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On the Concept of Chernebog and Bielbog in Slavic Mythology

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To Rado L. Lencek

The origin of Slavic cosmogonic and cosmological dualism – that is, dualism as a religio-historical phenomenon – is a controversial issue. On the basis of cosmogonic motifs in Slavic folklore, some scholars believe that the concept of a dualistic origin of the world was already present in pre-Christian Slavic tradition. These beliefs are linked, on the one hand, to postulates emerging from the study of comparative mythology and linguistics and, on the other, to the assumption that the Slavs had worshiped two opposing deities of good and evil: a white god, called Bielbog, and a black god, named Chernebog. While acknowledging the presence of some fundamental dualistic concepts in the pre-Christian Slavic tradition, one nevertheless feels uneasy with the sweeping generalizations that have elevated Bielbog and Chernebog to a central position in the sphere of Slavic religious beliefs without a clear statement on the *état de question* concerning these controversial Slavic deities.¹

Manifestations of Slavic cosmogonic dualism have been generally attributed in the past to Bogomil-Manichean influences² or, as in the case of Bielbog-Chernebog, to an *interpretatio Christiana*.³ That this dualism may have been present in pre-Christian Slavic beliefs, inherited from a more remote past, was first categorically denied by V. N. Mochul'skii⁴ and later by all positivist Slavic scholars (including A. Brückner, L. Niederle, J. Máchal, E. Wienecke, B. Unbegaun, and more recently, P. Nedo and H. Łowmiański).⁵ Other scholars (notably, R. Jakobson, M. Gimbutas, A. Gieysztor, and Z. Váňa)⁶ assume that the remnants of dualistic myths and concepts in Slavic folklore reflect either a direct Iranian or a still more ancient Indo-European heritage. A. M. Zolotarev and Mircea Eliade examined the distribution of the earth diver myth, concluding that the dualism inherent in this originally non-dualistic motif shows expansive Euroasian parallels and cannot, therefore, be explained among the Slavs solely on the basis of Bogomil influences.⁷ Zolotarev found, for example, that the binary opposition Perun-Veles and the polar opposition Bielbog-Chernebog had served as operative principles in the ancient dual structure of the Slavic religious system.⁸ Following the theses of Zolotarev, Eliade, and Levi-Strauss on the structure of dual organizations (and of Dumézil's neo-comparative tripartite model of Indo-European consciousness), V. V. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov have applied a model-forming semiotic analysis to the reconstruction of Slavic religious concepts. On the basis of Helmold's reference to Chernebog and to *a good god* in his twelfth century *Chronica Slavorum* (as well as a possible relationship of Chernebog to Chernoglav (Tjarnoglofi) in the thirteenth century *Knytlinga saga*), these scholars have elevated Chernebog and, by analogy, Bielbog, to the primary

religious system (I-RS) of Slavic beliefs.⁹ A. Gieysztor, whose work on Slavic mythology is the finest example of contemporary syncretic scholarship, accepts essentially the Ivanov-Toporov model but views the two images not as full personifications but only as ancient hypostases of good and evil.¹⁰ As a result of these studies and of her own extensive work in archeology and comparative religions, M. Gimbutas has recently put forth a challenging new hypothesis about three divine archetypes of the Indo-European religious tradition represented in the Slavic pantheon: the god of heavenly light, the god of death and the underworld, and the thunder god. She believes that “the god of heavenly light, also known as the white god, and the god of death and the underworld, also known as the black god, form a fundamental polarity in the Slavic religious tradition.”¹¹

This brief introduction alerts us to the significance of the Bielbog-Chernebog issue, for these two deities continue to perform a major role in the formulation of postulates, not only about the nature of Slavic dualism but about the entire system of Slavic early beliefs.

Our investigation represents a modest historiographic attempt to review, clarify, and add to the sources instrumental in both the acceptance and denial of Chernebog and Bielbog as legitimate Slavic deities. We hope to show that a reassessment of source material is never a closed issue but rather a valid exercise that can help scholars formulate new hypotheses.

The only reliable source on the worship of Chernebog and of an opposing nameless “good god” among the Slavs remains Helmold’s *Chronica Slavorum*. Since Helmold wrote between 1164-1168, and the last bastion of West Slavic paganism at Arkona was destroyed in 1168, his knowledge about Slavic pagans and their worship may be considered reasonably reliable. Helmold’s famous statement that gave rise to the entire concept of Slavic dualism reads as follows:

There exists among the Slavs a strange delusion. At their feasts and carousals they pass around a drinking bowl over which they utter words, not of consecration but of execration, in the name of the gods – of the good one, as well as of the bad one – professing that all propitious fortune is arranged by the good god, adverse, by the bad god. This is why in their language they call the bad god *Diabol* or *Zcerneboch*, which means the black god.

(Est autem Slavorum mirabilis error; nam in conviis et compotacionibus suis pateram circumferunt, in quam conferunt, non dicam consecrationis, sed execrationis verba sub nomina deorum, boni scilicet atque mali, omnem prosperam fortunam a bono deo, adversam a malo dirigi profitentes. Unde etiam malum deum lingua sua *Diabol* sive *Zcerneboch* / other Ms. *Zcerneboth* / id est nigrum deum, appellant.)¹²

Admittedly, Helmold’s identification of the evil god as *Diabol* or *Zcerneboch* in contrast to a nameless good god carries certain Christian

overtones, as does his other assertion that the Slavs after their initial conversion, lapsed into an error "worse" than paganism, for they began to worship St. Vitus as Svantevit, a "god of gods."¹³ Considering these assertions, we could assume that just as Svantevit may be for Helmold only a personification of St. Vitus, Chernebog may personify for him only the Christian devil while the unnamed good god represents the Christian god. However, this would not explain why Helmold appears to be genuinely perplexed rather than shocked (as he had been in the case of St. Vitus-Svantevit) by the Slavs' "strange delusion" of invoking with words of execration *both* a good and an evil god (believed to be the same as the devil). Since Helmold offers no explanation of this paradox, we would be justified by saying that he views the worship of these two deities as a phenomenon beyond his comprehension.

It is true that prior to the intensified revival of Slavic paganism under Pribislav and Niclot, Christian concepts had already spread among the Slavs and a church dedicated to St. Vitus had been built in ninth century Rugia. The building of churches on the sites of pagan sanctuaries, often dedicated to a saint similar in name or in function to that of a pagan god, was one of the most effective practices employed by the Church in eradicating traces of pagan worship.¹⁴ Thus in regard to Svantevit even most of the positivist scholars have ceased to apply an *interpretatio Christiana*, accepting his existence as an ancient Slavic deity. We believe that the time has come to grant the same privilege to Chernebog, especially since the rite surrounding his worship is clearly pagan and we see no reason why Helmold should have invented the name. The polar semantic opposition in the internal structure of the god's name, on the basis of which some scholars have argued against his existence, can also favor the hypothesis for his ancient origin. For, if the Slavs did participate in the Iranian evolution into a clear-cut dualism, as Jakobson firmly believes,¹⁵ they may have relegated a once good deity to the position of a dark and evil one (along the lines of the Slavo-Iranian evolution of Deiwos-Daewa-Div). The word could also be a taboo name for an ancient khtonic deity, in which case the god's color need not have had a moral connotation, signifying simply a god of the underworld or a daemonic being.¹⁶ Finally, the name's second component, "bog," which according to Ivanov and Toporov on the Proto-Slavic and Indo-Iranian level meant not only a deity but also a distributor of fates (*dolia-nedolia*) and good or bad fortune (*schast'e-neschast'e*), does point to the direct dual nature of Slavic religious concepts.¹⁷

The term Bielbog represents a more complex issue, for it is not attested by any primary source. Yet since the Renaissance, first the German chroniclers and then Slavic mythographers, beginning with Tatishchev and Chulkov,¹⁸ included both Bielbog and Chernebog in all expositions on Slavic mythology. Only toward the end of the nineteenth century did scholars begin to question Bielbog's existence, simultaneously doubting the credibility of Helmold's data on Chernebog.¹⁹ In 1903, W. Nehring published a concise scholarly article on the name of Bielbog in Slavic mythology, tracing its origin to the *Historia*

Camenensis, a work dating from the first half of the seventeenth century. Having investigated *Historia*'s sources and finding no references to Bielbog in these works, Nehring concluded that the compiler of the *Historia* had invented the name on the basis of Helmold's "good god."²⁰

Nehring's categorical claim that the earliest historians of Pomerania had known nothing about Bielbog led all of the later positivist scholars, but especially Wienecke and Nedo,²¹ to view not only Bielbog but the entire question of pre-Christian Slavic dualism as a closed issue.

Today Nehring's strongest argument against Bielbog, the fact that his name was unknown to early Pomeranian historians, is no longer valid. For we are able to show that at least two early Pomeranian works, S. Münster's *Cosmographiae* and T. Kantzow's *Chronic von Pommern*, are familiar with Bielbog, while in his *Grosse Pommerische Kirchen Chronicon* D. Cramer (1568-1637), discussing the founding of the Belbig Monastery near Treptow, uses a mythological reference which may be implying Belbug's existence.²²

Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographiae* (Ms. 1550), was first published in 1554. As his source on Rugia, Münster cites Petrus Artopoeus Pomeranos (Peter Becker, 1491-1564), the learned protestant pastor of Stettin who had compiled for him the map of Pomerania.²³ We find in a concise passage of the *Cosmographiae* a description of the annual harvest rite associated with the worship of Svantevit (based, in our opinion, on Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, published in 1514), followed by this statement:

In general they /i. e. the Rugian Slavs/ worshipped two gods, namely Belbuck and Zernebuck, as if a white and black god, a good and evil genius, god and satan, as the source of good and evil, according to the error of the Manicheans.

(Vulgo autem duos deos coluerunt, nempe Belbuck & Zernebuck, quasi album & nigrum deum, bonum & malum genium, deum & satanam, quasi boni & mali authores, iuxta Manichaerum errorem.)²⁴

In relation to the immediately preceding description of Svantevit's rite, this passage seems to imply that while the Slavs at harvest time honored especially Svantevit, "in general" they worshipped primarily the two deities of good and evil. There is something appealing about this measured and unemotional narration. In contrast to Helmold (and, as we shall show below, to Kantzow), the author does not view the two deities as distributors of good and ill fortune. His interpretation of the two gods in both Christian and Classical terms is obviously that of a learned scholar, a careful man interested in presenting Slavic paganism in the most objective terms. Why is Petrus Artopoeus, who must be responsible for this passage, thinking of the Manichean error? Is it because he knows Helmold and believes that Helmold had intended the Manichean parallel; is it because to a man soon to be accused of Ossianism and forced to explain his own "error" to a Council the idea of Slavic "pagan Manicheans" is particularly appealing; or is it, finally, because

he or Münster have at their disposal additional information that allows the formulation of such a hypothesis? All three answers are possible, including the last, since the major part of Belbug Monastery archives did not burn until 1560.²⁵

As it is, Münster's *Cosmographiae* is our earliest printed source on Bielbog. Some twelve years prior to the completion of the *Cosmographiae* however, Thomasz Kantzow (1505-1542) had finished the manuscript of his *Chronic von Pommern in Niederdeutscher Sprache* (ca. 1538, published only in 1835). The chronicle was based on masses of archival material, since Kantzow was a high official to Barnim, Herzog von Pommern, and had access to all libraries and archives in the area. Kantzow appears to know all about the Slavic gods of Helmold (as well as those, we might add, of Ebbo/Herbord and Saxo Grammaticus) and demonstrates this knowledge throughout his work. In the last chapter, entitled "About the Faith of Old Pommeranians and Rugians," Kantzow adds:

They also worshipped the sun and the moon and two gods to whom they assigned a higher value than to other gods. One they called Bialbug – that is the white god, believing him to be a good god, the other Zernebug – that is the black god, believing him to be a god who did harm. Therefore, they honored Bialbug so that he should do them good, and Zernebug so that he should not harm them. . .

(Darneben haben sie Sonne und Mon angebetet, und zu letzt zween Gotter, die uber alle ander Gotter wehren, gemacht. Einen, den sie Bialbug, das ist den weissen Got, genennet; den hielten sie vor einen gutten Got; den andern Zernebug, das ist der schwartze Got, den sie vor einen got hielten, der schaden tette. Darumb ehreten sie Bialbug deshalben, das er ynen gut tette und thun solte; Zernebug aber ehreten sie darum, das er nicht schaden solte. . .)²⁶

This passage contains the strongest assertion yet about the Slavs' dualism of worship – a clear statement of the supremacy of the two gods as distributors of good and ill fortune, worshipped above all other gods.

We have then before us two new sources for Bielbog, originating somewhere between 1530 and 1550. That Kantzow does not know the *Cosmographiae* is certain, for he died in 1542 and Münster's manuscript is dated 1550. At the same time, the text of the *Cosmographiae* shows no relationship to that of Kantzow. Did both authors, Petrus Artopoeus and Kantzow, independently invent the concept of Bielbog as a good white god solely on the basis of Helmold's "good god"? This seems improbable, not because the *Chronica Slavorum* remained unpublished until 1556 (for they could have used, and Kantzow apparently did, one of its existing manuscript copies), but because both texts have an authentic air about them (even in the variant local spelling of the gods' names) and lack, more strongly than Helmold's statement, the tone of an *interpretatio Christiana*. Both texts also

lack Helmold's reference to the rite associated with the worship of the two gods. The reality that both authors may still have had access to the subsequently burned Belbig Monastery archives, and the fact that Kantzow had been an enthusiastic collector of ethnographic material, strongly suggest that we are confronted here with two independent texts based on a source or sources other than Helmold or on a strong oral tradition.

Tempting as it may be to give the existence of Bielbog more credibility on the basis of these two texts, we cannot discount the possibility that the naming of the Belbug Monastery near Treptow on the Rega, established by the Swedish Premonstratian monks in 1170, may have contributed to the invention of this deity. Indeed, Daniel Cramer's *Grosse Pommerische Kirchen Chronicon* of 1628 offers us the following description of the founding of the monastery:

This monastery they named Belbug, pronounced Bialbuck, which in their Wendish tongue means a white god, in order to show that pagan ancestors of the Christians did not know anything about a black god. This name fits the Premonstratian clothing, since they dressed in white.

(Jenem Kloster haben sie den Namen Belbug gegeben, als spreche man Bialbuck, welches in seiner Wendischen Sprach so viel heisst, als den weissen Gott/ on margin, *Bialbuck Weisser Gott*/ damit zu verstehen zu geben, dass die Christen von keinem schwartzen Gott mit ihre Heydnischen Vorfahr wussten: Welcher Nam sich dann zu der Praemonstratenser Kleidung, welch in weiss gekleidet giengen, wol schicket.)²⁷

If Cramer's interesting statement is in fact true – namely, that the monks named the monastery Belbug to erase from the memory of the newly converted Christians their former worship of a black god, it reconfirms for us the existence of a black evil deity and alerts us to the possibility that the term Bielbog may be a literary invention. On the other hand, if the monks built the monastery near a site where both gods had once been worshipped with the intention of eradicating dualistic worship (i. e., by superimposing the idea of the true God over a good pagan god, along the lines of the St. Vitus-Svantevit parallel), then the same text can be used in support of the existence of both deities. The fact that the monks dressed in white garbs may have given them additional impetus for the naming of the monastery.

Conclusions

There is no reason to doubt that an ancient conception of a dualistic origin of the world did underlie the fundamental beliefs of the early Slavs and that the two deities mentioned by Helmold reflect this opposition. We are inclined to believe that Chernebog does echo the existence of an old khtonik god, possibly the same as Volos/Veles, and need no longer be expelled from the

Slavic pantheon. However, the limited amount of comparatively late historical and ethnographic material does not allow us to assert that the early Slavs – centering their religious beliefs around the worship of two opposing deities, hypostatized as a black and a white god – reached a level of religious dualism that can be viewed as a religio-historical phenomenon.*

Notes

- 1 The last such statement about Belbog-Chernebog was made by Alois Schmaus, "Zur altslavischen Religionsgeschichte," *Saeculum*, vol. 4 (1953), pp. 206-230. An excellent review of Slavic paganism with a partial treatment of this subject can be found in Zdeněk Váňa, "k současnému stavu studia slovanského pohanství," *Památky archeologické*, vol. 74 (1985), pp. 228-250.
- 2 See especially E. V. Anichkov, "Les survivantes manichéennes en pays Slaves et en Occident," *Revue des études Slaves*, vol. 8 (1928), pp. 203-225, and M. P. Dragomanov, *Notes on Slavic religio-ethical legends: The dualistic creation of the world*, transl. by E. W. Count, Russian and East European Series, vol. 23 (The Hague: Indiana University Publications, 1961).
- 3 See especially Erwin Wienecke, *Untersuchungen zur Religion der Westslaven* (Leipzig, 1940), pp. 276-280.
- 4 V. N. Mochul'skii, "O mnimom dualizme v mifologii Slavian," *Russkii filologicheskii vestnik*, vol. 2 (1889), pp. 153-204.
- 5 Alexander Brückner, "Fantazje mitologiczne," *Slavia, časopis pro slovanskou filologii*, vol. 8 (1929-1930), pp. 340-351; Lubor Niederle, *Život starých Slovanů*, 2nd ed. (Prague, 1924)(his *Slovanské starožitnosti*, vol. 2, pt. 1), pp. 159-164; Ján Máchal, *Nákres slovanského bájeslovi* (Praha, 1891), and his "Slavic Mythology," *The Mythology of all races*, vol. 8 (Boston, 1918), p. 288; E. Wienecke, *op. cit.*; Boris Unbegaun, "La religion des anciens Slaves," in A. Grenier, *Les religions étrusques et romaines* (Paris, 1948), pp. 420-422; Paul Nedo, "Czorneboh und Bieleboh, zwei angebliche slavische Kultstätten in der Oberlausitz," *Lětopis, Jahresschrift des Instituts für sorbische Volksforschung*, Reihe C, 6/7, 1963/1964 (Bautzen, 1964), pp. 5-18; and H. Łowmiański, *Religia Słowian i jej upadek* (Warszawa, 1979).
- 6 Roman Jakobson, "Slavic Folklore," *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (New York, 1949), p. 1026; Marija Gimbutas, "Slavic Religion," *The Encyclopedia of Religions*, ed. by Mircea Eliade, vol. 13 (New York, 1987), pp. 353-361; Alexander Gieysztor, *Mytologia Słowian* (Warszawa, 1982), pp. 77-87; and Z. Váňa, *op. cit.* Also in favor of dualism is G. Alexinsky in *The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, (New York, 1968). A. Gieysztor, in his excellent article on Slavic Mythology in the *Larousse World Mythology* (New York, 1965), avoids the issue of Slavic dualism.

- 7 A. M. Zolotarev, *Rodovoi stroi i pervobytnaia mifologiya* (Moskva, 1968), esp. pp. 281-282, and Mircea Eliade, "Le diable et le bon Dieu, la préhistoire de la cosmogonie populaire roumaine," *De Zalmoxis à Gengis-Khan* (Paris, 1970).
- 8 Zolotarev, *op. cit.* For a review of Zolotarev's work see V. V. Ivanov's review article in *Sovetskaia arkheologiya*, No. 4 (1968), pp. 276-287.
- 9 V. V. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov, *Slavianskie iazykovye modeliruiushchie semioticheskie sistemy* (Moskva, 1965), esp. pp. 56-57. The problem with their reconstructed parallel of Bielbog-Chernebog is that it is based on very limited and occasionally inaccurate data. Bielbog, for example, is reconstructed only on the basis of his polar opposition to Chernebog and on toponyms and hydronyms bearing this opposition. Further and more critical study of folklore material may strengthen their hypothesis. Interestingly enough, these scholars have not included Bielbog-Chernebog as components of their basic thesis on the *tripartity* of Slavic religious beliefs. On this subject see V. N. Toporov, "Fragment slavianskoi mifologii," *Kratkie soobshcheniia*, No.30 (Moskva: Institut slavianovedeniia, Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1961), pp. 14-32.
- 10 Gieysztor, *Mitologia*, p. 81.
- 11 Gimbutas, *op. cit.*, p. 356.
- 12 Helmold I/52 in *Fontes Historiae religionis Slavicae*, ed. by C. H. Meyer (Berlin, 1931)(*Fontes Historiae religionum ex auctoribus Graecis et Latinis collecto, edidit Carolus Clemens, fasc. 4*), p. 44.
- 13 II/108, *ibid.* p. 46.
- 14 Niederle, *op. cit.*, p. 141 and Gimbutas, "Ancient Slavic Religion: A Synopsis" *To Honor Roman Jakobson*, Vol. 1 (The Hague, 1967), p. 741. In this article Gimbutas does not deal with Slavic dualism.
- 15 Jakobson, *op. cit.*
- 16 This hypothesis has been suggested by Schmaus, *op. cit.*, p. 224, in agreement with V. Cajkanovic whose work has not been at our disposal.
- 17 Ivanov and Toporov, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57, 59, 65-3. It is precisely this point that such scholars as Brückner, Nehring, Wienecke and Nedo deny. They view *bog*, *boh*, *boch* in the meaning of *god* either as a much later local neologism for *bok* (side) or *buch*, *buk*, *bug* (beech tree or grove), or as an invention of the German chroniclers who did not understand the Slavic tongue.
- 18 M. D. Chulkov, *Peresmeshnik ili slavenskiia skazki*, Vols. 1-4(1766-1768). For Tatishchev and his sources see Myroslava T. Znayenko, *The Gods of Ancient Slavs: Tatishchev and the Beginnings of Slavic Mythology* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1980). On the basis of a typographical error in Trogillus Arnkiel's *Cimbrische Heyden-Religion* (Hamburg, 1702). Tatishchev believed that Bielbog was an evil god and Chernebog a good god of the Slavs.
- 19 One of the first critics was J. Jireček, "Studia v oboru mythologie české II.

- Bozi a besi," *Časopis Museum království českého*, vol.37 (1863), pp. 27-28. For other early critical studies see bibliographies in Niederle, *op. cit.*
- 20 W. Nehring, "Der Name Belbog in der slawischen Mythologie," *Archiv für slavische philologie*, vol. 25 (1903), pp. 66-73.
- 21 Both Wienecke and Nedo believe that there is no sense in studying the later Chernebog-Bielbog myths since they were 'created' on the basis of the invented parallel. We intend to deal with the evaluation of this material at a later date.
- 22 Bielbog appears also in Mavro Orbini's *Il regni degli Slavi* (Pesaro, 1601). For our partial treatment of these sources see Znayenko, *op. cit.*, esp. notes 126-128, pp. 121-122, and pp. 41-42.
- 23 On Petrus Artopoeus see Hellmuth Heyden, *Kirchengeschichte Pommerns*, Vol. 1, (Köln-Bransfeld, 1964), p. 51; and Karl Heinz Burmeister, *Briefe Sebastian Münster* (Insel-Verlag, 1964), pp. 115, 119-120.
- 24 Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographiae universalis* (Basileae, apud Henrichum Petri, 1554), p. 772.
- 25 See H. Hoogeweg, *Die Stiften und Klöster der Provinz Pommern*, Vol. 1 (Stettin, 1924), p. 13.
- 26 Thomasz Kantzow, *Chronik von Pommern in Niederdeutscher Sprache* (Stettin, bei Friedrich Heinrich Morin, durch Wilhelm Böhmer, 1835), p. 283. The edition has an excellent introduction about Kantzow's life and work. The mythological material in Kantzow's chronicle requires the attention of scholars.
- 27 Daniel Cramer, *Das Grosse Pomrische Kirchen Chronicon* (Stettin, 1628), p. 11.
- * This paper was delivered in an earlier version at the International Colloquium On the Origins of Slavic Cultures (December 1987), organized by the Universite de Paris (Sorbonne) at the Werner-Reimers Stiftung in Bad Homburg, Germany.