

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS a natural continuation of previous works arising from a number of research projects in which one of the co-authors was principal investigator and the other a member of the research team.¹ The goal of the projects was to identify and compile all available historical sources on Slavic pre-Christian religion, and to determine whether it was possible to reconstruct the religion from these sources. Slavic pre-Christian religion is at a disadvantage with respect to other religions of ancient Indo-European peoples: Slavs did not leave any direct written evidence of their religion. Like the other Indo-European peoples, their culture was originally non-literate, but in their case they did not adopt writing until they adopted Christianity. That is why the evidence which has reached us on their religion is all indirect, late and necessarily with an ideological bias, as it was produced within the framework of monotheistic religions, whether by Christian or Muslim authors.

This led us to reflect on whether it was possible to reconstruct this religion based on these materials. Of great use in this endeavour has been the compilation of historical sources on Slavic pre-Christian religion published recently by one of the authors of this monograph.² It constitutes the most complete compilation of historical sources so far. By comparing the evidence from these sources, it is possible to identify equivalent phenomena in the three zones of settlement of the Slavic peoples: the East, West and South Slavs. The evidence of these phenomena appearing in different authors from different periods argues in their favour. The problem arises when there is no coincidence or equivalence in the sources. Our observation has detected proportionally more parallelisms in the case of rites than myths.

The study of Slavic mythology faces the same methodological problems as any other aspect of Slavic pre-Christian religion.³ Basically, as there is no written record until Christianization, the Slavic peoples did not leave us directly any mythical stories. The evidence from historical sources is limited to only a few mentions of the names of gods, but the functions of each are barely explained. They have to be deduced through a comparison, first, of the historical references to gods among the different Slavic peoples, as well as between the gods of the latter and those of other peoples of the Indo-European

¹ Research projects: *Fuentes de la religión eslava precristiana* (BFF2003-04440, completed in 2007) and *La reconstrucción de la religión eslava precristiana. Los testimonios textuales y comparativos* (FFI2010-16220, completed in 2013). Moreover, this book has been published Open Access with the generous funding of the Institute for the Sciences of Religions of the Complutense University of Madrid (IUCRR).

² Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*.

³ See [Chapter 1](#).

family of languages and cultures. Second, the linguistic data, mainly the etymology of the theonyms and religious terms, have to be analyzed, as do the data from archaeology and folklore, though our analysis will be mainly philological. At times the differences in the names of the gods in the various geographical areas settled by the Slavs can also be due to religious taboo, which resulted in the faithful calling their gods by epithets, in order to avoid using their actual names. In short, we can say that the reconstruction of a common mythology for the whole Slavic area is much more difficult than that of other aspects of Slavic pre-Christian religion and rites.

As regards the rites, according to Rappaport,⁴ “no society is devoid of what a reasonable observer would recognise as ritual,” considering ritual “to be the social act basic to humanity.” This social dimension of the ritual was developed from the work of Émile Durkheim⁵ in which religion is analyzed as a set of beliefs and rituals, these being a dynamic and necessary part of the integration and consolidation of society. However, Durkheim’s dichotomy is difficult to apply in the case of ancient Indo-European religions, such as the Slavic one, where we know nothing or almost nothing about the beliefs, but at least we can know something about the rites. In fact, according to Dowden,⁶ in this type of religion the concept of “belief” is irrelevant, compared to ritual practice, which is what truly defines it and, ultimately, what creates patterns of regularity⁷ that allow regulating social interactions. It is perhaps this central aspect of rites in the social life of a community which makes them more recurrent and identifiable in the historical sources, and which is the reason why most evidence of them has come down to us, at times disguised behind popular traditions of folklore in the Christian period, sometimes even into today’s world.

Organizing a complete taxonomy of rituals is somewhat complicated.⁸ In this book, we have worked on some of those that seem most worthy of study within the field of pre-Christian Slavic religion or on which we have better materials. The selected rituals are grouped according to their purpose or function: fertility, elements of daily life, military activity and rituals related to death.

As we will see in this monograph, of particular importance for the Slavs are fertility rites and the cult of the dead, both of which are closely related to each other. Fertility and funerary rituals thus open and close the chapters of this book, [Chapters 2 and 5](#), as a kind of alpha and omega of the rites of Slavic pre-Christian religion. Between these two, the rest of the chapters are dedicated to the rites of everyday life ([Chapter 3](#)) and military rites ([Chapter 4](#)). We finally decided not to dedicate an exclusive chapter to divining rites, as they are widely represented in the rest of the chapters, particularly in [Chapters 3 and 4](#). [Chapter 4](#) in fact provides a profuse description of divining as practiced

⁴ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 31.

⁵ Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*.

⁶ Dowden, *European Paganism*, 167.

⁷ Stryker, *Symbolic Interactionism*, 53.

⁸ See a good example in Alexander “Ceremony,” 179–83.

by the ancient Slavs before combat, to discover the outcome of battles. Also, in [Chapter 2](#), which is dedicated to the fertility rituals, there is a description of various divining rites dedicated to predicting the result of annual harvests. In [Chapter 3](#), which is dedicated to the rituals of everyday life, we have included the rites of oaths and promises, divining rites related to throwing dice or interpreting omens, rites related to trade and travel, and those associated with curing illness. We have also included as a preliminary chapter an analysis of the methodological problems involved in reconstructing the Slavic pre-Christian religion, which we set out below.

