

THE CHAOSKAMPF MOTIF IN THE LIVES OF THE MILITARY SAINTS

MIHAIL-GEORGE HÂNCU

While hagiography credits saints with many ways of showing their faith, one motif tends to stand out – that of the dragon-slayer. Although the readers themselves would be unable to imitate such a feat (in stark contrast with the denial of earthly desires), the story is popular enough to be repeatedly represented in hagiography, iconography or even in folklore. That being said, one can't help but wonder *where* the dragon came from and *what* his role was. The answer to this question is, of course, very complex, and there is little hope of giving a satisfying answer in a few pages: as such, I will be discussing one interpretative model that, given some terminological improvements, might help clarify whether the saints' battle against the dragon is a battle against Chaos, as pointed out by Mircea Eliade¹ and, originally, by Hermann Gunkel².

Chaoskampf, as a term, was introduced by Hermann Gunkel in *Chaos und Schöpfung*, a book he published in 1895, a few years after the decipherment of the cuneiform script and, thus, of the various Assyro-Babylonian myths. His work was definitely not the first to discuss the links between the Old Testament and the Babylonian: Eberhard Schrader had mentioned them in *Keilinschriften* (1872) and George Smith had published the so-called *Chaldean Account of the Genesis* in 1875³. The unity of the Old Testament had been debated ever since 1753, when biblical scholars theorized that there were two versions of the Old Testament, which differed through the way God was called, namely Yahweh or Elohim⁴. Nevertheless, Gunkel's influence in Biblical exegesis has been repeatedly emphasized, one of the latest such statements coming as recently as 2013, which shows that the subject is still of great interest in modern scholarship⁵. According to Gunkel, the beginning of the Genesis is neither "the author's free construction", nor "the literary reception of the Babylonian material"⁶, but rather that it reflects the same oral tradition which provided the fundament for other Near Eastern

¹ Eliade, 464.

² Gunkel. 1895.

³ Lundström. 2013, 148.

⁴ Eliade, 1995 a, 75.

⁵ Eliade, 1995 a, 151–152.

⁶ Gunkel. 379–398.

cosmogonic myths, such as the famed *Enuma eliš*, which Gunkel saw as the most similar of them. One impediment may have been that the creation of the universe in the *Enuma eliš* was immediately preceded by a battle between Marduk, the supreme deity, and Tiamat, a sea monster⁷, whereas the Old Testament only implied the existence of such a battle, as seen in Job, 7:12: “A sea-monster am I, or a dragon, that thou settest over me a guard?”. Gunkel points out that the dragon is never actually killed, but only imprisoned by God, so that it may not return⁸. Indeed, as shall be seen from the definition we will be giving to the concept of “Chaos”, timelessness is a common trait of Chaos and his descendants.

One of the most revolutionary elements of *Chaos und Schöpfung* was the idea that divine revelation had reached more cultures, most notably in the Near East, and that these older religions had nevertheless paved the way towards the true faith. Although one may think that Gunkel was at odds with the more conservative biblical scholars, his position was, in fact, more moderate than that of another contemporary, Friedrich Delitzsch. In 1902, Delitzsch had organized a series of conferences titled *Babel und Bibel*, in which he claimed that Babylon was the main source for the Israelite cosmogony and for the Ten Commandments, which were in fact based on the Code of Hammurabi⁹. Delitzsch had chosen to adapt the recent discoveries of Assyriologists in order to provide a more sensational content to his conferences, which were meant to persuade the German emperor, who was part of the audience, to give more funds to still recent science of Assyriology. Delitzsch attracted criticism from both sides of the argument, and Gunkel writes an answer in 1903, in which he rejects Delitzsch’s extreme position, while he himself claims that he only intended to serve the Church by researching the Near Eastern texts and uncovering the truth behind certain biblical images¹⁰.

Gunkel’s relatively polemical position did not fail to bear fruit. In 1924, some three decades after Gunkel’s book, researchers had reached the conclusion that the first six books of the Bible were based on six different documents, some of which were ulterior to the Babylonian captivity, which made Oriental influences all the more possible¹¹. Although the matter of the unity of the biblical text is quite complex, we will mention one other possible confirmation of Gunkel’s theory: Mowinckel’s study from 1922 showed that the story of Yahweh’s victory against the monstrous Rahab (who is mentioned in the Bible as well) was the basis of the Israelite New Year’s tradition, according to which the king played the role of those forces of light that had defeated the aquatic forces¹². The discovery of similar myths in other cultures led Eliade to conclude the following:

⁷ Eliade, 1993, 231.

⁸ Gunkel, 1985, 88.

⁹ Lundström, 2013, 155.

¹⁰ Lundström, 2013, 158.

¹¹ Eliade, 1993, 19–20.

¹² Watson, 2005, 12.

Since “our world” is a cosmos, any attack from without threatens to turn it into chaos. And as “our world” was founded by imitating the paradigmatic work of the gods, the cosmogony, so the enemies who attack it are assimilated to the enemies of the gods, the demons, conquered by the gods at the beginning of time. An attack on “our world” is equivalent to an act of revenge by the mythical dragon, who rebels against the work of the gods, the cosmos, and struggles to annihilate it. “Our” enemies belong to the powers of chaos. Any destruction of a city is equivalent to a retrogression to chaos. Any victory over the attackers reiterates the paradigmatic victory of the gods over the dragon (that is, over chaos) [...]

As we shall see later, the dragon is the paradigmatic figure of the marine monster, of the primordial snake, symbol of the cosmic waters, of darkness, night, and death – in short, of the amorphous and virtual, of everything that has not yet acquired a “form”. The dragon must be conquered and cut to pieces by the gods so that the cosmos may come to birth. It was from the body of the marine monster Tiamat that Marduk fashioned the world. Yahweh created the universe after his victory over the primordial monster Rahab. But, as we shall see, this victory of the gods over the dragon must be symbolically repeated each year, for each year the world must be created anew. Similarly the victory of the gods over the forces of darkness, death, and chaos is repeated with every victory of the city over its invaders¹³.

In other words, the image of a battle against a representative of the Chaos that preceded cosmogony is conserved both in written stories *and* in folk traditions.

As can be seen, the matter of the *Chaoskampf* is quite complex and lends itself to many discussions. Since one of the more notable criticisms to Gunkel’s theory¹⁴ was that the word “Chaos” was constantly redefined according to the interpreter’s needs, we will attempt to strengthen this part of our argumentation by referring to a single definition of the concept. Quite fortunately, Chaos was a cosmogonic concept from its very first attestation, in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (7th century B.C.), where it is said to be the first element. Unfortunately for later readers, Hesiod doesn’t provide more details: the only thing he states about Chaos (who is not characterized with any epithet, as would have been customary in the literature of its time) is that it came first and that, at some later point, it was “dark”. Based on the limited data provided by Hesiod and on its later meanings, modern translators compared it to (or outright called it) a chasm or an abyss.

Robert Mondi¹⁵ opposed this interpretative tradition on account of its lack of logic: how could a chasm exist before whatever it separated? He then quotes one argument, namely that *Chaos* and *chasma* are used in the same position in two nearly identical descriptions of the Underworld. According to Mondi, however, the only reason why Chaos was defined thus was that it was *like* a chasm surrounded by the newer elements of the universe, since both descriptions occur during Zeus’ battle against the Titans.

The key element of Mondi’s demonstration was that he defined Chaos based on the parallelism between the two genealogies depicted in the *Theogony*: thus,

¹³ Eliade, 1959, 47–49.

¹⁴ Watson, 2005, 113–119.

¹⁵ Mondi, 1989, 8.

Chaos is the boundless, formless and substanceless counterpart of Gaia. This becomes particularly apparent when comparing their offspring: the Sun and the Moon are ultimately born from Gaia, while Night and Day (which are, admittedly, more abstract) are descendants of Chaos. Hesiod's intention to distinguish the two families is also confirmed by the fact that Gaia's descendants are all born from traditional couples, while Chaos' are consistently born from single entities. The only apparent exception to this rule is that Night and Erebus give birth to Day and Aether, although that might be due to each of the children being one parent's direct opposite. This same dichotomy applies to the evils included in the two genealogies: Chaos is the ancestor of Death, Plague, Old Age and other abstract evils, while Gaia is the ancestor of concrete monsters, which, unlike their counterparts, only existed in a limited space and a limited timeframe and are – or have been – killed by the time of Hesiod's writing.

If we use this particular definition of Chaos, then we can recognize his timelessness both in the New Year's traditions and in the biblical image from Job 7:31, where the dragon is merely chained and guarded by God. Even though Gunkel most definitely hadn't considered this interpretation of Hesiod's Chaos, we can still quite legitimately apply it to the *Chaoskampf* theory, especially since, as shall be seen in the following, it allows for a contrast between normal monsters and timeless evils. At first glance, one might argue that *Chaoskampf* was a theory that was created in order to account for the influx of Near Eastern myths in the Bible, and that it might not have much to do with the later hagiographical motif. That being said, Eliade rightfully notes that it was through Christianization of pagan religious traditions that countless dragon-slaying heroes and gods from all over Europe were recovered into the figure of one saint, namely Saint George¹⁶.

Seeing how Eliade distinctly connects the dragon motif to Saint George – not to the military saints in general – I will first focus on the most canonical versions of his story. As such, I started by consulting Lascarov-Moldovanu's *Lives of the Saints*, first published between 1934 and 1942 and then republished in 1992. In his preface to the new edition, Gheorghe Mihăilă explains how this version was based on “the first complete Romanian collection of the *Lives of the Saints*”, which had first been published at the Metropolitan Church of Iași and the Monastery of Neamț between 1807 and 1815. This version was then rewritten in a simpler style by Lascarov-Moldovanu, who took care to remove repetitions¹⁷. In other words, one may legitimately claim that this version of the *Lives of the Saints* is quite close to being the most popular and the most official.

In this version, the dragon, who torments the locals who live near a lake in Libya, can't be killed by ordinary people, which prompts them to pray to their own gods for help. The pagan gods demand that they send children to the dragon for a month, so as to appease him. However, when the local leader's daughter is the only one left, God sends Saint George, who defeats the dragon, then drags him into the

¹⁶ Eliade, 2000, 464.

¹⁷ *Viețile Sfinților*, 1992, 6–8.

city, where he burns his remains. As a result, the locals show their gratitude by converting to Christianity, since their old gods had not helped them in any way¹⁸.

Due to motifs such as the sacrifice of local youths, the story of Saint George has been compared to that of Perseus. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* from 1909 mentions this theory, but dismisses the possibility that Saint George could be a “converted Perseus” on account of the relatively recent date of the dragon motif in Christian hagiography. According to the author of the article on Saint George, this foreign image of the dragon-slayer will have been brought by 12th-century crusaders to the West¹⁹. While this theory would fit in with the date of the first Latin text on Saint George’s battle against the dragon, it must be noted that the motif was not a late pagan import, but had in fact been present in Christian art for quite a few centuries.

Georgi Atanasov, the Bulgarian author of a very detailed monograph on Saint George, notes that the first representations of the Saint striking a dragon with his lance date from the 6th century. Most extraordinarily, they hail not only from the Near East, where he was born and where his cult was first attested, but also from Vinitsa, in modern day Macedonia²⁰. Other researchers – most notably Christopher Walter – have pointed out that this graphical motif might have its origins in certain Israelite amulets from around 325 A.D which show Solomon fighting a female demon known for killing newborn children²¹. According to Walter, the rider becomes anonymous around the 5th century, while the female demon is replaced by a serpent. The hero is eventually identified with the military saints, whose function is now identical to that of Solomon – defeating evil with the power they received from God²².

The first Latin text containing this wonder is the *Legenda Aurea*²³, written by Iacobus de Voragine in the latter half of the 13th century. Since the point that interests us the most is whether this dragon shares any characteristics with the children of the Hesiodic Chaos, we will be focusing on the moment of its defeat. Iacobus de Voragine provides not one, but two versions for this final moment: in the “main” one, Saint George brings the dragon to the city, which terrifies its inhabitants. He promises that he would “free them from the dragon’s punishment” (*poenis vos liberare draconis*) if they convert. After convincing them, he slays the dragon with his sword and drags him out of the city (*beatus Georgius evaginato gladio draconem occidit et ipsum extra civitatem efferri praecepit*). According to de Voragine, “in other books, he kills the dragon when he attempts to swallow the girl” (*In aliquibus tamen libris legitur quod dum draco ad devorandum puellam pergeret, Georgius se cruce muniuit et draconem aggrediens interfecit*). Even though we have two versions of the same story, this does not change the fact that the dragon is killed.

¹⁸ *Vieșile Sfinților*. 1992, 191–192.

¹⁹ Herbert, Huston. 1909.

²⁰ Atanasov, 2001, 100.

²¹ Walter. 1991, 36

²² Walter, 1991, 42.

²³ Iacobus de Voragine, 2014.

Whoever attempts to study the evolution of this motif in older Romanian texts is faced with a different problem. Metropolitan Varlaam's *Romanian Book of Teaching*, a 17th-century religious work dedicated to the great holidays and the Sundays in the Orthodox calendar, features Saint George as well²⁴. The dragon, however, is in no way mentioned in his story. Could one claim that Varlaam tried to remove this foreign episode from his work? Hardly; another military saint, Saint Theodore Tiro, celebrated in the first Saturday of Lent, born a Christian, is depicted as its slayer. According to Varlaam's story, Saint Theodore prayed to God for a sign that should strengthen his faith. He finds a Christian woman, who tells him about a "great and terrifying serpent". He promises that he will slay the serpent, since he has Jesus Christ on his side, and goes to its lair in the forest. Before taking on the beast, he makes the sign of the Cross and "raises his lance and hits him right in the head, so that the lance went through it". After watching the serpent die, Saint Theodore realizes the meaning of this fight: by killing the serpent, he kills Satan²⁵. Varlaam's text on Saint Theodore Tiro is quite remarkable since it is, in fact, the longest in his *Book of Teaching* (the editor, Dan Zamfirescu, points out that it is two pages longer than the one for Palm Sunday, the second longest)²⁶. The source Varlaam used for both Saint George and Saint Theodore Tiro is the same: Damaskinos Stouditis' *Treasure*. As pointed out by Pandelescu Olteanu, the dragon episode is absent from Saint George's text and present in Saint Theodore's as early as Damaskinos' work²⁷. Varlaam's version is the Romanian translation of the Greek text (by means of a Slavonic intermediary), and the *Treasure* itself was a spoken Greek version of the old Byzantine hagiographical texts (to which Damaskinos testifies when he writes about the life of Pasichrates)²⁸.

It is quite notable that this series of sources fails to mention the dragon episode in the life of Saint George. Seeing how Gunkel had argued that the dragon motif had entered the Old Testament on account of its great popularity amongst the common people (even though the original myths would have been at odds with the Judaic dogma), one would expect the same principle to apply if Saint George was *the* dragon-slayer. Varlaam, who may very well have been loyal to his Greek sources, would not have written an explicitly *Romanian* religious book while omitting an episode that would have been vital to its Romanian public. From this, we should conclude that Mircea Eliade's generalization requires a small extension: the dragon-slaying heroes and deities of the pagan past were identified not with Saint George, but with the military saints as a whole.

Since the text of the *Apocryphal Miracle of Saint Theodore Tiro* (to quote the title given by Arizanova²⁹ to this fragment of the *Germanov Sbornik*, a manuscript

²⁴ Varlaam Mitropolitul, 2011, 372–380.

²⁵ Varlaam Mitropolitul, 2011, 359–360.

²⁶ Varlaam Mitropolitul, 2012, p. 164.

²⁷ Varlaam Mitropolitul, 2012, 173.

²⁸ Varlaam Mitropolitul, 2012, 176–177.

²⁹ Arizanova, 2013, 407–412.

from 1358–1359 which was edited by Elka Mircheva³⁰) is considerably longer than the versions we find in Varlaam's and Lascarov-Moldovanu's writings, we will be focusing on two episodes in particular.

The story is placed during the reign of an emperor called Saul (whose nationality is unknown), while Theodore Tiro is a soldier in his army. Their land was being tormented by a dragon who did not allow the locals to take any water from the spring that he guarded unless they gave him 8 young oxen, 40 sheep, 12 goats and 25 lambs. At the same time, Saul dreams about a bald man armed with a spear who appears before him and slices him in half, but doesn't conquer his empire. While the other nobles are unable to explain this dream, Saint Theodore points out that it is the soldiers' duty to die for Saul to prevent his death and, thus, that they should go fight the Saracens. The army takes the Saracens by surprise and captures their emperor, who looks exactly like the man from Saul's dream. Saul then decides to stop making any sacrifices to the dragon, since he was now safe.

The dragon is furious and stops any human beings from reaching the spring. Even so, the Saint's mother notices that her son's horse was thirsty and decides to go get water for him. After finding out that the dragon had captured her, Saint Theodore asks Saul to let him go slay the dragon, but the emperor answers that the dragon is unseen and too strong for the Saint, no matter how good a soldier he might be. Saint Theodore replies that he will defeat him with the help of God and that, if he does lose, then that will have been the emperor's and God's will (*То [да бъде] твоя воля и Божия*). Saul praises him for his words, but warns him that the enemy only asks for peace when he is defeated, but not otherwise (*Врагът винаги види ли, че ще бъде победен, то проси мир. А види ли, че ще победи, той не проси мир*). Saint Theodore replies that the emperor should take his properties and give them to the poor and only asks that his name be commemorated in the first Saturday of Lent (*на първата събота от поста направи ми памет*). The emperor then asks God to help Theodore and then allows his soldier to go fight the dragon.

One truly interesting moment is when Saint Theodore finds his mother surrounded by 12 serpents. Before killing them, he says the following prayer: "Oh, Lord Almighty, You have no beginning, who cannot be seen, who cannot be spoken, who cannot be expressed in words, single maker of all, my Creator, You who have limited sea and sand by Your will, listen to my prayer [...]" (*Господи Божие, Вседържителю, безначален, невидим, неизречен, неизразим, неизтисан, единствен създател на всички, Творец мой, ограждащ морето с пясък по Твоя воля, заслушай се в моята молитва*). Although Saul himself had invoked God as the "Creator" (among other epithets) in his own prayer, it is quite notable that Saint Theodore talks about God's role in limiting of the sea just before fighting the dragon. This very association would allow us to believe that the *Chaokampf* theory is more than just a modern construct, seeing how the author of this apocryphal text makes the same connection between the Genesis, the waters and Saint Theodore's opponent.

³⁰ Mircheva, 2006.

After fighting the 12 serpents, Saint Theodore finds his mother, who asks him to run away before the dragon returns. While we are told of the dragon's return and anger, the *Sbornik* does not depict the actual battle between the two. This is one case in which the reader would not be helped by Silvia Arizanova's translation, since she herself had struggled with this very passage (as pointed out in a footnote): according to her modern Bulgarian version, the raging dragon starts breathing smoke and fire, grows another head and, rather perplexingly, decides to kiss the Saint on the forehead while praising God (*а змяят целуна го по челото, славейки Бога*). This bizarre moment is followed by the Saint's joy at having defeated the dragon and his army (*като видя, че погуби змея и неговото войнство*) and his return to Saul, who rewards him for his deeds. Arizanova's translation of the Slavonic words is correct and appears to be confirmed by pages 295b – 296a of Elka Mircheva's edition of the original Slavonic text. That being said, the editor's notes concerning the manuscript shed some much-needed light on the dragon's actions: there is a blank between pages 295b (which ends with *zùìè-*, *dragon*) and 296a (which begins with *è wáëóá[r]za eão*, *and kisses him*), which explains why the dragon had become the grammatical subject of a verb that would have suited Theodore's mother³¹. While the blank still leaves us without any explanations as to how the battle unfolded, we can at least suppose that he shared his army's fate. We can, however, be sure that he did not switch to the true faith and that he did not start praising God while kissing his foe on the forehead, as Christian as that image may be.

Let us summarize what we have discovered after examining some of the oldest and most important Orthodox and Catholic sources concerning the battle against the dragon. First of all, even though Mircea Eliade had only extended the *Chaoskampf* motif to Saint George, who was supposed to be the hagiographical character who inherited this particular trait from his pagan counterparts, it must be noted that Saint George's connection to the dragon is not as strong as one might have expected. Even if we don't simply attribute this inconsistency to the artificial character of Christianization as a whole, it is quite striking that, following the Byzantine sources and Damaskinos Stouditis in particular, Metropolitan Varlaam did not include this episode in his *Romanian Book of Teaching* (which would have been the ideal medium to portray an episode that was popular enough to be featured on Stephen the Great's flag³²). We can be certain that this motif had not lost any of its actual fame by his time, since the chapter that *does* conserve it is, in fact, the longest in the entire book. Though one may attribute this choice to Varlaam's Greek and Slavonic sources, it is quite likely that the Romanian public appreciated this image enough to warrant its extended space in the book, even though it was attributed to a different military saint, namely Saint Theodore Tiro.

Secondly, it must be pointed out that every one of the variants that we consulted has the dragon be defeated and destroyed by the Saint. The only

³¹ Mircheva. 2006, 238.

³² Marinescu, Mertzimekis 2004, 185–186.

exception appears to be the *Germanov Sbornik*, where the Saint appears to subdue the dragon by having him become a Christian and praise God. As tantalizing as such a prospect may be, all we have here is an unfortunate translation that ignored the editor's notes on the manuscript. Although we do not know *how* Saint Theodore defeats the dragon, it is quite safe to assume *that* he defeats him for good.

Indeed, if we apply the Hesiodic classification of the various evils (namely that spatially and temporally limited monsters stem from Gaea, while abstract concepts like Death, Plague and Sleep are from Chaos' line), then we would be forced to admit that battle against the dragon – as depicted in Christian tradition – is not a *Chaoskampf*, since the dragon consistently and definitively dies. On the other hand, hagiographical texts tend to add a further nuance to this otherwise simple image by stating that the dragon is a symbol of the devil, of evil or paganism. This interpretation is generally external to the story itself, but Varlaam goes further by turning it into Saint Theodore Tiro's personal epiphany: be it as it may, the dragon ultimately stands for a more timeless evil.

The *Germanov Sbornik* does not include any such interpretation (although it could very well have been mentioned in the missing pages), but provides a different, but equally interesting element: Saint Theodore repeatedly invokes the Creator before going to battle the dragon, even mentioning His triumph against the seas. Although this particular detail is probably an innovation, just like the fictional king Saul (or Samuel, as per the Greek variant in *BHG 1766*). This particular story prompted Hippolyte Delehayé to state that “the study of this isolated story with many absurd details might tempt those who love folklore”³³, but not the specialists who, like him, attempt to find the origins of the *hagiographical* motif.

Since this paper's purpose is to verify whether the dragon motif can legitimately be classified as a *Chaoskampf*, we will be turning our attention towards the folkloric aspects of Saint George's cult both in Romania and in the Balkans. In Albania, Saint George is equally celebrated by the Orthodox and the Muslims, since it marks the beginning of the first half of the year, which lasts until Saint Demetrius' Day. In fact, the calendric role played by Saint George's Day in this area is so great, that some places give more importance to this holiday than to the Muslim Bairam or to the Christian Easter. Saint George is celebrated for three consecutive days, during which the locals sacrifice a lamb and don't work in any way³⁴. Saint George's Day occasionally signified the beginning of the civil year, but was consistently said to mark the beginning of the pastoral year, which is when the new shepherds are chosen. One notable aspect of Saint George's traditions is that the remains of the lambs that are sacrificed for the ritual meal are thrown down the river³⁵. Bulgarians and other South Slavs equally focus on the pastoral aspect, and the first lamb of the flock is sacrificed for the Saint, who is perceived as the protector of shepherds and sheep³⁶.

³³ Delehayé. 1909, 38.

³⁴ Olteanu. 2013, 71.

³⁵ Olteanu. 2013, 72.

³⁶ Olteanu, 2013, 75.

Russian linguist and folklorist Alexander Hilferding gives an account of a habit from Raška, a region from Southwest Serbia, where Christians and Muslims gather for Saint George's Day on the shore of a lake which, according to tradition, had been inhabited by a dragon who fed on the local virgins and was ultimately defeated by Saint George. Veselin Čajkanović, a Serbian historian of religions and classical philologist, who wrote a monograph on the remains of pagan religions in Serbia, attempts to explain this tradition not as the result of popular imagination, but rather as a direct adaptation of the legend of Saint George. That aside, Čajkanović argues that the local version of the Saint George story was, in fact, the *interpretatio Christiana* of the pagan myth of the three-headed god, Trojan, who was also the namesake of a place known to people as *Trojograd*, "Trojan's city"³⁷. This adaptation may have been facilitated by the general tendency to identify Saint George's opponent with paganism or, more generally, with the devil.

This tradition might have some parallels in Romanian folklore, since there is the tradition of the "Freeing of the Waters". This ritual, which takes place on Saint George's Day, is the duty of a family who has endured the recent death of a family member, seeing how they have to remove all demonic influences from the river. One alternate tradition claims that there are actual devils in the river, and that women can conquer them by making the sign of the Cross with their laundry mallet³⁸. While these traditions ultimately point to a battle against an aquatic – possibly timeless – evil, I find that the Serbian tradition is probably one of the most fascinating adaptation of Saint George's legend in folklore.

Similarly, Macedonians emphasize Saint George's role in raising animals and in the calendar itself, as shown by the following proverb: Дојде ли Ѓурѓовден, чекај си Митровден, "if Saint George's Day comes, then expect Saint Demetrius' Day"³⁹. Saint George (Sângiorz) is identified in Ion Ghinoiu's *Dictionary of Romanian Mythology* with a "god of vegetation"⁴⁰, which is equally attested in the tradition of the *Zelenij Juraj* or the *Grüner Georg*, where a man covered in branches is splashed with water on Saint George's Day⁴¹.

Is it then possible to argue that Saint George takes part in a battle against Chaos, as first defined by the Ancient Greeks? The most difficult impediment is that the dragon is emphatically killed in such a way that he may not return, which would contradict the Hesiodic dichotomy between Chaos and Gaea. Saint Theodore Tiro's story is more compatible with the concept of *Chaoskampf* by identifying the dragon/serpent with the devil, who is clearly seen as man's timeless enemy.

If we manage to go past the very concrete and clearly delimited shape of the dragon, it is nevertheless possible to confirm the *Chaoskampf* theory with the help

³⁷ Čajkanović, 1973, 177–179.

³⁸ Olteanu, 2009, 196–197.

³⁹ Kitevski, 2001, 142.

⁴⁰ Ghinoiu, 2013, 144.

⁴¹ Verebélyi, 2013, 118.

of folklore. Indeed, Saint George marks the beginning of the year, which is sometimes celebrated by suspending all activities for three days (in a manner that is not dissimilar to the Saturnalia, when all order was briefly reversed before the New Year). One might also argue that Saint George was associated with order and imposing limits, since it is on this same day that lambs are separated from sheep, which is – to a certain extent – a triumph against disorder. One strong counter to this interpretation is that the dragon motif enters Saint George's tradition relatively late, which makes the connection between the military saint and his most famous foe be less solid than one might have expected. That being said, Lascarov-Moldovanu, who otherwise claimed to have removed repetitions, attributes the dragon episode to both Saint George and Saint Theodore Tiro, although the absence of this same motif in Varlaam's work is relatively puzzling.

On the other hand, recent research on Judaic and early Christian art has provided proof that the tradition of the rider who strikes an anthropomorphic or serpent-shaped demon was actually quite ancient. Christopher Walter claims that Saint Theodore Tiro may have been the first military saint to have been associated with dragon-slaying, even if only because Saint-George's traditional opponent was, at first, Diocletian⁴². That being said, it is equally true that various Metaphrastic manuscripts depict Christian persecutors as being accompanied by serpent: one notable case is that of Trajan, who is likely to be the namesake of Trojan, the pagan deity from South Serbia, which is all the more interesting, if one considers that the Christian population conserved his myth by turning him into a local dragon and Saint George's opponent⁴³.

As such, we may accept the military saints' inclusion among the *Chaoskampf* protagonists, even though "Chaos" became a somewhat ambiguous term even during Antiquity. While the dragon himself would qualify as a descendant of Gaea, his meaning points to his actual timelessness. One may also extend research of the Christian *Chaoskampf* by referring to the traditional story Saint Charalambos, who is represented in several icons as keeping the Plague in chains. According to folklore, Saint Charalambos can't kill her and only sets her free whenever God asks him to. In a certain sense, this kind of aetiological myth accounts for the oldest meaning of "Chaos", seeing how Plague can't be eradicated and can only be *limited* by the forces of Order, here represented by the Saint. As such, even though the word "Chaos" did eventually lose much of its original meaning throughout Antiquity, it is possible to argue that the general idea of a *Chaoskampf* was conserved from the earliest Near Eastern myths to the more recent Christian folk tales of dragon-slaying military saints, who, just like other holy men, aimed to imitate God Himself.

⁴² Walter, 1999, 173.

⁴³ Walter, 1999, 178.

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