well as for rodents and monkeys who were then easily and abundantly captured by hunters. Santos (1987: 28) also mentions that the Kaingang historically competed with the Xokleng, their immediate Gê neighbours, for the control of these rich pine-forests.

The central symbol – in Victor Turner’s sense – of the second funeral is in fact an Araucaria pine tree, considered to be kamé, which is sacrificed ritually and transformed into a five metres trough in which honey beer is prepared. According to my informants, this pine trunk is treated like a deceased person and occupies the centre of the western pole of the ritual space-axis, the other pole being the cemetery.

Although I will not describe in detail the ritual, I would like to stress its fundamental aspect, which is the obligatory complementarity of moieties for its successful enactment. This essential complementarity is reiterated by the ritual performance, which literally and explicitly enacts the ideal of reciprocal exchange of services between moieties established after the great flood by Kaingang’s primordial ancestors of kamé moiety (I will return to this point).

In contrast to the first funeral, all seven phases of the second funeral ritual imply the coordinated action of kamé-veineky/kairu-votôro moieties in relation to a third term: recently deceased persons and ancestors who are said to gather around the ritual fires and trough because they very much enjoy *Kikikioia* ritual and especially honey beer.

The second funeral officially begins with the first fire. After sunset, two fires of pine knots are lit along an east-west axis in a clean flat open space in the settlement. The ritual singers, first kamé-veineky followed by the kairu-votôro, come to their respective fires to complementarity is reiterated by the ritual performance, which literally and explicitly enacts the ideal of reciprocal exchange of services between moieties established after the great flood by Kaingang’s primordial ancestors of kamé moiety (I will return to this point).

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sing and to drink the honey beer (or sugarcane alcohol nowadays) offered by the deceased’s families. The kamé-veinekyes singers occupy the western fire as they perform services for kairu souls, while the kairu-votôrô singers occupy the eastern fire where the kamé souls are said to gather.

The honey beer is called *kutu*, which could be translated as “deaf”. Ritual singers say that it should never be drunk before being ritually sung and beaten with a gourd rattle since it is a ritual signal or invitation transmitted to the deceased.

The following day, also after sunset, the second fire phase takes place along the same lines. Again, two fires are lit and the ritual singers finish singing over *kutu* alcohol for every deceased for whom the ritual is performed. The first and the second fire phases last approximately 3 hours each.

The following morning, the ritual singers and other participants proceed to the sacrifice of the pine tree. They select a mature pine of good diameter and walk around it from east to west while singing and beating rattle gourds before cutting the tree down. The kamé always perform first, followed by the kairu. Ritual officiants also sing and circulate around the felled trunk and while it is being transported to the ritual ground of the first and second fire phases. There, the trunk is placed along an east-west axis parallel to the fire axis, the head or crown of the tree toward east and its base or foot to the west. The trunk is divided into two sections: the lower section or the base of the tree is kairu and is attended by the kamé officiants while the crown, or high section, is kamé and consequently attended by the kamé.

Over the following days, the trunk is hollowed out and transformed into a trough by men of both moieties. The kamé take care of the eastern or high section (attributed to the kamé souls), while the kamé carve the western or low section. When the trough is ready, the fourth phase takes place. It consists in the preparation of honey beer, which again implies the coordinated action of the ritual singers of both moieties. All ingredients used in the mixture – water, honey, and sometimes white sugar and sugarcane alcohol – are said to be *kutu* and must be sung by each moiety before being mixed in the trough. Ritual singers gather around their respective extremities of the trunk with which they are associated: the eastern section by the kamé.

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After the beer is ready, the last or third fire can take place. It is the most elaborate and consists in a large gathering of people from Xapéoc and Palmas reservations and often from reservations of other regions. Six fires, three kamé and three kairu, are lit after sunset in the same ritual ground and along the same east-west axis where the singers and other participants must spend the whole night until sunrise. During this phase, participants must wear the respective facial painting that indicates their moiety, section and ritual affiliation. The facial paintings are applied by two elderly women, one from each moiety, with Araucaria pine-tree charcoal mixed with water, while a kamé woman paints the kairu and votôro with charcoal of sete sangria tree.

The night is spent singing and drinking sugarcane alcohol donated by the families of the deceased. Here again, the coordinated efforts of members of both moieties are essential to the enactment of the ritual. Both moieties compete in the intensity, enthusiasm and sadness of their songs – the kamé always initiating the singing followed by the kairu.

At sunrise, a meal is offered to all participants by the ritual organizers in the name of the families of the deceased. Then, a procession moves toward the cemetery. But, first, participants from both moieties, the ritual singers ahead and their ritual assistants, named penk, proceed to the houses of the families who are sponsoring the ritual to recover the wooden crosses of their deceased moiety member. The crosses are painted according to the deceased’s facial painting design. The kamé open this procession and proceed to kairu houses, followed at good distance by the kairu who go to kamé houses. Each family receives the celebrants by offering them sugarcane alcohol.

Participants then walk slowly to the cemetery. The kamé enter the cemetery first and proceed systematically to each individual kairu grave. There, the ritual singers sing and beat rattle gourds on each grave while their assistants enact specific ritual operations to free the spirits of the dead and send them to their resting place. The Kaingang said that they must remove the tipankri – that small branch of pine or

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sete sangria tree placed on the grave during the first funeral – and throw it over the cemetery fence in the direction toward which the spirit must travel to reach its resting place, more precisely to the east for a kamé or venekey spirit and to the west for a kairu or votóro spirit. After completing this task, the kamé participants slowly walk back to the fire ritual ground. Only then, do kairu singers and their powk assistants enter the cemetery and attend ritually the kamé graves. This order is said to be rigid and must be respected for the ritual to be successful.

Then both moieties go back to the ritual fire ground for the closing dance, the kairu well behind the kamé. Members of both moieties decorate their heads and waists with foliage picked up along the road and carry boughs of bamboo. At the entrance of the settlement, each moiety is welcomed by an officiant of the opposite moiety who gives generous portions of honey beer to every celebrant. The moieties then proceed to the fires, now almost out, singing and shouting joyously. They start dancing around the fires in an east-west circular movement. Drinking honey beer and dancing separately for a while, the moiety dancers progressively approach each other and eventually start dancing together as one body, ignoring for the first time the duality and the distance that was maintained between them during the whole ritual up to that point. Both groups dance together in a spiral-like movement forming a human wave in which moieties are fused and become one entity. This final phase is crucial since, according to my Kaingang informants, it consists in the fusion of moieties into a choreographically unified social group. Kaingang society is at the end represented as a single unified entity, rather than as dual or plural. The honey beer is served abundantly by several officiants to all celebrants until the trough is almost empty. The participants then gather around the trough and finish the last drops before reversing the trough and hitting it with boughs or with stones to signal that the Kikikóia is finally over.

**DISCUSSION**

According to contemporary Kaingang Catholic traditionalists of Xapecó reservation, the Kikikóia explicitly enacts their Amerindian
identity in the reservation, as well as in the regional and national contexts, to which the international context must nowadays be added. Almost abandoned during the 1950s and 1960s because of external religious and political pressures, the Kikiboia has been actualized in 1976 on Xapecó reservation with the help of CIMI (Centro Indigena Missionero – Native Missionary Centre), which is a progressive branch of the Brazilian Catholic Church (Veiga 2000). In 1976 and still at the time of my fieldwork in 1998, one of the greatest challenges facing the Kaingang in their desire to hold the Kikiboia ritual was poverty. Because of the massive deforestation of their reservation and the pollution caused by agricultural chemicals used by their neighbours, the Xapecó reservation is ecologically devastated. Nowadays, there is not enough honey from wild bees to make honey beer, and no more game to hunt or fish to catch to feed ritual participants. Consequently, CIMI financial support has been crucial for honey and food purchases as well as for meeting the transportation costs of participants from other reservations.

When my Kaingang informants described the Kikiboia as “beautiful”, particularly its final dance, they were referring to the fact that the ritual implies the coordinated reciprocal participation of people from every sub-group, moiety or section. At the present time, however, these aesthetic considerations are darkened by religious factionalism between Protestants and Catholics and consequently the last performance of Kikiboia was held in year 2000. Indeed, as already mentioned above, the Kikiboia was a powerful and provocative response of the traditionalists to this situation. Robert Hertz wrote of second funeral rite that it: “always has a pronounced collective character and entails a concentration of the society… This action thus takes a political significance” (Hertz 1960: 71). It is not surprising that according to my Kaingang informants, the Kikiboia ritual constituted a privileged means for the expression of their Amerindian identity, which they express in myths and enact ritually in a holistic mode. In these specific contexts, the kamé moiety is always first and constitutes a logical encompassing totality, which is used as standard, starting point or zero order of sociological and cosmological institutions.

As noted above, the central symbol of Kikiboia is a pine-tree transformed into a trough and ritually treated like a deceased person.

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As noted above, the central symbol of Kikiboia is a pine-tree transformed into a trough and ritually treated like a deceased person.
The pine-tree is associated with the kamé moiety while the honey beer is associated both with kamé and kairu. Indeed, according to my informants, bees are classified as kamé while water is associated with kairu, kamé being associated with the sun and consequently with the dry. Fermentation could be described as the transformation (or fusion) of both ingredients into a superior unity, which furnishes an interesting metaphorical parallel with the final dance of the Kikikioia, which consists in a choreographic fusion of the moieties.

Lévi-Strauss (1966: 125) mentions that in South America, and more specifically among Gé, wild honey was usually collected and immediately eaten on the spot. In contrast, honey beer implies a deferred consumption of honey, which is collected, preserved and then only transformed by fermentation. In short, honey beer is associated with reciprocity while honey per se is not. This, of course, explains why honey beer and not honey is the main object of exchange and circulation that causes (or motivates) everyone to gather around the trough into a single social and logical entity. Sullivan (1988: 197, 200) writes that in South America:

Fermentation marks a calendrical node where various time-cycles can be gathered symbolically. Furthermore, fermentation is a deliberate process by which human beings, imitating the actions of sacred beings, subject cosmic times to cultural artifice. ... Ritual drinking has the function of restaging the transformative acts that originally marked off time. ... Periodic drinking feasts reenact the effective return of destructive events ...

Indeed, my Kaingang informants explicitly associated the Kikikioia and a destructive event, the great flood. In the following narrative, the origin of Kaingang moieties partnership is explicitly described in association with this event:

God announced the flood:
"The day that this woman will wash a stove at the river, there will be a great flood".

The pine-tree is associated with the kamé moiety while the honey beer is associated both with kamé and kairu. Indeed, according to my informants, bees are classified as kamé while water is associated with kairu, kamé being associated with the sun and consequently with the dry. Fermentation could be described as the transformation (or fusion) of both ingredients into a superior unity, which furnishes an interesting metaphorical parallel with the final dance of the Kikikioia, which consists in a choreographic fusion of the moieties.

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This narrative – as well as others – describes the institution of post-diluvium social order. The initial logical unit of this new social order is constituted by a primordial couple who survived the great flood. They are the zero order of alliance, since their children are kamé following the rule of patrilineal affiliation to moiety or section. The following narrative describes how this primordial couple instituted Kaingang dual organization:

Numerous Indians died following a flood which took place in this area. The only survivors were a couple, a brother and his sister, both still very young. They were members of the Kamé group. The couple swam toward a very high mountain named Krim-Takré. They went to the summit and climbed into the branches of the trees. When the water withdrew they went back to earth. They married, the brother and the sister, and the Indians reproduced themselves. They made fire because they...

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Then Joseph, the father of Jesus Christ, built a boat in which he assembled a kamé-kairu couple as well as a couple of each nation. The Blacks did not board the boat except for a woman. The water came during a full day and retired in three days. After that there was no more humans or animals on earth; The Blacks escaped by climbing on top of the trees located on the highest mountains. The woodpecker, who is kamé, stole the fire and gave it to the kamé and the kairu. Then they made a feast called Kikikoia for those who perished during the flood. The first who came to his fire was yamuyé yãgrè, the Cayman, because the kamé always comes first to their fire. Then the kãyer monkey who is kairu went to his fire. … Then Joseph, the father of Jesus Christ, built a boat in which he assembled a kamé-kairu couple as well as a couple of each nation. The Blacks did not board the boat except for a woman. The water came during a full day and retired in three days. After that there was no more humans or animals on earth; The Blacks escaped by climbing on top of the trees located on the highest mountains. The woodpecker, who is kamé, stole the fire and gave it to the kamé and the kairu. Then they made a feast called Kikikoia for those who perished during the flood. The first who came to his fire was yamuyé yãgrè, the Cayman, because the kamé always comes first to their fire. Then the kãyer monkey who is kairu went to his fire. … Then Joseph, the father of Jesus Christ, built a boat in which he assembled a kamé-kairu couple as well as a couple of each nation. The Blacks did not board the boat except for a woman. The water came during a full day and retired in three days. After that there was no more humans or animals on earth; The Blacks escaped by climbing on top of the trees located on the highest mountains. The woodpecker, who is kamé, stole the fire and gave it to the kamé and the kairu. Then they made a feast called Kikikoia for those who perished during the flood. The first who came to his fire was yamuyé yãgrè, the Cayman, because the kamé always comes first to their fire. Then the kãyer monkey who is kairu went to his fire. …
had knowledge of the rope used to make fire. They had numerous children.

Before they died, the couple reestablished the division in two groups: the kamé are stronger and the kairu are weaker. They divided us to organize the marriages between them. After they multiplied themselves, the Indians also reestablished the division between votôro and veineky. The votôro have the strength of the kairu and the veineky the strength of the kamé.

(Narrated by João Xê Coelho of Paraná in 1947 to Schaden 1953: 140-1, my translation).

The normative frame of these Kaingang narratives is not an implicit principle such as exchange, reciprocity or the gift. Discussions with my Kaingang informants point toward a depiction in which the normative frame is rather a triangular configuration of social relations constituted by at least two individuals of opposed moieties and a third party. The latter is constituted by the victims of the flood, who are conceived explicitly in the first narrative as the recipients of the reciprocal ritual action enacted by the moieties during the celebration of the first Kikikoia.

CONCLUSION

While anthropology linked the problem of exchange and reciprocity with, for example, “a certain situation of the spirit in the presence of things” (Lévi-Strauss 1950: XLIII); or the problems implied by social relationships (Godelier 1996; Sahlins 1972) and cultural reproduction (Weiner 1992); or the problem of the status of collective representations, magico-religious and others (Godelier 1996: 144; Racine 1991), the Kaingang narratives and practices discussed above formulate a resolution to the problem which appears sociological through and through. This solution is based on the institution of complementarity between asymmetric partners from a zero order of sociality that is already (or never ceases to be) the social whole: kamé moiety. In the absence of initial or adequate triangular configuration of relations, there must be a praeordial event which engenders this triangular configuration and creates the context for further complementarity between asymmetric partners from a zero order of sociality that is already (or never ceases to be) the social whole: kamé moiety. In the absence of initial or adequate triangular configuration of relations, there must be a praeordial event which engenders this triangular configuration and creates the context for further complementarity between asymmetric partners from a zero order of sociality that is already (or never ceases to be) the social whole: kamé moiety. In the absence of initial or adequate triangular configuration of relations, there must be a praeordial event which engenders this triangular configuration and creates the context for further complementarity between asymmetric partners from a zero order of sociality that is already (or never ceases to be) the social whole: kamé moiety. In the absence of initial or adequate triangular configuration of relations, there must be a praeordial event which engenders this triangular configuration and creates the context for further complementarity between asymmetric partners from a zero order of sociality that is already (or never ceases to be) the social whole: kamé moiety. In the absence of initial or adequate triangular configuration of relations, there must be a praeordial event which engenders this triangular configuration and creates the context for further complementarity between asymmetric partners from a zero order of sociality that is already (or never ceases to be) the social whole: kamé moiety. In the absence of initial or adequate triangular configuration of relations, there must be a praeordial event which engenders this triangular configuration and creates the context for further complementarity between asymmetric partners from a zero order of sociality that is already (or never ceases to be) the social whole: kamé moiety. In the absence of initial or adequate triangular configuration of relations, there must be a praeordial event which engenders this triangular configuration and creates the context for further
interactions. In Kaingang’s flood narratives, Peirce’s “law of the strongest” is simply the anteriority or encompassing pre-emergence of the kamê survivors. Accordingly, social life is not based on exchange as such (as an implicit principle or unconscious given) but on the primordial and explicit sociological institution of partnership between asymmetric and complementary classes emerging of a pre-existing totality.

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Notes
1 The historical starting point of Gê studies is Nimuendaju’s publication of ethnographies translated into English by Robert Lowie (Nimuendaju 1939, 1946). Lévi-Strauss, who was himself a “Gê-ologist” through his study of the Bororo, discussed social dualism in The Elementary Structures of Kinship and elsewhere. The Harvard Central Brazil Project directed by David Maybury-Lewis (1979) in the 1960s and 70s focused on kinship and moieties systems of several Gê societies but excluded the Kaingang and the Xokleng of Southern Brazil.

2 Our data were collected between 1993 and 2009 on Xapecó and Palmas reservations located respectively in Santa Catarina and Paraná States in Southern Brazil. The fieldwork has been realized in collaboration with Silvio Coelho dos Santos, of Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina in Florianópolis. Funding has been provided by FQRSC (Quebec) and CRSHC (Canada). I want to thank my colleague Guy Lanoue for his very wise and helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper and an peer reviewer for his constructive and useful comments.

3 Following Brandom (1994, 2000), we would say today that in those expressions Mauss is emphasizing the explicit formulation of an implicit order.

4 It is rather important to note here that this conception is almost completely obliterated in the English translation of The Gift by Cunninm (Mauss 1967) who translated the French concept “droit” by “custom”; “nature du lien juridique” (p. 160) by “nature of the bond” (p. 10); “lien de droit” (p. 160) by “bond” (p. 10) and so on. The most recent English translation by W. D. Hall’s (Mauss 1990) corrects this.

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Such a logical system of rules is different from a general a priori principle such as exchange as proposed by Lévi-Strauss or Society as proposed by Durkheim – which Mauss divides into sub-groups linked by the gift-giving. What is primordial, in fact, is the logic of the whole and its parts which is different from the unconscious symbolic logic described by Lévi-Strauss (1950).

For example: “The Bororo themselves discuss their social organization in terms of a plan of the ideal village. Nearly all adult men and many women can reproduce an approximate version of the [circular] village model [...].” (Crocker 1969: 45)

Nowadays however, the dominant conception is that all souls are going to the Nûmbé (or paraiso, paradise) located to the west.

His nephew, Vicente Fokâe Fernandes, a kairu, was my main informant to whom the old man passed on the duty of organizing the Kikikoia. Many informants told me that the old man’s age was “four taquaras”. Taquara is a species of bamboo with a cycle of about 30 years and as such is an important time-marker for the Kaingang.

I witnessed and videotaped the Kikikoia ritual in 1994, 1995 and 1998. On some occasions, the fermented beverage, sugarcane or honey beer, was offered by the ritual organizers in the name of the families of the deceased. This fact is related to the difficult economic situation on the reservation that I will briefly address below. See Rosa (2005: 16-21) excellent depiction of anthropological research conducted in the 1990’s on the Kikikoia.

I borrow this concept from the logic of zero order or propositional logic from Gauthier (2002: 189).

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References


Reviews


Where does Sir Cunliffe find the time? Author of countless books and articles, excavator of Roman villas, whole hillforts and more, he has now written this 518-page archaeological equivalent of a Hollywood blockbuster, Europe Between the Oceans. The book aims to provide an interpretation of the history (and prehistory) of Europe from 9000 BC to AD 1000. A blockbuster it is, for Amazon informs me that the book is number one in books of the category Books > History > Archaeology > By Region > European, number five in the category Books > History > Reference > Geographical History and number 17 in the category Books > History > Maritime History (last accessed 21 April 2009). Indicators of esteem indeed, although I would like to know what those sailors are reading that are knocking this book out of the maritime top ten; there are certainly enough references to boats and watery places in this book to keep any salty sea dog happy. The 518 pages also put it in the blockbuster category and in the preface Cunliffe thanks the publisher for gently curtailing the length of his prose – perhaps a sequel will be needed.

This book developed from the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland’s annual Rhind lectures, which Cunliffe presented in 2002 on the subject of the sea and its significance in the development of western European society; it is a subject which is pursued with great relish and interest in this volume. The book opens with an anecdote about an Orcadian farmer talking of Aberdeen and England as distant lands emphasizing the importance of our cognitive geographies in conception of space and distance and this quickly brings out a central theme in the book: the interaction of people through contact, movement and trade. Certainly this book should be required reading for anyone with a nationalistic bent in order to understand the incredible population flux that led to the creation of modern Europe.

The narrative begins with the re-peopling of Europe after the end of the last Ice Age during the Mesolithic and the narrative follows a conventional chronological framework, loosely following the major period divisions. There is a refreshing focus on what archaeology, as opposed to history alone, can tell us, with as much about cultures beyond the historical worlds of the Greeks and Romans as there is on conventional Classical history. For example in Chapter 11, The Interlude of Empire, there is an outline of the Iron Age tribes that lived to the north of the Roman Empire, what anyone with a nationalistic bent in order to understand the incredible population flux that led to the creation of modern Europe.

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There is very impressive garnering of the evidence in the book with detailed knowledge of a dazzling array of peoples, dates, objects, places and geography and a great ability to order these into a coherent and at times compelling narrative. In the preface and throughout the book Cunliffe stresses that his focus and a main driver of the narrative is population mobility, with a resultant focus on routeways and evidence of long distance contact. There is also a focus on the emergence of certain forms of technology and the spread of stuff (wine, bronze, amber, slaves, tools and trinkets).

People who read this book to find out about early belief systems or cosmological motivators for change and contact are likely to be disappointed. Belief systems only make the very rare appearance, e.g. the Hallstatt burial ritual involving a four-wheeled vehicle, but there is little interpretation of this phenomenon or others that cannot be seen simply as the transferal of commodities between different peoples. The focus on contact and stuff can also get rather repetitive and the thread of argument and narrative loses focus at times, giving way to simple description of sequence. These are perhaps easy criticisms to make when so much detailed knowledge is required to even attempt to write such a book. Indeed there are few people in the world who could tell such a tale and it is testament to Cunliffe and his life work that such an ambitious book has been realised. It is also inevitable that in any blockbuster certain issues get glossed over in favour of a fast-paced, gripping narrative and overall this book delivers just such an experience. Steven Spielberg may not be able to make a movie out of it, but it is a book worthy of any bookshelf and a fascinating read for anyone interested in the origins of Europe. (Gordon Noble)


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Swedish, consists in a prologue, two main chapters on “Mythology and Criticism” and “The Modern Nibelungen Cycle”, and an epilogue. Almost forty pages of end notes follow on, then a bibliography and a list of the more than twenty illustrations that grace the pages of the book.

In the prologue, which is entitled “Myths are not stories about life experience and wisdom”, Arvidsson sets out to define exactly what kind of story he considers a myth to be. His main point here is that myths are not universal but are culturally and historically specific. Of course each culture and each period has myths, just as they have languages, but any given myth is not necessarily intelligible to outsiders – just as language is not, either. Different languages have very different structures, concepts, sounds and so on, and the same, Arvidsson argues, can be said for myths. He strongly rejects the claims made by scholars such as Carl Gustav Jung and Joseph Campbell that myths are universal in terms of their validity, meanings and motifs; they are, he argues instead, products of each their specific cultural, intellectual and political climate and should be considered as such.

Arvidsson’s stated objective is “to re-conquer ‘myth’ as a critical and humanistic term” (p. 15), and his chosen set of empirical data is what he refers to as the Nibelungen Cycle in all its incarnations from European tradition through the ages. He divides this extensive material into three groups: 1 the Nibelung Group (Nibelungenlied, Poëres saga and Das Lied vom Härnun Seyfrid), 2 the Edda Group (Poetic Edda, Völsunga saga, Snorra-Edda and the Faroese ballads Þiðreksvölsung), and 3 the Ring Group (Wagner’s opera Der Ring des Nibelungen and Tolkien’s book Lord of the Rings).

In the first section of chapter one, Arvidsson gives an overview of some of the most influential methodologies and approaches that have been applied to the study of myth, including historicism, functionalism, structuralism, folkloristic analysis, history of religion and new historicism. Each of these is briefly described with citations from different scholars who have employed the relevant approaches, and Arvidsson diligently points out what the problematic aspects of all of them are. Following this, Arvidsson presents a “critical definition of myth” in the second section where he works his way through to the conclusion that a myth is more than fiction (understood as “just entertainment”), it is a religious hegemony (understood as “a paradigmatic truth”) (p. 54). Throughout this chapter, Arvidsson displays a keen awareness of the difficulties involved in defining the concept of myth, treating the sources; yet, it is obvious that he himself is a part of the game through the mere fact that he, too, is defining the concepts relevant to his study and treating his selected sources. Arvidsson’s objectivity (if that is what it is) is not indicative of any lack of ideology, quite the contrary.

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The first section of chapter two concerns the influential Dutch scholar Jan de Vries whose works on Old Norse myth and religion are still considered academic heavyweights today. What Arvidsson wants to do here is to show how de Vries’ personal preferences and political affiliations have left their mark on his scholarly work. Like many of his contemporary scholars, de Vries was politically engaged on the right wing, and his interest in Norse culture was ideologically motivated as much as it was academically motivated. His interest in the Nibelungen tradition were strongly slanted towards turning it into myth rather than treating it as legendary narrative in keeping in mind that Arvidsson has defined “myth” as “religious hegemony.”

By regarding the surviving texts as pale reflections of a sometimetime great original narrative, de Vries explains away the texts available to him and shifts the focus to an even dimmer past for which there is even less evidence to disturb the picture he wants to produce. This way of using history to get rid of history is what enables de Vries to lend a degree of eternity to exactly those ethical rules, which he wants to promote. Essentially, then, de Vries is trying to turn the Nibelungen material into something, which (and the reader can only agree with Arvidsson on this point) it decidedly is not, namely religion. Arvidsson’s discussion of de Vries is enlightening as well as thought provoking and the reader is implicitly urged to consider very carefully what the underlying agenda of any scholarly work on Norse traditions may be, especially one that has been produced in German speaking parts of Europe during the period when Nazism openly influenced international politics.

Much of the second section in chapter two is taken up by discussions of the cultural debates and the philosophical and intellectual trends of Europe, especially Germany, during the 19th and 20th centuries. More specifically, it concerns Richard Wagner’s monumental work: Der Ring des Nibelungen, and the ways in which this has been used (and abused) in various contexts since its production in the late 1800s. Again, Arvidsson emphasises personal and political affiliations of Wagner, pointing out that, in his youth, Wagner was associated with strongly left-wing and revolutionary movements, and some of this shines through in his work, which can be seen as a socialist cry against capitalism, and where the moral is that greed incurs deserved punishment. In this way, his work is typical of its time in its apocalyptic search for a “purer” human being and in its reliance on ancient heathen symbols to achieve this (p. 101). What Wagner wanted to do was to create “a universal mythology” (p. 106), to create a work of art which could serve the same function as Greek drama had done in ancient times by appealing to the public’s liking for symbolic truths (p. 120), and one of the things he does in order to meet this end is to make the heathen deities much

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more prominent in his work than they are in the source material. Thus, Arvidsson portrays Wagner as another person attempting to turn into myth something, which is essentially not myth.

The third and last section of chapter two focuses on J. R. R. Tolkien, whose work: Lord of the Rings, is rather less directly linked to the Nibelungen tradition, although it draws on a number of motifs from the sources. Arvidsson gives some attention to the personal experiences of Tolkien (as a soldier during World War 1) and the ways in which these coloured his political affiliations and influenced his authorship, but the discussion to a large extent takes the form of a comparison between Tolkien and Wagner – their different ideologies, different agendas and different ways of achieving their aims. The essence of this comparison appears to boil down to the fact that Wagner, drawing on heathen (or at least perceived heathen) ideals, romanticised violence, whereas Tolkien, drawing on a number of clearly Christian notions, was a pacifist at heart (pp. 152-9). Arvidsson’s discussion is certainly interesting and worthwhile, but it is clear that Tolkien’s work does not qualify as a “myth”; nor, it would appear, was it intended to do so. This section also includes a comparison of Tolkien’s work and Peter Jackson’s film-trilogy, which is based on it (pp. 176-8). Arvidsson here lets his argument gradually slide into the theme of the epilogue: the role and function of myth in our late-capitalist society. He comes to the conclusion that the relevance of myth (and of religion) has shifted from the cultural centre (politics and ideology) to the cultural periphery (escapism and the entertainment industry) (p. 195).

Arvidsson has produced a worthwhile contribution to the cultural debate of the early twenty-first century, and his book serves as a good (not least a post-modem!) reminder to anyone who works with mythology, with myth and with traditional narratives that we are all caught up in and shaped by our contemporary climate – just as Arvidsson himself is. It is evident that Arvidsson, however, is motivated by academic rather than political interests, and he deserves to be read. Whether he has achieved his aim of “re-conquering ‘myth’ as a critical and humanistic term” is not immediately clear; he does not return to this question. He does manage to raise a lot of questions, and, if he seems more reluctant to articulate too many answers, he can hardly be blamed for this – having just produced an entire volume on the risks involved in attempting to give an adequate answer. (Karen Bek-Pedersen)

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This collection of articles contains nine essays on Old Norse myth plus a preface, an index of keywords from the essays as well as a note on the contributors. As the title of the volume indicates, these essays are "reflections on myths", each picking its own theme and taking its own approach in accordance with the interests and expertise of the authors.

The first essay, "Contemporary Research into Old Norse Mythology" by Jens Peter Schjødt, stands out as it constitutes an overview of research in the field from the past ten to fifteen years rather than a discussion of myths or mythology. Noting some of the major works that have produced since the mid 1990s, Schjødt’s essay is interesting in the sense that it discusses the range of methodological approaches employed by different disciplines – and discusses them with an admirably open mind, which simultaneously reveals an understanding of the premises that different disciplines work from. This sort of open mind is exactly what is needed for interdisciplinary research to work in practice and not remain a mere good idea.

Of the remaining eight essays, in particular four deal very closely with the idea of "reflections on myths". Pernille Hermann’s essay on “Islendingabók and History” discusses as one of its central themes the relationship between the concepts of myth and history as well as the significant differences that exist between our 21st century definitions and the ways in which medieval texts actually operate. Hermann’s thesis is that “an absolute opposition between myth and history is now often considered to be untenable” (p. 17) and her lucid discussion of how myth and history interact in Islendingabók serves as a reminder of the ways in which medieval scribes handled the traditions that had come down to them. A similar theme is dealt with by John McKinnell in his essay: “Why did Christians Continue to Find Pagan Myths Useful?” This is essentially a discussion of the Old Norse sources for mythology in comparison with Old English and Old High German sources, which reveals that there are significant differences between the ways in which medieval Icelanders and medieval Englishmen treated their pagan past. One important point made by McKinnell is that there is, in fact, much more mythological narrative found in the Norse than in the English sources, whereas the English material often has a more practical attitude towards charms and magic, often preserving directions for how to use the charms in magical rituals – something that is hardly ever the case for Norse charms. Furthermore, McKinnell is able to trace developments in the use of Norse mythological material in skaldic poetry and to show that the absolute opposition between myth and history is now often considered to be untenable (p. 17) and her lucid discussion of how myth and history interact in Islendingabók serves as a reminder of the ways in which medieval scribes handled the traditions that had come down to them. A similar theme is dealt with by John McKinnell in his essay: “Why did Christians Continue to Find Pagan Myths Useful?” This is essentially a discussion of the Old Norse sources for mythology in comparison with Old English and Old High German sources, which reveals that there are significant differences between the ways in which medieval Icelanders and medieval Englishmen treated their pagan past. One important point made by McKinnell is that there is, in fact, much more mythological narrative found in the Norse than in the English sources, whereas the English material often has a more practical attitude towards charms and magic, often preserving directions for how to use the charms in magical rituals – something that is hardly ever the case for Norse charms. Furthermore, McKinnell is able to trace developments in the use of Norse mythological material in skaldic poetry and to show that...
references to the heathen gods fell out of use in the early eleventh century but were brought in again during later periods, which indicates that medieval ideas about what was appropriate material and in which contexts changed over the course of time. Catharina Raudvere’s essay on “Myth, Genealogy, and Narration: Some motifs in Völunga saga from the perspective of the history of religions” concerns the so-called forナルdauðarstýgur (“sagas of ancient times”), discussing their suitability as sources for Old Norse ideological as well as religious concepts. Raudvere calls for “a broader understanding of what is of interest to a historian of religion” (p. 128) and her treatment of Völunga saga shows that also narratives of a type not directly connected to religion, ritual or divine beings can yield information relevant to the study of exactly these topics. Also Schjødt’s essay on “Ibn Fadlan’s Account of a Run Funeral: To what degree does it reflect Nordic mythology?” is concerned with exploring the source value of a problematic piece of literary evidence. The stance taken here is that, while a number of details presented in Ibn Fadlan’s account cannot be verified as truly Scandinavian, those details which can be supported by other sources, clearly dealing with native Scandinavian matters, should certainly be taken seriously. This attitude may seem entirely obvious and very reasonable to some of us, but it is true that there has been a tendency to be overly critical towards such problematic literary material, dismissing it as unreliable on source-critical grounds alone. This trend is hopefully turning.

The other four essays present studies of specific mythical themes. Rasmus Tranum Kristensen’s essay: “Why was Óðinn Killed by Fenrir? A structural analysis of kinship structures in Old Norse myths of creation and eschatology” provides some interesting structuralist perspectives onto the patterns underlying the Old Norse world view, though it does make a number of significant assumptions, which are not unproblematic. For example, Tranum Kristensen’s idea that the mythical ancestor of the race of asir gods, Börü, has his son Borr, a woman of the race of rígs leads to the conclusion that Borr’s three sons, Óðinn, Vé and Vili (whose mother is certainly of the race of giants), are therefore ½ giants and to base some of his further arguments on this (p. 152). In fact, the sources simply tell us that Börü had a son, nothing is said about the mother of that son. Tranum Kristensen is aware of this, though he does not let it stop him. Even so, the essay is certainly interesting; in particular the focus on kinship patterns in the mythology, mirrored by similar concerns in contemporary saga literature, is relevant. Judy Quintin’s contribution: “‘Hildr prepares a bed for most helmet-damagers’: Snorri’s treatment of a traditional poetic motif in his Edda” explores the role of Valkyries in skaldic poetry, focusing specifically on the phrase used in the essay title, which is found in Háttatal 49. With her usual references to the heathen gods fell out of use in the early eleventh century but were brought in again during later periods, which indicates that medieval ideas about what was appropriate material and in which contexts changed over the course of time. Catharina Raudvere’s essay on “Myth, Genealogy, and Narration: Some motifs in Völunga saga from the perspective of the history of religions” concerns the so-called forナルdauðarstýgur (“sagas of ancient times”), discussing their suitability as sources for Old Norse ideological as well as religious concepts. Raudvere calls for “a broader understanding of what is of interest to a historian of religion” (p. 128) and her treatment of Völunga saga shows that also narratives of a type not directly connected to religion, ritual or divine beings can yield information relevant to the study of exactly these topics. Also Schjødt’s essay on “Ibn Fadlan’s Account of a Run Funeral: To what degree does it reflect Nordic mythology?” is concerned with exploring the source value of a problematic piece of literary evidence. The stance taken here is that, while a number of details presented in Ibn Fadlan’s account cannot be verified as truly Scandinavian, those details which can be supported by other sources, clearly dealing with native Scandinavian matters, should certainly be taken seriously. This attitude may seem entirely obvious and very reasonable to some of us, but it is true that there has been a tendency to be overly critical towards such problematic literary material, dismissing it as unreliable on source-critical grounds alone. This trend is hopefully turning.

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sharpeness, Quinn surveys the material relevant to her central concept and discusses the ideology and societal circumstances that allowed Christian poets to openly draw on clearly pagan motifs. This thorough exploration shows how the martial culture of thirteenth century Iceland, in spite of its Christian identity, continued to draw on the ancient heathen glorification of warfare. Stephen Mitchell’s re-evaluation of the eddic poem Skírnismál in “Skírnismál and Nordic Charm Magic” is well worth the read. In this essay, Mitchell discusses whether this can truly be referred to as a “love poem” and whether its main theme really is to do with marriage, finding that it is, in fact, much more to do with the coercive seduction of a woman through manipulative magic. Rory McTurk’s essay on “Male or Female Initiation? The strange case of Ragnars saga” provides an engaging, if somewhat hypothetical, discussion of initiation or initiation-like patterns in one of the fornaldrásýgur, Ragnars saga. Raising several interesting points along the way – such as the historicity of the Ragnar figure, the male and/or female identity of the by-name Loftbrók, and the relationship between the different sources that refer to Ragnar – McTurk, intriguingly, ends his essay by posing the question of whether the initiation pattern found in the saga can be said to reflect pre-Christian ritual behaviour or whether it may, in fact, stem from Greek literary influence on the saga. The question is left unanswered.

As a whole, the volume provides plenty of food for thought and the essays, which are generally of a very high quality, are representative of several different approaches to and, indeed, reflections on Old Norse myths. (Karen Bek-Pedersen)


This lavishly produced volume presents a selection of papers from a major conference held in Klaipeda, Lithuania, on 22-31 July 2007. This was a joint meeting of two very active societies, The International Society for Archaeoastronomy and Astronomy in Culture (ISAAC) and La Société Européenne pour l’Astronomie dans la Culture (SEAC). Since the first ISAAC conference was held in Oxford, this conference was designated Oxford VIII in that series. Scholars in this area deal with exciting theoretical possibilities and strive hard to ensure academic controls in a field which has sometimes been unduly speculative. Papers often have a high mathematical and astronomical content but the emphasis in this case was on folk materials and so there was scope also for historical and ethnological studies. The...
French scholar, Arnold Lebeuf, draws attention to the neglected archaeological-astronomical work of his namesake, the Abbé Jean Lebeuf (1687-1760) and Cecilia Paul Gómez in a paper called “Venus and the Star Woman”, concerning a Gran Chaco indigenous group called the Wichi, points out “meaningful relationships between celestial beings (Venus), cosmological representations (Star Woman) and feminine social life (material culture, string figures, marriage alliance, initiation rites)”. The editor, Jonas Vaiskunas, has made a study of the art work on a ritual scoop held in the Rauhichi Folk Arts and Crafts Museum in Belarus which was apparently used as a drinking vessel in heathen times and then as a baptismal font. The surface was covered with polychromatic painting typical of Christian tradition in the seventeenth century but, when this was removed during restoration in 1956 and 1968, an underyear of twelve monochromatic linear drawings was revealed. These twelve images, which appear to represent a distinctive zodiac, are reproduced in both black-and-white and colour and are subjected to stringent analysis. Only a few signs are recognisably the same as in the familiar zodiac. Vaiskunas notes: “We can assume that the four most peculiar symbols in Lithuanian calendrical folklore – the Peacock, the Horse, the Deer and the Rider – can be interpreted as four cardinal seasonal star calendar points.” (p. 92). Apart from a difference in the actual images, there is a difference in relationship with celestial phenomena, as Vaiskunas notes: “The zodiac considered here differs from the classical Mediterranean one in that the latter takes note of the situation of the Sun in each constellation and thus of the period of invisibility of that constellation, while the northern zodiac proposed here marks the first or last apparition of a constellation over the horizon.” (p. 90).

The sweep of the papers is worldwide in extent and goes far back in time. Gøran Henriksson makes “A new attempt to date the Xia, Shang and western Zhou dynasties by solar eclipses” and Noemi Miranda, Juan A. Belmonte and Miguel Angel Molinero write about the sacred ceremony used in Ancient Egypt to establish the orientation of built structures and suggest that the sign of the goddess Sethat was an instrument used to target the relevant star or stars. An interesting comparison arises in the case of two studies (Pankenier et al., pp.141-48, and Malville et al., pp., 175-82) of Chinese and Andean sets of markers indicating summer and winter solstices and intermediate points. The book is a fascinating one and anyone with an interest in archaeoastronomy will wish to become familiar with the many updates it offers in often controversial areas. The book is available for 15 Euros, plus postage, from alfonsas.jankantas@ku.lt (Emily Lyle)