

A TREATISE ON THE SOUTH SLAVIC *VILA*

A Treatise on the South Slavic *Vila*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to clarify the often confused understanding of the Serbo-Croatian *vila* and elucidate her position within the archaic South Slavic world view. Through a survey of her functional traits within the Serbo-Croatian epics, the argument presented here attempts to typify her actions in the epic sphere, and weigh those against her conception in the folkloric sphere, making a case for the understanding and study of the *vila* as one distinct figure divided into two typological facets – one mythological in nature, the other a product of folk custom. From there the thesis explores a comparative Indo-European mythological study of the isolated epic functions of the *vila*, in order to properly posit her among similar analogues in the Indo-European myth system.

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GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION

The Serbian and Croatian languages are phonetic languages belonging to the South Slavic language family. The alphabet consists of thirty characters written in Latin by the Croats and in both Latin and Cyrillic by the Serbs. There are three digraphs in the Latin form. Most pronunciation follows English with a few exceptions.

A a	A a	like <i>a</i> in <i>father</i>
B b	Б б	
C c	Ц ц	like <i>ts</i> in <i>cats</i>
Č č	Ч ч	hard like <i>ch</i> in <i>church</i>
Ć ć	Ћ ћ	soft like <i>t</i> in British <i>tune</i>
D d	Д д	
Đ đ (Dj dj)	Ђ ј	soft like <i>d</i> in British <i>endure</i>
Dž dž	Џ ѓ	hard like <i>j</i> in <i>jam</i>
E e	Е е	like <i>e</i> in <i>best</i>
F f	Ф ф	
G g	Г г	always hard like <i>g</i> in <i>game</i>
H h	Х х	sounded like <i>h</i> in <i>happy</i>
I i	И и	like <i>ee</i> in <i>beets</i>
J j	Ј ј	as English <i>y</i>
K k	К к	
L l	Л л	
Lj lj	Љ љ	palatalized like <i>le</i> in French <i>fleur</i>
M m	М м	
N n	Н н	
Nj nj	Њ њ	palatalized like <i>ni</i> in <i>onion</i>
O o	О о	like <i>o</i> in <i>pope</i>
P p	П п	
R r	Р р	trilled as in Spanish <i>pero</i>
S s	С с	
Š š	Ш ш	as English <i>sh</i>
T t	Т т	
U u	У у	like <i>u</i> in <i>rude</i>
V v	В в	
Z z	З з	
Ž ž	Ж ж	like the <i>s</i> in <i>pleasure</i>

1.0 Introduction

Whether a casual reader or a scholar, anyone who works with Serbo-Croatian oral traditions will quickly learn the name of the *vila*. Drifting in a sea of Christian symbolism and static, stereotypical female characters, the *vila* (pl. *vile*) stands out in the corpora as markedly archaic, pagan, and unique. Yet, for all her appeal, the *vila* remains one of the most obscure and misunderstood characters in European mythology and folklore. Scholars following in the footsteps of Milman Parry and Albert Lord most often relegate her to footnotes, branding her a South Slavic nymph or fairy. Those who attempt to elucidate her character more thoroughly seem to produce uniformly contradictory opinions. The aim of this thesis is two-fold: it is an attempt to rectify and clarify the role of the *vila* in the Serbo-Croatian folk tradition, as well as an effort to situate her mythological aspects among the ranks of her analogues within the larger sphere of Indo-European mythology. By elucidating the position of the *vila* as existing in two typologically unique functions, this thesis advocates the need to split the conception of the *vila* into two distinct components before appropriate analyses can be performed. Where one figure exists on the level of folk-custom and legend (hereafter titled folkloric) and deserves the title of nymph, the other *vila*, the *vila* of the epics (*narodne pjesme/pesme* in Croatian and Serbian, lit., folk songs) and ballads, represents a separate and unique figure with mythological implications. The thesis will begin by outlining the functional traits of the *vila* as she appears in the Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian epics. By typifying her actions in the epic sphere and weighing them against her conception in the folkloric sphere, the thesis will set forth an argument for isolating the two formats. From that point, an argument will be made connecting the newly isolated epic function of the *vila* with other strong comparands in the Indo-European myth world, namely, the Norse *valkyrie* as well as two figures in the Indo-Iranian world, the Vedic *apsarās* and an obscure figure found in *The One Thousand and One Nights*.

2.0 Historical Background

Not much is definitively known about the early history of the Croats and Serbs. In the seventh century, the Byzantine Empire under Emperor Heraclius (c. 575-641) was besieged from the East by the Sassanian Persians and from the North by raiding bands of Avars, Slavs and Bulgars who had recently flooded the Balkan Peninsula in a mass migration. It is not clear why the Slavs left their homeland, but the migration proved easy due to struggles occurring between the Byzantine Empire and the Ostrogoths (who had overrun Dalmatia, Illyricum and parts of Italy) as well as the empire's ongoing strife with the Persians (Preveden 1955: 37). In 626 the warring groups, supported by the Persians on the east, attacked Constantinople from the west and from the sea, yet Heraclius' military managed to stave off the attack and the raiding efforts ended in failure (37). Heraclius would go on to defeat the Sassanid Empire in a number of campaigns, and quell the Avar hordes, yet through a mysterious turn of history, the Slavs settled the area of the Balkans that had once been the home of the Illyrians, Thracians, Dacians and a number of other substratal groups. Constantine Porphyrogenitus states in his *De administrando imperio* (approximately 950 C.E.) that Heraclius bequeathed the Eastern shore of the Adriatic to the Croats so that they might aid in driving out the Avars (Eterovich 1964: 82). Both Croatian and Serbian lore contend that due to their peaceful nature and habit of settlement, Heraclius sent a communication, inviting the Croats and/or Serbs to emigrate from their original homeland to the Balkans to repopulate the area. Most likely the areas were taken by force, the substratum of peoples being wiped out or absorbed into the arriving groups, but the Slavs seem to have settled into a relatively peaceful existence upon arrival and their utility in populating, cultivating and rebuilding the ruined areas they inhabited did not go unnoticed by the Byzantine Emperors (Preveden 1955: 37).

2.1 The Serbs and Croats

The original homeland of the Serbs and Croats, before their migration to the Balkans, is said to be north of the Carpathians (once thought to be the root of the Croatian name [Mijatović 2007: 1]) and east of the Vistula river in areas that form today's eastern Germany, southern Poland and possibly portions of western Ukraine. Theories abound as to whether the name of the Croats [*Hrvati*] is Germanic, Slavic or Iranian in origin as it can be found in toponyms and surnames spread from areas in Ukraine west to Germany and south along the migratory path to the Balkans. The Iranian origin is thought by many to be supported by the name *XOPAOΘOΣ* carved into two tablets found in Tanais, dating from 200 CE, which brings into question whether the Croats are truly a Slavic group that perhaps lived symbiotically with the Steppe Iranians,¹ or whether they are a slavified Iranian group (Eterovich 1964: 76-78). *Hrvatil/Horvati* seems also to be etymologically

¹ This idea is supported by archaeological material and historical records (see Gimbutas 1971: 46-49).

connected to the Alan word *hu-urvathos* which means ‘friend’ (78). Yet, despite the controversy over the etymological roots and biological origin of the Croats, culturally and linguistically they have been attested as a Slavic tribe since they entered the written historical stage.

The Russian Primary Chronicle names the Croats (those that remained in the North) as a Slavic tribe living on the Danube (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 56), not a Russian tribe, but subject to Russian conquest in 907 and again in 992 (231 n. 3). Prince Oleg of Kiev is said to have attacked the Greeks from 904-907 C.E. with an army that included pagan Croats (64). The Serbs, as well, are mentioned in the Chronicle as neighbours to the Croats in their original homeland (53). The name of the Serbs may have been attested as early as the second century in Ptolemy’s *Geography* where he enumerates the *Serboi* among the tribes of Sarmatia (Gimbutas 1971: 60).² Like the Croats, the Serbian name is found in the area above the Carpathians, although their location seems to have been more westerly than that of the Croats. The Sorbians, who live in the German region of Lusatia, are most likely descendants of the same tribe (Dvornik 1974: 14, 28). The Sorbians refer to themselves as *Serbi*, the same ethnonym as the Serbs, and to this day, the Serbs in Serbia refer to the Sorbians as *Лужички Срби* [Lusatian Serbs]. Whatever their origins may be, upon arrival in the Balkans the Serbs and Croats occupied a large area and began to settle and work the land.

The groups were culturally separated into tribes or *zadrugas* [extended family groups], composed of a *družina* [band, group]³ who were led by a patriarch (*Starešina* or often *Knez*) and controlled regionally by a *Župan* who was head of a district [*župa/županija*] and military, judicial and tributary authority to his region (Eterovich 1964: 131). In Croatia these *župas* often banded together under the leadership of a *Ban* (168).⁴ The people practiced mixed agricultural farming and livestock herding inland and fishing and sea trade on the coast and became rather productive members of the Byzantine Empire. Despite having taken part in the warring factions which besieged Constantinople, the Serbs and Croats were not accustomed to martial systems or large-scale organization and for centuries retained local systems of governance to varying degrees (Preveden 1955: 37).

Starting as early as the middle of the 7th century (with the alleged conversion of the Dalmatian and Istrian Croats by Pope John IV) and ending in the second half of the 9th century (with the missionary work of Saints Cyril and Methodius, who subsequently spread Church Slavonic using the Glagolitic script), the Croats and Serbs took part in a lengthy process of conversion from their form of Slavic paganism to Christianity. After much religious debate and controversy between the Orthodox and Catholic factions within the country, under the rule of Zvonimir (1075-1089) the Croats accepted the Roman Catholic Church with its

² Gimbutas suggests that *Hrvati* is an Iranian sound change on the root name of the Serbs **serv-* becoming **xarv-* in Sarmatian. Yet another etymology may link the name to a term for ‘easterner’. IE **sAwl-o/-* ‘sun’, in Iranian becoming **xwora-ta* ‘easterner’.

³ For more on the *zadruga* and communal living in the Balkans refer to Byrnes 1976.

⁴ *Ban* is a Slavic borrowing of the Avar *bajan*. It denotes a nobleman or land owner.

center in Rome (24). Serbia, as well, became a battleground for the missionary work of both the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches. Inevitably the Serbs became primarily Eastern Orthodox, looking to Greece and Mount Athos as their holy seat. Later, Saint Sava (1175-1235) would found the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1219; the second oldest autocephalous Orthodox Church in the Slavic world with its seat in the city of Peć.

2.2 Serbian and Croatian History to the Turkish Invasion

The Croatian-occupied area was the first of the two to be consolidated into an independent state. The first ruler to take the title of King [Kralj] was Tomislav (reigning 910-928), who held his center at Biograd on the Dalmatian Coast and whose kingdom reached well into Bosnia and North to the Drava River (24). Croatian independence was not to last long, however, and disputed successions found the crown in the hands of Ladislav I (1077-1095), king of Hungary. By 1102 Croatia was united with Hungary.

Thereafter, the Croatian leadership was to claim that the union rested on an agreement between equal partners who were joined primarily through the common monarch. Although the Hungarian government did not accept this interpretation of the arrangement, Croatia did thereafter retain a special position within the Hungarian kingdom and did have wide rights of autonomy. Croatia was kept administratively apart from Hungary, and the Croatian assembly of nobles had much authority (24).

Slavonija, the area of Croatia which sits on the Pannonian plain, was incorporated, for most of its history, into the Hungarian system of counties, Croatia proper would remain a semi-autonomous unit of the empire, and the Dalmatian coast (with its important trade centers) would experience a rather turbulent history and fall into a number of European hands over the course of history (25). With significant connections on the coast to both Italy and Venice, the Croats had a vibrant literary tradition as early as the fifteenth century which would play an integral part in the history of the Yugoslav epics.

From the eighth to the twelfth century, the Serbian people lived under Byzantine or Bulgarian rule until the Bulgars were defeated by the Byzantines and two independent Serbian states were allowed to thrive – Raška (modern day Serbia) and Zeta (today Montenegro) (18). Serbia was to see its height under the rule of Stefan Dušan (reigning 1331-1355), a member of the Nemanja dynasty which produced seven Serbian monarchs between 1166 and 1371. Dušan's kingdom was "to extend over Albanian lands, Macedonia, Epirus and Thessaly, as well as the Serbian territory which extended to the Adriatic" (19). In 1346 he crowned himself 'Emperor of the Serbs and Greeks', yet his great legacy was not to last. His son Uroš V (1355-1371), after the sudden death of his father, was unable to stop the country from splitting into competing factions of nobles and the

area was left open to the advance of the Ottoman Empire (19). Despite the efforts of Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović (1371-1389) to muster an army of Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian and Hungarian troops to fend off the Turkish advance, the Ottomans prevailed under the leadership of a number of competent Sultans and Lazar's army fell at the famous *Kosovo Polje* [Kosovo Field] in June of 1389. Though not the most decisive battle in the war between the Serbs and the Turks, the Battle of Kosovo would become immortalized in Serbian folk singing as the end of the Serbian empire and the beginning of Serbian vassalage as a *raja* [rayah] of the Ottoman Empire.

2.3 The Balkans Under Turkish Control and the Rise of Epic Singing

Although the Ottoman advance on Europe was to reach as far as Vienna (see fig. 1.1), territorial losses to the Hapsburg empire were to halt the border at a line very close to the modern southern border of Slavonija in Croatia; a military frontier that was mostly populated by Serbs fleeing the Turkish empire (145). The majority of Bosnians, Croats and Serbs were to encounter different fates through the Ottoman centuries. Croatia, allied with Hungary, was drawn into the Austro-Hungarian Empire which ensured their protection from the Ottomans and a Western European cultural orientation as well as a better standard of living than the neighbouring Balkan states. This did, however, also leave the nobility in a constant state of struggle for control of their lands (141), and often brought heavier taxes upon the peasantry and serfs than those experienced under Ottoman control (143). Dubrovnik and the Dalmatian coast, as a mercantile area, changed hands a number of times, although it was controlled longest by the Venetians. The area remained an oasis from much of the turmoil surrounding it, functioning well enough on its own that political dominance was sufficient for the nations that fought over it, and subjugation did not factor into its history (98).

The majority of the Bosnian nobles and peasantry were to take on or be converted to Islam. The area soon became a haven for converts from all reaches of the empire (88). Although the Muslim Slavic peasantry were to see little gain from their conversion, the nobility were able to preserve a large degree of autonomy and power over their regions and the peasants who worked their estates (88). A sort of feudal Bosnian epoch was to flourish during the reign of the Turks, and many of the historical rulers of the time would be immortalized as knights and heroes in the Bosnian epics.

Serbia was to remain under Ottoman control from the fourteenth century until two national revolutions brought them autonomy in the late nineteenth and full independence in the early twentieth century. Although the Turks collected (at times very steep) taxes from the Serbs and enforced very strong societal restrictions, and although living conditions within the Ottoman Empire were often far below those of the rest of Europe – the area saw terrible outbreaks of the plague, Serbs were denied an education system, kept largely illiterate and were generally impoverished – not all conditions under Ottoman rule were terrible.

Despite the [Ottoman's] emphasis on religious war, the object was not the destruction of... [its enemies], but their conquest and domination in a manner of advantage to Islam. If a city or region submitted without resistance, the population could, if it wished, retain its religion and a large measure of autonomy; if it resisted, it could be enslaved or massacred, and its property taken as booty. Conversions to Islam were welcomed, but they were seldom forced. Conquered people of another religion were allowed a definite place under the direction of their own ecclesiastical authorities. There was, however, no question of equality. Non-Muslims paid extra taxes, they were subject to a large number of special restrictions, and they were treated as definitely inferior in status (39-40).

With the imposition of, often corrupt, Turkish control on the Serbian lands, many resorted to a system of outlawry. The *Hajduk* (pl. *Hajduci*), was a bandit who lived in the forests and mountains during the warm seasons and raided and looted Turkish, foreign, and often even local parties. Although many of these units were less 'freedom fighters' than armed bandits, the lifestyle was always a last resort for Christians who found themselves in dire circumstances under Turkish rule. Throughout Turkish control the *Hajduci* posed a constant problem, especially in the mountainous regions of Montenegro where their efforts were quite successful (84) and many entered the oral epics as heroes similar to Robin Hood (175).

Although the Christian Serbs were not allowed to proudly exhibit their religion or build or fix their churches, they were still allowed to retain their religious system. Church leaders became important members of the community who often represented their people politically (91). Under these unique restrictions, two distinct oral traditions became the bastions of retention and proliferation of cultural heritage, the church and folk singing. Both taught of the nostalgic past of a great Serbian Empire, both passed on traditions of the Serbs and both taught that the Turkish occupation was only a temporary encumbrance which would one day be remedied.

2.4 The Art of the Guslar and Yugoslav Folk Singing

In *The Epic in the Making*, Svetozar Koljević refers to a Byzantine chronicle from the early seventh century which describes, "among other things, three Slav spies who were captured in the vicinity of Constantinople, carrying some sort of cipher instead of arms and claiming that their people preferred singing to fighting" (1980: 11). Whatever the circumstances surrounding this anecdote may have been, it is apparent that from early times the South Slavs were acquainted with the art of singing. Although there have been, and still are, a number of styles and methods of oral transmission in the former Yugoslav nations, songs from three separate, yet interconnected, oral traditions will be addressed in this study. Of all the singing traditions among the South Slavs, three

were to take on a level of intricacy that would link them in the nineteenth century to Romantic movements in Europe and to the search for folk epics. These three also importantly retain many stock oral formulas which have been passed down from ancient times and which often conceal kernels of ancient belief.

The first is the *Bugarštica*, which are the oldest body of recorded Serbo-Croatian oral songs. The first of these were published in 1568 and were continually published along the Adriatic Coast until the eighteenth century (31-32). The Bugarštice have an odd oral flavour, they are composed of trochaic, 12, 14 or 16-syllable lines and tend to reflect “the social and artistic downgrading and degeneration of an older, feudal form of epic singing” (36). Indeed, the courtly bardic technique of Medieval Balkan kingdoms was to fade in the face of the decasyllabic format used in village, and peasant life.⁵

The second format of note is the ballad, which was to be titled in the Serbo-Croatian example as *ženske pjesme* [women’s songs] by Vuk Karadžić (usually referred to simply as Vuk). Although the ballads are a form of the *narodne pjesme* [folk songs], they differ from the heroic songs by guidelines set forward by Vuk and are most often categorized as *lirske pjesme* [lyric songs]. They are often shorter, sung by one or two people for amusement, most often by women (although men sing the songs as well) in informal or domestic situations (such as while washing clothes). Women’s songs have even stanzas, include “full- or near-rhyme, assonance, consonance, and phonetic series, as well as formulaic and syntactic frames” (Foley 1990: 17). They employ various meters (Zimmerman 1986: 44) although most often tend toward a symmetrical octosyllable. Regarding content, the subject matter of the women’s songs more often deal with themes of heartbreak and loss and other, more emotional subject matter than the heroic songs and they are seldom performed to musical accompaniment.⁶ Many of the best and most archaic songs in the Vuk collection are in fact women’s songs and in many instances the distinction between women’s and men’s heroic songs is blurred and crossed.

The *junačke pjesme* [heroic songs], are, however, much more stylized and formal oral texts, the fullest expression, in a traditional sense, of the folk song or epic. Throughout the lands of the Serbs and Croats oral singing of epic songs has been retained from ancient times. The stock formulas and stories found in the heroic songs are rife with ancient material, a factor that is key to the analysis of archaic South Slavic beliefs. As a cultural mode of expression, oral traditions not only represent a focal point in a web of synchronic interconnection, but are also diachronic practices, often of great age. Folk epic songs (especially those which rely on structured formulas to satisfy metric conditions)

⁵ The existence of a large store of both courtly and folk epic poetry makes the former Yugoslav nations a very interesting environment for the study of oral literature.

⁶ See Vidan 2003: 12-19, for the problems associated with Vuk’s original classifications.

...have reference to materials and ideas that are anachronistic only from our decidedly synchronic perspective of post-oral and post-traditional thinking. Tradition simply finds no discrepancy... [between elements from] vastly different eras... [They] are held together in a diachronic suspension unique to traditional texts (Foley 1990: 10).

This factor of the epics allows for very ancient material to pass through generations of storytellers, often retained with no critical assessment.⁷

During the Turkish occupation, the ability for epic bards (or *guslari*, after the *gusle*, the instrument of choice for accompaniment) to relay current events, historic stories, and songs of Christian heroes overpowering Turkish oppressors was one of the most potent ways that Serbian and Christian culture and unity were retained. The folk hero Marko Kraljević became the epitome of this expression. Although based on a true king of Macedonia (who had a fairly uneventful historic life), Marko's representation in the oral tradition became a regional sensation. His name was laid over multiple story-types and ancient songs and his realistic portrayal, as simultaneously Turkish vassal and defender of Christians and Slavs from the injustices of Turkish rule, was to become a paradoxical position of the highest oral (and literary) calibre (Popović 1988: 29-45). It is within the *junačke pjesme* that the *vila* is most often portrayed, aiding or inhibiting heroes in their struggles, although some of her more ancient traits are expressed in the *ženske pjesme* and occasionally in the *bugarštice*.

These epic songs were, and to this day still are (see Perkowski 1978), preformed in public, but were most often relegated to coffee shops [*kafići*, *kafane*], inns and taverns (usually areas barred to women), as well as in private homes; the key ingredient for their recitation being an audience, even if only an audience of one (Zimmerman 1986: 45). Although professional (sometimes blind) bards did make a living by travelling and performing, most often a town or village would contain a handful of local men, of varying skill levels, who would perform the songs on certain nights and holidays throughout the year (Lord 1960: 14). Among the Muslims in Bosnia the performance of epic songs in the coffee-houses would become the most important observance of the singing. Most *kafane* would hire singers to perform nightly for the month of *Ramazan* [Ramadan], during which men would spend their evenings in the coffee-houses feasting and celebrating heroic deeds. Despite the fact that Muslim songs were variants of original Serbo-Croatian songs which were given a new roster of Muslim heroes and Christian enemies, the Ramadan observance allowed the Muslim epics to take on much larger and more elaborate forms than the Christian epics (Zimmerman 1986: 46, 52). The opportunities for employment in different regions of the

⁷ Cf. Jakobson's dissection of the proto-Slavic werewolf-warrior expressed in Russian in Volh Vseslav'evich and in Serbia in tales of the hero Zmaj Ognjeni Vuk (Jakobson and Szeftel 1948 and Jakobson and Ružičić 1966). See also Colarusso 1998.

empire also meant that many professional singers were versed in Serbo-Croatian, Muslim, and sometimes even Albanian songs (Kolsti 1968).

For the average Christian, however, the circumstances were different. Though the songs were employed for formal situations, they were also played and sung (and often simply recited) informally. For the Christian Serbs and Croats before the twentieth century, the average home in most regions of the former Yugoslav nations would have a *gusle* at least hanging on the wall as a decoration. Yet, for those Christians living under the Ottoman yoke, the songs took on very important social functions in the face of the constant threat of cultural extinction. This fact would not only allow the songs to flourish as an art form and encourage very competent singers, it would also allow for a situation where ancient materials could be easily retained. "...Certain themes, because of didactic purposes, would have to be included, whether or not they were stimulating or boring. Since the future of the society depended upon preservation of its history and religion, the formulation of linguistic patterns had to be conducive to the rhythms of the language" (48) and of the past.

The *gusle* itself is a single-stringed instrument, ideally made of maple wood, about two and one half feet in height. It has a sound chamber over which an animal hide is stretched and a neck, with a single tuning peg, usually topped with an intricately carved animal head. It is played rested over one knee and bowed with a horse-hair bow like a violin. Its note-range is limited and the instrument is either struck at the end of each verse, or else bowed on each syllable with a prolonged final stroke at the end of each line as a drone to accompany and punctuate the songs (Petrovitch 1914: 56). The songs are composed in decasyllabic lines (giving them their alternate name, *deseterci*) of five trochees, with a caesura after the fourth syllable.⁸ According to Roman Jakobson (1952), they represent an archaic metric structure, both connected to other Slavic meters and holding the strongest claim to antiquity of all the South Slavic forms.

2.5 The Collection of South Slavic Epics

Although numerous collectors over the years have gathered epic songs from within the former Yugoslav nations, there are three key collections which are most important, both historically and regarding content, for this study. After the First Serbian Uprising (1804-1813) was quelled, the great language reformer of the Serbian language Vuk Karadžić, began his work on oral poetry in Vienna, writing down a few *ženske pjesme* from memory. The work grew as he recorded songs, first from his family members, and then from well-known singers that he was able to track down (Koljević 1980: 344). His first minor collection was to be published in 1814, yet the work was to concern him for the rest of his life. He began to travel in Montenegro, Kotor, Hercegovina, Dubrovnik, Lika and other areas where the singing tradition was particularly strong and from 1841-1862 he published the definitive edition of his collection *Srpske Narodne Pjesme* [Serbian

⁸ See Foley 1990: 98 for a more in-depth analysis of the *deseterac* structure.

Folk Songs], containing one thousand and forty-five songs (345). This work is paired with a number of songs which Vuk recorded but were not published in his lifetime, not to mention that he would go on to standardise the Serbian alphabet and language and produce the first bible, grammar and encyclopaedic dictionary in the modern Serbian language (Mikasinovich, Milivojević and Mihailovich 1973: 3). Vuk's connection to Western scholars, due to his time spent in Vienna, also meant that the Western world was introduced to Serbo-Croatian epics very early in their history as collected folk texts. Jakob Grimm was to publish a study contrasting Serbian and German heroic songs in 1823 and to later encourage the translation and publication of many of Vuk's early songs in 1826 (Koljević 1980: 6). Although Vuk's collection was, and remains, one of the most important collections of oral poetry in Europe, he was greatly influenced by literary standards of the time and by his own admission "did not write all the songs from dictation or singing, but rather noted some of them down from memory" as well as 'improving', and correcting the lines to produce more cohesive story-lines (Vidan 2003: 3).

After Vuk's collections began to rise in popularity a number of scholars began to collect songs from throughout the former Yugoslav nations. In Zagreb, the publishing house Matica Hrvatska began an active process of hunting for and publishing songs, employing a number of collectors under the auspices of a handful of competent editors (2-3). Although the number of collectors made for a less uniform body of poems, it did produce a wide variety of songs (and variants of songs) and a rather large collection – ten volumes published between 1879 and 1942. The editors here, like Vuk, were guilty of tampering with their songs before publication occurred, although the systems employed by both were quite advanced compared to other European endeavours. No efforts were made to combine songs into a definitive 'national epic' such as the Finnish *Kalevala*, and the Matica collectors provided the names of their singers and the regions in which these songs were collected when it was possible.

These two collections were to stand as the definitive corpora for the region until the 1930s when Harvard scholar Milman Parry and his disciple Albert Lord began excursions into Bosnia to record epic songs. At the time new light was being shed on the lyrical character of the works of Homer and Parry was on the forefront of a new theory which hoped to test the ability of epic singers to produce oral songs the length of Homer's work from memory (Lord 1960: 3). Unable to enter Russia, Parry and Lord instead opted to travel to the Balkans and there began collecting songs with the aid of a translator and the first phonographic device for recording in the field. Although Parry was to die soon after their return from the field in 1935, Lord would go on to make numerous trips into the area and to publish extensively on the theories that the two scholars had devised regarding the nature of oral singing. This work would be highlighted by their prized singer, Avdo Međedović, from whom they would record a number of rather lengthy epic songs. To this day the Milman Parry library housed at Harvard University is one of the largest storehouses of manuscripts of oral tradition in the world and Lord's

book, *The Singer of Tales*, is the most important text regarding the bardic technique in Indo-European oral traditions.

3.0 Methods

To read Serbo-Croatian epic songs and the scholarship surrounding them is at once to be astounded at the sheer wealth and quality of the material and baffled by the glaring holes in the fabric of the scholarship. Although scholars in the past have written on the *vila*, even the earliest analyses seem clouded by preconceived notions. As with any observation into the workings of another culture, anthropological theory (and common sense) dictates that one approach the material as a *tabula rasa*. Surprisingly, when I began looking into the *vila* as a research topic, I found that the majority of studies written on her had already taken for granted that she is a fairy, or a witch, or a nymph, or any other form of Classical (read Greek) or Western European figure that was familiar to scholars. It is the misfortune of Eastern Europe to be regularly perceived as at once foreign and familiar by Western scholarship and opinion, and indeed, most often to receive the worst aspects of both categorizations. Finding the writings on the *vila* incongruent, and poorly explicated, I set out in this study to attempt to systematically organize the material in order to produce a clearer understanding of the *vila* as she is presented in the Serbo-Croatian folk epics and ballads.

For the work, one hundred folk songs were chosen, translated and surveyed. The majority of these songs were taken from the Matica Hrvatska and Vuk collections. Although a few other sources were employed, the two collections were chosen primarily because they represent the oldest attested collections of the *deseterci* songs. As well, both provide their own independent strengths. The Vuk songs contain some of the most archaic Yugoslav epics recorded, and many of the songs are familiar to analyses of this type. By employing this collection, I was able to reassess aspects which have been explored in earlier works. This study has, however, relied more heavily on the Matica Hrvatska collections for very specific reasons. Not only is the collection much larger than the Vuk collection, the songs recorded within it are nearly as old (in their recording) as the Vuk songs and were collected from more disparate regions by a number of scholars, which allows for more variation of both song and annotation style. Moreover, the Matica Hrvatska collection was employed because of the fact that it is seldom used in studies of Serbo-Croatian songs. To my knowledge none of the songs contained within the collection have been translated into English language collections. This novelty provides fresh insight into aspects of the Vuk songs that have been analyzed in both Serbo-Croatian and English language literature. Both the number and the selection of the songs were arbitrary. Although the *vila* is quite well attested for a mythological figure, songs were selected simply on the basis that they contained a *vila*, and one hundred was simply the roundest number of these songs that the two collections presented within the books containing the majority of old songs.⁹

⁹ Both the Vuk and the Matica Hrvatska collections are composed of themed books. A number of the texts are composed of *Hajduk* songs and other material that was more contemporaneous to the collections. Although these books do contain *vile*, their occurrences are sparse. This study has focused on the ancient songs, those employing Marko Kraljević and other collections where the majority of the *vila* songs are contained.

3.1 Theoretical Background

The study contained within this thesis is bipartite. The first half represents a functional analysis of the role of the *vila* in the epic songs and a brief comparison between this role and her role within local folk custom. This section contains an effort to 'root-out' the mythological form of the *vila* represented in the epics. The second half employs this newly isolated *vila* in a comparative mythological study with other, similar figures in the Indo-European mythological world. As with any study, much has been left out that could greatly support the work (such as a full analysis of the *vila* as she appears in folk custom), yet restrictions of time and space have dictated the form of the present work. The choice of analyses employed does, however, justify the aims of the thesis. My most modest hopes would be that this research forces studies of the epics which include the *vila* to cease referring to her as 'a Yugoslav fairy' and instead to designate whether her epic or folkloric form is being employed, and further point to the broader comparisons which I have outlined within this study for her mythological variants.

The first half of this thesis, then, follows a simple survey and functional dissection of the *vila* and her most important attributes. Most of this work is rooted in my theoretical background in structural-functionalist anthropology and sociology, most specifically the work of Émile Durkheim and Bronisław Malinowski. The divide which I posit between the folkloric and mythological variant of the *vila* is indeed a functional one, in that both aspects serve a very different role within the culture and society of the Serbs and Croats.

The second half of the thesis is strictly comparative work which relies heavily on the theoretical schools concerned with the study of myth which are the legacy of such scholars as Max Müller and Jan de Vries, and which are expressed in the sociological work of Georges Dumézil and modern scholars who have followed in Dumézil's footsteps such as Jaan Puhvel. Owing to the (mostly unwarranted) controversial nature of comparative mythology, and most specifically the *trois fonctions* of Dumézil, I think it important to briefly mention my own position on such work.

Although the work of Georges Dumézil has greatly enriched our understanding of Indo-European mythology, his legacy has been one (like so many scholars who conjure novel theories) of mass-devotion by its adherents. I agree with John Miles Foley when he states,

The danger in broader studies is self-evident: comparative work can fall victim to overgeneralization, to dilettantism, even to faulty reasoning within one area. But the risk is occasionally worth taking, and especially in the case of studies in oral tradition, for the comparative work can draw strength from more focused scholarship and, in return, provide a fuller, richer context for investigation within a particular literature or tradition (1990: ix).

Adherents to the work of Dumézil have often attempted to apply his theory of the three functions to every aspect of Indo-European, and subsequent European culture. These attempts have often contaminated the analyses and made a mockery of the points that Dumézil himself was exploring. Moreover, criticism has been raised regarding how valid the three functions actually are as reflections of ancient Indo-European culture.¹⁰ Suffice it to say that my own use of the three functions, in this study is simply as a theoretical method through which to organize and analyze the material. Whether the ancestors of the Europeans ever consciously structured society into three functions is not a question that I will address here. The question itself will most likely remain unanswerable, yet it is undeniable that within the myths of a number of European groups, the tendency to divide into three distinct groupings is rather pronounced. Whether this is simply a testament to the power of the number '3' in many societies is a fair question, but the fact remains that the system works quite competently as a framework through which to organize and analyze the *vila* material. This is the way that I have used the three functions in this study. My opinion on the matter is best summed up by Martin L. West, referring to his own theoretical framework, in "A New Approach to Greek Prosody".

In conclusion, I should like to point out that what is sketched in the foregoing pages is not a 'theory' to be accepted or rejected, but a formula for classifying empirical data; it is no more conjectural than the Dewey system of classifying books, it is neither true nor false. It must be judged on its ability to match the complexity of the facts (1970: 194).

¹⁰ See Littleton 1982 for a competent outline of both the theories and criticisms of Dumézil.

4.0 The Vila

Along with a number of dragons and polycephalus (monstrous) Turks, the *vila* belongs to the more obvious pagan aspects in the epics of the South Slavs. As Christian heroes defend their faith against an onslaught of Islamic nemeses (or in Bosnia, vice-versa), they frequently defer to their blood-sister *vile*, floating in the clouds or calling from a mountain peak. The *vila* is envisioned as an ethereal, white, supernatural woman – tall, blonde and armoured. There is a wealth of material devoted to her, and she herself is a very dynamic and multivalent figure. Yet, despite the stark figure that the *vila* casts, academic studies that address her often provide very mixed and incongruous descriptions.

In the appendix to Avdo Međedović's version of *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*, the translators, Albert Lord and David Bynum, refer to the *vila* as "a white female spirit, dwelling in mountain lakes. They have wings and fly. They are sometimes helpful to mortals, even becoming sisters-in-blood with, or marrying, mortal men. Sometimes they may be malicious, especially if their lakes are violated" (Međedović 1974: 252, n. 12). This depiction stands in rather stark contrast to the picture Jan Máchal paints of *vile* as the "souls of the departed [that] Serbian legends declare [were originally] proud maidens who incurred the curse of God" (2006: 91). And what then is to be made of Zora Zimmerman's statement that *vile* are connected to certain natural environments and that "the magic they are capable of is appropriate to the environment in which they are found" (1979: 169)? Or Š. Kulišić *et al.*'s description of her "ugly legs, which she tries to hide" (1970: 66) (usually those of a horse, donkey, or goat). Elizabeth Barber speaks of the *vila* as though she were indistinguishable from the Russian *rusalka* (1997). Truly the representation of the *vila* seems profoundly confused, yet the one aspect that these studies lack, and which provides the necessary clarity, is an acknowledgement of the formats within which the *vila* material is being transmitted.

As with any comparative study, an etymological analysis of the *vila* would be nothing but advantageous, were it feasible. Sadly, the name of the *vila* is most likely a shifted epithet for a long forgotten name. Etymologically *vila* would reflect a Proto-European form of **wi-l-ā*, the **wi-* designating a holy, as well as a more ghostly aspect,¹¹ while the **-l-* and **-ā* serve respectively as a diminutive and a feminine ending, with the overall meaning of 'little holy woman' or 'little supernatural woman'.¹² The etymologies of similar folk figures in Slavic cultures, which are often equated with the *vila*, offer equally vague insight, so that the analysis must rely on typological and functional scrutiny alone.

4.1 The Vila in Folklore and Folk-custom

¹¹ The same **wi-* root most likely informs the name of the Norse *Vé*, one of *Óðinn*'s brothers, and may also be the root of the Indic *Viṣṇu*.

¹² I owe this etymological break-down and a number of others in my work, in part or in whole, to the insights of my mentor and instructor Dr. John Colarusso.

The earliest mention of *vile* in written record comes from Procopius, the Byzantine historian, in the 6th century whose *De Bello Gotthorum* describes a Slavic tribe encountered near the Danube who worshiped and offered sacrifice to beings similar to Greek nymphs (270-271). The *vila* of folk-custom and lore is at her core a nature spirit, something fairly common among Slavic groups, and the necessity for her propitiation has been carried with the South Slavs into rather recent history.¹³ In his article on female deities of the South Slavs, Joseph Conrad cites a region of Bosnia where belief in *vile* as forest spirits carried into the 1970s (2000: 27). Conrad's depiction of the *vila* is a rare one that entirely focuses on ethnographic material and folk-custom. According to him, *vile* are shape-shifters who live in the forests, dance the *kolo* (a Slavic circle dance that is attributed to both forms of the *vila*) and interact with shepherds (27). They are portrayed in local memorates as harmful creatures that destroy crops with hail, tickle men to death, or turn them into stones or trees (27). Braiding horse's tails into tight knots, leaving fairy rings (*vilensko igrišće* or *plesališće* or simply *vilinsko kolo*) and similar fairy-type behaviour is also connected with them (27).¹⁴ Conrad also cites a crucial point: that in the Janj region of Bosnia "the *vile* are considered non-human, but resemble tall, thin and very beautiful girls who wear their long, black hair, *unbraided*" (27). Conrad places emphasis on the *vila*'s loose hair, but as we shall see, the more important feature for this argument is the colour.

The Bulgarians retain a similar figure in their epics, known as *samovila*, or sometimes as *samodiva*. The *samovila*, though sometimes functionally divergent, shares enough resemblance to the Serbo-Croatian *vila* to provide insight into some of her more obscure aspects. While *diva* is semantically linked to Indo-European **dyēus* in a feminine form, meaning goddess, *samo* in Slavic languages bears the meaning of only, just or merely, or can sometimes be connected to veracity or originality. The names would then be 'the real/true little holy woman' or 'the real/true goddess'. Although these two terms will have appealing implications further in this argument, etymologically they provide little of worth.

In Assen Nicoloff's book of Bulgarian folklore, the *samovila*'s mythological and folk-custom traits receive the same conflation that the *vila* often receives, although there are some important folkloric aspects addressed. He states that they live on mountains near springs, and that they dance the *kolo* (in Bulgaria the dance is the *horo*) (1975: 10-11). He also outlines the tendency for shepherds in the local memorates to enter into contests with the *samovili*, where they

¹³ Propitiation is, however, not the only form of interaction attested between humans and *vile*. Zoran Čiča (2002) chronicles church attestations, dating as early as the 16th century, of a shamanistic cult in Croatia where local healers (*Vilenice* and *Vilenjaci*) are said to derive their powers from *vile* (who are known in the epics for their knowledge of herbs and magic). The connection between folk healers and *vile* still exist in certain localities today (see Petreska 2008).

¹⁴ To this day in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia the *vila*'s name is used as a blanket term for fairies, nymphs and sprites from other countries and cultures. On my last visit to Croatia, a girl, assuming I knew nothing of the culture, tried to explain a *vila* to me by informing me that Cinderella had a 'vila godmother'.

challenge the shepherds' talents on the flute against their talents of dance. If the shepherds win, they most often receive the *samovili* as brides (11). Most of the material provided by Nicoloff, however, involves the mythological *samovila* and her ties to the folk hero Krali Marko (the Bulgarian variant of the Serbo-Croatian hero Marko Kraljević).

In his early study of archaic Slavic belief, Jan Máchal suggests that *vile* originate from dead maidens. "The Bulgarians believe that the Samovily are girls who have died unbaptized, and among the Slovaks there is a wide-spread story that the fairies are souls of brides who died after their betrothal, and finding no rest, are doomed to roam about at night" (2006: 91). He also discusses another aspect of folk belief regarding the hair of *vile* [*vilina kosa*]: "their life and strength are believed to depend upon it, so that if a fairy loses a single hair, she will die. The Slovenians, however, assert that a Vila will show herself in her true shape to anyone who succeeds in cutting off her hair" (92). Máchal's article reveals a number of intriguing points of local lore, but, like many texts of its type, it amalgamates material from the folk-culture and the epics indiscriminately.

In Svetozar Koljević's opus *The Epic in the Making*, he uses the folkloric conception of the *vila* to define her, but then proceeds to list a number of her epic functions. He explains that (folkloric) *vile* live in mountains, plants, trees, clouds and lakes, that they are "born out of dew and herbs" (347), and notes the earlier mentioned feature of possessing hideous legs (1980: 347).¹⁵ The same treatment is found in Woislav Petrovitch's brief explanation in his 1914 classic *Heroes and Legends of the Serbians* (16-18). In the most comprehensive study of the *vila* that exists in English, Zora Zimmerman (1979) outlines a number of important aspects of the *vila*, although she too oscillates between mythic and folkloric functions of the *vila*, with only an occasional notation of how drastically different those aspects can be. Her article, "The Changing Role of the 'Vila' in Serbian Traditional Literature", offers a respectable study of the *vila* in the epics and some insight into the folk beliefs, albeit, augmented by an odd literary analysis of the distribution of *vile* in South Slavic epics.¹⁶ She suggests that there existed a specialization of *vile*, based on their natural elements (much like Greek nymphs), so that 'cloud *vile*' cause wind and hail, 'water *vile*' bathe and turn into swans, and 'forest *vile*' will turn into wolves and deer (1979: 169-170) This same idea was pursued much earlier by Veselin Čajkanović in his survey of Serbian

¹⁵ Koljević takes this point from the Serbian Mythological Dictionary (Kulišić, *et al.* 1977), yet these two texts are the only ones I have read which mention this curious aspect. It seems on the surface to resemble the kinds of demonization that the church is fond of ascribing to pagan figures.

¹⁶ Zimmerman questions the absence of the *vila* in the Kosovo cycle, deciding that the sombre tone of the epics are not consonant with the *vila*'s character. This argument treats the corpora as though they are all contemporaneous and ignores the fact that although the historical Marko lived most of his life after the Battle of Kosovo, the Marko tales are mostly older songs with Marko's name pasted over those of other heroes. The Kosovo cycle is historical and completely based in a specific time, unlike the timeless, and often archaic, Marko songs.

demonology (1994: 228-230), who saw the traditional roots of the *vila* as a 'coin-toss' between the nymphic forest spirit, or the dead maiden.

Dejan Ajdačić (2001) suggests that the only way to account for the many aspects of the *vila* is to either attribute them to changes over time or else assume that multiple beings have been subsumed by the *vila* name (208). Although a few aspects of the *vila* may be borrowings from other folk creatures, her functions are not as varied as Ajdačić suggests. If the split is made between the folkloric and mythological aspects of the *vila*, the two show themselves to be rather similar to analogues in other European and Slavic folk beliefs.

Finally, an important article by Elizabeth Barber continues the work of Marija Gimbutas and tries to connect the *vila* and the Russian *rusalka* (she treats the two as synonymous figures) to a fertility ritual. Barber suggests that the *vile* and *rusalki* are the souls of girls who died before having children, and whose unused 'fertility potential' is employed in a spring festival (called *Rusali*) so that it may be transferred into the crops (1997: 14-18). Her evidence focuses heavily on the Russian material, only using the South Slavic material as support, yet there are important issues addressed in the article. Aspects of the tie between the *rusalka* and the *vila* (specifically the folklore variant) are well-founded and fascinating, and the attribution of the *vilalrusalka* motif to calendrical fertility rites is illuminating. Indeed, the *rusalka* has much to tell us about the folkloric *vila*, but with such conflated accounts of the *vila* in scholarly studies it is hard to determine which traits truly belong to her folkloric aspects. Few ethnographic accounts of folk belief exist regarding *vile*, yet a wealth of epics have been collected over the last 500 years. So it is to the mythic *vila* that this study turns for some much-needed clarity.

5.0 The Vila in Myth

Although there is bound to be some overlap, the *vila* that appears in the epics and ballads of the Serbs and Croats is a highly divergent figure with more markedly defined characteristics than the folkloric *vila*. By addressing what the mythic *vila* is, it is possible to show what she is *not* – that is, with traits that belong strictly to the folkloric use of the figure. The following is an outline of the traits and functions of the mythic *vila*. As this study will explore a vast breadth of typological aspects it makes sense to organize the material into categories which may provide some clarity to the work. Such a loose assortment of facts requires a framework, and given the tone and the nature of the study (although any framework would suffice) I have chosen to employ Dumézil's three functions.

5.1 First Function Traits – Magico-Sovereign Aspects **Supernatural Character**

First and foremost the *vila* is a supernatural being. She has magical properties. She exists on a luminal plane between nature and culture, between god(s) and humans calling out from or travelling between one realm and the other to interact with the heroes and villains of the epics. Despite the Christian nature of the Serbo-Croatian epics, the *vila* has always been the pagan 'sore thumb' sticking out of each song in which she appears. Although *vile* often take part in genial interactions with humans, they are still otherworldly and foreign. In the ballad *Ivanova Vila* [Ivan's *Vila*] (MH V pt. II, #22, 27),¹⁷ the protagonist Ivan brings his prospective *vila* bride to his manor, but at the sight of her, his mother invokes God and Mary, which blinds the *vila* and sends her fleeing. In the South Slavic folk imagination, there is no question that the *vila* belongs to the old world, and not to the new.

This factor also informs the actions which the *vile* perform in the epics. I reject the propensity for some scholars to categorize *vile* as good or bad, black or white (as Holton and Mihailovich do in their commentaries), depending on the actions they take within the songs. Like the Arabic *djinn* or the Celtic *sídhe*, the *vile* of the epics are seen as another race. Like humans they are impelled by their own motivations. They may be good, bad or indifferent, and may display any emotion that a human character in the songs may show. Koljević calls the *vila* the most morally ambiguous mythic figure in the epic songs (1980: 150). Certainly the actions of the *vile* set them apart, and their motives may not always be clear, but this is a testament to their supernatural otherness.

Whiteness

In every epic and ballad in which the *vila* appears she is referred to as white. Her hair, her clothing, her skin is not only *bijela* [white] but *prebijela* [more than white, very white, too white]; the overall impression is one of an

¹⁷ Songs from the collections MH (Matica Hrvatska) or SNP (Srpske Narodne Pjesme) are referenced by book number, song number and page number.

ethereal, glowing presence. It is difficult to find an epic involving the *vila* that does not contain the phrase *prebijela vila*. In one song, this glowing presence is employed by a *vila* to blind an imposing villain so that her *pobratim* may kill him (SNP III, #5, 76).¹⁸ Here we see the folkloric *vila*'s dark hair in stark contrast with the mythological *vila*'s overwhelming bloneness.

Beauty

The *vila* of the epics, like the *vila* of folklore, is known for her supernatural beauty. Not only is the figure herself often said to be beautiful in the songs, but beautiful human characters are also questioned as to whether they are *vile*, or are compared to them. In Međedović's *Wedding of Smailagić Meho*, all of the beautiful women are referred to as *vile*, and in fact so are most of the young male heroes! Albert Lord cites a famous ballad, in *The Singer Resumes the Tale*, where a young woman sitting by herself muses aloud, amongst a number of riddles, whether anyone is more beautiful than herself. She is quickly replied to by a *vila* on a mountain who answers all of her riddles, but not before perfunctorily stating, "*I ja sam lepša od tebe*" [I am more beautiful than you] (1995: 49).

Mountain/Cloud Dwelling

At their core, mythological *vile* are specifically celestial beings. Although they are also connected very firmly with water, this connection seems ancillary; *vile* should not be confused with water spirits. The waters that they idle by, bathe in, and often protect (or tax the distribution of) are always mountain lakes and *vile* in the songs are capable of being drowned, a problem that should hardly be a concern for a water spirit.¹⁹

Although their connection to water may pose some ambiguity, the mythological *vila*'s celestial traits are always explicit. Nearly as often as the *vila* is referred to as *bijela vila*, she is referred to by the epithets *vila iz oblaka*, *gorska vila* or *vila od planina* [*vila* from the clouds, mountain *vila* or *vila* from the mountain].²⁰ In one of the most famous and oldest *ženske pjesme* [women's songs], *Vilin Grad* [The *Vila*'s City], the *vila* of the song is said to build a city "*ni na nebu ni na zemlji... neg u kraju u oblaku*" [neither in the sky nor on the ground... but rather on the edge of a cloud] (MH VII, #219, 125, lines 1-3). In another variant of the song, *Buna Žuda Grad* [The *Vila* Builds a City], the *vila*'s children are said to play like lightning and thunder (SNP I, #226, 150), further

¹⁸ The concept of the *pobratim/posestrima* is one of kinship through non-sanguinal ties, best translated in the epics as blood-brother/sister, or brother/sister in battle/God.

¹⁹ In the song *Junak Utapa Vilu* [A Hero Drowns a *Vila*] (MH V pt. II, #29, 39) a young hero has a *vila* killed for disrupting his construction of a fortress. The fact that the *vila* is able to be drowned speaks strongly against her water sprite nature. Curiously, the *vila*'s unsuccessful plea bargain before execution follows the three functions – she promises the hero first wisdom and intelligence, then a fast horse and finally the ability to appeal to girls.

²⁰ The term *planina* in the Serbian and Croatian language applies to large mountains, while *gora* is given to smaller tree-covered mountains, large hills, and the bases of mountains.

connecting her to the cloud motif. In both the epics and the folklore the *vila* are described as territorial, they often belong to a single mountain in the epics (and can protect these rather aggressively), while in the local lore of the Former Yugoslav Nations, all large mountains are said to have their own *vila*.²¹ The mythological *vila* is also intrinsically connected to the fir tree, if she ever sits or lands in a tree in the epics it is always a fir; if a hero pursues her in an epic, he will invariably hide in, or watch her from a fir tree.²² The fact that firs primarily grow in mountain forests is less than a coincidence.

Although I believe that the concept of separate water, field, forest, and mountain *vila*, each living in their own topographic habitats, is a trait which only belongs to the folkloric *vila* (possibly a borrowing from the Greeks), the mythological *vila* most certainly possess aspects of nature spirits. Not only are they always found in nature in the songs, the *vila* of the epics converse with plants and animals and often seem protectors of nature. In a song where a *vila* compares the aspects of her upbringing with that of a beautiful human girl (MH V pt. II, #33, 44), she says:

„A mene vila rodila,
U zelen listak povila.
Meni su bile pelene
Od one trave zelene;
Meni su bile postelje
Grančice tanke od jele;
Koji su vjetri puhali,
Oni su mene zibali;
Koje su st'jene padale,
One su sa mnom igrale;
Koje su rose rosile,
One su mene dojile!“

“But a *vila* gave birth to me,
In green leaves she swaddled me.
My diapers were
Of that green grass;
My beds were
Slender branches from firs;
Winds that were blowing,
They rocked me;
Boulders that fell,
They played with me;
The dew that dropped,
It breast-fed me!”

(lines 30-41)

This role of nature spirit can, however, become ambiguous because of the *vila*'s harmful tendencies. In some of the Marko songs where the hero encounters a *vila* protecting a lake, after he has taken his fill of water and beaten or killed the *vila* for demanding a fee, there is often a sense in the songs that nature has been spoiled by the hero's transgression. And yet, in other songs the *vila* taxes all creatures for the water she controls and leaves every animal on the mountain miserable and thirsty (Petrović 1930: 70).

²¹ The *Velebit* Mountains in Croatia are famously home to the *Vila Velebita* who is the subject of pop songs, and whose marketable name graces the label of a number of *rakija* [brandy] bottles.

²² Arguably, firs are equally present in songs without *vila*, but this does not negate their connection, in fact it adds weight to their mythological significance. For a rather prominent fir tree, see *Vila Strijela Markova Pobratima* (MH II pt. I, #3, 8).

Dancing the *Kolo*

Another area of overlap between the folkloric and mythological *vila* is seen in the *vilinsko kolo*, and the idea that *vile* are both good singers and dancers. In many epics, such as *Ženidba Marka Kraljevića* [The Wedding of Marko Kraljević] (MH II pt. I, #19, 61), the hero stumbles upon a group of *vile* dancing a *kolo* in the mountains. In other songs the *vila* uses a *kolo* to enter or exit the *mise en scène* of the tale. In *Rodjenje Marka Kraljevića* [The Birth of Marko Kraljević], where Marko's mother is portrayed as a *vila*, she spins twice around in a *kolo*, and on the third spin she flies into the clouds and out of the story. The *vile* often playfully invite humans (particularly wounded heroes, a fact that speaks to the supernatural naiveté as well as the healing power that the *vile* often exhibit) to join their *kolo* circle. This propensity for dancing is matched with the functional role of singing that both the folkloric and mythological *vila* share, although the role of singing takes a strange form in the epics.

Singing

While the *vila* of the folklore is said to be a beautiful singer, the *vila* of the epics seldom sings. She does, however, become furious when humans sing or rejoice on her mountain. In the famous song *Marko Kraljević u Vila* [Marko Kraljević and the *Vila*] (SNP II, #38, 158), Marko persuades his travelling companion Miloš Obilić to sing him a song despite Miloš's vehement claims that the *vila* Ravijojla²³ will shoot him with her arrows.²⁴ Invariably, the instant he starts singing the *vila* fires a pair of arrows into his throat and heart and Marko must chase her down and punish her. In the similar song *Vila Strijela Markova Pobratima* [A *Vila* Shoots Marko's Blood-Brother], Marko asks his companion (this time Relja Bošnjanine) to specifically sing *to the mountains*, and it is *this* that angers the local *vile*. Elsewhere, the *vila*'s anger is extended to all noise and merrymaking when, in another tale (MH II pt. I, #20, 68), Marko sends his *kum* [best man] and a wedding party to deliver his fiancée to his wedding.²⁵ He sends them off with the strict warning that they are not to speak loudly, beat drums, play music or celebrate while passing over *Orlova Planina* [The Eagle's Mountain] because of the *vila* who resides there. These prescriptions of silence most likely have a deeper meaning than the superficial reading of a *vila*'s jealousy.

Flight

The *vile* have wings and can fly, although sometimes the nature of their flight is vague in the epics. This point will receive more attention and elucidation further in the discussion.

²³ Ravijojla is a common *vila* name and is most often the name of Marko's *posestrima vila*.

²⁴ Vuk Karadžić, attempting an explanation for the lack of context in this song, suggested that the *vila* and Miloš must have had a singing contest before the events of the epic, and the *vila* must have forbid the hero to sing due to jealousy of his fine voice (SNP II: 159 n. 31).

²⁵ For traditional Serbian wedding practices see Mijatović 2007.

Omniscience and Secret Knowledge

Though the *vila*'s preeminent role in most epics is that of heroic aid (see warrior aspects further below), her main form of aid is not martial, but her secret knowledge and seeming ability to see all and know all. Most often her role in the epics is that of a disembodied voice. If a hero or villain has performed a disgraceful act, or erred in some way, a *vila* will call down to him from a mountain like a manifest conscience.

*Al mu vikne iz gorice vila:
„Zlo ti jutro, mali Marijane!
Uteče ti beže Sokoliću
U avliju, u bijelu kulu.
U njega je kamena avlija,
Zatvorit će čelik i mandale,
Ti ga više ni viditi ne ćeš.“*

But a *vila* from the mountain yelled to him:
“Bad morning to you little Marijan!
The beg Sokolić fled²⁶
To his courtyard, to his white tower.
His is a stone courtyard,
He is going to close steel and wood beams,
You will not see him again.”

(MH VIII, #28, 176, lines 120-126)

The positive side of this trope is the *vila*'s ability to call down to her *pobratim* in a time of need. In the tale *Vidak Harambaša i Barun Franjo Trenk* [Vidak the Outlaw and Baron Franjo Trenk] (MH VIII, #13, 87), Franjo is saved from a secret ambush by his *vila*.

*Oni pošli Trenkovome dvoru,
Misle momci, nitko ih ne čuje,
Al to čula vila u planini,
Pa je vila Trenka dozivala:
„Pobratime, Trenkoviću Franjo!
Zlo si sio i vino popio
Eto na te gorski harambaše,
Pred njima je Vidak harambaša,
Misle tvoje popalit timare,
Opkoliti tvoju b'jelu kulu,
Pobiti će mlađane pandure,
Porušit će tvoju b'jelu kulu,*

They went to Trenk's manor,
The lads thinking that no one hears them,
But a *vila* in the mountains heard,
Then the *vila* called to Trenk:
“Blood-brother Trenković Franjo!
You have sown evil and drank wine
Mountain outlaws are upon you,
Leading them is Vidak the Outlaw,
They intend to burn down your estate,
Surround your white tower,
They will slaughter your young guards,
They will reduce your white tower to rubble,

*A tebe će mlađa uhvatiti
I tebi se ljuto osvetiti.
Već ti kupi, Trenkoviću Franjo,
Već ti kupi mlađane pandure,
Pa ih meći u tajne busije
I zatvori na čardaku vrata,
Pa kad dođu gorski harambaše,*

And you, young one, they will capture
And avenge their anger upon you.
But gather, Franjo Trenković,
But gather the young guards,
Then place them into a secret ambush
And close the door of your manor,
Then when the mountain outlaws arrive,

²⁶ Beg is a Turkish title, known in English as bey, denoting a district governor.

Pospi na njih iz zasjede vatru!“

Hasten upon them with ambush fire!”
(lines 63-82)

This secret knowledge, intelligence coupled with tactical advice, is the *vila*'s most characteristic aid in heroic epics. Perhaps the most familiar South Slavic epic to English language readers is that of Marko Kraljević's fight with Musa Kesedžija [Musa the Robber (lit. Purse-snatcher)] (SNP II, #67, 26). In this song, Marko is overcome by Musa, who is the more powerful warrior, and is near defeat, when he calls out to his *vila*, reprimanding her for deserting him after she has promised to protect him. In most variants the *vila* replies to Marko from the clouds above that she never fights on Sunday²⁷ and that two warriors attacking one is an unfair advantage. This does not preclude her involvement, however, and the *vila* reminds Marko of daggers that he has hidden upon him. Musa (an Albanian, which may explain his lack of familiarity with the *vila*²⁸) looks to the clouds to see with whom Marko is conversing and Marko exploits the opportunity by disembowelling him.

This secret knowledge of the *vile* also notably encompasses botanical knowledge. Every song which involves a *vila* harming an acquaintance of Marko's will inevitably end in Marko beating the *vila* into submission and then forcing her to obtain secret herbs (or sometimes healing waters) to cure the victim. Tatyana Popović cites a song where Marko forces a *vila* to use this knowledge to raise a hero from the dead (1988: 126).

While the *vile* are privy to secret knowledge and are always watching events unfold in the world, this omniscience is matched with an equally potent prescience. Their proclamations to heroes in a number of songs hint at their knowledge of the future, but the most telling example is in Vuk Karadžić's favourite variant of *Smrt Marka Kraljevića* [The Death of Marko Kraljević] (SNP II, #74, 314). Marko, being the great hero that he is, cannot be killed by a mere villain. In this famous song, Marko is travelling upon a mountain when his sure-footed steed, Šarac [lit. Pie-bald], begins to stumble and shed tears. Marko starts to reprimand his horse, but is interrupted by his *vila*, who informs him that Šarac is grieving the death of his master. Marko is unbelieving at first, but he is directed to a well where he sees the truth of his fate reflected. He kills and buries his horse (so that it may not fall into enemy hands), breaks his weapons, leaves a message and some money for the man who may find his body, and then lies down and dies.²⁹

As these traits illustrate, the supernatural abilities of the *vila* clearly attest to her otherworldly and fantastic character, yet the specific flavour of her function

²⁷ The fact that the supernatural, pagan *vile* appear in the epics as devout Christians is a wonderful trope that surfaces frequently.

²⁸ The Albanians have their own *vila*-like figure, the *zona* (see Miller 2009), but I suspect that a Serbian singer would assume any outsider to be unfamiliar.

²⁹ In line with the humorous element in most Marko songs, his body remains there a week; all the passersby assuming Marko is sleeping and leaving him alone, for fear of his rage.

within the songs is most often elicited in the field of battle – the place where her powers are measured and tested.

5.2 Second Function Traits – Warrior Aspects

Retinue

There are many *vile*, and they gather together in groups, most often to dance the *kolo*, but also for meetings. In *A Vila Shoots Marko's Blood-Brother*, a gathering of thirty *vile* convene to decide who should deal with Relja Bošnjanine. The group has a leader, elected by seniority, who offers her position to any of the clan bold enough to attack a friend of Marko's. In the tale *Ženidba Marijana, Sestrića Marka Kraljevića* [The Marriage of Marijan, the Nephew (son of sister) of Marko Kraljević] (MH II pt. I, #69, 286-300), a *vila* leads a troupe of (again) thirty in the protection of a mythical lake on the peak of a mountain. Within most stories the *vile* are distinct enough to receive a number of individual names, although they are mostly common names (Mandalina, Anđelija, Gjurja etc.) that provide little assistance to mythological analysis.³⁰

Powerful Warriors

The largest role that the *vila* plays in the heroic songs, and the most surprising given the usual passive depiction of women in South Slavic epics, is that of a warrior. The *vile* are seen as powerful, supernatural warriors whose might is only rivalled by the bravest of heroes. Often Kraljević Marko is the only hero said to frighten *vile*, and usually only after he has given one a reason to fear him, and yet, in one variant of *The Death of Marko Kraljević* (MH II pt. I, #72, 316), it is an angry *vila* who ends the life of this most famous hero.³¹ The fact that the *vile* are said to gather in groups most likely suggests their involvement in a supernatural war-band. If *vile* do intervene violently in the epics their weapon of choice is always a bow and arrow and they are often described as wearing armour.³²

In those epics that do not employ the *vila* as an enemy or love interest, her role is always that of a supernatural aid to the hero.³³ Most heroes in the corpora have a *vila* who acts as their *posestrima*, aiding them in battle (most often with secret knowledge rather than through action). This connection to heroes also informs a number of epics where a *vila* comes upon a wounded hero (often her *pobratim*) dying after a battle. In these songs the *vila* will extend the honour of last rites that any human hero would equally perform; she will either bring word of his death to the hero's family, or give him a proper burial. In one song a *vila* not only buries a hero, but builds a church and plants an orchard on his grave

³⁰ For more on the names of *vile*, see Banašević 1952.

³¹ Strangely, the *vila* simply wills Marko's death, as though telekinetically. The hero's head begins to hurt as he ignores the *vila*'s demands and then he promptly falls dead. This is not the only epic containing this motif.

³² See MH II pt. I, #3, 11.

³³ For a richer analysis of heroic helpers, including the *vila*, refer to chapter 2 of Miller 2000.

(Petrović 1930: 39).³⁴ Again, deeper meanings regarding this role may be shrouded in the past, as many songs hint at a *vila*'s possible role as psychopomp.

Bestowers of Power

Along with the *vila*'s ability to tap into supernatural powers, she is also able to bestow this power upon mortals. In many of the stories of Marko's birth, his mother *Jevrosima*³⁵ is replaced by a *vila*. Some stories even tell that Marko (as well as many other South Slavic heroes) was born of the union of a *vila* and a dragon. This mythological parentage is explanation enough in the epics for a hero's magnificent strength and other attributes. In other stories where Marko is human-born, his strength is often bestowed upon him by a *vila*. In these tales, a young Marko is usually working as a shepherd when he comes upon a *vila* lying out in the sun, whom he shades with plants and flowers lest her beauty be sunburned. In other variants Marko finds a *vila*'s children lost in the heat of the day and shades them. As a gift, the *vila* will often give Marko a sword and his marvellous horse Šarac (Popović 1988: 72), or tell him where to go to capture or purchase his horse.³⁶ In a number of other origin songs, most likely the oldest and certainly the most important for mythological study, the *vila* repays Marko for his kindness to her by letting him suckle three times from her breast, thus imbuing him with his heroic strength (Lord 1991: 206).

Power in Hair or Garments

Another shared feature between the myths and folk belief is that the hair or garments of a *vila* contain her power. Folklore materials place the most emphasis on the idea that a *vila*'s hair holds her supernatural power, and that control can be gained over her through the magic laws of contagion. There is some mention of this trait in the epics. In variants of Marko's battle with Musa Kesedžija, Marko's *vila* refuses to join the fight, for fear that Musa's more numerous *posestrime vile* will tear her hair out (Fisher 1990: 42). In one ballad, a mother's hasty wishes bring the sexual advances of a *vila* to her son (much to the chagrin of his fiancée). The mother's knife and the threat of shorn locks promptly remedies the situation (MH V pt. II, #23, 29). Yet most often within the epics, a *vila*'s clothing take on far more prominence than her hair. In a unique song, a *vila* becomes foster parent to her *pobratim*'s son when he is imprisoned (MH IX, #2, 11). When the child has grown old enough to rescue his father, the *vila* sets him off with a sword and horse and provides him with '*vila* clothes' [*vilinsko odilo*] which magically camouflage him, making him unrecognizable. When he arrives to rescue his father, the Turkish enemies mistake him for a number of famous heroes, unable to

³⁴ Respectively symbols of culture and nature, one of the many divides that the *vila* passes between.

³⁵ See Popović 1988 for more information on Marko's human parents and their implications regarding his heroic nature.

³⁶ Following a very common Indo-European motif, Šarac is often depicted as a mangy, unsightly horse until he is purchased by Marko who is aware of his true nature.

see through his glamour until he reveals himself with his ‘signature laugh’. A *vila*’s clothing, however, is a veritable repository of magic power and serves a much more important role, one that will be addressed below.

Sacrifice

Maybe the most intriguing and archaic aspect that belongs to the *vila* of myth is the connection with sacrifice. The sacrifice to *vile* that Procopius attributed to the South Slavic tribe he encountered finds attestation in a number of forms in the epic songs. The most famous example is from the song *Зиданье Скадра* [The Building of Skadar] (SNP II, #26, 90) where the three Mrnjavčević brothers are attempting to erect a fortress at Skadar.³⁷ Following a common European myth motif, the fortress walls fall every night. Here, however, it is a *vila* from the mountain who ruins the architects’ work. The *vila* calls down to the royal brothers from a mountain, and informs them that the building can only stand if twins are found, bearing the names Stojan and Stoja,³⁸ and buried under the foundation. When these twins cannot be located³⁹ the *vila* demands a surrogate sacrifice, telling the brothers that one of their wives must be walled into the foundation. It is at this point in the tale that most scholars will note the universal folklore motif of the ‘walled-up wife’ and contextualise it with evidence for human sacrifice in past European building practices (Zimmerman 1979b: 373), or the fact that in Montenegro, until fairly recently, a chicken or sheep was decapitated and its blood spread on the site of a future structure (Petrovitch 1914: 24). What is never addressed is the simple fact that, typologically, demanding sacrifice is part of the *vila*’s *modus operandi*. Moreover, most scholars overlook the detail that the buildings that the *vile* demand sacrifice for are military fortifications. A sacrifice is never performed without a beneficial outcome and within this motif, the ability of the *vila* to bestow power on heroes reaches its macabre zenith.

We find the clearest sacrificial evidence in the tale *Mijat Spasava Kraljevića Marka* [Mijat Rescues Marko Kraljević] (MH VIII, #17, 103), when Marko is captured in the city of Karlovac by Turks, but sends word to a number of heroes who form a rescue party. When the hero Marijan informs Marko’s brother Andrija, he is overheard by Marko’s two sons, who become worried and race to gather horses to ride to Karlovac. As they ride off, five seemingly random lines are devoted to a *vila* who exits the song as quickly as she enters.

*Gledala ih vila iz oblaka,
Sama sobom ona besidila:*

*A vila watched them from a cloud,
Alone to herself she said:*

³⁷ For a more in-depth study of this song (specifically the moral aspects explored within it), see Zimmerman 1979b.

³⁸ These names are derived from the verb *stojati*, to stand.

³⁹ The futility of this incident should immediately gather the attention of mythologists. See Colarusso 1998 for an explanation of how the small, odd details in myths often hold the most archaic implications.

„Koji bi se junak nahodio,
 Pogubio dvoje dice male,
 Dala bi mu pola snage svoje!“

“If there could be a hero found,
 To kill the two little children,
 I would give him half my power!”
 (lines 325-329)

Although it has no bearing whatsoever on the story or any of the characters, an old epic formula makes its way into this song – for a small sacrifice of two children, the *vila* would convey power to a hero; perhaps in the same manner that it was given to the young Marko as discussed earlier.

These ideas are found as well in the tales where a *vila* guards a secret mountain lake or spring. Most often thirsty heroes are directed to the lakes, but warned that the *vila* who guards them exacts a heavy toll or tax.⁴⁰ Usually the fee is the two eyes, or two arms of a hero, and his horse's legs, all crucial attributes and thus the highest of prices. In *The Birth of Marko Kraljević*, before King Vukašin forces the *vila* to marry him, he is sent to her lake by another *vila* to remedy his poor hunting prowess. He is told that the *vila* of the lake can teach him how to hunt, that is, for a small price, “from a hero, arm and muscle” (line 18). The sacrifice motif may even extend to the *vila*'s penchant for dancing the *kolo*. Yoffe and Krafczik suggest that the *kolo*'s roots lie in sacrificial dances (2003: 27-28), although I remain sceptical on the matter.

In one of the starkest examples of the sacrifice motif presented in the songs, a particularly cruel *vila* is building a city in the mountains, but not just any city, for her materials are the bones of heroes and their horses (MH V pt. II, #38, 51). When she runs short of these, she convinces her equally malicious *pobratim*, the *ban* Drinović, to lead the wedding party of a rich man's daughter into the mountain where he is to ambush the party and kill everyone, “*sve pogubi malo i veliko*” [kill everyone, both small and big (young and old)] (line 25). When the *ban* and his bandits have murdered all but the young girl, she begs for her life and asks him if he knows of her brother, the *ban* Drinović. In this tragic moment, the *ban* learns of his *vila*'s true cruelty, that she has set him to murder everyone near and dear to his own, long lost sister. And yet the epics need not be so specific in their depiction of the *vila*'s desire for sacrifice; at the lowest level, her strong connection to war and battle (a blood ritual itself) is enough. This savage side of the *vila*'s connection to heroes, however, is balanced by her relationship to them through roles of fertility; aspects which explore the true depth of this mythological figure.

5.3 Third Function Traits – Fertility Aspects **Marriage with Mortals**

⁴⁰ In some rare songs this taxation is brought to an extreme and the *vila* is depicted as a water merchant (Popović 1988:10). Within the folk customs regarding *vile*, Čiča outlines water taboos in Croatia requiring that *vile* be invoked as *posestrime* before the water may be touched (Čiča 2002: 38).

One of the most common functions that the *vile* serve in the epics has been hinted at earlier, that is, their ability to marry heroes, and bear them children. But it is the form of these unions that is most fascinating. One of the oldest motifs involving the *vila*, is that of a hero forcing her to marry him by stealing her garments while she bathes or sleeps. In some tales the garments are clothes, armour or a crown, in others (certainly the more mythologically important) it is her wings, a feather, or her bird garb. In *The Birth of Marko Kraljević*, Marko's father, King Vukašin, is directed to the lake of a mountain *vila* named Mandalina, where he finds her sleeping. He steals her crown and wings and flees back to his castle, promptly hiding them from sight. The *vila* races to his manor, demands her clothing back and offers a trade, to which Vukašin, fully aware of the rules regarding *vile*, replies,

„Ne ću, vilo, nijednoga dara,
Neg ako ćeš meni ljuba biti!“
Tužna vila u zlu se vidila,
Ide za njim b'jelom njeg'vom dvoru,
Vjenča vilu Vukašine kralju.
Dva je njemu porodila sina,
Prvoga je Kraljevića Marka,
A drugoga Andriju nejaka.

“I do not want any presents *vila*,
But that you will be my love!”
The sad *vila* found herself caught in evil,
She followed him into his white manor,
King Vukašin married the *vila*.
She gave him two sons,
The first was Marko Kraljević,
And the second Andrija the weak.⁴¹
(lines 38-45)

This tale also introduces the most crucial aspect of the marriage of heroes and *vile*, the fact that these marriages are temporary or conditional, and that the *vila* must inevitably return to her supernatural realm. After nineteen years Vukašin's *vila*-wife tricks him into returning her wings and crown and then, as mentioned earlier, dances a *kolo* in his courtyard before flying up to the sky. She calls down to him that although he shall never see her again, she shall return early in the mornings and late in the evenings to finish raising the infant Andrija.

In *The Wedding of Marko Kraljević* (MH II pt. I, #19, 61), Marko is similarly wed to a *vila*, only this time she is not forced into the marriage, but chooses him willingly as a mate. Marko sees the *vila* Nadanojla (here the leader of the *vile*) dancing a *kolo* in a group and he sends his falcon to steal her crown⁴² and wings. She chases after Marko, but when she catches up to him she is far from angry. They return to Marko's castle and on the way she explains her unique marital stricture to him. She instructs Marko on how to greet each of the people she knows will meet him on their arrival; he is not to tell anyone that he is returning with a *vila* to marry (obviously an honour, the pride of which he must

⁴¹ Marko's brother Andrija, or Andrijaš, factors into many epics including the oldest recorded song (*Marko Kraljević i Brat Mu Andrijaš*, recorded from fishermen on the Croatian Island of Hvar and published in Vienna in 1568). His weakness here is in regard to his young age in the tale since Andrija is a hero in his own right.

⁴² Here titled *uzglavje*, which is usually a term for a pillow, but here is more a headdress.

abstain from). As Marko meets the guard of his castle and his mother, they indeed react as the *vila* has foretold, each remarking on the *vila* at Marko's side. He responds (as she has instructed) incredulously that there is no *vila* with him, but only a young shepherd girl. A few years pass and Marko is holding a tripartite celebration, he has been given a son by his wife, he is giving his sister away in marriage and it is his name day.⁴³ Caught up in the merriment, Marko foolishly boasts that a *vila* has given him a child, and Nadanojla, enraged, seizes her crown and wings and leaves him. Marko does track her down, make amends and return with her to his castle at the end of this tale, but such an ending is unconventional and the original motif is still present.

While the mythological *vila* characteristically employs the swan maiden motif, the folkloric variant does not reflect this. The idea of marriage with *vile* does find its way into the folkloric portrayal of the *vila*, but the conception there is commonly vague. Bird aspects are seldom mentioned, and when this imagery is employed it is usually the acquisition of a feather from her wings that allows the protagonist to acquire his bride. The *samovili* are able to marry men, but are said to make bad wives and worse mothers, and it is said that they will not remain long (Nicoloff 1975: 10).

This point reveals another, albeit minute, difference between the folkloric and mythological *vila*. As a mother the *vila* of folk-custom is ill-suited, the *vila* of the epics however is quite nurturing. She must inevitably return to her own realm, yet seldom are the songs where the *vila* does not promise to continue raising her young children through secret visits. By suckling a young shepherd Marko, the *vila* also displays a propensity for fosterage (a mother's milk being a common symbol of kinship ties in myths).⁴⁴ The role of the children themselves is also a vague but interesting concept that could benefit from more intensive enquiry. Although heroes are said to be the children of *vile*, there are no songs that tell of their rearing. Conversely, the *vila* is often pictured with anonymous children, yet to my knowledge no song describes the adulthood of such a child. Since there are no male *vile* it can be assumed that an Amazonian system applies – the male children stay on earth as men, the females become *vile*, but this is never explicit. Only one song, to my knowledge, addresses the question at all. In *Ivan's Vila*, after the *vila* has been chased away by the hero's mother, Ivan implores her to return,

Progovara vili u oblaku:
„Vrat' se natrag, prebijela vilo!
što će tvoja dva nejaka sina?“
Al govori vila iz oblaka:
„Ne budali, lijepi Ivane!

He said to the *vila* in the cloud:
 “Turn back white *vila*!
 What will become of your two weak sons?”
 But the *vila* said from the cloud:
 “Don't be foolish, handsome Ivan!

⁴³ See Mijatović 2007 for more on this and other cultural traits.

⁴⁴ In folk-custom the *Vilenice* healers in communities are often said to have been abducted for parts of their childhood by *vile*, during which time they are taught their magic and knowledge (Čiča 2002: 44-45).

*Moji sinci dobro će bez majke.
Ako l' sinci moje krvi budu,
Oni ć' naći svoju milu majku;
Naći će ju nebu u oblaci'.
Ako l' sinci tvoje krvi budu,
Ti ji' 'ráni sebi uz koljena!'*

My sons will be fine without a mother.
If our sons are of my blood,
They will find their dear mother;
They will find her in the sky in the clouds.
If our sons are of your blood,
You will nourish them by your knees!"
(lines 61-71)

Connection to Birds

As has already been illustrated, the predilection of the *vile* to fly and the fact that they have wings is enough to link them totemically and anthropomorphically to birds, but beyond that, there are specific references to *vile* taking on the form of birds. While the *vile* of folk custom are said to be able to change into swans, wolves, snakes and any number of other animals (Kulišić et al. 1970: 66), the *vile* of the epics transform exclusively into birds. A *vila*'s magic garments are interchangeable for wings in the epics, a point that should not be seen as a variation so much as a continuation of a single theme. The fact that control can be gained over a *vila* by acquiring a feather, clothing or wings from her is befitting the common European myth motif, but her warrior nature also connects her to the totemic transformations of Indo-European warriors. Where berserkers in Norse mythology may don a bear hide, the *vile* wear bird suits or use their clothing to transform into birds (more will be presented regarding this trope below).

In a variant of *The Wedding of Marko Kraljević* mentioned earlier, Marko must save his fiancée from a *vila* who is holding her captive in a mountain lair, torturing her in retribution for the noise that her wedding party foolishly made in the mountains. While Marko is outside the *vila*'s cliff, trying to discover the secret entrance, she emerges and flies off. This *should* reveal the cave's entrance, and yet Marko remains confounded because the *vila* has quickly darted out of the rocks in the form of an eagle. Similarly, in an old variant of *Marko Kraljević and Mina of Kostur*, recorded in 1758 in Dubrovnik, a *vila* who comes to aid Marko in battle does not call to him from the heavens with her knowledge, but flies off from her mountain and lands on Marko's shoulder (MH II pt. I, #48, 210). It could be argued that the *vila* is in full womanly form, but the idea seems rather odd. The context suggests that the *vila* has theriomorphically transformed into a bird and has flown down to whisper help into Marko's ear. Given the nature of the *vila*'s bathing habits, her affinity to water and her connection to the swan-maiden motif, the folklore conception of *vile* as swans would be rather fitting as well. Although I have not seen it explicitly mentioned in the epics, her connection to water resembles that of a swan or similar bird.⁴⁵ There is another conception, however,

⁴⁵ Interestingly, an archaeological survey of a Slavic settlement (Pozharnaja Balka) in the district of Poltava in central Ukraine which dates to the sixth or seventh century BCE yielded a number of representations of swans. With each an outline had been drawn in the earth and the soil around it

which should be addressed. In the song *The Marriage of Marijan, the Nephew of Marko Kraljević*, the leader of the *vile* is said to sprout her wings from her shoulders. Although this description could be seen as contradictory, I believe that the idea of *vile* turning into birds does not negate the possibility of epic singers imagining a transformational middle-ground.

Aside from these firmly attested features of the mythological *vila*, there are some ambiguous aspects that should be addressed.

5.4 Ambiguous Traits

Blinding

Although *vile* in the epics seem to enjoy blinding their victims, the tendency is far from exclusive. The concept of tearing out eyeballs is a general trope for South Slavic supernatural beings, which is fitting given the dramatic and gruesome nature of such an act. In the tale *Јован и Дувск Старјевић* [Jovan and the Leader of the Giants] (SNP II, #8, 29), the Giant and Jovan's deceptive mother tear his eyes out. It is in fact a *vila* who heals his wounds with sacred waters and asks God to grant Jovan new eyes. In another song a woman offers to give a *vila* one of three gifts: her wealth, her eyes, or her white hands if the *vila* will only heal her dying brother. The *vila* scoffs at all these gifts and asks instead for the girl's blonde hair, another testament to the power of hair in the lore of the *vila* (MH V pt. II, #25, 33).

Riding Wild Animals

This is a somewhat difficult aspect to allocate to a depiction of the *vila* (folkloric or mythological), and one that requires more research. Although songs do on occasion depict the *vila* riding on horseback, a number of texts (Zimmerman, Máchal and Nicoloff) describe *vile* as riding deer and fighting in the forest while mounted on them. Commonly it is said that the *vile* ride deer, using serpents as reins. The concept is, to my knowledge, based upon two mythic tropes, whether it also belongs to the folkloric *vila* is an important question. The first example involves a number of Bulgarian songs where a *samovila* brings news to a hero, or weapons he requires in battle, which she delivers riding a deer (Nicoloff 1975: 11). Popović cites a song where a *samovila* delivers a message to Krali Marko riding a gray stag, "two vipers serve her as stirrups, yellow smoke is her whip..." (1988: 67).

The second example, which comes from the Serbo-Croatian songs, regards a number of variants of one epic, *Marko Kraljević i Vila Brodarica* [Marko Kraljević and the *Vila Brodarica*] (MH II pt. I, #2, 5) (also called *baždarkinja*, *bardarica* or *vodarica*, all terms implying a collector of a tax on water). In this tale, Marko faces off against a *vila* who rides a deer, uses snakes for reins, and fires snakes as arrows from her bow. This trope, however, is mirrored in the odd

had been cut away leaving a relief. The reliefs had been covered in ash and may represent early cult sites (Gimbutas 1971: 159).

tale *Цар и Дјевојка* [The Czar and the Girl] (SNP I, #234, 155), in which a young (human) girl retreats to the woods to construct a pagan ‘church’. When the Czar leads an army to retrieve her she is quick to act:

<p><i>А кад и је млада угледала, она оде у зелену баишу: јелен-рогом шарца оседлала, љутом га је змијом зауздала, још га љућом змијом ошибује.</i></p>	<p>And when the young girl saw (the army), ... she went to her green garden: she saddled her pie-bald with deer antlers, with an angry snake she bridled him, and with an angrier snake she spurred him. (lines 30-34)</p>
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Later, when she captures the Czar himself, she tears out his eyes and leaves him blind to wander the forest. Where the true root of this motif lies is debatable. If it is a key aspect of the mythological *vila*, then the trope not only adds credence to her role as a warrior, it takes her heroic traits and elevates them in league with her supernatural aspects by having her ride an animal that was deemed sacred by the South Slavs (Koljević 1980: 56 n.127). This trope would also create new questions regarding her sometimes ambiguous position as nature spirit.

Even considering these uncertain traits it is clear that typologically and functionally the *vila* of the myths and epics is a very distinct entity from the *vila* of folk customs. The implications of this suggest the need for an alteration to the way in which this figure is analyzed and described in academic work. Furthermore, this understanding sheds light on the connection that is often posited between the *vila* and the *rusalka*.

6.0 The Rusalka

In Russian oral tradition we find the *rusalka*. Like the folkloric *vila* she is a dangerous creature who is said to drown unsuspecting people in water or drop on them from the branches of forest trees (Ivanits 1989: 75). *Rusalki* dance the *kolo* (in Russian *khorovod*), tickle people to death, have green or brown, wet hair and are said to be “the souls of unbaptized or stillborn babies and drowned maidens” (75). Although they are said to take humans as husbands, they take boys from villages and most often bring them to their underwater kingdoms (76). The *rusalki* are often thought to be the mistresses of the *vodianoi* (the Russian male water spirit), and their earliest conceptions connect them to fish. Most folk drawings depict them as mermaids, or similar half-fish creatures.

Etymologically the water aspect comes naturally to the *rusalka*, as her name is derived from the word *ruslo* [river bed/channel], the same root that may lie behind the Sanskrit word *rasa* [water]. The elusive figure *bereginia*, which is said to be a precursor to the *rusalka*, derives its name from the word *bereg* [shore],⁴⁶ relating it to a common depiction of the *rusalka* as a ghostly maiden, combing her hair on the bank of a river. Both these etymologies comfortably suit Russian demonology where every spirit is named for its abode (such as the *domovoi*, derived from *dom* [home/house]). In Northern Russia, *rusalki* are said to be hideous and have large pendulous breasts, and indeed, the Russian scholar D. K. Zelenin found that many Russian tales lack suggestions of *rusalka*’s beauty, but always stress their status as unclean dead (1913). Zelenin not only emphasized the dead maiden aspect of *rusalki*, he also suggested that their closest mythological analogue is the sirens of Greece.

In addition, there is also the connection of the *rusalki* to fields and grain crops that is addressed in the Barber paper; Máchal stresses this point as well. “The Rusalky live in woods, meadows, fields, and waters. Generally appearing when the corn begins to ripen in the fields, and concealed amidst it, ready to punish him who wantonly plucks the ears... they frolic among the high-standing corn and, rocking upon it, make it wave to and fro” (2006: 90). He connects the *rusalki* to hail, bad weather and fairy-circles as Conrad did the folkloric aspects of the *vila*, as well as to midnight dances to the music of shepherds. He in fact attributes a profusion of fairy characteristics to the *rusalki*, but they all fall into actions performed in three zones – fields, rivers and forests. The manner in which the *rusalki* are associated with these environs should instantly remind one of the folkloric *vila*. Moreover, the *rusalki* never appear in Russian epics, only in fairytales and memorates where their role as dangerous spirits is stressed. In the tale *A Lad Who Watched Rusalki*, they are depicted as giggling nymphs, easily fooled, preoccupied by footwear (an interesting motif), and frightening when they pursue the hero (Haney 2009: 249-252). Oinas explains that *rusalki* “are said to

⁴⁶ This theory is not without controversy, Yoffe and Kraficzik argue that the term *bereginia* was a distortion of **pergyni*, the name, they suggest, for the hills where the Slavic god *Perun* was worshipped (2003:19).

spare those who can solve... riddles posed to them” (1985: 109). While these traits lack any connection with the mythic *vila*, they bear striking resemblance to the folkloric depiction of the *vila*. Both figures are portrayed as having a preoccupation with their dark hair, both play simple games (tickling, scaring, tying knots) which can turn deadly, both may originate with the ghostly dead, and both are connected to fields, forests and water. All of these aspects suggest that the *rusalka* can only be compared to the *vila* if her folkloric aspects are being analyzed.

While the *rusalka* aligns so clearly with the folkloric *vila*, she never appears in epics as the *vila* does; it makes sense then to seek a Russian analogue for the mythic *vila*. Sadly, there exists no clear mythological version of the *vila* in the Russian *byliny* [epics]. Though the *polyanitsy* or *bogatyry* are the most obvious female warriors in the *byliny*, they are specifically depicted as human, not supernatural. Although they may share some functions with the *vila* (blood-sisters and wives to heroes), their depiction as foreigners (often from Lithuania) and strong women (Bailey and Ivanova 1998:94-96) makes them a clearer analogue with the Amazons of Greek myth. There are, however, some possible vestiges of a *vila*-like figure, such as the disembodied voice from the heavens that provides Dobrynya Nikitich with tactical advice in the epic *Dobrynya and the Dragon* (91), or the supernatural swan woman that Mikhailo Potyk discovers while hunting and marries on a unique condition (156).⁴⁷ What this might suggest about the *vila* is debatable. Does the *vila* represent an out-growth of a Serbo-Croatian *rusalka* figure, altered over time to a new role in the epics, or conversely, has an epic *vila*, once the product of a professionalized bardic class, been taken up by the rural population and given local functions as a nature spirit? Perhaps two distinct figures have been subsumed by one *vila* name. An intensive historical study could provide some insight, although the question may be unanswerable, too shrouded in a preliterate past.

It is intriguing to note that the Bulgarian figures may reflect a similar divide. Máchal, Barber and Ivanits agree that the core aspect of *rusalki* is their connection to the seasons and fertility rites of spring. Ivanits claims that the Bulgarian version of the *rusalka* lives on the edge of the world and brings moisture and fertility (1989: 78). As noted earlier, the Bulgarians have two names for their folk figure, both *samovila*, and *samodiva*. Assen Nicoloff concludes the section of his book on the *samovila* by addressing the two terms. “Similar to *samovilas* are the *samodivas*. They live on the plains and are likely to be found along rivers, pools, springs and wells. In autumn they depart for the end of the world and come back again next spring. They leave their abodes only at night in order to wash, bathe and dance. Later [historically] the term *samodiva* is used in place of *samovila*” (1975: 11). More research is needed to support Nicoloff’s

⁴⁷ Potyk must vow that whichever of them may die first, the other will be buried with the deceased for three months, certainly not a condition reflected in *vila* tales, but the other aspects of the tale merit closer examination.

claim, but were the depictions so starkly divided it could support the division found between the functions of the *vila*. Where the one figure is connected to themes of fertility and inhabits plains, forests and water features, the other lives in the mountains and clouds and is linked to heroes and myths.

7.0 Conclusions Regarding the Functional Divide of the *Vila*

If this argument can be accepted, then certainly more questions arise than are answered. A line between folkloric genres is never as clear in practice as it appears in theory; obviously aspects of time-depth, borrowings, diffusion and regional variation must be taken into account. Document retention and the late date of epic annotation among the Serbs and Croats will ultimately leave some questions shrouded forever. Where the lines can be drawn on ambiguous features of the *vila* is difficult to say. It would be beneficial to study more ethnographic material regarding folk-practices, as well as to explore oral traditions that lie in the middle-ground between myth and folk-custom such as the fairytale depictions of the *vila*. Yet, the ability of epic songs to retain archaic material is often astounding and the oldest materials can be analyzed to create a relatively clear picture. The conclusions drawn here are not only plausible, but statistically consistent.⁴⁸

Whatever the mysterious past of the *vila* may be, the facts suggest enough of a functional divide to merit the separate study of the *vila* in the two formats, here sub-labelled as 'folkloric', belonging to folk custom, and 'mythological', belonging to the epics and ballads. While scholars in the past have created disordered lists of every story, trait or aspect that has been associated with the name *vila*, by employing a simple designation of which role of the *vila* is being analyzed, folkloric or mythological, studies overloaded with facts and conflicting ideas can become clear and unambiguous. Moreover, the distinction between the epic and legendary functions of the *vila* is highly productive in elucidating extensive parallels with homologous figures in the Indo-European world, a task which will be taken up in the second part of this thesis.

⁴⁸ Of the one hundred mythological and epic songs surveyed for this study only one did not conform to the trait parameters set forward in this paper. The song (a *women's song*, which are removed from the bardic practice) involves a *vila* transforming into a snake to bite a hero who has trampled on clover and made the clover cry (MH V pt. II, #31, 42).

8.0 The Vila and the Indo-European Myth-World

It is my contention that the *vila* is not a curiosity confined to the South Slavs but a vestige of a clearly attestable Indo-European mythological figure. The aspects which I have outlined suggest the possibility of linkages to figures from other corpora, often in novel ways. The second half of this thesis will explore how the mythological *vila* may be posited properly into the world of Indo-European mythology. By exploring the functional aspects of the *vila* outlined in the first half of the thesis and comparing them with myth figures from other corpora in the Indo-European world, an argument will be presented suggesting that the *vila* (or at least most of her key functional aspects) may in fact be a very ancient retention from the Indo-European past. The *vila* bears an intriguing comparison to three myth figures attested in different centuries and scattered from the northern reaches of Iceland to Central Asia. This study will explore the functional traits of the Norse *valkyrie*, the Indic *apsarā* and an ambiguous figure (most likely of Persian origin) found in *The One Thousand and One Nights* and what they might suggest about the historical time-depth of the *vila*.

9.0 The Vila and the Valkyrie

In her famous study *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, Hilda Ellis Davidson suggests that the Norse *valkyries*' roles as 'shield maidens' is a softening of their original forms as demonic figures, scavenging the dead (1964: 62). It is understandable how one could come to that conclusion. Although the oldest trace materials of Norse mythology contain numerous accounts of what she sees as the 'late form' of the *valkyries*, (capable of falling in love with heroes and represented as once having been human women) her choice of mythological comparison leads her astray. The only comfortable analogue that most scholars of Nordic material have at their disposal is the Irish Morrígan, this is Ellis Davidson's (65) choice as well as Rudolf Simek's (2007: 349) and Angelique Gulermovich Epstein's (1997). Yet the Morrígan has never truly fit the same mould as the *valkyries*. The Morrígan is a single goddess, sometimes bi or tri-partitioned, but certainly not equivalent to the numerous *valkyries*. She is subservient to no one, while the *valkyries* are the servants of Odin. Nor is the Morrígan specifically depicted as a warrior. Although some scholars have attempted to alter the conception of the *valkyries* to fit the Morrígan, the analyses often seem forced. Gulermovich Epstein's article, "The Morrígan and the Valkyries", which focuses directly on this comparison, suggests more reasons why the two are dissimilar than how they align. As well, her strongest comparisons rely on Norse figures that are not explicitly *valkyries* (121), and the Celtic Rhiannon is often employed in place of the Morrígan (127). The comparison is far from satisfactory, yet the repository of mythological comparands available to date leaves few options. It is my contention that by introducing the South Slavic *vila* into the equation, facts start to line up without any manipulation or force required.

9.1 First Function

Regarding supernatural aspects, the *valkyrie* is not only depicted as having a striking resemblance to the *vila*, but her actions in the Norse sagas parallel the *vila*'s own. The whiteness and glowing quality of the *vila* is mirrored in the description of the *valkyries*. The *Völundarkviða* [The Lay of Volund] makes a number of mentions of the 'white arms' of the *valkyries* (Terry 1990: 97), while the *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* [The Lay of Helgi Hjörvard's Son] is one of many poems of the Elder Edda to refer to a *valkyrie* as 'fair' (106) and 'white' (110). In this poem as well we find mention of a *valkyrie* as the 'shining maiden' (109) who has aided Helgi's fleet, a concept which is reflected in the name of the most famous *valkyrie* in Norse mythology, Brynhild (lit. burning heroine [or possibly helmet]). It is in Dumézil's first, magico-sovereign, function that we find the colour white and such a representation stresses the otherness and celestial nature of such supernatural figures as the *valkyrie* and the *vila*. Indeed both figures are to be found in the sky in most of their depictions.

Like the mythological *vila*, both a celestial nature and connection to lightning and thunder is demonstrated equally by the *valkyries*. Although the

valkyries do not reside on mountains as the *vile* do, they enter most of their epics flying through the sky, dramatically surrounded by lightning.

A great light shone	from Logafells
and in its brilliance	lightning flashed.
The warrior saw	women riding.
tall under helmets	at Himinvanga;
their shining byrnies	were stained with blood,
and from their spears	shot gleaming flames.

(*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* [The First Lay of Helgi Hunding's Bane] stanza 15)

Just as the *vila*'s supernatural nature and celestial position determines her most common role in the Serbo-Croatian epics, that is, her function as supernatural aid to the song's hero, so too this support role is found with the *valkyries* who converse with heroes from the sky. In *The Lay of Helgi Hjorvard's Son*, Helgi receives his name from the *valkyrie* Svava who "afterwards... often helped him in battles" (Terry 1990: 108). In *Sigdrífumál* [The Lay of Sigdrifa], the *valkyrie* of the title spends thirty-three stanzas reciting magic spells and runes which she will teach to Sigurd as well as providing prophetic counsel.

Sigdrifa said:

"First I will bring	beer to the warrior—
might brewed it,	mingled it with fame—
full of spells	and potent songs,
rich in charms	and runes of joy.
"I shall teach you	the runes of triumph
to have on the hilt of your sword—	
some on the blade,	some on the guard;
then call twice on Tyr...	

(162)

In the *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* [The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding's Bane], a *valkyrie* surprises the hero with secret knowledge of his exploits in battle. "I stood close by, prince, when your sword struck down that warrior yesterday morning" (126). Both the *vila* and the *valkyrie* use this knowledge to aid heroes in other ways as well. In *The Lay of Helgi Hjorvard's Son*, the *valkyrie* Svava not only graces Helgi with his name (perhaps signifying a transition to warrior status and manhood), she also tells him where heroic weapons can be found, specifically a sword which is the "bane of armor" with a "tip [that] strikes terror" (106). This trait is reminiscent of the Serbo-Croatian songs where Marko Kraljević, is given his power by a *vila* as well as a sword and his marvellous steed.

This all-knowing characteristic of the *valkyries*, like that of the *vile*, extends to knowledge of the future as well. The *valkyrie* Brynhild exhibits the

same tendency for prescience and foresight as the *vila* in the *Volsunga Saga* with her interpretation of Gudrun's dream (Byock 1999: 77-78) and her prophecy of future events, relayed to Gunnar before her death (92). In the 157th chapter of *Njal's Saga* a man named Dorrud sees twelve *valkyries* ride through the sky and land at a 'women's room' which they enter. He sneaks toward it and peers into the window where he sees that the *valkyries* have set up a loom. "Men's heads were used as weights, men's intestines for the weft and warp, a sword for the sword beater, and an arrow for the pin beater" (Cook 1997: 303). The *valkyries* begin to weave the entrails and prophesy (or direct) the outcomes of a battle that is set to happen (303-307). Fully aware that they are being watched, the *valkyries* relate a final prediction for their eavesdropper before tearing the cloth that they have made into pieces, dividing it amongst themselves, mounting their horses and flying off. A similar account is also found in Saxo's *History* (2008: 69). This connection and control over the lives of men on the field of battle is the key role of the *valkyries*, linking them strongly to Dumézil's second function, and to the *vila*.

9.2 Second Function Traits

The warrior aspects of the *valkyrie* are well understood and attested. The *valkyries* are "vowed to war" (Terry 1990: 190). Their most commonly used epithet is 'shield-maid' and their name itself reflects their role on the battlefield as 'choosers of the slain' (Proto Germanic **wal-kus-ya*, dead-choose-the one who). When Sigurd comes upon Sigdrifa in her eponymous lay, she is armoured in such a way that he mistakes her for a man (161). The narrator of the *Volsunga Saga* states that Brynhild's sister Bekkhild stayed at home and learned needlework while Brynhild "took up helmet and mail coat and went to battle" (Byock 1999: 73). The *vile* are similarly portrayed in the Yugoslav epics, often described as wearing armour, armed with bows and arrows and envisioned as powerful, supernatural warriors. This warrior status extends to the war-bands that both groups muster. Just as the *vile* gather in groups within the epics and refer to each other as *posestrime*, so too are the *valkyries* always portrayed in groups, riding through the sky together and referring to each other as sisters (Terry 1990: 97, 190). Despite their numbers and shifting rosters in the sagas, the *valkyries*, like the *vile*, are always named when certain members of their groups are given important roles in the tales.⁴⁹

There are convincing similarities as well regarding the connection between *vile* and *valkyries* and heroes in the epics and sagas. Most often this relationship is a bond of warrior kinship (as protectors and assistants), but this relationship can become both sexual (see below) and malicious. Just as a *vila* can manipulate heroes (or villains) to murder those of her choosing (such as Ban Drinović cited earlier), and can famously cause strife between the two loving Jakšić brothers

⁴⁹ Sadly, just as the *vile* names provide little material for comparison, the *valkyries* provide little as well. The *vile* are all given mundane, female names [Mandalina, Nadanojla, Ravijojla, Đurđa, etc.], while all the *valkyrie* names reflect their connection to war [(Hildr and Gunnr – both words for battle, or Hrist and Geirahgð – both names linking them to the spear (Davidson 1988: 96)].

(Miletich 1990: 179-183), so too the *valkyries* are reputed to play deadly games with the heroes with whom they associate. In *The First Lay of Helgi Hunding's Bane* and *The Volsunga Saga*, the *valkyrie* Sigrun draws the hero Helgi into battle with her betrothed, Hodbrodd, pitting the two against each other owing to her distaste for the latter (Terry 1990: 117, Byock 1999: 48). Even on intimate levels the *valkyries* seem to manipulate heroes to engage in battle. Like Odin himself, the affiliation that *valkyries* have with heroes often seems only to be an excuse to spur the men into battle so that they may prove their worth. As both Odin and his *valkyries* may turn on heroes at any moment, it is crucial to remember that the god's first order of business is enlisting men into the ranks of his army of the dead. It is fair to suggest that, were more early Norse material available, there would be more numerous mentions of the *valkyries* drawing heroes into peril in this manner.

The warrior aspect of the *valkyries* thus entails their connection to the god of war. It is for Odin that the *valkyries* 'choose the slain' on the battlefield and it is in Odin's famous *Valhöll*, the Hall of the Slain, that the *valkyries* serve mead or ale to the fallen heroes that they have brought from the battlefield (Davidson 1964: 28, Hollander 1962: 61). Davidson calls the *valkyries* 'the maids of Odin' and, indeed, it is Odin who is said in *Helreið Brynhildar* [Brynhild's Journey to Hel] to give the *valkyries* their 'swan suits' (Terry 1990: 190). When Sigdrifa/Brynhild disobeys Odin's orders and chooses the young hero Agnar to win in battle against Odin's choice Hjalmar-Gunnar,⁵⁰ Odin seeks retribution and pricks her with a sleep-thorn (162), thus setting in motion the story-arc that will inform *The Volsunga Saga*, *The Nibelungenleid* and a number of the songs in the *Elder Edda*.

Some of these comparisons are more difficult to establish when connected to the *vila*. The South Slavic material is removed from the early pagan beliefs and any vestige of the *vila* as psychopomp conducting dead heroes to their resting place in the after-life has probably been submerged by Christian ideas of the afterlife and a lack of retention of coherent cosmological myths among the Slavic groups. Yet, the *vile* are prone to administering last rites for dead heroes (26 above), as well as finding wounded heroes on the battle-field and bringing them news of battle, or of their families. In a song mentioned above (MH V pt. II, #32, 43) where a wounded hero joins the *vile*'s *kolo* after he is informed by them that his family is safe and well, one can see vestiges of this connection to the dead. In earlier traditions this miraculous healing might have been associated with a stubborn hero, only accepting death after he is sure of his family's safety. As will be discussed further below, a case can also be made for a connection between the *vile* and the God of War.

It is the *valkyries*' connection to Odin that also introduces the sacrificial motif. I have shown that the idea of sacrifice is integral to the image of the *vila* (27 above), and with the *valkyrie* we find similar themes of sacrifice of the dead in

⁵⁰ Here may be the vestige of another love affair between a hero and a *valkyrie*.

battle. Although the *valkyries* may not specifically ask for sacrifice as the *vile* do (MH VIII, #17, 103), they are intrinsically tied to Odin and the sacrifice of the dead that he collects from every battle. It is also interesting to note that Brynhild's last request in *Sigurþarkviða hin skamma* [The Short Lay of Sigurd] is to be burned on a pyre with Sigurd's body *as well as* 'many slaves', her "serving women weighted with gold, two hounds at [Sigurd's] head, [and] two hawks at his feet" (Terry 1990: 187), indicating that the famous *valkyrie* has some familiarity with the idea of sacrifice.

Yet, despite all the trappings of a warrior, the *valkyries*, like the *vile*, balance their depictions between warrior nature and fertility aspects in their connection to human warriors. As Dean Miller states, "the Valkyrie may thus intervene both before and after the hero's death, and her character as shield-maiden can emphasize either or both: the shield (and the good battle death), or the maiden (and sexuality)" (2000: 128).

9.3 Third Function Traits

Although the nature of the *valkyries*' flight is most often depicted as a magical ride on horseback (Terry 1990: 127) whereas the *vile* most often fly unmounted with the use of bird wings, it is not uncommon for the *vile* to ride horses (MH VII, #359, 217), or sometimes deer (32 above), nor is ornithological theriomorphy unheard of in regards to the *valkyrie*.

Scholarship on Norse sagas in the past has often prevented clear understandings of the *valkyrie* by attributing one of their most integral motifs to confusion on the part of the original *skalds* or their annotators (Bellows 1926). However, as Dumézil and Jan de Vries demonstrated when they defended the testimony of Snorri Sturluson (Dumézil 1973: xxviii), it is dangerous for scholars to assume that they have clearer understandings of the past than those living at, or closer to the time in question. In *The Lay of Volund*, a trio of *valkyries*, flying through the air, alight at a lake where three brothers find them spinning flax, their swanskins lying beside them (Terry 1990: 97). Indeed, one of the *valkyries* even bears the name 'Hladgud the Swan White'. Henry Adams Bellows appends a note to this, "I suspect that the annotator, anxious to give the Saxon legend as much northern local color as possible, was mistaken in his mythology, and that the poet never conceived of his swan-maidens as Valkyries at all" (Bellows 2007: 2-3 n.). The concept of *valkyries* as bird women has received mixed attention from scholars, ranging from this kind of refusal, to simply using the idea of birds to connect the *valkyries* to carrion eating birds on the field of battle or once again to the raven form of the Celtic Morrígan (Kinsella 1969: 98). Yet swans are not scavengers. One can understand the confusion that this has caused Norse mythologists, even if one cannot agree with the manner in which they have dealt with the problem. Indeed *The Lay of Volund* is not the only poem to mention this fact.

In *Brynhild's Journey to Hel*, the valkyrie Brynhild refers to the feather cloak which was given to her by Odin when she became a *valkyrie*.⁵¹ In *The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding's Bane*, when referring to his battle exploits, Helgi is asked by the *valkyrie* Sigrun if he has been “feeding the geese of Gunn's⁵² sisters” (Terry 1990: 126). Brynhild is said in the *Volsunga Saga* to answer Gunnar “like a swan on a wave” (Byock 1999: 81). Perhaps, as well, the migratory patterns of birds lies behind the *valkyries'* common epithet of ‘southern maidens’ (Terry 1990: 97, 117). Davidson cites a very clear reference to the bird nature of *valkyries* found in the *Hrafnsmál* where a *valkyrie* and a raven converse. The *valkyrie* “is said to account herself wise because she understood the language of birds, and is herself described as ‘the white-throated one with the bright eyes’, which suggests that she herself was in bird form” (1988: 87). This motif is perfectly mirrored in the Serbo-Croatian epics regarding the *vila* and her bird forms. It is my contention that the ‘swan-suit’ motif is one of the most archaic aspects of the *valkyrie's* and the *vila's* lore.

The ‘Swan-Maiden’ motif is not only abundant, but precise and familiar. In the *vila's* examples, many key aspects are specifically repeated – the animal symbolism (always ornithological), the detail of the event (always involving an excursion into nature to procure a bride), and the manner in which the hero approaches the situation (equally involving the *vila* marrying willingly or compelled by wily thefts). It is rather important then to see these traits mirrored perfectly in *The Lay of Volund* where the protagonist and his two brothers, while on a hunting trip, encounter their *valkyrie* brides idling by the side of a lake. Although there is no mention in the poem as to whether the *valkyries* are compelled to wed, or whether they do so of their own volition, we still find that *valkyries*, like *vile*, can only remain married to heroes for a brief amount of time before they must return to the supernatural realm. Here the heroes enjoy seven years with their brides before “the valkyries flew away to go to battles, and didn't come back” (Terry 1990: 97).

In *The Lay of Helgi Hjorvard's Son*, the hero Helgi is wed to, and given children by, his protective *valkyrie* Svava. Although Helgi does not live long enough to provide his wife the chance to leave him, we do find an odd affirmation of her higher calling. “Helgi and Svava exchanged vows, and the love between them was very great. Svava stayed at home with her father while Helgi waged war. Svava was still a *valkyrie* as before” (110). Brynhild herself replies to

⁵¹ It is important to note that the somewhat ambiguous Norse goddess Freyja, who is often thought to be the same figure as Odin's wife Frigg (Davidson 1993: 71) is said in the *Grímnismál* to share the dead with Odin – *hálfan val hon kýss hverian dag/ enn hálfan Óðinn á*. Every day she chooses half the slain/ and Odin the other half. (Kershaw 2000: 154, Hollander 1962: 56, translation Kershaw's). Moreover, when Loki finds himself in Geirrod's court in Snorri's *Skaldskaparmál*, it is because he is flying in Frigg's falcon-suit (Sturluson 1987: 81). It could be fair to assume that the wife of Odin is depicted as a *valkyrie*. Kershaw suggests this as well (2000: 154 n. 52), but relies on the connection between *valkyries* and Irish ‘death-demonesses’ in conclusion.

⁵² Gunn is another *valkyrie*, her name is mentioned in the *Völuspá* as well (Terry 1990: 4)

Sigurd's suggestion that they should be together, "It is not fated that we should live together. I am a shield-maiden. I wear a helmet and ride with the warrior kings. I must support them, and I am not averse to fighting" (Byock 1999: 75). There is also a suggestion of a forced marriage in *The First Lay of Helgi Hundings Bane* where the *valkyrie* Sigrun is being required by her father (the *valkyries* often tend to be historicized into princesses) to marry Hodbrodd (Terry 1990: 117). She is eager to convince Helgi to relieve her of the burden of a weak husband, and conversely Helgi is not so shy when he invites the *valkyrie* war band to "go home with the warriors that very night" (117).

In *The Lay of Sigdrifa* we find the idea of 'valkyrie marriage' expressed as being mutually exclusive to her warrior role "Odin pricked her with a sleep-thorn for this and said that never again would she be victorious in battle and that she would be given in marriage" (162). As well, we also find that the *valkyrie* Sigdrifa has a marital stipulation. "But I told [Odin] that I solemnly vowed for my part never to marry any man who knew what fear was" (162). Later we are told that Sigdrifa is "destined to continue being a warrior..." (167). Like the *vila*, the *valkyrie* has more important supernatural duties to attend to than remain a doting mother; Saxo Grammaticus stated that the ranks of *valkyries* are composed of virgins (Puhvel 1987: 267), a concept diametrically opposed to their role regarding heroes. Perhaps like Mādhavī in the *Mahābhārata*, constantly renewed virginity is one of the 'job perks' of becoming a *valkyrie*.

Despite the particulars, the comparisons of themes in both South Slavic and Norse corpora are tentatively convincing. In both the Serbo-Croatian and the Norse material we find clear and distinct representations of the swan maiden motif.⁵³ This identical structure and plot pattern is mirrored in the earliest forms of the Germanic 'Swan Maiden' folk tale. A peasant is on a hunting trip, three swans land at a lake and remove their 'swan suits' to reveal beautiful women who play in the waters. The peasant steals one of their 'suits'. The maiden to whom it belongs implores him for the clothing, but he refuses and takes her home as his bride. Years later he reveals her swan garb and she flies off and leaves him (Booss 1984: 248-250). Despite the claims of some scholars, such as those of Bellows cited earlier, I believe this material cannot be dismissed as an accidental bleeding of myth motifs; nor does it represent a shift from a darker, more ghoulish figure as Davidson (1964: 62), Simek (2007:349) and others have suggested.

Although Davidson continued to believe that the original *valkyrie* was a ravenous, corpse-hungry demon which slowly shifted to a hero-loving shield-maiden, her outline of *valkyrie* saga material in *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religion* seems to suggest exactly the opposite (1988: 92-95). By the time of the writing of the *Hákonarmál*, *Njál's*

⁵³ Both the *vila's* swan nature and her connection to clouds may be the root of her water traits. It is important to note that Dumézil's second function has always had a strong connection to water. The role of Thunder Gods, such as Indra (Hopkins 1916, Perry 1882-1885: 133) and Thor (Davidson 1964: 84-85, Dumézil 1973: 72), as bringers/releasers of rain and patrons of farmers is often stressed over their role as warriors.

Saga, Víga-glúm's Saga and Saxo Grammaticus' *History*, the *valkyries* had taken on a much more ghastly countenance, appearing in dreams spinning organs and gore like silk and revelling in the promise of future battle (94-96). Perhaps the influence of Christianity had begun to have a demonizing effect on them. What is certain is that among the scant early material retained on *valkyries*, the 'swan-suit' motif is well-attested and, in my opinion, crucial to an understanding of the figure. With the *vila* material supporting those aspects of the *valkyries* seen in the Elder Edda, perhaps light is shed on a strong Indo-European myth motif. Perhaps the motif's connection to *valkyries* is not a confusion, but two sides of the same coin. The *vila* and the *valkyrie* may inform scholars about what the swan maiden herself is doing when she is not courting or being courted. More will be said on this matter further on.

9.4 Conclusions Regarding the Vila and the Valkyrie

All of the facts presented here suggest that the comparison between the *vila* and the *valkyrie* is far from vague or uncertain. Their crucial traits and functions within both corpora line up surprisingly well, presenting a number of opportunities to use the comparative material to flesh out vague aspects of the two figures. Not only might the *valkyrie*'s connection to the gods and the afterlife provide new understanding of the *vila*, but the *vila* may provide more numerous examples of how the *valkyries* may have acted in earlier or unrecorded sagas, poems and myths, as well as pointing out which aspects of the *valkyrie* are oldest and most archaic.

There is ample evidence to suggest that the *valkyrie* and the *vila* are rooted in the same figure, their differences only marking certain variations resulting from lack of documentation and cultural difference between the Slavs and the Germanic peoples. Certainly the connection between the two figures is much stronger and more convincing than that so often posited between the *valkyrie* and the *Morrígan*. I contend that the *valkyrie* would be seen to act more like the *vila* if we had more tales about her. This argument can present a problem, however, for it could be concluded that one figure or the other may be a borrowing from the other group. The availability of modern texts on Norse epics in the Balkans cannot pre-date the bulk of the recorded Serbo-Croatian epics, and so if any borrowing has occurred, we could *at the least* bring the attestable age of the two figures back to the 6th century CE when the Serbian and Croatian tribes were still located in the North of Europe. And yet there may be evidence to push the date back even further to a true Indo-European retention. If the classic techniques of comparative mythology are to be used, then we must also find a third, and at best an Eastern, comparand for a valid triangulation, which brings us to the Vedic *apsarā*.

10.0 The Apsarā

Although her key function in the Indic myths and epics is drastically different than that of the *vila* and the *valkyrie*, the *apsarā*, aligns clearly with both figures. Although the linkage between the *apsarā* and the *valkyrie* has been explored (see Hatto further below), the evidence has often been questioned, yet the South Slavic material adds weight to the argument. The *apsarā* herself had already become a hazy, Indo-European memory by the time of the writing of the *Mahābhārata* and if the *valkyries* are viewed traditionally, they do not immediately elicit connections to the *apsarā*. Once our scope is broadened by the *vila* material, however, there are striking comparisons to be found.

10.1 First Function Traits

Like the *vila*, the *apsarā*⁵⁴ is a celestial being that is often connected to water. Williams refers to the *apsarās* as ‘celestial damsels’ (2003: 57) while Kosambi calls them ‘water-goddesses’ (2005: 58). Nearly every mention of *apsarās* in the *Mahābhārata* finds them on mountain peaks or flying alongside the chariots that deliver Gods and ascetics from Earth to the sky. Mount Mandara (van Buitenen 1973: 73), Mount Himālaya (1975: 428, 560) and every other mountain peak mentioned in the books are said to be the playgrounds and dwelling places of the *apsarās*. When we do find the *apsarās* in water, they, like the *vila* and *valkyrie*, are most often bathing in rivers or lakes, such as the river Kāverī “which is crowded with hosts of Apsarās...” (394). Even with a dissenting voice, Damodar Kosambi provides evidence to support their celestial nature. Describing the *apsarās* he states, “...Urvaśī is the most prominent of these, and is unquestionably a water-goddess besides being able to traverse the air” (2005: 58). He further states “The *apsarasas* as water-goddesses appear in the legend of Vasiṣṭha’s birth (RV. Vii. 33), where the sage is surrounded by these nymphs (vii. 33. 9). Vasiṣṭha is apparently clad in the [sic] lightning...” (58). As mentioned earlier, lightning is a key aspect denoting the celestial nature of both the *vila* and the *valkyrie*. For the *apsarā*, this example does not exist in isolation. This mention recalls the flash of lightning that ends the relationship of Purūravas and the *apsarā* Urvaśī (Doniger 1981: 252); the importance of this myth will become clear shortly.

Another interesting point of comparison is the propensity for the *apsarās* to partake in music. Like the *vila*, the *apsarās* are renowned for their dancing and singing and just as the *valkyries* wait on the *einherjar* in *Valhöll*, the *apsarās* entertain gods and fallen heroes in Indra’s hall with their feminine arts (van

⁵⁴ Puhvel uses the etymology *a-psarās*- ‘shameless, immodest’ (1987: 64), but the etymology could equally be composed of the Indo-Iranian hydronym *ap- coupled with the PIE form for woman, *soro- (Fortson 2004: 120), *ap-a-sarā > *apās-sarā shifting by haplology to ap-sarā. This form would certainly address the connection to water that the *apsarā* is often attributed with. Wright, on the other hand, attributes enough possible etymologies to confuse even the most earnest scholar (1967: 534).

Buitenen 1975: 47). The *gandharvas*, are said to be the musicians of the gods and the *apsarās* dance and sing to their playing.⁵⁵

Although my tentative research has not uncovered mention of the *apsarās* as white or fair (perhaps not surprising given their India context), like the *vila* and the *valkyrie* they are described as glowing, “the sheen of their skin is the color of gold” (van Buitenen 1975: 580), and certainly their beauty is more than well attested. As with the *vila*, human beauty is often compared to that of the *apsarās* (1973: 228, 236) and they are described in a number of, sometimes rather poetic, ways as “indescribably young and beautiful (163), good women with ‘shapely thighs’ (1975: 740). Indeed, the supernatural and holy aspects of the *apsarās* lines up well with those of the *vila* and the *valkyrie*. The more difficult task is to find her traits in the second function.

10.2 Second Function Traits

Within the second function’s traits, the *apsarā* presents the key difference between herself and the two other figures, but this difference may not be as important as it first appears. Simply stated, the *apsarās* are not depicted in the epics as warrior women. While the *vila* and the *valkyrie* are, despite their other important traits, primarily warriors, the *apsarā* is never depicted as clad in armour, carrying a weapon or seen in battle. This difference will certainly garner some criticism of my hypothesis from scholars, but all of the other evidence points directly to linkages between these figures, which are supported by some surprising vestiges of this warrior nature in the *apsarā*.

Like the *valkyries* and the *vile*, the *apsarās* appear in groups and many have individual names, most often connected to their womanliness or their roles as seducers. Some *apsarā* names even denote a womanly smell (Kosambi 2005: 57). It is undeniable that the key function of the *apsarā* is that of supernatural seductresses. No book in the *Mahābhārata* is complete without a dangerous ascetic becoming too holy and powerful, and Indra sending an *apsarā* to seduce him and soil or abort his demi-god status. But the inclusion of Indra here should catch the attention of scholars.

In Indra’s heavenly hall the *apsarās* entertain fallen heroes just as the *valkyries* do in *Valhöll*. Not only do they sing, dance and amuse the ‘King of the Gods’ (van Buitenen 1975: 47) but they wait on the gods and heroes as the *valkyries* are often depicted, bringing drink to dead heroes.⁵⁶ Though there are, to my knowledge, no examples of *apsarās* battling, they do cheer on battles in the *Mahābhārata* and are always sent out to avert battle (Indra even employs *apsaric* seduction when he is faced with the formidable *Trīśiras* in the retelling of the tale found in the *Mahābhārata*. Their aid allows him the opportunity to slay his

⁵⁵ Interestingly, like Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* ballet in Europe (and Adolfe Adam’s even earlier *Giselle, ou les Wilis* which borrows from the folklore of the non-mythological form of the *vila*), the *apsarās* have their own ballet in Cambodia, the *Robam Tep Apsara*.

⁵⁶ The 8th century Tjängvide tablet from Gotland, Sweden being a well-known depiction (see Davidson 1988, plate 2b).

opponent [van Buitenen 1978: 202]). In A. L. Basham's *The Wonder That Was India*, the god Kāma is said to have a troop of *apsarās*, one of which is his standard-bearer (1954: 315). The author also states "sometimes the apsaras appear in the role of *valkyries*, raising slain heroes from the battlefield and bearing them to heaven to be their lovers" (317). There are even vestiges of a sacrificial aspects hinted at for the *apsarās* (Kosambi 2005: 57). But the key issue that connects the *apsarā* to the *valkyrie* and which may provide insight into lost aspects of the *vila* is their connection with Indra.

It is well understood that some Norse gods have shifted from the commonly accepted pantheon of the Indo-Europeans; many scholars have commented on the shifting roles of Tyr, Thor and Odin in Norse mythology (Polomé 1989: 78-79, Puhvel 1987: 191-193). Suffice it to say, while the ambiguous Norse God of War, Odin, has received the retinue of *valkyries*, it is Indra in India, both War God and Thunder God, who has retained the *apsarās*.⁵⁷ By the time that the *vila* is attested most apparent vestiges of Slavic paganism have been long replaced by Christianity, yet what material remains of Proto-Slavic mythology points to its existence in a half-way position between Germanic and Indo-Iranian material. If this is the case then it makes sense to suggest that the *vila* may have at one time been subservient to the most widely attributed god of the Slavic world, Perun.⁵⁸ Not only is Perun very explicitly understood to be the God of Thunder for the Slavs, many scholars have interpreted the oaths taken in the names of Perun and Veles/Volos over weapons in the Russian *Primary Chronicle* as an indication that a war-god trait may have also been implicit in his character. (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 65).⁵⁹ This would explain the emphasis on lightning that accompanies the *vila*, the *valkyrie* and the *apsarā*. I would also conjecture that although the warrior function of the *apsarās* has been lost, perhaps some processes of the past have separated that warrior function away from them and placed it with their counterparts, the elusive (male) *gandharvas*. Those figures are seldom described independently from the *apsarās*, except when they are battling (van Buitenen 1975: 687), and the *apsarās* are later represented

⁵⁷ Dumézil (and other scholars) has explored the connection between Odin and Indra, although he did not consider the *apsarās* when discussing an analogue for the *valkyries*, instead opting (as others in the past) for Indra's *Marut* (1973: 42).

⁵⁸ Gimbutas associates the *vila* with the Slavic sun god *Svarog* (1971: 164), but her evidence is unconvincing and only based upon transformational forms attributed to the folkloric aspects of the *vila* which are tenuously associated with the god.

⁵⁹ After Prince Oleg's successful (albeit very possibly fictitious) attack on the Greeks at *Tsarigrad* [Constantinople], the peace treaty between the two groups is avowed quite differently. The Greeks kiss the Christian cross while the Russian pagans, "according to the religion of the Russes,... swore by their weapons and by their god Perun, as well as by Volos, the god of cattle" (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 65). Later, Perun is incurred as a contract-protector in another oath, "If any of the princes or any Russian subject, whether Christian or non-Christian, violates the terms of this instrument, he shall merit death by his own weapons, and be accursed of God and of Perun because he violated his oath" (77).

as their brides (Williams 2003: 57) or else as their sisters (van Buitenen 1975: 658).

Although the *apsarā* does seem to bear vestiges of an older connection to the second function, the evidence is not as solid as one would hope for such a comparison. Yet, if the (lack of) warrior traits of the *apsarā* draw her connection to the *vila* and the *valkyrie* into question, the comparisons in her third function traits help to substantiate the claim.

10.3 Third Function Traits

Like the *vila* and the *valkyrie*, the *apsarās* are known in the epics as the wives and mothers of heroes. Any human that they marry or sleep with in the myths is always described as a hero or as a powerful ascetic. “Raudrāśva had ten sons by an Apsarā, great archers all, who became warriors and patrons of sacrifices, rich in offspring and widely renowned, experts on all sorts of missiles and devoted to the Law...” (1973: 210). Even without sexual coupling, the *apsarās* are connected to a number of magic-laden heroic births. It is virtually impossible to count the examples in the *Mahābhārata* of the motif whereby an *apsarā* reveals herself to an ascetic, who, overwhelmed with her supernatural beauty, will lose his seed into or onto any number of plants, animals or rocks, magically incubating a heroic child (1973: 266, 315, 1975: 433 for a few examples). When they do marry a hero, like the *vila* and *valkyrie*, these marriages are conditional and temporary. Speaking about the children of *apsarās*, Kosambi writes, “the marriage had to be in some way legal for such a genealogy to be valid in patriarchal society, while it was notorious both by actual matriarchal custom and later tradition that the apsaras could not submit to a husband as permanent lord and master” (2005: 58). The depiction is clearly reminiscent of the *vila* and the *valkyrie* who can never remain in wedlock with a human.

Returning to the *R̥g Veda* and the story of Purūravas and Urvaśi, we find a hero married to an *apsarā*, and with a marital condition – he is not to allow her to see him naked (Doniger 1981: 252). Their marriage is ruined when *gandharvas* arbitrarily invade their bedroom and pretend to steal ‘lambs’ from the base of their bed (either a term of endearment referring to their children or truly lambs which have been employed as decoys, the text is unclear) while they sleep. Urvaśi (seemingly in league with the *gandharvas*) screams out that their children are being stolen, at which Purūravas jumps out of bed naked. The *gandharvas* produce a *flash of lightning*, which reveals the hero in his nakedness, and Urvaśi disappears. These aspects alone provide two apparent cognates with the *vila* and *valkyrie*, but the myth provides yet more. “She vanished, and he wandered in sorrow until he came to a lake where there were nymphs swimming about in the shape of water-birds, Urvaśi and the other nymphs” (252). So here as well, in the *apsarā*, we find the swan-maiden motif in a nearly complete form (although in a reverse order), housed in the oldest Indo-Aryan myth text. There are also other bird connections, such as the *apsarā* Śakuntalā whose name is derived from the

carrion-eating birds that feed her as an infant (Kosambi 2005: 57-58).⁶⁰ There are even a few odd aspects that parallel what has been presented regarding the *vila* and the *valkyrie*.

Like the *valkyries*, the *apsarās* are said to be reborn on Earth as human women, avatars of their supernatural forms. “Likewise he summoned the hosts of Gandharvas and Apsarās, and the Lord [Brahmā] spoke to them this great word; ‘Be born among men with parts of yourselves, in the fashion that pleases you’” (van Buitenen 1973: 138). Later in the *Mahābhārata* it is said, “I have already cited the group of Apsarās; a part of them was born on earth at Indra’s behest, and they became sixteen thousand queens... in this world of men, the wives of Nārāyaṇa” (154). Perhaps then there is reason to believe that the *valkyries*, being seen as simultaneously celestial demi-goddesses and human princesses is not a historicization so much as an attribution of *valkyrie* ancestry to heroic lineages. Kosambi states that *apsarās* often occupied prominent places at the beginnings of family genealogies, and this may be reflected in the Norse material.

A conflation occurs in India as well between the *apsarās* as celestial goddesses and as water nymphs, much like the confusion that I have outlined in the Balkans. Some texts mention ‘lower *apsarās*’, who live in water and drown people. In the district of Maharashtra in central India there exist local deities, the Sātī Āsarā, who live in local river-beds and water features (Feldhaus 1995: 33). These creatures (who are said to be each others’ sisters) live in the water with their brother,⁶¹ Mhasobā (34), are said to cause trouble (35), and are related to fertility (albeit in an opposite manner than the rusalka/folkloric *vila*). “...The trouble they are best known for causing is trouble with having children: infertility, miscarriages, and the death of infants” (35). I have yet to delineate the full range of connections that these figures may have to the *rusalka/samodiva*/folkloric *vila* complex, but it is rather startling to see this bifurcation into mythic and folkloric forms represented in both areas.

Although the *apsarā*’s inclusion in this study may still be questioned due to her lack of warrior characteristics, the number of comparative aspects (particularly the swan maiden motif) does merit her consideration. Moreover, an intriguing Iranian analog makes the suggestion all the more feasible.

⁶⁰ The bird nature of the *apsarā* is also a somewhat questionable cognate given that the *apsarās* do take on other forms in the epics. However, the story of Purūravas and Urvaśi is one of the oldest tales of Indic mythology and the role of the *apsarās* shifted quickly in India. Whether other forms of the *apsarā* are late additions or not is debatable. Wright suggests that the *apsarās* do not denote any specific animal form, but rather an amorphous manifestation of feminine fecundity (1967: 533).

⁶¹ Compare with the vodianoi and the rusalka (34 above).

11.0 Iranian Material – 1001 Nights

On the seven hundred and seventy-eighth night of her stay with Shahryār, Scheherazade told a fine tale of swan maidens. Though many of the tales in *The One Thousand and One Nights* are familiar to Western audiences, few may know *The Story of Ḥasan of El-Baṣrah*. Like many of the tales in the book, Ḥasan's is rife with Persian aspects,⁶² and even shares some folklore motifs that are familiar to Europe proper, such as the feuding brothers, who leave the distribution of their father's wealth to a stranger; a stranger who relieves them of the burden in a humourous fashion (Lane 1841: 490-491).

The story of Ḥasan presents a strong enough cognate in many aspects that I shall venture to retell it briefly. In the story young Ḥasan is duped by an evil Persian *Magian* and left for dead on an island. He finds his way to a 'cloud castle' (akin to the castles of the *vila*) which is inhabited by seven magical princesses, daughters of one of the Kings of *Ján*⁶³ (an ethnic group, or race possibly, which is compared to *Efreets* and *Djinns*) who are more than happy to have a human visitor. One even takes such a liking to Ḥasan that she becomes his honorary sister, much as the *vila* and *valkyrie* are prone to do. These supernatural warrior women wear armour, engage in great hunts and are the enemies of Ḥasan's *Magian*. After the women join Ḥasan in destroying the Persian (403), they leave him for a number of months in full control of their castle while they visit their father. Ḥasan is given the keys to the castle but, following the European *Bluebeard* motif, is told of one door in the house which he is not to open or enter. This door leads, not to a gruesome torture chamber however, but to a stairway which brings him to the top of the castle, and a beautiful garden that is housed there.

Idling in this beautiful garden, Ḥasan sits dumbstruck as ten birds fly overhead and alight at the side of the pool there. They all set down and Ḥasan watches as each "rent open its skin with its talons, and came forth from it; and lo, it was a dress of feathers" (406). Ten virgins exit their 'bird suits', wash in the pool and then begin to splash and play there. The dominant and most beautiful (421) bird woman enthralls Ḥasan's heart before they all return to their dresses and fly off. He reveals his yearning to his warrior sister, who informs him that his love is named Menār es-Sena, the eldest daughter of the greatest King of the *Ján*, a man of great prestige in the supernatural world.

He hath an army of damsels who smite with swords and thrust with spears, five and twenty thousand in number, every one of whom, when she mounteth her courser and equippeth herself with her implements of war, will withstand a thousand brave horsemen; and he hath seven daughters who in bravery and horsemanship equal their sisters, and

⁶² The Persian origin of many of the tales in the *1001 Nights* is well attested (see MacDonald 1924 and Abbott 1949).

⁶³ The word *Ján* may reflect from the Persian *Jān* - life/soul (Haïm 1961: 224)

excel them. He has set over this tract, of which I have informed thee, his eldest daughter, the chief of her sisters; and she is distinguished by bravery and horsemanship, and guile and artifice and enchantment, by which she can overcome all the people of her dominions (414).

Hasan's warrior sister informs him of how to proceed in order to procure his bride. When the bird-women return to the pool to bathe (as with their comparands elsewhere, they are said to 'approach like lightning' [415]), he steals the princess' bird garb and hides it from her in a chest. She begs for her dress back, but is informed that it has been destroyed and is soon wed to Hasan (422). He returns to his mother in Baghdád with his new wife and spends three years of happiness during which she gives him two sons (427).

After this time Hasan leaves to visit his warrior sisters and while he is gone charges his mother to tend to his wife and not reveal the location of her feather dress. Upon leaving, his wife implores her mother-in-law to bring her to the village bath, setting in motion a plan of her own devising. Word of his wife's beauty spreads to a wealthy local woman, Zubeydeh, who brings the wife to her court (432). "...the palace was illumined by her splendour and by the light of her countenance. Zubeydeh was amazed at her beauty, and so also was everyone in the palace, and everyone who beheld her became insane, unable to speak to another" (433). While the court marvels at her beauty she innocently asks for her feather dress so that she might truly regale them,⁶⁴ and her powerful patroness demands it of Hasan's mother. Upon receiving the dress she changes into a bird, takes her two sons and flies away, leaving a message with her mother-in-law that should Hasan one day wish to see her, he should come search for her on the mythical island of Wák-Wák.⁶⁵

After a time Hasan journeys there and is met by an evil Queen, his wife's sister, who discovers that her own sister has married a mortal (481) and punishes her with torture (echoing the *vila* who tortures Marko's betrothed in MH II pt. I, #20, 68). Hasan returns to save his wife through magical means and the story dwindles into a few minor episodes as well as Qu'ranic preachings about the sacrament of marriage and the role of a wife. The story itself, however, is a convincingly precise analog to the complex that this article has outlined.

I recount this story here, not only to express the abundance of comparative aspects, but because the plot itself, though the narrative has been expanded, seems to have one of the clearest mythical storylines of all the corpora and may possibly reflect an archaic (I dare even say original) form of the story. Nearly all of the comparative aspects of the *vila/valkyrie/apsarā* figure are present, both in the bird-women as well as in the warrior women whose home the bird-women alight upon (and who, as similar princesses of a king of *Ján*, may be simply an extension

⁶⁴ The idea that the swan maiden might *truly* dance only with her clothing is mirrored in Balkan folk examples from Bulgaria, Macedonia and Roumania (Beza 1925: 322).

⁶⁵ Imagined to be somewhere in the seas surrounding China (Hatto 1961: 334).

of the original bird women, bifurcated for necessities of plot). Within the story are presented warrior women who transform into birds, temporary marriages of the swan maiden type, vestigial connections to lightning and a number of the key aspects outlined in this paper, as well as some of the rarer material (such as the castle in the clouds). Most importantly, the swan maidens here exhibit the most important characteristic lacking in the Indo-Aryan world's *apsarās*, a warrior nature. But *The One Thousand and One Nights* is not the only evidence of a figure of this type attested within Iranian corpora, a number of these same themes arise in the Caucasus in the famous Nart Sagas.

11.1 The Nart Sagas

The Iranian material may be expanded based upon vestiges retained in the Nart Sagas of the Caucasus. The figure of Satanaya (sata-na-ya, from Iranian */sata-/ '(one) hundred', and Northwest Caucasian /na/ 'mother' /-ya/ 'the one who is'), who has also absorbed a number of other female figures, is most importantly mother of the Nart war band (Colarusso 1990: 3-4). She is forever youthful and beautiful (3), and in a number of tales is said to glow when naked (2002: 323). Though the figure is a great amalgam of mythic themes, characters and motifs, she does elicit a few of the traits outlined in this paper.

Like the *vila*, the *valkyrie* and the warrior women in *The Story of Hasan of El-Başrah* (henceforth referred to as *Jān bird-women*), Satanaya advises the hero Sosruquo in his battle against Sotrash/Totrash (238), as well as hinting at the battles which she has already drawn him into:

That was Albayk's son, Sotrash,
The only rider of whom we are afraid.
The horse under him has a deer's head.⁶⁶
Its head hangs in the sky.
They were nine brothers.
That is their number.
Eight of their heads have I made you fetch already.
Sotrash is the ninth.
(238)

Just as Marko's *vila* in his battle against Musa Kesedžija, Satanaya informs Sosruquo of a secret trick by which he may slay his opponent, by placing bells on his horse to distract his enemy's mount.

Like the *apsarās* in the Vedic context, the sight of Satanaya bathing or washing her clothes in the river causes one of the Nart warriors, overcome with

⁶⁶ Again an intriguing minor detail that is reflected in the *vila* myths. This same motif of riding occurs in the *Kalevala*, where the hero Väinämöinen is said in some lines to be riding a horse and in others an elk (Kirby 1985:66). Colarusso suggests a possible link between this myth motif and a number of Iranian or Scythian burial sites in Siberia which have revealed horse-headaddresses mounted with reindeer antlers (2002: 243).

lust, to ejaculate onto the rock which she is sitting on (185) and from this rock is born her son, the hero Sosruquo. Satanaya is also connected to dead warriors in that she has a resurrected son, She Batinuquo, who is raised in a grave mound to become a great warrior and hunter (65-66). Satanaya, however, only reflects a few thematic retentions and is not only missing a number of the original aspects, but has acquired a number of traits and functions of other mythic women, both Indo-European and Caucasian in nature. She may serve only to support the Iranian comparison, but may not be drawn into the argument as an analog.

11.2 Conclusion to Iranian Material

Although the Iranian material does not provide a number of myths or stories with which to fully support the theories explored in this article, it does provide evidence which bolsters the other work and fills in a number of the gaps which draw the majority of the *vila*'s, *valkyrie*'s and *apsarā*'s functional aspects into ancient mythological traits. *The Story of Hasan of El-Basrah* provides a logical bridge between the *vila* and *valkyrie* in Europe proper and the *apsarā* in India. Strengthened by the vestiges which arise in the Caucasian material, the traits of these figures, centered on warrior nature, divine connections to war, and the swan-maiden motif, provide a geographical locus for a possible origin of these mythic traits. The absence of analogues among the Italic and Greek corpora posits a firm location for the diffusion of this myth type and possibly sheds light on, and provides depth and breadth of understanding for a folklore motif that has long been taken for granted, that is, the Swan Maiden herself.

12.0 Provenience of the Swan Maiden

Integral to the mythological complex outlined in this paper is the swan maiden motif.⁶⁷ This line of enquiry was explored earlier by A.T. Hatto in his article *The Swan Maiden: A Folk-Tale of Northern Eurasian Origin?*, who found the swan-maiden motif spread, not only in Europe, but throughout Asia (as far as Japan), the Arctic and even north-western North America (1961: 327).⁶⁸ The scholar, however, was presumably unfamiliar with the *vila* and completely misses the warrior nature⁶⁹ attested in most of the corpora (327), as well as remaining confused on the lightning theme present in the *Rig-Veda* (345).

Hatto concerns himself with pinpointing the origin of the motif, yet (like so many anthropological studies of the 1960s) he chooses a biological criterion as his key. By following the flight patterns of swans and geese he attempts to posit the origin of the tale to the far North of the Eurasian and American continents (340). Hatto's evidence derives from the fact that the breeding ground of swans aligns with regions (northern Siberia) where shamans dress in bird costumes for rituals (341). Yet he admits that these shamanic costumes are most often owls, related to gulls or indistinguishable birds (341-342), never specifically swans or geese. At its core his argument is an attempt to disprove that the myth of the swan maiden originates in India, an idea suggested by folklorists before him, and indeed unlikely given that the attribution is an obvious by-product of the age attested for the *Rg Veda* (327-328). His alternative, however, is just as unlikely. The shamanic rituals that he outlines bear no resemblance to the myth itself, nor is such a ritualistic origin necessary for a myth. Moreover, large tracts of Asia and Europe are visited by swans on their frequent migratory stops, and I have seen (first-hand) swans lay eggs on the 50th parallel, facts which draw Hatto's locational analysis into question. More than this, if the mating grounds of swans are integral origins for the construction of a myth involving swan maidens, then the mythologists will be hard at working tracking down the ancient nesting grounds of the unicorn.

Indeed an Indic root for the swan maiden motif makes little sense given that it faded from India not long after its first written record.⁷⁰ Hatto does suggest

⁶⁷ For those adherents to the system, these would represent Stith Thompson Index numbers B 652.1 – Marriage to swan maiden, C 31.10 – Tabu: giving garment back to supernatural (divine) wife, D 361.1 – Swan Maiden. A swan transforms herself at will into a maiden. She resumes her swan form by putting on her swan coat, D 838.10 – prince procurs magic object from bathing fairy when he steals her clothes, F302.4.2.1 – fairy comes into man's power when he steals her clothes. She leaves when she finds them, F 420.4.6.1 – water-women are powerless when their garments are taken, K1335 – Seduction (or wooing) by stealing clothes of bathing girl, and T16 – man falls in love with woman he sees bathing. Personally I find the Stith Thompson system cumbersome to work with, and most often one that provides little or nothing to any analysis. Even here we find that such ideas as swan maiden=fairy are assumed (Thompson 1956).

⁶⁸ The Asian variants most often trade the 'swan suit' of the maiden for that of a crane.

⁶⁹ It would be worthwhile to explore the Asian examples presented by Hatto to look for mention of warrior nature in the swan and crane maidens.

⁷⁰ Hatto debates that the Purūravas/Urvāśī episode is truly a swan-maiden tale (344-347). He cites some ambiguities of translation as problematic, but the evidence is not very convincing, nor have I seen this issue raised elsewhere. The tale itself is still attested in two locations, the marriage to a

the idea of an Indo-European origin, with the Aryans having brought the tale from the North to India and then forgotten it in the absence of swans (347) and the Inuit receiving their version from Greenlanders (348), but he opposes these theories which I take to be most sound (347). Indeed, while Hatto is predisposed to tracing the oldest, verifiable attestation of the myth (which is frankly more an issue of historical chance than anything), he misses the larger picture. If myth-geography and wave theory should hold any worth, it is of note that the swan-maiden motif reaches out only to areas where the Indo-Europeans have tread in prehistory. The Siberians and Inuit (and by extension through them northern North American native tribes) have been in close contact with northern Europeans for centuries, and the Asian attestations could very feasibly be produced through Silk-Road connections (as early as the Tocharians 1800 BCE), or through the movements of Buddhism which, as stated earlier, brought the *apsarās* as far as South-East Asia.⁷¹ Despite some uncertainties and the Pan-Indian tendencies which Hatto was trying to avoid with his article, I believe that an Indo-European origin for the swan-maiden is still the most convincing theory.

holy figure, the marriage stipulation, the lightning and her water-bird form are all clear within the translation, all points which are too convincing to be discredited.

⁷¹ This point is mentioned but not explored by Hatto (330).

13.0 Conclusions Regarding the Comparative Vila

Like the *valkyrie*, the *Ján* bird-women and the *apsarā* may call into question the borrowed nature of the *vila*. Late attestation of sources has forever relegated Slavic material to a position where its authenticity must be defended firmly. Since the Iranian material seems to hold a very strong and possibly ancient variant of the tale, it could be argued that borrowing has occurred given that the Croatians possibly carry an Iranian name and are considered by some to be a slavized Iranian group. If borrowing does truly explain the diffusion of this myth, the strongest contender for a historical time frame would lie somewhere between 200 BCE and 400 CE when the proto-Slavs are thought to have cohabitated not only with Sarmatian tribes but also waves of Germanic groups (Goths, Gepids, Bastarnae and more) in areas of modern-day Poland (Gimbutas 1971: 63). There are, however, valid reasons to see this material as a true Indo-European retention. The fact that the story has been preserved by the Persians, who split off rather early from the nomadic Iranians (during the first centuries of the first millennium BCE) could speak to the time-depth involved with the myth figure. Although it is well attested that the Persians continued to interact with and assimilate neighbouring Iranian groups for most of their history (Fortson 2007: 203-212). I think that the numerous derivations that occur, all so similar and yet each with its own idiosyncrasies, support my assertion that this myth figure is original to the Indo-European groups addressed in this thesis and does not reflect a borrowing.

It is my contention that the majority of the functional aspects of the *vila*, the *valkyrie* and the *Ján* bird women are derived from the same Indo-European myth figure, shifted through historical and cultural circumstances, and indeed, despite her lack of warrior connection, I believe that the *apsarā* is also closely related and bears old traits of the figure, if slightly modified in purpose; perhaps reflecting an earlier divergence. If the traits are plotted out they make, I believe, a very convincing argument.

	Warrior Aspects	Swan-maiden Motif	Lightning	Glowing Countenance or Whiteness
Vila	x	x	x	x
Valkyrie	x	x	x	x
Apsarā	-	x	x	x
Ján women	x	x	x	x

	Omniscience and Prescience	Sacrifice	Ornithological Representation	Song and Dance
Vila	x	x	x	x
Valkyrie	x	x	x	-
Apsarā	?	x	x	x
Ján women	x	-	x	-

	Entertaining Dead Heroes	Connection to Thunder or War God	Unparalleled Beauty	Born on Earth as Humans
Vila	-	?	x	-
Valkyrie	x	x	x	x
Apsarā	x	x	x	x
Ján women	-	-	x	-

	Mothers of Heroes/Royals	Royal Princesses	Castles in Clouds	Marital Stipulation
Vila	x	-	x	x
Valkyrie	x	x	-	-
Apsarā	x	x	?	x
Ján women	x	x	x	x

x – certainty, ? – possible/vestigial, - – unknown, not supported

Although the *apsarā* has lost her warrior status, her shift in role toward a focus on fertility and her fading importance in general within the *Ṛg Veda* and the *Mahābhārata* is readily apparent and supports this loss of warrior aspect. The theory is all the more plausible since the warrior function is retained beautifully in the Iranian figure. When the Germanic, Slavic, Iranian and Indic figures are arranged in a continuum, west to east, there seems to be a shift from emphasis on the warrior aspects of the figure to an emphasis on her reproductive aspects.⁷² Moreover, time-depth allows for some transformation of function. Whereas the *apsarā*, by the time of the writing of the *Ṛg Veda*, had become a strong figure of fertility and nymphic sexual persuasion, the *valkyries*, post-*Elder Edda*, bifurcate into historicized princesses, more akin to amazons, and gruesome demons that ravage the dead on the battlefield. The *Ján* bird women have lost their connection to war gods and have been taken up as magic beings akin to the *Djinn*, while the *vila*, as well, has shifted by the time of her first written attestation. Blanketing a number of other folk-figures, she violently protects lakes and taxes water, is master of herbs and plants, and has taken on a plethora of roles as a fairy-sprite in local memorates. Yet the core, shared functions and roles of the four figures remain.

Despite the minor differences, the facts presented in this thesis all point to a very well-structured and solid Indo-European mythic figure of high antiquity, a retinue of lower or demi-goddesses, celestial cloud/bird ladies, intrinsically tied to

⁷² For this reason, the Morrigan and the bird-women of the Celtic world perhaps should not be completely discarded. Comparable aspects may also be found in the character Scáthach who trains Cú Chulainn in the warrior craft as well as providing him a marriage dowry and forecasting his future (Robbins Dexter 1998: 101).

war, the God of War and the heroes who take part in battle. Although they seldom join in battles themselves, these figures are sexually and reproductively connected to heroes through all stages of their heroic lives. They give birth to heroes, marry heroes, give the heroes children, help them acquire knowledge, skills and weapons for battle, ‘pull the strings’ in battle in order to aid the side which they (or the War God) have chosen, and then greet the fallen heroes in the afterlife with food, drink and entertainment. They are a supernatural war band of females, connected to their ‘swan-suits’ as many IE warriors were to their wolf or bear skin. They most likely lie at the root of the swan maiden motif, which also provides a venue of access to those treacherous, undeserving heroes who would not be willingly chosen by the *vilalvalkyrielapsarā/Ján* bird woman.⁷³ If they marry they may give children to a hero (ones which always mature into heroes themselves) but they can never be human and so must return to their own domain after a time. Paraterrestrial, they are connected to clouds, mountains and, to a lesser degree, water, where they gather to bathe, spin thread, comb their hair and admire themselves. They operate according to ethical standards of their own kind, and are not bound by the logic or morals of man. They are beautiful, alluring, fair, white and glowing, ethereal beauties that any man would be enticed by, at once totems and fantasies for heroes in battle. Some of the comparisons are yet weak and certainly merit further research, but the bulk of the aspects explored in this section of the thesis strongly suggest that the Norse *valkyrie*, the South Slavic *vila*, the Indic *apsarā* and the *Ján* bird women from *The One Thousand and One Nights* are all types of the same Indo-European proto-form, a figure of very ancient provenance.

⁷³ Perhaps in real-world contexts, this line of thinking would rationalize to an IE warrior how an inferior enemy may have obtained his own cloud/bird-woman.

14.0 Further Implications

Although the aims of this section of the thesis involve a comparative study of a mythic figure and her homologous matches in the Indo-European world, there are some broader theoretical implications of this work. First, the figure elucidated here calls into question the typical simplifications that occur in many comparative studies of female myth figures. The *vila* and her analogs depict, quite clearly, an image of male warriors and war bands that derive at least some of their power from a female source. The idea of a war band looking to the clouds for patron goddesses is certainly reasonable considering the numerous cloud and sky-related warrior groups attested in Indo-European myth. With *Niebelungs* on the ground and both Indra's *Maruts* (Hopkins 1916: 245-247)⁷⁴, the *Nefelim*⁷⁵ and Odin's *Einherjar* in the sky, the celestial connection to (and ultimate destination of) warriors might have been an ever-present thought in the minds of certain war-bands. The importance of female figures as repositories, from which access to warrior ability is to be gained, brings to mind the female power to bestow sovereignty found in many Celtic myths (see Herbert 1992).

This thesis also broaches an important subject regarding the study of myth. Despite the misogynistic tendencies of many mythologists, this thesis stresses the importance of exploring female myth figures with the same care that male figures have received in the past. There is no reason why every goddess should be lumped into broad categories such as Graves' ever-present 'White Goddess', or even the slightly more productive transfunctional goddess that many comparative mythologists use as a 'catch-all phrase'. With examination of the *vila/valkyrie/apsarā/Ján* bird women complex, it is apparent that more nuanced delineations are both possible and valuable. This may be further demonstrated by connecting the *vila* to her analogues, allowing other possible productive comparisons to present themselves.

14.1 Norns, Dísir and Sudenice

There are other figures in Norse mythology as well as the *valkyries* whose understanding may be augmented or clarified through comparison with Serbo-Croatian figures. The *Norns* (Urð 'Fate', Verðandi 'Necessity', and Skuld 'Being') of Norse mythology (Crossley-Holland 1980: 248) serve nearly identical roles as the *Fates* (Klōthō 'Spinner', Lakhesis 'Apportioner' and Atropos 'She Who Cannot be Turned Aside') of ancient Greece (Powell 2009: 142).⁷⁶ They allot one's fate at birth and hold sway over the lives of men. Within Serbo-

⁷⁴ See Kershaw (2000: 98-101, 180-195) for more on the *Maruts*, their connections to Indra and Rudra, and how these relate to Odin and his *Einherjar* as well as other celestial spirit warriors in the IE myth-world.

⁷⁵ The name of the *Nefelim* of the Old Testament looks suspiciously like an IE word. PIE *nebh-. Gk. *nephelē*, *néphos* 'cloud', Lat. *Nebula* 'cloud', Old Norse *nifl*-, Germanic **nibilaz*, Old High German *Nibulunc*/*Nibilung* (Watkins 2000: 57).

⁷⁶ For more on the *Norns*, the *Fates* and ancient Indo-European conceptions of fate see Bauschatz 1975.

Croatian folk custom there is also a divinatory trio, the *Suđenice* (also *sudaje*, *usud* or *rođenice*), who foretell the fate of humans and act identically to the *Norns* and the *Fates* (Conrad 2000: 28). They even ‘make housecalls’ when a child is born as the *Norns* are said to do (Davidson 1993: 118). *Urð*, as the ‘original’ Norn, has a well, *Urðarbrunnr*, at the base of *Yggdrasill*, the world tree; a well that is difficult to distinguish from *Mímisbrunnr*, Mimir’s Well, where Odin would frequent for necromantic prophecies (Puhvel 1987: 218). The well itself is named *Mímisbrunnr* because Mimir’s decapitated head was placed there by Odin. Dr. John Colarusso (personal communication) has suggested that these two wells may in fact be the same, meaning that the well where Odin gave his eye for secret or arcane knowledge would be guarded by the *Norns*.

In Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia the *vila* name became somewhat of a ‘catch-all’, incorporating some traits and functions from other folk creatures (Ajdačić 2001: 208). The common motif of the *vila* guarding a mountain lake and trading drinks of water, or secret knowledge for the sacrifice of body parts (28 above) sometimes sits in opposition to her more *valkyrie*-like tendencies. Possibly the motif was borrowed from the *Suđenice* and is a binary isotheme connected with the *Norns* and their well. Moreover, the *vila* who defends the lake is often depicted as riding a stag and using snakes for reins, an image which is reminiscent of the Troll women in Norse mythology who guide their wolf mounts with snakes (Puhvel 1987: 213, Terry 1990: 110). The elusive *Dísir* (cognate with [proto]Greek **thes-os* ‘god’, <- proto-Germanic **dīs-iyaz* ‘god-like ones’) as well, with their connection to fertility (Terry 1990: 163), and their harvest festival *Dísablót* (mentioned in numerous epics [*Hervarar Saga*, *Víga-glúm’s Saga*, *Egil’s Saga*, the *Heimskringla*] and still practiced today in parts of Sweden), may share some connection to the folkloric aspects of the *vila* that I have addressed and which may be reflected as well in the *apsarā*. Indeed, the pagan beliefs of the Serbs and Croats may have much to tell us about Norse and Indo-European beliefs.⁷⁷ Obviously, the line of enquiry being examined here is beyond the scope of this thesis, but the various analogies that have appeared through this research have been striking and abundant. And although these aspects cannot be pursued further, they do suggest that the ‘lumping together’ of female deities that has often occurred in the past is far too reductionary.

⁷⁷ A contention echoed by Jakobson (Jakobson and Ružičić 1966: 379).

15.0 Final Conclusions

This thesis stands as an attempt to contend with two unique and yet interconnected and important aims. Firstly, it endeavours to reassess the role of the *vila* in Serbian and Croatian ballads and epics in order to set-right her understanding and depiction in scholarly analyses. It not only presents a complete picture of her most intrinsic traits within the epics but posits a functional divide between her form and role within the folk epics and her depiction, understanding and function within local folk customs of the region. Secondly, this thesis uses this clarified position of the *vila* to draw into question her stereotypical depiction as a nymph or fairy. It endeavours to elucidate the connection that is often posited between her and the Russian *rusalka*, showing that this connection is only valid regarding the folkloric aspects of the *vila*. From there the article compares the mythological depiction of the *vila* to more suitable figures in the Indo-European mythological sphere, namely the Norse *valkyrie*, the Indic *apsarā* and the *Ján* bird women from *The One Thousand and One Nights*, in order to properly clarify how the *vila* was most likely understood by the Serbs and Croats until fairly recently. It also uses this comparison to suggest the possibility that these figures are strongly linked through their functional roles in their respective traditions as warrior women, aids and lovers to heroes and through their employment of the swan maiden motif, and that they may indeed be both culturally-specific retentions of a single Indo-European myth figure and the root of the swan maiden motif. Although some aspects of this thesis rely on conjecture and interpretation of ancient materials, the majority of the facts discussed are convincingly supported and often startling. At best this thesis may call for a complete re-analysis of many Indo-European mythological figures as well as a reassessment of a folklore motif once thought to be fully explicated and understood, at its humblest this thesis will at least stand to fully define the role of the *vila* in the epic songs in which she is depicted. It is the author's hope that this study does justice to the South Slavic *vila*, a figure which he believes to be of great antiquity and of the highest mythological stock.

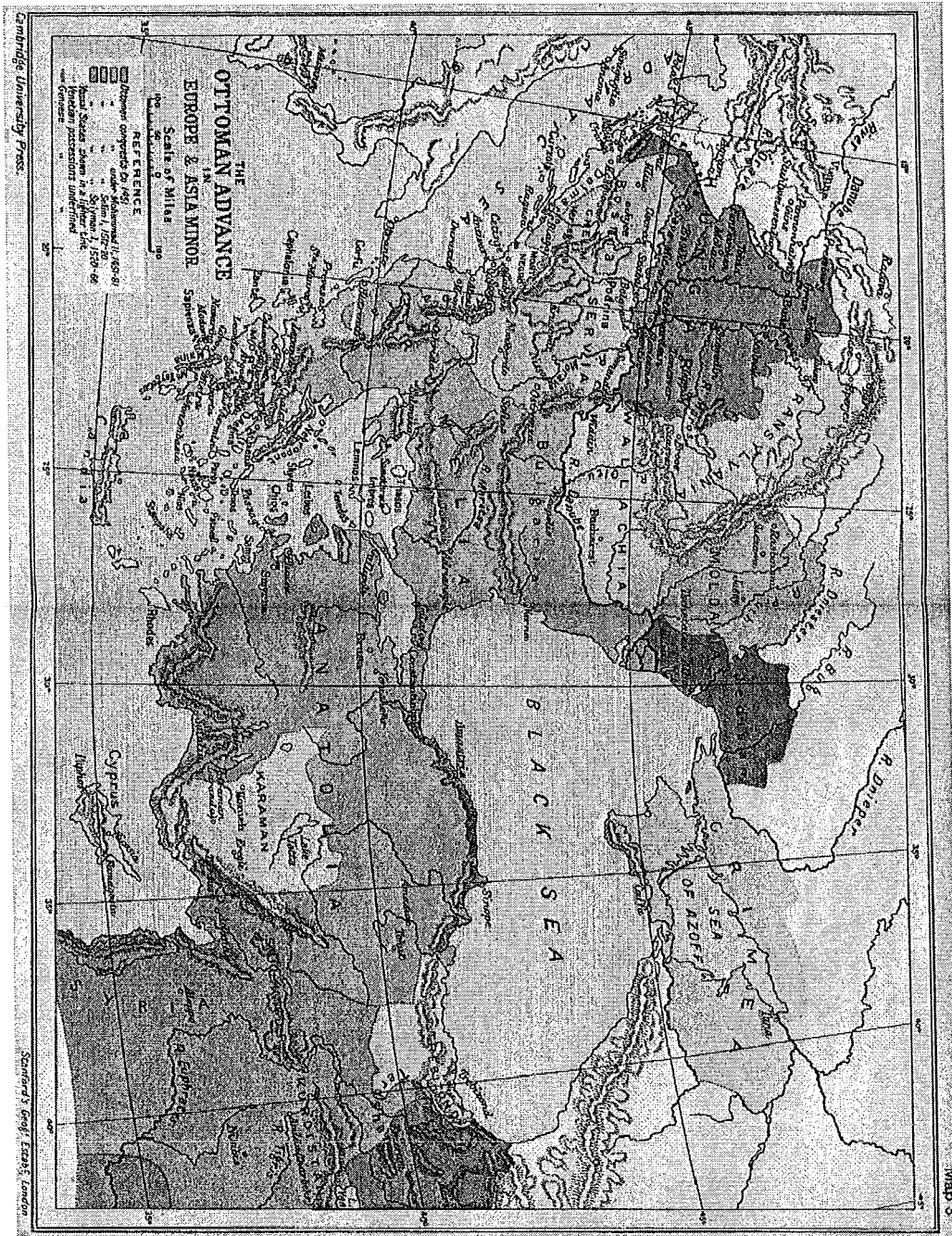


Fig 1.1

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