

Joanna Hubbs' *Mother Russia*: More than review.

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*On the example of a controversial book **Mother Russia** by American historian Joanna Hubbs, published in USA in 1993, the article attempts to explore studies in Slavonic religion worldwide. The author explores a number of selected serious mistakes made by Joanna Hubbs in her book and attributes them to a very poor knowledge of Slavonic religion and mythology in the West, and especially in English speaking countries. To address this problem, the article suggests that more articles should appear in SMS in English. Moreover it recognizes importance of SMS as vehicle to promote more research and better understanding of Slavonic religion and mythology worldwide.*

In 1993 Joanna Hubbs, an American historian, published a book titled *Mother Russia*. The author advanced the theory that Slavic religion was matriarchal in its nature and that the major early Slavic deities were predominately feminine, and only in later historical times did a masculinization of these cults and deities take place.

In my opinion the book deserved a lot of scrutiny and a firm academic response not for its new approach to the Slavic religion and Eastern Slavic in particular, but for a number of serious mistakes that appeared. It is not my intention here to challenge either the main thesis of Joanna Hubbs or her interpretation of the evidence, despite the fact they are often very controversial and revolutionary to say the least. Nor do I intend to review here the entire book. Nonetheless, from a few examples I would like to show a number of serious - and to-date undisputed - mistakes she has made, and I will address only some of the religious aspects.

Early in the book Joanna Hubbs states: "According to the 6th century Byzantine historian Procopius, the pagan Slavs worshipped: both river and tree nymphs and some other kinds of spirits".¹ She used the account by Procopius of Ceasarea here to advance her claims that the Slavs worshipped predominately feminine deities and that Mother Earth was dominant among them. However, she ignored an earlier part of the same account (just a few lines before) which identifies the male god of thunder, almost definitely Perun, as a major deity of the Southern Slavs.²

Furthermore, the four-faced Slavic idol of Zbrucz is identified by Joanna Hubbs as that of Sventevit, Polabian Sventevit of Rügen Island.³ Joanna Hubbs' speculation is based primarily on the fact that, according to Saxo Grammaticus, the idol of Svantevit of Rügen

¹ J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, p. 11.

² Procopius of Ceasarea, *History of the Wars*, VII.XIV.23.

³ J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, p.12.

had four heads.⁴ It is worth noting that the claim that the stone idol of Zbrucz is Sventevit was made in the 19th century, after the discovery of a statue. However, as early as the beginning of the 20th century, this fanciful claim was rebuked by Polish historian and linguist Aleksander Brückner.⁵ Today no serious scholar would identify the idol from Zbrucz as that of Sventovit of Arkona. Multicephalism was common in Slavic mythology and iconography so the four-faced Zbrucz idol and four heads of Sventovit are hardly sufficient evidence to identify them as the same deity. It appears that Joanna Hubbs fails to realize that four heads is not the same thing as four faces.

Further on, she advances the claim that masculinization of an original female divinity had taken place at some stage at Arkona.⁶ Joanna Hubbs based her claim on the basis of feminine elements (two out of four figures) and female figures on the trunk of the idol of Zbrucz. However, this alone would not allow any serious archaeologist or historian to claim either the femininity of the deity or a "half way" process of masculinization. Furthermore, these feminine elements in the idol at Arkona were not mentioned at all by Saxo Grammaticus.⁷ The idol's moustache, horn and sword can hardly be interpreted as feminine.

In relation to rituals associated with the goddess Zhiva (venerated and worshipped by the Obodrite branch of the Polabian Slavs in modern East Germany) Joanna Hubbs stated: "It is thought that, as in later Russian peasant rituals, the women, young and old, officiated".⁸

It is true that Helmold of Bossau, in his description of Polabian religion, mentioned gods such as Prove, Redigast and Siva (Zhiva). The feminine ending of the name Siva leads most scholars to accept that this was a female goddess, and it is beyond the scope of this article to argue either way. Helmold also stated that men, women, and children participated in the rituals associated with those gods. In relation to Zhiva, however, the account was rather brief, and no leading role of females was indicated whatsoever.⁹ Communal banquets associated with various Slavic religious festivals and celebrations involving the entire population were a common tradition in pagan Slavdom. The evidence for the claim that females officiated there lacks substantiation.

Joanna Hubbs also makes an assumption that male spirits such as Leshy, Vodianoï or Domovoi are later than Rusalki, Bereginye and Vily¹⁰, but this lacks any evidence. How could she substantiate this? It would be prudent to assume that female and male spirits always existed as an inseparable part of Slavic mythology. In another place Joanna Hubbs refers to: "Dazhbog, father of Svarog".¹¹ Although the real relationship between Dazhbog and Svarog in Slavic mythology is unimportant in the argument, Joanna Hubbs cites Marija Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, in which exactly the opposite relationship is stated.¹²

⁴ Saxo Grammaticus, XIV. 39.

⁵ A. Brückner, *Mitologia słowiańska i polska*, p. 325.

⁶ J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, p.16.

⁷ Saxo Grammaticus, XIV.39.

⁸ J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, p. 13.

⁹ Helmold of Bosau, *Chronica Slavorum*, Book I.52.

¹⁰ J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, p. 16.

¹¹ J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, p. 17.

¹² M.Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, p. 162.

Later Joanna Hubbs speaks of a female solar deity: "Among the Western Slavs.....Matushka Krasnovo Solnca (Mother of the Red Sun)".¹³ To one familiar with Russian, "Matushka Krasnovo Solnca" is obviously a Latin transcript from the Russian language. The Russians are not Western Slavs, and the Czechs, Poles, Slovaks and Sorbs are not in the habit of using Russian in these writings.

Another serious mistake was made by Joanna Hubbs when she wrote that: "The historian Thietmar of Mersenburg noted that in Stettin (where the statue of Svantevit was venerated) the popular assembly governed through unanimous vote. It is not clear to what extent women participated in the councils... We can speculate that women participated in government in some form".¹⁴

I would like to remind Joanna Hubbs that Thietmar of Merseburg did not mention Svantevit at all in any of the eight books of his *Chronicon*. The Slavic god named Svantovit was worshipped at Arkona on Rügen Island, a long way from Stettin. The people of Stettin worshipped the god Triglav. In his *Chronicon*, Thietmar specifically writes about the god Svarozhits (Zuarasici in the Latin version of his name) and of his worship at Radegosc (somewhere near modern Neubrandenburg). There is also nothing in Thietmar's account suggesting that women participated in such councils. Not even the word "women" or "female" is mentioned in this particular account.¹⁵

I would like to conclude by citing Joanna Hubbs' comments on the ethnic and linguistic divisions in Central Europe in the late Antiquity. She makes the following claim: "In the second and third centuries, the Dacians, associated with Slavic tribes and settled on the lower Danube, depicts her (Great Goddess of Central Europe) being worshipped...." ¹⁶

This claim gives the impression that Joanna Hubbs was unaware that the Slavs did not reach the Lower Danube until the 6th century C. E. It is possible that the Antaes (Antes) roamed the region sometime around the 3rd century C. E., but for this there is no evidence. The Antaes were most likely the Sarmatians, who Slavicized much later.

I have searched for reviews of the book in a number of periodicals from 1993 onward and found none in the following: *Russian Review*, *Slavic Review*, *The Slavic & Eastern European Review*, *Scottish Slavonic Review - Slavonica* and *Irish Slavonic Studies*. However I have found one in the *Canadian American Slavic Studies* by Adela Barker of the University of Arizona. It is worth citing two comments made by Adela Barker: "This is carefully researched work which draws on a wide range of ethnographic, historical, and literary materials to make its case."¹⁷ And soon after: "This book is a shining addition to the field".¹⁸

The case of Joanna Hubbs' book and the review in *Canadian American Slavic Studies* indicates how poorly researched the area of Slavic pre-Christian religion is in the English speaking world, and how poorly the topic is known and understood. It is surprising that a work with such serious mistakes and flaws was published by such a well recognized and prestigious institution such as the Indiana University Press. The survival of these flaws

¹³ J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, p. 18.

¹⁴ J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, p. 168.

¹⁵ Thietmar of Mersenburg, VI.23-25.

¹⁶ J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, p. 10.

¹⁷ *Canadian American Slavic Studies*, Vol. 27, 1993, p. 341-343.

¹⁸ *Canadian American Slavic Studies*, Vol. 27, 1993, pp. 341-343.

through the pre-publishing review process and the lack of proper academic response to the book shows again how little is known by English speaking scholars about pre-Christian Slavic religion and Slavic history in general.

To make things worse, *Mother Russia* has been used as a textbook in undergraduate History courses at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia, and quite possibly elsewhere. The flaws in Joanna Hubbs' book cannot be ignored, as it is probably the largest recent English language publication dealing with pre-Christian Slavic religion.

Also, as far as I am aware, there is no department of Religious Studies at any University in the English speaking world that offers courses on Slavic religion. Therefore, the belief that the Slavs were animists before converting to Christianity is still common even in academic circles. What lesson can we derive from this? I do believe that *Studia mythologica Slavica* is a perfect vehicle to advance the knowledge about Slavic beliefs and mythology, not only among European scholars, but also amongst those from English speaking countries.

We cannot realistically expect a high level of interest in pre-Christian Slavic religion in the English speaking world. The difficulty for most English speaking academics is the study of source materials in German or any Slavic language. Nonetheless, there are a sufficient number of academics who pursue their careers in this particular area. I believe it is up to European academics, especially those from the Slavic-speaking and Germanic countries, to break the wall of this linguistic barrier and provide a much needed forum that would encompass scholars from English speaking countries. I believe it desirable that articles in *Studia mythologica Slavica* appear in both the author's own language and English. This will not always be possible, as I do realize that many scholars do not speak English or that their knowledge of this language is limited. After all English is not compulsory. However, the articles may be translated by those of our colleagues who are fluent in English. I do fully realize that it is not a simple matter and cannot always be satisfactorily achieved. I myself, although living in Australia for many years, still write in rather crude English but am not too proud to seek assistance in the final editing. However, for the purpose of reaching the English speaking academics, the general public - and especially Joanna Hubbs and Adela Baker - there seems to be no other alternative.

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Thietmar of Mersenburg, *Chronicon*, in M.Z. Jedlicki, ed., *Kronika Tietmara* (Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 1953).

”*Mother Russia*” Joanne Hubbs, več kot ocena.

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Na primeru sporne knjige *Mother Russia*, ki jo je 1993 v ZDA objavila ameriška zgodovinarica Joanna Hubbs, poskuša avtorjev prispevek raziskati angleškojezične študije o slovanski religiji. Avtor razčlenjuje številne izbrane hude pomote, ki jih je zapisala Joanna Hubbs v svoji knjigi, in jih pojasni z zelo slabim poznavanjem slovanske religije in mitologije na Zahodu, še posebno v angleško govorečih deželah. Da bi odpravili to težavo, prispevek predlaga, naj bi v *Studii mythologicae Slavici* objavljali več člankov v angleščini. Omenjena revija se mu zdi pomembna kot sredstvo za predstavitev raziskav ter kot pomoč pri boljšem razumevanju slovanske religije in mitologije.