

The Slavs

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The Slavs are largest ethno-linguistic group in Europe and their entrance into European history in the early medieval period was the largest migration of the first millennium A.D. It had far reaching consequences for medieval Europe, Byzantium, and the subsequent course of Eurasian history. Despite this, their early history is largely overlooked by most traditional histories.

Until the first millennium B.C. the primary ancestors of the Slavic and Baltic peoples had not appeared on the scene and their origins have been a matter of much academic debate. Slavs and Balts were probably the last Indo-European groups to leave their original homeland in central Asia. When they did so is a matter of some speculation, perhaps as early as 2000 B.C. or as late as 500 B.C. Over the course of several centuries they moved westward in a gradual migration that would eventually bring them to eastern Europe. It is likely that they reached the territory of present-day Ukraine by the end of the first millennium B.C. At that point, the Balts (the ancestors of today's Lithuanians and Latvians) separated themselves and continued moving north toward the Baltic Sea.

The early Slavs (or proto-Slavs) may have been described by Greek chroniclers as the Vendi or the Scythian farmers and lived north of the Black Sea but were separated from the Greek world by such nomadic groups as the Scythians. They had close contact with Persian-speaking peoples such as the Sarmatians and Scythians and at some point may have been allies or subjects of those nomads. Slavic languages, including Polish and Russian, contain a significant number of loan words from Persian related to religion, hunting, and feasting. Slavs

also had close contact with Germanic peoples such as the Goths. There was probably significant intermarriage between Slav and Goth, and there are numerous loan words in Slavonic that date from this very early contact.

At the beginning of the first millennium A.D., the Slavs lived in a belt of territory between the steppes around the coast of the Black Sea and the vast forests of northern Europe. The mix of open land and forest was ideal for subsistence farming, herding, hunting, and gathering. In the fifth century as more and more barbarians were able to breach the borders of the Roman Empire, the Slavs came under increasing pressure from new invaders who sought to move through their lands to the rich pickings of the Roman world. In addition, Germanic neighbours to the west began to move further west and south into the Roman Empire, opening up opportunities for Slavic migration. These pressures perhaps combined with a growing population resulted in the Great Migration.

Throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, a mass movement of Slavic tribes dispersed throughout central and eastern Europe. The ancestors of the East Slavs (Russians, Ukrainian, Rusyns, and Belarusians) moved north and east, though many remained in the original homeland. The ancestors of the South Slavs (Bulgarians, Croatians, Macedonians, Serbs and Slovenes), driven in part by alliances with other nomads, travelled into the Balkans where they assaulted the Eastern Roman Empire, even raiding the Greek islands.

The West Slavs, the ancestors of the Poles, as well as the Czechs, Slovaks, and Sorbs, moved into present-day Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, and eastern Germany, occupying most of the territory east of the Elbe. Along the way, they absorbed and Slavicized remaining Germanic settlements.

The ancestors of the diverse Slavic groups did not exist as nations, but lived in tribal societies. These tribal groups were led chieftains whose power was based on military prowess and the ability to attract and keep a sufficient retinue of followers. Like earlier inhabitants, the Slavs lived in scattered farming communities but maintained a series of central hill forts that would serve as refuge in case of raid or invasion. Slavic settlers also built forts on islands in lakes and rivers or in marshes to provide additional protection. Although some existing hill forts were adapted for use by the Slavs, the existing archaeological record shows that the newcomers greatly expanded the number and range of such forts.

Slavonic society did not have a well-defined hierarchy. There were numerous chiefs and many tribes and subgroups who would unite only if threatened from the outside. Major population centres emerged only gradually, usually due to economic or religious reasons. Trading ports on the major rivers or the Baltic coast grew quickly. Wolin, near the present-day German-Polish border, grew into a major trading centre by the ninth century, with its own harbour, lighthouse, and a wide range of merchants and craftsmen. Its several thousand inhabitants traded with Russia, Germany, and Scandinavia. Further up the Baltic coast, at Arkona on the island Rugen in present-day Germany, comes evidence of another major Slavic centre—this one a cult site to the god Svantovit which existed until it was sacked by Danish invaders in 1168.

Slavic pagan beliefs are known only in their broad outlines as a mix of nature worship, animism, ancestor worship, and the existence of a few major deities shared by most Slavs. The centre of Slavonic spirituality was the family hearth. Personal and family spirits (*domowy*), if properly honoured and fed, protected the home and its inhabitants and may have been seen as embodiments of departed ancestors. Beyond the home were the generally benign but capricious

spirits of the fields. Further afield, lurking in the forests and marshes, were the dangerous *leshy* who could lead travellers astray and even to their deaths. Worship was often connected with sacred trees or groves, though larger cult sites were not unknown. In the Holy Cross Mountains south of Warsaw, pagan pilgrims continued to visit the site of strange rock barrow 1300 meters long well into the twelfth century much to the chagrin of local Christian monks.

The well-established pantheon of gods and goddesses memorized by generations of students of classical Greece and Rome, did not have a Slavic counterpart. A wide range of major deities were worshipped by the Slavs but without the (admittedly artificial) structure known in classical studies. Major gods in one tribe were minor figures in another and unknown to yet others. Only toward the end of Slavic paganism did the worship of major deities take on a form that would be familiar to our eyes. That said, a number of major deities did emerge during the pre-Christian period. Piorun was the god of war and the thunderbolt, worshipped in sacred groves of oak trees. Mokosh, whose name means “the moist one,” was the earth goddess, patroness of childbirth. Svarog was the god of the sun or of fire (depending on the location). Svantovit was the god of magic and prophecy. Svantovit, also known as Triglav (lit. “three headed”) like some Slavic deities, was portrayed as having multiple heads, reminiscent of Hindu gods and perhaps recalling an earlier Indo-European practice.