

5. Interpreting and Comparing the Representations of Hermes in Ancient Greece and Archangel Michael in Macedonian Folk Beliefs

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Abstract:

This paper provides a comparative interpretation of the Ancient Greek image of Hermes as a mythological figure with the image of Archangel Michael as a highly revered Orthodox saint in modern Macedonian society. The goal of this research is to show the similarities and the differences between these two characters and how these images are understood today in modern society. By comparing the representations of these two characters, popularly accepted as soul reapers and psychopomps and regularly portrayed holding a stick, and then through the comparison of the days that mark their celebration, the aim of this paper is to show that rudiments of Macedonian folk beliefs and customs associated with this saint, although modified, are still strongly present in the Macedonian tradition.

Keywords:

Hermes, Archangel Michael, Greece, R. of Macedonia, folk beliefs

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Introduction

In Greek mythology, Hermes is represented as the god of travel, which protects the journey and transition between underworld, the earthly world and the heavenly world. He is especially revered at the location of crossroads, in the shape of quadrilateral stone pillar *Herma* (Chausidis, 559), which are places that symbolize the transition from one world to another or from life to death. According to the symbolic interpretation of the crossroads, they do not represent the end, but rather a stoppage offering new choices. Once those choices are made they are irreversible. Therefore, statues bearing the likeness of Hermes were built at the location of crossroads to ward off demons and any unfortunate accidents that may befall a traveler along the way (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 2005, 537-541). In mythological tales, Hermes is a messenger between gods and men, chosen by Zeus, who appeared suddenly and unexpectedly to those who were supposed to die. Since Hermes, according to Ancient Greek folk beliefs, was a psychopomp (ψυχοπομπός) and a companion to the souls of the dead who "knows the way", he was generally accepted as the guide and guardian of the souls of their last trip to the residence of the dead (Shijakovic 1994, 57).

In the Bible, St. Archangel Michael is referred to as an "archangel," meaning 'chief angel'. He was the leader and commander of the Lord's angelic army of heaven, which according to the Bible was victorious in the great battle against Satan. Legends from the Macedonian folk tradition about the righteous godfather are based on the Bible and Church teachings and epitomize the character of St. Archangel Michael. In the Bible, Archangel Michael is placed next to God as the only other righteous figure who holds no prejudices and who makes no distinction between the rich and the poor. For those reasons, we acquired

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the "Righteous Godfather" epithet. In the Macedonian folk tradition he is known as the "soul reaper", sent to Earth by God to harvest the souls of men. He was known to counter some of the Lord's decisions, but upon hearing the reasoning, perceived the fairness of God's orders and understood God's infallible ways (Vrazinovski 2002, 248-251). Dating back to the fourth century, John Chrysostom wrote articles praising the deeds of archangels, but the Macedonian belief system regarding Archangels Michael and Gabriel comes from St. Clement of Ohrid's "Eulogy", his most popular text, whose 150 copies have been discovered to date (Grozdanov 2012, 134).

Representations of Hermes and Archangel Michael mark two different historical contexts; Ancient Greece in the case of the former and the early Christian period of Macedonia in the case the latter. Despite that difference, one can draw numerous comparisons and similarities between the two characters, both in terms of their actions and in terms of people's beliefs related to them, which are still present in these folk traditions.

Parallel Interpretation of Hermes in Ancient Greece and Archangel Michael in Macedonian Folk Beliefs

In terms of parallel interpretations, there are certain similarities and parallelisms between the actions of Hermes and Archangel Michael.

According to Greek mythology, Zeus chose Hermes to be a messenger between gods and men, and he was traveling at the speed of the wind gusting through his sandals (*πτερόντα πέδιλα*), which permitted him to arrive suddenly and unexpectedly. In mythological stories, Hermes is depicted as a messenger with a stick in his hands (*κηρύκειον* of *κήρυξ*-messenger), around which two snakes were wrapped and facing each other, and often with joined heads to symbolize negotiations and discussions after a war. According to ancient Greek mythological interpretations, Hermes knows the way and is the leader and guardian of the souls on their last trip to the residence of the dead, and therefore is considered to be a psychopomp (*ψυχοπομπός*), or a companion of souls. Hermes used his eloquence to invite and persuade those who were supposed to die, and with great

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tenderness, lowered the golden veil over the eyes. He never behaved violently but rather was a friendly persuader, often using trickery and magic (Shijakovic 1994, 57).

In the Macedonian folk tradition, Archangel Michael is known as the reaper of souls, sent by God to earth to remove one's soul. According to legend, he is described as a saint dressed in silk, holding a cane with a silver handle. By placing his stick next to his mouth, he sucks out the soul of man, which upon leaving the body goes to be with God (Kovacheva 2009, 29). If Archangel Michael sat next to someone's chest, that person would die, and if he stood by his feet, the person would recover. Therefore, St. Michael is generally accepted as the archangel of death and as the reaper of souls. In Macedonian folk beliefs, Archangel Michael is the figure that actually carries out the act of death on the ultimate judgment day. He harvests the soul and carries it right up to the Lord to worship. From there they walk 40 days to the ends of heaven and earth to see all of the beauty and the places the person visited while living. He shows the soul all of the good and evil deeds accomplished while on Earth. On the 40th day, he returns with the soul to the burial site and shows the soul the place where the body was buried that is now rotten, which is intended to strike fear in the soul (Cepenkov 1972, 50). Likewise, on the 40th day, Archangel Michael returns the soul to God to stand for the Last Judgment, where it is judged according to the deeds performed during its earthly life. Then the Lord the God commands the angel to send the soul to heaven or hell, according to the life it led while on Earth. In Macedonian folk beliefs St. Archangel Michael is the "righteous godfather" who shows no favoritism and makes no distinction between the rich and poor. He is the saint who presides over death, but in a fair way that treats all people equally (Vrazinovski 2002, 248-251). According to other stories, Archangel Michael stands at the gates of Heaven with a scale in his hands. On one side of the scale he places good deeds, and on the other side, he places the bad, such as one's sins. He then sends the souls of men to heaven or hell according to how the scale tips, which is a reflection of their deeds (Kitevski 2013, 290).

The best description of the Last Judgment is given in the Book of Revelation in the Bible, where it says:

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And I saw a great white throne and him that say upon it, from whose face the earth and sky fled away, and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. (*Revelation* 20. 11, 12)

The performance of the Last Judgment in the Book of Revelation greatly resembles the shamanistic experience of Er, the Armenian hero of Plato's Republic. At the end of Plato's Republic, Er says that he died in battle, but when collecting the already decomposing carcasses on the tenth day, they found his body healthy and took him in the house with the intention of cleaning his wounds on the twelfth day. But once it was laid upon the pyre, he came back to life and he began to tell what he had seen in the other world (Plato *Pol.* 614, b). According to the stories from Er, he and the souls of other fallen soldiers found a strange place where there were judges who determined their fates according to the deeds they had done during their lifetimes. When Er stood before the judges, they gave him orders to stand over there and watch and listen to everything they told the souls of the dead and to witness what happened to them, and then go back to the living to tell what he had heard and seen. As Er stood there, he heard many terrible and unusual life stories and witnessed how the trials that determined the rewards and penalties for the souls of the dead corresponded to the lives they had led (Mitevski 2005, 84-85).

In the Book of Revelation, it says: "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire" (*Revelation* 20.15). The existence of the lake is noted in the descriptions of Plato in *Phaedo* for judging the souls of the dead in the underworld (Plato *Phaedo* 113-114, c). According to Plato's descriptions, all those who lived an ordinary life went to the Acherusian Lake where they cleansed their petty sins and were rewarded for good deeds, and all those who have committed great sins, crimes and murders left for Tartarus from which there was no return. In the works of Plato, there were very few people whose souls easily passed the trial and granted release from the underworld to go live in heaven for 1000 years. Then they stood before Ananke, the goddess of necessity, and her three daughters Kloten, Lachesis and Atropa, known to the ancient Greeks known as the

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three predictors. These figures augured the fate of the newborn child, and the prophet threw the dice to determine the destiny of each soul, whether it was to be human or animal. After the souls' fates were determined, they went to the meadow of forgetfulness to drink from the waters of the River Lethe, after which they would forget everything that had happened until that point (Mitevski 2005, 85-86).

With respect to parallel interpretations of the characters' actions, there is a significant correspondence between Hermes the messenger in Ancient Greece and the image of Archangel Michael in Macedonian folk tradition. Both characters are typically shown holding a staff. While Archangel Michael's staff symbolically harvests the souls of mankind, Hermes comforts the dying and symbolically lowers their eyes while covering them with a golden veil. Both figures, therefore, act as personal escorts to the underworld, where the souls are judged according to the works they have done during their earthly life.

In addition, Hermes and Archangel Michael are both honored with autumn holidays in their respective cultures. In Ancient Greece, the second month of autumn was in the Maimakterion calendar cycle or the fifth month of the Attic calendar year cycle. In the modern Julian calendar, those timeframes correspond to the months of October and November. Since winter was coming and bring with it the chilly weather, many folk prayers were directed to Zeus in the hope that the winter would be favorable to the people, homes and crops (Kovacheva 2012, 101). During this month, there would be a sacrificial blood sacrifice of a sheep on the third day of the last decade. The name Zeus Maimaktes (sheep fleece) comes from the ritual of fleecing and skinning the sacrificial sheep (Parke 1977, 95), which is how the month received its name. Since the act of carrying the sheep fleece through the town derives its name from the holiday of Pompaia (procession), in honor of Zeus Meilikhios (Ancient Greek *μειλίχιος* 3. *ί* *μείλιχος* 2. gentle, kind, merciful, pleasant) (Sironić 1976, 263), it represented the chthonic aspect in the shape of a snake and was revered as the god of mercy. Only priests participated in the procession to carry the sacred fleece to be sacrificed to Zeus Meilikhios. During the procession, they also carried Hermes' magical staff, which was entwined with snakes.

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Linking Hermes with the celebration of this holiday suggests the protective power of the deity, which according to ancient Greek folk beliefs protects people and crops from the supernatural and evil forces that came with the advent of winter and colder weather (Parke 1977, 95). An integral part of the ceremony was the ritualistic purification of those who were considered to be unclean. Standing on the sacred fleece, which had the power to absorb all the filth of man, purifying the unclean. It was also possible to sit barefoot on the fleece, with a covered head, and to allow the priest to perform the cleansing ritual (Kovacheva 2012, 103). The ritual symbolism of objects that are worn during the procession is indicative of the popular practice of praying for protection from weather and other evils and demons that could bring harm to humans and crops.

The Church designated the festival of St. Archangel Michael (Arangjelovden-the day of St. Archangel) to be celebrated on the 21st of November. The holiday is one of the most important celebrations in the Republic of Macedonia and is meant to honor one the most important angels in the Christian religion (Malinov2006, 234). This holiday does not have any characteristic rituals. Most families hold a celebration in their homes (slava-celebration) or celebrate it as a name day. Those houses that do celebrate the holiday typically slaughter and sacrifice a ram, sheep or pig. A celebration such as this has its own specific customs and is celebrated within the family once a year on a particular saint's day. The particular saint's day and holidays that a family celebrates every year are passed down from the man's side of the family. Close relatives and friends are invited to break bread and drink wine or spirits, but more often than not uninvited guests also show up. On the day of the celebration people usually go to church to worship and to have the priest lift the bread. Following that customary act, the family returns home to eat dinner. The bread is placed on the table and made to cover a bowl of boiled wheat. As the priest sings the bread is cut into wafers while everyone present holds a lighted candle. Once singing is finished, the priest throws corn on the table while saying the following phrase: "May gifts and prosperity be as numerous as the grains" (Kovacheva and Boceva 2014, 300-301). After that ritual, the priest then leaves. A name day is a sort of personal or family celebration. While the occasion celebrates the name of one particular family member, the festive atmosphere pervades throughout the house, especially if it is the head of household's name day. Name day

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celebrations do not involve any special rituals or ceremonies and are modest in relation to the family celebrations (Kovacheva and Boceva 2014, 161).

From a chronological point of view, there are parallelisms between celebrations of Hermes and St. Archangel Michael. Both celebrations take place during the autumn ritual cycle, but the ways in which these holidays are celebrated are different. The Ancient Greeks celebrated with processions and by displaying sacred objects, while in Macedonian folk tradition the day of St. Archangel Michael is celebrated within the family or as a name day. The ritual items showcased during the procession of the ancient Greek holiday Pompaia symbolize the popular fear of various evils and demons, while the symbols associated with the celebration of a name day or to honor St. Archangel point to the pursuit of health, happiness and well-being for those involved with the celebration. Even though the celebration of a name day or household festival does not have any characteristic features in the Macedonian tradition, it is common practice to slaughter a ram, sheep or pig. Despite these differences, both traditions do follow the ritual activities with feasting, music, and an animal sacrifice.

Certain parallelisms are evident in the choice of food that is prepared and eaten during the celebration in the ancient Greek folk tradition of the third day of the holiday Anthesteria, called Chytrai (USA), which was held on the thirteenth day of the month Anthesterion (Parke 1977, 116). This day is to honor the dead by boiling various types of grains mixed with honey in a large bowl. Even though the food is a symbolic offering to the dead, it is consumed by the living. The food platter is associated with the myth of the great flood. After the water receded, the survivors from across the country gathered around a pot and boiled this type of food. The first meal after such a disaster was meant to celebrate hope and to remember those who died during the flood. Therefore, a portion of the food is given to the subterranean god Hermes the guide on behalf of the deceased before being consumed (Parke 1977, 116-118). The ritual consumption of food in this way indicates the intention of the living to reaffirm the life that lies ahead.

In the Macedonian tradition, preparing and consuming various types of grains is both a part of holiday celebrations and part of honoring the dead. Ritual foods are symbolic

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and may include various nuts but also grain, corn, wheat, rye, oats, barley, beans and lentils. On the feast of St. Archangel Michael, for example, the preparation of the food symbolizes health and fertility to the family and livestock in the coming year (Kovacheva and Boceva 2014, 70-71), and is meant to honor the deceased. These sorts of food preparation rituals predate milling flour and baking bread but were adopted into the funeral customs of the Ancient Greeks and in the Macedonian folk tradition.

While the specific origins of grain, barley, corn and beans are unknown, wheat has come to symbolize life. Wheat is revered as a gift from the gods as the basic and most important food associated with the gift of life (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 2005, 316-317). The symbolism of wheat is also evident in Christianity, as St. John glorified Jesus through his death by stating, "Verily, verily, I say to unto you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (*The Gospel of John* 12. 25). The harvesting of wheat with a sickle during holidays symbolizes the new life that will be born in the place where the stem was cut (Burkert 1985, 288).

Conclusion

Shapkarev (1976, 132) stated that home celebrations (slavas) have their roots in the pagan times, during which people believed in many gods. Families or communities would occasionally hold a celebration in their honor, which would include various ritual activities. Today's rituals are the same as the pagan rituals left to us from our ancestors, but modified in accordance with modern religious views and transformed into Christian holidays. During these holidays the roles of the pagan gods are given over modern Christian saints (Shapkarev 1976, 132). Therefore, the interpretation and comparison of Hermes and Archangel Michael give us insight into their corresponding characters, popularly accepted as a reaper of souls and a psychopomp, holding a stick. Hence, the mythological character of Hermes has possibly been transformed into St. Archangel Michael, the highly revered saint in Orthodox Christianity.

According to Christian beliefs, God created the spiritual world before creating the material world. Since angels are spiritual beings and therefore invisible to people, they are

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represented as humans with wings in the frescoes of churches (Kitevski 2013, 288-289). St. Archangel Michael is particularly revered in the Orthodox Church, as evident by numerous murals bearing his likeness in churches and monasteries throughout Macedonia. He is most often shown with a sword in his hand, which is meant to warn believers that those who enter the holy temple with an impure heart will be slain. Paintings of Archangel Gabriel often accompany those of Archangel Michael. Since both are regarded as guardians of the temple they are generally placed at the entrance of the church. Similar compositions exist at the entrance of churches in Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia. The depictions show Michael holding a sword and Gabriel holding a pen and scrolls inscribed with text. These images are held in high regard by Orthodox people in the Balkans, as is evidenced by the paintings in the Perivlepta churches of Ohrid, Macedonia, in Decani, Serbia, in Panagia Olimpiotisa in Greece and in the church of the Virgin of Proton, located in monastic town of Karyes on Mount Athos (Grozdanov 2012, 134-137).

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