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## **The blood motif in culture-forming narratives: Morphology and semantics**

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### **Abstract:**

*The paper seeks to explore the motif of blood, as it appears in various forms in all civilizational and cultural areas. Based on the genre- and culturally diverse texts from the material sample, the authors will present the basic and plot-motif stable forms of the blood motif in ancient culture-forming narratives and outline their archetypal significance.*

Blood, as an extremely important and precious bodily fluid, plays a significant role in the religious and mythological thinking of man. On the one hand, it symbolizes life, energy and vitality; on the other hand, a lack or spilling of blood signifies death. The blood motif is quite widespread in archnarratives, but it rarely assumes the function of a plot agent. Blood is

associated with the category of the body and corporeality, and therefore generally corresponds to such character actions as birth/delivery, sexual intercourse, killing and duelling, and such expressive qualities as drasticity, brutality and naturalness. Etymologically, blood has its origins in the Proto-Slavic term \*kry, which is related to the Old Indian attributive *krūrāḥ* ('wounded', 'bloody') and the noun *kravīḥ* ('raw flesh'). It became established in Greek as *kreas* ('flesh'), in Latin as *cruor* ('blood oozing from a wound'), and in Old Iranian as *crú* ('blood'). All words have their origins in the older Indo-European expression \*kreu(ə)-/\*krū, which denotes 'thick, coagulating blood, bloody, raw flesh' (Králik, 2019, p. 307).

In archnarratives, blood is associated with an exceptionally wide range of imagery and meanings, from the positive (these are rarer), which recognize blood as a life-giving fluid, to the highly negative. The American folklorist Stith Thompson indexes numerous examples of motifs associated with blood. Blood can cause disaster (A856.2. Ground, previously all wet, dries up when first woman cuts her little finger and blood drips on ground; A1012.3.1. Flood from slain giant's blood); prophesy danger; and misery or death (B259.5. Bird's wings drip blood when birds hear of Day of Judgment; F1066.1. Knife plunged into earth comes out bloody; G36.2. Human blood accidentally tasted: brings desire for human flesh). Blood can be considered poisonous (B776.5 Blood of animal considered venomous; Q582.4 Man dies from drop of blood of pet hound he has killed); but it also serves as an instrument of bewitchment. In this case, it has healing, protective or reviving effects (B301.4.2. Faithful horse weeps tears of blood for master; D712.4.1. Disenchantment by drinking blood; F955.1. Blood-bath as cure for leprosy), or provides magical powers (D1301.2. Drinking blood teaches animal languages; F872.3.1. Bath of blood of dragons, lions, vipers). Blood can be a sign of innocence or, on the contrary, reveal the culprit (D1318.5. Blood indicates guilt or innocence; C913. Bloody key as sign of disobedience; D1318.5.1. Blood springs from murderer's finger when he touches victim; D1318.5.3. Each drop of innocent blood turns to burning candle). In some narratives – especially in myths – blood exhibits transformative effects: a man can be created from its drops (A1211.1. Man from dirt mixed with creator's blood; A1241.4.1. Man from clay and animal's blood); as can an animal (D447.3. Transformation: blood to animal; D447.3.1. Transformation: blood drops to toads; D447.3.1.1. Transformation: blood drops to serpents; D447.3.2. Transformation: blood of gorgon to flying horse); and inanimate objects and plants (D457.1.1. Transformation: blood to rubies; D457. 1.3. Transformation: drops of blood to flowers); and substances (A717.1. Hero makes sun and moon from tree and vivifies them with blood of creator's son; A831.8. Gods create the Earth from their dead victim's blood and bones; D474.2.

Transformation: water becomes bloody; A922. Ocean made from blood; D457.1.2. Transformation: blood to milk; D477.0.1.1. Wine becomes blood).

### **Blood as a primary substance in creation myths**

According to Kurt Ranke, in religious-mythological thought the semantics of blood as the vehicle of *individual* human existence is elevated to the *cosmological* level and is regarded as an active component of existence in the whole cosmos (1979, p. 520). In world mythologies, blood is considered the primary substance (*prima materia*) that participates in the primordial formation of the world in so-called mythic time.

For example, it is an important ingredient in the creation of man. African, Indonesian and Polynesian myths elaborate the motif of the creation of man from clay/dust/earth and blood. In Sumerian mythology, the gods create the first humans Anullegar and Annegar from the blood of the slain Langa deities. In the Sumerian-Akkadian epic *Enūma Elish* Marduk kills the primordial being, the serpent/dragon monster Tiamat, and her son, the god Kingu. From Tiamat's body he creates heaven and earth, while Kingu's blood is mixed with clay and gives life to a man. In the Sumerian-Akkadian epic *Atra-Hasis*, man is created from the blood and flesh of the god Nintu mixed with clay. Indirect reference to blood as an extremely important component of the body of the first man can also be found in the Bible. According to Annick de Souzaenelle, the name Adam is interpreted in Hebrew as 'red man' (adama meaning 'red earth' and dam meaning 'blood') (2010, p. 79). The etymology of the name reminds us that Adam is the first man, the first thinking being in the world, created in the image of God but burdened with a physical body of flesh and blood.

In the religious-mythological thinking of man, blood stands for the element of water thanks to its liquid consistency and the element of fire thanks to its naturally higher temperature (it is found inside the body), in other words it is closely related to these elements symbolically. In terms of genesis, however, blood is always considered to be the older substance, i.e. from blood both water and fire arise. Water appears in cosmogonic mythology in the form of a spring or ancient ocean and in its positive aspect has fertile symbolism, similarly to blood: it constructively shapes the form of the fictional universe and gives rise to new life. It gives birth to the Earth's surface, heavenly bodies, mountains, etc. Blood, therefore, in some cosmogonic mythologies becomes a sublimation of the water element – then its distinctive life-giving semantics is intensified. For example, in the Norse-Germanic collection of mythological songs *Edda*, it is said that the water on Earth was created from the blood of the slain primeval beast Ymir (Kadečková, 2009, p. 26). A similar mythological idea can be found in the Finnish and

Estonian context. In Chinese mythology, the primordial being – Pan Gu, separates heaven and Earth first. Then he positions himself between them so that they do not rejoin. He stands between heaven and earth for almost two millennia, until he dies of exhaustion and old age. Parts of his body gradually turn into the world: his breath becomes wind and mist, his left eye the sun, his right eye the moon, his blood the rivers (Hrych, 2000, p. 509). According to Lithuanian etiological myths, the blood of mythical beings is the ancient matter from which fire was formed. However, Lithuanian myths are heavily overlaid with Christian beliefs. For example, there is a Christianized variant of the original myth, in which fire and hell arise from Lucifer's boiling blood (this is Thompson's motif A671.0.2.1. Fire in hell) (Vaitkevičienė, 2003, pp. 21-22).

Blood and fire represent symbiotic symbols also from the perspective of Aztec cosmogony. In Mesoamerica, there is a widespread myth of creation and destruction of the world, which takes place in regular cycles. When the world is reborn, it is shrouded in darkness. The gods therefore agree that it is necessary to create the sun and the moon. They choose two gods from among themselves – the healthy, beautiful, rich Tecciztecatl and the sickly, ugly, poor Nanahuatzin. Through their sacrifice, the heavenly bodies are to come into being. Tecciztecatl accumulates gold, precious stones, precious feathers, and balls of dry grass called zacatapayolli (lit. 'grass of life'), into which blood-soaked thorns are inserted. Nanahuatzin, on the other hand, sacrifices only bundles of green reeds, withered pine branches, and scabs from his wounds in addition to the zacatapayolli balls. After four days, these sacrifices are set on fire for the final act: jumping into the fire. Tecciztecatl stands in front of the fire and prepares to jump, but fear overcomes him and he reverses. Nanahuatzin, on the other hand, plunges into the flames without hesitation. Eventually, the shamed Tecciztecatl jumps in after him. Out of the two deities who have burned in the blood-sanctified fire, the sun and the moon rise (Chlupová, 2006, p. 240)

### **The motif of blood in biblical narratives**

In biblical texts, the motif of blood occurs in a variety of contexts and meaning but in general it has rather negative connotations. Because of blood's intrinsic association with life and death, blood has become "an ominous symbol of violence and wrong, guilt and coming punishment" (Ryken et al., 1998, p. 100). On the other hand, the shedding of blood symbolizes a necessary step towards attaining forgiveness and reconciliation, so in this vein it also has a positive meaning. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* lists seven basic meanings that blood implies in a biblical context (ibid., pp. 99-101):

**1. Blood as human life.** Blood is mentioned as a life-giving fluid in several places, pointing to a literal understanding of its biological meaning, i.e., in connection with the earthly body: “because the life of every creature is its blood” (Lev, 17:14). In a figurative sense, Christ’s blood is transformed in the New Testament in the form of the Eucharist (wine) into a life-giving liquid that at the same time brings forgiveness of sins and the hope of a blessed life: “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John, 6:53). Wine, like blood, is a symbol of life and youth, associated with blood because of its deep red colour (Durand, 2021, p. 325). Souzenelle also points out an interesting fact: God told Noah that the life of man lasts 120 years (Gen, 6:3), exactly the same length as the life of a red blood cell (Souzenelle, 2010, p. 206).

**2. Blood as death.** References to shed blood and extinguished life appear in numerous places in both the Old and New Testaments. Death can be caused by violence, sacrifice, envy, jealousy, etc. (Ryken et al., 1998, p. 100).

**3. Blood as guilt.** The motif of blood is often attributed to guilt in the Bible. In the Book of Hosea the prophet Hosea mentions the city of Gilead as a city of evildoers, stained with footprints of blood (Hos, 6:8); elsewhere we find mention of hands full of blood (Isa, 1:15), of sinners as bloodthirsty men (Ps, 139:19), Pilate washes his hands in front of an indignant crowd and declares, “I am innocent of this man’s blood” (Matt, 27:24), thus symbolically absolving himself of the guilt of Jesus’s death. In the same way, Judas, after Christ’s condemnation, declares: “I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood” (Matt, 27:4), thus clearly admitting and accepting the guilt resulting from his betrayal.

**4. Blood as impurity.** Shed blood defiles people (Lam, 4:1; Isa, 59:3) and the Earth and “destroyed the cleanness of creation” (Ryken et al., 1998, p. 100): “And shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan: and the land was polluted with blood” (Ps, 106:38). A special category of this subset is represented by the idea of the uncleanness of women during their menstrual cycle, detailed in the Book of Leviticus.

**5. Blood as omen.** As in folklore, in the Bible the deep red colour of blood foreshadows future events, mostly of a warning or even apocalyptic nature. In the Book of Exodus, God tells Moses that he will turn the water of the Nile into blood; the same image appears in the Revelation of the Apostle John and in the Second Book of Kings, where the water appears red as blood to the Moabites at sunrise – a portent of a devastating attack by the Israelites. The same meaning is given to the vision of the sun or moon turning to blood in the Acts of the Apostles or in the Revelation of the Apostle John: “And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and,

lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood” (Rev, 6:12).

**6. Blood as sacrifice and propitiation.** Ritual sacrifices (mostly animal sacrifices) are treated with extreme reverence and respect in the Old Testament. The shedding of the blood of any living creature is not indifferent, it always has a distinct purpose, and occurs under clearly defined conditions. God instructs Moses on the sacrificial ritual: “When anyone among you brings an offering to the LORD, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock. (...) You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you. You are to slaughter the young bull before the LORD... (...) the priests shall bring the blood and splash it against the sides of the altar at the entrance to the tent of meeting” (Lev, 1:2, 4, 5). The connection between the sacrifice of an animal and the achievement of atonement is made explicit by the Book of Leviticus: “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life” (Lev, 17:11). The blood thus becomes a key instrument of communication with God, which in turn leads to the desired transformation. According to the New Testament, Christ undergoes a bloody sacrifice on the cross to reconcile mankind to God and to cleanse them from their sins. Thus, in both the Old and New Testaments, the sacrifice has a reconciling, i.e. a spiritually healing, effect on all humanity: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt, 26:28). In the biblical story of Christ’s sacrifice, the motif of blood is implicitly present as a consequence of torture (whipping, crown of thorns) and crucifixion (bloody stigmata), but it also explicitly affirms Christ’s death: “one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water” (John, 19:34).

**7. Blood as wine.** In the books of the Old Testament, blood is most often associated with grape juice; in the New Testament, it is related to wine. It is mentioned in the Book of the Prophet Zechariah, in the vision of the triumphal coming of the Lord to humble the enemy: “and the Lord Almighty will shield them. They will destroy and overcome with slingstones. They will drink and roar as with wine; they will be full like a bowl used for sprinkling the corners of the altar” (Zech, 9:15). In the New Testament narrative, wine then replaces the blood of the sacrificial lamb, in this case Christ, the shedding of which secures mankind’s pardon from sin: “Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Matt, 26:27-28).

### **Blood as sacrificial fluid and life-giving essence**

The strengthening and renewing properties of blood are primarily manifested in the act of (self-)sacrifice. Blood sacrifice can reconcile a person with the gods, it is an expression of respect, provides the necessary energy, keeps the universe running and maintains the stability of its structures.

Blood as a magical substance was central to Mayan cults. Ritually, it was the blood of captives which was shed, but the Maya also sacrificed their own blood: it was customary, for example, to cut parts of the body with obsidian carvings. The blood from the wounds was caught on paper and burned. The burnt blood was then, according to their beliefs, turned into clouds and brought life-giving rain (Kováč, 2006, p. 221). Among the Aztecs, in turn, blood sacrifice consisted of tearing out the heart. It was considered a key duty assigned to man by the gods; on the one hand it was regarded as privilege (the sacrificed person was considered a hero, the chosen one), on the other hand as punishment (the sacrificed were often criminals and captives) (Kostičová - Křížová - Květinová, 2011, p. 54).

According to myths, blood sacrifices have been performed since the beginning of time because human blood provided the sun (and secondarily the moon) with the energy needed to move across the sky. For example, according to Aztec religious-mythological ideas, the human body is a kind of vessel in which cosmic forces are trapped. These are returned to the cosmos through the right sacrifice – when the most blood is drained from the body and the still beating/living heart is ripped out of it, thus guaranteeing its operation and nourishing the gods (Chlupová, 2006, p. 240).

The blood cult, often associated with cannibalism, was a common ritual practice in those societies that George Dumézil, in his triadic definition of the Proto-Indo-Europeans, calls the warrior class of society (for more, see Dumézil, 1997, pp. 69-97). Warriors in pagan Europe believed that the blood and flesh of their adversaries, especially those who proved to be tough and brave opponents during the course of a duel, or the blood of chosen animals, would enhance their fighting abilities, make them strong and invincible. For example, the Norse-Germanic special warfare units *ulfhednar* (wolf warriors) and *berserks* (bear warriors) drank the blood of slain enemies and wild beasts. They were supposedly characterized by ecstatic fury and killed the enemy by biting through their artery like werewolves (Vlčková, 1999, pp. 44-45). The Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus, in his chronicle *Gesta Danorum*, states that the warrior Hjalto drinks the blood of a bear because he believes that such a drink will increase his physical strength. The Nibelungs of the Old Germanic *The Song of the Nibelungs* also drink the blood of their defeated enemies to increase their strength. In the mid-13th century Middle High

German heroic epic *Kudrun*, the warrior Hagen kills a wild animal and drinks its blood. From antiquity, in turn, is the well-known story of Artemidorus of Ephesus (c. AD 100), who must drink blood to become a gladiator (Ranke, 1979, p. 510). According to the Roman encyclopaedist Pliny, the Scythians also drank the blood of their enemies (2021, p. 173).

The habit of drinking the blood of one's enemies is known outside Indo-European ethnic groups, so it seems to be a universally widespread phenomenon with an archetypal character. For example, according to Pliny, the Hungarians also drank the blood of their enemies. Moreover, they believed it to be a magical fluid capable of transporting the life force or opponents' qualities (especially courage and strength). North American Indians also drank the blood of their enemies (there is a record of an Iroquois missionary being captured and tortured by the Iroquois, who during the torture did not react to the pain inflicted, did not scream or beg for mercy – the Indians thus became convinced that he possessed supernatural fighting abilities, so by drinking his blood they tried to absorb his inner strength). In some Australian tribes, in turn, young men voluntarily give old men a drink of their blood to strengthen them (Ranke, 1979, p. 514).

The life force hidden in the blood is also needed by demons and the dead. According to the ancient philosopher Apollodorus, the god of medicine, Asclepius, awakens the dead with the blood flowing from the right vein of the Gorgon (Ranke, 1979, p. 510). In Homer's epic, Odysseus sacrifices a black sheep to feed the dead so that he can enter the underworld: "I would sacrifice a barren heifer for them, the best I had, and would load the pyre with good things. I also particularly promised that Teiresias should have a black sheep to himself, the best in all my flocks. When I had prayed sufficiently to the dead, I cut the throats of the two sheep and let the blood run into the trench, whereon the ghosts came trooping up from Erebus" (Homer, Book XI).

Blood is also intrinsically linked to vampire narratives. Already in ancient cultures there were stories about demonic blood-drinking creatures that can be considered as the ancestors of vampires. In Sumerian mythology, the demonic hybrid figure Dimme, daughter of the sky god Ana, who drinks human blood and feeds on human flesh, has vampiric traits (Bane, 2012, p. 119). In ancient Greece they feed on the blood of the goddess of vengeance, Erin, or even Empusa, daughter of the dark goddess Hecate; in the stories of the Plain Indians, an ancient man-eater goes around sucking people's blood in the form of a mosquito; in Europe, they suck the blood of a witch, usually in the zoomorphic form of a cat, a toad, or even a vampire (Ranke, 1979, p. 510). The figure of the vampire appears in literature only in the 18th century and is linked to the region of the Balkans and Eastern Europe (it is primarily associated with Bram



Stoker's novel *Dracula*). The vampire is an entity that "brings illness, misfortune, death and destruction. It is the demon parasite that threatens to suck health, vitality, and life away from its victims [...]" (Guiley, 2005, p. xiii). The victim's blood is a necessary requirement of its own existence – it returns from the realm of death to suck the life-giving fluid from its victim for its own sustenance, although in many cases its sucking is also associated with an erotic charge. Folkloric vampire often represents the victim of "plague, drowning, murder, suicide, or unnatural or suddenly violent causes, and corpses who become possessed by demonic or evil spirits" (ibid., p. 289). It is the embodiment of the most secret and "most primeval fears, of the dark, the unknown, the grave, and the uncertainty of what, if anything, comes after death" (ibid., p. xiii).

### **Protective and healing properties of blood**

*The Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* mentions that the blood motif in wonder tales has a significance as a magical protective fluid. It manifests itself at the level of kinship relations, especially between 1. mother and daughter or 2. twin brothers.

1. A mother's shed blood – usually in the form of a few drops – foreshadows the conception of a daughter, since female heroines inherit the life-giving blood of their ancestors. "This pattern suggests that women bear the essence of life, manifest in blood, which (being of limited supply) must quit old women to invest younger ones" (Haase, 2008, p. 127). For example, in the Brothers Grimm's *Snow White*, the queen pricks her finger and three drops of blood fall into the snow. At the sight of the red blood on the white snow, she wishes that she would give birth to "a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the embroidery frame!" The drops of blood from the mother's finger also perform a protective function in the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale *The Goose Girl* (type 533 The Repressed Bride). As the queen says goodbye to her daughter, who is going to meet her bridegroom, she pricks her finger and hands her daughter a white handkerchief soaked in three drops of blood. The evil maid who accompanies the princess constantly hurts and humiliates her on the way (e.g. she refuses to bring her water and forces her to drink from the river). Then the three drops of blood speak to the princess: "If your mother knew of this, it would break her heart." The blood in this case has a protective (apotropaic) function, it is a synecdochic personification of the royal mother and protects the main heroine from the malicious maid. When the princess loses the handkerchief with the blood, the protective spell passes away. Under threat of death, the maid forces the princess to switch places with her – taking her royal identity and marrying the prince.

2. In the folktale type ATU 303 *The Two Brothers*, blood can be part of a fatal omen that announces the death of one of the brothers and calls the other, living brother to help: blood appears in a bundle of hay, on the tree of life, etc.

In archnarratives, blood also functions as a medicine that can heal a sick or cursed character, or revive the dead. For example, in the folktale type ATU 516 Faithful John or The Petrified Friend, the prince has a faithful servant, friend or brother who fulfils the role of a helper. He helps the prince to win the coveted princess from a faraway land. Returning home, he happens to overhear an animal conversation about what dangers lurk for the young couple. However, the servant must not divulge anything to anyone or he will be petrified. Several times he saves the life of his master and his bride, but behaves strangely and secretively in doing so. It doesn't take long for the prince to suspect him of wanting to take their lives. The servant eventually reveals the truth to the young couple and becomes petrified. For several years the prince, now king, grieves over the misfortune he has caused the faithful servant. To atone, he kills his own children, smears their blood on a stone, and resurrects the faithful servant. The king is finally rewarded for his self-sacrificing act: the uncursed servant rubs the blood on the dead children's throats and they come back to life (Uther, 2011, pp. 303-305) (see also other tales of type ATU 516: Grimm's *Trusty John*, Basile's story *The Raven* from the Pentameron collection, etc.). The folktale type ATU 516 is probably based on older stories expressing the belief that the blood of innocent children heals and brings back health/life to people who suffer from leprosy. In the encyclopedia *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny claims that when a certain king fell ill with leprosy (he gives no further information about him), he was treated with a bath of warmed human blood. In *Midrash Rabbah* (Judaic commentary on the Bible), it is stated that when the king of Egypt fell ill with leprosy, he had 150 children of Israel killed every morning so that he could feed on their flesh twice a day and bathe in their healing blood. In the Old French chivalric romance *Amis et Amiles*, known since the 11th century, the hero Amicus is also afflicted with leprosy. Since only children's blood can save him, his loyal friend Amiles sacrifices his children. But a happy ending follows: God rewards Amiles' faithfulness and brings his children back to life. A similar motif can be found in the Old German chivalric epic *Der Arme Heinrich* by Hartmann von Aue from the turn of the 12th/13th century. The nobleman Heinrich falls ill with leprosy. Only the blood from the heart of a pure virgin can cure him. The farmer's daughter is willing to sacrifice herself out of love, but Heinrich renounces her help out of compassion. Because of his generosity, God grants him health (Ranke, 1979, p. 512).

### **Affinities to the real (actual) world and their presence in archnarratives**

In antiquity, human blood had a wide range of medicinal uses, besides leprosy, e.g. it also helped with epilepsy. Although these practices were quite widespread, they were considered sinful and reprehensible: “Epileptic patients are in the habit of drinking the blood even of gladiators, draughts teeming with life, as it were; a thing that, when we see it done by the wild beasts even, upon the same arena, inspires us with horror at the spectacle! And yet these persons, forsooth, consider it a most effectual cure for their disease, to quaff the warm, breathing, blood from man himself, and, as they apply their mouth to the wound, to draw forth his very life; and this, though it is regarded as an act of impiety to apply the human lips to the wound even of a wild beast!” (Pliny, 1856, Book XVIII)

Even in later times, blood in folk medicine has not lost its health-promoting, invigorating benefits. These were related to the element of fire. Blood was associated with the (*inner*) *fire* of man. The excess of this fiery energy was said to cause mental restlessness, discomfort, which is documented by phrases such as “to make someone’s blood boil” (to make someone angry), “to be hot-blooded” (to be easily excited) (Smatana, 2005, p. 312), or directly physical illness. The latter was usually thought to be related to circulatory problems, which often manifested themselves on the skin (eczema, spots, sores and redness). This is also evidenced by various folk wisdoms.

A similar idea of the connection between fire, blood and skin is also known in traditional Indian healing system (Ayurveda). Herbs (e.g. ribwort, St. John’s Wort, greater celandine), popularly called e.g. the herb of Jesus’s wounds, Mary’s blood (Vaitkevičiene, 2003, p. 31) or bloodroot (Balleková, 2005, p. 77), were used to treat these diseases in alternative healing.

Especially in Lithuanian folklore, biblically motivated herb names are derived from narratives in which saintly figures stop bleeding by a protective/prayer formula. For example, Jesus crosses a river and hurts his toe on a stone. Since Christ’s blood is also God’s blood, Jesus pleads with his Father to stop the bleeding. In another variation, the Blessed Virgin hurts her little toe and splashes the stone with her blood. She, too, begs the Almighty to stop the bleeding in her holy name (Vaitkevičiene, 2003, p. 31). In doing so, the belief that protective/prayer formulas invoking saints in combination with appropriate plants help with bleeding or blood-related illnesses is likely a continuation of older pagan ideas. According to these, red-coloured stones were also considered divine and healing, e.g. in Lithuania called “Perkunas’ bullets” (the Baltic equivalent of the Ancient Greek Zeus, the Norse-Germanic Thor, the Slavic Perun, etc.). In addition to curing diseases of the blood and skin, these stones brought good luck and provided protection against natural disasters (ibid., p. 32). Also in antiquity there is a well-known story according to which the so-called Gallic rose was originally white in colour. It only acquired its

intense red colour after it was stained by drops of blood from a wound on the leg of the god Eros or the goddess Aphrodite. Rose petals were precious and used in ancient medicine. They had a wider use, but were mainly used to treat diseases related to the blood and skin – they helped with inflammations, fevers, and also treated burns and various other skin diseases (Rätsch, 2001, p. 242). Pliny, in Book XXI on plants, writes that the rose has an astringent and cooling effect on the human organism, i.e. it quells the inner fire/fever of a person (“boiling”, “inflamed” blood). Bleeding from the wound on the thigh is also stopped by Odysseus with the help of the stopping formula (*The Odyssey*, Book XIX).

### **Spilled blood as a sign of guilt**

Although blood acquires positive properties in archnarratives in the case of (self-)sacrifice and healing (it reconciles gods with humans, ensures the order of the universe, is life-giving for gods, demons and humans), in connection with murder, the spilling of blood for no reason, or when its spilling is motivated by greed, jealousy or lust, it is regarded as the biggest transgression. The death of the victim here amounts to dishonouring and dissipating the divine power, since man was created by the gods (often by sacrificing his own body). Murder is a “loss of spirit” because through this act the murderer also kills a piece of his soul (Souzenelle, 2010, p. 388).

According to religious-mythological ideas, murderers and their victims are linked by a special bond through the blood that the murderer has “on his conscience” or “on his hands”. Blood is thus also proof of guilt. In the Bible, Cain kills Abel and the Lord said: “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.” (Gen, 4:10-11).

A similar motif occurs in folktales. For example, in the French folktale *Bluebeard* (ATU 311) the heroine unlocks a forbidden chamber in which the corpses of her predecessors are hidden. Horified, she drops her key into a pool of blood. She tries to remove the bloodstain left on the key, but to no avail. When Bluebeard arrives home, the bloodied key reveals to him that the heroine has entered the mysterious chamber despite a strict prohibition. In another French folktale from the province of Ille et Vilaine, child murderers try in vain to remove bloodstains from their clothes. In the folktale type ATU 960 *The Sun Brings All to Light*, the character-murderer comes (un)consciously into contact with the bone of his victim, who begins to bleed in his presence. The murderer eventually confesses to his deed or his deed is discovered and he is punished (Ranke, 1979, p. 507).

A variant of the “blood as an indicator of guilt” motif is the motif of the bleeding plant, which often grows out of the victim’s grave, or turns the person who died a violent death directly into a plant. In the epic *Aeneid*, Virgil reports that Hera Aeneas wants to break off a myrtle branch from the grave of the murdered Polydorus, but blood begins to gush from the tree accompanied by plaintive lamentations. In Austrian Carinthia, there is a widespread legend about a girl who is cursed by her mother and turned into a tree (the curse is often recognized as symbolic death in the metaphorical code of the archnarratives): three minstrels hammer the tree-girl because they want to make a violin out of wood, but the tree starts to bleed (Ranke, 1979, p. 507). According to Lithuanian folklore tradition, the blood of the deceased turns into roses (Vaitkevičiene, 2003, p. 21).

Blood can also function as false evidence and falsely incriminate an innocent character. This motif appears frequently in narratives of ATU 451 *The Sister Who Seeks Her Brother*, which is usually contaminated by stories from some fairy tale types about a wrongly accused woman-mother (ATU 706 *The Girl Without Hands*, 712 *Crescentia*). The villain wants to get rid of the heroine, so s/he kills her children. While the innocent woman sleeps, s/he smears her mouth with the children’s blood or hides a bloody knife under her pillow. The next day, the heroine is accused of murdering her children. Either she is about to be executed, or she is mutilated and banished from the kingdom (e.g. Dobšinský’s fairy tale *The Werewolf*, the Norwegian fairy tale *The Twelve Wild Ducks*).

In medieval symbolism, the colour red is associated with blood and acts of violence. Anthroponyms and toponyms associated with this colour take on a negative connotation in the fictional world of chivalric novels and chronicles: place names often refer to places considered dangerous, surnames with the meaning “red” or “reddish” refer either to the red hair of the name’s owner, to his reddened face (a sign of alcoholism, shame or aggression, red emphasizes the bloodthirstiness, cruelty, but also the devilishness of a person), or even to the redness of the person’s face (a sign of alcoholism, shame or aggression) and the red-coloured clothing worn by executioners, butchers and prostitutes.

In the Christian Middle Ages, red was also thought to be the colour of Judas because it supposedly reflected his “redness” - i.e. his red hair, treachery and dishonesty that caused the shedding of Christ’s innocent blood (which contributed to the medieval prejudice that red-haired people were evil, mean or dishonest). A pun was used in Germany at the end of the Middle Ages, according to which the surname Iscariot (a man from Kerioth) is derived from the expression *ist gar rot*, i.e. he is all red (Pastoureau, 2018, p. 181).

In the early Middle Ages, iconographies and illuminations showed martyrs who shed their blood for Christ and their faith, surrounded by a restrained and pure white colour. In the High Middle Ages, however, Cardinal Lothar (later Pope Innocent III), in his *Book on Colours*, already records that white, gradually replaced by red in the Martyr cult, semantically symbolizes blood. In the Christian world, red is still used on some ceremonial props today, symbolically adding to the sacred atmosphere on the feasts of the Apostles and Martyrs, the Feast of the Holy Cross, and the Holy Days of Obligation (ibid., p. 135).

### **Blood as part of taboos and rites of passage**

Blood has always been perceived as an important substance with magical powers, which is why it is strictly taboo in many cultures. Some cultures outright forbid drinking blood, which is also associated with the consumption of blood/raw meat. For example, the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy states: “But be sure you do not eat the blood, because the blood is the life, and you must not eat the life with the meat” (Deut, 12:23). The Qur’an, too, forbids the consumption of blood and sees it as an abomination: “Prohibited to you are dead animals, blood, the flesh of swine” (Sura 5:3).

The motif of blood is also associated with life crises or initiatory performances. In the case of female heroines, it is shed during menstruation, which in the current world was accompanied by various rites of passage and taboos, during the first sexual intercourse or childbirth. The tabooing of menstrual blood is associated with the epiphanies of lunar death (i.e. the cycle of the waxing and waning moon) (Durand, 2022, p. 141). For example, the biblical book of Leviticus details the precautions to be observed during the menstrual period. The African Bambara believe that menstrual blood materializes the impurity of the primordial Witch-Mother Muso-Koroni and causes temporary infertility in women. Among most peoples, sexual intercourse is forbidden during this period, and menstruating women, isolated in huts, are not allowed to touch the food they consume (see Douglas, 2014, for a detailed discussion of this). A similar custom was long held in the first half of the 20th century in some European regions, where farmers forbade menstruating women to touch butter, milk, wine or meat for fear that these foods would spoil or be religiously unclean (Durand, 2022, p. 141).

Related to the metaphorical depiction of virginal bleeding during the wedding night are narratives in which the beastly groom mutilates or kills his first and/or second bride immediately after the wedding, often during the wedding night. For example, in the Italian fairy tale *Il re porco* (‘The Pig King’), Galeotto, the King of England, has a son who is born in the

shape of a pig... or in the Grimm fairy tale *Hans My Hedgehog*, the groom stabs his bride with a skewer. In many narratives, however, the girl's blood does not appear in explicit form, but only in the form of redness (red cheeks, blood-red lips of the heroine, etc.).

In the case of male heroes, blood is also shed during initiation rituals, which involve various forms of mutilation (cutting the skin, knocking out teeth, etc.) or the hunting of a chosen animal (for more on this, see Gennep, 1996 and cf. Turner, 2004). Male blood is further shed in wars or during hunting.

## Conclusion

In the present paper, we have focused our research on the exploration of the motif of blood, as it appears in various forms in all civilizational and cultural areas. The analysis of the genre- and culturally diverse texts from our material sample has helped us to identify in what basic and plot-motif stable forms/patterns this archaic and universal motif appears in ancient culture-forming narratives. Generally, however, blood is ambivalent in ancient culture-making texts – it is often attributed miraculous powers – and can be valorized both positively and negatively.

The positive depictions of blood in archnarratives include the ancient mythologeme of blood as the primordial life-giving precious substance (*materia prima*), which participates in the primordial formation of the world in the so-called mythical time. Closely related to this is the motif of blood as a sacrificial fluid with the ability to reconcile angry, or hungry, exhausted gods or the dead and thus return stability/order to the disrupted structure of the universe. The positive valorization of blood also appears in an extended range of motifs thematizing its healing and protective properties. These are sets of motifs in which blood can heal a sick character or lift the curse from a bewitched character; in sublimated form, blood then has the power to directly revive the dead. Other beneficial and salutary effects of this precious fluid are manifested in its apotropaic (protective) function, where plot-motif schemes appear, e.g. about a hero who, through blood, gains miraculous powers or privileges – invulnerability, understanding of animal speech, access to the underworld, knowledge of the future or existentially important information, etc.

Blood, in its negative aspect, always refers to the cruel and violent acts of malevolent characters, hence it often appears as an unquestionable proof/sign of guilt, i.e. the victim's unjustly spilled blood convicts the perpetrator. Blood is also often seen as impure in cultural-religious contexts and taboos are attached to it, especially in relation to menstrual blood or blood associated with the act of childbirth.

In conclusion, one can claim that the motif of blood is immediately tied to the category of the body and corporeality. Since it is a substance that is found inside the body and is considered a precious life-giving and life-sustaining fluid, its transfusion always corresponds to the actions of characters with expressive qualities such as drasticity, brutality, naturalness (e.g. birth/delivery, sexual intercourse, killing, duel), regardless of whether its positive or negative valorization is indicated at the textual and extra-textual level of the text.

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