

The origin of the monastic life in the Ukrainian lands is closely related to their Christianization, which occured long before the official recognition of Christianity as the "State religion" by Prince Volodymyr the Great, traditionally dated as 988. The first missionaries, beyond any doubt, were monks who out of necessity had to establish mission centers where local young men could be instructed and become acquainted with the religious way of life. Certainly, some of these young men also became interested in the missionary work of their educators and joined them. Thus the first religious communities were established in Kievan Rus'.

Since Christianization of Kievan lands and monasticism were so closely interrelated, it is only logical to talk about the origin of the Ukrainian monastic life in the preparation for the millenary celebrations of Christianity in Rus'-Ukraine.

Monasticism before St. Volodymyr

The beginning of Christianity and in connection with it the origin of monasticism in Rus'-Ukraine should be sought not in Kiev but, rather, in the western Ukrainian lands on both slopes of the Carpathian Mountains in connection with the missionary work of SS. Cyril and Methodius, the Apostles of Slavs, and their disciples at the end of the 9th century. Christianity, and with it the monastic life, started then to spread from the western parts of the Ukrainian lands eastward, towards the lands of Kiev.¹

Christianity as well as monasticism, in all probability, was reaching Kievan Rus' also from ancient Bulgaria, where the disciples of SS. Cyril and Methodius found their refuge and established the center of Slavic Christianity after the death of St. Methodius in 885. The vestiges of Bulgarian influence gave rise to the so-called **Bulgarian theory**, which proposes that Christianity and its first hierarchy were introduced into Rus'-Ukraine from Bulgaria.²

The so-called **Byzantine theory** also must be taken into consideration, since Christianity was penetrating into Kievan Rus' likewise from the south, from the Byzantine colonies in the Crimea and on the northern coast on the Black Sea, where the Byzantine monks found refuge during the iconoclastic persecutions in the 8th and 9th centuries. Certainly, these "displaced" Byzantine monks, living in the borderlands of ancient Rus', tried to spread the Christian faith and with it also the monastic way of life among the neighboring Old Ukrainian tribes.³ Thus, for example, St. Theodore Studite /.826/ praises his refugee monks in the Crimea for their missionary efforts among the local population.⁴

Likewise, Latin Rite Christianity was reaching Kievan Rus' by the trading routes that connected Kiev with Central Europe, mostly through the efforts of the German missionaries. We must keep in mind that it was St. Olga that asked the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Otto the Great /936-973/, to send some German missionaries with the bishop to Kiev in 959.5

How far and to what extent the activity of these missionaries had in fact penetrated the Ukrainian lands and their inhabitants cannot be ascertained. But it must have been significant, since already in the middle of the 10th century a considerable part of the Kievan boyars was Christian⁶ and, through the conversion of Princess Olga, Christianity found its way into the ruling circles of Kievan Rus. It was precisely Olga, that "wise Princess," that considered Kievan Christianity established well enough to have its own hierarchy. §

As mentioned before, monastic life became rooted in the Ukrainian soil simultaneously with Christianity. The missionaries not only preached the gospel of Christ, they also proposed the monastic way of life as an ideal life to their converts. And we know from our own experience converts usually live their faith with much more fervor and passion than those who are born into Christianity. Therefore, we may conclude that already at the time of the first attempts at Christianization monasticism became implanted in Kievan Rus' and made a significant contribution to the swift diffusion of Christianity among the inhabitants.

Here I would like to quote one of the better known contemporary researchers of monasticism of Kievan Rus', Professor I. Smolitsch: "Monasticism as we know it now came to Rus'/Ukraine/ before the official acceptance of Christianity, serving as a living example of Christian piety." We concede that the first attempts to establish religious life in Kievan Rus' have escaped the notice of contemporary writers; nevertheless, we must admit that the moving force behind the Christianization of Rus'-Ukraine had to be monasticism in one or the other form. But it eventually surfaced in the annals at the time of the official recognition of Christianity by St. Volodymyr the Great.

Earliest Historical Evidence

In his noted **Sermon on the Law and Grace**, Hilarion, who in 1051 became Metropolitan of Kiev, explicity mentions that on the hills of Kiev "the monasteries were built and the monks came in sight" already at the time of St. Volodymyr's baptism. ¹⁰ And the first biographer of St. Volodymyr, Monk Jacob, mentions that one more solemn occasions the Prince used to host "the Metropolitan with the bishops as well as the monks with other clergy" in his court. ¹¹