

THE DITTY OF SOVIJUS (1261). THE NINE SPLEENS OF THE MARVELLOUS BOAR: AN INDO-EUROPEAN APPROACH TO A LITHUANIAN MYTH

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Abstract

In order to understand the narrative about Sovijus (1261), the author proposes a comparative analysis with similar myths in other Indo-European cultures: Hindu mythology (Indra), Irish mythology (Finn), and Scandinavian mythology (Sigurd). These myths emphasise the role of a sacred animal (Indra's tricephalous monster, Finn's salmon, Sigurd's dragon, Sovijus' boar with nine spleens). The animal allows the hero access to secret knowledge (divination in the case of Finn and Sigurd, revelation about cremation for Sovijus). Rituals or narratives of other folklore genres, such as tales, could be additional sources for a comparative analysis.

Key words: etiological myth, initiation, ritualistic meal, culture hero, cremation, divination, symbolic numbers.

Sovijus¹ was a man. Having captured a marvellous boar and ripped out its nine spleens, he gave them to his children. They ate them and Sovijus was angry with them. He resolved to descend to Hell. He managed to pass through eight gates, but not the ninth one. Assisted by one of his sons, he passed through the ninth gate. His brothers were angry with him, and he only got free by imploring them: 'I will go and look for my father.' He arrived in Hell. After having dinner with his father, Sovijus prepared a place for him to sleep, and buried him under the earth. The next day, when both had woken up, the son asked him: 'Did you sleep well?' He complained: 'Oh, I was eaten by worms and reptiles.' Again, the next day, the son prepared a meal and then put him on top of a tree trunk and let him sleep there. The next day, he asked him the same question, and he answered: 'I was bitten by bees and a swarm of mosquitoes: alas, I had an awful night!' Again, the next day, he prepared a great stake for a fire, and threw him into the flames. The next day, he asked him: 'Did you have a nice rest?' He responded: 'I slept like a log.'

What a great blunder was introduced to the populace of Lithuania, to the Slavs, to the Prussians, the Samogitians, the Livs and many other peoples called Sorikai, who think that Sovijus is the conductor of souls to Hell, having lived in the times of Abimelech, and today they burn the corpses of their dead on a pyre like Achilles, Eant and all the other Hellenic peoples. The false belief was diffused by Sovijus so that they could offer sacrifices to abominable gods (Greimas 2005, p.42).

Today, this text is considered to be the first great Lithuanian myth preserved in Medieval sources. Written in Old Slavonic, it is an appendage to the translation of *Chronographia* by Ioannes Malalas by a Russian clerk. Malalas' *Chronographia* narrates the story of the world since the era of the hordes till the reign of Justinian (emperor from 527 to 565 of our era). Four manuscripts exist (Lemeškin 2009). Sovijus is presented as the conductor of souls to Hell. He is also considered to have introduced cremation to Lithuania (the cremation of corpses is definitively established in Lithuania between the ninth and the tenth centuries). The myth of Sovijus certainly falls within the context of the controversy of Christianisation concerning the care to be taken of a corpse's inhumation or cremation. The Lithuanians had returned to cremation in the fifth to sixth centuries of our era, and a tract in 1249 enjoined them to renounce this practice. On the other hand, a text from 1261 presents the rite of cremation as having emanated from an ancient foundation myth. Written during the reign of Mindaugas, who was known for his apostasy, it falls within the polemical context which underscores the falseness of paganism and the truthfulness of Christianity.

Interpretations of the text

For Philippe Jouet (1989, p.158), 'Sovijus is an Odin-like warrior-hunter who undertakes to traverse hell. One recognises the unfolding of the ritualistic meal, with perhaps the initiatory nine parts (nine gates to pass through), at the end of which the hero makes his expedition, directed by his sons. After that, he presides in

¹ The manuscript gives the form Sovij; the name Sovijus is the Lithuanian interpretation/hypothetical reconstruction: Sovij + Lithuanian -us.

psychopomp instances. This promotion naturally leads to heroisation by the flame, the antithesis of the infernal sojourn. Therefore, the cultural legend in all probability came from an infernal ritual of brotherhood.' The author then invites us to compare this text to the expeditions of the Scandinavian Odin, of Indra of the Vala, and of the Irish Nera in the Síd (the other world). Jouet's interpretation is based on the calendar. Jean Haudry (1988) establishes the Indo-European entrenchment of this concept. Indeed, he attaches this mythical narrative to other similar stories with their common metaphorical reference to the nocturnal period of the year (the Twelve Days from the winter solstice). The hero is the one who can cross over the sombre stage and regain the beautiful season of the year. Sovijus is the one who manages to cross the ninth gate of the other world and open the way towards the new year.

At the same time (1988), the journal *Lalies* published an article by Algirdas Julius Greimas on Sovijus, 'the conductor of souls'. This article (Greimas 1988a) is the only one in French on our text. Greimas sets off with an analysis of the composition, before looking at content component motifs of the myth. For the composition: the narration of the myth itself (with verbs in the preterite), a present commentary on the myth (with verbs in the present tense). The myth attributes the institution of cremation to certain Baltic peoples. It is Sovijus who invented the practice. In fact, we will see that he owes the intuition for this innovation to a kind of supernatural intervention, and that it is a consequence of his slaying the magic boar and the ablation of its nine spleens.

As for the motifs, Greimas apparently stops at the figure of the boar. He underscores the link between this animal, the funerary rites and the feasts of the dead: the *skerstuves* described by Joannes Lascius and which are identified with All Saints' Day (Greimas 1985, p.50). The link between the spleen and the great cold of popular Lithuanian tradition confirms a calendar tale and the ritual of myth. It is a narrative linked annually to the commemoration of a rite and a foundation myth of the cult of the dead.

In what he calls an 'analogous' reading of the text, Greimas proposes the following elements: 'Sovijus orders his son to roast the nine spleens of the boar in order to destroy once and for all his principle of fury: the sons, instead of destroying the "boarishness" of the boar, eat the spleens raw, thus absorbing the elementary energy of the boar. Sovijus becomes angry with his sons who have chosen the heritage of the Boar of the Earth and denied the blood kinship which linked them to their father' (Greimas 1988a, p.48). As we will see later on, from a comparative perspective, Greimas defines the

capital motif of the myth, but searches for an overtly psychological motivation to explain the mythical narrative itself. From my point of view, this would be a mistake, for the logic of the text is not psychological but mythological.

The need for a comparative method

A mythical motif has no meaning on its own. In reality, it derives its meaning from the relations which it weaves with other motifs within a system, as well as its function in a narrative sequence. We cannot hope to decipher the meaning of mythological meaning by confining our analysis to a single text. For a myth is never reduced to the plain surface of a text, but functions interactively within the 'memory', which is referred to as Indo-European and in which we can find the key to its internal logic (Dumézil 1995). Greimas underlines this himself: 'Myth is not a narrative; it is the whole transformation of a narrative. Moving from syntagmatic to the paradigmatic, one could say that Indo-European culture is the whole transformation' (Greimas 1988a, p.29). In other words, in order to understand the system of Lithuanian myth, we must turn to similar myths in other Indo-European cultures.

Greimas' interpretation, accurate and learned as it may be, seems to rely on an insufficiently sustained study in Indo-European comparison. When faced with a Lithuanian myth, it must be possible to find some parallels to these myths in other Indo-European languages and cultures, since Lithuanian is itself an Indo-European language. This should allow us to establish a common archaic structure of all these narratives. It seems necessary to reinterpret Levi-Strauss' dichotomy of the raw and cooked in order to see in the motif of cooking on a grill the essential pivot of a comparative reading. The crux of the magical boar myth is, indeed, the consumption of the sacred meat which renders possible an exceptional phenomenon.

Why does the boar have nine spleens?

Obviously, the answer is because it is a magical animal. In the Slavonic text, the adjective *divij* qualifying the boar can mean both '*sauvage*' and '*merveilleux*' (Greimas 1988a, p.42). As Greimas reminds us, the spleen is the seat of choler, of black humour. I prefer to speak of 'fury', for this notion is strongly indicated in Indo-European mythology. Fury is a state of possession which betrays a divine origin (Dumézil 1984, §44). It is a characteristic of diviners visited by inspiration, just as Pythia, the priestess of Apollo, is regularly consumed by a strange and brutal force which tortures

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her before she pronounces her prophecy. In German popular belief, the witch (another possessed) has a white spleen (Hoffmann-Krayer 1927 IX, p.341). The spleen, therefore, seems to be linked to the supernatural. Undoubtedly, we must bear in mind one element of the Old Prussian world which is related to the Balts. According to Praetorius, the Prussians examined the spleen of a pig which they had killed (Schrader 1909, pp.13-55). The spleen was thus used for divinatory practices. In the Roman world, the haruspices examined the entrails of the victim and read the omens (Ernout Meillet 1967, p.289; Haack 2003). The spleen is therefore the most divine part of the animal, the one that receives directly the signs that the divinity wants to transmit to human beings.

Before being the motif of excitement or the furious energy of the warrior, the fury contained in the spleen is the supreme manifestation of the mythical creature which the warrior must face. This frightening creature is tricephalous, in other words it is the three-headed dragon or monster of Indo-European myths (Dumézil 1942), the most famous example of which is Geyron, beaten by Heracles. Three threes are nine, the number of spleens of the magic boar. It seems, therefore, that in the Lithuanian narrative, the nine spleens (three times three) are the exact equation of the three heads of the tricephalous monster. Mythologically speaking, they define the boar as a triple creature, that is to say, the initiatory creature for the battle against a triple adversary, which always gives the warrior a heroic stature as well as the privilege of knowledge. In the *Taittiriya Samhita* (Dumézil 1967, p.28), Indra beats the tricephalous monster, but cannot finish it off. A carpenter arrives with an axe over his shoulder. In return for a fee, he agrees to finish the work, and separates the heads of the monster with his axe. From each head escapes a bird (a hazel grouse, a sparrow, a partridge). This motif can be used to explain that in certain traditions the dragon (or the tricephalous monster) confers the hero who has conquered it with the gift of understanding the language of birds, that is to say, the power of divination.

Moreover, we must underscore the importance of the figure of pigs in the oldest European mythology (Walter 1999). The mythical role of the boar (or the swinish monster) is surely to allow the elevation of the cultural hero who will enact a remarkable innovation in society (Dumézil 1936). After the brutal murder of the sacred monster, the hero paradoxically acquires a divine part of the creature which he has slain (Walter 2002). Myth is reversible, as Gilbert Durand (1994, p.60) once remarked. After his exploit, the hero becomes the guardian of science and knowledge, which were traditionally inaccessible to common mortals.

Three parallel myths allow us to test the scenario. The Celtic myth of Finn the diviner, the Lithuanian myth of the boar with nine spleens, and the Germanic myth of Fafnir the giant are mythical equivalents of the salmon, the pig and the dragon, as primordial and initiatory creatures as triple creatures (Walter 2006).

The Lithuanian text brings to mind an old Indian tradition appearing in the *Taittiriya Brahmanan*. A boar safeguards the treasure of demons enclosed by seven mountains. Indra manages to open the seven mountains with a sacred herb. He kills the boar, and can then discover the treasure (de Gubernatis 1974, p.10). The Lithuanian text follows a similarly clear pattern. It makes the boar the mediating animal standing between two worlds, and, in addition, the guardian of a secret which the hero must acquire.

Initiating the son

In a somewhat puzzling narration, the myth tells of the acquisition of new knowledge, that of the cremation of corpses by one of the sons of the hero, Sovijus, who, having killed the boar and removed its nine spleens, wants them roasted. He gives them to his children to eat, and then gets angry with his progeny. He decides to leave for Hell (that is to say, the Other World), and only manages to cross the ninth and last gate with the help of one of his sons. The latter will resort to a convenient mode, that of cremation, for the transportation of his father's body.

The Lithuanian myth reproduces concisely the primordial myth of initiation. This is acquired through the warrior's test: killing a mythical boar. This boar is none other than the triple monster of Indo-European myths of heroic initiation (Dumézil 1942): its triple character is found in the fact that it has nine spleens (three times three). The killer of the triple boar inherits a curse, in the same manner as Tristan's combat against his pig adversaries warrants his punishment. Sovijus inexplicably loses his temper with his sons. In reality, after his crime of divine lese-majesty (he kills the divine boar), he goes mad and has no other solution but to leave for the Other World (a euphemism for death). Once the spleens have been roasted and eaten, fury enables one of his sons to help his father in his posthumous destiny. This charitable son has probably a particular rank among the siblings. Although the text does not specify it, everything leads us to believe that it is not the eldest but the youngest son (the ninth or, once more, three multiplied by three). In siblings of this kind, it is always the last-born who performs a feat that the other brothers cannot carry out (Aarne 1961).

If the father has indeed gone to the realm of the dead, his corpse is suffering. It must be rescued. The son first thinks that he must bury him, but the father (the soul of his father) complains about its fate. The son then exposes the body on a tree, but the father complains again. The son finally burns the corpse, and the soul of the father finally finds peace and comfort. This exemplary son is the initiator of cremation. This perfect idea occurs to him after his initiation, and after having served as a guide to his father in Hell. This initiation involves undergoing a particular rite: the roasting and the eating of the spleens of the boar. In an elliptical manner, the narrative clearly attributes the acquisition of the gift of knowledge to the manducation of the sacred meat of the savage boar by the hero.

In Irish mythology, Finn acquires the gift of similar knowledge by sucking his thumb which he burnt while roasting a salmon (Nagy 1985). We can see the number nine indirectly linked to the salmon. Nine hazels grow around the fountain of Boyne. The hazels, true fruits of wisdom, fall into the fountain, where a salmon swallows them. This fish is in reality a primordial being which preceded the existence of all things. Whoever eats its flesh first will receive the gift of divination. He will know all that is possible to be known. For seven years, Finnegas fishes in vain. One day, moments after the arrival of his student Finn, he finally captures the salmon of knowledge and asks his apprentice to roast it. Under no circumstances must Finn eat it. But during the cooking, a swelling appears on the skin of the fish. To remove it, Finn puts his finger on the fish and burns himself. He then licks his finger to soothe the pain. Thus, the divinatory gift infuses within him. He has tasted, involuntarily, the flesh of the salmon of knowledge. From now on, he will be the guardian of prophetic power. Whenever he wishes to use his power, it will suffice to suck his thumb. In Celtic myths of the initiation of the diviner, it is a salmon or a pig which confers the gift of knowledge. The name of these two animals (*orc*) is the same in Old Irish (Vendryes 1960, §28).

In the Germanic world, the heart of the dragon is the mythical source of the supreme knowledge of the diviner. It is a new analogy with the Baltic boar. This episode in Scandinavian mythology is represented on an engraved rock in Uppland in Sweden and told in *The Poetic Edda*. Sigurd the hero pierces Fafnir the giant with his spear. On the Swedish megalith, the dragon is represented in the form of a serpent by a long script in which a runic inscription is found. Within this figure, Sigurd roasts the heart of Fafnir on the grill. He then slips the finger of his left hand into his mouth, for he has burnt himself by touching the heart of the dragon to check on the progress of the cooking. In fact, without wanting to, he tastes the blood of the monster, and he

suddenly understands the language of the birds (Boyer 1992). The same motif is found in popular tales such as tale type No. 673 of the international repertoire (Aarne 1961). Tasting the meat of a serpent (a substitute for the dragon) enables someone to gain access to a comprehension of the language of animals. This means that the dragon or the pig-like monster has primitive magic powers which are transmitted to men under specific conditions. On the basis of these three European myths, it can be seen that the salmon, the boar and the dragon are homologous. These three animals are the main sources of the gift of divination.

The Poetic Edda tells how Sigurd kills the dragon and roasts its heart. He burns his finger on the grill, puts his finger in his mouth, and immediately understands the language of the birds. Tristan, like Sigurd, kills the dragon. What makes the dragon a pig? What makes it the source of knowledge? The Lithuanian myth provides some answers: the magical boar endows its slayer with a superior form of knowledge. Thus, Tristan's victory over the dragon has the symbolic value of a revelation: although Tristan does not roast the heart of the beast, he simply cuts out its tongue. It is enlightening that, after this exploit practised upon the pig-like dragon, he obtains the hand of Yseult. The endowment of sovereignty is acquired, almost magically; but, inexplicably, he refuses it. On the contrary, it is significant that the gifts of music shown by Tristan come after his victory over the Morholt. Everything takes place as if the Morholt had allowed Tristan to acquire the power of divination which will come to him in the form of the gift of music. In any case, the Morholt is an initiating character for him.

Conclusion: from roasted spleens to cremation

Fire plays an essential role in diverse stages of myth, and also in Baltic mythology (Vaitkevičienė 2001, 2003). It implies a symbolic link between the two main motifs of the myth. The roasting of spleen by Sovijus is itself an audacious act. But the gesture prefigures the final invention of cremation by Sovijus' son. During the course of the myth, three modes of handling corpses are tried: inhumation, exposition in the open air, and cremation. Only the third, cremation, is presented as legitimate and necessary. The role attributed to fire in this Lithuanian myth explains why Sovijus develops the cult of other gods mentioned in the final notice. They all have a close link with fire: Andojas and Perkūnas (that is to say, thunder to celestial fire), and Teliavelis the blacksmith utilising terrestrial fire (Gimbutas 1995).

Fire constitutes an essential cultural moment. To refer to C. Lévi-Strauss' famous insight, fire allows man to move from the 'raw' to the 'cooked', that is to say, from nature to culture. Fire transforms the flesh of the boar (nature) into an initiating and spiritual food (culture). Cremation transforms a corpse (nature) into a spiritual body (culture). The Ditty of Sovijus thus appears as a sacred narrative which recounts the way cremation was introduced on Earth. It establishes a magic concept of the sacred which makes Sovijus and his son the masters of fire.

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SOVIJAUS GIESMĖ (1261).
 DEVYNIOS NEPAPRASTOJO
 ŠERNO BLUŽNYS:
 ŽVILGSNIS Į LIETUVIŲ MITĄ
 IŠ INDOEUROPIEČIŲ
 PERSPEKTYVOS

Philippe Walter

Santrauka

Siekdami paaiškinti 1261 metais užrašytą pasakojimą apie Sovijų, turime jį palyginti su panašiais indoeuropiečių mitais – indų mitologija (Indra), airių mitologija (Finu) ir skandinavų mitologija (Sigurdu). Visi šie mitai pabrėžia švento gyvūno vaidmenį (trigalvė pabaisa Indros atveju, lašiša – Fino, slibino širdis – Si-

gurdo ir devynios šerno blužnys – Sovijaus). Gyvūnas leidžia kultūriniam herojui įgyti slaptą žinojimą (pranašavimą Fino ir Sigurdo atveju, mirusiųjų deginimo atradimą – Sovijaus). Lietuviškas pasakojimas veda link pirmąkartinio iniciacijos mito. Karys yra inicijuojamas naudojant kovotojo testą: jis turi sumedžioti ir nukauti mitinį šerną. Pagal G. Dumézilio teoriją, šis šernas būtų ne kas kita kaip triguba pabaisa indoeuropietiškuose herojaus iniciacijos mituose. Jo triguba prigimtis atsiskleidžia per devynias blužnis (triskart po tris). Indoeuropiečių tikėjimuose blužnis yra siejama su pranašavimu ir antgamtinėmis galiomis. Bet trigalvio žudiką persekioja prakeikimas: Sovijus be paaiškinamos priežasties supyksta ant savo sūnų. Iš tiesų, kai jis įvykdo nusikaltimą prieš dievišką įstatymą (nužudo stebuklingą šerną) jis netenka proto, todėl vienintelė išėitis yra pasitraukti į pragarus (tai mirties eufemizmas). Sovijus paprašo savo sūnų iškepti devynias blužnis. Kai blužnys iškepamos ir suvalgomos, dieviškas įtūžis, pasireiškiantis per vieną iš sūnų, leidžia padėti jam savo tėvui pomirtiniame gyvenime. Gailestingasis sūnus tarp brolių turi ypatingą statusą. Nors tekstas šio dalyko nedetalizuoja, bet iš visko galima spėti, kad tai ne vyriausias, o jauniausias sūnus (devintasis sūnus iš trijų po tris). Sprendžiant iš pasakų logikos, būtent jauniausias sūnus (ar dukra) šeimoje susiduria su iššūkiais ir juos sėkmingai įveikia. Sovijaus sūnus atranda mirusiųjų deginimo ritualą ir nebelaidoja savo tėvo žemėje. Mirusiųjų deginimas, turintis atitikmenį senovės indų ritualuose, liudija archajišką lietuvių civilizacijos pagrindą. Pasakojimas apie Sovijų savo ruožtu yra etiologinis mitas.

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