

prijelaz koji je ukorijenjen u političke i ideološke interese lokalnih elita 9. stoljeća, radije no postupan i dug proces<sup>13</sup>.

Problem postojanja i karakteristika slavenske religije i mitologije (vjerovanja) te njihovih pregovaranja i ugrađivanja u kršćanstvo poslijerimske i ranosrednjovjekovne Dalmacije, ostaje mračan i neproziran prostor obasjan tek pokojom svijećom, poput Miloševićeve nove knjige. Nadam se ne još zadugo.

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<sup>13</sup> D. DZINO, *Becoming Slav, Becoming Croat*, str. 201-208

**Ante MILOŠEVIĆ,**

*Tragovi starih vjerovanja u kršćanstvu ranoga srednjeg vijeka /  
Traces of Ancient Beliefs in Early Medieval Christianity.*

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As the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century slowly wears on, the existing interpretative frameworks for the concepts such as pagan Slavic mythology and religion become more and more like the 'elephant in the room' – an often used metaphorical idiom of the English language for denoting a problem that is ignored. The knowledge about these concepts is literally "put together" from several completely different historical and cultural contexts. These, to say at least inadequate grounds are not an obstacle for projecting Slavic pagan mythology and religion in the scientific and public discourse as organized, stable and even monolithic intellectual and spiritual systems. The earliest source, which can be referred to in this context, is Procopius who described the beliefs of Sclaveni in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. After that, there is a long gap in terms of written sources, lasting for full five centuries until records of Christian missionaries appear in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, such as for example those of Adam of Bremen, who were converting Polabian Slavs. Of great significance from this period is the Primary (Nestor's or Kiev's) Chronicle, a Russian source from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but also writings of Arab authors who described pagan beliefs in Russia. In addition, ethnographic material gathered in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century from the area inhabited by the Slavs has also been taken into account as the evidence for reconstruction of pre-Christian beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the problems with sources, which provide only fragments of 'knowledge' from completely different historical contexts and their 'assembly' during the national-romantic 19<sup>th</sup> century, two further questions come up. The

<sup>1</sup> See D. DZINO, *Becoming Slav, Becoming Croat: Identity transformations in post-Roman and early medieval Dalmatia*. (East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages 450-1450, Vol. 12), Leiden - Boston, 2010, p. 165-168, critically about traces of Slavic beliefs in Dalmatia.

<sup>2</sup> F. CURTA, *The Making of the Slavs: history and archaeology of the Lower Danube c. 500-700*. Cambridge, 2001

first relates to the criticism of a common origin and the existence of a common identity of the Slavs in the Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> The second refers to the relevance of transmitting into earlier periods modern concept of religion as the universal and ‘natural’ phenomena of belief that is unrelated to politics, economy or science.<sup>3</sup> This can certainly be followed up by the problematic nature of the term ‘mythological system’, which automatically imposes a comparison with the Greek mythological system, thereby presenting a whole range of difficulties in creating parallels that could serve as explanatory schemes in the reconstruction process of a possible ‘Slavic mythology’. In the Greek case on the one hand, it is actually the construction of the past, built on the grounds of the beliefs of Early Iron Age communities, which was actively manipulated in a political context to appropriate the past and legitimate local elites.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, and this is very important for the historical analyses, in the Greek case this all took place in a society with a high level of written culture which allowed to transmit the same, unchanged contents through space and time. However, in the case of the Slavic world, it is a society of a distinctive oral communication, in which the creation of any kind of ‘system’ in the spiritual sphere across a wider area and beyond the borders of the local communities is an undertaking hardly imaginable.

When taking into account said problems - and they represent only the tip of the iceberg - the need for a critical analysis becomes more and more necessary. Such a critical analysis should encompass not only what is known about the Slavic religion, mythology and beliefs, but also what is known about the creation and maintenance of this ‘knowledge’. The reconstruction of the past from the fragments, either written or material, is a problematic activity as well. History, as it is more and more understood in recent decades, is not a metonymic discipline that reconstructs the past by fitting historical fragments into a puzzle. Each of these fragments existed in certain contexts of ‘local knowledge’<sup>5</sup>, such as the power-negotiation within smaller and larger communities or social reality in which it was produced. Skepticism about the existing knowledge and the current approaches to concepts of Slavic religion and mythology certainly does not mean to deny the existence of a system of beliefs and spiritual life in communities in northern and eastern Europe during the ancient and early mediaeval period. However, it places significant restrictions in terms of interpretative frameworks that refer to a single, universal ‘Slavic’ system.

It seems that right within this conservative puzzle-fitting interpretative framework should be placed a return of the interest in studying Slavic beliefs among southern Slavs. This is clearly seen in the recent years, primarily through the works of Vitomir Belaj and Radoslav Katičić, but also through the idea of the Slavic sacred triangle, which Slovenian scholar Andrej Pleterski developed on the basis of examples from the eastern Alps.<sup>6</sup> The new book of Ante Milošević in many ways draws on this contemporary discourse on Slavic beliefs, with the author’s emphasis on objects of material culture in early mediaeval Dalmatia. His interests is focused on two interesting objects: the famous equestrian relief from Žrnovnica and the ‘cross’ from Nin on whose arms are

<sup>3</sup> B. NONGBRI, *Before Religion: A history of a modern concept*. Yale, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Npr. P. VEYNE, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* Paris, 1983

<sup>5</sup> C. GEERTZ, *Local Knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology*. New York, 1983

<sup>6</sup> Among others in: *Perunovo koplje*. In: *Studia mythologica Slavica - Supplementa 4* (ed. A. Pleterski - T. Vinšćak), Ljubljana, 2011 – V. BELAJ, *Hod kroz godinu. Mitska pozadina hrvatskih narodnih običaja i vjerovanja*. 2. edition, Zagreb, 2007 – R. KATIČIĆ, *Božanski boj. Tragovima svetih pjesama naše pretkršćanske starine*. Zagreb - Mošćenička draga, 2008 – V. P. GOSS, *The Three-Header from Vačani, Starohrvatska prosvjeta*, ser. 3, vol. 36, Split, 2009, p. 35-54 – A. PLETERSKI, *Structures of Threepartite Ideology in Space by Slavs, Zgodovinski časopis*, 50/2, Ljubljana, 1996, p. 163-185 Also see Н. ЧАУСИДИС, *Митските слики на Јужните Словени*. Skorje, 1994

represented four human heads and which was discovered in grave 342 on the 'old-Croat' cemetery at Ždrijac near Nin.

The book is divided into five chapters with a brief introduction and conclusion. The first chapter *The Image of the Divine Battle* (p. 11-87) deals with the famous image of the equestrian who kills an generic beast on the relief from Žrnovnica, thereby building on the ideas which were developed in Milošević's earlier works.<sup>7</sup> A detailed analysis of the artistic illustration and the iconography of the Žrnovnica relief lead the author to original conclusions, which hopefully will be a subject for much further discussions in the future. The dating of the relief was changed from 11<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of a detailed analysis of the visual illustrations that were contemporary to this period. The re-dating follows the path of the author's earlier revisions regarding the dating of other early mediaeval objects and illustrations, which (if they prove to be right) imply a significant contribution of Lombard cultural influences in Dalmatia and its hinterland.<sup>8</sup> The previous views of the relief as the illustration of St. George are criticised, and the author comes to the conclusion that these are actually Slavic divinities: the equestrian Perun and Veles, who is represented in shape of a bear as a kind of visualization of Katičić's 'Divine Battle'.

The second chapter called *A "Cross" from Nin* (p. 90-119) deals with cross-shaped items from Ždrijac and is an extended version of the author's article from 2012.<sup>9</sup> The earlier interpretation of Belošević considered it an import from the Carolingian territory and a direct evidence of the conversion of Croats to Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Milošević on the other hand takes up a different stance, following the earlier opinion of Jakšić that it is in fact an illustration of a multi-headed Svan-tevit/Perun on a cross-shaped object - an outcome of syncretism between the old and new beliefs.<sup>11</sup> By presenting detailed evidence material from the Late Antiquity/Early Middle Ages, Milošević attempts to prove that it was originally a case of a cross-shaped fitting of a horse harness that only in secondary use could have been used in a Christian context. According to the author, it is without doubt that this item originally belonged to the Slavic cultural circle and pagan context.

The third chapter *The Face-mask Motifs on the "Cross" from Nin* (p. 122-133) is focused on four human heads on the arms of the small cross from Nin. The motif of the face-mask, as Milošević shows on numerous examples, appears in the late ancient and early mediaeval period on objects that originate from the 'Germanic' cultural circle. Face-masks can also be found on Werner-type fibulae, which once used to be associated with the Slavs.<sup>12</sup> The next chapter *The Mask Motif among the Lombards and in Germanic Art* (p. 138-179) follows up to the previous one. The author presents here an important corpus of material findings in a comparative context, thereby arguing that the mask motif was common in the presentation of important divinities in northern European areas, and in particular those that were associated with the 'Germanic' cultural

<sup>7</sup> A. MILOŠEVIĆ, Il bassorilievo altomedievale del cavaliere di Žrnovnica in Dalmazia, *Godišnjak Centra za balkanološka ispitivanja ANUBiH*, 37/35, Sarajevo 2008, 181-217 – A. MILOŠEVIĆ, Slika Božanskog boja - likovni i ikonografski pogled na konjanički reljef iz Žrnovnice u Dalmaciji, in: *Perunovo koplje*, p. 17-72

<sup>8</sup> A. MILOŠEVIĆ, Scultura ornamentale del VII e VIII secolo nei Balcani occidentali, *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, 9, Motovun - Zagreb 2003, p. 357-382 – A. MILOŠEVIĆ, Je li crkva u Bilimišću srednjovjekovna građevina, *Godišnjak Centra za balkanološka ispitivanja ANUBiH*, 33/31, Sarajevo 2004, p. 253-267 – A. MILOŠEVIĆ, Ransrednjovjekovni reljef iz Maloga Čajna kod Visokog s dodanim natpisom velikog kaznaca Nespina, *Godišnjak Centra za balkanološka ispitivanja ANUBiH*, 41, Sarajevo, 2012, p. 187-200

<sup>9</sup> A. Milošević, O izvornoj funkciji križolikoga okova sa Ždrijaca u Ninu, in: *Munuscula in honorem Željko Rapanić*, (ed. M. Jurković - A. Milošević), Zagreb - Motovun, Split, 2012, 191-211

<sup>10</sup> J. BELOŠEVIĆ, *Starohrvatsko groblje na Ždrijacu u Ninu*. Zadar, 2007, p. 332-335

<sup>11</sup> N. JAKŠIĆ, *Prvih pet stoljeća hrvatske umjetnosti*. Zagreb, 2006, p. 142

<sup>12</sup> F. CURTA, *The Making of the Slavs*, p. 247-275 – F. CURTA, Werner's class I C: erratum corrigendum cum commentariis, *Ephemeris Napocensis*, 21, Cluj-Napoca, 2011, p. 63-110

circle. Chapter 5: *The Symbolism of Face-masks on Early Mediaeval Decorative Items* (p. 184-215) deals with the discussion on masks and multi-headed divinities, especially in the 'Slavic' cultural circle, while a brief conclusion (p. 218-221) recapitulates ideas of the cross as a material indicator of a slow and gradual Christianization process in Dalmatia.

Milošević's book is a valuable piece of work, regardless of interpretative paradigm the reader uses to shape his/her view of the past. The author boldly and uncompromisingly rejects existing views, opening thereby entirely new horizons for future interpretations. An extensive bibliography and visual documentation perfectly illustrate the author's ideas and his way of thinking. His unique gift of storytelling, which unfortunately all archaeologists or historians do not possess, has made the reading of the book a true pleasure, even to the author of this review - the self-stated agnostic in terms of early mediaeval Slavs and their beliefs in Dalmatia. Milošević presents an incredible ability to perceive the smallest details, which add to the sophistication and complexity of his typological analysis. Some basic ideas of the book, like the re-dating of the Žrnovnica relief to the 8<sup>th</sup> century and placing the 'cross' from Ždrijac into the primary context of a horse harness and its affiliation to the northern, pagan cultural circle are interesting and well-argued assumptions that are difficult to question without very strong counter-arguments.

On the other hand, I cannot say that I am fully convinced that the Žrnovnica relief really illustrates the divine battle of Perun and Veles, or that face masks on the 'cross' from Nin really represent Perun. The similarity between the visual presentations of the small figures from Schwedt and Novgorod (there are only speculations that these figures present Perun) with the equestrian figure from Žrnovnica (p. 59-61) does not necessarily imply that their meanings are identical in the local contexts of these spatially divided communities. Unlike Milošević, I consider the Christianization of Dalmatian communities a dramatic transition that is rooted in political and ideological interests of local elites in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, rather than a gradual and long process.<sup>13</sup>

The compilation of the book follows the tradition of quality editions within the scope of the series *Studia Mediterranea archaeologica*, the English translation is satisfactory, while the illustrations and photos are at an enviable level.

The problem regarding the existence and characteristics of Slavic religion and mythology and their negotiations and incorporations into Christianity of the post-Roman and early mediaeval Dalmatia, remains a dark and intransparent space that is enlightened only by a occasional candle, such as Milošević's new book. I hope this will not be for long.

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<sup>13</sup> D. DZINO, *Becoming Slav, Becoming Croat*, p. 201-208