

A Guide to Byelorussian Mythology

BY

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Until comparatively recent times one branch of Byelorussian history, namely Church history, suffered from undeserved neglect, and little or no research had been done into the cults of the pre-Christian era. The few treatises on the history of Byelorussia which have been published in the past and which deal with the pre-Christian beliefs of the Byelorussian tribes, give nothing more than a very general and vague outline. There are doubtless many reasons and difficulties which initially may have impelled historians to adopt this approach, but the subject is worthy of more attentive study, notwithstanding the obstacles; indeed, it is only through such study that the student will be able to comprehend the mentality of the early inhabitants of Byelorussia, and understand the origin and meaning of many of the ancient Byelorussian religious customs.

The significance of the study of Byelorussian mythology cannot seriously be put in doubt. Nevertheless, political developments over the last two centuries have caused a thick blanket of obscurity to be drawn over the origins and traditions of the Byelorussian people.

It should, of course, be mentioned that relatively numerous works have been compiled on the subject of Slav mythology. Authorities such as Anickov, Afanas'ev, Fomicyn, Scheppig, Bernhardt, Gorgowicz, Hanuš, Machek, Jagic, Leger, Brückner, Niederle and others besides have published many works relating to various aspects of Slav mythology, but references to a specifically Byelorussian mythological complex are unfortunately rare¹. This is perhaps the result of the extraordinary difficulties which the student of Byelorussian antiquities must invariably encounter.

One of the gravest difficulties resides in the absence of any large body of written source material. The old Byelorussian Chronicles were lost or destroyed in the course of innumerable and ruinous wars against the Mongols and the Russians, and any other books or writings which might have dealt with ancient customs or beliefs have probably suffered the same fate. Oral traditions have persisted,

1) A bibliography of the more important works on Slav mythology is given by L. Haroška in *Дахрысьціянская вера нашых продкаў, Божьим Шляхам* № 70-75, Paris 1956, b. 29 p. 1.

of course, often in great abundance, but in the course of time they have been heavily influenced by Christianity.

Another obstacle to a clear view of the subject under consideration, is the fact that during the pre-feudal period, in some of the more central East Slav principalities, attempts were made to set up a syncretized form of pagan religion by intermingling the several beliefs of various tribes. Thus, before his conversion to Christianity, Volodymir of Kiev established in his capital a kind of pantheon, in which he gathered together the images of the various tribal divinities, including those of the Byelorussian tribes. Volodymir's experiment was of short duration, coming to an end on his embracing the Christian faith, but the confusion persisted in the ancient chronicles, and occasionally also in folklore.

Consideration must also be given to the problem of the Taboo which, at least in theory, surrounded the names of the various divinities. Byelorussian folklore shows that this taboo of the sacred names was more strictly observed among the Byelorussian tribes than elsewhere. Thus one encounters the saying: "I would tell you something, but the oven is in the room." The oven was, of course, the seat of the household spirits, and by referring to their abode, one could avoid pronouncing their name. Another adage says: "Prostrate yourself in front of the thicket, and it will give you a piece of bread", — the thicket being the dwelling-place of the spirits of the countryside. Local customs provide additional evidence of the name-taboo. Thus until recent times in Palesia the name of "Trasca-Cuchna" was never spoken aloud, because, according to an ancient belief, this spirit had a keenly developed sense of hearing, and was very vindictive against those unfortunate enough to have pronounced his name. It was for this reason and to avoid offending them that the ancient Byelorussians gave to their divinities and spirits descriptive names in addition to their proper names. In doing this they brought about a confusion in nomenclature. Thus Trasca-Cuchna, the keen-eared spirit of fever, was referred to familiarly as Ciotka, and Hramavica, the wife of the god Piarun, also bore the very similar name of Ciocia. Another instance is provided by the name Dzied, which was used to describe not only an ancestor spirit, but also the great divinity Bielboh. After the reception of Christianity, the Christian chroniclers tended to disregard the name-taboo, — and it should not be forgotten that they would have had little intention of or interest in providing an exact representation of the pagan religion of times past. It might also be argued with some force, that the name-taboo not only created a confusion in the nomenclature of Byelorussian demonology, but also led to the loss or disappearance of substantial parts of popular mythology.

A further obstacle to rational study was raised in the XIXth century by some authorities who, in attempting to broaden the scope of Slav mythology, introduced foreign elements borrowed

2) I. Hanuš, *Die Wissenschaft der slavischen Mythos*, Wien-Leipzig 1842.

from other nations and cultures. Thus Hanuš, who had a keen interest in India, was always attempting to establish parallels with Hindu mythology². Other authors referred back to Iranian traditions, whilst others still endeavoured to establish links with German mythology³. These theories appear to have left their mark on some of the contemporary collections of folklore. In recent times, some Byelorussian ethnologists such as Chmara, have sought to follow the theories of Hanuš, but experience has shown that such strained analogies contribute little to positive research on the subject, and merely serve to confuse the issues.

According to the classical textbooks of Byelorussian history, the religion of the early Byelorussians took the form of a paganism based on the deification of the forces of Nature. This is true only of the more recent periods. The question arises as to what form religion took in the more distant past. Had the religious faith of the earliest Slavic tribes always been polytheistic in essence? On a close examination of all the available evidence, one comes of necessity to the conclusion that the primitive religion of all the Slavs was essentially monotheistic. Some historians, in dealing with the question of Slav mythology, have readily accepted this conclusion, though it is significant to note that the majority have sought to adopt the opposite viewpoint. Those familiar with Slav mythology will remember the testimony of Procopius of Caesarea (VIth c.) concerning the beliefs of the early Slavs⁴. He states categorically that the Slavs numbered amongst their gods a single ruler of the universe and supreme Master, to whom all others owed their origin. Similarly Holmond records in his *Chronica Slavorum*, compiled in about 1167-1168, that among the many gods of the Slavs, there was one more powerful than the others, whose realm was in the skies, and who commanded the lesser divinities⁵. Attempts have of course been made to cast doubts on the reliability of these testimonies, because the authors were Christian and their writings therefore tendentious, though no real evidence of any bias has been produced. Other significant factors, such as the existence among the Lusatian Serbs of a being known as *Praboh*, and the references made by Ebo to a paramount divinity among the Pomeranian Polabes called *Triglav*, have also been discounted as "an obviously later doctrine."⁶

On examining Byelorussian folklore, however, one finds many legends and tales, quite evidently of pre-Christian origin, to which

3) F. Leonhard, *Falche Slawengöter*, Brno-München-Wien 1945; E. Wienecke, *Untersuchungen zur Religion der West-Slawen*, Leipzig 1940.

4) Cf.: Procopius, *De Bello Gotico*, III, 14.

5) Helmond, *Chronica Slavorum*, I, 84: "Inter multiforma vero deorum numina... unum deum in caelis imperitantem ilium prepotentem celestia tantum curare has vero distributis officiis obsequentes de sanguine eius processisse et unumquemque eo praestatiorem, quo proximiorum illi deo deorum."

6) Л. Гарошка, *Дахрысьцянская вера нашых продкаў*, Божым Шляхам, No. 70-75, Paris 1956, б. 30.

classical Slavists might have done well to refer. Among the tales collected by Karski and Federowski are several which attribute the creation of the world to a being who had no proper name, but was referred to as the "god of gods." Other stories, perhaps of even greater antiquity, recount the various deeds of this divinity, who walked the earth disguised as an old man. It is noteworthy that these tales also say nothing of the proper name of the god, except occasionally when he is referred to as *Bielboh*. All this might suggest that the early Byelorussians had a basically monotheistic approach to religious matters, and that in speaking of the paramount god, they felt no specific need to distinguish him from other created beings. Even in later times, when other mythological beings had entered into the religion of the people, the idea of a supreme deity persisted. It is of considerable interest to note that, in recent times, the Soviet historian Deržavin has placed himself among those who hold the view that the religion of the ancient Slavs was monotheistic. According to Deržavin, among the East Slavs "more exalted than Piarun, and superior to him, there must have been a deity called *Niebo* (the sky), who was the paramount deity, the only great god."⁷

Taking into account all the arguments in support of the theory that the early Byelorussians had essentially monotheistic beliefs, it seems certain that these beliefs were neither the confused heritage of some Indo-European monotheistic concept, as Niederle suggested, nor the product of some later theogeny, as other ethnographers have thought, but were beliefs as ancient as the Eastern Slav peoples themselves.

Who, one might ask, was the supreme deity of the Byelorussian tribes during the period in which mythology developed? Some have mistakenly considered that it was Piarun, though this has now been disproved. In practice, the Byelorussian tribes worshipped as the paramount divinity the god *Bielboh*, otherwise called *Bialun*, who was sometimes referred to as *Niebo* (the sky). As he was considered to be the begetter of all the other gods, he was familiarly known as *Dzied*. Some writers, such as Nehring, have sought to disprove the very existence of *Bielboh* in Slav mythology⁸, and Brückner not only doubted the existence of *Bielboh*, but also of *Čarnaboh*⁹. Although the opinions of these latter authorities are very weighty, their views show one important weakness — neither Nehring nor Brückner show in their works any knowledge of Byelorussian mythology: *a contrario*, it might well be argued that *Bielboh* was only known to Byelorussian mythology. This indeed was the opinion of Adam Kirkor. Drawing on the rich sources of folklore, he maintained that, in Byelorussian

7) Н. Державин, *Славяне в древности*, Москва 1946, бб. 134, 136.

8) W. Nehring, *Der Name Belbog in der slavischen Mythologie*, Archiv für slavischen Philologie, Band XXV, Berlin 1903, s. 69.

9) A. Brückner, *Mitologia słowiańska*, Kraków 1918, st. 133; see also A. Wienecke, *Czorneboh und Bielboh — eine quellenkritische Studie aus dem Gebiet der slavischen Religionsgeschichte*, BGH, 1927, Band IV, Hft 6, ss. 278-280.

popular belief, Bielboh was venerated as the "praboh", the god who gave the enchanted hammer to Piarun to fight against the god of evil, Čarnaboh, and to destroy him. As Piarun, according to Byelorussian folk tradition, was the son of Bielboh, and was the brother of Ziuzia and Čarnaboh, the major hierarchy of Byelorussian mythological beings stems from Bielboh.

It is quite true that the worship of Piarun as the god of war and of thunder was widespread throughout the East Slavic world, and was particularly popular with princes and their companions in arms, who addressed themselves to him as a power ensuring victory in battle. Popularity was not however, a sign of superiority in any deity: the cult of Dažboh-Čors, the sun-god, although only the son of the mighty Piarun, enjoyed a considerably more favoured position in early Byelorussian mythology than that of his father.

The attributes of Bielboh or Bialun have already been cursorily mentioned. He was the *praboh* or primeaeval deity and the personification of the powers of heaven (*nieba*). The image of his divine greatness is somewhat obscured in Byelorussian mythology. According to Kirkor: "The Byelorussian believes that Bialun frequently walks the earth, and appears as an old man with a long white beard, robed in white, and bearing a staff in his hand." He was full of compassion and did nothing but good. Bialun would appear only in the daytime, when the sun was shining. Whenever he met a traveller in a forest who had lost his way, he would direct him towards the right path. Afanas'ev finds in this legend the origin of the Byelorussian proverb: »Цёмна ў лесе без Бялуна« ("The forest is dark without Bialun")¹⁰. A curious legend relates how Bialun created the earth. One day the god of gods saw floating before him a ball, from the inside of which came a plaintive mewling. On questioning the luckless prisoner, he learnt that he was a god, but a lesser one only, who implored Bialun to release him. The god of gods, ever compassionate, did so; the ball burst asunder, and there came forth a demon (possibly Čarnaboh). Bialun then told the demon of his intention to create the earth, and he bade him descend to the bottom of the sea, to bring back a handful of earth. The demon duly obeyed, but as he descended through the waters, the idea came to him that he also could create a world. He therefore collected a handful of earth from the bottom of the sea, and concealed a portion of it in his mouth, to keep for the fulfilment of his own plan. On returning to Bialun, the demon gave the handful of earth to the god of gods. Bialun then gave the command: "Earth, increase!", whereupon the handful of earth began to expand and form the dry land. But, at the same time, the portion concealed in the mouth of the demon also began to increase, so that his cheeks swelled, and the earth came spilling forth. Utterly confounded the demon turned and

10) А. Афанасьев, *Поэтическія воззрєнія славян на природу*, Том 1, Москва 1865, б. 93.

fled, leaving behind him a trail of earth which formed the mountains and hills. The Byelorussian peasants of Palessia tell that when he reached their country the demon's supply of expanding earth was exhausted, which is why their land remained forever flat, and became the Pripiac marshes.

Other homely tales tell of the kindness of Bialun. At harvest time he liked to appear in the fields and help the harvesters. Occasionally he would devise practical jokes, but always in a good-humoured way. He would go about with a purse attached to his nose, and whenever he met a good hard-working man or woman, he would ask the worker to wipe his nose. As soon as he did so, the purse would spill out gold pieces and Bialun would disappear. In Byelorussia the people still say of a fortunate man: »Мусіць пасябраваўся з Бялуном« (He must have made friends with Bialun)¹¹.

It is surmised that Bielboh-Bialun had three sons — Piarun, Ziuzia and Čarnaboh, for both the latter deities were brothers of Piarun. Mention has already been made of Čarnaboh, the god of evil. He was the husband of Marana, the goddess of death. Little is known of the attributes and exploits of Čarnaboh, except that he was involved in a struggle with the god Piarun, who vanquished him with the aid of a magic hammer given to him by his father Bielboh-Bialun. His memory survives in the folk song: *Biū na Rusi čorny boh*.¹²

Ziuzia was the terrible god of winter. Folk tradition depicts him as an ugly old man with a long grey beard. He went about clad in a white fur, bare-headed and bare-footed, having in his hand an iron staff or mace. When moved to anger he would strike the tree trunks in the forest with his staff, bringing ice and snow, and causing the winter to cast a cold shroud over the land¹³.

Piarun, being the god of thunder, war and manly virtue, was a popular deity among the warlike Slavic tribes. To those he chose to favour, he would grant victory in battle, even as he had vanquished his evil brother Čarnaboh. Byelorussian folklore shows him as being of great height, having black hair and a gold beard. He is depicted bearing two great millstones in his hands, which he would clash together — probably to make the sound of thunder. When angered he would strike down and kill those who offended him¹⁴.

The wife of Piarun was called *Žyva*, though she was also known as *Ciotia*, *Hramavica*, and occasionally as *Kaliada*¹⁵. She was worshipped as goddess of summer and of fertility, and was depicted as a beautiful woman, wearing on her head a crown of ripe ears of wheat, and

11) А. Киркор, *Белорусское Полесье*, Живописная Россия, изд. Семенов Том III, СПбг 1882, б. 273; see also Державин, op. cit., бб. 139, 152; Hanuš Ig. I., *Die Wissenschaft der slawischen Mythus*, Wien-Lemberg 1842, s. 151.

12) Н. Янчук, *О мнимонародных белорусских песнях*, Сб. Харьков. Истор. Фил. Об-ва, VIII, бб. 293-294.

13) Киркор, op. cit., бб. 236, 253.

14) Л. Гарошка, op. cit., б. 32.

15) П. Безсонов, *Белорусския песни*, Москва 1871, б. 87.

bearing fruits in her hands. She was filled with kindness and compassion towards mankind. One myth concerning her relates how Žyva-Hramavica once looked down from heaven in winter time, and saw how mankind was afflicted under the cruel and icy rule of Ziuzia. She at once took pity on their suffering and came down to earth from heaven to give birth to Piarun's child, Dažboh-Čors, the god of the sun, who would make war on Ziuzia and vanquish him. When Ziuzia learned of Žyva-Hramavica's plan, he changed himself into a bear, and gathered together a host of evil wind-spirits — the *Zaviei* — who took on the shape of a pack of wolves. With his ravenous supporters, Ziuzia set out across the snows to hunt down Hramavica and destroy her infant child, Dažboh. In order to escape her pursuers, Žyva-Hramavica changed herself into a white she-goat, and succeeded in shaking off Ziuzia and the *Zaviei* by hiding in a bed of willows. There she gave birth to her son Dažboh¹⁶. To this day in Byelorussia, at Christmas-time, there is a custom to lead around a goat, or more generally some youth dressed up to represent a goat, to the accompaniment of ritual carols. It may also be noted in passing that the early Byelorussian pagan priests were known as *kazlary* — or men who mind the goats.

The young sun-god *Dažboh-Čors*, grew up in strength and wisdom, and became known as the bestower of abundance and all riches. Together with his father Piarun, he was one of the most popular gods in all the East Slavic world, and his name is mentioned in the chronicles. He married the goddess of Spring *Lada-Liola*, and the tale of their courtship is related in an old Byelorussian song.

Lada was the daughter of the god of the sea, *Car-Mora*. She was fair of face and her tresses were long and golden. She would row on the sea in a golden boat with silver oars. One day, as Dažboh leaned out of heaven to watch her, she playfully splashed some water at him. Dažboh fell in love with Lada, and came down to earth to ask Car-Mora for her hand in marriage. The sea-god waxed angry against Dažboh, and beat him till he was senseless. But Dažboh escaped from the power of Car-Mora, and resolved to win Lada, notwithstanding her father's opposition to the match. His faithful servant, who knew the frailties of women, devised a plan. He spread out along the sea-shore a store of beautiful dresses and also a pair of wonderful green slippers, which so took the young goddess' fancy that she rowed to the shore to take them. As her boat touched the sand she was snatched away by Dažboh's servant, who took her to his master. The couple were married, and Lada, because of her beauty was called *Lala* or *Liola*¹⁷.

Dažboh and Lada had a son, *Jaryla*, who was the god of the fields, germination, strength, courage and love. He was depicted as a handsome young man, wearing a white cloak and having on his brow

16) Киркор, op. cit., 6. 252.

17) Киркор, op. cit., 6. 262; Гарошка, op. cit., б. 33.

a coronet of flowers. He rode upon a white horse, carrying a sheaf of rye in his left hand, and a human skull in his right hand. There is a myth which connects him with the burial of god. At the command of his mother Lada, he opened the gates of heaven and came down to earth, and his coming marked the beginning of spring. Indeed, his wife was *Viasna*, the goddess of spring, warmth and grace¹⁸.

In connection with his role as harbinger of spring, there existed a custom in Byelorussia among the village girls at the end of April to dress one of their number as Jaryla in a long, white cloak and a coronet of flowers. She was then seated upon a white horse, and the other girls would go in procession around her, singing:

А дзе ён нагою,
Там жыта капою,
А дзе ён зірне,
Там колас зацьвце.

Where he treads with his foot, there is abundance of rye, and where he casts his eyes, ears of wheat will spring.

It has been suggested that the Pahonia, or coat of arms of the Grand-Duchy of Lithuania and modern Byelorussia, are derived from the popular representation of the young god Jaryla¹⁹.

Of the lesser gods of Byelorussian mythology very little is known apart from their names. They may be divided into groups of gods of nature and the elements, gods of good or evil influence, and protector-gods of various crafts and occupations, though sometimes a deity might play a dual role.

Among the gods of the elements may be numbered the moon-god *Volas-Veles*, who was also mentioned in the chronicles as being the protector of herdsmen and the guardian of cattle and sheep. He was usually depicted carrying a set of bagpipes, which gave rise to the belief that he was the patron of singers and musicians. His wife was known under the name of *Dziannica*.

Svaroh was the god of the heavens and also the god of fire. He was often identified with *Dažboh*, whose name was considered to be one of the epithets of *Svaroh*²⁰. His son was *Svarožyč*, a sun-god. *Kupala* was another sun-god, perhaps the god of the mid-summer solstice. He was closely linked with a lesser known deity, *Jan* whose name frequently recurs in folksongs such as »Сёньня Купала, а заўтра Ян« (Today is Kupala, but tomorrow Jan)²¹.

In contrast to *Svaroh*, *Karačun-Siciūrat* was the god of the under-

18) Киркор, op. cit., 6. 236.

19) Т. Hryb, *Bielaruski herb Pahonia*, Iskry Skaryny, Praha 1933.

20) В. Unbegaun, *La religion des anciens slaves*. Les religions des Celtes, des Germains et des anciens Slaves, Paris 1948, pp. 406-408.

21) Киркор, op. cit., бб. 263-264.

world, a bringer of death, though he is sometimes confused with the winter-god *Ziuzia*²². *Žyžal* was the god of underworld fire.

The goddess *Pahoda* controlled the weather, though she seems to have been more a deity of fair weather. *Pašvist* on the other hand, was the god of clouds and bad weather.

There is some controversy concerning the attributes of the deity *Stryboh*. In the *Slove ab palku Iharave* he is described as the god of winds, though he appears in Byelorussian mythology as the god of water.

Among the gods of good or evil influence is found *Lad*, a god of spring, love, marriage and grace, who was in some way related to *Jaryla*. The god *Tur* was also reputed to be related to *Jaryla* and *Lad*, and has been identified on occasion with a lesser known sun-deity, *Aūsień*. He was however venerated separately as a god of fertility and strength. Another god of fertility and abundance was *Sparyš* otherwise called *Bahac* or *Roj*, though these may in fact have been synonyms of some other fertility-god. *Rada* was the goddess of intelligence and good counsel.

On the other hand, *Jaščur* was the god of plagues and epidemics. His name is still used in the Byelorussian language to describe an infectious disease which afflicts cattle. *Palandra*, another deity of ill-omen, was the goddess of rottenness, corruption, and more specifically septic fever.

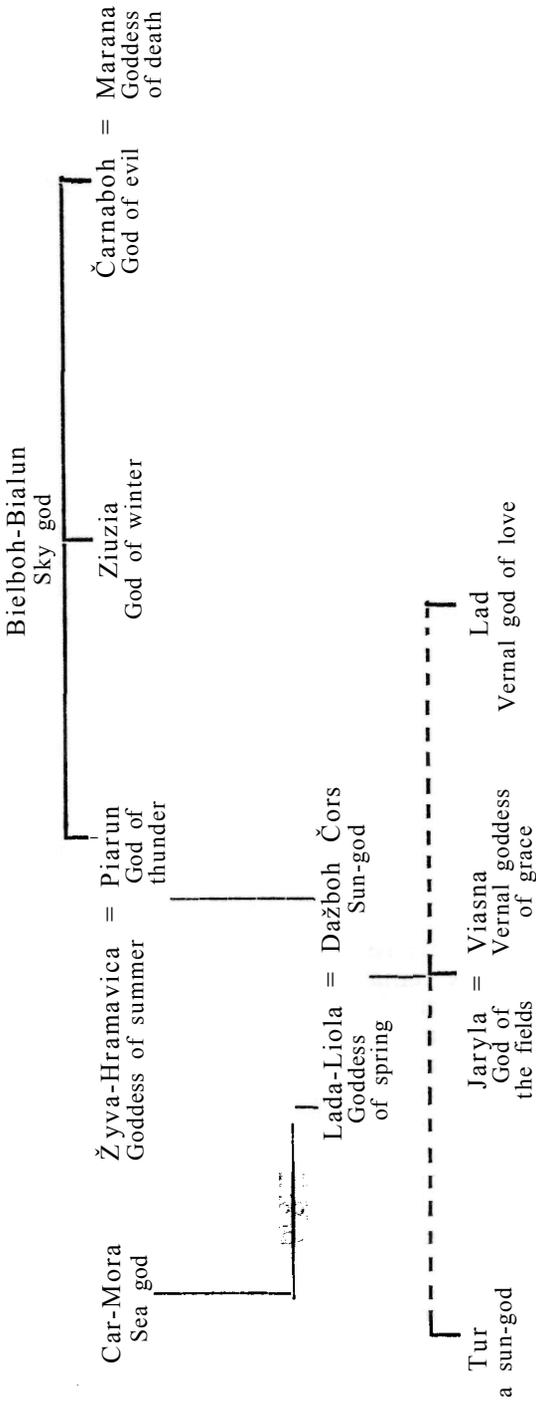
The names of a few protector-gods have come down to us. Mention has been made of the god of herdsmen, *Volas-Veles*. The goddess *Makoša* is referred to in the chronicles, but little is known of her. She is thought to be the patroness of sheep-shearing and spinning. The patron of the fields was the god *Zycień*, an autumnal deity, who was depicted as a thin little old man, of severe countenance having three eyes and touselled hair.

Of the attributes of the lesser deities *Lel*, *Dziewanna* and *Sim* nothing is known, and their names are only encountered on rare occasions.

After the gods in the mythological hierarchy, a few words must be said of the lesser spirits, demons and fairies whose names still appear in Byelorussian folklore. Numerous household sprites — some benevolent, some innocuous and others evil, traditionally haunted the Byelorussian homestead. The *Chatnik*²³ was a household sprite in the form of a bearded and long-haired mannikin dressed in a kaftan and girdle. He would rise early and frighten the cockerel till he crowed, and then awoke the householder for work. His abode was on or under the stove.

22) Киркор, op. cit., 6. 252.

23) K. Moszyński, *Kultura ludowa słowian*, Cz. II. Kultura duchowa, Kraków 1934, st. 254.



The principal Gods and Goddesses of Byelorussian Mythology

The *Chleūnik* was a malicious demon who harried the cattle and horses by riding them to exhaustion. He was afraid of magpies.

The *Čur* or *Ščur* was a benevolent domestic sprite who protected the boundaries of the family lands²⁴. Another household familiar was the female sprite *Damasia*, a hearth fairy, who reputedly lived behind the stove.

The *Dziedzia-Dziedka* was a fire sprite and took the form of a diminutive and aged manikin the size of a thumb nail. An old riddle relates to him: »Чырвоны дзедзя па жэрдачцы едзе« (A red dziedzia rides down a plank).

The elf *Kon* was a powerful being, somewhat akin to the fortuna of the Romans who would predict the future to all, even to the gods, and as such held an exalted position among the mythological beings. The *Liasuny* were forest elves, whereas *Paliasia* was the spirit of the countryside.

Other sprites were less benevolent towards mankind. Thus *Kaduk* was a malignant elf who brought about unfortunate accidents; *Kopsa* was the sprite of graveyards, and *Mara* was an evil being who misled travellers and disturbed sleepers. *Načnicy* were wicked nocturnal imps, and *Zlydni* were malignant dwarves who wrought all kinds of misfortunes. The imp *Pierapaloh* was a spirit of fright, concerning whom ethnographers have collected numerous prayers and exorcisms. *Trasca Čuchna* was the spirit of fever, whereas *Zmora* was a imp who troubled peoples sleep with nightmares.

Other malicious beings included the *Vadzianicy-kupalki*, the *pakutniki*, *visielniki*, *vaūkalaki* and *vupyry*.

Although some of the deities and sprites which have been mentioned were known to other Slavic peoples — in particular Piarun, Dažboh, Veles, Kaliada and Svaroh, most of them were encountered only in Byelorussian mythology.

Of the statues and graphic representations of the deities referred to, only a few fragments remain. In 1684, according to Kirkor, a solid gold image was unearthed which appears to have been a statue of Piarun²⁵. Other idols have not been possible to identify. Some images after their disappearance, left traces in the geographical nomenclature of local villages. Thus, in the neighbourhood of Kleck, one discovers villages having such odd names as Halavicy (*Halava*: a head), Cickavicy (*Cicka*: breast), Zubki (*Zub*: tooth), Puzava (*Puza*: belly), and so on. According to local tradition, there was long ago a famed statue of an unknown goddess. On his conversion to Christianity, the Prince had the idol demolished, but the fragments

24) Most of the details given here about sprites are to be found in А. Богданович, *Пережитки древнего мирозозерцания у Белоруссов*, Этнографический обзор. Гродно 1885, бб. 64-72.

25) Kirkor, op. cit, б. 243.

were saved by the local inhabitants, who took them back home. Thereafter their villages were named after the portion of the idol the inhabitants had been able to preserve²⁶.

On considering the ensemble of the Byelorussian mythological heritage, one is bound to conclude that it was far from being scant. Moreover, apart from Piarun, the deities were mainly peaceful, and in this the Byelorussian Olympus accurately reflects the character of the Byelorussian people. There was however, no unified mythological system similar to that found in the Scandinavian *Edda*, the Teutonic *Nibelungenlied* or the Finnish *Kalevala*. Byelorussian mythology was fragmented, and its subsequent development lacked coherence. These features lead one to surmise that they were the result of an evolution of monotheism towards a form of polytheism, which bore strong marks of decadence. Although little of this heritage survives today, folksongs, rural customs and local proverbs still preserve some remnants of the pre-Christian beliefs, despite a heavy over-gloss of Christian concepts and attitudes. They constitute precious links with an original and colourful past.

26) Л. Гарошка, *op. cit.*, 6. 35.