

Reinterpreting Russian History

READINGS

860–1860s

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and isolation which yield a highly individualized, internalized spirituality which coheres with the value system of Orthodoxy. In so doing, the *Life* of St. Theodosius idealized values perhaps better suited to individual than communal religious experience.

Until recently, there was little to be said about popular culture in Rus'. Little evidence of its existence could be found, so that all discussions about culture in Kievan Rus' revolved around the monuments of churchmen and the odd text with secular origins. But here too archeology has changed our impression. The excavations at Novgorod and similar digs elsewhere have brought to life the architecture of everyday life. Housing, implements of labor and warfare, and much else has emerged from these excavations. Most significant of all, perhaps, was the discovery of birchbark charters, strips of bark onto which various brief messages were scratched centuries ago. The charters may not have delivered all the insight which their discovery first promised, because the contents are generally laconic, sometimes interrupted, and usually difficult to interpret. All the same, the birchbark charters have opened new questions about literacy and the uses of literacy in Rus'. And together with other texts uncovered in unexpected places they have contributed to a new appraisal of popular culture in Rus'.

Because so many of the implements used in daily life in Kievan Rus' were fashioned from wood, few survive. We have already seen that the plows and harrows in use on the fields of Rus' depended on wood, sometimes in a near natural state. But much else was made from wood as well, as archeological excavation has demonstrated. Whether in Kiev, where subway construction periodically unearths the remains of some ancient house, or Novgorod, where whole teams have been systematically combing excavation sites for years, the wooden houses of that distant time have come partially back to life. In the south, wood was less important, but almost everywhere else timber sheltered the inhabitants of Rus'. Wood also served to contain and serve food, and digs have revealed many examples of these implements (see p. 61). In fact, artisans used wood for toys, chess pieces—almost anything.

Not everything, however, was made from wood. Those who could afford more durable materials acquired them, as the bone salt box reproduced here indicates (p. 61). In addition, bone served for combs, dice, and ornamental eating utensils. Excavations have also revealed many items fashioned out of iron, especially materials related to fishing and hunting. Although many Kievans might not have possessed such durable goods, their existence proves that a prospering artisanry was at work. Exactly how large it was and how widely used their products were cannot yet be determined.

DOCUMENTS

The Christianization of Rus' According to the Primary Chronicle (978–88)

By some scholars' reckoning, nothing in Rus' history was more important than the decision of Prince Vladimir in 988 to accept Christianity from Byzantium. The entrance of Rus' into the cultural world of Eastern Christianity decisively oriented Rus' toward Europe and the West, and away from the steppe, the locus of the other great magnet of Rus' society and culture. The Primary Chronicle, whose description of early Slav society and politics we read above, here relays two narratives which explain Vladimir's decision. One need not accept one or the other as the "true" story of Christianization, since it is clear that even by the time the chronicler compiled this work, different legends had grown up around that momentous decision. The chronicle notices are nonetheless revealing. In the first place, we observe traces of the multicultural milieu which prevailed in Kievan Rus'. The Rus', we learn, worshipped a pantheon of gods which originated in different cultures—some Iranian, others Slavic, still others Scandinavian—to judge only by the names of Khors, Simargl, Dazhbog, and Perun. Also important to these narratives is the motivation behind the decision to convert to Christianity. Both in the story which compares the different religions and in the narrative which relates Vladimir's own conversion we discover that the prince was interested not so much in his eternal welfare as in the prosperity of his earthly principality. So it was that Christianization, just like the cult of Perun before it, came to Rus' through the agency of the state, whose chief, the prince, also endowed and protected the church in the first centuries of its life in Rus' when other religions still held greater sway. There is considerable evidence to indicate that Christianity did not succeed in displacing other religions until as late as the

fourteenth century: for example, archeologists at Novgorod have uncovered from the earliest layers many objects indicative of pagan, animistic religions (see p. 64). But objects of Christian identity (such as the amber crosses reproduced on p. 65) begin to outnumber the other cult objects only in layers dated to the fourteenth century or later. These clues indicate that for a very long time Orthodox Christianity remained a religion of the minority, possibly confined only to elite urban culture.

(978–980) . . . Vladimir then began to reign alone in Kiev, and he set up idols on the hill outside the castle with the hall: one of Perun, made of wood with a head of silver and a mouth of gold, and others of Khors, Dazhbog, Stribog, Simargl and Mokosh. The people sacrificed to them, calling them gods, and brought their sons and their daughters to sacrifice them to these devils. They desecrated the earth with their offerings, and the land of Rus' and this hill were defiled with blood. . . .

(986). Vladimir was visited by [Turkic] Bulgarians of Mohanmedan faith, who said, "Though you are a wise and prudent prince, you have no religion. Adopt our faith, and revere Mahomet." Vladimir inquired what was the nature of their religion. They replied that they believed in God, and that Mahomet instructed them to practice circumcision, to eat no pork, to drink no wine, and, after death, promised them complete fulfillment of their carnal desires. "Mahomet," they asserted, "will give each man seventy fair women. . . ." They also spoke other false things which out of modesty may not be written down. Vladimir listened to them, for he was fond of women and indulgence, regarding which he heard with pleasure. But circumcision and abstinence from pork and wine were disagreeable to him. "Drinking," said he, "is the joy of the



Two wooden household idols (late twelfth, early thirteenth centuries) excavated at Novgorod. From *Drevnii Novgorod: Prikladnoe iskusstvo i arkheologiia* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1985), pp. 207, 209. Reprinted courtesy of Iskusstvo Publishers.



Three bronze pagan amulets (all twelfth century). From *Drevnii Novgorod: Prikladnoe iskusstvo i arkheologiia* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1985), p. 68. Reprinted courtesy of Iskusstvo Publishers.



Amber crosses (fourteenth century) excavated at Novgorod. From *Drevnii Novgorod: Prikladnoe iskusstvo i arkheologiia* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1985), p. 133. Reprinted courtesy of Iskusstvo Publishers.

Russes. We cannot exist without that pleasure."

Then came the Germans, asserting that they were come as emissaries of the Pope. They added, "Thus says the Pope: 'Your country is like our country, but your faith is not as ours. For our faith is the light. We worship God, who has made heaven and earth, the stars, the moon, and every creature, while your gods are only wood.'" Vladimir inquired what their teaching was. They replied, "Fasting according to one's strength. But whatever one eats or drinks is all to the glory of God. . . ." Then Vladimir answered, "Depart hence; our fathers accepted no such principle."

The Jewish Khazars heard of these missions, and came themselves saying, "We have learned that Bulgarians and Christians came hither to instruct you in their faiths. . . . [W]e believe in the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Then Vladimir inquired what their religion was. They replied that its tenets included circumcision, not eating pork or hare,

and observing the Sabbath." The Prince then asked where their native land was, and they replied that it was in Jerusalem. When Vladimir inquired where that was, they made answer, "God was angry at our forefathers, and scattered us among the gentiles on account of our sins. Our land was then given to the Christians." The Prince then demanded, "How can you hope to teach others while you yourselves are cast out and scattered abroad by the hand of God? If God loved you and your faith, you would not be thus dispersed in foreign lands. Do you expect us to accept that fate also?" . . .

(987). Vladimir summoned together his vassals and the city-elders, and said to them, "Behold, the Bulgarians came before me urging me to accept their religion [Islam]. Then came the Germans and praised their own faith [Roman Christianity]; and after them came the Jews. Finally, the Greeks appeared, criticizing all other faiths but commending their own, and they spoke at length, telling the history of the whole world from its beginnings. Their

words were artful, and it was wondrous to listen and pleasant to hear them. They preach the existence of another world. 'Whoever adopts our religion and then dies shall arise and live forever. But whosoever embraces another faith, shall be consumed with fire in the next world.' What is your opinion on this subject, and what do you answer?" The vassals and the elders replied, "You know, oh Prince, that no man condemns his own possessions, but praises them instead. If you desire to make certain, you have servants at your disposal. Send them to inquire about the ritual of each and how he worships God."

Their counsel pleased the prince and all the people, so that they chose good and wise men to the number of ten, and directed them to go first among the Bulgarians and inspect their faith. The emissaries went their way, and when they arrived at their destination they beheld the disgraceful actions of the Bulgarians and their worship in the mosque; then they returned to their own country. Vladimir then instructed them to go likewise among the Germans, and examine their faith, and finally to visit the Greeks. They thus went into Germany, and after viewing the German ceremonial, they proceeded to Tsargrad [Constantinople] where they appeared before the Emperor. He inquired on what mission they had come, and they reported to him all that had occurred. When the Emperor heard their words, he rejoiced, and did them great honor on that very day.

On the morrow the Emperor sent a message to the Patriarch to inform him that a Russian delegation had arrived to examine the Greek faith, and directed him to prepare the church and the clergy, and to array himself in his sacerdotal robes, so that the Russes might behold the glory of the God of the Greeks. When the Patriarch received these commands, he bade the clergy assemble, and they performed the customary rites. They burned incense, and the choirs sang hymns. The Emperor accompanied the Russes to the church, and placed them in a wide space, calling their attention to the beauty of the edifice, the chanting, and the offices of the archpriest and the ministry of the

deacons, while he explained to them the worship of his God. The Russes were astonished, and in their wonder praised the Greek ceremonial. Then the Emperors Basil and Constantine invited the envoys to their presence, and said, "Go hence to your native country," and thus dismissed them with valuable presents and great honor.

Thus they returned to their own country, and the Prince called together his vassals and the elders. Vladimir then announced the return of the envoys who had been sent out, and suggested that their report be heard. He thus commanded them to speak out before his vassals. The envoys reported, "When we journeyed among the Bulgarians, we beheld how they worship in their temple, called a mosque, while they stand ungirt. The Bulgarian bows, sits down, looks hither and thither like one possessed, and there is no happiness among them, but instead only sorrow and a dreadful stench. Their religion is not good. Then we went among the Germans, and saw them performing many ceremonies in their temples; but we beheld no glory there. Then we went on to Greece, and the Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. . . ." Vladimir then inquired where they should all accept baptism, and they replied that the decision rested with him.

After a year had passed, in 6496 (988) Vladimir marched with an armed force against Kherson, a Greek city, and the people of Kherson barricaded themselves in. Vladimir halted at the farther side of the city . . . [and] besieged the town . . . Then a man of Kherson, Anastasius by name, shot into the Russ camp an arrow on which he had written, "There are springs behind you to the east, from which water flows in pipes. Dig down and cut them off." When Vladimir received this information, he raised his eyes to heaven and vowed that if this hope was realized, he would be baptized. He

gave orders straightway to dig down above the pipes, and the water-supply was thus cut off. The inhabitants were accordingly overcome by thirst, and surrendered.

Vladimir and his retinue entered the city, and he sent messages to the Emperors Basil and Constantine, saying, "Behold, I have captured your glorious city. I have also heard that you have an unwedded sister. Unless you give her to me to wife, I shall deal with your own city as I have with Kherson." When the Emperors heard this message, they were troubled, and replied, "It is not meet for Christians to give in marriage to pagans. If you are baptized, you shall have her to wife, inherit the kingdom of God, and be our companion in the faith. Unless you do so, however, we cannot give you our sister in marriage." When Vladimir learned their response, he directed the envoys of the Emperors to report to the latter that he was willing to accept baptism, having already given some study to their religion, and that the Greek faith and ritual, as described by the emissaries sent to examine it, had pleased him well. When the Emperors heard this report, they rejoiced, and persuaded their sister Anna to consent to the match. They then requested Vladimir to submit to baptism before they should send their sister to him, but Vladimir desired that the princess should herself bring priests to baptize him. The Emperors complied with this request, and sent forth their sister, accompanied by some dignitaries and priests. Anna, however, departed with reluctance. "It is as if I were setting out to captivity," she lamented; "better were it for me to die here." But her brothers protested, "Through your agency God turns the land of Rus' to repentance, and you will relieve Greece from the danger of grievous war. . . ."

Vladimir was baptized in the Church of St. Basil, which stands at Kherson upon a square in the center of the city, where the Khersonians trade. . . . After his baptism Vladimir took the Princess in marriage. Those who do not know the truth say he was baptized in Kiev, while others assert this event took place in Vasiliiev, while still others mention other places. . . .

When the Prince arrived at his capital, he directed that the idols should be overthrown, and that some should be cut to pieces and others burned with fire. He thus ordered that Perun should be bound to a horse's tail and dragged along Borichev to the river. He appointed twelve men to beat the idol with sticks, not because he thought the wood was sensitive, but to affront the demon who had deceived man in this guise. . . . After they had thus dragged the idol along, they cast it into the Dnieper River. . . . Thereafter Vladimir sent heralds throughout the whole city to proclaim that if any inhabitant, rich or poor, did not betake himself to the river, he would risk the Prince's displeasure . . . On the morrow, the Prince went forth to the Dnieper with the priests of the Princess and those from Kherson, and a countless multitude assembled. They all went into the water: some stood up to their necks, others to their breasts, the younger near the bank . . . while the adults waded farther out. The priests stood by and offered prayers. There was joy in heaven and upon earth to behold so many souls saved.

SOURCE: Samuel H. Cross, "The Russian Primary Chronicle," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 12 (1930): 178, 180, 183-84, 197-205 (excerpted). Transliteration and spelling have been slightly modified.

*The Life of St. Theodosius
(Eleventh Century)*

The arrival of Christianity in Rus' brought in its train a gradually growing collection of local, Rus' saints. Boris and Gleb, about whose martyrdom in 1068 we read above, were the first local saints, their deaths symbolizing a particular form of piety which came to be highly regarded in Rus' culture. The Primary Chronicle, inserting dialogue into the mouths of these victims of Sviatopolk, alleged that these sons of Vladimir preferred to model their behavior on Christ, who willingly accepted death rather than resist evil. Theodosius, whose *Life*