

# Procopius, *De bello Gothico* III 38.17-23: a description of ritual pagan Slavic slayings?\*

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*Procopius' Gothic War is generally assumed to be the oldest source for the study of pagan Slavic religion. However, only the ethnographic excursus on the Slavs and Antes (Procop. Goth. III 14.22-30) is mentioned in works dealing with that subject, while no attention has been paid to another very interesting passage of the same work (Procop. Goth. III 38.17-23). In that passage Procopius describes the three ways in which the Slavs used to kill their enemies – impalement, tying their hands and feet to four stakes and beating them to death and, finally, burning them together with cattle and sheep. The analysis of the text, as well as the comparison with other sources, shows that those practices can best interpreted as various sorts of ritual slayings.*

It is generally agreed that Procopius' *History of Wars*, and specifically his *Gothic War*, is our oldest source<sup>1</sup> for the study of Slavic pre-Christian religion. In a well known passage of this work (Procop. Goth. III 14.22–30) he describes the habits and way of life of the Slavs and the Antes and provides some information about the religion of these peoples (III 14.23–24)<sup>2</sup>.

θεὸν μὲν γὰρ ἓνα τὸν τῆς ἀστραπῆς δημιουργὸν ἀπάντων κύριον μόνον αὐτὸν νομίζουσιν εἶναι, καὶ θύουσιν αὐτῷ Βόας τε καὶ ἱερεῖα πάντα εἰμαρμένην δὲ οὐτρ ἴσασιν οὔτε ἄλλως ὁμολογοῦσιν ἔν γε ἀνθρώποις ῥοπήν τινα ἔχειν ἀλλ' ἐπειδὴ αὐτοῖς ἐν ποσὶν ἦδη ὁ θάνατος εἴη ἢ νξόω ἀλούσων ἢ ἐς πόλεμον καθισταμένοις, ἐπαγγέλλονται μὲν, ἦν διαφύγωδι, θυσίαν τῷ θεῷ ἀντὶ τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτίκα ποιήσειν, διαφυγόντες δὲ θύουσιν ὅπερ ὑπέσχοντο, καὶ οἶονται τὴν σωτηρίαν ταύτης διὰ τῆς θυσίας αὐτοῖς ἐωνήσθαι. σέβουσι μέντοι καὶ ποταμούς τε καὶ νύμφας καὶ ἄλλα ἄττα

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<sup>1</sup> See Mikhailov (1995: 170), Holzer (2006: 36–37), among others. Meyer (1931: 80) included Herodotus' passage on the lycanthropy of the Neuroi in the section of *dubia* of his collection of the sources of ancient Slavic religion and the text is usually mentioned in connection with Slavic pagan rituals, but we do not know for sure whether these Neuroi were really a Slavic people (Holzer 2006: 25–26). If we understand the concept of religion in a broader sense than Meyer, we could also mention a reference to the hospitality of Slavic tribes found in Priscus Panopolita's *History* (fr. 11.271–280 Blockley) preserved in Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De legationibus Romanorum ad gentes* 3 – there were sacred duties (sšbaj) concerning hospitality among the Slavs according to the *Strategikon* (XI 4) attributed to the emperor Maurice.

<sup>2</sup> I will follow Haurý's (1963) edition in this paper.

δαμόνια, καὶ θυισι καὶ αὐτοῖς ἅπασι, τὰς τε μαντείας ἐν ταύταις δὴ ταῖς θυσίαις ποιοῦνται.

For they believe that one god, the maker of the lightning, is the only lord of everything and they sacrifice to him cattle and all kinds of victims, but they do not know the fate nor do they think that it has any bearing whatsoever on human beings. Instead, when death is getting close to them, either when sickness strikes them or when they get ready for war, they promise that, if they escape, they will make a sacrifice to the god in exchange for their life and once they have escaped, they sacrifice whatever they have at hand, believing that they have bought their safety thanks to that sacrifice. Nevertheless, they also worship rivers, nymphs and some other divine beings and they also sacrifice to them all, making divinations in those sacrifices.

Some scholars have been quite skeptical about the reliability of the information provided by Procopius<sup>3</sup>. However, in one of the most detailed analyses of the ethnographic excursus on the Slavs, Benedicty (1965) showed how, even if Procopius' report keeps within the traditional frame of the description of barbarian peoples in Greek historiography, the information that provides can, nevertheless, be considered reliable, in as much as most of it can be compared to other sources that support his views.

Focusing specifically on the religious aspects of his description of the Slavs, the reference to a supreme god, master of the lightning, fits well with the information about Perun that later sources provide, regardless of whether this god was or not already named in that way<sup>4</sup>. He also states that they worshipped rivers, nymphs, and some other divine beings (da...monej) and this information can be checked in other sources, too, such as the *Homiliary* of Opatovice (sermon 5, p. 4 Hecht), Helmold of Bosau's *Chronica Slavorum* (I 47), or Cosmes' *Chronica Boemorum* (I 4)<sup>5</sup>. In the latter text, the introduction of this type of cults is attributed to the mythical figure of Tethka<sup>6</sup>. The nymphs mentioned by Procopius have been usually linked to various female supernatural beings known in later Slavic traditions, such as the *vila* (Reiter 1973: 203-204, *s.u. Vila*) or the *rusalki* and *beregini* (Brückner 1923: 176-181, Benedicty 1965: 72-73). The information that presages were made during the sacrifices appears to be accurate, too, since it can be confirmed in later sources, especially Thietmar of Merseburg (VI 22-25)<sup>7</sup>.

It is not the aim of my paper to analyse once more this well known passage, but it was important to show how the information provided by Procopius concerning pagan Slavic religion seems to have a factual basis. I would like to draw attention to another interesting passage of the same work (Procop.*Goth.* III 38.17-23) that seems to have been overlooked in the scholarly literature on Slavic paganism. I will first provide the Greek text and a translation, and will then comment on it.

<sup>3</sup> See Vyncke (1969: 649) and Barford (2001: 193), among others.

<sup>4</sup> See Brückner (1923: 58-80), Niederle ([1926]1995: 46-51), Pisani ([1950]1995: 73-75), Benedicty (1965: 71-72), Reiter (1973: 189-191, esp. p. 190), Puhvel (1987: 234-235), Mikhailov (1995: 174-177), Barford (2001: 193-195).

<sup>5</sup> The texts can be found in Meyer's collection (Meyer 1931: 20-21, 43, 18).

<sup>6</sup> On this matter see Pisani ([1950]1995: 76-78). Even after the christianization of the Slavs these types of cults survived in popular beliefs; see Barford (2001: 189-192).

<sup>7</sup> According to Helmold (I 52), Sventovit's oracular capacities were rewarded by the Rugians with an annual human sacrifice.

ἔκτεινον δὲ τοὺς παραπίπτοντας οὔτε ξίφει οὔτε δόρατι οὔτε τῷ ἄλλῳ εἰωθότῃ τρόπῳ ἀλλὰ σκόλοπας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς πηξάμενοι ἰσχυρότατα ὀξεῖς τε αὐτοὺς ἐς τὰ μάλιστα ποιησάμενοι ἐπὶ τούτων ξύν Βία πολλή τοὺς δειλαίους ἐκάθισιν τήν τε σκολόπων ἀκμὴν γλουτῶν κατὰ μέσον ἐνείροντες ὠθούντες τε ἄχρι ἐς τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὰ ἔγκατα ὕτω δὴ αὐτοὺς διαχρήσασθαι ἤξιουν καὶ ξύλα δὲ παχέα τέτταρα ἐπὶ πλεῖστον ἐς γῆν κατορύξαντες οἱ βάρβαροι οὗτοι ἐπ' αὐτῶν τε χεῖράς τε καὶ πόδας τῶν ἠλωκότως δεσμεύοντες εἶτα ῥοπάλοις αὐτοὺς κατὰ κόρρης ἐνδελεχέστατα παίοντες ὡς δὴ κύνας ἢ ὄφεις ἢ ἄλλο τι θηρίον διέφειρου ἄλλους δὲ ξύν τε Βουσί καὶ πφοβάτοις ὅσα δὴ ἐπάγεσθαι ἐς τὰ πάτρια ἤθη ὡς ἥκιστα εἶχον ἐν τοῖς δωματίοις καθείρξαντες οὐδεμιᾶ φειδοὶ ἐνεπίμπρασαν οὔτω μὲν Σκλαβηνοὶ τοὺς ἐντυχόντας ἀεὶ ἀνήρουν.

They killed the people that they encountered not with sword nor spear nor in any other usual manner, but they fix very firmly in the earth stakes that they had made extremely sharp, violently seated those poor people on them, and, introducing the point of the stakes between their buttocks, pressed until they reached their entrails. They considered appropriate this way of killing them. These barbarians also used to plant four thick pieces of wood and tie the hands and feet of their prisoners to them; they then kept on beating them on their head until they killed them like dogs, snakes or any other beast. Others they shut in their huts together with the cattle and sheep that they were unable to carry with them to their homeland and mercilessly set them on fire. Thus did the Sclavenes put to death the ones that they found.

This excursus on the barbarian habits of the Slavs is inserted after Procopius has described the conquest of the town of Topir, on the Thracian coast, which took place in 549-550, during the invasion of Illyria and Thrace by a group of Slavs. Procopius expresses his surprise at the fact that on this occasion the Slavs had chosen not to kill everyone, but had just enslaved women and children, while their custom so far was not to spare anyone. He then goes on to describe the ways in which they used to kill their victims up to that point.

This passage has usually been interpreted just as an attempt on the part of Procopius to stress the ferocity and cruelty of this people, but, as Barford (2001: 58) remarks, even if part of the description may be based on a literary topos, basically the information that he provides must be related to the specific facts that really occurred. It would thus be a similar case to that of the previously quoted passage of the *Gothic War*.

Furthermore, I would like to compare Procopius' descriptions of these savageries to Photius' account of the Russian attack on Constantinople in 860<sup>8</sup>:

An obscure nation [...] as a wild boar has devoured the inhabitants of the land like grass, or straw, or a crop (O, the God-sent punishment that befell us!), sparing nothing from man to beast, not respecting female weakness, not pitying tender infants, not reverencing the hoary hairs of old men, softened by nothing that is wont to move human nature to pity, even when it has sunk to that of wild beasts, but boldly thrusting their sword through persons of every age and sex. One could see babes torn away by them from breast and milk and life itself, and finding an improvised

<sup>8</sup> Photius, *Homily IV 2*. Translation by Mango (1958: 98–99).

grave in the rocks against which, alas, they were dashed; mothers wailing miserably, being slaughtered over their infants who were still convulsed and gasping – a piteous thing to hear and more piteous to see, much better to be passed over in silence than to be told, and worthier of its perpetrators than of its victims. Nay, nor was the savagery stopped with human beings, but over all speechless animals, oxen, horses, fowl and others, which they fell upon, did their cruelty extend. There lay an ox and a man by its side, a child and a horse found a common grave, women and fowl stained each other with their blood. Everything was full of dead bodies; the flow of rivers was turned into blood; some of the fountains and reservoirs it was no longer possible to distinguish, as their cavities were made level with corpses, other retained but faint traces of their former outline, the missing traces being overlaid by the bodies that lay scattered alongside them. Corn-land was rotting with dead bodies, roads were obstructed, forests took on a wild and desolate aspect because of corpses rather than because of bushes and solitude, caverns were filled up, mountains, hills, ravines and gullies differed in no way from city cemeteries. Thus the calamitous destruction spread on, and the plague of war, borne on the wings of sin, flew all round about, destroying everything it encountered.

Even if the facts that Procopius and Photius are describing are similar – a massacre carried out by the Slavs in one case and by the Russians in the other –, it appears from the comparison between both texts that, while Photius is just following some literary clichés in his description, so that we cannot recover any factual information from his depiction of the attack, Procopius seems to be providing some more accurate informations about the ways in which the Slavs killed their enemies.

It is my point that what Procopius is describing in this passage are, in fact, some quite elaborate rituals performed by the Slavs to carry out the execution of their enemies. It would be rather unexpected that, in the context of their incursion on the other side of the river Danube, the Slavs would stop to make all the preparations necessary for those types of slayings for no reason at all. Such a behaviour, however, would be better understandable if those were some sorts of ritual sacrifices. As a matter of fact, ritual killing of human beings by the Slavs<sup>9</sup> after a battle is clearly attested in a passage of the *History* of Leo the Deacon (IX 6) in the 10th century<sup>10</sup>:

Ἦδη δὲ ὠκτὸς κατασχύσης καὶ τῆς μῆνης πλησιφανκὺς οὐσης, κατὰ τὸ πεδίων ἐξεληθόντες τοὺς σφετέρους ἀνεφιλῶν νεκροὺς οὐς καὶ συναλίσσαντες πρὸ τοῦ περιβόλου καὶ πυρὰς θαμινὰς διανάφαντες, κατέκαυσαν, πλείστους τῶν αἰχμαλώτων, ἄνδρας καὶ γυναῖα ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς κατὰ τοῦ πατρίον νόμον ἐναποσφάζαντες.

The night came and there was full moon, so they went out to the plain and examined their own dead. They gathered them in front of the precincts and, after setting fire to thick pyres, they burnt them and on top of them they slaughtered men and women following their native law.

<sup>9</sup> Leo the Deacon calls this people "Scythian", but taking into account the place where they are found and their description they are usually identified as Slavs. This passage was thus included by Meyer (1931: 7-8) in his collection of texts concerning Slavic paganism.

<sup>10</sup> I quote from Karalis' (2000) edition.

Coming back to Procopius' text, three different ways of putting the enemies to death after they have been made prisoners can be found in it. In the first place there is a description of a ritual of impalement. The Slavens planted the stakes in the earth, sharpened their points, and then seated their victims on them, forcing their bodies down on the stakes until they were perforated. It is important to note that Procopius uses the word ὁξ...οὖν "considered appropriate" to characterize how the Slavens envisaged this kind of killing. It seems thus that it was not chosen at random, unlike the ways of killing people in Photius' account, but it was precisely the way in which these prisoners had to be dealt with. Procopius had previously warned about the oddity of this practice when introducing his description with the words οὔτε ξίφει οὔτε δόρατι οὔτε τῷ ἄλλῳ εἰωθότι τρόπῳ "not by sword nor spear nor in any other usual manner".

The second procedure was even more elaborate. It involved planting in the earth four pieces of wood and tying the feet and hands of the prisoners to them, after which they beat their heads with clubs until they died. It cannot be by chance that the word ῥοῦλον "club, mace" appears only here in Procopius' work, so it seems that it has been chosen as specially adequate for this description, that is, it seems that the Slavens did not use whatever weapon they might have had at hand for this purpose, but they specifically had to use a mace or club. It is also important to remark that Procopius specifies that they beat their heads – or, maybe more precisely, their temples, for the word κόρρη instead of κεφαλή 'head' is used. Why should it be that they limited themselves to beating their heads and not their whole bodies unless this was not part of a ritual?

We do not have exact parallels of any of these practices in other texts dealing with pagan Slavic religion, but rituals in which different objects were planted in the earth seem to have played an important role in the religious rituals of these peoples. In a well known passage of Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De administrando imperio* IX, it is described how the Russians (Ῥώσσοι) used to come down to Constantinople for trading after the winter was over. They stopped at an island with a big sacred oak, where they used to sacrifice birds – and the ritual also involved planting arrows in a circle (πηγνύκουσι δὲ καὶ σαγίττας γυρόθεν "they plant arrows in a circle"). In various sources, specifically Thietmar of Merseburg (VI 22-25), Herbold (II 33), and Saxo Grammaticus (XIV 39. 10), we find the description of Slavic divination rituals for which spears had to be planted in the earth, too, after which a horse had to step over them, and according to how this happened favorable or unfavorable presages could be obtained.

Finally, according to Procopius' description, the Slavs had a third way of killing their prisoners – they put them in huts together with cows and sheep and burnt them. Procopius remarks that they did this just with the cattle that the barbarians were not able to take with them to their homeland. However, we can wonder whether this was not again a specific kind of religious offering. We have some interesting parallels in this case. Nicholas I Mystikos, patriarch of Constantinople, in his letter 66, dated 913-914, complains that a pagan sacrifice has been carried out for ratifying a treaty<sup>11</sup>. That sacrifice involved killing some animals and making a holocaust. He insists in his letter that it was not by chance that the animals selected for that purpose were cows, dogs, and sheep. In Procopius' text we

<sup>11</sup> Edition and translation of the letter in Jenkins – Westerink (1973). Additional information and comments can be found in Grumel – Darrouzès (1989).

find a similar selection of victims, but human beings are substituted for dogs, if this were the same type of sacrifice, which indeed we cannot know<sup>12</sup>.

It would thus seem that the three ways in which the Slavenes used to kill their enemies, according to this passage of *De bello Gothico*, are not accidental. If our arguments are right, Procopius – who is very well informed about the facts that he is describing – would be providing here a quite detailed account of the rituals followed by 6th century Slavenes for putting their enemies to death. It would thus be a very valuable source for our knowledge of Slavic pre-Christian religion.

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<sup>12</sup> Sacrifices to animals are mentioned in the *Homiliary* of Opatovice (p. 57 Hecht = Meyer 1931: 22), but no further clue about which those animals were is provided in this source.

**Procopius, *De bello Gothico* III 38.17-23: opis ritualnih pobojev slovanskih poganov?**

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Prokopijevo delo *Gotske vojne* velja za najstarejši vir za preučevanje poganske religije pri Slovanih. Vendar pa dela, ki obravnavajo ta tekst, prinašajo zgolj podrobno etnografsko analizo Slovanov in Antov (Procop.Goth. 14.22-30). V Prokopijevem delu pa je moč najti še en, izredno zanimiv odlomek, v katerem avtor opisuje načine, na katere so Slovani ubijali svoje sovražnike. Natikali so jih na kol, privezovali njihove roke in noge na kole in jih tepli do smrti ali pa so jih sežigali skupaj z govedom in ovci. Analiza teksta, v kombinaciji s primerjavami podatkov iz drugih virov, kaže, da je te prakse moč interpretirati kot ritualne poboje.