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## PROCOPIUS ON THE RELIGION OF THE EARLY SLAVS: COMPARISON WITH OTHER BARBARIANS\*

**Abstract.** The works of Procopius of Caesarea are generally perceived as one of the earliest and main Byzantine sources on culture of the early Slavs. Its various passages have repeatedly become subject of numerous interpretations and hypotheses. The present article adopts a different approach to this material and compares the information on the religion of the Sclavenes and the Antes with the beliefs of other barbarian groups mentioned by Procopius. The study demonstrates that the sentences on early Slavic religion are rather unique in Procopius's works especially in respect to the variety of his topics. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that the most similar elements in his descriptions of religious practices connect the early Slavs and the inhabitants of the island of Thule. This does not mean, however, that they were perceived as related by Procopius as there are no similarities in the description of other cultural specificities. The textual evidence nevertheless indicates that Procopius described the religious practices of these two groups in similar terms.

**Keywords:** Procopius of Caesarea, early Slavs, early Slavic religion

The accounts on the Sclavenes and Antes in the work of Procopius of Caesarea is a very well-studied topic that has been extensively researched in the past. In general, the information in Procopius' work is considered to be one of the oldest testimonies on the ethnonym Sclavenes who, together with the Antes, are generally perceived to be the early Slavs<sup>1</sup>. Traditionally, Procopius' works are cited as

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. J. UDOLPH, *Zum Stand der Diskussion um die Urheimat der Slawen*, BN N.F. 14, 1979, p. 1–23; A. ŁUKASZEWICZ, *De Sclavinis et slavivis...*, DHA 24.2, 1998, p. 129; E. MÜHLE, *Die Slaven im Mittelalter*, Berlin–Boston 2016, p. 4–5; G. WEISS, *Das Ethnikon Sklabenoi, Sklaboi in den griechischen Quellen bis 1025*, [in:] *Glossar zur frühmittelalterlichen Geschichte im östlichen Europa*, Beiheft 5, Stuttgart 1988, p. 25–44; P. HEATHER, *Empires and Barbarians. The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*, Oxford 2010, p. 392–393; P.M. BARFORD, *The Early Slavs. Culture and Society in Early Medieval Eastern Europe*, New York 2001, p. 35–36.

one of the main sources of our knowledge on the early Slavs' culture. Although he mentioned the beliefs of the Sclavenes and Antes very briefly in his excursus on these ethnicities, his testimony is one of the most quoted and discussed concerning their religion<sup>2</sup>, as despite its shortness it is the most detailed account on Slavic pre-Christian religion in an early Byzantine source. Nevertheless, the aim of this study is to focus on the problem of describing the religion of the Sclavenes and Antes in Procopius' work from a different point of view. The key question is how much the description of the religious customs of the Sclavenes differs from the description of the religions of other barbarian ethnicities, which the Byzantine author dealt with. From the Byzantine perspective the attention that Procopius generally paid to details about various pagan religions is rather unique. Other Byzantine authors from this period usually did not address issues related to non-Christian religions and in case they did, the texts definitely provided fewer details or a smaller amount of information than Procopius.

The aim of the present article is not to put the early Slavic religion in the context of contemporary knowledge about the culture of the early Slavs nor to interpret the content of testimonies, but to answer the question of how much the Sclavenes' faith was perceived by Procopius differently or similarly in comparison with other barbarians he paid attention to.

### Procopius on the religion of the Sclavenes and Antes:

#### Ὑπὲρ τῶν πολέμων<sup>3</sup> VII (III) XIV

[23] θεὸν μὲν γὰρ ἓνα τὸν τῆς ἀστραπῆς δημιουργὸν ἀπάντων κύριον μόνον αὐτὸν νομίζουσιν εἶναι, καὶ θύουσιν αὐτῷ βόας τε καὶ ἱερεῖα πάντα· εἰμαρμένην δὲ οὔτε ἴσασιν οὔτε ἄλλως ὁμολογοῦσιν ἓν γε ἀνθρώποις ῥοπήν τινα ἔχειν, ἀλλ' ἐπειδὰν αὐτοῖς ἐν ποσὶν ἤδη ὁ θάνατος εἴη, ἢ νόσῳ ἀλοῦσιν ἢ ἐς πόλεμον καθισταμένοις, ἐπαγγέλλονται μὲν, ἦν διαφύγωσι, θυσίαν τῷ θεῷ ἀντὶ τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτίκα ποιήσῃν, διαφυγόντες δὲ θύουσιν ὄπερ ὑπέσχοντο, καὶ οἴονται τὴν σωτηρίαν αὐτῆς δὴ τῆς θυσίας αὐτοῖς ἐωνῆσθαι.

[24] σέβουσι μέντοι καὶ ποταμούς τε καὶ νύμφας καὶ ἄλλα ἄττα δαμόνια, καὶ θύουσι καὶ αὐτοῖς ἅπασι, τὰς τε μαντείας ἐν ταύταις δὴ ταῖς θυσίαις ποιοῦνται...

<sup>2</sup> E.g. L. NIEDERLE, *Slovanské starožitnosti*, vol. II.1, Praha 1916, p. 66, 93 and elsewhere; M. TÉRA, *Prokopiova relace o víře starých Slovanů*, [in:] *Konference mladých slavistů I. Slavistika dnes. Trendy a perspektivy*, ed. D. FILIPPOVÁ, Praha 2005, p. 113–118; A. LOMA, *Procopius about the Supreme God of the Slavs (Bella VII 14, 23): Two Critical Remarks*, 3PBI 41, 2004, p. 67–70; H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, *Religia Słowian i jej upadek*, Warszawa 1979, p. 82–90; A. SZYJEWSKI, *Religia Słowian*, Kraków 2003, p. 43–44, 100, 138sqg; R. BENEDICTY, *Die Milieu-Theorie bei Prokop von Kaisareia*, BZ 55, 1962, p. 1–10; E.R. LUJÁN MARTÍNEZ, *Texts in Greek*, [in:] *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, ed. J.A. ÁLVAREZ-PEDROSA, Leiden–Boston 2021 [= TSHR, 169], p. 22–26. And many other publications.

<sup>3</sup> PROCOPUS CAESARIENSIS, *De bellis*, [in:] *Procopii Caesariensis Opera Omnia*, vol. II, rec. J. HAURY, Lipsiae 1905 [= BSGR] (cetera: PROCOPUS, *De bellis*), p. 357–358.

### The Wars of Justinian<sup>4</sup> VII (III) XIV

[23] They believe that one god, the maker of lightning, is alone lord of all things, and they sacrifice to him cattle and all other victims; but as for fate, they neither know it nor in any way admit that it has power over men, whenever they face death, either stricken with sickness or at the start of a war, they promise that, if they escape, they will immediately make a sacrifice just what they have promised and consider that their safety has been bought with this same sacrifice.

[24] But they also revere rivers and nymphs and some other spirits, and they sacrifice to all these too, and they make their divinations in connection with these sacrifices....

### The “Creator of lightning”

Among the most frequently quoted passages from Procopius’ work related to the Slavic pre-Christian religion is the one informing about the god, creator of lightning (... τῆς ἀστραπῆς δημιουργὸν...). Traditionally, the passage has been considered to be the oldest written testimony of the god Perun or Svarog<sup>5</sup>. There exist several different interpretations and translations of this passage<sup>6</sup>. Some scholars translate the part of the sentence as follows: *the creator of lightning is the sole ruler of everything*<sup>7</sup>. This translation supports the interpretation that the passage was influenced by the attempts to search for parallels between barbaric paganism and ancient Greek religion, where the chief god was Zeus<sup>8</sup>, who was also referred to

<sup>4</sup> PROKOPIOS, *The Wars of Justinian*, trans. H.B. DEWING, rev. A. KALDELLIS, Indianapolis 2014 (cetera: H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS), p. 408–409.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. J. MÁCHAL, *Bájesloví slovanské*, Praha 1907, p. 54; L. NIEDERLE, *Slovanské...*, p. 93; A. BRÜCKNER, *Mitologja słowiańska*, Kraków 1918, p. 35; M. TĚRA, *Perun – bůh hromovládcce. Sonda do slovanského archaického náboženství*, Červený Kostelec 2009, p. 66; N. PROFANTOVÁ, M. PROFANT, *Encyklopedie slovanských bohů a mýtů*, Praha 2004, p. 91–92; H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, *Religia Słowian...*, p. 82–85; A. SZYJEWSKI, *Religia Słowian...*, p. 43–47, 99–101; M. BIAŁOUS, *Fenomen religii prastłowian*, El 18, 2006, p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> For the overview cf., e.g. H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, *Religia Słowian...*, p. 82–85 or М.Г. ПИТАЛЕВ, *Славяне. Происхождение язычества*, Москва 2019, p. 18–20.

<sup>7</sup> English translation: *For they believe that one god, the maker of the lightning, is alone lord of all things...* (Procopius in Seven Volumes, vol. IV, *History of the Wars, Books 6 (cont.) – 7*, trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, London 1962 [= LCL, 173], p. 271); Czech translation: *Věří, že je jediný bůh, tvůrce hromu, a jediný pán všech věcí...* (PROKOPIOS z KAISAREIE, *Válka s Góty*, trans. P. BENEŠ, Praha 1985, p. 211); Polish translation: *boga bowiem jednego twórcę błyskawicy uważają za jedynego pana wszechrzeczy...* (in: H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, *Religia Słowian...*, p. 82); German translation: *Sie glauben an einen einzigen Gott, den Blitzeschleuderer und alleinigen Herrn über alles...* (PROKOP, *Gotenkriege*, ed. et trans. O. VEH, München 1966, p. 527).

<sup>8</sup> A. BRÜCKNER, *Mitologja słowiańska...*, p. 108; М.Г. ПИТАЛЕВ, *Славяне...*, p. 20; H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, *Religia Słowian...*, p. 86 (H. Łowmiański noted that Tacitus used a similar expression when describing a god of Germans). Some scholars even emphasized that the particular expression ἀστραπῆς δημιουργὸν is rather close to the passage in Sophocles’ *Aias* (*Aias* 1035: ἐχάλκευσε ξίφος... Αἴδης δημιουργὸς ἄγριος), cf. *Свод древнейших письменных известий о славянах I (I–VI в.в.)*. *Согрус*

in ancient sources as ἀστράπαιος<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, the expression τῆς ἀστραπῆς δημιουργὸν is considered to be unusual in Greek literature in general<sup>10</sup>. Also an opinion has been expressed that in this early period, one divine figure could indeed dominate the religious ideas of the Slavs<sup>11</sup>.

Of particular note is the reality that with respect to other barbarians, the cult of a god of thunder/lightning is not mentioned at all by Procopius. Concerning other ethnic groups in Procopius' works, in most cases there are no indications of the functions of particular deities, and almost no mention exists suggesting the primacy of one god over the others. The only exceptions exist in the cases of the inhabitants of the island of Thule and the Persians. In the case of the inhabitants of Thule, Procopius noted that they sacrifice the first war captive to Ares, whom they regard as the greatest god<sup>12</sup>. In the context of the Persians, Procopius stated that they honour fire above all gods and, moreover, in this passage there exists a connection to ancient Roman cults<sup>13</sup>. As regards other ethnicities, there is mention of the existence of a cult of the Sun, however there is no indication that the cult is in any way the most significant one<sup>14</sup>.

*testimiorum vetustiorum ad historiam slavica pertinentium I (I–VI saecula)*, ed. L.A. GINDIN, S.A. IVANOV, G.G. LITAVRIN, Moskva 1991, p. 221 (com. 70).

<sup>9</sup> E.g. *LSJ*, p. 262; or ... ἀπὸ τῆς ἐσχάρας τοῦ ἀστραπαιῶν Διός... in *Strabonis Geographica*, IX, II, 11, vol. II, rec. A. MEINEKE, Lipsiae 1877, p. 571.

<sup>10</sup> A. LOMA, *Procopius about the Supreme God...*, p. 68–69.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. R. BENEDICTY, *Prokopios' berichte über die slavische vorzeit. Beiträge zur historiographischen method des Prokopios von Kaisareia*, *JÖB* 14, 1965, p. 71; H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, *Religia Słowian...*, p. 82 – On the discussion cf. M. TÉRA, *Prokopiova relace...*, p. 113–117; IDEM, *Perun...*, p. 65–66.

<sup>12</sup> PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, VI, XV, [25], vol. II, p. 218: τοῦτον γὰρ τῷ Ἄρει θύουσιν, ἐπεὶ θεὸν αὐτὸν νομίζουσι μέγιστον εἶναι / *for they sacrifice him to Ares, whom they regard as the greatest god* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 350).

<sup>13</sup> PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, II, XXIV, 2, vol. I, p. 260: τὸ μέγα πυρεῖον ἐνταυῦθ' ἔστιν, ὃ σέβονται Πέρσαι θεῶν μάλιστα... τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ πῦρ, ὅπερ Ἑστίαν ἐκάλουν τε καὶ ἐσέβοντο ἐν τοῖς ἄνω χρόνοις Ῥωμαῖοι / *In that place is the great sanctuary of fire, which the Persians revere above all other gods... this is the fire which the Romans worshipped under the name of Hestia in ancient times* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 125).

<sup>14</sup> E.g. in the case of the Persians: PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, II, XI, 1, vol. I, p. 198: Τότε ὁ Χοσρόης ἐς Σελεύκειαν, πόλιν ἐπιθαλασσίαν, Ἀντιοχείας τριάκοντα καὶ ἑκατὸν σταδίοις διέχουσαν ἦλθεν, ἐνταυῦθ' αὖτε Ῥωμαίων οὐδένα οὔτε εὐράν οὔτε λυμηνάμενος ἀπελούσατο μὲν ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης τῷ ὕδατι μόνος, θύσας τε τῷ ἡλίῳ καὶ οἴσισιν ἄλλοις ἐβούλετο, πολλὰ τε ἐπιθειάσας ὀπίσω ἀπῆλθον / *Then Chosroes went to Seleukeia, a city by the sea, 130 stades distant from Antioch; and there he neither met nor harmed a single Roman, but bathed alone in the sea, sacrificed to the sun and such other divinities as he wished and, calling upon the gods many times, went back* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 95). On Blemyes: PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, I, XIX, 36, vol. I, p. 106: οἱ μέντοι Βλέμυες καὶ ἀνθρώπους τῷ ἡλίῳ θύειν εἰώθασιν. ταῦτα δὲ τὰ ἐν Φίλαις ἱερὰ οὗτοι δὴ οἱ βάρβαροι καὶ ἐς ἐμὲ εἶχον, ἀλλὰ βασιλεὺς αὐτὰ Ἰουστινιανὸς καθελεῖν ἔγνω / *But the Blemyes are accustomed also to sacrifice human beings to the Sun...* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 52).

Several scholars noted the possibility of a different reading and interpretation of the passage about the main god of the Slavs using a different manuscript edition of Procopius' text from the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>15</sup>. In this version there exists a plural form of the word θεός (θεῶν μὲν γὰρ ἕνα τὸν τῆς ἀστραπῆς δημιουργὸν [...] νομίζουσιν εἶναι). This text enables one to translate the passage as "he believes that one of the gods – the god of lightning – is the chief ruler of everything"<sup>16</sup>. If this variant reading is accepted, we can see that there is even one more similarity with the description of the inhabitants of Thule: in both cases Procopius speaks about a kind of henotheism, thus meaning a worship of one overarching god beside which exist various other deities. Such an interpretation actually makes the reports on the Slavic religion and on the religion of Thule's inhabitants even closer.

The use of the word θεός (god), which Procopius employed a total of twice in connection with the Slavs, is very interesting. The noun appeared in Procopius' works more than one hundred and seventy times, but the vast majority of the examples related to the Christian God (Chart 1). Only in a few cases did Procopius speak of a god/gods in connection with the religion of the ancient nations<sup>17</sup>, and in fifteen instances the word has been identified in cases that related to the pagan religion of the barbarians (Chart 2). It is obvious that in the case of the pagans, the use of this term was severely limited<sup>18</sup>. In addition, the word δημιουργός (creator) is not a common expression in Procopius' works, and apart from the Sclavenes, the term was used only in connection with the Christian God (Creator)<sup>19</sup>.

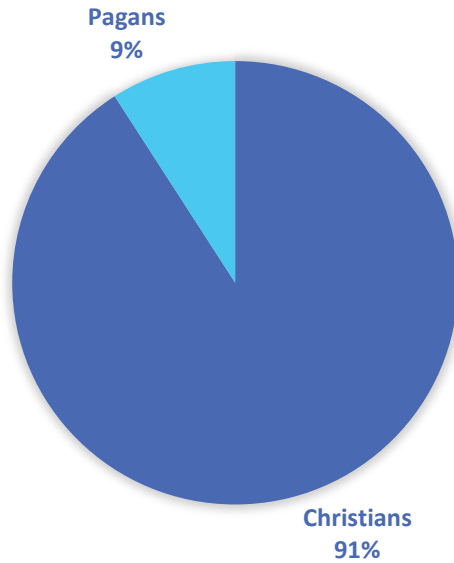
<sup>15</sup> Свод древнейших..., р. 12–13, 221–223; О.Н. ТРУБАЧЕВ, *Мысли о дохристианской религии славян в свете славянского языкознания (по поводу новой книги: Leszek Moszyński. Die vorchristliche Religion der Slaven im Lichte der slavischen Sprachwissenschaft. Böhlau Verlag, Köln–Weimar–Wien, 1992)*, ВЯ 1994, р. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Свод древнейших..., р. 183, 221 (com. 70): *Ибо они считают, что один из богов – изготовитель молний – именно он есть единый влаыка всего.*

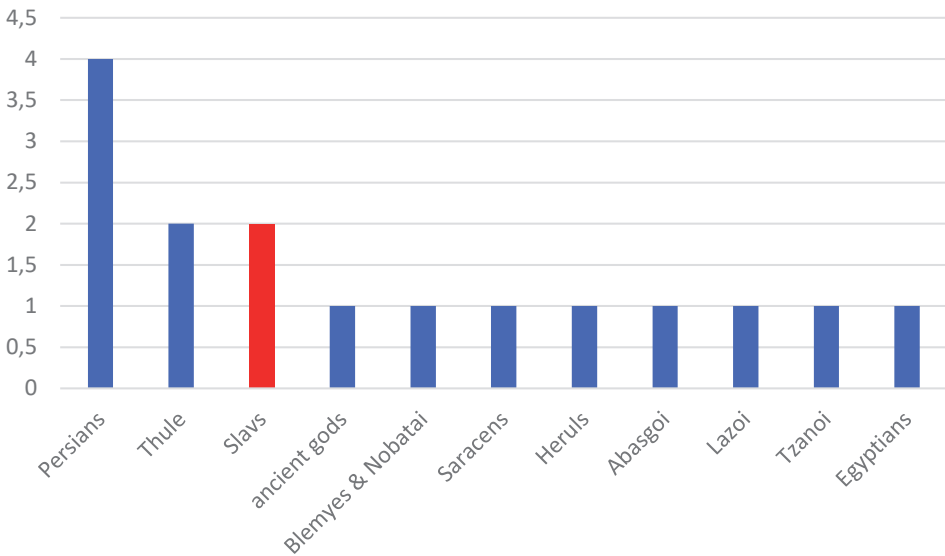
<sup>17</sup> E.g. PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, V, XXV, 19 (Romans); *Procopius in Seven Volumes*, vol. VII, *Buildings, General Index to Procopius*, VI, I, 12 (Egyptians), trans. H.B. DEWING, coll. G. DOWNEY, London 1971 [= LCL, 343] (cetera: PROCOPUS, *De aedificiis*), p. 364–365.

<sup>18</sup> PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, I, XIV, 11 (Persians); I, XIX, 35 (Blemyes a Nobatai); II, VII, 22 (Persians); II, IX, 1 and 3 (Persians); II, XVI, 18 (Saracens/Arabs); II, XXIV, 2 (Persians); VI, XIV, 1 (Heruls); VI, XV, 23 and 25 (Scrithifini from the island of Thule); VI, XIV, 23 and 24 (Slavs); VIII, II, 14 (Abasgoi); VIII, XVI, 10 (Lazoi). PROCOPUS, *De aedificiis*, III, VI, 2 (Tzanoi).

<sup>19</sup> PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, VIII, VI, 29, vol. II, p. 515: ...ἐν δὲ Λαζικῇ πανταχόθεν ἡ γῆ τῆς θαλάσσης ἀποκρουμένη τὴν πρόοδον καὶ ἀναχαιτίζουσα τὸν αὐτῆς δρόμον, πρῶτόν τε καὶ μόνον ἀπολήγειν αὐτὴν ἐνταῦθα ποιεῖ, τοῦ δημιουργοῦ δηλονότι τὰ ὅρια σφίσι τῆδε θεμένου... / *But in Lazike the land checks the advance of the sea on all sides and puts a stop to its movement, and thus makes its first and only ending at that point, the Creator obviously having set bounds there for the sea and land* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 474–475).



**Chart 1.** The frequency of the noun “god” (θεός)  
(prepared by Pavla Gkantzos Drapelova)



**Chart 2.** The frequency of the noun “god” (θεός) among pagans  
(prepared by Pavla Gkantzos Drapelova)

## Worship of deities

The following paragraph begins with the verb to worship (σέβω)<sup>20</sup>. In total, various forms of this verb are found in Procopius' works fifteen times. In several cases, the verb was used by Procopius in a figurative sense, for example in sentences expressing the fact that someone honours or respects someone or something<sup>21</sup>. In most cases, however, the verb had a religious meaning. In the *Wars*, all cases were associated with pagan worship<sup>22</sup>. In the *Secret History* and the *Buildings*, this verb was used primarily in connection with the Christian faith<sup>23</sup>. Only in two cases in the *Buildings* was the term used in the context of non-Christian religion<sup>24</sup>.

In addition, the text indicated the author's endeavour to emphasize the relationship of the early Slavs to the water deities. Procopius literally states that the Sclavenes and Antes worshipped rivers. The term ποταμός (river) in connection with religion appeared only twice: in the cases of the Slavs and Scythifini, the inhabitants of the island of Thule<sup>25</sup>. In the case of the people from Thule, Procopius noted that they worship demons living in water springs, a similar practice is not mentioned in the case of any other nation. Only in one passage can there be considered indirect evidence of the role of the river during sacrifices. In the case of the Franks, Procopius stated that they threw the bodies of Gothic women and children they had previously sacrificed in a river<sup>26</sup>.

The word νύμφη (nymph) is also relatively rare in Procopius' works. Moreover, this noun did not necessarily express a water deity, but in its original meaning it referred to a young woman or a bride. Procopius used the term "nymph"

<sup>20</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VII, XIV, 24, vol. II, p. 357: σέβουσι μέντοι καὶ ποταμούς τε καὶ νύμφας καὶ ἄλλα ἅττα δαιμόνια... / *But they also revere rivers and nymphs and some other spirits* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 409).

<sup>21</sup> E.g. PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, I, XI, 5; VII, XVI, 9.

<sup>22</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, I, XI, 35 (Persians); I, XIX, 35 (Blemyes and Nobatai); I, XX, 1 (Himyarites); VI, XV, 23 (Thule); VII, XIV, 24 (Slavs).

<sup>23</sup> E.g. PROCOPIUS CAESARIENSIS, *Historia arcana*, III, 24, [in:] *Procopii Caesariensis Opera Omnia*, vol. III, rec. J. HAURY, Lipsiae 1906 [= BSGR] (cetera: PROCOPIUS, *Historia arcana*). PROCOPIUS, *De aedificiis*, I, VI, 4; II, XI, 4 and elsewhere.

<sup>24</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De aedificiis*, III, VI, 2 (Tzanoi); V, VII, 2 (Samaritans).

<sup>25</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VI, XV, 23, vol. II, p. 218: ...Οἱ μέντοι ἄλλοι Θουλίται ὡς εἰπεῖν ἅπαντες οὐδέν τι μέγα διαλλάσσοσι τῶν ἄλλων ἀνθρώπων, θεοῦ μέντοι καὶ δαίμονας πολλοὺς σέβουσι, οὐρανίους τε καὶ ἀερίους, ἐγγεῖους τε καὶ θαλασσίους, καὶ ἄλλα ἅττα δαιμόνια ἐν ὕδασι πηγῶν τε καὶ ποταμῶν εἶναι λεγόμενα / ...*All the other inhabitants of Thule, practically speaking, do not differ much from the rest of mankind, but they revere many gods and spirits both of the heavens and the air, of the earth and the sea, and sundry other spirits that are said to be in the waters of springs and rivers* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 350).

<sup>26</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VI, XXV, 9, vol. II, p. 262: ἐπιλαβόμενοι δὲ τῆς γεφύρας οἱ Φράγγοι παῖδας τε καὶ γυναῖκας τῶν Γότθων, οὐσπερ ἐνταῦθα εὗρον, ἰερευόν τε καὶ αὐτῶν τὰ σώματα ἐς τὸν ποταμὸν ἀκροθίνια τοῦ πολέμου ἐρρίπτουν / ...*But, upon getting control of the bridge, the Franks began to sacrifice the women and children of the Goths whom they found there and to throw their bodies into the river as the first fruits of the war...* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 369).

in connection with religion only twice: in the contexts of the early Slavs and the Persians<sup>27</sup>. In the case of the Slavs, many scholars interpret this testimony as evidence of a faith in fairies – rusalki<sup>28</sup>.

In the case of the Persians, however, there was only a mere mention, which does not allow one to formulate a hypothesis about the Persians' belief in water deities. Procopius reports that during his military expedition to Byzantine Syria, the Persian King Chosroes sacrificed to the nymphs of Daphne, a very important cult site near Antioch. So this testimony means that the Persian king actually visited and made a sacrifice at a place related to an old Hellenic cult.

Furthermore, Procopius stated that the Sclavenes and Antes worshipped various demons. The term δαιμόνιον, which Procopius used in their case, appeared in his works more than twenty times. In most cases, this noun has a clearly negative meaning and was used in the sense of “evil power” or “supernatural power”. This term thus appeared several times in the context of someone doing something or something happening to someone as a result of some higher power<sup>29</sup>. Only in two other cases was the word used in the same sense: that someone worships “supernatural powers”, i.e. demons. Both cases, like the passage on the early Slavs, come from the *Wars* and they concern the Persians<sup>30</sup> and the inhabitants of the island of Thule<sup>31</sup>. In the *Secret History*, the term was used more or less only in connection with a negative description of the reign of Justinian and Theodora<sup>32</sup>.

S.A. Ivanov in his commentary on Procopius' works, stated that the Byzantine author used the word δαιμόνιον in the singular to express some abstract divine power and saw a certain archaization in it, and *vice versa*, in the plural he used it in connection with pagan faith<sup>33</sup>. Another term – δαίμων – also appeared in the meaning of some supernatural power several times in Procopius' work and again very often had a negative sense, but it was not used in the context of barbarian worship.

<sup>27</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, II, XI, 6, vol. I, p. 199: καὶ θύσας ταῖς νύμφαις ἀπιὼν ᾤχετο... / *After sacrificing to the nymphs he departed...* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 95).

<sup>28</sup> J. DYNDA, *Rusalki: Anthropology of Time, Death, and Sexuality in Slavic Folklore*, SMS 20, 2017, p. 86. Lubomír Niederle noted that the identification with the rusalki is not sure, but it is considerable, L. NIEDERLE, *Slovanské...*, p. 58, 60.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, III, XXV, 18; IV, IV, 16; VII, XXXV, 3 etc.

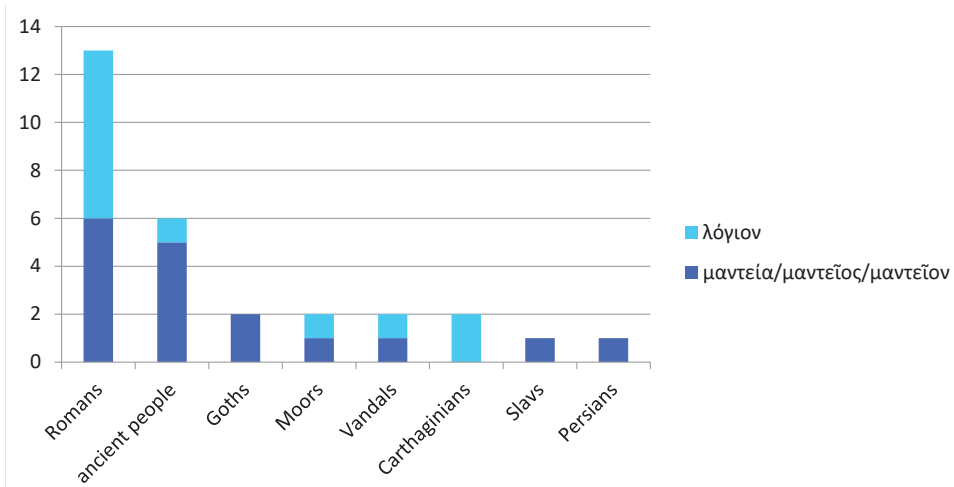
<sup>30</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, I, XI, 35, vol. I, p. 55 about Chosroes: καὶνὰ τε γὰρ αὐτὸν δαιμόνια σέβειν καὶ τελευτήσασαν ἔναγχος τὴν γυναῖκα θάψαι, ἀπειρημένον τοῖς Περσῶν νόμοις γῆ κρύπτειν ποτὲ τὰ τῶν νεκρῶν σώματα / *For he revered strange new divinities and recently by the laws of the Persians ever to hide in the earth the bodies of the dead* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 26).

<sup>31</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VI, XV, 23, vol. II, p. 218: καὶ δαίμονας πολλοὺς σέβουσιν, οὐράνιους τε καὶ ἀερίους, ἐγγεῖους τε καὶ θαλασσίους, καὶ ἄλλα ἄττα δαιμόνια ἐν ὕδασι πηγῶν τε καὶ ποταμῶν εἶναι λεγόμενα / ...they revere many gods and spirits both of the heavens and the air, of the earth and the sea, and sundry other spirits that are said to be in the waters of springs and rivers (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 350).

<sup>32</sup> PROCOPIUS, *Historia arcana*, XII, 14, 15, 19, 20, 28; XXII, 25 and 28.

<sup>33</sup> *Свод древнейших...*, p. 223 (com. 79).





**Chart 3.** The frequency of terms related to prophecy (prepared by Pavla Gkantziou Drapelova)

Moreover, Procopius mentioned that prophecies were performed by the Scлавenes and Antes in connection with the worship of these various deities (τε μαντείας ἐν ταύταις δὴ ταῖς θυσίαις ποιοῦνται). Words expressing divination or a prophecy with the same word-forming root (μαντεία/μαντεῖος/μαντεῖον) appeared in the context of different nations, including the Byzantines themselves and the ancient Greeks (Chart 3). The closest parallel can be found in the context of the Franks in whose case Procopius noted that they receive prophecies after sacrifices<sup>34</sup>. In addition to these terms, Procopius used the noun *λόγιον* several times in his work in the sense of prophecy<sup>35</sup>, but never in connection with the Scлавenes and Antes.

## Fate

Another of Procopius' statements that provoked debate among scholars and became a subject of various discussions is the reference to the fact that the Scлавenes and Antes did not believe in fate, *heimarmene*<sup>36</sup>. The verb *μείρομαι* (εἰμαρμένην – acc. part. perf. med.) literally means “to get one's share”, i.e. one's destiny<sup>37</sup>. This verb is

<sup>34</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VI, XXV, 10, vol. II, p. 262: θυσίαις τε χρώμενοι ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἄλλα οὐχ ὄσια ἱερεύοντες, ταύτη τε τὰς μαντείας ποιοῦμενοι / for they still make human sacrifices and other unholy offerings, and thereby they obtain oracles (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 369).

<sup>35</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, III, XXI, 14 and 16; IV, VIII, 17; IV, XII, 28 and elsewhere.

<sup>36</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VII, XIV, 23, vol. II, p. 357: εἰμαρμένην δὲ οὔτε ἴσασιν οὔτε ἄλλως ὁμολογοῦσιν ἐν γὰρ ἀνθρώποις ῥοπήν τινεῖ / but as for fate, they neither know it nor in any way admit that it has power over men (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 408).

<sup>37</sup> LSJ, p. 1093.

not common in Procopius' work at all and except for the instance in the context of the early Slavs, which is included in various editions, it appeared in Procopius' text exclusively in two Parisian manuscripts in a note expressing the fact that the belief in Fate is in contrast to Christianity<sup>38</sup>.

Various scholars explain the passage as saying that the Slavs did not believe in an irreversible fate, but believed in demons and supernatural forces that could influence their life<sup>39</sup> and this interpretation is in line with the facts known from Slavic folklore<sup>40</sup>. In any case, there exist various interpretations<sup>41</sup>. It is noteworthy that Procopius did not address similar issues (e.g. a belief in Fate or Providence) in the case of other barbarians, and only in the context of the early Slavs did he mention their different perceptions in any way. Just in the case of the Byzantines themselves did Procopius note the existence of cults of Fate's personifications that were connected to an older Roman tradition<sup>42</sup>.

### Sacrifice

The short passage on the Slavs and their religion actually mentions several times the fact that the early Slavs sacrificed to their deities. In the case of the "thunderlord" god, Procopius states that cattle (βοῦς) and other sacrifices were offered up to him. The very fact that Procopius mentioned a specific sacrificial animal is interesting, because in the case of other barbarians he did not do so<sup>43</sup>. Furthermore, in the case of nymphs and other deities (demons) worshipped by the early Slavs he does not specify the type of sacrifice.

<sup>38</sup> οὐκ ὀρθῶς παρεισφέρεις τῇ τῶν Χριστιανῶν πίστει δαιμόνιον καὶ τύχην καὶ εἰμαρμένην in Codex B, it is written εἰμαρμένη τύχη in Codex A, cf. F. DAHN, *Prokopius von Cäsarea. Ein Beitrag zur Historiographie der Völkerwanderung und des sinkenden Römerthums*, Berlin 1865, p. 190; M.A. ELFERINK, *ΤΥΧΗ et Dieu chez Procope de Césarée*, AClas 10, 1967, p. 111.

<sup>39</sup> J. MÁCHAL, *Bájesloví...*, p. 54; L. NIEDERLE, *Slovanské...*, p. 66; H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, *Religia Słowian...*, p. 89–90; *Свод древнейших...*, p. 222 (com. 74). In addition, see on the concept of heimarmene among neoplatonists I. HADOT, *Studies on the Neoplatonist Hierocles*, trans. M. CHASE, Philadelphia 2004 [= TAPS, 94], p. 98–125. I. Hadot notes on page 122 that *If Heimarmenē exerts its influence on the external and physical conditions of our life that is, if the demons ensure the complete accomplishment of all the elements included in the lot that Heimarmenē assigns to us as a consequence of our choice – it is therefore Heimarmenē that settles almost all the external details of our life.*

<sup>40</sup> I. SEDAČKOVA, *The Notion of Fate (Russian судьба) in Slavonic Folk Tradition: an Ethnolinguistic Approach*, C.YTCS 28, 2012, p. 154–169. *Славянские древности. Этнолингвистический словарь*, vol. V, ed. Н.И. Толстой, Москва 2012, p. 206.

<sup>41</sup> On various interpretations of this passage, cf. e.g. A. SZYJEWSKI, *Religia Słowian...*, p. 144; D. BRODKA, *Die Geschichtsphilosophie in der Spätantiken Historiographie Studien zu Prokopios von Kaisareia, Agathias von Myrina und Theophylaktos Simokattes*, Frankfurt am Main 2004 [= STB, 5], p. 41; L. NIEDERLE, *Slovanské...*, p. 66; *Свод древнейших...*, p. 222 (com. 74); A. WOLEK, *Obraz Słowian w dziełach Prokopiusza z Cezarei*, ŻHE 5, 2012, p. 227–228.

<sup>42</sup> PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, V, XV, 11 and V, XXV, 19–20.

<sup>43</sup> The only case in which the certain connection between cattle and religion in Procopius' work can be identified was an event in Rome, when a man of Etruscan origin made a prediction based on the standing of a bull next to a brass statue, cf. PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, VIII, XXI, 11–16.

The verb θύω (sacrifice) was used three times in a given passage about the Sclavenes and Antes. This verb is not really very common in Procopius' works, and in his *Wars* it appears in various forms a total of twelve times<sup>44</sup>. In two cases, it was used in the comparison that someone was killed similarly to sacrificial cattle<sup>45</sup>. Nor can a purely negative connotation be sought in these examples, because in one case it was a Byzantine who managed to kill the enemy in this way, and in the other it concerned a Goth who was killed by another Goth. In the remaining ten cases, the term was used in the context of religious sacrifice<sup>46</sup>. Human sacrifices are mentioned in context with the peoples of the Blemyes, Saracens (i.e. Arabs) and Scythifini of Thule. In the case of the Arabs and Scythifini, Procopius specifically states that prisoners were sacrificed.

Likewise, the noun θυσία (sacrifice) is not common in Procopius' work. Most of the cases come again from the *Wars*<sup>47</sup>, and only one from the *Secret History*<sup>48</sup>. Procopius mentioned this term in connection with three nations: Slavs (3x), Heruls (1x) and Franks (1x). In the case of the Heruls and Franks, it is again directly linked to human sacrifices.

Another term for sacrifice that Procopius used in connection with the Slavs is ἱερεῖον. This term was used by Procopius in his work in a religious context only three times, two of which were in the context of the inhabitants of the island of Thule<sup>49</sup>. In the case of Thule, the sacrifices are also specified: one case speaks of "all kinds of sacrifices" and the other instance is directly related again to human sacrifices<sup>50</sup>. The verb ἱερεύω was employed by Procopius exclusively in the case of the inhabitants of Thule and the Franks and in both the cases the term was again related to human sacrifices<sup>51</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> In the other two works, there are no passages in which this Byzantine author spoke explicitly of any pagan sacrifices.

<sup>45</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, I, XIII, 32; V, XI, 9.

<sup>46</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, I, XIX, 36 (Blemyes); II, XI, 1 (Persians); II, XI, 6 (Persians); II, XXVIII, 13 (Arabs), VI, XV, 24–25 (3x Thule); VII, XIV, 23–24 (3x Slavs).

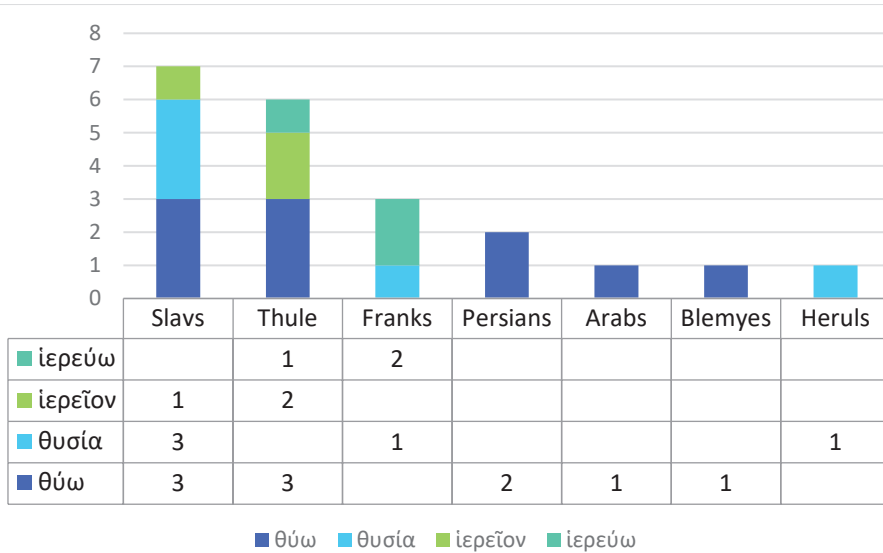
<sup>47</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VI, XIV, 1 (Heruls); VI, XXV, 10 (Franks); VII, XIV, 23–24 (3x Slavs).

<sup>48</sup> PROCOPIUS, *Historia arcana*, XI, 32 (pagans).

<sup>49</sup> Twice this term was employed in a figurative sense PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, I, XIII, 32 and V, XI, 9.

<sup>50</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VI, XV, 24, vol. II, p. 218: θύουσι δὲ ἐνδεδεχέστατα ἱερεῖα πάντα καὶ ἐναγίζουσι, τῶν δὲ ἱερείων σφίσι τὸ κάλλιστον ἄνθρωπός ἐστιν ὄνπερ δορυάλωτον ποιήσαιντο πρῶτον / *They incessantly offer up all kinds of sacrifices, in their eyes, is the first human being whom they have taken captive in war* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 350).

<sup>51</sup> On Thule: PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VI, XV, 25, vol. II, p. 218: ...ἱεραῖνται δὲ τὸν αἰχμάλωτον... / *They sanctify the captive...* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 350); on Franks: PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VI, XXV, 9, vol. II, p. 262: ...οἱ Φράγγοι, παῖδας τε καὶ γυναῖκας τῶν Γότθων, οὐσπερ ἐνταῦθα εὖρον ἱερευόν / *the Franks began to sacrifice the women and children of the Goths* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 369); PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VI, XXV, 10, vol. II, p. 262: ...θυσίας τε χρώμενοι ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἄλλα οὐχ ὅσα ἱερεύοντες /...*for they still make human sacrifices and other unholy offerings...* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 369).

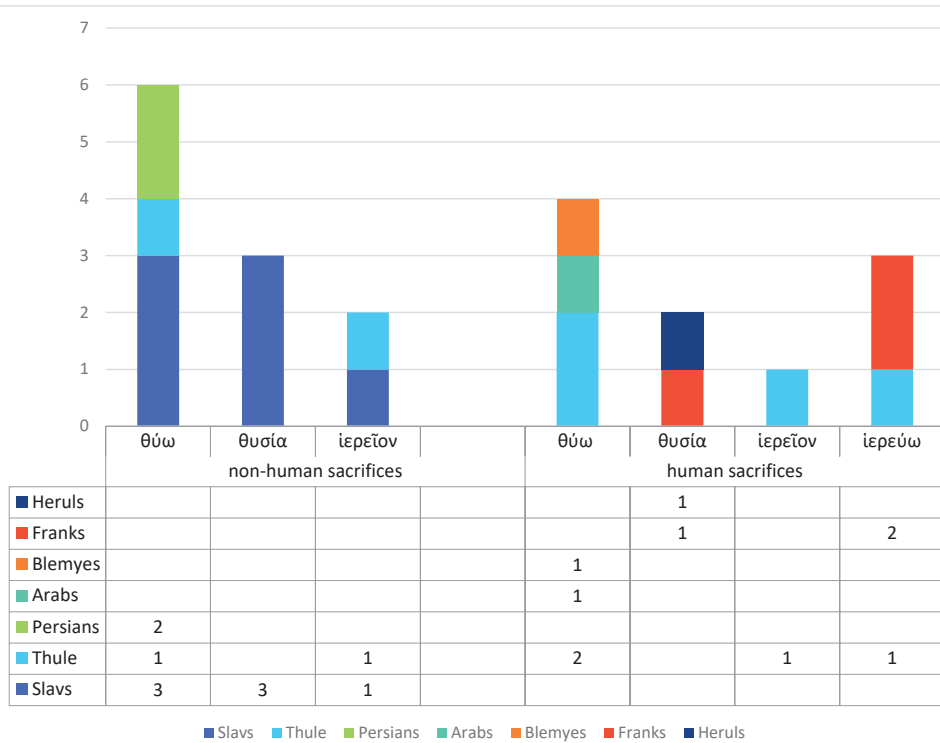


**Chart 4.** The frequency of terms related to sacrifices (θύω, θυσία, ιερείον, ιερεύω) (prepared by Pavla Gkantziou Drapelova)

If we look at the statistics (Chart 4), we see that all the terms used by Procopius to denote sacrifices in the case of the Slavs (the verb θύω and nouns θυσία and ιερείον) appeared also in connection with other barbarians, and always exclusively in the context of pagan religion. Of special interest is the fact that all three terms were also employed to describe human sacrifices. The only two nations in whose context the terms were never used explicitly in the sense of human sacrifice are the Persians and the Scлавenes (together with the Antes) (Chart 5).

In the context of the Scлавenes or Antes, Procopius did not mention human sacrifices at any point, although a hypothesis was formulated in the past that a certain passage in his work can be interpreted as evidence of the practice of sacrificing prisoners<sup>52</sup>. In his study, Eugenio Luján expressed the view that Procopius' description of the events that followed the conquest of the Byzantine city of Topeiros in 549/550 (the *Wars* VII, XXXVIII, 20–22) could be interpreted as a ritual sacrifice of prisoners by the Slavs. The scholar drew attention to the fact that the passage referring exclusively to the Scлавenes (not the Antes) mentioned several ways in which the prisoners were killed after the conquest of the city (impalement, beating to death, burning alive together with cattle) and attempted to interpret those as ritual practices comparing them with information on human sacrifices in the Slavic context from other sources.

<sup>52</sup> E. LUJÁN, *Procopius, De bello Gothico III 38.17–23: a Description of Ritual Pagan Slavic Slayings?*, SMS 11, 2008, p. 105–111.



**Chart 5.** Frequency of terms related to sacrifices (θύω, θυσία, ἱερεῖον, ἱερεῦω) depending on whether or not it is a human sacrifice (prepared by Pavla Gkantzios Drapelova)

Actually, impalement is one of the usual forms of punishment or an act of revenge in Procopius’ works and is mentioned in connection with the Persians, the Goths and the Roman (i.e. Byzantine) soldiers or the inhabitants of the Empire<sup>53</sup>. The only thing that makes the description of impalement really specific in the case of the Slavs is the absence of the verb ἀνασκολοπιζω (i.e. stabbing on a pole), which was used in all the other recorded cases<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, II, XI, 37–38; II, XVII, 11–12; III, III, 33; III, XII, 9 and 22; IV, I, 8; IV, XVIII, 18; V, X, 47.

<sup>54</sup> In the case of the Slavs the act was delivered in a rather descriptive form as follows: PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VII, XXXVIII, 20, vol. II, p. 470: ἔκτεινον δὲ τοὺς παραπίπτοντας οὔτε ξίφει οὔτε δόρατι οὔτε τῷ ἄλλῳ εἰωθότι τρόπῳ, ἀλλὰ σκόλοπας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς πηξάμενοι ἰσχυρότατα, ὄξεις τε αὐτοὺς ἐς τὰ μάλιστα ποιησάμενοι, ἐπὶ τούτων ξὺν βία πολλῇ τοὺς δειλαίους ἐκάθιζον, τὴν τε σκολόπων ἀκμὴν γλουτῶν κατὰ μέσον ἐνεῖροντες ὠθοῦντές τε ἄχρι ἐς τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὰ ἔγκατα, οὕτω δὲ αὐτοὺς διαχρήσασθαι ἠξιοῦν / They killed their victims not with sword or spear, nor in any other familiar way, but by planting stakes very firmly in the earth, having made them extremely sharp, and, by impaling the poor wretches upon them with great force, drove the point of the stake between the buttocks and pushed it up into the intestines. That was how they preferred to kill them (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELIS, p. 456–457).

From the aspect of the described brutality, the following two statements concerning the beating to death and burning alive are exceptional<sup>55</sup>. Procopius did not mention the beating or burning of prisoners anywhere else in his work. The acts of beatings or burning were usually associated with battles as a part of the turmoil of war<sup>56</sup>. In no other case is it possible to find in Procopius' works a similar testimony as in the case of the Slavs: there are no descriptions of torture and mass massacres of captives. Only in the cases of some barbarians (e.g. Franks, Scythifini, Arabs) – that were mentioned above – was it stated that a captive or a group of captives was sacrificed. In addition, in the context of the Scythifini from Thule Procopius described in detail the way in which the captives were sacrificed and noted the fact that the death was rather cruel<sup>57</sup>. Though the passage about the brutal killing of captives by the Sclavenes is really largely unusual and deviates somewhat from Procopius' texts. Nevertheless, the question remains whether the passage about the behaviour of the Sclavenes after the battle at Toperos can be interpreted as indirect evidence of the sacrifice of prisoners<sup>58</sup>, or if these acts should be perceived more as a "mere" description of barbaric cruelty<sup>59</sup> which for some reason

<sup>55</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VII, XXXVIII, 21, vol. II, p. 470: καὶ ξύλα δὲ παχέα τέτταρα ἐπὶ πλείστον ἐς γῆν κατορύξαντες οἱ βάρβαροι οὗτοι, ἐπ' αὐτῶν τε χεῖράς τε καὶ πόδας τῶν ἠλωκότων δεσμεύοντες, εἴτα ῥοπάλοις αὐτοὺς κατὰ κόρρης ἐνδελεχέστατα παίοντες, ὡς δὴ κύνας ἢ ὄφεις ἢ ἄλλο τι θηρίον διέφθειρον / *These barbarians also had a method of planting four thick stakes very deep in the ground and, after binding the hands and feet of the captives to them, they would then assiduously beat them over the head with clubs, killing them like dogs, snakes, or some other beast* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 457). PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VII, XXXVIII, 22, vol. II, p. 470: ἄλλους δὲ ζῦν τε βοῦσι καὶ προβάτοις, ὅσα δὴ ἐπάγεσθαι ἐς τὰ πάτρια ἦθη ὡς ἦκιστα εἶχον, ἐν τοῖς δωματίοις καθείρξαντες, οὐδεμιᾶ φειδοὶ ἐνεπίμψασαν. οὕτω μὲν Σκλαβηνοὶ τοὺς ἐντυχόντας ἀεὶ ἀνήρουν / *Others again they would imprison in their huts together with their cattle and sheep – those, of course, which they were unable to take with them to their native haunts – and then they would set fire to the huts without mercy* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 457).

<sup>56</sup> E.g. on beating during fights: PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, I, XIII, 31 and 34; I, XXIV, 51 and various other examples; on impalement: PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VI, XXVI, 26: Roman soldiers burned a traitor from their ranks as an act of revenge; PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VII, XIX, 19: Roman soldiers managed to set fire to ships containing enemy soldiers; PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VIII, XI, 61: Roman soldiers managed to set fire to the tower, in which enemy soldiers subsequently burned down.

<sup>57</sup> PROCOPIUS, *De bellis*, VI, XV, 25, vol. II, p. 218: ...ἱερῶνται δὲ τὸν αἰχμάλωτον οὐ θύοντες μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀπὸ ξύλου κρεμώντες, καὶ ἐς τὰς ἀκάνθας ῥιπτοῦντες, ταῖς ἄλλαις τε κτείνοντες θανάτου ιδέαις οἰκτίσταις / ...*They sanctify the captive not only by sacrificing him on an altar but alternately by hanging him from a tree, throwing him among thorns, or killing him by some other most cruel form of death* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 350).

<sup>58</sup> E. LUJÁN, *Prokopios...*, p. 105–111.

<sup>59</sup> Some scholars pointed out in the past that such brutal acts were actually common at this time, *Свод древнейших...*, p. 239 (com. 160). F. CURTA, *The Making of the Slavs. History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region, c. 500–700*, Cambridge 2001 [= CSMLT, 52], p. 85: *Procopius' description of the atrocities committed by the Sclavenes after conquering Topeiros matches not only contemporary historiographical clichés about barbarians, but also the appalling portrait of the Sclavenes by Pseudo-Caesarius.*

attracted Procopius and therefore he paid more attention to it. Given the absence of parallels in the context of other barbarians and the fact that a similar description does not occur in the other passages describing the raids of the early Slavs, it is unlikely that it would be a mere cliché aimed at depicting the Slavs in the worst possible light<sup>60</sup>. However, this does not confirm or deny that the given description of brutal treatment could be related to the ritual sacrifices of prisoners.

### Slavs versus other barbarians in Procopius' eyes

It is definitely worth mentioning the fact that most information on pagan religion in Procopius' works tended to be just random mentions that only completed the picture of a certain situation<sup>61</sup>. In the case of some barbarian ethnicities, the topic of religion was not addressed at all by Procopius. Only in the cases of the Slavs, Abasgoi<sup>62</sup>, Tzanoi<sup>63</sup>, Heruls<sup>64</sup> and Scythifini from Thule<sup>65</sup> are the descriptions

<sup>60</sup> In his monograph on the early Slavs in connection with the description of the massacres following the conquest of Toperos, Paul M. Barford stated that part of the description may be a literary topos, but that some of Procopius' observations seem to have a real basis, cf. P.M. BARFORD, *The Early Slavs...*, p. 58.

<sup>61</sup> E.g. the fact that the Persians worship fire, PROCOPIOUS, *De bellis*, II, XXIV, 2 or the fact that the Saracens celebrate the equinox, PROCOPIOUS, *De bellis*, II, XVI, 18 and perform human sacrifices, PROCOPIOUS, *De bellis*, II, XXVIII, 12–14.

<sup>62</sup> PROCOPIOUS, *De bellis*, VIII, III, 14, vol. II, p. 498: οἱ δὲ βάρβαροι οὗτοι μέχρι μὲν ἐς ἐμὲ ἄλση τε καὶ ὕλας ἐσέβοντο. θεοὺς γὰρ τὰ δένδρα βαρβάρῳ τινὶ ἀφελεία ὑπώπτειον εἶναι / *These barbarians have worshipped groves and forests down to my time, for with a sort of barbarian simplicity they supposed the trees were gods* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 468).

<sup>63</sup> PROCOPIOUS, *De aedificiis*, III, VI, 2–3, p. 204–207: αὐτόνομοι μὲν Τζάνοι ἐκ παλαιοῦ καὶ ἀναρχοὶ ᾤκουν, θηριώδη τινὰ βιοτήν ἔχοντες, θεοὺς μὲν τὰ τε ἄλση καὶ ὄρησι καὶ ἄλλα ἄττα ζῶα ἠγούμενοί τε καὶ σέβοντες, ἐν ὄρεσι δὲ οὐρανομήκεσι τε καὶ ἀμφιλαρέσι τὸν πάντα αἰῶνα διαίταν ἔχοντες, γῆν δὲ οὐδαμῇ γεωργοῦντες, ἀλλὰ ληστευόντες τε καὶ τοῖς φωρίοις αἰεὶ ἀποζῶντες. αὐτοὶ τε γὰρ ἀμελέτητοὶ εἰσὶν ἐργάεσθαι γῆν καὶ ἡ χώρα σφίσι, ἔνθα δὲ μὴ ὄρη τὰ γε ἀποτομώτατα περιβέβληται, λοφώδης ἐστὶν / *From ancient times the Tzanoi have lived as an independent people, without rulers, following a savage-like manner of life, regarding as gods the trees and birds and sundry creatures besides, and worshipping them, and spending their whole lives among mountains reaching to the sky and covered with forests, and cultivating no land whatever, but robbing and living always on their plunder. For they themselves are not skilled in cultivating the soil, and their country, at least where it is not occupied by the steepest mountains, is hilly.*

<sup>64</sup> PROCOPIOUS, *De bellis*, VI, XIV, 1, vol. II, p. 208: Οἵτινες δὲ ἀνθρώπων εἰσὶν Ἐρουλοὶ καὶ ὄθεν Ῥωμαῖοι ἐς ξυμμαχίαν κατέστησαν ἐρῶν ἔρχομαι. ὑπὲρ μὲν Ἰστρον ποταμῶν ἐκ παλαιοῦ ᾤκουν πολὺν τινα νομιζόντες θεῶν ὄμιλον, οὓς δὲ καὶ ἀνθρώπων θυσίας ἰλάσκεσθαι ὄσιον αὐτοῖς ἐδόκει εἶναι / *I turn now to explain who in the world the Heruls are and how they made an alliance with the Romans. They used to live beyond the Danube River from ancient times and worshipped a great host of gods, whom it seemed to them holy to appease even by human sacrifice* (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 345–346).

<sup>65</sup> PROCOPIOUS, *De bellis*, VI, XV, 23–25, vol. II, p. 218: 23 / τοῦτοις μὲν οὖν δὴ τοῖς βαρβάροις τὰ ἐς τὴν διαίταν ταύτη πη ἔχει. οἱ μέντοι ἄλλοι Θεουλῖται ὡς εἰπεῖν ἅπαντες οὐδὲν τι μέγα διαλλάσσοι τῶν ἄλλων ἀνθρώπων, θεοὺς μέντοι καὶ δαίμονας πολλοὺς σέβουσι, οὐρανίους τε καὶ ἀερίους,

of religion parts of a broader excursus into the culture of these nations, and therefore the information about the pagan faith of these groups is covered in more detail by Procopius. The descriptions of Slavic, Abasgoi, Tzanoi and Scythifini religions also bear several similar features, although it can be said that the descriptions of the Slavic religion and the religion of the inhabitants of the island of Thule are the closest ones. Moreover, there is almost no match between the vocabulary used by Procopius in the cases of the Slavs and Abasgoi, Tzanoi and Heruls. Except for the Heruls, Procopius emphasized in these cases faith in the power of nature: the Slavs worship water deities and the creator of lightning, the Abasgoi worship forests and groves, the Tzanoi regard trees and birds to be gods, and the Scythifini worship deities associated with heaven and air, earth and sea, and the “demons” of springs and rivers.

Nevertheless, some of the topics mentioned by Procopius in connection with the religion of the Scлавenes and Antes were not mentioned in the context of other barbarians (e.g. dis/belief in fate, type of sacrificial animals), some other motifs were widespread and found in the description of other barbarians too (e.g. prophecy) and at various times the vocabulary was rather similar to the vocabulary used in the context of the inhabitants of Thule and the Persians (main god, sacrifices, demons, water deities). If we look at the list of terms employed by Procopius in the sentences on the religion of the Scлавenes and Antes (Chart 6), it is obvious that most matches exist in cases of Thule<sup>66</sup> and the Persians. Actually, many matches exist also in the case of the Christians, but of course, here the vocabulary was used in a completely different context and sense than in the case of barbarians.

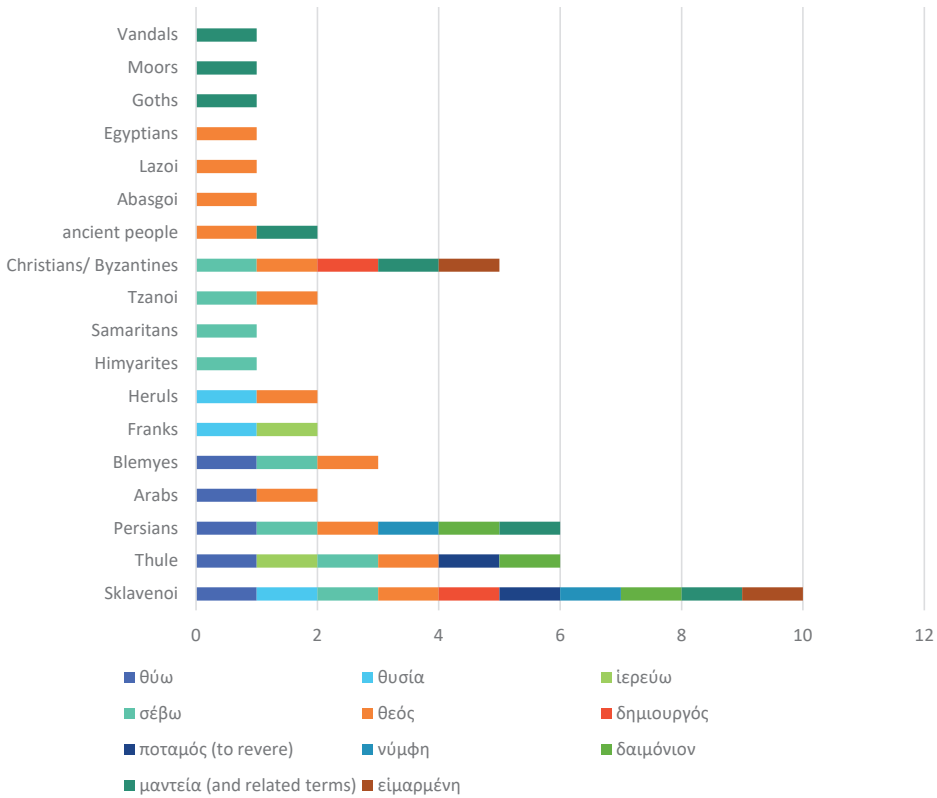
It is also worth mentioning the fact that in the case of the Persians, we speak about terms that were incorporated in narrations about Persians in various chapters of Procopius' work and they do not present a consistent testimony about their

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ἐγγείους τε καὶ θαλασσίους, καὶ ἄλλα ἅττα δαμόνια ἐν ὕδασι πηγῶν τε καὶ ποταμῶν εἶναι λεγόμενα. 24/ θύουσι δὲ ἐνδελεχέστατα ἱερεῖα πάντα καὶ ἐναγίζουσι, τῶν δὲ ἱερείων σφίσι τὸ κάλλιστον ἄνθρωπος ἐστὶν ὄνπερ δορυάλωτον ποιήσαιντο πρῶτον: 25/ τοῦτον γὰρ τῷ Ἄρει θύουσι, ἐπεὶ θεὸν αὐτὸν νομίζουσι μέγιστον εἶναι. ἱερῶνται δὲ τὸν αἰχμάλωτον οὐ θύοντες μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀπὸ ξύλου κρεμῶντες, καὶ ἐς τὰς ἀκάνθας ῥίπτουντες, ταῖς ἄλλαις τε κτείνοντες θανάτου ἰδέαις οἰκτιρίαις / [23] *So much, then, for the daily life of these barbarians. All the other inhabitants of Thule, practically speaking, do not differ much from the rest of mankind, but they revere many gods and spirits both of the heavens and the air, of the earth and the sea, and sundry other spirits that are said to be in the waters of springs and rivers. [24] They incessantly offer up all kinds of sacrifices and make oblations to the dead, but the noblest of sacrifices, in their eyes, is the first human being whom they have taken captive in war. [25] Him they sacrifice to Ares, whom they regard as the greatest god. They sanctify the captive not only by sacrificing him on an altar but alternately by hanging him from a tree, throwing him among thorns, or killing him by some other most cruel form of death* (trans. H.B. DEWING/ A. KALDELLIS, p. 350).

<sup>66</sup> Already Averil Cameron noted in her monograph on Procopius the similarity between the religion of the Scлавenes and Thule concerning their worship of rivers and spirits, cf. A. CAMERON, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, London 1985 [= TCH, 10], p. 218.





**Chart 6.** The variety of terminology used in the context of the Slavic religion (prepared by Pavla Gkantzos Drapelova)

culture, but random information in the context of other events and sometimes were even related to a particular person and not a group/nation. In the case of the inhabitants of Thule, the situation is the same as that of the Sclavenes and Antes: it is a part of a broader excursus that should introduce to readers some information about the ethnicity.

It is definitely interesting that the description of the religion of the early Slavs has most in common with the description of the religion of the slightly mysterious Scythifini ethnicity, which is mentioned in only one chapter of Procopius' work. Today, the prevailing view is that the island of Thule, inhabited by these Scythifini, was a designation for Scandinavia<sup>67</sup> and, in general, was perceived as a very remote

<sup>67</sup> A. KALDELLIS, *Ethnography after Antiquity. Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature*, Philadelphia 2013 [= EAF], p. 4, 9. A.H. MERRILLS, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge 2005 [= CSMLT, 64], p. 126–127. F. Nansen at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century even expressed an opinion that Procopius referred to the Sami, i.e. Lapps, by this term F. NANSEN, *Northern Mists. Arctic Exploration in Early Times*, vol. I, New York 1911, p. 132, 149.

place on the “edge of the world”<sup>68</sup>. The parallels in the description of the religions of the Slavs and Scythifini from Thule can thus indicate several factors: one is the reality that both of these groups (regardless of who precisely Procopius meant by the names Sclavenes, Antes and Scythifini) still had a religious system based equally on archaic Indo-European polytheistic starting points. Furthermore, the fact that Procopius and his contemporaries probably did not have much experience with either nation seems very likely, and therefore it seemed very useful to Procopius to include in his work excursus in which he would introduce these nations.

In describing the religions of both, he used a vocabulary and context he knew from classical texts to find parallels to the type of paganism most familiar to him<sup>69</sup>: in the case of the Slavs, the chief god is the ruler of lightning, in the case of the Scythifini it is Ares; both nations worship waters and various demons or spirits and in the case of the Slavs, Procopius even used the term nymph, which he used exclusively in this case and in the case of the ancient cult in Daphne. Such an *interpretatio graeca* and various borrowings from the ancient vocabulary are quite common in Procopius’ texts in general<sup>70</sup>, both in connection with the Sclavenes and other ethnic groups<sup>71</sup>.

Already S.A. Ivanov in the commentaries to Procopius’ text noted that Procopius’ excursus on early Slavs is extraordinary from the aspect of the number of various subjects implying that there existed an obvious interest of the writer and readers<sup>72</sup>. It is noteworthy that Procopius did not mention in the case of the Sclavenes and Antes any funeral customs; nevertheless in the case of some other barbarians he noted what they do when someone dies (e.g. the Persians<sup>73</sup>, Heruls<sup>74</sup> and White Huns<sup>75</sup>). Even in the case of the Scythifini he noted that they make oblations to the dead<sup>76</sup>. This fact also suggests that Procopius may have been unfamiliar with these customs, because the Sclavenes could be known to him primarily as raiders and

<sup>68</sup> P. VAN NUFFELEN, *Beside the Rim of the Ocean: the Edges of the World in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Historiography*, [in:] *Historiography and Space in Late Antiquity*, ed. IDEM, Cambridge 2019, p. 43–49, 54.

<sup>69</sup> On ancient influence in Procopius’ description of Slavic religion, cf. R. BENEDICTY, *Prokopios’ berichte...*, p. 54–55.

<sup>70</sup> E.g. Robert Benedicty speaks mainly about the impact of Herodotus and Thucydides on Procopius’ texts, cf. R. BENEDICTY, *Die Milieu-Theorie...*, p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Already Robert Benedicty noted on the use of Greek or foreign expressions that have become indigenous to Greek in the case of Procopius’ description of the Slavic society, cf. R. BENEDICTY, *Die auf die frühslavische Gesellschaft bezügliche byzantinische Terminologie*, [in:] *Actes du XII<sup>e</sup> congrès international d’études byzantines, Ochride 10–16 Septembre 1961*, vol. II, Beograd 1964, p. 45–46 and that the *topoi* of ancient origin play a significant role in Procopius’ formulation of the reports on the Slavs, cf. IDEM, *Prokopios’ berichte...*, p. 77.

<sup>72</sup> *Свод древнейших...*, p. 219 (com. 64).

<sup>73</sup> PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, I, XI, 35; I, XII, 4.

<sup>74</sup> PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, VI, XIV, 2–7.

<sup>75</sup> PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, I, III, 7.

<sup>76</sup> PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, VI, XV, 24.

mercenaries, whose goal was to become enriched and then leave the region. Procopius evidently perceived the Slavs as newcomers – a reality already expressed by various modern scholars<sup>77</sup>, thus it seems that it was desirable to comprehensively introduce the new entity<sup>78</sup>, Procopius' description of the Slavic religion appears to be an attempt to introduce the customs of a hitherto unknown and highly “exotic” nation. These factors would explain the attention that Procopius paid to the Slavic religion, because as regards most of the other barbarians, he evidently did not concentrate on such a topic. It is also important to mention the fact that Procopius did not devote as much space to the early Slavs and to the inhabitants of the island of Thule in his work as to other nations. He devoted an excursus to both of them, but in terms of the number of times he mentioned them in his texts, it is clear that he wrote about other barbarian groups much more often<sup>79</sup>. So neither of these nations was the centre of his attention, but in the case of both, he considered it useful to provide some details about their chief god, the worship of other deities, and sacrifices. It is worth mentioning that in other aspects the descriptions of the early Slavs and the Scythians do not match; however, they both follow features of classical topoi about barbarians<sup>80</sup>.

Some scholars discussed the methodological dilemma as to what extent Procopius' testimony on the Sclavenes and Antes represents an ethnographic stereotype impacted by classical tradition<sup>81</sup>. In general a huge discussion has been held on the topic as to what extent Procopius' writing just followed classical literature models and to what extent his testimonies are based on the sixth century realities<sup>82</sup>. Actually the excursus about the Sclavenes and Antes became the subject of scholarly debate about the authenticity of information and the evident influences of classical topoi about the barbarians<sup>83</sup>. Some scholars expressed the opinion that although the influences of ancient and Byzantine topoi and stereotypes about barbarians are

<sup>77</sup> Л. Гиндин, *Проблема славянизации карпато-балканского пространства в свете семантического анализа глаголов обитания у Прокопия Кесарийского*, ВДИ 2, 1988, p. 173–182; F. CURTA, *The Making of the Slavs...*, p. 39.

<sup>78</sup> Already Maria Cesa mentioned in her article that in general the Byzantines wanted to know about the various barbarians who posed a new danger so that they could better understand how to deal with them, cf. M. CESA, *Etnografia e geografia nella visione storica di Procopio di Cesarea*, SCO 32, 1983, p. 189–192.

<sup>79</sup> The Slavs were named by Procopius a total of 41 times, the inhabitants of Thule even less, but on the other hand Huns were mentioned 118 and the Persians 719 times.

<sup>80</sup> E.g. it corresponds to types of topoi in ancient literature listed by Karl Trüdinger, cf. K. TRÜDINGER, *Studien zur Geschichte der griechisch-römischen Ethnographie*, Basel 1918, p. 175; M. CESA, *Etnografia e geografia...*, p. 189–215.

<sup>81</sup> A. CAMERON, *Procopius...*, p. 218–219.

<sup>82</sup> From the recent scholarship cf. e.g. P. VAN NUFFELEN, *The Wor(l)ds of Prokopios*, [in:] *Procopius of Caesarea. Literary and Historical Interpretations*, ed. C. LILLINGTON-MARTIN, E. TURQUOIS, London 2017, p. 40–55.

<sup>83</sup> A kind of overview is offered in R.B. FORD, *Rome, China, and the Barbarians. Ethnographic Traditions and the Transformation of Empires*, Cambridge 2020, p. 130–133.

obvious, this does not always mean the falsity of the information provided<sup>84</sup>. Since Procopius himself was most likely not an eyewitness and the information was passed on to him<sup>85</sup>, he tended to liken his new knowledge to the paganism he was aware of, that is, to the ancient religion he knew from classical texts. Such a search for parallels with Greek realities can be found also in other passages concerning the Sclavenes and Antes<sup>86</sup>. Moreover, the comparison of a pagan religion to the religion of the ancient Greeks was also not strange to Procopius in the case of other barbarians<sup>87</sup>. Nevertheless, it is necessary to compare the information provided by early Byzantine sources with other sources so that their authenticity can be verified<sup>88</sup>. Some scholars also emphasize the fact that information about the Slavs in the early Byzantine sources must be taken into consideration with caution<sup>89</sup>.

Obviously, Procopius in the contexts of the Sclavenes/Antes and Thulites definitely followed similar patterns, influenced partly by his knowledge of the ancient religion. Whereas, there are very few matches between these two ethnicities concerning the rest of the information provided in the excursus on them. On the contrary, it is possible to find parallels between the Slavs and other nations concerning other topics<sup>90</sup>. Nevertheless, both descriptions of the religion of these two ethnici-

<sup>84</sup> Such an attitude was adopted by e.g. R. BENEDICTY, *Die Milieu-Theorie...*; IDEM, *Prokopios' berichte...*, p. 77–78; A.M. ΡΕΒΑΝΟΓΛΟΥ, *Γεωγραφικά και εθνογραφικά στοιχεία στο έργο του Προκοπίου Καισαρείας*, Thessaloniki 2005, p. 224–244. On the fact that sometime the classicizing topos could correspond to the reality, cf. A. SARANTIS, *Roman or Barbarian? Ethnic Identities and Political Loyalties in the Balkans according to Procopius*, [in:] *Procopius of Caesarea...*, p. 228–229. Many modern scholars thus approach the information about the Sclavenes in Procopius' work as serious and reliable information. E.g. T. ΖΙΝΚΟΒΙĆ, *Forging Unity. The South Slavs between East and West, 550–1150*, Belgrade 2008, p. 31–44.

<sup>85</sup> D. BRODKA, *Prokop von Kaisareia und seine Informanten*, *Hi* 65, 2016, p. 108–124.

<sup>86</sup> E.g. R. BENEDICTY, *Prokopios' berichte...*, p. 54–78.

<sup>87</sup> E.g. Blemyes and Nobatai, in connection with which Procopius stated that they worshipped the same gods as the ancient Greeks: PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, I, XIX, 35, vol. I, p. 106: διὸ δὴ καὶ Φίλας ἐπωνόμασε τὸ χωρίον. ἄμφοι δὲ ταῦτα τὰ ἔθνη, οἳ τε Βλέμυες καὶ οἱ Νοβάται, τοὺς τε ἄλλους θεοὺς, οὐσπερ Ἕλληνας νομίζουσι πάντας, καὶ τὴν τε Ἴσιν τὸν τε Ὀσίριν σέβουσι, καὶ οὐχ ἥκιστα γε τὸν Πρίαπον / Hence he named the place Philai. Now both of these nations, the Blemyes and the Nobatai, believe in all the gods in which the Greeks believe, and they also revere Isis and Osiris, and not least of all Priapus (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 52). Or in the case of the Saracens (Arabs) Procopius noted that they were sacrificing to Aphrodite: PROCOPUS, *De bellis*, II, XXVIII, 13, vol. I, p. 284: καὶ Ἀλαμούνδαρος μὲν ἕνα τῶν Ἀρέθα παίδων ἵππους νέμοντα ἐξ ἐπιδρομῆς ἐλὼν τῇ Ἀφροδίτῃ εὐθὺς ἔθυσσε, καὶ ἅπ' αὐτοῦ ἐγνώσθη οὐ καταπροΐεσθαι τὰ Ῥωμαίων πράγματα Πέρσαις Ἀρέθαν / Al-Mundhir captured one of the sons of al-Harith in a sudden raid while he was pasturing horses, and immediately sacrificed him to Aphrodite (trans. H.B. DEWING/A. KALDELLIS, p. 135).

<sup>88</sup> E.g. B. ΖΑΣΤΕΡΟΒÁ, *Zur Problematik der ethnographischen Topoi*, [in:] *Griechenland – Byzanz – Europa. Ein Studienband*, ed. J. HERRMANN, Berlin 1985 [= BBA, 52], p. 19; G. MAJESKA, *The Byzantines on the Slavs: on the Problem of Ethnic Stereotyping*, *ABF* 9, 1999, p. 82.

<sup>89</sup> G. MAJESKA, *The Byzantines on the Slavs...*, p. 82; G. KARDARAS, *A Re-approach of Procopius' Ethnographic Account on the Early Slavs*, *ΒΣυμ* 27, 2017, p. 256.

<sup>90</sup> For example, already Averil Cameron noted that concerning the appearance of the Slavs we can find parallels with the Goths and concerning the Slavic fighting we can find parallels with the Franks

ties – despite their shortness – are rather unique in Procopius' text especially from the aspect of informativeness and the number of mentioned themes. Regardless of the reliability of the information, it seems that in Procopius' eyes the pre-Christian Slavic religion was different to the religion of most other non-Roman groups.

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and Britons, cf. A. CAMERON, *Procopius...*, p. 218–219. L. Gindin already in the 1980s proved that vocabulary employed by Procopius to describe the state of living is close to the vocabulary used in the context of nomads, cf. Л. Гиндин, *Проблема славянизации...*, p. 173–182. Such similarities can be found also in other aspects and with other ethnicities.

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