

*Sacred Texts and Ritual Practices:
Catalogues as a Structural Component in the Most Ancient Indo-European Traditions*

Lecture by Prof. Dr. Velizar Sadovski (Austrian Academy of Sciences)
Rectorate of Sofia University, Hall 1
April 7, 2026, 6:00 p.m.

This talk consists of three major sections. After a brief introduction to the value of poetic lists, catalogues and taxonomies as cognitive and literary structures in the cultures of the ancient Near East – Sumeric, Eblaite, Babylonian, Aramaic and Hebrew –, the first part of the paper discusses ritual taxonomies as a fundamental form in various Indo-European traditions of religious poetry and pragmatics, spanning from ancient India and Iran, through Greece and Rome, to the Germanic and Celtic shores. This section shall discuss a number of sacred texts and ritual practices as transmitted by well-known pre-classical (Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, archaic Roman prayers and hymns) and classical Greek and Latin literature together with less-known representatives of (oral and written) ritual and hymnal poetry of other ancient Indo-European traditions such as the ones of the Old Indian ritual poetry and prose from the Rig-, Atharva- and Yajur-Veda, the Gāthīc and Young Avestan hymns and liturgies, the Old Norse Eddas, the Old Irish Triadic hymns and St. Patrick's Breastplate Poem, Armenian lyro-epic songs of the Birth of the Hero, Anatolian King's Lists and sacred laws etc. – highly intriguing *disiecta membra* of a large Indo-European mythopoetic and ritual database but also of heroic narratives with heuristic significance for the cultural reconstruction and the possibility of reconstruction of formulae and contexts of common relevance, with theological, cosmological and anthropological significance.

In the second part of the talk, the analysis will continue with theogony and cosmogony, focusing on the 'creation lists' as poetic (meta-)forms of classification and systematic representation of the Universe through the ekphrastic description of the various sacred components of the macrocosm. It will then move on to genealogical lists as a mytho-poetical pattern for the vertical, cause-oriented, 'etymological' presentation of theological ideas and cosmological processes, and to the narrative of generational succession (from the Hittite versions of the myth of Kumarbi through Hesiod's Five Ages to the Celtic and Germanic accounts of generational lineages). This will be followed by catalogues of divine epithets and/or lists of hypostatic appearances ('avatars') as a form of ekphrasis of the unity-in-diversity of the deity in question. Finally, it will examine ritual as a mediator between gods and humans, using the genre of 'body-part lists' as an example of poetic visualisation in both ritual descriptions of deities and rites involving body parts linked to various social and anthropological dimensions of the microcosm.

In the third section, we will discuss examples of such textual structures of Ancient Greek, Anatolian, Armenian and Indo-Iranian (Vedic, Avestan and Old Persian) origin, providing a unique insight into the value systems of poets and priests from different ancient Indo-European traditions. The relevant excerpts are taken from texts of medical rituals, rites of divination and magic spells, as well as other specific genres of ritual poetry and performative speech acts. These acts are believed to have the power – through the pronunciation of litanic mantras and the fulfilment of liturgical activities according to established ritual rules of right thought, speech and action, – to exert a demiurgic, (re)creative influence on the Universe. This paper presents such litanies in the relevant languages, from basic to increasingly complex structures, and explores cosmological taxonomies in myth and ritual as 'hyper-linked' catalogues of the universe – introducing new parallels of sacred catalogues from India to the Mediterranean, which arguably stem from an inherited Indo-European genre characterised by the cultic connection of groups of macro- and microcosmic elements, and the explicit 'ritual articulation' of time and space (ritual topography and chronology). This is illustrated by sacrificial formulae in the concluding part of liturgies and sacrificial litanies, as well as structurally (and largely lexically) parallel rituals and intertextual links between hymns and practices that have not been described so far.



Velizar Sadovski (*1972) is Senior Research Associate, Distinguished Research Fellow of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, and Leader of the Iranian Linguistics and Onomastics Department at its Institute of Iranian Studies. Specialist in Old Indic and Old Iranian Philology, Indo-Iranian Linguistics, Comparative-Historical Indo-European Studies. He graduated from the National High School of Ancient Languages and Cultures in Sofia (1991) and studied at Sofia University (1991–92) and the University of Vienna (1992–96). M.A. (1996) and PhD (2001) from the University of Vienna, both *summa cum laude*. PhD dissertation "Entheos-bahuvrīhis and prepositional governing compounds in Rigveda". Employed at the Austrian Academy of Sciences since 1998, Founding Member of its Institute for Iranian Studies (2003-). After a national and an international evaluation, Tenured Scientist at the Academy (2004). 2009 to 2011 Deputy Director of the Institute of Iranian Studies. Since 2010, Holder of the Austrian Habilitation as Associate Professor with *venia legendi* in Indo-European Studies. In the same 2010, promotion to Senior Scientist of the Austrian Academy.

After the 2021 Academy career reform, promoted (2022) to Senior Research Associate, the new top-rank research position at the Academy equal to the highest EU career level of Leading Researcher (R4) in the European Union's Framework for Research Careers. Since 2023 Holder of the National Scientific Habilitation of Italy, Rank I: *Professore Ordinario*, in the field of Historical and Comparative Linguistics. The research fields, in which he works, include Indo-Iranian Philology, Linguistics and Poetics; Ancient Indo-Iranian languages and literatures (Vedic Sanskrit, Avestan, Old Persian); Comparative-Historical Indo-European Studies: word formation (derivation, composition); Greek, Byzantine and Slavic Philology; Indo-Iranian syntax, stylistics & pragmatics; Indo-European poetry, myth, ritual and religion.

Visiting Professor at the Universities of Bologna, Rome (Sapienza), Naples (L'Orientale), Verona, Viterbo (Italy), Leiden (Netherlands), Salzburg (Austria), Bochum, Cologne, Munich (Germany). Gonda Research Fellow of the Royal Academy of the Sciences, The Netherlands. Senior Research Fellow of the Norwegian Institute of Philology, Norway. Senior Visiting Scholar with Mercator Fellowship, University of Bochum, Germany. Leading Editor of the monograph series "Iranisches Personennamenbuch", "Grammatica Iranica", "Veröffentlichungen zur Iranistik" (vols. 32–70), "Iranische Onomastik" (Vienna), "Studien zur historisch-vergleichenden Sprachwissenschaft" (vols. 1–17), "Indogermanische Textlinguistik, Poetik und Stilistik" (Hamburg), "Indo-Iranica et Orientalia" (Milan), "Ritual Texts and Contexts" (Oslo). Invited lectures: Athens, Basel, Bergamo, Berlin, Bochum, Bologna, Bonn, Brno, Bucharest, Cambridge, Cagliari, Cologne, Copenhagen, Cracow, Delhi, Dushanbe, Erlangen, Florence, Freiburg, Graz, Halle, Hamburg, Jena, Kyoto, Lausanne, Leiden, Liège, London, Marburg, Milan, Modena, Munich, Münster, Naples, Newcastle, Oslo, Palermo, Paris, Poznań, Ravenna, Rome, Salamanca, Salzburg, San Marino, St. Petersburg, Sofia, Strasbourg, Tartu, Uppsala, Venice, Verona, Vienna, Viterbo, Wrocław, Würzburg, Zürich.