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INHABITANTS OF THE HOLY RIVER OF NOVGOROD: THE VOLKHOV IN THE HISTORIC, CULTURAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL TRADITION OF MEDIEVAL NOVGOROD

The River Volkhov, connecting Lake Ilmen and Lake Ladoga, used to be a transportation line of utmost importance in northern Russia (Fig. 1). As early as the 8th–9th century AD, the water route along the Volkhov was mastered by the Slavs – migrants from the southern shores of the Baltic Sea. During the Viking epoch, two major townships of northern Russia appeared at the head and the outfall of the Volkhov: they were Ladoga and the predecessor of Novgorod, Rurik's Township. And in the second quarter of the 10th century Novgorod the Great was founded. For the city's population, the River Volkhov was not only the basis of their economic life, but also a sacred natural feature.

The hydronym *Volkhov*, in the language of the autochthonous population of the region, means 'drumly' – the river water is cloudy due to the silt load. However, for the Slavs taking residence there it was also associated with the notion of a *magus – volkhv* in Russian. In medieval Russia this was the name for the pagan votaries, wizards and diviners. Evidence has been preserved up to the present day that the Volkhov was not only worshipped by the people of Novgorod as a sacred river, but also represented an independent deity.

The personified image of the deity of the River Volkhov has been preserved in the Novgorod legend about Volkhov, the shapeshifter prince. The legend was included in the later Novgorod chronicles telling the story of the appearance of Novgorod and the Novgorod princes of the times before Rurik was called in – the 'Tale of the beginning of the Russian land, the creation of Novgorod, and the origin of the family of the Slovene princes' (Гиллярлов, 1878, 15–17). This tale is included in the 'Flower Garden' (1665) and a few other annalistic memorials of the 17th century. In the preceding period, it had for a long time been part of the oral folk tradition. We will provide the text in full, as it is included in the written sources:



Fig. 1. The River Volkhov at Novgorod.

The eldest son of that Prince Sloven – Volkhov – was a demon worshipper and a fierce sorcerer among the people, and worked marvels by the devices of the Devil, and by changing into the form of a ferocious crocodile beast, he blocked the waterway along the River Volkhov. And among those who did not worship him, he devoured some, and drowned others by casting them out (of their ships). Therefore, the people, ignorant at the time, presumed that cursed man to be the true god, and called him Perun ('Thunder'). So, that cursed sorcerer built a town in a place called Perynya, where Perun's idol stood, for night rites and demon assemblies. And the ignorant spoke about Volkhov: he sits as a god. And our true Christian work against that cursed sorcerer and magus – he was killed and strangled by demons in the River Volkhov, and by the devices of demons his body was taken up the Volkhov and thrown onto the bank, across from that wizard-town Perynya. And the ignorant people wept a lot when burying the cursed one with a pagan funeral feast. And a high grave mound was made for him, as is usual among the pagans. Three days after the burial, the earth gave way and devoured the vile body of the crocodile. And the grave mound above him fell straight to the bottom of Hell. And up to the present day, they say that pit remains there and does not fill (Гиляров, 1878, 15–17).

In the text of the source, the story of Volkhov is one of a series of eponymic legends connected with other geographical features in the environs of

Novgorod – Lake Ilmen, the Rivers Shelon, Volkhovets and Zhilotug, the trading district of Novgorod called Sloven Hill, as well as the town of Staraya Russa. All of these characters were in some way or other connected with the name of the legendary progenitor of the Ilmen Slovenes – Prince Sloven. But only the eldest son of the ancestor is described as possessing the abilities of a sorcerer and shapeshifter and being worshipped by people as a god. This indicates the special sacred role of this particular natural feature for the medieval people of Novgorod.

The written text of the legend about Volkhov bears significant traces of having been reprocessed by a Christian scribe, aiming to relegate the pagan deity to the level of a sorcerer prince, as well as show him in a negative light. The text is given the character of an edification against paganism: in such texts, similar techniques are often used to destroy a pagan deity. By opposing the worship of Volkhov as a god, the author tries to prove to the ignorant ones that the background of their ancient cults is the worship of a sorcerer killed by the water demons and dragged to Hell. But at the same time he uses the ancient myth about Volkhov known to the Ilmen Slovenes. The image of the shapeshifter prince, the nature of his cult and his connection with the natural landmark Peryn – the major sacred place of the medieval Novgorod people – indicates an archaic tradition reaching back to pre-Christian times. And the denunciatory style of the Christian author testifies to the durability of this tradition and the fact that in the period when the written version of the legend was created not only was the myth intact, but also the worship of Volkhov was widespread in Novgorod. The river was still considered sacred, and sacrifices were offered to it.

But even if we do not take into account the later anti-pagan reprocessing of the myth, the deity of Volkhov does not appear to be benevolent to people. The mythological shapeshifter blocks the waterway and mercilessly destroys those who do not worship him. The rituals in his honour are performed at night-time. His chthonic origin is also indicated by the nature of the zoomorphic image of Volkhov the Sorcerer – a ‘ferocious crocodile beast’. The appearance of an animal so exotic for Russia in the legend should without doubt be considered a literary adaptation. The medieval inhabitants of the European North had no idea of crocodiles; rather, the Russian scribe, familiar with the Christian literature of Byzantine or Middle Eastern origin, drew the image from there. Initially a dragon snake, more characteristic for Slavonic mythology, should have been present in the myth (*Иванов, 1980, 468–470*). This is also in-



Fig. 2. The fairytale snake on craft items of the medieval period from Novgorod.

dicated by the popularity of portraying a fairytale snake in the Novgorod arts and crafts of the medieval period (Fig. 2), which was probably directly connected with the cult of Volkhov, if the personified deity had a snake-like image. The indication of shapeshifting of the sorcerer prince Volkhov witnesses that the river deity could have been represented by an anthropomorphic image as well.

Representatives of both the high and low mythology of the Slavs connected with the water element were as a rule regarded as chthonic, borderline forces, not always benevolent to humans (Криничная, 2004, 324–371). The water element could, on the one hand, be the source of life and prosperity, and on the other hand, it often took the lives of fishermen, merchants and seamen. The image of the raging waters and the human sacrifice to rein them in is also present in the Novgorod tradition, in the famous folk cycle about Sadko (*Новгородские былины*, 1978, 148–151). In connection with Volkhov, the harsh side of the element also came to life. Sailing along this river in the Middle Ages was associated with a number of dangers, connected with the system of rapids on the Volkhov. The most difficult of them – the Ladoga Rapids – were 11 km

long, while the Pchev Rapids had the form of seven boulder bars. A German diplomat Adam Oleariy, visiting Novgorod in the 1630s–40s, wrote: “There the river dashes like an arrow from large boulders and between them” (*Ильина, Грахов*, 1980, 30–31). Only a very experienced pilot could lead a vessel through the rapids. Normally, merchants used to disembark from their ships and passed the rapids by land, and their ships with the cargo were dragged over the boulders with ropes. In any case, these rapids often caused people’s deaths and wrecked vessels. Probably, it is the rapids which led to the appearance of the notion that the god of Volkhov in the image of a snake blocked the way of ships and drowned those who had not honoured him with a sacrifice prior to the journey. The formidable god could take the traveller as a sacrifice instead. This fully corresponds to the Slavs’ traditional idea about drowned people being a sacrifice to the water spirit.

The text of the legend about Volkhov was studied for the first time by B. A. Rybakov, who connected the shapeshifter prince mentioned there with the deity of the River Volkhov, the cult of which, in his opinion, preceded the military and princely cult of the Slavonic god of thunderstorms, Perun (*Рыбаков*, 2001, 239–244). This assertion was based on the fact that in the legend the images of Perun and Volkhov are merged, and that the temple of both gods was located in the area of Peryn, at the head of the Volkhov (about 8 km from the town), on the left bank of the river. Its name is truly related to the name of Perun, the supreme god of the East Slavonic pantheon. According to the chronicles, in 980 the Novgorod voivode Dobrynya erected a statue of Perun there, which was thrown into the Volkhov nine years later by Dobrynya himself during the forced Christianization of Novgorod (*ПСРА*, I, 79). There are also a number of legends about this pagan idol, which are partly connected, based on their content, with the legend of Volkhov. However, it is unlikely that in 980 the cult of Volkhov was being replaced by the cult of Perun. The former god was worshipped locally, the latter was the common Slavonic one; the former was a chthonic deity, the latter belonged to the heavenly pantheon. It is more probable that Peryn used to be the major sanctuary of Novgorod and its area, and various rituals were performed in honour of different deities there. Later, the Christian author writing down the legend of Volkhov supplemented it with data on Perun, who was worshipped at the same place.

Excavations at Peryn in the 1950s disclosed the remains of the sacred complex in the form of several circular pits, remnants of fire pits in them and

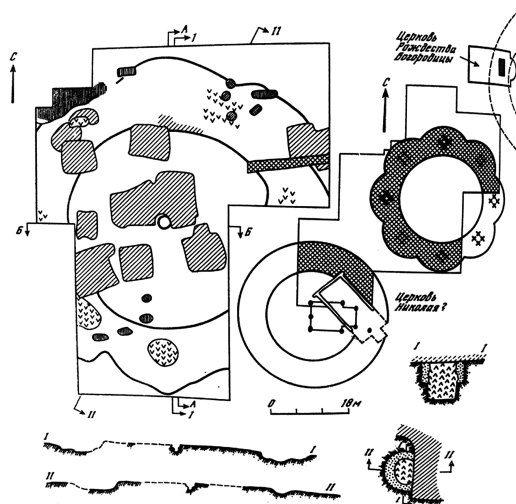


Fig. 3. The sacred complex in Peryn in the form of several circular pits, remnants of fire pits in them and stone pavings (after Седов, 1953).

stone pavings (Fig. 3). Pits with pillars were also discovered, which could have served for erecting idols. The discoverer of the Peryn complex, V. V. Sedov, reconstructed it as an open-plan sanctuary with nine idols, one of which (Perun?) was located at the centre (Fig. 4) (Седов, 1953, 92–103). However,



Fig. 4. Reconstruction of the Peryn sanctuary (after Седов, 1953).



Fig. 5. A *sopka* – a typical burial and sacred monument in north-western Russia in the 9th–10th century AD.

archaeologists from St Petersburg, V. A. Bulkin and N. Ya. Konetskiy, confirmed that the discovered complex represents the remainder of a group of *sopka*'s – a typical burial and sacred monument of north-western Russia in the 9th–10th century AD (Fig. 5) (Конечский, 1995, 80–85; Клейн, 2004, 152–157). This in no way contradicts the assertion that a pagan sanctuary was located at the site of Peryn, because *sopka*'s were a traditional place for performing cult activities for the people of the Novgorod land. This reconstruction of the sanctuary also corresponds to the mention of a huge burial mound in the legend of Volkhov, under which the sorcerer was buried. Probably, it was this *sopka*, the largest ever discovered, where the night rituals relating to the cult of Volkhov were performed. The *sopka*'s of Peryn were destroyed already in the medieval period, hence the motif of the 'sunken grave' in the legend of Volkhov.

The image of the shapeshifter prince as a personification of the River Volkhov relates to a unique natural event that took place from time to time in the river system – the low water season of Lake Ilmen. In the period of the spring floods the level of water entering the Volkhov from its tributaries sometimes exceeded the level of Lake Ilmen. Then the river reversed its course and flowed backwards. The last time this event took place was in 1960 (Ильина,

Грахов, 1980, 33). The medieval dwellers of Novgorod could not explain the event, and the Volkhov itself seemed to be a shapeshifter, a sorcerer behaving against the laws of nature. The reversal of flow in the Volkhov was a token foreboding wars and changes; it was often treated as the work of a god. This pagan attitude also became entwined with the Christian notions of the people of Novgorod. The reversal of flow in the Volkhov is also mentioned in the Novgorod chronicles: "The same year [1063], in Novgorod, the Volkhov went backwards. This token spoke of evil, because in the fourth year Vseslav burned the city" (ИЦРА, I, 163). However, the best-known is the chapter of 'The Life' of a locally worshipped saint, the Archbishop Elijah-John. The people of Novgorod decided to banish the archbishop, wrongly condemned for adultery, from the city. They put him on a raft and sent him down the Volkhov. But at the same moment the river reversed its flow, and the raft with Elijah-John swirled on the spot, and later floated upstream to the Yurievsky Monastery, located at the head of the Volkhov. The Novgorod people understood their mistake and asked for the archbishop's forgiveness, returning him to his post (Повесть 1981, 454–463). This chapter of 'The Life' of Elijah-John is connected with the legend about Volkhov, where the body of the dead prince also floats upstream, though not to the monastery, but to the pagan sanctuary at Peryn.

The motif of the archbishop's trial is closely connected not only with the natural event of the reversal of the river's flow, but also with one of the most important sacred functions of the Volkhov in the social and political life of the Novgorod Feudal Republic. In the course of the entire medieval history of Novgorod, the Volkhov was worshipped as a river passing the god's judgment. On the verdict of the city assembly (*veche*), those accused of major economic and often political crimes, among whom could be the nobility occupying senior posts in the republic, were thrown into the Volkhov from the bridge. If the river took the accused, their fate was sealed. A person who reached the bank was pardoned. This, for example, was the fate of a political activist of the Novgorod Republic, the *posadnik* (mayor) Yakun Miroslavich. His first term in 1141 led to a conflict between the city assembly and the prince, whose side Yakun had taken. The *posadnik* tried to escape, but he was captured and condemned to death. Yakun, stripped to the skin, was thrown from the bridge by the people of Novgorod, but he managed to reach the bank. **Therefore, he wasn't killed**, the chronicler lets us know. The death penalty

was replaced by a monetary fine and conviction (ПСРЛ, III, 26, 211–212). However, Yakun was soon released altogether and in 1156 he was chosen as *posadnik* again (ПСРЛ, III, 29, 216). The description of the *veche's* verdict and execution by throwing into the Volkhov from a bridge is mentioned in the Novgorod chronicles time and again. One *posadnik* greatly offending the Novgorod people at the beginning of the 13th century was even intended to be executed in this manner after his death (ПСРЛ, III, 51, 248). This motif is also present in the famous cycle of Novgorod epics about the hero Vasiliy Buslaev (*Новгородские былины*, 1978, 76). The parents of the children who were constantly being hurt during childhood games with the young athlete threatened to throw him into the Volkhov, unless he managed to find a more rational application of his strength. The archaic nature of the tradition of execution by the *veche* suggests that it appeared during the pagan period, when the sacrifice of criminals to the chthonic deity could have been practiced. In the system of the Russian pre-Christian beliefs, the stable notion is also stipulated that the 'unclean' dead should be thrown into the water, so that they cannot turn into vampires and harm the living (Зеленин, 1995, 88–123). Here, the Volkhov is seen not as a plainly hostile force, but as a just force which does not allow the innocent to be to be belied and punished.

For medieval Novgorod the River Volkhov acted as a sanctified natural feature. The mythological basis of the Volkhov cult and its basic features were shaped in the pre-Christian period. Conversion to Christianity did not uproot the ancient cult; it was included in the new system of notions, and during the entire medieval epoch as well as in later times it continued to play a significant role in the spiritual and public life of Novgorod.

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