AMAZONS, SHIELDMAIDENS, AND DARING *POLIANITSY*:

SLAVIC WARRIOR WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE AND FOLKLORE

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ABSTRACT

Dismissed as fiction, vilified, or relegated to a footnote, warrior women appear in ancient through medieval literature and folklore as accessories to men's stories. However, archaeological discoveries of recent decades validated the existence of real warrior women among the Scythians, a collective of Bronze- and Iron-Age nomadic tribes from the Eurasian steppes, who inspired the earliest myths about the Amazons. These ancient narratives then influenced literary accounts of real as well as fictional warrior women from Eastern Europe over the ensuing centuries. This dissertation seeks to recenter women in their own narratives by exploring evidence from multiple disciplines and analyzing fourteen literary case studies, including ancient Amazons and Scythians, Viking Age Slavic queens, and warrior women known as *polianitsy* who figure in Russian folklore. Many of the male warriors in these same narratives are widely believed to be based on real men, but most of the female warriors are disregarded as fictitious and sensational additions. Over the course of my research, several trends arose regarding portrayals of historical versus literary warrior women. Authors present historically attested accounts as exceptions and marvels, while fictionalized narratives stand as warnings for women who would transgress gender norms. Yet, authors consistently characterize both historical and literary warrior women as foreigners. Authors also downplay the military contributions of historical women, accentuating traditionally feminine qualities instead. Through the prevalence of the bride-taking motif combined with real social

hierarchies, marital status likewise affects their agency; widowed warriors possess the most power, and married women, the least. My research demonstrates how, despite two millennia's worth of suppression and distortion, the narratives of extraordinary women endure, as will the narratives of present-day female veterans and military members, whose accomplishments are undergoing similar suppression and distortion.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

From ancient Greco-Roman literature through Russian folktales recorded in the last few centuries, the fate of most warrior women in heroic narratives is to die. While grieving the loss of her sister, Penthesilea led an elite band of Amazons to aid the defense of Troy against the invading Greeks. The fierce maidens cut down countless Greek soldiers, yet every single woman ultimately fell to a Greek arrow, spear, or sword. As the last Amazon standing, Penthesilea challenged Achilles to a duel. She failed, and so a false horse breached the gates of Troy. Centuries later, Vlasta led the Bohemian women in an uprising against a nascent patriarchy, but she was betrayed by one of her own. Surrounded by bloodthirsty men intent on revenge, Vlasta fell, and the maiden army she commanded fell with her. None of the warrior women survived the battle of the sexes that christened the Czech state. Further east near Kyiv, Nastasia Korolevichna acquiesced to marry the hero Dunai only after he narrowly defeated her in combat, thereby proving himself worthy of her hand. She later bested him in a public archery contest. Overcome with jealousy, Dunai killed first Nastasia and then himself.

These three women emerged from different time periods, cultures, and genres, but they exemplify a pattern often repeated in literary accounts of warlike, incontrollable, or otherwise transgressive women. They are also united by their geography, born in lands formerly held by the Scythians, a collection of nomadic tribes who dominated the Eurasian steppes from approximately the ninth century BCE through the third century CE. In literature from the Black to the Baltic Seas, from antiquity to the medieval period, those women who dared to challenge men, on and off the battlefield, were doomed to strive valiantly, to put on a grand show of near victory, and then to die

spectacularly. Furthermore, warrior women do not stand alone in their narratives. They are cast as helpers, love interests, and enemies of the male protagonists. All we have of their narratives must be mined from the narratives of heroic men, against whom even the most extraordinary women are relegated to secondary roles.

Another pattern emerges, however, when we compare the more fantastical narratives in myths and folktales with the historical narratives in chronicles: fictional warrior women suffer worse fates than do the real ones. In literature, warrior women, no matter how successful in the short term, must eventually pay for their transgressions, namely, refusing to submit to men; whereas in history, warrior women can and often do remain victorious, defeating emperors, bringing multiple kings to heel, or laying siege to cities and setting their enemies ablaze before dying peacefully of old age. Thus, ancient and medieval representations of warrior women do not coincide with reality, a trend that sadly continues today with the distortion and erasure of narratives of female veterans and servicemembers in the US military. This dissertation aims to shed light on that erasure and distortion, past and present, and to restore warrior women to their rightful place in the center of their narratives.

Of the numerous motifs inherited from Ancient Greco-Roman literature, one subject enduringly dismissed as fiction is that of the Amazons. To societies entrenched in centuries of patriarchal norms prescribing proper womanly behavior, a matriarchal tribe of warrior women reads no less fantastical than a many-headed hydra or the convoluted voyage of Odysseus. Yet, the Amazons may not be as fictitious as scholars once concluded. Despite current US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's repeated assertions that women serving in combat is a recent development and is detrimental to military success, archaeological and anthropological efforts of recent decades have uncovered a plethora of material evidence that corroborates the existence of warrior women

throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages, across a vast swath of territory corresponding to modern day Ukraine, Central Asia, and Russia. Moreover, the Greeks and Romans were not the only literate civilizations of millennia past to portray warrior women from the Eurasian steppes, nor were warrior women absent from the literature of the ensuing centuries. Medieval authors provide accounts of Viking Age warrior queens and shieldmaidens, or *skjaldmeyjar*, among both the Scandinavians and Slavs who came to populate the same territories the Greeks once attributed to the Amazons. Russian oral literature, which developed parallel to written traditions until its tales were recorded in the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, also depicts warrior women who lived and fought in a legendary version of medieval Rus'.

The suggestion that some facts may be buried among the ancient Amazon fictions has been gaining popularity thanks to recent archaeological discoveries. After extensive excavations of graves containing remains of women buried with weapons, many of whose skeletons bear the scars of battle, the conclusion that those women knew how to use their weapons is inevitable. An exclusively female society is as impractical as an exclusively male one, and so some scholars continue to reject the Amazons as sheer fantasy, but a relatively egalitarian society in which both men and women went to war hardly stretches the modern imagination. In fact, ample evidence—material as well as literary—supports the existence of such societies among the various tribes of Scythia. Given more than a thousand years of nomadic incursions into the territories of their sedentary neighbors, the contemporary consensus is that a real presence of warrior women among Eurasian steppe nomads inspired Ancient Greco-Roman authors to mythologize factual Scythians into fictional Amazons.[1]

[1] D. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton University Press, 2007): 329.

Furthermore, the Amazons were not the only warrior women depicted in ancient literature. Alongside their more fantastical sisters, the narratives of several historical warrior queens also appear in the written record, and their combined narratives in turn provided subsequent literate civilizations with a template for documenting the curious phenomenon of warrior women, particularly those in positions of power. Medieval authors, classically educated and often writing in Latin regardless of their native tongue, drew inspiration from Greco-Roman models when describing extraordinary women. By examining medieval chronicles of Slavic and Scandinavian history, we can see the legacy of Amazons and Scythians among the Slavic queens and shieldmaidens of the Viking Age. Like their ancient predecessors, these warrior women were presented as "marvels," as extreme exceptions to the norm: a handful of extraordinary women capable of rising above the failings of their gender.[2]

Developing alongside written traditions, Slavic folklore carried a parallel torch of ancient warrior women into the present age. Russian fairy tales and epic folk ballads depict the exploits of female warriors known as *polianitsy* who, like the Amazons before them, often dueled and sometimes wed famous heroes. Though a minority of Russian scholars have suggested a connection between the folkloric *polianitsy* and ancient steppe nomads, the *polianitsy* have not undergone nearly the same level of scholarly scrutiny as did ancient or medieval warrior women, nor have they been treated with the same level of seriousness as their male heroic counterparts, known as *bogatyri*.[3] The prospect that several *bogatyri* trace back to historical persons is generally accepted, yet the *polianitsy* are almost universally regarded as fictitious additions intended to amplify the heroic narrative, not as reflections of an earlier reality that allowed for women to bear

[2] James Blythe, "Women in the Military: Scholastic Arguments and Medieval Images of Female Warriors," *History of Political Thought* 22, no. 2 (2001): 246.

[3] Tetiana Kaplun, "The Archetype of the Maiden Warrior in Eastern Slavic and German Musical Traditions," *Komitas Museum Institute Yearbook* (2020): 307-308.

arms. Nevertheless, hundreds of graves of armed women—and there are very likely many more female remains waiting to be properly gendered among the excavated burials of Scythian, Slavic, and Scandinavian origin—litter the landscape the *polianitsy* were said to roam.[4]

Buried Narratives

The relegation of women's narratives to the sidelines concerns the vast majority in historical literature written by, for, and about men, to include histories and other genres of purported nonfiction.[5] The authors of Ancient Greece and Rome, from Homer and Herodotus to Quintus of Smyrna, centered their works around great men and their accomplishments, but the occurrences of exceptional or transgressive women—queens, warriors, and sorceresses—at times overshadow the ostensible heroes of their works. Though blessed with divine battle prowess from her father, the god of war, the Amazon Penthesilea is but a supporting character who, like so many others, falls to the hero Achilles outside the gates of Troy. Similarly, Tomyris, a historical Scythian queen who defeated the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great, remains a footnote in the legacy of the far more famous emperor. In an all too consistent pattern of expunging great women from the historical record, Tomyris is rarely named in biographies of Cyrus.[6] In fact, rarely do they mention that he lost his final battle to a woman.

Women's literary effacement is not limited to the ancients. Medieval literature from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe likewise suborned its warrior women to the men in their lives. Despite consolidating power, ruling burgeoning nations, and conquering their enemies, medieval authors are quick to establish that Olga of Kyiv and Sigrid the Proud are widow-regents, not queens

[4] Adrienne Mayor, *The Amazons: Lives & Legend of Warrior Women across the Ancient Worlds* (Princeton University Press): 64.
[5] Maria Tatar, *The Heroine with 1000 Faces* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021): xx.
[6] Deberah Cameron, *Feminism: A Brief Introduction to the Ideas, Debates and Politics of the Movement* (University of Chicago Press): 96.

in their own right. As soon as their sons come of age, they are expected to relinquish the reins of their kingdoms. That neither woman truly does is, conveniently, overlooked by their male chroniclers. Accounts of warrior women in contemporaneous Slavic folklore also downplay the power, independence, and competence of the *polianitsy*. Though Nastasia Korolevichna is the superior warrior, the epic folk ballad in which she appears is nevertheless titled for the male *bogatyr* she outshines: "Dunai." Like several women I discuss in the following chapters, the ultimate reward for Nastasia's martial abilities is death. Warrior women are an existential threat to patriarchal society; thus, their narratives must reflect an appropriate punishment lest other women acquire dangerous notions about taking up arms.[7] In those instances where the fate of the warrior woman cannot be twisted into a punishment, as with the narratives of historical figures like Olga of Kyiv or Tomyris, then her warriorhood is instead deemphasized such that she is made remarkable in some other, more appropriately feminine way. Olga is remembered not as a warrior queen, but as a pious mother and the first Christian in Rus'. Instead of lauding her military legacy, authors laud her cleverness and compassion for her people.

For at least the past few millennia's worth of literate civilizations, the pervasive subordination of women in literature parallels the subordination of women in real life, yet there is room for speculation regarding pre-literate gender hierarchies.[8] While numerous scholars and laypersons alike posit a universal prehistoric matriarchy from the dawn of humanity until approximately six thousand years ago, or toward the end of the neolithic era, no uncontaminated literature and next to no physical evidence survives from so long ago to definitively corroborate or disprove that theory. The assumption of a prehistoric global society that revered women over

[7] Elizabeth Lesser, *Cassandra Speaks: When Women are the Storytellers, the Human Story Changes* (Harper Wave, 2020): 11.
[8] Cameron, *Feminism: Brief Introduction*, 8.

men, and held as superior those qualities deemed feminine over those deemed masculine, has been accepted by contemporary scholars of many fields, due in large part to the spiritual feminism movement of late twentieth century. However, the basic premise is not without flaw. Most relevant for my research is the question of what makes a certain human quality innately masculine or feminine, and where on that spectrum warrior women fall. The Greeks viewed Amazons as "masculine women," but is there anything definitively masculine about the concept or conduct of war?[9] The subjects of my research demonstrate that is not the case. War has no gender, and indeed, women are far from unaffected by its ubiquitous presence.

Regardless of the unprovability of a universal prehistoric matriarchy, stories of powerful women survived. As countless others have observed, the overarching pattern of the surviving narratives lends itself to an allegorical interpretation of matriarchy ceding to patriarchy, played out in individual stories of warrior women ceding victory to warrior men. Unfortunately, efforts to reclaim women's complete narratives are hindered not only by limited source material overall, but by the dearth of female voices among the surviving primary material.[10] Notably, every single written work I discuss in the following pages was authored by a man. It is only once I address folklore that women's voices appear at all since several prominent singers of Russian epic folk ballads, known as *byliny*, were women, and many fairy tales were performed by women. Yet, regardless of the performer's gender, the recorders and anthologists were almost always male, so the extent to which gender bias plays a role in the portrayal of warrior women across literary genres cannot be overlooked.

[9] Walter Penrose, *Postcolonial Amazons: Female Masculinity and Courage in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2016): 4.

[10] Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to 1870* (Oxford University Press, 1994): 13.

Convergence of Genres

The Amazons and their descendants exist at the crossroads of history, literature, mythology, and folklore. Consequently, a study such as this demands a multidisciplinary approach, drawing source material from archaeological reports, histories, ethnography, and a broad swath of literature from key time periods and locations. Out of this amalgamation of sources, I assemble the most complete, relevant narratives of individual warrior women who figure in the literature of Ancient Greece and Rome as well as medieval Russia, Iceland, Denmark, and the Czech Republic. I also synthesize the dominant narratives of the most popular *polianitsy* from dozens of Russian folktales collected in various provinces from the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries. Because of the breadth of sources consulted, it is necessary to first discuss the pertinent disciplines and where they intersect, beginning with genre.

One commonality that kept resurfacing among the primary literature I consulted was that the narratives, though they entered the written record, existed in oral tradition for centuries prior to their recording by ancient and medieval authors. Folktales and myths, as examples of oral literature that originated during humanity's earliest attempts to understand, interpret, and narrate the universe, share significant source material, and so they also contain overlapping motifs, themes, and plots.[11] Scholars of various disciplines have attempted to demarcate the line between the two genres. Since the Greek term μύθος (*mythos*) originally indicated 'tales' or 'stories' in a general sense, this continued nebulousness manifests in the tendency to illustrate rather than define either genre.[12] For the purposes of the present study, I would suggest the main difference between

[11] L. P. Koval'chuk, "Osobennosti integratsii antropomorfnykh blendov v russkom skazochnom diskurse (na primere ishkodnogo prostranstva 'zhenshchina')," *Vestnik ChelGU* 6, no. 335 (2014): 55; S. Binbin, N. Kravchenko, and S. Matvieieva, "Archaic archetypes and symbols of the Ukrainian and Russian peoples: to debunk the myth of a single people," *Amazonia Investiga* 11, no. 59 (2022): 187; O. G. Lopukhova, "Transformatsiia gendernykh obrazov v tekstakh russkikh volshebnykh skazok," *Vestnik TGGPU* 1, no. 16 (2009): 1.

[12] Graham Anderson, *Fairytale in the Ancient World* (Routledge, 2000): 2.

mythology and folklore lies in the elevation of subject. Myths answer lofty, existential questions through personification and deification: the origins of the universe, powerful forces of nature, night and day, life and death. Folktales, on the other hand, illuminate more mundane, human topics: duels and battles, unfaithful spouses, heists and thefts.[13] In this sense, Amazons and *polianitsy* alike belong more to the realm of folklore than mythology, which will become apparent in the following chapters.

Myths and folktales also differ with regard to their primary actors. Folk heroes, though they may occasionally possess magical powers or abilities beyond that of the average human, are not gods. Some folk heroes may indeed conceal remnants of deities, stripped of their divinity and transformed into saints and tricksters and devils as polytheism and paganism gave way to today's dominant monotheistic religions, but they are meant nonetheless to be interpreted as human, or at least mostly human in the case of ancient demigods like Heracles, Achilles, or the Amazons, who were said to be fathered by the god Ares.[14] Thus, some folktales contain mythic elements, and some stories straddle the line between folklore and mythology, such as the Russian epic folk ballad "Dunai," in which the suicide of the titular character begets the river Danube. Yet, as genres of oral literature, myths and folktales can be differentiated by the grandness of their subjects and the mortality of their protagonists. Mythology illuminates the deep and the transcendent mechanisms of the universe, and so the actors lean toward divinity, whereas folklore illustrates the breadth of human folly and adventure. Narratives of warrior women normally fit into the latter category.

[13] Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales: A New History* (State University of New York Press, 2009): 4.

[14] Grigory Bondarenko, "Russian Epic Songs and Folk Spirituality," *Temenos Academy Review* 18 (2015): 126; Izar Lunaček, "The Good, Bad, and Outcast: On the Moral Ambivalence of Folk Heroes," *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 17 (2014): 208-209; Anna V. Zhuchkova and Karina N. Gulai, "Funktsional'noe znachenie mifologicheskogo obraza Koshcheiia Bessmertnogo i ego otrazhenie v russkikh volshevnykh skazakh," *BBK* 82, no. 3 (2015): 166.

Since oral literature predates the very concept of writing, the earliest written literature derived its components from the myths and folktales previously preserved among a community's storytellers.[15] While oral literature is by its nature performative, core narratives within the genre are remarkably consistent. The names of certain characters or the specific magical item a hero procures may change from variant to variant of any given tale, but the tale itself remains recognizable. Once these stories took written form, they became even more static, exchanging their residual improvisatory qualities for permanence.[16] For example, the essential narrative of the Trojan War is the same across Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*, despite the lives of the three authors straddling nearly a millennium. At the time of Homer's initial composition, the story of the Trojan War had already been firmly established in oral tradition; by the time Quintus of Smyrna added his continuation, Homer's written account had become canon. Similarly, once scholars began collecting and publishing folktales, the disparate variants tended to coalesce into one or two dominant versions.

The evolution of written literature from and alongside oral literature further expanded the available genres to preserve warrior women's narratives, but most relevant here is the enshrining of the past in the form of historical chronicles. The relationships between history and recorded history, and between recorded history and literature, are necessary to address because of the present study's inclusion of people and events that are historically attested juxtaposed with those that are fabricated from a historical inspiration. History, as the sum of past events, is objective, but no matter how impartial a historian endeavors to be, the act of recording history requires a certain

[15] Bondarenko, "Russian Epic Songs," 110; Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (Routledge, 2006): 13.
[16] Tatar, *Heroine with 1000 Faces*, 30.

amount of judgment, interpretation, and perspective.[17] Different disciplines like archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and ethnography can supplement written histories by uncovering unwritten pieces, assembling their own narratives from evidence mined in burial sites, linguistic archaisms, genealogies, and other non-narrative sources.[18] The act of fashioning a narrative out of these events is where recorded history becomes literature, and thus, where the narratives of literary-historical warrior women like the Amazons reside.[19]

The line between recorded history and literature is also less and less distinct as we go further back in time as the delineation between historians and authors is a relatively modern one.[20] The earliest historians like Herodotus, the Father of History himself, had limited options for source material. With few prior histories to consult—and for some topics, none—these early historians mostly relied on eye witness accounts, hearsay, and oral literature. However, written epics, lyrics, dramas, and other literary works existed in abundance, and so they relied on such genres to give form to their histories, a method still employed by many contemporary historians.[21] The most readable, entertaining, and coherent of histories—in other words, the most literary—are the ones most likely to have endured beyond the historian's lifetime, thereby able to inform later generations of the happenings of the past.[22] The literary aspects of the histories and chronicles consulted for the present study, from Herodotus and Plutarch to Cosmas of Prague and Snorri Sturluson, are what preserved them such that they could be consulted at all.

[17] Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, 4; Hubert A. Royster, "Literature and History: A Comparison and a Contrast," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 20, no. 2 (1943): 125.
[18] Lesser, *Cassandra Speaks*, 38.
[19] N. O. P. Pyke, "History as Literature," *The Australian Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1947): 101.
[20] Walter Laqueur, "Literature and the Historian," *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, no. 1 (1967): 6.
[21] K. N. Panikkar, "Literature as History of Social Change," *Social Scientist* 40, no. 3/4 (2012): 4.
[22] Pyke, "History as Literature," 95.

From Scythia to Rus'

The various warrior women addressed in the present study survived in the literature of multiple cultures and time periods, but they all trace their roots to an arc of formerly Scythian territory between the Black and Baltic Seas. Beginning in the fifth or sixth century CE, various nomadic and pastoral tribes migrated northward from what is now Ukraine, spreading out into previously Scythian lands.[23] These tribes were later grouped together and labeled 'Slavs,' a name given to them by the Byzantines with little consideration for what they may have called themselves.[24] Historians have put forth competing theories regarding the origin of the Slavs; notably, some posit Scythian descent, citing the shared cultural elements evident in their art, burial customs, and semi-nomadic pastoralism, as well as their overlapping geography.[25] Regardless, by the time the Vikings made their earliest voyages into Eastern Europe in the late eighth century, these formerly Scythian territories supported a melting pot of ethnicities, languages, and cultures, of which Slavs and Finns comprised the majority.[26] Interestingly, though not conclusively, this same region corresponds to the area most often credited as the core of the supposed prehistoric matriarchy.[27] Certainly, such a drastic shift in social hierarchies as matriarchy ceding to patriarchy

[23] Jan Ivar Bjørnflaten, "Finno-Ugrians, Varangians, and Slavs in Upper Russia: New Chronologies and Interpretations," *Life and Text: Essays in Honour of Geir Kjetsaa on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday*, ed. Erik Egeberg, Audun J. Mørch, and Ole Michael Selberg (Universitetet i Oslo, Slavisk-baltisk avdeling, 1997): 76; Jens Ulriksen, "The Late Iron Age and Early Medieval Period in the Western Baltic," *Across the Western Baltic*, ed. Keld Møller Hansen and Kristoffer Buck Pedersen (Sydsjællands Museum Press, 2006): 234; Mateusz Bogucki, "On Wulfstan's right hand – the Viking Age emporia in West Slav Lands," *From One Sea to Another: Trading Places in the European and Mediterranean Early Middle Ages*, ed. Sauro Gelichi and Richard Hodges (Brepols, 2012): 86.

[24] Walter Pohl, "Ethnonyms and Early Medieval Ethnicity," *The Hungarian Historical Review* 7, no. 1 (2018): 13.

[25] Horace G. Lunt, "What the Rus' Primary Chronicle Tells Us about the Origin of the Slavs and of Slavic Writing," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 19 (1995): 346; Samuel H. Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans. and eds., *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text* (The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953): 36; Thorir J. Hraundal, "New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus in Arabic Sources," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Russel Pool et al (Brepols, 2014): 71.

[26] Tatjana N. Jackson, *Eastern Europe in Icelandic Sagas* (Arc Humanities Press, 2019): 33; Pohl, "Ethnonyms," 9; Charlotta Hillerdal, "Vikings, Rus, Varangians: The 'Varangian Problem' in View of Ethnicity in Archaeology," *Current Swedish Archaeology* 14 (2006): 93.

[27] Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Beacon Press, 2000): 40.

would leave a strong imprint on cultural memory, expressed in tales of heroic women, doomed to either submit gracefully to male dominance or, more commonly, to die.

Equally as disruptive to society as the posited genesis of patriarchy was the drastic shift in European religious paradigms during the medieval period. The Viking Age warrior women who appear in medieval Slavic and Scandinavian literature reflect elements of the Amazon-Scythian legacy, but they also embody the cultural fusion that accompanied the decline of Scythia and the rise of Rus'. More importantly, they reflect a Christian view of the pagan past. Numerous factors contributed to the literary portrayal of warrior women since ancient times, from misogynistic authorial biases to evolving social norms, but one of the most significant events to affect the preservation of women's activities in the historical record was Europe's widespread adoption of Christianity. By the end of the Viking Age, Scandinavians and West Slavs conformed to Roman Catholicism while East Slavs embraced Byzantine Orthodoxy, resulting in the majority of both Slavic and Scandinavian medieval authors serving one church or the other, typically as clerics.[28] Thus, the narratives of such "unruly women" as the Viking Age warrior queens who appear in medieval chronicles first passed through a Christian filter, either becoming sainted like Olga of Kyiv, who converted to Christianity, or vilified like Sigrid the Proud, who refused to do so.[29]

Although they did not enter the written literary record until comparatively recently, the warrior women who appear in Russian folklore also trace back to the late Viking Age and early medieval period. The narratives of these *polianitsy* take place at the dawn of Rus', when the heart of the kingdom was Kyiv, Ukraine. The mighty *bogatyri* whom they fought and wed served the court of Vladimir, who could be—though likely was not—a representation of Vladimir I, Olga's

[28] John Eldevik, "Saints, Pagans, and the Wonders of the East: The Medieval Imaginary and its Manuscript Contexts," *Traditio* 71 (2016): 244.
[29] Theresa Tinkle, *Gender and Power in Medieval Exegesis* (Palgrave MacMillian, 2010): 47.

grandson.[30] At this time the Orthodox Church held a near monopoly on literacy, but its influence outside the ruling and noble classes remained shallow. The peasantry largely could not read, and moreover, telling stories and singing songs made for easier entertainment while laboring in the fields than did reading.[31] Therefore, though the depiction of warrior women in written literature was subjected to heavy Christian influence, the adventures of the *polianitsy* would not have undergone the same level of ecclesiastical editing. Even by the time anthologists and folklorists began recording such tales, long after Orthodox Christianity had permeated all levels of Russian society, the storytellers were often illiterate.[32]

Spirit of the Warrior

In contemporary society, war is mainly the province of professionals, but this was not always the case. As of 2018, approximately six per cent of the living population of the United States had served in the US military; active service members typically account for less than one per cent of the total population.[33] For perspective, despite mandatory service for all adult men and a significant expansion of the armed forces following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian population currently serving in their military amounts to slightly over one per cent.[34] When accounting for the devastating losses they have suffered since invading Ukraine in 2022, the percentage may be closer to two. However, as a result of various factors—a reduction in peer-to-peer military conflicts, changes in technology and culture, diversification of labor, to name a few—such a small percentage is a drastic departure from the percentage of the overall population who

[30] Susana T. Prieto, "Slavic Epic: Past Tales and Present Myths," *Epic and History*, ed. David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009): 231.
[31] Barbara E. Clements, *A History of Women in Russia* (Indiana University Press, 20120: 10; Sverre Bagge, *Cross and Scepter: The Rise of the Scandinavian Kingdoms from the Vikings to the Reformation* (Princeton University Press, 2014): 8.
[32] Ruth B. Bottigheimer, "Fairy Tales, Folk Narrative Research and History," *Social History* 14, no. 3 (1989): 349.
[33] Jonathon Vespa, "Those Who Served: America's Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror," *Veterans*, United States Census Bureau, effective June 2, 2020.
[34] "Russia," CIA Factbook, effective November 4, 2024.

engaged in warfare in centuries and millennia past. While the military is now considered a profession, for the civilizations relevant to this study, war was closer to a way of life. Even when considering martial societies like Imperial Rome that employed standing armies, most warfare of the distant past was less a voluntary career than an ever-present fact of reality. 'Warrior' was not a job description; it was a permanent identity.

Participating in offensive operations like raids was an expectation of most able-bodied men in Viking societies, to include the Rus', but whenever they were *not* invading their neighbors—which was, in fact, the majority of the time, as the raiding season was finite—these men were farmers, merchants, and craftsmen.[35] Thus, although a heftier section of the population participated in warfare than many of their contemporaries, Viking raiders were not professional Soldiers as we would think of them today, but rather, the quintessential "weekend warriors." Presumably, any Viking women who participated in these short-term offensive operations also did so on a seasonal basis, but her identity as a shieldmaiden would likewise extend beyond her immediate participation. Scandinavian kingdoms maintained no standing armies, no permanent military hierarchies in service of a singular king or state, but rather the regular populace conducted war in accordance with the seasons.[36] In a society that so frequently participated in warfare, from seasonal raids to permanent colonization, the veneration of warriorhood was a natural development.

Centuries prior across the Eurasian steppes, warriorhood as an activity and as an identity was even more pervasive than among the Vikings. For many Scythian tribes, joining raiding parties was an obligation for all able-bodied men *and* women, with exceptions for those who were

[35] William R. Short, *Viking Weapons and Combat Techniques* (Westholme, 2009): 25.
[36] Anne Pedersen, "Military Organization and Offices: The Evidence of Grave Finds," *Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Bjørn Poulsen and Søren Sindbæk (Brepols, 2012): 47.

pregnant, nursing, or otherwise needed to tend the tribe's children, elderly, and infirm.[37] Even then, those women who stayed behind were expected to defend the camp against enemy incursions, which were likely to occur while the regular cavalry were otherwise occupied. Weapons, armor, jewelry, and other grave goods abound in Scythian burials, with nearly all male graves and most female graves containing, at a minimum, arrowheads.[38] Scythian nomads were not just societies that contained warriors, then, but societies comprised almost entirely of them.

When Women go to War

The idea that war was, is, or should be the exclusive province of men may be pervasive today, but it has no basis in history or reality. Some authors as ancient as Plato conceded that certain women could exceed the abilities of most men, including on the battlefield.[39] Regardless of Defense Secretary Hegseth's repeated claims that women are too risk-averse and maternal to effectively participate in combat, the thousands of women presently serving in official combat roles across the US Armed Forces, the tens of thousands who served unofficially in combat roles in recent decades, and the countless more women who participated in combat throughout the previous centuries of US history from the Revolutionary War onward, prove otherwise, and that is only in modern American history.[40] Aggression, violence, vengeance, the desire to protect one's

[37] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 132; A. I. Melyukova, "The Scythians and Sarmatians," trans. Julia Crookenden, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge University Press, 1990): 106; Eileen Murphy, *Iron Age Archaeology and Trauma from Aymyrlyg, South Siberia* (BAR Publishing, 2003): 15; Valeri I. Guliaev, "Amazons in Scythia: New Finds at the Middle Don, Southern Russia," *World Archaeology* 35, no. 1 (2003): 121.

[38] V. Iu. Murzin, "O pogrebeniyakh skifskikh nomarkhov," *Elita v istorii drevnikh i srednevekovykh narodov evrazii,* ed. P. K. Dashkovskii (Izdatel'stvo Altaiskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2015): 63; Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 64.

[39] Blythe, "Women in the Military," 243.

[40] One of Hegseth's primary points in disparaging women in combat is that allowing women into combat roles "lowers the standards." However, according to the National Defense Authorization Act of 1994, it is illegal for occupational standards to be altered in any way to allow women entry to a specific position. When the Army finally opened Ranger school to allow women to apply, the physical and academic standards remained unchanged; all of the female Ranger graduates—and there have been over a hundred now, though for their own safety the Army no longer publicly releases the names of its female Ranger graduates as they received significant harassment and death threats—met the exact same requirements as all male graduates. No standards were lowered.

loved ones – these qualities are not restricted to men, nor is the ability to act on them. The average man might be larger and possess more muscle mass than the average woman, yet as I will discuss in later chapters, literary warriors—male and female—are not meant to reflect the average, but the excellent. Therefore, the rules of what is 'average' do not apply.

The entrenched cultural association of warriorhood with masculinity has led some scholars to question not just the veracity of warrior women in the first place, but also the gender identity of individual warrior women throughout history. These scholars suggest that figures such as the ancient Amazons or Viking Age shieldmaidens exist in a gender-liminal state by being biologically female but taking on traditionally male roles as warriors and hunters, which in turn requires them to adopt socially male traits, both external (clothing style) and internal (aggression, dominance, et cetera).[41] Whatever these scholars choose to label this liminal state in which warrior women are theorized to exist—third gender, gender-fluid, nonbinary—the theory predicates on modern presuppositions about gender roles and identity, which are seldom applicable to past civilizations.[42]

The suggestion that, because long-dead warrior women do not fit neatly into the social binary of masculine or feminine according to the contemporary understanding of those terms, they must then occupy a third gender category outside that binary, is problematic, especially considering those long-dead women cannot speak for themselves. Placing warrior women outside the bounds of an acceptable gender binary also places them outside the bounds of acceptability, effectively

[41] Frieda S. Brown and Wm. Blake Tyrrell, "ἐκτιλώσαντο: A Reading of Herodotus' Amazons," *The Classical Journal* 80, no. 4 (1985): 302; Ken Dowden, "The Amazons: Development and Functions," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 140, no. 2 (1997): 97; Ben Raffield, "Playing Vikings: Militarism, Hegemonic Masculinities, and Childhood Enculturation in Viking Age Scandinavia," *Current Anthropology* 60, no. 6 (2019): 820; Kathleen M. Self, "The Valkyrie's Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender," *Feminist Formations* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 145.

[42] Holt N. Parker, "The Myth of the Heterosexual: Anthropology and Sexuality for Classicists," *Arethusa* 34, no. 3 (2001): 345; Ruth Hubbard, "Gender and Genitals: Constructs of Sex and Gender," *Social Text* 46/47 (1996): 158; Tatar, *Heroine with 1000 Faces*, 7; Anastasios G. Nikolaidis, "Plutarch on Women and Marriage," *Wiener Studien* 110 (1997): 27; Penrose, *Postcolonial Amazons*, 8.

othering them, hence their portrayal throughout the literary-historical record as transgressive, while simultaneously enforcing the binary. Instead, perhaps, it is our understanding of the binary that needs to change. There is nothing innately feminine about spinning wool or baking bread, nor is there anything innately masculine about wielding a sword or directing a battle. An activity has no gender, and so an activity cannot determine or invalidate the gender of the person engaged in it. Separating warrior women from their womanhood enforces the erroneous idea that women cannot be effective warriors and further serves to undermine the stories of extraordinary women. In other words, saying that warrior women are not really women is just another way of saying that women cannot be warriors.

Excluding warrior women from the acceptable gender binary is not the only, nor even the oldest, means of othering them. Another common trope regarding warrior women in literature is to portray them as foreign. Whenever Ancient Greeks and Romans wrote about Amazons and other Scythian nomads, they called them barbarians; conspicuously, they acknowledged no genuine warrior women among their own populations, though myths of such women existed.[43] Even the rare incidence of female gladiators in Rome was regarded as a foreign indulgence.[44] Likewise, when medieval authors discuss Viking Age warrior queens, they always come from somewhere else: Olga was a Varangian from Pskov who came to Kyiv; Sigrid was a Polish princess who came to Sweden. Even figures such as Libuše and Vlasta, though their chroniclers share their Czech origins, arose from the primordial otherness of a prehistoric matriarchy, not a recognizably Czech state. In Russian folklore, the *polianitsy* are also foreigners, arriving in Kyiv from a legendary version of Lithuania, Poland, or some distant, unnamed kingdom. In literature across the millennia,

[43] Penrose, *Postcolonial Amazons*, 4.
[44] Anna McCullough, "Female Gladiators in Imperial Rome: Literary Context and Historical Fact," *The Classical World* 101, no. 2 (2008): 202.

warrior women were more than just a foreign concept; they were portrayed as actually foreign since surely no women of the author's native civilization would behave so improperly.

Because warrior women's narratives are buried in narratives devoted to men, they are inevitably defined by their relationships with men. Consequently, one of the recurring topics that arises in any study of literary-historical women is how marriage affects their status, and this holds doubly true for warrior women. For the Amazons, marriage was taboo. Their relations with men were supposed to be temporary and solely for the purpose of procreation. The less fictionalized accounts of Scythians reveal a different approach to romantic relationships, but neither monogamy nor permanence were expected.[45] Marriage for an Amazon represented not only a betrayal of her sisters, but a loss of her autonomy. The same pattern occurs for the shieldmaidens of medieval literature and the *polianitsy* of Russian folklore: marriage results in a return to the domestic sphere as they exchange their warriorhood and independence for traditionally feminine roles as dutiful wives and mothers.[46] Meanwhile, widowhood had the opposite effect. The death of their husbands allowed such queens as Tomyris, Olga, and Sigrid to claim power and authority for themselves. There is abundant historical precedent for marriage reducing women's agency and widowhood reversing that loss, but for warrior women, the contrast is especially stark.[47]

Amazons Through the Ages

While there are 82 named Amazons in Ancient Greco-Roman literature, the authors grant detailed narratives to only a select few.[48] Yet, considering the minute sample of ancient literature

[45] Larissa Bonfante, ed., *The Barbarians of Ancient Europe: Realities and Interactions* (Cambridge University Press, 2011): 17; Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 132.

[46] Self, "Valkyrie's Gender," 148.

[47] Cameron, *Feminism: Brief Introduction*, 16; Gillian Clark, "Roman Women," *Greece & Rome* 28, no. 2 (1981): 206; Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Representations* 44 (1993): 5; Nancy Ries, "The Burden of Mythic Identity: Russian Women at Odds with Themselves," *Feminist Nightmares. Women at Odds: Feminism and the Problems of Sisterhood*, ed. Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner (New York University Press, 1994): 243.

[48] Paul Chrystal, *Women at War in the Classical World* (Pen & Sword Books Ltd., 2017): 24.

that survives to the present day, such a quantity of named Amazons is nevertheless impressive. In contrast, only 12 *polianitsy* are named in the thousands of recorded variants of Russian folktales.[49] In written medieval literature, the handful of women granted individual narratives pales next to the overwhelming list of male warriors, princes, and kings. While the number of women who do populate medieval histories about the Viking Age is comparatively small, their stories are extraordinary, and in fairness, many of the men named in those same chronicles do not receive detailed narratives either. Some Viking Age kings are mentioned only in passing genealogies before the author moves on to a later king's more eventful reign. Yet, even kings whose reigns are otherwise unremarkable are far more likely to be named than corresponding queens.

In the following chapters I review the narratives of fourteen exemplary warrior women in approximately chronological order. Each of these women stands out from her peers, male and female alike, for her strength, cleverness, fortitude, and martial prowess, but as extraordinary women constrained by deeply misogynistic societies, they also share struggles and themes in common with their fellow warrior women across the millennia. In the course of this study, I explore these common struggles and themes, what makes each woman's narrative unique, and factors that may have influenced or contaminated the authors' accounts. Finally, I root the narratives of these warrior women within the context of the surrounding cultures that both produced and narrated them, addressing their potential historicity in light of evidence uncovered in recent archaeological studies and the analyses of other disciplines when applicable.

In the second chapter I focus on the warrior women of Ancient Greco-Roman literature, namely Amazons and Scythian queens of renown. Among the Amazons, I discuss Hippolyte, the bearer of Ares' war-belt who faced off against Heracles; Antiope, who married Theseus and in so

[49] Kaplun, "Archetype of the Maiden Warrior," 309.

doing, instigated the Attic War; and Penthesilea, who led a band of Amazons in the Trojan War, during which she fatefully dueled Achilles. I also consider two historical queens of Scythian origin: Tomyris, queen of the Massagetae, who defeated the Emperor of Persia after he invaded; and Amage, a Sarmatian queen who orchestrated a surprise assault against another Scythian tribe to teach their king a lesson in humility. These warrior women appear in the work of numerous authors from Ancient Greece and Rome, including Herodotus, Strabo, Plutarch, Pseudo-Apollodorus, and several others. Elements of the Scythian way of life directly correlate to portrayals of the *polianitsy* in Russian folklore, from their association with horses and archery to their courtship customs and gender norms. Thus, I devote a great deal of space in this chapter to cataloging the pertinent aspects of the Scythian lifestyle that find parallels in medieval high literature and folklore. As the inspiration of both the Amazon stories and later narratives of Slavic warrior women, the Scythians form the foundation of my research.

In the third chapter I address Slavic warrior queens from the Viking Age who appear in medieval literature. Because of the collision of Scandinavian and Slavic cultures resulting from the Viking invasions of Eastern Europe during the ninth through eleventh centuries CE, the narratives of these queens—and the queens themselves—bear the marks of both cultures. I narrow my analysis to the Viking Age queens with the strongest claim of Slavic roots, including Libuše, who ruled as judge over the early Czechs and founded a Bohemian dynasty; Vlasta, who, following Libuše's death, organized an uprising against tyrannical male rule in a conflict later known as the Maidens' War; Olga of Kyiv, who exacted brutal vengeance from those who murdered her husband, burning an entire city in the process; and Sigrid the Proud, who dispatched unwanted suitors in a similar fashion and then incited a war against a king who scorned her. The narratives of these warrior queens appear in various chronicles and histories, from Danish and Icelandic kings' sagas

to the *Chronicle of the So-Called Dalimil*. While the Amazon-Scythian legacy may be less apparent in high medieval literature than in later folklore, the mix of admiration, disbelief, and prejudice with which medieval authors perceived their female subjects echoes ancient authors' othering of warrior women as barbarian foreigners. Moreover, remnants of the Viking Age, synthesized from the milieu of Scandinavian, Slavic, Baltic, and Scythian cultural collisions in Eastern Europe, likewise find expression in folkloric narratives about *polianitsy*. As a result, in this chapter I detail those elements of Slavic societies during the Viking Age that influenced both oral and written literary portrayals of warrior women.

In the fourth chapter I examine the narratives of warrior women gathered from two genres of Russian folklore: *byliny*, or epic folk ballads, and *skazki*, or fairy tales. I address the characteristics of each genre, particularly where they pertain to women's narratives, and the evolving trends of Russian folklore scholarship that influenced interpretations of warrior women's narratives over the centuries. From the *byliny*, I discuss Nastasia Korolevichna, who soundly defeated her husband in an archery competition; Vasilisa Mikulishna, who disguised herself as a man to rescue her hapless husband from the prince's dungeon; and Nastasia Mikulishna, who was so strong she plucked a hero from his horse with one hand and placed him in her saddlebag. From the *skazki*, I discuss Mar'ia Morevna, who slaughtered whole armies and imprisoned the villain Koshchei the Deathless only for her new husband to undo her accomplishments; and Sineglazka, who held an entire kingdom ransom until the father of her children returned to her. Although numerous variations of these women's narratives exist, I center my analysis on the the most popular and complete versions, drawing attention to areas where *polianitsy*'s narratives align with Amazon-Scythian and Viking Age models.

From Siberia to the Black Sea, nomadic tribes in which women fought and hunted alongside and, when the necessity arose, in lieu of men inspired stories about the Amazons. In the following pages, I demonstrate how these stories in turn informed the narratives of Slavic warrior women crafted by medieval authors in both written and oral literature. Fixed in patriarchal biases, the fact they recorded these stories at all is significant. Yet, regardless of the genre in which they appear, the narratives of warrior women surface only in relation to the narratives of warrior men; the women are never permitted to stand alone. No matter their individual accomplishments, no matter if they ruled a kingdom or commanded armies, women remain accessories in a man's story. But however secondary the female role in the arc of a male hero may be presented, it is worth exploring the old sources anew to uncover the origins of such women. They were queens who orchestrated invasions and sieges, sometimes charging into battle with their sisters. They were shieldmaidens who eschewed the company of men, widows who seized power for themselves, and mothers whose sons either furthered their mothers' warlike legacies or paid the ultimate price for them. Though obscured by centuries of misogyny, their bones mistakenly identified as male and their stories dismissed as fantasy, the legacies of the extraordinary women who fought and commanded and bled for their kingdoms could not be entirely erased.

CHAPTER 2

WARRIOR WOMEN OF ANTIQUITY

Although the majority of documented rulers and warriors over the past few millennia have been men, history also presents examples of extraordinary women who fulfilled those roles. Ancient Greco-Roman art and literature depict warrior women from every social stratum, from peasants and barbarians to queens and goddesses. For example, Athena was the Greek goddess of wisdom and just war; Minerva, originally an Etruscan deity, became her Roman counterpart. The Greeks also revered Nike, goddess of victory; Eris, goddess of discord; and Ioke, the Hysminai, and the Androktasiai, female spirits associated with various aspects of battle. Similarly, the Romans honored Victoria, Nike's equivalent; Bellona, whose name was synonymous with war; and Nerio, the personification of battle itself and the consort of Mars, the Roman war god. The rich tapestry of Greco-Roman mythology likewise proffers the stories of mortal women, such as the huntress Atalanta, who drew first blood against the Calydonian Bull, and the athlete Myrsine, who earned the favor of Athena through her prowess. And then, of course, there were the fantastic Amazons, a tribe of women who were the equals, and sometimes betters, of men.

At the intersection of history and literature, ancient authors also recorded the military achievements of attested warrior queens like Boudica, Tomyris, Amage, Zenobia, Artemisia, and Semiramis. To the Ancient Greeks and Romans, such queens were noteworthy not only because they were women who ruled, but because they were women who ruled *well*.[50] After all, in the Greco-Roman point of view, other civilizations were anything but civilized, and one of the key aspects that made some of these other civilizations particularly barbaric was their freer approach

[50] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 58; Deborah Gera, *Warrior Women: The Anonymous* Tractatus De Mulieribus, E.J. (Brill, 1997): 17.

to gender roles compared to the strictly separated sexes in Greece and Rome. So barbaric were the societies that produced women rulers, that their men wore not robes, togas, or tunics, but pants – a womanly invention, the Ancient Greeks thought, which they credited conversely to Semiramis, Tomyris, or the fictional sorceress Medea.[51]

Despite the Amazons' continued dismissal as pure fiction, recent archaeology supports that warrior women existed among the various nomadic tribes who shared the Scythian culture. In some Scythian burial sites, women, entombed with weapons and bearing skeletal evidence of battle wounds, comprise nearly 40% of armed graves, indicating that the majority of Scythian women were buried with weapons.[52] Even the geographer Strabo, writing with a skeptical mind, questions whether such an unbelievable history as that of the Amazons is pure imagination—after all, how could an army of women advance victorious so far into Greek territory as to lay siege to Athens, he questions, in reference to the Attic War—or if the relatively unchanged nature of their narratives over time indicates they were more historical than mythical.[53] Strabo concludes that the Amazons are indeed merely myth, but his question nonetheless raises an interesting point about the literary mutability of fact versus fiction. Individual narratives, so often aggrandized in cultural memory, are less reliable as a source of historical truth, but the attribution of an entire war that culminated in the siege of one of the most eminent Greek cities lends credence to the real-world existence of the Amazons as a people.

Whether or not the Ancient Greeks and Romans believed in the Amazons, they certainly kept writing about them, and they encountered plenty of warrior women among the nomadic tribes who roamed the steppes of present-day Eastern Europe and Central Asia to substantiate those

[51] Bonfante, *Barbarians of Ancient Europe*, 20; Renate Rolle, *The World of the Scythians*, trans. by F. G. Walls (University of California Press, 1989): 60.
[52] Murphy, *Archaeology and Trauma*, 11.
[53] Strabo, *Geographica*, 11.5.3.

narratives.[54] Although many distinct tribes known by many names populated this vast territory in ancient days, a shared culture, as evidenced not only by the literature composed about them but also by the material they left behind, united them.[55] It is not only plausible, but probable that the women riding into battle alongside their brothers, fathers, and sons became mythologized into the legendary Amazons. Considering other ancient literate civilizations besides Greece and Rome likewise recorded encounters with warrior women among Eurasian nomads, the Amazons' historicity increases.[56]

In this chapter I will explore the role of warrior women in ancient literature, the foundation upon which ensuing literate European cultures erected testaments to their own Amazons. In doing so, I will discuss the individual narratives of three Amazon queens—Hippolyte, Antiope, and Penthesilea—as well as two historical queens—Tomyris, who ruled the Massagetae, and Amage, who ruled the Sarmatians. I will also address the ancient authors who recorded these narratives, for their personal experiences, biases, and agendas undoubtedly informed the way they depicted women in general and warrior women in particular. First, however, it is necessary to root these queens, fictional Amazons included, in their historical context. If a measure of truth underlies the stories of the Amazons, whether as a distinct tribe or as individual women scattered among various tribes, it is to be found among the Scythians.[57] Considering their egalitarian approach to gender roles, geography, time period, military tactics, and general way of life, the Scythians are by far the most likely candidate for the origin of the Amazons.

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[54] Pasi Loman, "No Woman, No War: Women's Participation in Ancient Greek Warfare," *Greece & Rome* 51, no. 1 (2004): 37; Guliaev, "Amazons in Scythia," 124.

[55] Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 109; Nicola Di Cosmo, "The Northern Frontier in Pre-Imperial China (1500-221 BC)," *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. by Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge University Press): 891.

[56] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 20.

[57] Marcus Justinus, Historiarum Philippicarum *T. Pompeii Trogi libri XLIV in epitomen redacti*, 2.1; Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 44.

The ancient authors recording these narratives did so centuries after the fact, if fact they ever were. In the years between action and record, the stories of fierce warrior queens from beyond the Black Sea existed only in oral tradition, transmitted down the generations and embellished with each retelling. However, the same can be said of famous Greek heroes like Heracles, Theseus, and Achilles. If heroes by those names ever existed in reality, their stories survived first in oral tradition until they were fantasticized and mythologized; only then did Homer and his descendants put stylus to tablet or pen to papyrus. We know more about individual Greek and Roman heroes than about individual Amazons and Scythians because their narratives were preserved by Greek and Roman writers. Scythians did not have a written language, so the preservation of their own stories could not outlive their civilization except for those stories that had already spread to another. Thus, everything we know about the Amazons and Scythians, we know because Greek authors chose to immortalize them alongside their native heroes. The foreign warrior women made such an impression on the pre-literate Greeks that their names and stories endured until the time they, too, could enter the written record.

Scythia

Defining an ancient civilization when it did not generate any of its own written literature is difficult, but not impossible. Fortunately, their literate neighbors recorded a great deal about the nomadic Scythians and their relatives, and the nomads themselves left a plethora of material evidence that corroborates the surviving literature through their art, metalworks, and burials.[58] However, the names and natures of geographical locations change across time and from culture to culture, so identifying the definitive boundaries of Scythian territory at any given moment of their existence remains a challenge.[59] The comprehension of what lay beyond their known lands also

[58] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 20; Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 109.
[59] Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 102.

varied from author to author. The nomadic, semi-pastoral Scythian lifestyle further complicates the process of defining their temporal and geographic borders. Their territory was always shifting, expanding and contracting with the seasons as well as the constant invasions they committed against their neighbors, and vice versa.

Forgivably underestimating the geographical bounds of the world, ancient authors could not comprehend the vastness of Scythian territory, neither across the continent nor across time.[60] Though they entered the Greek periphery as early as the ninth century BCE and their expansion peaked during the eighth through seventh centuries BCE, the Scythians continued to control the heart of their territory—the Eurasian steppes—until the third century CE.[61] The archaeological record likewise indicates that Scythians reigned over a much larger expanse than the geographer Strabo or the historian Herodotus could articulate, and for a longer time period than the Greeks imagined. In any given decade of the centuries of their dominance, Scythian territory stretched from the Crimean coastline through Siberia to beyond the Ural Mountains, at times expanding into the Caucasus, Baltics, and Balkans, with some Scythian conquests advancing as far south as Syria and Egypt, as far east as China, and as far west as the Carpathian Mountains.[62]

The sense of whom, precisely, the Scythians encompassed is as murky now as it was during their own era.[63] Given that over two millennia have passed since Scythians were first described in ancient literature, it is unclear whether the 'Scythians' referenced by the Greeks equate to the

[60] Jeannine Davis-Kimball and C. Scott Littleton, "Warrior Women of the Eurasian Steppes," *Archaeology* 50 (1997): 46; Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, 10.

[61] E. V. Cernenko, *The Scythians 700-300 BC*, ed. by Martin Windrow (Osprey Publishing, 2008): 3; Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 109.

[62] Unterländer et al, "Ancestry and demography and descendents of Iron Age nomads of the Eurasian Steppe," *Nature Communications* 8, no. 14615 (2017): 1; Davis-Kimball and Littleton, "Warrior Women," 46; Rolle, *World of the Scythians*, 16.

[63] Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 98; Bonfante, *Barbarians of Ancient Europe*, 9; Ellis H. Minns, *Scythians and Greeks: A Survey of Ancient History and Archaeology on the North Coast of the Euxine from the Danube to the Caucasus* (Cambridge University Press, 2010): 35.

'Saka' referenced by the Persians, or if they were separate, though related, peoples.[64] Likewise, some ancient authors considered the Amazons a Scythian tribe, while others viewed them as distinct; it is interesting to note that in Greek and Roman art, Amazons appear either heroically naked or wearing Scythian-style clothing, including the tall, pointed hats with which many Scythians were buried.[65] The Massagetae, Issodones, Sarmatians, and Sauromatians are all linked with the Scythians by a shared culture and, to the best of our knowledge without a written record to confirm it, a shared language, to the point that many consider those tribes as falling under the Scythian umbrella.[66]

While scholars generally agree that the Scythians were originally an Iranian people, they interacted and eventually integrated with the Slavs who later settled in the northwestern parts of formerly Scythian territory, and they also shared many cultural aspects and genetic markers with other nomadic tribes, including the Huns and Mongols.[67] The Scythian influence on and integration with the early Slavs and other nomads is particularly apparent in the shared animal style of their art and in the linguistic remnants of Proto-Iranian in contemporary Slavic languages.[68] Consequently, for ease of explanation in the following sections, I will conform with the modern trend of referring to all the nomadic tribes who occupied the territories of present-day Ukraine, Russia, and Central Asia during the late Bronze and early Iron Ages as Scythians.[69] I will specify individual tribe names when relevant, such as the Massagetae or the Amazons.

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[64] Rolle, *World of the Scythians*, 37.

[65] Dowden, "Amazons: Development and Functions," 104.

[66] Peter B. Golden, "The Peoples of the Russian Forest Belt," *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. by Denis Sinor (Cambridge University Press, 1990): 230; Unterländer et al, "Ancestry and demography," 1.

[67] Richard Brzezinski and Mariusz Mielczarek, The *Sarmatian 600 BC – AD 450* (Osprey Publishing, 2002): 39; René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*, trans. by Naomi Walford (Rugers University Press, 2002): 7; Bonfante, *Barbarians of Ancient Europe*, 12.

[68] Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 117; Boris A. Rybakov, *Gerodotova Skifiia: Istoriko-geograficheskii analiz* (Izdatel'stvo "Nauka," 1979): *195.*

[69] Di Cosmo, "Northern Frontier," 891.

Although nomadic, the Scythians did establish some permanent cities for commercial use, particularly in the western portion of their territory.[70] However, most Scythians did not deign to linger in such locations; cities were for plundering, not for occupying long-term.[71] In contrast with such nomadic sentiments, the Ancient Greeks credited the Amazons with establishing several cities and numerous memorial sites in and around Greece, including altars, tombs, and battlefields.[72] Yet, explanations of the Amazons' original homeland vary. Some authors situate their territory somewhere north of Albania, or else along the northern Black Sea coast and the Sea of Azov, and still others place them in the Caucasus: all locations, it should be noted, that belonged at one point to the Scythians, further supporting the theory that the Amazons may have originally been a genuine Scythian tribe.[73]

Regardless of their Scythian affiliation or geographic origin, everyone agreed that the seat of Amazonian power was the city of Themiscyra.[74] Themiscyra was said to sit at the mouth of the Thermodon river, now called the Terme, which flows through present day Turkey and empties into the Black Sea. The land surrounding Themiscyra was ideal for both agricultural and pastoral use, supporting fields of cereal grains as well as herds of horses and cattle, indicating the Amazons—like many other Scythian tribes—were nomadic and pastoral.[75] According to some authors, Themiscyra was one of several great cities populated by Amazons along the Thermodon, all of

[70] Askold I. Ivantchik, "The Scythian Kingdom in the Crimea in the 2nd Century BC and Its Relations with the Greek States in the North Pontic Region," *Ancient Civilizations from Scythia to Siberia* 25 (2019): 224; Barry Cunliffe, *The Scythians: Nomad Warriors of the Steppe* (Oxford University Press, 2019): 21.

[71] Grousset, *Empire of the Steppes*, xxvii.

[72] Chrystal, *Women at War*, 21; Strabo, *Geographica*, 11.5.5; Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 163.

[73] Dowden, "Amazons: Development and Functions," 115; Davis-Kimball and Littleton, "Warrior Women," 45; Mayor, *The Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 18.

[74] Luis Ballesteros-Pastor, "Bears and Bees in Themiscyra: A Sanctuary for Artemis in the Land of the Amazons?" *From Artemis to Diana: The Goddess of Man and Beast*, ed. by Tobias Fischer-Hansen and Birte Poulsen (Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009): 333.

[75] Strabo, *Geographica*, 12.3.16.

which regrettably disappeared before the existence of a literary record.[76] Fittingly for the capital of a warrior race, Themiscyra was a well-guarded and fortified city. Some ancient legends tell that when an invading army sought to dig tunnels to infiltrate the city walls, the Amazons sent all manner of beasts and insects into the tunnels to thwart their efforts.[77]

From Death, Life: Scythian Burials

Much of what we know about the Scythian way of life comes from the literature of their neighbors. Certainly, descriptions of the Scythian language, customs, and other cultural artifacts appear frequently in ancient literature from Greece to Persia and China, but the authors' cultural biases permeate their writing: the Scythians were raiders, rapists, and cannibals who milked and ate not only cattle, but horses. Though not always described in such charged terms, multiple authors attest to human sacrifice and sporadic cannibalism among the Scythians, activities which our modern eyes view with horror, but which the Greeks viewed with disdain as indicative of a primitive culture – a primitiveness they reluctantly admitted in their own past, but had since moved beyond.[78] Yet, regardless of the original authors' potential biases, twentieth and twenty-first century archaeological efforts have corroborated some of these claims, including the occurrence of human sacrifice to mark the burials of important individuals.[79]

Russian archaeologists, with occasional international support, have been excavating Scythian burial mounds, or kurgans, for more than two hundred years.[80] During that time they have uncovered over a thousand kurgans, a number of which, particularly in the North Caucasus, lay undisturbed by both ancient and modern graverobbers.[81] In addition to human remains, these

[76] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 6.4.
[77] Appian, "Mithridatelos," *Historia Romana*, 11.78.
[78] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 4.100; Bonfante, *Barbarians of Ancient Europe*, 7.
[79] Bonfante, *Barbarians of Ancient Europe*, 13.
[80] Guliaev, "Amazons in Scythia," 113; Cunliffe, *Scythians: Nomad Warriors*, 10-11.
[81] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 63; Cunliffe, *Scythians: Nomad Warriors*, 14.

kurgans provide an abundance of material evidence of the Scythian lifestyle, including elaborate jewelry, assorted weaponry, harnesses and saddles, and various tools for domestic and religious purposes.[82] During the earliest excavations, archaeologists assumed that if a grave contained weapons, then the person buried there must have been a man, so they performed no analysis of the bones; similarly, if a grave contained jewelry and items like mirrors or spindles, they assumed the remains were female.[83] Recent excavators have looked more critically at exhumed remains, and technological advancements since the earliest excavations occurred, such as DNA testing and improved osteology methods, have invalidated the assumption of male gender based solely on the presence of weapons.[84] However, more testing and reexaminations are needed to completely correct the historical record. There could very well be many more warrior women awaiting recognition in addition to the substantial number of armed female burials already confirmed.

Of the many weapons in their arsenal, the Scythians were known best for their recurve bows, which they could fire effectively from horseback. Thus, it is no surprise that fragments of bows and arrows make up a significant portion of the weapons buried with every Scythian warrior, male and female. In kurgans where the remains were confirmed to be male, 97% contained, at a minimum, arrowheads.[85] In some excavation sites, over 20% of the remains confirmed to be female were buried with arrows; in others, as many as 40% of all armed burials were confirmed to be female.[86] Though by far the most common, bows and arrows were not the only weapons included in Scythian kurgans. In describing the Massagetae, Herodotus remarks on their preferred

[82] Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 109.
[83] Murphy, *Archaeology and Trauma*, 11.
[84] Jeannine Davis-Kimball, "Chieftain or Warrior Priestess?" *Archaeology* 50, no. 5 (1997): 41.
[85] Murzin, "O pogrebeniyakh skifskikh nomarkhov," 63.
[86] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 64; Murphy, *Archaeology and Trauma*, 11.

use of double-headed axes and lances.[87] Such weapons can be found aplenty in both male and female Scythian burials, along with swords, daggers, spears, and armored tunics.[88]

Some scholars have speculated that the mere presence of weapons in a grave is not necessarily indicative that the remains belonged to a warrior, but rather could signify their social status or represent a family inheritance, with the weapons as heirlooms buried with the deceased in the absence of someone to inherit them.[89] Still, the typical ages of those buried with weapons as well as skeletal evidence of wounds associated with combat would suggest otherwise, and this is particularly true with burials of armed women.[90] The majority of women buried with weapons were in their teens and twenties at their time of death.[91] In other words, they were in their physical primes, the perfect age to be riding into battle. One could argue that civilians could as easily die violently in such a world, but then why bury civilian victims with weapons? Why honor them with tools that could have defended their lives, had they but used them? Furthermore, the losers of a battle would be less likely to receive a formal burial since the victors usually enslaved any survivors and consigned their enemy's dead to a mass grave. Thus, we can assume any warrior burials, in which cause of death was clearly a battle wound, came from the victorious side. It should also be noted that in kurgans containing multiple burials, if one of those includes an armed woman, hers is the principal—the primary or central—burial, implying a higher social status than those in the secondary burials, which would have been added at a later time.[92] Thus, most modern

[87] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 1.215.1 - 1.215.2.
[88] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 65.
[89] Tomasz Bochnak, "The Phenomenon of Burying Women with Weapons in Iron Age Poland: Tactical, social and funerary considerations," *Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (2020):9; Murphy, *Archaeology and Trauma*, 11.
[90] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 67.
[91] Guliaev, "Amazons in Scythia," 114.
[92] Ibid., 115.

archaeologists acknowledge that the likelier scenario is that the Scythian women buried with weapons had been, in fact, warriors.[93]

In addition to weapons and armor, kurgans often contain a wealth of other grave goods, especially jewelry and gilded accessories. Despite Herodotus's assertion that Scythian men were fond of wearing gold, and despite the observable convention among steppe peoples of "wearing their wealth," it was originally thought that the presence of jewelry signified a female burial.[94] Modern study has proven this assumption false, though female graves do tend to contain more jewelry than male ones.[95] Scythian grave goods also frequently include tools for both ritual and mundane use, like mirrors, awls, and jars of the fermented mare's milk they called *koumiss*.[96] In the kurgans of wealthier and royal Scythians, horses and human slaves were likewise sacrificed and buried alongside the principal burial, accompanying their master into death.[97] The thought process behind the kurgans' myriad contents, scholars posit, is to recreate the cosmos; by entombing the dead with all their accustomed luxuries, they ensure a comfortable afterlife reflective of the deceased's former status among the living.[98]

Scythian Society and Culture

Like the Amazons, the Scythian way of life was centered around the horse, and even in their origin myths, the Scythians share a connection with their equine companions. Herodotus conveys several origins for the Scythians, one in which he puts the most stock as Asian nomads

[93] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 67.
[94] Niles, "Hawks, Horses, and *Huns*," 143.
[95] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 65; Rolle, *World of the Scythians*, 47.
[96] Guliaev, "Amazons in Scythia," 114; Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 146.
[97] L. T. Yablonskii, "Elitarnaya subkul'tura rannikh kochevnikov Yuzhnogo Priural'ya," *Elita v istorii drevnikh i srednevekovykh narodov evrazii,* ed. P. K. Dashkovskii (Izdatel'stvo Altaiskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2015): 46.
[98] P. K. Dashkovskiy and I. A. Meykshan, "Elita v sotsial'nom prostranstve kochevogo obzhchestva (teoreticheskii i metodicheskii aspekty)," *Elita v istorii drevnikh i srednevekovykh narodov evrazii,* ed. P. K. Dashkovskii (Izdatel'stvo Altaiskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2015): 13.

fleeing other Asian nomads from further east, along with several more fantastical versions echoed by later authors. In one of the origin myths that Herodotus credits to the Scythians themselves, they were descended from the youngest of three sons, Scythes, born to a daughter of the river god Borysthenes, which was another name for the Dniepro.[99] Scythes's father was said to be Zeus, or rather, whichever Scythian sky-father deity the Greeks equated with Zeus.[100] In a third version, which Herodotus credits to the Pontic Greeks, it is the hero Heracles rather than Zeus who fathered Scythes and his two brothers. In this version an *echidna*, a monstrous woman whose bottom half was a snake and whose chief mythic function was as a progenitrix of monsters, coerced Heracles into her bed by hiding the mares he stole during his eighth labor.[101] Yet, the connection between provable Scythians and supposedly fictional Amazons transcends supposition: Heracles' subsequent labor, after retrieving the mares from the *echidna* and fathering Scythes, is to acquire the war-belt of Hippolyte, an Amazon queen whose name translates to 'unbridled mare'.[102]

Astride a horse and wielding a bow, the gender of the warrior matters little, if at all. The lighter draw weight of the Scythian recurve bow further rendered the gender of the cavalryperson irrelevant, and ample evidence, both written and material, indicates many Scythian women comfortably wielded bow, spear, lance, or axe.[103] Despite the enduring myth that Amazons burned off one of their breasts so as not to interfere with their archery, there would be no physical impetus to do so, to which modern archers can attest. Moreover, the earliest sources like Herodotus make no mention of Amazons removing a breast in order to shoot better. It was only later authors, though the myth still originates in antiquity, who added that particular detail, searching for a Greek

[99] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 4.5.1.
[100] Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origins* (University of California Press, 1980): 98.
[101] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 4.10; Daniel Ogden, *Drakon: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Oxford University Press, 2013): 81.
[102] Chrystal, *Women at War*, 21.
[103] Guliaev, "Amazons in Scythia," 113.

etymology of 'Amazon' rather than accepting its poorly understood Scythian origin.[104] Certainly in descriptions of other Scythian warrior women, no mention is made of removing a breast. Much of ancient art is even in agreement, depicting many Amazons—as naked as the Greek heroes they battled—with both breasts.[105]

While there is some evidence that a minute fraction of Scythian nomads did not possess their own, horses were an undeniable necessity for the Scythian way of life.[106] Horses provided transportation, a key element for any nomadic or semi-nomadic society, as well as sustenance, material, and commerce.[107] They lived, hunted, warred, and often died on horseback. The remains of buried Scythians support this, with skeletal confirmation of a life spent in the saddle.[108] Horses also served as a source of art, both as inspiration and as medium: Scythians crafted intricate, gilded harnesses to adorn their mounts and carved statues and amulets from horse bones.[109] Moreover, horses feature prominently in the surviving folklore of steppe cultures.[110] The same equine associations are ascribed to the Amazons as to the Scythians at large, with some ancient authors crediting the Amazons with the domestication of the horse and the invention of cavalry tactics.[111]

When Scythian tribes went to war, which was frequently, they did it on horseback, for while their armies included infantry, cavalry comprised the bulk of their deadliest forces.[112] In particular, mounted archers were integral to both hunting and war, and ancient art, literary descriptions, and

[104] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 85-87; Justinus, Historiarum Philippicarum *T. Pompeii Trogi*, 2.4.10 – 2.4.11.
[105] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 89.
[106] Murzin, "O pogrebeniyakh skifskikh nomarkhov," 63.
[107] Murphy, *Archaeology and Trauma*, 10.
[108] S. A. Yatsenko, "Gruppy elity u sarmatov," *Elita v istorii drevnikh i srednevekovykh narodov evrazii,* ed. P. K. Dashkovskii (Izdatel'stvo Altaiskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2015): 91.
[109] Grousset, *Empire of the Steppes*, 4.
[110] John D. Niles, "Hawks, Horses, and Huns: The Impact of Peoples of the Steppe on the Folk Cultures of Northern Europe," *Western Folklore* 75, no. 2 (2016): 141.
[111] Chrystal, *Women at War*, 21; Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 22.
[112] Murphy, *Archaeology and Trauma*, 11; Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 97.

surviving examples all indicate the superiority of the bow used by Bronze Age steppe nomads compared to those employed by their contemporaries.[113] The composite materials and recurve design of the Scythian bow allowed for a more compact weapon with greater power and accuracy plus a lighter draw weight than a longbow, which in turn made the recurve bow especially easy to fire from horseback without sacrificing range.[114] This design changed little over the centuries of Scythian dominion and was adopted by later nomadic tribes further east, notably the Mongols.[115] In war, the Scythians dipped their arrowheads in poison, ensuring that, whether slow or fast, death would come for their enemies.[116] As neither the Greeks nor Romans held archery in any esteem and dismissed cavalry tactics as cowardly, the superiority of the Scythian bow is doubly indicated.[117] After all, why would the Greeks and Romans, so rigidly confidant in their military prowess, publicly admire a less rigid approach to war than strict lines of infantry? That invading horse-riding, arrow-firing barbarians comprised a key component in the decline of Roman imperialism is no coincidence.

Off the battlefield, gender roles were also much more relaxed among the Scythians than in Ancient Greece or Rome.[118] One's role within the tribe depended on age, ability, and social status rather than gender, though it should be noted that the amount of latitude Scythian women possessed did vary across individual tribes.[119] In some Scythian tribes like the Issedonians, men and women were described specifically as equal; little is apparently noteworthy of the Issedonians compared to the other tribes apart from this fact.[120] All Scythian children learned how to hunt and fight from

[113] Wallace McLeod, "The Range of the Ancient Bow," Phoenix 19, no. 1 (1965): 2.
[114] Cunliffe, *Scythians: Nomad Warriors*, 239.
[115] McLeod, "Ancient Bow," 3.
[116] Murphy, *Archaeology and Trauma*, 11; Cunliffe, *Scythians: Nomad Warriors*, 240.
[117] Murphy, *Archaeology and Trauma*, 11.
[118] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 58; Chrystal, *Women at War*, 211; Eva Cantarella, "Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual, and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece," *Poetics Today* 6, no. 1/2 (1985): 91.
[119] Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 112, and Chrystal, *Women at War*, 211.
[120] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 4.26.2.

a young age since they were expected to protect the camp while the proper armies, comprised of most adult men and childless women, were out raiding and warring.[121] Like Tomyris and Amage, whom I will address in detail later, charismatic women could rule as well as fight, ascending to the proverbial throne in the absence of an eligible male heir, when all eligible male heirs proved incompetent, or simply when a woman was the most capable person for the role.[122] Wives of tribal leaders could also rule in their husbands' absence with the same authority as their husbands would normally wield.[123] As far as we can determine, the Scythians provide the closest approximation of a gender-equal society of any historically documented civilization.

Although for many the present-day image of the Amazons is a matriarchy of misandrists who sought temporary liaisons with men solely to produce more warrior maidens, duly killing any male offspring, this was neither their original image nor is there any archaeological evidence of an all-female tribe.[124] A matriarchal tribe existing under the Scythian umbrella is certainly a possibility, as there is evidence that the Sarmatians and Sauromatians were at one time matriarchal, but the murder of infant males by either the Amazons or any other Scythian tribe is highly unlikely.[125] No archaeological evidence points to widespread infanticide of either gender – at least, not in Scythia.[126] According to Strabo, the Amazons retained their daughters while giving their sons to a neighboring Scythian tribe to raise.[127] While less extreme than outright murder, Strabo's

[121] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 83 and 132; Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 106; Murphy, *Archaeology and Trauma*, 15; Guliaev, "Amazons in Scythia," 121.
[122] Gera, *Warrior Women: The Anonymous*, 13; Chrystal, *Women at War*, 75; Murzin, "O pogrebeniyakh skifskikh nomarkhov," 69.
[123] Yatsenko, "Gruppy elity u sarmatov," 91.
[124] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 82.
[125] Cunliffe, *Scythians: Nomad Warriors*, 121.
[126] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 156; Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 112; Guliaev, "Amazons in Scythia," 114; Yatsenko, "Gruppy elity u sarmatov," 86. In contrast, infanticide of female children was depressingly common in Rome, where the preference for raising a male child was so ingrained, orators lamented the shortage of marriageable women for all the eligible bachelors: Clark, "Roman Women," 197.
[127] Strabo, *Geographica*, 11.5.1.

suggestion, echoed by some of his peers, is still improbable. A more plausible reason for this claim is to make the idea of warrior women less palatable to an audience of Greco-Roman women, lest they get any troublesome ideas, which was evidently of some concern.[128] Perhaps a desire for deterrence also explains the rumor of Amazons removing a breast.

The Scythians further defied Greco-Roman expectations of gender roles with regards to their approach to marriage and courtship. Monogamous marriage was not necessarily the default among ancient Eurasian nomads, but even more scandalous was the relative equality in individual male-female relationship dynamics.[129] Much is written about the extraordinary manner in which Amazons ensured their continued population, as discussed above, but even among the less mythologized Scythian tribes, neither the marriage dynamic itself nor the societally prescribed requirements for marriage were strictly patriarchal. With all able-bodied members of Scythian tribes called to the role of warrior, proving one's mettle in battle was a necessary prerequisite for marriage and parenthood.[130] Several Scythian tribes expected their tribe members to kill an enemy in battle, or by some accounts three enemies, before they were permitted to marry.[131] It is also possible that the ceremony to mark a Scythian marriage involved a ritualized duel if the partners came from differing tribes. Roman author Aelian describes the marriage duel of Scythians in *Historical Miscellany*, explaining that the winner of the duel held the dominant position in the marriage, but one must take into account that his anecdotes are known to be frequently embellished.[132] Moreover, the concept of an equal partnership between men and women was

[128] Women questioning their proper place and attempting to take over was a worry repeatedly voiced in Rome, as Clark observes in "Roman Women," 208. Loman similarly observes the Amazons functioned as a "negative role model," intended to deter the women of Ancient Greece from straying outside their normative roles in "No Woman, No War," 38.
[129] Bonfante, *Barbarians of Ancient Europe*, 17; Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 132.
[130] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 132.
[131] Dowden, "Amazons: Development and Functions," 109.
[132] Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 38.2; Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 132.

inconceivable to the Greeks, insisting that one gender had to be dominant, hence their transformation of the Amazons into not only a matriarchy, but one that excluded men entirely.[133]

Another illustration of the Scythians' more fluid approach to gender roles is the existence of what Herodotus calls '*enarees*,' which is a rough transliteration of the Scythian '*anarya*,' apparently meaning 'unmanly' or 'effeminate'.[134] *Enarees* were born biologically male, but as adults they took on traditionally feminine roles, occupying that liminal space between male and female within their tribe. Given the substantial overlap between male and female roles in most Scythian tribes, the extent of a gender liminality for *enarees* to occupy is debatable. Furthermore, their transition always occurred later in life, presumably after they were no longer called to war, effectively severing them from the militant aspects of Scythian society. Importantly, there is no documentation of the reverse phenomenon, with Scythian women transitioning to men; only male to female *enarees* are described among the Scythians, undercutting modern suppositions that would sever warrior women like the Amazons from their womanhood. Notably, the *enarees* often served their communities as diviners and shamans, but they were not confined to a religious role.[135]

Herodotus claims the *enarees'* existence originated with a curse from the goddess Aphrodite, whose temple a few Scythian men once plundered. According to Herodotus, the curse manifested in their descendants as a punishment for the transgression.[136] The ancient physician Hippocrates, or one of his protégés in the Hippocratic school, credits the Scythian lifestyle for the supposed effeminacy of their men, which he applied to all Scythian men, not just those labeled as

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[133] Penrose, *Postcolonial Amazons*, 6.

[134] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 4.67.2; Hippocrates, *De aere aquis et locis*, 22.

[135] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 4.67.2 M. A. Czaplicka, *Aboriginal Siberia: A Study in Social Anthropology* (Clarendon Press, 1914): 248 and 253; Manabu Waida, "Problems of Central Asian and Siberian Shamanism," *Numen* 30, no. 2 (1983): 216.. That anthropologists have documented the crossing of gender taboos in Central Asian and Siberian shamanism, sometimes establishing a third gender category specifically for transgender shamans, is no coincidence; as with the Scythians, the transition is almost always male to female. Like the ancient Greeks, most twentieth-century anthropologists have erroneously attributed transgender shamans to an illness, specifically 'arctic hysteria'.

[136] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 1.105.4.

enarees.[137] According to his arguments, too much time in the saddle renders men short, impotent, feminine, and weak, allowing them to be dominated by their women.[138] Hippocrates's physical description of Scythians is hardly flattering and likely inaccurate, or at least severely prejudiced, as a result of Greek attempts to distance themselves from the "barbarian nomads."[139] Yet, in contrast with Hippocrates's assessment, the archaeological record suggests Scythians were robust and tall even by modern standards, with men averaging over 6' – certainly taller than the average man in Ancient Greece, who was 5'7".[140] Consciously or unconsciously, here Hippocrates exemplifies not only the Greco-Roman disregard for cavalry, but also the perceived correlation between horseback riding and femininity. I doubt the Scythians—Amazons included, and, perhaps, especially—viewed their equine activities as having any gender association at all, and they certainly did not associate cavalry tactics with weakness.

However egalitarian their approach to gender roles compared to contemporaneous sedentary civilizations may be, Scythian society was not egalitarian across the board. Different socioeconomic classes, though still not as rigidly separated as in Greece or Rome, did exist.[141] Some scholars posit that among the Scythian tribes, one's social class was connected not only to his or her individual role within the tribe (i.e., raider, leader, herder, etc.) but also clan and ethnic affiliation; the Scythian tribes, although they most likely spoke an Iranian language, were not

[137] Cunliffe, *Scythians: Nomad Warriors*, 47. Though there is some debate on whether Hippocrates himself or one of his students composed the treatise, the notion of the nomadic way of life contributing to obesity and impotence was widely accepted by ancient physicians.

[138] Hippocrates, *De aere aquis et locis*, 22.

[139] Cunliffe, *Scythians: Nomad Warriors*, 199.

[140] Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, 46; Rolle, *World of the Scythians*, 55 – 56; Kron, "Anthropometry, Physical Anthropology, and the Reconstruction of Ancient Health, Nutrition, and Living Standards," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 54 (2005): 68.

[141] A. Abetekov and H. Yusupov, "Ancient Iranian Nomads in Western Central Asia," *History of civilizations of Central Asia, v. 2: The Development of sedentary and nomadic civilizations, 700 BC to AD 250* (UNESCO, 1994): 26; Cunliffe, *Scythians: Nomad Warriors*, 216.

ethnically homogenous.[142] Ancient authors refer to the ruling clan as Royal Scythians, occasionally describing them as a separate tribe altogether due to their considerable population and more sedentary habits compared to the rest of the Scythians, Amazons included.[143] The material artifacts uncovered in kurgans usually reflect the wealthier social strata since the upper classes could afford to bury their dead with luxury and protection, while the poorer herdsmen could not.[144] These burials are also most often found in the western part of Scythian territory, the area the Royal Scythians primarily occupied.[145]

Ancient Authors on Warrior Women

From Homer in the late eighth to early seventh century BCE to Quintus of Smyrna in the late fourth century CE, anecdotes about warrior women's exploits appear in Greek and Roman literature. In the *Iliad*, Homer touches on the participation of the Amazons in the Trojan war, though his *Iliad* ends before they enter the fray. Nearly a millennium later, Quintus of Smyrna elaborates on that same participation, devoting the first book of his epic *Fall of Troy* or *Posthomerica*, appropriately dubbed the *Penthesilead*, to the titular queen who led a doomed Amazon band in defense of Troy. In between these two extremes of ancient literature lie numerous historians, geographers, orators, poets, and philosophers who discuss Amazons and Scythians. Though many of these writers, derisive of fantasy and skeptical of myth, endeavored to convey truthful accounts, it should be noted that the ancient understanding of truth differs from that of the present day. To the ancient Greeks, objectivity was never the goal, nor even really a concept.[146]

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[142] Dashkovskiy and Meykshan, "Elita v sotsial'nom prostranstve," 14; Cunliffe, *Scythians: Nomad Warriors*, 20.
[143] E. D. Phillips, "The Scythian Domination in Western Asia: Its Record in History, Scripture and Archaeology," *World Archaeology* 4, no. 2 (1972): 130.
[144] Abetekov and Yusupov, "Ancient Iranian Nomads," 27.
[145] Ivantchik, "Scythian Kingdom in the Crimea," 229; Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 111.
[146] T. J. Luce, "Ancient Views on the Causes of Bias in Historical Writing," *Classical Philology* 84, no. 1 (1989): 17.

Ancient truth did not require strict adherence to facts, but rather the management of facts to achieve a higher, moral truth.

Addressing these authors to the extent they deserve is well beyond the scope of the present study. Thus, I will highlight relevant details, trends, and potential biases for the primary authors whose work I consulted, namely Herodotus, Diodorus of Sicily, Apollodorus, and Plutarch. Of these, as the earliest and most extensively detailed source on Scythians and Amazons, I devote the most attention to Herodotus. I will also comment on several others whose work includes stories of Amazons and Scythian warrior women, including Strabo, Pausanias, Polyaenus, and Pompeius Trogus via Marcus Justinus. Finally, I will devote attention to the anonymously composed *Treatise on Women Distinguished in Wars*, which, while not a strictly literary work, provides brief but invaluable profiles of historical warrior women like Tomyris.[147]

One might assume, given the deeply embedded patriarchal values of Greco-Roman societies, that the primary bias to be found among these ancient authors is misogyny. Surely a culture like Ancient Greece that kept its women cloistered in the home and whose divine tales overflow with rape, or a society like Rome in which male preference was so ingrained that female infanticide was commonplace, would breed writers who portrayed women as inferior, as subhuman, as property. Those writers certainly did exist, just as they exist today in the chatrooms of 4chan and Discord or in the comments section of any online news article or viral social media post written by, for, or about women.[148] However, although an element of sexism cannot be ignored, the chief bias apparent in ancient Greco-Roman portrayals of warrior women is less patriarchal than it is patriotic, bordering on xenophobic. They wrote for the glory of Athens, for Sparta, for Rome. Some admired their foreign subjects—even the women!—but the Greek and

[147] Gera, *Warrior Women: The Anonymous*, 26.
[148] For example, Hesiod posited that Zeus created women to make men miserable.

Roman heroes had to be victorious, and so their opponents, whether Amazons or warrior women from another Scythian tribe, had to ultimately fail. Not because they were women, but because they were foreign barbarians, their success could only be temporary. Their womanhood added to the inevitability of their failure, but it was not the primary impetus. Nevertheless, as Ken Dowden aptly observes, "Amazons do a lot of dying. It is in fact an important part of the mythical construct of Amazons in general, and of named Amazons in particular, that they should die."[149] As foreigners as well as women, Amazons were doubly dangerous to the Ancient Greco-Roman worldview. For that, literary Amazons had to die. Ancient authors had less leeway regarding the ultimate fates of historical Scythian queens, but they could still massage historical narratives to downplay the warriorhood of such queens, emphasizing traditionally feminine qualities like their beauty or distilling their reigns to a single accomplishment, such as one battle or campaign.

Regarding xenophobic bias, Herodotus (c. 484 – 425 BCE) is the exception that proves the rule. The reasons the Father of History became dismissed as the Father of Lies by his contemporaries and immediate successors are manifold, but one of the recurring accusations against him is that he was too fond of the barbarians about whom he wrote, in particular, the Scythians.[150] Herodotus, born in Halicarnassus in Asia Minor and traveling throughout the periphery of the empire, was deemed insufficiently pro-Greek. He did not write explicitly to exalt the glory of any one Greek polis or Greece at large, but rather to preserve the causes of wars and the actions of great men regardless of their nationality.[151] Though it goes unstated in his espoused purpose, he preserves the actions of several great women in his *Histories* as well. In a stark contrast

[149] Dowden, "Amazons: Development and Functions," 117.
[150] J. A. S. Evans, "Father of History or Father of Lies: The Reputation of Herodotus," *The Classical Journal* 64, no. 1 (1968): 14; Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography," *History* 43, no. 147 (1958): 6.
[151] Evans, "Father of History," 16.

with some of his contemporaries, Herodotus never expresses the opinion that the actions and decisions of such great women were weakened or corrupted by their sex.[152] It was Herodotus's very objectivity, in the modern sense, that distinguished him as biased according to his ancient peers: to write without a patriotic agenda was to write falsely.[153]

The other main criticism ancient writers aimed at Herodotus was that he fabricated much of his histories, because he wrote about events prior to his birth and did not consult other written histories, instead relying on oral history and anecdotes gathered from the local populace during his travels. However, in his lifetime there were few written histories for Herodotus to consult, none of which survive to the present day, so he had little choice but to seek his information personally.[154] The written word was neither universally understood nor widespread, particularly when Herodotus traveled outside of Greece, so the information accessible to him was primarily preserved in oral tradition.[155] Since he had to rely on stories passed along through at least several generations, and in some cases, many, accusations arose that he was first and foremost a storyteller, not a historian.[156] Maybe some truth lies in this assertion given the entertaining quality and easy readability of Herodotus's *Histories*, but a well-crafted story does not indicate falsehood any more than a badly crafted one indicates factuality. Moreover, as previously discussed, it is the well-crafted stories that are more likely to endure. Thus, it is Herodotus's storytelling that ensured the narratives of great warrior queens like Tomyris survived to the present day.

Herodotus's successors had the luxury of previously written histories that he lacked, and they leaned on them accordingly, often foregoing collecting their own anecdotes and instead

[152] Carolyn Dewald, "Biology and Politics: Women in Herodotus' *Histories*," *Pacific Coast Philology* 15 (1980): 15.
[153] Charles E. Muntz, "The Sources of Diodorus Siculus, Book 1," *The Classical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2011): 593.
[154] Rybakov, *Gerodotova Skifiia*, 5.
[155] Momigliano, "Place of Herodotus," 2; Rybakov, *Gerodotova Skifiia*, 93.
[156] Evans, "Father of History," 12.

reinterpreting or rewriting prior works. Alternatively, these later historians chronicled not historical events, but events that occurred during their own lifetimes.[157] The latter are irrelevant for my purposes since the Scythian queens I will discuss predate Herodotus, and the Amazons had entered the realm of myth well before Homer. Therefore, after Herodotus's time, we are left with writers like Diodorus of Sicily (first century BCE), who scholars believe generally regurgitated the words of prior historians whose work is since lost or endures only in fragments, or else Marcus Justinus (second or third century CE), whose primary contribution is a summary of the *Phillipic Histories* by Pompeius Trogus (first century BCE), the original of which likewise did not survive.[158] While somewhat lacking in creativity, these derivative works nevertheless provide us valuable information and insight into a past otherwise inaccessible.

In defense of Diodorus of Sicily and his supposed plagiarism, he deliberately chose which histories to compile and include in his *Library of History*, and those choices as well as his presentations convey his moral purpose. Like Herodotus before him, Diodorus intended to uphold the deeds of great men, including mythical heroes who helped establish the Greek identity.[159] Diodorus similarly attempted to compile histories across time and beyond the bounds of Greece, thereby covering much of the same subject matter as his predecessor, though Diodorus's purpose in doing so is to convey ethical action in as many different scenarios as possible rather than uncover the causes of war as Herodotus declared.[160] In yet another echo of Herodotus, Diodorus conveys the didactic imperative to be humble in victory, a lesson that the narrative of Tomyris exemplifies,

[157] Momigliano, "Place of Herodotus," 4.
[158] J. M. Alonso-Núñez, "An Augustan World History: The 'Historiae Philippicae' of Pompeius Trogus," *Greece & Rome* 34, no. 1 (1987): 61.
[159] Lisa Irene Hau, *Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus Siculus* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017): 79.
[160] Ibid., 77.

and that the Amazon Penthesilea would have done well to learn prior to facing Achilles, as will soon become apparent.[161]

Though considered the Father of Geography in much the same way as Herodotus is the Father of History, Strabo (c. 50s or 60s BCE – 24 CE) also dabbled in historiography. Only nineteen fragments of Strabo's *History*, comparatively unread even in his own time, remain.[162] However, it is his much better-known *Geography* that addresses Scythians and Amazons, as Strabo's *History* covers more recent events from the previous two centuries of its writing. Of Strabo himself, we know very little, only those autobiographical details he reveals in his texts.[163] Strabo's *Geography* is often compared to a later piece, Pausanias's *Description of Greece* (c. 110-180 CE), despite that Strabo's and Pausanias's respective works bear little resemblance to each other in scope, purpose, or style.[164] Strabo explores all the known lands of his world and roots his place descriptions in their historical and cultural background while glossing over information his audience likely already knew.[165] In contrast, Pausanias's work is, as its title suggests, limited to Greece, and reads more as a travel guide peppered with colorful stories and anecdotes to accompany the sites described, including descriptions of tombs and monuments attributed to various Amazons.[166] Both geographers conclude that Amazons belong to the realm of myth, not history, yet nonetheless describe their impact on Greek civilization.[167]

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[161] Ibid., 274. We see this moral play out in Herodotus's presentation of arrogant Cyrus's death at the hands of Tomryis, who as both a woman and a milk-drinking barbarian is the ultimate underdog.

[162] Katherine Clarke, "In Search of the Author of Strabo's *Geography*," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (1997): 93.

[163] Ibid.," 93.

[164] Lee E. Patterson, "Strabo, Local Myth, and Kinship Diplomacy," *Hermes* 138, no. 1 (2010): 112.

[165] Ibid., 112.

[166] Catherine Connors, "Eratosthenes, Strabo, and the Geographer's Gaze," *Pacific Coast Philology* 46, no. 2 (2011): 143.

[167] Pausanias describes such a monument to Antiope in *Helládos Periḗgēsis* 1.2.1.

Like Diodorus of Sicily, Apollodorus (first or second century CE), sometimes referred to as Pseudo-Apollodorus to distinguish him from Apollodorus of Athens, published a *Library* that relies heavily on the work of prior authors, so much so that a minority of scholars suggest Apollodorus's *Library* may itself be an epitome of some lost work.[168] Unlike Diodorus, Apollodorus focuses on Greek myths, making no pretense of recording actual histories among the heroic legends. In keeping with Greek patriotic norms, Apollodorus's *Library* presents the narratives of the foreign Amazons in context with the Greek heroes they faced, and so none of the women's stories end other than in their deaths. However, the value of such an exhaustive compendium of Greek mythology, unique in its scope and breadth, outweighs its shortcomings.[169]

Of the authors addressed for the present study, if Herodotus is the one most sympathetic to the barbarian Scythians and, by extension, warrior women, then Plutarch (c. 46 – 119 CE) is the one most sympathetic to women in general. Plutarch wrote of women as if they were human – a radical feat despite the nascent development in certain philosophical circles, primarily Stoicism, of acknowledging equal potentials and abilities in the sexes.[170] Throughout his philosophical writings, personal correspondence, and in his famed *Lives*, Plutarch treats his female subjects with the same depth and admiration as his male subjects.[171] Plutarch's women could be just as heroic, influential, intelligent, and moral as his men.[172] Considering the aspirational narratives of the heroes in Plutarch's *Lives* and *Parallel Lives* as well as his stated preference for extolling virtues over vices, his portrayal of women is usually positive.[173] We see this positivity in his presentation

[168] Ulrike Kenens, "The Sources of Ps.-Apollodorus's *Library*: A Case-Study," *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 97, no. 1 (2011): 130.
[169] Aubrey Diller, "The Text History of the *Bibliotheca* of Pseudo-Apollodorus," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 66 (1935): 296.
[170] Jeremy McInerney, "Plutarch's Manly Women," Andreia: *Studies in Manliness and Courage in Classical Antiquity* (Brill, 2017): 320; Gera, *Warrior Women: The Anonymous*, 60.
[171] Nikolaidis, "Plutarch on Women," 31.
[172] Ibid., 84.
[173] D. A. Russel, "On Reading Plutarch's *Lives*," *Greece & Rome* 13, no. 2 (1966): 143.

of the Amazons in his *Theseus* narrative, which I will discuss shortly. Most telling, perhaps, is Plutarch's insistence on naming the women in his writings, not merely associating them with a male relative as was common at the time.[174]

Though warrior women thus appear in numerous historical and mythological writings from antiquity, only two works are devoted exclusively to warrior women: the eighth and final book of Polyaenus's *Stratagems* (second century CE) and the anonymously composed *Treatise on Women Distinguished in Wars.* Based on the time period of the included subjects, the *Treatise* could have been written no earlier than the fourth century BCE, but was more likely written sometime in the first or second century CE. Notably, Polyaenus offers an alternate version of Tomyris's defeat of Cyrus and is the primary source for the narrative of another Scythian queen, Amage. Because of their shared topic and the overlap of some featured anecdotes, the two works are often paired in scholarly discourse. Some have suggested that Polyaenus also wrote the *Treatise*, that he used it as a source, or that the author of the *Treatise* consulted Polyaenus.[175] From a stylistic standpoint, scholars are critical of Polyaenus since *Stratagems* is neither literature nor history, but then Polyaenus did not intend to write either genre.[176] As its title implies, *Stratagems* is a collection of brief portraits of military leaders, strategists, and executers of clever or subversive tactics, particularly the section devoted to women.

Ancient Warrior Queens

The stories of individual Amazon warriors are as fantastical as those of other individual heroes, with Amazons interacting with gods, demigods, and monsters, though the Amazons

[174] Nikolaidis, "Plutarch on Women," 31-32.
[175] Kai Brodersen, "Mannhafte Frauen bei Polyainos und beim Anonymus *de mulieribus*," *Polyainos: Neue Studien* (Verlag Antike, 2010): 149-150.
[176] Kenneth Sheedy, Damian B. Gore, and Matthew Ponting, "The Bronze Issues of the Athenian General Timotheus: Evaluating the Evidence of Polyaenus's *Stratagemata*," *Journal of Numismatics* 27 (2015): 11.

themselves never exceed human limitations. Several prominent Greek heroes supposedly crossed paths and, in some cases, swords with famous Amazon queens. Heracles's ninth labor involved retrieving Hippolyte's war-belt, given to her by Ares, the god of war himself. Likewise, Theseus married Antiope, or in another version, Hippolyte. Achilles defeated Penthesilea, the last of the great Amazon queens, during the Trojan War. According to at least one ancient author whose work is unfortunately lost, it was actually Penthesilea, not Achilles, who slew Hector of Troy, even though she fought for the Trojan side.[177]

The narratives of warrior women in ancient literature must be gleaned from the narratives of warrior men, their relationships marked as often by romance as by conflict. Marriage may have been taboo to the Amazons, so much so that Theseus's marriage to an Amazon queen was enough to trigger a war, but Amazons' romantic entanglements with men—Greek and otherwise—occur in numerous stories, including the origin myth of the Sauromatians, another Scythian tribe. According to Herodotus, the Sauromatians were the descendants of Amazons who had been captured and enslaved by the Greeks. They rebelled against their captors, only to find themselves adrift at sea since they did not know how to sail. The Amazons wrecked their stolen ship on a strange shore, where they eventually attracted local Scythian warriors, who abandoned their own clans to form a new tribe with the Amazons. Their female descendants enjoyed the same freedoms as their Amazon forebears.[178]

Perhaps there is some granule of historical truth buried in the exploits of such heroes, even if that truth is nothing more than that a certain person bearing a certain name existed and accomplished a deed worthy of remembrance. No one would argue sincerely that Heracles was a demigod or battled a hydra, but it is not impossible that an extraordinary man named Heracles

[177] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives and Legends*, 302.
[178] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 4.110-4.116.

hunted and warred in preliterate Greece, his exploits embellished in oral legend until ancient authors consolidated and preserved them. Likewise, it is not impossible that warrior queens like Hippolyte and Antiope interacted with those same preliterate Greeks, their names remembered and stories aggrandized over the generations as they were told and retold. The history of the Amazons as a whole potentially contains truths among the more obvious embellishments; inversely, the narratives of individual Amazons likely contain more embellishments than truth.[179] Regardless of the ratio of fact to fiction, it is the individual narratives that capture the imagination. Works like Herodotus's *Histories* and Strabo's *Geography* contain invaluable information about the world these warriors, both men and women, occupied, but it is the stories of the individual heroes that add color to the map.

In the following sections, I discuss five Scythian queens: three Amazons, and two from other Scythian tribes. The Amazons, though by far the most mythologized of any Scythian tribe, were still recognizably Scythian, even to the ancient authors who described them. The territory Amazons commanded overlapped with Scythian territory. Amazons were semi-nomadic and pastoral. The Greeks attributed the taming of horses and the invention of cavalry tactics to both Amazons and Scythians in general. Amazons were often depicted in Greco-Roman art wearing Scythian style clothing. In all likelihood, the Amazons were a real Scythian tribe, coopted by pre-literate Greek storytellers to embody their discomfort with the idea of women holding equal power as men. Encountering real women leaders and warriors among Scythian tribes on the periphery of the Greek empire, the Greeks determined that Scythian men must be effeminate, weak, and dominated by women, as they could not conceive of a society in which men and women were equal.[180] Thus, the Amazon queens of ancient Greco-Roman literature were likely fictionalized

[179] Penrose, *Postcolonial Amazons*, 4.
[180] Ibid., 6.

representations of real Scythian women, made acceptable for a Greco-Roman audience through their ultimate defeat.

Hippolyte

As is often the case with heroic figures from bygone eras, several conflicting and overlapping narratives are attributed to Hippolyte and her sister Antiope, such that neither can be addressed without consideration for the other. Indeed, the narratives of Hippolyte and Antiope are so entangled that some suggest they are the same person. Hippolyte remains one of the most well-known Amazons owing in large part to her characterization in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which makes use of one of those entangled narratives. However, Shakespeare's portrayal of Hippolyte bears little resemblance to the warrior queen of ancient literature. Shakespeare's Hippolyte is mild, quiet, and deferential; the original Hippolyte was anything but.

While the specifics of the narratives differ, one role that is solely attributed to Hippolyte is the bearer of Ares's war-belt, the retrieval of which is the objective of Heracles's ninth labor. Usually translated into English with the more feminine sounding 'girdle,' the Greek word *zōstēr* (ζωστήρ) describes a wide leather belt worn originally by warriors to protect their midsection, as the word is used by Homer, though by the time of Pausanias it became associated with Greek clothing in general. The more mythologically-minded of ancient authors credit Ares with fathering the Amazons, while those more interested in history over fantasy remark instead that, as a warlike nation, the Amazons worshiped a warrior god, or more likely, a goddess, whom the Greeks equated with Artemis.[181] Ares is recognized not only for fathering the Amazon nation, but also fathering individual Amazons, in particular those Amazon queens of renown, including Hippolyte. Thus, as

[181] Ballesteros-Pastor, "Bears and Bees in Themiscyra," 335; Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 151.

a favorite of both his metaphorical and biological daughters, it comes as no surprise that Hippolyte bears Ares's belt.[182]

Hippolyte did not retain her belt indefinitely, but accounts differ on the nature of the loss. According to Diodorus and a few others, Hippolyte relinquishes her war-belt to Heracles against her will, but according to Apollodorus, her initial interactions with Heracles are friendly, and so she voluntarily offers it to him. In Diodorus's version, Heracles fights the Amazons immediately upon his arrival at Themiscyra. After a bloody battle during which he decimates their army, he captures Hippolyte, thus taking the belt from her by force.[183] According to the *Phillipic Histories*, as summarized by Justinus, the only reason Heracles was able to defeat the Amazons on their home turf was because the vast majority of the Amazon army was away on a military campaign, leaving Themiscyra guarded by only a small contingent. Meanwhile, Heracles had arrived with nine warships full of Greece's finest heroes. Hippolyte was then captured by Heracles's companion Theseus and taken back to Athens.[184] Despite being the queen of a fierce warrior race, Hippolyte could not compete with a true Greek hero like Heracles.

However, in the more fantastical version put forth by Apollodorus in *Library*, Hippolyte greets Heracles in friendship as soon as he debarks his ship and, upon learning the reason for his visit is to retrieve her war-belt for the Mycenean princess Admete, she agrees to give it to him. It is only after Hera, the ever-vengeful queen of the gods, disguises herself as an Amazon to spread lies and discord among them that a battle breaks out between Heracles's forces and the Amazons of Themiscyra. During this battle, Heracles kills Hippolyte and strips the belt from her corpse.[185]

[182] Hippolyte's war-belt is mentioned by numerous ancient authors, including Homer, Euripides, Herodotus, Apollonius Rhodius, Apollodorus, and Diodorus.
[183] Diodorus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 2.46.3 – 2.46.4.
[184] Justinus, Historiarum Philippicarum *T. Pompeii Trogi*, 2.4.19 – 2.4.25.
[185] Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 2.5.9.

In her initial willingness to part with her belt, the version of Apollodorus aligns more closely with the majority of ancient writers, including Apollonius Rhodius, Euripides, Isocrates, and Pausanias. Regardless of the friendliness of their initial interactions, however, the end result is the same: Hippolyte is defeated, and Heracles takes her belt.

If there is any merit to Aelian's depiction of Scythian wedding duels, one interpretation of the apparent hostility between Hippolyte and Heracles could be as a failed courtship. As a Scythian warrior woman and a queen, Hippolyte would expect any romantic partner to be at least her equal in battle. By defeating her, Heracles proves his worth as a suitor. However, Heracles is Greek, not Scythian, and so he misinterprets the interaction. Ergo, when their interactions turn violent, Hippolyte is slain. Her initial willingness to gift her belt to Heracles in Apollodorus's version underscores this interpretation, with the Amazon's friendly overtures developing into combat. Apollodorus blames the machinations of Hera for the ensuing battle between Heracles and Hippolyte, but the events are nonetheless reminiscent of misunderstood Scythian courtship customs as suggested by Aelian. This same pattern—combat between a male and female warrior resulting in marriage—appears frequently in later folklore as well through the theme of bride-taking, which I will discuss more thoroughly in later chapters.

Yet, for both Diodorus and Apollodorus, and indeed, most of their contemporaries, Hippolyte's importance ends the moment she parts with Ares's belt. It is only the nature of that parting and the immediate results that differ for each author. It is important to remember that these accounts primarily concern the exploits of Heracles. Though Hippolyte, too, is the offspring of a deity, her divine lineage through Ares is inconsequential compared to that of Heracles, one of Zeus's numerous offspring. Furthermore, no matter her military prowess or royal status, like too

many other women in antiquity, Hippolyte is but an accessory in the hero's narrative.[186] In a folklore sense, she is a donor, possessing an item of value the hero needs to fulfil his quest; once that item is gone, her personal value diminishes. For Apollodorus, her loss of the belt and her death coincide, thus definitively ending her narrative. For Diodorus, her agency and significance end with the loss of the belt, resulting in her capture.

Here is where the other role sometimes attributed to Hippolyte begins: wife of Theseus.[187] In some variations of Heracles's ninth labor, Theseus accompanies him on his journey to Themiscyra. In the variations in which Hippolyte survives her initial encounter with Heracles, whether as a captive or as a willing companion, she follows Heracles and Theseus back to Athens. In the most common variation, Hippolyte joins them because she has fallen in love with Theseus, gladly becoming his consort or in some instances, his wife – a role taboo to Amazons.[188] It is this version that Shakespeare portrays in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Yet, one detail upon which ancient authors all agreed is that Theseus's relationship with an Amazon, if it occurred at all, was brief and ill-fated. The notion of a romantic relationship between a Greek hero and a foreign barbarian was not unheard of, but the double foreignness of the Amazon—being both a warrior woman and a barbarian—necessitated a tragic end to such a relationship.

There could be no more tragic end to a relationship than all-out war, and war is what befell Athens as a result of Theseus's marriage to an Amazon. Ancient accounts of the Attic War differ, to include the names of the primary actors involved, so I will also discuss the war in the next section as it pertains to Antiope. However, as some accounts of Hippolyte's fate see her surviving the war, I will address it now. Sometimes the Attic War begins because Theseus puts aside

[186] Chrystal, *Women at War*, xiii.
[187] More often, the role of Theseus' Amazon wife is given to Antiope, Hippolyte's sister, further entangling the two women's narratives.
[188] Isocrates, *Panathenaicus*, 12.193.

Hippolyte to wed a woman named Phaedra, and so the scorned Amazon leads an army against him, invading Greece to exact her revenge. Other times, the Amazons invade Greece to recover their kidnapped sister, only to discover that she has not, in fact, been kidnapped, or else that she has fallen in love with her captor.[189] According to Plutarch, the Amazons, led by Hippolyte, nearly defeat the Athenians several times after having cut a path of destruction across Greece to siege their city. After several months of brutal fighting, both sides at times gaining the upper hand, the war eventually concludes with a peace treaty, which Hippolyte is typically credited for mediating. Plutarch contends that, had the Amazons not agreed to peace, they may have ultimately defeated the Athenians.[190] However, other authors posit that the Amazons were only able to make it as far as Athens in the first place because they enlisted the aid of other Scythian tribes; as soon as their Scythian allies desert them, the Amazons are soundly defeated, fleeing Greece in shambles.[191]

Some accounts of Hippolyte's fate see her dying during the war, but others see her survive, at least, for a time. As described by Quintus of Smyrna, Hippolyte returns to Themiscyra only to die in a hunting accident shortly thereafter, killed by a wayward spear intended for a stag. The name of the Amazon who threw the spear varies, but usually it is Molpadia or Penthesilea. Pausanias relays yet another variation of Hippolyte's fate as recounted by the Megarians. Along with a handful of other Amazons, Hippolyte survives the final battle against the Greeks and retreats as far as the city of Megara. Once there, Hippolyte realizes that she cannot survive the rest of the journey to Themiscyra, and so she dies of a broken heart. The Megarians subsequently build a tomb to commemorate the site of her death, one of many such Amazon tombs peppering Greece.[192]

[189] Ibid., 12.193.
[190] Plutarch, "Theseus," *Bíoi*, 27.5.
[191] Justinus, Historiarum Philippicarum *T. Pompeii Trogi*, 2.4.26 – 2.4.30; Diodorus, *Bibliotheca historica,* 4.28.2.
[192] Pausanias, *Helládos Periḗgēsis*, 1.41.7.

The myriad deaths ascribed to Hippolyte—murdered by Heracles, falling in battle, dying in a hunting accident, succumbing to a broken heart—contribute to the theory that Hippolyte is an amalgamation of several different women whose narratives became conflated over the years. Considering that these narratives originated centuries before the Greeks developed written literature, such conflation is not unexpected. In fact, the confusion and contamination of warrior women's narratives is a common theme throughout my research. While the possibility remains that the mythical Amazon Hippolyte may have been inspired by a real Scythian queen, the complicated and contradictory biography the Greeks provide reveals more about how the Greeks viewed warrior women than about how such women actually lived or perceived themselves.[193]

Antiope

Although she is not as famous as Hippolyte owing to her omission from Shakespeare's comedy, Antiope nevertheless remains one of the more recognizable Amazons for her role in the Attic War. However, one of the key areas of contention muddling the differentiation between Hippolyte and Antiope regards the Greek hero Theseus. Some authors attribute the role of Theseus's Amazon wife to Hippolyte, as previously discussed, but more often the role is attributed to Antiope. According to Plutarch's *Theseus* as well as Hegias and Pindar, as related by Pausanias in *Description of Greece*, along with several other authors, Antiope is the Amazon who accompanies Theseus back to Greece after Heracles retrieves Hippolyte's war-belt.[194] Since most sources cite Antiope as Theseus's wife and since Hippolyte's primary association remains with Heracles's ninth labor and the treaty that ended the Attic War, for the sake of clarity, going forward I will assume that the proper Amazon who married Theseus is Antiope.

[193] Penrose, *Postcolonial Amazons*, 3-4.
[194] Pausanias, *Helládos Periḗgēsis*, 1.2.1.

In a narrative that Plutarch attributes to Menecrates in *Theseus*, rather than accompanying Heracles on his venture, Theseus sails to Themiscyra long after Heracles's venture had concluded. Similar to Apollodorus's version, relations between the Amazons and the Greeks are at first congenial before they devolve into conflict. Antiope, pleased at the prospect of male company, brings gifts aboard the Greek ship, but Theseus repays her friendly overtures by kidnapping her. Upon the return journey to Greece, one of Theseus's young Athenian companions falls desperately in love with the Amazon. She gently rebuffs his advances and, in the spirit of diplomacy, does not tell Theseus of the incident. However, the young Athenian is so distraught by her rejection that he commits suicide. Theseus learns of the situation after the fact. Remembering an oracle given to him at Delphi that he should found a city when he is filled with the most grief, he establishes a city there and names it in honor of the deceased youth.[195]

Shortly after they arrive at Greece, Antiope bears Theseus a son, Hippolytus.[196] However, despite the seeming domesticity of marriage and motherhood, Antiope does not cease being a warrior when she arrives at Greece. Her refusal to lay down her Amazon mantle links her legacy to the Attic War, the outline of which is largely consistent regardless of the name of Theseus's Amazon wife. The Amazons invade Attica to either recover or avenge their sister, possibly with the support of other Scythian tribes, but after several bloody months, they retreat. Yet, while Hippolyte sometimes survives the war, Antiope never does. Some versions place her fighting alongside the Greeks, while other versions have her leading the Amazon army. In either case,

[195] Plutarch, "Theseus," *Bíoi*, 26.4-5.

[196] The name 'Hippolytus' might at first glance seem to support the version where Hippolyte is his mother, but since Hippolyte and Antiope are sisters, it is equally as credible that he could have been named after a beloved aunt. Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, E.5.3; Euripides, *Hippolytus*.

Antiope dies, fittingly for an Amazon, in battle, and Theseus subsequently expels the rest of the Amazons from Greece.[197]

Though the myth of Amazons murdering their male offspring originated in antiquity and persists in popular imagination, Antiope's son lives to adulthood. Yet, even this son of an Amazon still meets an unfortunate fate as a result of his parentage. To honor his mother's legacy, Hippolytus worships Artemis, the chaste goddess of the hunt. In Euripides's play *Hippolytus*, the titular character's devotion to chastity infuriates Aphrodite, the goddess of love and lust.[198] Through the interference of the jealous deity, Hippolytus's stepmother Phaedra falls in love with him. When he refuses to indulge her romantic advances, she commits suicide, leaving a note behind with a false accusation of rape. Finding the note, Theseus exiles his son Hippolytus, who is then fatally wounded when his chariot crashes as he flees. By honoring his Amazon heritage, Hippolytus ensures he will share the Amazon's doom.

The intertwining of Hippolyte and Antiope's narratives as well as the conflicting details within each likely stems from the method by which their narratives were preserved as well as who did the preserving. Since their stories would have existed in oral tradition centuries before being written down, the surviving versions likely retain only the essence of the originals, especially since we only receive one side of the story. As Scythians, the Amazons would not have had a written language, so they could not record their own version of events. Instead, we must rely on the Ancient Greeks and later, Romans, who rehashed Greek texts. In relaying narratives about Amazons, these authors had an agenda: to glorify their own heroes. Despite Plutarch's assumptions that the Attic

[197] Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, E.1.16.

[198] In Euripides's version, Hippolyte rather than Antiope was the Amazon who married Theseus, but as stated previously, more often his mother is Antiope. Less fantastical versions of Hippolytus's biography omit Aphrodite's involvement, yet the plot of the myth is otherwise unchanged, with his devotion to Artemis cited as the reason for his rejection of his stepmother's advancements, and thus, the reason for his death.

War was a genuine event and that Hippolyte, Antiope, and Hippolytus were real people, many of the authors who first wrote about the Amazons did so under the assumption that they were merely myth, a fabrication of their ancestors' imaginations meant to make their heroes seem more heroic by defeating barbarian female foes. Nevertheless, no matter how heroic or admirable individual Amazons might be, they remained subversive foreigners, and they had to be treated accordingly. Their otherness would not permit them to be victorious in the end.[199]

Penthesilea

Alongside Hippolyte and Antiope, Penthesilea is one of the Amazons most well-known in contemporary culture thanks to her recurrent appearance in works of art and literature in the interceding millennia.[200] Yet, these women share more than just fame. Like Hippolyte and Antiope, Penthesilea is a proud queen as well as a warrior. She likewise confronts a legendary demi-god. Where Hippolyte and Antiope face off with Heracles and Theseus, Penthesilea duels none other than Achilles. All three also serve as key combatants in famous wars that likely have some basis in real events, even if those events did not unfold precisely as described.[201] Where Hippolyte and Antiope served in the Attic War, Penthesilea served at Troy. Numerous ancient authors discuss Penthesilea's participation in the Trojan War, including Diodorus, Apollodorus, and others whose works survive only in summary by subsequent writers, like Marcus Justinus's epitome of Pompeius Trogus's *Philippic Histories*.

Filling the leadership void in the aftermath of the Attic War, Penthesilea becomes the queen of the Amazons. Though authors disagree on the identity of Penthesilea's mother, with some crediting Otrere, who was also the mother of Hippolyte and Antiope, and others saying she was

[199] Penrose, *Postcolonial Amazons*, 7.
[200] Chrystal, *Women at War*, 20 – 21.
[201] Barry S. Strauss, *The Trojan War: A New History* (Simon & Schuster, 2006): 7; Carol G. Thomas and Craig Conant, *The Trojan War* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2005): 2.

born to a Thracian woman, Ares is nonetheless her father.[202] She is as fierce a warrior as any of the war god's daughters. According to some authors, it was Penthesilea who slew Hippolyte in a hunting accident, though others lay the blame with another Amazon named Molpadia. Most authors posit that Hippolyte's death, if it came at the hand of her sister during a hunt, was accidental. Several authors, including Diodorus of Sicily and Quintus of Smyrna, cite Penthesilea's accidental killing of Hippolyte as the stimulus for her participation in the Trojan War: it was penance by means of a suicide mission.[203]

Racked with grief and possibly guilt, thus seeking atonement through a valiant death, Penthesilea leads a small band of Amazons to Troy to help defend the city against the invading Greeks. While defending Troy, Penthesilea and her fellow Amazons cut down numerous Greek soldiers, though her sisters-in-arms each fall eventually to Greek spear or sword. In most versions of her narrative, Penthesilea fights so well that she draws the attention of Achilles, who does not identify her gender beneath her armor. They fight an epic duel amid the chaos of the battlefield, but no Amazon, no matter how brave, heroic, or skilled, could hope to defeat the likes of Achilles. Penthesilea is doomed the moment he notices her. It is only as she is dying of a mortal wound—pierced through the breast in a single stroke that also takes her horse—that Achilles realizes his opponent is a woman, and so he falls in love as only a tragic hero could.[204] According to Quintus of Smyrna, however, Achilles is aware that he is fighting an Amazon throughout the duel since it is Penthesilea who calls him out by name and challenges him. Therefore, her death is as much a result of her own hubris as of Achilles's spear, though the end result is the same: Achilles falls in

[202] Dowden, "Amazons: Development and Functions," 99.
[203] Chrystal, *Women at War*, 22; Lee Fratantuono, "The *Penthesilead* of Quintus Smyrnaeus: A Study in Epic Reversal," *Wiener Studien* 129 (2016): 208.
[204] Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, E.5.2.

love as Penthesilea takes her final breath, a detail that some ancient authors viewed as diminishing Achilles's power, while others interpreted it as an example of love conquering death.[205]

In keeping with the ancient moral imperative to be humble in victory as presented by Herodotus and Diodorus, Penthesilea's death at the hands of Achilles is inevitable not only because of her status as a foreign barbarian and a woman, but because of her arrogance. Quintus of Smyrna's effusive praise of Penthesilea's battle prowess, as some have observed, approaches the divine.[206] Before she challenges Achilles, she is a valiant goddess of destruction, hewing through Greek opponents in a whirlwind of violence. However, she is not truly a goddess, but a mortal. The only fitting reward for such arrogance in a mortal is death, especially when that mortal is both a woman and a foreigner.

According to most authors, Penthesilea was the last Amazon worthy of the warrior's mantle, with their civilization dwindling and disappearing after her death. Between the massive losses during their failed invasion of Greece and then the loss of the entire detachment that accompanied Penthesilea to Troy, though only ten women are named in that detachment, the Amazons had few warriors and leaders left to defend their homeland.[207] Thus, their power and reputation all but vanished, with little mention of any Amazon again until Thalestris, who briefly consorts with Alexander the Great. However, even early historians dismissed Thalestris as a fabrication, an affair added to mythologize Alexander's accomplishments and put him on par with legendary heroes like Heracles and Theseus. Since they interacted with Amazons, so, too, must he. Apart from her supposed liaison with Alexander, no mention is made of Thalestris.[208] Thus,

[205] Marco Fantuzzi, *Achilles in Love: Intertextual Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2012): 278 and 285.
[206] Fratantuono, "Penthesilead of Quintus Smyrnaeus," 222.
[207] Diodorus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 2.46.4 – 2.46.6.
[208] Strabo, *Geographica*, 11.5.4; Chrystal, *Women at War*, 25.

Penthesilea stands as the last great queen of the fictionalized Scythian Amazons, but she is not the last great queen Ancient Greco-Roman authors documented among the rest of the Scythians.

Tomyris

While the Amazons' narratives underwent significant revision and mythologization over the centuries between occurrence and record, if they indeed occurred at all, the next two queens I discuss are rooted firmly in history, not myth. Tomyris ruled over a Scythian tribe known as the Massagetae during the sixth century BCE. The Massagetae occupied the lands east of the Caspian Sea, roughly correlating to present day Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, near the southern border of Scythian-held territory at the time.[209] During the Renaissance, she became a popular subject of painters like Peter Paul Rubens, who devoted several works to her in the seventeenth century. Her artistic portrayals earned her a position in the Power of Women *topos*, which explored gender hierarchies by depicting encounters of centuries past between powerful women and the most powerful of men.[210] Despite her inclusion in this art movement of the medieval and Renaissance ages, Tomyris is still little known to the larger world; however, she remains such an important figure to the present-day countries corresponding to the territory she once ruled that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have adopted her as a national hero, complete with monuments in major cities as well as numerous legends ascribed to her. Fictional though some of those legends may be, Tomyris was a real ruler of a real people, and she reigned over a substantial territory at a time when to most civilizations, the notion of female leadership was preposterous.

Multiple ancient authors mention Tomyris, including Polyaenus, Diodorus, and Strabo, but Herodotus provides one of the earliest and most detailed accounts of her reign. According to

[209] Kostas Deligiorgis, "Tomyris, Queen of the Massagetes: A Mystery in Herodotus's *History*," *Anistoriton Journal* 14 (2014-2015): 2.

[210] Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women: A Topos in Medieval Art and Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995): 2.

Herodotus, in the sixth century BCE Tomyris took control of the Massagetae following the death of her husband, who, in a stark reversal of the usual practice, remains unnamed; normally it is the women who remain nameless, described only in relation to their male kin, if mentioned at all. Upon Tomyris's ascension to power, suitors wishing to acquire her kingdom bombard her with marriage proposals. Most prominent of the suitors is Cyrus the Great, the emperor of Persia and progenitor of the Achaemenid dynasty. Cyrus sends emissaries to Tomyris, but she knows his eye is on conquest rather than marriage, and so she refuses to entertain them. Instead, she returns the emissaries to their emperor with a clear message of rejection. To paraphrase Herodotus's account of her pointed reply: You rule your kingdom, and I'll rule mine.[211]

Cyrus, unable to swallow such a response yet upholding his pretense of courtship, leads his armies into Massagetae territory across the river Araxes, now known as the Volga, all the while plotting with his advisors how best to absorb her tribe as he had so many others.[212] Most of his advisors recommend he face the Massagetae directly in open battle, but one advisor—Croesus the Lydian—proposes a ruse. Croesus suggests that Cyrus lure the Massagetae with a feast left in a poorly guarded camp, ply them with strong wine, and only once they are deep in a drunken stupor, descend upon them with elite troops.[213] As one of the affiliated Scythian tribes, the Massagetae were known to drink fermented mare's milk, but they were unused to stronger alcohols.[214] Thus, the portion of Tomyris's army that she sends to confront Cyrus's invasion, led by her son Spargapises, falls for the ruse. The returning Persians slaughter the drunken warriors and take her son captive. Spargapises, ashamed at his failure, commits suicide.

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[211] "ὦ βασιλεῦ Μήδων, παῦσαι σπεύδων τὰ σπεύδεις: οὐ γὰρ ἂν εἰδείης εἴ τοι ἐς καιρὸν ἔσται ταῦτα τελεόμενα: παυσάμενος δὲ βασίλευε τῶν σεωυτοῦ, καὶ ἡμέας ἀνέχευ ὁρέων ἄρχοντας τῶν περ ἄρχομεν." Herodotus, *Historíai*, 1.206.1.

[212] Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, 44.

[213] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 1.207.5.

[214] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 146.

Despite grieving the loss of her son and nearly a third of her army, Tomyris offers Cyrus one last chance at diplomacy. She sends a messenger with instructions that if all the Persian forces depart her lands immediately, she will let them live; remain, and she will see to it personally that the bloodthirsty emperor drinks his fill.[215] Still confident in their superiority over the milk-drinking, woman-ruled barbarians, Cyrus and his army continue their march through Massagetae territory. Thus, Tomyris gathers her remaining cavalry and faces the Persians on the battlefield. After a prolonged battle, the Massagetae eventually win the day. Tomyris deposits the fallen emperor's severed head in a bag of human blood and returns it to the Persians. As promised, she had quenched his thirst at last.[216]

It is noteworthy that, while the assumption of later authors is that queens only ruled as regents for underage sons or in the absence of a male heir, Tomyris's son Spargapises is an adult. He is old enough to be a general in her army, so we can assume he is likewise old enough to rule. However, Tomyris, not her grown son, is the leader of the Massagetae. This detail highlights not only the equality of the sexes in Scythian societies, but also the aptitude Tomyris must have possessed as a ruler. Her position at the head of the Massagetae despite the existence of what the Greeks and Romans would have considered a better qualified—i.e., male—candidate further indicates that, to the Scythians, gender did not matter nearly so much as ability.

Besides the war with Persia, little is mentioned of Tomyris's reign. Furthermore, outside of Central Asia, Tomyris remains relatively unknown in comparison to the emperor she defeated. Cyrus is discussed at length not only in many Ancient Greco-Roman sources, but also sources ranging from the *Babylonian Chronicles* and the *Dead Sea Scrolls* to the Bible and Quran. He is

[215] "εἰ δὲ ταῦτα οὐ ποιήσεις, ἥλιον ἐπόμνυμί τοι τὸν Μασσαγετέων δεσπότην, ἢ μέν σε ἐγὼ καὶ ἄπληστον ἐόντα αἵματος κορέσω." Herodotus, *Historíai*, 1.212.3.
[216] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 1.214.4 - 1.214.5.

commonly known even today as Cyrus the Great, and his conquests are widely taught in world history courses. As for the warrior queen who defeated him, beyond the memory of her geographic and cultural descendants in Central Asia and renaissance art circles, she has been relegated to a footnote. Many accounts of Cyrus's final battle do not even mention that the opposing force was led by a woman, let alone provide that woman's name.[217] Tomyris's exclusion from the dominant narrative is hardly an isolated phenomenon. Women of extraordinary achievements have long been overlooked by mainstream history, and Tomyris is no different.[218]

Amage

Another historical Scythian queen is Amage, who ruled over the Sarmatians during the third or second century BCE. Although she appears in fewer written sources than Tomyris and is thus even more obscure, she is nevertheless presumed to have been a real person. The main narrative source of information about Amage comes from Polyaenus's *Stratagems*, but there is ample archaeological evidence to support the existence of similar women, especially among the Sarmatians, a later Scythian tribe that came to dominate the territory between the Don and Dniepro rivers.[219] The exact time period Amage ruled over the Sarmatians is contested, but most contemporary scholars posit, based on the events included in her narrative, that she lived during the peak of Sarmatian power in the second century BCE.[220] According to Polyaenus, Amage takes over ruling their tribe when she realizes her husband, the king, is a lazy and incompetent drunk. She does not merely work from behind the scenes, as one might expect, but rather, she leads proudly and publicly, evidently without any resistance from her husband. Like Tomyris, despite

[217] Abetekov and Yusupov, "Ancient Iranian Nomads," 25.
[218] Cameron, *Feminism: Brief Introduction*, 96.
[219] John Harmatta, *Studies on the History of the Sarmatians* (Pázmány Peter Tudományegyetemi Görög Filológiai Intėzet, 1950): 11; Ivantchik, "Scythian Kingdom in the Crimea," 228.
[220] Harmatta, *Studies on the History of the Sarmatians*, 8.

the existence of a male candidate for leadership, Amage holds all the power. From what Polyaenus describes of her activities, she is a very involved and capable ruler. Her people adore her, and her shining reputation as a wise and dedicated queen extends far beyond the Sarmatians. Even leaders of neighboring Scythian tribes come to her for advice.

In one such instance, the Chersonesus come into conflict with another tribe, which Polyaenus describes only as Scythian. The king of the Chersonesus begs Amage for an alliance against the other Scythians, who keep encroaching on his territory. Agreeing to his request, she sends a message to the offending Scythian king to cease his forays into Chersonesus territory, a message he blatantly disregards. As a result, Amage leads a detachment of skilled cavalry, along with extra horses so they do not have to stop to rest, in a surprise attack against the Scythian king's encampment. Amage and her cavalry kill every guard, the king himself, and all of the king's retainers and family except for one young son. Amage installs the son as king and warns him against invading his neighbors, lest he meet the same fate as his father. Whether or not the son complies with Amage's directive is left undisclosed.

Polyaenus, focusing on the strategic details of Amage's stealth attack, does not tell us about the rest of her rule. How did her subsequent reign proceed? Did she bear any children? Who succeeded her? Like Tomyris, we know nothing else of her life after this one key event for which she was noteworthy, nor do we know much of the husband from whom she took power. Unlike most other queens remembered by history, however, Amage did not assume leadership upon widowhood, nor did she serve as a regent for an underage son. As far as we know, her husband, however ineffectual of a king he may have been, continued to live. Furthermore, since no mention is made of marital discord, we can only assume he was content to stand aside while Amage handled everything in the kingdom from daily administration to military actions.

Scholars posit that Amage reigned sometime in the third or second century BCE, which is when the dominant tribe we conceive of as the Scythians started to lose prominence in favor of the expanding Sarmatians.[221] Interestingly, some have also suggested that the Scythian and Chersonesus kings were Amage's vassals rather than neighboring kings.[222] By this interpretation, instead of acting as an ally of the Chersonesus and an invading force to the other Scythian tribe, Amage would have been mediating between two subordinates and then enforcing her commands against a rebellious subject. The Scythian king's death was not diplomacy by other means, then, but a stern reminder of who was really in charge.

Conclusion

If such extraordinary stories as Tomyris's defeat of Cyrus or Amage's surprise attack were based on real people and events, could there be any truth to the literature about the Amazons?[223] Could Hippolyte, Antiope, Penthesilea, or any other of the 82 Amazons named across Greco-Roman literature trace their origins to real women?[224] The answer, I would argue, is a resounding yes. Based on the abundant archaeological evidence of warrior women as a staple of Scythian civilization, we know that women fought in wars, led armies, and ruled kingdoms in the Eurasian steppes during the Bronze and Iron Ages, dating back to well before the period we ascribe to the Scythians. Based on the timeline of events in the literature composed about them, the Amazons as a tribe would have existed around the same time the Greeks—or more specifically, the Mycenaeans—were first aware of the barbarian nomads raiding along the periphery of their known world. Situating the Amazons at this early period, sometime between 2000 to 1200 BCE, would also make their participation in the Trojan War plausible. Excavations at Hissarlik, a Turkish site now

[221] Ibid., 8.
[222] Ibid., 9.
[223] Deligiorgis, "Tomyris, Queen of the Massagetes," 2.
[224] Chrystal, *Women at War*, 24.

widely accepted as the location of Troy, have revealed the city was destroyed at least twice during that same timeframe.[225] If the Trojan War indeed occurred, why not the Attic War?

Yet, no matter the genre, no matter how much fact may underly the fiction, the narratives of warrior women are not allowed to stand alone in ancient literature. Even historically attested queens like Tomyris and Amage are first introduced by their relation to men, even when those men remain unnamed. Tomyris inherits her position after her husband's death, and Amage usurps the duties of her incompetent husband. After the warrior queens defeat their immediate foes, their narratives end. They are not permitted to move on to another adventure – that is a fate reserved for men. Similarly, fictional Amazons must ultimately be defeated so that the male heroes can move on to the next battle, the next adventure, the next woman. Since they would have lived well before the Greeks possessed a written language, narratives about individual Amazons would have undergone significant revision prior to being recorded; the biographies of any real women they were inspired by may have ended quite differently than what the Greeks described.

The Scythians did not maintain power over Eastern Europe and Central Asia indefinitely, but their cultural influence extended long after their physical presence waned. In the ensuing centuries of the Viking Age, as various Slavs, Swedes, and other groups settled in the formerly Scythian-held lands between the Black and Baltic Seas, several warrior queens emerged. Parallels to the narratives of Hippolyte, Antiope, Penthesilea, Tomyris, and Amage can be found in accounts of these Viking Age warrior queens. Their military endeavors likewise earned them legendary prestige, and the authors who penned their stories—well-versed in the ancient narratives—ensured the Amazon legacy lived on in medieval Slavic and Scandinavian literature. In the next chapter, I will discuss several Viking Age warrior queens who carried forward the Amazon-Scythian torch.

[225] Thomas and Conant, *Trojan War*, 37.

CHAPTER 3

SLAVIC WARRIOR QUEENS OF THE VIKING AGE

Like the earlier Greeks and Romans across the sea, the Vikings possessed numerous examples of warrior women in their poetry, sagas, chronicles, and pre-Christian religion.[226] The Norse pantheon offers the goddess Freya, who embodied equal parts war and womanhood. Appropriately, Freya received half the souls of the heroic dead into her hall, Fólkvangr; the other half went to Odin's Valhalla, a much more familiar destination to the modern reader. The heroic dead themselves were selected and transported to their assigned afterlife by Valkyries, armed and armored female spirits who rode winged horses, combing the battlefield to choose the worthy from among the slain.[227] Medieval Norse literature likewise provides examples of mortal warrior women fighting alongside their warrior men. Lagertha, who first appeared as a *skjaldmær* ('shieldmaiden') and later *jarl* ('leader' or 'king') in Saxo's *History of the Danes*, is perhaps the most famous of these warrior women due to her inclusion in the History Channel's popular show *Vikings*.[228] Yet, she was hardly the only literary *skjaldmær*. To name just a few, Brynhildr, Hervor, Auðr, and Freydis took up swords for various reasons, usually revenge.[229] Some medieval Norse authors also mention societies comprised exclusively of warlike women, similar to the Amazons,

[226] While '*viking'* in Old Norse refers to the *act* of raiding or pillaging and not to the raiders themselves, I will conform to the term's modern usage, which describes the people of the Scandinavian countries as well as their outlying settlements, including their various colonies across Europe from the eighth to eleventh century.

[227] Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Boydell Press, 1991): 139; Self, "Valkyrie's Gender," 147. When I am referring specifically to Vikings (including the Rus') as opposed to warrior women in general during the Viking Age, I will use the Old Norse term. The plural form of *skjaldmær* is *skjaldmeyjar.*

[228] Terri Barnes, "The Intrigue of the Female Warrior," *Medieval Warfare* 9, no. 1 (2019): 43.

[229] Leszek Gardeła, "Warrior-women in Viking Age Scandinavia? A Preliminary archaeological study / Wojownicze kobiety w wikińskiej Skandynawii? Wstępne stadium archeologiczne," *Analecta Archaeologica Ressoviensia* 8 (2013): 305.

located in the far north.[230] However, as with their ancient predecessors, most historians—then and now—dismissed such accounts as fictional.[231]

Nevertheless, compared to the plethora of material evidence of the Scythian warrior women whom ancient authors mythologized into Amazons, the existence of real *skjaldmeyjar* among the Vikings remains contested. What evidence does exist suggests that such women were extreme exceptions, and furthermore, that they may have come from beyond the borders of Scandinavia.[232] More specifically, these warrior women were thought to originate in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, territories occupied only generations before by the Scythians. Even in Viking Age Scandinavian graves that contain the remains of women buried with weapons, the style of clothing and accessories, and sometimes the style of the burial itself, suggests Slavic or Central Asian origins.[233] For example, one famous warrior grave, known as the Birka Warrior, was confirmed as female through osteological and DNA analysis in 2017 after decades of scientists assuming she was a male chieftain. The Birka Warrior was buried with a Slavic style hat likely made in Kyiv.[234]

During the Viking Age, Eastern Europe gave rise to various principalities and kingdoms that, although strongly patriarchal and subject to Scandinavian influence, begat female rulers whose military legacies endured well beyond their own reigns: Olga of Kyiv, Libuše and Vlasta of Bohemia, and Sigrid the Proud. Of these, only Olga and Sigrid may claim Scandinavian roots, but this claim is nevertheless disputable since contradictory origins are presented for Olga, and Sigrid

[230] Birgit Sawyer, "Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia – or: Who Were the 'Shieldmaidens'?" *Vinland Revisited: the Norse World at the Turn of the First Millennium*, ed. by Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Inc., 2003): 2; Gardeła, "Warrior-women in Viking Age Scandinavia," 305.

[231] Carol J. Clover, "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85, no. 1 (1986): 36.

[232] Judith Jesch, "Women, War, and Words: A Verbal Archaeology of Shield-maidens," *Viking* 84, no. 1 (2021): 134 and 138.

[233] Leszek Gardeła, "Amazons of the Viking World," *Medieval Warfare* 7, no. 1 (2017): 14.

[234] Neil Price et al, "Viking warrior women? Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj.581," *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (2019): 184.

may have been originally a Polish princess. Though their narratives did not appear in written record until several centuries after their deaths, each of these queens reigned during the Viking Age, which is defined by the years 793-1066. In this chapter I will explore the narratives of these warrior queens not only in the context of the fusion of Slavic and Scandinavian cultures that characterized their era, but as heirs to Scythian Amazons, who provided both historical and literary models for medieval authors to consult as they framed these narratives. In so doing, I will demonstrate that while the societies they ruled bore strong marks of Scandinavian influence, the queens themselves share more in common with their Scythian-Amazon predecessors than any Viking *skjaldmær* or Valkyrie from Scandinavian literature.

Whether through medieval authors' direct reproduction, intentional or otherwise, of the ancient models, or through coincidence born from the pervasiveness of certain plots throughout historical literature, the narratives of these Viking Age Slavic queens overlap key elements with their ancient predecessors: widowhood as a means to power; righteous vengeance; defense of the homeland; multiple false suitors. Such commonalities in the biographies of warrior queens who lived across vastly different times and cultures could have several causes, but most can be reduced to a question of imitation or universality. Did medieval authors assign new names to borrowed legends, or are some experiences common among women rulers? Or do we only remember women rulers who were exceptional in narrowly defined ways? Regardless, to fully appreciate these women's narratives as history and as literature, it is necessary to understand not only the kingdoms they commanded, but also the ones that surrounded them. As Christian Raffensperger observes, "Medieval kingdoms, like modern states, did not exist in isolation."[235] This reminder is important for any consideration of the Viking Age, when the collision of Scandinavians and Slavs peaked.

[235] Christian Raffensperger, "Shared (Hi)Stories: Vladimir of Rus' and Harald Fairhair of Norway," *The Russian Review* 68, no. 4 (2009): 570.

"Viking" Rus'

It is almost universally accepted that Scandinavian Vikings, who raided and colonized the lands surrounding the Baltic and Black Seas, influenced the Rus'; the extent of that influence, in what capacities it occurred, and whether it went both ways, are the areas where scholars hold conflicting opinions. Some suggest the Rus' were essentially Scandinavian, probably Swedish, though others say they may have been Danes.[236] In either case, the names of the early rulers and nobility of Rus' certainly suggest Scandinavian origins.[237] Other scholars, particularly Russian nationalists and later, Soviets, have argued that the Rus' were predominantly Slavic, and so the Scandinavian impact was minimal.[238] Some have also explored the influence of steppe nomads such as the Khazars, who at one time exacted tribute from Rus' merchants, on the state's early development.[239] The contemporary consensus, however, is that the nature of the relationship between the Scandinavians and the Rus' was complex and intermittent, but largely unidirectional.[240] Fully dissecting the Scandinavian-Slav interaction that birthed the Rus' identity is well beyond the scope of the present study, especially since a wealth of academic attention has already been devoted to this topic. Therefore, I narrow my focus to aspects of this interaction that contributed to the portrayal of warrior women, with particular emphasis on the queens I am using as case studies. Significantly, in the portrayal of Viking Age warrior queens, I suggest the Scandinavian influence on the Slavs is neither as extensive nor as unidirectional as in other cultural

[236] Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 109; Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*, 22-23; Władysław Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe* (Koninklijke Brill NV, 2004): 122.

[237] Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 126; Petr S. Stefanovich, "The Political Organization of the Rus' in the 10th Century," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 64 (2016): 539.

[238] Hillerdal, "Vikings, Rus, Varangians," 75 and 89.

[239] Thomas S. Noonan, "The Khazar Qaghanate and its impact on the early Rus' state: the Translatio Imperii from Itil to Kiev," *Nomads in the Sedentary World* (Routledge, 2001): 91; Iver B. Neumann, "The Steppe and Early European State Formation," *Uluslararası İlişkiler / International Relations* 8, no. 30 (2011): 9.

[240] Leszek Gardeła, "Vikings in Poland. A critical overview," *Viking Worlds: Things, Spaces and Movement*, ed. by Marianne Hem Eirksen et al. (Oxbow Books, 2015): 215; Barika Mägi, *The Viking Eastern Baltic* (Arc Humanities Press, 2019): 58.

arenas. In fact, the manner in which medieval authors present the narratives of Slavic warrior queens aligns them more closely with Scythians and Amazons than with Vikings.

Since Olga of Kyiv may have been a Varangian, one of the Swedish groups who was active in northern Russia during her lifetime, it is necessary to review the legend of their arrival, dubbed the "Calling of the Varangians." According to the Russian *Primary Chronicle*, or *Tale of Bygone Years*, the earliest Slavic and Finnic tribes inhabiting northwestern Russia paid tribute to Scandinavian invaders, known as Varangians, until they expelled their overlords and attempted to rule themselves. The endeavor ultimately failed due to infighting between clans, and so they collectively invited the Varangians to return and rule over them once more. Three brothers obliged the request, with the eldest, Rurik, settling in Novgorod, and the other brothers ruling in Beloozero and Izborsk.[241] The two younger brothers died shortly thereafter, leaving only Rurik to found the dynasty that reigned over the Rus', as they had by then come to be known. When Rurik himself was dying (c. 870-879), he charged his relation Oleg with ruling over the Rus' and raising Rurik's son Igor', who was too young to lead on his own.[242] It should be noted that the Varangian Guard later employed by the Byzantines is unrelated to the Varangians referenced in this legend.[243]

As with all histories of the distant past, the "Calling of the Varangians" myth should not be taken at face value—after all, what independent tribes, regardless of how much they fought amongst each other, would *request* outside subjugation?—yet archaeological evidence corroborates the presence of Scandinavians in the Baltic region and northern Russia by the ninth century, possibly even earlier.[244] Excavations of Viking Age settlements, graves, and hill forts

[241] Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans and eds., *Russian Primary Chronicle*, 59.
[242] Ibid., 60.
[243] Sverir Jakobsson, "The Varangian Legend: Testimony from the Old Norse Sources," *Byzantium and the Viking World/Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia*, ed. by Fedir Androsjtsjuk, Jonathan Shepard, and Monica White (Uppsala Universitet, 2016): 360.
[244] Mägi, *Viking Eastern Baltic*, 56; Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation CA 800-1500* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 60; V. G. Dushin, "Priglashenie variazhskix

along the major river routes used for trading and raiding throughout Eastern Europe reveal a strong Scandinavian presence during the ninth and tenth centuries, particularly along waterways, that tapered off during the eleventh century.[245] All along the Volga and Dnieper rivers, from the Baltic Sea to the Black, Viking style weapons, jewelry, and assorted grave goods dot the route known in Norse sagas as the "Eastern Way."[246] Simultaneously, many examples of tenth- through twelfth-century Slavic pottery can be found in Denmark, which some suggest indicates an extensive, corresponding Slavic presence in Scandinavia.[247] Yet, the existence of Slavic pottery outside Slavic territories could just as easily be explained as a result of trade, gifts, theft, or the sharing of techniques among craftsmen. Attempts to link the Varangian prince Riurik with a Danish Viking of similar name—Rorik of Dorestad—might add support to a Danish-Slavic connection; however, the preponderance of evidence supports the theory that the leading Scandinavians interacting with Slavs, at least in Rus', hailed from Sweden.[248]

A stronger argument for a Slavic presence in Scandinavia, if the Scandinavian-Slavic marriage indeed worked both ways, can be found in women's graves. As mentioned above, the incidence of Slavic styled accessories, weapons, and clothing accompanying Viking Age female burials in Scandinavia proper as well as territories within their sphere of influence has led some scholars to suggest that these women, if they were indeed *skjaldmeyjar*, were not ethnically Scandinavian. The presence of Slavic weapons—usually axes, though ranged weapons like spears and bows also appear—are of particular interest, considering the vast majority of Viking women's

kniazei," *Rossica & Slavica*, ed. by M. G. Moiseenko (The Zimovniki Local History Museum, 2021): 25. Dushin suggests that, as there is some historical precedence for medieval peoples requesting outside military assistance to protect against another invading force, a genuine invitation for Varangian rule may have occurred. I would counter that the hiring of a mercenary army is hardly comparable to fully renouncing independence.

[245] Hillerdal, "Vikings, Rus, Varangians," 94; Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 115.

[246] Mägi, *Viking Eastern Baltic*, 50 and 69.

[247] Ulriksen, "Late Iron Age," 241.

[248] Fedir Androshchuk, "From Vikings to Rus: The Danish Connection," *Rus: Vikings in the East* (Moesgaard Museum, 2022): 89.

graves contain no weapons at all.[249] The women's graves that do contain weapons tend to be much more lavishly equipped than those of their male peers, and in fact, Viking women's graves in general are more richly furnished than Viking men's graves.[250] Interestingly, in contrast with the Scythian kurgans discussed in the previous chapter, most Viking men's graves do not contain weapons either, likely due to the high cost of their manufacture.[251] After all, weapons were of no use to the dead and of great use to the living. Since weapons were so expensive to manufacture and maintain, one can assume that any weapons found in graves held special significance either to the person buried there or to the ones who buried them.[252] Compared to swords and armor, which are almost entirely absent from Viking graves of either gender, anyone could afford an axe, and almost everyone needed one for domestic purposes outside their function as weapons, yet still not everyone was buried with an axe.[253] Perhaps, then, an axe of foreign make held a certain significance for the deceased, indicative of their heritage, but as with the Slavic pottery uncovered in Denmark, a foreign axe could also be a war trophy.

Thus, it is likelier that the Scandinavian-Slavic relationship in most areas was predominantly unidirectional, as evident by the relative scarcity of Slavic items in Scandinavia compared to the plethora of Viking material culture in Eastern Europe. The most common evidence of Scandinavian presence in ninth- and tenth-century Rus' can also be found in women's graves: women's jewelry and accessories comprise the majority of artifacts.[254] Of particular note are the shoulder brooches unique to Viking women's clothing. Usually made of gilded bronze, the prevalence of shoulder brooches confirms a sizeable population of Viking women living in what

[249] Short, *Viking Weapons*, 10; Gardeła, "Warrior-women in Viking Age," 298.
[250] Sawyer, "Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," 6.
[251] Gardeła, "Amazons of the Viking World," 10.
[252] Gardeła, "Warrior-women in Viking Age," 297.
[253] Short, *Viking Weapons*, 71.
[254] Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 128.

is now Russia, which in turn confirms a long-term Scandinavian presence rather than itinerant raiding parties.[255] Similar to the motifs characteristic of Scythian art, most of these brooches depict stylized animals. However, brooches depicting ambiguously gendered warriors, such as figures sporting weapons and male clothing but with feminine hairstyles, are also pervasive. Usually in a warrior-themed brooch pair, one of these figures holds a spear and sits astride a horse, reminiscent of the mythic Valkyrie, while the other carries a sword and wears a long, feminine dress.[256] Though these brooches could depict mythical or literary figures, some suggest they point to a tradition of actual *skjaldmeyjar*.[257]

Raids, Trades, and Marriages

The contemporary perception of Vikings as indiscriminate marauders, sweeping into otherwise peaceful villages to rape, pillage, and plunder before returning to their dragon-headed longboats to seek further victims is not wholly unjustified.[258] The Vikings were just as violent and expansionist as any other culture of their time, let alone in the preceding or ensuing centuries.[259] Yet, we must remember that the Vikings' victims were not as innocent nor peaceful as subsequent historians sometimes paint them to be. In fact, Viking raiding parties may have been *less* devastating than their contemporaries.[260] Standing armies, in the way we think of them today, were uncommon during the Viking Age, and so, contrary to the popular image, most Vikings were not professional soldiers, but farmers who joined a seasonal foray into foreign territories whenever planting and harvesting were not underway. Therefore, despite the idealization of masculinity and

[255] Ibid., 129; Mägi, *Viking Eastern Baltic*, 23; Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 35.
[256] Gardeła, "Warrior-women in Viking Age," 302.
[257] Ibid.
[258] Albrecht Classen, "The Emergence of Rationality in the Icelandic Sagas: The Colossal Misunderstanding of the Viking Lore in Contemporary Popular Culture," *Humanities* 1, no. 110 (2022): 5. Classen suggests the continued fascination with Viking violence—more so than their political or legal achievements—says as much about our current societal values as about theirs.
[259] Short, *Viking Weapons*, 2; Classen, "Emergence of Rationality," 4.
[260] Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*, 23.

warriorhood in Viking culture, violence tended to be committed by small bands of loosely organized individuals with individual goals, not for the glory of some idealized state, and certainly not for the sake of violence itself.[261]

Since blind death and destruction were not the aims, then, of Viking incursions into Europe, what were? In short, resources: arable land, jewelry, gilded fittings from churches, slaves, and other items that could be easily carried off and sold. They did not routinely demolish a town's infrastructure nor slaughter entire populations; instead, they captured treasures and slaves for later exchange, usually with the Byzantines.[262] They also sought better farmland for their families than what was available in their native Scandinavia, hence the inclusion of civilian women—wives and daughters, not necessarily *skjaldmeyjar*—in Viking raiding parties.[263] They acted more as colonizers and settlers than the berserkers stereotypical of Vikings in modern media. Which is not to say that colonialism is peaceful, quite the opposite, but the calculated violence of colonialism is a far cry from the anarchy popularly attributed to the Vikings. Their lingering reputation likely stems from the biases of medieval European authors, who were predominantly Christian monks. At the height of Scandinavian expansion in the ninth through eleventh centuries, most of the Vikings' victims were Christian, whereas most of the Vikings were not.[264]

While Scandinavian Vikings seized many items of tangible culture from settlements along rivers and coastlines, they left behind intangible, yet no less important, elements of their own culture. The northern Slavic and Finnic tribes that the Vikings initially encountered were semi-nomadic, pastoral, and agricultural, and they lacked a distinct noble or ruling class, enjoying a

[261] Short, *Viking Weapons*, 25.
[262] Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*, 23; Władysław Duczko, "Viking Age Wolin (Wollin) in the Norse Context of the Southern Coast of the Baltic Sea," *Scripta Islandica* 65 (2014) 143.
[263] Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 10.
[264] Short, *Viking Weapons*, 1.

more egalitarian social structure similar to that of the Scythians before them.[265] The Vikings brought some coherence to such loosely structured communities by establishing a noble warrior class: themselves. The Vikings also imparted a complex legal code, which I will discuss in more detail later as it pertains to gender roles and norms. Finally, the Vikings disseminated stories from their rich oral traditions, which mixed and merged with the equally rich Slavic oral traditions. This union of storytelling cultures consequently muddied the origins of the narratives later written down as histories, obscuring the identification of any given historical figure as initially Scandinavian or Slavic.[266] Both Olga of Kyiv and Sigrid the Proud embody this obscuration.

Although a distinct Slavic noble class did not exist prior to the Viking occupation, medieval literature, both Norse and Slavic, contains numerous examples of Slavic princesses marrying Scandinavian *jarls* and Scandinavian princesses marrying Slavic *kniazia* ('princes' or 'kings').[267] For example, Ellisíf, who accompanied her husband Haraldr harðráði on his invasion of England, was originally from Rus'.[268] Yaroslav the Wise, Olga's great-grandson, married the Swedish princess Ingigerd.[269] While these examples occur toward the end of the Viking Age, both Olga of Kyiv and Sigrid the Proud likewise figure in blended Scandinavian-Slavic marriages. Their staffs, the attendants and guards who would have accompanied the brides to their new homes, further contributed to the cultural melting pot at the elite level.[270]

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[265] Bogucki, "On Wulfstan's right hand," 86; Dushin, "Priglashenie variazhskix kniazei," 21; Hraundal, "New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus," 71.

[266] Raffensperger, "Shared (Hi)Stories," 577.

[267] Christian Raffensperger, *The Kingdom of Rus'* (Arc Humanities Press, 2017). One of Raffensperger's key arguments is that *kniaz*, as it refers to the rulers of Rus' prior to the fourteenth century, should be translated not as 'prince' or 'duke,' which is commonly used today, but rather as 'king'. The basis of his argument is the translations given in contemporaneous writings, which equate *kniaz* with *rex*, *konig*, *jarl*, and other titles that are all translated into modern English as 'king' or 'ruler.' I am inclined to agree with his argument, and so in this paper I will follow his lead by using 'king' – or, in the case of Olga, 'queen.'

[268] Judith Jesch, "Women and ships in the Viking World," *Northern Studies* 36 (2001): 55.

[269] Raffensperger, *Kingdom of Rus'*, 15.

[270] Ibid., 14.

Women in Rus'

Presenting a picture of the typical woman in ninth- to eleventh-century Rus' requires an amalgamation of sundry references and even more assumptions. Recreating the noblewoman's life is easier, but still requires sifting through numerous sources that are far more concerned with the demesne of men.[271] Of the examples we do have of individual women's lives, most are the exception and not the norm: rulers, regents, and other transgressors of gender expectations.[272] Thus, by working backward from these exceptions combined with examining archaeological evidence and what few descriptions do exist in literature, we can conclude the lives of women in Viking Age Eastern Europe were similar to their peers across the rest of Europe, especially in those kingdoms that were likewise subject to Scandinavian incursion.[273] Most of the available information about women comes from the Norse sagas and laws since medieval monks diverted little interest to the subject of women beyond virginal saints and holy mothers.[274] Arab writers at the time also made sporadic references to the women of Rus', but some of those descriptions parroted what previous writers had written, rather than making fresh observations based on their own limited interactions with women from the noble class.[275]

Because the ruling class of the Rus' during this timeframe was probably Scandinavian, because so few sources reference specifically Slavic women, and because most evidence suggests that social norms were largely the same on both sides of the Baltic Sea throughout this time period, I draw most of the following generalizations about the women of Rus' from sources concerning

[271] Gardeła, "Warrior-women in Viking Age," 273; Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 109; N. L. Pushkareva, "The Woman in the Ancient Russian Family (Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries)," *Russian Traditional Culture: Religion, Gender, and Customary Law*, ed. by Marjorie M. Blazar (M. E. Sharpe, 1992): 105-106.
[272] Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 3.
[273] Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 316, and Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 119.
[274] Birgit Sawyer, "Sigrid Storråda – Hur Och Varför Blev Hon till?" *Historisk Tidsskrift* 94, no. 1 (2015): 86.
[275] Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 118; Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 318.

Vikings.[276] First, older women held authority over younger women, and to some extent, over their sons until they came of age. Women were nevertheless under the authority of their male relatives for most, if not all, of their lives: first their fathers, and then their husbands; if not husbands, then brothers or uncles, and so on.[277] As was common elsewhere, marriages tended to be arranged for political or financial reasons. Though societal norms urged parents to take their children's wishes into consideration, the consent of both parties was not required for marriage until Christianity became the dominant religion.[278] Christianity likewise placed an emphasis on the bride's virginity, an emphasis that had been lacking under pagan Rus' custom.[279] Finally, in an interesting contrast with Western European wedding norms, the bride's dowry remained her property after marriage instead of being given to the groom.[280]

Once married, women and men were locked into strictly delineated roles, with the domestic sphere, to include the handling of finances, falling to the wife.[281] Women could inherit property, titles, and responsibilities in the absence of male heirs, and wives could likewise take charge of their households, including any guards or soldiers, when their husbands were absent or otherwise indisposed.[282] Still, widows tended to have more freedom, financially and otherwise, than married or unmarried women, and this was doubly true for widows of the noble class.[283] Even while one's husband was still alive, escaping a marriage was relatively simple and did not invite the same level of scorn or shame associated with divorce found in other societies of the time, particularly

[276] Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 127; Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 316.
[277] Short, *Viking Weapons*, 10; Sawyer, "Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," 7.
[278] Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 13; Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 190.
[279] Pushkareva, "Woman in the Ancient Russian Family," 109.
[280] Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 12-13.
[281] Sawyer, "Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," 8; Short, *Viking Weapons*, 10.
[282] Blythe, "Women in the Military," 245; Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 7; Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 4; Owen Rees, "Female Warriors and Generals," *Medieval Warfare* 4, no. 2 (2014): 7.
[283] Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 225; Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 5; Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 6.

Christian ones further west.[284] A woman could formulaically declare herself divorced in front of witnesses, and that was that. To the extent shame was involved in a divorce, it fell on the husband, not the wife, as the dissolution of a marriage was considered the failure of the man.[285]

The above generalities aside, scholarly debate continues on whether Viking women and, by extension, the women of Rus' had it better or worse than their Western European counterparts. On the one hand, many social trends were pan-European, and patriarchy was and remains the default social system. Any prehistoric Indo-European matriarchy, if it existed, was by then long forgotten, or endured only in fragmented stories and legends. Some argue that Viking women were freer because they could inherit property, declare themselves divorced, and controlled the family money.[286] The pervasive modern image of the independent, sword-swinging *skjaldmær* likely contributes to this argument, regardless of its basis in fact or fiction. Others assert that Viking women were more oppressed than women in contemporaneous Western societies because of the Scandinavian idealization of masculinity, which inherently limited the roles women could fulfill and restricted them to working behind the scenes to contribute to decision making.[287] Still others suggest a middle ground, where the enduring fascination with the image of the Viking woman is a study in contradictions: the masculine *skjaldmær* balanced by the feminine housewife.[288]

With regard to *skjaldmeyjar*, sagas and laws offer conflicting evidence. Legally, women and slaves were expressly forbidden from carrying weapons, yet some women in the sagas did. Contrary to what the modern reader might infer from this law, one theory is that women were

[284] Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 95; Pushkareva, "Woman in the Ancient Russian Family," 117.
[285] Short, *Viking Weapons*, 11.
[286] Ibid.
[287] Ibid., 12; Chelsi Slotten, "Daughters of Freya, Sons of Odin: Gendered Lives During the Viking Age," PhD Dissertation (American University, 2020): 4; Tatar, *Heroine with 1000 Faces*, 9. Tatar observes the confinement of women's agency to influence events to the "privacy of the home" is a near universal trend in global folklore.
[288] Saga Rosenström and Barbora Žiačková, "The North Engendered: Mythologized Histories, Gender and the Finnish Perspective on the Imagined Viking-Nordic Ideal," *Finnishness, Whiteness and Coloniality*, ed. by J. Hoegaerts et al (Helsinki University Press, 2022): 78-79.

forbidden from carrying weapons as an attempt to protect them in a society that so venerated masculinity, considering it dishonorable to harm someone who was not capable of defending herself.[289] However, it is more likely that warrior women were considered an existential threat to the social order that kept men's and women's responsibilities separate, and as such, those who transgressed their assigned gender role had to be outlawed.[290] In an interesting take on Viking concepts of gender, some suggest that traditionally masculine qualities were encouraged in women, despite their illegality, precisely because masculinity was so highly valued in general, while feminine qualities were disparaged in both men and women.[291] Femininity was so detestable that accusing a man of effeminacy, to include taking a passive role during intercourse, was considered a capital offence.[292] The accused was legally justified as well as socially pressured to challenge his accuser to a fight to the death. In fact, *not* aggressively retaliating to such an insult would have been dishonorable, adding further emasculation to a man's reputation; for the Vikings, masculinity was a quality that required recurrent confirmation through one's actions, not an innate aspect of one's biology.[293]

While it was a grave offense to accuse a man of womanly qualities but a compliment for a woman to possess manly ones, a combination of written literature and archaeological evidence indicates that women acting like men—wielding weapons, defending their honor, being generally aggressive—was socially acceptable, albeit unusual.[294] So why, then, did Norse legal codes outlaw women from carrying weapons or dressing in male clothing?[295] The potential occurrence of

[289] Short, *Viking Weapons*, 13.
[290] Julie Wheelwright, *Sisters in Arms: Female Warriors from Antiquity to the New Millennium* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020): 11.
[291] Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 12; Raffield, "Playing Vikings," 820.
[292] Short, *Viking Weapons*, 8; Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 8; Self, "Valkyrie's Gender," 152.
[293] Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 13; Short, *Viking Weapons*, 8.
[294] Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 7.
[295] Raffield, "Playing Vikings," 820.

skjaldmeyjar represented a threat to the established social order, robbing men of their monopoly on violence. But some women must have nevertheless transgressed their assigned roles, or else there would be no point establishing a law against it. Rules exist out of perceived necessity. If specific activities were prohibited by Viking law, it could only be because those activities transpired, and they represented enough of a societal threat to warrant prohibition. Thus, the very illegality of women carrying weapons in Viking and Viking-influenced societies like Rus' provides evidence that at least some women were, in fact, carrying weapons.

In most instances in the sagas, women took up arms only in defense of themselves, their loved ones, or their honor when the menfolk normally responsible for such defense proved unwilling or unable to do so.[296] However, just as Scythian mothers were charged with protecting the camp while the able-bodied men and childless women went raiding, so, too, were Viking women expected to defend the children, elderly, and infirm of the community whenever their men left on an expedition.[297] Norse sagas and medieval Slavic literature also contain examples of women urging their husbands, brothers, or sons to take violent revenge for either injury or insult. Indeed, incitement to violence is one of the primary methods of influence women seemed to employ during the Viking Age, at least according to surviving epic literature. It was only when the incitement failed that these women would enact the violence personally.[298]

However, it is also possible, even probable, that select women accompanied armies and military campaigns as warriors and in a few instances, as key leaders.[299] Archaeological finds like the famous grave of the Birka Warrior with the Kyivan hat, who turned out to be a woman, support the existence of women serving as key leaders. While these *skjaldmeyjar* were compared to the

[296] Gardeła, "Amazons of the Viking World," 15; Gardeła, "Warrior-women in Viking Age," 306.
[297] Santa Jansone, "Ladies with Axes and Spears," *Medieval Warfare* 4, no. 2 (2014): 12.
[298] Gardeła, "Warrior-women in Viking Age," 306.
[299] Raffield, "Playing Vikings," 820; Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 177.

Amazons of antiquity by medieval and modern historians, they nonetheless defied the norm.[300] Based on the general wealth accompanying Viking Age burials of armed women, such warlike women must have come predominantly from the noble class. Regardless, once the necessity for violence ended, Viking women were expected to lay down their weapons and return to their domestic lives. For Viking women, 'warrior' could only be a temporary status, not a destiny in itself. We lack the evidence to say definitively whether the same was true of Slavic women, but given the tremendous cultural overlap between the Scandinavians and Slavs for the duration of the Viking Age, we can assume with few exceptions that any Slavic woman who took up arms likewise did so temporarily.

Christianization

Although Christianity did not appear in Scandinavia and Rus' until the second half of the Viking Age, and although it took several centuries for Christianity to become the dominant religious paradigm across all levels of society, any discussion of medieval literature describing the Viking Age would be incomplete without taking Christianity into account, because most medieval authors were, first and foremost, Christians. The only surviving contemporaneous writings about Viking Age Rus' come from foreign sources, such as Arabic travelogues and Byzantine records.[301] The lack of a written Slavic language until the ninth century combined with the Church's near monopoly on literacy ensured that almost all surviving knowledge of those centuries first passed through a Christian filter.[302] Thus, the bulk of the literature we have about pagan Rus' was written well after the fact, and none of it was written by the pagan Rus' themselves.

[300] Blythe, "Women in the Military," 246; Gardeła, "Amazons of the Viking World," 15.
[301] Christian Raffensperger, "The Place of Rus' in Medieval Europe," *History Compass* 12, no. 11 (2014): 854.
[302] Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 10.

While Old Norse developed a written form centuries prior to Slavic, the use of runes for longform literature was nevertheless rare. Magic, rituals, divination, and the marking of memorial stones were more common usages of Norse runes.[303] Moreover, average Vikings knew the myths and legends of their ancestors by rote as these stories were transmitted orally down the generations and preserved in performative verse by *skalds*, or Norse court poets, and the same was true of Slavic *skomorokhi*, musicians and storytellers who fulfilled a similar role.[304] There was no impetus to record Scandinavian or Slavic folk beliefs, to include details of their pre-Christian religions, until such beliefs had become novelties of the past. Therefore, compared to the Ancient Greco-Roman religions and certainly compared to Christianity, we know little about Norse heathenism and next to nothing about the beliefs of the pagan Slavs – another commonality between Slavs and Scythians, the details of whose shamanic religion remains speculative.[305]

Yet, just as Viking incursions brought more coherence to the Slavic tribes around the Baltic and Black Seas through the dissemination of codified laws and the establishment of a noble ruling class, the spread of Christianity further solidified disparate Scandinavian-Slavic communities into more coherent and recognizable states.[306] Christianity took root in Scandinavia proper more quickly than in Rus', and according to Scandinavian sources, it was the *jarl* Olaf Tryggvason who first introduced Christianity to the Rus', which contradicts Slavic sources on the matter.[307] However, Slavic kingdoms further west, such as Bohemia and Moravia, officially adopted Christianity even sooner than did the Vikings since missionaries from Rome and Byzantium traveled through their territories first.

[303] Duczko, "Viking Age Wolin," 149.
[304] Raffensperger, "Shared (Hi)Stories," 579.
[305] Ulriksen, "Late Iron Age," 231.
[306] Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*, 6.
[307] Jakobsson, "Varangian Legend," 350.

Regardless of the order in which each community converted to Christianity, across the board the initial conversion was more political than spiritual. Adopting Christianity allowed rulers to strengthen their partnerships with other European kingdoms, freeing up trade and royal marriage opportunities. Secondly, Christianity's monotheism justified the rise of autocracy, consolidating power under a single ruler, which further contributed to the establishment of distinct kingdoms. Once baptized, rulers gained justification, or more realistically, a palatable excuse, to expand their borders.[308] They wanted to spread Christianity, of course; seizing territory and resources was simply a convenient byproduct of proselytization-through-conquest. Convincing citizens to fight and die in the name of the one true god was easier than convincing them to do the same for the sake of a mortal monarch's whims or the nascent concept of statehood.[309]

One of the other major changes Christianity brought to Viking Age Europe came in the form of mortuary practices. Though pagan Vikings and Slavs did bury their dead, they usually cremated them first. This was true even in the Slavic kingdoms of Central Europe, such as Moravia and Bohemia.[310] Much as in Scythia, buried remains were accompanied by assorted grave goods: jewelry, tools, food, and occasionally weapons. Sometimes animal sacrifices and, in instances where the deceased was of particular importance, human sacrifices also accompanied the dead.[311] Ship burials were common among pagan Scandinavian elites, though even this method involved cremation and a plethora of grave goods.[312] One Arabic traveler recounted an elaborate funeral for a leader of the Rus', which included a ship burial, cremation, and the ritual gang rape and murder of a slave girl, all overseen by a priestess-like figure.[313] However, once Christianity became the

[308] Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*, 66.
[309] Richard F. Bensel, "Valor and Valkyries: Why the State Needs Valhalla," *Polity* 40, no. 3 (2008): 393.
[310] Gardeła, "Vikings in Poland," 220.
[311] Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 24; Sara Ann Knutson, "Bridges to Eternity," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 12 (2016): 87.
[312] Mägi, *Viking Eastern Baltic*, 49.
[313] Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 144.

dominant religion in the area, the practice of cremation faded along with the inclusion of grave goods and human or animal sacrifices.[314] Certain exalted individuals—notably, royalty—still warranted special treatment in death. As sainted royalty, for example, Olga of Kyiv's remains were reinterred in the Church of Tithes, where they became objects of veneration prior to the church's destruction and her remains' subsequent disappearance.[315]

Christianity and Women

The official state adoption of Christianity brought drastic changes to the lives of Scandinavian and Slavic women, which in turn affected the way women were portrayed in medieval literature, including literature describing the pagan past. Whether women participated in active roles in pagan Scandinavian and Slavic priesthoods is unclear, but the Christian church explicitly prohibited women from leadership and other performative participation, limiting them to a passive role as observers.[316] Women likewise lost their participation rights in public storytelling as oral literature slowly gave way to written, which the church monopolized, thereby relegating the dissemination of folk stories to the domestic realm.[317]

Though Scandinavian law gave men authority over women in general, medieval Norse literature tended to portray the pagan women of bygone eras with more agency, activity, and willfulness than their Christian descendants, who were typically described as appropriately obedient and submissive.[318] However, one area in which Christian women were still expected to take an active role was in memorializing the dead as demonstrated in the plethora of memorial runestones sponsored by women to honor their male relatives as well as the extravagant funerary

[314] Slotten, "Daughters of Freya," 36.
[315] Fyodor Uspenskij, "The baptism of bones and prima signation in Medieval Scandinavia and Rus'," *Between Paganism and Christianity in the North*, ed. by L. P. Słupecki and J. Morawiec (Rzeszów University Press, 2009): 9.
[316] Zoe Borovsky, "Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature," *The Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 443 (1999): 13.
[317] Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 216.
[318] Sawyer, "Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," 1; Sawyer, "Sigrid Storråda," 86.

laments attributed to mourning wives, sisters, and mothers.[319] Women's elaborate laments whenever important men pass is consistently portrayed across both medieval Scandinavian and Slavic literature.

In addition to confining women to submissive roles and emphasizing the contrast between the active pagan and passive Christian women, medieval literature stresses women's innate sinfulness.[320] Women were a source of potential corruption, tempting good men away from virtue as did Eve in the garden, which was especially true of those pagan women who dared transgress gender roles by becoming warriors, distracting men from their military duties with their womanly wiles.[321] The medieval church blamed willful women for a variety of social ills and sought to limit their participation in family politics, particularly regarding blood feuds, which previously served as a means of enforcing common law during the Viking Age.[322] Generally, whenever medieval authors strayed from disparaging womankind, they praised the conflicting virtues of chastity and motherhood. According to an anonymous monk in eleventh-century Rus', Christian women were somehow expected to be simultaneously pure, chaste virgins and prolific, dutiful mothers.[323] An impossible standard, indeed.

Yet, despite the increased restrictions placed on them by the new religion, many women embraced Christianity long before their husbands and brothers, and in fact, it was women who ordinarily encouraged conversion in the first place.[324] Despite spending most of her life as a pagan, Olga of Kyiv was credited with attempting to convert her family members to Christianity. By the end of the Viking Age, the cult of the Virgin Mary, who embodied that impossible standard of

[319] Knutson, "Bridges to Eternity," 96; Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 62.
[320] Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 10.
[321] Blythe, "Women in the Military," 268.
[322] Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 216; Borovsky, "Never in Public," 25.
[323] Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 11.
[324] Ibid., 9.

chaste mother, had taken root among women in Eastern Europe, including Rus'.[325] Since Orthodoxy was the form of Christianity adopted by the Rus', priests were supposed to marry, further increasing women's exposure to the church as well as granting them an opportunity to claim a more active role as spiritual exemplars for other women.[326] Another possible reason scholars have purported for women's enthusiastic embrace of Christianity is that the aspirational values encouraged by the church for members of both sexes aligned with values traditionally considered feminine in Scandinavian and Slavic cultures, such as humility and compassion.[327] Perhaps the most compelling reason, however, was the church's ban on infanticide. Prior to the Christian church's supremacy, exposing infants—usually infant girls—was the most common method of family planning, much as it had been in Ancient Rome.[328] The church's encouragement of acts of charity likely helped feed the children whom these mothers were no longer pressured to abandon.

Christianity and Medieval Literature

As mentioned above, the church held a near total monopoly on literacy in medieval Europe. When Christian monks became the primary historians, the Bible became the primary history, and consequently, all other histories were adjusted to fit the biblical narrative. Thus, when the early Slavic language was first given written form, the driving principle behind the process was to bring Christian wisdom to the ignorant pagans.[329] However, this process proved to be a generations-long undertaking. The diffusion of biblical teachings to the masses was hindered not only by the pace at which the bible could be translated into an understandable form of Slavic, but also by the common people's resistance to the requisite cultural changes. Conversion took centuries, with

[325] Knutson, "Bridges to Eternity," 97.
[326] Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 10.
[327] Ibid., 11.
[328] Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 58.
[329] Janet Martin, *Medieval Russia 980-1584* (Cambridge University Press, 1995): 10.

pagan practices and beliefs existing alongside church teachings, especially in rural areas.[330] This *dvoeverie*, or 'dual-faith,' as it came to be later known in Russia, coincided with the transformation of pagan folk stories into Christian canon: deities became saints, spirits became demons, magic became miracles, and the whole of human history became a battle between heaven and hell for good men's souls.[331] We can see this process in Olga of Kyiv's transformation from a fierce pagan queen into a gentle Christian saint.

Contrasts between the morals presented by medieval authors and those of their ancient counterparts are diverse, and they are especially disparate regarding themes of war and revenge. As discussed in the previous chapter, some ancient authors emphasized the importance of staying humble in victory, hence Tomyris's defeat of the arrogant Cyrus was not just a historical fact, but also narratively inevitable. Ancient morals also encouraged the fair treatment of captives, innocents, and surrendered enemies. However, despite the biblical determination of 'pride' as one of the seven deadly sins, neither medieval Scandinavian nor Slavic literature required humility in its heroes, nor did their heroes need to treat surrendering enemies with any compassion; compassion should be reserved for their own people. Norse sagas laud the Scandinavian *jarls* for enacting violent revenge on their enemies, and Slavic chronicles depict a similar passion for epic conquests as well as revenge.[332] The warrior-saint is a popular motif in medieval literature, so the contradictory phenomenon of Christian authors praising pagan vengeance—in certain circumstances, that is—is not confined to Eastern Europe.[333] Since Olga of Kyiv is a saint, justifying her violence by calling it vengeance is in keeping with hagiographic traditions.[334]

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[330] Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 4.

[331] Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 11; Torfi H. Tulinius, "Saga as a Myth: The Family Sagas and Social Reality in 13th-Century Iceland," *The Eleventh International Saga Conference* (2007): 529.

[332] Classen, "Emergence of Rationality," 9.

[333] Jesch, "Women, War, and Words," 137.

[334] Alexandr V. Koptev, "Pagan Rites in the Story of the Princess' Revenge (The *Russian Primary Chronicle*, under 945-946)," *Mirator* 11, no. 1 (2010): 9.

Although humility was not essential to the protagonists of medieval literature, it was a common trait of medieval authors, at least in theory. With ancient texts authorial anonymity usually resulted because the ensuing millennia erased any information about the original author. With medieval texts, particularly those penned by Christian monks, anonymity is an intentional consequence of the author's assumed humility. The work, created through divine inspiration, should speak for itself, unhindered by editorial or autobiographical asides from the author. Later additions or corrections by scribes copying the work were similarly thought to originate by divine inspiration, and so there was no need to indicate who made the changes or when.[335] While true anonymity was not always the case, assigning a definitive name to the author of many medieval Slavic texts remains an academic challenge. This challenge is further exacerbated by the thematic unity and historical focus of medieval Slavic literature as a whole, particularly that of Russia, with authors collectively intent on crafting a seamless narrative of Russian history.[336] Regarding medieval Norse literature, demonstrating authorial humility through anonymity was not as common as with their Slavic contemporaries, but it should be noted that larger saga compilations—for example, the *Prose Edda* and *Heimskringla* attributed to Snorri Sturluson—derive from shorter, anonymously composed sagas and folktales.

Medieval Authors

I will now discuss, in approximate chronological order, the medieval authors and works that provide the most detailed accounts of the warrior queens Olga, Libuše, Vlasta, and Sigrid. I will devote the most attention to those works we can attribute to specific authors, including the *Czech Chronicle* by Cosmas of Prague, the *History of the Danes* by Saxo Grammaticus, and

[335] Donald Ostrowski and David J. Birnbaum, eds., *The* Povest' vremennykh let: *Interlinear Collation and Paradosis* (Harvard University Press, 2003): xlvii.
[336] Dmitrii S. Likhachev, *Velikoe nasledie: Klassicheskie proizvedeniia literatury Drevnei Rusi* (Logos, 1997): 7.

Heimskringla by Snorri Sturluson. As foundational texts written in Slavic languages, I will also address the various manuscripts of the *Russian Primary Chronicle* as well as the *Czech Chronicle of So-Called Dalimil*. Finally, I will consider the peculiarities of skaldic verse, including the parallels between the Scandinavian *skalds* and the Slavic *skomorokhi*, who were essential in the preservation of their respective oral cultures.

The oldest manuscript of the *Russian Primary Chronicle* is the Laurentian codex, which has been dated to 1377 and was scribed by a monk named Lavrentii, for whom the manuscript is named.[337] Based on the historical events portrayed in the *Primary Chronicle* as well as the lifetimes of its most probable authors, scholars estimate the date of its original completion between 1070 and 1099, with its earliest redaction in 1113.[338] Over the ensuing centuries, scholars have debated whether the *Primary Chronicle* was the work of a single author, the work of several authors, or a compilation of much earlier texts that did not survive.[339] When scholars posit a single author, usually Nestor the Chronicler (c. 1056 to c. 1114) is put forth as the most likely candidate. However, some argue that Nestor's contemporary and the hegumen of his monastery, Sylvester of Kyiv (c. 1055 to 1123), either compiled the chronicle himself or in conjunction with Nestor.[340] Reasons for the contention vary, but usually stylistic comparisons of Nestor's attested hagiographies with the *Primary Chronicle* are given as evidence contradicting his authorship.[341] Generally attributed to Sylvester of Kyiv, the hagiography *Life of Grand Princess Olga* is based predominantly on the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, which could perhaps give weight to Sylvester's authorship as her narrative in both sources closely aligns.

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[337] Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans and eds., *Russian Primary Chronicle*, 4.
[338] Ibid., 21; Koptev, "Pagan Rites," 6.
[339] Hraundal, "New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus," 67; Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans and eds., *Russian Primary Chronicle*, 3.
[340] Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans and eds., *Russian Primary Chronicle*, 6; Ostrowski and Birnbaum, eds., *The* Povest' vremennykh let, xvii.
[341] Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans and eds., *Russian Primary Chronicle*, 7.

Whether the *Russian Primary Chronicle* was originally penned by Nestor, Sylvester, both, or someone else entirely, the text is the first of its kind, representing the earliest history of the Slavs written in a Slavic language. Apart from the Laurentian codex, several other important copies of the *Primary Chronicle* dating to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries have been discovered.[342] Variations exist in vocabulary, spelling, some elaborations, and other minor details attributed to the assorted scribes who copied each version, but the overall contents of the chronicle are consistent. The chronicle tells the legendary history of the Slavs from biblical days through the life of its author in the early twelfth century, included in the first redaction. The earliest events described in the chronicle represent more fantasy than fact, encompassing the distant past and tracing the ancestors of the Slavic tribes to one of Noah's sons. The bulk of the *Primary Chronicle* details the reigns of the Princes of Rus', centered on the Rurikid dynasty, including the arrival of the Varangians and, most relevant for my purposes, the reign of Olga of Kyiv. The source material for the earliest histories up until the reign of Vladimir I include biblical narratives, oral history, legends and folk ballads, and Norse dynastic myths.[343]

Like the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, the *Czech Chronicle* attempts to link the Slavs, in particular the Bohemians, back to Biblical genealogies, covering historical events through the lifetime of its author.[344] Unlike the Russian chronicle, however, the authorship of the *Czech Chronicle* is not contested. Cosmas of Prague (c. 1045 to 1125) began working on the text when he was in his seventies and published it in three installments, the last of which was released shortly before his death.[345] Along with most of his contemporaries, Cosmas composed his chronicle in

[342] Ostrowski and Birnbaum, eds., *The* Povest' vremennykh let, xx.
[343] Dushin, "Priglashenie variazhskix kniazei," 11; Raffensperger, "Shared (Hi)Stories," 569; Likhachev, *Velikoe nasledie*, 46.
[344] Jan Hasil, "Kosmas: literát, ideolog a historiograf," 139.
[345] Rossos, "Czech Historiography," 246, and Hasil, "Kosmas: literát, ideolog a historiograf raného přemyslovského státu," *Přednášky letní školy slovanských studií* 56 (2013): 139.

Latin rather than his native Czech.[346] Ordained as a priest in 1099 and eventually rising to the rank of Dean of Prague, it is no surprise that Cosmas wove Christian themes throughout his narratives, despite the bulk of his sources for his oldest histories tracing to oral legends from the pagan past, such as the Maidens' War triggered by Libuše's death.[347]

Yet, in a pointed contrast with other medieval historians, especially his fellow monks and priests, Cosmas made no pretense of humility nor objectivity. He commented frequently on the events he described and inserted pointed opinions via the dialogue of his characters.[348] This method, using the words of a certain character to express the author's own opinions so as to avoid criticism by the church or state, was not uncommon for the time.[349] Because of his asides and commentary, some scholars suggest that Cosmas intended to subtly criticize the Přemyslid dynasty, but the mainstream opinion is that he wrote to justify the Přemyslids as the originators of Czech statehood.[350] In either case, the *Czech Chronicle* endures as a foundational text not only in Czech history, but in Czech literature as a whole.[351]

By the time the Viking Age gave way to the medieval period under the influence of Christian monotheism, Scandinavian kingdoms had begun to differentiate into more distinct states, under varying degrees of Roman Catholic influence; likewise, the Old Norse language began to fray into Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, and Danish. Writing in Denmark during a period of military and political upheaval, Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1150 to c. 1220) composed the first

[346] Andrew Rossos, "Czech Historiography: Part 1," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 24, no. 3 (1982): 245-246; Lisa Wolverton, "Introduction," *The Chronicle of the Czechs* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2009): 5.
[347] Hasil, "Kosmas: literát, ideolog," 139-140; Rossos, "Czech Historiography," 245.
[348] Wolverton, "Introduction," *Chroncile of the Czechs*, 8.
[349] Sawyer, "Sigrid Storråda," 81.
[350] Hasil, "Kosmas: literát, ideolog," 146.
[351] Wolverton, "Introduction," *Chroncile of the Czechs*, 5; Hasil, "Kosmas: literát, ideolog," 138; Rossos, "Czech Historiography," 246.

comprehensive history of the Danish people, appropriately titled *History of the Danes*.[352] Like Cosmas, Saxo wrote not in his native Danish, but in Latin. Thus, along with many of his contemporaries who likewise wrote in Latin, Saxo was familiar with ancient Roman writings.[353] He drew from numerous sources to craft his history, including oral legends and Old Norse sagas, for the first collection of books included in his *History*, which covers the mythic origins of the heathen Danes.[354] For the more recent histories in his collection, he could consult eyewitness accounts as well as his own observations.

Possibly a cleric, almost certainly a soldier, and definitely a Christian, Saxo's moral imperative and patriotism are apparent throughout *History of the Danes*. Most relevant to the present study, one of the topics in which he reveals his moral beliefs as well as his familiarity with the writings of Ancient Rome, is women. Like the Amazons of Greco-Roman myth, it is a narrative requirement for Saxo's *skjaldmeyjar* to lose and, typically, to die.[355] Moreover, such warrior women—as well as outspoken, independent, or otherwise transgressive women—appear primarily in the earliest parts of his *History*. To Saxo, strong women were an unfortunate symptom of the pagan past, not a phenomenon that could be replicated in a good Christian state such as the nascent Denmark.[356] Women, according to Saxo, were weak-willed and untrustworthy, only able to redeem their moral failings by becoming mothers.[357] We see this in his portrayal of Sigrid the Proud. To Saxo, she is redeemable only as a mother of kings.

Compared to the rest of the authors discussed in this study, we know a great deal about Snorri Sturluson (1179 –1241). We owe this wealth of knowledge in large part to Snorri's

[352] Waldemar Westergaard, "Danish History and Danish Historians," *The Journal of Modern History* 24, no. 2 (1952): 167.
[353] Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 178; Sawyer, "Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," 5.
[354] Westergaard, "Danish History," 168; Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 178.
[355] Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 177.
[356] Sawyer, "Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," 4.
[357] Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 217; Sawyer, "Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," 12.

prominent political careers in both Iceland and Norway. Born into a well-known family and highly educated, Snorri rose to the position of law speaker for the Icelandic parliament, later became one of the most powerful Icelandic chieftains of the thirteenth century, and was eventually assassinated by one of his son-in-law's henchmen after supporting a failed rebellion in Norway.[358] Despite such an active life, Snorri managed to write several foundational sagas of Norse history, including *Heimskringla*, most of the *Prose Edda*, and several independent kings' sagas.[359] Snorri based his historical works on numerous sources, including previously written histories he mentions by name, oral legends and stories, *skaldic* verse, and for his later histories, eyewitness accounts.[360] Though there is some room for doubt about Snorri's authorship of *Heimskringla* in that none of the surviving manuscripts name him specifically prior to two sixteenth century Norwegian translations, he is nevertheless widely accepted as its author.[361]

Of particular relevance to the present study, *Heimskringla* details the kings of Norway from mythical prehistory through Snorri's lifetime, including valuable information about Viking Age Rus' as well as the narrative of Sigrid the Proud.[362] *Heimskringla* marks a culmination of Norse history up to its time, and indeed, following its publication, no new sagas were written for several centuries; rather, fantastical expansions were added to Snorri's original text.[363] Unlike Saxo's *History of the Danes*, Snorri devotes little space to the mythological origins of the Vikings in *Heimskringla*, focusing instead on the political and military landscape under each king.[364] Snorri reserves most of his mythological content for the *Prose Edda*.[365] He also appears to have held a

[358] Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulks, "Introduction," *Heimskringla* (Viking Society for Northern Research, University College, 2015): viii-ix; Bagge, *Society and Politics in* Heimskringla, 12-13.
[359] Bagge, *Society and Politics in* Heimskringla, 13.
[360] Ibid., 20; Finlay and Faulks, "Introduction," *Heimskringla*, ix.
[361] Bagge, *Society and Politics in* Heimskringla, 11; Finlay and Faulks, "Introduction," *Heimskringla*, viii.
[362] Raffensperger, "Place of Rus'," 854.
[363] Finlay and Faulks, "Introduction," *Heimskringla*, xiii.
[364] Bagge, *Society and Politics in* Heimskringla, 9.
[365] Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 134.

more favorable opinion of women than did Saxo. While the majority of Snorri's female characters act behind the scenes in political and military schemes as meddlers and inciters, rather than taking up arms directly like some of Saxo's *skjaldmeyjar*, Snorri did not portray women as innately sinful nor morally weak, even when they transgressed gender norms.[366]

Returning to Czech history, we come to the *Chronicle of So-Called Dalimil*, or the *Dalimil Chronicle* for brevity. In contrast with Cosmas of Prague's *Czech Chronicle*, the *Dalimil Chronicle* is written in Czech verse, which marks it as the first example of Czech history written in a Slavic language.[367] Scholars generally agree that the anonymous author of the *Dalimil Chronicle* was most likely a member of the Czech nobility who composed the work between 1308 and 1314.[368] Because of its more recent publication compared to the other works considered in this chapter, we have more examples of early copies of the *Dalimil Chronicle* than any other work. Two main redactions survive, drawn from a total of seven complete or nearly complete manuscripts.[369] The author drew heavily from Cosmas's work, though he used a contemporary fourteenth-century perspective to revise key events, including the Maidens' War, which I will address in my discussion of Libuše and Vlasta.[370] Finally, as with the previously discussed works, oral culture comprised a significant portion of the chronicler's source material.[371]

A common aspect of the medieval literature considered here, whether Scandinavian or Slavic, is that the authors relied on oral traditions for many of their sources, particularly in the absence of previously written histories, as did the ancient authors who preceded them.[372] For

[366] Bagge, *Society and Politics in* Heimskringla, 116.
[367] Pavlina Rychterová, "The *Chronicle of the So-Called Dalimil* and its Concept of Czech Identity," *Historiography and identity 6: Competing narratives of the past in Central and Eastern Europe, c.1200-c.1600* (Brepols, 2021): 171.
[368] Rossos, "Czech Historiography," 248.
[369] Rychterová, "*Chronicle of the So-Called Dalimil*," 172.
[370] Rychterová, "*Chronicle of the So-Called Dalimil*," 174, and Adde, "Justification of Tyrannicide," 8.
[371] Rossos, "Czech Historiography," 246.
[372] Raffensperger, "Shared (Hi)Stories," 579.

medieval authors, these oral traditions often took the form of performative verse. Across Scandinavia and much of the Baltics, *skalds*, or Norse poets, were a welcome and prestigious presence at every noble court throughout the Viking Age and into the medieval period.[373] *Skaldic* poetry, characterized by its complexity of form but simplicity of content, immortalized kings and heroes, epic battles and conquests, and thus, had little to say about or for the common people, even those verses written by the few documented female *skalds*.[374] Conversely, the Slavic *skomorokhi*, who likewise presented poetry and other performative arts, were subject to church persecution by the noble classes once Rus' converted to Christianity.[375] Perhaps the disparity in status between *skalds* and *skomorokhi* can be explained by the origins of the latter: some have suggested that *skomorokhi* turned to performance only after their supposed previous occupation—pagan priests for the common rural folk, as opposed to the more urban *volkvy*—became anathema.[376] Regardless of their differences in method and reputation, *skalds* and *skomorokhi* alike preserved histories, myths, and folklore from the Viking Age that informed later written works.

Viking Age Warrior Queens

Whether or not they participated in military campaigns as *skjaldmeyjar*, women of all societal ranks participated in war in some form or another, often as camp followers. As has been well documented throughout military history, women—sometimes wives, daughters, or mothers of soldiers, and sometimes prostitutes—nursed the injured, cooked and laundered, performed other logistical work, and, in special cases, served as advisors and strategists.[377] When describing the

[373] Jackson, *Eastern Europe in Icelandic Sagas*, 3.
[374] Ibid.; Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 168.
[375] Russell Zguta, *Russian Minstrels: A History of the Skomorokhi* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978): 19.
[376] Ibid., 14.
[377] The necessity of long logistical trains during military campaigns is universal, and the phenomenon of camp followers fulfilling this role with the assistance of civilian merchants appears in practical descriptions of every army, from ancient Rome to the American Civil War. Viking Age Europe was no exception. Modern armies utilize professional logistics, sometimes incorporated into the military itself and/or outsourced to contracted civilians, but

Viking Age, medieval Slavic and Scandinavian literature tends to focus on the heroic, the exceptional, thereby glossing over the mundane roles ordinary women (and ordinary men) fulfilled during wartime. Warrior women are viewed as innately transgressive, flouting gender norms by taking on a culturally masculine role; in literature their role as warriors could only be temporary, so the ones who were worth immortalizing were those whose identity was noteworthy beyond their temporary warrior status.[378] Thus, when medieval authors devote attention to warrior women, they discuss members of the noble and ruling class: warrior queens.

Unlike the Amazons, Viking Age warrior queens generally did not wield a sword directly, but neither did they shy away from the battlefield. Given the same trend among male monarchs of overseeing the carnage without fighting on the front lines, we can hardly frame female monarchs as cowardly for avoiding the heart of the mêlée, nor label them as any less worthy of the warrior mantle than their male counterparts. King or queen, the strategic placement of the militant monarch outside the bounds of direct battle derives from practicality. Even modern military leaders observe and direct their troops from a distance. The necessity of preserving a strategic mind outweighs the benefits of a key leader's bravado, which is doubly true when that strategic mind also symbolizes the state itself. Should the queen fall to an errant arrow, so, too, falls her queendom. Rather than risk leaving the state without a head, as orchestrators of war the competent monarch would don armor and weaponry, inspire the army with a rousing speech, and then supervise the battlefield from higher ground. In the following sections, I will discuss examples of warrior queens who did precisely that.

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the basic principle is the same. Wars are won and lost due to logistics as much as strategy. There is much more to war than battle; one could argue that actual fighting represents the smallest piece.

[378] Wheelwright, *Sisters in Arms*, 25.

Libuše

The origin myth of the Czech people establishes the Přemyslid dynasty through a powerfully female-centric narrative. Little known outside of the Czech Republic, this origin myth contains numerous references to ancient literature as well as folkloric elements. For example, mythical Amazons and historical Scythians are invoked by both Cosmas of Prague and the author of the *Dalimil Chronicle*, and the narrative of the state's origin opens with a gender-bent inversion of a popular folklore trope. Since the events of the origin myth take place sometime during the late eighth or early ninth century—at the very beginning of the Viking Age—the original narrative developed without significant Scandinavian interference. However, by the time the legendary Bohemian histories took written form, the Viking Age had come and gone, and the narratives had passed unavoidably through a Christian filter.

Instead of the proverbial three brothers, the tale of Bohemian statehood begins with three sisters. The legendary progenitor of the Czech people, Krok, fathered only daughters: Kazi, Tetka, and Libuše. In a further contravention of this trope, the sisters are equally accomplished and never betray one another.[379] Cosmas grants them intelligence equal to that of men, a misogynistic compliment to be sure.[380] The eldest daughter, Kazi, is a talented and wise healer; Cosmas duly equates her with Medea and Asklepios for her knowledge of magic and medicine, respectively.[381] The middle daughter, Tetka, is a pagan priestess. Likely because this particular history was not recorded until after Christianity had risen to dominance in the region, little else is said of the middle sister. Though she is arguably the most accomplished of the three and she does rise to the highest leadership position among their people, in a final inversion of the trope, the youngest daughter

[379] *Česka Kronika* (Dalimil), ed. by V. Flajšhans (Jan Laichter, 1920): 3.5-7.
[380] Cosmas of Prague, *Chronicle of the Czechs*, Mutlová and Martin, trans., 19.
[381] Ibid.

never travels to unknown lands to seek her fortune before returning triumphant. Rather, Libuše's destiny keeps her at home. When Krok dies, she takes his place. For her wisdom, compassion, and virtue, the Czechs unanimously elect Libuše to lead them as their judge.[382] Throughout her narrative, Libuše is consistently portrayed as both the ideal leader and the ideal woman. Thus, Libuše may not be a recognizably warlike warrior queen, but she is certainly a strong female ruler whose reign, while described as peaceful, necessitated her to pass judgement over violent acts, and led to an undeniably violent outcome.

Unfortunately, the idyll of early Bohemia quickly disintegrates when those who suffer the losing end of Libuše's decisions band together. The people had chosen Libuše to sit in judgment over them, to guide them, to hear their grievances and find solutions to their battles, yet not everyone is satisfied with the solutions she proposes, and so they use her gender against her.[383] Eventually the dissatisfied men demand she take a consort so they can have a king to rule beside her, citing the neighboring kingdoms who scoff at their matriarchy: "We alone are set by nature to the shame of all nations and people, we, who lack a male ruler and manly judgment and who suffer under woman's law," they declare.[384] Libuše, harnessing her prophetic powers, warns them of the dire consequences should she subject them to male rule, for men govern with a harsher hand, and male rule inescapably becomes tyranny.[385] Nevertheless, at their continued insistence, Libuše complies, prophesying the location of her future husband, Přemysl the Plowman, who she predicts will found the utopian city of Prague and father a dynasty to rule Bohemia forever.[386]

[382] Ibid., 21.
[383] Rychterová, "*Chronicle of the So-Called Dalimil*," 178; *Česka Kronika* (Dalimil), 3.15-16.
[384] Cosmas of Prague, *Chronicle of the Czechs*, Mutlová and Martin, trans., 23.
[385] Ibid., 27; *Česka Kronika* (Dalimil), 4.15-16.
[386] Cosmas of Prague, *Chronicle of the Czechs*, Mutlová and Martin, trans., 29.

Although not strictly a warrior queen in that she never participates directly in a military conflict, Libuše's reign leads to a war that fundamentally changes the gender dynamics of early Czech society. She is a prophetess and a wise judge, yet her rule results in civil war. War ensues not because Libuše is a bad ruler, but because the men ignore her prophetic warnings and demand she take a husband, who then—as she had predicted—becomes a tyrant as soon as she dies, her tempering effect dying with her.[387] In this, Přemysl's rise to power is another reversal of the norm, in which usually a woman seizes power only after she becomes a widow; here, it is the widower who succeeds his wife. Unlike widowed queens, however, Přemysl does not serve as a regent for his underage sons, of which Libuše bore three. Maybe, had she born a daughter, events would have unfolded different. As it stands, there was no daughter to inherit Libuše's role, so leadership passed to her husband instead.

The details of Libuše's death go unspecified, perhaps because it was not her death as such that was important to medieval authors, but the civil war that erupted afterward.[388] Presumably, she died peacefully, and thus unremarkably, of natural causes. Nevertheless, once Libuše is no longer holding the reins of the Bohemian kingdom, chaos ensues. While neither Cosmas nor the *Dalimil* author makes the connection, it is men's dismissal of female authority that triggers the Maidens' War. It is not the hubris or foolishness of women that causes the women to revolt, as the *Dalimil* author suggests, but the hubris of men.[389]

Here is where the narratives of Cosmas and the *Dalimil* author drastically diverge. According to Cosmas's shorter version, Bohemian women before and during Libuše's lifetime

[387] *Česka Kronika* (Dalimil), 7.5-6.
[388] All the author of the *Dalimil Chronicle*, which was far more detailed than Cosmas's version, says on the matter of Libuše's death is that it happened: "Skončila svůj život Libuše, / pohřbili ji ve vsi, jíž říkali Libice." *Česka Kronika* (Dalimil), 8.1-2.
[389] *Ibid.,* 8.3-4.

were accustomed to a level of freedom, equality, and independence akin to that of the Amazons. They hunted, warred, chose their own consorts, and, like the Scythians, wore the same style of clothing as men. When Libuše dies, Czech matriarchy dies with her. The women chafe at Přemysl's attempts to constrain them. Thus, they rebel, building their own fortress and naming it Děvín.[390] Intermittent conflict ensues between the men and women until eventually they agree to settle their differences peacefully. They celebrate this peace with a grand feast, but the women are betrayed: once sufficiently drunk, each man seizes a woman as his wife. From that point forward, Cosmas declares, Czech women submitted to the authority of men.[391]

The ordeal is reminiscent of the Roman rape of the Sabines, a myth with which the classically educated Cosmas was likely familiar, but some scholars have suggested the Maidens' War instead describes a playful, pagan fertility rite.[392] That bridal abduction comprised a key component of early Slavic marriage rituals adds some weight to the latter argument, particularly since it was understood that the abduction was consensual: a very literal interpretation of the folkloric theme of bride-taking, acted out for the marriage ceremony.[393] Cosmas's ending of Libuše's idyllic reign brings the folkloric inversions at the beginning of her narrative full circle. Libuše was the youngest of three sisters who founded a dynasty, not the youngest of three brothers like Scythes, who fathered the Scythians. Moreover, in dispatching her people to bring Přemysl to her to wed, she had turned the bride-taking theme into a husband-taking one, further inverting the gender roles. In reverting those folkloric themes back to their rightful—i.e., patriarchal—position,

[390] Cosmas of Prague, *Chronicle of the Czechs*, Mutlová and Martin, trans., 39.
[391] Ibid., 41.
[392] Rychterová proposes the fertility rite interpretation in "*Chronicle of the So-Called Dalimil*," 181. The connection to the rape of the Sabines is mine. The rape of the Sabines refers to an origin myth about the founding of the Roman republic, in which a group of exiled criminals and runaway slaves, led by Romulus, abduct women from various other tribes, including the Sabines, under the pretense of hosting a festival. Roman author Livy (59 BCE – 17 CE) details the events in *Ab urbe condita* 1.9. The incident would have occurred in the eighth century BCE, approximately a millennium prior to the Czech Maidens' War.
[393] Pushkareva, "Woman in the Ancient Russian Family," 106.

Cosmas reestablishes the patriarchy as the proper system. Libuše may have been a matriarch, but she was also presented as a feminine ideal; as such, she was a warrior queen who could be tamed, and therefore, not a threat to the power of men.

Vlasta

Přemysl, as the progenitor of the Přemyslid dynasty, is remembered by history as a king of Bohemia, but he began his reign as the king of only half the Bohemian population. Following Libuše's death, the women chose another woman to lead them, Vlasta, who had been friends with Libuše. According to the *Dalimil* author, when the women rise up against the newly instated patriarchy, they choose the fierce and charismatic Vlasta as their leader.[394] As the embodiment of the prehistoric matriarchy, Libuše had been a gentle leader who guided her people to a state of prosperity and peace. However, her reign was also a precursor and a contrast to the events that followed it. In many ways, Libuše and Vlasta are opposites. Whereas Libuše represents a feminine ideal, Vlasta is a warrior queen in the true Amazon sense of the title, and as such, Vlasta also succumbs to the Amazon's fate. Her chroniclers could not allow her to stand as an aspirational model, but as a warning for any woman who would cast off her bonds and fight.

In contrast with Cosmas's version of events, according to the *Dalimil Chronicle*, the Maidens' War was lengthy, violent, and ultimately conducted in vain, culminating in the execution of all women involved in the revolt and the enslavement of the remaining women who had not participated. The *Dalimil* author presents a detailed, almost salacious, narrative, devoting several chapters to the bloody events and giving names to specific actors omitted in Cosmas's sparser version of events. Dissatisfied with Přemysl's patriarchal leadership, Vlasta rallies the women to war, inciting them to kill their male family members, and in time she attracts over 600 women to

[394] *Česka Kronika* (Dalimil), 8.10-12.

castle Děvín. She then trains them in the use of weapons and cavalry tactics and establishes her own laws, at which point Přemysl finally takes notice of her activities. Prior to Vlasta's perceived encroachment on his legislative authority, Přemysl could not be bothered with what he viewed as some insignificant feminine rebellion.

Once Vlasta's followers become a capable army, she leads attacks and raids against the men. Five years of civil war rage, far longer than the four-month Attic War when Amazons invaded Greece, but not all women follow Vlasta's lead. The "good" women, the *Dalimil* author proclaims, are content under patriarchy and ashamed of the war fought on their behalf.[395] Eventually the men begin to win the upper hand, so Vlasta devises a ruse to lure them in. Coercing the most beautiful of her followers, Šárka, into acting as bait, Vlasta ambushes a band of men, capturing the leader and slaughtering the rest.[396] However, Šárka soon regrets her deception and, betraying the other women at Děvín, frees the man, who is then able to take information back to the male army about the women's defenses and strategies.

Rather than the narrator as in Cosmas's *Czech Chronicle*, in the *Dalimil Chronicle* it is Vlasta herself who compares the Czech women to Amazons, perhaps implying the *Dalimil* author's rejection of the appraisal.[397] Vlasta also references Tomyris and her defeat of Cyrus, though she does not name the Scythian queen outright.[398] However, Vlasta is no Tomyris, and Přemysl is no Cyrus. Where Tomyris led the entirety of her people against arrogant foreign invaders, Vlasta leads only a fraction of women against the men they had known since birth. Rather than Tomyris's defeat of Cyrus, the final battle that follows Šárka's betrayal is more reminiscent of Penthesilea's doomed

[395] *Ibid.,* 11.35-38.
[396] *Ibid.,* 13.9-10.
[397] *Ibid.,* 10.49.
[398] *Ibid.,* 10.52-54: Vlasta declares, "Ty s císařem Cyrem válku vedly, / ty toho císaře slavně porazily / a javše ho, v krvi utopily."

charge outside the gates of Troy. Drawn beyond the safety of her fortress, an overconfident Vlasta rushes toward her death with spear held high. She slaughters many men along the way, her kills described with relish, her most valiant companions fighting at her side.[399] Like Penthesilea's accompanying Amazons, the *Dalimil* author grants these women names, setting them apart from the rest of her anonymous maiden army.[400] However, Vlasta's arrogance ultimately causes her downfall. When she finds herself outnumbered and surrounded, unable to wield her weapons in the thick crowd, the men cut her down and throw her remains to the dogs.[401] Following Vlasta's death, the rest of the women surrender, yet the men leave none alive lest they rebel again. The Maidens' War had come to an ignoble end.

The truth of the Maidens' War likely falls somewhere between Cosmas's condensed comedy and the *Dalimil* author's expanded tragedy. Perhaps the aftermath of Libuše's death—the struggle for leadership between her widower Přemysl and her friend Vlasta, culminating in the defeat of Vlasta's all-female army—reflects an actual struggle between matriarchal and patriarchal systems in early Bohemia, giving further credence to the myth of a prehistoric Indo-European matriarchy. As I discussed in the previous chapter, ancient literature and archeological evidence alike suggest that at least several Scythian tribes, whose territory overlapped with the early Slavs during the period of migrations prior to the influx of Scandinavian settlers during the Viking Age, were at one time matriarchal.[402] Certainly, a transition between two such disparate systems, characterized by a significant loss in status and power for half the population, would not be peaceful. If the Maidens' War does memorialize such a transition, it would indicate that the

[399] *Ibid.,* 10.82-84.
[400] *Ibid.,* 10.85-88: "Mlada, Hodka a Svatava, / Klimka, Vracka a Častava / tu vedle své kněžny vždy byly / a velmi hrdinsky se držely."
[401] *Ibid.,* 15.25-26.
[402] Melyukova, "Scythians and Sarmatians," 112; Guliaev, "Amazons in Scythia," 114.

prehistoric matriarchy posited by many scholars persisted significantly longer among the Bohemians than any other European group since most of those who subscribe to the theory of a near-universal prehistoric matriarchy believe it ended approximately six thousand years ago.

The contrast between the portrayal of Libuše and Vlasta's respective reigns also illustrates the medieval Slavic perception of female rulers. Libuše is praised profusely by both authors for her wisdom and leadership, while Vlasta is omitted by Cosmas in his abbreviated version and thoroughly villainized by the author of the *Dalimil Chronicle*. Libuše leads her entire people with a gentle hand—in other words, an appropriately feminine style of leadership—whereas Vlasta rules only women and does so with an iron fist, as evident in her manipulation of Šárka. Libuše oversees an egalitarian idyl; Vlasta, a brutal matriarchy reflecting the violence back at the patriarchy that replaced that idyl. Yet, Vlasta's goal is to return things to the way they were before, to reclaim the system they enjoyed before Přemysl became the prophesied tyrant and oppressed the women. It was her methods, her unabashed militarism, that made Vlasta unacceptable. The evolving image of the next queen, from fierce executer of revenge to gentle saint, reflects this disparity as well, but in the opposite order. Queens were one thing – warrior queens, quite another. Warrior queens were only acceptable to the extent they could be tamed.

Olga of Kyiv

Further east, approximately a century after the Maidens' War in Bohemia had concluded, another warrior queen featured in the origin myth of a nation. At that time, Rus' was only just beginning to coalesce into a recognizable state, and its population represented a constant flux of Vikings, Slavs, Finns, and Turanic nomads from the steppes.[403] Whether she was Scandinavian or Slavic, the details of Olga's life are veiled in layers of myth, legend, and folklore, all heavily edited

[403] Ion Tentiuc, "On the Viking Enclaves and their Relations with the Inhabitants of the Carpathian – Dniester Region between the 9th and the 11th Centuries," *Dacia: Revue d'Archéologie et d'Histoire Ancienne* (2019): 250.

by Christian clerics.[404] She first appears in written record in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, which assembles her narrative from preexisting oral traditions.[405] Several centuries after the *Primary Chronicle*'s composition, her hagiographic biography, *Life of Grand Princess Olga*, provides an elaborated account. Yet, like her Scythian predecessor Tomyris, Olga's story is unremarkable until the moment she becomes a widow. Though her hagiography stresses that she was wise and pure even in her youth, her active life does not truly begin until after her husband's death.[406] Indeed, her husband's death frees her to embrace decidedly unladylike qualities and achieve a military greatness that outshines her late husband's most daring endeavors.[407]

Both the *Primary Chronicle* and her *Life* agree that Olga grew up in Pskov, possibly as a Varangian princess, or possibly as a commoner, according to her hagiography. Interestingly, at that time Pskov was home to predominantly Finns, so she may even have been Finnish, especially considering that some scholars posit the word 'Rus'' comes from the Finnish name for the Swedes.[408] Other sources claim, based on local legends from the areas around Pskov and other medieval chronicles, that she may have yet another origin.[409] Whatever her origins, in the year 903 Olga moves to Kyiv and marries Prince Igor.[410] Olga's own age at the time is subject to debate,

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[404] Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 111.

[405] Ekaterina I. Sulitsa, "Zhenskie personazhi drevnerusskoi slovesnosti: poteicheskaia obraznost' i printsip sinkretichnosti," *Vestnik Riazanskogo gosudarstvenogo universiteta im. S. A. Esenin*a 4, no. 45 (2014): 77.

[406] O. P. Aikhacheva, ed., *Zhitie velikoi kniagini Ol'gi, narechennoi vo sciatom kreshchenii Elenoi*, Institute of Russian literature (Pushkin House): "От младаго бо возраста блаженная Олга искаше премудрости паче всего на свѣте сем."

[407] A. O. Lozhkina, "'Zhitie sviatyia blazhennyia i ravnoapostol'nyia i v premudrosti preslovyshchiia Velikiia Kniagini Olgi…': K voprosy o zhenskoi sviatosti v zhitiinoi literature," *Vestnik Cheliabinskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* 27, no. 165 (2009): 75.

[408] N. V. Lopatin, "K etnogeografii Skazaniia o prizvanii variagov," *Goroda i vesi srednevekovoi Rusi: Arxeologiia, istoriia, kul'tura* (Rossiiskaia Akademiia Nauk, 2015): 287; Mägi, *Viking Eastern Baltic*, 16-17; Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*, 22-23. The extrapolation that Olga may have been Finnish due to the ethnicities prevalent in Pskov during the ninth and tenth centuries is mine.

[409] A. S. Korolev, "Sviataia Ol'ga: Neznatnaia Pskovitianka ili mogushchestvennaia kniaginia Vyshgoroda?" *Vestnik Smaraskogo universiteta* 24, no. 3 (2018): 9. Korolev delineates the numerous origins put forth for Olga in assorted medieval sources from the *Primary Chronicle* through the early sixteenth century, including as a princess from Vyshgorod or a city located close to Kyiv, or as Oleg's daughter, which would make her Igor's foster-sister.

[410] Constantine Zuckerman, "On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion to Judaism and the Chronology of the Kings of the Rus Oleg and Igor," *Revue des études byzantines* 53 (1995): 269. Zuckerman provides a compelling argument

but some have suggested that, given the unreliability of dates during the reigns of the princes of early Rus', Olga may have been as young as ten or as old as 35 at the time of her wedding.[411] The *Primary Chronicle* implies that prior to her arrival in Kyiv, Olga had not met her betrothed. However, according to her hagiographer, Olga first meets Igor when he makes a trip to Pskov in his youth. During this brief encounter, Olga's purity and intelligence so impress Igor—she cleverly and politely rebuffs his amorous advances—that when it comes time for him to find a wife, he sends for her by name.[412]

With Olga beside him, Igor succeeds Oleg, and in the following year, he conquers a neighboring Slavic tribe, the Drevlians.[413] He then extracts a heavier tribute than that previously established by Oleg.[414] At that time the Drevlians occupied a resource rich territory, known especially for their iron ore and black marten pelts, which may explain the appeal of their subjugation and the subsequent tribute increase.[415] However, after Igor raises the tribute

for adjusting the dates of Igor's reign, which would in turn affect the dates of Olga's arrival in Kyiv. Based on comparisons with non-Russian sources about Oleg and Igor's reigns, the year given in the *Primary Chronicle* for Olga's arrival in Kyiv likely predates her birth by at least a decade. If her marriage to Igor shortly before he began his reign, as the internal chronology of the chronicles implies, she would have arrived in Kyiv around 939-940.

[411] Leonid V. Voitovich, *Genealogiia dinastii Riurikovichiv i Gediminovichiv*, ed. by Jaroslav D. Isaevich (Akademii nauk Ukraini, 1992): 16; Dushin, "Priglashenie variazhskix kniazei," 9.

[412] *Zhitie velikoi kniagini Ol'gi*.

[413] Zuckerman, "On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion," 265-269. The chronology of Oleg and Igor's reigns, as they are presented in the *Primary Chronicle* and the *Novgorod Chronicle*, do not align with non-Russian sources written about the same period. Zuckerman suggests that, in contrast with the 33-year reign allotted for each of the early kings of Rus' in the *Primary Chronicle* or the 24-year reign allotted for Igor in the *Novgorod Chronicle*, Igor actually reigned for only three to four years, beginning in 941. Thus, Oleg would have ruled as king, not regent, from approximately 911 until then, with Igor succeeding him after the failed invasion of Byzantium. Zuckerman argues that Igor returned to Kyiv immediately after their defeat at Byzantium, while Oleg continued on to attack Persia, dying in Azerbaijan in 944-945 without ever returning to Kyiv. Zuckerman centers his analysis on an anonymous Khazar *Letter* from the Genizah of Cairo, which describes Oleg's expedition to Byzantium and Persia. Other scholars, as Zuckerman points out, have dismissed the contents of the Letter as a fabrication due to its contradiction of the chronology in Russian sources, but the *Letter* aligns closely with Byzantine and Persian accounts of the attempted invasion of Byzantium.

[414] Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans and eds., *Russian Primary Chronicle*, 78.

[415] Androshchuk, "From Vikings to Rus," 98.

requirements yet again in 945, the Drevlians rebel, killing him when he comes to collect it.[416] Since Igor's son Sviatoslav is too young to rule, Olga rules as regent in his stead. Olga properly laments her husband's death and undergoes a period of mourning, but as soon as her required mourning ends, she sets in motion the events that establish her as a successful war leader and earn her the role in Russian Orthodoxy as the Patron Saint of Vengeance. Olga knows that her opponents underestimate her because of her gender, and she uses that fact to her advantage.

Olga's epic four-act revenge begins when she receives a delegation of twenty Drevlian emissaries, informing her of the death of her unworthy husband and proposing that she now marry their worthy prince.[417] Olga feigns contemplation of the proposal, instructing the emissaries to return to the boat in which they had arrived and await her summons the next day, at which point she would give them an official answer. As soon as they leave, Olga commands her people to dig a trench large enough to hold the Drevlian boat. When she sends for the emissaries the following morning, they demand—as she had instructed them—to be carried to her in their boat. Olga's guards deposit the emissaries, boat and all, into the trench, where she buries them alive.

The second act of Olga's revenge follows much the same pattern: she receives Drevlian emissaries, pretends to take them seriously, and then brutally executes them. It is the details of the second act that set it apart from the first. Following the burial of the first batch of emissaries, Olga sends a message to the Drevlians that, if they want her people to release their beloved queen from her duties, they should send a properly distinguished delegation as befits her station.[418] When this second delegation arrives, she demands that they bathe before appearing in her court. Like the first

[416] Korolev, "Sviataia Olga: Neznatnaia," 8. Though not included in official canon as it would significantly contradict her characterization, some legends suggest that Olga either killed Igor herself or had someone else kill him so that she could claim power.
[417] Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans and eds., *Russian Primary Chronicle*, 78-79.
[418] Ibid., 79.

group, the emissaries fall for the ruse. They enter the bathhouse, upon which the doors are locked and the bathhouse, set on fire.[419] By burning, or perhaps boiling, her victims alive, this second act of revenge continues the elemental theme established by the first – a decidedly pagan motif for a woman who would become a Christian saint.

In the third act of her revenge, Olga takes a contingent of guards and visits the Drevlians in person, rather than waiting for emissaries to come to her. Ahead of her arrival, she instructs the Drevlians to prepare massive amounts of mead so she can hold a fitting funeral for her murdered husband, after which she will consent to marry their prince.[420] Naturally, she makes no mention of the emissaries she already dispatched, lest the Drevlians be suspicious of her intentions. The unsuspecting Drevlians comply with her requests, and, suggestive of the ruse by which Cyrus slew a third of Tomyris's army, Olga has the drunken Drevlians slaughtered at Igor's belated funeral feast.[421] According to the *Primary Chronicle*, 5000 Drevlians were massacred, yet the number is likely symbolic, indicating that there were too many to count.[422]

As Alexandr Koptev suggests, taken together the first three acts of Olga's revenge are reminiscent of an elaborate funeral rite reserved for pagan royalty.[423] In this interpretation, the murder of the two Drevlian delegations followed by the massacre of the Drevlian celebrants at the funeral feast constitute human sacrifices. Perhaps the motive of revenge is assigned to Olga because it was more palatable than the enactment of a pagan funeral rite. According to Scandinavian common law, only death can pay for death; physical injury and insult should be met in like kind.[424] Koptev rightly compares the sacrifices of the Drevlians to the funeral of the Russian

[419] Ibid., 80.
[420] Ibid.
[421] Ibid.
[422] Koptev, "Pagan Rites," 36.
[423] Ibid., 13.
[424] Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*, 94.

prince described by the Arab traveler Ibn Fadlan, as well as Scythian royal burial practices as demonstrated through evidence in excavated kurgans and corroborating descriptions by Herodotus and other ancient authors.[425] Significantly, in addition to the prevalence of ship burials among Scandinavian nobility—one of Olga's possible origins—Vikings frequently included drinking mead as part of their funeral practices.[426] Thus, one could argue a connection between Olga's revenge and the combined funerary traditions of the Rus', Scandinavians, and Scythians.

From a military standpoint, however, these events beg a practical interpretation. The first three acts of Olga's revenge are usually interpreted as just that: revenge. Yet, they are more than just clever ruses to punish the people who murdered her husband; they are strategic military actions. By slaughtering the two groups of Drevlian emissaries, she not only depletes her enemy's manpower, she disrupts his ability to gather intelligence. Presumably, the emissaries the Drevlian king would have sent to treat on his behalf would have come from the nobility and would thus have strategic value as advisors as well as spies. Thus, Olga prevents them from taking intelligence back to their king about her fortifications, personnel, potential weaknesses, and other information vital to planning an attack. With the emissaries dispatched, Olga is free to choose the location of her next confrontation before the Drevlians have a chance to realize she played them for fools.

Although the fourth and final act of Olga's revenge differs in pattern and timeframe from the first three, it, too, relies on a ruse and concludes with a massacre. Sometime later, still dissatisfied by her husband's murder, Olga gathers her army and lays siege to Iskorosten', the Drevlian capital city. The siege lasts for a full year, with neither the Drevlians able to expel the prospective conquerors nor the Rus' able to breach the city defenses.[427] Eventually tiring of the

[425] Koptev, "Pagan Rites," 8.
[426] Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 145.
[427] Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans and eds., *Russian Primary Chronicle*, 80.

stalemate, Olga informs the Drevlians that her revenge is complete and that she will settle for a tribute of three pigeons and three sparrows per each Drevlian household. Relieved, they comply. That evening, Olga's forces tie burning strips of cloth to the birds' feet so that once they return to their roosts, the whole city erupts in flames. As Iskorosten' burns, Olga's forces bar the gates. They kill or enslave most who manage to escape, sparing only a small population to pay an even steeper tribute than that for which they had originally murdered Olga's husband.[428]

Because of the differences in tone, structure, and time between the first three acts of Olga's revenge and the razing of Iskorosten', some have suggested the latter was a late addition to her narrative that did not appear in the original manuscript of the *Primary Chronicle*.[429] This argument is underscored by the use of sparrows and pigeons with burning brands, which is a common strategy employed by heroes of Scandinavian as well as other medieval European literature.[430] While employing birds is recognizably a fabrication meant to mythologize Olga's uncommon cleverness, there is no reason to doubt that the Rus' did indeed lay siege to Iskorosten', nor that the city burned. By that point, Olga had already proven she had a clever military mind, no birds necessary. Perhaps their inclusion in the narrative is meant to soften the militant aspects of razing a city, as if using birds to do the deed makes the execution more feminine.

After her revenge is finally complete, the nature of Olga's narrative alters entirely. Despite, or perhaps because of, such a spectacularly violent start, Olga's subsequent reign is relatively peaceful.[431] The primary anecdotes illustrating the rest of her tale in the *Primary Chronicle* and her hagiography involve her conversion to Orthodox Christianity. Given its genre, Olga's *Life* is

[428] Ibid., 81.
[429] Alexey A. Gippius, "Reconstructing the original of the *Povest' vremennyx let*: a contribution to the debate," *Russian Linguistics* 38, no. 3 (2014): 348.
[430] Raffensperger, "Shared (Hi)Stories," 577.
[431] Clements, *History of Women in Russia*, 7.

concerned primarily with the religious aspects of Olga's later years, detailing the good works she does in the name of the Christian god, such as caring for orphans, the ill, the poor, and those widows who do not share her exalted status. Notably, she continues to rule long after she relinquishes her official role as regent when her son comes of age, for while Sviatoslav is away waging war, she reigns in his absence. For reasons of brevity and relevance, I will not go into further detail about her conversion, apart from observing that even in her adoption of the Christian faith, she manages to outwit any man who would subdue her: in this case, the Byzantine emperor.

Though supposedly the first Christian in Rus' and sainted accordingly, earning her comparisons to Saint Helen, Olga's early reign has strikingly pagan and violent overtones that even her hagiographer could not erase.[432] Her elaborate and bloody revenge undercuts the repeated declarations that she exemplifies the modest, meek Christian woman. Olga may have been a regent for an underage prince, but she was a regent in title only. Functionally, she was a warrior queen, no less capable than Amage, and no less fierce than Tomyris or Vlasta. However, whereas Vlasta's militarism is demonized, Olga's is celebrated. Had she not transformed into the ideal Christian woman, her primary legacy would remain one of violence. Perhaps, then, Olga would not have been so revered by her chroniclers. As it is, her violence is downplayed and reduced to a display of uncommon cleverness in executing a necessary act to ensure the safety of her people; she did what any good leader would do, she just happened to be a woman.

Sigrid the Proud

Another warrior queen who, like Vlasta, was transformed into a villain, only to then be ignored by most historians, is Sigrid the Proud. Arguments for her dismissal as fiction stem from the conflicting accounts of Sigrid's lineage, which make it impossible to determine beyond doubt

[432] Sulitsa, "Zhenskie personazhi drevnerusskoi slovesnosti," 78.

whether she was of Slavic or Scandinavian birth. However, evidence of her Slavic origins, linking her to a historical person, is more compelling. According to one contested saga that appears in *Heimskringla*, she is the daughter of a Swede named Skoglar-Toste, but apart from this role as Sigrid's father, he receives few biographical details; Sigrid's narrative contains far more depth than her supposed Swedish father.[433] However, other sources have linked Sigrid to a Polish princess, the daughter of Mieszko I. In this version of Sigrid's biography, her given name is usually Świętosława, though she is sometimes left anonymous, considered only in relation first to her father and then to her two husbands: Erik the Victorious and Sveyn Forkbeard, both of whom are specified as the husbands of Sigrid in Scandinavian literature.[434] The more plausible scenario is that Sigrid was indeed a Polish princess who married into Scandinavian royalty not once, but twice.

Compiled from oral traditions and preexisting literature, Sigrid's narrative contains some obviously fictionalized elements, and so some have suggested she may be an amalgamation of several different historical and literary women, Olga included.[435] After assessing the multiple fathers, marriages, and sons assigned to Sigrid, historians have yet to agree on a definitive biography since the timelines of certain plots conflict, with the actors in question living during different centuries.[436] As a result of these contradictions, Sigrid has largely been written out of history during the past century, consigned instead to fantasy and folklore.[437] Yet for her strength of personality, orchestration of violence, and, indeed, her pride, Sigrid the Proud more than earns her place among other Viking Age warrior queens.

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[433] Rafal Prinke, "Świętosława, Sygryda, Gunhilda: Tożamość córki Mieszka I i jej skandynawskie zwia,zki," *Roczniki Historyc*zne (2004): 89; Niels Lund, "Sven Estreidsen's Incest and Divorce," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 13 (2017): 131.

[434] Prinke, "Świętosława, Sygryda, Gunhilda," 82; Hieronim Chojnacki, "Świętosława – skandynawistka: o znaczeniu północnego wymiaru w polskiej kulturze i polityce," *Folia Scandinavica* 19 (2016): 36.

[435] Bergitta Fritz, "Sigrid Storråda," *Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon* 32 (2006): 185.

[436] Prinke, "Świętosława, Sygryda, Gunhilda," 93.

[437] Sawyer, "Sigrid Storråda," 78.

Of the various renditions of Sigrid in Scandinavian literature, the Icelandic and Danish traditions are the most essential. In the Danish tradition as conveyed by Saxo Grammaticus, Sigrid is worthier of the other popular translation of her epithet: "haughty."[438] Saxo's Sigrid, as many have observed, is corrupt, conniving, and ultimately ineffective, though the basic events of her narrative remain the same across both traditions. Some scholars suggest Saxo's unsavory depiction, which is in keeping with his typical approach to female characters, stems from his narrative need for a villain in the death of Olaf Tryggvason.[439] In contrast, the Icelandic portrayal of Sigrid is far more complimentary, if still tinged with sexist undertones. In Snorri's *Heimskringla*, Sigrid is intelligent, witty, and prophetic; in fact, he describes her as "the wisest of women."[440] Since Saxo and Snorri consulted the same Icelandic sources in crafting their narratives, since Snorri provides a more detailed and less censorious account, and since the basic events are consistent across both, I will base the rest of my analysis on Sigrid as she appears in *Heimskringla*, rather than in *History of the Danes*.

Sigrid's remarkable story begins, like those of so many powerful women in history, with widowhood, yet it is nonetheless necessary to briefly address the marriage that makes her a widow. Her first husband is Erik the Victorious, the king of Sweden. It is this marriage that provides the strongest argument that Sigrid is actually Świętosława, for both are named in various sources as his only wife. Polish and other Slavic sources tend to cite the daughter of Mieszko I as Erik's wife, while Scandinavian sources name her Sigrid.[441] It would not be unusual for a Slavic woman to take on a Scandinavian name upon her marriage into Swedish royalty, and in fact, the practice may

[438] The Romanized Danish spelling of her name is Siritha, which is how Saxo refers to her, but Siritha and Sigrid are the same woman. Sigrid's title in the original Norse is *storråda*, which in English is usually translated to either "proud" or "haughty." As the more neutral term, I have chosen to use "proud."
[439] Sawyer, "Sigrid Storråda," 86.
[440] Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, trans. by Finlay and Faulks, 178.
[441] Fritz, "Sigrid Storråda," 185; Prinke, "Świętosława, Sygryda, Gunhilda," 82.

have been expected.[442] Whether Erik's wife is originally named Sigrid or simply takes on that name after her marriage, Sigrid gives Erik a son: Olaf the Swede. Shortly thereafter, Erik succumbs to an unspecified illness. Olaf the Swede is the earliest Swedish king with significant historical evidence attesting his existence, and yet the identity of his mother remains controversial.[443] We can infer from the uncertain chronology of Sigrid's marriage to Erik and Erik's subsequent death—we know that no more than ten years elapsed between the two events, but not the specific dates—that her son Olaf was too young to rule at the outset of Sigrid's widowhood. Very likely, Sigrid served as his regent, although the sagas do not say so directly.[444]

The next time we meet Sigrid, it is when Olaf is already the king of Sweden, and she, a wealthy widow with multiple properties who is still regarded as beautiful. In this anecdote, Sigrid's foster-brother, a minor Norwegian *jarl* named Harald Grenske, visits Sweden. Sigrid invites him and his men to a banquet at one of her palaces, during which everyone—Sigrid included—gets quite drunk. Snorri does not say outright due to the moral constraints of the church at his time of writing, but a sexual liaison between Sigrid and Harald is heavily implied: "And when the king was undressed and lying down, then the queen came to him there and served him herself and enticed him hard to drink and was most agreeable."[445] The next morning, Sigrid sends Harald and his men on their way.

Evidently, Harald enjoyed his time with Sigrid, because after an excursion in the Baltics, he returns to Sweden and proposes to her. Sigrid rebuffs the proposal, reminding Harald that he is already married to a worthy woman named Ásta, who has no idea Harald is off suggesting marriage

[442] Chojnacki, "Świętosława – skandynawistka," 36.
[443] Bagge, Cross and Scepter, 55.
[444] Sawyer, "Sigrid Storråda," 84.
[445] Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Finlay and Faulks, trans., 178.

to another.[446] Since divorce was a possibility under Norse law, perhaps Harald wished to secure his next wife before setting aside the first. Nevertheless, Harald is not content to suffer rejection. Ignoring the advice of his men, he visits Sigrid a third time. Unbeknownst to Harald, a prince is also on his way with amorous intentions: Vsevelod, a *kniaz'* of Rus'. Vsevelod arrives at Sigrid's palace the very same evening as Harald. Hardly the first widowed queen to entertain unwanted offers of marriage—Tomyris and Olga also dealt with men proposing marriage as a means to take what was theirs—Sigrid feigns gratitude for the uninvited attention, despite being inwardly insulted that vassal kings of such minor territories would deem themselves her equals. Thus, she hosts a lavish party, plying both kings and their retinues with an abundance of mead. Once they are asleep in a drunken stupor, she locks the building and sets it ablaze. Her men kill any who escape the fire.[447] While she was described as a proud woman prior to this incident, it is her actions regarding the unfortunate suitors that earn her the epithet "the Proud."

Although she answered unwanted proposals with such dramatic finality, Sigrid continues to receive offers of marriage. The next offer, however, she does not dismiss outright. Rather, after exchanging several messages, Sigrid agrees to marry Olaf Tryggvason, the Christian king of Norway.[448] To honor their engagement, Olaf sends Sigrid a golden ring. Sigrid, along with the rest of her court, is initially pleased by the gift, yet upon closer examination her goldsmiths declare the ring a counterfeit. When she gives them permission to break the ring, they discover it is only gilded brass. Sigrid concludes that Olaf is untrustworthy and decides to remain watchful, but she does not yet break the engagement. Later, when Olaf arrives in person to arrange the details of their wedding, he demands she convert to Christianity. Sigrid refuses. Olaf slaps her and calls her a

[446] Ibid.,179.
[447] Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Finlay and Faulks, trans., 179.
[448] Ibid., 192.

heathen dog, and here is where Sigrid utters the prediction for which Snorri dubbed her a prophetess. She tells Olaf, "That could well cost you your life."[449] It soon does.

Sigrid's second husband, King Sveyn Forkbeard of Denmark, is a widower. The sagas do not go into details about their courtship; maybe it was not as interesting as her prior courtships nor as eventful as their marriage's aftermath. After Sveyn's previous wife, Gunnhild, passes away, he marries Sigrid. Sigrid then births two more sons: Knut the Great, who becomes in turn the King of England, Denmark, and lastly Norway; and Harald II, who succeeds his brother as King of Denmark. Along with Olaf of Sweden, Sigrid's younger two sons share an illustrious set of titles, and their exploits are well chronicled, lending further historicity to Sigrid's narrative. Sigrid's second marriage initiates an alliance between her eldest son Olaf and her new husband Sveyn, which, as she had predicted, leads to the death of her former fiancé. Olaf Tryggvason not only insulted and hit Sigrid, but he had once raped Sveyn's sister, and according to Viking law this is sufficient grounds for war.[450] Sigrid uses her considerable persuasive powers to incite her husband and son to violence, and they gladly oblige.[451] Sigrid does not take part in the battle personally, but without her insistence, it would not have occurred. During what came to be known as the Battle of Swold, Olaf Tryggvason is killed.[452] The war Sigrid orchestrates to avenge her own honor, as well as that of her sister-in-law, ensures their violator is never heard from again.

Scholars have observed multiple parallels between Olga of Kyiv and Sigrid the Proud, so many so that some suggest Sigrid is essentially a Scandinavian copy of Olga, or at a minimum, that her narrative was modeled after the queen of the Rus'.[453] They were both widows whose royal

[449] Ibid., 193.
[450] Ibid., 217.
[451] Ibid., 218.
[452] Ibid.
[453] Lund, "Sven Esreidsen's Incest," 131; Sawyer, "Sigrid Storråda," 81.

status earned them unwanted marriage proposals. Both served as regents for underage sons. Both took revenge upon those who slighted them, orchestrating bloody wars in the process. However, one of the most striking parallels between the narratives of Olga and Sigrid is their chosen method of revenge, in particular, their decisive use of fire. Olga burns alive the messengers of an unwanted marriage proposal, and later, she burns their whole city. Sigrid likewise burns alive the unfortunate suitors who earned her ire. Another connection between Olga and Sigrid is their inverted role with respect to Christianity. Olga of Kyiv is credited as the first Christian in Rus', having converted later in life, and her grandson Vladimir I as the one who officially converted all of Rus'. However, if we assume Sigrid the Proud was based on the historical figure of Świętosława, then it was her father Mieszko I who adopted Christianity for Poland.[454] Furthermore, by rejecting Olaf Tryggvasson, Sigrid also rejects Christianity, thereby taking the opposite path as Olga. Olga is duly sainted; Sigrid, like Vlasta, is deemed a villainess. Christian chroniclers only appear to tolerate violent women when they can temper their narratives through religion.

Conclusion

The Slavic warrior queens who lived during the Viking Age and were described centuries later in medieval literature do not owe their warriorhood to a Scandinavian legacy. They were born into cultures that certainly bore the marks of Scandinavian influence, but they did not inherit their warrior spirit from the Vikings. Though they may share traits with legendary Norse figures like the Valkyries, they did not descend from a line of Swedish or Danish or Norwegian *skjaldmeyjar*. Such Scandinavian shieldmaidens were extreme exceptions, if they existed at all outside of literature, and as previously discussed, archaeological evidence suggests that any *skjaldmeyjar* were not ethnically Scandinavian in the first place. Instead, it is from the Scythians, and their own Slavic

[454] Gardeła, "Vikings in Poland," 220.

heritage as evidenced by Libuše's matriarchal reign, that these Slavic queens inherited a tradition of powerful women. Certainly, literary depictions of Viking *skjaldmeyjar* and Valkyries influenced the recorded narratives of these Viking Age Slavic queens, but the Scythians provided a stronger historical precedent.

Scythian and Amazon queens imparted their narratives to their Slavic successors, as the classically trained medieval scribes were inevitably familiar with the ancient stories.[455] Saxo and Cosmas both composed their chronicles in Latin, the *Dalimil* author invokes Scythians and Amazons in his account of the Maidens' War, and references to warrior maiden kingdoms in the north pepper Scandinavian literature. Like Tomyris, both Olga and Sigrid claim their power only after becoming widows. Additionally, Olga and Sigrid receive ill-intentioned proposals of marriage and deal with them in violent, spectacular fashion: through fire and war. Like the Sarmatian queen Amage, Libuše holds functional power over her kingdom even though her husband lives. In an inverse of the typical pattern, Přemysl does not come into his own as a ruler until after his wife's death. Finally, like Penthesilea, Vlasta rides heedless into battle while mourning the loss of a friend. Hippolyte's death triggers Penthesilea's path to self-destruction; for Vlasta, it is Libuše's death.

While not all warrior queens rode into battle personally like Antiope, Penthesilea, or Vlasta, they all played key roles in military endeavors, from instigator to strategist. However, another important quality all these women, whether Amazon, Scythian, or Slav, share is their royal status. First and foremost, they were queens. They had states to rule, responsibilities to fulfill, larger pictures to keep in mind. A ruler riding into battle personally would have been not only unnecessary, but downright foolhardy. Sound strategy is a far more vital component of winning a

[455] Sawyer, "Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," 5.

war than the addition of one more soldier on the battlefield, and these queens were in position to provide such strategic oversight. Thus, these Viking Age Slavic queens illustrate one aspect of the Scythian-Amazon legacy, an aspect required by their royal status: orchestrators of war. In the next chapter, I will explore the non-royal inheritors of that same legacy, who were thus free to participate directly on the battlefield: the daring *polianitsy*.

CHAPTER 4

WARRIOR WOMEN IN HEROIC BALLADS AND FAIRY TALES

Thus far, all of the individual women I have discussed held key leadership roles, and all except Vlasta were born or married into royalty. Even the *skjaldmeyjar* in Norse sagas came predominantly from the noble class. Many of the strong women remembered by history were not just warriors, then, but warrior queens, obligated to understand military command beyond the requirements of peacetime leadership. While the archaeological record supports the existence of warrior women at elite levels of society from ancient times through the medieval period, not all women who donned armor and took to the battlefield were rulers. The spectrum of wealth with which armed women were buried, from simple arrowheads and axes to elaborate jewelry and crowns, likewise supports this notion. So, where are all the non-royal warrior women in literature? Ancient and medieval authors seldom deigned to immortalize their stories in written record, but the narratives of ordinary warrior women—to the extent any women transgressing social norms could be considered ordinary—survived in oral literature: in fairy tales, epic ballads, and other subgenres of folklore.

Of course, folklore also contains numerous examples of princesses and queens, some of whom did indeed wield weapons. Yet, as the name implies, common folk often populate folktales.[456] Oral literature fell under the purview of every socioeconomic class, from the illiterate peasant up to the monarch himself. Children, even princes and princesses, listened to their nurses recite fairy tales about dragons, deathless sorcerers, witches, and youngest sons who became

[456] Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales: A New History* (State University of New York Press, 2009): 4.

tsars.[457] Therefore, it is no surprise that the protagonists of folktales likewise represent all levels of society. Warrior queens Mar'ia Morevna and Sineglazka may rule over distant fairytale kingdoms, but they are also accompanied by all-female *druzhiny*, contingents of loyal soldiers or guards, who would not necessarily have been noble by birth. In some variants of their tales, Vasilisa and Nastasia Mikulishna are the daughters of a Lithuanian king, but in other versions, their father is a plowman. Perhaps, like the Czech Přemysl, the roles of king and plowman are not mutually exclusive, at least as far as folklore is concerned.

Regardless of their social status at birth, medieval Slavic warrior women, known as *polianitsy*, appear in several subgenres of Russian folklore, predominantly in *byliny*, or epic folk ballads, as well as *skazki*, or fairy tales. Little studied beyond their surface role in folktales, *polianitsy* are warrior women with heroic traits who appear in Russian folklore and correspond to the male heroes known as *bogatyri*. Some folklorists consider *polianitsy* stock characters since they fulfil specific, repeated roles in *byliny*.[458] While the most recognizable *polianitsy* in *byliny* can be princesses, they never rule; in contrast, the *polianitsy* in *skazki* are usually queens. However, *polianitsy* are always foreigners, typically arriving in Kyiv from Lithuania, Poland, or some distant, semi-magical maiden kingdom. Like the Amazons and other Scythian nomads, *polianitsy* are closely associated with horses and bows. Epic folk ballads depict them fighting as cavalry and performing impossible feats of archery, besting their male opponents. In fact, some scholars have been drawing parallels between the *polianitsy* of folklore and the Amazons of ancient literature since the early twentieth century. The theme of Russians as the descendants of Scythians also traces back at least to the reign of Catherine II, who often stylized herself as the war goddess Athena or

[457] Christopher Troye, "Istinno bylinno: predstavleniia o dobrodeteli v russkom epose," *Vestnik Rossiiskogo universiteta druzhby narodov* 3 (2010): 90; Anderson, *Fairytale in the Ancient World*, 8.

[458] Laura J. Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2012): 34.

Minerva, and under whom Russian scholars proposed a Scythian origin for their people.[459] Nevertheless, the vast majority of scholars dismiss the *polianitsy* as pure fiction.

Although some folktales refer to warrior women as *bogatyrki*, I will exclusively use the term *polianitsy* for consistency and to distinguish them from the male heroes known as *bogatyri*. Notably, *polianitsy* by other names appear in the folktales of other Slavic nations besides Russia as well as non-Slavic ethnic communities residing within present-day Russia, including indigenous Siberian tribes who maintained an oral tradition of warrior women akin to Amazons who also likely trace back to historical Scythians.[460] Russian folklore provides the names of twelve *polianitsy* in total, but as with the named Amazons, most do not possess their own narratives, and significant overlap in the narratives of those who do complicates their differentiation.[461] Thus, for the sake of brevity and consistency, I confine my analysis to the most famous Russian *polianitsy* with the most complete, distinct narratives: Nastasia Korolevichna, sisters Nastasia and Vasilisa Mikulishna, Mar'ia Morevna, and Sineglazka.

Russian Folklore

The symbiotic relationship between oral and written literature is nowhere more apparent than in folklore, and this is especially true of genres like *byliny*, which contain heroic plots worthy of any written epic. Written literature allows the author to be deliberate, to order plot elements in a certain way, to choose the perfect metaphor or epithet or character monologue. Once written, the text of the story is difficult, though not impossible, to alter, even more so in the distant past when texts were scribed by hand, excluding the copying errors that inevitably occurred. In contrast, the

[459] Kaplun, "Archetype of the Maiden Warrior," 307-308; Selivanova, "Voitel'nitsy russkikh stepei. Barbary i tsivilizatory," *Problemy istorii, filologii, kul'tury* 3, no. 29 (2010): 115.
[460] Kaplun, "Archetype of the Maiden Warrior," 311; Anna N. Danilova, "Eposy o zhenshchinakh-bogatyrkakh," *Prirodnye resursy Arktiki i Sybarktiki* 4 (2006): 150.
[461] Kaplun, "Archetype of the Maiden Warrior," 309.

nature of oral literature requires the storyteller to improvise, but at the same time, the story can never be a complete improvisation.[462] As with written literature derived from oral sources, the story itself predates its performance. Written works entered the permanent record at an earlier stage, becoming static, but even orally preserved tales achieve permanence once recorded, compiled, and catalogued. Thus, in folklore we encounter the evolution of archaic plots and themes to reflect the storyteller's contemporary reality.[463] Through this combination of evolution and preservation, we can observe the anachronistic insertion of firearms in some variants of *byliny* that otherwise take place in tenth century Kyiv, well before their European usage.

Oral Literature as Performance

The mutability of oral literature results from its performative and collective nature. We can usually attribute written literature to a single author, even if that author remains unknown, but there is no one author of a folktale; instead, we have storytellers, singers, performers, those who heard the tale from another and made their own edits, and so in the vast majority of cases, we cannot trace a folktale to a specific, individual creator.[464] Moreover, rarely is storytelling one's primary profession, especially regarding *skazki*.[465] The oral method of preserving and disseminating folklore (i.e., performance) also begets several impediments to scholarship. Because of the high number of variants of any folktale—some of the more popular *byliny* have been recorded in at least two versions and hundreds of variants—it is impossible to pinpoint an original narrative.[466] Even

[462] S. N. Azbelev, *Istorism bylin i spetsifika fol'klora* (Soviet Institute of Russian Litearture, 1982): 22; Karl Reichl, "Lying or Blaspheming? Problems in the Translation of Oral Epics," Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies.

[463] James Bailey and Tatyana Ivanova, trans. and eds., *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics* (Routledge, 2015): 189; Anderson, *Fairytale in the Ancient World*, 18-19; Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 13.

[464] Claudia Pieralli, "La tradizione epica orale delle byliny russe: Mat' syra semlja e il culto della terra," *eSamizdat* 2, no. 3 (2005): 301; Azbelev, *Istorism bylin i spetsifika fol'klora*, 19.

[465] Olson and Adonyeva, *Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 29.

[466] In folklore studies and as I use them here, 'version' refers to a significant variation in the overall narrative or plot of a folktale, while 'variant' refers to the text of an individual recording of that tale. For example, in one version of "Danila Lovchanin," Vasilisa Mikulishna is his wife and dies at the end of the narrative, whereas in another version, she is not his wife at all and she lives. These two versions are derived from numerous variants, which may

repeat performances of the same tale by the same singer differ, creating more variants based on each individual performance.[467] As a result, scholars have collected more than 4000 variants of *byliny* alone.[468] As soon as collectors and anthologists begin to record those variants, however, some contamination naturally occurs, with live performers drawing from the written texts in addition to or in lieu of oral traditions, contributing to the development of one dominant, hybridized version of a particular tale.[469]

Certainly, some tales have been so oft repeated that they become ingrained in the minds of not only the performers, but also the audiences, and therefore collective memory and correction produces a dominant, consistent narrative.[470] However, the specific language of folklore also contributes to the preservation of certain versions. In both *byliny* and *skazki*, performers make use of repetition through stock epithets (the hero always rides a "good horse;" the Russian *bogatyr* always has "golden curls"), stock locations (the feast at the court of Prince Vladimir, the land "beyond thrice nine kingdoms"), and stock characters (the ideal princess, the evil sorceress, the kidnapping dragon).[471] Tatars and Lithuanians appear as stock enemies for the *bogatyri* to fight, and Prince Vladimir stands in for any ruling prince, not to a specific ruler like Vladimir I or Vladimir Monomakh, though he is sometimes thought to represent one of them.[472] The performative aspect of *byliny* and *skazki* precludes unique, detailed descriptions of places or people, so the use of stock language streamlines the narrative and allows the performer to focus instead on presenting the plot and encouraging audience engagement, which likewise relies on

have subtler changes, such as the spelling of a character's name or the addition or subtraction of a minor detail, but the overall plot of each variant usually conforms to one of the dominant versions.

[467] Reichl, "Lying or Blaspheming."
[468] Nikita V. Petrov, "Russian *Byliny*," *Studies on Cultures along the Silk Roads* 3 (2022): 167.
[469] Prieto, "Slavic Epic: Past Tales," 225.
[470] Anderson, *Fairytale in the Ancient World*, 19.
[471] Z. I. Vlasova, *Skomorkhi i fol'klor*, ed. by S. N. Azbelev (Aleteiia, 2001): 165.
[472] Prieto, "Slavic Epic: Past Tales," 231.

stock language through formulaic opening and closing statements and standardized interjections that break the fourth wall.[473] Judging the reaction of listeners allows the performer to alter the length and detail for a particular section of the narrative based on the audience's interests. Having a ready repertoire of epithets, phrases, and interludes facilitates this process.[474]

Along with repetitive language, folktales make use of repeated themes, motifs, and plots, which, once combined, form the basis for the most common means of classification. The Aarne–Thompson–Uther (ATU) Index, developed initially in Finland and then revised several times since, categorizes folktales by tale type. It is often used in conjunction with the Motif Index created by Stith Thompson (1885-1976). Although contemporary scholars have raised concerns about the ultimate helpfulness of both indexes, citing issues with Eurocentric bias and Victorian censorship, they remain in wide usage.[475] Interestingly, ATU tale type 519, designated as "The Strong Woman as Bride," which characterizes the narratives of *polianitsy* as the wives of *bogatyri*, is a common tale type across Slavic folklore, so much so that analysis of European folklore supports a likelihood greater than 50% of that tale type originating among the proto-Balto-Slavs.[476] Building on the existing classification methods, in *Morphology of the Folktale* Vladimir Propp (1895-1970) details the numerous plot functions available to the fairy tale as a subset of folktales identified in the ATU index. While he presents the plot functions and dramatis personae in the context of fairy tales, with the majority of his examples drawn from Russian *skazki*, many of those plot functions also apply to *byliny*, which Propp addresses accordingly in a separate study devoted to the epics.[477] For

[473] Pieralli, "La tradizione epica," 304; David Elmer, "Presentation Formulas in South Slavic Epic Song," *Oral Tradition* 24, no. 1 (2009): 48; Olson and Adonyeva, *Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 13.

[474] Reichl, "Lying or Blaspheming."

[475] Alan Dundes, "The Motif-Index and the Tale Type Index: A Critique," *Journal of Folklore Research* 34, no. 3 (1997): 198; Bottigheimer, "Fairy Tales, Folk Narrative," 350.

[476] Sara Graça da Silva and Jamshid J. Tehrani. "Comparative phylogenetic analyses uncover the ancient roots of Indo-European folktales," *Royal Society Open Science* 3, no. 1 (2016).

[477] While *byliny* do contain many of the same motifs and tale types used to classify tales in the ATU and Motif Indexes, usually *byliny* are inconsistently organized into cycles based on time period and geography, or else

example, taboos are a common trope shared by *skazki* and *byliny*. An interdiction issued to the protagonist of a *skazka* by his mother or wife is inevitably violated, but we find interdictions, also inevitably violated, in *byliny* as well.

The folkloric themes most relevant to the present study include hunting, fighting, testing, and bride-taking. Hunting and fighting comprise key narrative elements in almost all *byliny*, with most battles preceded by a hunt.[478] Given that *byliny* are epics with warrior-heroes as their protagonists, hunting and fighting as predominant themes is expected. Yet, testing and bride-taking also appear as themes in many *byliny*, to include when the hero seeks a bride for himself or on behalf of Prince Vladimir. Though some might consider *skazki* primarily concerned with the protagonist's happily-ever-after (frequently, marriage), once he or she has proven worthy through a series of magical tests, hunting and fighting appear as key themes in several *skazki* as well.[479] Additionally, when bride-taking is the central theme of a *bylina* or *skazka*, the timing of the marriage in the tale tends to differ according to the tale's genre. The marriage usually marks the end of a *skazka*, whereas it more often occurs in the middle of a *bylina*.[480] A notable exception to this genre rule is the narrative of Mar'ia Morevna, whose wedding occurs early on in the *skazka*. It should be noted that this combination of seemingly incongruous themes is prevalent in those *byliny* and *skazki* that involve *polianitsy*; warrior women appear to bridge the genre gap.

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separated into categories by form and theme. Most scholars agree that *byliny* with archaic plots, containing the most fantasy and featuring the oldest generation of *bogatyri* like Sviatagor, constitute the oldest tales, and classify them as the Mythological cycle. However, there is some disagreement about the actual age of these epics as not all scholars believe they were composed prior to the establishment of Kyiv. The names given to the other cycles categorizing *byliny* vary, with some scholars differentiating them as either Novelistic or Heroic, sometimes further differentiating Heroic *byliny* between those that take place in Kyiv versus those in Novgorod. Other scholars distinguish *byliny* as Heroic, *Skazka*-like, or *Byliny*-Novellas. Still others differentiate between Heroic versus Balladic *byliny*. For my purposes, I discuss Mythological and Kyivan-Heroic *byliny*, as those are the cycles in which *polianitsy* figure.

[478] Felix J. Oinas, "Hunting in Russian *Byliny* Revisited," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 31, no. 3 (1987): 421.

[479] Zhuchkova and Gulai, "Funktsional'noe znachenie mifologicheskogo obraza," 167.

[480] G. A. Trofimov, "Obraz zhenshchiny v russkikh narodnykh zmeeborcheskikh siuzhetakh," *Vestnik ViatGU* 11 (2015): 105.

Female Character Roles

The female characters who populate the realms of fairy tales and epics look remarkably similar. Women in folklore fulfil the same archetypal roles, regardless of subgenre: mother, princess, sorceress, maiden-warrior, and so on. Speaking in the broadest generalities, female characters in folklore tend to represent one extreme or the other of morality. As exemplars of the feminine ideal, they are dutiful and loving mothers, beautiful and appropriately passive brides, or kind and helpful youngest daughters; as transgressive villains, they are abusive step-mothers and step-sisters, evil sorceresses and cannibalistic witches, or unfaithful foreign brides.[481] As maiden-warriors, *polianitsy* can fit into either category, sometimes even switching roles over the course of the tale, which I will address in conjunction with the narratives of individual *polianitsy* as appropriate. Any one of these female characters can also act as a prophetess, but usually the mother is most likely the one to issue an interdiction or taboo to the hero, which he inevitably violates, thus initiating the conflict.[482] Likewise, any female character can also act as a donor, granting direct aid, information, or a magical item to the hero. Yet, as soon as that aid is given and her role as donor or helper complete, that female character is discarded.[483]

Of the non-warrior archetypal roles available to female characters, the women with the most agency tend to also be the most villainous. Perhaps it is their very agency that marks them as such, for witches and unfaithful wives—much like warrior women—transgress their expected roles. Some scholars suggest that the trend of equating feminine independence with villainy is a later addition to folklore, a result of editing and censorship in accordance with nineteenth century

[481] Petrov, "Russian *Byliny*," 177.
[482] Rakhimova, "Karelo-finskaia geroicheskaia runa v tipologicheskom sopostavlenii s bylinami," *Filologicheskie nauki* 4 (1997): 88.
[483] Savchenko, "Integratsiia zhenskikh tipov v kontsepte 'Geroid': Sotsiokul'turnye konteksty i dinamika," *Sovremennye issledovaniia sotsial'nykh problem* 3, no. 3 (2010): 156.

social norms and values at the time of publication, and therefore does not reflect the social norms and values of the storytellers whose performances were, in such cases, unfaithfully recorded, let alone the social norms and values of the tales' forgotten creators.[484] Citing examples in which female characters give up their agency as a prerequisite for achieving their happily-ever-after, some scholars also suppose that such tales reflect an actual loss of female agency as society became more patriarchal in deference to the controversial theory of a prehistoric matriarchal society.[485] In other words, the marriage of the heroine to a prince or tsar or monster, who may or may not be a prince in disguise, results in a reduction of her independence even as she ostensibly rises in status. A reflection of this dichotomy can be found not only in fairy tales and epics, but in other oral literature such as traditional Slavic wedding laments, in which the bride grieves her fate.[486]

Whether or not the loss of female agency in folklore is a reflection of that same loss in reality, the end goal of female-centric plots, especially in *skazki* and to a lesser extent in *byliny*, is marriage.[487] The most independent of these brides are cast as villainous at least in part, or at a minimum, they are characterized as foreigners.[488] In fact, the foreign-bride-as-antagonist is a common trope in *byliny*.[489] For example, in "Ivan Godinovich," the villainous act of the foreign bride amounts to remaining faithful to her existing fiancé, thereby rejecting the titular Russian *bogatyr*, who in most variants kidnaps her. Ivan rewards the kidnapped bride's crime—her

[484] Bottigheimer, "Fairy Tales, Folk Narrative," 346.
[485] Koval'chuk, "Osobennosti integratsii antropomorfnykh blendov," 56; Lopukhova, "Transformatsiia gendernykh obrazov," 3-4; Petukhov, "Arkhaicheskie sledy matrimonial'nykh otnoshenii v russkom bylinnom epose," *Vestnik* 4, no. 8 (1999): 63.
[486] Ries, "Burden of Mythic Identity," 243.
[487] Ibid., 255; Kathy McKay et al, "Fairytales, Folklore, and Femininity: Making Sense of the (Un)Sexed Female Body across Time and Space," *Exploring Bodies in Time and Space*, ed. by Loyola McLean, Lisa Stafford, and Mark Weeks (Brill, 2014): 16; Nikita V. Petrov, "Brachnye kollizii v bylinnom epose," *Vestnik RGGU: Seriia: Literaturnovedenie. Iazykoznanie. Kul'turnologiia.* 7 (2007): 158.
[488] Petrov, "Brachnye kollizii v bylinnom epose," 158; O. S. Iakushenkova, "Obraz voitel'nitsy v rossiiskom i kitaiskom diskursakh: spravnitel'nyi analiz," *Zhurnal frontirnykh issledovanii* 3 (2017): 33.
[489] Petrov, "Brachnye kollizii v bylinnom epose," 158; Vlasova, *Skomorokhi i fol'klor*, 174-175.

faithfulness to the "evil" man she is first promised to, instead of the "good" one stealing her away from her family—by brutally, almost ritualistically, murdering her and scattering her remains. We, the audience, are expected to applaud Ivan's vengeance as justified, because foreign brides cannot be trusted. Significantly, *polianitsy* are almost always characterized as foreign.

Skazki *and* Byliny

While I have thus far addressed fairy tales and epics collectively as representatives of folklore in which warrior women appear, it is now necessary to consider them separately. One of the most important distinctions between *skazki* and *byliny*, scholars generally agree, is that the former predates the latter.[490] Some folklorists posit that this order of creation is true not only generally, but specifically, such that in cases where an individual *skazka* and *bylina* share a central theme, plot, or motif, the *skazka* version likewise predates and, therefore, directly influenced the crafting of the *bylina*.[491] For example, Koshchei the Deathless—the antagonist of many *skazki* including "Mar'ia Morevna"—also appears as the kidnapped bride's original fiancé in the *bylina* "Ivan Godinovich." Koshchei's insertion as the villain of the *bylina* adds to the fantastical element in the duel with the *bogatyr* Ivan, demonstrating the influence of the established, older portrayal of the *skazka* villain on the traditionally more realistic *bylina*.

Though the evidence for the claim that *skazki* predate *byliny* is largely suppositional since there is no definitive way to determine the age of an orally preserved tale, the argument most frequently presented regards the time period of the events in each genre. While some *byliny* take place in archaic, prehistoric times, most of the events described take place no earlier than the Kyivan era of Rus', which further supports the historicity of some *byliny*. *Skazki*, on the other

[490] Zguta, *Russian Minstrels*, 98; Alex E. Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale: The Origins of Russian Heroic Poetry* (Moutaon & Co., 1973): 7.

[491] Vlasova, *Skomorkhi i fol'klor*, 176; Zhuchkova and Gulai, "Funktsional'noe znachenie mifologicheskogo obraza," 168.

hand, take place outside of time entirely, with the action occurring in fantastical worlds according to fantastical rules, even when the real world is invoked in the text, and so the setting of a *skazka* has no direct relation to a real-world place or time. The incorporation of more supernatural elements in *skazki* than *byliny* likewise points to a time with a more magical, and therefore primitive, understanding of the world. Thus, while neither depiction of Rus' is true to reality, the Rus' of the *skazka* is nevertheless further removed from historical reality than the Rus' of the *bylina*, and so, the argument goes, *byliny* must have been composed at a later time when realism was preferential. On the other hand, some folklorists believe that *skazki*—and fairy tales in general—are an invented genre dating no earlier than the development of the literary fairy tale in the seventeenth century, thus having no basis in unbroken oral tradition.[492]

One of the other key distinctions between *skazki* and *byliny* is the demographics of their typical performers as well as their typical audiences. In turn, these demographics contributed to the seriousness with which scholars traditionally treat each genre. *Byliny* were usually performed by men, some of whom even qualified as professional storytellers, in a public setting, for the entertainment of other men, although there are several notable exceptions I will discuss shortly.[493] In contrast, *skazki* were usually performed by women, in a private domestic setting, for the entertainment of other women and the education of children.[494] Fairy tales allowed for the inclusion of women's voices, usually excluded from the heroic stories perpetuated by male-centric literature, in their own narratives.[495] That *skazki* belonged almost exclusively to the domestic

[492] Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 21; Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales*, 2; Graça da Silva and Tehrani, "Comparative phylogenetic analyses."
[493] Bondarenko, "Russian Epic Songs," 113.
[494] Olson and Adonyeva, *Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 29.
[495] Tatar, *Heroine with 1000 Faces*, 11.

sphere made them not only less appealing to early folktale collectors and scholars, who were mostly men, but less accessible in the first place.[496]

Yet, despite being taken more seriously than *skazki*, *byliny* remain a lesser-known subgenre of Russian folklore outside of Russian children's cartoons. They are also unique in their nationalistic overtones as well as their pretense of historical veracity, though fantastical elements certainly exist in many *byliny*. The nationalism of *byliny* is apparent in their lauding of militarism, their romanticization of the princely court if not necessarily the prince himself, and their depiction of the mighty *bogatyri*, whom some scholars equate with legendary founders of the Russian state.[497] However, such overt nationalism could also be a result, at least in part, of editing by conscientiously patriotic collectors, publishers, and folklorists, who artificed a national identity through a semi-created tradition of epic folk ballads. There is no way to prove the full extent of editing that occurred throughout the collection to publication process, particularly regarding the earliest publications.[498] By the time auditory recordings of *byliny* performances were possible, contamination through written publications had already occurred.

While they do share some qualities, such as honor and honesty and cleverness, epic and fairytale heroes are not interchangeable.[499] At a superficial level, the *skazka* hero typically lacks both patronymic and surname, instead being identified by a descriptive epithet, unlike the hero of a *bylina*: Ivan the Fool versus Ivan Godinovich, or Vasilisa the Beautiful versus Vasilisa Mikulishna.[500] A prominent exception to this is Mar'ia Morevna, who despite being a *skazka* heroine is identified by her patronymic. The depiction of the protagonist in a *skazka* is also less

[496] Olson and Adonyeva, *Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 31.
[497] Troye, "Istinno bylinno: predstavleniia," 89-90; Zguta, *Russian Minstrels*, 90; Olson and Adonyeva, *Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 31.
[498] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, xliv; Prieto, "Slavic Epic: Past Tales," 224.
[499] Bondarenko, "Russian Epic Songs," 110.
[500] Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale*, 26.

constricted. At the outset of a *skazka*, the hero may be male or female, wealthy or rich, heroic or not, but usually by the end he or she will have risen in social and economic status. Even when a fairytale hero starts out already a prince, then he is the youngest son, oppressed by his brothers and overlooked by his father, but by the end of the tale he becomes a tsar.[501] If a fairytale hero is an abused peasant girl, by the end she marries a prince or tsar. However, the protagonist of a *bylina* is always a *bogatyr*, a mighty warrior, a patriotic standard of Russian strength and Orthodox piety whose name appears in the title of his tales.[502] Even when the heroic action of a *bylina* belongs to a female character, as in "Dunai" or "Stavr Godinovich," the protagonist must still be male, and the tale titled accordingly.

The different role of magic in *skazki* and *byliny* also influences the portrayal of a given tale's hero. Either the fairytale or the epic hero can receive aid from a magical helper or ride a magical horse, but the source of a *bogatyr*'s ultimate strength is his Orthodox faith, and he is less reliant on assistance from magical aids.[503] In contrast, the magic of a *skazka* is usually more intrinsically woven into the world itself, or it is a skill, such as shapeshifting, which the hero can acquire through training or with the aid of a magical item, and so it is not linked to personal piety.[504] Regardless of the specific form it takes, the *bogatyr*'s magical aid ultimately comes from the Christian god.[505] None of the heroic Ivans of the fairytale world could faithfully substitute for Ivan Godinovich, but neither could a *bogatyr* navigate the chicken-legged hut of Baba Yaga. Most *bogatyri*, so much larger than life, might not even fit through the door.

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[501] Imre Pachai, "Vostochnye motivy russkikh volshebnykh skazok." *Al'manakh "Etnodialogi"* 1, no. 63 (2021): 225.

[502] Likhachev, *Velikoe nasledie: Klassicheskie proizvedeniia*, 15.

[503] Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale*, 35; Prieto, "Slavic Epic: Past Tales," 231.

[504] Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales*, 5; Prieto, "Slavic Epic: Past Tales," 231.

[505] Julia M. Tuñón and Susana T. Prieto, "The Atypical Hero in the Bylinic Tradition: The Mythological Cycle," *Medieval Slavonic Studies: New Perspectives for Research*, ed. by Juan A. Alvarez-Pedroza and Susana T. Prieto (Institut d'études slaves, 2009): 16.

Key Collections

Russian folklorists and historians have released numerous collections of folktales in recent centuries, beginning in 1804 with the earliest known collection to include *byliny*: *Ancient Russian Poems Collected by Kirsha Danilov*. Several decades passed after Danilov's release before additional scholars began to assemble collections of *byliny* and other folktales, such as *Songs Collected by P. V. Kireevski*, gathered in the 1830s and published posthumously in 1860. At this time, some collectors and anthologists, such as P. N. Rybnikov (1831-1885), recorded paraphrased plots rather than full texts based on live performances. Most famous and enduringly popular, however, is the work of Alexandr Afanas'ev (1826-1871). In the 1850s Afanas'ev assembled and published several collections of *skazki*, which he either gathered himself or drew from the archives where he worked, including tales recorded by Vladimir Dal (1801-1872).[506] The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw several more important publications, particularly of *byliny*, including *Onega Byliny Recorded by A. F. Gilferding in the Summer of 1871* and *Archangelsk Byliny and Historical Songs Collected by A. D. Grigorev from 1899-1901*. Most noteworthy about Grigorev's collection is that he was the first anthologist to make audio recordings of performances. In 1961 A. M. Astakhova (1886-1971) released two collections, *Byliny of the North* and *Byliny of Pechora and the Winter Shore*, in which she included detailed notes on the performers. After that, the widespread availability of printed folktales combined with increased literacy undermined a living tradition of authentically oral literature, and so the academic collection of folklore ceded to its interpretation and revision in the second half of the twentieth century.

[506] Tristan Landry, "Quand les mots racontent l'histoire: le travail éditorial d'A. N. Afanas'ev sur les sources tirées des archives de la Société russe de géographie pour son édition des Contes populaires russes," *Revue des Études Slaves* 1 (2014): 27.

Not all collections of *byliny*, and almost no collections of *skazki*, include notes about the performers whose renditions of the tales were recorded or paraphrased. Nevertheless, we do know the names of multiple *byliny* singers, which the performers of *byliny* are usually called since the epics are meant to be sung, hence the importance of Grigorev's audio recordings, however limited they were. Furthermore, these singers did not call their songs *byliny*, but rather, *stariny*, or 'old songs.'[507] '*Byliny*' was the term assigned by academics, derived from a line in the medieval written epic *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*.[508] The most famous of *byliny* singers came from the Riabinin family, including T. G. Riabinin (1791-1885), I. G. Riabinin-Andreev (1873-1926), and P. I. Riabinin-Andreev (1905-1953). T. G. Riabinin's performances appear in the collections of Rybnikov as well as Gilferding, and he is still considered one of the best.[509] Nineteenth-century collections also included texts based on the performances of I. Eremeev, A. E. Chukhov, P. L. Kalinin, K. I. Romanov, and V. Lazarev. Though the vast majority of *byliny* singers were men, some female *byliny* singers did exist, such as A. P. Chupova and A. M. Pashkova, who was one of the last recorded singers before the tradition died out in the twentieth century.[510] Notably, the repertoires of male and female *byliny* singers overlapped, but female singers tended to perform a wider range of tales and genres and were more likely to perform *byliny* featuring *polianitsy*.[511]

Evolving Scholarship Trends

Various schools of thought developed over the past few centuries of academic interest in Russian folklore. One of the earliest theories, derived primarily from the work of Afanas'ev and Orest Miller (1833-1889), became known as the mythological school.[512] This theory proposed a

[507] Petrov, "Russian *Byliny*," 165.
[508] Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale*, 13.
[509] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, xxxv.
[510] Ibid., 227.
[511] Olson and Adonyeva, *Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 34.
[512] Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale*, 18.

connection between Slavic folklore and a prehistoric, pan-Slavic past, which was preserved in the language itself.[513] The mythological school grew out of Western European folklore studies, particularly the work of the brothers Grimm, whom Afanas'ev and O. Miller both admired.[514] Through the study of folklore and folkloric language, including oral epics like the Russian *byliny*, adherents to the mythological school sought a proto-Indo-European worldview, citing examples of common grammatical gender; for example, 'earth' as a feminine noun in French, Russian, German, and other Indo-European languages, according to Afanas'ev, reflects a prehistoric concept of the earth as feminine.[515] Similarly, the concept of the sun and sky as masculine, and therefore embodied as male deities, left linguistic remnants in grammatical gender.[516] Thus, with a common mythological ancestry for all Indo-European folklore, the oral epics of one Slavic nation are inherently related to the oral epics of all other nations.[517] In arguing this, O. Miller cited similarities between the Russian *byliny* and Ukrainian *dumy*, which are also oral epics of East Slavic origin, though Miller considered the *byliny* superior examples of Slavic tradition.[518]

The next school of thought to take hold among Russian folklorists was the comparative school, also sometimes referred to as the "Theory of Borrowing."[519] The key proponents of this theoretical approach were V. V. Stasov (1824-1906) and A. N. Veselovskii (1838-1906). Like the mythological school, the comparative school paralleled changes in the approach of Western scholars.[520] Unlike their mythologically inclined predecessors, Stasov and Veselovskii proposed that Russian folklore was not, in fact, Russian, nor even Slavic at all; rather, the so-called Russian

[513] Landry, "Quand les mots," 29.
[514] Ibid., 28.
[515] Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale*, 18; Landry, "Quand les mots," 29.
[516] Roman Zaroff, "Organized Pagan Cult in Kievan Rus'. The inention of Foreign Elite or Evolution of Local Tradition?" *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 2 (1999): 53.
[517] Zguta, *Russian Minstrels*, 85.
[518] Ibid.
[519] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, xxxix.
[520] Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale*, 19.

folktales were stolen directly from their Eastern, Central Asian, and Byzantine neighbors.[521] Known, continuous cultural exchange between Europe and Asia throughout the medieval period adds weight to the comparative school's arguments, but as the mythological school had already established, many elements from contemporary folklore owe their similarity across cultures to a common Indo-European ancestry.[522] Folklore, as an artefact of orally preserved culture, does not arise in isolation, but in conjunction with surrounding cultural influences.

Emerging from the work of Vsevolod Miller (1848-1913) and continuing into the early Soviet period, the historical school contended that folklore is fundamentally based in historical fact, and that this axiom applies even more so to epic genres like the *byliny*.[523] V. Miller and his peers sought commonalities in the plots, personages, and settings between orally preserved folklore and written medieval literature, such as chronicles, to recreate the source history of individual folktales.[524] The more historically significant the original event was, they argued, the more likely it was to be preserved in both written and oral literature, and therefore the more likely to be found.[525] One of the key problems faced by the early historical school was the geographic collection of *byliny*: despite being set mostly in Kyiv, *byliny* were almost exclusively recorded in the Russian north. To address this mystery, V. Miller proposed that the source material of *byliny* could be traced to a tradition of aristocratic poets that became downgraded to peasant *skomorokhi*, who, upon their exile, took their folktales with them as they migrated north.[526]

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[521] Ibid; Susana T. Prieto, "Found in Translation? Heroic Models in Slavonic," *Medieval Slavonic Studies* (2009): 122.
[522] Prieto, "Slavic Epic: Past Tales," 224-225.
[523] Azbelev, *Istorism bylin i spetsifika fol'klora*, 6; Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale*, 20.
[524] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, xi.
[525] Azbelev, *Istorism bylin i spetsifika fol'klora*, 35.
[526] Felix J. Oinas, "The Problem of Aristocratic Origin of Russian *Byliny*," *Slavic Review* 30, no. 3 (1971): 514; A. N. Rozov, "Byliny tsentral'nykh raionov Rossii v svode russkikh bylin," *Vestnik Syktyvkarskogo universiteta. Seriia gymanitarnykh nauk* 3, no. 15 (2020): 41.

Early Soviet scholars furthered the approach of the historical school in many ways, but they eventually rejected V. Miller's proposed aristocratic origin of *byliny*, instead adopting the view that all folklore arose from and reflected the reality of the peasantry.[527] Some Soviet scholars went so far as to dismiss the collection of folktales outright as a form of classist appropriation.[528] Within the increasingly narrow ideological bounds of acceptable Soviet academia, the focus of folkloristics shifted to formalist, structuralist, and semiotic approaches, as pioneered by Propp and Yuri Lotman (1922-1993), among others.[529] Like the mythological school, Soviet folklore studies encouraged a nationalistic slant, advocating for a pan-Slavic foundation and the idealization of folk heroes like the *bogatyri*.[530] Nevertheless, Soviet scholarship echoed elements of the historical school in insisting on the historical significance of folklore, but restricted that significance to preservation of societal norms and ideals, not necessarily preservation of specific historical events, which were better found in written literature.[531]

Contemporary folklore studies have brought a revival of the historical school with a rejection of the most ideological of Soviet theories, as well as an exploration of the underlying psychology of folk epics and fairy tales, including assessments of gender relations and individual identity as opposed to national or ethnic identity.[532] However, some modern studies assert a connection between individual and national identity. For example, some scholars suggest that the archetypal mother in Ukrainian folklore reflects a genuine "feminocentricity" in Ukrainian folk culture that Russia lacks.[533] Notably, prior to the late twentieth century, gender played little to no

[527] Oinas, "Problem of Aristocratic Origin," 515; Bottigheimer, "Fairy Tales, Folk Narrative," 344.
[528] Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales*, 6.
[529] Binbin, Kravchenko, and Matvieieva, "Archaic archetypes and symbols," 185.
[530] Azbelev, *Istorism bylin i spetsifika fol'klora*, 6; Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale*, 21-22.
[531] Arsenii S. Mironov, "Politiko-ideologicheskie kriterii podlinnosti geroicheskogo eposa v teorii V. Ia. Proppa." *Novyi filologicheskii vestnik* 1, no. 44 (2018): 17.
[532] Anderson, *Fairytale in the Ancient World*, 14; Bottigheimer, "Fairy Tales, Folk Narrative," 347; Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 15.
[533] Binbin, Kravchenko, and Matvieieva, "Archaic archetypes and symbols," 188.

role in Russian folklore studies.[534] The previous omission of gender analysis in Russian folkloristics extended from not only the near total exclusion of female storytellers in academic discourse, but also the dismissal of female characters as undeserving of serious examination.[535]

Legendary Rus'

The image of the Kyivan court painted by *byliny* is only partially derived from historical fact, but unlike the various kingdoms in *skazki*, the epic version of Kyiv remains remarkably consistent across the many tales set in that location.[536] Magic is a key part of this world, with the occasional dragon or giant or shapeshifter, which may reflect remnants of pre-Christian Slavic beliefs.[537] Yet, the legendary Rus' of the *byliny* contains elements of the real: as often as the hero faces a monster, he faces an army of Tatars. In fact, so often are Tatars and Lithuanians the stock enemies of the *bogatyri*, regardless of the time period in which a *bylina* is set, that characters typically greet each other with formulaic questions about their patronymics or homelands, to include asking about any horde affiliation.[538] The court is always led by a prince named Vladimir, whose portrayal varies from an inactive and mostly ineffective ruler to a petty, jealous coward, yet he is nevertheless the head of an idealized state with absolute power.[539] Several contemporary scholars posit that Vladimir's negative qualities are given to differentiate him from the *bogatyri*, so that the *bogatyri* appear more heroic and noble in comparison.[540] The court over which Vladimir presides frames the action of a *bylina*, with a grand courtly feast serving either as the hero's starting or ending point, and often both.[541]

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[534] Olson and Adonyeva, *Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 23.
[535] Ibid.
[536] Likhachev, *Velikoe nasledie: Klassicheskie proizvedeniia*, 12.
[537] Bondarenko, "Russian Epic Songs," 114.
[538] Irina P. Chernousova, "Kontsept 'inostrannoe, chuzhezemnoe' v bylinnoi kartine mira," *Mir russkogo slovo* 1 (2020): 14.
[539] Igor V. Lisiuchenko, "Evoliutsiia verkhovnoi vlasti u vostochnykh slavian v X v," *Vlast'* 7 (2010): 165.
[540] Prieto, "Slavic Epic: Past Tales," 233; Petrov, "Russian *Byliny*," 174.
[541] Prieto, "Slavic Epic: Past Tales," 231.

Many warriors populate the epic landscape of Rus', but the Kyivan *byliny* in which *polianitsy* appear revolve around three *bogatyri*: Ilya Muromets, Dobrynia Nikitich, and Alyosha Popovich.[542] Ilya Muromets marries, for a time, a *polianitsa* named Zlatygorka, and in some variants of "Ilya Muromets and Falconer," he fathers a warrior daughter rather than a son. In another tale, Ilya Muromets is saved from the villainous Mar'ia White Swan by Nastasia Korolevichna, who may be the same *polianitsa* as in the tale "Dunai" or a different foreign princess named Nastasia.[543] Dobrynia Nikitich likewise marries a *polianitsa*, Nastasia Mikulishna, whom Alyosha Popovich later tries and fails to marry. Interestingly, despite all the fantastical adventures attributed to them, it is probable that both Ilya and Dobrynia trace back to real men. Ilya Muromets, purportedly disabled until age 33 when he was healed by a passing holy man, may have been a twelfth-century monk named Ilya Pecherskii, sainted by the Russian Orthodox church. Similarly, Dobrynia Nikitich may have been the maternal uncle of Vladimir I, grandson of Olga of Kyiv.[544] That both Ilya and Dobrynia are considered to be based on real people, yet the important women in their lives are dismissed as fantasy, highlights the gender disparity in folklore studies.

However, there is a fourth *bogatyr* whose storyline crosses paths with warrior women in a significant way, and he is arguably more important in that regard than the others: Mikula Selianovich, the father of not one, but two named *polianitsy*. Though considered a *bogatyr*, Mikula's heroic endeavors—a result of his divinely gifted strength and potentially gigantic stature—have nothing to do with war.[545] Like the Czech Přemysl or the Polish Piast, both progenitors of powerful dynasties, Mikula begins as a humble plowman.[546] Unlike Přemysl or

[542] Bondarenko, "Russian Epic Songs," 114.
[543] Lisiuchenko, "Evoliutsiia verkhovnoi vlasti," 164.
[544] Bondarenko, "Russian Epic Songs," 114.
[545] Fedor S. Kapitsa, *Slavianskie traditsionnye verovaniia*, 125.
[546] Kapitsa, *Slavianskie traditsionnye verovaniia*, *prazdniki i ritualy: Spravochik* (Flinta, 2021): 125.

Piast, however, he remains a plowman, never ascending to kingship.[547] Thus, he embodies the perfect blend of warrior and farmer, a sacred combination in a pre-feudal, agricultural Rus', more important than the prince himself – at least, according to class-conscious Soviet scholars.[548] Mikula employs a plow so large that no one else can lift it, not even an entire *druzhina*. Similarly, no one else can lift his shoulder bag, not even the giant Sviatagor. Because of his humble social status, some argue that Mikula represents the ultimate victory of the working class, but others have linked him to a historical mayor of Novgorod of the same name.[549] While there is little evidence for the latter claim beyond the circumstantial—the existence of a different *boyar* in Novgorod, named in the *Novgorod Chronicle* as Stavr, who supposedly married Mikula's daughter—if true, it would add historical weight to the *bylina* "Stavr Godinovich," in which Mikula's daughter Vasilisa is indeed Stavr's wife.

Daring *Polianitsy*

Like the *skjaldmeyjar* of medieval literature, the warrior women who appear in Russian folklore are a study in contradictions. In defining folk heroes, Lunaček observes, "[T]heir bravery is expressed foremost in a willingness to cross the boundaries of the socially acceptable rather than in heeding the expectations of their respective surroundings."[550] In other words, heroes are exceptional not only in the superior sense, but in the rule-breaking sense of the word; the rules simply do not apply to them. Warrior women, the pinnacle of subverting societal expectations, certainly embody Lunaček's description. *Polianitsy* ride the line between traditional interpretations of masculine and feminine, balancing the warrior's independence and strength with domestic

[547] Arsenii S. Mironov, "'Nevelikie' geroi: ob odnoi osobennosti russkogo epicheskogo kontsepta bogatyrstva," *Filologiia: nauchnye issledovaniia* 1 (2020): 77.
[548] Igor V. Lisiuchenko, "Kniaz', narod i muzhskoi soiuz voinov-kamnei u vostochnykh slavian vo vtoroi polovine," *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta* 2, no. 2 (2009): 85.
[549] Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale*, 23; Kapitsa, *Slavianskie traditsionnye verovaniia*, 126; Mikhail N. Kozlov, "Za chto nakazali Stavra Godinovicha," *Kul'turnoe nasledie Rossii* 2, no. 41 (2023): 41.
[550] Lunaček, "Good, Bad, and Outcast," 207.

submission.[551] Significantly, none of the named *polianitsy* remain unwed, and none become widows. They combine heroism with cleverness and beauty, defeating their enemies—*bogatyr*, prince, or legendary monster—through guile as often as combat.[552] Like the *skjaldmeyjar* of Norse sagas, *polianitsy* are destined to either marry or die, and in some cases, both.[553]

As with 'Amazon,' the etymology of the term '*polianitsa*' is unclear, with scholars positing several potential origins. Most suggest that it shares a root with the Russian *polia*, or 'field', echoing the location in which a *bogatyr* and *polianitsa* typically meet (in the 'open field,' which is where all epic battles take place), or else connecting the warrior women with Scythians and other steppe nomads.[554] However, it is also possible that *polianitsa*, or sometimes *polenitsa*, is simply the feminine form of an Old Slavic word meaning 'warrior,' the masculine form of which would have been *polianin*, which was ultimately replaced by a borrowed word of Turkic-Mongolian origin: *bogatyr*.[555] Considering that the *polianitsy* as characterized in Russian folklore come from foreign lands while the *bogatyri* are always Russian, the etymological inverse of the words themselves could indicate a Slavic tradition of warrior women in addition to the nomadic warrior women of the steppes attested in ancient literature and archaeological record, or, perhaps, a patriarchal revision of history, in which native Slavic warrior women were erased.

The *byliny* and *skazki* that contain the adventures of the most well-known *polianitsy* share several commonalities besides the mere presence of warrior women, but the most striking commonality is the theme of bride-taking. Named *polianitsy* must always wed, and most often they wed a fellow warrior. Through single combat or a series of tests, the prospective spouses

[551] Mikhail V. Novikov and Tat'iana B. Perfilova, "Maskulinnost' i zhenstvennost' geroev narodnogo eposa v traktovke F. I. Buslaeva," *Vestnik KGU* 2 (2019): 103.
[552] Koval'chuk, "Osobennosti integratsii antropomorfnykh blendov," 55; Kaplun, "Archetype of the Maiden Warrior," 310.
[553] Sawyer, "Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," 7.
[554] Petukhov, "Arkhaicheskie sledy matrimonial'nykh otnoshenii," 64.
[555] Petrov, "Russian *Byliny*," 174.

prove themselves worthy of each other, echoing accounts of ritualized Scythian wedding duels.[556] In contrast with the warrior queens previously addressed, however, the active narratives of *polianitsy* do not begin with widowhood. With few exceptions, as soon as a *polianitsa* marries, the period of her agency ends, and instead she becomes a passive, dutiful wife. The warrior bride who does not undergo this transformation must be punished, usually with death.[557] Yet, no matter her contradictory qualities nor her ultimate fate, nor even whether or not she is granted the power of an individual name, a *polianitsa* is always introduced by the same epithet: she is *udalaia*, 'daring.'

Nastasia Korolevichna

Nastasia Korolevichna, heroine of the popular *bylina* "Dunai," is a warrior princess whose military endeavors have nothing to do with her royal status. She rules no kingdom, she leads no armies to protect her country, and while she does marry, her husband is no prince. Furthermore, her marriage ends in swift tragedy. The *bylina* in which Nastasia appears is one of the most popular, existing in over a hundred variants, and it explains the origins of the river Danube.[558] One of the earliest recorded variants, which became the dominant version, was performed by Avdotia Koppalina and captured by Grigoriev in 1899, though the narrative itself considerably predates its recording. Koppalina's two-part rendition describes the *bogatyr* Dunai's initial trip to Lithuania, during which he enjoys a romantic relationship with Nastasia, as well as the tragic aftermath of his second trip.[559] Some Ukrainian variants give her name as Nepra, but most often the *polianitsa* is Nastasia, the eldest daughter of a foreign king, a fierce and independent maiden who is "always roaming and looking for a fight."[560]

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[556] Mayor, *Amazons: Lives & Legends*, 132.
[557] Savchenko, "Integratsiia zhenskikh tipov v kontsepte 'Geroid'," 156.
[558] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 188.
[559] M. V. Novikov, ed., "Primechaniia k tekstam," *Arkhangel'skie byliny i istoricheskie pesnii sobrannye A. D. Grigorevym v 1899-1901* (Tropa Troianova, 2002): 656.
[560] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 192.

Like all *byliny*, the hero's journey—for, of course, the hero of the tale is a man—begins at the court of Prince Vladimir. In this instance, Vladimir is lamenting his lack of wife, and so requests if any in attendance know of a worthy woman. The *bogatyr* Dunai Ivanovich, who previously spent either three, nine, or twelve years serving at a foreign court, offers up the names of the two foreign princesses. Most often this foreign court is in Lithuania, but in a few variants, Poland.[561] Dunai describes both sisters' beauty, but cautions Vladimir, "The first daughter, Nastasia Korolevichna, / her face is white as snow, / her brows are darker than sable, / her eyes are clear as a falcon's, / only, my sun, you would not be able to control her."[562] Instead, he proposes that Vladimir should wed Nastasia's younger sister, usually named Apraxia, who shares her beauty but not her warlike proclivities. Vladimir agrees and subsequently dispatches Dunai to woo Nastasia's gentle younger sister, by force if necessary, and offers Dunai the might of his armies to accompany him on his bride-taking mission. However, in lieu of an army Dunai requests only the presence of fellow *bogatyri* Dobrynia Nikitich and Alyosha Popovich.

Faced with the might of three Russian *bogatyri*, the Lithuanian king grants his approval of the marriage, and so Apraxia accompanies Dunai back to Kyiv. However, while riding through the obligatory 'open field,' the Russians spy a rider in the distance. Not knowing whether or not the rider is friendly, they determine that if he proves to be a true Russian *bogatyr*, they will escort him to Vladimir's court; if he proves to be an enemy, then he will answer for it in battle.[563] When the unknown rider catches up with the *bogatyri*, Dunai challenges him, and so the two duel, first astride their horses with various weapons, and then finally hand-to-hand on the ground. Dunai eventually

[561] Novikov, "Primechaniia k tekstam," *Arkhangel'skie byliny*, 653.

[562] A. M. Astakhova, ed., "Dunai," lines 70-74, *Byliny Pudozhskogo kraia* (Gosoudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo K-FSSR, 1941): "Перва дочь — Настасья королевишна, / Лицом она как белой снег, / Брови у ей чорна соболя, / Глаза у ней ясна сокола, / Только, солнышко, не владать тебе будет ей."

[563] Astakhova, "Dunai," lines 194-195: "Если руськой бога́тырь — звать к Солнышку на почестен пир, / А если неверной бога́тырь — то с ним поотведатце.".

gains the advantage and demands the foreign warrior's identity. However, once the warrior speaks, chiding Dunai's lack of recognition, Dunai finally realizes that he has bested none other than Nastasia Korolevichna. Having proven worthy of each other through combat, the *polianitsa* and *bogatyr* decide to marry. Thus, when the party finally returns to Kyiv, Nastasia and Dunai join Apraxia and Vladimir in a double wedding.

Typical of feasts in legendary Rus', the wedding celebration involves much merriment, drinking, and most importantly, boasting. Nastasia participates enthusiastically in the boasting, which violates the expected norms of femininity. In most variants, she brags of her archery prowess, citing her ability to split an arrow down the center along a knife's edge.[564] Some variants have her shoot an arrow from a great distance through a golden ring, furthering the wedding imagery, and in a later variant collected in the twentieth century, she anachronistically uses a rifle, thereby threading the ring with a bullet instead of an arrow.[565] Regardless of her choice of weapon, Dunai is ashamed by his new bride's boasts and so challenges her to prove her claim, which she readily does. When he fails to duplicate her feats, Dunai turns his weapon against Nastasia. She argues with him not to kill her, confessing that she is pregnant, sometimes with twins, sometimes with a single child. Sometimes she suggests alternate punishments, or else requests that he at least delay her execution until after she has given birth.

Nevertheless, Dunai cannot bear the realization that his wife is the superior warrior, and so in a blind rage he lets his arrow fly. Pierced through the heart, Nastasia dies instantly. Dunai then cuts open her chest and discovers that she was, in fact, pregnant. In a minority of variants, Dunai shoots Nastasia not through the heart, but through the womb, prolonging his wife's suffering while hastening their child's death. In either case, the unborn child is described in accordance with

[564] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 198.
[565] Kaplun, "Archetype of the Maiden Warrior," 311.

imagery traditionally used in Russian folklore to indicate a heroic or miraculous birth: the baby has silver legs, golden arms, and stars at his brow.[566] Overcome with grief at the loss of both his bride and child by his own hand, Dunai falls upon his knife. From his blood flows the river Danube, and from Nastasia's flows another river.

In another early variant of "Dunai," recorded by Gilferding in 1871, Nastasia Korolevichna and Nastasia Mikulishna are one and the same, with the Lithuanian king thus named as Mikula.[567] Performed by a female singer, D. V. Surikova, this variant differs from the primary version that became popularized later in several key ways. In Surikova's version, when Nastasia follows the *bogatyri* after they take her sister, Dunai is aware immediately that his opponent is a woman, though he still does not recognize her as Nastasia. Dunai sends Dobrynia Nikitich ahead to keep escorting her sister to Kyiv while he stays behind to face the "daring *polianitsa*."[568] Another key difference is the length of their marriage. In most variants, the fateful boasting occurs immediately after they wed, but in Surikova's version they live together for three years before attending another of Vladimir's feasts. At this feast, Dunai initiates the competition by first bragging about how he secured a "white swan" for himself as well as the prince.[569] Nastasia counters that he may have done so, but that she could shoot a flaming arrow through a golden ring he held without hurting him, while if he attempted to perform the same feat, he would surely kill her.[570] Unfortunately for Nastasia, her prophecy comes to pass, and Dunai's inability to duplicate her feat results in her death. The distinction here is that in Surikova's rendition, Dunai does not *intend* to kill his wife, so he does not act out of vengeance. Dunai's folly is in thinking he could be Nastasia's equal. A

[566] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 199.
[567] D. V. Surikova, "Dunai," No. 139), *Onezhskie byliny* (Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1949).
[568] Ibid. Dunai's parting words to Dobrynia: "А'ще ль я жив буду, поеду за поляницей за удалою," line 174.
[569] Ibid. Dunai says, "Я-ка в зе́млях ляховинскиих, / Как сам женился, да царя женил, / Вытащил две белые две лебеди," lines 234-236.
[570] Ibid. Nastasia declares, "А тебе не стрелить стрелочки каленой, / Чтобы попасть в колечко золоченое: / Ты у́бьешь Настасью Микуличну," lines 247-249.

final difference between Surikova's version and what came to be the dominant narrative is that no mention is ever made of a miraculous pregnancy.

As yet another reflection of mortal punishments for unruly women in literature, Nastasia's tragic fate is a natural consequence of not submitting to her husband. Her persistent independence after her marriage merits Dunai's wrath, because it amounts to a betrayal of his rights as her husband. Therefore, while she was at first an equal companion to the hero, as soon as she disagrees with him and then bests him—worse still, she does so publicly—she gives Dunai no choice but to punish her.[571] A husband's jealousy in a *bylina* amounts to guaranteed death. The pattern of a heroine dying when she ceases to be useful to the hero, and dying at the hand of the hero himself if she displeases or betrays him, is a common trope in Russian *byliny*. However, despite folkloric norms justifying Dunai's response to Nastasia Korolevichna's public display of superiority, Dunai regrets his impulsive actions, hence his suicide; it is Dunai's fate that marks the *bylina* as a tragedy rather than Nastasia's.[572]

In telling a creation story, this *bylina* straddles the line between folktale and myth. "Dunai" explains the origins of the Danube, which among European rivers is second in length only to the Volga. As a river in the real world, the Danube reigned supreme as an important trade route not only for Kyivan Rus', but for the Scythians in the centuries before them and for many other peoples in the thousands of years before that, cutting across central Europe and emptying into the Black Sea.[573] As a river in the legendary world of folklore, the Danube also holds a special place. The river figures in the mythology and folklore of many cultures, with legendary heroes from Rome to Scandinavia navigating its waters.[574] Herodotus even emphasizes the significance of the river, at

[571] Savchenko, "Integratsiia zhenskikh tipov v kontsepte 'Geroid'," 156.
[572] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 191.
[573] Beattie, *Danube: A Cultural History*, xiii.
[574] Ibid., ix.

that time known to the Greeks as the Istros or Ister, in his descriptions of Scythian geography.[575] However, Slavic folklore in particular regarding the Danube—as evident in Dunai and Nastasia's star-crossed romance, among other tales—equates the themes of marriage and death, perhaps indicative of a prehistoric association between the Danube and fertility cults.[576] Rivers, as flowing earthly waters, likely held sympathetic significance with fertility concepts in Slavic paganism.[577] Some Russian folklorists suggest that the death of Dunai and Nastasia's unborn son is a remnant of child sacrifice to appease a water deity.[578] Given the evidence among the pagan Slavs for not only human sacrifice in general, but specifically self-sacrifice, it is also possible that the entire narrative of "Dunai" reflects a pagan ritual, perhaps in which sacrifices were made—human or otherwise—to a body of water.[579] If that were the case, the underlying events of the *bylina* would significantly predate its supposed setting of medieval Kyiv, suggesting the inclusion of a *polianitsa* in a key narrative role reflects an earlier reality during which such warrior women existed. The Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus viewed strong, warlike women as an unfortunate occurrence of the pagan past; Nastasia Korolevichna would certainly fit the bill.

Though Dunai is the stated hero of the *bylina*, though his name appears in the title, and though it is his death that marks the *bylina* as tragic, the bulk of the heroic action in the plot belongs to Nastasia Korolevichna. Anonymously and alone, she confronts three *bogatyri* who are, in some interpretations, kidnapping her younger sister. While she only duels one of them, she holds her own for multiple rounds, and only once the fight goes to the ground does she yield, and even then,

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[575] Herodotus, *Historíai*, 4.48.

[576] Petukhov, "Arkhaicheskie sledy matrimonial'nykh otnoshenii," 65; S. Iu. Khar'kova, "Gidronim *Dunai* v severnorusskikh bylinakh," *Istoriia i kul'tura. Vypusk* 14, no. 14 (2016): 98.

[577] Francis Conte, "Paganism and Christianity in Russia: 'double' or 'triple' faith?" *Christianization of Ancient Russia: A Millennium 988-1988*, ed. by Yves Hamant (UNESCO, 1992): 210.

[578] T. V. Tadevosian, "Chelovechskie zhertvoprinosheniia i kannibalism (na materiale nartskogo epos ai russkikh bylin," *Eposovedenie* 1, no. 9 (2018): 104.

[579] Sergey Averintsev, "The baptism of Rus' and the path of Russian culture," *Christianization of Ancient Russia: A Millennium 988-1988*, ed. by Yves Hamant (UNESCO, 1992): 139.

only after a fierce struggle. Considering the rest of her martial achievements and the parallels between *polianitsy* and Scythian cavalry, one could assume that, had the fight remained on horseback, Nastasia would have won. Maybe she loses intentionally, in the spirit of a ritual Scythian marriage duel. Later, at the wedding feast, she continues to hold her own among the men, participating as any other hero in the rounds of boasts. It is only her gender which designates her boasts unacceptable. Furthermore, unlike the rest of the heroes present, Nastasia makes good on her claims, performing feats of archery none of the men can replicate, including her new husband. Yet, for all her heroic action, for all her valor and ability, her reward is death. She is uncontrollable, undomesticated; relegated to the realm of folklore and without a historical imperative insisting otherwise, Nastasia's story could end no other way.

Vasilisa Mikulishna

Across the many variants and several versions of their narratives, multiple patronymics are assigned to the warrior sisters Vasilisa and Nastasia: Mikulish(ch)na and Nikulish(ch)na are the most common, and rarely, Vikulichna. Despite being sisters, they seldom appear in the same *bylina*, and when they do, one is mentioned only in passing in relation to the sister whose narrative dominates that particular plot. Vasilisa is usually described as the elder of the two.[580] Like Nastasia Korolevichna, Vasilisa and Nastasia Mikulishna are frequently characterized as Lithuanian princesses, but upon occasion their father is instead a Polish king. Conversely, they are commonly understood as the daughters of the *bogatyr* Mikula, who is neither foreign nor a king, but rather a Russian plowman from Novgorod. The combination of the Slavic tradition of legendary plowman as progenitors of dynasties and the potential existence of a *boyar* in Novgorod named Mikula, who

[580] L. A. Magnus, *The Heroic Ballads of Russia* (Leopold Classic Library, 1921): 26 and 52; Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 266. Rarely, a third sister is mentioned, sometimes named Katerina or Apraxia, but she is never described as a *polianitsa* except when replacing Vasilisa or Nastasia in a variant. When she does play any sort of individual role in a tale, it is as Apraxia, the ideal princess.

fathered at least one daughter, further muddles the sisters' origins while simultaneously granting a level of credibility to their existence.[581]

Vasilisa Mikulishna is best known from the *bylina* "Stavr Godinovich" as the *polianitsa* who disguises herself as a man and fools the prince in order to rescue her husband, whom the prince had imprisoned. The plot of a cross-dressing heroine saving a male relative is a widespread one, not only in other branches of Slavic folklore, but in folklore across Europe.[582] As with "Dunai," even though the heroic action of the tale belongs to a *polianitsa*, the *bylina* itself is named for her husband. To add insult to injury, while Dunai at least performs some heroics early in the tale when he duels Nastasia Korolevichna, Stavr is no *bogatyr*. In fact, Vasilisa's hapless husband spends almost the entirety of the *bylina* locked away in Vladimir's dungeon due to his own folly. Despite the title character's absence and ineffectuality, "Stavr Godinovich" is a popular *bylina* with more than 50 variants on record.[583]

Some contemporary scholars posit that Stavr Godinovich may have been based on a real person—another boyar in Novgorod—yet the *bylina* is set in Kyiv.[584] Typical of Kyivan-Heroic *byliny*, "Stavr Godinovich" opens at one of Vladimir's feasts, but Vasilisa is not in attendance. Rather, the members of Vladimir's court are taking their turns boasting about their wealth, wives, and accomplishments. Noticing Stavr's silence, the prince pressures him to join in. Stavr replies that he has nothing exceptional to boast about except for his wife, who is so clever, she could outwit the entire court, including Vladimir.[585] The prince imprisons Stavr for the implication that

[581] Kozlov, "Za chto nakazali Stavra Godinovicha," 41.
[582] Vlasova, *Skomorkhi i fol'klor*, 207.
[583] Ibid., 204; Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 264; K. N. Pan, "Introduction to the Analysis of Gender in the ATU 514 Fairy Tale Type on Examples from the Balkans," *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 16 (2013): 173.
[584] Kozlov, "Za chto nakazali Stavra Godinovicha," 38.
[585] Stavr declares of Vasilisa, "Уж как она бы здесь всех вас дак продала-купила бы, / А тебя-де, Владимера, с ума свела!" lines 38-39, recorded from a 1964 performance by V. I. Lageev and E. N. Kirilova, who in turn compiled their script from two earlier variants recorded by Danilov and Gilferding.

anyone, let alone a woman, could outwit him. Bragging about a wife's beauty is perfectly acceptable; bragging about her brain is grounds for incarceration.

When the news of her husband's misfortune reaches her, Vasilisa determines that the best way to save him would be through subterfuge since Vladimir would not respect the request of a woman, not even that of a daring *polianitsa*. Though her reputation as a warrior precedes her, she realizes she could not rescue her husband through brute force alone. He would be executed as soon as she arrived. Instead, she disguises herself as a man and gathers a *druzhina* of archers and wrestlers to accompany her to Vladimir's court. She leaves her *druzhina* camped outside the city, charging them to enter only if anything goes awry.[586] At court, she introduces herself as an ambassador from a neighboring kingdom to which Kyiv owes twelve years of unpaid tribute. Vasilisa, in the guise of Vasily the ambassador, demands the unpaid tribute, but offers the caveat that should Vladimir be unable or unwilling to pay, then she would accept a marriage to his niece Zabava instead.[587] In a later version, Vasilisa makes no pretense of being an ambassador, but pretends solely to woo the prince's niece.[588] Interestingly, Zabava is the only one in the entire court to see through Vasilisa's manly disguise.

Prince Vladimir chastises his niece for her perceived foolishness, but he decides to alleviate her concerns by posing a series of tests to validate Vasilisa-as-Vasily's masculinity. The details of these tests vary, but one always involves archery. As a proper *polianitsa*, Vasilisa easily accomplishes whatever military feats Vladimir requires of her, defeating her opponents in wrestling or besting them with bow or sword. In some variants, the prince tests her gender by less

[586] "Я поеду одна дак в стольной Киёв-град, / И есле случи́тце со мной дак всё несчастьицо — / Приезжайте-ко вы ко мне да выручите!" Ibid., lines 137-139

[587] In some variants, Vladimir's niece is named Apraxia, thereby corresponding to the archetype of the perfect princess, and sometimes she is described as his daughter.

[588] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 264-265; Vlasova, *Skomorkhi i fol'klor*, 204-206.

aggressive means, such as dispatching servants to her chambers to check the imprint her body left in the bed, a test which Vasilisa passes by sleeping with her feet positioned at the head of the bed to conceal her feminine ratio of hips to shoulders. Another common test trope involves bathing in a *banya*. Whatever the specifics of each test, they usually come as a set of three, corresponding to the 'Difficult Task' identified by Propp.[589]

After Vasilisa passes Vladimir's assorted tests, Zabava remains unconvinced, but the prince insists on going ahead with the wedding. In one version, Vasilisa reveals herself before the ceremony occurs, humiliating Vladimir and his court and demanding that he release her husband while they are still reeling from the realization that they had been so thoroughly fooled. Vladimir complies, accepting that the boast for which he had imprisoned Stavr had been proven true. In the more common version, Vasilisa derides Vladimir's choice of musicians at the celebratory feast, prodding him until they bring Stavr up from the dungeon to play the *gusli*. Vasilisa drops hints to Stavr about her identity, often with erotic undertones, but he fails to recognize his wife.[590] Vasilisa then convinces Vladimir to exchange her marriage to Zabava with keeping Stavr as her personal *gusli* player, and so the two reunite with Vasilisa's *druzhina* and escape.[591] Only once they are away from the court does Stavr finally recognize his wife.

In addition to a potential connection to actual persons in the early history of Novgorod, this *bylina* is significant for several reasons. Some scholars suggest that, through the activity of Vasilisa, the *bylina* reflects women's higher status among the ancient Slavs and in early Rus' compared to subsequent centuries – another callback to a potential prehistoric matriarchy.[592]

[589] Pan, "Introduction to the Analysis of Gender," 168.
[590] For example, a popular hint Vasilisa offers Stavr goes, "The silver nail was yours, / And the gilded ring was mine, / I hit the mark from time to time, / But you hit the mark every time." Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 276.
[591] Vasilisa says to Vladimir, after Stavr plays, "Мне не надо твою ныньче племянницу, / Уж ты только отдай мне Ставра сына Годинова!" lines 246-247, Lageev and Kirilova.
[592] Vlasova, *Skomorkhi i fol'klor*, 208.

However, in order to achieve her goals, Vasilisa must don the guise of a man. She cannot complete her daring rescue as a woman, despite being superior in ability to the best of Vladimir's men. Her warrior prowess is not enough on its own; she must pretend to be a man, thereby undermining an interpretation that, even as an extraordinary woman, she could have enjoyed the same rights and status as a man at the time of her tale. Vasilisa's masquerade also contrasts the magical gender transformation that occurs at the end of fairy tales corresponding to tale type ATU 514, which conclude with the heroine's manly disguise becoming realized, so that she, now a genuine he, can marry the princess.[593] It is clear throughout "Stavr Godinovich" that while Vasilisa wears her disguise compellingly, it remains a disguise, never becoming an authentic identity.[594] She acts as a man, and she passes the same series of trials to test her masculinity as in the other tale type, but she does not become a man. Being a woman and a warrior are not mutually exclusive states of being; they are both integral aspects of Vasilisa's identity.

Although Stavr praises her cleverness at the outset of the *bylina* and it is generally considered her cleverness that makes her ruse successful, it is Vasilisa's military abilities that ultimately allow her to succeed. If she were less capable as a warrior, she would not have been able to pass the tests and fool Vladimir, and so she would not have been able to free her husband, nor would she have held a *druzhina* to command. She is, first and foremost, a *polianitsa*. She is also very much her father's daughter. Mikula the *bogatyr* possesses superhuman strength. He is the only one strong enough to lift his plow or pick up his bag. Similarly, Vasilisa is the only one who can wield her bow. An entire *druzhina* could not make Mikula's plow budge from where he

[593] Pan, "Introduction to the Analysis of Gender," 171.
[594] Petukhov, "Arkhaicheskie sledy matrimonial'nykh otnoshenii," 63.

left it. Similarly, not even ten men working together could draw Vasilisa's bow.[595] The *bylina* may be named for her quite ordinary husband, but the obvious hero is Vasilisa.[596]

Yet, Stavr is not Vasilisa's only husband, at least according to some *byliny*. Whereas the male *bogatyri* have multiple adventures ascribed to them across the vast canon of *byliny*, the female *polianitsy* have multiple husbands. If these warrior women indeed trace back to ancient Scythians, for whom monogamy was optional and marriages tended to be brief, historical precedence exists for a *polianitsa*'s association with more than one romantic partner. In most variants of the rarely recorded *bylina* "Danila Lovchanin," Vasilisa Mikulishna is the wife of the titular character.[597] This *bylina* begins much as most *byliny* do, including the previous tale from which Vasilisa is known: at a feast hosted by Prince Vladimir, during which everyone is boasting. In another stock interlude typical of the bride-taking theme, Vladimir ends the boasting by lamenting his lack of a suitable bride. Those in attendance suggest that the prince wed Vasilisa Mikulishna, because she is the only woman who is sufficiently pious and possesses both a beautiful face and a sharp mind, and is thus the only woman worthy of being their empress. However, Vladimir objects since she is already married to the *bogatyr* Danila Lovchanin.

To overcome this obstacle, Vladimir and his court devise a ruse to dispatch Danila by means of an impossible hunt, the specifics of which vary, but the ruse always begins with a hunt of some form. Ilya Muromets argues against the plan, and so Vladimir imprisons the *bogatyr* in

[595] Novikov and Perfilova, "Maskulinnost' i zhenstvennost' geroev," 103.

[596] Savchenko, "Integratsiia zhenskikh tipov v kontsepte 'Geroid'," 159. Savchenko observes the literary trend of extraordinary women who avenge their ordinary husbands, linking Vasilisa's rescue of Stavr with Olga's revenge against the Drevlians. Savchenko poses the question, would we even remember Igor if not for Olga? Based on Zuckerman's analysis suggesting Igor only reigned for three years, whereas Olga would have reigned for significantly longer and had a much more eventful—and successful—rule, I would argue the answer to Savchenko's question is no, we would not remember Igor if Olga had been ordinary.

[597] In some variants Vasilisa's sister Nastasia is given the role of Danila's wife, and sometimes it goes to a third sister, Katerina or Apraxia, instead.

the cellar—a euphemism, some suggest, for the grave.[598] Sometimes Danila does not fall for the ruse, and sometimes, he does, but his wife is never fooled. Nevertheless, after Danila either defies Vladimir's orders or completes the impossible mission, he ends up fighting against the other *bogatyri* sent by Vladimir to finish the job. In some variants Danila recognizes his brother among his opponents and so, in despair at the prospect of fighting his own blood, he commits suicide. Other times, he realizes that he has displeased his prince, and so takes his own life because of that realization. When Vasilisa learns of her husband's suicide and Vladimir's desire to marry her, she initially appears to acquiesce. Yet, she brings a knife with her to the wedding ceremony. Right before they wed, she stabs herself in the chest. Upon witnessing her death, Vladimir regrets his decisions and decides to release Ilya Muromets from the dungeon.[599]

Both "Stavr Godinovich" and "Danila Lovchanin" revolve around the theme of bride-taking, but Vasilisa Mikulishna's role in each *bylina* is reversed. Nevertheless, she remains a warrior. In "Stavr Godinovich" she is the pursuer. Whether or not she disguises herself as an ambassador, she presents as a suitor for Vladimir's niece, and after proving herself worthy through a series of tests, she earns her bride. It is only by revealing her true self that she subverts the typical fairytale ending of a wedding, reclaiming her feminine identity along with her husband. However, in "Danila Lovchanin" Vasilisa is not the pursuer, but the object of pursuit. Vladimir conspires to take Vasilisa as his bride, and so he cannot leave her husband alive. Additionally, in both *byliny*

[598] D. G. Litinskaia, A. A. Kononova, and R. Iu. Kunchinov, "Poteria sub"ektnosti pri perezhivanii goria: zhenshchina v muzhskom plat'e," *Nauchnyi elektronnyi zhurnal ARTIKUL'T* 36, no. 4 (2019): 138.

[599] Vladimir Ia. Propp and B. N. Putilov, eds., "Danila Lovchanin," *Byliny* (Gosudasrvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1958): 251-258 and 457. Another version of "Danila Lovchanin," as paraphrased by N. E. Onchukov from a performance by Anisim Vokuev in Pechora, names Danila's wife as Ovdot'ia, and Vasilisa Mikulishna is instead the one sent to inform Ovdot'ia of her husband's death and Prince Vladimir's intent to marry her, rather than the prince showing up himself. In this version, Vasilisa gets to live, since it is Danila's wife—a role here given to another—who necessarily dies to make this *bylina* a tragedy. Yet, apart from avoiding death, Onchukov tells us nothing of the *polianitsa*'s ultimate fate in his summary. Apparently Vokuev's performance sparked a debate among the other *byliny* singers present at the recital who added further details on the outcomes ascribed to different characters, but Vasilisa was not among those addressed.

she relies on violent means to achieve her ends, but those ends are likewise reversed. In "Stavr Godinovich," she seeks to save her husband so that they can be reunited, and her violence is directed outward. In "Danila Lovchanin," saving her husband is impossible, so instead she seeks to join him in death, thus directing her violence inward at herself. She is an active player throughout the first *bylina*, and seemingly passive in the second, yet she seizes an active role by determining her own fate at the end. The details of her narrative may change, but her identity as a warrior woman does not.

Nastasia Mikulishna

Nastasia Mikulishna is every bit as fierce and clever as her sister Vasilisa, and in some respects, she resembles their father even more. She is best known as the wife of the *bogatyr* Dobrynia Nikitich, and her narrative arc occurs in two episodes of Dobrynia's *byliny*. The first episode details her initial meeting and subsequent wedding with Dobrynia. The second episode describes the aftermath of Dobrynia's long absence, during which she is tricked into marrying another *bogatyr*. These episodes are sometimes combined into a single epic consisting of three plots total that form a lengthy, continuous *bylina* about Dobrynia's exploits, often titled for its first plot: "Dobrynia and the Dragon."[600] Some *byliny* singers reorder these three plots, with Dobrynia marrying Nastasia prior to facing the dragon, therefore using the episode with the dragon as an explanation for his long absence. More often, the slaying of the dragon precedes Dobrynia's meeting of Nastasia, and his subsequent absence goes unexplained.

Because of Dobrynia Nikitich's popularity, there are hundreds of variants describing his adventures, and his meeting with his wife is a standard theme. In the dominant version of

[600] Nastasia's arc appears as the second and third plots of this hybrid *bylina*, which are respectively titled "Dobrynia and Nastasia" and "Dobrynia and Alyosha," although in many variants, the second plot is instead titled "Dobrynia's Marriage." The third plot is also sometimes called "The Failed Marriage of Alyosha Popovich."

"Dobrynia and Nastasia," Dobrynia Nikitich first spies Nastasia Mikulishna from a distance as she rides across the open field, and, as with Dunai and Nastasia Korolevichna, in most variants he does not initially realize she is a woman, instead assuming she is another *bogatyr* or sometimes, a Tatar.[601] In another parallel with Dunai, Dobrynia challenges the unknown rider, and like Vasilisa Korolevichna, Nastasia ignores his hail. Dobrynia then attempts to get her attention through a direct assault, most often with a club or sword, or alternatively, he shoots flaming arrows at her. In some variants Dobrynia recognizes the rider as a *polianitsa* as soon as he spies her, but since he is out seeking a wife anyway, he approaches her in the same violent manner.[602] Regardless of Dobrynia's intentions or choice of weapon, Nastasia ignores his assaults, which frustrates the *bogatyr*, causing him to doubt his own strength. Consequently, Dobrynia tests his *bogatyr*'s strength—typically against an oak tree—and, determining that there is nothing wrong with his abilities, only his resolve, he repeats his attack. Nastasia ignores him a second time, and after a third attack, she finally acknowledges Dobrynia with a dismissive remark: she thought he was a biting mosquito, not a *bogatyr*.[603] For such a mighty hero as Dobrynia to be so thoroughly dismissed, Nastasia's strength must be impressive indeed.

Without so much as looking at Dobrynia, Nastasia Mikulishna picks him up with one hand and tosses him into her saddlebag, or else she puts him in her pocket, and continues on her way. Eventually her horse starts to slow from the extra weight and, in the manner of all talking heroic horses, requests a reprieve. Thus, Nastasia stops to inform the captive Dobrynia that his appearance

[601] Given the significant overlap in culture and way of life between the Scythians and Mongols, Dobrynia's initial identification of Nastasia as a Tatar (Mongol) underscores the association between the nomadic tribes.

[602] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 94.

[603] Nastasia's first words to Dobrynia echo the lines said by Sviatagor when he is similarly harassed by Ilya Muromets in another *bylina*. The specific verbiage varies, but mosquitoes are always the comparison. For example, recorded from a performance by M. S. Kriukova in 1899, "Что думала я, что русские комарики меня покусывают, — / Ажно русские могучи-ти киевски богатыри / Калену стрелу в меня пускают-то," lines 52-54. The same is true in variants where Dobrynia attacks her with clubs instead of arrows: she mistakes his attacks for mosquito bites.

will determine his fate. The specifics vary, but usually she grants him three potential fates, one of which is marriage to her, one of which is immediate death, and one of which is more or less inconsequential. Most often, if he is old or ugly, she says she will kill him. If he is very young, she will consider him a brother. If he is handsome and around the same age as her, she will marry him.[604] Fortunately for Dobrynia, his appearance pleases Nastasia, and he assures her that they are the same age. Dobrynia, in a pointed reversal of the expected power dynamic in medieval marriages, usually has no say in the matter, though in some variants Nastasia does give him the choice to leave freely if he does not wish to marry her – assuming, still, that he pleases her.

Another, less popular version of Dobrynia and Nastasia's initial meeting downplays her involvement and omits her warrior abilities. This version, which generally makes use of "Dobrynia's Marriage" as the title in place of "Dobrynia and Nastasia," begins in one of three ways. Most often, this *bylina* opens with a conversation between Dobrynia and his mother, where he either laments his lack of bride or else his mother chides him for the same. Sometimes the *bylina* opens with Vladimir remarking upon Dobrynia's sad countenance at an otherwise merry feast, or else with Dobrynia listing the unavailable and unsuitable women of Kyiv and claiming he will have none other than Nastasia Mikulishna as his bride.[605] However, instead of meeting Nastasia the *polianitsa* and futilely attacking her, this version usually skips straight ahead to their wedding without any details of their initial meeting or courtship. In another variation, Dobrynia approaches her father, a foreign king named Mikula (as opposed to the *bogatyr* of the same name), and

[604] In Kriukova's rendition, Nastasia tells Dobrynia, "Кабы знала, что ты старой-эт, / Я отрубила бы тебе да буйну голову; / Чтобы знала кабы я, что ты ведь младой-эт, / Назвала бы я тебя да родным брателком; / Кабы знала я, что ты летами-ти да со мной наровень, / Я пошла бы взамуж за тебя-то все." In another version, she says she will consider him a father if he is old and wise, she will marry him if he pleases her, and she will kill him if he displeases her.

[605] T. G. Ivanova, "Bylinnaia traditsiia v byvshem Eniseiskom okruge," *Eposovedenie* 1 (2023): 31.

demands Nastasia's hand with threats of violence.[606] After some minor conflict, Mikula agrees. In either case, Nastasia's agency is excised, her warrior identity erased. Significantly, these variations tend to be recorded later than the variants in which Nastasia is a true *polianitsa*, perhaps constituting further evidence of patriarchal biases reducing women's agency in narratives of the past, either through editing by the recorders or contamination of the performer's sources, which by that time would have been influenced by previously written variants.

The second episode of Nastasia's narrative, contained in a *bylina* usually titled "Dobrynia and Alyosha" or "The Failed Marriage of Alyosha Popovich," likewise overlooks her warrior talents. Presumably, her marriage to Dobrynia in the previous *bylina* negates the need for her to continue life as a daring *polianitsa*, instead requiring her to assume the domestic duties expected of a typical medieval Russian bride. Thus, it is unsurprising that Nastasia Mikulishna does not always fulfil the role of Dobrynia's wife in this *bylina*. Some variants give her role to a young woman named Apraxia, and some do not bother to name her at all. However, the earliest variants of "Dobrynia and Alyosha" maintain Nastasia's relationship with Dobrynia, beginning with Dobrynia being called away for some mysterious government service. Sometimes he is sent on a hunt, other times to a war, and still other times this service goes unexplained. Regardless of the reason, Dobrynia leaves, and Nastasia stays behind to tend Dobrynia's mother – a dramatic departure from mistaking the attacks of mighty *bogatyri* for mosquito bites.

Before he departs on his grand adventure, Dobrynia charges Nastasia to wait for him for a specific number of years, most often three or six, and then if he has not returned to her by then, she may consider herself a widow and either live alone or remarry anyone of her choosing…except

[606] S. N. Azbelov, Iu. I. Marchenko, and T. G. Ivanova, eds. *Belomosrkie stariny i dukhovnye stikhi: Sobranie A. V. Markova Markov* (Saint Petersburg Press, 2002): 312. In a variant recorded by Kriukov, Dobrynia threatens the king, saying, "Ише с чести не отдашь, дак я боём возьму, / С той да дракой кроволитною," lines 43-44.

for Alyosha Popovich. Several explanations for this interdiction are given. Often, Alyosha and Dobrynia are sworn brothers or godbrothers, and so marrying Alyosha would be borderline incestuous; other times, Alyosha and Dobrynia are enemies, and so marrying Alyosha would be a betrayal.[607] It is significant that this interdiction is issued not by the mother or wife to the hero, which is typical of folklore, but by the husband to the heroine. Therefore, the interdiction represents not only a gendered reversal of the norm, but also undermines the notion that Dobrynia is the hero of the tale in the first place.

Nastasia lives out the specified number of years, taking care of Dobrynia's aging mother and waiting for her *bogatyr* to return. The deadline passes, but Nastasia remains faithful, cleverly deflecting marriage proposals in the spirit of Tomyris, Olga, or Sigrid, though Nastasia's methods are not nearly so violent as her historical predecessors.[608] When twice the number of years Dobrynia initially requested have passed and he has still not returned to her, Nastasia can no longer use waiting for him as an excuse to deflect proposals, especially after Alyosha falsely claims proof of Dobrynia's death. Vladimir then pressures Nastasia into marrying Alyosha. Most of the time, Vladimir coerces or forces her into the taboo engagement, but in a small number of variants she agrees without protest.[609]

It is only once Nastasia violates the terms of the interdiction that Dobrynia reappears in the narrative. Though still away on his mysterious adventures, the *bogatyr* learns of Alyosha and Nastasia's impending nuptials, typically from his horse who makes an uncharacteristic stumble, or else from a strange old woman he meets in passing. Dobrynia hastens back to Kyiv, surprises his

[607] Ivanova, "Bylinnaia traditsiia v byvshem Eniseiskom okruge," 31.

[608] Typically, Nastasia dismisses prospective matchmakers by saying she has lived six years for herself, and wants to live another six for Dobrynia before she will consent to marry: "Я шесть прожила за себя, а другие шесть — за́ мужа, за Добрыню Микитьевича. Когда не приеде, тогда взамуж пойду, взамуж пойду через двенадцать годов," from a 1962 prose performance by U. A. Kraskova, *Archives of the Folklore Department of Moscow State University*, folder 1, notebook 1, no. 36, p. 305.

[609] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 131.

mother at home, disguises himself as a *gusli* player, and sneaks into the wedding feast. The disguised Dobrynia drops hints to Nastasia about his identity, much like her sister Vasilisa did to Stavr when he was first released from Vladimir's dungeon. Unlike the bumbling Stavr, however, Nastasia recognizes her true husband right away. Nastasia begs Dobrynia's forgiveness for marrying the one man he asked her to avoid, and in most variants, Dobrynia grants it, punishing only Alyosha and chastising Vladimir for orchestrating the false wedding. Rarely, Dobrynia reconciles with all three, not just Nastasia. Occasionally Nastasia incorporates into her pleas a sexist Slavic proverb, echoing the insults cast at the Czech ruler Libuše by her detractors: her hair is long, but her wit is short.[610] In a brutal version of Siberian origin, Nastasia Mikulishna meets a fate similar to Ivan Godinovich's reluctant fiancée: murder and dismemberment.[611] However, the far more common ending sees Dobrynia and Nastasia joyfully reunited, their marriage renewed, and Alyosha Popovich short a head.[612]

Nastasia's nonreaction to Dobrynia's repeated attacks places her in the same category as the archaic *bogatyri*. Like Sviatagor and her father Mikula, she is larger than life, able to accomplish feats no one else can approach. She can lift Dobrynia with a single hand, defeating him without breaking a sweat nor even looking at him, an accomplishment which inspires some scholars to equate her with the giants from early Norse-Slavic mythology.[613] Similar reasoning

[610] Cosmas of Prague, *Chronicle of the Czechs*, Mutlová and Martin, trans., 22; Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 142.

[611] Ivanova, "Bylinnaia traditsiia v byvshem Eniseiskom okruge," 31.

[612] Like her sister, Nastasia Mikulishna occasionally appears in an unrelated *bylina* as a different *bogatyr*'s wife. In this case, Nastasia is the wife of the *bogatyr* Bermiata in the less popular *bylina* "Churilo Plenkovich." More often, the role is given to a third Mikulishna sister named Katerina. Since Bermiata's unfaithful wife bears no resemblance to the *polianitsa* who plucked the mighty Dobrynia Nikitich from his horse and deposited him in her saddlebag, one can assume that these *byliny* refer to two different women and that the use of the name Nastasia for Bermiata's wife is a result of contamination. The insertion of Nastasia in place of Katerina is also a later development from twentieth century variants, further supporting the assumption that Dobrynia's wife and Bermiata's wife should not be construed as the same person. Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 251; Magnus, *Heroic Ballads of Russia*, 60.

[613] Tadevosian, "Chelovechskie zhertvoprinosheniia i kannibalism," 105; Novikov and Perfilova, "Maskulinnost' i zhenstvennost' geroev," 103;

applies to Sviatagor and Mikula, both of whom possess superhuman strength. Sviatagor is so large that Mother Moist Earth cannot bear his weight, necessitating his isolation, and none but Mikula can lift his plow from Mother Moist Earth's embrace.[614] Interestingly, though Sviatagor appears to be even more gigantic in stature than Mikula, Mikula is still the stronger of the two.[615] Considering the association of gigantism with heroism occurs in the folklore of other Indo-European cultures besides Russia, Nastasia's size and strength suggest she is not only a superior warrior compared to Dobrynia Nikitich, but also more heroic.[616]

Mar'ia Morevna

Unlike their counterparts in the epic world, *polianitsy* in fairy tales are not just warriors, but warrior queens, connecting them more closely with those warrior women discussed in the previous chapters. Most famous of these *skazki* queens is Mar'ia Morevna.[617] She is a dynamic, contradictory figure, whose narrative sees her transform from her first appearance in the *skazka* as a fierce warrior queen into a damsel-in-distress, and according to some she is the favorite daughter—and the only one without a fishtail—of the Sea Tsar, a potential explanation of her patronymic.[618] Some scholars connect her to folkloric figures with similar names as remnants of the Slavic chthonic goddess Marena.[619] Others suggest she may be an incarnation of a goddess of the dawn.[620] Yet, while her name doubles as the title of the most popular version of the *skazka*, the protagonist is the man she marries, Ivan Tsarevich, as the bulk of the heroic action belongs to him.

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[614] Bondarenko, "Russian Epic Songs," 115; Mironov, "'Nevelikie' geroi," 77.
[615] Kapitsa, *Slavianskie traditsionnye verovaniia*, 126.
[616] Mironov, "'Nevelikie' geroi," 74.
[617] Some variants provide the alternate spelling of 'Marevna', but 'Morevna' is more common.
[618] A. A. Kornifskii, *Narodnaia Rus': Kruglyi god skazanii, poverii, obychaev i russkogo naroda* (1901), (Rusich, 1995): 130.
[619] Kaplun, "Archetype of the Maiden Warrior," 309. Different Slavic peoples had different spellings for this same goddess—Marena to the Russians, Mara to the Ukrainians, Marzanna to the Poles, Morana to the Czechs, and so on—but they all clearly share a linguistic root. Kaplun connects Mar'ia Morevna with the *byliny* villainesses Mar'ia White Swan and Marinka.
[620] T. D. Kokoszka, *Bogowie: A Study of Eastern Europe's Ancient Gods* (Moon Books, 2022): 165.

The alternate title, "The Death of Koshchei the Deathless," likewise dismisses the *skazka*'s functional protagonist, invoking the villain instead. As previously observed, a similar phenomenon occurs in *byliny*: the tales themselves are always named for a male *bogatyr*, even when the star of the narrative is a *polianitsa*. Typical of *skazki*, Mar'ia's military endeavors are only alluded to, never shown in the text of the tale itself.[621] We know that Mar'ia Morevna demolishes her enemies, but we do not get to see the battles unfold in the course of the narrative.

By far the most popular version of "Mar'ia Morevna" is the one published in Afanas'ev's famous collection. According to Afanas'ev's version, before their death, a certain tsar and tsarina advise their son Ivan to marry off his three sisters—Mar'ia (not to be confused with the titular Mar'ia), Olga, and Anna—to the first suitors who come calling. Shortly thereafter, upon returning from a walk in the gardens, a thunderstorm heralds the arrival of a falcon, who then transforms into a young prince and requests to marry Ivan's eldest sister. She agrees to the match, marries the falcon prince, and departs for her new kingdom. The pattern repeats for Ivan's other sisters. The next year, Olga marries an eagle prince; the year after that, Anna marries a raven. Each of these shape-shifting princes is more handsome than the last, and Ivan's sisters appear to be happy with their new lives. After one more year, Ivan determines to visit them.

It is on this journey that Mar'ia Morevna makes her first appearance in the *skazka* that bears her name. In his travels Ivan Tsarevich comes across a decimated army, and after inquiring who wrought such destruction, he discovers that the "great army" had been defeated by Mar'ia Morevna, a beautiful foreign queen.[622] Ivan travels further, eventually encountering Mar'ia and

[621] Kapitsa, *Slavianskie traditsionnye verovaniia*, 124-5; Zuseva-Ozkan, "Obraz voitel'nitsy v poeme 'Tsar'-devitsa'," 113. Although the battles waged by Mar'ia Morevna's armies are omitted from the text of the tale, the illustrated version of Afanas'ev's collection of *skazki* contains a detailed illustration of the carnage she wrought upon her enemies.

[622] The sole survivor of the battle informs Ivan, "Все это войско великое побила Марья Моревна, прекрасная королевна." As with the *polianitsy* in the *byliny* traditions, Mar'ia Morevna is understood as foreign through the use of 'королевна' rather than 'княгиня' or 'княжна.' Afanas'ev, *Russkie narodnye skazki*, 43.

her army. Mar'ia invites him to stay a while and share her tent. After several days, they decide to marry. In a marked deviation from the usual expectation of the woman exchanging her home for her husband's, Ivan departs with Mar'ia for her kingdom. They live happily in her palace for some time until Mar'ia realizes she misses the battlefield, and so she sets off to wage another war. In a further deviation from gendered expectations, Ivan remains behind in Mar'ia's palace rather than returning to rule his own kingdom.

Yet, before she departs on her campaign, Mar'ia issues a single instruction to her husband: under no circumstances should he open her closet.[623] Whereas Nastasia Mikulishna violates her taboo under significant duress, Ivan willingly—and nearly immediately—disobeys Mar'ia's sole command. In her closet he discovers an imprisoned Koshchei the Deathless, who begs Ivan for water and, upon drinking his fill, regains the strength to escape. Koshchei turns the tables and captures Mar'ia, fleeing to parts unknown, and Ivan vows to find and rescue his lost love.[624] However, he cannot do so alone. He is aided in this endeavor by his brothers-in-law, who each extract an item from him to remember him by. Ivan gives a silver spoon to the falcon, a silver fork to the eagle, and a silver snuff box to the raven.

When he eventually finds the captive Mar'ia Morevna, she no longer behaves as one would expect of a warrior queen, but rather, she resembles the stereotypical damsel-in-distress: passive, reliant on the hero, utterly without agency. Ivan manages to escape with her since Koshchei happens to be absent, but Koshchei quickly catches up and steals her back, leaving a distraught Ivan with a warning that his forgiveness is finite. Twice more Ivan finds and flees with Mar'ia, only to be caught by Koshchei. After the third escape, Koshchei makes good on his earlier threats,

[623] Some variants instead have Mar'ia instructing Ivan not to enter the dungeon, or not to open a door to a specific cell in her dungeon, but in Afanas'ev's version, Mar'ia keeps Koshchei imprisoned in a closet.

[624] Ivan declares, "Что ни будет, а разыщу Марью Моревну." Afanas'ev, *Russkie narodnye skazki*, 46.

chopping up Ivan's body and hiding his remains in a barrel tossed out to sea. Mar'ia, now a widow, remains under Koshchei's control. Meanwhile, the silver items Ivan gave to his brothers-in-law turn black, notifying them of his death. The falcon, eagle, and raven princes locate the barrel, reassemble Ivan with the waters of death, and lastly, revive him with the waters of life.

Returned to the world of the living, Ivan tracks down Mar'ia Morevna a fourth time, and she finally reclaims some agency by facilitating her own rescue, albeit her action is prompted by Ivan's suggestion. Mar'ia discovers from Koshchei where he acquired such a swift horse—for it is his horse that has allowed him to overtake them on their previous escape attempts—and passes along the information to Ivan. Consequently, Ivan departs on yet another quest, and only through the aid of a bird, a swarm of honeybees, and a lioness is he able to secure a steed worthy of a *bogatyr* from Baba Yaga. Finally in possession of the means to escape Koshchei for good, Ivan and Mar'ia make a final attempt. This time, when Koshchei catches up with them, Ivan's magical horse kicks the villain from his saddle, allowing Ivan to finish him off with a sword. Free at last, Ivan and Mar'ia visit Ivan's three sisters before returning to Mar'ia's kingdom to live out the rest of their lives in peace.

Another version of Mar'ia's narrative, based on a variant collected by Khudiakov in 1860, portrays the events of Mar'ia's relationship with Ivan and the associated aftermath with a darker tone, and in some ways, this version more closely aligns with normative gender dynamics of the time while still initially portraying Mar'ia as a warrior queen. For example, Ivan's sisters are not given a choice in their marriages. Moreover, in this version Ivan Tsarevich is the one who decides to marry Mar'ia, rather than the reverse. After his sisters have mysteriously disappeared, Ivan announces his intention to marry the beautiful queen to a wandering old man, who happens to be

one of his brothers-in-law in disguise.[625] In fact, the whole purpose of Ivan's journey is to find Mar'ia Morevna so that he can propose, rather than to locate his missing sisters. When Ivan finally reaches Mar'ia, fortuitously learning the fates of his sisters and exchanging magical items with them on the way, the warrior queen is less than pleased, casting Ivan into the same dungeon where she imprisons all her would-be suitors.[626] Ivan uses the magical items he received from his sisters to lure Mar'ia Morevna into marrying him and releasing the other suitors, to which, more out of curiosity than affection, she eventually agrees.

Ivan and Mar'ia live together in her palace for several years before she goes off to war, leaving Ivan in charge as in Afanas'ev's version. In this version Ivan also succumbs to his curiosity immediately and unlocks the forbidden door. However, Koshchei, here in the guise of a serpent, does not capture Mar'ia as soon as he is released. Instead, he drives Ivan from the palace. When Mar'ia returns and ascertains what has happened, the warrior queen reclaims her throne, but this time Ivan does not join her for another six months, at which point he invites her to journey with him to his homeland. Several more months pass until the serpent discovers that Mar'ia has left her palace, and it is only then that Mar'ia becomes his victim. The rest of the narrative follows the same pattern as Afanas'ev's version with a few deviations. For example, whenever the serpent kidnaps Mar'ia, he locks her in her own palace while Ivan retreats to the kingdom of his birth. Yet, instead of remaining as queen in her own kingdom at the conclusion of the *skazka*, Mar'ia accompanies Ivan permanently back to his.

Much of the existing analysis on "Mar'ia Morevna" as a *skazka* centers around the ATU tale types and motifs contained within the text, especially the animal grooms, animal helpers, and

[625] Ivan A. Khudiakov", ed., *Velikorusskiia skazki* (Izdaniie K. Soldatenkova i N. Shchepkina,1860): 78. "Отвѣчаетъ Иванъ царевичъ: я ѣду сватать Марью Маревну, прекрасную королевну!"

[626] Ibd., 81. Mar'ia asks her guards, "какой такой невѣжа осмѣлился такъ дерзко предлагать!"

the hunt for a magical horse.[627] Much of the existing analysis of Mar'ia Morevna as a character centers on the gender dynamic her narrative models.[628] Although she goes off to war after her marriage to Ivan, Mar'ia's continued independence has consequences, resulting in her imprisonment and victimization. Some posit that Mar'ia's reduction in power after marriage likewise reflects the replacement of a prehistoric matriarchy with patriarchy, an idea posited with regard to many of the warrior women thus far discussed.[629] The struggle between Mar'ia and Koshchei, then, is an ancient one, played out in folkloric form with Ivan as the catalyst.[630] As the tale progresses, Mar'ia loses more and more agency, all resulting from her marriage to Ivan. At the beginning, she is clearly Ivan's superior, but then she becomes reliant upon his rescue, until by the end she has reclaimed some of her power to achieve a relationship approaching equals.

Since fairy tales are primarily concerned with the protagonists achieving their happily-ever-after, Mar'ia Morevna's narrative concludes once she and Ivan are safe from Koshchei. We do not learn whether she ever picks up another sword or resumes her dominance as a ruler. In the primary version as told by Afanas'ev, we likewise do not learn whether they have any children or what befalls Ivan's original kingdom. Perhaps Mar'ia succumbs to the same fate as the other *polianitsy* discussed in this chapter, setting aside her weapons and armor permanently to assume a domestic role, lest she suffer more severe consequences than temporary captivity. Considering that Mar'ia's captivity constitutes the heart of her *skazka* in both versions, the latter fate seems most likely. However, while her marriage weakens her, it is her choice to wage another war that allows

[627] Jack V. Haney, *Russian Wondertales II: Tales of Magic and the Supernatural* (M. E. Sharpe, 2001): 24; Kapitsa, *Slavianskie traditsionnye verovaniia*, 123; Barbara Fass Leavy, "The Animal Groom," *In Search of the Swan Maiden: A Narrative on Folklore and Gender* (NYU Press, 1995): 103.

[628] Lopukhova, "Transformatsiia gendernykh obrazov," 4; Kapitsa, *Slavianskie traditsionnye verovaniia*, 124. In exploring the strong woman archetype in *skazki*, Kapitsa notes contrasts between Mar'ia Morevna and another fairy tale queen, the Tsar Maiden, who does not go off to war and is never kidnapped by Koshchei. Rather, the Tsar Maiden removes her own heart and hides it, and so her rescue involves her suitor returning it to her.

[629] Lopukhova, "Transformatsiia gendernykh obrazov," 5.

[630] Zhuchkova and Gulai, "Funktsional'noe znachenie mifologicheskogo obraza," 170.

Koshchei the opportunity to escape; the resumption of her warriorhood led to her victimhood. Whether or not the *skazka* is indicative of a prehistoric matriarchy ceding ground to patriarchy, Mar'ia Morevna stands as another example in a long tradition of cautionary tales about what happens when women go to war. After all, if women can take up arms, what is to stop them from—as the Romans worried so long ago—taking over entirely?

Sineglazka

Although Mar'ia Morevna remains the most famous *polianitsa* in Russian *skazki*, particularly outside of Russia, she is not the only one, nor even the most overtly aggressive. Another warrior queen, Sineglazka, likewise marries an Ivan and features in a fairy tale that bears her name as its title, but unlike Mar'ia, Sineglazka never lays down her arms and become a helpless victim. The only time she is vulnerable is when she is asleep. The most popular variant of Sineglazka's *skazka* appears in Afanas'ev's collection, though other variations have been published. According to Afanas'ev's version, Sineglazka guards the waters of life in the land beyond thrice nine kingdoms, which three brothers are dispatched by their father, the tsar, to retrieve.[631] The elder two fail, sidetracked along the way by a lovely maiden in a castle, who tempts them from their mission and traps them in a pit. The youngest brother—another Ivan—succeeds by enlisting the help of first Baba Yaga, then Baba Yaga's two sisters, who each provide him with a magical steed as well as advice.[632]

When Ivan reaches Sineglazka's fortress, the final magical horse takes him beyond her *druzhina* and all of her defenses, directly into her bedroom, where she is flanked by an additional

[631] Some variations of Sineglazka's tale have her guarding a magic apple tree, the fruit of which grants eternal youth.

[632] A. Nechaev and Leonid Mezinov, "Tsarskii vodovoz i bogatyrka Sineglazka," *Zabavnye skazki* (M. Raduga, 1992). This version of the tale gives the role of Ivan to a peasant named Matyusha, but it otherwise follows the same pattern.

twelve sleeping guards. Each guard is identical to her in appearance. However, having been forewarned that Sineglazka sleeps in the center, Ivan recognizes her. He then "watered his horse in her well […] and left his clothes behind," an obvious euphemism for rape.[633] That this assault occurs while she is sleeping is significant, not only because in a realistic sense, sleep is when she is most vulnerable, but also because of the folkloric symbolism of the "Heroic Sleep" that mighty *bogatyri* undergo in order to gather their strength for whatever impossible task they must accomplish.[634] In a pattern consistent with portrayals of assault in folklore from across the globe, we never get to see Sineglazka's emotional reaction to such a violation of her person.[635] The narrative glosses over the event, tracking Ivan's flight instead of Sineglazka's pursuit. In fact, the only consequence Ivan faces for assaulting a sleeping queen is that his horse, once magical, is now ordinary and therefore unable to bypass Sineglazka's defenses.

With Ivan lacking his magical advantage, Sineglazka's *druzhina* of twelve identical *polianitsy* easily overtakes him. When she catches up with him, the fierce queen determines he is handsome enough to forgive his theft of the waters of life. We can assume that she also forgives him for assaulting her while she slept, but as before, the narrative omits the incident. Sineglazka and Ivan spend three days and nights together before she sends him away, vowing that she will come to him after three years have passed. In some variants, she sends him off after making him promise to return to her in three months and threatens retribution should he fail. In either event, Ivan is unable to fulfil his promise. On his way back to his father's kingdom, Ivan rescues his brothers only for them to betray him, trapping him in the pit in their stead.

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[633] Boris M. and Iuri M. Sokolov, eds., "Ivan-Tsarevich i bogatyrka Sineglazka," *Skazki i pesni Belozerskogo kraya* (Severo-zapadnoe sknizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1981): 195: "Он и напоил в еé колодцике своего коня […] так и одеяня оставил." The wording of other variants to describe Ivan's actions in Sineglazka's bedroom sometimes use a different metaphor, but each one constitutes a euphemism for sexual assault.

[634] Kapitsa, Fedor S. *Slavianskie traditsionnye verovaniia*, 124.

[635] Tatar, *Heroine with 1000 Faces*, 59.

When three years have passed and Sineglazka arrives at Ivan's homeland, she takes her *druzhina* and pitches her tent in a field outside the castle, demanding the tsar send out the father of her two sons. In Afanas'ev's version, the tsar reacts with confusion, and the elder brothers claim ignorance since Ivan has not yet arrived, so no one knows what transpired between Ivan and Sineglazka.[636] Thus, the tsar sends out his eldest, whom Sineglazka's boys reject, asserting he is not their father. Sineglazka repeats her demand, and the next day the tsar sends his middle son, whom the boys likewise reject. On the third day, Ivan finally arrives home, having escaped the pit through further magical assistance. As he approaches the castle, the boys recognize him as their true father and rejoice. Ivan and Sineglazka marry, Ivan becomes the new tsar, and his two older brothers are banished for their duplicity.

As with Mar'ia Morevna, Sineglazka's tale ends as soon as she achieves her happily-ever-after. The *skazka* does not tell us whether she gives up the sword or cedes power to Ivan, but based on her choice to reclaim her husband through a show of force, maintaining her independence and agency seems likely, especially considering Ivan appears to have little choice in the matter. While both Mar'ia Morevna and Sineglazka are described by the narrators as warrior queens, the details of any battles either may have previously fought are omitted by the narrative. Yet, we do see more of Sineglazka's martial prowess in action, if not in a direct battle: she pursues her assaulter, rather than being pursued by one she formerly held captive, and moreover, she lays siege to a kingdom until her demands are met. In that sense, Sineglazka resembles Olga more so than her fellow fairy tale queen, although unlike Olga, Sineglazka does not follow through on her threats. For Sineglazka, no vengeance is needed. Ivan may have stolen from her and assaulted her while she

[636] In another variant, Ivan's brothers confess their betrayal to the tsar as soon as Sineglazka arrives and makes her demands. The tsar then banishes them from the kingdom, but Sineglazka still readies to attack. Ivan arrives home just in time to spare the city.

slept, but Sineglazka was the one who decided they should wed, and her siege of his kingdom ends in celebration rather than slaughter.

Conclusion

The names of twelve *polianitsy* are scattered throughout Russian folklore, but beyond the handful already discussed, most named *polianitsy* are confined to minor roles and brief appearances. For example, Zlatygorka, a former consort of Ilya Muromets, is said to be a *polianitsa*, yet her sole contribution to the *bylina* in which she appears is as the mother of Ilya's estranged son, usually named Falconer.[637] In the dominant version, her son kills her after his initial confrontation with his father, though Falconer's motives in doing so are unclear; some posit he was embarrassed by the circumstances of his birth.[638] In an alternate version, the heroic Ilya kills Zlatygorka after defeating Falconer a second time, apparently as punishment for their son's wrongdoings.[639] More surprising than the fact of her death is that, if she were indeed a *polianitsa* as the narrative asserts, Zlatygorka dies without putting up a fight. Interestingly, in a small number of variants, Zlatygorka bears a daughter instead of a son, but this daughter, too, grows up to hunt down and challenge her father. The daughter meets the same fate as the son in the majority of variants, yet unlike Falconer, she never receives a name. Instead, this anonymous *polianitsa* joins the faceless ranks of the other unnamed *polianitsy* scattered throughout Russian folklore: the "daring *polianitsy*" who are intermittently in attendance at Vladimir's illustrious feasts or the occasional all-female *druzhina* accompanying a named *polianitsa*.

Another uncommon *skazka* takes its title from the heroine's name. "Vasilisa Vasilievna" belongs to the woman as soldier tale type, which exists in only twelve known variants in Russian

[637] Petukhov, "Arkhaicheskie sledy matrimonial'nykh otnoshenii," 65.
[638] Bailey and Ivanova, trans. and eds., *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, 38.
[639] Savchenko, "Integratsiia zhenskikh tipov v kontsepte 'Geroid'," 156.

folklore, but is more popular globally.[640] Unlike the other *polianitsy* discussed, this Vasilisa is neither princess nor queen, nor is she foreign. She is usually a merchant's daughter, and she takes the place of her father when he is called to war but unable to fight. Vasilisa Vasilievna disguises herself as a man and must undergo tests to prove her masculinity, similar to Vasilisa Mikulishna in her guise as Vasily the ambassador. Overall, Vasilisa Vasilievna's narrative is emblematic of the woman as soldier tale type, aligning more closely with international variants than with the narratives of other Slavic *polianitsy*. For instance, the original Chinese folktale upon which Disney based its *Mulan* franchise shares numerous plot points with the Russian version. Furthermore, Vasilisa Vasilievna's narrative is primarily concerned with the social hijinks resulting from her masculine disguise, not any actual warfighting.

Unlike in *byliny*, we do not get to see the *polianitsy* in *skazki* wield their weapons. The narrators inform us that they are warriors, and the other characters treat them as such, but we do not see them accomplish any martial feats. We may not hear about the war Vasilisa Vasilievna goes off to fight in, but we know that the war happens. The *polianitsy* of the fairy tale realm set up military camps and entertain heroes in their tents, but we receive no descriptions of their actual warlike activity. Mar'ia Morevna's and Sineglazka's battles and duels occur outside the plot. In contrast, Nastasia Korolevichna, Vasilisa Mikulishna, and Nastasia Mikulishna each perform daring feats of military prowess as part of the main plot, though they still do not fight in any actual wars. Instead, they draw bows no one else can string and fire arrows at targets no one else can hit. They challenge and duel the greatest of the *bogatyri*, winning as often as conceding. They wrestle ten men at once and defeat them all, outwitting the prince in the process.

[640] Lev Barag, *Spravitel'nyi ukazatel' siuzhetov. Vostochnoslavianskaia skazka* (NAUKA, 1979): 133.

Several possible explanations for this contrast between the *polianitsy* of *skazki* versus *byliny* exist, mostly related to the peculiarities of genre. *Byliny* are epics, ballads meant to be sung and enjoyed by an adult, generally male, audience. Meanwhile, *skazki* are fairy tales, meant for a more diverse audience that includes children. Thus, the violence in *skazki* would be necessarily downplayed, though not entirely eliminated. After all, Bilibin's artwork for "Mar'ia Morevna" in the illustrated publication of Afans'ev's collection depicts plenty of gore. Another possible explanation is that the narrators of *skazki* are uncomfortable not with violence—there is certainly violence in fairy tales from across the globe, not just Russian *skazki*—but with violent women. Thus, the *polianitsy* in *skazki* have to find other, more feminine means to accomplish their goals, usually magic or wit.[641]

Whether in a *skazka* or *bylina*, *polianitsy* are predictably characterized as foreign. The stock location of Lithuania is the most common location given for their birth in *byliny*, whereas *skazki* place warrior queens in charge of distant, fantastical maiden kingdoms. However, a more likely explanation for the historical origin of *polianitsy* can be found among the steppe nomads native to the soil of Ukraine, Russia, and Central Asia. If several Russian *bogatyri* were based on real men, no matter how fantastical their folkloric adventures, then it is hardly a stretch to assume a historical origin for some of the *polianitsy* as well. Some scholars posit that the *polianitsy* were Polovtsians, the Russian name for a Turkic-Iranian tribe of nomads who occupied territory adjacent to medieval Rus', essentially the inheritors of the Scythian culture and geography.[642]

Numerous arguments from multiple fields of study have likewise sought to establish a Scythian origin for the Russians at large, an idea that extends to Western European scholarship as

[641] Kapitsa, *Slavianskie traditsionnye verovaniia*, 125.
[642] Petukhov, "Arkhaicheskie sledy matrimonial'nykh otnoshenii," 65.

well.[643] Given the ethnic and cultural melting pot that characterized the lands that became modern Russia, reflected in material culture as well as surviving European folklore, the notion of warriors and princes of Rus' intermarrying with warriors and princesses from adjacent nomadic kingdoms is likely. Some of those women may have, as the folktales describe, taken up arms for various reasons, including conquest. Olga of Kyiv stands as a real-world example, and she would have reigned shortly before the era of Kyiv as depicted in *byliny*. Yet, closer to the Ancient Greco-Roman portrayal of the Amazons than of historically attested queens like Olga or Tomyris, folklore about *polianitsy* endured as cautionary tales against the societal threat represented by violent, disobedient women who abandon their socially prescribed roles. Threats need to be quashed, and so like the Amazons before them, any *polianitsy* who do not cast aside their weapons must be punished, lest they unravel the fabric of patriarchal society, no matter the ultimate fate of their historical predecessors.

[643] Selivanova, "Voitel'nitsy russkikh stepei," 109.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Over the past two millennia, authors have chronicled wars, reigns, religious shifts, scientific discoveries, and other significant events, but though women contributed to developments in all of these categories, seldom were their contributions acknowledged.[644] Nevertheless, ancient literature, medieval chronicles, and folklore preserved the narratives of certain women throughout Eastern European and Central Asian history whose legacies were too powerful to ignore. No matter how many social and legal barriers these civilizations erected to prevent women from taking up arms, some women kept doing so, and historians and storytellers had no choice but to immortalize those women who, in doing so, altered the course of history.[645] Yet, the deeply embedded association of warriorhood with masculinity resulted in the literary treatment of warrior women as transgressive and exceptional.[646] Despite overwhelming evidence, both physical and literary, the historical existence of warrior women remains a controversial topic. Certain public figures, like Defense Secretary Hegseth, still question the value of women serving in combat despite the reality that women have always been present on the battlefield, not just as casualties, but as combatants.

Some narratives of the warrior women addressed in the preceding pages have more recognizably fictionalized elements than others, but it would be negligent to overlook the possibility that even the most fantastical stories contain grains of truth: a name, a battle, a ritual, a marriage. Several Amazons were described as the biological daughters of the god Ares, but there is nothing innately magical or supernatural about their individual narratives, and the same

[644] Cameron, *Feminism: Brief Introduction*, 96; Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, 5.
[645] Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 3.
[646] Loman, "No Woman, No War," 37; Lesser, *Cassandra Speaks*, 11.

generalization can be made about warrior queens in medieval literature. Unlike many opponents Greek heroes such as Heracles, Theseus, or Achilles face, the Amazons wage traditional battles, employ realistic tactics and strategies, and are not in themselves monstrous or magical beings. They are warriors of great ability, but their abilities stay within the margins of the human. The same is true of the warrior women who inherited the Amazon mantle. Even *polianitsy* like Nastasia Mikulishna with her superhuman strength, mistaking the blows of a mighty hero for mosquito bites before unhorsing that same hero with a single hand, do not employ magic or sorcery to accomplish their deeds. Instead, they rely on their strength and intelligence.

As literary heroines, *polianitsy* reflect a threefold inheritance, synthesizing characteristic portrayals of Amazons, Slavic queens, and Viking *skjaldmeyjar*. From the Amazons, *polianitsy* inherited their foreignness. As the Amazons were foreign barbarians to the Greeks who encountered them, so, too, were the *polianitsy* necessarily foreign to those who told their stories. From Slavic queens, they inherited their nobility. Medieval literature required its strong women to come from the ruling classes, so in *byliny*, *polianitsy* were typically princesses, and in *skazki*, they were queens, aligning their fairytale incarnations more closely with medieval literary traditions. From both Amazons and *skjaldmeyjar*, the *polianitsy* inherited their tendency to die for the sake of the male heroes, but since marriage was taboo for Amazons, it was the *skjaldmeyjar* who provided the amorous impetus of their relationships with those heroes, manifesting in the bride-taking theme and "Strong Woman as Bride" trope prevalent in Slavic folklore.

However, as historical heroines, the *polianitsy* possess another inheritance, one suggested by early Russian folklorists before being swiftly—and erroneously—discarded: *polianitsy* were Scythians. Preserved through countless generations in the cultural memory of those who came to populate the territory Scythians once roamed, raided, and ruled, real warrior women manifested in

Russian folklore as the fictional *polianitsy*. To the early and largely agricultural Slavs, the fierce women riding into battle must have seemed as fantastical as they did to the Ancient Greeks. But unlike the Greeks, the Slavs not only encountered Scythians on the periphery of their civilization, but eventually integrated with them, as evident in their shared artistic styles, burial methods, and linguistic remnants of proto-Iranian in contemporary Slavic languages. By the time Scandinavian Vikings invaded from across the Baltic Sea, bringing along their own traditions of warrior women, *polianitsy* already held an important place in Slavic folklore; the stories, like the people, blended together out of the necessity of proximity. When Christianity later achieved dominance among the medieval Rus', the *skomorokhi*—the preservers of such subversive tales depicting pagan warrior women—fled, carrying the *byliny*, and the memory of Scythian *polianitsy*, to the north, where they would be rediscovered by Russian folklorists in the eighteenth century.

Militant queens like Tomyris and Olga almost certainly existed in real life, even if their narratives took on fictional elements once recorded centuries after their deaths, which in turn highlights the possibility that less believable figures like Penthesilea or Mar'ia Morevna may also have roots in reality. Penthesilea is a deadly force on the battlefield, but she performs no feat that could not have been performed by another talented warrior. Likewise, Mar'ia Morevna and Sineglazka may be dismissed as fairytale queens, but none of the magical elements in their tales involve their abilities. Other characters sometimes display supernatural capabilities over the course of their respective fairy tales, but these queens are only portrayed as warriors and rulers: extraordinary women to be sure, but mundanely human ones. From Scythians and Amazons to Viking Age queens and *polianitsy*, the women who orchestrated and participated in wars left an undeniable mark in literature as well as history. Their narratives may have been suppressed through the ages, but they could not be entirely erased.

Life Stages of the Warrior Woman

In historical literature and folklore, a woman's agency is directly tied to her marital status, but the amount of agency correlating to whether she is unwed, wed, or widowed depends on both her historicity and the genre in which she appears. In purportedly nonfiction genres—histories, chronicles, and sagas—widows enjoyed the most power and freedom, and married women, the least. Tomyris, Olga, and Sigrid each claimed power upon the deaths of their husbands: Tomyris became the queen of the Massagetae, Olga became the de facto ruler of the Rus', and Sigrid became the queen of Sweden. The exception to this pattern is Amage, who ruled over the Sarmatians while her ineffectual husband still lived, but one could argue that her husband's perpetual inebriation rendered her essentially a widow. Bohemian history provides an inverse of the pattern, in that Libuše maintains power only so long as she is unwed. Once she marries Přemysl, subservient motherhood and her own death follows, leaving her widower to rule alone while setting in motion Vlasta's doomed rebellion.

However, in folklore there are no widowed warrior women. Amazons in Ancient tales avoid entanglements with men, and for good cause, yet in folktales *polianitsy* actively seek them. Yet, the end result of marriage for an Amazon or a *polianitsa* is the same. When Antiope marries Theseus—whether she does so willingly or not—she loses her agency as soon as she departs Themiscyra on a Greek ship. She survives the journey, but not the destination. In contrast, the Amazon Penthesilea never marries, and so she remains a powerful and independent warrior up until her death at Troy. However, as she dies, Penthesilea's independence is undermined by Achilles falling in love with her. Nastasia Mikulishna and Mar'ia Morevna give up much of their power as soon as they wed Dobrynia and Ivan, respectively. Nastasia tends Dobrynia's mother and waits passively for his return. Though Mar'ia rides off to war again after her marriage, she becomes

the victim of a villain she had previously captured. Nastasia Korolevichna refuses to take on a submissive role after her marriage, and she pays for it with her life. Yet, despite losing their independence (or their lives) as soon as they married a man, marriage was the purported goal of the *polianitsy*, in keeping with the bride-taking theme common to *byliny* and *skazki*.

Shieldmaidens and Marriage

While in history widowed queens held more power than married ones, in literature unwed warrior women are the most powerful incarnations of themselves, yet the power still derives from their relationships with men. Married and widowed women take their power from their husbands, but unwed warrior women inherit their power directly from their fathers. The quasi-historical Libuše inherits her position as judge from Krok, the mythic progenitor of the Czech people. In leading her people after his death, she carries his legacy forward with confidence and determination. As such, her relationship with her mother is irrelevant; it is as Krok's daughter that she becomes the ruler of early Bohemia. Similarly, Vasilisa and Nastasia Mikulishna, as unmarried women, are able to accomplish feats no man can replicate, aligning them closely with their *bogatyr* father. Mikula's superhuman strength, manning a plow no other can so much as budge, passed down to his daughters. In this sense, Vasilisa, Nastasia, and Libuše all represent archetypal "daughters of the father," allowing them to harness their full power by embracing their patrilineal gifts.[647] The same generalization could be made about the Amazons. Though they avoided the company of men and only acknowledged their mothers, Amazons took their warrior's inheritance from their father, the god Ares.

For literary warrior women from Scandinavian sagas to Russian *byliny*, just as for their Amazon forebears, marriage was tantamount to a death sentence. It had to be, lest women start to

[647] Maureen Murdock, *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness* (Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2021): 31.

dream they could "have it all" like their modern descendants, for whom marriage is not typically an impediment to a career – including a military one. But in the legendary Rus' of *byliny* and *skazki*, warrior women had to either give up their agency after their wedding to a hero, or die. Often, even if they willingly discarded their independence for the sake of a man, they would still die. Medieval literature carries more nuance, but *skjaldmeyjar* usually follow the pattern of the Amazons when it comes to relationships with men, especially in Saxo's work.[648] In contrast, powerful queens like Olga and Sigrid, both widows whose biographies are more rooted in reality than those of their folkloric counterparts, are not subject to the same narrative constraints.

Apart from one notable exception, in folklore the *polianitsy* who willingly part with their warriorhood upon marriage meet better ends than those who cling to their previous identities. Vasilisa Mikulishna stands as the exception to folklore's punishment of warrior women who remain warriors after marriage, and the main difference between her narrative and the narratives of the other *polianitsy* is in whom she married. Nastasia Korolevichna and Nastasia Mikulishna married fellow warriors. Mar'ia Morevna and Sineglazka married princes who, although not warriors, were still heroic within the context of their genre. In contrast, Vasilisa Mikulishna married a merchant, and not a very smart one at that. His general ineptitude earned him a spot in Vladimir's dungeon, necessitating his rescue. Thus, Vasilisa had to pick up her weapons and come to her husband's aid. It would appear that in folklore, relationships can only allow for a single warrior at a time. Since her husband did not fulfill that noble role, Vasilisa was free to do so without personal consequence.

The Maidens' War in Czech history, taking place in prehistoric times at the dawn of the Viking Age, aligns more closely with the folkloric pattern than with the rest of medieval literature.

[648] Self, "Valkyrie's Gender," 147.

Libuše and Vlasta take opposite paths when it comes to men, and so they come to opposite ends. So long as she remained unwed, Libuše held onto her power. Having been unanimously elected to serve as her people's judge, she wielded sole political authority over the Bohemians up until the point they demanded she take a consort. She warned them of the consequences, but after their continued demands that she marry, she eventually acquiesced, elevating the humble plowman Přemysl to a position of authority at her side. In contrast with Libuše, Vlasta, who rebelled against Přemysl's tyrannical reign, eschewed the company of all men as did her Amazon forebears. Libuše willingly gave up her independence and submitted in marriage, and so she passed this life, we can assume, in peace; Vlasta refused to entertain the very thought of submission, and so she perished under horrific circumstances, betrayed by a friend and surrounded by enemies. The obvious moral is that women who conform to the subservient role expected of them when they marry survive, but those who reject that role share the Amazons' doom. Warrior queens are acceptable only to the extent to which they can be tamed.

Widowed Warriors

For noble women throughout history, the death of a husband was a chance to reclaim their independence and, in some cases, seize power for themselves. Widowhood granted unparalleled freedom compared to married life, and ancient through medieval written literature reflected this reality.[649] Remarrying would have stripped their power again, so warrior queens especially were unlikely to take a second husband. Tomyris, Olga of Kyiv, and Sigrid the Proud illustrate the array of possibilities for ambitious widows of means. These widows held fast to their independence, refusing to entertain marriage proposals unless it suited their purposes, and even then, of the three, only Sigrid remarried.

[649] Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*, 155; Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 5.

Tomyris, recognizing the ulterior motive in the Persian emperor's proposal, met her suitor on the battlefield. What Cyrus truly wanted was to add her considerable territory to his expanding empire, not just to add another wife to his harem. Marriage to Tomyris was the most direct and financially expedient route to acquiring her territory since a wedding, even an imperial one between monarchs, is significantly cheaper than war. However, Tomyris was a queen in her own right. After the king of the Massagetae died, ostensibly her husband, she took control of the tribe. Her son Spargapises was old enough to lead a portion of her army, so we can assume he was also old enough to rule, yet Tomyris, not Spargapises, ruled the Massagetae. Rather than relinquish her individual power, sacrificing her territory to Persia in the process, Tomyris led her forces against the invading Persians and decapitated her would-be husband.

Widows Olga of Kyiv and Sigrid the Proud likewise dispatched unwanted suitors through violence. Olga slaughtered multiple envoys and reduced a city to cinders to avoid marrying again, though her stated goal—at least according to her chroniclers—was vengeance on behalf of her people for the murder of their king. To a medieval Christian audience, revenge made for a more palatable justification for such brutal conquest than a pagan desire to maintain her freedom. Even after her grown son was the official ruler of the Rus', Olga declined to marry. Her son was perpetually off fighting wars, so she managed the kingdom in his absence. He may have been the ruler in title, but she was still the de facto queen. Thus, remarrying, even after she was no longer regent, would have resulted in a reduction of her power and authority.

Though not technically a widow since her husband was very much alive, Amage may as well have joined their ranks. As a king her husband was disinterested and ineffectual, leaving Amage free to take the reins of the kingdom, to include its armies. Thus, it is Amage who is remembered by history, it is her military victory over the neighboring Scythian tribe that is

commemorated in ancient literature, while her husband Medosacus is consigned to the sidelines. His sole contribution to history is a name and a dismissal as a useless alcoholic. While on the surface Amage's marital status did not affect her rulership of the Sarmatians one way or the other, it was still her functional widowhood—her husband's ineffectuality and absence—that put her in place to become a warrior queen.

Martial Mothers

In his chapter about women in *The War on the Warriors*, Hegseth declares, "Dads push us to take risks. Moms put the training wheels on our bikes. We need moms. But not in the military." The overwhelming number of mothers who are serving or have served in present day armed forces, from the United States to Ukraine and everywhere in between, demonstrates to the contrary. The contemporary Western stereotype of the gentle, cautious mother evolved not from any biological imperative for mothers to be more risk-averse than fathers, but from the Christian characterization of the Virgin Mary as the ideal mother figure.[650] Various pagan religions offer plenty of warrior-mother goddesses, from the Norse Freya to the Roman Juno, and history abounds with real-world examples of mothers going to great and violent lengths to protect those they love. Motherhood did not prevent Antiope, Tomyris, Olga, or Sigrid from going to war, nor did it lessen their abilities, lethality, or strategic contributions. In this arena as well, the archaeological evidence is in agreement with the literary. For example, in Ukraine, the remains of two young children accompanied a Scythian warrior woman in her burial mound.[651] If anything, motherhood made warrior women fiercer on and off the battlefield, giving them something tangible to protect and fight for besides their own or their kingdom's interests.

[650] Shannon E. French, "With Your Shield or on It: Challenging the Pacifist Mother Archetype," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2001): 52.
[651] Guliaev, "Amazons in Scythia," 115.

Nevertheless, literature, even literature that presents as history, does not correspond exactly to reality, but rather provides a representation of real and imagined events.[652] Thus, warrior-mothers in literature must typically conform to certain representations. At one end of the spectrum of possible depictions, and where most of the women in this study reside, we find mothers like Tomyris, Sigrid, and Olga, who urged their sons to war and supported them in their efforts. They raised them to be competent military leaders, and then they unleashed them on the world to continue the paths their mothers forged. These warrior mothers knew the risks inherent in war first hand, and they encouraged their sons to pursue it anyway. At the other end, we find mothers like Antiope, who abandoned her son so she could wage war unencumbered. In between, we find mothers like Sineglazka, who takes her young sons along with her on military campaigns, or mothers like Libuše, whose focus is on diplomacy and peaceful conflict resolution.

Statistically, some of these warrior women must have birthed daughters, but with the exception of Amazons, as far as warrior women are concerned, literature only allows for sons. However, even among the literary Amazons, who supposedly killed their male offspring, daughters enter the narrative only as adults. Otrere was the mother of Hippolyte and Antiope, and she may have been Penthesilea's mother as well, but her only named grandchild is male. Sigrid may have had a daughter, Estrid, by her second husband, but history only celebrates Sigrid's sons, all of whom became Scandinavian kings.[653] Zlatygorka, a lesser known *polianitsa*, may have had a daughter by the *bogatyr* Ilya Muromets, but the vast majority of *byliny* give her a son instead. Tomyris had Spargapises, and Olga had Sviatoslav. Libuše had three sons; Sineglazka, two. Nastasia Korolevichna had a son, but he died with his mother before he could be born.

[652] Frank Ankersmit, "Truth in History and Literature," *Narrative* 18, no. 1 (2010): 39.
[653] Prinke, "Świętosława, Sygryda, Gunhilda," 88.

The literary tendency of warrior women to raise sons, not daughters, has several potential explanations. The most obvious factor is the pervasive misogyny of the past, which still permeates history, literature, and folklore. Women were rarely acknowledged in historical literature, and even real women who accomplished great feats were often reduced, transformed, or expunged from the record. Women were considered unimportant, so their daughters—even the daughters of extraordinary women—were unimportant, too. The second factor likely in play calls back to the association of warriorhood with masculinity. Many authors view warrior women as straddling the line between traditionally masculine and feminine traits. Motherhood is a uniquely feminine experience, so the feminine role of mother had to be balanced with masculine progeny to ensure warrior women continued to reside outside the acceptable gender binary. Moreover, permitting literary warrior women to raise sons, but not daughters, allows them to pass on their warriorhood to the next generation without further violating social norms. Sons can inherit the warrior mantle without the stigma of their mothers' otherness, whereas warrior daughters only add to it.

Yet, just as the narratives of warrior mothers must conform to one of several representations, so, too, must the narratives of their sons. The more fortunate sons carry on their mothers' military legacies, furthering their wars and conquests, like the sons of Olga and Sigrid. The less fortunate sons pay for their mothers' perceived sins of warriorhood and independence, a pattern which traces back to ancient literature and finds renewed expression in folklore. Tomyris's son Spargapises commits suicide after he fails in his attack against the invading Persians, resulting in the slaughter of his army and his captivity. Similarly, Hippolytus meets a violent end because he chooses to honor his Amazon heritage through his mother, worshiping Artemis and eschewing all romance. After Nastasia Korolevichna bests her husband Dunai in the archery competition, her unborn son dies with her, joining in her punishment.

The Amazon Legacy

Women have taken part in warfare since before the birth of written language, with ancient literate civilizations describing the fierce women from the Eurasian steppes who later became mythologized into Amazons. Undoubtedly, women have participated in warfare since the very invention of armed conflict; we just lack a written record to confirm it, and archaeology can only tell us so much. As warfare has evolved over the millennia, so has women's participation in it, waxing and waning across different civilizations with different gender norms, alongside changes in topography, strategy, and weaponry that determined the nature of battle. Yet, from isolated shieldmaidens and *polianitsy* to the millions of women who serve in militaries across the globe today, authors and historians cannot help but compare warrior women to their Amazon ancestors. Numerous other models of female warriorhood exist, but the image of the Amazon reigns supreme.

Classically educated medieval authors inevitably drew inspiration from ancient templates when describing events like the Maidens' War, not only echoing the language used to portray Amazons, but directly invoking them. Even now, nearly three thousand years after the original Amazons would have lived, many athletic, tall, and military women are popularly labeled 'Amazons.' Warfare has evolved, and the reality of the warrior has evolved to match it, but the vocabulary with which we talk about warriorhood has not. Uniforms, weaponry, and technology have all changed with the centuries, but we still expect to find the same heroic warriors in the modern military as we imagine walked among Centurions, Vikings, and Knights. Despite the plethora of literary and historical examples in between ancient prehistory and now, for female servicemembers and veterans, the only model in popular memory remains the Amazons, and Amazons are dismissed as myth.

Cavalry Maidens

The means and manner of Scythian warfare minimized the effects a warrior's gender might have on his or her ability to fight. Astride a horse and wielding a powerful recurve bow with a lighter draw weight than other types of bows, it made little difference whether a man or woman sat in the saddle, only if they were trained for it. The size and strength of the individual warrior did matter, however, in the type of ground combat favored by sedentary civilizations throughout Viking Age and medieval Europe. Heavy body armor, comprised of layers of quilted padding, leather, chainmail, and sometimes metal plate, along with a preference for bulkier weapons like lances and swords that could pierce such armor, played to the advantage of men. Nevertheless, European militaries continued to employ cavalry units alongside infantry, and it should likewise be noted that not all medieval infantry fighters could afford full suits of armor. In fact, few could. Thus, the possibility for motivated women to participate in combat did not disappear after the Scythians ceded their territory to Slavs, Vikings, Khazars, Balts, and others, they just typically had to disguise themselves as men, thereby becoming the inspiration for folkloric heroines like Vasilisa Vasilievna and Vasilisa Mikulishna, who likewise masqueraded as men.

Even beyond the medieval period, cavalry units continued to provide the best opportunity for warrior women to hide in plain sight. Like a daring *polianitsa*, Nadezhda Durova (1783-1866) disguised herself as a Cossack man and took on the name Aleksandr Durov so she could fight in the Napoleonic Wars. She detailed her military exploits in her memoir, *The Cavalry Maiden*, though later writings make it apparent she did not choose that particular title. Her active military career was cut short by an injury at the Battle of Borodino, which also revealed her biological sex to her superior officers, and in time, to the tsar, but she continued to serve in administrative roles

before retiring to Petersburg.[654] Some contemporary scholars argue that because Durova maintained the male persona of Durov beyond its necessity, she must have been a transgender man, and as such should not be included on a list of warrior women or held up as a feminist icon.[655] However, Durova remains widely heralded as someone who, chafing at the constrictive life of an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian woman, chose to take up arms and defend her homeland rather than waste away in envy of male privilege.[656] Instead, by joining the military, she seized that male privilege for herself and then was understandably loathe to let it go.

As military technology progressed, advancements in firepower and transportation further diminished the importance of an individual warfighter's physique. Out of a wartime necessity during the twentieth century, some militaries began allowing women to openly serve in limited, non-combat capacities, usually as nurses or secretaries. However, the Soviet Union, espousing gender equality, took advantage of improvements in the range and accuracy of modern rifles by establishing a corps of female snipers during the Second World War. Russian women had already proven their mettle by fighting in the tens of thousands during the revolution, and in a lengthy war of attrition like WWII was shaping up to be, the side with more fighters in the ranks is the side that usually survives.[657] Of these female snipers, Liudmila Pavlichenko (1916-1974) is the most famous, credited with killing 309 Nazi combatants.[658] This number is most likely extremely inflated, and Pavlichenko may have not been a sniper at all; nevertheless, she was paraded around the world to garner international support for the Soviet cause and inspire other women into joining

[654] Nadezhda Durova, *The Cavalry Maid: The Memoirs of a Woman Soldier of 1812*, trans. by John Mersereau, Jr. and David Lapeza (Ardis Publishers, 1988): 9.
[655] Ruth Averbach, "The (Un)making of a Man: Aleksandr Aleksandrov/Nadezhda Durova," *Slavic Review* 81, no. 4 (2022): 977-978; Renner-Fahey, "Diary of a Devoted Child," 198.
[656] Ona Renner-Fahey, "Diary of a Devoted Child: Nadezhda Durova's Self-Presentation in The Cavalry Maiden," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 53, no. 2 (2009): 190.
[657] Lyuba Vinogradova, *Avenging Angels: Young Women of the Soviet Union's WWII Sniper Corps* (MacLehose Press, 2017): 15.
[658] Ibid., 41.

the war effort.[659] Yet, very real female snipers like Nina Petrova, Lida Larionova, and Anya Sheinova all pulled the trigger on the front lines, collecting numerous attested kills to their names.[660] The tradition of cavalry and ranged weaponry as a niche for women to be warriors did not end with the Scythians, it just evolved.

Women in Command

There is no physical size or strength component to the comprehension and implementation of military strategy. Thus, warrior queens like Tomyris, Amage, and Olga could direct their forces with the same ability as any king. Sigrid could manipulate events and people to orchestrate a war serving her interests. Likewise, for Sineglazka and Vasilisa Mikulishna, leaving their encampments to threaten a siege if negotiations fail is a solid contingency plan. Depending on the ideology driving an army, knowledge that a woman commands the opposing force, or that an army includes female warriors, may affect the outcome to the benefit of the woman's side. Cyrus and his advisors underestimated Tomyris; they paid for it with their lives. Today, female Kurdish fighters from Women's Protective Units (YPK) in Syria and Iraq terrify soldiers of the Islamic State, because they believe that if they die at the hand of a woman, they cannot enter heaven. To these soldiers, women are not just inferior, but unclean, demonic, a source of evil. Yet, to the Kurds the women fight for, they are heroes. For Tomyris and Olga as well as the YPK, sexism worked in their favor.

Some authors would have us believe that great kings and queens did not just direct battles, but actively participated in them at the tactical level. Hence, Quintus of Smyrna details Penthesilea's final charge outside the gates of Troy, echoed by the *Dalimil* author in his depiction of Vlasta during the final battle of the Maidens' War. However, rulers entered the thick of the fray only in obviously fictionalized or embellished narratives, or in instances where the battle had

[659] Ibid., 45.
[660] Ibid., 50-54.

already concluded or turned into a massacre. Thus, the concept of "leading from the front," commonly echoed throughout militaries today as the standard of leadership, applies less literally as an officer moves up to higher and higher ranks. Rarely do commanders rush into direct combat with the troops under their commands, certainly not once they command at the strategic rather than tactical level.

At higher echelons of command, especially the head of state, "leading from the front" is metaphoric, and that was as true thousands of years ago as it is now. Herodotus's account of Tomyris's confrontation with Cyrus exemplifies this. Herodotus makes it clear that both monarchs were present at the site of the final battle since Tomyris decapitated the fallen Cyrus, but he also implies that they did not directly interface until the Massagetae had already won. Likewise, Amage led her armies in their surprise attack on the rebellious king's encampment, but it is highly unlikely that she entered the premises herself until after her people had secured the upper hand. Rulers like Cyrus still fell in combat from time to time, but more often than not, a losing king and his retinue would flee before the battle became a rout, and many would not even be there in the first place. Olga and Sigrid likewise orchestrated their wars from a distance, as neither queen charged personally into combat, but they were nonetheless responsible for directing the violence conducted in their names. As orchestrators of war, their personal presence was not necessary for their success.

Conclusion

From Ancient literature through medieval folklore, from Scythian queens to Slavic *polianitsy*, warrior women were presented either as cautionary tales or curious marvels. In literature, warrior women were supposed to fail on the battlefield, thereby proving their inferiority and innate wrongness, so Amazons and *polianitsy* alike had to die. Penthesilea is pierced through the breast by the same spear that takes her horse. Vlasta is dismembered and fed to dogs. Nastasia

Korolevichna is slaughtered by her own husband, and afterward he cuts open her chest. When historians encountered warrior women, however, they were faced with the dilemma of facts. They could manipulate narratives to an extent, but the fundamental arc had to remain in place, so instead of making obviously successful warrior queens like Tomyris, Amage, Olga, and Sigrid fail in their military endeavors, they subverted their military legacies by attributing their victories to a more acceptably feminine quality like cleverness, or else they vilified them in some way. Tomyris and Amage achieve victory on the battlefield through subterfuge, not strength, never mind that subterfuge is a key part of any military strategy. Sigrid is painted as manipulative and haughty. Even though she was sainted and is upheld as aspirational, the cleverness for which Olga is praised reads closer to conniving.

History is written by the victors, as they say, but the wise historian can read between the lines. Ancient Greek heroes had to be victorious, so the Amazon opponents they faced had to die. However, the inevitable failure of Amazons does not indicate that warrior women in real life were likewise doomed; Tomyris and Amage stand as testaments to women's triumphs over male opponents in the ancient world. Similarly, the strictly divided gender roles of medieval European societies prompted those authors to confine their female characters—the few who made it into the narratives in the first place—to acceptable characteristics. Heroines could be victorious, but only if they were humble, clever, and compassionate. Ergo, Libuše is remembered as a prophetess rather than a leader, Olga is praised for her cleverness rather than her violence, and Vasilisa Mikulishna rescues her husband with duplicity rather than combat. Furthermore, any heroine whom these authors could not place neatly into an acceptable box—the most independent, outspoken, and warlike women—they characterized as foreign aberrations. Sigrid is a Polish princess who marries into Swedish royalty, *polianitsy* always hail from other kingdoms, and Mar'ia Morevna and

Sineglazka rule distant, fantastical lands. Like the Ancient Greco-Roman authors before them, medieval authors, to include the keepers of oral literature recorded in more recent centuries, could not tolerate the existence of warrior women native to their own culture.

Despite the progress of recent centuries that saw an exponential increase in opportunities available to women, duly documented by a corresponding rise in literature written by, for, and about women, the suppression of women's narratives continues today, even in supposedly enlightened countries like the United States. Dangerous to patriarchal concepts of "traditional" family values, narratives of warrior women are especially at risk. The current administration's ongoing purge of articles and photographs that feature female servicemembers, veterans, and federal workers from all official United States media accounts as well as internet archives marks a return to the misogyny that sought to erase women's accomplishments, contributions, and victories from the historical record, and to cast as villains the women who could not be erased. However, as with the resurrection of Tomyris, buried for so long as a footnote in Cyrus's biography, the narratives of warrior women past and present cannot be eliminated forever. No matter how many photographs they delete, women like Kristin Greist, the first female Infantry Officer in the US Army and one of the two first female Ranger school graduates, or Amanda Lee, the first female Blue Angels pilot, will have their stories memorialized alongside such figures as Olga of Kyiv and Nadezhda Durova. The paths forged by the Scythian Amazons, reenforced by the strides of every warrior queen, shieldmaiden, *polianitsa*, and female warfighter since, will endure.

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"Danila Lovchanin."
"Dobrynia i Alesha."
"Dobryni v Aleshi."
"Dobrynia i Nastas'ia."
"Dobrynia zhenitsia."
"Dunai."
"Dunai Ivanovich."
"Dunai i Nastasia-korolevichna."
"Dunai svataet nevestu kniaziu Vladimiru."
"Ilya Muromets i doch' ego."
"Ivan Godinovich."
"Molodets i korolevichna."
"Nepra i Don."
"Podvigi Dobryni i neudavshaiacia zhenit'va Aleshi Popovicha."
"Stavr Godinovich."
"Sviatagor i Mikula Selianinovich."
"Vol'ga i Mikula."
"Zhenit'ba Dobryni."
"Zhenit'ba Dobryni i neudavshaicia zhenit'ba Aleshi."
"Pesni (Zhenit'ba Dobryni, ego ot"ezd, boi so zmeem i vozvrashchenie)."

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"Ivan-tsarevich i bogatyrka Sineglazka."
"Ivan-tsarevich i Mar'ia Marevna."
"Mar'ia Morevna."
"Pro Koshcheiia, Ivan-tsarevicha i Mar'iu Morevnu."
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