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On the smoke to heaven – The cremation rite in ancient and traditional cultures. Its rationalization in the eschatological beliefs of Indo-European peoples, with a special regard to the pagan Slavs

The paper deals with the rite of cremation in the ancient and traditional cultures, focuses on its association with the eschatological beliefs of Indo-European peoples and finally takes into a special consideration such ideas among the pagan Slavs. It begins with briefly surveying the worldwide distribution of the rite since its very beginning up to the modern times (1). The data that may be attributed to the historically defined peoples are separated from the anonymous archaeological evidence of the prehistoric cultures (1.1) and put together with the facts provided by the anthropological research of the primitive societies (1.2). This survey is taken as a basis for some typological observations made in the following chapter (2). They concern in the first place the distinction between the rite of cremation being marked, within the society in question, positively, as a common or an elite-rite, or negatively, as a punishment or a prevention against some dangerous categories of the dead (2.1). The presence or absence of accompanying funeral rites and the ancestor worship are also taken into account (2.2), as well as the technical and economic aspects of cremation, such as its limitation through the shortage of wood and its expansion with the development of the bronze and iron metalurgy (2.3). Special attention is paid to the reasons given by different ethnic or social groups for having adopted the cremation as their mode of disposal of the dead (2.4); those explanations coincide for a good part with the modern hypotheses about the original motivation of this funeral rite as exposed in the next chapter (3.1), which proceed from practical and/or magical-religious motives, such as overcrowding of burial places; protection against the plague, desire to ensure soldiers slain in alien territory a homeland funeral; fear of the desecration or a black magic misuse of dead bodies; prevention of the revenants; reduction of the corpse to bones for a secondary burial; liberation, radical and instantaneous as possible, of the soul from the body in order to provide its immediate transport to heaven. To this variety of possible motives for the introduction of the cremation rite corresponds a diversity of opinions about its genesis and place(s) of origin (3.2). The variable character of the rite and its diffusion over all the continents speak in favour of its polygenesis, but there are monogenetic theories too, the most popular of them tracing it back to the ancient Sumer, where at Nippur in the court of the stage-tower funeral urns from the time before 3000 B.C. were found and near Lagash two fire-necropolises have been excavated (Surghul and el-Hibba). According to it, the cremation rite spread from its South Mesopotamian cradle in the other parts of the ancient world, including Pre-Arian India, where it was later adopted by the Arian newcomers; from this new centre, the custom kept on radiating in the course of centuries in various directions, together with the promulgation of Hinduism and Buddhism, and eventually reached the remotest parts of the world –Australia, Siberia, and even the Americas. This hypothesis seems highly speculative not only because of its historical-geographical uncertainty, but also in view of the problem it sets to the cultural anthropology by claiming that the more primitive, animistic forms of the rite have arisen as a degradation of the higher ones, developed once by Sumerian priests and based on the belief in the immortal soul. Moreover, it seems less compatible with some facts well known to the history of religions. That is not only the prevalence of the inhumation among the Sumerians –including the royal burials– and the complete absence of any mention of cremation in their texts, but also their rather pessimistic view on the afterlife, with the soul descending after mortal dissolution to the underground ‘desolate land’, *Arallū*, to pass a dreary and shadowy existence. Similar otherworld beliefs are shared, together with a repulsion against the burning of corpse, by the Semitic peoples, whereas an eschatological evaluation of the cremation rite, wherever it occurs, is connected with the idea of a kind of celestial paradise. Although it is not unfamiliar to some primitives in Africa, Oceania and America, such a “fire-eschatology” was in the antiquity highly distinctive of ancient Indo-European peoples (4). It is best preserved in the Vedic Indian texts, but the comparative evidence provided by Homeric poetry and the burial ritual of Hittite kings speaks for a common Indo-European heritage. A complex of eschatological beliefs can be reconstructed, where the destiny of the soul after death is correlated with the daily circuit of the divine fire in its various manifestations and functions. According to Gregory Nagy, this link between the microcosm of sacrificial fire and the macrocosm of celestial fire was believed to enable the soul of the deceased to follow the path of the sun and to be finally reborn on the highest sky, where his ancestors abide (4.2.). These ideas bear some resemblance to Egyptian solar soteriology, which is known from the Pyramid Texts and originally interested only the dead kings and queens. Although some influence of Pharaoh’s solar cult may be observed on the iconography of Aryans who ruled in the 15-14<sup>th</sup> century B.C. over the Mitanni kingdom in northern Mesopotamia, their custom of burning their dead cannot be derived from the same source; totally strange to the indigenous Hurrians as well as to the Egyptians themselves, but common to the neighbouring Hittites, it links the Mitanni rulers with their consanguines, who invaded India only a few centuries later, and we have all the reason to assume that those Mesopotamian Aryans shared with these latter also the eschatological beliefs described above, along with the underlying cosmology of fire, which all forms together with the cremation an original and coherent system, unknown as such to the ancient Egypt (4.3). The example of the cremating Aryans of Mitanni and their inhumating Hurrian subjects illustrates the possibility of an ethnic difference having developed into a social one and being reflected in the burial rite; the same phenomenon is observable in other times and other parts of the world, among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and some Indian tribes of South America; it can explain why cremation is limited in India to the first three castes which originally embraced the Aryan invaders. Their members are distinguished by being “twice-born” (*dvijā-*), i.e. considered reborn after they have finished the learning of Vedas, which includes an initiation into the mystery of afterlife (5.2). It seems that in some cases the cremation rite was limited to the initiated persons, e.g. in the Greek community in Eretria on Euboea about 700 B.C., where, according to archaeological excavations, only the adult dead were burned, whereas the children under sixteen were buried (thus Vidal-Naquet). Considering this possibility helps to explain some epic motifs, such as the ring of fire (*Waberlohe*) surrounding Brynhild’s

abode in the Old Norse sagas; vowing this Amazon marked with Valkyrian traits is, for Sigurd, a kind of warrior initiation, and young man's passing through the fire symbolises, in a society practising cremation, his crossing the border of the afterworld. In other words, the initiated youth is granted a vision of the Valhalla, where his celestial bride waits for the union with him, which is to take place after his heroic death on the battlefield. A similar motif is recognizable in some Serbian epics and seems to be rooted in common Indo-European beliefs (5.3).

Among the pagan Slavs the cremation was the prevailing rite, although the archeology gives evidence of certain occurrence of inhumation in the Slavic-Iranian border area. This archaeological picture is paralleled with the linguistic fact of the word *vatra* being substituted, in the SLAVIC South-East, by *ognь*, the latter reflecting the common IE word for 'fire' *\*(o)n-gni-* (literally 'non-decaying', properly a designation of the burial fire?), and the former being probably borrowed to Iranians, who together with the cremation abandoned the Indo-Iranian word *agni-* in favour of *āθr-*, a process analogous to IE *\*deivos* being degraded, in both Iranian and Slavic, to 'demon' and replaced, in the meaning 'god', with *\*bhaghos*, originally 'giver' (6). The Slavic word for 'vampire', which in 18<sup>th</sup> century from Serbian entered West-European languages, seems to go back, together with Greek *á-pyros*, to the IE compound designating a rite in which no fire was used, and consequently an unburned corpse, that leaves the grave and disturbs the living –especially his relatives who ought to ensure him a proper burial, i.e. the cremation (6.1). A similar apology of cremation is found both in Ibn-Fadlan's report about heathen Russians (which might concern the Scandinavian Varjags) and in an Old Russian source concerning the pagan Balts, where this kind of burial is personified under the name *Sovij* (6.2.1). It is explained here as *\*su-veju-* 'good wind', in view of the belief, common to the Hindus and heathen Balts, that the destiny of the soul after death depends on the direction of the wind blowing over the funeral pyre. A mythological parallel is provided by Zoroastrian concept of the double *Vayu*, the wind-god guarding the entrance to heaven, who appears in two hypostases, a good and an evil one (Pehl. *Vāi-i-veh*, *Vāi-i-vattar*), and has his counterparts in Gogol's *Vij* as well as in Lithuanian double-faced wind-god *Vejo patis* (6.2.2). This etymology gives the possibility of better understanding of the Slavic word for 'death' *сѣть*, which is a compound with the same prefix IE *\*su-* and literally means 'good death'. This euphemistic designation does not refer to a peaceful, non-violent death after a long and prosperous life, but rather to a death inaugurating a blessed afterlife by means of a proper funeral rite, i.e. cremation, and with the help of the psychopompic "Good Wind" (6.2.3).