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The Ancient Sarmatians and the “Sarmatism” in Modern Eastern Europe (the Slovak Case)

In 1864 a famous Slovak poet Samo Chalupka (1812–1883) came forward with a new poem, *Mor ho!*, which was destined to become a real hit in the context of the Slovak national revival. This is a story of freedom-loving Slavs, produced by the Slavophile imagination. Those Slavs stood proudly upright in front of the Roman Emperor, pleading for freedom. “To have a ruler is injustice and even more unjust is to be a ruler yourself” (*Pána mat' je nepravost': a väčšia byt' pánom*) was their main slogan. The Emperor, however, disdained both the gifts and the plea for peace and freedom. As a result, a strong grumble appeared among the Slavic warriors and a cry “Mor ho!” (Kill him!) did overwhelm them when dashing into battle against the ruler of mighty Rome. The Slavs were overcome and perished in that battle, fighting for their freedom and their peaceful homeland. “*They are dying, but as heroes*” – claimed pathetically pompously the poet and continued with “*Hey, Tatry, mother of bright eagles! Your children will never come back from that battle*”. The conflict was generally presented as being that between the tyrannical Rome and the Slavdom (*Slovanstvo*) eager to cheer their romantic peacefulness and nearly anarchical freedom.

We can't say for sure if Samo Chalupka read Ammianus Marcellinus or not. Probably he took the story from P.J. Šafárik and his *History of Slavonic Language and Literature* from 1826. The story is based on the *Res Gestae* of Ammianus Marcellinus (XIX, 11), when part of the Sarmatians, the so called Limigantes, nearly killed the Emperor Constantius II (337–361) in 358, or more likely in 359, near Acimincum (Slankamen in modern Serbia, close to Novi Sad) with cries “Marha, marha” (“kill him”, or “death”), but were finally defeated and butchered.

Sarmatians played an important role in the *Res Gestae* of Ammianus Marcellinus who used to be a military officer and a direct witness to most of the events described from the 350s up to the 370s. Generally, Sarmatians continued to cause trouble to the Romans, mostly on the Middle Danube lines. Ammianus described the Sarmatians as good riders equipped with lances and chain armor made of horn,

which partly coincided with the description made by Pausanias two centuries before (*Description of Greece* I.21.5–6). At the time Sarmatians were located mostly in the region of Danube and Tisza (Parthiscus) rivers, approximately the modern Voivodina in Serbia, Eastern Hungary, and Northern Romania. It was the last period in their development, the so called *Third Sarmatian period* when Iazyges and Roxolani played the main role in the development of the Sarmatian confederacy, but also some German tribes, like Taifali and Quadi, and finally the remnants of the older Celtic population in Central Europe.¹ The Sarmatians in that period continued to be divided into two distinctive groups, the free (*argaragantes*) and the *limigantes*, the “slaves”. Ammianus gave detailed information about the conflict between them. When Constantius II subdued the “free” Sarmatians (*liberis ... Sarmatas*) in 357–358, the Emperor allowed them to inhabit the region between Danube and Tisza, close to the Roman border. Sirmium (Sremska Mitrovica) and Bregetion (near Komarom in Hungary) were the main imperial bases at that time. The Romans had to deal with the *limigantes*, too, the latter being defeated. Thus, probably in 359 there was an incident, when the *limigantes*, coming presumably for peace negotiations, nearly killed the Emperor close to Acimincum.

Sarmatians continued to persist in Roman and Early Byzantine sources in the next decades and centuries after Ammianus Marcellinus. According to Theodoret (*Hist. Eccl.* V. 5), the Sarmatians of what is nowadays Banat were pushed by the Goths to Valeria (modern Western Hungary, in Roman territory) during the troublesome times of the Hunnic invasion and the dramatic events in the Balkans in 376–378. Theodosius, who was just to become the Emperor, defeated them. “*Many of the barbarians – wrote Theodoret – were killed by their countrymen*”. Obviously, we have new repercussions of the older conflict between the *argaragantes* and *limigantes*.²

Also Jordanes wrote about the Sarmatians in the 6th century. In his *Gethica* he generally used older sources for the events described, telling stories like that of the Scythian-Amazon genealogy of the Sarmatians. He located them in the region around the Sarmatian mountains (III. 17), which could be identified with the Carpathian range and its northern extensions – the Beskids, the Tatra mountains, and the sources of Vistula river. Moreover, it is the region considered to be the native land of the Croatian tribes later. Jordanes also mentioned the wars between the Goths and the Sarmatians who came to be traditional foes. The military encounters were located predominantly around Sirmium and Singidunum in the 5th century (LIV–LVI). However, after the 5th century the Sarmatians disappeared from the historical scene, substituted by their relatives and probably direct descendants, too – the Alans.

¹ J. Harmatta, ‘Studies in the History and Language of the Sarmatians’, *Acta Universitatis (Szeged)*, vol. 13, 1970, pp. 41–56.

² O. Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, University of California Press, 1973, pp. 31–34.

Although coined in the 18th century, Sarmatism became dominant among Polish nobility in the 16th century. With historians and historiographers, like Marcin Bielski, Marcin Kromer, Maciej Strykowski and Stanislaw Sarnicki, the new trend was forged just to become a kind of fashion during the next two centuries. Furthermore, Sarmatism was partly related to the Baroque Slavism, which was brought into the world approximately at that time. Thus, Marcin Kromer would describe as early as in the 16th century the existence of two *Sarmatiae*, the Asian one and the European one, divided by the river Tanais (Don) and the Cimmerian Bosphorus. The European Sarmatia was obviously centered round the Carpathian Arc. In that region, according to Kromer, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, had spread the Sarmatian nations, known in the sources as Wenedi, Slavs, Russians, Bulgars, Serbs, and Croatians.³ Kleczewski will pretend in the 18th century that not only Sarmatians and Alans were Slavs, but also the ancient Scyths and even in Ancient Greece people used to speak Slavonic.⁴ Thus, we are not far from the fantasies of W. Dembolecki who not only considered Poles to be Sarmatians, but pretending that in the Paradise the Poles/Sarmatians spoke the same language.⁵ The *Privilege* of Alexander the Great to the Slavs appeared as a well-known forgery sometimes in the 15th or rather 16th century with naivety we should pardon. Slavism, Sarmatism and the kernels of nationalism were coming to the fore with the same veneer of Romantic dilettantism, vigorously searching for the roots of nations, languages, and identities.

The spirit of Romanticism and Historicism in Eastern Europe in the last centuries, starting from the time of the Renaissance and Baroque, did not come out of nothing. Nowadays, there is still a temptation to search for the "birth" of the Slavs (*Sclavenoi*, *Sclavi* of the Roman/Byzantine sources) among certain ethnic groups in Central Eastern Europe, including the *limigantes*, the people subdued to the "free" Sarmatians. The *limigantes*, described by Ammianus, who inhabited the region generally known as Voivodina and Banat today, used to live in simple huts, made of reed or wood, close to rivers and marshes, where they hid themselves when danger appeared. They also used boats from one piece of a huge tree, known as *monoxyla* in the later Greek sources, and used to fight predominantly as infantry (*nunc cavatis roboribus, aliquotiens peregrans pedibus flumina...*, XVII. 13. 27). All these features of lifestyle of the *limigantes* in the 4th century to a great extent coincide with what Procopius and Jordanes wrote about the Slavs in the 6th century. Moreover, there is a discussion, starting at least from F. Dvornik, considering the genealogy of the Antes, who were perceived in the literature as Slavic people, ruled by a Sarmatian elite, or simply as a Slavic-Sarmatian (or rather Alanic) mixture. The question is by all means still open, especially when having in mind the

³ *Kronika Polska Marcina Kromera wydana w Krakow r. 1611*, Sanok, 1857, pp. 26–43 (p. 37: *Słowacy i Wenedowie dawnymi są Sarmatami*).

⁴ R. Brtaň, *Barokový slavizmus*, Liptovský Mikulaš, 1939, pp. 85–86.

⁵ Brtaň, *Barokový slavizmus*, p. 79.

typology of migration, political and ethnogenetic developments in Eastern and Central Europe in Late Antiquity and the generally complicated picture of ethno-social remodeling.

Let us return, however, to the Sarmatism of the age. As it was already mentioned and it is well-known, in Poland there was a kind of fashion and inclination for *Sarmatism*, popular mostly among the nobility from the 16th to the 19th century. Polish nobles viewed themselves as descendants of the Sarmatian warriors and that is why they wanted to imitate their – to a great extent invented – style in hair-cut, dressing and general behavior. Related to developing Slavism and nationalism, the phenomenon was not to pass by unnoticed by other Eastern European nations and their intellectual gurus. In the spirit of the Romantic Pan-Slavism of the 19th century, Samo Chalupka's *limigantes* were presented as proud Slavic warriors, ancestors of the Slovaks, if not Slovaks themselves. The general trend in Pan-Slavism was to include national identity into wider frame of kinship nations appearing out from the Middle Ages with strong vigor, mostly those inside the Habsburg lands, like the Czechs and Croatsians, Slovenians and Serbs.

Slovak lands were part of the Habsburg Empire from the 16th century up to the First World War. During the 17th century and in the context of the Baroque Slavism, Slovak *literati* became curious and eager to reveal the roots of the nation and to support the development of a national language along with the popular Bohemian/Czech in its "Biblical" orthographic form. Lacking state tradition or a glorious past, Slovak *literati* were striving to unveil the deepest roots of their ethnic existence, thus proving their right to be the original population of those lands. It was an upright stand against the pretensions of both the Germans and the Hungarians. During those struggles of identity and dominance, however, Sarmatism was used by both sides with different, sometimes even opposite purpose. Thus, in 1641 came out a book written by the rector of school in Levoča, David Frölich, a German, who described the history of Pannonia from the biblical times up to the settlement of the Magyars/Hungarians. The book was entitled *Ancient German-Hungarian-Spiš and Transylvanian inhabitant*.⁶ The main point and purpose of that opus was to prove the German historical pre-eminence in the Carpathian Basin. Goths, Vandals, Quadi, Gepids and many other German tribes used to live in the region before the arrival of the Slavs, who were no other than the former Sarmatians and Veneti (Heneti). Those Sarmatian tribes invaded firstly the Illyrian lands and only later the Carpathian Basin. This book, staging Sarmatism versus the Slavic autochthonic pretensions, provoked a Bohemian, who identified himself as a Slovak as well – Jakub Jakobeus (1591–1645), to write a polemic answer, *Viva gentis Slavicæ delineatio*. We don't have the text, but know generally the content thanks

⁶ D. Frölich, *Der uralte deutsch-ungarische-zeipscherische und siebenbürgische Landsmann*, Levoča, 1641. See also J. Tibenský, *Chvály a obrany slovenského národa*, Bratislava, 1965, pp. 42–43.

to Daniel Sinapius Horčíčka.⁷ Jakobeus was also a rector of a Protestant lyceum in Prešov. Here we could witness a clash between national identities where Sarmatism was used rather as an argument against the birth of what we could define as Romantic Baroque Slavism.

It is more than certain that we have many different examples. The abovementioned Daniel Sinapius Horčíčka (1640–1688) was another Slovak Protestant rector, a preacher, writer and translator, who became famous for his collection of Biblical, ancient and humanist proverbs and sayings, along with an extensive introduction, the so called *Neo-forum Latino-Slavonicum* from 1678. There he reasoned over the very popular question of the origin of Slavs and the Slovaks in particular. Being more cautious, Sinapius was not enthusiastic about the origins of the Slavs from Jafet, the son of Noah, or connecting it with the Tower of Babylon. That did not stop him, however, from believing in the so called *Privilege* of Alexander the Great, given to the Slavs, or to support, in a rather delicate way, the Sarmatian theory. When mentioning the ancient Sarmatians and their homeland around river Tanais, he preferred to base his considerations on the older text of the Czech Jan Dubravius (1486–1553), namely his chronicle *Historia regni Bohemiae* (1552). Dubravius was a strong supporter of the Sarmatian origin of Slavs. He wrote in his *History*: “Id enim *slowo* apud Sarmatas, quod verbum apud Latinos personat. Quoniam igitur omnes Sarmatarum nationes, late iam tunc, longeque, per regna et provincias sparsae, unum tamen eundemque sermonem, atque eadem propemodum verba sonarent, se uno etiam cognomine Slovanos cognominabant”⁸ Thus, Sinapius, who was a great lover and supporter of the Slavic revival and Slovak language, used older Sarmatism just to prove the common origin and predestination of all Slavic nations from the ancient Sarmatians. One of the followers of Sinapius, a young theologian from Zvolen – Jan Fischer Piscatoris, defended in his dissertation from 1697 (*De origine, jure ac utilitate linguae slavonicae*) the Scythian and Celtic origin of the Slavonic language. What is less known is that the same Fischer had also written another book, dedicated to linguistic comparisons and etymological exercises, named *Convenientia XII linguarum ex matrice Scytho-Celtice natarum*.⁹

Passing into the 18th century, there was an obvious trend in the *Upper Hungary* to focus more on Slovaks as national entity and on Slavic nations in general. It was noticeable among both Catholics and Protestants, although Lutheran Protestants were more eager to use the “Biblical” Czech orthography (based in the Kralice Bible from the 16th century), while Catholic intellectuals, especially the Jesuits, were paramount in inventing a particular Slovak literary norm, based mostly on the Trnava dialect. The hazy and blurring ancient past, however, was still strongly alluring

⁷ D. Sinapius Horčíčka, *Neo-forum Latino-Slavonicum*, Bratislava, 1988, pp. 21–22.

⁸ Original citation from Jo. Dubravii, Olomuzensis episcopi, *Historia Bohemica*, Frankfurt/M., 1687, p. 46. See also: Sinapius Horčíčka, *Neo-forum*, pp. 24–25.

⁹ Tibenský, *Chvály*, pp. 52–55.

for both sides and was still connected with the Iranian tribes for many of them. Martin Szentiványi (1633–1708), a Jesuit writer, held the opinion that Slavs who finally became Slovaks, were called Jaziges by ancient authors, and so far as “jazik” (language) came from the latter, thus following the same logic Slavs were named by the word “slovo”.¹⁰ As a member of the next generation and a Lutheran priest, Daniel Krman (1663–1740) was prone to keep ties with Czechs, considering “Biblical” Czech as a proper language for Slovaks. In *Biblia Sacra*, edited together with Mathias (or Matej) Bel, they put together Czechs and Slovaks as a unified national entity, coming together as a specific branch from the Slavonic tribes, descendants of the ancient “Sauromats”.¹¹

Mathias/Matej Bel, a great polymath and a Lutheran pastor, well-known for his attention towards Latin, Hungarian and German languages, was by no means considered to be either a Slovak or a Slavonic ‘nationalist’. His arguments concerning the origin of Slavs, however, were not very different from the general trend of the defenders of the Slavic identity and its archaic roots against the critics of different kind. In his introduction to the *Gramatica Bohemo-Slavica* of Pavel Doležal (1746), Bel speculated over those popular topics using a relatively new approach, more professional to a certain extent. The Slavs (Venedi) were regarded as historical, if not ethnic, descendants of the Vandals, covering the territory of the latter from the 6th century onwards. Both Vandals and Venedi originated from Asia and their particular homeland was the territory named “Slavia Sarmatica”. From there most of the nations emerged at different historical stages of what we call today Eastern and Central Europe. When enumerating tribes and nations, Bel did not miss the “Limi-gati” (sic!), the already discussed branch of the Sarmatians, or rather their slaves, if we are to believe Marcellinus. Divided, the Slavs formed two Slaviae, one in the central and northern parts, the other in the south-eastern corner of the European continent.¹²

The weakening impetus of Sarmatism in the Habsburg lands during the second half of the 18th century was evident by the vague mentioning of Sarmatia (or Great Sarmatia) in the sources. In the Slovak lands Sarmatism was to a great extent overshadowed by the disputes among different streams inside the national revival movement. Czecho-Slovakism as a leading trend among the members of the Lutheran intelligentsia during the 17th and 18th centuries still had a certain support in authors like J. Kollar and Pan-Slavism was personally cherished by P.J. Šafarik, but in the face of Ľudovít Štur and his followers, the codification of the Slovak language (mostly based on the central Slovakian dialects) took force and the national revival entered a new period of clarifying Slovak national identity, usually not without the

¹⁰ M. Szentiványi, *Curiosa et selectiora variorum scientiarum miscellanea*, pars I, 126–128. See also: Tibenský, *Chvály*, p. 60.

¹¹ Brtaň, *Barokový slavizmus*, p. 26.

¹² Tibenský, *Chvály*, pp. 61–71, n. 46.

allures of the Romantic (or political) Pan-Slavism. In the case of Šafarik we already witness a more professional treatment of sources, although the purpose is to prove the original character of Slavdom, its antiquity and pre-eminence in Europe.

And just to sum up: Sarmatism was discernible in the Slovak lands during the Baroque period (16th–18th centuries) as part of a more general trend. It was connected with the specific Baroque interest in antiquity and curiosity, with the birth of Slavism and later Pan-Slavism and also with the beginnings of what we could define as national revival movement. It was used as a historical argument, proving the glorious past of the Slavs, and Slovaks in particular, by both streams of the Baroque intelligentsia in the Slovak lands, the Protestants (mostly Lutherans) and the Catholics (predominantly Jesuits). The difference between both streams was mainly on the issue of the language used: Catholics preferred Latin and later tried to create a Slovak norm from Trnava dialect, while Protestants were fond of the Czech “Biblical” norm. Catholics were usually more attentive when Pan-Slavic ideas were in concern, although there were some connections with the *Illyrism* developing in the Croatian lands. Lutherans were generally stronger supporters of Slavic uniqueness and unity, thus adding Sarmatism as an important ingredient to it. Furthermore, in Poland Sarmatism was cherished as a favorite trend among aristocracy, in the Slovak lands it was rather an element in the process of national, and popular, creation of identity by the town elites in difficult conditions, provoked by the pretensions of both Germans and Hungarians.

However, Sarmatism did not disappear completely in the 19th century. Šafarik in his *History of Slavonic Language and Literature* (Chapter I) was clear enough to distinguish Sarmatians, as Asians and nomads, from the Slavs. Using many sources, concerning the historical and ethnical changes in the Carpatian Basin and Pannonia in the 4th century, he came to the conclusion of a possible mixture between what he called Veneti (Venadi) Sarmatae and the Danube Slavs (or Proto-Slavs), thus forming a group, called Sarmatae limigantes, subdued to the main core, the *argaragantes*. We have to recognize that such a theory, with many different variations and additions, is not excluded by some historians and archaeologists nowadays. The story was used by Samo Chalupka, whose poetic imagination, fueled by the flames of nationalism and Pan-Slavism, turned that particular event into a glorious example of Slavic/Slovak resistance versus the Romans. This is how the masterpiece *Mor ho!* had come to life. And this is how the circle of different interconnections starting in the Baroque era came to its close. Even the new academic approach was not strong enough to shatter the endurance of what the imaginary concept of freedom, nationality, and identity had created for centuries.

Concerning the persistence of the Sarmatian myth, I would just like to point out that in modern Bulgaria of the 21st century the origin of the ancient Bulgars from the Iranian peoples, Sarmatians included, is coming to the fore as one of the strongest theories speculated at academic level. This is, however, another chapter to be discussed on another occasion.

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Starożytni Sarmaci i „sarmatyzm” w nowożytnej Europie Wschodniej (przypadek słowacki)

Streszczenie

Artykuł koncentruje się na rozwoju sarmatyzmu na ziemiach słowackich w okresie pomiędzy XVI a XIX wiekiem. W tym samym czasie ruch sarmacki rozwijał się w Polsce i na ziemiach słowackich, które znalazły się w granicach cesarstwa Habsburgów. Sarmatyzm był związany ze szczególnym zainteresowaniem starożytnością w epoce baroku, z narodzinami sławizmu i panslawizmu, a także z początkami ruchu odrodzenia narodowego. Ponadto był używany jako historyczny argument na udowodnienie chwalebnej przeszłości Słowian, w szczególności Słowaków, przez obie grupy inteligencji okresu baroku na ziemiach słowackich: protestantów i katolików.

Słowa kluczowe: Sarmaci, sarmatyzm, sławizm epoki baroku, odrodzenie narodowe