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The Pagan Priests of Early Russia: Some New Insights

The year 1071 was a particularly difficult one for the relatively young Christian church in Kievan Rus'. In a lengthy entry the Primary Chronicle details the activities during 1071 of the *volkhvy* (pagan priests or magicians), who seem to have embarked upon an intense, widespread campaign of subversion and active opposition to the new faith.¹ Appearing in such major cities as Kiev and Novgorod, they sowed confusion and discord among the people, many of whom, at least momentarily, turned against their ecclesiastical authorities to side with their former spiritual leaders.²

The influence of the *volkhvy* among the people was particularly pervasive in the outlying regions far removed from the centers of population. This can be seen, for example, from the following description of their activities in the district of Rostov: "There was at that time [i.e., 1071] a famine in the district of Rostov when two *volkhvy* arrived from Iaroslavl saying: 'we know who holds the answer [to the food shortage].' And they went along the Volga and coming to a designated place they summoned the most distinguished women, saying that some of these affected the grain, some the honey, some the fish, some the furs. Then the inhabitants from the surrounding areas brought them their sisters, mothers, and wives while they, by means of magic, stabbed each of the women in the back and drew out from their bodies wheat or fish. And they thus killed many women and took what they had for themselves."³

1. *Laurent'evskaia letopis'* (*Die Nestor-Chronik*), ed. Dmitrij Tschizewskij (Wiesbaden, 1969), pp. 169–76; in translation, *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, ed. S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), pp. 150–54. The *volkhvy* have not as yet been subjected to any systematic analysis by Russian scholars. E. E. Golubinsky describes them briefly in his *Istoriia russkoi tserkvi*, vol. 1, pt. 1 (2nd ed.; Moscow, 1901), pp. 177, 211–14. G. P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind: Kievan Christianity, the Tenth to the Thirteenth Centuries* (New York, 1960), pp. 344–47, and George Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 124–25 and *passim*, have also made an attempt to examine the pagan priesthood as an institution in Kievan Rus'.

2. A similar popular reaction to Christianity took place in Poland several years after its conversion. Upon the death of Mieszko II in 1034 many of the people rose up against their spiritual leaders and even killed one of their bishops. See *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, vol. 1 (Warsaw, 1960), pp. 415–17.

3. *Laurent'evskaia letopis'*, p. 170; *Russian Primary Chronicle*, pp. 150–51. The

Not only is this one of the most problematic passages in early chronicle literature but it is also one of the most revealing as regards the pagan *volkhvy* and their relation to the primitive cult of early Russia.⁴ As it reads here, however, this brief narrative of events in Rostov during the famine of 1071 defies reasonable explanation and taxes the imagination even of the most gullible. It seems inconceivable, for example, that the relatives of the “distinguished” women who were being stabbed to death by the two *volkhvy* would passively watch and condone the slaughter, or for that matter be fooled by the sorcerers’ claims of finding wheat and fish inside their slain victims’ bodies. Clearly there must be some better explanation for the seemingly highhanded and bizarre actions of the two pagan priests from Iaroslavl than the one offered by the chronicler.⁵

To help in explicating this mysterious passage we would like to turn to an essay published in 1867 by P. I. Melnikov in which the author discusses some aspects of Mordvinian religious practice.⁶ Among the traditional customs that Melnikov writes about is *velen'-molian* (*vel-özks* in the Moksha dialect), a form of communal worship service that is also a type of the women’s festival or *babii prazdnik*, which was popular, according to Oskar Loorits, in many widely dispersed parts of Russia even as late as the 1930s.⁷ Melnikov’s detailed

so-called Radzivil Chronicle, dating from the fifteenth century, contains several illustrations depicting the activities of the *volkhvy* in 1071. One of the miniatures shows the two pagan priests from Iaroslavl actually stabbing a woman in the back and removing what appears to be fish, furs, and bread from inside her. Several onlookers are shown standing nearby. *Radzivilovskaia ili kenigsbergskaia letopis'* (photocopy ed.; St. Petersburg, 1902).

4. S. H. Cross, in his otherwise copious notes to the translation of the Primary Chronicle, offers no comment on this passage. Fedotov (p. 344) interprets the passage in its literal sense and says that the *volkhvy* murdered the Rostov women because they blamed them for the famine.

5. Soviet scholars by and large interpret this particular incident of the stabbing of the distinguished women of Rostov by the two *volkhvy* as a vivid manifestation of serious and violent class conflict in the Suzdalian lands in 1071. According to this interpretation the “distinguished women of Rostov” represent the upper-class element of Suzdalian society, while the two *volkhvy* are regarded as the leaders of the *smeryd* in their open revolt against the authorities. V. V. Mavrodin, “Ocherk istorii drevnei Rusi do mongol'skogo zavoevaniia,” in *Istoriia kul'tury drevnei Rusi*, vol. 1 (Moscow and Leningrad, 1948), p. 20, and illus. p. 23; A. V. Artsikhovskiy, *Drevnerusskie miniatury kak istoricheskie istochniki* (Moscow, 1944), pp. 36–37. A more detailed account of events in Rostov connected with the famine of 1071 appears in M. N. Tikhomirov's *Krest'ianskie i gorodskie vosstaniia na Rusi XI–XIII vv.* (Moscow, 1955), pp. 114–24.

6. The Mordvinians or Mordvins are a Finno-Ugric people who live on the Volga east and southeast of Moscow.

7. In Mordvinian the term *velen'-molian* literally means the “village sacrifice.” In his detailed study of the *babii prazdnik* in its various surviving forms Loorits shows that this ancient festival was until recently quite common in the Caucasus, in a Ukrainian colony in Saratov, in Setumaa (Estonia), in Latvia, and in other areas of Great Russia. Among the basic characteristics of the *babii prazdnik*, wherever it has survived, are the collection of money and other provisions (in some instances by special “elders” or

description of the rituals surrounding the preparations for this surviving nineteenth-century Mordvinian worship service is most fascinating.⁸ He begins by elaborating on the circumstances leading up to the celebration of this particular *velen'-molian*.

In 1848 a serious cholera epidemic, the second in as many decades, was ravaging the province of Nizhny Novgorod, along with many other parts of Asiatic and European Russia.⁹ On Sunday, July 8, the people from several surrounding communities, having resigned themselves to certain death, gathered in a grove near the village of Seskina to receive the Eucharist or Last Rites and to offer up a traditional *velen'-molian* to their pre-Christian gods. Fortunately for the historian, the ever-vigilant local government official who had jurisdiction over Seskina learned of the assembly, rounded up all of the worshipers, and ordered a thorough investigation into their "pagan" feast.¹⁰ All of those apprehended were subsequently released in the custody of ecclesiastical authorities for proper rehabilitation, and a complete record of the whole inquest was eventually deposited with the Imperial Russian Geographical Society.¹¹

Before a *velen'-molian* can take place certain preparations have to be made.¹² The secular elders from all the villages in the district, having decided beforehand to hold a communal worship service, present themselves before the spiritual elder of the community, who designates a time and place for the service. This resolved, the elders meet again to make the final arrangements, which include fixing the amount of money and other provisions (such as flour and honey) needed for the sacrificial feast and appointing the persons

"leaders") as a preparation for the feast and the exclusion of men from the festival. The rites associated with this festival have a strong sexual overtone, an allusion no doubt to the main purpose of the *babii prazdnik*, the promotion of fertility both in the family and among domestic animals. Looerts traces the roots of the women's festival to the earliest period of Russian history. He feels that it may originally have come into southern Russia from Byzantium and then gradually spread northward. What, if any, was the relation between the Russian *babii prazdnik* and the Mordvinian *velen'-molian* is difficult to say without a thorough comparative analysis of the two, which is beyond the scope of this essay. See "Das sog. Weiberfest bei den Russen und Setukesen in Estland," *Sitzungsberichte der Gelehrten Estnischen Gesellschaft* (Tartu, 1938), pp. 259–330.

8. P. I. Mel'nikov, "Ocherki Mordvy," *Russkii vestnik*, 71 (September 1867): 243–58.

9. R. E. McGrew, *Russia and the Cholera, 1823–1832* (Madison, 1965), p. 5.

10. In the eyes of the Russian authorities the Mordvins were still regarded as "unreliable" Christians even in the mid-nineteenth century, since they had been formally converted and baptized only in the 1740s. H. Paasonen, "Mordvins," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 8 (New York, 1961), p. 842b.

11. Mel'nikov, "Ocherki Mordvy," p. 244.

12. The following description of the ceremonies connected with the preparations for *velen'-molian* is taken from *ibid.*, pp. 244–47.

who will be responsible for collecting them. Those entrusted with gathering the necessary provisions are then dispatched in three separate directions with special containers and sacrificial knives to call on all the members of the community for their donations.

In the meantime, word is passed down to all the households to make preparations for receiving the sacerdotal collectors. Essentially this involves the sewing of three or more small linen sacks and attaching two long braids or strings to each. The sacks are then filled with a pound or more (depending on the number of potential worshipers from a given household) of flour, honey, butter, eggs, and the like. In some instances coins are also placed in the sacks. These sacks are then neatly arranged on a table in the main room of the house to await the arrival of the collectors. It is important to note that only the women of the house are allowed to engage in the advance preparations for *velen'-molian*. The men are barred also from witnessing these pre-*velen'-molian* activities. Even the male children of the house, except for those still at the breast, are sent away with the men for the day.

The actual collection of the offerings for the communal worship service and feast is carried out according to strictly prescribed rules. As the collectors approach a household they intone an invocation to all the gods while one of them strikes the outer gate five times with the sacrificial knife and opens it. A similar ritual is performed as the collectors pause before the threshold of the dwelling itself. Meanwhile inside the house all the married women, naked from the waist up, stand with their backs to the door behind the table with the sacks on it. Beside them stand the unmarried girls of the house, fully clothed, with their backs to the door also. As they enter the room the collectors intone another prayer. Then the oldest of the married women, her bare back still to the door, picks up with both hands the sack containing flour by its two braids and, lifting it over her head, suspends it from her back. One of the collectors now comes up behind her and places the special container next to the back of her neck while the collector carrying the sacrificial knife approaches and, as he recites a prayer, gently "stabs" her five times in the back and on the neck.¹³ Then he cuts the two braids by which the sack is suspended and it falls into the container. The ceremony is repeated as each of the remaining married women, in descending order according to age, picks up one of the sacks until all are collected. If there is only one married woman in the house, then she simply repeats the ceremony as many times as is necessary to collect all the sacks.

13. This mock stabbing of the women in the back and neck is a unique feature of the Mordvinian women's festival and is practiced quite widely. U. Harva, *Die religiösen Vorstellungen der Mordwinen (Folklore Fellows Communications, no. 142)* (Helsinki, 1952), pp. 375, 377, 380.

During this entire ritual the women never face the collectors but remain standing with their backs to the door. Once they have discharged their duties the collectors leave the house as swiftly as they came. What remains to be done is to burn the remnants of braid which the women held in their hands while suspending the sacks from their backs. Accordingly, a fire is quickly made, the braid-ends burned, and the preparatory or first stage of *velen'-molian* concluded.

With this description of Mordvinian pre-*velen'-molian* ceremonies in mind let us now re-examine the Primary Chronicle account of the appearance in the district of Rostov in 1071 of the two *volkhvy* from Iaroslavl. The account begins with the statement that in the year 1071 the Rostov district was experiencing a severe food shortage—a famine. Finding themselves in a desperate situation, the people of the district were willing to listen to anyone who would promise to alleviate their suffering. At that point the two *volkhvy* arrived from Iaroslavl, a town northeast of Rostov on the Volga River. Both Iaroslavl and Rostov were in an area traditionally inhabited by Finnish tribes, in this instance the Meria and the Ves. Both towns were almost totally isolated from the effects of Christianity, which was only gradually making its way from Kiev and Novgorod eastward.

According to the Primary Chronicle the two *volkhvy* who appeared in Rostov at this critical juncture were part of a wider movement, launched by the pagan priests themselves in 1071, intended to reverse the trend toward Christianization set in motion by Vladimir in 988. The ready acceptance of the *volkhvy* by the people and their obedience to them would indicate that the high esteem in which these pagan cult leaders were traditionally held had not been diminished by the introduction of a new official religion. Upon their arrival in Rostov the two priests were undoubtedly welcomed by the people and immediately charged by the elders of the surrounding communities to “go along the Volga” and make the necessary preparations for a communal worship service in the hope of appeasing the ancestral deities and bringing an end to the famine. This kind of joint sacrifice, involving several larger communities, was not uncommon among the Mordvinians of earlier times.¹⁴ Because of the great number of Finns in the area, it is quite likely that these were Finnish rather than Slavic priests.¹⁵

The first official act of the two visiting *volkhvy* was to request that, in the words of the chronicle, the “most distinguished women” of the surrounding area be brought to them. By “most distinguished” the chronicler probably

14. Paasonen, “Mordvins,” p. 847a.

15. Mel'nikov states categorically that they must have been Finnish. V. J. Mansikka likewise describes them as Finnish “warlocks.” See his book, *Die Religion der Ostslaven (Folklore Fellows Communications, no. 43)* (Helsinki, 1922), p. 102.

meant the oldest married women. These were undoubtedly the most respected members of the community and the logical choice for the solemn ceremony about to take place. Accordingly, men brought their mothers, wives, and sisters to the appointed place, probably a grove designated as the site for the communal sacrifice.¹⁶ Every village community had such a site. Some were fenced in, and some contained a simple, windowless building, resembling an ordinary dwelling-house, which was used exclusively for religious purposes.¹⁷

Although there were sacrificial feasts in which members of both sexes participated, there were also some in which only males or females took part. Evidently in Rostov in 1071 only women were involved in the ritual collection of the provisions (much like the preparatory stage of *velen'-molian* in Nizhny Novgorod in the mid-nineteenth century) and in the sacrificial act itself, while the entire community partook of the feast that followed.

With the women assembled, the combined ritual of the collection of provisions and human sacrifice was begun. The two officiating priests, according to the chronicle, first engaged in some magic. Then, before everyone present, they fatally stabbed each of the women in the back. The magic referred to by the chronicler was probably an incantation or prayer analogous to the one recited, as we have seen, just before the ceremonial "stabbing" during the *pre-velen'-molian* ritual in Nizhny Novgorod. Significantly, no mention is made of the simultaneous cutting, with the same sacrificial knife used for the stabbing, of the braids or strings holding the sacks of provisions suspended from the women's backs.

That the women were in fact carrying sacks of provisions for the sacrificial feast on their backs can be inferred from what follows in the chronicle. Having fatally stabbed each of them, the two *volkhvy* allegedly removed wheat and fish (in some accounts also honey and furs) from inside the dead women's bodies and proceeded to appropriate these items for themselves. Note that here, as in Nizhny Novgorod in the mid-nineteenth century, the women were stabbed in the back, and wheat and honey figured prominently among the provisions assembled for the communal feast.

There is little doubt that the description in the Primary Chronicle of the appearance of the two *volkhvy* in the district of Rostov in 1071 was intimately connected with an early prototype of the Mordvinian *velen'-molian* or communal worship service, occasioned in this instance by the serious famine in the area. Furthermore, the nineteenth-century survival bears a striking resemblance to the eleventh-century prototype in all but one important aspect, that of human

16. In the Primary Chronicle (*Lavrent'evskaia letopis'*, p. 170) the place where the women were to be brought is referred to as a *pogost'*, which Cross (p. 150) translates rather loosely as "trading-post."

17. Paasonen, "Mordvins," p. 847a.

sacrifice. The sacrificial killing of the Rostov women by the *volkhvy* was apparently real enough,¹⁸ as is clear from the lengthy description in the Primary Chronicle of the subsequent activities and ultimate fate of the two pagan priests. From Rostov they had made their way northward. Their fame or notoriety evidently preceded them, for upon arriving in Beloozero with a large following of some three hundred supporters (coreligionists or converts) they were immediately confronted by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, who demanded the surrender of the two *volkhvy* on charges of multiple murder. A violent confrontation between the authorities and the supporters of the *volkhvy* ensued. The authorities ultimately seized the two priests and, after thoroughly interrogating them on the fundamental precepts of their pagan beliefs, hanged them.¹⁹

We know that among the early Mordvinians human sacrifice connected with communal worship was not unheard of.²⁰ Anyone tempted to point an accusing finger at the "primitive" Mordvinians, however, would do well to remember that the Kievan Slavs, on the eve of their conversion to Christianity, allegedly brought their sons and daughters "to sacrifice them to the devil" (that is, Perun and the other East Slavic deities).²¹ By the mid-nineteenth century, and probably much earlier, bulls, lambs, and geese, which were bought with the money collected during the pre-*velen'-molian* gathering of provisions, became the chief sacrificial victims in the Mordvinian communal worship service.²² Women continued to be the only ones involved in the ritual collection of provisions, from which the sacrificial act itself was detached but not completely forgotten. The sacrifice was incorporated into the feast, and the entire community actively participated in both.²³

18. It is possible that under the circumstances only a ritual mock stabbing of the women may have taken place and that this was subsequently interpreted, largely through rumor, as actual human sacrifice. This would account, for example, for the passive acquiescence and lack of concern for the women's well-being on the part of the relatives who stood by and witnessed the whole ceremony.

19. *Lavrent'evskaia letopis'*, pp. 170–73; *Russian Primary Chronicle*, pp. 151–52.

20. Paasonen, "Mordvins," p. 847a. For a more detailed discussion of human sacrifice among the Mordvinians see I. N. Smirnov's "Mordva: Istoriko-etnograficheskii ocherk," *Izvestiia obshchestva arkhologii, istorii i etnografii pri Imperatorskom Kazanskom Universitete*, 12, no. 4 (1895): 308–12.

21. The quotation refers to the early 980s after Vladimir had consolidated his authority in Kiev. In 983 there was even a case in which a foreigner who was a Christian, refusing to give his son up for sacrifice, perished together with him at the hands of a raging mob in Kiev. *Lavrent'evskaia letopis'*, pp. 77, 80–81; *Russian Primary Chronicle*, pp. 93 and 95–96. Mansikka, *Religion der Ostslaven* (pp. 40 ff.), among others, has expressed some doubt regarding the chronicle account of human sacrifice among the Kievan Slavs. He interprets this particular passage as probably being of literary provenience.

22. Mel'nikov, "Ocherki Mordvy," p. 249.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 250–58.

One puzzling question remains: Why did the chronicler neglect to mention that the women who were stabbed to death by the *volkhvy* were carrying provisions for the communal feast in sacks suspended from their backs and that the cutting loose and collecting of these sacks was an integral part of the total worship service? Since the chronicler in all likelihood was not an eyewitness to the events in Rostov in 1071, he could simply have overlooked this essential part of the ceremony out of ignorance.²⁴ More likely than not, however, he purposely chose to omit any reference to the ritual collection of provisions by the *volkhvy* for a pragmatic, perhaps even didactic, reason. From as early as 988 the Kievan church had been waging a relentless, if only partially successful, campaign against all vestiges of paganism. Here was a splendid opportunity for the chronicler-monk to discredit both paganism and the *volkhvy*, its chief spokesmen. Not only could they be branded cold-blooded murderers for stabbing the women to death, and thieves for taking “what they had for themselves,” but charlatans as well, because who but an utter fool would claim to be able to remove wheat, fish, and the like from inside a human carcass.

No doubt the classic example of this selective editing which one frequently encounters in the Primary Chronicle involves Vladimir the Great himself. Before his conversion to Christianity the Kievan prince was described as an unspeakable lecher. In addition to Rogned, his lawful wife, he allegedly had four mistresses, all of whom bore him sons, and eight hundred concubines.²⁵ Upon his conversion in 988 he was suddenly transformed into an exemplary husband, totally committed to his one wife, Anna.

Because paganism as an official religion was so short-lived in Russia, it left few historical traces. In addition to a rich body of popular oral tradition one has to rely primarily on the early chronicles in attempting to reconstruct Russia's pagan past. It is for this reason that, even though distorted, the brief description in the Primary Chronicle of the activities of the two *volkhvy* in the district of Rostov during the famine of 1071, when augmented by other sources such as Melnikov's essay, affords an excellent opportunity to take an in-depth look at one of the many functions of the pagan priests in medieval Russian society.

24. A. A. Shakhmatov maintains that the story about the appearance of the two *volkhvy* in Rostov during the famine of 1071 was originally narrated to Nestor in Kiev shortly after the event by an eyewitness or perhaps even a participant. It was included by Nestor in the 1073 edition of the *Drevneishii kievskii svod 1039 goda* and subsequently found its way into other early chronicles as well. See *Razyskaniia o drevneishikh russkikh letopisnykh svodakh* (St. Petersburg, 1908), pp. 455–57.

25. *Lavrent'evskaia letopiś*, p. 78; *Russian Primary Chronicle*, p. 94.