

Article

Christian Saints in Russian Incantations

Aleksey Yudin 

Department of Languages and Cultures, Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium; Oleksiy.Yudin@UGent.be

Abstract: This article discusses the Christian saints who are most often mentioned in Russian incantations: Sts. George, Nicholas, Florus and Laurus, Kossma and Damian, Zosima and Savvaty of Solovki, as well as the semi-apocryphal saints Sisinius and Solomonia. The first six are among the most popular saints of Russian folk Orthodoxy. The article presents the naming conventions of saints, and their attributes and functions in Russian folk magic. Depending on their magical function, the protagonists of the incantations can act as helpers, protectors, and healers. They assist in various practical areas of life, and protect against real and magical dangers, in addition to helping healing from diseases and wounds.

Keywords: Russian; Orthodox; Christianity; saints; folklore; magic; incantations

1. Introduction

Popular Orthodox Christianity is widely represented in various genres of Russian folklore: songs, legends, spiritual poems, and incantations. However, the images of saints represented in folklore genres differ significantly. This article is devoted exclusively to their images and functions in Russian incantations. It presents in English the results of my research previously outlined in (Yudin 1997, 2010) and other publications.

From the point of view of methodology, this is a study of the onomastics of East Slavic folk magic. The study was carried out by means of a continuous scan of the corpus of published texts of incantations and a complete extraction of data on the names, attributes, and magical functions of saintly figures. In the lexicon (Yudin 1997), I also described with which figures each figure appears (in a group), and which figures he is opposed to. In this short article, I will limit myself to describing the forms of names of saintly figures, sets of their magical functions, and associated motifs.

Incantations are oral or written magical texts that were intended to guarantee the achievement of some desired state: security, health, love, success in the hunt, etc. In the Russian tradition, they could be short incantatory formulas, but they could also be long apocryphal prayers mentioning the names of many Christian figures. A large number of important Christian figures are mentioned in Russian incantations, including around 200 names of saints. Many of them are mentioned only once or twice, but certain saints are particularly popular in folk magic. The two most frequently invoked figures are Saint George and Saint Nicholas.

2. Saint George (*Georgii*)

The image of one of the most popular saints, *Georgii-Egorii-Iurii*, in Slavic folk culture is one of the best studied. However, most of the fundamental research about him in the 19th–21st centuries was published in Russian. Here, I will only draw upon one book (Senderovich 2002). With regard to publications in Western languages, I would like to name the following works: (Loorits 1955; Oinas 1982; Stangé-Zhirovova 1981).

The image of George varies significantly in different folklore genres. The East Slavic Yuri (*iur'evskie*) songs are most closely associated with him. They regularly contain motifs of the invocation of spring, the awakening of nature, the unlocking of the earth (the spring awakening of nature is, in *iur'evskie* songs, presented as unlocking of the earth with a key),



Citation: Yudin, Aleksey. 2021. Christian Saints in Russian Incantations. *Religions* 12: 556. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080556>

Academic Editor: Dennis Ioffe

Received: 7 June 2021

Accepted: 5 July 2021

Published: 21 July 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

and, in general, the motif of keys. Additionally, common are the motifs of dew, grass, cattle protection, and improving the harvest. The object (attribute) most associated with George-Yuri in these songs is a horse. In spiritual poems he slays the dragon and thus saves *Elizaveta* the Beautiful (cf. Sokolov 1995). We also see this in the saga about Saint George the Brave (Barsov 1903, p. 18). Within the framework of the East Slavic syncretism of Christianity and paganism, called in Russian double faith (*dvoeverie*), he had a whole series of functions. According to the list of “The Graces Bestowed by God to Saints and when to appeal to them”¹ (Shchapov 1863, p. 64), which goes back to Russian icons of the same name², St. George protects livestock from wild animals. As A.N. Afanas’ev noted, he is “revered as the patron saint of livestock and chief of the wolves, telling them where to feed and what to eat” (Afanas’ev 1914, p. 195); see: (Toporkov 2013). In the folklore, wild animals are represented as “the flock of God, but as their nearest chief and protector God has appointed Saint George” (Ermolov 1905, p. 4; Tokarev 1957, pp. 47, 115). People prayed to George everywhere on George’s Day (*Iur’ev den’*), when the cattle were first taken out to pasture. In the Vologda region, people prayed to George for their horses (Adon’eva and Ovchinnikova 1993, p. 11). At the same time, he is seen as the patron saint of warriors (Ganchenko 1995, p. 258). Subsequently, I will analyze his image in Russian incantations.

I found approximately 200 mentions of St. George in Russian incantations. This is too much to refer to all sources here. As a representative corpus of references to St. George, I will indicate here only the pages in the most important publication of Russian incantations: (Toporkov 2010, pp. 101–2, 115–16, 124–25, 136, 141, 143–44, 316, 336, 347, 353, 358, 435–36, 439, 459, 468–69, 480–81, 508, 510, 512, 514, 522, 525, 540–41, 544, 681, 702, 707, 713, 729). Saint George is found in texts from the following provinces of the Russian Empire or regions of the USSR: Amur³, Arkhangelsk (*Arkhangel’sk*), Karelia (*Kareliia*), Kostroma, Mangazeya (*Mangazeia*), Minusinsk, Nizhny Novgorod (*Nizhnii Novgorod*), Novgorod, Karelia (*Kareliia*), Perm (*Perm’*), Saratov, Simbisk, Smolensk, South Siberia (*Iuzhnaia Sibir’*), Tobolsk (*Tobol’sk*), Vologda, Vyatka (*Viatka*), Yeniseysk (*Eniseisk*). The saint’s name is presented in the following forms: *Georgii*, *Egorii*, *Egori*, *Egor*, *Egorushka*, *Grigorei*. The name has permanent epithets: George the Brave (*Georgii Khrabryi*⁴), George the Victorious (*Georgii Pobedonosets*), George the passion bearer (*Georgii strastoterpets*), the great martyr George (*velikomuchenik Georgii* {XE “Георгий”}), George, Gracious Saint George (*Georgii Svet Milostivyi*); the Great George (*Velikii Egori*), etc. He rides on an *Egor’evskii* horse. His functions in Russian folk magic are various. However, like the functions of other figures in Russian incantations, these functions can be grouped into three broad categories: helper, protector, healer.⁵

Helper. George helps to conjure up someone’s love and assists with the hunt, more specifically the hunt for foxes, ermines and other fur-bearing animals, as well as hares and bears. He also helps find lost livestock and with keeping the livestock at home and by calming the cow, so that it does not kick, thus increasing the cow’s milk production.

Protector. He protects people from sorcerers, from witches, the evil eye, and diseases, as well as from enemies in general; against rulers; against any weapon; against dogs (except rabid dogs); he protects wedding processions from sorcerers, evil, witches, and diseases; protects livestock from all harm; protects livestock from bears, wolves, etc.; ensures that a partridge that falls into a trap is not eaten by ravens.

Healer. He heals people (including infants) and livestock from all diseases, including from ailments that come about by magical means (the evil eye, etc.). Upon intercession he feeds and herds the livestock when they are first taken out to pasture in the spring. He can also deliver people from the fire dragon that visits young women. In the latter case, among the Eastern and Western Slavs, it was believed that unmarried girls or married women could be visited by flying fire dragons, which shed their wings on land and took the appearance of a woman’s husband or lover, or simply turned into beautiful young men and entered into a love affair with these girls and women, who subsequently lost weight, became ill, and often died. The dragon sucked milk or blood from the breasts of his victim and finally killed her. The dragon itself was considered a variant of the walking dead.

Copulation with the dragon resulted in the birth of demons and freaks. It was considered a widespread, serious problem, so much so that the people invented a whole cycle of incantations against the fire dragon. The same dragon, associated with the devil, could befriend the master of the house and bring money into the house. For more information on this figure, see: (Levkievskaja 2009).

Sometimes George is portrayed as a rider dressed in white (or gold) on a white (gray, silver) horse, with “a sharp spear and a holy knife”. This image goes back to the traditional depiction of St. George on icons that represent a motif from his apocryphal life of the saint, namely as a rider on a white horse taming or defeating a dragon. St. George can also descend from heaven on a golden ladder and send down “three hundred golden daggers, three hundred tightly stretched bows” or “one hundred arrows and one hundred swords”. He is often mentioned together with St. Michael and is connected with the motifs of thunder arrows, of shooting down diseases with a bow and arrow, stabbing them with a spear, and of chasing them away with a staff and whip. He is also a rider who has authority over wolves. He is the superior to the forest, earth, and water kings and the father of the two archer brothers who shoot down diseases. In the incantation against cataracts, he walks across an iron bridge, while three dogs—one gray, one white, and one black—run after him and lick his cataracts away. In the incantation for inducing cows to produce milk, there is the motif of the three-pound stone which St. George carries and places on the cattle’s “lower vertebrae”.

3. Saint Nicholas (*Nikolai*)

St. Nicholas of Myra in Lycia is the most popular saint of the folk Christian cult of the eastern Slavs, and his image is one of the most researched. In Russian folk Christianity, the functions of St. Nicholas are almost universal. He was especially revered as the patron saint of sailors. According to the folk list of “The Graces Bestowed by God to Saints”, he delivers from drowning, disaster, and sorrow (Shchapov 1863, p. 64). “He is prayed to for help in all kinds of mischief and is worshiped as the one who feeds widows and orphans ...” (Ganchenko 1995, p. 194). In the Vologda area, he was thought to assist travelers (Adon’eva and Ovchinnikova 1993, p. 11). Nicholas in folk performances is the patron saint and savior of sailors, and the patron of girls awaiting marriage and children. Russians are raised with the legend of Nicholas as the lord of mice and rats (which is a version of the famous “Pied Piper”) (Klinger 1931, p. 76).

For more details about his image and functions in folk culture, see: (Uspenskii 1982). St. Nicholas is provided in magical texts—and in the Russian popular Christianity in general—with numerous epithets from ecclesiastical practice. He is the (great) wonder-worker of Myra (Mirlikiiskii chudotvoret), the holy man, Christ’s saint, the great keeper, and a speedy helper (velikij khranitel, skoryi pomoshchnik⁶). Furthermore, the personified icon of Nicholas of Mozhaisk is mentioned. The name of St. Nicholas appears in several canonical and folk variants, including *Nikolai*, *Nikola*, *Mikolai*, and *Mikola*. It is found in texts from the following provinces of the Russian Empire or regions of the USSR: Amur (Azadovskii 1914, p. 9), Arkhangelsk (*Arkhangel’sk*) (Efimenko 1878, pp. 149–50, 166–72, 185–86, 191; Maikov 1869, pp. 501–2, 553–55; Ivanova 1994b, p. 44), Kostroma (Vinogradov 1907, pp. 53–56, 58, 74; Vinogradov 1909, pp. 10–11, 44–45, 88), Kursk (Maikov 1869, pp. 486, 489), Minusinsk (Putilov 1984, p. 52), Novgorod (Maikov 1869, pp. 530–39), Karelia (*Kareliia*) (Sreznevskii 1913, pp. 502, 507), Oryol (*Orël*) (Maikov 1869, p. 488), Perm (*Perm’*) (Maikov 1869, p. 498, Saratov (Maikov 1869, pp. 505–8), Vologda (Popov 1903, p. 229), (Sreznevskii 1903, p. 148), (Sheremetev 1902, pp. 51–53), Voronezh (Selivanov 1886, p. 91; Maikov 1869, pp. 503–4; Lobanova 1993, p. 14), Vyatka (*Viatka*) (Ivanova 1994a, pp. 21, 93; Osokin 1856, p. 4), Yaroslavl (*Iaroslavl’*) (Balov 1893, p. 427; Sokolova 1982, p. 15), unspecified location (Buslaev 1861, pp. 1511–13; Eleonskaia 1917, p. 48; Tikhonravov 1863, pp. 352–53; Maikov 1869, pp. 457, 493, 534; Zenbitskii 1907, p. 1; Rybnikov 1867, pp. 254–55).

St. Nicholas has the following functions in Russian incantations:

Helper. He helps travelers along their way and assists with hunting, especially hunting foxes, stoats, and other fur-coated animals. He enhances fishing and helps summon and stop rain. Furthermore, he is the helper in the grazing of cattle (incantation at the first pasture) and reinforces the words of the incantation.

Protector. He protects people from sorcerers, from witchcraft, the evil eye, diseases and the like (his dominant function), and protects people from enemies and rulers and from any weapon. He protects wedding processions from wizards, witchcraft, and other mischief, and protects cattle from all misfortune (this is also his dominant function).

Healer. St. Nicholas heals people from all diseases, especially from inguinal and umbilical hernias, ulcers, and all kinds of growths in infants as well as in adults. He heals adults of hemorrhages; of the twelve (also seven or seventy-seven) shivering fevers and the twelve demonic spirits; of erysipelas; of inflammation of internal organs; stabbing pain including in the ears; and general pain in the body. He heals children from convulsions, adults from snake bites, enchantments, witches, the evil eye, *perepoloch* (dismay, an illness resulting from a child being severely frightened by someone, such as the night demons of childhood insomnia), and the like. He provides assistance during birth. He also heals cattle of all diseases. Like St. George, St. Nicholas saves people from the fire dragon that visits young women.

In the incantation texts, St. Nicholas can sit on a golden throne on the “Ocean sea” and use his bow to defend against witchcraft and other harmful magical acts⁷. He is also found in long lists of saints called for help. He rolls away diseases with his bow and spears into the “blue sea”, “the sandy sea”, in “dark forests and treacherous swamps”. In an invocation text, he sails across the golden sea in a golden ship (probably as the patron saint of sailors and seafaring).

4. Saints Florus and Laurus (*Flor* and *Lavr*)

The feast day of the martyrs Florus and Laurus, August 18, O.S, is known in popular culture as a “horse holiday” (Ermolov 1905, p. 423), and the saints themselves are the patrons of horses. In the spiritual verse, Florus and Laurus graze horses (Shchapov 1863, p. 49); according to the list of “The Graces Bestowed by God to Saints”, they deliver horses from death as a result of an epidemic (ibid, p. 64; Ganchenko 1995, p. 302). Their names are found in the following regions: Amur (Azadovskii 1914, p. 11), Kostroma (Vinogradov 1907, pp. 53–56), Novgorod (Maikov 1869, pp. 530–39), Karelia (Kareliia) (Sreznevskii 1913, pp. 496, 512), Smolensk (Dobrovol'skii 1891, p. 209), Tobolsk (*Tobol'sk*), (Gorodtsov 1916, pp. 43, 52), Vologda (Sheremetev 1902, p. 49; Maikov 1869, p. 528), unspecified location (Maikov 1869, pp. 492, 534; Zenbitskii 1907, p. 5).

These saints are always mentioned together as a pair. Sometimes they are seen as one indivisible figure. They also appear in spiritual folk verses that mention horse grazing (Shchapov 1863, p. 49). According to the list of “The Graces Bestowed by God to Saints”, they deliver from horse mortality (ibid, p. 64; Ganchenko 1995, p. 302).

Widespread forms of their names are: *Flor* and *Lavr*; fathers *Flory* and *Lavry*; *Flora* and *Lavr*; *Flor* and *Laver*; *Frol* and *Lavr*; *Frol* and *Laver*; father *Frol-Laver* the horse herder; *Frël* and *Lavër*; *Khrol* and *Lavër*, great martyrs and wonderworkers. Their magic functions are limited, they are mainly associated with the feast day of the martyrs Florus and Laurus, the so-called “horse feast” (Ermolov 1905, p. 423). In this way, they were regarded as the “horse saints”, the protectors of horses. In the incantations, they contribute to improving the harvest of the oats so much desired by horses. They protect livestock against all harm (this being their dominant function) and horses against bears, wolves, and other wild animals. They cure livestock—especially horses—of all diseases, particularly eyelid hardening. They can also cure people—including infants—of diseases that have arisen by magical means: enchantment, bewitching, the evil eye, *perepolokh*, and others (motifs include shooting down diseases with a bow and an iron fence that is placed around the object of the incantation to protect it).

5. Saints Cosmas and Damian (*Kuz'ma and Dem'ian*)

Another pair of saints that are almost always mentioned together, in accordance with the worship in the Church and with the iconography, are the saints Cosmas and Damian. According to the list of “The Graces Bestowed by God to Saints”, they clarify the mind for the purpose of learning to read and write (Shchapov 1863, p. 64). According to folklore, they are the patrons of calligraphy (cf. *ibid.*, p. 69). They are mentioned in the “tooth prayer” of the Holy Martyr Antipa (Tikhonravov 1863, p. 356).

In Russian folk culture, some pairs of saints bearing this name unite into one.

The day of commemoration of the unmercenary (*bessrebrenniki*) wonderworkers and martyrs of Rome, Cosmas and Damian, is 1 July; that of the unmercenary martyrs Cosmas and Damian of Cilicia is 17 October; that of the unmercenary wonderworkers Cosmas and Damian of Asia, sons of Theosodia, 1 November. “In the scientific literature, three holy pairs of brothers are apparently distinguished with these names, according to the place where they were buried: resp. Cosmas and Damian of Asia (feast day 1 November), of Arabia (17 October) and of Rome (1 July). Common to all three couples are their family ties and their activities: they are brothers and act as unmercenary healers” (Likhachev 1987, p. 154).

There are also different forms of their names: besides the ecclesiastical names, folk variants from spoken language were used. First of all, there is the old canonical form of the name (*Kozma*). There is also a Russian literary variant (*Kuz'ma*) and various colloquial forms. The contemporary Russian canonical form (*Kosma*) is only found in the spelling variant *Kosma*.

The following forms of the names of the saints were found in the sources: the holy “lords” wonderworkers *Kozma* and *Damian*; the saints *Kuzma* and *Dem'ian*; *Kuz'ma-Dem'ian* “the god of this place”; *Kuz'ma* and *Dem'ian* (*Damian*) the unmercenary saint of Christ; *Kuzma* and *Dem'ian*, the craft god and unmercenary saint of Christ; the honorable saints *Kuz'ma* and *Dem'ian*; *Koz'ma* and *Dem'ian*, saints of Christ; *Kaz'ma* and *Damien*; *Kosma* and *Damien*, holy men; *Kozma* and *Dem'ian* (*Dam'ian*, *Damiiian*, *Domiiian*); *Kos'ma* and *Damiiian*; *Kuz'ma-Dev'ian* (sic!); *Kuzma*, *Demian*, great helpers (*velikie pomoshchniki*); Saint *Kozma Demiiian*; *Kuz'ma* and *Damian*, the unmercenary saints; *Kozma* and *Damian*, holy unmercenary wonderworkers; *Kozma* and *Damian*, unmercenary holy lords, teachers, masters, leaders, intercessors and guardians; holy honorable *Kozma* and *Dam'ian*, wise masters; *Kos'ma* and *Dem'ian*; teachers and punishers and mentors and protectors and preservers (*uchiteli i nakazateli i nastavniki i zastupniki i sokhraniteli*). United in one figure, they can act as a third helping angel (along with *Michael* and *Gabriel*) in the incantation against disease.

Their names are found in the following regions: Amur (Azadovskii 1914, p. 13), Arkhangelsk (*Arkhangel'sk*) (Efimenko 1878, pp. 149–50, 169–70, 214; Smirnov and Il'inskaia 1992, p. 23), { XE "Христос" } Kostroma (Vinogradov 1907, pp. 40–43, 73–74; Vinogradov 1909, pp. 39–40, 44–45, 80), Nizhny Novgorod (*Nizhnii Novgorod*) (Popov 1903, p. 226); Novgorod (Maikov 1869, pp. 504–5, 507; Maikov 1869, pp. 530–39), Karelia (*Kareliia*) (Maikov 1869, p. 471), (Sreznevskii 1913, pp. 488, 496, 504–5, 507), Oryol (*Orël*) (Popov 1903, p. 237; Skalozubov 1905, p. 10), Priangarye (*Priangar'e*) (Kliaus 1990, p. 8), Smolensk (*Dobrovol'skii* 1891, p. 209), Transbaikalia (*Zabaikal'e*) (Maikov 1869, p. 469), Tula (Maikov 1869, p. 747), Vologda (Vinogradov 1907, p. 14; Popov 1903, p. 229; Sreznevskii 1903, p. 155), Yaroslavl (*Iaroslavl'*) (Balov 1893, p. 427), unspecified location (Vinogradov 1907, pp. 22–25), (Dal' 1989, p. 37; Efimenko 1878, p. 205; Maikov 1869, pp. 466, 492–93; Rybnikov 1867, pp. 254–55; Shchurov 1867, p. 164; Anikin 1998, pp. 202, 220, 232, 265, 274, 294, 339, 349–50). Uniting into one figure, they can act as a third helper angel (+ *Michael* and *Gabriel*) in incantations against diseases (Popov 1903, p. 226).

These saints help make someone fall in love with the person who reads the incantation, or make a loving couple lose love; further, they aid in the hunt, and they reinforce the words of the incantation. They protect people against wizards, witchcraft, the evil eye, diseases, etc. (using the motif of an iron fence that is placed around the object of the incantation

to protect it), against demonic spirits (the devil), arrows, and any weapon. They protect bridal processions from wizards, witchcraft, and other mischief and cattle from wizards, demonic forces, witchcraft, disease, etc. They also protect against the traps of hunters. They cure people of all diseases, including angina, scarlet fever, scrofula, toothache (their dominant function), (groin and navel) fractures, hemorrhages, and the twelve (also seven or seventy-seven) shivering fevers; and protect from snakebites, enchantment witches, the evil eye, and others. They save the cattle from hardening of the eyelid and from colic.

In the incantation against bleeding, one also encounters their (or rather “his”, because the saints are often perceived as one figure) younger sister, with whom they help stop bleeding together. They can hang from or stand in a tree.

6. Saints Zosimas and Sabbathius

This pair of Russian saints is associated with *Solovetskii* Monastery and they are widely venerated as the patron saints of beekeeping. In the *Solovetskii* Monastery, in the Russian north, bees were bred, of which Saint Zosima (died in 1478, holidays 17 April and 18 August) was said to be the first beekeeper. Zosima was both the superior and the founder of the monastery. Saint Sabbathius (died in 1435, feast days 8 August and 27 September) is known for erecting a cross on Solovki Island in 1429. In the spiritual poems, Zosima of Solovki loves bees (Shchapov 1863, p. 50). According to folklore, Zosima and Sabbathius help bring back lost horses (Shchapov 1863, p. 68). Their names are found in the following regions: Karelia (*Kareliia*), (Anikin 1998, p. 208), Kostroma (Vinogradov 1909, p. 77), Novgorod (Maikov 1869, pp. 530–39), Perm (*Perm'*) (Maikov 1869, p. 498), Tula (Maikov 1869, p. 747), Vologda (Popov 1903, p. 229), (Sheremetev 1902, pp. 51–53), Vyatka (*Viatka*) (Maikov 1869, pp. 540–41), unspecified location (Shchapov 1863, pp. 52–54), (Toporkov 2010, pp. 426, 698, 726).

The forms of these saints' names also vary in the texts. They are called: *Zosima* and *Savvatii* (*Savvati*); the wonderworkers of Solovki; the saints *Zosima* and *Savvatii* of Solovki full of grace; *Zosima* and *Savatei*, wonderworkers of Solovki; the holy fathers *Zosima* and *Savvatii* of Solovki; *Izosim* and *Savvatii*, wonderworkers of Solovki; the saints of God *Izosim* and *Savvathii*; *Izosima* and *Savatel'*.

These saints also help in the hunt, and they protect people against wizards, witchcraft, the evil eye, diseases, etc. (using the motif of an iron fence that is placed around the object of the incantation to protect it). They protect cattle from all disasters, and bees from danger (their dominant function). They heal people of the twelve (also seven or seventy-seven) shivering fevers, of enchantment, witchcraft, the evil eye, *perepoloch*, and others (sporadic motif of shooting of diseases with a bow).

7. Saint Sisinius (*Sisinii*)

This is a rather enigmatic saint, who appears in only one category of texts, viz. in the apocryphal invocation against the twelve fevers widely distributed in Russia. As a noted researcher of Russian folk culture wrote, “Sisinius is one of the forty saints celebrated on March 9 according to the ecclesiastical calendar. In the ecclesiastical tradition about Sisinius there is nothing to be found about his ability to drive away diseases. Nevertheless, in folk tradition his name is invariably associated with the cure of fever” (Gromyko 1975, p. 94). Incidentally, as Liatskii already noted, nine Sisiniuses are known, five of whom are saints. According to him, three of them influenced the tradition of incantations, while the Sisinius of the incantations is said to be a contamination of Sisinius the bishop of Laodicea, who lived in the early fourth century, at the time of Diocletian, and—indirectly—from Sisinius of Cyzicus (Liatskii 1893, pp. 133–34). In connection with the presumed sources of the texts about Sisinius—the magical treatise “*Testamentum Salomonis*” and the Byzantine legend about Gilo (Gilu, Γίλλυ, Γύλου), the infanticide who was conquered by the brothers Sisinius and Sisinodorus—see: (Mansvetov 1881; Sokolov 1888; Miller 1896; Cherepanova 1977; Toporkov 2017). Toporov believes that the name and representation of the saint ultimately go back to the Sisinius who was an heir of Mani, the founder of Manichaeism

([Toporov 1993](#), pp. 102–3). “False prayers” against fever, with reference to Sisinius, were mentioned in the ancient indexes of forbidden books. On “The Saint Sisinius Legende” in Christian culture, see the fundamental collective monograph ([Toporkov 2017](#)).

His name forms are: Saint Sisinius (*Sisinii*); the holy father *Sisinei*; the St. *Sisenii*; *Sosinii*; Saint Apostle *Sizinii*; the holy martyr *Sisimi*; the saint father *Sosentii*. His name was found in texts from the following regions: Arkhangelsk (*Arkhangel'sk*) ([Efimenko 1878](#), p. 205; [Efimenko 1878](#), pp. 205–6; [Efimenko 1878](#), pp. 207–8), Kostroma ([Vinogradov 1909](#), pp. 6–7), ([Vinogradov 1909](#), pp. 7–8), Novgorod ([Popov 1903](#), p. 239), Karelia (*Kareliia*) ([Toporkov 2010](#), p. 125), Siberia ([Novombergskii 1907](#), p. 223; [Gromyko 1975](#), p. 92), South Siberia (*Iuzhnaia Sibir'*), ([Buslaev 1861](#), pp. 1596–97), Yaroslavl (*Iaroslavl'*) ([Balov 1893](#), pp. 425–26), unspecified location ([Maikov 1869](#), pp. 461–64; [Vokhin 1878](#), p. 490; [Tikhonravov 1863](#), pp. 351–52; [Toporkov 2010](#), p. 527).

The usual tale associated with Saint Sisinius is that he encounters fevers that come from a lake and take the guise of multicolored, often naked girls. The saint asks them who they are and where they are going, whereupon they usually say their (multiple, often obscure) names and say that they are going to Russia to torment the people, each in their own way. Then, the saint exorcises and expels these demons from the person.

8. Saint Solomonida

Another Christian apocryphal figure who had made it into East Slavic folklore was Grandmother Solomonia. According to [Adon'eva and Ovchinnikova](#) is “Grandmother Solomida”—a frequent figure in children’s incantations—an obvious cross-contamination of two figures. The apocryphal proto-gospel of Jacob tells of how a midwife was invited by Joseph and Mary to the birth of Christ and told a passerby named Salomé that “the virgin had given birth and yet kept her virginity” < . . . >. Separate portions of this text (second–third centuries AD) were translated from Greek in the fifteenth century at the latest and appear in various documents of Old Russian literature (for example, in Makarii’s menologion on September 8). Another possible source for the appearance of Solomonia or Solomida in oral tradition is icon painting. The icon of the Nativity shows the “Apocryphal midwife” ([Adon'eva and Ovchinnikova 1993](#), pp. 167–68). This figure can also be compared with Solomonia, who was, according to ecclesiastical tradition, the mother of the seven brothers and martyrs of the Maccabean family. The day on which they are all remembered is August 1. The name Solomonia does not appear in the Holy Scripture (cf.: [Solarskii 1884](#), pp. 56–57). On the possible connection between the image of Solomonia-Salamanida and that of King Solomon cf.: ([Toporov 1993](#), p. 102). For the reflection of the name of Solomonia in Russian folk names of plants (phytonyms), see: ([Berezovich and Osipova 2018](#), p. 129).

There are many variants of her name: midwife (*baba, babushka*) or mother (*matushka*) *Solomonida, Solomoneia, Soloman'ia, Solomon'iushka, Solomoneiushka, Solomonida, Salmanida, Solomonia, Solomonidushka, babushka Salamanidushka, Solomat'iushka, Soloveia Mikitishna, Solomida, Salama, baba Sov'ia, grandmother Solomonidushka, midwife of Christ (babushka Solomonidushka, Khristova povivalushka)*. Her name was found in texts from the following regions: Arkhangelsk (*Arkhangel'sk*) ([Adon'eva and Ovchinnikova 1993](#), p. 89; [Zagovory 1895](#), pp. 240–41; [Cherepanova 1977](#), p. 81; [Efimenko 1878](#), pp. 201, 212; [Maikov 1869](#), p. 471), Kostroma ([Vinogradov 1907](#), p. 62), Olonetsk ([Sreznevskii 1913](#), p. 508), Oryol (*Orël*) ([Popov 1903](#), p. 228), Saratov ([Shchapov 1863](#), p. 59), Smolensk ([Dobrovol'skii 1891](#), p. 194), Vologda ([Popov 1903](#), p. 224), ([Sheremetev 1902](#), p. 49), Voronezh ([Maikov 1869](#), p. 484), Vyatka (*Viatka*) ([Maikov 1869](#), p. 447; [Ivanova 1994a](#), p. 19; [Ivanova 1994a](#), p. 82), unspecified location ([Zenbitskii 1907](#), p. 3; [Anikin 1998](#), p. 340).

She is the protectress of infants and, in general, a healer. She cures little children of all kinds of diseases, including insomnia, and protects them against the evil eye and other harmful magical acts. She helps with childbirth, heals people from bleeding, cures horses from all diseases, and makes sure that cows give milk. There is a permanent motif associated with her: she was the midwife at the birth of Jesus Christ, wrapping him in a

diaper, washing him, and, according to some sources, she even gave birth to him herself (!). She also carries the keys with which she opens a cow's udders, or three iron bars which she swings to ward off witches (the evil eye, harmful magical acts).

This concise overview is intended to describe the images and functions of saints in Russian folk magic. From a genetic point of view, Russian folk Christianity is a complex amalgamation of Byzantine orthodoxy (along with elements of Mediterranean paganism and folk culture brought by this orthodoxy) on the one hand, and substratic or borrowed pre-Christian elements of Slavic folk culture on the other. These factors have been the subject of scientific analysis for more than a century, but an exhaustive interpretation is still a matter for the future.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The study does not report any data other than those extracted from the sources cited in the bibliography.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ “Skazanie, kiim sviatym kakovyya blagodatit ot Boga dany i kogda pamjat’ ikh”.
- ² These Old Believer icons depict about 50–60 figures of popular saints, with signatures like the following: “Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker—(pray to him) for deliverance from drowning; Hieromartyr Cyprian and Holy Martyr Justina—for protection from evil spells; Holy Great Martyr George the Victorious—to save livestock from animals; Saints John the Warrior and Theodore Tiron—to find stolen things.” (see image: <http://varvar.ru/arhiv/slovo/skazanie.html> (accessed on 7 July 2021)).
- ³ I render geographic names in the transliteration accepted on Google maps. In case it does not match the transliteration of the Library of Congress, the latter is shown in parentheses.
- ⁴ Permanent ecclesiastical or folk epithets of saints are capitalized, while the designations of classes of saints (martyrs, passion-bearers ...) are written with a small letter.
- ⁵ In order to save space, references to sources are not given for each name, motif or function.
- ⁶ Stable poetic descriptions of the saints that go back to prayer formulas are written with a small letter.
- ⁷ Saints in incantations often shoot away the evil eye, *uroki* (an extraneous harmful magical effect through words, eyes, objects) and illness. The saints shoot their arrows at the evil eye and diseases to make them disappear.

References

- Adon’eva, Svetlana Borisovna, and Ol’ga Ovchinnikova. 1993. *Traditsionnaia Russkaia Magiia v Zapisiakh Kontsa XXVeka*. Sankt-Peterburg: Frendlikh-Taf.
- Afanas’ev, Aleksandr Nikolaevich. 1914. *Narodnye Russkie Legendy*. Kazan’: Molodye Sily, vol. 1.
- Anikin, Vladimir Prokop’evich. 1998. *Russkie Zagovory i Zaklinaniia: Materialy Fol’klornykh Èkspeditsii 1953–1993 gg.* Edited by Vladimir Prokop’evich Anikin. Moskva: Izdatel’stvo Moskovskogo universiteta.
- Azadovskii, Mark. 1914. Zagovory amurskikh kazakov. *Zhivaia Starina* 3–4: 5–15.
- Balov, Aleksei. 1893. Molitvy, zagovory i zaklinaniia, zapisannye v Poshekhonskom uезде Iaroslavskoi gubernii. *Zhivaia Starina* 3: 425–31.
- Barsov, Elpidifor Vasil’evich. 1903. *O russkikh Narodnykh Pesnopeniakh*. Moskva: Universitetskaia Tipografiia.
- Berezovich, Elena L’vovna, and Kseniia Viktorovna Osipova. 2018. Sud’ba imeni v svete podkhoda Wörter und Sachen: Solomon v russkikh govorakh i prostorechii. *Russkii Iazyk v Nauchnom Osveshchenii* 2: 123–47.
- Buslaev, Fiodor Ivanovich I. 1861. *Istoricheskaia Khrestomatia*. Moskva: Universitetskaia Tipografiia.
- Cherepanova, Ol’ga Aleksandrovna. 1977. Tipologii i genezis nazvanii likhoradok-triasavits v russkikh narodnykh zagovorakh i zaklinaniakh. In *Iazyk Zhanrov Russkogo Fol’klora: Mezhdvuz. Nauch. sb.*. Petrozavodsk: Petrozavodskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, pp. 44–57.
- Dal’, Vladimir Ivanovich. 1889. *Tolkovy Slovar’ Zhivogo Velikorusskogo Iazyka*. Moskva: Russkii iazyk, vol. 2.
- Dobrovol’skii, Vladimir Nikolaevich. 1891. *Smolenskii Ètnograficheskii Sbornik*. Sankt-Peterburg: Tip. Evdokimova, vol. 1.
- Efimenko, Piotr Savvich. 1878. Materialy po ètnografii russkogo naseleniia Arkhangel’skoi gubernii. Ch. 2. Narodnaia slovesnost’. In *Izvestiia Ètnograficheskogo Otdela Imp. Obshchestva Liubitelei Estestvoznaniia, Antropologii i Ètnografii pri Moskovskom Universitete*. Moskva: Tipografii Arkhipova i Ko, vol. 30, Book V. Part II.

- Eleonskaia, Elena. 1917. *K Izucheniiu Zagovora i Koldovstva v Rossii*. Moskva: Tipografiia Shamordinskoi Pustyni, Part 1.
- Ermolov, Aleksei Sergeevich. 1905. *Narodnaia Sel'skokhoziaistvennaia Mudrost' v Poslovitsakh, Pogovorkakh i Primetakh*. Sankt-Peterburg: Tip. A.S. Suvorina, vol. 3, Zhivotnyi mir v vozzreniiakh naroda.
- Ganchenko, Oleg. 1995. *Chudotvornyi Dukh Istseleniia. Chudotvornye Ikony, Zhitiia Sviatykh, Molitvy*. Sost. o. Oleg (Ganchenko). Khar'kov: Grif.
- Gorodtsov, Piotr Alekseevich. 1916. Prazdniki i obriady krest'ian Tiumenskogo uezda. In *Ezhegodnik Tobol'skogo Gubernskogo Muzeia*. Tobol'sk: Tipografiia Eparkhial'nogo Bratstva, Part 26. pp. 1–65.
- Gromyko, Marina Mikhailovna. 1975. Dokhristianskie verovaniia v bytu sibirskikh krest'ian XVIII–XIX vekov. In *Iz istorii sem'i i byta sibirskogo krest'ianstva v XVII nachale XX v*. Sbornik nauchnykh trudov Novosibirsk: Nauka SO, pp. 71–109.
- Ivanova, Anna Aleksandrovna, ed. 1994a. *Viatskii fol'klor. Zagovornoe Iskusstvo*. Kotel'nich: Kotel'nichskaia tipografiia.
- Ivanova, Anna Aleksandrovna, ed. 1994b. *Zagovory i zaklinaniia Pinezh'ia*. Karpogory: Pinezhskaia tipografiia.
- Kliaus, Vladimir Leonidovich, ed. 1990. *Lechebnye «nagovory» Priangarskogo Kraia iz Sobraniia A. A. Savel'eva*. Moskva: Dom Russkoi Kosmetiki.
- Klinger, Witold. 1931. *Doroczne Świąta Ludowe a Tradycje Grecko-Rzymskie*. Kraków: Gebethner i Wolff.
- Levkieskaia, Elena Evgen'evna. 2009. Zmei Ognennyi. In *Slavianskie Drevnosti. Etnolingvisticheskii Slovar'*. Edited by Nikita Il'ich Tolstoi. Moskva: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, vol. 2, pp. 332–33.
- Liatskii, Evgenii Aleksandrovich. 1893. K voprosu o zagovorakh ot triasavits. *Ėtnograficheskoe Obozrenie* 4: 121–36.
- Likhachev, Dmitrii Sergeevich, ed. 1987. *Slovar' Knizhnikov i Knizhnosti Drevnei Rusi*. Leningrad: Nauka, Part 1.
- Lobanova, Irina. 1993. Zagovornoe iskusstvo Kotel'nichskogo raiona. *Zagovory. Proselki. Literaturno-kraevedcheskii al'manakh* 11: 6–21.
- Loorits, Oskar. 1955. Der heilige Georg in der russischen Volksüberlieferungen Estlands. In *Veröffentlichungen der Abteilung für Slavische Sprachen und Literaturen des Osteuropa-Instituts (Slavisches Seminar) an der Freien Universität Berlin*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, Berlin: Osteuropa-Institut, pp. 11–29.
- Maikov, Leonid Nikolaevich. 1869. Velikorusskie zaklinaniia. In *Zapiski Imperatorskogo Russkogo Geograficheskogo Obshchestva po Otdeleniiu Ėtnografii*. Sankt-Peterburg: [s.n.], vol. 2, pp. 417–580.
- Mansvetov, Ivan Danilovich. 1881. "Vizantiiskii material dlia skazaniia o dvenadtsati triasavitsakh" Drevnosti. Tr. Imp. Moskovskogo arkheologicheskogo obshchestva. *Moskva* 9: 24–36.
- Miller, Vsevolod Fiodorovich. 1896. Assiriiskie zaklinaniia i russkie narodnye zagovory. *Russkaia mysl'* 7: 66–89.
- Novombergskii, Nikolai Iakovlevich. 1907. *Materialy po Istorii Meditsiny v Rossii*. Tomsk: Iakovlev, vol. 4.
- Oinas, Felix Johannes. 1982. St. George as Forest Spirit. *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics* 25/26: 313–17.
- Osokin, S. (Mikhail Ionovich.). 1856. Narodnyi byt v Severo-Vostochnoi Rossii. *Zapiski o Malmyzhskom uezde (v Viatskoi gubernii)*. Stat'ia vtoraiia. *Sovremennik* 11: 1–40.
- Popov, Gavriil Ivanovich. 1903. *Russkaia Narodno-Bytovaia Meditsina*. Sankt-Peterburg: Suvorin.
- Putilov, Boris Nikolaevich, ed. 1984. *Russkaia Svadebnaia Poëziia SIBIRI*. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- Rybnikov, Pavel Nikolaevich. 1867. *Pesni, Sobrannye P. N. Rybnikovym*. Ch. 4. Narodnye byliny, stariny, pobyval'shchiny, pesni, skazki, poveriia, sueveriia, zagovory i t. p. Sankt-Peterburg: Kozhanchikov.
- Selivanov, Aleksei Ivanovich. 1886. Ėtnograficheskie ocherki Voronezhskoi gubernii. In *Voronezhskii Iubileinyi Sbornik*. Voronezh: Izdanie Voronezhskogo Gubernskogo Statisticheskogo Komiteta, vol. 2, pp. 69–115.
- Senderovich, Savelii. 2002. *Georgii Pobedonosets v Russkoi Kul'ture: Stranitsy Istorii*. Moskva: AGRAF.
- Shchapov, Afanasij Prokof'evich. 1863. *Istoricheskie Ocherki Narodnogo Mirosozertsaniia (Pravoslavno i Starobriadcheskogo)*. Sankt-Peterburg: [s.n.], vol. 1.
- Shchurov, Ivan. 1867. Znakharstvo na Rusi. In *Chteniia v Imperatorskom Obshchestve Istorii i Drevnostei Rossiiskikh pri Moskovskom Universitete*. Moscow: V universitetskoi tipografii Publ., pp. 143–74.
- Sheremetev, Pavel Sergeevich. 1902. *Zimniaia Poezdka v Belozerskii Krai*. Moskva: Sinodal'naia tipografiia.
- Skalozubov, Nikolai Lukich. 1905. Materialy k voprosu o narodnoi meditsine. Narodnaia meditsina v Tobol'skoi gubernii. In *Ezhegodnik Tobol'skogo Gubernskogo Muzeia*. Tobol'sk: Tipografiia Eparkhial'nogo Bratstva, pp. 1–30.
- Smirnov, Igor', and Vera. Il'inskaia, eds. 1992. *Vstanu ia Blagoslovias' ... Lechebnye i Liubovnye Zagovory, Zapisannye v Chasti Arkhangel'skoi Oblasti*. Moskva: Russkii mir.
- Sokolov, Matvei Ivanovich. 1888. *Materialy i Zametki po Starinnoi Slavianskoi Literature*. Moskva: Universitetskaia tipografiia, Part 1.
- Sokolov, Boris Matveevich. 1995. *Bol'shoi Stikh o Egorii Khrabrom: Issledovaniia i Materialy*. Edited by Valentina Aleksandrovna Bakhtina. Moskva: Nasledie.
- Sokolova, Vera Konstantinovna. 1982. Zaklinaniia i prigovory v kalendarnykh obriadakh. In *Obriady i Obriadovyi fol'klor*. Moskva: Nauka, pp. 11–25.
- Soliarskii, Pavel Fiodorovich. 1884. *Opyt Bibleiskogo Slovaria Sobstvennykh Imen: 5 Vol.* Sankt-Peterburg: Tipografiia Eleonskogo, vol. 4.
- Sreznevskii, Vsevolod Izmailovich. 1903. *Otchet Otdeleniiu Russkogo Iazyka i Slovesnosti Imp. Akademii Nauk o Poezdke v Vologodskuiu Guberniiu (mai i iun' 1901 goda)*. Sankt-Peterburg: Tipografiia IAN, Part 2.
- Sreznevskii, Vsevolod Izmailovich. 1913. *Sreznevskii V. I. Opisanie Rukopisei i Knig, Sobrannykh Dlia Imp. Akademii Nauk v Olonetskom krae*. Sankt-Peterburg: Tipografiia IAN.
- Stangé-Zhirovova, Nadia. 1981. Le cult de loup chez les slaves orientaux d'après les sources folkloristiques et ethnographiques. *Symposium Internationale et Pluridisciplinaire sur le Paganisme slave, Slavica Gandensia* 7/8: 181–91.

- Tikhonravov, Nikolaj Savvich, ed. 1863. *Pamiatniki Otrechennoi Russkoi Literatury*. Moskva: Universitetskaia tipografiia, vol. 2.
- Tokarev, Sergej Aleksandrovich. 1957. *Religioznye Verovaniia Vostochnoslavianskikh Narodov XX Nachala XX v.* Moskva-Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR.
- Toporkov, Andrei L'vovich, ed. 2010. *Russkie Zagovory iz Rukopisnykh Istochnikov XVII—Pervoi Poloviny XIXv.* Moskva: Indrik.
- Toporkov, Andrei L'vovich. 2013. Siuzhet o Egorii Xrabrom—Volch'em pastyre v slavianskom fol'klore i russkoi literature pervoi treti XX v. In *Pis'mennost', Literatura, Fol'klor Slavianskikh Narodov. Istoriia Slavistiki. XV Mezhdunarodnyi s'ezd Slavistov. Doklady rossiiskoi delegatsii*. Moskva: Institut russkogo iazykoznanii RAN, pp. 529–57.
- Toporkov, Andrei L'vovich, ed. 2017. *Sisinieva Legenda v Fol'klornykh i Rukopisnykh Traditsiiakh Blizhnego Vostoka, Balkan i Vostochnoi Evropy*. Moskva: Indrik.
- Toporov, Vladimir Nikolaevich. 1993. Ob indoevropskoi zagovornoj traditsii (izbrannye glavy). In *Issledovaniia v Oblasti Baltoslavianskoi Dukhovnoi kul'tury. Zagovor*. Moskva: Nauka, pp. 3–103.
- Uspenskii, Boris Andreevich. 1982. *Filologicheskie Razyskaniia v Oblasti Slavianskikh Drevnostei*. Moskva: Izd. MGU.
- Vinogradov, Nikolai. 1907. *Zagovory, Oberegi, Spasitel'nye Molitvy i Proch.* Sankt-Peterburg: Tipografiia MPS, Part 1.
- Vinogradov, Nikolai. 1909. *Zagovory, Oberegi, Spasitel'nye Molitvy i Proch. (Po starinnykh Rukopisiam i Sovremennym Zapisiam)*. Sankt-Peterburg: Tipografiia MPS, Part 2.
- Vokhin, Nikolai Nikolaevich. 1878. Narodnye zagovory protiv boleznei nachala XVIII-go veka. *Russkaia Starina* 22: 490–92.
- Yudin, Aleksey Valerievich. 1997. *Onomastikon Russkikh Zagovorov. Imena Sobstvennye v Russkom Magicheskom Fol'klore*. Moskva: MONF.
- Yudin, Aleksey. 2010. Orthodoxe heiligen in de Russische volksmagie. In *De drie Romes. Heiligenlevens, Vormen van Verering en Intellectuele Debatten in de Westerse Middeleeuwen, in Byzantium en in de Slavische Tradities*. Onder redactie van Danny Praet, met de medewerking van Nel Grillaert. Gent: Academia Press, pp. 221–34.
- Zagovory. 1895. Zagovory Arkhangel'skoi gubernii Shenkurskogo uezda sela Kurgomen'. *Zhivaia Starina* 2: 240–41.
- Zenbitskii, Piotr Nikolaevich. 1907. Zagovory (kontsa XVII veka). *Zhivaia Starina* 1: 1–6.