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Historical Myth: Definition, Formation, Transformation (Theoretical Aspect)

Abstract: The relevance of the problem of theorising historical myth and derivative concepts is due to the widespread use of this terminology in the modern information space. At the same time, society has formed an erroneous interpretation of historical myths based on their identification with fairy tales, fables, and lies in the broadest sense. The study object was theoretical discussions on the definition of historical myth, mechanisms of its formation and transformation. Within the framework of the publication the study purpose was realised by solving the following research tasks: analyse the main approaches dominating in the world humanities in relation to the definition of the concept of “myth”; identify the interrelationships between the definitions of “history” and “myth”; outline the key stages of the formation of the historical myth, its functions and typology. The theoretical and methodological tools of the study are based on an analytical and synthetic analysis of scientific publications by authors who have dealt with the theorisation of historical myth and related concepts. The article states the continuity of discussions on the definition and correlation of the concepts of “historical/historiographical myth” and the need to involve a wide range of specialists from a number of other disciplines. At the same time, it is emphasised that a noticeable intensification of theoretical research on the problems of defining historical myth is associated with the cultural and anthropological turn in the humanities and the influence of French analysts. The author also clarifies the content of the concepts of “modern myth” and “national myth”.

Keywords: historical myth, national myth, modern myth, narrative, historiosophy, neo-Kantianism, cultural anthropology.

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Історичний міф: визначення, формування, трансформація (теоретичний аспект)

Анотація: Актуальність проблеми теоретизації історичного міфу та похідних понять обумовлена широким побутуванням означеної термінології у сучасному інформаційному просторі. Водночас, у суспільстві сформувалося хибне тлумачення історичних міфів, засноване на отождествленні їх з казками, байками, неправдою у широкому розумінні. Об'єктом пропонованої статті є теоретичні дискусії щодо дефініції історичного міфу, механізмів його формування та трансформації. У рамках публікації мета була реалізована шляхом вирішення наступних дослідницьких завдань: проаналізувати основні підходи, що домінують у світовій гуманістиці по відношенню до

визначення концепту «міф»; виявити взаємозв'язки між дефініціями «історія» та «міф»; окреслити ключові етапи формування історичного міфу, його функції та типологію. Теоретико-методологічний інструментарій дослідження заснований на аналітико-синтетичному аналізі наукових публікацій авторів, що займалися проблематикою теоретизації історичного міфу та пов'язаних з ним понять. У рамках статті констатовано тяглість дискусій щодо визначення та співвідношення понять «історичний/історіографічний міф» та потребу залучення широкого кола фахівців ряду інших дисциплін. Водночас, підкреслюється, що помітна активізація теоретичних студій над проблемами дефініювання історичного міфу пов'язана з культурно-антропологічним зворотом у гуманітарних науках та впливом французьких аналістів. Також з'ясовано змістовне наповнення концептів «сучасний міф» та «національний міф».

Ключові слова: історичний міф, національний міф, сучасний міф, наратив, історіософія, неокантіанство, культура антропологія.

Introduction

In everyday life, society is increasingly confronted with the problems of the theory and philosophy of historical science, which is caused by the rapid development of the information society, the activation of public intellectuals and “opinion leaders” of various kinds, which in turn is a consequence of the aggravation of the global socio-political crisis. On the pages of popular publications and in blog posts, the average reader constantly encounters such definitions as “narrative”, “historical memory”, “historical myth”, etc., which are not clearly understood not only by society, but also sometimes in academic circles. There is a lack of comprehensive, generalising studies of an overview nature that would fill in certain terminological gaps.

The study object is the theoretical framework of the concept of “historical myth”.

The study purpose is to analyse the process of theorising the “historical myth” concept and a number of its derived definitions.

The proposed purpose can be achieved by solving the following research tasks, which in general terms determine the article structure:

- trace the evolution of the definition of “myth”;
- establish the relationship between the concepts of “history” and “myth”;
- determine the main stages of formation of the historical myth, its functions and typology.

In terms of methodology, the study is primarily based on an analytical and synthetic analysis of scientific publications by authors who have dealt with the theorisation of historical myths and related concepts.

Even in the last few years, a huge number of monographic studies of the problems of historical myth theory have appeared, both in general works and works that highlight individual national or contemporary historical myths in their development. It is impossible to ignore the research of Jacques Pauwels, who set out to give an overview of the seven most common myths of world history of the 18th to 20th centuries and to trace the context of their use at the present stage ([Pauwels, 2022](#)). More theoretical is the work of John Karabelas, who summarises information on the relationship between history and mythology, considering myth as a representation of a specific historical experience ([Karabelas, 2023](#)). The issue of mythologising history is quite common in Polish historiography. Leaving aside the well-known works of Jerzy Topolski and Jerzy Maternicki, to which we will refer in the main part of the article, it is worth

mentioning the study of national myths by Magdalena Reksć, where she referred to the experience of the countries of the former Yugoslavia ([Reksć, 2013](#)), just like the classic monograph *History and Myth* by Jerzy Roniker, who outlined both the theoretical side of the problem and provided specific examples of the mythologisation of Polish history ([Roniker, 2002](#)).

Results

Myth: The Problem of Definitions

A universal task faced by the researcher of the mythologisation of history is the problem of defining the “myth” category, which, despite its widespread use in many fields of knowledge, began to be actively studied only in the mid-twentieth century. Defining myth is a complex and multidimensional problem. The definition of this term directly depends on the discipline concerning which it is defined. Attention to the processes of mythologisation is related to the fact that it is inherent in both primitive thinking and leading intellectual concepts. Myth is an integral part of human life, which we encounter daily. It is worth emphasising at the outset that myth is a cultural phenomenon, as most theorists of this concept have written about, so the processes of mythologisation directly depend on the cultural superstructure within which they occur.

Thus, it is worth stating that there is no single definition of the “myth” concept today, and scholars are dealing with a multivalent concept. Researchers have long since moved away from the definition of myth as a sacred narrative that attempts to explain the origin of nature, the world, and humans. We can use this definition only when it comes to the religions of the ancient world.

To begin with, we need to turn to every day realities since the term “myth” is used very often in real life, and society has a completely wrong understanding of this concept. One of the well-known Ukrainian myth theorists, Viacheslav Artyukh, draws attention to this problem. Artyukh wrote that in everyday life, myth is often identified with a fairy tale, which results in the most popular interpretation of the concept of “myth”—it is a pre-existing false story about the past that cannot be verified by evidence from available sources. The only thing noteworthy in this simple definition, and to which we will refer repeatedly, is that a myth is really a story (narrative, semantic construction) ([Artiukh, 2021](#)).

The development of the concept of myth is closely related to the progress of the social sciences, especially ethnography, ethnology, cultural anthropology, sociology, etc. In particular, C. Jung, E. Cassirer, C. Lévi-Strauss and others have contributed to the problem of myth theorisation. Each of these scholars defined myth according to the subject of their research. Given the complexity and multifaceted nature of the definition of “myth”, the American scholar Ivan Strenski wrote that myth is both everything and nothing ([Strenski, 1987, p. 3](#)). The aforementioned neo-Kantian E. Cassirer continued this idea but did not support Strenski’s meaningless and vague definition since with this approach, any theoretical concept can be defined as “anything” ([Topolski, 1998, p. 57](#)).

However, the American anthropologist Joseph Campbell in his *The Power of Myth* gave the most original and apt definition of the myth concept. Campbell wrote that society lives in myth and has nothing outside of myth ([Campbell, 1988, p. 78](#)). The Italian historian Carlo

Ginzburg associated myth with culture in a broad sense, arguing that myth is the culture of a particular era, which forms a kind of cage around an individual, beyond which it is almost impossible to go without breaking with this culture. Therefore, the culture of an era is a kind of filter through which a person observes the world (*Ginzburg, 1992, p. 17*).

Myth and History: Correlation of Concepts

Most scholars who have dealt with the theoretical aspects of myth have noted its strong connection with history, which is the background on which mythic narrative develops. One of the main features of myth is its constant references to the historical past, usually to a specific historical event. However, this intertwining of mythic narrative and history does not mean that myth reproduces what happened but rather the opposite. A mythical narrative provides a distorted image of historical realities—most often overly embellished and hyperbolic. Public and political leaders who try to find motives for their actions in past events very often rely not on historical facts but on their mythologised version. For example, let us recall the mutual hostility between Serbs and Albanians. For Serbs, the latter became the reincarnation of the Turks, the outsiders who once threatened the existence of Serbian statehood. Serbian leaders often forgot that in the famous Battle of Kosovo, Serbs and Albanians fought on the same side against the Turks (*Reksić, 2013, pp. 52-53*).

The French Annales school works particularly widespread the “historical myth” concept. This school used the historical myth concept in the sense considered by cultural anthropology of the time. For example, Lucien Febvre noted that historians, for the most part, are mainly engaged in adapting their statements to the historical periods they study. Thus, each historical epoch creates its intellectual universe, its understanding of the historical periods that came before it. Febvre wrote that each period of history had its understanding of Ancient Rome, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (*Febvre, 1982, pp. 3–7*). To paraphrase L. Febvre, historical myth can be understood as a specific form of perception of the past, distorted by the influence of the surrounding reality.

When analysing the problem of theorising the concept of historical myth, it is impossible to ignore the views of the classic Polish historiographer Jerzy Topolski. Topolski considered myth as a sacralised form of knowledge that is established and not subject to criticism. At the same time, myth is a surrounding reality reflection (*Topolski, 1996, pp. 204–207*). For J. Topolski, myth and science are very closely linked. Therefore, myth occupies one of the leading places in historiography. Following L. Febvre, the Polish historiography theoretician wrote that every historian writes history from the viewpoint of standards and moral norms of his or her time. For both Febvre and Topolski, a historian is not someone who knows the past but someone trying to find this knowledge under the layers of later attempts at mythologisation (*Topolski, 2012*).

Formation of Historical Myth, Its Functions and Typology

In the work, the author will adhere to some compromises in defining the “historical myth” concept. Firstly, we should equate the concepts of “history” and “narrative” since we will perceive history as a reflection of the existing reality shaped by many external factors. In other words, in this article, we refer to history as a subjective version of events rather than an objective one. Thus, we can consider the “narrative myth” and “historical/historiographical myth”

concepts to be identical, defining the latter as knowledge that is not generally recognised in the scientific community, exists in the mind of the researcher, and is retransmitted by him/her in his/her works. It is how one sacralises knowledge and forms a construct associated with factual or symbolic truth.

From the historiosophical viewpoint, the historical narrative has two levels: theoretical and ideological (deeper, the main core of the narrative) and logical and grammatical (superficial, informative). Historiographical myths are formed at the theoretical and ideological levels and directly influence the content of the informative level of the historical narrative. Society faces the mythologisation of history when a scientist loses control over the narrative or deliberately begins to deviate from the principles of scientific objectivity (*Topolski, 2012*).

Western history theorists have often addressed the construction of myths and stereotypes in their research, trying to find the causes for their emergence. In particular, French historian Daniel Beauvois believes that individuals or strata of society need some masks to justify their behaviour or to impose their standards of thinking on others. Cassirer wrote that some ritual and repetition must fix every myth to exist. A myth can decay without cyclical renewal—it goes out of circulation in society or, most often, changes its form. The scientist believed that every myth cannot exist beyond the belief in it. Thus, developing Cassirer's thesis, we can say of living and dead myths (*Chekan, 2011*).

If we turn to historiographical practice, it is easy to identify the main function of myth. It is the core binding the historical narrative, gives it meaning and defines its main message. In this way, the historian's position becomes a coherent structure from the viewpoint of narrative line, chronology, or structure. Myth can guide historians' narrative strategies but it is not a prerequisite. In other words, if a historian aims to create a coherent narrative about the past, he or she must be guided by some position that will organise his or her thoughts and serve as the cement that will bind the foundation of the historical narrative. It is the leading position influencing the process of selecting facts and examples intended to illustrate the conceptual statements of the historical narrative (*Topolski, 2012*).

From the viewpoint of the typology of historical myths, it is more or less generally accepted to divide them into national and modern ones. In the national myth, the nation is perceived not as a category we are used to but as a definition of some idea that is inherent in some process extended over time. As an example of such a national myth, V. Artyukh cited the use of the "Ukraine" definition for the Old Russian times, the Middle Ages and the twentieth century. In other words, it is a national myth that aims to demonstrate the historical continuity and continuity of statehood on the Ukrainian lands. At the same time, the nation is perceived as some spirit present in each individual, where all together constitute a collective nation. Similar national myths in one form or another existed in the mid-seventeenth century and then were clearly seen in the works of Taras Shevchenko.

The national myth is the closest concept in the viewpoint of meaning to the everyday understanding of myth, as it has a pronounced sacred component. In the so-called modern historical myths, this component is not traced. Instead, in modern myths, one can observe a clear link to several historical facts or places of memory that are important in the nation-building context (the already mentioned Kosovo Field). While national myths appeal to the spiritual level

of past perception, modern myths appeal to the corporeal level. They sacralise not ghostly substances but specific places, objects, and facts (*Artiukh, 2021*).

Discussion

Discussions about the form and content of the concept of historical myth have never stopped, both in the theoretical plane and on the example of specific historical problems. It is necessary to emphasise the tendency of researchers to generalise the meaninglessness of the definition because the provision of a formal definition does not affect the study of the content of the semantic construct itself. However, in our opinion, a clear theorisation of historical myth will allow us to draw a clear line and establish the relationship between historical narrative and historical myth.

The problem of the theory of historical myth has broad prospects for further research. In particular, it is necessary to resolve the interdependence of historiographical and historical myth issue and terminate the debate on the identity of these two concepts. Scholars' attention is worth drawing to the study of individual examples of historical myths, analysis of their development over time, and identification of the dominant factors that influenced the form, content and functions of a particular myth. It is also necessary to pay attention to the role of historical myths in shaping the policy of memory, national identity, the pantheon of national heroes, etc.

Conclusion

Thus, the problem of unambiguously defining historical myth remains unresolved to this day despite the constant attention of scholars to this fundamental, interdisciplinary topic. In addition, the problem of mythologising history is closely related to another issue still considered open – the definition of the concepts of “narrative” and “historical/historiographical narrative”. The problem lies in the dominant stereotypical ideas about the concept of myth at the everyday level, associated with lies, fiction, fables, etc. The study of myth in the sense of a semantic construction has intensified only since the mid-20th century, caused by the spread of the advanced ideas of French analysts and later postmodernists.

The general form of defining myth as everything and nothing at the same time proposed by some researchers (I. Stretensky, D. Campbell) seems to us to be a false path that only fills a specific definition with a meaningless sense. L. Febvre's definition of historical myth as a specific perception of historical reality form, modified to suit a particular socio-political situation, is much more acceptable.

The cultural and anthropological turn in historiosophical research has shifted the focus from the very understanding of myth to the problem of its deconstruction. Studies devoted to the detailed study of individual myths and their transformation in public consciousness, literature, and historiography have become widespread. It is a paradox that the greatest historical myths in human history were created by historians who tried to weave their historiographical narrative into the fabric of the dominant socio-political situation. The myth-making process is virtually uninterrupted and is actively continuing in our time, so the issue of the theoretical framework of historical myth requires further study in both general and specific historical formats.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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