13

Slavic Epic: Past Tales and Present Myths*

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Slavic epic is, in fact, something of a misnomer. By "Slavic" we designate first and foremost one of the major branches of the Indo-European family of languages, while "epic" is a type of composition which, more often than not, deals with foundational or national myths. No texts have survived in which both characteristics, Slavic and epic, were concurrent. We do not have any written accounts dating to the time of the unified Slavic proto-language. Writing arrived late to Slavic-speaking peoples, only after they had abandoned their original homeland and spread across the land between Europe and Asia that is nowadays mostly populated by speakers of languages of the Slavic family.[1] Unfortunately, too, none of the literate peoples with whom the Slavs had contact recorded a hypothetical Common Slavic Epic.

We therefore have no such thing as a long Slavic epic poem narrating a foundational myth, either in written form or somehow preserved in oral form. In fact, what we refer to nowadays as "Slavic epic" are speculative and partial reconstructions of certain aspects of purported common oral epic poetry, such as the type of verse or the characteristics of performance. Not only are we dealing, then, with an uncertain, reconstructed tradition, but such reconstruction is founded only upon late written evidence from only two of the three linguistic areas of Slavic (South and East Slavic); there is little or no evidence of any West Slavic epic.[2]

Bleak as this outlook might seem, there is still much to be said about epics written or performed in Slavic languages, and how they functioned, in the distant as well as in the more recent past, in the societies that produced them and kept them alive.

Past Tales

Within the sphere of Slavic languages, we can attest with a relative degree of certainty only to the existence of written epic poems in East Slavic, produced in medieval

times in the territories that have come to be known as the Kievan Rus' or Early Rus' principalities.[3] If such written production also existed in other areas, such as the Balkans, we have only second-hand notices of it (Koljević 1980: 2–4, 11–13, 30–2). In any case, no written specimen of South Slavic epic was transmitted prior to the collections taken down directly from singers in the nineteenth century. The paucity of written production and its limitation to the east area within the Slavic realm was to a certain extent compensated for by translations of various epic works originating elsewhere, manuscripts of which circulated among various Slavic-speaking peoples well into the eighteenth century.

The reconstructed tradition

During the second half of the nineteenth century, following the emergence of what came to be known as Pan-Slavism, a powerful idea penetrated literary studies. This idea was based on the assumption that Slavic was more than a linguistic concept: it was an ideological and cultural and, to a large extent, also a religious one (Conte 1986: 613–45; Jakobson 1953: 1–5; 1954; Potebnja 1914). Philological studies of Church Slavonic showed clearly that manuscripts of religious works in Slavonic were produced, circulated and read, at least for several hundred years, from Kiev to Mount Athos and from Ohrid to Novgorod. This large sphere of cultural exchange excluded the Western Slavic peoples, who had adopted the Western rite instead of the Eastern one, and therefore a script based on Latin characters instead of the Cyrillic-based Old Slavonic script.[4] The areas that followed the Eastern Church of Byzantium engaged in longer-lasting cultural exchange, the full impact of which is yet to be assessed. It is precisely this area that has yielded sufficient material to encourage a reconstruction of Slavic oral epic.

   Nevertheless, before we can list those common features, several cautionary remarks need to be made. The reconstruction of oral epic has been based upon *modern* material, that is, upon poems that were for the most part collected between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Before audio recordings could be used, this process of collection had to rely on the honesty and accuracy of the collectors. Fortunately, their transcripts, in general, compare quite well with the later phonographic records. Although it is unlikely that the characteristics we shall examine migrated in either direction within the two traditions to be compared, South and East Slavic, we can neither pinpoint the exact date when these characteristics took shape nor be sure that they were present early enough to postulate a common origin for them.

   First of all, there is what Roman Jakobson (1952, 1953) called Slavic epic verse, or rather, verses. By comparing the surviving oral epic traditions in both areas, he came to the conclusion that there had been two asymmetrical epic verses – a long one, the famous decasyllable, or *deseterac*, consisting of two cola (between six and four syllables each), and a short epic verse (between five and three syllables each). To that we can add certain compositional techniques – for example, the negative

comparison – and perhaps some compositional elements, such as the feminine lament.[5] The morphological analysis of the poems and the systematic study of motifs, formulas and themes (*siuzhets* in Russian academia), proved fruitful in encouraging comparative studies on common Slavic stock elements or repertoires (Jakobson and Szeftel 1949; Lord 1954; Vesterholt 1973). However, as further analysis has shown, some of these supposedly common elements are not as evident as they were claimed to be, others can be considered to be literary universals, and still others could be the result of translations of heroic literature. At any rate, all these elements, jointly or separately, force us to reconsider some evidence that has thus far been taken for granted by scholars who apply conclusions reached in one area to another or engage in speculative comparisons but ignore chronological and functional differences.

We can tentatively reconstruct a common epic verse, certain shared topics – such as the often-mentioned rescue of a bride, although this is not necessarily an original Slavic motif (Lord 1954: 381–3; Vesterholt 1973: 52ff) – and certain compositional techniques (mentioned below), but there are no heroes or plots common to both oral traditions which would allow us to postulate a common origin for any text. In oral traditions, some plots seem to share some elements (such as Mikhailo Potyk in the Russian and Baš Čelik in Serbian and Macedonian traditions), but the heroes are not identical, and the common elements do not amount to full plots. We are therefore dealing with national and geographically as well as chronologically localized traditions. Even to the most adventurous critics, it would seem hazardous to go any further. It is difficult to use comparison to isolate purely Slavic elements, for two reasons: on the one hand, it is almost impossible to determine precisely when a common Indo-European or, indeed, a universal theme becomes particularly Slavic; on the other, the arrival of literacy exposed all Slavic traditions to the same possible outside influences. Hence, when we think we are seeing a common pattern, we might actually be seeing various adaptations of a non-Slavic model received at different times.

Translations, mutatis mutandis

These non-Slavic epic models arrived, at least partially, in translation. The number of translations of non-Slavic epics that were produced and circulated in the Slavic-speaking world is remarkable. This is not surprising, however, given that translations represented 90 percent of the total output of written texts during the first five centuries of literary activity in Slavic languages (tenth to fifteenth centuries; Marti 2003: 676). From the time when manuscript production and copying first became widespread in *Slavia Orthodoxa*[6] and well into the seventeenth century, translations of various epic works were made and circulated within the realm of Slavic-speaking peoples. These included Pseudo-Callisthenes' text of the *Alexander Romance*, Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae*, Flavius Josephus's *Jewish War*, and, in certain areas, adaptations of the Byzantine romance of *Digenis Akritas*. Some of these works arrived initially as parts of other works, usually chronicles,[7] and not as

functionally independent epic works, while others were adapted even to the point of losing their title, or were preserved only in oral tradition.[8]

The degree of adaptation of these works varied and so, accordingly, did their role in the development of epic Slavic models. In general, when they were embedded in chronicles, the translation was quite faithful to the original (the first translations of the *Alexander Romance*, for example). The process of adaptation seems to have been more conscious, including additions or the abridgement of some sections, when the epic work was independent (Josephus' *Jewish War*, Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae*) though its historical background apparently prevented a free use of the materials, which seems to have been the case when the tale was perceived as ahistorical (*Digenis Akritas*, *Boeve de Haumtone*).[9] The influence of these translations could range from the appropriation of formulas to the reception of themes that were later reworked in oral tradition.

Written epos

As mentioned above, evidence of medieval epic writing exists only in the East Slavic area, in the area of the Early Rus' principalities. In the view of specialists, the number of works that can be included in this analysis differs greatly. Essential to this question is an ongoing debate on generic classifications in Early Rus' literature, which swings between diachronic definitions and synchronic descriptions, between interpretation and categorization. While from a formalist point of view some would include military tales alongside epic texts, others, adopting a socio-cultural and functional perspective, would situate the latter closer to princely panegyrics.[10]

The epic of the losers: the Igor Tale

The *Slovo o Polku Igoreve*,[11] also known as the *Tale* (or *Lay*) *of Igor's Campaign*, or simply the *Igor Tale*, is in medieval East Slavic literature the work that has received the highest proportion of scholarship per written word, and this not only due to the fact that its authenticity has been challenged repeatedly.[12] The problem is really twofold: its only known manuscript perished in the Moscow fire of 1812, and the text, as it is known today, does not seem to fit within the universe of Russian epics as we know it. Neither of these problems, however, is impossible to overcome.

The *Igor Tale* narrates the defeat of Prince Igor of Novgorod-Seversk by the Polovtsians in the year 1185, a historical fact also attested in various redactions of the *Russian Primary Chronicle*.[13] We only have an edition made in 1800 of the sixteenth-century manuscript belonging to the collection of Count Musin-Pushkin and a copy of the same manuscript, made for the Empress Catherine II the Great between 1795 and 1796. Musin-Pushkin's manuscript, which also contained other works (Jakobson 1966: 106–8),[14] supposedly perished in the Moscow fire in 1812. Since the poem shares many features with another milestone of Russian epic, the

Zadonshchina, which narrates the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380 and has survived in at least six manuscripts, there has been much discussion on whether the direction of influence went from the *Igor Tale* to the *Zadonshchina* or vice versa.[15] Given that the historical events narrated in the latter were chronologically later, and since the *Igor Tale* was "peculiar" in comparison with other surviving epics, the theory of forgery began to gain followers. The *Tale* was located, furthermore, at the end of the manuscript, another reason why the defenders of the forgery theory thought it was "added." As a result of this controversy, the poem has been analyzed from all possible points of view, from folklore to semiotics.

Linguistic evidence, however, seems to have settled the question, at least for the moment. Improved knowledge of the language of the late twelfth century, stemming in large part from evidence found in birch bark documents in Novgorod, leaves little doubt about the poem's authenticity. The experts who defend its genuineness argue, in a nutshell, that no forger could have come up with the forms of certain words attested in the copy at that stage of linguistic evolution, which precedes the composition of the *Zadonshchina*.[16] That said, it is much more difficult to provide a date of composition. Arguing, for example, that the poem must have been written no later than 1 October 1187, the date of the death of Prince Igor's father-in-law, Iaroslav Osmomysl of Galich, who is mentioned in the *Igor Tale* as still living (verse 130), implies a gross misunderstanding of compositional techniques outside historiography. Zalizniak (2004: 30–2) concludes on the basis of linguistic evidence that the *Igor Tale* was composed at the end of the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth century and copied in the northwest region in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries.

The other problem to be resolved was the poem's "peculiarity." Unlike the oral epics, but like the *Zadonshchina*, it was not written in verse, but in rhythmic prose,[17] and only a tenth of the whole text actually describes the attested events of 1185. The *Tale* is a dramatic account of the defeat, highly lyrical in many passages (particularly the lament of Jaroslavna), with lavish imagery abundant in comparisons with animals and natural phenomena. It does not follow a linear account of events, and the references to Christianity, although present (particularly in vv. 163, 214–18), are less relevant than in other, possibly later, epic texts. Even so, the poem is far from representing a completely pre-Christian society because, although references are made to pagan gods (Veles v. 17; Stribog v. 48; Dazhbog vv. 64 and 76; Khors v. 159) as well as oneiromancy (vv. 93–102) and omens (vv. 27–9, 44), there are also clear allusions to Christian thought: nobody can escape the judgement of God (v. 163); it is God who shows Igor the way back home (v. 184), and, most importantly for considering the *Igor Tale* an epic poem, antagonists are addressed as infidels or pagans (vv. 41, 78, 87, 132, 217). Of all these verses containing a clear Christian component – to which we could add various references to churches (vv. 63, 160, 213) – only vv. 41 and 132 are also present in the *Zadonshchina*.

On the other hand, although it seems difficult to understand what the purpose would have been of composing a lay about the defeat of a minor prince, when the coalition of Russian princes united under the leadership of Grand Prince Sviatoslav

Vsevolodich of Kiev had just inflicted a serious defeat on the Polovtsians only the year before (1184), capturing several of the khans and other notables, it is no less true that the *Igor Tale* is neither the only example of a pessimistic medieval epic (the *Chanson de Roland* is another; see Bossy and Duggan, this volume) nor even the only Slavic example of this kind: the cycle of Kosovo, for instance, focuses on the Serbian defeat in the battle of Kosovo and on the tragic destiny of prince Lazar (see Foley, this volume).

What is more startling is the choice of the historical event. The expedition of Igor Sviatoslavich was on no account politically or militarily relevant. The Battle of the River Kalka in 1223, where the combined armies of Chernigov, Kiev, and Galicia, together with Polovtsian troops, were for the first time defeated by the Mongols, would have offered a more obvious framework for such a sorrowful epic composition. The main questions to be asked, therefore, are why, for whom, and with what aim was the *Igor Tale* composed.

Be all this as it may – the lyric tone, the narration of a defeat, the low emphasis placed on the defense of religion – the truth is that a better path to resolving the paradox of the epic qualities of the *Igor Tale* lies in changing the terms of the paradox. Instead of insisting on forgery theories because the poem does not fit our preconceived parameters of the genre (or of what the epic genre came to imply), perhaps a more promising approach is to rethink our *a priori* conceptions of genre definitions and to allow room for the possibility that such a genre evolved into a more deeply religious and state-conscious form of expression than circumstances at the end of the twelfth century in Rus' would have permitted or, indeed, required.

The epic of the winners: the Kulikovo Cycle

Nearly two centuries later, another historical event, the Battle of Kulikovo Field, prompted the composition of the greatest epic cycle in Russian medieval literature. In 1380, the Mongol army of the Golden Horde led by Mamai was defeated by the combined forces of various Russian territories led by the grand prince of Moscow and Vladimir, Dmitrii Ivanovich, who, because the battleground was situated on the banks of the river Don, earned the sobriquet of Donskoi. The cycle consists of two independent epic works, the *Zadonshchina* ("the battle beyond the Don"),[18] and the *Tale of the Battle Against Mamai*, both in prose, as well as a chronicle account of the events, as was also the case with the events narrated in the *Igor Tale*. It was traditionally accepted that the *Zadonshchina* was written shortly after the battle, before the city of Trnovo, capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire and mentioned in the epic as a stronghold of Christianity, had fallen to the Turks in 1393 (Jakobson and Worth 1966: 540–2). Watermark analysis of the oldest manuscripts, however, confirms that none of them can be placed before the last quarter of the fifteenth century (Kuchkin 1998: 88, 95–6).

Regarding its authorship, a certain Sofonii of Riazan is mentioned in the colophons of two manuscripts.[19] Since these belong to different branches of the

stemma, it is possible that Sofonii was the author of an archetype, now lost, from which they both derive (Vaillant 1967: viii–ix). This hypothesis is reinforced by the fact that the short redaction, including certain addenda, is not simply an abridged version of the long one (Zimin 1966). Attention has turned lately to the role played by the copyist of the oldest, short redaction of the work, Efrosin, from the *scriptorium* of the monastery of Kirillo-Belozerskii, not only in his capacity as copyist but also as editor and maybe creator of certain epic compositions (Romanchuk 2007: 197–237; Bobrov 2005, 2006, 2008).

The *Tale of the Battle Against Mamai* was undoubtedly composed after the *Zadonshchina*, from which it borrows quotations. We have nine main redactions and more than a hundred copies, and the earliest manuscripts date to the early sixteenth century.[20] The *Tale of the Battle* is much more detailed and lacks the poetic and lyric digressions that situate the *Zadonshchina* far closer to the *Tale of Igor's Campaign* than to the *Tale of the Battle Against Mamai*. The latter emphasizes even more insistently that the fight against the pagans was waged in defense of the Motherland and of Christianity, and it clearly identifies Moscow as a stronghold of Christianity. This equation of the defense of the Motherland and the Christian faith is also typical, as we will see, of Russian oral heroic poems, the *byliny*. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the *Tale*'s different tone – it abounds in biblical quotations and contextualizes the victory over the Mongols within a prearranged divine plan – corresponds to the political agenda of the rise of Moscow in the second half of the fifteenth century (Garzaniti 2006). If there was an evolution of the epic genre in Rus', from the *Igor Tale* through the *Zadonshchina* to the *Tale of the Battle Against Mamai*, it clearly would have moved from a more lyrical and less religious form to a more factual, consciously religious, and state-oriented form.

Along with these three main works, quite a large number of "epic passages" are found in the chronicles (the *Tale about the Ruin of the Russian Land*, and the texts that have been collectively known as the *Riazan' Cycle*),[21] whose classification as epic largely depends on whether it is made on the grounds of content (they all narrate military deeds, and should therefore be included) or function (the narratives originally conceived for inclusion in the chronicles or as princely panegyrics were created with neither the same function and aim nor using the same stylistic devices as epic, and should therefore be excluded). It is, nonetheless, noteworthy that the descriptions of certain princes, like Andrei Bogolubskii or Prince Roman of Galich, included in thirteenth-century chronicles, are remarkably similar to those of the epic heroes of oral poetry, the *bogatyri*, as they enter into battle to defeat their enemies single-handed.[22] We could also include in this group the *Narrative of the Pious Prince Dovmont and his Courage* and the *Heroic Deeds of Mercurius of Smolensk*, which were written probably as early as the fourteenth century. Perhaps the most representative of these princely biographies embedded in the chronicles is the *Life of Alexander Nevski*, a grandiloquent panegyric of the prince's life, endowed with all the typical characteristics of a great warrior and saint.[23]

The East Slavic written epic follows a highly typical pattern: a historical event prompts the composition of an almost always glorifying and deeply Christian literary

tale, parallel to its annalistic account, that invariably reflects the struggle between the Motherland and foreign pagan enemies. These texts have survived, whether or not they were originally created in written form, as independent units and self-contained compositions. The relation of this type of epic to history should thus be clear: history provides an argument that literature embellishes for the glorification of present or past rulers, always in the service of a propagandistic aim.

Surviving Slavic traditions: the Russian oral epic[24]

The byliny

Byliny[25] (singular *bylina*) is the conventional name given to Russian oral heroic poems.[26] The poems, known to those who sang them as *stariny*, "old songs," were first collected in northern Russia, in the province of Olonets, in the 1860s, and their collection continued until the 1930s in the regions near Lake Ladoga. They share a particular verse type, and we can infer that they were originally not only recited but sung, both from their verse pattern and because recordings, if only of some stanzas, were made at the end of the nineteenth century (Grigor'ev 1904). Of around 3,000 collected transcriptions of the *byliny*, approximately 2,000 have been published. These 3,000 transcriptions, however, do not correspond to 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. The *byliny* usually contain between 200 and 400 verses or lines, although some can reach 1,000 lines. They have no rhyme or stanza patterns, but rather follow a stress pattern (long epic line) usually concluding in a two-syllable ending or "clausula" at the termination of each verse.

The corpus of *byliny* has traditionally been divided into cycles: the mythological cycle, the Kiev cycle, and the Novgorod cycle. The first cycle comprises heroes who seem to have extraordinary characteristics: Sviatogor, who is a giant riding slowly towards his own death; Mikula Selianovich, a mighty ploughman who ploughs at a miraculous speed; and Volkh Vseslavevich, who is able to metamorphose himself and his retinue into animals to conquer a foreign kingdom. The poems of the Kievan cycle, the largest of the three, mainly narrate the adventures of various heroes (*bogatyri*) who travel to the court of Kiev to prove themselves or narrate their own deeds. Among the most famous heroes, who are the protagonists of the greatest number of versions, are Il'ia Muromets, Dobrynia Nikitich and Alesha Popovich. Other minor heroes of the Kievan cycle are Mikhailo Potyk, Dunai and Diuk Stepanovich. The Novgorod cycle groups together the adventures of Sadko and Vasilii Buslaev, two sailors from this merchant city who undertake unusual trips. Sadko travels underwater to the realm of the King of the Sea, while Vasilii Buslaev meets his death upon returning from a pilgrimage to Constantinople.

The Kievan *byliny* show certain constant characteristics that differentiate them from *byliny* of the other two groups.[27] Their protagonists are lonely heroes – except

for Alesha Popovich, who is accompanied by his squire, Ekim – whose travels always have the Kievan court as their point of departure or arrival. This court is presided over by Prince Vladimir, a character not necessarily representing any historical figure,[28] before whom they have to prove their honor and their prowess. This is typically achieved by defeating an antagonist, who is usually an individual rather than a faction, representing the forces of evil – a foreign invader (as in the fights of Il'ia Muromets against Kalin Tsar), a dragon (Dobrynia Nikitich), a sorceress (Mikhailo Potyk), or other mythical creatures (Alesha Popovich). The *byliny* hero is, for the most part, strongly attached to the Kievan court, which bestows upon him the fame and social status required for a heroic figure. His moral qualities are essential, as is his sense of duty and loyalty to Prince Vladimir. Since he is a warrior, his military skills are strongly underlined; so is his Christian faith. His reliance on the intervention of God rather than on his comrades-in-arms conveys the impression of a highly individual hero rather than a leader.[29] He displays his military skills not only in the defense of the land, as is typical of most heroes, but also in the search for a bride. This search rarely has a happy ending, unlike the defense of the land, in which he is always successful: a knight-errant, victorious against all odds, always morally superior to his master.

All these common features allow us to envision a semiotic universe of the *byliny* which differentiates the *bylina* from other oral and/or epic forms, such as the historical songs or the military tales. The Kievan *byliny* thus define the canon of oral epic, whereas the *byliny* belonging to the mythological and Novgorod cycles would be at the periphery of such a canon; they share some characteristics with the Kievan *byliny* and others with various forms of oral compositions, such as folktales. The semiotic universe (the lonely hero, the court, the prince, the single antagonist) is structured around a feature which is dominant in the compositions: the hero's journey (Torres Prieto 2005). There is no such thing as a static *bylina* where the action takes place in one single location. There may be different types of travels – a military campaign, the search for a bride, or even an adventure trip – but there is no *bylina*, of any type, without them. What makes the Kievan *byliny* paradigmatic is that such journeys always begin or end in the Kievan court. This courtly element is an intrinsic part of the semiotic universe; its purpose is the reflection not of a historical situation but of a symbolic and stable reality that is recognizable by an audience as functionally effective. Each of the components of the *byliny* is so constructed as to permit the audience to recognize this specific type of composition (the travelling hero, the coward prince, the heathen antagonist).[30] Mikhailo Potyk, for example, clearly represents an antihero, but the *bylina* contains all the literary elements of the semiotic universe that allow us to define it as such, that is, the trip, the court, the prince, the antagonist.

Alongside the semiotic universe of the *byliny*, there are many other recurring details that form a more complex structure on two levels: the *realia* and the behavior of the characters. The *realia* include the means of transport (either horse or boat), ceremonies at court, banquets, the game of chess, archery contests, pilgrimages to Constantinople and the life of pilgrims, descriptions of palaces, churches, or tents in

the open field, tax-collection and tax-payment, and the occasional use of magic. All these "details" make clear to the audience that what they are listening to or reading is a *bylina*. Some of them can be traced in history, but not to the extent, as some have attempted, of dating the *byliny* within a specific historical context (Lipets 1969; Rybakov 1963). Likewise, the behavior of the characters, as described above, is constant in all the poems: they always convey, for example, a poor image of the Kievan prince. The elements of both these variables, the *realia* and the behavioral pattern of the characters involved in the plots, are stable, defining the *byliny* and distinguishing them from any other form of oral narrative in which a hero goes on a quest and is victorious.

From the compositional point of view, the proposition has been strongly defended that there was no "Urtext" underlying the *byliny* and that they were composed anew each time. Although reconstructing an "original text" is impossible, and indeed futile, the distribution and combination of episodes in the *bylina* are not as free as they are in the fairy tale or other forms of popular literature (laments, harvesting songs) which, furthermore, had a clear social function as songs accompanying social rituals.[31] Nor are the motifs and themes as freely combined by the singer as they are in South Slavic epic (Vesterholt 1973).

The *bylina* is, in many respects, closer to medieval romance than to national epic. The hero fights to defend his personal honor, which sometimes coincides with national defense (though very often it does not), and when national defense is at stake, he is usually forced or requested to fight. Very often we find the heroes in the middle of trips that have a completely different aim, and they meet adventures as they go along, instead of having been predestined for them.

Origin and transmission of the byliny

From the time of their collection, studies on *byliny* have focused mainly on two questions: their origin and their transmission. These questions are pertinent to a study of the relation between *byliny* and history because, depending on the answers given to these questions, different, even contradictory, models of this relation have been produced by divergent schools of thought.

V. F. Miller and his followers, in what came to be known at the beginning of the twentieth century as the Historical School, argued that the origin of the *byliny* was aristocratic. They based this view mainly on certain details of *realia* and a process of "Kievization" of wandering epic motifs. These historical details are probably what allowed the reciters to say that the *byliny* were "staroe-byvaloe" ("old and real"). The fact that some of these details can be checked against historical information does not, however, make the *byliny* historiographic documents. We have evidence, for example, that from the mid-tenth century onwards the princes granted the privilege of collecting tribute to somebody else (Mel'nikova 1996: 67), which matches the occurrence of tax-collecting trips in the *byliny* in which the prince does not participate.[32] We also find in the chronicles tales of single combat up to the mid-eleventh century,

which could have been an actual practice (Franklin and Shepard 1996: 195). Nevertheless, and although many details point to what Stender-Petersen (1956: 70–4; Stender-Petersen and Bach 1953: 217–40) and Mel'nikova (1996: 66–72, 96–112) call a "retinue culture," whether of exclusively Varangian origin or of later, mixed Scando-Slavic provenance, actual connections are still difficult to prove – not because the historical arguments or theories are not consistent but because they overlook the literary element. It has often been claimed that the informants of the *byliny* and the chronicles were members of the prince's retinue forming the court, but such claims disregard the fact that the idealized heroic environment of the *byliny* might also have been projected onto this court. If the origin of the *byliny* was aristocratic and they were created at court, the process of transmission, probably by wandering minstrels, would have moved "downwards" until the texts were "adopted" by the community.

On the opposite side was the Soviet School of Folklorists, who insisted that the popular masses had mastered the creative process and that their texts offered evidence of opposition to the "feudal state." In making this claim, however, these scholars were equating creation with preservation.

The above-mentioned semiotic universe, however, offers some clues as to the poems' relation to history, if the focus is changed from the possible producers to the potential addressees. We might then be able to infer an aristocratic origin of the *byliny* not only from certain historical details or from the use of certain motifs, such as hunting (Oinas 1985). Rather, it seems obvious that the *byliny* are closer to heroic romances than to grand national epics; the hero as the central figure embodies all the moral qualities to be highlighted. Accordingly, the poems' ethos must have resonated with a ruling class, commercial or military, whose ideas and ideals about loyalty to a master, defense of the land, and the importance of wealth were reflected in the poems. The hero's trust in God's intervention and the role that both the Mother of God and the saints play in his salvation are significant and comparable to later works of heroic literature; they suggest a Christianized society as potential recipients, sharing in the ethos of the *byliny* hero.[33]

From the types of plots and heroes featured in the *byliny*, we might further infer that the society that was the intended audience of these poems was exposed to frequent war, worried about the integrity of the land, and was familiar with taxes and marriage arrangements with foreign peoples. The elite culture depicted in the poems, represented by the court and its ceremonials, the wealthy, long-distance trade, and the heroes' skills, not least in hunting and playing chess and musical instruments, suggests an audience that valued these skills and would view the lack of ceremony displayed, for example, by the envoys of Kalin Tsar upon entering the Kievan palace as reproachable behavior. The audience would also understand that the hero is aided by God or his saints and consider the equation of Motherland and Christian faith self-evident, as is the case in the written epics we discussed. Nor is the behavior of the prince unexpected. Unlike the princes whose lives are described in the chronicles, the prince of Kiev, as we have seen, is not an admirable character. By contrast, the heroes shine even more brightly. Like some mistreated military saints,

such as the brothers Boris and Gleb who were long worshipped as cult figures, the *byliny* heroes also endure their persecutions and set examples to follow.

Byliny *as history*

The historical context in which oral epic emerged and developed can thus be narrowed down. Based on the content of the poems, we can establish a historical *terminus post quem*. In the case of the *byliny*, this *terminus* comprises the following constellation: the pre-eminence of Kiev over other cities has clearly been established and not yet been diminished; the society is incontrovertibly Christian; and the Mongol conquest has already taken place. This is probably as close as we can get.

   The fact that Kiev is constantly represented in the poems does not necessarily mean that they were composed in Kiev. In fact, as we saw, the description of the Kievan court and the Kievan prince is not at all favorable. The reference to Kiev is explained by the emblematic status of the city during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when it became a symbol in "the myth of common identity" (Franklin 1998: 188). The myth of the political legitimacy of the dynasty relied heavily on Kiev as a symbol, although the ruler of that court was not particularly favored. The poor image of the Kievan prince, rather than reflecting the people's anti-feudal aspirations, as Soviet scholars proposed, could betray the internecine struggles of various branches of the emerging principalities – after all, the hero in the *byliny* is always non-Kievan – to acquire legitimacy by overcoming the mythic status of Kiev. This would clearly meet the quintessentially propagandistic aim of epic.

Present Myths

Epic vs. historiography

The problem of how to classify the texts available to us (both in original production and in translation) is connected with a complex controversy, mentioned above, about genre categorization. In the case of the Russian written epics, as well as of some of the translations made, for example, of the *Alexander Romance*, we find both a chronological or annalistic account of the events and a novelistic recreation of them. In a literary system such as the Slavic, where the central texts were either religious or historiographical (Lotman 1970–3; Yónova 2004), so that all others were dismissed as peripheral, the fact that certain works were considered "true" and "real" was enough for them to be incorporated into serious accounts (such as chronicles or liturgy), regardless of how they might fit into modern genre classifications.[34] If literary *accounts*, with a more or less epic or heroic character, were inserted into historiographical works narrating the history of the world from its creation, it is because they were perceived as functionally equivalent to history and therefore not subject to change – probably due to the prevailing principle of *imitatio auctoritatis*:

the integrity of the text was still preserved, regardless of linguistic adaptations (like those made in Rus').

By contrast, epic as a *narrative form* was at the periphery of such a system and therefore adaptable to the perceived needs of the readers or listeners. Even if the content of some prose descriptions of princes inserted in Russian chronicles might remind us of epic, this does not mean that they were perceived as peripheral in the same way that epic was. These chronicle accounts were, therefore, governed by the same compositional rules as those that applied to the chronicles in which they were inserted, namely, imitation and re-creation.[35] This is most likely the reason why we find doublets of the same plots in Rus', one historiographic and another epic, and why the *peripheral* versions, i.e. the epic ones, in fact show little respect for historical facts. In the case of South Slavic epic, for example, where chronicle writing did not serve the interests of a ruling dynasty, the boundaries between central and peripheral genres were much more blurred. This could be one of the reasons that would explain the strong historical sense of Christian epic in the Balkans (Lord 1972).

Related to the latter, there is also an enduring controversy over dating the texts, and not only in the case of oral compositions, for which the only secure date is that of collection. The complication is clear in dealing with written epic because there are three different dates: the manuscript date, that can be reasonably attested by watermarks and other codicological and palaeographic means; the copying date, that sometimes is also attested in a colophon or by some indirect textological evidence; and then the purported time of composition, which sometimes can (but very often cannot) be confirmed by linguistic means. If it is accepted that copies were made in *scriptoria* where historiographic material was available to the same copyists who copied, or even maybe composed, the epic texts, would they choose not to check the historical account of the same facts that were being narrated in literary form? Iaroslav of Galich, for example, mentioned in the *Igor Tale*, was in fact ruling when the expedition of Igor took place in 1185, and Trnovo was still Christian when the battle narrated in the *Zadonshchina* took place, but choosing to use these data as means for internal dating of the epic texts carries some implications about authorship as well. It implies that epic was first created orally and then written down, and that those dates correspond to a real witness who lived at the time of composition; it implies that the copyist would not have added these chronological references to enhance the narrative's credibility; and it implies that the composer of the epic was unaware of the existence of chronicles telling these same facts. In short, it implies that epic was not only peripheral, but almost on the verge of literacy. And whereas this could be said of the circumstances where oral epics were collected in the nineteenth century, it seems far-fetched for the composition of written epics in Early Rus', particularly now that literary and linguistic analysis has opened many new avenues of research. Paradoxically, if the division between central and peripheral genres is accepted as a truism, it implies giving more credibility to the historical knowledge of a wandering minstrel, or a series of them, than to a conscientious copyist.

It has already been pointed out how a rigorous linguistic analysis is the surest path to putting an end to decades of controversy, and the analysis of written epics in

comparison with other literary forms (hagiography, translations, panegyrics) has also proven extremely fruitful. In particular, the relevance of hagiography in the development of epic genres in the East and also South Slavic areas can hardly be overstated. This is not surprising, since ruling dynasties were making substantial efforts to assert their political and religious independence from Byzantium. In both cases, the development of epic or heroic poetry as a genre was encouraged by a prominent ruling dynasty – the Nemanjas in Serbia and the Riurikovichi in Rus' – a great part of whose members were sooner or later anointed as saints, and who were involved in constant military campaigns against foreign invaders or to establish the authority of one dynastic branch over others.

Epic is intrinsically propagandistic,[36] and the common aspects found in the creation of heroic figures in both traditions might well reflect the expectations of the audiences for whom the poems, in both written and oral form, were composed. The sanctity of the ruler, mirroring the holiness of the land, was clearly an indispensable factor. The combination of the defense of religion and the defense of the Motherland became, therefore, as has been pointed out, a regular feature in written as well as oral production.

Conclusion

Despite the differences we have seen in the various ways of creating, translating, composing, recreating, and recomposing epic tales in Slavic languages, two factors are pervasive: epic is not history and epic needs to have a social function to subsist.

The first point seems to have been much clearer to the primary composers or translators of medieval epic poems, who seem to have been able to draw clear lines between historiographical accounts (central) and epic ones (peripheral), than to nineteenth-century romantic nationalists, whether they were Slavophiles or not. At the core of the arguments on the authenticity of the *Igor Tale*, for example, or of the purported existence of Serbian epics at the court of the Nemanjas, is the antiquarian concept that the justification of the *raison d'être* of modern states lies with epic. More than two centuries after James Macpherson's sham we are still trying to find relevant data to retrieve *our* idea of nation from the epics of the Middle Ages.[37]

Regardless of the fact that their value as historiographical evidence is minimal – even if authentic, the content of none of the epic poems would tell us anything we do not already know from other sources about the Slavic Middles Ages, and it would only slightly modify our assumptions about the development of epic – they are still being understood as quintessential reflections of what has come to be known as "national soul." And it works. Like the statues of medieval heroes and princes scattered in cities and villages across Europe, epics give evidence of the role the past plays for the identity of modern societies, similar to that which they played at the time of their creation.

If at the time of their composition or translation they served the political claims of the ruling dynasties, they have also contributed to the creation of modern national

myths. Particularly in the case of oral epics, it did not matter much to the composers of bygone times whether the poems were historically accurate – after all, that was not the reason for which they were being composed. Neither has it mattered much to modern ideologists that modern positivist disciplines, such as archaeology, history, and linguistics, have long been struggling to provide us with a broader, clearer, and more accurate picture of the Slavic Middle Ages.

A dispassionate and detailed study of the received tradition, as it is presently attested, should take us to a new point of departure, where past tales were no longer at the service of present myths.

Notes

1   For a clear and up-to-date introduction to Slavic, see Schenker 1995. On the Slavs' history, see Conte 1986.

2   The traditional labels for these two traditions are also a contentious issue. South Slavic or Balkan are sometimes preferred to Serbian or Serbo-Croatian, if they include both the Bulgarian and the Macedonian traditions. Likewise, it is a contentious issue whether the literature composed in Kievan Rus', or Old Rus', should be labeled as Russian, or Rusian. The difficulty depends on whether one wants to refer to the time of their purported composition, the time and language in which they were collected, or the current geopolitical situation. For the purposes of the present chapter, we will refer to South and East Slavic.

3   The most up-to-date and comprehensive reference work on medieval Russia, with ample bibliography on a wide range of aspects, is currently Perrie 2006.

4   This area of cultural exchange, denominated *Slavia Romana*, included the Czechs and the Poles, who adopted Christianity in the Western rite in 863 and 966, respectively. It also included part of the South Slavic lands.

5   The lament, a strictly feminine form of lyric, is common to some Slavic languages (*tuzh-balice* in Serbian and *tbzhachki* in Bulgarian), and long narrative laments are intimately connected with heroic epics (mentioned below in the case of Jaroslavnas's lament in the *Igor Tale*). Famous in Serbian medieval literature are the laments of Jefimija (Jelena Mrnjavčević) over the deaths of her infant son and Prince Lazar, her protector since the death of her husband, the despot Ugljesa Mrnjavcevic, in 1371 in the Battle of Marica (Matejić and Milivojević 1978: 94–9).

6   *Slavia Orthodoxa* is a convenient term used to designate those areas where the use of the Cyrillic alphabet was predominant, usually linked as well to Orthodoxy after the schism (1054). The difference became more drastic after the sack of Constantinople by the crusaders during the Fourth Crusade in 1204.

7   Most important were the *Chronicle* of John Malalas and the *Chronicle* of George Hamartolus.

8   For further details on translations of other heroic and epic works into Slavonic, see Torres Prieto 2009.

9   The process of adaptation also varied from one area to another. See ibid. for further details.

10   On general difficulties of generic classification in medieval Rus' literature, see Birnbaum 1985; Ingham 1987a, 1987b; Lenhoff 1982, 1984, 1987, 1989, and Seemann 1987. For the specific case of military tales, see Stokes 1979. For a wider discussion on generic classification in medieval literature, see Jauss 1982.

11   The text has been masterfully edited recently by Zalizniak (2004: 336–50), based on the division into chapters or verses made by Jakobson (1966: 133–50). The number of translations available in English is meager in comparison to the works dedicated to it: e.g., Nabokov's highly lyrical version (1961) and Zenkovsky's, included in his anthology (1974: 167–92).

12   Most recently by Edward Keenan (2003) whose work has prompted a wide range of reactions; see Butler 2006; Franklin 2005; Strakhov 2004.

13   Hypatian (PSRL T. 2: cols. 628–51) and Laurentian (PSRL T.1: cols. 394–400).

14   Namely, two historical writings (a universal chronograph and some Russian annals), as well as translations of the *Tale of Opulent India* (The Letter of Prester John), the *Romance of Akir the Wise*, and a copy of a Russian version of the Byzantine romance of *Digenis Akritas*, the *Devgenievo Dejanie*.

15   An extraordinarily detailed study of both texts and their points of contact can be found in Zimin 2006.

16   Linguistic analysis validating the *Igor Tale*'s authenticity has been advanced by Strakhov (2003) and further developed by Zalizniak (2004).

17   Jakobson's edition divides the text in 218 chapters or verses (1966: 133–50; we refer here to verses as "v.").

18   The edition of all the extant texts was made by Dmitrieva (1966), and English translations are available in Jakobson and Worth (1966); Zenkovsky (1974: 211–24).

19   One of the three manuscripts of the longer version (Synodal), and the only manuscript of the short version (Kirillo-Belozersky).

20   Those who accept an earlier date for the composition of the *Zadonshchina* would date the *Tale of the Battle* to 1408–15, although watermark analysis of all the exstant manuscripts places the earliest ones at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

21   This cycle would comprise various works, such as the *Narration of the Destruction of Riazan' by Batu* or the *Tale of Icon on Nikola Chudotvortsa*; all are included in the First Novgorod Chronicle.

22   This fact should perhaps prompt us to reconsider the compositional process of oral epics rather than the generic definition of epic in Rus'.

23   On Aleksander Nevsky, see Isoaho 2006. On the text of his *vita*, see Ostrowski 2007; 2008.

24   Since South Slavic oral epics are dealt with elsewhere in this volume (see Foley's chapter), I shall focus on Russian oral epics.

25   The term *bylina* was introduced in 1839 by I. P. Sakharov in his work *Songs of the Russian Nation*, taken from the opening lines of the *Tale of Igor's Campaign*.

26   The best collection of *byliny* (introduction and translation) in English is Bailey and Ivanova 1998.

27   On the atypicality of the heroes of the mythological cycle, see Mendoza Tuñón and Torres Prieto 2009.

28 Two possible historical figures have been proposed, though: Vladimir I Sviatoslavich (who ruled c. 978–1015) and Vladimir Vsevolodovich Monomakh (who ruled between 1113 and 1125).

29 The mother of the hero plays a prominent role in the *byliny*, sometimes replaced by another female figure in the family, such as an aunt or a sister.

30 What Jauss (1982) called *Rezeptionästhetik*, which is intimately linked to a phrase he coined: "horizon of expectations."

31 If we analyze other oral compositions, such as Russian lyric songs, wedding songs, or funeral laments, we will see that they have the same meter and motifs, but not a common plot.

32 We should not overlook, however, that some *byliny* describe trips in which the Kievan prince sends a *bogatyr* to pay tribute to Kalin Tsar and not to collect it from him, a practice that presumes at least the arrival of the Mongols in 1223. On tax paying by Rus' princes to the Golden Horde, see Martin 2006.

33 The use of magic does not make the *byliny* pagan, as some Soviet scholars contended; it only makes them more fantastic. On the reflection of the process of Christianization in the *byliny*, see Torres Prieto 2004.

34 An in-depth, masterful discussion of problems of genre classification, in regard to hagiography, is Lenhoff 1989.

35 A parallel situation with respect to the panegyrics of deceased princes is discussed by Tolochko 1999.

36 For studies on the propagandistic dimension of epic, see, among many others, Dumézil 1995; García Gual 1983; Innes 2000; Jiménez Garnica 1995; Meletinskii 1998; Powell 1992; Schneidmüller 2002.

37 James Macpherson published in 1761 an epic poem he had purportedly discovered, under the title of *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books, together with Several Other Poems composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal, translated from the Gaelic Language*. In fact, he had copied, pasted, and edited traditional ballads of historical content to create a long epic poem, which, nevertheless, under the predominant spirit of Romanticism, greatly contributed to the collection and edition of traditional Scottish and Irish folklore. The Finnish *Kalevala* was made by the same technique, although never purporting to be a lost manuscript.

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