



Treatment of Hair and Fingernails among the Indo-Europeans

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Source: *History of Religions*, May, 1977, Vol. 16, No. 4, The Mythic Imagination (May, 1977), pp. 351-362

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1062635>

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Bruce Lincoln

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One of the important lessons that is learned from the study of history of religions is that there is no act so small or insignificant that it can not take on symbolic importance in certain cultures. It is not always an easy task to recognize such symbolically invested action, although the existence of elaborate rules for behavior in a given situation may serve as a valuable clue. And if the identification of such action is sometimes difficult, the interpretation of a given motion, gesture, or ritual is even more delicate.

An interesting example is provided by the extreme care with which hair cuttings and nail parings are treated by numerous peoples throughout the world. This care has often been noted, and two major theories have been propounded during this century to account for it. First, Sir James George Frazer argued that the reason these items of bodily refuse were disposed of so carefully was that, having once been attached to their owner, a sympathetic connection persisted between them and him. A witch or sorcerer could then make use of this connection if one's hair or nails fell into his hands, and accordingly one must destroy them or hide them well in order to prevent this possibility.¹ In Frazer's scheme,

¹ See Sir James George Frazer, "Disposal of Cut Hair and Nails," in *The Golden Bough*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1935), vol. 2, *Taboo and the Perils of the Soul*, pp. 267-87.

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the magical use of hair or nail parings by a sorcerer belonged to "the contagious branch of sympathetic magic," and care in disposal was simply a piece of precautionary action.²

Like most of Frazer's theories, this view has been enormously influential and still finds many adherents,³ but also like most of his theories, it has come under sustained attack and has fallen into disfavor in many circles. One of the most interesting and powerful attacks has come from Mary Douglas in her work, *Purity and Danger*.⁴ There, following the lead of Marcel Mauss, she argues that Frazer created a false dichotomy between magic and religion, that acts assumed by Frazer to be magically motivated—specifically, rules of purity—in fact were religious and rational in nature, and finally that, beneath the religious significance, there lay a social significance.⁵ Specifically, Douglas argues that the body is a powerful model or image which can represent any bounded system and which most often represents society itself. The limits of the body, then, represent the limits of society, the points at which it encounters opposition and danger, and must thus be treated with appropriate care. She writes,

. . . All margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spit, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat. The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins. There is no reason to assume any primacy for the individual's attitude to his own bodily and emotional experience, any more than for his cultural and social experience.⁶

² *Ibid.*, pp. 268, 274 ff.

³ Note, for instance, the way in which classicists have commonly accepted the Frazer theory in dealing with the observances of the Flamen Dialis: for instance, Cyril Bailey, *Phases in the Religion of Ancient Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1932), pp. 26–29; W. Warde Fowler, *The Religious Experience of the Roman People* (London: Macmillan Co., 1933), p. 35; or Jean Bayet, *Histoire politique et psychologique de la religion romaine* (Paris: Editions Payot, 1957), pp. 43, 100.

⁴ For her remarks on Frazer, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 22–28.

⁵ For the social nature of magic, see Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 119–21, 124–34. See also his important review of the first two volumes of the third edition of *The Golden Bough* which appeared in *L'Année sociologique* 12 (1913): 76–79, now reprinted in Mauss's *Oeuvres. 1. Les Fonctions sociales du sacré* (Paris: Editions Minuit, 1968), pp. 154–57. Note Douglas's acknowledgment of her debt to the authors of the French sociological school in her *Natural Symbols* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 11–12.

⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 121.

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Douglas's suggestion is an original and fascinating one and undoubtedly has great applicability in many instances, as does that of Frazer. But given the data which we will consider below, I fear that neither of these theories can account for the way in which hair and nails are treated by the people with whom I have the greatest familiarity, the Proto-Indo-Europeans. Rather, another theory seems more suitable, that which has been advanced by Mircea Eliade.

To the best of my knowledge, Eliade has not taken up the issue of what various people do with their hair and fingernails; yet his general remarks on the nature of ritual provide us with a framework for considering this specific problem:

In the particulars of his conscious behavior, the "primitive," the archaic man, acknowledges no act which has not been previously posited and lived by someone else, some other being who was not a man. What he does has been done before. His life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others.

This conscious repetition of given paradigmatic gestures reveals an original ontology. The crude product of nature, the object fashioned by the industry of man, acquire their reality, their identity, only to the extent of their participation in a transcendent reality. The gesture acquires meaning, reality, solely to the extent to which it repeats a primordial act.⁷

One of the first places we might look in considering the practices of the Indo-Europeans with regard to hair and nails is the Indian rite of a child's first tonsure, the Cūḍākarman, described in the Śaṅkhāyana Gṛhya Sūtra 1.28⁸ and elsewhere. This is performed for a Brahman at the age of one or three, for a Kṣatriya at age five, and for a Vaiśya at age seven. The child's hair is untangled and anointed, and a young Kuśa shoot is placed in it, Kuśa being the sacred grass of ceremonial.⁹ His hair is then shaved with a copper razor and placed in a mound of bull dung mixed with Kuśa grass that has been prepared to receive the hair. Finally, "to the North-east, in a place covered with herbs, or in the neighborhood of water they bury the hairs in the earth."¹⁰

We must note in this description the constant association of the hair with vegetation, first through the insertion of the Kuśa shoot

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1954), p. 5.

⁸ Translated by Hermann Oldenberg in *The Grihya Sūtras* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886-92), 1:55-57.

⁹ See A. A. Macdonell and A. B. Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects* (1912; reprint ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967), 1:173.

¹⁰ Śaṅkhāyana GS 1.28.23, in Oldenberg, 1:57. For similar practices, see Khādīra GS 2.4.31, in Oldenberg, 1:399; Gobhila GS 2.10.26, in Oldenberg, 2:62; and Hiranyakeśin GS 2.2.6.13, in Oldenberg, 2:218.

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in the child's hair, then through the placement of the shorn hair on the mound containing Kuśa grass, and finally through the burial of the hair in the earth "in a place covered with herbs." A similar situation is found among the Romans in the rites associated with the chief priest of Jupiter, the Flamen Dialis, and his wife, the Flaminica. The description of these practices is found in Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 10.15:

1. The ceremonies placed upon the Flamen Dialis are many, and the forbearances are also numerous. . . . 11. No one should cut the hair of the Dialis except a free man. . . . 15. The cuttings of the nails and hair of the Dialis are buried in the earth under a fruitful tree. . . . 26. There are almost the same ceremonies for the Flaminica Dialis; 27. and they say that other different ones are to be observed, 28. for instance, that she is covered with a dyed gown and that in her veil she has the shoot of a fruitful tree.¹¹

Now for the most part, these observances have been treated as "taboos" by scholars who have chosen to comment upon them,¹² but the text allows considerable doubt on this point. Gellius specifically states that he is discussing the ceremonies, the rites (*caerimoniae*) of the Flamen Dialis as well as the avoidances (*castus*) which he must observe, and the question is whether these practices fall under the first category or the second. Recently W. Pötscher has shown that much of what had been assumed to be simply taboo or superstition with regard to the Flamen Dialis is really ritual of the most profound significance,¹³ and Angelo Brelich has argued in favor of seeing the Dialis as the most archaic and in ways the most important of the Roman priests.¹⁴ That the rules surrounding the treatment of the Dialis's hair and nails is not merely some frivolous superstition can be perceived from the fact that similar rules are imposed on the Vestal Virgins, who are also

¹¹ 1. *Caerimoniae impositae flamini Diali multae, item castus multiplices. . . .* 11. *Capillum Dialis, nisi qui liber homo est, non detonset. . . .* 15. *Unguem Dialis et capilli segmina subter arborem felicem terra operiuntur. . . .* 26. *Eaedem ferme caerimoniae sunt flaminicae Dialis; 27. alias seorsum aiunt observitare, 28. veluti est quod venenato operitur et quod in rica surculum de arbore felici habet. . . .*" On the expression *arbor felix*, here translated "fruitful tree," and associated in Rome with a whole system of classification as to whether trees are fruitful or unfruitful, auspicious or inauspicious, see Jacques André, "Arbor felix, arbor infelix," in *Hommages à Jean Bayet*, ed. Marcel Renard and Robert Schilling (Brussels: Collection Latomus, 1964), pp. 35-46.

¹² See n. 3 above. Frazer himself considered the Flamen Dialis as "a striking example" of the taboos placed on priests (p. 13).

¹³ W. Pötscher, "Flamen Dialis," *Mnemosyne* 21 (1968): 215-39. Pötscher's discussion centers on the relations of the Flamen and the Flaminica, seeing them as a model of the *hieros gamos* of heaven and earth.

¹⁴ Angelo Brelich, "Appunti sul Flamen Dialis," *Acta Classica Universitatis Scientiarum Debreceniensis* 8 (1972): 17-21. See esp. p. 19, and note the fact that the form of the name *Dialis* (rather than *Iovialis*) indicates great antiquity.

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among the most important and archaic of the Roman priesthood.¹⁵ Thus Pliny reports in his *Natural History*, 16.235, "Truly, there is a lotus tree in Rome, in the area of Lucina. . . . Now this tree is about 500 years old or older—its age is uncertain—and it is called 'the hairy one' because the hair of the Vestal Virgins is brought to it."¹⁶

Again we have the association of hair with vegetation and, in the case of the Flamen Dialis, nails as well. The practices of the Flamen and Flaminica bear other similarities to the Indian Cūḍākarman also—a shoot is stuck in the Flaminica's hair, just as a shoot is placed in the hair of the young Indian boy; and the hair and nails of the Flamen (and presumably the Flaminica) are buried in the earth, as is the hair of his Indian counterpart. In both the Indian and Roman examples, these practices have been restricted to certain specific situations. The Cūḍākarman is performed only for the first tonsure, and in Rome special care is taken with the hair and nails of only the most important priestly personages. Among the Germans, however, such practices seem to have been more general, and they survive in a number of folkloric practices.

Thus in Oldenburg hair and nails are wrapped in a cloth and fastened under a tree three days before the new moon, to cure infertility.¹⁷ Similarly, in Brandenburg, Düsseldorf, Swabia, and elsewhere, hair and nails are placed in a hole bored in a tree or are placed on a branch. This is often done when one suffers from some sort of pain, and the pain is said to go with these, moving to anyone who comes close to them.¹⁸ It is difficult to evaluate the meaning and importance of such beliefs. Certainly the prescription of such practices as means to cure specific ailments is a different form of behavior from those we have encountered in India and Rome. Yet

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 17. Note that only the Vestales and the Flamines among Roman priests and priestesses were named after the gods they served.

¹⁶ "Romae vero lotos in Lucinae area, . . . haec nunc D circiter annum habet; antiquior, sed incerta eius aetas, quae capillata dicitur, quoniam Vestalium virginum capillus ad eam defertur." On the very special nature of the lotus tree, see Pliny, *Natural History* 22.55: "Those who consider the lotus to be just a tree may actually be refuted on the authority of Homer, for he has called the lotus the most delightful among the plants that grow up beneath the gods . . ." (referring either to the land of the lotus eaters in the *Odyssey* or to *Iliad* 14.348, where Zeus makes a bed of lotus, crocus, and Hyacinth for Hera and himself). "Loton qui arborem putant tantum esse vel Homero auctore coargui possunt. Is enim inter herbas subnascentes deorum voluptati loton primam nominavit. . . ."

¹⁷ Wilhelm Mannhardt, *Germanische Mythen* (Berlin: Ferdinand Schneider, 1858), p. 630.

¹⁸ Adolf Wuttke, *Der deutsche Volksaberglaube der Gegenwart*, 4th ed. (Leipzig: Moritz Ruhl, 1925), p. 330.

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we do again perceive the close association of hair and nails with vegetation, something which we again see in an important Avestan text.

The text in question is Vidēvdāt 17.1–6, where Zarathuštra asks Ahura Mazdā, the Wise Lord, what is the act for which a certain demon, Aoša (literally “burning,” “destruction”) punishes men.¹⁹ The Lord replies,

2. “Truly that, righteous Zarathuštra, when one arranges and cuts his hair and clips his nails and then lets them fall into holes in the earth or into furrows. 3. For by these improprieties, demons come forth, and from these improprieties monsters come forth from the earth which mortals call lice and which devour the grain in the fields and the clothes in the closets. 4. Now when you must arrange and cut your hair and clip your nails in this world, Zarathuštra, hereafter you should bear it ten steps from righteous men, twenty steps from the fire, thirty steps from the water, and fifty steps from the *barəsman* [bundle of sacred twigs] when it is laid out. 5. Then you should dig a pit here, a *dišti* deep in hard soil and a *vitasti* deep in soft soil. To that pit you should bear the cuttings. Then you should pronounce these words, victorious Zarathuštra: ‘Now for me may Mazdā make the plants grow by means of Aša [“Right”].’ 6. You should plow three or six or nine furrows for Xšaθra Vairyā [“Good Dominion”], and you should recite the Ahuna Vairyā prayer three or six or nine times.”²⁰

There is much that is fascinating in this text: the need to carry potentially impure matter away from sources of purification (righteous men, fire, water, and *barəsman*), the use of troughs to mark off sacred space, and the spontaneous production of monsters from hair and nails that are improperly disposed of—a point to

¹⁹ The discussion of the treatment of nails continues in Vidēvdāt 17.7–11 (hereafter cited as Vd.), but this section is obviously a later addition. As we will see, the formula pronounced according to Vd. 17.5 presents a truly archaic ideology, while that of 17.7 is based simply upon a foolish pun, as was recognized by James Darmesteter in *Le Zend Avesta* (1892–93; reprint ed., Paris: Maisonneuve, 1960), 2:238, n. 9. For a less satisfying treatment of these two formulae, see Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, “Two Iranian Incantations for Burying Hair and Nails,” *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay* 8 (1907–9): 557–72. Modi was extremely influenced by the ideas of Frazer, although he was forced to admit (pp. 559, 569) that there was no notion of magicians’ use of hair and nails attested in the Avesta.

²⁰ 2. āaṭ mraoṭ ahurō mazdā. hāu bā ašāum zaraθuštra. yō aētahmai aṅhvō yaṭ astvaiti varəsāesca ḥam.rāzayeiti varəsāesca pairi.barənti sraēca upa.θwərəsənti aθa dim upa.taošayeiti unāhva dim raēšayaca. 3. āaṭ āhva vyarəθāhva zomō daēva ḥam.bavainti. āaṭ āhva vyarəθāhva zomō xrafstra ḥam.bavainti yim mašyāka spiš nāma aojaiti. yim mašyaka yaom yavohva nižgonhənti vastra vastrāhva. 4. āaṭ yaṭ tūm zaraθuštra aētahmi aṅhvō yaṭ astvaiti varəsāesca ḥam. .rāzayaṅuḥa varəsāesca pairi.barənaṅuḥa sraēca upa.θwərəsaṅuḥa. āaṭ tūm pascāeta apa.barōiš dasa.gāim haca nərəbyō ašavabyō vīsata.gāim haca āθraṭ θrisata.gāim haca apaṭ pancāsata.gāim haca barəsman frastairyāṭ. 5. āaṭ aθra maṅm ava.kanōiš dištīm xraoždisme vīstīm varodusme.paiti dim abarōiš. aθa imā vacō framruyā vərəθrayniš zaraθuštra. aṭ ahyāi ašā mazdā urvaṛā vaxšaṭ. 6. xaθrāi vairyāi pairikarəm pairi.kārayōiš tišarō yaṭ vā xšvaš yaṭ vā nava. ahunəmea vairīm frasrāvayōiš tišarō yaṭ vā xšvaš yaṭ vā nava.

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which we shall return. But the heart of this passage lies in the sacred formula that is prescribed in verse 5: "Now for me may Mazdā make the plants grow by means of Aša." This statement is a *maqbra* (Sanskrit *mantra*), a sacred formula filled with efficacy and magicoreligious force. In particular it is a quote from one of Zarathuštra's own hymns (Yasna 48.6c), which has been appropriated, used out of context, and put to a creative new use. In its original context, this line refers to the creation of cattle at the beginning of the world, and the demonstrative pronoun *ahyāi* ("for this one") refers to the cow. Thus Mazdā is said to have created the plants for the well-being of the cattle. But here, taken out of context, the pronoun lacks a referent of any sort and can thus only be assumed to refer back to the speaker himself: "for this one [standing here], that is, for me."²¹ The quotation becomes a spell, a ritual by which the proper disposal of hair and nails leads to the production of vegetation. Again we have the association of hair and nails with the plant world, and again we have the instruction to dispose of hair and nails by burying them in the earth.

The association of hair and plants is also supported by some linguistic evidence related to certain Indo-European families of words. Of particular interest are two sets of words formed from the verbal root **√wel-* ("to cover").²² A number of nouns are formed from this root with the addition of certain suffixes, and two are particularly noteworthy, in that they both display a curious dichotomy of meaning. Thus there existed a Proto-Indo-European (P-I-E) **wol-ko-* from which are formed Avestan *varəsa-*, Old Church Slavonic *vlasъ*, and Russian *volos*, all of which mean "hair," but also Sanskrit *valśa-* ("sprout," "shoot," "twig"). Similarly, from P-I-E **wol-to-* are derived Old Irish *folt*, Welsh *gwallt*, Old Church Slavonic *vladъ*, and Old Russian *volodъ*, all meaning "hair," as well as Cornish *gwels* ("grass"), Old High

²¹ There is one possible objection to this interpretation, which is that the pronoun *ahyāi* is feminine, since in its original context it refers to the cow. However, in that Vd. 17 is one of the most recent portions of the entire Avesta, written at a time when knowledge of the grammatical details of Gathic Avestan had degenerated tremendously, it is doubtful that such a fine point would have been noticed by the author of the passage when he borrowed the Gathic *maqbra*. On this, see A. V. Williams Jackson, *An Avesta Grammar* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1892), pp. xxii-xxiii.

²² There actually are a number of verbs **√wel-* from which these words could be derived, on which see Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1959), pp. 1136-45. I have chosen his 3. **√wel-* ("to cover, press, surround") (p. 1138) as most likely, but derivation from his 8. **√wel-* ("to tear, rend, snatch, rob") might also be possible.

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German and Anglo-Saxon *wald* ("woods"), Old Norse *vǫllr* ("meadow"), and Old Prussian *wolti* ("ear of grain").²³ Here, as in the customs we have treated with above, hair and vegetation are inextricably linked.

This association may be due to any number of morphological similarities. Hair and vegetation both cover surfaces, both are stringy, both continue growing indefinitely as long as their parent organism is alive, and both need to be cut repeatedly. Any and all of these factors could have served as the basis for the homology which was drawn between them. It should be noted that the similarities between hair and vegetation are considerably more numerous and more striking than those between nails and vegetation. Given this and given the fact that the etymological evidence supports only the hair-vegetation connection, I am inclined to believe that nails might not have originally formed an important part of the homology but were added to the picture later, due to their resemblance to hair in some respects.

More important than any morphological resemblance, however, and more important than any etymological connection, there is another basis for the intimate association of hair and vegetation in the Indo-European mind. This is to be found in the creation myth of the Proto-Indo-Europeans. This myth, as I have established elsewhere, told how the world and all the creatures in it were established by the first act of sacrifice. In the primordial offering, the first priest, *Manu ("Man") dismembered the first king, *Yemo ("Twin") and from his body built up the material world.²⁴ Now certain steps in the process of creation were specified in this myth, steps whereby the body of the primordial victim became the world. Thus his skull became the heavens, his eyes the sun and moon, and his blood the seas; and, what is most important for the issue at hand, his hair became the plants and trees,²⁵ as attested to in the following texts:

From Ýmir's flesh
The earth was made,
And from his blood the sea,

²³ See Pokorny, pp. 1139-40; Carl Darling Buck, *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 204.

²⁴ Bruce Lincoln, "The Indo-European Myth of Creation," *History of Religions* 15 (1975): 121-45.

²⁵ Hermann Güntert, *Der arische Weltkönig und Heiland* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1923), p. 329 n., listed five homologies as present in the P-I-E creation myth: earth derived from the flesh of the first victim, sea derived from his sweat or blood, mountains from his bones, clouds from his brains, and trees from his hair.

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The mountains from his bones,
The trees from his hair,
And from his skull, the heaven.

[GRÍMNISMÓL 40]²⁶

Now this is why he [the priest] places the brick of Dürvā grass: the bodily hairs of Prajāpati which were lying on the ground when he had fallen asunder, they became these plants. Now the vital breaths went out from his middle, and when they had passed away he fell dead.

[ŚĀTĀPĀTHA BRĀHMAṆA 7.4.2]²⁷

The mainstream of the Iranian tradition seems to have lost the idea of the homologies between the body of the primordial victim and the parts of the world,²⁸ but in one text this notion is attributed to the arch-heretic Mani:

8. Again, he states this, that the worldly existence is a bodily formation of rudiments of Aharman; 9. the bodily formation being a production of Aharman. 10. And a repetition of that statement is this, that the sky is from the skin, 11. the earth from the flesh, 12. the mountains from the bones, 13. and the trees from the hair of the demon Kuni.

[ŚIKAND-GŪMANĪK VIKĀR 16.8–13]²⁹

Another trace of this archaic theory is found in an eschatological passage, *Bundahišn* 30.6. Here, as is often the case with eschatology, we see the cosmogony reversed. The context is that Ōhrmazd (< Avestan Ahura Mazdā) is explaining why bodily resurrection is possible:

“Observe that, when that which was not was then produced [referring to the preceding discussion of the creation], why is it not possible to produce again that which was? For at that time [the end] one will demand the bone from the spirit of earth, the blood from the water, the hair from the plants, and the life from fire, since they were delivered to them in the original creation.”³⁰

In the P-I-E view, the world was unformed at the beginning of time, and the earth had none of its defining characteristics. These were only produced as a result of the first sacrifice when they came into being from *Yemo’s body. Like the other physical features of the world, plant life appeared at that time, being formed from the hair of the primordial victim. But we must note that the creative drama did not establish the world for all time; rather, it was

²⁶ “Ór Ýmis holdi / var jorð um sköpuð, / en ór sveita saer, / björg ór beinum, / baðmr ór hári, / en ór hausi himinn.”

²⁷ “yaddeva dūrveṣṭakāmupadadhāti / prajāpatevisrastasya yāni lomāny asīyanta tā imā ośadhayo ’bhavannathāsmāt prāṇo madhyata udakrāmantasminnutkrānte ’padyata.”

²⁸ Lincoln, p. 128, n. 28.

²⁹ Translation by E. W. West, *Pahlavi Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1880–97), 3: 243–44.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:122–23.

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necessary to reestablish it repeatedly, and each sacrifice was seen as an act that repeated the cosmogony.³¹

Sacrifice is, of course, a major act and was the most important ritual of the Indo-Europeans. But other acts which seem relatively insignificant by comparison were also understood to be nothing less than repetitions of the cosmogony or at least of parts thereof. We have seen that this was the case with the disposal of hair cuttings and perhaps of nail pairing, which are seen to further the life of vegetation in myth and in ritual. When one buries his hair in the ground according to the sacred rules, he repeats the act of creation; he is projected back to the time of the beginnings and becomes like the first victim, whose body supplied all the raw material for creation.

All this is accomplished when proper care is taken with the disposal of one's hair and nails. But we must also note that when such care is not taken—when disposal is not a ritual and does not repeat the acts of a mythic model—the reverse can be the effect. For if proper disposal serves to create the cosmos, then improper disposal can de-create it or, to put it negatively, can serve to create chaos out of cosmos. This was seen in the Avestan text which we considered above, where Ahura Mazdā warned that demons (*daēvas*) and monsters (*xrafstras*) would spring from hair and nails that were let fall to earth without the proper ritual; and an Eddic text contains a similar idea:

. . . Then [at the time of Ragnarok] the Fenris wolf is loosed, and the high sea dashes upon the land, for the Midgard serpent turns about with a giant's rage and assails the land. Then it happens that the ship which they call Naglfar is loosed. It is built from the nails of dead men, and therefore it is worthy of a warning: if a man dies with uncut nails, then he increases the material for the ship Naglfar greatly, which gods and men would wish to be slow in being built. And in this wave, Naglfar becomes seagoing, and the giant who steers Naglfar is called Hrym. [*GYLFAGINNING* 55]³²

The specific image of Naglfar, the "Nail-ship,"³³ is undoubtedly specific to the Germanic world, although it does date to a fairly

³¹ Lincoln, pp. 144-45.

³² ". . . þá verðr Fenrisúlfr lauss; þá geysist hafit á lönðin fyrir ví, þat þá snýst Miðgardsormr í jötunmóð, ok sækir upp á landit; þá verðr ok, at Naglfar losnar, skip þat, er svá heitir; þat er gjört af nøglum dauðra manna; ok er þat fyrir því varnana vert, ef maðr deyr með óskornum nøglum, at sá maðr eykr mikit efni til skipsins Naglfars, er goðin ok menn vildi seint at gjört yrði. Enn í þessum saefargang flýtr Naglfar. Hrymr heitir jötunn, er stýrir Naglfara."

³³ There has been some dispute over this etymology. Thus Adolf Noreen, *Altisländische und Altnorwegische Grammatik* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1892), p. 143, argued that *nagl-* does not have its normal meaning of "nail" in this compound but, rather, is a variant form of Old Norse *nár* ("corpse"), corresponding to the Greek *vékus* and Gothic *naus*, all being derived from a P-I-E **nok-w-i-*. In his

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ancient date within that area.³⁴ But the basic idea on which it is based—that the improper disposal of hair or nails is an act which threatens the well-being of the cosmos—does ascend to the Indo-European period, as can be seen from the comparison with Iran.

We are thus led to conclude that the care which the Indo-Europeans took with their cut hair and their nail trimmings was not due to a desire to protect themselves from the possibility of their being used by a magician, as Frazer would have it. Neither were they protecting the borders of their society in symbolic fashion, although Douglas might argue that this was present at some culturally unconscious level. What is clear, however, is that there was a very real and very conscious symbolic motive at work; that the Proto-Indo-European who buried his hair and perhaps his nails in a place covered with grass, under a fruitful tree, or with a prayer for the growth of the vegetation felt himself to be participating in the cosmogonic drama, recreating the very world with this simple gesture and reestablishing the order on which life depends. A common act has been raised to a level at which it assumes great importance, and through its association to the creation myth it is invested with meaning.

Such a state of affairs may seem strange to us, but it is a familiar pattern in the thought of archaic, traditional, or “primitive” peoples, as Eliade has so brilliantly recognized and so richly

view, the story of the nail-ship was simply a folk etymology, and the original sense was of a “ship of the dead.” This explanation has been accepted by Jan de Vries, *Altnordische etymologische Wörterbuch* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), p. 404, and *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2d ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1956), 1:285. The derivation of *naus* from **nok-w-i-*, on which this analysis depends, has been soundly rejected by Sigmund Feist, *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der gotischen Sprache* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1909), p. 372; and Albert Morley Sturtevant (“Etymological Comments on Certain Words and Names in the Elder Edda,” *PMLA* 66 [1951]: 279–81) has also pointed to major difficulties in the Noreen thesis, the chief of which is that whenever Old Norse *nár-* (“corpse”) appears in a compound, it always appears as *ná-* (thus, e.g., *ná-bjargir* [“the last service to the dead”]; *ná-gráðugr* [“corpse greedy”] and *ná-grindr* [“the gates of the dead”]), never as *nagl-*. Given this, there is no reason whatever to content that *nagl-* does not have its usual meaning of “nail” and that *Naglfar* is anything other than the nail-ship, just as Snorri describes it.

³⁴ Snorri’s is the only description which we have of *Naglfar*, but the ship is also mentioned in the Elder Edda, *Völuspá* 50. If the interpretation offered above in n. 33 is correct, the idea of the nail-ship must date back to a considerably earlier age, as the *Völuspá* contains some of the most ancient of Norse materials. The belief in a nail-ship is well attested to throughout Scandinavia, on which see Axel Olrik, *Ragnarök: Die Sagen vom Weltuntergang* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1922), pp. 72–73; and Kaarle Krohn, “Das Schiff Naglfar,” *Finnisch-Ugrische Forschungen* 12 (1912): 154–55. Attempts to show an Indo-European origin, however, such as those of Kaarle Krohn, “Zum schiffe Naglfar,” *Finnisch-Ugrische Forschungen* 12 (1912): 317–20, and Elard Hugo Meyer, *Völuspá: Eine Untersuchung* (Berlin: Meyer & Müller, 1889), pp. 195 ff., have been singularly unsuccessful.

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documented. He has taught us to look for meaning in unfamiliar places, to appreciate the subtleties of myth, and to perceive some of the myriad ways in which people have sought to bring meaning into their lives.

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