

Rusudan Tsanava (Tbilisi)

## MYTH-MODEL OF THE SUBSTITUTE SACRIFICE AND THE CLASSICAL EPOS

The legends on the willful and voluntary sacrifice and the related rituals are widely known in the folklore of all ethnos and people.

The ritual of the willful sacrifice, as it is presented and disclosed in the Georgian-Caucasian material, is studied by ethnologist I. Surguladze. In his article: "The willful sacrifice in the Georgian myth and ritual, and its cultural-historical aspects"<sup>1</sup>, the researcher analyzed the information concerning the facts of bull sacrifice as regards to St. George – the material left by missionary Archangelo Lamberti (XVII c.), Chardin (XVII c.) and Vakhushti Bagrationi (the particular detail stressed the point that a sacrificed bull was taken to the sanctuary *not by force*). The said ritual existed till the middle of the XIX c. and was popular among the entire population of the western Georgia.

The idea of sacrificed animals that enter the sacrifice area and altar voluntarily, under no compulsion and not by force, are widely spread in the entire Caucasia. Apparently, these animals that approached a holy spot voluntarily are chosen for sacrificial and create the grounds for establishing a ritual rhythmically repeated in time.<sup>2</sup>

Such attitude towards a concept of sacrifice as regards to animals is not limited by the instances of animals or birds, and the way of the believers' thinking and mentality was the same in the cases of their willful self-sacrificial, or the cases when they sacrificed a piece or a part of their body, afflicted wounds to their bodies or sacrificed their first-born children.

I. Surguladze reviews the instances of voluntary self-sacrificial in Armenia, Russia and on the territory of Western Europe. A similar theme is studied

---

<sup>1</sup> Surguladze I. Myth, Cult and Ritual in Georgia, Tb. 2003: 154-174

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 157.

and reflected in the works of I. Tolstoy dedicated to the materials concerning the classical period of Greek history.<sup>3</sup> We can summarize this issue: the fact that the diverse ethnic cultures spread and dispersed on immense territories and space are characterized by the systematic similarity of rituals cannot be merely explained by simple borrowing or lending. In spite of the modifications, the invariant version that reflects the essence of a ritual is preserved in all instances. It is obvious that in the religious thinking of the society it represented a universal bond the origin of which can be traced back to the layers of ancient past. The archaic origin of the ritual is indisputable. It is created and developed in the immense cultural environment.

It must be acknowledged that the ritual of an unforced animal sacrifice represents a peculiar category of willful human sacrifice. This problem is analyzed by I. Surguladze in his article "The Substitute Concept in the Georgian Myths"<sup>4</sup>. The researcher points particular attention to the issue of a Georgian folk verse "Menatsvle" ("A substitute") that was interestingly interpreted by V. Kotetishvili who considers it to be a ritual song<sup>5</sup>. I. Surguladze follows this line of V. Kotetishvili's reasoning and writes that the researcher disclosed a custom of "natsvaloba", i.e. of substitution, that had existed in Georgia. According to that custom, by charms or magic, the mother or some kin or relative tried to substitute their own selves for the ailing baby – in order to save the beloved child; instead, they were ready to depart and occupy the child's place in the netherworld. The existence of this custom in the Georgian highlands is confirmed under the name of "tavshemovla" or "shemovleba" which signifies "making a round (or a circle)"<sup>6</sup>. The analysis of the said ritual prompts an idea to the researcher that it reflects an orderly system of beliefs existing in the ancient past; according to the Georgian term, that system can be called a "substitution institute". The said custom was widely spread in the ancient world, and it was founded on a wider mytho-religious concept of the netherworld – and also on the principles of communicating with that world. I. Surguladze provides parallels from mythology of Greeks, Sumerians and other ethnoses.

On the social plane the substitution element was effective in the context of the sacral kings. Special rituals were revived that were aimed at the restoration and soundness of the tribe-chiefs or kings; along with the said custom

---

<sup>3</sup> Толстой И. И. Чудо у жертвенника Ахилла на Белом острове. В сб. Статьи по фольклору. М.-Л. 1966 19-23.

<sup>4</sup> Surguladze I. The Substitute Concept in the Georgian Myth. In: Myth, Cult and Ritual in Georgia, Tb. 2003: 169-174.

<sup>5</sup> Kotetishvili V. Folk Poetry, Tb. 1966: 80, 361-362.

<sup>6</sup> See: Makalatia S. Khevsureti, Tb. 1935: 235. Mindadze N. Folk Medicine in Georgia, Tb. 1961: 71-73.

there also existed another one that introduced the sacrifice of a kin of the king – or in some cases, even the life of the king's son; yet, in the end, the said ritual was shifted to the sacrifice of a slave. It seems obvious that in the said environment, the decisive role was attributed to the idea of a willful sacrifice; at least, as regards to the issue of animal sacrifice – the idea is definitely confirmed in the mundane practice and conventional existence. So, there are grounds to spread this idea on the issue of human sacrifice as well."<sup>7</sup>

It is possible to provide a number of examples when the case of the "substitute sacrifice" can be traced in the materials on mytho-ritual vision and ideas in a variety of cultures and ethnoses.

I believe that the substitute sacrifice ritual is particularly interesting the way it is disclosed in the Hellenic epic. In view of the said matter I am providing now the analyses of several episodes; they include the stories of Elpenore ("Odyssey"), Butes (the "Argonautica"), Mysenus and Palinurus (the "Aeneid"), and in my opinion they epitomize the idea of a substitute sacrifice. In addition to this point I underline another issue of the fact that they remained unburied. I have also to point out this matter as well: the concept of unburied represents one of the ancient mytho-ritual models. Thus, it is obvious that these two archaic rituals – of unburied corpses and of a substitute sacrifice are closely related in the analyzed episodes.

### Elpenore

When Odysseus escaped from Circe and started preparations for departure together with his companions, young Elpenore (who was not particularly bright, and neither brave) was awakened by the noise from his sleep on the "flat roof of a holy house (ιεροῖς ἐν δώμασιν)<sup>8</sup> of Circe. Being awakened so suddenly after the night of heavy drinking (οἰνοβαρείων)<sup>9</sup>, the youth failed to

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 172.

<sup>8</sup> δῶμα, τό - according to one meaning, the term signifies a flat roof, a so-called bani. In the XI canto a "megaron" is used in the same context (Κίρκης δ' ἐν μεγάροφ καταλέγμενο, X, 62).

<sup>9</sup> Homer mentions the matter of being drunk in other episode of the "Odyssey": Odysseus makes Polyphemus drunk with the wine he, the descendant of King Laert, was given by Maron, the priest of Apollo. Homer dedicates 15 lines to the matter of this wine (IX, 197-212). So, in a sense, Apollo played some role in the death of Polyphemus. The god's hatred of the Cyclops has very deep roots. Apparently, the wine was viewed as a "punishing drink" and is related to the wrath of gods. It should also be noted that in the discussed episodes, the dead Elpenor comments on his fate in the following way: ἄ σε με δαίμονος οἶσα κακὴ καὶ ἀθέσφατος οἶνος which means "an evil demon and wine ruined me". When Elpenor, already in the kingdom of Hades, experiences the opening of the inner vision, he clearly defines that he was destroyed by Demon and Wine (wine as the means for the demon). As regards the matter of "inner vision", it is certainly present in the episode when Elpenor knows that Odysseus shall visit Aiaia when he is back in the world of living and the sun.

recollect that he had to descend a **long staircase** (ἄψορρόν καταβήναι ἰὼν ἐς κλίμακα μακρὴν)<sup>10</sup>, and instead of coming down he just made a step from the roof, **fell down** on the ground, broke his spinal chord<sup>11</sup> and died. Odysseus leaves Elpenore's body *without a due ritual of wake*, and heads for Hades, leaving the *unburied* and unattended corpse behind. The first soul that meets Odysseus in the netherworld is the soul of Elpenore. He tells Odysseus his story and pleads not to leave his body unburied; apart from that, Elpenore explains to Odysseus the way he prefers to be buried: to mound a grave mound on the seashore and drive an oar into the mound.

Immediately after his return to Aiaia from Hades, Odysseus sends his companions to Circe's house ordering them to bring Elpenore's body. This episode is followed by the scene of a burial ritual. It must be noted that Circe learns about Odysseus's return from Hades only after Elpenore is buried.

The story of Elpenore is uncovered in three cantos: X (551-561), XI (51-816) and XII (9-16) – 47 verse lines altogether. No doubt that Homer considered this information of particular importance, otherwise he would hardly describe it so extensively. Bravery is not characteristic of his nature, but he cannot be viewed as good for nothing either<sup>12</sup> – and these features do not present his image positively; the only detail that makes him different from all the others is his age: he is the youngest among all the other characters. There is also another detail worth consideration: the story of Elpenore is set in the most complex episodes of Odysseus's voyage, i.e. his descent into the netherworld.

### Butes

A story that is included in the narrative of the "Argonautica" of Apollonius of Rhodes describes the following:

The Argo ship on its way back from Colchis, passed an island of Sirens. The sirens represent creatures that are a mixture of semi-birds (οἰωνοῖσιν IV, 898) and semi-maidens (παρθενικῆς, IV, 899). They used to observe the area from a steep shore and when spotting a ship, they tried to attract sailors with their singing. A number of sailors fell a prey to their plot and ended their lives rotting and stagnated (τηκεδόνι φθινύθουσαι, IV, 902). They followed this scheme again, and on taking a glimpse of the Argo, began their singing; yet, Orpheus succeeded to cover the sound of their singing by his forminx. Never-

<sup>10</sup> This phrase is repeated unchanged in the XI canto.

<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the XI canto repeats the issue of the broken spinal chord.

<sup>12</sup> See the matter of Elpenore, as a creative image of the so-called "unnoticeable man", in R. Gordeziani, "Greek Literature (Epic, Lyrics and Drama of the Hellenic Epoch), Tb. 2002: 121.

theless, Butes, the son of Teleontes, jumped into the sea and swam to the island of Sirens. Yet, Aphrodite managed to save him: she pulled him out of the maelstrom and sent him to the island of Lilibeum where he settled and lived ever after. Apollonius of Rhodes does not provide some further details concerning successive episodes and adventures, but according to other sources, after settling the boy on the island, goddess Aphrodite made him her own spouse and even bore him a child, a boy she called Erix.<sup>13</sup>

This narrative is especially interesting because of a few details: sailors are attracted by the Sirens' song and fell a prey to their singing willingly and voluntarily. Apollonius of Rhodes notes that the Sirens used to damp and rot the bodies of their victims and prey – apparently because they devoured the decayed corpses. After saving Butes from the Sirens, and making him her spouse, the goddess certainly became the "possessor" of the youth; in fact, Aphrodite can be viewed as the person in charge of life-or-death of Butes.<sup>14</sup>

The story of Butes differs from the other three plots – the stories of Elpenore, Mizenus and Palinurus. The episodes concerning the fates of the latter are similar in the same point and on the same issue: all three of them died and pleaded for their burial. I underline the detail that in the Apollonius of Rhodes's version, the Argonauts believe that Butes died. The sailors are very upset but incapable of providing their lost friend any help, they continue their trip – and this is the way the writer describes the episode. Correspondingly, Butes is never again mentioned in the "Argonautica" – whether among the dead or the living characters. In my opinion, there is a strong resemblance with the myth of Iphigenia: goddess Artemis substituted a deer for the maiden the sacrifice ritual and set Iphigenia in Tauris and made her a priestess of her temple. This seems indisputable that we are dealing with the instance of changing one form of a sacrifice to another one.

In spite of the fact that the story of Butes does not represent a complete picture of a myth model (because the scene does not provide a death-scene or a death-episode), I consider the first part of the ritual very important; even for the fact that the said episode is preserved in a great work of epic. It is acknowledged that the mytho-ritual systems of Homer, Apollonius of Rhodes, and of Vergil, are founded on the same principles.

---

<sup>13</sup> Serv. Comment, Aen. I, 570; Apld. II, 5, 10; Diod. IV 32.2; Paus. III 16. 4; IV 36, 4; IV 36.4; Hyg. 260.

<sup>14</sup> The Greek mythology has another instance of Butes, the son of Boreas. Dionisus drove him mad because he dared to rape maenad Koronida. After loosing his wits and reason Butes jumped down into the well and drowned (Diod. V, 50).

### Mysenus

The well-known VI song of Aeneid uncovers the following story: Aeneas visits Sibyl, the priestess of the god Apollo to learn from her what she foresees and what awaits him in future. After learning what the fortune telling stated, Aeneas begs Sibyl to teach him the possible way to reach the domain of Hades and meet there his own father. Sibyl sets to him two conditions: one – to get a golden twig, and the other – to bury the body of a killed warrior whose unburied corpse depressed the sailors. Aeneas could approach Sibyl with his wish only after fulfilling these two preconditions. So, Aeneas is induced to return to his kin and clarify the matter.

The dead warrior proved to be Mizenus, a hero of Eolide, a famed *trumpeter*<sup>15</sup>. He used to summon the warriors by the sound of his brass horn that excited the soldiers to the fight.

"Sed tum, forte cava dum personat aequora concha,  
Demens, et cantu vocat in certamina divos,  
Aemulus exceptum Triton, si credere dignum est,  
Inter saxa virum spumosa immerserat unda." (VI, 171-174).

I want to pay attention to some particular details of this piece: 1. Mizenus blows not his usual brass *lituus* but *concha*, i.e. a conch; as it is known, a conch is the instrument favored by Triton. 2. Mizenus dared to challenge gods for competition and was duly punished for that – the way the mortals (Tamjrisi, Arakhne) had always been punished for their impertinence in fighting with deities. 3. According to the commentator,<sup>16</sup> the words "si credere dignum est" that appear on the 173<sup>rd</sup> line, clearly signify the shifting of narration to the myth plane. 4. Triton throws a "foolish" Mizenus from the cliffs into the roaring billows. The analyses of poetic images draws the following picture: the rocky sea shore is beaten and struck by waves that explode into a white foam. Standing on the edge of a cliff, Mizenus appeals to gods and challenges

<sup>15</sup> Vergil uses two terms to express the idea of a horn: *lituus* – is a horn with the bell turned upward, while *tuba* was a special horn used in the battle as a signal for soldiers. According to a commentator of Aeneid, there is a difference between *tuba* and *lituus* but Vergil uses both words as synonyms: in the VI canto (line167) Mizenus's instrument is mentioned as *lituus* but on the 233 line of the same part he uses *tuba* when describes the instrument that Aeneas stuck into the grave mound after burying Mizenus (*arma viro remumque tubamque*). Vergili Maronis Opera (with a commentary), Lond. 1888: 444.

Being an exceptional trumpeter, Mizenus first fought side by side with Hector, always carrying his lance and horn. After Hector's death Minezus became Aeneas's guide and companion. In the poem there is a scene where Minezus signals an attack to the Trojans standing on a hill slope (III. 239-240).

<sup>16</sup> P. Vergili Maronis Opera, p. 447: according to the commentator, the death of Mizenus a mythological story that took place in the "timeless time" – using M. Eliade's term.

them to compete with him. Enraged by the fact that Mizenus dared to challenge Triton to play "his own" instrument – concha on his own "ocean-grounds", the god hurls him down from the cliff and kills him.

Mizenus's death deeply affects all. The narration then switches to the detailed description of the burial ritual but suddenly the episode that describes the preparation for the last rites, is unexpectedly stopped – and instead of that the narrative switches to the forest where Aeneas follows two doves (185-212) sent by Venus. There he finds the tree with a golden twig and he takes the twig with him. Meanwhile, the Trojans lament the death of Mizenus and Aeneas joins them in the lamentation and wake (213-235). After the body is burned on the ritual fire, a burial mound is erected, and the cape is named after Mizenus.

The story of Mizenus covers 46 lines of the poem "Aeneid", and this episode is included in the scene where the descent into the netherworld is described. So, Sibyl orders Aeneas to return and bury Mizenus.

Vergil cannot be attributed to the category of authors that favor the overloading of the poem by extra properties or additional accessories. The story of Mizenus is linked with two decisive points: banning access to the netherworld (if he fails to bury the body, Aeneas shall not be allowed to enter), and finding a golden twig (if Aeneas fails to present the golden twig, he shall not be allowed to enter the netherworld). The tree with a golden twig grows in the holy forest that Hecate herself passed to priestess Sibyl to protect.

"... nec te

Nequiquam lucis Hecate praefecit Avernis" (VI. 117-118).

### The story of Palinurus

Palinurus was an experienced helmsman of the flagship of the Trojan fleet (Aen. III, 21; 514-519). The V canto of Aeneid describes the death of that hero. He was doomed and condemned by the *deity of sleep* (Somnus V, 838) – overcoming him in slumber the god let the sleeping sailor *fall* into the water together with the broken helm (Cumque gubernaculo liquidas proiecit in undas V, 859). As for the deity, he flew up in the sky (Ipse volans tenuis se sustulit ales ad auras V, 861). Meanwhile, the ships approached the rocks (scopulos) where the sirens lived, once so menacing and covered by whitish bones (multorumque ossibus albos V, 865). Aeneas took the helm of the ship in his hands but was greatly upset by the fate of Palinurus who was to be left unburied on the white sand in foreign country (Nudus<sup>17</sup> in ignota, Palinure, iacebus

<sup>17</sup> In the commentator's opinion, in this context, *nudus* has the meaning of "unburied"; to support this opinion, he quotes an excerpt from Sophocles's "Antigone" where σῶμα γυμνόςαντες

harena V, 871). The VI canto tells a story of Palinurus's soul meeting Aeneas. The soul is suffering because it is deprived of the right to enter the kingdom of souls. Sibyl explains to Aeneas that Charon takes in his boat to cross the river only the souls of the buried people; so, the souls are forbidden to cross the river till the bones are not buried and covered by earth (VI, 325-6). Therefore, the souls have to spend a century wondering along the river bank and only after hundred years are passed, they are allowed to approach the swamp they longed to get to. The soul of Palinurus approaches Aeneas and tells his story: he says that he was not thrown from the ship by the deity and the god was not involved in his drowning (*nec me deus aequore mersit VI, 348*).

Due to Notos, Palinurus faced his fate and whims of the waves for three days. On the morning of the fourth day Palinurus was taken to the shore of Italy. He tried to climb the steep shore covered by rocks and cliffs (*Presantemque uncis manibus capita aspera montis*<sup>18</sup> V, 360), but the pitiless and cruel people (*gens crudelis*) attacked him – clumsy and uncomfortable in wet heavy clothes (*veste gravatum*) – with swords (*Ferro invasisset*) in hands. Now the waves and wind roll the corpse along the beach. Palinurus appeals to Aeneas, entreats him and makes him vow – in the name of daylight and heavens, in the name of the memory of his father and Iulus, to save him from the terrible fate and *bury him, cover his body with earth* (*mihi terram inice VI, 365-6*). He asks Aeneas to go to the Velinum bay, or to try some other trick he may know if taught by the mother-goddess (*diva creatrix*<sup>19</sup> VI, 367).

Sibyl reproaches Palinurus for he dared to approach her while still unburied (*inhumatus*), but reassures him that soon he will find his rest. His bones (*resp. soul*) will be soothed and calmed (*ossa*<sup>20</sup> *piabunt*), then buried and a burial mound will be erected; a special holiday and celebration shall be established and in addition to that, the place shall be named after his name.

The story of Palinurus is uncovered in two cantos (V, VI) and it has a lot in common with the story and the closing days of Elpenor (partially, of Miz-enus, too). Palinurus fell into the sea according to the wish of the deity of

(Ant 409) *nudus* is used in the same meaning as in the cited example. *Nudus* (*nudo*) and γυμνός, i.e. "I am baring myself" – in the sense of burying, is interesting from another point of view: it is possible that the meaning of "getting rid of the flesh" is also implied. Ignota, or being buried in the foreign land was considered a tragic event, but the corpse left unburied beyond the borders of the native land was viewed as a complete disaster. P. Vergili Maronis, *Aen. Ibid.* II, 422.

<sup>18</sup> The "Aeneid" commentator cites Servius's comments and states that *mons* in this instance is used in the sense of *saxum*. Vergili Maronis *Ibid.* 472.

<sup>19</sup> *diva creatrix* is quoted in the VIII song (534); the analysis of this detail helps to deduce that the mother-goddess mentioned in the VI song is Venus, Kytheria. See: Vergili Maronis *Ibid.* III, 136

<sup>20</sup> According to the commentator, *ossa* = *manes* P. Vergili Maronis. *Ibid.* II: 474



sleep. It happened not far from the Island of Sirens; yet, in case he could die closer to the island, his bones would "join" the mass of the "white bones" and we would face a standard version of the myth, but Vergil prefers to complicate the narrative. So, Palinurus reaches an Italian shore, meets a crowd of the savage people and falls from the cliff after being stabbed by their sword. Semantically, both instances: falling from the ship-deck into the sea, and falling from the cliff into water – have the same meaning. It is possible to interpret this case as the desire of the author to represent Palinurus as the eponym of some cape of Lukania. The episode that takes place in the netherworld deserves particular attention due to its likeness to the story of Elpenore where the hero tells his own story of his death and pleads for his burial.

If the episodes where are involved Elpenore (Palinurus) and Mizenus are summarized, the following picture will appear:

All the three characters fall from a high spot and die.

The matter of the unburied heroes creates immense feeling of discomfort among the protagonists of the poem.

The burial ritual is described scrupulously (to the point of similarity with the last rites and the burial scene of Patrocles).

All the three persons: Elpenore, (Palinurus) and Mizenus were not in normal condition when they fell. Elpenore was sleepy and drunk, and Mizenus – elated by the sounds of singing; so, the similarity is also in the details that their death was preceded by an inordinate state.

In case of Elpenore, there are no signs that prove that he managed to engage anybody, although during his encounter with Odysseus, he says that he became a victim of Demon (and wine). In the case of Mizenus, it is obvious that he was punished by Triton's rage.

It must also be noted that the burying ritual is carried out after the return of Odysseus and Aeneas from the netherworld. Elpenore explains Odysseus all the details to be observed at his burial. Apparently, in "Aeneid" this function is fulfilled by Sibyl (see episode of Palinurus, VI, 379). Can we assume that the "right" way to carry out the burial (i.e. the way the souls need it to be done<sup>21</sup> and the way that pleases the gods) can be attributed to the heroes who had underwent the initiation? – Which means that they came out from the netherworld where they are instructed of the ways they are to follow and observe in reality. If the matter is viewed from this angle, one can assume that these three episodes represent the first sacral rituals, and all the successive burial rituals should be carried out in the similar way.

---

<sup>21</sup> It is instructive to make here a parallel with "Iliad" where the image of the soul of Patrocles appears to Achilles in his dream and asks the victorious hero to bury him.

The discussed episodes represent the so-called "insets, included stories". An epic narrative is capable of embracing and "bearing" a number of episodes. An epic narrative itself is created from a variety of stories but the cases that are analyzed in the paper represent another matter. Both, Odysseus and Aeneas have to worry about their dead companions in the conditions of utmost responsibility – in another sacral space, after descending into the underworld (or prior to that), and later as well. Butes in the "Argonautica" fell from the ship when sailing near the Island of Sirens (muses of the "beyond-world"). Definitely, all the three authors (Homer, Apollonius of Rhodes, Vergil) attribute a special function to the meeting with the soul of the deceased companion. This insets show that the peculiar features of their deaths - along with the strict demand of the burial, shows that deceased represent the category of the "substitute sacrifice". They substituted for particular individuals (for instance: Elpenore – Odysseus, whom Circe was reluctant to free and let him leave the island), or the substitution concerned the aim that the people are anxious to reach (e.g. the Argonauts strive to get the Golden Fleece and then come back safely home: the Trojans – under the guidance of Aeneas, want to reach the promised land – the shores of Italy).

I think that comparing the Greek and Georgian sources offered the possibility to restore a scene of a particular ritual. This ritual was interestingly reflected in the creative and epic works of the period of antiquity and Hellenic culture.