

RUSSIAN MYTHOLOGY

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Introduction

Mythology takes as its subject the significance of the objects that exist in the world, natural events, and the private matters and objects of social life from an emotional point of view. Mythology is the identification of humanity with nature, making the powers of nature one's own in the imagination. In the face of natural events, the first humans were powerless, both before the events within themselves and those that came from outside. Therefore, it is directed at describing events and objects that were considered taboo, or embodying and personalizing events or objects that the mind could not grasp. Identifying itself with all living and non-living thing from the very beginning, the human mind tried to express them through various objects and symbols. The rustle of leaves, thunder, bird calls, and lightning striking – all these natural events were perceived by humans as a sign of good or evil, life or death.

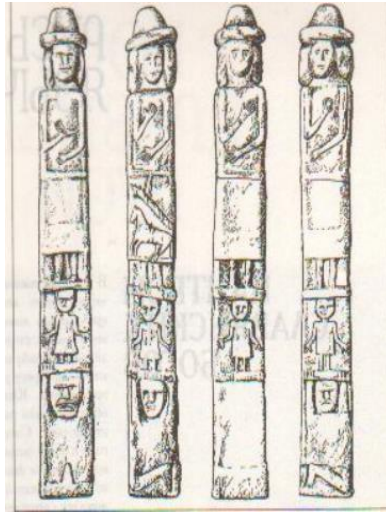
Mythological images are indirect expressions of humans' internal worlds and emotions. Emotions override reason. Mythological images do not consist only of imaginary depictions. They also have the quality of making living in harmony with human desires and emotions, and acting together easier. In this context, The subject of Russian mythology consists of the belief of the Russian people, who planted fields, worked the land, and spent their lives together with animals such as eagles and wolves, that supernatural powers directed the fates of men, and the symbols and gods that before and after the coming of Christianity were passed down from generation to generation.

Mythology sustains its existence in all cultures in both oral and written sources. It is possible to find knowledge about the mythology of the Indo-European people in the earliest literary works. Therefore, for example, we can gain a great deal of information about Greek mythology from Homer's epics. We can learn about Russian mythology, however, from priests' manuscripts, epics, or some treaties signed by princes (Oleg, 971; Igor, 945). Apart from these, religious folk beliefs, ceremonies, songs, and stories play an important role in providing mythological information.

Prior to accepting Christianity, the pagan Russians worshipped the earth, trees, stones, fire, the sun and water. It is possible to see traces of these beliefs in the one of the oldest manuscripts, *The Tale of Bygone Years*.

The first find from archaeological excavations is the Zbruchskiy statue, found at the foot of the Zbruch river in the vicinity of the city of Gusyatyn. This statue, three meters in length, made of limestone, and in the form of a square column has three levels. The upper level is dedicated to the gods, the middle to human beings and the bottom level is the underworld (see picture 2).

(2)



On the column are four figures, all the same height and wearing the same hat. Two of the figures are women, and each figure has its own unique symbols: a ring, sword, horse, horn etc. However, it is still not known which divinities are depicted here. It is believed that this four-faced statue from the 10th century symbolizes the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west).¹.

We know from archaeological data that a pagan temple was used in the Perin district of Novgorod in Russia. It is thought that this temple was built for the god of thunder, Perun.

(4) "The center part of the temple consists of a plaza surrounded by a regular circular ditch more than 1 meter in depth, 7 meters across and 21 meters in diameter which rises horizontally on the surrounding surface. In the exact center of the circle, excavations revealed a hole 0.6 meters in diameter. Here there was a wooden image of Perun that was carved in 988 and thrown into the Volkhov. In front of the image was a place for sacrifices made of paving stones."

The Russians conducted their religious ceremonies, prayers and supplications in these forests and temples; in these ceremonies they rang bells and played trumpets wildly, and danced hopping and jumping. Sacrifices were offered during these ceremonies for the fulfillment of their prayers. Animal and human bones, skulls, vessels, coal and ashes have been found in archaeological excavations. Offering sacrifices continued in Russia until the mid-16th century.

We learn from *The Tale of Bygone Years* that the first time that the Russians officially placed images of the gods in the palace was during the reign of Vladimir Svyatoslavich:

(5) 'And Vladimir began to rule in Kiev, and he had a temple built on a hill outside the palace; Perun, and Hors, Dazhbog, Stribog, Symargla and Mokosh made of wood, their heads of silver and their mouths of gold.'

¹ Путилов, Б., 1999.

(*The Tale of Bygone Years*, 1113)

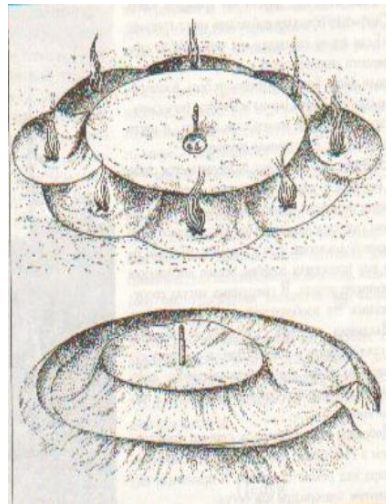
From the same paragraph we learn that after the acceptance of Christianity the pagans began to be called 'sinners' and that there is now a church on the hill where the image of Perun stood:

(6) 'However, God, who distributes his blessings, did not wish for the sinners to die; now the church of St. Vasiliy stands on that hill.'

(*The Tale of Bygone Years*, 1113)

The greatest and most important god (4) during the Russians' time as pagans was the god of the sky, lightning, storms and war, Perun. Perun was also the protector of princes and soldiers in battle. In times of war soldiers swore oaths in his name. Perun was depicted as a bellowing bull, or a male goat; he ensured fertility by sowing seeds and moistening the earth with rains. Perun's symbol was the oak tree and his weapon was the axe. The axe was Perun's lightning and the oak tree drew this lightning to itself. The flames created by Perun's lightning striking the earth could not be extinguished. It was for this reason that the common people cursed someone by saying "May Perun strike you dead!" (Chtob tebya Perun ubil!) ². The Russian sacrificed chickens, goats, oxen and even humans to images of Perun made of oak wood. In Novgorod, an image of Perun was located on the top of a hill, and in that location was seen as a symbol of power. Below is a drawing, based on archaeological estimates, of the image of Perun found on that hilltop:

(7)



In *the Story of Oleg's Conquest of Constantinople* (Povest' o vzyatii Olegom Tsargrada) from *The Tale of Bygone Years*, the moment Tsar Leon, Alexander and Oleg pledge themselves to keep the peace after signing a peace treaty, the following words are found:

(8) 'Tsar Leon made peace with Alexander and Oleg, promised to pay tribute and swore oaths among themselves; Tsar Leon and Alexander kissed the cross, Oleg and

² Путилов, Б., 1999.

his men in accordance with Russian law approved the peace by swearing by their weapons, their god Perun, and the god of animals Volos.'

(*The Tale of Bygone Years*, 'Story of Oleg's Conquest of Constantinople', 1113)

The god Volos appears as Perun's opposite; whereas the image of Perun, the greatest of the gods, was placed on the top of a hill, and when agreements were signed in time of war a prince's soldiers swore by the god of war Perun, the others swore by the god of the underworld, Volos who protected all of Russia. Volos' reign in the underworld was represented by death and animal herds, and it was believed that he controlled the demons of the underworld. His place was not a hill, but under a tree or a stone. Volos' place was taken by St. Vlasii in Christianity. St. Vlasii was a shepherd who protected domestic animals and herds, and represents a martyr. St. Vlasii is depicted as a man mounted on a horse, or seated on a rock surrounded by sheep, cattle and horses. In Russia today, the colloquial words *volosatik* and *volosen'* are known to derive from Volos, and both are used with the meaning 'evil spirit' or 'devil'.³ The use of Volos in the name of constellations, as in *Volosini* or *Volosozhari*, is also seen. It was believed that the hunt would be successful in the month when these stars shone brightly.

Again, in the "Story of Oleg's Conquest of Constantinople" from *The Tale of Bygone Years*, Svyatoslav expresses his belief in the thunder god Perun and the god of animals Volos:

(9) If the Greek Tsar will swear an oath with me, the boyars and all Russians, we will be faithful to our oath. However, if he fails to fulfill the promises he made before, I swear by the gods whom we believe in under the names Perun and the god of animals Volos to those with me and to God above me, that we will be as gold, such that our weapons also will be gold and that we will kill them.'

(*The Tale of Bygone Years*, 'Story of Oleg's Conquest of Constantinople', 1113)

Another image found on a hilltop in Kiev was that of the goddess Mokosh'. Mokosh was the goddess of darkness, wet rainy nights, sacred wells, springs, sexuality and fertility. Her role was to make the work of men and animals easier, and to protect them. After the acceptance of Christianity she was replaced by St. Paraskeva. Another form of this goddess was as the goddess of death and rebirth Baba Yaga. In one Russian tale, *Beautiful Vasilisa* (*Vasilisa prekrasnaya*), she appears as an evil old woman who eats children and threatens them with death. However, Baba Yaga also protected women and guided them. In the story, Baba Yaga tells Vasilisa, who was sent by her three step-sisters on the pretext of requesting a candle to be eaten by Baba Yaga:

(10) "Before I give you a light you must live with me and do some work for me. If you refuse, I will eat you."

(*Beautiful Vasilisa*)⁴

However, being pleased with the work Vasilisa has done for her, she decides not to eat her, and explains that she is going to send her back:

³ Юдин, А.В., 1999.

⁴ *Русские народные сказки*, 1997.

(11) "Pushing Vasilisa outside, she took a burning eye from the skull, put it on a stick and gave it to the girl. 'Take this and carry it to your three sisters. I know that they sent you for this.'"

(*Beautiful Vasilisa*)

Today mythological female heroes called *Mokushi* or *Mokoshi* are talked about in northwestern Russia. These women are depicted spinning wool. In addition, the names *Mara*, *Morena*, *Markita* and *Makrina* are said to be connected to Mokosh.⁵

Svarog, god of the heavens and the universe, was considered the father of the gods. The gods of the sun, lightning, clouds, wind, fire and water were begotten by him. The sun god Dazhbog, son of Svarog, distributed wealth prosperity and abundance to humanity with his fruitful rays. It was believed that his marriage to the goddess of spring, Lada, brought prosperity and happiness to the world. In an old story entitled *Dazhbog and Lada* (Dazhbog i Lada), the first encounter and later marriage of the sun god and goddess of spring are described in these lines:

(12) "One day when the sun god Dazhbog was passing through the heavens in his two-wheeled chariot drawn by twelve horses with shining golden manes, he leaned over to see where a sad voice that he heard was coming from and spied a beautiful girl. Lada looked at him and flirtatiously threw water at him, and right then the sun god struck her."

(Dazhbog and Lada)⁶

In the story, Svarog, the high god and god of the heavens, hears that Lada's father Tsar Mora was opposed to this marriage. By creating dark clouds above Tsar Mora and blacking out the sun Svarog helps his son to kidnap Lada in the darkness. The story ends with Lada and Dazhbog's marriage and having a son. Dazhbog's name is found in *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*:

(13) 'Oleg Gorislavich in his time... destroyed all the wealth of Dazhbog's descendants, smashed it and ruined their lives.'

(*The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, 16th century)

Another sun god among the Russians was *Khors*, also known as *Khrys*.⁷ Khors' name appears in *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* in the following lines:

(14) The noble prince of all the Slavs put a code of laws into place, met with the princes of the city, and at night ran like the wolves. Setting out from Kiev, he reached Tmutarakan by the time the roosters crowed. Running like a wolf to noble Khors, he reached the other side of the road.'

⁵ *Op cit.*

⁶ Simonov, P., 1997.

⁷ It is thought that this name is derived from the Persian word *khurset* 'divine sun'.

century)

(*The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, 16th

In *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, one of the most important works of Old Russian literature, Stribog, the god of storms and wind, appears in the following lines:

(15) 'Those winds, Striborg's grandchildren, blew like arrows from the sea on Igor's brave troop.'

(*The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, 16th century)

In addition to the gods the Russians believed in minor divinities and supernatural powers. These were the spirits, demons, sprites, fairies and giants that lived in the forests, trees, sky, water and houses. These types of mythological beings were far more numerous than the gods; there was only one pantheon of major divinities, but the number of minor mythological beings varied by location.

The Russians' old religion was based on the influence of agriculture; for these people the concepts of earth, fields, forests, rivers, courtyards, houses and barns held great importance in their daily lives. For this reason their religious thoughts and emotions always developed within this framework of their lives. These people whose livelihoods were obtained from the earth sought the help of supernatural powers to protect them from the worries and dangers they encountered in their daily lives and to be able to live in peace. They even went so far as to give them a corner of their homes.

The most important of these supernatural powers, the *Domovoy*⁸ or 'house spirit', protected the house. Every house had its *Domovoy* and every part of the house had its unique characteristics.

Figures of *Domovoy* were generally made from wood, and depicted a bearded, white-haired old man. Sometimes *Domovoy* could appear as a rabbit, dog or cat. They were generally accepted to be an invisible being in the house, and it was believed that anyone who looked at a *Domovoy* would go blind, or even die. A figure of a *Domovoy* as an old man is seen below (16):

(16)

⁸ Other names are *Dobrojil*, *Kormilets*, *Dedushka*, *Susedka*, *Batan*, *Zhirovik*, *Shut*, *Sadolom*, *Oblom*, and *Karnouhiy*.



Domovoy in farm houses, like all people, were beings which required feeding and being shown the proper respect. They abandoned homes were they felt they were not respected or were not fed, and the house that they abandoned would be visited by illness, disaster and death. Before a farmer bought a new animal they walked it around the house both to determine if the Domovoy approved of the animal or not, and to show how much they respected the Domovoy.

Domovoy hid by day and only came out at night. At night the groomed the horses, fed them and dried wheat in the storehouses.

The Domovoy and the Two Villagers (Domovoy i dva krest'yanina) is a folk story about the lives of two farmers, which clearly shows the place of the Domovoy in the home. One farmer had three well-raised horses and with them he was able to provide a good living for his family. The other farmer had three lazy horses; as a result the family barely got by. When the farmer who was in difficulty asked the farmer with the good horses how he fed them, this was the reply:

(17) 'I don't know. It's as if the animals are secretly fed at night, but I don't know anything about it.'

(*The Domovoy and the Two Villagers*)⁹

Lying in wait that night, the jealous farmer who had seen the Domovoy feeding the mares, convinced their owner that the water the Domovoy left for the animals would bring disaster to humans and that he should drill a hole in the bottom of the bucket that the Domovoy used to give water to the mares. Listening to the jealous farmer, the other farmer did as he had been advised and through this thoughtlessness angered the Domovoy. In response to this disrespect the Domovoy of the well-off farmer burned the stable with the horses in it and never returned to that house.

Another household spirit was the *Ovinnik*¹⁰ 'the granary giant', who lived in the granary and resembled a cat the size of a black dog with eyes that burned like coals. In the granaries

⁹ Simonov, P., 1997.

¹⁰ Other names are *Gumennik*, *Podovinnik*.

where the heads of wheat were dried was an oven located in a depression in the floor. The Ovinnik lived here, stoked the oven's fire, and went to the threshing floor where threshed the wheat. His duty was to protect those living in the house, and to ensure their happiness. However, it was known that he never forgave the inhabitants' mistakes and misbehavior and punished them.

The spirit that protected the stables and barns outside of the house was the *Khlevnik*, 'stable giant'. The Khlevnik herded the animals outside, cleaned them and fed them. His place was the back corner of the stable, where he watched the horses and cattle. Other animals did not attract his attention. In addition to being the protector of the animals, the Khlevnik was also regarded as a trouble-maker who could sometimes do them harm. For example, he was sometimes the one who made the horses suddenly run in the stable, or caused to cow to go dry. To guard against the Khlevnik's bad side, owners of animals hung scarecrows at the stable's entrance, braided whips made from hemp that had several knots, forced their animals to pass under a brazier hung in front of the stable door containing glowing poplar coals.

The protective spirit of nature and the forests beyond the house was the Leshiy ¹¹, 'forest giant'. He lived in dense forests and fed on the moisture on the trees. He took the height of any tree and shrub and could assume the shape of any animal. Unlike humans, he wore his clothes reversed, and could uproot even the strongest tree. The Leshiy is depicted as a creature wearing animal furs, and having a blue tail, protruding green eyes, long eyebrows, long hair, a green goatee and horns.

(18)



The Leshiy disappeared every October until the following year, and reappeared the next spring. In spring he was merciless to people wandering through the forests he watched. By whistling and making noises he made people lose their way in the forest, but in the end allowed to return unharmed. The Leshiy was also known for stealing orphan children abandoned under a tree. In a folk tale called *The Tailor and the Leshiy (Portnoy i Leshiy)* , one day a poor, unemployed tailor says in desperation:

(19) 'If the Leshiy even asked me to sew something for him I would do it.'
(*The Tailor and the Leshiy*)

12

¹¹ Other names are *Leshak*, *Lesovik*, *Lesovoy*.

¹² Simonov, P., 1997.

Following the words, an old man has the tailor sew a number of things for him; in the end, as a reward for his talent and patience, the old man gives the tailor a beautiful girl, a gold carriage with three horses and a quantity of money. This girl had been forgotten by her father under an oak tree twenty years before. Thanks to the tailor and the Leshiy, the girl eventually gained a good husband and father.

The water nymphs, *Rusalka* (plural, *Rusalki*)¹³, were the spirits of unbaptized young girls who had drowned in the rivers or had been killed. They lived in river beds or lake shores. They sometimes appeared as nude, fair-skinned, beautiful girls with long hair; sometimes they had the form of a mermaid, a frog, or even a mouse. The water nymphs lived in the water and only came out of the water for a few days in summer to dry out. These days when they emerged from the water brought plenty and prosperity to the fields and crops. The *Rusalki* were lonely and constantly sought companions to spend their lives with. They attracted men with their beautiful dances and songs. Men who became enchanted by the *Rusalki* fell into their trap and eventually either drowned in a river or became a slave of the *Rusalki*. Therefore, the *Rusalki* represented darkness, underground water and death.

(20)



The folk tale *Ivan Savelevich and the Rusalka* (*Ivan Savelevich i Rusalka*) describes how a hunter who one winter day set out in his boat to hunt seals, was trapped at sea, and fell in love with a beautiful *Rusalka* who entertained him with her dances at this difficult time, fell into the *Rusalka*'s trap. Before diving into deep waters to meet the *Rusalka* he says:

(21) 'Rusalka, my love, are you there, below waiting for me perhaps? Or is this a trap? I am afraid of drowning.'

(*Ivan Savelevich and the Rusalka*)

14

The hunter senses a trap, but completely enchanted by her beauty he cannot stop himself from diving into the deep waters. At the end of the story, when the hunter wants to return to the surface he understands that it is impossible and becomes an eternal slave to his love for the *Rusalka*.

The oldest stories in Old Russia that were passed from generation to generation and person to person were *epics* (*bylina*). The subject of these epics is the lives of heroes and champions such as *Svyatogor*, *Il'ya Muromets*, *Dobrynya Nikitich*, *Mikula Selyaninovich*, and *Sadko*; and their triumphs in Russian history.

¹³ Other names are *Krinitsy*, *Loskotalki*, *Zemlyanochki*.

¹⁴ Simonov, P., 1997.

Among these champions, Svyatogor¹⁵ is a great hero in Russian epics. He has no home and no county, and wanders the the Sacred Mountains¹⁶.

(22) "I do not wander in Holy Russia, for I was not given permission; permission was given me to wander the mountains and heights."¹⁷

He was forbidden to enter Holy Russia due to his great height (his head almost touched the clouds) and his great weight, beyond the ability of Mother Earth to bear. He was exiled to live in the Sacred Mountains. In the epic *Svyatogor, Mother Earth and Fate*, while sitting on a mountain peak and angry at being exiled Svyatogor asks himself this question:

(23) 'Why can I not freely wander the lands of my own country?'
(Svyatogor, Mother Earth and Fate)¹⁸

Boasting about himself, Mother Earth and the Sky oppose him. He attempts to demonstrate that he is even strong enough to turn the earth upside down. However, Svyatogor's tries to pick up Mikula Selyaninovich's load, a small one which he is carrying on his back, Svyatogor is unable. When he asks Mikula what this load is, the reply is that the sack contains Mother Earth and the Sky who had opposed him. Mikul explains the reason for Svyatogor's exile:

(24) 'You boasted, saying that you could turn the world upside down; now you have seen the world's true weight. The gods have punished you for your pride.'
(Svyatogor, Mother Earth and Fate)¹⁹

In the end of the epic Svyatogor is unable to escape the dictates of fate, but he stabbed because of his ugliness and left die; from his wife he learns that after the stroke of the knife he has suddenly become beautiful:

(25) 'I lay deep in sleep for thirty years on a dung heap. A fig skin completely covered me. One day a man came to the hut and left 500 gold rubles. When I awoke there was a wound on my chest and the fig skin that covered me had fallen off.'
(Svyatogor, Mother Earth and Fate)²⁰

In the folk epic *Il'ya Muromets and the Hero Svyatogor* (Il'ya Muromets i bogatyr' Svyatogor) three miracles occur in Il'ya Muromets life. The child of a peasant family, Il'ya is bedridden by an illness. The first miracle takes place when three travelers come to their house. The old men want Il'ya to give them water, but Il'ya cannot stand up; the old men then order Il'ya to get up immediately and bring them something to drink. Il'ya, as if nothing was wrong with him, gets up and brings them kvas. The old men then offer him some of the drink. As soon as Il'ya drinks the kvas he revives and regains his strength.

¹⁵ *Svyatogor* means 'sacred mountain'.

¹⁶ That is, the clouds.

¹⁷ Путилов, Б., 1999.

¹⁸ Simonov, P., 1997.

¹⁹ Simonov, P., 1997.

²⁰ Simonov, P., 1997.

(26) 'There is such incredible strength within me, as if I could even move the world.'
(*Il'ya Muromets and the Hero Svyatogor*)

21

Immediately after these words the the travelers give him a drink for a second time. However, after drinking this drink Il'ya realizes that his strength has decreased slightly. By giving him this second drink, the travelers want to show Il'ya that the strength he has gained is temporary and that he needs to be humble in life. After the second drink the travelers confirm to Il'ya that no one will be able to harm him in battle and that he will be a great hero. Putting Il'ya on a horse, the ask him to look after throughout its life. In the epic, one day Il'ya encounters Svyatogor, with the strength to move the world; after the giant man tests Il'ya and sees that he is humble, by giving him his sword and strength makes Il'ya even stronger. Thus, thanks to his own strength and his horse who warns him of danger ahead of time Il'ya is thrown into the miraculous.

One of the heroes of the epic, Alyosha Popovich Rostovlu, is the son of a priest. Alyosha became famous not for his strength, but from his erratic behavior, cunning actions and quickness of mind that stem from his youth. Alyosha's childhood is described in this manner in the epic *Alyosha Popovich* (Alyosha Popovich):

(27) 'Before long he learned to walk, wander the streets and play with other small children. However, when one of the children caught him by the arm, the child's arm was dislocated; when caught by the foot, the foot was almost torn off – their games were very vicious. In fact one day he grabbed a man by the waist and the man's waist was torn in two.'

(*Alyosha Popovich*)²²

Alyosha's greatest victory was defeating the dragon Tugarin who had threatened the prince of Kiev, Vladimir, and his principality.

(28) 'Immediately Alyosha jumped on Tugarin and tore off his head. The dragon's head fell to the ground like a beet boiling in a cauldron. Then, Alyosha put Tugarin's bloody head on a spear and returned to Prince Vladimir with this trophy.'

(*Alyosha Popovich*)²³

After this event Prince Vladimir made Alyosha a knight in his troop.

Another important epic hero is Dobrynya Nikitich; after Il'ya Muromets and Alyosha Popovich he is the third great champion. Il'ya Muromets was a peasant, Alyosha Popovich had a clerical personality, but Dobrynya Nikitich represents a man from the class of princes. In the epic *Dobrynya Nikitich and the Dragon* (Dobrynya Nikitich i zmey), Dobrynya is described as follows:

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Simonov, P., 1997.

²³ Simonov, P., 1997.

(29) ' Thus Dobrynya arranged for himself a great, suitable feast in the palace. He wore green Moroccan leather shoes with high heels and pointed toes. The toes of his shoes were so pointed that an egg could even turn around them, and sparrows could fly under his heels. His clothes were worked in gold and his cape was made of black sable brought from countries beyond the sea.'

*(Nikitich and the Dragon)*²⁴

In the epic Vladimir sends Dobrynya to find the dragon that had taken the beautiful princess. Dobrynya finds the monster, but cannot defeat him in three days. Six days later he reaches the dragon's lair, saves the princess and sends her back to Kiev with Alyosha Popovich. At the end of the epic Dobrynya marries Nastasya whom he encountered on the road and returns to Kiev.

Mikula Selyaninovich, a farmer and father of the Nastasya mentioned the epic *Nikitich and the Dragon*, is also one of the epic heroes. In the epic *Volga and Mikula* (*Volga i Mikula*), Prince Volga with his soldiers set out to collect the taxes and annual tribute from the cities that are resisting payment. On the road he hears the sound of a plow; when introduced to the plowman, he tells Volga to be very careful as the people living in the cities are very dangerous and set an ambush for him. Volga then asks the plowman to join him. The plowman and his mare join Prince Volga's troop, and they all set out on their expedition. Along the way the plowman remembers that he left his plow out in the open, and worried that it might be stolen, asks Volga's help in hiding it in a safe place. Volga sends five men back to hide the plow, but the five men cannot move it. Volga then sends ten strong men, and finally the entire troop to do the job, but none of them can budge the plow. Seeing this the plowman mounts his mare and returns to hide the plow himself. He picks up the plow with one hand, shakes off the dirt and hides it behind some bushes. Catching up with Volga's troop, he passes them. Volga admires the plowman's mare and asks for it. Mikula replies that the mare is priceless. Confronted by the plowman's courage before him, Volga asks his name. The plowman answers Volga as follows:

(30) 'When I plow the field for barley, and when I heap it up,
When I heap it up and bring it home
When the grains are beaten in the mortar and I make drink,
When I give it to the villagers to drink,
The villagers praise men,
And call me the peasant's son, the young Mikula Selyaninovich'

*(Volga and Mikula)*²⁵

Another epic hero is Sadko, who besides being a singer from Novgorod who plays the *gusli*²⁶, is also a wealthy merchant. He earns money by playing the *gusli* at banquets, but in the epic *The Wealthy Merchant Sadko* (*Bogatyj kupets Sadko*) Sadko is no longer called to banquets. One day while sitting on the shore of Lake Ilmen and playing his *gusli*, thanks to the advice of the Tsar of the Oceans, who was born from the waves, Sadko's life is changed and he becomes rich in gold. He sails by ship to neighboring countries to conduct trade. However, because of Novgorod's storms and waves he is unable to return. Thinking that the Tsar of the Oceans desires tribute from him, he vows offerings of gold, silver, and even humans to

²⁴ Simonov, P., 1997.

²⁵ Simonov, P., 1997.

²⁶ The *gusli* is a multi-stringed Russian instrument similar to a zither.

the sea. However, nothing calms the sea. Finally, Sadko abandons the ship to sacrifice himself. The Tsar of the Oceans appears and asks him which is more valuable to Novgorod – gold, silver or steel? Sadko answers:

(31) 'Gold and silver are truly valuable in Russia, but steel is no less so. One can live without gold or silver, but not without steel and iron.'
*(The Wealthy Merchant Sadko)*²⁷

As tribute, the Tsar of the Oceans wants Sadko to play the *gusli* and then get married. An old man who suddenly appears says that fulfilling what the Tsar has asked of Sadko and listening to him are the only ways that he can return to Novgorod. In return for the old man's help Sadko promises that when he returns to Novgorod he will build St. Nikolay's Church. When Sadko returns to Novgorod he marries, becomes very wealthy and builds many churches in Novgorod.

²⁷ Simonov, P., 1997.

Reading Assignments:

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Questions

Which deities did the pagan Russians worship?

What sources help us to get information about Russian mythology?

Discuss about the reflections of paganism in Russian Orthodoxy and provide relevant examples.