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THE CHRISTIAN AND PRE-CHRISTIAN CONCEPTION OF THE MASTER OF THE WOLVES

Abstract: In the paper the authoress examines the legends about the Master of the wolves in Slavic and other European folklore. She first shows interpretatio christiana of the Master of the wolves and then tries to unveil also pre-christian layers and the mythological background of the tradition connected with this mythical being.

Key words: Christianity, Prechristianity, Master of Wolves.

In 1961, Lutz Röhrich published a paper on the Master of the Animals (Herr der Tiere) in the European folk tradition. In the paper he argues that in European folk legends and tales we can find a series of folk beliefs in some kind of a master of the animals. These legends are, according to him, one of the most ancient layers of European legends, and had come to Europe from the Mediterranean basin, more precisely from the Cretan-Minoan cult of Artemis (Röhrich, 1961: 343-347). One of the masters of the animals briefly mentioned in the paper is the Master of the Wolves, known in the Slavic tradition.

The majority of Slavic peoples (and some non-Slavic ones as well) are indeed familiar with the folk tradition of a some kind of a ruler, commander, leader, or master of the wolves, sometimes also called the Wolf Herdsman. In this paper I'll try to examine the pre-Christian strata and the mythological background of the tradition connected with this mythical being, especially, but not exclusively, within the Slavic tradition. Parallels with some other European folklore traditions will also be considered.

The tradition of some kind of a Master of the Wolves can be found in various segments of ancient rural folklore, recorded by scholars mostly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – in legends and beliefs, and proverbs.

There are many various legends about the Master of the Wolves, but most often one encounters variants of the legend¹ with an identical, characteristic plot: a man sitting in a tree in a forest sees the Master of the Wolves, who is giving out food to the wolves or sending them in all directions to search for food. The last in line is the Lamé Wolf. Since there is no more food, the Master of the Wolves says he can eat the man watching from the tree. The wolf – either immediately or after various twists of the plot – actually succeeds in eating the man in the tree.

Among part of the southern Slavs (Serbs, Macedonians, Bulgarians) the legends and beliefs about the Master of the Wolves are also connected with numerous commandments, prohibitions and customs associated into the so-called “wolf holidays”. Legends about some type of Master of the Wolves can also be found in written form among the majority of southern and eastern Slavs, partially also among the Poles, and among the Estonians, the Gagauz in Moldavia, in Latvia, Romania and in an incomplete form even in France. His function, as can be established from the legends and beliefs, is to lead the wolves and

¹ I have managed to collect 51 Slavic variants, and one Estonian, one Romanian, one Latvian, one Gagauz and one French variant of this legend. For a brief survey of majority of the mentioned Slavic legends about the Master of the Wolves see Polivka, 1927. The legend is not included in the Aarne – Thompson index, nor is it included in Thompson's motif index. For detailed information on the sources of all of the legends see Mencej, 2001. Due to the limited place I was not able to include all the data into the present article.

determine what they may and may not eat. The same function (with emphasis on what the wolves may not eat) was obviously ascribed to the person or being to whom the people turned in incantations (prayers and blessings) in the hope that that person would defend their livestock against wolves and other wild beasts,² therefore we can suppose that both genres together reflect the entirety of the same tradition.

The image of the Master of the Wolves, as we shall see, exhibits numerous pagan elements, and the saints, such as St. George, St. Martin, St. Sava, St. Nicholas, St. Michael etc. who most frequently appear in the role of the Master of the Wolves are obviously later Christian substitutes, the *interpretatio Christiana* of some pre-Christian mythical person or being who appeared in the role of the Master of the Wolves. Scholarly opinions are divided as to the identity of this pagan being: the Russian researcher Afanas'ev e.g. suggested that St. George in the role of the Master of the Wolves is the successor to the God of Thunder (cf. Afanas'ev, 1865 (1994), I: 707-712; 1869 (1994), III: 528-532). The Serbian ethnologist Veselin Čajkanović, who focused his discussion on St. Sava, who often appears in the role of the Master of the Wolves, defined the latter as an ancient Serbian nomadic chthonic deity, who supposedly originally appeared in wolf form (as a lame wolf) (Čajkanović, 1994/I: 451-462, 1994/III: 32-36; cf. also Zečević, 1969). In the opinion of Czech J. Polivka, the original mythical being from the pre-Christian era should be the Forest Spirit (Polivka, 1927: 175-176). Lutz Röhrich classified the Master of the Wolves under the general category of “masters of animals” who could appear in anthropomorphic or partially or completely theriomorphic guises, while the legends and beliefs, i.e. legends in connection with him were supposed to have originated in hunting culture (Röhrich, 1961: 347-349).

Widely different persons, beings and animals appear in the role of the Master of the Wolves. We find 35 different saints in this role, although some of them appear extremely rarely (in incantations people often call on a long list of saints whom they ask for help). In a wider geographical area we find, in addition to figures of Christian origin such as God, the Mother of God, Jesus and the Holy Ghost, only the following saints:³ *St. George* (who is found as the Master of the Wolves in legends among Croats, Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgarians and eastern Slavs; he is also turned to in incantations by Prussians in Poland, Latvians, Finns, Germans, the German-speaking population of Switzerland, the French and Romanians; he is known as a protector against wolves by the Greeks, while Austrians sometimes utter incantations against wolves on his name-day); *St. Martin* (Mrata/Mina/Menas) (known as the Master of the Wolves among Serbs and Macedonians, while according to the opinion of N. Kuret, traces of this belief can also be found in Slovenia (cf. Kuret, 1989, II: 117); known as a protector against wolves by the Greeks, while Austrians, Germans and German-speaking Swiss sometimes turn to him in incantations); the *Archangel Michael* (known by Serbs and eastern Slavs); *St. Nicholas* (who is found especially among Poles and in western Ukraine, and more rarely also among eastern Slavs); *St. Peter* (who usually appears only in Polish incantations and more rarely among eastern Slavs, but also in Austrian and German incantations and incantations of the German-speaking Swiss; in one case he also appears in a

² In my monograph *The Master of the Wolves in Slavic Folklore* (Mencej, 2001) I dedicated a special chapter to demonstrating that the person to whom people turned to in incantations in the hope of protecting their livestock against wolves and other wild beasts has the same function as the Master of the Wolves in the legends and beliefs. Due to space limitations I have not been able to summarize it here, but I shall proceed in the paper with the assumption that all of these levels of folklore refer to the same being, i.e. that all of the pieces which are preserved in the different levels of folklore make up the entire tradition of that being.

³ It is not possible to list all of the saints in the space afforded by this paper, but the saints not listed appear only sporadically, most often in incantations in which people sometimes utter a long list of saints whom they wish to on call to protect people and livestock against wolves (and other wild beasts).

legend of the Serbian population, which was written down in Croatia). *St. Paul* appears independently only in one of the Byelorussian legends, but otherwise he appears in a Ukrainian legend and in all incantations together with St. Peter. The cult of *St. Sava* is known only among Serbian populations, where he is known not only in the role of the Master of Wolves in legends, but celebrated during the St. Sava holidays, during which the same activities take place as during St. Martin's day, activities which are in the same way connected with the legend of the Master of the Wolves, except that in this case St. Sava appears in that role. Very seldom *St. Andrew* also appears in this role.

Characteristics of the saints who appear in the role of the Master of the Wolves

If we consider the holidays which are consecrated to various saints, and the characteristics and attributes of these saints, we can conclude that the majority of them, especially the most important among them, St. George, St. Martin and St. Nicholas, as well as St. Michael, are all associated with *livestock, herdsman, herdsman's life, and herdsman's holidays*:

St. George is the saint whose holiday, St. George's day, is considered the most important turning point in the herdsman's year over a very wide area. Livestock are first driven out of the barns and out to pasture on St. George's day practically everywhere in the Slavic world and also among certain other peoples of Europe. (Even where such work is no longer done, customs are still followed which indicate that this day was once considered the day that the livestock was first driven out to pasture). St. George "opens up the barns" as they say in Slovenia. This day is the most important herdsman's holiday of the year, in which herdsman play an important role, and St. George is considered in many places to be the guardian of livestock and the patron saint of the herdsman who have their holiday on this day – they collected presents from the houses, and in the evening they roasted meat, danced, had bonfires and made merry (Orel 1944: 330; Rešek 1979: 117; Orel 1944: 330-332). In Pivka as recently as the time between the two world wars, herdsman still took their posts mainly from St. George's day to St. George's day – and on that day they switched (Smerdel 1989: 121). In Croatia, herdsman and their masters adorn their livestock on St. George's day, and in many places the livestock are first driven out to pasture at that time. St. George's day is the herdsman's holiday, and on that day herdsman are invited into houses as guests, and especially in northern Croatia, servants and herdsman are hired, exchanged and fired on that day (Gavazzi 1991: 41-43). In Croatia on St. George's day, St. George's rounds are especially characteristic, in which, as in the Slovene rounds, the herdsman take part, and receive gifts from their masters, most often in the form of eggs (Huzjak, 1957).

In the Balkans as well,⁴ St George's day is considered the livestock (Grbić 1909: 64) and herdsman's holiday (Drobnjaković 1960: 207). On this day lambs are slaughtered for the first time in the year, and mutton is first eaten. Among Serbs, Macedonians and Bulgarians, if we conclude from the legends and beliefs about him, St. George is considered the patron saint of herdsman and herds, especially of small livestock (Atanasovska 1992: 109; Vražinovski 1998/II: 167). In Bulgaria livestock are first driven out to pasture on St. George's day, and St. George was considered to be the "first shepherd" (Koleva 1977: 152, 158; B'lgarsko narodno tvorčestvo 1962: 450). In the same way, among eastern Slavs St. George is known as the

⁴ I use the term "Balkan" only when it is used in the source which I am citing, as the borders of "the Balkans" are not clearly defined.

patron of domestic livestock and herdsmen, and St. George's day is considered the herdsmen's holiday.

Afanas'ev cites a Russian proverb from which in his opinion the herdsmen's nature of the St. George's holiday can be seen: "*Св. Юрiй коровъ занасаетъ*" (St. George takes care of the cattle), i.e. lets them out to pasture (Afanas'ev 1994 (1865), I: 706). Springtime St. George's day⁵ is a herdsmen's holiday; they are fêted with cakes, eggs and milk and are given gifts of linen and money (Afanas'ev 1994 (1865), I: 708; Maksimov date unknown: 151). Russian peasants believe that St. George is the patron of wild animals and the guardian of domestic livestock. Many legends mention that he protects domestic livestock, helps herdsmen, and punishes them for transgressions or negligence (Sokolova 1979: 155). On his name day the livestock are first led from the barns out to pasture (Zabylin" 1992 (1880): 98; Eleonska 1994: 145). Thus in the Harkov guberniya it was believed that on St. George's day, St. George rode a horse over the fields and took under his protection the livestock which had first been driven from the barns out to pasture on that spring day. If the livestock were not driven out on that day, there could be bad luck. In the village of Kabani the belief has been preserved that if the livestock are driven out before St. George's day, they will frequently become ill and be attacked by wild animals (Ivanov 1907: 137-138; cited in Sokolova 1979: 156). In northern regions and in Siberia, where there was still a great deal of snow on the ground at that time, the driving out to pasture of the livestock on St. George's day had only a symbolic character – livestock were driven out to pasture mainly on St. Nicholas' day (in the spring), however the main rituals were observed on St. George's day. This was also true in the Vologod guberniya (Ustyushki region), the Moscow guberniya and in Ukraine. Byelorussians also had to celebrate herdsmen's holidays on St. George's day, even if the livestock were driven out to pasture before that time (Demidovič" 1896: 95; Sokolova 1979: 156). Herdsmen received gifts on St. George's day throughout almost all of Russia, Byelorussia and Ukraine – on the first day of driving out to pasture the herdsmen's gifts would be eggs, in some places (in Byelorussia almost everywhere) herdsmen would make themselves meals out of eggs (Sokolova 1979: 158; Kirčiv 1989: 103; Ilarion 1995: 284). According to Ukrainian belief St. George is the patron saint of livestock and his name-day is a herdsmen's holiday, and the herdsmen's year begins on that day (Ilarion 1995: 284). In the Czech lands as well, livestock were first driven out to pasture on St. George's day (Kravcov 1976: 55). St. George's day is also considered a herdsmen's holiday in many places in western Europe, the day on which herdsmen first drive their livestock out to pasture, for instance in Austria, eastern Germany, Switzerland, eastern Finland and in Estonia (Gugitz 1949: 204; Grabner 1968: 22, 37, 41; Schmidt 1955: 21; Rantasalo 1945: 13-15; Weiss 1941: 50), while elsewhere, May 1st is the most frequent day on which livestock are first driven out to pasture.

The second major annual turning point in the lives of herdsmen, besides St. George's day, is (from the border of the area reached by the influence of the Byzantine empire onwards) St. Martin's day (up to that border, St. Dmitri's day is the turning point, while in some places in western and especially northern Europe, this turning point is marked by St. Michael's day or some other, more locally tinged holiday, such as St. Gal's day etc.). This day is seen as the last day on which livestock are driven out to pasture, or the day on which livestock are driven back from the upland pastures into the valleys, or any day on which livestock could begin to graze in all directions. In many places St. Martin's day is a herdsmen's holiday, as St. Martin is the patron saint of herdsmen and livestock. Thus e.g. in Slovenia, St. Martin is the most

⁵ The Russian folk agrarian calendar includes both springtime and autumn feasts of the saints in the majority of cases (e.g. St. George, St. Nicholas).

important protector of herdsmen, and judging from a written legend he also appears as a shepherd (Benigar, 1865: 25-26; Kuret 1989, II: 28-29; Ložar-Podlogar 1972: 72-73; Hudej, Hribernik 1954: 105). In some places on this day feasts were prepared and bills were dealt with in regard to the year's or at least the autumn's pasturing, which was followed by feasting, dancing, and in many places the herdsmen also received gifts (Turnšek 1946: 71-2; Kotnik 1943: 76; Kuret 1989, II: 118-119; Hudej, Hribernik 1954: 110). St. Martinija (Matrona) is considered the patron saint of livestock in Macedonia as well – according to belief he watches the livestock (Vražinovski 1998/II: 166-167). In Greece, the 11th of November, i.e. the same day as St. Martin's day, is celebrated as St. Menas' day, which ranks as an important herdsmen's holiday (Megas 1963: 21). In addition to the fact that St. Martin's day is also celebrated as a herdsmen's holiday in many places in western Europe, St. Martin is sometimes presented as holding a shepherd's crook in his hand (Miles, date unknown: 206). In the majority of western Europe, St. Martin's day is the last day on which livestock may be led out to pasture (Miles, date unknown: 203). In Austria, St. Martin's day was the day on which the pasturing season ended and on which the herdsmen collected their pay (Fehrle 1955: 15; Grabner 1968: 21, 37, 38, 41, 45, 46; Schmidt 1955: 11). Even in Burgerland, where the pasturing season lasted only until St. Michael's day, the herdsmen remained employed until St. Martin's day (Grabner 1968: 8). In Germany as well, St. Martin's day is an important point in the farming year, on which the livestock are driven into the barns and servants are exchanged and paid off (Siuts 1968: 79-81). In Switzerland, the day on which the livestock have to be driven back into the barns is different, but St. Martin's day is considered the last possible day (Weiss 1941: 46, 48-50). Proverbs also attest to this. For example, in Val de Bagnes they say: "A la Saint Martin les vaches au lien" (On St. Martin's day fetter the cows) (Weiss 1941: 49) and "Martini, stell ini" (Martin leads the livestock into the barns) (Fehrle 1955: 15).

In Poland, where *St. Nicholas* is considered the patron saint of wild animals, especially wolves, he is also the patron saint of herdsmen and livestock (Klimaszewska 1981: 148; Kotula 1976: 53, 91). It can clearly be seen from a song which is sung by boys from Gnojniczy (near Ropczyce) while they are herding their cattle that they consider St. Nicholas a herdsman:

»Święty Mikołaju, pasterzu dobytku!
 Nicsz wczoraj nie jadł,
 Nie masz nic w lelitku...« (Kotula 1976: 50)

(Saint Nicholas, herder of livestock!
 Yesterday you ate nothing,
 You have nothing in your belly...)

B. Uspenski listed a great deal of evidence that St. Nicholas was considered the patron saint of livestock among *western and eastern Slavs*. Among eastern Slavs, St. Nicholas was above all the patron of horses (while St. George was more the patron of cattle and sheep, although in some places also of horses). In Byelorussia for instance, the first driving out of horses occurs on St. Nicholas' day, while the driving out of cattle and sheep occurs on St. George's day (cf. Uspenski 1982: 44-55). A Russian proverb states: "The winter St. Nicholas drives the horses into the courtyard, the summer St. Nicholas fattens them up" (Čičerov 1957: 18).

The holiday of the *Archangel Michael* is also connected with the herding population and their customs: in Slovenia, herdsmen in some places also celebrated their autumn holiday, a turning point in the herdsmen's year, on St. Michael's day (Šašelj 1906/I: 199). St. Michael, they say, closes the pasturing season, and St. George opens it. In the Balkans, livestock were in some places driven to their mountain pastures on St. Michael's day (Kašuba 1979: 15). The Russian researcher Uspenski reports that among *eastern Slavs*, St. Michael also has the

function of patron of livestock and is also considered to be a herder of horses (Uspenski 1982: 48-49).

The day on which the old herdsmen were let go and new ones were hired was also celebrated on St. Michael's day in some places in Hungary (Dömötör 1978: 170). In western Europe, especially in the north, in addition to St. Martin's day, St. Michael's day is most often considered the last day of open pasturing of livestock (Rantasalo 1953; Morozova 1978: 104; Weiss 1941: 45). In Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, as well as northern Germany and Estonia, St. Michael's day, September 29th, is most commonly considered the last day of open pasturing, or the day on which the livestock are driven from the hills to the barns (Rantasalo 1945: 13, 15). St. Michael's day was at least in principle the day on which the livestock already had to be in the barns and pasturing finished – if the livestock were driven in before that, they were not tied up until St. Michael's day. If the weather was still good after that day, the livestock could still graze outside, but they had to be tied up in the barns at least at night, “or otherwise you could expect a lot of damage due to wolves the following summer”, and in addition, in some places the animals could not be left alone outside, or the wolves and bears would attack them immediately (Rantasalo 1953: 19, 5, 6, 7). This day was an important holiday for herdsmen, but also for other members of the farming community. The pasturing season was over, which was shown symbolically by the herdsmen handing their staffs and kit bags to the farmer's wife (Rantasalo 1953: 6). The herdsmen prepared a feast in the fields from the food which they had received as gifts (in Estonia, if this was not done, they expected that the wolves would harm the sheep), and on the farms it was mandatory to slaughter a sheep (and if they had none, then at least a cock or a hen) (Rantasalo 1953: 11, 19).

A herdsmen's nature, i.e. a connection with herdsmen and with the herding calendar is also shown by various more local saints who appear in the role of the Master of the Wolves: *St. Sava*, whose name day is otherwise not connected with any particular herdsmen's celebration, shows a strong connection with herdsmen and herdsmen's life. *St. Sava* appears as a shepherd in many legends. Some legends speak of how *St. Sava* and the Devil worked together: the former watched sheep, the latter goats (Kašiković 1897: 56). In the legend *Sveti Savo i đavo* (*St. Sava and the Devil*), *St. Sava* is the one who watches the sheep (Terzić 1898: 186), and we see the same in the legend *Sveti Savo na Treskavici* (*St. Sava in Treskavica*), where he herds together with herdsmen (Mutić 1901: 279). In Herzegovina they say that *St. Sava* was once a herdsman (Antonić, Zupanc 1988: 43). V. Čajkanović also writes about the folk belief that *St. Sava* watches over abandoned herds and in general over all herds, since “watching over herds is his field” (Čajkanović 1994, III (1941): 39), and he calls him θεός υόμις, “the herding god” (cf. Čajkanović 1994, III (1941): 37-41). In the same way, *St. Flor* and *St. Lavr* (*St. Florian* and *St. Laurence*) are considered by eastern Slavs in some places to be herders of horses (Uspenski 1982: 49), and *St. Blaise* is considered the patron of livestock in Russia (Ivanov, Toporov 1974: 46) – all three of these saints are turned to in incantations with supplications to protect the livestock from wolves. In southern France, where *St. John* appears in the role of the Master of the Wolves in the legends which are told in that area, he is also mainly considered to be the patron saint of sheep, and his name day is a herdsmen's holiday (Sebillot 1968a: 37). In French incantations in which people turn to *St. Genovefa* in the hope that she will protect them against the danger from wolves, it can similarly be seen that she also has experience with herding: “*Saint Genovefa, who was seven years a herder...*” (Eberman 1914: 145).

All of the saints who appear most often in the role of the Master of the Wolves are in one way or another important to the context of husbandry: they are considered patron saints of herdsmen, they appear as herdsmen in the folklore tradition, or their name day is an important herdsmen's holiday. The work of all the most important saints who appear in the role of the Master of the Wolves extends into two areas: they are the patron saints of livestock and herdsmen and at the same time they are the patron saints of wolves. It is almost a rule that in the same place the same saint appears in the functions of both the patron saint of

livestock/herdsmen and the Master of the Wolves.⁶ For example, in Poland the patron saint of livestock and herdsmen is Saint Nicholas, and he is also considered the Master of the Wolves. Among eastern Slavs both of these functions are most often fulfilled by St. George. Among southern Slavs these functions are most often fulfilled by St. George (Croatia, Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria) and St. Sava (Serbs in Serbia, Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbs in Croatia). The function of the Master of the Wolves and at the same time of the patron saint of livestock is fulfilled by St. Mrata/Martin among the Macedonians, and according to the opinion of Slovene ethnologist N. Kuret, the same holds true for Slovenia.

On the other hand, the majority of saints who appear in the role of the Master of the Wolves are also connected with other spheres of activity: death, dying, the world of the dead. It can be seen from Slovene folk prayers that *St. George* also had the role of an aide in dying (Novak 1983: 136-138, no. 87; from the Uskoks). In addition, researchers involved in reconstructions of Slavic mythology made connections between him and the other world and its god Veles/Volos (cf. Belaj, 1998: 139, 156-157+, where he states that George spent part of the year with Veles/Volos).

The *Archangel Michael*, who also occasionally appears in the role of the Master of the Wolves, has an especially important role in death: his task was to accompany the souls of the deceased to the other world. According to Slovene belief, St. Michael “weighs souls”, and sacrifices are made to the ghosts of the dead on St. Michael’s day (Kuret 1989, II: 14-15, 18). In Serbia there is a belief that God ordered St. Michael to take people’s souls away from them, and therefore in the area of Boljevac they also call him the “soul-taker”, i.e. the one who takes the soul out of the body. In Leskovačka Morava they celebrated his name day so that they would not suffer too much upon death. According to a belief from Gruža he measures the people’s good and evil deeds upon death: he throws evil souls to hell, and hands the good souls to St. Peter, who accompanies them into heaven. They also believed that if the Archangel appeared standing by the feet of a sick patient, the patient would recover, while if he appeared standing near his head, the patient would die (Nedeljković 1990: 5). Medieval iconography also shows St. Michael as the supervisor or performer of the weighing of souls.

Uspenski dedicates an entire chapter in his book to the important role played by *St. Nicholas* at death in the beliefs of the eastern Slavs (Uspenski 1982: 70-80). His role at death is also obvious among southern Slavs. In a Serbian folk song, St. Elijah orders St. Nicholas:

»*Ta ustani, Nikola,
da idemo u goru,
da pravimo korabe,
da vozimo dušice
s ovog sveta na onaj!...*« (Najveći grijesi, Karadžić 1969/1: 101-102, no. 209)

“Get up, Nikola,
so we can go up to the mountain,

⁶ The unusualness of this double function has been pointed out by Polivka, who cites Kirpičnikov, who believes that the reason for this lies in the fact that the role of St. George was expanded from patron of the flocks to patron of wolves, which represented the greatest danger to the flocks (Kirpičnikov 1879: 148-149), but Polivka disagrees with him. In his opinion the patron saint of livestock and the patron saint of wolves were originally two different persons (Polivka 1927: 176).

so we can perform our tasks,
so we can lead the souls
from this world to the next! ...

which St. Nicholas then does.

St. Martin played no special role among the eastern Slavs, but among the Serbs and Macedonians he is closely associated especially with the so-called “wolf holidays” (also among Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina; the feast of St. Mrata or the time at which it occurs is also associated in this way among the Bulgarians, the Gagauz and the Romanians). His cult is also widespread in western Europe. In Slovenia a ritual celebration is known on St. Martin’s day which is also attended by the souls of deceased ancestors (Kuret 1989, II: 108, 114-115). Upon the appearance of Christianity, the so-called marches of souls were divided among various holidays: in addition to the fact that they were held on All Saints’ day, All Souls’ day and St. Michael’s day, they were also held on St. Martin’s day and *St. Andrew’s* day, which was the main pre-Christian holiday of souls (Kuret 1989, II: 19).

The same was true of local saints: *St Sava*, according to the statements of Čajkanović, had the role of a chthonic deity among the Serbs (see Čajkanović 1994, III (1941): 33, 36, 41). In the Christian tradition, as is well known, *St. Peter* has the role of receiving souls into heaven, and according to belief and iconographic imagery is the holder of the key to the gates of heaven. We can assume that St. Peter is the successor to the Master of the Wolves due precisely to this: one of the most important elements in incantations is a *key*, in some cases even a “heavenly key” or “key from heaven” etc., with which the saints “close” the muzzles of the wolves and other beasts, and whose owner is St. Peter.⁷ St. Paul joins him mainly as his constant companion. In older incantations (Austrian and German – where St. Peter normally appears in the role of the Master of the Wolves), it is primarily St. Martin who closes the mouths of the wolves or orders others to do so. In addition these incantations are called the “blessings of St. Martin” and usually begin with the words “St. Martin is coming...”, and are uttered most frequently on St. Martin’s day. In Poland these incantations are called “Our Father St. Nicholas”, although it is St. Peter (and St. Paul) who “closes the mouths of wolves” in them, from which we can conclude that in the incantations they primarily turned (only) to St. Nicholas, and not to St. Peter or St. Peter and St. Paul.

St. Blaise, who otherwise rarely appears in the function of the Master of the Wolves, displays both aspects: it is said that St. Blasios was a shepherd from Capodoccia (Váňa 1990: 77). The legend tells that he was loved even by wild beasts (the Bishop Basileos lived long in impenetrable forests, and the wild animals became his friends). On the other hand he is turned to even in times of illness, and the people of Vipava (Slovenia) call on him at the hour of death (Kuret 1989, II: 538-540).

On the basis of this data we can conclude that the common denominator of all the saints who appear in the folkloric tradition as the Master of the Wolves is on the one hand his role in the context of husbandry and on the other his more or less close connection with representations of death.

The pre-Christian aspect of the figure of the Master of the Wolves

In addition to saints and other Christian figures, other beings, animals and persons who are not of Christian origin appear in the tradition of the Master of the Wolves. In the Slavic

⁷ Uspenski also calls attention to the shared features of St. George and St. Peter (Uspenski 1982: 125-127).

legends about the Master of the Wolves we find the following beings in that role: In Croatian legends he can be a white wolf who alternates with St. George; a sagging wolf who becomes an old grandfather; a wolf who is old, sagging and grey with age; a lame wolf who changes into a lame man; and a white wolf. When the Master of the Wolves does not have a special name or title, he is referred to as: the old one; the old, feeble Master of the Wolves; every tenth son; the poor or old extremely hairy grandfather. In Bulgarian legends we find a white wolf, in Russian ones a forest spirit (Lesovoj).⁸ In Ukrainian legends this role is fulfilled by a forest spirit (Lisun), a forest spirit (Polisun)/St. George (in alternation); an old man; a wolf. Byelorussian proverbs speak of a grey old man; an old man who appears in the role of the Master of the Wolves is also mentioned in legends from Latvia and Moldavia.

In addition to saints, this role is therefore also taken by: a *wolf* (in five examples from Croatia and one from Bulgaria and one from Ukraine), who in one case changes into an old man; an *old man* (in five examples, which are found in Croatia, Byelorussia and Ukraine); a *pitiable man* (in one Croatian legend the Master of the Wolves is spoken of as a pitiable man, in another this description appears alongside others) and a *forest spirit* (three examples among eastern Slavs). In only one example we also find a *tenth son*⁹ among the Croats, and among the Estonians we find a child who was abandoned by his mother, although he appears as a grown man riding a horse.

In records of *beliefs* we also find the following beings who are not of saintly or Christian origin: In Bulgaria, in connection with the November wolf holidays, they say that the wolves are ordered by the *Wolf-Mother of God*. In Russia and Ukraine it is believed that a *forest spirit* commands the wolves (this is also true in northern Europe), while in Russia and Byelorussia we find evidence that this is a *wolf*. The Setu in Estonia believe that the Master of the Wolves is a *small boy in red clothing*.

In *incantations or prayers*, in Russia and Byelorussia they turn also to a forest spirit, and in Russia also to a wolf.

Among the Croatians, Bulgarians and all eastern Slavs we therefore find a *wolf* in the role of the Master of the Wolves (when it is not a figure of Christian origin), among the Bulgarians also the *Wolf-Mother of God*; an *old man* is found among the Croatians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians, and a *forest spirit* among the Russians, Byelorussians and Ukrainians. The Estonians also have an abandoned child and a small boy in red clothing in this role, while in Croatia a tenth brother and a pitiable man appear in one case each, which indicates more his characteristics and properties rather than the “type” of being he is.

Therefore two beings most frequently appear in the role of the Master of the Wolves which we find among eastern and southern Slavs (among western Slavs we find only the Christian interpretation in the role of the Master of the Wolves – St. Nicholas): a *wolf* and an *old man*. Descriptions of the Master of the Wolves in legends (when referring to saints) give additional information about the fact that the wolf saint was pictured as an old man: the fact that the saint who appeared in the role of the Master of the Wolves was old can be seen in the Croatian, Byelorussian, Ukrainian and Latvian traditions. In one Croatian legend the wolf is described as grey with age. Various other descriptions of the Master of the Wolves could

⁸ Lesovoj, Lisun, Polisun, Leši etc. are names which are derived from the Russian word *les* (forest).

⁹ It is questionable whether we can identify him with St. George, as Katičić believes (Katičić 1987: 35-36); Šmitek disputes this (cf. Šmitek 1998: 107-108).

eventually confirm this characteristic: he is feeble (Croatia), has a long/grey beard (Serbia, Ukraine).

However, it appears in some Russian ritual songs that the old man/wolf duality has disappeared. In these songs, Ivanov and Toporov claim that we can recognize the wolf as an old man: *“In the comparison of the described rituals with the image of George/Jegory – as the protector against wolves (...) the motif of fear of old men (...) who appear as anthropomorphic substitutes for the wolf, is especially characteristic. An old man (grandfather) and wolves are frequently mentioned together in the same ritual song:*

»Только баюся
Старого дъзиеда,-
У старого дъзиеда
Сива барада,
Ён мяне набъе,
Ён мяне ўдарыць

.....
Як скачыць ваўчук,
За казу ханчук..» (Ivanov, Toporov 1974: 192)

(I am afraid only
of the old man -
the old man has a grey beard.
He will thrash me,
He will beat me

...
When the little wolf leaps
Jump for the goat.)

We can also see that the old man and the wolf are one and the same from the following carol:

»Побойся, козачка,
Стараго дзеда
С сивой бородой,
Ён табе згубя,
Шкуру облупя
Дуду пошля...» (Ivanov, Toporov 1974: 192)

(Beware, goatling,
of the old man
with the grey beard,
he will finish you,
skin you,
and sew himself a set of bagpipes.)

We also find parallels between the wolf and the old man in Romania (where belief in the Master of the Wolves is known); from Romanian riddles we can conclude that the wolf and the old man are equated (Svešnikova 1994; 250). In the same way we can clarify the duality in the Croatian legend where the Master of the Wolves first appears as a wolf, and then mysteriously turns into an old man. The information from a Croatian legend that the Master of the Wolves has a human head and four legs, and can walk on either two or four legs (and is therefore simultaneously man and wolf) also becomes understandable in this light, as does a Ukrainian legend in which the wolf becomes an old man and eats the person who was allotted to him.

If one of the guises of the Master of the Wolves is a wolf, we can also make sense of the ambivalence of the metamorphosis of humans in legends from Croatia and Vojvodina, where

in some legends they change into wolves and in some into the Master of the Wolves.¹⁰ The most obvious of these is the presentation of the Master of the Wolves in the form of a wolf in a Croatian legend, where the Master of the Wolves gives a hunter the choice of becoming Master of the Wolves for seven years or being eaten by wolves. The hunter decides that he would rather become the Master of the Wolves, and tumbles through a ring – and when he does this, he actually turns into a wolf (!) (Valjavec 1890: 93, no. 3). We can see the same duality in another legend recorded by Valjavec: a brother notices a wolf among the swine, but as the story continues: “*this was his brother, because he became a wolf in order to be the Master of the Wolves*” (Valjavec 1890: 95, no. 6). Also, two foresters who shoot at a “sagging” old wolf, after the wolf waves his leg at them, realize “... *listen, that’s not a real wolf, that must be the Wolf Herdsman*” (Valjavec 1890: 96, no. 7). From some legends it is obvious that the storytellers actually did not sense a difference between the two figures: the man becomes a wolf and/or the Master of the Wolves (Bosić 1996: 179, both variants). A faded trace of the belief that the Master of the Wolves is a wolf can perhaps be seen in two Russian legends in which this role is fulfilled by St. George, who is however surrounded by a “corps of wolves” – the white wolves (Remizov 1923: 312-316; Vasil’ev 1911: 126-128).

The figure of the forest spirit or tsar of the forest (Leši, Lisun, Polisun etc.) who appears in the role of the Master of the Wolves among eastern Slavs is occasionally intertwined with the figure of the wolf: as reported by Dobrovol’ski (see above), the Lord of the Forest (Čestnoj Lesa), i.e. the leader of the Leši - forest spirits/masters of the forest sometimes changes into a white wolf, and sometimes the master of the forest is simply considered to be a white or grey wolf (Dobrovol’ski 1908: 10; Ridley 1976: 329). On the other hand this conception reiterates the emphasis on the age of the Master of the Wolves, as the people, for instance in the Smolensk guberniya in Russia conceive of a Leši as a grey-haired old man in white clothing, or describe him as a “grey old man with a too-long beard, who herds the wolves” (Dobrovol’ski 1908: 4, 10). Also, the “abandoned child” from the Estonian legend, characteristically, rides a wolf.

As F. Marolt has already established (Marolt 1936: 6, 16), we can also partially discern the wolf nature of the Master of the Wolves from the threats of Slovene herdsman, so-called “jurjaši” (“St. George’s”) which they utter during their rounds on St. George’s day, when they visit a house and receive no presents:

»..*dajte mu jajce, da vam ne pokolje jagnjet...*«

“... *give him (St. George – op. M.M.) an egg, so that he won’t slaughter the lambs...*” (Vinica)(Tomšič, 1854: 180)

The same can be seen from Croatian carols on St. George’s day:

»*Dajte Juri jaje, da ne kolje janje.*«

“*Give St. George an egg, so that he won’t slaughter the lamb.*” (Viduševac) (Huzjak 1957: 17)

»(...) *Dajte Jurju jajac, da ne kolje janjac (...)*«

“(...) *Give St. George an egg, so that he won’t slaughter the lamb (...)*” (Žakanje, in the vicinity of Karlovac) (Heffler 1931: 279; Huzjak 1957: 33).

¹⁰ It is possible that this also reflects an intertwining with beliefs in werewolves.

On the “mratinci” holidays, the wolf holidays around the feast of St. Mrata (Martin), in Serbia and Bulgaria, when they slaughter a hen or a cock on the threshold, they incant: “*It is not I who slaughters you, Mrata/Mratinjak slaughters you!*” (see Nikolić 1910: 142; Stanojević 1913: 41; Dimitrijević 1926: 84; Marinov 1994 (1914): 700). St. Mrata (Martin), who is considered the Master of the Wolves in this area, is supposed to be the one who slaughters – this fact most probably indicates, more than the Christian conception of St. Martin as a friendly and compassionate saint, an older layer, which lies hidden underneath the image of the Christian saint – his wolf nature.

If the common denominator of the majority of saints who appear in the role of the Master of Wolves was their role in the life of herdsmen, caring for livestock and on the other hand upon death, it therefore seems that the shared feature of the various conceptualizations of the Master of the Wolves which are not of Christian origin indicate especially his “wolf” and “old man” features, which overlap each other.

But also the forest spirit Leši in eastern Slavic belief displays a connection with herdsmen and pasturing, like the saints who appear in the role of the Master of the Wolves: in the Kazanski Povolžje, Leši are referred to as “herdsmen”, since they are thought to drive livestock which never returned to the herd from place to place (Maksimov date unknown: 5). “The Herdsman” is also an affectionate nickname for the forest spirit Leši (Uspenski 1982: 94-95).

The mythical origin of the Master of the Wolves

With regard to the fact that the folklore tradition of the Master of the Wolves is closely related to customs which are essentially not of Christian character, but which obviously display pagan elements;¹¹ that in addition to figures of Christian nature, various mythological beings of pagan character appear in the role of the Master of the Wolves; and that this tradition is known among all branches of Slavs as well as among other non-Slavic people, we can surmise that this tradition was known among the Slavs before the Slavic diaspora, either as a collective heritage or as a result of the diffusion of these legends to the Slavic peoples before the rise of Christianity. We can therefore hypothesize that the saints who appear in the role of the Master of the Wolves are merely the *interpretatio Christiana* of a pagan entity, and that various saints were selected to substitute for this being who were appropriate to this substitution due to their own characteristics.

What being can therefore lie hidden in the basis of this tradition? As we have seen, we find a multitude of different beings in the role of the Master of the Wolves, even if we do not take the Christian layer into consideration. In truth, we cannot state with certainty that only one single being originally held this position. The essential characteristic of folklore is its variability – in the course of the transmission of legends it changes, acquires different features and different elements. Therefore it seems quite likely that in the very earliest phase of the dissemination of these legends, various persons and beings were found in the role of the Master of the Wolves. However, we can also expect that behind all these various emanations we will find some common features and characteristics.

¹¹ During the times these customs were being observed a number of prohibitions obtained: people could not lend anything from their houses, they could not walk in the forest, they could not chop, cut or do anything with sharp objects, they could not sew, weave, spin etc. – all in order that wolves would not slaughter their livestock that year (cf. Mencej 2001).

The old man, the wolf and the forest spirit were the beings and persons whom, in addition to saints and God, we most often encountered in the role of the Master of the Wolves in the Slavic tradition. In the remainder of this paper I will focus primarily on the Slavic tradition, since a deeper study of the pre-Christian layer of this tradition in a broader framework requires a longer and broader discussion. Despite this, I will whenever possible also indicate parallels with non-Slavic traditions.

In all likelihood the very fact that the Masters of the Wolves were substituted to a great degree by some of the most important Christian saints (St. Martin, St. Michael, St. Nicholas etc.) indicates that these were not trivial persons, beings or animals. Frequently, God himself appears in this role – e.g. in Russian and Ukrainian legends, in Macedonian and Bulgarian legends, and among the Gagauz. Below Prokletije it is believed that God closes the mouths of the wolves, in the area of Kosanica it is believed that God empowers St. Sava to command the wolves. God is also turned to in Russian and Byelorussian incantations (and even German incantations in Poland and the Czech Republic), and the Mother of God is turned to in Russian incantations and German incantations in the Czech Republic. According to belief in Serbia, the Mother of God protects against wolves. Similarly we also find Jesus in this role – e.g. in Russian, Ukrainian and Polish legends (Afanas'ev 1914a: 194-195; 1914: 219-221, no. 32; 1957: 86-87, no. 56; A. P. 1887: 453; Zbiór wiadomości 1892: 33-34, no. 17; Kolberg 1881: pp. 318-319, no. 86), and he is turned to in incantations against wolves by Russians and German inhabitants of the Czech Republic. All of this allows the possibility that this mythical being was included in the pagan religious framework before the rise of Christianity. The question is therefore whether the characteristics which indicate a common origin of the various emanations of the Master of the Wolves can be connected with the characteristics of any of the Slavic gods.

In truth, we do not know a great deal about Slavic mythology, but Ivanov and Toporov convincingly show in their book that the ancient Slavs once worshipped a deity whom they called the Wild Beast (Ljut' zver') and who had the appearance of a beast. This deity was actually the Slavic god of livestock (and perhaps also of possessions in general, cf. Belaj 1998: 47) and of the land of the dead Veles/Volos (see Ivanov, Toporov 1974: 57-60). The fact that "Ljut' zver'" was at the same time the master of wild beasts in Russian literary folklore was shown earlier by Miller (1877: 11), which signifies a direct connection with the Master of the Wolves, the subject of the present study (who at the same time in the folkloric tradition very often has authority over other wild beasts and protects livestock from them).

The basic common denominator of the beings of pagan origin who appear in the role of Master of the Wolves is their animal, wolf-like nature. It seems that Ivanov and Toporov are leaning towards the opinion that the Wild Beast had the appearance of a bear, but at the same time they also provide examples which indicate that this deity had the appearance of a wolf (or even a lion) (see Ivanov, Toporov 1974: 57-60; cf. also Miller 1877). In this they partially take the same sources into account as I have – for example eastern Slavic incantations against the danger of wolves and bears, although they primarily selected the original incantations which emphasize the danger of bears. They did not take into account the legends, beliefs and customs connected with the Master of the Wolves. The fact is that in some places in the incantations, bears appear as a danger which must be protected against; this is also true of one of the legends. However, in taking into consideration the entire body of materials about the Master of the Wolves, it seems that we must give the advantage to the image of the wolf. Miller for example emphasizes that the adjective "ljut" (wild) in Russian is ascribed to all wild animals, *especially wolves* (Miller 1877: 11-12; emphasis mine). In the same way, he states that the phrase "Ljut' zver'" in old Russian literature is a name for the wolf (Miller

1877 : 12; Zelenin 1930: 37). The designation “zver” (beast) is also used to indicate the wolf in Serbia, Lithuania and Poland (Zelenin 1930: 37), and in some Romanian riddles the term “zver” is a synonym for wolf (Svešnikova 1994: 248). It is perhaps possible that in certain areas, contamination from underlying cults or cults from neighboring areas occurred and thus an intertwining of different conceptions – e.g. in Russia and Byelorussia an alternate word for wolf is “birjuk”, a word which was taken from the northern Turkish language, in which it means “bear” (Zelenin 1930: 37). The possibility of the wolf and the bear appearing as allotropic beings can also be seen from examples given by Ivanov and Toporov (1974: 57-60). In the same way, the Lithuanian god of death, magic and the underworld and the protector of herds Velinas/Velnias, who is probably the Baltic god who corresponds to Veles/Volos, can take the appearance of a wolf (Ridley 1976: 327-328). The forest spirit (Leši, Lisun, Polisun, the Lord of the Forest etc.), who often appears as the Master of the Wolves in the eastern Slavic tradition, similarly displays a parallel with the proto-Slavic god Veles/Volos: as shown by Uspenski, Leši is actually one of his successors. In some places Leši is called Volod’ka, i.e. by a name which in Uspenski’s opinion is derived from the name Volos (see Uspenski 1982: 86-87).

It is difficult to find a direct connection for the Old Man, the other person who appears in role of the Master of the Wolves, or the age of the Master of the Wolves, which would be reflected in the image of Veles/Volos, although it seems unbelievable that the god of death would be a young god. Perhaps this is implicitly shown in the tradition which is connected with him: Slavs in some places have the custom of “curling Veles’ beard”, which could imply that he is an old god. A harvest custom in which some chaffs of oats (or the upper part of a bundle, armload, fibers, threads) are left unharvested and are turned to with forms of incantation such as “*A little beard for the prophet Ilija(Elijah)!*” or “*May his beard curl: strength to the plowman, (...) a beard for Mikula (Nicholas)!*” and similar is sometimes called “curling Volos’ beard” and other variants such as “curling Ilija’s beard” or “curling the grain grandfather’s beard”) (Ivanov, Toporov 1974: 62-63).

The areas in which Veles/Volos, who was the god of the land of the dead and of livestock, had authority are also made clear by the basic characteristics of the majority of the saints who took the role of the Master of the Wolves – their role of patron saints of livestock and herdsmen and at the same time the role which they have upon death. This direct connection shows that the common core of the tradition of the Master of the Wolves even in the Christian layer actually corresponds to the core of the proto-Slavic belief in Veles/Volos. Moreover, other researchers have shown that some of these saints are the successors to the role of the pagan god of death and/or livestock. The fact that St. Nicholas appears as a Christian substitute for the god of death Veles/Volos in the eastern Slavic tradition in his functions in connection with death and the otherworld was demonstrated thoroughly by Uspenski in his book *Filologičeskie raziskanija v oblasti slavjanskih drevnostej* (Philological Research in the field of Slavic Antiquities)(Uspenski 1982; for various parallels in the south Slavic tradition see Mencej 1996: 17-20). Uspenski also showed that many of his functions were taken over by Sts. Florian and Laurence (Uspenski 1982). St. Vlasi (Blaise), who is occasionally turned to in Russian incantations (Sts. Florian, Laurence and Blaise appear only in lists of many saints, never independently), is, as demonstrated by Ivanov and Toporov, the Christian successor to Veles/Volos – the similarity is even noticeable in their names (see Ivanov, Toporov 1974: 46, 62, 65 etc.; Mikhailov 1995: 177; Váňa 1990: 77). Researchers of western European mythology have in their attempts at identification tried to identify St. Martin (who has a very important role especially in western Christianity) with the Germanic god Wodan/Wotan/Odin (Miles date unknown: 208), but how well-founded these parallels are is difficult to say. Slavic scholars have interpreted St. George in various ways: Ivanov

and Toporov wrote that he is related to both of the characters in the basic myth – Perun and Veles/Volos (Ivanov, Toporov 1974: 207), while Ridley has him as the successor to Veles/Volos (Ridley 1976). In Christianity, the pagan god of death Veles/Volos is often equated with the Devil (Ivanov, Toporov 1974: 57, 66). In this light we can today understand the Serbian legend which is the same in its basic content as typical legends about the Master of the Wolves (see Šaulić 1931: 37-38; no. 18), except that devils appear in place of wolves and the Master of the Wolves.

To summarize, it seems that the fundamental shared features of the pagan beings and the saints who appear in the role of the Master of the Wolves are his role on the one hand in herding and husbandry, and on the other hand in death and dying. With regard to how archaic the legends are and with reference to modern research and reconstructions of Slavic mythology, these features could perhaps be connected with the features which judging from this modern research are shown by Veles/Volos, the proto-Slavic god of death, livestock and the land of the dead. It appears to be possible to assume that the legends about the Master of the Wolves were included in the mythological context,¹² and in that case the role of the Master of the Wolves would most probably have been played by Veles/Volos.

¹² This legend and the tradition of the Master of the Wolves probably played a role in the changing of the two halves of the year – winter, the half which in this mythological context would belong to Veles/Volos (the time during which the wolves would be set free and the livestock shut in), and summer (when the livestock were out and the wolves shut in), which would belong to his adversary, Perun (for more on the basic myth which tells of the battle between the two see Ivanov, Toporov 1974).

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