
OBRUSÁNSZKY, Borbála**Tongwan City and the Motif of Building Sacrifice**

Those Chinese scholars, who research the history of the Southern Huns, know the special construction method of Tongwancheng from the 130th coil of Jin shu. The Huns applied the so-called building sacrifice in order to strengthen its walls. It is not an independent, isolated story in the steppe world; rather it has some parallels in Southern and Eastern Europe — the former territory of the Hungarian Kingdom — and the Caucasus as well. Because of the shortness of time, I only summarise some research point of views about their origin and present several ancient Hungarian examples of it.

Researching directions and some conclusions

Many European religious historians, ethnographers and cultural anthropologists usually mention building sacrifice practices among the human sacrifices and they keep it as a very ancient ritual, and according to them, human communities sacrificed young boys and girls for the God or spirits in order to put end to natural disasters or prevent their land from diseases and epidemics. Almost in the whole world's folklore tradition can be found such stories, e.g. during the floods or droughts human communities tried to win the heaven's favour and that's why young people — boys and girls — are recommended for rivers or even monsters.¹

Similar stories are often included in the folklore of the steppe peoples, in their neighbouring peoples' folklore too, although for European scholars the most accessible source of information are the ancient European ones, even though China has ancient samples from the very early period.

But generally the above mentioned human sacrifice is not equal with the building sacrifice, despite some common motifs. It is a special one and it doesn't appear everywhere in the world; it is focused on some determined territories; according to collected materials it is to be found in the traditions of the horsemen of the Eurasian steppe belt.

Although many ethnographers believe that human sacrifices, including the building sacrifices, gradually disappeared in the 1st millennium B.C., after which no longer played an important role in the lives of the communities of the Eurasian steppe belt, and simultaneously the old rites were replaced by symbolic sacrifices, the steppe folklore preserved the memory of these bloody rituals. In some places

¹ Look at some Turkic, Turkish, Mongolian and Hungarian folk tales, where young girls used to be given to a monster, which lives in a deep lake. We have such stories in Northern China, around the Yellow River; moreover there is such a story from the Hunnish period. L. Batsaikhan, 2002.

they were practiced even until modern times, but they didn't sacrifice humans, but animals. In order to find out what kind of peoples practised this kind of sacrifice in ancient times, we must investigate the areas where it appeared, and determine its origin and cultural heritage.

The ethnographers in the international literature characterised the humans sacrificed as the victims of a new construction in ancient times when the constructors wanted to strengthen the new building by mixing human ashes or bones into the construction materials. The ancient custom was based on the belief that parts of the human body is the best long-lasting "material" for strengthening for example walls. We can find other kind of ancient belief in the local customs of Eastern Hungary, where people often put animal bones under the threshold in order to keep evil spirit away; also a number of cases of building sacrifice methods when people lay small pets into the walls.²

The motif of the building sacrifice drew the attention of European ethnographers in the second half of the 19th century, when Romanian and Hungarian experts began to argue whose heritage is that ancient custom. Later, some Croatian, Serbian, Greek and German researchers became involved in the dispute, many of whom believed the story had originated from Southern Europe and gradually spread northward and reached the Carpathian Basin and the Danube-Sava area.³

The European researchers generated sharp debates about the origins of the building rituals, but instead of a deep and comprehensive investigation, they either focused only on one theory, or stated that it could be only of Southern European origin. Regarding the history of building sacrifice we have no comprehensive, analytical study, which relates to the whole Eurasian region. Although the ethnographers collected lots of folklore texts, their overall analysis was carried out only by Louis Vargyas, who listed the whole reachable European examples and showed their presence on a detailed map. Louis Vargyas put an end to the long lasting debate, when he published his study in 1959; he summarised the researchers' points of view and results and the correct chronology. He gathered Eastern European, Southern European and Caucasian examples of building sacrifices and concluded that the motif of the building sacrifice was widespread from the vast steppe region toward the settled civilizations.

He tried to determine their origin and the way of their spreading according to folklore variants. His research contained not only Southern European and Carpathian Basin ones, but he also mentioned several Caucasian ballads and one archaeological finding from Buryatia, near the Lake Baikal.⁴

He found that the real way of spreading of this motif was from north to south, or the ancient elements of the story appeared first inside the Carpathian Basin and from there reached the Balkans or Southern Europe. He realised that the Hungarian examples were very close to the Caucasian ones, and thought that the first versions came from the east, from the steppe region and the Hungarians brought this story into the Carpathian Basin. This theory was supported and proved by the huge appearance of the

² Erneyi, 1927.

³ Vargyas, 1959. 5.

⁴ Vargyas, 1959.47.

Hungarian variants throughout the whole Carpathian Basin; only from Seklerland ethnographers collected 91 stories.⁵

Let us take a look at the Hungarian examples, which are the richest in Europe. The most popular ballad is the Wife of Kelemen Manson, which is known almost by every Hungarian.

Twelve Masons discuss,
How to build the Castle of Deva
They build for half bushel of silver,
Half bushel of silver, half a bushel of gold.
They began to construct the Deva Castle
What they built until noon, fell at night,
What they built at night, came down in the morning.
Twelve Masons discuss again
How to stop the falling wall
They agreed on the following deal
Whose wife would come here sooner,
They would gently catch her, would throw her into the fire,
Her mild ashes would be mixed with the lime.
In order to stop falling the wall of the Deva Castle.

(Details of the Ballad of Wife of Kelemen Manson)

Although it is the most popular one, there are many kinds of appearances among Hungarians. The eastern part of the former Hungarian Kingdom, in present-day Ukraine, namely, Karpatalya there are numerous fortresses, which had their own legends; inside them we can observe variants of building sacrifices. One of the legends is regarding the Castles of Denikó and Ungvár, where we can also get a glimpse of the memory of real and symbolic human sacrifices: the constructors wished to strengthen walls with human bones or ashes, or any organic material (horsehair, eggs, etc.).⁶ We know the same examples from Western Hungary, Fort Szigetvár, at the time of late Middle Ages, which faced a strong a

⁵ Albert, 2004.

⁶ Regarding constructing Denikó fort, the mansonries built mother milk into the wall in order to strengthen it. Building fort Ungvar, ilona drugeth one noble girl was walled.

siege in 1566. According to an ancient legend, Hungarians strengthened the wall by mixing golden hen's eggs into the constructing materials. In addition to that, in former Northern-Hungarian Kingdom, which is Slovakia today, near the city of Nyitra, in the territory of Zser and Alsobodok similar stories can be found; the far western examples can be found in the Lower Austrian castle, Gobelsburg, where a child was built into the wall.⁷ The later occurrence is probably a variant of an ancient story, and it is possible that the territory, namely Gobelsburg had steppe population during the ancient and medieval times.

Some researchers have found variants of building sacrifices in the Danube and Sava regions, where large numbers of Serbs and Croats live now, but during the Middle Ages, before the Ottoman conquest, the area was mostly inhabited by Hungarians. The second rank after the Carpathian Basin is the territory of Bulgaria, where scholars collected 85 occurrences, but in addition to that, there are ballads or stories from Albania and Macedonia, which were part of the former Bulgarian Empire, but some ethnographers kept them as the heritage of the smaller Southern European nations.

As already mentioned above, the comparative study was written by Vargyas, who was able to define the spreading of the story and determined the exact date of its late occurrence in Eastern Europe; he realised that it spread out as late as the 14th century or before the Ottoman rule. As he drew the occurrences of these ballads and stories on historical maps it became clear that the mostly eastern and southern parts of Europe were divided by two great powers: the Kingdom of Hungary and the Bulgarian Empire, whose ruling dynasties were successors of Attila. Both the Bulgarian Dulo clan and Hungarian Árpád are said to be descendants of Attila's youngest son, Irnek or Chaba. Not only the leaders were firmly bound to Hunnish civilization, but also those ordinary people, who have been living there. The ancient steppe heritage can be observed by archaeological findings as well. According to ancient Greek and Latin historical sources in the 7th century B.C. nomadic tribes, namely Scythians settled down there and during the ancient time to Middle Ages related peoples arrived from the east and the allied tribes and states inhabited the Eastern and Central European territory.

Returning back to the building sacrifice motif, we can state that according to the historical and archaeological evidences the similarities originated from an ancient Eurasian steppe heritage, which two allied powers, Scythians and Huns brought it to Europe. They were able to unite vast territories from the Ordos to Eastern Europe, up to present-day Eastern Austria, until the River Enns. These people preserved the common intellectual treasures of the steppe.

Early examples of building sacrifice

I mostly accept Vargyas' point of view relating to the Eastern origin of the building sacrifice, but I have found several early stories, which drew my attention, and which show, that not only the Huns, but the earliest European steppe dwellers, the Sarmatians also knew it. If this is true, we are able to date the time of the appearance of this motif in Europe, not in the 9th century, but at least the 3rd century A.D,

⁷ Lukacs, 2005. http://www.niton.sk/documents/2-129-2442-acta_2005_lukacs_miklos.pdf

when nomadic horsemen brought their special story westward, when - as Littleton and Malcor presume it - Romans settled down 5,000 Sarmatian horsemen as border guards in Britain and they have brought their own intellectual heritage from the Caucasus or Hungarian Plain and preserved it in the King Arthur stories.⁸

The story is about how to construct a castle and the masons wish to perform the building sacrifice, and want to place human bones into the wall. According to the legend, only that person's bones can be built in, who had no earthly origin, that's why they chose Merlin, a special boy, who was born with outstanding signs. It shows some similarities with the Hungarian and Caucasian examples.

Vargyas mentioned some Caucasian, namely Georgian examples, but other local examples are also available, which drew these researchers' attention, but these examples have no roots in Western European folklore.⁹

One example is the story of construction of Fort Surami in Georgia, which was built in a similar way, as Deva Castle. In the neighbouring Abhazia, the established ancient Kingdom of Kolchis, where Scythian tribes lived in the ancient period, we can find another such a sacrifice; according to that in Fort Kelasuri, a woman and a cow were built together into the fort, to strengthen the wall.¹⁰

In addition to that, on the territory of Azerbaijan a similar story is known, which I have heard during my study trip in the summer of 2010. Near Ganja city in Western Azerbaijan we can find the Juma or Holy Friday mosque, where constructors performed a symbolic building sacrifice; they did not build human bones inside the wall, but they mixed eggs and horsehair with lime and strengthened the walls in such a way.¹¹ The method is similar to one Hungarian fort, namely Szigetvár, which had a related construction, they did not use humans anyway; they resorted to a symbolic one. Not far from the Caucasus, in Asia Minor, in one Cappadocian village stood a bridge between Akdag and Atana; it was built according to the above mentioned method. The examples of the Caucasus and Turkey deny that early theory that the building sacrifice originated from Europe, because we do not know of any migration from Europe eastward, but we have archaeological and philological evidences of the appearance of steppe horsemen in Southern Europe in ancient times and Early Middle Ages as well.¹²

Moreover the appearance of this motif can be dated from the ancient time in spite of Middle Ages and it is obvious that we must find its origins and additional examples in the steppe regions.

⁸ Littleton-Malcor, 2005.

⁹ Vargyas, 1959. 59.

¹⁰ Vargyas, 1959. 59.

¹¹ Obrusanszky, 2011.

¹² Vargyas, 1959. 57.

Eastern examples

The former Hungarian researchers thought that the similar building sacrifice examples among the Eastern steppe horsemen can be found beyond the Caucasus, where mostly Turkic and Mongol peoples live. Vargyas was encouraged by the news, which Vilmos Diószegi shared with him, who was a great Shamanist researcher. He went to the region of Lake Baikal and after returning home, he informed his colleague that next to village Balagansk, along the shores of Lake Baikal archaeologists excavated an earth fort, Kurikan and dated it to the 6-7th centuries A.D. Inside the wall, they found a woman skeleton, which was buried next to the fortress. Because of her unnatural posture the ethnographers assumed that she was probably sacrificed there, in the process of a building sacrifice. In addition, some Central Asian and Chinese stories are also available on how to sacrifice people for the construction; that is why we need to proceed with the study of these stories in order to discover Far Eastern parallels, too.

Surprising numbers of data are available from ancient special Chinese sacrifices how to strengthen the walls and gates by human sacrifices; they usually used to use men, mostly prisoners of war for this purpose. The sources recorded that once Crown Prince Cai was sacrificed for this purpose. Getting confirmed that, archaeologists have found hundreds of human skeletons in ancient palaces and surrounding walls, which indicate the existence of building sacrifice.

Ildikó Ecsedy, a Hungarian sinologist, indicated that from the Shang-dynasty (18-11. Centuries B.C.) there are written evidences that local communities in a variety of cases performed human sacrifice rituals when building walls. Jacques Gernet also said that in the former Shang civilization, one of the most characteristic features of human sacrifice was concluded with the dedication of different buildings. It stopped at the Zhou era, although some elements have survived in small communities. Unfortunately, for European scholars we have not enough data available in order to determine exactly which areas are affected by this custom, and exactly which kind of civilisations –horsemen or settled Chinese or both - used this method.

We have one exact time and place, where we can read about such a sacrifice: we can find one example in the 29th chapter of Shi Ji, relating to the construction of the Great Wall in Manchuria. The story had played during the reign of Qin Shi Huangdi, the first emperor of China, who began the construction of defence wall against the northern neighbours or Huns. They strengthened the wall with human bones, where we can recognise the ancient rite of the building sacrifice. According to the Shi Ji, those workers, who died there, their bodies were incorporated in the wall, as the historical source explains their souls wanted to tighten it. One wife, Meng Jiang Nu waited for her husband, who was carried away to build the wall, and he did not return home. In the autumn she decided to find him in order to give him warm clothes. She climbed the mountains along the wall sections, and everywhere he asked about him, but nobody had heard of him. Finally, she reached the present-day Manchuria where she had learned that her husband had died and his bones were buried into the wall. The place name is well-known now; it is Shanhaiguan, where locals dedicated a statue to the brave woman.

After that story there is another ancient record on building sacrifice in the beautiful Hunnish city, Tongwancheng, or White City. We can read it in Jin Shu 130th coil, where we can find Helian Bobo, the Hunnish King constructing his capital. After he established a new Da Xia (407-431) Hunnish dynasty in

Gaoping, he lived there only a short time; he wanted to choose a steppe territory for his residence. So he sought a pleasant place for that purpose. As the Jin Shu recorded: "The hills are beautiful, in front of it we can discover a wide plain, surroundings there is a lake and fresh rivers. I have seen lots of places, but I haven't found such a territory, which would be so beautiful."¹³ So, Helian Bobo chose the place of His capital as Attila the Hun in Europe, in the heart of Hungary.¹⁴

The construction of Tongwancheng began in 413 A.D and the method was similar to the building of the Great Wall or Déva Castle: they used building sacrifice! The 130th coil of the Jin-shu reports that:

"When Helian Bobo planned to construct Tongwan city, Chi-Ali was appointed as the boss of the construction. Ali was a master architect, but nature was so cruel. The palace was built with great force. If he was able to drill a hole in the wall, then he (Ali Chi-gan) immediately killed the builder of the wall section and his body was incorporated into the wall."¹⁵

Not only the historical texts preserved this special construction method, but it is a living tradition among those workers, who reconstruct Tongwan or White City nowadays. They know the ancient story as well.¹⁶

This source suggests that the Huns knew and practiced this ancient form of human sacrifice.

I wondered, whether only Southern Huns or any other steppe people knew this tradition, whether the Mongolians, a real steppe dwellers had the same tradition. The international literatures often says that "nomads" had no fixed house or settlements.

We can find the memory of ancient building sacrifice in the Mongolian steppe. The earliest examples of special sacrifice were found by archaeologist in the northern part of Mongolia, Khovsgol province, where a joint Mongolian-Japanese expedition excavated an ancient ritual site. It is a major centre of sacrifice, which is classified with the culture of deer stones and they dated it to the second millennium B.C. Those tribes, who lived there during the Bronze Age created a big sacrificial centre, and under the stone statues they placed animal bones. It is possible that it is one of the early examples of building sacrifice because similar custom can be observed on the Hungarian countryside, too. The Hun-related Hungarians placed animal bones under the most sacred place in houses or under the threshold in order to protect the inhabitants of the house from the evil spirits. It is possible that the Eastern horsemen emphasized this cult of threshold. I found other version of the ancient building sacrifice in China, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, where those people, who were killed by thunderbolt, were not buried, but their bodies were placed under the sacred mound, or obo.

Most Hungarian and European researchers do not know exactly, whether the southern and central parts of China preserved such legends and stories, or we can find this tradition only in those parts, which were inhabited by the ancient horsemen. It would be a great scientific achievement, if we could clear this question according to the historical sources of that time, and map the occurrence of this motif.

¹³ Jin shu, 130.

¹⁴ Rather the same story can be read in Tarihi Üngürüs, History of Hungary.

¹⁵ Jin shu, 130.

¹⁶ According to the brand-new field research in Tongwancheng, 2013. 06.12.

Summary

The existence of the common folk treasures in the vast Eurasian steppe zone necessitates the deeper examination of the various folk motifs. We need to check exactly, according to the ancient sources, where a motif can be found and from where it originated. We should not miss the two border regions or the easternmost edge of the Chinese civilisation, where steppe territory and Chinese folklore met, and influenced each other for centuries. The westernmost part is the Carpathian Basin, where the steppe horsemen settled down and created a special cultural.

The above study clearly demonstrates that the building sacrifice was a common cultural heritage of the Eurasian steppe belt, from the Chinese civilisation via steppe land to the Carpathian Basin or the former Hungarian Kingdom.

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