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TABLE of CONTENTS

Volume XXII, no. 1

ARTICLES / СТАТЬИ

Ольга Б. Страхова (Бостон)

Лк. 24:43 в византийской, латинской

и ранней славянской традиции 1-20

Лора Тасева (София)

Цитати от Григорий Назиански в схолии към

Второто аподиктично слово на Григорий Палама:

особености на превода 21-37

Светлана К. Севастьянова (Новосибирск)

Символика архиерейского облачения

в трактовке Патриарха Никона 38-118

PUBLICATIONS / ПУБЛИКАЦИИ

Ива Трифонова (София)

Южнославянската редакция на Тълковния апокалипсис:

Речник-индекс и издание на запазената част от

Националната библиотека "Св. св. Кирил и Методий",

София, № 101, XVI в. 119-163

Александр Б. Страхов (Бостон)

Полесские фольклорно-этнографические материалы

в современных записях: 8. Демонология (русалки) 164-188

SPECULUM

Искра Христова-Шомова (София)

Превод и познание: богословската терминология

в "Небеса" на Йоан Екзарх 189-198

Charles J. Halperin (Bloomington, Indiana)

"Ivan IV's 1572 Testament as a Literary 'Mystification'" 199-219

MISCELLANEA / СМЕСЬ

Александр Б. Страхов (Бостон)

О некоторых глаголах на -*xnōti* и их производных

(этимологические заметки) 220-232

Francisco Molina Moreno (Madrid)

Migrating Fabulous Half-Birds?

Sirens And Sirin 233-246

Francisco Molina Moreno (Madrid)

Migrating Fabulous Half-Birds? Sirens And Sirin¹

In memory of Olivier Messiaen

I. Introduction.

In this paper, we deal with the degree to which we can say that certain fabulous creatures, namely the sirens of classical mythology, migrated through translation into Russian folklore and became the so-called Sirin bird, whose very name reflects the Byzantine and Modern Greek pronunciation of the name of the ancient sirens. Despite the coincidence in name and appearance, there are differences between the sirens and Sirin. Such differences could be due to the influence of other Slavic folk beliefs.

II. The Ancient Greek Sirens.

We may take as an introduction to our fabulous creatures an Attic-Corinthian *hydria* from ca. 580-550 B. C. E., now in Paris (Musée du Louvre, Inv. No. E 869). It shows a bird with the head of a woman, beneath which an inscription reads: ΣΙΠΕΝ ΕΙΜΙ, that is, "I am a siren."² At approximately the same time as that image, such woman-headed birds appear in illustrations of the famous episode of the *Odyssey* (XII, 181-91), in which the sirens try to lure Odysseus and his fellows. We may see them, for example, on an Attic red-figured *stamnos* of the so-called Siren Painter (500-480 B. C. E.), found at Vulci (Etruria, Italy), and now in the British Museum (E440; our pl. I).

III. The Russian Sirin.

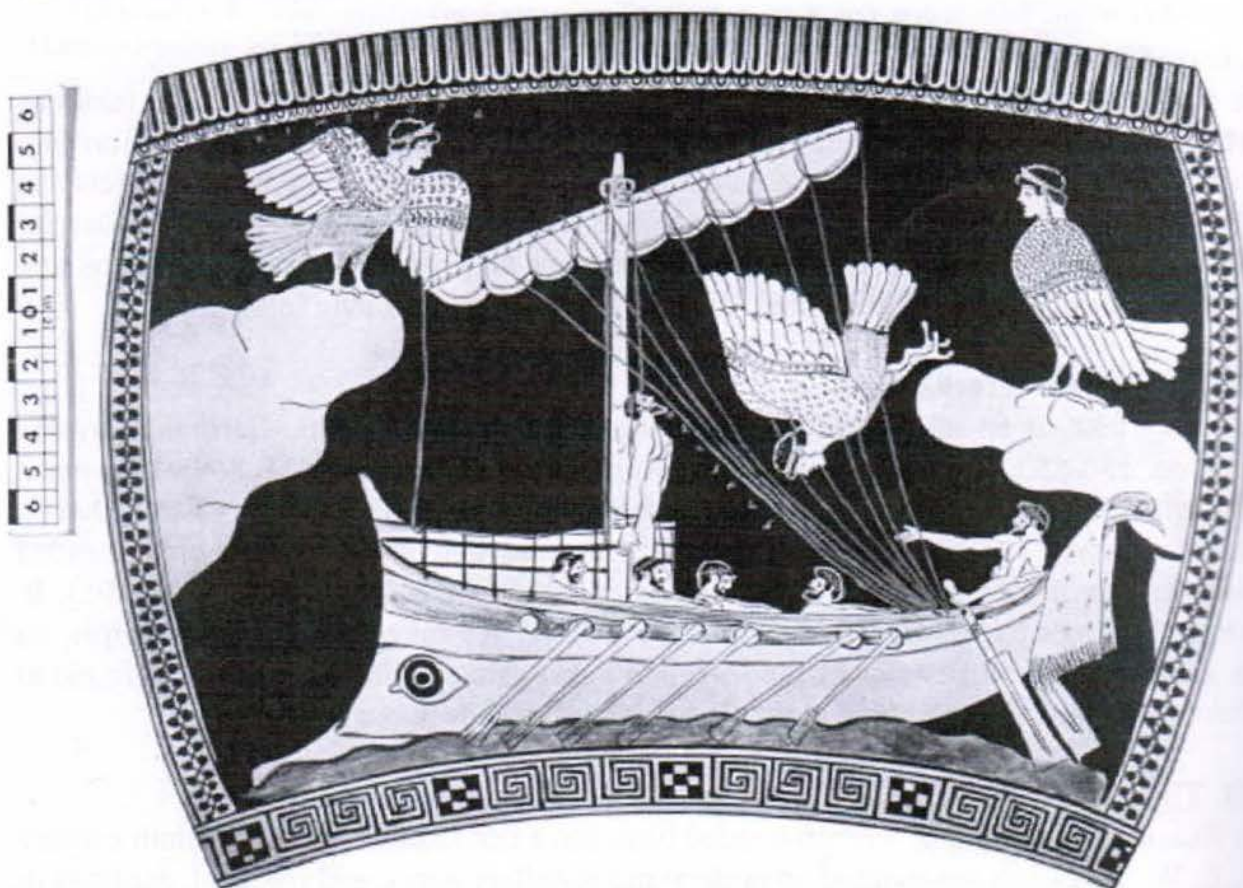
In Russian art, images of woman-headed birds have been known since the ninth century C. E. We find them represented on pottery and jewellery items, embroidered, depicted or carved on wood, and sculpted on stone reliefs. From the seventeenth century onwards, these creatures appear on the so-called *lubki* (a genre of pictures, drawings, and prints in Russian folk art³). Thereafter, they became the subject of paintings by such eminent artists as Vasnevov, Bilibin, Korenfeld, Korol'kov, Evseeva, and Panasenkov, and of poems by Kljuev and Blok; they appeared in Rimskij-Korsakov's opera *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and of the Maiden Fevronija*, as well as in narratives by Aleksej Remizov and Tat'jana Tolstaja, and have been evoked in songs by Vladimir

¹ The present paper is part of the results of a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, the Complutense University of Madrid, and the European Union, within the "Ramón y Cajal" Programme (RYC-2008-02327). Published with permission of the Vice-Rector for Research at the Complutense University of Madrid, Joaquín Plumet Ortega (letter from January 14, 2013). Our special thanks to Proof-Reading-Service.com Ltd. For transcribing Cyrillic into Latin letters we have used the system proposed by Alvarado Socastro, 2003, 63 and 27-9.

² Cf. Molina-Moreno, 2013 a, 6-7, pl. III a-c, and 2013 b, 13-4, pl. 3 a-d.

³ Talbot Rice, 1963, 92; Попова, 1967, 48-52; Иткина, 1992 (for the *lubki*); Лучшева, 1997, 13, and Белова, 2001, 226.

Vysocki and Boris Grebenščikov. Here we shall focus on the first pieces of visual and written evidence about these fabulous creatures. In particular, we shall discuss two texts, one of which suggests that hybrid creatures similar to the ancient Greek sirens could exist in Slavic folklore, before the “arrival” of the latter, whilst the other could also have exerted some influence on later Russian evidence.



Pl. I: The sirens and the ship of Odysseus

(<http://images.perseus.tufts.edu/images/1993.01.2/1993.01.0608>, February 8th 2013).

The earliest piece of visual evidence for human-headed birds, in the Slavic realm, can be seen on a fragment of a clay plate from the ninth-tenth centuries, found at Korsun' (the Slavic name of the ancient Greek colony of Chersonesos, on the southern coast of Crimea⁴). In such a location, one could easily assume that it was an object of Greek origin. It shows a bird, covered with feathers, and with the graceful, crowned head of a damozel who stares at us with wide open eyes.⁵ Another image from around the same time can be seen on a *kolt*, a pendant which was a mandatory part of the female head-

⁴ http://rosdesign.com/design_materials3/sirin.htm, August 12, 2013. According to Попова, 1971, 52, n. 1, the remains of the ancient Chersonesos and of the medieval port of Korsun' are 4-5 km from Sevastopol'. They must not be mistaken for the modern city of Korsun' Ševčenkivs'kyj, in Central Ukraine, nor with the city of Cherson, founded in 1778 on the southern coast of the Russian Empire, north-west of Crimea.

⁵ Попова, 1971, 52, ill. 15.



dress in ancient Russia.⁶ The *kolt* we must deal with now dates back to the ninth century, and was found in excavations in Kiev. Enamelled on its obverse, we can see two human-headed birds (our pl. II); similar images are found on later *kolty* (our pl. III).

Pl. II: Woman-headed birds on a Kievan *kolt* of the 9th century (Washington, Dumbarton Oaks Collection)⁷

We do not know yet what the Slavs called these imaginary beings; for now we shall still call them "sirens," as the Greeks did. But we must pay attention to the crown on the head of the sirens depicted on the Korsun' plate and on

our pl. II, as well as to the haloes of the sirens on our pl. III. Were it not for the crown, we might think that the siren on the Korsun' plate was perhaps inspired by Greek models, especially if we bear in mind that Korsun' had been a Greek colony. But, as far as we know, the ancient Greek sirens were never represented with a crown or a halo, although they sometimes wore a headband or a garland made of flowers or laurel leaves.⁸

On the grounds of those crowns and haloes, Elena Igorevna Itkina suggested that the sirens on the artefacts found at Korsun' and Kiev could have come from Persia or Armenia to the Kievan Rus through Korsun'.⁹

⁶ Попова, 1971, 54.

⁷ Image taken from <http://www.ruicon.ru/arts-new/carving/1x1-dtl/emali1/krest - drevo zhizni i siriny kolt/> (Aug. 16, 2013).

⁸ Cf. Pl. I, and the black figured Attic amphora of 600-580 B. C. E., now at the Musée du Louvre, E 817 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/image?img=Perseus:image:1992.06.0028> and <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/image?img=Perseus:image:1992.06.0029>, August 12, 2013). Sirens wearing a laurel crown can be seen in a bowl from ca. 470 B. C. E., now in Paris, Louvre, G 268 (cf. Hofstetter, 1990, pl. 25, A 174, and p. 122). Cf. also Hofstetter, 1990, 101 (A 154), 121 (A 171), 139 (A 187 and 188), 275 and 277-8 (W 62). Hofstetter's item A 188 is especially interesting because of the geographical closeness of the place where it was found to Korsun': it is a plastic *lekkythos* from a necropolis at Phanagoria (Taman', currently in Krasnodarskij Kraj, Russia), from the beginning of the fourth century B. C. E., now in Saint Petersburg, Hermitage (cf. <http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/fcgi-bin/db2www/fullSize.mac/fullSize?sellLang=Russian&dlViewId=NRU0AXFSOVSDQ5TA&size=big&selCateg=utensil&dlCategId=RV4DL OWDCQH5FRYH&comeFrom=simil>, December 20, 2013).

⁹ Иткина, 1995, 40. However, the examples of crowned sirens in Armenian manuscripts known to us so far are later than the Korsun' and Kiev sirens: there are three miniatures showing crowned sirens in the Armenian ms. 333 of the Bibliothèque Nationale of France (f. 186v, on <http://visualiseur.bnf.fr/Visualiseur?Destination=Daguerre&O=7892532&E=JPEG&NavigationSimplifiee=ok&typeFonds=noir>, August 13, 2013; f. 232, on <http://visualiseur.bnf.fr/Visualiseur?Destination=Daguerre&O=22012364&E=JPEG&NavigationSimplifiee=ok&typeFonds=noir>, and f. 210, on <http://visualiseur.bnf.fr/Visualiseur?Destination=Daguerre&O=22012363&E=JPEG&NavigationSimplifiee=ok&typeFonds=noir>, August 13, 2013). That manuscript, illustrated by Yovhannēs, is a *tetraevangelion* of 1335, that is, later than the



Pl. III: Woman-headed birds on a Kievan *kolt* of the eleventh century (New York, Metropolitan Museum)¹⁰

The port of Korsun' was especially active, and its merchants controlled all trade between the East, Byzantium, and Kievan Rus. From the port of Korsun' and through the Dnieper, as well as through the Caspian Sea and the Volga, artefacts of Indian and Persian origin, decorated with all kinds of fabulous creatures, side by side with narratives and tales about them, could spread into all Russia.¹¹ All this probably exerted an influence on the work of the artisans of Korsun'.¹²

It is likely that those *kolty*, that is, pendants like the ones we have presented, belonged to the family of the princes or to people closely related to them.¹³ We may ask why those "sirens" were so often represented on the *kolt*. Popova has suggested that the "sirens" were represented on the *kolt* in order to magically protect the women who wore them. In other words, a *kolt* with "sirens" on it would be a kind of talisman. It seems that the ancient Slavs divinised the elements of nature; among animals and plants, they would look for their protectors, and, in order to keep such protectors close to themselves, they would represent them on articles for daily use, weapons, clothes, and so on.¹⁴ Later on we shall see the extent to which this hypothesis is likely.

We have seen that the first piece of visual evidence for a bird with the head of a woman, in Russian art, dates back to the ninth century, that is, before the adoption of Christianity as a state religion in Kievan Rus in 988. Later, during the process of Chris-

Korsun' and Kiev sirens. On the other hand, we know a Scythian gold pendant of the fourth century B. C. E., showing a bird with the head and breasts of a woman (and one can interpret that she wears a crown; this pendant is now at the Museum of Historic Treasures of the Ukraine, Kiev; cf. <http://www.sirin.com/docs/etymolog.htm>, January 19, 2011; Ганина, 1974, № 59, and Talbot Rice, 1963, 11). Besides that, we can only mention five examples of crowned sirens in Western European art, all of them later than the Scythian and Slavic artefacts we are dealing with, and earlier than the Armenian miniatures (cf. Leclercq-Marx, 1997, ill. 87, 88, 89, and 155; fig. 170 of the appendix). A thorough research of these parallels would lead us beyond the limits of this paper.

¹⁰ Image taken from http://www.ruicon.ru/arts-new/carving/1x1-dtl/emali1/sireny_i_drevo_zhizni_kolt/ (August 16, 2013).

¹¹ Попова, 1971, 51-2. Half birds half men (or half women) are known to Indian and south-eastern Asian art: we may remember the *kinnari* (celestial female singer with the body of a bird and the head and breasts of a woman) from Java, dating back to the ninth-tenth centuries, now at the British Museum, OA 1859.12-28.176).

¹² Попова, 1971, 52-3. Hilton, 1995, 144, also points out the possibly important role of the Persian merchants in the diffusion of the images of woman-headed birds through Russia.

¹³ Попова, 1971, 54.

¹⁴ Попова, 1971, 56. Likewise, the authors of http://rosdesign.com/design_materials3/sirin.htm (August 12, 2013) suggest that those birds with human female heads were represented on the *kolt* in order to protect the woman who wore it. Иткина, 1995, 40, says that those fabulous beings played an apotropaic function.

tianisation of the Eastern Slavs, the Church had to compromise with syncretistic phenomena such as the association of the pagan gods Perun and Veles with the prophet Elias and Saint Blaise.¹⁵ The haloes around the heads of our woman-headed birds, on some *kolty*, are a sign of holiness for Christians; so the "sirens" could be endowed with those haloes in order to be "Christianised."¹⁶ So far we do not know any specimen of these "sirens" with a halo before the Christianisation of the Eastern Slavs,¹⁷ but we do still find them in later Russian art, both with a crown and a halo.

We have mentioned the syncretistic phenomena by which Slavic pagan gods were associated with Christian saints or prophets. As for our "sirens," it has been suggested that they became what was labelled in later images with the inscription "Райская птица" = "bird of paradise."¹⁸ But was there any bird with a human head in Slavic pagan beliefs that could be the model of those later images? We must not forget that the first image of a bird with a human head is earlier than the adoption of Christianity among Eastern Slavs, but we also know that those first images could be of foreign origin. Among other authors, Šeping, Itkina, and Lučševa have suggested that the celestial winged damozels of Slavic pagan beliefs could have been the "ancestors" of the Christian "birds of paradise" with human female heads.¹⁹

When speaking of the "celestial winged damozels" of Slavic pagan beliefs, those authors had in mind the supernatural winged women still alive in Southern Slavic folk beliefs, the so-called *vile* (in Serbian), *samodivi* or *samovili* (in Bulgarian). Since we are going to deal mostly with the first pieces of textual evidence about those beings, and such texts are written in Russian Church Slavonic, we shall use here the form *vily*, plural of *vila* in that language. These creatures share many traits with the nymphs of classical mythology and with the *rusalki* of Eastern Slavic folklore.²⁰ One of the main differences

¹⁵ Gieysztor, 2006, 99 and 142.

¹⁶ Попова, 1971, 57-8.

¹⁷ And we only know an example of a siren with a halo, out of the Slavic realm, namely a miniature on a Greek *Physiologus* of Smyrna (eleventh century; cf. Leclercq-Marx, 1997, ill. 96).

¹⁸ The first image known to us, where a bird with the head of a woman can be seen under the inscription СТАГО БЛАЖЕНН РАЯ ПТИЦА СИРИН = "Святого блаженного рая Птица Сири́н" = "Sirin bird of the holy and blessed paradise," can be seen on the lid of a trunk from Olonec, northern Russia, made in 1710, now in the State Historical Museum, Moscow. Vid. Попова, 1971, 1971, 55, illustration № 18; perhaps the best reproduction we know can be seen in the flyleaves of Жералова, 1984 (http://rusfolder.com/24550462?ints_code=28ac0957d1508bc56ea1185fca6cc991, July 30, 2013; cf. also http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3a/Sirin_Sunduk_1710.jpg, July 24, 2013).

¹⁹ Vid. Шепинг, 1865-7 (thanks to Elena Igorevna Itkina, of the State Historical Museum, Moscow, for letting us know about this valuable paper); Иткина, 1995, 50; Лучшева, 1997, 13, and http://rosdesign.com/design_materials3/sirin.htm (August 18, 2013).

²⁰ Vid., about the Southern Slavic *vily*, Караџић 1841, 62; Афанасьев, 1865-9, т. 3, 154-88; Толстая, 1995, and Плотникова, 2004, 199-212 (with the maps II-3-1 a and II-3-1 b, and pp. 616-23); on the Eastern Slavic *rusalki*, Виноградова, 2009; Виноградова & Левкиевская, 2012, 467-698 and Molina-Moreno, 2012. The characteristics of these mythical beings were redistributed in complex ways in their Western Slavic counterparts; we tried a comparison of the nymphs of classical mythology and related beings in Polish folklore in our still unpublished lecture "Żeńskie duchy przyrodnicze w folklorze polskim i w mitologii klasycznej" (= "Female Spirits of Nature in Polish Folklore and in Classical Mythology"), held on June 12, 2013 in the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Jagiellonian

between the Southern Slavic *vily*, on one side, and the Eastern Slavic *rusalki* and the ancient Graeco-Roman nymphs, on the other, is that the former have wings, which are one of the traits they share with the sirens of classical mythology, although a winged woman (as the *vily* are supposed to be) is not exactly the same as a bird with the head of a woman (like the ancient sirens).²¹

The *vily* were already present (and under that name) in the earliest Slavic sources we have about ancient Slavic paganism.²² Unfortunately, most of those texts do not describe the *vily* nor tell any narrative where they played a role; but there is a comparatively early source where the *vily* are likened to the sirens of classical mythology, namely the eleventh-century translation of the *Chronicle* by the ninth-century Byzantine monk Georgios Hamartolos into Russian Church Slavonic.²³ There we read:

Иѣвиста^жса в рѣцѣ Нилѣ, слнцоу вшедшоу, члѣкообразнѣ двѣ животнѣ, мужъ и жена, ꙗже и сирины нарицаютсѣ, рекше вѣлы, сладкогѣна весма оумртѣаща. вбразъ же имоу ѿ главы и до поуѣа члѣска, прочее же птичина. мужъ же краснопрѣсецъ и дивенъ, женѣ же лице и власи чрѣмни, подобно^ж и мужъ, сесца имѣаше и безвласъ, власи же на^лчернѣ. людие же съ епархомъ чюдасѣса клатвы приложиша тѣма малженома, да не раздроушита видѣ, прежде аще вси да видать прѣдивноюу тоу видѣ. и до деватаго часа вси людие дивлахоуся, зраше животины тоѣ, тако^ж паку в рѣкоу внидоша. сима же погразшима, коркодили всплывше и искочивше многы члѣкы поадоша.²⁴

University (Cracow, Poland). Anyway we must focus here on Southern and Eastern Slavic folklore, because: a) the name “вила,” attested in the sources we will discuss below, appears both in Old Russian sources and still in recent Southern Slavic folklore, and b) we are studying here the presence of a mythical being in the culture of Russia, an Eastern Slavic country.

²¹ Vid. Карацѣи, 1841, 62 (the *vily* fly on the wings of the butterflies); Карацѣи, 1845, 49 (= song “*Myjo и Алиѣ*”, vv. 23-4); Kukuljević Sakcinski, 1851, 87 and 89; Миладинови, 1861, 1-2; Афанасѣев, 1865-69, т. 3, 158, 185-6, 240, and 809-10 (quoting Петрановић, 1867, 245-55, 378, and 383-4), and Толстѣа, 1995. The *vily* are also able to appear in the shape of a bird, as we see in a Carantanian tale (Valjavec, 1858, 22 and 29, and Афанасѣев, 1865-9, т. 3, 160). Vid. also Плотникова, 2004, 204-5 and 617-23.

²² Cf., for example, Mansikka, 1922, 151 and 174.

²³ Vid. Истрин, 1920-2, vol. 2, 306. Творогов (1987-9в), mentions of those who proposed that the *Chronicle* by Georgios Hamartolos had been translated in Bulgaria in the tenth century, and revised in Russia in the XI (cf. Мещерский, 1978, 91). However, the earliest manuscript of the translation into Russian Church Slavonic has been dated in the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries (vid. Снегирѣв, 1830, 258; Никольский, 1897, 261, and Истрин, 1920-2, vol. 1, XI). Moreover, Istrin says that the earliest manuscript is not complete: it reaches up to the reign of Emperor Justinian (527-65 AD) and the fifth *concilium*, whereas the episode we must deal with here belongs to the reign of Emperor Maurice the Armenian (582-602 AD). According to Истрин, 1920-2, vol. 1, 2, the part of the *Chronicle* after the fifth *concilium* is edited according to a manuscript of the fifteenth century (ms. “Ундольский” № 1289, ff. 288-404, at the Rumjancev Public Museum at the time when Istrin prepared his edition).

²⁴ Истрин, 1920-2, vol. 1, 428-9. The Greek original (Georgios Hamartolos, *Chronicon*, IX, 20; cf. Boar, 1904, vol. 2, p. 657, lines 4-20) reads: ἐφάνησαν δὲ καὶ ἐν τῷ Νεῖλῳ ποταμῷ ἡλίου ἀνατέλλοντος ἀνθρωπομορφα ζῶα δύο, ἀνὴρ καὶ γυνή, ἅπερ σειρῆναι προσαγορεύονται ἡδύφθογγα πάνυ καὶ θανατηφόρα. τῇ δὲ μορφῇ ἔχουσι τὸ μὲν ἥμισυ ἀπὸ κεφαλῆς μέχρις ὀμφαλοῦ ἀνθρώπου, τὸ δὲ λοιπὸν πετεινοῦ. καὶ ὁ μὲν ἀνὴρ εὐστερνος ἦν καὶ κατάπληκτος τὴν ὄψιν καὶ τὴν κόμην ξανθός, ἡ δὲ γυνή ὁμοίως ὀρεσμένη τοῖς μαζοῦς εἶχε καὶ τὴν ὄψιν ἄτριχον καὶ τὴν κόμην βαθεῖαν. ὁ δὲ λαὸς μετὰ τοῦ ὑπάρχοντος θαυμάζοντες ἔρχαντο

After sunrise, two human-shaped creatures appeared in the river Nile, a man and a woman, whom they call "sirens," that is, "vily," of very sweet voice, and deadly. They have human shape down to the navel, and beneath - that of a bird. The man was broad-chested and of impressive aspect; both the face and hair of the woman were red, like those of the man, and she had no hair on her breasts, but her hair was dark. And the people and the prefect admired them and swore by these androgynes that they would not lose sight of them until everybody had seen that astounding view. And until nine everybody was amazed contemplating those creatures, and later they entered into the river. And when they sank, crocodiles popped up, jumped, and devoured many people.

What we have rendered as "sirens" in our translation corresponds to "сирины" in the Russian Church Slavonic text. Perhaps we have here the first instance, in the whole written output in Slavic languages, of the word "сирин" as the name of a fabulous, hybrid being, half bird, half woman (or half man as well, as in the given context; on the other hand, there are also images of male sirens with beard in ancient Greek art of the archaic period,²⁵ but in Russian art they are consistently half women, half birds). The word "сирин" is obviously borrowed from the ancient Greek *σειρήν*, and it reflects the Byzantine and Modern Greek pronunciation of that name. In the episode told by Georgios Hamartolos, the sirens do not sing, and they do not kill anybody, but indirectly they are deadly for people: once they had lured the attention of humans, the latter were devoured by crocodiles.

The word "сирин," which the translator assumed their Slavic readers would not understand, is glossed with the comment "рекше вилы," which means "that is, the *vily*." This can tell us something about how the Slavs imagined the *vily* in the eleventh century:²⁶ if the Slavic translator inserted the gloss "рекше вилы" = "that is, the *vily*," this means that neither he nor his Slavic readers would see any contradiction between what the Greek text said about the sirens, and what the Slavs believed about the *vily*. We may therefore assume that in the eleventh/fifteenth century the *vily* were imagined as hybrid winged beings. If so, Lučševa and Itkina could be right when they hypothesised that the pagan *vily* might have been the "ancestors" of the birds with female human head, labelled "райская птица" (= "bird of paradise") in later Russian artworks.

ἔβαλλον ἐκεῖνο τὸ ἀνδρόγυνον μὴ καταλῦσαι τὴν θεωρίαν, πρὶν ἂν πάντες ἐμφορηθῶσι τῆς παραδόξου ταύτης θεάς. καὶ δὴ μέχρις ὥρας θ' πᾶς ὁ λαὸς ἐθαύμαζεν ὁρῶν τὰ ζῶα ταῦτα, καὶ οὕτω πάλιν εἰς τὸν ποταμὸν κατέδυσαν. τούτων δὲ καταδυσάντων κορκόδηλοι ἀναδύσαντες καὶ ἐκπηδήσαντες πολλοὺς τῶν ἀνθρώπων διέφθειραν. The English translation of this text would fit the one provided for the Old Russian text, the only difference being the gloss "that is, the *vily*."

²⁵ Cf. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/image?img=Perseus:image:1990.01.1260>, May 4, 2013, and <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/image?img=Perseus:image:1990.05.0088>, August 12, 2013.

²⁶ Or at least in the fifteenth, if the gloss would be a late interpolation in the manuscript that transmits the text; anyway, Истрин, 1920-2, vol. 2, 286, says that the glosses were the work of the translator, not of a later interpolator. According to Evgenij Germanovič Vodolazkin (Institute of Russian Literature, Section of Old Russian Literature, Russian Academy of Sciences), to whom we thank for his e-mail of December 7, 2013, Istrin's statement is grounded on the fact that the gloss is found in every one of the copies of the text.

It is true that those *vily* are described as winged women (not as birds with female human head or torso) in modern records of Southern Slavic folklore;²⁷ but it is not impossible that the *vily* were imagined as birds with human heads in the Middle Ages (as suggested by the gloss of the Slavonic translator of Georgios Hamartolos), and as winged young women in modern times: a similar shift (although contrariwise) took place with the Greek Harpyiai in Antiquity.²⁸ On the other hand, even if the *vily* were already imagined as winged women in the Middle Ages (for what we do not know any piece of evidence), the difference between a bird with a human torso, and a winged human being (as the *vily* are described in modern records of Southern Slavic folklore) could have been irrelevant to the translator, whose attention seems to have been focused on the hybridism.²⁹ It is also likely that when Georgios Hamartolos' *Chronicle* was translated, the *vily* were already imagined as dwelling near the water, and singing so beautifully that they could be deadly for humans.³⁰

The gloss "that is, the *vily*" after the word corresponding to "sirens" in the translation of Georgios Hamartolos' *Chronicle* is the only piece of evidence known to us that suggests that the *vily* would be birds with a human torso. This could make us think that the human-headed birds on the Kievan pendants (manufactured at the same time in which the translation was written) were also *vily*; if so, Popova's hypothesis that the pendants with the *vily* were a kind of talisman would make sense, since the earliest Slavic sources about the *vily* mention offerings and prayers made to them, and therefore it seems that they were regarded as eventually protective for humans.³¹

²⁷ Cf. our n. 21.

²⁸ Cf. Smith, 1892-3.

²⁹ According to Белова & Петрухин, 2008, 178, that part of the Slavonic version of Georgios Hamartolos' *Chronicle* was inserted in the so-called *Собрание Дамаскина Студита*, and an illustration on an eighteenth-century copy of that work (сборник лицевой собрания В. М. Ундольского, РГБ, № 688, л. 140б.) shows a bird with human crowned head and arms, holding a branch. This means that the difference between a bird with human head and a bird with human shape down to the navel (as the sirens are described in Georgios Hamartolos' *Chronicle*) was not relevant for the illustrator either, and what mattered for both the translator and the illustrator was that they were dealing with a winged hybrid being. The wings were the common trait shared by the human-headed birds (ancient sirens and fabulous creatures on the Kievan pendants) and the winged young women (*vily* in Southern Slavic folklore).

³⁰ (a) Concerning the motif of beautiful singing by the Serbian and Croatian *vile*, cf. Kukuljević Sakcinski, 1851, 87-94, and Афанасьев, 1865-9, т. 3, 175-7; as for the Bulgarian *samovili*, Афанасьев, 1865-9, т. 3, 183. Vid. also Плотникова, 2004, 616-19 and 621-2. The Eastern Slavic *rusalki* are also excellent singers; cf. Molina-Moreno, 2011 and 2012, 49-62, and Виноградова & Левкиевская, 2012, 479 (№ 15), 503 (№ 133), 515 (№ 193-194), 517 (№ 203), 556 (№ 361), 561 (№ 387-388), 562-563 (№ 391-392), 566 (№ 404), 579 (№ 447), 584 (№ 461-462), 588 (№ 473), 596 (№ 502), 600 (№ 513-514), 601 (№ 516), 601-602 (№ 518-520), 603 (№ 528), 605-611 (№ 534-562), 613-614 (№ 567-569), 615-616 (№ 574), 648 (№ 680), 653 (№ 706), and 696 (№ 930); (b) For the *vily* abiding by rivers, lakes, springs, etc., Kukuljević Sakcinski, 1851, 87, 89, and 101-4; Афанасьев, 1865-9, т. 3, 155-7 and 159-60, and Плотникова, 2004, 616-23; (c) The Eastern Slavic *rusalki* can also be seen in water environments and around trees; cf. Molina-Moreno, 2012, 36-45, and Виноградова & Левкиевская, 2012, 541-4.

³¹ Cf. Mansikka, 1922, 151, 155, 162-3, 174 and 210. We have not been able to check the sources alleged by Mansikka, 1922, 250, as evidence for prayers to the *vily*.

We do not know any other description of the *vily* as birds with a human torso, nor any image of a bird with a human torso and an inscription that would identify that creature as a *vila*: as we have said in our n. 18, such creatures are labelled with the word "Сирин" in later Russian artworks. We suggest the hypothesis that the word "Сирин" was substituted for "вила," because the latter was so strongly reminiscent of paganism that it could not be admitted by the representatives of official Christian culture.³² On the other hand, although the name "Сирин" also came from another pagan mythology, this one was not Slavic, so it was not likely that the Slavs would know or believe it (neither did the Byzantine Greeks believe in the gods of the ancient Greek myths, but considered them a literary and historic phenomenon). Classical mythology would therefore not be dangerous from the point of view of the young Russian Christendom, and the name "Sirin" would be neutral and tolerable.

There is, however, a difference between the ancient Greek sirens, the *vily*, and Sirin. We have already said that we do not know any piece of evidence for the ancient Greek sirens wearing crowns (if anything, they seldom wear a headband or garland), whereas Sirin is consistently represented with them in the "колты" and in later Russian art. Neither the translation of Hamartolos' *Chronicle* nor that of the *Alexander Romance*, which we shall deal with later, mention any crown on the head of the fabulous beings they describe: it is obvious that the sirens mentioned in those Greek texts were the Greek ones, who did not wear any crown. As for the *vily*, we only know two allusions to their wearing a wreath of flowers,³³ like those sometimes worn by the ancient Greek sirens, but that is obviously not a crown like that of Sirin. A tentative assessment of this difference will be undertaken in another place.

Another trait that distinguishes Sirin and the *vile* is that the former is not related to water. The context in which such human-headed birds appear in Russian art is different to that of the ancient Greek sirens: so far as we know, the latter did not perch on trees,³⁴ whereas the Russian Sirin birds on the other hand are consistently represented on or beside a tree.³⁵ We must note that later folklore texts about the Southern Slavic *vile* and Eastern Slavic *rusalki* often present them dancing around trees or swinging on their branches, and Cosmas of Prague in the twelfth century (that is, by the time when some of the Kievan pendants were being made) mentioned the pagan Slavic cult of nymphs associated with trees and mountains.³⁶ Further, we should also remember that the *vile*

³² The texts presented and commented on by Mansikka, 1922, 151, 155, 162-3, 174 and 210, clearly show how the Russian clergy was disgusted by offerings to the *vily*.

³³ Kukuljević Sakcinski, 1851, 98, and Афанасьев, 1865-9, т. 3, 163.

³⁴ We can only mention some images of sirens perching on tendrils: for instance, a bowl from ca. 470 B. C. E., now in Paris, Louvre, G 268 (cf. Hofstetter, 1990, pl. 25, A 174, and p. 122), shows a siren with a laurel crown, perching on a tendril. Hofstetter, 1990, pl. 14, 1, and p. 96, and p. 128, gives further examples.

³⁵ In ancient Greek art, so far as we know, the only image similar to those of the Russian Sirin(s) flanking a tree (as in the Kievan pendants) can be seen on the late proto-Corinthian *oinochoe* from München, 235, showing two bearded sirens flanking a volute tree (cf. Hofstetter, 1990, 36 with pl. 2, K5).

³⁶ (a) Cosmas Pragensis, *Chronica Bohemorum*, I, 4, in Meyer, 1931, 18, and Bretholz & Weinberger, 1923, 10. Writing in Latin, Cosmas of Prague employed the Greek terms *dryades*, *hamadryades*, *oreades* to refer to those tree- and mountain-nymphs. We must note that such nymphs had no wings, according to

and the birds of paradise can share the function of letting the heroes know about the healing properties of dew: in a Southern Slavic tale the *vile* of the mountains reveal to a blinded boy that the dawn dew can restore his sight, and in a Russian *bylina*, published three years later than the Southern Slavic tale, it is a "bird of paradise" that perches on the branches of an oak and announces the healing powers of the dew of that tree.³⁷

On the other hand, not much later than when the *Chronicle* by Georgios Hamartolos was being translated and copied, the hybrid creatures described therein were being represented in church reliefs: for example, in the Church of Saint George in Jur'ev-Pol'ski (1120-8, our pl. IV) we can see one of those birds with the head of a woman, who wears a crown, like those we saw on the pendants from Kiev.³⁸ Another bird with human torso and arms is sculpted in the reliefs of the Cathedral of Saint Dmitrii in Vladimir (1194-7; our pl. V).³⁹

Another interesting piece of evidence about human-headed birds can be found in the second version of the *Alexander Romance*, which was translated from the Greek into Old Russian in the thirteenth century, and included in the second version of a historic collection entitled *Летопи́сецъ Еллинскій и Римскій* (= *The Hellenic and Roman Chronicler*). This second version of *The Hellenic and Roman Chronicler* seems to have been compiled in Russia in the fifteenth century, from which its earliest manuscript dates.⁴⁰ There we can read:

[Ѣ] ПТИЦА НЕЗНАЕМА. И ѿтолѣ же пакы ѿшеде, прїидохѣ вдале въ пропасти тои. И ндохо стади ѿ, ктоли и поидохомъ, видѣше зарю бѣ сѣца, и без лоуны, и вѣзъ звѣздъ. [и ради выше, възрѣхомъ въ зарѣ тои]. И видѣхѣ двѣ птицѣ летаща, иише ѿбличіе члѣче, [гѣвѣ члѣтѣи. Едина же птица] еллинскыи языкомъ свѣща. Александре, почто ходиши по зем- ли единого бѣа. възвратисѣ, ѿкаание. на мѣста бо блаженный не можеши въстоупити.⁴¹

Greek and Latin sources. It is obvious that Cosmas of Prague was trying to describe Slavic mythical creatures in a foreign language; there being no exact equivalent, his choice was seemingly guided by the place where those creatures appeared, rather than by their physique. On the other hand, on the Slavic cult to sacred oaks, vid. Helmold, *Chronica Slavorum*, I, 83 (from 1164-7; cf. Pertz, 1868, 163, and Meyer, 1931, 45), and Brückner, 1912, 50; (b) We must note that the Kievan pendants show our birds with human heads flanking a plant or flower (cf. our plates II-III); later, they were represented perching on trees by *lubok* artists, and we should remember that the *vile* abide near trees or in the woods as well, according to later sources of Southern Slavic folklore; vid. Kukuljević Sakcinski, 1851, 90 and 97; Valjavec, 1858, 31-2; Афанасьев, 1865-9, т. 2, 295-6; *ibid.*, т. 3, 155-7 and 159-60, and Плотникова, 2004, 616-17 and 620-3. However, it seems that there are more pieces of evidence for the link with trees when it comes to the *rusalki* (the Eastern Slavic counterpart of the *vile*) than in the case of the *vile* themselves; cf. Капамзин, 1818, vol.1, chapter III, quoted after http://www.kulichki.com/inkwell/text/special/history/karamzin/kar01_03.htm; Бантыш-Каменский, 1830, III, 215-6; Снегирѣв, 1839, 5; Терещенко, 1848, VI, 121 and 129 (= 1999, 72 and 78); Molina-Moreno, 2012, 36-45, and Виноградова & Левкиевская, 2012, 541-4.

³⁷ Cf. Valjavec, 1858, 36-8; Рыбников, 1861, 240, and Афанасьев, 1865-9, т. II, 296 with n. 5.

³⁸ Talbot Rice, 1963, 33, pl. 22.

³⁹ Иткина, 1995, 40.

⁴⁰ Vid. Творогов, 1987-89a, and Творогов, 1987-89b.

⁴¹ Cf. *Александрия второй редакції*, II, 40, in Истрин, 1893, 192 (2nd pagination). The ancient Greek text (*Historia Alexandri Magni*, recensio β, II, 40) reads: Πάλιν οὖν ὀδεύσαντες σχοίνους τριάκοντα [πλεῖον ἢ ἑλαττον] εἶδομεν λοιπὸν αὐγὴν ἀνευ ἡλίου καὶ σελήνης καὶ ἄστρον. καὶ εἶδον δύο ὄρνεα

[About the unknown birds]. And, going again from there, we arrived [...] and traversed thirty stadia; then we went further and saw dawn without sun, without moon, without stars [...] and we saw two birds flying, with human face [and with human heads. And one of those birds], from above, said in Greek: "Alexander, why are you walking through the land of the only God? Turn back, you poor wretch! You cannot enter the places of the blessed ones."



Pl. IV: Relief in the Church of Saint George, Jur'ev-Pol'ski, in the lower right part of which a bird with human crowned head can be seen.⁴²

Although here the word *сирин*, as the name of those half birds, is absent, we find them in a paradisaical environment, "the places of the blessed ones," as they put it themselves. This could have exerted some influence on later Russian conceptions of our mythical creatures as birds of paradise (as we said in our n. 18, the first piece of evidence for which belongs to the early eighteenth century). It is likely that the link of the *vily* with trees allowed them to be transferred later under a new name (Sirin) to the earthly paradise of *Genesis*.

πετόμενα καὶ μόνον ἔχοντα ὄψεις ἀνθρωπίνας, Ἑλληνικῇ δὲ διαλέκτῳ ἐξ ὕψους ἐκραύγαζον· τί χώραν πατεῖς, Ἀλέξανδρε, τὴν θεοῦ μόνου; ἀνάστρεφε δεῦλαιε. μακάρων γῆν πατεῖν οὐ δυνήσῃ. The English translation of this text would fit that provided for the Old Russian one.

⁴² Image taken from <http://im3.turbina.ru/photos.4/6/8/0/0/2/1820086/big.photo/Yurev-den-vernee-den.jpg> (August 27, 2013).

IV. Conclusion.

Let us now try to answer to the question we asked at the beginning of this paper: to what degree can we talk of migration of the ancient Greek sirens into Russian folklore? And to what extent did such a migration happen through translation? As we have seen, visual representations of what later would be called Sirin, were made around a century earlier than written records of that fabulous half-bird. The first written piece of evidence for Sirin is a gloss to the translation of Georgios Hamartolos' *Chronicle* into Russian Church Slavonic, and it hinted at the fact that a creature similar to Sirin, the so-called *vily*, already existed in Slavic paganism, before that translation was made. From this point of view, it seems that, rather than as migration *stricto sensu*, it would be more accurate to describe the process as the meeting of two groups of mythical beings (the ancient Greek sirens, who migrated into the Slavic realm, and the Slavic *vily*), who were delighted to see how much they had in common.



Pl. V: Relief of the Cathedral of St. Dimitrij, city of Vladimir, on the upper right part of which a bird with a human torso can be seen.⁴³

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⁴³ Image taken from http://ic.pics.livejournal.com/uchitelj/16634194/974046/974046_original.jpg (August 27, 2013).

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