

# Belin

Marjeta Šašel Kos

*As late as the end of the 19th century a tradition concerning Belin was still alive in the area of Tolmin, among the Slovenes there, who regarded Belin as a great healer and believed that with his »key« it was possible to cure blindness. It may be hypothesized that there was a continuity of worship of the Aquileian Belinus/Belenus, through the late Roman period and late antiquity up to the early Slavic period. The Slavs that settled in this region would have taken over from the indigenous folk the cult of the god and modified it consistent with their own beliefs. Perhaps they brought with them the cult of Belibog, Belin(ec), whereupon a mingling of the two divinities came about.*

As late as the end of the 19th century a tradition concerning Belin was still alive in the area of Tolmin (Fig. 1), this deity being called »holy« (»sveti«) by the Slovenes there, who regarded Belin as a great healer and believed that with his »key« it was possible to cure blindness.<sup>1</sup> Simon Rutar, the author of the *History of the Tolmin Area*, who is to my knowledge the only source for the existence of Belin among the Slovenes in the Tolmin region, explained him as the Slovene version of Belinus/Belenus, worshipped during the Roman period in eastern Venetia as the main god of the Carni and patron of Aquileia, the divinity of sunlight. He had several sanctuaries in Aquileia, wrote Rutar, but according to his erroneous opinion, the god was not of a Celtic origin, rather of Illyro-Thracian, i.e. oriental, provenance.<sup>2</sup> Rutar's misunderstanding of the nature of the ancient Belenus was mainly due to the lack of scholarly work done in the field of Roman and Celtic religions in his time. In what follows I shall attempt to give a different explanation of the belief in Belin, in accordance with the present state of knowledge.

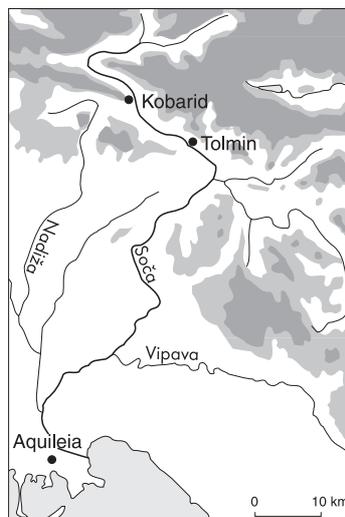


Fig. 1: Map of the Tolmin region (Computer generated map by Mateja Belak).

<sup>1</sup> D. J. Ovsec, *Slovanska mitologija in verovanje* [Slavic Mythology and Beliefs], Ljubljana 1991, 472. I would like to thank Dr. Patrizia De Bernardo Stempel for having kindly informed me about the new etymology of the name Belenus, and Dr. Andrej Pleterski for having read the »Slavic« part of the text and offered valuable suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> S. Rutar, *Zgodovina Tolminskega* [The History of the Tolmin Region], Gorica 1882, 21: id., *Belinjska opatija*, *Soča* 13, no. 14 (6 April), Gorica 1883.

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### The Celtic Belenus/Belinus

In B. Cunliffe's recent book on the Celts, Belenus is described as a Celtic deity, mainly connected with light and fire. According to him, a holiday called *Beltane*, dated around May 1, »was associated with the Celtic god of fire, Belenus. The fires lit on this occasion may have been used to fumigate cattle before they were turned out to graze on the summer pastures.«<sup>3</sup> Although it is tempting to connect this Celtic holiday, which is usually spelt as *Beltaine*, with Belenus, it should be noted that this connection is not documented in the sources; thus the feast and the god are not necessarily related. The feast Beltaine survived in the Irish calendar as one of the four great Celtic feasts, in addition to Imbolc (1 February), Lughnasad (1 August), and Samain (1 November), and it signified the beginning of summer. According to the etymological glossary of bishop Cormac (ca. AD 900), the cattle would have been driven between two bonfires, to prevent diseases, during a ceremony supervised by the druids.<sup>4</sup> The feast of Beltaine may or may not derive from the veneration of Belenus, but it is no doubt significant that so much oral tradition has been associated with the god, especially traditions concerning Belenus' fires and cakes.<sup>5</sup> According to M. Green, Belenus would have been »the commonest Celtic healer associated with Apollo, mentioned in several literary sources; his name would imply light-imagery.«<sup>6</sup>

Belenus may not be considered one of the most common Celtic gods,<sup>7</sup> but he is quite well documented as a Celtic god. His worship has been attested to date in various regions of the Celtic world, notably in Celtiberia and Galliae, and also in the western Alps,<sup>8</sup> while in time – and this is most interesting – he became known on the one hand as a specifically Norican god, the god of the Norici, i.e. those Celtic tribes who inhabited the core of the Norican kingdom, and, on the other, as the most prominent god of Aquileia.<sup>9</sup> As a Norican divinity he is mentioned by Tertullian in two passages (*Apol.* 24.7: *Unicuique etiam provinciae et civitati suus deus est, ut Syriae Atargatis, ut Arabiae Dusares, ut Noricis Belenus, ut Africae Caelestis, ut Mauretaniae Reguli sui*; cf. *ad nat.* 2.8). In Noricum, the dedications to Belinus (the god is always attested with this form of the name) are actually concentrated in the territory of Magdalensberg and Virunum, where the Norici were settled. It is inter-

<sup>3</sup> B. Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, Oxford, New York 1997, 189. He erroneously assumed that the holiday of Beltaine would have been mentioned in the famous fragmentary bronze calendar of Coligny (Ain, France), probably from the late 1st century BC, where there is actually no mention of it.

<sup>4</sup> B. Maier, *Lexikon der keltischen Religion und Kultur*, Stuttgart 1994, 42.

<sup>5</sup> J. MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, Oxford 1998, 35, and s.v.

<sup>6</sup> M. J. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, Stroud 1986, 162 f.; cf. 152–153; see also ead., The Gods and the Supernatural, in: *The Celtic World*, ed. ead., London, New York 1995, 474.

<sup>7</sup> J. De Vries, *Keltische Religion* (Die Religionen der Menschheit 18), Stuttgart 1961, 75–76.

<sup>8</sup> G. S. Olmsted, *The Gods of the Celts and the Indo-Europeans* (Archaeolingua 6), Budapest 1994, 386; J.-J. Hatt, Les divinités indigènes dans les districts alpins à l'époque romaine (Alpes Grées et Pennines, Alpes Cottiennes, Alpes Maritimes), in: *Atti. Ce.S.D.I.R. (Centro Studi e Documentazione sull'Italia Romana)* VII, 1975–76, 358–359; J. Gourvest, Le culte de Belenos en Provence occidentale et en Gaule, *Ogam* 6/6, 1954, 257–262.

<sup>9</sup> P. G. Scherrer, *Der Kult der namentlich bezeugten Gottheiten im römerzeitlichen Noricum*, Diss. Wien 1984 (unpublished), 175–187; M. Šašel Kos, *Pre-Roman Divinities of the Eastern Alps and Adriatic* (Situla 38), Ljubljana 1999, 25 ff.

esting that Belestis (perhaps related to fertility and nature), too, is documented in the regions of the Norici – but not elsewhere – thus it is more than probable that she should be associated with Belinus.<sup>10</sup>

The cult of Belenus, however, which in eastern Venetia is also attested in Concordia and Altinum, while an altar was discovered even in Norican Celeia (*Fig. 2*), flourished most of all in Iulium Carnicum, where the god seems to have been one of the most important divinities, since *magistri vici*, the main representatives of the settlement, had his sanctuary renewed and additionally decorated in the late Republican period (*CIL V 1829 + p. 1053 = ILS 5443*).<sup>11</sup> This Carnic town had the closest contacts with the Norican kingdom, and must have been an important commercial station and intermediary on the way between the kingdom and northern Italy. His cult may have spread from there to Aquileia, where he played an undisputed role of the patron divinity.<sup>12</sup> As such he is mentioned by Herodian (8.3.7-8) and *Historia Augusta (Maximini duo 22.1)*, when these authors described the march of Maximinus Thrax to Italy in A.D. 238,<sup>13</sup> during which the city was being aided by its divine protector Belenus Apollo, a god of (sun)light, healing powers and a *defensor*, a protector against hostile attacks.<sup>14</sup> He soon became, like Timavus, the officially acknowledged divinity of the city's pantheon, where he had at least one sanctuary also outside the urban centre, to the south of the town.<sup>15</sup>

How to explain his popularity in Aquileia at an early date (although he has not yet been attested among the very earliest divinities of the city),<sup>16</sup> where part of the indigenous population was Venetic and Carnic? Aquileia was founded (in 181 BC) in the territory of the Carni, which had formerly been Venetic; it soon developed into an important metropolis, which established good connections with the Norican kingdom, always seeking to maintain them and expand its influence in the neighbouring, mainly Celtic, regions.

The question of where Belinus/Belenus had first been established as an important divinity, in Aquileia or in the Norican kingdom, is perhaps still open, although the Norican origin, which has already been postulated by C. B. Pascal,<sup>17</sup> seems to me more probable, despite the fact that testimonies to Belenus' cult in Italy are chronologically earlier and much more numerous. This may be explained by a relatively late assertion of the epigraphic

<sup>10</sup> Šašel Kos, *Divinities* (n. 9), 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> F. Fontana, A proposito dell'area forense di *Iulium Carnicum*, *Aquileia Nostra* 68, 1997, 201-210.

<sup>12</sup> F. Maraspin, Il culto di Beleno-Apollo ad Aquileia, *Atti Ce.S.D.I.R.* 1, 1967-1968, 145-161. See also G. Brusin, Beleno, il nume tutelare di Aquileia, *Aquileia Nostra* 10, 1939, 1-26.

<sup>13</sup> M. Šašel Kos, *Zgodovinska podoba prostora med Akvilejo, Jadranom in Sirmijem pri Kasiju Dionu in Herodijanu. A Historical Outline of the Region between Aquileia, the Adriatic, and Sirmium in Cassius Dio and Herodian*, Ljubljana 1986, 412 ff.

<sup>14</sup> H. Birkhan, *Kelten. Versuch einer Gesamtdarstellung ihrer Kultur*, Wien 1997, 582-585; Olmsted, *Gods* (n. 8), 386-387, and *passim*; C. B. Pascal, *The Cults of Cisalpine Gaul* (Coll. Latomus 75), Bruxelles 1964, 123 ff.; Maraspin, *Beleno-Apollo* (n. 12), 145-161; I. Chirassi Colombo, I culti locali nelle regioni alpine, in: *Aquileia e l'arco alpino orientale* (Antichità Altoadriatiche 9), Udine, 1976, 175 ff.

<sup>15</sup> C. Zaccaria, Testimonianze epigrafiche dei culti greco-romani nell'area adriatica settentrionale in età romana – bilancio e problemi, in: *Les cultes polythéistes dans l'Adriatique romaine*, eds. C. Delplace, F. Tassaux (Ausonius Publ., Études 4), Bordeaux 2000, 183.

<sup>16</sup> M. Verzár-Bass, I primi culti della colonia latina di Aquileia, in: *Preistoria e protostoria dell'alto Adriatico* (Antichità Altoadr. 37), Udine 1991, 253-277; see also F. Fontana, *I culti di Aquileia repubblicana. Aspetti della politica religiosa in Gallia Cisalpina tra il III e il II sec. a. C.* (Studi e Ricerche sulla Gallia Cisalpina 9), Roma 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Pascal, *Cults* (n. 14), 125.

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*Fig. 2: The only altar of Belinus discovered in Slovenia, in Celeia (M. Lovenjak, Arh. vest. forthcoming).*

habit in provinces, even in Noricum, whose contacts with Italy go back to the 2nd century BC. It is significant that as late an author as Tertullian (3rd century AD) claimed that Belenus was the god of the Noricans, although by his time the divinity was at the height of his fame in Aquileia, as the defender of the city, who saved it from the besiegement by the soldiers of Maximinus Thrax. Belenus must have been widely known as the main divinity of the town, which increasingly developed as one of the most important cities of the Empire.

The last to deal with his cult in Aquileia has been P. Wojciechowski, who argued against the (secondary) Norican origin of the divinity, but also against the thesis that the cult of Belenus in Aquileia would have originally belonged to the Celtic autochthonous population in the city. In his opinion, Belenus had been imported to Aquileia from southern Gaul, whence the deity reached the town in the course of trade contacts between the

two regions. His cult would have consequently been brought to Noricum from Aquileia.<sup>18</sup> His arguments do not seem convincing, but given the lack of decisive arguments in favour of either thesis, no definite answer can be given for the time being to the question of where Belenus had first become affirmed, in Noricum or in Aquileia.

While the god was always worshipped in Noricum as Belinus, in Aquileia his name was spelt either as Belinus or as Belenus, especially when associated with Apollo, with whom he was often equated. Hence he has always been considered predominantly as the god of (sun)light and healing powers. This would be additionally confirmed by the usual etymology of his name, allegedly deriving from the IE root *\*b<sup>h</sup>el-*, indicating light, brightness.<sup>19</sup>

Strangely, no *pro salute* dedications to Belinus/Belenus have been discovered so far, but his connection with water is epigraphically attested. Two dedications to Fons B(eleni) have been found, one at Monastero, one at Beligna, a toponym derived from god's name (Brusin, *Inscr. Aquil.* 153; 152 = Wojciechowski, *Beleno*, p. 144 nos. 61; 62). On an altar he is associated with the Nymphs (Brusin, *Inscr. Aquil.* 155 = Wojciechowski, *Beleno*, p. 125–126 no. 12), while his association with Valetudo is uncertain (Brusin, *Inscr. Aquil.* 5 a,b = Wojciechowski, *Beleno*, p. 123 no. 5), since the reading *B(eleno) D(eo)* (or: *D(at)*) was also interpreted as *B(onae) D(eae)*. Belinus' connection with water would be confirmed by a new etymology of his name, proposed by Patrizia de Bernardo Stempel, according to whom it should rather be considered as related to a spring of water and derived from the IE root *\*g<sup>w</sup>el-*, »to drip«, also apparent in German *Quelle* and Greek *balaneús*, *balaneíon* (Celt. *Belenos* < *\*g<sup>w</sup>elen-* [»spring«] -o-s).<sup>20</sup> Both the god's documented connection with water and his identification with Apollo indicate that he must have doubtless also been a healer.

#### The Slavic Belobog

Belobog is documented in the Slavic mythology; he is a god reconstructed from the mythology of the western Slavs, settled along the Baltic Sea, in northwestern Poland and northeastern Germany. Writing about the gods of these Slavs, Helmold in his *Slavic Chronicle* of the 12th century mentions a god of evil, Černobog (= Black God, i.e. Hudič, Devil), who undoubtedly presupposes the existence of a god of good, Belobog (= White God), although his name is not documented in the Chronicle. Further testimonies of his existence are toponyms of the type Belyj bog, such as Belye bogi near Moscow. Especially interesting are two oronyms among the Serbs of Lužice: »Beli bog« and »Černi bog«, the former relating to the »positive«, the latter to the »negative«.<sup>21</sup> Belobog is also known among the southern Slavs, as Beli bog in Serbia, as Bel bog in Bulgaria. In the context of the early history of the Slovenes, he figures as Bēlibog, Belinez (Flinz) in the pantheon of the southern Slavs as reproduced by A. Linhart.<sup>22</sup> Belobog/Beli bog is further encountered in

<sup>18</sup> P. Wojciechowski, *Beleno Augusto sacrum. Celtyckie i weneckie bóstwa w rzymskiej Akwilei*, Toruń 2000; see also id., *Belenus – die Schutzgottheit von Aquileia*, *Eos* 84, 1996, 93–98.

<sup>19</sup> Birkhan, *Kelten* (n. 14), cit.

<sup>20</sup> *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 53, 2001, forthcoming.

<sup>21</sup> V. (V.) I(vanov), V. (N.) T(oporov), *Belobog*, in: *Slavjanskaja mifologija*, Moskva 1995, 42–43; cf. also N. Profantová, M. Profant, *Encyklopedie slovanských bohů a mýtů*, Praha 2000, 46.

<sup>22</sup> A. Linhart, *Poskus zgodovine Kranjske in ostalih dežel južnih Slovanov Avstrije*, Ljubljana 1981, 258–259 (transl. from German: *Versuch einer Geschichte von Krain und den übrigen Ländern der südlichen Slaven Österreichs*, Laibach 1788, 251–253)

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various folk sayings and proverbs in which he personifies a good life. Perhaps he could be considered a pre-Christian god. Several scholars, especially linguists, do think, on the basis of folk proverbs and toponyms, that the reconstruction is not only plausible but correct, and should cause no problems, particularly if the name is considered an epithet of the "good" divinity<sup>23</sup>.

There are nonetheless some researchers who do not believe in his existence, since they insist that Belobog does not appear in Helmold's *Chronicle*, and N. I. Tolstoi acknowledged their opinion.<sup>24</sup> However, in the opinion of both cited authors, V. V. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov, the possibility that Beli bog would be a product of a cabinet mythology is almost excluded, mainly on account of the many toponyms derived from his name, which are attested throughout the Slavic world.

A good spirit Belun is documented in the 19th and 20th centuries in the mythology of White Russia: an old man who gives wealth, helps people who lost their way in a forest, and helps in the fields,<sup>25</sup> and among the Slovenes spirits such as Beliči, the companions of fairies, are documented.<sup>26</sup>

### The belief in Belin in the area of Tolmin

There are mainly two possible explanations for the origin of the Slovenian Belin, particularly since his worship is documented in the Tolmin region. It may be hypothesized that there was a continuity of worship of the Aquileian Belinus/Belenus, through the late Roman period and late antiquity up to the early Slavic period. The Slavs that settled in this region would have taken over from the indigenous folk the cult of the god and modified it consistent with their own beliefs.<sup>27</sup> The worship of Belenus was of extreme importance in the broad region of Aquileia throughout the Roman period. Thus it would not be strange if his cult survived in late antiquity, on the contrary, it would be unusual if it did not. On the other hand, Christianity advanced only slowly in the region of Tolmin, which is indicated by the fact that as late as 1331 pagan worship of a sacred tree and a sacred spring was attested at Kobarid. The church at Cividale (Slov. Čedad) organized a punitive expedition against the pagans under the supervision of the Franciscan Franciscus de Clugia (Francesco di Chioggia), the inquisitor operating against the heretics in the regions of Venetia and Friuli, in the course of which the sacred tree was cut down and the sacred spring filled up with stones.<sup>28</sup> These and similar pagan traditions may have been preserved by the epichoric population of the Tolmin and Kobarid regions (note an important pagan sanctuary in the immediate vicinity of Kobarid),<sup>29</sup> which may have blended with the Slavic forms of paganism. Perhaps Belin would have simply been a Slavic/Slovenian name for Belenus/Belinus, with modified characteristics, adapted to their mythological concepts. Re-

<sup>23</sup> N. Mikhailov, Appunti su \*Belobog e \*Černobog, *Ricerche slavistiche* 41, 1994, 41-51.

<sup>24</sup> N. I. Tolstoi, s.v. Belyj bog, in: *Slavjanske drevnosti* 1, Moskva 1995, 151.

<sup>25</sup> E. E. Levkieskaja, *Slavjanske drevnosti* 1, Moskva 1995, 150-151.

<sup>26</sup> J. Kelemina, *Bajke in pripovedke slovenskega ljudstva z mitološkim uvodom*, Celje 1930 (repr. Ljubljana 1997), p. 175 no. 146.

<sup>27</sup> Celtic culture and cults had elsewhere in the Slavic world exercised some influence on the Slavic world, cf. J. Rosen-Przeworska, *Tradycje celtyckie w obrzędowości Protosłowian*, Wrocław, Warszawa, Kraków 1964.

<sup>28</sup> I. Juvančič, Križarska vojska proti Kobaridcem 1331 (La crociata contro gli abitanti di Caporetto / Kobarid del 1331), *Zgodovinski časopis* 38/1-2, 1984, 49-55, with all further citations.

mains of various pagan beliefs, but mainly beliefs related to the worship of the sun, have been preserved until recently in customs at Christmas and Easter time, as well as on the holidays of several saints, especially St George and St John.

Alternatively, it may be supposed that the Slavs who came to settle in this western part of the future Slovenia brought with them the cult of Belibog, Belin(ec), or knew about him from their homeland. In the new country they encountered an already existing tradition of a cult of the epichoric Belinus, in whom they recognized a god who seemed at least in some ways similar to their own. The two gods may have had some traits in common, so it may have been quite natural that a mingling of the two divinities came about, which resulted in a belief in Belin, the divine healer. That Belin would be a purely Slavic daemon, can with the utmost probability be excluded, since, in view of the belief in Belin, attested precisely in the Tolmin area, i.e. in close proximity to Aquileia, it is hardly possible to hypothesize a complete discontinuity of the cult of the Aquileian (Celtic) Belinus/Belenus in these regions.

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<sup>29</sup> N. Osmuk, Die Bronzeplastik aus Kobarid. Kulturgeschichtliche Bedeutung kobarider Gruppe kleiner Bronzeplastik und ein Datierungsversuch, *Archaeologia Jugoslavica* 24, 1987, 57-79. During the first few excavations campaigns, three statues of Apollo were discovered, one of Venus, one of Mars, one of Diana, and three of Hercules, along with votive tablets, as well as Celtic and Roman coins. During subsequent excavations, more statuettes have come to light; however, these new finds have only been published in a preliminary way, see ead., Kobarid od prazgodovine do antike [Kobarid from Prehistory to the Roman Period], in: *Kobarid*, Kobarid 1997, 9-16.

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Simon Rutar v svoji *Zgodovini Tolminskega* (1882) omenja, da so tamkajšnji ljudje verovali v Belina, ki so ga imenovali »sveti« in verjeli, da je z njegovim »ključem« mogoče ozdraviti slepoto. Ni mi znano nobeno drugo poročilo o tem izročilu. Rutar ob tem dodaja, da gre za slovensko različico rimskodobnega Belina/Belena, ki je bil pomembno božanstvo Karnov in zavetnik Akvileje, kjer je imel tudi več svetišč. Belin je bil bog Noričanov, kot izrecno piše Tertulijan (2. stol. po Kr.) in je tudi dejansko dokumentiran na rimskih votivnih napisih z območja Viruna, kjer so le-ti živeli. V Akvileji so ga častili kot Belina oz. Belena in ga v več primerih izenačili z Apolonom. Nedvomno gre za keltsko božanstvo, po dosedanjih ustaljenih razlagah za boga svetlobe in sonca, najnovejša etimološka dognanja pa kažejo, da je bil Belin predvsem povezan z vodo, torej nedvomno tudi z zdravilstvom. Kot zavetnik Akvileje pa je mesto branil tudi pred napadi sovražnikov in drugimi nevarnostmi, ki so pretile njenim prebivalcem.

Po vsej verjetnosti je bilo izročilo o češčenju Belina/Belena v Virunu, Akvileji, Juliju Karniku in drugod v vzhodni Benečiji in Karniji ob prihodu Slovanov še živo. Krščanstvo se je v teh odročnih krajih v zaledju Akvileje in Čedadale počasi ukoreninjalo, saj je v Kobaridu pogansko češčenje svetega drevesa in izvira zabeleženo še leta 1331. Slovani so po vsej verjetnosti Belina/Belena sprejeli, prilagodili svojim verskim predstavam in ga častili kot Belina. Ni tudi izključeno, da so iz pradomovine prinesli vero v Belega boga, ki je bil v slovanskem panteonu nedvomno prisoten (izrecno je v Helmoldovi *Slovanski kroniki* sicer dokumentiran zgolj Črni bog). Beli bog bi v tem primeru utegnil še dodatno vplivati na vero v Belina.