

0. DEATH BY POISON - Story Preface

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1902 water-color and charcoal by Apollinary Vasnetsov entitled: "[Old Moscow. The Walls of the Wooden Town.](#)" This view depicts how Moscow may have looked when Ivan IV and Anastasia Romanovna were married. Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons. Click on it for a full-page view. PD

After his great victory at Kazan, in 1552, Ivan IV was referred to as [Ivan Grozny](#) - "Ivan the Terrible." His marriage to [Anastasia](#) was still strong. She was everything he had never had as a child and, more than anyone else, she was able to keep his cruelty in check.

To celebrate the victory over Kazan, Ivan ordered that a church be built near the Kremlin. Architects began to formulate plans for the great cathedral now known as [St. Basil's](#).

Life in the palace seemed good, but Anastasia (this was [her chalice](#)) was unwell. Something was making her ill and, in the summer of 1560, after a long illness, [she died](#) at the age of 25 (or 26). Always believing his mother was poisoned, Ivan was convinced his wife had suffered the same fate.

The Tsar was absolutely inconsolable. Becoming increasingly unstable, he accused his nobles of murdering Anastasia. Beyond reach, Ivan suffered a severe mental collapse. Banging his head on the floor, in the presence of his court, he punished himself.

Throughout the succeeding centuries, scholars had always dismissed Ivan's claims that his wife was murdered. But after their bodies (together with the remains of other royals, including Ivan's mother, [Elena Glinskaya](#)) were exhumed in 2000, Moscow scientists at the Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, were shocked.

Their forensic tests revealed that Anastasia had more than ten times normal levels of [mercury](#) in her hair. Glinskaya's hair contained high mercury levels as well. As reported in the 3/9/2001 issue of *Himiya i Zhizn* (Chemistry and Life):

*She [[Tsaritsa](#) Anastasia Romanovna] died in 1560 at the age of 25 - 26 and the legend says that she was poisoned. In collaboration with the experts from the Bureau of Forensic Medicine, the scientists carried out the [spectral analysis](#) of her well preserved light brown braid and found the high content of mercuric salts: 4.8 mg per 100 grams of the sample. The scraps of the shroud and the decayed matter from the bottom of Anastasia's stone sarcophagus also contained mercury.*

What was the meaning of such findings?

*The scientists believe that the body of the young woman could not accumulate such amount of mercury even if she used cosmetics and ointments daily. [At the time, women were required to whiten their faces when they participated in official ceremonies. The cosmetics they used contained lead, mercury and arsenic.] Upon acute poisoning the body tries to excrete mercury through kidneys, bowels, and with sweat. Bones do not have enough time to accumulate mercury. However, the hair is soaked with poisoning sweat and keeps the metal for a long time. It is worth mentioning that mercuric salts were the main poisons in the Middle Ages.*

The hair of Ivan's mother was also examined:

*The spectral analysis of the princess's cap, on which the scientists found strands of her red hair, showed that it contained much more than a normal concentration of mercury. The scientists believe that the versions of poisoning Russian Tsaritsas Anastasia Romanovna and Elena Glinskaya are clearly proved with the chemical analysis of their hair.*

Ivan married seven more times - not for love but for political advantage. In 16th century Moscow, divorce was not possible. If a king tired of his wife, he would simply send her to a convent and have the marriage annulled. Two of Ivan's subsequent wives went to the convent. It is said three others were poisoned and one drowned. Meanwhile, work on St. Basil's proceeded. One of Ivan Grozny's more extreme acts of cruelty was associated with the building of that church.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/DEATH-BY-POISON-Ivan-the-Terrible>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/DEATH-BY-POISON-Ivan-the-Terrible>

## Media Stream



### Old Moscow - Walls of the Wooden Town

Apollinary Vasnetsov (1856-1933) used charcoal, water-color and white paint on paper (mounted on pasteboard) to create this work (in 1909). He called it "Old Moscow. The Walls of the Wooden Town."

A creator of art based on history, Vasnetsov has brought us back to a time when the royal family lived inside the Kremlin and buildings in the town of Moscow were mostly made of wood.

Click on the image for a greatly expanded view.

Water-color, as described above, is currently maintained in a private collection. Image of the work online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons. PD

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Old-Moscow-Walls-of-the-Wooden-Town>



### Anastasia - First Wife of Ivan IV

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Anastasia-First-Wife-of-Ivan-IV>



### St. Basil's: Church Built by Ivan the Terrible

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/St.-Basil-s-Church-Built-by-Ivan-the-Terrible>



### Anastasia's Drinking Vessel

Image online, courtesy Russian State Archives.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Anastasia-s-Drinking-Vessel->



### Anastasia's Death

Painting by Grigory Sedov, described above, online via Wikimedia Commons.

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### Mother of Ivan IV

Image online, courtesy Russian-language Wikipedia. The painting, on the left side of the image, is by an unknown (therefore, uncredited) artist.

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### Ivan the Terrible - Sergei Eisenstein Film

Film now in the public domain. Online via YouTube and many other places.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Ivan-the-Terrible-Sergei-Eisenstein-Film>