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## Dumézil, Ideology, and the Indo-Europeans

### Abstract

*The author suggests that Dumézil's most important contribution was his insistence on the ideological character of myth, while other aspects of his writings are more problematic. In particular, he questions whether Dumézil's affinity for Charles Maurras and the Action Française led him to constitute diverse data as an idealized »system of three functions.« Going beyond the question of Dumézil per se, and invoking the example of Procopius, Vandalic War 1.2.2-5, he treats the notion of an »Indo-European« people as a discursive construct that attempts to dissolve the diversity of historically attested evidence in an almost mythic narrative of unity and perfection in the most ancient past.*

### I

Georges Dumézil was a highly intelligent man, a meticulous and indefatigable researcher. He will always be associated with »the Indo-European ideology of the three functions.« The central, least specific piece of this fittingly tripartite formula strikes me as a major contribution, but the other two as misguided. Thus, let me begin by expressing my appreciation for Dumézil's stress on ideology, which led him to study myth not as a self-contained system of speculation (Lévi-Strauss) or revelation (Eliade), nor as the reflection of psychic (Jung) or natural processes (Max Müller), but in its relation to social concerns. His position has implications and value that transcend the sphere of Indo-European studies and have only begun to be appreciated.

As is well known, in the 1950s Dumézil modified the way he theorized the relation of mythic discourse to social structure, within which latter term I would include the actual (as opposed to the ideal) division of labor, the distribution of power, prestige, and material resources, and the pattern of stratification. Having initially understood myth as a reflection of current or prior social actualities, Dumézil came to reject that position, and replaced it with one that grants relative autonomy to the ideological, such that its import in no way depends upon its concrete instantiation.<sup>1</sup> This, however, is as unidirectional and unsatisfactory as its

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1 Dumézil's earlier position is evident, for example, in *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus. Essai sur la conception indo-européenne de la Société et sur les origines de Rome*, Paris 1941. His later stance is articulated most clearly in *L'idéologie tripartite des indo-européens*, Brussels 1958, having been announced already in *Rituels indo-européens à Rome*, Paris 1954, 7.

discarded predecessor. Far preferable is a dialectic model, in which mythic discourse appears first as a product (but not an unmediated reflection) of social relations, and second as a strategic intervention authored by persons whose social identities and interests inflect the details of their discourse. Such a model gives a sense of contingent and finite human agency, permitting us to see that society constructs people through the myths it tells to them, while people reconstruct society as they retell those myths.<sup>2</sup>

If one understands myth in this fashion, it follows that one ought give careful consideration to the social and political circumstances of the historic moment in which given texts and mythic variants were produced, and to the interests of their authors and the audiences those authors hoped to engage. This is to say that the interrogation of any text ought focus upon its immediate context before proceeding to the comparative inquiries through which a proto-text and proto-context might be reconstructed, a principle that has yielded valuable results, for example, in studies of Tacitus' *Germania* or Herodotus's account of the Scythians.<sup>3</sup> To take another convenient example, should one wish to study Livy's treatment of Romulus and Numa, before turning to Indic or Scandinavian data, it would make sense to consider how Livy regarded the two foundational rulers of his lifetime: Julius and Augustus Caesar, the first of whom labored to identify himself with Romulus, while the second (whose favor and patronage Livy desired) came to reject that identification, while cultivating a moral and pious image reminiscent of Numa.<sup>4</sup>

## II

These same principles of method apply also to scholarly discourses, which no less than myth constitute strategic interventions within a social and political field.<sup>5</sup> It is thus appropriate to ask what it is that interests particular scholars in particular topics. Why do they undertake particular studies at particular moments? Finally, of what do they wish to persuade their readers? Why, and with what consequences?

Along these lines, I would like to see a critical genealogy of Indo-European studies and the history of religions, starting with Sir William Jones and running through a host of diverse figures, including – but not limited to – Friedrich and August Schlegel, Franz Bopp, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Adalbert Kuhn, Émile

2 For a fuller discussion, see B. Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification*, New York 1989, esp. 3-50, 160-170.

3 See, for example, K. von See, »Der Germane als Barbar«, in: *Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik* 13, 1981, 42-72, A. A. Lund, *Zum Germanenbild der Römer. Eine Einführung in die antike Ethnographie*, Heidelberg 1990, or F. Hartog, *Le miroir d'Hérodote: Essai sur la représentation de l'autre*, Paris 1980 (English translation 1988).

4 Something similar has been attempted by T.P. Wiseman, with results that are interesting, but not entirely satisfactory: *Remus: A Roman Myth*, Cambridge 1995.

5 This is to say that both myth and scholarship have a political dimension, not that this is their *only* dimension. It is, however, a dimension that ought not be ignored, still less denied.

and Eugene Burnouf, Christian Bunsen, Friedrich Max Müller, Ernest Renan, Arthur Comte de Gobineau, Richard Wagner, Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Mannhardt, Leopold von Schroeder, Michel Bréal, Antoine Meillet, Henri Hubert, Matthias and Rudolf Much, Otto Höfler, Richard Reitzenstein, Hermann Güntert, Jacob Wilhelm Hauer, Hans Heinrich Schaeder, Herman Lommel, Franz Rolf Schröder, Walther Wüst, Franz Altheim, Wilhelm Schmidt, Wilhelm Koppers, Alois Closs, Jan de Vries, Henrik Nyberg, Stig Wikander, Geo Widengren, René Guéron, Julius Evola, and Mircea Eliade, as well as Dumézil.

Some important steps have already been taken, but much remains to be done.<sup>6</sup> With regard to Dumézil, however, the crucial facts have been established. It is now clear to anyone who has followed the last fifteen years of debate, that in the middle and late 1930s, when Dumézil introduced the »system of three functions,« he was closely associated with Charles Maurras and the Action Française, an admirer of Mussolini, and – in the words of his foremost defender – »profascist and anti-nazi.«<sup>7</sup> Some people think this irrelevant for his scholarship. Others, myself among them, think his beliefs, desires, and orientation colored his scholarly practice and writing.<sup>8</sup>

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- 6 L. Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, New York 1974; I. Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History*, Iowa City 1987; I. Strenski, *Religion in Relation: Method, Application and Moral Location*, Columbia 1993; M. Bernal, *Black Athena, Vol. I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, New Brunswick 1987; M. P. Bologna, *Ricerca etimologica e ricostruzione culturale. Alle origini della mitologia comparata*, Pisa 1988; M. Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, MA 1992; S. Pollock, »Deep Orientalism: Sanskrit and Power beyond the Raj«, in: P. van der Veer; C. Breckenridge (ed.), *Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament*, Philadelphia 1993, 76-133; D. Dubuisson, *Mythologies du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Lille 1993; K. von See, *Barbar, Germane, Arier. Die Suche nach der Identität der Deutschen*, Heidelberg 1994; S. Wasserstrom, »The Lives of Baron Evola«, in: *Alphabet City 4/5*, 1995, 84-89, and T. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, Berkeley 1997. The forthcoming dissertation of S. Arvidsson, *Ariska gudinnor och mån i extas. Den indoeuropeiska mytologin mellan modernitet och reaktion*, Lund University, Institute for the History of Religions, will also be a contribution of importance, and I will have more to say on the topic in my *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarships*, Chicago 1999.
- 7 D. Eribon, *Faut-il brûler Dumézil? Mythologie, science, et politique*, Paris 1992, 140. This conclusion follows from examination of the political columns G. Dumézil wrote in *Le Jour*, a short-lived publication of the Maurrassian right, under the name »Georges Marcenay«. D. Eribon, *Faut-il brûler Dumézil?...* them at pp. 119-144.
- 8 I have discussed my reasons for this view in *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice*, Chicago 1991, 231-268, and »Rewriting the German War-God: Georges Dumézil, Politics and Scholarship in the late 1930s«, in: *History of Religions* 37, 1998, 187-208. Others whose positions are similar include A. Momigliano, »Premesse per una discussione su Georges Dumézil«, in: *Opus* 2, 1983, 329-342 (English translation in G. W. Bowersock; T. J. Cornell [eds.], *A. D. Momigliano: Studies on Modern Scholarship*, Berkeley 1994, 286-301); A. Momigliano, »Georges Dumézil and the Trifunctional Approach to Roman Civilization«, in: *History and Theory* 23, 1984, 312-330; C. Ginzburg, »Mitologia Germanica e Nazismo: Su un vecchio libro di Georges Dumézil«, in: *Quaderni Storici* 19, 1984, 857-882 (English translation: *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, Baltimore 1989, 126-145), C. Grottanelli, *Ideologie miti massacrati: Indoeuropei di Georges Dumézil*, Palermo 1993, and P. Pinotti, »La »Repubblica« e Dumézil: gerarchia e sovranità«, in: M. Vegetti (ed.), *Platone, La Repubblica. Libro IV*, Pavia 1997, 257-288. Dumézil responded to Momigliano in *L'oubli de l'homme et l'honneur des dieux*, Paris 1985, 329-341, and to Ginzburg in »Science et politique«, in: *Annales Économies Sociétés Civilisations* 40, 1985, 985-989. D. Eribon, *Faut-il brûler Dumézil?...*, continues the case for the defense.

I do not charge Dumézil with intellectual dishonesty or blatant manipulation. Rather, I think he read widely in the vast literature of the disparate Indo-European languages, and that given his personal values, associations, and commitments, his attention was drawn to those passages that encode (and valorize) an ideal like that advocated by Charles Maurras: a stable and discriminatory social hierarchy dominated by royal, priestly, and warrior institutions. Taking such passages out of their original historic and cultural contexts, he constituted them as a set and explained their resemblance not by the interests that conditioned his own selectivity, but by claiming they preserved a common »Indo-European« heritage of the greatest antiquity. The process strikes me as dubious. To embed the ideals one espouses for the present within a narrative that speaks of primordial times is the very essence of mythic discourse.

### III

Beyond the problems specific to M. Dumézil's system of three functions, there are those characteristic of »Indo-European studies« in general. For these he bears no special responsibility, of course, but he, like others, is both victim and replicator of certain fallacies, particularly those of misplaced concreteness. Beginning with a situation where similar – but not identical – phenomena are distributed widely over space, the reconstructive endeavor constitutes that state of affairs as a problem to be resolved through an audacious temporal regression. The goal is to reach (i.e. posit) a single, primordial, originary point that lets one view the phenomena scattered in the present not just as similar, but as genetically related. Archeologists keep fighting over when and where to locate this magical point, not knowing it is a space of the imagination. One reaches it via a flight from the diversity of the present to the most ancient past, and the further one regresses the less there is to resist the projections of one's desire for perfect unity.<sup>9</sup> Shades of nostalgia for paradise (Figure next page).

Although this style of speculation is usually thought to have originated with Sir William Jones, that learned gentleman had any number of predecessors.<sup>10</sup> Among

9 At present, the prime candidates for the Proto-Indo-European homeland include southern Russia (Gimbutas), Anatolia (Renfrew), and the Caucasus (Gəmkrelidze-Ivanov), but some have recently made pleas for India (Talageri) and Armenia (Kavoukjian), while the north pole – the whitest, most nordic place on earth – continues to have its adherents (Haudry). Some of these choices seem more plausible than others, but all of them are motivated by factors beyond the concrete data marshalled by their advocates. Is it necessary to remember that more than ink was spilled by those who wanted to situate the *Urheimat* in north Germany and Scandinavia?

10 For discussions of Jones' antecedents, see G. Bonfante, »Ideas on the Kinship of the European Languages from 1200 to 1800«, in: *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale* 1, 1953/54, 679-699; G. Metcalf, »The Indo-european hypothesis in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries«, in: D. H. Hymes (ed.), *Studies in the History of Linguistics: Traditions and Paradigms*,

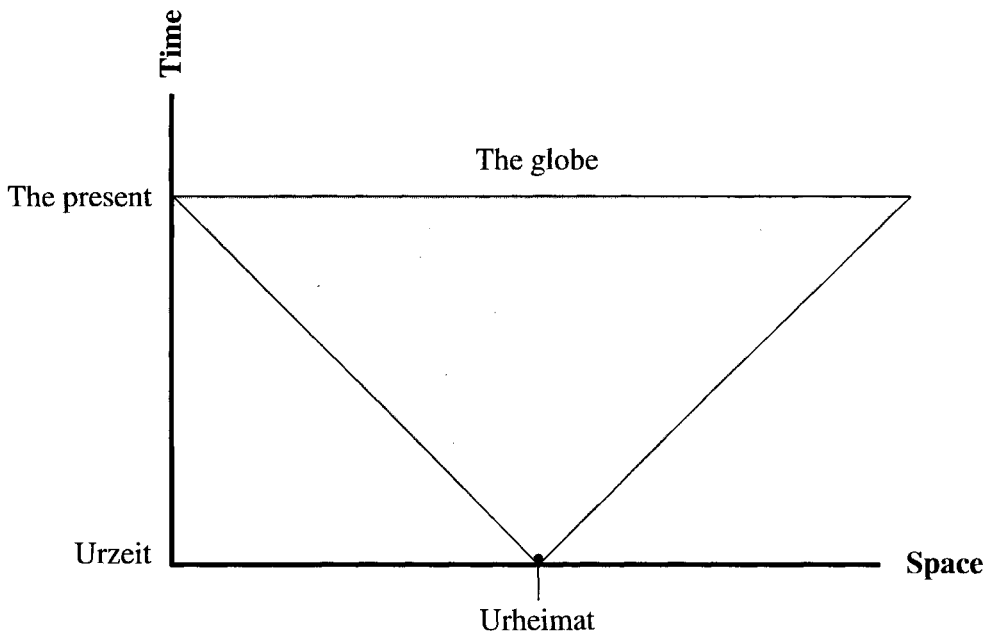


Figure: Imaginary reconstruction of the »Indo-European *Urheimat*«

the earliest I have found is Procopius, who wrote c. 551 C. E., a propos of certain barbarians at the frontiers of the Byzantine empire.

*»There were many Gothic and other nations in earlier times, as is the case now. The biggest and most noteworthy of all are the Goths, Vandals, Visigoths, and Gepaides. But in antiquity they were called Sauromatai and Melankhlainoi, and there are those who called these nations Getic. All these are differentiated from each other by their names, as has been said, but they differ in nothing else at all. For all their bodies are white, their hair is gold, their appearance is tall and noble, they practice the same customs, and likewise they honor god in the same fashion. For they are all of the Arian faith and they have one language, which is called Gothic. It seems to me that they were all originally from one nation, and later they came to be distinguished from each other by the names of those who were leading each group. This people dwelt above the river Ister.«<sup>11</sup>*

Bloomington 1974, 233-257, and J.-C. Muller, »Early Stages of language comparison from Sassetti to Sir William Jones (1786)«, in: *Kratylos* 31, 1986, 1-31.

- 11 Procopius, *Vandalic War* 1.2.2-5: Γοθικὰ ἔθνη πολλὰ μὲν καὶ ἄλλα πρότερόν τε ἦν καὶ τανὺν ἔστι, τὰ δὲ δὴ πάντων μέγιστά τε καὶ ἀξιολογώτατα Γόθοι τὲ εἰσι καὶ βανδίλοι καὶ Οὐσιγοῖθοι καὶ Γήπαιδες. πάλαι μὲντοι Σαυρομάται καὶ Μελάγγλαινοι ὠνομάζοντο· εἰσι δὲ οἱ καὶ Γετικὰ ἔθνη ταῦτ' ἐκάλου, οὗτοι ἅπαντες ὀνόμασι μὲν ἀλλήλων διαφέρουσιν, ὥσπερ εἴρηται, ἄλλω δὲ τῶν πάντων οὐδενὶ διαλλάσσουσι. λευκοὶ τε γὰρ ἅπαντες τὰ σώματά εἰσι καὶ τὰς κόμας ξανθοί, εὐμήκεις τε καὶ ἀγαθοὶ τὰς ὄψεις, καὶ νόμοις μὲν τοῖς αὐτοῖς

Procopius moves from his recognition of complexity, intermixture, motion, and violence in the present to an image of stability, simplicity, and unity in the unspecified past. First he connects Goths, Vandals, Visigoths, and Gepaides to Getes, Sauromatai and Melankhlainoi (the last two northern neighbors of the Scyths). Then he asserts that all these distinctions are recent developments, since all were originally members of a single tribe, race, or nation (*ex henos... einai hapantes to palaion ethnous*). Why? The answers are those that run through the history of Indo-European studies. They have the same language (*phônê te autois esti mia*); they have the same culture (*nomois men tois autois khrôntai*); they have the same religion (*es ton theon autois êskêtai*). Oh yes, they're also all tall (*eumêkeis*), blond (*komas xanthoi*), fair-skinned (*leukoi... sômata*) and noble in appearance (*agathoi tas opseis*), which shows they're of one (extremely good!) stock. Although historic accident led them to separate and adopt different names (*onomasi de hysteron tôn hekatois hêgêsamenôn diakekristhai*), it's obvious they originally all came from one place. Where was it? Well, why not the northern bank of the River Ister (i.e. the Danube), the traditional border separating northern from southern Europe.<sup>12</sup> Goths, Getes, Sarmatians, and the rest thus all blend into one *nordische barbarische Urvolk*.

From a distance, Procopius' reasoning strikes us as foolish. The single religion he posited for these groups – groups he saw from his perspective and aggregated on the basis of his interests – was the Arian heresy (*Areiou doxês eisin hapantes*) to which they converted in the 4th century, and not some deep ancestral heritage. Further, blond hair and the other somatic characteristics were not accurate indices of race, but an ancient stereotype attributed to northerners in general and theorized as the product of life in a cold-moist climate.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the languages of these people were related in a variety of ways. Some were close in morphology and lexicon (Gothic and Visigothic, e. g.); others quite distant (Sarmatian and Getic); and some are virtually unknown to us, as they were most probably to Procopius (those of the Gepaides and Melankhlainoi).

Procopius sought cognitive control over a mobile situation of bewildering diversity and he pursued this goal by positing («reconstructing») a single »Proto-Gothic« language, homeland, religion, culture, and people. One can understand why he did this, but one ought not repeat his error, which is one of grand conceptualization and not simple mishandling of evidence. Chastened by his example, let us admit that is possible to recognize similarities in the languages of Greeks, Indi-

χρῶνται, ὁμοίως δὲ τὰ ἐς τὸν θεὸν αὐτοῖς ἦσκηται. τῆς γὰρ ᾿Αρείου δόξης εἰσὶν ἅπαντες, φωνὴ τε αὐτοῖς ἐστὶ μία, Γοτθικὴ λεγομένη· καὶ μοι δοκοῦν ἐξ ἑνὸς μὲν εἶναι ἅπαντες τὸ παλαιὸν ἔθνος, ὀνόμασι δὲ ὕστερον τῶν ἐκάστοις ἡγησαμένων διακεκρίσθαι. οὗτος ὁ λεῶς ὑπὲρ ποταμὸν Ἴστρον ἐκ παλαιοῦ ᾤχουν.

12 Regarding the Ister, see Strabo 2.5.30. Procopius, *Vandalic War* 3.1.10 and *De Aedificationes* 4.5.9-10 and 4.6.11-14 makes this river the impassable border between the Byzantine empire and the northern barbarians. Authors regularly report a situation of ethnic mixture in the vicinity of the Ister. Thus, e.g. Strabo 7.1.1 and 7.3.13-15, Pliny, *Natural History* 4.79-81, Diodorus Siculus 4.56.7 and 5.25.4 Horace 4.15.12.

13 See, for instance, such texts as Tacitus, *Germania* 4, Livy 38.17.1-8, Diodorus Siculus 5.28.1, Herodotus 4.108, Xenophanes Fragment 16, and Vitruvius 6.1.3. I hope to write more on this topic in the near future.

ans, Germans, Tocharians, and the like without inventing a single »Proto-Indo-European« ancestor for all these languages, still less a unified *Urvolk* or specific *Urheimat* for all those who spoke them. Let us agree, rather, that variety is the universal condition of humanity, that similarities can be explained in many ways, and that primordial ancestors who resolve all problems and embody one's ideals are the characters of myth, not of science.<sup>14</sup>

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14 Others who have expressed related reservations about the »Indo-European hypothesis« include N. S. Trubetzkoy, »Gedanken über das Indogermanenproblem«, in: *Acta Linguistica* 1, 1939, 81-89; U. Drobín, »Indogermanische Religion und Kultur? Eine Analyse des Begriffes Indogermanisch«, in: *Temenos* 16, 1980, 26-38; B. Schlerath, »Ist ein Raum/Zeit Modell für eine rekonstruierte Sprache möglich?«, in: *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachwissenschaft* 95, 1981, 175-202; S. Zimmer, *Ursprache, Urvolk und Indogermanisierung: zur Methode der indogermanischen Altertumskunde*, Innsbruck 1990; J.-P. DeMoule, »Réalité des indo-européens: Les diverses apories du modèle arborescent«, in: *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 208, 1991, 169-202, and A. Häusler, »Archäologie und Ursprung der Indogermanen«, in: *Das Altertum* 38, 1992, 3-16.





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