

On the creation of domestic animals in Proto-Indo European mythology

by

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Abstract:

At the beginning there were two men and a bull. These men were twin brothers, Manu and Yemo. Manu was the first Priest, Yemo was the first King. Manu sacrificed his brother, dismembered his body and with his parts he formed the world. Then he sacrificed the bull, dismembered its body and with his parts Manu created edible plants and domestic animals. Yemo, the first dead man, became King of the Dead, and his realm he opened for all those who followed. This is, according to Lincoln, the Proto-Myth of Creation among the Proto-Indo Europeans (PIE). As soon as these PIE evolved into the different Indo European (IE) peoples, this myth changed, evolved, adapted itself to different environs, to different points of view, until it became almost completely disguised into folklore and religion. But this original proto-myth underlies all IE cosmologies, every IE creation myth, every IE sacrifice. For sacrifice is, according to this cosmovision, the act of reunification of this Cosmos that was once divided.

Introduction

This paper will try to find new questions, and hopefully some answers, about the mythical relationship that bound men and animal together in ancient times. For that, I will go back to the myth of origins among some Indo-Europeans peoples and I will discuss the role of some animals in that sacrificial context. But first, some background to those not familiar with IE studies.

For PIE I mean those peoples who spoke a language or group of languages from where the different IE languages come. But it is not only a linguistic definition, as has been stated. The PIE peoples could have shared a common material culture, land of origin, etc. In that context is it possible that they had a similar understanding and account of Creation, although this is not attested sufficiently in literary sources nor archaeological grounds to be taken as plain facts.

Prof. Bruce Lincoln proposed the reconstruction of a PIE mythical structure which, on his opinion, would serve as a basis to understand the different accounts of creation among various IE peoples.¹

What I will now describe is his reconstruction of a PIE mythical structure. I should warn the reader that this is not a myth. It is an ideal reconstruction of an ancient ideological system. This reconstruction includes the

tracing back of the names of the characters according to comparative and historical philology. It runs as follows:

“At the beginning of time there were two brothers, a priest whose name was “Man” (*Manu) and a king, whose name was “Twin” (*Yemo), who travelled together accompanied by an ox. For reasons that are not specified, they took it upon themselves to create the world, and toward that end the priest offered up his brother and the ox in what was to be the first ritual sacrifice. Dismembering their bodies, he used the various parts to create the material universe and human society as well, taking all three classes from the body of the first king, who --as stated above-- combined within himself the social totality.”²

Here ends the story. It is short, but full of meaning. Also, the consequences of these acts are very important to IE thought, as we shall see.

The Sacrifice

Manu, having performed the first sacrifice became the first Priest. As such, he has also been regarded as the first man in later priestly literature. We can find an example of this in India, where Manu is regarded as the first man and first priest. He is the model for any sacrificer, and every sacrifice is a repetition of Manu’s first ritual act. In Iran Manu is regarded as one of the founders of human society and ancestor of Zoroaster. There he is called Manushkihar. Yemo is the first dead person. As such, he is the king of the dead, but he is also regarded as ancestor of all humankind and identified with the human king.

“As Yama at the appointed time subjects to his rule both friends and foes, even so all subjects must be controlled by the king; that is the office in which he resembles Yama.”³

Yemo will be called Yama in Indian literature and Yim in the Iranian account. As the first king, he will become the model for any later one. Every king must be ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of its society. In later times, the horse sacrifice became a substitute of the king’s sacrifice because of the horse’s association with sover-

eignty. But that's another story. Due to the fact that the King is the source of human society he is said to contain within him the whole of the social body. In this context we can understand the Purusasukta Hymn of Rig Veda X, 90, 11-12 which states:

“When they divided Purusa how many portions did they make? What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet? The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arm was the Rajanya made. His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced”

Brahman, Rajanya or Chatrya and Vaisya are the three IE classes in Indian account. The Sudra stands for the non-IE, lower class, an Indian addition to contemplate the huge number of autochthonous peoples. The vertical stratification of society is sustained by this mythical thinking (regardless of the political implications of this). Yemo is also the source of the Universe, so the universe is a macrocosmic projection of man, and a direct consequence of this first sacrifice. In the same hymn we can read that: “The moon was gendered from his mind, and from his eye the sun had birth; Indra and Agni from his mouth, and Vayu from his breath. Forth from his navel came mid-air; the sky was fashioned from his head; Earth from his feet, and from his ear the regions. Thus they formed the worlds”.

Manu cut up Yemo and with his parts he fashioned the cosmos and men following a defined pattern: the sun from his eye, the moon from his mind, grass from his hair, sky from his head, earth from his feet, the regions from his ear, and so on. After that, he cut up the bovine and out of its body all animals and edible plants were created. All this ideas have been recorded in priestly, ritual literature. Maybe because of this fact, no special attention has been paid to the third character in this story: the bovine. Nevertheless, some traces have been kept in the ancient written sources. One late example is in the Iranian account of creation, the Bundahishn. Yet in the Iranian tradition, sacrifice has been condemned by the Zoroastrian reform. So this first sacrifice is regarded as an evil act, even though the consequence of it is the Creation of the World. Thus is the account of the death of Gayomard and the bull. Gayomard is also the Iranian version of Yemo, for Yima retained only its function as Lord of the Dead, while Gayomard became the first, sacrificed man along with a primeval bovine.

In the Bundahishn we can read:

III, 13. “He [the Evil Spirit, Ahriman] came to the water which was arranged below the earth, and then the middle of this earth was pierced and entered by him. Afterwards, he came to the vegetation, then to the ox, then to Gayomard, and then he came to fire; so, just like a fly, he rushed out upon the whole creation. [...] III, 17 And avarice, want, pain, hunger, disease, lust and lethargy were diffused by him abroad upon the ox and Gayomard. [...] This also is said, that when the primeval ox passed away, it fell to the right hand, and Gayomard, afterwards, when he passed away, to the left hand. [...] III, 18 as its breath went forth and he passed away, the ox also spoke thus: ‘ the cattle are to be created, and their work, labour, and care, are to be appointed’. [...] X, 1 As it passed away [...] from every limb of the ox fifty-five species of grain and twelve species of medicinal plants grew forth from the cattle, and their splendour and strength were the seminal energy. [...]

XIV, 1 On the nature of the five classes of animals it says in revelation that, when the primeval ox passed away, there where marrow

came out grain grew up to fifty-five species and twelve species of medicinal plants grew. 2. From horns arose peas, from nose the leek, from blood the grapevine from which they make wine, from lungs rue-like herbs, from the middle of the heart thyme. 3. The seed of the ox was carried up to the moon, there it was purified and produced the manifold species of animals. 4. First, two oxen, one male and one female, and afterwards, one pair of every single species was let go into the earth; as it says, that, on account of the valuableness of the ox it was created twice, one time as an ox, and one time as the manifold species of animals. [...] 6. ... First were the goat and sheep, and then the camel and swine, and then the horse and ass. 7. For, first, those suitable for grazing were created, ... now kept in the valley; the second were those of the hill... wide travelers, habits are not taught to them by hand; third were those dwelling in the water.”⁷⁴

Although the Zoroastrian lore openly declares the abolition of animal sacrifice, still in the Zend Avesta we can find more traces of this ancient cosmological and ritual belief:

“(6)... and we sacrifice to Zarathustra, the holy lord of the ritual; also we sacrifice to the Mathra Spenta, and to the soul of the Kine, and to Zarathustra. (7) Also we sacrifice to the Fire-priest, the holy lord of the ritual order, and to the charioteer, the holy lord of the ritual order. Also we sacrifice to the thrifty tiller of the earth, the holy lord of the ritual order. And we sacrifice to the house-lord, and to the village chief, and to the Zantu-chief, and to the province chief of the province, the holy lord of the ritual order.”⁷⁵

In this passages we can see, again, the intimate relationship between kine, sacrifice, cosmological and social order, and the importance of sacrifice as maintainer of this system order.

This account is not only about the creation of domestic animals but also a statement of purpose. This sacrifice that has been performed serves as the basis for any further sacrifice, as we have seen with the sacrifice of Yemo. But also states that their function and tending are really serious matter, for so has been declared in this revelation. There are variants of this theme almost everywhere in the IE world. For example, in Ireland we can find *The Battle of the Bulls*, told in the Irish epic *Tain Bo Cuailnge*.

“There were two twin bulls, who were originally two pig-keepers at the service of rival lords of Ireland. These pig-keepers were able to take any shape they wanted because they dominated some magic (or pagan, as the text says) arts. And they were close friends. They rivaled and competed about whose magic was strongest and they put spells on the other's herd, so they lost their jobs because the pigs would not eat, and things like that. So they transformed themselves into birds, stags, undersea creatures, warriors, phantoms, dragons, maggots... and they finally got into the water and that water was drank by cows owned by... rival lords, again.

After a while, two bulls were born. So beautiful and powerful as have never been seen. Finnbennach Ai, the White, and Donn Cualnge, the Brown. The bulls fought each other for a long time. Night fell upon the men of Ireland and they could hear the uproar and fury in the darkness. That night the bulls circled the whole of Ireland. When morning came, the men of Ireland saw the Donn Cualnge coming westward with the remains of Finnbennach hanging from his horns. He turned his right side towards Cruachan, and he left there a heap (cruach) of the liver of the Whitehorned, so that thence is named Cruachan Ai.

... Then he raised his head, and the shoulder-blades (lethe) of the Whitehorned fell from him in that place. Hence, Sruthair Finnlethe is the name given to it.

He pursued his way to the brink of Ath Mor ('the Great Ford'); and he left behind the loin (luan) of the Whitehorned in that place,

so that thence cometh Athione. He continued eastwards into the land of Meath to Ath Truim. And he left behind there the liver (tromm) of the Whitehorned. He raised his head haughtily and shook the remains of the Whitehorned from him over Erin. He sent its hind leg (larac) away from him to Port Large. He sent its ribs (cliathac) from him to Dublin, which is called Ath Cliath. He turned his face northwards then, and he knew the land of Cualnge, and he went his way towards it. In that place were women and youths and children lamenting the Brown Bull of Cualnge. They saw the Brown of Cualnge's forehead approaching them. "The forehead (taul) of a bull cometh towards us!" they shouted. Hence is Taul Tairb ever since. Then turned the Brown of Cualnge on the women and youths and children of the land of Cualnge, and he effected a great slaughter amongst them. He turned his back to the hill then and his heart broke in his breast, even as a nut breaks. Such, then, is the account and the fate of the Brown Bull of Cualnge and the end of the Tain".⁶

The twins are present in this story, the bovine also. And the Lord of the Dead? In Irish mythology the ancestor of Irish people, and Lord of the Dead is called Donn, and lives off-shore in an island called "Bull's Rock". So we have the whole set: the twins, the Lord of the Dead, the Creationthrough dismemberment, the bovine, the slaughter, the landscape and terraforming... And the animals are not created here, but a product of transformations. Yet, we can still identify them.

Another example is the well known story of Romulus and Remus, the semi-divine mythic twins, fed by the she-wolf. Romulus, in the midst of a power struggle with his brother killed him, and later founded Rome and became its first king. So here again we have twins, one dead, the other founder, the nurturing role, here in the

character of the she-wolf, and, of course, the unavoidable temptation to identify the name of Remus with Yemo, though many authors have argued that the names of the twins derive from ancient localities around the place of Rome.

In all cases, the figure of the bovine, in its nurturing role as a sustainer of life and source of it, is well attested, in my opinion.

To finish, I would like to say that this myth has many different levels of reading and a lot of symbolic charge and deserves further investigation.

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¹ Lincoln 1981; 1986.

² Lincoln 1991, 7.

³ MS VII,7.

⁴ The Iranian full text version can be found at: <http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/miran/mpers/bundahis/bunda.htm>

⁵ Zend Avesta, Gah IV, 6-7. Cited from The Zend Avesta, vol. 3, 385, SBE XXXI.

⁶ The Tain, lines 4854-4919.

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