

Scythian Monks and the Christian West



Petro B.T. Bilaniuk

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Because of a pervading lack of attention to the present topic, secondary literature is fragmentary. Consequently, one must find primary sources without guidance. Furthermore, Eastern European Church history is often presented in many highly stereotyped forms — one must learn how they can be appreciated, or understood. For instance, it is customary to assert: “*ex oriente lux, ab occidente lex.*”¹ As we shall see, the second part of this saying is very inexact. Such a maxim is best left in the realm of folk-knowledge, and is of very little use for scholarly work.

The difficulty begins with Scythian historical geography. If one glances through today's historical atlases, one is amazed at the grave inconsistencies, contradictions and omissions. Some reputable atlases do not even mention Scythia, while others extend its boundaries over all of Eastern Europe. There is one recent atlas² which places the outer boundaries of the Scythian sphere (7th to 3rd centuries B.C.) from along the River Prut (Pryetos), past the River Dnister (Tiras) to the sources of the Boh River (Hypanis); thence eastward all the way to the Don River, thence southward to the Caucasus Mountains, and then westward again to the north-east shore of the Black Sea. However the same atlas mistakenly places Scythia Minor in Crimea and part of the adjacent mainland (about equal in size to the peninsula). This however was Tauridic Scythia, whereas the Roman Province of Scythia was located on the shores of the Black Sea from the estuary of the Dnister River, southward, past the mouth of the Danube River (Istros).³

The Scythians migrated into Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 7th century B.C. and dislodged the Cimmerians.⁴ They established a dynamic and powerful empire that persisted until the 2nd century B.C. when it disintegrated under the onslaught of the Sarmatians. Some remnants of the Scythians were absorbed into the Sarmatian population; but some did establish a relatively small state in parts of Crimea and the adjacent mainland. The geographic name of “Scythia” persisted well into the Middle Ages, designating almost the whole area of what is contemporary Ukraine.

We may not forget that both the Scythians and the Sarmatians, as well as the transient tribes, did not dislodge the indigenous population (living there from time immemorial which had a highly developed agricultural culture, flourishing continuously since Trypillia culture (as early as 4000 B.C.).⁵ It was the indigenous peoples — who had survived the various onslaughts — who finally remained in the area; however, they had inherited the name of “Scythians” from the time of the Scythian domination. And they carried this name well into the Middle Ages.

In a number of written sources, we find reference to the preaching of St. Andrew the Apostle in Scythian lands. First: a sentence in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea, Book III, chap. 1 (quoting Origen): “But the holy apostles of our Saviour [were] scattered over the whole world, Thomas, according to tradition, received Parthia as his allotted region; Andrew received Scythia ...”⁶ This was later confirmed by Nikephorous in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*.⁷ Without reciting a complete list of sources, we will mention not only the well known 4th century works: the *Acts and Martyrdom of the Holy Apostle Andrew* and the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, available in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8.⁸ Hence, the narrative in the *Primary Chronicles of the Kievan Rus'* (10th century) on the missionary activities of St. Andrew in Scythia is not a mere legend, but actually has a documentable historical foundation.⁹ In my article, *Christianity in Eastern Europe and Ancient Rus' from Pentecost to St. Volodymyr* (988),¹⁰ and again in the address entitled *On the Apostolic Origins of the Ukrainian Church*,¹¹ I have documented the presence of Christianity in Scythia and Ancient Rus'-Ukraine from the sub-apostolic times down to the times of St. Volodymyr.

Now we shall focus our attention on three Scythian monks, who contributed greatly to the cultural and ecclesiastical development of the Christian West, namely Johannes Cassianus, Johannes Maxentius, and Dionysius Exiguus.

Johannes Cassianus (John Cassian, c. 360 - 435) was a monk and an important ascetical writer.¹² According to the witness of Gennadius of Marseille *Vir. ill.* 61, Cassian was born in Scythia of a noble and rich family, c. 360 A.D. Scholars have claimed that he was born in Scythia Minor (Contemporary Rumania), but there is no definitive proof for that. Even if it were true, Scythia Minor at that time was inhabited by a mixed population, predominantly of Slavic origin — which had fallen under both Greek and Latin influence.

In his youth, Cassian received a good classical education (*Cass. Conl.* XIV, 12). While still a boy (*Cass. Inst. Praef.* 4), probably 378-380, he became a monk and soon travelled to Bethlehem where he learned the basics of the cenobitic life in a local monastery (*Conl.* XIV, 5). He was accompanied by his