Book Reviews


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This book is of interest to scholars of new religious movements, and in particular those who focus on nationalist and ethnic forms of Paganism in central and eastern Europe. Slavic Pagan mythology is fragmentary; the “Introduction” notes that complex mythological texts are available from Iceland, Ireland, and Finland, but the Slavic medieval texts are exclusively written by Christians, and texts authored in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were forgeries, the most important of which was the Book of Veles, published in 1957, which remains popular and the subject of attempts to establish its authenticity. Judith Kalik and Alexander Uchitel are equally dismissive of the efforts of the “Mythological School” (p. 2) who “tried to fill the vacuum that the absence of authentic pagan texts created by using medieval and early modern anti-pagan compositions written by Slavic clerics and mythological motives (sic motifs) in Slavic folklore” (pp. 2-3). They argue that their study is innovative and will succeed where others have failed by looking for Slavic religion/ mythology in the right rather than the “wrong place” (p. 4).

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Part I, “Ancient Slavs,” identifies the Slavic language family as part of the satem branch of the Indo-European language family, and closely related to the Baltic languages. The homeland of the Slavs is unknown: the archaeological Prague-Korchak culture is not linked to a linguistic cultural entity, and the Slavs are first documented in the sixth century CE in Byzantine texts from the reign of Justinian. Christianization occurred in the ninth and tenth centuries, primarily for political reasons; the authors note that “only Slavic Polabian and Pomeranian tribes in what is now East Germany … fiercely resisted Christianization, since it was associated among them with foreign invasion” (p. 16). Slavic Paganism is extracted from texts beginning with Procopius’ account of Justinian’s wars. Procopius notes the supreme god of the South Slavs is a lightning/storm deity (often identified with East Slavic Perun), and mentions the vila, water nymphs like the East Slavic rusalki). He mentions other spirits, likely the male water spirits (vodyanoy, wodnik, vodenjak), woodland spirits (leshy), and house spirits (domovoy), known only from nineteenth century folklore. Boniface of Devon, Thietmar of Merseburg, and Ibn Fadlan confirm widow immolation (Indo-Iranians and Indians had the same practice), Herodotus noted it among the Thracians, and Procopius among the Germanic Heruli. The ritual significance of Khortitsa Island was described by Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. Widukind of Corvey and Leo the Deacon also contributed fragments of knowledge.

Part II, “Gods,” opens with the fact that texts only preserve the names of gods from the eleventh century onwards. A number of relevant medieval texts are briefly described and in Chapter 5 the focus shifts to individual deities, first of all Svarozhich, a god of the Liutici federation, whom Bruno of Querfurt compares to the demon Belial and Thietmar identifies as a god of the Redarrii, supported on various points by Adam of Bremen and Helmold of Bosau. Svarozhich is mentioned in both East and West Slavic contexts, which is unique, though Kalik and Uchitel observe that his name may derive from the German svart (black) and he may in fact be a version of the Christian devil. Chapter 6 focuses on Sventovit, revered on Wittow Island, on the Pomeranian coast of the Baltic Sea, which is linked to Rügen Island, an important religious site. Saxo Grammaticus mentions a cult statue that resembles “the existing stone statue known as the ‘Zbruch idol’, found in 1848 in the Zbruch River in Podolia (in Ukraine)” (p. 55), which may be a forgery. Also worshiped on Rügen Island were three gods – Rugevit, Porevit, and Porenut (sometimes identified with the Estonian Turupid) – belonging to the Rani peo-
ple. Two more Rügen deities are Pizamar and Chernoglav, the latter of whom the authors link to the Christian devil, again. Helmold of Bosau describes the religion of his homeland, Wagria (modern Holstein). The god Prove was worshipped in a sacred grove, whereas Podaga had a built temple. The Pomeranian god Triglav (three-headed) is connected by Kalik and Uchitel with the Christian Trinity, despite verified triplism in Indo-European cultures. There is also the war god Gerovit/ Yarovit and Pripegala, a possible god of the Baltic Prussians, and the gods venerated by Vladimir I before Kiev was Christianised (two triads, Perun, Dazh’bog, and Stribog, which were Slavic, and Khors, Simar’gl and Mokosh’, which were Iranian in origin). Finally, there is Volos (Veles). This section concludes that there was no unified Slavic pantheon, only local gods, and the authors conclude that “[e]ight out of 22 attested Slavic gods were of Christian origin (Chernobog, Sventovit, Rugevit, Porevit, Gerovit, Chernoglav, Triglav, and Volos), six had non-Slavic names: the Germanic Svarozhich, the Estonian Tutupid, the Baltic Pripegala, and the Iranian Khors, Simar’gl, and Mokosh’” (p. 83). They argue that Christian saints were transformed into Pagan gods (using some ill-informed speculations about “voodoo in the Caribbean, Louisiana and Brazil” (p. 84). Fine distinctions between Vodun, Candomble, Santeria, Macumba and other Afro-Caribbeans elude Kalik and Uchitel, and they are unaware that voodoo is a derogatory and colonialist term no longer used in scholarly analysis.

Part III, “Heroes,” finds in contrast that foundation legends have a pan-Slavic character; the authors cite Cosmas of Prague’s *Chronicle of the Czechs* (1119-1125), the twelfth century *Deeds of the Princes of the Poles*, Wincenty Kadłubek’s *Chronicles of the Kings and Princes of Poland* (1190-1208), the *Chronicle of Great Poland*, the *Chronicle of Dalimil*, and Jan Długosz’s (1414–1480) *Annals or Chronicle of the Famous Kingdom of Poland* are described. From Chapter 18 eponymous heroes and heroines are described and information regarding the religious and ritual practices of the Slavis peoples are extracted from national epics. Chapter 23, “Reconstruction,” opens with the assumption that “that the Slavic foundation legends reported in the Slavic national historiography go back to the proto-Slavic totemic myth” (p. 127). This, in short, is a tale in which: “the common Slavic Forefather, the snake, was killed by his son, the raven, who was killed in turn by his brother, the white eagle. The latter was exiled for fratricide and sovereignty passed to their sister, the swan” (p. 129). There is an interesting Appendix on “Indo-European
Hippomancy” and another on “Zmey Gorynych”, the Slavic dragon. Overall, the book is a disappointment, because the authors have taken pains to learn something about the Indo-European cultural and religious instantiations (ancient and medieval) and accept the heroic foundation legends, while continuing to ascribe to the politically correct narrative of Christianity being all that is known from the Middle Ages (Paganism being non-textual leaves no traces). It’s not surprising that Christian authors thought that Pagan gods were demonic or should be likened to devils from the Bible. It is, however, depressing to learn that twenty-first century scholars think this is valid, despite the inroads made by postcolonial and decolonising methodologies (and the horrific reality of how modern Indigenous cultures have been brought low by Early Modern Christian Europe and its historical offspring). Those interested in Slavic Paganism will find this book chiefly useful as a sourcebook for texts, and will view the interpretative framework as of secondary importance.