Herman Wirth’s Theory of Civilization

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The Cultural Circle of Thule

Bachofen’s idea of primordial matriarchy and his theory of “cultural circles” were developed by another historian, archaeologist, and specialist in paleo-epigraphy, Herman Wirth (1885-1981).

Wirth’s theories are based on the hypothesis borrowed from the Indian author Bala Gandhara Tilak (1856-1920) [1], that the original Proto-Indo-European civilization was formed in the late Paleolithic (the Aurignacian culture) in the lands of the Northern polar circle. This hypothesis was based on the interpretation of the data of Indian astrology, Vedic texts, and the myths of the Hindus, Iranians, and Greeks which speak of the existence in remote antiquity of a populated country lying in the Far North (Hyperborea). This continent was described in the Vedas as the “land of the white boar”, Varahi, and the “island of light”, or Sweta Dvipa. The Zoroastrian tradition speaks of the ancient abode of the first man, the city of Vara, located in the Far North, from which he was forced to descend southwards as the dark deity Angra Mainyu, the enemy of the god of light, Ahura-Mazda, unleashed a “great cold” across these lands. Tilak argues for the existence of this “Nordic” proto-civilization on the basis of Indian astrology, the symbolism of which, according to Tilak, becomes clear only if we accept that the constellations were originally observed in the circumpolar regions, where the day of the gods is equal to the year of men.

Wirth adopted this hypothesis and constructed his own theory upon it, the “Hyperborean theory” [2] or theory of the “cultural circle of Thule” [3], which represents the Greek name for the mythical city lying in the country of the Hyperboreans. According to this theory, before the latest wave of global cooling, the circumpolar zone in the North Atlantic Ocean was home to inhabitable lands whose inhabitants were the creators of a primordial cultural code. This culture was formed under conditions when the natural environment of the Arctic was not yet so harsh, and when its climate was similar to the modern temperate Central European climate. There were present all the annual and atmospheric phenomena which can be observed in the Arctic today: the Arctic day and Arctic night. The yearly solar and lunar cycles of the Arctic are structured differently than their counterparts in middle-range latitudes. Thus, the symbolic fixations of the calendar, the trajectory of the sun, the moon, and the constellations of the zodiac necessarily had a different form and different patterns.

On the basis of an enormous swathe of archaeological, paleo-epigraphical (cave paintings, Paleolithic symbols, ancient carvings, etc.), mythological, and philological material, Herman Wirth undertook an attempt to reconstruct the primordial system of this Arctic proto-civilization’s cultural code. At its heart he put the reconstructed proto-calendar, the last traces of which Wirth believed are constituted by the Scandinavian runes, which he attributed to remote antiquity. Wirth proposed to examine this calendar, which records the key moments of the Arctic year, as the key to all later versions of mythological, religious, ritualistic, artistic, and philosophical heritages which continued and developed this primordial algorithm over the course of the wave-like migrations of the bearers of “Thulean culture” into the southern regions. When applied to other climatic conditions, however, many of the symbolic patterns of this calendar, otherwise crystal clear in the Arctic, lost their meaning and rationale. They were partially transferred to new realities, partially frozen as relics, and partially lost their meanings or acquired new ones.

First and foremost, this change entailed a fundamentally new understanding of the basic unit of time: instead of the Hyperborean day, equal to a year, the daily circle, which is much more clearly defined in the regions south of the polar circle, became the measure of events of human life. What is more, the localizing points of the spring and autumn equinoxes changed in relation to southward movement. All of this gradually confused the crystal clarity and simplicity of the primordial matrix.

Wirth believed that his reconstruction of the sacred complex of the culture of Thule lay at the heart of all historical types of writing and language, as well as musical tones, the symbolism of colors, ritual gestures, burials, religious complexes, etc.

Studying this culture formed the basis of Wirth’s attempts at reconstructing what he called the “proto-writing” or “proto-script” of humanity. Wirth published the results of his studies in two monumental works, Der Aufgang der Menschheit (The Emergence of Mankind) [4] and Die Heilige Urschrift der Menschheit (The Sacred Proto-Script of Mankind) [5], both equipped with an enormous lot of synoptic tables, comparative illustrations of archaeological excavations, writing systems, etc.

Nordic matriarchy

Wirth embraced Bachofen’s notion of primordial matriarchy and attributed to the “Thule culture” a matriarchal form of civilization. He suggested that the belief that the female gender is inclined towards materiality, corporeality, chthonicity, and empirical specifics is purely a product of patriarchal censorship, and that matriarchy could be no less, indeed even more of a spiritual phenomenon than patriarchy. Wirth believed that societies dominated by women and female priesthoods, religions, and cults represented the more advanced types of Hyperborean culture, which he termed the “culture of White Ladies” (weisse Frauen).

Wirth thus presented an altogether peculiar view on the relationship between matriarchy and patriarchy in the archaic culture of the Mediterranean region. In his point of view, the most ancient forms of culture in the Mediterranean were those established by bearers of the Hyperborean matriarchy, who in several stages descended from the circumpolar regions, from the North Atlantic, by sea (and that ships with shamrocks on the stern were characteristic of them). These were the people mentioned in ancient Near Eastern artifacts as the “sea-peoples”, or am-uru, hence the ethnic name of the Amorites. The name Mo-uru, according to Wirth, once belonged to the very main center of the Hyperboreans, but was transmitted along with the natives of the North in their migration waves to new sacred centers. It is to these waves that we owe the Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian (whose pre-dynastic writing was linear), Hittite-Hurrian, Minoan, Mycenaean, and Pelasgian cultures. All of these Hyperborean strata were structured around the figure of the White Priestess.

Patriarchy, according to Wirth, was brought by immigrants from Asia, from the steppe zones of Turan, who distorted the primordial Hyperborean tradition and imposed upon the Mediterranean cultures quite different – rude, violent, aggressive, and utilitarian -values which contrasted (for worse) the pure spiritual forms of the Nordic matriarchy.

Thus, in Wirth we have the following reconstruction: the Hyperborean cultural circle’s primordial, spiritual and highly-developed type of matriarchal culture spread from a circumpolar center, mainly be sea, penetrating the Mediterranean, scraping Africa, and even reaching the southern coast of Asia all the way down to Polynesia, where the Maori culture still retains traces of the ancient Arctic tradition. Another offshoot of the center of Mo-uru in the North Atlantic migrated to North America, where it laid the foundations of the cultural code of many tribes. One of Wirth’s undertakings was to demonstrate a homology between these two branches that dispersed out of the culture of Thule – the European, Mediterranean, and further African and Pacific on the one hand, and the North-American on the other.[6]

Meanwhile, in continental Asia there formed a cultural pole which represented the embryo of proto-patriarchy. Wirth associated this culture with crude naturalism, phallic cults, and a martial, aggressive, and utilitarian type of culture, which Wirth believed to be lower and Asian. We have devoted a whole separate volume to a more detailed outline of Herman Wirth’s views.[7]

The significance of Wirth’s ideas to geosophy

Many aspects of Herman Wirth’s unjustly forgotten works deserve attention in the study of plural anthropology. First of all, his extremely fertile hypothesis of the cultural circle of Thule, which is usually discarded from the outset without any careful analysis of his argumentation, is so rich that it deserves serious attention in itself. If such an hypothesis allows for the resolution of such numerous historical and archaeological problems associated with the history of symbols, signs, myths, rituals, hieroglyphs, the calendar, writing, and the most ancient views of the structure of space and time, then this alone is enough to warrant thorough inquiry. Even though Wirth’s works contain many claims which seem either unequivocally wrong or highly controversial, we can set them aside and try to understand the essence of his theory which, in our opinion, is an extraordinarily constructive version that expands our understanding of the archaic epochs of the ancient history of mankind. The theory of the cultural circle of Thule need not be unconditionally accepted, but an assessment of its interpretive potential is necessary.

Secondly, Wirth’s positive appraisal of matriarchy is extremely interesting and adds weight to sympathy for Bachofen. Indeed, we are dealing with an interpretation of a conditionally reconstructed matriarchal civilization from the position of what is the, in the very least nominal, patriarchy to which our society has become accustomed. Wirth proposes an alternative interpretation of the female Logos, an attempt to view the Logos of the Great Mother through different eyes. This is also an extremely unconventional and fertile proposal.

Thirdly, in Wirth’s theories we can see clear analogues to the reconstructions of both Spengler and Frobenius. If Frobenius and especially Spengler took the side of Indo-European (Turanian, Eurasian) culture, i.e., the side of patriarchy as they interpreted it, then Wirth proposes to look at things from the standpoint of the civilization of the White Ladies, i.e., from the position of the primordial Mediterranean culture that preceded the invasion of the “people on war chariots.”

Footnotes:

[1] Tilak, B.G., Arkticheskaiia rodina v Vedakh (Moscow: FAIR-PRESS, 2001). In English: Tilak, B.G., The Arctic Home in the Vedas: Being Also a New Key to the Interpretation of Many Vedic Texts and Legends (Poona City: Tilak Bros, 1903).

[2] Dugin, A.G., Znaki Velikogo Norda: Giperboreiskaiia Teoriia (Moscow: Veche, 2008). English translation of introduction available here.

[3] Wirth, H., Khronika Ura-Linda. Drevneishaiia istoriia Evropy (Moscow: Veche, 2007). In German: Wirth, Herman. Die Ura-Linda Chronik (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1933).

[4] Wirth, H., Der Aufgang der Menschheit. Forschungen zur Geschichte der Religion, Symbolik und Schrift der atlantisch-nordischen Rasse (Jena: Diederichs, 1928).

[5] Wirth, H., Die Heilige Urschrift der Menschheit. Symbolgeschichtliche Untersuchungen diesseits und jenseits des Nordatlantik (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1936).

[6] The full title of Wirth’s Die Heilige Urschrift der Menschheit specifies “on both sides of the North Atlantic.” See footnote 5.

[7] See footnote 2.