# MYTHICAL BEINGS PUNISHING THE BREAKING OF TABOOS ON SPINNING

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In many places in Europe, as well as outside of it, e.g. in Asia, there are legends told about figures, usually of female gender, who, according to folk belief, watch over spinning, punish lazy spinsters, make sure that no spinning is done on days when spinning is forbidden and so forth. Many legends tell of the visits of these beings, and how they punish spinsters who violate spinning taboos or fail to finish their spinning on time etc. They are also frequently described as being equipped with flax and spinning tools while in the act of spinning.

Thus, in Slovenia, Austria and Germany we find Perchta/Pehtra/ Perhta/Pehtra baba/Pehtrna/Pirta/Pehta/Percht/Berchta/Zlata baba, in Germany Frau Holle or Holda, Stampe/Stempe/Stempa, and in Switzerland Frau Saelde in the role of the "Spinnstubenfrau". The most prominent Slovenian researcher in these traditions, Niko Kuret, points out the similarities with beings which in Slovenia we also know by other names, such as Kvatrnica, Torka or Torklja. The Italians know a similar being named Befana, the French have Tante Airie, and we also find them with several different names in Central Asia, from Iran through Tajikistan to the basin of the lower Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers etc. (Kuret 1997; 1989, II: 458). There are also various other beings with whom we could equate them to a certain extent, for instance the French Heckelgauclere, the Swiss Sträggele and Chrungele, the German Herke, the Slovenian/ Czech/Slovakian Lucy and others.

Let us, therefore, first look at beings within the European territory who watch over spinning and the observance of spinning taboos, the time of their appearance and the punishments that they were believed to inflict in order to enforce prohibitions against spinning. Then I shall look at the reasons for their appearance in precisely defined time periods and argue for the symbolic meaning of (taboos on) spinning.

## Female figures watching over spinning

In 1858, Slovenian researcher Peter Hicinger wrote about Zlata baba (the Golden Hag), who, according to tradition, rages about the sky with the Wild Hunt during the nights *around the New Year*, and in 1859, Davorin Terstenjak wrote that Vehtra (Pehtra) baba was known from Tržič, across the Kamnik highlands, to Pohorje, that she was known as the queen of the "white wives" and that she was also called Zlata baba. During the winter she made "baba's mash" (baba's groats—an expression for sleet) and liked to spin. She blinded or buried a hatchet between the shoulder blades of anyone who treated her badly, and one year later returned their sight or pulled out the hatchet; she also slit open the belly of anyone who failed to observe the fast (Kuret 1989, II: 457). At dusk she was supposed to walk along the mountain ridges holding a golden pail[1] or *vehtra* (doormat) in her hand (Kuret 1989, II: 457; Kelemina 1997, 93, no. 57). She would kill women in Karner Vellach (Koroška Bela) who were still spinning on *Ember Friday before Christmas* if, by midnight, they did not spin twelve coils which she would throw through the window; however, there are no records pointing to her also overseeing the injunction against spinning during the Twelve Days of Christmas or at least on 5 January (her feast day), although in some places in Slovenia the custom of Pehtra's hunt or Pehtra's rounds used to be observed on that day (Schmidt J., "Perchtenglaube bei den Slovenen." *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 1, 1889, 418, cited in Rumpf 1976, 217; Kuret 1989, II: 460–8).

In Germany, Berchta or Bertha appeared as a wild woman who took the distaff away from those who had not spun all of their flax by the *last day of the year* (Saintyves 1987, 89). In the mountains around the Chiemsee, Berchta slit open the bellies of girls who had not spun everything by *New Year's Eve* and filled them with curlers. In the Tyrol, Percht watched over spinning wheels during the Twelve Days of Christmas, especially on her feast day, *5 January*—she destroyed the spindles of spinsters who had not finished their work by Christmas Day. In Tiers (South Tyrol), the girls had to spin all of the flax before the beginning of the *twelve nights*, or Berchta would unravel the remainder. In South Tyrol, Frauberta cooked and boiled washerwomen who spun during the *twelve nights* (Rumpf 1976, 215). In Orlagau, during the nights before *Epiphany*, she hunted through the spinning rooms for women who were spinning, to whom she would give a huge amount of flax which they

[1] In foreign translations she appears with "a golden spindle in her hand" (cf. Schmidt 1889, 414; cited also in Rumpf 1976, 218; Kilbourne Matossian 1973, 333: with a spindle and a tub of water), but the Slovenian word *ročka* means pail or jug, not "spindle".

would then have to spin in a very short time. If they failed in this, she would pull the flax off the distaffs, and tangle and defile it (Rumpf 1976, 216). In Saalfeld they said that Bergda would defile any distaff not cleared by the spinster by the *last day of the year* (Grimm 2012 [1888], 4: 1797, no. 512). "Much flax is placed by girls near the Hörselberg upon their distaff *at Christmastime* when Frau Holle starts her round, for she promises 'a good year for every thread'. But the flax must be spun by *Epiphany*, for on her return she threatens 'a bad year for every thread'" (Motz 1984, 154). In Ostfranken, Donndorf and Bad Steben, Berta defiled the distaffs of lazy spinsters, who should have spun everything by December 6 (Rumpf 1976, 219). In Franconia, Frau Holle defiled the flax of careless spinsters with her excrement (the distaff had to be cleared by *Christmas Eve*); Perchta could decide whether those who did not complete their tasks would have bad luck spinning for the entire following year. She could also slit open the bellies of such spinsters and fill them with waste and filth. This punishment was usually directed at those who had spun at the spindle at forbidden times (Motz 1984, 154 and 164, note 52).

In Slovenia there was also the figure of *Torka (also Torklja, Tvorka, Štorka, Turklja, Torek* etc.), whose synonymy with Pehtra baba, according to Slovenian researcher Niko Kuret, cannot be overlooked. Torka is the "guardian of Slovenian spinning", and in the Christian tradition also watches over the sanctification of the Ember Days (cf. Kropej 2008a, 331; Kuret 1997, 73). She most often prohibited spinning (in some places also baking, threshing and washing) on a *Tuesday*—from which some people derive her name (Sl.: *torek* "Tuesday").[2] According to beliefs from Pohorje, Torklja appeared on Tuesdays at eleven o'clock at night if people were spinning, baking or doing anything they shouldn't be and killed them, chewed them down to their bones, or tore them to shreds. A legend from Pohorje says that "If they were grinding or spinning after eleven, she came through the closed door, supposedly in the form of a huge woman, terrifically strong, and they had to stop; if they didn't, she destroyed everything. And if you were spinning, you never got up again!" (Gričnik 1995, 260). In Kamna Gorica and around Železniki people were threatened with legends of Torklja, who killed women who baked or laundered on Tuesdays. No spinster was allowed to leave any thread on the wheel overnight, or Torka would come and spin all night, although not actually spinning anything; apparently, on one occasion a farmhand watched her, as a result of which she tore him to shreds. In the Notranjska region there was a rule that you were not allowed to spin on Tuesdays; any woman who broke the rule would be boiled alive by Torka (Kuret 1989, II: 459–60). According to a belief from Martinji Vrh, Torka is a monster who lives in the attic, behind the chimney or behind the stove, killing women who spun, sewed hems or boiled laundry on Tuesdays. One story tells of a disobedient girl who went to the attic to fetch a bundle of flax for spinning. From the attic you could hear: "I'm gnawing, I'm gnawing!" and in the morning her sister found her chewed-on bones lying in a pile (Kelemina 1997, 219, no. 199, I.). A woman who forgot the taboo against spinning on Tuesday was saved when her neighbours reminded her how to get rid of Torka—she should scream that all of the hills are on fire and her children as well. Torklja would then tell her that she should feel lucky that she screamed like that because otherwise, she would have boiled both her and all her flax in a cauldron (Zemon near Ilirska Bistrica) (Kelemina 1997, 219, no. 200). In some places Torka also came on *Fridays* and *Saturdays*. In the Ormož area in Slovenian Styria, "Torklja" pulled the meat from the bones of women who spun too long into the night on a Saturday. She also ripped all of the meat off the bones of mothers-in-law who spun and forced their daughters-in-law to spin on a Saturday night, so that all that remained were bones (Kelemina 1997, 219, no. 199, II.).

Spinning was especially forbidden on *Ember Thursday* or *Ember Nights* in general. In the Kamnik area people said that you shouldn't spin on Ember Thursday, or Torka would come (Cevc 1999, 93). In Gorenjska they said that Torka would come to spin in the evening if a spinster left thread on the wheel on Ember Thursday; sometimes they said that she spun the wheel in the form of a dog's leg in order to trample all of the flax. Several legends tell of how, if the taboo was not respected, the spinning wheel would begin to rattle at the stroke of eleven, and two farmhands would see Torka, a huge woman, who had started spinning at the wheel—when she noticed them, she tore them both to shreds. Another legend tells of spinsters in the Komenda area who intentionally left thread on the wheels and the distaffs on Ember night, because they didn't believe in Torka. Torka began to spin immediately, until she was chased off by neighbours with holy water, but the spinning materials and flax were destroyed (Kelemina 1997, 216–8, no. 198).

Since Torka is most often associated with Ember Days, she is also sometimes known as the *Kvatrnica* or *Kvatrna* (also *Kvatarnca, Kvatrna baba, Kvatrnječ etc.***)** [Slo. kvatre "Ember Days t.n."] (Kuret 1997, 73; Novak 1987, 282). It was by this name that she punished women who spun during *Ember Weeks*, especially on *Ember Friday and Saturday*, by gnawing the meat from their bones or boiling them together with their skeins. In some places people would not spin on Ember Saturday because "otherwise the Kvatarnca would come" (Dolenc 1977, 182; see also p. 193–5: variants of legends about the taboo against spinning on Ember Days—M. Stanonik). In Rožak, the Kvatrna baba took particular care to ensure that work on Ember Days, especially the Winter Embers, was halted on time. A legend about a peasant woman who wanted to steam a large amount of flax on the Ember

[2] Slovenian etymologist France Bezlaj holds that this is just a folk etymology. In his opinion the word came from India: "The ancient Indian spinning deity Tarku also has traces in Germanic languages (Herbig IF XXVI, 377–8) and could have come by some unknown paths to the Slovenes as well, although the Indian *tarku* ('spinning wheel') phonetically corresponds to the [Slovenian] word *trak* ('ribbon/band/strip')." (Bezlaj 1951, 351).

Friday before Christmas tells of how an unknown woman appeared all of a sudden and offered to help her. When the peasant woman went to borrow a tub from her neighbour, the neighbour warned her that the other woman was undoubtedly a Kvatrnica. The peasant woman remained with her neighbour, and around midnight, the Kvatrnica knocked on the door and told the peasant woman that if she went home she would boil her skeins with her on top (Kelemina 1997, 95, no. 60). A similar presentation of the cruel punishment meted out by Kvatr(ni)cas is shown in the following narrative, which was recorded by my students during the fieldwork we conducted in 2000 in Gorjane (in the Kozjansko district in eastern Slovenia):

> And there were also a lot of Kvatrcas on Ember Saturdays and Sundays… they went to a woman's house on Ember Saturday, and the woman put out a platter, and there was meat and such things hanging from the rafters and she wanted to serve them. But the woman did not come down and they all thought, what's this? Her neighbours asked her what was going on, and they heard: "I'm gnawing, I'm gnawing". It seemed strange to them. And they got the same answer six times. And then nothing but bones fell down. That was the punishment for working on Ember Saturday.[3]

In southern Germany (from Chamaven to Ostfalen), it was Herke who was responsible for watching over spinning rooms (Timm 2003, 194). Among the demonic beings associated with watching over spinning is also the Swiss Chlungere (Chlungeli, Chlungeri, Chlungere, Chunkle), whose name is frequently associated with *spinnen* (Ger.: "to spin") (Zürich and Solothurn cantons). She is described as having humps on her chest and back, a vulture's beak and long fingernails. She moved about during the *last nights of the old year*, punished lazy spinsters, sat like a nightmare on people's chests while they were sleeping, and strangled or flogged them. In the Canton of Zürich there was also a custom on "Chrungeli-Nacht" (23 or 30 December) that masked village youths break into the houses, accept food and play tricks on the spinsters, e.g. throw ash-covered spindles at each other, tangle the spinsters' tow—just like the legends say (Hoffmann-Kreyer 1940, 80).

Tante Airie is known on both sides of the border between France[4] and francophone Switzerland (Timm 2003, 98; Gennep 1999, 2429–33; Hoffmann-Kreyer 1940, 80). Researchers frequently connect her with the Italian Befane (Epiphanie) and the German Frau Holle (similarities include her cavern, working as a baker, rewarding the good, punishing the bad) or Berchte (punishing careless spinsters). Her activities included spinning with her distaff (Rocken) and a spindle, frequenting spinning rooms, and rewarding the best spinsters with gold and good husbands, while at *Carnival* she tangled up flax that had yet to be spun by lazy spinsters, and in a rage could even burn down houses (Timm 2003, 98); Gennep 1999, 2431). She was a role model for spinsters because she never put down her distaff, and she punished lazy young spinsters by tangling their flax. In the Montbéliard commune it was said that spinning wheels had to be completely cleared by *Christmas Day*, or Tante Airie would soil them with her urine and their work would be destroyed (Gennep 1999, 2741–2). In Saulnet, Tante Airie was exchanged for the Trotte-vieilles. These were fairies (*fées*) in the form of women with horns with which they used to grab naughty children and throw them into the stream in front of the door; however, they also rewarded good children (Gennep 1999, 2432–3).

In France and Switzerland, the Chaussevieille was a similarly horrific spectre for lazy spinsters over the period of the Twelve Days (Hoffmann-Kreyer 1940, 80; Gennep 1999, 2433). In the Alpes vaudoises, stories were told about the Tschausse-villha, who was supposed to be an old witch who harassed people in every possible way, especially during the *last days of the year*. In the Pays d'Enhaut, spinsters who spun at night were particularly warned that they would have to finish their work by *Christmas Eve*, otherwise the Tsaôthavîdhe would come during the year and tangle up the flax so that it could never be untangled (Saintyves 1987, 89). According to French legends, Berthe la Fileuse was considered to be a fairy protectress of spinsters—some folklorists associated her with Perchta. Every year at midnight, in the week between Christmas Day and New Year's Day, she appeared in the houses and brought misfortune to any house with disobedient children, tangling the flax or hemp not yet spun (Gennep 1999, 2437). In Fislis, Haut-Rhin, they used to say that women who spun too long on *Christmas Eve* fell under the power of Heckelgauclere, who would put twelve skeins in front of their window after midnight, which they would then have to spin on the same night (Gennep 1999, 2741).

In Switzerland, even the Wild Hunt sometimes played the role of punishing lazy spinsters (Hoffmann-Kreyer 1940, 79). Odin (Wodan), who from the 14th and 15th centuries onwards was considered the leader of the Wild Hunt, also sometimes had the same function of enforcing taboos against spinning: in Ivendorf (20 km northeast of Lübeck-Mitte) they said that Wodan's horse would trample the flax if it wasn't spun by *Christmas Day* (cf. Lecouteux 1997, 28–9). In present-day Holstein they still warn people about the taboo against spinning and leaving flax on the distaff during the *Twelve Days*, lest Wode (Wodan) should ride over (trample) it ("der Wode jage da durch") (Timm 2003, 187).

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[3] Inf. 35; recorded by Matena Bassin, Anja Kušar and Nina Rolc; Archives of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.

[4] According to van Gennep, in spite of the record from 1891 he cannot find any evidence for this being in the three French provinces mentioned.

In Switzerland it was said that if a spinster failed to spin e.g. 10 bobbins *by the Wednesday before Christmas Day* (Weichnachtsfronfasten), Streggele would take away the flax (Motz 1984, 154). In legends from the Zug and Lucerne cantons, Strägele or Sträggele carried off any girl who didn't want to do her spinning (in a variant from Lucerne on the *third Sunday of Advent*)—all they found were torn braids of hair or, in another variant from Lucerne, the remains of a corpse. In Zürich Sträggele or Strunze came on the *Wednesday before Christmas Day* to get girls who didn't do enough spinning (Rumpf 1976, 225). In Lucerne the witch Sträggele harassed girls who didn't finish their work by *Ember Week* (Saintyves 1987, 89).

Peasants in Brittany say that on the night before St. Andrew's Day (30 Nov.), a very old fairy would come to see whether people were still spinning, and if she saw them spinning she would warn them that the following day was the holiday of St. Andrew (Sébillot 1981, 148).

According to Scottish belief, the Gyre-carlin is a mighty giantess reminiscent of Frau Perchta, with a disgusting visage, a long nose and supernatural abilities, who wounded the heels of her victims with an iron pike. Like Perchta, she carried off flax that had not been spun *by the end of the year* (Smith 2004, 176–7). In John o' Groats she was active from *Candlemas* to *Fastern's E'en (Shrove Tuesday*), disturbing and frightening the whole family with her own spinning if the spinning wheel had not been put out of action and sained (blessed) at night (Smith 2004, 177). In Fife, superstitious females were anxious to spin off all the flax that was on their racks on the *last night of the year*; being persuaded that if they left any unspun, the Gyre-carlin, or as they also pronounce the word, the Gy-carlin, would carry it off before morning (*Jamieson's Scottish Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1840, 496, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh; Briggs 1976, 213).

In Sorbian belief, after eleven o'clock at night during the *Twelve Days*, the Spinnstubenfrau appears in the form of a Murawa (also Morawa, formerly Mora [i.e. "nightmare"]), spits on the unspun flax and sits on (haunts) the spinster like a nightmare (Timm 2003, 103).

The Unjats in the villages of Eastern Slovakia were not permitted to spin on *St. Sava's Day* (5/18 December)—they believed that a female demonic being called Sava would scold people who violated the taboo: Sava would bring a spindle into the house in a sieve and demand that the woman of the house would spin all the thread in a single night (Valencova 2009, 325). Like the above-mentioned demonic being, the taboo against spinning is also supported by Lucy(s), who was usually associated with beings such as Pehtra, Kvatrnica, Torka etc., and appears primarily in the Czech lands, Moravia, in parts of Hungary and Croatia, and in north-eastern Slovenia (Kuret 1997, 82; Kuret 1989, II: 245; Pócs 1999, 125). St. Lucy is the patron saint of spinsters in northern Croatia, more rarely in central Croatia and even more rarely along the Adriatic coast and in some places in Bosnia and Vojvodina. In some of these places there was also a belief that spinning was forbidden on *St. Lucy's Day*, 13 December. In some places in Croatia and also in Slovenia the main reason for prohibiting spinning (as well as sewing and knitting) on St. Lucy's Day was the fear of losing one's sight (Gavazzi 1988, 119; Kuret 1989, II: 251; Belaj 2006, 261). According to belief, in western Slovakia St. Lucy travelled about on her feast day, using a spindle to smite and pour charcoal on the heads of anyone who spun, causing them to have a headache; in other places she threw an entire basket of spindles into the house and demanded that they spun all of its contents in a single night, otherwise she would tear the spinster to shreds (Slovakia, Ukraine, Zakarpatska Region) (Valencova 2009, 325). In some places in south-eastern Austria, Perchta's counterpart Lutzel or Luzia performed similar gastrotomic activities to those of Perchta: she opened the heads of lazy people and filled them with refuse, or lacerated people's knees or heels and filled the wounds with salt (Smith 2004, 176).

## Punishments for violations of taboos

Various explanations for the punishments for violations of this taboo meted out by these beings are actually nearly impossible to distinguish from each other: explanations that emphasise that these beings destroyed flax that was *not spun by a certain day* in fact implicate another frequent explanation, that *spinning had to be finished by a certain day, since from then on spinning would be forbidden for some time*, otherwise the being would punish the spinster—in both cases we can therefore state that such beings, in essence, enforced the prohibition against spinning during a certain period of time. And there is a third explanation that cannot be completely distinguished from these two: the punishment of *lazy spinsters*, who can be understood as those who (due to their laziness) did not finish their work on time.

Punishments for transgressions connected in one way or another with spinning encompassed on one hand the destruction, soiling, tangling etc. of the flax, the destruction of spinning tools or the setting of impossible tasks connected with flax: Perchta/Berchta/Holle/Holda etc. sometimes destroyed or took away distaffs, destroyed flax, soiled distaffs or made spinsters spin a huge amount of flax in a very short amount of time. Tsaôthavîdhe and Berthe la Fileuse punished spinsters by tangling the flax, as did Tante Arie, who also soiled it with urine. Heckelgaucklere, Sava and Lucy demanded that spinsters who had not finished their work on time or who spun at forbidden times should spin a huge amount of flax in a single night. Wodan rode over unspun flax, the Gyre-carlin took it away, and Murawa spat on it.

On the other hand, these beings could inflict various injuries on spinsters (and more rarely mere observers) and even cause their death: they slit open people's bellies, pulled out their intestines, filled them with waste, refuse etc., blinded them, gnawed them to the bone, killed them, steamed them, boiled them, strangled them and so on. In the stories, the Kvatrnica gnawed spinsters to the bone or parboiled them, Torka boiled them alive, gnawed them to the bone or licked the meat off their bones, tore them to shreds, and threw them to the ground so that they never rose again. She also tore to shreds those people who witnessed her spinning. Perchta/Berchta/Holle/Holda etc. steamed, boiled or simply killed spinsters who failed to observe the injunction against spinning, failed to complete their spinning on time or were lazy, or sliced open their bellies and filled them with waste and filth. Chlungere punished lazy spinsters—although exactly how, we don't know, nor do we know how the Wild Hunt punished spinsters. Sträggele carries off or harasses lazy spinsters or those who fail to finish their work; Murawa could sit on a spinster's chest; Lucy obviously robbed them of their sight, threatened to tear them to pieces, smashed in their heads, or gave them headaches; Sava and the old fée in France scolded or admonished them.

Many of these punishments were not as illogical as they appear at first sight. Smith holds that the punishments are analogous to the offences: "What the fictions under consideration convey is that if you spin or perform related tasks on a holiday, you can expect a penalty to match. Boil skeins, and you will be boiled alive. Spin, and your guts will be spun out of your belly" (Smith 2004, 174). But it seems that such direct parallels between the actions and the punishments are not always clear. Perchta, in a similar way to the prohibition on spinning, also punished people for other prohibited behaviour: when they did not observe the fast or did not eat certain foods, when they offended her, laughed at her, behaved badly towards her or stared at her, she also punished naughty or lazy children. As with lazy spinsters, she tore out the guts of naughty or lazy children and people who did not observe the fast, and filled them with straw, rocks and refuse.[5] People who saw her coming or who behaved badly towards her were punished with blindness, the same punishment that Lucy administered with regard to the spinning taboo. She administered punishments in the same way in cases both of failure to observe the prohibition against spinning and to observe the fast: she cut open people's bellies with a spindle. As Smith also points out, these methods of punishment are not exclusively connected with Perchta (Smith 2004, 176–7).

The punishments meted out by these beings, especially to spinsters and in particular unusual bodily injuries such as the gnawing of spinsters to the bone or pulling out their guts, undoubtedly deserve special treatment owing to their possible initiation roles, with which some researchers find parallels in shamanism, e.g. in the initiation dreams of Australian shamans (Josef Hanika, after Smith 2004, 169). Similarly, according to some, Perchta's act of carrying off children into the wild is reminiscent of the puberty initiation rites in "primitive" communities (cf. Motz 1984, 160).

## Prohibitions of spinning in the annual cycle

In European beliefs we find other mythical beings and saints who prohibited spinning on specific *days of the week*[6] (some of the beings that watched over spinning in the annual cycle were sometimes also guardians of individual days of the week, as we have seen in the case of Torka), or just *at night*. These latter (e.g. fées, lutins, revenants in France, mora, kikimora, Paraskeva Piatnitsa in Russia etc.) did not necessarily threaten people with punishments, but people believed that they spun at night, when everyone in the house was asleep, so the injunction against spinning was certainly enforced through the belief in their presence near spinning wheels or spindles (cf. Sébillot 1981, 142–3; cf. Krinichnaia 1995, 5–6).

However, in this paper, I will focus solely on beings who enforced prohibitions against spinning in the *annual cycle of holidays* and whose main function was therefore above all to enforce prohibitions against spinning on certain days or in certain periods during the annual cycle. I will concentrate on the chronological context within which these beings appeared and in one way or another punished the failure to observe prohibitions against spinning. Whenever a time is given, we can conclude that the majority of these beings that we find throughout Europe appeared in the dead of winter, i.e. the time from the Winter Embers/Christmas/New Year's Day, to Epiphany. Erika Timm notes that none of these beings (Perchta, Holle, Stampe etc.) appeared regularly over the course of the year, but emerged with increased frequency during these twelve days, in the

[5] Smith in fact believes that at the outset, Perchta's task seems to have been the supervision of feasting and fasting: "Initially Perchta was the enforcer of communal taboos, hunting down those who spun on holidays or who failed to partake sufficiently in collective feasting (a propitious act designed to ensure future plenty). However, with the growing involvement of peasant women in the market economy (particularly for textiles), Perchta's role changed to the punisher of the lazy" (Smith 2004, 178). Gastrotomy was originally meant to discourage undue abstinence or its opposite (Smith 2004, 176).

[6] E.g. The east-Slavic St. Paraskeva Piatnitsa, female figures Wednesday, Sunday (personification of the Assumption), in Central Asia Bibi Seshambe (Woman Tuesday), Bibi Chorshambe ("Woman Wednesday"), among the Turks Pershambe-Kary ("Woman Thursday") (Krinichnaia 1995, 8), Romanian Marți Nopate ("Tuesday Night") and Vineri-Noapte ("Friday Night") (Kuret 1997, 73) etc.

middle of winter or on certain days over the course of the Twelve Days (Timm 2003, 249). Pehtra/ Holle/ Bergda/ Berchta or Bertha appeared above all on the nights between 25 December and 6 January: on Christmas Day, on the last day of the old year, around New Year's Day, and also 5 January (on her feast day) or before Epiphany (6 January); Heckelgauclere on Christmas Day, Murawa during the Twelve Days, Tante Airie on Christmas Day, Tschausse-villha or Chlungere on Christmas Day and on the last days of the old year, Berthe la Fileuse in the week between Christmas Day and New Year's Day, Sträggele on the Wednesday before Advent or the third Sunday of Advent and during Ember Week, the Gyre-carlin on the last night of the old year and Wodan at Christmas or during the Twelve Days. Torka and/or Kvatrnica, who appeared overwhelmingly during Advent Ember Week (Thursday, Friday, Tuesday, Saturday; sometimes also every Tuesday, Friday or Saturday night), also appeared during the Twelve Days, and the same occasionally holds for Pehtra, Lucy on her feast day (13 December), and Sava on the feast day of St. Sava (5/18 December). Slovenian researcher Niko Kuret thus uses the single name "Midwinter Woman" (*Sredozimka*) for Indo-European or Eurasian beings who appeared in Europe and Asia in the middle of winter under various names[7] and who, according to popular belief, were the protectors of customs and morals (especially the patrons of spinning and guardians of prohibitions against spinning) and at the same time the guides of souls (especially children's) (Kuret 1997, 66–9). Only rarely do we find them on other days of the year: Tante Airie could appear at Carnival (as well as Christmas), the old *fée* before St. Andrew's Day, and the Gyre-carlin could appear in the period from Candlemas to Shrove Tuesday.

We can therefore see that these beings, as a rule, enforced taboos against spinning in the very same period when we find the most widespread prohibitions against spinning in Europe in general, even when they are not supported by the appearance of and inflicting of punishments by mythical beings. The prohibition against spinning occurs on several days in the year,[8] but if we ignore individual, and expressly local saints on whose feast days spinning was forbidden for one reason or another, one of the periods during which taboos on spinning were most widespread throughout Europe was the *Christmas period*, as has also been established by van Gennep (Gennep 1999, 2740). The injunction could apply only to Christmas, for the period from Christmas to New Year, from Christmas (in Germany even from the winter solstice, 21 December) to Epiphany or even from Christmas to Candlemas (2 Feb.). Thus, spinning was forbidden at Christmas in Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Scotland; from Christmas to New Year in Scotland and Denmark, on New Year's Day in Switzerland and France, and in certain places in Scotland from Christmas to Candlemas. During the twelve nights, i.e. the period from Christmas to Epiphany, spinning was forbidden in France and among Slavs in general, from St. Thomas' Day (21 Dec.) to Epiphany in Germany, and only on Epiphany or the day after in France and England (cf. Mencej 2009a).

The cycle of twelve nights between Christmas and Epiphany, in spite of the name the "twelve nights" or "Twelve Days", can actually last for varying lengths of time, as van Gennep points out: in France, for instance, it begins on St. Catharine's Day (25 Nov.) and lasts until Epiphany (6 January); sometimes it lasts from St. Andrew's Day (30 Nov.) until Epiphany or from St. Lucy's Day (13 December) to Epiphany; from Christmas to New Year, from Christmas to Epiphany or even from Christmas to Candlemas (Gennep 1999, 2308–9). So, we shouldn't be surprised to find taboos on spinning on other holidays during this period in the widest sense. The taboo on spinning was fairly widespread on *St. Lucy's Day*, especially among Catholic Slavs (Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia), in Sweden and in Germany, often supported by a threat of Lucy(s). We find a taboo on spinning during the *Advent Ember Week* in Slovenia, Switzerland and Romania. Spinning was forbidden in some places among Slavs on *St. Catharine's Day* (in Croatia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Slovakia), which is just before Advent. We also find injunctions against spinning on *St. Andrew's Day* in France (supported by the threat of an old *fée*) and Slovakia, on *St. Nicholas' Day* in Slovenia and Slovakia and on *St. Barbara's Day* in Croatia and Slovakia.

[7] Characters similar are also found in Central Asia—Tajikistan, Afghanistan, in the area of the lower c rivers (Robert Blechsteiner, Perchtengestalten in Mittelasien, Archiv für Völkerku , 68–9).

[8] For a detailed revie o against spinning is in effect, see Mencej 2009a.

Saint Jedrt (Saint Gertrude), mural on the wall of the chapel next to the village of Ožbolt nad Zmincem (Slovenia), 2006. Photo by Nena Židov.

## Liminal periods

This period can undoubtedly be understood as a *turning point in the year*. It probably does not need to be made explicit that the Twelve Days in the narrow sense, i.e. the period from Christmas to Epiphany, is understood everywhere as a time of the intrusion of the other world: it is a time in which the world is open (*mundus patet*), which is manifested in numerous beliefs or legends about the Wild Hunt, witches, various demonic beings, the souls of the dead (which wander about our world during this time); it is a time of magic and soothsaying etc. The ancient custom near the turning point of the year—the winter solstice, i.e. the pagan holiday of the "birthday of the unconquered sun" (*Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*) on 25 December, has been obscured to a great extent by the celebration in western Christendom of the birth of Christ. The rituals, beliefs and customs which accompanied the former "New Year" holiday were transferred to various holidays: those which were related to the coming of the dead were transferred for the most part to All Souls Day, costumed processions to St. Nicholas' Day and St. Lucy's Day, magical practices to St. Andrew's Day, which falls at the end of the ecclesiastical year (when costumed processions are also held), and to St. Thomas' Day and New Year's Eve.

In fact, apparitions and masked people appear throughout Advent, indicating a belief in ancestors who return to this world. Fortune telling is also popular throughout this period (Kuret 1989, II: 129–31, 212–3 and 261). On *St. Barbara's Day*, 4 December, in Slovenia and in Croatia in the area of Slavonski Brod we find processions of *polažarji*,[9] the successors of pre-Christian costume processions in the role of the souls of the dead (Kuret 1989, II: 218; Gavazzi 1988, 117). Since the twelfth century, the Christian custom of winter processions with demons on *St. Nicholas' Day*, 6 December, has obscured the tradition of the old costumed processions characteristic of Indo-Europeans, which represented the departed and other daemons who brought blessings for the New Year, later changed into demons and fiends in Christianity; St. Nicholas joined them only after the twelfth century (Kuret 1989, II: 210, 222–4 and 226). The feast day of *St. Lucy*, 13 December, was the shortest day of the year according to the old Julian calendar and thus also a turning point in the year since, in its time, St. Lucy's Day was the day of the winter solstice, and according to the ancient tradition, also the end of the old and the beginning of the new year: on that day the world was open to the incursions of otherworldly beings, animals were able to talk, girls believed that they would dream about their future husbands (Feilhauer 2000, 249; Kuret 1989, II: 244 and 250). On this day processions of masked "Lucys" were held in certain places in Slovenia, Croatia, Czech lands and Moravia, and in parts of Hungary (Kuret 1989, II: 244–7). *St. Thomas' Day*, on which the taboo on spinning begins in Germany, is celebrated before the actual shortest day and longest night of the year. It is on this day, according to the belief of Slovenes living in Rož (Rosental in Austria), that witches have the most power, the world is open, and fortune telling can be conducted. After the change to the calendar in 1582, St. Thomas took over some of Lucy's duties, and he was also assigned some of the duties of *St. Andrew*, who had been considered the primary winter saint in the folk tradition (Kuret 1989, II: 259–60). Although the taboo against spinning in Slovenia on *St. Sebastian's* Day, 20 January, is expressly local, according to some beliefs this day marks the end of winter, similarly to *St. Vincent's Day*, which marks the middle of winter, or, as Kuret puts it, the "eagerly awaited spring", when, according to belief, birds chose their mates. *St. Agnes' Day*, on 21 January, when spinning was likewise forbidden in some places in Slovenia, was connected with spinning as St. Agnes was the protectress of sheep, and people brought tufts of wool to church on her feast day (Schauber, Schindler 1995, 33). As on St. Sebastian's Day, on St. Agnes' Day the servants were relocated and these days therefore represented a kind of turning point in the year, a line of demarcation in the hiring of the workforce (Kuret 1989, II: 517–21).

The *Ember Weeks*[10] similarly represented major breaks in the cyclical flow of the year, especially the Advent Ember Week, when spinning was particularly strictly forbidden.[11] The celebration of the Ember Weeks obscured

[9] Belaj also mentions *čarojičari*, who appear during the period before Christmas (when St. Barbara's Day also occurs), and which are known primarily among the Orthodox population (western Bosnia and the area of Vojna granica) (Belaj 2007, 191).

[10] At first the Embers were seasonal fasts and were not held on prescribed days—they were held in March, June, September and December (the reason for this is the impermanent dates of the agricultural holidays, which were set according to the weather and the climate zones). The present Ember times were determined only by Pope Gregory VII (1020–85) (Kuret 1989, II: 168–9).

the former pagan rituals in honour of the sanctity of agriculture, during which deceased ancestors were honoured in Rome, something also confirmed by various customs during the Christian Ember Weeks—in Slovenia one had to pray for the deceased during these weeks, milk was given to the poor so that they would also pray for the departed and so forth. The Ember nights were generally ruled by ghosts, witches and other malevolent beings. Children born during Ember Weeks became *vedomci*, humans with the power of metamorphosis and the ability to communicate with the other world (Kelemina 1997, 92; Kuret 1989, 168–72; Šešo 2007, 257–8). According to Slovenian (Stara Fužina, Gorenjska region) beliefs, on these days *vedomci* would fly, those who spun on Ember Thursdays were "all witches", and it was during this time that the Friulian *benandanti* fought their battles (Novak 1987, 282; Ginzburg 1992, 109).

On the other hand, a great number of these ancient rituals at the end of the old and the beginning of the New Year were transferred to the celebration of *Carnival*—a time when we also meet Perchta and Tante Airie, and some places in Scotland the Gyre-carlin, from Candlemas until Shrove Tuesday. Therefore, it is not surprising that the second period during which a strict taboo on spinning was most widespread in Europe, as has also already been established by van Gennep, was Carnival (Gennep 1999, 2740). The end of Shrovetide or the Carnival funeral represented the end of winter and beginning of spring (Kuret 1989, II: 39). Soothsaying was also characteristic of this time, and the most characteristic event was the arrival of masked individuals representing deceased ancestors.[12]

Some of the other holidays when spinning was likewise forbidden also represent a turning point in the annual cycle, the end of the old and beginning of the New Year or the beginning of a new half/quarter of the year. For instance, *Saint Brighid's Day*, the Christianised Imbolc (1 February) of the Celtic calendar, one of the four turning points in the Celtic calendar, is a day when the use of spinning wheels or spindles is strictly forbidden (Torma 2002; Danaher 1972, 13–4). In Bulgaria no spinning is done on *St. Triphun's Day* (also 1 February), which represents the first possible beginning of spring; in other European traditions the dividing line between the two halves is often represented by *Candlemas*, 2 February, when spinning is forbidden in Scotland. This is a day which usually marks the beginning of spring or the middle of winter. In the Pyrenees, Candlemas is not paid as much attention as elsewhere in Europe, but all the more attention is paid to *St. Agatha's Day*, which they celebrate three days later (5 February), but whose day according to Violet Alford was once 2 February. Neither spinning nor washing may be done on this day (Alford 1937, 68–9). In wassailing on St Agatha's Day in the Pyrenees, the shepherds reserve part of the gifts they gather for the dead and so we can conclude that in the Pyrenees, St. Agatha's Day was also associated with beliefs about the coming of the dead. St. Agatha's Day falls during Carnival, and she is also the patron saint of the harvest, especially of fruit trees[13] (in Bigorre) (Alford 1937, 97–8; Alford 1937, 107). After the appearance of Christianity, we know that the ancient beliefs and customs surrounding the New Year were also transferred to *Easter* (in addition to Christmas Day and New Year, Epiphany and Carnival), so it is no wonder that at that time we also encounter typical New Year's customs such as driving out witches and evil forces by making noises, explosions etc., putting out the old and lighting the new fire, and magical practices to drive out evildoers in the coming year—and in some places, also a taboo on spinning (Sweden, Polesian Brest, perhaps Greece, Belgium, Slovakia) (Kuret 1989, I: 181, 185, 188 and 213). *St. Martin's Day*, 11 November, can also be understood as a turning point as it divides the year into halves of winter and summer. On this day the turning of all wheels is forbidden in Ireland, as well as spindles and spinning wheels, and spinning is also forbidden in Denmark and among the southern Slavs. According to numerous interpretations, this day is an important turning point in the year, especially for Indo-European stockbreeders, which can be seen from the Celtic calendar. According to Miles, St. Martin's Day is the closest possible approximation of the day of the old celebration of the beginning of winter in November, the day when snow began to fall in central Europe and the pastures were closed to livestock (Miles 1976, 172 and 202). Miles believed that these days were joined by the celebration of the New Year from the German division of the year, which according to this calendar began on 11 November (Miles 1976, 172–3; Mencej 2001, 192–6 and 204–6; 2005). We also frequently encounter taboos on spinning during the *wolf holidays*,[14] which in the Balkans (Serbia,

[11] The Church never ordered a taboo on spinning on Ember nights; this taboo obviously comes from a pre-Christian tradition which was preserved after Christianisation (Kuret 1989, II: 168–9).

[12] Of course, Carnival, which arrives with the end of winter and the beginning of spring, has a strong connotation of fertility: Frazer already interpreted Carnival as a holiday which ensures the growth of the crops, and although Burke believes that the people did not understand it this way, he does state that fertility is a very important concept for the understanding of Carnival (Burke 1994, 191).

[13] According to various interpretations she supplanted the goddess of agricultural fertility, Demeter (Ceres), who was venerated under her Greek nickname Agatha (*agade*, "good") and later the Latin Bona Dea (good goddess) by Greeks throughout Sicily and particularly in the city of Catania (cf. Kuret 1989, II: 542).

[14] However, the taboo on spinning, although here also appearing at the turning point between summer and winter, is nevertheless most often just a part of a wider taboo on any kind of work with wool, which symbolically takes the place of sheep, and working with livestock in general, so that the wolves wouldn't "see", since in this way, the people want to prevent the wolves from slaughtering the livestock during the winter.

Macedonia, Bulgaria) are usually celebrated around St. Martin's (Mrata's) Day, and more rarely around St. Michael's Day, as well as St. Andrew's Day, St. Dimitri's Day and St. Sava's Day. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, in the folk calendar the wolf holidays represent a strong line of demarcation between the summer and winter halves of the year (Mencej 2001; 2005; 2009b). We find a similar situation of the autumn dividing line between summer and winter in Estonia and in other agrarian peoples of northern Europe who mark the end of the year with the harvest (which usually falls around St. Michael's Day, 29 September) and the transition to the winter work cycle, which begins with the celebration of St. Andrew's Day, 30 November (when an old *fée* forbids spinning in France). Within this period, particularly significant roles are played by St. Martin's Day on 11 November, which is the symbolic initiator to a successful new agrarian year, and St. Catharine's Day, 25 November, and the end of the year approximately coincides with All Saints Day. On the whole, the turn of the agricultural year in Estonia more or less coincided with All Souls' Day, the traditional rites of which included the worship of deceased ancestors, the keeping of silence, but also the interdiction on spinning and other kinds of housework. The souls of deceased ancestors are invited for a meal on this day (Hiiemäe 1995, 16–20).[15]

To summarise: all holidays in which we encounter a taboo on spinning in European rituals of the annual cycle therefore have the characteristic of a turning point in the year, a dividing line between the old and the new year, winter and spring, between one part of the year and another, a rupture which also always implies the intrusion of the other world—the appearance of the souls of the dead, represented as masked people, witches, demonic or supernatural beings. The intrusion of the other world is also clearly represented in numerous beliefs or legends about supernatural beings, such as Perchta/Holda/Holle, Tante Airie, Torka, Heckelgaucklere, Sträggele, and Gy(re)-carlin, who on certain holidays would check to see whether anyone might be spinning, and any spinster so caught would be punished by having their flax destroyed, or some other punishment would be meted out. Often these were not only a matter of belief and legend, but also constituted rituals—masked people who represented those beings, breaking into houses, frightening or giving gifts to children, making their rounds and so on (e.g. Lucy, Perchta, Chrungele). We can probably apply the same explanation to the injunctions on spinning during the night: night is the time of demons and supernatural beings and therefore also the time of the intrusion of the other world (cf. Smith 2004, 173; Mencej 2008b). Besides, some of the days of the week when spinning was forbidden also bore a connotation of the turning/liminal day of the week and/or intrusion of the other world:[16] Thursday was once a Sabbath-like day of rest and according to Romanian belief was the day which the souls of the dead and the fairies chose as a day when they entered into contact with the living, Sunday was later proclaimed a day of rest, Saturday evening was already the beginning of Sunday[17] etc. (Bächtold-Stäubli and Hoffmann-Krayer 1987, 1: 572–3; and 2: 333; Smith 2004, 170; Timotin 2009, 193). However, it is still not clear why it was *spinning* that was forbidden in these periods.

## Circular movement

In another paper (Mencej 2008a), I have argued that according to legend, folk belief, folk poems, ancient sources and philosophical treatises, there is a firmly established notion in the European world view about the passage between the two worlds through circular movement—be it in the form of a whirlwind, whirlpool, mill, spindle or spinning wheel. When one wishes to communicate with the other world, this can also be evoked on purpose, through various magic techniques or various forms of circular movement, such as rolling, circumambulation, turning around, whirling, spinning round, walking around and so forth.

Here I would like to argue that one important, if not the most important, reason for spinning being forbidden at certain times of the annual (or life) cycle is precisely the fact that spinning always involves *circular movement*: of a spinning wheel, a spindle or of the thread itself. Therefore, it is no surprise that during periods when spinning was forbidden, often it was not merely spinning that was forbidden, but the turning of *any kind* of wheel.[18]

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[15] This type of division of the year would be recognised in Galicia in the celebration of the chestnut festival (Magosto), when the youths eat chestnuts at the beginning of winter, 1 November, and during Carnival. As Mandianes-Castro demonstrates, there is a symbolic association between chestnuts and the dead, which indicates that the chestnut festival is an "inverse Carnival": during Carnival the dead visit the living, while during the Magosto festival, the living visit the dead (Mandianes-Castro 2004, 101).

[16] However, folk beliefs about the quality of the days of the week vary considerably from country to country, according to different criteria (Tolstaja 1995, 31–3).

[17] According to folk beliefs, the beginning of a new day was after dusk of the previous day.

[18] For instance, in Slovenia on St. Nicholas' Day, 6 December, there is a *taboo on turning mills* at the same time as the taboo on spinning; on St. Catharine's Day, 25 November, *all wheels* must be still; in Germany on 21 December, St. Thomas' Day, *all wheels* (*machines with wheels*) must stop. In Ireland we find a taboo on spinning together with a taboo on turning *any kind of wheel* (mills, carts, bicycles) on 1 February, St. Brighid's Day, and 11 November, St. Martin's Day. In Denmark *nothing* is *allowed to turn around* (in a circle) between Christmas and New Year. In Sweden *no wheel is allowed to turn around* on St. Lucy's day. The wheels must *all* be packed away during Shrovetide in the Ansbach region of Germany (cf. Mencej 2009a).

The idea of passing from one world to the other through circular movement while spinning is clearly evident from the actions or descriptions of goddesses or mythical beings who are entrusted with the passage of people's souls from birth to death and vice versa. In Plato's famous Vision of Er the *Moirae* (Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, the Greek Goddesses of Fate), for instance, by sitting around the *Spindle of Necessity*, Ananke, the central axis of the universe, "through which all the orbits turned"[19] and guiding its revolutions, allow the souls of the people-to-be-born into their new incarnation on Earth.[20] We could therefore understand the spinning motion of the spindle, turned by the Moirae, as a channel through which a passage of souls from the other world into this one was made possible.

In the Moirae concepts such as death, fate, birth, and spinning are interwoven: for Homer the expression *moira* is an abstract concept of fate, and *Moira* is a chthonic goddess who brings death, understood as an aspect of man's fate. In Hesiod these three goddesses have individual names—Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos[21]—and are no longer connected only with the death of men, but with man's fate in general. In literary sources, the Moirae are clearly connected with spinning processes (Cottica 2004, 185–6).[22]

In Indo-European mythology and the mythology of the Near East in general, we encounter many mythical creatures or goddesses that are associated with spinning on the one hand, and with the domain of fertility/birth and death on the other (Krinichnaia 1995, 7–8; Toporov 2002, 47–9; Kilbourne Matossian 1973, 329–30; Cottica 2004). But this association of spinning with fertility (and therefore also with death) seems logical: "In the ancient religious sphere, spinning was a powerful metaphor of fertility and of the ability to give birth, ensuring the continuity of human gender" (Cottica 2004, 185). For instance, Istustaya and Papaya, the Hittite goddesses of destiny, are described in documentary sources "while spinning the life of the King" while in others they are mentioned in conjunction with other Hurritic and Hittite goddesses whose influence extends to the domestic sphere and to the moment of birth (Cottica 2004, 186).

The *Parcae* in Roman representations were three women spinning one's destiny, but when they are assimilated with the Latin goddess *Dea Parca*, who is traditionally associated with birth, and the goddess Fata Scribunda, the spindle attribute usually disappears, being replaced by a book or a globe (Cottica 2004, 191). The *Nornir*, the feminine beings who represent the notions of fate in Norse mythology and are in charge of birth and death also have a widespread connotation of being spinsters or weavers.[23] The pantheon of Prince Vladimir, mentioned in a chronicle from 980 AD, mentions the (only female) goddess *Mokosh*, who was supposed to have been directly connected with spinning. Toporov has demonstrated a possible linguistic connection between the word "mokos" and the meaning "spinning". A Russian proverb says: "Don't leave your tows [lying around], otherwise Mokosh will spin them" (Krinichnaia 1995, 7–8; Toporov 2002, 47). Mythological stories also tell of how, when everyone is asleep, you can hear spindles turning—it is the sound of Mokosh spinning wool (Krinichnaia 1995, 7–8). In ancient Russia (in the north), Mokosh was conceptualised as a woman with a large head who spun at night. She has exaggerated sexual traits (large breasts, long, loose hair), and stories (the Russian Slovo) denigrating Paganism emphasise the theme of her debauchery; this reminder of her debauchery has been preserved to the present day in the appellative *mokos'ja* (in the dialect of Podmoskovje), which means a woman who behaves immorally. But Mokosh is also the protectress of women in labour and the overseer of childbirth, and also appears as a mother (Toporov 2002, 49). In later folklore she is associated with rain, wetness, water, ground, darkness, night, odd numbers, sheep's wool, yarn, and spinning (Toporov 2002, 48; Kilbourne Matossian 1973, 329). The Slovenian legend of Mokoshka (from Trg Šent Florjan in Ložnica), if she is to be related to Mokosh, similarly confirms an association between Mokoshka and children: it suggests that she is particularly fond of carrying off children, especially those that are not being raised well by their parents, an activity also attributed to Perchta (Kelemina 1997, 220, no. 201, I.).

Christianity, of course, for the most part assimilated the pagan gods into its doctrine by changing them into saints or demons: one of these saints is the Russian *Paraskeva Piatnitsa*,[24] who obviously succeeded Mokosh. Tows, spun sheep's wool and even cloth were thrown into her wells (Toporov 2002, 48). Since the distaff was reminiscent of the description of Piatnitsa (often portrayed as tall and thin with loose hair), Russian peasant women sometimes referred to distaffs as *piatnitsy*. At first, she was the patron saint of spinning, weaving and housework (Krinichnaia 1995, 8). They also offered her the first sheaf of flax. In this connection, they forbade

[19] Politeia X, 616b–617d.
[20] Politeia X, 620d–620e; see also 617d–620e; (http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/PhilosophicalStages/1642).
[21] Hesiod, Theogony 211–20 (http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/theogony.htm).
[22] However, as Cottica states, spinning symbolism was not originally included in the concept of the Moirae; they absorbed it or appropriated it from older goddesses of fate known in Minoan and Mycenaean mythology (Cottica 2004, 185–6).
[23] However, Karen Bek-Pedersen argues that in spite of this widespread popular opinion, one would search in vain for an absolutely clear and unequivocal representation of spinning or weaving *Nornir* anywhere in Old Norse mythological texts (Bek-Pedersen 2007a; 2007b; cf. also Simek 2000, 237).
[24] Both names mean Friday, the fifth day of the week (same as Petka).

doing such work on "women's days" during the week, i.e. on Wednesday and especially on Friday. They believed that women who spun on Friday or holidays were invisibly stabbing Paraskeva Petka (also St. Barbara or the Virgin Mary) with their spindles, or that Piatnitsa walked about the world stabbed by the spindles of lazy spinsters. Another variant of the motivation for the prohibitions was the fear that they would soil the eyes of deceased relatives with a mote (of flax) (Kilbourne Matossian 1973, 330).[25] Piatnitsa had many functions, but she especially fostered marriage and fertility, spinning and weaving (Kilbourne Matossian 1973, 330).

We find a similar set of conceptualisations in images and beliefs in Slovenia associated with *Saint Jedrt* (Gertrudis, Gertrude), whose feast day is 17 March: she is depicted with a stick crawling with mice, and sometimes holds a distaff in her hand while mice gnaw on the thread. This is a day when the spinning must be finished and the spinning wheels must be still. According to the interpretations of some researchers, she drove off a pagan feminine deity who took over people's souls after death; these were portrayed as mice and were seen as the souls of the dead who refused to leave the earthly plane. From this, stems the belief in some places that St. Jedrt is the protectress of the souls of the dead on the first night after death (Kuret 1989, I: 106–7).

The question is whether the mythical beings that watch over spinning can also be understood as the successors of former feminine deities of spinning and often of fertility (i.e. birth and death). Although Smith holds that Perchta and other similar beings are merely personifications of the feast days or fast days,[26] many researchers have connected them with older pagan goddesses (Smith 2004, 169–70). Jakob Grimm connected Holda/Holle e.g. with the maternal goddesses like Nerthus and Isis, who paid special attention to flax and spinning, similarly also Frigg; with respect to spinning tools also with Artemis[27] (Diana), Leto, Athene, Amphitrite and the Nereids, who hold a spindle or a distaff in their hands. Also, frequently mentioned in association with these beings are goddesses such as Hecate, Selena, Freya (often equated with Frigg, the fertility goddess who also functioned as the leader of the dead), Astarte, Atargatis/Dea Syria (Hittite superior goddess), Minerva, the Germanic goddess Tanfana/Tamfana, the Germanic Mistress of Wild Things (the force of nature which is both life-giving and life-taking), the Irish St. Brighid etc. (Grimm 2012 [1888], I: 270; Motz 1984, 161–3; Kuret 1989, II: 458; Ellis Davidson 1993, 116–7; Pócs 1999, 125–6; Timm 2003, 212, 255; Smith 2004, 168–9). Éva Pócs claims that the line of seers, usually women (who had particularly Germanic and Celtic historical roots, but existed in village communities of several European peoples between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age, as we know from the witch trials in the Alpine regions) who were taken and inaugurated into the soul troops around Christmas time, and who kept regular contact with the dead through their doubles, "lived on in the cult of Artemis and Diana up to the Middle Ages, in close relationship with the shaping of the belief system of the witches in the early Middle Ages". Other chthonic figures who appeared as the leaders of the march of the dead and as the guardians and initiator spirits of seeing women included Hecate, the Austrian and south German Perchta, Holda, the Swiss Frau Saelde, the Slovenian Pehtra baba, Freya and Lucia or Lucy. She also emphasises their role with respect to spinning and other feminine occupations, and their attributes of distaff and spindle. This female line corresponds to Ginzburg's female type of magicians (*benandanti*) who were initiated during the procession of the dead visiting humans and who were mostly concerned with healing, seeing the dead, and seeing treasure, and whose origin he finds in the Scythian fertility goddess of the dead with snake attributes ("snake goddess") (Pócs 1999, 124–6; cf. also Ginzburg 1992, 89–152).

Whether Perchta etc. or Midwinter Woman in general follow directly from the line of all of these goddesses or not (which is not the subject of the present discussion), the fact is that the beings who oversaw spinning or whose traditions connected them with spinning also often possessed aspects that were both associated with *fertility* and were at the same time *chthonic*—they are often, although not always, associated with birth, with the souls of (newborn) children and also the souls of the dead. For instance, Perchta, as Timm finds, is shown above all in three interconnected roles: as the bearer of children, as the kidnapper of children and as the protectress of children's souls (Timm 2003, 259). Women who immersed themselves in Frau Holle's well were given the gift of fertility, Berchta shared a cave in the Tyrol with unborn children, and anyone who wanted a child had to pay her a visit; besides, the tradition frequently depicts her surrounded by a crowd of children who had died before baptism (Motz 1984, 155). According to the beliefs, Percht lived with small children in a cave near Lucerne (variant: cared for unborn children on a hillside in Wasserkufen). Anyone who wanted a child could take one from there. In Entlebuch, Switzerland, they said that small children came from Seltenbach (the stream of Mrs Selten—a variant of Perchta, who was called Frau Zälti there), while in Transylvania, that Frau Holle cared for unborn children in caves, mountains and wells. It was said that the Frau-Holen-Teich pond in Meissner made women who lay in her well healthy and fertile, and that the newborn came from her well, and that she brought them out. In Silesia, the Spillaholle (from Ger.: *Spindel-Holle*) brought children, whom she dragged into the well

[25] I would like to thank Aleksei Iudin for sending me information on Piatnica (email 13 Dec. 2007).

[26] He argues that the origin of the word Perchta and Befana is a "feast of Epiphany" in the sense of the "Manifestation of Christ" which, later on being no longer understood, was reinterpreted to "Eve/Night of Perht", "Day of Percht"; the majority of other similar beings may also be seen as personifications of feast or fast days.

[27] Called the "Lady of the Golden Spindle" (Iliad 20, 70); cf. Motz 1984, 161; the protectress of small children, and the overseer of childbirth (Graves 1987, 76–7).

because of their laziness, to parents who were unable to have children (Timm 2003, 260). We find Perchta (Percht, Berchta, Holda, Holle, Stampe, Pehtra) surrounded by a crowd of unbaptised deceased children throughout her entire region (Timm 2003, 262–3; cf. also Kretzenbacher 1941, 86, who writes of Bercht as "Seelenführerin"; Kuret 1989, II: 458; 1997, 66; Kropej 2008b, 182). Certainly, the fundamental trait of Midwinter Woman was that she was a leader of souls, especially the souls of children (Kuret 1997, 66–7). Pehtra's fertility aspects in the Slovenian tradition can also be seen in the song sung by herders to call her as she walked along the ridges with a golden pail in her hand: "Vehtra baba, deža daj, Lanu ti dam debel kučaj". ("Vehtra baba, give us rain, I give you flax, a thick bunch") or "Vehtra baba, daj pšenice, Moji kravički travice". ("Vehtra baba, give us wheat, And grass for my cows") (Kelemina 1997, 93–4, no. 57, Gorenjska region; Kuret 1997, 67; Kilbourne Matossian 1973, 333).

Pehtra's association with children can also be explained by her occasional punishment of lazy or naughty children and more rarely of rewarding good ones: in Heidermoos/Inntal in Upper Austria she carried off naughty children, in Lauthenthal she threatened to carry off naughty and lazy children (Rumpf 1976, 219). Particularly in Alpine regions, Perchta meted out punishment by cutting open the bellies of naughty children and filling them with straw and rocks (Motz 1984, 154). According to southern German and Austrian beliefs, Perchta walked about during the twelve nights and rewarded those who followed the rules, punishing the negligent, greedy, lazy and curious; disobedient children and even adults were in danger of her slicing open their bellies, removing the contents, including the intestines, and filling them with refuse (Smith 2004, 168). We encounter the same conceptualisation in Slovenia (in a legend from Mežakla, which possibly indicates former rituals): Pehtra was said to come into the valley before the Epiphany, reward good children and kill naughty ones with fire tongs and pull out their intestines with them (Kuret 1989, II: 461). According to belief, in the Slovenian Carinthia and Goriško regions she walked about during Carnival and particularly at Epiphany, frightening children: "Perhta baba, hodi zdaj,/ kjer otrok se najde kaj,/ bucne vampič z vilami,/ tih' k' so zlo nasiteni ('Perhta baba, walks now,/ where there are children to be found,/ pokes their bellies with pitchforks,/ of those who are overstuffed')" (This could otherwise be understood as her overseeing the fast, cf. Smith 2004). In Bovec, she had a hatchet and walked about on the day after Epiphany frightening children; in Trenta, the "Perte" (a variant of Pehtras) distributed good and bad things at Epiphany (Kelemina 1997, 94, no. 58). In Rož (Rosental), among Slovenes in Austrian Carinthia, Pehtra came into the house, gave out gifts, usually dried apple slices, and threatened naughty children (Kuret 1989, II: 465). In lower Styria they said that on Christmas Day children disappeared from houses that were not well-cleaned—this was the work of the Pudelmutter, which is another name for Percht. In Upper Styria, Perchta carried naughty children away with her on Christmas Day. According to a legend in the Tyrol, Stampe sees a beautiful child and takes him into a cave. Germans in Moravian Kuhländchen said that Spillalutsche (= Spindel-Luzie, "Spindle Lucy") killed children who lagged behind and took them off with her. In Niederwald in Silesia, she took lazy children to her home, Spillalutschenstein. In Dillingen (Saar) they said that Frau Holle received her name because she "takes away" (Ger.: "holen") children. In Meissner, Holle liked to lure children to her pond; she made the good ones happy and foisted the bad children upon others—and here the circle is thus complete, as Timm observes. In Hausberg in Harz, children not only came from Frau Holle's well, but parents also threatened the children that they were going to put them back in it. The Silesian Spillaholle also took lazy children away before giving them to other parents (Timm 2003, 261–2). Similarly, the Trotte-vieilles kidnapped naughty children and threw them into a stream in front of the door, while they gave gifts to good children, and, according to belief, the Wild Hunt in Switzerland sometimes carried off disobedient children too (Gennep 1999, 2432–3; Hoffmann-Kreyer 1940, 79).

Why is it that these goddesses, saints and mythical beings are so often connected with spinning on the one hand and with birth and/or death on the other?[28] If we leave the symbolic meaning of a thread behind,[29] we see that if circular movement is a movement characteristic of a liminal space between the worlds and is at the same time an indicator of a passage from this to the other world (and vice versa) where the souls of the people-to-be-born abide, the connection between spinning (the turning of a spinning wheel or a spindle) on the one hand and

[28] West argues that a close semantic connection between turning and eventuating is perhaps relevant to the image of the goddesses' spindle that spins round because it twists the loose wool into a firm thread. A pervasive image of spinning for the fixing of human destinies might be understood as suited to symbolise the conversion of loose, incoherent possibilities into something definite, that, like a human life, grows continuously longer but sooner or later is cut off (West 2007, 383, 385).

[29] Spinning is an especially appropriate attribute of goddesses responsible for birth and death, since there is also a strong symbolic connection between thread and body tissue. The allegorical image of the "mother-as-a-distaff" together with that of the "child-as-the-flax-on-a-spindle" shape the metaphorical representation of "life-span" as "flax-spun" (Badalanova Geller 2004: 231). In the symbolism of Western civilisation to spin and weave means to create body tissue. The spinning goddesses therefore spin because their activity has magic power: in this way they spin the body tissue of a newborn child, they wind a band around a baby—but the winding sheet is also wrapped around the corpse in a spiral, like thread around a spindle, which should, according to Matossian, explain the association of the Goddess of life and death with spinning and weaving (Kilbourne Matossian 1924: 331; cf. also Cottica 2004, 200). The Hittite word for a spindle even derives from the verb "to live" (Cottica 2004, 200).

birth and death on the other hand seems only natural. The turning so often applied to goddesses of birth and destiny usually refers to the technique of spinning,[30] which requires some sort of *turning* of a thread (Belmont 1971, 176–7; West 2007, 383).[31] Through turning the circular motion of a thread, a spindle or a spinning wheel, these goddesses are therefore able to communicate between the worlds, to enter the other world and draw the souls that are to be born into a new existence in the world of the living (and vice versa).

## Conclusion

But to return to our original question: Why, then, was spinning forbidden precisely during the periods or on the holidays which we mentioned at the beginning? Why was circular movement, i.e. spinning, not allowed on the days/periods when the door between the world of the living and the world of the dead was open? Now, if it was possible to draw the souls of the newborn babies from the other world through circular movement (spinning), it could just as well be possible to draw dangerous demons, i.e. death itself from the other world. If the spinning, circular movement of the spinning wheel or spindle was a way to enter the other world, then we can understand the taboo on spinning as a preventive measure against drawing death to this world during the time when the door to the other world was open.

This is especially so if we understand the annual cycle as a two-phase temporal cycle, where "each year includes a double action where spin in one direction is succeeded by spin in the other" (Lyle 1990, 65), with time therefore going forwards and backwards, thus circling or spiralling there and back to the starting point, whereby backwards movement has a connotation of being the time of death (Lyle 1990, 62–5 and 94–5). In this model "[...] a ritually marked period of time (is) analogically related to backward movement, which is, in the Indo-European case, connected with death and reverse movement" (Lyle 2008, 15). If we apply this model to the year, then the period of reversal and death would most typically be found between Christmas and the Epiphany (25 December to 6 January). Just as spinning was therefore forbidden at times of death in the life cycle, since "death, which is already the reversal of the direction of the corpse,[32] forbids any other reversals in the time when the body still lies at home" (Belmont 1971, 179; cf. also Mencej 2009a) it was also forbidden in the "reversed" periods in the annual (as well as daily) cycle. The circular motion of the thread/wheel/spindle[33] in the periods of reversal thus becomes the movement that brings death and infertility to our world.*

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[30] Belmont argues that the turning movement of these goddesses is primarily connected with their task of the turning of a child in the mother's womb to the head down position before its birth.

[31] The word for a spindle or a spindle-whorl actually derives from the same verbal root **uert-* in various languages (Old Church Slavonic *vrěteno*, Middle High German *wirtel*, Welsh *gwerthyd*).

[32] While death is associated with reverse movement, life is associated with forward movement. The notion about birth being connected with forward movement and death being connected with reverse movement at the level of the human life cycle corresponds well with Emily Lyle's hypothesis of a two-phase annual cycle.

[33] I would like to thank Karen Bek-Pedersen and Freda Bayne for clarifying a few facts of spinning to me.

*I would like to thank the Humboldt foundation for their financial support during my research stay at the University of Mannheim in 2008, where I collected most of the literature for the present paper and where the paper started to take shape.

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