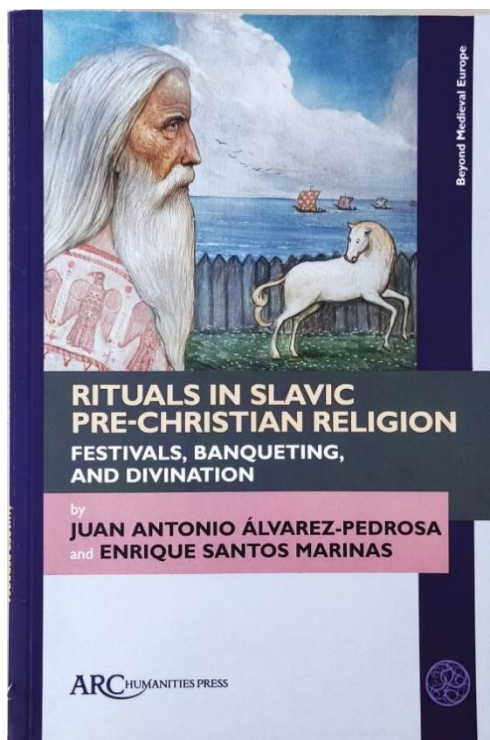


**FROM FERTILITY TO POST-MORTEM RITES: RITUALS IN SLAVIC PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGION**

**DA FERTILIDADE AOS RITOS PÓS-MORTE: RITUALS IN SLAVIC PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGION**



ÁLVAREZ-PEDROSA, Juan Antonio & MARINAS, Enrique Santos. *Rituals in Slavic Pre-Christian Religion: festivals, banqueting, and divination*. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2023.

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Anyone who delves into the study of Slavic pre-Christian religion and mythology should already be familiar with the works of both these authors. Juan Antonio Álvarez-Pedrosa was responsible for editing and working with many of the translations which composed the monumental volume *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, a reference book

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that gathered and presented for the first time in English language all the relevant sources containing descriptions of the pre-Christian religious life of the different Slavic peoples. Enrique Santos Marinas has also participated in this endeavor, translating the sources from South Old Church Slavonic and working along with Juan Antonio Álvarez-Pedrosa on the chapter regarding sources in East Old Church Slavonic.

Luckily for us, the two researchers decided to reunite once more in order to bring into existence a book entirely devoted to the different rituals in Slavic pre-Christian religion. One of the highest points of this work is that it focuses in presenting the reader both the relevant excerpts from the sources translated into English and the relevant considerations and/or questions regarding them. As one should expect, the knowledge they own regarding these sources is enormous, ranging from well-known authors from Antiquity and Mediaeval Age such as Tacitus, Plinius, Saxo Grammaticus, Adam of Bremen and Thietmar of Merseburg, from less-known literary documents with which only the specialists are familiar, such as the *Summula Chronicae tam Romanae quam Bohemicae*, which recounts the history of Bohemia until 1346. As the reader might have noticed by now, the sources taken into consideration vary not only chronologically, but geographically as well: we have Byzantine, Latin, Greek, German and Norse materials put together to give a possible coherent reconstruction of what these rituals might have been.

The book consists of a brief introduction, followed by five chapters. Chapter one presents the author the methodological problems that arise frequently when we try to reconstruct the pre-Christian Slavic religion. Matters as literacy, the Christianization process and the Great Slavic Expansion are introduced, followed by a categorization of the sources, based on their attitudes towards Slavic religion, a distinction that is going to be useful as one goes through the book. The next chapters are divided according to the types of ritual: fertility rites (chapter 2); rites of everyday life (chapter 3); military rituals (chapter 4) and funerary rites (chapter 5). This thematic organization instead of, for example, a chronological one is in my opinion an advantage, as it makes it possible to read the book as a whole, chapter by chapter, or going after a specific topic, similar to an encyclopedia organized by subject.

Focusing on fertility rites and their relations to the calendar, chapter 2 discusses complex matters such as the harvest ritual in the sanctuary of Arkona and the spring festival known as *rusalia*, besides many other rituals related to summer, spring, wedding festivities

and the deities to whom such rituals appealed, such as the pair Rod and Rozhanitsy, Svarozhich, Pereplut and Hennil. The next chapter brings into question the rites of everyday rites, such as oaths and pledges, divination and healing. The authors frequently include relevant etymological considerations, as when they discuss the thunder god Perun and his relation to oaths (p. 42).

One of the highest attributes of this book is the comparative scope on which it relies: the authors are constantly comparing a similar ritual or cult between the West, East and South Slavic peoples; moreover, they also tend to read these ritual actions within a wider Indo-European background, and the resemblances are indeed striking. For example, they compare the pair of antagonistic gods Perun/Veles (the thunder god and the god of death/cattle, respectively) and their ritual functions with Mitra and Varuna from the Indo-Iranian tradition. This is maintained in the further chapters, as when they compare the cremation rites of the Slavs with parallels in Hittite, Greek, Vedic and Latin traditions (p. 77).

Chapter four focuses on military rituals, beginning with pre-combat rituals to obtain divinations about the probable outcome. This is a rather interesting part, discussing aspects as the divine capacity of women and the sacred importance of the horse in a ritual in which it could end up being killed or not as an omen related to the battle's result. Parallels with other Indo-European cultures are once again drawn, as the sacred horses of the Germans according to Tacitus, or Xanthos, Achilles' horse that predicts the heroes' tragic destiny (p. 61). The chapter goes on and analyzes rituals during and after combat, besides a few military rituals during peacetimes.

The last chapter is about the many types of funerary rites among the Slavic peoples. It begins presenting their concept of the afterlife as we know it from fragmentary sources, since many of the descriptions we have of this concept come precisely from the descriptions we have of their funerary rites. The cremation and banquet rites for the dead are discussed in depth, considering many of the Arabic sources we have on the matter. The sacrifice of widows and the baths of the dead are presented next, making another great topic of discussion regarding the *Radunitsa* festival. The last pages of this chapter are one of the book's highest points, for it analyzes various possible aspects of the living dead among the Slavs, from the belief in vampires to the (not necessarily) aggressiveness of their undead and the relation this belief maintains with precautionary and adequate rites for the dead. The authors also discuss this

phenomenon from a diachronic point of view, pondering whether a binary reading “pre-Christianity stratum vs. Christian stratum” is adequate to understand it or not.

This book, written by two leading researchers on the subject is a fantastic addition to anyone interested in the study of pre-Christian Slavic religion and mythology which, as we known, have come down to us in very disperse and fragmentary sources. Furthermore, it is also a very relevant reading to anyone interested in the comparative study of Indo-European or simply of pre-Christian religions, since it provides a detailed frame of reference from the Slavic branches that needs to be taken into consideration.

### **Works Cited**

ÁLVAREZ-PEDROSA, Juan Antonio. *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*. Leiden: Brill, 2021.