

Belarusian Mermaids: Appearance and the Pragmatics of the Image

Nikolay Antropov, Timofey Avilin, Elena Boganeva

Abstract: The mermaid is one of the most famous and popular mythological figures in the Belarusian folk tradition. The analysis conducted of Belarusian mythological texts about mermaids and descriptions of their appearance demonstrates the extreme diversity and polymorphism of this image, including the characteristics (from beautiful to scary) and axiological (from evil spirits to saints). Many texts about mermaids describe only their appearance, while saying nothing about their actions. Researches have mapped individual motifs in mythological texts and typical characteristics of habitat, microareals and isodoxes. The maps for the article were prepared using the QGIS geographic information system, which is distributed under the GNU GPLv2 license.

Keywords: mermaid, water spirits, appearance, mythology, Belarus

The mermaid is one of the most famous and popular mythological figures in the Belarusian folk tradition, and, at the same time,

perhaps the most vague and multivalued. Even though the mermaids in Belarusian folklore and mythos are described vividly, the descriptions are so different that they can often be identified only by the mythonomic, mermaid.

In contradistinction to other Alfar, mermaids are undomesticated: they can be found in ponds, forests, fields, meadows, gardens, cemeteries, and in certain circumstances in gardens, baths, and village houses. They can be anthropomorphic (like children, young girls, women with small children, old women), zoomorphic (like creatures in the guise of birds, monkeys, snakes, cats, rats, an indefinite 'animal', etc.), and have a number infernal features, such as iron or other artificial body parts.

In the way of axiological characteristics, the whole range of evaluations is present from evil spirits through to a neutral status to saints. In equal measure they harm and foster the growth of field and garden crops, bring about disease and cure them, tickle to a frazzle, crush, drown, take people with them; but also reward them for their goodness towards their children, warn them of danger, and do housework.

A complete description scheme for mermaids includes: appearance; attributes, clothing, loci of habitat; actuality (actions); origin; temporality (characteristic time of the year/day); acoustic characteristics (what sounds the mermaids make, what they say, sing); the functionality of figure (for whom/for what people talk about mermaids/threaten with mermaids); and other characteristics, in particular what mermaids are afraid of, what they feed on, etc.

The present article is concerned only with conceptualisations of the appearance of mermaids, their attributes and clothing. Currently, Belarusian folklore studies already contain research on some characteristics of this character, namely, external qualities (Avin, Antropov & Boganeva 2016: 232–273); acoustic appearance (Boganeva & Avilin 2024: 33–49); origin (Buiko 2025: 248–278). The article analyses the pragmat-

ics of the image. On the working versions of the maps we indicate the distribution of those or other components of the appearance of the demon/demons, which are united by mermaid mythology, in the territory of Belarus. The authors did not set themselves the aim of reconstructing the genesis of the mermaid as a character in order to draw typological and comparative parallels, to show the connection of Russian ritualism and prohibitions against the mythologema of the mermaid, etc., which by all means are significant, but come within the framework of a different study. In the article there is also no special review of literature devoted to mermaids, because this would cause an increase in the page count.

The appearance of mermaids is distinguished by exceptional polymorphism. They can be anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and have infernal features, but in any case they are written out as extremely “material”, have visual, acoustic and even in some cases tactile (for example cold) characteristics, which correspond to the general mental strategy of constructing a mythological image. What is more, in the absence of appropriate naming, the appearance of a ‘female’ character is one of the indications that a character is possibly a mermaid or a character similar to mermaids (in the Belarusian tradition, there are a number of local spirits with other names, but the feature of a mermaid: Galyshka (from *golaya*, meaning naked), Zhalyaznyachka (*zhaleznyaya*, meaning iron), Kazytuha (‘one who tickles’), Tsytsokha (‘one with a large bust’), Nimka (from *nyamaya* meaning dumb), Lesavitsa (‘one who lives in the forest’), Vadzyanitsa (‘one who lives in water’), Smalyanka (‘as black as tar’), Nachnitsa (‘one who comes at night’), etc.).

In specific texts about mermaids, the entire complex of visual artefacts, together with the functionality of images, their pragmatics, ambivalent characteristics, and ratings, is intended to emphasise the otherworldly belonging of the images.

The article will repeatedly mention the historical and ethnographic regions of Belarus, which do not coincide with the administrative divisions of the modern country (see map 1).



Map 1. Historical and Ethnographic Regions of Belarus

Data and sources

According to the electronic database of the Belarusian folklore-ethnolinguistic atlas (hereinafter the BFELA), there are 1870 units relating to mermaids and the Sunday before Whitsuntide¹ (each unit includes the following meaningful fields: the text of the record, the motifs in the text, the place of recording (community, district, region), the informant's data (last name, first name, middle name, year and place of birth, education, religion) as well as the collector's data, published sources (texts, studies). The BFELA electronic

database currently contains the largest volume of mythological texts (legends and beliefs) about mermaids from the ethno-cultural space of Belarus; therefore, the authors' priority task was to systematise Belarusian material as a separate case.

Maps for our analysis were prepared in the QGIS geographic information system, which is distributed under the GNU GPLv2 license. Data for the maps is stored in an Access database, where the following can be listed as main tables: the text of the recording, the community in which the recording was made and its geographical coordinates, the conventional classification of the recording (for example, folkloric motif). Most records are in the BFELA database from Belarussian Polesye² (Western and Eastern), which is explained by the introduction to the database of the entire body of texts about mermaids from the Polesye archive of the Institute of Slavic Studies (Moscow), for which a survey of settlements on the subject of "demonology" was carried out according to the full ethno-linguistic program Atlas (PELS 1983: 21–49).

Among the sources, archives and publications used for this article are the BFELA handwritten archive; the archive of the department of folklore and culture of the Slavic peoples at the Centre for Studies of Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature at the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus; the archive at the Vetka Museum of Old Belief and Belarusian Traditions, Polesye Archive of the Institute of Slavic Studies of the RAS (hereinafter referred to as the PA), publications by Pavel Shein (Shein 1887: 185–191), Evdokim Romanov (Romanov 1912: 204), Dmitry Bulgakovskiy (Bulgakovskiy 1890: 189–190), Fedor Klimchuk (Klimčuk 2003: 217–225), Vladimir Sivicki (Sivicki 2006), Alexander Strakhov (Strakhov 2014: 164–188), Lyudmila Vinogradova and Elena Levkiyevskaya (Vinogradova 2000, 141–229; Vinogradova & Levkiyevskaya 2012: 476–698), dictionaries of Belarusian dialects, personal archives of Timofei Avilin, Nikolai Antropov, Elena Boganevay, Tatyana Volodina, Tamara Varfo-

lomeeva, Tatyana Kukharonok, Gennady Lopatin, which are partially published in 2–10 volumes of the series “Traditional Art Culture of Belarusians” (Varfolomeeva 2004: 755; 2006: 364–366; 2009: 428–429; 2011: 438–440; 2013: 601–603), “Belarusian Folk Bible in Modern Records” (Boganeva 2010: 48–49), “Polotsk ethnographic collection” (Lobach 2011: 59–62), publications with lyrics by Gennady Lopatin in the PALAEOSLAVICA almanac (Lopatin 2007: 275–292). A number of texts are included in the database from publications on Ukrainian Polesye and Bryansk.

For the preparation of the article we used text publications and studies from different periods from the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 21st century. However, the set of fundamental study texts falls at the turn of 21st century, specifically the expeditionary materials of Nikolai Antropov and his students, Elena Boganeva, Tatyana Volodina, Tamara Varfolomeeva, Tatyana Kukharonok, Timofey Avilin.

Appearance

Anthropomorphic mermaids

1.1. Gender and age

Most of the records studied testify to the anthropomorphic image of the mermaid, and, in terms of gender, her female appearance. At the same time, there is rare (although not unique) information about male mermaids: “A person who was born on the Sunday before Whitsuntide – either a man or a woman can become a mermaid”³ (Zamoshye village, Lelchitsky district, Gomel region). In the village of Dyakovichi, Zhitkovichi district of the Gomel region (Central Polesye), a name for male mermaids is even noted, Rusalim: “Like girls – stone breasts, she can crush

a person with them; Rusalim is like an ordinary man.” When it comes to mermaid children, then, as a rule, both girls and boys appear. “There are a lot of girls and boys. So, hand in hand, they danced. In the cemeteries they were dancing” (Dubitsa, Brest district, Brest region.).

However, the most common image is the mermaid who has the appearance of a woman. According to the age characteristics, mermaids can look like little girls, young ladies, brides, women and old women.

1.2. Peculiar features

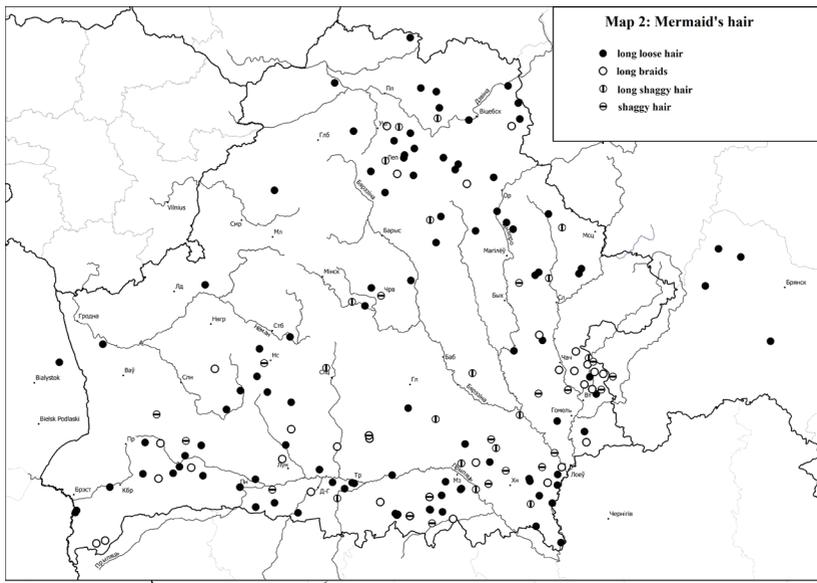
The dominant external features of images of adult mermaids, both young and old, are, firstly, their long hair, secondly, large breasts, and thirdly, nudity, that is, features that emphasise the femininity of the character: “A long time ago, old people said, two mermaids were brought to our village. They had everything feminine, only their busts are very big, it’s even frightful, and they have long hair” (urban-type settlement Belynichi, Mogilev region).

1.2.1. Hair

Mermaid hair can be unfastened, tressed, shaggy, etc.: “Mermaid hair is unfastened, it rides on a trolley, on a pushchair... , and the ribbons are behind” (Krivitsa village, Ivanovo district, Brest region); “With a long plaits and naked” (Khotislav village, Maloritsky district, Brest region). For the distribution of texts that refer to mermaids’ hair, see map 2.

The mermaids’ untressed hair, together with nudity, meant that they belonged to a non-human, demonic world. Mermaids were compared to girls (women) who let their hair down (“she had braids loose like a mermaid”). At the same time, in some

tales about bird mermaids, a motif stands out according to which it is the mermaids who perform the regulatory function when women wear nothing on their heads. “The mermaid is like a big bird, they even cling to the hair of girls who go to pick rye flowers... She flies, sits on you and clings to your hair... That’s why girls should wear a kerchief on (the Sunday before Whitsuntide) as she can cling to their hair... Once she was caught, her claws are large, bent... People say that all the hair will come out if she sits on your head, the hair will not grow on that head.” (Prudniki village, Gorodec district, Vitebsk region). In total, the BFELA database contains 2 texts in which a mermaid-bird sit on women’s bare heads.

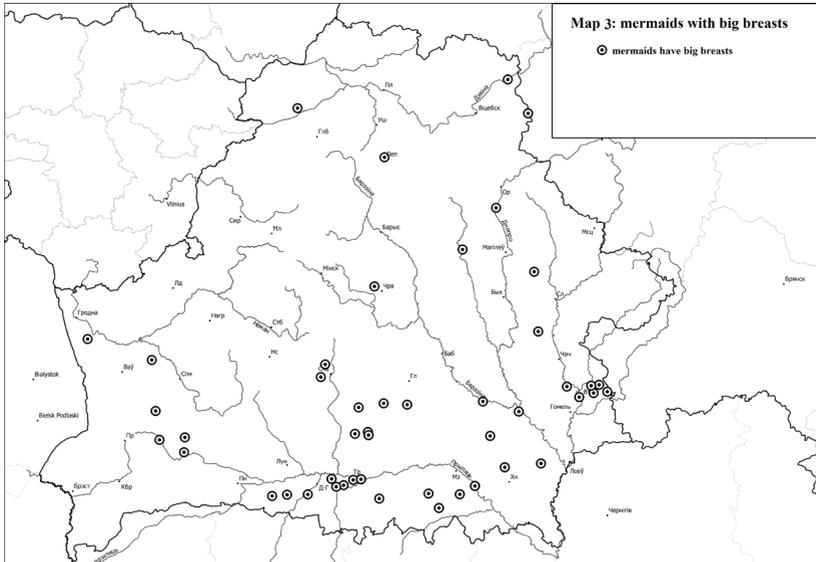


Map 2. Mermaid's hair

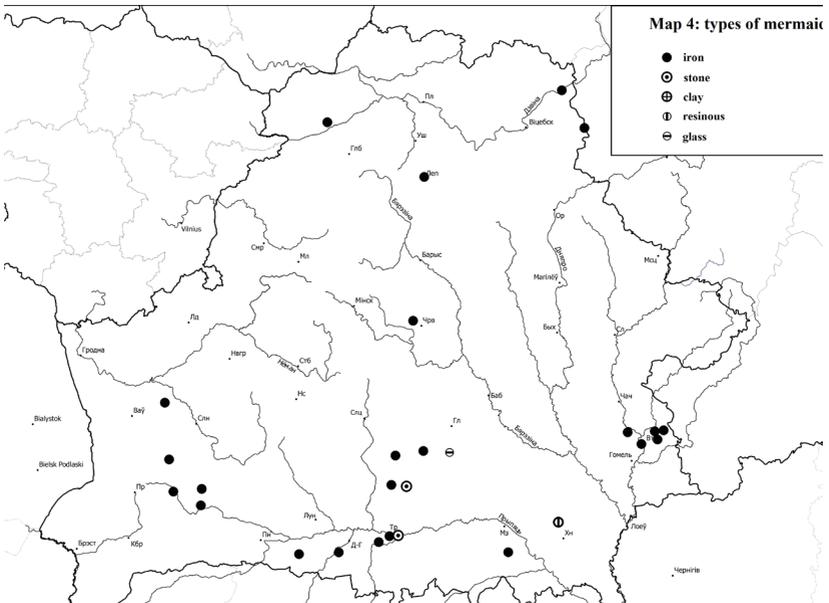
1.2.2. Bust

The mermaid's bust is said to be hypertrophically huge (map 3), in addition to which it can be made of iron, stone, glass, clay or resin, giving a certain infernality to images of mermaids (map 4). "My deceased father saw a mermaid. He saw her himself. My father raised the landowner's horses... And there was a rye field, and the sun at lunch. He went to turn these horses, and she came out. Such a bust, he said, and it seems to him that they were shiny like iron, and the hair was *loose*" (Boyanichi village, Luban district, Minsk region) "*The people frightened the children with the mermaid <...> Don't go there, otherwise the mermaid will jump out, put a glass bust into your mouth*" (Khoromtsy village, Oktyabrsky district, Gomel region). "*When children go to the cemetery, so I say: "Go, go, there the mermaid will strike you with stone bust!"*" (Pogost village, Zhitkovichi district, Gomel region)

If the mention of the long hair of the mermaids is a characteristic of the entire territory of Belarus, then informants of mainly East Polesye and the lower Belarusian Podneprovye focus on the big bust of the mermaids⁴.



Map 3. Mermaids with big breasts



Map 4. Types of Mermaid breasts

1.2.3. The skin

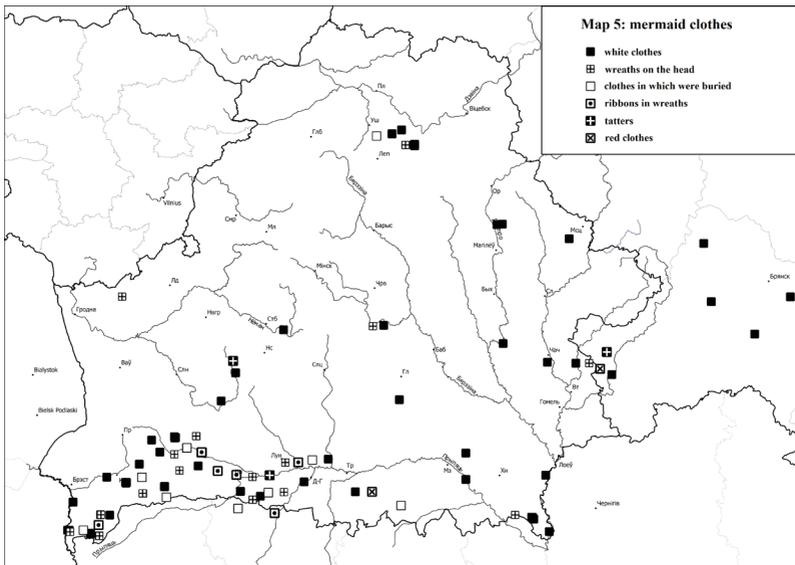
There are instances where the features of mermaids' skin are emphasized. "*Mermaids– the common run of men, only just they have a long hair and their skin is different*" (Kopani village, Chausy district, Mogilev region). Exactly what kind of the mermaids had was specified in the records of the famous Belarusian collector and publisher of early 20th century folklore Evdokim Romanov "*Belarusians conceive mermaids as girls, it is certain that they are naked, with long untressed hair and a body of earth color, covered not with skin, but with something hard like nails*" (Romanov 1912: 204). Here the motives exchange of the nail skin of the mermaids and the nail (horn, shell) body of the first people before the Fall are evident. The motives of the shell (nail) skin are traditional for the Belarusian Folk Bible (Dobrovolskiy 1891: 236; Federowsky 1897: 201; Boganeva 2010: 34), as well as for many European Folk Bibles – Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, Estonian and other. (Belova 2004: 239–241; Zowczak 2013: 97; Kerbelite 2001: 107; folklore archive of Estonian Literature Museum). Corresponding parallels are also found among the Jewish people (Kaspina 2000: 125–126). The conceptual difference between the motives of the horn-type body of mermaids and the first people is that the skin of the first people was a sign of holiness and sinlessness, it protecting them from heat and cold and hiding gender differences. For mermaids, the nail skin along with its earth colour emphasise their belonging to the demonic world, the world of the dead, or the undead⁵.

1.2.4. Clothing

Most texts say that mermaids were dressed in white clothes, or in clothes in which they were covered with sod when they were

girls: “People were afraid of mermaids. There were young girls who died, with their hair loose, in a white dress, in a bridal veil” (Druzhilovichi village, Ivanovo district, Brest region).

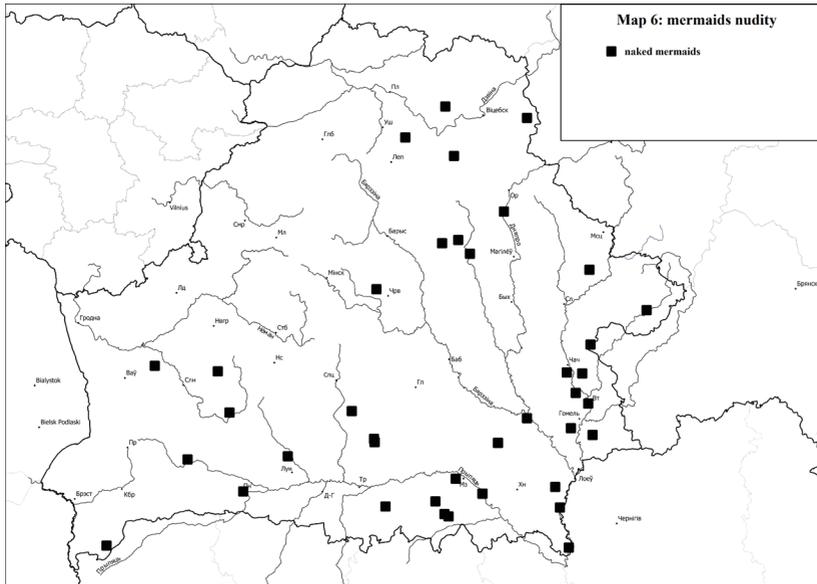
The motif of mermaids’ funeral clothing is common mainly in Western Polesye. It is no coincidence that motifs of mermaids originating from deceased girls or brides are also concentrated in this area. In Belarus, the practice of burying dead girls in wedding dresses of pre-eminently white, including a chaplet, is universal, and is a trait frequently attributed to mermaids. On rare occasions, mermaids can be dressed in tatters or red clothes. Among the Slavs, red clothes on mythological figures is a marker of evil spirits (Belova 1999: 649–650), which is also evidenced by Belarusian records (Varfolomeeva 2013: 652).



Map 5. Mermaid Clothes

In the images of Belarusian mermaids, both the presence of clothes (white, burial, tattered, red) and their absence are noted.

Many records document the nudity of mermaids, while naked mermaids can appear anywhere they live – in rye, in the forest, in water (see map 6).



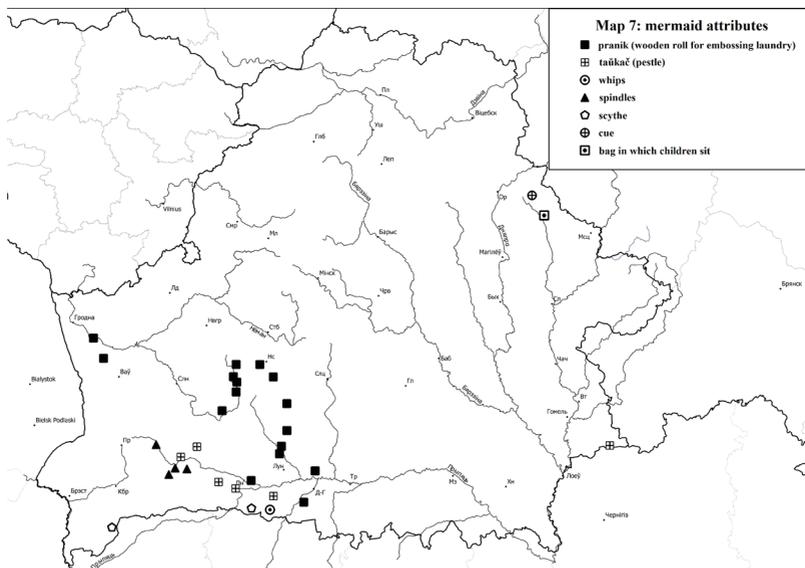
Map 6. Mermaid Nudity

1.2.5. The attributes

In some vernacular Belarusian traditions, an integral part of the image of mermaids is their paraphernalia, i.e. objects they have with them (a *pryanik*, a pestle, a mortar, spindle, cane, whip, bag) (Map 7). With these items, the mermaid acts as a frightening character, for example punishing obstinate children with these tools. The most common such mermaid item is the *pryanik*, a flat wooden bar with a handle used to pound linen during the washing and bleaching process. “A mermaid is in the rye field, with long hair and a *pryanik* in her hands. She will kill. The people are scared

in this way when they go to pick blue cornflowers” (Podborechye village, Lyakhovichi district, Brest region). The second most common tool is the pestle, which she needs for a similar reason to the *pryanik*: “It occurred when the rye was ripe... the mermaid was already coming with a big pestle! And killed the children! Oh, that was the fear!” (v. Vyzhlovichi, Pinsk district, Brest region). Together with the pestle, a mortar is often mentioned: “Don’t go to the rye fields, otherwise the mermaid will beat you with an iron mallet and pound you in a mortar” (Obrovo village, Ivatsevichi district, Brest region). Mermaids’ large busts are sometimes substitutes for the pestle, with which they crush children or make them suck to death: “Look! She’ll put you into a mortar and pound you with a pestle... Instead of a pestle, she has her bust, with this bust she will pound you in a mortar” (Sporovo village, Berezovsky district, Brest region).

In addition to the *pryanik* and pestle, mermaids could also use a scythe, whip or cane. In order to snatch the children, mermaids could have a bag with them. In some districts of Western Polesye, texts about mermaids indicate that they carry spindles (Klimčuk 2003: 220).

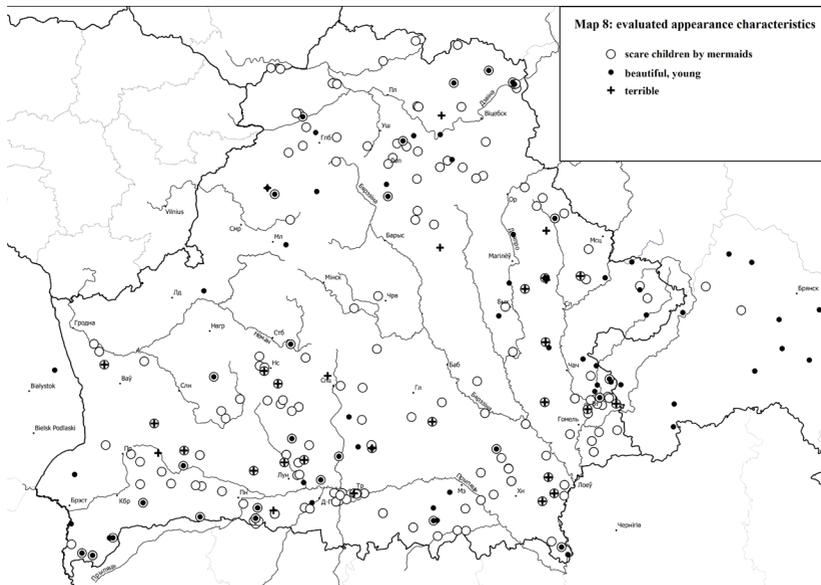


Map 7. Mermaid Attributes

1.3. Evaluation

The evaluative (in general terms) aspect of appearance is often updated in responses from rural respondents, i.e. mermaids can be beautiful or look ghastly. Mermaids who are evaluated as beautiful, look like children or young girls. The ugly mermaids were most often presented as old women with wild hair, overgrown with hair, or with a big bust, which they threw over their shoulders.

However, beautiful mermaids as well as ugly ones were scary. The very fact that they belong to the world of the dead was perceived as something terrible. Moreover, in relation to people, mermaids seemed dangerous and foreign. This is why children were scared not only by ugly mermaids, but equally by beautiful ones (map 8).



Map 8. Evaluated Appearance Characteristics

2. Zoomorphic characteristics of mermaids

In addition to the anthropomorphic type of mermaid, there are a certain number of other images 1) that have combinations of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic characteristics; and 2) that have only zoomorphic characteristics. Mermaids of the first type acquire a grotesque, often extremely bizarre and ugly appearance, and look like mixanthropic creatures. Each of these types is discussed below.

2.1. Mermaids with the appearance of people with zoomorphic characteristics

Among the zoomorphic characteristics found in anthropomorphic mermaids are a hairy (shaggy) body, an animal face, hooves, sharp claws and sharp teeth.

The shaggy-looking body is usually marked not as a separate characteristic, but in a complex of comparisons of mermaids with monkeys, cats, non-specific animals; or this characteristic is given to emphasise their ugliness. In some descriptions, the mermaid looks like a shapeshifter who stopped at some stage of transformation from a person to an animal, or vice versa: “Mermaids are walking naked... Their eyes are big... Only long hair around their head... Hands and legs are similar to a man’s, and the neb is like a beast’s, slightly oblong. She holds her child as a person, and understands the conversation” (Simonichi village, Lelchicy district, Gomel region).

Images of mermaids with horse’s legs (and hooves) have demonic features.

“One woman said: once I weeded the millet. And there, near the cemetery, exactly at noon, I raised my head and saw a young woman standing and asking which way to go... and suddenly she disappeared. She said that she went over, looked, and where she had stood, only hoofmarks remained. Well, not leg, but hoofprints such as that of a foal. When I looked, I was stupefied, I had the feeling I would die...”

“Who did she actually meet?”

“That was a mermaid.”

“With hooves?”

“Yes, she walked, well, like a woman, so young, so good, but they don’t walk with feet like us... With hooves they walk, old people said”

(Sinkevichi village, Luninets district, Brest region).

This text and stories similar to it remind us of plots of common Belarusian mythical narratives about evil spirits that appear at parties looking like handsome guys, but with horses legs or tails (Varfolomeeva 2006: 440–446; 2009: 479–482; 2011: 470–471; 2013: 655–658).

Anthropomorphic mermaids with sharp teeth and claws also look demonic: “And the parents were at work, and did not want us to go far away, and frightened us with mermaids. They said they were such tall girls, their arms were thin, their hair was long, their eyes were blue, and their teeth and claws were sharp. And if they catch you, they will tickle you until you die” (Sho village, Glubokoye district, Vitebsk region).

2.2. Mermaid-fishes

Mermaids that have the body and face of a young girl, but instead of legs have the tail of a fish, are the most famous combinations of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic characters. As a rule, such mermaids inhabit the water. Characters similar to mermaids were also popular in classical and European mythology (nymphs, naiads, sirens, undins, melusins, etc.), the romance. Odds are good that in modern Belarusian vernacular folklore, the source of the image of a mermaid with a fish tail was the literary works of Adam Mitskevich, Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Gogol or similar. Moreover, the consolidation of this stereotypical image in the peasant environment had already begun in the 19th century through popular prints. At the same time, the image of mermaids

with fish tails in certain cultural micro-dialects was inherent in the Belarusian folk tradition without regard to literary influence, as evidenced by records from the late 20th and early 21st centuries from informants who did not attend school.

As a matter of interest, mermaids with fish tails do not always live in water, in some cases such mermaids are said to run around fields (and the lack of legs necessary for running confuses the storytellers a little). “My uncle said that he was walking early in the morning, the sun had just risen. At sunrise he saw women. He looked out and realised that they had no legs. They were naked, laughing, running around the rye field. Scales and tails, well, that means mermaids. He was frightened and ran away, so he said” (Staro-Vysokaya village, Yelsky district, Gomel region). Similar records of mermaids with fish tails observed in fields were also documented in north-east part of Ukraine, in the Chernigov region) (Vinogradova & Levkiyevskaya 2012: 515).

Quite often in the image of mermaids along with a fish tail, wings also appear which motivates the ability of mermaids to sit in trees. “*Long hair, and with a fishtail. And with wings. Believe me, both wings and fishtail she had. The people frightened that way. And she flie*, and was in the water as well” (Zaronovo village, Vitebsk district, Vitebsk region).

2.3. Mermaids-birds

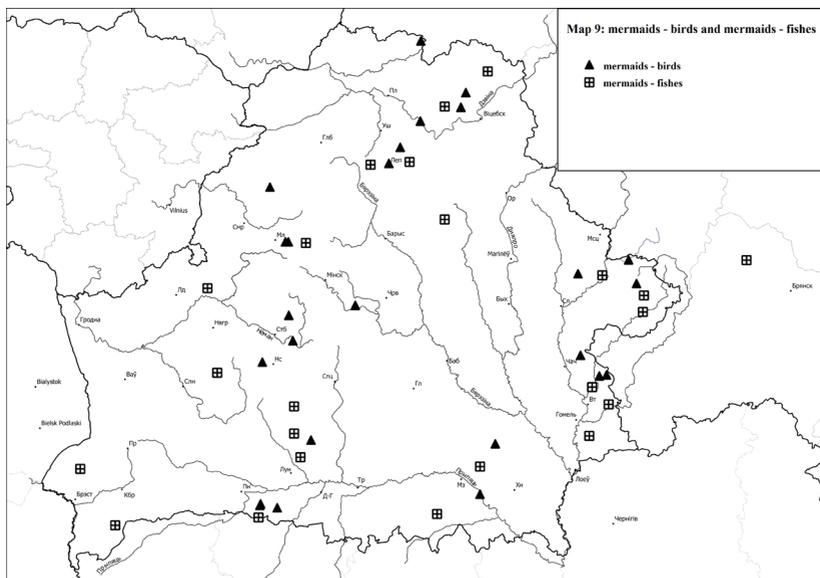
Winged mermaids are quite well known in Belarus, and they can have both the appearance of a bird and a combination of anthropomorphic ornithological features.

This type of mermaid, similar to the mythical birds of Alkanost (Tolstoy 1995: 100), or the Siren (Ivanov, Toporov 1992: 438), or Gamayun (SRYA XI–XVII 4: 10), with the body of a bird and head of a woman, is unique according to our material. Francisco

Molina-Moreno in his article “Mermaids in Polesye and Sirens in Antiquity” (Molina-Moreno 2015: 197–220) wrote that in the Polesye archive of the Institute of Slavonic Science (Moscow) the image of a bird-like mermaid with a female head does not occur. There is such an image in the Belarusian BFELA base, although it is unique. “The mermaid then is without legs, without arms, she is only with wing... She has a woman’s head, but only a body with wings. ‘And can they fly?’ Sure, if they have wings, they can fly. ‘And when do they fly?’ At night. Like a bat flying in the dark, so a mermaid flying in the dark... ‘Where were these mermaids coming from?’ Well, God punished the woman. Recompense for her sins. She had sinned a lot, put the cat among the pigeons, and God punished her and made her like this: without hands, without legs so that she couldn’t take anything or walk, just fly. ‘And does she fall upon people in the night?’ No, she doesn’t” (Dukora village, Pukhovichi district, Minsk region).

Another type of flying mermaid, this time anthropomorphic, is much more common: “Well, the mermaids were these... ‘And what were they?’ Well, they were shown with long plaits that were beautiful... They have wings, and those two wings are on the back” (Volosovichi village, Chechersk district, Gomel region).

Some species of large bird, for example, owls, hawks, storks, are also often associated with mermaids. Occasionally descriptions of mermaids conjure up a picture of a bird, but they are not compared with specific species: “The mermaid is a big bird, or looks like a bird... She lived in a rye or barley field. And kept watch over it” (Myasota village, Molodechno district, Minsk region). On map 10, expressive ‘isodoxes’ are shown⁶ from north-east Belarus through the western part of Central Belarus to Western Polesye and from the eastern part of the Podneprovye to East Polesye.



Map 9. Mermaid-Birds and Mermaid-Fishes

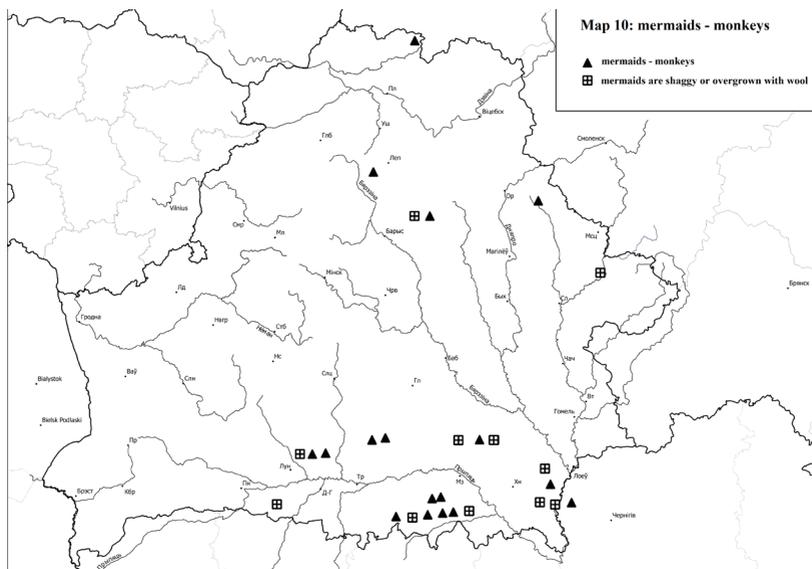
2.4. Mermaids-monkeys

The appearance of monkey mermaids is quite common among the zoomorphic images of mermaids (see map 10). In these situations mermaids are either compared to monkeys or identified with them: “Once upon a time there were monkeys – these were the mermaids, mermaids that once had been. They had shaggy-looking hair, they were primitive ones. Both women and men are shaggy, naked in the forest. They sway, climb, peep. Once upon a time...” (Zolotukha village, Kalinkovich district, Gomel region)

In this case, as with the nail skin, a parallel can be seen with Belarusian narratives about the first people, who descend from monkeys and were covered with hair (Boganeva 2010: 32–33). The motif of the hairy bodies of the first people is also found

in the Polish and Bulgarian folk Bibles (Zowczak 2013: 97; Badalanova 2017: 52–53) and among the Ukrainian Guzuls and Old Ritualists of the Kirov Region (Belova 2004: 241). The first people, according to some local versions of folklore Bibles, gradually went through the evolutionary stages of the acquisition of human attributes, getting rid of the signs of chthonic beings. Chthonic features and demonic nature are particularly distinguished among mermaid-monkeys. “What do mermaids look like?” “People say that they look like monkeys. I’m not sure... The story runs that they will troop around a man and tickle him until he runs out of force, and then they will drink his blood” (Volova Gora village, Lepel district, Vitebsk region)

Map 10 shows a large area in East Polesye of the occurrence of mermaid-monkeys and hairy/shaggy mermaids. Documentation of this mermaid type in the north is scarce, but they also form an isodox from the eastern part of Poozerye to the eastern part of the Podneprovye.



Map 10. Mermaid-Monkeys

2.5. Mermaid-snakes

Mermaid-snakes are a rather rare species of zoomorphic mermaid. In certain instances, mermaids are called snakes, referencing witches who take away milk from cows: “On the Sunday before Whitsuntide, mermaid-snakes came to suck out the milk” (Zamoshye village, Lelchicy district, Gomel region). There is probably also an association with snakes (grass-snakes) sucking milk from cows (see Varfolomeeva 2009: 583; 2013: 706), as well as with witches who turn into snakes and suck cow’s milk from the udder (Varfolomeeva 2009: 564–565).

Mermaid movement is often characterised as having an upright posture: they walk, run, dance, sit on tree branches, etc. At the same time, there are texts about mermaids that talk of them having a horizontal position and crawling, and so they are compared with snakes: “The mermaids in the garden crawl on the earth the same way as grass-snakes do. Who wants to scare, lie in the furrows in the garden and already scares – crawls like a mermaid” (Dublin village, Bragin district, Gomel region).

2.6. Mermaids that look like cats, rats or squirrels

In rare cases, mermaids become similar to cats (4 records), rats (2 records), and squirrels (1 record). “The mermaid is small, black, shaggy, like a cat” (Stodolichi village, Lelchytsy district, Gomel region.). Rats and squirrels do not have a direct comparison, but rather are hinted at in vague associations that can be explained by gradual attenuation (but not yet complete obliteration) of this aspect of local tradition. “Hasn’t your mum scared you with mermaids?” These are... rats, perhaps. Or mermaids. “Rats?” Once we started fooling around, and she says... She said it was not mermaids, but rats: “I will kick you to the rats right now!” “And

what kind of rats were they?” And now you can see them. Well, these are mermaids, perhaps. But in my mother’s mind, rats, in your language now, probably, mermaids” (Sava village, Goretsk district, Mogilev region).

As for the squirrel, it was not the mermaid that was compared with the squirrel, but rather the squirrel was called the mermaid, see: “I caught a little squirrel, and he bit my hands all over. Little squirrels are also called mermaids” (Solonaya village, Volozhin district, Minsk region). There is every likelihood here that the attenuation of the existing beliefs about mermaids occurred and left only an indefinite trace of those ideas that used to belong to mermaids, i.e. how quickly they travelled, perching in trees.

3. Infernal characteristics of mermaids

Many texts about mermaids demonstrate their infernality, which is emphasised by anomalies in their appearance, in particular their artificial body parts (most often these are texts that horrify children).

So mermaids can have an iron bust⁷ (31 texts), iron hands, an iron tail, iron fingers, iron claws, iron wings (6 texts). Not only can parts of the body be iron, but the entire mermaid can look like an iron woman (7 records). “They only used mermaids to scare the children so that they would not go to the garden. Do not go to the garden, the mermaid is sitting there!” “We had a barn made of withe. Once I went there, peered through a gap. And saw a woman. She was iron but normal, with a naked bust. I was thinking: “Where did she go?” I went outside, but she was not there.” (Khalch village, Vetka district, Gomel region). One record was documented that mentioned mermaid looking like an iron black bird: “We walked, and there in the field the rye was sown, and the cornflowers could be seen. We wanted to pick them, but

one female said: No, it's impossible, the mermaid sits in the rye and will take away anyone who will pick cornflowers or trample on them. The mermaid is like an iron bird. The mermaid is fully black, wings are black, iron, she's very scary" (Demyanovka village, Pukhovichi district, Minsk region).

Several texts stand out from the Belarusian texts about mermaids, in which mermaids are described not as a visible creature with a body – anthropomorphic or zoomorphic – but as something indefinite, like a ghost. These mermaids can seem like shadows (3 texts), like a moving pillar in the air (2 texts), or like a light in a cemetery (1 text).

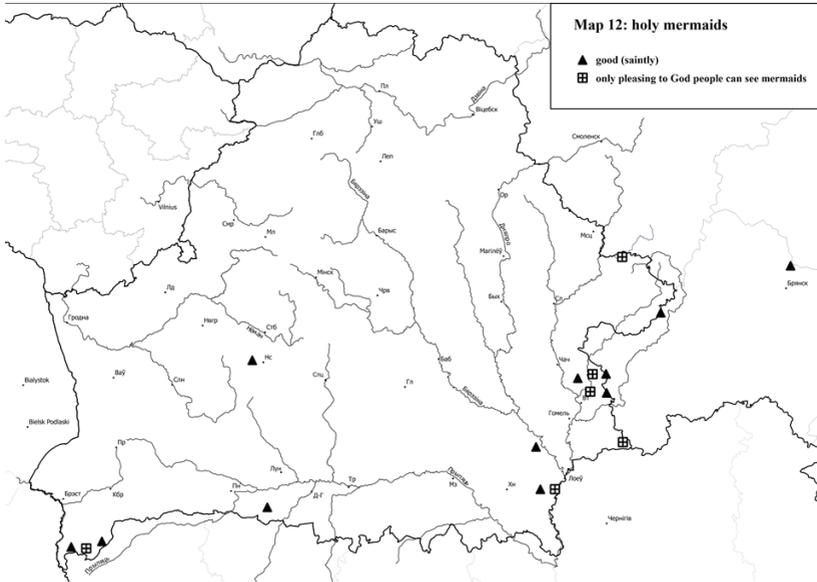
4. Perception and axiological characteristics of mermaids

Mermaids can come across as evil spirits more rarely as the saints, and, quite often, as something intermediate and neutral. As a rule, if the collector does not ask about the mermaid being an evil spirit, informants rarely reflect on this topic. But if the question is asked, most answers are affirmative. Anecdotal evidence suggests that mermaids comes directly from hell: "The mermaids came out of the abyss, out of hell... Mermaids, these are the devils walking evil spirits. They did a lot of harm to people. They could scare someone or do a harm, make something..." (Mikhalinovo, Liozno district, Vitebsk region).

Common signs of evil spirits in Slavic mythological texts are fear of the cross or of prayer, blessed things or holy places. Mermaids are also afraid of the cross (both the baptismal cross and the sign of the cross) and of prayer. Apart from the cross itself, mermaids are afraid of everything that looks like the cross. So there was a belief about how a person could be saved if mermaids were chasing him or her in a field. In this case, the person needs to

In West Polesye, where mermaids appear as children, and, according to superstition, descend from dead children, including baptized ones, they are perceived as akin to saints and are sinless: “Mermaids are small children, good children. They are from paradise, heaven born. Wreaths of cornflowers are collected in the rye fields and woven for them” (Oltush village, Malorita district, Brest region). However, the perception of mermaids as saints is not without ambivalence, and ‘holy’ mermaids can pose the same danger to humans as evil spirit mermaids. “Well, the mermaid is one of those who die young, unmarried... Whoever dies young becomes a little mermaid then. “Baptized or not baptized?” No! Baptized. Still so young that they did not know sin, men... “And are the little mermaids kind-hearted or evil?” Kind-hearted. They used to scare us when we went to pick cornflowers in the rye: Go, go! There the little mermaid lulls her child on the spikelet, she will strangle you there!” (Balandichi village, Ivanovo district, Brest region).

Map 12 shows the distribution of texts that have the mermaid-saints, i.e. mainly the south-west and south-east of Belarus.



Map 12. Holy Mermaids

The analysis of the descriptions of mermaid appearances in Belarusian mythological texts demonstrates the extreme diversity and polymorphism of this image, including the estimated characteristics (from beautiful to scary) and the axiological description (from evil spirits to saints). Moreover, unlike Estonian mermaids, Belarusian mermaids are not characterized by proteism. Belarusian mermaid tales do not include stories of mermaids transforming into inanimate objects or zoomorphic creatures, which are extremely dangerous for humans if they interact with them in any way (for more information on these beliefs in Estonia, see (Kõiva 2024, 141–166)). Mermaids in Belarusian beliefs can appear anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, or mixed-race (with a combination of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features). Anthropomorphic mermaids can appear as children, young girls, middle-aged women, or terrifying old women with enormous

breasts (the latter beliefs are common in the Belarusian Eastern Polesie region). Some tales of mermaids emphasize their infernal nature by using artificial body parts (iron/glass/clay breasts, iron fingers, hands, claws, etc.). Mermaids can appear as fish, birds, monkeys, snakes, and other animals. Mermaids can possess a combination of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features (a girl with a fish tail, a woman with wings, etc.). Mermaids may carry objects that are used to intimidate: children were frightened to keep them from going into the rye because a mermaid was there with a sack (for carrying and lifting children), a spindle (for stabbing), or stick (for beating). In the system of Belarusian mythological characters there is not one with whom mermaids could be compared, according to appearance, from which the functionality of the image does not always follow. In other words, many texts about mermaids describe only their appearance, but say nothing said about their actions. Mapping the individual motifs found in mythological texts as well as the ascribed characteristics, opens up other areas within the framework of this research.

Notes

¹ The Sunday before Whitsuntide, the week after Trinity, the 8th week after Easter. It was believed that in this week mermaids showed their faces to people and were most active. In the south-eastern part of Belarus a mermaid's farewell rite is of a mermaid has been performed. A young girl put on "clothes" from green branches and leaves, then she is taken over village with songs, then the girl is led outside the village into the field. There the mermaid's dressy clothes from green branches and leaves are taken into pieces (later on, this greens are used as a talisman), and she is pushed into the rye (into the river), thus removing her from rural society, from the world of people.

² Polesye (Polesie) is a historical, cultural and geographical area, located on the territory of four countries: Belarus, Poland, Russia and Ukraine.

In Belarus, Polesye is located in the south part of Belarus, and according to historical and ethnographic characteristics it is divided into Western and Eastern Polesye.

³ Hereinafter, all citation records of texts are given in translation from Belarusian. After the citation, the place of recording is indicated. The informant (respondent) and the collector are not indicated in the article, all information about them is available in the BFELA database

⁴ Podneprovye is a historical and ethnographic region of Belarus. It is situated in the east of the country occupying the Mogilev, part of the Vitebsk and Gomel regions.

⁵ The undead, according to Slavic convictions, are people who pass away unnaturally and can then return to the world of the living in the form of mythical creatures (mermaids, ghouls, etc.).

⁶ The motifs of mythological texts, as a rule, are geographically tied, and on this basis, isodoxes – the conditional boundaries of certain phenomena, zones, or microzones – are distinguished in ethno-linguistic mapping systems.

⁷ On the artificial busts of mermaids (stone, glass, etc.), see above 1.2.2

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