

Indo-European Time and the Perun-Veles Combat

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In Studia mythologica Slavica 11, I laid out some ideas about the Indo-European calendar and began to relate the gods of a suggested tenfold pantheon to my model of the year. In the present short note, I refer back to this earlier study with the aim of clarifying the calendar model and I add a tentative interpretation of the Perun-Veles combat as a version of the birth story of the young gods.

This is a supplementary note intended to clarify some points in my previous article (Lyle 2008a) and to extend my discussion of the sequence of ritual moments in the year into new territory in the light of recent work on Slavic and Vedic fights against a serpent or dragon.

Following on from aspects of Svetlana Tolstaya's study of the ritual year (1995), I presented in diagrammatic form temporal sequences in the year cycle, the diurnal cycle, the lunar cycle and the life cycle. Since the summer solstice line was accidentally omitted from Figure 4 in Lyle 2008a, making it difficult to follow my argument, I repeat this diagram as Figure 1 here, and have taken the opportunity of explicitly indicating the solstices and the beginnings of the summer and winter halves at the top of the diagram. The letter C (which was sometimes misprinted as S in the figures in the previous article) stands for "Centre". I have argued that, to avoid confusion, we have to be careful to specify whether we are referring to a total period or to a central point within it.

Figure 2 presents some of the same material in a diagram that shows winter above and summer below in a way that is comparable to Figures 5 and 6 in Lyle 2008a but includes a new feature in the use of an expanding line to show the movement from least light at the winter solstice to most light at the summer solstice and vice versa. This movement is shown here as a turn to the right and, in the terms I have discussed before, it is balanced by a reverse movement which can be represented as a turn to the left. When I presented this idea at the conference on space and time in Ljubljana in September 2007 (see Lyle 2008b), it received support from other speakers dealing with very different materials (Vaz da Silva 2008; Pleterski 2008) and I think we may be said to have jointly brought out the need to work with this concept of a period of time connected with reversal.

In the model of the Indo-European year, the reversal belongs primarily to the ritually marked 12-day period at midwinter, which is a time out of normal time. After I had given the conference talk, I came on a very interesting expression of this idea of a completely different time within the year cycle in an article by Marc Gaborieau on the Hindu calendar in Nepal. The period is a more extended one and relates to the sleep of Viṣṇu in the autumn but, between the god's falling asleep and his waking, time cannot be

mapped onto horizontal space, as shown for the rest of the year, but relates to the vertical dimension and the world tree (Gaborieau 1982: 25). This formulation can readily be connected with the concept of reversal since the movement is from the bottom to the top of the world tree. Culturally and cosmologically, the top (equated with head and heaven) is the beginning point, and a start at the bottom would be perceived as reversal. A total year would consist of a vertical movement from bottom to top followed by a mainly horizontal movement going from the top and circling outwards and to the right with a gradual downwards slope until turning inwards and arriving at the foot of the world tree. If we now turn to myth and consider what was happening at this midwinter time, we find a combat that has recently been re-examined by Vedic scholars in relation to the year. Michael Witzel has just published a piece called “Releasing the Sun at Midwinter and Slaying the Dragon at Midsummer”, distinguishing between two feats performed by Indra (Witzel 2007, pub. 2009; see also Witzel 2005). In the midwinter one, the opponent is Vala and in the summer one Vṛtra, and it is only the first of these that concerns us here. The period treated in the contest with Vala and the release of the sun maiden seems to be that between midnight and dawn in the diurnal cycle and that between the winter solstice and the beginning of spring in the annual cycle. Vala is equated with Veles in the Slavic context and his opponent, corresponding to Indra, is Perun, the thunder god (Katičić 2008).

The Croatian scholar, Mislav Ježić, kindly discussed these myths with me in April this year and drew my attention to a paper where he treats the contest between Rāma and Rāvaṇa in the *Rāmāyaṇa* in relation to the two Indra contests and makes mention of the world tree in connection with the Vala one. It will be valuable to quote a passage from this paper (Ježić 2005: 286), both to give the general context in which this combat is being placed, and to show that the world tree, that has entered the discussion in relation to study of the calendar, appears to be present at this midwinter point in myth as well.

The specific difference between Indra’s combats with Vṛtra and Vala lies, according to H.-P. Schmidt (1968), in the fact that they refer to different times of the year, the Vala myth referring to the New Year. By Ivanov and Toporov (1974: 37 ff) the terms *budhna-* ‘the bottom’ and *budhnya-* ‘belonging to the bottom, to the depth’ are explained and connected with the Greek name for a dragon Python and with the Croatian (or Bosnian, Serbian) term *Badnjak* for the Christmas Eve (when a tree stump is brought into the house), showing that it refers to the bottom of the world tree or to its root, where the dragon dwells. However, it already seems to point (at least in South Slavic) to a calendar period too, moreover a sacred one. I have supposed that the expression *rtāsya budhné* in RV 3,61.7 – for the place wherefrom Indra liberates the Dawns – refers to the lowest point in the yearly path of the sun (Ježić 1987: 188 ff).

The story of the release of the sun is not, I think, to be taken on its own as expressing an anxiety about the non-return of that heavenly body. There is a rich complex of interlocked registers that have to be held in place in an overall structure and the first appearance of light is an important and welcome transition point within it. There may be more than one story embedded in the winter period, but I would like to propose here that we can tentatively identify a narrative strand that concerns the birth of the gods.

The actual form of the story is speculative at present, although it can be hoped that further evidence may be adduced that will clarify it, but what I have recently seen is that the defeat of Veles by Perun at the world tree could well be an addition to the set of the birth stories of the young gods that I have been studying. The time of year is right. At the 12 Days, there is a return to the beginning. Only one of the birth stories I have examined fixes the time in the calendar and this is an Egyptian one coming through Plutarch that states very clearly that the five young gods are born on the five epagomenal days (Lyle 1990 111-12; 2007: 65). These days outside the Egyptian calendar correspond notionally to the 12 Days. I argue that there are six young Indo-European gods, one of darkness (= Veles) and five of light (lightning = Perun, the sun = goddess, and the moon and the morning and evening stars). The Slavic world mountain that corresponds to the world tree is inhabited by the moon and his wife, who is the sun, and their two star children (Katičić 2003: 21, cf. 17 and 2008: 337), so it seems that the grouping suggested is broadly in keeping with Slavic tradition, although there is a difference in generation level which would have to be explored.

An important point that recurs in a number of birth stories of the young gods is that the god associated with darkness and death, who is the king's opponent, is born first (Lyle 1985; 1990: 105-18). In the *Mahābhārata*, for instance, where the story is told on the human level, Karṇa is born before the rest of the brothers including Arjuna, who corresponds to Indra and who eventually kills the first-born son (Lyle 2008c: 365). If we apply this to the present instance, Veles would be born first. It can be taken for granted that there is no long period of infancy, and that the gods are immediately capable of adult action. Veles, established at the root of the world tree before his siblings are born, is in a position to prevent their emergence. They may be 'hidden' (as the sun is certainly said to be) and possibly Veles swallows them, and a distant but perhaps suggestive analogy is that of the salmon which swallow the nuts of wisdom that fall from the hazel trees overhanging a mysterious well in Ireland (Rees and Rees 1961: 161). As snake, Veles may threaten nestlings that are helpless to defend themselves (Katičić 2008: 336-38). However, Perun, as bird of prey (eagle or falcon) at the top of the tree, can fly and he attacks and defeats Veles, after which, in this postulated form of the story, all the other young gods of light are freed. The release of his swallowed siblings by the king who is the last-born occurs in the story of the birth of Zeus in Hesiod's *Theogony*.

Study of the essential connection between the cycle of the year and the gods has flourished in the Slavic context and a number of full or partial theories have been put forward and are now ripe for debate. I offer a calendar model that I am continuing to check and develop which I hope may sometimes be found useful in the course of discussion. As regards the victory over the serpent/dragon at midwinter, ideas about the year or Indra or the sun being reborn at this time have been current in the extensive scholarship concerning the Vedas (see, e.g. Witzel 2005: 13, 18, 22-3), but I am not aware of any treatment that includes the birth of Vala as the eldest of a set of siblings, and the suggestion that the midwinter combat is tied in with a "multiple birth" motif found in other Indo-European contexts may perhaps eventually enrich our understanding of this mythic theme.

Summer begins	Summer solstice	Winter begins	Winter solstice
Spring, C spring equinox	Summer, C sum. solstice	Autumn, C aut. equinox	Winter, C winter solstice
Morning, C sunrise	Middle part of the day, C noon	Evening, C sunset	Middle part of the night, C midnight
Waxing moon, C first quarter	Near full moon, C full moon	Waning moon, C last quarter	Old & new crescents C dark moon
Young men	Mature men	Mature men	Old men
			Death

Figure 1. Divisions of the time cycle indicating the solstices and the beginnings of the winter and summer halves.

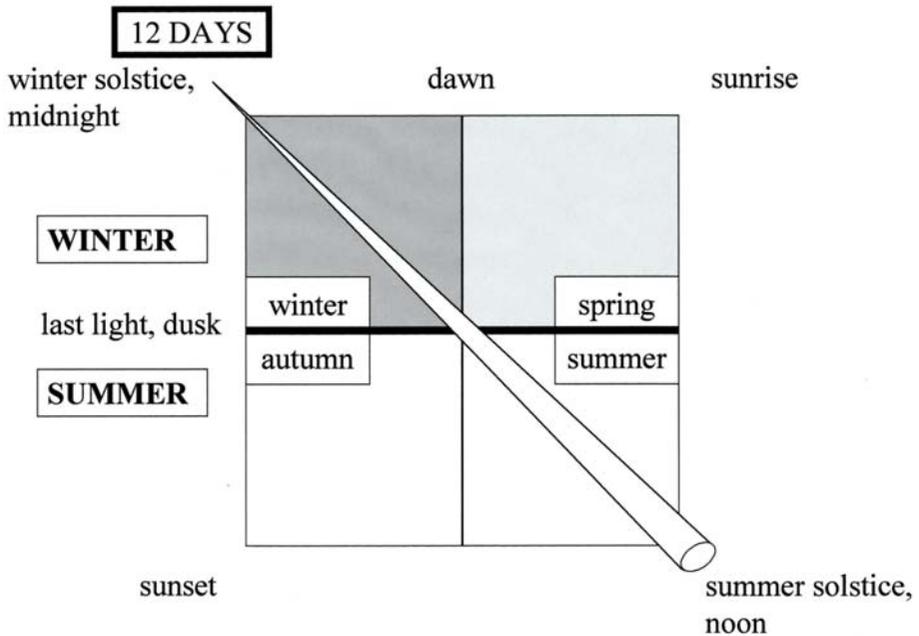


Figure 2. A representation of the year, showing: a) the divisions into the halves of winter and summer and the halves of increasing and decreasing light, and b) the correlation with the diurnal cycle, including the correspondence between the winter quarter and the period between dusk and dawn and the correspondence between the 12 Days and midnight.

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Indoevropski čas in boj med Perunom in Velesom

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V lanski številki *Studia mythologica Slavica* je avtorica članka že predstavila nekatere ideje o indoevropskem koledarju. Pri tem je začela povezovati bogove predvidenega desetdelnega panteona s svojim modelom leta. V tej kratki notici se avtorica obrača nazaj k temu članku z namenom, da bi razjasnila v *Studia mythologica Slavica* 11/2008 objavljen koledarski model; dodaja pa tudi poskus interpretacije boja med Perunom in Velesom kot različico zgodbe o rojstvu mladih bogov.