Indo-European Mythology and Poetics

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Indo-European
Mythology and Poetics

Indo-European Mythology and <u>Poetics</u>

Basic formula

Indo-European **Mythology** and Poetics

Basic formula and

Serpent-slaying myths

Typology of PIE formulaics

Types of PIE formulaic expressions and poetic figures reconstructed so far:

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1.   Epithet
    - An adjective indicating some quality or attribute:
    - of the person or thing described.
    - which the speaker or writer regards as characteristic:
        [SWIFT – HORSES]   = [HORSES]

Typology of PIE formulaics

Types of PIE formulaic expressions and poetic figures reconstructed so far:

1. Epithet: [SWIFT – HORSES] = [HORSES]

2. Merism

- A bipartite noun phrase
- consisting of two nouns in a copulative relation
- two nouns which share several semantic features
- together serve to designate globally a higher concept C

[MEN and CATTLE] = [MOVEABLE WEALTH]

Typology of PIE formulaics

Types of PIE formulaic expressions and poetic figures reconstructed so far:

1. Epithet: [SWIFT – HORSES] = [HORSES]

2. Merism: [MEN = SLAVES and CATTLE] = [MOVEABLE WEALTH]

3. Kenning
    - A bipartite figure of two nouns:
    - in a non-copulative, typically genitival grammatical relation:
    - or in a non-copulative compound:
    - which together signify a third notion C:

        [HORSE – of SEA]   = [SHIP]

Typology of PIE formulaics

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What do they all have in common?

Typology of PIE formulaics

Types of formulaic expressions / poetic figures reconstructed so far:

1. Epithet: [SWIFT – HORSES] = [HORSES]

2. Merism: [MEN and CATTLE] = [MOVEABLE WEALTH]

3. Kenning: [HORSE – of SEA] = [SHIP]

What do they all have in common? THEY ARE ALL NOUN PHRASES!

WHAT'S UP WITH THE VERBS?

WHERE'S ALL THE ACTION?

Basic formula

- "A common Indo-European verbal formula expressing the central act of the inherited serpent-slaying myth [...] a single sentence [...]. The verb phrase involves a single verb, in the original or underlying formula, a form of the Indo-European root *g^{wh}en- 'to smite, slay'. The basic formula may optionally include the presence of a marginal element (in the instrumental case or its equivalent), the specification of either a weapon or a companion (normally not both)."

(Watkins 1995:301)

Basic formula

Features of the basic formula:

- A common Indo-European verbal formula

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HERO – SLAY – SERPENT

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- A common Indo-European verbal formula: a fixed traditional verbal phrase attested by several IE languages

- involves a single verb

    HERO – SLAY – SERPENT

Basic formula

Features of the basic formula:

- A common Indo-European verbal formula: a fixed traditional verbal phrase attested by several IE languages

- involves a single verb, originally a form of a PIE verbal root

$$\text{HERO – SLAY } (*g^{wh}en\text{-}) \text{ – SERPENT}$$

Basic formula

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- A common Indo-European verbal formula: a fixed traditional verbal phrase attested by several IE languages

- involves a single verb, originally a form of a PIE verbal root

- <u>expressing</u> the <u>central act</u> of an inherited myth:

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$$\text{HERO} - \text{SLAY } (*g^{wh}en\text{-}) - \text{SERPENT}$$

= <u>indexically</u> refers to the whole dragon-slaying myth

Indexicality of the basic formula

- The basic formula HERO – SLAY $(*g^{wh}en\text{-})$ – SERPENT expresses the <u>central act</u> of an inherited myth.
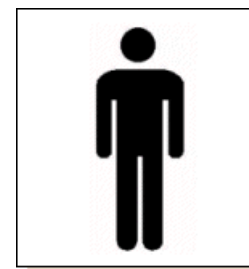
Indexicality of the basic formula

- The basic formula HERO – SLAY (*$g^{wh}en$-) – SERPENT expresses the central act of an inherited myth.

- But the whole myth was way more complex:
    - the hero is born, has a father and a mother
    - grows up,
    - becomes a warrior,
    - the serpent is born, has a father and a mother
    - appears and brings destruction,
    - etcetc.

Terminology: *index,* vb. *to index,* adj. *indexical*

Three different types of signs: (Charles Peirce)

- ICONS: signifier resembles signified

- INDEXES: signifier has a real
       connection with signified

- SYMBOLS: signifier has no real
       connection with signified:

MALE

BUY

< p >   / p /

Indexicality of the basic formula

- The basic formula HERO – SLAY $(*g^{wh}en\text{-})$ – SERPENT expresses the central act of an inherited myth. But the whole myth must have been more complex: the hero is born, grows up, becomes a warrior, the serpent appears, brings destruction, etcetc.

Therefore: does the basic formula iconically, indexically or symbolically refer to the whole myth?

Indexicality of the basic formula

Therefore:

- The basic formula HERO – SLAY (*$g^{wh}en$-) – SERPENT does have some kind of real connection with the whole myth

  ≠ does not SYMBOLICALLY refer to whole dragon-slaying myth.

Indexicality of the basic formula

Therefore:

- The basic formula does not SYMBOLICALLY refer to the whole myth.

- The basic formula HERO – SLAY (*$g^{wh}en$-) – SERPENT does not resemble the whole myth ≠ does not ICONICALLY refer to the whole dragon-slaying myth.

Indexicality of the basic formula

Therefore:

- The basic formula does not SYMBOLICALLY refer to the whole myth.

- The basic formula does not ICONICALLY refer to the whole myth.

- The basic formula HERO – SLAY (*$g^{wh}en$-*) – SERPENT describes a part of the whole myth ≠ it INDEXICALLY refers to the whole dragon-slaying myth

(metonymy, syneddoche, pars pro toto association)

Basic formula

Features of the basic formula:

- A common Indo-European verbal formula: a fixed traditional verbal phrase attested by several IE languages

- involves a single verb, originally a form of a PIE verbal root

- expressing the central act of the inherited myth

- optionally includes a marginal element (in the instrumental case or its equivalent), the specification of a weapon or a companion (normally not both)

HERO – SLAY (*$g^{wh}en$-) – SERPENT (– with WEAPON/COMPANION)

More details

- The PIE root *$g^{wh}en$- originally meant 'hit repeatedly' (García Ramón 1998) later 'slay, kill'.

- All languages have synonyms and all languages undergo lexical renewal:

  Watkins identifies several variant roots which may be used instead of *$g^{wh}en$-.

- One of these variants is *$terh_2$- 'cross over, pass through, overcome':

  associated with a temporary victory (one won battle, not the whole war).

- Finally, Watkins demonstrates that his basic formula is bidirectional: sometimes the

  SERPENT/ADVERSARY – SLAY (*$g^{wh}en$-) – HERO

(1) Vedic: Indra slays (√*han-*) the serpent (*áhi-*)
***Vṛtrá-* 'Obstacle, Resistance'**

Vedic	*á-han-n*	*áhi-m*
PIE	*$é$-g^{wh}en-t*	h_3ég^{wh}i-m
	"slew	the serpent"

(2) Avestan: Thraētaona slays (√*jan*-) *Ažī*- ('Serpent') Dahāka

Avest.	*jan-aṱ*	*ažī̆-m*
PIE	**gʷʰen-et*	*h₃égʷʰi-m*
	"slew	the serpent"

(3) Hittite: the Storm-god kills (*kwenta*) the Serpent

Hittite ^{MUŠ}*illuya[nk]an* *kwenta*

PIE (eel, anguilla?) **gʷʰen-t(o)*

"the serpent" "he slew"

(4) Greek: Perseus slays (aor. πεφνέμεν) the snake-haired Gorgon, also called ὀφι-όεις 'snaky'

Greek	ἔπεφνέν	ὀφι-όεις
PIE	*e-g^{wh}e-g^{wh}n-e-t	h$_3$ég^{wh}i-
	"he slew	the serpent"

(5) Old Norse: Thor is the *orms bani* 'slayer of the (Midgard)-Serpent'

ONors	*orms*	*bani*
PIE	*$\underset{\circ}{u}rmi$-	$g^{wh}onó$-

"the serpent's slayer"

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- In fact, several attestations of the basic fomula actually have a mortal man as the subject.

- There is however a pattern that is more likely to be inherited than to be innovative.

Thunder and Serpent?

- Hittite: the Storm-god

- Name: Tarhunta- or Tarhunna- < root *$terh_2$-

- SLAYS

- the SERPENT Illuyanka.

Thunder and Serpent?

- Old Norse: the Thunder-god

- Name: Þórr < *þun-ara- < root *tenh$_2$-

- SLAYS

- the Midgard-SERPENT.

Thunder and Serpent?

- Vedic: Indra the SLAYER of the SERPENT Vrtra is mainly a warrior-god,

- but he has absorbed several of the rain-god Parjanya's features

- Parjanya is the only other Vedic god associated with both
  $g^{wh}en$- SLAY and *$h_3eg^{wh}i$*- SERPENT

- Indra clearly becomes a thunder-god in later Indic tradition (e.g. Mahabharata's episode of the Khandava forest, where he makes rain fall against Agni).

Thunder and Serpent?

- Hittite: the Storm-god (Name: *Tarhunta-* or *Tarhunna- < root *terh_2-*)

SLAYS the SERPENT Illuyanka.

- Old Norse: the storm-god (Name: Þórr < **þun-ara-* < root **tenh_2-*)

SLAYS the Midgard-SERPENT.

- Vedic: Indra the SLAYER of the SERPENT Vrtra is mainly a warrior-god, but he has absorbed several of the storm-god Parjanya's features (only other god associated with **g^{wh}en-* SLAY and **h_3ég^{wh}i-* SERPENT) and even becomes a storm-god in later Indic tradition (recall the episode of the Khandava forest).

Thunder and Serpent!

Several features may be reconstructed for the PIE Storm-god e.g. :

- a mace/hammer as WEAPON: Hitt. Storm-god's mace, Thor's hammer

- a derivative of the root $*(s)tenh_2$- 'thunder, roar' as epithet/name:

      ON Þórr, Gm.Donner < PGmc. *þun-ara- < *$tn̥h_2$-ero- 'thunderer'

      Vedic stanayitnú- 'thunderer' < verb *$stenh_2$-ei̯e- 'to thunder'

      Latin Iuppiter Tonans < *$tonh_2$- 'thundering'

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- The association between the myth of the Slaying of the Serpent and a STORM-god can hardly be an innovation in the single traditions.

Thunder and Serpent!

- Several features may be reconstructed for the PIE Storm-god: e.g. a mace/hammer as WEAPON and a derivative of the root *(s)tenh₂- 'thunder, roar' as epithet/name.

- The association between the myth of the Slaying of the Serpent and a STORM-god can hardly be an innovation in the single traditions.

- Most probably reflects an inherited theme (association of concepts):

  STORM-GOD – SLAY – SERPENT !

LINGUISTICS IN PAVIA

UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA
Department of Humanities

Indo-European Mythology and Poetics

The dragon is slain (for now):

THE END (THANK YOU SO MUCH!)