

## Chapter 5

### FUNERARY RITES

#### Was the Concept of the Afterlife Unknown to the Pre-Christian Slavs?

Such a question may legitimately arise for us if we consider a text by the eleventh-century German chronicler Thietmar of Merseburg belonging to his *Chronicon* (1.14),<sup>1</sup> who states as follows:

Though I may act as the whetstone which sharpens the iron but not itself, I would not be marked by the shame of a mute dog. Thus I direct the following to the ignorant and especially to the Slavs who believe that everything ends with temporal death.<sup>2</sup>

However, a better understanding of the excerpt from Thietmar's *Chronicon* forces us to analyze its context: the text appears in the middle of a digression that the author embarks upon to discuss the omens that can foresee death, and follows by describing the evidence of the immortal life of the soul<sup>3</sup> and of the resurrection of the flesh. According to Thietmar, those omens were not accepted by the pre-Christian Slavs, and that is why he says the Slavs "believe that everything ends with temporal death." The fact that such omens, whose importance was underlined by Thietmar throughout his work, were not commonly included among the traditional beliefs of the Slavs, would be confirmed by another text written in the mid-sixth century by Procopius of Caesarea,<sup>4</sup> a Byzantine author who was secretary to Belisarius, general of the emperor Justinian:

Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars. The Gothic War* 3.14: But as for fate, they neither know it, nor do they in any wise admit that it has any power among them.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, Thietmar's text must be read with those critical precautions and it does not mean that the Slavs lacked eschatological concepts, but obviously that they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or in the omens of a sudden death.

In contrast to the relevance that has been given to the fragment of Thietmar (out of context), another line of research insists that the Slavs rendered veneration to the dead and to their ancestors.<sup>6</sup> The funerary banquets, as we will see, would be the evidence for such a belief.

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1 Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 21.

2 Warner, *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, 78.

3 Brückner, *Mitologia Slava*, 174; Krawiec, "Sny, widzenia i zmarli w kronice Thietmara z Merseburga," 33–48.

4 Haurly, *Procopii Caesariensis Opera Omnia*, vol. 2.

5 Dewing, *Procopius in Seven Volumes*, 271.

6 Vyncke, "The Religion of the Slavs," 648–66.

Likewise, the most relevant information that can be found in the sources regarding the attitudes of the Slavs towards death and the afterlife comes from the description of the funerary rites.

## Funerary Rites among the Pre-Christian Slavs

### Cremation

Arab authors always paid special attention to the funerary rites of the peoples they came into contact with, presumably because of the emphasis that is made by Islam on the sanctity of dead bodies and the respect they must be shown. Regarding this, the dialogue that the famous tenth-century Arab traveller Ibn Faḍlān has with a *Rus'* on cremation is highly relevant:

Ibn Faḍlān, *Mu'ḡam al-Buldān, "Rūsiyah"*:<sup>7</sup> One of the Rūsiyyah stood beside me and I heard him speaking to my interpreter. I quizzed him about what he had said, and he replied, "He said, 'You Arabs are a foolish lot!'" So I said, "Why is that?" and he replied, "Because you purposely take those who are dearest to you and whom you hold in highest esteem and throw them under the earth, where they are eaten by the earth, by vermin and by worms, whereas we burn them in the fire there and then, so that they enter Paradise immediately." Then he laughed loud and long. I quizzed him about that [i.e., the entry into Paradise] and he said, "Because of the love which my Lord feels for him. He has sent the wind to take him away within an hour." Actually, it took scarcely an hour for the ship, the firewood, the slave-girl and her master to be burnt to a fine ash.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the earliest and most reliable testimony of an Eastern Slavic funerary rite can be found in Ibn Rustah's *Book of Precious Gems*:<sup>9</sup>

When one of them dies they burn him with fire and the women, when someone close to them dies, cut their hands and their face with a knife. When they cremate the deceased, they return to where he is in the morning, collect the ashes, put them in an urn and place them in a burial mound. When the person has been dead for a year, they place the amount of approximately twenty wooden urns of honey. They carry this to the mound, gather together the family of the deceased, and eat and drink there.<sup>10</sup>

Thanks to the fact that the Arab author thought that Slavic customs were scandalous, we know that the usual rite among the Slavs was cremation, something that violated the idea that he had on the sanctity of corpses, in accordance with the Islamic religion. In addition to cremation, the funerary ritual included ritualized self-harm of the deceased man's wives. The fact that the latter had more than one wife indicates that the person was a member of the Eastern Slavic aristocracy.

<sup>7</sup> Wüstenfeld, "Risāla Ibn Faḍlān," 83. For a discussion on the identity of the people called "Rūsiyah" in this account, see Montgomery, "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah," 23–25.

<sup>8</sup> Translation in: Montgomery, "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah," 20–21.

<sup>9</sup> De Goeje, *Abū 'Ali Aḥmed b. 'Umar b. Rusta*, 143–48.

<sup>10</sup> Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 455; De Goeje, *Abū 'Ali Aḥmed b. 'Umar b. Rusta*, 143.

The rite also marks a ritualization of the time following cremation: the next morning the ashes are gathered and put inside an urn that is buried in a mound. It thus becomes the space devoted to the “living memory” of the deceased, where the ceremonies for his commemoration are celebrated. The act of putting the ashes inside an urn that is buried in a mound has several Indo-European parallels: it was done in the ancient Greek tradition with Patroclus (*Il.* 23.243–256), and with Achilles (*Od.* 24.72–84), or in the Germanic tradition with Harald (*Saxo Grammaticus* 8.5.1). In the Vedic tradition, the bones were collected a few days after cremation and were put inside a jar that could also be placed in a mound.<sup>11</sup>

One year later an offering of honey is made, an element that becomes a symbol of immortality because of its physical characteristic of incorruptibility. Together with this offering, a funerary banquet is held to honour the deceased.

Likewise, the same type of burial custom, together with the ritual killing of human beings, is attested among the East Slavs<sup>12</sup> by a Byzantine author, Leo the Deacon, in his *History*.<sup>13</sup> In this work, the author gives first-hand information on Prince Svyatoslav I of Kiev, who invaded Bulgaria in 969 while fighting against the army of the Byzantine Empire. When narrating the result of a combat with Svyatoslav’s soldiers, he describes the customs of the *Rus’* regarding the dead during combat:

Leo the Deacon, *History* 9.6: When night fell, since the moon was nearly full, they [the Rus’] came out on the plain and searched for their dead; and they collected them in front of the city wall and kindled numerous fires and burned them, after slaughtering on top of them many captives, both men and women, in accordance with their ancestral custom. And they made sacrificial offerings by drowning suckling infants and chickens in the Istros,<sup>14</sup> plunging them into the rushing waters of the river.<sup>15</sup>

The Slavs’ ritual of cremation of the dead has been widely confirmed by archaeologists<sup>16</sup> and has numerous parallels in other well-known Indo-European customs, such as the Hittite, Greek, Vedic and Latin traditions.<sup>17</sup> Confirmation of the practice comes both from textual data and from archaeological evidence. The cremation ceremony of a Slavic nobleman could be performed together with either self-sacrifice rituals of the relatives of the dead or the non-voluntary slaughter of women, slaves or cattle including the burning of the dead’s belongings.

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**11** West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 497.

**12** Although Leo the Deacon calls this people “Scythian,” taking into account the place and time where they are located, as well as their description, they are commonly identified as Slavs.

**13** See **Chapter 4**, section “Rituals after combat.”

**14** Ancient Greek name of the river Danube.

**15** Talbot and Sullivan, *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 193.

**16** Conte, *Les slaves*, 164; Barford, *The Early Slavs*, 200–208; Holzer, “Gli slavi prima del loro arrivo in occidente,” 23.

**17** Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 725–30.

A “positivist” explanation of the cremation ritual suggests that it could be related to hygiene and it was developed by “primitive” peoples in permanent danger of infections caused by decomposing corpses. Cremation of wives, slaves, cattle and goods of the deceased may also have had a prophylactic function.<sup>18</sup> However, the clear link that was made between the cremation ritual and the aristocratic practice could also imply religious motivations in the Indo-European traditions where such a practice was preserved. It is possible that they harboured the belief that fire set by religious professionals consumed the mortal part of the body, but at the same time ensured access to the afterlife.<sup>19</sup>

### Funerary Banquet

Funerary banquets such as the one described by Ibn Rustah<sup>20</sup> were common. It is important to mention that he makes on the date when they took place: one year after the relative’s death in whose honour it was celebrated.

Abundant parallels can be found for ritualized funerary banquets in the Indo-European domain. For instance, people from ancient India honoured the deceased *pitars* (forefathers) on the anniversary of the death, during which a ritual cake was prepared and invocations were made so that the dead could find their way to the other world.<sup>21</sup> In Athens, the ritualized banquet was celebrated on special dates, specifically on the third day of *Anthesterias*, during a festival called *Chytroi*.<sup>22</sup> The Romans held a banquet called *Silicernium* shortly after the funerary rite. In addition to this banquet, a feast called *Cena Novendialis* was held on the ninth day after the funerals, and it marked the family’s return to social life, interrupted during the time of mourning.<sup>23</sup> The most important annual remembrance to honour the deceased of the family was the *Parentalia*.<sup>24</sup>

The testimony of Ibn Rustah on the burial practice of cremation associated to a funerary banquet coincides with the information provided by the *PVL* when describing the funerary rites of different East Slavic tribes:

Whenever a death occurred, a feast<sup>25</sup> was held over the corpse, and then a great pyre was constructed, on which the deceased was laid and burned. After the bones were

<sup>18</sup> Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 730.

<sup>19</sup> Mendoza studies from such perspective Homeric and Vedic rituals: Mendoza, “Muerte e Inmortalidad: Homero y las creencias indoeuropeas,” 555–66. Cf. *Odyssey* 11.601–627, *Rigveda* 10.14.8, 10.16.1.

<sup>20</sup> See former section Cremation.

<sup>21</sup> West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 394.

<sup>22</sup> Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians*, 116–17.

<sup>23</sup> Dowden, *European Paganism*, 264.

<sup>24</sup> Lindsay, “Eating with the Dead: the Roman Funerary Banquet,” 67–80; Dowden, *European Paganism*, 267.

<sup>25</sup> In the Slavic original we read the word *tryzna*, that is, the funerary banquet in honour of the deceased.

collected, they were placed in a small urn and set upon a post by the roadside, even as the Vyaticians do to this day. Such customs were observed by the Krivichians and the other pagans, since they did not know the law of God, but made a law unto themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Here is mentioned an urn set upon a post by the roadside where the bones and ashes were placed after the cremation of the corpse, a custom performed by some East Slavic tribes. It reminds us of the funerary urns with the shape of small huts that can be found too in the Lusatian culture, in the later Bronze Age and early Iron Age in Eastern Poland and Western Ukraine.

Burials in isolated places, such as forests and fields, as well as at crossroads, are attested also among the West Slavs by Cosmas of Prague in his *Chronica Bohemorum* (*Chronicle of the Czechs*), in the passage that has already been discussed in [Chapter 2](#), on fertility rituals. This may be due either to the need for physical separation of the living and the dead, or to the sacred nature of forests and fields, as well as to the liminal character of crossroads, which, together with rivers and lakes, could play an important role in their rites of passage. In addition, we have another East Slavonic testimony of certain paranormal activity associated to an idol of the god Veles placed by the roadside in the vicinity of the city of Rostov, close to Lake Nero. It can be found in the *Life of St. Abraham of Rostov*,<sup>27</sup> a controversial saint who might have lived at the end of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth century, though his existence is questioned by some scholars. The earliest copy of his hagiography dates back to the fifteenth century, and the text says:

The venerable (Abraham) beheld the deceit of idolatry in which (the inhabitants of Rostov) indulged, for they had not yet received holy baptism, but in a place of miracles worshipped a stone idol (of god Veles) in which an evil demon lived, for their hearts were shrouded in darkness. When they passed by him on that road, no one laughed, as that created spectres and ghosts for Christians through its malign darkness. The venerable Abraham prayed to God, saying: "Lord God, the Most High! Look down on your servant from on high and give me the strength and grace of your Holy Spirit to destroy this devious idol." But it was impossible for him.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the saint received help from an unknown old traveller who appeared to be St. John the Evangelist, who gave Abraham his miraculous staff in order to destroy the idol, an action that reminds us very much of the magic wands of fairy tales. St. Abraham subsequently established a monastery dedicated to the Epiphany of the Lord in the same place where the evil idol of Veles had stood, the first mention of which can be found in the *Chronicle of Vladimir-Suzdal'*, dating back to the fourteenth century, in the entry corresponding to the year 1261.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 56–57; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 268–69.

<sup>27</sup> Kostomarov, *Skazaniya, legendy, povesti, skazki i pritchi*, 221–25.

<sup>28</sup> Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 418.

<sup>29</sup> Karskii, *Lavrent'evskaya letopis' i suzdal'skaya letopis po akademicheskomu spisku*, 476, 5.

The god Veles appears with its variant name Volos in the peace treaties of 907 and 971 between the Rus' and the Byzantines as contained in the *PVL*, where he is referred to as "the god of cattle."<sup>30</sup> However, the place where his idol stood according to the *Life of St. Abraham of Rostov* (in an isolated spot by the roadside close to a lake), together with the strange phenomena and ghosts that it produced would link the god to the dead. This interpretation is confirmed by the etymological explanation of the name, which coincides with different Indo-European cognates.<sup>31</sup> We have already seen among the West Slavs other cases of lakes associated with oracular rites that also displayed otherworldly connections.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, there is a mention in the *Memoir and Encomium of Prince Vladimir*,<sup>33</sup> written by a certain monk Jacob, that could support this interpretation of the god Veles as both the god of cattle and the god of the dead. He was not listed in the *PVL* among the gods belonging to Prince Vladimir's pantheon in Kiev.<sup>34</sup> However, this could be because the idol of Volos (Veles) was not erected on top of the hill of Kiev as the other gods, but in the lower side of the city known as Podol,<sup>35</sup> a fertile pasture by the river Pochaina<sup>36</sup> where cattle used to graze, and where the idol was located according to the *Memoir and Encomium*.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the pasture for the cattle of Kiev was located by a river, the natural boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead.<sup>38</sup> This would be the most appropriate place for the idol of Volos (Veles) to stand.

Summarizing the information that we have through the texts on the funerary banquets of the dominant class among the East Slavs, called *tryzna*, allows us to identify a set of characteristic common features, namely the presence of many warriors, the consumption of alcohol to the point of drunkenness, the construction of a mound on the grave, and the widow's lament for her dead husband.<sup>39</sup> All these can be found also in the *PVL* in the following description belonging to the story of Princess Olga's third revenge on the Derevlians for the murder of her husband, Prince Igor, in 945:

Olga then sent to the Derevlians the following message, "I am now coming to you, so prepare great quantities of mead in the city where you killed my husband, that I may

**30** Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 269, 277.

**31** The name Veles would come from the Proto-Indo-European \*wel- meaning originally "pasture, meadow" and subsequently "dwelling of the dead" and "god of the dead." Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 723. For other possible etymologies: Zochios, "Slavic Deities of Death," 83–84.

**32** See the testimonies regarding the sacred lakes among the West Slavs in [Chapter 2](#), The Sacred Lake of Glomuzi and the Auguries of Fertility.

**33** Sreznevskii, "Pamyat' i pokhvala knyazyu Vladimiru i ego zhitie po sp. 1494 g.," 2–12.

**34** See [Chapter 2](#), Svarozhich.

**35** Neighbourhood of Podil in modern Kiev.

**36** Small tributary of the river Dnieper.

**37** Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 298–99.

**38** For the afterworld as a pasture among the Indo-Europeans, see Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 722–23.

**39** Petrukhin, "Pogrebal'nyi kult drevnerusskom yazychestve," 396–404.

weep over his grave and hold a funeral feast for him." When they heard these words, they gathered great quantities of honey and brewed mead. Taking a small escort, Olga made the journey with ease, and upon her arrival at Igor's tomb, she wept for her husband. She bade her followers pile up a great mound and when they had piled it up, she also gave command that a funeral feast should be held. Thereupon the Derevlians sat down to drink, and Olga bade her followers wait upon them. The Derevlians inquired of Olga where the retinue was which they had sent to meet her. She replied that they were following with her husband's bodyguard. When the Derevlians were drunk, she bade her followers fall upon them, and went about herself egging on her retinue to the massacre of the Derevlians. So they cut down five thousand of them; but Olga returned to Kiev and prepared an army to attack the survivors.<sup>40</sup>

The text is very interesting since it gives a detailed account of the aforementioned practices. Banqueting to honour the deceased was a basic way of feasting the death of a relative. It was useful ultimately in order to celebrate being alive, as well as to strengthen the family and reinforce social cohesion, in addition to showing respect for the deceased, which could be understood as a kind of cult to the ancestors. In this sense, in the text quoted from the *PVL* the celebration made by the Kievan people, a celebration of being alive, is set against the punishment inflicted on the Derevlians, who were massacred by taking advantage of their drunken state.

There is only one action that does not appear in the former excerpt: self-immolation of the widow. On the contrary, here the widow's lament seems to replace the act of killing herself. Perhaps, Ol'ga's heroic character makes her special enough not to have to sacrifice herself on her husband's grave. Or the long and complex revenge<sup>41</sup> exempts her from self-immolation, being replaced in this case by the ritualized triple sacrifice of her husband's murderers: buried alive in a boat, burned alive in a bathhouse, massacred while drunk during the funeral banquet.<sup>42</sup> The widow's lament is a softened or "literary" equivalent of the ritualized self-injuries of which Ibn Rustah spoke.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, the expression "she wept for her husband" leads us to suggest the possible existence of a ritual funeral lament or threne on the dead husband's tomb. Unfortunately, we do not have any further textual information, except perhaps from the lament of Yaroslavna for her wounded husband, Prince Igor Svyatoslavich, as it appears in the twelfth-century East Slavic epic poem known as *Tale of Igor's Campaign*:

(1) The mourners sing in the Danube. Yaroslávna hears their voice; she moans early like a cuckoo<sup>44</sup> in the unknown land:—"I will fly" she spoke,—"like a cuckoo along the Danube;

<sup>40</sup> Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 80; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 276.

<sup>41</sup> García de la Puente, "The Revenge of the Princess: Some Considerations about Heroines in the *PVL* and in Other Indo-European Literatures," 195.

<sup>42</sup> Koptev, "Ritual and History: Pagan Rites in the Story of the Princess' Revenge (the Russian Primary Chronicle, under 945–46)," 21–37; see *The Baths of the Dead*.

<sup>43</sup> See former section.

<sup>44</sup> According to Ryan, in general the cuckoo was a bad omen of death and famine. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 125.

I will wet my beaver sleeves in the Kayála river, I will wipe away for the prince his bloody wounds on his stricken body.”<sup>45</sup>

The main difference between Ol’ga and Yaroslavna is that the latter’s husband did not die from his wounds, unlike the former’s, who was also called Igor. The custom of the widow’s lament for her dead husband is very well attested in other Indo-European literary traditions: in the ancient Greek tradition it is done twice by Andromache on her husband Hector’s death (*Il.* 22.483–507, 24.725–738); in ancient Indian epics it is performed by Tārā over her husband Vālin’s body (*Rm.* 4.20.14–15).<sup>46</sup>

### Ritual Sacrifice of the Widows

The ritual sacrifice of the widow was reported among the East Slavs by the aforementioned Ibn Rustah’s *Book of Precious Gems*, though in a different way. First, in a symbolic way, by cutting her hands and face with a knife, and secondly in an explicit description of a voluntary suicide by hanging herself, something that the author finds more scandalous:

Afterwards they retire and if the deceased had three wives and one of them considers herself to be his favourite, she stands before the deceased with two posts and erects them in the surface of the ground. She then places another post across the top of the other two, hangs a rope in the middle which she ties around her neck and stands on the chair. When she has done this, the chair which is under her is removed and she hangs there until she strangles herself and dies. When she is dead, she is thrown onto the fire and burned.<sup>47</sup>

This practice is confirmed by other early testimonies. We can find a similar kind of sacrifice of the widow during her husband’s burial among the South Slavs, as it is described in the *Strategikon*<sup>48</sup> from the sixth century, attributed to the Byzantine Emperor Maurice, who ruled between 582 and 602: XI.4. “Their women are more sensitive than any others in the world. When, for example, their husband dies, many look upon it as their own death and freely smother themselves, not wanting to continue their lives as widows.”<sup>49</sup>

Chapter 4 of Book XI of *Strategikon* bears the title *Dealing with the Slavs, the Antes, and the Like* and includes an explanation of the customs and character of those peoples, as well as a whole set of tactical and strategic advice on how to confront them in war. As the author says at the end of the ethnographic excursus, the information that he offers on them is based both on his direct experience and from former treatises. Maurice’s testimony is employed, in turn, as a source by Leo VI the Wise, Byzantine emperor

<sup>45</sup> Magnus, *The Tale of the Armament of Igor*, 19. After this fragment follows the famous invocation of Yaroslavna to the natural elements: to the wind, the water (river Dnieper) and the sun.

<sup>46</sup> West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 499.

<sup>47</sup> Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 456; De Goeje, *Abū ‘Ali Aḥmed b. ‘Umar b. Rusta*, 143.

<sup>48</sup> Dennis, *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*.

<sup>49</sup> Dennis, *Maurice’s Strategikon*, 120; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 31.

between 886 and 912, including an almost textual quotation in his *Tactica*:<sup>50</sup> XVIII.98. “Their women manifested particularly strong feelings. Many of them regarded the death of their husbands as their own and would have themselves suffocated, [finding it] unbearable to keep on living as widows.”<sup>51</sup>

The same information is conveyed, in this case about the West Slavs, by Saint Boniface, the “Apostle of the Germans,” during the eighth century. The following fragment<sup>52</sup> is found in a letter addressed by the saint, together with his fellow bishops Wera, Burghard, Werberht, Abel and Wilbalth, to King Æthelbald of the Mercians around 745–746. In the letter, the saint blamed the Saxons for the maintaining of depraved pagan sexual customs, praising the burial sacrifice of widows among the Wends, the name used in medieval Latin works for the Slavic tribes living in the Northern Holy Roman Empire. The excerpt reads as follows:

Epistle 73, XL. [...] And the Wends, the most degraded and depraved race of men, observe the mutual love of the married state with such zeal, that a wife, when her husband dies, refuses to live; the wife is thought deserving of praise, who brings death with her own hand and burns on the one pile with her husband.<sup>53</sup>

Like this, all the medieval extant sources coincide in describing the burial ritual as the cremation of the corpse closely linked with the sacrifice of the widow in all the Slavic areas, that is, South, East and West Slavs, which would constitute evidence of its ancient and pan-Slavic character. This ritual only has sense in the context of a conception of the afterlife in which a member belonging to the dominant caste, probably a warrior, takes with him all his beloved belongings, and in particular his favourite spouse.

The most striking parallel in other Indo-European religions would be the well-known *satī* attested in India. However, it is not exactly the same. In the Indian tradition, the widows burn themselves alive on their husbands’ pyre, as, for instance, do Kṛṣṇa’s four widows in *Mahābhārata* 16.8. Instead of this, what is recounted by historical authors on the Slavic funeral ceremony is a kind of ritualized suicide of the favourite wife of the deceased, normally by hanging or smothering; afterwards, the widow’s body is burned on the funeral pyre together with her husband. Other Indo-European parallels with the Slavic tradition are incomplete. Procopius of Caesarea (*Bell. Goth.* 2.14) tells us that among the Herules, a Germanic people, the wife hangs herself afterwards by her husband’s grave. Herodotus (*Hist.* 4.71.4–5) gives a detailed account of the funeral of a Scythian king. One of the king’s concubines is strangled, as well as his most trustful servants. However, they are not burned on a funeral pyre, but entombed in a burial mound together with the king’s body. Herodotus (*Hist.* 5.5), when describing the funeral of a Thracian chieftain, also gives us a partial parallel. His wives quarrel among

<sup>50</sup> Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 107.969.

<sup>51</sup> Dennis, *The Taktika of Leo VI*, 473; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 38.

<sup>52</sup> Dümmler, “S. Bonifatii et Lulli Epistolae,” 342.

<sup>53</sup> Kylie, *The English Correspondence of Saint Boniface*, 166; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 51.

themselves to determine which one is the favourite. The one chosen by the deceased's friends is showered with praise, but unlike the Slavic ritual, she is not killed by hanging nor by smothering; rather, her throat is cut. Herodotus does not mention whether she is burned on a pyre with the husband or not. He merely says that she is entombed with him.

Finally, there is also a testimony of the self-cremation of widows among the East Slavs provided by the Arab historian Al-Mas'udi in his *Muruj adh-dhahab wa ma'adin al-jawhar* (*The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*).<sup>54</sup> The text is a kind of world history that he wrote about his travels during the first half of the tenth century. Specifically, on the funerary rites of the East Slavs, he said:

I, 17: One of the various Pagan nations who live in his country (Khazar) are the Sekálibah (Sclavonians) and another the Rús (the Russians). They live in one of the two sides of this town; they burn their dead with their cattle, utensils, arms, and ornaments. When a man dies, his wife is burnt alive with him; but, when the wife dies, her husband is not burnt. If a bachelor dies, he is married after his death. Women are glad to be burnt; for they cannot enter into paradise by themselves. This usage prevails also among the Hindus, as we have said. But the Hindus never burn a woman with her husband, unless it is her own wish.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, we see how Al-Mas'udi was already noting the similarity of the Slavic custom of the self-cremation of widows with the Hindu tradition; and he considered the latter more "humane" since it was always performed with the widow's consent, according to the author. His mention of the posthumous marriage of single young men is also very interesting, for it could be a way to complete their vital cycle in extremis. This was most probably to avoid their transformation into restless dead, which was one of the main worries for the Slavs with regard to the cult of the dead, as we will discuss later in this chapter.

### Votive Victims

One of the oldest aspects of the Slavic conception of the afterlife that can be deduced from the rituals has been preserved in the *History of the Wars* of Procopius of Caesarea (VII. 14.23), dating from the sixth century, and specifically in Procopius' *Gothic War* (*Bell. Goth.* 3.14.23), when speaking of the South Slavic peoples of the Sclaveni and the Antae. It deals with the idea that, faced with the risk of imminent death, the sacrifice of votive victims could guarantee the salvation of the offerer:

but as for fate, they neither know it nor do they in any wise admit that it has any power among men, but whenever death stands close before them, either stricken with sickness

<sup>54</sup> al-Rifā'ī, *Mas'ūdī, Murūğ ad-dhahab wa ma'adin al-ğawhar*.

<sup>55</sup> Sprenger, *El-Mas'ūdī's Historical Encyclopaedia*, 407–8; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 466.

or beginning a war, they make a promise that, if they escape, they will straightway make a sacrifice to the god in return for their life; and if they escape, they sacrifice just what they have promised, and consider that their safety has been bought with this same sacrifice.<sup>56</sup>

The underlying ideology, present in numerous cultures, is that the afterlife asks for a life in exchange, which can be paid through a votive sacrifice.

### The Baths of the Dead

The presence of the dead in daily life and the rituals devoted to them is even more evident in the pre-Christian customs that were observed in Christianized societies, and especially among the East Slavs. We already mentioned the funeral banquet. However, another common practice was to honour the dead in the steam baths during a festival called *Radunitsa*, which coincided with the Christian Easter. It has been attested by several sermons dating back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, such as the *Sermon on Fasting for the Ignorant, on the Monday of the Second Week*,<sup>57</sup> which gives the most detailed description:

On Holy Thursday [people] offer to the dead meat and milk and eggs, heat the bath and pour [water] on the stove, and ashes amidst they scatter for the footprints, and say “wash yourselves.” And undergarments [or “linen”] and towels they hang up and order them to rub themselves. The devils laugh at their evil-mindedness. And they enter to wash themselves and wallow in the ashes, and they show [or “leave”] in the ashes footprints like cockerels’, for the temptation [of the people], and they use those linen and towels. And [the people] come to the heated bathhouse, and look in the ashes for footprints, and when they see in the ashes footprints, they say “there came to us the *navii* [spirits of the dead] to wash themselves.”<sup>58</sup>

It is possible that the action of making the souls of the deceased, or *naviē*, come to the steam baths with the offerings of food and drinks could be related to the dryness of a dead body, which has to be rehydrated by means of libations or, among the East Slavs, using the humidity of bathhouses. Another plausible parallel explanation—that does not contradict the former—can be found in the archaeological analysis of Celtiberian steam baths in the hillforts of the Iberian Peninsula. The warmth of the steam bath would stand for the development of the embryo inside the uterus in a symbolic way; the small and narrow aperture of the doors through which the people who entered those baths had to pass would give place to a ritualized representation of a rebirth. According to García Quintela,<sup>59</sup> the sweat houses in the Iron Age Iberian Peninsula probably had a

<sup>56</sup> Dewing, *Procopius in Seven Volumes*, 271; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 23–24.

<sup>57</sup> Monday of the second week after the Easter, that is, the Monday of St. Thomas, popularly known in the Kievan Rus’ as *Radunitsa*. Ed. by Gal’kovskii, *Bor’ba khristianstva*, 14–16.

<sup>58</sup> Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 29; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 397–98.

<sup>59</sup> García Quintela, “Sobre las saunas en la Edad de Hierro en la Península ibérica: novedades, tipologías e interpretaciones,” 125–26.

ritual function so that the warrior who returned from war could be reborn and return to society as a man of peace. Accordingly, such saunas were located at the entrance to the settlements. The Slavic ritual described by the medieval cleric contained the invocation of the deceased to make him appear inside his former community of the living thanks to the warmth of the symbolic uterus as represented by the steam bath. Finally, a complementary explanation could be that the bath of the dead would be a part of the Slavic funerary ritual made up of three actions: washing the body, burning the corpse on the pyre, and banqueting and feasting. These three actions were implicit or explicit in the triple revenge performed by Princess Ol'ga,<sup>60</sup> together with burial in a boat that could have a Scandinavian origin.<sup>61</sup> According to Koptev,<sup>62</sup> the ceremonies had nothing to do with revenge, but would instead be the different purifying rituals of the Slavic pre-Christian funeral ceremony for Ol'ga's deceased husband. In Koptev's opinion, those rituals would have been transformed into the stages of the princess' revenge by the *Primary Chronicle's* Christian compiler, who would find a horrible triple revenge more acceptable than a pagan funeral. From our point of view, if we accept that Ol'ga actually performed the triple revenge, it could have been a kind of ritual murder following the different steps of a Slavic pre-Christian funerary rite, taking the boat burial from the Scandinavian tradition.

In addition, the aforementioned three ritual actions can also be found in a symbolic way in Russian folk tales. Coming back to the *Sermon on Fasting for the Ignorant, on the Monday of the Second Week*, the cockerels' footprints left on the ashes of the bathhouse by the spirits of the dead, called *naviē*, remind us very much of the house of Baba Yaga standing on chicken legs, but the parallelism goes further.<sup>63</sup> As Vladimir Propp<sup>64</sup> pointed out, the hero of some popular Russian fairy tales, usually called Ivan, comes into the house of Baba Yaga and takes the food and the bath that she offers him, because he wishes to die temporarily and gain access to the world of the dead, the "thirtieth kingdom," as it is called in the tales. Moreover, inside Baba Yaga's hut there is a huge cooking stove used to inflict a deadly punishment on children who fail to do the tasks that she orders. They are threatened with being burned and cooked alive in the stove and eaten by the witch.<sup>65</sup> The sorcerer herself bears the signs of the dead, with her bony leg and her blindness, being the gatekeeper of the other world, the "thirtieth kingdom."<sup>66</sup> In fact, her hut is nothing but the magic gate to the other world, being the symbolic representation of both the funeral pyre and of the cinerary urn. Therefore, the food and

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60 See Funerary Banquet.

61 Koptev, "Ritual and History," 22n47.

62 Koptev, "Ritual and History," 49–50.

63 On the *navii* or the souls of the dead with the shape of birds in Bulgarian folklore, see Casas Olea, "Génesis y configuración del mito del vampiro en los Balcanes," 40.

64 Propp, *Istoricheskije korni bolshebnoi skazki*, 66–69.

65 Propp, *Istoricheskije korni bolshebnoi skazki*, 98–103.

66 Propp, *Istoricheskije korni bolshebnoi skazki*, 69–75.

bath of the stories of Baba Yaga, as well as the fire of the stove, would be a reminiscence of the funeral rituals of the ancient Slavic society that according to Propp were employed to perform an initiation ceremony or a rite of passage from youth to adulthood. This was embedded in a metaphorical way in fairy tales and implied the symbolic death of the children and their rebirth as adults prepared to become full members of the community with parallels in many cultures around the world.<sup>67</sup> This is similar to the Celtiberian warriors coming back from war and their rite of passage in the steam baths that we mentioned above. A conclusion that can be inferred from all this is that in the Slavic pre-Christian ideology, the dead had to accomplish all the steps of this ceremony or rite of passage if they wanted to cross the border between the world of the living and of the dead in both directions. Actually, the Slavs believed that the dead could appear among the living, although they had to do it in an appropriate and orderly manner to avoid being harmful, as we will see later.

### Festivals to Honour the Dead

In the previous section we have seen a festivity to honour the dead attested by several sermons, such as the *Sermon on Fasting for the Ignorant, on the Monday of the Second Week*, that date back to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. It was called *Radunitsa* and coincided with the Christian Easter. Despite this, it involved disrespectful songs and dances, as well as excessive eating, drinking, and uninhibited sexual behaviour. Consequently, it was severely condemned by the homiletic and ecclesiastical literature because it violated compulsory fasting just before Easter. During this festival the East Slavs performed a curious ritual devoted to the spirits of the dead (*navii*) that could be called “the baths of the dead,” as we commented above. In the fifteenth-century *Polish Sermons* (Fol. 142 b),<sup>68</sup> we have a striking coincidence of a food offering for the souls of the dead that are called *vbosshe*.<sup>69</sup> Specifically, this refers to the leftovers of the Holy Thursday meal, similar to the way it was done by the East Slavs during the *Radunitsa*, but without preparing baths for the dead.

Moreover, in [Chapter 2](#) we said that there was another Slavic pre-Christian festivity to honour the dead called the *Semik* or *Rusal'naia nedelia* by the East Slavs that coincided with the Christian Pentecost and also combined certain fertility rites. It should be noted that the two Slavic pre-Christian festivities to honour the dead, the *Radunitsa* and the *Rusalii*, took place during the spring, when nature comes back to life, unlike the Western European tradition where the cult of the dead is associated with autumn.

Further references to these festivities can be found as late as the sixteenth century in the *Stoglav*,<sup>70</sup> which we already mentioned in [Chapter 2](#) when speaking of fertility rites.

67 Propp, *Istoricheskie korni bolshebnoi skazki*, 92–93.

68 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 69–76.

69 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 230.

70 Ėmchenko, *Stoglav. Issledovanie i tekst*.

Specifically, allusions to the spring festivals can be found in questions 23 to 26 belonging to chapter 41:

Question 23. On Trinity Saturday, in the villages and on the estates, men and women gather in the cemeteries and cry among the tombs with great wailing. And when the bards and the *gudki*<sup>71</sup> musicians begin to play, they themselves, putting their lamenting aside, begin to jump and dance and clap and sing satanic songs in these very cemeteries, the frivolous rogues. [...]

Question 25. And after the Great Day, the *oklički* on the Radunicy, the *v'junc*<sup>72</sup> and all devilish acts performed therein. [...]

Question 26. And on the morning of Easter Thursday they burn straw and summon the dead; and on Easter Thursday some ignorant priests place salt under the altar and keep it there until the seventh Thursday after the Great Day, and they give this salt to heal men and beasts. [...]<sup>73</sup>

The rites referred to in question 23 are very similar to the pagan celebrations that Cosmas of Prague mentioned in his *Chronica Bohemorum* as well as the rites during the *Rusalia* described by Demetrios Chomatenos.<sup>74</sup> The same can be said regarding the *oklichki* during the *Radunitsa* of question 25, because *oklichki* was a popular tradition of heathen origin consisting in honouring the dead by means of funeral songs and laments on the graves. As for question 26, we can see how deeply rooted the pagan customs were, to the point that even priests participated in them. It recounts the “calling of the dead” burning straw during Holy Thursday, which is complementary to the “baths of the dead”<sup>75</sup> of the sermons from the thirteenth century. In addition, it should be noted that the word *oklichki* in question 25 means literally “callings.” The custom of lighting bonfires in cemeteries on the eve of Good Friday or Holy Saturday was observed up until the twentieth century, which indicates how established the practice was and shows the complicity of some ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the same custom among the Poles is described in the *Polish Sermons* written in the fifteenth century by Friar Michael of Janoviec,<sup>77</sup> who recounts how people used to light bonfires called *grumathky* on Holy Wednesday so that the souls of the dead could come and warm up.<sup>78</sup>

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**71** Ancient Russian string instrument similar to a violin.

**72** Ceremony with choirs and songs with which people used to congratulate the young spouses in the first spring after their wedding. For more information, see Propp, *Russkie agrarnye prazdniki*, 63–65.

**73** Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 431–32; Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 20.

**74** See Chapter 2.

**75** See The Baths of the Dead.

**76** Bogatyrev, *Vampires in the Carpathians*, 68.

**77** Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 78–79.

**78** Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 246.

Finally, we must not forget an interesting festival devoted to the personification of Death among the West Slavs that is described in several Polish and Czech works. It took place “in the middle of Lent” according to the *Records from the Councils of Prague*<sup>79</sup> corresponding to the years 1366 and 1384, or more specifically during the fourth Sunday in the period of Lent, or “Laetare Sunday,” as it is recounted by the *Annals* of Jan Długosz, canon priest of the cathedral of Krakow, and by the *Synodal Statutes* of Andreas Bninski, bishop of Poznań, both from the fifteenth century. In the *Records from the Councils of Prague*, it states that the people carried “images in the form of death” in procession outside the cities and villages and threw them into the river in the belief that this would save them from their own death.<sup>80</sup> Jan Długosz says that “in some towns a farce is still represented in which they worship Dzyewana and Marzyana<sup>81</sup> in the form of a long stick, which is thrown and sunk in swamps on *Laetare* Sunday.”<sup>82</sup> Additionally, in the *Synodal Statutes* by Andreas Bninski<sup>83</sup> the following is found:

35. On the image of straw during fasting. On the Fourth Sunday of Easter, also called *Biała niedziela*,<sup>84</sup> you must prohibit anyone from practicing the superstitious custom of carrying in procession an image that they call “death” and then throwing it in the mud, because acts of this nature are not free from the suspicion of superstition.<sup>85</sup>

Krappe<sup>86</sup> has associated these spring festivals combining both fertility rites and the cult of the dead with the way Prince Vladimir of Kiev destroyed the idol of Perun in Kiev after his baptism in 988: throwing it into the river Dnieper.<sup>87</sup> Something similar is attested by Jan Długosz about Prince Mieszko of Poland and his destruction of the idols after the Christianization of his kingdom in 965.<sup>88</sup> This way, according to Krappe,<sup>89</sup> Prince Vladimir (and Prince Mieszko too) would be taking advantage of a known pre-Christian ritual in order to disguise the destruction of the idols, making it easier to assimilate by their respective peoples.

79 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 63–64.

80 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 218.

81 These could be two female deities related to Death: Zochios, “Slavic Deities of Death,” 74–76.

82 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 226.

83 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 77–78.

84 “White Sunday” in Polish.

85 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 245.

86 Krappe, “La chute du paganisme à Kiev,” 212–18.

87 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 281.

88 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 225–26.

89 Krappe, “La chute du paganisme à Kiev,” 217.

### Self-immolation of the Warriors

There are other sacrifices whose interpretation is more controversial, because they are attested among the East Slavs in the historical period when the trade routes of the big rivers of Eastern Europe were controlled by the Scandinavian military elites who ruled over the first East Slavic state, the Kievan Rus', during its formation between the ninth and tenth centuries. We cannot thus be completely sure regarding the origin of the rituals described. We do not know whether they were restricted to the Scandinavian elite, called in the texts Varangian or *Rus'*, whether they were Slavic ceremonies that coincided with Scandinavian rites due to their common Indo-European tradition, or whether they had a Scandinavian origin and had been assimilated by the East Slavic elite as their own.

The first of these rites is the self-immolation of warriors to avoid becoming servants and slaves in the afterlife. If the ritual belonged to the Scandinavian elite, self-immolation would be necessary to enter Valhalla. However, slavery in the afterlife could be a condition that is part of the Slavic eschatological conception, as the self-execrations that we will comment on later would confirm. The problem is therefore not easy to solve. The specific text is transmitted by Leo the Deacon in his *History*.<sup>90</sup> He explains the reasons for the strange behaviour of the *Rus'* combatants when narrating the battles of the Byzantine army with the Kievan Prince Svyatoslav's troops:<sup>91</sup>

Leo the Deacon, *History* 9.8:

This also is said about the Tauroscythians,<sup>92</sup> that never up until now had they surrendered to the enemy when defeated; but when they lose hope of safety, they drive their swords into their vital parts and kill themselves. And they do this because of the following belief: they say that if they are killed in battle by the enemy, then after their death and the separation of their souls from their bodies they will serve their slayers in Hades. And the Tauroscythians dread such servitude, and, hating to wait upon those who have killed them, inflict death upon themselves with their own hands. Such is the belief that prevails among them.<sup>93</sup>

### The Ritual Described by Ibn Faḡlān

The most famous text in which a funerary ritual of a chieftain of the *Rūsiyyah* settled by the river Volga is described has been conveyed by the tenth century Arab traveller Ahmad Ibn Faḡlān in his *Kitāb ilā Mulk al-Saqāliba* (*Book for the Owners of Scalivia*),<sup>94</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Karalis, *Λεών Διάκωνος. Ιστορία*.

<sup>91</sup> See Cremation.

<sup>92</sup> That is, *Rus'*, whom Leo calls in his work Scythians, Tauroscythians and Tauroi, following a former Greek literary tradition.

<sup>93</sup> Talbot and Sullivan, *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 195; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 44.

<sup>94</sup> Wüstenfeld, "Risāla Ibn Faḡlān," 79–83.

who visited that area as an envoy of the embassy of Caliph al-Muqtadir in 921. However, there is a wide consensus that considers that the text recounts the burial of a Scandinavian (Varangian) chieftain.<sup>95</sup> The details of the lengthy text would confirm such an interpretation: the placing of the corpse in a boat, the drug-induced vision of the slave-girl destined to be sacrificed, the description of the other world as a green field, the function of the crone known as “Angel of Death” who performs the slave girl’s sacrifice, and the burning of the boat with all the victims who accompany the chieftain on his journey to the other world.<sup>96</sup> In any case, the interpretation is the same as for the sacrifice of widows: the warrior’s most valuable belongings are offered so that he can take them with him to the afterlife.

Nevertheless, there is a contemporary testimony from Ibn Rustah’s *Book of Precious Gems* regarding the customs of the *Rus’* that curiously does not include the cremation and the boat, but still contains the sacrifice of the widow. It reads as follows:

When an important man among them dies, they dig him a grave like a spacious house and they lay him inside, including with him clothing for his body, an armband of gold, in which he used to dress, as well as a quantity of food and drink and coins. And they place his woman whom he loved in the grave with him while she is alive. They close the lid of the grave on her and she perishes inside.<sup>97</sup>

It is surprising, especially if we bear in mind that the *Rus’* belong to the Scandinavian culture, where cremation was a well-known burial custom, and moreover if we consider Ibn Fadlān’s account.

### The Oath of Self-execration of the Warriors

Additional information regarding the ritual of self-immolation of warriors is provided by the oath of self-execration, according to which whoever breaks the oath will live in the afterlife as a slave. This idea is linked to the eternal slavery of those defeated in battle as conveyed by Leo the Deacon.<sup>98</sup> It is not clear either whether it is Slavic or Scandinavian, being a part of the self-execration formulas belonging to the peace treaties between *Rus’* and Byzantines contained in the *PVL*, and specifically in the third Treaty of *Rus’* during the rule of Prince Igor of Kiev in 945. The Treaty contains a set of self-execration

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**95** On the Normanist versus anti-Normanist controversy on the testimony of Ibn Fadlān, see Montgomery, “Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsiyyah,” 1–25. Cf. Lajoie, “Les Rous d’Ibn Fadlān: Slaves ou Scandinaves? Une approche critique,” 155–63.

**96** Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 153–54. For the English translation, see Montgomery, “Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsiyyah,” 1–25; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 462–65.

**97** Watson, “Ibn Rustah’s Book of Precious Things,” 289–99; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 457.

**98** See Self-immolation of the Warriors.

formulas to guarantee the accomplishment of the agreement that includes the threat of being killed by their own swords, arrows and weapons, of not being able to defend themselves with their own shields, as well as of becoming slaves in the future life:

If any inhabitant of the land of Rus' thinks to violate this amity, may such of these transgressors as have adopted the Christian faith incur condign punishment from Almighty God in the shape of damnation and destruction forevermore. If any of these transgressors be not baptized, may they receive help neither from God nor from Perun:<sup>99</sup> may they not be protected by their own shields, but may they rather be slain by their own swords, laid low by their own arrows or by any of their own weapons, and may they be in bondage forever.<sup>100</sup>

The reproductions of the second and third treaties between Rus' and Byzantines are probably the most reliable texts of the *PVL*, because it is very likely that the compiler could have had access to the original version of the treaty.<sup>101</sup> The explicit allusion to the supreme deity of the East Slavs, Perun, makes this text even more reliable, for it is earlier than the establishment of Prince Vladimir's pantheon in Kiev. Therefore, it can be taken as a reference to the possibility that in the afterlife of the Slavs, the divisions between masters and slaves could be perpetuated, and as a consequence that it would be a reflection of the world of the living. In addition, it removes the doubts regarding the Slavic origin of the custom described in the testimony of Leo the Deacon.

## The Change of the Funerary Ritual and the Appearance of the Restless Dead in the Slavic Cultural Realm

### Slavic Vampires

A widespread idea among many scholars and the public in general is that the figure of the living dead and its most famous variant, with very negative connotations, the vampire, is a cultural feature that is typically Slavic and in particular Balkanic and East Slavic.<sup>102</sup> On the contrary, we believe that the figure of the living dead, with positive and negative aspects, is present in numerous ancient traditions. Specifically, we will analyze it in the framework of a wider European context, within the domain of the Indo-European tradition, both late antique and medieval. The positive or negative characteristics of the living dead are related to a sociological explanation, as we will see.

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**99** Supreme god and god of thunder and lightning among the East Slavs.

**100** Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 74; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 273.

**101** Malingoudi, *Die russische-byzantinischen Verträge des 10. Jahrhunderts aus diplomatischer Sicht*.

**102** For a survey on the creation of the myth of the vampire in the Balkans, see Casas Olea "Génesis y configuración del mito del vampiro en los Balcanes," 35–53; for a study of the Slavic vampire myth in Russian literature, see Townsend, *From Upyr' to Vampire: The Slavic Vampire Myth in Russian Literature*.

## The Living Dead among the East Slavs

Since Wienecke,<sup>103</sup> the term *lebende Leichnam* (living dead) has been employed in order to define the Slavs' conception of the deceased. It means that for them, the soul of the dead had a material entity, sometimes even corporeal, that continued to have physiological necessities and links to the living. Somehow, it could be said that the survival of the soul for the ancient Slavs did not take place in an afterlife or in another world but in this very world. Therefore, in the Slavic tradition, all the dead come back; they are all revenants. Of course, this return had to be organized so that it could be beneficial for the living, being regulated by certain precise rituals and taking place at certain specific times of the year. We have already seen the case of the "baths of the dead" during the *Radunitsa* festival.<sup>104</sup> In contrast, they will become harmful and negative, as we will analyze later.

Among the East Slavs, the spirits of the returning dead were called *naviĕ*<sup>105</sup> in several sermons dating back to the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century, such as the *Sermon on Fasting for the Ignorant, on the Monday of the Second Week*.<sup>106</sup> In a contemporary sermon, the *Sermon by Saint Gregory*,<sup>107</sup> the name of the other variant for the living dead, the *upiry* (vampires), can be found for the first time:

Whence the Hellenes became accustomed to offer sacrifices to Artemid and Artemis, that is to say *rod* and *rozhanitsa*, and so also the Egyptians, thus also to the Slavs this came. These Slavs also began to hold rites to *rod* and *rozhanitsy*, at first Perun was their god and before that they held rites to *upiry* [vampires?] and *bereginy* [river-bank spirits?]. By holy baptism they rejected Perun, and accepted Christ as God. But now also on the outskirts they pray to him, to the accursed god Perun, and Khors, and Mokosh, and *vily*, and this they do in secret and they cannot give this up.<sup>108</sup>

As Stella Rock<sup>109</sup> remarked, this sermon could be either a copy of parts of an earlier translated South Slavic version with additional commentary, or a translation of parts of Saint Gregory the Theologian's sermon *On the Epiphany*, with a commentary. In this fragment, in addition to other pre-Christian deities, *upiry* (vampires) are mentioned together with *bereginy* that are identified as river-bank spirits, as Stella Rock indicated in her translation. In the text, it is said that the Slavs performed rites to *upiry* and

**103** Wienecke, *Untersuchungen zur Religion der Westslawen*, 96.

**104** See The Baths of the Dead and Festivals to Honour the Dead.

**105** This word would come from Proto-Indo-European \**nāu-s-* (ship, boat), and therefore it would refer to the vessel that transported souls to the afterworld: Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 724. For a commentary on the *navie*, see Zochios, "Slavic Deities of Death," 71–73.

**106** See The Baths of the Dead.

**107** The full title is: *Sermon by Saint Gregory, Found in the Comments, on How the Ancient Nations, When Pagan, Worshipped Idols and Offered Sacrifices to Them, and Continue to Do So Now*. Ed. by Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 22–25.

**108** Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 28; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 366n282.

**109** Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 26.

*bereginy*. However, no further information is given about what those rites entailed. In addition, in a contemporary sermon, the *Sermon by Saint John Chrysostom*,<sup>110</sup> *upiry* are again associated with *bereginy*, who are said to be “three times nine sisters” and to be offered the sacrifice of roosters. *Bereginy* are mentioned again with different natural elements that are worshipped by heathens and even by “those who called themselves Christians,” such as fire, stones, rivers, fountains and trees. Therefore, it may be inferred that *bereginy* were also a kind of natural deities, and that *upiry* combined the cult to the natural elements and the cult to the dead. The name of *bereginy* could come from the Old Russian words *beregū* (river bank) or *beregit’* (to keep), so it could refer either to the place where they were found or to the agent name “guardians.”<sup>111</sup> Regarding the etymology of *upiry*, we do not yet have a satisfactory explanation.<sup>112</sup> The only thing on which scholars agree is that the term is ancient and is found in all the Slavic languages.<sup>113</sup> It seems plausible that its transfer into other European languages took place between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through a literary written intermediary, and possibly via the German loanword *Vampir*, which would come from the homonymous Serbian form.<sup>114</sup>

As for the sacrifice of roosters, it appears in different texts and contexts. However, specifically as a funerary rite we saw it in the testimony of Leo the Deacon<sup>115</sup> regarding the offering of victims (suckling infants and chickens) to the river Danube during the funerals for the dead warriors at the time of Prince Svyatoslav’s campaign in Bulgaria between 969 and 971. Although we do not know the exact reason for the offering of roosters or chickens, this bird is associated to the daylight and the cult of the sun, announcing with its crowing the coming of day and the end of night and darkness. Moreover, they remind us of the cockerels’ footprints left on the ashes of the bathhouse by the visiting spirits of the dead known as *naviĕ* during the “baths of the dead” as recounted in the *Sermon on Fasting for the Ignorant*.<sup>116</sup>

The sacrifice of roosters or cockerels appeared again in the *Sermon by One Who Loves Christ and Is a Jealous Defender of the Righteous Faith*, but this time related to *vily*, as

**110** The full title is: *Sermon by the Holy Father Saint John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on How the First Pagans Believed in Idols*. Ed. by Gal’kovskii, *Bor’ba khristianstva*, 59–61.

**111** Dynda, “Rusalki,” 86, n. 7.

**112** There are several hypotheses gathered by Vasmer, *Russisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, III, 186. On the one hand, there are a few authors who suggest a foreign origin, coming from Hungarian or Greek, or even from the Tatar *ubyr* (witch), and on the other hand, the majority of authors propose a patrimonial Slavic origin, identifying the form *-pyrĭ* with the root of *pŭrati*, *pariti* (to fly) and *pero* (feather), as well as with *netopyr’* (bat) that would mean literally “the one who flies at night.” But this is not clear at all.

**113** Serbo-Croatian *vampire*, Bosnian *lampir*, Bulgarian *vampir*, *văpir*, Ukrainian *upyr’*, Belarusian *upyr*, Russian *upyr’*, Czech and Slovak *upír*, Polish *wąpierz*, *upiór*, Kashubian *wupji*, *lupi*.

**114** Dundes, *The Vampire: A Casebook*, 3–11.

**115** See Cremation.

**116** See The Baths of the Dead.

we saw in the passage quoted in [Chapter 2](#) dealing with fertility rites.<sup>117</sup> Here *vily* were mentioned together with other deities, as in the *Sermon by Saint Gregory*, but play the role of *bereginy* as in the *Sermon by Saint John Chrysostom*, repeating the number “three times nine sisters” (thirty in another variant) and receiving the offering of sacrifices of cockerels. *Vily* are attested also with this name as female spirits of nature among the Western and Southern Slavs.<sup>118</sup>

The oldest testimony of the worship of nature spirits connected with divination among the Southern Slavs can be found in Procopius' *Gothic War* (*Bell. Goth.* 3.14.23), as we have seen already in the chapter dealing with everyday life rituals. According to Procopius, “they make their divinations in connection with these sacrifices,”<sup>119</sup> so it would be possible to identify these sacrifices with the offerings of roosters to the *vily* and *bereginy* in the East Slavic sermons. Procopius mentioned the “rivers, nymphs and other spirits,”<sup>120</sup> calling them by their Greek names, but they could be identified with the water spirits *vily* and *bereginy*.

Later, among the East Slavs, these nature deities were assimilated by other creatures belonging to the East Slavic folklore considered by several authors<sup>121</sup> as the female counterparts of the restless dead: *rusalki*. However, as Dynda<sup>122</sup> remarked, they are much more than this. Most authors agree in considering that the name of *rusalki* is derived from the festival known as *Rusal'naia nedelia*.<sup>123</sup> As we have seen already, it was a spring festival devoted to the dead that also included agrarian rites.<sup>124</sup> It usually fell on the Thursday of the so-called Green Week (better known as Trinity Week in Russia and the Whitsuntide week in Britain). However, it started on the eve of Pentecost and finished one week later on the eve of Trinity Sunday. As Dynda<sup>125</sup> reminds,

*rusalki* are souls of maidens who died an untimely and often unnatural death, or of those who died in the liminal period between betrothal and marriage. Ultimately, there are some hints that any woman who did not marry, i.e. did not fulfil her life role, had the potential to become *rusalka* following her death.

Therefore, *rusalki* included all of the elements that characterize the restless dead, and in this shape, they could be either a benefit or a hazard for humans. They were believed to attract careless men to the lakes, rivers, ponds or swamps where they lived, causing their death. Moreover, as we have seen already, similar to other “unclean dead” or to the

117 See Svarozhich.

118 Niederle, *Slovanské Starožitnosti*, 53–64; Jurić, *Treatise on the South Slavic Vila*, 15–19.

119 Dewing, *Procopius in Seven Volumes*, 271.

120 *καὶ ποταμούς τε καὶ νύμφας καὶ ἄλλα ἄττα δαιμόνια*, see Dewing, *Procopius in Seven Volumes*, 270.24–25.

121 Dynda, “Rusalki,” 83–109; Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*; Zelenin, *Ocherki russkoi mifologii*.

122 Dynda, “Rusalki,” 89.

123 Dynda, “Rusalki,” 86; Miklosich, *Die Rusalien*, 7.

124 See *Festivals to Honour the Dead*.

125 Dynda, “Rusalki,” 88–89.

souls of the dead called *navii*, they were thought to have power over natural phenomena as well as over the fertility of the earth.<sup>126</sup> As a consequence, they needed to receive a special kind of offerings and to celebrate specific rituals during a specific period of time in order to be pleased and not do harm to the living. If the *Radunitsa* coinciding with Holy Week was the time devoted to the *navii* and the “baths of the dead,” Pentecost and Trinity Sunday during the *Semik* or *Rusal'naia nedelia* was the moment when *rusalki* could appear to humans. Actually, these creatures played an important role in the rites of the festival, though they are not mentioned explicitly by the texts. It is only said<sup>127</sup> that the first Monday of Saint Peter's Fast, that is, after Trinity Sunday, people would go to the forest and to the springs, places associated to *rusalki*, and perform demonic amusements.<sup>128</sup> This date marked the end of the *rusalki*'s period of influence, and it was accompanied with a very special farewell ceremony in the villages, including parades of girls dressed as *rusalki*.<sup>129</sup>

The celebration of all these festivals and rituals ensured that these supernatural entities would be favourable for humans. Otherwise, they could bring negative and destructive consequences for the fertility of the earth. We can find a good example in a legend from the region of the river Onega, according to which during the *Smutnoye Vremya*<sup>130</sup> (Time of Troubles), some Polish soldiers called *pani* (lords) had died on Russian soil. Subsequently, every year during the festivity of *Semik*, the people of the region used to gather by the clock tower and take the *kisel*<sup>131</sup> to keep those dead men calm. One year they forgot to perform the ritual and there was a bad harvest. Since then, they never forget to calm the wicked *pani* through offerings.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, these dead warriors have the additional problem of being foreigners and enemies that have been killed far from their homes, and whose remains do not rest in their fatherland. Another example is to be found in the sixteenth-century epistle of Maxim “the Greek”<sup>133</sup> dealing with the superstitious belief on the alleged harmful effect that the burial of those who have drowned or have been murdered is thought to have on the fertility of earth.<sup>134</sup> According to this work, if freezing winds flow during spring, then, “if we know that a

**126** Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 79–81.

**127** For example in question 27 belonging to chapter 41 of the *Stoglav*.

**128** Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 432–33.

**129** Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 80.

**130** Period of political crisis and instability in the Muscovian state between the demise of the Riurikid dynasty in 1598 and the establishment of the Romanov dynasty in 1613.

**131** Drink made of forest fruits or grains.

**132** Zelenin, *Ocherki russkoi mifologii*, 133; Casas Olea, “Génesis y configuración del mito del vampiro en los Balcanes,” 42.

**133** Greek humanist called Michael Trivolis, later known in Russia as Maxim the Greek, was a monk from the monastery Vatopedi in Mount Athos, who in 1518 was sent to Moscow at the request of Grand Prince Vasili III, who needed a learned translator. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 392.

**134** Maksim Grek, *Sochineniya prepodobnogo Maksima Greka*, 170–71.

man who had either drowned or been murdered recently has been buried, we exhume the damned man [...] and abandon him in a distant place."<sup>135</sup> Therefore, in both examples the deceased had a problematic death, or lacked the appropriate funerary rites.

### Living Dead among the West Slavs

But as we said at the beginning, the testimonies regarding the living dead are not limited to South or East Slavs. We also have an interesting source on restless dead among the West Slavs. The oldest accounts of this figure of the living dead or restless dead<sup>136</sup> among the West Slavs can be found in a fourteenth-century work by Jan Neplach, abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Opatovice, *Summula Chronicae tam Romanae quam Bohemicae*, which was written between the years 1360 and 1365 and recounts the history of Bohemia until 1346.<sup>137</sup> This work has the monastic chronicles as literary models, for it gathers in an analytic way the anecdotes and historical data that were relevant for the local history of the Bohemian kingdom. There are two interesting passages that refer to the years 1336 and 1344 respectively, and they read as follows:

Jan Neplach, *Summula Chronicae tam Romanae quam Bohemicae, sub anno 1336*: In Bohemia near Cadanus<sup>138</sup> a league from a village called Blau<sup>139</sup> a certain shepherd called Myslata died. Rising every night he made the rounds of the villages and spoke to people, terrifying and killing them. And while he was being impaled with a stake, he said, "They injured me severely, when they gave me a stick with which to defend myself from dogs." And when he was being exhumed for cremation, he had swelled like an ox and bellowed in a dreadful manner. And when he was placed in the fire, someone, seizing a stake, drove it in him and immediately blood burst forth as from a vessel. Moreover, when he was exhumed and placed on a vehicle, he drew in his feet as if alive, and when he was cremated, all the evil ceased, and before he was cremated, whomever he called by name at night died within eight days.<sup>140</sup>

Jan Neplach, *Summula Chronicae tam Romanae quam Bohemicae, sub anno 1344*: AD 1344 a certain woman died in Lewin [Levin] and was buried. After her burial she rose and killed many, and ran after whomever she pleased. And when she was transfixed [impaled], blood flowed as if from a living animal. She had devoured more than half of her shroud, and when it was extracted, it was covered completely in blood. When she was to be cremated, the wood could not be set alight unless, according to the instruction of

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**135** Zelenin, *Ocherki russkoi mifologii*, 93.

**136** Also is employed the French term *revenant*.

**137** Emler, *Iohannis Neplachonis Chronicon*, 451–84. Passages commented on here, analyzed as manifestations of vampirism, can be found too in Perkowski, *The Darkling: A Treatise on Slavic Vampirism*, and Svobodová "Dva případy vampyrismu v Neplachove kronice," 571–77.

**138** Kadaň.

**139** Blov.

**140** Perkowski, *The Darkling: A Treatise on Slavic Vampirism*, 105; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 216.

some old women, it was made from the roof of a church. After she had been impaled, she always kept rising, but when she was cremated, all evil subsided.<sup>141</sup>

Both texts present common elements: the main characters of both accounts are people who live on the margins of society. It is clear in the case of the shepherd from Blov and it is most probable for the woman of Levin. It was even possible that this woman was a witch during her life, though in the text it is not stated explicitly. In any case, the fact of being a woman placed her already in a very marginal position in the medieval society of Central Europe. Both deceased become restless dead and harm the living. The bodies bleed (the shepherd's even draws his feet in) as if they were alive, in what is considered one of the main characteristics of the living dead. Additionally, there are some details that provide very interesting information. The shepherd from Blov died a league from the village. That is, he died without Christian confession, or it may even have been a violent or accidental death. The woman from Levin was hungry in her grave, devouring her own shroud.<sup>142</sup> The solution for the problem of both revenants is similar, though the woman from Levin requires more extreme actions. In both cases a first attempt is made to transfix the corpses with stakes. This fails and subsequently they are cremated, which proves to be the effective solution, with the peculiarity that the woman needs to be burned with sacred wood taken from the village church.

Another invisible and incorporeal variant of the spirits of the dead, similar to the East Slavic *navii*, can also be found among the West Slavs. As we already mentioned in [Chapter 2](#), Thietmar of Merseburg in his *Chronicon* (VII, 68)<sup>143</sup> narrates the following episode of a haunted house in 1017:

68. In my neighbourhood, in a place called Sülfeld,<sup>144</sup> a miracle occurred in the second week of December. A certain woman there had barred herself and her children in her house, because her husband was not at home. Behold, just before the rooster crowed, she heard a loud noise. Horrified by this intrusion, she cried out to her neighbours and indicated that she needed help. When the neighbours rushed to her aid, however, they were repeatedly thrown back by some force. Finally, breaking down the doors, they entered with drawn swords and diligently searched for whatever had attacked the mistress of the house, and them as well. Because of its supernatural character, however, this enemy could not be discovered. The searchers went away, disheartened, while the woman anxiously awaited the break of the day. In the morning, she fetched the closest priest who purified the entire house with the relics of saints and consecrated water. During the following night, she was assailed by the same terror, but to a much lesser extent. Thanks be God, repeated visits by the priest freed her from it completely.<sup>145</sup>

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**141** Gordon, "Dealing with the Undead in the Later Middle Ages," 97–98; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 217.

**142** Gordon, "Dealing with the Undead in the Later Middle Ages," 113–14.

**143** Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 482.

**144** Village belonging to Lower Saxony, in modern Germany.

**145** Warner, *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, 355.

The invisible supernatural force described here that does not allow the neighbours to enter the house reminds us very much of the strange phenomena of ghosts and evil spirits that surrounded the idol of Veles which was destroyed by St. Abraham of Rostov with the help of the staff that St. John the Evangelist had given to him, as narrated in the former's hagiography.<sup>146</sup> The problem of the haunted house is solved in Thietmar's account by means of a traditional Christian exorcism with the relics of saints and consecrated water.

### The Aggressiveness of the Living Dead

The identification of the anecdotes gathered by abbot Neplach with cases of vampirism would integrate those testimonies within the Slavic vampirism that, according to the theory of "binary stratification," would appear as the result of the superposition of two fundamental ideological strata: on the one hand, a pre-Christian stratum, where the belief in an aggressive living dead that could be identified with the vampire pre-existed, in Common Slavic *upyr'*, and on the other hand, a Christian stratum, which would appear as a forced innovation and conflict with the traditional pre-Christian ideology.<sup>147</sup> In our opinion, the theory of binary stratification is based on the *petitio principii* of the oldest antiquity of the category of the aggressive living dead and of its specifically Slavic character. On the contrary, the figure of the living dead is not necessarily aggressive and it is not restricted to the Slavic realm, for one of the arguments supporting the antiquity of Slavic vampirism would decay.

An example of the ambivalent character of the Slavic living dead can be found among the East Slavic *navii*. We have seen already how during the spring festival known as *Radunitsa*, the East Slavs prepared the "baths for the dead," in which the souls of the dead called *navii* were believed to visit the living.<sup>148</sup> This is an example of a peaceful visit of the living dead, following an organized ritual with that aim. However, there is also a testimony of a harmful and extremely aggressive visit of the *navii* among the East Slavs. It can be found in the *PVL*, which describes a massive ghostly apparition that would have taken place in the city of Polotsk in the year 1092 in the context of a surge of omens and signs that would announce the imminent end of the world. This incident is recounted as follows:

An extraordinary event occurred at Polotsk. At night there was heard a clatter and a groaning in the streets, and demons ran about like men. If any citizen went forth from his house to look upon them, he was wounded straightway by some invisible demon, and so many perished from such wounds that the people dared no longer leave their houses. The demons later began to appear on horseback during the day. They were not visible themselves, but the hoofs of their horses could be seen. Thus they did injury to

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**146** See Funerary Banquet.

**147** On the theory of "binary stratification," see Uspenskii and Lotman, *Semiotika istorii. Semiotika kul'tury*.

**148** See The Baths of the Dead.

the people of Polotsk and the vicinity, so that it was commonly said that ghosts were killing the people of Polotsk. This portent had its beginning in Dryutesk. At this time, a sign appeared in the heavens like a huge circle in the midst of the sky. There was a drought in this year, so that the earth was burned over, and many pine forests and peat-bogs were consumed. There were many portents in various localities, and incursions of the Polovcians were reported from all quarters.<sup>149</sup>

We are faced here with a violent apparition of the *navii*, as they are called in the original,<sup>150</sup> the souls of the dead that seemed to be peaceful while they were visiting the houses of the living and were taking their drinks, foods and baths. However, they share some features with them: they are invisible and only the footprints that they leave can be seen, in this case the hoofs of their horses. But unlike the other, these *navii* inflicted mortal wounds. The key to this behaviour can be found in the last sentences. In addition to the apocalyptic context, this apparition coincides with several violent attacks launched by the Polovtsians, a nomadic people of Turkic origin that came from the steppes of Central Asia, invading the territory of Kievan Rus' in 1068. Similar to the legend of the Polish *pani*,<sup>151</sup> here we have a foreign invading host that dies in enemy land after having killed many natives. They fulfil all of the conditions to become harmful restless dead, the ghostly army being a reflection of the invading troops, though they were far away. In addition, we can find one of the negative effects typical of the restless dead among the apocalyptic signs: that year there was a severe drought, as well as many fires, that is, a negative influence on nature and the fertility of earth. Only two years earlier, in the same *PVL* the arrival at Kiev from Constantinople of another *navie* was reported, an alleged living dead, though this time peaceful:

In this year [1090], Yanka, the above-mentioned daughter of Vsevolod,<sup>152</sup> went to Greece. She brought back the Metropolitan John, a eunuch, and when the people saw him, they exclaimed, "A ghost<sup>153</sup> has come." After staying a year in Kiev, he too died. He was not a learned man, but frank and simple in character.<sup>154</sup>

In this case, the Kievan's identification of the new Greek Metropolitan with the living dead made may be because the man was a eunuch, that is, a disabled person in his sexual reproductive function, something that could have been confirmed in their eyes with the Metropolitan's early death.

**149** Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 173–74; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 293.

**150** Ostrowski, Birnbaum and Lunt, *The "Pověst' vremennykh lět": An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, col. 215, 6.

**151** See The Change of the Funerary Rite and the Origin of the Living Dead.

**152** Vsevolod I Yaroslavich, Grand Prince of Kiev (1078–1093).

**153** *Navie* in the original text: Ostrowski, Birnbaum and Lunt, *The "Pověst' vremennykh lět": An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, 208, 17.

**154** Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 170; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 291.

Just like other aspects of the Slavic pre-Christian religion, the aggressive apparition of the living dead is not unique. On the contrary, the violent attack of *navii* in Polotsk as recounted in the *PVL* would be an early example of the phenomenon known in French as *chasse sauvage* (Wild Hunt). Many examples of this supernatural event can be found in medieval Western European literature; this tradition goes back to the Germanic and Scandinavian myths. The legend of the ghostly host is known in medieval French literature as *Menée Hellequin* and appears for the first time in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, written by Orderic Vitalis<sup>155</sup> in the early twelfth century. This host Hellequin probably takes its name from the Germanic terms *Heer* (army) and *thing* (retinue of armed free men).<sup>156</sup> The oldest mention of this myth, though rather obscure, is identified in an account of the *Harii* that fought at night taking the shape of an army of ghosts, belonging to the *Germania* of Tacitus.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, there are numerous testimonies in the *Sagas of the Icelanders* on aggressive living dead or *draugr*<sup>158</sup> that confirm the existence of such a belief in Scandinavia since pre-Christian times and a long coexistence during the period of Christianization. It is not, therefore, a phenomenon restricted to the Slavs; it has counterparts in central and northern Europe.

Similarly, there are many records of appearances of non-violent living dead outside the Slavic domain. For instance, there is an anecdote told by Caesarius of Heisterbach in his thirteenth-century work *Dialogus miraculorum* (11.36) to instruct the young monks on the importance of wearing the cowl at the moment of death. It tells the story of a pious French monk who had to return from death in order to properly put on his cowl, which he had taken off just before he died.<sup>159</sup> Therefore, there are many stories that suggest that the aggressiveness of the returning dead is not a compulsory feature, and that all of the revenants do not have to be identified with vampires, as the theory of binary stratification argues.

### The Change of the Funerary Rite and the Origin of the Living Dead

A theory that we could define as “ritualistic,” which highlights the importance of ritual for pre-Christian religions, suggests that the living dead could have originated in the change in the model of the funerary ritual, from cremation to inhumation. This seems very clear for the West Slavs in the cases of the shepherd Myslata of Blov and the woman of Levin, as recounted by Jan Neplach in his *Summula Chronicae*, where the only way to

**155** Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 93–94.

**156** Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 100.

**157** Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 100.

**158** Lecouteux, *The Return of the Dead*; Noetzel, “Outlaws and the Undead: Defining Sacred and Communal Space in Medieval Iceland,” 175–200.

**159** Strange, *Caesarii Heisterbacensis Dialogus miraculorum II*, 298; Álvarez-Pedrosa, “Dos muertos vivientes en la Bohemia del siglo XIV. Aspectos comparativos, rituales y sociales,” 148. On the importance of Caesarius of Heisterbach on the history of the living dead, see Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 127–33.

terminate evil and stop the restless dead was cremation, returning to the former pre-Christian funerary ritual. An example of a preventive action, although not that evident, can be found among the East Slavs in a passage of the *PVL* that relates the funerary ritual of Prince Vladimir of Kiev after his death in 1015:

For when Vladimir fell ill, Boris was with him at the time. Since the Pechenegs were attacking the Russes, he sent Boris out against them, for he himself was very sick, and of this illness he died on July 15. Now he died at Berestovo, but his death was kept secret, for Svyatopolk was in Kiev. But at night his companions took up the flooring between two rooms, and after wrapping the body in a rug, they let it down to the earth with ropes. After they had placed it upon a sledge, they took it away and laid it in the Church of the Virgin that Vladimir himself had built.<sup>160</sup>

It would be hard to explain this strange funerary ritual performed with Prince Vladimir's body if we dismiss the Slavic pre-Christian rites, something really shocking if we remember that Vladimir was the first Kievan ruler to be officially baptized in 988, converting his kingdom to the Christian faith. First, the hole that is drilled in the floor between two chambers in order to remove the prince's corpse could have been to confound the deceased. This can be linked to the custom of removing a body through a hole made for that purpose, which in Belarusian is called *dušnik*.<sup>161</sup> The aim of this was to disorient the souls of the dead to prevent them from returning home and becoming vampires or harmful dead. Second, placing the corpse on a sledge is highly symbolic, especially if we bear in mind that when Prince Vladimir died, on July 15 according to the *PVL*, there was no snow at all. Therefore, the sledge can be interpreted as a symbolic means of transport of the soul of the deceased to the other world, the same as the boat for the Vikings. That is supported by other testimonies that can be found in the same *PVL*, for instance, the sledge where the body of Prince Izyaslav of Kiev was placed after being killed in a battle against the troops of his nephews Oleg Svyatoslavich and Boris Vyacheslavich in 1078,<sup>162</sup> or the words of Prince Vladimir Monomakh in his *Pouchenie* (Instruction or Testament), written shortly before the prince's death 1125, when he says the following:

"As I sat upon my sledge, I meditated in my heart and praised God, who has led me, a sinner, even to this day. [...] If this document displeases anyone, let him not be angry, but rather let him believe that, in my old age, I talked nonsense as I sat upon my sledge."<sup>163</sup>

The words "as I sat upon my sledge" could be understood in a metaphorical sense as the prince was feeling his own death approach. In addition, there is the archaeological evidence of burned sledges in one of the burials of the area of Kostroma.<sup>164</sup> Finally, the

**160** Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 124; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 282.

**161** Váňa, *Svět slovanských bohů a démonů*, 134.

**162** Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 166.

**163** Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 206.

**164** Likhachëv, *Povest' vremennykh let, chast' vtoraya*, 357.

wrapping of the body in a rug seems to be one of the many techniques used to immobilize the corpse to prevent it from rising. These practices have been attested in archaeological excavations throughout Europe,<sup>165</sup> the most famous of which was the transfixion with a stake, whose real aim would be to fix the dead to the ground so as not to rise again. The wrapping of Vladimir's corpse reminds us of how Prince Vasil'ko of Terebovl' was raised and placed in a rug on a cart after being blinded with a knife and left for dead in 1097, during the internecine war between the members of the Rurikid dynasty, as is recounted in the *PVL*.<sup>166</sup>

This kind of extreme and shocking funerary rites were performed on specific people suspected of becoming restless dead. They have been summarized very well by Dynda:<sup>167</sup>

(1) those who had met unnatural, violent, or unexpected deaths (people drowned, lost in the forest, frozen to death, fallen into a swamp, assassinated by someone); (2) those who committed suicide, regardless of the manner of death they chose (*samoubijcy*); (3) those who died during a liminal period of their lives, that is, above all, the unbaptized children (*nekrešćenie deti*), or miscarried fetuses (*poterčata*), and also young people deceased, for example, just before their wedding or initiation; (4) those who were believed or suspected to be witches, sorcerers, and vampires even when they were alive. (i.e. socially determined unclean dead; cf. Warner 2000)

However, Prince Vladimir I of Kiev does not fit into any of these categories. Thus, the preventive measures could be due to his problematic life as a pagan, which included fratricide, rape, incest and polygamy, together with his relatively recent baptism.

Actually, all the testimonies on how to deal with the restless dead belong to the period that followed the Christianization of the Slavs, but never to the former pre-Christian times. This aspect is relevant, for it seems to confirm that those living dead were a result of a problem with the funerary ritual of inhumation that, as we have seen, was completely new for the Slavs, who adopted it after their conversion to the Christian faith.<sup>168</sup> This ritual shift affected not only the Slavs but also the Germanic peoples, among others.<sup>169</sup>

The importance of cremation as a suitable funerary ritual has a peculiar appearance in diverse stories of revenants: the fiery revenants, who somehow clamour for the ancient ritual of cremation. There are several accounts of revenants that appear enveloped in flames or wearing fiery garments. Medieval tradition makes them messengers of the punishments of hell and purgatory, but this is most likely a Christian reinterpretation.

<sup>165</sup> Stülzembach, "Vampir- und Wiedergängerserscheinungen aus volkskundlicher und archäologischer Sicht," 97–121.

<sup>166</sup> Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 190; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 293–94.

<sup>167</sup> Dynda, "Rusalki," 88.

<sup>168</sup> Cremation was only replaced by inhumation after the Christianization of the different Slavic peoples: Conte, *Les slaves*, 164; Barford, *The Early Slavs*, 200–208; Holzer, "Gli slavi prima del loro arrivo in occidente," 23.

<sup>169</sup> Lecouteux, *The Return of the Dead*.

For instance, there is a passage in chapter 163 of the most famous work on medieval Western European hagiography, the *Golden Legend*,<sup>170</sup> that exemplifies the reasons for the Commemoration of All Souls. It explains how a dead disciple visited his Parisian teacher, chancellor Silo, in order to show him his penance in purgatory, wearing a coat made of burning parchment, a drop of incandescent sweat dripping onto his former teacher's hand.<sup>171</sup> We have found a probable variant of those fiery revenants among the East Slavs in the figure of two saints believed to have performed posthumous miracles related to fire: the martyred Princes Boris and Gleb, Prince Vladimir's sons who were killed by their half-brother Svyatopolk in the struggle for power that followed Vladimir's death in 1015. They were the first East Slavic saints canonized in the Kievan Rus' already in 1072, and their cult became a way to legitimate the Christian faith as well as the reigning dynasty. In their honour two hagiographies were written: the *Narrative and Passion and Encomium of the Holy Martyrs Boris and Gleb*, and the *Lectio on the Life and Assassination of the Blessed Passion Sufferers Boris and Gleb*.<sup>172</sup> The question regarding the date of their composition and their relationship with the account of the PVL has not been solved yet. The latter recounts in 1015 that "after Gleb had been slain, his body was thrown upon the shore between two tree-trunks, but afterward they took him and carried him away, to bury him beside his brother Boris beside the Church of St. Basil."<sup>173</sup> However, the *Narrative* gives some extra information:

And though the saintly one lay there a long time, he remained entirely unharmed, for He left him not in oblivion and neglect but gave signs: now a pillar of fire was seen, now burning candles. Moreover, merchants passing by on the way would hear the singing of angels; and others, hunters and shepherds, also saw and heard these things.<sup>174</sup>

Similarly, the *Lectio* relates the following:

The Christ-loving prince ordered that the body of the holy Gleb be sought. Though they searched long and hard, no one could find it. Then one year later hunters came upon the saint's body lying unharmed, for neither beasts nor birds had touched it. They went to the town and informed the town's senior official. Together with servants, he went [to the place] and saw how the saint's [body] glowed like lightning, and the official was awestruck. He ordered his servants to guard the holy body in that place, while notification was sent to the Christ-loving Jaroslav.<sup>175</sup>

Here the detail according to which the saint's body was "glowing like lightning" is very interesting, something that reminds us of the fiery revenants. Once the corpse had been located, it was brought to the Vyshgorod church of St. Basil, where it was interred beside the body of Boris. However, the strange phenomena did not cease, for

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**170** Maggioni, *Iacopo da Varazze. Legenda aurea*.

**171** For the English translation, see Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 198.

**172** Abramovich, *Zhitiya svyatykh muchenikov Borisa i Gleba i sluzhby im*.

**173** Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 129.

**174** Kantor, *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes*, 193.

**175** Lenhoff, *The Martyred Princes Boris and Gleb*, 127n14.

candles and fiery pillars were observed over the princes' grave. However, even stranger things happened: flames burst from the grave, burning the feet of a Varangian soldier who had inadvertently stepped on the holy site. A few days after the Varangian was burned, reports the author of the *Narrative*, the Church of St. Basil was destroyed by a dreadful fire:

Once Varangians came close to the place where the saints lay buried beneath the ground. And as one of them passed by, at that instant fire issued from the grave and set his legs afire. Leaping up he began to exclaim, showing his burned and scorched legs to his retinue. And thenceforth they dared not approach closely, but bowed down in fear. A few days after this the Church of Saint Vasilij, near which the saints lay, caught fire. People flocked to the sight and, as the church was burning from the top down, they carried out all the icons and chalices, and nothing was consumed save the church itself.<sup>176</sup>

The reaction by half-brother Prince Yaroslav and the Orthodox clergy in response to this strange phenomenon is revealing, for a kind of exorcism was performed, in which crosses were carried to the place where the church had burned down and a mass on the grave was celebrated.<sup>177</sup> As a consequence, a new stone temple was built, and the incorrupt bodies of the saints were placed in a sepulchre above the ground, on the right side. These precautions do not seem to be by chance. On the contrary, they would respond to a rite of exorcism and purification, with the aim of ensuring the eternal rest that the martyred saints apparently could not find.

As Gail Lenhoff<sup>178</sup> reminds us, Boris and Gleb's fiery miracles have many parallels not only in medieval East Slavic literature but also in other Slavic literatures, with the burning luminaries that appear on the grave of the Bohemian saint princess Ludmila, grandmother of Prince Wenceslas,<sup>179</sup> as well as in medieval Scandinavian literature, with the lights that surrounded the corpse of the Norwegian saint King Óláfr Haraldsson, which can be found in the *Heimskringla Saga*, chapter 238. Olaf II of Norway, known as "the Saint," is in fact the patron saint of Norway. He helped strengthen the Christianization of his country that had been started by King Olaf I Tryggvasson. Olaf II ruled between 1015 and 1028, coinciding with the rule of Prince Yaroslav in Kiev. Not only were they contemporaries but they got to know each other and they established family ties. When the Danish king Cnut the Great invaded Norway in 1028, King Óláfr went into exile in the Kievan Rus' and stayed in prince Yaroslav's court. In 1030, he returned to his kingdom with an army, in an attempt to retake it, but failed in the battle of Stiklestad, where he was killed. It was right after his death that his posthumous miracles started, including the luminaries described in the *Heimskringla Saga*:

238. Þorgíls Hálmuson and his son Grímr had King Óláfr's body in their keeping, and were very anxious about how they could manage to take care that the king's enemies

**176** Kantor, *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes*, 209.

**177** Kantor, *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes*, 209.

**178** Lenhoff, *The Martyred Princes Boris and Gleb*, 39–40.

**179** Jakobson, "Russkie otgoloski drevnecheshskikh pamyatnikov o Lyudmile," 47.

were not able to get hold of it to mistreat the body, since they heard the farmers' talk of it being the best thing to do, if the king's body was found, to burn it or convey it out to sea and sink it down. The father and son had seen during the night as if it were a candle flame burning above where King Óláfr's body was among the slain, and similarly afterwards, when they had hidden the body, then they always saw at night a light from the direction where the king rested. They were afraid that the king's enemies would search for the body there where it was if they saw these signs.<sup>180</sup>

Previously, in chapter 236 it was recounted how the father and his son

took up King Óláfr's body and carried it away to where there was a kind of small, empty cottage on one side of the farmstead, taking [395] a light with them and water, then took the clothes off the body and washed the body and wiped it then with linen cloths, laid it down there in the building and covered it with pieces of wood so that no one could see it, even if people came into the building.<sup>181</sup>

Therefore, though neither the place nor the circumstances of King Óláfr's death coincide with those of Prince Gleb, they share both the lights and the pieces of wood, or the tree trunks, to hide the corpse. However, King Óláfr's story is more explicit regarding the fact that the body was hidden to prevent it from being burned and sunk in the sea, that is, to prevent the celebration of a typical Scandinavian pre-Christian funerary ritual with his remains. As a consequence, in our opinion, the probable cause of the fire miracles would be the sudden change in the burial rites that took place both in the Kievan Rus' and in Norway after the Christianization of the countries with the baptism of their respective ruling princes. This sudden change in customs may have caused them a real trauma that, according to the aforementioned sources, could have triggered all the famous stories of vampires and the restless dead. Not by chance the martyred saints Boris and Gleb would be, from the Slavic pre-Christian mentality, the perfect candidates to become "restless dead," being the victims of a murder, and specifically of a fratricide, and not having completed their life cycle. As we have already seen, in most of the stories of the restless dead the only way to restore the natural order is to resort to the primitive funerary rite, cremation, and fire was precisely the phenomenon provoked by the remains of the princes.

For ancient peoples, the importance of celebrating the appropriate funerary rites to guarantee the passing of the souls of the deceased is a well-known fact. We have a medieval example in the *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum* (*Small Index of Superstitions and Paganism*). It is the index of a longer work, preserved in the Vatican Library, which has unfortunately been lost. It dates back to the eighth century and most probably came from Saxony (in modern Germany) at a time when the forced Christianization of the area was being carried out under the rule of Charlemagne. The first two entries of the Index refer specifically to the funerary rituals and the eventual pagan deviations that could be introduced in them. Specifically, the first entry bears the title *De sacrilegio ad sepulchra mortuorum* (On the sacrileges that can be committed on the burial of the

**180** Finlay and Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla*, 265.

**181** Finlay and Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla*, 264.

dead).<sup>182</sup> This gives us an idea of how important the funerary problems were for certain types of deceased, particularly those who were perceived as problematic during their lives or that experienced problems at the time of their death.

An appropriate burial was something that all of the dead needed, even those who had been criminals during their lives. As we have already seen in the Slavic realm, the lack of a suitable funerary rite could mean that the deceased could become one of the restless dead. Other European examples exist where the dead provide signs or give direct requests so that their remains receive the proper rites. Similar testimonies have existed since ancient times, such as the classical story of the haunted house in Athens described by Pliny the Younger (*Epist.* VII.27).<sup>183</sup> But there are examples also in Homer's *Iliad*: the appearance of Patroclus to his beloved comrade Achilles in order to remind him that he needed to be buried (*Iliad* 23.69–71), and King Priam's petition to Achilles claiming the body of his son Hector to give him the appropriate funeral (*Iliad* 24.696–704), which included cremation, as per the Slavic funerary rite. In late ancient or early medieval times, Constantius of Lyon recounts in his *Life of Saint Germanus of Auxerre*,<sup>184</sup> written around 478, how St. Germanus had rid an abandoned house of "evil shadows" that were haunting it, being the souls of two dead criminals whose remains were lying unburied.<sup>185</sup>

Also sins "against nature" could have as a consequence the return of the dead from the afterlife to interview the living. The Benedictine monk Guibert of Nogent (c. 1055–1124) tells in his *De vita sua (Autobiography)* (1.24)<sup>186</sup> an anecdote referring to a nun who had fallen into some "foul sins," most likely carnal sins with the same sex, that she refused to confess. After her death, she appeared to one of the sisters who was sleeping in the cell where she had died. In the vision, she was on fire and was being beaten by two wicked spirits with two hammers, and the sparks fell into the eye of the sleeping nun, who woke up with a burning pain in her eye.<sup>187</sup>

Cases of aggressive living dead have been recorded when they received anomalous burials, such as in the *Story of Egil One-Hand and Asmund Berserker-Slayer*, as conveyed by Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum* (5.11.3).<sup>188</sup> The text says that after a prince called Aswid died of an illness and was buried together with his horse and his dog in a mound, his friend and comrade Asmund, bound by his oath of eternal friendship, was also buried alive with him. This transgression of the funerary ritual would have caused the dead Aswid to become an extremely aggressive living dead, coming to life one night

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**182** Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 19.

**183** For the English translation, see: Lewis, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, 244–47.

**184** Levison, "Vita Germani episcopi Autissiodorensis auctore Constantio," 225–83.

**185** Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 29, 181.

**186** Labande, *Guibert de Nogent. Autobiographie*.

**187** For the English translation, see Bland, *The Autobiography of Nogent*, 96–97.

**188** Lluçh, "Saxo Gramático, traductor," 1–27.

and biting his former friend's ear after having eaten his horse and his dog. Finally, Asmund cut off Aswid's head and impaled him with a stake.<sup>189</sup>

As we can see, in almost all of the testimonies regarding the living dead, three remedies are more frequently used to counter them: beheading, transfixing them with a stake or burning them, the latter being the repetition of the common funerary ritual of pre-Christian times.

Transfixing the dead with stakes was still a widespread custom in Central Europe during the ninth century when babies and women died during childbirth. These deaths were considered to break the natural vital cycle. This was attested by Bishop Burchard of Worms (*Decretum* 19.5.179),<sup>190</sup> who condemned the Germanic custom of impaling unbaptized infants to the ground.<sup>191</sup> Moreover, it can still be found in Russia during the sixteenth century in the following testimony contained in Maxim the Greek's epistle,<sup>192</sup> this time regarding those who have drowned or have been murdered: "the bodies of those who have drowned or have been murdered, unworthy to be buried, after being thrown away in the fields, are transfixed with a stake."<sup>193</sup>

Finally, there is the famous story recounted by the twelfth-century historian William of Newburgh (*Historia Rerum Anglicarum* 5.24.4–7),<sup>194</sup> according to which a man "of evil conduct" escaped from the province of York and married a woman in the vicinity of Anantis,<sup>195</sup> dying shortly after he discovered his wife in the act of flagrant adultery with a young man, and becoming an aggressive restless dead. After having killed many people with his "pestiferous breath," two young brothers who had lost their father due to the pestilence decided to unbury the corpse and to burn it in a funerary pyre. When they found the body, they pierced it with a sword and a lot of blood flowed from the corpse. Before burning it in the pyre, they took out its heart.<sup>196</sup> This case is very similar to the events told by Jan Neplach with regard to the shepherd of Blov and the woman of Levin in fourteenth-century Bohemia:<sup>197</sup> all the corpses are full of blood and are burned. In the case of the man from Yorkshire, he became a restless dead because of his former criminal conduct or even because of the duties that he had left undone, such as punishing his adulteress wife.

Bearing in mind the above, several conclusions can be inferred on the origin of the living dead in the Slavic tradition. First, the aggressive living dead do not belong to the oldest Slavic pre-Christian stratum, but are most likely a phenomenon affecting

**189** Elton, *The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*, 200–202.

**190** Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 140, cols. 537–40.

**191** Gordon, "Dealing with the Undead in the Later Middle Ages," 108.

**192** See The Living Dead among the East Slavs.

**193** Zelenin, *Ocherki russkoi mifologii*, 93.

**194** Howlett, "The Fifth Book of the 'Historia Rerum Anglicarum' of William of Newburgh," 481–82.

**195** Alnwick.

**196** For the English translation, see Stevenson, *The Church Historians of England*, IV, II.

**197** See Living Dead among the West Slavs; Gordon, "Dealing with the Undead in the Later Middle Ages," 109.

all the Indo-European cultures, and whose origin would be the collective trauma that resulted from the change of the funerary ritual from traditional cremation to the Christian inhumation. Second, when the living dead appear they are not necessarily aggressive: their mission is mostly to send a warning regarding the abandoned funerary ritual, which was considered highly relevant. It is true that there are many testimonies about the aggressive living dead. However, as stated by Spatacean<sup>198</sup> on the basis of an analysis of this very same phenomenon in the *Sagas of the Icelanders*, the aggressiveness has much to do with the social background of the deceased. The living dead that belonged to the higher classes were perceived with respect rather than feared. On the contrary, the living dead from low socio-economic backgrounds kept their status after their deaths. The author concludes that just as the community of the living is organized in classes, so is that of the dead.<sup>199</sup>

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**198** Spatacean, *Women in the Viking Age: Death, Life and After Death and Burial Customs*.

**199** Spatacean, *Women in the Viking Age: Death, Life and After Death and Burial Customs*, 45.

