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## NOTES ON THE FUNERAL RITES OF THE BULGARIANS AND ROMANIANS: TREE IN RITUALS AND MYTHOLOGICAL IDEAS ASSOCIATED WITH DEATH<sup>1</sup>

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### Rezumat

#### Note privind obiceiurile funerare ale bulgarilor și românilor: arborele în rituri și reprezentări mitologice legate de moarte

Articolul examinează câteva reprezentări mitologice și acțiuni rituale legate de rolul arborilor în obiceiuri funerare ale bulgarilor și românilor cu scopul identificării generalului și specialului. Informațiile furnizate provin din teritoriile în care bulgarii și românii locuiesc alături – zonele de frontieră din nord-vestul Bulgariei și estul Serbiei (valea Timocului), unde, alături de bulgari și sârbi, există o populație destul de mare românofonă, Oltenia, Dobrogea etc. Reprezentările mitologice, acțiunile rituale și textele folclorice ale bulgarilor și românilor legate de moarte și înmormântare, în care sunt prezenți arborii, demonstrează o serie de trăsături comune. Lista copacilor asociați cu moartea în credințele populare este, de asemenea, în mare măsură comună – ea include molid (brad), plop, nuc, pomi fructiferi etc. Prezența copacului în ritul funerar se remarcă nu numai la bulgari și români, ci și la alte popoare din regiunea carpato-balcanică – în special, la sârbi și ucraineni (huțuli). Se poate presupune că toate popoarele slave enumerate au împrumutat acest obiect ritual de la români, dar această problemă necesită un studiu suplimentar. Cultura populară a bulgarilor și românilor are în comun și ideea metaforică a morții ca nuntă (această idee se regăsește și la alte popoare ale regiunii).

**Cuvinte-cheie:** „pomul mortului”, moarte, nuntă, reprezentări mitologice, texte folclorice.

### Резюме

#### Заметки о погребальном обряде болгар и румын: дерево в обрядах и мифологических представлениях, связанных со смертью

В статье рассматриваются некоторые мифологические представления и обрядовые действия, связанные с ролью деревьев в погребальной обрядности болгар и румын, с целью выявить общее и особенное. Приводимые сведения происходят преимущественно с тех территорий, где болгары и румыны живут по соседству: приграничные районы северо-западной Болгарии и восточной Сербии (долина реки Тимок), где наряду с болгарскими и сербскими проживает довольно многочисленное румыноязычное население, Олтения, Добруджа и др. Мифологические представления, обрядовые действия и фольклорные тексты болгар и румын, связанные со смертью и погребением, в которых присутствуют деревья, демонстрируют ряд общих черт. В значительной мере общим является и перечень деревьев, связанных в народных представлениях со смертью – в нем присутствуют ель, тополь, грецкий

орех, различные плодовые деревья и др. Присутствие дерева в погребальном обряде отмечается не только у болгар и румын, но и у некоторых других народов карпато-балканского региона – в частности, у сербов и у украинцев (гуцулов). Можно предположить, что все перечисленные славянские народы заимствовали эту обрядовую реалию у румын, однако этот вопрос требует дополнительного изучения. Общим для традиционной культуры болгар и румын является также метафорическое представление о смерти как о свадьбе (это представление также встречается и у других народов региона).

**Ключевые слова:** «дерево покойника», смерть, свадьба, мифологические представления, фольклорные тексты.

### Summary

#### Notes on the funeral rites of the Bulgarians and Romanians: tree in rituals and mythological ideas associated with death

The article tells about some mythological ideas and ritual actions related to the role of trees in the funeral rites of the Bulgarians and Romanians in order to identify the general and the special. The information provided comes mainly from those territories, where Bulgarians and Romanians live nearby – the border areas of northwestern Bulgaria and eastern Serbia (Timok Valley), where, along with Bulgarians and Serbs, there is a fairly large Romanian-speaking population, Oltenia, Dobrogea etc. Mythological ideas, ritual actions and folklore texts of Bulgarians and Romanians associated with death and burial, in which trees are present, demonstrate a number of common features. The list of trees associated with death in folk beliefs is also largely common – it includes spruce, poplar, walnut, various fruit trees, etc. The presence of trees in funeral rites, as already stated, is noted not only among Bulgarians and Romanians, but also among some other peoples of the Carpatho-Balkan region – in particular, among the Serbs and the Ukrainian Hutsuls. It can be assumed that all of the listed Slavic peoples borrowed this ritual reality from the Romanians, but this issue requires additional study. The traditional culture of Bulgarians and Romanians also has in common the metaphorical idea of death as a wedding (this idea is also found among other peoples of the region).

**Key words:** “dead tree”, death, wedding, mythological ideas, folklore texts.

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formation provided comes mainly from those territories, where Bulgarians and Romanians live nearby. These are the border areas of northwestern Bulgaria and eastern Serbia (Timok Valley), where, along with Bulgarians and Serbs, there is a fairly large Romanian-speaking population, Oltenia, Dobrogea etc.

There are beliefs that a tree of a certain type growing in the yard foreshadows the death of the inhabitants of the house and its desolation. For example, Bulgarians living in the Romanian Banat (in the Timiș district) consider poplar to be such a tree. Walnut is a tree of such kind for Bulgarians and Romanians (Vlachs) in the northwestern regions of Bulgaria (in the Vidin region), as well as lilac for Romanians in neighboring regions of eastern Serbia, etc. In many cases this idea is motivated by the fact that these trees grow in cemeteries (Телбизов, Векова-Телбизова 1963: 180; Бизеранова 2013: 92, 104-105).

The tree is present in the funeral rites of some groups of Bulgarians – in particular, among the Bulgarians of Dobrogea, i.e., in the northeastern part of Bulgaria, and among residents of the northwestern regions of the country (such areas as Vidin, Vratsa and Montana). The Bulgarians of Dobrogea name such a tree as *bayrak* (байрак) ‘banner’ or *klon* (клон) ‘branch’, the Bulgarians of the Vidin district use such words as *oruglitsa* (оруглица) or *oruglitsa* (уруглица) (Генчев 1974: 296-297; Бизеранова 2013: 92, 104-105; Маринов 1892: 229; Вакарелски 1990: 101-102). The term *байрак* came to the Bulgarian language from Turkish (< tur. *bayrak* ‘banner’), the term *оруглица* (уруглица) possibly comes from the Old Slavonic *хоругъвь* ‘banner’. The terms *bayrak* and *oruglitsa* (uruglitsa) are also used in relation to the tree that is present in the wedding ceremony. The Bulgarians usually use some kind of fruit tree as a “dead tree”. Bulgarians place the tree on the graves of people who died young and were not married (Генчев 1974: 296-297; Бизеранова 2013: 201, 224, 229, 277).

The famous Bulgarian ethnographer Dimitar Marinov, in his work devoted to the Bulgarians of Vidin, Vratsa and Montana, described this custom as follows: “If a guy or girl dies, two rites must be performed for them in the same time: a wedding rite and a funeral rite. They did not have a wedding during their lifetime, so they need to celebrate it now. The funeral *oruglitsa* is very different from the wedding one: the wedding one looks like a rod with white and red cloth attached to it, the funeral one looks like a small tree whose branches are pruned. Each branch is pinned with an apple or quince fruit, wrapped in foil; wreaths and bouquets decorated

with foil are also attached to the branches. <...> The girls, who in this case are considered matchmakers, collect bouquets and weave wreaths for the funeral tree. I couldn’t find any songs sung at these moments. But I was told that girls wove wreaths and tied bouquets while the mourner mourned the dead boy or girl. Girls also wrap apples and quince fruits in foil. A guy carries the *oruglitsa*, walking behind the man carrying the cross. When the deceased is lowered into the grave, the *oruglitsa* is dug into the ground behind the cross, and it stands there until it dries out and falls. In its place, another tree is planted, with roots, and this is always a fruit tree: cherry, quince, apple, pear, plum, but never walnut, thorn, hawthorn or other wild-growing tree is used in this capacity” (Маринов 1892: 229).

Modern Bulgarian ethnographers describe this custom in a similar way, but note that at the funeral of a young man, his beloved may carry the tree. The tree is sometimes decorated with gifts that the mother of the groom should have presented to the bride (information from the village of Brankovtzi in the Gramada commune of the Vidin district), while Marinov wrote that in all cases the tree is carried by the guy (Данчева 2007: 117; Бизеранова 2013: 224). S. Bizeranova reports in her monograph that a fruit tree (plum, apple, cherry, etc.) is used as a “dead tree”. This tree is dug up with its roots, carried in the funeral procession of a young man or girl, and planted on the grave next to the cross. Such a tree may or may not be accepted at the grave. In some settlements it is considered desirable that the tree is adopted, while in others on the contrary (Бизеранова 2013).

According to information from the villages of Syanovo and Nova Cherna in the Tutrakan commune of the Silistra district, recorded in the 1970s, if a girl was buried, some of the items from her dowry – towels and some items of clothing – were placed on the tree. In these villages, the chosen one of the deceased girls had to carry the tree in the funeral procession. After the funeral, he took these items for himself (Генчев 1974: 296-297).

The presence of the tree in funeral rituals is also typical for Romanians. Residents of some Romanian settlements bury “with a tree” only unmarried people (this is the most common option), others – people, whose children have not yet married, others – all men and young men, fourth – all people who died young, regardless of gender and marital status, fifths – those who were married, but did not get married in a church or did not celebrate a wedding, sixths – only children, sevenths – absolutely all the dead. There are some regions where all people are buried (or were buried until recently) with a tree. Such as, for exam-

ple, the Romanians (Vlachs) – in eastern Serbia (in particular, in the Zaječar commune of the Zaječar district). The Romanians (Vlachs) of northwestern Bulgaria, like the Bulgarians of this region, usually bury unmarried young men and women with a tree. However, for example, in the village of Rabrovo in the commune of Boynitsa of the Vidin district, located near the Serbian border, a “dead tree” is prepared for each deceased (Бизеранова 2013: 229). Romanians most often use a coniferous tree as a “dead tree” – fir or spruce. This ritual object is most often called *brad*. The term *brad* is translated as ‘fir’ or ‘spruce’ (Marian 2008: 234-236). Romanians use the same term (*brad*) for a wedding tree. Another common Romanian name for “dead tree” is *pom* (< lat. *pomus*). In Romanian, this word most often means ‘fruit tree’, but it can also be used to mean other trees, including in phrases such as *pom de Crăciun* ‘Christmas tree’, and *pomul mortului* ‘dead tree’ (Dicționarul explicativ 1998: 821; Ciorănescu 2007: 619). Romanians in Western Oltenia (Mehedinți district, commune of Ponoarele), Banat (Caraș-Severin district) and Transilvania (Kluj, Hunedoara, Alba, Covasna, Harghita districts) use the term *suliță* ‘spear’ (< Old Slavonic *сѹлицѹ* ‘spear’) for “dead tree” (Boteanu, Borloveanu 2003: 379; Sărbători și obiceiuri. Oltenia. 2001: 181; Sărbători și obiceiuri. Banat, Crișana, Maramureș. 2002: 150; Sărbători și obiceiuri. Transilvania. 2003: 186; Micul dicționar 2010). Residents of most of the listed regions use this term to designate a fir or spruce with the lower branches cut off, which is placed on the grave. However, in some villages of the Hunedoara district, the word *suliță* is used to describe a beech tree with its lower cut off (Sărbători și obiceiuri. Transilvania. 2003: 186). The term *prăjină* (basic meaning – ‘six, pole’, as well as an ancient measure of length) is used in Mehedinți district in Western Oltenia (commune of Ponoarele). Romanian linguists consider this word a Slavic borrowing and compare it with Bulgarian *пържина* and Czech *pružina* ‘rod’ (Micul dicționar 2010; Ciorănescu 2007: 629; Scriban 1939). The Romanian Small Academic Dictionary provides information that the “dead tree” can be called *săgeată* ‘arrow’ (< Latin *sagitta*) (Boteanu, Borloveanu 2003: 379; Micul dicționar 2010). Residents of some settlements in the Caraș-Severin district in the Romanian Banat (for example, in the village of Doman near the town of Reșița) call the “dead tree” *prapor* ‘banner, flag’. English oak is the “dead tree” in this village (Marian 1995: 67). The term *fedelês*, meaning the “dead tree”, is used in the villages of the Mălaia commune in the district of Vâlcea (Oltenia). Locals use the term *brad* along with this term. The “dead tree” here is always a coniferous tree – fir or

spruce. The tree (fir or spruce), which is an attribute of wedding rituals, is designated by the same terms (Голант 2011: 145-150). The word *fedelês*, according to Romanian dictionaries, comes from Hungarian *fedeles* ‘covered, having a lid’ and can be used in the meanings of ‘a small barrel for water’, ‘wedding dance’, ‘pre-wedding party in the groom’s house’, ‘Saturday party of rural youth’ (Румынско-русский словарь 1954: 320; Dicționarul explicativ 1998: 372; Micul dicționar 2010). The term *târș* or *târșuț* used to designate the “dead tree” (fir or spruce), is found in Romanian Moldova and southern Bucovina (Marian 1995: 67). Some Romanian linguists looked for the word *târș* ‘low-growing tree’ in Slavic languages – cf., for example, Serbian *trs* ‘grapevine’, southern Russian *тырса* ‘steppe grass’, Ukrainian *тырса* (*tyrsa*) ‘опилки’ (Ciorănescu 2007: 792).

Residents of the Polovragi commune of Gorj district (Oltenia) clear the “dead tree” – fir or spruce – from its lower branches (resulting in it becoming pine-like), decorate it with black and red tassels made of woolen threads, and patterns are carved into its bark. Funeral wreaths made of fresh or artificial flowers can also be placed on this tree (Голант 2011: 145-150). Residents of the villages of the Ponoarele commune of Mehedinți district (Oltenia) also clear the trunk of a fir or spruce from the lower branches, decorate it with colored paper, tassels of red and black woolen threads and flowers. A scarf, a towel or a woman’s head cover made of raw silk can also be tied to it. The fir trunk is cleared of bark, wrapped in linden bast and singed, as a result of which a serpentine pattern is formed on the trunk (white stripes on a black background, remaining where areas of the trunk were covered with bast (Boteanu, Borloveanu 2003: 379-380; Голант 2011: 145-150). Young fir or spruce, decorated with colored paper or tassels of red and black woolen threads and ribbons, is also present in wedding rituals in the villages of the communes of Mălaia, Ponoarele and others settlements of Oltenia (Голант 2011: 145-150). The “dead tree” in various localities of Romania could be decorated with fruits (apples, plums, cherries, grapes), sweets, dyed wool, tassels made of woolen threads, ribbons of colored paper, and natural or artificial flowers. In some places there is a custom of placing headscarves or handkerchiefs, towels, and pocket mirrors on the tree. Sometimes some sign of mourning was placed on it – for example, a black scarf. Scarves, towels, mirrors, etc., as well as fruits and sweets, were intended to be distributed as funeral gifts (Sărbători și obiceiuri. Oltenia. 2001: 182-183; Sărbători și obiceiuri. Transilvania. 2003: 188-189; Sărbători și obiceiuri. Moldova. 2004: 210). In most areas of Romania, young

people participated in the preparation of the “dead tree”, although there is also information that women or the family of deceased were involved in this task (Sărbători și obiceiuri. Oltenia. 2001: 183-184; Sărbători și obiceiuri. Banat, Crișana, Maramureș. 2002: 150; Sărbători și obiceiuri. Transilvania. 2003: 188; Sărbători și obiceiuri. Moldova. 2004: 210; Sărbători și obiceiuri. Dobrogea, Muntenia. 2009: 201). The designation of the person who chose and brought the “dead tree” with a wedding title is found in a number of areas of Oltenia. This person may be called *cumnat de mână* (in Dolj district) or *fratele de mână* (in Olt district) (Sărbători și obiceiuri. Oltenia. 2001: 182). These terms can be translated as ‘best man’ (in the context of wedding ceremony).

Fir or spruce is replaced by a fruit tree in regions where there are no or few coniferous forests. This happened, for example, among the inhabitants of the Romanian Dobrogea, some areas of Oltenia, and among the Romanians of eastern Serbia and northwestern Bulgaria (or among the Vlachs, as they are more often called in these countries) – in all territories where Romanians live near to the Bulgarians. Among fruit trees, the “dead tree” is most often a plum, less often another fruit tree, for example, an apple tree or a cherry tree. In this case, a fruit tree that is carried in a funeral procession (following the cross) and then placed on the grave (also next to the cross) can also be designated by the word *brad*. Such information is recorded, in particular, in Romanian villages located in Vidin, Vratsa and Pleven districts of Bulgaria and in Braničevo district in Serbia (Бизеранова 2013: 240; Sărbători și obiceiuri. Oltenia. 2001: 182; Sărbători și obiceiuri. Dobrogea, Muntenia. 2009: 198; Atlasul etnografic 2011; personal communication from S. Gacović). The transfer of the name *brad* to a ritual tree that is not a fir or spruce may indicate that the fruit tree is precisely a replacement for the coniferous one, and the variant of the custom with the fruit tree is more recent. Simion Florea Marian, in his Trilogy of life (*Trilogia vieții*), in the volume dedicated to funeral rites, derives the Romanian custom of using fir / spruce as the “dead tree” from the Roman custom, mentioned by Virgil and Horace, of placing a cypress tree in front of the house of the deceased as a sign of mourning. In the northern provinces, where cypress did not grow, it could be replaced with fir or spruce (Marian 1995: 75). The custom of burying unmarried people with a tree is also found among the Serbs. It was recorded, for example, in the Serbian villages of the Knjaževac commune in the Zaječar district in eastern Serbia (near the border with Bulgaria and Romania). In the event of the death of a boy or girl, local residents dig up a fruit tree, usually a plum, decorate

it with wedding gifts and carry it in the funeral procession. They also carry in the procession a banner, decorated with a bouquet of flowers, like a wedding one, and a flask with brandy decorated with flowers (Крстић 2003: 147-168). Hutsul Ukrainians living in the western regions of Ukraine bordering Romania also place a tree on the grave of a deceased boy or girl. It can be either a spruce or a fruit tree. The Hutsuls also place a small spruce at the head of a dead girl while she was lying in the house. This spruce was decorated with white and red wool. A similar spruce is also present in the Hutsul wedding ceremony (Шекерик-Доників 2021: 189, 205).

Mentions of trees are found in many folklore texts, one way or another related to death. The Bulgarians in northwestern regions of Bulgaria have ballads about a drowned bride, which say that close people of the bride and groom turn into trees out of grief. So, in the text from village of Bukovets of the commune and district of Vidin says that the bride’s godparents became willows. Text from the village of Golemanovo of the commune of Kula in the district of Vidin says that the mothers of the bride and groom turned into poplars, and the groom sisters into willows (Бизеранова 2013: 152). The “wedding-death” motif is also found in Romanian folklore. It is also present in ballads (in many versions of the famous ballad “Miorița”, in particular in its classic version published by Vasile Alecsandri, where fir and poplar trees are present as guests at the “wedding” of the murdered shepherd). This motif is also present in texts directly related to funeral rites – in songs found in the western regions of Romania, which are performed while bringing the “dead tree” into the house and decorating it. The text of the “Fir’s / spruce’s song” (Romanian *Cântecul bradului*) is usually constructed in the form of a dialogue between the performers and the tree, in which the tree tells who, how and why chose it, cut it down and brought it from the forest. In some of them, this tree (fir or spruce) may be called the bride or wife of the deceased. This version of the “Fir’s / spruce’s song” was recorded in southern Transylvania, in the vicinity of the town of Orăștie in the Hunedoara district (Marian 2008: 235).

A tree (spruce / fir, apple tree or just a tree, the species of which is not specified) may be mentioned in Romanian folklore texts, also relates to the cycle of ritual songs performed during the stay of the deceased in the house and at the funeral, which Romanian folklorists and ethnographers, as a rule, denoted by the term *zorile din casă*, i.e., “dawns (performed) in the house” (Кахане, Georgescu-Stănculeanu 1988: 505-507, Паня 2017). *Zorile din casă* in their expanded form contain a description of the road to

the next world, which should help the soul of the deceased find this road.

There are also some other names. For example, S. Fl. Marian entitled the song of this type that he published *petrecerea mortului* ('seeing off the deceased') (Marian 1995: 117). The Romanian-born Serbian historian Slavoljub Gacović, who published many texts of this type from his native eastern Serbia, uses the term *petrecătură* ('farewell') or *cântecul raiului* ('song of paradise') for such a song<sup>2</sup> (Gacović 2012: 67). Following him, the Serbian musicologist of Romanian origin Filip Paunjelović also uses the term *petrecătură* (Paunjelović 2018: 117-120). Such texts have been recorded, in particular, in Oltenia, in the Romanian Banat and in the Romanian-speaking settlements of Eastern Serbia (among speakers of the Banat dialects of the Romanian language, for example in the Bor and Braničevo districts) (Marian 1995: 117; Gacović 2012: 67). According to the lyrics of such songs, which contain a description of the path to the next world, the tree is located at the beginning of the deceased's journey to the next world or at the very entrance to the next world. It should be noted that most often in the ritual poetry of the funeral and memorial cycle, fir/spruce and apple trees are mentioned. Marian wrote that the presence of the apple tree in Romanian familial rituals is associated with Christian ideas about heaven, and that the "Christian" apple tree partly replaced the "pagan" fir or spruce in funeral customs (Marian 1995: 115).

Mythological ideas, ritual actions and folklore texts of Bulgarians and Romanians associated with death and burial, in which trees are present, demonstrate a number of common features. The list of trees associated with death in folk beliefs is also largely common. It includes spruce, poplar walnut, various fruit trees, etc. The presence of trees in funeral rites, as already stated, is noted not only among Bulgarians and Romanians, but also among some other peoples of the Carpatho-Balkan region. In particular, among the Serbs and the Ukrainian Hutsuls. It can be assumed that all of the listed Slavic peoples borrowed this ritual reality from the Romanians, but this issue requires additional study. The traditional culture of Bulgarians and Romanians also has in common the metaphorical idea of death as a wedding (this idea is also found among other peoples of the region).

#### Notes

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<sup>2</sup>Gacović also uses the term *zorile* in his publications, but uses it only for the first song of the funeral cycle, containing an appeal to the dawns (Gacović 2012: 9).

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