

Life and beliefs of the Proto-Slavs

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Biskupin is the oldest preserved Polish stronghold. It was the castles that gave rise to the cities. They were built on hills, swamps or islands - where it was easy to defend itself against the enemy.

The strongholds were fortified with a wide rampart. The prince lived there with his family and army. There were also food warehouses, stables and a treasury. Wooden huts covered with thatched roofs, inhabited by various craftsmen, merchants and ducal servants were built under the stronghold. The entire city was surrounded by a deep moat filled with water. The only way to get to the fortress was via a drawbridge which was raised in case of danger. The castles were built and adapted to defence.

An important element of the strongholds were also high towers which were an observation point and were used for defence. Residents defended themselves in the castles for months. They used shields for defence and swords for fighting. They fought in armour and iron helmets.

The former Slavic tribes were mainly engaged in agriculture and domestic animal husbandry. They used oxen to cultivate the land. They grew grain and other crops such as peas and turnips, which were the main food sources. They bred cows, pigs, goats and horses. They also obtained food by hunting wild game in forests and fishing in rivers and lakes. Through hunting, they obtained not only food but also clothing and ornaments. It was also a popular activity to collect honey from wild bees, which was highly valued by our ancestors as it had healing and magical properties.

The religion of the Proto-Slavs was based mainly on the cult of nature. Slavic tribes believed in supernatural forces that were a great mystery to them. The sky sending rain, hail or storms, forests rich in fruit and game, the sun favouring abundant crops - all this had divine power for the Slavs.

The cult of the dead was a great cult. The Slavs believed strongly in the afterlife. In the graves of the dead, they placed food along with the deceased person's favourite things to provide him with what he had during his life. Funeral ceremonies were of great importance for the Slavs. In the novel "Stara Baśń" an example of a funeral ceremony is the funeral of Wisz, who was burnt at a high pile, and his wife Jaga was burned live with him. Wisz was dressed in expensive robes and equipped with weapons. The wife went to the stake with her husband to show her love and devotion to the end. Sometimes the servants of the deceased were also burnt together with him.

The pre-Polish tribes had their gods, whom they built temples for, statues and rendered them pagan priests. This is shown in Kraszewski's novel in the example of Dziva, the daughter of Wisz, whom her parents assigned to the gods as a

priestess. The greatest Slavic god was Swaróg - the god of the sun, fire and lightning. In the beliefs of the Slavs, various deities interfered with the life of man at its various stages.

When young people entered adulthood, boys had haircuts and girls were braided. Another ritual that signified reaching maturity was Kupala Night, when the wreaths were symbolically dropped in the water, there were dances around the fire and ritual seduction, and even the kidnapping of girls by their loved ones. The Slavs believed in black magic and ghosts and they were superstitious. In this way, they could interfere with supernatural forces and impose on them the will of man. In those days young people were most often matched by so-called matchmakers.

The origins of Christianity in Poland began with Mieszko I who united all the Slavic tribes and in 966 was baptized by the Czechs. These two worlds, Pagan and Christian, have functioned side by side for centuries. Despite the fact that Poland adopted Christianity, many of our traditions and customs are associated with the times of the Pagan Slavs, and even today we still succumb to some superstitions.

Translation – Abigail Latecki