

Chapter 2

FERTILITY RITES

Fertility Rites and Calendrical Rituals

We agree with Rappaport¹ that a characteristic inherent in the ritual is the “performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers,” and is “the social act basic to humanity.”² According to him, “rituals are among the most precisely recurrent of social events.”³ This is particularly evident in the fertility rites that organize time socially, with their links to the annual seasons and nature’s cycle of death and rebirth—the passage from winter to spring and the celebration of the goods from the autumn harvest.

Medieval texts that refer to the period when paganism was still a living religion give us information on the symbolic offerings related to seasonal harvests, in a higher degree of socialization and codification. Christianization suppressed those rituals performed in temples with clearly heathen sacrifices. However, other types of less formalized rituals that existed before the Christian times still remain, and they endeavour to express the joy of natural renewal in springtime. These are rituals with dances, chants, music and sometimes some kind of disguise or mask that represented the dead forefathers.

Fertility Rites Prior to Christianization

The Description of a Harvest Ritual in the Sanctuary of Arkona

One of the most interesting texts referring to a fertility ritual among the Slavs has been preserved in book XIV, 39 of Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*.⁴ This book covers a period of 44 years, from 1134 to 1178, and recounts the ascension to the throne of King Valdemar I of Denmark, who, with the active help of his minister, Bishop Absalon, gave back to Denmark the supremacy lost during the preceding years of civil war. Among other deeds, the king conquered the Slavic kingdoms of the Baltic shore, during several victorious expeditions that gave Saxo the chance to describe the Slavic settlements, together with their costumes and beliefs, thereby becoming one of the most important testimonies regarding the north-western Slavs in the Middle Ages.

In 1169, Valdemar began the conquest of the territory of the Rugiani,⁵ in a retaliatory strike after the Slavs broke their alliance while he was being attacked by the Norwegians.

1 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 24.

2 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 31.

3 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 221.

4 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*.

5 Western Slavic people from the island of Rügen, in the Baltic coast of modern Germany.

Valdemar was very successful, and he decided to move forward, besieging the citadel of Arkona. This gave Saxo Grammaticus (14.39.2.1–8)⁶ the opportunity to describe the fortification located on an elevated plane by the sea, “surrounded by the stormy sea” from the east, south and north, and with a rampart on the west side. His account includes a detailed description of the structure of the city and of its famous wooden temple with its double walls, located on the central square of the city.

In addition, Saxo Grammaticus (14.39.3.1–9)⁷ elaborates on the rituals devoted to the representation of their supreme deity, the four-headed idol of the god Sventovit.⁸ The statue holds in his right hand a horn decorated with metal pieces, which the priest—*sacrorum eius peritus* (experienced in his annual sacred rites)—filled with “liquor”⁹ every year with the aim of foretelling the abundance of the following year. The periodical character of the rite reveals its relationship with other fertility rituals from the agrarian year. The other attributes of the idol show the diverse functions of the god: the bow in his left hand together with the bridles and the saddle of his sacred horse. This would be to point out the transfunctional character of the divinity: the horn would stand for fertility and plenty, and the weapons, the bow and the sword, would refer to military powers.¹⁰

According to Saxo (14.39.4.1–2),¹¹ the most significant ceremony related to the god Sventovit was celebrated in autumn, after the harvest had been brought in and accounted for. Another passage, which will be discussed later, provides a clue regarding when the ritual was held, at the end of November. Worship of this god was public and solemn, and observed nationally, for the island’s entire population participated in it. The ceremony was conducted by the god’s priest. This person is described as “showing the strict observance of the length of hair and beard according to old traditions of the ancestral community,” unlike the common men, who used to shave their beards and cut their hair imitating the idol’s fashion. On the eve of the feast, the priest made the essential preparations for the rite. They consisted of the purification of the *sacellum* or *sancta sanctorum* where the idol was kept, a restricted area where only the priest could enter and where strict ritual purity was observed: the priest had to clean the *sacellum* with a broom, but during that ritual task he was not permitted to breathe inside the shrine. He had to hold his breath and go outside every time he needed air.

The next day, the initial part of the rite started, dealing with taking auguries in order to foretell the harvest of the following year. The priest looked at the idol’s horn, which had been filled with liquor the previous year. If the amount remaining was less than

6 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 564.22–565.3.

7 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 565.3–24.

8 For the English translation, see Sielicki, *Saxo Grammaticus on Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*.

9 *Liquor* in the Latin original, which could be understood as any kind of fermented liquor, most probably mead.

10 Zaroff suggests that the original domain of this deity would be strength and vitality. Zaroff, “The Origins of Sventovit of Rugen,” 17.

11 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 565.24–35.

expected, then the following year's harvest would be poor and he ordered the people to save part of the current harvest for the future. If no change in the level of the liquid inside was observed, they would expect an abundant crop for the year to come, and a more generous use of the present harvest was prescribed.

After this first part of taking the auspices, the central part of the ritual was performed. The priest poured out the old liquor at the feet of the statue, as a libation for the god, and then he refilled the idol's horn twice: the first time, he would drink it and toast for the increasing wealth and victory of his people with the solemn formula *sibi patriae ciuibusque* (for himself, for the homeland and for the people), according to Saxo's literal words (14.39.5.1–10).¹² The second time, after replenishing the horn with liquor, he would put it back in the right hand of the statue. This liquid would be observed the following year.

The symbolism of the horn is clear: it was not just a mere container for drinking but also stood for abundance and wealth in the iconography of ancient cultures. However, even more interesting is the triple formula employed during the rite, with which the priest expressed his wish for wealth and victory for his people. Although it seems obvious that Saxo would not reproduce the exact words, but rather would make an abbreviation in his Latin account, there is further evidence of parallel three-part formulae in other Indo-European religious traditions. These triadic formulae would show the way that the mentalities of those peoples unconsciously represented the concept of totality in a triple form, the same as the tripartite structure of Indo-European societies, as was determined by Benveniste¹³ when he analyzed formulae such as those from the Greeks and the Romans. A very clear parallel with the formula employed by the Rugian priest is the invocation described by Cato the Censor¹⁴ to the god Mars to ensure the purification of his fields: *Mars pater te precor quaesoque / uti sies uolens propitius / mihi domo familiaeque nostrae* (Father Mars, I pray and beseech you / that you be favourable (and) propitious / to me, my house and our household).¹⁵ The coincidence between the words *sibi patriae ciuibusque* from the Rugian formula as attested by Saxo Grammaticus and *mihi domo familiaeque nostrae* by the Roman senator and historian is remarkable. Moreover, in the Tables of Iguvium,¹⁶ up to 11 examples of such triadic imprecations in doublets can be found, for instance: *nerf arsmo / ueiro pequo / castruo frif / pihatu* (magistrates (and) formulations, / men (and) cattle, / heads [of grain] (and) fruits / purify) (32–35).¹⁷ Comparative evidence seems to confirm that Saxo would have

¹² Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 565.35–566.17.

¹³ Benveniste, "Symbolisme social dans les cultes gréco-italiques," 5–16.

¹⁴ *De agri cultura* 141.1ff.

¹⁵ Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, 197–213.

¹⁶ The most extensive source for the Umbrian language, they consist of a detailed set of liturgical and devotional instructions for a college of priests, the Atiedian Brethren, dating back to the third century BC. See also Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, 214–25.

¹⁷ Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, 215, 221–22.

recovered, in a synthetic way, a very ancient formulaic expression, present also in other Indo-European religions.

The third part of the ceremony as recounted by Saxo Grammaticus (14.39.5.1–10) included a ritualized dialogue between the priest and the people, whose main element was the offering of a round cake, almost as tall as a human, that was made of mead and honey, which were two typical components of fertility rites. From behind the cake the priest asked the people whether they could see him or not from where they were standing. There was always somebody who could see him, so he would say that for the following year he would wish for a cake big enough so that nobody could see him. We do not know if it was a kind of huge cylindrical cake like the Russian *kulich*,¹⁸ or if it was a wheel-shaped cake placed standing on its side during the ritual. If the latter is the case, then the solar symbology would be plausible, and it would remind us of the round Roman pies made of honey and flour offered to the god Summanus on June 20 during the festival of *Summanalia*, as attested by Paulus Festus,¹⁹ the Umbrian *urfeta*,²⁰ or the *rathacakra* (chariot wheel) from the Brahmanic rite of *Vājapeya*.²¹ In any case, Saxo says explicitly that the purpose of the ritual was to increase the future harvest.

Finally, coming back to the account of Saxo Grammaticus (14.39.6.1–3),²² the Rugian ritual ended with a farewell speech addressed to the community in which the priest, speaking on behalf of the god, asked the people to maintain both the cult and the rite devoted to Sventovit in order to win military victories on land and sea, if the ritual was performed correctly.

The final point of the celebration was a collective ritual banquet, which was usually the case in most fertility rites shared by the whole population, including the sacrifice of cattle that were eaten later during the banquet that, in Saxo's words (14.39.4.1), was celebrated "in the name of religion."²³ This banquet was massive and excessive, for according to Saxo (14.39.6.3), "in this banquet it was considered pious to violate abstinence and observing it was considered a bad habit."²⁴

In short, we can infer that the ceremony had the following steps: a preparatory phase with a purifying function, a first part during which the auguries were taken, a central part focused on the triadic oration for the sake of the whole community, and a

18 On ritual sweet bread baked during Easter, see Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 9.

19 Festus 557 L.

20 *Tabulae Iguvinae* IIb, cf. the etymological connected parallel, Lat. *orbita*.

21 Petazzoni, *La onniscienza di Dio*, 240, 252; West concludes that these cakes "used in rituals may also symbolize the sun." West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 214–15, 226.

22 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 17–25.

23 *solenne epulum religionis nomine celebrabat*: Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 565.27.

24 *In quo epulo sobrietatem uiolare pium estimatum est, seruare nefas habitum*: Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 566.24–25.

third part with the ritualized dialogue between the priest and the people, including the offering of the ritual cake. To conclude, there was the sacrifice of cattle and the collective banquet, with the breaking of the rules of austerity. This particular and rigid structure would support the reliability of Saxo's report.

Structure of the fertility ritual of Arkona as described by Saxo Grammaticus²⁵	
Parts of the ritual	Contents of the ritual
Preparatory ritual	Purification
First part	Taking of auguries
Central part	Triadic invocation
Third part	Ritualized dialog
Conclusion	Collective banquet

This very same structure has been described by Bernard Sergent²⁶ regarding the festival of *Huakinthia*, celebrated once a year in Sparta in honour of the Greek god Apollo of Amyklai. Moreover, Sergent identified other similarities between both gods Apollo of Amyklai and Sventovit of Arkona: the relevance of the number four in the shape of their bodies and the participation of horses in their respective festivals.²⁷ This could be pointing out the historicity and the antiquity of the Slavic cult of Sventovit of Arkona.

Another supporting argument in favour of the historical existence of the Rugian ritual would be a recently identified testimony of William of Malmesbury,²⁸ a twelfth-century English monk and historian, who never travelled outside England but who was very well informed. When describing the reign of the German emperor Henry III (1039–1056) in his work *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (II.189),²⁹ he speaks about the peoples that Henry III conquered:

But the Vindelici worship Fortune, and putting her idol in the most eminent situation, they place a horn in her right hand, filled with the beverage, made of honey and water, which by a Greek term we call "hydromel" [...] Wherefore on the last day of November, sitting round in a circle, they all taste it; and if they find the horn full, they applaud with loud clamours: because in the ensuing year, plenty with her brimming horn will fulfil their wishes in everything: but if it be otherwise, they lament.³⁰

²⁵ Álvarez-Pedrosa, "Fortune and Fertility Rites among the Pre-Christian Western Slavs," 161.

²⁶ Sergent, "Svantovit et l'Apollon d'Amyklai," 24.

²⁷ Sergent, "Svantovit et l'Apollon d'Amyklai," 19–20, 37–39.

²⁸ Ślupecki and Zaroff, "William of Malmesbury," 9–20.

²⁹ Stubbs, *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis Monachi*, 230–31.

³⁰ Ślupecki and Zaroff, "William of Malmesbury," 10. See the original English translation in Gilles, *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England*, 208–9.

Although William of Malmesbury attributes this ritual to the Vindelici³¹ instead of to the Rugiani, the details that he provides remind us very much of the Rugiani ceremony described by Saxo Grammaticus, and both testimonies are very close in time. The divinity that he mentions is identified with the Roman goddess Fortune, but it could be due to the *interpretatio romana*. However, she is considered a supreme deity, for she is said to occupy “the most eminent situation.” Moreover, if we assume that the Vindelici of William of Malmesbury are none other than the Ranove or Rugiani from the island of Rügen, as Roman Zaroff³² argues, then we could infer the exact date when the ritual devoted to the god Sventovit was celebrated: Saxo Grammaticus says that it took place in autumn, after the harvest, and William of Malmesbury gives a more precise date, the last day of November.

Another ritual more simple related to harvest is attested in Ibn Rustah’s *Book of Precious Gems*, a tenth-century history and geography encyclopedia, when speaking about the East Slavs: “When harvest time arrives, they collect the millet grain onto a shovel, raise it towards the sky and say: ‘Oh Lord, you are the one who provides for us and we have none left.’”³³

The Sacred Lake of Glomuzi and the Auguries of Fertility

Luckily, we have another source that is almost contemporary with the former two, which deals with taking auspices concerning the fertility of the earth and peace and war among the West Slavs. To be precise, it speaks of a sacred lake and it can be found in Thietmar of Merseburg’s *Chronicon* (I.2–3),³⁴ written between 1012 and 1018, the year he died. Thietmar, despite being a Christian bishop, seems very interested in pagan auguries and sacred places, such as the one that according to him was performed around the sacred spring and lake of Glomuzi,³⁵ where the natives used to go in order to take omens on the outcome of the harvest and the war.³⁶

Again in the western Slavic area, another author is Adam of Bremen, with his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (Deeds of Bishops of the Hamburg Church)

31 The Vindelici were a Celtic tribe that occupied Raetia in Roman times. It is likely that it should be an intentional mistake for Venedi, a western Slavic people, especially if we bear in mind that it is mentioned together with the “Leutici,” that is, “Liutici,” another western Slavic people.

32 Stupecki and Zaroff, “William of Malmesbury,” 11–14.

33 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 456.

34 Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 6. It is an extinct lake that was located two kilometres north of Lommatzsch, between the villages of Paltzsch and Dörschnitz, in Saxony (modern Germany).

35 Called Lommatzsch in modern German. This was the province situated between the river Chemnitz and the Elba.

36 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 68–69; cf. Warner, *Ottoman Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, 69.

(II, 21),³⁷ written between 1073 and 1076. When speaking about the Slavic peoples who lived between the Elbe and Oder Rivers, he mentions the Retharii, who according to him were “centrally located and the mightiest of all,” and who had erected a temple to their god Redigast³⁸ in the middle of a deep lake, where people used to look for oracular advice, in their capital city of Rethra.³⁹ We do not know where the city of Rethra was, in spite of Adam of Bremen’s indications. Over 30 hypothetical locations have been suggested in the territory between the rivers Elbe and Oder.⁴⁰ Traditionally, the sacred lake has been identified by scholars with the Tollensee⁴¹ based on the similarity between the name of the latter and the ethnonym of the Slavic tribe of the Tholenzi who, according to the account of Helmold of Bosau in his *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 21),⁴² disputed supremacy with the Retharii within the so-called Lutician union in 1057. Both Slavic tribes were fighting for control of the city where the temple of god Radigast was found, because all of the Slavic peoples came to it to consult the oracle and offer yearly sacrifices.⁴³

However, as Dowden⁴⁴ remarked, the coincidence is striking that there was a Slavic tribe in the westernmost point of the Lutician dominion, the *Plune*, who were settled in the surroundings of the *lacum Plunensem*,⁴⁵ which is the modern Great Plöner See.⁴⁶ On one of the islands, named Olsborg, archaeologists have found a fortress corresponding to a Slavic settlement that according to Helmold’s *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 25),⁴⁷ was linked to the shore by a long bridge. It is also a coincidence that the Saxon historian and priest Helmold came from the city of Bosau, on the south-east banks of the Plöner See,⁴⁸ not far from the city of Plön and the island of Olsborg. Moreover, the *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 83)⁴⁹ mentions an idol of the god *Podaga*⁵⁰ worshipped by the *Plune*.

37 Waitz, *Adami Gesta Hammaburgensis*, 54.

38 The name of this divinity could also appear as Radigost or Radigast.

39 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 81–82; cf. Tschan, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen. Adam of Bremen*, 66.

40 Ślupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*, 57–60; Schmidt, “Retra—Lieps, am Südenende des Tollensees,” 33–46; Zaikouski, “How Many Radogošćes Were There,” 271–72.

41 Lake close to the city of Neubrandenburg, in the southeast of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, in modern Germany.

42 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 47–48.

43 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 155; Zaikouski, “How Many Radogošćes Were There,” 169.

44 Dowden, *European Paganism*, 50.

45 *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 57, 63); Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 116, 124.

46 The Great Plön Lake, the largest lake in Schleswig-Holstein, north-east of Hamburg, in modern Germany.

47 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 54.

48 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 2; 34n3.

49 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 163.

50 Its etymology has been linked by Jakobson to the Proto-Slavic stem **dag-* (to burn). Jakobson, “Slavic Gods and Demons,” 8.

The description offered by Adam of Bremen, followed a century later by Helmold of Bosau (*Chronica Slavorum* I, 21, 23; 52; 71),⁵¹ differs from the testimony of Thietmar of Merseburg's *Chronicon* (VI, 23),⁵² who mentions the city of Riedegost in the land of the Redarii.⁵³ Adam of Bremen's Rethra seems to be in the middle of a lake, while according to Thietmar of Merseburg, the city of Riedegost's lake is said to be located at one of the three entries and/or corners of the city. Both have in common the frightening appearance of the lake. So if they are speaking about the same city and lake, it is possible that Thietmar of Merseburg's location could be the oldest and that it was later moved to an island in the centre of the lake after the city was destroyed for the first time due to the events that took place in 1057 during the internecine war within the Lutician union that was mentioned by Helmold of Bosau.⁵⁴ Thietmar identifies the name of the deity with the name of the sanctuary. The etymology of the theonym is apparently clear: it is a compound form for "he who becomes happy with guests," although it could be understood also as "he who becomes happy with (the victory over) enemies." Depending on one or the other interpretation, the function attributed to this divinity varies.⁵⁵ The first etymology would make it more oracular, and the second would give it a more military character. In support of the former would be the presence of the lake and its possible eschatological nature, bearing in mind Adam of Bremen's quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid* that associates the lake with the river Styx, the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead in the Roman tradition, something that was shared by many other Indo-European religions.⁵⁶ Actually, there was a lake close to the idol of the god Veles⁵⁷ among the East Slavs, according to the *Life of St. Abraham of Rostov*, as we will comment in [Chapter 5](#). Nevertheless, the lake of Rethra was related to a major sanctuary and temple where auguries could also be taken. As Dowden⁵⁸ already pointed out, this sacred lake together with the city of Rethra, wherever it was, were religious centres of political legitimacy in their territory and consequently centres of "national" identity for the surrounding Slavic peoples.

The worship of sacred lakes is well known not only in the Slavic realm but also in other Indo-European religions like those of the Celts, Romans, Greeks and Iranians, among others.⁵⁹ For instance, in the Celtic domain of the Gauls, there is the testimony by

51 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 47–49, 50–51, 106–8, 140–41.

52 Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 302.

53 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 70–73; Warner, *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, 253.

54 Zaikouski, "How Many Radogošćes Were There," 170.

55 See other etymologies in Stupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*, 60. Stupecki feels rather inclined to attribute to him a primary function of oracular character.

56 Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 724.

57 Sharing both functions as "god of cattle" and "god of the dead" (see [Chapter 5](#), Funerary Banquet).

58 Dowden, *European Paganism*, 50.

59 Dowden, *European Paganism*, 50–51.

Gregory of Tours, *On the Glory of the Confessors*, on the lake of St Andéol, 30 kilometres north-west of Marvejols.⁶⁰ This lake was worshipped by the local population during an annual three-day festival in which all kinds of sacrifices and offerings were thrown into the lake, out of fear of the storm that happened every year on the fourth day following the celebration.⁶¹ We can find here the same reverential fear mentioned by Thietmar of Merseburg regarding the sacred lakes venerated by the West Slavs, and it can be found again among the Celts in the fear that the Gauls felt towards the sacred lake near the city of Toulouse. This was exploited by the corrupt Roman consul Servilius Caepio, who used it to hide the silver and gold that he had stolen in 106 BC from the Roman treasury, according to Strabo's *Geography* (4.1.13).⁶² Likewise, the famous lake of Nemi, near Rome, was revered with fear (Ovid *Fasti* III, 263–264), and it is not by chance that the fertility ritual of the *rex Nemorensis*⁶³ could have originated in this lake. Another renowned example of a sacred lake associated with an oracular divinity is the lake on the island of Delos, the birthplace of the gods Apollo and Artemis in Greek mythology. The sanctuary where the oracles were consulted was located right near the lake. Moreover, in Iranian Zoroastrianism there were many sacred lakes, though none of them was linked directly with fertility rites or oracular deities. However, there is a myth closely associated with fertility, for it was thought that Zoroaster's seed was kept in the lake Hāmūn⁶⁴ with the aim of impregnating the three virgins expected to give birth to the three *saošyants*, the Iranian eschatological saviours.

A Festival at the Beginning of the Summer at Wolin

In the first section of this chapter, we reviewed a great festival to celebrate the wealth of the whole population of the island of Rügen that took place at the end of autumn, just after the harvest. But we have several testimonies of other agrarian fertility rites celebrated by the north-western Slavs at the beginning of the summer. After the Christianization of the Slavs of northern Europe, such an important period in the natural cycle was associated with the Christian holiday of Pentecost. Although pre-Christian practices were condemned by Polish and Czech bishops, the half-Christianized rural population maintained many of them. We will focus here on a source dealing with this festival dating back to a time when Slavic paganism was still a living religion, as well as a sign of cultural identity for the people. The specific fragment belongs to Ebbo's *Life of Saint Otto, Bishop of Bamberg* (III, 1),⁶⁵ one of the three hagiographies devoted to the

⁶⁰ In Gévaudan (Lozère), modern France.

⁶¹ Dowden, *European Paganism*, 50–51.

⁶² Dowden, *European Paganism*, 21.

⁶³ See Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, chap. 1.

⁶⁴ In Avestic *Kāsaoya*.

⁶⁵ Köpke, "Vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis," 858–59.

“apostle of Pomerania,” who lived between 1060/1061 and 1139. In this passage⁶⁶ we can find a very interesting account of the Slavic pre-Christian revival that took place in the Pomeranian cities of Szczecin and Wolin after the previous missionary activity of St. Otto of Bamberg in 1125. According to the text, the population of Wolin used to worship a spear that the author links to Julius Caesar, the legendary founder of the city, due to the resemblance of the Latin name of the city and the Roman ruler’s. However, the mention of a pre-Christian festival that was celebrated in Wolin at the beginning of the summer in honour of “a certain idol” is more interesting for us. Though we do not know the identity of the god to whom this festivity was devoted, we have as a hint the time of the year when it took place, together with the fact that it included playing, dancing and feasting, so we can conclude that it may be related to fertility. In spite of the fact that the rest of the passage is inspired by the biblical episode of the worship of the Golden Calf by the Israelites after the descent of Moses from the Mount Sinai with the Tables of the Law (Exodus 32), it does not diminish the historical value of the account, especially if we compare it with the parallel festivals celebrated by South and East Slavs in the same period of the year, as we will see in the next section.

Calendrical Rituals after Christianization

Spring Festivals: *Rusalia*

There was another Slavic pre-Christian festivity that started on the eve of Pentecost and finished one week later on the eve of Trinity Sunday, in what was called the *Semik* or *Rusal’naia nedelia* among the East Slavs. A similar holiday with the same designation *Rusalii* was first attested among the Balkan Slavs in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by authors like Theodore Balsamon⁶⁷ and Demetrios Chomatenos.⁶⁸ Therefore, in Theodore Balsamon’s *Scholia* or comments to the *Nomocanon* of Photios, and specifically in his comments to the canon LXII of the Council in Trullo,⁶⁹ it is said that the festival called *Rusalia* takes place after Easter.⁷⁰

More detailed information is given by Demetrios Chomatenos in his *Ponemata diaphora* (Miscellaneous works),⁷¹ which contain very diverse writings such as a letter in which Demetrios answers as Archbishop of Ohrid a question (number 120) on the

⁶⁶ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 121–23; Robinson, *The Life of Otto Apostle of Pomerania 1060–1139* by Ebo and Herbordus, 108–9.

⁶⁷ Byzantine canonist and Patriarch of Antioch who lived in the second half of the twelfth century.

⁶⁸ Archbishop of Ohrid (1216–1236) during the Second Bulgarian Empire.

⁶⁹ Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 137.728–729.

⁷⁰ Theodore Balsamon is writing in Constantinople, and therefore the expression “the outer lands” refers to the territory outside the Byzantine Empire; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 45–46.

⁷¹ Prinzing, *Demetrii Chomateni*, 120.

Rusalia,⁷² that according to the text was celebrated in the district of Moliskos⁷³ in the week after Pentecost. The word *Rusalii* comes from the Latin *rosalia*,⁷⁴ the Roman festival of the *dies rosae*,⁷⁵ with which was probably identified in order to acquire the higher prestige emanating from Roman culture. The *Rusalii* was an ancient fertility festival celebrated in early June and closely linked with the cult of the dead and the springtime agricultural rites. In different parts of the Balkans until very recent times, the celebration of spring festivals in honour of the dead has been maintained, called *rusalje*.⁷⁶ The “games, Bacchic dances and coarse theatrical plays” mentioned by Demetrios Chomatenos remind us of the plays and profane jests performed by the Czechs among the West Slavs, as was recounted by Cosmas of Prague.⁷⁷ In the East Slavic texts, other festivities called *rusalia* appear, coinciding with the summer and winter solstices: these are most likely related to a pre-Christian solar worship, as we will analyze later.

The annual practice of the celebration of *Rusalii* among the South Slavs meant that its name lost its pre-Christian connotation and became synonymous with Pentecost since very early. Already in the lectionary *Savvina kniga*, which dates back to the ten to eleventh centuries, the term *rusalii* appears three times, referring to Pentecost (*Savv.* 134r, 135v, 149r).⁷⁸

In addition to the South Slavic references to *Rusalii*, we also have East Slavic texts that mention similar festivals with the same name. The earliest allusion can be found in the oldest East Slavic chronicle that has come down to us, the *Primary Chronicle*,⁷⁹ also known as *Povest' Vremennykh Let* (henceforth *PVL*), or *Tale of Bygone Years*, which would have been compiled at the beginning of the twelfth century, based on earlier materials. When it recounts the invasion of Kievan Rus' by nomad peoples in 1068, it explains this event as a divine punishment because of the impiety of the inhabitants of Rus', with the following comments:

By these and other similar customs the devil deceives us, and he alienated us from God by all manner of craft, through trumpets and clowns, through harps and pagan festivals.⁸⁰

72 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 46–49.

73 One of the administrative divisions of the Second Bulgarian Empire, in the area of Skopje in modern North Macedonia.

74 Ovid, *Fasti* II, 533–40; Martial, *Epigrams*, 9.93.5.

75 Miklosich, *Die Rusalien*, 1–2.

76 See a detailed account on the rituals performed in the village of Duboko, in the west of Belgrade, in Wenzel, “The Dioscuri in the Balkans,” 369–74.

77 See the Other Spring Festivals in the Western Slavic Realm.

78 Shchepkin, *Savvina kniga*.

79 For the reconstruction of the original text, see Ostrowski, Birnbaum and Lunt, *The “Povest' vremennykh lët”: An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*. For the Spanish translation and a study on the Indo-European literary motifs, see García de la Puente, *Perspectivas indoeuropeas en la Crónica de Néstor*.

80 *Rusalii* in the original text, see Ostrowski, Birnbaum and Lunt, *The “Povest' vremennykh lët”: An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, col. 170, 12–13.

For we behold the playgrounds worn bare by the footsteps of a great multitude, who jostle each other while they make a spectacle of a thing invented by the devil.⁸¹

Although the *PVL* does not specify when the *Rusalii* took place, it confirms one of the elements that we knew from the testimony of Demetrios Chomatenos: the presence of music and theatrical plays. However, as Sreznevskii⁸² pointed out, the discourse on the religious significance of barbarian incursions in 1068 would be derived from the *Zlatostrui*, an anthology of the writings of John Chrysostom prepared by or for Tsar Simeon of Bulgaria (893–927) from a Greek original, and as a consequence, we could infer a South Slavic origin for this passage.

The festive character of the *Rusalii* linked to the celebration of public games also appears in an old East Slavic penitential, the *Commandments to the Sons and Daughters Who Confess*.⁸³ Some scholars attribute its authorship to the Metropolitan George (c. 1065–1078),⁸⁴ dating back from the twelfth century at the latest.⁸⁵ In spite of its great antiquity, this work has come down to us only in sixteenth-century copies. The text consists of 165 rules, commandments or penances that have been numbered by editors, for in the original manuscripts they were written with no separations and almost without titles. As happened in Theodore Balsamon's fragment, in rule number 105,⁸⁶ the *Rusalii* are associated with another festival: *Koliada*.⁸⁷ We know from the same text (rule number 137) that the latter was celebrated on the first of January.⁸⁸

This source does not specify the period when the *Rusalii* were celebrated, but the context of rule number 105 could help us, because the rule that follows (number 106) includes instructions on fasting or not eating meat during Pentecost. Thus, it would coincide with the witnessing of the celebration of *Rusalii* by Demetrios Chomatenos during the week after Pentecost. In addition, rule number 147 contains a condemnation of another practice of making potions and casting spells that is said to be carried out on St. Basil's day, that is, on January 1.⁸⁹

From these allusions, we can infer that during *Koliada*, on January 1, people used to participate in a kind of game where cattle played an important role, preparing potions and saying spells. Additionally, we can find more information on this winter festival in the *Instruction of Bishop Ilya of Novgorod*.⁹⁰ This text is related to another relevant source, the *Questions of Cyricus, Sava and Ilya to the Bishop Niphont of Novgorod*, for they share one

81 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 147.

82 Sreznevskii, *Svedeniya i zametki o maloizvestnykh i neizvestnykh pamyatnikov*, 258.

83 Smirnov, *Materialy dlya istorii*, 112–32.

84 Golubinskii, *Istoriya Russkoi Tserkvy*, I, 436–37.

85 Mansikka, *Die Religion der Ostslaven*, 247.

86 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 319–20.

87 The name *Koliada* would come from the Latin *calendae*, meaning the first day of every month, and especially the first of January, or St. Basil's day in the Orthodox Church.

88 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 322.

89 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 322–23.

90 Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava*, cols. 349–76.

of its main characters, the priest Ilya, who afterwards was appointed bishop of Novgorod, an office that he would have held between 1165 and 1186.⁹¹ Therefore, his *Instruction* would be consecutive in time to the *Questions*, both of them being penitential works. Both provide very interesting information on the sins and practices condemned by the ecclesiastical authorities in the Kievan Rus' during the second half of the twelfth century, some of which would have been inherited from the Slavic pre-Christian religion. However, these works have come down to us in the form of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century copies. Specifically, the passage from *Instruction*⁹² number 26 deals with the festival that took place coinciding with the winter solstice, called *Koliada*, which lasted from Christmas Eve until the Epiphany on January 6, forming a cycle of two weeks known as *Koliadki* or *Sviatki*, which may be translated as "Yuletide." In its central point was the celebration on the eve of St. Basil's day, that is, New Year's Eve. According to the last passage, these holidays included a kind of ritual fight, as well as the game of "knuckle-bones," that is, the throwing of the bones from the ankle of an animal, usually sheep, which since ancient times were employed both in gambling and in divination. Slightly more complicated is interpreting the mention of the "aurochs."⁹³ The Eurasian "auroch," also known as "urus,"⁹⁴ was a primitive species of wild cattle that inhabited Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North Africa, and became extinct in the seventeenth century in Europe. According to Pavlov,⁹⁵ it likely refers to a popular custom of pre-Christian origin that would be celebrated coinciding with the Christian festivities of Christmas and *Semik* or *Rusal'naia nedelia*,⁹⁶ that is, the week after Pentecost or *Rusalia* that we are analyzing. This custom probably had its origin in worship of the auroch as a totemic animal and symbol of fertility. Following Pavlov,⁹⁷ it would consist of the ritual during which young men and women would disguise a young man as an auroch, probably with the real fur of the animal, and they would organize a parade through the village, walking the man-bull tied with a rope while singing chants allusive to the auroch. Therefore, the celebration of *Koliada* would add a component of ritualized disguise to the music, as well as to the dances and games.⁹⁸

91 Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava*, cols. 21–22.

92 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 330.

93 *Tury* in the original text, see Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava*, cols. 370–71.

94 *Bos primigenius* or *Bos taurus* in its scientific name.

95 Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava*, cols. 370–71n24.

96 Also known as *Zelenye Sviatki* (Green Yuletide), see Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 9.

97 Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava*, cols. 370–71n24.

98 Rybakov links this festival devoted to the auroch at the beginning of the year with the god Veles-Volos. Rybakov, *Yazychestvo drevnikh slavyan*, 578–84. Veles-Volos was the "god of cattle" according to the *PVL*: Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 65, 90. And this god would be related to the Christian holiday of Epiphany, in whose dedication St. Abraham of Rostov would have founded a monastery in his native city in the same place where a pagan idol of Veles had stood, if we believe the saint's hagiography (See [Chapter 5](#), Funerary Banquet). According to Rybakov, the horned masks that were worn during the celebrations of New Year's Eve and the Epiphany also were called *tury* (urus). Rybakov, *Yazychestvo drevnikh slavyan*, 581.

Coming back to the *Rusalii*, there are other references to their festive and musical character, as for instance in the *Sermon of St. Niphont on the Rusalii*. The account of the life and miracles of St. Niphont, a fourth-century bishop from Cyprus, was very popular and widespread throughout the Slavic lands, most probably because of the nature of its contents that fit very well into the medieval ideological context of the orthodox Slavic world: the saint is constantly halfway between heaven and hell with many revealing dreams and eschatological visions. In the different versions of the *Vita*, it is narrated how the saint, born in Paphlagonia (Asia Minor) and commemorated by the Orthodox Church on December 23, abandoned his former life as a sinner and took the robes in Constantinople. He experienced a succession of extraordinary episodes as a consequence of the gift received from God: he was able to see the angels and the demons that act in the earthly world and in human lives, which were invisible to the rest of humankind. Such episodes, as happens frequently in the hagiographical genre, are scattered unchronologically around the narration and can be found in the manuscript tradition separately. In the Slavic tradition, the *Life of St. Niphont* had two main versions (short and long), both of them coming from the same source,⁹⁹ a South Slavonic translation (most likely Bulgarian) from a Greek original. The first East Slavonic version would have been copied in Rostov during the thirteenth century.¹⁰⁰ Regarding the short Slavonic version, it would have been composed between the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹⁰¹ Concerning the episode on the *Rusalii*, it would have become an independent text around the fourteenth or the fifteenth century,¹⁰² being a part of later miscellanies. Actually, it was one of the most popular and widely known episodes of the *Vita*. It recounts how during a festival a group of demons were dancing, singing and asking for money, while inside the church the faithful were singing matins. The demons got angry about this, and their leader tried to comfort them, showing how humans also celebrate worldly festivals to honour the devil, and specifically the musicians playing flutes and *gusli*.¹⁰³ The episode ends with the saint exhorting them to quit their devilish celebrations.¹⁰⁴ Like the *PVL*, the *Sermon* does not provide us with a temporal framework for the celebration of the *Rusalii*. Actually, the two texts may be related among to each other.

In contrast, a later passage provides a chronological identification between the *Rusalii* and the holiday of Pentecost. This text, attributed to a certain “Peter the Unworthy,” bears the title *Tale of Peter the Unworthy on Fasting and Prayer from the Canon and Ecclesiastical Order*.¹⁰⁵ It is included in the fol. 56v–59r of the manuscript known as *Troitskii Sbornik*,¹⁰⁶ an anthology of edifying texts that would have been

99 Gribble, “Earliest Slavic Attestations of the Custom of *Rusalii*,” 44.

100 Rystenکو, *Materiyali z istorii vizantiisko-slov'yans'koi literaturi ta movi*.

101 Gribble, “Origins of the Slavic Short Version of the Life of Nifont,” 9–19.

102 Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 263.

103 Ancient East Slavic string instrument.

104 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 333–34.

105 Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 141–63.

106 Ms RGB Col. Tr. N^o 12.

compiled in the Kievan Rus' between the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century, based on South Slavic sources, most probably Bulgarian, such as the *Zlatostrui* or the *Izbornik of Tsar Simeon*, among others. However, the sources of the *Tale of Peter the Unworthy* remain unidentified, as well as its authorship, for it is not clear who "Peter the Unworthy" was, either Tsar Peter I himself of Bulgaria (927–969),¹⁰⁷ or the writer *Pētrъ Ruskij*, whose name appears in the lists of the most renowned authors of Byzantine and Slavonic apochryphal works.¹⁰⁸ In any case, most authors agree that the work is an original East Slavic composition, and not a mere translation.¹⁰⁹ Actually, the message fits very well into the ideological context of the East Slavic society and the Christian Church in their beginnings. In the *Tale*, the Christians are warned to follow in their behaviour the divine commandments of life properly, while respecting the sacred feasts and fasting periods, such as those prescribed for the period "after the Coming of the Holy Spirit, that is, after the *Rusalii*."¹¹⁰

Therefore, we can see that at the end of the twelfth century or the beginning of the thirteenth century, the word *Rusalii* had become a popular synonym of Pentecost. Its usage had been normalized in Christian terms and had been incorporated into the liturgical calendar, depriving it of its negative connotations. However, the festivals that were celebrated during that period were still being condemned by the authors of sermons, and therefore the *Rusalii* continues to appear together with the typical music and dances from the spring celebrations. Therefore, we find it in a later text that could be dated to the end of the thirteenth century. It is the *Sermon on Peter and Philip's Great Fast*,¹¹¹ which gives instructions to the faithful in order to accomplish the fasting prescribed by the Orthodox Church for those days and also criticizes the worldly customs observed by them at the time with a long list of acts considered shameful for a Christian. Some of them are general in nature, while others were related to Easter fasting. The Sermon in its earlier and longer form appears in the *Troitskii spisok* (fol. 96r) from the first redaction of the *Zlataia Tsep' (Golden Chain)*,¹¹² dating back to the end of the thirteenth century and having an East Slavic origin. Though it is linked by its title to the Byzantine tradition of the Latin *Catena*e (*Chains*, Greek *σειρά*), it differs from them in its contents, for it contains a variety of edifying texts instead of the comments on the Old Testament that were found in the Byzantine works. Among the evil acts that are condemned, it mentions the *Rusalii*.¹¹³

107 Popovski, Thomson and Veder, *The Troickij Sbornik*, 2.

108 Petukhov, "Materialy i zametki po istorii drevnei russkoi pis'mennosti. Pouchenie Petra o poste i molitve," 151.

109 Petukhov, "Materialy i zametki po istorii drevnei russkoi pis'mennosti. Pouchenie Petra o poste i molitve," 151.

110 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 349–50.

111 Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 224–47.

112 Ms RGB Col. Tr., № 11.

113 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 394.

In addition to the aforementioned texts, in which the chronological framework coincides with the Christian celebration of Pentecost, we have a later East Slavic testimony, in which the term *Rusalii* refers to the summer festival of the eve of St John's Day, on June 23, and therefore corresponds to the pre-Christian celebration of the summer solstice. It is found in the sixteenth-century *Stoglav*,¹¹⁴ the proceedings of the Council of the One Hundred Chapters that was held in Moscow in 1551 during Tsar Ivan IV's reign. It contains chapter after chapter of answers by the Council to the tsar's questions about different aspects of the church's operations, as well as regarding the lives of the clergymen and laymen. It also shows that the heathen rites were deeply rooted among the Eastern Slavs, surviving long after their Christianization in the popular religion. Specifically, this allusion to the summer *Rusalii* can be found in the tsar's question 24 contained in chapter 41:

Question 24. At the *Rusalii* for [St.] John's day¹¹⁵ and on the Eves of Christmas, and of Epiphany men and women gather together, and maidens, for night games [splashing?] and for improper conversations, and devilish songs, and for dancing and skipping, and for impious acts. And there happens defilement by lads and seduction by maidens. And when the night has passed, then they go to the river with a great cry, like devils, and wash themselves with water. And when the morning [bells] start to ring, then they go to their homes and fall, like the dead, from the great noise.¹¹⁶

As in other sources that we discussed earlier, the condemnation of the *Rusalii* here is lumped together with other festivals linked to the calendar, especially those celebrated during the winter from the festival called *Koliada*, as mentioned by other texts. Therefore, as Linda Ivanits¹¹⁷ has pointed out, a kind of "pre-Christian calendar" is drafted marking two central moments coinciding with key periods in the agrarian and plant cycle: the death of nature in the winter and its rebirth in the spring. Additionally, the condemnation of such festivals that happen to coincide with major Christian holidays is due to the feasting, dancing and singing, as well as of the lust during the frenzied gatherings of young men and women. In this specific case of the *Rusalii* for St. John's day, the bathing in the rivers and the water as a symbol of fertility played an important role. However, postponing the date for the celebration of *Rusalii* from Pentecost until the eve of St. John's could be motivated by the semantic change in this term. We must not forget that Pentecost is mentioned indirectly in the *Stoglav* as part of question 23 belonging in the same chapter, when it stated that on Trinity Sunday there were gatherings of men and women at cemeteries who began by weeping at the graves and later singing and dancing. It might therefore refer here to worship of the dead, as we will discuss in [Chapter 5](#).

114 Ėmchenko, *Stoglav. Issledovanie i tekst*.

115 The Nativity of Saint John, on June 24, is known in Russia as *Ivanov den'*, or *Ivan Kupala's Day*. *Kupala* is derived from the Slavic word for bathing, and was reinterpreted as the commemoration of St. John's action of baptizing people through full immersion in water.

116 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 38.

117 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 17.

Consequently, throughout the whole medieval East Slavic homiletics we can find in parallel a double semantic value for the term *Rusalii*. First, it is equated with the practices linked to the celebration of the arrival of spring, including music, dances and theatrical plays that take place in spite of ecclesiastical prescription and disregarding the fasting prescribed by the Orthodox Church. Second, it became a popular name for Pentecost and was assimilated into the Christian liturgical calendar.

To conclude, we can say that the name *Rusalii*, taken from the classical tradition to dignify a type of festivities associated with the beginning of spring, spread from a cultivated Byzantine context. It was applied first to the spring festival of the South Slavs of the Balkans and later, as a consequence of the translations of the Byzantine ecclesiastical canons, was attached to a kind of fertility feast celebrated also by the East Slavs.

Other Spring Festivals in the Western Slavic Realm

In the process of Christianization of the West Slavs, there were also condemnations by the church targeting spring celebrations, very similar to those from the *Rusalii* that we just have described among the South and East Slavs.

The oldest text with reference to the festivals celebrated in spring was written by Cosmas of Prague in his *Chronica Bohemorum (Chronicle of the Czechs)*,¹¹⁸ dating from the first quarter of the twelfth century. This medieval historian from Bohemia lived between the second half of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth century, being canon priest and dean at St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague. His chronicle would have been written between 1119 and 1125, and recounts the history of the Czechs, starting from their legendary origins up until the times of the author. The fragment that describes and condemns the pre-Christian festivals that were linked to the Christian celebration of Pentecost, similar to the *Rusalii* among the South and East Slavs, is to be found at the beginning of the third book. This volume begins with the narration of the ascension to the throne of Břetislav II on September 1092.¹¹⁹ The new duke is portrayed as a fierce enemy of what remains of Slavic paganism, which can be seen as proof of its persistence among Czech peasants.¹²⁰ The passage reads as follows:

III.1. Burning with great zeal for the Christian religion at the beginning of his rule, he [Duke Břetislav II] expelled all the magicians, prophets, and soothsayers from the midst of his realm. He also eradicated and consumed with fire the trees and meadows which the base commoners worshipped in many places. So also the superstitious practices which the villagers, still half-pagan, observed on the third or fourth day of Pentecost, offering libations over springs, offering sacrifices, and making offerings to demons; the burials they made in forests and fields; the plays they performed according to the pagan rite at crossroads and crossroad temples as if for the suppression of spirits; and the profane jests, which they performed over the dead, rousing useless ghosts, wearing masks on

118 Bretholz, *Die Chronik der Böhmen des Cosmas von Prag*.

119 Duke Břetislav II of Bohemia (1092–1110), son of Vratislav II and successor of Conrad I.

120 Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom*, 108.

their faces, and revelling. The good Duke exterminated these abominations and other sacrileges, so they might no longer persist among the people of God.¹²¹

The text gives us precise information on the dates when the Czechs celebrated those festivals, on the third or fourth day of Pentecost, which would link them to the *Rusalii* of the South and East Slavs. However, we can find an important innovation in this source that would explain the later evolution of the festival among the South and East Slavs: the joy at the rebirth of vegetation and the renewal of the earth is combined with worship of the deceased forefathers, with whom the former is shared somehow. This is exactly the same thing that we just saw in the previous section regarding the practices mentioned in question 23 of the Russian *Stoglav*, condemning the activities performed in the cemeteries on Trinity Sunday. This celebration would be the origin of the “theatrical” aspect that since the eleventh century those spring festivities seemed to feature, for those rituals devoted to worshipping the dead would include not only libations and “minor” sacrifices in the springs and crossroads—where the spirits of the dead were thought to appear to the living coinciding with the rebirth of nature—but also the action of wearing a disguise portraying ghosts or the dead (*induti faciem laruis*). In these ritualized disguises would lie the roots of the theatrical plays that we have seen in other testimonies dealing with the winter festival of *Koliada*. Probably the letter number 55 addressed by Pope Innocent III to the bishop of Gniezno¹²² in the thirteenth century was referring to these “ghosts,” when he condemned the performance of theatrical plays inside churches with *monstra laruarum* (ghost masks).¹²³

The date of the festivals condemned by the ecclesiastical legislators in Poland during the fourteenth century and the fifteenth century gives us an idea of how long these spring rituals survived. In the *Synod Statutes from Krakow*,¹²⁴ which brings together the canon law of this archdiocese, in the conclusions issued in 1408 it states:

On the pagan rites preserved until nowadays by Christians. [...] Therefore, we forbid that during Pentecost were sung pagan chants with which are invoked and worshipped idols; the people of Christ should rather be faithful and keep apart from them with all their strength, in order to expel the cult of the idols and to embrace what is convenient for the Catholic faith, and to do what is a benefit for their own salvation.¹²⁵

One can easily notice that those festivals with demonstrations of joy for the arrival of the spring, expressed by means of chants, take place during Pentecost, the same as *Rusalii*.

Dating back to the same period there are other texts, like the *Polish Sermons*, of great philological interest for they contain a lot of medieval Polish vocabulary.¹²⁶ In them it is

¹²¹ Wolverson, *Cosmas of Prague. The Chronicle of the Czechs*, 183–85.

¹²² Kraszewski, *Codex diplomaticus maioris Poloniae*, I, 58.

¹²³ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 204.

¹²⁴ Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 65–66.

¹²⁵ Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 223.

¹²⁶ Ms. *Leningradensis Lat. I Quarto N^o 244*; Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 69–76.

stated on the Pentecost celebrations as follows: "There are also those who in the days of Pentecost are feasting in the name of pagan demons, or those who do not want to sleep indoor, or do not speak to nobody, or go barefoot as if they could not save themselves in a different way."¹²⁷

Unfortunately, the Polish preacher does not say the name of those festivals during Pentecost. He does not describe either the main characteristics of the festivities, but other secondary activities that seem to be penitential, such as sleeping outdoors, the ritualized silence or to walk barefoot, something that could be probably related to the cult of the dead that we have seen in the testimony of Cosmas of Prague quoted previously.

In contrast, Jan Długosz (1415–1480) does mention explicitly the Polish name of the Pentecost celebrations. This Polish writer, known by his Latin name, Ioannes Longinus, was canon priest of the cathedral of Krakow and secretary of the cardinal Zbigniew Oleśnicki (1389–1455). He accomplished several diplomatic missions under the rule of King Casimir IV Jagiellon (1440–1492), being appointed as archbishop of Lviv short before his death. His work as chronicler is very prolific. Among others, he wrote the *Annales seu cronicae incliti regni Poloniae*, 12 books on the history of Poland and Eastern Europe.¹²⁸ As a historian, he gave priority to the beauty of style over the veracity of facts. Moreover, his chronicles have an ideological purpose, to demonstrate that every single historical event is influenced by Divine Providence. In particular, we have to bear in mind that the texts which referred to the Slavic paganism traced back to the mythical origins of Poland are mostly fictional, and they simply seek to reproduce in a Slavic pantheon of imaginary names the structure of the Roman pantheon. According to his *Annales* I, the festivals of Pentecost in Poland were called *Stado*:

The Poles, though we know that they profess the Christian faith since five hundred years, they continue repeating even nowadays the rite of those festivals and other relics every year on the day of Pentecost, and they commemorate their ancient pagan superstitions in an annual festivity, that in their language is called *Stado*, that is "group," for groups of people gather to celebrate it, and split in parties or bands they do celebrate it, with exalted and seditious minds, delivered to all kinds of pleasures, vices and orgies.¹²⁹

The ritualized joy for the arrival of the spring is attested to in the *Statutes of the Polish Provinces* (262 b), as have come down to us in the Manuscript Ossolinense, that dates back to 1627 but refers to the fifteenth century:¹³⁰

Likewise, forbid the clapping and the songs in which are invoked the names of the idols *lado yleli yassa* and *tya*, that used to be done during the festivity of Pentecost, for as a matter of fact the believers in Christ must invoke God in that moment at night, in order that the same as the apostles they could have the capability of receiving the Holy Spirit, whom they will not be worthy to receive unless they were based on the advantageous Catholic faith.¹³¹

127 Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 229.

128 Mansikka, *Die Religion der Ostslaven*, 133–35; Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 66.

129 Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 478.

130 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 76.

131 Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 241.

The names of the idols are not fully comprehensible and they may well have been already totally distorted, but what is deduced from the text is that during Pentecost were celebrated festivals with ritual chants of joy for the coming of the spring.

Likewise, in a text known as *Postscript from a Polish Hussite*, attributed to an anonymous Hussite¹³² author of Polish origin,¹³³ it is condemned the idolatry practised during the period of Pentecost:

And so the Poles, that still worship in Pentecost the idols *Alado gardzyna yesse* on the day of their calends; and with great pain in that period it is shown by the bad Christians a higher esteem for those idols than for God, for the young girls who in the whole year did not use to go to church in order to venerate God, in that time they use to gather to worship the idols.¹³⁴

To sum up, all the aforementioned texts agree in attributing to the period of Pentecost something that we have seen too in the celebration of the *Rusalii* among the South and East Slavs: the joy for the arrival of the spring expressed by means of ritualized chants. Additionally, in the oldest testimony, belonging to Cosmas of Prague's *Chronica Bohemorum*, complementary relevant information is provided: the joy for the rebirth of nature is combined with the commemoration of the deceased, who are expected also to be reborn somehow at that time. Such rebirth of the dead forefathers would have as its ritualized expressions certain theatrical plays that were performed with the help of masks.

Rituals Related to Fertility Deities

Rod and Rozhanitsy

Two important fertility deities that are referred to in the East Slavic sources are *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy*. They appear together in almost all texts, and always in the combination of a singular masculine deity (*Rod*) accompanied by several feminine deities (*Rozhanitsy*). Different authors identified them with household death deities, and the *Rozhanitsy* have even been equated with the Roman *Parcae* or the Greek *Moirae*, the personifications of destiny.¹³⁵

The traditional interpretation of these figures worthy to be worshipped is based mostly on the etymology of their names: OCS *rodъ* is a masculine deverbial noun formed on the verb *roditi*, which means "to bear." In the oldest texts it translates the Greek γενετή (birth), but also the Greek γένος, ἄιμα (race, kin, generation).¹³⁶ *Rod* appears

132 Christian reformist movement of the followers of the Czech theologian Jan Hus (c. 1369–1445), that spread throughout the lands of the Kingdom of Bohemia and the surrounding countries prior to the Protestant Reformation.

133 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 76.

134 Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 241.

135 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 14–15.

136 Tseitlin et al., *Staroslavjanskii slovar' (po rukopisyam X-XI vekov)*, 583–84.

together with one or several female characters that show a certain formal variation in their names: sg. *Rozhenitsa*, *Rozhdenitsa*, *Rozhdanitsa*, pl. *Rozhanitsy*, *Rozhenitsy*, *Rozhdenitsy*. In any case, all these names are derived from the Common Slavic form that is attested in the neuter noun *rozhdenie*, which translates to the Greek τόκος, κήσις (birth) and that with a collective meaning can also render the Greek οἱ συγγενεῖς, οἱ ὁμογενεῖς, συγγένεια, γένος (descent). Based on this etymological interpretation, Rybakov¹³⁷ thought that *Rozhanitsy* were fertility deities associated with the agrarian cycle of harvest, bearing in mind that their festivity was celebrated around September 8, the feast day of the Nativity of the Virgin and the period of the harvest. According to Rybakov, *Rozhanitsy* mentioned always in plural would have been Christianized by assimilating them to two saint mothers: the Virgin Mary and Saint Anne, the “mother of the mother.” Rybakov’s interpretation has been considered too imaginative by later authors.¹³⁸

From our point of view, while considering that the etymological interpretation leads us towards the reproductive function or to the family bonds of *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy*, they were already desemantized names by the time they appeared in several East Slavonic sermons dating back to the period between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. The linguistic evolution of this type of personification can be very unstable. For instance, in an interpolation from chapter 93 of the sixteenth-century *Stoglav* in the commentary on rule 61 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, we can find “those who believe in destiny and genealogy, that is, in *Rozhdanitsa*, are condemned,”¹³⁹ which would be identifying this name with the magic practice of predicting the destiny of the newborn child. This would explain the adaptation in Slavonic folklore as mentioned by West,¹⁴⁰ who describes the *Rozhanitsy* as “supernatural females who appear at midnight within three days of a birth, mostly in threes, sometimes in a larger group, sometimes in the form of beautiful maidens, sometimes as grandmotherly old women, and pronounce destinies.”

It is our aim to analyze the testimonies of medieval East Slavonic sermons in order to determine the type of ritual practice associated with *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* and see if this practice has parallels in other religions belonging to the Indo-European domain. Therefore, our analysis has nothing to do with an eventual belief in alleged East Slavic deities, but with the reality of those ritual practices, as well as with their importance for the reconstruction of Slavic pre-Christian religion and the possibility of comparing them to other similar rites of the Slavic and Indo-European realms.¹⁴¹

In the sermons, *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* appear in different devotional contexts. First, they are linked to a sacrifice that is described as the “table set up for *Rozhanitsy*,” which

137 Rybakov, *Yazychestvo drevnikh slavyan*, 593–636.

138 Klein, “Pamiati iazycheskogo boga Roda,” 13–26; Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 59n41; Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 29.

139 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 21.

140 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 384–85.

141 On the importance of rites for the reconstruction of the Indo-European religion, see Dowden, *European Paganism*, 167.

can be found in the twelfth-century *Sermon Commented by the Wisdom of the Holy Apostles and Prophets and Fathers on the Creation and the Day Called Sunday*.¹⁴² They also appear four times in an almost monographic sermon with the title of *Sermon by the Prophet Isaiah, Commented by Saint John Chrysostom, on Those Who Set a Second Table for Rod and Roženicy*.¹⁴³ Here the figures of Rod and Rozhanitsy are identified explicitly with “idols.”

Second, the offerings were described using various terms. The words “unlawful” or “false” were used in the *Sermon by One Who Loves Christ and Is a Jealous Defender of the Righteous Faith*.¹⁴⁴ It should be noted that in the earliest version of this sermon, contained in the fourteenth-century *Paisievskii Sbornik*, the difference between the table for the *kut'ja*¹⁴⁵ and the table for Rod and Rozhanitsy¹⁴⁶ is established clearly, the former being qualified as “rightful” and the latter as “false.” Another qualifying adjective received by the table of the food offerings for Rod and Rozhanitsy is the ordinal number “second,” as we have seen already in the title of the monographic sermon. Likewise, it appears in the *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*.¹⁴⁷

In a similar vein, this term can be found in the penitential *Commandments of the Holy Fathers to the Sons and Daughters Who Confess*.¹⁴⁸ In this text, containing the oldest reference to this practice, the second table dedicated to Rod and Rozhanitsy is mixed with the *Troparion*, the hymn devoted to the Mother of God. As Stella Rock¹⁴⁹ states,

if indeed *rozhanitsy* are related to birth, as the name implies, this connection with Mary would be a logical one in the minds of neophyte Slavs, since the figure of the Mother of God has traditionally been appealed to by believers concerned with matters of fertility and childbirth.

However, another plausible explanation would be that the “priests serving their bellies” added the *Troparion* of the Nativity of the Virgin to the feast of Rozhanitsy in order to justify the pagan ritual activity.¹⁵⁰ The nature of the second table set up for the

¹⁴² Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 76–83; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 385–91.

¹⁴³ Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 84–95; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 407–9.

¹⁴⁴ Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 36–48; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 385.

¹⁴⁵ Ritual food, a type of porridge made of wheat and honey, according to Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 22, 168n41.

¹⁴⁶ Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 22, 168n42; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 385.

¹⁴⁷ Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 22–25; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 366.

¹⁴⁸ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 322.

¹⁴⁹ Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 22.

¹⁵⁰ Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 24.

sacrifice devoted to *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* is related to the place and the practice: the first table is the Christian altar and the second one is the pagan offering that coexists with it.

The only text that explains the composition of the offerings placed on the table for *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* is the twelfth-century *Questions of Cyricus, Sava and Ilya to the Bishop Niphont of Novgorod*,¹⁵¹ where it is said that the offering consisted of bread, cheese and honey, including drinking to honour *Rozhanitsy* (question number 33).¹⁵² In this respect, Rock¹⁵³ considers that “it seems conceivable that rather than ‘*rod*’ representing here a specific deity and *rozhanitsa* (singular in her text) meaning ‘spirit of birth’ or ‘fate,’ they might instead be translated as ‘childbirth’ and ‘a woman giving birth’ respectively,” based on the canonical prohibitions on special meals in honour of the Nativity. However, bearing in mind that in Smirnov’s edition¹⁵⁴ the second mention of *Rozhanitsy* appears in plural, Rock’s interpretation loses its strength and the relationship between the celebrations of ordinary births and the Nativity of Christ suggested by the author is not clear.

As a summary, we can conclude that between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries in the Kievan Rus’ a special type of sacrifice devoted to minor deities that consisted of bread, cheese, honey and drinking (most probably mead), offered and consumed inside of the churches was still practised. The sacralization of the food and drinks was justified by the sacral character of the Christian temple where the tables were located and it could even be accompanied by a Christian prayer, such as the *Troparion* to the Mother of God. From a purely formal perspective, three fixed elements of the ritual can be identified: the table with the offerings, the fact that they were bloodless, and the intended recipients, certain minor deities.

The methodological bias considering that East Slavic religious expressions are unique and isolated vis-à-vis other Slavic groups has meant that the presence of tables inside temples in other Slavic religious traditions has been disregarded. Actually, worship tables among the West Slavs can also be found, although they have a slightly different function. In the *Dialogue on the Life of St. Otto of Bamberg* (II, 32–33), written by the monk Herbord in the twelfth century, detailed descriptions are provided of the four temples or *contine* of the city of Szczecin. The main temple, which was dedicated to the three-headed god Triglav, was used to store the enemies’ wealth and weapons captured in wars. The other three adjacent buildings, which could be less important halls of worship, “only had seats and tables on the inside as the people were accustomed

151 Smirnov, *Materialy dlya istorii*, 1–27; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 325–28.

152 Here Rock translates *rozhanitsa* in the singular, following most probably the edition of Pavlov. Cf. Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 23; Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava*, col. 31. In contrast, Álvarez-Pedrosa translates the second mention in the plural following the edition of Smirnov. Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 328; Smirnov, *Materialy dlya istorii*, 10.

153 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 23.

154 Smirnov, *Materialy dlya istorii*, 10.

to hold councils and meetings there. For they like to drink, play, and transact serious business there and in the same temple they met on certain days and hours."¹⁵⁵ Therefore, these were ritualized banquets, for they were celebrated on set days and hours, and were employed not only to feast but also to take important decisions.

In the ancient Greek religious tradition a parallel ritual element exists. It has been called *trapezómata*¹⁵⁶ by scholars in a conventional way, when they refer to the offerings placed on a table, τράπεζαι (tables) being the most frequent designation found in the ancient texts. The Grammarian Pollux (6.83–84) explains that for “tables,” we must understand the offerings that were placed on them. The link between tables and the place of worship was warranted by the inscriptions. For instance, there is an inscription from the first century BCE in Esmirna (SIG3 996) that mentions a table in front of the statue of Helios Apollo Cisauloddono. The literary testimonies confirm this custom. Pausanias (8.31.3–4) describes the bas-relief of a table standing in front of a statue of Heracles in the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore of Megalopolis.¹⁵⁷

Frequently, the tables and the offerings placed on them are associated with the worship of heroes or minor divinities. For example, in the oldest calendar of worship from Athens that has come down to us, dating back to the fifth century BCE, a table is established for Semele (IG I3 234, 18–19). In addition, tables can be found in the sacred calendar of Thorikos (SEG 33, 147) dedicated to several heroines. In these cases, the offerings put on the table are considered as a complement to a blood sacrifice devoted to a superior deity. According to Aristophanes’ comedy *Plutus* (676–678), on the tables that were inside the temples food offerings such as cakes and dried figs were laid out. In spite of the fact that many of the testimonies say bloodless offerings were placed on the tables of worship, some of the rituals prescribed both blood and bloodless offerings.¹⁵⁸ In the scholia of Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 7,¹⁵⁹ when recounting the rites of Haloa, an Attic harvest festival to honour Demeter, Kore and Dionysos, the scholiast says that the *arkhontai* prepared the tables, which were full of all food from the land and the sea, except those things forbidden in the mysteries of Eleusis. An explanation for the rite is that civilized food was found by the gods and shared with humankind. On the tables, the genitals of both sexes made of bread were also placed. The *arkhontai* left their women inside together with the offerings.

The τράπεζαι appear too in a wider and more complex ritual called *theoxénia*, in which gods and heroes were the guests of humans,¹⁶⁰ and beds and tables were prepared

155 Stupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*, 73; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 137.

156 The most exhaustive study was made by Gill, “Trapezomata: A Neglected Aspect of Greek Sacrifice,” 117–37.

157 Gill, “Trapezomata: A Neglected Aspect of Greek Sacrifice,” 7–11; Mattern, “Griechische Kultbildschranken,” 158.

158 Jameson, *Cults and Rites in Ancient Greece*, 151–52.

159 Rabe, *Scholia in Lucianum*, 275, 22ff.

160 Jameson, *Cults and Rites in Ancient Greece*, 150.

where they could drink and eat. It was a cheaper alternative to the animal sacrifices and common in the private domain.¹⁶¹ The purpose of the *theoxénia* could have been to bring the god or hero closer to the offerer, establishing between them ties of hospitality that would later be beneficial for humans. Moreover, the *theoxénia* became an occasion to celebrate a sacral collective banquet.¹⁶² Probably the oldest testimony of a *theoxénia* is an Attic inscription (*IG I³ 255*), with a list of rituals to honour the superior gods (Aphrodite, Zeus Troppaeus and Apollo) that mentioned the tables together with the beds prepared for the respective associated deities and heroes (Eros, Hyppolitos and Heracles).

In short, as stated by Jameson,¹⁶³ the primary function of *theoxénia* was the celebration of a collective banquet to which the gods, who were usually far away from the human community, were invited. The sacral context where it was performed favoured the integration of humans and divinities.

Something similar happened in Rome with the ritual known as *lectisternium*. In it the gods participated in the shape of their effigies reclining on a couch (Latin *lectum*), with their left arm resting on a cushion before one or several tables with food offerings. The deities would be set up in pairs, dressed in drapery appropriate for the ritual. This probably had a function similar to the aforementioned *theoxénia*. Possibly the earliest epigraphic testimony we have is a bronze tablet from Lavinium from the third century BCE in which a *lectisternium* is offered to Ceres and Vesperna.¹⁶⁴ Livy's *Books on the Foundation of the City* (36.1 and 42.30) state that *lectisternia* were celebrated during the whole year, although with less solemnity. We have better information regarding the *lectisternia* that took place after important disasters in Rome, where they were clearly used with a purifying purpose. Livy (5.13.4–8) gives a detailed account of the celebration of what he called “the first *lectisternium*” in the history of Rome after a severe winter and subsequent plague that spread in 399 BCE. The Sybilline Books were consulted and the *duumviri* in charge of the religious festivals organized a *lectisternium* that lasted eight days. It was dedicated to three pairs of divinities: Apollo and Latona, Diana and Hercules, and Mercury and Neptune. The celebration even included expressions of hospitality towards the prisoners. Another great public *lectisternium* took place in 217 BCE after the Roman defeat at Lake Trasimene by the Carthaginians.¹⁶⁵ A rite of purification was celebrated for the religious crime committed by consul Gaius Flaminius, who went to battle against the Carthaginians without taking the prescribed auguries. The *lectisternium* lasted three days and was organized by *decemviri* and dedicated to six pairs of gods: Jupiter and Juno, Neptune and Minerva, Mars and Venus, Apollo and Diana, Vulcan and Vesta, and Mercury and Ceres.¹⁶⁶ The last solemn and public *lectisternium* took place in 204 BCE and it is

161 Ekroth, *The Sacrificial Rituals of Greek Hero-Cults*, 129–213; Ekroth, “Heroes and Hero-Cults,” 107.

162 Jameson, *Cults and Rites in Ancient Greece*, 160–63.

163 Jameson, *Cults and Rites in Ancient Greece*, 172.

164 Guarducci, “Nuove osservazioni sulla lamina bronzea di Cerere a Lavinio,” 411–25.

165 Livy, *Books on the Foundation of the City*, 22.10.8.

166 Nouilhan, “Les lectisternes républicains,” 27–41.

not clear if its aim was to celebrate the arrival in Rome of the statue of the Magna Mater or to avoid the bad omens that could damage the city during the Second Punic War.¹⁶⁷ Nowadays, the traditional theory stating that the Roman *lectisternia* were a borrowing from the Greek religious tradition has been dismissed.¹⁶⁸ They can be divided into two types. First, there was the private ceremony that was celebrated during the whole Roman religious tradition. It had the aim of offering a banquet to the gods, while respecting the higher nature of the divinities and the hierarchical structure of society. Second, there was the public variant as witnessed by Livy, which included a performance and implied expressions of hospitality and social integration.¹⁶⁹

As a summary, the East Slavic tables with offerings for *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* have parallels in other Western Indo-European religious traditions, such as the Greek and the Roman. All of them share some elements, like the presence of a table in a sacral context. The function of the table can be limited to holding mostly bloodless offerings, as can be seen in the Slavic and Greek traditions. It seems originally to have been a ritual dedicated to minor deities. However, in ancient times the rite could have been simpler and more functional, with the aim of inviting both heroes and gods so that they felt a connection with the person who offered the sacrifice. This function of a bond with the gods goes beyond the city of Athens, with examples in Delphi especially and in other places in ancient Greece. The invitation to the gods became a way to keep misfortunes away from the city, mainly in ancient Rome, or to overcome a disaster that had already happened.

Various central elements of the rite can be suggested. It was a simple structure marked by a table as a container for the offerings, which used to be bloodless and, as a consequence, not expensive. The recipients of the offerings would be, in principle, minor divinities. This core ritual went through functional changes: on the one hand, the offerings could be replaced by a blood sacrifice, and on the other hand, the recipients could be deities belonging to a higher rank. Increasing the type of the offerings and the recipients of the offerings enlarges the functional framework of the sacrifice, to the point of transforming it into a public celebration seeking to strengthen the social bonds among the community members by means of ritualized periodical banquets and, in periods of collective crisis, to stave off evil from the city.

Svarozhich

Besides *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy*, the historical sources mention other deities to whom fertility rites are dedicated. For instance, in the *Statute of Prince Vladimir*,¹⁷⁰ allegedly authored by Prince Vladimir I himself after his baptism in 988, among the crimes mentioned to be judged by the ecclesiastical courts appear the following: “if someone

¹⁶⁷ Livy, *Books on the Foundation of the City*, 29.14.

¹⁶⁸ Scheid, “Nouveau rite et nouvelle piété: Réflexions sur le ritus Graecus,” 168–82.

¹⁶⁹ Estienne, “Vie et mort d’un rituel romain. Le lectisterne,” 15–21.

¹⁷⁰ Golubinskii, *Istoriya Russkoi Tserkvy*, I, 621–27.

prays beneath the granary or in the forest or in the water.”¹⁷¹ The word *ovinŭ* (granary) can be translated also as “threshing barn” or “oven for drying cereals.”¹⁷² This meaning is more explicit in the allusion that is made in a passage of the *Sermon by One Who Loves Christ and Is a Jealous Defender of the Righteous Faith*, when stating:

Because of that, Christians must not celebrate devilish festivals, that is, dancing, singing worldly songs, and making offerings to the gods, to the fire under the threshing barn nor to make prayers to the *vily*, to Mokosh, to *Sim* and *R'gl*, to Perun, to *Rod*, to the *Rozhanitsy*, and all similar ones.¹⁷³

The custom of praying under the granary or under the threshing barn appears together with praying in the stables in the subsequent Chudovskii redaction of the *Sermon of Saint Gregory*.¹⁷⁴ It seems plausible that it was an agrarian rite related to the harvest, especially if we take into account the statement in the *Sermon of Saint Gregory*: “Fire dries and ripens this abundance.”¹⁷⁵ In another excerpt from the *Sermon by One Who Loves Christ* the fire is embodied by the pagan god Svarozhich, who is mentioned together with other deities:

so he [God], too being unable to bear Christians who live a double faith and believe in Perun and Khors, Mokoš, Sim and Rgl and in the Vily, who number thirty ninth¹⁷⁶ sisters,—so say ignorant people who consider them goddesses—and thus give them offerings and cut the throats of hens and pray to fire, calling it Svarožic.¹⁷⁷

The first five deities belong to the pantheon erected by Prince Vladimir in Kiev a few years before his baptism in 980, as can be read in the *PVL*.¹⁷⁸ Perun was the supreme god, the god of thunder; Khors has been identified with an Iranian solar deity; Mokosh is the moist mother earth; and *Sim* and *R'gl* would be a corruption of Simar'gl, a mythological creature from the Iranian religion, who was related to the harvest.¹⁷⁹ It would represent also the fire element, the same as Khors, the sun. In contrast, Mokosh is the fertile earth, and Perun could be interpreted in this context as the provider of rain. Regarding Dazh'bog, as Stella Rock¹⁸⁰ stated,

171 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 308n121.

172 “In the Russian North this was a two-level structure, the first level containing a primitive furnace partly entrenched in earth and the second the floor on which the sheaves of grain were dried.”: Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 60.

173 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 384.

174 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 30.

175 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 366.

176 In a variant “thirty”: Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 382n316.

177 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 382–83; Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 18.

178 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 278; Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 93.

179 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 13–14.

180 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 19.

under the year 1114, the *Primary Chronicle* cites an unnamed chronicle on “the god Svarog” of the Egyptians, and his son Dazh’bog, the Sun. This is probably the Byzantine Chronicle of John Malalas, the Slavonic translation of which contains glosses naming the deities Hephaestus and Helios as Svarog and Dazh’bog respectively.

Therefore, we can identify Svarozhich, the “son of Svarog” judging by the meaning of its derivative suffix, with the Dazh’bog of Vladimir’s pantheon, and likewise establish the same relationship between both of them with Svarog, specifically, between the fire in the sky (the sun) and his father the fire on earth. We see here how fire played an important role in the agrarian process of drying and ripening the harvest, and of course associated with the “fire in the sky,” the sun. Additionally, certain rituals were dedicated to fire including prayers and offerings that were made in a special symbolic place: under the grain drying furnace.

As for the *vily*, they were absent in Vladimir’s pantheon but are also attested to with this name among the Western and Southern Slavs. We will speak about them later in [Chapter 5](#) dealing with funerary rites.¹⁸¹

Hennil/Bendil

Another fertility god among the West Slavs is the god *Hennil* (variant *Bendil*) as mentioned in Thietmar of Merseburg’s *Chronicon* (VII, 69).¹⁸² The specific passage follows the account of a paranormal phenomenon that according to the chronicle occurred at a house in the village of Sülfeld¹⁸³ which had been taken over by invisible demons or spirits during the second week of December in 1017. The author draws on this strange event to describe the following Slavic pre-Christian custom preserved in this scarcely Christianized rural area:

The inhabitants, who rarely go to church, do not concern themselves at all about their priests. They worship greatly their household gods and, in the hope of some benefit for themselves, perform sacrifices to them. I heard tell of a shepherd’s staff, crowned by a hand holding an iron circle, which was carried from house to house by the shepherd of the village it was in, and as soon as it entered [the house] it was hailed by its bearer: “Keep watch, Bendil, keep watch!” for such was its name in their rustic tongue, and afterwards, over a banquet, the fools argued amicably about keeping it in their custody.¹⁸⁴

Thus, it seems to be a god protector of the households, and therefore a fertility god. Its protecting role, as well as its agrarian (fertility) function, is shown in the attribute of the shepherd’s staff, while the ring is associated in the Indo-European traditions to kingship¹⁸⁵ as well as with alliances, agreements and oaths. Actually, a new interpretation of the etymology of the variant reading of the theonym *Bendil*, which can be found in a

181 See [Chapter 5](#), The Living Dead among the East Slavs.

182 Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 482–84.

183 Nearby the city of Wolfsburg, in Lower Saxony, in modern Germany.

184 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 75; Warner, *Ottoman Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, 356.

185 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 424–25.

second manuscript, would link the name to the Indo-European stem **b^hend^h-* (tie, bind). This would confirm the connection of the god with the binding oaths.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, the fertility function would also be expressed by the abundant ritual banquet mentioned in the text. The relationship between the king's justice and the fertility of the land is well attested also among the Indo-European peoples, as remarked by West,¹⁸⁷ for whom the two were dependent on one another. The hand holding a ring reminds us of the four-headed idol found in the Zbruch River, one of whose four faces also holds a ring.¹⁸⁸ On the other sides it shows a horn, a sword and a horse respectively, which, except for the ring, are the same attributes of the idol of Sventovit of Arkona, as described by Saxo Grammaticus.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, the Zbruch idol would bring together the warrior function of the sword and the horse together with the fertility, represented by the horn, and justice or oaths, whose symbol would be the ring.¹⁹⁰ The same can also be said regarding *Hennil/Bendil*.

As for the association with roosters, the plausible Germanic interference of the scribe when transcribing the god's name into Latin as *Hennil* due to the influence of the Germanic term for "rooster,"¹⁹¹ could be suggested. In addition, the invocation of the god with the words "Keep watch, Bendil, keep watch!" and the previous mention of the rooster's crow in the episode of the haunted house¹⁹² could make *Hennil/Bendil* a night deity, bearing in mind the symbolism of the rooster's crow, which is linked to dawn and is believed to drive away the spirits of the dark in the folklore of the Slavic peoples.¹⁹³ This could be the reason why roosters or cockerels were offered as a sacrifice to the unclean spirits of nature such as *vily*, *bereginy* or *upiry*, as we will see in Chapter 5. Thietmar's fragment explains that the household gods like *Hennil/Bendil* receive sacrifices, but the kind of sacrifices is not specified.

The ritual of the god *Hennil's* staff could be related to a shepherd's ritual attested by the fifteenth-century *Polish Sermons* (Fol. 142 b)¹⁹⁴ that state:

A certain reprehensible rite is also still practiced, whereby on the day of circumcision,¹⁹⁵ which is called the new year, a shepherd goes around the houses giving out branches, which cannot be received by bare hands, so that with those branches they make the sheep and livestock go towards the herd: who could have taught men this, if not the father of trickery and error?¹⁹⁶

186 Álvarez-Pedrosa, "¿Existió un dios eslavo Hennil?," 137.

187 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 422–23.

188 Rybakov, *Yazychestvo drevnikh slavyan*, 622–25; Ślupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*, 217–26.

189 See The Description of a Harvest Ritual in the Sanctuary of Arkona.

190 See Chapter 3, dealing with rites of everyday life, Ritual and Daily Life.

191 Álvarez-Pedrosa, "¿Existió un dios eslavo Hennil?," 137–38. Cf. OHG *hano* (rooster), Ger. *Hahn* (rooster) in Gramkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 515.

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

193 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 42, 120, 157, 181, 194, 204–5.

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

195 The circumcision of Jesus traditionally is celebrated on January 1.

196 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 238.

If both rituals are one and the same, then they would coincide with the period of the celebration of the East Slavic pre-Christian festival known as *Koliada*.¹⁹⁷

Pereplut

In the *Sermon by our holy father John Chrysostom on how the first pagans believed in idols*¹⁹⁸ together with Dazh'bog there is mention of a mysterious Pereplut:

And others believe in Stribog, Dažbog and Pereplut, for whom they drink from horns while cavorting, having forgotten God who created heaven and earth, the seas and rivers. And this way they rejoice in their idols.¹⁹⁹

As pointed out by Stella Rock²⁰⁰ regarding this Pereplut, “nothing is known, although Rybakov indulges in a great deal of speculation about possible connections with rain and agriculture.” However, we can say that the ritual action of drinking for this deity, together with the symbolic instrument they used in the ritual, the horn, would link it very clearly with abundance and the function of fertility, similar to the fertility ritual dedicated to the idol of Sventovit of Arkona among the Western Slavs.

In another sermon, the *Sermon by One Who Loves Christ and Is a Jealous Defender of the Righteous Faith*, we can find similar ritual drinking to honour the gods:

and offer garlic to the gods when someone holds a banquet in his house, then they throw it in buckets and drink a cup to their idols, and in their joy they are no worse than the Jews and heretics.²⁰¹

According to Stella Rock,²⁰² the garlic was thought to have apotropaic powers in the ancient world. However, in a later variant that appears in a fifteenth-century *Novgorodskii Sofiiskii Sobor* manuscript, this drinking ritual has an even more explicit sexual or phallic connotation:

And when one of them celebrates a wedding, they entertain themselves with drums and pipes and many other demonic devices; and another rite is even more inimical than this: after making a false male phallus, they insert it in buckets and drink from cups, and when drunk they smell and lick and kiss it.²⁰³

197 See Spring Festivals: Rusalia.

198 The full title is *Sermon by the Holy Father Saint John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on How the First Pagans Believed in Idols, Offered Sacrifices to Them and Called Upon Them and Many Continue to Do So Now, for Even Though, Being Christians, They Do Not Know What Christianity Is*. Ed. by Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva s' ostatkami yazychestva v' Drevnei Rusi*, II, 59–61.

199 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 374. Italics added.

200 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 32.

201 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 383; Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 21.

202 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 21.

203 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 383n321; Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 22.

Here the ritual drinking is performed in a very specific context: a wedding celebration. Additionally, a curious container with a phallic shape is employed. It could be related to an allusion contained in the same Sofiiskii redaction of the *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*: “The same Slavs during the wedding celebrations put their private parts inside of a bucket with garlics and drink through ithyphallic objects.”²⁰⁴

In both cases, the reproductive function is more than evident, and the purpose could be to increase the male fertility of the groom. The Slavs could have known the benefits of garlic for increasing the blood flow to the sexual organs. However, its use in the ritual could have been motivated also by its phallic shape. In any case, wedding rituals deserve a separate section among the fertility rites.

Wedding Rituals

We have seen above a fertility rite that has ritual drinking associated with a wedding celebration. In the earliest East Slavic sources other rituals can be found. For instance, in the *Church Statute of Prince Yaroslav*,²⁰⁵ which is reported to have been prepared by the prince himself in the first half of the eleventh century, although it is preserved in a late fifteenth-century copy, the following food offering is condemned:

35. If someone steals (the dowry) from the bride and groom and for the marriage, everything (corresponds) to the Metropolitan. He who offers (cheese) for a maiden, one grivna²⁰⁶ for the cheese, three grivnas for the dishonour and repayment of what has been lost, six grivnas for the Metropolitan, and the Prince shall impose a punishment.²⁰⁷

According to Golubinskii,²⁰⁸ this likely refers to the repudiation of the bride by the groom after formalizing the betrothal, but it might instead be the practice of sealing the engagement with the pre-Christian custom of offering cheese.²⁰⁹ It reminds us of the offerings of bread, cheese and honey (or mead) for *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* that we discussed earlier. There is a similar food offering of eggs for betrothal that is attested among the Poles by the fifteenth-century *Synodal Statutes* of Andreas Bninski,²¹⁰ bishop of Poznań:

XXXIV. On engagement with eggs. You must prohibit that on the Monday and Tuesday after Easter, men become engaged with women and the women with men through eggs and other presents, commonly called *dyngowacz*, and that they throw water on them.²¹¹

²⁰⁴ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 362n257.

²⁰⁵ Golubinskii, *Istoriya Russkoi Tserkvy*, I, 629–38.

²⁰⁶ Currency in ancient Kievan Rus’.

²⁰⁷ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 310.

²⁰⁸ Golubinskii, *Istoriya Russkoi Tserkvy*, I, 635n5.

²⁰⁹ Kaiser, *The Laws of Rus’: Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries*, 48.

²¹⁰ Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 77–78.

²¹¹ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 244.

The offerings of food and drink during a marriage were thus essential to guaranteeing the fertility of the couple. Water was also important, for the Chudovskii redaction of the *Sermon of Saint Gregory* says: “They throw brides who are to be married in the water, and drink a cup to the devil, throwing rings and belts into the water.”²¹² The text does not mention the name of the devil to whom they dedicated the drinking. We could think that it was either the same Pereplut from the *Sermon of Saint John Chrysostom* or even the nature spirits of the rivers and lakes, known as *vily*, *bereginy* or later *rusalki*, as we will see in [Chapter 5](#), dealing with funerary rites. The throwing of rings and belts as symbols of engagements and bonds may be understood as an offering to the water spirits in order to ensure the fertility of the bride and as a way to seal the marriage, with the water spirits as witnesses. This custom of carrying the brides to the water is linked to the region of Novgorod in rule number 7 of the *Proceedings of the Council of Vladimir*²¹³ celebrated in 1274. It may even have been mentioned in the *PVL* in a description of the barbarian pagan customs of some Eastern Slavic tribes:

And they [the Polyanians] had as a marriage custom that the bridegroom did not go to fetch his bride, but she was brought to him by night, and the following morning they took to her what they gave her. And the Derevljane lived savagely, lived like cattle, killed each other, ate all kinds of filth, and there was no marriage between them but they abducted virgins in the water. The Radimiči, Vjatiči and Severjane had a shared custom: they lived in the forest, like wild animals, eating all kinds of filth, and they spoke obscenities to each other in front of their parents and daughters-in-law and there was no marriage between them, but games between the villages, and they came together for the games, for the dances and for all types of diabolical songs, and there [the men] abducted the women; he who had arranged with one of them, as each man had two or three women.²¹⁴

Whether it was done “in the water” or not, depending on the different readings of the text,²¹⁵ the fact is that in the fragment among the East Slavic tribe of the Derevljans the earliest Indo-European form of marriage is attested—the abduction of brides—the same as was practised by many Indo-European peoples according to the comparative linguistic data.²¹⁶ Mythological echoes of such a practice would be, for instance, the rape of the Sabine women in the Roman mythic tradition or the myth of the capture of Medea by the Argonauts, as well as the Homeric myths of the kidnapping of Persephone and the abduction of Helen in ancient Greek mythology. In this passage it is mentioned also that among some East Slavic tribes there was the custom of carrying off the brides during festivals in which ritual games, singing and dancing played an important role. This is similar to what we have already seen in the fertility festivals of *Rusalii* and,

²¹² Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 376n303.

²¹³ Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava*, cols. 83–102. For the English translation, see Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 340.

²¹⁴ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 268.

²¹⁵ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 268n26.

²¹⁶ Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 658–60.

more specifically, in question 24 of chapter 41 of the sixteenth-century *Stoglav*, when condemning the *Rusalii* for St. John's Day, which involved the gathering of young men and women together with bathing in rivers and the celebration of "night games." It is possible that those night games were a kind of competition to win a wife, as has been observed by several Indo-European traditions.²¹⁷ However, as West²¹⁸ suggested, it could be explained rather as a "popular seasonal custom in which a girl chose a beau for the summer," something that would fit well with the celebrations on the eve of St. John's Day among the East Slavs as described by the *Stoglav*. Furthermore, in question 25, in the same chapter of the *Stoglav*, the festival called *v'iunets* is mentioned. It was celebrated in the first spring after the wedding in order to congratulate the newlyweds.²¹⁹

To summarize, we can say that wedding rituals among the East Slavs contained the same constituent elements as other fertility rites that we have analyzed from different Slavic areas: the offering of food and drink, the ritualized actions of singing, dancing and playing games, as well as water as a symbol of fertility.

217 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 432–36.

218 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 436.

219 Propp, *Russkie agrarnye prazdniki*, 63–65.

