

Organized Pagan Cult in Kievan Rus'. The Invention of Foreign Elite or Evolution of Local Tradition?

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The article attempts to address a common notion in the English speaking world that the pre-Christian Slavic religion was basically animistic. And that personified and anthropomorphic Slavonic deities, known from medieval sources, were a foreign invention. In particular this article focuses on the pagan Kievan cult of the late 10th century as institutionalized by Vladimir the Great. As the Eastern Slavic religion did not evolve in a vacuum, the article analyses it within the broader Slavic and Indo-European context.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Laurentian version of *The Russian Primary Chronicle* in the year 980: „И нача княжити Володимеръ въ Киевѣ единѣ, и постави кумиры на холму внѣ двора теремнаго: Перуна древяна, а главу его сребрену, а усь златъ, и Хърса, Дажьбога, и Стрибога и Симарьгла, и Мокошь”.¹

“And Vladimir began to reign alone in Kiev, and he set up idols on the hill outside the castle: one of Perun, made of wood with a head of silver and a moustache of gold, and others of Khors, Dazhbog, Stribog, Simargl, Mokosh.”

There is no doubt that this was an attempt by the Kievan ruler to organise a more centralised, pagan cult to facilitate state building and centralisation. However, on many occasions, it has been claimed that he merely elevated the elite cult. And that the beliefs, as well as those gods, were of foreign origin - namely Scandinavian. At the same time the native Eastern Slavic religion was often assumed to be a collection of some animistic beliefs with an impersonalised “Mother Moist Earth” as a dominant, agricultural deity.²

Such an assumption is a consequence of the paucity of knowledge about Slavic mythology. This is so for a number of reasons. First, in the English speaking world, as far as now, no one has really attempted to research the pre-Christian Slavic religion. The subject usually occupies a short chapter or paragraph in general publications on European mythol-

¹ RPC, year 980, p. 56; *Die Nestor-Chronik* (Laurentian version), D. Tschizewskij, ed., (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1969), p. 77.

² Claims of Kievan Slavic religion being: animistic, elitist and of Scandinavian origin of Kievan cult: G. Alexinsky, ‘Slavonic Mythology’, in P. Grimal, *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology* (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1982 ed.), p. 281; G.P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind, Vol. I, Kievan Christianity, The 10th to the 13th Centuries* (Belmont: Nordland Publishing Company, ed. 1975), pp. 8, 19-20, 351; J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 17-19 & 74.

ogy - and that is all. This is a surprising situation considering the fact that the Slavs are the largest linguistic sub-family in Europe, numbering close to 300 million people. Secondly, many publications do not go beyond the various accepted ideas that originated in the German school of the 1930's and early 1940's, championed by Erwin Wienecke and Leonhard Franz. Briefly, both Wienecke and Franz claimed that without outside help the Slavs were incapable of developing any complex beliefs beyond animism due to their racial inferiority, and that they needed an external stimulus from the "Master Race" to invent more complex beliefs or personification of their deities.³ Thirdly, a number of Russian and Soviet scholars, accepted, more or less, these notions. It may well be that those Russians in the West, who were recruited predominantly from post-revolution emigres, were in general deeply religious and conservative. Hence, their views were biased against any pagan beliefs. Meanwhile, many historians in the Soviet Union generally treated any religion as a collection of ancient superstitions not worth investigating.

The issue of this organised pagan cult of the Kievan Rus' under Vladimir along with its emergence can only be properly investigated in a broader Indo-European and a common Slavic context. For that reason the first section of the following work will deal with the common Indo-European background and pre-migration Slavic beliefs. Apart from the deities of Vladimir's pantheon, some other Slavic gods, mentioned in other Eastern Slavic sources, will also be investigated. Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that the following reconstruction of the common ancient Slavic religion is only partial, and explores only selected "core" concepts and deities with some relevance to the later Kievan cult.

It is commonly accepted that all the Indo-European languages evolved from closely related Bronze Age dialects collectively termed Proto-Indo-European.⁴ Further, certain similarities in the names of many ancient deities were also observed. From this premise, a rather simplistic Indo-European pantheon was postulated by the early 12th century.⁵ More recently a comparative analysis of Indo-European beliefs focussed on common functional and conceptual elements rather than on linguistic similarities of the god's names. Such a study was first attempted by an American scholar of Romanian background - Mircea Eliade.⁶ It was further developed and championed by French philologist Georges Dumézil, and is now followed by the "new comparative school" of religious studies world-wide. This new approach focuses on the premise that the pre-Christian beliefs of Indo-European people (Germanic, Celtic, Italic, Greek, Baltic, Indian Iranian and Hittite) share certain concepts, ideas and a number of deities on a functional level. It also explores the concept that various Indo-European people built their own theology and mythology, drawing it from a common tradition.⁷ However, the "new comparative school" acknowledges that different peoples developed their beliefs on their own, in different conditions and under different influences.⁸

The Slavs, as a culturally and linguistically distinct people, emerged in Central and Eastern Europe on a relatively small area. Geographically the Slavic cradle was located somewhere along the northern slopes of the Carpathian mountains, reaching as far north

³ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian* (Warszawa, Poland: Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1982), p. 90.

⁴ M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs* (London: Thames And Hudson, 1971), p. 16.

⁵ G. Dumézil, *Gods of Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1973), pp. xx-xliii.

⁶ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 14.

⁷ G. Dumézil, *Gods of Ancient Northmen*, p. xx-xliii.

⁸ G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, Vol. 1 & 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 176.

as the Pripet marshes that divided the proto-Slavic group from the proto-Balts. As the linguistic uniformity of Slavonic languages suggests, the process of Slavic ethnogenesis must have been completed at some time during the first half of the first millennium C.E. - prior to their migration period during the 6th and 7th centuries C.E.⁹ The area under discussion was under a strong Iranian (possibly Scythian and more likely Sarmatian) influence, during the first millennium B.C.E. and until the 3rd century C.E.¹⁰ This explains the strong Iranian influence on pre-Christian Slavic religion. The Scythians and Sarmatians spoke dialects which are classified as Eastern Iranian. Nowadays the Ossetic language of the Caucasus is the sole survivor of this linguistic group.¹¹ However, for the purpose of clarity, throughout this study both Scythians and Sarmatians will be referred to as Northern Iranians, basically employing a geographical rather than a linguistic context.

Taking into consideration the relatively small area where the Slavs emerged, and the fact that the Slavic languages did not begin to diverge significantly before the 10th century C.E.¹², it may be assumed that prior to their migration period their culture and religious beliefs were relatively uniform. This working hypothesis does not imply that Slavic religion was a monolithic and solid set of beliefs, but rather - like other tribal religions - a heterogeneous collection of various beliefs revolving around the same common "core" concepts.

The question of pre-migration Slavic religion will be addressed through a three-way approach. Firstly, by tracing common Indo-European concepts and ideas in Slavic religion. Secondly, by searching for these concepts among the Eastern Slavs, especially among the ordinary people. And thirdly, by looking for the existence of similar concepts among the Western and Southern Slavs. By doing this, we can isolate those beliefs which were common to all Slavs from those which were of foreign influence or a result of later cultural developments in Slavdom.

SELECTED DEITIES AND CONCEPTS IN SLAVIC RELIGION

Most of the Indo-European mythologies shared the concept of a Sky God, as well as Sun and Fire worship. Also a common Indo-European world view shared a tri-partite functional division. The first function is sacred power and knowledge. The second is associated with war. Finally, the third function covers economic activities, such as agriculture, animal husbandry and others.¹³ This spiritual system is reflected in an organised social hierarchy, which found its greatest expression in the original caste division of India. There, society was divided into: priestly class of brahman; warriors - kšatryas; and farmers - Vaiśya.¹⁴ In a similar fashion the functions of principal deities were divided into three main spheres of

⁹ This is not the generally accepted area of Slavic ethnogenesis. The author supports the theory of Kazimierz Godłowski and Zdenek Váňa of the late ethnogenesis of the Slavs and on the territory of Western Ukraine: Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs* (London: Orbis Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 24-28; and J. Strzelczyk, *Od Praszowian do Polaków* (Kraków, Poland: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1987), pp. 23-24.

¹⁰ M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, pp. 28-29, also in: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 33-34. The Slavic ethnogenesis might have been a result of cultural and ethnic mixing of the Sarmatian and the southern Balto-Slavic people (The commonly used term Balto-Slavic is unfortunate and misleading. The people who are so called were neither the Balts or Slavs but rather the Eastern branch of Old European speakers).

¹¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (London, New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1982 ed.), Vol. 9, pp. 45-451.

¹² Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs*, pp. 26-27.

¹³ G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 162 & M. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 1 (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1979) pp. 192-195.

¹⁴ G. Dumézil, *Gods of Ancient Northmen*, p. 16.

sovereignty, military and the economic activities.¹⁵ In a peculiar way, the first domain was occupied by two deities in a system of dual sovereignty.¹⁶ For example, Indian Varuna and Mitra; Iranian Ashura and Mithra; Germanic Wodan/Odin and Tyr/Tiw; and Italic Jupiter and Dius Fidius. The second function was the domain of war gods, such as: Indian Indra, Germanic Donar/Thor, Celtic Taranis, Greek Ares and Italic Mars.¹⁷ Moreover, this tripartite view found another reflection in the division of the world into three spheres - those of heaven, atmosphere and earth. Much of the Indo-European mythologies revolved around the inter-relation of those three separate domains.¹⁸

SVAROG

The name of a common proto-Indo-European sky deity derives from a word *deivos* - heavenly, and who was known as Dyaus.¹⁹ Different historical and cultural developments over the millennia resulted in divergence from this concept, but it still could be traced among many Indo-European people, either in its function or name. For example, many Indo-European languages associated a similar name with gods, divinities and the sky, such as: the Latin *deus* and even Jupiter himself whose name derived from *Dyau Pater*,²⁰ Greek - Zeus²¹ and Hindu Dyaus.²² The old Germanic Tyr/Tiw and the Saxon god of the 8th century called Tiewaz, also fall into that category.²³ Baltic mythology also preserved a Sky deity known as Dievas - the sky.²⁴ The Balts and Slavs are culturally and linguistically closely related. Because the Baltic languages preserved many ancient Indo-European features it is believed that Slavic languages branched out from the common Balto-Slavic dialects.²⁵ Hence, it is logical to conclude that, in some form or other, the concept of a sky god also existed among the proto-Slavs. At first, the search for a Slavic sky god also is disappointing as there was no deity known by the name related to the root *deivos* or to the Lithuanian Dievas. It has been suggested by the Polish historian Alexander Gieysztor that Perun originated as a sky god.²⁶ However, although Perun evinced some attributes of a sky god, the etymology of the name and his original functions point to the common Indo-European god of thunder, rain and weather. It seems that the Slavs abandoned the Dievas-like name of a sky god which they had shared with the Balts while under the Northern Iranian influence. In Slavic languages the old name echoes only in the term *div*, which in the Slavic languages it de-

¹⁵ On the three functional pantheon: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, pp. 161 & 279; also in: G.J. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 10.

¹⁶ G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 199.

¹⁷ The first function gods: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, pp. 161 & 279; also in: G.J. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity*, p. 10.

¹⁸ Tri-partite division of the world: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 226 and G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of a King* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 105-106.

¹⁹ G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, pp. 30-31, 409.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 176.

²¹ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 48.

²² Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, pp. 30-31 & 409.

²³ "teiwa, tiwar" and Tiwaz : H.R.E. Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Limited, 1975 ed.), p. 196.

²⁴ M. Gimbutas, *The Balts* (London: Thames And Hudson, 1963), p. 199; and also in M. Gimbutas, "The Lithuanian God Velnias, in G.J. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 92.

²⁵ Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs*, pp. 12-27.

²⁶ Perun as a sky god: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 45-48.

scribes a supernatural occurrence or some demonic being.²⁷ Despite relatively fragmentary state of the available evidence, only the god known as Svarog fits the concept. Etymologically, the name Svarog fits perfectly with the sky god because of its celestial connotations. The root *svar* in the name of Svarog is a cognate of the Old Indian *svar*, describing upper heavenly worlds.²⁸ Further, a related word *svarga* means radiant sky, and *svarati* - shines or gleams. Elsewhere, in modern Hindi *svarg* means heaven.²⁹ In Ossetian, the sole surviving Eastern (Northern) Iranian language, the adjectives in present continuous have the suffixes *-ak* or *-ag*, corresponding to the Scythian *-akos* and *-agos*.³⁰ Therefore, the name Svarog could be reconstructed as “The shining one”. It is worth noting that the Slavs adopted a number of Iranian loan words. For example, the Slavic sky *nebo*, derives from *nebah*, both initially meaning the cloud;³¹ the Polish word for the heaven *raj* meaning garden;³² and the term *batwan* from *phalavan* of the same meaning.³³

The evidence for the Svarog cult among the Slavs is weak, and is sometimes confused with another deity known as Svarozhich. These issues will be addressed in detail in the section on cosmology. In terms of written sources Svarog appeared in the Russian translation of John Malalas, a Byzantine chronicler of the 6th century. In the Slavic version, Hephaistos was substituted by Svarog, and Helios by Dazhbog. The Malalas version goes as follows:

“After the death of Hephaistos, his son Helios reigned over the Egyptians for...12 years and 97 days”, and “Helios the son of Hephaistos, was very generous”.³⁴ In the Slavic version we read: “After Svarog reigned his son, named Sun, was also called Dazhbog, for he was a mighty lord”.³⁵

The Slavonic version clearly indicates that the translator was fully aware of the mythological nature of Hephaistos and Helios resulting in substitutions of Slavic deities instead. Usually it has been accepted that the functions of both Slavic gods correspond to Greek deities: that is, Hephaistos and Svarog of fire, and Helios and Dazhbog of the Sun. But this is not necessarily the case. It is reasonable to assume that the translator, knowing Hephaistos to be the father of Helios, introduced into the text two Slavic deities who were in a father-son relationship. So, while Dazhbog was a Sun deity, his father Svarog's domain was not fire. Although in this translation there is no suggestion of Svarog being a Sky god, another account from the other side of Europe supports this claim. Certain relevant Slavic myths were reported by Helmold of Bossau, a German clergyman of the 12th century:

“...one god in heavens ruling over the others. They (the Slavs) hold that he, the all powerful one, looks only after heavenly matters; that the others, discharging the duties assigned to them in obedience to him, proceeded from his blood...”³⁶

²⁷ A. Brückner, *Słownik Etymologiczny Języka Polskiego* (Warszawa, Poland: Wiedza Powszechna, 1985 ed.), p. 114.

²⁸ J. Herbert, 'India: The Eternal Cycle', in P. Grimal, *Larousse World Mythology* (London, New York, Sydney: Hamlyn Publishing Group, Ltd., 1973), p. 227.

²⁹ “Svargas”: M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, p. 162; “Svarga” - the sky: R. L. Turner, *A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 804.

³⁰ V. V. Martynav, *Etnagenez Slavyan* (Minsk, Belorussia: Nauka i Tekhnika, 1993), p. 7.

³¹ A. Brückner, *Słownik Etymologiczny Języka Polskiego*, p. 359.

³² *ibid.*, p. 452.

³³ L. P. Slupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries* Warszawa, Poland: IAE, 1994), p. 200.

³⁴ John Malalas, *The Chronicle of John Malalas* (Melbourne: Australian Association of Byzantine Studies, 1986), Book 2.1 and 2.2.

³⁵ The Slavonic version of Malalas: G. Alexinsky, 'Slavonic Mythology', p. 284.

³⁶ Helmold of Bossau, *The Chronicle of the Slavs* (New York: Octagon Books Inc., 1966), Book I.84. HB will be an abbreviation for Helmold's work.

It is worthwhile noting, that the concept of a passive god is common among the other Indo-Europeans. The Greek Uranos, a Sky God, became incapacitated and an inactive deity after the act of creation.³⁷ In Indian mythology Dyaus', a sky god, is also a creator whose involvement in earthly affairs was unclear and indirect afterwards. In the Vedic period his importance was surpassed by Varuna and Mitra, with Varuna appropriating some attributes and functions of Dyaus.³⁸ Taking into consideration that Sun worship was widespread among the Slavs (to be discussed later), it seems that one of the deities fathered by the Slavic Sky God was the Sun God. This again is a common Indo-European concept, and in Indian mythology the Sun - Surya - is often described as a son of Sky (Dyaus) and Earth.³⁹ Although the name of the Sky god was not mentioned by Helmold, the complementary nature of both stories suggests that he was referring to Svarog.

A reinforcement for this claim that Svarog was the father of the major Slavonic gods comes from the name of another Slavic deity, that of Svarozhich, a Fire god. The ending of the name Svarozh(-ich), indicates that he was son of Svarog.⁴⁰ The endings "ich" (spelled "icz" or "ic" in Polish and "ич" in Russian), common in all Slavic languages, indicate a patronymic name and are still in use in present day Russia. For example: Иванович (Ivanovich), means "son of Ivan". In other countries these endings have been preserved in surnames: like in Polish - Włostowicz, "son of Wlast"; or among the Souther Slavs - Josipović, "son of Joseph".⁴¹ Some scholars have postulated that Svarog and Svarozhich were the same god, and that Svarozhich is a diminutive for Svarog.⁴² But it is highly unlikely that such a fierce and fear-inspiring god of fire would be addressed in such a disrespectful way.

The relationship between Svarog, Svarozhich and Dazhbog, and their functions, has been interpreted in various ways by many different scholars. However, it only fits together perfectly if we accept the notion that Svarog was the Sky god, and furthermore that he fathered the Sun god (Dazhbog) and Fire god (Svarozhich).⁴³

The evidence for Svarog as a common Slavic deity comes mainly from the toponymy. Examples of it include: Svarożyn near Gdańsk and Swarzędz near Poznań, in Poland; Svaren in the Czech Republic; and Свариж (Svaryzh) near Pskov in Russia. Moreover, the name of the German Mecklenburgian town of Schwerin derives from its old Slavic name Swarzyn. According to Roman Jakobson, an American scholar of Russian background, Svarog under tabu names appears in places such as Tvarožna Góra in Poland and Tvarožna in the Czech Republic.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it could be assumed that whenever or wherever Svarozhich (son of Svarog) was reported, it implied that the concept of Svarog, the sky god, was also known. A prime case is the 10th and 11th centuries cult of Svarozhich in Eastern

³⁷ M. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 1, pp. 247-250; & G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 178; & A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp.133-135.

³⁸ Dyaus' - no earthly involvement: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 409.

³⁹ Sky & Sun in Indian myths: *The Rig Veda* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1981), 1.160 & 1.164. On sancticity of the sky and its fatherly functions, see: M. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 1, p. 189.

⁴⁰ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p.130.

⁴¹ Patronymic names: L. Leciejewicz, *Słownik Kultury Dawnych* (Warszawa; Poland: Wiedza Powszechna, 1990), pp. 146-147.

⁴² Claim for Svarozhich being the dimunitive of Svarog: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 130.

⁴³ This claim is supported by George Vernadsky & Polish historian Henryk Lowmiański: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 134.

⁴⁴ Svarog in Slavic toponymy: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 131.

Germany, then inhabited by Slavs⁴⁵, indicating that the concept of a Sky god - Svarog - pre-dates the migration period.

The explanation for the lack of a more prominent cult of Svarog lies in Helmold's account. The Slavic Sky god was an otiose and passive god who became removed from earthly affairs. Hence there was not much point in worshipping a "retired" deity, and the cult slowly lost its prominence.

DAZHBOG

The cult of the Sun is well attested among many of the Indo-European peoples. It was especially prominent among the Iranians and the Medes of Persia, as well as among the Masagetae, Scythians and Sarmatians.⁴⁶ In the case of the Slavs it is difficult to ascertain how "solar" their religion actually was. It is possible that 'solarisation' of the religion was more prominent among the Eastern Slavs, due to the closer and prolonged contacts with Northern Iranian people. Whatever the case, there is evidence that in Slavic religion the Sun cult played an important part.

The Slavic Sun god was called Dazhbog, and it is reasonable to assume that he was a son of Svarog. The name Dazhbog could be translated as "giver of wealth" or "giving god". The root *bog*, literally meaning god in all Slavic languages, is a clear Iranian borrowing, from the Iranian *bhaga* - god.⁴⁷

The widespread Sun cult of Dazhbog featured prominently among the Eastern Slavs, not just as a part of the Kievan pantheon of Vladimir. In the *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, a 12th century Russian epic poem⁴⁸, the Russians are twice referred to as "Dazhbog grandsons".⁴⁹ Also in the poem, a prayer by the daughter of Yaroslav of Galich begins with the words: "Bright, thrice-bright Sun!"⁵⁰ Regardless of the literary nature of these sources, the survival of Dazhbog in popular memory and of sun worship in general indicates that it was deeply rooted in Eastern Slavic beliefs. It definitely is not the case of short-lived elitist cults. An Arab traveller, Al Masudi, reported around the middle of the 10th century that Eastern Slavs were sun worshippers⁵¹, and that they had a temple-like structure with an opening dome and some other feature enabling them to observe the sunrise.⁵² Although it was most likely an open shrine rather than a temple, it is almost certain that such structures were part of a sun cult.

The name Dazhbog does not appear in other Slavic languages in association with the Sun deity. However, the name Dazhbog survived in the Polish personal name - Daźbog.⁵³ And in Serbian folklore it remains as the demons called Dajboga and Daba.⁵⁴ The cult

⁴⁵ Svarozhich cult at Radogost: Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon*, edited & transl. by M.Z. Jedlicki, (Poznań: Poland: Instytut Zachodni, 1953), Vol. VI.23-25.

⁴⁶ Sun & Fire worship among the Sarmatians: T. Sulimirski, *The Sarmatians* (London: Thames And Hudson, 1970), p. 34; among the Massagetae: *ibid.*, p. 58, and in: Herodotus, *The Histories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986 ed.), Vol. I.215-216 (p. 128). Among Scythians: *ibid.*, Vol. IV. 59-64.

⁴⁷ A. Brückner, *Słownik Etymologiczny Języka Polskiego*, p. 84; also in: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 137.

⁴⁸ It was written in Kiev at the close of the 12th century: V. Nabokov, in, SIC, p. 14. and: S.A. Zenkovsky, ed., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles and Tales*, p. 137.

⁴⁹ SIC v. 258 & v. 305 & p. 109n.

⁵⁰ SIC v. 722-730.

⁵¹ Al Masudi on Sun worship: G. Vernadsky & R.T. Fisher, Jr., *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917*, p. 9.

⁵² Al Masudi on the Sun "temple": M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, pp. 164-165.

⁵³ A. Brückner, *Słownik Etymologiczny Języka Polskiego*, p. 84.

⁵⁴ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 137.

might have existed in the German Baltic region of Wagrien among the Slavic Obodrites, where Helmold of Bossau reported a temple and idol at Plön called Podaga.⁵⁵ The name Podaga was interpreted by Roman Jakobson as a corruption of Daboga or Dajboga⁵⁶, but this interpretation is questionable. Nevertheless, the remnants of a sun cult survived among the Slavs till recent times, thus clearly demonstrating its importance to all the Slavs since the pre-migration period. The Southern Slavic peasants were known to swear an oath on the Sun, and in Bulgaria the Sun was regarded as divine. Also, customs of greeting the rising sun were reported all over Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia. Certain medieval Eastern Slavic sources reported the rural custom of bowing to the south (the Sun) at midday.⁵⁷ In Germany, in the south-eastern district of Lusatia the Slavic Sorbs were reported to greet the rising sun before entering church on Sunday.⁵⁸ In the Western Ukraine a curse was known: "May the Sun make you perish", and in Croatia peasants would say "May the Sun avenge me on you".⁵⁹ In Christian times the Sun has been called "God's face" or "God's eye".⁶⁰ Clearly this is an echo of the old Indo-European concept, in which the Sun deity Surja is called an eye of Varuna.⁶¹

The Sun figures prominently in Slavic folklore throughout all Slavdom. It was believed that the Sun resided in the east, in the land of the everlasting summer and of plenty, inhabiting a palace made of gold. The morning and evening auroras were associated with the Sun and were regarded as two virgin divinities. They were called morning and evening Auroras - Zoryas in Slavic. The Zoryas stood on both sides of the Sun's golden throne. According to one story, the morning Zorya opened the palace gates when the Sun was to begin his daily journey across the sky, while the other one closed the gates after the Sun returned at the evening.⁶² Similar forms of sun worship and stories about auroras, morning and evening stars (planet Venus), were reported in Baltic mythology.⁶³ Also, in Iranian mythology, there were two divinities of dawn and dusk associated with the sun god Mithra,⁶⁴ and Ushas as Sun companions in Indian mythology.⁶⁵

There is also some indirect evidence for the Sun cult among the Slavs. For example, the depictions of a wheel or circle in pre-Christian, Indo-European iconography are interpreted as solar symbols, and a large number of such engravings have been found on early Slavic pottery.⁶⁶ Furthermore, in Indo-European mythology, it is commonly accepted that the horse is usually associated with the Sun cult. It was reported among many Indo-European people, such as: ancient Indians, Iranians, Germans, Celts, Greeks, Balts and Slavs.⁶⁷

⁵⁵ HB, Book I.84.

⁵⁶ Jakobson's interpretation: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 137.

⁵⁷ M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, p. 165; and A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 132-133.

⁵⁸ M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, p. 165.

⁵⁹ G. Alexinsky, 'Slavonic Mythology', p. 285.

⁶⁰ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 132.

⁶¹ *Rig Veda*, 1.50.

⁶² G. Alexinsky, 'Slavonic Mythology', p. 285.

⁶³ M. Gimbutas, M., *The Balts*, p. 199.

⁶⁴ J. De Menasce, 'Persia: Cosmic Dualism', in P. Grimal, *Larousse World Mythology* (New York: Hamlyn Publishing Group, Ltd., 1973 ed.), p. 202.

⁶⁵ G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 53.

⁶⁶ A. Gieysztor, 'Slav Countries: Folklore of the Forests', in P. Grimal, editor; *Larousse World Mythology* (G. P. Putnam: Sons, 1965), p. 401.

⁶⁷ The horse as a Sun symbol among I.E. people, Germans: H.R.E. Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia*, pp. 51-52; among the Balts: M. Gimbutas, *The Balts*, p. 199; among the Indians: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 133;

Among the Western Slavs, horses associated with the cult of Sventovit of Rügen, Svarozhich of Radogost and Triglav of Szczecin were reported. One of their important functions was being used in foretelling the future.⁶⁸ Although none of those later and complex cults were purely solar, the incorporation of a horse indicates an amalgamation of solar and other elements. It is worth noting that there is a saying in Russian *áľúćé ěiüü* (veschiy kon'), meaning "prophetic horse",⁶⁹ indicating that use of a sacred horse in foretelling the future was a common Slavic concept.

SVAROZHICH

The cult of Svarozhich, the fire god, and son of Svarog, also shows common and strong Indo-European roots. Practically all Indo-European people worshipped fire in one form or another. It was of the greatest importance among the ancient Indians. The Iranians were regarded as fire worshippers too, and were reported to swear oaths by fire.⁷⁰ Also, the ancient Baltic people were reported to worship a female fire goddess, and to believe that fire was brought to the earth by a thunder god Perkunas.⁷¹ In Indian mythology there was a fire deity known as Agni, meaning literally a fire, this being a cognate to the Latin word *ignis*, Lithuanian *ugnis* and Slavic *ogni* - a fire.⁷²

The Svarozhich cult also appears to be universal to all Slavs. Evidence for the cult comes from two extremes of Slavdom. According to the Russian source known as Боголюбец (*[Unknown] Admirer of Christ*):

"They (the pagan Slavs) also address prayer to Fire, calling him Svarogich".⁷³

The sanctity and divinity of fire survived into the Christian era among most of the Slavs. The 19th century Russian peasants would not spit into the fire or swear at it. Throwing a sheaf into fire was believed to bring luck. There was also a widespread belief that fire had special powers. A fire started by friction using wooden sticks was called a "living fire" and supposed to have healing properties. For example: sick cattle were driven around "living fire", bon-fires in the field to cure them. One of the spells to cast out illness, that began with the words: "Little Fire, Tsar-Fire", seems to be a clear reminiscence of the times when Fire was worshipped as a god.⁷⁴ Igniting a "sacred fire" through friction is a common element of the wide-spread Indo-European tradition. It is known to have been practised in ancient India,⁷⁵ as also was the case with ancient Roman Vestal fire.⁷⁶ It was also reported among the Lithuanians as late as the 17th century.⁷⁷ And fire was started in this manner as late as the first half of the 20th century in some parts of rural Poland on Annunciation Day.⁷⁸

among the Iranians: M. Eliade, *A History Of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 1, Chapter XIII. par. 109; among the Celts: A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1983), p. 404.

⁶⁸ A.P. Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom*, p. 146; and Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs*, p. 94; and M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, p. 154.

⁶⁹ M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, p. 161.

⁷⁰ G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, pp. 322-323.

⁷¹ M. Gimbutas, M., *The Balts*, pp. 203-204.

⁷² A. Brückner, *Słownik Etymologiczny Języka Polskiego*, pp. 375-376; also in: M. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 1, Chapter VIII, par. 62.

⁷³ G. Alexinsky, *Slavonic Mythology*, p. 284.

⁷⁴ E. Warner; *Heroes, Monsters and other Worlds from Russian Mythology* (London: Peter Lowe, Inc., 1985), p. 16.

⁷⁵ G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, pp. 312-314.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷⁷ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 47.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 135.

In Western Slavdom, the cult of Svarozhich gained prominence among the Veletian people, a branch of the Polabian Slavs. It was a regional deity and its major temple stood at Radogost, near modern Neubrandenburg, in eastern Germany.⁷⁹ This elaborate cult was an amalgamation of various elements of Slavic religious traditions, and it cannot be fully equated with the Slavic fire worship of the pre-migration period. It will not be discussed in detail, as it was a later development, and because the issue goes beyond the scope of this work. Nevertheless, the name of the deity clearly shows that the cult evolved from a common Slavic concept of a Fire God.

PERUN

There is also no doubt about the antiquity and Indo-European origins of the Slavic god Perun, the god of thunder and lightning. The name Perun derives from an Indo-European root *perk*, *perg* or *per*, meaning - to strike, and is directly associated with a striking thunderbolt.⁸⁰ In Indian mythology there was a weather god, Parjanya, whose domain was thunder storms and monsoons. This deity, who also makes things grow, like Perun, is associated with cattle.⁸¹ Moreover, among the Balts, a thunder god Perkunas was one of the major deities.⁸² There is a close conceptual relationship between the foregoing and thunder-associated gods of other Indo-European people, such as: Celtic Taranis; Greek Zeus and Germanic Thor/Donar.⁸³ Independent developments separated Indo-European beliefs, but certain common concepts were preserved. For example, in Germanic mythology the goddess Fjörgynn is the mother of the thunder god Thor. Taking into consideration that in Germanic languages the original Indo-European “p” changed into “f”, her name clearly appears related to the stem *perg*.⁸⁴ In Hittite mythology the stone monster Ullikummi, who fights the weather god Tešub, is a son of the major god Kumarbi and a rock, a goddess called Perunaš or Pirunaš.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, Hittite mythology is so mixed up with Semitic and non-Indo-European beliefs that the similarity of name with Parjanya or Perun may be only a coincidence. On the other hand it may reflect a common Indo-European tradition shared with the Germanic people.

Further support for the antiquity of the Perun-like deity in Eastern Europe comes from Mordvinian mythology. In pre-Christian times, the Mordvins, who are an Ugro-Finnic people of the middle Volga basin, worshipped a thunder god called Purginepaz.⁸⁶ This is a clear borrowing from the Indo-European mythology. However, it was not borrowed from the Slavs, as their Eastern branch did not penetrate the middle Volga in pre-Christian times. While at the same time the root *purg* in Purginepaz suggests some relation with the Baltic *perk* in Perkunas, the only plausible explanation being that the Mordvins borrowed the

⁷⁹ For description of cult and temple of Svarozhich at Radogost, see: Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon*, Book VI.23 - 25.

⁸⁰ M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, pp. 165-166; and A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 45-48.

⁸¹ M. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 1, p. 213; and *Rig Veda*, 5.83 & 7.101.

⁸² M. Gimbutas, *The Balts*, p. 202; and J. Puhvel, 'Indo-European Structure of the Baltic Pantheon', in G. J. Larson, *Myth In Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 78, 83.

⁸³ For Taranis, see: P. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (London: Newnes Books, 1983), p. 24; for Zeus see: M. Gimbutas, *The Balts*, p. 198; for Thor, see: P. Grappin, 'Germanic Lands: The Mortal Gods', in P. Grimal, ed., *Larousse World Mythology* (New York: Hamlyn Publishing Group, Ltd., 1973 ed.), p. 373.

⁸⁴ Goddess Fjörgyn story in *Völuspá*, a poem in Scandinavian Edda: D. Evans, 'Dodona, Dodola And Daedala', in G.J. Larson, *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 101 & 101n.

⁸⁵ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 49.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 49.

concept and the god's name from the Fatyanovo culture of the second half of the second millennium B.C.E. The Fatyanovo culture emerged in the Eastern Baltic area and spread along the Volga and Oka as far as the Ural mountains. The physical anthropology, and the strong cultural affiliation of the Fatyanovo complex with the Kurgan and later Baltic cultures, indicates that they were Indo-European people. They were not Balts, and probably not Balto-Slavic people either, but rather culturally and linguistically ancestral to both.⁸⁷ Whatever the case, this shows that the concept of a Perun-like deity was common amongst the Old European population of Eastern Europe in the middle of the second millennium B.C.E. This in turn clearly indicates a continuity of this common Indo-European concept.

The evidence for the notion of a thunder god among the Slavs is relatively plentiful, with his worship first mentioned among the Southern Slavs. According to the mid-6th century Byzantine historian Procopius:

“For they (Slavs) believe that one god, the maker of the lighting, is alone lord of all things, and they sacrifice to him cattle and all other victims”.⁸⁸

There is no doubt that this account refers to Perun. The account does not imply that the Slavs were monotheists, but rather that Perun gained prominence among the Southern Slavs, whose religion evolved into henotheism. There is also evidence that in the mythology of non-Slavic Albanians, there was a thunder god known as Perëndi. Again, this is no doubt a borrowing from the Southern Slavs.⁸⁹

As a consequence of the relatively early Christianisation of the Southern Slavs, there are no more direct accounts in relation to Perun from the Balkans. Nevertheless, as late as the first half of the 12th century, in Bulgaria and Macedonia, peasants performed a certain ceremony meant to induce rain. A central figure in the rite was a young girl called Perperuna, a name clearly related to Perun. At the same time, the association of Perperuna with rain shows conceptual similarities with the Indian god Parjanya. There was a strong Slavic penetration of Albania, Greece and Romania, between the 6th and 10th centuries. Not surprisingly the folklore of northern Greece also knows Perperuna, Albanians know Pirpirunā, and also the Romanians have their Perperona.⁹⁰ Also, in a certain Bulgarian folk riddle the word *perušan* is a substitute for the Bulgarian word *гърмотевница* (grmotevitsa) for thunder.⁹¹ Moreover, the name of Perun is also commonly found in Southern Slavic toponymy. There are places called: Perun, Perunac, Perunovac, Perunika, Perunička Glava, Peruni Vrh, Perunja Ves, Peruna Dubrava, Perunuša, Perušice, Perudina and Perutovac.⁹²

In addition, the Eastern Slavs, promised to uphold treaties with the Byzantines by invoking Perun in 907, 945 and 971. The Perun idol was already standing in Kiev by 945, when prince Igor swore to be true to the treaty at the shrine.⁹³ Therefore, either Vladimir did not erect it or only enlarged the shrine.

There are more accounts and other evidence showing that the cult was widespread among the ordinary people and in various forms survived christianization. It is worth noting certain passage in *The Russian Primary Chronicle*. This stated that when the Perun idol

⁸⁷ Fatyanovo culture: M. Gimbutas, *The Balts*, pp. 34 & 44-46 & 91-93.

⁸⁸ Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), Book VII.XIV.23.

⁸⁹ D. Evans, *Dodona, Dodola And Daedala*, p. 100.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 103; and also in: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 67-70.

⁹¹ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 50.

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁹³ Perun in Russo-Byzantine treaties: RPC, years 907, 945, 971.

and its sanctuary was destroyed, the people cried,⁹⁴ while, according to the Chronicle of Novgorod, assault on the Perun shrine in Novgorod caused serious uprising and bloody fighting in the city.⁹⁵ Surely, both cases implied that it was a well established people's cult and not exclusively a domain of the élite.

The survival of Perun's worship well into the Christian era is also well attested. The following accounts strongly demonstrate the popularity of the cult among the ordinary people. In a Russian apocrypha of the 12th century, known as *Хождение Богородицы по мукам (Hozhdyene Boguroditsi po mukam)*, idols of Perun and other gods were mentioned: "And they made gods out of the devils Troyan, Khors, Veles and Perun, and they worshipped these evil devils".⁹⁶

Furthermore, a 14th century source known as *Слово Григория (Slovo Grigoriya - The Word of Gregory)*, says that in remote areas pagans still prayed to Perun.⁹⁷ In the late 18th century Russia, an ecclesiastic ruling had forbidden the singing of Christian prayers in front of an oak tree.⁹⁸ It has to be remembered that the oak tree was closely associated with the cult of Perun (oak tree worship will be discussed later). Also, an interesting custom was reported near Novgorod, as late as the early 12th century. Here many travellers or boatsmen, sailing the Volkhov river, would cast a coin into the water, at the spot where the Perun shrine was excavated in the 1950's.⁹⁹

Finally, after Christianization the cult merged and was transformed into veneration of Saint Elias. This happened most likely because of the Old Testament, which credited Saint Elias with the ability to bring rain and thunderstorms. Thus, through these means, an obscure Christian saint became a major celebrity in Eastern Slavic Orthodoxy. In the later Christian iconography of Saint Elias, he appears like Perun traversing the sky in the chariot of fire or riding on the horse. He has also been associated with thunders, arrows and oaks.¹⁰⁰ In the early 20th century, in the north-east of Russia, the following celebration was reported. On the 20th of July, Saint Elias' day, a cow was slaughtered and the meat prepared by males. It was then distributed in the church and eaten by the whole congregation. This custom, evidently not being Christian, resembles the sacrificial killing of an animal and the communal consumption of the meat.¹⁰¹

The veneration of St. Elias with its mixture of pagan and Christian elements is one of the best arguments for the purely Slavic character of Perun and of the cult being widespread among all sections of Eastern Slavic society. Put simply, if Perun was only a deity of the elite and was elevated to prominence at Kiev only for a few years, ordinary people would not have retained the cult for centuries. Neither would the Orthodox Church be forced to accept and tolerate certain evidently pagan beliefs and practices. The name of Perun also appears in Eastern Slavic toponymy. The most famous place is Peryn' near

⁹⁴ RPC, year 988.

⁹⁵ V. Volkoff, *Vladimir the Russian Viking* (London: Honeyglenn Publishing Ltd., 1984), pp. 242-244.

⁹⁶ *Hozhdyene Boguroditsi Po Mukam* is a 12th century Apocrypha known in English as *The Visitation to the Torments by the Mother of God*, also called *The Descent of the Virgin into Hell*: in S.A. Zenkovsky, ed. *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles And Tales*, p. 123.

⁹⁷ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 51.

⁹⁸ M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, p. 166.

⁹⁹ E. Warner, *Heroes, Monsters and other Worlds from Russian Mythology*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁰ M.N. Tikhomirov, 'The Origins of Christianity in Russia', *History*, Vol. XLIV, 1959, p. 204; also in: M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, pp. 166-167.

¹⁰¹ E. Warner, *Heroes, Monsters and other Worlds from Russian Mythology*, pp. 15 & 17.

Novgorod, where the remnants of an open site shrine were unearthed by archaeologists,¹⁰² and there was a place on the Dneper known as “Perun’s Shoal”.¹⁰³

Perun was also a deity of the Western Slavs, although the cult did not show up so prominently. In all Slavic languages, except Polish and Kashubian, the term for thunderbolt is *grom*. The term is known to the Poles but more often they call it “piorun”, a word clearly deriving from the name of Perun. In Silesia, even today, people say *ty pioronie!*, which in free-lance translation means “you bastard!”. The older Poles’ saying of dissatisfaction, *do pioruna!*, could be translated as “by thunder!”. It sounds like nonsense, but if we substitute the old meaning it would be “by Perun!”. Very close to the familiar “by Jove!”.¹⁰⁴ Similar sayings have survived among the Kashubians in the form of *na peróna!* and *ty perónie!*. It is good to note that in Kashubian, thunder or lighting is called *parón* not *perón*,¹⁰⁵ indicating that the original saying refers to the deity rather than to thunder. In Moravian and Slovakian folklore there are spells using the term *parom* or *hrom* (original Slavic “g” replaced by “h” in Ukrainian, Czech, Slovak and High Sorbian languages) interchangeably for thunder.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the Slovaks would say *parom do teba* or *do paroma*, meaning “may Perun strike you” and “by Perun!”, respectively.¹⁰⁷ Among the now almost extinct Polabian Slavs of eastern Germany, a deity called Porenutius (Porenut) was reported on Rügen island by a Danish chronicler of the turn of the 13th century Saxo Grammaticus.¹⁰⁸ Some scholars have interpreted the name as a corrupted form of Perun. However, this interpretation is not uniformly accepted. Another deity called Proue was mentioned by Helmold as being worshipped in the 12th century near Oldenburg in Wagrien. Its idol stood in an enclosed sanctuary situated in an oak grove. Sacrifices of cattle and sheep, and sometimes humans were performed for this deity, and once a week the tribal court and assembly was held there.¹⁰⁹ Again it has been postulated that the name Proue is a corruption of Perun, taking into consideration that in another version of the chronicle, known as the Stettin manuscript, it appears as Prone.¹¹⁰ Whatever the case, Proue’s association with oaks and with cattle sacrifice indicates close conceptual links with a Perun-like deity. Toponymic evidence from the Polabian lands is a harbour of Prohn (Por) in the Tribsee region opposite Rügen island, recorded in the earliest source as Perun.¹¹¹

Nonetheless, the strongest evidence for the antiquity of the Perun cult, as well as its universality among all the Slavs, and all sections of the Slavic society, comes from the western extreme of Slavdom. In the region of Hanoverian Wendland, west of the Elbe river in Germany, a Polabian Slavic language survived till the end of the 18th century. Those Slavs called Thursday a *Perëndan* - meaning literally a “day of Perun”.¹¹² Evidently, these

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁰³ RPC, year 988.

¹⁰⁴ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 46.

¹⁰⁵ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 51. Also from the personal experience of the author.

¹⁰⁶ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 50.

¹⁰⁷ Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁸ Saxo Grammaticus, *Danorum Regum Heroumque Historia*, edited & transl. by E. Christiansen (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1981), Book XIV.XXXIX.

¹⁰⁹ HB, Book I. 52, 69, 84.

¹¹⁰ Proue - Perun: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 51; and on Prone: J. Strzelczyk & J. Matuszewski, editor & translator, *Helmolda Kronika Słowian* (Warszawa, Poland: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1974), p. 244n.

¹¹¹ Saxo Grammaticus, Book XIV.XXXI (p. 476) and E. Christiansen in Saxo, p. 820 (n410).

¹¹² K. Polański & J.A. Sehnert, *Polabian-English Dictionary* (The Hague: Mouton & Company, 1967), p. 109; and in: H. Popowska-Taborska, H. ‘Polabszczyzna jako Północno-Zachodnia Peryferia Słowiańszczyzny’, in J. Strzelczyk, *Słowiańszczyzna Połabska* (Poznań; Poland: Wydawnictwo UAM, 1981), p. 107.

people were aware that the name for Thursday in German *Donnerstag* means “day of thunder”, (deriving from a continental Germanic war god Donar). However, instead of substituting the Polabian word *grom* for the thunder they used the word *perĕn*. Clearly, the term *perĕn*, as in the Polish language, derives from the name Perun.

VELES/VOLOS

The origins and functions of the god Veles or Volos, are controversial. According to the Laurentian version of the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, Veles was the god of cattle.¹¹³ This view was accepted without question by the majority of scholars. However, there is some indication that he was more than a mere god of the beasts. In Christian times, Veles was replaced by St. Blasius - a patron of domestic animals. It is likely that a monk who had written the “Russian Primary Chronicle” had projected the functions of St. Blasius functions onto Veles, albeit ignorant of the role of the ancient god.¹¹⁴

From the scarce written records we know that at the official signing of the treaty with the Byzantines in 907 the whole Kievan army swore by Perun and Veles, and also, in the 971 treaty, the warriors swore by Perun and the “rest of Rus” by Veles.¹¹⁵ This shows that Veles was an important god whose functions must have gone much beyond caring for cattle. The importance of cattle for the Eastern Slavs cannot be denied, but their economy was agriculturally based. It would make more sense if they swore by the “Mother Earth” rather than Veles. So, this suggests that Veles was also the guardian of the oath.¹¹⁶ In reference to the punishment for breaking the oath, the offenders would be killed by their own weapons and *да будем золотые яко золото* (*da budem zoloti yako zoloto* - become yellow as gold).¹¹⁷ Knowing the war function of Perun it seems that punishment by their own weapons must have referred to the wrath of Perun. For other punishment, at first the sentence appears to make no sense at all. However in Russian *золотуха* (*zolutukha*) means scrofula, a tuberculosis of the bones and lymph glands - a serious and life threatening disease. So, this suggests that Veles was also able to inflict disease as a punishment.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, from the *Song of Igor's Campaign* comes a passage referring to the bard Boyan: “Vatic Boyan, grandson of Veles...”,¹¹⁹ suggesting a clairvoyant and prophetic nature of the god. After Christianisation of the Kievan Rus', Veles was transformed into St. Blasius (Russian Власий /Vlasiy/), a patron of domestic animals.¹²⁰ An interesting insight into the cult comes from ethnographic data. Well into Christian times in Russia, during the cattle epidemic, peasants carried an icon of St. Blasius and performed a certain ritual. This ritual involved killing a ewe, ram, horse and cow, all being tied together.¹²¹ The rite is a mixture of many traditions and customs, and it is impossible to analyse it in detail. Nevertheless, the killing of horses

¹¹³ Veles as a cattle god, see: RPC, year 907.

¹¹⁴ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 112.

¹¹⁵ RPC, year 907. On the 971 treaty, see: RPC, year 971.

¹¹⁶ Veles - guardian of oath: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 114.

¹¹⁷ phrase *Da budem zoloti yako zoloto*: RPC, year 971.

¹¹⁸ A. Gieysztor interpretation: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 113-114.

¹¹⁹ Veles in SIC: SIC v. 65. This association of Boyan's clairvoyancy and prophetic attributes with Veles supports the argument for the sometimes questioned authenticity of *The Song of the Igor's Campaign*. The Much later forger would have no knowledge of the association of Veles with prophecies, which can be deduced only through comparison with the Baltic Velinas.

¹²⁰ M.N. Tikhomirov, 'The Origins of Christianity in Russia', p. 204.

¹²¹ Cattle epidemic ritual, in: G. Alexinsky, 'Slavonic Mythology', p. 298.

must be an ancient tradition associated with the cult of Veles. Among Indo-Europeans, the very common sacrifice of a horse was performed to only a few major deities.¹²² Hence, in this new perspective, Veles emerges as a deity of great importance, not only as a cattle god, but also as a guardian of the oath, punishing with diseases, and associated with clairvoyance and prophecies. A horse, and possibly some other animals were sacrificed to Veles.

Furthermore, his importance could be fully realised if we look closer into the merger of the cult of Veles with St. Blasius. Most historians, without much thought, accept the simple notion that Veles was a cattle god transformed into the Christian saint of similar patronage. However, there is no doubt that Greek missionaries and the Eastern Slavic clergy viewed the non-Christian beliefs as evil, and tried as hard as possible to eradicate any traces of them. If they did not succeed, and had to accept a merger of pagan and Christian beliefs, Veles must have been a god of great importance whose cult was deeply rooted in Eastern Slavic tradition. Only Perun, no doubt a major god of the 10th century Eastern Slavs, managed to achieve the same by “transforming” himself into Saint Elias.

Some further insight into the functions of Veles comes from Baltic mythology. Both the Slavs and the Balts are linguistically and culturally closely related and share many similar religious concepts. In Baltic mythology, there is a deity known as Vėlinas, Velnias or Vėls, very well attested in folklore and toponymy, hence indicating the importance of this god in Baltic beliefs. In folklore, Vėlinas appears to be a deity or demon of the dead and of cattle.¹²³ In some Lithuanian legends Velnias is associated with clairvoyance.¹²⁴ Furthermore, according to Marija Gimbutas and Jaan Puhvel, the underworld demons known as Pikulas, Pikis or Piktis are alternative names of Vėlinas.¹²⁵ There is also evidence that the Balts sacrificed a horse, bull and he-goat to Velnias.¹²⁶ So, the similarity of names and functions strongly indicate that both, Veles and Vėlinas are conceptually the same deity.

Other historical accounts also mentioned the cult of Veles on a number of occasions. A Veles statue stood in the suburb called Podol, an area which was apparently a craftsmen’s and tradesmen’s quarter. The source known as *The Tale of Vladimir’s Baptism* tells us that this idol was destroyed shortly after conversion.¹²⁷ We will probably never know if Veles was included in Vladimir’s pantheon or not, and if not, why his worship was not incorporated into the Kievan cult. The cult of Veles is also known from other parts of Eastern Slavdom. The destruction of a stone idol of Veles was recorded in the Rostov district in the 11th century in *Живот Авраама (The Life of Abraham)*, a biography of an archimandrite of the Rostov monastery.¹²⁸ In the other 12th century source already cited in reference to Perun, known as *Hozhdyene Boguroditsi Po Mukam*, Veles is mentioned as still being worshipped in some rural areas.¹²⁹

¹²² Vedic hierarchy of sacrifices: men, horse, ox, sheep, goat: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, pp. 239 & 468.

Vedic Indian horse sacrifice - Ashvamedha, *ibid.*, p. 224; among the Massagetae - to Sun: Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book I. 215-216 (p. 128); among the Scythians - to god of war: *ibid.*, Book IV. 59-64 (p. 289-290); among the Celts & Romans: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 17.

¹²³ Vėlinas domains: deceased and the cattle: M. Gimbutas, ‘The Lithuanian God Velnias’, pp. 87-88.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 89.

¹²⁵ Pikulas-Vėlinas: *ibid.*, p. 88; and J. Puhvel, ‘Indo-European Structure of the Baltic Pantheon’, p. 84.

¹²⁶ M. Gimbutas, ‘The Lithuanian God Velnias’, p. 90.

¹²⁷ V. Volkoff, *Vladimir the Russian Viking*, p. 103.

¹²⁸ M.N. Tikhomirov, ‘The Origins of Christianity in Russia’, p. 208.

¹²⁹ S. A. Zenkovsky, *Medieval Russia’s Epics, Chronicles and Tales*, p. 123.

The name of this ancient god was also preserved in Eastern Slavic toponymy. Although many place names may relate to *волосы* (*volosy*) hair in Russian, the names for at least two places in the Belorussian forests are associated with some supernatural forces called Volosin and Volosach, or the river Velesa in the Smolensk district of Russia, and seem to be derived from Veles.¹³⁰ All this suggests that the cult of Veles was widespread among all sections of Eastern Slavic society.

It appears that the borrowing from Baltic mythology could be excluded and that the Veles-Vélinas concept comes from common Balto-Slavic tradition. This is supported by evidence from other than the eastern branch of Slavic people. For example, there is a mountain called Veles in Bosnia and a place of the same name, Veles, on the river Vardar in Macedonia.¹³¹ The name of a Greek port on the Aegean coast of Thessaly, Vólos, on the site of ancient Iolcos, may also be of Slavic origin,¹³² being a legacy of Slavic penetration into Greece between the 6th and 9th century. In Serbia, one of the names for the constellation of Pleiads is *Vlašići*, clearly meaning “children of Vlas”.¹³³ In Western Slavdom, among the Poles of the Tatra Mountains there is a folk tale about the dragon and the mountain called Wołoszyn (phonetically: Voloshin),¹³⁴ while in a Kashubian folk song, a female spirit called Velevitka (the root: Vele, Velev) appears.¹³⁵ In a certain Bohemian folk tale, a bad wife turns into the goose that flies “beyond the sea, to the Veles”. In an old Bohemian carol, condemned by a Christian priest, a spirit called *vele* brings the people luck and happiness. The word *vele* is meaningless in the Czech language, but seems to be an echo of an ancient pagan chant.¹³⁶ The 16th century Czech could say about weird ideas: *ký veles ti to našeptal?* (what devil put you up to it?), and there is another Czech saying: *u velesa!*, as an expression of annoyance.¹³⁷

So, despite this indirect evidence, it seems to be cumulatively convincing that Veles was a major god of various functions and known to all branches of Slavdom. Hence his cult definitely pre-dates the migration period.

STRIBOG

Stribog of the Kievan pantheon appears to be a god of wind or winds. The word's etymology is unclear, but the root *stri* may derive from the Slavic *stru* - to flow. Whereas the root *bog* means either means god or wealth. An alternative etymology was postulated by Russian scholars Ivanov and Toporov. According to them, the name Stribog derives from the Iranian *patri bhagos* - a Father God.¹³⁸ However, this would make Stribog a major god of a first function, at least among the Eastern Slavs. This seems to be unlikely considering his rather minor position in the Kievan pantheon and low prominence in Slavic mythology and folklore.

¹³⁰ Veles in Eastern Slavic toponomy: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 115.

¹³¹ Veles in Southern Slavic toponomy: *ibidem*; and in Macedonia: A.P. Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom*, p. 169.

¹³² *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. X, p. 488.

¹³³ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 117.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 115.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 117.

¹³⁶ *ibidem*.

¹³⁷ Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs*, p. 87.

¹³⁸ M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, p. 165; and in: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 140-141; and A. Brückner, *Słownik Etymologiczny Języka Polskiego*, p. 520.

There are parallel beliefs in various Indo-European mythologies. For instance in India there was a wind deity called Vāyu, also known in ancient Persia as Vayu. Furthermore, a similar deity named Wejopatis was worshipped by the Balts.¹³⁹ Besides *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, this deity was also mentioned in *The Song Of Igor's Campaign*, where the winds were called “Stribog’s grandsons”.¹⁴⁰ In another passage in the tale, the daughter of Yaroslav of Galich - a 12th century prince - addressed this prayer to the wind:

“Wind, Great Wind!
why, lord, blow perversely?
Why carry those Hinnish dartlets
on your light winglets
against my husband’s warriors?”¹⁴¹

This seems to link the Wind with some military affairs, which finds a conceptual reflection in the military association of India’s Vāyu and the Iranian Vayu.¹⁴² Finally, Stribog also appears in Eastern Slavic toponymy, such as: Stribozhe Lake, or a place called Stribozh.¹⁴³

Any search for the Stribog cult beyond the borders of Eastern Slavdom does not produce much evidence. Nevertheless, the winds and associated demons are common in Slavic folklore and mythology - from Bulgaria to Poland.¹⁴⁴ Among the Western Slavs, in some regions the Poles called certain winds *stryj*, but this may as well derive from *stryj* - a term for father’s brother.¹⁴⁵ As for toponymy, there is Strzyboga in central Poland, and in the 13th c., a stream near Gdańsk was called Striboc.¹⁴⁶ The latter suggests that Stribog, like Perun and Veles, might have been a common Slavic deity. How developed this cult was in the pre-migration period is hard to determine. It was definitely not as prominent and elaborate as it was in late 10th century Kiev.

The remaining deities of the Kievan pantheon, such as: Khors, Simargl and Mokosh seem to be specifically Eastern Slavic deities, and will be discussed later.

PERSONIFICATION AND ANTHROPOMORPHISATION

The question of Slavic animism is probably sufficiently answered by the foregoing evidence demonstrating that these major common Slavic deities were to a various degree personified. Nonetheless, the whole issue should be explored a bit further. It should be pointed out that the personification and anthropomorphisation of Slavic deities is also supported by their very names. All the deities discussed above had different names from their functions or their domains. For example, Svarog was a sky god, while the sky is called “nebo” in all Slavic languages.¹⁴⁷ Dazhbog - “the giver of wealth” or “giving god” was a Sun god and the Sun is called *солнце (solntse)* in Russian, and similiary in all other Slavonic

¹³⁹ Indian, Iranian & Baltic wind gods: M. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 1, p. 190.

¹⁴⁰ SIC v. 197.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, v. 699-703.

¹⁴² A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 141.

¹⁴³ *ibidem*.

¹⁴⁴ G. Alexinsky, ‘Slavonic Mythology’, pp. 285-286; and A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 141.

¹⁴⁵ A. Brückner, *Słownik Etymologiczny Języka Polskiego*, p. 521.

¹⁴⁶ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 141.

¹⁴⁷ A. Brückner, *Słownik Etymologiczny Języka Polskiego*, p. 359.

languages.¹⁴⁸ In a common Slavic myth the Sun takes a journey across the sky - from the east to the west - in his chariot, pulled by flame-breathing white horses. This is a broad and general description of the myth, as certain details differ from region to region.¹⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the myth clearly indicates that Slavs worshipped the Sun god but not the Sun itself. The name of Svarozhich, a Fire deity, shows a clear son-father relationship with Svarog. The fire in Russian is *огонь* (*ogon'*), in Polish *ogień*, and similarly in all other Slavonic tongues.¹⁵⁰ Perun is the name of a deity, not a thunderbolt, clearly related to personified Indian and Baltic deities of a similar function, and the original proto-Slavic name for thunderbolt in all languages is *grom*.¹⁵¹ The Veles etymology, although unclear, does not resemble any Slavic name for domestic animals.¹⁵² The same applies to Stribog, god of winds, as wind is called *вѣтер* (*vyeter*) in Russian, and similarly by other Slavs.¹⁵³

The personification and anthropomorphisation of major Slavic deities should not be a surprise. All the other Indo-European peoples had personified and anthropomorphised deities from the earliest times, suggesting that the process began already among the Proto-Indo-Europeans, before divergence into separate linguistic branches.¹⁵⁴ It would be most unusual if the Slavs had reverted to animism after branching off from a Balto-Slavic ethno-linguistic stratum.

To what degree Slavic gods were personified and anthropomorphised is difficult to establish. Possibly it varied, not only between various Slavic branches and tribes, but also between social classes. It is worth noting that different conceptions of deity are still common today, even in very uniform and organised religions. For example, for a Calabrian peasant and a Christian Democrat minister in Italy, the concept of Jesus Christ is definitely very different, although both are Roman Catholics.¹⁵⁵

The beliefs and veneration of a multitude of lesser gods, demigods, spirits, waters, wells etc., is an Indo-European phenomena and was common among the Celtic, Germanic, Italic, Slavic and other people¹⁵⁶, forming the lower layer of their pre-Christian religion. Claims of Slavic animism could emerge as a result of customs and beliefs observed among the Eastern Slavs in Christian times, a situation which arose from the eradication of major cults where only the lower strata of beliefs survived in folklore, customs and some rites. At the same time written records about Slavic religion were scarce. We can imagine a person equipped with a book containing Catholic doctrines but ignorant of the ancient Aztec religion trying to reconstruct the pre-Christian beliefs of Mexicans. We would have a similar situation where the upper stratum of the Aztec religion was completely wiped out, while the Catholicism of the rural Mexicans heavily intermingled with the lower stratum of old beliefs. In such a case the conclusion would very likely be: that the Aztecs were animists.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 500.

¹⁴⁹ G. Alexinsky, 'Slavonic Mythology', pp. 254-255.

¹⁵⁰ A. Brückner, *Słownik Etymologiczny Języka Polskiego*, pp. 375-376.

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 495-496.

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, pp. 610-611.

¹⁵⁴ M. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 1, Chapter VIII, paragraph 62.

¹⁵⁵ The same religion is not practiced on the same level, as there are significant differences in relation to education, social status, etc.: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁵⁶ Lesser deities and spirits in mythologies of the Celts: A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 46-50, 61-65 & 84; of the Germanic people: E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myths and Religion of the North; Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (Westport: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1975 ed.), pp. 221-235; of the Italic people: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 553, and A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 59.

“CORE” CONCEPTS AND GODS IN SLAVONIC COSMOLOGY

As the above evidence shows, the Slavic pre-Christian religion was conceptually rooted in the common Indo-European tradition. It evolved into its own relatively uniform set of beliefs in specific conditions and circumstances. Where especially Northern Iranian influences played an important part, they had major deities and their personification is also well attested. That does not imply that some animistic elements did not exist, especially on the level of lesser spirits.

The expression of particular cults might not have been common among all the Slavs, as the presented evidence often comes from much later times. Nevertheless, the “core” of the pre-migration period Slavic religion was an acknowledgment of a passive Sky god, known as Svarog. There are some indications that Veles was also a deity ranking among the major gods.¹⁵⁷ The Slavs of the pre-migration period were clan based, small tribal societies and it seems logical to conclude that lack of political unity and any central authority led to the demise of Svarog and to some degree of Veles. Svarog was the creator of two deities, Sun and Fire, being Dazhbog and Svarozhich respectively. This conceptually echoes an Indo-European tradition. In Rig Veda, Sun-Surja is created by Dyaus but also often confused or identified with Fire-Agni.¹⁵⁸ From there, it is not hard to conclude that both deities descended from the Sky god. Perun, and his thunderbolt was most likely perceived as the “fire link” between celestial fire of the Sun and earthly fire.¹⁵⁹ This clearly reflects a common Indo-European concept of tri-partite division of the world. At the same time, the original deity of the second function, the god of war, faded into oblivion.¹⁶⁰ However, taking into consideration some war-like attributes of Perun, it appears that the original deity of weather and thunder was always to some extent associated with war functions. This is supported by evidence of the association of Indian Parjanya with Indra and military functions.¹⁶¹ It might have happened that by the time the need for a war deity arose, Perun, who fits most closely, was assigned this function, and this is reinforced by the already presented evidence from Procopius and from the Hannoverian Wendland.

EVOLUTION OF THE EASTERN SLAVIC BELIEFS

Now let us return to the end of the 10th century at Kiev, and Vladimir’s pantheon. As has already been shown, Perun and Dazhbog are major and common Slavic gods. The case of Stribog seems to be unclear, and his cult might have not extended far from the Eastern Slavdom. The remaining deities are without doubt specifically Eastern Slavic.

KHORS

Khors seems to be unique to the Eastern Slavs, and appears to be another version of Dazhbog, that is, the Sun god. The etymology of his name is Iranian again, and it appears to

¹⁵⁷ Veles as a major deity: J. Puhvel, ‘Indo-European Structure of the Baltic Pantheon’, pp. 84-85.

¹⁵⁸ Surja & Agni: *Rig Veda*, I.50 & 10.123 & 10.177. Agni as a son of Dyaus: M. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 1, Chapter VIII. par. 69.

¹⁵⁹ Perun-thunder, a link between the sky and Earth. This concept is evident in Indian tradition of setting up of three sacrificial fires: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, pp. 312-314, and in invoking the sky, atmosphere and earth in Ashvamedha rite (horse sacrifice): *ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁶⁰ There are some indications that Yarilo/Yarovit type of deity might have been an original and old Slavic war god. This hypothesis requires further research, but this is going beyond the scope of this work.

¹⁶¹ *Rig Veda*, p. 163.

be cognate to Iranian *khvar*, and the modern Persian *Khorsid*, both meaning the Sun.¹⁶² It is likely that some easternmost Slavic tribes, possibly those of Tmutorokan, were under much stronger Sarmatian influence than the rest of the Eastern Slavs. They might then worship the Sun god under its Iranian name. Khors' inclusion in a Kievan pantheon might have been an attempt to bring some tribal god into the mainstream and state organised cult. The cult is not Vladimir's invention, since the deity and its worship is mentioned in some other source. He appears in the *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, in reference to Vseslav, a Russian prince-wizard of the turn of 12th century, strongly suggesting his solar character.¹⁶³ In the 12th century *Hozhdyene Boguroditsi Po Mukam*, the idol of Khors, alongside other already mentioned deities was recorded.¹⁶⁴ The survival of Khors' memory into the Christian era suggests that the cult was widespread, and that under the name of Khors some sections of Eastern Slavic society worshipped the Sun.

SIMARGL

Simargl appears to be yet another direct borrowing from the Northern Iranians. In medieval Iranian and Caucasian mythology a bird-like demon with a dog's head is known as Simurgh, or Senmurv, and was the creature of a "good omen".¹⁶⁵ What the function of the Eastern Slavic Simargl was is unclear. In later Russian folklore, a similar-looking creature is sometimes called Paskudj, and it appeared as a decorative motif between the 9th and 13th centuries.¹⁶⁶ There is no evidence for this obscure cult anywhere else in Slavdom and it seems confined to its eastern branch. It is also hard to say how and why it was included in the Kievan pantheon.

MOKOSH

The interpretation of the Mokosh cult, the only female deity in Vladimir's pantheon, poses a great difficulty. Above all, the etymology of her name is unclear.¹⁶⁷ A common Indo-European etymology is unconvincing and speculative.¹⁶⁸ An Ugro-Finnian borrowing has been suggested, as there was a deity or demon called Moksha. However, borrowing from the Slavs by the Ugro-Finnian people also cannot be excluded. An Iranian origin of this goddess was also postulated by the Belorussian scholar Viktor Martynav.¹⁶⁹ In Russian folklore Mokosh is associated with a variety of activities such as shearing and spinning. There are also some links with sexuality and fertility. It is possible that Mokosh derives from the Slavic root *mok* or *mokr* - wet. In that case, she could have been somehow associated with "Mother Moist Earth".¹⁷⁰ Taking into consideration that there is no evidence of the personification of Mother Earth in Slavic mythology, the possibility is that Mokosh was Vladimir's invention. But it has to be acknowledged that the above argument is also of a highly speculative nature.

¹⁶² A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 131 & 138. Xurs/Xors - a sun in Iranian: A.P. Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom*, p. 394.

¹⁶³ SIC v. 665-666.

¹⁶⁴ S.A. Zenkovsky, ed., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles and Tales*, p. 123.

¹⁶⁵ P. Masson-Oursel & L. Morin, 'Mythology of Ancient Persia', in P. Grimal, *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology* (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1983 ed.), p. 315; and A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 142-143.

¹⁶⁶ 'Paskudj' in Russian folklore: G. Vernadsky, *Kievan Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976 ed.), p. 54.

¹⁶⁷ Mokosh - an Ugro-Finic etymology: Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs*, p. 87.

¹⁶⁸ Mokosh - an Indo-European etymology: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 153.

¹⁶⁹ V. V. Martynav, *Etnagenez Slavyan*, p. 7-8.

¹⁷⁰ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 153-154.

FOREIGN INFLUENCE ON SLAVIC RELIGION

There is no doubt that the long association between Slavs and Iranians left a visible mark on their beliefs. Their religion absorbed and incorporated numerous Iranian elements; nevertheless, Slavic beliefs had also developed on their own. In this context the deities like Svarog, Svarozhich, Dazhbog, Veles and Stribog should be regarded as Slavic, rather than Iranian. Only Khors and Simargl are clear and direct borrowings from the Northern Iranian pantheon. Finally, the knowledge about Mokosh and her cult is so obscure that any claims in regard to her remain in the sphere of speculation.

It is interesting to note that by an overwhelming majority, the champions of Slavic animism and supporters of Norman origin of an organised cult in Kiev never substantiate their claims, rarely going beyond a simple statement without any evidence being presented. Such statements were made by Alexinsky and Fedotov.¹⁷¹ For Vlasto and Turville-Petre, Veles was a rustic Slavic deity while Perun a "Varangian god". Additionally, Turville-Petre says that Perun is not well attested in Slavonic mythology,¹⁷² a claim already disproved by the above work. And in a recent publication, titled *Mother Russia*, Joanna Hubbs claimed strong Scandinavian elements in Vladimir's pantheon, and that Thor was a prototype for Perun. Again, no evidence was presented.¹⁷³ As far as the author's research goes, only Nora Chadwick attempted to prove her point in the 1945 publication on Russian history. However, before addressing Chadwick's claims, we shall analyse the Kievan cult in the context of possible Scandinavian influence.

Firstly, we can look into the organisational aspect of religious life in Kiev. One of the most common shortfalls in addressing the Slavic religion is a failure to recognize that, like any living religion, it was not a static phenomenon. Any religion serves the social function appropriate for the society that practices it, and both evolve together.¹⁷⁴ Hence in the clan-based, small tribal society,¹⁷⁵ there is no need for elaborate, highly organised and hierarchical cults. On the other hand, in supra-tribal society,¹⁷⁶ socio-political realities facilitate the emergence of more complex and hierarchical religions. During the migration period and shortly after - that is between the 6th and 9th centuries - the Slavic societies underwent transformation from a clan-based to a large tribal form of socio-political organisation. In

¹⁷¹ G. Alexinsky, *Slavonic Mythology*, p. 293-294; and G.P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind*, Vol. I, pp. 8, 19-20, 351.

¹⁷² A. P. Vlasto on Perun-Thor: A.P. Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom*, pp. 252 & 254, and Turville-Petre on Perun: E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myths and Religion of the North; Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, p. 96.

¹⁷³ J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, pp. 17-19, 74.

¹⁷⁴ On society and religion, see: E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1968 ed.), p. 30, 47, 347.

¹⁷⁵ To clarify the terminology, the term "clan based" or "small tribal" society is applied to the socio-political entity incorporating number of clans into small unit of *vicinatus* known as *opole* in Polish covering around 75-80 sq. km. The number of *vicinatus*' would form a small tribe of the size between 150-300 sq. km, while a "great tribe" would be around 2000-4000 sq. km.: Z. Kobyliński, 'Settlement Structures in Central Europe at the Beginning of the Middle Ages', in P. Urbańczyk, ed., *Origins of Central Europe* (Warszawa, Poland: Scientific Society of Polish Archaeologists, 1997), p. 109.

¹⁷⁶ A "Supra-tribal" society is a large tribal and regional unit combining a number of smaller tribes, ie., medieval Obodrite principality. Its equivalent in the West would be an average duchy, such as Saxony and Bavaria or Scania and Zealand in Scandinavia: R. Zaroff, 'Socio-political Developments Among the Polabian Slavs (Wends) between the Eighth and Twelfth Centuries - An Obodrite Case', *Proceedings of the University of Queensland History Research Group*, Number 8, 1997, pp. 10-11.

the case of the Eastern Slavs, this was partly a result of their expansion to the north and east¹⁷⁷. The process is facilitated when people are on the move, colonising new territories, encountering new challenging environments, circumstances and often hostile locals. This undoubtedly created a need for better hierarchical organisation and more clearly defined leadership. Also, during that period, Eastern Slavs came into contact with, and often were subjugated by, nomadic or semi-nomadic people such as Huns, Avars and Khazars.¹⁷⁸ This also stimulated internal socio-political changes. Consequently, by the 9th century, Eastern Slavs were already organised into supra-tribal political units, such as: Polyane, Kriviche, Drevlyane and others.¹⁷⁹ In this context, the religion of the Eastern Slavs had to serve new and different functions, and became more organised, elaborate, and hierarchical.

It has to be acknowledged that Scandinavian military organisation and prowess, as well as their mercantile spirit, played a significant part in the foundation of the Kievan Rus'. Nevertheless, the Scandinavian impact on the Eastern Slavs is frequently exaggerated. It is often overlooked that the Scandinavians did not have much to offer in political and religious spheres. Above all, Sweden did not exist as such by then, and on its territory there were a number of independent supra-tribal political units.¹⁸⁰ Those principalities were more or less on a par with the large, regional, tribal political entities of Eastern Slavdom. In the religious sphere, Scandinavians were also on a similar level. Their mythology was often as inconsistent as in the case of the Slavs. It is worthwhile to note, that formal priesthood did not exist in Scandinavia until the 10th-11th century. Furthermore, Scandinavians did not have temples and worshipped their gods at open shrines. It is commonly accepted that later temples and the priesthood (from subsequent centuries) came into being as a result of unification trends and to some extent as a response to the ideological challenge of Christianity.¹⁸¹ So, there is no reason to believe that the evolution of Eastern Slavic religion was the result of any direct Scandinavian influence.

Secondly, we can look into the cult of Perun and how it acquired its war god characteristics and developed henotheistic tendencies. It is hard to say when the atmospheric functions of this deity were surpassed by the military functions. Nevertheless, it is likely that it took place just before the Slavic migration began. This is supported by the foregoing evidence from the Hannoverian Wendland, in which Perun was conceptually perceived as a similar deity to the Germanic Thor/Donar, and where later contacts with Eastern Slavdom could be safely excluded. It seems natural that the warlike deities would become of greater importance in the societies engaged in frequent warfare. This is the case with the Eastern Slavs during the northern and eastern expansion of their migration period, as well as a result of later constant conflicts with the people of the steppes. A similar development took place among the Southern Slavs, who conquered and colonised the Balkans. This is confirmed by the previously cited account by Procopius that their dominant deity was a

¹⁷⁷ Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs*, pp. 45-51.

¹⁷⁸ The Eastern Slavs and the nomads: D. MacKenzie & M.W. Curran, *A History of Russia, The Soviet Union and Beyond* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1993), pp. 16-20.

¹⁷⁹ The 9th century Eastern Slavic political entities: this is confirmed by archaeological data and by the Russian Primary Chronicle, where large tribes like Polyane or Kriviche are treated as single socio-political units: *ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

¹⁸⁰ Socio-Political structure of the early medieval Sweden: I. Andersson, *A History of Sweden* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970 ed.), pp. 22-23, 32-35.

¹⁸¹ H.R.E. Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia*, pp. 139-142, and in: J. Puhvel, *Indo-European Structure of the Baltic Pantheon*, p. 76.

thunder god - no doubt Perun himself. On the other hand, it appears that among the Polish tribes, the cult of Perun never became dominant. Simply because they were surrounded by fellow Slavs and, as a consequence, sheltered from other hostile people. This of course does not imply that inter-tribal warfare among the Slavs did not exist. It did exist, but such inter-tribal conflicts were of a different nature, magnitude and consequence. A similar development took place among the people of Scandinavia, where the cult of Thor gained prominence from the outset of the Viking era,¹⁸² that is, when warfare became of greater importance to their society.

Thirdly, we will explore the close association of the Perun cult and the oak tree. There is evidence that sacred and consecrated oaks were situated in some form of enclosure, usually surrounded by a ditch, a stone ring or a fence.¹⁸³ Here sacrifices and offerings were made to Perun. The most common sacrificial animal was a cock, but sometimes on special occasions a bull, bear or he-goat. The sacrificial animals were killed and consumed at the communal eating event. It was believed that such a feast would strengthen the bonds between the group's members.¹⁸⁴ This association clearly derives from the common Indo-European heritage, shared by most European people. The oak was a holy tree, not only of the Germanic Thor/Donar but also of the Italic Jupiter, Baltic Perkunas and Celtic Taranis. Also, Greek Zeus was associated with this tree.¹⁸⁵ This universal association of thunder gods with an oak could be explained in the following terms. As oaks are quite tall and large trees, they must have been struck by lightning more often than any other trees. So, this coincidence must have been seen by ancient Indo-Europeans as being caused by divine power. There is also a linguistic association of thunder gods with an oak tree. The Indo-European root "perg" - to strike, found in Perun and Perkunas, also appears in oak-related terms. In Latin an oak is *quercus*, where the Indo-European "p" was replaced by the Latin "q". In Celtic, *hercos* means oak forest, where "h" replaced "p", while in Gothic, "fairguni", means "hill covered with oaks", with a typical Germanic change of the Indo-European "p" into a Germanic "f".¹⁸⁶

Fourthly, in popular Slavic mythology Perun's magic weapon was a bow and arrow.¹⁸⁷ The Slavs believed that arrow-like stones were Perun's thunderbolts. They were called *stryela* - arrow, arrow-bolt, and had certain magic properties when found.¹⁸⁸ Evidence for this belief is overwhelming, and comes from the Ukraine, Slovenia, Serbia and Poland.¹⁸⁹ This again echoes the ancient Indo-European tradition, as arrows were associated with the Indian god Parjanya.¹⁹⁰ At the same time, the most recognisable attribute of the Baltic Perkunas was an axe,¹⁹¹ the same as the Germanic Thor/Donar who wielded and threw an axe or stone hammer.¹⁹²

¹⁸² H.R.E. Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia*, p. 132.

¹⁸³ J. Puhvel, *Indo-European Structure of the Baltic Pantheon*, p. 77.

¹⁸⁴ M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, p. 166.

¹⁸⁵ Worship of Thunder God and its association with the oaks among the Balts: M. Gimbutas, *The Balts*, p. 198; among the Celts: P. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 48; among the Germans: H.R.E. Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, p.86.; and among the Greeks: A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 48; and among the Slavs: *ibid.*, pp. 47-51.

¹⁸⁶ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 47-48.

¹⁸⁷ M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, p. 165.

¹⁸⁸ *ibidem*.

¹⁸⁹ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 65.

¹⁹⁰ *Rig Veda*, 6.75.

¹⁹¹ M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, p. 165.

¹⁹² P. Grappin, 'Germanic Lands: The Mortal Gods', p. 373; also in: & H.R.E. Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia*, pp. 132-133.

Fifthly, we can explore a shrine devoted to Vladimir's pantheon. Although we have no description of the Kievan site, presumably a similar shrine was excavated near Novgorod. It is known from historical records that Novgorod had a shrine for Perun¹⁹³, and the site excavated nearby at a place called Peryn' must be the old Perun's cult centre of the Novgorodians. It was an open, circular site 33 metres in diameter enclosed by a ditch, in which a number of sacred fires were burnt. A number of large post holes and centrally located fragments of rectangular stone were interpreted as being bases for the idols.¹⁹⁴ A similar, but smaller site was excavated near Житомир (Zhitomir) on the river Гнилопята (Khnylopiata) in Ukraine which dated from the second half of the 9th century.¹⁹⁵ Numerous sites, similar to the foregoing, were unearthed all over Slavdom. Just to list a few, there were two enclosures at Trzebiatów and one at Smoldzin dated to the 9th and 10th centuries. Stone encircled sites were located on mount Chełmno, mount Góra Grodowa, mount Paleni near Wapiennica in Silesia and on the mount Świąty Krzyż in Kielce district (all in Poland - the 9th - 10th centuries). Furthermore in Bohemia, circular, ditched sites were unearthed at Stará Kouřim and at Pohansko, both from the 9th century.¹⁹⁶ Generally speaking, the early Slavs did not build temples, but neither did the Scandinavians before the 10th - 11th centuries.¹⁹⁷ As a matter of fact, the early ancient Indians, Iranians, Celts and Romans also worshipped their deities in the open. For many Indo-European people, sacred places were often: trees or groves; springs and lakes; or open, fenced or stone encircled enclosures.¹⁹⁸ Hence, there are no reasons to believe that the open, circular shrines of Eastern Slavdom bear any Scandinavian influence. The wooden, or sometimes stone idols - often with a moustache - are also common finds across Slavdom, dating from the 6th to 11th centuries.¹⁹⁹ Here again there is no evidence of Norse influence.

Now, returning to Nora Chadwick: a major problem with her interpretation is her initial assumption that Scandinavian pre-Christian religion was somehow superior to that of the Baltic and Slavic peoples, an issue already briefly addressed. In her interpretation of the 971 treaty with the Byzantines, she postulated that a parallel exists with an Icelandic oath taken on a golden ring, in which Freyr, Njördr and an unspecified "almighty god" were invoked.²⁰⁰ She claimed that the name of Veles derives from the Scandinavian Völsi: a horse penis and a symbol of fertility from the *Saga Of King Olaf Tryggvason*. Then by associating Völsi with the fertility attributes of the god Freyr, she equated Veles with Freyr. In the next step of her reasoning, she introduced Thor as an "almighty god" and equated him with Perun. This was then followed by the interpretation of a passage in the Russo-Byzantine treaty, "slain by their own weapon", as a reference to Odin/Wodan. Finally, she arrived at the conclusion that the 971 treaty was really sworn on Odin, Thor and Freyr.²⁰¹ However,

¹⁹³ RPC, year 980.

¹⁹⁴ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, pp. 54-56.

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁹⁶ Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs*, pp. 92 & 96-98; and A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, p. 177.

¹⁹⁷ H.R.E. Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia*, pp. 139-142.

¹⁹⁸ Open shrines of early Vedic India: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 93; of the Scythians: Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book IV. 60-64 (p.290); of the Celts: A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 61-65, 84; of the Romans: G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, p. 115.

¹⁹⁹ Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs*, pp. 94-96.

²⁰⁰ Icelandic oath: N. K. Chadwick, *The Beginnings of Russian History: An Enquiry into Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966 ed.), pp. 84-89.

²⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 86, and for the Völsi story, see: R. Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 1993 ed.), pp. 365-366.

this interpretation poses serious problems. Previously cited passage from *The Russian Primary Chronicle* „да будем золотые яко золото” (*da budem zoloti yako zoloto* - to become yellow as a), already explained in terms of sickness as a punishment for breaking the oath, has no conceptual link with the Icelandic golden ring. A brief account of laying some gold under the Perun idol by prince Igor in 945, as a part of the oath, is hard to interpret and explain. Unfortunately, *The Russian Primary Chronicle* does not specify whether the “gold” of Igor’s was personal jewellery, some booty or some other artefacts. Consequently, it does not offer any clues which could assist in the interpretation of its symbolism, and it could be freely interpreted or linked with most of the religions. Using Chadwick’s logic we may come to the conclusion that the Kievan cult was influenced by Roman Catholicism. After all, Catholics are known to make golden votive offerings to their Saints.

Although, the authenticity and antiquity of the Völsi story has been questioned,²⁰² its links with the god Freyr seem plausible. Nevertheless, this interpretation fails to explain how Freyr under the name Vélinas, became a major deity of the Baltic people. And how, under the Slavic name Veles, it became known among the Western and Southern Slavs (see earlier paragraph on Volos). In a subsequent step in her study, Chadwick conveniently omitted Njördr and more or less out of the blue introduced Odin and Thor - neither of which is mentioned by name in either the Icelandic oath or the Russo-Byzantine treaty. Hence, taking into consideration that the entire interpretation is based on a lengthy sequence of highly speculative arguments it should rather be disregarded.

Also, Nora Chadwick claimed that the name of the Kievan deity Khors derives from the Anglo-Saxon *hors* or Old Norse *hross* - both meaning: horse - and that Khors did not appear in other sources. Then by association of horse with the horse penis she also linked Khors with both Völsi and Volos.²⁰³ Evidently, she was unaware that this god was mentioned together with Veles and other deities in *Hozhdyene Boguroditsi Po Mukam*, and once more in the *The Song of Igor’s Campaign*. Above all, taking into consideration the strong and undisputable Northern Iranian influence on the Slavic religion and languages, the Iranian etymology of Khors and his solar association appear to be more plausible.

Nevertheless, taking into consideration that the Varangians and Slavs coexisted for centuries in the land of Rus’, we could conjecture that some diffusion of religious elements took place. For example, a number of ship burials were reported in Russia. This is obviously a Scandinavian custom with similar burials found all over Scandinavia, in Iceland, Brittany and England.²⁰⁴ It is hard to say who was buried there, but it is likely that at least in some cases the Slavic elite might have adopted these Scandinavian burial customs.

It is possible that prince Igor’s act of laying down his weapons under Perun’s idol²⁰⁵ reflected a Scandinavian ritual. All Germanic people revered their swords, resulting in many of them being endowed with magical and supernatural powers.²⁰⁶ On the other hand, other people like the Scythians worshipped the sword as a war god symbol, and are known to perform the sacrifice of a horse and cattle in it’s honour.²⁰⁷ As a matter of fact, “celebration” of weapons could be viewed as any warriors’ ritual, not exclusively Germanic.

²⁰² R. Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, pp. 365-366.

²⁰³ N. K. Chadwick, *The Beginnings of Russian History...*, pp. 89-90.

²⁰⁴ H.R.E. Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia*, p. 113.

²⁰⁵ RPC, year 945.

²⁰⁶ Germanic custom of swearing oath on the sword (from Ammianus Marcellinus): N. K. Chadwick, *The Beginnings of Russian History...*, p. 85 n.

²⁰⁷ Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book IV, 59-64 (p. 289-290).

On the contrary, there is some evidence of slavization of the Varangian beliefs in Kievan Rus'. For example, according to Al Masudi, wives of deceased prominent Slavs were burned alive with their husbands.²⁰⁸ There is no reason to doubt the account, since similar customs were practiced by Indians and Sarmatians.²⁰⁹ However, an account by another Arab trader of the early 10th century, referring to the Varangian Russes, tells us that they buried alive the wives of important men upon these men's death.²¹⁰ There is no evidence for that practice among any other Germanic people, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that it was adopted by Varangians from the Eastern Slavs. It is also worth noting that, according to "The Russian Primary Chronicle", treaties with the Byzantines in 907, 945 and 971 were sworn by the Russes on Perun.²¹¹ Regardless of conceptual similarities between the Germanic Thor and the Slavic Perun, the very fact that they swore by a Slavic rather than Scandinavian deity suggests a high degree of slavization of the Varangian beliefs.

CONCLUSION

In summary, it has to be acknowledged that the reconstruction of the "core" Slavic beliefs (presented above) may be a subject of criticism, and certain details subject to different interpretations. Nevertheless, it could be said that the pre-migration religion of Slavs was clearly and deeply rooted in the common Indo-European tradition. In this period, the Slavic religion shows a certain conceptual uniformity but was not a single set of beliefs. It displayed a very strong and indisputable Northern Iranian influence, in both religious concepts and in the origins of many deities.

As the foregoing work shows, the alleged animism of pre-Christian Slavic beliefs appeared to be a hard dying legacy of biases of the two German historians of 30's and early 40's, Wienecke and Franz; and also of the general lack of serious research on the subject.

Moreover, Vladimir's pantheon was not a foreign, Scandinavian elite cult. It is reasonable to assume that certain Norman elements were incorporated into the Kievan cult, but their impact is hardly traceable. In principle, Vladimir's pantheon was a response to internal socio-political changes and the external needs of the emerging Eastern Slavic state. It was a henotheistic and dynastic cult focussing on the deity which best served state building purposes - Perun. It was a product of the long evolution of the Eastern Slavic religion which in post-migration times diverged from relative conceptual unity of the common Slavic beliefs. Eastern Slavic beliefs evolved in specific geographic, ethnic and political conditions, characteristic of Eastern Europe. Its development was the response to those circumstances. Serving new needs and purposes, the Kievan cult had to incorporate new attributes and acquire a new dimension. Nevertheless, those new elements were drawn mainly from Slavic and Northern Iranian heritage, rather than from the Scandinavian one.

²⁰⁸ Al Masudi account in G. Vernadsky & R.T. Fisher, Jr., *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917*, p. 9.

²⁰⁹ Burning the wives among the Indians: Z. Váňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs*, p. 85; among the Sarmatians, see: T. Sulimírski, *The Sarmatians*, p. 50.

²¹⁰ Ibn-Rusta on Varangian Russes: G. Vernadsky & R.T. Fisher, Jr., *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917*, p. 10.

²¹¹ RPC, years 907, 945 and 971.

Abbreviations

HB - Helmold's of Bossau's *Chronica Slavorum*

RPC - *Повѣсть временныхъ Лѣтъ* (*Povest' vremennykh Let - The Russian Primary Chronicle*)

SIC - *Слово о полку Игореве* (*The Song of the Igor's Campaign*)

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**Organizirani poganski kult v kijevski državi.
Iznajdba tuje elite ali razvoj krajevnega izročila?**

Roman Zaroff

Članek kaže, da so bila glavna božanstva panteona Vladimirja Velikega iz 10. st., ki jih omenjajo kronika "Povest' vremennyh let" in drugi pisni viri, skupna vsem Slovanom ali pa vsaj vsem vzhodnim Slovanom. To kaže, da so jih Slovani poznali in častili že pred prihodom Skandinavcev. Zapletenost kijevskega kulta je bila verjetneje v neposredni povezavi z razvojem kijevske države kakor z nordijskim vplivom, ki ga je sploh težko slediti. Skandinavska verovanja in kulti so bili enakovredni slovanskim in zato niso predstavljali privlačnega zglada. Zato je bil nordijski vpliv na slovanska verovanja zelo majhen, če je sploh bil. Še več, zdi se, da božanstva, kot so Svarog, Perun, Veles in Dažbog, konceptualno izvirajo še iz obdobja pred razselitvijo Slovanov, in globoko koreninijo v indoevropskem izročilu. Prav tako se zdi, da so bili Slovani v času pred razselitvijo pod razmeroma močnim iranskim (sarmatskim) vplivom. Ta je bil vedno močnejši proti vzhodu, kjer so bili stiki s Sarmati tesnejši in bolj pogosti. To se odraža v številnih idejah, pojmi in imenih bogov, ki so si jih Slovani izposodili od Irancev. Članek kaže, da sta bila tudi bogova Hors in Simargl jasno iranskega izvora in da ni prepričljivega dokaza, da bi ju častili tudi zunaj področja vzhodnih Slovanov. Etimologije imen Stribog in Mokoš so dvomljive in čeprav so ju morda častili tudi drugi Slovani, so dokazi zato še šibki. Članek dodatno dokazuje, da sta antropomorfizacija ter personifikacija slovanskih božanstev obstajali že pred slovansko razselitvijo in da mnenje o animistični naravi slovanske religije temelji na napačnih ter predsodkov polnih domnevah.