

# Legends reveal old secrets of Svyatoye and Chertovo lakes

Scientists decipher mysteries of names of Belarusian water reservoirs, forests and hills

By Viktor Korbut

Historian Lyudmila Duchits and journalist Irina Klimkovich have spent many years travelling through the country, stopping at banks of rivers and lakes, at forest outskirts and near boulders, recording legends told by local residents. Many stories of miracles exist, which are now compiled in a huge database. This lifts the veil of secrecy which once shrouded the country many thousands of years ago.

Until Byzantine Christianity was adopted in 988, becoming Catholic in 1386, our ancestors believed in pagan spirits: the earth, air and, even, the corners of the house were inhabited by spirits and deities. They attached special importance to each item, believing it to be alive, and many of these legends remain today in villages, forming the basis of their rich culture and mythology. Some customs — such as ‘Tsars’, in the Kopyl District’s Semezhevo village — are registered on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

The study of the origin of Belarusian place names began in the 19th century, pioneered by archaeologist and ethnographer Zorian Dolengakhodakovsky and teachers from Vilno University. Later, officers from the Rus-

sian Empire’s General Staff became keen on the folklore of the landscape, taking photos of terrain in Belarus and recording legends about how sites gained their names. At around the same time, the Imperial Geographical Society and Imperial Archaeological Commission of Russia took interest in Belarusian folklore. In the late 19th century, even the heads of Belarusian eparchies of the Orthodox church, and officials, became keen on this occupation.

Ms. Duchits has been involved in archaeology for over 40 years while Ms. Klimkovich has studied Belarusian mythology for 15 years. They tell us of the achievements of their predecessors and how they’ve used these materials alongside their own.

“There are so many rivers, marshes, forests and lakes in Belarus,” notes Ms. Klimkovich. “Legends about them have been handed down since pre-Christian times and are similar in various regions of Belarus. This shows that our nation possesses a collective memory of long forgotten times. Belarusian mythology is so rich, although little is currently known about it abroad.”

Many names of topographical sites in Belarus have cultural origins, since pagan churches were often built on the top of hills and



Belarus boasts many beautiful lakes

on the banks of lakes. Ritual customs are still held near some of them during Christian holidays, as these places remain sacred, visited by be-



‘Rusalle’ (Mermaid) custom conducted on water

lakes called Svyatoye (Saint) and Chertovo (Devil) — as explained by cultural origins. Chert (devil) was a pre-Christian deity; only after Christianity was adopted in Belarus, did it become a small malicious spirit in Christian hierarchy. The lake name Chortava Voka (Devil’s Eye) is also very curious, explains Ms. Klimkovich. “Our ancestors believed that Chert sat below the earth observing human life above, through the lake. The lake is circular, like an eye, so served the purpose of being the devil’s eye,” she says. Interestingly, local residents believed that water from this lake cured eye ailments.

Ethnographers have written of similar legends across Europe: from Ireland to Russia. Ms. Duchits warns that legends of buried treasure, very popular among Belarusians, shouldn’t be taken literally. “If a legend says that gold is buried in a certain place, it doesn’t mean that it’s really so. It may be connected with a pagan cult of the Sun, which is associated with gold in all cultures.”

Almost every district in Belarus has its own Lysaya Gora (Bald Mountain). Originally, such mountains were connected with evil powers, so were said to have gone bald, meaning that the

plants and trees had died.

Poland’s Lysa Góra, near Sandomierz, is also called a Polish Olympus and is famous worldwide. Altarja Mountain in Vilnius and Uspenskaya Mountain in Vitebsk were also once called ‘bald’. Zalesie village in the Glubokoe District has a legend that its Lysaya Mountain was burnt by the French during the 1812 War.

According to legend, evil spirits would gather on mountains on Kupalle night. Unexpected miracles and fires would occur where they danced and, around Mstislavl, people believed that Kupalle saw wizards and witches turn into flying animals to climb their nearby Lysaya Mountain.

Of course, such stories are perceived as no more than intriguing legends today but Ms. Duchits and Ms. Klimkovich can prove that these are the remains of the ancient mythology of our Belarusian ancestors — no less wonderful than legends about the gods of Ancient Greece.

You can read of Ms. Duchits’ and Ms. Klimkovich’s investigations, as well as those of other scientists regarding Belarusian mountains, forests and stones, by dropping into book stores. Their latest works are printed by several publishing houses in the Belarusian language.



Legends say that, when the summer flowers bloom, mermaids leave the water to walk through fields and visit villages