

# Pagan Customs of the Veleti According to Notker Labeo

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The article studies a literary fragment written by Notker Labeo around 1000 in Old High German, which mentions a strange cannibalistic custom of the Slavs. This fragment had almost been forgotten by scholars of pre-Christian Slavic culture. It is a commentary on Notker's translation of *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* by Martianus Capella, which was considerably influenced by a certain literary tradition. The paper looks into Notker's sources, his influences and the trustworthiness of his evidence.

KEYWORDS: Slavic Paganism, Veleti, Notker Labeo, cannibalism, Polabian Slavs

Članek obravnava literarni odlomek Notkerja Labea, napisan okoli leta 1000 v stari visoki nemščini, ki omenja nenavaden kanibalistični običaj Slovanov. Raziskovalci predkrščanske slovanske kulture so na ta odlomek skorajda pozabili. Gre za komentar Notkerjevega prevoda dela *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* Marcijana Kapele, ki je bil pod precejšnjim vplivom določene literarne tradicije. Članek obravnava Notkerjeve vire, njegove vplive in verodostojnost njegovih dokazov.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: slovansko poganstvo, Veleti, Notker Labeo, kanibalizem, Polabski Slovani

## I.

There can be no doubt that attempts to trace the outlines of pre-Christian Slavic religion – Slavic Paganism – often draw the attention of scholars to ancient Russian, in other words, Old East Slavic material. Its sources are well-known and have been translated into modern languages. Serious studies have been devoted to this area. Moreover, ancient Russian sources on Slavic Paganism are much richer in evidence than Czech, Polish, Slovak, Bulgarian or Serbian sources, or indeed any other West or South Slavic cultural region. Important texts that touch upon Paganism, such as the *Primary Chronicle* or *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* are studied at school in Russia and other countries.

However, a different cultural world, often undeservedly overlooked in this respect, can offer as much vivid, ancient and trustworthy evidence on Slavic Paganism. It is the region of the Polabian and the Baltic Slavs who are now mostly extinct, but who played an important role in Europe between the 7th and 12th centuries CE, and contributed greatly to West Slavic culture. The Polabian Slavs inhabited the basin of the River Elbe in present-day Germany. Their very name meant that they lived “along the Elbe”, for Elbe in Slavic languages is “Laba” (cf. the Czech Labe etc.). In addition to the Obodrites (Abotrites), the Veleti (or the Wilzi) and the Rujani (or Rani), who all spoke the Polabian

language (which disappeared in the 18th century), the group of the Polabian Slavs also included the Sorbs<sup>1</sup> (Lusatian Serbs), who still speak Lusatian languages today and number around 30,000 people living in Germany.<sup>2</sup> While the Obodrites, the Veleti and the Rujani are considered to be both Polabian and Baltic Slavs because they lived close to the Baltic coast, the Lusatian Serbs never had access to the sea and are thus classed as Polabian, but not Baltic Slavs. A different group of Baltic Slavs, who were not Polabian Slavs, were the Pomeranians. They inhabited about one fifth of present-day Poland in the north-west of the country and spoke the Pomeranian language, which was close to both Polabian and to a certain extent also to Polish (Brüske 1955: 3–5). These five groups were divided into many tribes, but had a common destiny, which is why they are categorised as the **Polabian-Baltic Slav community**. For a long time, they struggled to remain independent and to preserve their Paganism against Christian states such as Germany (Holy Roman Empire), Denmark and Poland. In some places they stood their ground until as late as the 1170s,<sup>3</sup> but they were eventually defeated in the late 12th century and were annihilated or assimilated by the conquering nations (ЖОБ 2021: 524–525, 644–656).

A number of attempts have been made to collect all the fragments that deal with the Paganism of the Polabian-Baltic Slavs in one publication, from the classical work by K. H. Meyer<sup>4</sup> to the recent compendia by J. A. Álvarez-Pedrosa and J. Dynda.<sup>5</sup> However, these collections cannot be considered comprehensive. This small study looks at the text that was missed by the abovementioned scholars, as it is peculiar in its genre and its content. I will consider this text as it is preserved in all the relevant languages and briefly analyse it.

Although this passage seldom draws the attention of Western scholars, it has never been forgotten in the works of Russian mediaevalists. Alexander Kotlyarevsky, Alexander Veselovsky, Aleksey Sobolevsky, Vyacheslav V. Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov, among others, commented upon this text in the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>6</sup> Oddly enough, the fact

<sup>1</sup> This ethnonym was never used by the nation itself. Present-day Lusatia enjoys cultural rights within the German lands of Brandenburg and Saxony.

<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, only one of the tribes of the Obodrites were called Polabians, but in this paper I use this name only in the broad sense.

<sup>3</sup> This date can be traced from the Icelandic *Knyttlinga saga* written in the mid-13th century, which deals with Danish history. The chapter 122 of the saga report that even after the Danish conquest of Arkona and Korenitsa/Charenza (the main Pagan centers of the Rujani) in the late 1160s, a number of Pagan shrines were still functioning, and one of them dedicated to the god Tjarnaglófi “resisted longer than the others but they managed to get him three years after” (*Knyttlinga saga* 1986: 169); in the original: “Hann helzk lengst við, en þó fengu þeir hann á þriðja vetri þar eptir” (*Knyttlinga saga* 1982: 305).

<sup>4</sup> Meyer (1931) is a collection of fragments in the original without translation or commentary. It comprises sources on Paganism of all the West Slavs and partially the South Slavs. These sources are mostly trustworthy Latin texts. This article deals with a source in a different language.

<sup>5</sup> These works have a solid commentary. The book by Álvarez-Pedrosa was initially published in Spanish (Álvarez-Pedrosa 2017: 61–199 etc.), and then in English with the addition of fragments in the original (Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021: 50–221 etc.); the original texts with translations into Czech are given in Dynda 2017: 33–248. In the indefinite future I plan to publish a compilation of this kind in Russian. In my recent article (in English) I tried to make a thorough review of the reliable evidence on the deities venerated by the ancient Slavs (Kutarev 2023). However, the sources mentioned are treated in a cursory manner and many facets of the multifarious Pagan culture are left out.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Веселовский 1906: 20 and Иванов, Топоров 1974: 69 и т. д. and their bibliographies. I mention other authors below.

that Friedrich Engels mentioned this passage in his *History of Ireland* was mostly left unnoticed by the Soviet scholars. He wrote:

The reports of the classical writers of antiquity about the [Irish] people do not sound very edifying. Diodorus recounts that those Britons who inhabit the island called Iris [...] eat people. Strabo gives a more detailed report: “Concerning this island I have nothing certain to tell, except that its inhabitants are more savage than the Britons, since they are man-eaters [...] they count it an honourable thing, when their fathers die, to devour them [...]” The patriotic Irish historians have been more than a little indignant over this alleged calumny. It was reserved to more recent investigation to prove that cannibalism, and especially the devouring of parents, was a stage in the development of probably all nations. Perhaps it will be a consolation to the Irish to know that the ancestors of the present Berliners were still honouring this custom a full thousand years later (Engels 1970: 34–35).

Engels’ text then proceeds to quote the passage from Notker (following Jacob Grimm) that interests us. His commentary on cannibalism is in itself a curious document of his time, and we will also refer to the ancient geographers below.

## II.

A detour is needed to access Notker’s text. A mysterious author flourished in late Antiquity, called Martianus Capella. We know virtually nothing about him apart from the fact that he lived in Carthage and wrote in Latin. His main work is variously dated by scholars from the early 5th to the early 6th centuries.<sup>7</sup> That should not bother us here because Capella only provided the source for the text we will explore.

Martianus’ work is named *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, or “On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury”.<sup>8</sup> This text is unusual in form and its genre defies simple characterization. Clive Staples Lewis famously said: “For this universe, which has produced the bee-orchid and the giraffe, has produced nothing stranger than Martianus Capella” (Капелла 2019: 6).<sup>9</sup> Usually, *De nuptiis* is defined as an encyclopaedia or a handbook of the Liberal Arts – Grammar, Rhetoric, Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy, Dialectic and Music. Seven of the nine books of the treatise (3rd–9th) are devoted to each of these arts. At the same time *De nuptiis* can also be read as a work of fiction (Капелла 2019: 9–11).

<sup>7</sup> See the literature in Капелла 2019: 8–9; certain scholars date Capella as early as the 3rd century. Yuri A. Shahov, translator and scholar of Martianus Capella, does not explicitly side with any date.

<sup>8</sup> Latin (Martianus 1866); Russian (Капелла 2019).

<sup>9</sup> See the opinions regarding Martianus Capella that range from the critical to the respectful. For example, one claims his treatise was the most popular literary work in Western Europe at some point, next only to Virgil and the Bible, in Капелла 2019: 7–8.

In the Middle Ages, Martianus Capella's book became the definitive text in the education system. According to one scholar, "His work may be likened to the neck of an hourglass through which the classical liberal arts trickled to the medieval world" (Капелла 2019: 7). Martianus Capella is quoted as an authority on the most important disciplines by Gregory of Tours, Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede and many others, and he later influenced Dante, although his importance diminished by the advent of the Renaissance (Капелла 2019: 11–12).

The first two books of *De nuptiis* do not deal with the individual arts, acting instead as a narrative framework for the whole treatise. In the first book, the Roman gods decide to marry Mercury to a lady named Philology. The second book opens with Philology divining about her future marriage (it turns out that the bride and groom suit each other perfectly), then the bride is variously dressed and decorated by her friends and kin. Philology is then adopted into the ranks of the immortals and communicates with the gods, travelling across their numerous abodes. Then follows the marriage. Beginning with book three, the author addresses the Liberal Arts, one per book.

Martianus' work was a very popular school text and was often commented upon in the 9th and 10th centuries. The most influential commentary was written circa 900 by Remigius of Auxerre, a student of John Scotus Eriugena and a renowned expert in philology and philosophy.

### III.

Around the year 1000, Notker Labeo (also known as Notker the German), a monk and teacher at the famous centre of study, the Abbey of St. Gall, translated the first two books of *De nuptiis* into High German.<sup>10</sup> I date this translation to the period between 983 and 1020.<sup>11</sup> This was not the only thing Notker did for the development of a literary German language,<sup>12</sup> but what interests us here is the evidence of Pagan culture of the Veleti found in his translation.

The early 11th century was a high tide in the history of the Veleti. In the first 80 years of the previous century, the German state, especially under Otto the Great, the founder of the "Ottonian" branch of the imperial Saxon dynasty, succeeded in subduing the Polabian Slavs, including the Lusatian Serbs, the Southern Veleti and the Obodrites

<sup>10</sup> The original text is from Notker (1979), taking into consideration Piper (1882), and a critical edition (Notker latinus 1986).

<sup>11</sup> In 1020, Notker in his old age recounts in a letter (*Epistola ad Hugonem episcopum Sedunensem*) to Hugo, Bishop of Sitten (modern-day Sion in Switzerland), his various translations, and among them notes: "and I translated 'The Marriage of Philology'" ("et transtuli nuptias philologiae") (Grotans 1999). See the letter in Piper (1882: 859–861). It is hard to establish the *terminus post quem* of the translation, however, it is not earlier than 970s because Notker is said to have been born in the 950s, and he is described at the time of his death in 1022 as a septuagenarian by one of his students (Ганина 2015: 39). I am sure it is safe to claim the translation was made after 983, although it is impossible to give a more precise date.

<sup>12</sup> See Ганина (2015). Natalia Ganina provides an in-depth examination of Notker's life, his works and the purpose of his translations into German.

(Brüske 1955: 16–38). However, by the end of the 900s the situation had changed. A **Great Slavic Pagan Revolt erupted in 983**, which started in the lands of the Northern Veleti – the Lutici. The revolt aimed to gain independence from the Germans, destroying the emerging ecclesiastical system in the Slavic lands and bringing back the traditional religion. The Lusatian Serbs did not succeed in the revolt, but the Veleti and the Obodrites did (Brüske 1955: 39–54). In the words of Adam of Bremen, who wrote his chronicle in the 11th century:

the Slavs, more than fairly oppressed by their Christian rulers, at length threw off the yoke of servitude and had to take up arms in defence of their freedom [...] the rebel Slavs wasted first the whole of Nordalbingia<sup>13</sup> with fire and sword; then, going through the rest of Slavia, they set fire to all the churches and tore them down to the ground. They also murdered the priests and the other ministers of the churches with diverse tortures and left not a vestige of Christianity beyond the Elbe. At Hamburg, then and later, many clerics and citizens were led off into captivity, and even more were put to death out of hatred for Christianity [...] And so all the Slavs who dwell between the Elbe and the Oder and who had practiced the Christian religion for seventy years and more, during all the time of the Otto's, cut themselves off from the body of Christ and of the Church with which they had before been joined.<sup>14</sup>

The Lutici, also known as the Northern Veleti, gained significant power from that point onward. During the war with Poland in the years 1002–1018, Henry II, the Holy Roman Emperor, was even compelled to enter into alliance with the Lutici and practically legalize their Paganism. This inflamed such authoritative contemporaries as Bruno of Querfurt and Thietmar of Merseburg, but also became an incentive for them to record information about the Slavic deities, their cults and shrines (Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021: 64–76).<sup>15</sup> The revolt contributed to popularising the Veleti, but they were also demonized as being especially brutal barbarians. I believe Notker followed this line, being a contemporary of Bruno and Thietmar. Not so long ago, it seemed that the Germans had succeeded in suppressing their eastern Pagan neighbours, but after 983 the new reality had to be accepted: the Slavs

<sup>13</sup> The lands in the lower, that is, northern part of the Elbe.

<sup>14</sup> *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, II, 42–44 (40–42) (Adam 2002: 83–85). “Sclavi a christianis iudicibus plus iusto compressi, excusso tandem iugo servitutis libertatem suam armis defendere coacti sunt. [...] Sclavi rebellantes totam primo Nortalbingiam ferro et igne depopulati sunt; deinde reliquam peragrantes Sclavoniam omnes ecclesias incenderunt et ad solum usque diruerunt; sacerdotes autem et reliquos ecclesiarum ministros variis suppliciis enecantes, nullum christianitatis vestigium trans Albiam reliquerunt. Apud Hammaburg eo tempore ac deinceps multi ex clero et civibus in captivitatem abducti sunt, plures etiam interfecti propter odium christianitatis. [...] Omnes igitur Sclavi, qui inter Albiam et Oddaram habitant, per annos LXX et amplius christianitatem coluerunt, omni tempore Ottonum, talique modo se absciderunt a corpore Christi et ecclesiae, cui antea coniuncti fuerant” (Adam Bremensis 1917: 102–105).

<sup>15</sup> For the “legalization” of Slavic Paganism under Henry II, which brought to life the first detailed descriptions of Slavic religion (the earliest material being about the Lutici), see my article (Кытапов 2018).

were once again politically independent, possessed a formidable military power and were determined to develop their Pagan culture. Meanwhile, the Germans did not yet possess the necessary resources to crush them.

However, the golden age of the Lutici was short-lived. In 1056–1057, a devastating internecine war subverted their power. According to Adam of Bremen, “many thousands of pagans were laid low on both sides”.<sup>16</sup> Military campaigns against the Baltic Slavs intensified, led by neighbouring powers. With the rapid decline of the Lutici, their lands were taken by the Obodrites, the Rujani, the Pomeranians, the Polish, the Danish and the Germans (Brüske 1955: 78–118; ЖОБ 2021: 593–597). But Notker died before that in 1022.

#### IV.

Now I turn to Notker’s passage on the customs of the Veleti. It is part of a translated text by Martianus Capella, which includes a commentary on the original treatise and was influenced by other texts. For certain vowels of the Germanic language Notker used acute and circumflex accents, which he thought was crucial, as he himself had written to Hugo of Sitten.<sup>17</sup> This orthography is preserved in German editions of Notker, which I follow here.

Notker did not only base his translation on the text by Martianus, but also on the corpus of commentaries on *De nuptiis*, such as the ones by John Scotus Eriugena and Remigius of Auxerre. In addition, he also turned to “more than sixty sources”, which figure in the commentary by James C. King.<sup>18</sup> Notker notably “preferred Remigius to other commentators” (Notker latinus 1986: XV), and opened his translation with a direct reference to him.<sup>19</sup>

In the second book of *De nuptiis*, the last one to give the bride adornments is her mother Phronesis, whose name is Greek for “discretion”. The scene takes place at the break of dawn, which ushers in the day of the wedding. Martianus describes this morning in a verse fragment (II, 116) (Martianus 1866: 31):

Et iam tunc roseo subtexere sidera peplo  
coeperat ambrosium<sup>a</sup> promens Aurora pudorem.

Different manuscripts give two readings for a): *ambosium* and *ambro-num*. Translation:

<sup>16</sup> III, 22 (21) (Adam 2002: 133). “Multa milia paganorum hinc inde prostrati sunt” (Adam Bremensis 1917: 165).

<sup>17</sup> “Teuton words are not to be written without accents [...] acute and circumflex”; “uerba theutonica sine accentu scribenda non sunt [...] acuto et circumflexo” (Piper 1882: 861).

<sup>18</sup> See Notker latinus (1986: XVII–XVIII); all his sources are not yet identified (ibid.: XX).

<sup>19</sup> Notker opens his translations with a telling phrase “Remigius instructs us that the full name of this author was Martianus [...]”; “Remigius lêret únsih tîsen auctorem álenámen uuêsen gehéizenen martianum [...]” (Notker 1979: J2; Piper 1882: 687).

And now Aurora, with the modesty befitting an immortal, began to hide the stars with her rosy gown.<sup>20</sup>

Notker did not only translate these lines but provided an explanation, which he based on the tradition of commentary. What follows is the commentary to this text by Remigius of Auxerre (48.20) (Lutz 1962: 158) with Martianus' text in bold type:

**Et iam tunc roseo subtexere sidera peplo coeperat** Ortum diei describit. **Et iam tunc coeperat Aurora subtexere** id est occultare vel opperire, **sidera in roseo peplo.** Oriente enim die splendor siderum evanescit. **Promens** id est manifestans, ipsa **Aurora pudorem** hoc est facinus vel turpitudinem, **ambronum.** Ambrones populi sunt Scythiae qui carnibus humanis vescuntur et maxime noctibus vagantes captos homines devorant. Inde fingit Auroram, id est ortum diei, manifestare scelus illorum quod noctibus peragunt. Brosis Grece cibus dicitur, hinc ambrones ipsi sunt et antropofagi, id est hominum comesores.

Translation:

**And now she started to cover the stars with a rosy gown** – [he] describes the break of day. **And now Aurora started to cover** – that is, to occult or wrap the stars in a rosy gown. For at the break of day the splendour of the stars disappears. **Bringing forth,** means manifesting, that is, Aurora [makes manifest] the shame (**pudorem**), that is, the crime (facinus) of the Ambrones (ambronum). The Ambrones are the peoples in Scythia who eat human flesh and mostly devour people whom they catch roving in the night. That's why he [Martianus] depicts that Aurora, that is the break of day, makes manifest their atrocity which they commit by night. Brosis in Greek means food, and thus "Ambrones" means the same as "Anthropophagi", that is, eaters of humans.

In this commentary, the most important distortion of the text occurs, impacting how it is understood later. In Martianus we see the word *ambrosium*, meaning "immortal", which refers to the blush (pudor) on the goddess' cheeks and is a metaphor for the blush of dawn. But Remigius, who reads a garbled manuscript, mistakenly accepts *ambronum* instead of *ambrosium*, interpreting it as the name of savage tribes. Whatever the time and circumstances of this distortion,<sup>21</sup> Remigius felt the urge to inform the reader about the Ambrones (completely unknown to Martianus' text!), who figure in the ancient sources, and also to add a story of their nocturnal evildoings, made manifest by the dawn (Aurora).

<sup>20</sup> I substitute "the immortal" for "the goddess" in the quoted translation (Martianus 1977: 40) because it better reflects the word *ambrosium*, which is crucial for us here, cf. Капелла (2019: 80).

<sup>21</sup> It looks like one of the manuscript copies had identical ducts for "si" and "n".

The Ambrones, a “barbaric” tribe of Germanic or, according to older scholarship, Celtic origins, repeatedly defeated the Romans in the late 2nd century BCE in alliance with other Germanic tribes. However, they were ultimately defeated alongside their allies, the Teutons, at the Battle of Aquae Sextiae. These events were mentioned by Titus Livius, Strabo and Plutarch. However, Remigius and later Notker present a completely new tradition of the Ambrones, far from that found in ancient history.

**This is the passage from Notker**, which shows familiarity with the commentary by Remigius (*Notkeri translatio “De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii” Martiani Capellae*, II, 8) (Notker 1979: J104–105), with Martianus’ and Remigius’ text set in bold type:

**Et iam tunc coeperat aurora subtexere. i. operire sidera. roseo peplo.**  
 Sô uuárd táz ter tág pegónða décchen die stérmen. **Prodens<sup>a</sup> pudorem. i. turpitudinem ambronum.** Irbáronde dfa únere<sup>b</sup> dero mán-ézon<sup>c</sup>. Cibus héizet grece brosis. dánnan<sup>d</sup> sínt ambrones kenámot. Dîe<sup>e</sup> héizent óuh antropofagi. dáz chît **commessores hominum.** In\_scithia gesézzene<sup>f</sup>. Síe ézent náhtes. tés sie síh táges scámen<sup>g</sup> múgen. álsó man chît. táz óuh ház-essa<sup>h</sup> hîer in\_lánde tûen<sup>i</sup>. Áber uueletabi dîe in\_germania sízzent. tíe uuír uuilze<sup>j</sup> héizên. dîe nescámént<sup>k</sup> síh níeht ze\_chédenne. dáz síe íro parentes mit<sup>l</sup> mêren réhte ézen súlfn. dánne die vuúrme.

Variant readings:<sup>22</sup> a) *Promens*, b) *Erbáronde únêra*, c) *ézôn*, d) *tánmân*, e) *kenámôt*. *Tíe*, f) *gesézene*, g) *scámên*, h) *házessâ*, i) *tûên*, j) *uuilze*, k) *nescámênt*, l) *mít*.

Translated from Old High German by Matvey M. Fialko:<sup>23</sup>

**And now Aurora, began to occult, i.e., cover the stars with her rosy gown.** – And there was the day [i.e., dawn] covering these stars. **Bringing forth the shame, i.e., the disgrace of the Ambrones.** And aroused (?) [the dawn] shame in the man-eaters. Food in Greek is called “brosis”, thus they are called “the Ambrones”. They are called the Anthropophagi, that is “**eaters of humans**”, who are in Scythia. They eat by night, because they are ashamed to do it by day. It is also said that the same is done by the witches who inhabit these parts. But the Weletabi who live in Germany, and whom we call the Wiltzi, are not ashamed to admit that they have more rights to eat their parents than do the worms.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> From Notker (1979: J104–105); the earlier edition is almost identical (Piper 1882: 787), only *mánézon* and *zechédenne* are written as one word; in all other cases the \_ is replaced with an interval.

<sup>23</sup> I thank Dmitry Galtsin, Matvey Fialko and Andrey Dosaev for their assistance in the translations to this article.

<sup>24</sup> As translated by Alexander N. Veselovsky into Russian: «Велетабы, живущие в Германии, которых мы зовём Вильцами, не стыдятся говорить, что они едят своих родителей с бóльшим правом, чем черви» (Веселовский 1906: 20) – “the Veletabi who dwell in Germany, and whom we call the Wilzi, are not ashamed to say that they eat their parents with more right than do the worms”; in the Russian version of F. Engels’ treatise: «Велетабы, которые живут в Германии и которых мы называем вильцами, не стыдятся признавать, что они могут поедать своих родителей с бóльшим правом, чем черви» (Энгельс 1948: 89) – “the Veletabi,



So, here is the text regarding the customs of the Veleti. According to Notker, they are cannibals, like the “Ambrones”, and they admit to eating their own parents. Where do these notions come from and are they trustworthy as evidence?

## V.

As has been said above, Martianus Capella knows nothing about the Ambrones, although he does mention the Anthropophagi. This tradition is no doubt descended from ancient Greek historiography through intermediary texts. Its main *topos* is Scythia, inhabited by the *Anthropophagi*, the Man-eaters.

They are first mentioned by Herodotus, who is directly quoted neither by Martianus, nor by Remigius, nor by Notker. The father of history deals at length with cannibalism among the barbarians. For example, he uses this topic to illustrate the varying conceptions of what is sacred among different peoples (Herod., Hist. III, 38):<sup>25</sup>

When Darius was king, he summoned the Greeks who were with him and asked them what price would persuade them to eat their fathers' dead bodies. They answered that there was no price for which they would do it. Then he summoned those Indians who are called Callataie, who eat their parents, and asked them (the Greeks being present and understanding by interpretation what was said) what would make them willing to burn their fathers at death. The Indians cried aloud that he should not speak of so horrid an act.<sup>26</sup>

But the main corpus of evidence on cannibalism is found in book four. First, he introduces the name of the people “Androfagi” (*Ἀνδροφάγοι*) (Herodotus 1928: 218) in IV, 18 and IV, 106:<sup>27</sup>

The Man-eaters are of all men the most savage in their manner of life [...] they are the only people of all these that eat men.

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who inhabit Germany and whom we call the Wilzi, are not ashamed to acknowledge that they can eat their parents more rightfully than the worms can”.

<sup>25</sup> (Herodotus 1928: 50–51): “Δαρείος ἐπὶ τῆς ἑωντοῦ ἀρχῆς καλέσας Ἑλλήνων τοὺς παρεόντας εἴρετο ἐπὶ κόσῳ ἂν χρήματι βουλοῖατο τοὺς πατέρας ἀποθνήσκοντας κατασιτέεσθαι· οἱ δὲ ἐπ’ οὐδενὶ ἔφασαν ἔρδειν ἂν τοῦτο. Δαρείος δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα καλέσας Ἰνδῶν τοὺς καλομένους Καλλατίας, οἱ τοὺς γονέας κατεσθίουσι, εἴρετο, παρεόντων τῶν Ἑλλήνων καὶ δι’ ἑρμηνέος μανθανόντων τὰ λεγόμενα, ἐπὶ τίνι χρήματι δεξαίαι’ ἂν τελευτῶντας τοὺς πατέρας κατακαίειν πυρὶ· οἱ δὲ ἀμβώσαντες μέγα εὐφημέειν μιν ἐκέλευον”.

<sup>26</sup> The Ancient Russian “Primary Chronicle” (12th century), in concordance with the Greek *chronographs*, attributes cannibalism to the Indians, who are reported to be fond of eating travelers: “the Indians [...] eat people and kill travellers”; «Индомъ [...] члѣвки ядуше. и странъствующихъ оубиваху» (Ипат. 1908: 11).

<sup>27</sup> (Herodotus 1928: 306–307): “Ἀνδροφάγοι δὲ ἀγριώτατα πάντων ἀνθρώπων ἔχουσι ἦθεα, [...] ἀνδροφαγεύουσι δὲ μοῦνοι τούτων”. They are mentioned some more times.

Then, Herodotus describes the details of cannibalism, although in relation to other nations, for instance in IV, 26:<sup>28</sup>

It is said to be the custom of the Issedones, that whenever a man's father dies, all the nearest of kin bring beasts of the flock, and having killed these and cut up the flesh they cut up also the dead father of their host, and set out all the flesh mingled together for a feast.

This place echoes I, 216:<sup>29</sup>

Now, for their [the Massagetes'] customs [...] when a man is very old all his kin meet together and kill him, with beasts of the flock besides, then boil the flesh and feast on it. This is held to be the happiest death; when a man dies of a sickness, they do not eat him, but bury him in the earth, and lament that he would not live to be killed.

The fact that the authors who interest us here do not make direct references to Herodotus is irrelevant. The historians and geographers of later ages who wrote about Northern and Eastern Europe have taken such legends into account. In time they appeared in Latin letters. In the middle of the first century CE, Pomponius Mela quotes Herodotus' story of the "Essedones" (sic) almost verbatim (II, 8 (9)) (Древняя Русь 2017: 233). In his *Naturalis historia*, his junior contemporary Pliny the Elder, read by Remigius (Lutz 1962: 23) and Notker (Notker latinus 1986: XVIII), uses the names Anthropophagi and Essedones alongside other ethnonyms found in Herodotus (IV, 88). Pliny the Elder is also one of the first to mention the Venedi (IV, 97), that is, the Slavs (Древняя Русь 2017: 244, 246). Many more examples can be given. The topos of bizarre savages taken up by Herodotus was repeatedly exploited over the centuries. Despite the plots and ethnonyms becoming increasingly anachronistic, these stories continued to be reimagined and mixed in various forms, retaining their popular appeal.

I will not dwell upon cannibalism as represented in Latin literature. It is worth noting, however, that the stories of cannibals remained popular in mediaeval literature in the West. The old names of nations merged with new ones, and half a century later Notker Adam of Bremen wrote (IV, 19):<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> (Herodotus 1928: 224–225): “Νόμοισι δὲ Ἰσσηδόνες τοῖσιδε λέγονται χρᾶσθαι. ἐπεὶ ἀνδρὶ ἀποθάνῃ πατὴρ, οἱ προσήκοντες πάντες προσάγουσι πρόβατα, καὶ ἔπειτα ταῦτα θύσαντες καὶ καταταμιόντες τὰ κρέα κατατάμνουσι καὶ τὸν τοῦ δεκομένου τεθνεῶτα γονέα, ἀναμίξαντες δὲ πάντα τὰ κρέα δαῖτα προτίθενται”.

<sup>29</sup> (Herodotus 1920: 270–271): “Νόμοισι δὲ χρέωνται τοιοῖσιδε [...] Μασσαγέτης [...] οὗρος δὲ ἡλικίης σφι πρόκειται ἄλλος μὲν οὐδεὶς· ἐπεὶ δὲ γέρον γένηται κάρτα, οἱ προσήκοντες οἱ πάντες συνελθόντες θύουσί μιν καὶ ἄλλα πρόβατα ἅμα αὐτῷ, ἐψησαντες δὲ τὰ κρέα κατεωχέονται. ταῦτα μὲν τὰ ὀλβιώτατά σφι νενόμισται, τὸν δὲ νοῦσφ τελευτήσαντα οὐ κατασιτέονται ἀλλὰ γῆ κρύπτουσι, συμφορὴν ποιούμενοι ὅτι οὐκ ἔκετο ἐς τὸ τυθῆναι”.

<sup>30</sup> (Adam 2002: 200–201): “Cynocephali sunt, qui in pectore caput habent; in Ruzzia videntur sepe captivi, et cum verbis latrant in voce. Ibi sunt etiam, qui dicuntur Alani vel Albani, qui lingua eorum Wizzi dicuntur, crudelissimi ambrones; cum canitie nascuntur; de quibus auctor Solinus meminit; eorum patriam canes defendunt;

The Cynocephali<sup>31</sup> are men who have their heads on their breasts. They are often seen in Russia as captives and they voice their words in barks. In that region too, are those who are called Alani or Albani, in their language named Wizzi; very hard-hearted gluttons,<sup>32</sup> born with grey hair. The writer Solinus mentions them. Dogs defend their country. Whenever the Alani have to fight, they draw up their dogs in battle line [...] Finally there are those who are given the name Anthropophagi and they feed on human flesh. In that territory live very many other kinds of monsters whom mariners say they have often seen, although our people think it hardly credible.

Here, there is a curious gloss to the word “ambrones” in Adam’s chronicle, which echoes Notker’s evidence, specifically the scholia 124 (120):<sup>33</sup>

In their language they are called Wilzi; most cruel gluttons [ambrones], whom the poet calls Gelani.<sup>34</sup>

According to the scholarly commentary (Бременский 2011: 150 сн. 98), the “poets” are Virgil (Geor. III, 461) and Lucan (Phars. III, 283). They only mention the swift Geloni<sup>35</sup>, without speaking of the Ambrones or the Wiltzi. Therefore, the identification was either made by Adam of Bremen himself, or borrowed by both Adam and Notker from some common mediaeval source. Another alternative is that Adam followed the literary fashion, randomly mixing the bizarre images of Northern European nations.<sup>36</sup>

Another ancient geographic work calls for attention here. It is the *Geographical Guidance* written in the 2nd century by Claudius Ptolemy (III, 5.10):<sup>37</sup>

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si quando pugnandum est, canibus aciem struunt. Ibi sunt [...] qui dicuntur Antropofagi et humanis vescuntur carnibus. Ibi sunt alia monstra plurima, quae recitantur a navigantibus sepe inspecta, quamvis hoc nostris vix credibile putetur” (Adam Bremensis 1917: 247–248).

<sup>31</sup> Literally “the dog-headed”, who had also been mentioned by Herodotus (IV, 191) as the “κυνοκέφαλοι” (Herodotus 1928: 394).

<sup>32</sup> In the original: “crudelissimi ambrones”, i.e., “the cruelest Ambrones”.

<sup>33</sup> (Adam 2002: 200); “Qui lingua eorum Wilzi dicuntur, crudelissimi ambrones, quos poeta Gelanos vocat” (Adam Bremensis 1917: 248).

<sup>34</sup> Adam makes numerous references to Martianus Capella. For instance, in the next chapter (IV, 20) he mentions the Scythian, that is, the Baltic shore (Adam 2002: 201): “which Martian says was ‘full of a multifarious diversity of barbarians’” (“litus Scithicum, quod Martianus ait ‘confertum esse multiplici diversitate barbarorum’” (Adam Bremensis 1917: 249)), while in the same chapter of *De nuptiis* (VI, 663) the author enumerates nations including “Geloni Agathysi Anthropophagi” (Martianus 1866: 227); cf. VI, 693: “beyond the Scythian ocean [...] the way becomes impenetrable due to the Anthropophagi” (“sed Scythico Oceano [...] Anthropophagi excursus inuios reddidere” (Martianus 1866: 240)), etc.

<sup>35</sup> The Geloni were first mentioned by Herodotus (“Γελωνοί”; IV, 102, 108–109 etc.), although he does not write that they were swift or cannibals (Herodotus 1928: 304, 308).

<sup>36</sup> The possible confusion in IV, 19 between the Wilzi and the Wizzi is notable, for the latter could have been a reference to the Finnic people known as the Vepsians (Бременский 2011: 147 сн. 37), cf. Old Russian «весь» (*Ves*) (Инар. 1908: 8, 14 и т. д.).

<sup>37</sup> Ptolemy 1991: 80. “Πάλιν δὲ τὴν μὲν ἐφεξῆς τῷ Οὐνεδικῷ κόλπῳ παρωκεανῆτι κατέχουσιν Οὐέλται, ὑπὲρ οὓς Ὅσιοι, εἶτα Κάρβωνες ἀρκτηκώτατοι, ὧν ἀνατολικώτεροι Καρεῶται καὶ Σάλοι ὑπὸ τούτους καὶ Γέλωνες” (Πτολεμαί 1994: 50–51).

Back from the Ocean, near the Venedicus Bay, the Veltae dwell, above whom are the Ossi; then more toward the north the Carbones, and toward the east are the Careotae and the Sali; below whom are the Gelones.

While the ethnonym “Ven(e)di” was used by German authors to refer to the Polabian-Baltic Slavs as late as the early Middle Ages, Venedicus (Οὐνεδικῶ) Bay was the Baltic Sea. I will not touch upon the dubious matter of whether Ptolemy’s Veltae (Οὐέλται) were linked to the mediaeval Slavs – Veleti.<sup>38</sup> My point is to show that from an early period, the “Wilzi”, whoever this ethnonym referred to, were firmly placed among other barbaric nations in geographical literature.

Among Notker’s sources identified by James C. King, two deserve special consideration (Notker latinus 1986: 156–157). The first one is the *Life of Charlemagne (Vita Caroli Magni)* written by Einhard in the 9th century (chapter 12):<sup>39</sup>

[In 789 CE] he [Charlemagne] waged war against the Slavs, whom we are accustomed to call Wilzi, but who properly – that is, in their own tongue – are called Welatabi [...] There is a gulf stretching from the western sea towards the East, of undiscovered length [...] The Slavs and the Aisti and various other nations inhabit the eastern shore, amongst whom the chief are these Welatabi against whom then the king waged war.

Notker borrowed his “Weletabi” from this passage. I believe it is beyond doubt that the geographical description of North-East Europe (Scythia/Baltic region) first attempted by Herodotus was subsequently expanded by various authors. Over time, this list of nations included the Veleti, who were sometimes confused with their “neighbours” the Geloni, the Ambrones, the Anthropophagi, and others. We see here a typical example of a literary game. By providing an intertext with references to earlier sources, the new author could first show his erudition and bow to the authoritative texts, and then proceed to make his story more vivid by adding old material and interpretations or etymologies, no matter how fantastical they might be.

The second text to mention the Veleti in the time of Charlemagne was written by **another Notker** – **Notker Balbulus**, or Notker “the Stammerer” (c. 840–912) (Ноткер Заика 2023: 389). He also worked at the Abbey of St. Gall, but a century earlier than Notker Labeo. Around 885 he wrote *The Deeds of Charlemagne (Gesta Karoli Magni)*, in which he mentions the Veleti and “worms” in a somewhat boastful context. In the following story, he mentions an enormous and mighty warrior of Charlemagne’s throng named Eishere (II, 12):<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Some literature can be found in Пролемай (1994: 54–62), although this topic needs special treatment.

<sup>39</sup> (Einhard 1999: 12); “Sclavis, qui nostra consuetudine Wilzi, proprie vero, id est sua locutione, Welatabi dicuntur, bellum inlatum est [...]. Sinus quidam ab occidentali oceano orientem versus porrigitur. [...] At litus [...] Sclavi et Aisti et aliae diversae incolunt nationes; inter quos vel praecipui sunt, quibus tunc a rege bellum inferebatur, Welatabi” (Einhardi Vita 1911: 15).

<sup>40</sup> (Ноткер Заика 2023: 439–440); “Is itaque cum in comitatu cesaris Bemanos, Wilzos et Avaros in morem prati secaret et in avicularum modum de hastili suspenderet, domum victor reversus et a torpentibus interrogatus,

Therefore, when he was in the company of Caesar, he mowed the Bohe-  
mians, the Wilzi and the Avars like the grass in the meadow and stringed  
them on his spear like little birds. When he returned home and was asked  
by those who wondered how did he fare in the region of the Veneds, he  
answered, despising the latter and chafing at the former: “What are these  
froglets to me? I usually stringed seven, eight or even nine of them on my  
spear and carried them around, while they were blathering I don’t know  
what. Our Lord the Caesar and us just wasted our time on these worms”.

It is, however, unclear to what extent this Notker influenced the other.

## VI.

James C. King wrote “it is unclear where Notker borrowed the information about such a  
diet of these people from” and saw no parallels in the sources (Notker latinus 1986: 157).  
Wolfgang Bröske did not deal with this matter at all, only studying the forms of the ethnonym  
from the passage without translating or retelling it (Bröske 1955: 7 Anm. 29). Alexander  
F. Hilferding spoke of the Slavic cannibalism as “German fairy-tales”, without taking the  
problem seriously (Гильфердинг 2013: 92–93). Alexander N. Veselovsky took the same  
approach (Веселовский 1906: 20). Alexander A. Kotlyarevsky found other German texts  
discussing the cannibalism of the Slavs in the early modern period, up until the 17th and 18th  
centuries. These texts seemed to allude more to Herodotus than to ethnographic evidence  
(Котляревский 2016: 118–120). He concludes that “one feature is particularly striking,  
namely that the Wilzi ate their elderly parents. As we find no similar customs among the  
Slavs or even the most savage peoples, we do not consider this to be an ethnographic ac-  
count. Such tales were in vogue during the Middle Ages. Travellers and seafarers loved  
to boast about the miracles they saw abroad, and the gullible chroniclers were only too  
keen to record their stories as fact. The tale could also have a bookish and scholarly origin  
because mediaeval lore traced the origin of the Slavs to the Scythes and the Massagetes,  
who engaged in such customs, according to Herodotus” (Котляревский 2016: 121–122).

There is, however, a curious passage from the so-called Pseudo-Caesarius of Nazian-  
zus, attributed to a 4th century author, but actually written in the mid-500s (II, 110):<sup>41</sup>

How is it possible that the Sclaveni and the Physonites (who are also called  
Danubians), [...] the ones who devour with great pleasure the breasts of

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qualiter ei in regione Winidum complaceret, illos dedignatus hisque indignatus aiebat: ‘Quid mihi ranunculi illi? Septem vel octo vel certe novem de illis hasta mea perforatos et quid nescio murmurantes huc illucque portare solebam. Frustra adversum tales vermiculos domnus rex et nos fatigati sumus’ (Notker Balbulus 1959: 75). James C. King wrongly attributes this fragment as II, 13 (Notker latinus 1986: 156).

<sup>41</sup> (Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021: 28): “ὄντες οἱ Σκλαυνοὶ καὶ οἱ Φεισωνῖται, οἱ καὶ Δανούβιοι προσαγορευόμενοι, οἱ μὲν γυναικομαστοβοροῦσιν ἡδέως διὰ τὸ πεπληρωθῆαι τοῦ γάλακτος, μυῶν δίκην τοῖς ὑποτίθους ταῖς πέτρας ἐπαράττοντες, οἱ δὲ καὶ τῆς νομίμης καὶ ἀδιαβλήτου κρεοβορίας ἀπέχονται”.

women because they are full of milk, dashing unweaned babes against the rocks like rats, while the others abstain even from the licit and irreproachable consumption of meat?

The commentary on the passage (Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021: 27–28) can be seen as a reference to Herodotus, specifically his account of the Amazons, who, according to later authors like Diodorus Siculus and Strabo, removed one of their breasts. The sceptical tone of the passage is due to the author being a witness to Slavic military raids. This episode only faintly echoes Notker.

## VII.

To conclude, the possibility that the Veleti actually ate their parents seems highly unlikely. It is more probable that Notker engaged in a literary game, with origins in Herodotus. **I argue that this passage in Notker was due to the fact that the Great Slavic Revolt of 983 had a deep impact on Germany.** The cruelty of the Veleti towards the Christians prompted men of letters to write about ancient nations and their savagery. This was facilitated by the historical connections between the Veleti and other nations of North-East Europe from the time of Ptolemy, as documented in literature. Remigius, misinterpreting a passage in *De Nuptiis* by Martianus Capella, forged a connection that Notker accepted, leading to the conflation of the Anthropophagi/Ambrones with the Veleti. Tenuous as such links may be, they fit seamlessly into the mediaeval tradition of literary invention, a practice in which both Adam of Bremen and a Russian chronicler enthusiastically participated. I argue that it was the literary sources and not the ethnographic data that made Notker write of the Veleti as cannibals. The Abbey of St. Gall, where Notker “spent his entire life” (Ганина 2015: 39), was 600 km away from the closest settlements of the Veleti and he probably learnt about this people either from his contemporaries, who were horrified by the atrocious revolt of 983, or from literary works, which spoke of the northern and eastern barbarians engaging in cannibalism and other types of savagery. Notker was equally ready to ascribe the same cannibalism to the local witches (“hâzessa”), but it did not produce the same reaction as the account of the man-eating Wilzi.

Although it would have been perfectly natural for any Christian author writing about the Pagan Slavs, for two hundred years after Notker while Paganism was alive, no one mentioned such a barbaric and bizarre custom as cannibalism among the Veleti. This is notable as it could have been used for the purpose of Christian missions or calls to subdue the Pagans. On the contrary, when we turn to descriptions of Western Slavic customs by Thietmar of Merseburg (“Chronicon” VIII, 3) or St. Boniface, 250 years before him, we find cremation as a standard Slavic funerary rite.<sup>42</sup> No other sources mention cannibalism

<sup>42</sup> A letter from St. Boniface No. 73, addressed to Aethelbald, King of Mercia circa 746–747 (Бонифаций 1995: 416–417). Boniface compares the “rustic kindred of the Slavs and the savage Scythia” (“rustica gens hominum Sclaforum et Scythia dura”) (Бонифаций 1995: 414–415, cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021: 50–51).

among any Slavic people. It is highly likely that, much like the Greeks in the story told by Herodotus about King Darius' court (III, 38), the Slavs would have shuddered at the mere notion of the cannibalism ascribed to them by Notker. His use of literary tradition to interpret the events of the 983 rebellion should lead us to dismiss cannibalism as an aspect of Pagan Slavic culture.

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<sup>43</sup> All dates for internet resources are given on 31. 10. 2023.

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## POGAŃSKIE ZWYCZAJE WIELETÓW WEDŁUG NOTKERA LABEO

OLEG VLADISLAVOVICH KUTAREV



Pomimo długich prób zebrania wszystkich najważniejszych źródeł na temat przedchrześcijańskiej religii i kulturze Słowian, wciąż pozostają teksty i autorzy, którzy nie są dobrze znani w literaturze i są niejako “zapomnianymi” badaczami. Jednym z takich autorów jest Notker Labeo (ok. 950–1022), dzięki któremu nastąpiło powstanie niemieckiego języka literackiego. Wśród jego dużych prac wyróżnia się tłumaczenie na język staro-wysoko-niemiecki łacińskiego późnoantycznego dzieła Marcjanusa Capelli “O zaślubinach Merkurego i Filologii” (lat. “De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii”). Oprócz przekazywania tego złożonego tekstu w języku ojczystym, Notker po pierwsze powoływał się na szeroką tradycję komentatorską w odniesieniu do Marcjana, a po drugie dawał mu kilka własnych komentarzy. W jednym z wyjaśnień poetyckiego obrazu świtu lub Bogini Aurory Marcjana, Notker, pod wpływem komentarza Remigiusza z Auxerre (IX w.), rozpoczął krótką opowieść o ludziach ambronów – komentarz do słowa “ambronum”, które było zniekształceniem pierwotnego “ambrosium”, tj. “nieśmiertelnych”, co dotyczyło cech Aurory, a Marcjan w ogóle nie wspomniał o tym etnonimie. Łącząc w stos wyobrażenia o różnych ludach północnej i wschodniej Europy z różnych źródeł antycznych i średniowiecznych, Notker podążył za Remigiuszem, przedstawiając ambronów jako kanibali i przy okazji postanowił dodać, że w jego rodzinnych Niemczech również Wieletowie (Słowianie połabscy) “*nie wstydzą się przyznać, że mają większe prawo niż robaki do jedzenia swoich rodziców*”. Oprócz przeglądu samego fragmentu Notkera o Wieletach, tekstu źródłowego Marcjana

i wskazanego błędu Remigiusza dotyczącego ambronów, w artykule omówiono również prawdopodobne inne źródła Notkera oraz kontekst kulturowo-historyczny, w którym tworzył swoją pracę. W rezultacie okazuje się, że zamieszanie w ludach północno – i wschodnioeuropejskich, ich nazwach i zwyczajach jest od dawna grą literacką, która sięga starożytnych geografów i historyków, takich jak Ptolemeusz i Herodot. Przy tym same narody mogły nawet zniknąć (jak te same ambrony), ale przekazać swoje imię lub cechy sąsiadom (geograficzne, ale nie zawsze historyczne). W taki szereg etnonimów wchodziły również Wiolety, przy czym podobne geograficzne wyobrażenia o nich występują u innych autorów epoki (na przykład w XI wieku u Adama Bremenskiego). Jednakże, Notker miał powody do demonizacji Wioletów, przypisywania im barbarzyńskich i dzikich cech. Jest to Wielkie pogańskie Powstanie w 983 roku, które ogarnęło znaczną liczbę narodów słowiańskich na terytorium dzisiejszych Niemiec. W trakcie powstania, kierowanego przez Wioletów, niszczone kościoły i niemieckie instytucje władzy, przywracano pogaństwo; wszystko to towarzyszyło wielkiej przemocy. Notker, współczesny wydarzeniom, kontynuując grę literacką, włączył Wioletów do barbarzyńców, a nawet kanibali, co było przyczyną pojawienia się tego fragmentu. Jednocześnie krótki przegląd innych źródeł o Słowianach połabskich i bałtyckich i ich pogaństwie nie potwierdza informacji Notkera, a tym samym wzmacnia teorię o grze literackiej w geograficznych opisach “barbarzyńskiej” Europy.

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