

PERUN'S THUNDER: SLAVIC DEITIES & FOLKLORE FOR FANTASY GAMING

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SLAVIC MYTH: INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Among European mythologies, the varieties of paganism found in the Slavic world remain especially enigmatic.

Reconstructing the details of old Slavic worship has long challenged scholars and continues to do so today. Few primary sources speak of the subject,



most of them written by foreign observers or after the fact by disapproving Christian commentators. There survives no body of Slavic lore to compare with the trove of legends left behind by the Greeks, the Vikings, or the Celts. Archaeological evidence is likewise scanty, with a fragmentary assortment of artifacts and ruins spanning centuries and scattered over the expanse of Central and Eastern

Europe. Finally, the term “Slav” encompasses such a wide array of ethnicities that deciding how far one can go in identifying a single pagan tradition among them is no easy task.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, there is something tantalizing about the Slavic mythos, which holds much potential as an RPG asset. In recent years, heroes and monsters inspired by Eastern European tropes and tales have become increasingly prominent in the Anglophone fantasy sphere. But if they are no longer novel, neither have they wholly left the periphery, so they retain an exotic flavor that GMs may find useful. Indeed, the very unfamiliarity of Slavic gods may increase their appeal to players—and the fact that their roles and natures are less well-defined in the popular mindset than the divinities of Olympus or Valhalla may afford more flexibility in figuring out how to use them.

This document is a gaming resource, not an academic treatise, so it emphasizes playability and gaming appeal over

Traditionally, Slavic peoples are divided into three linguistic subgroups: *East Slavic* (Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian); *West Slavic* (Polish, Czech, Slovak); and *South Slavic* (Macedonian, Serbian, Croatian, Bulgarian, others). In the distant past, mutually intelligible dialects of *Proto-Slavic* predominated widely, and neighboring *Baltic languages* also influenced their evolution. No written script existed among the pagan Slavs: both Latin and Cyrillic forms of writing—and the latter’s Glagolitic forerunner—were imported by Christian missionaries. (GMs are free to waive or alter this fact). In presenting the gods and spirits of the ancient Slavs, this document will attempt to include variants and examples from as many of these ethnolinguistic streams as possible.

ethnographic precision or cultural authenticity. The pantheon presented in these pages is more tidily organized and internally coherent than its real-life counterpart would have been. For one thing, regional variations abounded. Different Slavic groups, spread over great distances, venerated these deities in different combinations and sometimes under different names. For another, the sources available to us, both primary and secondary, are frequently inconsistent when describing the gods' features, attributes, and functions.

To resolve these real-life complexities would be intellectually futile and, from a gaming point of view, tedious. Therefore, in assembling a pantheon that best serves the needs of a fantasy RPG campaign, I have simplified where necessary. Where the evidence about one god or another is ambiguous, I have smoothed out contradictions and redundancies. Also, I have drawn on the legends of a number of Slavic peoples, freely conflating diverse elements that would not have been juxtaposed in actual fact. This last, I hope, will at least have the effect of showcasing the many distinct traditions that exist within the larger Slavic cultural framework.

On language and folklore: The legends inspiring this document transcend political boundaries and are the common heritage of Eastern Europe's many Slavic peoples. Because Russian versions of these tales, along with Russian names and spellings, tend to be most familiar to Anglophone readers, this document will at times default to them. This, however, should not be taken as a privileging of Russia's traditions over those of its neighbors, nor is it intended to validate Russia's ongoing and illegal military assault against Ukraine. Furthermore, this document does not endorse the contemporary practice of *rodnoverie* (Slavic native faith) and like-minded varieties of Slavic neopaganism, or the nationalistic and patriarchal sentiments that often underpin such doctrines.

MASTER NARRATIVES/CAMPAIGN QUESTIONS

A dazzling array of folk stories and fairy tales can be found among each of Europe's Slavic peoples. These, however, tend to be of more recent vintage, compiled almost exclusively in the Christian era and especially between the 1600s and the 1800s. When it comes to lore drawn directly from the pagan past, what survives is meager at best.

We have, therefore, no Slavic version of the Mabinogion, the Irish Mythological Cycle, or the Kalevala, much less the Eddas or Homer's epics, to serve as grist for our creative mill. Neither the personalities of Slavic deities nor their relationships with each other are engraved on our collective memory the way the dramas and battles of the Greek gods or the Æsir are. There are no master narratives to rival the impending doom of Ragnarok, or the Olympian interventions in the Trojan War, or Cúchulainn's bloody clashes with the armies of Connacht.

This lack of detail may seem a deficit, or somehow less gripping. But for gaming purposes, this open-endedness can prove liberating. Using a Slavic-inspired pantheon, you have more of a blank canvas when pondering how to

incorporate religion into a campaign. With gods that are less familiar—and, as a result, suitably mysterious—there are no clichés or preconceived notions to labor against. It is a rare opportunity. But it also requires planning.

No matter what fundamental character you wish your campaign's version of the Slavic pantheon to take—various possibilities are discussed below—basic questions must be settled first. Among these are:

- Is this the only pantheon in your campaign? If not, is it the preeminent one? Or does it stand equal with several or many others?
- If multiple pantheons exist, how do they get along? Do they coexist peacefully or at least tolerate each other? Do they compete in a more or less neutral marketplace of faiths, or are they actively hostile, even persecutory, toward each other?
- Are your Slavic deities worshipped only by humans? Or is veneration of them open to other humanoids? (A good question to ask of any pantheon, especially if you find older RPG approaches outdated in the way they assign all elves—or dwarves, or orcs, and so on—a tiny set of gods while giving humans a more diverse array to choose from.)
- Does alignment play a role in your campaign? If so, which of the Slavic deities will be of which alignment? (Suggestions are provided below but are not binding.)
- How organized and centralized are clerics who serve the Slavic gods? (What relationship do they have to political authority? Are they state-sponsored or -controlled? Autonomous? Actively defiant? (Also, do druids fit into the practice of Slavic paganism? If so, how?))



Once you settle the above, you can move on to specific choices. Again, because there are few predetermined plotlines or storytelling arcs associated with pagan Slavic myth, you have latitude for individualized design. Below are some possibilities for how Slavic-themed worship might take shape in your campaign:

- **UNIFIED and TIMELESS:** In this most typical of pagan outlooks, the Slavic gods, despite their different divine functions and personality traits, form a

coherent and mostly cooperative pantheon. Worshipers respect all of them, strive to offend none, and generally pick one to favor. Doctrinal points and moral abstractions matter less than understanding one's place in the cosmos and being at peace with it. Adherents petition the gods for protection and good fortune, and worship is based principally on the changing of the seasons and the rhythms of agriculture and the hunt.

- **INTERNAL TENSIONS and DIVISIONS:** Perhaps your version of the Slavic pantheon is less united, with various gods divided by personal rivalries, differing ethical outlooks, romantic triangles, or other animosities.

In more famous mythologies, a great deal of drama is generated by the hatred of Loki for Balder or Hera's domestic quarrels with Zeus. In Slavic pagan lore, there are few built-in conflicts of this sort, but they can be manufactured as needed. Two options in particular have a possible basis in the mythography. In some texts, the gods Perun and Veles are described as having fallen out—thereby dividing the pantheon—over their mutual love for the goddess Mokosh (and, in some stories, for deeper cosmic reasons). Also, Belobog and Chernobog, the so-called “white” and “black” gods, are depicted as mutually antipathetic.

- **BINARY STRUGGLE between GOOD and EVIL:** Arguably the most conventional approach to religious campaign—building and diametrically opposed to the “eternal cycle” approach described above. Here, most if not all members of the pantheon are joined in a virtuous struggle to safeguard the world against the cosmic threat posed by some malign foe. Suitable candidates for this diabolical adversary might include Chernobog and Koshchei the Deathless, both profiled in later sections.

PRIESTS, DRUIDS, & THE QUESTION OF SACRIFICE

In recreating the cyclical nature of Slavic paganism, what role should sacrifice play? It is beyond doubt that ancient Slavs sacrificed animals, large and small, for ceremonial purposes. Indeed, the pagan Slavic word used to define “priest”—*zhrets* (plural *zhretsy*)—literally means “one who offers the sacrifice.”

Slavic pagans may also have practiced human sacrifice. While there is much debate among modern academics about how far to trust them, several medieval sources attest to such grisly rites. You can, of course, ignore these. But if you like the darker side of things and want to add this touch to your campaign, Slavic lore allows for that possibility.

What about druids? In strictly ethnographic terms, they have no place in a Slavic setting, but what matters is what works for your game. This supplement has taken the position that, if clerics are the *zhretsy* described above, druids also worship the Slavic pantheon, but in a less hierarchical way and with special respect for deities whose domains include nature. You can, of course, do things differently. Perhaps your druids serve nature more abstractly, neither venerating nor opposing the Slavic pantheon? Or perhaps they are at odds with, even persecuted by, the pagan priesthood? The choice is yours.

- **PROSELYTISM or RESISTANCE:** If gods other than those of the Slavs feature in your campaign, there are many ways they might coexist. If you wish to build excitement by maximizing discord, you can heighten religious conflict, placing Slavic paganism on one side of this equation or the other. Are the Slavic gods jealous of their rivals? Do they require their priests to proselytize and convert non-believers by aggressive persuasion or even coercion? Conversely, are Slavic pagans oppressed by those of other faiths, forcing them into a position of resistance and underground worship? Note: Before adopting this approach, consult with your players to ensure that all of them are comfortable with a scenario so rife with religious zealotry.
- **CONTENDING with MONOTHEISM:** One variation on the above theme, although it can be as peaceful or as conflictual as you like, is an encounter between Slavic paganism and a newly-arrived form of monotheism. There are obvious historical parallels, as each of the Slavic peoples in real life gave up their pagan ways—whether by persuasion or violence—in favor of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, or Islam. This transition could form an intriguing religious backdrop for your campaign, especially considering how long pagan practices are thought to have survived under the surface of Christian belief in many Slavic communities. Not all scholars are in agreement about this, but many historians of religion have supposed that this sort of “dual faith” (*dvoeverie*)—in which old rituals and holidays were repurposed to suit new doctrines, and old gods came to be identified with Christian saints—prevailed for several centuries in parts of Eastern Europe.

THE MAJOR GODS

The entries below describe the Slavs’ major gods. Where information from the sources is inconsistent—or when scholarly interpretations vary—I have resolved disparities as I see fit. For added color, I have occasionally fictionalized small details, especially where the myths themselves remain vague or ambiguous. If a deity’s name differs from one language to another, I have highlighted the best-known version and, at the end of each entry, mentioned alternative names. (Sometimes it is unclear whether two gods are separate entities or the same divinity worshipped under various names by various groups. Here, too, I have used my own judgment.)

Deities are listed roughly in order of importance, although hierarchy among the Slavic gods is less clear-cut than in other pantheons, so these rankings are to some extent subjective. (The same is true with the distinctions I make between “major” gods in this section and “minor” deities in the next.)

If alignment forms part of your game’s ruleset, suggestions are provided for each deity.

ROD

*primal deity; god of fate, the family, and ancestor worship
alignment: neutral (with good tendencies)*

When the Cosmic Egg nesting in the highest branches of the great oak that is the Tree of Life was shattered, bringing the known world into being, Rod—the great progenitor—was present. It is thought by some that he may have been the Creator himself, but the truth of this remains shrouded in time.

As the first god, Rod reigned for a time as the supreme deity. In his old age, however, he stepped aside in favor of Perun, ascending to a higher, more meditative state of being. He is still regarded as the prototypal ancestor of the gods and, indeed, of all life. (In Slavic languages, his name is the linguistic root for words such as “birth” and “origin.”) Rod thus serves as god of the family, encouraging the veneration of one’s forebears.

Rod is seen by worshippers as aloof but fundamentally benevolent. In keeping with his lofty, mysterious nature, he is also associated with the forces of fate. In this guise, he is sometimes called Sud, which means “judge,” referring to his role as the arbiter of cosmic affairs and human destiny.

Rod is aided in his divine duties by a cadre of female spirits known as rozhanitsy or sudzhenitsy (see “Minor Deities/Other Notables” below). Among other duties, the rozhanitsy spin out the destinies of all mortals. Rod’s holy day is celebrated in December, near the solstice, with a feast culminating in the sacrifice of foods that do not require the taking of life: honey, cheese, grains, and the like.

Rod is symbolically linked with the tree of life and the wheel of fate. His priests gravitate toward the domains of life/healing, fate, and family.

alternative names: Sud (as mentioned above); Rid (Ukrainian)



PERUN

chief deity; god of thunder, the sky, and war

alignment: chaotic neutral



Perun—storm king and ruler of the sky realm Prav (Prawia)—presently reigns as high chief of the Slavic pantheon.

A fierce combatant, the quick-tempered Perun is also god of war, fervently honored by soldiers and warriors. He wields a spear that casts bolts of lightning and an axe that strikes fear into the heart of every foe. His war chariot courses magically through the air, and he is befriended by a great golden eagle named Yarost (“rage”).

When Rod relinquished leadership of the gods to pursue his own inscrutable ends, Perun emerged as the most dominant of the contenders seeking to replace him. Initially standing against him was the god Veles (see below), and this struggle for primacy is one of the factors underlying the two deities’ continued rivalry.

Also dividing Perun from Veles is a romantic history with a bitter end. Ages ago, both gods vied for the love of Mokosh the Earth Mother, and each enjoyed her favors for a time, with Perun fathering two children—the twin gods Morana and Yarilo—upon her. In the end, however, Mokosh chose neither as a life companion. Although any pangs of desire Veles and Perun, who has since married, once felt for Mokosh have cooled, the old contest of affections remains a sore point between them. (See “Perun vs. Veles?” for more on this.)

As ruler of the gods, Perun struggles at times to keep his headstrong ways in check and act instead with the tact and cooler calculation that his greater responsibilities call for. In this, he is aided by his current queen, the rain goddess Dodola, a calming presence more inclined to think before acting. He also rejoices in the company of Yarilo and Morana, his divine offspring.

The oak tree is sacred to Perun, as is the iris. Rams and oxen are sacrificed in his name, especially on his feast day in late July. His symbols are the oak leaf and thunderbolt, and his clerics' domains are tempest (thunder), sky/air, and war.

alternative names: **Perkūnas** (Lithuanian), **Pērkons** (Latvian)

PERUN vs. VELES?

How antagonistic is the relationship between Perun and Veles, and how central is that antagonism to the Slavic mythos? Scholarly debate rages over these questions. Some maintain that ill will between the two is the defining fact of the pagan Slavs' cosmology, while others insist that no such animus existed and is the invention of hyper-imaginative folklorists overinterpreting the sources.

What matters most is what you want in your campaign. There are two questions to decide if you wish a rivalry to exist between Perun and Veles. First, how keenly is it felt? Does it lie mainly in the past, now half-forgotten? Or does it still rankle and cause strife? Second, how all-encompassing is it? Is it simply about the pair's long-ago love triangle with Mokosh? Or Veles's theft of cattle that once belonged to Perun, as some tales have it? Does it involve the power struggle that followed Rod's withdrawal from rulership of the gods?

Even more broadly, the dispute could be about the nature of Veles himself. Veles's divine spheres are difficult to pin down (see his entry below), and several folklorists have seen him not just as a god of farming and livestock, but also as lord of the underworld (Nav, or Nawia). Such reconstructions of Slavic myth speak of Perun and Veles locked in a primordial battle during the creation of the world, with Perun casting Veles down from the heavens (Prav, or Prawia) and consigning him to the underground realm of earth and water. Related stories describe Veles provoking Perun by holding his son Yarilo in the underworld for part of each year, either as guest or captive. Pitting Perun and Veles against each other this intensely would allow you to generate interesting conflicts among the Slavic gods, not to mention among the priests who serve them. Or you could opt for a less divisive approach. The choice is yours.

DODOLA

*queen consort of the pantheon; goddess of rain
alignment: neutral good*

A minor deity in her own right, the rain goddess Dodola is queen consort of the Slavic pantheon by virtue of her marriage to Perun. By that token, she is sometimes referred to as Perperuna.

Gentler in spirit than her turbulent husband, Dodola is often called upon by mortals desiring calmer weather to intercede with Perun on their behalf.

Similarly, when farming communities need rain, they carry out ceremonies in Dodola's honor. Children perform circle dances,



while the adults surround a young woman clothed in leaves and garlands—representing Dodola—and sprinkle her with water. These rituals are named *dodoly* or *perperuny*, after the goddess herself.

Dodola's symbol is the rainbow. Domains pertaining to nature, water, and the weather attract her clerics, and she is respected by druids as well.

alternative names: **Perperuna** (as mentioned above), **Preperuda/Preperuša** (South Slavic variants), **Dodole/Dudola/Dudala** (South Slavic variants)

MOKOSH

earth mother; goddess of fertility, childbirth, and vegetation

alignment: neutral



One of the pantheon's oldest deities, Mokosh embodies the life-giving properties of the earth, metaphorically twinned with women's fertility and the nurturing power of the womb. Her most common byname is "Damp Mother Earth" (Mat Syra Zemlya in Russian, Sira-Zemlya Mati in Ukrainian).

In the gods' earliest days, Mokosh enjoyed dalliances with Perun and Veles—a circumstance that continues to strain relations between the latter two—but settled in the end with neither. With Perun, she begat Morana and Yarilo, and while she is more aloof as a parent than her former paramour, Mokosh regards both of her children with affection.

As the goddess of fertility, Mokosh is a spirit of nature, whose blessings guarantee the thriving of crops and the lush growth of vegetation. She also oversees the mysteries of birth, and it is to her that women expecting—or hoping to bear—children turn. (To a degree, Mokosh shares the sphere of fertility with the lesser deities Lada and Zhiva, although they concern themselves more with the lighter side of love and courtship.) Priests of Mokosh often serve as midwives and tend more generally to women's ailments and illnesses. Mokosh is a patron of handiworks associated with women, and she is thought to have invented the crafts of spinning, weaving, and embroidery.

Slavic pagans swear their most sacred oaths by placing their hand upon the earth and invoking Mokosh's name. It is also to her that they confess their wrongdoings, especially as their time of death nears, by digging a hole in the ground and whispering their secrets into it. She is not a goddess of death, but Mokosh is acknowledged at burials, as the departed are seen as returning to her loamy embrace.

Large boulders serve as altars to Mokosh, and her clerics wear rough-hewn pendants of stone to symbolize the earth. They choose domains such as earth, nature, and life/healing. Druidism likewise centers heavily on Mokosh. Her highest holy day falls in late October, but women also pay respect to her in May.

alternative names: **Mokosz** (Polish), **Mat Sgra Zemlja** (as mentioned above), **Sira-Zemlja Mati** (as mentioned above)

VELES

god of beasts, livestock, and farming (OPTIONAL: lord of the underworld)
alignment: neutral



Veles—who appears to have taken on different guises in different parts of the Slavic world—is the hardest of the major gods to categorize. Moreover, how you choose to define him will bear considerably on how the whole pantheon takes shape in your campaign. Put briefly, you have three options. You can assign Veles one set of divine functions. You can assign him a second set. Or you can assign him both, a hybrid approach that makes him versatile but risks leaving him unfocused in purpose and identity.

In his most common incarnation, Veles is associated with all beasts, but especially livestock, and even more specifically with cattle. This version of Veles is a god of agriculture, viewed with affection by all rural folk. Because cattle serve as a form of currency in such communities, Veles is also seen as a god of wealth and trade, a divine champion of honest commerce.

Deals and exchanges are typically sealed with an oath to Veles, and those who go back on their word are likely to have illnesses visited upon them as a punishment.

This by itself is enough to give Veles a noteworthy place in the pantheon, and you may wish to leave it at that. However, certain tales describe Veles instead as a god of the underworld, sometimes taking the shape of a serpent or dragon. If this is the Veles you wish to feature in your campaign, he can serve as god of the dead, the judge and caretaker of all departed souls. You can go even farther and accept the folkloric depictions of Veles as Perun's cosmological antagonist—sky god versus chthonic deity—with a rivalry dating as far back as the creation of the world itself. (See “Perun vs. Veles” above.)

You can also have Veles serve *both* as a farming deity *and* the god of the dead, but you may find this combination unwieldy. If you decide to restrict Veles to the agricultural sphere, the winter goddess Morana (see below) would make a suitable candidate for a deity associated with death and dying.

No matter which persona you give Veles, you should maintain some degree of tension between him and Perun. How severe and over what is for you to decide. Romantic rivalry lies in their past. In his youth, Veles is said to have stolen cattle from Perun, whether for his own benefit or as a gift to humankind. Veles opposed Perun's rise to power—but did he do so peacefully, or did he resort to armed rebellion? At the dawn of time, did the two indeed fight a world-defining battle of sky against earth, forever driving them apart? Do the two compete for influence over Perun's son Yarilo? In your game, the rancor between Veles and Perun can generate anything from mere awkwardness to outright violence, with whatever consequences you wish to contrive for the entire pantheon.

If Veles manifests as the god of beasts, he can take on the appearance of a bull, and he occasionally retains the horns even in human guise. If instead (or additionally) he is master of the underworld, he assumes draconic form at will. This version of Veles is typically to be found on an island in the subterranean marshes of Dav, his throne enshrouded by the roots of the tree of life.

Veles's holy symbol is a bull's head or, depending on what role he assumes in your campaign, a serpent in the ouroboros pose. In either case, the willow tree is sacred to him, and the holiday dedicated to him falls in February. If Veles serves as the god of beasts and farming, his domains will involve nature, agriculture, and, optionally, wealth and commerce. If he governs the underworld, they will have more to do with death, the grave, and the earth.

alternative names: **Volos** (various languages), **Wales** (Polish)

SVAROG

deity of fire; blacksmith to the gods

alignment: neutral good



A respected figure among the gods, Svarog stands equal in seniority to Perun and Veles. For all that, he is a humbler spirit, less inclined than his brethren to push himself forward.

The god of fire, Svarog is also the inventor of metallurgy and serves as the pantheon's smith and artificer. He is beloved by builders and craftspeople of all types.

It is said of Svarog that he was the first god to marry, thereby originating the custom of matrimony. Accordingly, unions consecrated by his priests are thought to be especially blessed.

Svarog remains happily wed. His bride is Lada (Lada in Polish), a minor goddess associated with romance and devotion. Their eldest child is Dazhbog, renowned as god of the sun.

Svarog's symbol is a black hammer silhouetted against a red flame. His clerical domains include knowledge, the forge, and anything else to do with making and crafting. Although all priests serving this pantheon can officiate at weddings, most couples, if at all possible, turn to those of Svarog to do so.

alternative names: **Svaroh** (Ukrainian and Belarusian), **Swarog** (Polish/West Slavic)

DAZHBOG

god of the sun

alignment: lawful good

The proud and virtuous Dazhbog, embodiment of the sun, is the offspring of the fire god Svarog and his wife Lada.

Each morning, Dazhbog rises from the magic isle of Bugan, guiding the solar chariot—a marvelous vehicle of gold, drawn by three white steeds—



from the eastern end of the sky to the western. Each evening he descends to the dark underside of the world and races back to Bugan, battling the powers of night the entire way, all so he may rest and rise again the next day.

Admired for his constancy, Dazhbog is a steady, honorable upholder of justice. He is a favorite among those who strive to help others and defend the vulnerable. His wife is Zhiva, a goddess of vitality. His sister Zarya, the dawn goddess, lives on Bugan, stabling his horses and opening the sky gate for his chariot each morning.

Dazhbog's emblem is a glowing orb of gold, representing the sun. He is linked symbolically with horses, and he is known to be a friend to wolves. His clerics' domains are light (the sun), order, protection, and duty.

alternative names: **Dazhboh** (Ukrainian), **Daždźboh** (Belarusian), **Dadžbóg** (Polish)

SOLAR and LUNAR DEITIES: SIMPLICITY or COMPLEXITY?

It should be no surprise that the pagan Slavs, over so many years and across so many regions, associated a variety of gods with entities as central to life as the sun and the moon. (This happens even in mythologies where divine roles are more clearly defined, as seen by the parallel existence of Apollo and Artemis and Helios and Selene in Greek legend.) In our own day, scholars remain perplexed by the question of how many solar and lunar deities the ancient Slavs worshipped. This document takes a streamlined approach, assigning the pantheon a single sun god (Dazhbog) and a single moon goddess (Devana) and letting that suffice.

More complex interpretations are possible. To start with, Svarog, the father of Dazhbog, is described as having had a son named Svarozhich (also Swarożyc or Svarožič). But does this name, which translates simply to "son of Svarog," refer to Dazhbog himself? Or to Dazhbog's brother, a second child born to Svarog and Lada? Those who prefer the latter theory propose that Dazhbog and Svarozhich, as brothers, each represent a different aspect of sun worship—but this seems needlessly elaborate for gaming purposes.

Complicating things further, one of the pantheon's most frequently mentioned gods is Khors, a sun deity long thought to have been imported via Persia's cultural influence on the Eastern Slavs. (Recent scholarship has called this view into question, but, should you choose to include Khors in your game, you can keep or discard it as you please.) Folklorists disagree about whether Khors and Dazhbog are separate deities of the sun—Slavic counterparts to Helios and Apollo—or two names for the same god. You can omit Khors altogether as this document has done (or let Dazhbog be known by this name as well), you can opt to let Dazhbog and Khors both be sun gods, or you can add Khors as a god of light (although distinguishing such a deity from Dazhbog as the sun god might pose difficulties).

What about the moon? Among the Slavs as a whole, there was no firmly established association between the moon and any one deity. Attempts have been made to link Khors, mentioned above, with the moon instead of the sun, but this is tenuous at best. Equally weak are the connections some have tried to draw between the moon and goddesses such as Mokosh and Morana. Western Slavs appear to have identified the moon consistently with the goddess Devana, and this document has followed suit.

DEVANA

goddess of the moon; mistress of the hunt

alignment: chaotic neutral (with good tendencies)



The product of an old love affair between Perun and the spirit of the Evening Star, the moody, mercurial Devana embodies the mutable nature of the moon, whose avatar she has long been.

Dwelling in the forest as much as in the sky, Devana, the most skilled archer known to gods or mortals, is also the patron of hunters—at least those who treat their prey with dignity and nature as a whole with due deference.

As Perun's daughter, Devana is half-sister to Varilo, whom she regards with mild affection, and Morana, her one boon companion among the gods.

Of woodland beasts, the wolfhound is favored by Devana, and she is never without a female hound as a hunting companion. Her holy symbols include a crescent moon—her priests wear masked headdresses topped by a horizontal crescent shaped almost like horns—and the mullein (*verbascum*) flower. Devana's worshippers drink a tea made from mullein leaves, both in her honor and for medicinal purposes. Her domains are nature, the moon, and twilight.

alternative names: Dziewanna (Polish), Divana (Ukrainian), Zevana (Russian)

STRIBOG

weather god; keeper of the winds

alignment: neutral good

A spirit of the air whose strength as a weather god falls short of Perun's in some respects but exceeds his in others. Stribog may not wield the thunder, but the tempests are his to command.

Stribog summons the winds by sounding a horn of gold and ivory named Prizyvatel ("the invoker"). Solitary by nature, he dwells apart from the other gods in the high places of the world. He is a friend to all birds, but especially the gyrfalcons of the north.



Druids are fond of Stribog, as are sailors and all others who rely on the winds for their work or their safety. His votaries wear small pendants in the shape of the horn with which he calls the winds, and the gyrfalcon is part of his iconography as well. His domains are sky/air and tempest.

alternative names: **Striboh** (Ukrainian and Belarusian), **Strzybóg** (Polish)



YARILO

god of spring and fertility
alignment: chaotic good

The perpetually youthful son of Perun, Yarilo is the god of springtime, embodying vegetative fertility and the rhythms of agricultural production. Although to a lesser degree than Dazhbog, he is associated with the sun as well.

A seasonal deity, Yarilo is understood by worshippers to experience the full cycle of birth, maturation, and death every year, in parallel with the planting, growing, and harvesting of wheat. Some of the pagan Slavs' most important festivals are connected to this cycle's key moments.

Returning from a period of dormition—a winter slumber that leaves him on the verge of death—Yarilo is reborn during the spring equinox, an occasion celebrated with the joyous feast of Komoeditsa (see “Spirits & the Seasons” below). With the warming of the weather and the flourishing of the wheat, Yarilo grows into a charming, high-spirited young man, with little on his mind but the delights of love. The summer holidays of Semik (“green week”) and Kupala mark crucial moments in the agricultural calendar, but romance and wooing are just as much at the heart of the games and rituals that go on at this time. Although these holidays pay homage to Mokosh as the earth goddess, along with the minor deities Lada and Zhiva as spirits of love and fertility, the starring role belongs to Yarilo. He leads the bacchanalian revels of the season, and while he singles out a favorite partner to be his bride—typically the spring goddess Vesna—he takes many paramours as the summer rolls on. In the fall, the harvest brings Yarilo's merriment to an end. After one more round of feasting—with a touch of bittersweet, almost funereal, farewell to it—Yarilo departs once again, sinking into his annual state of hibernation until the spring returns the following year.

There are variations on this theme that you can adopt or ignore as you prefer. Echoing the Greek tale of Persephone, some stories tell of Yarilo spending his winters in the underworld, with Veles described variously as his captor or a surrogate father of sorts. (Either version would further inflame the disdain Veles and Perun have for each other.) A particularly grim—and not universally accepted—reconstruction of the Yarilo myth holds that his dearest lover during the warm months is not Vesna, but rather his sister Morana. As the summer passes and the number of Yarilo's infidelities grows, Morana grows increasingly jealous. The siblings' romance sours by autumn, when Morana, driven to the point of blind fury, ushers in the season of frost and decay by killing her brother—only to repeat the cycle with the next coming of spring. This parable of the seasons is metaphorically apt, and brother-sister couplings are not unknown in world mythology. Still, if you prefer to pass on incest narratives, it is easy enough to fall back to the more standard story that places Vesna at the center of Yarilo's love life.

Whatever choices you make about the way he moves through the year, Yarilo is a figure of sunny disposition and irresistible charm. Boyishly high-spirited, he brings joy wherever he goes, but is often capricious, not least in how widely he shares his romantic attentions. Yarilo is said by some to be a shapeshifter—the horse being one of his favorite forms—and if you wish to include a trickster god in your campaign, Yarilo is a good candidate (although his pranks and deceits are never intended to be truly malicious). Yarilo enjoys teasing his gloomy sister Morana, although the two are strongly attached to each other despite their differing temperaments.

All of the holidays leading from Komoeditsa to Kupala are important to Yarilo. He generally appears as a handsome young man wearing a white cloak and garland of leaves or flowers on his head. His holy symbol is a sheaf of wheat, and his clerical domains are life/healing (fertility), nature (vegetation), and (optionally) trickery.

alternative names: **Yarila** (variation on standard Russian/Ukrainian/Bulgarian version), **Yargla** (Belarusian), **Jarilo** (Serbian, Croatian, Czech), **Gerovit** (Polabian)

MORANA

goddess of winter and decay

alignment: neutral

The daughter of Perun and the twin sister of Yarilo—although diametrically opposed to her brother in terms of personality and divine function.

Commonly known by the Czech version of her name, Morana embodies the snowy chill of deepest winter. Her arrival signals the coming of the cold and dark,



and her presence causes the ebbing of the life force that suffuses the land in warmer seasons. She is therefore regarded also as a goddess of death. Morana is not perceived by worshippers as sinister, but neither does anyone mistake her for a nurturing deity.

For all her implacability, Morana is good friends with Vesna, the gentle spirit associated with spring. She is also fond of her brother Yarilo—although, as described above, it lies with you to decide what form that fondness takes.

Like her brother, Morana is venerated during Komoeditsa in March, but as a figure fading away, rather than on the ascendant. To signal the end of winter, villagers create an effigy of Morana and, brandishing bundles of juniper or pine, carry it to the river to drown it symbolically. In some communities, the

effigy is set on fire instead of (or before) being thrown into the water.

Although the earth mother Mokosh is more fervently prayed to at funerals, Morana, as an avatar of death, receives her due respect. While she does not rule the underworld, she plays a role in deciding the fates of those who go there. Therefore, the dying—and their loved ones—will petition Morana, seeking an easy passage to the beyond and merciful judgment regarding the afterlife. In this capacity, Morana acts sternly but never with unwarranted cruelty.

Morana's holy symbol takes the shape of a perfect snowflake. Her domains are cold (winter), grave, decay, and vigil. Her affiliation with the natural process of decay attracts certain druids. In November, with the passing of fall, worshippers pray to her, asking that the winter to come will be an easy one.

alternative names: **Marzanna** (Polish), **Marena** (Russian), **Mara** (Ukrainian), **Mora** (Bulgarian)

ZARYA

goddess of the dawn

alignment: neutral good

Spirit of the morning and younger sister to the sun god Dazhbog.

Zarya is believed to dwell on the enchanted isle of Bugan. There, she helps tend to the chariot and white steeds that draw her brother across the sky every day. Each morning, she opens the gates of the east for him, allowing him to begin his daily journey.

Virginal and kind-hearted, Zarya is beloved by young women as a sympathetic figure among the gods. She is also a patron to idealists who value decency and an optimistic spirit. Clerics who venerate Dazhbog as the sun god typically include Zarya in their services and prayers, and it is not unheard of for priests to serve both deities at once.

When women cast charms and minor spells—known respectively in Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian as *zagovory*, *zamovi*, and *zamovlyanni*—they often chant Zarya’s name and ask her to lend them extra strength. (Such appeals will fall on deaf ears unless their intent is good or at least free of harmful effect.)

Zarya’s symbol is a red orb that signifies the morning sky. Her clerics’ domains are light, peace, arcana, and magic. (Note: in some regions, Zarya was understood to have manifested quite differently. If you wish to explore these more complex possibilities, see “Triune Gods” below.)

alternative names: **Zorja** (Serbian), **Zorya** (Ukrainian), **Zara-Zaranitsa** (Belarusian), **Zori** (Bulgarian)

SVETOVIT

lord of abundance, giver of the feast

alignment: lawful good

The most physically striking of the pantheon’s deities, the four-headed Svetovit is a much-loved god of generosity and beneficence. Temples built to him—always



decorated with the god's emblem of the white horse—are houses of sacrifice and celebration alike.

Svetovit is the provider of plenty, as well as a guardian to those who venerate him. To signify these twin roles, he carries in one hand a drinking horn that never runs dry, while in the other he wields a sword or a bow. (The historical Svetovit was sometimes worshipped as a god of war, but with Perun in charge of that sphere, it is better to view Svetovit as a deity of protection.)

Svetovit's holiest days arrive soon after the harvest. The week beforehand, the god's clerics purify his temple, holding their breath lest their mortal exhalations contaminate the space. Svetovit's festival unfolds over two days. On the morning

of the first, a white horse—kept on the temple grounds since last year's harvest—is sacrificed before the statue of the god that stands in the temple, and an all-day feast of thanksgiving follows. At midnight, Svetovit's priests pour alcohol into the drinking horn held in the statue's right hand. The next morning, the villagers assemble outside while the clerics investigate the drinking horn. If the alcohol has vanished, it is a sign of Svetovit's displeasure, and next year's crop will likely be poor. If the alcohol remains, Svetovit has bestowed his blessings, and next spring and summer are sure to be bountiful. When the portents are happy, the priests each take a swallow of the alcohol, then spill the rest at the statue's feet. They then refill the horn and place it back in the statue's right hand. A new white horse is brought to replace the one slain the day before, and it lives in comfort until the next harvest comes round.



During its year in service to Svetovit, the white horse can only be ridden by a cleric of the god, and its mane and tail must be groomed perfectly to avoid bad luck. In advance of important decisions, and especially before deciding questions of war and peace, Svetovit's horse is guided through three gates formed by thrusting three pairs of spears into the ground, point first. If the horse leads with its right forehoof through all three gates, it signifies that the proposed venture will

prosper. If it crosses through any of the gates with its left forehoof first, the venture is considered ill-starred and typically called off.

The feast of Svetovit is most often in early September, sometimes at the end of August. The head of a white horse is his principal holy symbol, although the drinking horn serves as another. His domains are protection, prosperity, and luck.

alternative names: **Svantovit** (Czech), **Sventovit** (Bulgarian), **Sviatovit** (Ukrainian)

TRIUNE GODS?

A feature of some Slavic idols is their depiction of certain gods as many-headed, the abovementioned Svetovit being a case in point. It remains unclear whether pagan Slavs imagined the gods thus pictured to appear that way physically or believed that gods with multiple heads embodied multiple avatars within themselves—like various Hindu deities or Hecate of the Greeks, who is at once the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. (Sometimes, as with the famed Zbruch idol, which pictures Perun, Mokosh, Dazhbog, and Lada, including more than one head is simply a way to honor more than one deity with one sculpture.)

Such ambiguity makes it hard to grasp one figure in particular. This is Triglav, or “The Three-Headed,” carvings of whom were prevalent throughout the Slavic world but especially among the Pomeranians and Polabians. What cannot be told from the idols themselves is whether Triglav was an actual god in his own right. Was he instead an alternative version of Svetovit, but with one less head? Or, as others think, was the Triglav concept a means to collectively depict Perun with some combination of Svarog, Veles, and Dazhbog? For the sake of simplicity, this document takes the last approach. But if you wish, you can certainly design Triglav on your own as a separate, uniquely triune god.

Much the same applies to the goddess Zarya. In a few places, Zarya was understood to personify not just the dawn, but the midday and the evening as well. Some saw her as a single entity, containing three aspects within her. Others went farther, viewing her not as one individual, but as three sisters, one of the morning, one of midday, and one of the night, all named Zarya (or Zorya, or Zora). Yet another tradition associates these siblings not with the passing of the day, but with stars—the Morning Star, the Day Star (obscured by the sun), and the Evening Star. If you want more complexity than that provided by the singular Zarya described in the entry above, it would be possible to turn the goddess into a sisterly trio, in whichever form you like.

CHERNOBOG & BELOBOG

god of darkness (OPTIONAL: lord of the underworld) vs. god of light

alignment: neutral evil vs. neutral good

Literally the “black god” and the “white god,” these cosmic antagonists came into being as twin brothers—equal in strength and destined to oppose each other throughout eternity. Both gods are more abstract in nature than the deities listed above. In fact, many scholars maintain that they were not known to the pagan Slavs at all, but added later by Christian writers who wished to insert a prototypically Satanic figure—and his spiritual opponent—into the old legends. Be that as it may, they exist authentically enough in Slavic folk memory to form part

of this pantheon. Chernobog in particular is too famous to leave out: he is the demonic creature who haunts Mussorgsky's tone poem "Night on Bald Mountain" and, even more chillingly, the sequence based on that music in Disney's *Fantasia*.

As religious elements in your game, Chernobog and Belobog will function best as pure distillations of evil and good. The iniquitous Chernobog is an excellent candidate for a central villain, if not *the* archvillain, in your campaign. (You may also wish to make him ruler of the underworld instead of Veles.) He presides over



witches' sabbaths—as in "Night on Bald Mountain"—and has demons and devils at his command. (If your game makes meaningful distinctions between these types, you can decide which to associate with Chernobog, although devils seem a better choice.) Only those willing to oppose the rest of the gods are likely to serve Chernobog, so whether and under what conditions you wish to allow players to take on roles

as his clerics or worshippers is for you to determine.

Chief among Chernobog's servitors are his twelve hideous daughters, collectively known as the Sisters of Fever. As their name suggests, they spread disease, making use of their deadly kiss to contaminate their victims. They bring other woes as well, acting on their father's orders. Their names are Ague, Fever, Chilblain, Nausea, Angina, Deafness, Bonebreak, Dropsy, Jaundice, Convulsion, Insomnia, and Death-Throe.

Belobog is obsessed with opposing whatever nefarious undertakings his brother involves himself with. He should be portrayed as an avenging angel, full to overflowing with crusading ardor. He is armed with a lance of white fire, forged for him by the divine smith Svarog and called Mstitel ("the avenger").

The symbol most associated with Chernobog is a black skull, while Belobog is known by an emblem of white flame. Chernobog's clerical domains fall into the spheres of death, necromancy, darkness, and pain. Acolytes of Belobog choose light, justice, and zeal.

alternative names: **Chornoboh & Biloboh** (Ukrainian), **Białobog & Czarnobog & Białobog** (Polish), **Černoboh & Bělboh** (Czech)

NAME	ALIGNMENT	DIVINE SPHERE(S)	CLERICAL DOMAIN(S)	HOLY SYMBOL(S)	HOLIDAY(S)
ROD	neutral (good tendencies)	fate, family, ancestor worship	life/healing, fate, family	tree of life, wheel of fate	late December (ca. Kolgada & winter solstice)
PERUN	chaotic neutral	thunder, war	tempest (thunder), air/sky, war	thunderbolt, oak leaf	late July
DODOLA	neutral good	rain	nature, weather, water	rainbow	--
MOROSH	neutral	fertility, childbirth, vegetation	life/healing, earth, nature (agriculture)	stone pendants	late October (also early May)
VELES	neutral	beasts, livestock, farming (OPTIONAL: underworld)	nature (husbandry), commerce (OPTIONAL: death, grave)	ball's head (OPTIONAL: worm ouroboros)	mid-February
SVAROG	neutral good	fire	forge, crafting, knowledge	black hammer on red flame	--
DAZHBOG	lawful good	the sun	light (sun), protection, duty	golden sun	--
DEVANA	chaotic neutral (good tendencies)	the moon, the hunt	nature, moon, twilight	lawful good	--
STRIBOG	neutral good	weather, the winds	tempest, air/sky	horn of summoning, ggrfalcon	--
YARILO	chaotic good	fertility, springtime	nature (agriculture), life/healing (OPTIONAL: trickery)	sheaf of wheat, garland of flowers	Romoedita (spring equinox) + Semik + Kupala (summer solstice) + farewell on fall equinox
MORADA	neutral	winter, decay, death (as a natural process)	cold (winter), decay, grave, vigil	snowflake	end of autumn (November) + ritually banished in March
ZARYA	neutral good	the dawn, white magic	light, peace, arcana/magic	red orb	--
SVETOVIT	lawful good	abundance, feasting	prosperity, protection, luck,	white horse, drinking horn	late August or early September (after harvest)
CHERNOBOG	neutral evil	darkness (OPTIONAL: underworld)	darkness, death, pain, necromancy	black skull	--
BELOBOG	neutral good	light	light, justice, zeal	white flame	--

LESSER GODS/OTHER NOTABLES

In addition to the major deities, dozens of magical entities and legendary beings populate the tales told by the Slavs. Some of the more prominent are described here in a series of thumbnail sketches. (Others, less individualized or less powerful, are featured below, in the “Spirits & the Seasons” section.) Use these to add further folkloric and mythological depth to your campaign and to inspire possible adventure hooks and story lines.

MINOR DEITIES: Slavic pagans identified a myriad of lesser gods, some of whom are better viewed as demigods, local deities, or divine personifications of holidays and natural phenomena. Listing all of them would be fruitless, especially because many are thought to have been *ex post facto* inventions (created by over-imaginative scholars or modern followers of Slavic neopaganism) or regional and differently-named versions of the major gods described in the previous section.

Lesser deities worth having in your campaign—even if some of them are not altogether authentic or historically verifiable—include the rain goddess **Dodola**, who has her own entry above, thanks to her status as Perun’s queen. **Lada**, the wife of Svarog, fits into the pantheon as a minor deity of love, and **Zhiva**, a fertility spirit whose name derives from the Slavic word for “life,” has a place alongside her husband Dazhbog.

Vesna, a female embodiment of spring, is depicted as a young maiden with a cheerful demeanor. She enjoys an unlikely friendship with the morose winter goddess Morana. Also active in the spring is the fertility goddess **Rostroma**, closely associated with the festival of **Semik**, or “green week.” **Rolgada** appears as a young boy, a male incarnation of the lengthening of daylight caused by the passing of the winter solstice. He lends his name to the joyful late-December holiday that marks the reemergence of the new year’s sun.

The most curious of the Slavs’ lesser gods is **Simargl**, the only deity to take a wholly non-humanoid form. A winged beast resembling a gryphon, but with a dog’s head instead of a lion’s, Simargl is best regarded as a guardian spirit whose purpose is to protect the gods and those they favor. In his capacity as the lord of



An intriguing assortment of deities belonged to the Polabian Slavs (Wends) of the Elbe River and the nearby Rujani of Rügen Island. Their pantheon contained gods known to the Slavs more widely—Svetovit (or, to them, Svantovit) was of central importance to them—but also others unique to their region. These include Porenut, Gerovit, Pripegala, Porevit, Turupid, Rugevit, and Pripegala. Several of these, like Svantovit, were depicted as having more than one head. Much uncertainty surrounds the Polabian gods, and they do not mesh particularly well with the ones more familiar to the Slavs as a whole, so this document has not made use of them. Still, they are worth knowing about, and you may find it interesting to research and develop them further for your own use.

fate, the deity Rod commands a cohort of female spirits, wielding various magical powers, called **rozhanitsy** (sing. **rozhanitsa**) or sometimes **sudzhenitsy**. These can appear in any angelic or beatific form you wish, designed with various spells and abilities. Serving the dark god Chernobog in similar fashion are his infernal daughters, the twelve **Sisters of Fever**—who, at their father’s behest, infect humans with ailments of every kind. Finally, the **Morning Star** and **Evening Star** are personified as female demigods in most Slavic traditions. (See the above notes on “Triune Gods” about whether to associate these starry beings with the goddess Zarya or differentiate them from her.)

BABA YAGA: The mightiest witch in all of Slavdom and a figure of enormous mythological significance. A tall, slender crone with the strength of an ogre and teeth and claws as hard and as sharp as iron.

Robed in rags, Baba Yaga travels the countryside in an oversized magical mortar, steered with a large pestle. When at home, she dwells in a hut perched on chicken legs that move under their own wizardly power. (Thanks to dimension-defying spells, the hut’s interior is far more spacious than any observer would guess from the outside.) Her servants include a large black cat and three mysterious knights—the white rider of morning, the red rider of noon, and the black rider of night—who patrol whatever vicinity her hut happens to occupy at the time.

Spiteful, barb-tongued, and more than capable of visiting woe on anyone who stands in her way or earns her dislike (rudeness and arrogance are surefire ways to provoke her ire), Baba Yaga is undeniably wicked. There are countless ways she can challenge or frustrate characters in your campaign, and any number of adventures might center on her or at least involve her.

Still, however villainous she can be, you should resist the temptation to make Baba Yaga your campaign’s *main* villain. Unless her foes are truly vile or



seriously menace her, she is more likely to terrify or humiliate them than to cause them lasting harm. At times, she can be surprisingly helpful, even generous, especially to the weak and vulnerable, or to those who show her proper courtesy or act bravely without blustering. Most of all, far from wishing to undermine the existing order, Baba Yaga sees herself as one of its guardians—albeit a grudging and ill-tempered one—and she will not stand idly by if anything threatens its stability. Thus, while characters may find themselves working against her at times, they may, under other circumstances, receive information, advice, or quests from her—perhaps even her active aid. (Even if this is the case, she will always drive a hard bargain and will never cease to be her irascible self.)

In the end, the nuanced version of Baba Yaga may not be for you. If you wish her to be more purely fiendish, you may—although figures like Chernobog and Koshchei arguably fit that role better. On that note, see the latter's entry below for thoughts on different ways Baba Yaga might interact with him.

OTHER WITCHES: Southern Slavs speak of **Baba Roga**, sometimes identified as Baba Yaga's sister. She is equally shrewish but stouter in build and distinguished by the crooked horn growing out of her forehead. Another formidable sorceress, somewhat less vicious than her cousins, is **Ježibaba**, a master herbalist well-known to the Western Slavs. (She is the enchantress who grants the title character her unwise wish in Antonín Dvořák's opera *Rusalka*.) Hideous to behold and cruelest of all is **Likho the One-Eyed (Odnoglasnoe)**, an enchantress with a single eye staring out balefully from the center of her brow. Likho actively delights in the pain of others and roams widely in search of victims to torment.

KOSHCHEI the DEATHLESS: Immortal yet not quite godlike, Koshchei is a ghoulish wizard ideally suited to serve as your campaign's quintessential archfoe.



In effect, he can stand as a Slavic Sauron, should you desire such a figure.

A spellcaster of immense skill and deadlines, Koshchei takes the form of a tall, pale man of advanced age. His frame is gaunt, even skeletal, and it is no coincidence that that his name derives from the Slavic root word for "bone." Despite his scrawny build, he is adept at hand-to-hand combat and wields a fearsome black broadsword or a mammoth mace of ebony, depending on what mood strikes him. Into battle, or simply to survey his domains, he rides a dark, bat-winged steed.

Koshchei has gained eternal life by means of magic. The key to his undeath is the transplantation of his soul from his own body into another object—an egg, in most tellings of the tale. The egg is encased

within the body of a duck, which in turn is contained inside the body of a hare, which is trapped inside a wooden chest, which is buried beneath an oak tree, which lies deep inside a large forest on the island of Bugan. (The hare is sometimes depicted as living inside a log that floats on the surface of a forest lake at the island's heart.) As long as the egg remains safe, Koshchei will not age or die, and he cannot be killed unless someone travels to Bugan, unearths the egg, and shatters it, thus forcing Koshchei's soul to return to his body. (Koshchei's method of winning immortality should be treated as a dark mystery, and the location of his soul as a closely-guarded, near-inaccessible secret.)

Although he is not undead in his own right, Koshchei is cadaverous in appearance. Functionally, he can be regarded as having the attributes and powers (but not the explicitly skull-faced visage) of the most powerful of lichens. To realize his full potential as a centerpiece of your campaign, give him a status approaching that of a demigod, and design a variety of minions—from low-level underlings to close allies and advisors—to serve him. Designed well, some of the latter may also become memorable enemies for your players to face.

Koshchei rules a dark kingdom of misery and injustice, and he seeks to expand his hegemony into the civilized lands that border it. The location of his realm is for you to decide, but is typically said to lie to the east. His plans for conquest should be long-term and complex, combining subterfuge and outright threat, building over time to provide as much adventuring opportunity as possible. Koshchei also has a weakness for beautiful, highborn women and is a notorious abductor of princesses and fair maidens.

The defeat of Koshchei would mark a major moment—if not the crowning episode—in any campaign. If you opt to establish him as your game's chief antagonist, you should also figure out ahead of time what relationships you intend him to have with figures such as Chernobog and Baba Yaga. Does he serve Chernobog? Regard him as a rival? Or operate independently from him? Concerning Baba Yaga, different folktales depict her and Koshchei in so many different ways—as enemies, as spouses, as siblings, as mother and son—that you are free to imagine their interactions as you please. In accordance with the above entry on Baba Yaga, this document recommends that you pit the two against each other, with Baba Yaga loathing Koshchei for the unbridled and all-consuming nature of his evil. As an added twist, you might make Koshchei a former pupil of Baba Yaga's—once prized, now hated for some great betrayal.

A linguistic note: The Russian name “Koshchei” has long been romanized inconsistently, sometimes appearing as “Kashchei,” or with the ending “-ey,” or with the cluster “sch” instead of the more precise “shch.” (For years, a fantasy RPG of some repute has insisted on rendering this name as “Kostchtchie,” a bewildering mess from a Slavist's point of view.) He is Koshchiy in Ukrainian, Kościej in Polish, Kostěj in Czech, and Košćej in Serbian and Croatian.

THE SEA TSAR: Somewhat curiously, Slavic folklore mentions no noteworthy deity of the ocean. It does, however, feature an undersea ruler with power equivalent to a demigod's. The Sea Tsar rules from a grand palace built from coral and mother-of-pearl. Enchantments allow the palace to materialize at whatever point on the ocean floor the Sea Tsar wishes, so although its current location can be detected with the right spells, it can always move again, and it cannot be charted on any map. The Sea Tsar wields mighty aquatic magic, and all but the most intelligent and powerful creatures of the sea obey him.

As temperamental as the ocean weather and as ever-changing as water itself, the Sea Tsar is far from evil, but he can be vain and capricious. In the right mood, he is susceptible to flattery and gifts of treasure—he avidly hoards even the smallest of trinkets—but he is also easily angered. Adventures that feature the Sea Tsar should not pit players against him violently, but should either involve trickery or diplomacy or lead to characters performing some kind of task or mission for this mercurial monarch.

DED MOROZ & SNEGUROCHKA: Ded Moroz, or Grandfather Frost, serves as a Slavic version of Santa Claus. A benevolent winter spirit, Ded Moroz—sometimes called Morozko—takes the appearance of a stout, elderly man with a bushy white beard. Clothed in fur-lined robes of blue or red, he distributes gifts in late December, helping to celebrate the coming of the new year. Despite his jolly appearance, he is a powerful caster of spells and possesses more than a little influence over the weather. (His name appears as Did Moroz in Ukrainian, Dzed Maroz in Belarusian, Dziadek Mróz in Polish, and Diado Mraz in Bulgarian.)

Ded Moroz is typically accompanied and assisted by his granddaughter, the lovely Snow Maiden, or Snegurochka. (She is called Sniaburka in Belarusian, Snihuroňka in Ukrainian, Snezhanka in Bulgarian, and Śnieżynka in Polish.) Kind-hearted and beautiful, the Snow Maiden stars in many tales of tragic romance. In some, the god Yarilo pursues her, inadvertently melting her with his springtime warmth. In others, including a famed stage play and ballet,

Snegurochka falls in love with Lel, a handsome, flute-playing shepherd boy, and the warmth of her feelings melts her from inside. It is entirely possible to craft happy endings to these stories, with Ded Moroz reviving Snegurochka with his magic—or perhaps with the help of your players. No matter what, both of these



figures are excellent as possible NPCs, either to provide color (especially around the holidays), or to open quest lines, or simply to bestow small magic items as gifts.

NIGHTINGALE the BRIGAND: Contrary to the connotations of beauty associated with his name, Nightingale is a squat, pot-bellied humanoid with demonic, pig-like features, bristly jowls, and leathery wings. An outlaw who preys on those traveling through the wild, he perches in trees by the roadside and plots his ambushes. Deeper in the woods, he dwells in a hut hidden by the forest canopy, stashing his ill-gotten loot in the trunks of hollow trees.

Nightingale's whistle can deafen victims and cause great pain. When he puffs his cheeks and exhales, he can buffet those before him with blasts of wind or spew forth a fetid mist that causes blight. He takes great pleasure in taunting weaker victims, but when confronted by stronger foes, he becomes a self-pitying toady. If he wishes to mingle with ordinary folk, he can shape-change into human form.

SOUTHERN QUEENS: Drawn as much from literature as from folklore, two female monarchs from the distant south offer prospects for alluring storylines.



Ruler of an opulent realm that borders the Slavic lands, the beautiful and ruthless **Queen of Shemakha** can serve as friend or foe, depending on your preferences and your players' actions. Antagonist of the famous tale of the Golden Cockerel—retold in poetic form by Pushkin and as an opera by Rimsky-Korsakov—the Queen of Shemakha has great ambitions for her domain, and it may be that her expansionist tendencies will threaten her Slavic neighbors.

Alternatively, she may be cultivated as an ally against some other menace, such as Koshchei the Deathless—with whom she will never join forces, however Machiavellian she may be otherwise. Her palatial fortress should appear as something out of old Persia or the Arabian Nights, and she herself is bewitchingly charismatic and seductive. She can be a sorceress if you wish, with command over djinn, efreet, and other such beings.

Also reigning in the south, but in the wild mountains, is **Queen Tamara**. As a figure of legend, Tamara was directly (if loosely) based on the empire-building Tamar, a real-life monarch who governed the Caucasian land of Georgia in the late 1100s and early

