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## Sacrifices and funerary customs in the religious context of the Early Slavs

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**Abstract:** The sacrifices of the Early Slavs to pagan deities, spirits, etc. are well known from the written sources as well as the archaeological finds. The paper tackles with the recorded to the written sources human sacrifices, as well as certain finds in cremation urns, in the religious context of the Early Slavs. Focus point is Procopius' testimony on the ritual execution of Topeiros' inhabitants in c. 550, while, on the other hand, cases of double cremations in one urn are compared with Maurice's Strategikon testimony on the women's suicide after the death of their husband, which may actually concern sacrifices of religious character. Avoiding to reproduce common places about the rituals of the Slavs, as Pseudo-Caesarius and, later, other Byzantine authors, Procopius' account makes it clear that some of the sacrifices to the supreme God, as well as to other deities, included also human beings. The background of the human sacrifices, reflection of religious beliefs, should be sought to the Slavic mythology and perceptions for both the uranic powers and those of the underworld. The mass and ritual execution of war prisoners interprets in a logical way the desire of the Slavs, based on a promise to reward the salvation of their lives by offering the lives of prisoners, likely to the chthonic Gods. Furthermore, information from other medieval sources and archaeological finds testifies that the early Slavs performed human sacrifices using concrete

rituals and instruments for the humans' execution, according to the customs of their ancestors.

In pagan societies, as well as later in the folklore traditions inspired by old customs, the importance and impact of ritual feasts and sacrifices were directly linked to the beliefs, the values, the perceptions, the symbolisms etc. of the society which practised them (usually on holidays). Among other things, the sacrifices and the relevant rituals, through their contact with the sacred, contributed to the promotion of the "sense of community", to recalling the community's past and to strengthening its continuation.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the human sacrifices made by the Early Slavs to pagan deities, spirits, etc., revealed by written sources and archaeological finds, are under consideration, taking also into account equivalent testimonies from sources and finds dated to the Middle Ages as comparative material.

Firstly, and the main point of our presentation is the testimony of Procopius on the execution of the citizens of Topeiros, near modern Xanthi in the Greek Thrace. That event took place at the end of a Slavic invasion in the Balkans dated to 549/50, which affected both Illyricum and Thrace. According to the Byzantine historian, 3,000 Slavs, divided into two groups, defeated the Byzantine garrisons many times. Procopius quotes that "the whole land inhabited by the Illyrians and Thracians came to be everywhere filled with unburied corpses."<sup>2</sup> Considering the fall of Topeiros, despite the resistance of the citizens, the Slavs captured the city and then slew all the men, numbering fifteen thousand, while the children and women were forced into slavery

Now they killed their victims, not with sword nor spear, nor in any other accustomed manner, but by planting very firmly in the earth stakes which they had made exceedingly sharp, and seating the poor wretches upon these with great violence, driving the point of the stake between the buttocks and forcing it up into the intestines; thus did they see fit to destroy them. These barbarians also had a way of planting four thick stakes very deep in the ground,

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1 Izabella Wenska, "Sacrifices among the Slavs: Between Archeological Evidence and 19th Century Folklore," *Analecta Archaeologica Ressoviensia* 10 (2015): 271–312, here 274–77, 284. See also, Andrzej Pankalla, "Slavic Indigenous Psychology as a Science about the Slavic Soul," *Psykhologija i osobystist*, 2/1 (10) (2016): 21–31.

2 Henry B. Dewing, trans., Procopius, *History of the Wars* [LCL, vol. IV-V] (London: William Heinemann LTD; Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), VII, 38.1–8, 20–23 and 38.19, 26–27. Florin Curta, *The Making of the Slavs: History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region, c. 500–700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 83–84. Alexander Sarantis, *Justinian's Balkan Wars. Campaigning, Diplomacy and Development in Illyricum, Thrace and the Northern World A.D. 527–565* (Prenton: Francis Cairns, 2016), 278–279.

and after binding the feet and hands of the captives to these they would then assiduously beat them over the head with clubs, killing them like dogs or snakes or any other animal. Others again they would imprison in their huts together with their cattle and sheep –those, of course, which they were utterly unable to take with them to their native haunts– and then they would set fire to the huts without mercy. Thus did the Sclaveni consistently destroy those who fell in their way.<sup>3</sup>

In our view, the reason for the human sacrifices should be sought in the Procopius' account relating to the early Slavs, where the author provides information on the religious beliefs and the rituals of the pagan Slavs:

...for they believe that one God, the maker of the lightning, is alone lord of all things, and they sacrifice to him cattle and all other victims; ... but whenever death stands close before them, either stricken with sickness or beginning a war, they make a promise that, if they escape, they will straightway make a sacrifice to the god in return for their life; and if they escape, they sacrifice just what they have promised, and consider that their safety has been bought with this same sacrifice. They reverence, however, both rivers and nymphs and some other spirits, and they sacrifice to all these also, and they make their divinations in connection with these sacrifices.<sup>4</sup>

This passage by Procopius used to be interpreted as a literary *topos*,<sup>5</sup> likely to promote the atrocities and the savage character of the Slavs. Despite the fact that Procopius' ethnographic account contains enough *common places* regarding the natural characteristics, the dress, the warfare etc. of the Early Slavs,<sup>6</sup> information on the Slavic religion and rituals are most likely the exception to the rule.

Along with the previous passage, we share the opinion which considers the events in Topeiros as a credible narration of Slavic ritual sacrifices.<sup>7</sup>

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3 Dewing, *History of the Wars*, VII, 38. 9-23, 22-27 (esp. 20-22, 26-27). Curta, *Slavs*, 84-85. Paul M. Barford, *The Early Slavs* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 58. Eugenio R. Luján, "Procopius, De bello Gothico III 38. 17-23: a description of ritual pagan Slavic slayings?", *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 11 (2008): 105-112, here 106-107. Sarantis, *Balkan Wars*, 279.

4 Dewing, *History of the Wars*, VII, 23-24, 270-271. Luján, "Description", 105-106. with further literature.

5 Barford, *Early Slavs*, 193, 209. Luján, "Description", 106.

6 See Georgios Kardaras, "A re-approach of Procopius' ethnographic account on the early Slavs," *Byzantina Symmeikta* 27 (2017): 239-257. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.10407>

7 Luján, "Description", 106-108.

In a detailed study of the topic, Eugenio Luján rightly approached the testimony as evidence for “ritual sacrifices performed by the Slavs to carry out the execution of their enemies”(i.e. the prisoners), using three different ways, namely the ritual of impalement on stakes with sharpened points, the binding of the feet and hands of the victims on four planks of wood followed by beating their heads (maybe their temples) with clubs or maces until they died and, finally, the burning of prisoners in huts together with cattle and sheep. Limited to the three practices of ritual killings, though citing parallels from other later sources, his conclusion lacks an adequate interpretation since he does not go further in the field of religious beliefs: “it would thus seem that the three ways in which the Slavenes used to kill their enemies, according to this passage from *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 quite a detailed account of the rituals observed by sixth century Slavenes for putting their enemies to death. It would thus be a very valuable source for our knowledge of Slavic pre-Christian religion.”<sup>8</sup>

At this point, we have to distinguish Procopius' credible testimonies from those of Pseudo-Caesarius. The latter, a Monophysite monk in the monastery of *Akoimiton*, was often considered in the past as providing the oldest testimony on the early Slavs and it was thought that his work was written in c. 540.<sup>9</sup> However, newer approaches discern traces of Procopius to the account of Pseudo-Caesarius and date it to c. 560.<sup>10</sup> His account makes reference to the extreme barbaric customs of the *Sclaveni*, from which we'll consider only the infanticide and the killing of rulers

... and how is occurring, those living on either side of the river, the Sclaveni and Fysonites, who are called Danoubians, the former to devour pleasantly female breasts when they are full of milk, and fly breastfed infants in stones

<sup>8</sup> Luján, “Description”, 105–112, esp. 109 for the execution's ritual.

<sup>9</sup> See Ivan Duichev, “Le témoignage du Pseudo-Césaire sur les Slaves,” in I. Duichev, *Medioevo Bizantinoslavo 1*, Saggi di Storia Politica e Culturale (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1965), 23-43, here 35-38, 42 (530-558). See also, Rudolf Riedinger, *Pseudo-Kaisarios. Überlieferungsgeschichte und Verfasserfrage* (München: Beck, 1969), 250-251, 254-255, 259-261, 305 (c. 550). Sergei A. Ivanov, “Pseudo-Kesarii,” in *Svod drevneishikh pis'mennykh izvestii o slavianakh*. ed. Leonid A. Gindin et al., vol. 1 (Moscow: RAN, 1991), 251-259, here 251. Georgios Kardaras, “Pseudo-Caesarius on the early Slavs? A reconsideration from the cultural point of view,” in *Multikulturalis'm i Mnogoezitsie. The Thirteenth International Slavic Studies Conference, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, April 21–23<sup>rd</sup> 2016*, vol. 2 (Antropologija. Literaturoznanie), eds. Dobromir Grigorov et al. (Veliko Tarnovo: Faber 2017), 89-97, here 89. On the views of older scholars for the reliability of Pseudo-Caesarius, see Duichev, o.p., 39, n. 1-2, Kardaras, o.p., 89, n. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Curta, *Slavs*, 115. Luján, “Description”, 105. Kardaras, “Pseudo-Caesarius,” 89.

like rats, and the latter abstain even from lawful and permissible meat eating? Why the former are wild, autonomous and not dominated by someone and constantly kill the ruler and lord when they eat together or when they follow him? Why they eat foxes, wildcats and boars and call each other by imitating the howl of the wolves, while the latter abstain from any kind of voracity and obey and subjected to the first man they meet?"

As far as the testimony on infanticide is concerned, Ivan Duichev noted its correlation with Psalm 137.9 (*Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks*) as well as the use of that motif in Byzantine sources.<sup>12</sup> Special interest in Pseudo-Caesarius' testimony has the Syriac ecclesiastical tradition (the so-called Apocalyptic literature), inspired by Hunic invasions of the late fourth century, where the lost primary material is preserved mostly in the *Alexander legend* (c. 629/30) and the *Apokalypsis* of Pseudo-Methodius (c. 692).<sup>13</sup> Regarding the *Alexander Legend*, the killing of embryos is presented as a ritual practice<sup>14</sup> while in Pseudo-Methodius' account a narration model that Pseudo-Caesarius followed in his extract is apparent.<sup>15</sup> A plausible interpretation for the interrelation of the Syriac ecclesiastical tradition with Pseudo-Caesarius is offered by S. Bednarowicz, who argues that the Syriac authors followed the Judeo-Christian division of the land among Noah's sons: "the Slavs descended

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11 J.P. Migne, ed., Caesarius, *Dialogues Four* [P.G. 38] (Paris: Garnier, 1862), II, 110, 985. Duichev, "Témoignage," 29-30. Curta, *Slavs*, 325-326. Kardaras, "Pseudo-Caesarius," 89-90.

12 Ivan Duichev, "Legendata za deteubijstvoto u drevnite Slavjani," *Zbornik filozofskog fakulteta u Beogradu* 8/1 (1964). Spomenica Mihaila Dinića I: 125-130. Ivanov, "Pseudo-Kesarii," 257. Kardaras, "Pseudo-Caesarius," 93.

13 Wolfram Brandes, "Gog, Magog und die Hunnen: Anmerkungen zur eschatologischen 'Ethnographie' der Völkerwanderungszeit," in *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1100*, eds. Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner and Richard E. Payne (Farnham, UK – Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 477-498, here 483-491, who considers the testimonies as part of the magical practices of the Huns. Kardaras, "Pseudo-Caesarius," 93. On the Syrian/monophysitic and Greek influences to Pseudo-Caesarius, see also Riedinger, *Pseudo-Kaisarios*, 258-259, 283-300.

14 Ernest A. W. Budge, trans., *The History of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1889), 144-158 (A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander), here 151. Brandes, "Anmerkungen," 487-488. Kardaras, "Pseudo-Caesarius," 93.

15 Benjamin Garstad, ed.-trans., *Apokalypse Pseudo-Methodius. An Alexandrian World Chronicle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), I, 3, 20, 63: "For the nations coming from the North eat the flesh of men and drink the blood of beasts like water and eat unclean things: snakes and scorpions and all abominable and disgusting beasts and the reptiles that creep upon the earth and brutal things and dead bodies and the aborted fetuses of women. And they will slaughter infants, even producing them from their wombs, and they will boil the meat and eat it. And they will corrupt the earth and defile it and deface it, and there will be no one able to stand before them". Brandes, "Anmerkungen," 489-491. Kardaras, "Pseudo-Caesarius," 93.

from the Japhetic branch of peoples. Their abodes were located in the north-eastern parts of the ancient oikoumene in the neighborhood of the Iranian Sarmatians and Turkic Bulgarians.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the preference made by Pseudo-Caesarius to the killing of rulers dates back to Herodotus and in particular to the Scythian custom (known also from other nomadic peoples) of killing their ruler, as in the case of the much travelled Anacharsis or Skylis, who was leaning towards Greek customs.<sup>17</sup>

Disputing the reliability of Pseudo-Caesarius, I. Duichev argued that he used for the Slavs the testimonies of Bardesanes (154-222 AD) for Indians and Persians, i.e. the cannibalism of the former, as well as “nothing more than a variant of the ancient myths about the Getae, the Thracians and the Dacians.”<sup>18</sup> Following that view, we believe that Pseudo-Caesarius’ fragment, full of *common places*, has no value for the study of the early Slavic customs. Similarly, we have to exclude from our topic the fourth *Homily* by Patriarch Photius on the Rus’ attack on Constantinople in 860, where we read

one could see babes torn away by them from breast and milk and life itself, and finding an improvised 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.

As E. Luján points out, “while Photius is just following some literary clichés in his description, Procopius seems to be providing some more accurate information about the ways in which the Slavs killed their enemies.”<sup>19</sup> Those *literary clichés* are obviously related to Pseudo-Caesarius’ account. Also, we consider as a mixture of information from Herodotus and Pseudo-

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16 Sebastian Bednarowicz, “Syriaco-Slavica. What did the Syriac medieval writers know about the Slavs.” *Orientalia Christiana Cracoviensia* 2 (2010): 29-44, here 40-41. Kardaras, “Pseudo-Caesarius,” 93.

17 Alfred D. Godley, trans., Herodotus, *Histories* [LCL, vol. II] (London: William Heinemann – Cambridge: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928), IV, 76-80, 274-283. See also, Reinhold Bichler, “Herodotus’ Ethnography. Examples and Principles,” in *The World of Herodotus. Proceedings of an International Conference held at the Foundation Anastasios G. Leventis, Nicosia, September 18-21, 2003*, eds. Vassos Karageorghis and Ioannis Taifacos (Nicosia: Foundation Anastasios G. Leventis, 2004), 91-112, here 104. See also, Kardaras, “Pseudo-Caesarius,” 92.

18 Duichev, “Témoignage,” 31-33, 40, where the relevant fragments. Ivanov, “Pseudo-Kesarii,” 252. Kardaras, “Pseudo-Caesarius,” 93-94.

19 Cyril Mango, trans., *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), IV. 2, 98-99. Luján, “Description,” 107-108.



Caesarius the testimony of Leo the Deacon about ritual human sacrifice of the Rus' during prince Sviatoslav's campaign in Bulgaria (969–971)

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. And they made sacrificial offerings by drowning suckling infants and chickens in the Istros, plunging them into the rushing waters of the river. For they are said to be addicted to Hellenic mysteries...<sup>20</sup>

The sacrifices for deities or spirits were part of the rituals concerning the religion of the Slavs, labelled as *animistic* (worship of the natural powers) whose main feature was polytheism and the dualistic nature of the Slavic pagan religion. On the one hand, on the top stands Perun, the God of lighting (or thunder), and along with him other deities identified mostly with nature, such as Svarog (Sky), Jarovit and Rigevit (War), Vesna (Spring), Ziva (Health) etc. However, the Slavs did not have a kind of “pantheon”, equivalent to the Greek one.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, in the second group, some Slavic deities associated with death are known, namely Veles (on the top), Nija, Morana/Mara, Chernobog, Karachun, Triglav and Chernoglav, and the sacrifices to them had likely to do with the so-called *dualistic fertility rites*, involving death and the regeneration of nature.<sup>22</sup>

A question that could be posed regarding the manner of the aforementioned execution is its relation to the chthonic deities, even

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20 Alice-Mary Talbot and Denis F. Sullivan, trans., *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2005), IX. 6, 193-94. Luján, “Description,” 108.

21 Luján, “Description,” 106. Wenska, “Sacrifices,” 283. Barford, *Early Slavs*, 193-196, 198. Kardaras, “Ethnographic account,” 253-254. For the Slavic wooden/bone idols, see Torsten Capelle, “Zur Bedeutung slawischer Menschenförmiger Holzfiguren,” *Folia Praehistorica Poznaniensia* 9 (1999), 219-229. Kamil Kajkowski, Paweł Szczepanik, “The multi-faced so-called miniature idols from the Baltic Sea area,” *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 16 (2013): 55-86. Naďa Profantová, “New archaeological evidences of traces of pagan rituals in Bohemia,” in *Slovani, naša dedičina/Our Heritage: The Slavs*, eds. Judita Lux, Benjamin Štular and Katharina Zanier [Vestník 27], Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of Slovenia: Ljubljana 2018, 108-122, here 109-110.

22 Luka Trkanjec, “Chthonic aspects of the Pomeranian deity Triglav and other tricephalic characters in Slavic mythology,” *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 16 (2013): 9-25. Stamatis Zochios, “Slavic deities of death. Looking for a needle in the haystack, in *New Researches on the religion and mythology of the Pagan Slavs*, ed. Patrice Lajoie (Lingva: Lisieux 2019), 69-98. For Veles see also, Barford, *Early Slavs*, 195. Wenska, “Sacrifices,” 283 (a deity linked with the earth, dead ancestors and the powers of fertility and life). Milorad Ivanković, “New Insights on Slavic god *Volos̆/Veles̆* from a Vedic Perspective,” *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 22 (2019): 55-81. DOI: 10.3987/SMS20192203

more to a concrete one. Furthermore, the Slavs worshiped various spirits and nymphs (female supernatural beings), among them the Rusalki, the Beregini, etc.<sup>23</sup> The dualistic nature of the Slavic pagan religion was also reflected in the epochs or parts of the day. As I. Wenska points out, “day and, analogically, summer were devoted to agrarian activities, and they were regarded as the celebration of life and fertility. Night and winter were the time of rest for people, but also the time of activity for demons and the Devil. Spring and autumn (morning and evening) were mediatory and they were also a good time for divination.” ... “Noon and midnight are the moments, and probably also directions, places of opening of the border between the world of the living and the world of the dead”.<sup>24</sup> To this concept, linked to the Slavic mythology and perceptions, was also adapted the meaning of human sacrifices. Emphasizing that parameter, K. Kajkowski notes that “... the religious ceremonies were directed equally to the uranic powers, but also to those of the underworld. The basic principle of the world’s existence was the balance between the powers of Cosmos and Chaos, which had to be maintained through religious acts. It is therefore quite likely, that the head was sacrificed to the main uranic deity, while other body parts were either buried in the ground or drowned. The latter practices may have been a form of sacrifice to the chthonic deities or supernatural beings.”<sup>25</sup>

The sacrifices of the pagan Slavic communities to both groups of deities and spirits are attested in many sources during the Middle Ages.<sup>26</sup> The places devoted to sacral practices for particular purposes (divinatory, thankful, etc.) were either some constructions (e.g. a temple with wooden statues of Slavic deities, a house) or some “holy” places (a sacred grove, a

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23 Barford, *Early Slavs*, 189-193. Luján, “Description”, 106. Jiří Dynda, “Rusalki: Anthropology of time, death, and sexuality in Slavic folklore,” *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 20 (2017): 83-109.

24 Wenska, “Sacrifices,” 276, 286.

25 Kamil Kajkowski (Bytów), “The Symbolism and Ritual Significance of the Human Head among the Pomeranians in the Early Middle Ages,” in *Motywy głowy w dawnych kulturach w perspektywie porównawczej/The Head Motif in Past Societies in a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Leszek Gardela and Kamil Kajkowski, Bytów: Muzeum Zachodniokaszubskie w Bytowie, 2013, 156-193, here 180-81.

26 See e.g., Stanislaw Sielicki (Corrector N. Christie), trans., *Saxo Grammaticus on Slavic Pre-Christian Religion. The Relevant Fragments from Book XIV of Gesta Danorum*, (no place of issue: CreateSpace, Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 11: “[sacerdos] ... quo quoties capessendo vel emittendo opus habebat, toties ad ianuam procurrebat, ne videlicet dei praesentia mortalis spiritus contagio pollueretur. ([the priest] ....” Myroslava T. Znayenko, *Gods of the Ancient Slavs. Tatishchev and the Beginnings of Slavic Mythology* (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1980), 31-32. Barford, *Early Slavs*, 198-199. Wenska, “Sacrifices,” 274, 276, 280, 285-86. Zochios, “Slavic deities,” 70-71.



wood, a field, a lake, a river etc.).<sup>27</sup> For such places the sources mention a variety of sacrifices or offerings, mostly of animals,<sup>28</sup> survival of which we find in the sources, the folklore or popular beliefs of late Medieval and modern Slavic societies.<sup>29</sup> Limited to the framework of our topic, we will focus only on the cases of human sacrifices, which concern the pagan Slavs.

Considering Eastern Europe, George the Monk's Continuator records the attack of prince Igor in 941 on Constantinople, when the Rus' executed the captive priests by binding back their hands and piercing the middle of their heads with iron nails.<sup>30</sup> For the year 980, the *Russian Primary Chronicle* records the temple of prince Vladimir with a pantheon of pagan gods as well as human sacrifices made by pagan inhabitants of Kiev. The statues of the pagan deities were erected on a hill close to the city.<sup>31</sup> In Central Europe, Helmold of Bosau (12th century) records sacrifices of Christian people by the Polabi and the Obotriti, *because the god particularly liked their blood*. Furthermore, the Rugians practiced an annual human sacrifice in honor of god Sventovit.<sup>32</sup> The same chronicler

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27 Wenska, "Sacrifices," 272-74, 281-82, with notions on the symbolisms of such places. Kamil Kajkowski, Andrzej Kuczkowski, "Water in pre-Christian beliefs in Pomerania (northern Poland) of the early medieval period," *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 20 (2017): 15-32.

28 Znayenko, *Gods*, 15, 29-30. Luján, "Description", 109. Wenska, "Sacrifices," 272-274. For the relevant archaeological data, namely cult places and objects linked to sacrifices and offers (horse skulls, eggs, aurochs, cattle etc.), from the area of Poland, see ibidem, 279-287. For Cultic aids and amulets in Bohemia, see Profantová, "Bohemia," 112-113. Taking into account a testimony of Saxo Grammaticus (Sielicki, 12-13), the sacrificed cattle were consumed during the feast that followed: *His ita peractis, reliquum diei plenis luxuriae epulis exigentes, ipsas sacrificii dapes in usum convivii et gulae nutrimenta vertere, consecratas numini victimas intemperantiae suae servire cogentes*.

29 Znayenko, *Gods*, 14-20, 32-34. Barford, *Early Slavs*, 188-193, 199. Wenska, "Sacrifices," 274, 282-83, 287-291. Zochios, "Slavic deities," 72ff. \_

30 Ioannes Bekker, ed., Georgii Monachi, *Vitae recentiorum imperatorum (Theophanes continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus)* (Bonn: Weber, 1838), 51, 916: ὅσους δὲ τοῦ ἱερατικοῦ κλήρου συνελάμβανον, ὅπισθεν τὰς χεῖρας δεσμούντες ἤλους σιδηροῦς κατὰ μέσης τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῶν κατεπήγνυον·

31 S.H. Cross and O.P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, ed.-trans., *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian text* (Cambridge Mass.: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953), 93 (980) "Vladimir then began to reign alone in Kiev, and he set up idols on the hills outside the castle with the hall: one of Perun, made of wood with a head of silver and a mustache of gold, and others of Khors, Dazh'bog, Stribog, Simar'gl, and Mokosh'. The people sacrificed to them, calling them gods, and brought their sons and their daughters to sacrifice them to these devils. They desecrated the earth with their offerings, and the land of Rus' and this hill were defiled with blood." Znayenko, *Gods*, 14. Barford, *Early Slavs*, 196. Wenska, "Sacrifices," 272.

32 G.H. Pertz (ex schedis I.M. Lappenberg), ed., Helmoldi Presbyteri, *Chronica Slavorum* [MGH SS 21] (Hannover: Weidmann, 1869), I 52, 13-18, 52 (*De ritu Sclavorum*): Porro sollempnitates diis dicandas sacerdos iuxta sortium nutum denunciat, convenientique

also describes the martyrdom of bishop John in 1066 by the Obodriti in Rethra (Redariergau/Radogoszcz/Riedegost?), based on Adam of Bremen: “the bishop was finally beheaded in Rethra. His hands and feet were also cut off. The wounded and dismembered body was left on the road and the cut off head of the bishop was stuck on a spear and sacrificed to the main god of the Obodrites – Radigast (Radogost).”<sup>33</sup>

According to Thietmar of Merseburg (975-1018), the most important temple (a wooden one with priests called Zutibure or Holy Forest) used by the Liuzici/Lutizens, was located in Rethra, where sacrifices of animals (cattle) and people were taking place.<sup>34</sup> The same author records for the year 990 the beheading, likely a sacrifice to some pagan god(s), of a Polish military commander by the Liuzici.<sup>35</sup> In Polish Pomerania, the missionary activity of Otto from Bamberg ended with his decapitation and dismemberment in Szczecin, while a letter from St. Bruno of Querfurt

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virī et mulieres cum parvulis, mactantque diis suis hostias de bobus et ovibus, plerique etiam de hominibus cristianis, quorum sanguine deos suos oblectari iactant. Post cesam hostiam sacerdos de cruore libat, ut sit efficacior oraculis capescendis. Nam demonia sanguine facilius invitari, multorum opinio est. Consummatis iuxta morem sacrificiis, populus ad epulas et plausus convertitur. .... 22-27: Inter multiformia autem Sclavorum numina prepollet Zvantevith, deus terre Rugianorum, utpote efficacior in responsis. Cuius intuitu ceteros quasi semideos estimabant. Unde etiam in peculium honoris annuatim hominem cristicolam, quem sors acceptaverit, eidem litare consueverunt. Quin et de omnibus Sclavorum provinciis statutas sacrificiorum impensas illo transmittabant. Znayenko, *Gods*, 30-31. Luján, “Description”, 106, n. 7. Wenska, “Sacrifices,” 272-73. Stanislaw Rosik, *The Slavic Religion in the Light of 9th- and 12th-Century German Chronicles (Thietmar, Adam of Bremen, Helmold of Bosau). Studies on the Christian Interpretation of Pre-Christian Cults and Beliefs in the Middle Ages* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2020), 273-76, 306-323.

33 Pertz (ex schedis I.M. Lappenberg), *Chronica Sclavorum*, I, 23, 28. See also, Bernhard Schmeidler, ed., Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificu/Adam von Bremen/Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte* [MGH SS rer. Germ. 2], Hanover-Leipzig: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1917, III, 51, 193-194: Iohannes episcopus senex cum ceteris christianis in Magnopoli civitate captus servabatur ad triumphum. Ille igitur pro confessione Christi fustibus caesus, deinde per singulas civitates Sclavorum ductus ad ludibrium, cum a Christi nomine flecti non posset, truncatis manibus ac pedibus, in platea corpus eius proiectum est, caput vero eius desectum, quod pagani conto praefigentes in titulum victoriae, deo suo Redigast immolarunt. Haec in metropoli Sclavorum Rethre gesta sunt 4. idus Novembris. Kajkowski, “Human Head,” 174-75, where more examples of decapitation by the Obodrites. Rosik, *Slavic Religion*, 223-24, 244-45, 262-66, 294-99.

34 Werner Trillmich, ed.-trans., Thietmari Merseburgensis Episcopi, *Chronicon/Thietmar von Merseburg, Chronik* (WBG: Darmstadt 2011), VI, 23-25, 266-269, here 25, 28-32: Hanc ad bellum properantes salutant, illam prospere redeuntes muneribus debitis honorant, et, quae placabilis hostia diis offerri a ministris debeat, per sortes ac per equum, sicut prefatus sum, diligenter inquiritur. Hominum se sanguine pecudum ineffabilis horum furor mitigatur. Znayenko, *Gods*, 29. Luján, “Description”, 106. Barford, *Early Slavs*, 199. Wenska, “Sacrifices,” 272-273. Rosik, *Slavic Religion*, 145-148.

35 Trillmich, *Chronicon* IV, 13, 128-129. Kajkowski, “Human Head,” 173. Rosik, *Slavic Religion*, 91-93.

to Henry II in 1008 informs us about the alliance of the Emperor with the pagan tribe of Veleti, as well as that “the Slavs sacrificed Christians and decapitated them.”<sup>36</sup> Also, in the year 1108 the Archbishop Adalgot of Magdeburg mentions the beheading of Christians in front of Slavic profane altars as a sacrifice to the god Pripegala and the drinking of human blood.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, archeological finds from sacral places complete the information we have on the human sacrifices carried out by the Slavs and among them there are some cases that recall the practices mentioned by Procopius. In a cult place found in Płock the skull of a twelve-year-old girl and the head of a stone mace came to light,<sup>38</sup> while in central Bohemia (Klecany II), the grave of a male with trepanation of the skull (mid-10th century).<sup>39</sup> In Pomerania (a cult-site on the hill Srebrne Wzgórze in Wolin), lies a pit related to human sacrifices with the remnants of vessels and three skulls (man, woman and a child) with the latter two severely deformed.<sup>40</sup> Very important are the remarks made by K. Kajkowski concerning some finds of human skulls in Polabia (cult places of Arkona and Ralswiek), where the scholar distinguishes either “traces of wounds by a sharp instrument, i.e. sacrificed victims” or “some ‘surgical’ practices conducted on the human skulls”, as well as his general conclusion that “before being decapitated the victims were beaten” and often, after their death, dismembered.<sup>41</sup>

Regarding the so-called “foundation sacrifices”,<sup>42</sup> there are also finds concerning human sacrifices, e.g. in Bohemia an infant’s grave under the wooden structure of the St. Wenceslas rotunda in Prague – Malá Strana (9th century), a child’s skeleton in the destroyed layers of the suburb of Drahůš in the hill fort’s wall (first half of the 10th century) as well as a skull and long bones embedded into the fortification stone wall at the St. George hill fort in Kouřim (second half of the 10th/first half of the 11th century).<sup>43</sup> Similar samples of foundation sacrifices are recorded for

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36 See Barford, *Early Slavs*, 199. Kajkowski, “Human Head,” 171-173. Rosik, *Slavic Religion*, 244-46.

37 Epistola pro auxilio adversus paganos (slavos), ed. J.P. Migne, PL 157, col. 483-486., Kajkowski, “Human Head,” 173-74. Rosik, *Slavic Religion*, 245.

38 Wenska, “Sacrifices,” 280, 282.

39 Profantová, “Bohemia,” . 111.

40 Kajkowski, “Human Head,” 169-70.

41 Kajkowski, “Human Head,” 170-71, 181.

42 Profantová, “Bohemia,” 111-12.

43 Profantová, “Bohemia,” 110, 112.

Eastern Germany.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, a widespread phenomenon among the Western Slavs were the burials of human skulls or headless bodies (decapitation), which, though they had a religious-magical character, it is not clear if they were linked to sacrifices.<sup>45</sup> As far as the instruments related to human sacrifices are concerned, one possibility is some iron knives decorated with spirals on the upper part of the handle, found in some Slavic settlements north of the Lower Danube.<sup>46</sup> Even clearer seems to be a case of a young woman's grave (20–30 years old) in central Bohemia (Klecany II, c. 940–980). As N. Profandová notes, “the woman was buried with two special, probably surgical, iron knives, decorated with a special wavy line welded onto the steel lower cutting edge and they were pinned and wrapped in two cloths. This was found in the right hand in addition to a single child's tooth near the hand and a luxurious silver container for magic aids.”<sup>47</sup>

Going back to the early Slavs, both the sources and the finds allow us to note another aspect, that of the voluntary sacrifices. According to *Strategikon of Maurice*, many women used to commit suicide after the death of their husbands:

Their women are more sensitive than any others in the world. When, for example, their husband dies, many look upon it as their own death and freely smother themselves, not wanting to continue their lives as widows.<sup>48</sup>

Once more, for Maurice's testimony an interpretation of a *common place*, based on a local and geographical limited Thracian custom is proposed, while, taking also into account certain medieval chronicles, the motif “about the unusual strength of faithfulness and love in marriage”. is

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44 Volker Schmidt, Tierische und menschliche Bauopfer bei den Nordwestslawen. *Studia mythologica slavica* 4 (2001), 25–34. Kajkowski, “Human Head,” 170–71.

45 Kajkowski, “Human Head,” 158–70, 177–81, where various interpretations, among them the mythological tradition.

46 Dan Gh. Teodor, “Éléments slaves des VIe–VIIIe siècles ap. J.C. au nord du Bas Danube,” in *Trudy VI: Trudy VI Mezhdunarodnogo Kongressa Slavijskoj Arkeologii, Novgorod. 26–31 Avgysta 1996/Works of the Vith International Congress of Slavic Archaeology, Novgorod. 26–31 August 1996*, vol. 3, επιμ. V.V. Sedov (Moscow: RAN 1999) 298–307, here 304–305. Kardaras, “Ethnographic account”, 254.

47 Profantová, “Bohemia,” . 111.

48 Georg T. Dennis and Ernst Gamillscheg, ed.-trans., *Das Strategikon des Maurikios* (Wien: Verlag der ÖAW, 1981), XI, 4. 18–22, 372. Cf. George T. Dennis, trans., *Maurice's Strategikon. Handbook of Military Strategy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 120. Barford, *Slavs*, 207.

promoted.<sup>49</sup> However, regarding Herodotus' account, there is mention to a choice for ritual execution, presented as suicide, because of polygamy. Maurice's testimony concerns a voluntary sacrifice and we are probably dealing again with sacrifices to death deities. A possible effect of that sort of sacrifice on the burial customs is the double cremations in one urn. Such a case, for example, was discovered in the small Prague type cemetery of Prützke in eastern Germany (state of Brandenburg periphery of Potsdam–Mittelmark), dating back most likely to the early 7th century, where in grave no. 2 an urn came to light containing the cremated remains of a couple.<sup>50</sup> Such a case is also likely in the cremation urns from Dessau-Mosigkau (Grab 24) in Sachsen-Anhalt, as four of them contain the cremated remains of more than that number of deceased.<sup>51</sup>

To summarize, regarding our testimonies about the religious practices of the early Slavs, and having first disputed the view of E. Luján concerning no equivalent practices with those mentioned by Procopius for the execution of war prisoners<sup>52</sup> as well as the view of K. Kajkowski that the human sacrifices were very exceptional and only carried out in extreme situations,<sup>53</sup> we may consider as credible both the testimonies of Procopius about human sacrifices and the practices the Slavs used for the execution of the Topeiros' citizens/war prisoners. Avoiding to reproduce *common places* about the rituals of the Slavs, as Pseudo-Caesarius and, later, other Byzantine authors, Procopius' account makes it clear that some of the sacrifices (*all other victims*) to the supreme God, as well as to

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49 Alfred D. Godley, trans., Herodotus, *Histories* [LCL III] (London: William Heinemann LTD; Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), V, 5, 4-7: "Those who dwell above the Crestonaeans have a custom of their own: Each man having many wives, at his death there is great rivalry among his wives, and eager contention on their friends' part, to prove which wife was best loved by her husband; and she to whom the honor is adjudged is praised by men and women, and then slain over the tomb by her nearest of kin, and after the slaying she is buried with the husband. The rest of the wives take this sorely to heart, deeming themselves deeply dishonored." Rosik, *Slavic Religion*, 176-182.

50 Hansjürgen Brachmann, "Die Funde der Gruppe der Prager Typs in der DDR und ihre Stellung im Rahmen der frühslawischen Besiedlung dieses Gebietes," *Slavia Antiqua* 29 (1983): 23-64, here 51-52. Marek Dulnicz, *Frühe Slawen im Gebiet zwischen unterer Weichsel und Elbe. Eine archäologische Studie* (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 2006), 91, 267-269 (in Prützke), 346-347, who notes the possibility of a violent death for the man by an unidentified object found nearby (269, "... die Überreste eines Mannes, der wahrscheinlich eines gewaltsamen Todes gestorben war (ein nicht identifizierter, in einem Wirbel steckender Gegenstand soll die Ursache seines Todes gewesen sein" ...).

51 Brachmann, DDR, 29, where is mentioned in total two urns with mixed remnants of men and women among the early Slavic graves in former DDR.

52 Luján, "Description", 109: "We do not have exact parallels of any of these practices in other texts dealing with pagan Slavic religion".

53 Kajkowski, "Human Head," 181.

other deities, included also human beings. The background of the human sacrifices, reflection of religious beliefs, should be sought to the Slavic mythology and perceptions for both the uranic powers and those of the underworld. The mass and ritual execution of war prisoners interprets in a logical way the desire of the Slavs, based on a promise (“if they escape [death], they will straightway make a sacrifice to the god in return for their life”), to reward the salvation of their lives by offering the lives of prisoners, likely to the chthonic Gods. Furthermore, information from other medieval sources and archaeological finds testifies that the early Slavs performed human sacrifices using concrete rituals and instruments for the humans’ execution, according to the customs of their ancestors. On the other hand, rare material from cremation urns coincides with the testimony of *Strategikon* about the voluntary sacrifice of the women after the death of their husbands.