

Reconstructing the Funeral Ritual of the Kievan Prince Igor (*Primary Chronicle*, sub anno 945)

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The article deals with the story of the revenge of Kievan Princess Olga to the Drevlyans who murdered her husband, Prince Igor, in 945. Three stages of the revenge are interpreted as a princely funeral ritual, determined by the mythological picture of the tripartite structure of the universe.

The Russian *Primary Chronicle* (The Tale of Bygone Years, ca. 1110), under the year 945, relates the story of the murder of Kievan prince Igor by tribesmen of the tributary Drevlyans:

“6453 (945). In this year, Igor’s retinue said to him, “The servants of Sveinald are adorned with weapons and fine raiment, but we are naked. Go forth with us, oh Prince, after tribute, that both you and we may profit thereby”. Igor heeded their words, and he attacked Dereva in search of tribute. He sought to increase the previous tribute and collected it by violence from the people with the assistance of his followers. After thus gathering the tribute, he returned to his city. On his homeward way, he said to his followers, after some reflection, “Go forward with the tribute. I shall turn back, and rejoin you later”. He dismissed his retainers on their journey homeward, but being desirous of still greater booty he returned on his tracks with a few of his followers. The Drevlians heard that he was again approaching, and consulted with Mal, their prince, saying, “If a wolf comes among the sheep, he will take away the whole flock one by one, unless he be killed. If we do not thus kill him now, he will destroy us all”. They then sent forward to Igor’ inquiring why he had returned, since he had collected all the tribute. But Igor’ did not heed them, and the Drevlians came forth from the city of Iskorosten and slew Igor and his company, for the number of the latter was few. So Igor was buried, and his tomb is near the city of Iskorosten in Dereva even to this day”¹

The story represents historical events which were also known to contemporaries outside Kievan Rus.² Although the tale of Prince Igor’s death contains valuable information that itself needs a comparative analysis, in this article I intend to examine the events that happened after his murder. The medieval compiler and modern scholars alike see in

¹ *The Russian primary chronicle* 1953: 78-81.

² See Leo Diacon, *Hist.* VI, 10 and the comments by Ditten 1984: 188.

the series of violent deaths that followed his killing the stages of revenge by Igor's widow, Princess Olga. First, she ordered that the embassy from the Drevlyans who arrived in Kiev be buried alive; then her servants set fire to the bathhouse where the Drevlyan "best men" washed themselves, so that they were burnt alive; and finally, the princess went to the place where her husband was buried and, during a funeral banquet, ordered the massacre of thousands of Drevlyans. Next year Princess Olga departed for the land of the Drevlyans with the Kievan army, where she besieged and burned their city Iskorosten, slaughtering the majority of its population.

The last, fourth action of the princess is structurally and temporarily separated from the former ones. Alexander A. Shakhmatov considered the story of capturing Iskorosten with the help of incendiary birds as a later interpolation to the *Initial Compilation* (*Nachalnij Svod*, 1093-95), added by the author of the *Primary Chronicle* (ca. 1110).³ This follows from the fact that the story of the capture of the Drevlyan capital is missing from the 946 entry in the *First Novgorodian Chronicle*.⁴ The story of Iskorosten remained among the tales and legends of oral tradition until the twelfth century (1110-1118), while the story of her threefold revenges was possibly written down as early as ca. 1039. Therefore, scholars frequently examine it alone.

The first three murders are recently considered in scholarship manifestations of the Dumézilean three functions, but the fourth one is more difficult to interpret.⁵ At the same time, when examining the four stages of revenge, scholars give to each of them an explanation connected with a ritual action: funeral, sacrifice, funeral competition, and use of magic incendiary birds.⁶ This interpretation allows them to make the basis of the story ritualistic, rather than a simple banal matter of revenge. My hypothesis is that in this analogistic story we have a series of rituals connected with the death of the Kievan prince. Although in the opinion of Vasilij M. Istrin, the story does not seem to be an interpolation, because it logically follows the previous narration, I follow the common approach and consider here the only three first actions of Princess Olga.⁷

1. The arrival of the Drevlyan embassy.

"But Olga was in Kiev with her son, the boy Svyatoslav. His tutor was Asmund, and the troop commander was Sveinald, the father of Mstikha. The Drevlians then said, "See, we have killed the Prince of Rus'. Let us take his wife Olga for our Prince Mal, and then we shall obtain possession of Svyatoslav, and work our will upon him". So they sent their best men, twenty in number, to Olga by boat, and they arrived below Borichev in their boat. At that time, the water flowed below the heights of Kiev, and the inhabitants did not live in the valley, but upon the heights. The city of Kiev was on the present site of the residence of Gordyata and Nicephorus, and the prince's palace was in the city where the residence of Vratislav and Chudin now stands, while the hunting grounds were outside the city. Without the city stood another

³ Shakhmatov 2001: 84-85, 109-110.

⁴ *PSRL* t. 3: 112-113.

⁵ See Garcia De La Puente 2005: 255-272; 2009:193-202.

⁶ See Ward 1970: 123-142.

⁷ Istrin 1924: 56-57.

palace, where the palace of the Cantors is now situated, behind the Church of the Holy Virgin upon the heights. This was a palace with a stone hall. Olga was informed that the Derevlians had arrived, and summoned them to her presence with a gracious welcome. When the Derevlians had thus announced their arrival, Olga replied with an inquiry as to the reason of their coming. The Derevlians then announced that their tribe had sent them to report that they had slain her husband, because he was like a wolf, crafty and ravening, but that their princes, who had thus preserved the land of Dereva, were good, and that Olga should come and marry their Prince Mal. For the name of the Prince of Dereva was Mal”.

The tale of the ambassadors from the people, who had killed the prince and then came with the proposition to marry his widow, looks a bit strange. Some Russian scholars try to interpret the story as an ancient custom, according to which the power formerly held by the prince was obtained through marriage to a woman (girl) of the ruling family.⁸ In this case, the princess Olga held power in Kiev, and the Drevlyans, by marrying their prince Mal to her, wished to achieve control over the whole Kievan polity.

However, another interpretation of the tale is possible, based upon the folkloric motif of association between death and marriage.⁹ In this motif, widespread in Russian fairy tales, the love of the deity of death causes a human to die, as the deity carries him or her away to its own kingdom for marriage. The historical connection between Slavic marriage and funeral rites has recently been examined by Valeria Eremina, whose book is devoted to the symbolism of rites of transition.¹⁰ Eremina shows how widespread in Slavic folklore and ritual tradition is the idea of the joint death of husband and wife, or two lovers.¹¹

Ahmed Ibn Fadlan, the secretary of an Arabic embassy to the Bulgars, saw such a burial-marriage ritual on the lower Volga in 921. The funeral of a Rūs noble was accompanied by the sacrifice of a girl and was arranged as her marriage to her deceased master.¹² Both Arabic and Byzantine authors point to the Slavic and Rūs custom of burning the wife, alive or dead, together with her dead husband.¹³ Especially impressive is the information of Abu al-Hasan al-Masudi (*The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*, chap. 17), written down about 943-947, who relates that if a Slavic or Russian man happened to die unmarried, or as a widower, he was married off after death:

“One of the various pagan nations, who live in his country, are the Sekalibah (Sclavonians), and another the Rus (the Russians). They live in one of the two sides of this town: they burn the dead with their cattle, utensils, arms, and ornaments. When a man dies, his wife is burnt alive with him; but, when the wife dies, her husband is not burnt. If a bachelor dies, he is married after his death. Women are glad to be burnt; for they cannot enter into paradise by

⁸ Likhachev 1947: 132-138; 1950: 2, 296-297; 1996: 435-439; Rybakov 1982: 360-362; 1987: 365-375; Froyanov 1995: 59-72. Cf. Garcia De La Puente 2005: 256.

⁹ See Propp 1998: 112-436.

¹⁰ Eremina 1991: 83-101, 121-164.

¹¹ Eremina 1987: 21-32; Eremina 1991: 166-192. Cf. Baiburin, Levinton 1990: 64-99; Garnizov 1991: 247-252.

¹² Kovalevskij 1956: 42-44; Smyser 1965: 92-102. Cf. Lewicki 1963: 32-42.

¹³ Kotlyarevskij 1868: 42-43, 46-49, 54-55, 57-59, 61, 63-68, 73, 79, 82-83, 93-95; Lewicki 1963: 10-29; *Orientalische Berichte* 2001: 77 (Ibn Rusta), 178, 181-182 (Gardīzī).

themselves. This usage prevails also among the Hindus, as we have said. But the Hindus never burn a woman with her husband, unless it is her own wish” (translation by Aloys Sprenger).

Here we see the same association of burial and wedding rituals that appears in the story of Princess Olga in the *Primary Chronicle*.¹⁴ Masudi compares these Slavic and Russian customs with similar Indian ones, which suggests that they may have originated from a common Indo-European tradition.¹⁵

Following this, one can surmise that there was an original version of the tale of Prince Igor’s death, in which the messengers offered his wife the opportunity to be buried together with her husband. Later, a Christian compiler put the description of the funeral ritual into the context of the war with the Drevlyan tribe, headed by their prince Mal. There are, however, doubts as to whether a Drevlyan prince of this name really existed. The name ‘Mal’ could originate from a misunderstanding by compilers of the ritual words that usually accompanied the Russian wedding ceremony, for instance: “you have a bride, and we have a prince small (*mal*) for her” or “would your bride like to marry our prince small (*mal*) and brave”. The wording “prince small” (*knjaz mal*) is a euphemism for bridegroom; the compiler most likely converted the common name into the personal name.¹⁶ Thus the prince Mal is probably an annalistic fiction.

After the death of Prince Igor, the messengers offer his wife, according to the local custom, the chance to join her deceased husband on the funeral pyre, rather than to marry their living prince. In the *Pereslavlean Chronicle*, there is a fragment of the so-called “dream of the prince Mal”, which tells what he saw in his sleep after the Drevlyans had sent two groups of ambassadors to Kiev. The prince Mal, preparing for the marriage, dreamt that when Princess Olga arrived she gave him many rich and decorated clothes and other valuable things, and the boats that would carry him during the wedding ceremony.¹⁷ In this case, the “sleeping” prince is the dead Prince Igor, who is waiting for his funeral.¹⁸ In the ritual described by Ibn Fadlan, the Rūs buried their noble men in boats, which provides an explanation for the boats in Mal’s dream. Analysing the ritual by Ibn Fadlan, H.M. Smyser points out that the dead leader was buried in a temporary roofed grave for ten days, while funeral clothes were prepared and other arrangements made.¹⁹ In the case of Igor’s death, this period seems to be the time during which the Drevlyans sent their messengers to inform Olga. Following the custom in Ibn Fadlan’s description, the enslaved servants of the deceased were asked who would die and follow him, and a young woman volunteers herself. The noble Rūs died during a journey along the Volga River, far from his family. Igor’s situation was different; he had his wife (and perhaps concubines) in Kiev, near the place of his murder. The Drevlyan

¹⁴ Kotlyarevskij 1868: 58, 73. Cf. Баряктаровић 1990: 95-105; Ђокић 1998: 136-153.

¹⁵ Cf. Casquero 2001: 253-292 (bibliogr. 287-292).

¹⁶ After the Drevlyans arriving in Kiev proposed that Olga should marry their prince Mal, the compiler added “for the name of the Prince of Dereva was Mal”. The addition shows the words were an explanation by the compiler rather than the text of the original story. In other words, “the prince Mal of Dereva” appeared in the text only after the compiler had explained the original expression “prince small (*knjaz mal*)”.

¹⁷ *PSRL* t. 41: 15.

¹⁸ Likhachev 1996: 437 compares the dream of Prince Mal with the description of the funeral ceremony of Prince Vladimir Galizkij in the *Primary Chronicle* under 1152, and the dream of Prince Svjatoslav of Kiev in *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign* (*Slovo o plūku Igorevě*).

¹⁹ Smyser 1965: 107-108; Sayers 1988: 173.

ambassadors arrived in Kiev, most likely to ask Olga whether she would accompany her husband herself or find a substitute among the prince's concubines or slaves.²⁰

Actually, the ceremony for which the Drevlyans arrived in Kiev seems to have been a posthumous wedding of the deceased prince.²¹ Therefore, they performed the scene of matchmaking. But Princess Olga made them participants in another ritual.

2. The first embassy was buried in a boat.

“Olga made this reply, “Your proposal is pleasing to me; indeed, my husband cannot rise again from the dead. But I desire to honour you tomorrow in the presence of my people. Return now to your boat, and remain there with an aspect of arrogance. I shall send for you on the morrow, and you shall say. ‘We will not ride on horses nor go on foot; carry us in our boat’. And you shall be carried in your boat”. Thus she dismissed them to their vessel. Now Olga gave command that a large deep ditch should be dug in the castle with the hall, outside the city. Thus, on the morrow, Olga, as she sat in the hall, sent for the strangers, and her messengers approached them and said, “Olga summons you to great honour”. But they replied, “We will not ride neither on horseback nor in wagons, nor go on foot; carry us in our boats”. The people of Kiev then lamented, “Slavery is our lot. Our Prince is killed, and our Princess intends to marry their prince”. So they carried the Derevlians in their boat. The latter sat on the cross-benches in great robes, puffed up with pride. They thus were borne in before Olga, and when the men had brought the Derevlians in, they dropped them into the trench along with the boat. Olga bent over and inquired whether they found the honour to their taste. They answered that it was worse than the death of Igor’. She then commanded that they should be buried alive, and they were thus buried”.

Scholars noted the resemblance between this story and a funeral ceremony long ago. The boat in which the Drevlyan ambassadors were placed before being buried in a pit is associated with the boat in which the body of a Russian noble man was burned in Ibn Fadlan's narrative.²² The boat buried as a vehicle to another world is known especially in the funeral customs of medieval Scandinavians.²³ There is also other evidence of ship/boat burials among the Ruthenes, who lived on the Baltic coast,²⁴ in the Merovingian kingdom,²⁵ in early medieval England,²⁶ and in Kievan Rus.²⁷

²⁰ Rapov 1988: 156 guessed that Princess Olga adopted Christianity in order to avoid being sacrificed during her husband's funeral. For a critical note, see Petrukhin 1995: 230, 205-215.

²¹ On the interpretation of Ibn Fadlan's narrative as a posthumous wedding, see Smyser 1965: 111, cf. Sayers 1988: 177-178.

²² Lewicki 1963: 25, 30-59; Smyser 1965: 92-102; *The ship* 1995: 131-137; Montgomery 2000: 1-25.

²³ Major 1924: 113-150; Smyser 1965: 106-107; Davidson 1975: 73-89; *The Ship* 1995: 100-109, cf. 20-24, 87-99.

²⁴ Saxo *Gesta Danorum*, V, 8, 1.

²⁵ Gregorii Turonensis *Historiarum* VI, 46; *Liber Historia Francorum*, ch. 35.

²⁶ Bruce-Mitford 1975: 230-435. On the funeral of the Danish king, Scyld, in the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* 32-52, see *Voyage to the Other World* 1992: 47-78.

²⁷ *Skazanie i stradanie*, p. 346; cf. Anuchin 1890: 152-184. It is clear, however, that some funerary rites are of Scandinavian origin, notably boat-burnings at places such as Staria Ladoga and Gnezdovo; see Franklin, Shepard 1996: 127-128; Stalsberg 2001: 359-401.

The ship or boat in the funeral ritual plays the role of a vehicle to another world. Such transport was necessary to people who believed that water surrounded their world.²⁸ The idea that an ocean encircled the earth is widespread in Slavic folklore, as well as in the folk traditions of many other peoples.²⁹ Only by crossing this expanse of water in a boat or a ship can the dead pass into the otherworld.³⁰ The flying ship, which carries the heroes of fairy tales away to another world of happiness, is an analogy of death.

According to the *Ustyuzskaya Chronicle*, Princess Olga ordered that a wide and deep hole should be dug in the palace yard and live coals of oak put into it.³¹ The fire into which Princess Olga threw the Drevlyan ambassadors, like the water and the boat, was a kind of vehicle to another world.³² Russ and Slavs worshipped fire and often used it during their ritual ceremonies.³³ Fire as a means to enter another world resembles the folklore motif of a “fiery river *Smorodina*” between the kingdom of a hero and the other world.³⁴ The name of the “river *Smorodina*” means “stinking river”, because it is not water that runs in the river, but fiery flames, which leap higher than the trees in the forest.³⁵ The essential attribute of the fiery river is the so-called “Red-hot bridge” (*Kalinovij most*). It is the bridge over the fiery river, which is red from heat of the flames below. Another name of the bridge is “Copper” (*Medjanoj*), also representing the colour that it turned in the heat.³⁶ On the Red-hot Bridge, the heroes of Russian fairy tales met the monsters which came from another world and battled with them.

Why, it might be asked, are all the patterns of the funeral rite connected with the murder of the Drevlyan ambassadors, rather than with the burial of Prince Igor?

The Drevlyan ambassadors arrived in the capital of Princess Olga as “good guests” (Olga’s words), rather than as representatives of a hostile tribe. Landing in Kiev, they received Princess Olga’s order to appear in her court next day, and responded in a very strange way, refusing to use any Kievan vehicle: “We will ride neither on horseback nor in wagons, nor go on foot; carry us in our boats”.³⁷ If we follow the compiler of the *Chronicle*

²⁸ See Kelly 2006: 119-136; West 2007: 389-390.

²⁹ See Eremina 1984: 195-204; 1991: 55-82; Mencej 1998: 205-224; Mencej 2000: 89-97; Trubachev 2002: 189-191, 424. In folk songs, the crossing of the river Danube is often regarded as symbolic of rites of passage, marriage or death. See Harkins 1968: 55-64; Machinskij 1981: 110-171; Eremina 1991: 55-82, 149-164. Trubachev 2002: 190-191 argues that the Slavic word for “paradise”, *rajb*, was related to **rojьb*, **rěka* (river) and had the meaning “the world over the river”; cf. Finnish *raja* – border.

³⁰ On the symbolism of passages over the river in Russian fairy tales, see Propp 1998: 295, 324, 334. Cf. *The ship* 1995: 20-24.

³¹ *PSRL* t. 37: 19 and 58; cf. Kirpichnikov 1897: 60-61.

³² Leo Diaconis (*Hist.* IX, 6, 21-27) relates the burning and drowning of captives in the river during the funeral of the noble Russian warrior Ikmor.

³³ The importance of fire-worship among the Slavs features prominently in Arab accounts: Golden 1995: 876-887. See further Gimbutas 1971: 151-170. On the custom of cremation by the Rūs and the Slavs, see Kotlyarevskij 1868: 42-43, 46-49, 54-55, 57-59, 61, 63-68, 73, 79, 82-83, 93-95; Trubachev 2002: 207-212.

³⁴ Propp 1998: 299-300; Eremina 1991: 151-152.

³⁵ Sometimes the fiery river was called *Puchai*-river, that is, the river whose water became swollen and is boiling. Cf. the Old-Russian *puchina* – abyss.

³⁶ The Russian names *reka Smorodina* and *Kalinovij most* are formed following the homonymy between the words “*kalina*” (snowball tree) and “*kálina*” (burning) (*kalinovij* = *kalénij*, i.e. red-hot), “*smorodina*” (currant) and “*smórod*” (stench). The similarities may originate from the magic substitution of a sacred name by a common one, of unknown by known. Many rivers with the name *Smorodina* in Ukraine and central Russia give the impression that the mythic river was also called according to shrubbery.

³⁷ Likhachev 1996: 435-436 sees here elements of folkloric influence. Cf. Garcia De La Puente 2005: 259. They might have been formed during the period when the tale was orally transmitted, from ca. 946 to ca.1039/1110,

literally, one can see that the Drevlyan ambassadors did not set foot upon Kievan soil, but after having been carried in their boats, were sent straight to the world of death. In other words, Princess Olga, who acts as a master of ceremonies, did not receive the ambassadors, but sent them. In this scene, they were actually sent by the Kievan princess to a God (or Gods) of another world with the mission to deliver the message of Prince Igor's death. Therefore they were messengers, and this role is combined in the *Primary Chronicle* with their previous role as ambassadors from the Drevlyans. Delivery of the important message was the honour which the princess promised to bestow upon them, and with which they sat in the boat "puffed up with pride". At the final moment, Olga looked out from the window of her palace and gave a farewell speech to her messengers, inquiring of them what kind of honour they received; they loudly answered, literally, that it especially concerned the death of Igor.³⁸ After that the princess ordered that they be covered with earth.

In the *Lavrentian* and *Hypatian* versions of the *Primary Chronicle*, after the messengers were dropped into the trench along with the boat, Princess Olga "bent over (the trench) and inquired" of them.³⁹ However, before that she welcomed them into her palace; therefore, a later compiler was more accurate when he wrote that the princess looked through the window of her palace when she appealed to the messengers. The scene resembles the mythological motif of "window goddess" or "woman at the window".⁴⁰

Certainly the "woman at the window" was an aspect, perhaps priestess, of the ancient Mother-goddess (for instance, Inanna/Ishtar/Astarte in the Near East). She was called "queen of the windows" by the Assyrians and her name, becoming the name of a minor goddess, Kiliti, has been associated with the *kilili*, "the mural crown" worn by Assyrian queens. The Sumerians called her "(One) who leans in (or looks out of) the window" or "(One) who answers/ commands from the window". She was considered wise in the sense of "skilled" or "knowing".⁴¹ One of the epithets of the Greek goddess Aphrodite, who was identified with Astarte, was *Parakypitousa*, "Peeping out (of a window/door)". According to Plutarch (*quest. Rom.* 36), the early Roman queen Tanaquil was considered an incarnation of a similar goddess when she, from the window, advised the people to make Servius Tullius their king. Plutarch writes that King Servius preserved close ties with the goddess of his Fortune, and their relationship was conducted through the window. It must be added that Tanaquil was also responsible for the assumption of Roman kingship by her husband Tarquinius, so that one modern scholar called her "a maker of kings".

From the Hebrew Bible, we know that a daughter of Eth-Baal, king of Sidon, Jezebel, was a devotee of the Canaanite goddess Asherah (Astarte), the main female deity of her Phoenician home state. After her marriage to King Ahab, of the northern kingdom of Israel, Jezebel persuaded him to become a worshiper of Baal (I *Kings* 17: 32). Eventually Ahab was killed in battle (I *Kings* 22: 35), and later his son and successor, Joram, was treacherously slain by his ambitious general Jehu (II *Kings* 9: 22-24). Thus, Jezebel was left alone and vulnerable in Samaria, at the mercy of Jehu, now king of Israel (II *Kings* 9: 1-14),

when the sacred ritual had been transformed into a profane story.

³⁸ PSRL t. 3: 112; t. 37: 20 and 58. The phrase is usually understood to mean that Olga inquired of them ironically, scoffing, as to whether they found the honour to their taste, and they then answered that their torments were worse than the death of Igor. But the original text allows a different interpretation.

³⁹ PSRL t. 1: 56; t. 2: 45.

⁴⁰ On the "window goddess", see Borghini 1979: 137-161; Grottanelli 1987: 71-110; Ward 1996: 7-19.

⁴¹ Lapinkivi 2004: 233-234.

and a man who blamed her “countless harlotries and sorceries” for most of the problems of the land (II *Kings* 9: 22). When Jehu arrived in the city, Jezebel painted her eyes, dressed her hair, and stood at a window in the palace awaiting her death (II *Kings* 9: 30). The Biblical picture of Jezebel, defiantly and bravely confronting her enemy from a window, may also be associated with the motif of the “Window Goddess”.

Some features of Jezebel’s story may have been used during the creation of a preliminary history of Princess Olga, to which the motif of revenge was added later. An early Russian compiler, perhaps, borrowed them, together with the topic of the brave queen and timid king (Jezebel and Ahab, Olga and Igor), from the *Chronicle* of Johannes Malala because they resembled contemporary folk beliefs known to him. In Slavic belief, the window symbolically connects the house with another world.⁴² Like a door, a window can be used to enter the house, but, in contrast to the door, the window is an unregulated entrance. According to Slavic folklore, in heaven there is a window through which the sun looks at the earth.⁴³

Ibn Fadlan relates that during the funeral ceremony, the girl who was chosen to die with her dead master looked into the world of the ancestors through the wooden construction specially built for the ritual, which resembled an extempore “window”, or a “doorframe”.⁴⁴ According to Ibn Fadlan, the men lifted the girl up, and she, looking into the “well”, reported on her visions of the “other side”, a green and beautiful paradise, her dead father and mother, other relatives and her dead master.

The scene of Princess Olga at the window resembles not only this, but also the portrait of the goddess Demeter in the frescos at the Bolshaya Bliznitsa tumulus (fourth century BC) on the Taman Peninsula. The portrayal is placed against a blue background, which is surrounded by the frame imitating a breach in the vault (window); through that the goddess looked into the tomb (another world).⁴⁵ Therein, into another world, Princess Olga looked from the window of her palace, making a farewell speech to the messengers.

The fact that the messengers, burned in a boat, were covered with earth shows the location of the world into which they were sent, under the ground. The chthonian deity of the underworld seems to have been Veles (Volos).⁴⁶ He was one of the two deities by whose names the Rus’ swore in the treaties with Byzantium in 907 and 971. The fact that Veles was the object of the first embassy of Princess Olga shows him as an “old god” in comparison with Perun.

Thus it seems possible that the “murder” of the Drevlyan ambassadors was the first part of the princely funeral ritual rather than the first stage of the princess’ revenge. In the ritual the ambassadors played the honorary role of messengers to the god of the underworld.

3. The second embassy was burned in a bathhouse.

“Olga then sent messages to the Derevljans to the effect that, if they really required her presence, they should send after her their distinguished men, so

⁴² See Baiburin 1983: 140-145; Toporov 1984: 184-185.

⁴³ Trubachev 2002: 213 points to the link between the concepts of “window” (*okno*) and “eye” (*oko*) in Russian.

⁴⁴ Sayers 1988: 173. Cf. Kotlyarevskij 1868: 77.

⁴⁵ See Savostina 1990: 243-244.

⁴⁶ Jakobson 1969: 579-599. On the connection of Veles with Varuna, see Trubachev 2002: 428.

that she might go to their Prince with due honour, for otherwise her people in Kiev would not let her go. When the Derevlians heard this message, they gathered together the best men who governed the land of Dereva, and sent them to her. When the Derevlians arrived, Olga commanded that a bath should be made ready, and invited them to appear before her after they had bathed. The bathhouse was then heated, and the Derevlians entered in to bathe. Olga's men closed up the bathhouse behind them, and she gave orders to set it on fire from the doors, so that the Derevlians were all burned to death".

In the burning in a bathhouse, Igor Froyanov sees a sacrifice to the gods of the upper zone of the Universe.⁴⁷ I suggest that the second group of Drevlyans were the messengers who were sent, with the help of the fire, into the heavens where they were obliged to inform the celestial gods of Prince Igor's death. The compiler emphasizes that Princess Olga demanded that the Drevlyans send their best men (*narochitie muži*). The gods of the upper world were regarded as the highest deities, and the messengers to them had to be of a suitably high status.⁴⁸

The embassies to the gods of the lower and upper worlds were probably necessary because the Kievan Prince was considered the sacred lord of the terrestrial world, the sovereign of all people and all beings in his territory, a kind of terrestrial deity. In this situation, it was natural to inform the gods, who correspondingly ruled in the cosmic spaces, the Heavens and the Underworld, about the death of their divine brother.

We have no information to which gods of the upper world the Drevlyan noble men were sent by Princess Olga. Celestial gods were usually connected with worship of the sun and thunder. The Heaven and the Sun as Russian deities, *Svarog* and *Dažbog*, are mentioned in the *Hypatian Chronicle*, under the year 1114.⁴⁹ *Svarog* is equated with the Greek smith god Hephaestus and identified with the generative and sexual powers of fire, and the solar god *Dažbog* is regarded as *Svarog*'s son. This evidence is much discussed. On the one hand, the name *Dažbog* resembles Greek *Zeus*, Roman *Jovis*, Sanskrit *Dyauh*, Latvian *Dievs*, Germanic *Tyr*, and most likely originated from the basic Indo-European **deiuo*-.⁵⁰ The Sanskrit name *Svarga* and the Persian *xwar* indicate an Indo-European etymological relationship with *Svarog*.⁵¹ *Svarga* is a heaven, presided over by Indra, where the righteous live in a paradise before their next reincarnation. On the other hand, the name of *Dažbog* resembles a typical euphemism from two Russian words *daž* (*daj*) - "give" and *bog* - "god" that means "the god who gives, giving god".⁵² Therefore, it is frequently considered a pseudo-theonym,⁵³ although in this case the sacred unutterable name of god, **Dejuo*-, is very close to its folk euphemistic substitute *Dažbog* (*Dajbog*). Scholars frequently refute the reality of *Dažbog*, because in the sources he forms a pair with the solar god *Khors* (from

⁴⁷ Froyanov 1995: 59-72.

⁴⁸ Both Drevlyan embassies consisted of noble men. According to the *Pereslavlean Chronicle* (PSRL t. 41: 14 and 15), the first messengers were the "noblest 20 Bojars" and the second "20 especially famous".

⁴⁹ Cf. Rybakov 1981: 266-352, 434; 1987: 440-442; Sokolova 1995: 79-82.

⁵⁰ Motz, 1998: 28-39. Cf. Machek 1946: 48-65; Stender-Petersen 1956: 45.

⁵¹ Machek 1946: 60; Stender-Petersen 1956: 51-52; Čausidis 1998: 75-92.

⁵² Strakhov 2005: 19 considers the name of *Svarog* (*svartschik* - smith, from **sv̅ariti*) literary, generated in the Christian epoch. The name of *Dažbog* (lit. "given by the god", "god's gift", a version is the name *Bogdan* (*Богданъ*) which he regarded as a calque of the Greek Θεοδοτος (*Федот*).

⁵³ See Moszyński 1989: 285-291.

the Iranian solar term *Xorsed*); the latter is considered a sacred name, while the former is its profane substitute.⁵⁴ However, one can see in the pair of gods an analogy to Varuna and Mithra.

In Old Russian texts, Khors also forms a strong pair with Perun. In the *Primary Chronicle* the thunder-god Perun is represented in a pairing with Veles during the reign of Prince Oleg in 907 and Prince Svjatoslav in 971. Under Prince Igor, the *Primary Chronicle* names Perun alone as the main deity, while under his grandson, Prince Vladimir, in 978-988, Perun appears at the head of a pantheon of five (or six) major deities. His statue was made from oak, the tree of Perkunas or Perun, according to the *Gustinskaya Chronicle*, and the sacrificial fire was kept up with oaken firewood.⁵⁵ Therefore the use of oaken coals to fill the pit in which the Drevlyan ambassadors were to burn indicates the presence of Perun in the ritual concerning Veles.⁵⁶

The bath house in which the Drevlyan noble men were burnt seems to be the folkloric substitute of a building, which was specially prepared for the sacrifice.⁵⁷ Such a construction, according to Ibn Fadlan, was built on the ship as a house in which the dead body would be placed and the rituals performed.⁵⁸ During the funeral of the Lithuanian Great Prince Gediminas, which was accompanied with human sacrifice by burning, the victims were enclosed in a wooden or wicker structure. This resembles the “wickerman” figures, described by Julius Caesar (*Bell. Gall.* VI, 16) in Gaul, also used by the druids in sacrificial rituals.⁵⁹

4. The massacre of the Derevlians on Prince Igor’s tomb.

“Olga then sent to the Derevlians the following message, “I am now coming to you, so prepare great quantities of mead in the city where you killed my husband, that I may weep over his grave and hold a funeral feast for him”. When they heard these words, they gathered great quantities of honey and brewed mead. Taking a small escort, Olga made the journey with ease, and upon her arrival at Igor’s tomb, she wept for her husband. She bade her followers pile up a great mound and when they had piled it up, she also gave command that a funeral feast should be held. Thereupon the Derevlians sat down to drink, and Olga bade her followers wait upon them. The Derevlians inquired of Olga where the retinue was which they had sent to meet her. She replied that they were following her husband’s bodyguard. When the Derevlians were drunk, she bade her followers fall upon them, and went about herself egging on her retinue to the massacre of the Derevlians. So they cut down five thousand of them; but Olga returned to Kiev and prepared an army to attack the survivors.”

⁵⁴ Toporov 1989: 103-126; Sokolova 1995: 79-82.

⁵⁵ *PSRL* t. 40: 44.

⁵⁶ On the offerings for a big oak on the island Khortiza, performed by Rus, see Constantine Porphyrogenetos *De Administrando Imperio* 9. Cf. Rybakov 1987: 210, 374-375; Agapkina, Toporkov 1988: 224-235; Zabashta, Poshivajlo 1992: 57-68.

⁵⁷ On the possible archaeological analogies of the funeral ritual, see Aleksandrov 1994: 22-31.

⁵⁸ An old-Russian term for coffin, *domovina*, has the same root as the term for house, *dom*. See Nevskaya 1982: 106-121, cf. Smyser 1965: 108.

⁵⁹ Miller 2009: 131.

The third sacrifice, offered by Princess Olga near the Drevlyan settlement of Iskrosten and depicted by the compiler as her “third revenge”, was performed during the funeral feast on the tomb of Prince Igor. The participants were the widow, her retinue and a number of Drevlyans. The figure of five thousand massacred is obviously inaccurate because, according to the next story, the majority of Drevlyans survived and withstood a siege by Olga’s army within a year. ‘Five thousand dead’ is an “epic number”, a symbolic replacement of the notion “many”. In reality a certain number of Drevlyans were sacrificed. Herodotus (IV, 72), who describes the similar funeral custom of the Scythians, gives the number of warriors who were killed to accompany their chief on his journey to the other world as fifty. The Drevlyans were sacrificed when they were drunk, just as the girl in the funeral feast of the Russian noble man described by Ibn Fadlan was forced to drink several bowls of strong drink (*nabīdh*) before she was sacrificed.

The word “*trizna*” in the *Primary Chronicle* is considered a notion for the custom of war games during the funeral feast of a dead chief. Later, the word became a synonym for funeral commemoration and the funeral banquet.⁶⁰ According to Vladimir Toporov, the *trizna* could be organized as a ‘three-stage’ battle (**tri* > **trizna*) between the warriors of the princess and the Drevlyans.⁶¹ Leonid Gindin surmises that such a *trizna* might have been organized as a real combat, like the gladiatorial contests in Rome, not merely as military games.⁶² Seen in this light, the war between Olga’s army and the Drevlyans, which the *Primary Chronicle* tells of after the massacre, may be an indirect description or distorted memory of the same event. In this case, the Drevlyans who were massacred on Olga’s orders could be those who died in the military games; there the result of the combat, usually influenced by the favour of the gods, was preordained by the princess, who ordered her servants to make the Drevlyans drunk and her warriors to kill them.

Ibn Fadlan perhaps also observed a *trizna* during the funeral of the noble Rus, but, being an Arab, he noticed only the drinking-bout in the ritual.⁶³ Dmitrij I. Illovayskij drew attention to Ibn Fadlan’s information about the dividing of the goods of the dead noble Russian into three parts, of which one part was used for the funeral clothes, the other was left to the family, and the third was spent on the funeral drinks.⁶⁴ Illovayskij sees in the word “*trizna*” a third part of the goods used for the funeral banquet, but the three parts can also be regarded as corresponding to the three parts of the Universe – Heaven (the burning goods), Earth (the part for the family), and the Underworld (the drinks drunk during the funeral banquet).⁶⁵

The description of the burial itself was not necessary for the annalist, as the princess’ revenge on the Drevlyans became the main theme of the tale. The compiler selected from the oral tradition only that material which concerning the killing of them. Fortunately, we have the account of the Rus burial by Ibn Fadlan, which enables us to reconstruct the missing part of the ritual.

⁶⁰ Kotlyarevskij 1868: 114-117; Rybakov 1981: 274; Gindin 1990: 65-67; Likhachev 1996: 437-438. Cf. Sayers 1988: 176.

⁶¹ Toporov 1979: 3-20.

⁶² Gindin 1990: 67. Many scholars assume the origin of the Roman gladiatorial combats to have been ritual, rather than sport as they later became.

⁶³ Kotlyarevskij 1868: 79.

⁶⁴ Illovayskij 2002: 39-40; cf. Toporov 1979: 14 n. 34.

⁶⁵ Strakhov 2002: 172-181 argues against the connection between *trizna* and three.

5. Conclusion.

1. Our interpretation suggests that there existed an original story in which Princess Olga's actions had nothing to do with revenge for the murder of her husband. Step by step, she performed the funeral rituals appropriate for a prince's death: the sending of messengers to the lower and upper worlds, the funeral games and banquet (*trizna*) on the tomb of the dead husband. The full description of the princely funeral ritual shows that the author of the description had at his disposal some factual material.

The assumption that the concept of three worlds existed in the early-medieval Kiev is based on an interpretation of the so-called Zbruch-idol, tetrahedral pillar of grey limestone found in the river Zbruch in modern western Ukraine. The Zbruch-idol, dating to the tenth century, has three rows of images.⁶⁶ The tripartite structure most likely reflects the ancient concept of a three-world Universe, which consisted of the Heavens (the world of Gods), the Earth (the world of people), and the Underworld (the world of Monsters). The figures in the upper row are bigger than the others, which allows for seeing in them images of celestial deities: one of them holds a sheaf of corn, another a ring, the third has a horse and a sword, and the fourth is empty-handed. The figures in the middle row are of lesser proportions than both the gods of the upper worlds and the figures in the lower tier. The relatively small proportions of two male and two female figures show the transitional nature of the world represented on this row. Perhaps they symbolised the terrestrial world between the upper, celestial world, and the lower, underground world. The lower stage is adorned with a male figure, which supports the celestial and the terrestrial worlds upon his shoulders. The figure is represented on only three sides of the pillar that corresponded with the usual description of mythical monsters from another world with three heads.

The god of the Zbruch statue is often identified with the West Slavic god Sventovid, worshiped especially on the island of Rügen.⁶⁷ The name of Sventovid resembles the Russian word "*svet*" (light) close to "*svjat*" (sacred).⁶⁸ Saxo Grammaticus (*Gesta Dan.* XIV, 564) ascribed to the god Sventovid the same attributes as the Zbruch deity has: horn, horse, and sword. The quadripartite figure of the Zbruch-idol is reminiscent of the Indian Brahma, the Roman Janus, and the Greek Apollo of Amyclae, as Bernard Sergent showed.⁶⁹ The deity was obviously of Indo-European origin and perhaps personified the quadruple seasonal division in the annual cycle.

Unfortunately, we have evidence neither of the origin of the Zbruch-idol, nor of any association with a particular tribe or people. The statue was discovered in eastern Galicia, the ancient population of which was possibly a mixture of the so-called Khalyzians (*Khalisioi* in Greek, and *Khvalis* in Russian), an Iranian people, Slavs (White Croats) and Celts (Gallic people, Gauls).⁷⁰ The neighbouring land was inhabited by the Drevlyans who murdered Prince Igor. Leo Diaconus (*Hist.* VI, 10) identified them with Germans. It is therefore very interesting that the Gothic "*Tervingi*" is of the same meaning as the Russian "*Drevlyane*", that is "forest people". One can suppose they were, perhaps, a mixture

⁶⁶ Lenczyk 1964: 5-59; Rybakov 1981: 460-464; 1987: 236-251; Telegin, Mallory 1994: 77-86; Szymański 1996: 75-116.

⁶⁷ On the problem, see Szymański 1996: 75-116; Zaroff 2002: 9-18.

⁶⁸ See Toporov 1987: 184-252.

⁶⁹ See Sergent 1994: 15-58.

⁷⁰ On Celtic analogies to Zbruch-Idol, see Rosen-Przeworska 1963: 65-69.

of Slavs and distant descendants of the Goths partly inhabiting Eastern Europe in former times. The place where the Zbruch statue was found is quite close to the traditional Drevlyan territory and its supposed date broadly coincides with the events of 945.

The funeral ritual is represented in the *Primary Chronicle* as a part of a historical process. In this context, the behaviour of the participants in it has an entirely different meaning and sense than it would have had in reality. It is hardly likely that the chronicler deliberately refashioned the evidence of the rituals in the description of revenge. Obviously the compilers of 1039 or 1110 were not participants in the events of 945.⁷¹ The transformation seems to have taken place through repeated oral transmission; the keepers of the information related the deeds of Princess Olga and her contemporaries, while their audience perceived the information in their own way and gave it their own explanation. The changing consciousness of the epoch, especially after the Russians had adopted Christianity, demanded a new interpretation of the events as told by the eyewitnesses. The next generation that received the story had already lost contact with its origins and, in compliance with the specific character of genre and the expectations of listeners, full of folkloric details and symbols. Thus, customs and events, which originally had a sacred meaning, received a rational treatment suitable for a different epoch. They became a part of folklore and could absorb influence from other genres and traditions.

2. In the case of the story of Olga, the most important was the influence from Scandinavian oral culture familiar to the Kievan ruling house. Prince Igor (*Ingvar*) and Princess Olga (*Helga*) were said to be of Scandinavian origin, Varangians (*Varyags*), so that they must follow the same principles of behaviour as the heroes of Scandinavian sagas. However, the Scandinavian origin of the ruling pair could be the product of the Russian annalistic tradition, which had been created between 1039 and 1118, when Kiev was governed by the dynasty of Yaroslav the Wise married to Ingegerd Olofsdotter of Sweden. It was the time when oral evidence of Princess Olga transformed into the written story of her deeds.

Just as Princess Olga was the great-grandmother of Prince Yaroslav the Wise, the latter's wife, Ingegerd, was said to be a granddaughter of Sigrid the Haughty (*Storråda*), a Nordic queen, who received her cognomen on account of her independent character. Sagas ascribe to her a prominent role in the politics of her time and depict her as a very wise woman who also had the gift of prophecy.⁷² Sigrid is known to have had many suitors because of her wealth and nobility, and once had the Norwegian king Harald Grenski and the Russian prince Vissavald, who were burnt to death inside a house on Sigrid's order to discourage other petty kings from proposing to her.⁷³ It seems quite possible that this Swedish tale was known at the court of the Kievan ruling clan and had an influence on the story of Princess Olga. The burning of enemies in a house was a well-known motif in medieval Scandinavia, but it is not found in earlier Russian tradition.⁷⁴ The figure of an in-

⁷¹ Shakhmatov 2001: 111-118 assumed that the story of Princess Olga originated from an ancient biographical narration; Likhachev 1996: 304-306, from a hypothetical "Tale of adopting Christianity by Rus"; Müller 1988: 795-796, from a folklore tradition.

⁷² See Rydzevskaya 1978: 196-197.

⁷³ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (*The Saga of Ólaf Tryggvason*), chapter 43.

⁷⁴ On the burning of an enemy/rival in a house, see *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. F. Jónsson, Halle 1908, p. 299-303; *Heiðarvíga saga*, ed. Kr. Kålund, Kjöbenhavn, 1904, p. 13-14; Grundvíg S. *Danmarks gamle folkeviser*, del. III, Kjöbenhavn, 1862, p. 46-48.

dependent woman-ruler like Sigrid was appropriate to the image of Princess Olga because she had ruled alone in Kiev for some time.⁷⁵

In this case, the description of the second stage of the ritual (“second revenge”) in the *Primary Chronicle* was distorted by Scandinavian influence on the compiler, who wrote at the beginning of the twelfth century.⁷⁶ In both stories of the princely widows, Princess Olga and Sigrid the Haughty consider their suitors unworthy of their own high status and burn them with their retinue (their matchmakers) in a house.⁷⁷ Snorri’s story of Sigrid with only the motive of pride appeared to explain her cognomen “the Proud”. In contrast, the *Primary Chronicle* explains the behaviour of Olga as revenge for the murder of her husband. The more complicated topic of the latter can be a developing of the simpler Scandinavian motif rather than vice-versa, so that the tale may have been transmitted by Swedish relatives of the Kievan ruling family to the Russian annalists. The motive of revenge, unusual in Russian literature and folklore, may also have been added to the story of Olga under the same Scandinavian influence.⁷⁸

The closeness of the story to Scandinavian culture brings in itself danger of mistaking a Nordic motif for the ritual under consideration. The tripartite structure of the universe has an analogy in Scandinavian mythology, in which the “middle earth” of people (Midgard) is surrounded by the ocean that divides two other worlds, the upper Valhalla and the lower Hel.⁷⁹ Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* depicts the burial of Balder, the Scandinavian god of the summer sun and a son of Odin, whose body was burned on a ship: “Then was the body of Balder borne out on shipboard; and when his wife, Nanna the daughter of Nep, saw that, straightaway her heart burst with grief, and she died; she was borne to the pyre, and fire was kindled” (*Gylfaginning* 48). The scene looks like a euphemism for the sacrifice of Nanna together with her deceased husband.⁸⁰

The analogies, however, seems to be common for the Indo-European cultural circle. Specific to the Russian story, the burning of the Drevlyan noble men in a bathhouse as opposed to a dwelling house in Snorri’s story of Sigrid, is a known motif in Indo-European poetry.⁸¹

⁷⁵ At the same time, a proud, independent and unapproachable woman-warrior/regent, who refuses to marry any suitor of lower dignity than she, is a widespread folkloric image and could be common to Princess Olga and Sigrid. Olga (~920-969) was a generation older than Sigrid (~968-before 1013). The Russian suitor for Sigrid’s hand, Vissavald, cannot be identified in Russian history.

⁷⁶ On Scandinavian parallels for Olga’s behaviour, see Chadwick 1946: 28-33; Jesch 1991: 111-115.

⁷⁷ This is one of the reasons for the appearance of the prince *Mal* (small) and the wedding embassy in the *Primary Chronicle*.

⁷⁸ The revenge story of the princess Rogneda of Polozk is known from the *Laurentian Chronicle* sub anno 1128 (as well as in two manuscripts closely related to it, the *Radziwiłł* and *Academy Chronicles*). Garcia De La Puente 2009: 196-197, discusses its similarity to the two Scandinavian legends of Gudrun’s revenge, in *Heimskringla* (chapters 76-78) and in *Volsungasaga* (chapters 34 and 40). Also see Stender-Petersen 1934: 210-244: esp. 215-220. It seems, however, that the motif of Rogneda’s vengeance by attempting to kill her own husband was a later tale added to the original story of Rogneda, known in the *Primary Chronicle* under the year 980. The addition was borrowed by the later compiler from Scandinavian tradition. Shakhmatov 2001: 246-251 seems correct in noting its dependence on the later Novgorodian tradition, which supported the superiority of the Yaroslavichi clan in comparison to the Rogvolodovichi clan of the princes of Polozk.

⁷⁹ The Scandinavian tripartite model of the Universe is represented on the Gotland picture stones. The upper world there is marked with solar signs and the lower one with a monster. See *The Ship* 1995: 165-171.

⁸⁰ Other examples of similar female sacrifices in early Germanic funerals are discussed by Ellis 1977: 50-58; Smyser 1965: 109.

⁸¹ See West 2007: 444. It may also go back to the Russian custom of stoking bathhouses for the deceased. See Likhachev 1996: 437.

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**Rekonstrukcija pogrebnih obredov ob smrti kijevskega princa Igorja
(«Nestorjeva kronika», sub anno 945)**

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Nestorjeva kronika pri letu 945 poroča, kako so podložni Drevljani umorili kijevskega kneza Igorja in kako se je maščevala njegova vdova, kneginja Olga. Najprej je ukazala žive zakopati odposlance Drevljanov, ki so prišli s to novico v Kijev. Nato so njeni služabniki zažgali savno, v kateri so se umivali najuglednejši Drevljani, da so živi zgoreli. Nazadnje je kneginja odšla na prostor, kjer je bil pokopan njen mož, in med pogrebno pojedino ukazala pokol tisočev Drevljanov. Avtor vsako od teh dejanj razlaga kot pogrebni obred ob smrti kijevskega kneza. Trije obredi so sestavljali tri stopnje pogrebne ceremonije, ki je potekala v sklopu predstav o trodelni zgradbi sveta. Zdi se, da je bila ta mitska slika razširjena med Rusi in Ukrajinci v 10. stol. v Kijevu, njen izvor pa lahko najdemo v skupnem indoevropskem kulturnem krogu.