

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# RUSSIAN MYTHOLOGY

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**Overview** Mythology takes as its subject the significance of the objects that exist in the world, natural events, and the private matters and objects of social life from an emotional point of view. Mythology is the identification of humanity with nature, making the powers of nature one's own in the imagination. In the face of natural events, the first humans were powerless, both before the events within themselves and those that came from outside. Therefore, it is directed at describing events and objects that were considered taboo, or embodying and personalizing events or objects that the mind could not grasp. Identifying itself with all living and non-living thing from the very beginning, the human mind tried to express them through various objects and symbols. The rustle of leaves, thunder, bird calls, and lightning striking – all these natural events were perceived by humans as a sign of good or evil, life or death.

The subject of Russian mythology consists of the belief of the Russian people, who planted fields, worked the land, and spent their lives together with animals such as eagles and wolves, that supernatural powers directed the fates of men, and the symbols and deities that before and after the coming of Christianity were passed down from generation to generation.

Mythology sustains its existence in all cultures in both oral and written sources. It is possible to find knowledge about the mythology of the Indo-European people in the earliest literary works. Therefore, for example, we can gain a great deal of information about Greek mythology from Homer's epics. We can learn about Russian mythology, however, from priests' manuscripts, epics, or some treaties signed by princes (Oleg, 971; Igor, 945). Apart from these, religious folk beliefs, ceremonies, songs, and stories play an important role in providing mythological information.

## ANCIENT PERIOD

**Paganism:** The pre-Christian Rus' were pagan that revered numerous gods and spirits, particularly the gods of the heavens, and prime among them was Perun, the god of thunder. Traces of old pagan beliefs and practices have survived up to the present in chronicles, folklore, some folk traditions.

**Russian Myths and Deities:** Prior to accepting Christianity, the pagan Russians worshipped the earth, trees, stones, fire, the sun and water. It is possible to see traces of these beliefs in the one of the oldest manuscripts, *The Tale of Bygone Years* (Povest' vremennyh let).

The first find from archaeological excavations is the Zbruchskiy statue, found at the foot of the Zbruch river in the vicinity of the city of Gussyatin. This statue, three meters in length, made of limestone, and in the form of a square column has three levels. The upper level is dedicated to the gods, the middle to human beings and the bottom level is the underworld.

Some of the gods of pagan Rus' mentioned in *The Tale of Bygone Years* were Perun, Volos, Molosh, Svarog.

**Perun:** The greatest and most important god during the Russians' time as pagans was the god of the sky, lightning, storms and war, Perun. Perun was also the protector of princes and soldiers in battle. In times of war soldiers swore oaths in his name. Perun was depicted as a bellowing bull, or a male goat; he ensured fertility by sowing seeds and moistening the earth with rains. Perun's symbol was the oak tree and his weapon was the axe. The axe was Perun's lightning and the oak tree drew this lightning to itself. The flames created by Perun's lightning striking the earth could not be extinguished. It was for this reason that the common people cursed someone by saying "May Perun strike you dead!" (Chtob tebya Perun ubil!). The Russian sacrificed chickens, goats, oxen and even humans to images of Perun made of oak wood. In Novgorod, an image of Perun was located on the top of a hill, and in that location was seen as a symbol of power.

**Volos:** The god Volos appears as Perun's opposite; whereas the image of Perun, the greatest of the gods, was placed on the top of a hill, and when agreements were signed in time of war a prince's soldiers swore by the god of war Perun, the others swore by the god of the underworld, Volos who protected all of Russia. Volos' reign in the underworld was represented by death and animal herds, and it was believed that he controlled the demons of the underworld. His place was not a hill, but under a tree or a stone. Volos' place was taken by St. Vlasii in Christianity. St. Vlasii was a shepherd who protected domestic animals and herds, and represents a martyr. St. Vlasii is depicted as a man mounted on a horse, or seated on a rock surrounded by sheep, cattle and horses. In Russia today, the colloquial words *volosatik* and *volosen'* are known to derive from Volos, and both are used with the meaning 'evil spirit' or 'devil'.

**Mokosh:** Another image found on a hilltop in Kiev was that of the goddess Mokosh. Mokosh was the goddess of darkness, wet rainy nights, sacred wells, springs, sexuality and fertility. Her role was make the work of men and animals easier, and to protect them. After the acceptance of Christianity she was replaced by St. Paraskeva. Another form of this goddess was as the goddess of death and rebirth Baba Yaga. In one Russian tale, *Beautiful Vasilisa (Vasilisa prekrasnaya)*, she appears as an evil old woman who eats children and threatens them with death. Today mythological female heroes called *Mokushi* or *Mokoshi* are talked about in northwestern Russia. These women are depicted spinning wool. In addition, the names *Mara*, *Morena*, *Markita* and *Makrina* are said to be connected to Mokosh.

**Svarog:** Svarog, god of the heavens and the universe, was considered the father of the gods. The gods of the sun, lightning, clouds, wind, fire and water were begotten by him. The sun god Dazhbog, son of Svarog, distributed wealth prosperity and abundance to humanity with his fruitful rays. It was believed that his marriage to the goddess of spring, Lada, brought prosperity and happiness to the world.

**Divinities and Supernatural Powers:** In addition to the gods the Russians believed in minor divinities and supernatural powers. These were the spirits, demons, sprites, fairies and giants that lived in the forests, trees, sky, water and houses. These types of mythological beings were far more numerous than the gods; there was only one pantheon of major divinities, but the number of minor mythological beings varied by location.

The Russians' old religion was based on the influence of agriculture; for these people the concepts of earth, fields, forests, rivers, courtyards, houses and barns held great importance in their daily lives. For this reason their religious thoughts and emotions always developed within this framework of their lives. These people whose livelihoods were obtained from the earth sought the help of supernatural powers to protect them from the worries and dangers they encountered in their daily lives and to be able to live in peace. They even went so far as to give them a corner of their homes.

**Domovoy:** The most important of these supernatural powers, the *Domovoy* or 'house spirit', protected the house. Every house had its Domovoy and every part of the house had its unique characteristics.

Figures of Domovoy were generally made from wood, and depicted a bearded, white-haired old man. Sometimes Domovoy could appear as a rabbit, dog or cat. They were generally regarded as an invisible being in the house, and it was believed that anyone who looked at a Domovoy would go blind, or even die.

**Ovinnik:** Another household spirit was the *Ovinnik* 'the granary giant', who lived in the granary and resembled a cat the size of a black dog with eyes that burned like coals. In the granaries where the heads of wheat were dried was an oven located in a depression in the floor. The Ovinnik lived here, stoked the oven's fire, and went to the threshing floor where he threshed the wheat. His duty was to protect those living in the house, and to ensure their happiness. However, it was known that he never forgave the inhabitants' mistakes and misbehavior and punished them.

**Khlevnik:** The spirit that protected the stables and barns outside of the house was the *Khlevnik*, 'stable giant'. The Khlevnik herded the animals outside, cleaned them and fed them. His place was the back corner of the stable, where he watched the horses and cattle. Other animals did not attract his attention. In addition to being the protector of the animals, the Khlevnik was also regarded as a trouble-maker who could sometimes do them harm.

**Leshiy:** The protective spirit of nature and the forests beyond the house was the Leshiy, 'forest giant'. He lived in dense forests and fed on the moisture on the trees. He took the height of any tree and shrub and could assume the shape of any animal. Unlike humans, he wore his clothes reversed, and could uproot even the strongest tree. The Leshiy is depicted as a creature wearing animal furs, and having a blue tail, protruding green eyes, long eyebrows, long hair, a green goatee and horns.

**Rusalka:** The water nymphs, *Rusalka* (plural, *Rusalki*), were the spirits of unbaptized young girls who had drowned in rivers or had been killed. They lived in river beds or lake shores. They sometimes appeared as nude, fair-skinned, beautiful girls with long hair; sometimes they had the form of a mermaid, a frog, or even a mouse. The water nymphs lived in the water and only came out of the water for a few days in summer to dry out. The days when they emerged from the water brought plenty and prosperity to the fields and crops. However, the Rusalki were lonely and constantly sought companions to spend their lives with. They attracted men with their beautiful dances and songs. Men who became enchanted by the Rusalki fell into their trap and eventually either drowned in a river or became a slave of the Rusalki. Therefore, the Rusalki represented darkness, underground water and death.

The Russians conducted their religious ceremonies, prayers and supplications in these forests and temples; in these ceremonies they rang bells and played trumpets wildly, and danced hopping and jumping. Sacrifices were offered during these ceremonies for the fulfillment of their prayers. Animal and human bones, skulls, vessels, coal and ashes have been found in archaeological excavations. Offering such sacrifices continued in Russia until the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century.

## POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

**Christianity:** With the conversion to Christianity in the 10<sup>th</sup> century in the reign of Vladimir I, many pagan practices and beliefs continued to survive, but in new forms that were acceptable to the Orthodox Church. According to the Primary Chronicle, Vladimir I had constructed a shrine to the pagan gods, but ordered the images of the gods destroyed the day before he was baptized. The images may have been destroyed, but the gods they had represented often reappeared in the guise of Christian saints. In a notable example, Perun's thunder-making powers were transferred to the prophet Elijah. The forms of magic and divination previously practiced by pagan sorcerers was now sometimes practiced by the lower clergy.

**Dvoeverie (dual faith-ditheism):** The merging of pre-Christian beliefs and rituals with Christian ones is frequently labelled 'dual faith'. The pagan thunder-god Perun, equated with Thor by the Varangians, was identified with the biblical prophet Elijah, and Veles, god of wealth and cattle, became Saint Blasius. Pagan traditions were especially prevalent in rural communities and the borderlands. Many peasants merged Christian beliefs and practices with the older, local pagan practices. This dual faith meant that many Russians were publicly and overtly Orthodox, but still held to the old ways in the privacy of their homes.

**Folktales (Bylina):** Although Christianity rapidly spread and became a part of the everyday life following Vladimir I's conversion in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, old folktales remained popular, particularly among the peasantry. The Orthodox clergy, on the other hand, opposed the survival of folklore in any form due to the fact that many of these traditions contained elements of pre-Christian beliefs, concepts, practices and ways of thought. Among these were tales of daily life before Christianity, animal tales, magic, initiation rites, ancestor worship, totemic beliefs, and human sacrifice.

The epic tales that depict the lives of heroes and champions such as *Svyatogor*, *Il'ya Muromets*, *Dobrynya Nikitich*, *Mikula Selyaninovich*, *Alyosha Popovich* and *Sadko*; and their triumphs are the best examples for folktales in Russian history.

## Discussion/Questions

1. Describe the deities the pagan Russians worshiped that were absorbed into Christianity.
2. What sources provide us with information about Russian mythology?

3. Discuss about the reflections of paganism in Russian Orthodoxy today and provide relevant examples.
- 4- How did Christianity regard pagan beliefs? In what way could there be a connection between mythical thinking and religion today?

**Reading**

- 1- Blakey, Kate, "Early Russian Folk Epics", *The Slavonic Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Mar., 1923), pp. 525-532.
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- 4-Ivanits, L., *Russian Folk Belief*, ME Sharp, Inc., 1989.
- 5-Kennedy, M.D., *Encyclopedia of Russian and Slavic Myth and Legend*, ABC-CLIO Inc., 1998.
- 6-Bailey, J. and Ivanova, T., *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, ME Sharpe, Inc., 1998.