

## **Pagan Beliefs in Ancient Russia.**

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Slavic mythology is a difficult subject. The historical evidence is fragmented, with many conflicting sources and multiple later literary inventions. This is a brief reconstruction of ancient Russian mythology.

The first archaeological findings that can be attributed to Slavs date to approximately 6<sup>th</sup> c. AD. The origins of Slavs are still debated. The pagan Slavic society was an oral society. Christianity, which introduced writing, was more concerned with eradication rather than preservation of pagan beliefs. No one really tried to preserve and record whatever remained, until late period. Then, there is some evidence recorded from the Germans who visited Russia in 18<sup>th</sup> c., but a lot of it is based on the written 15<sup>th</sup> c. sources, rather than eyewitness accounts.

The 19<sup>th</sup> c. Europe saw renewed interest in folklore, and combined with rise of nationalism and need for developed mythos, a lot of what was left was recorded, but a lot was altered to make it more palatable, and questionable things (especially with fertility rituals) were edited out as not to besmirch the emerging national character.

During the Soviet time, the study of any religion was problematic, due to mandatory atheism. Eventually, the study of the early Slavic traditions was permitted, and even encouraged, but, everything had to pass stringent censorship rules, and could not contradict Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

So, people who had the material (in the USSR) could not publish, and people who actually could publish (in the West) did not have access to the materials.

After the fall of the USSR and the iron curtain, the situation changed. While you could pretty much publish whatever you want, the lack of funding to the academic institutions compromised scholarly peer reviewed publications. At the same time, rapid development of post Soviet neopaganism and search for a new post Soviet national identities created a huge market for a well developed mythology, and tons of books were published and are still published, some of which are poorly researched and some are just fictional.

### **Whose god is this, anyway?**

To complicate that matter further: there are three major Slavic Language groups: Eastern, Western, and Southern, and each is subdivided even further. For example, Eastern group contains Russian, Ukrainian, and Byelorussian languages. There are many smaller languages and dialects, the farther back in time we go, the more subdivided the people were, in the 7-8<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were dozens of Slavic tribes, all with their own takes on beliefs and religion.

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Even when there is solid written or archaeological evidence, it is difficult to attribute it to the correct people/ culture.

### **So what do we have?**

There is no good well preserved source on old Slavic beliefs, and evidence is extremely fragmentary at best:

-Old Russian chronicles, and records of the church's admonitions against paganism from 11-14<sup>th</sup> c., usually limited to mentioning the deity's name only.

-Accounts from catholic missionaries about religion of the Western Slavs, in the lands that bordered German speaking states. These may actually describe the celebrations and the holidays, but the descriptions are fragmented.

-Later Russian and Polish historians from 15-17<sup>th</sup> c, such as Jan Dlugosz and Innocent Gisel, who attempted the earliest reconstruction of the pagan mythology, based on the surviving remnants, and tried to find exact parallels to the Classical mythology.

-Topography and place names.

-Folklore, especially the songs and rituals.

### **The development of cosmology and mythology can be roughly divided into several stages:**

**Stone/Bronze Ages** (prior to 6<sup>th</sup> c.) - development of animal cults:

- **heavenly deer/reindeer** – mother and daughter goddesses of fertility, which Rybakov sees as the precursors of the Rozhanitsi

- **great lizard /serpent** - denizen and ruler of the underworld who swallows the night sun, who later becomes the Yashcher, god of the waters

- **bear** – later becomes fused with Veles, god of cattle and wealth, also god of the dead/underworld.

**Religion prior to the Kievan state** (6<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> c.) difficult to research and systematize : many local gods, spirits of mountains, rivers, streams etc. Some gods attain regional prominence. Similar or even the same deities are known by different names in different places.

**Kievan Rus** (10<sup>th</sup> c.) – a well established state, with a well-established pantheon. Names of gods and descriptions of rites appear in chronicles and accounts of foreign travelers. For example:

907AD (from *Primary Chronicle*) the Rus (Oleg, Igor's regent) swear by their weapons, Perun, and Volos the cattle god during the peace treaty with Byzantium

922 AD- Ibn Fadlan, an Arabic traveler, describes many Slavic customs including burial rites with human sacrifices (although he probably observed Rus, as in the Varangians, not Slavs, which complicates things even further)

945 AD- (from *Primary Chronicle*) Igor's men swear at the statue of Perun (pagans) and at the St. Elijah's church (the Christians) during the peace talks with Byzantium. (later that year - murder of Prince Igor and cruel revenge of Princess Olga, which actually according to some researchers, recreated the appropriate funeral sacrifices).

946 AD- Princess Olga becomes a Christian

971 AD (from *Primary Chronicle*), Svyatoslav's treaty with Byzantium, swear by Perun and Volos the cattle god.

980 AD- (from *Primary chronicle*), Prince Vladimir performs a religious reform, with "state-required" worship of the following gods:

Perun – thunder god

Stribog - probably wind god

Dazhbog - sun or sunlight

Chors - god of sun

Simargl - winged dog, god of vegetation

Makosh - goddess of fortune and harvest

Then sends Dobrynya his maternal uncle to Novgorod, to establish the worship of Perun there.

983 AD – a Christian Varangian is sacrificed to Perun in Kiev

988 AD – Christian reform of Prince Vladimir, with mandatory conversion of population to Christianity. Sends his uncle Dobrynya back to topple the idols he established mere seven years earlier.

***Dvoyeveriye*** (time of dual faith, 11- 14<sup>th</sup> c, and even later)

- pagan beliefs with Christian veneer

-Merging of the old deities with the new saints

-Breaking down of the old calendar customs, and sliding of the pagan holidays around to accommodate the church holidays

-persistence of old pagan symbols in everyday life and even in decoration of churches (thunder and solar signs, etc)

- the admonitions against the pagan remnants continue.

- *volkhvy* (priests, diviners) – persisted, four were burned in Novgorod as late as 1218 AD (in 912 AD, as per Russian Primary Chronicle, they predicted death of Oleg)

-led an uprising in Suzdal' in 1024 and in Rostov in 1071.

### **Who were the gods?**

***Svarog*** - Not a part of Vladimir's pantheon. In *Primary Chronicle* dated by 1114 year entry, equated with Hepheastus. Probably was a sky god (*svarga* in Sanskrit means sky/one of the heavenly planes), father of a sun god, etc., also father of fire, which is referred to as *Svarozhich* in the *Primary Chronicle*.

According to Rybakov, is also a cultural hero, who instituted monogamy, taught people how to forge iron and plough fields. Defeated a great serpent. Father of *Dazhbog*. Was later replaced

by Sts. Kuz'ma and Dem'yan, who later became one semi-pagan deity known as *Kuz'modem'yan the Smith*. (similarity of the name *Kuz'ma* with *kuznya*, or forge, smithy).

***Dazhbog*** in the *Primary Chronicle* from the 1114 year entry is equated with Greek Helios, deus dator, or the giving god. Son of *Svarog*. Supposed to be the god of the Sun and light, similar to the Greek Apollo. The Kievan princes were referred to as the grandchildren of *Dazhbog*. Traces of *Dazhbog* are now most prominent in Serbian mythology, where he's quite different, lame god of the underworld, not necessarily evil.

***Hors*** is probably another sun god, perhaps of the sun itself, the celestial body. In the 1114 year entry from the *Primary Chronicle* is also listed as a thunder god, together with *Perun*, stating that *Perun* is Greek, and *Hors* – Jewish, (probably Khazar), or from the steppe region, which corresponds to the hypothesis that *Hors* is borrowed from the Iranian speaking people.

Interestingly, there are two sun gods in the territory where the sun was originally female, (the moon was male). There are even theories that *Dazhbog* and *Hors* are the two names (Slavic and Iranian) of the same god, basing it on the fact that these two names are the only ones not separated with a conjunction in the *Primary Chronicle*, and probably refer to the same deity. Alternatively, some differentiate them as the gods of the sun itself, and the god of the light. Another hypothesis is that this represents the sun in its benevolent daytime aspect, and more chthonic malevolent aspect of the nighttime sun (sun trapped in the underworld).

***Stribog*** – grandfather of the winds. Very little information exists, and a lot has been inferred and reconstructed. Inferred to as the master of the winds, and more broadly, may have been an “atmospheric” god. Had a destroyer, war like aspect. Also lives beyond the sea (the winds are mentioned as coming from the sea or from beyond the sea. The proposed etymology ranges old Slavic words for “to destroy”, “wind that bring bad weather”, etc.

There is a theory that after the Christianization of Rus he became equated with St. Cassian. In folk hagiology/demonology, St. Cassian is the master of the winds, which he keeps in a bag, he lives in faraway cave, is punished in hell except on his name day (February 29), alternatively, is punishing the devil in hell, and gets one day off every four years (in his absence, the hell is guarded by the 12 apostles), is the gatekeeper of hell (as opposed to St. Peter, who is the gatekeeper of heaven, had venomous breath and an evil eye, etc. He is also connected with cults of the malevolent dead (*zalozhniye pokoyniki*). Indirectly, in Slavic belief, the winds are connected with the souls of the dead. (Interestingly, the vampires/malevolent souls in areas of Russia and in modern Romania are called *Strig*, *strigoi* – though I believe this is purely coincidental as *Strigoi* is known to derive from Latin *striga* (hag) and *strix* (owl)).

### ***Perun***

God of thunder and lightning, the supreme deity of Vlainmir's pantheon. Idols of *Perun* were made of oak, with silver head and gold mustache, in the later chronicles dated from end of 15<sup>th</sup> century the idol of *Perun* is depicted as a naked man with a spear and a shield.

Procopius in 545AD describes their social structure and beliefs:

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“ For these nations, the Sclaveni and the Antae, are not ruled by one man, but they have lived from of old under a democracy, and consequently everything which involves their welfare, whether for good or for ill, is referred to the people. It is also true that in all other matters, practically speaking, these two barbarian peoples have had from ancient times the same institutions and customs. For they believe that one god, the maker of lightning, is alone lord of all things, and they sacrifice to him cattle and all other victims”.

Main holidays were in July, with some evidence of human sacrifices. After the Christian reform *Perun* was quickly replaced by St. Elijah the Prophet (Elijah the Thunderer), who rode across the skies in his chariot of fire. *Perun* started merging with Elijah even before 988 – in 945 AD the pagan Rus envoys to Byzantium swore by *Perun*, the Christians swore in the church of St. Elijah. Elijah’s day was celebrated on July 20. His day of the week was Thursday (common for a European thunder god).

According to Klejn, *Perun* was universally prominent in the Slavic mythology (traces of *Perun* found as far as Caucasus folklore – Chechens and Vaynakhs), was god of thunder, lightning, and, therefore, rain, and was a prominent figure in the fertility cults, as a dying and resurrecting deity similar to Osiris and Dionysus. In his book, he associated the surviving Russian celebrations of Ivan Kupalo (summer solstice), Maslenitza (Mardi Gras) and others as remnants of the *Perun*’s cult, displaced and distorted by the Russian Orthodox holiday calendar.

### *Veles/Volos*

Even though not included in the pagan reform of the Prince Vladimir, was a major deity. ( Rus envoys swore by the names of *Perun* and *Veles*.

Was also known as “*skotiy bog*” or cattle god. May have descended from the Stone Age cult of the bear. Traditionally, a bear paw was hung in the barn to protect the cattle, which was also referred to as “*skotiy bog*”. He was the god of wealth, abundance, and ancestors (underworld). His main holidays were between January 1 and 6, and also during Maslenitsa (Mardi Gras), when the bears were thought to awaken from winter sleep. After the Christian reform, he was replaced by St. Vlas (St. Blaise)

According to Klejn, *Veles* is indeed god of the dead and the underworld, and parallels can be seen in Baltic mythology (*Velis*, *Velnus*). St. Blaise is a patron of cattle in Europe, which started prior to Christianization of Russia, the cult of Blaise, came to Russia from southern Slavs (Bulgaria), in Bulgarian, Blaise became Vlas, and in Russia, Vlas became Volos. The whole cattle/ animal connection is exacerbated as *Volos* in Russian also means “hair”, and St. Blaise got fused with the ancient bear cult. Many researches now separate *Volos* and *Veles*.

The Holiday associated with *Veles* are in the winter (between Christmas and Epiphany) – this time is traditionally when the borders between this and the underworld are blurred, and in April, when cattle is first let out to pasture (St. George Day)

(in some reconstructions, *Perun* and *Veles* and antagonists, it is not well supported, and while interesting, is most likely erroneous).

### ***Makosh* or *Mokosh* or Mat' Syra Zemlya**

(Mother Damp Earth)– goddess of home, good fortune and harvest, deity of women and women's work, also known as a spinner, similar to the Greek Tyche. Later merged with the cult of St. Paraskeva-Friday, and was known as St. Friday. Depictions of Makosh on ritual embroidery persist well into XIX century. Cult of Paraskeva with 12 sacred Fridays was known into 19<sup>th</sup> c.. She was also probably a patron (matron?) deity of trade, as traditionally, Friday was a market day in Russia, and numerous Sr. Friday churches in the market places exist (one of the earliest ones, from 1207 was build in Novgorod).

Also associated with worship of wells and springs, has similarities with Mother Holle from Grimm's tales.

### ***Simargl* (occasionally referred to as *Pereplut*)**

*Simargl*, is supposedly depicted as a winged dog or a griffin is one of the gods of Vladimir's pantheon, related to Iranian *Senmurv* or *Simurg*. He is a deity of vegetation and roots, and is associated with vily/rusalki cults and *Rusalii* celebrations. Other functions attributed to Simargl : fire and fire worship, and some see him as messenger of the gods.

### **Other gods, not included into Vladimir's pantheon:**

***Rod*** – is always mentioned with the *rozhanitsi*. Rybakov tried to make him the main god, the creator, and the progenitor. Interestingly, the only mentions of *Rod* are in church writings which blast the honoring of *Rod* and *Rozhanitsi*, and the feasts for them, as late as 15<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, as the church was so concerned, he must be important.

*Rod* is not known to Western Slavs. Commonly, is conceptualized as an ancestral spirit, later a house spirit, *domovoy*. *Rod* is still very common Slavic word root, effectively dealing with birth. Interestingly, it can also mean fate ( *na rodu napisano*, *rod*, *rodimchik* is also a word for stroke (fatal stroke was considered a desirable form of quick easy death))

I like Klejn's suggestion that *Rod* is personification of fate, personal fortune. In his reconstruction, it is a later deity/concept (as in 6<sup>th</sup> c. according to Procopius, the Slavs did not believe in fate), which came to Russia after after Christianization, when Greek literature became available, and astrology and horoscopes became popular. He states that *rodopochitanie* – literal translation of Greek word *geneology*, also means *honoring or Rod*. In Chekh – *Rodowestnik* means astrologer, in Polish *rodowieszczek*.

***Rozhanitsi*** - always paired and unnamed, often connected to *Rod*, probably are analogous to the fates or parkas. The *Azbukovnik* – the medieval Russian encyclopedia from 11- 13<sup>th</sup> c. states that *Rozhanitsy* are Greek.

Rybakov describes them as a mother-daughter pair, sometimes known as *Lada*, older, and *Lyelya*, younger. With advent of Christianity became merged with St. Anne and St. Mary. *Lada*

was a patron deity of marriage. Images of the Rozhanitsi persist into XIX century. This interpretation is contested today.

Southern Slavs have names for their fates: *Srecha* and *Nesrecha* - fortune and misfortune (they are also spinners, Serbs have a saying: *nesrecha tanko prede* – misfortune spins a thin thread. Eastern Slavs also names them in pairs, in fairy tales, such as *Dolya* and *Nedolya*, or *Schastye* and *Neschastye*, which probably were at some point *rozhanitsy*.

Interestingly, the feasts to *Rod* and *Rozhanitsi* were celebrated rather openly, sometimes with the participation of the Orthodox priests.

### **Other deities, mentioned in the period sources that may be attributed to Eastern Slavs**

*Div/Diy*, may be an equivalent of the sky god of Baltic mythology, is mentioned in the “Tale of Igor’s campaign”

#### **Plausible Deities:**

*Ovsen’* - can’t find anything definite about this deity. Klejn very briefly mentions the name and states that it is related to the Sanskrit *Ushas*, the goddess of dawn, and the name itself is common in refrain of the ritual songs.

*Lada* and *Lelya*. Very controversial . Rybakov considers them a pair of mother daughter fertility/matrimony goddesses, similar to Greek pairs of *Demeter/Persephone*, or *Leto/Artemis*, and in his reconstruction they are the names of the *rozhanitsy*. He relies on Polish chronicles from 15<sup>th</sup> c, of Jan Dlugosz, among others, where the names of *Lado*, *Ileli*, *Poleli* is mentioned. Later in the to the Russian *Primary Chronicle*, by Innokentiy Gizel dated from 1674 and first published in Kiev, reiterated the same, but it is likely he used the earlier 15<sup>th</sup> c. material, and did not record his own observations.

Some think that these names are the nonsense words from the refrains of many ritual songs associated with fertility and marriage were interpreted as names of the gods/goddesses.

Currently, the pendulum is swinging the other way, and, apparently there is some evidence that there was a *Lada* (holidays celebrated May 25 to June 25) , a goddess of marriage, and *Lyelya* (celebrated April 22).

#### **Porbably reconstructed:**

*Chernobog* (and, *Belobog*) may have been epithets of a god, used as not to use the name itself – a common practice. Despite prominence in popular culture, not actually Russian gods. In period, Chernobog mentioned by Helmhold (12<sup>th</sup> c.) in *Chronica Slavorum*, which talks about Wends, North-Western Slavs, not Russians.

**Yarilo** - name of the effigy during celebrations of fertility. Some associated *Yarilo* with Baltic *Yarovit* (*Gerovit*). However, the existence of *Yarilo* as a god, is questionable, and the name may have referred to the holiday or the straw doll itself. (Klejn thinks that the *Yarilo* referred to the doll only, and the actual rituals and songs themselves refer to *Perun*, which he reconstructed as the Slavic dying and resurrecting god.)

**Morena**

**Kupala**

**Kostroma**

**Kolyada**

All likely refer to the holidays themselves or the effigies used during the celebrations, but not deities.

### **How were they worshipped?**

There were sacrifices – animals, food, and humans, as well. The writings of the church directed against the pagan worship don't go into details, but briefly mention feasts.

The temples are often described as surrounded by wooden palisades – in western regions. There are accounts of sacking and destroying these temples. No such descriptions survive of the Eastern Slavic places of worship. There is archeological evidence of the circular ritual earthen structures, sometimes with double concentric earthen circles and remnant of bonfires. There are mentions of idols (outside of the palace courtyard, for example, in Vladimir's reform), and the chronicles talk about toppling of the idols, but don't really mention temples. So, it is possible that there were no temples as we know them. Sacred groves, and trees are mentioned, however.

### **How did they look?**

Nobody knows. In the chronicles, the most idols and statues were described as wooden. There is some evidence that the statues had many faces – either multiple deities or many aspects of one, as can be seen on the Zbruch idol. Most tend to think this idol is *Svetovid*, described by Saxo Grammaticus in his description of temple in Arcona (12<sup>th</sup> c.). I don't know how relevant it is to Easter Slavs, though.

*Perun* is described as having golden mustache and a silver head, otherwise, there is no descriptions.

The Chronicles mention idols – of wood, less common of stone. Smaller wooden statues of household gods were found, but these are very crude, and can't be identified as a particular god.

### **Lesser deities/spirits (a very short list)**

**Domestic:**

**domovoi** - the household spirit

*bannik* - spirit of the bathhouse  
*ovinnik* - spirit of the barn/stables

***Agrarian:***

*poludennitsa* – a woman spirit of the summer fields, shows up at noon, usually malevolent  
*polevik* – spirit of the fields

***Forest:***

*leshiy* – spirit of the forest, sometimes referred to as a forest tsar, usually malevolent  
*kikimora* – female spirit of the forest, or, sometimes, the swamp. (can't find any period references for either, but included them for completion)

***Water:***

*vodyanoi* – or water tsar, usually malevolent (Rybakov postulates the connection between the vodyanoi and Yashcher – the great lizard. Was revered as a god of the water and underworld. Was more prominent in the north, where fishing and sailing were more important than in the south. Humans and equine sacrifices were supposedly made by drowning. After Christian reform he became associated with St. Nicholas, who was patron saint of all seafarers.)

*rusalki* – water spirits of rivers and lakes, occasionally referred to the Vodyanoi's wives or spirits of the drowned unmarried women. Connected with the plants vegetation and fertility. Were celebrated at Semic (Whitsuntide), during the summer Rusalii. Also connected with the malevolent dead, and are also considered a subtype of the malevolent dead.

*vily* – somewhat similar to *rusalki*, sometimes depicted with wings, more common in southern region, were associated with Simargl by Rybakov, with Perun by Klejn.

*beregini* - female guardian spirits, sometimes depicted as benevolent *rusalki*.

***Undead***

*nav'yi* – belligerent souls or the souls of the enemies, that appear at night with evil winds, and suck life/blood out of the living and spread disease

*upyri* – souls of the people who died unnatural death, or unbaptized, similar to vampires.

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If you are interested in Slavic mythology in general, there is a very good article at

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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simargl> - once there, follow the link on the left to the Russian wikipedia, which has a very good and informative article about Simargl (07/30/12)

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