

# Interpretationes Slavicae: Some Early Mythological Glosses

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*The paper deals with three cases of a Slavic theonym standing as substitute for an ancient mythological name: Dajbog in NE Serbia for the Roman Aesculapius, originally perhaps for an autochthonous deity akin to Zalmoxis; Dažbbogъ (Old Russian form of the same name) in the Slavic translation of Malala's chronicle for the Greek Helios and Veles in West-Serbian toponymy for Apollo.*

In sources for Slavic religion and mythology a Greek or Latin theonym can be substituted for an indigenous name (*interpretatio graeca/latina*),<sup>1</sup> and in the popular tradition a Christian hagionym often takes the place of a Pre-Christian nomen sacrum (*interpretatio christiana*).<sup>2</sup> But the opposite is possible, too, what we call *interpretatio slavica*, namely, that in Slavic literature, folklore or topography a Slavic theonym stands as substitute for a foreign mythological name. We are not interested here in the late and purely literary substitutions of that kind, but merely in the cases in which such an interpretation seems to be early and authentic enough to represent a kind of gloss elucidating the very nature of a Slavic god. Although minimal, any information of this kind can be precious for a branch of knowledge lacking in the first-hand sources, such as the history of the old Slavic religion. A part of the pagan nomenclature was mediated to the Slavs through Christian texts, but they did not fail – shortly after having migrated to South-Europe and before being evangelized – to get a direct knowledge of some autochthonous pagan cults still not extinguished by the Church and to relate these mythological figures to their own deities. Let us examine here three examples of such mythological glosses.

## 1. Aesculapius : Dajbog

The Serbian phonetic form *Dajbog* corresponding to the Old Russian theonym *Dažbbogъ* seems to have originally designated the legendary “Silver King” (*Srebrni car*), who was believed to live inside a hill in Kučajna-mine (NE Serbia); *Dajbog* survives into these days as the name of this hill.<sup>3</sup> The Silver King shows some kobold-like traits, which could be German in origin, the silver-mine of Kučajna having been exploited by Saxon

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Cosmas from Prague (1045–1125) in his *Chronica Boemorum* I 10 lets the prince Vlastislav swear by *Mars* and *Bellona*, without citing Slavic names of these deities (Fontes 19).

<sup>2</sup> The most notorious example is Saint Elias as folklore substitute for the thunder-god Perun.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Čajkanović 1941, cap. VIII–IX. The traditions about the Silver King recorded in Kučajna between 1829 and 1910 are collected by Đorđević 1932.

miners in the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> However, the Silver King must have been more than a simple underground spirit. In his legends, as many as three successive layers are to be distinguished, the German one being the most recent one. The name *Dajbog* proves that the Saxons met on this place some older Serbian beliefs dating back to the first centuries after the migration of the Slavs into the Balkans. This pagan Slavic stratum was preceded by an ancient one: *Dajbog* “Giver of the riches” seems to have succeeded here to a divine  $\pi\lambda\upsilon\tau\omicron\delta\omicron\tau\eta\varsigma$  akin to the Greek-Roman Pluto. A legend from Kučajna<sup>5</sup> recalls the descent of Persephone to Hades: once upon a time, there was in Kučajna a pretty girl who used to gather wild flowers, especially immortelle (serb. *smilje*) and for that reason people gave her the name *Smiljana*. As she was once gathering flowers in the mountain, Smiljana found a silver shrub sprouting from the ground; while trying to pick it, the girl discovered under its root silver stairs leading into the underworld.<sup>6</sup> Guided by an old dwarf named *Kuč* (thus eponymous of *Kučajna*), having passed through many corridors with silver walls and having crossed many silver bridges over underground rivers, Smiljana came to a sea surrounded by silver trees. In the middle of that forest stood the castle of the Silver King. *Kuč* introduced the girl to the lord of the castle. The Silver King appeared to her as a young man of unequalled beauty. He invited Smiljana to dinner: never before had she seen such a sumptuous table. She spent the night there with the king; in the morning he asked her to stay with him as his queen. At first the young girl turned him down; she said she could not be happy in that luxury, as long as her people on earth suffered from poverty. Then the Silver King promised to her that he would make men happy by giving them his silver to dig, and she accepted his proposal on the condition that he let her go to say good-bye to her parents. *Kuč* led the girl back to the sunlight; before leaving the underworld she received from him instructions for the future miners. Smiljana set off for her home through the forest, breaking off branches to mark the way back. However, in the valley under the mountain where till a day ago her village lay there was not a house left, not even a single trace of it, but only a deserted field grazed by sheep. Astounded, she asked the shepherds about the village, but they did not even know its name. The most they could help her was to send her to an old woman lighting candles at an empty grave on the neighbouring hill. Yes, she answered Smiljana, her grandmother told her, that long ago there used to be a village of that name in this place, and a beauty named Smiljana in it; one day she disappeared in the mountain and after a futile quest her parents dug this grave to her and lighted candles on it till they died. In the course of time the village was devastated by wars, but the custom remained, that the oldest woman from the neighbourhood lights candles on Smiljana’s grave on the eve of the day she vanished. Smiljana revealed her identity to the old woman and announced her the

<sup>4</sup> The same already Đorđević op.cit.; generally about the mine demons in Serbian folklore see M. S. Filipović in *Glasnik Etnografskog muzeja* 8/1933, p. 93. Though there is no direct evidence of Saxon presence in Kučajna, the historical topography seems to preserve some memories of it: an Old-Serbian charter mentions together with “Mount Kučajna” (*gora Kučajna*) a “Saxon Way” (*saški put*), another one a village *Sase* “Saxons” in the neighbourhood. Thus it seems probable that here, like in other mines of the medieval Serbia, the exploitation was started by Saxon immigrants, roundly about 1250. Cf. Simić 1951, 244.

<sup>5</sup> Recorded by M. Vladimirović from Požarevac, edited by Milojković 1974, 42 f. This legend sounds quite authentically, a variant of it being known to Đorđević (1932); only its tongue is affected, which is due to an intervention of the editor.

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, according the Homeric hymn to Demeter, while gathering flowers on the plain of Nysa Persephone perceived a wonderful narcissus, made to grow by Earth to catch her; when she reached out for the miraculous flower, the earth opened, Hades sprang forth and carried her away on his chariot.

message of the Silver King to the mankind. Then the old woman took a better look at her and noticed that the young girl was all made of silver.

This story is a kind of ἱερὸς λόγος, which ends by giving the αἴτιον of a rite. Although no direct evidence of Smiljana's cult is available, her legend has some mythological and ritual connections. In an old St. George's day song, also known in that part of Serbia, figures a young girl *Smiljana* who gathers immortelle and weaves wreaths of it.<sup>7</sup> In the same region, there is a legendary personage named "Silver Queen" (*Srebrna kraljica*): she fought against her rival, the "Golden Queen", till they and their female armies exterminated each other.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, this legend alludes to the Pentecostal processions of women named *kraljice* (i.e. Queens), that were once customary in all of the northern Serbia; on the other, it aims to explain the origin of women's ritual trance taking place on Pentecost in Wallach village Duboka: during it an ecstasized woman is believed to visit the other world and meet with the dead, which recalls Smiljana's underworld journey. All legends and beliefs mentioned above seem to belong to the same religious complex. It contains several elements – the date, the flowers, the cult of the dead – connecting it with the Roman grave-festival of *Rosalia*, which the Christianity associated with Pentecost. Yet Smiljana is related to immortelles, not to roses, but both species are complementary and/or interchangeable in the rites and beliefs concerning the life after death.<sup>9</sup> On the Adriatic coast the immortelle finds a ritual use at the so-called *Rusalje*, which is the Slavicized form of *Rosalia*.<sup>10</sup> On the Ascension Day – a festival which falls ten days before Pentecost – the people of Budva, on the Montenegrine coast, used to go to the so-called "Fairy threshing floor" (*Vilino gumno*), where young boys and girls, wreathed with flowers, danced a *kolo* and sang a song about the girl who was once on the Ascension Day raped by a dragon: he held her in his cave until the next Ascension Day; then she convinced him to let her gather roses and weave wreaths, as the other girls did on that day; finally, the dragon allowed her to visit her mother, but she never came back to him.<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the Adriatic cities as well as East-Serbia are areas of a longer survival of Roman population in Slavic surrounding. Moreover, the silver-mine of Kučajna was exploited as early as the

<sup>7</sup> The classic record is Vuk I 330° Sofrić 1912, 203 is inclined to see in Smiljana of Serbian folk-songs the "soul of immortelle", or a fairy.

<sup>8</sup> Milojković 1974, p. 86 f., from the contributor of the legend of Smiljana and Silver King, which is cited above.

<sup>9</sup> The name of this plant *immortelle* expresses the idea of immortality; it is borrowed into English from French, from which also stem, as calques, German *Ewigkeitsblume* and Russian *bessmertnik*. In a tale from Bosnia, *Smiljana* is the name of the highest mountain in the world, where the saints confer (SEZb 32/1925, 280), cf. also *Neven* "marigold", literally: "fadeless" as the Serbian name of the mythical mountain where the sun sets every evening (e.g. Vuk I 304°). This mountain should represent the place in the extreme west where the souls come after death, according to Janković 1951: 36, who cites the epic song Vuk VI 1°. Legends from Macedonia know a deserted, inaccessible mountain, where some birds – magpies or cranes – fly every summer and gather immortelle for the fairies (Čajkanović 1985, 219); the fairies certainly need immortelle because it procures them the eternal youth and beauty (cf. above the Sofrić's assumption of a fairy nature of *Smiljana*; for Diana surviving in Balkan folklore as fairy, see below). By the Serbs immortelle plays an important role in love charms (Sofrić, Čajkanović l.c.), because of the etymological magic, its name recalling the verb *smiliti se* "to become dear" (Slave *milo* "pleasant"), in fact, it seems to be related to lett. *smails* "sharp" (M. Furlan in Bezlaj 1995, 271); on the other hand, as the name of a mythic mountain *Smiljana* could be compared with Old Indian (*Su*)*meru*, both names being reducible to I.-E. \*(*Su*)*meil*, perhaps "a (very) pleasant place", an euphemistic designation for the abode of the dead.

<sup>10</sup> Čajkanović 1985, 219.

<sup>11</sup> Vuk I 270°; a variant from Podgora near Makarska in Dalmatia in the collection of Matica Hrvatska V (1) 1°.

Roman time;<sup>12</sup> among other archaeological finds bearing witness to this two monuments of cult are to be noticed, which represent Diana respectively Aesculapius.<sup>13</sup> Diana was worshipped in the late antiquity as the Moon-goddess and the silver was related to her; therefore, she was considered to be protectress of silver-mines.<sup>14</sup> The silver girl Smiljana, with her predilection for wild flowers and forests, could preserve some memories of the Roman goddess. As for Aesculapius, in a legend from Kučajna mineral springs in the vicinity of the underground residence of the Silver king are mentioned.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the Greek and Roman god was not only a divine healer, but also a giver of immortality, which recalls Zalmoxis worshipped by the Gethae,<sup>16</sup> and the Thracian name of Asclepius, Ζυλμυ-δρηνοσ (and similar), resembles in its first element closely the Getic theonym.<sup>17</sup> Thus the association of Diana and Aesculapius may reflect here a more ancient divine couple. If \**Dad'bbog* is in this place substituted for such a Palaeobalkanic prototype, we have here a trace of an early *interpretatio slavica* suggesting that the Slavic god had, too, a chthonic character or the psychopompic function.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Helios : Dažbog

In Slavon translation of Malala's chronicle Greek god-name Ἥλιος is glossed through *Dažbbog* (an East-Slavic form), which led to conviction that the homonymous Old-Russian god was a solar deity. Our conclusions about Serbian Silver King-Dajbog make it possible to re-examine this interpretation by analysing a related cycle of legends from NW Serbia, where the name *Dabog* occurs too. As guardian of underground treasures the Silver King has his counterpart in the "Snake King" (*zmijski car*) of South-Slavic legends and beliefs; sometimes he is being imagined with three heads.<sup>19</sup> In a tale from the region of Srem – not far from Kučajna – occurs a similar personage connected with the time-spell. It tells about a three-headed and three-tailed dragon who lived in a cave near Šuljam and used to abduct a girl from the village every day; after spending night with him, in the morning she was transformed into an old woman.<sup>20</sup> In Srem and in the adjacent regions of Mačva and Pocerina a legendary cycle is concentrated around the demonic, three-headed, man-eating, dragon-shaped king Trajan (*car Trojan*).<sup>21</sup> An Old-Russian god bore the same name,<sup>22</sup> and

<sup>12</sup> Kanitz 1904, 244; Simić 1951, 243.

<sup>13</sup> Kanitz l.c. Diana is represented on the silver coins from Kučajna, too (Dušanić 1980, p. 12, n. 21).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Dušanić op.cit. p. 11 f. and 34.

<sup>15</sup> Milićević 1876, 1083.

<sup>16</sup> The classical account of Zalmoxis given by Herodot IV 94–96 contains such elements as underground refuge and rich entertainment for his guests, that recall the story of Silver King from Kučajna. Plato Charm. 156 d. speaks on the "doctors of Zalmoxis" (Ζαλμόξιδοσ ἰατροί), who pretend to be able not only to heal the people with their spells (ἐπωδοί), but even to immortalise them (ἀπαθανατίζειν) – which closely resembles the Greek Asclepius.

<sup>17</sup> The various forms of both names are cited by Detschew 1957, pp. 173 ff. and 195 f.

<sup>18</sup> More about it Loma 1995.

<sup>19</sup> ZNŽOJS X 225 (Poljica in Dalmatien). The snake was an attribute of Asklepios, too. It could be interesting, that the variant of the legend recorded by Đorđević 1910 makes the girl (Smiljana) find the entrance into the underworld under a hazel bush, and it is precisely under a hazel tree that the Snake King is believed to reside guarding his treasures (see Vuk 1818 s.v. *mela*).

<sup>20</sup> Radovanović-Erić 1981, 15.

<sup>21</sup> In the following my report is summarising – and in several points developing – the conclusions made by Čajkanović in the chapters VIII-IX and XII-XIV of his study of the Serbian supreme god (Čajkanović 1941).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Łowmianski 1979, 126 ff.

on the other hand, a three-headed deity was not unknown to the pagan Slavs: there are Latin sources from the eleventh century testifying the worship of a god named *Triglav* among the Baltic Slavs: in Stetin, he had a sanctuary, where stood his statue with three silver heads.<sup>23</sup> The “Silver King” from Kučajna is silver-headed, too, and an epic song deals with the worship of a “silver god” (*srebrni bog*) in the city *Trojan*. In the same region of Mačva, where the memory of Trajan is still living, figures *Dajbog* in a dualistic legend (published in *Vila II/1886*, p. 642) as rival of Christian God,<sup>24</sup> while in the tradition from other regions of Serbia this role belongs simply to the “Devil King” or, in Dalmatia and Montenegro, to another Roman emperor, Diocletian (*car Dukljan*). It was already Čajkanović who established the chain of identification Trojan = Triglav = Silver God = Silver King = Dabog = Daba = Devil king = Dukljan and questioned the interpretation of Old-Russian *Dažbog* as a solar deity, Serbian *Da(j)bog/Daba* having no closer connection with the Sun-worship, except that in an epic song<sup>25</sup> his homologue Dukljan – and in a tale<sup>26</sup> the “Devil King” (*davolji car*, elsewhere designated with a hypocoristic of Dabog’s name *Daba*) – occur as temporary owners of the sun (which is to be conceived either as astral body in the context of a storm- or eclipse-myth, or as a symbol of the universal sovereignty). Like the legends from Kučajna, Serbian cycle of Trojan may be connected, too, with the ancient mining, which seems to have been developed in Pocerina in the Roman time.<sup>27</sup> It is hard to fix the place and the date of Roman emperor Trajan being substituted for a Slavic god. Old-Russian *Trojan* suggests that it could have happened already in Slavic proto-home beyond the Carpathians, soon after Trajan’s conquest of Dacia in 106 AD.<sup>28</sup> However, there is no trace either of *Trojan* or of *Dažbog* in the – extremely rich! – East-Slavic folklore, so that these Old-Russian deities may be purely literary figures originating in the South, and more precisely in Pannonia, where the Slave mission of St. Cyril and Methodus in the second half of the ninth century provoked the first flourishing of Slavic literature, and it would not be due to an accident, that on the south border of Pannonia, in the present-day North Serbia, an authentic folklore tradition survived, where both of them, *Trojan* as well as *Da(j)bog*, occur as mythological personages. In Old-Russian translation of Malala’s chronicle *Dažbog* = *Helios* refers not to a pagan god, but to an ancient ruler of Egypt. It was in a similar pseudo-historical perspective and perhaps thanks to their imperial cults that Roman emperors Trajan and Diocletian entered Slavic mythology; later both of them were demonized under the influence of Christian church. The emperor Trajan became in the memory of the peoples of north-east Europe a personification of Roman sovereignty, and Diocletian was an enemy of the Christianity par excellence, so that in Christian epoch both of them could be turned into symbols of paganism (“The age of Trajan” in “Slovo” can be understood simply as “the Pre-Christian era”),<sup>29</sup> which led to the possibility of designating any pagan god by their names. A more concrete association was provoked through the assonance of Slavicized name-form *Trojan* to the Slavic word for “three” (*troj-*), a three-headed god having been

<sup>23</sup> The sources are collected by Meyer 1931, pp. 26, 33– 36, 42, 62; cf. Łowmianski 1979, 175 ff.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Jagić 1881.

<sup>25</sup> *Vuk II 17°*.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* p. 84 f..

<sup>27</sup> Cf. SEZb LXXXVIII/1975, 188.

<sup>28</sup> The fact that Rumanian form of this name is borrowed from Slavic would not contradict the mediatorial role of the Dacians in transferring this name to the Slavs, but rather the autochthony of Rumanians in Dacia.

<sup>29</sup> The same already Lichačev, cf. Łowmianski 1979, 127.

already familiar to the Slavs in their northern homeland (cf. the *Triglav* in Stetin; of course, some indigenous, Pre-Slavic deity in Pannonia or in the Balkans may have possessed a similar attribute, too). On the other hand, if *Dad'bbogō* became in Serbian legends and beliefs a kind of archidemon, while the Slavic glossator of Malala's chronicle transformed him into an ancient ruler of Egypt, identified with the Greek Helios, both of these transformations were perhaps due to a pagan myth making him an usurper of the cosmic sovereignty and a temporary owner of the sun.

### 3. Apollo : Veles

There are examples in Serbian toponymy of two adjacent geographical objects both of them bearing names of some mythological relevance. In an article published 1987 I discussed, among other "connected mythological designations" (as I proposed to call these cases), the names of two neighbouring hills near the city of Valjevo (NW Serbia), *Veleš* and *Vilinac*, the former – mentioned for the first time in 1725 as an old fortress: *Schloß Vellesch* – recalling Slavic theonym *Veles*, the latter deriving from serb. *vila* "fairy".<sup>30</sup> Recently an archaeological find was made in the vicinity, which seems to confirm the pagan provenance of both oronyms: an ara dedicated to Apollo, probably to a local hypostasis of him.<sup>31</sup> Dedications to this deity being unusual in the NW part of the Balkans, and the region of Valjevo generally lacking in Roman epigraphic monuments, it can hardly be by chance that the classical god of the poetry meets here a divine patron of poets, as *Veles* seems to have been among the pagan Slavs, according to Old-Russian epic "Slovo o polku Igorevu", where a poet is called his grandson (verses 78–79: *veščej Bojane, Velesovō vnuče*). The couple *Veles* - *Vila* may have, too, Pre-Slavic roots and reflect Apollo's association in the local worship with his sister Diana, whose name in the Balkans developed its significance into "fairy" (alb. *zanë*, rum. *zină*). This "topographical" identification of *Veles* with Apollo incites a reconsideration of the former views on the Slavic god. It proves that the mention made of him in "Slovo" points to an essential trait of his nature; consequently, the supposed identity of *Veles* with the "cattle-god" *Volos* becomes very doubtful, still more so since the linguistic equation of both names, on which this identity is based, clashes with the phonetic laws, *Veles* going back to Common Slavic \**Velesō* (cf. OTch. *velēs* "devil") and *Volos* to \**Volsō*.<sup>32</sup>

#### Additional note

Soon after having sent this paper, I received the manuscript of an article by Slavoljub Gacović, entitled "Petrecătura in the funeral customs of the Wallachs in northeastern Serbia", to appear in *Razvitak* (Zaječar). *Petrecătura* (Rum. "accompanying", i.e. farewell to the deceased) is a kind of funeral song describing the journey of a dead person's soul to the Paradise. Several motifs are to be noted, which recall the legend of the Silver King examined above as well as its classical connections: the well of oblivion (cf. Greek *Lethe*); a

<sup>30</sup> Loma 1987, 42 f.

<sup>31</sup> Published and commented by Svetlana Loma in *Starinar* XLV-XLVI, Belgrade 1994–95 pp. 173–179. Apollo bears the epithet *Gangarensis*, which is probably a local epiclesis of the Greco-Roman god, derived from a place-name.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Loma 1987, 41 f.

castle made of gold and silver in the middle of a forest, a (narrow) bridge leading to it, a willow-shoot and a snake which helps the soul to cross this bridge (cf. the staff and the snake often coiled about it, as the most constant attributes of Asclepius), and especially the mythological figure named *Zin*, the ruler of the underworld and the master of the underground waters. Gacović supposes this name to be a Thracian equivalent of Greek Ζεῦς/Ζῆν (also identifiable as the final element in the epiclesis of Zalmoxis cited by Herodotus IV 94 Γεβελῆτις, cf. "Južnoslovenski filolog" XLIX/1993, p. 202); but it is more likely that *Zin* is simply a secondary masculine form derived from *zinä* "fairy" < *Diana*, the couple *Srebrni Car/ Smiljana* going back to Aesculapius and Diana, and *Zin* himself appearing in the "petrecătura" accompanied by a fairy (*Samodiva*).

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## Interpretationes Slavicae. Некоторые ранние мифологические глоссы

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В статье рассматриваются три случая замены дославянского теонима славянским. Первые два касаются праславянского *\*Dad'ьbog'a*. В северо-восточной Сербии у рудника Кучайна есть гора *Дабог*, имя которой первоначально относилось к пребывающему в ней мифологическому персонажу *Серебряному царю*. Сопоставление сказаний о Серебряном царе с археологическими данными позволяет предположить, что славянские языческие представления здесь наслоились на античный культ Асклепия-Эскулапа, восходящего на этом месте к фракийскому или дако-гетскому божеству типа Залмоксиса. Тот же самый славянский теоним в форме *ДАБОГ* обозначает в преданиях из северозападной Сербии демоническое существо, соперничающее с христианским Богом. Тот факт, что в аналогичных ролях выступают такие легендарные персонажи, как цари Троян (= Траян) и Дуклян (= Диоклетиан), заставляет пересмотреть интерпретацию греческого Гелия как Дажьбога в славянском переводе хроники Иоанна Малалы. Речь идет там не о боге, а о древнем правителе Египта, который отождествлен с Солнцем, подобно тому как в славянском фольклоре римские цари наделяются мифологическими чертами. Таким способом Дажьбога-Гелия нельзя считать солярным божеством в полном смысле слова (в рамках древнерусского пантеона таким был вероятно Хорс); он является, в (псевдо)исторической перспективе, временным владельцем Солнца, сопоставимым с Диоклетианом - Дуклянцем и дьявольским царем (*Даба / Дабог*) сербской традиции, которые в вариантах космологического мифа фигурируют в качестве похитителей Солнца и узурпаторов Божьей власти. И в третьем нами рассматриваемом случае удалось, исходя из данных сербской топонимии, бросить дополнительный свет на природу одного древнерусского божества, на этот раз Велеса. К его имени можно возвести ороним *Велеш* в северозападной Сербии, мифологическая мотивировка которого подтверждается названием соседнего холма *Вилинац* (из вила "русалка"). Вблизи обнаружен жертвенник Аполлона, грекоримского бога покровительствующего певцам и музыкантам; та же функция приписывается и Велесу, так как Боян в "Слове о полку Игореве" называет его внуком. Поэтому кажется, что дославянская мифологическая пара Аполлон - Диана интерпретирована здесь славянскими именами *Велес* и *Вила* (ср. значение рум. *zîă*, алб. *zanë* "русалка" / лат. *Diana*).