



When one considers the topic of Volodimer's baptism, one usually turns to the Old Kievan chronicle for detailed information. The chronicle itself presented that event as the turning point in the history of Rus' and devoted over 30 (printed) pages to a description of it. I shall not read all these pages here (even if they do exist in English translation), but only some excerpts, while trying not to omit any essential element of the story.

*... Volodimer 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, Dazhborgh, Striborgh, 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...*

*Volodimer was overcome by lust for women. His lawful wife was Rogned, whom he settled on the Lybed, where the village of Predslavyno now stands. By her he had four sons: Izyaslav, Mstyslav, Yaroslav, and Vsevolod, and two daughters. The Greek woman bore him Svyatopolk; by one Czech he had a son Vysheslav; by another, Svyatoslav and Mstyslav; and by a Bulgarian woman, Borys and Hlib. He had three hundred concubines at Vyshhorod, three hundred at Bilhorod, and two hundred at Berestovo in a village still called Berestovo. He was insatiable in vice. He even seduced married women and violated young girls, for he was a libertine like Solomon. For it is said that Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. He was wise, yet in the end he came to ruin, but Volodimer, though at first deluded, eventually found salvation.*

This prelude is reported under the year 980. Six years later, in 986, an examination of all four monotheistic religions is supposed to have taken place in Kiev.

*Volodimer was visited by Bulgarians of Muhammedan faith, who said, "Though you are a wise and prudent prince, you have no religion. Adopt our faith, and revere Muhammad." Volodimer inquired what was the nature of their religion. They replied that they believed in God, and that Muhammad instructed them to practice circumcision, to eat no pork, to drink no wine, and, after death, promised them complete fulfillment of their carnal desires. "Muhammad," they asserted, "will give each man seventy fair women. He may choose one fair one, and upon that woman will Muhammad confer the charms of them all, and she shall be his wife. Muhammad promises that one*

*may then satisfy every desire, but whoever is poor in this world will be no different in the next."* They also spoke other false things which out of modesty may not be written down. Volodimer 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 Russes. We cannot exist without that pleasure."

Then came the West Europeans, asserting that they had 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.'" Volodimer 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, as our teacher Paul has said." Then Volodimer 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. The Christians believe in him whom we crucified, but we believe in the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Then Volodimer inquired what their religion was. They replied that its tenets included circumcision, not eating pork or hare, and observing the Sabbath. The King then asked where their native land was, and they replied that it was in Jerusalem. When Volodimer 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 King 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?"

*Then the Greeks sent to Volodimer a philosopher.*

The latter expressed brutal criticism about the three religions whose representatives attempted to convert Volodimer, who, impressed by the philosopher's gift as a communicator, asked him to present his version of the biblical story, which the philosopher gladly did, in a very extensive narrative comprising half of the conversion tale. This expose is known in the scholarly literature as the "Discourse of the Philosopher" (rev' filosofa).

*As the philosopher spoke thus, he exhibited to Volodimer a canvas on which was depicted the Judgment Day of the Lord, and showed him, on the right, the righteous going to their bliss in Paradise, and on the left, the sinners*

*on their way to torment. Then Volodimer sighed and said, "Happy are they upon the right, but woe to those upon the left!" The scholar replied, "If you desire to take your place upon the right with the just, then accept baptism." Volodimer took his counsel to heart, saying "I shall wait yet a little longer," for he wished to inquire about all the faiths.*

This time — the chronicler now puts events in the year 987 — Volodimer dispatched his emissaries to the Volga Bulgarians, the Western Europeans, and the Byzantines (but not to the Jews since they were living in Christian-held Jerusalem), to inquire about each religion's ritual and manner of worshipping God.

After a few months the envoys returned and reported to the King.

*"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 West Europeans, 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. For we cannot forget that beauty. Every man, after tasting something sweet, is afterward unwilling to accept that which is bitter, and therefore we cannot dwell longer here." Then the vassals spoke and said, "If the Greek faith were evil, it would not have been adopted by your grandmother Olga, who was wiser than all other men." Volodimer inquired where they should all accept baptism, and they replied that the decision rested with him.*

We are, however, not told about the king's decision; instead, the so-called "Korsun'-Legend" is presented. Korsun', or Chersones-on-the-Crimea, was an old Greek self-governing colony. Between the 5th and 10th centuries it was the leading manufacturing and trade center of the entire Crimea and the northern shores of the Black Sea.

*After a year had passed, in 988, Volodimer marched with an armed force against Korsun', a Greek city, and the people of Korsun' barricaded themselves therein: Volodimer halted at the farther side of the city beside the bay, a bowshot from the town, and the inhabitants resisted energetically while Volodimer besieged the town. Eventually, however, they became exhausted, and Volodimer warned them that if they did not surrender, he would remain*