

Of the Vard and the Ushka

Origins

I have compiled this document from two primary sources. In 214YE during the reign of Empress Mariika the Senator for Zenith commissioned historical research into "The Origins of the Vard and the Steirn" and that formed the basis of some of my notes about the coming of the Vard. This was one of the earliest historical research documents commissioned after the firey cataclysm that consumed the Empire during the reign of the Mad Emperor, and I was fortunate enough to secure an ancient, crumbling copy from which to work that barely survived my reading of it.

Another significant part of this document comes from the report commissioned in 312YE by the Senator for Holberg regarding "The Culture and Customs of the Ushkan People". The document itself was very poorly put together in my scholastic opinion, but I have gleaned from it several details about the Ushka, and their war with the Vard.

In addition to these two documents, I referenced both "A History of Varushka" and to a lesser degree "A History of Wintermark." Despite being written nearly 200 years ago, both volumes are excellent resources for the broad strokes of pre-Imperial and early-Imperial history.

This then is my essay "On the Vard and the Ushka"

A brief history lesson

The modern Varushkan people are a folk formed from the union of two disparate people. Where the Winterfolk proudly maintain three seperate traditions under a single unified culture, the Varushkans are the result of a melding between two very different traditions. Neither the Vard nor the Ushka are Varushkan – and I say with confidence that no Varushkan alive today is purely Ushkan or Vard. Their culture and society is uniquely their own, for all that it is a tree grown from the rich soil of two peoples who were once the bitterest of rivals.

The Ushkan people we know were at the least contemporaries of the Terunael, the Suaq and the Kallavesi, and perhaps the Feni, the Urizen, and the Axou. There are paintings in the deep caves of Miekarova that suggest they go back even further than the Terunael – that when the forerunners of the Navarr raised their first cities the Ushka, Kallavesi, and Suaq were already well established in the north.

Some extremely old tales claim that Ushka share an immeasurably ancient ancestry with the Suaq and the Kallavesi – that they come from the far north-east, possibly even out of the unknown lands beyond the Vore. They found that the fertile lands of the south were utterly dominated by the orcs, and so they took up residence in the deep forests and hills of the north, in the shadow of the great mountains beyond which lay Otkodov. In time, the Suaq and Kallavesi split away from this unnamed forerunner people, and went into the cold plains and marshes of the west.

The Suaq and the Kallavesi themselves tell a different tale, but the stories of being descended from seals and ravens must surely be seen for the myths they are.

It is possible that the Terunael, Feni, Urizen, and Axou, and an unknown number of other human nations long since lost to the annals of time, may have sprung from the same wellspring to which the Ushkans were the heirs. It is likely we will never know.

We do know that the Ushka dwelt beneath the shadow of the trees, and in the hollows beneath the hills, for centuries before the Ascent of the Vallorn, and before the Arrival of the Vard.

The Isolation of the North

It seems that Ushkan civilisation rose to its height around the time of Terunael, yet the people of the dark trees never sought to build cities or even towns. They dwelt in vales beneath the trees, and according to the few fragmentary references to them in documents from Terunael and early Navarr (referenced in the seminal Navarri history of the post-Vallorn years, *The Long Road* now sadly lost to Imperial scholars), they had a dark reputation. While the spirits of the northern forests and the dark hills took their due from the Ushkans, those vales whose bargainers were cunning could allegedly draw on the power of the sovereigns and other sinister forces to gain work deadly magic when the need was great – and the price was acceptable.

They kept to themselves, although they were considered “rich” and almost certainly traded wood and amber to the Terunael. There is a hotly debated theory that the *Song of Gold and Pine* is a highly allegorical recounting of an open war between Ushkans and Terunael, in which “Gold” (the Terunael analogue) is driven out of the north (the “garden of the pines”) by dark magic (the great dogs referred to in the song that come to the aid of “Pine” are even in some sources said to be the kind of creatures the Varushkans call wolves today – or possible even plaguwulfs). In the most common form of that song the Terunael are the aggressor, but given that the song exists in so many different arrangements it is unwise to place much credence on this.

Relations between the Terunael and the Ushka were not always so strained – some very old legends suggest that the practice of blood magic, long considered a development of the Terunael or their Navarr descendants, may have originated among the Ushka (or the forerunner people from which they were descended). Inscriptions on the *Stela of Knives* recovered during the scouring of Old Ranging in Hercynia appears to recount a tale that the tradition was taught to the Terunael as part of a bargain of some sort – and that the inhabitants of the other cities were, initially at least, less than impressed with its use.

The *Stela of Knives* was old even by the standards of Terunael ruins, and had been extensively damaged by long exposure to the Vallorn, so specific details are not forthcoming. One interpretation of some of the designs on the surface suggests that this might actually be a piece of art, rather than a historical “document”, and that this story of blood magic coming to Hercynia from the Ushka is actually an allegory for an ancient interweaving of two powerful bloodlines.

Still, it would prove ironic if this tale were true, for while there are Varushkans who use the blood magic tradition today, the practice is by no means as prevalent as it is among the Navarr, the descendants of the Terunael city lords.

The Nature of the Ushka

The Ushka were the first human inhabitants of this land; their legends claim that they were born, fully formed, from the soil and the shadows beneath the trees. Their villages clustered together in the wilderness, prey for wolves and worse, but they had an understanding of the cruel realities of life in the forest. They made bargains with stronger powers and thus survived, although they often paid a steep price for their survival.

From “A History of Varushka”

Many sources, both written and oral, agree that the early Ushka had a rough caste-based society that revolved around four key roles – warrior-hunters, diplomat-priests, crafter-gatherers, and bargainers. The bargainers are the most distinct caste, and one of those we know the most about because they still survive (albeit in altered form) today. I will touch on them in the later sections about magic, but for now suffice to say that the Cabalist tradition of the modern Varushkans undoubtedly has its roots in the bargainer traditions of the Ushka.

All reports agree that long before the existence of the Way, the Ushkans were a people guided by principles of wisdom and vigilance. Whenever they are mentioned in stories, they are referred to as wise, but also commonly credited with having a specific kind of wisdom that is *hidden* – and usually not in a positive way. Modern accusations that the Varushkans

make deals with dark powers when it suits mirror those made untold centuries ago about the Ushka.

Yet at the same time, they are sometimes referred to as “timid” or “cowardly”. The Ushka sought to avoid danger; they bargained with the spirits of their dark land as often as not for sheer survival as for power; they compromised with hungry monsters, sacrificing the few so the many could live. They were known as a hard people, dark and mysterious.

Of course these reports come largely from the Varushkans themselves, and from the Navarr who at that time had problems of their own. Much of what made the Ushka culture unique is lost to us now, and so it is possible that these stories of sinister Ushkan mystics making pacts with darkness bear as little resemblance to reality as the calims the citizens of the Twin City of Tassato make about their relatives on the other bank.

The Lands of the Ushka

Several clusters beautifully painted caves lie under the hills of Miekarova, thought to be of Ushkan origin. The paintings in the cave are incredibly vibrant, and iridescent gloaming has clearly been added to the pigments. They are often quite abstract, but occasional enigmatic images of people and animals are common features. Several of the caves are known to have potent wards laid over them that still maintain their power today, and more than one contains a strong regio, often connected to the realm of Night.

The most famous are those in western Mierada; they have been extensively explored and the galleries extend for at least a mile beneath the hills. Many of the paintings here are damaged, either by weapons or by a deliberate attempt to deface them, and historians believe the damage may be the result of an early conflict between Vard and Ushka. Others mutter darkly that the damage here has nothing to do with the Vard, but talk about an internal conflict between the ancient Ushka – they generally claim to have come by this information through visionary dreams, and can provide little proof. Some cabalists have claimed that the caves enhance night rituals intended to provide visions, while the famous volhov Pakaanan claimed that the caves were somehow connected to the enigmatic dreams created with Sift the Dreamscape's Sands. Other caves exist under several other peaks

From “The Painted Caves of Miekarova” by Vollo Gulsternd di Holberg

As near as we can tell, the Ushka heartlands lay in the territory of Miekarova. In the painted caves there, they gathered and pursued their mystical communion with the spirits of their dark land. They also had settlements in Karov and Temeschwar, although in many cases these vales were threatened by native orc forces as well as the more typical dangers of the Varuskan interior.

The Ushkan presence in Volodmartz was always comparatively minor – but it seems that the more magically minded Ushka flourished here, far from the eyes of their fellows. The families of Ushka that dwelt in the northernmost forests were said to go even further than their southern brethren in making pacts with sovereigns both native to the forests, and with those drawn from the Eternal realms. There are even legends that hint unpleasantly of communion between the Ushka of Volodmartz and the Dragons of the Thule.

Volodmartz remained an enigma for untold generations. After the Vard conquered the Ushka, however, the territory was finally explored and the great riches uncovered – yet it was also the first real encounter between the Vard and the Thule. There are a several locations lost in the woods along the slopes of the northern mountains where the Vard and their Ushkan allies destroyed Thule settlements and strongholds – and there have been numerous reports that hidden passages and perhaps even high passes exist in the mountains that the Thule can use to enter Volodmartz – and that some unscrupulous types use to this day to trade with the sorcerous barbarians of cold Otkodov.

Likewise, the territory that is today Karsk saw only scattered Ushkan settlement primarily along the Semmerlak and the western border. One exception appears to be Branoc, the site of the so-called Broken Barrow. There are plenty of legends about this place, but few facts – but what facts they are concur that some of the oldest Ushkan settlements are found here, some of them pre-dating the Painted Caves. The myths about the Cursed King who sleeps beneath the Broken Barrow strongly imply that at one point his tomb was the heart of a unified nation of Ushkan or proto-Ushkan people, and that he slumbers there to this day, enjoying some primal connection to the dark and thirsty soil of that war-torn territory.

Varushka has always been a dangerous land. The creatures called sovereigns and wolves have been there as long as there have been humans. Indeed, oral traditions still recounted by some wise ones and storytellers in Volodmartz and Miekarova tell of ancient, vicious battles with the orcs that would be the forerunners of the tribe of Otkodov, today called the Thule.

By the time of the Fall of Terunael, however, however, it seems the bulk of the Thule (and the nascent identity of this sorcerer-dominated barbarian tribe was quite evident in the scattered accounts) were focused on the Terunael. There has been a great deal of speculation that there is or was a Terunael city north of Volodmartz, although how the ancestors of the Navarr survived in such a cold, inhospitable land so different to the warm and fertile soil of the southern nations, is difficult to imagine.

A Cautionary Word Regarding the History of the Vard

Actual facts relating to the arrival of the Vard are difficult to come by. Even without the fiery intervention of Emperor Nicovar, the early Varushkans had a strong oral tradition that left few written accounts. Coupled with the day-to-day dangers of living in the north-east, it is little surprise that contemporary accounts are thin on the ground.

The situation is not much better with regard to the Steinr, who the tales say are the brothers and sisters of the Vard. The lands that are now Wintermark were emerging from a century of warfare with the Trolls when the Steinr arrived and the entire history of their union with the Suaq and the Kallavesi has a strong flavour of mythology about it. Here again we see a lack of factual written records that did not relate to magic, ceremony, or poetic entertainment.

This is a tragic pattern the historian sees repeated over and over.

The Terunael leave few written documents because in the confusion following the Ascent of the Vallorn the first imperative was survival; the Feni do not share their documents with anyone; the Axou have little interest in their own past outside the mythologised doings of their ancestors, and are the most unreliable of unreliable narrators; only the Urizen really had much truck with the idea of writing down history and even they seem to have been remarkably insular. It is frustrating – one can find detailed records of the day-to-day trivia of a certain spire stretching back eight hundred years with barely a mention of anything that happened outside the specific mountain on which the building stands.

With that in mind it is odd in some ways that the early Varushkan records agree with the claims of the Steinr of Wintermark. The Vard were adamant that they had “fallen from the stars” or were themselves “the children of the stars.”

One of the oldest references to what is clearly the Vard and the Steinr appears in Steinr oral history saying that they first encountered orcs in what is today northern Upwold. After some scattered engagements, the human force was rebuffed and chose to take a tactical retreat.

The idea that the Steinr and the Vard are related is repeated again and again in both cultures. In Varushka particularly, the Vard are portrayed as the wise, realistic, and slightly cynical sibling while the Steinr are portrayed as young, impetuous, and impressed with their own foolhardy strength of arms. Wintermark tales by contrast characterise the younger brother as strong, courageous, and full of heroism while the elder Vard are pessimistic, old, and prone to procrastination.

Interestingly, there are scattered tales in which the two brothers have a third sibling, a middle brother, who is universally presented as foolish, headstrong, and overconfident – in these rare tales, the brother ignores the good advice of the older brother and refuses the aid of the younger brother, and is invariably devoured by a monster. Most scholars dismiss this as nothing more than a fictional motif, but I wonder if perhaps it is reference to a third force that arrived at the same time as the Vard and the Steinr, but came to some tragic end – perhaps at the hands of the orcs.

The Steinr – whose earliest tales claim they were already a distinct people – went north into what is today Hahnmark, and made alliance with the Kallavesi and the Suaq. The Vard, however, chose to go east.

They would almost certainly have encountered the horrors of Seren – modern day Miaren – at that time entirely dominated by the Vallorn. It is not clear whether they attempted to claim the forest from the unspeakable force that dominated them, but the next report of the Vard is driving orcs out of modern-day Temeschwar.

It is likely during this time that the Vard encounter the Navarr, and the encounter did not go well by all accounts. The Vard immediately attempted to conquer the Navarr, who simply moved away from them, slaughtering any scouts or isolated groups who were separated from the main force. Given the Vard had no interest in monster-haunted Seren, their conflict was almost certainly limited in scope.

The Leviathan Enigma

The original research into the origins of the Vard and Steinr contained a frankly incredible tale regarding an effort by the Archmage of Day (a Suaq named Wynflaed Suvvishall) to consult the Eternal Leviathan about the origins of the Steinr.

The tale claims that after failing to uncover any information the Celestial Library of Phaeleron (despite an alleged boon owed by the entity), she decided to consult Leviathan only to discover that that Eternal could not – or more intriguingly would not – “speak of the origins of the Steinr or the Vard”.

It is interesting that the entity used those words – those precise words if the Archmage is to be believed, and she had little reason to lie. They are very specific – and while they appear to confirm that Leviathan at least believes the provenance of the two peoples is connected, the Archmage had not asked about the Vard.

As I understand it, under normal circumstances the Eternal would clarify why it did not know the answer – many events are too complex to have a true origin, for example, or cover

matters too “small” for the Eternal to perceive.. Especially in the former case the Eternal often offers a boon to the questioner, but in this case no boon was forthcoming and the Archmage reported that the ritual conversation was brought to a swift end.

If, as I suspect, the Eternal is bound not to speak of the origins of one or both of those people (and if it were bound not to speak of one then by definition it could not speak of the other), then who has that power? Such a binding must surely rankle with an Eternal so pleasantly interested in sharing what it knows about history with those powerful enough to consult it.

The Nature of the Vard

All references to the Vard describe them as “brutal”. Other common adjectives include “ruthless”, “hard-minded”, “uncompromising”, “cruel”, and “bent on conquest”. Almost as soon as they encountered the Navarr for the first time, a short-lived war broke out that saw deaths on both sides. After a few engagements, the Navarr began to give the Vard a wide berth.

According to the report of a past life vision experienced by Cecile Mantaing de Sarvos (referenced in *Visions of the Past – Collected Visionary Experiences 284YE to 299YE* compiled by Violan of Hart’s Leap Chapter) the Vard were “like a swarm; their campfires stretched across the horizon, they were not an army, but an army of armies.” The Vard were a nation on the move, but a nation almost entirely composed of warriors.

They were also highly disciplined when it came to warfare, but their main strength lay in their weapons and armour. The Vard were workers of steel at a time when many of their opponents still relied on iron, bronze, and wood. They wore hauberks of scales or metal chain, and wielded one- and two-handed axes and both one- and two-handed spears with equal facility. Some of the oldest examples of the trollslayer’s crescent and the razorleaf hasta have been uncovered on the sites of ancient Vard battlefields.

One weakness they may have had was a dearth of practitioners of magic. The Vard appear in stories to be suspicious of ritual magic in particular. Their magicians appear to have been much more comfortable with spells and incantations than with rituals, and they were especially suspicious of the eternals and those who dealt with them. Where they did excel, allegedly, was at the art of breaking magic – destorying curses, turning them aside, and defeating magical creatures with their martial enchantments. Rather than compromise with a dark force as the Ushka might, the Vard would rather trap it, or ward against it, or uncover it’s weakness and slaughter it.

With that in mind it should come as no surprise that they responded to the Ushka in the way that they did.

In all the stories, the Vard are depicted as much more violent than the Steinr, and more dedicated to conquest. Abacar I Riqueza of Atalaya theorised in his essay "Conquest and Cooperation – the divergent destinies of the Starborn" that the violent conquest of the Vard and the swift assimilation of the Steinr had their roots in the same phenomenon. Regardless of where they came from originally, the Steinr and the Vard were clearly cut off from their homes – homes they could not or would not return to.

Both Vard and Steinr were warrior-people, soldiers, and champions but both responded to the dilemma of being adrift in an unknown land in a different way. The Steinr – often portrayed as the younger, more optimistic of the two people – accepted the hand of peace and friendship from the Suaq and the Kallavesi, and those three people were bound together by shared experience against the trolls. Yet all three traditions maintained a unique identity even as they accepted children from any of their three roots. The Steinr forged a new home for themselves through bonds of loyalty and friendship, showing little interest in domination. In some ways their assimilation was even more complete than that of the Vard, but the Steinr identity still exists as a distinct element of Wintermark.

The Vard by contrast attempted to conquer a new home – to carve one out with their axes. They fought everyone they encountered, refusing to compromise, cold and brutal. They subjugated the Ushkan people ... yet in the end they ended up almost entirely losing their unique identity and giving rise to something completely different. They made a new home for themselves, but the price of their violence as the almost complete subsumption of their unique culture into something new.

The Note on the Language of the Vard

The Vard almost certainly did not speak the Imperial tongue when they arrived. There is some doubt among serious scholars whether the language they did speak was even the same as that spoken by the Steinr. That they learned Imperial in time is obvious, and their original language has almost entirely died out apart from a few words that exist in common use on Varushka today (Schlacta, Boyar, Volhov) – although how many of these words came from the Vard and how many from the Ushka is impossible to say.

This initial inability to communicate with those they faced probably created some of the problems the Vard faced, but it must be noted that despite language barriers the Steinr had little difficulty assimilating into the culture that would become Wintermark, and that they did so with gusto and much more swiftly than the Vard blended with the Ushka.

The War Between Vard and Ushka

The Vard were cousins to the Steinr, warlike and fierce; they came to Varushka meaning to claim the riches of the land for themselves. When the Ushka encountered the Vard, at first they tried to hide. When hiding failed they tried to make bargains with the Vard. When this too failed, they tried to fight the Vard. When the steel axes and steel shirts of the Vard meant they could not be defeated, they bowed their heads and were conquered. Rather than destroy them, the Vard offered the Ushka a place at their hearth and protection from the shadows beneath the trees. In return the Ushka shared their hard-won wisdom and helped them to survive the dangers that could not be defeated with steel alone.

From "A History of Varushka"

The war was always one-sided, and the outcome seemed predetermined. The Vard and Ushka first clashed in modern-day Temeschwar, and in Karov. Temeschwar was almost entirely under Vard control by the time the Ushka of Miekarova and Volodmartz realised what was coming. Much of Karov followed, and the Varushkans continued a grim march eastward killing any who resisted them.

According to the accepted history, the warrior-hunters attempted to fight the Vard and were defeated. The diplomat-priests attempted to negotiate and were slain or enslaved. The survivors came together to debate their options as the trade of iron boots came closer and closer to their homes, and in the end the decision was made to simply surrender – for while the Vard were brutal and cruel they did not kill those who submitted to their rule.

One group of bargainers, however, refused to submit. They scorned and cursed the others as cowards, and they turned to the darkest of powers and made an unspeakable oath that somehow placed them beyond the reach of death. They became the Volodny, the eternal and sworn enemies of the Vard and (by extension) the majority of the Varushkan people who do not care about the ancient Ushkan way of life.

Of course some pockets of resistance held out against the Vard for a little longer and there are many tales of vales who accepted unwise bargains with sovereigns rather than be conquered, but for the most part the Vard were able to claim Varushka as their kingdom.

The invasion itself was not a swift affair – the stories imply strongly that it took more than one generation for the Vard to rule over southern Varushka, and in between their campaigns against the Ushka they also engaged in battles with other forces of the world – the orcs of course, but also the northern Navarr and on more than one occasion their own cousins in the form of border skirmishes with Wintermark along the borders of Skarsind.

The War Between the Vard and the Navarr

While the Vard conquest was focused eastward, once they had established a solid foothold in Karov, the ambitions of the invaders turned north and west. Solvihill and Southpines in Skarsind were quickly cleared of orcs, and then the Vard attempted an invasion of what is today Hercynia, into modern Summersend.

Unlike previous battles, where the pragmatic Navarr had simply retreated having minimal interest in the ownership of land and seeing little difference between barbarian orc and barbarian human, the Vard faced a fierce foe on its home ground. The Navarr fought tooth-and-nail to keep the Vard out of Summersend, which if old records are to be believed was one of the first regions ever reclaimed from the vallorn (although the details are imprecise, it would explain why the Navarr refused to surrender the land to the Vard, and why the Vard would try and conquer it in the first place).

The Navarr were not alone in their resistance to the Vard. There were a few scattered Navarr settlements in Skarsind, along the borders with Hercynia (likely steadings long since abandoned as the Navarr reclaimed Hercynia). The inhabitants unsurprisingly rallied to help their kin once it was clear that the Vard ambition was to annexe those parts of Hercynia from which long years of sacrifice had driven the Vallorn.

*The ancient Varushkan song *Rubies on the Snow* is said to refer to this war between Vard and Navarr. The provenance of the song has long been debated – some take the line describing the Vard as “*Schlacta came here to conquer*” to mean that the song was penned long after the events it describes. An alternate suggestion favoured by some scholars, however, is that *Schlacta* was a word used by the Vard themselves to describe their soldiers.*

*The song goes on to describe how “*Our foes heard an Ushkan Mage call / All was not lost if they'd pay his bloody cost.*” The Navarr have a conflicted relationship with powerful magic, but their Vates are not weak in arcane lore. If they accepted the aid of an Ushkan mage I think we can infer two things – that they were desperate to keep the Vard out of Hercynia, and that the magician must have been of unparalleled potency.*

*The song continues to describe “*Deals struck in darkness and cold Gold he was paid, / darkest promises were made*” This line is problematic – and I am uncomfortably reminded of how the earlier *Song of Gold and Pine* uses Gold as an allegory for the people of Terunael – the ancestors of the Navarr – although that is pure speculation on my part. With the aid of this Ushkan magician – and I think it likely that what the Varushkans are describing here is actually one of the accursed Volodny – the tide turns against the Vard*

"Strong was the spell and our foes they used it well"

In the end though, and unsurprisingly, the Navarr are betrayed: "Their victory did not last / Fast they were slain, only to rise up again" the volodny (if such it was) uses the Navarr as a disposable weapon against the hated Vard. Regardless, the Vard were clearly facing a foe they could not defeat empowered by blackest sorceries.

At the same time, there are stories that the Vard did not entirely understand the relationship between the grim, leather-clad folk they had encountered on the outskirts of Seren (Miaren as it is today) and the grim, fur-wrapped folk they encountered in southern Skarsind and Hercynia. A sudden assault along the southern borders of the Vard holdings in Temeschwar, obviously coordinated with a great push from the Hercynian Navarr themselves, convinced the Vard that they risked fighting on three fronts and they withdrew their forces from Hercynia.

As the war to conquer Volodmartz and Karov continued, the Vard would slowly be driven back out of Skarsind by the barbarian orcs of that mountainous territory. Peace returned to Hercynia – inasmuch as there is ever peace in a forest with a Vallorn.

Rubies On The Snow (Trad.)

Thick fell the snows on Navaar
Far we had come, following the battle drum
And their blood fell like rubies on the snow
Swift were the blades of the Vard
Hard iron wrought; and like heroes bold we

fought
And the blood fell like rubies on the snow
Snow falls thick in the hollow
Covering the earth, and war's bloody stain
Schlachta came here to conquer
Now here we ever must remain
Our foes heard an Ushkan Mage call
All was not lost if they'd pay his bloody cost
Where the blood fell like rubies on the snow.
Deals struck in darkness and cold Gold he
was paid,

darkest promises were made
And our blood fell like rubies on the snow
Though we fought hard and fought long
Strong was the spell and our foes they used
it well
And our blood fell like rubies in the snow
Their victory did not last
Fast they were slain, only to rise up again
Where our blood fell like rubies on the snow
Bury my bones where I fell
Tell to my vale all the sorrows of my tale
How our blood fell like rubies on the snow
There lies a heart hard as stone
Bone guards it still in the Mourning Hollow's
chill
Where the blood fell like rubies on the snow

The Assimilation of the Vard

With the wisdom of the Ushka and the prowess of the Vard, their ancestors defeated or bound many of the monstrous threats that lurked in the wilds. They spread slowly over the land, working together, until eventually the Vard and the Ushka were both gone, and in their place were the Varushkan people who partook of the strengths of both.

From "A History of Varushka"

This is as difficult to track as any other element, but I tend to agree with Acabar I Riqueza's statement that the Vard were doomed almost from the start. Their people were warriors and soldiers. They were ill suited for farming, forestry, mining, or any other tasks vital to the maintenance of a strong society. They were disciplined, but their discipline was vulnerable to all the horrors of Varushka. For the first time they began to encounter opponents they could not defeat with their axes.

Even more, these were people in search of a home. While they would not – or could not – make the kind of concessions and compromises their Steirn cousins made, they were still humans. They wanted what any human being wants – comfort, love, children, family. A place to belong. The Vard quickly began to intermarry with the conquered Ushkans. What taboos there were quickly eroded after the decision of the Ushka to surrender to the Vard.

Within a dozen generations or so the concept of "Vard" or "Ushka" was meaningless to all save a few staunch xenophobes who sought to keep their blood "pure" – and within a few more generations these people became effectively pariahs.

One of the greatest aids to the blending of the two people, surprisingly, came in the form of the dark powers of Varushka. The Ushka had long made compacts with those powers, as I mentioned before, but when the Vard arrived they questioned the need for these pacts. Many of the spirits that had tormented the Ushkans they simply killed with their grim steel axes. Those they could not kill, they imprisoned. Those they could neither kill nor imprison they feared – but the Ushka had long experience of dealing with such spirits. An Ushkan bargainer or wise one could protect an entire settlement of Vard from the darkest of horrors with words and minor sacrifices – and the Vard stubbornness was slowly blunted into pragmatism by the results the Ushka could secure.

At the same time as the Ushka were teaching the Vard to survive in Varushka, and the Vard were driving back the shadows, the two peoples faced the external threat of the barbarian orcs – the inhabitants of the Malum and the orcs of what is today Dawn as well as those that lived in the more hospitable areas of southern Varushka.

Between Ushkan cunning and Vard steel, for the first time the lowlands of Varushka were purged of their orc inhabitants – most were killed, some were enslaved to work the mines and forest plantations. Whenever orcs came against Varushka the same pattern repeated – the Ushka used their mystic connections, the Vard their force of arms, and the orcs were scattered and defeated.

This unity against an outside threat further eased the transition from two people to one. The Vard, unexpectedly, had strong tabboos against taking humans as slaves – tabboos which protected the Ushka, but that did not apply to the inhuman orcs.

Finally, the Vard began to build stronger settlements. From their early military camp in modern-day Hanuri they spread methodically throughout Varushka. And where they went, they build roads – roads warded against the darkness of the forests and the hills. Initially intended to help their armies move, these roads also allowed the early Varushkans to travel deep into the interior without concern for the many minor spirits and monsters of the Varushkan interior.

The Legacies of the Vard and the Ushka

There are numerous legacies of the original people in the modern Vard. The Schlacta, for example, are clearly modelled after the soldiers of the Vard. The word appears to come from the invaders, as does the word Boyar. Yet the Boyars of Varushka partake also of the wisdom of the Ushka – and are as likely to be wiley diplomats as they are to be hard-faced killers who lead their Schlacta into battle.

By contrast the wise ones are very much in the model of the Ushka diplomat-priests, personifying wisdom, while the warden fellowships unite the vigilance of the Ushkan people with the implacable spirit of the Vard that refuses to bargain with a malign entity that might instead be slain.

The cabalists are the descendants of the Ushka bargainers – and by extension heirs to the same dark magic as the undying volodny – but for every Circle of painted mystics pursuing the secret magic of the Night in their rainbow caves, there is a family of stalwart cabalists weaving the magics of Summer and Autumn to empower the armies and artisans of the nation. Likewise the volhov are heirs to the practical magic of the Vard, with their emphasis on warding and using their power where it is most needed (or “meddling” as it is often termed), yet they also bargain in the manner of the Ushka – although it must be said they more often seek a position of authority or use trickery than the traditional bargainers who seem to have had a much more respectful attitude to the powers of Varushka.

Other elements of Varushkan culture are entirely unique – the wagon raiders and the clever merchants of Volodmartz and Karov have no counterparts among the people of either of the vanished cultures.

It is also foolish to consider the legacy of the Ushka and the Vard restricted only to the Varushkan children. The League city of Temeschwar was effectively founded by the Vard, then assimilated into Varushka, then into the League. The native peoples of the Navarr, the Kallavesi and the Suaq, and possibly even the Urizen, or even the exotic peoples to the north and the east, had hundreds if not thousands of years of communion with the Ushka and surely did not emerge from their meetings unchanged.

The Freedom of Varushka

It is not clear who first used the term Varushka to describe the new nation that grew from the union of the Vard and Ushka. The earliest reported use is again in a vision of a past life, that of Ser Pelircles de Coyne of Drycastle. In 342YE he reported a vision from what is believed to be fifty years after the time of the paragon Vardas, in which both the visionary and those speaking about him used the word “Varushkan” – somewhat humorously in context – but referred to Vardas (the reality of whose existence was the subject of their discussion) as “Vard”.

Regardless of when the union was finally recognised, by the time of the formation of the Empire the idea that there were Vard and Ushka had entirely vanished. While some children were born with the silver mark of the Ushka on their bodies, the mark does not seem to run in bloodlines and may have an actual explanation that has nothing to do with the Ushka at all – although children born with such birthmarks are often a little fey and unpredictable, feeling a strong instinctual connection to the dark forests and are said to possess a natural talent for bargains – a “silver tongue flows from a silver mark.”

The Ushka could have survived without the Vard, it is true – but it is doubtful they would ever have prospered. They lived in their northern woods for centuries in scattered vales, scratching out an existence tainted by the presence of vicious predators both natural and supernatural. Left to their own devices it is easy to believe that they might eventually have slipped out of history in the same way as the Feni have done.

The conquest of the Vard – for all its horror – actually preserved the legacy of Ushka. It freed them from subservience to the darkness of their land, and it allowed them to fully exploit the wealth of their nation. The roads the Vard built connected the most distant vales to each other, and to the rest of the world – and while there are still parts of the nation that are sparsely settled, very few of them would count as “isolated” – unless by choice.

I shall leave the last judgement of this document to the poem *All the Ushka*, which is often dated as being from some time around 95BE.

All the Ushka (Unknown)

*All the Ushka mother
Born of land and shadow
Clustered in our wilderness
Prey for wolves and snow*

*All the Ushka father
Alive in wilderness
Holding fast against the cold
Surrounded by the darkness*

*All the Ushka sister
Hiding from the Vard
Bargains failed, fighting too
Then conquered heads are bowed*

*All the Ushka brother
Shared their hard won hearth
Rather than destruction
Protection offered worth*

*All the Ushka wise ones
Work hard and keep the faith
Bargainers refused to bow
Were exiled to the waste*

*All the Ushka children
From shadow 'neath the trees
Joined together, now are one
Varushka, we are free*

Heléne de Coyne

*Begun 12th September 362YE
Done 7th March 363YE*

