

Fortune and Fertility Rites among the Pre-Christian Western Slavs

Juan Antonio Álvarez-Pedrosa

The purpose of the present paper is to analyze the fertility rites attested in the Medieval sources about the Western Slavic Pre-Christian Religion in order to make an assessment of such texts. It allows us to elaborate a hierarchy: the more reliable text belongs to Saxo Grammaticus and narrates the festival made every autumn in the temple of Arkona; in second term we place the fragment of Thietmar of Merseburg relating to the obtaining of auguries about the harvest by the sacred lake of Glomuzi; finally we can read a text of Ebbo about a yearly feast at the beginning of summer in the city of Wollin, inspired by the biblical story of the Golden Calf.

Keywords: Fertility Rites; Reconstruction of Slavic Pre-Christian religion; Western Slavs; Saxo Grammaticus; Sventovit of Arkona; Thietmar of Merseburg; St. Otto of Bamberg.

1. The description of the religion of the North German Slavs before their complete Christianization, which took place after the falling of their last independent bastion, the siege of the island of Rügen by the Danes in 1168, has provided us with many quotations in which several medieval authors make references to the religion of pagan Slavs.

The reconstruction of Slavic Pre-Christian religion¹ upon the basis of these indirect quotations allows us to postulate the existence of various instances of pagan rites from which we could draw an opinion with a certain degree of security, depending on the characteristics of such references. As is well known, we do not have direct accounts on Pre-Christian Slavic religion: everything we know about it has been drawn from indirect references, gathered in authors, mostly Christian, and some Muslim travelers in the case of Eastern Slavs. Such references should be read with great care, since they often only reproduce the stereotyped vision that Christians have of pagans, or else they just conform to some literary patterns. Other quotations, however, are more specific, they are abundant in details and match the religious reality they describe. It is the scholar's task to differentiate what is useful from what is just a literary motif or a religious prejudice.

Within these quotations, we will analyse those referring to rituals related to wealth and fertility in the communities practising such religion, using internal analysis and

¹ This article has been written thanks to the support of the Research Project *La reconstrucción de la religión eslava precristiana. Los testimonios textuales y comparativos* (no FFI2010-16220) of the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación. A first version of it was read at the International Medieval Congress 2011, Leeds, 11-14 julio 2011.

comparative evidences. We may also design a hierarchy of evidences, according to their level of reliability.

The methodological importance of ritual for the reconstruction of Indo-European religion (and within this, Pre-Christian Slavic religion) has been emphasized by Dowden (2000:25): »If paganism is largely not a matter of belief, then it speaks the language of actions, the language of ritual«.

2. The most interesting text referring to a fertility ritual has been preserved in book XIV, 39 of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*². This book, which spans a period of forty-four years, from 1134 to 1178, narrates the ascension to the throne of king Valdemar I of Denmark, who, with the direct support of his minister, Bishop Absalon, manages to restore to Denmark the power lost during the preceding years of civil strife. Among other deeds, the king subjects the Slavs of the Baltic coast to Danish rule, in a series of winning wars that give the opportunity to Saxo to describe Slavic citadels, uses and cults, thus becoming one of the most important sources for the knowledge of North Western Slavs in the Middle Ages

In 1169 Valdemar starts the conquest of the territory of the Rugiani, in retaliation for the breach of alliances by the Slavs while he was being attacked by the Norwegians. Valdemar's advance did not find any resistance, but, driven by his blood-thirst, he decides to besiege the fortress of Arkona. This gives the chance to Saxo Grammaticus to describe the fortress, placed on a hilltop, surrounded by sea on three of its sides and joined to the mainland by a fortified isthmus. In the text, there are descriptions of the inside layout of the city, as well as of the temple placed in its centre and of its rituals.

The most characteristic feature of the temple is the presence of an enormous four-headed idol of the god Sventovit³. The idol carries in his right hand a metal horn, which the priest – *sacrorum eius peritus* »expert in their rites« – would fill with wine every year, with the aim of foretelling the crops of the following year. The cyclical character of the ritual puts it in relation to other fertility rituals, directly linked to the agrarian year. His other characteristic attribute is the bow he carries in the left hand, as well as the bridles of his holy horse and the saddle. The god's emblems represent his functions and would denote a divinity of transfunctional type: the horn represents fertility and abundance and the weapons, the bow and sword, represent the warlike strength⁴.

² Edited by Christiansen (1980–1981).

³ *Ingens in aede simulacrum, omnem humani corporis habitum granditate transcendens, quattuor capitibus totidemque ceruicibus mirandum perstabat, e quibus duo pectus totidemque tergum respicere uidebantur. Ceterum tam ante quam retro collocatorum unum dextrorsum, alterum laeuorsum contemplationem dirigere uidebatur. Corrasae barbae, crines attonsi figurabantur, ut artificis industriam Rugianorum ritum in cultu capitum aemulata putares. In dextra cornu uario metalli genere excultum gestabat, quod sacerdos sacrorum eius peritus annuatim mero perfundere consueuerat, ex ipso liquoris habitu sequentis anni copias prospecturus. Laeua arcum reflexo in latus brachio figurabat. Tunica ad tibias prominens fingebatur, quae ex diuersa ligni materia creatae tam arcano nexu genibus iungebantur, ut compaginis locus non nisi curiosiori contemplatione deprehendi potuerit. Pedes humo contigui cernebantur, eorum basi intra solum latente. Haud procul frenum ac sella simulacri compluraque diuinitatis insignia uisebantur. Quorum admirationem conspicuae granditatis ensis augebat, cuius uaginam ac capulum praeter excellentem caelaturae decorem exterior argenti species commendabat.*

⁴ Zaroff (2002) postulates that the original domain of this deity was fertility and vital forces.

The most important ritual of the god Sventovit used to take place, according to Saxo, in autumn, when the crops had been harvested⁵. Another text, that will be referred to further on, allows us to fix that ritual at the end of November. The cult is public and solemn, and bears a national character, since the whole community attends. The ritual is presided over by the god's priest. Characterised for having long hair and beard, unlike the majority of Rugiani, who used to be shaved and with short hair, as we have been informed before. The day before the solemn event, the preparatory part of the ritual takes place. In it, a priest purifies the cella where the idol is housed, a place only he can have access to and that is subjected to a severe taboo of ritual purity: the priest couldn't even exhale inside the cella, so he had to conduct himself in it holding his breath and step out each time he needed to take air.

The following day, the initial part of the rite takes place⁶, which consisted in the taking of auguries that foretold the harvest of the coming year; the priest examined the god's horn, where the previous year wine had been poured, and if the amount of liquid had decreased, he foretold a bad harvest for the following year and ordered the community to save part of the current year's harvest to compensate for the shortage of the coming year. On the contrary, if the amount of wine was the same as had been poured the previous year, the harvest of the following year would be good.

The first part of the rite, focused on the obtaining of auspices, is followed by the central part of the rite⁷. The old wine was poured at the feet of the idol as libation, and then the priest would fill the idol's horn twice: the first time, he would drink all the wine in the horn and pronounced a solemn impetrating formula »for himself, for the homeland, and for the people« *sibi patriae ciuibusque*, says Saxo literally. This invocation was aimed at securing from the god wealth and victories. Next, he would fill the horn with wine again, which would be examined the following year.

The symbolism of the horn, which is not only a receptacle for drinking but represents as well a symbol of abundance, is evident, as in the iconography of the Classical world. But the most interesting aspect of this part of the celebration is the threefold formula with which the priest requests wealth and victories. Although Saxo, obviously, does not reproduce the original formula, but rather synthesises it in its Latin translation, there is evidence of threefold formulas of similar content in other Indo-European religious traditions. These triadic formulas illustrate the principle that the definition of a conceptual totality unconsciously tends to borrow the tripartite framework in which

⁵ *Sollemnis eidem cultus hoc ordine pendebatur: Semel quotannis post lectas fruges promiscua totius insulae frequentia ante aedem simulacri, litatis pecudum hostiis, sollemne epulum religionis nomine celebrabat. Huius sacerdos, praeter communem patriae ritum barbae comaeque prolixitate spectandus, pridie quam rem diuinam facere debuisset, sacellum, quod ei soli intrandi fas erat, adhibito scoparum usu diligentissime purgare solebat, obseruato, ne intra aedem halitum funderet; quo quoties capessendo uel emittendo opus habebat, toties ad ianuam procurrebat, ne uidelicet dei praesentia mortalis spiritus contagio pollueretur.*

⁶ *Postero die, populo prae foribus excubante, detractum simulacro poculum curiosius speculatus, si quid ex inditi liquoris mensura subtractum fuisset, ad sequentis anni inopiam pertinere putabat. Quo annotato, praesentes fruges in posterum tempus asseruari iubebat. Si nihil ex consuetae fecunditatis habitu deminutum uidisset, uentura agrorum ubertatis tempora praedicabat. Iuxta quod auspiciu instantis anni copiis nunc parcius, nunc profusius utendum monebat.*

⁷ *Veteri deinde mero ad pedes simulacri libamenti nomine defuso, uacuefactum poculum recenti imbuit, simulatoque propinandi officio statuum ueneratus, tum sibi, tum patriae bona ciuibusque opum ac uictoriarum incrementa sollemni uerborum nuncupatione poscebat. Qua finita, admotum ori poculum nimia bibendi celeritate continuo haustu siccauit repletumque mero simulacri dexterae restituit.*

the societies of Indo-European peoples are organised, as was established by Benveniste (1945) when he studied formulas such as these in the Greek and Roman realms. A very clear parallel to the formula pronounced by the Rugian priest is the invocation⁸ to be found in Cato the Censor addressed to the god Mars in order to guarantee the lustration of his fields:

*Mars pater te precor quaesoque
uti sies uolens propitius
mihi domo familiaeque nostrae*

»Father Mars, I pray and beseech you
that you be favorable (and) propitious
to me, my house, and our household«

The parallel between *sibi patriae ciuibusque* of the formula of the Rugian priest and the *mihi domo familiaeque nostrae* is remarkable. In the Iguvine Tablets, there are up to 11 examples of such triadic formulaic expressions⁹ in doublets:

*nerf arsmo
uipro pequo
castruo frif*

»magistrates and formulas,
men and cattle,
grain and harvest
(purify and/or protect)«.

Comparative material seems to demonstrate that Saxo has reproduced, synthetically, a very archaic formulaic feature, typical also of other religious traditions of the Indo-European group.

The third part of the ritual would establish a ritualised dialogue between the people and the priest, whose symbol was an offering symbolising fertility as well¹⁰. A round pie, made with wine and honey, two typical offerings in prosperity rituals, was then offered. The priest would stand behind the pie and ask the community whether he could be seen or not behind the pie. The response was ritually conditioned and it was always the same, so the priest would ask that the following year the pie would be so big he could not be seen. We do not know whether it was a huge cylindrical pie, like the Russian *kulič*, or whether it was baked in the shape of a wheel, and for the ceremony it was presented standing on its side. If it were the latter, the solar symbology would be evident, analogous to the Roman round cakes made of flour and honey offered to the god Summanus each

⁸ Studied in Watkins (1995: 197–213).

⁹ See also Watkins (1995: 221).

¹⁰ *Placenta quoque mulso confecta, rotundae formae, granditatis uero tantae, ut paene hominis staturam aequaret, sacrificio admouebatur. Quam sacerdos sibi ac populo mediam interponens, an a Rugianis cerneretur, percontari solebat. Quibus illum a se uideri respondentibus, ne post annum ab iisdem cerni posset, optabat. Quo precationis more non suum aut populi fatum, sed futura messis incrementa posebat.*

20th of June in the *Summanalia*, as narrated by Paulus Festus¹¹, the Umbrian *urfeta*¹², or the *rathacakra* (literally: »chariot wheel«) offered in the brahmanic rite of *vājapeya*¹³. In any case, Saxo explicitly states that the aim of the ritual was the increase of future harvests.

In its third part, the ritual would conclude with a farewell to the people that the priest made on behalf of the idol, exhorting the community to keep the cult to the god alive and promising military victories if the ritual were followed scrupulously¹⁴.

As is characteristic of fertility rituals dedicated to the whole community, the end of the ritual was the sacrifice of cattle that were later consumed at a collective banquet,¹⁵ which Saxo himself points out was made »in the name of religion« (*sollemne epulum religionis nomine celebrabat*). The banquet is also characterised by incontinent exuberance since, as Saxo says, *in quo epulo sobrietatem uiolare pium aestimatum est, seruare nefas habitum* »At this banquet, it was considered pious to break with sobriety and unpropitious to keep it«.

Therefore, the ritual has a very clear structure: a preparatory part focused on purification, a first part, consisting in the taking of auguries, the central part of the ritual, which is the triadic invocation in favour of the whole collective, and the third part, which is the ritualised dialogue in favour of the prosperity of the community. Finally, the ritual has a conclusion, with the sacrifice and the collective banquet, characterised by the transgression of norms. This rigorous structure suggests that the text of Saxo provides reliable information.

Structure of the Fertility ritual of Arkona described by Saxo Grammaticus

Preparatory part: Purification
First part: Taking of auguries
Central part: Triadic invocation
Third part: Ritualised dialog
Conclusion: Collective banquet

The historical reality of the ritual is confirmed by an indirect reference to it preserved in William of Malmesbury (Ślupecki-Zaroff 1999), a monk who never left England, but who confirms the existence of the rite: in his work, *Deeds of the English Kings* II, 189, he states the following:

¹¹ Festus p. 557 L

¹² *Tabulae Iguvinae* II b, cf. the etymological connected parallel, Lat. *orbita*.

¹³ Petazzoni (1955: 240, 252). West (2007: 214–215, 226) concludes that these cakes »may originally have been solar symbols«.

¹⁴ *Consequenter sub simulacri nomine praesentem turbam consalutabat, eamque diutius ad huius numinis uenerationem sedulo sacrificii ritu peragendam hortatus, certissimum cultus praemium terra marique uictoriam promittebat.*

¹⁵ *His ita peractis, reliquum diei plenis luxuriae epulis exigentes, ipsas sacrificii dapes in usum conuiuii et gulae nutrimenta uertere, consecratas numini uictimas intemperantiae suae seruire cogentes. In quo epulo sobrietatem uiolare pium aestimatum est, seruare nefas habitum.*

Vindelici uero Fortunam adorant; cuius idolum loco nominatissimo ponentes, cornu dextrae illius componunt plenum potu illo quem Graeco uocabulo, ex aqua et melle, Hydromellum uocamus. Idem sanctus Hyeronimus Aegyptos et omnes pene Orientales fecisse, in decimo octauo super Isaiam libro confirmat. Vnde ultimo die Nouembris mensis, in circuitu sedentes, in commune praegustant; et si cornu plenum inuenerint, magno strepitu applaudunt, quod eis futuro anno pleno copia cornu responsura sit in omnibus; si contra, gemunt.

The Vindelici adore Fortune, whose idol they place in the most prominent position, and they place in his right hand a horn full of a drink we call, with a Greek word, hydromel, because it is made of water and honey. (...) Therefore, on the last day of the month of November, seated in circle, they drink it together; and if they have found the horn full, they clap very noisily, since there will be plentifulness for all of them the following year due to the full horn; if they find the opposite answer, they cry.

The ritual is here attributed to the Vindelici¹⁶, not to the Rugiani, but the coincidence of details is striking¹⁷. The divinity to whom the ritual is addressed is subject to *interpretatio romana* and receives the name of Fortune, who, nevertheless, appears as a sovereign divinity, since she is in the »most prominent position«.

3. In obtaining auguries about the harvest, another numinous entity also relevant for the Slavs could intervene: a sacred lake. The text serving as evidence is contemporary with the existence of an »alive« paganism among the Slavs of Northern Germany. It is the work of Thietmar of Merseburg¹⁸, who wrote a *Chronicle* datable between 1012 and 1018, the year of his death. Thietmar, despite being a Christian bishop, is a very credulous author in everything related to auguries, and relates in the following manner the way in which pagan Slavs foretold the abundance or shortage of future crops: *Cronicon* I, 2–3:

Glomuzi est fons non plus ab Albi quam duo miliaria positus, qui, unam de se paludem generans, mira, ut incolae pro uero asserunt oculisque approbatum est a multis, sepe operatur. Cum bona pax est indigenis profutura, suumque haec terra non mentitur fructum, idem tritico et auena ac glandine refertus, laetos uicinorum ad se crebro confluentium efficit animos. Quando autem seua belli tempestas ingruerit, sanguine et cinere certum futuri exitus indicium premonstrat. Hunc omnis incola plus quam aecclesias, spe quamuis dubia, ueneratur et timet.

Glomuzi is a spring situated no further than two miles from the Elbe and is the origin of a lake¹⁹ where miracles often occur, according to what the inhabitants of

¹⁶ The Vindelici were a Celtic tribe that occupied Raetia in Roman times. It is likely that it should be an intentional mistake for *Venedi*.

¹⁷ In fact, Zaroff (in Słupecki-Zaroff 1999) thinks that the reference to the Vindelici here points to the Rugiani.

¹⁸ Edited by Holzmann (1935).

¹⁹ This lake no longer exists, but was placed two km north of Lommatzch, between the villages of Paltzchen and Dörschnitz, in Saxony.

the area hold as true and has been verified by the eyes of many. When a peace good for the natives of the place is approaching and the land is not deceitful about its fruits, the lake becomes full of wheat, oats and acorns, and raises the spirits of the neighbours who frequently come up to it. But when the cruel times of war come, it foretells the true sign of the future outcome with blood and ashes. Every local person venerates it and fears it more than any church, although with uncertain hope.

The existence of sacred lakes is well attested among Western Slavs, Celts, Romans, Greeks, and Iranians²⁰. The Redarii built, in a middle of a lake, the temple dedicated to the god Redigast, where oracular advice could also be obtained, according to Adam of Bremen II, 21 (Pagani 1996):

Inter quos medii et potentissimi omnium sunt Retharii, ciuitas eorum uulgatissima Rethre, sedes ydolatriae. Templum ibi magnum constructum est demonibus, quorum princeps est Redigast. Simulacrum eius auro, lectus ostro paratus. Ciuitas ipsa nouem portas habet, undique lacu profundo inclusa, pons ligneus transitum praebet, per quem tantum sacrificantibus aut responsa petentibus uia conceditur.

Among them, situated in the middle, and very powerful, are the Redarii, whose city, very widely known as Rethra, a seat of idolatry. There a great temple was erected to the demons, the chief of whom is Redigast²¹. His image is of gold, his bower bedecked with purple. The city itself has nine gates and is surrounded on all sides by a deep lake. A wooden bridge is the route which gives access to those who would make sacrifices or seek oracular advice.

We do not know exactly where was the temple of Radogost-Rethra (Ślupecki 1994:57–60; Schmidt 1999: 33–46). The citadel had three towered gates and the city built next to it had four; seven in total. Adam's description (followed by Helmold I, 21; 23; 52; 71) does not coincide with Thietmar's VI, 23, so it is feasible to infer that the former is describing a later location of the temple, once the site was transferred to an island after its first destruction in the mid-eleventh century:

Est urbs quaedam in pago Riedirierun, Riedegost nomine tricornis, ac tres in se continens portas, quam undique silua ab incolis intacta et uenerabilis circumdat magna. Duae eiusdem portae cunctis introeuntibus patent; tertia, quae orientem respicit et minima est, tramitem ad mare iuxta positum et uisu nimis horribile monstrat.

There is in the land of the Redarii a city with the name of Riedegost, which has three corners and three gates on each side, completely surrounded by an intact great forest venerated by the locals. Two of its gates are open to anyone coming

²⁰ On the relevance of the sacred lakes among the Indo-Europeans, see Dowden (2000).

²¹ The name of this divinity could also appear as Radigost or Radigast. The etymology of the theonym is apparently clear: it is a compound »he who becomes happy with guests«, although it could also be understood as »he who becomes happy with (the victory over) enemies«. Depending on one or the other interpretation, the function attributed to such divinity varies. See other etymologies in Ślupecki (1994:60), who feels rather inclined to attribute him a primary function of oracular character.

inside. The third one, which faces the East and is the smallest of all, leads to a path towards the nearby lake and has a horrid air.

In any case, the lake is linked to a very important temple where oracles can equally be obtained.

The Celts also used to go to lakes to make all sorts of offerings, according to Gregory of Tours *Glory of the confessors* 2 regarding a lake near Javols, where a three-day yearly pilgrimage used to take place during which clothes, cheeses, wax and bread would be thrown:

Mons erat in Gabalitano territorio cognomento Helarius²², lacum habens magnum. Ad quem certo tempore multitudo rusticorum, quasi libamina lacui illi exhibens, linteamina proiebat ac pannos qui ad usum uestimenti uirilīs praebeantur: nonnulli lanae uellera, plurimi etiam formas casei ac cerae uel panis, diuersasque species unusquisque iuxta uires suas, quae dinumerare perlongum puto. Veniebant autem cum plaustis potum cibumque deferentes, mactantes animalia et per triduum epulantes.

»In the territory of Javols there was a mountain named after Hilary²³ that contained a large lake. At a fixed time, a crowd of rustics went there and, as if offering libations to the lake, threw into it linen cloths and garments that served men as clothing. Some threw pelts of wool, many threw models of cheese and wax and bread as well as various other objects, each according to his own means, that I think would take too long to enumerate. They came with their wagons: they brought food and drink, sacrificed animals, and feasted for three days.«

Furthermore, the lake used to inspire reverential fear, as Thietmar refers in regard to lake Glomuci. Such reverential fear was the same that the corrupted Roman Consul Servilius Caepio took advantage of in order to hide in a sacred lake near the Gaulish city of Tolosa the 15,000 gold talents that the Gauls had pillaged in Delphi, which the consul swindled from the Roman treasury (Strabo IV 1, 13). Also subject to reverential fear was the famous sacred lake of Nemi²⁴, near Rome, and perhaps this fear was the origin of the famous institution of the *rex Nemorensis*²⁵. Another famous sacred lake related to an oracular divinity is in Delos, where Apollo and Artemis were born. The hieron where oracular predictions were made was situated precisely by the sacred lake. In Zoroastrianism there are many sacred lakes, but none is directly related to fertility cults or oracular sites, although there is a myth connected with fertility: In the lake Hāmūn, Avestic *Kṣaoya-*, the seed of Zoroaster is preserved in order to impregnate the three virgins,

²² According to the editor's critical apparatus (Krusch 1885:299), in one manuscript there is a variant *Helarus*, that could be the original name of the sacred lake. I follow here the translation given by Van Dam (2004).

²³ St Hilary, bishop of Poitiers (c. 315–367).

²⁴ Ovid, *Fasti* III, 263–264: *uallis Aricinae silua praecinctus opaca / est lacus, antiqua religione sacer* »There is a lake in the vale of Aricia, ringed by dense woods, and sacred to religion from ancient times«.

²⁵ Frazer (1951) postulates that the legend of the priest of the temple of Diana Nemorensis, by the lake of Nemi, known as *rex Nemorensis*, a run-away slave that killed the man previously consecrated to that office, was the original myth of a fertility rite.

mother of the three *saošyants*, or Iranian eschatological saviours, cf. *Yašt* 13.28; 13.62; 13.142; 19.92, *Vidēvdad* 19.5, *Dēnkard* 7.8.1 ff.

4. We have seen a great festivity dedicated to the prosperity of the whole community being celebrated at the end of autumn on the island of Rügen. There are several pieces of written evidence that agree in informing us of other types of agrarian rituals of fertility that used to take place at the beginning of the summer. Once the Slavs of Northern Europe were Christianised, such a ritual moment was identified with the Christian celebration of Pentecost. Leaving aside the numerous condemnations made by Polish and Czech bishops of this type of practices in a rural society partially Christianised, I would like to analyse a text which refers to this festivity at a time when paganism was a religion still alive and identifier for the whole population. The text in question is one²⁶ of the three biographies of St. Otto of Bamberg (1060/1061-1139), the person responsible for the Christianisation of Pomerania. See Ebbo, *Life of St. Otto, Bishop of Bamberg* III, 1:

Beatissimo patre nostro Ottone post primum gentis Pomeranicae apostolatum ad sedem propriam feliciter reuerso, duae ex nobilissimis ciuitatibus, id est Iulin et Stetin, inuidia diaboli instigante ad pristinas idolatriae sordes rediere hac uidelicet occasione: Iulin a Iulio Cesare condita et nominata –in qua etiam lancea ipsius columpnae mirae magnitudinis ob memoriam eius infixata seruabatur– cuiusdam idoli celebritatem in inicio aestatis maximo concursu et tripudio agere solebat. Cumque uerbo fidei et baptismi lauacro urbe mundata, per beatum pontificem idola maiora et minora, quae in propatulo erant, ignibus conflagrari coepissent, quidam stultorum modicas idolorum statuas, auro et argento decoratas, clam furati penes se absconderunt, nescientes quale per hoc urbis suae operarentur excidium (...). Nam ad praedictam idoli celebritatem cunctis comprouincialibus solito feruore concurrentibus, ludosque et commessiones multiformi apparatu exhibentibus, ipsi dudum absconditas simulacrorum effigies populo inani laetitia resoluta praesentantes, eos ad antiquum paganizandi ritum impulerunt, statimque per hoc diuinae correptionis plagam incurrerunt. Siquidem ludis et saltationibus paganico more omni populo occupato, subito ignis Dei cecidit e coelo super apostatricem ciuitatem.

»After our holy father Otto had come again in peace to his episcopal site²⁷, on the completion of his first apostleship to the Pomeranian people, two of the best-known towns, Wollin and Stettin, moved by the envy of the devil, returned to their former sordid idolatry under the following circumstances. Iulin, which had been founded by Julius Caesar and called after him, and in which his spear was kept, fixed to a column of great size in order to preserve his memory, was accustomed to hold a festival in honour of a certain idol at the beginning of the year, which was accompanied by large gatherings and dancing. Although the town had been cleansed by the word of faith and the washing of baptism, and the people, moved by the holy bishop, began to burn the larger and smaller idols that were in the open air, certain stupid persons carried off secretly some small images adorned

²⁶ Edited by Köpke (1856).

²⁷ Year 1125.

with gold and silver, little knowing how they were bringing about destruction to their town [...] For when the people of the province had assembled with their accustomed eagerness to celebrate the idol festival to which I have referred, and were playing and feasting together with great pomp, there men brought forth to the people, who had been weakened by their vain pleasures, the idols that they had before carried off, and invited them to resume their pagan rites. By doing this they laid themselves open to divine reproof. For when all the people were engaged in playing and dancing in the heathen fashion, the fire of God suddenly fell from heaven upon the apostate town.«

In fact, the text only provides us with two reliable pieces of information for the reconstruction of Slavic paganism; one has to do with the revival of paganism after the first missionary campaign of St. Otto of Bamberg; the second makes reference to the celebration of a yearly feast at the beginning of summer in honour to the sacred spear. The rest of the passage is in fact confirmed as bearing on the model of the biblical passage in which Moses, upon returning from Mount Sinai after taking the Tablets of the Law, finds the Israelites thrown into idolatry around a Golden Calf (*Exodus* 32). It is a good example of how the texts of medieval chroniclers have to be taken with extreme precaution.

Bibliography

- Benveniste, E. (1945) Symbolisme social dans les cultes gréco-italiques. *Revue de l' Histoire des Religions* 129: 5–16.
- Christiansen, E. (1980–1981) *Saxo Grammaticus Books X–XVI*: Vol. I: *Books XI, XII and XIII*, BAR International Series 84; Vol II: *Books XIV, XV and XVI. Text and Translation*; Vol III: *Books XIV, XV and XVI. Commentary and Notes* B.A.R. International Series 118 (i–ii), Oxford.
- Dowden, K. (2000) *European Paganism: The realities of cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, Londres-Nueva York, Routledge.
- Frazer, J. G. (1951) *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, New York, Macmillan.
- Holtzmann, R. (1935) *Thietmari Merseburgensis episcopi Chronicon*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, Nova Series 9, Berlin.
- Köpke, R. (1856) »Vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis« *Annales et Chronica aevi Salici. Vitae aevi Carolini et Saxonici* ed. G. H. Pertz, Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptores 12, Stuttgart, pp. 822–883.
- Krusch, B. (1885) *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis. Miracula et opera minora*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum I 2, Hannover.
- Pagani, I. (1992) *Storia degli arcivescovi della chiesa di Amburgo, di Adamo di Brema*, Torino, UTET.
- Petazzoni, R. (1955) *La onniscienza di Dio*, Torino, Einaudi.
- Schmidt, V. (1999) Retra - Lieps, am Südenende des Tollensesees. *Studia mythologica Slavica* 2, 33–46.
- Ślupecki, L. P. (1994) *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Varsovia.

- Słupecki, L. P. - Zaroff, R. (1999) »William of Malmesbury on Pagan Slavic Oracles: New Sources for Slavic Paganism and its two Interpretations« *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 2: 9-20.
- Van Dam, R. (2004) *Gregory of Tours. Glory of the Confessors*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press.
- Watkins, C. (1995) *How to kill a dragon. Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- West, M. L. (2007) *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Zaroff, R. (2002) »The Origins of Sventovit of Rügen« *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 5: 9-18.

Fortuna e riti di fertilità presso gli slavi occidentali precristiani

Juan Antonio Álvarez-Pedrosa

Lo scopo di questo articolo è l'analisi e la successiva valutazione dei frammenti di testi medievali che ci informano sui riti pagani di fertilità tra gli slavi occidentali. Stabilendo una gerarchia si può affermare che il testo più affidabile è quello di Sassone il Grammatico che racconta delle festività celebrate ogni autunno nel tempio di Arkona; al secondo posto si colloca il passo di Tietmaro di Merseburgo sull'ottenimento di oracoli di fertilità presso il lago sacro di Glomuzi; infine possiamo leggere un testo di Ebbone sulla festa di benvenuto all'estate della città di Wollin, elaborato sul modello del racconto biblico del vitello d'oro.