

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN KIEVAN RUS'

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Greek and Roman writers such as Hesiod, Herodotus, Pliny, Tacitus and others referred to the Rus' Slavs, calling them either Antae or Venedes, as far back as the early sixth century B.C.¹ when the Greeks were still establishing colonies along the Danube and on the North shores of the Black Sea.² Archaeological excavations indicate that some of these city-colonies were large, some with several market places, fortifications, stone walls, paved streets, beautiful public buildings and temples.³ These excavations also suggest a certain cultural development, as well as considerable trade relations with the outside world. To be specific: near Kiev, especially to the West of it, there are extensive cemeteries known as "funeral fields" which contain skeletons,⁴ some dishes, ornaments and weapons, not to mention large finds of coins of Roman origin.⁵

Christianity also came to these Greek colonies via commerce and shipping routes. It may be that the faith of Christ was first planted here in Apostolic or sub-Apostolic times; after all, ancient tradition has credited St. Andrew as being the "Apostle of Ukraine."⁶ Gradually and

¹ For an excellent survey of ancient authors, see Y. Pasternak, *Ranni sloviany v istorychnykh, arkheolohichnykh ta lingvistychnykh doslidzenniakh* (New York, Toronto, Paris and Munich, 1975) 44ff.

² Olbia, Chersonesis, Turas, Phanagoria, Panticapaeum, etc.

³ Ruins of Greek temples of Dionysius, Apollo and Artemis have been excavated in the Poltava region. Cf. O. Povstenko, *Istoria Ukrainskoho mystetstva* (Nuereenberg and Fuerth, 1948) vol.1 p.24.

⁴ Sometimes the bodies were cremated; and their ashes, whether in urns or not, were covered with soil.

⁵ See M. Braichevsky, *Rymska Moneta na Terytorii Ukrainy* (Kiev, 1959); also his "Starodavni skhidni sloviany" in *Narysy z starodavnoi istorii USSR* (1957) 315-327.

⁶ Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* III, 1. PG XX. 216) in the 4th century is the first to mention St. Andrew's mission field as "Scythia" (in the neighborhood of the Black Sea, now part of Ukraine); for this he apparently relies on a work of Origen which is no longer extant.

imperceptibly, but nonetheless inexorably, did Christianity penetrate into the interior.

About 867 A.D., Photius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, in a *Circular Letter* to other Patriarchs of the East, mentions that, acting on a request of Askold (Prince of Kiev) to Emperor Michael III a bishop and priest(s) were sent to organize the Church there. Photius describes the faith of the Kievans in glowing terms, stating that "their desire and zeal for the faith was so intense that they gladly received the bishop and pastor and that they revered Christians with great attentiveness and sincerity."⁷ The Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, however, asserts that it was the Patriarch Ignatius who sent them the archbishop (*sic*).⁸ Whatever the case, the important fact is that missionaries—and a bishop or archbishop—had been sent to Kiev in the middle of the ninth century and that the Patriarch considered the number of Christians there significant enough to warrant a bishop or an archbishop.⁹

By the time the power of Kievan Rus' had been consolidated during the ninth and tenth centuries, the Christian faith was well rooted in its chief commercial cities, including Kiev.¹⁰ Again, it was

Gregory of Nazianzus (*Or.* 33. *PG* XXXVI. 228) states it was Epirus (Northwest Greece); Jerome (*Ep. ad Marcell.* *PL* 1805) says it was Achaia or Southern Greece or Peloponnesos; Theodoret (*Or.* *Ps.* cxvi. *PG* LXXX. 800) claims it was Hellas (Eastern, central and Northwest Asia Minor). Probably all these territories are in the same general part of the world. For further details, see I. Nazarko, *Sviaty Volodymyr Velykyj* (Rome, 1954) 15-24; also M. Chubaty, *Istoria Khystyianstva na Rusy-Ukraini* (Rome and New York, 1965) vol. 1, 43ff.

⁷ *Epist.* *PG* CII. 756. Photius, as the leading Byzantine ideologue of his day, also gave the underlying reason for such action: "to transform the people of Rus' from enemies into friends and subjects of the Roman Byzantine Empire." See also J. Hergenrother, *Monumenta graeca ad Photium* (Ratisbonae, 1869) 44; also F. Dvornik, *The Slavs, Their Early History and Civilization* (Boston, 1959) 197.

⁸ *De caeremoniis aulae Byzantinae.* *PG* CXII. 78. What seems more certain, however, is that after the political coup, the new Patriarch, Ignatius, and the new emperor, Basil of Macedon, created a diocese, probably Tmutorokan, on the Taman peninsula of the Azov Sea; this diocese belonged at first to the metropolitanate of Dorus but later in the 10th century, about 50 years before Volodimir's baptism, it became an independent archdiocese.

⁹ The historian M. de Taube (*Rome et la Russie avant l'invasion des Tartars. IX-XIIIc.* Vol. 1 [Paris, 1947] 25f.) calls this era, 856-882 A.D., "the first conversion of Rus'." Askold himself must have been baptized since the church of St. Nicholas was built in the 11th century on his grave. (It is highly unlikely that a church would have been built on the grave of a pagan—they were often built on graves of Christian confessors of the faith.) See I. Ohienko, *Ukrainska Tserkva* (Prague, 1942) 29.

¹⁰ For a survey of contemporaneous Greek and Arabic sources, see H. Koch, *Byzanz, Ochrid und Kiev 987-1037.* KYRIOS (1938) IV. 254.

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the cities on the main trade routes where the people of Rus' came into contact with foreign Christians. Rus' Christians were so numerous that by the time Ihor, the grandfather of Volodimir,¹¹ had concluded his treaty with the Byzantine Empire, his army—according to a statement in the treaty—consisted of both pagans and Rus' Christians.¹² The same treaty also mentions the church of St. Elias in Kiev: "Those of us who are baptized have sworn in the Cathedral (*sobor*) by the church of St. Elias upon the Holy Cross set before us and upon this parchment...."¹³ That the Christian community was organized in Kiev seems obvious, since the word *sobor* means either that this was a bishop's church (a cathedral) or, at minimum, that there were other churches in Kiev and that this was the principal one.¹⁴

Olha, Volodimir's grandmother, was baptized in Kiev and not at Constantinople in 955 A.D., as an old tradition has it;¹⁵ for none of the Byzantine chronicles nor any other records at Constantinople make any mention of her baptism there, though they fully describe her visit there.¹⁶ She was probably baptized in Kiev before her trip to

¹¹ Some are of the opinion that Ihor himself must have been a Christian; E. Golubinsky, *Istoriya Russkoy Tserkvi* (Moscow, 1901) vol.1, 44f.; I. Ohienko, *Ukrainska Tserkva*, vol.1. 51; and others.

¹² The treaty was sealed with the following pledge/oath:

"May whosoever of our compatriots, Prince or common, baptized or unbaptized, who does so violate them [the stipulations of the treaty] have no succor from God, but may he be slave in this life and in the life to come, and may he perish by his own arms.

"The unbaptized Russes shall lay down their shields, their naked swords, their armlets, and their other weapons, and shall swear to all that is inscribed upon this parchment, to be faithfully observed forever by Igor, all his boyars, and all the people from the land of Rus'. If any of the princes or any Russian [Rus'] subject, whether Christian or non-Christian, violates the terms of this instrument, he shall merit death by his own weapons, and be accursed of God and of Perun because he violated his oath." *The Russian Primary Chronicle, Laurentian Text* 52-53 (trans. and ed. S.H. Cross and O.P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor. Cambridge, Mass., 1953) 77.

Cosmas of Prague also attests to the presence of Christians in Kiev (*MGH N.S.* II xxii, 44).

¹³ *The Russian Primary Chronicle* 52, p. 77.

¹⁴ E. Golubinsky (*Istoriya*, p.44) states that the Christians in Kiev were numerous at the time. For the approximate location of this church, see S.H. Cross, "The Earliest Mediaeval Churches of Kiev" *Speculum* 11 (1936) 478.

¹⁵ Probably based on the *Primary Chronicle*, 61 (p.82) which states that the baptism of Olha took place at Constantinople in 955 A.D.

¹⁶ See Constantine Porphyrogenitus in his *De caeremoniis aulae Byzantinae II*. PG CXII, 33-144. There is, however, one Greek source—Cedrenus, contemporary of