

# The Angels' Questions: Symbols and Ideas about Death between East and West\*

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## 1. *Europe and shamanism in the Middle Ages*

During the first part of the Middle Ages Barbarian peoples coming from the East brought shamanism in Europe. Little by little, while Christian religion became more and more important and widespread, shamanism began to be considered only superstition. In 1966 Carlo Ginzburg, published a book about the *beneandanti*, a sect of sorcerers who had existed in Friuli, in the North-East of Italy, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> c. He discovered many resemblances between these persons and shamans. He went on with his researches and in *Storia notturna*, tried to explain the European witchcraft of the Middle Ages as a permanency of very ancient popular beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the nomadic peoples who settled in Europe during the Middle Ages had a Turkic-Mongol origin, such as Huns and Avars, and followed shamanism. Others, such as Lombards, came from the Northern part of Europe but their religion too had some elements coming from shamanism, probably derived from very ancient contacts with the peoples who lived in Siberia and in the steppes of Asia. For instance, their most important god, Odin (Wotan), was not only associated with war but also with poetry and magic; he was a kind of medicine man. According to the ancient Scandinavian poem *Edda*, he had remained hanged from a tree for eight days and in this way he acquired wisdom. Thus, Odin proved a kind of re-birth, such as that experienced by shamans. He had also an eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, which some scholars consider a shamanic animal used by its owner to reach the sky. The German saint for Christmas, Santa Claus, is probably modelled on this ancient god, linked with the pagan solstice holiday, and then merged with the Christian legend of Saint Nicholas of Myra.

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\* The aim of this paper is to present the first results of a research about the passage of ideas and symbols concerning death from Turkic-Mongol shamanism and Islam, to the Ottoman Empire and Europe. The team of research, directed by Maria Pia Pedani (Venice) is formed by experts in history (Antonio Fabris, Venice; Giorgio Rota, Wien), linguistics (Elisabetta Ragagnin, Göttingen) and anthropology (Matteo Benussi, Venice; Michela De Giacometti, Venice). In this paper, chapter 1 and 2 have been written by Maria Pia Pedani, chapter 3-5 by Antonio Fabris.

1 Carlo Ginzburg, *I Benandanti. Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento*, Torino, Einaudi, 1966; Carlo Ginzburg, *Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba*, Torino, Einaudi, 1989.

Taking into consideration shamanism one may understand better some episodes, described in ancient medieval chronicles, which might appear odd. Jordanes's *Getica* of the 5<sup>th</sup> c., Paul the Deacon's (720-799) *Historia Langobardorum* and the *Cronaca di Novalesa* (about 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c.) are a good starting point. For example, the first author says that the Visigoth king Alaric I (395-410) was buried beneath the riverbed of the Busento in Calabria. The river was diverted; his grave was dug and he was buried together with precious spoils he had won from his enemies. Then the stream was re-directed into its original channel and the slaves who had worked to divert it were executed so that nobody could discover the place.<sup>2</sup> Even if Alaric was already an Arian Christian, however the place chosen for his grave was one of the most sacred according to ancient belief. Rivers, as well as mountain tops, were the places where peace agreements were made and also where important persons were buried. For instance, the Arab writer ibn Fadlân (877-960) tells that the rulers of the Khazars were buried in the same way, and many other examples may be found in the Eurasian steppe.<sup>3</sup>

Jordanes also describes Attila's death in 453 and his funeral, basing his story on Priscus of Panium who had written about it in Greek.<sup>4</sup> First of all that very night the Byzantine emperor Marcian dreamed that Attila's bow had been broken. Then Huns rode around the silk tent where his body lay, proclaiming a funeral song recalling his glorious deeds. A feast was made and, lastly, he was interred in the ground. His body was put into three coffins, the first was made with gold, the second with silver and the third with iron. Such a device was used to show that he was a most mighty king: iron, because with it he subdued nations, gold and silver because he received the honours of both empires. They added arms of enemies gained in battles, costly fittings gleaming with precious stones and ornaments of every kind denoting royal status. As in the case of Alaric the slaves who had dig the grave were killed to keep secret the location of the great king's grave. In this story too there are some elements that derive from ancient customs and traditions: the breaking of the bow which means the breaking of power; the warriors riding around the precious tent where the ruler lay; the coffin used to inter his body. In Medieval times Christians were usually buried in a shroud in the ground. On the contrary, coffins were used by barbarians and also by Scythians. We must start from the idea that a living being had not only one soul but different souls which followed different paths after death. One of them took flight as a bird. A brave warrior's courage could find rest in a flag, to protect his tribe. The part of the great human soul that belonged to all human creatures returned to revive another body. Lastly the corpse had to be buried immediately, otherwise it retained a part of his life and became a kind of vampire. This word, now used in many languages, has a Turkic origin and it comes from the verb to suck.<sup>5</sup> The legend of the vampire,

2 Jordanes, *Storia dei Goti*, a cura di Elio Bartolini, Milano, TEA, 1991, pp. 72-73.

3 Jean-Paul Roux, *La mort chez les peuples altaïques anciens et médiévaux*, Paris, Maisonneuve, 1963, p. 153.

4 Jordanes, *Storia*, pp. 120-121.

5 The Turkic etymology of *vampir* has been recently discovered by Elisabetta Ragagnin, paper

even if it evolved greatly during the 19<sup>th</sup> c. due to the works written by John William Polidori (1795-1821) and Abraham Stocker (1847-1912), probably had its origin in this old religion.

Paul the Dean also tells stories that may be explained in the same way. For instance Alboin, king of the Lombards (d. 572) killed Cunimund, the Gepid king (d. 566), and made a goblet with his skull (called in Lombard language *scala*). He ordered his wife Rosamund, the king's daughter, to drink from it but she refused. After some time she killed her husband who was buried under a staircase near his castle. According to shamanic ritual, to drink from a skull cup means to assume the dead man's power. The cup was the symbol of the royal power. Sometimes a warrior who had killed another ruler drank his blood in his skull. The same fate of Cunimund was that of the Roman consul Lucius Postumius Albinus, who was defeated by the Celtic tribe of Boii in 216: he was beheaded and his skull was used as a goblet, as Titus Livius tells (*Ab Urbe Condita*, XXIII 24, 6-13). Alboin's grave, beneath the palace steps, may seem odd, but a staircase too had a high symbolic meaning. It was probably a place suitable for enemies, since it was possible to trample on their graves.

Paul the Dean tells also other stories. One makes reference to the king of Franks, Guntramno, who fell asleep and a small reptile emerged from his mouth; then it went back and the king awoke. Another story is about the king Cunicpert: he told his friend that he wanted to kill Ald and Graus, in the meantime he struck a big fly and cut one of its legs, and then a man without a foot told the two what the king devised. Both tales make reference to the ability of shamans to change their aspect and become animals. In Paul's *Historia Langobardorum* we find also men who cut the hair (or the beard) of another person in order to recognize him as their son and this too was an ancient Mongol and Turkic custom. Paul the Dean tells also that in a Lombard churchyard, near Pavia, wooden poles, surmounted by a dove, were sunk into the earth to mark the place of those who were not buried there and we know that one of the souls of a human being becomes a bird. Lastly there is the story of Cunicpert who killed Alachis, cut off his head and then broke his legs: in this way, according to ancient shamanic belief, he destroyed also his lineage and the possibility that his descendants will emerge determined to avenge him.

We may take into consideration other Medieval sources. For instance the chronicle of the abbey of Novalesa, in the North-West of Italy (*Cronaca di Novalesa*) was written about four centuries after the history of the Lombards by Paul the Dean, but it makes references to facts which had happened the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c. The author, an unknown monk who lived in that abbey, clearly did not understand any longer the meaning of some episodes he describes. Sometimes he tells them as odd happenings, sometimes he tries to interpret them from a Christian perspective. For instance, Algisus, king Desiderius's son, went to the court of Charlemagne; there, in disguise, he took part in a feast and he broke all the bones of the animals which were

served as food.<sup>6</sup> This was not a way of showing Algisius's strength, as the monk tells us to explain his behaviour, but, on the contrary, a means to show contempt for Charlemagne's food and disregard for the host. In fact, seeing what had happened, the king understood immediately that the person who had made this was his enemy. The behaviour of Algisius damaged the great soul of the animals and future generations will have been crippled or mutilated. Ibn Battuta, who travelled among Turkish and Mongols tribes in Anatolia in the 14<sup>th</sup> c., makes reference to the same belief, as well as Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, a 13<sup>th</sup> c. friar who made a famous journey among the Mongols. The former says that they carved the meat in a special way, leaving it attached to the bones, because if there were not the bones the Turks would not eat the meat,<sup>7</sup> while the latter tells us that when the Mongols killed an animal they were careful not to break their bones.<sup>8</sup> In the *Novalesa* chronicle there is also a snake which enters the body of a shepherd but this time the story is told in reverse: the shepherd fell asleep and the snake, which is the Devil, entered his mouth, and took possession of him; only when he fell asleep again did it come out.<sup>9</sup> In Paul the Dean's story Guntramno felt asleep and a small reptile, i.e. one of his souls, came out of his mouth, then it went back and the king awoke. Clearly, in the chronicle, Christian religion shaped a similar story in another way.

Lastly there is the story of the emperor Maximian (250-310): according to the monk he was a very evil person who was strangled near Marseille. After this event, his grave was opened by order of the archbishop of Arles; his corpse was found uncorrupted but this was not considered a sign of sanctity, as was usual in Christian Middle Ages: it was thrown into the sea and where it touched the surface, the waters seemed to burn for many days.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, it was in the shamanism that the body of a dead person could become evil as a kind of zombie or vampire. These are only few examples of how medieval chronicles may be read and explained.

## 2. *Europe and the Islamic paradise*

A little later also Islamic influences reached Europe coming from the Near East and some of them make reference to death and funeral rites. According to an Islamic popular tradition two angels, Munkar and Nakîr, have the task of asking some questions to every person who has died. In the Koran (50, 17-18) it is written: «When the two receivers receive, seated on the right and on the left. Man does not utter any word except that with him is an observer prepared [to record].» Answering the angels' questions the Muslim must confirm his faith

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6 *Cronaca di Novalesa*, a cura di Gian Carlo Alessio, Torino, Einaudi, 1982, pp. 168-171.

7 Ibn Battuta, *I viaggi*, a cura di Claudia M. Tresso, Torino, Einaudi, 2006, p. 375.

8 Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, *Viaggio ai Tartari*, Milano, Istituto Editoriale Italiano, 1956, p. 152.

9 *Cronaca*, p. 306-307.

10 *Cronaca*, pp. 340-341.

(Koran: 14, 27: «Allah keeps firm those who believe, with the firm word, in worldly life and in the Hereafter. And Allah sends astray the wrongdoers. And Allah does what He wills.») The most ancient sources are very general, while the two angels' names made their appearance only in the 8<sup>th</sup> century when the eschatological tale became more complex: Iblîs, the angel who disobeyed the orders of God, accompanies Munkar and Nakîr to tempt the dead for the last time; the infidel and the sinner begin to be punished immediately, before the final punishment they will receive after the Day of Judgement. According to Islam also the four archangels are linked with the idea of death: Isrâfîl, who blows the breath of life into the body, will blow the last trump on Doomsday; the angel of Death is Izrâ'il who has the task of separating the soul from the body; Jibrîl and Mikâl (Mikâ'il) weigh human deeds using the balance, the former holds it and checks the dial, while the latter controls everything (cfr. Koran: 42, 17; 55, 7-9; 57, 25); moreover, they stand one in front of the other during another interrogation made while the dead person is crossing the narrow bridge above Hell (cfr. Koran: 37, 23-24). Classical theology was greatly concerned with the measure of human good and evil deeds and with this balance.<sup>11</sup>

Philipp Ariès, in his classical book *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, stresses how European Christian eschatology changed in the Middle Ages. Until the 11<sup>th</sup> century, before Doomsday, there is neither judgement nor damnation; the dead who had been committed to churches and saints fall asleep, as the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, and will awake in the Heavenly Jerusalem; the sinners will not survive death, they will not awake and will disappear. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the archangel Michael weighing souls makes his appearance in iconography. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Christ is represented as a judge sitting in a court of justice, while souls are weighed on scales for both their good and evil deeds. At the end of the Middle Ages everyone had an accounting book where his good and evil deeds were recorded.<sup>12</sup>

The 12<sup>th</sup> century was also the period in which the Purgatory made its appearance, as Jacques Le Goff wrote in 1981. In his book *La naissance du Purgatoire* this author studies ancient legends about afterlife: from Hindu myths to Iranian ones, from ancient Egypt to Greece and Rome, from the saga of Gilgamesh to the Jewish Sheol, from the first Christian writers to the barbarian shamanism and to the order of Cluny. Le Goff also says that to study the history of Purgatory the best theologian is Dante.<sup>13</sup> However, he does not take into consideration Islam which certainly began only in 622, long after the climax of Egyptian, Hindu, Iranian or Roman civilizations, but had been present in the Mediterranean zone from

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11 Olga Lizzini, *L'angeologia islamica: il Corano e la tradizione*, in *Angeli. Ebraismo. Cristianesimo. Islam*, a cura di Giorgio Agamben e Emanuele Coccia, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2009, pp. 1455-1500, in particular pp. 1480-1488; Jane Idleman Smith-Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2002, pp. 22-23.

12 Philippe Ariès, *Storia della morte in occidente*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1978, pp. 35-35.

13 Jacques Le Goff, *La nascita del Purgatorio*, Torino, Einaudi, 1982, pp. 18, 23-144.

the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Islam too may have influenced European eschatology.

Published in 1919 the book *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia* by the priest and scholar of Arabic Miguel Asín Palacios aroused bitter controversy and was rejected by his colleagues interested in Dante as well as in European history.<sup>14</sup> They said that the many points in common between the *Divina Commedia* and Islamic afterlife could not be probable since there was no proved link between Dante, who did not know Arabic, and the vision that the prophet of Islam had of the hereafter as described in the traditional story of Muhammad's Night Journey, the *Kitâb al-Mi'râj*. Asín Palacios's theory had more success among Arab scholars who considered the discovery and the edition of the *Libro della Scala* by Enrico Cerulli in 1949 as the direct evidence that he was right. In 1972 this Italian scholar published another essay about the knowledge of Islam in the West. According to his researches the king of Castile and León, Alfonso X the Wise (1252-1284), ordered his Jewish court physician, Abraham Alfaquím, to translate the *Kitâb al-Mi'râj* from Arabic into Castilian and his court notary, Bonaventura da Siena, from Castilian into Latin and French. The first translation was called the *Libro del Subimiento* and the others *Liber Scale Machometi* and *Livre de l'Eschiele Mahomet*. Bonaventura was one of the Ghibelline exile who had left Tuscany for Spain. From this milieu the book could have reached Italy, Italian scholars and above all Dante.<sup>15</sup>

Finally we must take into consideration the fact that, according to Islamic religion, the believer will go to Heaven. Even if he has committed some crimes when he was alive, his sins deserve only a temporary punishment. His soul will suffer in Hell for some time but at last it will reach the Garden of Eden where young girls with black eyes and boys await to serve the happy Muslim and, according to some theologians, will be able to enjoy at last the vision of God. This belief is probably the basis of the idea of the Christian Purgatory, a place where the sinful souls of those who must go to Heaven remain for a certain time. It is not the Hell of the Islamic tradition, but a place which resembles Hell, conceived dividing those who will reach God from those who belong to Satan. In a society divided into different classes as Medieval Europe the idea that the damned souls were in direct contact with the heavenly ones was probably something to be rejected and an intermediary place, such as Purgatory, solved all the problems of this uncomfortable closeness.

In the Middle Ages most contacts between Christian and Muslim societies and cultures

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14 Miguel Asín Palacios, *Dante e l'Islam*, Parma, Nuova Pratiche Editrice, 1994, vol. 1 *L'escatologia islamica nella Divina Commedia*, pp.1-5; vol. 2 *Storia e critica di una polemica*.

15 Enrico Cerulli, *Nuove ricerche sul Libro della Scala e la conoscenza dell'Islam in Occidente*, Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1972, pp. 5-12. Cfr. also Roberto Tottoli, *Tours of Hell and Punishments of Sinners in «Mi'râj» Narratives: Use and Meaning of Eschatology in Muhammad's Ascension*, in *The Prophet's Ascension. Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic «Mi'râj tales»*, ed. by C. Gruber - F. Colby, Bloomington, Indiana UP, 2009, pp. 11-26; *Il viaggio notturno e l'ascensione del Profeta nel racconto di ibn 'Abbâs*, a cura di Ida Zilio-Grandi, Torino, Einaudi, 2010.

took place in al-Andalus but in that period there were also the Crusades (1095-1291) throwing Christians and Muslims in the Near East into direct contact. In Palestine and Egypt most soldiers were Turkish slaves coming from the East. Some dynasties also had Turkish origins. There were the Seljuks who created a great empire in the Middle East (1037-1194) and a smaller one, the sultanate of the Seljuks of Rum, in Anatolia (1077-1307). In the 13<sup>th</sup> c., in the same region, many Turkish beyliks (emirates) were created. Another sultanate was that of the Mamluks (the slaves), who ruled Egypt and Syria from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The *bahri* Mamluks (1250-1382) were Turkish slaves, while the *burji* (1382-1517) were Circassian. Even if converted to Islam these slaves kept many of their traditional customs. It is still a doubtful question if heraldry, which made its appearance in the Near East during the Crusades, was a Western device used to recognize men wearing armours or had its origin in the Turkic *tamga*, the emblem of a tribe, a clan or a family used by Eastern Eurasian nomadic peoples to identify property or cattle. Then there were the Ottoman Turks who created an Empire that spread from Anatolia to the Balkans, Maghreb and Arabic peninsula and lasted till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3. *Ottoman Turks and blood*

Among the Turkish beyliks the most important was that of Osman; it became a great Empire (1302-1922) which ruled from the frontier of Morocco to that of Persia and since 1453 Istanbul was its capital. Even if this Empire was a Muslim one from its very beginning, as the name of the founder shows, many ancient rites and practices were kept alive for centuries. The religious evolution of Ottoman society was more or less the same as that of European society. In the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> c. ancient belief survived side by side with the official religion in both societies, but in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. in both zones, religion became more and more orthodox and stern and what remained of shamanism became folklore and fables.

Nomadic influences can be discovered above all in the Balkans which had been part of the Ottoman Empire for more than four centuries. Islam was introduced in that area together with ancient shamanic customs which had already become only superstition in the same Ottoman society. For instance the blood brotherhood was a very old custom: two persons could become real brothers on exchanging their blood, usually putting some drops of blood of both in a glass of water and drinking it. In this way the two persons became *anda*. In Turkish *and içmek* means to swear, but literally it means «to drink the oath». An episode concerning this kind of brotherhood is described by Evliya Çelebi in 1660.<sup>16</sup> A *gazi*, a Muslim frontier warrior, was discovered while he was trying to hide a Christian prisoner. When they both were dragged

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16 Quoted by Wendy Bracewell, *Frontier Blood-Brotherhood and the Triplex Confinium*, in *Constructing Border Societies on the Triplex Confinium*, ed. by Drago Roksandic, Natasa Stefanec, Budapest, Central European University, 2000, pp. 29-45.

before the great vizier the former shouted:

«Mercy, Great Vizier! I have sworn brotherhood with this captive on the battlefield, we have pledged each other our faith. If you kill him, he will go to paradise with my faith and that will be an injury to me, wretch that I am; and if I die, the faith of this captive with whom I have sworn brotherhood will stay with me, and we will both go to hell, so that again I am the loser.»

The Great Vizier asked to his soldiers what was the matter and his *gazis* explained him that it was true and that

«when our heroes on the border fall into Christian captivity and then eat and drink at table, they swear brotherhood with the Christian and give an oath to him on their faith. The Christian pledges his faith to the Muslim that he will redeem him from infidel captivity if need be, and the Muslim also (does the same) and says: ‘If I fall captive to us, I will redeem you from the Turks.’ And then they pledge each other their firm faith, having said: ‘Your faith is mine, and my faith is yours.’ ‘Is it so?’ ‘It is.’ Then they lick each other’s blood. This is how a Muslim swears blood-brotherhood with a Christian. And so in this case this infidel is the blood-brother of this *gazi*. He once redeemed this Muslim from captivity. Now, behold, this infidel who is in the hands of these men has become captive. If (the *gazi*) hides him and if he is saved, then he will have fulfilled his sworn word and faith. Then he could redeem his faith from him, and return (the Christian’s) faith to him. But if this Christian is killed now, he will go to paradise, and this (Muslim) will go to hell with the faith of the infidel. Although this is written neither in the Muslim nor in the Christian books, this is nonetheless the custom on the border.»

At this answer the great vizier released them both, but all the present were astonished at this conversation. Clearly in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. Ottoman high society persons had already forgotten the customs of their ancestors which remained only in border areas and among common people. In fact blood-brotherhood was the kind of agreement made by Gazi Osman, the founder of Ottoman dynasty, with his first companions, such as the Greek Kōse Mihail or Turahan, Evrenos, Malkoç.<sup>17</sup> The descendants of all these warriors settled in the Balkans and they became the *üç beyi*, the lords of the frontier, whose task was to protect the border of the Ottoman Empire and to fight against its enemies. Until the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. companies of Christian and Muslim irregular soldiers, called *akıncı*, recruited in the *üç beyi*’s lands and lead by their lords, were used by the Ottomans as frontier raiders and scouts. These were the men who reached the Venetian Friuli during the wars of the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>18</sup> The same blood-brotherhood united Temüjin, the future Gengis Khan, with his *anda* Jamuka.<sup>19</sup>

17 Halil Inalcik, *An Overview of the Ottoman History*, in *The Great Ottoman-Turkish Civilization*, Ankara, Yeni Türkiye, 2000, vol. 1, pp. 3-90.

18 Maria Pia Pedani, *Turkish Raids in Friuli at the End of the Fifteenth Century*, in *Acta Viennensia Ottomanica. Akten des 13. CIEPO - Symposium, vom 21. bis 25. September 1998*, Wien 1999, pp. 287-291.

19 *Storia segreta dei mongoli*, a cura di Sergej Kozin, Milano, Longanesi, 1973, pp. 95, 175-177.

At the beginning the blood-brotherhood was used by soldiers to save their lives fighting on the Christian-Muslim frontier, but later, in the Balkans, among South Slavs, Vlachs, Albanians and Greeks, it became a form of fictive kinship, which included also rites such as standing witness at a marriage, baptism, circumcision and first hair-cut. It was also officiated in churches so that in 1579 the archbishop of Split and Zadar thought it important to forbid these ceremonies. Moreover, sometimes it was also a means to disguise and give an official status to homosexual unions.

The belief that blood retained one of the souls of a being is linked also to the refusal of spilling it. When a member of the Ottoman dynasty had to be executed he was strangled, usually using the string of a bow. The same happened with great viziers and other important persons.<sup>20</sup> This too was an ancient Turkic and Mongol custom. Many examples of this kind can be found in history from Gengis Khan's blood-brother Jamuka to the last caliph of Baghdad: both were executed without spilling their blood, the first breaking his neck and the second putting him in a carpet and letting horses trample on him. According to Jean-Paul Roux in this way the strength of an important person was preserved and not spilled on the earth that drank it. This strength was useful to other men and, above all, to the killer.<sup>21</sup> Animals too had to be strangled, if possible, and their blood was also drunk. Marco Polo (*Milione*, cap. 69: *Del Dio de' Tartari*) tells us that the knight riding in the Eurasian steppe could drink the blood of his horse, if he had no other food. This custom created some problems in the eating habits of Turks when they converted to Islam. According to Muslim religion, in fact, blood is not pure, *halal*, and the throats of the animals must be cut.<sup>22</sup>

In the Ottoman Empire only the blood of criminals could be spilled on the earth. Evil persons were not worthy of preservation. They were often beheaded, even if this was a honourable way of dying according to Islam. Near the first gate of the Topkapı palace there were some niches on the wall where the most important criminals' heads were exhibited in public. Only when the Muslim religion began to permeate all Ottoman society, at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> c., did the idea of honourable and shameful death penalties change a little and strangulation was no longer considered a suitable way of leaving this earth. In 1603, for instance, the chief leader of the rebellious *sipahis* asked to be killed by a sword and not to be strangled as would be a woman. All the same, the decapitation of rebels and the exposition of their heads in Istanbul went on till 1828.<sup>23</sup>

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20 Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, *La proibizione di versare il sangue nell'esecuzione di un membro della dinastia presso i turchi e i mongoli*, «Annali dell'istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli», n.s., 1 (1940), pp. 15-23.

21 Jean-Paul Roux, *La religione dei turchi e dei mongoli. Gli archetipi del naturale negli ultimi sciamani*, Genova, ECIg, 1990, pp. 76-80, 270-274.

22 Angelo Scarabel, *Il sangue e la tradizione islamica*, in *Mysterium Sanguinis. Il sangue nel pensiero delle civiltà dell'Oriente e dell'Occidente. Valenze simboliche e terapeutiche*, ed. by Annalisa Amadi, Venezia, Avis, 1998, pp. 27-38.

23 Matei Cazacu, *La mort infâme. Décapitation et exposition des têtes à Istanbul (XV<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles)*,

Some scholars say that the strange way in which some Ottoman soldiers arranged their hairs, completely shaved but a wisp in the middle of their head, was a device used to make easier the work of the executioner.<sup>24</sup> However, in this case, it was probably an Islamic custom since a popular legend present also in the Islamic Spain records that on Doomsday the Prophet Muhammad will grasp the wisp of the Muslims who are in Hell and in this way will bring them to Heaven.<sup>25</sup>

In Ottoman history, we find sometimes that also important persons were beheaded, but usually after their death, when there was no risk to spill their blood. This was, for instance, the destiny of the great vizier Kara Mustafa (d. 1683), whose skull was preserved while his body was buried in Belgrade. In 1444, after the battle of Varna, the King of Poland Wladislaw III's head was displayed on a pole, where before the battle the peace agreement violated by the Christians had been placed.<sup>26</sup> The same happened to the last *basileus* of Constantinople, Costantine XI Palaiologos (1404-1453), whose body was discovered after the battle and beheaded by order of Mehmed II. In the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. the Ottoman sultan Bayezid II (1482-1512) received as a gift from the Safavid shah a jewelled drinking goblet made with the Uzbek khan Muhammad Shayabak's skull. His son Selim I (1512-1520) sent two Persian rulers' heads as horrific gifts to the doge of Venice and to the Mamluk sultan of Egypt. The cup was the symbol of royal power and to keep a skull probably meant taking the enemy's right to rule.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. Ottoman vampires

In the Balkans and in Greece, the sanctity of a person was revealed also by the fact that his body disintegrated and only the bones remained. This was completely the reverse of the widespread European and Christian idea that the body of a saint remained uncorrupted, but it gave an answer to the fear of ghosts as conceived in ancient Turkic shamanism. According to

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in *Les Ottomans et la Mort. Permanences et Mutations*, sous la direction de Gilles Veinstein, Leiden-New York-Köln, Brill, 1996, pp. 245-289.

24 Theodoro Spandugnino, *De la origine deli imperatori ottomani...*, in *Documents inédits relatifs à l'Histoire de la grece au Moyen Age*, par C.N. Sathas, Paris, 1980, vol. 9, pp. 135-261, in particular p. 234.

25 Cerulli, *Nuove ricerche*, p. 259.

26 The king's body and armour were never found and a Portuguese legend tells us that he survived, went to the Holy Land seeking forgiveness to have betrayed the sworn peace made with the Ottomans, became a knight of Santa Caterina and then went to Madeira where he obtained some lands and married again.

27 Richard F. Kreutel, *Kara Mustafa vor Wien. 1683 aus der Sicht tuirkischer Quellen*, Graz-Wien-Köln, Verlag Styria, 1982, pp. 299, 307; Maria Pia Pedani, *Ottoman Fetihnames. The Imperial Letters Announcing a Victory*, «Tarih incelemeleri dergisi», 13 (1998), pp. 181-192; *Mehmed II the Conqueror and the Fall of the Franco-Byzantine Levant to the Ottoman Turks: Some Western Views and Testimonies*, ed. by Marios Philippides, Tempe (Arizona), ACMRS, 2007, pp. 198-207; Marino Sanuto, *I Diarii*, Venezia, Deputazione, 1886, vol. XIII, col. 47 (24 August 1511).

this religion a man, or an animal, had many souls. One of these was in the bones. It formed a small part of a great general soul that belonged to all one breed and, after the death of its owner, it found another body to inhabit. As we have already seen, if a person broke a bone of an animal, the other being, which would have its "breed-soul", would be mutilated. To cancel it completely from the face of earth one had to burn the bones. This destiny was reserved above all to enemies. In this way one may explain many Balkan and Greek customs that may seem odd. For instance, still at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., in Laconia a scholar saw the members of a family remove the flesh completely from the corpse of one of their relatives: this was a means to show that he had not been an evil person and that he had gone to Heaven. In the same region people believed that the body of an excommunicated would never become a skeleton.<sup>28</sup> To get rid completely of an enemy and his family the best thing to do was to burn his bones. In this way he will not have future relatives. Many examples of this kind can be found in Mongolian and early Ottoman history. One of the latest ones makes reference to 1544, when the great admiral Hayreddin Barbarossa disinterred the corpse of his enemy Bartolomeo Peretti, who had died four months before, and burnt it. The previous year this captain had raided the Ottoman great admiral's native island, Methylene, with a papal fleet.<sup>29</sup>

According to ancient shamanism as well as later Turkic belief, the corpse, which had not been buried well or had belonged to an evil person, kept one of his souls together with a kind of life. Sometimes he became a zombie, as in certain part of China, or a vampire; Chinese animated bodies had white hairs and long nails but they were stupid.<sup>30</sup> Above all fire, but also water, were used to get rid of vampires. Another custom was to sink a rod of wood into their heart. Practices of this kind were present also in Scandinavia, Ireland and England but they gradually disappeared during the Middle Ages. On the contrary in Greece and in the Balkans legends about vampires spread from the Middle Ages onwards, in late-byzantine and post-byzantine period, and had a great diffusion above all in the 18<sup>th</sup> c. when many scholars and scientists became interested in these phenomena and spread these legends also in other countries of Europe. Even the great *müfti* of Constantinople, Mehmed Ebussuud Efendi (1490-1574), issued a *fetva* (religious decree) about vampires which haunted a Christian village near Salonica.<sup>31</sup> He suggested this solution:

The day the event takes place, a well stripped stake has to be driven into the body until the hearth; the problem is therefore expected to be eliminated. If not, and if the redness appears on the face of the corpse, the head has to be severed and placed next to the feet. Some sources inform us that this method is efficient. If the corpse, after having been buried again, is found in the same situation,

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28 Tommaso Braccini, *Prima di Dracula, Archeologia del vampiro*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2011, pp. 133-141.

29 Salvatore Bono, *I corsari barbareschi*, Torino, ERI, 1964, p. 145.

30 Marco Ceresa, *Vampiri cinesi*, in *Mysterium Sanguinis*, pp. 141-148.

31 Ertuğrul Düzdağ, *Şeyhülislam Ebussuud Efendi Fetvaları Işığında 16. Asır Hayatı*, İstanbul, Enderun Kitabevi, 1972, p. 198.

slaughter it and place it in the same position. If, after the application of all these methods, the problem remains unsolved, take the corpse out and burn it with fire. At the time of our well-guided predecessors, the practice of burning with fire was many times reiterated.

At the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> c., this *fetva* was quoted by the great vizier Hüseyin pasha (1697-1702) in a letter sent to the *subaşı* (police chief inspector) of Edirne, when cases of vampires, which had began to haunt the Muslim village of Marash, were brought before the court of the *kadı* Mirzazâde Mehmed Efendi.<sup>32</sup>

The Greek and Balkans creatures were different from the Classical ghosts, *striges* and spirits as well as from the 19<sup>th</sup> c. vampires. They were primarily not thirsty for blood but could kill or annoy the living beings. They had many names. According to their aspect or their behaviour they were called with the Greek words *katakhanas*, *lampasma*, *stoicheio*, *tympaniaios*, but also with the Turkic *upir/vampir*, the Slav *vrykolakas* (i.e. werewolf), the Persian-Turkish *cadı* and also *strigois*. There was in fact a possible connection between vampires and werewolves: the vampire had many characteristics of the shaman; it was evil and could eat both the body and the soul of living beings; on the other hand the shaman too could become an animal, such as a wolf, but his intention was good.<sup>33</sup>

Carla Corradi Musi was the first scholar to link the vampires with the ancient shamanic religion.<sup>34</sup> She found similar beliefs in ancient peoples who followed shamanism such as the Celts, Scythians, and other Barbarian tribes. According to me the fact that in Greece and the Balkans the vampires made their appearance in late-byzantine and post-byzantine period does not invalidate her hypothesis, as some scholars seem to think.<sup>35</sup> We must remember, in fact, that it was the period in which Turkish states made their appearance in Anatolia. They were small states as the beyliks but also great empires as those of the Selgiuks. At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> c. the Ottoman tribe settled near the Byzantine border and in the middle of the following century it had already settled on the European shore of the Marmara Sea. Even if they had converted to Islam from the very beginning of their history, the popular belief was still deeply influenced by shamanism. We may advance the hypothesis that some of their customs matched with traces of more ancient, almost disappeared, beliefs and gave them a new life.

## 5. Conclusion

Societies and cultures are not motionless and still. They mix and blend together. We can recall the Scandinavian heroes who had died in battles and rode behind Odin in the stormy

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32 *Anonim Osmanlı Tarihi (1099-1116/1688-1704)*, ed. by Abdülkadir Özcan, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2000, pp. 148-149.

33 Carla Corradi Musi, *Vampiri europei e vampiri dell'area sciamanica*, Messina, Rubbettino, 1995, pp. 64-65.

34 Musi, *Vampiri*, pp. 33-57.

35 Braccini, *Prima di Dracula*, pp. 55, 77.

sky and then read in an Ottoman chronicle the story of Süleyman pasha who, after his death, came to the Ottomans' aid together with a flight of heavenly heroes, surrounded by light and riding white horses.<sup>36</sup> We can discover that in England until the period of Henry VIII (1509-1547) during the procession held on Palm Sunday the Christian priest used to kick the gate of the church and, on the contrary, to read in William of Rubruck (1220-1293 about) that one of his friars run the risk of being killed since he had dared to step on the threshold of the khan's tent which was considered a sacred place by their hosts.<sup>37</sup> Even fairy tales sometimes contain ancient symbols whose meaning has been forgotten. The apple of Snow White means apparent death. For Mongols and Turks it was a symbol of love and death and in Turkey people say that it is given to children by Izrâ'il, the Muslim angel of Death.<sup>38</sup> In Italy too we may find some strange connections. If the *beneandanti* from Friuli had been linked with the shamans, in the South of Italy other customs and legends refer to Islam. In Sicily all the relatives of a dying person used to stand on the left of the deathbed to protect him, because that is the part of the Devil, as in the Islamic tradition, while, according to another Italian popular thought, the Devil's part is the right; this belief comes from a mistaken interpretation of Psalm 108:6-7 (*constitue super eum peccatorem et diabolus* (here i.e. accuser) *stet a dextris ejus, cum judicatur exeat condemnatus et oratio ejus fiat in peccatum*); people say that is it this the reason why at the altar the bride is at her bridegroom's right. The bridge of San Giacomo, which the dead have to cross in Calabria folklore, has many characteristics of the narrow bridge which traverses Hell in Islamic belief.<sup>39</sup> These are only a few examples but many others may be found if ancient chronicles, present customs and fairy tales are compared from a cross-cultural point of view.

### Summary

Shamanism arrived in Europe together with barbarians coming from the North-East in the Middle Ages. The most ancient medieval chronicles, as that of Jordanes (5<sup>th</sup> c.), describe practices belonging to this religion as odd customs belonging to those peoples. On the contrary, in the 8<sup>th</sup> c., Paul the Dean tells stories which are based on shamanic belief but he considers them usual events that do not deserve any explanation. In the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c. European society has already become completely Christian and in the chronicles of that period everything is read from a Christian point of view; some ancient stories are also altered to fit this religion even if

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36 (Hoca Saadeddin Efendi) Saad ed-dini scriptoris turcici, *Annales turcici usque ad Muradem I cum textu turcico impressi*, ed. by Adam F. Kollár, Vienna 1755, pp. 60-64.

37 O. Niccoli, *A proposito di qualche libro recente di storia religiosa*, «Quaderni Storici», 38/1 (1997), pp. 107-138, in particular p. 115; Guglielmo di Rubruck, *Viaggio nell'Impero dei Mongoli. 1253-1255*, ed. by Claude and René Kappler, Pavia, Lucarini, 1987, p. 176.

38 Roux, *La religione*, pp. 231, 301.

39 Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani - Mariano Meligrana, *Il ponte di San Giacomo*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1996, pp. 161-193.

they clearly sprang from another source and meant something different.

In the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c. another cultural revolution concerning afterlife had place in Europe. The evil and good deeds of the deceased began to be weighed on the scales of justice. At the same time the Purgatory made its appearance. In the following century Dante wrote the *Divina Commedia* where the geography of Heaven, Purgatory and Hell is fully described. Scholars discovered an Islamic influence on these ideas. The story concerning the Prophet's ascension to Heaven, which clearly influence Dante's afterlife, arrived in Muslim Spain and then reached Italy and Tuscany in particular. Other influences were prevalent in the Middle East during the period of the Crusades.

In the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> c. Ottomans conquered the Balkans and Greece and they ruled there for about four centuries. They introduced Islam in that area together with ancient shamanic customs that had already become only superstition in their own society. The Ottoman customs investigated in this paper makes reference above all to blood and to the body's life after death. These ideas are at the basis of the Balkan blood-brotherhood, that in later periods it was also a means to disguise and give an official status to homosexual unions, and of the myth of the vampire, so important in 19<sup>th</sup> c. literature.