

## Epics and Byliny

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## Outline

- Structure and feature of bylíny
- Types of bylíny
- Poetics of bylíny
- Byliny and history
- Byliny and art
- *The Sword and the Dragon*

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## Bylína (pl. bylíny)

- Epic poems of legendary heroes
- Rediscovered mid-nineteenth century
  - Collectors recorded by hand while performers sang
- Performers
  - Byliny passed from royal courts to the peasantry
- Recitations were improvised
- Accompanied on gúslí (dulcimer, harp)

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## Gusli



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## Bylína Cycles

- Mythological epics
  - Oldest bylíny
  - The giant Svyatogór
- Kievan bogatýrs of Vladímír’s court
  - Ilyá Múromets
  - Dobrýnia Nikítich
  - Alësha (Aliósha) Popóvich
- Novgorod merchants
  - Sadkó
  - Vasíly Busláev

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## Bylina Structure and Features 1

- Epic Ceremonialism
- Introduction, narrative section, epilogue
- Epic Retardation
  - “The hero’s heart is ardent and impetuous; it flared up hotter than fire, hotter than burning frost.”

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## Bylina Structure and Features 2

- Epic Hyperbole
  - “He poured a goblet of green wine, Not a small chalice but a bucket and a half.”
- Slavic Negative Analogy
  - “A Bright Falcon didn’t swoop down on the geese, on the swans, and on the small, migratory ducks. A holy Russian bogatyr swooped down on the Tatar army.”
- Fixed epithets
  - “good steed,” “bright falcon,” “damp earth”
- Verse

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## What Happens in Kievan Byliny

- Quasi-historical
- Feasts at court
- Vladímir (or later prince) assigns heroic tasks
- Bogatýrs (epic heroes) protect Rus’ from foreigners (pagans), foreign warriors, monsters, robbers
- Bogatýrs defend country, widows, orphans, the poor
- Leisure time devoted to romance and hunting

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## Kievan Rus’



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## Tatars (Mongols)

- Pagans before the Tatars: Miscellaneous enemies and allies of convenience
- Genghis Khan (d. 1227) and his offspring
- 1223: Tatars appear suddenly in the southeast, defeat Rus' and Polóvtzy at the river Kálka, and then vanish as suddenly as they had appeared
- 1237–40: Tatars return and conquer Rus', which must pay tribute and provide military aid (Golden Horde)
- 1240: Kiev falls
- 1380: Dmítrii Donskói victorious at Kulíkovo Field
- 1480: Ivan III renounces allegiance to Khan

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## What Happens to Ilyá Múromets

- Initially lame; healed by Jesus or wise men
- Works on parents' farm
- Goes to Kiev, capturing Solovéy the Robber (Solovéy Razbóinik) en route
- Defeats Tatars, sometimes with divine aid
- Sometimes quarrels with Vladímir (and is imprisoned)
- Dragon-slaying: Cult of St. George

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## Bogatyrs (Vasnetsov)

Viktor Vasnetsov, 1848–1926



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Bogatyr at the Crossroads (Vasnetsov)



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Bogatyr  
(Vrubel')  
(1898)



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The Great  
European War

c. 1915



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## Russia—for Truth!

WWI Poster



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## Heroic Deeds of the Grandsons



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## Recycling of the legend: Ilya Muromets (bomber, 1912)



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Ilya Muromets  
(Palekh)



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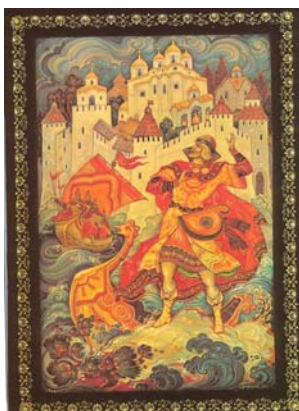
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Sadko  
(Kholui)



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### *The Sword and the Dragon*

- History
  - *Ilyá Múromets* (USSR, 1956)
  - *Epic Hero and the Beast* (UK, 1956)
  - *Sword and the Dragon* (US, 1960)
- Director: Aleksánder Ptushkó (1900–73)
- “Ilyá Múromets and the Dragon” (Afanas’ev 569–75)

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### *The Sword and the Dragon (1)*

- MST3K (1994)
- Borís Andréyev (Ilyá)
- Cast of 106,000; 11,000 horses
- Vladimir (10th/11th century)
- Tugars (= Tatars; 13th century)
- (Self-serving tablecloth)
- (Three-headed dragon)

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### Viewing Guide

- Vasnetsov’s “Bogatyr at the Crossroads”
- Solovéy (Nightingale) the Robber (Wind Demon / Whistler)
- Vladímír’s wisdom
  - Horse’s tail (“Shemiáka the Judge”)
- Banquet at Vladímír’s court
- Ilyá produces the Wind Demon

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### Epic Tales

- “Ivan the Simpleton” 142–45
- “Foma Berennikov” 284–87
- “Ilya Muromets and the Dragon” 569–75

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