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PROCOPIUS ABOUT THE SUPREME GOD OF THE SLAVS (BELLA VII 14, 23): TWO CRITICAL REMARKS

A passage from Procopius, *Bella VII 14, 23* is reconsidered, in which the beliefs of the heathen Slavs are described. It is shown to be corrupted. The main emendation proposed here consists in separating the word δημιουργόν from the preceding τῆς ἀστραπῆς and connecting it with the following πάντων: consequently, the supreme god of the Slavs is said not to be the producer of lightning, but the creator of the universe.

The earliest and the most precious record of Slavic heathendom is found in an ethnographic excursus of Procopius' Gothic war, *Bella VII 14, 23*. It starts with a mention of the supreme god of the Slavs. The sentence reads as follows:

θεὸν (v.l. θεῶν K) μὲν γὰρ ἕνα τὸν τῆς ἀστραπῆς δημιουργὸν πάντων κύριον μόνον αὐτὸν νομίζουσιν εἶναι, καὶ θύουσιν αὐτῷ βόας τε καὶ ἱερεῖα πάντα (v.l. ἅπαντα K.).¹

This passage has been quoted many times and subjected to many interpretations, but the textual problems it poses have never been tackled, at least two of which are identifiable. One of them is the superfluous αὐτόν. It is noticed by L. A. Gindin and V. L. Cymburskij, who explain –and translate– it as an emphasis:

Ибо они (т. е. Анты и Склавины) считают, что один из богов² — создатель молнии — **именно он есть** [bold A. L.] единый владыка всего, и ему приносят в жертву быков и всяких жертвенных животных.

In our opinion, it is better to assume an ellipsis here, caused by avoiding the repetition of the verb νομίζειν, which is used in the double sense of 'to believe in, to worship' with the complement θεὸν μὲν γὰρ ἕνα, and 'to believe that, to consider'

¹ We follow the edition of *J. Haury*, *Procopii Caesarensis opera omnia*, Vol. II, *Bella V–VIII*, Leipzig 1963, p. 357.

² Свод древнейших письменных известий о славянах т. I, Москва 1991, 183. The editors read θεῶν following the manuscript K.

with κύριον μόνον αὐτὸν νομίζουσιν εἶναι, both constructions being familiar to Procop in similar contexts.³

The other oddity is less striking, but more relevant for the correct understanding of information given to us by Procopius. It is the expression ὁ τῆς ἀστραπῆς δημιουργός. What does it mean? Was the supreme god of the Slavs envisioned as the ‘producer of lightning’ as an atmospheric phenomenon, or ‘the manufacturer of lightning’, in the sense of a thundergod skilled in smithery who forged his own thunderbolt? The latter interpretation is that of Gindin and Cymburskij, who in their commentary on the page 221 admit the possibility of the literal translation “изготовитель молнии” and refer to the Slavic myth, as reconstructed by Potebnja, of the divine blacksmith defeating a dragon. However, there is no reliable evidence of such a representation among the heathen Slavs. In Baltic mythology the corresponding role is played not by the thundergod Perkunas himself, but by Teljavel’, who is said to have forged for him the sun.⁴ If the god mentioned by Procopius is Perun –this being the most probable identification– we would expect him to be defined rather as the master of lightning than as its producer or manufacturer. No wonder that most scholars spontaneously interpret the passage in question precisely in this sense, regardless of the oddness of Procopius’ expression, cf., for instance, *J. Puhvel, Comparative Mythology, Baltimore/London* ²1988, 234:

Already Procopius ... spoke of the Slavs as having the **lord of lightning** [bold A.L.] as their supreme deity, to whom they sacrificed cattle and other animals.

However, what we are facing here is not a problem of interpretation, but a textual one. The expression τῆς ἀστραπῆς δημιουργός is unparalleled in entire Greek literature,⁵ and thus necessarily suspect of corruption. In late authors the word δημιουργός is related to θεός designating Christian God or a monotheistically conceived Zeus almost exclusively in the Platonic sense of ‘demiurge’ as the creator of the universe, and regularly completed by (τῶν) ὄλων,⁶ (τοῦ) παντός,⁷ (τῶν)

³ For the former usage cp. *Bella* I 19, 35: ἄμφω δὲ ταῦτα τὰ ἔθνη, οἳ τε Βλέμυες καὶ οἱ Νοβάται, τούς τε ἄλλους θεούς, οὐσπερ Ἑλληνας νομίζουσι πάντας, καὶ τὴν τε Ἴσιν τὸν τε Ὅσιριν σέβουσι “both those peoples, Blemyes and Novatae, worship all the other gods worshiped by the Greeks, and also Isis and Osiris” and id. VI 14, 1: ὑπὲρ μὲν Ἰστρον ποταμὸν ἐκ παλαιοῦ ὄκουσι πολὺν τινα νομίζοντες θεῶν ὄμιλον “long time ago they lived on the other side of the river Danube, and worshiped a large number of gods”, and for the latter VI 15, 25: τοῦτον γὰρ τῷ Ἄρει θύουσιν, ἐπεὶ θεὸν αὐτὸν νομίζουσι μέγιστον εἶναι “they make of him a sacrifice to Ares, because they consider him to be the greatest god”.

⁴ According to a gloss inserted by a west-Russian copyist into Slavic translation of Malala’s chronicle. Only in the later folklore can Perkunas be represented as the blacksmith of God (Dievs). Cf. *V. V. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov in Мифы народов мира. Энциклопедия, т. 2, Москва* ²1988, p. 499.

⁵ *Soph. Aias* 1034 sq.: Ἄρ’ οὐκ Ἑρινὸς τοῦτ’ ἐχάλκευσεν ζήφος, / κάκεινον (sc. ζωστήρα) Ἄιδης, δημιουργός ἄγχιος cited by Gindin and Cymburskij p. 221 is a poetic metaphor and cannot be taken as a proper parallel to the bare definition in Procopius.

⁶ τῶν ὄλων δημιουργός *Aetius* I 7, 11–34 p. 301 sq. *Diels.*; *Ael. arist. Jebb*, VI 26–27; *Philostr. Vita Apoll.* IV 30; VIII 7; *Ael. Arist.* 144, 23–24.

⁷ ὁ τοῦ παντός δημιουργός *Philostr. Vit. soph.* 2, *Olearius* p. 575, 23.

πάντων⁸ and (τῶν) ἀπάντων.⁹ In the view of this fact, it can hardly be by accident that the word δημιουργόν is followed here precisely by the genitive ἀπάντων. Yet, in the present state of our text it is related not to the preceding, but to the following word, κύριον. We propose to insert a comma behind ἀστραπῆς, thus relating it to the preceding θεόν and at the same time separating from δημιουργόν, with the consequence that ἀπάντων is understood as a complement to the latter word and not to the following κύριον, which is the reading of our vulgate. This slight intervention seems inevitable, but not sufficient, because the construction of the word ‘god’ with a genitive of competence such as *θεὸς τῆς ἀστραπῆς or **deus fulguris*, common as it is in modern languages, where the expressions like *god of lightning*, French *dieu de l'éclair*, German *Gott des Blitzes*, Russian *бог молнии*, etc. are normally used, was, to our knowledge, quite unusual in both classical Greek and Latin. Consequently, the text seems to be not only misunderstood by the scribes and editors, which resulted in a wrong punctuation, but more seriously corrupted. We are forced to admit a lacuna before the genitiv τῆς ἀστραπῆς with its necessary antecedent fallen out. We can only guess which word it might have been. Perhaps a substantive meaning ‘lord, master, owner’, but also an adjective such as ἐπώνυμος, used with genitive in the meaning ‘named after’, with no less than seventeen occurrences in the “Wars” only. This conjecture can be supported by a linguistic fact. If it is Perun that is referred to, as is generally accepted, it is worth noticing that his name occurs in Slavic languages also as an appellative meaning ‘lightning, thunderbolt’ (Russ. *перун*, WRuss. *пярүн*, Pol. *piorun*, Czech *perun*).¹⁰ Consequently, Procopius or his source may have spoken of Perun being named after the lightning.

In the light of the conjectures proposed above, we read as follows:

θεὸν μὲν γὰρ ἓνα τὸν τῆς ἀστραπῆς [ἐπώνυμον,] δημιουργὸν ἀπάντων [καὶ] κύριον μόνον αὐτὸν νομίζουσιν εἶναι “they believe in one god, named after the lightning, (and believe) that he is the creator and the only master of the universe”.

The proposed reading is, of course, hypothetical, but we hope it to be a step toward a better understanding of this obviously corrupted and lacunate passage. For the history of religions we can deduce that the Slavs ascribed their thundergod a demiurgic role, which may be traced back to the Indo-European cosmogony of fire.¹¹ A further deduction, much less certain because it is based on our highly conjectural supplying of ἐπώνυμον, would be the existence, among the southern Slavs, of the word **perunь* both in its theonymic and its appellative usage at a date as early as the

⁸ πάντων δὴ τῶν ὄντων Ζεὺς αἰτιός τε καὶ δημιουργός Ael. arist. Jebb, 6, 26–27; τοῦ πάντων δημιουργοῦ καὶ βασιλέως 9, 8–9, ср. и 9, 27.

⁹ (ὁ) δημιουργὸς τῶν ἀπάντων Clem. Rom., Ep. I ad Cor. 26, 1; 59, 2, ὁ (μέγας) δημιουργὸς καὶ δεσπότης τῶν ἀπάντων id. 20, 11; 33, 2; Πλάτων γὰρ τοι καὶ αὐτὸς Δία μὲν καλεῖ τὸν δημιουργὸν τῶν ἀπάντων Stobaeus I 1, 28.

¹⁰ Cf. *М. Фасмер*, Этимологический словарь русского языка, перевод и дополнения О. Н. Трубачева, т. III, Москва 1987, 246.

¹¹ Cf. *А. Лома*, Пракосово. Словенски и индоевропски корени српске епике, Београд 2002, 207.

sixth century A.D., i.e. some two hundred fifty years before it is for the first time explicitly attested in the treaty between Russia and Byzantium of 908 A.D. cited by “the Primary Chronicle”. This possibility might be of interest for the much disputed etymology of the word, which is, however, a problem that deserves a special study.

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ПРОКОПИЈЕ О СЛОВЕНСКОМ ВРХОВНОМ БОГУ
(BELLA VII 14, 23): ДВЕ КРИТИЧКЕ ОПАСКЕ

Разматра се место из Прокопијевих Ратова VII 14, 23 где је реч о веровањима паганских Словена. Доказује се да је оно искварено. Најважнија поправка која се овде предлаже састоји се у томе што се реч δημιουργόν одваја од претходне τῆς ἀστραπῆς и повезује са следећом ἀπάντων: на тај начин излази да је за словенског врховног бога речено не да је произвођач муње, него да је творац свега.