

# IVAN THE TERRIBLE'S MALADY AND ITS MAGICAL CURE

*William F. Ryan*

This paper discusses the testicular hydrocele which afflicted Tsar Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible), Ivan's alleged belief in witchcraft and employment of witches, the history of the Russian word *kila*, from its Greek origin to its employment as a Russian folk term for 'a swelling, hernia', and magic charms to cure it. From the evidence of two independent English manuscript dictionaries of Russian in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the word *kila* in Old Russian texts of that period meant exclusively the swelling of the testicles caused by witchcraft. It is argued that Ivan would have known the word in that sense, believed that his condition was caused by witchcraft, and would have looked for a magical remedy. There are no recorded charms for this purpose dating from Ivan's lifetime, but there are from the seventeenth century. In more modern occurrences of the word *kila* it seems mostly to have reverted to its previous non-specific sense of 'swelling' or 'hernia' – but Russian occult and medical websites show that the 'hydrocele' meaning survives as a folk term and that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century association with witchcraft is also still well known.

**Key words:** *kila*, Ivan the Terrible, hydrocele, impotence, illness caused by witchcraft, historical survival of witchcraft beliefs

## INTRODUCTION

When William John Thoms (1803–1885), a leading British antiquarian, coined the term 'folk-lore' in 1846 in a letter to the London journal *The Athenaeum*, he said that he had invented the word as a more appropriate term for what had previously been called 'popular antiquities'. In other words, he was thinking of the new subject of 'folklore' as essentially a diachronic or historical discipline. Nowadays, of course, it is used to cover a far wider spread of topics, and some folklorists may even regard the search for the historical roots of popular culture as a distraction – and it can indeed lead to a great deal of misleading speculation. It is certainly true that it is very easy to draw quite unjustifiable historical conclusions from folkloric evidence and assume that any folk belief, or legend, or dance, or curious custom must have existed long before it was first recorded. Margaret Murray's bizarre theories on witchcraft, for example,

influenced many historians, and are still gospel to many neo-pagans.<sup>1</sup> I think that present-day historians, anthropologists and folklorists are all aware of the problem, but the temptation to engage in speculation is always there.

Nevertheless, some researchers cannot help thinking primarily in historical terms, and instinctively look for antecedents, textual witnesses and historical linguistic evidence. I personally find it particularly satisfying when solid historical and linguistic data can be brought together to demonstrate the historical continuity of a popular belief or practice. In this short paper I am going to combine some historical information about a medical condition of Tsar Ivan IV, commonly known as Ivan the Terrible, with some notes on the Russian language recorded by English visitors to Russia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and some magic charms recorded in Russia in the following four centuries. In this way I shall try to arrive at a plausible hypothesis about one aspect of Ivan the Terrible's health, and demonstrate a continuity of popular belief about one particular medical condition thought to be caused by witchcraft, its name, and its magical treatment, which can actually be localized and fixed in time.

## IVAN THE TERRIBLE AND WITCHCRAFT

Ivan the Terrible ruled Muscovite Russia from 1547 to 1584. He has been associated with magic and witchcraft of various kinds in many historical sources. It is a definite historical fact that he employed a disreputable physician and astrologer called Elisaeus Bomelius, or Bomel, who was born in Westphalia, educated at Cambridge, and recruited into the tsar's service by the Russian ambassador in London. He had the reputation, while still in England, of being a magician. Bomel is reputed to have poisoned Ivan's enemies at court on the tsar's orders, and was eventually accused of sorcery and treason and was punished by being tortured by the strappado, roasted on a spit, then thrown into a dungeon where he died (*ODNB* 2004: s.v. Bomelius). The Russian historian of science R. A. Simonov has suggested, quite plausibly, that it was Bomel who introduced Tsar Ivan to western-style Renaissance magic (Simonov 1986: 79). His evil reputation in Russia persisted – in Rimsky-Korsakov's 1898 opera, *The Tsar's Bride*, Bomel (described as a German) is depicted as a scheming supplier of poison and magic love potions, a crucial element in the plot.

An earlier accusation of interest in witchcraft came from Prince Andrei Kurbskii, a trusted boyar general of Ivan the Terrible who defected in 1564 to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Polemic texts attacking Ivan as a tyrant in league with the devil are ascribed to him. In one of these, the *History of the Grand Prince of Muscovy*, Kurbskii denounced Ivan as having been conceived

with magical assistance of Karelian witches employed by his father, and that he himself had employed *charovniki* and *sheptuny* who commune with the devil (literally a *charovnik* is a charmer and a *sheptun* is a charm whisperer) (Fennell 1965: 202–3). Both Ivan's mother and his grandmother were commonly thought by the people of Moscow to have been witches. Other sources, including Sir Jerome Horsey, who at various times was a merchant, spy, ambassador, agent of the Tsar and representative of the Muscovy Company, say that Ivan summoned witches from Karelia when he felt he was near to death. Horsey was also a disparaging acquaintance of Bomel, the Tsar's physician and astrologer mentioned above. Ivan certainly seems to have been interested in magic and astrology – and contemporary accounts describe the summoning in 1584 of sixty “wizards and witches” (*kudesniki i koldunii*, i.e. male and female magicians) to foretell the time of his death.<sup>2</sup>

Ivan, like other Renaissance rulers, managed to be both a client and a persecutor of witches – despite his magical interests he had summoned a Church Council in 1551 (the so called Stoglav) to extirpate abuses within the Russian church, of which a considerable number were connected to magic, witchcraft, blasphemy and divination. In his account of Ivan, Jerome Horsey describes a meeting just before Ivan's death in which Ivan showed him his royal staff, a magic unicorn horn set with precious stones, the magical properties of which were enumerated by Ivan (Berry and Crummey 1968: 304–6). Historians know that Horsey was not always a reliable informant but his account, together with other sources, certainly indicate that Ivan was both familiar with magic and a user of it.

Ivan was notoriously a violent, cruel, and unpredictable ruler, and many historians have discussed the possible medical or psychological causes of his apparently unbalanced and sadistic behaviour. However, none of these historians, as far as I can discover, has discussed the relatively minor condition afflicting Ivan in his last days and which is part of the topic of this paper.

## **IVAN'S HYDROCELE AND THE *KILA***

Jerome Horsey's account of the death of Ivan tells us that Ivan's sexual excesses in deflowering a thousand maidens caused him to “grievously swell in his cods” in his last illness (Berry and Crummey 1968: 304), that is, he had a serious swelling of the testicles, or more probably the scrotum, known in medicine as a hydrocele (*hydrocele testis*). Although the round figure of one thousand deflowerings suggests a rhetorical exaggeration, there seems to be no reason why

Horsey should have invented the particular medical detail of the hydrocele, so I accept it as probable.

The modern medical term ‘hydrocele’ (more specifically in this case *hydrocele testis*, in Russian *vodianka iaichka*), is a composite word made up of two Greek words *hudor*, ‘water’, and *kēlē*, ‘a swelling or hernia’, a meaning it still has in modern Greek. This second word is similar in sound to the root of the Greek verb *kēlēō*, ‘to bewitch’; and although the two words appear not to be etymologically linked there could obviously be a popular association. This Greek word *kēlē* seems to have been borrowed into Slavonic at a very early date, because it occurs in all the Slavonic languages. In Russian it emerges as *kilá*. This is a relatively rare word which occurs in a few Old Russian documents, but in early modern and modern Russian it is a folk term for several medical conditions in which some part of the body is swollen, or for a hernia or an abscess. Vladimir Dal’s celebrated dictionary of spoken Russian, published in the late nineteenth century (Dal’ 1880–82: s.v. *kila*), tells us that a *kilá* in general popular belief at that time was a swelling inflicted by magicians (*znakhari*), and many folklore records agree, although there is nothing on the topic in the encyclopedic study of Russian folk belief by Afanas’ev (1865–9). A fairly recent book on 19th–20th century charms in Nizhnii Novgorod says that a *kilá* there was an abscess on the face, always caused by witchcraft, and it could only be removed by a *koldun*, a male witch, with a spell (Korobashko 1997: 4). One of the Nizhnii Novgorod charms even personifies the *kilá* as a demon: “Kila, kila, nechistaia sila, kila-bes, podi v les” (note that *kilá* is normally stressed on the last syllable but here possibly on the first), and the others suggest that a *kilá* may afflict any part of the body. It is slightly surprising that a word of learned Greek origin should be used for a rather non-specific condition in non-literary Russian and in other Slavonic languages and even more so that it should have also a magical connotation.

Dal’s information that in Russian popular perception a *kilá* is inflicted (*nasylat’*, *privesit’ kilu*) by witchcraft is important as evidence of its usage in the 19th century, and is supported by the (later?) Nizhnii Novgorod charm quoted above. There are several medical conditions in Russia which have a long history going back to classical antiquity and which were thought to be demonic in origin – these include the fevers or *triasavitsy*, personified illnesses which are linked with St Sisinnius and the Greek Gylou tradition, and the mysterious *dna*, the Greek *hystera*, a personified illness which may be an affliction of the womb, or a fever, or almost any other disorder (Ryan 2005). Several conditions, also probably of ancient origin, were thought to be caused by the Evil Eye (which is usually called *sglaz* or *durnoi glaz* in Russian) and were classed as *porcha*, the Russian equivalent of *maleficium*, which may be inflicted by a witch, but not

necessarily so. And there are a few medical conditions which are definitely *maleficium* caused by a witch – these include *kilá*, which we are discussing here, *strély* (literally arrows: sharp pains, usually in the lungs), *nasyłki po vetru* ('things sent on wind', i.e. afflictions sent from a distance by a *koldun* or witch) and *nevstanikha* (literally 'not standing up': impotence).

Slightly more information about this word *kilá* and its meaning can be found by looking not at modern dictionaries but at two old manuscript vocabulary books written by two Englishmen.

## MARK RIDLEY AND RICHARD JAMES

The first of these vocabulary books is by Dr Mark Ridley and was written at the end of the sixteenth century. He was a Fellow of the College of Physicians of London, and he was sent to Moscow in 1594 by Queen Elizabeth to be personal physician to Ivan's successor Tsar Fedor Ivanovich. He was a learned man who wrote two manuscript dictionaries of Russian with a large medical, botanical and scientific content. The entry for *kilá* in his dictionary is: "a swelling of the coddess [i.e. testicles] by witchcraft" (Stone 1996: 174).

A few years later, in 1618–19, the Reverend Richard James, the very observant chaplain of the embassy to Russia of Sir Dudley Digges, wrote in his phrase book of the Russian spoken in the northern town of Kholmogory: "*khila*, the disease of the stones [i.e. testicles] bewicht into an exceeding swelling bignesse" (Larin 1959: 123).

Some years ago I wrote a history of Russian magic and divination (Ryan 1999), and was criticized by one reviewer of my book for using the travel accounts of foreigners as historical evidence. This was a strange objection since in fact the observations of educated and curious foreigners, when used with care, are always useful to historians and anthropologists because foreigners often notice things which are strange to them but which local inhabitants take for granted and do not bother to talk or write about. In this case we have confirmation, from two unrelated, educated, foreign sources, in two quite different parts of Russia, and not found in any Russian source, that *kilá* at that time, only a few years after the death of Ivan, was in fact quite specifically a swelling of the testicles, and that already in the sixteenth century it was thought to be caused by witchcraft. And Ivan the Terrible must surely have known this about his own condition, since he seems in any case to have been convinced that he was a target for witchcraft.

## KILA AND ITS CURE

Here, then, we have Tsar Ivan, who has developed a *kilá* or hydrocele, a condition thought, in the Russia of his time, to be caused by malefic witchcraft. He believes in magic and witchcraft, and he has a large number of witches at his bedside. Would he not consult them in this matter?

It is true that there are herbs which in Russia were supposed to cure *kilá*, such as *kil'naia trava*, but this term seems to have been used only in later translated *travniki* or herbals as a translation of Latin *Herniaria glabra* (*Slovar'* 1975: s.v.) or in traditional English 'Rupture Wort' – which echoes the more general meaning of Russian *kilá* and which was a specific for hernia. In Russia the only other magical remedy for a *kilá*, apart from the herbs or other substances with magical curative properties, were prayers to St Panteleimon, St Michael, or St Nicolas, or a magic charm, such as the prayer-like invocation of Vezi, Puzi and Sinii, the three sons of Baba Yaga,<sup>3</sup> which would normally be the property of a witch. And we should remember that in Russia, as elsewhere, there is a common rule in popular belief, that a condition created by a witch can only be cured by a witch.

*Kilá*, as defined independently by the two English observers, but nowhere else, was just such a bewitched condition – and as it happens we do have some recorded charms for treating it.

If you search on the Internet for *zagovor* and *kilá* (together) you will obtain over 20,000 results, many of them modern charms put together from old published sources, and very few of them mentioning testicles or witches. In fact the word *kilá* in modern contexts seems mostly to have reverted to its general etymological sense and may refer to almost any kind of swelling or hernia or abscess, although one enquiry to a Russian medical website suggests that the more specific meaning of 'hydrocele' still survives: "У меня кила, так по-моему в народе называют большое яичко" ("I have a *kilá*, I think that is what simple folk call a large testicle" – <http://www.andros.ru/consult/list/19/117.html>). The word may perhaps be regional – it is not found at all in the collection of Polesian spells edited by Agapkina, Levkievskaja and Toporkov (2003), nor in Toporkov's *Russkie zagovory* (2010), although both in these books and elsewhere it is possible that *kilá* is subsumed under spells for *gryzha*, the more common word for hernia.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately for my argument, at least one much older charm for a *kilá* survives: Nikolai Iakovlevich Novombergskii, the legal historian who examined 17th-century Russian legal records for information about witchcraft, has published the following charm ("*kil'nyi stikh*") from a trial transcript of 1646; it will supposedly cure a *kilá*:

На морѣ-окіянѣ, на островѣ Буянѣ стоитъ сырѣ дубѣ крѣпковистѣ, на дубу сидитъ чернѣ воронѣ, во рту держитъ пузырь и слетаетъ съ дуба на море, а самѣ говоритъ: ты, пузырь, въ водѣ наливайся, а ты, кила, у него развѣмайся.

On the Ocean Sea, on the isle of Buyan, there stands a moist strong oak, on the oak sits a black crow, in his beak he holds a *puzyr'* (either a bladder or a small bottle) flies down from the oak to the sea and he says: you, bladder, fill up with water, and you, *kilá*, disperse. (Novombergskii 1906: 66, 99)

This is a fairly standard type of short charm in Russia – the ocean-sea, the mythical island of Buyan, and the oak tree, are standard introductory elements of a historiola; and the strong oak tree (often with the adjective *bulatnyi*, steely, of steel) is a phallic symbol which is a common element in charms against impotence (Toporkov 2005: 338–9). The action described imitates the result desired. The charm may be incomplete – no final affirmation at the end or religious element is recorded. The spell is consistent with *kilá* in the sense of hydrocele but the context is not clear.

A general anxiety in 17th-century Russia about impotence caused by witchcraft was graphically described by Samuel Collins, the English physician of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich at the end of that century (Collins 1671; Cross 1971: 114):

Seldom a wedding passes without some witch-craft (if people of quality marry), chiefly acted, as 'tis thought by nuns, whose prime devotion tends that way. I saw a fellow coming out of the bride-chamber, tearing his hair as though he had been mad, and being demanded the reason why he did so, he cry'd out: I am undone: I am bewitched. The remedy they use is to address themselves to a white witch, who for money will unravel the charm, and untie the codpiece point, which was this young man's case; it seems some old woman had tyed up his codpiece point.

This passage, and the topic of impotence, is relevant to the argument because Novombergskii, whom I have just mentioned, also describes a court case in 1647 when a man and a woman were convicted of using witchcraft to inflict both *kilá* and *nevstanikha* (erectile failure) (Novombergskii 1906: 99). Here the linking of witchcraft with two words denoting problems with the male genitals in a purely Russian source reinforces my contention that the word *kilá* in late Old Russian denotes not just a swelling, as in modern Russian, but specifically a swelling of the testicles caused by witchcraft, and that the meaning of the word *kilá* as given by the two English travellers in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in their glossaries of Russian is accurate.



## CONCLUSION

On the evidence of Jerome Horsey, Tsar Ivan IV (the Terrible) in the second half of the 16th century suffered from a large hydrocele or swelling of the testicles, or more accurately the scrotum, and, on the evidence of two English visitors to Russia, Ridley and James, just a few years after Ivan's death, this condition was called *kilá* in Russian and was thought to be inflicted by witchcraft. I think it is a reasonable hypothesis that Ivan, a man with a known interest in magic and an employer of magicians, must have been aware of this and would in all likelihood have expected one of his attendant witches to cure his *kilá* with a charm. There is at least one recorded charm against *kilá* which dates from the seventeenth century, and a court case record from the same period, both of which are consistent with Ridley and James's interpretation of the word. The word *kilá* in later periods lost the specific meaning of hydrocele but retained its probable original sense which covered a fairly wide variety of conditions involving swelling of various body parts and not just the testicles. However, the belief that *kilá*, even in these wider senses, is inflicted by witchcraft has survived up to the present time, and now flourishes on the Internet.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For a history of these see Simpson 1994, and Oates and Wood 1998.
- <sup>2</sup> For some discussion see Simonov 1986: 79–80. Simonov also entertains the possibility that, besides Bomel, Ivan IV may have been inclined towards astrology by Ivan Peresvetov from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania who wrote political tracts to Ivan and possibly drew up a horoscope for him – Simonov 2001: 298–300). There is also evidence that Ivan IV had read the Russian version of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum* which makes a strong case for astrology as a necessary science for monarchs – Ryan 1999: 399.
- <sup>3</sup> Iudin 1997: 98, lists *kilá* among the conditions for which these could be invoked in prayer. Ss. Nicholas and Michael are general-purpose saints who were very widely prayed to; St Panteleimon was often invoked as a healing saint – he had been an imperial physician in the late 3rd century and was martyred in the persecution of Diocletian. It is not clear if *kila* in these charms is in fact a hydrocele. Baba Yaga was the demonic witch of Russian folklore.
- <sup>4</sup> For example, in Anikina 1998: 253, where several verbal and non-verbal charms referring specifically to *kilá* are grouped with similar charms for *gryzha*. One of these (no. 1544) lists twelve different kinds of *kilá* afflicting all parts of the body, from which one may conclude that in fairly recent popular belief a *kilá* could be almost any kind of swelling or abscess. Agapkina similarly includes *kilá* with *gryzha* in her chapter on charms against *gryzha* in Agapkina: 2010: 293–314. Neither gives *kilá* specifically in the sense of “hydrocele”.



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# **Incantatio**

An International Journal on  
Charms, Charmers and Charming

<http://www.folklore.ee/incantatio>

Print version

Issue 2

2012

ISNFR Committee on Charms, Charmers and  
Charming

# **Incantatio**

An International Journal on  
Charms, Charmers and Charming

## **Issue 2**

General Editor: Mare Kõiva

Guest Editor for This Issue: Emanuela Timotin

Tartu 2012

General Editor: Mare Kõiva  
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Supported by and affiliated to projects SF0030181s08 and  
EKKM09-159 of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research,  
and the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund  
(Centre of Excellence in CECT).

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ISSN 2228-1355  
DOI 10.7592/Incantatio

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doi: 10.7592/Incantatio2012

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doi: 10.7592/Incantatio2012\_1\_Reports

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