

# זלמוקסיס

## דאקיה – ויקיפדיה

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## תראקים – ויקיפדיה

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# Zalmoxis

For the arachnid with this name, see *Zalmoxis (harvestman)*. For the assassin bug with this name, see *Zalmoxis (insect)*.

**Zalmoxis** (Greek: Ζάλμοξις),<sup>[1]</sup> is a divinity of the Getae (a people of the lower Danube), mentioned by Herodotus in his *Histories* IV, 93–96.

In later interpretations, which begin with Jordanes (6th century AC) and have proliferated during the 19th and 20th century, mainly in Romania, he was regarded as the sole god of the Getae or as a legendary social and religious reformer who, according to Herodotus, taught the Getae a belief in *immortality*, so that they considered dying merely as going to Zalmoxis. Herodotus states that Zalmoxis was also called by some of the Getae *Gebeleizis*, which made some researchers conclude that Getae were actually henotheists or even polytheists. Another discussion exists about the chthonic (infernal) or uranian (heavenly) character of Zalmoxis.

## 1 Herodotus

Herodotus writes about Zalmoxis in book 4 of his *Histories*:

93. ...the Getae are the bravest of the Thracians and the most just. 94. They believe they are immortal in the following sense: they think they do not die and that the one who dies joins Zalmoxis, a divine being; some call this same divine being Gebeleizis. Every four years, they send a messenger to Zalmoxis, who is chosen by chance. They ask him to tell Zalmoxis what they want on that occasion. The mission is performed in the following way: men standing there for that purpose hold three spears; other people take the one who is sent to Zalmoxis by his hands and feet and fling him in the air on the spears. If he dies pierced, they think that the divinity is going to help them; if he does not die, it is he who is accused and they declare that he is a bad person. And, after he has been charged, they send another one. The messenger is told the requests while he is still alive. The same Thracians, on other occasions, when he thunders and lightens, shoot with arrows up in the air against the sky and menace the divinity because they think there is no god other

than their own.

Herodotus asserts that Zalmoxis was originally a human being, a slave who converted the Thracians to his beliefs. The Greeks of the Hellespont and the Black Sea tell that Zalmoxis was a slave on Samos of Pythagoras, son of Mnesarchos. After being liberated, he gathered huge wealth and, once rich, went back to his homeland. Thracians lived simple hard lives. Zalmoxis having lived amongst the wisest of Greeks - Pythagoras and had been initiated to the Ionian life and Eleusinian Mysteries. Building a banquet hall, he received the chiefs and his fellow countrymen at a banquet, he taught that neither his guests nor their descendants would ever die, but instead they would go to a place where they would live forever in a complete happiness. He then dug an underground residence and, once finished, he disappeared from the Thracians going down to his underground residence, where he lived for three years. The Thracians missed him and wept fearing him dead. The fourth year, he came back amongst them and thus they believed what Zalmoxis had told them.

Zalmoxis may have lived much earlier than Pythagoras and was rumored either to be a divine being or from the country of the Getae.

There are different theories about the disappearance and return of Zalmoxis:

- Some authors believe that Herodotus is mocking the Getae's barbarian beliefs;
- Some take the passage seriously, and consider Zalmoxis to have created a ritual of passage; this theory is mainly supported by Mircea Eliade, who was the first to write a coherent interpretation of the Zalmoxis myth;
- Some authors insist on Zalmoxis' relation with Pythagoras, stating that he has founded a mystical cult; partly this theory may be found in Eliade's work;
- Some see in Zalmoxis a Christ figure who dies and resurrects; this position was also defended by Jean (Ioan) Coman, a professor of patristics and an orthodox priest, who was a friend of Mircea Eliade and published in Eliade's journal "Zalmoxis," which appeared in the 1930s.

This belief precisely parallels the belief about the universal king Frode given in both Ynglingsaga and Saxo

Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*; particularly, *Ynglingsaga* 12 and Saxo 5.16.3, in which Frode disappears into the earth for three years after his death.

It is difficult to define the time when a cult to Zalmoxis may have existed. It is just sure that it antecedes Herodotus' work. It seems that some people have considered that the archaism of Zalmoxis's doctrine points out to an heritage from before the times of Indo-Europeans, which is nevertheless quite difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate.<sup>[2]</sup>

Plato says in the *Charmides* dialogue 156 D – 157 B that Zalmoxis was also a great physician who took a holistic approach to healing body and soul (psyche), being thus used by Platon for his own philosophical conceptions.

## 2 Getae's religion

Strabo in his *Geography*, book 7, 3, 1–11, mentions a certain Deceneus (Dékainéos) whom he calls a γόητα "magician". According to Strabo, king Burebista (82–44 BC) hired Deceneus, who had been in Egypt, to "tame" his people. As a sign of the people's obedience, they consented to destroy all their wines as ordered by Deceneus. The "reform of Deceneus" is the interpretation by the 6th century bishop and historian Jordanes who includes the Getae in his history of the Goths (as assumed ancestors of the Goths): Jordanes describes how Deceneus teaches the Getae people philosophy and physics. Even if it is far more probable that Jordanes just introduced his own philosophical knowledge in the text, many modern Romanian authors consider that Deceneus was a priest who reformed the Getae's religion, changing Zalmoxis' worship into a popular religion and imposing strict religious rules, such as the restriction of wine consumption. Jean Coman deems this prohibition as the origin of the modern food restrictions by the modern Orthodox Christian Church during Lent.

Iamblichus (280-333 AD): "For instructing the Getae in these things, and for having written laws for them, Zalmoxis was by them considered as the greatest of the gods."<sup>[3]</sup>

Aristotle is said, in a brief epitome of his *Magic* given by Diogenes Laertes, to have compared Zalmoxis with the Phoenician *Okhon* and Libyan *Atlas*. Some authors assume Zalmoxis was another name of Sabazius, the Thracian Dionysus, or Zeus. Sabazius appears in Jordanes as Gebelezis. Without the suffixes -zius/-zis, the root Saba- = Gebele-, suggesting a relationship of the name of the goddess Cybele, as "Cybele's Zeus". Mnaseas of Patrae identified him with Cronos (Hesychius also has Σάλμοξις ὁ Κρόνος).

In Plato's writings, Zalmoxis is mentioned as skilled in the arts of incantation. Zalmoxis gave his name to a particular type of singing and dancing (Hesych)<sup>[4]</sup> His realm as a god is not very clear, as some considered him to be a

sky-god, a god of the dead or a god of the Mysterics.

Lactantius (an early Christian author, c. 240–320 AD), referring to Getae's faith, provide an approximate translation of Julian the Apostate writing, who put these words in [emperor] Traian's mouth:

We have conquered even these Getai (Dacians), the most warlike of all people that have ever existed, not only because of the strength in their bodies, but, also due to the teachings of Zalmoxis who is among their most hailed. He has told them that in their hearts they do not die, but change their location and, due to this, they go to their deaths happier than on any other journey."

## 3 Zalmoxian religion

The "Zalmoxian religion" is the subject of a scholarly debate that has continued since the beginning of the 20th century. Participants have included Nicolae Densușianu, Vasile Pârvan, Giurescu (father and son), Jean (Ioan) Coman, Constantin Daicoviciu, and Mircea Eliade. The most complete summary of the debate, which has often taken a political or religious turn, is Dan Dana's *Zalmoxis de la Herodot la Mircea Eliade. Istorie despre un zeu al pretextului* (Iași, 2008), a work partly published only in French and has not been translated into English.

According to some scholars, such as Vasile Pârvan, Jean Coman, R. Pettazon, E. Rohde and Sorin Paliga, since ancient sources do not mention any god of the Getae other than Zalmoxis, the Getae were monotheistic.<sup>[2]</sup> However, Herodotus is the only ancient author who explicitly states that the Getae had only one divinity. The sending of a messenger to Zalmoxis and the fact that Getae shot arrows towards the sky have prompted some authors to believe Zalmoxis was a sky god, but his journey into a cavern has led others to suggest that he was a chthonic divinity.

Other scholars argue that the Zalmoxian religion was henotheistic, that is, that Zalmoxis was the supreme god, but there were also minor divinities closely associated with him.

A third group of scholars believe that the Getae, like other Indo-European peoples, were polytheistic. They draw on ancient authors such as Diodorus Siculus, who states that the Getae worshipped Hestia as well as Zalmoxis.<sup>[5]</sup>

In fact, not all the ancient sources depict Zalmoxis as a god,<sup>[6]</sup> while Jordanes Iamblichus (in his *Life of Pythagoras*) says that Zalmoxis was a man who became a god.

Some researchers at the beginning of the Communist era in Romania argued that the Getae were atheists, as in the case of Constantin Balmuș in his short article *O apreciere a lui Herodot asupra geților*.

There have also been discussions about Herodotus' state-



A tomb painting at the Aleksandrovo Kurgan (Bulgaria), depicting Zalmoxis.

ment that the Getae “think that they do not really die, but that when they depart this life they go to Zalmoxis”.<sup>[7]</sup> Romanian Orthodox authors such as Jean Coman considered this to be evidence that the Daco-Getae had a proto-Christian belief and that, with the Christianisation of Romania, they were easily able to accept the Christian faith. This idea appears in Mircea Păcurariu’s history of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which is deemed authoritative by that Church.

Mircea Eliade concluded in his book *From Zalmoxis to Genghis Khan* (1970) that the Getae had a religion based

on a rite of passage, in which ritual death was symbolized by disappearance into a cavern and was followed by ritual rebirth, symbolized by the leaving of the cavern.

### 3.1 Music and dance

Music and dance are said to have been important parts of Zalmoxis’ teachings. According to Hesychius, Zalmoxis gave his name to particular types of singing and dancing.

## 4 Etymology

A number of etymologies have been given for the name. In his *Vita Pythagorae*, Porphyrius (3rd century) says that he was so named because he had been wrapped in a bearskin at birth, and *zalmōn* is the Thracian word for “hide” (τὴν γὰρ δορὰν οἱ Θραῦκες ζαλμὸν καλοῦσιν). Hesychius (ca. 5th century) has *zemelen* (ζέμελεν) as a Phrygian word for “foreign slave”.

The correct spelling of the name is also uncertain. Manuscripts of Herodotus’ *Historiae* have all four spellings, viz. *Zalmoxis*, *Salmoxis*, *Zamolxis*, *Samolxis*, with a majority of manuscripts favouring *Salmoxis*. Later authors show a preference for *Zamolxis*. Hesychius quotes Herodotus, using *Zalmoxis*.

The *-m-l-* variant is favoured by those wishing to derive the name from a conjectured Thracian word for “earth”, *\*zamol*. Comparisons have also been made with the name of *Zemelo* and *Žemelė*, the Phrygian and Lithuanian goddess of the earth, and with the Lithuanian chthonic god *Žemeliūkštis*. Lithuanian word *Želmuo* means corn shoot or fresh grass. *Žalmokšnis* is only another possible form of it.

The *-l-m-* variant is admitted to be the older form and the correct form by the majority of Thracologists, as this is the form found in the older Herodotus manuscripts and other ancient sources. The *-l-m-* form is further attested in Daco-Thracian in *Zalmodegikos*, the name of a Getic King; and in Thracian *zalmōn*, ‘hide’, and *zelmis*, ‘hide’ (PIE *\*kel-*, ‘to cover’; cf. English *helm*).

The other name for Zalmoxis, *Gebeleizis*, is also spelled *Belaizis* and *Belaixis* in Herodotus manuscripts.

Since the Getae-Dacian religious system was monotheistic aniconism centered around the God Zalmoxis, it is less likely that the believers in his resurrection would use a name meaning “hide” / “foreign slave”, as the hostile ancient Greek non-believers related about him.

## 5 In popular culture

Romanian rock band *Sfinx* worked from around 1975 through 1978 on what became one of the most appreci-

ated Romanian progressive rock LPs, *Zalmoxe*. It was based on lyrics by poet Alexandru Basarab (actually a pen name for Adrian Hoajă), which retold the story of Zalmoxis's existence. However, the album was banned on being released for about three years and was eventually shortened drastically by political censorship with the Communist regime.

## 6 See also

- Allegory of the cave
- Metaphor of the sun

## 7 Notes

- [1] also known as **Salmoxis** (Σάλμοξις), **Zalmoxes** (Ζάλμοξες), **Zamolxis** (Ζάμολξις), **Samolxis** (Σάμολξις), **Zamolxes** (Ζάμολξες), or **Zamolxe** (Ζάμολξε),
- [2] Dialogues d'histoire ancienne (Persée revue) La divinité suprême des Thraco-Daces by Ph D Historian Sorin Paliga
- [3] The Complete Pythagoras Edited by Patrick Rousell for the World Wide Web, A full-text, public domain edition for the generalist & specialist
- [4] *Shamanism* by Andrei A. Znamenski
- [5] Diodorus Siculus, Book 1, c. 94: "...among the people known as the Getae who represent themselves to be immortal, Zalmoxis asserted the same of their common goddess Hestia;..."
- [6] For instance, Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, c.2, 24; Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*.
- [7] *The History of Herodotus* by Herodotus, 440 BCE, translated by George Rawlinson

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- Strabo. *Geographica*, VII. 3. 5
- Plato. *Charmides*, 156-158
- Apuleius. *Pro Se De Magia (Apologia)*, 2.26
- Diodorus Siculus. *Bibliotheca historica*, 94.2
- Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, 14

### 8.2 Secondary sources

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## 9 External links

- Media related to **Zalmoxis** at Wikimedia Commons
- “History” by Herodotus, about **Zalmoxis**
- Journey to the Land of the Cloud Rovers - slideshow of Dacian fortresses and the Getae - Requires Macromedia Shockwave.

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