

CONCLUSIONS

AS A CONCLUSION, we can say that the comparison of historical sources dealing with the rituals and festivals of the Slavic pre-Christian religion allow us to identify common elements in all the Slavic peoples (East, West and South Slavs), as well as in other Indo-European and non-Indo-European cultures. Moreover, fertility and funerary rites played a crucial role in the society and mentality of the Slavic peoples. Perhaps that is why many testimonies on rituals and festivals performed in all the Slavic areas have come down to us.

One of the most detailed descriptions on the rites of the Slavic peoples can be found in the *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo Grammaticus' twelfth-century history of the Danes. It reveals the agrarian fertility rites in honour of the idol of the deity Sventovit, which took place every year in the sanctuary of Arkona on the island of Rügen, on the Baltic shore of modern Germany, at that time settled by West Slavs. All the islanders took part in these rites, which thus took the form of an element which bound the community together and provided them with an identity, as did the sanctuary.

Saxo Grammaticus also tells us how military divining rites were carried out before the battles, using for this a white horse dedicated to the god Sventovit, which was made to pass over lances fixed in the ground. This is similar to the oracles involving the horse of the god Svarozhits among the Luticians, or with the black horse of the god Triglav in the city of Szczecin, as attested by Thietmar of Merseburg and Helmold of Bosau, respectively.

With respect to the cult of the dead, we can say that the funeral rites which were most common among all the Slavic peoples were cremation. The treatment of the ashes varied: in some Slavic tribes they were buried in a funerary mount, while in others they were deposited in an urn. Cremation tended to be associated with a funeral banquet, which was called *tryzna* by the East Slavs. Similarly, there are mentions of the ritual sacrifice of widows in all Slavic peoples. At times this involved self-immolation or hanging, while at other times they limited themselves to self-harm.

Among the East and South Slavs, two annual festivals dedicated to the cult of the dead are well documented, although they actually have marked features of agrarian fertility rites. Both took place in the spring. The *Radunitsa* coincided with the Christian Holy Week and was dedicated to the spirits of the dead called *navii*, who it was believed returned to the world of the living attracted by the heat of the bonfires lit to call them. They were offered food and drink, as well as what was called the "bathing of the dead."

Then there were the Rusalias, also called the Week of the Rusalias or *Semik*. This was celebrated in Pentecost and was dedicated to the *rusalki*, a late name of the minor deities of the waters, which in the sermons of the thirteenth century were called *bereginy* or *vily*. They were girls who had died young, or by a violent death without having completed

their life cycle, and thus became “unclean dead.” To prevent them from becoming harmful to humans or for the fertility of the soil, they were given offerings which included the sacrifice of cocks and hens.

As we can see, the Slavs, like other ancient peoples, established a connection between the cult of the dead and the cult of the fertility of earth, believing that there was a close link between the deceased and the place where their remains were placed. As an example of this, the same East Slavic god Veles (variant Volos) was both the god of cattle (of wealth) and of the dead.¹ Therefore, the festivals to honour the dead also had an important agrarian function, and the supernatural beings that were worshipped in them (*navii*, *rusalki*) had an ambivalent character, for they could be either beneficial or harmful depending on the rituals that were performed. In this case, just as in any other aspect of Slavic pre-Christian religion, the rites were essential for safeguarding the natural order and for ensuring a good harvest and the good health of domestic animals that were basic for the survival of the community.

¹ See Funerary Banquet.