

## A worshipped "Blue Stone" from Kleshchin, Yaroslavl Region

"... There was in the town of Peryaslavl in the gully behind the Church of SS Boris and Gleb a stone; and a demon became installed there, and bewitched the people of Peryaslavl: men, women and their children, and confused their hearts and souls on the Holiday of the Apostles Peter and Paul. And the people obeyed him and gathered there from year to year and worshipped him. But he (St. Irinarch) ordered to throw it down into a pit to prevent Christians from coming to the stone and acting in this evil way..." (1).

The above is a rare written account of a worshipped stone dating back to the 17th century.

Originally the abovementioned "blue stone" was in one of the ravines near the ancient town site of Alexandrova Gora (Alexander Mountain). Two attempts, first, to bury it (in the beginning of the 17th century) and later, to move it away (1788), were made, but both of them failed, and the stone has remained on the low swampy bank of the lake until the present.

It is important to conclude to what particular cult this stone is to be attributed and to establish the chronology and origins of the rite. An answer suggested in literature on regional history is to be generalized. For example, S. Vassiliev noted that the worship of a "blue stone" existed in the 8th—9th centuries, when the Finno-Ugrian tribe of the Merya inhabited the lake banks, later, the same cult was widespread among Slovens that had come to the area in the 10th—11th centuries (2).

In order to analyze this problem in more detail it is necessary to give an overall historical outline of the region. According to chronicles, this subregion is known as one of the centers of the Finno-Ugrian tribe of the Merya. A chronicle text points definitively to the considerable concentration of a Merya population on the banks of the lake. "... And there are Meryas at the Kleshchin lake, too"- reports a chronicle (3).

A later message on Peryaslavl is connected with the activities of the prince Juri Dolgoruky, when he was involved in the construction of a series of fortifications along the western borders of his domain. "In the year 6660 Juri Volodimerich (Dolgoruky) has moved Peryaslavl from Kleshchin and founded a large town (larger than the old one) and erected the Church of Our Saviour in Peryaslavl"- according to the chronicle register of 1152 (4).

In a source of the early 15th century "The list of far and close Russian towns" (Spisok gorodov russkikh dalmikh i blizhnikh) Kleshchin is listed between Vladimir and Peryaslavl-Zalessky (5). It implies that the Kleshchin stronghold existed in the 14th—15th centuries and was as well known as Peryaslavl, its chronicled "successor". Scholars who studied this source had no doubt that Kleshchin was an independent town in the close neighbourhood of Peryaslavl-Zalessky, along the road from Vladimir-on-Klyasma to Peryaslavl, and most probably on the banks of Lake Kleshchin, where the routes from the Vladimiro-Suzdal region and Upper-Volga region (Verkhneye Povolzhye) crossed. All investigators of the Kleshchin problem agree almost unanimously that the

sole admissible site for the location of Kleshchin was the shore of the lake near the contemporary village of Gorodishche next to a well-preserved Medieval town site.

In the 9th—11th centuries the Kleshchin complex included the Alexander Mountain (Yarilina Plesh), a village-site (selishche) and a barrow burial ground with a number of burial mound agglomerations (1300 mounds). The Alexander Mountain is likely to have had the role of a stronghold (detinets), while the village site was a settlement. This was an Old Russian early urban center with a mixed population that included both Rus-sified Meryas and Sloven migrants.

In the 11th—13th centuries the structure of Kleshchin underwent changes. The Alexander Mountain lost the role of a fortified center of the monumental complex, a new strong "castle" (gorodishche) was erected, and nearby at the site of the present village of Gorodishche, appeared and evolved a settlement (posad). The cultural layer and ceramics of that and later periods can easily be determined there. The barrow burial ground was still growing and new mounds were added. In the early 11th—12th centuries life continued at the village site, but then it gradually lost its importance, surrendering the role of the center of the complex to the stronghold (detinets) and the settlement (posad). Later, in the middle of the 12th century the town of Peryaslavle-Zalessky was formed. The town stronghold was moved away from Kleshchin and all activities also were located inside the ramparts of the new town, while Kleshchin became its suburb.

The "blue stone" belongs to the same complex as the Alexander Mountain and is likely to have been used as an idol in the heathen Pre-Christian period of the Peryaslavle-Zalessky region, i.e. in the 9th—11th centuries, when Novgorod Slovenes were settling in the area.

Besides the "blue stone", several other idols of the same kind are known from along the Volga near Yaroslavl (Yaroslavskoye Povolzhye). One of them was described by M.I. Smirnov. This is a stone from the Berendey Bog called a "blue (or stone) woman" (sinyaya (or kamennaya) baba). An event similar to that at Kleshchin occurred in connection with it: "during the construction of a stone church in the village of Lavrovo it had been decided to use it in the basement, but because of its weight an attempt to move it away failed; however, it was told, that when the stone was placed on the carriage, it tipped over and shards split of" (6).

In the following M.I. Smirnov describes a rite associated with this stone: "to prevent themselves from loosing their way, when they are gathering cranberries at the Berendey Bog, country women bring some berries to the stone and with dresses turned inside out recede from it. Cases of offering on other occasions are also reported, and from time to time, one can find there not only berries, but bread as well". Another stone identical to the "blue" one is at one of the squares of Peryaslavle-Zalessky.

There is a similar stone in the historical center of Yaroslavl, near the Church of St. Nicholas (Nikola Nadein), built in the 17th century. This was used as a gravestone.

Inside the Church of St. Nicholas (Nikola Mokry) of the 17th century there is also a large trimmed boulder with a step cut out. As reported by S.E. Novikov, a restaurator from Yaroslavl, similar stones can be found in the basements of almost all Yaroslavl churches.

The biography of Saint Abraham from Rostov reports that there was in Rostov the Chud District (Chudskoy Konets) with an idol of Volos (7). According to a legend this stone idol was shattered by the Archbishop Abraham who founded a monastery there, which was named after him (8). As it was reported: "The Chud District people worshipped the stone idol, because their hearts were shadowed by acts of the devil".

Two worshipped stones are known from Uglich. One of them was situated near the Church of St. Nicholas the Thaumaturge at Petukhov (9). It was called the "cock stone",

as there were two bird's tracks on its surface. A legend tells us that a cock used to appear on this stone at midnight foreshadowing disasters with its crow.

The second one, the "sledge-hammer stone" (kuvaldin) lay on the Volga bank at the Jerusalem settlement. It was said that on moony nights of the summer bathing season singing elves used to appear there, and that several times an old maid combing her hair was seen there (10). All attempts to trace these were unsuccessful. However, we know that this place was in sinister disrepute because of frequent accidents occurring there.

Judging by original reports and most scholarly conclusions, the worshipping of stones is a genuine component of the cult of the Cattle God — Veles-Volos-Vlasy. As noted N.F. Lavrov: "the worship of Volos was especially widespread in the Novgorod Sloven region and in the Rostov region" (11). Academician B.A. Rybakov affirms that "the name of Veles has a semantic nuance pointing to the worship of the dead, ancestors and their souls" (12). Veles days came in January, immediately after the New Year Holiday (13), and the Vlasy Day was February 11th, according to the Julian calendar (14).

The worshipping rite at the Peryaslavl "blue stone" used to take place every year, on July 29th, on the day of St. Peter and St. Paul Apostoles (15, 16).

A custom of worshipping dead ancestors and bringing sacrifices on the day of St. Peter is also well known (17).

All this implies that the "blue stone" was an attribute of dead souls and ancestor worship, which is quite consistent with its topographical characteristics. It seems possible that formerly the stone was a component of a complex containing a settlement, burial ground and a heathen sanctuary.

During the 9th—10th centuries the Upper-Volga region, including the banks of Lake Kleshchin (Lake Pleshcheyevo), was explored by the new population that had come from the north-west, i.e., from the Novgorod region, where the worship of stones was common (18). Apparently this new population brought the custom of worshipping stones, and the Peryaslavl "blue stone" in particular was associated with the cult of dead ancestors.

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