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HUMAN SACRIFICE AMONG THE PAGAN SLAVS IN SELECTED BYZANTINE SOURCES

Abstract. – This paper examines a selected corpus of Byzantine Greek sources describing the religious practices of the pagan Slavs, particularly those involving human sacrifice. Drawing on the comprehensive source collection edited by Álvarez-Pedrosa (2021), the authors analyse passages from Pseudo-Caesarius of Nazianzus, Emperor Maurice, Leo the Deacon, and Procopius, situating their accounts within both philological and ethnological frameworks. Several forms of human sacrifice attested in these texts, including the killing of war captives, ritual suicide, widow immolation, and infanticide, are identified and compared with corresponding practices found in other Indo-European traditions. By contextualizing Slavic ritual behaviour alongside Greek, Roman, Vedic, and Germanic evidence, the paper highlights the broader Indo-European patterns underlying these practices and contributes to a deeper understanding of the religious world of the early Slavs.

Key words. – Pagan Slavs; human sacrifice; ritual suicide; infanticide; Byzantine Greek sources; religious practices

1. Introduction

While the religions and mythologies of India, Greece, and Rome are today relatively well understood thanks to the wealth of surviving literary and archaeological evidence from antiquity, Slavic religion and mythology, despite the large number of speakers of Slavic languages, have unfortunately not enjoyed the same fate.[1] This is due to two principal factors.

[1] This paper has been prepared within the framework of the project *Digitization of Sources for the Study of Early Medieval Croatian History II: Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, De administrando imperio* (DigIzDAI2) (IP–UNIZD2025–28050), funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU. The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the

First, the Slavic languages are attested comparatively late, at least in relation to the aforementioned classical languages. Second, the Slavs underwent Christianization at an early stage,[2] a process that proved devastating for the preservation of their pagan religious tradition.[3] Nevertheless, two valuable categories of evidence for Slavic religion remain available. The first is found within the Slavic languages themselves, in the form of lexical material, phraseology, and oral tradition, from which portions of sacred texts may be reconstructed.[4] The second consists of descriptions of the Slavs written by members of foreign peoples. Among these foreign observers were the Byzantines, that is, predominantly Greek-speaking inhabitants of the Eastern Roman Empire, conventionally referred to in modern historiography and Classical philology as the Byzantine Empire,[5] into whose territories the early Slavs migrated.[6]

The aim of this study is to re-examine selected Byzantine Greek sources relating to Slavic religion and mythology, with a particular emphasis on accounts of human sacrifice. Through philological analysis and comparative Indo-European interpretation, the study seeks to situate the religious practices and beliefs of the early Slavs within broader Indo-European ritual patterns, thereby highlighting their Indo-European identity and their place within the wider Indo-European cultural continuum.

European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held responsible for them. The present article evolved from an MA thesis defended by one of the authors, Gian Luca Braus, at the University of Zadar in March 2026, under the supervision of the other two co-authors. We would also like to take the opportunity to express our gratitude to our late friend, colleague and mentor, Daniel Nečas Hraste, who first introduced us to sources for Slavic mythology written in the classical languages of Europe and whose guidance played an important role in inspiring the research that ultimately led to this study.

[2] For more on Christianization of the Slavs see Vlasto 1970, Dvornik 1970. For a general overview of Slavo-Byzantine relations, see Obolensky 1994.

[3] Kapović 2008, 101-111.

[4] Croatian academic Radoslav Katičić has been the most prolific researcher with regard to the reconstruction of Slavic sacred texts, having dedicated the final years of his life precisely to this subject. For an introduction to this topic, see Katičić 2017; for more detailed research see Katičić 2008; Katičić 2010; Katičić 2011; Katičić 2014.

[5] The Byzantine state officially came into being in AD 330, when the Roman emperor Constantine I the Great transferred the imperial capital to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). Following the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, the Eastern Empire continued independently until 1453, when Constantinople was captured by the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror and incorporated into the expanding Ottoman Empire. For more on the history of the Byzantine Empire see Ostrogorsky 2006, Treadgold 1997, Mango 2002, and Norwich 2013.

[6] The most important non-Slavic sources on Slavic myth and religion remain those written in Latin. Among non-Slavic – other than Latin and Byzantine – sources, important sources come from Icelandic and Arabic texts. See Álvarez-Pedrosa 2023 and Meyer 1931.

2. Corpus and Methodology

For many years, Meyer's *Fontes historiae religionis Slavicae* served as the standard reference work containing the principal textual evidence for Slavic mythology and Slavic pre-Christian religion. Only a small number of the sources included in that collection are written in Greek, while the majority are in Latin and comprise both Classical and Late Antique works, although the latter are relatively few in number. It was not until 2021 that this work was superseded by Álvarez-Pedrosa's edition, which gathers all known medieval testimonies on Slavic religion and mythology in a wide range of languages, including Greek, Latin, Old Church Slavonic, Old Norse, Arabic, and Medieval Czech, accompanied by a catalogue of relevant Classical sources.[7] This comprehensive corpus provides the foundation for the present study.

Drawing upon Álvarez-Pedrosa's collection, this paper examines a selected corpus of Byzantine Greek sources on Slavic religion and mythology.[8] Owing to the breadth of the available material, particular attention is devoted to those authors who provide the most informative descriptions of Slavic rituals, festivals, and sacrificial practices: Pseudo-Caesarius of Nazianzus, Emperor Maurice, Procopius, and Leo the Deacon. Each source is presented in the original language, namely Byzantine Greek, followed by the authors' own English translation and detailed commentary from both philological and ethnological perspectives.

The analysis focuses on passages describing sacrificial religious practices and beliefs of the early Slavs, such as the killing of war captives, ritual suicide, widow immolation, and infanticide, and interprets them within their broader cultural context. Furthermore, the study will seek to compare the observed religious elements with corresponding ritual sacrificial behaviour found in the cultures of other Indo-European peoples, drawing on both literary works and mythological traditions, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the beliefs and cultural heritage of the period when the Indo-European peoples still constituted a single cultural community.

3. Sacrifice in the Indo-European Tradition

The institution of blood sacrifice is one of the most important aspects of Indo-European religious cult practice, as is clearly reflected in the Indo-European world creation myth, as reconstructed by Bruce Lincoln on the basis of evidence from cultural traditions that are extremely

[7] Álvarez-Pedrosa, together with Santos Marinas, is also the co-author of a monograph on pre-Christian rituals; cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, Santos Marinas 2020.

[8] The present study limits itself to Byzantine Greek material; Latin and other non-Greek sources will be examined in future work.

distant from a geographical point of view, and which most likely did not have any direct contact for centuries, if not millennia, prior to the recording of the myths; namely, the most striking evidence for this reconstructed myth comes from Vedic and Icelandic sources.[9] In short, the myth involves the sacrifice of a primordial deity by their twin brother. The sacrificial victim's body is then dismembered, with their constituent parts forming the various parts of the world: their brains becoming the clouds, their eyes, the sun, etc.[10] The sources examined in this paper do not indicate any traces of belief in Lincoln's reconstructed cosmogony, but they nevertheless speak to the importance of sacrifice among the pagan Slavs, as we shall see in the following section. While human sacrifice is a controversial topic due to its very nature, this phenomenon has been evidenced in many cultures that are Indo-European in origin.[11]

Puhvel, a leading scholar in comparative Indo-European religion, reconstructed a victimal hierarchy in Indo-European animal sacrifice, including both human and non-human animals, consisting of five levels, and based partially on Brahmanic tradition.[12] Traditionally, Brahmanic sources list the victimal hierarchy, in descending order, as man, horse, cattle, sheep, and goat.[13] Puhvel further recognizes that human sacrifice was, in many instances, only a subtype of animal sacrifice, and that horse sacrifice could be interchangeable with human sacrifice, further noting that, depending on the culture and specific situation, other substitutions could be made in the hierarchy.[14] Lincoln, however, discusses the difficulties in reconstructing a human or otherwise sacrificial context in Indo-European culture, especially in terms of sacrifice as a microcosmic recreation of Indo-European cosmogonic myth, despite the presence of common elements and motifs present in extant texts.[15] While it is not our aim here to reconstruct the human sacrificial context in Indo-European culture, it is our hope that this paper will contribute to future studies on the subject.

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[9] See the Rigvedic hymn to Puruṣa, RV X.90, and the Prose Edda, the Vafthrudnismal, Grimnismal, Voluspa, and Voluspa en skamma. Aspects of this myth are also found in narratives concerning the foundation of Rome by Romulus and his twin brother Remus, best described in Book 1 of Livy's *Ab urbe condita*.

[10] Lincoln 1975.

[11] Human sacrifice is, of course, present the world over, in many non-Indo-European cultures, certainly in too many to list here. For an overview, see Carrasco (2013).

[12] See also

[13] Puhvel 1978, 354.

[14] Puhvel 1978, 355.

[15] Lincoln 1991, 167-175.

4. An Analysis of Selected Byzantine Greek Sources on Human Sacrifice

This section offers a closer examination of selected Byzantine Greek sources containing accounts relevant to Slavic religion and mythology, particularly those describing various forms of human sacrifice. The texts, composed between the sixth and tenth centuries CE by authors belonging to the higher strata of Byzantine society, provide valuable testimonies on ritual practices among the early Slavs. For the sake of clarity, the sources are grouped according to thematic units, allowing each source to be discussed within its specific cultural context.

4.1. Ritual Killing of War Captives

When dealing with sources concerning the killing of war captives among the pagan Slavs, the first passage to be examined comes from Book IX of the *History* of Leo the Deacon. This ten-book narrative covers the reigns of Romanos II, Nikephoros II Phokas, John Tsimiskes and the early years of Basil II (959–975), remaining incomplete.[16] In the account of the campaigns of Sviatoslav I of Kyev against Bulgaria, Leo comments on the practices of the Rus' concerning the treatment of those killed in battle (Chapter 6):

> Ἤδε δὲ νυκτὸς κατασχούσης καὶ τῆς μήνης πλησιφανοῦς οὔσης, κατὰ τὸ πεδίον ἐξελθόντες τοὺς σφετέρους ἀνεψηλάφων νεκρούς· οὓς καὶ συναλίσαντες πρὸ τοῦ περιβόλου καὶ πυρὰς θαμινὰς διανάψαντες, κατέσκαυσαν, πλείστους τῶν αἰχμαλώτων, ἄνδρας καὶ γύναια, ἐπ᾽ αὐτοῖς κατὰ τὸν πάτριον νόμον ἐναποσφάξαντες. ἐναγισμούς τε πεποιηκότες, ἐπὶ τὸν Ἴστρον ὑπομάζια βρέφη καὶ ἀλεκτρυόνας ἀπέπνιξαν, τῷ ῥοθίῳ τοῦ ποταμοῦ ταῦτα καταποντώσαντες. λέγεται γὰρ Ἑλληνικοῖς ὀργίοις κατόχους ὄντας, τὸν Ἑλληνικὸν τρόπον θυσίας καὶ χοὰς τοῖς ἀνοιχομένοις τελεῖν, εἴτε πρὸς Ἀναχάρσεως ταῦτα καὶ Ζαλμόξιδος, τῶν σφετέρων φιλοσόφων, μυηθέντες, εἴτε καὶ πρὸς τοῦ Ἀχιλλέως ἑταίρων. (Leo Diac. *Hist*. 9.6, ed. Karalis)
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> When night had fallen and the moon was full, they went out onto the plain and inspected their own dead. After gathering the bodies in front of the wall and igniting multiple pyres, they burned them; many of the captives, both men and women, they slaughtered over the corpses, in accordance with ancestral custom. As offerings to the dead, they drowned infants and cocks in the Istros, throwing them in the river's current. It is said that, following Hellenic rites, they perform sacrifices and libations for the deceased in the Greek man-

[16] Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021, 41-42.

ner, whether initiated in these practices by Anacharsis and Zalmoxis, their own philosophers, or by the companions of Achilles.[17]

Although the text links the sacrifice of captives to the ancient Greeks, such a practice is not commonly attested among them, although it is present in certain literary traditions, most notably in Homer's Iliad, despite the fact that human sacrifice is not mentioned in Homer's works other than that incident; namely, near the end of the Iliad Achilles sacrifices twelve captive Trojans at the funeral of Patroclus.[18] Nevertheless, the traditions of ancient Indo-European civilizations point, within a religious context, to the existence of the practice of human sacrifice among the ancient Indo-Europeans. Indeed, a fragment of a Mycenaean text preserved on tablet PY Tn 316, dating to the 13th century BC and discovered at the archaeological site of the palace ruins in Pylos, mentions human beings in the context of sacrifice.[19]

There is also archaeological evidence from the Palace of Kydonia on Crete. It is also known that the Romans buried Vestal Virgins who violated their vow of chastity alive at a site far from the Forum, a practice that is, in essence, the same form of human sacrifice intended for purification and maintaining peace with the gods.[20] Over the centuries, the practice of human sacrifice was replaced by sacrifices and rituals of a different kind; for instance, among the ancient Indians, a king's coronation was accompanied by a horse sacrifice, an act considered far more significant in their religious worldview than the 'ordinary' sacrifice of cattle, pigs, and small livestock.[21] In Indian and Roman religious contexts, the horse sacrifice is almost identical to the human sacrifice.[22] We see a clear illustration of such a belief in the description from Book 14 of the Indian epic poem the *Mahābhārata* (skt. महाभारतम् *Mahābhāratam*),[23] in which one of the main heroes, *Yudhiṣṭhira* (skt. युधिष्ठिर), must complete the horse sacrifice known as the *aśvamedha* (skt. अश्वमेध) in order to become the king of the city of *Hastinapur*. To do so, he consecrated a spotted horse, left it roam freely for a year accompanied by 400 Kshatriyas[24], and then

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[17] On the names and the mention of Achilles in the final sentence see Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021, 43, footnotes 62, 63 and 64.

[18] Hughes 1991, 49.

[19] Hughes 1991, 199. For more on the interpretation of PY Tn 316 as referring to human sacrifice see Buck 1989.

[20] Rüpke 2007, 295.

[21] Talbott 1995, 111.

[22] Winternitz 1927, 175.

[23] The 14th book of the *Mahābhārata* is called the *Aśvamedha parva* (skt. अश्वमेध पर्व), and is composed of 96 chapters, divided into two parts: the first is titled the same as the book, while the second, which contains a retelling of the *Bhagavad gīta* (skt. भगवद्गीता), is thus called *Anugītā parva* (skt. अनुगीता पर्व 'The Book of the Subsequent Song').

[24] The Kshatriyas are a warrior caste in Hindu belief. See Michaels 2021, 16.

sacrificed.[25] A similar practice of horse sacrifice replacing human sacrifice is also found in the Roman rite on the Ides of October,[26] performed in honour of the god Mars, called Equus October (lit. 'October horse').[27]

Furthermore, the author notes that the Slavs performed libations for the deceased, a practice strongly reminiscent of the offering made upon entering the underworld as described in Book XI of the *Odyssey*. Indeed, in Book XI of the Greek epic, the protagonist Odysseus, following Circe's instructions, travels to the land of the Cimmerians, where he digs a pit, performs libations of honey, milk, water, and wine, and slaughters two sheep in order to gain access to the underworld, communicate with the souls of the dead, and thereby learn his fate. A similar journey to the underworld is undertaken by Aeneas in Book 6 of the Aeneid.[28] It is also known that the Romans performed animal sacrifices and libations as part of funeral rites.[29]

Procopius' *History of the Wars*, and in particular the *Gothic War*, is generally regarded as the earliest testimony for the study of Slavic pre-Christian religion. Luján was the first to highlight a remarkable passage in the same work (Procop. *Goth*. 3.38.20-23), which appears to have escaped the attention of most scholars dealing with Slavic paganism.[30] The passage reads as follows, offering a valuable glimpse into the ritual practices, namely ritual human sacrifice, attributed to the early Slavs:

> ἔκτεινον δὲ τοὺς παραπίπτοντας οὔτε ξίφει οὔτε δόρατι οὔτε τῳ ἄλλῳ εἰωθότι τρόπῳ, ἀλλὰ σκόλοπας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς πηξάμενοι ἰσχυρότατα, ὀξεῖς τε αὐτοὺς ἐς τὰ μάλιστα ποιησάμενοι, ἐπὶ τούτων ξὺν βίᾳ πολλῇ τοὺς δειλαίους ἐκάθιζον, τήν τε σκολόπων ἀκμὴν γλουτῶν κατὰ μέσον ἐνείροντες ὠθοῦντές τε ἄχρι ἐς τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὰ ἔγκατα, οὕτω δὴ αὐτοὺς διαχρήσασθαι ἠξίουν. καὶ ξύλα δὲ παχέα τέτταρα ἐπὶ πλεῖστον ἐς γῆν κατορύξαντες οἱ βάρβαροι οὗτοι, ἐπ' αὐτῶν τε χεῖράς τε καὶ πόδας τῶν ἡλωκότων δεσμεύοντες, εἶτα ῥοπάλοις αὐτοὺς κατὰ κόρρης ἐνδελεχέστατα παίοντες, ὡς δὴ κύνας ἢ ὄφεις ἢ ἄλλο τι θηρίον διέφθειρον. ἄλλους δὲ ξύν τε βουσὶ καὶ προβάτοις, ὅσα δὴ ἐπάγεσθαι ἐς τὰ πάτρια ἤθη ὡς ἥκιστα εἶχον, ἐν τοῖς δωματίοις καθείρξαντες, οὐδεμιᾷ φειδοῖ ἐνεπίμπρασαν. οὕτω μὲν Σκλαβηνοὶ τοὺς ἐντυχόντας ἀεὶ ἀνήρουν. (Procop. *Goth*. 3.38.20-23, ed. Haury-Wirth)
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> They killed those that they encountered neither by sword nor by spear nor by any other customary means, but having fixed very firm-

[25] Talbott 1995, 111, 112. For a full description see Talbott 1995, 111-126.
[26] The 15th day of the month of October (Lat. *Idus Octobres*).
[27] Pascal 1981, 261.
[28] See Hom. Od. 11.13-50.
[29] Rüpke 2007, 271.
[30] Cf. Luján 2008, 105-111.

> ly stakes into the ground that they had made as sharp as possible, seated the wretched victims upon them with great force, and driving the point of the stakes through the middle of the buttocks, pushed it upward into their entrails, thus considering it proper to kill them in this way. And these barbarians used to bury four thick pieces of wood deep into the earth, bound upon them the hands and feet of the captives, then struck them continuously on the head with clubs, killing them as if they were dogs, serpents, or other beasts. Others, together with cattle and sheep that they could not carry back to their homeland, they shut within dwellings and burned without mercy. In this manner the Sclaveni always killed those who happened to fall into their power.

Luján (2008: 107-110), analyzing the excursus on the barbarian habits of the Slavs inserted after the description of the conquest of Topir on the Thracian coast (549–550), during the invasion of Illyria and Thrace by Slavs, argues that this passage, often interpreted merely as a literary topos emphasizing the cruelty of the barbarian Slavs, actually contains elements pointing to ritual practices. Procopius gives a more accurate depiction of the Slavic ritualized executions of their enemies, suggesting the existence of quite elaborate rituals related to the killing of captives, a fact further confirmed by the passage from Leo the Deacon's History (9.6) discussed above. The text describes in detail three distinct methods of execution employed by the Slavs, all of which reflect the ritual character of the act. The first was impalement: prisoners were violently "seated" on sharp stakes driven into the ground, whose tips pierced their bodies up to the entrails. The second involved tying the victims' hands and feet to four wooden posts and beating them to death, with Procopius comparing the victims to "dogs, snakes, or other beasts," thus emphasizing their dehumanization. Finally, the third method consisted of burning people together with livestock that could not be taken back home. These detailed descriptions of the Slavs' execution practices, according to Luján, demonstrate that Procopius was well informed about the facts he reported concerning the ritual killing of enemy captives among the pagan Slavs. For this reason, this passage represents a highly valuable source for understanding pre-Christian Slavic religion.

4.2. Ritual Suicide

Another passage from Book IX of Leo the Deacon's *History* offers an intriguing insight into the ritual practices of the pagan Slavs. The section in question, namely Chapter 8, centres on the phenomenon of ritual suicide among the Slavic peoples, in this case a type of suicide commonly referred to as heroic suicide:

> Λέγεται δὲ καὶ τοῦτο περὶ Ταυροσκυθῶν, μήποτε μέχρι καὶ νῦν ἑαυτοὺς ἐγχειρίζειν τοῖς δυσμένεσιν ἡττωμένους· ἀλλ᾽ ἤδη τῆς σωτηρίας ἀπαγορεύσαντας ὠθεῖν τε κατὰ τῶν σπλάγχνων τὰ ξίφη, καὶ οὕτως ἑαυτοὺς ἀναιρεῖν. τοῦτο δὲ πράττουσι, δόξαν κεκτημένοι τοιαύτην· φασὶ γὰρ τοὺς πρὸς τῶν ἐναντίων κατακτεινομένους ἐν τοῖς πολέμοις, μετὰ τὸν μόρον καὶ τὴν ἐκ τῶν σωμάτων διάζευξιν τῶν ψυχῶν ἐν ᾅδου τοῖς αὐθένταις ὑπηρετεῖν. Ταυροσκύθαι δὲ, τὴν τοιαύτην δεδιότες λατρείαν, ἀποστυγοῦντες δὲ καὶ τοῖς ἀναιροῦσιν αὐτοῖς ἐξυπερητεῖν, τῆς ἑαυτῶν σφαγῆς αὐτόχειρες γίνονται. ἀλλὰ τοιαύτη μὲν ἡ ἐπικρατήσασα ἐν αὐτοῖς δόξα. (Leo Diac. *Hist*. 9.8, ed. Karalis)
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> It is also said of the Tauroscythians that, to this day, they have never surrendered to their enemies when defeated; rather, once they have renounced any hope of salvation, they plunge their swords into their own entrails and thus kill themselves. They do this because they hold the following belief: namely, they claim that those who are slain in war by their enemies, after death and the separation of their souls from their bodies, serve their killers in Hades. Fearing such servitude and abhorring the idea of serving those who put them to death, the Tauroscythians become the agents of their own slaughter. Such, then, is the belief that prevails among them.

Heroic suicide appears to have held a significant place in Slavic pre-Christian religion, a practice that bears a striking resemblance to a specific Roman religious tradition. The Romans practiced a special form of sacrifice known as *devotio*, in which a person would commit ritual suicide, or allow themselves to be killed, as a particular type of human sacrifice to the gods of the underworld (*Di Manes*) during battle. The best-known example is the account of the father and son who shared the same name, Publius Decius Mus, both of whom sacrificed themselves in battle, as related by Livy.[31] Since, in Roman religion, the sacrificial victim had to enter the rite voluntarily,[32] this type of sacrifice, that is to say, one in which a person willingly offers themselves for sacrifice, was regarded as the purest form of sacrifice.[33]

4.3. Widow Immolation

In this section, we draw attention to Chapter 4 of Book XI of the *Strategikon*, a late sixth-century military manual divided into twelve books, traditionally attributed to Emperor Maurice, although its authorship remains uncertain. While the *Strategikon* is primarily a military treatise, it

[31] Livy 7.21.7; 8.9.6; 8.10.
[32] See Varro, 2.1; 2.5.11; Macrobius, 3.5–6; Cato the Elder, 141; Ovid, 1.337–338.
[33] For more on *devotio* see Stern 2020.

is particularly valuable for its ethnographic notes on the peoples with whom Byzantium came into contact and frequently engaged in conflict, including the Slavs.[34]

The chapter examined here, titled "Dealing with the Sclavs, the Antes and the like", contains both a description of these peoples' customs and character and military advice on how to fight them, based on the author's personal experience and earlier treatises. The passage cited below provides important evidence for the practice of widow immolation among the pagan Slavs.[35]

> σωφρονοῦσι δὲ καὶ τὰ θήλεα αὐτῶν ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν φύσιν ἀνθρώπου, ὥστε τὰς πολλὰς αὐτῶν τὴν τῶν ἰδίων ἀνδρῶν τελευτὴν ἴδιον ἡγεῖσθαι θάνατον καὶ ἀποπνίγειν ἑαυτὰς ἑκουσίως οὐκ ἡγούμενας ζωὴν τὴν ἐν χηρείᾳ διαγωγήν. (Ps. Maur., *Strat*. 11.4.18-22, ed. Dennis)
>
> Their women display a remarkable soundness of mind, surpassing that of ordinary human nature, so that many of them regard the death of their husbands as their own death and voluntarily drown themselves, considering life in widowhood not to be life at all.

Regarding the ritual suicides of widowed Slavic women mentioned in the text, another parallel with the religious practices of the ancient Indians can be observed. Namely, Indian religious practice includes a ritual best known as *satī* (Sanskrit: सती, meaning 'truthful, virtuous'), which consists of a widow's voluntary suicide;[36] it is performed by the widow casting herself onto a pyre, most often her deceased husband's funeral pyre, and burning to death.[37] Prior to the actual ritual of burning, the widow solemnly confirms her decision through a ritual bath or by breaking her bangles, symbols of her status as a married woman; once she has solemnly resolved to be burned, she is already considered dead and is not permitted to withdraw from the ritual.[38] If the bereaved woman is pregnant, has other living husbands, or is taking care of a small child, she is prohibited from entering the ritual in order to avoid spreading suffering to other people.[39] The earliest accounts of such rites among the ancient Indians come to us from the Hellenistic-era Greek historians Diodorus Siculus and Aristobulus of Cassandrea (preserved through the works of the Roman historian Strabo),[40] while Indian sources generally point to the popula-

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[34] Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021, 29.

[35] Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021, 30.

[36] While the idea behind the ritual was that the widow would undertake it willingly, practice has shown that the opposite was often the case. For more on the topic, see Michaels 2021, 149-153; Kundra 2014.

[37] Michaels 2021, 149, 150.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Garzilli 1997, 205–243, 339–365.

rity of this practice between the 5th and 9th centuries.[41] Furthermore, the *satī* ritual experienced an unexpected and sudden resurgence in the 18th and 19th centuries as a form of resistance by the indigenous population against British colonial rule, which had banned the practice by law.[42]

4.4. Infanticide

Several Byzantine sources attest practices involving the killing of children among pagan Slavs. The first source to be considered is the *Erotapokriseis* or *Quaestiones et responsiones*, traditionally attributed to Caesarius of Nazianzus but now generally considered a sixth-century work composed by a monk of the Monastery of the Acemites in Constantinople. Structured as a collection of questions and corresponding answers on religious, geographical, and anthropological topics, the text is particularly valuable for its references to the Slavs and for reflecting the author's first-hand knowledge of the Slavic incursions into the Balkans during the reign of Justinian I (527-565).[43]

References to Slavic customs appear in Ps. Caes., *Dial*. 109, in the answer to a question concerning the astronomical theory of the seven planets and the seven terrestrial climates. The author seeks to explain how peoples with markedly different customs could inhabit the same region, contrasting the Slavs and Physonites with other groups distinguished by practices such as cannibalism, vegetarianism and fasting, or incest.[44]

> πῶς δ᾽ ἐν ἑτέρῳ τμήματι ὄντες οἱ Σκλαυνοὶ καὶ οἱ Φεισωνῖται, οἱ καὶ Δανούβιοι προσαγορευόμενοι, οἱ μὲν γυναικομαστοβοροῦσιν ἡδέως διὰ τὸ πεπληρῶσθαι τοῦ γάλακτος, μυῶν δίκην τοὺς ὑποτίτθους ταῖς πέτραις ἐπαράττοντες, οἱ δὲ καὶ τῆς νομίμης καὶ ἀδιαβλήτου κρεοβορίας ἀπέχονται; καὶ οἱ μὲν ὑπάρχουσιν αὐθάδεις, αὐτόνομοι, ἀνηγεμόνευτοι, συνεχῶς ἀναιροῦντες, συνεστιώμενοι ἢ συνοδεύοντες, τὸν σφῶν ἡγεμόνα καὶ ἄρχοντα, ἀλώπεκας καὶ τὰς ἐνδρύμους κάττας καὶ μονιοὺς ἐσθίοντες καὶ τῇ λύκων ὠρυγῇ σφᾶς προσκαλούμενοι, οἱ δὲ καὶ ἀδηφαγίας ἀπέχονται καὶ τῷ τύχοντι ὑποταττόμενοι καὶ ὑπείκοντες. (Ps. Caes., *Dial*. 109.12-19, ed. Riedinger = Migne 38.935)
>
> How can it be that the Sclaveni and the Physonites, also called Danubians, who are found in another region, the former with pleasure consume women's breasts because they are filled with milk, smashing the suckling infants against rocks like mice, whereas the latter abstain even from lawful and irreproachable meat-eating? The

[41] Michaels 2021, 150.
[42] Michaels 2021, 150; Dalmia 2017, 66-90.
[43] Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021, 27.
[44] Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021, 27.

> former being arrogant, independent, without rulers, repeatedly slaying their own chief and leader, whether while feasting together or travelling together, eating foxes, wild cats, and wild boars, and calling one another by imitating the howling of wolves, whereas the latter abstain even from gluttony and submit obediently to whoever happens to rule over them.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of this passage is the portrayal of certain Slavic peoples as cruel, gluttonous, treacherous, and strikingly wolf-like.[45] The Sclaveni are further characterized as savage and inhuman through accusations of infanticide and cannibalism. The claim that they killed suckling infants and consumed the breasts of lactating women constitutes an extreme example of barbarian stereotyping, portraying the Sclaveni as transgressing the fundamental norms of civilized human behaviour. Dujčev (1965: 40–42) associates these accounts of infanticide and the consumption of women's breasts with the myth of the Amazons, who were believed to dwell in the same geographical area as the Slavs. He also emphasizes that the motif of enemies consuming women's breasts frequently appears in Greek and Byzantine depictions of enemy peoples and should be understood as a rhetorical expression of their barbarity and ferocity. At the same time, beliefs concerning demons that consumed the milk of postpartum women remained widespread in both Slavic and Greek folklore until modern times.[46]

Notably, milk is present in both traditions, Slavic and Roman; namely, it figured prominently in the rites of the Lupercalia, otherwise not a particularly common element in Roman ritual practice. During the Lupercalia, the foreheads of the Luperci was ritually cleansed with wool dipped in milk (presumably of animal origin) after having been blooded by the knife used to sacrifice the goats earlier in the ritual.[47] The milk used by

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[45] In the Indo-European tradition, the wolf is consistently associated with precisely these characteristics. Indeed, the negative perception of the wolf is so deeply embedded in Indo-European culture that it is reflected even in its legal traditions. Thus, already in the laws of the ancient Hittites, the term *wolf* is employed as a legal designation for a lawbreaker (cf. Gerstein 1974, 134). Similarly, the Romans celebrated the festival of the Lupercalia in the month of February, whose name derives from the Latin word for wolf (*lupus*). During the festival, scantily clad young men known as the *luperci*, who symbolically identified themselves with wolves, ran wildly through the city, striking passers-by with thongs made from goatskin (Vuković 2023, 27). This ritual was believed to promote fertility while simultaneously driving away evil spirits and ritual impurity from the community (Vuković 2023, 72). Comparable ideas can also be observed among the Germanic peoples. In Germanic law, murderers, thieves, and robbers could be declared a *wa*r*g*, that is, 'wolf' or 'werewolf,' perhaps because they were condemned to live outside the protection of the law, much as wolves exist beyond the bounds of human society (Gerstein 1974).

[46] Cf. Stewart 1991, 99-101.

[47] Plut. *Rom*. 21.9.

the Luperci clearly has a purificatory function,[48] alongside its common association with fertility and abundance.[49] Vuković also notes the complementary presence of milk in myths involving Romulus and Remus, and the milk offered to Diva Rumina – in both cases related to the Lupercalia.[50] The milk noted regarding the Slavs, however, is human in origin and taken directly from the source. As during the Lupercalia, human sacrifice is brought into relation with wolfish behaviour; the Luperci may be likened to a warband or a männerbund.[51]

In the above-discussed passage from Book IX of Leo the Deacon's *History* (9.6), the author also notes the practice of infanticide, more specifically by drowning, as an offering to the spirits of the dead slain in battle, after which roosters and unweaned infants, presumably belonging to their enemies, although this is not stated explicitly, were thrown into the Danube. It should come as no great surprise, then, that the same passage contains both infanticide and the ritualistic, non-consensual drinking of milk directly from the breasts of women: as we are dealing with members of a warband made up of young men, the drinking of milk combined with infanticide seems to indicate the ritual rejection of boyhood, and a passage from the drinking of milk for reasons of nourishment to the sexualization of breasts experienced by young men.

5. Conclusion

The Byzantine Greek sources discussed in this paper provide some of the most important written evidence for understanding pagan Slavic religious practices, particularly various forms of ritual killing and human sacrifice. Since these accounts were written by Byzantine authors observing communities whose beliefs and customs differed significantly from their own Christian beliefs and values, the descriptions cannot be accepted uncritically as accurate historical reports and should therefore be interpreted with caution. The sources examined here refer to several practices, including the sacrifice of war captives, the death of widows following the loss of their husbands, infanticide, and ritual suicide. While some of these accounts may preserve traces of genuine religious customs, others were likely shaped by literary conventions or broader Byzantine ideas about pagan peoples. Human sacrifice, in particular, was a powerful motif through which Christian writers could emphasize the contrast between their own religious and moral values and those of non-Christian societies.

[48] The purificatory function of milk is noted by Wildfang (2006, 55-60). For more on the ritual use of milk in the Lupercalia, see Vuković 2023.

[49] See Vuković 2023.

[50] Important to note, also, is Vuković's discussion of the role of the Lupercus as a symbolic sacrificial victim in the context of the Lupercalia; cf. Vuković 2023.

[51] See Vuković 2023.

Nevertheless, not all such reports can be dismissed as mere stereotypes. The recurrence of similar motifs in different texts suggests that ritual violence, in one form or another, may indeed have existed in certain Slavic communities before their conversion to Christianity.

Perhaps the most significant conclusion emerging from this study is that the practices attributed to the pagan Slavs can be linked to similar forms of ritual killing and human sacrifice attested among numerous Indo-European peoples, including the Celts, Germans, Greeks, Romans, Indo-Iranians, and various steppe populations with whom the Slavs interacted throughout their early history. While the specific forms and meanings of these rites varied across time and space, the underlying principle of offering human life under exceptional circumstances, whether to secure divine assistance, commemorate the dead, fulfil religious obligations, or avert perceived threats to the community, appears repeatedly throughout the Indo-European world. The comparison with other Indo-European traditions also helps to explain why reports of human sacrifice continued to circulate long after the original rituals may have disappeared. Rather than simply describing individual acts or ceremonies, these accounts reflect deeply rooted ideas about the sacred value of sacrifice and the relationship between humans and the divine.

Ultimately, the available evidence does not permit definitive conclusions regarding the frequency or precise character of human sacrifice among the pagan Slavs. It does, however, suggest that such reports deserve to be interpreted within a wider comparative context. When considered alongside parallels from other Indo-European traditions, the testimonies analysed in this paper contribute to a richer understanding of pre-Christian Slavic religion and highlight the importance of situating Slavic beliefs and religious practices within a broad Indo-European cultural landscape.

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