

Chapter 4

MILITARY RITUALS

WE HAVE SEVERAL testimonies about the military rituals practised among the pre-Christian Slavs. There are two reasons for this. On the one hand, the Slavs inherit the Indo-European tradition of military expansion; on the other, from the ninth century onwards, the West Slavs in particular suffer intense military pressure from the surrounding Christian powers, resulting in greater emphasis on the militarization of their way of life, which includes all aspects of their religious life. It has been emphasized that many divinities that were originally transfunctional or belonged to areas not strictly military are “militarized” in this period.¹

The primary function of military rituals is the cohesion of the population to which they are addressed. This entails designing a series of ritual gestures of a religious nature with the intention of promoting the success of the military campaign to be launched, giving confidence to the combatants, or ensuring that the return of the army to civilian life will not involve any kind of ritual pollution or impurity.²

Rituals before Combat

In general, pre-war preparation involves some kind of preparatory ritual like rites of passage, which allow those enlisted for combat to realize that they are leaving behind their civilian role to focus solely on their military duties; military vows or consecration of the troops would be part of this group.

One of the oldest testimonies we have about the pre-Christian Slavic religion tells us about these military vows: Procopius of Caesarea was born at the end of the fifth century and died in the middle of the sixth. After becoming a rector, in 527 he became secretary and legal adviser (*adsector*) of Belisarius, the general of Emperor Justinian, with whom he participated in the wars against the Persians, the vandals and the Ostrogoths. This provided him with first-hand information about the events, which he used to write a masterpiece, *De bello Gothico*, in eight books, which constitutes the key historical source of the knowledge of his time. Procopius of Caesarea's *De bello Gothico* 3.14.22–30³ tells us how to try to ward off fear of death in combat by means of a vow, which entails a substitutionary sacrifice in which “the victim offered in the sacrifice dies, but not me”: “When death is on their heels, whether they get sick or are getting ready for war, they promise that if they survive, they will immediately make a sacrifice to God in

1 Campanile, “La religione degli Slavi e dei Balti,” 595.

2 Pritchett, *The Greek State at War*, 109–117.

3 Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis Opera Omnia*, vol. 2.

exchange for their life and, once they are free, they sacrifice whatever they have at hand and believe they have bought their salvation through that sacrifice.”⁴

Simultaneously, preparatory rituals must build a cohesive society, so military oracles will assume great importance. This is possibly the ritual aspect we know best about West Slavs, probably because Christian chroniclers were impressed by its strong predictive content, which they logically could not have.

Obtaining oracles and divine rituals before going to war is very well evidenced in the texts that inform us about pre-Christian Slavic religion. We learn about rituals of a cohesive nature in which combatants are assured about the battle through general guessing like “will the military expedition succeed? Yes/No,” or “what are the best dates to go to battle?”

The oldest text referring to these practices can be found in question 35 of the *Responses of Pope Nicholas I to the Questions of the Bulgars*,⁵ which is a key to understanding the Christianization of Bulgaria in the ninth century and how difficult it was for followers of a highly ritualized pre-Christian Slavic religion to understand Christianity:

You have told us what you used to do when you went to battle, like the augural observation of days and hours, the enchantments, the festivities, the songs and the auguries. And you want to be instructed on what you have to do from now on: we will tell you what we need, unless we also see that you are divinely inspired. [...] The things you celebrated, that is, the augural observation of days and hours, the enchantments, the festivities, the wicked songs and the auguries are pretentious and the work of the devil.⁶

The oracles can be specifically oriented towards the marching of the army or predict a war scenario to prepare the population for what is to come. Although we study it in detail in the chapter on fertility rituals, we must remember that the oracular lake of Glomuzi, which Thietmar of Merseburg mentions in his *Chronicon* 1.3, predicted not only situations of prosperity but also the time of war, full of blood and ash:

Glomuzi is a fountain located no more than two miles from the Elbe that forms a lake⁷ where miracles often take place, which is true according to the local inhabitants and is proven by the eyes of many. When there is going to be peace for the locals and the earth does not lie about its fruits, the place fills up with wheat, oats and acorns and gladdens the spirits of the residents who often gather there. But when the cruel time of war ensues, it anticipates the true indication of the future outcome with blood and ash.⁸

4 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 23–24.

5 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Las respuestas del Papa Nicolás I a las consultas de los búlgaros*.

6 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 56.

7 Poltzcher Lake.

8 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 68–69.

Thietmar *Chronicon* 6.24. refers to another oracular lake, where the temple of Riedegost was located, one of the most important for the Slavs according to Ślupecki,⁹ where a wild boar appeared when a new period of war was announced:

Since ancient times, a different error has been transmitted, stating that when the cruel misfortune of a confrontation threatens them, a large wild boar with white fangs shines through the foam of this lake, rolling in the dust and appearing terribly agitated.¹⁰

The oracle that predicts the success of a more widespread military enterprise among the Slavs is emitted through the behaviour of a horse devoted to divinity. We will look at this same type of oracle to confirm the votive offerings made after the battle at the temple of Riedegost, according to Thietmar's testimony, but a prognosis to predict the success or failure of a military campaign is very well described for the temple of Szczecin, as one of St. Otto's biographers, Herbord, tells us in detail in *Dialogue on the Life of St. Otto of Bamberg*¹¹ 33:

Because they had a large shiny black and very fiery horse. Throughout the year he would lounge around and was considered to be such a sacred character that no rider was allowed to ride him and he was diligently guarded by one of the four priests of the temple. Thus, when they thought about launching a land campaign against the enemies, or looting, they would determine the future of the company through this in the following way: nine lances were placed on the ground, alternately separated by the space of one elbow. Thus, after the priest responsible for the horse would saddle him and lead him three times by the bridle alone through the spears on the ground. And if the horse moved without stumbling or stepping on the spears, they would continue with the venture as they saw this as a sign of prosperity and safety. Otherwise, they would abandon [the venture]. In short, this type of prophecy and other calculations made with wood, which were used to examine auguries in case of naval combat or piracy, although closely observed by some, was totally eliminated [by St. Otto] with the help of God.¹²

The ability of horses to predict the future of a military company is witnessed in other Indo-European cultures. The best known case is that of Xanthos, Achilles' horse that predicts his tragic destiny in *Il.* 19.405–418. Among the Germans, the oracular capacity of the sacred white horses, not mounted by any human being, is described very well by Tacitus, *Germania* 10, who claims that the Germans considered the sacred horses to be confidants of the gods.

The oracular horses of the Slavs were mounted only by the divinity,¹³ in this case by the god Triglav, as we are told by the third biographer of St. Otto, the Anonymous Monk of Prüfening, *Life of St. Otto, Bishop of Bamberg*¹⁴ 2.11 and were subject to a taboo against tampering. Other Indo-European traditions in which gods ride horses are related in West.¹⁵

⁹ Ślupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*, 51–69.

¹⁰ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 72–73.

¹¹ Kōpke, *Herbordi Dialogus*.

¹² Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 138.

¹³ Dumézil offers parallels to this belief that God rode the sacred horse. Dumézil, *Le problème des centaures: Étude de mythologie comparée indoeuropéenne*, 34–36; 155–93.

¹⁴ Kōpke, "Vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis," 883–903.

¹⁵ West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 152.

Szczecin's horse is black, while Arkona's sacred horse, which serves the same purpose, is white, like the clothes of the priests who took care of him. The oracular capacity of the Arkona temple for military affairs is already announced by Helmold of Bosau, *Chronica Slavorum* 1.36.

Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*¹⁶ 39.2–13 tells us in detail the ritual of obtaining auguries that was performed in the temple of Arkona before the battle:

In addition to this, he owned his own white horse; cutting the hairs on its mane or tail was considered a bad omen. Only a single priest was allowed to feed and mount it, so that the use of the divine animal would not be considered less valuable if it were mounted more frequently. According to Rügen, it was believed that this was the horse used by Sventovit—this was the name of the idol—to wage a war against the enemies of his cults. The most important argument in support of this was that, when he was to remain in the stable all night, he would often appear in the morning covered in sweat and mud, as if he was returning from a long ride. Through this same horse, auguries were also obtained in this way: when they felt it was a good time to start a war against a region, the servants placed a triple row of spears in front of the sanctuary. Every two spears, united in a cross, would have their tips driven into the ground in any of these rows to divide them into spaces of equal dimensions. When the time had come to begin the expedition, the priest gave a solemn prayer, brought the harnessed horse before them from the porch and, if it were to cross all the rows in front of it with the right foot before the left foot, this would be seen as a good omen of war; if, on the contrary, it were to use its left foot before its right even once, the decision to take the region would change, and no navigation would be considered safe before seeing three tracks followed by favourable steps.¹⁷

In the first book of his *Chronica Bohemorum*,¹⁸ written between 1119 and 1125, Cosmas of Prague left us a description of the mythical origins of the kingdom of Bohemia strongly influenced by classical sources. In that sense, critics have long debated the reliability of Cosmas' oral sources or their eminently literary character.¹⁹ In the context of his narration of the struggle between bohemians and fighters, whose aim is to be a parallel to the fighting between Trojans and Latins of Virgil's *Aeneid*, he describes an oracle before the campaign and a ritual sacrifice of an ass of doubtful historicity. This is how it is narrated by Cosmas of Prague in *Chronica Bohemorum* 1.11:

But as it always happens, unfaithful men have a tendency towards evil, when strength and good offices are lacking, to the point that they are oriented towards the worst possibilities of depravity. These people were inevitably devoted to pagan cults, in addition to being credible to liars, in despair of their strength and their soldiers' weapons, so they turn to a fortune teller, consult her and beg her to tell them what needs to be done in such a crisis or what events the future of the war will hold. Since she was full of divinatory ability, she did not keep them long in the ambiguous uncertainty of words; she said: "If you want to win the battle, you must first follow the command of the gods. Therefore,

¹⁶ Christiansen, *Saxo Grammaticus Books X–XVI*: vol. 1.

¹⁷ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 187.

¹⁸ Bretholz, *Die Chronik der Böhmen des Cosmas von Prag*.

¹⁹ de Lazero, "The Dynastic Myth of the Přemyslids in the *Chronica Bohemorum* by Cosmas of Prague," 129–38.

sacrifice an ass to your gods so that they become your allies. Jupiter, the most important god, Mars himself, his sister Bellona and Ceres' son-in-law²⁰ want this offering made." A miserable ass is immediately sought, killed and, as ordered, divided up into thousands of pieces and, before you know it, the whole army eats it. Cheered up from eating the ass—something similar to a prodigy!—you could then see happy battalions and men willing to die like wild boars.²¹

The practice of consulting oracles before combat prevails even after Christianization. A very interesting text preserved in the *Cronicon Montis Sereni*, for the Latin name of Lauterberg, which narrates events between the date of the founding of the Augustinian monastery of Petersberg in 1124 and that of 1209, tells us in an entry made in 1209 that the Duke of the Poles, Władysław III Spindleshanks (1202–1206, 1227–1228) had: "a fortune teller who drew water from the river with a sieve and did not drain it, so they say, and carrying that water, preceded the army, which was a sign that promised them a victory."²²

The divine capacity of women is based on the wonder of drawing water with a sieve, which is impossible, but confirms, as in other historical moments of the different processes of Christianization, that the survival of the pre-Christian religion is preserved through minor ritualized gestures and privileged by the female population, away from power, or by the lower classes. Despite this, the first thing that the Margrave Conrad II of Landsberg (1159–1210) does after defeating the Poles is kill the fortune teller.

The method of divination of the fortune teller reminds the legend of the Vestal Virgin Tuccia: when she was accused of the *crimen incesti* (incest crime), she asked to prove her innocence by the ordeal of carrying water from the river Tiber to the temple of Vesta using a sieve without draining a single drop.²³ The bronze sieve was a ritual object that had the purpose of carrying the sacred fire of Vesta. This legend appeared as connected with the myth of the Danaids, who were punished to the afterlife torment of carrying water in a sieve for eternity.²⁴ However, the Danaids, unlike the Vestal Tuccia or the Slavic fortune teller, were not successful in their task and their punishment was linked to other torments in the Greek Hades in which the effort has never a reward, as for example the well-known punishment of Sisyphos.

The connection between the myth of Tuccia and the method of divination of the Slavic fortune teller seems to be the success in an impossible task, in this case to carry water in a leaky recipient, and that would be the irrefutable evidence of something: either the victory in a military campaign or the innocence of a serious crime. In their turn, the continuous failure of the Danaids is related to other ritual manifestations of failure as

20 Pluto.

21 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 98.

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

23 Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 28.3; Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* 8.1.5.11; Dionysus of Halicarnase, *Ant. Rom.* 2.69.1.

24 Hyginus, *Fabulae* 168.

embedded into the same symbol: Pausanias²⁵ tells that there existed in Delphi a painting of Polygnotus of Thasos which represented women carrying broken jars and symbolized women without having received the initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries.

Rituals during Combat

The armies needed to march under some kind of protective ritual that gave them confidence. The oldest testimony we find of a military idol is in Response 33 of the *Responses of Pope Nicholas I to the Consultations of the Bulgars*, where we are informed of the existence of a sacred military emblem consisting of a horsetail. Whether the origin of this emblem is Proto-Bulgarian (not Indo-European) or not, it does not affect the whole of this study, because at the time when Pope Nicholas I wrote to Prince Boris-Mikhail I of Bulgaria, the Slavization of the Bulgarians was practically complete. The horsetail was a sacred symbol of protection for the Bulgarians, as shown by the fact that the pope proposes the cross to replace it: "You said that when you used to go to battle you would carry the horsetail as a military emblem, and still do, and ask what you take with you instead. What better than the sign of the Holy Cross?"²⁶

The existence of sacred banners is also confirmed by a later testimony, the letter that St. Bruno of Querfurt sent to Emperor Henry II in 1008 to ask the king to break his alliance with the pagan Lutici, make peace with Duke Bolesław I of Poland and return to an active policy of support for missionary work before the Slavs: "What common front do the Sacred Spear and the diabolical standards, which feed on human blood, have in common?"²⁷

The Sacred Spear is one of the relics that was believed to be the authentic spear of Longinus that, according to John 19, 34, pierced Christ's side on the cross; by this time it had become a symbol of Germanic royalty. It is currently kept in the Schatzkammer in Vienna; in medieval times a nail from Christ's crucifix was attached. Bruno of Querfurt's comparison between this sacred symbol and the standards of the pagan Slavs allows us to assume the existence of sacred banners that ritually accompanied the Slavs in campaign.

The sacred banners were kept in the temple, as we were informed by Thietmar of Merseburg *Chronicon* 6.23, in the temple of Riedegost: "The banners of all of them [the pagan gods] are never moved from there, unless they are needed for a military campaign and even so only by foot soldiers."²⁸

The banners are the symbol of the gods that precede the people in arms, according to the same source, Thietmar, *Chronicon* 6.22, when he recounts how Henry II became an

²⁵ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 10.31.9.

²⁶ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 56.

²⁷ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 66.

²⁸ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 72.

ally of the Lutici, which joined the imperial army in 1005: "After this, the Lutici joined us the day before they reached the Oder River, following their gods that preceded them."²⁹

The military divinities of the banners could be female, according to the details Thietmar gave us in *Chronicon* 7.64, in the context of the campaigns between Bolesław I of Poland and Emperor Henry II in 1017. The Lutici, allies of the emperor, suffered a defeat that is accompanied by a sacrilege of one of their sacred banners:

But when the Lutici returned, they were angry and looking to provide reparation to their goddess. Since the latter, represented on their banners, had been pierced by a stone thrown by a vassal of Marquis Hermann; when his assistants regretfully told the emperor about this, they received twelve gifts in compensation. And when they wanted to cross the Vltava River, which was very swollen, near the city of Vurcin,³⁰ they lost another goddess³¹ along with a select company of fifty soldiers.³²

The tutelary banner of the city of Arkona was called *Stanica*, according to Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* 14.39.15 and not only accompanied the armies in campaign but also dispensed inviolability to their bearers:

They were so confident about this work that the tower that was located above the door was only protected with signs and banners. Among these was *Stanica*,³³ standing out for its size and colour, which the Rugian people venerated just as much as the greatness of almost all the gods together. Since, by carrying it in front of them, they had the power to transgress human and divine law, and they considered that nothing they wanted to do was illegal: they could devastate cities, demolish altars, put divine law and sin on the same level, cast all the houses of Rügen into ruin or into flames, and there was so much trust in superstition that the authority of a small piece of cloth was superior to the strength of true power. They honoured the one who struck himself with the banner, as if it were an almost divine sign, compensating damages with services, and injuries with gifts.³⁴

Again, we find sacred banners in the narration of one of the biographers of the Pomeranian evangelist, St. Otto of Bamberg, more specifically Ebbo, who composed his *Life of St. Otto, Bishop of Bamberg*³⁵ between 1151 and 1159. The banners do not appear in military service in the *Life of St. Otto* 3.3.

Therefore, [St. Otto] after asking for his blessing [the archbishop of Magdeburg, Norbert], the next day he went to the diocese of Havelberg, which, at that time was so ravaged by the frequent incursions of the pagans that only meagre remains of the Christian name

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

30 In modern German, it is the city of Wurzen.

31 It must be assumed that this is another sacred banner.

32 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 74.

33 The name of this sacred banner seems to be related to the Polish word *stanica* (banner).

34 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 189.

35 Köpke, "Vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis," 822–82.

were to be found in it. On the same day of his arrival, the city, full of banners of such an idol called Gerovit, celebrated a feast in his honour.³⁶

This god Gerovit may be the transcription into medieval Latin of a Slavic theonym, Jarovit, the guardian deity of Wolgost. A primitively solar and fertility value is usually attributed to this divinity, which would be confirmed by the round and brilliant iconography of a golden shield, such as Ebbo describes to us in *Life of St. Otto* 3.8:

But a clergyman called Dietrich, who had already gone before them and had approached the doors of the temple itself, not knowing where to go, boldly broke into the same sanctuary. Seeing the gold shield consecrated to Gerovit, who was the god of his army, hanging on the wall, which was illegal to touch, he grabbed it and came out to face his men. And these men were such simpletons that they thought it was the god Gerovit who appeared before them and, stunned, they backed away and fell to the ground.³⁷

A similar story also appears in Herbord, *Dialogue on the Life of Saint Otto of Bamberg* 3.6 specifying that the shield of God was carried by Wolgost's armies to all battles to guarantee victory. Both the Gerovit shield and the oracular horses that can only be mounted by the invisible divinity are subject to the taboo against tampering.

There would have been a transfer of duties to an eminent warrior because of the difficult circumstances to which the West Slavs would be subjected. This scenario would confirm the etymology of the name: Jarovit would be an epiclesis formed by the well-known adjectival suffix *-ovit* (cf. Sventovit) and ael. *jarǫ* (spring): it would therefore be the refreshing spring sun.

Possible, although of doubtful historical authenticity, is the magical ritual destined to separate the invisible tethers that tie together the legs of the Lutici combatants' horses, literary parallels of the Latins, who fight against the Bohemians, equivalent to the Trojans, according to Cosmas of Prague, *Chronica Bohemorum* 1.11. The truth is that the ritual described makes sense from our knowledge of sympathetic magic, because we know that tying and untying is a recurring magical activity, but the strongly rhetorical character of the text makes us doubt its information:

Meanwhile, a certain woman, one of the Eumenides,³⁸ when calling her stepson, who was about to leave for war, said: "Although it is not usual for stepmothers to behave well with their stepchildren, I do not forget the relationship I had with your father:

I will make you cautious so you can live, if you want.

He knows that the vampires and the wraiths of the Bohemians have defeated our Eumenides with their enchantments so, seeing as our men are all dead, the victory will be for the Bohemians.

36 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 124.

37 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 126–27.

38 The term *Eumenides* is used by Cosmas in a general way to define any priestly role assigned to women. He also uses it to define the three daughters of Krok (*Chronica Bohemorum* 1, 4). The source of this designation is Virgil: Virgil, *Aeneid* VI 280; 6 374–75; Kras, *Kultura antyczna w kronikach Anonima zwanego Gallem i Kosmasa z Pragi*, 108.

So that you can escape this disaster.

When you kill an enemy in the first fight, cut off both his ears and put them in your bag, take out your sword and use it to make the figure of the cross on the ground between your horse's legs. By doing this you will unleash the invisible bonds through which your horses lose their strength, bound by the wrath of the gods, and fall, as if they were exhausted after a long journey; then jump on the horse and, even if an invincible fear assails you, do not look back but ride away quickly and you will thus be the only one to escape alive. Because the gods who went with you to combat, turned their backs on you to help your enemies."³⁹

The ritualization of aspects of combat can affect the way prisoners of war are treated. Procopius *De bello Gothico* 3.38.17–23 tells us in great detail how the Slavs acted in the sixth century with conquered populations. In principle, his description calls our attention to the cruelty of the Slavic invaders, who do not take prisoners of war but exterminate the entire population. However, the strongly ritualized character of their behaviour seems to conceal a way of acting that is characteristic of a military ritual: enemies must be exterminated following a meticulous execution procedure, which has more to do with human sacrifices than with pure military combat needs:

They killed those they encountered not with the sword or the spear or with any of the usual methods but, ramming stakes firmly into the ground and sharpening them as much as possible, sat the poor victims on top of them with much force, inserting the point of the stakes between their buttocks up until the entrails of the men in question, as they believed this was the right way to execute them. Likewise, these Barbarians stuck four thick pieces of wood into the ground and tied the hands and feet of the prisoners to them, and then struck them ceaselessly on the temples with maces thus putting an end to them like dogs, snakes or other beasts. Others they shut into their huts along with the cows and sheep they could not take back with them and there they burned them without mercy. Thus did the Sclaveni kill all those they encountered.⁴⁰

Rituals after Combat

An essential aspect of group cohesion maintained with the help of special rituals lies in the behaviour of those killed in combat. Warriors have to go to battle knowing that if they die there, the funeral rites of their society must be guaranteed.⁴¹ The guarantees of dignified treatment for those killed in combat are firmly preserved in other Indo-European traditions: as Krentz⁴² notes, the Greeks took the recovery of corpses and the ritual treatment of the dead very seriously; six Athenian generals were sentenced to death in 406 BCE for not having complied with that ritual obligation after the naval battle

³⁹ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 97–98.

⁴⁰ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 26. For an analysis of this ritual, see Luján, "Procopius, *De Bello Gothico* III 38.17–23: A Description of Ritual Pagan Slavic Slayings?," 105–12.

⁴¹ Pritchett, *The Greek State at War*, 96.

⁴² Krentz, "War," 212.

of the Arginusae. Like the Athenians,⁴³ the Slavs incinerated their dead after combat, as Leo the Deacon tells us in *History* 9.6. Leo was born in Caloe, in Asia Minor, around 950, but was educated in Constantinople, where he was ordained a deacon, as reflected by the nickname with which he is known. The year of his death is not known. The ten books of his *History*,⁴⁴ which he must have started writing in 992, cover the events that occurred during the reigns of Roman II, Nicephorus II, John Tzimiskes and the first years of the reign of Basil II, from 959 to 975, and it is unfinished.

At nightfall and under a full moon, they went out to the plain and carefully checked their own dead. After gathering them together in front of the city walls and setting many fires, they were cremated, slaughtering most of the prisoners, both men and women, as was customary in their homeland. As offerings to the dead, they drowned breastfeeding children and roosters in the Istro,⁴⁵ throwing them into the fast flowing river. In fact, it is said that, being subject to Greek mysteries, they made sacrifices and libations for the deceased in the Greek way, as they had been taught by their own philosophers⁴⁶ Anacharsis and Zalmoxis or by Achilles' companions.⁴⁷

There is archaeological evidence of these collective cremations, according to Barford.⁴⁸ This incineration was accompanied by human sacrifices in honour of fallen Homeric heroes, as Homer tells us (*Iliad* 23,179–193). Human sacrifices on the fallen may help us understand the testimony of cruelty transmitted by the aforementioned text of Procopius.

Brelich⁴⁹ postulated the existence of a distinction between human sacrifice, in which death is accompanied by the ritual offering to a divinity, and “ritual death,” which occurs after the fighting is over, where there is no mention of a divine recipient of the offering. However, those sacrificed after combat are killed instead of being already dead and have

⁴³ Krentz, “War,” 175.

⁴⁴ Karalis, *Λεών Διάκονος. Ιστορία*.

⁴⁵ Greek name of the Danube. The text transmits to us a military action in the area near the river mouth.

⁴⁶ As Leo identifies the Slavs with the Scythians, he quotes characters from the Scythian religious tradition. Anacharsis was a prince of Scythian origin who visited Athens, was a friend of Solon and dedicated himself to philosophy, as we were informed by Herodotus 4.46.76–77, Aristotle *APo.* 78b30 and Strabo 7.3.8, among other classic authors. Lucian of Samosata wrote a short work entitled *Anacharsis* about him. The reason he is mentioned here is that Herodotus narrates that he was responsible for introducing the Greek cults to the Mother of the Gods (Cybele) among the Scythians. Zalmoxis was a mythical character whose oldest reference is found in Herodotus 4.94–95, where he appears as a divinity to whom Thracians made a human sacrifice every five years by throwing a man onto three spears held by other men. Before the victim died, the message they wanted him to convey to the divinity was communicated, since he was considered a messenger.

⁴⁷ Reference to book XI of the *Odyssey* that narrates the descent of Odysseus to hell, where he finds Achilles and his companions, who inform him about life in Hades; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 42–43.

⁴⁸ Barford, *The Early Slavs*, 120.

⁴⁹ Brelich, “Symbol of a Symbol,” 200.

a similar function to that of votive offerings, in which a victim instead of a living person is offered, so these deaths should still be looked upon as human sacrifices in a ritual context.⁵⁰

Other times, the texts leave us doubting whether we are facing real human sacrifices in compensation for those killed in combat or bloody revenge. Thus, when Thietmar of Merseburg tells us in his *Chronicon* 4.13 that Boleslaw II of Bohemia (972–999) goes to war against Mieszko I of Poland (962–992) and becomes an ally of the Slavic tribe of the Lutici, who see death of the head of a conquered city as a human sacrifice:

From there he returned [Boleslaw] to a city called [...] ⁵¹ and, without the opposition of its inhabitants, he conquered it along with his superior and handed the latter over to the Lutici to behead. Immediately, [the Lutici] offer these sacrifices to the gods helping them before the city and everyone deals with the matter of their return.⁵²

The same goes for the killings of some Christians during the anti-Christian revolt from the Retharii of 1066. The fact that the head of Bishop John Scotus is offered to the divinity in the temple of Riedegost sanctifies an act of violence, as Adam of Bremen tells us in *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg* ⁵³ 3.51:

The ageing Bishop John, ⁵⁴ captured with other Christians in the city of Mecklenburg, was kept alive to be displayed in triumph. He was therefore beaten with whips for having confessed to Christ, then taken by each of the Slavic cities to be mocked, as he could not be made to deny his faith in Christ. After cutting off his hands and feet, his body was thrown into the street, but not before stripping it of its head, which the pagans nailed to a pike and offered to their god Redigost as proof of victory. These events occurred in Rethra, the Slavic capital, on the fourth day before the ides of November.⁵⁵

The news that the Slavic pagans sacrificed Christians becomes a topic skilfully used by German princes and bishops. In 1108, Adelgot, archbishop of Magdeburg, together with the bishops Albuino of Merseburg, Walram of Neuenburg, Hervig of Meissen, Hecil of Havelberg, Hartbroth of Brandenburg and a series of nobles from northern Germany, sent a letter ⁵⁶ begging for the support of their companions in the episcopate and the nobility from the rest of Germany, Flanders and France. The letter was based on the anti-Christian violence that had become widespread in Slavia after the murder of the Christian prince of the Obotrites, Godescalc (June 7, 1066) and was inspired by the

50 Bonnechère, *Le sacrifice humain en Grèce ancienne*, 13.

51 The manuscript leaves room for seven letters.

52 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 70.

53 Schmeidler, *Helmoldi presbyteri Bozoviensis cronica Slavorum*.

54 *Scholia* 81: "This John, who came to Saxony on a trip from Scotland, was kindly received by our archbishop, like everyone else, and not long afterwards he was sent to Slavia to Prince Gotescalc; in the days he lived with him they say he baptised many thousands of pagans."

55 November 10, 1066: Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 85.

56 Israel and Möllenberg, *Urkundenbuch des Erzstifts Magdeburg*, Nr. 193, 249–252.

principles of the First Crusade. The consequence of such an appeal was the meeting of a council in Merseburg to study the measures to be taken, which consisted of an expedition led by Lothair, Duke of Saxony, in the summer of 1110. This letter speaks of a divinity, Pripegala, which is not mentioned anywhere else, to which human sacrifices are offered within the context of a war against Christians:

The most fanatical among them [the pagan Slavs] say, every time they want to have fun at banquets, "our Pripegala—vehemently—wants heads, so sacrifices must be made." Pripegala, as they call him, is a shameless Priapus and Belphegor. Thus, after slaughtering Christians before the altars of their idols, they fill the craters with human blood and, screaming in a horrifying manner, they say: "Let's make this a day of joy, Christ has been defeated by the victorious Pripegala."⁵⁷

The etymology of the name Pripegala is much discussed. Brückner⁵⁸ proposed an etymology **pribyhvalō* "that increases his praise"; Boyer⁵⁹ makes it derive from common Slavic *piklō* "bitumen, tar," preceded by the preverb *pri-* so it would mean "the blackened" and would be related to the theonyms *Chernaglov* (Black Head) and that of the goddess *Siwa* (the Dark One). Loma⁶⁰ reconstructs a name **pribygolva*, which would come to mean "head hunter," and would be quite consistent with what is said about him in the letter from Archbishop Adelgot. The connection with Priapus and Belphegor is not proof of a sexual function of the Slavic divinity but is simply an *interpretatio romana* that is brought about by the phonetic proximity of the first and last syllable of both names.

In the temple of Riedegost, votive offerings were made after returning from combat, along the lines suggested by Procopius *De bello Gothico* 3.14.22–30. An oracular inquiry was conducted using the horse dedicated to the deity to find out which were the most convenient victims, according to Thietmar in *Chronicon* 6.25:

When they go to war they greet her and when they return successfully they honour her with votive offerings. A diligent inquiry is conducted through the fortunes and the enshrined horse, as stated above, to know which propitiatory victims must be offered to the gods by the priests.⁶¹

Thietmar *Chronicon* 6.24 describes in detail the oracular ritual that is performed with the horse, which not only has a military function, but is also an oracle of success/non-success applicable to any company that always served as an oracle of confirmation. The ritual described by Thietmar is consistent with those performed by other Indo-European traditions destined for chthonic divinities, for which a hole was dug (Lat. *mundus*); equally consistent with what we know of the Roman religion is the murmured prayer and the obligation of the priests to sit down, as also described in the *Iguvine Tables*.

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

58 Brückner, *Mitologia Slava*, 223.

59 Boyer, "Mitos eslavos y bálticos," 228.

60 Loma, *Prakosovo. Slovenski i indoevropski koreni srpske epike*.

61 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 73.

Priests are trained among the natives to guard these places closely. When they sacrifice something for the idols or placate their anger, they sit down, while the others remain standing and, muttering to one another in secret, digging the earth with a reverent tremor, in the very place where they cast lots and clarify their doubts. Afterwards, they cover it with green grass and, in a suppliant and humble manner, lead a horse that they look upon as the greatest and which they venerate as sacred, over two spears crossing each other and stuck in the ground; through this divine animal, a new omen is obtained over the previous lots used for previous investigations. And if the omen is identical in both operations, it is carried out; but if not, the saddened inhabitants immediately leave it.

We have already seen the use of a horse in the temples of Szczecin and Arkona to determine the success of the military company.

In addition to the rituals for the return, temples were also guaranteed the reception of some special offerings that were devoted to the temple and the tithe of the spoils of war. This custom that appears in other Indo-European cultures: Plutarch, *The Pythia's Prophecies* 401c provides a practical description of the booties of war enshrined in the sanctuary of Delphi in a very similar way to another of St. Otto's biographers, Herbord, *Dialogue on the Life of Saint Otto of Bamberg* 32 referring to the temple Szczecin: "According to ancestral customs, the captured booties and weapons of the enemies, as well as what was obtained from naval combats or land battles converge to this temple, pursuant to the law of tithing."⁶²

Like the Szczecin temple, the Arkona temple also received a very important part of the booty including precious metals, according to Helmold of Bosau, *Chronica Slavorum*⁶³ 1.36 and 1.38 and Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* 39.2–13.

Military Rituals during Peacetimes

Day-to-day peace was short-lived among the pre-Christian Slavs and the reasons for the outbursts could have multiple causes. One of them was the violation of the right to hospitality, considered a sacred duty for the Slavs;⁶⁴ moreover, the ritual purity of the population was ensured by the return of prisoners of war after the payment of a ransom or social insertion in terms of freedom, as the Emperor Maurice, *Strategikon* 11.4 tells us at the beginning of the seventh century (the text is adapted at the beginning of the tenth century by Emperor Leo VI, the Wise, *Tactics* 18.102–105). The *Strategikon* is a military training manual in 12 books⁶⁵ intended for middle commands that, in most of the preserved manuscripts, is attributed to Emperor Maurice (582–602). According to its account on the Slavs and their sacred hospitality, it says as follows:

They are pleasant and friendly with foreigners who are among them and alternate to take them safe and sound wherever they need to go, because if the guest is harmed in any

⁶² Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 137.

⁶³ Schmeidler, *Helmoldi presbyteri Bozoviensis cronica Slavorum*.

⁶⁴ Conte, *Les slaves*, 275–78.

⁶⁵ Dennis, *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*.

way due to the carelessness of the person protecting him, the person who entrusted the guest to him declares war on the latter, since he considers it a sacred duty to avenge the foreigner. Prisoners of war are not kept as slaves for an indefinite time, like the others, but are allowed to do as they see fit after a given time, whether they want to return to their land by paying a ransom or stay there as free people and friends.⁶⁶

When the Slavs are learning the culture and integrating into the cultural and economic life of the surrounding peoples, they look upon the slavery of prisoners of war as normal, and, for example, in the tenth century, Kiev becomes an important slave trading centre of commerce of slaves.⁶⁷

As we have already mentioned,⁶⁸ an important part of the rituals related to war but carried out in peacetime has to do with pacts and oaths, which could be made sacred following various types, all inherited from the Indo-European tradition. Saxo Grammaticus 14.25.2 tells us how Domborus, an ambassador of the Rugians, goes to the Danes in 1160 to ask for peace from Bishop Absalon, who is preparing a military campaign against them:

Absalom asked him to make an honest offer and he said he could throw a pebble into the water, as a form of guarantee. When the barbarians were going to make a treaty, for example, they would observe the rite of throwing a pebble into the water, saying that if they were to break the agreement, then they would perish, just as the stone would sink.⁶⁹

The custom of sanctioning an oath by throwing a stone seems well attested among Indo-Europeans. In this case, the act of throwing the stone is looked upon as the destiny of the one who breaks the oath, as the Roman negotiator before the Carthaginians says in Polybius 3, 25:

"If I sincerely swear I have done everything right; if I think or act differently, whilst others see that their homeland, their laws, their own life, their own temples and their own graves are safe, let me alone be expelled just as I now throw this stone." And uttering these words, he threw the stone.

Another interpretation, purely Slavic, is found in the ratification of the treaty of the year 985 between Vladimir I of Kiev and the Bulgarians: "there will be no peace between us when the stone begins to float and the hops to sink."⁷⁰ Sielicki⁷¹ relates it to the Indo-Iranian water and fire rites of the oath and guilt confirmation.

Another type of solemn oath is that which warriors make on their weapons, to which they somehow endow with animation and submit them as evidence not only that they will not be used against those who sign the pact but also that they will not

⁶⁶ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 30–31.

⁶⁷ Conte, *Les slaves*, 182–83.

⁶⁸ See Chapter 3 "Oaths and Pledges."

⁶⁹ Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 179.

⁷⁰ Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 96.

⁷¹ Sielicki, "Indo-Iranian Parallels of the Slavic Water Rites of the Oath and Guilt Confirmation Attested in Medieval Latin Accounts and Slavic Law Codes," 35–37.

defend properly if they violate the pact. This oath, which has Indo-European origins, as described by West,⁷² is preserved among the West Slavs, according to Cosmas of Prague, *Chronica Bohemorum* 1.10 in the oath that the Bohemian prince, Vlastislav, makes for Mars, Bellona and the hilt of his sword. Solemnly, the Rus' warriors who signed the first peace treaty⁷³ in 907 with the Byzantine emperors, Leo and Alexander, swear by their weapons, and by the gods, Perun and Veles, as stated by the *PVL*, col. 32. Similarly, in the second treaty of 912, the Rus' warriors swear by their weapons (*PVL*, col. 33). This oath on arms would have a clear parallel between the southern Slavs in number 67 of the *Responses* of Pope Nicholas to the consultations of the Bulgarians, according to which "whenever you decided to make someone swear an oath on any matter, you placed a sword in the middle and the oath was sworn on it."⁷⁴

The third treaty (*PVL*, col. 47–48), of 945, is more detailed and describes the self-exempting formula employed by pagan (non-baptized) Rus' warriors:

and if they are not baptised, they do not get help from God or from Perun, they do not defend themselves with their own shields, they die for their swords, their arrows and their other weapons, and they are slaves in this world and the next. And anyone from our country who violates it, be they a prince or any other, either baptised or not, who is not helped by God, who is a slave in this world and the next and who is torn apart by his own weapon.⁷⁵

Finally, the *PVL* presents the text of the peace treaty between Svyatoslav and the Byzantine emperors that was signed in 971, in which the gods Perun and Veles are cited once again as guarantors. It also includes the self-exemption formula of being killed by the weapons themselves and the threat of turning yellow like gold, maybe sick, thus violating the treaty.⁷⁶

72 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 463–64.

73 Šakhmatov already said that the treaty of 907 did not exist, but that it was inserted by the chronicler based on information from the treaty of 912, which did take place. Šakhmatov, *Neskol'ko zamečanii o dogovorakh s grekami Olega i Igora*, 69.

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

75 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 273.

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

