

A Structure for the Gods: The Indo-European Pantheon Reconsidered

Emily Lyle

This article suggests that we can possibly reach a fuller understanding of the Indo-European pantheon by positing a prehistoric state when a tenfold set of gods had places in a structure of space and time and social organisation. The place of kingship is especially complex but it is suggested that eight of the deities (including two goddesses) can be categorised in terms of three pairs of dualities.

Ideas that I have had for some time (see Lyle 1990; forthcoming “Importance”) are beginning to penetrate into the scholarship on mythology, although still rather slowly, and it seems appropriate at this point to invite discussion of them in the Slavic context. Nowhere in the Indo-European world do we have a coherent system of gods but my view is that it is possible to postulate such a system as having once existed in prehistory. It was very likely in decay even in the oral period and the arrival of writing would have been inimical to it. It is an interesting fact that it is actually rather difficult to convey a total cosmological scheme in writing, and that is our task at the present day if we want to envisage the possibility that the pantheon was a coherent grouping of gods that made sense in an original setting thousands of years ago and retained its mythic power long after it had fragmented.

We can expect that the names we have for gods in most branches of the Indo-European language and culture family will be many more than can be accommodated in a relatively compact structure. We have to allow for duplications and the splitting off of aspects of a deity as separate divine figures. At the same time, we can expect that there will be gaps when we try to match the set of major gods in any one branch with an overall schema. There is likely to have been loss in the course of time, and possibly also two or more gods that were once separate will have been amalgamated into a single one that is conceived of as especially powerful. The task of arriving at an overall system might seem hopeless and it has certainly not been possible to posit one through working back from the historical evidence in the different branches of the Indo-European in the absence of a theory about how the gods fitted into a total cosmology.

There has been structural work done in the past in the Indo-European area and we are indebted especially to Georges Dumézil for a lifetime of work (see Littleton 1982), without which the current advances would not have been possible. We are also indebted to the anthropologist, N. J. Allen, for pointing out that the structures that Dumézil elicited from texts indicate that we are dealing with the remnants of a primitive classification system (Allen 2000: 62-63). Once we acknowledge this, we can begin to work from the other end and make theoretical statements that would apply to a postulated state in prehistory.

The remnants scattered throughout the Indo-European area are very rich and clearly much attention was paid to the ritual use of space and time, and so we can safely posit a cosmology that enclosed human beings and supernatural beings in a spatio-temporal framework. The ritual year has recently become a focus for research and I will take up some points about time below but I will start with space, which I will consider first simply on the horizontal plane. In a universal schema deriving from the sense of the upright human body we are aware of four directions reaching out from a centre, and this centre may or may not be given expression as a separate, fifth, place. Into this neat schema of four or five places comes the anomalous and puzzling Indo-European emphasis on tripartite division. Dumézil simply thought that there were two different systems (1973: 9) but Rees and Rees (1961: 118-133), Allen and I have attempted to co-ordinate them. I shall give my own solution here.

The first point I wish to make is that we can only begin to understand a system that includes a valuing of both three and four/five by admitting that it is complex. Dumézil's thinking in this area was not confined to simple "functional" figures (representing his three "functions" of the sacred, physical force and prosperity/fertility) but also posited additional trifunctional figures – a king god and a goddess. Daniel Dubuisson recognised a fivefold scheme like this too and also argued, as others have done, that there are light and dark aspects of the functional and trifunctional positions (Dubuisson 1985). This gives us not simply the five positions called for by considering the fuller set of the horizontal divisions of space but a set of ten. I argue that this is the total number of major gods in the pantheon and that they can be placed in this spatial pattern. Kingship is widely associated with the centre and there is little difficulty in placing the trifunctional king figures here. The goddesses I understand as having the third place in the sequence of four running round the four directions, but this is perhaps more problematic and I would like to consider the matter of sequence in vertical as well as horizontal space. Because of the force of gravity, we are inclined to take the top as the beginning and I understand the equivalent of the four directions to be, in vertical space, the four layers of: heaven, the space between heaven and earth (atmosphere), earth, and sea in that order. It will be no surprise, then, that I see the female as in the position that corresponds to earth. We can lay out the set of ten as a single string of numbered items (Figure 1) and, as I first suggested this treatment at a conference in Edinburgh in 2005, it can be referred to as the Edinburgh reference set. The first of each pair is the light component and the second the dark one. The identifications in terms of Dumézil's functions are given above and the identifications in my terms are given below.

When we come to the identifications in my terms, the kings in the centre are distinctly different from the rest and do not fall under the pattern that I suggest for the other gods. I argue that the eight other gods are definable as different combinations of three characteristics. This may seem too calculated but it just makes precise a number of features of the gods that have been recognised in myth and cult. It has, for example, been quite customary to talk about "sky gods" and "chthonic gods" and "old gods" and "young gods". Let us discuss the "old gods" first since they can be considered to form a set of their own in the beginning of time before the "young gods" came into existence (cf. Lyle 1990; 1995; forthcoming "Narrative"): These are the dark components in the series (excluding the dark king). I understand them as gods that can be identified with the layers of the universe, including the primal goddess located at the level of the earth. Two of them belong to the above and two to the below, and it is quite relevant here to look at categories from

Ancient Greece, where the above corresponds to the hot and the below to the cold (Lyle 1990; 1995). Ancient Greek philosophy cross-cut these categories with a second duality of the dry and the wet, and I think we can see the four old gods as corresponding to the four elements, although discussion of the four components takes its own direction in philosophy so that the elements are not normally listed in the order that would be appropriate to the layers of the universe: air, fire, earth and water. It may be relevant here to mention a set of cosmological figures in Old Norse literature that Jón Hnefill Adalsteinsson writes about in this way (1998: 30-31) for it is interesting to observe that, in this grouping of elemental figures, one of the four is female.

Ægir, the god or giant of the sea, and Hræsvelgr, the god or giant of the wind are not the only *jötnar* who represent the elements in the Old Norse world picture. One can also mention the giant Surtr, who is the representative of fire. Some scholars have also wished to see the fourth element, earth, in the shape of the giant Gymir, the father of Gerðr who was won over by Freyr. In Old Norse belief, however, Jörðin or Earth was early on connected to Óðinn, who became her husband, and to Þorr who is known as “Jarðar burr”, the son of Earth, and was considered to be their son.

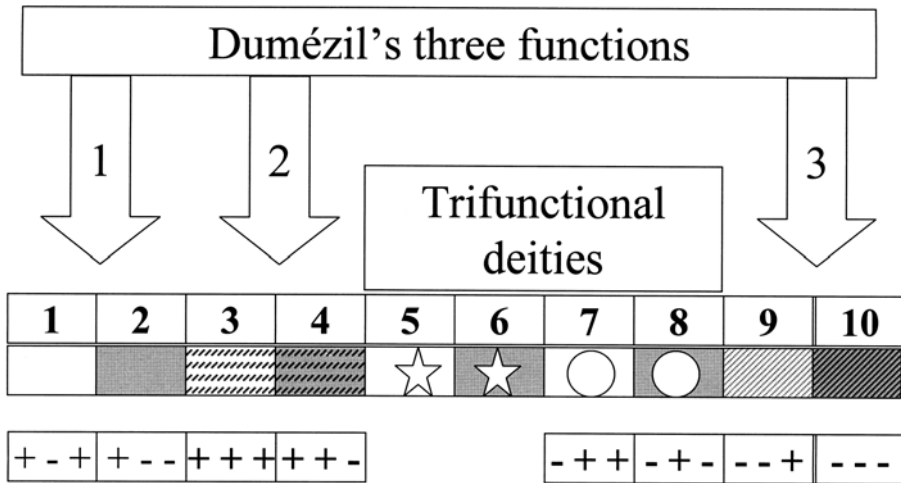
The “old gods” sequence runs as shown in Table 1. The opposition hot/cold (A) is given first and the opposition dry/wet (B) is given second, with the hot and dry called + and the cold and wet called -. In a third opposition already implied (C) all the old gods are the dark (-) part of a light/dark opposition.

A	B	C			
+	-	-	hot and wet and dark	heaven	air
+	+	-	hot and dry and dark	atmosphere	fire
-	+	-	cold and dry and dark	earth	earth
-	-	-	cold and wet and dark	sea	water

How are we to see these components in relation to time? I am pleased to say that Nikita I. Tolstoy independently of my own studies has shown that the cycle of the year corresponds to the cycle of the 24-hour day and that both are cross-cut by two dualities (Tolstoy 1997; 2002; cf. Lyle 2006). I would put them in correspondence with what has just been discussed and say that the halves that run from midwinter to midsummer and from midnight to noon and back belong to the hot/cold series of oppositions (A) and that the summer/winter and day/night (as period between sunset and sunrise) oppositions belong to the dry/wet series (B). We will not be surprised, however, to find that there is an extra complexity in the system. The period of the twelve days around midwinter and a corresponding period in the night (which I would define as between last light and first light) seems to be the dark part in the light/dark opposition (C) of which the light part is the whole of the rest of the year. The period of the twelve days, then, would be dedicated to the old gods and be strongly associated with danger and death and reversal while the rest of the year would relate to the young gods.

Why should we think that names would identify gods more securely than the triple categories proposed here? Of course, we relate to named beings as to human friends and enemies but we have to be careful not to reify the gods and say that such-and-such a named

god has such-and-such characteristics and takes part in such-and-such specific activities. Very often, all we can safely say is that a named god is called upon in cult at a specific place and time or that a named god acts in a particular way in a story told in a particular century in a particular language. There is no desire to replace what can be learned from cult and narrative, but I hope we can begin now to put that information together with definitions of gods who are old or young, of the above or the below and of the summer or the winter (to take certain aspects of their dualities), and that can be related to divisions of space and points in the ritual year. The period of the twelve days, then, would be dedicated to the old gods and be strongly associated with danger and death and reversal, while the rest of the year would relate to the young gods (excepting the dark king).



Although I have accepted Dumézil's notion of the functions and built from that, I should add that in many ways my approach to them differs from his. I see the possibility that, in the prehistoric period, the concept of physical force was attached to young men, the concept of prosperity/fertility to mature men, and the concept of the sacred to old men in a society that operated an age-grade system (1997; 2001). I also find that two of the keys that Dumézil used to unlock the system of the pantheon – the Mitanni treaty with its Indic names of gods and Adam of Bremen's account of the Uppsala temple with its Norse names – were misinterpreted by him (2004; submitted), and that we cannot place any reliance at all on his placement of gods within the structure, although the threefold structure itself does hold up well under examination. We really have to start again and it could be an exciting time for comparative mythology as we unfold the layers of meaning in the light of the suggested paradigm. Once we discard Dumézil's interpretation of the triads in the keys he used, we can probably agree that the central figure in each of them – Indra in the one case and Thor in the other – are both powerful thunder-and-lightning gods and are also likely to be in the role of king as is the thunder-and-lightning Greek god, Zeus. In the Baltic context, Perkūnas, whose name means thunder, was the sole god in the thirteenth-century Lithuanian shrine found under the

cathedral in Vilnius (Laurinkienė 1996: 81-86, English thesis abstract 15-16), and I take it that as the king figure he represented the totality. In the Slavic context, the equivalent figure that I would identify as the king is Perun (cf. Kropej 2003: 126-131). I think this may strike scholars as a natural interpretation, but time will tell whether this is the case and whether it is possible to build up a Slavic structure centred on the king that is in keeping with a total Indo-European tenfold pantheon that draws on all branches of our wide-ranging tradition and relates to concepts of space, time and social organisation that were current in prehistory.

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Struktura za bogove. Ponoven pretres indoevropskega panteona.

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Do novih spoznanj o indoevropskem panteonu bi bilo mogoče priti ob predpostavki prazgodovinskega stanja, v katerem je bil desetdelen niz bogov umeščen v strukturo časa, prostora in socialne organizacije. Posebno obsežno je vprašanje kraljevanja. Avtorica je mnenja, da lahko osem od teh desetih božanstev, med katerimi sta tudi dve boginji, razporedimo v kategorijo treh dualnih parov.