

Re-Reading Dumézil's "Mythes et Dieux Des Germains" (1939)

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On the eve of World War II, as the German military machine was getting ready to smash all of western Europe, Georges Dumézil, then still in the elaboration phase of his tripartite system of Indo-European religion,¹ produced a valuable little book on Germanic religion of 157 small-8o. pages for the collection "Mythes et Religions" published by Ernest Leroux in Paris. This book has been a major target for the leftwing defamators of the gentle scholar before and after his death in 1986. It is very interesting to examine the despicable attacks of such authors as Bruce Lincoln, Arnaldo Momigliano, Carlo Ginzburg, Cristiano Grottanelli, and others.²

Apologizing in his preface for not being a Germanist and

¹It has often been assumed Dumézil was (un)consciously inspired by the fascist system of a leader, a militarized party elite, and the mass of the population ["Ein Führer, eine Partei, ein Volk!"], but as C. Scott Littleton showed in his *New Comparative Mythology (an anthropological assessment of the theories of Georges Dumézil)* [Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966], pp. 49-52, Georges Dumézil [henceforth GD] initiated his tripartite scheme after examining the Indo-Aryan situation ["La préhistoire indo-iranienne des castes" in *Journal Asiatique*, vol. 216 (1930), pp. 109-130)]. In the same *Journal* [vol. 221, pp. 117-134], the Jewish Professor of Indo-European linguistics confirmed his views in a paper entitled "Les classes sociales dans la tradition avestique."

²In the Preface to my *Indo-European Religion after Dumézil* (Monograph 16 to *The Journal of Indo-European Studies*, Washington D.C.: Institute for the Study of Man, 1996, pp. 9-10), some of these were already pointed out: Bruce Lincoln, whose excellent "Priests, Warriors and Cattle" (1981) showed a very strong Dumézilian impact as the author was still influenced by his Chicago master Mircea Eliade, later became one of the most virulent critics of GD, with his friend Cristiano Grottanelli whose *Ideologie, miti, massacri* (Palermo: Sellerio editore, 1993) is subtitled: *Indoeuropei di Georges Dumézil* and, is entirely devoted to tendentious criticism of GD, going back to his days in Turkey in the 20's, accusing him of sympathy with Atatürk's "ethnic cleansing" operations. Only Didier Eribon ("Faut-il brûler Dumézil?") tries to give a more objective picture of the issues.

for not having always determined what is strictly Scandinavian or what is definitely pan-Germanic, GD rightly shows respect for Jan de Vries' first edition of the *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (published in the thirties under Hitler). The fact that Jan de Vries averred himself pro-Nazi and was even involved in the Nazi administration of the Netherlands, does not in any way diminish the widely recognized quality of his scholarship. Anyhow, GD also used abundantly the then available sources on the *Edda* (B. Sijmons, H. Gering, F. Jónsson, F. Wagner, A. Olrik and others³). GD's manuscript was completed in 1938; in his Introduction, he indicates how Germanic culture fits into his Indo-European tripartite pattern and looks for influences that may have affected the Germanic world. The first chapter is devoted to the "sovereign gods," as he looks for IE features similar to those discussed in previous works (*Ouranos-Varuna* [1934], *Flamen-Brahman* [1935]), in the Germanic pantheon, examining essentially the main characteristics of Odin/Wotan. Particularly interesting is the chapter on the dangers affecting the sovereign and leading to his demise, as they are revealed in two passages in *Saxo Grammaticus*. The following chapter deals with "blood and sovereignty," but its main concern is sacrificial practice, legitimacy of descent, reincarnation of an ancestor, confirmed by onomastics and the like; there is not one trace of celebration of *racial* features in this context.

A following section is devoted to myths of warriors: in its initial chapter, GD peruses some of the material gathered by J. Grimm in connection with the conflict between age-groups, as it is illustrated by the frequent ill-treatment of the elderly. The following chapter studies the mythical *einherjar* [= the cohorts of dead champions under Odin's leadership] and the *berserker*, whom he compares with the *juvenes* of Romulus with their *celeritas* mystique, raiding herds of cattle and capturing the Sabine women. He stresses the frenzy of the members of early *Männerbünde*, which Bruce Lincoln himself underlined, in his 1981 book.⁴ GD concludes with the remark: "les considérations qui précèdent expliquent peut-être en partie certains phénomènes sociaux, parmi les plus récents, de l'Allemagne: le développement, le succès des corps paramilitaires, la *dura virtus* et les droits des Sections d'Assaut, les formes particulières de

³See John Lindow, *Scandinavian Mythology: an annotated bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988).

⁴*Op. cit.*, pp. 122-131.

police qu'a parfois été tentée d'exercer une jeunesse en uniforme.⁵" How some people endeavor to read a sympathy for Nazism from a mere statement of facts about what happened in Germany at that time, events everyone could read about in the press, simply boggles my mind!

Next comes an analysis of the first duel which GD describes as an initiatic test for young warriors, basing himself on the narrative of the saga of *Hrólf Kraki* and on Snorri's tale of *Hrúngnir* and comparing the Vedic episode with *Vytrahan* and the Tricephal. The final section covers the myths of vitality, surveying the drinking rituals and stressing the role of beer in libations; it also looks more closely at the masterbrewer *Ægir* and the banquet of the gods in the *Lokasenna*, as well as at the dealings of Thor with the giant *Hymir*. A further chapter discusses the deities of fertility, defining the respective roles of Thor and the *Vanir*; a final chapter inquires into the importance of wealth and treasures, of honoring gifts by leaders to their retinue, enhancing the power of gold, symbolized by *Gullveig*.

As a whole, the book is an original presentation of Germanic religion, reflecting the best data and research available at the time, and this explains the deep changes GD made in the book for its second edition twenty years later.⁶

In his conclusion, GD reminds the reader of the conspicuous shifts toward the military side in Germanic religion: Odin, though he actually never takes part in real combat until *Ragnarök*, often mixes in battles and favors certain heroes over others; he is described as the heavenly patron of a kind of 'Teutonic Order' that mobilizes the total population. Then comes the touchy part: maybe this already prehistoric 'militarization' has given Germanic myth and religion that special tinge that survived in the external forms of paganism and is recognizable in medieval Christian writings such as *Heliand*?

For the Frenchman Dumézil, coming from a military

⁵"The preceding considerations partly explain, maybe, some social phenomena, among the most recent ones, in Germany: the development, the success of organized paramilitary groups, the *duo virtus* and the rights of the Storm Troopers, the particular form of policing that a youth in uniform has sometimes been tempted to apply" (pp. 90-91).

⁶"Les dieux des Germains. Essai sur la formation de la religion scandinave." Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959.

family, this trend revives in the XIXth century, with Bismarck and the exaltation of the Germanic spirit, and he deplores the revival of neo-paganism under Hitler (whom he mentions only [p. 156] with reference to the ghost of Siegfried that may have haunted him in the trenches of World War I!). "Nous le [= this Germanic spirit] voyons, de nos yeux, reprendre possession des Germains continentaux, les disputer aux disciplines et habitudes chrétiennes, avec toute la frénésie d'une revanche."⁷ And he goes on to show how ultranationalistic states piously invoke a distant past and bring it back through rhetoric and artificial ancestor worship. For 150 years, he states, Germanic legends have been perverted and *remythicized* to justify certain types of individual and collective behavior. Romanticism has 'naturalized' the Scandinavian myths in the South, building up the image of a German *Wotan*, whose personality was glorified by Wagner. German soldiers in World War I were already animated by a Wagnerian mystique in triumph and sacrifice, and GD goes on: "Le troisième Reich n'a pas eu à créer des mythes fondamentaux: peut-être, au contraire, est-ce la mythologie germanique, ressuscitée au XIXe siècle, qui a donné sa forme, son esprit, ses institutions, à une Allemagne que des malheurs sans précédent rendaient merveilleusement malléable."⁸ Here again, GD objectively reports the prevailing ideas in Europe in 1938; if, perhaps, one can detect a touch of sympathy for Germany in the post-WW I period, the author's purpose is evidently to try to explain how Germanic mythology may have been partly responsible for the situation that developed in Germany. The already alluded-to ghost of Siegfried may have inspired Hitler when he elaborated his image of absolute control? In surmising this, GD merely reflects on the possible *rationale* of things as a historian of religion. He does not show any particular sympathy or admiration when he indicates that the German people and leadership have remolded their social actions and reactions by eliminating all extraneous elements, bringing in new structures, often unaware

⁷"We see it with our own eyes take hold of the continental Germans and oppose Christian disciplines and habits with all the frenzy of revenge" (p. 155).

⁸"The Third Reich did not have to create fundamental myths; on the contrary, Germanic mythology, revived in the XIXth century, may have given its shape, its spirit, its institutions to a Germany which unprecedented disasters (such as the economic collapse and runaway inflation under the Weimar Republic) had made wonderfully malleable" (p. 156).

of their conformity with the most ancient organizations and mythology of the Germanic people. For him, the contemporary German experience unconsciously reflects this link with the past, which it will be most interesting to study further. Finally, GD notes the clever use of mythology in a lecture Hans Neumann gave in Bonn in 1937 on the occasion of the Führer's birthday. Not once is there a word of approval of the German situation⁹: all we get is a scientist's neutral statement, description or personal interpretation of the facts. Never in the whole work does GD praise or support Nazi views: using this outstanding work as a tool to denigrate Dumézil or accuse him of pro-Fascist tendencies is pure defamation of a remarkable scientist's memory, and what is even worse, implies that "to describe is to subscribe," a message that would frighten any scientist aiming at objectivity.¹⁰

⁹My friend and colleague Dean Miller kindly draws my attention to a passage in D. Eribon's *Faut-il brûler Dumézil?* (p. 191), where GD is associated by L.-F. Céline with the Jews who allegedly run the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris and described as a "near-Jew." So much for his assumed anti-Semitic proclivities!

¹⁰Some critical commentators even go so far as looking at the books in GD's library to 'demonstrate' his pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic tendencies, as if any historian who has a copy of *Mein Kampf* were strongly in favor of Hitler!