

The Horse as a Cosmological Creature in the Slovene Mythopoetic Heritage

Monika Kropej

The author states that Slovene rituals and the song and narrative heritage which include the horse are frequent in the time of transition, at midwinter and midsummer solstices and at spring and autumnal equinoxes. All these turning points are marked by Perun, the god of thunder, the ruler of the cosmic driving forces.

In every civilization in which it was of decisive economic value, thus also bringing respect to its owner, the horse played a significant role in the religious as well as the ideological notions of people. These were based on an archetypal image of the horse. The archetypal horse is the son of night and mystery, bringing life and death at the same time. When it lifts into the sky, into perfect light, it becomes uranic and of the sun.¹ These notions represent the basis of the mythopoetic heritage of different peoples.

The oldest Indo-European sources already mention horse in connection with myths. According to these sources, numerous deities with the teriomorphic image of a horse were closely connected with water. It was thus believed, for instance, that people were given the horse by Poseidon, master of waters; the Norse horse Nennir (Nikur) appeared on the water surface as a handsome grey horse with his hooves turned backwards. He would take a rider underwater, but would also be willing to be tamed.² In Scotland there is a legend of the Celtic Waterkelpje - a water ghost appearing as a horse, dragging people into waters and sinking ships. Kelpje appeared in the form of a horse and would shake off any rider into the water and drown him. But if one covered it with a young bride's veil, Kelpje had to serve him as a benevolent ghost.³ In Schleswig the demonic Waterman was named "Utoplec" or "Topilec", appearing as a horse or as a human with horse's legs. He guarded the souls of his victims locked in vessels in his underwater dwelling.⁴ The Slovene tradition of half-horses has similar roots to the antique legends about the Centaurs whose names, according to Kretschmer, denote "to whip water" (Glotha 10, 50 f.p.). It was believed that Centaurs personified whipped, foamy water, namely the untamed powers of nature, especially water. Their original home was in the land of Nephele, meaning cloud. In Slovenia, legends of half-horses are mainly preserved in Štajersko (Styria) and Gorenjsko and in Venezia Friulia

¹ J. Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Slovar simbolov* (Translated by Stane Ivanc), Ljubljana 1993, p. 241. For more on the horse in Indoeuropean languages and culture see: T. V. Gamkrelidze and V. V. Ivanov, *Indoeuropejskij jazyk i Indoeuropejcy I*, Tbilisi 1984, pp.544-593.

² *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (from now HDA), Bd. 6, Berlin & Leipzig 1934/35, p.1635.

³ L. Petzoldt, *Kleines Lexikon der Dämonen und Elementargeister*, München 1995, p.108.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 174.

which is now in Italy (M. Ravnikar-Poženčan, J. Pajek, V. Ostermann). A round clasp from the 8th century with the image of a Centaur was found in the former village Grad near Bled.⁵

Though the origin of the horse was supposed to be in the depths of the Earth and in its waters, the horse was also linked to wind. In antiquity and in the Middle Ages people believed that mares were impregnated by the wind⁶ - Achilles' horses were born to Zephyrus by harpye Podarge which was grazing in the moors by the ocean.⁷ This is also the origin of the belief that horses originally had wings, the same as the antique mythopoetic horse Pegasus which supposedly opened the stream of the Muses - Hippocrene (horse's stream) - with his hooves. The windy horse supposedly flew around and grazed among the branches of the world tree, for instance Odin's horse in Norse legends which was thought to be swifter than the thunder wind and which flew with no wings. He was tied to the world tree called Iggdrasil in Edda⁸. The Russian wild ghost was believed to snort from branch to branch. A white horse is also the constant attribute of the Serbian Dažbog, Polabian Sventovit, Germanic Wodan, Scandinavian Odin. A swift horse, fast as lightning, is ridden by swift gods in Indian, Greek, German, and Slavic mythologies. Horses' hooves cause sparkles - lightning, which is then followed by rain - the source of water.

The horse was an important attribute of the majority of archaic deities who performed cosmogonic and heroic deeds.⁹ The old archetypal images of horses and horse gods were handed down in the form of oral tradition, customs and beliefs from generation to generation up to the present.

The Horse in the Yearly Cycle

All of the four yearly turning points - the midwinter and midsummer solstices, the beginning of spring and fall - are marked with the image of the horse in Slovenian heritage. Christmas, namely the birth of the young god, the foal, is announced by St. Stephen who assumed the role of the protector of horses in folk heritage. The Carnival, during which horse masks are frequently seen, forecasts the coming of spring when at last St. George, a hero on a white mare, defeats a terrifying dragon and casts winter from the country. Midsummer Day is announced by Kresnik who was born with horse hooves and who often assumes the image of the horse. Finally, when summer turns to fall, Jarnik, St. George with a gun, shoots a white horse, a goat or a chamois named Goldenhorn, symbol of the sun, but only to be reborn at Christmas as the young sun, or the foal.

Winter Solstice, Christmas - Birth

Rituals which tie horses to the renewal of nature are typical of the period of midwinter solstice when days are shortest and nights are longest. This is the time when the young sun

⁵ J. Kastelic, Blejska fibula s kentavrom - lokostrelcem. Arheološki vestnik 13-14, Ljubljana 1962-63, pp.545-563.

⁶ HDA, p. 1605.

⁷ Homer, The Iliad 16, v. 150 f.

⁸ Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, 1984, p. 549.

⁹ Comp. V. V. Ivanov, Konj, in: Mify narodov mira 1, Moscow 1987, p. 666; Robert Turcan, The Cults of the Roman Empire, Oxford 1996, pp. 248-254.

is supposed to be born. According to some legends, even St. Nicholas rides up to houses on a white horse during Advent. Jože Vršnik thus described in *Planinski vestnik* 1971 the custom on St. Nicholas Day in Logarska dolina: *Chains rattled outside on the shed /.../ the door to the house slowly opened and in rode St. Nicholas on a horse covered with blankets. He was followed by the angel and the devil.* N. Kuret, citing this extract in his book¹⁰, mentions that the blanket-covered horse was probably an equine mask. This piece of information is also interesting in view of the role of the horse during the time of waiting for the Christmas foal to be born. He is born on a winter night when, according to an Iranian variant, a fight between Indra and Vritra took place; we could find a parallel in Perun and Veles fighting each other. Indra kills Vritra and sets the sun free. A similar case takes place during Christmas when the Christmas horse is set free and is born.¹¹

Old Bela krajina Christmas carols, which were published by Štrekelj in *Slovenske narodne pesmi*¹² under the numbers 4743-4747, tell about a black stallion on which a boy with a cap or a silver belt sits, either in the saddle or in a crib on the saddle. In some variants the horse is standing above six oxen, in others it is tied to a green fir, etc. Inhabitants of Žumberak in Bela krajina went around during Christmas practising magic, that is singing this Christmas carol which was recorded by Janko Barle¹³:

*Dobar dan, gospodar,
Bog vam dobre gostje daj!
Na dvori vam zelen bor,
Zanj' privezan konjič vran.
Na konjički sedlice,
Na sedlici sinek vaš,
Sinek ima srebern pas.
Več vam velja dober glas,
Kakor tisti srebrn pas.
Rodila vam šenica
In ta vinska mladica!
Stari čako, donesite vina,
Stara majko, komad kruha,
Mlado snaše, povesance,
I djivojka, jabučicu!*

*Good day, master,
May god grant you a good feast!
A green fir on your land,
A black stallion tied to it.
A saddle on the stallion,
Your son is in the saddle,
Your son has a silver belt.
A good reputation is better
Than the silver belt.
May your wheat grow,
May your vineyards be full!
Old man, bring us wine,
Old woman, a piece of bread,
young daughter-in-law, a skein,
And the girl, an apple!*

Similarly, since a black horse does not foretell death in Russian folk songs, but is the symbol of joy and the life force, the black horse in this song has by analogy no connection with death either.¹⁴

Some customs have preserved the memory of the Christmas horse as well. Most evident remains of these beliefs are in the Šavrin tradition about the Christmas "foal" which is supposed to come in the evening to eat hay under the table. In Gažon and its surroundings, for instance, children had to fast all day on the Christmas vigil, for it was believed that

¹⁰ N. Kuret, *Praznično leto Slovencev* (2nd Edition), Ljubljana 1989 (from now PLS), p. 229.

¹¹ Comp. A. Pleterski, *Božič naših prednikov. Naši razgledi* 38, No. 23 (910), Dec. 15., 1989.

¹² *Slovenske narodne pesmi I-IV*, Ljubljana 1895-1923 (from now Š.).

¹³ Š 4746.

¹⁴ J. Keber, *Živali v prispodobah*, Celje 1996, p. 167.

whoever can endure without food all day can behold "the foal" in the evening. On Christmas Eve people in Divača watched a reflection of the shadow cast by a blazing Christmas log in the fireplace, saying that "Christmas" jumps about the fireplace. In Brkini a basketfull of hay was ready for the Christmas "foal" on Christmas Eve¹⁵. Similar to the "jullbock" of Scandinavia, these customs are based on ancient beliefs in the foal as the personification of a deity which is closely connected to the yearly cycle and the renewal of spring. These beliefs must have been rooted in Indo-European traditions - the twelve-spoke wheel of the god Rita who never grows old is supposed to roll across the sky. In the Atharvaveda, time is personified by Kala who runs like a horse with numerous bridles¹⁶.

According to a legend the Christmas birth is announced by St. Stephen whose name day is on December 26 and who is the patron saint of horses. The saint took the place of a pre-Christian deity of Indoeuropean origin closely connected to the divine horse and to numerous myths and rituals associated with it. A pre-Christian deity functioning as the horse patron which is closest to us is the Celtic Epona. The cult of Epona was widespread also in Carinthia and Styria, and December 18 was dedicated to her. Strabon (5, 1, 9c, 215) reports that Venetians worshipped Diomedes, usually sacrificing a white horse to him¹⁷.

St. Stephen assumed the role of a deity connected with horses who was the patron of horses in Northern and Central Europe. It is significant that according to a legend horses pulled a casket with the dead St. Stephen as portrayed also in Utik near Ljubljana¹⁸.

In folk songs and tales depicting the stoning of St. Stephen (Š I, No. 632, f.p.; Š II, No. 120) a biblical story about Stephen - a deacon in Jerusalem who was stoned by Jews because he was successfully spreading the teachings of Jesus (Apd. 6,5-7,60) - intermingles with pre-Christian elements. Slovenian legends and legendary songs relate how St. Stephen announces the birth of the king, Jesus the Saviour. He is heard by Herod's wife Herodiada and Herod orders that St. Stephen be captured and tied to a beech tree in the middle of a green forest where a wild white horse is to tear him apart. But when the horse beholds St. Stephen it quiets down and follows him to a castle¹⁹:

*Perdirjal je že divji konj,
Štefan je storil sveti križ,
konjič je pa postal krotak,
da še ni bil nikoli tak.
Odvezal je pintico,
naredil mu je uždico,
perjezdil je pod beli grad,
še je dalej lepši pel...*

*A wild horse came galloping,
St. Stephen crossed himself,
The horse quieted down,
As never before.
He untied the ribbon,
Fashioned a bridle,
Came riding to a white castle,
Singing an even prettier song...*

Herod then orders St. Stephen to be thrown into a pit, then locked into a tower where snakes and lizzards will eat him, but when St. Stephen crosses himself the creatures do not harm him. Finally Herod orders that St. Stephen be taken to a field and stoned there.

¹⁵ After PLS II, pp. 333-334.

¹⁶ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Vol. 2: Mythical Thought*. New Haven, London (Yale Univ. Press) 1965 (First Edition 1955), p. 115.

¹⁷ M. Šašel Kos, *Boginja Ekorna v Emoni*. *Zgodovinski časopis* 46, No. 1, Ljubljana 1992, p. 11.

¹⁸ PLS 2, p. 383. after Emilijan Cevc.

¹⁹ Š, No. 633; SLP II, Ljubljana 1981, p. 398.

Stephen asks Jesus to take him to his side and to grant heavenly paradise to all souls. The morning after the stoning a chapel stands there, the stones all turned to salt. This is the origin of the custom on St. Stephen's Day when water is blessed together with salt.

This legend is known in England and in Scandinavia as well. Researchers could not agree on its origin and spreading. H. Calender presumed that the legend originated in Sweden and came to Slovenia via Germany²⁰. S. Baldi, however, felt that it travelled in the opposite direction, from south to north²¹. I. Grafenauer agreed with Baldi's opinion in his treatise²², maintaining that the legend of St. Stephen's stoning originated in the Roman language area, and from there spread to Slovenia and to Western and Northern Germans. Regardless of the way the legend evolved - which in view of the differences in its contents could also have been preserved by different peoples independently - the connection between St. Stephen and horses is evident in all of its variants. What is of interest is also the fact that among the Germans Herod or Herodiada both appear as leaders of the Wild Hunt. In most variants St. Stephen is connected with horses in one way or another, be it as a hired hand in a horse stable, a rider on a white horse, and especially as the one who tames the wild horse.

Folk customs practiced on St. Stephen's Day testify to the fact that the saint took over the role of the horse patron. On St. Stephen's Day horse breeders started their pilgrimages connected with horses. Especially famous were Stara vas by Šentjernej in Dolenjsko, Kupljenik by Bohinjska Bela, Blejska dobrava, Št. Vid by Lukovica, Mengeš, Utik by Vodice, Suha by Kranj, and Sora by Medvode. On this day horses were blessed in many places in Slovenia and people brought offerings - horse statuettes or money - to churches. The custom survived also in Štepanja vas by Ljubljana - in the past also in Gorenja vas by Sorica, in Stara loka, etc. - where believers sacrificed little horses made of white wax²³.

The horse denoted a sacrificial animal par excellence. It was necessary to sacrifice a horse to ensure the renewal and the existence of cosmic order²⁴. In view of this and also of the fact that the ballad was sung and danced to on the day of St. John the Evangelist, December 27 which is the day after St. Stephen's Day - and thus events depicted in it were supposed to happen the day before, or the night before to be exact - we may presume that there is a certain connection between the horse and the victim in a song "Tri žene iztrgajo mladeniču srce" (Three Women Pull out a Young Man's Heart, SLP I, No. 23). The song depicts a sacrifice connected to a certain ritual²⁵, but does not mention the hero's name - or if it does, his names may be different: Sinek Martinek, Sinek Dominek, Ivan moj sin, also Štefica in some Croatian variants. His actual name is of minor importance here, more important is the fact that the victim in all variants is the son, a shepherd. He grazed sheep,

²⁰ H. Celander, Till Steffanslegendens och Steffansvisornas utvecklings-historia. (To the History of the Development of Stephen's Legend and the Song about Stephen), ARV, Tidskrift för nordisk folksminnesforskning 1945, pp. 134-164.

²¹ S. Baldi, Ballate Popolari d'Inghilterra e di Scozia - Testo, traduzione, introduzione e note a cura di Sergio Baldi, Firenze 1946.

²² Legendarna pesem o sv. Štefanu in Herodu, in: I. Grafenauer, Bogastvo in ubožstvo v slovenski narodni pesmi in v irski legendi. SAZU, razr. 2, Razprave 4, Ljubljana 1958, pp. 37-100, 65-75.

²³ After PLS 2, 389 f.p.

²⁴ More about cosmogonic sacrifice see: B. Lincoln, Myth, Cosmos and Society. Indo-European Themes of Creation and Destruction. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London (Harvard University Press) 1986, pp. 1-40.

²⁵ A similar motif can be found in Euripides' tragedy The Bacchae which describes Pentheus' death during the ritual dedicated to Dionysus in which the leader of the horrible murder is his mother Agave.

mares, or young oxen. According to the song two women, one his own mother, the other his aunt or his sister, tore out his heart while the third, his lover (or wife or sister) defended him, or cried over him. In some variants all three pulled out his heart. The song ends when the shepherd judges the three white women. The first two deserved to be burnt at the stake or suffer some other similar punishment, while the third - if not equally punished - received three white castles, paradise, love, or something similar. It is interesting that in one of the variants the mother also asks her son what awaits his brother - who otherwise plays no role in the song - whereupon the son replies that his brother is to receive a horse and a wagon²⁶. The second part of the song - which is sometimes the only one - is sung in the form of a dialogue. The mother tries to wake up her son in the morning as if unaware of the horrors of the previous night. But the dead cannot talk and the mother, the leader of the ritual, should have known what had happened. The song really is a mystery. Following his death, the son is revived in the afterworld. The mystery, which has been preserved up to Christian times, is tied to the idea of renewal and fertility.

Renewal and fertility cults in their degenerated form remained parallel with Christianity in the Middle Ages and were persecuted as magic. Researchers believed that the song reflected the notions of witches and their orgies²⁷, or dreams with all their nightmares²⁸. Both notions are right to a certain degree, but the real basis of the song has to be looked for in ancient religious mysteries and their archetypes in human subconsciousness and beliefs. The notion that this used to be a religious ritual is also supported by the fact that in Predgrad (in Poljanska dolina in Bela krajina) this song was sung as a dance song. Thus it is the only example of a ballad which has been preserved in its original form in Slovenia. As already mentioned, it was sung only once a year, on December 27 which follows St. Stephen's Day, on which people celebrated midwinter solstice by dancing outside. A similar habit of dancing outside around Christmas time has also been preserved among the Uskoki from the *što* dialect of Bosnia²⁹.

In all of the three above-mentioned song types about St. Stephen there is a victim who is in some way connected with the sacrifice of a horse. The horse thus presents a teriomorphic image of a deity who plays a decisive role in the process of renewal. It is therefore not strange that the oldest preserved Carnival mask in Slovenia is Rusa, a mare. In Ščavnica and its surroundings Rusa was taken around the village while people were singing³⁰:

*Belo Ruso vodimo,
Konjem srečo prosimo,
Zobi ji ne dajamo,
Z meglo jo napajamo.*

*We are leading the white Rusa,
Asking for good luck for horses.
We do not feed her with oats,
But water her with fog.*

²⁶ This could be linked to a folk tale about a mythical hero on horseback who has a brother. Together they form a complementary pair.

²⁷ E. Seemann, *Die drei Hexen. Deutsche Volkslieder mit ihren Melodien IV*, no. 80, Berlin 1959, pp. 216-227.

²⁸ M. Bošković-Stulli, *Balada o pastiru i tri vještice*, in: *Narodno stvaralaštvo folklor 7*, Vol. 25, Beograd 1968, pp. 20-36

²⁹ SLP I, p. 142

³⁰ Š, No. 5157.

When they came to a brook the two young men who represented the horse threw an old pot and a broom into the water, and all of them started to sing:

*Smo Rusa v vodo stirali,
Konjem srečo sprosili,
Zdaj bomo pa pobirali,
Da bomo težko nosili.*

*We chased Rusa to a brook,
And got good luck for horses,
Now we will gather presents
Until we can carry no more.*

Horse masks are known elsewhere in Europe as well. Young men masked themselves as horses on Christmas or during Carnival in Germany, France, Austria, Hungary, Italy³¹, etc. It is obvious that the original old rituals which were once part of this custom have gradually lost their original meaning. The custom slowly acquired ironic and theatrical elements, but inadvertently preserved some of its original elements. The song thus speaks about a white mare which is sacrificed for the benefit of horses. The mare is thrown into water, which is a distinctive mediator between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The sacrificial horse should thus obtain mercy from God in the afterworld. This is also the role of St. Stephen, for the endings of certain song variants about the "Kamenjanje Sv. Štefana" (The Stoning of St. Stephen) are tailored to the spirit of Christianity, yet with a marked note of deliverance such as the following one³²:

*Ko je ravno Štefan videl to,
da on smrt storil bo,
iz ljubezni šče je prosil to,
da bi Jezus dal grešnikom nebo:
"Oh Jezus, prosim te,
h sebi vzemi me,
po smrti ti vsem dušam daj
aj, nebeški sveti raj!"*

*When St. Stephen saw
That he was about to die,
Still he asked Jesus with love
For absolution for all sinners:
"Oh, Jesus, please take me with you,
And after death all souls
May join you up in heaven!"*

The Beginning of Spring - St. George's Day - Transition

St. George took the place of a mythical killer of dragon. By killing the dragon he saves his land from disaster, defeats winter and brings spring and sun. There are numerous customs, folk songs, legends, tales and fairytales connected with St. George's Day.

St. George replaced a prominent spring deity, perhaps Vesnik, Jaril (the name has the same basis as Jarnik, but here it denotes spring, the young, and does not mean irritable or irascible, which is how the name of Jarnik, his brother, is explained). On this day a young boy wrapped in vine tendrils so tightly that he was not discernible under the green was led from door to door in Bela krajina. His escorts sang a carol which started with the following verses³³:

³¹ HDA, p. 1629.

³² SLP II, 397 (Š 635).

³³ After PLS I, pp. 258-259.

<i>Prošel je, prošel pisani vuzem, došel je, došel zeleni Jure na zelenom konji, po zelenom polji. Dajte mu, dajte, Jurja darovajte...</i>	<i>Over is, over the colorful Easter, Here comes, here comes George all in green, On a green horse, over the green fields, Give him, oh give him an offering...</i>
--	---

Some of the St. George customs have preserved the connection of St. George with the horse, and in these we can recognize St. George the rider. St. George from Adlešiči, for instance, rides a white horse and is not allowed to descend until he has ridden through the whole parish. It is also significant that St. George's Day is also the holiday of horse breeders.

A long journey by St. George on horseback seems to be announced in a song entitled "Aj zelena je vsa gora" (Oh, How Green Is the Mountain), sung by young women while dancing the Črnomaljsko kolo (round dance from Črnomelj) on Easter Monday. Easter is usually celebrated before St. George's day, but according to folk beliefs the year in which this sequence is reversed is supposed to be an unlucky one. The song announces a long journey awaiting the rider³⁴:

*Aj, zelena je vsa gora, zelena, aj, zelena je.
Aj, notri raste trava, diteljina, aj, notri raste.
Aj, žela jo je spremlada devojka, aj, žela jo je,
aj, zlatim srpom, belimi rokami, aj, zlatim srpom.
Aj, nesla jo je svojga bratca konjem, aj, nesla jo je.
Aj, jejte, pite mojga bratca kojnci, aj, jejte, pite,
ker jutri bote daleč potovali, aj, jutri bote,
aj čez te gore, gore so visoke, aj, čez te gore,
aj, čez te vode, vode so široke, aj, čez te vode.*

*Oh, how green is the mountain, how green it is, how green.
Oh, and on the mountain clover grows, it grows.
Oh, a young girl the clover reaped, she reaped it.
Oh, with a golden sickle, hands of white, the golden sickle.
Oh, she took it to her brother's horses, took it there.
Oh, eat and drink, my brother's horses, eat and drink.
For you shall travel far on the morrow, on the morrow.
Oh, over these mountains, the mountains high, high over.
Oh, over these waters, the deep wide waters, wide over.*

While the songs have preserved only a fragment of ritual texts, a fairy tale of the AaTh 300 type entitled "Dragon Slayer" preserved the basic archetype in the form of narrative. This is a story about the hero who kills a monster, saves a princess, resumes his travels and returns, usually precisely at the moment when the princess is to marry someone else. The design of the story reminds one of a cosmological myth about the creation of the world, which represents the central deed of the hero's life and has therefore been joined to the initiative ritual of the chosen³⁵. Principally the same myth can also be traced

³⁴ M. Ramovš, Polka je ukazana. Plesno izročilo na Slovenskem. Bela krajina in Kostel, Ljubljana 1995, pp. 58-59.

³⁵ J. de Vries, Heldenlied und Heldensage, Bern, München 1961, p. 297.

in old Canaan and Hittite messages, antique myths, Old testament as well as Christian legends - especially in the already-mentioned legend of St. George who saves St. Margareta. In all of these George is always portrayed as a rider on a white horse. St. George has taken the place of Gromovnik (Thundermaker), god of thunder, who according to the central pre-Slavic myth, fights a dragon³⁶. Radoslav Katičič made a detailed analysis of Slavic folk song traditions from the viewpoint of the pre-Slavic myth about the cosmological duel, or the fertility ritual respectively.³⁷ Among other things, his research has revealed the connection between George and the horse. Based on the preserved song material Katičič established that George, who rode his horse across a sea, across fields and forests, over mountains and through valleys, payed to the dragon - as a ransom for the girl - a horse³⁸. He further stated that certain elements of Eastern Slavic wedding customs give rise to the conjecture that the groom (George) was identified with the horse³⁹. The difference between St. George's Day as a tradition with markedly cosmogonic elements and Midsummer Day with its fertility functions is still preserved in Slovene folk songs and customs. With the exception of Croatian mythic tradition the line between these two myths among other Slavs is much more blurred, with both figures blending into a single one.

Midsummer Solstice - Kresnik - The Sacred Wedding

Summer solstice is announced by Kresnik⁴⁰. As is evident from the name, in people's notions Kresnik was connected with fire, with striking fire, with the sun which attains its zenith on midsummer solstice. N. Kuret allowed for a comparison between the "golden-haired and golden-armed son of the heavenly ruler" - Kresnik - and the sun-god, the Old Slavic Sventovit⁴¹. Stories about Kresnik say that he was born with horse's hooves (Popotnik 5/1, Jan. 10., 1884; Slovenski gospodar 29/1895) and could change his appearance. According to a tradition based on older religious notions his father was the ruler of heavens, meaning

³⁶ For more about the cosmogonic myth among Slavs compare: V.V. Ivanov, V.N. Toporov, Slavjanskije modelirujuščie semiotičeskie sistemy. Moscow 1965; idem: Issledovanija v oblasti slavjanskich drevnostej. Leksičeskie i frazeologičeskie voprosy rekonstrukcii tekstov. Moscow 1974; R. Katičič: Hoditi - roditi, Spuren der Texte eines urslawischen Fruchtbarkeitsritus, in: Wiener slavistisches Jahrbuch 33, Wien 1987; idem, Nachlese zum urslawischen Mythos vom Zweikampf des Donnergottes mit dem Drachen, in: Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch 34, Wien 1988; idem, Weiteres zur Rekonstruktion der Texte eines urslawischen Fruchtbarkeitsritus 1-2, in: Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch 35, 36, Wien 1989, 1990; idem, Nachtrage zur Rekonstruktion des Textes eines urslawischen Fruchtbarkeitsritus, in: Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch 36, Wien 1990.

³⁷ See above.

³⁸ R. Katičič, Hoditi - roditi, Wien 1987, p. 39.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 39-40.

⁴⁰ For more about this mythical creature see: J. Pajek, Črtice iz duševnega žitka štajerskih Slovencev, Ljubljana 1884; J. Kelemina, bajke in pripovedke slovenskega ljudstva, Celje 1930; M. Bošković-Stulli, Kresnik - Krsnik, ein Wesen aus der kroatischen und slovenischen Volksüberlieferung, in: Fabula 3/3, Berlin 1960; C. Ginzburg, Storia notturna, Una decifrazione del sabba, Torino 1989; N. Mikhailov, Fragment slovenskoj mifopoetičeskoj tradicii, in: Koncept dviženija, Moskva 1996, pp. 128-141; idem: Kr(e)snik; eine Figur der slowenischen Version des urslawischen Hauptmythos, in: Književna istorija, XIX, 101, Beograd 1997, 23-37; J. Simpson, Witches and Witchbusters, in: Folklore 107, London 1996.

⁴¹ PLS I, p. 385. J. Kelemina has compared Kresnik and Svarožič (or Božič) in: Bajke in pripovedke slovenskega ljudstva, Celje 1930, p. 8. Comp. Sventovit in: Mify narodov mira 2, Moscow 1988.

Perun, the fire lightning⁴². His mother carried Kresnik for nine years before he was born. He was born as the tenth (Slovan IX/1911, pp. 300-301) or twelfth (Navratil, LMS 1887, pp. 106-107) son, thus symbolizing the future of mankind and eternal development of the universe. He was said to have lived in the Ninth Land, in Eastern Lands, on a Golden or a Glass Mountain⁴³. According to some stories, especially the ones which mention a specific Kresnik - the Kresnik of Vurberg - he lived on the Vurberg castle⁴⁴ which was also called Wurben (etym. worm, also snake or dragon) or Kačjak, the name of which symbolizes the underground world of his opponent, his double, named Veles or Zmaj (Dragon), Kačji kralj Babilon (Babylon the Snake King), Lintvern, Krut, Vož, Sas, Ses, Triglav, Trdoglav, Krutoglav, Potoglav, Črt, Trot, Trod, Bes, Velikan Vouvel, Volvel, Baron Balon, Tolovaj iz Velenja, etc. While it was believed that Kresnik lived in the heavens, his opponent lived in the underworld, in a rocky cave on a river bank, thrice wrapped around a stone table, in a rocky castle, in the Skala castle, in Beli grad, in Pusti grad with no windows or doors, in a mountain cave, in a castle on the highest mountain, in Trotkovo, in Medvedgrad (Bear Castle), etc. Together with his double - brother or with his father (Kelemina, p. 7, No. 202/II) - he travelled around in a carriage. When the two were once on the way to a feast, the Babylonian Snake Queen dispatched a snake to intercept them. The story says that when Trot beheaded the snake with a golden axe the snake's tail hit the clouds, and a terrible storm started. The brothers were saved only because of their swift horses. In Slovene folk tales Kresnik's sister (Marjetica, Vesina, Alenčica, Deva, Zora) - or his cattle - was abducted by his opponent Zmaj (Dragon) and held captive in a rocky cave. Kresnik's four-eyed dog Vedež helped him find her. Following the advice of a White Lady, Kresnik opened the rock with the help of the "vouvelica" or "kounertnica" - grass which grows on top of Pohorje on Midsummer Day - and saved his cattle. Other stories say that he struck the rock with a cudgel, whereupon thunder and lightning started, and ghosts and the Snake king came running from the rock. Kresnik struck down all the ghosts, killed the Snake king with lightning or beheaded him with a golden ax, and set free his herd, or a goat with a golden beard which he then harnessed to his carriage. Wherever the carriage went, cool rain wet the earth and golden wheat started to grow. According to another story (Trstenjak, LMS 1870, p. 21) Count Kresnik saved princess Vesina from the Vurberg (Wurben) castle where she was imprisoned by a huge dragon which crawled across the Drava river. The river flooded Ptujsko polje. Kresnik, who had actually grown wings, killed the dragon in a sword fight in the air. He then chained the dragon to a cliff in the castle brook, and golden wheat started to fall. Folk songs (Trdoglav in Marjetica, SLP I, No. 21; Kelemina, No. 8) tell about a young prince who saved his sister who had been abducted by a dragon and taken to his castle. The prince finds his sister after walking across twelve lands. The kidnapped sister advises him to strike on the castle with three year-old hazelwood switches, or to bring holy water, salt and a candle, or three olive crosses with him, etc. The prince saves the maiden and a wedding ensues (hierogamy between

⁴² The folk narrative material this study is based on is taken from the Institute of Slovene Ethnology (Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts) archives and from the anthology: J. Kelemina, *Bajke in pripovedke slovenskega ljudstva*, Celje 1930.

⁴³ He is believed to live here occasionally in the form of a golden-horned stag. Plants (apples) which bring immortality grow on the mountain (Kelemina, pp. 26-27; No. 1/IV). This tradition links Kresnik to Goldenhorn.

⁴⁴ Vurberg was the birthplace of Krstnik who had horse hooves and had to be christened nine times (Popotnik 5/1, 10.1. 1884, pp. 11-13). A snake was believed to be coiled around Vurberg. It followed Kresnik when he abducted Snake Queen's crown (or daughter, according to some narratives) from Snake Land. Kresnik saved himself with the help of his swift horses.

the Earth and the Sky). In some folk songs sung on Midsummer Day, for instance “Brat in Sestra” (Brother and Sister) from the village of Drašiče⁴⁵, the hazily preserved memory of the sacred marriage is still evident:

<i>Na gorici ogenj gori, Detel ga prerašča. Okol ognja lepoj kolo, Detel ga prerašča. V kolu mi je brat sestrica, Detel ga prerašča. Bratec kolo sponehuje, Detel ga prerašča: Sestrica ga pogleduje, Detel ga prerašča. “Oj sestrica, lepa si mi, Detel ga prerašča: Bila bi si lepa gliha! Detel ga prerašča.” “Ne govori, bratec, toga Detel ga prerašča: Od ljudi je presramota, Detel ga prerašča, Od Boga je pregrehota! Detel ga prerašča.”</i>	<i>There is a fire lit on the hill, Clover grows above it. A dance circle round the fire, Clover grows above it. In the circle a brother and a sister, Clover grows above it. The brother ceases dancing, Clover grows above it. The sister looks at him, Clover grows above it. “Oh, sister, how beautiful you are, Clover grows above it: How nice a couple we would make! Clover grows above it.” “Pray do not say a thing like that, Clover grows above it: Others would find it such a shame, Clover grows above it, And God would find it such a sin! Clover grows above it.”</i>
--	---

One of the most beautiful Slovene Midsummer Day songs entitled “Device tri kresujejo” (Three Maidens Celebrate Midsummer Day) recorded by Matija Majar Ziljski in Podgorje in Rosenthal in Austria is also about the marriage of a mythological sun hero who appears as a “young prince” and comes riding to get his sweetheart⁴⁶. The maiden he has chosen is lost and does not know who her parents were. An incestuous connection could thus be implied here as well.

In the opinion of N. Kuret (PLS I, p. 433) the song about the incest and the custom of marriage on Midsummer Day - the marriage having a parallel in the Whitsun pair of the Western European tradition - are reminiscent of a tale about the marriage of Sun and Earth, both children of the Highest Being. The duality of the Highest Being’s life is evident from stories about his night struggles and journeys to the land of the “Snake Queen,” where the snake’s daughter was Kresnik’s lover. In some variants Kresnik even led her away from there. At night he travelled at the speed of lightning and his wife did not even notice that he was gone; but when she saw him coming from his lover once she called him by his name (taboo), thus causing his death. Some customs have also preserved the memory of the once mythical character of Kresnik, for instance: the rolling of little sun wheels made of wood, of lighting St. John’s fires (Johanisfeuer, jarilo, kres, sobotka), of dancing around and leaping across bonfires, of young girls dressed as *Kresnice* or *Ladarice* who went around singing

⁴⁵ Š 5014, recorded by Janko Barle in 1890.

⁴⁶ Comp.: Š, pp. 297-302; PLS I, p. 385.

songs for a bountiful harvest, of ringing bells and firing cannons to keep away the ghosts of the dead who could otherwise return not only around Christmas, but also on St. John's Day. As with Christmas time, the period around St. John's Day was believed to be the time of crossing over, of transition. It was both dangerous and sacred at the same time. Water, fire and plants were believed to possess special powers at that time - purifying, fertile and healing powers. Of special importance in folk medicine were fern and litter which were strewn around the floor in honor of Kresnik who was to come at night⁴⁷. The question arises whether Kresnik's alter-image in the beliefs of those who lived during the time of this mythical legend may have been the horse, or else did Kresnik assume the image of the horse? At all events, he rode one as a prince. He came on a horse to fetch his bride, and their marriage thus assured renewal and fertility.

Gradually Kresnik began to lose his mythical role. At first he still appeared as a tribal god or as Prince Kresnik fighting the neighbouring false Kresniks to ensure a good harvest in his country. Later he acquired the role of a magician, *zduhač* (a wizard whose soul sometimes wanders outside his body), marked from birth. People believed that he was born with his placenta, with his brows grown together, with more fingers - usually seven - than ordinary people, with teeth, with a small tail, etc. Men and women like himself were believed to associate with Fairies and knew more than others (Vuk, Rječnik 62, 260). But a newborn child could be spared this fate if he was placed between a forked vine branch which had to wither afterwards; later his comrades who came to fetch him for the first time should be told that he was not there, or he should be struck with a rosary during a night meeting. It was actually believed that such a person met with other Kresniks at night, at crossroads or under walnut trees, fighting his enemies the witches, wizards and *Vedomci* in order to ensure a good harvest. People believed that they saw their fights reflected in lightning on clear summer evenings. According to some legends there were fights between *Vedavci* and *Šentjanževci* at Christmas or on St. John's Day. Kresnik was believed to change his appearance, appearing as an ox, "nerest", "per" (Trstenjak; Pajek), a sow with horse's hooves, a horse, a donkey, he fought in a stone garment, etc. As a red ox he fought a black one, meaning the false Kresnik. He fought using horns (lightning), an axe, a thunderbolt ("tranbalta"), sheaves, vine poles. Coincidental bystanders could help him by striking the opposite ox with a year-old hazelwood branch, with a stake, etc (this is how Peter Klepec, for instance, would have acquired his might in return for his help)⁴⁸.

The connection between Kresniks and their comparable Hungarian Taltos, Italian Benandanti, and especially Kallikantzaros from the Peloponnesian peninsula, and the horse in folk legends is evident. According to some etymological explanations the word kallikantzaros derived from kalos-kentauros (beautiful Centaur)⁴⁹. The being on whom fertility and prosperity depended would thus be a Centaur, half horse and half human. The connection between Kresnik and the horse as his alter ego is thus obvious.

As the son of the highest deity Perun, the sun god, the god of warfare, Kresnik can identify with Perun⁵⁰, representing a developmental phase in Perun's life. This is the period

⁴⁷ I. Navratil, Slovenske narodne vraže in prazne vere, in: LMS 1887, p. 96.

⁴⁸ M. Ravnikar-Požencan, NUK, Ms 483, Vol. 11, No. 19.

⁴⁹ For further details see: C. Ginzburg, Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba, Torino 1989, pp. 130-160.

⁵⁰ This hypothesis has been defended already by N. Mikhailov: Fragment slovenskoj mifopoeičeskoj tradicii, in: Koncept dviženija, Moscow 1996, pp. 128-141; idem, Kr(e)snik, eine Figur der slowenischen Version des urlawischen Hauptmythos, in: Književna istorija, XIX, 101, Beograd 1997, 23-37.

when the development is in its zenith, followed by a gradual decline, by the turn downwards, and the establishment of a new life.

The Coming of Autumn - Jarnik - Death

According to Slovene mythical legends a hero who kills a dragon - in Christian mythology St. George on a white mare - has a brother, a mythical hunter Jarnik, also called Bartolomej (Bartholomew) or even "Jurij s pušo" (George with a Gun)⁵¹ by Slavs. It was believed that the poacher led "Divja jaga", also called "Divji lov" (Wild Hunt) for twelve days around Christmas, during the terrible "wolf nights" in which mysterious horses thundered beneath the firmament⁵².

This teriomorphic image is taken over by a hero on a white mare, St. George, later called Kresnik, a sun hero in the tale of Zlatorog (Goldenhorn). Zlatorog, Beli konj (White Horse), or Beli kozorog (White Goat), who has access to and watches over earthly treasures, is the symbol of fertility⁵³. Kresnik, the hero who was the winner before and who killed a mighty beast, now becomes the victim. He is killed by his own brother Jarnik out of greed and passion. But Zlatorog, the sun horse, is immortal, and from his blood the flower of life, the flower of Triglav grows. Zlatorog swallows it, is revived and gets his revenge by pushing his opponent into an abyss. Here too we have a mythical couple, brothers, one of which personifies sun and light, the other moon and darkness. Both mythical riders are important for mankind and for life on earth. As part of the vegetative, renewable circle of nature Jarnik has an ambivalent character. The fact that he shoots at an animal of the sun in order to attain the goal he pursues establishes him as the lunar, night, winter demon who plays an important part in the renewal of the circle of life, especially as the leader of the dead, thus the demon of thunderstorms, like the Scandinavian Odin, Germanic Wodan or Greek Charon, all of whom were believed to be riding through clouds.

Just as the tale of Zlatorog speaks about the treasures opened by Zlatorog's golden horns, and about a miraculous flower which grows from drops of his blood, so too the legend about "Beli konj" (The White Horse) tells about treasures hidden in the valley between Triglav and Vršac, and about marvellous healing blooms which spring from the horse's blood. These are its abbreviated contents⁵⁴:

Two men, an old hunter and a shepherd, went up a mountain to look for buried treasure. All of a sudden they heard thunder and beheld a white horse standing on the spot where they wanted to dig. A thick fog enveloped them and wherever they turned they saw the horse in front of them. Finally the fog lifted, leaving them far from their chosen path, frightened but happy that they could get away alive.

Yet one day he who will find the treasure will come along. He will have to kill the white horse with the first bullet when the first ray of light strikes the horse's mane. The man will be able to take the treasure, and the gold will be so bountiful that people will not know what to do with it. From the horse's blood flowers will grow. Cattle which will eat them will be fat and healthy, and whoever will pick such a flower will remain happy for the rest of his life.

⁵¹ Comp. Kresnik's opponent Veles, Trdoglav, Trot, etc., later Vedomec.

⁵² PLS 2, p. 382.

⁵³ The unicorn assumed a similar role in Christian medieval apocryphal symbolism.

⁵⁴ J. Kelemina, pp. 127-128, No. 76 - after Tonejc-Samostal, Dunajski zvon 1879, 363 f.p.

It is true that according to folk tradition, Zlatorog, the white horse, the goldenhorned stag, etc. is mortally wounded, but the miraculous flower, the flower of life springing from his blood revives him and returns his life force⁵⁵.

Notions about the cosmogonic sacrifice of the horse have already been known in Vedic traditions, which undoubtedly influenced old Slavic religious traditions. The classic citation referring to it is the beginning of the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad:

*The head of the sacrificial horse is really the dawn, his eye the sun, his breath the wind, his jaws the worldly fire, his body a year! His back is the sky, his abdominal cavity air space, the curve of his stomach the earth, his sides the sides of the sky, his ribs the sides between heavens, his limbs the seasons, his joints months and halfmonths, his legs days and weeks, his bones the stars, his flesh the clouds, the contents of his stomach the sand, his entrails the rivers, his liver and lungs are mountains, his hairs plants and trees, his front the rising and his back the setting sun*⁵⁶. The Slavs have preserved the image of the horse as a sacrificial animal in their mythopoetic heritage. Based on this, we can conclude that Perun, the highest Slavic deity, was closely connected with the horse, with fertility and the processes of renewal. His earthly incarnations, captured in the yearly cycle, were marked by important attributes of horses, his double nature - that of the earth and of the sun - clearly evident in them. Certain elements and actions, for instance his struggle with a menacing enemy force, emphasized components of fertility, the female image - the hero's sister and wife (mother) - a plant with miraculous powers, associations with lightning and rain, can be repeated in Perun's incarnations such as Božič (Christmas), Jurij (George), Kresnik, and Zlatorog (Goldenhorn).

As is evident from the treatise all of the four turning points are in some way connected with the horse and the god of thunder, the mighty deity who commands the cosmological driving forces and combines the male (fire) with the female (water) principle.

⁵⁵ K. Deschmann, Die Sage vom Goldkrikel (Zlatorog), in: Laibacher Zeitung no. 43, Feb. 21., 1868

⁵⁶ See: R. Katičič, Hoditi - roditi, in: Wiener slavistischer Jahrbuch 33, Wien 1987, p. 41.

Konj kot kozmološko bitje v slovenskem mitopoetičnem izročilu

Monika Kropelj

Obredja, pri katerih gre za povezavo konj z obnovitvijo narave, so značilna za mejni čas, obdobje zimskega in poletnega kresa ter za pomladni in jesenski preobrat. Tudi pesemsko in pripovedno gradivo, ki te mejnike spremlja, je tako ali drugače zaznamovano z likom konja.

V času zimskega solsticija, ko so dnevi najkrajši in noči najdaljše, lahko zasledimo v slovenskem mitopoetičnem izročilu spomin na rojstvo mladega boga. Po ohranjenih ljudskih šegah in kolednicah, bi lahko sklepali, da se to božanstvo lahko identificira s konjem. Tudi sv. Štefan, ki goduje 26. decembra, je prevzel vlogo zavetnika konj. Njegova povezanost s konji je razvidna iz določenih pesemskih tipov o sv. Štefanu in o žrtvovanem pastirju.

Konj je torej v mitopoetičnem izročilu teriomorfna podoba božanstva, ki ima odločilno vlogo pri obnovitvenem procesu, kar potrjujejo tudi pustne maske. Znano je, da je najstarejša pustna maska na Slovenskem prav Rusa - kobila, ki so jo, npr. v Ščavnici in okolici vodili po vasi in jo nazadnje vrgli v vodo, da bi s tem izprosili milost konjem, kot poje ljudska pesem.

Tudi pesmi in šege vezane na Jurjevo govorijo o Juriju - jezdecu. Poleg tega je Jurjevo tudi konjerejski praznik. Sv. Jurij je, kot je ugotovil že R. Katičič, stopil na mesto boga strele Gromovnika, ki se po osrednjem praslovanskem mitu bojuje z zmajem.

Na poletni Kres se v slovenskih ljudskih pesmih in povedkah navezuje Kresnik - kraljevič na konju, tudi bajno bitje, zaznamovano s konjskimi kopiti, ki naj bi po pesemskem izročilu rešil iz rok ugrabitelja svojo sestro in se poročil z njo. Spomin na sveto poroko ohranjajo tudi nekatere kresne pesmi. Kot sin najvišjega boga Peruna oz. Gromovnika, se Kresnik lahko istoveti z njim, kot ugotavlja tudi N. Mikhailov. Kresnik predstavlja razvojno stopnjo Perunovega bivanja. obdobje, ko je dosežen višek in se začenja nazadovanje. Obrat navzdol in zasutek novega življenja.

Jesenski mejnik v slovenskem ljudskem izročilu zaznamuje lovec Jarnik, pri Slovanih imenovan tudi Bartolomej, na Slovenskem pa tudi Jurij s pušo, ki naj bi bil brat Jurija - ubijalca zmaja. Lovec Zlatoroga, belega konja ipd. sicer ustrelil, po ljudskem izročilu je žival smrtno zadeta, toda čudežna roža, roža življenja, ki zraste iz njegove krvi, jo oživi in ji povrne življenjske sile.

Vsi štirje mejniki so, kot je razvidno iz članka, na nek način povezani s konjem in bogom groma, vsemogočnim božanstvom, ki obvladuje kozmološke sile.