



## DUMÉZIL, GEORGES

**DUMÉZIL, Georges** Edmond Raoul (b. 4 March 1898, Paris; d. 11 October 1986, Paris), comparatist philologist and religious studies scholar.

Dumézil was one of two sons born to General Jean Anatole Dumézil (1857-1929), a career officer who rose to become inspector-general of the French artillery corps at the end of the First World War, and the former Marguerite Dutier (1860-1945). Having mastered Greek and Latin at an early age, Dumézil became interested in the study of Indo-European myth and religion when still at the Lycée Louis le Grand in Paris, largely via exposure to the linguist Michel Bréal (1832-1915), the grandfather of a schoolmate. Bréal, who was a student of Franz Bopp (1791-1867) and taught comparative grammar at the Collège de France, was one of the last French advocates of nature allegorical theories of myth.

Educated in elite institutions, Dumézil enrolled in 1916 at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS), served from 1917 until 1918 as a junior officer in the French army, and obtained in 1924 his doctorate. Having learned Sanskrit from Bréal, he went on to study under Antoine Meillet (1866-1936), who held the chair of comparative grammar at the Collège de France. Via Meillet, Dumézil was introduced to Iranian materials and given state-of-the-art knowledge of method in Indo-European linguistics.

Unlike Meillet's other students, Dumézil's primary interests were not primarily linguistic or even really historical. Rather, from the beginning of his studies, he was concerned to rehabilitate the field of comparative mythology



that had fallen into discredit toward the end of the 19th century, when the theories of Adalbert Kuhn (1812-81), Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), and Elard Hugo Meyer (1837-1908)—whose chief French advocate had been Bréal—were shown to be untenable. Following a pre-Saussurean understanding of language, they had used phonological resemblances, attempting to glean mythic and ritual data that would show a deeper connection at the level of cultic practice.

In his early writings, Dumézil drew heavily on the theories and methods of James George Frazer (1854-1941), which were themselves falling into discredit as a result of advances in anthropological method. Dumézil made occasional use of Iranian data to support lines of interpretation that originated elsewhere. For example in his dissertation (*thèse principale*) about *Le festin d'immortalité* (1924), he followed Kuhn's *Die Herabkunft des Feuers* (1859) in focusing on the Indic myths of soma, Germanic accounts of mead, and Hesiod's treatment of Prometheus, though he also considered Amərətāt ([Amurdād](#)) and Haurvatāt ([Hordād](#); Dumézil, 1924, pp. 61-83), along with some Italic, Celtic, and Slavic materials. Similarly in *Le problème des centaures* (1929) Dumézil followed Meyer's *Gandharven-Kentauren* (1883) in its focus on the Greek and Indic comparison, but also paid considerable attention to the few occurrences of Avestan Gandarəwa ([Gandarəba-](#)) and related figures.

In his formal report on *Le festin d'immortalité* Dumézil's advisor Meillet pronounced it the work of a young man, full of promise, who was not a specialist in any of the traditions examined and whose interpretations, while original and suggestive, showed many weaknesses. Meillet urged Dumézil to consult with Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) and Henri Hubert (1872-1927), the leading Durkheimian sociologists of religion, both of whom were well versed in the study of Indo-European religions. Hubert taught at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE), and was thus in a position to assist the careers of those he favored. His reaction to Dumézil's work was sharply critical, for reasons that are not entirely clear. It is possible that political differences played some part, for Hubert and Mauss were socialists in the tradition of Jean Jaurès (1859-1914), dedicated to the progressive ideals of the French Third Republic (1870-1940). In contrast, Dumézil was politically and personally close to Charles Maurras (1868-1952), one of the leading members of the Action Française, a monarchist, anti-parliamentary, and counter-revolutionary movement that had been founded in 1898 during the Dreyfus affair. Pierre Gaxotte (1895-1982), Maurras' personal secretary and Dumézil's closest friend

from the ENS, had introduced Dumézil to Maurras. Since Hubert handled all issues of race for *L'Année sociologique*, he was particularly suspicious of the tendency for work on Iranian, Indian, or Scandinavian languages to carry nationalist, racist, and anti-semitic subtexts. But whatever Hubert's motives may have been, his reaction led Meillet to withdraw his support for Dumézil, whom he encouraged to move abroad, there being no position for him in France. (For the sources of these biographical details, see Dumézil, 1987; Eribon, 1992.)

Dumézil began his career with a series of positions as French language instructor at universities in Warsaw (1921), Istanbul (1925-31), and Uppsala (1931-33) using the two latter posts to excellent advantage. In Turkey, he mastered Armenian, several Caucasian languages, and Ossetic, a western Iranian language that gave him access to traditions concerning mythic heroes known as Narts (cf. Av. *nar-*, Vedic *nr-* "man"), which he treated in several monographs (Dumézil, 1930a; 1965a; 1978).

Uppsala also proved valuable for his work on Iranian materials, for there he encountered [H. S. Nyberg](#) (1889-1974), then at the peak of his influence, and Nyberg's two prize students of ancient Iranian religion: Geo Widengren (1907-96) and [Stig Wikander](#) (1908-83). Both men became life-long friends of Dumézil, as well as close colleagues and strong advocates of his theories. Through them he became acquainted with the Austrian folklorist Otto Höfler (1901-87) who taught German at Uppsala from 1928-31. His book *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (1934), in which he argued for a Germanic tradition of cultic bands of frenzied male warriors (cf. Ger. pl. *Männerbünde*) had deeply impressed the Swedish scholars. Wikander took Dumézil's *Problème des centaures* to confirm Höfler's views, and in his dissertation *Der arische Männerbund* (1938), he sought to adduce Indo-Iranian evidence for religious fraternities that celebrated martial deities and cultivated aggressive virile energy. Conversely, this monograph, along with Wikander's study of the Indo-Iranian wind god *Vayu* (1941) and Höfler's *Kultische Geheimbünde*, would become touchstones for Dumézil's later work on the warrior function. The question to which extent these books reflect admiration for, or simply the importance of, paramilitary groups in the interwar period (Camelots du roi, Black Shirts, SA, SS, Croix de feu, Iron Guard, etc.) has provoked considerable controversy. For Höfler, the case is clear, as he was a member of the Austrian SA from 1922 until 1928 (Simon, p. 5) and from 1937 onwards actively advised the SS on matters of race (Grüttner, p. 76); for the others, the issue is more



elusive.

In 1933, Dumézil returned to France, in large part thanks to efforts by the Indologist Sylvain Lévi (1863-1935) who had worked with Meillet on Tocharian B. Initially, Dumézil was made *chargé de conférences*, and in 1935 he became *directeur d'études*, with responsibility for the religions of Indo-European peoples, at the Section des Sciences Religieuses of the EPHE. Dumézil held this position until his retirement in 1968. In addition to his teaching obligations he followed some lectures of Marcel Mauss and studied under the Durkheimian Sinologist Marcel Granet (1884-1940), whose focus on the organizing structures of any ceremony, legend, or text Dumézil took as a model of proper method.

In the 1930s, Dumézil's classes attracted only a handful of students. Among his most loyal and enthusiastic protégés was the critic and poet Roger Caillois (1913-78), who felt that Dumézil's treatment of Centaurs, Luperi, and related phenomena spoke to France's need to renew its energy, confidence, and masculine daring in the contemporary period of crisis. The lectures Dumézil gave on this theme, published as *Ouranos-Varuṇa* (1934) and *Flamen-Brahmán* (1935), greatly appealed to Caillois who also perceived a need for creative acts of sacrifice. These themes, as well as the tendency to ground them in discussions of Indo-European antiquity, were transmitted to the short-lived, but highly influential Collège de sociologie (1936-38) that Caillois founded, along with Georges Bataille (1897-1962) and Michel Leiris (1901-90).

Dumézil's views, however, were changing. First, he abandoned Frazer and his tendency to view myth as the residue of older ritual practices. Second, he acknowledged the linguistic weakness of the comparisons he had championed, and assigned now a distinctly subordinate importance to linguistic evidence and methods. Third, under Granet's influence, he began to stress the importance of structure—understood as the way focal categories were identified and organized in a coherent system—that might manifest itself in any number of contexts under widely varying terminologies.

Traces of this shift may be seen as early as 1930 when Dumézil published an article on the Indo-Iranian prehistory of the caste system (1930b), in which he used Avestan (*Vidēvdād* 5.28-29), Pahlavi (*Mēnōg-ī xrad* 31.1-12, 32.1-7), New Persian (*Šāh-nāma* of [Ferdowsi](#)), Arabic (*Ġorar akbār moluk al-Fors* by Abu Manṣur 'Abd-al-Malek Ṭa'ālebi), Greek (Herodotus 4.5-6), and Ossetic texts to construct Zoroastrian and Scythian (i.e., legends of the Narts) precursors of the Hindu caste system. He suggests that the Hindu division of society into four



hierarchically differentiated classes was already common prior to separation of the Indic and Iranian peoples. The decision to include Scythian data, as already attempted by [Arthur Christensen](#) (1875-1945), was crucial to this approach, and Christensen remained one of the Iranists Dumézil held in high esteem, along with [James Darmesteter](#) (1849-94), Hermann Güntert (1886-1948), and Herman Lommel (1885-1968). Dumézil thanked [Émile Benveniste](#) (1902-76) for having recommended Christensen's work to him and for having read and commented on the manuscript of this article, although Benveniste had indicated he could accept neither Dumézil's nor Christensen's interpretations (pp. 115-16, n. 3). Whatever his earlier reservations may have been, Benveniste—who had earlier been a rival within the circle of Meillet and always maintained a certain distance from Dumézil—quickly rallied to the latter's view, providing a more nuanced treatment for some of the Iranian evidence in two articles published in 1932 and 1938.

Encouraged by Benveniste's support, Dumézil greatly expanded his argument. The crucial book was *Mythes et dieux des Germains* (1939), where he argued that the same tripartite structure he had recognized in Indo-Iranian society could also be perceived in the ancient Germanic pantheon, which suggested an origin in deep Indo-European antiquity. At the outer limits of the Eurasian linguistic community, religion and society both manifested a tendency to organize themselves in three functional categories: (1) sovereignty, subdivided into legal and magic types; (2) force, especially that of warriors; and (3) a more diffuse category, which he called the Third Function, concerned with abundance, material well-being, sensual pleasure, wealth, food, and the flourishing of life. At the human level, this function comprised agriculturalists, herdsmen, merchants, artisans, and women, while its divine representatives tended to be goddesses, twins, or both.

*Mythes et dieux des Germains* is a complicated, uneven book, flush with the thrill of new theories, but not yet worked out in all details. Written on the eve of World War II, it also contained multiple subtexts, including an attempt to trace the prehistoric roots of German militarism. Flawed and controversial, it marked a new beginning in Dumézil's research. Ultimately he renounced all his earlier books, although he did attempt to incorporate some of their materials and analyses in his newer vision. That vision rapidly took shape over the course of the war years, as Dumézil devoted books to deities of the first and the second functions in *Mitra-Varuna* (1940) and *Horace et les Curiaces* (1942), respectively, while extending the trifunctional model to the



Roman pantheon in *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus* (1941a) and to the stories of Rome's foundation in *Horace et les Curiaces* (1942), *Servius et la Fortune* (1943), and *Naissance de Rome* (1944).

From this point onward, Rome was the privileged point of reference for Dumézil's research, alongside India, much as Greece had held disproportionate importance for comparatists of the 19th century. After 1939 he largely excluded Greek materials from consideration, regarding them as the product of a specifically "Greek miracle" that departed from its Indo-European origins. This change in interest coincides with the outbreak of World War II in September 1939 and the German occupation of France from May 1940 until December 1944. Only late in his life did Dumézil integrate a few Greek data into the trifunctional model, as with his treatment of *Apollon sonore* (1982). After Rome and India, Scandinavia figured most prominently, while Iran was a very distant fourth.

In 1945, toward the end of the war, Dumézil published *Naissance des archanges*, the sole book he devoted to Iranian and Zoroastrian materials. The book opens, however, by considering a treaty signed around 1380 BCE between the Hittite king Suppiluliuma and Šattiwaza, ruler of Mitanni, which named the gods Mitra (see [MITHRA](#)), Aruna (Uruvana), Indara (Indra), and Našattiyā (i.e., two deities with the same name, as the noun is grammatically a dual) in that order. Dumézil constituted this list, though it appears nowhere else in India or Iran in precisely this form, as the canonical set of Indo-Iranian deities, associating each god with one of the three Indo-European functions. In pre-Zoroastrian Iran the same gods were known and in the same way understood, he asserted, but the reform undertaken by [Zoroaster](#) disrupted this system, placing the new deity [Ahura Mazdā](#) in a near-monotheistic position, while demoting many of the older gods, as in the case of Indra, Saurva, and Nāṇhaiθya (i.e., one deity, as the noun is grammatically a singular), who are identified as demons (sing. OIr. [\\*daiva](#)) in the *Vīdēvdāt* 10.9 and 19.43.

Far from disappearing, however, the structure of the old pantheon was displaced and reworked in the system of the [Aməša Spəntas](#), whose deified abstractions Dumézil took to be nothing other than elaborate recordings of the trifunctional system. Using statistical measures of the combinations in which these entities appear in the [Gathas](#) as an index of their true nature, Dumézil proposed the identifications in [TABLE 1](#).



After the war, Dumézil resumed his research on Rome (*Tarpeia*, 1947; *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus IV*, 1948, *L'héritage indo-européen*, 1949; *Rituels indo-européens*, 1954; *Déesse latines*, 1956), though he also considered some Germanic materials (*Loki*, 1948; *La saga de Hadingus*, 1953). In 1949, the year of his election to the Collège de France, Dumézil published *Le troisième souverain* which is devoted to the Indo-Iranian god \*Aryaman (see [AIRYAMAN](#)). In the book he returned to a prewar quarrel with the Indologist Paul Thieme (1905-2001) on the meaning of the ethnonym “arya” (Thieme, 1938; Dumézil, 1941b). The debate recommenced and continued through the 1950s, culminating in Thieme’s 1960 article about the Mitanni treaties where he demonstrated that Dumézil’s reading of the Mitanni series as evidence for the original Indo-Iranian pantheon was mistaken, as the divine names are all Indic—and not Iranian or Indo-Iranian—in their phonology and morphology.

Others offered criticisms of Dumézil’s theories on different grounds. Latinists disputed his reconstruction of Roman origins, and some objected to the sociological orientation of his theories. Some Indologists and Iranists found his system overly schematic, forced, or so elastic as to encompass all manner of unrelated data (Gershevitch, 1959; Brough, 1959; Gonda, 1960; Frye, 1960; Kuiper, 1961). Dumézil responded vigorously to all his critics, defending and refining his position in the process. Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, he gained support from numerous specialists. The Iranists who accepted his views—in whole or in part—included Benveniste (1969, I, pp. 279-92), Wikander (1947), Widengren (1965, pp. 11-20), Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (1958, pp. 38-51; 1962, pp. 170-81, 193-207), and Marijan Molé (1952; 1963, pp. 16-25). But in the postwar period his theories gained little traction among German and English scholars.

Among the most significant modifications in Dumézil’s views during this period was his decision to abandon the claim that Indo-European society was originally divided into three functional groupings, whose defining characteristics were then inscribed in myth, ritual, and the structure of the pantheon. Rather, beginning in the mid-1950s, he came to regard the tripartite system as an “ideology.” Dumézil (1959) now understood ideology as a collective ideal, which could occasionally find instantiation at the level of social reality most notably in the Indian system of *varṇa* but which more consistently was articulated at the level of theory and symbolic discourse.

After Dumézil had retired from teaching in 1968, he continued a vigorous program of research until his death in 1986, continually adducing new



examples of tripartition and refining his earlier interpretations. Over the course of his life, he published no fewer than 75 books, culminating in the three volumes of *Mythe et épopée* (1968-73), where he showed the transposition of mythic materials into epic and pseudo-historic narratives, as in the case of the Mahābhārata, accounts of Rome's origin, and stories associated with Kavi Usan. In his later years, he was showered with honors, including election to the Académie Française in 1978. Dumézil became a figure well known to the French public, frequently cited and interviewed in the popular press. Not all the attention was welcome, however, and he attracted enthusiasts of the conservative, nationalist movement known as the "Nouvelle droite," including Alain de Benoist (b. 1943), Michel Poniatowski (1922-2002), and Jean Haudry (b. 1934), who took the trifunctional ideology as a model for an anti-egalitarian, post-Christian social order, which calls itself "euro-nationalist." Initially flattered by this attention, Dumézil later politely distanced himself from these followers. While acknowledging that he was conservative (*un homme de la droite*), he insisted that his work was strictly academic and had no relation to his personal convictions.

Among his more recent critics are Arnaldo Momigliano (1908-87), Carlo Ginzburg (b. 1939), Cristiano Grottanelli (b. 1946), and Bruce Lincoln (b. 1948), who thought that the connection between scholarship and politics was real enough. From their perspective Dumézil did not so much "reconstruct" a seemingly Indo-European system of three functions as he projected onto highest antiquity an extremely conservative model of social hierarchy that he himself favored, as did Plato in the *Republic* and Charles Maurras in his theory known as "integral nationalism," and French society before the Revolution of 1789, which was divided into three estates (*trois états*) that correspond to Dumézil's functions. Dumézil responded indignantly to such charges, and his adherents, above all Didier Eribon (b. 1953), have continued to defend his accomplishments and reputation.

For the most part, Iranists have not much concerned themselves with these debates, and have gradually turned away from Dumézil's theories in the decades since his death. His treatment of Iranian data never advanced beyond the arguments of *Naissance d'archanges*, though in later years he did return to Scythian and Ossetic materials (Dumézil, 1978; 1983, pp. 79-155) and discussed a few mythic figures, including the Soul of the Ox (Dumézil, 1965b), Vərəθrayna (Dumézil, 1968, pp. 135-71), Yima (*Mythe et épopée*, II, pp. 282-300), Ōrita, Ōraētaona, and Kərəsāspa (*Mythe et épopée*, II, pp. 137-44), Kavi Usan

(*Mythe et épopée*, II, pp. 133-238), and [Apam Napāt](#) (*Mythe et épopée*, III, pp. 21-89). In 1982 Johanna Narten convincingly demonstrated that the semi-personified abstractions of the Gāthās formed a much larger and looser set than the six who were only later constituted as the Aməša Spəntas. Her study was the crucial intervention which made Dumézil's interpretation of 1945 very difficult to sustain. More recently, Éric Pirart has reconsidered the argument of *Naissance d'archanges*, focusing on the Mitanni series and on Dumézil's assumptions of an Indo-Iranian pantheon and the demonization of certain deities as a result of Zoroaster's presupposed reform. Pirart faults the selectivity Dumézil exercised in his presentation of evidence, and concludes that he imposed a preconceived theory on the data in a procrustean fashion, rather than working from data to generate theory. While Dumézil retains his supporters among Classicists, Celticists, Germanists, and Indologists, with Iranists his theories have largely fallen out of favor.

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Dumézil wrote only one book devoted to Iranian and Zoroastrian materials, *Naissance d'archanges (Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus III): Essai sur la formation de la théologie zoroastrienne* (Paris, 1945), along with several that focus on Ossetic and Scythian materials, most importantly *Romans de Scythie et d'alentours* (Paris, 1978). See the selected bibliography of his Iranian studies publications in *Bio-bibliographies de 134 savants*, Acta Iranica 20, Leiden, 1979, pp. 146-48. The works that best summarize his theory of the three functions are *Mitra-Varuna: Essai sur deux représentations indo-européennes de la souveraineté* (Paris, 1940; 2nd ed., 1948; tr. as *Mitra-Varuna*, by Derek Coleman, New York, 1988), *Les dieux des indo-européens* (Paris, 1952), *L'idéologie tripartite des indo-européens* (Brussels, 1958), and *Mythe et épopée: L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens* (3 vols., Paris, 1968-73). Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin summarized Dumézil's contributions to Iranian studies in "Georges Dumézil (1899-1986) et l'iranologie," *Stud. Ir.* 17, 1988, pp. 95-97.

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