

Study Note

Religion in Dacia Pre-Christian Religion in Romania

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In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin says :

“Man and the higher animals, especially the primates, have some few instincts in common.... Similar passions, affections and emotions, even the more complex ones, such as jealousy, suspicion, emulation, gratitude and magnanimity; they practice deceit and are revengeful; they are sometimes susceptible to ridicule, and even have a sense of humor.”

However, unlike animals man has tried to identify his feelings of sadness, of awe, and above all the feeling of fear. Moreover, the fact that death is inevitable, the question of not knowing what is on the other side has haunted man. For millennia the specter of death has remained present and the first and oldest question was ‘What happens when man dies?’ Without doubt, this question gave birth to the faith in a power bigger than that of man, a power that knows and directs human life and death: a divinity or divinities. But the mists of time obscure the awareness of high divine being(s) that were involved in the sacred creation of man and his evolution.

The secret of death has always been existent. Often enough man has thought that life could triumph over death and legends containing this affirmation have been abounding since the ancestral times. Many traditions belonging to different cultures seem to be older than even the specific civilization.

In most cultures around the world there are varieties of myths that unveil the mystery of life. They provide insights into the relationship between human body and the earth, the relationship between man and divinities. These myths left us their messages on creation of the world, of man and on a divine power. Also, many myths contain the origin of the divinities’ lives veiled in a code

language.

Since olden times each nation has had its own gods and in many instances, in different cultures the gods were similar. The information we have now of the existence of these gods is provided by myths and by the writings of the historians of antiquity. We might doubt that myths would acknowledge the existence of each nation's god as being one and the same in several different countries. However, if we take in consideration the collective unconscious or the collective mind, which is like, a planetary library and which contains all of the thoughts, memories and experiences of us, the people, than we will understand why Carl Jung emphasized the psyche and its relationship to the collective mind. After an assiduous research, the Swiss psychiatrist recognized that throughout the world in all cultures there were similarities in their religious prophecies, their myths and fairytales. There must be, he thought, an original source that connected them all. He came to the conclusion that this source is the universal mind. This might then be the reason why there are similarities among different religious interpretations of all the inhabitants of the world, dead or alive. Or, as Virgil once said that there was a time in the distant past when all the land was held in common. Thus, it is quite understandable to share similarities in worshiping the same gods in different cultures.

Babylonians looked to the skies for guidance and the Phoenicians worshipped the Sun. The Roman Empire and its eastern provinces worshipped the god Mithra, ⁽¹⁾ the Indo-Iranian god of airy light between heaven and earth, associated with the light of the sun. Mithra was also associated with the Greek Sun God. On the Japanese archipelago we know that the people have lived with 'The Way of Gods - Shinto. Shinto is nature worship where everything is venerated : mountains, trees, animals have a *kami*. Shinto is the veneration of the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu Omikami.

While the Japanese venerated the Sun, in the Dacian Kingdom of the Carpatho-Danubian regions, the descendants of Romanians, the Geto-Dacian people venerated a heavenly deity called Gebeleizis - the God of Thunder or the God of Sky. Unfortunately, not much information was left about Gebeleizis. Herodotus was the only one to mention this deity (*daimon*) and no other writer mentioned him after him.

It is possible that the Getic name was Zebeleizis: *ziber* meaning the **radical** and *gheib* **lightening** ⁽²⁾ Therefore Gebeleizis was the deity that provoked thunder and lightening. Herodotus mentioned the fact that when there was thunder the Thracians (the Dacians) would shoot arrows toward the sky as a threat to the god, believing in no other god than theirs. According to some historians, and among them, Mircea Eliade, it might be difficult to believe that Deity Gebeleizis was threatened: instead the demonic omnipotence in the clouds was. Mircea Eliade mentions that 'it was a positive cult act : it imitated and indirectly helped, the god of lightening by shooting arrows

at the demons of the darkness.’⁽³⁾

The ritual of shooting arrows skyward is not limited to the Dacians only. Folk mythology from around the world proves that there were some other people, for example in China, Malacca and Bolivia, who did the same. The oldest occurrence of this custom is attested at Yurakare, Semang and Sakai: they aimed their arrows at the sky, uttering threats against the thunder god⁽⁴⁾ In China there was a god of thunder called Lei Kung. Lei Kung made thunder with his hammer. He is represented as a god with a head of a bird with wings and claws and a blue skin.

Numismatic testimonies found at different places in Romania show this Deity Gebelezis as a peaceful horseman carrying a torch. At other times Gebelezis appears as having three heads. Occasionally he was represented seated on a throne holding an arch in his hand. Throughout the antique world, Gebelezis’s cult spread and was assimilated by Armenians, Macedonians and Greeks.

This supreme divinity also goes by having a feminine faithful companion named Bendis. Prehistoric embodiment of the Goddess shows her as a woman with prominent cheekbones and curly hair. She is represented standing between two sacred animals. To the Dacian woman, perhaps Bendis was the embodiment of the Mother Moon.

Several inscriptions consecrated to Apollo were found in Dacia in the Apulum city the capital of the province Dacia Apulensis in central Transylvania. That means the Dacians worshiped Sun God Apollo. Pliny wrote in 77 AD “Apollineum serpentemque eius sagittis configi, citharoedum qui Dicaeus appellatus est”⁽⁵⁾ The meaning is: Apollo who arrowed the serpent, he who plays the guitar, who is called Dicaeus (Dacian). People in Maramures - Romania still play the instrument “cetera” or “chitara” which comes from the Latin “cithara”. Although considered a Greek god, Apollo is thought to be of foreign origin coming from somewhere north of Greece. Pindar mentioned that after building of Troy Apollo returned to his country on the river Ister (Danube). That confirms that Apollo was from Dacia.

Thousands of years ago, people from around the world including that of Dacia had identical beliefs concerning of what will be after death. No human society small or great has ever existed that did not believe in life after death in one form or another. In the mists of the past the answer of the secret of death was lost. However, the ancient teachings offer the key to understanding the past belief systems about death and afterlife. In ancient times men knew the secret of death. About the Dacians all classic authors attest to the deep true nature of the religious life of these people and the most significant information on their deity offered by Herodotus was about Zalmoxis and his teaching of immortality. The historian stated that the Dacians were “bravest and most righteous among the Thracians” and they “claim to be immortal. ...They believe that they do not die but that

he who perishes goes to the god (daimon) Zalmoxis or Gebeleizis, as some of them call him.”⁽⁶⁾

Although some scholars think that Gebeleizis and Zalmoxis are one and the same god it is difficult to think so. Gebeleizis was a storm god while Zalmoxis was a celestial or and terrestrial deity. Without doubt, he is definitely not the god of thunder. From the information left by the Greeks we know that Zalmoxis did not have any temples. He just worshipped on hills and Carpathian Mountains. The Dacians under the influence of Zalmoxis doctrine spent their lives in a parsimonious way, with nothing in excess although thanks to her riches Dacia was called for a certain period of time Dacia Felix. Zalmoxis had taught them to be valiant and strong-minded, to have contempt for death and suffering. Zalmoxis taught his people that death was just a change of habitation and this faith surely reminds of the great 19th century Indian sage Ramakrishna who said that death was like leaving one room and going into another.

Herodotus in *The Persian Wars* Book 4 and *Melpomene*, 93-96 and Plato in *Charmides or Temperance* left us evidence on Zalmoxis. Herodotus wrote about the supreme god of the Getae (or Dacians) as being a man who in his youth was a slave in the southeastern island of Samos in the Aegean Sea and his master was Pythagoras who taught him 'the sciences of skies'. After he was freed he returned to his country and there he decided to help his unobtrusive country fellows. He made a hall and in that hall he began to extend hospitality toward the chief countrymen. During the feasts he gave, he taught them the essentials of the Pythagorean doctrine of immortality; he taught them what he learned from the Egyptian priests through Pythagoras, about the sacramental mysteries and the striving for purity. He taught them that neither he nor the guests should die. He taught that after death they would go to a world where they will have everything and there they will live forever. Pythagoras himself compared human life to a gathering like the Olympic games and he taught the doctrine of rebirth or transmigration and so there is no doubt that Pythagoras must have influenced Zalmoxis teachings.

Then Zalmoxis made himself a subterranean chamber on the holy mountain called Kogainon (nowadays Mt.Bucegi located in the center of Romania) and vanished leaving the Getae by themselves alone. He stayed there for three years and during this time the Getae mourned him considering him dead. However in the fourth year he reappeared and thus he made them believe what Zalmoxis had told them as true.

In his *Persian Wars* Herodotus mentions :

I for my part neither put entire faith in this story of Zalmoxis and his underground chamber, nor do I altogether discredit it: but I believe Zalmoxis to have lived long before the time of Pythagoras. Whether there was ever really a man of the name, or whether Zalmoxis is nothing but a native god

of the Getae, I now bid him farewell. ⁽⁷⁾

From Plato we know also one important fact: Zalmoxis, the Thracian king knew not only the secret of how to become immortal, but also he was a medicine man. In his CHARMIDES or TEMPERANCE he says :

For all good and evil, whether in the body or in human nature, originates, as he declared, in the soul, and overflows from thence, as if from the head into the eyes. And therefore if the head and the body are to be well, you must begin by curing the soul ; that is the first thing. And the cure my dear youth, has to be affected by the use of certain charms, and these charms are fair words ; and by them temperance is implanted in the soul, and where temperance is, there health is speedily imparted, not only to the head, but to the whole body. And he who taught me the cure and the charm at the same time added a special direction : “Let no one” he said, “Persuade you to cure the head, until he has given you his soul to be cured by the charm. For this” he said, “is the great error of our day in treatment of the human body, that physicians separate the soul from the body.” ⁽⁸⁾

Definitely, Plato's message was that Zalmoxis, first, gave consideration to the soul, and second, his image was that of a king, a god and also a medicine man, a shaman. It is important to take into account the relationship between the body and soul. In Greece, Asclepius, the god of medicine, the son of Apollo and Coronis treated the sick in his temples. He lived about 1200 BC and is said to have performed many miracles of healing by visiting the sick while they were dreaming. This perhaps explains how Asclepius could cure his patient by addressing to the soul while he was asleep.

Unlike the traditions that followed Zalmoxis' cult, he did not hold the thought that there is eternal life in a **hell** or a **heaven**. But he taught his countrymen that they are immortal. Zalmoxis did not even once mention that after death some people will go to heaven and those who did wrong, will continue their lives in hell. He did not condemn anyone to hell. The hellish punishments or heavenly rewards came later, together with Christianity. He just taught the existence of immortality of man. Anyone who dies “make[s] oneself immortal.”⁽⁹⁾ Anyone who dies goes back to the initial source - God. It is very interesting that in Romanian language the courtesy title before the surname or full name of a man is *domnul*. *Domnul*, besides holding the meaning of prince or, king, also means Dieu - God. There is an analogue title for women as well. They come from the Latin: DOMNUS- UM. DOMNA-AM ⁽¹⁰⁾ Is the use of this title (Mister- God, Domnul - Domnul) nowadays in anyway connected to the lesson Zalmoxis taught the Dacians that they are immortal and they go back to a place where they live for ever? We are not sure but it is important to take this

small detail in consideration when we treat the subject of afterlife.

Zalmoxis' retreat in the underground chamber has a symbol. Eliade said that the retreat into the underground could be equivalent to *katabasis*, similar with *descendus ad infernos* and delineates an initiation. To go underground means a ritual scenario of death and return to earth. This vanishing (**occultation**) and re-appearance (**epiphany**)⁽¹¹⁾ of a divine being is quite often found in the myths of the Mediterranean and Asian world. For example, Minos, Zeus' son would retreat in a mountainous cave every nine years and on his return he would bring tablets with law inscriptions⁽¹²⁾. Dionysus is also described as having the qualities of being able to disappear and appear. This means the 'death' and 'rebirth' of vegetable life and in general with the eternal cycle of life and death. The Armenian traditional stories tell us also about a cave that was visited by Meher (Mithra) in which he would come in and come out once a year. Eventually, Pythagoras himself goes in the underworld accompanied by supernatural guide. He retreats there for seven years and when he re-appears from Hades he meets the people.

This departing of persons into the lower world has been often mentioned in the last two thousand years. One of them is the great yogi Milarepa of Tibet, and there were also some other lamas who chose the cave. Another is Bodhidharma of southern India and a Brahman by birth. We do not know why Zalmoxis chose the chamber in the underworld and why he came back to 'life'. Was he wondering on the meaning and aim of existence? We can ask this question if we decide the fact that he was a human. Let us return to the cases-in-point of those others who chose the cave.

If we look at Milarepa and his retreat into the cave, after learning his decision of the retreat we can realize that he took the most rigid ascetism out of compassion for humanity. His story is different from that of Zalmoxis: Milarepa renounces black magic he learned in order to destroy the enemies of his family, and seeks mystic truth instead. He retreats into a cave. After many years of continuous mediation he begins to develop psychic powers, he comes out and he is able to fly across the sky. He is determined to travel bringing enlightenment to people. He had many disciples but two of them were like the sun and the moon and headed by Milarepa they, became the protectors of the human race. Milarepa radiated spiritual light to a lot of beings attracting them toward the light and dispelling darkness and ignorance.

Let us now consider Bodhidharma from India: He is associated with Shaolin temple on Mount Sung in China. He is said to have spent nine years in meditation, facing a rock wall in a cave about a mile from the temple. Unlike Milarepa, Bodhidharma found few disciples. Although, he brought Zen to China, Bodhidharma is known for teaching the purification of mind. Three years after his death an official met Bodhidharma walking in the mountains of Central Asia. He was carrying a staff from which hung a single sandal, and he told the official he was going back to India. Reports of this

meeting aroused the curiosity of other monks, who finally agreed to open Bodhidharma's tomb. But inside all they found was a single sandal, ⁽¹³⁾

There are some resembling elements in these few examples of a human going underworld, or in a cave. They appear later and teach people the truth of life and death. No doubt, though, that there is a great difference between Zalmoxis and the other sages that mediated to find the meaning of life. For instance, Milarepa's teaching was that all worldly pursuits have but the one unavoidable end, which is sorrow.

To step down into the bowels of the earth, being it a cave or a solitary confinement in the earth means to perceive, to visualize death, to know the *Tenebrae* the darkness. But just like a passage of a celestial body like the moon that moves between the earth and the sun in a solar eclipse, when the darkness progressively blocks the light only to allow it to come out again, the same can be said about the beings that are considered nowadays as deities ; they climbed down in the underground and up again. This is the case of Zalmoxis. Herodotus calls him a deity but he concludes:

"I neither disbelieve nor fully believe the talk about Zalmoxis and his chamber ; but I think that he lived many years before Pythagoras ; and whether there was a man called Zalmoxis, or this is a name among the Getae for a god of their country, I have done with him. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Perhaps the man Zalmoxis gave himself over to meditation and prayer there in the grotto where he closed himself. He gradually freed his consciousness from the bondage of his physical senses and thus his divine nature revealed to himself the divine human nature. It showed him the mysteries of the transcendental world. He could perceive the spiritual world, he could see the meaning of the earthly life and during these four years he realized that the earth and the water and the people become inseparable and that there is this Spiritual World where we all go once we die. And just like Hermes Trismegistus, Zalmoxis thought that man had taken on a mortal body not only to commune with nature but also to show that the essence of man is immortality. A human being does not die; nobody dies. The body is dissolved in order to reform again. Everything is just a perpetual change.

Mircea Eliade mentions in one of his articles on Zalmoxis, in *Ecstasy and Immortality*, that the Getae were venerating Kronos and they named him Zalmoxis. Kronos in Greek mythology was one of the 12 Titans and the personification of heaven and earth. The Roman counterpart of Kronos is Saturn, the god of seed and sowing.

Hesiod as well as Ovid wrote about the Age of Kronos when people were like gods living happily. There was no hate or fear, then.

A golden race of mortal men who lived in the time of Kronos when he was reigning in heaven. And they lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil: miserable age rested not on them. The fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things.⁽¹⁵⁾

But this Golden age of Kronos came to its end. Other ages followed, those of Silver Age when men lacked in manliness, the Bronze Age when the people were warlike with pitiless hearts. Then the Iron Age followed with people better than those of the Bronze Age, however, an age with men as Hesiod wrote, who respect neither vows nor justice, nor virtue.” In short an age of “ progressive degeneracy of people.”⁽¹⁶⁾ Returning to the Golden Age when men lived like gods and Kronos was the master of the Happy Lands, where decent faithful people lived, we can come to the conclusion that Zalmoxis cult was centered on a post- existence in a happy afterlife, a celestial life full of grace. If Zalmoxis was compared with Kronos, who was an authority on ecstasy, then we can assume that ecstasy was a temporary passing away, a time when the soul leaves the body. What Zalmoxis taught his countrymen was the liberation from the thought of not knowing what would happen after death. And in doing so Zalmoxis took away the feeling of fear, despair and helplessness and answered to the dilemma of what is after death.

Zalmoxis who taught his countrymen that there is no death but only a change of worlds, was a seer, a revelator of light to his people. To him the physical body and the spiritual body were reduced to one: the mind of god within. His world where all people go after they die was like a new Garden of Eden.

Dacians were also called in some of the historian writings as “wolves”. These people were like wolves: they were haunting villages and were living by looting. They were like bandits. If we look back at the state of things during the Iron Age we may find a similar situation: men had neither virtue nor respect and the Age was associated with crime, treachery and cruelty, as Hesiod wrote. And here we have Zalmoxis, the God, the man and the healer who taught his people about the Golden Age when men lived like gods without any fear or suffering, in the light of an immense loving god. Zalmoxis’ duty was to make sure that people would understand the real life is that after death, the life people had during the Golden Age.

During Buerebista, one of the most important leaders in Dacia, there was a great priest called Deceneu. Like Pythagoras and Hermes Trismegitus, who traveled to Egypt, Deceneu left his country and also traveled up to Egypt where he learned about the Egyptian priests and their sacramental mysteries. Back to his home country he tried to teach men to worship god. However, he is not considered being a god but just a wise priest who played an important spiritual role during king Buerbista’s endeavor to unite the Geto-Dacian people.

Mythologies are a form of religion even when they are not intended as such. A myth or myths describe profound events in the history of a culture. Each culture has its own central myth and the spiritual life of the Romanians is dominated by a very important myth. This myth, which is in form of a folk poem, is a simple story of a shepard who is in danger of being killed by two of his companions who were envying him for his sheep. An ewe lamb warns, the shepard about the danger but he does not run away : instead he accepts his death. This serene attitude of seeing death is a mystical union with the universe, with the whole. We are faced with the/an original vision of life and death. Death is being seen as a bride promised to the entire world, to all humans. Death is not a tormenting experience and a vanishing into unknown but a return to the source. Death is not a process of diminution of the humans. The shepard accepts his death with peace. That is from metaphysical point of view, a reintegration with nature, and nature is seen as a creation of God. Through death the soul is reintegrated in the big cosmic unit, which is as a whole the work of the Creator. This folk poem, this myth actually reminds us of Zalmoxis' significant teaching that nobody ever dies and that death is not an end.

In my quest for finding the meaning of religious credence in Dacia more than two thousand years ago, it seems like I discovered several special situations that prompted me to ask this question: Weren't we preceded by civilizations that were superior then us, civilizations that surpassed us in scientific knowledge? Aren't the archaic mythologies actually telling us the truth concerning the gods of antiquity?

It was mentioned that god Apollo after finishing building Troy, returned to his country on the river Ister. Perhaps this " god " was one of those supreme entities who belonged to a much more advanced civilization that was destroyed much longer than we could get information about it. He remained known to this day as an Olympian god, a god of sun and light. However, light may mean Sun but it also means Sirius or Alpha Centauri.

Zalmoxis, this god of earth and sky, was the one who persuaded his countrymen to believe that they were immortal and that death was just a change of worlds. This promptly reminds of what the old tribe of **Dogons** of Mali, who have extensive knowledge of the star Sirius, advocate: Sirius houses the souls of the dead. The **Dogons** speak of entities from Sirius that visited them some 3000 years ago. Even today they base their religious life on a ceremony that rests on the belief system left by beings from Sirius.

Also, recently in some articles in newspaper or programs on TV there are a few who claim that scientists can make rain. Gebeleizis was the god of thunder and lightening. Where there is thunder there is rain as well !

The American professor Charles Hapgood said :

“We shall now assume that some 20,000 or more years ago, while Paleolithic peoples held out in Europe, more advanced cultures existed elsewhere on the earth, and that we have inherited a part of what they once possessed, passed down from people to people.”⁽¹⁷⁾

In the view of this outstanding evidence I cannot but think that greater civilizations existed, civilizations that were superior to ours in scientific knowledge and technology, and who also had higher authority on esoteric sciences. Their knowledge belonging to the olden age becomes a mystery to us. However this mystery will not last not forever : intelligence will ascend again and reach the zenith, and false perceptions will leave no trace.

Notes and selected bibliography

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