

Primitive Slavic Culture

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Early Communal Organization

The status of social organization and primitive government among the Slavs at the dawn of history cannot be defined with complete certainty, but may be best determined by comparing the data preserved by the earliest native sources and in the accounts of contemporary foreign observers with survivals of primitive custom and usage among the branches of the Slavic peoples least touched by the influences of modern civilization. When the Slavs made their first appearance in history, they were for the most part beyond the nomadic stage of existence in which an exclusively patriarchal and tribal organization might be expected to prevail, and had been so long exposed to the effects of alien pressure and colonization that some resolution of primitive social structures was inevitable.

The most peculiar social unit preserved by a Slavic people in historical times is the Serbian *zadruga*, which may be defined as

“a household composed of two or more biological or small-families, closely related by blood or adoption, owning its means of production communally, producing and consuming its means of production jointly, and regulating the control of its property, labor and livelihood communally.”

The characteristic family community is probably, like the Indic “joint-family”, a remnant, not merely of Slavic, but of common Indo-European antiquity.

As far as we can judge then from historical survivals, the basic social unit among the primitive Slavs was a rural community consisting of a certain number of persons of common descent together with outsiders who acquired membership by marriage or adoption. Its head was either its senior male member or an elected chief, and direction might even devolve upon a prominent widow. The chief represented the group in external relations and directed its economy, though in serious matters he was subject to the joint decision of its membership. Collectivity of goods prevailed; the whole future of such a unit, together with the individual earnings of its members, belonged to the group and could not be disposed of without common consent. The individualization of property and of real estate in particular did not take place till the end of the pagan period and was frequently the result of alien influences, especially among the Elbian Slavs of central Germany. Membership in such groups might exceed a score of households. When trade and barter became matters of vital interest (as was the case very early on the Russian watercourses), primitive towns seem to have been the creations of ambitious groups who sought or possessed a convenient point for defense or trade and proceeded to expand their possessions and influence by the acquisition (peacefully or by violence) of adjacent interesting territory.

Patriarchal relationships might persist even in these centers and the persistence of the tradition of kinship is proved by the preservation of the law of family vengeance in

eleventh-century Russia. But tribal complexes such as we encounter among the Russian Slavs in the ninth century derived from the union of various family or local units which preserved only the remotest ties of kinship, and might attain a membership of several thousand souls. The presence of a patronymic suffix (-ichi) in East Slavic tribal names indicates that these tribes passed through a stage when membership depended on kinship, but that the original implication had been forgotten before the historical period.

Social Classes

When the Slavs first impinged upon the Mediterranean world, they were organized into tribes or clans relatively independent of one another and not always living in harmony with their neighbors. The population was divided into three distinguishable strata. At the bottom of the scale stood the slave class, composed of captives taken in war, of men who had lost their freedom for debt, and of the issue of slave parents. At least in their earliest history, the attitude of the Slavs toward their slaves was exceedingly mild. As one sixth century source remarks,

“Those in captivity among them they do not hold in servitude for an unlimited period, like other nations, but, after setting them a fixed term, they leave it to their choice whether they wish to return home after paying ransom or remain among them as free men and friends.”

Above the slaves stood the great mass of rural freemen, taking part in civic assemblies, enjoying property, and serving as soldiers at need. At the top stood a rudimentary aristocracy composed of family and tribal chiefs and their descendants, who later formed the entourage of the prince and ruling class when the monarchical system developed. This budding aristocracy is noticeable as early as the sixth century.

The earliest known designation for a Slavic tribal leader is *zhupan*, a term for tribal elder recognized in the ninth-century Balkans by Constantine Porphyrogenitus, and habitually rendered in Latin as *senior*, ‘elder’. It was also used by Bohemians and Sorbs. As larger tribal combinations developed, the Slavs universally adopted from the Germans the term *kuning*, ‘king’, which is reproduced in Slavic guise by a Western source for the first time in 828. Since, however, it is a common Slavic borrowing, it must have been taken over several centuries earlier, and it is exclusively used in the sense of ‘prince’. For the specific word ‘king’ the Slavs adopted the name of Charlemagne in the form of *korl*, *kral*, *korol*. The term *tsar*, earlier *tsear* with its special Russian associations, may be a specific Bulgarian borrowing of the ninth century from *caesar* through Greek *kaisar*, though an earlier Western origin is also claimed with considerable plausibility.

Family Life

Polygamy and concubinage were common to all primitive Slavs. But in spite of the evidence for considerable promiscuity, a sense of the sanctity of marriage as a permanent tie is also demonstrated by early accounts of pagan Slavic wives who committed suicide upon the death of their husband, so that the fidelity of the Slavic women is almost universally commented on with favor by foreign observers. Survivals of primitive custom among the Russian peasantry down to modern times indicate notwithstanding that

marked freedom was allowed both sexes prior to marriage. Slavic women enjoyed no equality in the household, though a surviving widow was authorized to take her dead husband's place as head of a family. Marriage by capture or purchase was a long prevalent Slavic practice. The Russian Primary Chronicle refers with disapproval to the kidnapping of maidens among the Drevlians, but notes that marriage by purchase was customary among the East Slavic Polyanians. In this respect also, the retention of pre-Christian custom among Russian peasants even until modern times points to the coexistence of these two types of marriage, and reversions to marriage by capture was particularly common among the Schismatics (Old Believers) in pre-Soviet times.

Material Culture

In the course of their early history, before and during the epoch of dispersion, the Slavs were exposed to a series of foreign influences, especially Iranian and Germanic, which rapidly placed at their disposal the techniques of material culture common to adjacent ethnic groups. Linguistic evidence demonstrates the mass of the Slavs, like the Germans and the Baltic peoples, was familiar with iron, gold, silver and lead from the earliest times, at least from the second half of the first millennium B.C., and therefore much prior to their dispersion. The names for gold and silver are identical in all three linguistic branches, while those for iron and lead are common to both Baltic and Slavic, though differing from the German vocable. The common Slavic term for copper (*med*) has no cognate of equivalent meaning in either the Baltic or Germanic languages, nor has the Slavic word for ore (*ruda*) and Baltic parallel. Since iron became known on the coast of the Black Sea about 900 A.D. and appears in archaeological finds from the Kuban district fully two centuries before that date, the early transmission of iron technique to the Slavs is beyond question, particularly in view of the traces of iron mining and smelting in Poland and Bohemia even in the pre-Roman period. While gold and silver were available in some abundance in the territories of the Balkan Slavs, the smelting and smithing of both of the precious metals was a post-dispersion development. Tin was found in Bohemia.

In ceramics as in metalworking, the Slavs were imitators rather than pioneers. Slavic pottery of the close of the pagan period consists of well-turned and fired vases in the form of pots without handles, showing a somewhat flattened lip and ornamented sometimes with a wavy line several times repeated, sometimes with horizontal stripes, and occasionally with vertical or transverse stripes or a series of dots in oblique lines. The potters mark usually occurs on the base. This species conventionally known as *Burgwalltypus*, from its being found so often among the remains of small Slavic *gorodischa* (fortified towns) not only in Russia but also at the extreme western European limits of Slavic settlement, is literally scattered all over Slavic territory from the Elbe to the Volga in the tenth and eleventh centuries. There is, however, nothing specifically Slavic about its technique, since it is a reproduction of the Roman vase with undulating ornament familiar in the northernmost Roman provinces between the Danube and the Rhine from the first to the fourth century A.D. The Slavs thus seem to have had some contact with the northern Roman markets in this interval, and gradually (sixth to tenth centuries) to have adopted this new type of pottery in preference to their own previous products of this character, that is, high vases, or lower bowls without a flattened edge,

decorated either with horizontal stripes or rows of oblique lines developed independently of Roman influence. All pre-Christian glass or glazed ware (bottles, goblets) was imported, since the technique of glass manufacture and of glazing both pottery and the tesserae used in mosaic was not introduced into Kievan Russia until closer relations with Byzantium were developed in the late tenth century. Larger receptacles (pails, buckets) were made of wood bound with iron hoops and lifted by a moveable handle.

Among the chief domestic industries were spinning and weaving. While rich silks were an item of import attainable only by the wealthy, the masses were clad in homespun fabrics made of wool, flax, and hemp. Since the early Slavs were not expert bleachers, the fabrics were mostly grayish in color, and all finely dyed fabrics even in the early historical period were imported merchandise. Not only is the general terminology of spinning and weaving so homogeneous throughout the Slavic languages as to show that this technique was a matter of common knowledge before the dispersion began, but the absence of foreign borrowings in this vocabulary also proves it to have been a development of very early date. It is significant that this vocabulary was taken over bodily by the Magyars upon their settlement on Central Europe.

Agriculture

Just as the pagan Slavs by the ninth century had attained a respectable command of technique in metalworking, textiles and ceramics (acquired in part from their neighbors) there is likewise abundant evidence that, at an early stage of their existence, they also possessed a knowledge of agriculture considerably in advance of what is often attributed to them by frequently cited historical sources. The content of the general Slavic vocabulary with respect both to agriculture and cattleraising is in itself sufficient to vitiate any conception of the Slavs at the dawn of their history as a race of agricultural nomads leading a precarious and unstable life on scanty fare. Nor are there a sufficient number of loan words in the Slavic vocabulary to indicate that any appreciable amount of their knowledge of agricultural products or livestock was the result of contacts with other ethnic units of more advanced material culture. Early medieval sources (especially Byzantine) which represent the Slavs as nomads poorly clad and fed should thus be taken as referring to their economic status during the uncertain period of migration rather than to their mode of existence and means of livelihood either before their expansion took place or after its most acute phase had ended.

The common Slavic vocabulary shows that among feed grains the primitive Slavs knew barley, wheat, millet, rye and oats. Among fruits they knew apples, pears, cherries and plums, and of vegetables they consumed peas, beans, lentils, onions, garlic and beets. The Germans themselves knew nothing of grape-culture until their migrations took them across the threshold of the Mediterranean world. Hence it is not surprising that the Slavic words for vine and vineyard derive from the Goths, who also introduced the fig to the Slavs after Gothic settlement on the Black Sea coast. Flax and hemp were familiar textile fibers. Among domestic animals, the common Slavic vocabulary includes homogeneous terms for horse, cow, bull, steer, sheep, goat, pig and dog (also cat, of uncertain origin) and, among domestic fowl, for ducks, geese, chickens, and pigeons.

In these phases of material culture the primitive Slavs were in no wise inferior to the primitive Germans, though the latter advanced more rapidly in proportion with their prior and more intimate contacts with the Mediterranean world. The predilection of the Slavs for agriculture is the natural consequence of their long residence in areas long-suited to its practice: namely, the plains of the Vistula and the Dnieper, though it is likely that the epoch of migrations and repeated nomad incursions interrupted the sedentary tendencies and habits which they had previously developed.

The primitive plow of the Slavs prior to the migrations was at first only a forked branch with one fork lopped short and cut into a point. It was later supplemented by a pole to which draft animals could be attached and by handles by which the driver could guide its course. The share itself was then made of iron with a pinch into which the shaft could be inserted. The more complex plow, with coulter and mould-board, was a Roman invention, and did not reach the Slavs before the time of Charlemagne or even later. At the close of the pagan period, the Slavs were applying the three-field system of culture, familiar from Roman and German usage, but since this system was not introduced in Western Europe before the eighth century, its adoption among the Slavs can date only from Carolingian times.

Buildings

The aspect of the Slavic village even in early historical times was extremely simple. The Elbian Slavs (perhaps imitating their German neighbors), habitually inhabited so-called "round villages" in which the houses of the inhabitants were grouped in a circle or horseshoe pattern around a central square. While the round village prevails in areas where German influence was strong (Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia) it is replaced in Poland, Russia and among the South Slavs by a form of village in which the houses are set in parallel lines on either side of the main thoroughfare. The so-called "dispersed village", with houses scattered irregularly among the fields, is particularly common in the Balkans because of the rough terrain.

Stone buildings were unknown except as official residences of fairly late date. The earliest type of house consisted of a trench dug in the ground, of which the sides were raised by walls of logs stopped with earth. The two-sloped wooden roof (planks, thatch or reeds) might also be coated with earth as additional protection. The primitive Slavs also erected rude log cabins without digging into the ground. Two-story wooden houses are not known before the beginning of the historical period, and then only in northern Russia and among the tribes of the Baltic coast in Pomerania and west of the Oder. Originally there was only an open fire with a hole in the roof to let the smoke escape. At the beginning of the historical period the open hearth was replaced by an oven, and the single room dwelling was supplemented by a vestibule which became a separate living room or even a stable when houses came to be built entirely above ground. The roof might also be allowed to project out over the eaves to create a sheltered porch. Under German and Scandinavian influence the evolution of the Slavic house was rapid at the beginning of the historical period. The early house had only a stamped earth floor, and its furniture was limited to benches which served as both seats and beds.

Dress

The common male costume of the Slavs at the end of the pagan period consisted of a coarse shirt made of hemp or flax and falling to the knee, with sleeves and an opening for the neck, combined with long tight trousers (wide ones, when attested, are due to oriental influences), tied at the ankles and held up by a belt of rope or leather around the waist. The Western Slavs also seem to have worn shirts and leggings of foreign model. For the shirt was sometimes substituted a short tunic, frequently embroidered like the Russian *rubakha*. The tunic might be either of light material or else of coarse wool, in which case it was worn over the shirt. These garments were fastened by buttons or buckles, and any outer garment of ankle length was belted at the waist. The long coat, or *kaftan*, was a characteristic feature of Eastern Slavic garb. It might be trimmed or even lined with fur, though the common people ordinarily used sheepskins or the cheaper pelts (bear, wolf) for protection against the cold. A cloak buckled at the right shoulder might also be worn over the kaftan.

Women of the period were clad in a long skirt or wrapper of rough linen or hempen material, often representing merely a cylinder of fabric held up by straps over the shoulders. From the waist down they might also wear a double apron attached to a belt, while the upper part of the body was clothed in a coarse woolen jacket, along with a cloak of similar material around the neck and shoulders.

Footwear consisted of rough leather slippers held by a strap over the ankle or wound around the calf, or of slippers made of warm bast fiber. Leather slippers split down the instep and provided with eyelets for laces have also been found in Kievan tombs, while leather boots were likewise worn by the prosperous classes, and both woolen stockings and socks are attested in Russia at an early date.

The usual male headgear was a high felt hat, sometimes with a narrow brim, or a type of beret edged with fur. Married women might wear a kerchief or bonnet on their heads over hair cut short, but maidens habitually went bareheaded, wearing their hair braided and long. Men also wore their hair long. The beard might be trimmed or shaved, but mustaches were common. Close shearing and shaving are, however, when they occur, due to foreign influences, and in general the Slavs were always prompt to adopt foreign usages in matter of attire.

Weapons

Originally a peaceful race, the primitive Slavs were unskilled in the use of weapons, and at the time of their dispersion had no offensive equipment except bows and spears and were unprotected by even the most elementary shields. Such was their armament as known to Procopius early in the sixth century A.D., and by its close the Pseudo-Mauritius could add only that they used poisoned arrows and carried two spears, while some individuals were equipped with shields too heavy for rapid movement. The constant warfare of the migratory epoch and the necessity for defense against successive nomad incursions across the steppes produced in the succeeding centuries a marked amplification of Slavic military equipment, which is especially noticeable during Carolingian times, after which the German and Frankish influence is supplemented by

imitations not only of the well-equipped Scandinavian pioneers who scouted the eastern European watercourses, but also of the nomads whom the Eastern Slavs were forced to fight.

The Slavic terminology for this improved equipment is largely foreign. At the very outset the names for sword (*mech*) and helmet (*shlem*) were derived from the Goths. The primitive German sword was single-edged, but as early as the first century A.D. the Germans themselves were using the Gallo-Roman type of straight double-edged weapon which must thus have become known to the Slavs even before the Merovingian period. The axe is not attested before the eighth century. Armor was not employed by the Slavs till the Carolingian epoch, and Frankish origin of this protection is indicated by Charlemagne's Cartulary of Thionville which prohibited the sale of arms and armor to the border Slavs. The use of cavalry was first introduced in the tenth century by the Eastern Slavs, who even then hired friendly nomads from the steppes for this purpose.

Commerce

The chief avenue by which foreign cultural influences reached the primitive Slavs was supplied by commerce. Trajan's conquests in Dacia at the beginning of the second century brought Roman traders and artisans into close proximity with the Slavs. Caches of Roman coins dating chiefly from the interval between Trajan and Septimus Severus (98 – 193 A.D.) have been found in Central Europe and on the west bank of the middle Dnieper, and Slavic imitation of Roman pottery has already been noted. But commerce affecting Slavs, both Eastern and Western, took on large dimensions only in the eighth and ninth centuries, with the growth of the Carolingian empire and the establishment of close commercial relation between Byzantium and the Dnieper valley, coupled with intensive trading activity of Arab merchants and the opening of Scandinavian trade relations with the Orient via Russian waterways.

The articles exported by the Slavs were largely the products of their rudimentary industries: furs, honey and wax, grain, salted and smoked fish. The staples were mainly bartered for weapons, jewelry, beads, glassware, perfumes, silk and luxury articles in general, although the omnipresence of coin shows that sales against cash were also current by the eighth century. While slaves had not played a large part in the primitive Slavic social economy, they became an important item of commerce at the close of the pagan period, and were sold chiefly to the Orient. The principal trade routes from the west were through Magdeburg to eastern Germany, through Erfurt to Bohemia, and through Regensburg to Hungary and the Balkans. Apart from the internal trade routes of the rivers Volga and Dnieper, communication between Russia and Central Europe went over the Carpathian passes to the Danube valley, while the route from Kiev to Galicia was particularly important for the Russian salt supply. The chief mode of transport (apart from rafts and river boats) was the pack, the sledge, or the four-wheeled cart which the Slavs used at least from the fifth century A.D.

The Slavs were familiar with coins at least from Roman times, but minted none of their own until the tenth century. The earliest names for coins are primarily of German origin. Thus the Latin *denarius* is rendered either by *tsinta* from Gothic *kintus*, 'farthing', or by

penedz (also common to all Slavic languages), cognate with our *penny* and borrowed from the West Germanic *penning*, while Slavic *skuledz* is of either Gothic or West Germanic origin. The unit of money weight was the silver *grivna*, originally a neck ring of definite weight, but later a lump (ingot) of silver of variable weight, for example, the Carolingian pound of 367 grams or the Kufic pound of 407 grams.

Religion

Though the linguistic, source, and archaeological data permit a tolerable accurate and convincing evaluation of the material culture of the Slavs especially toward the close of the pagan period, there is no such coherent mass of evidence upon which any wholly satisfactory statement of their religious beliefs, demonology, and eschatology can be predicted. The early Slavs cremated their dead, sharing this custom with their Indo-European neighbors (Lithuanians, Germans, Celts). Burial was adopted as the result of foreign influences, and before the various conversions to Christianity (beginning with the Slovenes in the eighth century) both customs existed side by side. The primitive pagan Slavs were animists, attributing a soul to the natural elements amid which they lived. They deified some of the heavenly bodies and great phenomena of nature. They believed not only in a supreme deity but also in the existence of wood, water and household spirits to which they offered sacrifice. Besides these natural spirits they also honored the spirits of their ancestors, and thus believed in a future life.

Our earliest source on these topics is Procopius (sixth century), who wrote of the Slavs:

“They believe that one god, the maker of the lightning, is alone lord of all things, and they sacrifice to him cattle and all other victims; but as for fate, they neither know it nor do they in any wise admit that it has any power among men. But whenever death stands close before them, either stricken with sickness or beginning a war, they announce that, if they escape, they will straightaway make a sacrifice in return for their lives. And if they do escape, they sacrifice what they have promised, and consider that their safety has been bought with this same sacrifice. They likewise revere, however, rivers, nymphs, and some other spirits; they sacrifice to all these, and they make their divinations in these sacrifices.”

There are certain gods that may be regarded as common to all Slavs in general. The most prominent of such deities (though it is only fair to admit that this general Slavic status has been questioned) is *Perun*. The name is *nomen agentis* with suffix *-un* from the base *per*, “to strike”, and therefore means “the striker” as applied to the thunder. This deity took on special importance among the Russian Slavs because of specific Scandinavian influences and the importance of Thor in the Scandinavian pantheon. *Perun* is also attested among the South Slavs, the Poles and the Elbian Slavs. He personifies the sky during a storm, the god of thunder and lightning. In Russia, after the introduction of Christianity, an easy syncretism transferred his attributes to Elijah, the rolling of whose chariot was the thunder, while the lightning was the prophet’s darting arrow.

Outside of the Eastern Slavic area, *Perun* was less prominent than *Svarog*, the god of the shining sun, while fire as such was revered as *Svarozhich*, “the son of *Svarog*”. The name

of Svarog itself is connected with the Indo-European base *svar*, meaning “heat, brilliance”. Russian tradition also knew the sun as *Dazhbog*, which would signify “the giver of wealth and plenty”. Svarog and Dazhbog would seem to be two aspects of the same deity. Among the Baltic Slavs Svarog was the dominant deity to whom great shrines were erected, but does not appear among the South Slavs at all.

A third general Slavic deity was *Veles* or *Volos*. The Russian Primary Chronicle characterizes Volos as “the god of cattle,” but he is not mentioned among the deities to whom Vladimir of Kiev erected idols in 980. However, a Life of Vladimir mentions that the prince caused an idol of Volos to be cast into the creek below the citadel of Kiev, and there is also a late tradition concerning an idol of Volos at Rostov. The general Slavic occurrence of Veles (Volos) is attested by his frequent invocation in medieval Bohemian curses. The qualification “god of cattle” has no relation to the original attributes of Veles, but results from a monkish chronicler’s identification of the specifically Russian form of his name (Volos) with that of Saint Blasius (Old Slavic, *Vlas*; Russian, *Volos*), a Cappadocian bishop who died a martyr’s death around 316 A.D. and was extensively revered thereafter as a patron of flocks and herds. This identification of Veles with the saint has misled previous investigations into regarding Veles as an agricultural divinity, though the etymology of the name forbids any such attribute. Where Perun and Volos are mentioned together in 905-907 as the gods by whom Oleg’s Scandinavian and Slavic followers swore, the implication is that the Scandinavians swore by Perun and the Slavs by Volos. The latter may be thus viewed as the guardian of oaths, a sort of *Zeus epiorkios*. The name Veles itself is cognate with various Lithuanian words meaning “ghost” and “devil,” so that Veles is to be interpreted as the god of the dead.

Besides these general Slavic deities, East Slavic tradition mentions four other gods of a specifically Russian cycle: Khors, Simarigl, Stribog, and Mokosh. Khors, though perhaps a sun god of Iranian origin, cannot be satisfactorily identified. Simarigl is very likely a scribal error for *Sim* (god of the family or house spirit) and *Rigl* (god of the harvest). Stribog is probably the god of the whistling winds, while Mokosh was not a deity at all, but a female house spirit associated with women’s work. In contrast with the scantily documented Russian cycle, the Baltic Slavs furnished contemporary German observers with more ample data on their various deities. For example, there seem to have been various *Svarozhichi* (kin of Svarog) who were the object of local cults. Thus, among the Slavic Retharii of southern Meklenburg there was at Rethra, which is characterized as a populous place, an extensive wooden shrine known as Radgost (Redigost), which was famous for its oracles until it was destroyed in 1121.

Similarly at Arcona, on the island of Rugen, another extensive and wealthy temple honored a god known as Svantovit, who received a tithe from the neighboring Slavs and revealed himself in oracles like the tutelary genius of Radgost. Svantovit was here represented by a wooden idol with four heads, which was destroyed by the Danes in 1168, though its pedestal still remains, and he may be viewed as another member of the Svarozhich family. The same observation applies to Triglav, worshipped in the guise of a three-headed idol, by the Pomeranians at Stettin until it was destroyed by Bishop Otto of Bamberg in 1127. Very little is known of pagan observances in Poland, Bohemia, or

among the South Slavs. Only among the Baltic Slavs is existence of a well-defined priestly caste attested. In Russia, however, the prevalence after the conversion (988) of magicians and sorcerers who claimed to be in touch with a non-Christian spirit would identify them as debased interpreters of the old cult.

In general, by the epoch of dispersion, the Slavs had developed beliefs in an extensive array of supernatural beings which profited the household, terrestrial nature, and the sky. Of these some (like Perun and Sverog) acquired dominant authority, so that, when dispersion took place, they assumed the attributes of deities. But any detailed recollection of earlier mythology and of character of the pagan gods was wiped out among the Eastern Slavs by conversion and among the Baltic Slavs by invasion and conquest.

Writing

A final problem in early Slavic culture is to determine the epoch at which the Slavs learned to write. While there have been some fruitless thoughts entertaining attempts both at the forgery of specifically Slavic runes and the identification as genuinely Slavic of certain runic texts more probably of north German origin, it is improbable that letters of any sort were known to any Slavs of the pre-Christian period, except where some individual managed to write down a few phrases or words of his language in Greek or Latin characters.

A Bulgarian source of the late ninth century, the so-called Apology of the Monk Khrabr, which discusses in some detail the origin of the Slavic alphabet, declares the “originally the Slavs had no letters, but counted and calculated by lines and notches; and after they were converted, they were obliged to write the Slavic language with Roman and Greek letters without system.” Khrabr’s reference to counting and calculating by lines and notches has a modern parallel in the sticks of wood known as *rabushi* on which, by means on incised symbols the illiterate Yugoslav peasants kept their accounts. These are, however, mnemonic or arithmetical devices unconnected with the actual features of writing, and thus offer no evidence of literacy.