

# Between Christianity and Paganism: The Bulgarian Spring Customs and Holidays

Между християнството и езичеството:  
Българските пролетни празници и обичаи



## Part I - Част I

The spring has always had a special place in **the Bulgarian folklore calendar** (*Българския фолклорен календар*). It is considered not only as a new beginning, but also as a time with **very meaningful rituals** (*много значими обреди*). The difficult travel and restrictions can cause a lot of inconvenience, but one thing is certain - the pandemic created **an unexpected opportunity for Bulgarians to get to know their own country with its fascinating secrets and traditions**. We offer you to start your sightseeing tour of Bulgaria with a walk among **the most beautiful Bulgarian holidays and folk customs that the spring season can give us**.

### **When the Christianity meets the Paganism (*Когато християнството срещне езичеството*)**

Bulgarians have been professing a specific "pagan Christianity" ("*езическо християнство*") for centuries. That is why many of the holidays in our country have an **ancient pagan origin** and nevertheless **fit well into Christian dogmas**. The most famous and at the same time the oldest spring celebrations are **Baba Marta (Баба Марта), Annunciation (Благовещение), Lazarus' Day (Лазаровден), Palm Sunday (Цветница), Easter (Великден) and St. George's Day (Гергьовден)**. Many of them are being moved to the city as the population of the villages has been declining for decades. But we are now reviving the interest in our holidays. We celebrate them even in an online environment.

### **Baba Marta was in a hurry (*Баба Марта бързала*)**

There are three months in the Bulgarian folklore calendar that **are personified - January (Big Sechko - Голям Сечко), February (Small Sechko - Малък Сечко), March (Baba Marta - Баба Марта)**. Baba Marta is the name of a mythical character in the Bulgarian folklore with a changeable character. It is believed that she "comes" on March 1. Different rituals are performed throughout the month. Divinations related to some migratory birds are made. The custom of **tying martenitsa** is known in **Bulgaria, Moldova, Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Serbia and Romania**. There are several **legends** related to this custom.

### **The Annunciation or Kukuvdan - we celebrate the good news and beware of samodivies (*Благовещение или Кукувден - празнуваме благата вест и се пазим от самодиви*)**

This holiday is unknown to the younger generation in Bulgaria. It is a part of the **Easter holiday cycle** with a permanent date. It is a holiday for **all Christians**,

regardless of which branch of the Church they belong to. This is the day when, according to the **Bible**, the Archangel Gabriel brings the news to the Virgin Mary that she is going to give birth to Jesus Christ. On March 25, we celebrate **two holidays together - the Christian holiday of the Annunciation and the folklore holiday of Blagovets (Благовец)**.

According to the folk beliefs, after this day everyone should leave home with money in his pocket, because in case the **суккоо (кукувицата)** knocks him, he will be full and with money in the whole year. On the feast of Blagovets, the **cuckoo calls for the first time after winter - a proof that spring has come**. Therefore, the older name of the holiday in some areas is "**Kukuvden**". Most **ritual songs (обредни песни)**, which are performed on this holiday, are **related to the symbolism of the cuckoo**.

The holiday has its magical notes. According to an **old folk belief**, on this day in the springs, rivers and forest meadows return the "**forever young maidens of Bulgarian folklore**" - the so-called **samodivies (самодиви)**. The songs also **contain a note of warning** - if someone enters a corner of the diva, she can take him out of the human world. Fairy-tale poetic stories are told of girls who were killed by the samodivies because they did not listen to the warning. This day is a good example of **how folk beliefs express people's hidden fears of natural forces when the seasons change**. What is more, there are customs such as praying for rain - "**German**" (**герман**) and "**butterfly**" (**пеперуда**). The reason behind this is that the **Bulgarians have been worshiping the Mother Nature for centuries**.

## Part II - Част II

Lazarus Saturday (Лазаровден) is the apotheosis of spring in the Bulgarian folklore calendar. It does not have a fixed date, like Easter and Palm Sunday. It is associated with the biblical figure of Lazarus, whom Jesus resurrected on the fourth day after his burial, in gratitude for his hospitality.

An extremely important part of the holiday is the custom of "lazaruvane" (лазаруване). It is performed only by girls and women. Apart from being extremely beautiful with his songs and wishes for prosperity, it is also connected with the "transition" of the young girls to maidens who can get married. It is believed that if any girl has not been lazarka (лазарка), she will not find a husband.

It remains a popular custom to this day - it is practiced in its "modern" version in many kindergartens, community centers and schools...



### Part III - Част III

#### **St. George's Day: The holiday of valor (*Гергьовден: Празникът на храбростта*)**

The holiday of St. George the Victorious is both a **Day of Valor** and a **Day of the Bulgarian Army** from a modern point of view. According to folk beliefs, **St. George** (*свети Георги*) and **St. Demetrius** (*свети Димитър*) are twin brothers, between whom the year is divided. It is believed that from St. George's Day to St. Dimitrov's Day is its **summer half**, and from St. Dimitrov's Day to St. George's Day - its **winter half**. For this reason, on May 6, the beginning of the new year for work is set. That is why many customs related to **agriculture, cattle breeding** and **health** are observed on the holiday. The ritual lamb is an important food for the day. The custom associated with tying **St. George's Day swings** (*гергьовденски люлки*), which are a symbols of youthful love, health and beauty, is very beautiful and it **brings positive energy**. The songs that are sung on the holiday **have love character**. It can be concluded that the most important customs are connected with the pagan practices more than the religious ones.

#### **St. Spas's Day and Rousal Sunday: A homage to death, but also a hope for health and life (*Спасовден и Русалска неделя: поклон пред смъртта, но и надежда за здраве и живот*)**

Forty days after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the church holiday of the Ascension Day is celebrated. It always falls on a Thursday and is the last of the seven Holy Thursdays. According to biblical notions, after his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ met with his disciples for forty days to tell them about the kingdom of God. On the fortieth day he ascended the Mount of Olives before the eyes of his disciples and Virgin Mary ascended to heaven, thus ending her earthly journey.

In the Bulgarian holiday calendar, St. Spas's Day is one of the holidays associated with the "**cult of the dead**" (*култа към мъртвите*). On this day, according to the belief, the souls of the deceased, who have been "at large" since the first Holy Thursday, are "collected".

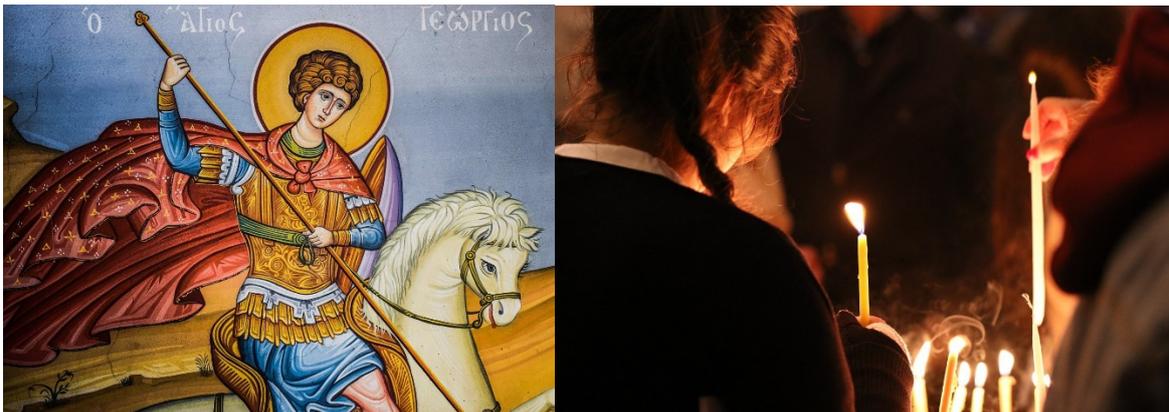
The most common for this day is "**walking on dew**" (*ходене по роса*) (mostly in Eastern Bulgaria). It is believed that on the night before Easter, the medicinal herb "rosen" (росен) which the so-called **roussallies** go out to gather it. The night before the holiday the sick people and the childless women go to sleep in

forests and meadows, where dew grows. In the morning they get up and on what is in the bowl or on the towel, they guess what awaits them. The green dew leaf is a sign of healing and the soil is a sign of death. The sick person washes himself with water from the bowl and drinks the rest in the hope of healing.

On the afternoon of the day, people dance "spasovi hora" (*спасови хора\**) on who are only accompanied by songs - **without musical instruments**. In the eastern parts of the country, girls are caught by these people dressed in clothes taken by young brides. It is believed that this will ensure their marriage until the next St. Spas's Day.

One of the characteristic customs for Rousal Sunday, performed mainly in Northwestern Bulgaria, are the so-called "rousal games". All participants in the custom are young men, **the roussalies**, who go in groups composed of an odd number of people with one main leader called "vatafin" („ватафин“).

The **vatafin** receives his male inheritance title. He chooses the **roussaliies** (русалиите) in his group by **physical qualities, mental resilience and ability to keep secrets**. They go all week and dance everywhere. Few have heard of them as **they prefer to keep information** about their roots, beliefs and rituals shrouded in mystery. It is an interesting fact that the **Bulgarian Orthodox Church has never denied the roussaliies** and their pagan practices. In most cases the Bulgarian Orthodox Church **has patronized** them.



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