

Chapter I

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN RECONSTRUCTING PRE-CHRISTIAN SLAVIC RELIGION

ONE OF THE main methodological problems for the study of Slavic pre-Christian religion resides in the indirect nature of the sources. As in the case of the rest of the Indo-European peoples, Slavic culture was not originally literate. Because they began to use writing later than other Indo-European peoples, starting in the ninth century and linked to Christianization, we have no first-hand records of sacred texts or myths.

This involves a second methodological problem: religious manipulation of the sources. The texts in which Slavic paganism is described are mostly the work of Christian or Muslim authors; in other words, monotheists who treat the local religion with a significant anti-pagan bias, and because of this we have to apply extreme caution to all the sources. However, if this caution is taken too far, we may be left with no information. This happened in the 1930s, mainly in the German school, which tended to consider alien to Slavic culture all elements it had in common with other Indo-European cultures.

Another problem we find is the great dispersion over space and time and linguistically, of both the Slavic languages and peoples, as well as of those informing us of their pre-Christian religion. The texts in which we find some kind of reference to Slavic pre-Christian religion range from the fifth century to the second half of the sixteenth century, a period covering 11 centuries. With respect to geographic diversity of the Slavic peoples, it has its origin in a historical event known as the "Great Slavic Expansion," a massive migratory movement which began at the end of the fifth century and the start of the sixth. It was at this point that the Slavs entered history, when they clashed with the great European states of the time: first, the Germanic kingdom of the Franks and its successor the Carolingian Empire, as well as the Byzantine Empire, which is our main source of information on them.

With their westward expansion, the number of sources which are contemporary with living pagan practices would increase. The Slavs based on the shores of the Baltic created a number of independent states, the last being the independent pagan state on the island of Rügen, which was conquered and Christianized by the Danes in 1168. There are a significant number of Latin chroniclers of Germanic origin, taking us up to the start of the thirteenth century, and giving us their vision of a paganism that was still alive.

The expansion of the Slavs towards the east would generate a very unusual form of state, based on a model of trading posts created by the Scandinavians to control the routes along the major rivers linking the Baltic to the Black Sea and the trade between northern Europe and Byzantium. A series of texts in Arabic records religious practices in this area. They are very interesting, although they raise serious problems of attribution, given that at times it is not clear to what extent the Arabic travellers are talking about

the Scandinavians settled on the banks of the Volga or the Slavic inhabitants of the same zone. In any event, they are texts referring to a geographical area which would see the creation of the first Eastern Slavic state, Kievan Rus', and they are contemporary to the events described (tenth century). Following the conversion to Christianity in 988, it is Christian authors who write the history of the principate of Kiev and to whom we owe our information on the pre-Christian period of this state.

With respect to the sources on the Slavic pre-Christian religion, J. A. Álvarez-Pedrosa¹ has shown in his recently published monograph that they can be of various types, including the following three: historical, archaeological and those from folklore.

If we categorize the historical sources from greatest to least value, we should first mention the authors contemporary to a "living" paganism. Within this group we can distinguish, first, the authors with an "anthropological curiosity" or strategic interest; and second, the Christian missionaries who had to have a good knowledge of the peoples they were to evangelize. Second, with less value, are the texts that are not contemporary with the events they narrate, and third, are those condemning the survival of pagan practices in a Christianized society.

The archaeological sources are the only ones that provide direct proof, but they are difficult to interpret without textual evidence and without historical context. The sources from folklore are complementary and very valuable with respect to the Slavs. However, they do involve the risk of interpreting folk practices of a universal character as Slavic and considering as ancient the ideological interferences of the folklorists of the nineteenth century.

Finally, linguistic data are supplementary, but insufficient in themselves, and at times disputed. They need to be compared with other sources.

Taking everything into account, the methodological problems mentioned make it necessary to reconstruct Slavic pre-Christian religion by a comparative method, applying the comparison at all levels: comparison of all types of sources (history, archaeology and folklore), as well as the written testimonies on all the Slavic peoples among themselves, and these compared with other Indo-European and non-Indo-European cultures: Scandinavians, Finno-Ugric, Baltic, Germanic and Iranian.

1 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 1–3.