



Grand Princess Olga of Rus' Shows the Bird: Her 'Christian Falcon' Emblem

Roman K. Kovalev

The College of New Jersey

kovalev@tcnj.edu

Abstract

This study attempts to interpret the symbols (a falcon “crowned” with a cross, a key, and a Riurikid bident) found on a newly discovered tenth-century trapezoidal pendant from Pskov. Aside from a handful of imitation dirham coins that carry identical images of the falcon, no other parallels of these symbols or their combination have yet been discovered. Based on various sources, it is argued that the pendant was jointly issued to a Rus' administrator-revenue collector by Grand Princess Olga and her son Sviatoslav at the time of his minority but not prior to Olga's administrative reforms in the late 940s, i.e., ca. 950. While the bident was Sviatoslav's dynastic emblem (reserved for reigning male Riurikids), Olga's authority over the realm and her minor son was represented by way of a key (latchlifter) and a falcon. The key carried legal and possibly religious symbolism of right over the domain, while the falcon represented religious as well as royal authority. But, both emblems can be connected with the goddess Freyja – the chief female divinity in the Nordic pantheon – and Olga adopted them as her symbols in ca. 950. Based on her choice of these symbols and other circumstantial evidence, it is contended that Olga was a devotee of the goddess and practiced her cult prior to her conversion to Christianity (i.e., she was a *volva*). Indeed, it is possible that Olga was the supreme priestess of Freyja, or her close equivalent Slavic goddess Mokosh, for the Rus' state prior to her stepping down from the position as regent and her official conversion to Christianity.

Keywords

Olga, Falcons, Keys, Dirhams, Pendant, Pskov, Freyja, Volva

Introduction

Until very recently, scholars who have been interested in Olga (d. 969) – Grand Princess of Rus', regent for her son Sviatoslav (d. 972), and the first historical Christian Rus' ruler – have had to rely exclusively on the written

evidence to explore her many interesting and important historical roles. Unfortunately, there are few of these textual sources: some tidbits coming from German Latin chronicles as well as Norse sagas, and a bit more, albeit not much more, from Byzantine documents. Most of what is known about Olga comes from the Rus' written accounts, but they are also laconic and, to make things even more interesting and problematic, they are semi-legendary. Using these texts, researchers have constructed a short biography of Olga and her role in Rus' history. Aside from being very brief, this history has not changed much from one generation to the next. This is understandable, since the traditional written sources can eventually be exhausted for information, particularly since they are scant, dubious, and at times contradictory. It is for this reason that historians should welcome a new set of source material that speaks of Olga and her time – namely the newly discovered trapezoidal pendant from Pskov and the evidence of the “Christian Falcon” imitation dirham coins that can now be better interpreted thanks to the pendant. These non-textual sources – indeed largely pictorial – open a new window to the better understanding of the traditional texts as well as provide insights and new directions for the study of Olga and the history of Rus' during her time in general. To interpret them, however, it will require the author and the reader to engage in sources that are not altogether typical for the customary historical discipline: archeology, historical numismatics, heraldry, semiotics, comparative mythology, ethnography-folklore, and others. But, when utilizing all of the evidence available to date, it becomes possible to open up a totally new chapter to a forgotten, but very important, period of early Rus' history – the “Olga Era.”

Chamber Grave №6 from Pskov

In 2008, T.E. Ershova and her team of archaeologists excavated chamber grave №6 at a Viking-age cemetery in Pskov. The grave was a large chamber inhumation burial belonging to a male some 45-55 years of age. While robbed sometime during the Middle Ages, it still contained a considerable number of artifacts: wooden utensils, including a large ladle decorated with silver leaf inlay worked in niello; a birch bark case containing a collapsible scale-set (balancing beam and two cups), two Sāmānid silver coins or dirhams (one whole coin with two holes dating to 953/54 and half a coin dating to 924-928?), and a Byzantine copper coin or folis of Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos dating to 931-944); a silver earring; a knife;

a fragment of cloth with sixteen silver buttons; a wooden bowl with bird remains inside; a large wax candle; a wooden chest with metal bindings; a wooden bucket; and, a wooden board with the remnant of a painting of a cross inside a circle, a cross inside a circle with Christ's monogram (*Chrismon*), or Christ's monogram inside a circle (executed with white, black, red, and yellow paints). Remains of a decapitated rooster lay near the head of the deceased and that of a wood grouse (*Capercaillie*) near the feet. A silver gold-gilded cross lay near the deceased alongside a bone comb. At his waist a leather wallet/pouch was discovered, inside of which lay one more Sāmānid dirham dating to 914-943, a gold nugget, and a knife wrapped around in silver wire. Next to the wallet/pouch, under a piece of clothing, rested a silver trapezoidal pendant (2.3 cm x 3.2 cm x 4.2 cm) with a hole and a loop made of silver wire, tied in the so-called "Scandinavian" knot for hanging. The pendant was cast-made and carries images on both of its sides made in niello. One of its sides carries an image of a "bident" with a key and the other an image of a bird with a cross over its head. Numerous micro-defects and loss of niello caused by wear on the surface of the face with the bird suggest that the owner of the pendant wore this side facing the body while the side with the bident and key facing outward.¹

Ershova argues that because the latest coins in the burial (dating to 953/54) had two holes, made so that it could be worn as a pendant, the coin had a lifespan somewhat later than it is dated. Thus, she dates the burial to the late 950s-960s.² However, it is possible to refine this chronology. Since no coins dating to the 960s were deposited in the burial, it seems that its chronology should be narrowed down to the early 960s at the latest. In other words, there would have been a very good chance that new dirhams would have been added to the burial, had it been made any later than the first few years of the 960s. What also needs to be considered is that the individual buried in this grave clearly was involved in financial operations, particularly ones dealing with dirhams and weighing precious metals. Therefore, it would be reasonable to believe that he would have had direct

¹ T.E. Ershova, "Kamera №6 Pskovskogo elitnogo nekropolia X veka" (in the press) ; idem., "Serebrianaia podveska s izobrazheniem tamgi Riurikovichei iz kamernogo pogrebeniia v Pskove," *Kraeugol'nyi kamen': Arkheologiia, istoriia, iskusstvo, kul'tura Rossii sopredel'nykh stran*, vol. I (Moscow: Lomonosov", 2010), 284-289.

² Ibid.

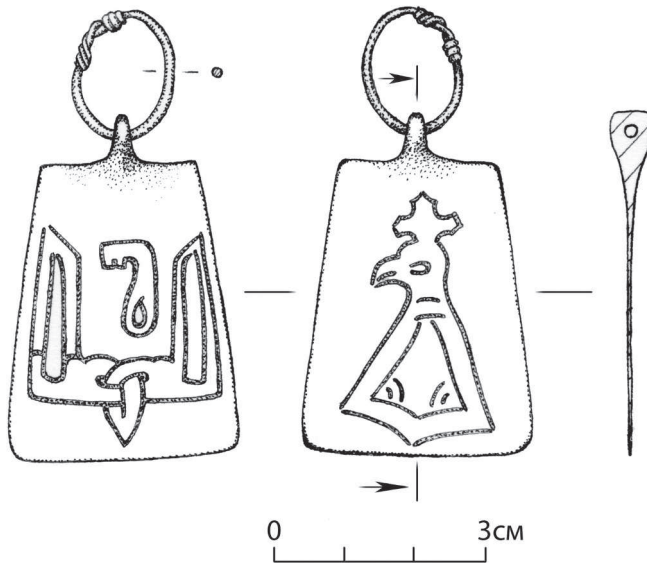


Figure 1 Trapezoidal Pendant from Pskov

access to the most current coin-stock that circulated in eastern Europe, where, incidentally, a great many of the coins that circulated during the period in question were newly-struck dirhams.³ In light of all of this, a more confined chronology of late 950 to early 960s at the latest will be proposed for the burial.

This grave is *exemplar par excellence* of a syncretic burial. It has obvious pagan elements, such as sacrificial birds, deposits of birds (most probably poultry) in the bowl as food items for the journey to the “otherworld,” and the inclusion of all other objects that were deemed necessary in the afterlife. At the same time, there were quite a number of Christian rituals and symbols attached to the deceased: inhumation chamber burial, painting of a cross/Christ’s monogram, a cross-pendant, a wax candle, and the

³ Th.S. Noonan, “The Vikings in the East: Coins and Commerce,” *Developments Around the Baltic and the North Sea in the Viking Age* (The Twelfth Viking Congress) [Birka Studies, vol. 3], eds. B. Ambrosiani, H. Clarke (Stockholm: Birka Project for Riksantikvarieämbetet and Statens Historiska Museer, 1994), 234–35; R.K. Kovalev, “Circulation of Sāmānid Dirhams in Viking-Age Northern and Eastern Europe (Based on the Mints of Samarqand and al-Shāsh)” (in the press).

Byzantine folis, which, being made of copper, had no intrinsic value and was probably understood as a Christian object by its owner. All of these features of the burial bring to mind Olga's final wishes just before she died in 969 "... not to hold a *trizna* (pagan funeral feast) for her, since she had a priest to perform the last rites over her;" her request was observed.⁴ It appears that the individual buried in chamber grave №6 in Pskov never made such a request, although the Christian elements of his burial seem to dominate the pagan. In this connection, it should be remembered that the burial predates the official Christianization of the Rus' lands by some three decades. But, this burial chronologically corresponds to Olga's baptism in Constantinople (perhaps Kiev) in the late 940s to late 950s.⁵

The artifacts found in Pskov chamber grave №6 speak very well of the deceased high status and wealth. Despite being robbed, the grave still contained an extraordinary quantity, quality, and variety of objects. Finds of gold in graves of this period are extremely rare in the Rus' lands. The large ladle decorated with silver leaf, silver buttons, a silver earring, and the knife wrapped in silver wire all speak of his high social and economic status. What is more, the scales, weights, and coins deposited in the burial also betray the individual's role in processing silver as well his ownership of it. The wealth and the status of this individual can be explained by the role he played in the administrative-fiscal apparatus of the Rus' ruling elite. Ershova is most correct to associate the trapezoidal pendant discovered with the

⁴ PVL = *The Povešt' vremennykh lët: An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, comp. and ed. D. Ostrowski; associate ed. D. Birnbaum (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press for the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2003), vol. I, 458.

⁵ Scholars have been at odds over the question of whether Olga was baptized in Kiev or Constantinople and when it happened. The dates that have been suggested range from 945 to 959, with a preponderance dating her baptism in Constantinople in 957. For the basic discussions and literature on the date of Olga's conversion, see S. Franklin, J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus, 750-1200* (London-New York: Longman, 1996), 134-137. Since then, there have been a handful of other important studies that should be mentioned: O. Kresten, 'Staatsempfänge' im Kaiserpalast von Konstantinopel um die Mitte des 10. Jahrhunderts. *Beobachtungen zu Kapitel II, 15 des sogenannten 'Zeremonienbuches'* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 6-19, 33-41; C. Zuckerman, "Le voyage d'Olga et la première ambassade espagnole à Constantinople en 946," *Travaux et Mémoires* 13 (2000): 647-72; A.V. Nazarenko, *Drevniaia Rus' na mezhdunarodnykh putiakh. Mezhdistsiplinarnye ocherki kul'turnykh, torgovykh, politicheskikh sviazei IX-XII vekov* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 2001), 218-310; J. Featherstone, "Olga's Visit to Constantinople in *De Cerimoniis*," *Revue des Études Byzantines* 61 (2003): 241-51; F. Tinnfeld, "Zum Stand der Olga-Diskussion," *Zwischen Polis, Provinz und Peripherie. Beiträge zur byzantinischen Geschichte und Kultur*, ed. L. Hoffmann (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 551-63.

deceased with such a post.⁶ Indeed, these types of trapezoidal pendants have been interpreted as sanctioned badges issued to individuals entrusted by Rus' rulers to act as their officials and revenue collectors.⁷ Badges (Old Norse *jartegnir*, often translated as “tokens” or “signs”) were also issued and used by officials of kings in contemporary Scandinavia.⁸ In this way, the deceased male was not only of high social and economic standing, but also political.

The Trapezoidal Pendant

One side of the pendant carries an image of a classic Riurikid dynasty (ca. 860–1598) princely emblem, which at first was a bident and later evolved into a trident with numerous variations. Inside the bident found on the pendant, there is an image of a key turned leftwards. No such images of keys appear on any early Rus' objects discovered thus far. The image of the key is thus unique. On the other side of the pendant, there is an image of a bird with a Byzantine cross above its head, also turned leftwards [Fig. 1]. An almost identical image of a bird is found on a set of “Christian Falcon” coins (Types I–III) that are imitation Islamic dirhams struck sometime in ca. 950 [Fig. 2].⁹ While this is not the place to discuss these coins in detail, several important observations need to be made presently.

⁶ Ershova, “Kamera №6 Pskovskogo elitnogo nekropolia X veka.”

⁷ While there has been some disagreement on the specific use of these items, it is now becoming generally accepted that they were issued by Rus' princes to officials they appointed on their behalf to act as their administrators. For the main literature on the use of trapezoidal pendants in the Rus' lands, see B.A. Rybakov, “Znaki sobstvennosti v kniazheskom khoziaistve Kievskoi Rusi X–XII vv.,” *Sovetskaia arkheologiia* 6 (1940): 238–9; A.A. Molchanov, “Podveski so znakom Riurikovichei i proiskhozdenie drevnerusskoi bully,” *Vspomogatel'nye istoricheskie distsipliny* 7 (1976): 69–91; V.L. Ianin, “Arkheologicheskie kommentarii k Russkoi Pravde,” *Novgorodskii sbornik: 50 let raskopok Novgoroda* (Moscow: Nauka, 1982), 149, 154; S.V. Beletskii, “Podveski s izobrazheniem drevnerusskikh kniazheskikh znakov,” *Ladoga i Gleb Lebedev* [Vos'mye chtenii pamiati Anny Machinskoi] (St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2004), 243–319.

⁸ See, for instance, *The History of Hacon the Good* (ch. 1, p. 78), *The History of St. Olav* (ch. 56, p. 255, ch. 123, p. 348), and *The History of Harald Hardrade* (ch. 64, p. 546) in Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, tr. A.H. Smith (New York: Dover, reprint 1990). For other examples, see A.A. Molchanov, “Veritel'nye znaki' v drevneskaninavskikh sagakh,” *Ladoga i severnaia Evropa. Vtorye chteniia pamiati Anny Machinskoi* (St. Petersburg: Staroladozhskii istoriko-arkhitekturnyi i arkheologicheskii muzei-zapovednik, 1996), 32–5.

⁹ For dating, see note 14.



Figure 2 Imitation of Islamic Dirham with Falcon and Cross

First, in his analyses of these coins some quarter century ago, Gert Rispling suggested that they were struck somewhere in European Russia, although none have been found (or at least identified) in the area at the time he wrote his work. All of these coins – only 12 found to date – were discovered in the Baltic region (mostly Sweden). Despite this potential problem of connecting these coins with Russia, Rispling advanced a number of solid numismatic arguments that make his suggestion quite compelling.¹⁰ With the discovery of the pendant with the same exact image of a “Christian Falcon” in Pskov and, furthermore, with the image of a Riurikid bident on its other side, Rispling’s suggestion has been fully vindicated. It is now clear that the “Christian Falcon” was not only known in Rus’, but, as will be argued below, was also intimately connected with the highest Rus’ ruling elite.¹¹

¹⁰ G. Rispling, “Coins With Crosses and Bird Heads – Christian Imitations of Islamic Coins?” *Formvännan* 82 (1987): 75–87.

¹¹As the present author was checking the proofs of this article, brand new and critically important information came to light on the presence of a “Christian Falcon” imitation dirham in the coin collections of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. Unfortunately, the coin has no specific provenance, i.e., it is unknown when, where, and

Second, in his examination of the coins, Rispling was the first to suggest that the bird represented on the dirham was a falcon. Others who have studied these coins have supported his identification of the bird with the falcon. There seems to be no good reason to disagree with this interpretation. The only question that remains to be answered is the falcon's outfit or the object/item found below its neck. Rispling and later E. Lindberger described the falcon as wearing a hood, a fundamental part of falconer's training program or when the falcon was not in action.¹² However, this interpretation can be seriously challenged, since the purpose of the hood in falconry was to cover the bird's head and eyes. On the coin and pendant, however, it is quite apparent that both the head and the eyes are uncovered, and the eyes are indeed open. What can be suggested instead – at least tentatively – is that the bird is represented as clothed in a cloak. Cloaks were one of the most common items of Viking-age woman's attire, worn over the rest of the female outfit. Parallels, albeit imperfect, of the cloak worn by the falcon occur on pendant-figurines and other objects depicting women dressed in cloaks, discovered in many areas of early medieval Scandinavia [Fig. 3].



Figure 3 Viking-Age Women's Garments from Scandinavia¹³

how it was discovered. Albeit, its presence in a Russian collection again points towards its place of origins in the same region. It should also be noted that this coin represents a new type, one not known to Rispling (hence, it will be tentatively referred to as Type IV, although due to its stylistic features it appears that this particular coin type is the earlier of the other three types (e.g., the cross is above the bird's head, but not attached to it!). I should like to thank V.S. Kuleshov of the State Hermitage Museum for verbally sharing with me this most interesting information at the international conference "Two Centuries of Islamic Numismatics in Russia. General Results and Prospects. Sept. 24-29," State Hermitage Museum.

¹²⁾ Ibid., 78; Lindberger, "The Falcon, the Raven and the Dove," 63.

¹³⁾ F. Bau, "Seler og slæb i vikingetid, Birka's kvindedragt i nyt lys," *KUML. Årbok for Jysk arkæologisk selskab 1981* (1981): Fig. p. 15.

Lastly, in his initial 1987 study of these coins, Rispling connected the emission of the “Christian Falcon” imitation dirhams with the Rus’ Grand Prince Igor’ (d. ca. 945). The reason for this association was based on Rispling’s belief at the time that these coins were struck in the early 930s, or the period of Igor’s rule. Naturally, the image of the cross over the bird’s head has brought doubt to Rispling’s suggestion, since it is very unlikely that it could have been this prince’s symbol; Igor’, after all was known to have been a good pagan. For this reason, some fifteen years thereafter, Lindberger speculated that Olga minted the coins, since it is known that she was a Christian.¹⁴ However, as Rispling ignored the cross, Lindberger ignored the chronology Rispling gave to the emission of the coins – early 930s. Although the exact date of Olga’s conversion is debated – did it occur in the late 940s or the late 950s? – there is no discussion of it occurring in the early 930s. The subject of Olga’s conversion and the meaning of the cross on the “Christian Falcon” coins is much larger than this article intends to be and will be considered in another inquiry. But, as the present study hopes to show, it turns out that Lindberger is actually correct to associate these coins with Olga, but not strictly based on the cross over the bird’s head and Olga’s Christianity. Furthermore, very recently, based on a newer reading of the coins Rispling has redated the emission of these “Christian Falcon” imitations to ca. 950, which does, indeed, correspond to the period of Olga’s rule.¹⁵ Such a dating of the “Christian Falcon” image also seems to give more credence to the arguments posed for Olga’s earlier conversion,

¹⁴ E. Lindberger, “The Falcon, the Raven and the Dove. Some Bird Motifs On Medieval Coins,” *Eastern Connections Part One: The Falcon Motif*, ed. B. Ambrosiani [Birka Studies 5] (Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet, 2001), 70, 72.

¹⁵ The falcon and the cross aside, the rest of the legend found on these “Christian Falcon” imitations chiefly derives from a prototype of a Sāmānid dirhams of Naṣr ibn Aḥmad who ruled in 914–943. While Sāmānid coins usually also carry the names of the caliphs in Baghdad, the caliphal name can be read on only the so-called Bird I type; however, the name is defective or is missing altogether on many coins. Recently, Rispling reexamined these coins and was able to propose a defective spelling of the caliph al-[Mu]tṭaqī, who ruled in 940–944. When combined – the names of the amīr and the caliph – it is possible to date the prototype to 940–943 as the earliest possible date for the emission. However, it is possible to refine the date when these coins were struck based on the time period they came into circulation. Using *tpq* (*terminus post quem*) or the approximate earliest date hoards were entered into ground with the “Christian Falcon” dirhams, these coins first appeared in ca. 951/52 (Smisss hoard, Gotland). In this way, it can be deduced that the coins in question were struck sometime in ca. 950. I should like to thank Gert Rispling for kindly informing me of his newest findings regarding these coins.

i.e., in the late 940s, although this subject will not be considered in the present study.

Ershova has interpreted the images on the pendant in the following way. She connects the bident with the key to Vladimir I (r. 970-ca. 978 as Prince of Novgorod; ca. 978-1015 as Grand Prince of Kiev) and does so for the following reasons. The bident has been traditionally identified as belonging to Sviatoslav, Vladimir's father, but the appearance of the key in its midst suggests that it is not Sviatoslav's. On the other hand, Vladimir's mother, Malusha, was a servant to Princess Olga, whose role it was to keep keys, i.e., she was a key-bearer (*kliuchnitsa*), as described in the *Russian Primary Chronicle* or *Povest' vremennykh let* (henceforth, *PVL*). While Sviatoslav recognized Vladimir as equal amongst his other sons, such a low birth from his mother's side, equated with a "slave" by Rogneda when the latter proposed to marry her, prevented him from inheriting the official bident used by his father. When Olga died in 969, the following year Sviatoslav divided up the Rus' realm amongst his three sons and Vladimir received Novgorod. Noting V.L. Ianin's earlier suggestion that Vladimir used the trident sign as his symbol beginning with 970 when he was appointed to rule Novgorod (also see below), Ershova proposes that Vladimir could have used the bident with the key before that time. Ershova then contends that Vladimir's trident could have developed out of the key inside the original bident.¹⁶

As for the other side of the pendant with the "Christian Falcon," Ershova connects it with Olga not only because it carries a cross, an obvious symbol of Christian Olga and no other ruler at the time, but also because the other rulers of Rus' had their own symbol in the shape of bidents that can be dated based on graffiti of these symbols on coins to the late ninth century. As further evidence, she points to the chronology of the grave in which the pendant with the "Christian Falcon" was found, which she dates to the late 950s-960s. She argues that this dating corresponds to the circulation of the "Christian Falcon" coins, which was mainly in the 950s. Since this chronology corresponds to both, the coins and the pendant should be connected with Olga and her activities in the late 950s to the 960s.¹⁷

Finally, based on all of this, Ershova draws the following hypothetical reconstruction of events surrounding the pendant and its symbolism. When still alive, Olga gave Vladimir the Pskov lands which were her

¹⁶) Ershova, "Kamera №6 Pskovskogo elitnogo nekropolia X veka."

¹⁷) Ibid.

patrimonial territories, as is known from the *PVL*. In this event, since the pendant carried emblems of Olga and Vladimir, the individual buried in chamber grave №6 was an official appointed by these two individuals to administer the princely affairs in the lands of Pskov.¹⁸

Ershova advances some interesting and compelling arguments in her evaluation of the symbolism found on the pendant. On the one hand, her connection of the “Christian Falcon” with Olga stands on solid ground, but needs much closer study and elaboration. On the other hand, her conclusions in reference to the bident and the key need to be closely reexamined.

The Meaning of the Bident

Ershova’s suggestion that the pendant carried on it Vladimir’s emblem has to be seriously questioned for a number of reasons. First, it should be kept in mind that while the pendant was buried in chamber grave №6 sometime in the late 950s to early 960s, it was not new when deposited. As Ershova herself observes, the pendant shows clear signs of wear. Its 45–55 year-old owner could well have worn it for quite a few years prior to his death. Thus, all that can be said about the upper chronology of the pendant is that it was made and worn sometime before the late 950s to early 960s, or using Ershova’s dating, more broadly to the 960s, which is less likely. However, the lower chronology can theoretically be a bit broader than Ershova suggests. While it is true that the “Christian Falcon” coins circulated in the 950s, the coins in question were actually struck in ca. 950. Thus, based strictly on the coins, the preliminary lower chronology of the pendant in question can be given as ca. 950.

With the above in mind, the “Christian Falcon” emblem can be dated to the period anywhere from ca. 950 at the earliest to the early 960s at the latest (perhaps 960s, if Ershova’s chronology is to be accepted). Of course, this does not necessarily indicate that the pendant itself has to be dated so broadly. All that this means is that the pendant does not necessarily have to be dated to the 950s, as Ershova suggested. In light of its wear, it could easily date to the late 940s. Vladimir, however, was born only in ca. 958, when Sviatoslav was sixteen (*sic!*), based on the record of the latter’s birth *sub annum* 942 found in the *Hypatian* and *Khlebnikov* chronicles.¹⁹ Even if

¹⁸⁾ Ibid.

¹⁹⁾ *PVL*, vol. I, 261. Vladimir’s birth in ca. 958 is based on speculation, since his date of birth is nowhere indicated in the sources.

Vladimir was born by the time the pendant was made, it is doubtful that Olga would have granted her patrimonial estates to an infant or perhaps a small child who was not a Grand Prince at the time nor would he have been even a contender for the position in light of his two more legitimate and older half-brothers. The fact that he was relegated to remote Novgorod by Sviatoslav in 970 points to the same conclusion. It is true that Vladimir was associated with the lands of Pskov because he was allegedly born there when Olga exiled his mother to the area.²⁰ Nothing in the written sources, however, suggests that Olga gave Vladimir anything; Vladimir, even if he was born in the Pskov region, appears to have resided in Kiev until 970 when he was sent to Novgorod.²¹ Of course, it could be argued that Vladimir was not residing in Pskov but was simply granted authority over it, mainly to collect revenues. But, the question why Olga would grant Vladimir her patrimony has to be answered or at least addressed. Furthermore, it is not altogether clear why Olga and Vladimir would advertise his lower social status – born to a servant-stewardess mother – by inserting the key into the bident. It does not appear to be a very convincing and authoritative symbol for Vladimir to use to declare his dominion. Overall, it seems that Ershova came to her evaluation and understanding of the meaning of the bident with the key solely based on the reference made in the *PVL* to Vladimir's mother being a bearer of keys. As convenient and even at first compelling as this passage may be for such an interpretation, Ershova's conclusion seems to pose more questions than it answers.

Second, most importantly, it was Sviatoslav, not Vladimir, who was Grand Prince of Rus' until 970/972. It was Sviatoslav's bident that designated his authority throughout the Rus' lands during his lifespan after his father Grand Prince Igor' was killed in ca. 945. It was Sviatoslav, Grand Prince of Kiev and qağan of the Rus', who was the head of state starting with ca. 945 to the time of his death in 972, not regent Olga nor any of his sons.²² It was

²⁰ *Patriarshaia ili Nikonovskaia letopis'* [*Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*, vol. 9] (St. Petersburg, 1862), 35; A.A. Shakhmatov, *Razyskaniia o russkikh letopisiakh* (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2001), 269.

²¹ His presence is attested to in the *PVL*, vol. I, in 968 when Olga and her three grandsons, listed by name, was being besieged in Kiev by the Pechenegs. He was also there when the Novgorodians came to seek a prince from Sviatoslav in 969; *PVL*, vol. I, 433–34, 469–471.

²² Shakhmatov, *Razyskaniia o russkikh letopisiakh*, 11; *PVL*, vol. I, 516. On Rus' qağans and the Rus' qağanate, see O. Pritsak, *The Origin of Rus'*, vol. 1 [Old Scandinavian Sources other than Sagas] (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press for the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1981), 28; P.B. Golden, "The Question of the Rus' Qağanate," *Archivum Eurasiae*

only after Sviatoslav decided to move the capital of his realm from Kiev to Pereiaslav on the lower Danube that the bident began to evolve into other forms. As a result of his move, Sviatoslav divided up the old Rus' territories between his three sons in 970 (Kiev for Iaropolk, Drevlianian lands for Oleg, and Novgorod for Vladimir), and each of them began to use the Riurikid insignia. But, they did so by developing their own, unique forms of the symbol based on the original bident.²³ While Oleg's symbol remains unknown, Vladimir changed the bident into a trident. The earliest evidence of this trident comes from a bone pendant discovered in Novgorod in layers dating to the third quarter of the tenth century. But, it has been more precisely dated to 972.²⁴ Iaropolk most probably retained the original bident, since he was the oldest son and ruler of Kiev. However, he soon also changed the bident by adding a cross to its bottom, almost certainly because of his conversion to Christianity, or at least taking *prima signatio*, in 975.²⁵ In sum, only Sviatoslav could have used the bident as a symbol of authority in the Rus' lands until he died in 972 or, at least until he granted Kiev to Iaropolk in 970 who could then use the insignia as his own. Consequently, it was only in 970 that Vladimir could have had any pretensions on the insignia when he was sent to rule over the Novgorodian lands. Then and there he developed the bident into his own unique symbol – the trident. To suggest that he could have had one any earlier would go against the grain of everything that is known about the use of Riurikid bident-trident symbols. Since there is no reason to think otherwise, this emblem was used only by reigning princes, be they Grand Princes of Kiev or princes of other principalities. Prior to 970, Vladimir was neither.

Third, Ershova's suggestion that Vladimir's trident evolved out of the key inserted into the bident likewise can be questioned. The third and central "dent" found in his trident can be associated with a body of a bird.

Medii Aevi 2 (1982): 77-107; T.S. Noonan, "The Khazar Qaghanate and its Impact on the Early Rus' State: The *translatio imperii* from Itil to Kiev," *Nomads in the Sedentary World*, ed. Anatoly M. Khazanov and André Wink (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 76-102.

²³) Beletskii, "Podveski s izobrazheniem," 254-5.

²⁴) See Fig. 7 and commentary below.

²⁵) Nazarenko, *Drevniaia Rus' na mezhdunarodnykh putiakh*, 339-90. For Iaropolk's cross-bident, see R.K. Kovalev, "Birki-sorochki: upakovka mekhovykh shkurok v Srednevekovom Novgorode," *Novgorodskii istoricheskii sbornik*, vol. 9 (St. Petersburg: Sankt.-Peterb. Institut istorii RAN/Dmitrii Bulanin, 2003), p. 37, Fig. 1; Beletskii, "Podveski s izobrazheniem," 253.

By adding this central “dent,” the earlier bident came to represent a full, albeit, highly stylized representation of a bird in mid-air flight diving position. The earlier features of the bident represented only wings and a head-beak pointing downwards. Vladimir’s new central “dent” completed it with the torso [Figs. 7-8]. That this symbol represented a bird has been made quite clear by the existence of eyes above the beak on some of the later coins of Iaroslav the Wise (ca. 978-1054).²⁶ Hence, it is unlikely that the key has anything to do with the evolution of the bident into a trident. This process occurred in context of changes to other symbolism.

Overall, presently there is little dispute in scholarly literature that bidents were all associated with the earliest Rus’ princes up through the end of Sviatoslav’s reign.²⁷ As mentioned above, only after 970 the bident metamorphosed into other variants. Furthermore, because the pendant was deposited in the grave sometime around the late 950s-early 960s it would stand to reason that it was made sometime during the reign of Sviatoslav, but not earlier than when it began in ca. 945. In such a case, the tentative lower chronology of the pendant – ca. 945 at the earliest – seems to confirm the time of the emergence of the “Christian Falcon” imitation dirhams, i.e., ca. 950. Thus, both the coins and the pendant made their appearance at almost the same exact time.

The Meaning of the Key

Another interpretation of the key and its place inside Sviatoslav’s bident on the Pskov pendant, other than Ershova’s, can be put forward. Keys and locks of various types were well known in eastern Europe since the ninth century and have been found in many towns, settlements, and cemeteries across the Rus’ lands. While there were a number of different kinds of keys, there is one particular type that is fully analogous to the key depicted on the pendant [Fig. 4, especially nos. 4 & 7]. This key type – known as latchlifter in English – was used for locking and unlocking wooden locks, particularly those that locked chests. They have been found in Novgorod, Pskov, Gnezdovo, Chernigov (Chernaia mogila burial), upper Volga (e.g., Rostov, Mikhailovskoe cemetery, and a settlement near Uglech), Voin, and other

²⁶ Lindberger, “The Falcon, the Raven and the Dove,” pp. 79-80, Fig. 2.21.

²⁷ Beletskii, “Podveski s izobrazheniem,” 254-56.

Rus' sites.²⁸ Latchlifters of this type have also been discovered across Viking-age Northern Europe, from Sweden (e.g., Helgö, Birka, and Gotland) and Denmark (e.g., Ribe) to England (e.g., Kent).²⁹ In Novgorod and in Pskov they appear in the first half of the tenth century and were in use there through the early twelfth.³⁰ Thus, a representation of a latchlifter on the pendant from Pskov dating to the mid-tenth century should not seem to be out of the ordinary.

In Norse Viking-age Northern European world, to which Olga and the Rus' ruling elite largely belonged, there was a very close connection between keys and women, as is evidenced by way of archaeological finds as well as literary sources. In Viking-age Norway 55.8% of keys and parts of chests to which they belonged have been found in women's graves, while 44.2% in men's. Albeit, the percentage is actually much higher in favor of females, since there are three times many more male graves than female, thereby making the ratio of key and chest finds in female graves 3.7 times higher

²⁸ B.A. Kolchin, "Khronologiia novgorodskikh drevnostei," *Novgorodskii sbornik*, 161-2; T.Iu. Zakurina, "Zamki i kliuchi iz raskopok Pskova," *Arkheologi rasskazyvaiut o drevnem Pskove* (Pskov: Pskovskii gos. Ob"edinennii istoriko-arkhitekturnyi khudozhestvennyi muzei-zapovednik, 1992), 115-6; *Put' iz Variag v Greki/The Road From the Varangians to the Greeks and from the Greeks...: Katalog vystovki*, ed. V.L. Egorov (Moscow: Gos. istoricheskii muzei, 1996), p. 69, Fig. 508; p. 78, Fig. 663; A.E. Leont'ev, "Rostov epokhi Iaroslava Mudrogo: po materialam arkheologicheskikh issledovaniï," *Istoriia - arkheologiia: Traditsii i perespektivy* (Moscow: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 1998), p. 142, Fig. 6:10; N.G. Nedoshivinas, "Mikhailovskii mogil'nik," *Iaroslavskoe povolzh'e X-XI vv.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1963), p. 28, Fig. 15:8; S.V. Tomsinskii, *Ugleche Pole v IX-XII vekakh* (St. Petersburg: Izd. Gos. Ermitazha, 2004), p. 317, Fig. 69; V.I. Dovzhenko, V.K. Goncharov, R.O. Iuga, *Drevnoruske misto Voin* (Kyiv: Naukovo Dumka, 1966), p. 87 and Table XIV:3, 6, 7.

²⁹ "Locks and Keys" in *Excavations at Helgö V:1. Workshop*. Pt. II, ed. K. Lamm, et al (Stockholm-Lund: Kungl. Vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademien, 1978); M. Östergren, *Millan Stengrund och Stenhus. Gotlands vikingatida silverskatter som boplatsindikation* [Theses and Papers in Archaeology 2] (Stockholm: Institute of Archaeology at the University of Stockholm, 1989), p. 111, Fig. 101; pp. 113-4, Figs. 108 and 110; pp. 128-9, Figs. 123 and 125; G. Westholm, "Gör en man hor ... Vikingens vardag och kvinnosyn," *Gotland Vikingaöen* [Gotländskt arkiv 2004, 76] (Visby: Länsmuseum på Gotland, 2004), pp. 69-70, Fig. 2; *Ribe Studier. Det Äldste Ribe. Udgravninger på nordsiden af Ribe Å 1984-2000*, vol. 1.2, ed. C. Feveile (Århus/Højbjerg: Jysk Arkæologisk Selskab, 2006), p. 408, Table 28: 4; p. 434, Table 54: D; p. 440, Table 60:1.

³⁰ Kolchin, "Khronologiia novgorodskikh drevnostei," pp. 161-2, Fig. 4; Zakurina, "Zamki i kliuchi iz raskopok Pskova," p. 114, Fig. 4:4.

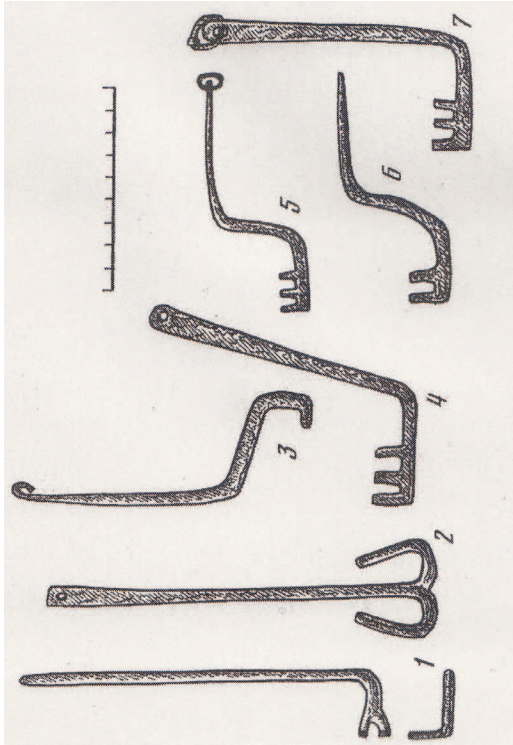


Figure 4 Keys/Latchlifters from Novgorod³¹

than in those of males.³² In the Scandinavian graves discovered in the Rus' lands, the statistics still suggest the frequent, if not dominant, association of women with keys: of the 24 such graves with keys and locks, seven were female, ten male, and seven male and female.³³ The tradition of depositing

³¹ A.S. Khoroshev, "Zamki, kliuchi i zamochnye prinadlezhnosti," *Dranviaia Rus'. Byt i kul'tura*, ed. B.A. Kolchin, T.I. Makarova (Moscow: Nauka, 1997), p. 253, Figs. 7:4-7.

³² J. Petersen, *Vikingetidens redskaper* [Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo II] (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1951), 485; A. Stalsberg, "Women as Actors in Northern European Viking Age Trade," *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, ed. R. Samson (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1991), 80.

³³ A. Stalsberg, "The Implications of the Women's Finds for the Understanding of the Activities of the Scandinavians in Rus' During the Viking Age," *Kvinner i arkeologi i Norge* 5 (1987): 44.

keys in female graves actually had a long history in the Germanic world. Keys were most commonly buried in women's graves in the Merovingian lands and early Anglo-Saxon England, and in both areas have been associated with women's status and domain.³⁴

Aside from actual keys discovered in female graves, miniature keys served as pendants-amulets. Among the earliest are the silver ornamental keys that were unearthed in the two richest female Lombard graves excavated in the Carpathians dating to the very early Middle Ages.³⁵ Miniature key-amulets were also quite common items of female dress in early Anglo-Saxon England and are known in scholarship as "girdle-hangers," since they were suspended from the waist.³⁶ Miniature keys have also been discovered in Viking-age Scandinavia.³⁷ Amulets in the form of keys were likewise known in Rus'. They became particularly widespread in the eleventh to the early twelfth centuries and were deposited mainly in female graves in the southern Lake Ladoga area as well as the upper-Volga and upper-Dnepr regions. The keys found in the later Rus' period have been interpreted as symbols of womanhood and matrimony.³⁸ But, one of the earliest of these examples comes from Pskov.

This miniature pendant key/latchlifter found in Pskov comes from a male grave dating to second half of the tenth-early eleventh centuries [Fig. 5]. Based on the types of artifacts discovered in the grave (e.g., weights and scales, Borre-style ornaments), the deceased is believed to have been a Scandinavian merchant. The key was one of fourteen miniature amulets suspended on a bronze ring; amongst them, many cannot be connected

³⁴ G. Halsall, "Female Status and Power in Early Merovingian Central Austrasia: The Burial Evidence," *Early Medieval Europe* 5 (1995): 1-24; S. Chadwick Hawkes, "The Dating and Social Significance of the Burials in the Polhill Cemetery," *Excavations in West Kent 1960-1970*, ed. B. Philp (Dover: Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit/The West Kent Border Archaeological Group, 1973), pp. 195-6; Fig. 56: 547-8.

³⁵ I. Bóna, *The Dawn of the Dark Ages. The Gepids and Lombards in the Carpathian Basin* (Budapest: Corvina Press, 1976), p. 43, Fig. 60.

³⁶ G.R. Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England, Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 66-7, 153-4; G.B. Brown, *The Arts in Early England. Saxon Art and Industry in the Pagan Period* (New York: J. Murray, 1915), 394-402.

³⁷ B. Almgren, *Bronsnycklar och djuvornamentik vid övergången från Vendeltid till Vikingatid* (Uppsala: Appelbergs boktr., 1955).

³⁸ N.G. Nedoshivina, "Drevnerusskie amulety v vide miniatiurnikh predmetov byta i ikh rol' v pogrebal'nom obriade" in *Arkheologicheskii sbornik: Pogrebal'nyi obriad* [Trudy GIM, №93] (Moscow: Gos. istoricheskii muzei, 1997), p. 81, Fig. 1: 9-12; p. 85; pp. 90-4.

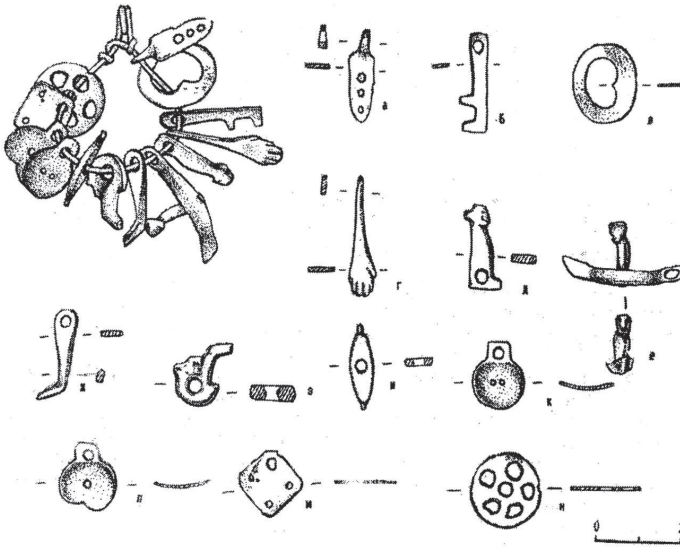


Figure 5 Ring with Amulets from Pskov³⁹

with any specific objects.⁴⁰ However, the figure sitting inside a ship can be securely identified as the god of the sea Njǫrðr, father of both Freyja and Freyr, or perhaps Freyr himself, as both are clearly associated with ships in Old Norse mythology – all Vanir gods, connected with fertility, the

³⁹ I.O. Kolosova, N.N. Miliutina, “‘Bol’shoi kurgan’ drevnerusskogo nekropolia Pskova (pogrebeniia 57 i 59),” *Arkheologicheskoe izuchenie Pskova*, vol. 2 (Pskov: Pskovskii gosudarstvennyi nauchno-issledovatel’skii tsentr, 1994), p. 120, Fig. 12.

⁴⁰ Kolosova, Miliutina, “‘Bol’shoi kurgan,’” 120, 124. Aside from the key, the other objects that can be identified with some certainty are a sword; a ring; a hand; an anthropomorphic female (?) figure; a leg; and, a zoomorphic figure. Swords very similar to this one have been found in Scandinavia and other Rus’ sites (e.g., Gnezdovo) and have been interpreted as symbols associated with Óðinn. The ring can rather easily be understood as a miniature representation of a strike-a-light or “fire-steel,” usually interpreted as a symbol of life-giving and powers of purification through fire. The leg and perhaps the hand can be understood as votive gifts to the gods; see A.-S. Gräslund, “Some Viking-age Amulets – the Birka Evidence” in *Cultural Interaction Between East and West* [Archaeology, artifacts and Human Contacts in Northern Europe], eds. U. Fransson, et al (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2007), 94-5. The hand may also be understood as a symbol of bounty; see T.A. Pushkina, “Tri amuleta iz Gnezdova,” *Problemy arkheologii Evrazii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1991); G.L. Novikova, “Skandinavskie amulety iz Gnezdova,” *Smolensk i Gnezdovo* (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), 182-6, 195.

life-death-rebirth cycle, and ships.⁴¹ Njǫrðr, in particular, is closely tied not only to ships, but also to seafarers (fishermen and merchants) and great wealth that derives from the sea itself or from sea travel.⁴² Not coincidentally, a miniature wooden boat was deposited into the same male grave in which the amulet set was found.⁴³ This boat was most likely a proxy for a real ship used in classic Viking ship burial. In light of all of the above, the ring with the amulets can be interpreted as an assorted collection of various Nordic divinities and their symbols, including those of the Vanir gods – Njǫrðr/Freyr. The other major Vanir divinity – the goddess Freyja – is very likely to be represented by the key. Her figurative presence here would compliment and, indeed, complete the other chief Vanir deity in the ship – all fundamental gods that would be of great concern to the merchant buried in this grave.

Indeed, literary sources not only tie keys to women, but to Freyja in particular. In his *Gylfaginning*, Snorri Sturluson describes the goddess Sýr – actually one of Freyja's hypostases whose function was to “shield/protect”⁴⁴ – as one who “Guards the doors in the hall and locks out those who ought not enter.”⁴⁵ In the *Þrymskviða*, a connection is made yet again between key ownership and Freyja as well as women in general (at least those of the highest rank), like the goddess. It relates an episode in which the god Þorr had to disguise himself as a woman and borrowed Freyja's outfit to do so, which included keys:

⁴¹ J. de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1957), 163–208. It should be noted that the connection between the two gods can be more than just a father-son relationship, as they may be identical or have shared identity – one older (early Germanic) and the other younger (Viking-era) deities; see B.-M. Näsström, *Freyja: The Great Goddess of the North* (Lund: Clock & Rose Press, 2003), 38, 53.

⁴² *Gylfaginning*, Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, tr. J.L. Byock (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 33–4, ch. 23. Also see G. Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 20–5; idem., *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 20; G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 163. For discussions of the connection between Freyja and ships, see H.R.E. Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess* (London-New York: Routledge, 1998), 112–3 and Näsström, *Freyja*, 24. Also see below.

⁴³ Kolosova, Miliutina, “Bol'shoi kurgan,” p. 122, Fig. 13:9.

⁴⁴ B.-M. Näsström, “Freyja – a Goddess of Many Names,” *The Concept of the Goddess*, eds. S. Billington and M. Green (London-New York: Routledge, 1996), 56, 72. For protective function and powers of Freyja and parallel divinities as “Mistress of the Household,” see Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 124ff; Näsström, *Freyja*, 32.

⁴⁵ *Gylfaginning*, ch. 35, p. 42.

Let's dress Þorr in a bridal head-dress,
let him wear the great necklace of the Brisings [Freyja's necklace, R.K.K.]

Let keys jingle about him
and let women's clothing fall down to his knees,
and on his breast let's display jewels.⁴⁶

In the *Rígsþula* we hear that when the god Rígr fathered three races – slaves, farmers, and nobles, his second son Farmer got a wife and:

Then they drove home the woman with keys at her belt,
in a goatskin kirtle, married her to Farmer.⁴⁷

Keys were thus associated with farmwomen as well. This information is supported by early medieval Scandinavian laws, which also relate that farmwomen were given the legal right to keys to the farms, thereby charging them with the responsibility over the property whether the husband was at home or away.⁴⁸ Women as key-keepers (O.E. *locbore*, i.e., “lock/key-bearer”) are noted in the early Anglo-Saxon law of the King of Kent Æthelberht (560–616).⁴⁹ The same connection is made in the later laws of Cnut/Canute (ca. 985–1035), king of England, Norway, Denmark, and regions of Sweden: “But it is her duty to guard the keys of the following – her store-room and her chest and cupboard.”⁵⁰

Leaving the Worldly for the Otherworldly: it has been argued that the key symbolized Freyja, the goddess of fertility and bounty. The symbol of the key has been connected with her function of assisting in childbirth and marriage; woman's personal integrity/loyalty; and, woman's power over the household.⁵¹ The key has also been interpreted as opening up the door to

⁴⁶ *Drymskviða*, *The Poetic Edda*, tr. C. Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), sts. 15–6, p. 99.

⁴⁷ *Rígsþula*, *The Poetic Edda*, st. 23, p. 249.

⁴⁸ P.-E. Wallen, et al, “Husfru,” *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* 7 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde & Bagge, 1979), 133–7; E. Gunnes, *Norges historie*, vol. 2 [Rikssamling og kristning 800–1177] (Oslo: Cappelen, 1976), 299.

⁴⁹ C. Fell, “A *fríwif locbore* Revisited,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 13 (1984): 157–165.

⁵⁰ Also: “And unless the goods had been put under the wife's lock and key, she shall be clear [of any charges completely]” of theft; 74.1 & 1a in “The Laws of Canute, I,” *The Laws of the Kings of England from Edward to Henry I*, tr. A.J. Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 215.

⁵¹ E. Arwill-Nordbladh, “Nyckelsymbolik i järnålderns kvinnogravar,” *Formvannen* 85 (1990): 255–9. Examples from folklore regarding connections between keys and childbirth are also provided in Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 148–9.

the “Other World,” likewise connecting it with the Freyja cult.⁵² Indeed, Freyja is associated with death in mythology in a number of ways, but especially in her connection to being a battle goddess. More specifically, according to Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning*, when she went into battle she would pick up and bring half of the slain to her own palace (Folkvángur) and hall (Sessrúmnir) in Ásgarðr (home of the gods), while the other half went to her husband Óðr/Óðinn’s Valhalla.⁵³ But, she is also clearly a deity that regenerates life, being a fertility goddess – one of her other chief functions.⁵⁴ Again, none of these associations are mutually exclusive; indeed, they complement one another, representing the regenerative cycle of life-death-rebirth. In one form or another, all of the principal female attributes, such as woman’s reproductive abilities, family, and household, came to be personified – indeed deified – in the form of Freyja.

In his *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri Sturluson sums it up nicely when he describes Freyja as someone who “became so very renowned, that they called all their noble women by her name, even as they are now called *fruer*; so every woman is called Freya (Frue), who rules over her own property, but she is called house-freya (*husfrue*), who has a household.”⁵⁵ In his *Skáldsaparmál* he adds that Freyja can be referred to in kennings as “the household deity of the Vanir” gods.⁵⁶ Women were entrusted with keys to the family treasure chests or households in general to guard, particularly when the men left

⁵² A. Andrén, “Doors to the Other Worlds. Scandinavian Death Rituals in Gotlandic Perspective,” *Journal of European Archaeology* 1 (1993): 33–56.

⁵³ *Gylfaginning*, Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, p. 35, ch. 24. It should be noted that not all agree that Freyja was directly linked to death, at least not based on the reference to Freyja being in charge of taking half of the dead for herself; see J. Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 127. Albeit, there is additional evidence that connects Freyja with the dead through her hypostases, such as Gefjon who accepted dead unmarried women into the underworld (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 35). For this and other arguments connecting Freyja with the dead, her function as a battle goddess, as well as her other hypostases in the form of Norns, Dísir, and Valkyries see Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 65, 166–170, 173ff; Näsström, *Freyja*, 15, 59, 67–9, 81, 112–2; B.-M. Näsström, “Freyja: The Trivalent Goddess” in *Comparative Studies in History of Religions: Their Aim, Scope and Validity* ed. E. Reenberg Sand, J. Podemann Sørensen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1999), 57–73.

⁵⁴ *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldsaparmál*, p. 35, ch. 24, p. 111; Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 177; de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 163–208; Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 65ff., 85, 79–90, 141–53; Näsström, *Freyja*, 36, 50–1, 59–64.

⁵⁵ *Ynglinga saga* in Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, ch. 10, p. 8.

⁵⁶ *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldsaparmál*, pp. 42–3, ch. 35, p. 111.

home for long periods of time. By having keys entrusted to them, women became heads of households and the keepers of family fortunes, as was Freyja and her doublet Frigg, whose husbands, Óðr and Óðinn respectively, were very often away from home.⁵⁷ His absence caused Freyja to weep golden tears, according to Snorri's *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldsaparmál*.⁵⁸ Thus, while Freyja was the ruler over half of Ásgarðr or home of the gods when Óðr/Óðinn was at home she became ruler over its entirety when he was away. It is the woman's power over the household and her connection to keys that is of particular interest to us presently.

Aside from being active managers of the household when men were away for extended periods of time, women could become in charge of the household permanently when widowed. Of what we know of widows in Scandinavian as well as early Rus' societies, they could not inherit their husband's property while there were living children, but they could act as heads of the household and dispense of their wealth as they saw fit by acting as guardians for their children until they were of age.⁵⁹ Control over capital, movable or immovable, by a widow while the children were minors

⁵⁷ The goddesses Frigg and Freyja are quite problematic in that they cannot be fully connected nor disconnected from one another. But, the same cannot be said about their husbands Óðr and Óðinn, since it does seem clear that the two were identical. For these question, see S. Grundy, "Freyja and Frigg," *The Concept of the Goddess*, 56-67; Näsström, *Freyja*, 62-4. Albeit, the solution that seems to make most sense is the one that argues that the two goddesses represented various aspects of one chief "Great Northern Goddess" and, thus, at times they shared certain functions; see Näsström, *Freyja*, 76-7, 79, 80-92; Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 10, 65, 79, 85-6, 89. In this way, both were hypostases of one chief deity and only towards the late Viking period came to be worshiped as individual divinities. Indeed, there are a number of other lesser goddesses that were hypostases of Freyja, if not Frigg also. See Näsström, "Freyja – a Goddess of Many Names," 68-77. But, they all probably derived from one early Germanic chief female deity – Nerthus; see Näsström, *Freyja*, 43-4.

⁵⁸ *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldsaparmál*, pp. 42-3, ch. 35, p. 111; Saxo Grammaticus also relates that Óðinn was often absent from his realm; see *The History of the Danes*, vol. 1, tr. P. Fisher, ed. H.E. Davidson (London: D.S. Brewer, 1979), I:26, p. 26.

⁵⁹ B. Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones. Custom and Commemoration in Early Medieval Scandinavia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); idem., "Women as Bridge-Builders; The Role of Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia" in *Peoples and Places in Northern Europe. 500-1600. Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*, eds. L. Wood and N. Lund (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991), 217-20, 223; J. Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991), 56. The situation was different when the woman's dowry was concerned. According to the Kievan Rus' law code, the *Pravda Rus'kaia* ("Expanded Version"), a woman's dowry remained her private property, provided that she was single. If she married, the dowry became part of

should not be at all strange or surprising. There are plenty of examples from the early Middle Ages in the Germanic world not only of royal wives controlling treasuries when they were widowed, but even when their husbands were still living.⁶⁰

It is precisely in this connection that the image of the key found on the Pskov pendent has to be understood. When her husband Grand Prince Igor was killed by the Drevlians *sub annum* 945, the widowed Olga was left with a very young son and thus had to become regent for him until he came of age. In her capacity as *de facto* ruler-regent, she acted as the keeper or guardian of the state until Sviatoslav matured to take over the realm in his own full right. The key was thus Olga's symbol of regency for her son over the Rus' lands. What is more, to make it clear that she was only a temporary custodian of the state, and underscore Sviatoslav's legitimate ruler-to-be status – Grand Prince of Kiev and qağan of the Rus' – Olga had the engraver making the pendant combine both symbols into one – the main one being Sviatoslav's bident regal family emblem, while the central, albeit a smaller one, of herself – the custodial key, symbol of a woman in charge of the royal household. It needs to be underscored that this role Olga assumed sometime just after ca. 945, or the approximate date estimated above for the lower chronology of the pendant based on Sviatoslav's bident (post-ca. 945) and the "Christian Falcon" imitation dirhams (ca. 950). In this way, all of the above historical events are tied together by the symbols and the coins discussed above, which date to the late 940s/ca. 950.

Lastly, some have suggested that Olga could have had her own regal bident insignia. However, no convincing evidence of such an emblem has thus far been advanced.⁶¹ What is more, since Olga came from outside of

the family property that could be used or invested for the common good of the household. In the event of a divorce or widowhood, the dowry was to pass back to the woman while the rest of the property was to be distributed in accordance with the will of the husband. Otherwise, the husband's property was to be cared for by the widow, unless she remarried, until the children turned of age and were able to inherit it. See *The Laws of Rus' – Tenth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, tr. D.H. Kaiser (Salt Lake City: Charles Schlacks, 1992), arts. 93, 102-3, and 106, pp. 30-2. Also see E. Levin, "Women and Property in Medieval Novgorod: Dependence and Independence," *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 10:2 (1983): 154-169.

⁶⁰ P. Stafford, "Queens and Treasure in the Early Middle Ages" in *Treasure in the Medieval West*, ed. E.M. Tyler (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY, York Medieval Press, 2000), 61-82.

⁶¹ For a "reconstruction" of Olga's "bident," mostly from imagination, see Beletskii, "Podveski s izobrazheniem," Fig. 12:3, p. 311; Fig. 21:1; commentary pp. 271-273. Beletskii

the Riurikid bloodline and was a female, she could not have possibly had any pretensions on this symbol connected with a male qağan's authority of her husband and son.⁶² Furthermore, not one example of a bident-trident Riurikid emblem used by a princess has thus far been found. Being regent, not official ruler, she chose the symbol of a key, which surely would have been understood by most people of the day in Northern Europe not only as a sign of a woman, but probably also as a religious-legal symbol of guardianship, as is suggested by the close connection between women and keys in the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon laws. In this regard, one is reminded of mayors of cities in more recent times who hold the key to their city, which they present on occasion to outsiders in welcoming ceremonies.

Combining Identities

Interestingly, the pendant from Pskov is not the only object that combines Olga's identity with that of her son Sviatoslav. The other is a *bullā* from Kiev [Fig. 6]. Strangely overlooked, or intentionally avoided in literature because of its implications, is the cross that is found above one of the bidents. There is a general consensus that this *bullā* belonged to Sviatoslav.⁶³ But, how can

derives at his conclusion based on one massive bone pendant or plaque that was discovered in Novgorod outside of archeological context. Hence, it has no chronology. It contained an image of a bident without a triangular-like bottom or stem below the bident on the one side and an image of a cross (?) on the other. He notes that bidents without stems occur very rarely on pendants from the tenth-eleventh centuries: the exception is a trapezoidal pendant from Pskov dating to the eleventh century, which has not been interpreted due to its unique symbolism, i.e., it cannot be connected to any ruler. In light of this, and because the bone pendant from Novgorod that is in question carried a cross, Beletskii concludes that it belonged to Olga. Albeit, in the same article (p. 272) the author notes that bidents without stems do occur on items dating to the twelfth-thirteenth centuries. Since the chronology of this pendant is unknown, it could well also date to the same (later) centuries and then there would be nothing unique about it. In sum, because the pendant in question lacks chronology, it can be interpreted in many ways and it can hardly be used to "reconstruct" Olga's alleged Riurikid symbol.

⁶² O. Pritsak is correct to note that the title "qağan" could only have been used by one ruler at a time and it had to be a male. See N. Golb, O. Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 64.

⁶³ V.L. Ianin, *Aktovye pečati drevnei Rusi X-XV vv.*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Nauka, 1970), Tb. 1:1, p. 249, commentary pp. 38-40; A.P. Motsia, A.K. Syromiatnikov, "Kniazheskie tamgi Sviatoslava Igorevicha kak istochnik izucheniia istorii drevnerusskikh gorodov,"

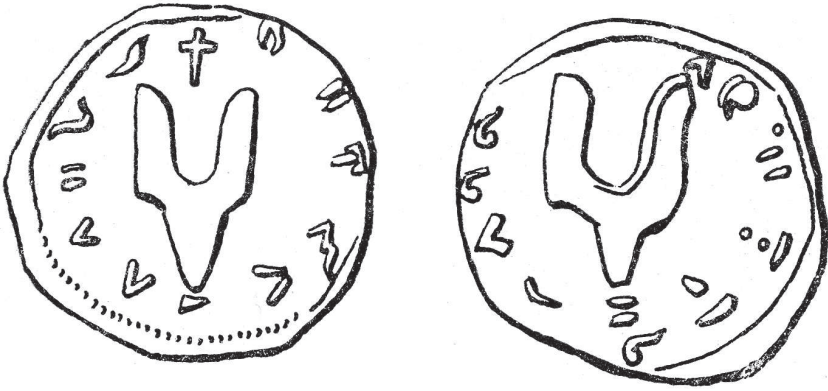


Figure 6 Sviatoslav's (and Olga's?) *Bulla* From Kiev. Discovered under the Church of the Holy Virgin (*Desiatinnaia*) in Kiev, built in 994-996, with a cross above a "bident," with the letters, Greek or Cyrillic reading "Sviatoslav" encircling it, and another "bident" with several letters encircling it, the meaning of which have yet to be understood. Dated to the lifespan of Sviatoslav (ca. 942-972)

one explain the cross above the bident? Sviatoslav was by no means a Christian, and, indeed, all that we know of him suggests that he was a true pagan until his death. So, how is one to understand the cross? It seems that the most likely explanation for the cross can, once again, be tied to his Christian mother and regent, until he turned of age, or perhaps even afterwards. The authority of young Grand Prince/qağan had to be made clear on the *bulla* with his bident. But, regent Olga also had to assert her own position of power and authority in the Rus' lands and used the cross as her identity to underscore it. Even after Sviatoslav became an adult, Olga's Christian identity of power represented in the form of the cross was retained, since it would have been most handy in diplomacy with the Byzantines and other Christian polities.

There are other examples of combining identities amongst early Rus' rulers. Perhaps the most interesting of them is the bone pendant discovered in Novgorod which carries two princely signs – one side has a bident

Drevnerusskiy gorod (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1984), 84-7; A.A. Molchanov, "Pechat' Sviatoslava Igorevicha (k voprosu o sfragisticheskikh atributakh dokumentov vneshnei politiki Drevnei Rusi X v.)," *Vneshniaia politika Drevnei Rusi* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988).

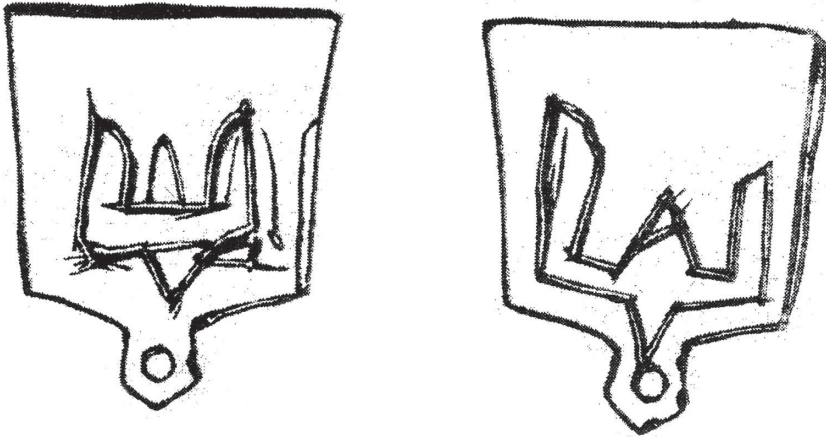


Figure 7 Sviatoslav-Vladimir Bone Pendant from Novgorod. Yard (*usad'ba*) "G" of the Troits Dig, layers dating to 950s-970s⁶⁴

belonging to Sviatoslav and the other a trident belonging to his son Vladimir [Fig. 7]. The former sign was "corrected" to make it Vladimir's by adding an extra "dent" to the middle of the bident, thereby making it into a trident, or Vladimir's insignia. It is believed that this "correction" was made after Sviatoslav died in 972 and thus Vladimir became full ruler of Novgorod. Prior to then, the pendant contained the bident of Sviatoslav, the titular ruler of the Kievan Rus' realm, on the one side, and the trident of Vladimir, the acting ruler in the Novgorodian lands, on the other. The pendant, hence, dates to 970-972 when Vladimir was sent to rule in Novgorod by Sviatoslav, but the change that was made dates to a period just after he became full ruler with Sviatoslav's death in 972. In this way, the pendant initially contained symbols of two Riurikid authoritative identities and later just one.⁶⁵

Another example of combined royal identities can be found on the trapezoidal pendant made of bronze that was discovered in a grave near Staraja Ladoga in the Novgorodian lands. It contains an image of Vladimir I's "trident" on its one side and Iaroslav the Wise's "trident" on the other

⁶⁴ Ianin, "Arkheologicheskie kommentarii k Russkoi Pravde," 149.

⁶⁵ Beletskii, "Podveski s izobrazheniem," 254-5.

[Fig. 8]. It has been convincingly argued that this pendant was issued to a native resident of Staraja Ladoga who acted as an administrator for Vladimir's son Iaroslav the Wise, appointed by the former to rule Novgorod and its lands, including Staraja Ladoga, from 1010-1015.⁶⁶ In its semantics, the symbolism on the pendant is analogous to the pendants from Pskov and Novgorod. It bears on its one side the symbol of the titular Grand Prince of Kiev – Vladimir – and on the other, the subordinate, but acting prince of the lands of Novgorod – Iaroslav. Similarly, the pendant from Pskov carries on it the symbols of Olga (key, and as we will see also the falcon and cross) and Sviatoslav (“bident”). Sviatoslav is the titular Grand Prince of Kiev, while Olga is the subordinate but acting ruler of the Rus' state.

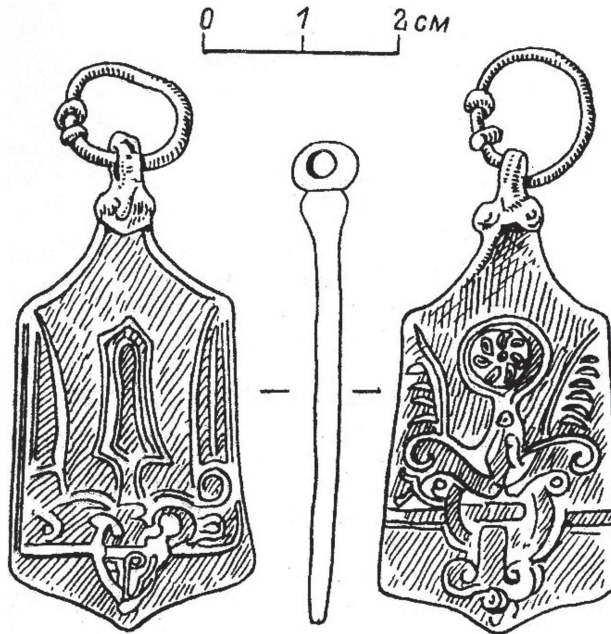


Figure 8 Trapezoidal Pendant from Staraja Ladoga Region

⁶⁶ V.P. Petrenko, *Pogrebal'nyi obriad naseleniia Severnoi Rusi VIII-X vv.: Sopki Severnogo Povolkhov'ia* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1994), p. 82, Fig. 43:7; Beletskii, "Podveska so znakom Riurikovichei," 30.

All three pendants serve as excellent parallels to one another and shed new light on the early Rus' political and administrative structures. The Pskov pendant, however, is the earliest one of such objects found and its appearance is very likely connected with Olga's well known administrative-fiscal reforms in the northern Rus' lands that she carried out a year or two after she became regent, as recorded in the *PVL sub annum* 947, and is very likely evidenced archeologically and numismatically. If this is so, then the lower chronology of the pendant in question can be further readjusted from ca. 945 to post-ca. 947, at the earliest.⁶⁷ This dating fully corresponds to the first appearance of the "Christian Falcon" imitation dirhams (dating to ca. 950) and the advent of the images found on the Pskov pendant (dating to the late 940s).

The "Christian Falcon"

1. *The Meaning of the Falcon*

The images of the bird and the cross on the coins and the pendant from Pskov are stylistically and semantically very similar to one another, suggesting that they were modeled from a common prototype [Figs. 2 and 9]. It should be observed that there are no parallels to these falcon images, with or without crosses over their heads, on any object from the Rus' lands, or anywhere else for that matter. Rispling observed in his study of the coins that the image of the falcon was executed with high precision, unlike the Kuffic text in the legends, indicating a total lack of familiarity with Arabic script on the part of the die-cutter.⁶⁸ Lindberger proposed that the die-cutter was of Byzantine origin, albeit with no particular reason indicated.⁶⁹ This may well be so. However, until a close examination by an art specialist is conducted on the image, the origin of the die-cutter will have to remain open (although, as said above, it is unlikely that the cutter was of Muslim background).

⁶⁷ Kovalev, "Circulation of Sāmānid Dirhams;" idem., "Olga Fiscal-Administrative Reforms in the Rus' Lands in the Late 940s and Its Impact on Trade Relations with the Baltic" (forthcoming).

⁶⁸ Rispling, "Coins With Crosses and Bird Heads," 78.

⁶⁹ Lindberger, "The Falcon, the Raven and the Dove," 70.

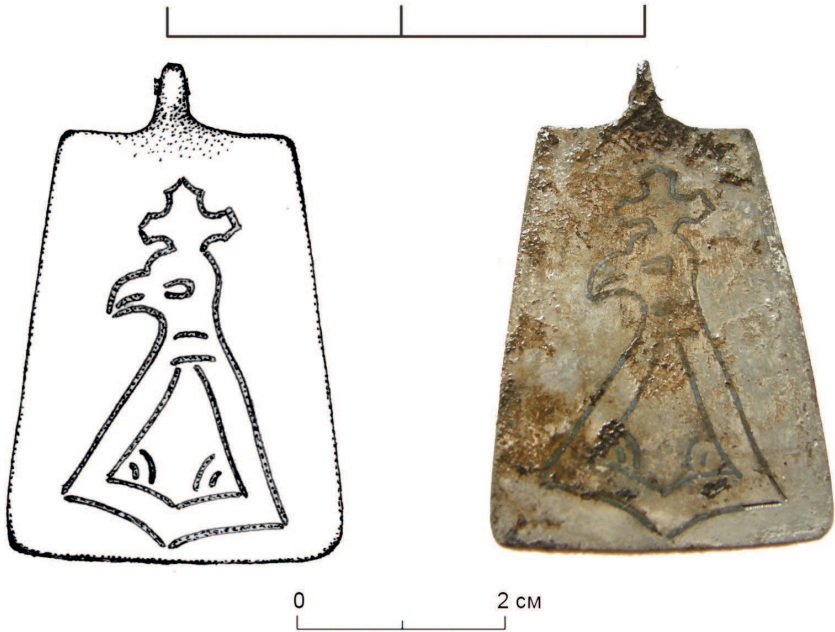


Figure 9 Trapezoidal Pendant from Pskov

As discussed above, there is no argument on identifying the bird with a falcon. Falconry and, by default through association, the falcon itself became very closely linked with the royal hunt and the ruling elites, not only in medieval Northern Europe, but across Eurasia in general.⁷⁰ Indeed, falconry was such a beloved preoccupation of the aristocracy in Europe by the High Middle Ages that the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (r. 1220–1250) wrote an entire opus dedicated to falconry – *The Art of Hunting With Birds* (*De arte venandi cum avibus*).⁷¹ Most probably having its origins in the pastoral nomadic societies of the Eurasian steppes, this sport-hunting entertainment involving falcons was carried to late

⁷⁰ T.T. Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 58–60, 68–9; R.S. Oggins, *The Kings and Their Hawks. Falconry in Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); J. Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk. The Art of Medieval Hunting* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 187–234.

⁷¹ Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, *The Art of Falconry*, tr. and ed. C.A. Wood and F.M. Fyfe (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1943).

Roman northwestern Europe from where it entered England by the early sixth century, as is made clear by the images of the bird on objects deposited in Suffolk burial of Sutton Hoo.⁷² Based on the finds of skeletal remains of falcons in graves beginning with the sixth century, falconry spread to eastern Scandinavia very rapidly and was well known there during the Viking Age, as is evidenced by archaeological, written, and pictorial evidence.⁷³ Not insignificantly, falcons appear mainly inside elite male burials and the overwhelming majority of them are found in the Uppland and Södermanland regions of east-central Sweden.⁷⁴

East-central Sweden where falconry was particularly prominent had very close contacts with the northwestern Rus' lands since the early Viking Age.⁷⁵ This may well then explain how and why this elite hunting practice entered northern Rus'. Falconry, or at least association between the falcon and the nobility, can be traced in the Rus' territories to the late ninth century. The bird, albeit usually in highly stylized form, was represented on various decorative metalwork objects such as sword scabbard chapes, pendants, and other items discovered in the Rus' lands (e.g., Staraja Ladoga, Riurikovo gorodishche, Gnezdovo, Timerevo, Sarskoe gorodishche) or regions that had especially close contact with northwestern Russia, such as east-central Sweden (e.g., Birka) and southeastern Baltic. Most of these objects have been found in graves belonging to the warrior elite class, or those who took part in the Rus' princely retinues.⁷⁶ In the following centuries, falconry continued to play a prominent role in Rus' society, as is made evident in the eleventh-twelfth centuries Rus' law codes (various editions

⁷² C. Hicks, "The Birds on the Sutton Hoo Purse," *Anglo-Saxon England* 15 (1986): 153-65.

⁷³ S. Sten, M. Vretemark, "Storgravsprojektet – osteologiska analyser av yngre järnålderns benrika brandgravar," *Formvannen* 83 (1988): 145-56; T. Tyrberg, "The Archaeological Record of Domesticated and Tame Birds in Sweden," *Acta Zoologica Cracoviensia* 45 (2002): 216-31; K. Jennbert, "The Mania of the Time. Falconry and Bird Broaches at Uppåkra and Beyond," *On the Road. Studies in Honor of Lars Larsson*, ed. B. Hårdh, K. Jennbert, D. Olausson [Acta Archaeologica Lundensia in 4º, №26] (Lund: Tryckår, 2007), 24-8; G. Akerström-Hougen, "Falconry as a Motif in Early Swedish Art," *Figura* 19 (1981): 264-93; Hicks, "The Birds on the Sutton Hoo Purse," 162-3.

⁷⁴ Sten, Vretemark, "Storgravsprojektet," 145-56.

⁷⁵ I. Jansson, "Wikinerzeitlicher orientalischer Import in Skandinavien," *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission* 69 [1988] (1989): 631.

⁷⁶ V.I. Kulakov, "Ptitsa-khishchnik i ptitsa-zhertva v simvolakh i emblemakh IX-XI vv.," *Sovetskaia arkhelogiia* 3 (1988): 106-17; idem., "Birds as Companions of Germanic Gods and Heroes," *Acta Archaeologica* 75 (2004): 184-187; E.Iu. Novikova, "Podveska s ptitsej iz

of the *Pravda Rus'kaia*) that established stiff fines for pilfering falcons, hawks, and other birds from snares.⁷⁷ Not surprisingly, falconry was also associated with the Rus' princes: in the "Testament" to his sons, Grand Prince of Kiev Vladimir Monomakh (d. 1125), an avid hunter, speaks of his personal care for his hawks and falcons.⁷⁸ There is also some archaeological evidence and a birch-bark text that provides evidence of hawking-falconry in medieval Novgorod.⁷⁹

Based on the pervasive imagery of falcons found on objects associated with the Rus' warrior elite culture spoken of above, B. Ambrosiani has proposed that this bird may have somehow been tied to the Frigg/Freyja cult amongst the Rus'. He further suggests that this goddess may have been the patron female deity of the earliest Rus' rulers.⁸⁰ These suppositions are quite compelling. Indeed, many ruling dynasties in Northern Europe of the day adopted major Nordic gods as their patron deities and came to claim these divinities as the progenitors of their dynasties and justified their sacral kingship based on these divine connections. The early Anglo-Saxon house of Kent associated itself with Woden/Óðinn.⁸¹ Other Old English royal genealogies are derived from Ingui, Inguinus, and Inguet – in all

Vladimirkikh kurganov. Opyt atrebutsii," *Srednevekovye drevnosti Vostochnoi Evropy* (Moscow: Gos. Istoricheskii Muzei, 1993), 46-56; N.V. Eniosova, "Azhurnye nakonechniki nozhen mechei X-XI vv. na territorii Vostochnoi Evropy," *Istoriia i evoliutsiia drevnikh veshchei* (Moscow: Izd-vo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1994); Lindberger, "The Falcon, the Raven and the Dove," 29-54; B. Ambrosiani, "The Birka Falcon" in *Eastern Connections Part One*, 11-27; C. Hedenstierna-Jonson, "Rus', Varangians and Birka Warriors" in *The Birka Warrior. The Material Culture of a Martian Society* [Theses and Papers in Scientific Archaeology 8] (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2006), III, 12-3.

⁷⁷ *The Laws of Rus'*, arts. 37, p. 18; arts. 80-1, p. 29.

⁷⁸ *Lavrent'evskaia letopis' i suzdal'skaia letopis' po akademicheskomu spisku* [*Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*, vol. 1] (Moscow: Nauka, 1964), 251.

⁷⁹ S. Hamilton-Dyer, "The Bird Resources of Medieval Novgorod, Russia," *Acta Zoologica Cracoviensia* 45 (2002): 104-6. The birch-bark text (№54) dates to the 1310s-1330s and lists hawks as items of tribute or taxes owed by certain individuals; see A.A. Zaluzniak, *Drevnenovgorodskii dialect* (Moscow: Shkola/ "Iazyki Russkoi Kul'tury," 2004), 565. It should also be noted that falcons were on occasion exported out of Novgorod westwards in the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries; see A.L. Khoroshkevich, *Torgovlia Velikogo Novgoroda v XIV-XV vekakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1963), 158-9.

⁸⁰ Ambrosiani, "The Birka Falcon," *Eastern Connections Part One*, 21.

⁸¹ C. Behr, "Do Bracteates Identify Influential Women in Early Medieval Kingdoms?" *Kingdoms and Regionality. Transactions from the 49th Sachsensymposium 1998 in Uppsala* (Stockholm: Archaeological Research Laboratory, 2001), 95-101; idem., "The Origins of Kingship in Early Medieval Kent," *Early Medieval Europe* 9, no. 1 (2000): 25-52.

cases identifiable as Yngvi-Freyr.⁸² Swedish kings came to be known by the title of Yngvi after Yngvi-Freyr, hence the Swedish Ynglingar dynasty.⁸³ The kings of Norway also connected their descent from Yngvi-Freyr.⁸⁴ More interesting for our purposes is the Danish Skilfingar dynasty that derived its origins from Skjálfr-Freyja.⁸⁵ In light of this, it would be somewhat strange if the Rus' rulers did not choose a major Norse divinity as their patron deity.

As it was alluded to above in relation to the pendant from Pskov, the image of the key may link Olga with Freyja. But, as will be proposed below, there is much more evidence that not only makes this association closer, but also explains why and how the bird and the goddess came to be so closely coupled with the Rus' princess. To do so, it is first necessary to examine the sources that speak of Freyja, and her association with the image of the falcon, in particular.

First, the *Drymskviða* and *Skáldsaparmál* both relate that the goddess Freyja had a feather cloak (*fjaðrhamr/valshamr*) in the shape of a falcon or made of falcon feathers, which she lent the god Loki to fly to Giantland.⁸⁶ As with her many other characteristics, Freyja shares the attribute of the falcon outfit with Frigg: the mischievous Loki steals the falcon outfit from Frigg and for bemusement flies in it to Giantland, according to the *Skáldsaparmál*.⁸⁷

Aside from the written accounts, visual evidence also links Freyja with the falcon. For instance, the miniature gold figurine of a female clad in what appears to be a cloak made of feathers (discovered near Trønninge, Holbæk, Denmark) has been interpreted as Freyja.⁸⁸ A very similar amulet-figurine, made of silver and gilded in gold, was discovered in 1867 in

⁸² de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2, 167. Also see Näsström, *Freyja*, 31.

⁸³ *Ynglinga saga* in Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, ch. 10, pp. 7–8. Also see Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 191; Näsström, *Freyja*, 52–3.

⁸⁴ Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 192–3; O. Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring. Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society* [Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis] (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2002).

⁸⁵ Näsström, *Freyja*, 67, 125–8, 167.

⁸⁶ *Drymskviða*, *The Poetic Edda*, sts. 3, 5, 9, pp. 97–8; *Skáldsaparmál*, p. 82, ch. 1; also see Snorri's note on the kenning that can be made by evoking "the falcon's feather cloak" to refer to Freyja in his "Poetic References From Skáldsaparmál," p. 111.

⁸⁷ *Skáldsaparmál*, p. 90, ch. 4.

⁸⁸ M.B. Mackeprang, "Menschendarstellungen aus der Eisenzeit Dänemarks," *Acta Archaeologica* 6 (1935): p. 242, Figs. 16–8; H.R.E. Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia* (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1967), pp. 95, 198, Fig. 39.

Gnezdovo inside a coin-treasure hoard dating to the mid-tenth century.⁸⁹ Likewise, perhaps one of the two episodes from Norse mythology mentioned above is depicted in a series of broaches that have been unearthed by archaeologists in Uppåkra, near Lund in southernmost Sweden. In them one finds male faces (Loki?) wrapped inside a falcon [Fig. 10]. Such falcon broaches – with and without male faces – were discovered in female graves.⁹⁰ It has been suggested that the women owners of these broaches were involved in fowling or that the image of the falcon was their high status symbol. It is possible that both of these interpretations are correct.⁹¹

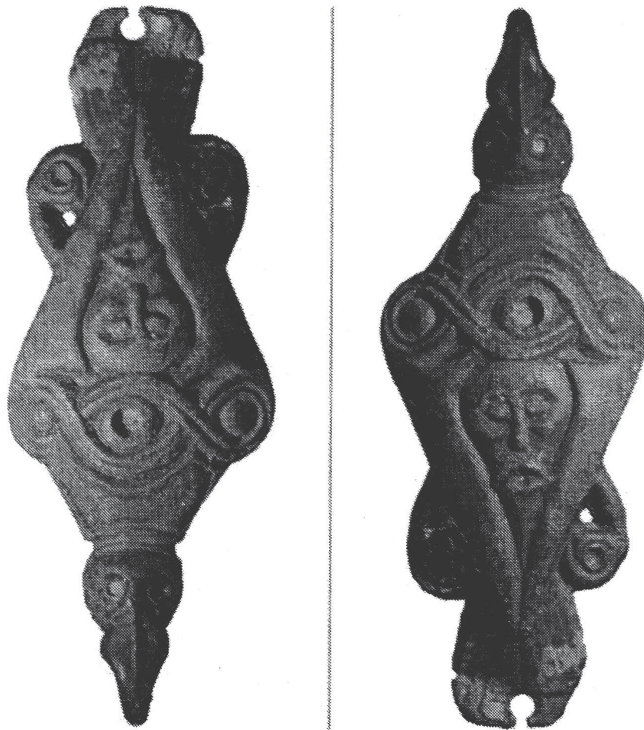


Figure 10 Falcon Broach from Uppåkra⁹²

⁸⁹ A.V. Plokhov, "Unikal'naia liteinaia forma iz Staroi Ladogi," *Arkheologicheskie vesti* 11 (2004): Fig. 10:3, pp. 211-212.

⁹⁰ Jennbert, "The Mania of the Time," 24-8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 27-8.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Fig. 4, p. 27.

However, it is just as possible that these women had a close association/relationship with Freyja and her cult, and the falcon served not only as the goddess's symbol but also as their own – in life and death. High social status, falconry, and worship of Freyja are not at all mutually exclusive. In fact, they complement one another.

Another possible connection between Freyja, the bird, and women – particularly elite females – can be found on the well-known Oseberg tapestry. The tapestry was deposited in a lavish ship-burial of two women dating to the first half of the ninth century in southern Norway. Based on the finds of four looms, various spinning and weaving instruments, embroidered wall hangings, corn, apples, nuts, a wagon, and other artifacts, it has been strongly argued that the burial belonged to a high priestess of Frigg/Freyja. Indeed, all of these objects connect with the cult of fertility and the goddesses. Alternatively, but not excluding the former possibility, the burial was of a queen-high priestess of Frigg/Freyja.⁹³ What is of particular interest is that amongst the many images of people and other beings depicted on the embroidered tapestry found in the burial there are female figures, standing prominently larger above others, with bird heads. It has been suggested that these figures may be connected with Freyja's falcon image.⁹⁴ In light of what is known about the nature of the burial, such a suggestion does not seem to be unreasonable.

Although a rather tenuous suggestion, it is possible that some of the images of falcons found on rune-stones with scenes of falconers can also be linked with a divinity – Freyja in particular – and the aristocratic hunt. On the Alstad rune-stone from Norway (ca. 1000), one finds a “scaffold”-like scene of animals starting with a huge and quite stylized falcon above all, while below there appears a mounted horseman with a falcon on his wrist and two accompanying dogs. Below them, there is a horse and further down is another mounted horseman.⁹⁵ The large falcon atop of the scene may belong to the mounted horseman depicted below. But, in context of its style and placement on the stone, it seems unique to all of the other much more realistic pictures found below; and, surely, it is very different in all features

⁹³ Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 106–113; idem., *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe. Early Celtic and Scandinavian Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 117–8; A.S. Ingstad, A.E. Christensen, B. Myhre, eds., *Oseberg-dronningens Grav: vår arkeologiske nasjonalskatt i nytt lys* (Oslo: Schibsted, 1992), 166.

⁹⁴ Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 110.

⁹⁵ Akerström-Hougen, “Falconry as a Motif,” 277, 283.

from the other falcon perched on the wrist. It can be suggested that the falcon placed atop was “otherworldly” and represented a divine leader of the hunt.

The above suggestion can be supported with another, perhaps, even more telling rune-stone from Böksta (U855), Uppland, Sweden (ca. 1050), that contains two scenes. The main scene, enclosed inside a ribbon with a runic inscription, depicts a male (quite possibly Óðinn) on horseback hunting with a spear, two dogs at the side (Óðinn’s two wolves?), and his falcon is attacking the head of a large prey animal (elk or deer). To the left below, there is also a representation of a human figure on skis shooting an arrow in the general direction of the prey. The second scene, outside of the band and towards the right of the first scene, depicts another, much larger falcon hovering over the hunter as if to show him the location of the prey.⁹⁶ The human figure on skis has been interpreted as the Norse god Ullr who was associated with archery, hunting, and skis.⁹⁷ But, there is a obvious disconnect in the two hunting scenes, since, as G. Akerström-Hougen observed, falconry is a summer-time activity and the person on skis does not seem to fit into the “picture.”⁹⁸ However, her suggestion that the artist simply filled in space with the hunter-skier is not at all convincing: it is probably better explained as an image of a divinity of the hunt, administering or assisting the hunter in his endeavor.⁹⁹ The large falcon in question can likewise be interpreted as an “otherworldly” or divine bird that leads the hunt: it could hardly have belonged to the mounted hunter, since only one bird at a time is used in falconry, and, for obvious reasons, bow and arrow are not used in falconry, and hence, cannot belong to the god Ullr. Consequently, the bird may well be a divinity and, perhaps, the goddess Freyja herself. The “Great Goddess,” which Freyja represents in many of her fundamental functions and characteristics, was closely associated with the so-called “Mistress of

⁹⁶ Ibid., 276–7, 286–7.

⁹⁷ L. Silén, “Några reflektioner angående bilderna på Balingsta-stenen i Uppland,” *Formvännen* 78 (1983): 88–91.

⁹⁸ Akerström-Hougen, “Falconry as a Motif,” 286.

⁹⁹ It should be noted that Davidson suggests that it was Skaði who came closest in Old Norse mythology to fulfilling the role of the “Mistress of the Animals/Hunt;” *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 24. Indeed, the goddess is associated with hunting using bow and arrows and skies. She is also clearly connected to the Vanir divinities in mythology, e.g., her marriage to Njörðr or Freyja’s father, but her association with Freyja are much more moot. For more on Skaði, see Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 268–270.

the Animals/Hunt.”¹⁰⁰ The latter was not only known to have had the ability to control animals in mythology through her spells, but also, literally, she held the key of power over their behavior, as is evidenced by references to her possession of keys to animals in folklore as well as the figurine of a goddess holding a latchlifter from Winchester, England, which has been interpreted as a “Milk Goddess.”¹⁰¹ Freyja may well have taken on some of the mythological attributes connected with the “Mistress of the Animals/Hunt.”¹⁰²

It must be stressed that no Nordic divinity other than Freyja/Frigg is associated with the falcon. How the falcon, a bird carrying with it connotations of predatory behavior and power, came to be tied to Freyja needs to be examined. First, as the falcon was associated with the nobility, according to Snorri, “Freyja, along with Frigg, is the most noble” of the goddesses, and

¹⁰⁰ For the discussion of Freyja as the “Great Northern Goddess,” see Näsström, *Freyja*, 20–44. For Freyja as “Mistress of the Animals/Hunt,” see Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 13–51.

¹⁰¹ Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 24, 34–5; idem., “Milk and the Northern Goddess,” *The Concept of the Goddess*, pp. 93–7, Fig. 7.5.

¹⁰² As a fertility goddess, Freyja’s connection with a bird should not be surprising. Since the Neolithic, goddesses of fertility in southeastern Europe, from where the “Agricultural Revolution” spread to the rest of the continent, were represented in the form of birds. Initially, these birds were waterfowl like ducks, herons, and cranes, since they were connected with bringing moisture to earth and crops. But, over the course of time, some evolved into other types of birds. Athena, for instance, connected with agriculture as well as the “Mistress of the Hunt,” was initially symbolized by a sea-eagle, sea-crow, and gull, but eventually came to be associated with the swallow, vulture, dove, and then the owl, as she is best known for from Hellenic authors such as Aristophanes as well as the Athenian silver drachm coins that carry images of both the goddess and the bird, or just the bird. The terminal link with the owl – symbol of wisdom – can be explained by Athena’s mythological preoccupation with cloth-production and particularly with spinning flax and wool thread, i.e., spinning the thread of human life-fate, hence her association with prophesy and wisdom; see M. Gimbutas, *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe. Myths and Cult Images, 6500-3500 BC* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 132–150. The association of the owl with Athena has been dated to the pre-Indo-European Neolithic era; see, M. Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 158. Also see M.E. Voyatzis, “From Athena to Zeus. An A-Z Guide to the Origins of Greek Goddesses” in *Ancient Goddesses. The Myths and the Evidence*. eds. L. Goodison and C. Morris (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 144–145; M. Détienné, “The Sea-Crow,” *Myth, Religion and Society*, ed. R.L. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 16–42. Since the falcon does not have any close association with water or fertility, as does not Athena’s owl, it is possible that Freyja had some other bird attached to her identity before the falcon. But, probably not

then again, “Freyja is the most splendid of the goddesses.”¹⁰³ In much the same way, in the human realm, Freyja was perceived as the ideal noble female who possessed such qualities to be emulated by aristocratic women as inciting their male relatives to protect their family and maintain honor.¹⁰⁴ The falcon and Freyja, thus, were both linked with the aristocracy within the realm of the divinities as well as on earth amongst humans. Falcon, being a predatory bird that has few natural predators stood at the apex of the animal world “food chain,” like the human ruling elite and, hence, it would be natural that the aristocracy would come to associate itself with this bird.

Second, let us dispel any possible assumptions that the image of a bird of prey has to be necessarily a male symbol. The reality is that in falconry it was the female, not the male, bird that was preferred by the hunter. The reason for this is that the female is more courageous, significantly larger, and, consequently, more able to hunt larger prey than the male. Indeed, in falconry, the term “falcon” refers to the female bird, not the male, which is called *tiercels* (Latin *tertius*, meaning “third”), most probably derived from the common belief that the male was one-third smaller.¹⁰⁵ That falconers, in fact, favored female birds is supported in the archaeological records of Vendel and Viking-age graves in Sweden.¹⁰⁶ In light of the preference for female falcons due to their power and mastery of the hunt, it is not difficult to see how the bird would become associated with the most powerful and noblest goddess of them all, Freyja.

Third, the falcon symbolizes more than just noble female power and authority: it is also its primary role as guardian of the nest and the nurturing role as mother to its young that has to be taken into account. Female

coincidentally, Athena’s owl and Freyja’s falcon share two key common features, besides being birds: both are predators and both have extraordinary vision, one at night (essential in weaving) and the other during the day. Both goddesses also share the feature of being protective/shielding divinities, like their predatory bird symbols (see below). Also, both goddesses are associated with wisdom that derives from vision of the future, symbolized by their birds.

¹⁰³) *Skáldsaparmál*, p. 35, ch. 24; p. 42, ch. 35.

¹⁰⁴) Näsström, *Freyja*, 69–72.

¹⁰⁵) Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, *The Art of Falconry*, 108; Oggins, *The Kings and Their Hawks*, 12.

¹⁰⁶) Tyrberg, “The Archaeological Record,” 230.

falcons are known for their solitary role in feeding the broods, teaching them to feed, fly, and hunt.¹⁰⁷ In their nature, thus, the female falcon very much resembles Freyja/Frigg, who is often left at home alone by her husband Óðr/Óðinn, and also explains why Snorri Sturluson referred to Freyja as “the household deity of the Vanir” gods.¹⁰⁸ Falcon’s natural behavior also corresponds to one of Freyja’s multiple functions noted above in relation to her other name Sýr – “to protect/shield.” Thus, the falcon played dual roles, but both were intimately interconnected – one of a passive guardian and, at the same time, an active predatory protector.

In this way, both the falcon and Freyja were considered the most noble of female beings – one in the animal realm and the other in the divine. Hence, it is understandable why aristocratic and powerful women like Olga would choose to associate themselves with Freyja and her falcon symbol. Much has already been said concerning Olga’s use of the key as a symbol of her own custodial power over the realm when she became acting regent in ca. 945. All that needs to be underscored presently is that by choosing the falcon as her other emblem, Olga once again turned to Freyja’s symbolism. Indeed, the key and the falcon images compliment one another. In this way, the falcon represented on the Pskov pendant and on the coins is Olga’s symbol of her female aristocratic status, power, and authority in the Rus’ lands. Based on the date of the “Christian Falcon” coin issues and the estimated lower chronology for the pendant (ca. 947), Olga’s use of the falcon as her symbol can be dated to ca. 950 at the latest.

Freyja, Her *Vǫlur*, and Olga the “Wise”

Sources permit us to go even further in associating Olga with Freyja and, indeed, they lead to the conclusion that Freyja and her cult was Olga’s pre-Christian choice of religious affiliation. While fulfilling the functions of the goddess of prosperity-fertility, on the one hand, and battle-protection (“shielding”), on the other, Freyja also had a third function – that of chief priestess, who determined fate through prophesy.¹⁰⁹ This last function had

¹⁰⁷ Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, *The Art of Falconry*, 118–119.

¹⁰⁸ *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, pp. 42–43, ch. 35, p. 111.

¹⁰⁹ For the discussion of Freyja’s three principal and complex functions, see Näsström, “Freyja: The Trivalent Goddess,” 57–73; *Freyja*, 69–77.

much to do with her being a giver of prosperity, since fate determined the outcome of wealth in the future, be it agricultural or some other. In this capacity, like the other classic divinities that were originally responsible for fate (Greek Athena as well as Etruscan and later Roman Minerva), Freyja/Frigg was associated with weaving, flax, and the distaff, i.e., the spinning of the thread/web of life-fate and the consequential association with possessing special or numinous knowledge.¹¹⁰ Indeed, some of the earliest images of Freyja show her with a distaff.¹¹¹

Closely related to the function of spinning, fate, and numinous knowledge/wisdom was Freyja's one other key attribute – *seiðr*.¹¹² In fact, according to Nordic mythology Freyja taught the Æsir gods, Óðinn in particular, the art of *seiðr* at the time of the union of the Æsir and Vanir gods.¹¹³ *Seiðr* can best be understood as a kind of magic that affords the ability to foresee the future.¹¹⁴ Because of her knowledge of *seiðr*, Freyja was the prophetess for the gods in Ásgarðr. But on earth or Miðgarðr, it was the *vǫlva* (pl. *vǫlur*), her priestesses, who could simulate Freyja's prophetic function, although the distinction between the divinity and her priestesses could become quite blurred, if not fully identical. This is well illustrated in the *Sörla þáttur* where Freyja disguises herself as a *vǫlva* by the name of Göndul and is then

¹¹⁰ Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 99-124, 145-147; Näsström, *Freyja*, 66-67, 121ff; E.H. Højgård, "Spinnesiden – ett uttryck bara för flittige hender?" *Viking* 53 (1990), 102-116. For the Greco-Roman goddesses, see below.

¹¹¹ Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, pp. 115-116, Fig. 21; idem., *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 131-132.

¹¹² E. Heide, "Spinning *seiðr*" in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, ed. A. Andrén, K. Jennbert et al (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 164-170.

¹¹³ *Ynglinga saga* in Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, ch. 4, p. 3. Also see Näsström, *Freyja*, 46-47, 65-69.

¹¹⁴ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 117ff; Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 265-266; N.S. Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2002). It should be noted that while *seiðr* was known to have been practiced by both women and men in Norse societies, it was deemed more appropriate for women and even Óðinn who was skilled in it was shamed in mythological tales for knowing and using *seiðr*. In other words, *seiðr* was mostly relegated to women, i.e., was gendered; DeBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 122-138. Heide ("Spinning *seiðr*," 167-168) has suggested that this can be explained by the possible sexual overtones that are associated with the practice.

solicited for numinous knowledge by an earthly king.¹¹⁵ Based on the written evidence as well as the archaeological discoveries of graves belonging to *vǫlur* – in all cases associated with very wealthy and distinguished women – the cult was very widespread and much revered in Viking-age Scandinavia.¹¹⁶

Written and archaeological sources connect the cult of the *vǫlur* and the *vǫlur* themselves with birds and their sacrifice. For one, excavations of *vǫlur* graves have revealed that they were often buried with birds. Thus, in one tenth-century grave (the richest) at the Fyrkat cemetery in Denmark, identified as belonging to a *vǫlva*, a wooden chest filled with the remains of bones of birds and small animals was placed at the feet of the deceased female.¹¹⁷ Also, aside from the female figures with bird heads represented on the Oseberg tapestry noted above, the boat grave of the two women (a least one of whom is identified as a *vǫlva*/priestess) also contained a pile of down and feathers, inside of which were placed cannabis seeds (most likely used in shamanic ritual).¹¹⁸ But, the most compelling evidence comes from the written records. *Erik the Red Saga* relates that during her prophetic vision ceremony in Greenland in ca. 1000, a *vǫlva* sat on a special high-seat on which a pillow was placed and that this pillow had to be stuffed with hen's feathers.¹¹⁹ In his famous eyewitness account of 921/22, Ibn Falān observed how a rooster and hens were sacrificed during the funeral of a Rus' chief in the middle Volga area, administered by an old woman/

¹¹⁵ *Flateyjarbók, En samling af Norske Konge-saegar*, vol. I (Christiana: P.T. Malling, 1860), 279, 378ff.

¹¹⁶ Price, *The Viking Way*; D. Harrison, K. Svensson, *Vikingaliv* (Värnamo: Natur och Kultur, 2007), 55-74; Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 105, 133, 162. Also see G. Adolfsson, I. Lundström, *Den starka kvinnan. Från völva till häxa* [Museiarkeologi 6] (Borås: Statens historiska museum, 1993). For a discussion of priestesses-prophetesses in early Germanic, pre-Viking society, see Näsström, *Freyja*, 32.

¹¹⁷ Grave 4 in the "Circular Enclosure" in E. Roesdahl, *Fyrkat en jysk vikingeborg: II. Oldsagerne og gravpladsen* (Copenhagen: Det kgl. nordiske Oldskriftselskab, 1977), 83-104.

¹¹⁸ J. Holmboe, "Nytteplanter og ugræs i Oseberfundet" in *Osebergfundet*, vol. V, eds. A.W. Brøgger, H. Shetelig (Oslo: Distribuert ved Universitets oldsaksamling, 1927), 32-35. For interpretation of the burial as belonging to a *vǫlva*, see Ingstad, Christensen, Myhre, eds., *Osebergdronningens Grav*, 240ff.

¹¹⁹ *Erik the Red and other Icelandic Sagas*, tr. G. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 134.

priestess whom he called the “Angel of Death.”¹²⁰ The sacrifice of roosters by the Rus’ is also reported in contemporary Byzantine sources.¹²¹ Although they do not inform who specifically administered the rituals, it is safe to assume that they were performed by the *vplur*. These priestesses generally lived a wandering lifestyle and were often recruited by Viking chiefs and kings to follow them on their journeys as well as stay at their court for a period of time when needed.¹²²

In the Danish *Tale of Hadding* recounted by Saxo Grammaticus (d. 1220), there is a reference to the sacrifice of a cock by an unknown woman (most probably a *vplva*), which, in turn, is resurrected, permitting the hero to leave the “underworld.”¹²³ Thuetmar of Merseburg (d. 1018) noted that the Danes sacrificed roosters (in lieu of falcons – *sic!*) among other animals and people every nine years at Lejre, the focal spot of royal authority on Sjælland. He adds that the Danes “... were convinced that these would do service for them with those who dwell beneath the earth and ensure their forgiveness for any misdeeds.”¹²⁴ Hence, it is clear that these sacrifices were connected with the cult of the dead. This sacrificial feast, as the one described by Adam of Bremen (writing in ca. 1075–1080) that took place in

¹²⁰ Ibn Falān, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey To Russia: A Tenth Century Traveler From Baghdad to the Volga River*, tr. R. Frye (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2006), 68.

¹²¹ Leo the Deacon directly states that the Rus’ sacrificed roosters (as well as women, men, and children it may be added) in connection with funerary rites, while Constantine Porphyrogenitus supplies enough information that leads to the same conclusion. See *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, tr. A.-M. Talbot and D.F. Sullivan [Dumbarton Oaks Studies 41] (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2005), X.6, p. 193. Also see Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, vol. 1, tr. R.J.H. Jenkins, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1967), ch. 9, p. 61. It should be noted that Constantine Porphyrogenitus does not directly state that the Rus’ sacrificed in connection with funerary rites. But, this can be gathered because the place where they carried out the ritual – the Island of St. George – was the first stop they made after their highly dangerous journey along the lower Dnepr and its cataracts. Constantine makes it clear that up to that point they were constantly under threat of attack from the Pechenegs, who, no doubt, killed some of the Rus’ (it was also there where they killed Sviatoslav in 972).

¹²² Harrison, Svensson, *Vikingaliv*, 74; G. Steinsland, P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *Människor och makter i vikingarnas värld* (Stockholm: Ordfront, 1998), 80–82.

¹²³ Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, vol. 1, 31; Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 215; Näsström, *Freyja*, 130–131.

¹²⁴ *Ottonian Germany. The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, tr. D.A. Warner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 80.

Uppsala later that century,¹²⁵ were all connected with the Vanir deities, such as Freyja, fertility rites, and the assertion of royal power.¹²⁶

The rooster at the center of sacrifice in all of the sources mentioned above should be understood as the Norse mythological cock named Salgofnir, known in the *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II as one who awakens Óðinn's warriors in Valhalla to their daily combat.¹²⁷ The *Vǫluspá* or “*Vǫlva's* Prophecy” (the *vǫlva* here named Gullveig/Heiðr is commonly understood as Freyja herself¹²⁸) speaks of three roosters that crow to announce the coming of the end of the world – Ragnarøk. One of them, named Gullinkambi also awakens Óðinn's warriors to fight in the “Final Battle,” and, thus, the two birds (Salgofnir and Gullinkambi) are the same mythological being, in both cases connected with the underworld and the life-death-rebirth cycle.¹²⁹

Naturally, the rooster is associated with fertility-sexuality (cock-penis association is an ancient one across Europe), sunrise and a new day, life-luck, ritual purification (e.g., when it crows in the morning), and in folklore and mythology is often connected with the sun.¹³⁰ The rooster thus represents resurrection and new life or the life-death-rebirth cycle. This then may well explain not only why the individual buried in chamber grave №6 in Pskov was interned with a rooster, but also shed light on why it was placed near his head, i.e., to awaken him to rise up again. But, the grave from Pskov with the rooster is not unique for the Rus' lands. Chickens and roosters are the most commonly found birds in Viking-age Rus' cemeteries dating to the late ninth-early eleventh centuries. Indeed, they occur as sacrifices (not connected with ritual funerary meals/feasts) in some half of the

¹²⁵ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, tr. F.J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, reprint 2002), XXVI-XXVII, pp. 207-208.

¹²⁶ Näsström, *Freyja*, 106-108ff.

¹²⁷ *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II, *The Poetic Edda*, st. 49, p. 140.

¹²⁸ See, for instance, Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 127; Grundy, “Freyja and Frigg,” 62; Näsström, *Freyja*, 64.

¹²⁹ *Vǫluspá*, *The Poetic Edda*, sts. 42-43, p. 9. Cf. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 215, 273.

¹³⁰ W.F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight. Magic in Russia* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 109; L.J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Beliefs* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 40, 42, 49, 52; A.N. Afanas'ev, *Drevo zhizni* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1983), 129; idem., A.N. Afanas'ev, *Poeticheskie vozzreniia slavian na prirodu*, vol. I (Moscow, 1865), 467, 468, 518-24; N.N. Veletskaja, *Simvoly slavianskogo iazychestva* (Moscow: Veche, 2009), 139-40.

graves at such sites as Gnezdovo, Timerevo, Shestovitsy, and Chernigov cemeteries.¹³¹ What is also interesting to note is that these birds were placed not only in graves that are associated with Nordic ethnic elements but also with Slavic.¹³² Deposit of these birds, in other words, is not necessarily an “ethnic marker.” As will be discussed below, the Slavs had a similar pagan association between hens and roosters and the life-death-rebirth cycle.

Lastly, it would also be good to recall the connection between the agricultural calendar festivals, and the autumn harvest in particular, and sacrifice brought to the so-called “Spirit of the Corn” divinity, known in many agricultural societies across the world. In light of what was said about the symbolism of the rooster-hen, it is not surprising that as late as the nineteenth century in Europe these domestic birds or their symbolic equivalents (e.g., effigies) were sacrificed during agricultural festivals to this fertility goddess, who would be the equivalent of Freyja of early medieval times. Likewise, it is not surprising that women played a key, if not the sole, role in performing some of the rituals associated with these festivals, often including carrying out the sacrifice itself.¹³³ In light of this, it would seem natural to conclude that in the time of the Viking Age it was the *vǫlur* or other priestesses associated with the Freyja cult who would have been responsible for administering these agricultural and birth-death-rebirth cycle rites.

Overall, the *vǫlva* cult and the priestesses themselves were clearly associated with birds and their sacrifice, particularly roosters and hens. These sacrifices were carried out in context of the rites of passage from this world into the next, or the birth-death-rebirth cycle. *Vǫlur*'s role in such rituals should not be surprising, since they represented the goddess Freyja on earth, who functioned as a fertility deity and was as well associated with death by harboring half of the slain in her hall and palace in Ásgarðr. But, there is another dimension to the association of birds with Freyja and *vǫlva* that needs to be brought into the discussion.

¹³¹ D.I. Blifel'd, “Drevnerusskii mogil'nik v Chernigove,” *Arkheologia* 18 (1965): 105-138; idem., *Davnoruski pamiatnik Shestovitsy* (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1977), 23-27; Iu.E. Zharnov, “Zhivotnye v pogrebal'nom obriade kurganov perioda stanovleniia Drevnerusskogo gosudarstva,” *Sovetskaia arkhologiia* 2 (1991): 84-85.

¹³² Zharnov, “Zhivotnye v pogrebal'nom obriade,” 80-85.

¹³³ For the classic work on the issue of sacrifice in connection with the “Spirit of the Corn” Goddess and autumn harvests (including examples of hen-rooster sacrifice), see Book V of J.G. Frazer, *The New Golden Bough. A New Abridgement of the Classic Work*, ed. T.H. Gaster

Erik the Red Saga provides invaluable details on the function of the *vǫlva* and the nature of Freyja herself. Aside from noting *vǫlva*'s use of a pillow stuffed with hen feathers when she sat on her special high-seat, it describes her attire, various ritual objects she bore such as her staff (representing a distaff used in weaving), and the ceremony she performed. Other sagas that speak of *vǫlur* corroborate many of these details, leading historians of Nordic religion to conclude that the *vǫlva* had much in common with a shaman priestess performing classic shamanic rites.¹³⁴ To attain the visions and insight into the future, it was required that the *vǫlva*, like her chief priestess Freyja, traveled in spirit into the “other world.” To do so, as H.R.E. Davidson put it so well in regard to Freyja, she took “... on a bird-form, which meant that she could journey far in some shape other than human. As goddess of the Vanir, the prosperity of the community and marriage of young people were within her province, and these were precisely the subjects on which the *vǫlva* used to be consulted.”¹³⁵ This then further elucidates on the connection of the goddess and her *vǫlur* with birds as well as sheds much light on the origins of their prophetic visions and wisdom or numinous knowledge that it brings.¹³⁶ All that can be added is the obvious other feature of falcon's natural attributes – extraordinary eyesight, which may well have added to its connection with the “seeress” divinity and her priestesses.

In context of the story of Vladimir's conversion to Christianity in 988/89, the author of the *PVL* has Vladimir's boyars call Olga “wiser than all others.”¹³⁷ While the chronicler was clearly speaking of Olga in light of her conversion to Christianity and her vision of a Christian Rus' land, there is little doubt that Olga's wisdom also had other meanings to the author and others

(New York: Criterion Books, 1959), 303-431 and Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 69ff. Also see below for more examples in connection with the Slavic Mokosh divinity.

¹³⁴) Price, *The Viking Way* and DeBois, *Nordic Religions*, 122-138; Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 117-119.

¹³⁵) Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 119.

¹³⁶) It would be amiss not to note that in sagas, birds, particularly birds of prey, were attributed with the powers of determining the fate or leading individuals to their destiny. Such is the case in the *Vǫlsunga saga* where Sigurðr is led by his hunting hawks to Brynhildr's window where the hero followed the bird and discovered her embroidering on a golden tapestry illustrating the deeds that Sigurðr accomplished; see, *Vǫlsunga saga/The Saga of the Volsungs*, tr. Ad. R.G. Finch (London: Neslon, 1965), ch. 25, p. 42. Also see p. 37 of the saga for more on Brynhildr and her prophetic powers and knowledge, as well as Näsström, *Freyja*, 113.

¹³⁷) *PVL*, vol. II, 834.

who knew something of the legends associated with her. This “wisdom” can be traced in the chronicler’s own words to her pre-conversion years in a number of ways, particularly in the riddles she posed to the Drevlianian in context of her famous revenge upon them for their murder of Igor.¹³⁸ The chronicler had the Byzantine emperor stricken with Olga so much, because she was so “fair and wise” and intelligent, that he wanted to marry her. But, once again, Olga outwitted the emperor through a cunning trick: she asked to be baptized and for him to be her godfather, hence the marriage could not take place on canonical grounds after her baptism.¹³⁹

Writing his *Saga of Olaf Tryggvason* sometime in the last two decades of the twelfth century in Iceland, Oddr Snorrason also had some recollection of Olga’s legendary “wisdom.” Indeed, he characterized her in quite a similar light as the Rus’ sources. While clearly confusing Olga for Vladimir I’s “aged” mother whom he named Allogia, he was obviously describing his grandmother Olga who was, according to him “... a very wise woman” and a “... great woman and a great queen ...,” as well as one who urged him to accept Christianity after she converted.¹⁴⁰ All of these characteristics and the name itself point to Allogia being Olga.¹⁴¹ But, above all, Oddr was clear that her main function at court was one of a prophetess and that “Things turned out much as she predicted.”¹⁴² Writing about Allogia/Olga, Oddr

¹³⁸ Ibid, vol. I, 334–77. For the interpretation of Olga’s words and actions as riddles, see D.S. Likhachev, V.P. Adrianova-Peretts, *Povest’ vremennykh let* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1996), text pp. 28–29 and commentary pp. 435–38.

¹³⁹ PVL, 386–95. The author of her sixteenth-century *vita* also made quite a few references to Olga’s wisdom in her pre-Christian life; see “Zhitie sviatyia blazhennyya velikia kniagini Ol’gi ...” in *Stepennaia kniga tsarskogo rodoslovia. Po drevneishim spiskam*, vol. I: *Zhitie sv. Kniagini Ol’gi. Stepeni I–X*, eds. N.N. Pokrovskii and G.D. Lenkhoff (Lenhoff) (Moscow: Iazyki slavianskikh kul’tur, 2007), 151–52.

¹⁴⁰ Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, tr. T. M. Andersson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), ch. 8, p. 47; ch. 13, p. 55.

¹⁴¹ The association between Allogia and Olga (it should not take too much linguistic skill and imagination to see the connections between the two names) is not a new one and was suggested already in the mid-nineteenth century and argued for thereafter; see *Saga Olafs konungs Tryggvasunar: Kong Olaf Tryggvesons saga forfattet paa latin henimod slutningen af det tolfte aarhundrede af Odd Snorrson*, ed. P.A. Munch (Christiana, 1853), 76; S.H. Cross, “La tradition islandaise de Saint Vladimir,” *Revue des etudes slaves* 11 (1931): 132–48; and, for more on the topic and literature, see T.N. Dzhakson, *Islandskie korolevskie sagi o Vostochnoi Evrope (s drevneishikh vremen do 1000 g.)*. *Teksty, perevod, kommentarii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), 186–187.

¹⁴² Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, ch. 6, p. 44.

noted that “It was their custom on the first evening of Yule to carry her on a chair to the king’s throne, and before the drinking began, the king asked his mother whether she could see any peril or threat looming over his realm...”¹⁴³ Striking here is the mention of the use of the chair by Olga, a fundamental “tool of trade” for a *vǫlva*, since during her visions she sat on a high-seat or some sort of an elevated platform as is indicated in *Erik the Red* and other sagas.¹⁴⁴ While it is unlikely that Oddr describe any specific historical events in his saga concerning Olga, it clear that he knew of some nuances of *vǫlur* rituals and that he came to associate them with Olga, whom he describes as a typical *vǫlva* or a priestess of Freyja. In this way, Olga came to be connected with wisdom and extraordinary visionary powers in the twelfth-century literary traditions at two opposite ends of Europe.

It has been convincingly argued that Olga’s “wisdom” derived out of the tradition of Germanic women using words as weapons in lieu of swords, axes, and spears that were reserved for males. Indeed, examples of women fighting with words are plentiful in the Norse and Anglo-Saxon sources.¹⁴⁵ Although this explanation sheds much light on why women used words to fight their battles, it does not explain the source of their wisdom and the power of credibility and legitimacy of their “wise” words. There may well be a religious dimension to their wisdom and prophecies. Let it be proposed that the answer may lay in their connection to the cult of Freyja and the wisdom associated with her due to the goddesses’ ability to see into the future.

It has been pointed out before that *vǫlur* fought with prophecies and their distaffs-wands were their virtual weapons. Their prophecies could be benign but, depending on the circumstances, the *vǫlur* could also introduce

¹⁴³) Ibid., ch. 6, p. 44.

¹⁴⁴) Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 118-119; Näsström, *Freyja*, 64-66; DeBois, *Nordic Religions*, 125-128. DeBois (p. 128) explains the tradition in the following manner: “Raised above the human community on a platform, the *seiðr* practitioner appears positioned to interact with both human and spirit worlds at the same time, acting as a point of convergence between natural and spiritual realms.” It should be noted that miniature chairs made of metal, mainly pendants-amulets, have been discovered in Scandinavia; they have been associated with the cult of the *vǫlur*; see Harrison, Svensson, *Vikingaliv*, fig. and discussion on p. 57. Others, however, have connected the chairs with Óðinn; see S.H. Fuglesang, “Viking and Medieval Amulets in Scandinavia,” *Fornvännen* 84 (1989): 16 with literature.

¹⁴⁵) F. Butler, “A Woman of Words: Pagan Ol’ga in the Mirror of Germanic Europe,” *Slavic Review* 63 (2004): 790-93 and notes 109-110 for references.

curses and, thus, modify fate.¹⁴⁶ There are some fine examples of the latter in the Norse sources.¹⁴⁷ But, *vǫlur* were not the only ones to have made connections with Freyja. Women, especially aristocratic females, in Germanic societies had personal-religious ties to Freyja through her cult or by virtue of their actions that associated them with the goddess, particularly weaving and fate.¹⁴⁸ They were known to use these connections with the goddess as tools or weapons to achieve their goals. Perhaps the best example of such a female is found in the semi-legendary account of Paul the Deacon's (d. ca. 790) *History of the Lombards*, as well as the earlier source that he used, *Origo Gentis Langobardorum* (ca. 670¹⁴⁹). In these works, there is a story of a queen of the Winniles/Lombards named Gambara and her two sons Ibor and Aio. Paul the Deacon describes Gambara as "a woman of the keenest ability and most prudent in counsel among her people, and they trusted not a little to her shrewdness in doubtful matters" and her sons as "in the bloom of youthful vigor," but still acted with the approval of their mother.¹⁵⁰ When threatened by the Vandals with the imposition of either tribute or war, the queen appealed to Frea (i.e., Frigg/Freyja) for help. In turn, the goddess provided Gambara with advice and then herself tricked her husband

¹⁴⁶ Price, *The Viking Way*; Harrison, Svensson, *Vikingaliv*, 55.

¹⁴⁷ For instance, *vǫlur* placed curses in context of their prophecies on heroes in the following: *Norma-Gests þátttr*, *Orms þátttr Stórolfssonar*, *Qrvar-Oddr saga*, and *Vatnsdóla saga*. See discussion in DeBois, *Nordic Religions*, 125–28.

¹⁴⁸ See, for instance, *Egil's Saga* (tr. H. Pállson and P. Edwards (London: Penguin, 1976), ch. 78, p. 203), which notes that after the death of her brother, Þorgerðr says "I have had no evening meal, nor will I do so until I go to join Freyja" (i.e., commit suicide). In another saga, Sigrudr's mother, a "sorceress," wove and gave her son a magical banner that, in her words, brought victory to "the man it's carried before, but death to the one who carries it." Her prophesy was fully fulfilled multiple times; see *Orkneyinga Saga. The History of the Earls of Orkney*, tr. H. Pállson and P. Edwards (London: Penguin, 1978), chs. 11–12, pp. 36–38. Also, see Princess Freawaru (*freoðuwebbe* or "peace-weaver") in *Beowulf* [I. 2020] and the poem *Darraðarljóð* in the *Njáls Saga* (tr. Njal's Saga, tr. M. Magnusson, H. Pállson (London: Penguin, 1960), ch. 157, pp. 349–51) in which one finds valkyries figuratively and literally weaving fate. On the issue of weaving, fate, Norns, valkyries, and Freyja, see Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 117–19ff. Also see Harrison, Svensson, *Vikingaliv*, 74 and Näsström, *Freyja*, 109–22.

¹⁴⁹ L. Schmidt, *Geschichte der deutschen Stämme bis zum Ausgang der Völkerwanderung*. I: *Die Ostgermanen*, 2nd ed. (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1934), 30.

¹⁵⁰ Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, tr. W.D. Foulke, ed. E. Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), ch. I.3, I.7; pp. 5, 15. Noting Paul the Deacon, centuries later Saxo Grammaticus also relates this story, expanding it in parts but also truncating it in others. What is interesting is that Saxo also clearly portrayed Gambara as the wisest of all in the kingdom; see, *The History of the Danes*, vol. 1, VIII:237–238, pp. 260–61.

Godan (i.e., Óðinn), to whom the Vandals appealed for help. In the end, the Lombards gained victory, thanks to Gambara's appeal to Freyja.¹⁵¹ Thus, not only did Freyja offer Gambara advice that she could apply to resolve her problem on earth, but she also acted on Gambara's behalf in the realm of the divinities to help her devotee.¹⁵²

The *Hálfs saga konungs ok Hálfrekka*, a fifteenth-century Icelandic saga full of legendary data, speaks of a very similar episode where two queens in Norway were set to compete with one another over who would brew the finest ale. While one named Signy appealed to Freyja, the other named Geirhild to Óðinn (Hǫtt). In this instance, Geirhild carried the day thanks to Óðinn, no doubt because of the drink's strong association with the god.¹⁵³ While the sources do not explain the process by way of which Gambara and Signy approached Freyja to seek her assistance, there should be little doubt that they would have done so through administering an offering of sacrifice to the goddess, the classic form of communion with divinities. That females, particularly prominent women like Gambara and Signy, sacrificed to Freyja is illustrated in the *Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins Vitra*. In it, Álfhild, daughter of the legendary King Álf, was designated to perform late autumn sacrifices (*dísablót*) to the female deities (*dísir*), particularly the supreme goddess (*dís*) – Freyja. In the process, she drenched an altar (*hǫrgr* – fem. form, hence designated to female goddesses) in blood.¹⁵⁴ In doing this, Álfhild, like other females who sacrificed to Freyja, is likely to have imitated Freyja herself, who, according to Snorri Sturlason's *Ynglinga Saga*, was priestess (*blótgyðja*) of the sacrifices.¹⁵⁵ Snorri wrote a bit later in the saga that after god Yngvi-Freyr's death, Freyja took over his role of carrying out the ritual sacrifices (*blótum*) "... for she alone of the gods still lived."¹⁵⁶ Quite convincingly, it has been argued that these

¹⁵¹ Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, I.7-9, ch., pp. 13-17; *Origo Gentis Langobardorum* can be found in Appendix, *ibid.*, pp. 316-17.

¹⁵² Not inconsequentially, the etymology of Gambara's name can mean "bearer of the wand" from Gand-bera, suggesting that she was a *vǫlva*; see Näsström, *Freyja*, p. 92, n. 397.

¹⁵³ W.B. Bachmann, Jr. and G. Erlingsson, *The Sagas of King Half and King Hrolf* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991), ch. 1, pp. 3-4.

¹⁵⁴ *Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins Vitra/Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, tr. C. Tolkien (London: Nelson, 1960), 67; cf Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 224, 239. Also see Näsström, *Freyja*, pp. 100-109 on Freyja's role in the *dísablót* and her connection to sacrifices.

¹⁵⁵ *Ynglinga saga* in Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, ch. 4, p. 3; cf Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 226; Näsström, *Freyja*, 66ff., 81, 104-5.

¹⁵⁶ *Ynglinga saga* in Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, ch. 10, p. 8.

sacrifices were dedicated to the chief Vanir deities, such as Freyr and Freyja, and were directly related to fertility rites as well as affirmation of royal power.¹⁵⁷ In this way, it seems clear that women not only performed sacrifices to the chief female deity, but that they did so on a sound theological-mythological bases.¹⁵⁸ Through these sacrifices and intimate association with Freyja, like the *vǫlur*, they gained insight into the future and, need be, altered the course of fate itself. It is this prophetic insight and ability to modify destiny that gave actual power to women's words of "wisdom."¹⁵⁹

Like Freyja and her *vǫlur*, Olga was not only associated with wisdom and prophesy, but also with birds. In fact, no other ruler of the Kievan era has as many references made to birds as Olga. The falcon coins and pendant aside, the *PVL* closely ties birds to Olga. In describing the layout of Kiev *sub annum* 946 in context of Olga's revenge against the Drevlians, the chronicle states that there were fowling nets outside the city.¹⁶⁰ The following year

¹⁵⁷ Näsström, *Freyja*, 105.

¹⁵⁸ It should be noted that while Freyja and her cult is often associated with women, there is evidence of male adherence to this goddess. Perhaps the most well-known one is Óttarr who was Freyja's "protégé" (*fulltrúi*) and a faithful devotee of the goddesses. He built her a stone altar (*hǫrgr*) and sacrificed oxen, with the blood of which he smeared it, so often that the stone turned to glass. In turn, he received Freyja's assistance in gaining numinous knowledge; see *Hyndluljóð*, *The Poetic Edda*, st. 10, p. 254. Also see Näsström, *Freyja*, 131–33, 138. Aside from Óttarr, King Erik the Bloodaxe and Gunnhildr (for her, see below) were both present during *dísablót*, according to the *Egil's Saga* (ch. 44, p. 100) although it is not told who performed the actual sacrifice. Jarl Hákon Sigurðsson (ca. 937–995), the *de facto* ruler of Norway, was also known for his association with the Freyja cult, and, indeed, perhaps all of his predecessors had a special relationship with the goddess; see Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 177–78. Snorri, in his *Olaf Haraldson Saga*, mentioned that the kings of Sweden regularly performed *dísablót* in Uppsala; see *Heimskringla*, ch. 77, p. 280, also see below.

¹⁵⁹ It should be noted that there are a number of queens recorded in the sagas who fit Gambara's profile of "wise" women who ruled along with their sons. One is Gunnhildr Gormsdóttir or Gunnhildr konungamóðir ("Mother of Kings) who, according to Snorri Sturlason, gained her knowledge of *seiðr* from the Finns and used it as a tool-weapon to achieve her aims; see *The History of Harald Hairfair* in *Heimskringla*, ch. 33, pp. 66–67 and *Egil's Saga*, ch. 37, p. 90. On the other hand, Oddr Snorrason (*The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, ch. 1, p. 36) noted that when Gunnhildr wished to find out what the four chieftains talked about in their private conversation "She sacrificed to the gods and was given the intelligence that the nature of their conversation was indeed what she thought." Thus, Oddr directly connects sacrifice and numinous knowledge.

¹⁶⁰ *PVL*, vol. I, 341.

she set up fowling nets along the Dnepr and Desna Rivers.¹⁶¹ It has been argued that these strange reports of fowling nets can be tied to Olga's great love of hunting.¹⁶² But, there may be another explanation, and, in part, it comes from yet another *PVL* reference made to birds in connection with Olga – her so-called “Incendiary Bird” revenge on the Drevlians *sub annum* 946.

Olga's “Incendiary Bird” revenge – one of the most colorful of all the stories found in the *PVL* – is of course a legend that has a number of analogies in other medieval European tales.¹⁶³ All but one of the main Rus' chronicles repeats the story in more or less the same way: Olga requested pigeons and sparrows from the Drevlians as tribute because they had nothing more left of the items they traditionally gave as tribute (honey-mead and furs). On receiving the birds, Olga proceeds to use them to burn down their city.¹⁶⁴ However, the *Pereiaslevl-Suzdal'* chronicle provides a more detailed explanation for her seemingly odd request:

... прошю дати б(ого)мъ жрътву от вас, и ослабу вамъ подать себе на лекарство главныя болезни; дайте ми отъ двора по 3 голуби и по 3 воробьи, зане у вас есь тыи птици, а инде ужь всюду събирахъ и нет ихъ, а в чюжую землю не шлю.¹⁶⁵

The account specifically states that her reason for requesting sparrows and pigeons was not only because she understood that the Drevlians had little else to give as tribute, but also because she wanted to sacrifice these birds to the gods and thus atone for the murder of Igor'. Olga adds that she had been seeking birds, but could not find any and did not wish to turn to other lands to obtain them.

The *Pereiaslevl-Suzdal'* chronicle, which still has not received a close philological study, was a compilation of a number of earlier sources and

¹⁶¹ Ibid., vol. I, 385.

¹⁶² Lindberger, “The Falcon, the Raven and the Dove,” 69.

¹⁶³ See, for instance, H.M. Cam, “The Legend of the Incendiary Birds,” *English Historical Review* 31 (1916): 98-101; A. Stender-Petersen, “Et Nordisk Krigslistmotivs historie,” *Edda* 29 (1929): 145-64; idem., *Die Varägersage als Quelle der altrussischen Chronik* (Aarhus-Leipzig: Trautmann 1934), 127-55; J. de Vries, “Normannisches Lehngut in der isländischen Königssagas,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 47 (1931): 51-79; H.R.E. Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1976), 19-21, 215-16.

¹⁶⁴ *PVL*, vol. I, 373-80.

¹⁶⁵ *Letopisets Pereiaslavlia Suzdal'skogo (Letopis' russkikh tsarei)* [*Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*, vol. 41] (Moscow: Arkheograficheskii tseñtr, 1995), 16.

most probably composed in southwestern Rus' (Galicia-Volynia) in the fifteenth century when these lands were part of the Lithuanian state. One of these older sources contained the original *PVL* account with Olga's "Incendiary Bird" revenge, but the author made some additions to the original.¹⁶⁶ While the source or sources of these redactions remains unclear, D.S. Likhachev has observed that the author inserted a number of humoristic and dramatic folk elements to the account of Olga's revenge tale.¹⁶⁷ The inclusion of the sacrifice of birds to the gods on Olga's behalf, with a rather extensive explanation, by an Orthodox monk living in the Catholic Polish-Lithuanian state (which he incidentally did not favor in his writings¹⁶⁸) seems rather an odd addition. It is unlikely that the monk would have invented this appendage to the tale by himself, and surely it would not have reflected positively on the earlier Rus' rulers, even if they were pagan before they converted to Christianity, i.e., Olga. Rather, because the account is folkloric – with additions of humor and dramatic elements – it seems quite possible that the source of the addition was a song or ballad (*bylina*) that was still known to the author and others of his day which contained some archaic information about Olga's connection to sacrificing birds. Knowing this song-ballad, the author may have felt compelled (or perhaps was simply betaken by the story) to insert some of its contents into his compellation.¹⁶⁹

In light of all of the above, it now seems safe to suggest that Olga was not so much preoccupied with falconry and hunting, but with birds, in general, and bird sacrifices, in particular. Her "obsession" with birds, as recorded in the written sources in one way or another, probably stemmed from her association with Freyja and one of her main attributes – birds. Olga's connection to the cult of Freyja seems to be rather well spoken of in the written sources, albeit rather loosely and vaguely. In light of this, Olga's connection

¹⁶⁶ Shakhmatov, *Razyskaniia o russkikh letopisiakh*, 628–29.

¹⁶⁷ Likhachev, *Povest' vremennykh let*, commentary, 436.

¹⁶⁸ *Letopisets Pereiaslavlia Suzdal'skogo*, ed. remarks, iii.

¹⁶⁹ Very recently, A. Koptev, based on the *PVL* account alone, has convincingly argued that all four parts of Olga's revenge tale can be explained as ritual sacrifices administered by Olga in connection with Igor's death. He suggests that the choice of sparrows and pigins may have been a form of a purification act; see A. Koptev, "Ritual and History: Pagan Rites in the Story of the Princess' Revenge (the Russian Primary Chronicle, under 945–946)," *MIRATOR* 11: 1/ 2010, 1–154 [accessed March 20, 2011: <http://www.glossa.fi/mirator/pdf/i-2010/ritualandhistory.pdf>].

with birds and their sacrifice is not surprising. Like other powerful and aristocratic women in Viking-age Northern Europe, Olga came to associate herself with Freyja. The cult of this divinity was most suited to women in general, but royal women like Olga, in particular. It gave them authority and power – in words of “wisdom” – to rule their lands. All of this suggests that not only was Olga a *vølva* or a high priestess of Freyja, but the supreme priestess of the Rus’ state. It was she who administered state ceremonies and sacrifices as a representative of Freyja on earth for the benefit and prosperity of the Rus’ and their lands. She may have fulfilled this role from the time she became Grand Princess of the Rus’, or assumed this role only during her regency (ca. 945–ca. 958) when she acted as the head of state for her son during his minority.¹⁷⁰ Performing such pagan ritual would have been, no doubt, in conflict with her Christian beliefs, had she converted prior to 958. But, this topic will be left for another time.

Before leaving the topic of Freyja, one more consequential nuance has to be considered – her likely connection to commerce. As noted above, in Norse mythology Freyja was sister of the god Freyr, and both were children of Njǫrðr. All three were the chief Vanir deities and all associated with wealth and prosperity. It was also mentioned that Freyr and Njǫrðr were connected with navigation and the latter especially with commerce. Freyja’s association with trade, however, remains much less known or documented, although it is more than likely that she too was tied to commerce during the Viking era. For one, Freyja’s link to the market is strongly suggested in one account recorded by Snorri Sturlason in his *Olaf Haraldson Saga*. It informs of the special “age-long” pagan custom of staging an annual festival known as Disæðing or Disaðing (Disting), held in Uppsala during the month of Góa or late February and late March. Attended by all of Sweden, the event

¹⁷⁰) It should be noted that Olga’s sacrifice of birds as recorded in the sources does not necessarily have to be solely connected with Igor’s funeral. Rus’ princes prior to Olga and thereafter, at least until the official conversion in 988/89 appear to have been intimately involved in the sacrifice of birds. V.I. Kulakov identified a number of artifacts, such as pendants and sword scabbard chapes, which carried on them not only images of birds of prey like falcons, but also representations of birds in dismembered form or sliced apart by blank spaces i.e., “sacrificed.” The objects in question date from the late ninth through the early eleventh centuries. Since they were found in context of the Rus’-warrior elite burials and were connected with the princely retinue or women connected with them, Kulakov argued that the Rus’ princes were responsible for state sacrifices of birds and thus acted as chief or high priests for the Rus’; see, Kulakov, “Ptitsa-khishchnik i ptitsa-zhertva,” 106–117. Therefore, Olga may well have continued the tradition.

involved blood offerings (*dísablót*) made by the king to the female deities for peace as well as in honor of his own victories. Central to the festival was the royal legal assembly (*þing*) as well as a large market-fair. Snorri notes that after Christianization, the market was moved and held at Candlemas (“Kyndelsting”) and that “It has always been held then ever since, but now it does not last more than three days.”¹⁷¹ The gathering was organized around the lunar calendar and, thus, everyone from across Sweden could determine when it was held.¹⁷² *Dísablót* or sacrifices made to female deities (*dísir*), particularly the supreme goddess *dís* or Freyja herself, have already been discussed above. All that needs to be underscored presently is the direct association of this chief Swedish festival held in connection with prosperity and trade and the goddess.

The goddesses’ close mythological counterparts also lead to suggest that Freyja was tied to commerce. The Greek Athena and her Etruscan and later Roman counterpart Minerva have been mentioned above in the discussion of their parallel functions with Freyja in the spinning of the thread of life-fate and wisdom. Athena and Freyja were considered shielding/protective goddesses and both were associated with prosperity, agriculture, and ships. Athena as Minerva was also closely linked to commerce; indeed, both were the chief female patronesses of ships, sailors, and trade.¹⁷³ There are also good reasons to connect ships with Freyja.¹⁷⁴ Thus, speaking strictly from a comparative mythology point of reference, it would stand to reason

¹⁷¹ *Olaf Haraldson Saga* in *Heimskringla*, ch. 77, p. 280. For Disæðing/Disaðing/Disting, see “Disa (Drottning Disa),” *Nordisk Familjebok. Konversationslexikon och Realencyklopedi*, vol. 6 (Stockholm: Nordisk familjeboks förlags aktiebolag, 1907), 499–500. It should be noted that other sources relate that *Dísablót* in other parts of the Viking world took place in “the Winter Nights” or early October. See Näsström, *Freyja*, 103ff.

¹⁷² P. Sawyer, “Markets and Fairs in Norway and Sweden Between the Eighth and the Sixteenth Centuries” in *Markets in Early Medieval Europe. Trading and ‘Productive’ Sites, 650–850*, eds. T. Pestell and K. Ulmschneider (Macclesfield: Windgather Press, 2003), 170–72.

¹⁷³ Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 91–99; W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 140–42; Voyatzis, “From Athena to Zeus,” 144–45; K. Kerényi, *Athene: Virgin and Mother. A Study of Pallas Athene* (Zürich: Spring Publications, 1978), 7–13; S. Deacy, *Athene* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses*, 157–58; M. Détienné, “Le navire d’Athéna,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 178:2 (1970): 133–77; idem., “The Sea-Crow,” 16–42.

¹⁷⁴ Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, 112–13. It would be amiss not to note Minerva’s connection with keys (as Freyja) at this point, as is evidenced by her figurine as key-bearer on a Roman key. <http://www.historicallocks.com/en/site/hl/Articles/19-Keys-and-locks-from-Imperial-Rome/The-goddess-Minerva-as-a-key-bearer/> [accessed June 15, 2012].

that Freyja could have shared a commercial function with her two close divine female counterparts. Knowing what we do about the other chief Vanir gods' connection to navigation and commerce and keeping in mind Snorri's account of the Disæðing, such a suggestion does not seem to be unreasonable.

To make the above point even stronger and closer to home geographically and chronologically, it is now time to bring into the discussion Freyja's very close parallel from Slavic mythology – the goddess Mokosh/Makosha. First noted as “Mokosh” in the *PVL sub annum* 980, she stood in sixth place after five male idols erected by Vladimir in Kiev.¹⁷⁵ While clearly relegated to the last position of importance in context of Vladimir's obvious male-dominated pantheon, by default she stood as the chief female deity of the Rus', being the only non-male divinity present. The origin of this goddess remains disputed, as some argue for her Finno-Ugrian derivation while others for Slavic (either pan-Slavic or East Slavic). However, since place names with reference to her can be found as far west as Poland and the Czech lands, her pan-Slavic origins are more likely than Finno-Ugrian.¹⁷⁶ But, whatever her origins, she was worshiped in the tenth century at the absolute latest, although her roots most likely go back to the Stone Age in the form of “Great/Mother Goddess.” She continues to appear in East Slavic folk and ethnographic sources into the early twentieth century. Based on the available evidence, Mokosh was connected with childbirth, matchmaking, love affairs, the agrarian-cycle, bounty, housekeeping, weaving, spinning, divination, and fate.¹⁷⁷ In other words, she shared many key functions attributed to Freyja and her Greco-Roman counterparts.

With the advent of Christianity, the cult of Mokosh was in large part synchronized with the worship of St. Paraskeva-Piatnitsa/“Friday,” patroness of weaving, women's housework, and commerce.¹⁷⁸ St. Paraskeva-Piatnitsa

¹⁷⁵ *PVL*, 566-67.

¹⁷⁶ L.S. Klein, *Voskreshenie Peruna. K rekonstrukcii vostocnoslavianskogo iazycestva* (St. Petersburg: Evraziia, 2004), 245. Also see for a discussion of Mokosh's equivalent in Slovene folksongs in V. Nartnik, “Pogansko bogovje slovanskega vzhoda in zahoda v luči slovenskih ljudskih pesmi,” *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 1 (1998): 61-73.

¹⁷⁷ E.V. Anichkov, *Iazycestvo i Drevniaia Rus'* (Moscow: Indrik, 2009), 347-8; B.A. Rybakov, *Iazycestvo drevnikh slavian* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), 380-81, 383, 385; Ivanits, *Russian Folk Beliefs*, 13, 14, 16, 17.

¹⁷⁸ Rybakov, *Iazycestvo drevnikh slavian*, 387-8; Klein, *Voskreshenie Peruna*, 246; J. Hubbs, *Mother Russia. The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 17ff.

rather early on came to be a patroness of trade in Rus', as is evidenced by the appearance of churches dedicated to Friday in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Novgorod and Chernigov, and Friday was most commonly the days for markets in the Rus' lands.¹⁷⁹ But, Mokosh continued to play a fundamental role in the folk beliefs of the East Slavs into modern times. As recently as the early twentieth century, peasants celebrated the cult of Mokosh in context of late fall harvest festivals that fell on the Church calendar associated with SS. Cosmos and Damian or the slavified *Kuz'minki*, which the peasants also called "Chicken Celebrations" or "Chicken Namedays/Birthdays." In the fourteenth century, Rus' churchmen battling with the old beliefs condemned the sacrifice of chickens on pagan holidays, although the association of this ritual was not made expressly with Mokosh in the document. However, since *Kuz'minki* was the only major festival known at which the key ritual involved the killing and eating of chickens, it is most likely that the medieval author referred to the cult of Mokosh.¹⁸⁰ In general, as the medieval sources spoken of above mention chicken-rooster sacrifices in connection with the birth-death-rebirth cycle, later East Slavic ethnographic and folklore materials speak much of the same.¹⁸¹ Similarly, chickens were often used in divination by the East Slavs, thereby underscoring the association between prophesy and determining

¹⁷⁹ Rybakov, *Iazychestvo drevnikh slavian*, 388; M. Zabylin, *Russkii narod. Ego obychai, obrady, predaniia, sueverii i poeziia* (Moscow, 1880; Moscow: Kniga Printshop, reprint 1989), 100-1; Ivanits, *Russian Folk Beliefs*, 33-5.

¹⁸⁰ Rybakov, *Iazychestvo drevnikh slavian*, 393. Also see Ivanits, *Russian Folk Beliefs*, 32-33, 61. It should be noted that roosters were known to have been killed and tossed into fires (i.e., sacrificed) by women during spring festivities associated with the beginning of plowing; see W.R.S. Ralson, *The Songs of the Russian People*, 2nd ed. (London: Ellis & Green, 1872), 396ff. Of course, this information does not contradict but, in fact, supports the connection of chickens/roosters with the Mokosh's fertility cult. Chickens were also carried in processions and eaten during weddings, thus, again, underscoring connections with fertility and reproduction; see Afanas'ev, *Poeticheskie vozzreniia slavian na prirodu*, I, 467. The ritual sacrifice (known as "cock executions") of roosters during weddings appears to be a pan-Slavic rite, connected with the cult of dead ancestors; see Veletskaiia, *Simvoly slavianskogo iazychestva*, 139-40, 190-1, 257-60.

¹⁸¹ For example, the killing of chickens was connected with the cult of the dead: e.g., when a *bania* (bathhouse) burned down, peasants would bury a chicken under the new structure; see Ivanits, *Russian Folk Beliefs*, 59. The *bania* was associated with death as well as birth; see R.K. Kovalev, "Banias," *The Supplement to the Modern Encyclopedia of Russian, Soviet & Eurasian History*, vol. 3 (Gulf Breeze: American Academic Press, 2000), 193-5. Also see A.N. Afanas'ev, *Poeticheskie vozzreniia slavian na prirodu*, vol. II (Moscow, 1868), 84, 106, 249-60.

fate, on the one hand, and fortunetellers-*vqlur* and the cult of Freyja-Mokosh, on the other.¹⁸² By choosing the Freyja cult, Olga would certainly not have gone against the religious practices of the larger Slavic population of the Rus' lands who worshiped Mokosh in the tenth century.

All in all, Mokosh's many fundamental attributes and functions that are associated with Freyja have led historians of early Slavic paganism and mythology to conclude that these two divinities can be understood as mythological parallels in most regards.¹⁸³ As her Greco-Roman and Slavic counterparts, Freyja most probably was also linked to commerce, quite likely because all of these goddesses represented bounty and prosperity as well as the rejuvenation of wealth. If this were so, then the adoption of the Freyja cult and her falcon symbol by the Rus' ruling elite starting with the late ninth century would make a lot of sense. That Rus' were commercially oriented in their activities hardly needs to be dwelt upon. Suffice it to quote the well-informed and very reliable Arab historian al-Mas'ūdī (ca. 896-ca. 957) that "The Rus' (*Rūs*) are a numerous nation with various subdivisions. Among them are Northmen (*al-Lūdhghāna*/**al-Ūrmāna*), who are the most numerous and for trading purposes constantly visit the countries of al-Andalus (Spain), Rome, Constantinople, and Khazaria."¹⁸⁴ Indeed, it would be strange if the Rus' had not adopted a patron divinity connected with commerce. The choice of a female goddess should not be perplexing, particularly in light of all that is known about Freyja's powers and her falcon image associated with the elite. Like the Athenians in Hellenic times who placed the image of their patron goddess Athena in the form of an owl on their drachm coins and other objects, the Rus' also bore the image of their patron goddess Freyja in the form of a falcon on their coins and pendants (in Olga's case) as well as sword scabbard chapes, pendants, and other items.

¹⁸²) For the use of chickens in divination, see Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 107-8, 125.

¹⁸³) Klein, *Voskreshenie Peruna*, 246; Rybakov, *Iazychestvo drevnikh slavian*, 388-9. It must be noted that as Mokosh, the goddess Frigg (or Freyja's doublet) has had long connection with the day Friday and, indeed, giving the weekday its name, i.e., Old English *Frigedæg* and Old Frisian *Fri(g)endei*, borrowed into Old Norse as *Frjádagr*. The same can be said about the association between Venus and Friday (*dies Veneris*) in Romance languages. See Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 188. However, the question of how, why, and when these divinities came to be tied to Friday is not only highly complex but also requires much more time and space than this article permits.

¹⁸⁴) al-Mas'ūdī in *A History of Sharvān and Darband in the 10th-nth Centuries*, tr. V. Minorsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 150.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the recently discovered trapezoidal pendant from Pskov sheds a great deal of new light on Grand Princess Olga, regent for Sviatoslav – Grand Prince of Kievan Rus'. Deposited sometime in the late 950 to early 960s, the pendant had an earlier life as an official badge issued by both Olga and Sviatoslav to one of their administrators-revenue collectors, probably in ca. 947 or very soon thereafter, who ultimately was buried with it in Pskov. This badge carried on it a typical Riurikid dynastic emblem in the form of a bident, which belonged to Sviatoslav, at the time still a minor. As symbol of authority and regency, Olga inserted her own symbol inside Sviatoslav's bident – an image of a key. The key or more appropriately a latchlifter was not only a very common symbol of women and their role as guardians of the household across medieval Northern Europe, but also an emblem of the goddess Freyja – the chief goddess of the Norse pantheon, a divinity connected with the management of the household and a patroness of women in most aspects of their life. Aside from representing Olga's regency, the key may well have also been understood by others as a kind of a legal-religious symbol of her authority over the realm.

The other side of the badge-pendant carried on it an image of a falcon “crowned” with a Byzantine cross. An identical image of a bird with a cross also occurs on a number of contemporaneous imitation dirham coins minted sometime in ca. 950, almost certainly in the Rus' lands. Clearly, these two images are intrinsically interconnected. In light of what we now know about the imagery of the badge-pendant from Pskov, it becomes possible to link these coins and the falcon symbol itself with Olga. In addition, there are religious and political grounds for tying the image of the falcon with Olga. First, the image of the Byzantine cross on the bird's head denotes Christian beliefs on the part of the owner of the falcon emblem. The only known Rus' ruler living in the late 940s-early 960s that was a Christian was Olga. Second, the image of the falcon was, again, intimately connected with the goddess Freyja. On the examination of a number of clues contained in the semi-legendary Rus' sources that speak of Olga, there are reasons to believe not only that Olga was a devotee of the goddess and practiced her cult prior to her conversion to Christianity (i.e., she was a *vqlva*), but, indeed, was the supreme priestess of Freyja for the Rus' state. Hence, she chose the goddess' symbol – the falcon. But, this bird, like the image of the key, also carried with it a number of other associations – female authority over domain and property. Ultimately, the falcon indicates aristocratic

power. In choosing the symbols of the falcon and having close ties to Freyja, Olga was not unique. Many other elite and royal women in Nordic Northern Europe made the same associations.

Finally, Freyja, being a divinity associated with fertility and bounty, also seems to have been associated with commerce, like a number of her close mythological counterparts. For this reason, it is not surprising that the falcon symbol, albeit in quite a different (stylized) form than Olga's, came to be used by the Rus' ruling elite even prior her use of it, i.e., starting in the late ninth century. The Rus' – some of the most well traveled merchants of western Eurasia in the Viking Age – naturally would find this goddess and her symbol compatible to their many commercial activities. Like Athena's owl in classical Athens, Freyja's falcon of the Rus' in the early Middle Ages became the chief emblem that was placed on coins and other objects. What remains to be addressed is the question of the cross above the falcon's head. Since this is a large topic, it will be left for another study.

