



The Origins of the *Byliny*: a Working Hypothesis*

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Истоки былины: рабочая гипотеза

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Abstract

The oral heroic poems found in the Northern province of Olonets in the late nineteenth century, usually known as *byliny*, present a unique case of oral preservation of medieval literature within European context. For decades, due to the lack of manuscript copies of those texts, theories about their origin have been highly conjectural and subject to many ideological demands. While any definitive conclusion on their authorship, place and time of composition has to remain necessarily speculative, the present article, analysing the internal evidence of the poems and what can be concluded from studies on orality in other literary traditions, proposes that they were originally composed in written form in a clerical environment in the Northern area of Kyivan Rus'.

Keywords

byliny, Kyivan Rus', heroic poetry, monastic culture, orality

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Резюме

Устные героические поэмы, найденные в северной Олонецкой губернии в конце девятнадцатого века, обычно известные как былины, представляют собой уникальный случай устного сохранения средневековой литературы в европейском контексте. На протяжении десятилетий из-за отсутствия рукописных копий этих текстов теории об их происхождении были весьма предположительными и подчинялись многим идеологическим требованиям. В то время как любой окончательный вывод об их авторстве, месте и времени составления должен обязательно оставаться спекулятивным, настоящая статья, анализируя внутренние свидетельства стихотворений и то, что можно сделать из исследований устной речи в других литературных традициях, предполагает, что они были первоначально составлены в письменной форме в церковной среде на севере Киевской Руси.

Ключевые слова

былины, Киевская Русь, героическая поэзия, монастырская культура, устность

Entia non sunt multiplicanda sine necessitate.

William of Ockham (1285–1347)

The first thing to clarify in the present article is that it does not negate, or contradict, as many things as it seems to. It does not deny that there were oral compositions preserved for centuries in an epic verse similar to the epic verses of other Slavic peoples². It does not negate the existence of a courtly culture, maybe oral or one whose written forms have not survived, that flourished around the '*druzhiny*' of ruling princes, whether in Kyiv or in any other principalities³. It does not negate that the *byliny* constitute a very important part of the national heritage of at least one, if not two, modern countries. In fact, it does not affirm or deny any historical fact because it focuses on literary analysis of several literary works. It is not an assessment of sources that could endorse or question any historical evidence otherwise obtained by means of archaeological endeavour or historiographic examination. Moreover, being much later written collections of very late oral expressions, *byliny* should not be evaluated using the methods and principles traditionally employed in literary analysis of medieval literary texts: we have no manuscripts, no colophons, no possible diachronic linguistic analysis, no authors, no scribes, no watermarks, no palaeographic evidence, no patronage, no entry in any known

² Particularly relevant were the studies of Roman Jakobson collected in volume IV of his *Selected Writings* [Jakobson 1966] as well as his previous work, with J. Simmons, *Russian Epic Studies* [Jakobson, Simmons 1949].

³ As indeed has been recently described by P. S. Stefanovich [Стефанович 2012: 185–262; 480–540].

record, no purchase of paper, no use of inks. Immediately after their purported time of composition, no excerpts in other literary works, no paraphrasing, no quotations in other non-literary works (except maybe of some proper names), no evidence of any secondary use has been preserved. We have nothing of that, so attempting an approach using any of those parameters is doomed to fail. Miserably.

What we have is an echo, a reverberation, a resonance, the trail of something that certainly was there, but the study of which has to be done taking into account possible approaches different from the ones traditionally used for medieval literature or history. Does that mean that we can only analyse them from the folkloristic point of view, from their existential iterations (typology of singers, use of accompanying music, verse variation, role and function in peasant communities, popular beliefs)? Not necessarily. Between the folkloristic existential approach and metaphysical angst of being deprived of material support that can be subjected to scientific analysis, there are many shades of grey.

By focusing on what we have, rather than on what we do not have, we might be able to obtain a better idea of why the *byliny* existed at all, and how is it that they came to survive all those centuries, until they were finally collected mostly in the second half of the nineteenth century. That is the miracle, and where our study should focus, and not the lack of manuscripts. Furthermore, the study of their production at the time of collection, superbly conducted for decades by the school of Russian and Soviet folklorists, tells us a lot about their survival and about oral culture *at the time they were collected*, but maybe not that much about oral culture at the time they were composed, unless one assumes that nothing had changed in the region of Novgorod in at least five hundred years⁴.

The aspects that could potentially interest medieval scholars on perceiving this distant echo, or at least the questions that interest me, are mainly two: why and who, which could be further subdivided into by whom and for whom. These, in turn, are necessarily linked to when and where, but I believe the last two will be automatically answered if the analysis of the first two is correct. So what this article questions are only two aspects of the traditional and accepted understanding of what *byliny* were: namely, that the same social group which preserved them was the one who composed them, and that they originated in Kyiv, whose capital city and prince figure prominently in a substantial part of them.

⁴ I would like to underline that, while the aspects of preservation and transmission are indeed extremely relevant in the study of the genre of *byliny*, they are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of the present article, whose focus is mainly on the first composition and creation of the poems. Therefore, the role of singers, of any type, that is so paramount in the study of orality is, regrettably, left aside at present.

The *byliny* survived orally at least until the nineteenth century⁵, when they started to be collected, and enjoyed afterwards a dual existence, oral and written, which contributed to their oral survival by means of a process that Zumthor has called of *archéocivilisation*⁶. This process conferred on the *byliny* certain characteristics, among which should be noted their limited degree of improvisation by comparison, for example, to South Slavic epics⁷, and the focalisation of the action at a certain court. In the case of the majority of the *byliny*, this is typically the Kyivan court, which becomes the physical and spiritual headquarters of a group of heroes (the most important being Ilya Muromets, Dobrynia Nikitich and Alesha Popovich) in permanent campaign against a foreign invader, or in defence of Christianity, or against a mythical creature. Many of these elements constitute the semiotic universe of the *byliny*, which consists mainly of four elements: namely, the hero, the antagonist, the prince and the court, all grouped around a dominant (in Jakobson's functional terminology), which is the trip [Torres Prieto 2005: 195–217]⁸. All five are constant throughout the five phases into which Zumthor divided the existence of an oral poem: production, transmission, reception, preservation and repetition [Zumthor 1983: 32–33]. These five elements, whose characterisation is constant, fulfilled Jauss' concept of the 'horizon of expectations' of the audience [Jauss 1982: 94–97] in terms of defining *byliny* as an identifiable genre. Even in the case of a *bylina* like the one narrating the misdeeds of the anti-hero Mikhailo Potyk, for whom everything goes wrong precisely for pursuing a lady, the five elements are clearly recognisable. For the purpose of the present article, I will focus on the two elements that more often have been used to show a Kyivan origin of the *byliny*: that is, the prince and the court.

⁵ Interestingly, prose versions of the tales described in some *byliny* had already been published in written form or included in written sources, such as *lubki* and others. The study carried out in 1960 by Astakhova, Mitrofanova and Skripil' [Астахова, Митрофанова, Скрипиль 1960] offers a survey of these prose versions published before the first collections of oral poems were carried out, and poses very interesting questions on the interaction between orality and the written word or, as discussed below, secondary orality.

⁶ On the mutual influences of this process, see [Zumthor 1983: 35–37]. In the case of Russian *byliny*, this process has been masterfully studied by Novikov [Новиков 1995].

⁷ This different degree of improvisation was already noted by Vesterholt [Vesterholt 1973] and further confirmed by Novikov's research [Новиков 2000].

⁸ While my analysis focuses on the functionality of the hero's trip, understood as dominant in the narrative structure of the *byliny* (number and typology of trips, achievement of objectives, points of departure and return), A. S. Mironov has conducted a cultural and philosophical analysis on what he has labelled 'aksiosfera' of the *byliny* with very profitable results [Миронов 2021].

General overview

The first time we hear about the living tradition of the *byliny*⁹ is the famous anecdote of peasants singing them by the fire at night in the province of Olonets in the 1860s. In 1859, Pavel Nikolaevich Rybnikov (1831–1885) was sent into exile to the province of Olonets for belonging to Revolutionary circles. There, one night while he was seeking shelter in a hut from a ferocious storm, he found by accident that *byliny* were still being sung. Rybnikov had studied in the Historic-Philological Faculty of Moscow University and applied his theoretical knowledge to his compilation of texts. In his notes, he already puts forward the relation between epic tradition and the poem sung by each individual singer. Between 1861 and 1867, he published the poems he had gathered in two volumes [Рыбников 1909]. There were 224 in total.

In 1871, Alexander Fedorovich Gil'ferding (1831–1872) made a trip to the same region in order to collect more texts. This Russian civil servant had studied in the same faculty as Rybnikov and was as enthusiastic as the latter about the recent discovery. Unfortunately, in the following year, on his second trip to the area, Gil'ferding contracted typhus and died. His collection of poems, published posthumously, contained 318 texts [Гильфердинг 1949–1951]¹⁰.

In 1804, almost sixty years before the discovery by Rybnikov that *byliny* were being performed and the first intensive collections of texts made by these two researchers, a collection of 25 texts had been published under the name *Drevniia ruskiia stikotvoreniia, sobrannye Kirsheiu Danilovym* (*Ancient Russian Poems collected by Kirsha Danilov*) [Евгеньева, Путилов 1977], comprising songs from Western Siberia, from the province of Perm¹¹. Another collection of poems, including *byliny*, gathered by P.V. Kireevsky had been published after his death in 1856 by P.A. Bezsonov in ten volumes [Киреевский, Безсонов 1860–1874].

⁹ The term *bylina* was introduced in folklore studies first in 1841 by I. P. Sakharov in the third edition of his work *Tales of the Russian nation* (*Skazaniia ruskogo naroda*), one of whose sections was entitled “*Byliny* of the Russian people” [Сахаров, 1], for which he drew extensively from the first collection of Kirsha Danilov (see further below). V. F. Miller pointed out in 1897 [Миллер 1897] that Sakharov had taken it from the opening lines of the *Tale of Igor's Campaign*: Начати же ся тѣй пѣсни / по былинамъ сего времени, / а не по замышлению Бояню. (vv. 5–7), pointing out at the same time the artificial character of the term [Миллер 1897: 29]. It is now widely accepted that Sakharov made a mistake in interpreting the lines of the *Slovo*, but the term gained popularity and since the 1860s has been accepted also as an academic term. The same compositions had been previously known as ‘*bylevaia pesnia*’ or ‘*bylevaia poeziiia*’, and at the time of their collection probably as ‘*stariny*’.

¹⁰ Among later phonographic recordings, the first ones were made by A. D. Grigor'ev [Григорьев 1904–1939] who between 1899 and 1901 recorded the opening lines of 150 songs.

¹¹ Recent studies have proven that Kirsha Danilov did exist and that he was in the service of the Demidov family. His are the most archaic texts and the melodies included seem to have been arranged for violin [Bailey, Ivanova 1999: xxix–xxx].

Despite having at least 3,000 transcriptions of poems, these do not represent 3,000 different poems, since many are fragmentary or correspond to different variants of the same poem, transcribed from different singers, or from the same singer at different times. Their collection continued well into the 1930s in Northern Russia, especially in the area around Lake Ladoga, in areas under the rulership of Novgorod at the time in which the poems were supposedly composed. The *byliny* are poems, usually of between 200 and 400 verses or lines, although some of them can reach a thousand lines. They have no rhyme or stanza patterns, but rather follow a stress pattern (long epic line) usually finishing with a two-syllable ending or “clausula” at the end of each verse. From the time of their collection until today, the bibliography produced on their many interesting aspects is immense and, as expected, different agendas have been pursued in the last two centuries¹².

From all the *byliny*, the ones that interest me the most for the current discussion are those whose action revolves around the city of Kyiv¹³, which is the place where the majority of *byliny* take place. The poems of the so-called Kyivan cycle narrate mainly the adventures of different heroes (*bogatyry*) who travel to the court of Kyiv, the historical capital of Kyivan Rus', to prove or narrate their deeds. Among the most famous heroes, who are the protagonists of the greatest number of versions and variants overall, are Ilya Muromets, Dobrynia Nikitich and Alesha Popovich. Among other minor heroes of the Kyivan cycle we could count Mikhailo Potyk, Dunai and Diuk Stepanovich. The Kyivan *byliny*, nevertheless, present certain constant characteristics that differentiate them from other *byliny*. Their protagonists are lonely heroes – except for Alesha Popovich, who travels with his squire, Ekim – whose trips always have the Kyivan court as departure or arrival point. This court is presided over by Prince Vladimir, a character not necessarily representing any historical figure, before whom they have to prove their honour and their prowess. This is usually achieved by defeating foreign invaders (Ilya Muromets), or fighting a dragon (Dobrynia Nikitich), or other mythical creatures (Alesha Popovich). The theme of the abduction of a bride is also present (Diuk Stepanovich), as is the fight of a hero against a sorceress who had bewitched him (Mikhailo Potyk, Dobrynia Nikitich). The heroes, despite having extraordinary characteristics, receive help from other characters, particularly from other brothers in arms

¹² In recent years, one of the most remarkable synthesis of current knowledge on the topic is Nikita Petrov's *Russian Folk Epics* [Петров 2017].

¹³ In traditional classifications, and many older anthologies, these are grouped under the heading of “the Kyivan Cycle”. This classification, based on a merely geographical indicator of the place where action happened (as opposed to “the Novgorod Cycle”, for example), left aside the many complex questions of generic classification of the corpus of *byliny* and was really devoid of any content with respect to their literary aspects or functionality, among others. It has been challenged for some decades now, and an updated *status questionis* can be found in [Петров 2017: 28–35].

or their own mothers. The mother of the hero has a prominent role in the *byliny*, sometimes taken by another female family figure, such as an aunt or a sister. More often than has been so far willingly acknowledged, they also receive help from God, either by direct intervention or, more commonly, by the intervention of St Nicholas, who advises the hero on what is the right decision to make. Notwithstanding the extensive role of the defence of the land and of Christianity in the Kyivan *byliny*, particularly in those whose protagonist is Ilya Muromets, other subjects — such as the search for, or abduction of, a bride, the loyalty of friends and the betrayal of enemies, the incompetence of the ruler and the danger posed by women who are not kin by blood — contribute to the repertory of literary themes addressed overall in the *byliny*¹⁴.

Composition versus survival

It has been traditionally taken for granted that the *byliny* were composed orally, as they were found mostly in oral form and subsequently collected (equating composition with survival), that they were composed at the zenith of Kyiv's political power, and in Kyiv. Regarding composition, the proposition has been firmly defended that the *byliny* had no such thing as an *Urtext* — an original text that could be reconstructed — and that they were composed anew each time. However, the *byliny* had no social function as songs accompanying any social ritual, as do other forms of Russian or Ukrainian popular literature (laments, harvesting songs), and the individualistic and aristocratic mentality of the hero, who seeks recognition for himself before a princely court, clearly points out to a courtly audience. Although it is true that the court of Kyiv, and its ruler, are often depicted as weak and mischievous, unable to defend the Rus' land properly from foreign enemies, they are still the entities from which the hero seeks recognition and which he obeys. The Kyivan court seems to represent a mythical place of the past, duly acknowledged, rather than a real political and economic power. Furthermore, foreign invasion, though a constant since its foundation, became much more of a social and literary issue in Kyivan Rus' over the centuries, as other peripheral principalities were also challenging Kyiv's prominence.

Finally, although trying to reconstruct an original text is impossible, and indeed inane in a case of secondary orality as this one, the distribution and combination of episodes in the *bylina* is not as free as in the fairy tale, for example¹⁵. It is always Dobrynia who fights the dragon, and always with the help of

¹⁴ See: [Torres Prieto 2005].

¹⁵ Secondary orality is a term coined by Walter J. Ong in his groundbreaking study *Orality and Literacy* (1982). Ong differentiates societies that have not been exposed to literacy, or the written word (“a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print” [Ong 1982: 11]), which he calls primary orality, from those in which literacy existed,

his mother, just as it is always Mikhailo Potyk who marries a sorceress and has to go to the underworld to rescue her from death. So, if there is no *Urtext* for the words themselves that can be reconstructed given the evidence available, which the singers adapt to their style every time, there is certainly a fixation of plots and themes which allows very little space for individual originality in the composition of narrative lines. The particular wording of each *bylina* seems to be directly linked to the language of the singer or the area, and sometimes this wording is easily traced back to published versions.

As with other works of Russian and Ukrainian medieval literature, many studies concerning the origin of the *byliny* and the reality described in them have provoked attempted answers from historians. In the main, however, these were more concerned with trying to find evidence for their use as historical documents, in order to prove a particular point, rather than seeing the whole tradition as a social and cultural reality. This tendency has not contributed greatly to their study as literary works. Beyond the Historical School inaugurated by Vsevolod F. Miller (1848–1913), who believed that a *bylina* was the result of a combination of a migratory plot and a historical fact, giving rise to the process of Kyivitisation of the *bylina*¹⁶, one of the interesting proposals of the beginning of last century was put forward in the 1920s by A. P. Skaftymov (1890–1968), who refuted the thesis of the Historical School stating that *byliny* had to be analysed as a form of oral literature, with its particular aesthetic characteristics rather than as a reflection of a historical moment. Skaftymov argued that the main aim of this form of oral literature was to describe the position of the hero within the story, and that all the other characters and circumstances were only what he called the “resonating background”. His was the first attempt to study all the oral and folklore features of the *byliny*, rather than just their contents as a historical document [Скафтымов 1924].

even if it was limited to a minority, and coexisted with a type of orality he calls secondary orality. In more recent terms, what Simon Franklin has called a society with or without a graphosphere [Franklin 2019]. For Ong, real oral creation can only be possible in cases of primary orality: once societies have been exposed to literacy, in whatever degree, the psychodynamics of orality, and therefore of oral composition, are altered. What is present in secondary orality societies is oral preservation of compositions whose origin may have been oral or written; it does not matter, because it only focuses on transmission for preservation, not in original creation. In the case of the *byliny*, from the time of composition, whenever that might have been, the society is already immersed in secondary orality, and exposed to a graphosphere, regardless of their level of engagement with it, whether it was only visual through icons, or being read out loud to them, or dictated by them. This is a possible scenario for the transmission of the *byliny*. The structure and combination of the fairy tale was masterfully explained by V. Propp in his classic *Morfologija skazki* [1969]. The stability of the *byliny* by comparison to the fairy-tale, for example, is based on the attachment of certain plots only and exclusively to certain heroes.

¹⁶ That is, old epic themes (migratory plots) were further developed in Kyiv, creating Kyivan heroes and adjusting them to the characteristics of Kyivan life, within the poetics and language of the *byliny*.

In 1955, V. Propp published one of the most important studies on *byliny* ever. In his *Russkii Geroicheski Epos* [Пропп 1955], written under the influence of the functionalist literary theories, Propp defended the hypothesis that *byliny*, as an artistic reality, had emerged not from the chronicles, but as a historically conditioned artistic invention¹⁷. Propp does not condemn the historical study of the *byliny*, but denies that the *byliny* reflect historical facts. Rather the *byliny* are created by means of reinterpreting and transforming a former tradition, in a process of reinterpretation and transformation carried out, nevertheless, by the people, who project onto the poems their ideals and their struggles. According to Propp's theory, the Kyivan epos was the result of the development of an earlier epos existing among Eastern Slav tribes long before the establishment of the Kyivan state.

After the publication of Propp's *Russian heroic epos*, a new method was formulated to study the *byliny*: historic-typological analysis. In 1958, V. M. Zhirmunskii formulated its principles in his book *Epic creations of the Slavic Peoples and problems of the Comparative study of the Epic* [Жирмунский 1958]. This was the last attempt to reconcile the methodologies of the Historical School with the migratory and borrowing theories, always defending the importance of the texts as artistic creations. Its aim is, using the enormous amount of materials compiled by the supporters of the Historical School and the borrowing and migratory theories, to try to recreate and explain the different phases of the historical-folkloristic process on the basis of typological parallels obtained from the analysis of the traditions of many different peoples. On the one hand, it tries to explain the emergence of a motif, a plot or a character in a given tradition by means of synchronic analysis (whether they appear before or after). On the other hand, by developing a diachronic analysis in all different traditions, this methodology would enable us to establish different development stages of a motif, a plot or a character. From this point of view, the Russian epos does not have an *Urtext* and is not fixed, since *byliny* are subject to continuous processes of adaptation and reinterpretation as they undergo different historical times. The two most prominent followers of this method are B. N. Putilov and Iu. I. Smirnov. Putilov has applied this method underlining the *byliny*'s artistic and ethnographic qualities and has enunciated concepts as important as epic subtext, epic knowledge, epic memory and epic milieu¹⁸.

Different scholars since the 1970s have put forward different theories concerning the transmission and textology of the *byliny*: V. M. Gatsak and F. M. Selivanov have studied the aesthetics and poetics, the historian

¹⁷ Propp thought that the *byliny*, contrary to the historical song, reflect not reality, but an idealization of reality [Пропп 1955: 9].

¹⁸ See: [Путилов 1988; Idem 1997].

I. Ia. Froianov and the folklorist Iu. Iudin have focused on alleged pre-Kyivan elements and, following Astakhova's line of research [Астахова 1966], Novikov has studied how the publication of cheap editions of the poems (*lubki*) changed the way the singers learned their songs, the transmission of which was then made both in written and oral form¹⁹. The fact that many singers knew certain texts from reading them, or having them read aloud, from earlier written collections might invalidate some of the previous conclusions regarding the geographical distribution of songs and themes, and also the survival of certain songs. One of the clearest examples is posed by the *bylina* of Volkh Vseslavevich, all variants of which derive ultimately from the song included in the so-called collection of Kirsha Danilov²⁰, published in 1804, before the collection of sung or recited *byliny* was undertaken. If there were singers continuing the purely oral transmission before the first collections were published, we cannot know. The fact that the first collections of poems postdate the first publications makes the argument even more complex. If Rybnikov had found the poems being sung *before* the publication of Kirsha Danilov's collection or the poems gathered by Kireevsky, the idea of a purely oral transmission will be beyond doubt. The fact that these publications, as well as the prose versions printed in chapbooks or *lubki* [Астахова et al. 1960] predate the first oral collections poses doubts about the form of transmission. Moreover, the jump from a written source, in verse or in prose (someone reading from a published volume, chapbook, or a *lubok*) to oral transmission could have happened at any time during the many centuries between their purported composition and their collection in the mid-nineteenth century. This transfer of the medium of transmission would have originated what Walter Ong calls "secondary orality", which is the oral preservation of a text, unlike "primary orality" which is the oral composition of a text.

Byliny are not an epic tradition in the sense that other European traditions are. We do not have a long written poem, from which *byliny* could represent individual unwritten poems lost in the transmission of the tradition (some form of *membra disjecta*); and the heroes of the *byliny* are not in the strictest sense national heroes, although they have been regarded as such. The *bylina* is, in many respects, closer to romance than to a national epic, a phenomenon necessarily expected after the long period of oral preservation, during which

¹⁹ See: [Гацак 1988; Селиванов 1977; Фроянов, Юдин 1997; Юдин 1975; Новиков 1995].

²⁰ Kirsha Danilov is indeed a fascinating character about whom our knowledge is really limited. His collection sometimes raises more questions than answers. Did he write the songs himself or dictate them? The same with the accompanying melodies. And if so, how had he learnt the songs and from whom? Or had he read them, or had them read to him, somehow? Was he only another Ossian, or was he fully responsible for the collection that carries his name? The fact that his is the first collection published of these texts only complicates matters further.

plots could have been modified, usually incorporating folktale details. The hero fights to defend his personal honour, which sometimes coincides with national defence (though very often it does not), and when national defence is at stake, he is usually forced or requested to put on a fight. Very often we find the heroes in the middle of quests that have a completely different aim, and they stray into adventures as they go along, rather than having sought them out specifically. The hero is often an outcast of the society he defends, and before which he has to — and wants to — defend his personal name. This is represented by the efforts he has to go through to gain fame; at the same time, the Kyivan court where he often returns despises him and calls on him in times of trouble.

If we agree with Felix J. Oinas, and I do, that the universe represented in the *byliny* portrays a courtly environment (banquets, hunting, princes, princesses, merchants, the ‘resonating background’, as Skaftymov called it) rather than a peasant one [Oinas, Soudakoff 1975; Oinas 1978; Idem 1984], then we have to think that those who composed the original episodes were familiar with such a *milieu*, and here there are two options: courtiers or clerics. It has very often been pointed out that members of the prince’s retinue, the *druzhina*, were depicted as singing songs, or at least their Viking ancestors did. That is very well, but we have no direct evidence of such activity except for the mention of a certain Bojan in the *Slovo o polku Igoreve*. Regardless of how problematical the relation of the *Slovo* to the *byliny* might be, and it is in more than one sense, we have little evidence of literary courtly culture undertaken directly by lay members of the court. We do of course have plenty of evidence of lay members of any of the princely courts or prominent cities sponsoring or directly founding the construction of churches and monasteries, the creation or transport of icons or the commissioning of books, but we have no evidence that, once Kyiv was established as a relevant court (and there is hardly any *bylina* in which this is not obvious) courtiers or members of *druzhiny* got involved in the creative literary process *themselves*. That is not to say that there were no *druzhiny*, or that their members did not contribute decisively to the flourishing of culture, or that their Scandinavian ancestors did not play instruments and compose songs by the time they arrived at Lake Ladoga for the first time; it is just that, more than a century after their arrival, we have no evidence in the sources of any courtly, lay culture directly undertaken by the members of *druzhiny*.

If we also analyse many of the plots of any of the cycles, there are very few that do not have a biblical or bookish antecedent. If we rule out the possibility of courtiers actually writing the poems, as indeed they did in other European courts (for example, in Bohemia), the other possibility of anybody involved in literary activities in Kyivan Rus’ from its dawn is the clergy. In fact, the

monks working at the scriptoria were responsible, for example, for inserting biblical and non-biblical models of princes in the works of historiography that have survived. They also had access, of course, to courtly life, at least before the cenobitic reform. It would make more sense that these monks had composed popular retellings of biblically or literary inspired episodes as part of the Christianising endeavour amidst the hardships of defending the land of the Rus' from foreign invasions, a topic quite amply discussed in medieval Rus' literature. It should not be forgotten that the hero becomes victorious, in a surprising number of cases, with the direct help of God, or a saint, or a mother (a reflection of the Virgin Mary?). Even episodes obscured in our understanding become clear when analysed under the light of the Bible: there is a *bylina* in which Dobrynia Nikitich kills the dragon, the wording of which is reminiscent of Revelations 12:15–16. Likewise, Sviatogor, a character who seems to appear only together with Ilya/Elijah, might be a personification of the Holy Mountain, the Mount Horab where he only returned after Moses had been given the Commandments. The encounter between the two, at least in some versions, is reminiscent of the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39: 7–23). Like Elijah confronting Ahab and his wife Jezabel for having abandoned the true faith in favour of Jezabel, and suffering the terrible consequences of it, Ilya Muromets will endure endless adventures to try to save Kyiv both from infidel invaders and its own inadequate rulers²¹. One of the most remarkable examples of literary importations is probably the case of the *bylina* about Volkh Vseslavevich, whose birth from a serpent and trips to India make him remarkably similar to Alexander of Macedon, whose life was well known in monastic circles from early times. This is, moreover, one of those *byliny* included in Kirsha Danilov's collection whose variants present remarkable similarity with one another.

Popular piety is not the same as popular religion. Popular piety, from Easter processions to mystery plays, is one of the most common ways of trying to transmit to non-literate people, though not necessarily pagan or recently converted, the stories of the Bible. If the plots have mostly a biblical or bookish parallel, if the monastic environment had an almost exclusive monopoly of literature (not of writing, of course), if the milieu described is courtly, then maybe they were not composed by peasants, but received by peasants at the end of the above-mentioned survival process described by Zumthor (production, transmission, reception, preservation and repetition). Maybe the first intended

²¹ Since only a vague date can be proposed for the composition of the *byliny* (see below), the precise knowledge of which books were at that purported time available in Slavonic translation is maybe not that relevant. It should also be taken into account that many of these stories were also transmitted in apocryphal books, whose precise moment of translation is often even more difficult to pin down.

audience were precisely the people inside the court who had to be Christianised and attracted to Christian heroes, just like the deeds of Lancelot and Perceval were composed by Chrétien de Troyes for the entertainment and modelling of future knights, or the battles of El Cid were sung in the Spanish Romancero to encourage Spanish nobles to pursue the Reconquista. As in the latter case, it is only during their preservation and repetition when the peasantry become their primary recipients, as well as their custodians.

Of course in the process of appropriation, whether this was made via the famous *skomorochi* or not, some folktale details could have migrated, even the versification could have changed, but the stable episodes so many times repeated, attached to specific characters (real or not) and places and plots, should have been composed by those sufficiently aware of the compositional models they seem to use, and that points directly to the clergy.

There is yet another argument to support clerical authorship: the absolute lack of romantic involvement of the hero, or the bad luck and misery that the hero would find should he attempt to have a romantic *liason*. The extreme misogynistic tone of the poems, combined with praise for women only in their role of mothers or sisters, detaches *byliny* from any other European heroic tradition where the hero could not only have very happy adulterous relations, but also be happily married, at the same time. The absolute absence of happiness brought by love between a man and a woman (as I mentioned, when it existed, like in the case of Dunaj, it only brings bad luck to the hero) is quite symptomatic of a world where intimacy with women was shunned, if not clearly punished.

Why?

The composition of something, certainly before the arrival of modern authorship, was made with a purpose, with a public in mind, for a reason. The idea of someone composing something out of an unquenchable wish to share his thoughts and feelings with the public is something only someone like Catullus could afford. The problem of course, and it is not negligible, was the access to the material support necessary to transmit one's thoughts or feelings. It could be stone, birchbark, parchment, papyrus or paper, but availability as well as adequacy of the material support were both necessary.

It is of course arguable in the case of the *byliny* that, since we have no material support that has survived with the poems, there was none. Composition, therefore, was understood to be as oral as preservation. Moreover, oral composition does not necessarily mean peasant composition, so the question of the popular origin, this is, peasant origin, could be easily surpassed if we rely on the existence, clearly attested, of *skomorochi*, or some other minstrels, or even wandering monks. This is of course possible, but then we have another

problem. The closeness of all variants is such after a such a long time, that either they all descended from nineteenth century written collections, such as Kirsha Danilov's or others similar, currently lost, or they relied on written accounts for longer immediately after their time of composition until the plots became sufficiently stable. The long centuries of silence between composition and collection make all these possibilities highly speculative. We were simply not there. But we can try to tackle the question from another angle.

Who benefited from transmitting allegorical biblical stories under the form of heroic poetry, with antagonists and princes and dragons? Who was interested in transmitting, for example, the pilgrimage of Vasilii Buslaev to Jerusalem? Or to stress the relevance of God's intervention? Or to denounce the impiety of the Kyivan prince, if need be? Even to denounce the invasion of the dog-headed and infidel Mamai to Kyivan Rus'? Who else was familiar with all these topics and had enough literary resources and images in the written repertoire to compose the poems but the clergy? Whether they decided to write them down or not in durable parchment, which they clearly used for other more official uses, is by the bye. In our case, clearly the problem was not the access to material means but rather the understanding on the part of those who had access, of what should it be used for, and popular piety was clearly not a priority. The traditional theory of popular origin also relied on persistent illiteracy of the non-elites, the reason why, according to such a theory, they had had to keep them orally, because nobody wanted or cared for writing them down, like all the folklore tales. The birchbark findings in the last decades have shown that some lay people were perfectly well aware of literacy and used it, directly or indirectly, when the situation arose for the purpose they deemed important. Folktales and *byliny* were simply not one of those scenarios. Orality is a fascinating phenomenon, particularly among societies that are not, as Walter Ong would put it, primarily oral, meaning societies where literacy was not widespread, even radically reduced, but where, nevertheless, the uses of literacy were known [Ong 2002: 10–12]. This would support the above-mentioned theory of Novikov that many of the nineteenth-century attested singers had learnt the poems from written collections, either Kirsha Danilov's or others. Whether earlier singers, professional or not, had learnt their trade otherwise, purely orally or also from written sources they learnt by heart at some point, is something that, due to the flimsy evidence available, remains necessarily unknown.

So we might have a who and we might have a why, namely, a courtly and monastic environment maybe with the intention of transmitting biblically inspired stories about the defence of the Motherland, but we still need to answer the two final questions.

When?

While the *byliny* are, due to their literary heroic nature, intrinsically unreliable as historiographic sources, there are, nevertheless, certain constant features that could help us at least to propose a range of possible dates where their composition took place. First of all, they speak certainly from a Christian point of view to listeners who have at least a rudimentary understanding of the Christian religion: the intervention of God (or Saint Nicholas) in the salvation of the hero, the relevance of churches, the portrayal of the antagonist as non-Christian; all these point to a Christianised society, in full or in the process of becoming so. The relevance of Kyiv in the compositions is undeniable, but, curiously, most heroes come not from Kyiv but from the North. Only Dobrynia Nikitch might be Kyivan. Most importantly, the authority represented by the prince of Kyiv is not really on the side of the hero, being often his antagonist. So, while Kyiv is relevant, it does not seem to be the model to follow for Ilya Muromets, Dobrynia Nikitch or Alesha Popovich, but rather the place, and the palace, where they have to give an account of their deeds.

The recurring anxiety caused by foreign invasions (one of the main reasons Kyivan heroes have to intervene), is difficult to pinpoint temporally. It could be the Pechenegs of the mid-twelfth century or the Mongols of the mid-thirteenth, but the relevance of Kyiv makes it more plausible to place them before the complete loss of political and cultural relevance of the Rus' capital, but once foreign enemies had started to be a real threat *ad portas*. Since the fall of Kyiv did not happen until the mid-thirteenth century, I would argue that 1240 and the decades immediately after is certainly a *terminus ante quem*. It would need to be a time when the preeminence of Kyiv as the political and cultural centre was still perceived as relevant, otherwise the heroes would not seek recognition at the Kyivan court; they would go elsewhere for their necessary social sanction. After the first quarter of the fourteenth century, the battle of Kyiv was waged between the Lithuanians and the Tatars, so the relevance to the Northern Russians of the ancient capital of Kyiv must have been greatly diminished by then. The *terminus post quem* is probably after the threats to Kyivan Rus' were felt as sufficiently real and imminent, either by the Pechenegs or subsequently by the Mongols. This leaves us with a range of about one hundred years each side of the turn of the thirteenth century where the point of view of poems, their functionality and their rhetoric made any sense, at least to their first intended audience.

Where?

Since the beginning of the study of the *byliny*, the presence of the city and the prince of Kyiv in a substantial part of them moved scholars to bend towards Kyiv as their place of origin. Some attempts were even made to match the de-

scription of buildings with archaeological evidence. A few things should be pointed out, though. The fact that Kyiv figures prominently does not make the *byliny* pro-Kyivan in any sense at all. Kyiv is the reference point from which some of the heroes depart or return to, but the court of Kyiv is cruel to the hero, the prince of Kyiv is less heroic than the heroes, to the point that sometimes he or his wife are his antagonists, and Kyiv is the city from which the defence of the Motherland, carried out by the heroes, has to be done in order to save Christianity. So it is not really pro-Kyivan at all. Kyiv, rather than being the Ithaca of the hero, is the Troy, the place that has to be fought for, but from which nothing good would come out, unless one is Aeneas escaping the city in order to found a new civilisation.

The fact that the *byliny* were first collected in the North of Russia, near Lake Ladoga and in the province of Olonets, but referred to a medieval court in Kyiv, has traditionally spurred all sorts of theories as to how the compositions would have travelled north and when. And this might have been the question if the rationale behind the compositions was to defend the Kyivan agenda, or to defend the position of the Kyivan court, or prince, which they don't. There is no reason to suppose that the anti-Kyivan rhetoric of the compositions had to originate in Kyiv, no reason at all. The most logical thing would be to suppose that they were composed by anybody but Kyivans. Kyivans would not laugh about their prince and princess, certainly not if they were members of the clergy; Kyivans would not need Northern heroes to come and rescue them from infidels; Kyivans would not make a point of having a court of useless knights among which only three, with the help of God, will deliver the entire nation. So, if they were found in the North and they do not display a pro-Kyivan point of view, the most likely scenario is that they were composed more or less where they were found, that is, the region of Novgorod. Even more so if one bears in mind that the only other place mentioned is actually Novgorod, and this one in much reliable detail. The descriptions of the streets and markets of Novgorod, the dealings of Vasilii Buslaev and Sadko in the *veche* and in the ports, and the very important fact that these are the only two heroes not involved in the salvation of Kyiv, but only involved in their own journeys and adventures could help us understand the rationale for the composition of the *byliny*. It is, after all, the same Novgorod that was never conquered by the accursed Mongols depicted in the poems, the same Novgorod that has a cathedral to St. Nicholas, the only saint intervening in the poems to save the heroes. Of course this does not mean that the *skomorochi*, the wondering minstrels did not have the *byliny* in their repertoires [Zguta 1978]; it only means that 1) maybe they had not necessarily composed the episodes originally, though they might be partially responsible for their later recombination; and 2) that even if they were part of their repertoires, they did not have to travel about a thousand kilometres north.

It is always tempting, of course, to try to trace back the origin to the city of one of its greatest heroes, Murom, but the attempt is inane: we cannot know if the Murom in the patronymic of Ilya represented really Murom, or any city in the north, or any of the principalities to which the city belonged during the possible time frame. The only thing we can know is that the name of the great hero was not Ilya the Kyivan. Likewise, there are several mentions in fifteenth and sixteenth century chronicles to characters who might have inspired or paralleled the heroes of the *byliny*. The earliest reference is probably made in the Novg. IV – Sof. I to a certain Aleksander Popovich who died alongside other ‘*hrabry*’ in the Battle on the Kalka against the Tatars in 1223. Aleksander Popovich and Dobrynia (or sometimes Timonya) Zolotoy Poyas are mentioned in several chronicles in the account of the Lipitsa Battle (1216), maybe based on a Rostov source, according to Ia. S. Luria. And another Dobrynia Mikitich is mentioned in the inscription on the wall of the St. Saviour Cathedral in Pereyaslavl'-Zalessky among the murderers of Andrei Bogoliubskii, who, in turn, might be the same person mentioned in the Laurentian chronicle on accounts of the war waged in Vladimir Suzdal in the 1170s²².

All of this might be true, but identifying a possible real person behind a literary character does not add or take anything from the literary endeavour. It is not going to make it more or less relevant, or more or less true, because the parameters of analysis should not be – should never be – the historical accuracy of the poems. Those who composed them for the first time most likely used long-lasting material writing supports, whether these were parchment, paper or walls, to transmit the facts they thought were relevant to be transmitted, and conveyed the literary endeavours to more perishable supports, either books that were not kept or a collective memory that could transmit them. It is irrelevant to trace back Dobrynia because we are not going to trace back the dragon either, and the moment they become antagonists in a fight described in literature, they belong to the same realm for the receiver, and maybe for the singer, which is neither history nor necessarily unreal fantasy – it is only literature.

So what do we have? We have an old repository of heroic episodes and trips, kept orally for at least five hundred years, in a verse form that could have been either the one in which they were originally composed or adopted later at any stage of their long survival history; that seem to represent, at least partially, popular forms of biblical and bookish plots intended initially for an audience who could relate to the courtly, martial, or trading settings described in the poems. What further characterises all the existing *byliny* is a clear anti-Kyivan agenda, comprehensively explicit in the characterisation of the Kyivan prince

²² On the assassins of Bogoliubskii, see: [Гиппиус, Михеев 2020].

as cowardly and morally flawed and the city of Kyiv not as victorious (unless the *byliny* heroes intervene), but as the place where the ruin of the Motherland and Christianity are about to be unleashed. This alone would have been enough reason for not having any written record of them, no quotation, no paraphrasing, no reference, no allusion elsewhere. Their subversiveness at the time of their initial composition, together with their social and political redundancy during the long centuries of preservation, could explain why they were not committed to writing earlier. At any rate, the *byliny* are, together with the Serbo-Croatian epics and the Spanish *Romancero*, the only European examples of a remarkable and extraordinarily long epic tradition, of an uninterrupted survival from medieval to modern times.

Many of the questions posed by the very existence of this epic tradition necessarily remain unanswered and, as such, any hypothesis, such as the present one, does have to remain speculative, in absence of any hard core facts that could be provided. Much more is known about the oral environment in which they survived than about the environment in which they were composed. My hypothesis only addresses the literary environment where I think they were created taking into account the point of view of the narrative, the typology of the plots, the characterisation of the heroes, the possible audience, the studies on secondary orality, and the ideological environment where literary activity was being conducted before Kyiv lost relevance as a medieval capital. It is not much to get by, but it is a possible answer, the most straight-forward, I think, to many of the questions that remain unanswered.

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