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ILINDEN IN THE CYCLE OF A MYTHICAL STORY

Andrej PLETERSKI
ZRC - SAZU Ljubljana
pleterski@zrc-sazu.sl

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Abstract: *Natural events were explained by a mythical narrative about a mythical couple creating prosperity through continuous sexual intercourse in which they live in unity. When their communion disintegrates, a period of scarcity follows. The sacrificial victim on Ilinden (the day of St. Elijah) is the sacrifice of the sexually exhausted member of the mythical couple in the moment directly following the period of sexual activity. There is no doubt that Ilinden as a date is already Christianised and does not stand in the same place of the calendar as the original date of the autumn sacrifice, which was probably the 20th of August, the end of the summer-third of the year, which begins on the 23rd of April.*

Keywords: *Slavs, mythology, calendar, Macedonia, Ilinden*

Human existence is dependent on what happens in nature. With the global climatic changes that everyone is now beginning to feel on their own skin, fewer and fewer people believe in human omnipotence. Such belief had arisen as a result of excessive enthusiasm during the industrial age, when rapid technological progress seemed, briefly, to indicate that humanity was capable of everything. In pre-industrial times, people had felt a deep sense of awe at the forces of nature, since even a minor weather disturbance was enough to cause hunger and death. Even in those times, however, people thought it was possible to influence these natural forces, and thus a system of magical acts was developed and applied. This system changed and evolved according to needs dictated by changes in the environment, economy, society, and way of life. The interrelation of individual system variants is the subject of future research, but a solid structure, known and used by ancient Slavs, has already emerged[1].

This structure has different manifestations. The narrative form can be called a **mythical story** that explains the changes that take place in nature with the annual repetition of the seasons. Events are seen as running in a circle with neither a beginning nor an end. These cyclical changes are illustrated by the story of a mythical couple, a woman and a man, who spend the summer part of the year as spouses in continuous harmonious intercourse. With their coital energy they produce fertility, which in turn creates prosperity. The time when they are united

1 Andrej Pleterski, *Kulturni genom. Prostor in njegovi ideogrami mitične zgodbe* [Studia mythologica Slavica, Supplementa, supplementum 10] (Ljubljana : Založba ZRC, 2014).



Figure 1. The Zbruch Idol, embossed pillar. Found in Ukraine, kept in the Muzeum Archeologiczne, Krakow, Poland (drawing: Andrzej Waldemar Moszczyński).

is a period of abundance in the cycle of the year. In autumn, however, their union collapses: the man grows old and loses his sexual power, while the female figure consequently cripples him (castrates him, takes his weapon), swallows him, encloses him in a cavity. With the acquired weapon (fire, lightning, an axe, etc.) the infertile woman rules during winter. The man is apparently dead (sleeping), but in spring he is rejuvenated, and can leave the woman's cavity. Then he beats the elderly woman, forces her into sex and consequently restores her youth and fertility[2]. In addition to this story about a fertile and an infertile pair, which is symbolised by the number four, there is another version with three characters who live in a love triangle. In this triangle there is one woman and two men. The woman has intercourse with one of the men in winter and with the other one in summer (see below).

When it comes to the **figural form** of the mythical structure of the ancient Slavs, the most sophisticated tangible example is a stone pillar called the Zbruch Idol (**Fig. 1**). The pillar is made of local limestone, figurally decorated in shallow relief. It was discovered during the dry summer of 1848 in the riverbed of the Zbruch under the mountain of Bogit in present-day south-western Ukraine, then the border between Austria and Russia. Since 1851 it has been kept in Krakow in Poland. Its preserved length is 257 cm (the broken-off base remained in the river), and the cross-section measures 29–32 cm[3].

While this is not the place for a detailed analysis of its structure with argumentation[4], it should be noted that the pillar has three tiers of figures that illustrate the three levels of the universe: the upper world, the middle world, and the underworld. A hat covers and unites all within a whole.

The upper, heavenly world, features the story of the fertile couple. They are depicted as a full-bosomed woman and a man (half-horse) with a sabre below the waist. The infertile couple consists of an unarmed male figure and a woman with withered breasts and a ring (a lightning bolt) in her hand.

2 Pleterski, *Kulturni genom*, 7.
3 Gabriel Leńczyk, "Światovid zbruczański," *Materiały archeologiczne* 5 (1964).; Anna Tyniec, "Światowid ze Zbrucza," 2011, http://www.ma.krakow.pl/pradzieje/swiatowid/.
4 For that see: Pleterski, *Kulturni genom*, 363–376.



Figure 2. Triglavca near Divača, Slovenia. Devač (above) and Deva (below).



Figure 3. Baba (right) and Dedec (left). Prelože, Slovenia.

In the underworld there is a three-headed figure with only one body, i.e. Triglav (literal meaning: three-headed). It consists of a female figure representing earth, a hairy man representing water, and a beardless male representing fire. These are the functions of fire or lightning (Perun), water (Veles) and earth (Baba). United in Triglav, they compose life energy. Fire controls the upper world, water controls the underworld, and earth controls the middle world, as is explicitly shown by the positioning of the woman's hands.

In the middle world depicted on the Zbruch Idol there are four human figures holding hands and whirling around. They imitate the fertile and infertile couple of the upper world. The fertile man once had an erectile protuberance (now broken off), while the infertile one is without it. Beside the fertile woman there is a depiction of a child, while the infertile one is without a child.

The task of humans is to connect the triple underworld with the quadruple world of the celestials. This happens in a springtime wedding ceremony that brings life energy to the celestial pair so that they can begin their sexual intercourse and procreate prosperity[5].

As can be seen in the tradition of Karst, a region in south-western Slovenia, mythical structures were also to be found in space. The work of Boris Čok, who collected the traditions of Karst stonecutters and their marks[6], as well as describing the area of the villages of Lokev and Prelože and their traditions[7], provides a perfect confirmation of the upper mythical structure of the Zbruch Idol. The tradition of the area of Prelože knows the fertile mythical pair of Deva and Devač, constantly fecundating in the cave of Triglavca (**Fig. 2**), as well as the infertile couple, i.e. the disputing spouses Baba and Dedec (**Fig.3**). The people of Prelože had a shrine called Beli križ ("white cross") in which the cross of Svetovid was composed of stones, with the cross in a circle and four stones in each quarter and four rocks on the perimeter (**Fig. 4**).

A preserved explanation claims that Triglav is a god with three heads. One head keeps an eye on the sky, the second on the ground, and the third on the underground. Three heads also mean that there are three gods in one[8]. It is especially worth noting that one of the gods was a female who married one of the other two gods in winter and the other god in summer

5 Pleterski, *Kulturni genom*, 368– 370.

6 Boris Čok, "Kamnoseško izročilo o znamenjih na portalih in kolonah po Krasu," In *Nesnovna krajina Krasa*. edited by Katja Hrobat Virloget and Petra Kavrečič (Koper : Založba Univerze na Primorskem, 2015), 99–134.

7 Boris Čok, *V siju mesečine* [Studia mythologica Slavica, Supplementa, supplementum 5] (Ljubljana : Založba ZRC.4, 2012).

8 Čok, *Mesečine*, 22–23.



Figure 4. Beli križ, Prelože, Slovenia. Reconstruction according to descriptions by locals (the basic photo by Boris Čok).



Figure 5. Cave Triglavca with its three stalactites, Slovenia.

(narrative of Marija Božeglav, information by Boris Čok). This is a description of a love triangle of one woman with two men. The people of Prelože saw the three heads of Triglav in three stalactites in the cave of Triglavca (**Fig. 5**).

The four quarters of Svetovid's Cross are supposed to represent the four geographical directions, four periods of life and four seasons, while the four dots were there as the ingredients of the world , i.e. earth, fire, water, and air. Masons, however, sometimes used an additional four lines instead of dots in a circle, making a total of eight lines. The four lines forming the cross were more pronounced than the other four in between. This underlines the ability that gave the god its name: Svetovid was an old deity who supervised the whole world[9]. This resolves the etymological enigma of the name Svetovid[10], which means supervising the world.

At Beli križ a ceremony of rotation was held through which the spring's fertility and abundance were retrieved[11]. It was neither Triglav nor Svetovid that were evoked in ritual songs, however, but Dajbog. In the tradition of Prelože, Dajbog is described as a separate character. His mason mark is a circle, representing the Sun god with the old name Dejbuh = Dajbog – a god who gives all, and without whom all would disappear[12]. According to the tradition, the number seven brings together two old gods, Svetovid and Triglav, who have a total of seven heads[13]. This is the explanation behind the number 7, as well as the number 34, which is also composed of 3 and 4. The circle (also a wreath and multi-petalled flower) comprising 3 and 4 means that only together can Triglav (the life force) and Svetovid (fate and spacetime), both of which are connected with the earth, compose the whole of Dajbog. In this respect the Sun is, of course, only the most obvious manifestation of Dajbog.

The all-uniting Dajbog, the sum of Triglav and Svetovid and therefore seven-headed as well as almighty, matches the oldest surviving description of the Slavic religion from the middle of the 6th century, written by the Byzantine author Procopius (De bello Gothico III, c. 14). Procopius claims that the Slavs "believe that one god, the maker of lightning, is alone lord of all

9 Čok, "Kamnoseško izročilo," 112.
10 Radoslav Katičić, "Vidova gora i sveti Vid," *Studia mythologica Slavica* 13 (2010): 15–32.
11 Čok, *Mesečine,* 34.; Andrej Pleterski, "Preplet 3 in 4, preloška Beli Križ in Triglavca ter Zbruški idol," In *Nesnovna krajina Krasa.* edited by Katja Hrobat Virloget and Petra Kavrečič, 21–33 (Koper : Založba Univerze na Primorskem, 2015), 29.
12 Čok, "Kamnoseško izročilo," 109.
13 Čok, "Kamnoseško izročilo," 125.
14 Viljo J. Mansikka, *Die Religion der Ostslaven. I Quellen* [FF Communications, No. 43, Vol. X.] (Helsinki

things"[14]. Only Dajbog can master everything. Even Triglav is insufficiently capable, in spite of what I once mistakenly argued[15]. It still holds true, however, that Procopius does not claim that the Slavs have only one God; rather he claims that only one god is the master of everything. With this in mind, the Zbruch Idol can now certainly be called Dajbog. Those who interpreted it as representing Triglav were right at least to a certain extent, as well as those who interpreted him as Svetovid. The upper part is really the four-headed Svetovid, comprising four gods, and the lower part is really the three-headed Triglav, comprising three gods. In the middle there is ourselves, humans.

Mythical structures also have a **time dimension**, since they are associated with changes in nature throughout the year. The arrival of the young god who helps to create fertility in spring is undoubtedly connected with the 23rd of April. In the Christian calendar this is the day of St. George (Gjurgjovden), and it is very likely that the old Slavic name of the potent groom was Jarilo[16].

I would like to draw attention to a calendar that is generally not well known but which is important for understanding the old Slavic calendar. Discovered and described by Branimir Gušić[17] in Malesija, on the border between Montenegro and Albania, it is an old calendar of Albanian shepherds, whose year began on the day of St. George (the celebration begins on the 24th of April). The day of St. Demetrius (October 26th) marks the middle of the year, and the two halves of the year lasted 180 days each. The day of St. George was celebrated for three days and the day of St. Demetrius for two days. These five days were not counted, meaning they had a year of 365 days. This is undoubtedly a solar calendar that followed the position of the Sun on the horizon, thus showing they were unaware of the problem of leap years.

With the help of the calendar we can figure out the importance of the days of St. George or St. Demetrius in calendars. From the 26th of October up to and including the 23rd of April there are 180 days, i.e. a rounded half of the year. If we observe the sunrises and sunsets on the horizon from the same point in the plane, virtual lines can be drawn joining the sunrise on the 23rd of April and the sunset on the 26th of October, as well as vice versa, i.e. the sunset on the 23rd of April and the sunrise on the 26th of October (**Fig. 6**). Of course, any other opposite pair of dates could have been chosen, but the 23rd of April has another important feature that no other dates have. On the 23rd of April the sun rises and sets at the same place on the horizon as on the 20th of August. From and including the 23rd of April up to and including the 20th of August there are 120 days, which is rounded up to one third of the year. This third begins with the arrival of the potent mythical male character in the spring, who rejuvenates the mythical female character, and they spend the next four months in constant intercourse. The third ends with their separation, when the mythical female character ascends to power.

The separation is a conflict situation, and traditional storytelling describes it in a number of ways, though without ascribing it an actual date. One of the few Slavic versions of the mythical story that describes the autumnal mythical confrontation in conjunction with an actual calendar date is the story about the origin of the Russian town of Yaroslavl: *Сказание о їосѿроении ґрада Ярославля* (a story of the foundation of the town of Yaroslavl). This story is preserved in a record from 1781, which is supposed to be a copy of an older, unknown manuscript, most likely from the 17th century. The latter was written with the help of older sources, perhaps from the oral tradition of Yaroslavl[18]. Among other things, the record describes

: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1922), 320.
15 Pleterski, *Kulturni genom*, 106-107.
16 Cf. Katičić, "Vidova gora."
17 Branimir Gušić, "Kalendar prokletijskih pastira," *Zbornik za narodni život i običaje Južnih Slavena* 40 (1962): 169–174.
18 Radoslav Katičić, *Božanski boj. Tragovima svetih pjesama naše pretkršćanske starine* (Zagreb –

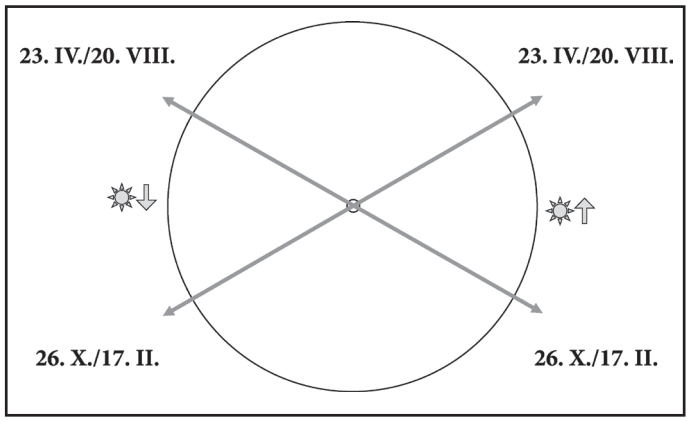


Figure 6. The sunrises and sunsets in the plain.

the worship of Volos. At present, however, we are interested in what the Kiev Prince, Yaroslav the Wise (978–1054), experienced during his visit. According to the narrative, he built the church of St. Elijah because he had slain a wild beast (*лютa звер*) with an axe on the day of St. Elijah. Despite the fact that this date is, of course, already Christian, it is still a very important event in late summer.

The division of the year marked by *Gjurgjovden* and *Mitrovden* (the day of St. Demetrius) is known also in the Macedonian folk calendar. And although Ilinden is an extremely important national holiday, its place in the folk calendar is less prominent[19]. For the interpretation I shall use the case of the village of Dejlovce, north-east of Kumanovo, where, some decades ago, Nikos Čausidis discovered a well-preserved example of a mythical landscape with surviving customs and traditions. The village has two ritual sites that are associated with certain calendar days. The sites are separated by a torrent-bed. To the west there is a stone cross called Krst where *Ivanden* (the day of St. John the Baptist) and *Gjurgjovden* (local information in 1989) were once celebrated. *Ivanden* is essentially linked to the summer solstice[20].

To the east there is a sacred oak grove and a spring called *Iliski kladenec*, where a black ram is slaughtered each year on *Ilinden* (the 2nd of August). According to village tradition, this custom arose as a response to some troubles that had affected the village. It was necessary to first plough a furrow around the village with two black oxen, led by twins, and then to slaughter a black ram[21]. In the village of Vitolište, in the region of Mariovo southeast of Prilep, a black ox is slaughtered on Ilinden for a very similar reason. In order to overcome the troubles that beset the village, a new furrow around the village must be ploughed with two black oxen-twins, and then the right ox must be slaughtered as a sacrificial victim[22].

With this we have sufficient structural matches to venture an interpretation. The sexual connotation of ploughing is well known, and the colour black denotes an old animal. The sacrificial victim on Ilinden is the sacrifice of the sexually exhausted member of the mythical couple in the

Mošćenička Draga : Ibis grafika, Katedra Čakavskog sabora Općine Mošćenička Draga, Odsjek za etnologiju i kulturnu antropologiju Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2008), 123–124, 132.

19 Љупчо Ристески, *Категориите простор и време во народната култура на Македонците* (Скопје : Матица македонска, 2005), 364–394.

20 Ристески, *Народната култура*, 390.

21 Никос Чаусидис, *Митските слики на јужните Словени* (Скопје : Мисла, 1994), 428–435.

22 Тренчо Димитриоски, *Древна цивилизација II - Мариово. Археологија, митологија, преданија* (Прилеп : Растер ком, 2002), 60.

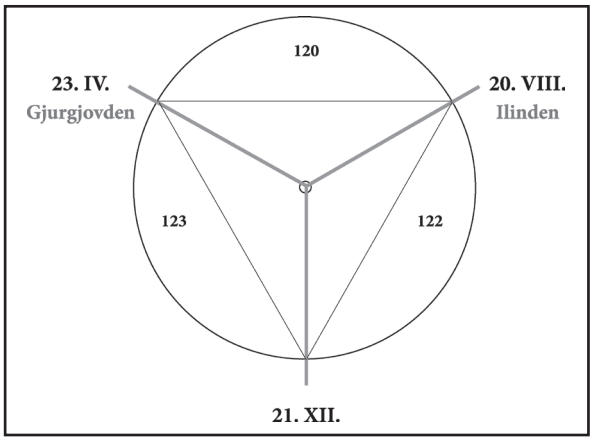


Figure 7. The three major turning points in the course of the calendar year.

moment directly after the period of sexual activity. There is no doubt that, as a date, Ilinden is already Christianised and does not stand in the same place of the calendar as the original date of the autumn sacrifice, which was probably the 20th of August, the end of the summer-third of the year (**Fig. 7**). The exceptional importance of mid-August is preserved in Catholic Christianity with the celebration of the Assumption on the 15th of August. In Macedonia the importance of this time in August is marked by a special period of twelve days, *Makaevi*, which predicts the fate of the next 12 months[23].

23 Ристески, *Народната култура*, 398.

РЕЗИМЕ́

ИЛИНДЕН ВО ЦИКЛУСОТ НА МИТСКАТА ПРИКАЗНА

Андреј ПЛЕТЕРСКИ

Природните појави се објаснети како митолошка приказна за митскиот пар којшто креира просперитет преку континуиран сексуален чин каде што парот живее во единство. Кога нивната заедница се распаѓа, следува период на немаштија. Жртвувањето на *Илинден* (денот на св. Илија) е жртвување на сексуално исцрпениот член од парот во моментот што директно следува по периодот на сексуална активност. Нема сомнение дека *Илинден* како датум е христијанизиран и не се наоѓа на истото место во календарот како оригиналниот датум за есенска жртва, што најверојатно бил на 20 август, на крајот од летната третина на годината, што започнува на 23 април.