Chapter 3

RITES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Ritual and Daily Life

As stated in Rappaport,[1] ritual helps societies protect themselves from the erosion of daily practice, sanctifying whatever it encodes, including everyday life actions and social conventions. Moreover, Rappaport[2] identifies two classes of rituals, "factive" and "commissive," depending on the actions that are performed, the former being the actions that "bring into being the states of affairs with which they are concerned" (declarations of peace, marriages, purifications, healings etc.) and the latter those actions that "merely bring into being the commitment of those performing them to do so sometime in the future" (oaths, pledges etc.). In the case of oaths, the same as in divination, there is an utterance or linguistic expression that is sanctified.[3]

Oaths and Pledges

According to Rappaport,[4]

> that the sanctification of commissives—oaths, pledges, and the like—is closely related to the sanctification of reports and testimony is at least strongly suggested by the derivation of the Old English and Old Norse terms for oath or pledge, *waer* and *var* respectively, from the Indo-European stem *wero-*, true, from which the Latin *verus*, true, and its descendants are also derived (American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd ed. 1992).

That is why keeping the oaths becomes a sacred duty and breaking them entails a divine punishment.

Precisely from the same Old Norse word *vár* (pledge, oath) mentioned by Rappaport came the name of the Varangians, the Scandinavian warriors migrating during the Viking Age to the Eastern European territory of the Kievan Rus', where a majority of Slavic peoples were settled. This way, Old Norse *væringjar* would mean "oath-bound warriors" for a majority of authors.[5] The Varangians became the military elite that controlled the trade routes from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea along different rivers and lakes, mainly along the Dnieper River and the Volga River respectively. In the *PVL*, this Scandinavian minority of warriors are called Rus' too, a term that was to subsequently give its name during the tenth century to the first East Slavic state.

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1 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 323.

2 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 115.

3 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 320.

4 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 320.

5 Thomsen, *The Relations between Ancient Russia and Scandinavia*, 111; Danylenko, "Urmani, Varjagi and Other Peoples in the Cosmography of the Primary Chronicle," 183–84.

In addition, in the same *PVL* there can be found several testimonies to the way the Varangian Rus' used to seal their peace treaties with the Byzantines, swearing by their gods Perun and Volos, "the god of cattle," and by their weapons, as we will discuss later in the chapter dealing with military rites. Specifically, it happened in the peace treaties of 907 and 971.[6] Moreover, in the *PVL* in the year 944, when narrating the signing of the agreement between the Byzantine envoys and the Rus'ian representatives of Prince Igor of Kiev, it is recounted that the Christian Rus' took an oath in the church of St. Elias, while the pagan ones did it by the idol of god Perun, as follows:

> (54) In the morning, Igor' summoned the envoys, and went to a hill on which there was a statue of Perun. The Russes laid down their weapons, their shields, and their gold ornaments, and Igor' and his people took oath (at least, such as were pagans), while the Christian Russes took oath in the church of St. Elias, which is above the creek, in the vicinity of the Pasyncha square and the quarter of the Khazars. This was, in fact, a parish church, since many of the Varangians were Christians.[7]

This clearly shows the equivalent mention at the same level of the church of St. Elijah and the idol of the god Perun, both of them sharing the same function as guarantors of the oaths. An important detail of this passage is the location of the church of St. Elijah on the top of the hill, something that according to Jane Baun[8] was very common both in Greek and Slavic lands. After Christianization, in the folklore and popular religion of the Orthodox Slavic peoples, the prophet Elijah took the role of the Slavic pre-Christian god Perun as a weather god.

As we mentioned before, in the peace treaties of the years 907 and 971, as attested by the *PVL*, the oaths were made by the gods Perun and Volos. The latter, called "the god of cattle," had also some eschatological connotations as god of the dead, as we will see later in the chapter dealing with the funerary rites. The pair of gods Perun–Volos could have worked among the East Slavs in a parallel way as the gods Mitra and Varuna in the Indo–Iranian tradition supervising justice, oaths and contracts; they were mentioned in a treaty between Hatti and Mittani dating back to the fourteenth century BCE.[9]

As for Perun, the etymology of his name would make him a "thunder god,"[10] and therefore a "sky god" in the highest position for the East Slavs, with the chance to see everything from above and to know everything, and be the ideal guardian of oaths. The god of lightning was the supreme deity for the South Slavs, too, as it is recounted by Procopius in his *Gothic War* (*Bell. Goth.* 3.14.23): "For they believe that one god, the maker of the lightning, is alone lord of all things, and they sacrifice to him cattle and all other victims."[11]

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

7 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 77.

8 Baun, *Tales from Another Byzantium*, 206.

9 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 171–72.

10 Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 694, 699.

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

Though he is not called by his proper name, he could be identified with the East Slavic Perun, considering both his attributions and functions. Moreover, in the twelfth-century *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 83),[12] written by the monk Helmold of Bosau, the West Slavs living in the region of Oldenburg[13] are said to worship Prone (or Prove) as their supreme deity. Concretely, the chronicle recounts the embassy of Bishop Gerald of Oldenburg to the Slavic lands of Prince Pribislav, who received him in his domains in the year 1156, crossing a sacred forest:

> I, 83: It happened that on the way we arrived at a forest, the only one in that territory, which extends along the entire territory, across a plain. There, among the ancient trees, we saw sacred oaks that had been dedicated to the god of that country, Prone; they were surrounded by a vestibule and a wooden fence built with great care that had two gates. For, besides the household deities and the idols that abounded in that hamlet, that place was a sanctuary for the entire country, to which a priest, religious festivities, and several sacrificial rites were assigned. Every Monday, the people met there in council with the prince and the priest to administer justice. Access to the vestibule was prohibited to all, except for the priest and those who wished to offer sacrifices or those in danger of death, who were never denied the right to refuge. For the veneration that the Slavs show for the aspects of their religion is so great that they do not tolerate the area around the sanctuary being tainted with blood, not even in times of war. They rarely accept solemn oaths, as for the Slavs swearing is like perjury and with it they expose themselves to the vengeful wrath of the gods.[14]

In the last sentence of the fragment we see the confirmation of Rappaport's words when speaking of the sanctification of oaths by rituals: "Such oaths transform reports or accounts into testimony, and common lies into perjury."[15] Here a god of justice associated with the oaks as his sacred trees is described, being the guardian of the oaths. Both bearing in mind the etymology of his name and his connection to the oaks, Prone has been identified with the East Slavic Perun by many authors.[16] This way, the oaks are both his representation and personification as guarantors of the oaths and of the justice delivered in their enclosure, the oaks and oak groves being connected to the thunder god in Indo-European traditions, as shown by their common etymology.[17]

Among the East Slavs, according to the *PVL*, an oak tree was the place where was performed the execution of the two sorcerers from Jaroslavl' who headed the rebellion in Beloozero in 1071.[18] In the chronicle's account, both sorcerers were hanged from an oak and left there unburied until a bear devoured their bodies. We could see here

12 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 163.

13 Oldenburg in Holstein, in modern Germany.

14 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 162.

15 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 320.

16 Leger, *La Mythologie slave*, 63; Jakobson, "Slavic Gods and Demons," 6; Lajoye, *Le dieu slave de l'orage Perun et ses successeurs chrétiens Élie et Georges*, 47.

17 Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 527–28.

18 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 289.

the oak tree as the sacred place of justice and the hanging as a likely ritual method of execution,[19] leaving their corpses unburied to the beasts in order to avoid the inhumation of the bodies, something that could imply negative consequences for the community, bearing in mind the problematic nature of sorcerers even in the afterlife for the Slavic mentality,[20] as we will see in Chapter 5.

The following passage belonging to the aforementioned *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 83)[21] bears witness to the practice of swearing by the trees, springs and stones when recounting the destruction of the sacred groves by the Christian missionaries commanded by Bishop Gerald:

> As soon as he arrived[22] at Oldenburg, he began the work of God with great fervor and summoned the pagan Slavs to the grace of regeneration, cutting down the sacred forests and eliminating their sacrilegious rites [...]. The Slavs were subsequently prohibited from swearing on the trees, fountains, and rocks; instead, they presented those accused of a crime to the priest for him to probe them with an iron or plowshare.[23]

We see here, therefore, the oaths made by different natural elements (trees, waters and stones) or directly by the gods associated to those elements. Again among the West Slavs, Saxo Grammaticus (14.25.2) describes an oath proposed by a nobleman from the island of Rügen called Domborus as a guarantee of his good faith in requesting peace from the Danish Bishop Absalon. This rite involved throwing a stone into the water, because, as Saxo Grammaticus reports, "when the barbarians were going to make a deal, they observed the rite of throwing a pebble in the water, saying that if they broke the agreement, then they would perish, just as the stone had sunk."[24] This custom of validating an oath by throwing a stone seems to be well documented among the Indo-Europeans. In this case, the act of throwing the stone is likened to the destiny of he who breaks the oath, as the Roman negotiator says before the Carthaginians in Polybius (3.25):

> "If I swear truly, may only good come to me; if I think or act differently, while others see their homeland, their laws, their own lives, their own temples and tombs safe, may I alone be expelled as I now throw this stone." And saying these words, he threw a stone with his hands.

Another, purely Slavic interpretation can be found when Vladimir I of Kiev ratifies the treaty with the Bulgarians as attested in the *PVL s.a.* 6493 (985): "So Vladimir made

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19 See the ritual sacrifice of a heathen priest from the city of Wolin, strangled with a rope while being tied to a tree on an island by some merchants and sailors on a trade trip, as narrated by Herbord in his *Life of St. Otto of Bamberg* (see section "Travelling and trading" in this same chapter).

20 Dynda, "Rusalki," 88.

21 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 167–68.

22 Priest Bruno.

23 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 163.

24 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 179. See Chapter 4, "Military rituals during peace times".

peace with the Bulgars, and they confirmed it by oath. The Bulgars declared, 'May peace prevail between us till stone floats and straw sinks.' "[25]

In the preceding chapter on the fertility rites, we already mentioned Thietmar of Merseburg's testimony of a fertility god *Hennil*/*Bendil* among the West Slavs, who could also have a connection with oaths on the basis of a recent interpretation of the etymology of its variant name *Bendil* together with the Indo-European symbolism of the ring.[26]

In a similar way, oaths were made by the sun among Polish and Czech noblemen during the Middle Ages, though in Unbegaun's opinion this would be a custom of Germanic origin.[27] In contrast, we consider that Unbegaun was influenced by an ideological prejudice that goes back to the German scholars from the first half of the twentieth century, according to which Slavic paganism was the result of the influence of Germanic culture through the Frankish missionaries among the West Slavs, and the Nordic Varangians among the East Slavs. Unlike Unbegaun, we think that a thorough consideration and comparison of the sources regarding the different geographical areas could give us a global picture of similar phenomena in all of them, allowing us to suggest an original Slavic pre-Christian religion, with parallels in other Indo-European cultures. In the case of the oaths made by the sun, it is so if we compare the practice of the West Slavs as mentioned by Unbegaun with a rarely quoted testimony on the South Slavs, actually one of the oldest utterances made by a South Slavic military chief that has been recorded: the sixth-century account of the Byzantine historian Menander Protector (fr. 21)[28] of the answer given by the Sclavene chieftain Daurentius (or Dauritas) and his comrades to the Avar embassy sent to them in the year 578, asking the Slavs to accept Avar suzerainty and the payment of a tribute. According to Menander, Protector Daurentius' answer was the following:

> 21. Dauritas and his fellow chiefs replied, "What man has been born, what man is warmed by the rays of the sun who shall make our might his subject? Others do not conquer our land, we conquer theirs. And so it shall always be for us, as long as there are wars and weapons."[29]

We think that Daurentius' speech can be understood both as an invocation and as an oath made by the sun and the weapons. The latter will be discussed in the chapter dealing with military rituals.

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25 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 96.

26 Álvarez-Pedrosa, "¿Existió un dios eslavo Hennil?," 135–38.

27 Unbegaun, *La religion des anciens slaves*, 425.

28 Fr. 48 in the edition by Müller, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, 252.

29 Blockley, *The History of Menander the Guardsman,* 195.

Divination

In addition to oaths, Rappaport[30] listed other types of sanctified expressions, among them prophecies, auguries, divinations and oracles. All of these are well attested in every Slavic area. We have the oldest reference to divination practices associated to nature spirits among the Southern Slavs in Procopius of Caesarea's *Gothic War* (*Bell. Goth.* 3.14.23): "They reverence, however, both rivers and nymphs and some other spirits, and they sacrifice to all these also, and they make their divinations in connection with these sacrifices."[31]

In Procopius' testimony, it is said that the Southern Slavs used to offer sacrifices to nature deities, called by him "rivers, nymphs and other spirits" using the corresponding Greek words, in exchange for their divinations. On the basis of his description, we could infer that it was a kind of augury practised on the bodies or blood of the sacrificial victims. There is no certainty about this, however.

Blood sacrifices connected with divination can be found more clearly among the West Slavs, as for instance in Helmold's *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 52),[32] when condemning the diverse religious cult given by the Western Slavs to their gods; this included the blood sacrifices of different animals (cows and sheep), as well as of "Christian men," whose blood was drunk by the priest in order to make his oracles more accurate, "for it is the opinion of many that it is easier to conjure the demons with blood."[33] After consuming the sacrifices, as was their custom according to Helmold, people would turn to banquets and amusements. Still another divination practice that is described in detail by Helmold:

> The Slavs, too, have a strange delusion. At their feasts and carousals they pass about a bowl over which they utter words—I should not say of consecration but of execration—in the name of the gods—of the good one, as well as of the bad one—professing that all propitious fortune is arranged by the good god, adverse, by the bad god. Hence, also, in their language they call the bad god Diabol, or *Zcerneboch*, that is, the Black God.[34]

We can observe here, therefore, the account of a curious technique for propitiating good and bad fortune, saying some words over a bowl in the name of a good god and of a bad god, who is called *Zcerneboch* in the Latin original and would correspond to Slavic Chernebog or Chernobog,[35] that is, "the Black God," as Helmold himself translates correctly. On the one hand, we have a dualist system between a god of good that is not named, and a god of evil associated to the colour black, that is identified with the Devil by the Christian chronicler. We could infer a Belobog (White God) too; therefore, though

30 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 320.

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

32 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 107.

33 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 159.

34 Tschan, *The Chronicle of the Slavs by Helmold, Priest of Bosau*, 159.

35 For a comment on Chernobog as a chthonic god and the dualism in Slavic pantheon, see Zochios, "Slavic Deities of Death," 79–83.

it is not attested anywhere in the oldest historical sources, being mentioned only in two late sixteenth-century German chronicles as *Belbuck* and *Bialbug*.[36] On the other hand, we have here one of those "factive" rituals as defined by Rappaport,[37] being those with the aim of "bringing into being the states of affairs with which they are concerned." In the following paragraph, Helmold refers to the god Sventovit of Arkona as the most powerful of the Slavic gods, one thought to be the most effective in his oracles. For this reason, according to Helmold, the god was offered the blood sacrifice of a Christian man chosen randomly once a year. On the fertility rituals of taking auguries associated to the god Sventovit of Arkona, we already mentioned the testimony of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* in Chapter 2 dealing with fertility rites. As for the military rites of taking auguries before battle with the sacred horse of the god, we will speak later in the following chapter. Moreover, Saxo Grammaticus (14.39.11.1–3)[38] gives a detailed account of other methods of divination practised by the Slavs of the island of Rügen, saying as follows:

> Also when they wanted to undertake other endeavors, they obtained omens regarding their intentions from the first animal they found; and if these omens were good, they would continue on, full of good spirits, but if, on the contrary, they were bad, they would turn around and go home, retracing their steps. They were also familiar with the practice of drawing lots; instead of the lots, they would put three little pieces of wood, black on one side and white on the other, into their laps, and the white parts meant favorable omens and the black parts, adverse omens. And not even women were indifferent to this type of science; since, sitting before the fire, without paying attention, they would draw random lines in the ash; and when they counted them, if they were even, they considered that an omen of success, and if they were uneven, they said that that was a portent of bad luck.[39]

We can observe here a similar dual system of good/bad omens associated to the black and white pieces of wood respectively that reminds us of the Black God of evil as mentioned by Helmold. Furthermore, as Ryan[40] already remarked, this could be the first mention among the Slavs of the Russian *zern'*. As well, the method of casting lots is to be found in Thietmar of Merseburg's *Chronicon* (VI, 24),[41] associated to the military rites of the inhabitants of the city of "Riedegost," which we will discuss later. Moreover, in the chapter dealing with fertility rites we already referred to the oracles that were taken and the corresponding sacrifices offered in the sacred lake of the city of Rethra, as narrated by Adam of Bremen in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (*Deeds of the Bishops of Hamburg*) (II, 21).[42]

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36 Zochios, "Slavic Deities of Death," 81–82.

37 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 115.

38 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 567.29–40.

39 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 187–88.

40 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 321.

41 Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 302.

42 Waitz, *Adami Gesta Hammaburgensis*, 54.

Coming back to the South Slavic sources, one of the earliest allusions to divination among the Slavs linked to the origins of the Slavic script appears at the beginning of the famous tenth-century treatise *On the Letters* written by a mysterious anonymous author bearing the pseudonym of Chernorizets Khrabr (The Brave Monk), where it states that "Earlier the Slavs did not have books but by strokes and notches read and divined, being heathen."[43] These *črьtami i rězami* (strokes and notches) could be understood as incisions made on pieces of wood employed to make predictions, in a similar way to the black and white pieces of wood that the Rugians drew as lots according to Saxo Grammaticus. In the view of Schenker,[44] in spite of the possibility that those "strokes and notches" could be interpreted as a Slavic version of the Germanic or Turkic runes, due to the historical contact of the Slavs with those cultures, no Slavic runes had been discovered until now. However, this could have changed very recently, for an archaeological finding made in the Czech Republic could confirm the existence of Slavic runes dating back to the seventh century carved on a cow bone that could have been used to divine.[45]

Regarding the "auguries taken from the first animal that they met" recounted by Saxo Grammaticus, this belief in omens based on casual encounters with animals is also well attested among the East Slavs. Actually, these omens belong to the most common and popular kind of auguries in many cultures, such as oneiromancy—the interpretation of premonitory dreams—or divination through the behaviour of different animals—mostly birds, called ornithomancy, and snakes, known as herpetomancy. But there are also more uncommon omens, like those obtained by the interpretation of chance meetings with different animals or persons, of sneezing and of wall cracks. For instance, oneiromancy is condemned twice in the *Izbornik* of 1076 in the following passages:

> 313ah–313ai: You must not practise divination, nor believe in dreams, nor make auguries, nor turn to devilish teachings, for all these are punished by Law.
>
> 523–525: A person without any understanding has false and vain hopes, and dreams encourage fools. Divinations and auguries and dreams are nonsense, for dreams have deceived many people, and those who have placed their hopes in them have failed. As with those who strives to catch a shadow or chase the wind, so those who believe in dreams.

Moreover, it has an old parallel in the dream of Svyatoslav Vsevolodich, as it is recounted in the *Tale of Igor's Campaign*, the oldest East Slavic epic poem that dates back to the end of the twelfth century:

> 93–102: The ramparts of the cities were hushed and mirth declined. And Svyatoslav dreamed a troubled dream at Kiev on the hills. "This night," he said, "from even-time, ye dressed me with a black coverlet on my bed of yew; [men] poured me out blue wine mixed with dust; they scattered great [treasure of] pearls from the empty quivers of the

43 Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 173.

44 Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 173–74.

45 Macháček et al. "Runes from Lány (Czech Republic)—The Oldest Inscription among Slavs. A New Standard for Multidisciplinary Analysis of Runic Bones," 105333.

> nomads on to my lap and [try to] soothe me. Already are the boards in my golden-roofed abode bereft of wall-plates. All night long from even-time have the crows of Bus [or Blus] croaked; two captives [stand] by the fen: mercilessly [the foe] have carried the two to the landing-stage of the river, down to the blue sea." And the Boyars answered the Prince; "Already, Prince, has grief taken captive our mind. For two hawks have flown away from their sires' golden throne, to seek the city of Tmutorokań, or, may be, to quaff in their helms of the Don. Already are the wings of the two hawks by the sabres of the heathen made to walk afoot; and, [Igor] himself they have fettered in fetters of iron."[46]

This excerpt also contains two references to ornithomancy: the crow-cawing during the whole night and the flight of the two hawks. Actually, these are the two main actions in which this divinatory technique consists: the interpretation of the song and of the movements and flights of birds. Both the belief in birdsong and in dreams can be found also in a thirteenth-century sermon attributed to Saint John Chrysostom that is contained in a medieval Russian compilation called *Izmaragd*.[47]

Furthermore, ornithomancy is condemned in the *Sanctifying Instruction for a Newly-Ordained Priest*, together with gambling with dice and chess and watching horse competitions. In this thirteenth-century work of canon law, included in later Russian versions of the Byzantine *Nomokanon* known as the *Kormchaia kniga*, the following can be read:

> Do not read prohibited texts; what have you learned until now? Hateful words, enchantments and cures by witchcraft, prophecies from the flight of birds or games, to tell wonderful tales by charlatans; you must renounce your sets of dice and chess, do not watch horse races.[48]

Again, in the *Three Sanctifying Instructions for the Clergy and Lay Persons on Various Matters of Ecclesiastical Discipline*, dating back to the fifteenth century, ornithomancy continues to be condemned together with chance meetings and herpetomancy.[49] A longer description of ornithomancy can be found in the *Sermon of the Holy Father Cyril, Archbishop of Cyprus, on Evil Souls*, an East Slavic text of probable South Slavic origin that dates back to the period between the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries:

> And we, being as we say true Christians, believe in these same demons, as well as sorcerers and soothsayers, and we hold it in the highest esteem, by believing in birds, in woodpeckers, crows and magpies. When we want to go somewhere, if one should sing, we stand listening to see whether, in our opinion, it sings on our right or on our left. Then we say to ourselves [fol. 233r.] that the bird is a good omen, and favours us in its blaspheming, for has not God shown good to the bird so that it can tell us? Or when something bad happens to us on the road, then we start saying to our *druzhina*.[50]

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46 Magnus, *The Tale of the Armament of Igor*,12.

47 *Troitsk. Lavr*. no. 202, chap. 59.

48 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 354.

49 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 413.

50 Retinue or personal guard that accompanied the princes in Kievan Rus'.

> Why didn't we turn round, otherwise the bird would not have let us go in vain and we did not listen to it?[51]

It mentions three types of birds, woodpeckers, crows and tits or chickadees, whose song could be interpreted both as a good and a bad omen depending on the direction from which it comes when going out: from the right or from the left respectively. This text condemns the belief in ill-omened chance meetings and sneezing, both of which had been mentioned earlier in the entry for the year 1068 in the *PVL*, where the chronicler was showing the recent defeat of the Rus'ian princes by the nomad Polovtsians as a result of their sins, among which could be counted the following:

> Do we not live like pagans as long as we attach superstitious significance to meetings? For he turns back who meets a monk, a boar or a swine. Is that not pagan? It is part and parcel of the devil's teaching to retain such delusions. Other people attach special significance to sneezing, which is healthy for the head.[52]

As Ryan[53] already pointed out, the belief in the unlucky nature of those kinds of omens such as chance meetings with monks or pigs was widespread throughout all medieval Europe. And here they are condemned explicitly as pagan customs. The practices of those omens were codified in books, some of which are mentioned by later East Slavonic sources like, for instance, the index of forbidden books by the Russian metropolitan Zosima (1490–1494) and the *Stoglav* (1551). That was the case of the *Voronograi*, the book of divination from crow-cawing.

Furthermore, in his account, metropolitan Zosima refers to several other books of omens, which he considers heretical: the *Myshepisk*, the book of divination from the noise of mice; the *Stenoshchelk*, the book of divination from wall cracks; the *Gromovnik*, from the Greek *Brontologion*, the book of divination from thunder and lightning; and the *Koliadnik*, coming from the Greek *Kalendologion*, the book of divination based on the day of the week on which Christmas or the New Year falls. Actually, the Greek *Kalendologion* comes from the Latin *calendae*, the word that was borrowed in Slavic as *Koliada*, that is, the period between Christmas and Epiphany that includes New Year's Eve. Among the Eastern Slavs, it was believed to be one of the most magical periods of the year and it was a custom in several Slavic countries to take omens every night, especially on those between New Year's Eve and Epiphany. The *Koliadnik* is a compilation of these predictions arranged by the different days of these holidays, called also *sviatki*. The *Koliadnik* has come down to us both in South Slavic (Bulgarian and Serbian) and East Slavic (Russian) copies, dating back to the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries respectively. According to Ryan,[54] in spite of the variations that they show in

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51 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 368.

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

53 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 124.

54 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 380.

their contents and wording, all of them probably come from Byzantine Greek versions, at least, as regards the written tradition.

However, there were other ritual practices belonging to popular divination that have been attested by Russian literary works from the nineteenth century, such as Aleksandr Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Vasily Zhukovskii's *Svetlana*, or Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, practices which have also been registered by ethnographers and folklorists.[55] Those practices of fortune telling were made by young girls during the Christmas holidays or *sviatki*, and their main purpose was to ascertain marriage prospects. With the aim of knowing the name of their future spouse, girls employed different methods, as for instance invoking the image of the future husband in front of a mirror holding a candle, or pouring wax, tin, lead or egg white into water and interpreting the shapes formed. Sometimes, they even used chickens or cockerels, that is, *alectryomancy* (chicken oracle), in order to make predictions depending on the object or the direction that they chose when pecking at grain that the observer had scattered on the floor. We have seen already the relationship between cockerels and chickens both as regards fertility rites and the cult of the dead, whose spirits were thought to dwell in or enter the world of the living through the bathhouse. It was at the bathhouse at midnight that all those divination practices were made, especially on St. Basil's Eve, that is, New Year's Eve, this date being considered to be of particular significance in order to contact the spirits or "demons."[56] It is interesting if we compare them with the fifteenth-century *Polish Sermons* (Fol. 142 b),[57] where we can read the following:

> (144) Some melt lead and they mix it with water, to tell the future with it, and they tie it to the neck of children and sick people to chase away terrors. Foolish, they believe that […] Others melt wax with water, and by the resulting shape, with hollow belief, they foretell astonishing things of the living or of those who must die, without realizing that because of the difference in the qualities and unevenness in the material and the form, different figures arise, which are given shape by art or nature, and these are natural things.[58]

Therefore, we observe the same methods of divination among the Poles dealing with people's life and death. The belief in destiny and genealogy is mentioned in chapter 93 of the sixteenth-century *Stoglav*, within a comment on rule number 61 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council.[59] It follows the twelfth-century Old Russian translation of the *Pandects* of Nikon Chernogorets, both in the magical practices condemned (the visits to magicians and fortune tellers, the taming of bears for pagan festivals, and the beliefs in destiny determined by birth or genealogy, and in the so-called cloud-chasers),[60] as well as in the punishment that must be inflicted on them: six years of excommunication.

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55 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 96–114.

56 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 45–46.

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

58 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 237–38.

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

60 For the English translation of a parallel fragment belonging to the contemporary sixteenth-century household guidance manual the *Domostroi*, see Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 40.

But two differences may be noticed: first, the later Muscovite text translates as "quack doctors" what in the original work appeared with the enigmatic word *centurion*, and it also added a Slavic equivalent in order to explain the Greek technique of divination through *Rozhdanitsa* (Genealogy): being derived this word from *rozhdenie* (birth).

In addition to this technique of divination based on date of birth, the East Slavs also practised the rites of divination that were carried out on the first days of every month, or *calendae* in Latin, as attested in the comment on rule 62 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, contained in the same chapter. Moreover, in question 17 of chapter 41 of the *Stoglav*, divination through the observation of the stars and the planets (astrology) and of good and bad days and hours is referred to.[61] Likewise, belief in the date of birth, in the "reading of the stars" as well as in days and years appears in the aforementioned thirteenth-century sermon attributed to Saint John Chrysostom.[62] Likewise, the fifteenth-century *Polish Sermons* (146) mention different kinds of fortune tellers, haruspices and augurs, who observed the auspicious days and hours in order to perform different actions, such as closing a deal or agreeing a marriage.[63]

As a conclusion, we can say that, though the written tradition of divination books could have been taken from the Greek Byzantine sources, the popular divination practised especially during the Christmastide was originally Slavic, and shared both by East and West Slavs.

Travelling and Trading

Closely related to divination are the rites destined to propitiate a safe trip or a good deal or business, for most of them entail the act of taking auguries or offering sacrifices. One of the earliest examples of this can be found in the testimony of the tenth-century Arab traveller Ibn Faḍlān, when speaking of the Rus' merchants that he met at the confluence of the Volga and Kama Rivers:

> The moment their boats reach this dock every one of them disembarks, carrying bread, meat, onions, milk and alcohol (*nabīdh*), and goes to a tall piece of wood set up [in the ground]. This piece of wood has a face like the face of a man and is surrounded by small figurines behind which are long pieces of wood set up in the ground. [When] he reaches the large figure, he prostrates himself before it and says, "Lord, I have come from a distant land, bringing so many slave-girls [priced at] such and such per head and so many sables [priced at] such and such per pelt." He continues until he has mentioned all of the merchandise he has brought with him, then says, "And I have brought this offering," leaving what he has brought with him in front of the piece of wood, saying, "I wish you to provide me with a merchant who has many dīnārs and dirhams and who will buy from me whatever I want [to sell] without haggling over the price I fix." Then he departs. If he has difficulty in selling [his goods] and he has to remain too many days, he returns with a second and third offering. If his wishes prove to be impossible he brings an offering

61 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 19–20.

62 *Troitsk. Lavr*. no. 202, chap. 59.

63 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 240.

> to every single one of those figurines and seeks its intercession, saying, "These are the wives, daughters and sons of our Lord." He goes up to each figurine in turn and questions it, begging its intercession and grovelling before it. Sometimes business is good and he makes a quick sell, at which point he will say, "My Lord has satisfied my request, so I am required to recompense him." He procures a number of sheep or cows and slaughters them, donating a portion of the meat to charity and taking the rest and casting it before the large piece of wood and the small ones around it. He ties the heads of the cows or the sheep to that piece of wood set up in the ground. At night, the dogs come and eat it all, but the man who has done all this will say, "My Lord is pleased with me and has eaten my offering."[64]

Here we can see the offering of sacrifices (of sheep and cows) before and after a business transaction has been done, as a propitiatory victim and as a sacrifice of thanksgiving respectively. In a similar way, there is a famous example of a contemporary sacrifice of thanksgiving for a safe trip that is described in the tenth-century Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De Administrando Imperio*, which describes the curious rite that the Rus' merchants and warriors used to performed after having traversed the rapids of the river Dnieper on their way to the Black Sea and Constantinople:

> After traversing this place,[65] they reach the island called St. Gregory,[66] on which island they perform their sacrifices because a gigantic oak-tree stands there; and they sacrifice live cocks. Arrows, too, they peg in round about, and others bread and meat, or something of whatever each may have, as is their custom. They also throw lots regarding the cocks, whether to slaughter them, or to eat them as well, or to leave them alive.[67]

Among the West Slavs it is attested in the twelfth-century Helmold's *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 6) the compulsory offering that was imposed on foreign merchants, who had to offer a portion of the most valuable part of their merchandise to the god Sventovit of Arkona on the island or Rügen, if they wanted to trade with its inhabitants, the Rugiani or Rani.[68] Even the request of a human sacrifice is reported after a satisfactory fishing expedition and trade made in November a few years before Helmold wrote his chronicle (II, 108), when the foreign merchants who had come to the island of Rügen on account of the herring are said to have been asked to pay a tribute to the god Sventovit that consisted of the life of a Christian priest.[69] Helmold tells how they refused to pay the tribute and managed to escape with the priest safe and sound during the night. Moreover, in the *Dialogue on the Life of St. Otto of Bamberg* (III, 24),[70] written by the monk Herbord in the

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64 Montgomery, "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah," 9–11.

65 The ford of *Vrar* on the river Dnieper.

66 The modern island of Khortytsia, belonging to the city of Zaporizhia (Ukraine).

67 For the English translation, see Moravcsik and Jenkins, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: De Administrando Imperio*, vol. 1, 61. For a commentary on the passage, see Jenkins, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: De Administrando Imperio*, vol. 2, 54–56.

68 Tschan, *The Chronicle of the Slavs by Helmold, Priest of Bosau*, 61.

69 Tschan, *The Chronicle of the Slavs by Helmold, Priest of Bosau*, 276.

70 Köpke, *Herbordi Dialogus*, 139.

twelfth century, the description of the murder of a heathen priest from the city of Wolin, one of the fierce enemies of St. Otto, who was strangled with a rope while being tied to a tree on an island by some merchants and sailors on a trade trip, could be interpreted as a ritual human sacrifice made by the latter to ensure successful trade and a safe journey, rather than as a divine punishment as it was understood by Herbord.[71]

Healing

"Illness is the irregularity which disrupts the regularity of daily life. It is the disorder of being in the very circumstances of life's existence, and strikes without warning. This is how Sinhalese understand the demonic."[72]

Likewise, the Slavs conceived illness as a chaotic anomaly that could be regularized, restoring the natural order of health by employing the proper ritual. They even personified disease in different evil creatures, such as the demon called *Triasca*,[73] which is mentioned in the East Slavic *Sermon of the Holy Father Moses on blasphemy and oaths*, written in the context of the twelfth-century Novgorodian Church. It says as follows:

> Similarly and other like misdeeds: making sacrifices to demons, curing illness with charms and knotted cords,[74] and believing they expel the weak demon called *Trjasca* with certain false writings, by inscribing the names of accursed Hellene demons on apples and putting [them] on the holy altar during the liturgy and then terrify themselves with fear of confrontation by angels; […] But we continue to do the same, and adhere to the sins that the Lord God prohibits largely through his saints, and does not allow disease to be cured by charms, nor knotted cords, nor by seeking demons, […][75]

This would be one of the oldest mentions of *Triasca*, one of the female demons of fever that is to be found among the so-called *Triasavitsy* (shaking fevers), personified in the figure of the 12 daughters of Herod in the East Slavic folk religion, as has already been studied by Ryan.[76] In popular legends, spells[77] or prayers against fevers were associated with King David, St. Tikhon, St. Pafnutii or St. Sisinnius, whose name was invoked and written in amulets in order to fight the fevers, as in some amulets found among the Novgorodian birchbark letters.[78] Those spells could be both prophylactic and curative.

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71 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 146.

72 Kapferer, *A Celebration of Demons: Exorcism and the Aesthetics of Healing in Sri Lanka*, 235.

73 From the Church Slavonic verb *triasti* (to shake): Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 248.

74 *Nauzy* in the Church Slavonic original. This seems to be a special type of talisman, a knotted cord worn round the neck or on the wrist to ward off sickness and evil spirits.

75 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 342.

76 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 244–50.

77 For East Slavic spells or *zagovory* against fevers, see Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 172–73; Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 49.

78 Casas Olea, "San Sisinio y Sichael: los amuletos en corteza de abedul como fuente sobre la magia bizantinoeslava," 273–84.

As it is reported by Ryan,[79] the Slavonic version of the story of St. Sisinnius appeared already in an eleventh-century Glagolitic prayer book or *Euchologion* that was later condemned in a fourteenth-century Russian list of forbidden books, because of both its pagan and Bogomil[80] elements.

In the former excerpt, three methods are described for curing fevers: making sacrifices, saying charms and wearing *nauzy* (knotted cords) in East Church Slavonic. Moreover, it is described how the East Slavs wrote down the names of "Hellene demons," that is, "heathen gods," on apples, putting them on the altar of the church during the liturgy. Similar techniques can be found in the fifteenth-century *Polish Sermons* (Fol. 142 b), where the following list of popular remedies for different illnesses is included:

> (144) Some heal tooth pain by writing certain words and (145) symbols with clay or in other ways, or some who by nailing a nail into a stick they believe they heal, when they are making people sick, and believe that they can offer a medicine while they are plaguing souls. Some, to heal certain headaches that are called *vrzeczyene*,[81] lick with their tongue the forehead of he who suffers from the illness, adding some words. There are many who seem to heal different fevers, some *inub'o*,[82] and others with different words and acts, whenever they hear someone is suffering from them. Some write certain things on a piece of fruit or on wafers and give it to the sick person, others on a piece of papyrus, others do not allow fevers to be named in their presence, but allow many other evil and sordid things; the faith of all of these individuals is hollow, for they seek medicine that comes from an apostate, not from the wisdom of God. […] There are some who say that they cure a disease that they call *myara*[83] by measuring a man or his head with a thread, and they say that it happens with this disease and others that resemble it, when however they disregard other things that they do not know: this error is completely ridiculous, as the body's illness is not expelled with a thread, but rather with true things and remedies. […] Others attempt to cure the diseases called *nogecz*[84] or *vrasz*[85] with hollow words that are full of trickery, saying that God had given them this virtue of words, but these wretched individuals do not know to whom, as, what saint has taught them this, if not the maker and master of the thousand tricks? I recognize that the Sunday prayer or the Annunciation to the Virgin can be said as a symbol, whenever providing and giving to someone a medicine; however, this should be done with care, so that there is no occasion for superstition.[86]

Among them, the custom of writing certain words on some fruits or on wafers and giving them to the sick persons in order to heal fevers reminds us very much of the method of writing the names of heathen gods on apples and "consecrating" them during the

79 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 246.

80 Bogomilism was a dualist heresy that emerged in the Balkans between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, and which takes its name from the legendary Bulgarian priest Bogomil.

81 This word means "fever," not "headache."

82 The term *inub'o* does not seem to be Slavic, cfr. perhaps the Latin *inūber* (skinny).

83 Cf. Polish *miara* (measurement).

84 "Foot pain."

85 Possibly a type of fever.

86 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 238–39.

mass that was attested in the East Slavic *Sermon of the Holy Father Moses on Blasphemy and Oaths*. Likewise, in question 11 of Chapter 5 of the *Stoglav*, the practice of writing a name spell on the communion bread to protect the health of the named person is condemned.[87] In addition to this, the remedy of curing some illnesses by measuring a man with a thread is very similar to the practice mentioned in the fourteenth-century *Sermon by the Holy Father Cyril, Archbishop of Cyprus, on Evil Souls* (fol. 234v.), according to which old women were called to heal children by tying knotted cords to them and taking measures everywhere:

> They use knotted cords to deceive many of the faithful. [The woman] starts by tying children with knots,[88] taking measures around all sides while spitting on the ground saying that she is cursing the devil, and that invokes him even more, [saying that] she is doing it to cure the children, but she is taking the father and mother to the abyss of hell, with their souls going into eternal torment.[89]

In another East Slavic text, the *Three Sanctifying Instructions for the Clergy and Lay Persons on Various Matters of Ecclesiastical Discipline*, the quack doctor who made those knotted cords was called *uzolnik*.[90]

Therefore, very similar healing methods were found among both the East and West Slavs. Regarding the South Slavs, we have a few references to remedies associated with pre-Christian rites. For instance, in answer 79 of the *Responsa Nicolai ad consulta Bulgarorum*,[91] Pope Nicholas I condemned the custom among the Bulgarians of making the sick wear a binding around their neck in order to be cured,[92] which coincides with the *nauzy* (knotted cords) of the East Slavs. In addition, in the same work, answer 62 mentions the belief in healing through a stone that was found in Bulgaria.[93] Finally, chapter 13 of the fourteenth-century *Life of St. Theodosius of Tărnovo*, written by Patriarch Callistus of Constantinople, relates how a mysterious monk from Constantinople called Theodoretus induced the inhabitants of Tărnovo, in Bulgaria, to worship an oak tree, from which they believed to obtain healing by offering to it the sacrifice of sheep and lambs.[94] He could have here a specific allusion to the offering of sacrifices to be cured, as

87 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 19, 171.

88 We have translated the word *nauz'* as "knot" and "knotted cord" unlike Ryan, who prefers to use "amulet." Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 222. Nevertheless, he acknowledges in a note that it is the equivalent of the Latin term *ligatura*, a magical technique consisting in tying knots. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 256n40.

89 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 370.

90 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 413n388.

91 The answers of Pope Nicholas I to the Bulgarian prince Boris I on the teachings and the discipline of the church, that were sent in a letter in 866.

92 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 59.

93 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 58.

94 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 254–55.

was mentioned in an abstract way in the East Slavic *Sermon of the Holy Father Moses on Blasphemy and Oaths*.

Finally, according to Ryan,[95] blood sacrifices could be required during the extremely interesting rite of *opakhivanie* or *opashka* that was practised in central and southern Russian provinces in order to protect a village from a plague or epidemic by ploughing round the place.[96] Unfortunately, we can find no written allusions to this in the earliest sources.

95 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 171–72.

96 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 15, 48–49, 110.