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Introducing the Mythological Crescent

Ancient Beliefs and Imagery
connecting Eurasia with Anatolia

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Prelude – Archaeomythology as an interdisciplinary enterprise

(Harald Haarmann)

In recent years, ever more scholarly investigation has been carried out applying novel methodologies of an interdisciplinary range, crossing the boundaries of individual fields of study. Progress has been made especially in the contacts between sciences of the same orientation, the natural sciences in particular. The rise and growing importance of human genetics has had considerable impact on archaeological research as to produce a contact science: archaeogenetics which has become an indispensable tool for investigating early population movements. Similarly, archaeology has profited from the findings of biological investigation. Research on the origins and early spread of agriculture is a field where the benefits of archaeobotany as an interdisciplinary gravitation of science are well recognized.

More demanding is interdisciplinary research that involves collaboration between a diverse range of traditional fields. Before archaeogenetics and archaeobotany were established, another interdisciplinary methodology was introduced which combines disciplines from the natural sciences and the humanities. The scholar who conceived this novel approach is archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1921–1994) with her formulation of archaeomythology. Gimbutas realized the advantage of combining archaeology, mythology, linguistics, comparative religion, ethnology, and other disciplines in order to gain a broad foundation for an interpretation of the beliefs and social structures of prehistoric societies. In her view, it is essential to treat the sciences and the humanities as complementary and she demonstrated the benefits of archaeomythology as a contact science (see Gimbutas 1980, 1989, 1991).

Marija Gimbutas has attracted considerable appreciation for her work but also criticism. It is claimed that Gimbutas' conceptualizations are not grounded in a network of objective categories and that the belief systems and social structures of prehistoric societies cannot be reconstructed by interpretative methods. Archaeomythology is virtually ignored, and the study of the spiritual realm of culture has been neglected by her own discipline of archaeology.

In 1954 British Archaeologist Christopher Hawkes presented his four stepped “ladder of reliability in archaeological inference” in which he stated that the first two steps, concerning production techniques and subsistence economies, were “fairly easy” to determine, while socio-political institutions were “considerably harder” to understand. “To infer to the religious institutions and spiritual life is the hardest inference of all” (Hawkes 1954: 61 f.).

“Thus, Hawkes set up a hierarchy in which studies of past religious and spiritual practices are out of reach for anyone but the most experienced archaeologist. This notion – and implicitly the ladder – has become imbedded in archaeological thinking and practice” (Bertemes and Biehl 2001: 2 f.).

It is unfortunate that Gimbutas is no longer among the living and cannot participate in the debate about her ideas. Discussion about the methods of archaeomythology and about the involvement of the humanities in the investigation of ancient cultures now lies in the hands of those who have been inspired by her interdisciplinary methodology.

Mythopoetic experiences in prehistoric communities – A redefinition of mythology

A crucial constituent of archaeomythology is mythology which requires an investigation of how mythology is defined. In a modern observer's understanding, the notion of “myth” stands in opposition to the concept of reality. In contexts where beliefs or prejudices are confronted with facts, there is the well-known saying “the reality behind the myth,” with myth connotating everything that is not real.

This notion of myth has a long tradition in European cultural history, going back as far as the pre-classical period of ancient Greece (7th and 6th centuries BCE). Then, the Greek term *muthos* assumed the meaning ‘story, tale, narrative’, referring to the imagined world of mortal heroes and divinities. Most derivations of the basic expression *muthos* carry those connotations:

<i>muthologia</i>	‘a telling of mythic legends, legendary lore’
<i>muthologos</i>	‘a teller of legends, romancer’
<i>muthologikos</i>	‘versed in legendary lore’
<i>muthologeō</i>	‘to tell mythic tales or legends; to invent like a mythical tale; to frame an imaginary constitution’
<i>muthografia</i>	‘a writing of fables’
<i>muthografeō</i>	‘to write fabulous accounts’

Nevertheless, there is an older meaning of *muthos* that was common in the society of archaic Greece (8th century BCE) which was not associated with notions of the imaginary or of entertainment. In this older context, *muthos* was not opposed to *logos*, that is, reason and logical thinking. In the context of Homeric epic literature, *muthoi* (myths) were synonyms of holy ideas, *hieroi logoi* (Vernant 1988: 204). In archaic Greece, *muthos* referred to the cultural knowledge accumulated in society and handed down from one generation to the next. Therefore, what was considered true was concentrated into myth. The mythic experience of the world and its origins which crystallizes in orally transmitted knowledge, is as old as the emergence of human culture itself (Donald 1991: 201 ff.).

A great deal of orality in traditional cultures, ancient or recent, is associated with ceremonial life. Here, the verbal performance – an articulation of mythic memory

– is firmly intertwined with local cultural symbolism. Ceremonies and rituals may have various functions such as the Mystical (reflecting on the preconditions of one's existence), the Cosmological (constructing an imagined model of the universe) and the Sociological (validating the conventions of social conduct in the community), but they all relate to the verbal expression of mythopoetic experience and to imagery in similar ways (Doty 2000: 140 ff.).

There is something of a cognitive duality that characterizes the infrastructure of mythopoetic experiences in humans, and this is the following: “the emotional necessity of myth is constant; the forms of myth are not” (Chase 1969: 113). This statement does not contradict the observation of a similar relationship between the mythic experience and its modes of expression:

- A myth is always articulated in words although the narrative strategies may vary considerably from one culture to another;
- A myth is always articulated by visual means although these may be sculpting in one culture (e.g., figurines as agents in a ritual) and painting in another.

The oldest Greek myths find their origin in the oral tradition, and the most general meaning of *muthos* is ‘anything delivered by word of mouth, word, speech’. The original connection of myth to knowledge, reason and truth continued to be reflected during the classical age in various meanings of *muthos*: (a) ‘a speech in the public assembly’; (b) ‘talk, conversation’; (c) ‘counsel, advice, a command, order, also a promise’; (d) ‘the subject of speech, the thing or matter itself’; (e) ‘a resolve, purpose, design, plan’; (f) ‘a saying, saw, proverb’, etc. (Liddell and Scott 1991: 521).

It is important to note, however, that the written versions of the myths of the classical period which have come down to us are later adaptations of oral narratives transferred into the medium of written literature. It is appropriate to speak of the invention or creation of mythology when thinking of the tradition of fiction that was crafted as literary narrative.

The connotations which *muthos* had in archaic Greek society as a source for the transfer of traditional knowledge was revitalized in the tradition of philosophical thought during the time of Plato (c. 427 – c. 347 BCE) who restored the original meaning of *muthologia* as tradition, or as the useful knowledge handed down from the ancestors (Detienne 2003: 22 ff.).

Mythology, as a modern science, investigates the embedding of traditional knowledge transmitted within an ancient community. That is, an approach is made to reconstruct the belief system and the social structure of that community, and also the systems of communication as media of transmission of knowledge. Given these tasks for mythology as a constituent of archaeomythology, it is evident that the participation of various disciplines of the humanities in the overall endeavor is required. Archaeomythology, in fact, extends into such domains as folklore (in the study of popular traditions such as oral literature or ritual dances), anthropology, the history of religion, linguistics and semiotics.

Archaeomythology is dedicated to the investigation of ancient civilizations, and also to the study of cultural continuity, that is how ancient patterns of belief systems live on

in later periods. Therefore, a major goal of archaeomythology is to highlight how mythopoetic worldviews are anchored in a culture, ancient or modern.

“Our best chance of understanding the structure of mythical thought is to study cultures in which myth is a ”living thing”, constituting the very support of religious life – cultures in which myth, far from portraying fiction, expresses the supreme truth, since it speaks of realities” (Eliade 1992: 3).

Chances for the study of thus-defined living myths offer themselves in northern Eurasia where ancient traditions of a mythopoetic worldview have never vanished but live on in multiply transformed and actualized ways (see chapters 1 and 2).

The study of culture is not restricted to the investigation of its material basis, of artifacts. The study of culture is as much the investigation of its “mentifacts,” that is, of all the ideas, social patterns and cultural traditions which are valid and valued in a community and which are, as items of knowledge in cultural memory, transmitted from one generation to the next. In recent investigations, this dual nature of culture has been highlighted (Haarmann 2007a: 24 ff.).

The infrastructure of every culture, historical or recent, is comprised of two domains which vividly interact:

- the realm of artifacts, i.e. the domain of material culture whose items are open to observation and can be analyzed with the categorical conceptions of the natural sciences;
- the realm of mentifacts, i.e. the invisible realm of patterns of social conduct, systems of beliefs and values, of attitudes and knowledge-construction.

The visible domain of ancient civilizations is studied by applying archaeological methods, while mythology (as a cover for a variety of disciplines) provides the tools for the investigation of the mindset of the ancient community and its symbolism as manifested in the material culture.

In order to illustrate the effectiveness of an archaeomythological methodology, the interaction of its constitutive disciplines will be exemplified in several case studies (see chapters 2 and 3). These studies illustrate different grades in the complexity of interdisciplinary analysis. The symbiosis of archaeology and mythology may be illustrated within a specific context where certain mythical categories are identified as components of a belief system and where the significance of these categories can be put in perspective by archaeological finds that confirm their longevity.

A crucial problem for the assessment of cultural continuity, especially under the aspect of longevity, is the relationship between individual symbols in a contextual web and the possible change of meaning of single motifs in the horizon of time. The V sign, the spiral and the motif of the snake originated in the Palaeolithic repertory of signs and symbols. The meaning of these symbols may have undergone changes during the transition from the Palaeolithic to the Neolithic. Thus, when discussing the theme of continuity involving visual symbols we must consider two different dimensions: (a) the visual manifestation of motifs; and (b) the meanings of such visual motifs, which may be reconstructed or inferred from the interplay of symbols in context.