

1 SLAVIC RELIGION

2 From their earliest knowable pre-history up
3 to the time of their conversion to Christianity
4 beginning in the eighth century, two social
5 characteristics of the Slavic peoples remained
6 fairly constant, despite the frequently
7 disrupting historical forces of invasion and
8 migration. The Slavs, a collection of Indo-
9 European tribes originally based in east and
10 central Europe, were by nature and organization
11 sedentary (consequently, peaceful) and agrarian.
12 Slavic religion, of which we possess little
13 direct record, in all its forms and under all its
14 influences - from the Balts and Germans, Kelts,
15 Sarmatians, Scythians, Thracians, Phrygians,
16 Greeks and several Central Asian Turkic tribes,
17 to name several of the more obvious - always
18 emphasizes the spiritual continuity of the
19 patrilineal family or clan, especially in its
20 relationship to natural elements, which may be
21 personified.

22 There does not appear to have been an
23 elaborate or stable hierarchical pantheon among
24 the broader race of Slavs, and dedicated military

25 gods of the sort that abound in other European
26 religions are few and secondary. Rather, the sky
27 and deep fecund earth together maintained an
28 important mythological place as the progenitors
29 of divinized natural elements. This persistent
30 centrality of the celestial and chthonic
31 divinities, incarnated in a lower mythology of
32 animistic spirits and demons, is reflected for
33 example in a South Slavic version of the
34 dualistic earth diver cosmogony. While all Slavic
35 groups eventually embraced Christianity, they did
36 so provisionally: never did the substratum of
37 belief in an animated nature and cyclical
38 (agrarian, solar) time disappear entirely, and
39 the oral and ritual folklore among all major
40 branches of the Slavs - the Eastern, the Western,
41 and the Southern - has conserved strong reflexes
42 of pre-Christian Slavic belief.

43 To speak at all of Slavic religion, one must bear
44 in mind three significant difficulties that arise when
45 attempting to place boundaries around this topic: (1)
46 although the ancestors of the Slavs are
47 archeologically evident at least from the Early Iron
48 Age (750-500 BCE), when they lived under Scythian

49 influence in the Pontic area directly north of the
50 Black Sea, we see no autonomous settlement of a Slavic
51 ethnic group until around 500 CE; (2) in the
52 historical period, Slavs were dispersed geographically
53 from the Baltic Sea in northwestern Europe to European
54 Russia and present-day Ukraine in the east and
55 Bulgaria and Macedonia in the south, at one point even
56 reaching down into the Greek mainland; and (3)
57 vernacular literacy did not come to the Slavs until
58 the Christianizing mission of Kiril and Methodius in
59 the ninth century. Consequently, a wide variety of
60 cult divinities ranges over a large expanse of both
61 space and time, and virtually all of the written
62 descriptions of the early Slavs, their beliefs or
63 their rituals were authored by non-Slavic witnesses,
64 who often had a political agenda (such as the
65 Christian missionaries who were devoted to the task of
66 supplanting "paganism" in all its forms).

67 There has been, in Western scholarship at least,
68 a tendency to privilege this literate but foreign
69 testimony, relying heavily upon the fairly late but in
70 fact somewhat reliable written evidence of Slavic idol
71 worship and ritual provided by northern chroniclers
72 from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Thus the
73 widely cited accounts of two German clergymen,
74 Thietmar of Merseburg and Adam of Bremen, whose Latin

75 chronicles of the struggle against the German crusades
76 by the maritime Slavs occupying the land between the
77 Vistula and the Elbe, along with that of the Dane Saxo
78 Grammaticus describing the rites at the temple of
79 Arkona among the pagan Slavs living on the Baltic
80 island of Rügen, serve as a major basis for our
81 knowledge of the Slavic deities Svętovit (connected
82 with harvest and destiny, claimed by J. Grimm to be
83 equivalent to Ares in his aspect as shining god of
84 victory), Svarog (identified with Hephaistos, thus
85 also with the fiery principle and fusion) and his son
86 Svarožič (the divinity of the hearth fire, especially
87 important in the northern climate), as well as a local
88 protective god, Rugievit. Prince-Bishop Otto of
89 Bamberg mentions a statue of a three-headed *summus*
90 *deus* Triglav, as well as a war god, Jarovit (also
91 connected with spring, his name suggests he was
92 originally connected with the sun, the Slavic root
93 *jar-* designating brightness and clarity). Two other
94 chronicles, one by Helmold describing a pagan revival
95 among the Slavic Wends in 1134, and an early Russian
96 history by the Kievan monk Nestor (and perhaps several
97 other authors), provide evidence about the importance
98 of the Slavic thunder god, Perun, who some claim may
99 be linked indirectly to Germanic Thor. The latter
100 history, usually referred to as the *Primary Russian*

101 *Chronicle*, and the *First Novgorod Chronicle*, describe
102 from a Christian perspective the politics of the
103 conversion of the Russians to Christianity under
104 Prince Vladimir around 980 and the annihilation of
105 paganism in Kiev and Novgorod. From these sources is
106 obtained a list of the East Slavic divinities known to
107 the chroniclers between the tenth and eleventh
108 centuries: Perun, the god of thunderstorms and,
109 abstractly, the violent fecundation of the earth;
110 Khors, the personified sun, whose name is borrowed
111 from the Avestan *Khurshid* and who is frequently
112 identified with Daž(d)bog, literally the "giver of
113 wealth (i.e. solar energy, fertility)", Slavic *bog*
114 being comparable to Vedic Bhaga, the dispenser of
115 fortune; Stribog, another representation of the solar
116 fire divinity Svarog; Simurglŭ, really a demon, a
117 winged lion taken directly from an Iranian heroic
118 gryphon named Simorg (Simurgh); and Mokoš, connected
119 with the earth's moisture and apparently the only
120 goddess worshipped by the Slavs. Though they are
121 usually treated as something of a pantheon, this
122 grouping is not constant either throughout Slavic
123 history or in the different Slavic areas. In
124 actuality, only three deities - all somehow connected
125 to solar fire and energy - seem to have been common to
126 all Slavs, namely Svarog, Svarožič, and Dažbog.

127 Another sky god, Perun, is also widely attested among
128 all three Slavic branches, although it is only in the
129 East Slavic chronicles that he is placed above the
130 other gods.

131 The epithets, character and even names of the
132 main Slavic gods vary across the different Slavic
133 tribes. Attempts to situate the specific gods
134 encountered in the works of various authors within a
135 Hellenic-style system of well-differentiated divine
136 functions and powers for all Slavs have proven
137 fruitless, not only because our sources are too scanty
138 or unreliable, but also because in all likelihood,
139 such an elaborate system never truly existed, at least
140 not until a fairly late stage of Slavic paganism.

141 Recalling that the early Slavs were not warlike but
142 gradually evolved from being pastoral semi-nomads to
143 sedentary clan-oriented farmers, of utmost importance
144 in their day-to-day existence was neither an imperial
145 hierarchy of divinities mimicking and thus recreating
146 an elaborate social power structure, nor a system of
147 war gods to assist them in military enterprises, but
148 rather the persistent beneficence of nature, upon
149 which they depended for their physical survival, and
150 the continuity of the extended family (*zadruga*), which
151 could ensure the survival of their personal and
152 cultural identity.

153 The earliest archeological evidence reveals that
154 the Slavs performed sacrifices and represented their
155 various divinities as idols, ranging from large stone
156 or wooden statues (as at the temple of Arkona) to tiny
157 figures of various grains. While the mythological
158 system of celestial and chthonic deities remained
159 fairly simple, nature was represented in all her
160 dangerous complexity in the form of a lower
161 mythological system of more local (hence, more
162 accessible) spirits and demons.

163 Indeed, in early Slavdom's encounter with the
164 expanding and syncretizing force of Christianity, the
165 greater Slavic divinities were absorbed into the
166 Christian array of saints rather quickly and easily
167 (the image of Perun merging with the iconography of
168 St. Elijah, Svarog's assimilation into the figure of
169 St. George, as cases in point), while the personified
170 forces of the natural world encountered at the human
171 level tended to resist Christianity's inclusionism.
172 Early post-conversion folk mythology among the South
173 and East Slavs resembles Gnostic apocryphal narrative
174 insofar as the figure of Christ was often perceived
175 more as an accessible hypostasis of a solar divinity
176 than as a celestial omnipotent prince.

177 The encounter of Slavic paganism with
178 Christianity is in some ways more revealing of the

179 deeper nature of Slavic beliefs than the distanced
180 descriptions by foreign observers that were colored by
181 preconceptions or private agendas. While much
182 Christian written polemic against Slavic paganism has
183 been discounted as biased or useless diatribe, on the
184 contrary, the focus of the polemicists' wrath is
185 precisely that set of beliefs and rituals that the
186 indigenous population was reluctant to give up or
187 allow to be entirely absorbed into a new mythological
188 system, either because they were immediately useful
189 and deeply ingrained, or else because Christianity's
190 solution to the problem addressed by those beliefs and
191 rituals was itself not completely worked out. This is
192 especially true in regard to beliefs about sacrifice,
193 the body and the afterlife.

194 We see, for example, an elaborate belief in
195 natural magic persisting throughout the Slavic lands
196 well into the modern period. Sorcerous practices,
197 frequently associated in Russia with a priestly class
198 of shamanic healers known as *volkhvy* (the name
199 sometimes associated with a chthonic Slavic deity,
200 Volos or Veles), were of course the target of great
201 accusation by ecclesiastical writers. A fourteenth-
202 century recension of an eleventh-century polemical
203 treatise, in turn a crude translation of a set of
204 sermons by St. Gregory, mercilessly condemns not only

205 all forms of sorcery, but also ritual sacrifice (to
206 both Slavic and Hellenic gods) as being "taught by the
207 devil." Of special note is the fact that it appears to
208 be the Dionysiac, celebratory aspect of sacrifice that
209 is most offensive to the scribe, not the actual
210 slaughter of livestock or even the symbolism of
211 sacrifice.

212 Sacrifice played an important role in early
213 Slavic life, surviving even to this day in the South
214 Slavic region in the form of a common meal known as
215 *kurban*. Claims, found in the travel writing of an
216 Arabic diplomat Ibn Fasudi (c. 950) and subsequently,
217 that the Slavs engaged in human sacrifice are
218 groundless: there is no solid primary evidence of this
219 whatsoever, although certainly human sacrificial
220 altars have been discovered in lands later occupied by
221 Slavs. Animal and crop sacrifice is evident not only
222 from written sources, but also from archeological
223 findings and folkloric survivals. Animals tended to be
224 slaughtered during significant calendrical periods,
225 including Christianized periods such as Easter, and
226 these sacrificial gatherings were frequently held in
227 honor of a family ancestor rather than great deities.

228 In the South and East Slavic regions, where
229 Slavic paganism came into direct conflict with the
230 Christianizing force from Byzantium, the general

231 reluctance to abandon calendrical rituals and
232 sacrificial feasting despite the unmitigated hostility
233 of the Orthodox clergy underscores the Slavs' devotion
234 to an agrarian worldview in which guardian ancestors
235 and the animating spirits of the natural environment
236 played a real and significant part. There was, in
237 other words, in Slavic religion something of a
238 spiritual continuum between man and the natural world,
239 on the one hand, and between life and death on the
240 other. As with other European agrarian societies,
241 Christian eschatology did not fit entirely comfortably
242 on top of the Slavic view, and this discomfort over
243 the course of a millennium resulted in the
244 establishment of bounded ritual periods during which
245 "demons" - the minor Slavic pagan gods and spirits,
246 folklorized - were allowed to roam the earth.

247 Unlike the locale spirits found in Russian
248 folklore, such as the forest sprite, *lešii*, or the
249 household spirit (and ancestor), *domovoi*, these
250 chthonic demons - *rusalki*, vampires, werewolves
251 (*vukodlaci*), to name but a few - are associated with
252 death, or the Other World. While the folkloric
253 characteristics of these beings are now a syncretic
254 admixture of beliefs of the Slavs and their neighbors,
255 they collectively reveal a belief system in which the
256 Other World is interpenetrable with This World through

257 the mediation of ritual (magic) or the special vision
258 of seers such as *volkhvy*. In virtually all Slavic
259 areas, including the New World diaspora, funerary
260 processes are characterized by elaborate rituals and
261 layered taboos, many of which seem expiatory in nature
262 and concerned with preventing the unmediated re-entry
263 of the soul of the dead into the world of the living.
264 This suggests that at the very center of Slavic
265 religion was a sense of the natural iterative cycles
266 of life and death, and of utmost importance to the
267 maintenance of this proper order was the carrying out
268 of appropriate sacrifices and ensuring that deceased
269 members of the family reached their place in the other
270 world without hindrance, so they could be supplicated
271 to provide health and bounty for the living.

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