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Princess Olga

Eastern Woman Through Western Eyes

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in History.

By
Lee A. Hitt

Under the mentorship of Dr. Olavi Arens

ABSTRACT

In the Viking world, stories of women inciting revenge reach back through the past into oral history. These legends were written down in the sagas of the Icelanders. Princess Olga's story was recorded in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*. Though her heritage is uncertain, Olga ruled in Kievan Rus' in the ninth and tenth centuries. Kievan Rus' was governed by Vikings from Sweden known as Varangians. There are similarities between Olga's story and the sagas. This study applies the research of scholars who pioneered the topic of gendering the Old Norse Icelandic literature, to compare her story to the gender norms and cultural values of the Scandinavians. The goal is to tie Olga's heritage, to the greater Viking world. She was a female ruler, so this study also looks at her relationship with power to demonstrate her uniqueness in history and show that she ruled Kievan Rus' as a Varangian Princess. It also seeks to add to the gendering of Kievan Rus' which at present is very limited.

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Introduction

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned! Princess Olga is a perfect example to illustrate this adage. The theme of women and revenge has a long history in literature. It is a common thread woven through many tales, whether found in the chronicles of twelfth-century Russia, the sagas of thirteenth-century Iceland, or in the plays of seventeenth century England. The above adage is attributed to two English playwrights who were active writers at the end of the 17th century.¹ Though they were written at a much later time, they still reiterate the trope of a scorned woman. The power of these stories is that their elemental theme strikes a chord with the emotions of their audiences, especially audiences of women. These stories show women of strength, wit, wisdom, and fierce passions. Though times have changed, the basic instincts and emotions of humanity remain the same, allowing the stories to be passed down, reshaped, and retold by future authors, and enjoyed by many audiences throughout time

In the case of our leading lady – Princess Olga – she was not a woman scorned in love, though she was undoubtedly a woman wronged. The story of Olga is one that leaves a lasting impression. The tale of her accomplishments is told in two parts, divided by her religious affiliation. The first part is most memorable – and occurs when she is still a pagan “bad-girl” of Kievan Rus’- that of her comprehensive revenge on the Derevlian people for the murder of her husband Igor’. The second part details her baptism into the Eastern Orthodox Church in Byzantium. It again demonstrates her wit, and also shows

¹ Either Colley Cibber or William Congreve. It does not come verbatim from either of their plays; however, the plays, written in 1696 and 1697 respectively, expressed the above sentiment and gave rise to the saying as we know it today. Colley Cibber, *Love’s Last Shift* (1696) *Restoration Drama: an Anthology*, edited by David Womersley (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), 553-593; William Congreve, *The Mourning Bride, A Tragedy*, [10] (London: Printed for Jacob Tonson [etc.], 1697), 74 p, Act III, Scene I. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2138575475?accountid=11225>.

her as a bit of a minx, however hereafter she is praised for her decision to convert. The primary source for the focus of this study is *The Russian Primary Chronicle*,² with an analysis of themes from the Old Norse Icelandic sagas (Íslendingasögur). The themes within their pages, as well as their ethnic origins, both have much in common.

It is the very commonality between these sources which allows a historical comparison to be made. First, the roles for women in the stories of the Icelandic Sagas and the *Primary Chronicle* have characters based on historical families that were all of Viking origin; as such, they share a similar culture and ethnic group. These sources also find their origins in the oral histories and legends of the ruling class of various Viking tribes. They are all based on literature written in the early Middle Ages, predominantly the twelfth century. The Icelandic sagas and the chronicles of Kievan Rus' were written by well-educated men.³ Lastly, another factor in common among these tales of women's revenge is that they were written in locales that had a history of Viking settlement outside the homeland of Scandinavia. The Vikings of both groups left their native Scandinavia to seek fortunes - and forge new lives - in other lands. In the case of the Norse, they left Norway, headed west and colonized the empty island of Iceland. In the case of the

² In Slavic sources it is referred to as the *Povest'*, short for *Povest' Vremennykh Let*, which means *The Tale of Bygone Years*. Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans. and eds., *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, Laurentian Text, no. 60 (1953; repr., Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1973), 3. At the time Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor translated this source, Kievan Rus' territory fell under the claim of Russia. Since the re-establishment of Belarus and Ukraine as separate countries, the idea of Kievan Rus' history as "Russian" is disputed. It is now considered outdated at best, or biased in favor of Russia at worst. To be mindful of changing times, the title will be henceforth referred to as the *Primary Chronicle*. This brings up an interesting question for another study: who 'owns' the history of a place?

³ With the possible exception of *Laxdæla saga*. According to Jesch, "Not only does this saga have more female characters than any other, but they are so dominant, so much in control and so much more clearly individualized in a saga with many stock male characters, that it has been suggested that *Laxdæla saga*, if not written by a woman, was at least produced for a predominantly female audience." Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 1991), 193.

Swedish, they headed east and created a federation called Kievan Rus', situated in what is now Ukraine, Belarus and Russia.

This study will explore the story of Princess Olga in the *Primary Chronicle* and compare it to the roles of women, especially royal women, as shown in the Viking Sagas of the Icelanders. It will highlight connections between both the account of Olga in Kievan Rus' and themes found in the Viking epic poetry of Norway and Iceland. It will explore the idea that Olga's legend began in oral history, as an Eastern European equivalent to the western Icelandic sagas. It will focus on similarities between Olga with her saga sisters,⁴ the Viking women in western Europe. The ultimate goal is to offer a persuasive analysis reinforcing the argument that Olga was a Viking Princess, and add to the body of gendered history of Kievan Rus' and the Vikings.

The primary source for the study is chiefly the *Primary Chronicle*. The secondary sources will focus closely on the research of those most knowledgeable in analysis of the primary sources of the western Viking world – mainly Icelandic sagas with a focus on women. It takes heavily from scholars who have pioneered the topic of gendering the Vikings: Judith Jesch and Jenny Jochens; and especially that of Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir who is building on their framework while adding her own. The specific work of analysis completed in this study focuses on comparisons between Olga's legend and the roles of saga women as discussed in Friðriksdóttir's book *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*. The broader background, the geography, and the history of Kievan Rus', rely on a range of works from multidisciplinary scholars of the

⁴ The idea for this study and the term saga sister owes credit to a comment Jesch made about similarity between Olga's legend and women in Icelandic saga literature: "The Scandinavian parallels that can be found for many of Olga's adventures suggest she is a literary sister of the strong and vengeful women we find in saga literature." (Jesch, 114)

Vikings and are taken from the well-known older works of scholars such as Samuel Cross, Thomas Noonan, and George Vernadsky. Lastly, the research of Ronald Glassman is applied for the anthropological framework of the Norse culture. The use of Vernadsky's study of the Slavic culture allows a cultural comparison with Kievan Rus'.

Historical Background

Kievan' Rus'

Kievan Rus' was a trade-based federation ruled by Swedish Viking traders known as Varangians.⁵ Scholars have heavily debated how Scandinavians came to rule in the Slavic area of Eastern Europe, which has generated vast amounts of literature in the historiography⁶ - more than any other topic of Eastern European history.⁷ The complete veracity of the story as related in the *Primary Chronicle* is doubted.⁸ The compiler of the *Primary Chronicle* says Kievan Rus' was founded by a family-group of Varangians

⁵ According to philological study by Benedict Benedikz - based on the work of Sigfús Blöndal - Swornmen of the Scandinavians were known in Old Norse (O.N.) as *væringi*. "There is now a general agreement that the derivation is from the O.N. word *vár*, pl. *várar*, 'confidence (in)', 'faith (in)', 'vow of fidelity'... In other words, in Scandinavian culture, a Varangian, was a mercenary sworn shield-man. See Benedikz explanation for more detail in *The Varangians of Byzantium*. Trans. rev. and rewritten by Benedict Benedikz, (Cambridge Books Online. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 20. EBSCOhost. eBook Academic Collection. Adobe Digital Editions PDF; Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor also touch on this in their introduction. Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 49.

⁶ George Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia* (1959; repr., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 174; Thomas S. Noonan, "The Dnieper Trade route in Kievan Russia (900-1240 A.D.)," iii-iv.

⁷ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 39. This has been a point of major contention within the historiography of Eastern Europe and Russia. It is known as the Normanist vs. Anti-Normanist controversy.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 59-60. According to the *Primary Chronicle*, in the late 850s, "The Varangians from beyond the sea imposed tribute upon [certain eastern Slavic tribes between the Baltic Sea down to modern Ukraine]. But the Khazars imposed it upon [the eastern Slavic tribes in the eastern half of Ukraine]." Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 59. The Khazars had a neighboring empire which ruled between the Caspian and Black Seas and the eastern half of modern Ukraine in the 850s. The *Primary Chronicle* says the Slavic tribes north of Khazar controlled territory rebuffed the Varangians' control in favor of ruling themselves but after several years of in-fighting could not agree on a leader, so in 862, the Varangians were called back from across the Baltic Sea to rule the eastern Slavic lands. *Ibid.*

called the Rurikids – named for their first leader Rurik. After his death, “The Varangians and Slavs, and others who accompanied Oleg [Rurik’s successor], were called Russes.”⁹

Prior to the Rurikid Dynasty, the population of the lands stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea was an amalgamation of Scandinavian traders, Slavic and Finnic peoples that arose at a string of stops along the river routes of Eastern Europe which were utilized as trade-routes by the Varangians.¹⁰ The Swedish were prolific traders in the Baltic Sea and controlled river trade-routes all over Eastern Europe from the Gulf of Finland to the Black Sea, and also out to the Caspian Sea.¹¹ At this point in Kievan Rus’ history the term Varangian was synonymous with colonists from Sweden.¹² During the time of Rurik, the chronicler mentions “Varangian colonists” among the peoples of Rurik’s territories.¹³ After this point in the *Primary Chronicle*, the term Varangian most often applies to the Viking mercenaries who were called from Scandinavia to inflate the

⁹ Donald F. Dixon, “Varangian-Rus Warrior-Merchants and the Origin of the Russian State,” *Journal of Macromarketing* 18, no.1 (June 1998): 61.

¹⁰ These trade routes were the basis of the economy in Kievan Rus’, and also the progenitor of the state itself. Thomas S. Noonan, “The Dnieper Trade route in Kievan Russia (900-1240 A.D.),” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1965), 4-5, UMI Dissertation Information Service. Thomas Noonan quotes Russian historian Vasily Klyuchevsky, on Varangian trade saying it was “instrumental in the emergence of Rus’ cities. Rus’ towns first arose along the Varangian-Greek route as the result of the flourishing foreign trade. They were primarily fortified trading and transit centers for a given area and were connected with other trading centers/towns that appeared along the main Rus’ trade routes.” (Ibid., 5); They had multiple river trade routes, but this main route is known as the Varangian-Greek trade route. (Ibid., 2-3); Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 78, 83, 86; These active trade centers attracted people from all over the region “...making the material cultures of the Germanic Baltic increasingly homogenous.” Wladyslaw Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe*, Northern World, North Europe and the Baltic c. 400-1700 AD, Peoples, Economies and Cultures, edited by Barbara Crawford et al., vol. 12. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 3. By the time the *Primary Chronicle* was written, Kievan Rus’ culture had become quite Slavicized. However, the ruling class at the time of Olga’s life was still Varangian as will be discussed later.

¹¹ Duczko, 2-3.

¹² Dixon, 50-61; Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 50. In Finnish today the name for Sweden is *Ruotsi*, and in Estonian it is *Rootsi*, which suggests another possible origin for the word Rus’ to designate the Varangians as people from Sweden. Credit to Dr. Olavi Arens for this linguistic connection.

¹³ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 60.

forces of Kievan Rus' leaders for their military campaigns.¹⁴ Eventually, the term Varangian and Rus' were so closely associated that Rus' came to represent all those who settled in Kievan Rus' not just those of Swedish origin.¹⁵

Iceland

According to historian and sociologist Ronald Glassman, Scandinavian tribes were able to develop and flourish more independently as an ethnic group than southern Germanic tribes. This was due in large part to their sea-going navigational abilities combined with trade-contacts and geographic isolation. Their trading allowed the diffusion of innovations and goods, while their location farther north allowed them to insulate their culture without undue influence from outsiders. The areas that Glassman deems the “periphery” such as Iceland, Norway, Sweden did not develop as a civilization as quickly as those on the European continent.¹⁶ Scandinavia is the land north of the Rhine between the North Sea and Baltic Sea. It is vertically divided by a peninsula, most of which is Denmark. The Norse tribes, being separated from continental Europe had an advantage over the Germanic tribes farther south, some of which were wiped out by the Roman Empire.¹⁷ As Glassman states, “The Norse tribes, beyond the Rhine, had little contact with Roman civilization. Through cultural diffusion – by way of trade and war

¹⁴ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 64, 72, 91, 93, 127, 130, 131, 135, 136.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 49-50; 59-60.

¹⁶ Ronald M. Glassman, “The Norse Tribes Before and During Contact with Roman Civilization,” in *The Origins of Democracy in Tribes, City-States and Nation-States*, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 2, 1294-1295.

¹⁷ Ronald M. Glassman, “The Religion of the Norse Tribes: No Official Priesthood,” in *The Origins of Democracy in Tribes, City-States and Nation-States*, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 2, 1274.

training – they did learn metallurgy and weapon making. And they slowly learned better agricultural techniques and craft skills – especially woodworking and ship building.”¹⁸

The Norse - Vikings from Norway - were fierce fighters (as were all Vikings), but they, very generally, pirated less and colonized more than the other Viking groups. The Norse, in the northwest of Scandinavia, mostly went west – colonizing the Hebrides, the British Isles, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland and Vinland. This is detailed in their sagas, especially the *Íslendingasögur*, or the Sagas of the Icelanders. While historians have to sort out the facts from the fiction contained within, the sagas are a very important source of information about Viking culture because they were written by Scandinavians, not outsiders.¹⁹ Take for example, two Icelandic sagas about Erik the Red and Leif Eriksson which contain tales of a land to the west called Vinland. Historians long suspected (though without evidence), that Vinland was in North America.²⁰ This was eventually corroborated by the archeological discovery of the settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland on the eastern coast of Canada.²¹ Recently, further proof of contact with North America was made in 2010 when genes specific to Native Americans were discovered in some residents of Iceland.²²

¹⁸ Glassman, “Norse Tribes Before Contact,” 2, 1229.

¹⁹ Jesch, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Razib Khan, “Icelanders descended from Native Americans?” *Discover Magazine*, November 17, 2010 1:17 PM, accessed 10/18/2020, <https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/icelanders-descended-from-native-americans>.

Sources

Primary Chronicle

For the history of the Vikings in the east of Kievan Rus', the primary source is the *Primary Chronicle*. The compiler begins by saying, "These are the narratives of bygone years regarding the origin of the land of Rus', the first princes of Kiev, and from what source the land of Rus' had its beginning."²³ This is a straightforward introduction, which outlines the contents, and the work holds true to these aims. From the outset, it is clear the tales included are from the stories/legends of a time preceding the author's own; they cover the beginnings of the Kievan Rus' state, and consequently the beginnings of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus; and they are about the princes – the male ruling line – of Rus'. For some entries the information included is in narrative form. At the time the *Primary Chronicle* was written, these stories likely still existed in the form of epic poems, known in medieval Russia as *byliny*.²⁴ However other entries occur as succinct sentences.

In English, the *Primary Chronicle* that exists today is a translation of a formerly compiled chronicle from the 12th century written in old Slavic, and covers the rulers of the Rurikid dynasty of Kievan Rus' during the decades from 850s-1120. The original prototype manuscript was long attributed by later chroniclers to a man named Nestor who was, "a monk of the historic Crypt Monastery in Kiev at the close of the 11th century and the beginning of the 12th century."²⁵ The sources for the prototype were a compilation of

²³ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 51.

²⁴ In pre-literate Russia, "Poems on historical characters were the foundation for popular epic fiction - the *stariny* (conventionally called 'byliny') in which the valiant knights (*bogatyri*) were glorified." George Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia* (1959; repr., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 150.

²⁵ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 6. The idea of Nestor as the author is debated by scholars, including Cross himself.

Rus' legends, oral histories from elders and military leaders such as Yan Vyshatich,²⁶ extant religious texts (especially Greek ones from the Byzantine Empire), and Norse Sagas. The *Primary Chronicle* currently exists in two main redactions. The first, the Laurentian redaction, was written in Old Church Slavonic and was copied "by the monk Lawrence...in 1377."²⁷ The second, the Hypatian redaction, "[dates] from the middle of the fifteenth century."²⁸ The last entry in the Laurentian redaction is dated 1116 and claims to be written by "Sylvester, Prior of St. Michael's Monastery...during the reign of Prince Vladimir in Kiev."²⁹ These authors quoted portions of the original compilation into their own chronicles or redactions.³⁰ This study uses Samuel Cross and Olgerd Sherbowitz-Wetzor's translation of the Laurentian redaction.

Icelandic Sagas

Written in Old Norse in the 12th or 13th centuries on the basis of an oral tradition, the sagas are a reflection of Norse culture. The Icelandic Sagas in poetic and narrative form, are replete with warriors, revenge and the intrigues of Norse mythology. Because of their themes - love, lust, revenge, valor - these sagas have a powerful ability to connect with people's emotions. Like the *Primary Chronicle*, it is a valuable source because it was written by a native of Iceland. A significant portion of the Icelandic Sagas were written by Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic historian, law-speaker, and poet. In the pre-literate Viking Age, law-speakers were chosen from childhood for their intelligence and

²⁶ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 203; Vernadsky, 280.

²⁷ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 4.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 205.

³⁰ Ibid., 3-6.

memory, and trained to memorize the oral histories of their tribe.³¹ Some of Sturluson's more well-known tomes are the *Prose Edda*,³² *The Heimskringla*, and the *Ynglinga saga*. *The Prose Edda* contains *Gylfaginning*, an invaluable resource. *Gylfaginning* is where much of our knowledge of Norse Mythology stems from.³³ *The Heimskringla*, contains histories of Norwegian kings. The *Ynglinga saga* is a comprehensive Scandinavian history from mythic times to Snorri's own in the early Middle Ages. The Sagas of the Icelanders reveal the history of Norse peoples who travelled to the west. As mentioned, their value as emic primary sources for the study of the Vikings is undeniable.

Roles of Viking Women in the Sagas

Little is known about the ancestry of Olga, though it is thought she came from a Scandinavian background. The saga stories and the roles of women revealed in them, will be used to create further ties between Olga and her possible Scandinavian heritage. This will be done by comparing the qualities and behaviors exhibited in her legendary story with common themes found among the Icelandic sagas. Judith Jesch and Jenny Jochens are pioneers on the topic of gendering the Vikings and the sagas. Judith Jesch wrote the seminal book on gendering the Vikings.³⁴ In it, Jesch worked her way through all possible sources available in the early 1990s that had any connection to Viking women, and made an analysis of how Scandinavian women were represented in them. The

³¹ Glassman, "Norse Tribes Before Contact", 2, 1231.

³² Sometimes written as prose *Edda*.

³³ Jesch, 134-135.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

sources with the largest representation of women are the sagas, which lead into an exploration of women in the sagas.³⁵ She also wrote a section called *the female inciter*.³⁶

Building on Jesch's work, concerning women in the sagas, Jenny Jochens categorized recurring themes evident among the stories: "roles", or literary functions that female characters often portray. They have been much discussed by scholars of gendering the Vikings – and became the standard by which female characters in the sagas have been analyzed by scholars. According to Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir who studied the work of Jochens, the four categories were "...the Prophetess/Sorceress, the Warrior Woman, the Avenger, and the Whetter, each of whom serve a separate literary function."³⁷ They will be explained briefly below.

1. The Prophetess/Sorceress – "The figure of the wise woman...the ancient volva,"³⁸ or seer. These women combined the mythical and real worlds and foretold events.³⁹ Their role was defined by cerebral and verbal endeavors.⁴⁰
2. The Warrior Woman – She "assumed male roles, performing as shield-maidens, maiden warriors, or maiden kings."⁴¹ Warrior women differed from queens

³⁵ In her survey Jesch: analyzed the material culture left behind by Viking women through archaeology; investigated women's lives through runic texts found in Scandinavia including runestones; explored the idea of female Viking colonists through the study of names and place names; sifted through foreign views of Viking women, from historical sources written by people outside of Scandinavia; and finally she studied Viking art, myth and poetry. See Jesch *Women in the Viking Age* for more.

³⁶ Jesch, 189-191.

³⁷ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words and Power*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 10.

³⁸ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, Middle Ages Series, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) 88, EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9781512802818>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁴¹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 103.

because they did not marry, but disavowed men, and were generally disapproved of.⁴² Their role was defined by physical action.⁴³

3. The Avenger – This woman took revenge into her own hands. Acts of the Avenger “...demand[ed] less brute endurance than extended warfare but require[ed] more cerebral and emotional stamina...”⁴⁴
4. The Whetter – This character differs from the Avenger in that, “...the figure of the whetting and inciting woman is entirely removed from physical violence.” The Whetter had to rely on verbal skills only to get men to take up revenge.⁴⁵

Gender roles in Scandinavian culture were clearly defined.⁴⁶ A women’s sphere was the home.⁴⁷ Women did not have as much social power as men to act in settings outside their sphere of influence.⁴⁸ Friðriksdóttir says, “This...is visible in sagas, where women are shown as having restricted opportunities to participate in the socio political and legal structures that affect their lives, and, especially in the Íslendingasögur, they occasionally expressed dissatisfaction and frustration with their lot, or subversively

⁴² Two common outcomes of a maiden-king: she was eventually either won-over by a suitor, or sometimes she was violated. In either case, she was therefore conquered by a man, and she lost her status and power. For more on maiden-kings see Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*.

⁴³ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 132.

⁴⁴ Ibid. In the Eddic poetry these features became hallmarks of the avenging woman who used her bodily energy in single acts of aggression for personal revenge but obtained better results when she verbally urged male family members to pursue her quest.

⁴⁵ Glassman, “Norse Tribes Before Contact,” 2, 1230. Because of clearly defined gender roles men had the ability to maneuver in other spheres – such as the law – that women could not; Ronald M. Glassman, “A Closer Look at the Germanic, or Norse, Assemblies,” in *The Origins of Democracy in Tribes, City-States and Nation-States*, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 2, 1309.

⁴⁶ Glassman, “Norse Tribes Before Contact,” 2, 1231.

⁴⁷ Friðriksdóttir says, “...historically, high ranking women in medieval Iceland seemed to have had a clearly defined role and realm of power *innan stokks* “within the domestic sphere” as heads of households, symbolized by the bunch of keys, hanging at their belt, and this position is often reflected in literary sources.” (Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 9-10)

⁴⁸ “The public sphere was the realm of (high-status) males: men took part in local and national assemblies, legislation, blood feud, travel, trade, and other business, where women had no official role.” (Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 10); Jesch, 162.

circumvent these structures in order to take control of events.”⁴⁹ Whetting is the act of verbal provocation women in the sagas used to incite men to take revenge that was socially unacceptable for them to take themselves. It served an especially important function for widows and other women who had no male representative.⁵⁰

The Whetter is arguably the most iconic role for saga women to fulfill, and subsequently, the most discussed in scholarship.⁵¹ As will be shown, it also applies to Princess Olga’s legend. Therefore, it deserves a more in-depth explanation. According to Jochens, the Whetter did not incite for the good of the community, but for their own agenda.⁵² Friðriksdóttir says, “...the female inciter uses words that function as speech acts to empower herself to participate in the male sphere.”⁵³ In many whetting scenes, the woman calls the masculinity of the man she is goading into question.⁵⁴ Carol J. Clover, as cited by Friðriksdóttir, makes a salient observation about the mechanisms of whetting: “Clover has shown, many women choose a meal time as the opportune moment to incite; this is the one occasion where they have direct and, most importantly, public access to the man in their own space within the household.”⁵⁵ The choice to incite men in a public atmosphere gave the Whetter’s speech more power because the men could not as easily

⁴⁹ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 10.

⁵⁰ Jochen’s believes the female Whetter’s inciting behaviors were well substantiated in the sagas, and “served a social function among Icelandic widows who were without close kin and who thereby [powerless and] sought to preserve their position after husbands’ deaths.” (Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 211); According to Jesch, “Whetting as well as bribery appear as tools for an independent widow who has no male kin to act on her own behalf to help her improve her life in the safety and cohesion of the community.” (Jesch, 24); To further illustrate its use among women who had no male representative, Jochens says, “Even the most impressive of the manly and forceful women appear to have exercised their authority most effectively in the absence of the husband.” (Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 214)

⁵¹ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 7.

⁵² Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 132.

⁵³ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 25.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; “Meal times have a special place in the literary representation of blood feud.” (Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 150)

say no without their manhood and honor being called into question, as if the women prompted them in private.

A Fresh Look at Women's Roles in the Sagas

More recently, Friðriksdóttir discovered possibilities for expanding the women's roles in the sagas. Friðriksdóttir believes that while "there is much critical value in [the] model influenced by the second-wave feminist agenda to identify and combat the ways in which patriarchal power structures oppress women..." it is not without its problems.⁵⁶ While the above categories created by Jenny Jochens have served to provide a general explanation for what became the most common roles for Viking women, Friðriksdóttir actually found it could be too limiting. Researchers only interpreted saga women according to these four narrow roles - leading to skewed research results of female saga characters and their motivations.⁵⁷ Friðriksdóttir discovered there are other types of women's roles that need exploration. She saw a need to discuss "Female characters that gain agency without stigma and thus do not fit into its paradigms of women...[and as such] are largely excluded from the analysis..." This oversight was leaving behind a subset of women in the Icelandic sagas whose "...possible meanings [were] not yet accounted for."⁵⁸

In *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words and Power*, Friðriksdóttir sought for ways to bring more saga women's stories to light and expand the roles of women in the sagas. She studied a more diverse body of the sagas, and created new roles

⁵⁶ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

from the stories she found. Her book analyzes Norse women of the sagas based upon acts - in other words - how they gained agency⁵⁹ through their roles - in a culture that limited their power. Friðriksdóttir's expansionary approach to the roles of women in the sagas helped make this study possible.

The categories and sub-roles Friðriksdóttir explores that are applied to this study are as follows: Women Speaking -Wise Words, showcases Types of Female Wisdom such as Resourcefulness, Innate Intelligence, and more; Royal and Aristocratic Women – discusses Queens of Legend, Mothers of Kings, Heads of Royal Households, and Whettters; Lastly, The Female Ruler. One additional women's role – that of widows - will be assessed from Friðriksdóttir's new book *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World*. It includes a section on Widows – with a sub-section on Mourning, Lament, and Whetting. This is not an exhaustive list. Olga's story will be analyzed for parallels between her actions and these roles from the sagas. The three overall categories from *Women in Old Norse Literature* that are most pertinent to a study of Olga are – The Female Ruler, Royal and Aristocratic Women and Women Speaking.⁶⁰ Notably, Women Speaking -Wise Words, is a new role examined by Friðriksdóttir, but as yet unnamed. This role will be referred to as a Wise Woman (of Peace).

Due to its novelty, the Wise Woman (of Peace) will be outlined below. To reiterate, “The female inciter is the most prominent old Norse female stereotype...”⁶¹ Friðriksdóttir discovered a “less discussed counter image [to the inciter], the wise woman, who advocates peace rather than violence...So pervasive is this figure in the

⁵⁹ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 12.

⁶⁰ Friðriksdóttir's category of Monstrous Women was left out as it assesses giantesses in saga myth. Women and Magic was also left out. These saga roles do not apply to Princess Olga's story.

⁶¹ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 25.

fornaldarsögur⁶² that she is arguably a stereotype associated with that genre.”⁶³

Friðriksdóttir is the first to document the Wise Woman (of Peace) in saga literature and to “[analyze] the content and function of her advice.”⁶⁴ Two important differences between a traditional Whetter and a Wise Woman (of Peace) are, “they are rarely motivated by their own individual agendas or sense of honor, and they keep within the limits of a more traditional socially conformist female image.”⁶⁵ And importantly, “Their pacific and prudent advice has positive results...”⁶⁶ Friðriksdóttir points out that “The association of women with wisdom and good counsel is pervasive in Old Norse-Icelandic literary sources.” In this regard, Olga’s legendary reputation as a wise woman has ties to this Scandinavian cultural value as will be demonstrated. The saga role Wise Woman (of Peace) only has a minor application to Princess Olga’s legend, but it now has a title.

Inversely, the role of a mother-of-kings (or *konungamóðir*) is eminently applicable to Olga’s story, and therefore necessary to discuss in more detail. Olga reigned as a regent for her son in Kievan Rus’. Friðriksdóttir places *konungamóðir* under her category the Female Ruler. According to Friðriksdóttir in cases of multiple royal wives (common among the Vikings before Christianity), “If a woman succeeded in placing [her] son on the throne, [she] could act as ruler, either solely or jointly with the son—depending on his age and other factors—enabling them to gather supporters, resources, and power.”⁶⁷ There are sub-roles below the Female Ruler category that will be utilized as well.

⁶² Old Norse Icelandic sagas of Scandinavian myths and legends.

⁶³ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 25.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

Gendering The Vikings/Kievan Rus'

Gendered Silences

Research on the topic of women in Kievan Rus' is not an easy task. The problem stems from too few sources, and too many "silences" as anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot says of historiographical gaps in topics.⁶⁸ These silences exist both in the primary historical records of Rus', and the interpretations of the archaeological records of Eastern Europe.⁶⁹ They exist where Scandinavian goods are found, and where women's items are found. These silences speak volumes – and those that are the loudest, are the lack of information in the written sources, and lack of thorough interpretation of the material culture pertaining to the lives of Viking women.⁷⁰ This absence of women in the sources of Kievan Rus' is reflected in the historiography of Kievan Rus' and of the Vikings overall. The focus on male-dominated analysis of the Vikings is obvious.⁷¹ One wonders if the study of Viking men has been so weighty because the archaeologists and historical researchers of the past century-plus were historically men, thus leading to an

⁶⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

⁶⁹ Wladyslaw Duczko says, "The most visible Norse archaeological finds from Eastern Europe are female personal ornaments. This fact is of importance because warriors and traders occupy a primary position in the universal picture of Viking Russia and if women are mentioned they are often regarded as slaves transported to Islamic markets for sale. The presence of Norse women should be given more space in an examination of Rus society. Women were a part, a decisive one, of families, a part that to great extent was responsible for their Norse identity...the material culture of women...is so salient, so tangibly present in archaeological sources..." Wladyslaw Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe*, Northern World, North Europe and the Baltic c. 400-1700 AD, Peoples, Economies and Cultures, edited by Barbara Crawford et al., vol. 12. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 9.

⁷⁰ Duczko, 9; According to Anne Stalsberg, "Feminist and gender archaeology developed not least as a reaction against research that did not duly include the female half of humanity or focus on that half in research, analyses, and syntheses. It was, and still is, necessary not only to make women consciously visible in research, but also to understand why women who are clearly visible in the archaeological record could be so neglected by scholars in historical generalizations." Anne Stalsberg, "Visible Women Made Invisible: Interpreting Varangian Women in Old Russia," in *Gender and the Archaeology of Death*, edited by Bettina Arnold and Nancy L. Wicker (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2001), 65.

⁷¹ Jesch, 1-3.

androcentric view of Viking life, or if it stemmed from the fact that historically, as the saying goes, ‘it is a man’s world.’ The fact remains, there was little written about women in the past, and there has been little written about Viking women until near the turn of the 20th century.

The first published book on the topic of gendering the Vikings was *Women in the Viking Age* written by Judith Jesch in 1991. In the beginning of her groundbreaking book, Jesch, discusses the absence of Viking women from scholarly analysis at length.⁷² In the last 20 years, more has been written about the subject of Viking women than ever before, but it is slow going. There are factors that make gendering the Vikings difficult, as will be discussed below. Historians and archaeologists together have begun trying to fill in the gaps left by a historically, male-favored approach which led to studying only half of the population. The author contacted Judith Jesch concerning more recent research on the lives of women among the eastern Vikings or Kievan Rus’, to which she replied, “There has been quite a bit written in the last thirty years [on Scandinavians in Kievan Rus’] but not much on women...”⁷³ Therefore, the need to gender Viking history, especially concerning Kievan Rus’, is still ongoing.

⁷² Jesch surmised, “Women’s history has penetrated many areas, but is only just beginning to have an impact on viking studies. This book is an attempt to bring into prominence the invisible women of the Viking Age. And it was written out of a belief that, even if we choose to retain a narrow definition of ‘vikings’ as murderous, roving males, we cannot possibly study them without an understanding of the whole of the historical period during which they operated, and of both the culture that they came from and those which they, to a greater or lesser degree, affected. For the study of such a substantial period of time and such a variety of cultures to ignore the experiences of half the population would be a nonsense.” (Jesch, 3)

⁷³ Dr. Judith Jesch, Professor at the Centre for the Study of the Viking Age, in Nottingham, England, email to author, February 13, 2020.

Gendering the Sources

Across many disciplines feminists decry the role of patriarchal systems of power in the suppression of women. The subject of history is no exception. As scholar Jenny Jochens describes in the preface to her book *Women in Old Norse Society*, “A chief concern of women’s history in its early days was to find, in the words of Natalie Davis, ‘women worthies,’ women who had made important contributions to the cultures of the past but had been forgotten by (male) historians.”⁷⁴ She goes on to say her work in Old Norse literature – and especially the women of Icelandic sagas – arose “...out of an emerging suspicion that the saga “worthies” did not represent flesh-and-blood women from the pagan age in which they had been situated or from the Christian age of the saga writers themselves, but that they were images formed in men’s imagination.”⁷⁵ Jochens further elaborates, “Although women’s own voices cannot be separated from this predominantly male chorus, the myriad of female figures generated by male authors do divide readily into two groups. The first group includes portraits of divine figures and heroic women⁷⁶...These images were created by male poets and later elaborated by prose writers...[and]...were constructed by 13th century authors and historians from their observations of contemporary society and combined with oral tradition and deductions about the world of their Pagan ancestors.”⁷⁷ Jochen’s observations of women in Old Norse literature aptly describe the set of circumstances regarding Olga’s story in the

⁷⁴ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), ix.

⁷⁵ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, ix.

⁷⁶ According to Jochens, “The second group offers comparatively mundane descriptions of ordinary women in both Pagan and Christian settings in Iceland and Norway;” (Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, x) but because of this study’s focus on Olga, who was a royal Princess of Kievan Rus’, this group does not apply to the current study and will be left out.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Primary Chronicle as well. The many similarities reveal a comparison is appropriate between the Icelandic sagas of the Viking world in the west, with the legend of Olga in the *Primary Chronicle* of the Viking world in the east.

In the sources, many aspects of a woman's story are shaped by societal views about the roles of women. These aspects include, but are not limited to, women's occupations – what work is allowed and expected by women; women's thoughts and actions – whether they are acceptable, and whether they can be recorded (by themselves or anyone else); and women's positions in society, and therefore their access to power, both social and legal. These ideas about the role of women in society even influenced whether women are included within the histories - more often they are not. When they are included, their lives eke out very little space in the sources. For these reasons, since the feminist movement began, it has become of interest to gender disciplines and shed light on the lives of women. But again, gendering the history of Kievan Rus' proves especially difficult.

Gender in Kievan Rus' Sources

There are few primary sources containing information about women in Kievan Rus'. The focus on the history of the Rus' is decidedly male. Noting this lack of women, Jesch remarks, "Other than Olga, women are most conspicuous by their absence in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*..."⁷⁸ In the eastern European sources, the women written about are limited to one social class: royal women. Royal women in the sources were mentioned for what they did to support men, i.e. who they married, what dowries they

⁷⁸ Jesch, 115.

brought to a family, what heirs they produced, etc.⁷⁹ Across the Viking world, noblewomen had very strict expectations for their lives. They were used to seal alliances, bring or solidify prestige to a dynasty, produce heirs, and rule as regents when necessary until a new king was on the throne (after which, the queen regnant typically became inconsequential again). Even royal women didn't have many options – for widows and maidens alike – their two main options were to (re)marry or become a nun. A possible third option of ruling as co-regent was less often available but will be discussed in detail further down, as it applies to Olga's story. There is a lag in the gendering of history in Eastern Europe as compared to the west for various reasons but that is outside the purview of this study. In sum, more work needs to be done. This study attempts to add to the work of gendering Kievan Rus' sources.

Entries in the *Primary Chronicle* are typically succinct when it comes to the details of women. Natalia Zajac says, “Western sources record more about women in general than do Rus' chronicles,” and “...sometimes they only consider worthy of note the bare fact that a marriage took place and the male children who resulted from it.”⁸⁰ Though Olga's story is in most ways quite exceptional, her early life falls into the typical silence. A perfect example is the first mention of her in the *Primary Chronicle* when she was brought to marry Igor', the son of Rurik. The entry, dated 903, says, “A wife, Olga by name, was brought to him from Pskov.”⁸¹ Notice the perfunctory nature of the information.

⁷⁹ For more information on the lives of Rus' Princesses, see Natalia Anna Makaryk Zajac, “Women Between West and East: the Inter-Rite Marriages of the Kyivan Rus' Dynasty, ca. 1000-1204” (PhD Diss., University of Toronto, 2017). <http://hdl.handle.net/1807/98793>.

⁸⁰ Zajac, 165.

⁸¹ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 64.

Gender in Icelandic Sources

The Icelandic sources have much more about women than any other Scandinavian sources. However, in regard to royal women, a lack of details similar to the sources of the eastern Vikings is found. Like other ruling classes of Europe in the Early Middle Ages, Scandinavian groups were highly interconnected. There were many family ties and marriages among the nobility. There are stories of Icelanders going to Rus', and Kievan Rus' princesses being married to kings in France, Norway and powerful persons in Iceland.⁸² But, these women are seldom mentioned in Eastern European sources. This lack of information is highlighted by Friðriksdóttir who says, "Many queens and princesses appear in the *konungasögur* of whom the reader learns nothing more than their name, whom they marry, and who their children are, and in many cases their only role is to be exchanged between families and political negotiations and settlements, and to produce an heir. In some instances, they function as a vessel for the Royal line [but only in cases where] the throne [could] be inherited through the female line (*kvenkné*)."⁸³

The Icelandic sagas are discussed among small academic circles comprising those who study Old Norse and Scandinavian culture. Outsiders to academia may know that there are women represented in these sagas. However, they may not realize that amongst the few images we do have of Scandinavian women in the Viking Age, most of these representations of women come directly from the Icelandic sagas. For this reason, scholars who study Viking women have realized their significance in analyzing them. As a scholarly forerunner on the topic of Viking women, Jesch asserts, "Any study of the

⁸² For more information on the lives of Rus' Princesses, see Natalia Anna Makaryk Zajac, "Women Between West and East: the Inter-Rite Marriages of the Kyivan Rus' Dynasty, ca. 1000-1204" (PhD Diss., University of Toronto, 2017). <http://hdl.handle.net/1807/98793>.

⁸³ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 81.

Viking Age has to come to terms with the testimony of Old Icelandic literature and it would be almost impossible to write about the period without taking this into account.”⁸⁴ Because of this, researchers who focus on gendering Viking and/or Scandinavian history find the Icelandic Sagas the crucial resource to study. One can’t gender the Vikings, without encountering the sagas.

Princess Olga of Kievan Rus’

Olga – in the Sources

Other historians have noted the ties between Olga’s legend in the *Primary Chronicle* and the women of the Icelandic sagas. As previously mentioned, Jesch herself commented on it.⁸⁵ However, until now no one has studied the ways Viking women are represented in the sagas as a means to evaluate Olga’s heritage, which will be the focus of this study. Outside the purview of this topic, another area of possible research is a comparison between Olga and/or other Kievan Rus’ women and specific saga characters. For example, according to Friðriksdóttir, Gunnhildr in the *konungasögur* has an exceptional status, and the “image that emerges from the different accounts [in the sources] is striking.”⁸⁶ Olga was also a woman of exceptional status. She was the first and

⁸⁴ Jesch, 181.

⁸⁵ After noting the cultural parallels that mirror many saga tales, Jesch remarks, “Nora Chadwick wrote that the ‘entire story of Olga’s relations with the Derevlans reads exactly like a Norse saga’. But if we are suspicious of her early adventures, there can be no doubt that she ruled in the Principality of Kiev for many years. The rather fanciful account in the *Primary Chronicle* must be based on memories of that rule and indeed on its visible results, as the chronicler points out.” (Jesch, 114); Vernadsky also references Chadwick’s analysis of Olga saying, “N.K. Chadwick thinks that Olga was Oleg’s daughter. Be this as it may, it appears that Olga’s prestige was high among both the Russes and the Varangians.” (Vernadsky, 272) He cites, N.K.Chadwick, *The Beginnings of Russian History* (Cambridge, 1946), 21.

⁸⁶ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 83.

only Princess regnant of Kievan Rus',⁸⁷ the first ruler in her dynasty to convert to Christianity,⁸⁸ the first female saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church⁸⁹ and the only Kievan Rus' princess to have her story told in the *Primary Chronicle*. Told in two parts, Olga's account and the description of her character also differ (pre-baptism vs. post-baptism). The first part is of her revenge on a neighboring tribe for the murder of her husband and it takes place when she is still a pagan Viking woman, it has multiple layers, contains a series of revenge scenarios, and showcases an epic whetting scene. The second part is the story of her baptism in Constantinople where she slyly avoids a proposal from the emperor. After her conversion she is described differently from the account of her pagan past. She is mentioned in few outside sources.⁹⁰

Olga - Varangian Background

Much of what historians believe about Olga is based upon inferences from the few details provided throughout the text of the *Primary Chronicle*. Nothing is recorded about Olga's life before she married Igor', and very little was written about her before his death forty-two years later. Was their marriage made for a trade deal/alliance with a wealthy Varangian family that had ties back to Sweden? We may never know completely, but there are some things that can be reasoned out about her heritage. Her

⁸⁷ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, "Genealogy of the Rurikids in the Period Covered by the Primary Chronicle," Fold-out between pages 298-299.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 87.

⁸⁹ Abbot Andronik Trubachev, "Canonization of saints in the Russian Orthodox Church," Section 1: Canonization of saints in the 11th century – 1547, from THE ABC OF FAITH, nested under - Saints and Holiness, accessed 11/01/2020 at 15:25. https://azbyka.ru/kanonizaciya-svyatyx-v-russkoj-pravoslavnoj-cerkvi#1_kanonizatsija_svjatykh_v_xi_v%20%80%94_1547_g.

⁹⁰ Such as *De ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae*, written by Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus. (Jesch, 114-115); And "a much later *Life* (in a manuscript from the sixteenth century)." (Jesch, 111)

background is now thought to be Scandinavian. Some scholars, like Jesch are undecided based on little evidence, but there are things that tie Olga to a Varangian heritage, starting with her name.

Both Jesch and Vernadsky agree that her name is from the Scandinavian Helga, further supporting her Varangian origins.⁹¹ Jesch says, it is impossible to know, as her name could have been changed upon marriage to Igor'.⁹² Zajac shows evidence that this did happen with princesses who were married to rulers outside of Kievan Rus' and vice versa.⁹³ Perhaps her parents were Varangian colonists who had been established in Pskov for some time, even a few generations, and preferred the Slavicized version of Helga. Examination of the Table of Princes for the Rurikids shows Norse naming conventions did not hold out very long. They were one of the first things to go when the culture began to become more amalgamated. Olga and Igor' themselves named their son Svyatoslav – an obviously Slavic name. This is likely only evidence of a culture beginning the process of coming into its own as Rus' instead of Varangian, Slavic or Finnic. In a Greek (foreign) source that mentions her, her name was recorded as Elga.⁹⁴ However, if she was born with a Slavic name (Olga) and her name was changed because she married into a Varangian dynasty, her name is more likely to have been recorded as the Scandinavian Helga by the Kievan Rus' chronicler instead of reverting back to her natal name of Olga. Or finally, maybe her name always was Helga, but had been Slavicized by the chronicler

⁹¹ Vernadsky, 272. "Olga's name is Norse, Helga (feminine form of Helgi, Oleg)." Building on this, Jesch says, Olga "...was a lady with the good Scandinavian name of Helga (she gave the name Olga to the Russian language)." (*Women in the Viking Age*, 111)

⁹² Jesch, 111.

⁹³ Zajac, 31,70, 95, 181, 217, 219, etc.

⁹⁴ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae*, as cited in Jesch, 114.

200 years later when he wrote her legend, and he changed it to Olga. Regardless, her name has definite Scandinavian ties.

In addition, Jesch says a sixteenth-century source reports that Olga's parents spoke the Varangian language.⁹⁵ That her parents are historically known as speaking Swedish is a very important clue to Olga's heritage. Language is intimately tied to personal identity, culture, and world-view. Also, it is well documented by linguistic anthropologists that those who speak the language of the ruling class have more access to education, social mobility, wealth and power – all things a good candidate would require to marry the prince of Kievan Rus'. Advantageous marriages among elites and royalty/nobility have been a common practice since ancient times, and even in its infancy Kievan Rus' was no different. Since Olga was brought to marry the heir apparent of Kievan Rus', she must have come from a family of high standing. Vernadsky asserts "She probably was a Norse [or Varangian] princess."⁹⁶ The only information the *Primary Chronicle* provides is that she came from Pskov. Though brief, this tidbit acts as supporting evidence of her Varangian origins as well.⁹⁷ Pskov was a perfect place for a node on a Varangian river trade route, with easy access to the greater Scandinavian world along the Baltic, and was a Varangian trading center, adding credence to claims that Olga's background was Varangian.

⁹⁵ Jesch, 111. "Historians dispute whether Olga was of Scandinavian or of Slavic origin. There is little...evidence...except her name...and a much later *Life* (in a manuscript from the sixteenth century), which says that her parents were 'of the Varangian tongue'."

⁹⁶ Vernadsky, 272.

⁹⁷ Pskov is on the Velikaya river in what is today, western Russia near southeastern Estonia. The Velikaya river has its mouth in Lake Pskovskoe. From Lake Pskovskoe by way of another river – the Narva – it is very easily possible to reach the Gulf of Finland and thus the Baltic Sea.

When Olga was born, it had been less than three decades since Rurik came from Sweden to rule in Kievan Rus' in 862.⁹⁸ Olga's husband Igor' was the first generation of Rurikids born in Kievan Rus', probably in the mid-870s. He followed the instruction⁹⁹ of Oleg who was Varangian. The *Primary Chronicle* describes a treaty initiated in 912 by Oleg, between Kievan Rus' and the Byzantines - ruled jointly by emperors Leo and Alexander.¹⁰⁰ Oleg's retainers listed in the treaty almost all had Scandinavian names, showing the heavy influence of Varangians over Slavs in his court. The cultural ties to the Varangian homeland were all still very strong. This treaty is recorded almost a decade after Olga's marriage to Igor' in 903. Oleg's preference for Varangians in his retinue suggests he was most likely to have chosen a princess for Igor' from a Varangian family rather than a Slavic one.

⁹⁸ The Varangians had already been actively trading in the Baltic for a long time at this point and had been utilizing the river routes for trading as well. Wladyslaw Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe, Northern World, North Europe and the Baltic c. 400-1700 AD, Peoples, Economies and Cultures*, edited by Barbara Crawford et al., vol. 12. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 2-3. However, among the various people groups attracted to the trading centers, of Kievan Rus' archaeological findings show there was a slow process of cultural homogenization. (Ibid., 3) At his death Rurik designated Oleg "...who belonged to his kin," as Igor's foster-father and regent. (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 60) At the time of Olga and Igor's marriage in 903, the ruler of Kievan Rus' was Oleg, and had been for about almost two-and-a-half decades.

⁹⁹ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 64.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 65-66. "This is the copy of the treaty concluded under the Emperors Leo and Alexander. We of the (33) Rus' nation: Karl, Ingjald, Farulf, Vermund, Hrollaf, Gunnar, Harold, Karni, Frithleif, Hroarr, Angantyr, Throand, Leithulf, Fast, and Steinvith, are sent by Oleg, Great Prince of Rus', and by all the serene and great princes and the great boyars under his sway, unto you, Leo and Alexander and Constantine, Great Autocrats in God, Emperors of the Greeks, of the maintenance and proclamation of the long-standing amity which joins Greeks and Russes, in accordance with the desires of our Great Princes and at their command, and in behalf of all those Russes who are subject to the hand of our Prince."

If Olga was born circa 890, as is commonly believed,¹⁰¹ when she married Igor' in 903, she was around thirteen years of age.¹⁰² The death of Igor' is recorded in 945.¹⁰³ Therefore Olga spent forty-two years as his wife before anything else about her is recorded, outside of mentioning her name in a peace treaty with Byzantium in 945.¹⁰⁴ Because so few details of her life were recorded, scholars are left with many questions. What happened in Olga's life during the three decades under the rule of her husband Prince Igor'? The answer is unfortunately indiscernible, but some historians do have theories. Olga was married from thirteen years old and had Svyatoslav in her late 40s proving she was fertile, so unless she had an adulterous affair, Igor' was also capable of producing heirs. It is probable, that Olga had other children during her marriage, prior to the birth of Svyatoslav.¹⁰⁵ If true, they were likely daughters, because no other children are recorded, and as is typical in the sources of Kievan Rus', daughters are not always mentioned. Or, in the case of children of either gender at this time, they may not have survived infancy or childhood.

¹⁰¹ Vernadsky, 272; The Orthodox Church in America, "Blessed Olga (in Baptism Helen), Princess of Russia," accessed on 10/24/2020 at 11:23, <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2019/07/11/102003-blessed-olga-in-baptism-helen-princess-of-russia>.

¹⁰² Vernadsky, 272. Vernadsky agrees with this age at marriage.

¹⁰³ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 78.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 73-74. This peace treaty under Igor' still shows a very heavy Varangian influence in the Kievan Rus' *druzhina*. "We are the envoys from the Russian nation: Ivar, envoy of Igor', Great Prince of Rus', and the general envoys as follows: Vefast representing Svyatoslav, son of Igor'; Isgaut for the Princess Olga; Slothi for Igor', nephew of Igor'; Oleif for Vladislav; Kanitzar for Predslava; Sigbjorn for Svanhild, wife of Oleif; Freystein for Thorth; Leif for Arfast; Grim for Sverki; Freystine for Haakon, nephew of Igor'; Kari for Stoething; Karlsefni for Thorth; Hegri for Efling; Voist for Voik; Estr for Amund; (47) Freystein for Bjorn; Yatving for Gunnar; Sigried for Halfdan; Kill for Klakki; Steggi for Jotun; Sverki; Hallvarth for Guthi; Frothi for Throand; Munthor for Ut; the merchants Authun, Authulf, Ingivald, Oleif, Frutan, Gamal, Kussi, Heming, Thorfrid, Thorstein, Bruni, Hroald, Gunnfast, Freystein, Ingjald, Thorbjorn, Manni, Hroald, Svein, Styr, Halfdan, Tirr, Askbrand, Visleif, Sveinki Borich: sent by Igor', Great Prince of Rus', and from each prince and all the people of the land of Rus'..."; *Druzhina* means princely retinue. For more see Vernadsky, 281-284.

¹⁰⁵ Vernadsky, 271.

Olga's Legendary Revenge and Saga Roles

Olga – Revenge Part One

When Olga's husband Igor' became Prince of Rus', a nearby Slavic tribe, the Derevlans, gave him some resistance,¹⁰⁶ but in 914 he conquered them, "...and after conquering them, he imposed upon them a tribute¹⁰⁷ larger than the previous Prince's."¹⁰⁸ In 945, after nearly three decades of rule over the Derevlans, Igor' visited them with his men to again collect tribute, then headed home. However, he changed his mind and decided to go back with only his retinue and demand more payment. The people of Dereva convinced their prince to kill Igor'. So, the Derevlans came forth from [their] city...and slew Igor' and his company..."¹⁰⁹ leaving Olga a widow.¹¹⁰ After their victory, the Derevlans reasoned it would be advantageous for their prince to marry Olga and inherit the land of Rus' through marriage allowing manipulation of her young son. Little did the people of Dereva know, that the Princess of Kiev would not be easily influenced, or exactly what they would unleash with their calculated decision to murder

¹⁰⁶ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 71.

¹⁰⁷ Tribute was a type of tax payment the Viking groups imposed on the conquered. In the western sources, it was called *danegeld* – an extortionary payment made to prevent further attacks. The Vikings in Kievan Rus' practiced collecting tribute as part of their economy. Tribute could be in money, or in kind – i.e. goods like swords, animal pelts, or other desirable local products, like wax or honey. If the tribute collectors could not get their desired tax from the cities in their territories, they resorted to terror and would take payment in people; The Vikings operated a large slave trade throughout the Scandinavian world and sold many people to markets across the Baltic and through Russia - to the British Isles, Iceland, in the west and among the Muslim caliphates and Byzantine empire to the east and south.

¹⁰⁸ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 71.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹¹⁰ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 147. Friðriksdóttir writes of saga widows, "The ubiquity of widows and written sources - weather sagas or runic inscriptions - suggests ...the widespread use of violence meant that men were more likely to die an untimely death than women. Some never returned from Viking Expeditions abroad, others died in accidents, storms, blizzards, skirmishes or blood feuds..."

her husband. They made the fatal mistake of underestimating the enemy, assuming as a woman, she would be an easy target to manipulate for their own ends.

Thinking to influence her in her time of grief, the Derevlians sent twenty of their best men to Olga to announce that they had done her a favor by killing her husband, because he was a greedy, evil man, and that she should marry their good prince instead.¹¹¹ Outwardly showing hospitality, and honoring her guests, as a good Viking woman,¹¹² Olga received them and gave them platitudes, while simultaneously setting in motion a plan for revenge. This highlights both her Innate Intelligence for scheming and revenge.¹¹³ She instructed the Derevlian representatives in what she wanted them to do and say – letting them think that she agreed – and then she dismissed them.¹¹⁴ However, as soon as she sent them back to their boat, “Olga gave command that a large deep ditch should be dug...outside the city.”¹¹⁵ After that, she had the men of Dereva carried in by the people of Kiev in their boat as if they were being honored, and had the Derevlian men thrown into the trench, boat and all.¹¹⁶ Here, part of her personality is revealed by the narrator: after they were unceremoniously dumped into the trench, Olga archly, “...bent over and inquired whether they found the honor to their taste...She then commanded that they should be buried alive, and they were thus buried.”¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 78-79.

¹¹² Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 40. Hospitality was an important part of Germanic and Norse culture and is described in the sagas. Friðriksdóttir says, it was “an ancient...social obligation that should be fulfilled on principle...[and] has...an additional strategic benefit in [some contexts].”

¹¹³ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 29.

¹¹⁴ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 79.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Olga had quite creatively upheld her responsibility to avenge her slain spouse, an ancient clan custom practiced by many groups, including Slavic¹¹⁸ and Norse cultures,¹¹⁹ and an extensive theme in the sagas of the Icelanders.¹²⁰ But she didn't stop there; she sent a message to the Derevlans, that if they really wanted her to come marry their prince Mal, they should send their most distinguished men to accompany her back to him with the proper honor she was due.¹²¹ So the Derevlans "...gathered together the best men who governed the land of Dereva, and sent them to her."¹²² Again, demonstrating the importance of hospitality, when they arrived, "Olga commanded that a bath should be made ready, and invited them to appear before her after they had bathed."¹²³ But, it was another trick; "Olga's men closed up the bathhouse behind them, and she gave orders to set it on fire from the doors, so that the Derevlans were all burned to death."¹²⁴ One would think Olga's desire for revenge must surely be satisfied at this point, but she had more in store for the Derevlans.

¹¹⁸ Vernadsky, 13. On ancient clan culture "All of the members of the clan were bound to help each other and to defend each other period in the case of an offence by an outsider against any member of the clan or murder, vengeance was the sacred duty of kinsman. If the murderer could not be found or reached, a kinsman of his had to be killed. 'Blood is washed off by blood' was the traditional rule of behaviour. The result of the custom was constant blood feuds."

¹¹⁹ "Clan revenge, or clan retribution for killings or thefts, typified North society. The most powerful principle imposed on members of a clan was to participate in the feuds which involved kin and clan could extend to between 20 and 50 households." Ronald M. Glassman, "Marriage, Clans, and Clan Retribution," in *The Origins of Democracy in Tribes, City-States and Nation-States*, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 2, 1279. "So important was clan retribution that it defined the bonds of kinship as nothing else did. In fact, the only time that clans are mentioned in the Norse sagas is when clan vengeance and violent retribution are demanded and carried out." (Glassman, *Ibid.*)

¹²⁰ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 150.

¹²¹ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 79.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

Olga - The Whetter

This section of Olga's story has a large amount of parallels with Viking women's roles and culture. She sent a message to Dereva and instructed them that she was coming to them. Olga asked them to prepare a massive amount of mead¹²⁵ in Iskorosten, so that she could "weep over [Igor's] grave and hold a funeral feast for him."¹²⁶ Vernadsky, says women were considered born weepers, and lamenting was a crucial skill practiced in mourning by ancient Slavs,¹²⁷ but it was not common only to them. Celtic women keened and according to the sagas, Scandinavian women also lamented.¹²⁸ To the Vikings, a lamenting widow was culturally expected; when a widow did not fulfill this duty, like Guðrún of the sagas, it was cause for concern.¹²⁹ Thinking their plan had worked, the people of Iskorosten quickly followed her instructions. "Taking a small escort, Olga made the journey with these, and upon her arrival at Igor's tomb, she wept for her husband.

After this Olga bade her followers pile up a great mound – a common Viking burial practice for a chieftain¹³⁰ - and when they had piled it up, she also gave command that a funeral feast should be held."¹³¹ Vikings held funeral Ale-feasts for the dead. After this, the Derevliaus began to feast and drink, and ever the gracious hostess, "...Olga bade

¹²⁵ An alcohol made from fermented honey.

¹²⁶ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 80.

¹²⁷ Vernadsky, 143, 145.

¹²⁸ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 149-150; "...when a Norse woman first heard of her relative's death, she was expected to demonstrate her grief to others through standard, culturally recognized expressions of lament. (Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 150)

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹³⁰ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 189. The Slavs instead practiced ritual burning for funerals. Vernadsky, 11; Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 57.

¹³¹ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 80.

her followers to wait upon them.”¹³² This again highlights her playing her role as a hospitable woman. However, her duplicitousness was soon to be revealed again. Now, we see Olga the Whetter: “When the Derevlans were drunk, she bade her followers fall upon them, and went about herself egging on¹³³ her retinue to the massacre of the Derevlans. So they cut down five-thousand of them...” The added theme of the incitement taking place during a meal can also be applied here and illustrates a further connection.¹³⁴ Surely now Olga’s anger at the Derevlans must have been spent, with her revenge so thoroughly executed, “...but Olga returned to Kiev and prepared an army to attack the survivors.”¹³⁵

Olga - Revenge Part Two

It took about a year, for Olga and her son Svyatoslav to “[gather] a large and valiant army,¹³⁶ and [proceed] to attack the land of the Derevlans.”¹³⁷ This caused them to scatter and take refuge in their cities, whereupon Olga marched to Iskorosten, where her husband had been killed, and began a siege of the city.¹³⁸ When it finally began to dawn on the Derevlans that they had messed with the wrong woman, “The Derevlans barricaded themselves within the city, and fought valiantly from it, for they realized that they had killed the Prince, and to what fate they would in consequence surrender.”¹³⁹

¹³² Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 80.

¹³³ Friðriksdóttir says the word used is *eggja* Old Norse for ‘to incite’. Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 16-17. In English ‘egg on’, is a cognate.

¹³⁴ Friðriksdóttir reiterates the whetting scene is most common at mealtime. (Friðriksdóttir *Valkyrie*, 150)

¹³⁵ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 80.

¹³⁶ These would be hired Varangian troops from abroad, as well as fighting men from tributary tribes in the Kievan Rus’ territory.

¹³⁷ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 80.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

After a year passed of unsuccessful siege on Olga's part, the narrator says, she came up with a new plan. Olga deceived the people of Iskorosten and told them that all the other cities of Dereva had submitted to her as their ruler and paid tribute. However, after the experiences of the previous two years, the Derevlians finally didn't trust her, and "...replied that they would be glad to submit a tribute, but that she was still bent on avenging her husband."¹⁴⁰ Olga proves here, both her Innate Intelligence and her ability to reason and negotiate.¹⁴¹ Putting on a front of forgiveness, Olga is said to have answered, "“Since I have already avenged the misfortune of my husband twice on the occasions when your messengers came to Kiev, and a third time when I held a funeral feast for him, I do not desire further revenge, but I'm anxious to receive a small tribute. After I have made peace with you, I shall return home again.”"¹⁴²

The Derevlians cautiously asked what she wanted from them and offered to pay tribute in honey and furs. Presenting herself with all graciousness and magnanimity, as a Wise Woman (of Peace),¹⁴³ Olga told them that "...she had one small request to make. 'Give me three pigeons,' she said, 'and three sparrows from each house. I do not desire to impose a heavy tribute, like my husband, but I require only this small gift from you, for you are impoverished by the siege.'" The Derevlians were relieved at her seeming reasonableness, and quickly acquiesced to these terms. Again, they went about doing as Olga instructed. After receiving the tribute, she promised the people of Iskorosten that

¹⁴⁰ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 80.

¹⁴¹ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 25, 29.

¹⁴² Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 80-81.

¹⁴³ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 25. This is the only example relating Olga to a Wise Woman (of Peace), but she used it deceptively and for her own ends. Though it was put-on falsely by Olga in order for her to pull off a successful ruse, the gender role of Wise Woman (of Peace) had to already be part of her cultural identity. Credit for the tie to her cultural identity goes to MAJ Nicholas J. Hitt.

she would depart the next day. Believing her anger and desire for revenge had finally been quenched, “The Derevlians re-entered their city with gladness, and when they reported to the inhabitants the people of the town rejoiced.”¹⁴⁴

However, Olga was still not satisfied by her revenge on the Derevlians. One must give her credit for her inventiveness and her ability to hold a grudge. Not only had Olga lied about going home and leaving them in peace, as the story goes, she “...gave to each soldier in her army a pigeon or a sparrow, and ordered them to attach by a thread to each pigeon and sparrow a piece of sulfur bound with small pieces of cloth.”¹⁴⁵ Upon nightfall, “Olga bade her soldiers release the pigeons and the sparrows. So the birds flew to their nests...and the haymows were set on fire. There was not a house that was not consumed, and it was impossible to extinguish the flames, because all the houses caught fire at once.”¹⁴⁶ Importantly, this part of the story shows one of the strongest connections to Olga’s Scandinavian heritage, and a real historical link between her story and several saga stories showing that they had a common source in Scandinavian oral tradition.¹⁴⁷ To add to their punishment, as the people of Iskorosten fled from their burning city, she exacted still further revenge upon them. The narrator says, “...Olga ordered her soldiers to catch them...and captured the elders of the city. Some of the other captives she killed,

¹⁴⁴ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 81.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ According to Jesch, “We may detect the influence of oral tradition, particularly in the account of Olga’s threefold revenge and in the reuse of the ‘incendiary birds’, which is a common motif in literature elsewhere and particularly in Scandinavia. (Jesch, 114); Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor also mention this theme saying, “The legendary account of Olga’s triple revenge is complicated by the introduction of the “incendiary bird” motive, fairly common elsewhere...The legend obviously came into Russia from Scandinavia;” Several versions of Snorri Sturluson’s, *Heimskringla*, are cited here for reference; “And for a similar exploit by Harold Hardrade in Sicily, and a corresponding stratagem by Freidelev before Dublin;” see *Saxo Grammaticus*, and *Edda*.” (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 239) It may be more difficult regarding separating fact from fiction, but for this study it makes uncomplicated the ties between Olga’s legend and the sagas, and further associates Olga as being of Scandinavian heritage.

while she gave others as slaves to her followers. The remnant she left to pay tribute.”¹⁴⁸ She had also lied about wanting to exact a small tribute. As a final judgement, “She imposed upon them a heavy tribute, two parts of which went to Kiev, and the third to Olga in Vyshgorod; for Vyshgorod was Olga’s city.”¹⁴⁹

Olga – The Konungamóðir

Friðriksdóttir, discusses the saga role of konungamóðir, or mother-of-kings, under Royal Women. She begins by questioning “did [konungamóðir] have a specific meaning, implying a socially sanctioned [formal] role of authority?”¹⁵⁰ Based upon her analysis of mother-of-kings, Friðriksdóttir believes, “...the title conceivably had a formal connotation indicating a powerful political role, whether formal and legitimate or not, instead of being merely emblematic of the obvious maternal position of [konungamóðir].”¹⁵¹ Therefore, not every Queen regent was a konungamóðir. Friðriksdóttir also shows, mothers-of-kings were often remarried, likely because “...the queen needed to be neutralized as a threat to the new king, suggesting her considerable scope of power.”¹⁵² This was because, “if they succeeded at placing their son on the throne, they could act as ruler, either solely or jointly with the son - depending on his age and other factors - enabling them to gather supporters, resources, and power.”¹⁵³

The parallels between these strong saga konungamóðir and Princess Olga are striking. By the time she became a widow, Olga was around fifty-five years old, with a

¹⁴⁸ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 81.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 85.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 84.

young son. After Olga had finally avenged her husband's murder to her satisfaction, she took a tour with her son through the lands of Dereva, in essence asserting her dominance over them, setting herself up as a *konungamóðir* and Head of Royal Household.¹⁵⁴ Like Gunnhildr the famous mother-of-kings in *Heimskringla*, it was Olga's job to make sure Svyatoslav would grow up to be Prince of Kievan Rus'. One of the ways Olga did this was to bring her son to battle against the Derevlans. The account says, in "946...when both forces were ready for combat, Svyatoslav cast his spear against the Derevlans. But the spear barely cleared the horse's ears, and struck against his leg, for the prince was but a child."¹⁵⁵ It was recorded in 946, so Svyatoslav may perhaps have been eight at the time and unable to throw a spear with much force.¹⁵⁶ Bringing him to the battle and going through the motions of having him toss the spear served to assert his rightful authority over them. It staked his claim as the prince and heir of Kiev, and the message would have been clear: even though Svyatoslav was a child, he still ruled over the lands of Dereva.¹⁵⁷ Here Olga can again be compared to saga sister Gunnhildr who is another powerful mother-of-kings frequently referred to as *konungamóðir*. Gunnhildr successfully established her own sons on thrones – and ruled jointly with them. The power tied to the

¹⁵⁴ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 84. See section further down for a comparison of Olga's story with the Head of Royal Household saga role.

¹⁵⁵ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 80.

¹⁵⁶ Based on Olga's age at widowhood, the young prince Svyatoslav was close to seven years old when Igor' died in 945. This age was chosen for several reasons. Seven is reasonably old enough for him to have been born and nursed for a few years before Olga reached menopause (assuming she did so at fifty); young enough for him to still be impressionable to outside influence (as the Derevlans had planned with their proposal); and because the *Primary Chronicle* includes a helpful detail and states that he was still a child. (Ibid.) This would place his birth circa 938.

¹⁵⁷ Oleg did something very similar with Svyatoslav's father Igor' when he was a boy about the same age as Svyatoslav was here. In 862, Oleg claimed princely birth (because he was kin of Rurik), and presented Igor' before the leaders of Kiev and "announced that he was the son of Rurik." According to the Chronicler, this was how Oleg claimed the territory of Kiev from two other Varangians named Askold and Dir who were not Rurikid kin. (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 61).

term *konungamóðir* also serves to explain why the Kievan Rus' Princess Regnant's revenge upon the Derevlans was so ruthless, drawn-out and thorough: Olga was asserting herself as a formidable *konungamóðir* and power behind the throne, to the tributary lands of Kievan Rus'.

Olga – Wise Woman

Friðriksdóttir says: “In the *fornaldarsögur*, the predominant human female characters are royal women: princesses (or in some cases aristocratic women) who are normally married off in the course of the narrative, and queens, whose role often seems to be an advisory one. These women are often both beautiful and wise, but usually at least wise; the common phrase used to describe them in the *fornaldarsögur* is *væn ok vitr* “beautiful/promising and wise...”¹⁵⁸ She also says, Viking “women in the *fornaldarsögur* can be skilled negotiators...to reach their ends.”¹⁵⁹ In addition, Friðriksdóttir says of types of Resourcefulness, “One of the ways in which wisdom is manifested in female characters is in their independence and resourcefulness. Women negotiate various perils with skill and tact and rely on their wits rather than physical strength or working through male kin to achieve their aims.”¹⁶⁰ We will see an example of all of these below in the story of Olga's baptism.

After a time of peace, the *Primary Chronicle* then moves on to the story of her baptism at Constantinople in 955¹⁶¹ – ten years after beginning her reign. The story of her religious conversion has equal coverage devoted to it in the *Primary Chronicle* as did her

¹⁵⁸ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 26

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶¹ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 82.

revenge, and perhaps also as much legend.¹⁶² After her conversion to Christianity, the chronicler's tone changes when he writes about Olga in subtle ways which will be discussed further in another section. It should be noted that when discussing her baptism, the chronicler makes his first reference to her appearance, and begins to mention her intellect. The *Primary Chronicle* says, "The reigning emperor was Constantine, son of Leo. Olga came before him, and when he saw that she was very fair of countenance and wise as well, the emperor wondered at her intellect. He conversed with her and remarked that she was worthy to reign with him in his city."¹⁶³ She is given much credit for her crafty thinking in avoiding another proposal, at which point the Emperor admits, "Olga, you have outwitted me."¹⁶⁴ This example highlights her negotiating skills and her intellect/Innate Intelligence as well. In the rest of her account several references are made to her wisdom.¹⁶⁵ One wonders if her age had an influence on her strength, determination and self-worth.

¹⁶² Where Olga's baptism took place is a matter of some debate. It is unclear based on inconsistencies among early Kievan Rus' and Byzantine sources, but the *Primary Chronicle* has it set in Constantinople. Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 82; Vernadsky says, "This information is contradicted by the official record of Olga's reception at the Imperial Palace in Constantinople in Constantine Porphyrogenitus's book *De Ceremoniis Aulae Byzantinae*. This document gives the year 957 as the date of Olga's visit to Constantinople; It also makes it plain that at the time of her visit Olga was already Christian. Most likely, Olga was baptized in Kiev, around 956, and went to Constantinople afterwards. She accepted the Christian name of Helen, which was that of the emperor Constantine's wife." Vernadsky, 272. Also, Jesch remarks, "Constantine's account has a very different emphasis. He mentions no proposal of marriage, for instance. If indeed this ever did take place (and it seems more likely to have been invented by the Russian chronicler to glorify Olga), it is hardly surprising that Constantine would not mention such a humiliation. In keeping with the purpose of his book, Constantine instead concentrates on describing in great detail the official receptions and banquets given for Olga." (Jesch, 114-115)

¹⁶³ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 82.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ The chronicler also makes two more references to Olga's wisdom making a comparison between the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon for human wisdom; and the "sainted Olga [who] sought the blessed wisdom of God...divine wisdom..." (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 83); "... Olga always sought wisdom in this world, and she found a Pearl of great price, which is Christ..." (*Ibid.*); The last entry about her in the *Chronicle* praises her in flowery speech, saying that her preternatural wisdom is what caused her to convert to Christianity and seek the things of God. (*Ibid.*, 87).

After her baptism, she returned to Kiev and "...Olga dwelt with her son Svyatoslav, and she urged him to be baptized, but he would not listen to her suggestion." Svyatoslav is reported to have said to his mother, "'How shall I alone except another faith? My *druzhina* will laugh at that.'" ¹⁶⁶ will laugh at that." ¹⁶⁷ So, this time, Olga's power of speech and persuasion failed her; other mothers of teenage boys can surely sympathize. Not many teenagers are prone to listen to their mothers when it comes to something as serious as changing religions, but especially if they feel peer pressure from their closest social group. However, she does offer him advice ¹⁶⁸ which is another example of a role of Wise Women in the sagas. ¹⁶⁹

Olga – The Head of Royal Household

This section brings up two other questions as yet not satisfactorily answered.

1. How long did Olga rule?
2. When did Svyatoslav reach his majority?

Moving forward in time, according to dates from the *Primary Chronicle*, Olga ruled as regent for nearly twenty years after the death of Igor' from 945-964. Olga would have been nearing seventy-five years old in 964. But, this may not actually be when Svyatoslav came into his role as sole ruler of Kiev, as will be discussed further below.

¹⁶⁶ Vernadsky, 272. As a native Russian speaker, Vernadsky's assessment is based upon the *Povest'*. In English, Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor translated *druzhina* as 'followers'. (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 84) But as discussed earlier *druzhina* was the princely retinue, which shows these were the people closest to Svyatoslav, and he did not want to be thought foolish.

¹⁶⁷ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 83-84.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Friðriksdóttir says, "Most importantly, women are expected to share their wisdom, and men sometimes actively seek their counsel: dispensing prudent advice is a socially sanctioned female gender role." She gives several examples in the sagas. (Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 27)

Friðriksdóttir says it is expected that mothers of boys or young men with a claim to the throne will support their son's candidacy.¹⁷⁰ Compare Olga to saga character Ásta Guðbrandsdóttir who "provides her son with military training and a ship, and honors him when he returns...after his foreign exploits."¹⁷¹ After Olga's conversion, The *Primary Chronicle* says in 964, "When Prince Svyatoslav had grown up and matured, he began to collect a numerous and valiant army."¹⁷² Twenty years of his mother's regency would have made him about twenty-seven years old by this point. From here the chronicler notes for the five years preceding Olga's death, Svyatoslav was driven to go on campaigns to build an empire "...stepping light like a leopard."¹⁷³

Another important question lies hidden between the lines of the *Primary Chronicle*: When did Svyatoslav begin to rule on his own? Vernadsky boldly states, "...until Sviatoslav's coming of age, [Olga] was the actual ruler of Russia,"¹⁷⁴ a point which will now be challenged. To clarify, it should not be disputed Olga was the actual ruler of Kievan Rus' during her regency (as will be discussed further in another section), but should be argued that Olga did not step down as Vernadsky asserts, but continued to rule as co-regent from Kiev while Svyatoslav went on his empire-building campaigns. During one of his many campaigns, in 967, Svyatoslav "...captured eighty towns along the Danube. He took up his residence there, and ruled in Pereyaslavets, receiving tribute from the Greeks [or Byzantines]."¹⁷⁵ Pereyaslavets was a city much farther south from Kiev, on the Danube river which meets the Black Sea in today's eastern Romania. The

¹⁷⁰ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 87.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 84.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Vernadsky, 272.

¹⁷⁵ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 84-85.

last story of Olga in the *Primary Chronicle* before her death reveals that while Svyatoslav had the Kievan military forces and was out expanding his empire, his mother stayed in Kiev. Friðriksdóttir says Heads of Royal Households in the sagas exist, like one of King Burislafr's three daughters, who "reigns over her own land" while sharing power with her father.¹⁷⁶ She continues, "These powerful women are portrayed as having considerable economic independence and resources, and an important basis for their power independent from male kin."¹⁷⁷

All of this applies to Olga throughout her twenty-plus-year reign in Kievan Rus'. After establishing her economy through taxes and laws, she then allowed her son to go on military campaigns while she ruled from Kiev. In 968, a nearby bellicose tribe called the Pechenegs, decided to take advantage of Svyatoslav's absence and "invaded Rus' for the first time."¹⁷⁸ Olga was forced to shut up the city of Kiev, so that she endured a long siege. When things began to get very desperate, word finally reached Svyatoslav who quickly rode to the rescue in 969. At this point, Olga's health had begun to grow weak, likely because of the siege. It is understandable that someone in their mid-seventies, would have a more difficult time recovering from the starvation caused by siege warfare, and described in the *Primary Chronicle*.¹⁷⁹ In fact, she died not long after.

Did Olga step down as Grand Princess of Rus' at some point before her death in 969?¹⁸⁰ During the invasion of the Pechenegs, the *Primary Chronicle* discloses that Olga was not alone in Kiev: "her grandsons, Yaropolk, Oleg, and Vladimir"¹⁸¹ and presumably

¹⁷⁶ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 87.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 84-85.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 85.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 86.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 85.

their anonymous mother(s) resided in Kiev with her. This small scrap of information reveals several important things: first, by 968 when the siege occurred, Svyatoslav already had at least one wife and three male heirs (with the possibility of other children); and second, while Svyatoslav had been absent conquering neighboring tribes for the last four years, the now aging Olga had been left in charge of the capital in Kiev to hold down the fort, so-to-speak. This supports the argument that instead of stepping down, Olga reigned from Kiev as co-regent, with her son. Another clue to this effect, is that a mere three days before Olga's death, while in Kiev, Svyatoslav announced to her, that Pereyaslavets was to be his new capital, Svyatoslav declared, "I do not care to remain in Kiev, but should prefer to live in Pereyaslavets on the Danube, since that is the centre of my realm..."¹⁸² This announcement implied that his mother could continue to stay in Kiev, while he would not. Based on the above analysis, it is clear that Svyatoslav shared the responsibility of ruling with his mother. We can be confident Olga never officially stepped down from ruling in Kievan Rus', but ruled as a Head of Royal Household over Kievan Rus' from her capital in Kiev.¹⁸³ Svyatoslav did not take full reign of Kievan Rus' before Olga's death; he shared his empire with her as a Head of Royal household, until the end of her life. This is another testament to the remarkable woman Olga was and how closely her story matches the roles of strong Heads of Royal Household in the sagas.

¹⁸² Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 86.

¹⁸³ This was notable. In Medieval times, many women who had held power as Regents for their sons either remarried or were sent to be a nun. See Zajac "Women Between West and East: the Inter-Rite Marriages of the Kyivan Rus' Dynasty, ca. 1000-1204" for multiple examples. Olga did neither.

Olga – The Saint

Most scholars have relegated Olga's inclusion in the *Primary Chronicle* to merely 'author bias' due to the facts that Olga was the first ruler of Kievan Rus' to convert to Christianity, and the *Primary Chronicle* was written by a Christian monk. There is an obvious argument for this. It is clear from the *Primary Chronicle* that the monk who authored it in the late eleventh-century¹⁸⁴ venerated Olga for her conversion to Christianity; she is declared: "...the sainted Olga" a few times afterwards.¹⁸⁵ Why did the chronicler do this? Applying positive adjectives to Olga after her conversion, added a value judgement to her actions and behaviors as a Christian woman, over her previous actions as a pagan woman. From this example, and the chronicler's effusive language upon her death,¹⁸⁶ one would think that, by the time the *Primary Chronicle* was compiled, she had already been declared a saint, though this did not happen until the thirteenth century.¹⁸⁷

As the first ruler to convert, Olga was a spiritual leader of Kievan Rus'. The narrator of the *Primary Chronicle* declared in her eulogy, "She was the first from Rus' to enter the kingdom of God, and the sons of Rus' thus praise her as their leader..."¹⁸⁸ However, even taking into account the fact that she was the first ruler to convert, the religious bias of the chronicler is not the only reason Olga's story was included.

¹⁸⁴ Duczko, 203.

¹⁸⁵ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 83.

¹⁸⁶ See Conclusion, page 55.

¹⁸⁷ Trubachev, "Canonization of saints in the Russian Orthodox Church," Section 1: Canonization of saints in the 11th century – 1547.

¹⁸⁸ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 87.

If the chronicler had included Olga's story only because she converted to Christianity and he wanted to highlight her saintly behavior, it would really only explain two things:

1. That Olga and Vladimir¹⁸⁹ each have the longest stories of all the rulers written in the *Primary Chronicle* (male or female); and
2. That Olga and Vladimir were both in the top-five first saints canonized in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Based on comments made in Vladimir's story, the chronicler sometimes included pre-Christian behavior to show that when Christianity was accepted over paganism, God had thereby triumphed over Satan.¹⁹⁰ But this isn't true in Olga's case. Especially interesting is that the chronicler never makes negative judgements of her actions before she became a Christian, as he did with others like Vladimir. As has been mentioned, Olga's legend was valued enough to carry down through many years before it was written, demonstrating her significance as a ruler of Kievan Rus' to the oral historians as well, not only to the Prior who wrote them down. In addition, even as a pagan princess Olga was an admirable woman and worthy of writing about, and though the chronicler praises her virtues more readily after conversion, he does note that according to the oral history, she had some of these admirable qualities even as a child,¹⁹¹ and she did not

¹⁸⁹ Vladimir was Olga's grandson (mentioned in the siege of Kiev) and the second ruler of Kievan Rus' to convert to Christianity.

¹⁹⁰ The chronicler mentions Vladimir's insatiable sexual appetites, then says, "But Vladimir, though at first deluded, eventually found salvation. Great is the Lord, and great is his power..." (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 94)

¹⁹¹ "From her youth up, the sainted Olga always sought wisdom in this world, and she found a Pearl of great price, which is Christ..." (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 83)

convert until she was about 65 years old based on dating in the *Primary Chronicle*, so she lived much more of her life as a pagan princess than as a Christian saint.

Olga - Model of Power

At the core of gender studies is understanding the balance of power in a culture or society. Any discussion of female rulers in history should explore the topic of power: titular vs. real power, hard power vs. soft power, etc.¹⁹² Though the constraints of this study do not allow an in-depth sociological discussion of power, Olga was a ruler of Kievan Rus'. Therefore, at the very least a cursory examination should be made of her outcome in that role to determine both her ability to exert power, her sphere of influence, and her success or failure as a leader. Princess Olga is the only Princess of Kievan Rus' listed on the table of Princes for the Rurikid Dynasty. Though not many specifics of her reign are provided in the *Primary Chronicle*, clues like this, when combined with the *konungamóðir* saga role, leads one to believe she had true power. It is safe to say that Olga was not merely a figurehead.

The very uniqueness of Olga's case is compelling. If women were not meant to wield power under the patriarchal order that created the framework in which the *Primary Chronicle* was written, why was Olga's story told? If the lives of women were meant to be suppressed by patriarchal systems, why would a Prior of the Church – arguably the most powerful patriarchal organization in the Middle Ages - include the story of a woman in his chronicle? And why especially so, if she was a powerful woman, instead of a demure, servile example to women? Therefore, the presence of her story, and the very

¹⁹² Several of the sources utilized for this study discuss a theoretical framework of power, in particular that which is attributed to sociologist Max Weber. Friðriksdóttir, 9; Glassman, ix-x.

lengths of it, is telling, as is the inclusion of the vengeful pre-Christian side of her character, which could be considered unflattering in the Christian times in which it was written.

Olga Law-giver

Princess Olga functioned as the legislative and economic leader of Kievan Rus' and is credited with perhaps the very first standardized legal and economic reforms of Kievan Rus'. After avenging her husband's death, the *Primary Chronicle* says she passed through the lands, "establishing laws, and tribute,"¹⁹³ establishing cities, and having administrative buildings constructed.¹⁹⁴ As mentioned earlier, the economy of Kievan Rus' was based on trade and a system of tribute collection. Vernadsky noted, with her actions, Olga was "...appointing definite quotas for taxes and liabilities of the Drevliane."¹⁹⁵ Therefore, Olga's new standards were important administrative actions. Her measures created a system of economic regulations that standardized the taxes collected among the tributary territories of Kievan Rus', which would prevent another occurrence like the one which led to the death of her husband Igor'. Until she passed these laws, tribute could be exacted at the ruler's whim. These were lasting reforms, and meant that "Annual expeditions for collecting tribute (*poludie*) were replaced by a network of permanent local agencies."¹⁹⁶ The narrator takes pains to note more than once, that the administrative buildings from her reign were still in existence, and the changes she made to collecting tribute were also still in use when the *Primary Chronicle* was

¹⁹³ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 81-82.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Vernadsky, 271.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

written.¹⁹⁷ This is significant as the events were not recorded until two hundred years later. It reveals a pride in Olga and the legislation she instituted while she was leader of Kievan Rus’.

Olga – Military Commander

During the story of her revenge it is made clear Olga was also accepted as a military leader of Kievan Rus’. Vernadsky says, “the Kievan army led by Olga and the *voevoda* Sveneld, stormed the capital of the [Derevlians].”¹⁹⁸ The chronicler has no qualms about portraying her as the military leader and uses examples of direct speech by Olga to the military, saying she ‘gave orders’, ‘commanded’, and ‘bade’ them to do her wishes and to exact revenge.¹⁹⁹ At one point the chronicler even refers to the Kievan Rus’ army gathered to attack Iskorosten, as “her troops.” This proves Olga took part in leading the military. However, this role as military leader only lasted for a portion of her reign. Olga was only the military leader until Svyatoslav reached his majority. He went on frequent campaigns afterward and took most of the military forces with him for those. When the Pechenegs saw Svyatoslav was away, they knew Kiev was left largely unprotected making it an opportune time to attack. Olga was forced to shut herself up in Kiev during the siege, proving she did not have control of a large military force at that time.

¹⁹⁷ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 81-82.

¹⁹⁸ Vernadsky, 271. *Voevoda* means general of the army. (Vernadsky, 270).

¹⁹⁹ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 79-81.

Olga – Extraordinary Princess

As has been shown, the lack of information about women in Kievan Rus' is not uncommon, with one notable exception: the story of Olga. If the exclusion of the stories of other women in the *Primary Chronicle* leads to questions, the fact that Olga's was included – and at length – also leads to questions. Why did Olga's story break the patterns of silence towards women and garner inclusion in the *Primary Chronicle*? As there was nothing written about her previously, her story could easily have been left out by the chronicler. This may have happened to some of the women of the princely line in Kievan Rus', such as Olga's (theoretical) daughters. What makes Olga different is the very reality that her story is included; and not only that, she earned multiple pages in a chronicle where most women were only given the space of one or two sentences, if they are mentioned at all. Perhaps because her story came to the chronicler from the realm of oral history and legend,²⁰⁰ it had more impact. The fact stories of her reign existed as enduring legends carried-on after the passage of over two centuries, shows her rule had great importance to the oral historians of Kievan Rus', not just to the Christian monk who finally penned it. Later princesses closer to the chroniclers' time are included with ever shrinking detail. Olga's story is included in the *Primary Chronicle* in large part because of its importance in the oral tradition of Kievan Rus', and not in spite of it.

Is Olga's stature as Grand Princess the reason she was covered in the *Primary Chronicle*? From a historian's standpoint, one might think yes. But at best it could only partially account for her inclusion – the only women included are royal, but not all got the same amount of space and attention by the chronicler. Did the high-status of royal

²⁰⁰ Jesch, 114; Vernadsky, 316; Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 239.

women earn them a place in the *Primary Chronicle*? No - if inclusion criteria were based solely on royal status Olga's story would not be the only one. A cursory reading through the *Primary Chronicle* shows that after Olga's story, not all royal women were considered her equal. Did the princesses' places of birth matter to the chronicler? No - the natal land of the princesses did not give them any advantage for space and details in the *Primary Chronicle*. Even a foreign princess such as Princess Anna Porphyrogenita of Byzantium, who was the sister of the jointly-ruling emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII, was given little coverage.²⁰¹ In some cases, the princesses are given so little coverage that their names are not even mentioned. For example, the Princess Ingigerd, daughter of Olaf, King of Sweden was married to Olga's great-grandson Yaroslav the Wise, but she is never mentioned by name in the *Primary Chronicle*.²⁰² Therefore, simply being a princess didn't earn women any 'royal treatment' as far as their importance to the chronicler went.

High royal stations did not earn princesses the right to be included either - not even for the woman who achieved the highest title among the princesses of the Rurikid dynasty. Through her marriage to King Henry of the Holy Roman Empire, Princess Eupraxia (Ingigerd's granddaughter) achieved a station higher than that of any other princess of Rus': 'Queen of the Romans and Germans'²⁰³ but she is barely mentioned in

²⁰¹ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 112, 124.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 137. According to Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, the only mention of Ingigerd is in her Greek Saint name – Irene – and it is an indirect association. (*Ibid.*, 258). The *Primary Chronicle* mentions Yaroslav "...founded...the Monastery of St. George and the convent of St. Irene" which were named for himself and his consort. (*Ibid.*, 137) Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, also reveal Ingigerd was given in marriage as part of a deal with her father Olaf Skötkonung, who reigned in Sweden from 995-1022. As part of a family power-struggle in Kievan Rus', Yaroslav hired the services of some Varangians – mercenary Viking warriors – from her father Olaf, and marriage to Olaf's daughter was in the terms. Snorri Sturluson wrote about this event in *Heimskringla*. For further information, see Cross "Yaroslav the Wise". (*Ibid.*, 254)

²⁰³ Zajac, 214-215.

the *Primary Chronicle*. If not titles, then perhaps it was Olga's brazen actions during her memorable mid-life revenge as a new widow that prompted the chronicler to include her; after all, her legend was still known at the time. But this still doesn't give a satisfactory answer. If it was salacious gossip that earned princesses an account in the *Primary Chronicle*, Eupraxia should have had a story longer than Olga's. After a disastrous second marriage, filled with drama appropriate for an HBO television series (such as accusations that she was forced to participate in orgies at her husband's court),²⁰⁴ Eupraxia ran away from her husband and returned home as a divorcée to Kievan Rus' and became a nun.²⁰⁵ But, even after living such a colorful life abroad, in two entries near the end of the *Primary Chronicle*, the chronicler gives but the barest glimpse into her life, in the blandest terms.

Was Olga's role as regent for Svyatoslav the reason that her story was included in the *Primary Chronicle*? The arguments against this are more ambiguous. A comparison can be made between Olga's regency and Oleg's regency. For example, Oleg ruled as a regent for her husband Igor'. Oleg's story as regent is listed in the *Primary Chronicle* - like Olga, he also has ten pages devoted to his reign, including a very entertaining legend about attaching wheels to his ships and sailing them across "open country" towards Constantinople to attack.²⁰⁶ He was awarded a lucrative trade deal from the Byzantines for this²⁰⁷ and "The Russes hung their shields upon the gates as a sign of victory."²⁰⁸ Oleg was kin to Rurik and Igor', and also ruled a minimum of two decades, Oleg is in the

²⁰⁴ Zajac, 222.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 221-226.

²⁰⁶ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 64.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 64-65.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 65.

Table of Princes in the *Primary Chronicle* as well,²⁰⁹ but not the Genealogy Chart. This leads to the conclusion that Olga's role as regent could at least be partly responsible for her inclusion in the *Primary Chronicle*, but not entirely.

What gave Olga's story as Princess Regnant the importance required to be included in the *Primary Chronicle*? In addition to the evidence of her Scandinavian name and birth-tongue, the connections shown between Olga's actions and Icelandic women's roles, add convincing detail to her cultural identity as a Varangian. More in depth analysis of the sagas themselves may be required to see how many of these roles a female character in the sagas typically fulfilled, but according to Jochens, "Playing the single role of the warrior, the avenger, or the whetter, these [Icelandic saga] women appear when their theme is needed in the story and disappear immediately after."²¹⁰ Olga's story fulfills multiple saga roles, not just one, further proving she was a truly exceptional woman – not only in Kievan Rus' but possibly across the whole of the Scandinavian world.

Conclusions

This study was made possible by comparing details from Princess Olga's story in the *Primary Chronicle* with the roles of women in Icelandic sagas. The roles of Viking women in the sagas were discussed throughout Olga's story. In review, the saga roles evaluated were established by Jesch, Jochens, and Friðriksdóttir. The expanded roles of women created by Friðriksdóttir, aided the evaluation. There is no question that many themes of women in the Icelandic sagas are prevalent throughout the story of Olga in the

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 297.

²¹⁰ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 88.

Primary Chronicle. Based on the connections made in the above sections, there are multiple ways in which Olga's actions match the cultural expectations of Scandinavian women as they are portrayed in the Icelandic sagas. In particular she played The Whetter (sometimes also 'inciter'): when Olga satisfied her revenge upon the Derevlans in at least three inventive ways, taking it upon herself to plot the revenge of her husband's death; She especially filled the role of The Whetter when she –'egged on'– her retinue to slaughter the Derevlans at the funeral feast of her husband. She also held the role of The Wise Woman: for her whole life according to the chronicler, and Olga is praised multiple times by the chronicler for her wisdom and intellect. Finally, as a Princess Regnant, Olga's story is also especially reflective of two saga roles for royal women - that of a *konungamóðir* and Head of Royal Household.

Based upon this study, one can conclude, elements of Olga's legend strongly reflect Icelandic saga roles, and therefore represent Scandinavian qualities in her behavior, revealing her cultural identity. This ties her natal culture convincingly to the Varangians. In addition, the sagas connect directly to her own legend as it was written in the *Primary Chronicle*, demonstrating a common past with Scandinavian oral history/epic poetry which gave rise to both the Icelandic sagas, and her legend.²¹¹ If Olga was not Varangian, she would not have been given all of these qualities in her epic poem/oral history. Though Princess Olga lived on the other side of the Viking world from Iceland, the Scandinavian influence in her story is readily apparent when analyzed from a saga perspective. The small amount of historical details we have of Olga's heritage combined with ample connections between Olga's behavior and that of Viking women in

²¹¹ Such as the incendiary bird theme mentioned before.

the sagas, support a convincing argument that she was a Varangian princess in Early Medieval Kievan Rus'. Now Olga earns her place as a Varangian "saga sister" to women in Old Norse Icelandic literature.

As the *Primary Chronicle* attests, several centuries elapsed from the time in which Olga lived, to when the events of her life were written in the *Primary Chronicle*. Society can alter greatly in such a span of time, and in Kievan Rus' it did. The rulers of Kievan Rus' lost much of their Scandinavian identity in a cultural blend that grew increasingly Slavic - due to the influence of permanent settlement among Slavic peoples; a new religion - especially with the adoption of Christianity by Olga herself, and then her grandson Vladimir and the people; and stronger connections with Byzantium than with Scandinavia. Yet two-hundred years later, the chronicler still included the story of Olga in his book. This reveals the high regard with which she was held by the people of Kievan Rus'. Her story indicates that though she was a woman in a man's world, she was nimbly able to navigate that world for her own benefit, and the benefit of her people and she was admired for it. Her status as the first ruler to convert to Christianity earned her sainthood in the thirteenth century. Today, she is known as Olga Grand Princess of Kievan Rus' and Saint Olga, Equal of the Apostles.²¹² The most poetic language used in the entire *Chronicle* was reserved for Olga, in a eulogy. Upon her death, the chronicler says, "Olga was the precursor of the Christian land, even as the dayspring precedes the sun and as the dawn precedes the day. For she shone like the moon by night, and she was radiant among the infidels like a pearl in the mire..."²¹³

²¹² The Orthodox Church in America, "Blessed Olga (in Baptism Helen), Princess of Russia," accessed on 10/31/2020 at 19:52, <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2019/07/11/102003-blessed-olga-in-baptism-helen-princess-of-russia>.

²¹³ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 86.

Olga was the only woman included at length in the *Primary Chronicle*, for reasons that go far beyond simply her shining example to women for her conversion to Christianity. The reasons are five-fold. Olga was a leader who had a significant influence on Kievan Rus' that was both multi-layered, and influential. At the time the *Primary Chronicle* was written her buildings and tax system were still in use; her epic poems/legends were still part of the historical fabric of Kievan Rus'; she had been a true ruler and kept Kievan Rus' from being absorbed by neighboring tribes; she was wise and (aside from her lengthy revenge) had a peaceful rule; and the polity of Rus' had become thoroughly Christian, which had comprehensive effects on Scandinavian culture.²¹⁴ The impacts of her rule were long-lasting - two hundred years later most of these were still felt by the people, and were considered important enough to include in the history of Kievan Rus'. The only exception was peace in Kievan Rus'. Lacking Olga's abilities to act as a Wise Woman (of Peace), her grandsons began killing one another, and the infighting continued among their descendants.²¹⁵

In conclusion, Olga's conversion to Christianity, highlights her role as a religious leader, but was only one of several reasons why her story is included in the *Primary Chronicle*. The others are: her role as legislative leader; her role in Kievan Rus' legend/oral tradition; her reputation as a wise woman; and her role as a true ruler of Kievan Rus'. It is the combination of all five of these factors that led her to be very

²¹⁴ Glassman concludes, "Finally, it should be mentioned that it was the slow conversion to Christianity that altered the Norse culture away from its violent roots. The norms of violence and berserk Warriors were slowly – slowly – illuminated in favor of a more Humane social ethic: forbidding human sacrifice in Pagan ceremonies, forbidding murder, outlying duels to the death, and generally establishing a more civilized and controlled set of morals and manners." (Glassman, *Norse Tribes before Contact*, 2, 1231)

²¹⁵ Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, after page 90.

highly respected and earned her a lengthy section in the *Primary Chronicle*. Additionally, these two factors added weight to her inclusion in the *Primary Chronicle*:

1. Her overall uniqueness: Olga was an extraordinary woman.
2. Her accomplishments as ruler had an enduring effect.

The presence of Princess Olga's story in the *Primary Chronicle* is a testament to the remarkable woman she must have been. Olga's story ultimately highlights the danger of men underestimating both a woman's mental acuity, her capacity for revenge, and her ability to wield power, to their own detriment. Like an Ulfberht sword sheathed in silk, Olga's deceptive appearance – as well as her way with words – enveloped an ingenious mind and backbone of steel. Olga was no meek widow. When her husband was killed, she did not wilt at the news – she rose to the occasion. Gathering her wits, she took full command of her resources – her people and her military, and even her status as a woman – and she accomplished two things: the first was a multi-layered, very satisfying revenge for the death of her husband; the second was that she established herself in no uncertain terms as the ruler of the Rus' and protected her son's rightful place in the line of inheritance, and eventually continued to rule beside him. It is in times of trouble that the true colors – the mettle – of a person is revealed. And when she was tested, Olga asserted herself as a fierce Varangian Princess in Kievan Rus', ruling for - and then with - her son, for over 20 years and taking measures that created lasting change among her people. By doing so, she earned a place of highest honor in both the legends and annals of Kievan Rus' history. In other words, Olga ruled.

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